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# ‘The Spanish Are a Wonderful People’: The International Brigades and Their Cross-Cultural Encounters with Civil-War Spain, 1936-1939

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## Abstract

This thesis investigates the cross-cultural encounters which took place between the multinational fighters of the International Brigades and the people, places, politics and institutions of civil-war Spain between 1936-1939. Although the approximately 35,000 individuals who rallied to the transnational fighting unit have long been the focus of considerable attention, existing accounts of their service tend to relegate Spain itself to the status of a more-or-less incidental backdrop to a far wider-reaching struggle against global fascism. In contrast, this thesis places Spain at the very centre of its analysis. In particular, it focusses on the volunteers' relationship to the wider Republican war effort, their antifascist allies in the loyalist zone, the Spaniards within their own ranks, the enemy on the field and the civilians of the rearguard – amongst them considerable numbers of women and children. Taking its cue from the new military history and its emphasis on the cultural aspects of war, it sets out to investigate how these encounters ultimately shaped the volunteers' attitudes, identities and actions as transnational soldiers. It also explores the important opportunities they created for those same soldiers to exercise an impact on the wartime society of the Spanish Republic. By homing in on the neglected meeting-points between a transnational fighting force and the domestic context within which it operated, the thesis demonstrates how thousands of combatants are capable of imagining – and indeed making – war in their own image. Above all, it argues that the volunteers of the International Brigades were engaged in a creative process of constructing an imagined antifascist community in arms as well as placing themselves at its helm in their capacity as compassionate soldiers engaged in a just struggle for the 'Spanish People'.



## Lay Summary

The International Brigades were a volunteer fighting force established by the Comintern in late 1936 in order to assist the embattled Spanish Republic in its struggle for survival against a military insurgency led by General Francisco Franco and his rebellious Nationalists. Franco's reliance on massive support from both Hitler and Mussolini in the form of tanks, planes, technicians and soldiers convinced the 35,000 volunteers who eventually rallied to the International Brigades' ranks that Spain was the latest frontline in a far wider-reaching struggle against a familiar fascist enemy. This has, however, resulted in many historians of the famous fighting unit to treat the country which hosted them as a more-or-less incidental backdrop to a far more transcendental antifascist struggle. In contrast, this thesis places Spain at the very centre of its analysis by recovering the wide range of cross-cultural encounters which took place between the foreign volunteers and the people, places, politics and institutions of the loyalist zone throughout the Civil War of 1936-1939. It explores how these encounters influenced the attitudes, identities and actions of the volunteers

throughout their time in Spain, as well highlighting the opportunities they created to shape the host country in their own image. Above all, the thesis argues that the volunteers were engaged in a creative process of defining the Spanish Civil War in their own terms – not least by rendering it as a sovereign struggle for the independence of a unified national community against the common, and foreign, fascist enemy. In so doing, it shows that Spain – far from being incidental to the International Brigades' military service – was at the very heart of their antifascist struggle.

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## Introduction: Spain and the International Brigades

*'The Spanish are a wonderful people'.*

International Brigade volunteer Sandor Voros in a letter from civil-war Spain.[1]

Of all the reasons for the enduring fascination of the Spanish Civil War, the now-legendary role of the International Brigades surely ranks amongst the most influential. The volunteer fighting force was established by the Communist International in October 1936 in the hopes of assisting the embattled Spanish Republic in its struggle for survival against a military insurgency led, at that point, by General Francisco Franco and his Nationalist rebels. The eventual presence within its ranks of around 35,000 individuals from some sixty different countries helped to transform a civil war taking place in what was still a little-known corner of Europe into a matter of enormous interest, and indeed importance, for politically-minded individuals across the world.[2] It still continues to do so well over eighty years on, with the sheer number of books and articles inspired by the volunteers' wartime service contributing to the remarkable fact that the literature dealing with Spanish Civil War is, by now, almost as sizeable as that dealing with the even more catastrophic – and global – conflict which came on its heels.[3] Whilst the presence of tens of thousands of volunteer soldiers in another country's civil war is certainly striking in its own right, there is a good reason why the International Brigades have become a household name across much of the world while the transnational soldiers who have offered their services in many other conflicts have, for the most part, not. As the dozens of memorials erected in the towns, villages

[1] Sandor Voros, letter dated 3 January 1938 in Cary Nelson and Jefferson Hendricks (eds.), *Madrid 1937: Letters of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade from the Spanish Civil War* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 124.

[2] Giles Tremlett provides these figures in *The International Brigades: Fascism, Freedom and the Spanish Civil War* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 5-6.

[3] Francisco J. Romero Salvadó argues that the 'immense interest' and 'enduring appeal' of the Spanish Civil War would have been impossible had it been a 'purely domestic dispute'. See Francisco J. Romero Salvadó, *Historical Dictionary of the Spanish Civil War* (Lanham, Toronto, Plymouth: The Scarecrow Press, 2013), 32. In an overview of International Brigade scholarship published up to the year 2004, Manuel Requena Gallego suggested that, on the basis of data compiled by Fernando Rodríguez de la Torre, 'it is perhaps the subject of the Spanish Civil War which has most generated publications' with at least 2,000 titles specifically on the Brigades, and another 317 which make some reference to them. The figure has certainly gone up since then. See Manuel Requena Gallego, 'Las Brigadas Internacionales: una aproximación historiográfica', *Ayer,* 56 (2004), 13. The bibliography compiled by Fernando Rodríguez de la Torre two years later contains, tellingly, well over a thousand pages. See Rodríguez de la Torre, *Bibliografía de las Brigadas Internacionales y de la participación de extranjeros a favor de la República (1936-1939)* (Albacete: Instituto de Estudios Albacetenses "Don Juan Manuel", 2006). As for the comparison between the size of the historiography dealing with the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War, see Paul Preston's *The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution and Revenge* (London: William Collins, 2016), 2.

and cities from whence they came continue to remind us, these particular volunteers went to Spain to fight something far greater than Francisco Franco alone. They went, above all, to fight fascism.

An overriding preoccupation with the International Brigades' transcendental struggle against the most notorious ideology to emerge from what Eric Hobsbawm memorably dubbed 'The Age of Extremes' has, however, tended to come at the cost of a thorough reckoning with the social, political, cultural and indeed historical peculiarities of the country which hosted them for almost three years of war.[4] Whether it is in public commemorations of the volunteers or printed works of academic scholarship, 'Spain' tends to appear as a largely incidental, if occasionally interesting, backdrop to a far-wider reaching struggle against the global fascist menace. Encounters with its people are, by extension, reduced to the unenviable status of anecdotal window dressing for familiar narrative accounts focusing on the supposedly separate, and infinitely more important, business of waging antifascist war on the frontlines. The following thesis, by way of contrast, places Spain at the very center of its analysis. Above all, it draws attention to a series of largely neglected cross-cultural encounters which, together, reveal the multifaceted ways in which thousands of foreigner soldiers imagined, encountered and at times even shaped the country in which they found themselves fighting. Spain, it will show, was not incidental to the volunteers' transnational military service at all. In fact, it was at its very heart.

## Searching for Spain: The Historiography so Far

The repeated marginalization of Spain in much of the literature devoted to the International Brigades becomes a great deal more understandable in light of the volunteers' *own* belief that the country was, above all else, the latest frontline in Manichaean struggle between the global forces of freedom and fascism. Massive German and Italian assistance for Franco's rebel troops in the form of tanks, planes, technicians and soldiers convinced all of them that a familiar reactionary menace was once again on the offensive and must be stopped by force of arms. A great many were keen to intensify an antifascist struggle which, as far as they were concerned, had already begun elsewhere; in the preceding years some had helped resist the dictatorship of Getúlio Dornelles Vargas in Brazil, others had fought the Blackshirts in Britain, and not a few had opposed the Nazis both within and without Germany.[5] Their

[4] Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (Abacus: London, 1995).

[5] See Brazilian volunteer Delcy Silveira's claim that his compatriots decided to help the Spaniards 'in the fight against fascism. The same fascism that founded integralism, and which was so close to Getúlio, would be our enemy in Spain. […] it was our obligation to contribute to the Spanish cause', quoted in Jorge Christian Fernández, *"Voluntários da Liberdade": Militares Brasileiros nas Forças Armadas Republicanas durante a Guerra Civil Espanhola (1936-1939),* (MA Thesis for the Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos, 2003), 259; British volunteer and trade unionist Jack Jones claimed that the volunteers went to Spain because 'for us it was the battle against Fascism, including our local Mosley crowd, and that inspired me and encouraged me to do what I could against it', quoted in *The Real Band of Brothers: First-Hand Accounts from the last British Survivors of the*

attitude towards Spain therefore tallies well with political scientist David Mallet's observation that transnational military service is more often motivated by a sense of existential threat to a cross-border community than any deep knowledge of – or indeed interest in – the political intricacies of the host country.[6] Yet while an understanding that the volunteers were engaged in 'one fight' against a common fascist enemy may help to explain why they decided to take up arms in a foreign civil war, it gives little sense of the decidedly Spanish context they had to contend with upon their arrival.

A long-standing tendency to focus on the experiences of specific national contingents has further contributed to this problem. Beginning with those accounts written by the veterans themselves, a veritable flood of works dealing with the discrete national groups which fought within the International Brigades has long enabled readers to become familiar with a key cast of characters and their experiences fighting side-by-side while, at the same time, failing to provide much sense of the war – or the country in which it took place, or the majority of people fighting it, or the civilians caught up within its violence – beyond battalion level.[7] Rather than investigating their contact with their host country, these works represent the volunteers as the militant vanguard of home-grown movements whose links to one another were far stronger than those with the people, places and politics of Spain. This is reasonable enough; once again, the volunteers and their admirers saw themselves in much the same terms. 'We who

*Spanish Civil War* (London: Collins, 2009), 131; the German Wilhelm Jagow wrote that 'I was one of the many German antifascists who had already suffered fascism through my own flesh and, for me, it was clear that what was occurring in Spain was also my business', quoted in Isabel Esteve Torres (ed.), *Recuerdos de brigadistas alemanes sobre la guerra de España (1936-1939),* (self-published online, 2014), 94.

[6] David Mallet, 'Framing to Win: The Transnational Recruitment of Foreign Insurgents' in Dan Miodownik and Oren Barak (eds.), *Nonstate Actors in Intrastate Conflicts* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 34-35.

[7] The participation of their co-nationals in the International Brigades has long proven to be of particular interest for historians working beyond Spain. For seperate overviews of the German scholarship into German volunteers, Hungarian scholarship into the Hungarians, French scholarship into the French and Scandinavian scholarship into Scandinavians see Carlos Collado Seidel, 'Entre la esvástica y las Brigadas Internacionales: Bibliografía reciente sobre la Guerra Civil en alemán'; Iván Harsányi and Anita Zalai, 'Sobre la Guerra Civil Española y sus antecedentes: Una visión desde Hungría'; Morten Heiberg, 'Visiones Nórdicas de la Guerra Civil Española' and Jean-Marc Delaunay, 'Miradas francesas sobre la Guerra Civil', all published in *Studia Histórica, Historia contemporánea*, 32, (2014). To get a sense of just how widespread 'national' histories are, it is useful to consider contingents of specific volunteers. Take, for example, those who spoke English. Amongst the many secondary works devoted to them are Robert Rosenstone's *Crusade of the Left: The Lincoln Battalion in the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Pegasus, 1969); Cecil Eby's *Comrades and Commissars: The Lincoln Battalion in the Spanish Civil War* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007); Michael Petrou's *Renegades: Canadians in the Spanish Civil War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008); Fearghal McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999); James Hopkins' *Into the Heart of the Fire: The British in the Spanish Civil War* (California: Stanford University Press, 1998); Richard Baxell's *British Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War: The British Battalion in the International Brigades, 1936-1939* (London: Routledge, 2004) and Hywel Francis' *Miners Against Fascism: Wales and the Spanish Civil War* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1984).

publish this booklet', wrote the essayist Nettie Palmer in her preface to a 1948 *who's who* of the Australian fighters, 'feel that theirs is a brave chapter in our Australian history'.[8] This approach has been mirrored in dozens of subsequent accounts, very few of which engage with the enormous scholarship dedicated to the Spanish Civil War in general. Tellingly, the vast majority of the many books devoted to the English-speaking volunteers fail to cite a single work of Spanish-language scholarship whatsoever. The foreign units, in short, are treated as isolated worlds unto themselves.

Whilst those monographs dealing with the foreign fighters as a multinational whole tend to engage far more closely with the broader Spanish context, they too tend to look inwards by exploring familiar issues such as their backgrounds, their motivations in going to fight, their journeys to the peninsula, their experiences of training and, most importantly, their role on the frontlines. These priorities are evident, to varying degrees, in all of the major studies published since the war, starting with Verle B. Johnston's *Legions of Babel* in 1967, continuing with Rémi Skoutelsky's *Novedad en el frente* and César Vidal's *Las Brigadas Internacionales* in 2006, and concluding with Giles Tremlett's *The International Brigades: Fascism, Freedom and the Spanish Civil War* in 2020.[9] Certainly, these works touch on a range of issues which are largely overlooked by the histories of individual national contingents such as the initial steps which were taken to set up the International Brigades as well as their subsequent relationship with the loyalist military and civilian authorities. Whilst passing references to the volunteers' encounters with both Spain and Spaniards can also be found in the pages of them all, they invariably take second place to the primary objective of bringing their vivid example of international solidarity, resistance and even humanitarianism back to life – an example which, of course, makes the International Brigades so compelling for their intended readers in the first place.

This brings us to the question of precisely what themes have attracted the many individuals writing about the volunteers in the past eight decades. If historians often make it their business to dismantle myths, there is a good case to be made that the word itself appears with particular frequency whenever the International Brigades are mentioned, with a now very long line of writers seeking, again and again, to debunk competing claims over the unit's origins, its day-to-day management and the political ambitions of its founders.[10] Every one of these controversies can be traced back to the war itself, with rebel propagandists working hard to represent the volunteers as

[8] Nettie Palmer, Len Fox, Jim McNeill and Ron Hurd (eds.), *Australians in Spain: Our Pioneers Against Fascism* (Sydney: Current Book Distributors, 1948), 3.

[9] Verle B. Johnston, *Legions of Babel: The International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1967); Rémi Skoutelsky, *Novedad en el frente: Las Brigadas Internacionales en la guerra civil* (Madrid: Temas de Hoy, 2006); César Vidal, *Las Brigadas Internacionales* (Madrid: Espasa, 2006); Tremlett, *The International Brigades*.

[10] For an example of an item of scholarship which openly situates itself within this historiographical back-and-forth, see Richard Baxell's 'Myths of the International Brigades', *Bulletin of Spanish Studies,* Volume 91, 1-2, (2014), 11-24. Michael Jackson openly acknowledged a desire to challenge a series of supposed 'myths' in *Fallen Sparrows: The International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society,1994), especially pages 25 and 31-32.

mercenaries of international communism so that they, in turn, could bolster their claims to be the sole representatives of the 'Spanish People'.[11] This simplistic narrative became a mainstay of the four-decade-long Francoist dictatorship, appearing in newspaper articles marking wartime anniversaries as well as the earliest history of the International Brigades to be published in Spain, in 1948.[12] Motivated by much the same wartime need to strip the enemy of legitimacy and bolster their own claims to represent an authentic national community, those responsible for establishing and later running the International Brigades carefully skirted around the glaring question of precisely who had brought them into existence, with its leading figures simply arguing that they were the inevitable outcome of global working-class enthusiasm for the Republican cause.[13]

Whilst it was never a secret that the International Brigades had first been assembled in the Castilian town of Albacete in October 1936, the precise role of both the Comintern and the Soviet Union remained hugely controversial until relatively recently. The long-standing dispute was given fresh impetus towards the end of the Cold War with the publication of several works claiming that the International Brigades were, to quote the title of R. Dan Richardson's provocative 1982 study, a 'Comintern Army' staffed by hand-picked apparatchiks whose primary allegiance was not to Madrid, but to Moscow.[14] Richardson's argument that its leadership was less interested in defending Spanish democracy than extending Communist power throughout Europe was eagerly taken up by Radosh, Habeck and Sevostianov in their tellingly-titled 1997 tome *Spain Betrayed* and has since been embraced by historians such as the Francoist Minister of Culture Ricardo de la Cierva, the American scholar Stanley Payne and the Spanish writer César Vidal.[15] As Enzo Traverso pointed out in his seminal study of ideological conflict in inter-war Europe, the climate of post-Cold War revisionism which emerged in the 1990s had already led a number of scholars to redefine 'antifascism' as an essentially communist project whose democratic language

[11] Ángel Viñas, 'La creación de las Brigadas Internacionales' in Josep Sánchez Cervelló and Sebastián Agudo (eds.), *Las Brigadas Internacionales: nuevas perspectivas en la historia de la Guerra Civil y del exilio* (Tarragona: Publicacions URV, 2015), 15-24.

[12] Anon., *Las Brigadas Internacionales: La ayuda extranjera a los rojos españoles* (Madrid: Oficina Informativa Española, 1948).

[13] For the hesitancy of the International Brigades' founders and leaders to discuss the unit's Comintern origins, see R. Dan Richardson's *Comintern Army: The International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1982), 32-33 and the same author's 'Foreign Fighters in Spanish Militias: The Spanish Civil War 1936-1939', *Military Affairs,* 40:1 (February 1976), 7-11. For an alternative view emphasising the role of spontaneous antifascist enthusiasm in leading to the creation of the International Brigades see Baxell, *British Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War*, 130-149.

[14] R. Dan Richardson, *Comintern Army.*

[15] Ronald Radosh, Mary M. Habeck and Grigory Sevostianov, *Spain Betrayed: The Soviet Union in the Spanish Civil War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001); Ricardo de la Cierva, *Brigadas Internacionales 1936-1996: La verdadera historia: Mentira histórica y error del estado* (Madrid: Editorial Fenix,1997); Stanley Payne, prologue in César Vidal, *Las Brigadas Internacionales* (Espasa, Madrid: 2006).

was, apparently, little more than a façade for deep-seated authoritarianism.[16] Revisionist interpretations of the International Brigades can be comfortably situated within this historiographical shift. For those scholars who subscribe to them, the principal 'myth' is that the volunteers had fought for democracy.

A number of historians who are more disposed to accept the volunteers' antifascist language at face value have accused proponents of the Comintern Army thesis of using questionable methods to push through sweeping, foregone and above all partisan conclusions. Peter Carroll was particularly vehement when claiming that 'such efforts appear to have the trappings of *bona fide* scholarship, but to a remarkable degree stand instead as examples of unvarnished ideology and polemic'.[17] Helen Graham has pointed out how revisionist claims that Joseph Stalin sought a Communist takeover of Spain are undermined by none other than the same declassified documents the authors of *Spain Betrayed* boasted of having uncovered; she argues that if anything, these show that the volunteers, their superiors, the Comintern and the Soviet Union often had quite distinct ambitions in Spain. Just as importantly, they expose the latter's often limited ability to direct events taking place thousands of miles away and determined, to a large extent, by the contingencies of war.[18] Josep Puigsech Farras' brief biographical study of a chief figure in the early running of the International Brigades' base at Albacete – the Italian Communist Giuseppe di Vittorio – provides compelling evidence for these arguments by showing that even those individuals directly appointed by the Comintern enjoyed significant autonomy of action and often expressed dissatisfaction with the decisions made by their communist superiors.[19] For these historians, then, the real 'myth' is one of unbridled Stalinist control over the International Brigades.

Historiographical culture wars aside, the Comintern Army debate continues to matter for the purposes of this thesis for a number of reasons. In the first place, it invites us to consider the precise relationship between the International Brigades and the home-grown institutions of the Spanish Republic. Although Daniel Kowalsky has shown beyond doubt that the decision to establish the transnational fighting force was indeed taken by the Comintern Executive Committee in September 1936, there was neither a concerted communist plot to take over the Republic war effort nor any attempt to install a Stalinist dictatorship in Spain.[20] While relations with civil and military authorities were certainly not free of occasional tensions, the International Brigades ultimately answered to the Republican High Command and, for the most part, abided by its

[16] Enzo Traverso, *A sangre y fuego: de la guerra civil europea (1914-1945)* (Valencia: PUV, 2009), 17-18.
[17] Peter Carroll, 'The Myth of the Moscow Archives', *Science and Society,* 68:3 (Fall 2004), 338.
[18] Helen Graham, 'Spain Betrayed? The New Historical McCarthyism', *Science & Society,* 63:3 (Fall 2004), 364-369.
[19] Josep Puigsech Farras, 'Entre el ejército del Comintern y la solidaridad antifascista: la trayectoria de Giuseppe di Vittorio en el debate sobre la naturaleza de las Brigadas Internacionales', *Studia Histórica, Historia contemporánea,* 28 (2010), 309-327.
[20] Daniel Kowalsky, 'The Soviet Union and the International Brigades, 1936-1939', *Journal of Slavic Military Studies,* 19:4 (2006), 88-89.

military regulations. The Comintern Army debate similarly encourages us to weigh up the relative importance of foreign and domestic factors in the making of the International Brigades' institutional culture. The so-called 'political commissars' are crucial for getting to grips with this particular issue. These were not unique to the International Brigades, instead being appointed to every company, battalion and brigade in the Popular Army with the explicit mandate of exercising a socio-political influence over the combatants and maintaining their antifascist fighting spirit. Whilst an important precedent for the Commissariat lay in the Russian Civil War, its Spanish equivalent developed out of the ad-hoc system of appointing 'political delegates' to the workers' militias which had sprung up in the wake of the military rising.[21]

The predominance of communists within the Commissariat's ranks, combined with their penchant for writing lengthy reports on the conduct of the men under their authority, has rendered the system controversial ever since it was formalised by the Ministry of War in October 1936. This controversy has proven particular keen for those operating within the International Brigades, with R. Dan Richardson describing them as gatekeepers of the 'Comintern Army' responsible for guarding its social, political and military affairs at the expense of the common Republican good.[22] Certainly, the most senior amongst them were Comintern appointees firmly committed to both the Communist Party and the Soviet Union. They unquestionably monitored the conduct of their fellow volunteers and had the right to discipline those they judged to be erring from antifascist orthodoxy, whatever that might have meant, with Robert Stradling going as far as to argue that they deliberately imported Stalinist terror into Spain.[23] But for all the spy-mania they displayed – not to mention the liability of individual commissars to abuse their power – there was neither a constant, nor fundamental, conflict between the commissariat and the volunteers. Even taking into account inevitable personality clashes, the commissars were bound to their men by a shared worldview and identical wartime objectives. This does not mean, of course, that they were any less interested in initiating, managing and representing encounters between the volunteers and 'ordinary' Spaniards in a way which was favourable to their own military and political ends, nor that they were always happy for the Republican authorities to involve themselves in what they often saw as their personal business.

## The Transnational Turn

In the past decade, a transnational approach to the International Brigades has proven invaluable in enabling historians to rethink the familiar set of questions raised above.

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[21] For an overview of the commissar system, see James Matthews, '"The Vanguard of Sacrifice"? Political Commissars in the Republican Popular Army during the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939', *War in History*, 21:1 (2014), 82-101.

[22] Again, the trend was set by R. Dan Richardson in *Comintern Army,* 119-133. One of the veterans who later described the commissars in these terms was William Herrick in *Jumping the Line: The Adventures and Misadventures of an American Radical* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998).

[23] Robert Stradling, 'English-speaking Units of the International Brigades: War, Politics and Discipline', *Journal of Contemporary History,* 45:4 (October 2010), 744-767.

While the first systematic attempts to grapple with the veritable multitude of ideas, institutions and individuals which refuse to fit within neat national borders can be traced back to the 1990s and the seemingly inexorable march of globalisation, it is only recently that transnational approaches have made serious inroads into the study of modern Spain. Given that the international implications of the Civil War have always been evident, it is little surprise that the conflict has proven to be a particularly attractive subject for historians working within the new paradigm.[24] By reconsidering topics as diverse as communist musical propaganda and anarchist immigration from abroad, they have shown how the wartime country was fundamentally shaped by ideas, actors and networks spanning far beyond its own borders.[25] Transnationalism is now the principal lens through which historians are conceptualising the International Brigades, too; tellingly enough, the word itself appears no less than seventeen times in the first chapter alone of one recent study into the Scottish volunteers.[26]

It might, at first, seem counter-intuitive that a thesis which intends to restore Spain to the history of the International Brigades should also draw on an approach which seeks to 'denationalise' our understanding of the past by – in the words of Paisley and Scully – 'decentering the nation and the state as the natural foci of historical experience and historical enquiry'.[27] In reality, though, the national and the transnational are rarely easy to separate. The very origins of the transnational turn can, after all, be located in the attempts of historians specialising in specific nation states to better understand the outside factors which play such a crucial role in shaping them.[28] It is therefore worth bearing in mind Pierre-Yves Saunier's contention that 'the transnational perspective acknowledges and assesses foreign contributions to the design, discussion and implementation of domestic features within communities, politics and societies; and vice-versa, the projection of domestic features into the foreign'.[29] Unlikely though it may at first seem, civil wars offer a particularly valuable opportunity to interrogate this key meeting point between the 'domestic' and the 'foreign' given that they often involve direct intervention from outside states, armed fighters and civil groups.[30] The Spanish

[24] Giuliana Chamedes, 'Transnationalising the Spanish Civil War', *Contemporary European History,* 29 (2020), 261-263.

[25] Diego Alonso, 'Transnational networks of Communist Musical Propaganda in the Spanish Civil War', *Journal of War and Culture Studies,* 14:4 (2021), 454-478; James A. Baer, *Anarchist Immigrants in Spain and Argentina* (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 161-178.

[26] See the introduction to Fraser Raeburn, *Scots and the Spanish Civil War: Solidarity, Activism and Humanitarianism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 1-19.

[27] On 'denationalising' the past, see Akira Iriye, *Global and Transnational History: The Past, Present, and Future* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 9. On 'decentring the nation', see Fiona Paisley and Pamela Scully, *Writing Transnational History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 1.

[28] Pierre-Yves Saunier, *Transnational History* (Basginstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 27-9.

[29] Ibid, 3.

[30] Jeffrey T. Checkel (ed.), *Transnational Dynamics of Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 3-4.

Civil War has long been treated as an exception in this regard, but it was not. What *was* exceptional was the extent and breadth of foreign intervention, with the International Brigades representing an obvious case study when it comes to seeing just how transnational soldiers can contribute to the making of a nation at war, and how the domestic circumstances of a nation at war can, in turn, contribute to the making of a transnational soldier.

It would be difficult for any new study of the International Brigades to ignore the recent transnational turn for the simple fact that the volunteers themselves were, in many respects, archetypical transnational actors. Although historians and military theorists have typically regarded modern soldiering as bound to the growth of national conscript armies, Nir Arielli and Bruce Collins have rightly pointed out that multinational military forces have, in fact, been almost ubiquitous for three centuries.[31] Insightful though this certainly is, there remains a great deal more to the making of a transnational soldier than the simple fact of fighting outside of ones' own country. The identities, ambitions and actions of those who belonged to the International Brigades were also, in many respects, profoundly transnational. Communism was a particularly important influence on many of the volunteers, and not just because the majority of them were card-carrying party members. Lisa Kirschenbaum's work has shown how they often shared basic assumptions about revolution, labour relations and the Soviet Union, too.[32] Come the 1930s, the international communist movement would closely overlap with an emerging transnational antifascist culture – a culture which was, in turn, reinforced through the geographical mobility of many volunteers, including those who had been forced to leave their countries as a result of left-wing political activity.[33] the International Brigades became home to a quite extraordinary antifascist diaspora, with the 1,664 Yugoslavian volunteers arriving from no fewer than 24 different countries.[34] As far as Helen Graham is concerned, 'border crossings' are nothing less than the volunteers' defining feature.[35]

The volunteers' personal backgrounds are not the only reason to consider the International Brigades through a transnational lens. After all, the institution itself was brought into being by the Comintern and set up under the direct guidance of key figures

[31] Nir Arielli and Bruce Collins, 'Introduction' in Arielli and Collins (eds.), *Transnational Soldiers: Foreign Military Enlistment in the Modern Era* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1-12.
[32] Lisa Kirschenbaum, *International Communism and the Spanish Civil War: Solidarity and Suspicion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
[33] For recent studies of the volunteers' geographical mobility before, during and after the Spanish Civil War see Gerben Zaagsma, *Jewish Volunteers, the International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017); Enrico Acciai, 'Albanian Transnational Fighters: From the Spanish Civil War to the European Resistance Movements (1936-1945)', *War in History,* 27:3 (2020), 346-367 and Jorge Marco, 'Transnational Soldiers and Guerrilla Warfare from the Spanish Civil War to the Second World War', *War in History,* 27:3 (2020), 387-407.
[34] Avgust Lešnik, 'La Guerra civile spagnola (1936-1939) nella storiografia jugoslava/slovena', *Qualestoria,* 1 (June 2011), 43.
[35] Helen Graham, *The War and its Shadow: Spain's Civil War in Europe's Long Twentieth Century* (Brighton, Portland and Toronto: Sussex Academic Press, 2012), 75-95.

in the international communist movement. For as long as they existed the International Brigades enjoyed a degree of autonomy which went hand-in-hand with a distinct institutional culture. Over time, however, they were integrated into the Republic's emerging Popular Army and subjected to its various rules and regulations. They were, as a consequence, something of a hybrid. They were a Comintern-created organisation integrated into the regular armed forces of Spain; they were predominantly led by foreign communists who stressed their allegiance to a cross-party antifascist alliance; they adopted Spanish as an official language but most of the volunteers could not speak it; their distinguishing feature was their internationalism but they soon consisted, in the main, of Spanish conscripts.[36] As this thesis will show, transnationalism would come to underpin its members' cross-cultural encounters with the host country in practically every way. In order to understand those encounters, however, it is first necessary to unearth them.

## Problematizing Cross-Cultural Encounters

Cross-cultural encounters are a fact of war. Fighting and travelling have gone hand-in-hand for as long as the two have existed, with the association firmly cemented in the popular imagination by works of literature such as Homer's *Iliad*, classic films like Rossellini's *Paisà* and even television shows such as the cult classic *Sharpe*.[37] With their deliberate evocation of the sounds, sights and smells of an exotic country, the memoirs of the antifascist volunteers who fought in Spain can, in many ways, be considered a form of travel literature in their own right. All the same, and as entertaining though references to their first experience of foreign food or their attempts to barter with peasant villagers may be, it is important to remember that their contact with Spain could amount to something far more significant than a series of amusing anecdotal asides. As Alan Beyerchen has pointed out in relation to the expeditionary forces of the First World War, being based in foreign territory creates a range of challenges which must be carefully navigated by both rank and file soldiers and their military superiors if they are to operate at full potential. Most obviously, they must collaborate with home forces, deal with unfamiliar languages, adapt to local customs and procure basic services such as housing and food from civilians. [38] Nor does cross-cultural contact always have to be a face-to-face affair to be militarily significant. Whether they come into sustained contact with locals or not, soldiers operating in foreign territory will often construct a mental image of their host country in such a way as to facilitate their own sense of individual and collective purpose. The following thesis therefore defines cross-cultural encounters in deliberately broad terms, encompassing both direct and imagined contact between the volunteers and the people, places, politics and culture of Spain.

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[36] Iriye, *Global and Transnational History,* 12-13.

[37] Alan Beyerchen, 'Introduction: Concept and Themes' in Alan Beyerchen and Emre Spencer (eds.), *Expeditionary Forces in the First World War* (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing and Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 1-2.

[38] Ibid, 7-8.

The encounters which unfolded between foreign soldiers and native civilians in the course of the twentieth century could be friendly, coercive, violent, and practically everything in-between depending on the place, the time, the people concerned and the wider social, political, and military context at hand. They have, in short, been about as varied as the kinds of wars which make them possible in the first place. While the concept remains controversial, the Spanish Civil War betrayed many of the key characteristics of a 'total' conflict in which the boundaries between civilians and soldiers broke down as each side sought to mobilise their respective populations in favour of ideologically-driven, zero-sum, mutually-exclusive war aims.[39] The International Brigades' internal press often stressed how the foreign volunteers' struggle against the fascist menace enjoyed the backing of their Spanish hosts, not least the thousands of women working in rearguard production. Even more strikingly, the volunteers actively sought to win Spaniards of all ages and backgrounds over to their partisan vision of antifascist war by holding rallies, bringing in the harvest and establishing orphanages. In addition to being mobilised in favour of total war, Spanish civilians famously found themselves on its receiving end, too. Nationalist bombing raids against Madrid, Barcelona and Guernica convinced the volunteers that they were witnesses of a new kind of fascist warfare, with their own treatment of civilians enabling them to differentiate themselves from the enemy and, in turn, legitimise their own participation in what they all considered a just war.

Longstanding prejudices as well as the awkward contingencies of war can quickly undermine top-down narratives of mutual understanding between soldiers and civilians of the kind espoused by the International Brigades throughout their time in Spain. The language of liberation used by the Allies as they swept northwards through Italy in 1943 was hopelessly undermined by the realities of hunger, disease and prostitution described by the likes of Norman Lewis in his classic first-hand account of the British intelligence service in Naples.[40] In situations such as these, the very language used to conceptualise cross-cultural encounters can prove to be a source of contention, with the concepts of 'liberation' and 'occupation' very much open to interpretation – both in the eyes of historians and the subjects they study.[41] As in other wartimes contexts, the cross-cultural encounters which took place between the International Brigades and their Spanish hosts required managing, navigating and rationalising in a manner which was favourable towards a specific set of military aims; as the following thesis will show, this took up considerable time and energy on the part of all those concerned. The commissars, in particular, were keen to ensure that their ubiquitous claims of having come to civil-war Spain to protect the 'Spanish People'

[39] On the difficulties of defining the Spanish Civil War as a 'total war' see Roger Chickering, 'The Spanish Civil War in the Age of Total War', In Martin Baumeister and Stefanie Schüler-Springorum (eds.), *'If you Tolerate This…': The Spanish Civil War in the Age of Total War* (Frankfurt and New York: Campus Verlag, 2008), 28-43.

[40] Norman Lewis, *Naples '44: An Intelligence Officer in the Italian Labyrinth* (London: Eland, 1978).

[41] Maria Escolar, *Allied Encounters: The Gendered Redemption of World War II Italy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019).

from fascism were not undermined by the behaviour of the volunteers. Education and punishment often went hand-in-hand.

Encounters between soldiers of different nationalities can be just as strained as those with civilians. Once again, rhetorical gestures of friendship can all too easily give way to disillusionment, impatience or even outright prejudice, particularly given the widespread habit of generalising about the supposed martial abilities of different ethnic groups.[42] This has often proven the case with multinational troops fighting side by side in the same military campaigns. The Britons who fought in the Peninsular War between 1808 and 1814 not only had a stubborn tendency to regard the Spaniards who were supposed to be their allies as both inherently violent and hopelessly incompetent but seemed to find it altogether easier to sympathise with their more 'cultured' French enemy. It is no coincidence that these anti-Spanish stereotypes were mainstays of the so-called 'Black Legend' which had plagued international attitudes towards Spain since the Inquisition.[43] Nor was the habit of denigrating military allies limited to Wellington's troops, with transnational historians drawing attention to the fraught relationship between well-intentioned foreign volunteers and their native counterparts in conflicts as diverse as the First Boer War and the Arab-Israeli War of 1948.[44] Those responsible for leading multinational armies, not least the British Army in the Second World War and the Red Army in the Russian Civil War, have proven just as likely as the rank and file to regard specific nationalities with deep suspicion, particularly when it comes to their political loyalties.[45] For all their talk of international solidarity, the volunteers of the International Brigades complained about the fighting capacity of their Spanish comrades so often, and so unabashedly, that the commissariat was forced to undertake numerous campaigns against what they justifiably saw as a threat to their military effectiveness.

The International Brigades by no means had a monopoly on the cross-cultural encounters generated by Civil War. Beating them to the chase on the Republican side were the foreigners who took up arms to stave off the military rising in cities such as

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[42] Heather Streets, *Martial Races: The Military, Race and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 6-8.

[43] David T. Gies, '"Such is Glorious War": British Reflections on the Peninsular War in Spain (1808-1814)', *Bulletin of Spanish Studies,* 91:9-10 (2014), 261-271; Gavin Daly, 'Barbarity More Suited to Savages: British Soldiers' Views of Spanish and Portuguese Violence during the Peninsular War, 1808-1814', *War & Society,* 35:4 (2016), 242-258.

[44] Fransjohan Pretorius, 'Welcome but Not That Welcome: The Relations between Foreign Volunteers and the Boers in the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902' in Christine G. Krüger and Sonja Levsen (eds.), *War Volunteering in Modern Times: From the French Revolution to the Second World War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 122-149; Nir Arielli, 'Recognition, Immigration and Divergent Expectations: The Reception of Foreign Volunteers in Israel During and After the Wars of 1948 and 1967', *Journal of Modern European History,* 14:3 (2016), 374-390.

[45] Steven O'Connor and Martin Gutmann, 'Under a Foreign Flag: Integrating Foreign Units and Personnel in the British and German Armed Forces, 1940-1945', *Journal of Modern European History*, 14:3 (2016), 321-341; Peter Whitewood, 'Nationalities in a Class War: <<Foreign>> Soldiers in the Red Army during the Russian Civil War', *Journal of Modern European History,* 14:3 (2016), 342-358.

Barcelona and Madrid in July 1936. These fought in the various workers' militias which were formed in the earliest days of the war, with some of them later switching to the International Brigades.[46] The most famous of them remains, without a doubt, George Orwell. Along with up to 700 other foreigners, Orwell fought in the approximately 10,000-strong militia affiliated to the *Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista* (POUM) and has played a unique role in keeping international interest in the Civil War alive and well ever since. Many of the most memorable passages of his memoir, the belated classic *Homage to Catalonia*, describe his encounters with the proletarian revolution which had spilled into Barcelona's streets in the wake of the rebellion's defeat in vivid detail.[47] As Andy Durgan has shown, foreigners within the POUM militia exercised a direct influence over their Spanish comrades by taking on positions of authority in their respective units and on occasion reorganising them along more traditional military lines.[48] Although the volunteers of the International Brigades rarely had anything substantial to say about the militias, they were all too happy to contrast them with the effectiveness of their own antifascist army in the making. As we will see, they considered themselves to be nothing less than pioneers in the art of antifascist war – a claim which, combined with the predominance of foreign communists amongst their ranks, caused occasional tensions with their loyalist allies.

While the workers' militias were busy fighting fascism on the nearest frontlines, General Franco was flying in thousands of Moroccan troops to finish off the frustrated business of the military rising. Using state-of-the-art aircraft provided courtesy of Adolf Hitler, the Nationalists succeeded in landing some 13,962 men in southern Spain by early October 1936.[49]As the new arrivals advanced towards the Republican capital of Madrid, they sacked towns and terrorised local populations in a striking example of how violent cross-cultural encounters could be used as a deliberate arm of military strategy.[50] Recently, Ali Al Tuma has worked hard to reconstruct the Moroccan experience of war, including their encounters with Spaniards.[51] Christopher Othen and Judith Keene, meanwhile, have used a range of ego-documents to pen similarly bottom-up histories of Franco's other foreign fighters, whether they were wealthy Britons attracted to the Nationalists' quasi-crusade against 'red atheists' or Italian peasants fighting for a pay cheque. Stefanie Schüler-Springorum, for her part, has

[46] Kenyon Zimmer, 'The Other Volunteers: American Anarchists and the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939', *Journal for the Study of Radicalism,* 10:2 (Fall 2016), 19-52; Morris Brodie, 'Volunteers for Anarchy: The International Group of the Durruti Column in the Spanish Civil War', *Journal of Contemporary History,* 56:1 (2021), 28-54.

[47] Andy Durgan, 'International Volunteers in the POUM Militias', https://libcom.org/article/international-volunteers-poum-militias, 3-8, accessed 12 April 2023.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Michael Alpert, *Franco and the Condor Legion: The Spanish Civil War in the Air* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 31-32.

[50] Sebastian Balfour, *Deadly Embrace: Morocco and the Road to the Spanish Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 192-198.

[51] Of particular note in this regard is Ali Al Tuma's account of the relations between Moroccan soldiers and Spanish women in *Guns, Culture and Moors: Racial perceptions, Cultural Impact and the Moroccan Participation in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939)* (London: Routledge, 2018), 109-139.

focussed on the 19,000 Germans who were recruited by the Luftwaffe to provide crucial aerial support for the rebels.[52] Together, these studies of Franco's foreign fighters demonstrate how preconceived notions of the war came up against the more pragmatic realities of racist intolerance, military incompetence, and – as far as the German pilots were concerned – a frustrating lack of ideological imagination on Franco's part.[53]

## The Argument

While the direct consequences of the many encounters sustained between the foreign volunteers of the International Brigades and their Spanish hosts varied over time and place, they often shared one crucial characteristic. The principal argument made in every one of the following chapters is that they played a unique role in reinforcing the volunteers' identities as compassionate soldiers working towards the survival of a unified 'Spanish People' as they faced a brutal, foreign and above all fascist invasion. 'Civil War', as Stathis Kalyvas wrote in his well-known study of intranational violence, 'often refuses to speak its name'.[54] The antifascist volunteers certainly proved him right. This is not to deny that many of the veterans later used the words 'civil war' to describe the events which took place in Spain between 1936-1939, not least because it was the most commonly-recognised way of doing so in democratic countries such as Britain and the United States, if not Cold War Hungary, Poland or East Germany, where it stubbornly remained a 'National Revolutionary' war.[55] Even those who *did* use the language of 'civil war' were unlikely to regard the key fault line of the conflict as falling between Spaniards, however. Instead, they saw the violence as being, above all else, an existential struggle between the representatives of an authentic, working-class, sovereign and eternal Spain on the one hand and a numerically insignificant handful of reactionaries on the other. The work of Xosé Manoel Núñez Seixas has already highlighted how antifascist groups across the Republican spectrum rallied the concept of 'The Spanish People' (*el pueblo español*) as a means of securing legitimacy

[52] Christopher Othen, *Franco's International Brigades* (London: Reportage Press, 2008); Judith Keene, *Fighting For Franco* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 2001); Stefanie Schüler-Springorum, *La guerra como aventura: La Legión Cóndor en la Guerra Civil Española, 1936-1939* (Madrid: Alianza, 2014).

[53] Stefanie Schüler-Springorum, 'War as Adventure. The Experience of the Condor Legion in Spain' in Baumeister and Schüler-Springorum (eds.), *If You Tolerate This*, 230-233.

[54] Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 17. David Armitage makes the same point in *Civil Wars: A History in Ideas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), as well as pointing out that civil wars tend to include so many overlapping political conflicts – not to mention the added element of foreign intervention – that it is a challenge to define them in clear-cut terms. See in particular pages 3-27.

[55] For this Soviet-inspired version of the Spanish Civil War, see Igor Mednikov, 'Los Limites de una renovación: la historiografía actual rusa sobre la Guerra Civil Española', *Studia Histórica, Historia contemporánea,* 32 (2014), 411-426. German veterans use the language of a national revolutionary war in their testimonies in Esteve Torres (ed.), *Recuerdos de brigadistas alemanes*.

for their war effort, and it was precisely this discourse on which the foreign fighters so richly drew throughout their time in Spain.[56]

This, in itself, is an important reminder of the impact Spanish politics, history and culture could have on the institutional culture of the International Brigades and the motivations of the men within its ranks. The concept of 'The Spanish People' as a unified historical entity had nineteenth-century roots, with Spanish liberals inspired by Enlightenment ideas and the example of the French Revolution amongst its most enthusiastic advocates despite the fact that they themselves enjoyed only limited support from the popular masses.[57] Historians – many of them also liberal politicians – increasingly spoke of 'The Spanish People' as a single community whose origins could be traced into the ancient past. For these intellectuals, it was the intrinsically Spanish – and decidedly plebian – characteristics of rebelliousness and heroism which explained the arch of their nation's history; characteristics which had manifested themselves, above all, in popular resistance to the Napoleonic Invasion of 1808.[58] The myth of 1808 – a year in which Spain was, in reality, far from united against the foreign invader – was frequently invoked by propagandists on both sides throughout the Spanish Civil War as a historical parallel which enabled them to strip their opponents of their claims to represent the nation in arms. While they certainly made occasional appearances in the International Brigades' own propaganda, the events of nineteenth-century Spain were not common knowledge amongst the foreign volunteers.[59] What they *did* share with their Spanish hosts was the basic assumption that they were fighting for an organic, unified, sovereign community of Spaniards against an alien menace.

That community of Spaniards existed in the volunteers' minds much more than it did in reality. One is immediately reminded of Benedict Anderson's famous definition of the nation as an 'imagined community' on the grounds that its members feel a sense of shared belonging even though the vast majority of them will never come into contact with one another.[60] The fact that the foreign volunteers had not been born in Spain did not stop them from imagining the national community in terms favourable to their own participation within the country's fratricidal violence, with those Spaniards who had sided with the military rebellion conveniently left out. This latter point was not, at any rate, a major hindrance given that those volunteers who discussed the matter generally assumed – wrongly – that they had the overwhelming majority of Spaniards on their side. Those Spaniards who had not sided with the Republic were invariably

[56] Xosé-Manoel Núñez Seixas, 'Fighting for Spain? Patriotism, War Mobilization and Soldiers' Motivations (1936-1939)' in Baumeister and Schüler-Springorum (eds.), *'If you Tolerate This'*, 50.
[57] José Álvarez Junco, *Spanish Identity in the Age of Nations* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 297.
[58] Mark Lawrence, *Nineteenth-Century Spain: A New History* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2020), 2.
[59] See, for example, Jesus María Varela, 'The Second of May', *Our Fight: Front Line Organ of the XV Brigade,* unnumbered, 2 May 1938, 1, RGASPI, 545.3.515.
[60] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2016), 6-7.

regarded as unrepresentative parasites who had not only worked against the interests of their working-class compatriots for centuries on end, but were now relying on a combination of deceit, coercion and violence to carry out their illegitimate war effort. Crucially, these parasitic traitors – chief amongst them General Franco – answered to the beck-and-call of global fascism. The International Brigades' imagining of wartime Spain was, therefore, based on a profoundly exclusionary understanding of the nation in arms. Crucially, it enabled them to sidestep the fact that hundreds of thousands of Spaniards were at war with one another over two mutually-exclusive visions of their country's past, present and future.

The political expediency of using the 'Spanish People' in order to monopolise wartime legitimacy is starkly exposed by the Nationalists' repeated claims that *they* were the ones defending the imagined community against the corrupting evils of international political forces and their treacherous proponents within Spain – not least the 'reds', 'communists', 'atheists' and 'mercenaries' of the International Brigades.[61] Franco's wartime speeches betrayed a veritable obsession with the *extranjerismos* – 'foreign things' – which he believed had corrupted Spain's traditional character and threatened its Catholic destiny.[62] In this way, he was able to spin foreign support for the Republic not only as a menace to Spanish sovereignty, but as an affront to Spanish history itself. In a message delivered in the Nationalist capital of Burgos on the second anniversary of the military rising, the *Generalísimo* mocked Republican claims that they were fighting for national independence on the basis that, in his words, 'foreign invasion means opening up the Catalan frontier and allowing the undesirable internationals who loot and destroy to pass through', as he now implied the loyalists had done.[63] Of course, these charges required Franco to either overlook or downplay the fact that he himself counted on the support of around 78,000 foreign fighters sent by Mussolini, another 78,000 recruited from Spanish Morocco and some 19,000 Germans provided courtesy of the Luftwaffe.[64] When he *did* acknowledge the presence of these troops, it came with the spurious caveat that they were fighting on behalf of Spanish interests against an attempted Bolshevik takeover.[65]

These battles over the fundamental meaning of the Spanish Civil War have been overlooked in the existing literature on the International Brigades. This thesis, by contrast, draws attention to the way in which the volunteers imagined, as well as made, war in Spain. They were certainly not unique in defining a hugely contentious armed

[61] Xosé Manoel Núñez Seixas, *¡Fuera el invasor!: Nacionalismos y movilización bélica durante le guerra civil española (1936-1939)* (Madrid: Marcial Pons Historia, 2013)
[62] See for example Francisco Franco's speech to the SEU Youth on the *Día de la Raza*, Burgos, 12 October 1937, http://www.generalisimofranco.com/Discursos/discursos/1937/00016.htm, accessed 2 September 2022.
[63] Francisco Franco, 'Message on the Second Anniversary of the Rising', Burgos, 18 July 1938, http://www.generalisimofranco.com/Discursos/discursos/1938/00006.htm, accessed 2 September 2022.
[64] Viñas, 'La creación de las Brigadas Internacionales', 15-24.
[65] See Francisco Franco's declarations to the United Press, 18 July 1938, http://www.generalisimofranco.com/Discursos/prensa/00027.htm, accessed 2 September 2022.

conflict in their own narrow terms. Three competing claims over the fundamental character of the fighting which followed the allied landings in Italy were in circulation before Claudio Pavone synthesised them in his famous 1991 study, to take just one particularly striking example, spanning the civil war emphasised by defenders of Mussolini, the war of national liberation described by the state authorities and the revolutionary class war favoured by a new generation of left-wing activists. For all their attempts to monopolise the fundamental meaning of the violence, the far messier reality is that all three of these power struggles were often being carried out at once.[66] Between 1936 and 1939 Spain was faced with a similarly violent combination of civil conflict, workers' revolution, Francoist counter-revolution, religious war and a level of Italian and German intervention which makes it hard to deny that the fascist dictatorships were essentially at war with the Spanish Second Republic.[67] As with Second-World-War Italy, both the individuals directly engaged in this overlapping violence as well as those who have sought to influence the way in which it has been rationalised ever since have, for a range of political, social and even military reasons, tended to favour one all-encompassing interpretation over the rest.

The International Brigades were not exempt from this process. Moreover, by consulting the enormous written and spoken record its members generated throughout their time in Spain, it becomes possible to go beyond existing approaches which limit themselves to identifying and analysing the discourses used throughout the Spanish Civil War to mobilize Spaniards in both zones. For those discourses to be successful, it was essential that those on their receiving end found them compelling enough to fight and even die for. Whilst Núñez Seixas has himself argued in favour of 'going down into the trenches' in order to determine the extent to which this proved to be the case, his treatment of soldiers' attitudes towards the fundamental meaning of the Spanish Civil War has tended to be relatively brief as well as based on a limited set of sources such as trench journals.[68] This thesis seeks to fill the historiographical gap by placing the issue of reception centre stage and, in so doing, determining the impact of mobilizing narratives on the experiences and identities of just some of the soldiers responsible for waging war in Spain. One of its main findings is that the members of the International Brigades were by no means passive recipients of top-down propaganda. Instead, thousands of men from division right down to company level were engaged in a constant process of imagining the antifascist community in arms as well as situating themselves at its very vanguard. For the volunteers to make war

[66] Claudio Pavone, *A Civil War: A History of the Italian Resistance* (London: Verso Books, 2013).

[67] Paul Preston makes the argument that Italy was engaged in an undeclared war against the Second Spanish Republic in 'Italy and Spain in Civil War and World War' in Sebastian Balfour and Paul Preston, eds., *Spain and the Great Powers* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 151-184. There is also a very convincing case to be made that Nazi Germany sought to use its support for the Nationalists as a means of converting Spain into an informal outpost of its empire by gaining control of valuable primary materials with which to enrich the Third Reich as it rearmed for world war. See Pierpaolo Barbieri, *Hitler's Shadow Empire: Nazi Economics and the Spanish Civil War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015).

[68] Xosé-Manoel Núñez Seixas, 'Fighting for Spain?', 47-73.

on the frontlines they first had to make it in their own minds – and to do so, encounters with Spain and Spaniards would prove invaluable.

## Sources and Methodology

To uncover the largely forgotten cross-cultural encounters which form the focus of the following thesis it has been necessary to make use of an unprecedented range of primary sources. The International Brigades' own records, preserved in the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, are a particularly invaluable source of information. This enormous collection, which contains tens of thousands of documents collected under the auspices of the Commissariat, has been largely digitised. The benefits of digitisation are not limited to the rather obvious fact that documents once shrouded in massive secrecy are now easily accessible anywhere in the world. Just as important is the possibility of sifting through tens of thousands of files with unprecedented speed and flexibility, making the unusually wide-reaching focus of this particular study feasible. The archive contains commemorative books produced and distributed by the commissars, illustrated newspapers and military bulletins, censored correspondence, files on individual volunteers, military reports, draft memoirs, press cuttings and a great deal more. While these collections are a familiar source for many historians, existing studies into the International Brigades have made comparatively scant use of archives based in Spain itself. Both the Documentary Centre for Historical Memory in Salamanca and the General Military Archive in Ávila contain yet more commissarial material including military reports, disciplinary proceedings, a wide array of printed propaganda and even files documenting the sexual health of the volunteers which have made their way into the following chapters.

This extraordinarily varied documentary record, which simply has no parallel amongst other units in the Republican Army, is an even richer source of information than might, at first, be thought. For the most part it has been used to answer familiar questions concerning the backgrounds, motivations and military experiences of a familiar cast of foreign volunteers, often with a focus on specific national contingents. What has gone comparatively unnoticed is that it also represents an incredibly valuable window into the volunteers' engagement with the world outside their battalions. Old sources therefore invite new questions. Why limit the use of military newspapers to determining where a particular unit was stationed and which foreigners were fighting in its ranks when they also contain the first letters ever written by formerly illiterate conscripts, caricatures of Hitler, Franco and Mussolini which shed light on visions of the enemy, essays and poetry written by men of all nationalities which reveal their attitudes to Spanish war aims and photographs showing the foreign volunteers surrounded by civilians giving the antifascist salute? Many of these sources also enable the critical reader to reconstruct the process by which these encounters were initiated, managed and later reported by both the volunteers and their commissars. A thorough dive into the archives therefore reveals that the relatively minor importance they have been attributed in the historiography is by no means representative of their real-life importance during the Spanish Civil War.

A far more typical set of sources when it comes to writing about the International Brigades has been the volunteers' own written and spoken testimonies. Given that these volunteers were flesh-witnesses of an antifascist struggle which continues to inspire enormous admiration almost one-hundred years later, it ought not come as a surprise that their descriptions of their time in Spain have long been invested with a tremendous moral, as well as academic, importance. Those reading or listening to them are encouraged to reflect on the fact that these seemingly ordinary working-class volunteers had not only looked fascism in the face, but had done so on behalf of everybody who loves peace and democracy – their own audiences included. This moral premium goes a long way towards explaining the sheer number of recollections available in print, on tape and online in various languages. The construction of collective memories began before the war had even ended, with volunteers taking on the role of antifascist ambassadors by writing letters home describing the horrors of the fascist enemy which were, in turn, read out in local party or union meetings. Here was a distinctly antifascist version of the familiar soldiers' claim that to understand war – and, indeed, life itself – you have to 'be there'.[69] First-hand testimony continued to accumulate long after the war's end as veterans decided to write their memoirs as well as respond to requests for interviews or written recollections from historians and, in the case of East Germany, the state authorities.[70] Both written and spoken testimony has been used throughout the thesis, albeit with an unprecedented focus on the direct role of all-things-Spanish in the volunteers' lives and memories.

The moral premium invested into volunteer testimony often leads to the slippery assumption that these sources speak for themselves.[71] But as every good oral historian knows, the setting down of all past events, whether written or spoken, is a socially performative act shaped by the intervening days, weeks, months and years – not to mention the social, cultural and political context of the present.[72] This need not be considered a weakness; in fact, the subjective nature of the volunteers' recollections provides an invaluable insight into their attitudes and assumptions about Spain. One of the most striking aspects of these recollections is their general agreement about what aspects of the war are most worth writing or talking about. This is encouraged by interviewers who tend to focus on key chronological milestones such

[69] For the concept of the 'flesh witness' see Yuval Noah Harari, *The Ultimate Experience: Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture, 1450-2000* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 231-240.

[70] María Isabel Esteve Torres has translated and transcribed documents commissioned by the East German authorities and stored in the German Federal Archive in *Recuerdos de brigadistas alemanes.*

[71] For recent examples of popular histories which provide almost no critical gloss on volunteer testimony, see Arthur, *The Real Band of Brothers* and Adrián Bodek, *Brigadas Internacionales: Memorias vivas* (Madrid: La Oficina, 2014). For accounts of the International Brigades written by the volunteers and largely relying on their own testimony, see William C. Beeching, *Canadian Volunteers: Spain, 1936-1939* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, University of Regina, 1989) and Bill Alexander's *British Volunteers for Liberty* for the British.

[72] Corinna M. Peniston-Bird, 'Oral History: The Sound of Memory' in Sarah Barber and Corinna Penison-Bird (eds.), *History Beyond Text: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2009), 105-121.

as deciding to volunteer, crossing the Pyrenees, being hospitalised and returning home. Listening to the volunteers' many interviews and reading their equally voluminous written works leaves a definite sense that many of their narratives have, to varying degrees, been repeated, refined and reinforced over the years to tally with those of their comrades as well as the more general expectations of sympathetic audiences. For all these similarities, volunteer testimonies also differ in important ways. What an English volunteer wrote about in his memoirs may not correspond to what a Swedish volunteer discussed when interviewed in-person; what was of interest to a German volunteer writing in a letter home may not have been of interest to a Polish volunteer speaking at a memorial event; what an American volunteer experienced in one village may not have been the same as what a French volunteer experienced in another.

The International Brigades contained individuals from over fifty countries. These are not evenly represented in the following pages. We will hear from Britons, Brazilians, Spaniards, Americans, Canadians, Cubans, Mexicans, Hungarians, Czechs, Germans, Austrians, Russians, Italians, Poles, Swedes, Australians, Irishmen, many French volunteers, one who was born in China, another who was born in Ukraine and another who came all the way from Paraguay, but not always in equal measure. Rather than aspiring to be comprehensive – which given the sheer number of languages spoken in the unit would be an enormous logistical challenge for any historian – volunteer testimony is used in order to illustrate a number of key arguments made with the help of other forms of archival documentation. Another inescapable feature of the thesis is an imbalance in its use of 'ego-documents' originating from foreigners on the one hand and Spaniards on the other. The volunteers, at one point or another, will have come into contact with tens of thousands of Spaniards but only a fraction of these ever left behind *their* recollections of the cross-cultural encounters which ensued. While it is certainly the intention of the following chapters to restore both Spain and Spaniards to the history of the International Brigades, the sheer imbalance in source material means that this will be a history told, in the main, from the perspective of the foreign volunteers.

What follows, then, is above all a history of fighting men. It situates itself firmly within the so-called 'new military history' which, since the 1970s, has sought to look beyond grand strategy and large-scale military movements in order to properly understand the experiences of individual combatants on the ground. In many respects, a great many of the primary and secondary accounts of the International Brigades published in the decades following the Spanish Civil War pre-empted this historiographical shift by narrating the conflict from the decidedly 'bottom-up' perspective of recognisable and relatable individuals, almost always on the basis of their own testimony. Many of the traditionally side-lined aspects of combat which John Keegan brought to his colleagues' attention in his 1976 classic *The Face of Battle* have, as a result, long been evident to those historians interested in the International Brigades, be it the sensory overload of combat, the emotions of the soldiers involved, the role of individual

agency and the importance of contingent factors on the battlefield.[73] Far from offering top-down accounts of Republican military strategy, a great many spoken and written narratives of the unit risk leaving their audiences feeling – intentionally or not – that the fate of entire battles, and at times even the Spanish Civil War itself, lay firmly in the hands of the antifascist volunteers. It is, after all, their seemingly unparalleled example of individual armed action which makes those volunteers the subject of interest in the first place.

New military historians are not only concerned with rewriting battle narratives. They have also sought to give a fuller understanding of both military institutions and the experience of soldiering by engaging far more closely with the cultural, social and political factors which shape them both.[74] In the past two decades, historians of the Spanish Civil War such as Michael Seidman, James Matthews, Miguel Alonso Ibarra and David Alegre Lorenz have turned their attention to such diverse issues as the role of ideology in the lives of soldiers, the impact of material conditions on their sense of motivation, the influence of propaganda on their attitudes, the place of civilians in their lives and the importance of gender in forging their martial identities.[75] The International Brigades have, unfortunately, been largely left behind by this important wave of scholarship. Part of the explanation rests, as we have already seen, with the reluctance of their many devotees to engage with the wider historiography dealing with the Spanish Civil War. In fact, historians of the International Brigades have proven reluctant to engage with the wider scholarship on twentieth-century conflict in general. By investigating the unit's cross-cultural encounters with the Republican Government, other antifascist groups in Spain, native conscripts, enemy soldiers and loyalist civilians, this thesis not only hopes to put the history of the International Brigades in

[73] John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976).

[74] For a survey of some of the themes which were of interest to cultural historians of war in the 1990s – all of which continue to interest them today – see John Whiteclay Chambers II, 'The New Military History: Myth and Reality', *The Journal of Military History*, 55 (July 1991), 395-406.

[75] Although he has published widely with a 'new military history' focus, see in particular James Matthews, *Reluctant Warriors: Republican Popular Army and Nationalist Army Conscripts in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Before him, Michael Seidman had emphasised the role of material conditions as opposed to ideology in underpinning civilians' and soldiers' attitudes alike in *Republic of Egos: A Social History of the Spanish Civil War* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2002). For more recent Spanish-language scholarship on the soldiering experience, see Miguel Alonso Ibarra, 'La oferta del nuevo estado. Propaganda e ideologización del combatiente sublevado en la Guerra Civil Española (1936-1939)', *Historia y Politica,* 44 (2020), 305-335. The author argues that the Nationalist authorities actively sought to influence the attitudes of their conscript soldiers, largely in opposition to Francisco J., Leira Castiñeira's *Soldados de Franco: Reclutamiento forzoso, experiencia de guerra y desmovilización militar* (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 2020). For the application of the new military history to a specific battle narrated in chronological form, see David Alegre Lorenz, *La batalla de Teruel: Guerra total in España* (Madrid: La Esfera de los Libros, 2019). See, in particular, pages 21-25, in which Alegre Lorenz lays out his intention to 'put ourselves within the reality of the combatants' during the months in which the Battle of Teruel became, in his view, a 'paradigm of total war'.

closer contact with that of Spain, but also with that of twentieth-century Europe more broadly.

# 1: ‘Soldiers of the Glorious Popular Army’ – The International Brigades and the Spanish Republic at War

## Introduction

A long-standing emphasis on the multinational volunteers’ transcendental struggle against fascism means that historians have rarely asked how, exactly, they saw themselves fitting into a civil war which was led, and predominantly fought, by Spaniards. This chapter will show that the role they assigned to the International Brigades often amounted to something far greater than simply channeling foreign manpower into the beleaguered loyalist frontlines, important though this unquestionably was. Certainly, in the short run, fresh supplies of motivated and in some cases experienced soldiers would help stave off the enemy troops who were already gathering at the gates of Madrid by the end of 1936. All the same, the International Brigades’ original architects as well as their subsequent leaders rarely regarded manpower as being, in itself, sufficient for victory. Throughout the war, they worked hard to instill the volunteers with the unshakeable conviction that the truly unique contribution of their transnational fighting force was to act as the vanguard of an emerging antifascist army which, by uniting disciplined soldiers of all nationalities and political creeds under a central command, was the surest means of defeating a technically-superior enemy. By channeling their antifascist energies into an all-out defense against the foreign invaders in this way, the International Brigades could claim to be fulfilling the true will – and realizing the full potential – of the Spanish People in arms.

This chapter investigates the volunteers’ understanding of their place within the Republican War effort through the lens of military culture – that is, the collective norms, values and assumptions which shape the identities and actions of soldiers within specific military institutions.[76] The volunteers were constantly extolled to bring much-needed reserves of ‘unity’, ‘volition’ and ‘discipline’ to a war effort which, until their arrival, had been undermined by the supposed ‘factionalism’, ‘egoism’, and ‘inefficiency’ of the loyalist militias. This was not empty rhetoric foisted on the rank and file by a minority of self-interested commissars. Although most of the volunteers certainly focused on their frontline contribution to the antifascist struggle in their own accounts of the war, the assumption that they had facilitated the formation of a disciplined Popular Army is never far from hand. The unique circumstances in which the International Brigades were established had a major impact on the development of these martial values. For the most part, historians of military culture have focused on institutions which have emerged, and developed, within the confines of specific nations states over a period of several years, decades or even centuries. As a transnational institution created for the explicit purpose of fighting in another country’s civil war, the International Brigades’ own such culture was shaped by a more complex

[76] Peter R. Mansoor and Williamson Murray, ‘Introduction’ in Peter R. Mansoor and Williamson Murray (eds.), *The Culture of Military Organizations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1-14.

combination of national and transnational factors, not to mention the distinct cultural, political and military values of the multinational volunteers who made up the whole.

So far, the only historians to seriously consider the relationship between the International Brigades and the wider Republic war effort have done so within the narrow confines of the Comintern Army debate. R. Dan Richardson, for example, argued that the Brigade Commissariat were more intent on maintaining their operational autonomy in order to further communist influence in Spain than they were in co-operating with the beleaguered loyalist Government to defend parliamentary democracy.[77] This is far too simplistic a view. This chapter will argue that the main priority of the men within the International Brigades was not installing a Soviet beachhead in Spain so much as spearheading an organized and efficient war effort, the likes of which they considered absolutely necessary to secure a Republican victory and, by extension, deal a major blow against fascism. This is not to suggest, however, that communism played no role in the forging of the International Brigades' military culture. After all, their blueprint for victory was profoundly influenced by long-standing communist tenets such as revolutionary discipline, the much more recent Comintern policy of forming antifascist popular front alliances with a range of left-wing groups, as well as the even more immediate example of the Spanish Communist Party and its calls for a trained mass army. Crucially, it was never enough that the volunteers recognized the importance of these military values. Instead, they were promoted at every turn as an example of the International Brigades' ongoing utility to the Spanish Republic in such a way as to legitimize their presence on the frontlines.

## I: 'I remember the Word *Disciplina'* – The Making of a Transnational Military Culture

The role which the International Brigades' architects, leaders and volunteers assigned themselves within the wider Republican war effort was largely forged in opposition to what they made of the political and military situation prior to their own intervention. While the rising of July 1936 had triumphed in a number of the country's traditionally conservative areas, loyalist sections of the security forces fought alongside groups of armed workers in order to put down the rebellious garrisons in several major cities and, in so doing, kept large parts of the map under Republican control. Rifle-wielding militiamen and women who owed their allegiance to a dizzying array of left-wing organizations wasted no time in establishing their control over city spaces, taking over the means of production, bargaining for political power through local committees or else heading off to the nearest front to take on the fascist enemy. In the second half of August, the influential Italian Communist and future Commissar General of the International Brigades Luigi Longo made his first visit to the war-torn country in the hopes of assessing this situation. Although it would still be another month until the Comintern gave the official go-ahead for regional communist parties to begin recruiting for a volunteer fighting force in Spain, what he saw immediately convinced him of the Republic's need for increased political unity, firm military discipline and a centralized

[77] R. Dan Richardson, *Comintern Army,* 179-180.

command structure. As the man responsible for organizing the first batches of troops as well as overseeing the commissariat's subsequent work amongst the masses of volunteers, he would be absolutely key in ensuring that all three of these factors became cornerstones of the International Brigades' military culture.

Like the vast majority of the future volunteers, Luigi Longo's first port of call was Catalonia, a highly-industrialized region with a long-running reputation for class conflict, workers' revolt and radical anarchism. He immediately took note of how the barricades which had been set up along the roads in the wake of the military rising's defeat were manned by militiamen belonging to a range of different political parties and trade unions, while the requisitioned cars forced to navigate around them displayed the banners of an equally overwhelming array of workers' organisations. So too did the hotels, offices, schools and mansions of the region's many towns and villages.[78] Nowhere was this more evident than in its capital of Barcelona, a city in which – to borrow the famous words of George Orwell – the working class was still very much 'in the saddle'.[79] Armed with the tens of thousands of rifles which had fallen into their hands in the course of their struggle against the rebels a month previously, thousands of socialists, communists and above all anarchists had taken it upon themselves to collectivise businesses, requisition private property and establish working-class control over public spaces.[80] While impressed by their revolutionary enthusiasm, Longo was confirmed in his pre-existing belief that antifascist unity was in desperately short supply.[81] Nonetheless, he took the formation of a new government at the end of July as a sign that collaboration between the various antifascist groups of Spain was increasing.[82]

As far as Longo was concerned, political disunity went hand-in-hand with military weakness. While commending the antifascist enthusiasm shown by the workers' militias in the first weeks of the war, he would ultimately conclude that they lacked the technical expertise to face off a determined and technically-superior enemy, feeling that their leaders were more used to managing branches of political organisations than commanding armed units.[83] On a joint trip to obtain approval for the International Brigades from the Ministry of War in Madrid in late October 1936, both Longo and his colleague Pierre Rebière were confronted with what they took to be clear evidence of the ongoing failure of the militias. Rebière, a French Communist who would go on to become one of the International Brigades' first commissars, recalled seeing groups of soldiers milling around the streets whom he could only assume had left the front in

[78] Luigi Longo, *Las Brigas Internacionales en España* (Mexico: Era, Ancho Mundo, 1969), 32.
[79] George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 6.
[80] Pelai Pagès i Blanch, *War and Revolution in Catalonia 1936-1939* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013), 74-83.
[81] Longo, *Las Brigadas Internacionales en España,* 32.
[82] Ibid.*,* 35.
[83] Ibid., 30.

order to see their families or friends.[84] Similar descriptions of the early war effort as well-intentioned but naive would later be transmitted to the foreign volunteers in the pages of their trench press. One article not only informed them that 'the first forces were organized not by the government, but by trade unions, syndicates and political parties' but also added, with a predictable dash of condescension, that 'these groups were nothing more than a number of friends who rallied round the strongest character among them'.[85] All of these commentators were keen to stress the confusion of the early war effort in order to legitimise the merciful intervention of their own antifascist shock troops. That does not mean, however, that they considered that intervention to be any less essential.

Fortunately for the founders of the International Brigades, a ready-made alternative to the chaos of the workers' militias was already close at hand. Conveniently, if not coincidentally, Luigi Longo had long moved within the same transnational networks as the leading members of the Spanish Communist Party and, upon his arrival to Madrid at the end of August 1936, he made sure to get back in touch with old acquaintances. Amongst them were José Díaz, the Secretary General of the Party, Vicente Uribe, a member of its Executive Committee, and Dolores Ibárruri, its most talented and internationally-recognised orator. In the course of their meeting, these individuals left their Italian visitor under no doubts that the Nationalists enjoyed a massive superiority of arms over the Republic as well as a wider range of capable military leaders. Moreover, these belonged to a clear hierarchy of command leading all the way up to General Franco. Longo left feeling that a month and a half of war had made it patently clear what the Republic needed to do in response to this alarming situation. Above all, he was convinced of the need for the loyalists to unify their own political forces, rationalise their military command and mobilise fresh reserves of soldiers.[86] Even before they had come into existence, then, the International Brigades' blueprint for military victory was all but guaranteed to be tied to that articulated by Longo's trusted acquaintances in the Spanish Communist Party.

In addition to this blueprint for victory, the Communist Fifth Regiment supplied the founders of the Brigades with a direct example of how to put it into practice. Alexander Rodimitsev, a Soviet machine-gun specialist who was posted to Spain by his military superiors, defined the organisation as 'a scientific laboratory whose experience became the patrimony of the entire Republican Army'.[87] Rather than fighting on the frontlines, the Regiment limited itself to training men for what they rightly predicted would be a long-term war fought on a far larger scale than the individual militias were capable of sustaining with their limited resources and competing command structures. Mobilising huge numbers of soldiers in a joint war effort, instilling those men with a

[84] Pierre Rebière, manuscript for brochure on the creation of the International Brigades, 16, RGASPI, 545.3.401.

[85] Anon., 'Our Army is a People's Army', *English Volunteer for Liberty* (henceforth VFL), vol. 1, no. 2, 1 June 1937, 1, 5, Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (henceforth RGASPI,) 45.2.362.

[86] Longo, *Las Brigadas Internacionales en España,* 33-5.

[87] A. Rodímtsev, *Bajo el cielo de España* (Moscow: Editorial Progreso,1981), 122.

sense of discipline and creating capable officers to lead them in battle were all regarded by its most important leader, the Comintern agent Vittorio Vidali, as essential pre-requisites for facing off a highly organised, technically superior enemy.[88] Vidali was present at Longo's meeting with the Spanish Communists, where he wasted no time in convincing his old acquittance from Italy that it was an unparalleled example of discipline and combativity.[89] Relations between the Fifth Regiment and the International Brigades were close from the very beginning, with their local headquarters in Albacete being amongst the first places Longo called at when he arrived to the Castilian town on 12 October 1936 in order to organise the first units of foreign fighters.[90] Before long, many of the figures to emerge from its ranks, including General Juan Modesto, General Enrique Líster and Colonel Valentín González, would became familiar examples of discipline, firm leadership and antifascist volition for the volunteers owing to the frequent praise they received in their military bulletins.[91]

Longo had far more contact with both the Spanish Communist Party and the Fifth Regiment than he did with the Republican Government itself during these initial stages of organising the International Brigades. It was not, in fact, until the 22 October – as we saw earlier – when he, Pierre Rebière and the Polish Communist Stephan Wisniewski approached Prime Minister Largo Caballero for his express approval of their work, relying on an introduction from none other than their Comintern colleague Vittorio Vidali. The close link between the three organisations would endure all throughout the war. Tellingly, Manfred Stern – a Hungarian general whom the Comintern appointed to the International Brigades and went by the *nom de guerre* of Kleber – reported not to the Spanish Ministry of War on his arrival to Spain but rather to the Central Committee of the Spanish Communist Party, not unlike Longo himself had done before him.[92] Cosy though these left-wing dealings may seem, they do not, by themselves, amount to evidence of a Comintern plot to overtake the Spanish Republic. What the close working relationship between these nominally separate groups, the presence of communist foreigners within their ranks and the shared networks to which their members tended to belong does in fact reveal is the close overlap between transnational and national factors in the making of the International Brigades' military culture from its very first moments of existence.

Whether or not that military culture took root depended on the efforts of the commissars to disseminate its core values amongst the volunteers as well as the latter group's willingness to assimilate them into their daily lives and identities. As ever, the trench press was one of the main tools at the Commissariat's disposal. Capitalized

[88] Michael Alpert, *The Republican Army in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 44.
[89] Longo, *Las Brigadas Internacionales en España,* 35.
[90] Ibid., 47.
[91] See for example anon., 'Lister, People's Soldier, Raised to Rank of Lieut.-Col. By New Government Decree', *English VFL,* vol. 2, no. 2, 13 January 1938, 1, RGASPI, 545.2.362.
[92] Stanley Payne, *The Spanish Civil War, the Soviet Union, and Communism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 162.

exhortations to demonstrate ‘discipline’ were a particularly frequent feature of the articles, essays and editorials which were produced on a daily basis. The readers of one piece unambiguously titled ‘Discipline: The Difference between Troops and Rabble’ were reminded that ‘no campaign has ever been successfully waged by an ill-disciplined army’ and that, on the contrary, ‘discipline is the keystone of military success'.[93] This was a lesson which those volunteers who arrived to Spain expecting a more ‘democratic’ style of making war had to be patiently taught. Given that many of them had become used to resisting authority in their civilian lives back home, it was all the more necessary to remind them of the importance of saluting their superiors and following their orders without question. This, they were told, was appropriate antifascist behaviour given that those same superiors were – for once – on their side.[94] So constant was the push for discipline that several decades later the American volunteer Irving Goff still recalled ‘a major campaign on *disciplina*, I remember the word *disciplina*, the party newspaper would come out with big red letters beside which it said *disciplina*’.[95] Clearly, the commissars had worked hard to make it a major cornerstone of the International Brigades’ military culture.

For the most part, the International Brigades’ transnational communist culture assisted, rather than impeded, attempts to impose order throughout the ranks. Those members who had passed through the gates of Moscow’s Lenin School had been taught that discipline was a core value of the Bolshevik Party – an attitude which crossed over easily enough to a military context, with many of the commissars likely to have agreed with Leon Trotsky’s view that the armed forces are an ideal institution with which to instill the Communist Party’s values of ‘moral hardness, self-sacrifice and […] discipline’. [96] Illustrations clearly inspired by Soviet iconography appeared constantly in the volunteers’ trench press encouraging them to imagine themselves as constituent parts of a disciplined, motivated and unstoppable mass force. On other occasions, soldiers were sketched in smart uniforms charging in close formation against the enemy, their faces stern and their rifles at the ready. A veritable obsession with bayonets took root within the International Brigades as it did throughout the entire Republican Army, with illustrated images of the iconographic accessory soon becoming a recurring feature of their bulletins and newspapers. The fact they had been rendered largely obsolete by the kind of warfare being fought in Spain only serves to highlight their unique symbolic value, representing as they did a combination of

[93] Anon, 'Discipline: The Difference Between Troops and Rabble', *English VFL*, Vol. 2, No. 13, 2 April 1038, 1, RGASPI, 545.2.362.

[94] Anon, 'Discipline in Our Army' *English VFL*, Vol. 1, No. 26, 13 December 1937, 3, RGASPI, 545.2.362.

[95] Interview with Irving Goff, tape 1, Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica (henceforth CDMH,), PHO_ABAL_135.

[96] Lisa Kirschenbaum, *International Communism and the Spanish Civil War: Solidarity and Suspicion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 15-51; William E. Odom, 'Bolshevik Ideas on the Military's Role in Modernization', *Armed Forces & Society*, 3:1 (Fall 1976), particularly pages 105-8.

relentless movement, individual heroism and a willingness to use violence against the enemy.

Rather than being regarded as desirable and necessary in their own right, the International Brigades' military and political leadership considered both iron discipline and unflinching action to be an essential prerequisite for the formation of a unified, hierarchical, mass fighting force. By the end of 1936, enormous progress had been made in the formation of just such an army. For all of Longo's complaints about the fractured nature of the war effort prior to the creation of the International Brigades, a process of military rationalisation was already underway by the time he began welcoming the first volunteers to Albacete in October. Prime Minister Largo Caballero's realisation that the Republic was faced with a drawn-out civil war led him to finally start bringing the disparate militias operating all across the loyalist zone under government control from September onwards despite his initial reluctance to do so on the basis that it was the Communist Party's favoured policy.[97] The development of a powerful army was a cause for repeated celebration in the International Brigades' subsequent propaganda. In a speech delivered in Albacete at some point in 1937, Louis de Brouckère, the president of the Second International, recalled a previous visit to Spain during which 'the iron will amongst the Spanish people' had been undermined by a lack of arms and organization. 'Now, after a year', he declared, 'I have seen that you already have a solid army, organized in an extraordinarily short amount of time'.[98] Not for the last time, military rationalization was represented as the fulfillment of the Spanish People's antifascist will.

However much it may have resembled its 'bourgeois' counterparts elsewhere, the International Brigades' left-wing leadership greeted the emergence of a hierarchical Republican Army as entirely natural, inexorable and indeed desirable. After all, a clear precedent had already been set by the Soviet Red Army, which, in the course of the Russian Civil War, had supplanted a similarly complex system of revolutionary militias with organised units consisting of masses of conscripts, generally trained by military experts and former Tsarist officials.[99] The emphasis on the overlapping importance of discipline, order and hierarchy which was first promoted by Trotsky in the early 1920s and had come to form the undisputed cornerstone of Soviet military culture by the time the Spanish Civil War broke out would be closely mirrored in the International Brigades some twenty years later, facilitated by the fact that some of its highest ranking officials, not least General Kleber, had themselves fought within the Red Army.[100] These were now faced with the task of galvanizing support for military rationalization amongst the rank and file. This was achieved through a range of creative methods,

[97] Alpert, *The Republican Army,* 59-84.

[98] Anon., *Unity or Death*, 1937, 8, RGASPI, 545.2.379.

[99] Jonathan D. Smele in Daniel Orlovsky (ed.), *A Companion to the Russian Revolution* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2020), 369.

[100] For a detailed study of Soviet attitudes towards the military in the years running up to the Spanish Civil War and beyond see Roger R. Reese, *The Soviet Military Experience* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

with prospective officers at the training school at Pozo Rubio even finding themselves engaged in several hours of political education which included crash-courses in the history of the Popular Army, starting with the original militia system, moving on to the work of the Fifth Regiment and ending with the imposition of a unified command, all presented with a not-too-subtle whiff of communist determinism.[101] This knowledge filtered down to the volunteers through news articles on the history of the Republican Army as well as the glowing assessments of its military performance which appeared in the pages of their trench press, sometimes written by Soviet experts.[102]

The International Brigades' official incorporation into the Popular Army by government decree in September 1937 was represented as the culmination of this supposedly inexorable and thoroughly welcome process of militarisation. Among other items, the decree stipulated that the volunteers were subjected to the same military justice code as Spanish soldiers, that their instruction would mirror that of other units, that their uniform and equipment would be identical to those used across the army and that they were to remain in their units until the end of the war.[103] In a brief article making its contents known, Longo repeated his familiar claim that 'a regular army and a unified command' were 'essential conditions for victory in the armed struggle against fascism', now adding that 'because of this we receive with enthusiasm all those measures in the decree which tend to make our Brigades more and more integral parts of the Spanish People's Army'.[104] R. Dan Richardson argued that this vocal support for the International Brigades' incorporation into the Popular Army was, in fact, a rhetorical smokescreen which disguised the Commissariat's true ambitions of guarding their institutional autonomy in order to continue serving at the pleasure of the Communist International. There were certainly limits on how far they wished to place the International Brigades under Republican control. After all, their most senior figures were directly appointed by the Comintern, while the promotion of commissars was decided within the ranks with very little oversight from the Ministry of War. Regardless, there were clear benefits to the decree insofar as it both legitimised the foreign volunteers' presence in Spain as well as gave them a renewed sense that they were fighting shoulder-to-shoulder with the Spanish People against the foreign fascists.

It was for precisely these reasons that the decree was not only reprinted in the volunteers' press, but also hailed as 'completely satisfactory' to their needs as antifascist soldiers.[105] The experience Tom Murray had with a number of disgruntled British volunteers shows how useful inculcating a sense of personal belonging to the

[101] Programme of political instruction for officials at the School of Pozo Rubio for January/March 1937, RGASPI, 545.2.274.
[102] See, for example, Golubiev, 'Soviet Expert Analyzes Military Actions in the North and on the Aragon Front', *English VFL*, Vol. 1, No. 14, 13 September 1937, 1, RGASPI, 545.2.362.
[103] Indalecio Prieto, Decree on the International Brigades, reproduced in the *Diario official del Ministerio de Defensa Nacional*, Vol. 3, 27 Setember 1937, 762, RGASPI, 545.2.2.
[104] Luigi 'Gallo' Longo, 'Our Rights and Our Duties', *English VFL,* 1 November 1937, 12-13, RGASPI, 545.2.362.
[105] Ibid.

Popular Army and, by extension, the antifascist struggle of the Spanish People could prove when it came to motivating the troops. When a group of the men under his authority began speculating about the possibility of imminent repatriation, his response was to remind them of their responsibilities as soldiers serving at the orders of the Republican Government. 'Look here, we're soldiers of the Spanish Army', he recalled telling his frustrated compatriots, along with a reminder that 'we are the disciplined soldiers of the Spanish. We are not here to speculate about whether we're going to the front or going home. We're the servants of the Government and the Government will decide our policy'.[106] Some five months after the decree's publication, a group of Austrian volunteers expressed the same sentiment in an open letter assuring Prime Minister Juan Negrín that 'we Austrian volunteers in Spain are proud to be able to participate in this struggle as soldiers of the glorious Popular Army, with the same duties and rights as our Spanish brothers'. They drew particular attention to the fact that they felt like 'loyal sons of the Spanish Republic, whose laws are also our laws, whose Popular Front is also our Government' and concluded by promising to fight under the flag of the Spanish Republic with unbending discipline.[107] For these volunteers, integration into the Republican Army was essential in enabling them to imagine themselves at the forefront of a national struggle for independence.

As the letter penned by the Austrian volunteers makes clear, one of the most important consequences of their formal assimilation into the Popular Army was to legitimise the International Brigades' participation in the war. Their leaders were always eager to remind both the volunteers and their Spanish hosts that they were equal partners in a unified struggle for national liberation rather than self-interested agents operating on behalf of world communism. 'The International Brigades have simply been units in the new Republican Army', the Comintern-appointed Commissar André Marty wrote in one of his articles directed at the volunteers, 'whereas Hitler and Mussolini dictate from Berlin and Rome, even to the point of giving orders for the conducting of operations'. 'The commanders of the army to which the International Brigades belong are not called Von Fapel, Teruzzi or Bergonzzoli', he added, 'but Miaja, Pozas and Rojo'.[108] In other words, by belonging to the Republican armed forces and being subjected to the same rules and regulations as Spanish soldiers, the volunteers of the International Brigades could not be described as mercenaries fighting for their own cynical interests. Unsurprisingly, this did not stop Nationalist propaganda from portraying them in precisely those terms. In August 1938, Longo was alarmed to find out that newspapers in rebel Zaragoza were claiming that the Republican war effort was being run by foreigners, supporting their allegations by reprinting French-language documents captured from the XIV Brigade during the fighting at Amposta. Eager to avoid a repeat,

[106] Tom Murray in MacDougal (ed.), *Voices from the Spanish Civil War* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1986), 314-315.
[107] 'Los soldados austriacos del Ejército Popular a su Presidente de Ministros, camarada Negrín', 12 February 1938, RGASPI, 545.3.54.
[108] André Marty, 'The International Fighters for Freedom Show that the Path to Victory Lies in Unity', *English VFL,* 1 November 1937, 6-10, RGASPI, 545.2.362.

Longo called on his subordinates to file their official documentation in Spanish from now on.[109]

Since the Commissariat worked so hard to represent the International Brigades as an integral component of a unified struggle for survival, it was essential that the volunteers avoided boastful claims of single-handedly saving the Republic from military defeat. This necessitated a careful balancing act between stressing their utility to the war effort in a way which made their presence in Spain seem worthwhile on the one hand and overstating that same utility in such a way that might offend their hosts on the other. Members of the International Brigades who failed in this balancing act by exaggerating their role in the war were even open to accusations of being fifth columnists responsible for sowing dangerous national tensions.[110] The personal consequences could be catastrophic, as General Kleber discovered for himself when he was stripped of his command and shipped back to the Soviet Union after claiming excessive credit for the defence of Madrid.[111] A key way of walking the tightrope was to situate the unique contribution of the International Brigades within a broader narrative of home-grown heroism. In a speech given before various civil and military authorities, André Marty accordingly stressed that the victory in Madrid had been achieved through an enormous collective effort. By alluding not to the unique heroism of the International Brigades but rather to 'the work of a general loyal to the Republic, of his High Command, of the Defence Committee, of every organisation, of the entire people', he also reaffirmed the International Brigades' long-standing case for military rationalisation. Tellingly, the idea of the civil population of Madrid resisting the siege was itself a myth propagated, above all, by the Communist Party.[112] Not for the first time, the International Brigades' military culture had been influenced by their closest political allies in Spain.

The Commissariat worked hard to remind the volunteers that the Popular Army, in addition to its successes in the field, had been built on the foundations of firm political unity amongst the 'Spanish People'. As ever, the transnational communist culture in which many of the volunteers shared predisposed them to agree. With the Comintern's decision to call for regional 'Popular Front' alliances between liberal and left-wing forces in 1934, Communists everywhere had suddenly switched from seeing bourgeois democrats, socialists and anarchists as 'social fascists' blocking world revolution to hailing them as potential allies against the growing threat of Nazi Germany. In this way, the Soviet Union's immediate geopolitical interests sparked a

[109] Luigi Longo to 'Comrade Tanguy' on the use of foreign languages in International Brigade documentation, 22 August 1938, RGASPI, 545.1.39.
[110] Longo, *Las Brigadas Internacionales en España,* 206.
[111] Michael Alpert, '<<Una trompeta lejana>>. Las Brigadas Internacionales en la guerra de España: Una reconsideración sesenta años después', *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma,* 5:12 (1999), 235.
[112] Ramón Salas Larrazábal, *Historia del Ejército Popular de la República: Vol. 1: de los comienzos de la guerra al fracaso del ataque sobre Madrid (noviembre de 1936)* (Madrid: La Esfera de los Libros, 2006), 776.

profound shift in the strategies, rhetoric and actions of Communists the world over.[113] The architects of the International Brigades considered the transnational fighting force to be nothing less than an armed popular front bringing antifascists of all nationalities, social backgrounds and political tendencies together against the fascist invasion in Spain. For this narrative to seem at all plausible, the commissars as well as their Spanish admirers repeatedly exaggerated the predominantly communist volunteers' socio-political heterogeneity. In his postwar memoirs, General Enrique Líster – who, as we have seen, emerged from the ranks of the Fifth Regiment – played ball by claiming that the presence of Christians, Jews, atheists, anarchists, socialists, peasants, workers and intellectuals within the International Brigades proved that they were 'the real, living and working expression of proletarian internationalism'.[114]

In addition to stressing the unity of antifascist purpose within their own ranks, the Commissariat sought to forge public ties with a wide range of other political and military groups throughout loyalist Spain. Rallies and meetings held in their honour were proudly publicised in the news reports which almost inevitably followed in the volunteers' trench press. One such meeting, arranged by the communist aid organisation *Socorro Rojo Internacional* at Madrid's Monumental Cinema in September 1937, was attended by 'thousands and thousands of *madrileños*' who listened to members of the Left Republican, Socialist and Communist parties expressing thanks to the foreign volunteers for their selfless sacrifices in Spain.[115] At a huge meeting held in Madrid's Calderón Theatre later that year, the Irish commander Frank Ryan and the German commissar Artur Dorf shared the stage with General Miaja and the General Secretary of the local Popular Front, driving home the shared nature of their antifascist military struggle.[116] Another tactic was for the Commissariat to send free copies of their various publications to unions, generals and influential politicians – hence why the editors of *Mundo Obrero, El Liberal, Ahora* and *El Sol* alongside the Secretary General of the Madrid Popular Front and the Commissar General of War all received copies of *Garibaldis in Spain,* a book celebrating the achievements of the Italian volunteers.[117] Like the various political meetings held in Madrid and elsewhere, these multilingual publications offered an important chance to sell the International Brigades' vision of antifascist warfare to as wide an audience as possible.

[113] For the development of the Popular Front strategy see Jonathan Haslam, 'The Origins of the Popular Front 1934-1935', *The Historical Journal*, 22:3 (Sep. 1979), 673-691 and Payne, *The Spanish Civil War, the Soviet Union and Communism,* 38-82.

[114] Enrique Líster, *Nuestra guerra: memorias de un luchador* (Ediciones Silente: 2007), 319-20.

[115] Anon., '¡Honor y gloria! Madrid rinde homenaje a las Brigadas Internacionales', *Ayuda: Semanario de la solidaridad*, year 2, no. 72, 11 September 1937, 4-5, digitised by the Catálogo Colectivo de la Red De Bilbiotecas de los Archivos Estatales, Ministerio de Cultural y Deporte, Spain.

[116] 'Madrid Popular Front Government Honors the International Brigades', *English VFL,* 8 November 1937, 4-5, RGASPI, 545.2.362.

[117] Cover letters attached to copies of *Garibaldini in Spagna,* RGASPI, 545.1.14.

## II: 'A First Class Military Machine' – The International Brigades and the Formation of the Popular Army

The soldiers of the International Brigades did not stop at considering themselves part and parcel of the Spanish People's heroic efforts to resist fascism. Significantly, many of them came to feel that they were exercising a direct influence on the very shape that resistance had taken. In a set of brief recollections written in the late 1950s, the one-time commander of the Hungarian volunteers, Cséby Lajos, implied that General Kleber's priority as he prepared to face off the Nationalist advance on Madrid was to instruct the native Spaniards in the art of antifascist war. Lajos claimed to have been present at a meeting held in the Fifth Regiment's Headquarters in which the general urged his comrades 'to organize people who are inexperienced in handling weapons and warfare, workers, peasants, into an army dedicated to the revolution, and to make the most of the very modest weapons and ammunition we have left'.[118] This understanding of the foreign volunteers' wartime role as going far beyond simply fighting on the frontlines was surprisingly widespread, although it has received scant attention from their chroniclers. Writing in his diary in August 1938, the British volunteer Fred Thomas admitted that while vast majority of his comrades would have loved to see their homes again, he himself felt the International Brigades could only leave, in his words, 'when the People's Army would be strong enough on its own to hold and finally defeat fascism, [and] when we ourselves could say with truth we had served our purpose in helping to build this army'.[119] This sentiment was echoed by the German volunteer Hans Schaul several years later when he wrote that 'above all our desire was the formation of a "regular army" under sole command and discipline'.[120]

By the time the foreign volunteers were demobilised in October 1938, many of them felt that they could look back on a job well done. In a characteristically-communist end to their military service, those awaiting repatriation were asked to fill out a questionnaire encouraging reflection on what their chief contribution to the loyalist war effort had been. While many rather predictably referred to their frontline participation in the fighting at Madrid, the Jarama and Guadalajara, far more focused on their 'political' impact on the antifascist struggle. One Frenchman went as far as to claim that the foreign volunteers were the 'forge' of the Popular Army, with much the same sentiment being found, with startling frequency, in the responses of British, American, French, Cuban, Argentinian and other volunteers.[121] John Roberts spoke for many of

[118] Cséby Lajos in Györkei Jenő, (ed.), *Magyar önkéntesek a spanyol nép szabadságharcában* (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1959), 59.
[119] Fred Thomas, *To Tilt at Windmills: A Memoir of the Spanish Civil War* (Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1996), 129.
[120] Hans Schaul in Esteve Torres (ed.), *Recuerdos de brigadistas alemanes,* 351.
[121] Frenchman Raymond Bottin described the Brigades' as the 'forge' of the army in his demobilisation form, RGASPI, 545.6.1089. For another French viewpoint, see Bernard Bordenave, RGASPI, 545.6.1053; For the British, see Wolf Bayan, RGASPI, 545.6.104; Stephan Beryaquet Tornieles, RGASPI, 545.6.105; Harry Bourne, RGASPI, 545.6.109; Eric Gardner Camp, RGASPI, 545.6.113;

his comrades in boasting that 'the formation of the International Brigades is one of the most important things that has happened in history, and they have given the Spanish people a lot of help in building an army'.[122] Whatever precise role they assigned themselves in its making, the fact that the volunteers were leaving Spain in possession of an ostensibly strong army likely compensated for any feelings of guilt triggered by their own departure from the frontline struggle. In one of the many speeches he gave on the occasion of the volunteers' withdrawal, Luigi Longo reassured his audience that 'we leave behind the magnificent and powerful Popular Army of the Spanish Republic which we have seen born, grow and strengthen, and in whose ranks we participated in the epic defence of Madrid, in the firm resistance of the Jarama, in the victorious offensives of Brunete and Belchite, and in the hard battles of Teruel and all the operations of the Aragon'.[123]

There were several grounds on which the volunteers based their claims to have contributed to the formation of the Popular Army. Some felt that their presence on the frontlines had managed to hold the fascist enemy at bay and, in this way, provided their Spanish comrades with the necessary time to organise themselves into an effective fighting force. The British volunteer John Carson, for example, felt that the International Brigades were 'an organisation that helped hold up fascism while [the] Spanish masses mobilised and unified'.[124] His compatriot, Ernst Lesser, agreed that 'they have fought in Spain giving our Spanish comrades the time to organise effectively', while Wilfred Winnick wrote that they had 'helped to give time to build [a] people's army, organise and discipline Spanish workers and peasants'.[125] While the International Brigades certainly helped other Republican units to hold the Nationalist forces at bay on a number of occasions, volunteers such as these nonetheless tended to greatly exaggerate the extent of their frontline contribution, with historian Charles Esdaile recently concluding, in no uncertain terms, that 'militarily, the International Brigades contributed very little'.[126] This is all too easily forgotten when reading the countless first-hand testimonies which narrate the war through the narrow focus of whatever front, mountain or village the volunteer in question happened to have been

Albert Charlseworth, RGASPI, 545.6.114; Ian Birkett Clark, RGASPI, 545.6.115; Alexander Ferguson, RGASPI, 545.6.132; Joseph Fuhr, RGASPI, 545.6.137; Charles Gallagher, RGASPI, 545.6.138; William John Griffiths, RGASPI, 545.6.143; Emrys Jones, RGASPI, 545.6.155; Eugene Perea Wall, RGASPI, 545.6.184; Peter Philips, RGASPI, 545.6.185; John Roberts, RGASPI, 545.6.192; Thomas Richardson, RGASPI, 545.6.192; Edward Smallbone, RGASPI, 545.6.202; Miles Tomalin, RGASPI, 545.6.208; for the Americans, see Andrém Borysko, RGASPI, 545.6.866; Max Bowers, RGASPI, 545.6.866; for an Argentinian view, see Antonio Moreno Vives, RGASPI, 545.6.228; for a Cuban, see Pedro Fajardo, RGASPI, 545.6.552.

[122] John Roberts, demobilisation form, RGASPI, 545.6.192.

[123] Luigi Longo, farewell speech given at Rabassada, undated, C. October 1938, RGASPI, 545.2.376.

[124] John Carson, demobilisation form, RASPI 545.6.113.

[125] Ernst Lesser, demobilisation form, RGASPI, 545.6.162; Wilfred Winnick, demobilisation form, RGASPI, 545.6.216.

[126] Charles J. Esdaile, *The Spanish Civil War: A Military History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 293.

deployed to, with the capture of particular targets often appearing as disproportionately important achievements in their wartime writings and later recollections.

In addition to time, the volunteers believed they had provided their Spanish comrades with a direct example of how to organise a modern army. The International Brigades' propagandists often rallied their baptism of fire at Madrid as key evidence of this process. In late 1937, the readers of one trench publication were reminded of how the hastily-organised junta which had taken control of the capital's defence in the wake of the government's departure for Valencia took it upon itself to unify all the available forces under General Miaja's command. The volunteers were assured that, in fulfilling this urgent and admirable task, the junta was 'greatly aided by the International Brigades who from the very beginning considered themselves as part of the regular Spanish Army'. The author's conclusion that 'the immense prestige of the International Brigades and the discipline upon which this was founded did much to help the remodelling of the army' was widely shared amongst the volunteers.[127] Among them was the Italian Giuseppe Baldo, who felt that their main contribution to the war effort had been to demonstrate the urgent need for disciplined troops fighting under a single command.[128] This was all the more important given what these volunteers considered, not entirely fairly, to be the ongoing predominance of the revolutionary militias throughout 1936. The Cuban volunteer Alberto Monteagudo felt that the International Brigades' principal role had been 'militarily organising the old militias',[129] with Joseph Latus concurring that they had 'formed a basis whereby a militia could be transformed and made into a first-class military machine'.[130]

As with their frontline performance, the overall efficiency of the International Brigades was much exaggerated by the commissars in their wartime propaganda. The military historian Michael Alpert has rightly argued that they were riddled with problems such as entirely inadequate training, frequently ragtag uniforms, improperly cared-for weapons and an overall lack of relevant military experience.[131] If none of these were a secret to the volunteers, they became particularly obvious to the minority who did indeed have some kind of prior military knowledge with which to measure their experiences in Spain against. For the British volunteer Huw Williams, 'the big difference' between the British Army and the International Brigades was the latter's 'total lack of discipline'.[132] This was compounded by the fact that, in his words, 'there was *no* equipment' with the exception of 'old-fashioned rifles'. An almost complete lack of ammunition convinced his compatriot Fred Copeman that the training offered by the Brigades was 'not within miles' of what he had previously experienced in the Navy,

[127] Anon., 'Development of the People's Army', *English VFL*, Vol. 1, no. 3, 8 June 1937, 5, RGASPI, 545.2.362.
[128] Giuseppe Baldo, demobilisation form, RGASPI, 545.6.511.
[129] Alberto Monteagudo, demobilisation form, RGASPI, 545.6.597.
[130] Joseph Henry Latus, demobilisation form, RGASPI, 545.6.157.
[131] Alpert, 'Una trompeta lejana', 236.
[132] Interview with Huw Alun Menai Williams, 1988, reel 3, Imperial War Museum Collections (henceforth IWM), catalogue number (henceforth CN) 10181.

with the whole battalion having to 'take turns' with about six rifles.[133] Curiously, however, the volunteers did not allow these obvious shortcomings to undermine their underlying belief that the International Brigades were both an effective fighting unit and an invaluable asset to the Spanish Republic. If they were perfectly open about them in their subsequent recollections, it is because they were easily shrugged off as inconvenient obstacles which were nonetheless surmounted in order to fulfil the principal mission of crushing fascism on the frontlines.

For other volunteers, the International Brigades' principal contribution to the war effort was a great deal less direct than spearheading a new army, if no less important. Time and again, they referred to their unique role in raising the morale of the Spanish People and, in this way, giving their native hosts fresh reserves of energy for the gruelling struggle against the fascist invaders. Once again, this was seen to be particularly vital in the desperate days when the Nationalists were besieging Madrid. As the very first columns of international volunteers marched from the train station to the frontlines on the edges of the city they were profoundly moved by the sight of countless *madrileños* lining the streets to greet them. The volunteers were understandably given the impression that the entire population of the capital felt unlimited gratitude for their arrival, not least because it represented the clearest evidence yet that the Spanish People, although betrayed by the western democracies who refused to send them desperately-needed arms, were not alone in their struggle against fascism. Some volunteers felt that their example of international solidarity would, in turn, have crucial military consequences. An Australian volunteer who was interviewed for a newspaper back home while the fighting in Madrid still raged on contended that the mere presence of the International Brigades had raised the fighting capacity of the local people. Rather than limiting himself to the already hyperbolic claim that 'their belief in the justice of their cause was enhanced a hundredfold' by the presence of the multinational volunteers, he added that, as a direct consequence, 'they were willing to put up with anything and everything; to fight the fascists, if necessary, with their bare hands'.[134]

Crucially, the international support which the people of Madrid could now count on had come in the form of apparently determined and disciplined soldiers. David Crook, a British volunteer who was recruited by the NKVD during his time in Spain, recalled reading an article in a British newspaper which described 'the entry into Madrid of a formation of German anti-Nazis, armed, marching like guardsmen and bringing with them the discipline and military training which the Spaniards, with their blend of Quixotism and anarchism, lacked'. The reason Crook recalled the article so vividly was because it convinced him to go and fight himself.[135] The impression it conveyed was fully shared in by those volunteers actually present in Madrid at the time. Willi Grunert recalled the moment the Eleventh Brigade first stepped off the train and – 'within

[133] Interview with Fred Copeman, 1978, reel 5, IWM, CN: 794.
[134] Ron Hurd quoted in Palmer et al. (eds.)*, Australians in Spain,* 8.
[135] David Crook, *Autobiography of David Crook* (digitised), http://davidcrook.net/simple/downloads.html, accessed 24 March 2022, chapter 3, page 2.

seconds' – arranged themselves into columns. He recalled orders along the lines of 'Rifles ready! In groups! Turn to the right! March, in step, march!' before they set off for the front.[136] 'Our volunteers filed out upright, disciplined, singing, one group, one squad, one company, one battalion after another', fellow German Fritz Rettmann recalled. Both volunteers directly linked the International Brigades' conspicuous display of martial prowess with the supposed boost they gave to the city's morale.[137] Much the same association would become a recurring feature of many future accounts of the Siege of Madrid, whether written by the volunteers themselves, their admirers in Spain or journalists elsewhere. One such account was penned by the Italian Socialist Pietro Nenni, who, in one of his regular wartime pieces for *Il Nuovo Avanti,* argued that the volunteers' presence had 'a decisive character because it elevated sunken energies and brought to the battle new elements of volition and competence'.[138] In this way, the legend of the International Brigades as the core of a disciplined new army spread far beyond their own ranks.

In contrast to their critical assessments of the International Brigades' direct military importance, historians tend to agree with the volunteers that their arrival to Madrid in November 1936 really did raise Republican spirits.[139] Enrique Moradiellos, for example, has argued that 'their contribution to the defence of the Republic was crucial and substantial, not so much for their strict military value […] than for the example of international solidarity they demonstrated and for the model of discipline and efficiency they offered to the battered Republican troops'.[140] There is no question that the deep emotion which the volunteers' arrival to Madrid triggered amongst many of the people who came out to greet them must have been genuine. Even more importantly, some members of the local militias later claimed to have been just as glad of their arrival. In the mid-1990s battalion commissar Julia Manzanal recalled how 'they notified us that some brave warriors of liberty from all the countries of the world were coming towards Madrid', adding that 'the emotion which I felt cannot be defined with words; only those who were there can know it'.[141] Julio San Isidro, a commissar for the Army of the Centre, agreed that the arrival of the volunteers was 'something which can make a human being shake to the spine' and 'elevate to the maximum the most noble emotions and sentiments that can exist in a man'. He concurred with many of the volunteers when he stated that 'the presence and decisive action of the internationals

[136] Willi Grunert in Isabel Esteve Torres, *Recuerdos de brigadistas alemanes*, 49.
[137] Fritz Rettmann in Esteve Torres, *Recuerdos de brigadistas alemanes,* 308.
[138] Pietro Nenni, *España* (Barcelona: Plaza & Janes, 1977), 228.
[139] One need look no further than the classic English-language surveys of the war to find this view. See Antony Beevor, *The Battle for Spain: The Spanish Civil War 1936-1939* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2006), 178; Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 466 and Paul Preston, *The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution and Revenge* (London: William Collins, 2016), 175-6.
[140] Enrique Moradiellos, 'Las Brigadas Internacionales en la Guerra Civil Española: Una revisión histórica y bibliográfica', *Norba Historia,* 14 (1997), 203.
[141] Julia Manzanal in Santiago Álvarez (ed.), *Historia política y militar de las Brigadas Internacionales: testimonios y documentos* (Madrid: Compañía Literaria, 1996), 279.

[…] provided growing consistency and morale to all the front'.[142] Even leaving aside the extremely scarce and scattered nature of the evidence, quantifying the morale of an entire city is, however, no easy task. Nor, indeed, is pinpointing its exact military consequences. All that we can take for certain, in the end, is the volunteers' unshakeable conviction that they had provided essential reserves of antifascist energy to the Spanish People in arms.

Spanish gratitude for the volunteers' wartime role was certainly not limited to the civilians and soldiers of besieged Madrid. When news of their departure was announced by Prime Minister Juan Negrín two years later, the Commissariat was inundated with dozens – if not hundreds – of letters thanking them for their service. These were sent by the representatives of political parties ranging from the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia to Republican Union, civil groups such as Antifascist Women, unions like the anarchist *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo* (CNT), political figures including the leader of the Catalan Government Lluís Companys and the mayor of Madrid, military heroes like José Miaja and a whole panoply of individual units spanning divisions, battalions, cavalry formations and even an educative club attached to a Spanish machine-gun company.[143] Given that one of the self-stated purposes of the International Brigades had been to provide experienced manpower for the antifascist struggle in Spain, it is unsurprising that the vast majority of these letters lauded their sacrifices in the Battles of Madrid, the Jarama, Guadalajara, the Ebro and elsewhere. Far more interesting, if a great deal rarer, are occasional mentions of the broader impact the International Brigades exercised on the antifascist war effort. 'We have obtained many lessons and experiences which, collected with warmth and thanks, have collaborated hugely in the formation of this magnificent and glorious Army of the Republic', wrote the 494th Battalion of the 124th Mixed Brigade in one such letter.[144]

Similar statements were made, in public, by a number of sympathetic politicians all throughout the war. In late October 1938 Negrín delivered a speech at the government's secret headquarters of Poblet, in Tarragona, in which he stressed to those present how 'I saw you all, authentic representatives of your countries, come to the defense of our cause and facilitate through your collaboration in the great task of organization which has crystalized in a magnificent and powerful army […] which

[142] Julio San Isidro in Álvarez, *Historia política y militar,* 281.

[143] For letters from political and military figures, see those prepared for publication in the *Volunteer for Liberty,* RGASPI, 545.2.90. For dozens of letters from military units, see RGASPI, 545.1.65, which contains those from the commissars and commanders of the 11 Division, the men of the 2 Battalion of the 4 Company of the 1 Mixed Brigade, leaders of the cavalry unit of the 46 Division, the Sargeant of the 547 Battalion in the 144 Brigade, the captain of the *Compañia del Tren Automovil,* and the *Club de Educación del Soldado* of the Machine-gun Company of the 124 Battalion of the 31 Brigade, all sent between late September and early October 1938.

[144] Letter concerning the departure of the International Brigades from the commissar and captain of the 494th Batallion of the 124th Mixed Brigade, 8 October 1938, RGASPI, 545.1.65.

marches with a firm and secure step towards victory'.[145] The volunteers' role in building such an army would be reiterated in the subsequent writings of sympathetic government figures such as the Socialist Minister of the Interior, Julián Zugazagoitia. Like the founders of the International Brigades, he had little faith in the original workers' militias and was eager to highlight the role of the volunteers in putting an end to their supposed military incompetence in an article written prior to his execution at the hands of the victorious Nationalists in 1940. According to Zugazagoitia, the foreign volunteers had taught the militia fighters of Madrid 'elementary precautions and defences and, at the same time, illustrated the way of fighting with the greatest efficiency'. As a result, 'each International became transformed into a teacher without realising it'.[146] Praise from communist militants should not come as a surprise given that they entirely agreed with the International Brigade leadership over the basic preconditions for victory, with General Antonio Cordón García stressing that the volunteers had provided the militias of Madrid with 'their example of discipline and organisation'.[147]

While far from every military and political figure in Republican Spain felt such intense admiration for the International Brigades, these statements show just how commonplace the volunteers' own understanding of their role in building a unified, hierarchical and enthusiastic army had become by the time they were withdrawn in late 1938. Given his horror at the state of the Republican war effort when he first arrived to Catalonia in the summer of 1936, Luigi Longo must have been incredibly satisfied to receive so many compliments invoking the volunteers' self-assigned task of imposing order, discipline and competence on the Spanish People's struggle against the fascist juggernaut. Their carefully-honed military culture, it seemed, had been thoroughly vindicated. The historical balance sheet, however, reveals a far more ambiguous picture. In the first place, the loyalist war effort was not nearly as successful as the commissars of the International Brigades themselves liked to make out in their political speeches and newspaper articles. For all that the Popular Army streamlined the militias into a more traditional army run on the basis of a unified command, it was faced with a practically unbroken record of military defeats meted out by a far superior enemy. Nor were the International Brigades quite as central to the formation of that army as some of its members believed. Rather than spearheading a new kind of antifascist warfare, they had embedded themselves within a process of military rationalisation which had, as we have already seen, begun before their arrival to the frontlines. What the International Brigades *had* succeeded in doing, however, was forging a unique military culture which defined the volunteers' individual roles as antifascist soldiers in addition to providing them with crucial legitimacy. The importance of this should not be underestimated.

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[145] Juan Negrín, farewell speech to the International Brigades delivered at Poblet on the 25 October 1938 in Enrique Moradiellos (ed.), Juan Negrín, *Textos y dicursos políticos* (Madrid: Fundación Juan Negrín and the Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales, 2010), 268.

[146] Julián Zugazagoitia, *Guerra y vicisitudes de los españoles* (Spain: Tusquets Editores, 2001), 221.

[147] Antonio Cordón García, *Trayectoria: memorias de un militar republicano* (Barcelona: Editorial Crítica, 1977), 368.

## Conclusion

The role of the International Brigades on the Spanish frontlines is, by now, well known. As far as the volunteers were concerned, taking up arms against fascism was the very reason for their being in a foreign country in the first place and a source of long-lasting pride for years afterwards. It is therefore unsurprising that historians have framed the *raison d'etre* of the International Brigades in terms of providing conscientious soldiers for the military struggle already being carried out in the fields, towns and trenches of civil-war Spain by the soldiers of the embattled Republic. In so doing, however, they have either failed to notice or deliberately overlooked some of the other equally-important ways in which the founders of the transnational military unit imagined themselves to be contributing to the loyalist war effort. In fact, they regarded the International Brigades as nothing less than crucial in bringing fresh reserves of discipline, unity and volition to an otherwise fractured military struggle and, in the process, bolstering the Spanish People's untapped potential to defeat a technically superior enemy. All three of these characteristics were crucial to the unit's military culture and can be traced back to its establishment in October 1936, with Commissar General Luigi Longo immediately drawing on the example of the Spanish Communist Party and its legendary Fifth Regiment when putting together his own blueprint for victory. For as long as the foreign volunteers were in Spain, they were exposed to a constant stream of propaganda which sought to convey the nature of that blueprint, as well as outlining the behaviour which was expected of them as they worked towards fulfilling it.

The forging of the International Brigades' military culture was not a simple top-down process. Much like their Comintern-appointed superiors, the majority of the rank and file seem to have been in no doubts as to the importance of antifascist volition, discipline, order, unity and hierarchy when it came to securing a loyalist victory. Far more surprisingly, a number of them expressed the unshakeable feeling that they had played a unique role in bringing all of these characteristics to the forefront of the wider Republican war effort, culminating in the formation a strong, unified and hierarchical Popular Army. The consequence was that, in addition to feeling like integral components of the Spanish People's heroic struggle against the fascist invaders, the foreign volunteers could consider themselves a key influence in determining the very shape that struggle had taken. This latter sentiment was in evidence from the earliest moment of their military service right up until their last. Many of the first volunteers to have arrived to besieged Madrid in 1936 would later reflect, with a great deal of pride, on how their example of disciplined antifascist solidarity had not only raised the spirits of the civilian population but also given the various workers' militias defending the capital an opportunity to organise themselves into a competent fighting force. Almost two years later, those of their comrades who remained in Spain similarly reflected on their successes in showing the Spanish People how to build a powerful army and secure military successes against a technically-superior enemy in the field. Exaggerated though these claims were, only by taking them fully into consideration can we understand the International Brigades in what were, after all, their own terms.

## 2: 'We Had a Good Deal of Trouble With Them' – The International Brigades and their Allies in Antifascist Spain

### Introduction

In addition to providing them with a crucial sense of purpose and legitimacy, the volunteers' belief that they were at the helm of a unified struggle between the Spanish People and a brutal fascist invasion fundamentally shaped their relationships with the many other political and military groups operating within the loyalist zone. These relationships have received scant attention in the existing literature, with most works written about the International Brigades treating the wider political context of the wartime Republic as background information rather than an important factor feeding in to the men's attitudes, identities and experiences of war. As such – and as we saw in the introduction – only a few of the many thousands of books and articles written about the volunteers make extensive use of the now enormous historiography dealing with the Spanish Civil War in general. Part of the explanation for this historiographical oversight can be traced back to the outlook of the volunteers themselves. In both their wartime writings and subsequent testimonies, many of these seem to have taken it for granted that they were fighting for a homogeneous entity called 'Spain' against a common enemy called 'Fascism'. As a result, the intricacies and occasional intrigues of loyalist politics are all-too-easily shrugged off as a bothersome sideshow to the fundamental business of saving the country from the foreign invaders. None other than the British veteran Fred Thomas admitted that 'there was abysmal ignorance of Spain and Spanish affairs' amongst his compatriots, although the statement was not equally true of all nationalities – the Cubans, in particular, tended to have a deeper interest in the domestic politics of their former metropole.[148]

This chapter will show that detailed knowledge of the various groups making up the loyalist coalition was not, in fact, necessary for them to exercise an important influence on the volunteers' experiences and understandings of the Spanish Civil War. It will demonstrate how individuals at every level of the International Brigade hierarchy were engaged in a process of ideological negotiation with their antifascist allies as they each sought to defend their interests against one another's alternative visions of war and revolution. If the military rising of July 1936 had succeeded in unifying a diverse range of political actors in opposition to the common 'fascist' enemy, the fact remained that their attitudes towards the kind of Spain they were fighting for often remained divergent. Some were anarchist revolutionaries impatient to build a workers' utopia on the ashes of the failed rising; others were liberal republicans keen to keep power in the hands of democratic institutions; others still were socialists or communists who

[148] Thomas, *To Tilt at Windmills,* 24-25. Disasapointment with the volunteers' engagement with Spanish issues was voiced, amongst other places, in an anonymous manuscript on the history of the XV Brigade, undated, 1938, RGASPI, 545.3.475. Ariel Mae Lambe has argued that volunteers from Cuba arrived with greater knowledge of, and interest in, Spanish domestic issues than other volunteers. See *No Barrier Can Contain It: Cuban Antifascism and the Spanish Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 89-90.

believed in limited redistributive measures directed from above.[149] These groups also disagreed over the most appropriate military means of securing and defending these objectives, with the revolutionary militias which so frustrated Luigi Longo on his first visit to wartime Catalonia soon coming into conflict with the Communist Party's calls for a mass army.[150] The intervention of the International Brigades signified the emergence of yet another interest group eager to spearhead its own version of antifascist warfare in Spain. In the process, they aroused both admiration and aversion amongst their Spanish counterparts.

By situating the International Brigades within the context of loyalist party politics, the following chapter draws on an article written as long ago as 2004 by Marta Bizcarrondo and Antonio Elorza which argued that frequent declarations of antifascist solidarity often disguised a surprising range of attitudes towards the foreign volunteers on the part of Spanish Socialists, Communists, Republicans and Anarchists.[151] Almost all of their evidence, however, came from wartime newspapers and the memoirs of well-known political figures. While similar sources occasionally underpin this chapter, it also seeks to take into account more direct encounters between members of the International Brigades and their Spanish hosts. By extension, it hopes to investigate the ways in which masses of ordinary soldiers understood their place within the antifascist coalition and the impact this had on their attitudes and actions whilst in Spain. That it does not devote equal attention to all of the groups who were involved in the political and military struggle against Franco's Nationalists is, in large part, a reflection of the relative importance the members of the International Brigades themselves attributed to their antifascist allies. Comprehensive and disinterested reportage on Spanish politics is, after all, hard to find in the volunteers' internal propaganda because its purpose was never to educate for the sake of it, but rather provide material which reinforced the volunteers' own antifascist identities and, by extension, make them more competent soldiers.

## I: 'We Have No Other Objectives Than These' – The Communist Connection

In order to understand the volunteers' relationship with their allies in the Republican zone, it is crucial to establish exactly what they imagined themselves to be fighting for. Too often, historians have used the testimonies of a select handful of veterans as a smoking gun in order to demonstrate that the International Brigades were a tool used by the Comintern to spearhead a Soviet-style regime in Spain. This strategy was first used in an anonymous history of the International Brigades which was published under the Franco regime in 1948 and made extensive use of unreliable or decontextualised volunteer testimony, but it can also be found in more recent works of academic

[149] For a brief overview of the different groups operating in the Republican zone, see Julián Casanova, *The Spanish Republic and Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 236-74.

[150] For these respective positions, see Michael Alpert, *The Republican Army in the Spanish Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 29-59 and 44-47.

[151] Marta Bizcarrondo and Antonio Elorza, 'Las Brigadas Internacionales: Imágenes desde la izquierda', *Ayer,* 56 (2004), 67-91.

scholarship.[152] In his prologue to César Vidal's revisionist history of the Brigades, Stanley Payne quotes the American veteran William Herrick to the effect that the volunteers 'went to Spain to fight fascism, but democracy was not our aim' in order to support his own view that the International Brigades were, in all essentials, a Comintern Army.[153] The claims made by specific volunteers, however, can hardly speak to the attitudes of some 35,000 soldiers. This is all the truer when dealing with veterans such as Herrick, who in the process of abandoning his former communist beliefs also set about reimagining the International Brigades as a microcosm of Soviet tyranny. His memoir, as a consequence, is full of distortions, exaggerations and what, at times, are likely to be outright lies – however quotable they may be.

Beyond the overarching aim of defeating fascism, the volunteers were liable to express fairly divergent views over what they hoped to achieve in Spain. Even the undeniable fact that the majority of them were communists is, on close reflection, insufficient grounds on which to build sweeping generalizations about their wartime objectives. After all, some of the volunteers had joined the party because of its activist approach to securing working-class rights, not because they were doctrinaire ideologues who had clearly thought-out social, economic or political plans for the future – let alone the future of Spain, a country few of them were particularly familiar with.[154] What kind of Republic did they imagine themselves to be fighting for, then, and to what end? The Belgian Communist Paul Nothomb, for his part, echoed the conclusions of the Comintern Army historians when he claimed that he went to the country 'not to defend freedom especially' but 'to defend the freedom of the party, to be able to eventually take power in Spain'. In his opinion, any talk of defending the values of bourgeois democracy was a self-interested smokescreen.[155] Fellow volunteer Roger Ossart disagreed, however, arguing that the primary motivation even 'among the Communists' was not to impose a revolutionary state but rather to simply 'win the war'. This did not stop him, however, from linking the defeat of fascism to the protection of the revolution already made in the Soviet Union and, by extension, that 'to come' elsewhere.[156] Simon Hirschmann, on the other hand, simply 'didn't care' what the government did in the wake of a Republican victory given that, once again, 'the important thing was to win the war'.[157]

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[152] Anon., *Las Brigadas Internacionales: La ayuda extranjera a los rojos españoles*.

[153] Stanley Payne, Prologue in César Vidal, *Las Brigadas Internacionales*, 11-12; Payne, *The Spanish Civil War, the Soviet Union, and Communism* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2004), 165. The original quotation can be found in Herrick, *Jumping the Line*, 165.

[154] Baxell, *Myths of the International Brigades,* 14; Richard Baxell, *Unlikely Warriors: The British in the Spanish Civil War and the Struggle Against Fascism* (London: Aurum Press, 2014), 18-25; Robert A. Rosenstone, *Crusade of the Left: The Lincoln Battalion in the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Pegasus, 1969), 113-6.

[155] Paul Nothomb in Florence Gavas (ed.), *Le sel de la terre: Espagne, 1936-1938: des brigadistes témoignent* (Paris: Éditions Tirésias, 1999), 50.

[156] Roger Ossart in Gavas, *Le sel de la terre,* 115.

[157] Simon Hirschman in Gavas, *Le sel de la terre,* 94.

As the above quotation from Roger Ossart reminds us, many of the volunteers saw the communist *détente* with democracy as a temporary measure which was required to contain the immediate threat of fascism. If they had little time for liberal parliamentarism for its own sake, they could take solace in the fact that the main architect of the Popular Front strategy, the Bulgarian Communist Georgi Dimitrov, saw it as heralding a 'democracy of a new type' which would feel free to engage in limited revolutionary measures. Michael Seidman has recently drawn attention to the widespread terror, nationalization of industry and redistribution of land which took place across the loyalist zone throughout the Spanish Civil War and, for him, indicate that the Second Republic had given way to just such a 'democracy of a new type' in the shape of a revolutionary Third Republic.[158] Make what you want of the nomenclature; there is no denying that many of the foreign volunteers took it for granted that the country they were fighting for was not a truly pluralist democracy but rather a 'New Spain' in the making. For those veterans who settled in countries aligned with the Soviet Union following the Republic's defeat, the Spanish conflict would remain a 'national revolutionary war' for decades afterwards. In some written recollections taken down in official commemoration of the International Brigades in Communist Poland in 1967, the Commander of the Dombrowski Battalion proudly recalled how 'a social revolution was taking place which changed the social, economic and political face of the country', quoting the wartime leader of the Spanish Communist Party to the effect that Spain 'evolved during the war into a people's republic, without large capitalists, without landowners, without reactionaries, in a republic based on the masses of the people.'[159]

The claim that the Internationals Brigades 'fought for democracy' has by now become almost axiomatic, but – as the preceding paragraph should indicate – it is more problematic than it may at first seem. Certainly, some of the volunteers *did* believe in liberal democracy as a desirable end in its own right, proudly stating that they went to Spain in order to defend the right of Spaniards to vote in free elections.[160] As Tom Buchanan argues, however, the word itself – 'democracy' – was open to competing definitions, with not a few volunteers believing that Stalin's Soviet Union, rather than Chamberlain's Britain or Blum's France, continued to offer the best roadmap for delivering on the democratic will of 'the people'.[161] Tellingly, the International Brigades' commissars saw no contradiction in publishing laudatory accounts of life under Stalin's one-party dictatorship in the volunteers' trench press while, at the same time, reminding their readers that they were defending a democratic system of government through force of arms in Spain. A deeply class-conscious understanding of the

[158] Michael Seidman, *Transatlantic Antifascisms from the Spanish Civil War to World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 9-51.
[159] Michał Strzelczyk in Michał Bron, (ed.): *Polacy w wojnie hiszpańskiej (1936-1939)* (Warsaw, Wydawnictwo Ministerstwa Obrony Narodowej: 1967), 116.
[160] Tom Buchanan, 'Antifascism and Democracy in the 1930s', *European History Quarterly,* 32:1 (2002), 40.
[161] Ibid, 39-57.

Spanish Republic was encouraged by their political training in the rearguard and soon filtered down to the volunteers, not least in the form of their references to the 'Spanish People' – an imagined community which conveniently excluded those individuals who had voted for right-wing parties, not to mention those unlucky enough to be considered a capitalist landlord or a reactionary priest. These, of course, had either fled, gone into hiding or ended up amongst the 55,000 civilians murdered throughout the Republican zone in the course of the war.[162]

If a Spanish repeat of the 1917 Revolution was, for the time being, off the cards, many volunteers continued to believe that the long path towards communism's more maximalist aims remained wide open, even if the troublesome roadblock of fascism would have to be overcome through alliances with other left-wing and liberal parties first.[163] At least some of those volunteers who had been hardline communists long before the introduction of the popular front strategy were unlikely to have abandoned their more revolutionary ambitions overnight; ambitions which many Polish and German volunteers would indeed be able to put into practice later on in their capacity as intellectuals, legislators and secret security personnel in Communist East Germany and Poland.[164] For others, a Republican victory would not entail a full-blown revolution so much as a limited socialist democracy. 'You could say that the Socialist Revolution was a secondary matter in Spain', the Swedish volunteer and Communist Gösta Karlsson recalled, in so far as 'you were fighting for the survival of the Republic'. He did not stop there, however, adding that – in his words – 'the bourgeois democracy in Spain was so very compromised, tied up with the big landowners and Capitalism' that 'to fight for the upholding of that system – that was probably pretty unthinkable'.[165] If anything, many of the politicians leading the loyalist war effort would have agreed.

All the same – and regardless of what the 35,000 volunteers of the International Brigades actually imagined themselves to be fighting for in Spain – their undeniable connections to world communism immediately, and repeatedly, opened them up to accusations of meddling in the country's internal affairs. Rumours that the volunteers

[162] The figure of 55,000 is provided in an overview of rearguard violence by José Luis Ledesma in 'Total War behind the Frontlines? An Inquiry into the Violence on the Republican Side in the Spanish Civil War' in Baumeister and Schüler-Springorum, '*"If you Tolerate This…"*', 155. This violence has long been blamed on anarchist 'uncontrollables' when in fact it was carried out by the entire liberal and left-wing spectrum, with Julius Ruiz arguing that it was intrinsic to the wartime antifascist project in *The 'Red Terror' and the Spanish Civil War: Revolutionary Violence in Madrid* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[163] Payne, *The Spanish Civil War, the Soviet Union, and Communism*, 63.

[164] For the shift away from 'social fascism' see Jonathan Haslam, 'The Origins of the Popular Front', 684. For the role of Polish volunteers in 'shaping and strengthening' communist rule – including their involvement in repressive activities, see Jacek Pietrzak, 'Poles in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939): During the Conflict and After', *Cuadernos de Historia Contemporánea,* 43 (2021), 167-184; for the Germans Arnold Krammer, 'The Cult of the Spanish Civil War in East Germany', *Journal of Contemporary History,* 39:4 (Oct. 2004), 531-560.

[165] Interview with Gösta Karlsson, translated by Anders MacGregor-Thunell, https://educationforum.ipbhost.com/topic/897-spanish-civil-war-oral-history/, accessed 28 November 2022.

were motivated not by antifascist solidarity but by political self-interest proved a serious enough threat for some of their key leaders to make a series of public declarations reassuring any Spanish listeners that they were not, in fact, some kind of foreign trojan horse. In the course of a radio broadcast made in the first year of the war, none other than Commissar General Luigi Longo took it upon himself to guarantee listeners that the foreign volunteers' sole objective was 'saving the independence of Spain; saving the liberty and independence of all peoples' and 'saving the peace of the world', concluding in no uncertain terms that 'we have no other objectives than these'.[166] This same message appeared repeatedly in the International Brigades' public declarations until the very moment they were withdrawn from frontline service in October 1938. In a speech given before various civil and political authorities in Albacete in the winter of 1937, Longo once again declared that the volunteers had come to Spain with the simple aim 'to put themselves at the disposition of the People's Front Government' and 'to fight under the orders of its General Staff'.[167]

For all of these attempts to convince their Spanish hosts that the International Brigades were politically disinterested, the association between the foreign fighting unit and the Spanish Communist Party would remain stubbornly in place throughout the war. The latter had succeeded in rapidly expanding its membership in the first months of the conflict owing, in no small part, to the appeal its approach to military rationalisation and political unification held for large numbers of professional officers. Largo Caballero's discomfort with the sudden boost to communist influence was well-known within the International Brigades. As early as 10 October 1936 André Marty had informed his Comintern superiors that 'our party has found itself opposed to Caballero, who is completely obsessed by the development of his own political career'.[168] Longo sensed a distinct lack of enthusiasm when he approached the prime minister with his proposal to establish the International Brigades that same month, with his colleague Pierre Rebière overlaying his own recollection of the meeting with snide references to Caballero's bourgeois self-interest, personal vanity and collaboration with the Primo de Rivera dictatorship.[169] This hostility soon trickled down to the volunteers. The American Joe Dallet informed his wife that his stint at the International Brigades' school for commissars in May 1937 'assumed particularly important proportions in view of the present political situation here, with Caballero leaning toward the Right', openly acknowledging in the same letter that there were non-Communist members of

[166] Longo, *Las Brigadas Internacionales en España,* 117.
[167] Anon., '"The International Brigades Will be Worthy of the Glorious Epic of the Spanish People" Declared Comrade Gallo in Moving Speech', *English VFL,* 1 November 1937, RGASPI, 545.2.362, 5.
[168] Quoted in Ricardo Miralles, *Juan Negrín: La República en guerra* (Madrid: Temas de Hoy, 2003), 105.
[169] Pierre Rebière, manuscript for brochure of founding of the Brigades, 19, RGASPI, 545.3.401; Longo, *Las Brigadas Internacionales en España,* 50-52.

the government who were ‘afraid of our influence in the army, which is growing by leaps and bounds’.[170]

Various leaders within the International Brigades, not least Longo, came to feel that the anti-communist prejudices of certain government ministers had directly undermined their ability to operate effectively. Vital Gayman, the Parisian municipal councillor and longstanding Communist Party member who was Chief of Staff at the International Brigade base at Albacete, spared no punches in an internal report which claimed that the Spanish authorities’ superficial courtesy hid a whole series of abuses against the unit.[171] He mentioned the Central Staff seizing foreign material destined for the volunteers; the same Central Staff also attempting to strip the Brigade postal service of its autonomous censorship capacities; The Ministry of War ordering all foreign currency belonging to the volunteers to be changed into pesetas in spite of the unfavourable exchange rate; the government failing to provide arms they had promised, with the result that international artillery units were left lacking, in addition to their refusal to provide leave for men who had spent months in the line and an apparent unwillingness to send Spanish conscripts to the Albacete base through fear they would be ‘contaminated’ by communism. Some of these complaints were fair, others less so. The French Communist found a clear explanation for them all, however, in his clear belief that the loyalist state apparatus was ‘swarming’ with ‘enemies of the Republic’ who insisted on considering the International Brigades a self-interested communist vanguard.[172]

Mutual suspicion between non-communist government ministers and the communist-dominated International Brigades came to a head through the thorny issue of commissarial appointments. In the spring of 1937 Largo Caballero embarked on a crackdown of the controversial institution, insisting that appointments were, from now on, to be signed off by himself. His stated ambition was to ensure that there was genuine political plurality within its ranks given that, until then, they had been thoroughly dominated by communists.[173] To his credit, Longo was already making genuine efforts to convert the International Brigades’ own commissariat into a more politically representative organisation from late 1936 onwards. Just as importantly, when the Spanish Commissar General of War alerted him to ongoing cases of partisanship, he was willing to accept that some improvements still needed to be made. Before long, Longo was taking it upon himself to warn his subordinates against such activities as attempting to poach new members for the Communist Party, as well

[170] Joe Dallet, *Letters from Spain: By Joe Dallet, to His Wife* (New Era Publishers, Toronto, 1938), 34-35.

[171] For more on ‘Vidal’, as Gaymann was known in Spain, see Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War,* 444 and Tremlett, *The International Brigades,* 74.

[172] Vital ‘Vidal’ Gaymann, Report on relations between the Albacete base of the International Brigades and the Spanish civil and military authorities, undated, RGASPI, 545.2.32.

[173] Alpert, *The Republican Army,* 179-182.

as showing favouritism in the assignation of political posts.[174] Neither Longo nor his subordinates were always quite so understanding, however. On a number of occasions, they claimed that it was hostile government ministers, not themselves, who were the ones engaged in partisan activity. One internal document described October 1937 until April 1938 as a period of 'open war' between the Minister of War – the moderate socialist Indalecio Prieto – and the predominantly-communist Commissariat.[175] Prieto's replacement, Crescencio Bilbao, came into direct conflict with Longo when he accused him of falsifying statistics relating to the political and union composition of the 45th International Division in order to disguise communist control – an accusation which Longo staunchly denied.[176]

Although Socialist ministers were plainly liable to find themselves on the receiving end of Luigi Longo's impatience with loyalist politics, it is important to note that neither the volunteers nor their commissars felt automatic adversity towards the party. Tensions only ever arose when specific government figures were deemed unwilling to wage the war along the lines the International Brigades leadership themselves saw as fit. Given that those lines were largely set by the Communist Party, it is only natural that those socialists weary of the latter's increased power within the Republican coalition – Largo Caballero chief amongst them – should in turn have come into conflict with the International Brigades. But there were many Spanish Socialists who saw the Communist Party as an important ally, too. Before the war began, the two parties had succeeded in merging their youth groups into the Unified Socialist Youth (*Juventudes Socialistas Unificadas*). Even more significantly, it should not be forgotten that the Catalan branches of both parties were brought together within the auspices of the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia *(Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya* – PSUC*)* shortly after the failed military rising. According to historian Julián Casanova, the PSUC's increasingly dominant role in Catalan politics was linked to the prestige of the International Brigades, although he does not specify exactly why – or how – this was the case.[177]

Co-operation with the Spanish Socialist Party became a key theme of the International Brigades' internal propaganda. The commissars' comradely rhetoric was much facilitated by the fact that the party leadership had themselves been stressing the need for discipline and military rationalization since August 1936. Equally importantly, they framed these pragmatic measures in the language of a unified struggle for national independence which would have been music to the ears of the foreign fighters.[178] If relatively little effort was made to discuss the peculiarities of the Socialist approach to the military and political struggle in Spain, it was because both the volunteers and their

[174] Longo to the political commissars of the International Brigades, 1 January 1938, RGASPI, 545.1.41.
[175] Anon., 'El Comisariado General de Guerra en las distintas etapas de la Guerra', RGASPI, 545.1.2.
[176] Ibid.
[177] Julián Casanova and Carlos Gil Andrés, *Twentieth-Century Spain: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 187.
[178] Bizcarrondo and Elorza, 'Imágenes desde la izquierda', 79-80.

political superiors seem to have taken it for granted that they were willing partners in the formation of a unified, national, regular war effort fought under the aegis of an antifascist Popular Front. Juan Negrín was a source of particular admiration, with the International Brigade Commissariat considering his thirteen-point strategy for victory as so satisfactory that it was discussed in special meetings until, in the words of one British commissar, 'every man in our battalion knew the kind of Spain he was fighting for'.[179] Thorough-going engagement with the Thirteen Points was further encouraged by a competition held in May 1938 inviting volunteers to submit essays analyzing the government approach to the war in their own words.[180] In short, the volunteers were encouraged to feel a sense of personal loyalty to the Spanish Prime Minister and his cabinet ministers regardless of the party they belonged to.

For all of the volunteers' talk of antifascist co-operation, a number of the political and military figures they dealt with in the course of the Civil War continued to feel plenty of suspicion towards them on the grounds that they represented a communist law unto themselves. Competing visions of the foreign volunteers' fundamental role in Spain occasionally centred on the town where they were based. They had, after all, become a frankly inescapable presence in Albacete practically overnight, taking over a whole array of the town's most important buildings including the Barracks of the Republican Guard, the bullring, various churches and the College of Dominican monks for their propaganda offices, postal services, prisons and lodgings. Three warehouses alone were required for storing the volunteers' clothing.[181] Vital Gaymann admitted that they were by far the richest and most powerful organism in Albacete by January 1937.[182] For some commentators, this expansion of foreign influence in what had previously been a provincial backwater had sinister overtones. The Italian mercenary Nick Gillain, who joined the International Brigades out of a sense of adventure, claimed with enormous hyperbole that the town had been brought to physical and moral ruin having been, in his words, 'invaded by 10,000 militiamen'.[183] As late as 1972 a Francoist historian described Albacete as a Soviet canton through which 'great figures of international communism' imposed ferocious discipline by means of their sinister 'chekas'.[184]

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[179] Bob Cooney, *Proud Journey: A Spanish Civil War Memoir* (London: Marx Memorial Library and the Manifesto Press, 2015), 80.

[180] Anon., 'The Competition', *Our Fight,* unnumbered, 6 May 1938, 1, RGASPI, 545.3.515.

[181] Manuel Requena Gallego, 'Albacete, base de reclutamiento e instrucción de las Brigadas Internacionales', *Al-Basit: Revista de estudios albacetenses*, segunda época, year XXII, (November 1996), 66-72.

[182] Gaymann, report on relations between the Albacete base of the International Brigades and the Spanish civil and military authorities, undated, 334, RGASPI, 545.2.32.

[183] Nick Gillain, *El Mercenario: Diario de un combatiente rojo* (unspecified place of publication: Editorial Tanger, 1939), 9. A chapter of the first Francoist history of the International Brigades is dedicated to 'el carnicero de Albacete'. Anon., *Las Brigadas Internacionales: La ayuda extranjera a los rojos españoles,* 93-94.

[184] José M. Martínez Bande, *Brigadas Internacionales* (Barcelona: Luis de Caralt, 1972), 52.

Some of the harshest criticism levelled against foreign presence in Albacete came from Justo Martínez Amutio, the town's Socialist Civil Governor until his replacement by Communists in 1937 and 1938. While he mirrored many of the International Brigades' critics in drawing a distinction between a relatively decent rank and file and their supposedly tyrannical leaders, he ultimately felt that they posed a profound danger to the Spanish Republic.[185] Amutio's memoirs are notoriously unreliable; all the same, they remain a useful example of the hostility the International Brigades could inspire on the basis that they were, even in the opinion of some loyal Republicans, a 'Comintern Army' operating over the head of the legitimate Spanish authorities. At one point he regales his readers with the story of how, one unspecified day, a fellow socialist informed him of the summary execution of nine international volunteers not far from their officer training school at Pozo Rubio. The indignant Civil Governor took it upon himself to call the police before setting off to the International Base in search of an explanation. When André Marty arrived after a short delay, Amutio demanded to know why the Republican authorities had not been informed of the execution. Unsatisfied with the response, he took the issue up with none other than the Prime Minister himself. Martínez Amutio's criticism of the International Brigades' was double-edged. Firstly, he accused them of being a communist army whose leaders were importing terror into Spain. Secondly, he charged them with knowingly circumventing the laws of the Spanish Republic. In making his case, he presented himself – not particularly subtly – as a socialist hero defending the interests of the Spanish People from foreign tyranny.[186]

The Socialist Civil Governor of Albacete was not the only Spaniard to accuse the International Brigades of overstepping Republican authority. Although they overwhelmingly co-operated with other units of the Popular Army without any issue whatsoever, there were occasional frictions. A particularly striking incident occurred at the fortress at Castelldefells, which was – in the month of June 1938 – shared by a Spanish observation unit and a notorious International Brigade prison overseen by a sadistic lieutenant by the name of Lantez. That month, a Spanish artilleryman arrived to the castle and proceeded to urinate in its patio. This same individual, Lantez would later maintain in an internal report which has long since sat unnoticed in the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, had already provoked the guard two weeks earlier with drunken shouts of 'I am Spanish and you are all foreigners!'. On this particular occasion, a member of the International Brigades ordered him to stop what he was doing before finally apprehending him and bring him before Lantez. The Spaniard refused to give his name to the French lieutenant on the grounds that the latter did not have the authority to ask for it, resulting in him being swiftly thrown into

[185] Justo Martínez Amutio, *Chantaje a un pueblo* (Esplugas de Llobregat, Barcelona: Plaza & Janes, 1977), 287.
[186] Ibid, 265-287.

a dark and dirty dungeon cell, fed on bread and water, cut off from the outside world and made to sleep on the ground without bedding for three or four days.[187]

The Spanish artilleryman's commissar was so alarmed at what he considered to be a disproportionate response to what was, at the very worst, a minor offence that he took it upon himself to inform his superiors and have an investigation carried out. Just like the Civil Governor of Albacete, he framed the incident not only as unacceptable in its own right, but also as having grave implications for the integrity of the Spanish Republic. Rallying every inch of his antifascist patriotism in his written report, the commissar proceeded to describe it as 'intolerable that any foreigner should attempt […] to impose correctives to our soldiers in an arbitrary and cruel manner with complete ignorance of our laws', adding that not a single Spanish official of the Republican Army would have behaved in the same way to one of their soldiers. 'Our international brothers are welcome and warmly received so long as they behave with the fraternity and all the respect owed to our men, our customs and our laws', the commissar concluded, 'but I do not believe that in a single moment a case of arbitrariness such as the aforementioned can be permitted'. [188] Interestingly, Lieutenant Lantez framed his own case around the same premise that he had acted on behalf of Spanish interests given that the artilleryman's insubordination risked opening the way – or so he claimed – to the fifth column. As we will shortly see, this was far from the first time in which two groups made competing claims to represent the Spanish People in their struggle against fascism.

## II: 'Cloud Cuckoo Land' – The International Brigades, The Anarchists and The POUM

Mutually-exclusive claims to be fighting on behalf of the 'Spanish People' were an underlying feature of the relationship between the International Brigades and the various anarchist groups operating alongside them within the Republican zone. While the volunteers' superiors represented anarchist participation in the antifascist struggle as cause for celebration if it was carried out on the International Brigades' own terms, they were quick to criticise even the slightest resistance to the inexorable and triumphant march towards military-political rationalisation carried out, as they so often liked to believe, under their own auspices. The criticism of uncooperative anarchists was certainly not limited to a few newspaper articles. Both during and after the war many of the volunteers felt bold enough to make sweeping, and often condescending, generalisations about their war aims and military abilities even though the members of the two main anarchist unions – the *Confederación Nacional de Trabajo* (CNT) and

[187] Commissar Rafael Purón, report concerning arrest at Castelldefels, 14 June 1938; Teniente Lantez, report to the Inspector-General of Artillery informing him of the arrest of a Spanish artilleryman, C. June 1938; Report by the *Comisariado General de Guerra* on the arrest of an artilleryman at Castelldefels, 29 June 1938; Comandante Lantez, Report 'concerniente la arrestación de un soldado del puesto de observacion', Castelldefels, 23 July 1938, all located in RGASPI, 545.1.21; Anon., biographical report on Marcel Lantez, 2 January 1939, RGASPI, 545.6.1262.
[188] Report concerning arrest at Castelldefels, Rafael Purón of the Observation Post, 14 June 1938, RGASPI, 545.1.21.

the more radical *Federación Anarquista Ibérica* (FAI) – were frequently riven by their own disagreements over a whole series of political, social, economic and military matters. If the volunteers insisted on treating 'the anarchists' as a monolithic bloc whose principal characteristics barely changed throughout the war, it was in order to hold them up as a mirror against which to define the International Brigades' own approach to the fighting. That they made for such an easy foil also explains why they received particularly frequent – if equally fleeting – attention in the volunteers' written and oral recollections while other important political groups such as the Socialists and Republicans received almost none.

Above all, the volunteers tended to consider the anarchists as impractical dreamers who had little sense of how to win a modern war. A major reason for this was their understanding of the revolutionary activity which had taken place early on in the conflict, shortly after the rising. While many members of the International Brigades admired the revolutionary heroism of the anarchist militias which had, after all, successfully subdued the rebels, collectivised businesses and taken over public spaces in July 1936, they concurred that their more libertarian ambitions were ultimately incompatible with the material needs of a large-scale, long-term war fought on multiple fronts. While the British volunteer Sam Russell was recuperating from recent wounds in Catalonia, some local contacts invited him to give a speech about the International Brigades at an enamel factory run by the CNT. He later described what he saw as nothing less than 'cloud cuckoo land', with the factory not only operating on a thirty-hour week on full pre-war wages but also failing to shift production towards government needs. He said that the workers listened politely to his speech but, in the end, his words made no difference.[189] Few volunteers had the same kind of direct contact with revolutionary workers' control described, years later, by a still-dumbfounded Sam Russell. Nonetheless, many of them shared his view that 'the anarchists' were fatally mistaken to prioritise the revolution over the military struggle on the frontlines.

The question of 'war versus revolution' was brought up in conversations amongst the foreign volunteers throughout the war. It was also something they continued to contemplate years later. When prompted by their interviewers to weigh in on the debate, they were only too happy to oblige. 'We were a political army and we discussed these matters' recalled Michael Economides in the 1980s. The solution to the 'war versus revolution' dilemma was, for him, never in doubt. 'Nobody could deny it; how can you?' Economides concluded when explaining to his own interviewer that the immediate need to win the war against fascism on the frontlines was far more important than the construction of the anarchist utopia in the rearguard.[190] As both Sam Russell and Michael Economides' language shows, the volunteers tended to regard the anarchists as pursuing an utterly naive approach to the antifascist struggle which, as far as they were concerned, required the patient imposition of good old-

[189] Interview with Sam Russell, reel 5, 1986, IWM, CN: 9484.

[190] Interview with Michael Economides, reel 1, 1996, IWM, CN: 17320.

fashioned common sense. Fortunately enough, the International Brigades, by following the lead of the Spanish Communist Party, were seen as having enough of this to spare. 'In this case, the party-line was the logical position' Steve Nelson stressed in one of his own interviews. 'Our first business was to win the war', he specified, adding that 'after we had won the war, we could begin the social revolution'.[191] While the volunteers were right to recognize that the workers who manned the barricades throughout Catalonia in July 1936 were fighting for a new world order which left little room for the laws, attitudes and institutions of the 'bourgeois' Second Republic, they failed to notice that the regional Catalan government had in fact worked to re-establish government control over the newly empowered workers' organisations almost immediately.[192]

For many volunteers the very way in which the anarchists went about waging war was evidence enough that they required the patient example of the more experienced and knowledgeable cadres of the Spanish Communist Party, the Fifth Regiment and – of course – the International Brigades. Within days of subduing the rebels garrisons in Barcelona, columns consisting of Socialist, Communist, Marxist and above all Anarchist workers had left for the Aragon front, with the famous Durruti Column departing amidst much fanfare just four days into the ongoing revolution.[193] It was in the anarchists' own interests to represent these militias as the result of spontaneous mass mobilisation amongst the workers, although this was more myth than reality.[194] All the same, thousands of men filled their ranks and took their new military responsibilities entirely seriously. The militiamen – and to a much lesser extent militiawomen – considered themselves part of a revolutionary army fighting for the social, cultural, economic and political transformations implemented in the rearguard and, as such, espoused a novel military culture based on the concept of 'self-management'. In practice, this meant equal pay regardless of rank, a deliberate absence of traditional salutes and even the right to debate orders. The Catalan Government's own orders for several classes of reservists to be mobilised in August 1936 were, for their part, simply ignored.[195]

Once again, members of the International Brigades rallied common sense as reason enough to do away with these experiments in antifascist warfare. Far from admiring self-management as a novel contribution to military theory, they saw the militias' approach to frontline fighting as an expression of Spanish incompetence, an excuse for poor individual conduct and a means through which to safeguard partisan political interests. Whilst in Spain, these negative attitudes were reinforced through the International Brigades' own emphasis on discipline and unified command. For

[191] Quoted in Donald L. Miller, 'Fighting in Spain: A Conversation with Steve Nelson', *Salmagundi,* 76-77 (Autumn 1987 – Winter 1988), 119.
[192] Pagès i Blanch, *War and Revolution in Catalonia,* 32-43.
[193] Ibid., 45-46.
[194] Julián Casanova, *Anarchism, the Republic and Civil War in Spain: 1931-1939* (London: Routledge, 2005), 109.
[195] Pagès i Blanch, *War and Revolution,* 49-50.

accusations of incompetence one need look no further than Heinz Hoffman, a future Minister for National Defence in the German Democratic Republic, who believed that the more-or-less suicidal nature of uncoordinated military action meant that the few anarchists who refused to participate in the process of military rationalisation 'had to pay with their lives for their contempt for military discipline'.[196] The belief that the militias paved the way for poor individual conduct, meanwhile, was expressed by some of the foreigner volunteers who had actually fought alongside them in the early days of the war. Karl Jung recalled that his fellow Germans had to patiently explain how taking unannounced leave in Barcelona was militarily detrimental to their Spanish comrades in the Thälmann Militia.[197] Then there was the question of specific groups protecting their own partisan interests at the expense of the common good. Mechanic Frank Shesler was so convinced of this that, on his official expeditions to Barcelona, he took it upon himself to steal 'a couple of trucks' given that the 'anarchists didn't want to part with anything, the fighting was going on at the front' and 'we were the shock troops'.[198]

As Frank Shesler's shady activity leaves in no doubt, the volunteers were liable to consider the anarchist approach to warfare as something far graver than a simple display of quixotic naivety. Just as often, they regarded it as a direct obstacle to victory and, by extension, an open affront to the antifascist will of the Spanish People. The British volunteer Maurice Levine described the lines which were held by a diverse array of militia groups in Catalonia and Aragon early on in the war as 'a joke', taking offense at the fact that they were 'quiescent' when the war raged desperately on elsewhere. The fact that his interview was recorded makes it possible to register his audible disgust with George Orwell's description of the same front in *Homage to Catalonia,* citing the comparative sacrifices made by the International Brigades at Jarama, Lopera and Las Rozas. He says, with deadly seriousness, that he threw his first edition of the book in the dustbin.[199] The Cuban volunteer Gaspar González Rodríguez linked his own impatience with what he perceived to be the anarchist's military selfishness to the Communist's calls for discipline and unity. 'Later on there was the issue of sole command because there were the anarchists who would take a small village and not allow the communists to pass and things like that', he recalled, adding that 'I think that was madness; the war was lost because there wasn't the strength of unity'.[200]

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[196] Heinz Hoffman, *Mannheim, Madrid, Moskau: Erlebtes aus drei Jahrzehnten* (Militarverlag der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, Berlin: 1981), 325.

[197] Karl Jung, report on the Thaelmann Group in María Isabel Esteve Torres (ed.), *Los primeros voluntarios alemanes en la guerra de España (julio-noviembre 1936), Grupo Thälmann y Centuria Thälmann* (self-published online, 2014), 27.

[198] Interview with Frank Shesler, CDMH, PHO_ABAL_20.

[199] Interview with Maurice Levine, reel 5, undated (after 1978), IWM, CN: 9722.

[200] Interview with Gaspar González Rodríguez in Francisco Hernández Muñoz-Rivero (ed.), *Los voluntarios cubanos en la Guerra de España, 1936-1939* (self-published online, 2011), 223.

The unpleasant feeling that the anarchists essentially had it in for the International Brigades dawned on many volunteers no sooner than they set foot in Spain. In their subsequent testimonies, several of them describe the experience of getting past anarchist border guards as a major achievement in itself.[201] The Sephardic Jewish volunteer César Covo wrote all about how the guide responsible for driving his own contingent of volunteers into Spain devised a clever scheme to get past one particular guard, the likes of whom Covo described unsympathetically as 'the height of ugliness'. As the stocky Catalan approached, Covo and his comrades were told to pretend that they did not speak French and, in this way, give the impression that they were Spaniards returning from abroad who had the right to pass unmolested. Eventually, 'the car passes the barrier and advances lazily' with the consequence that 'an electric sensation invades us up to the fingertips'. [202] Erich Glückauf was another volunteer to have a close encounter at the Catalan border. No sooner had the truck carrying his contingent of volunteers crossed in Spain than it was surrounded by a group of anarchists. He later recalled the general impression as 'not very agreeable' when these told the foreigners to save their gas and go back home.[203] Were these words really uttered? If they were, did Glückauf understand them? It is, of course, entirely possible that they were – and that he did. All the same, some of the volunteers only learned of anarchist hostility to the International Brigades later on and, in this way, could finally make sense of the lukewarm reception they received, much to their surprise, when they had first crossed into wartime Spain.[204]

Not all of the antifascist fighters of the International Brigades considered the anarchists to be unhelpful obstacles to victory. The British volunteer Walter Gregory was outright complimentary towards them, citing their 'obvious sincerity, dedication and enthusiasm'.[205] Dutchman Patrus Laros regarded those who were stationed alongside him on one front as 'demons' when it came to fighting, although he admitted that the foreign volunteers had to be 'vigilant' with them given that, as far as he could tell, they essentially operated as their own army at that stage.[206] Others differentiated between cynical anarchist leaders and a well-meaning rank and file in much the same way opponents of the International Brigades did. Herbert Grünstein marvelled at the capacity of the anarchists to 'cloud the heads' of otherwise capable soldiers, while William Edgar Williamson stressed that the men fought bravely even though their leaders were at constant 'loggerheads' with the Popular Front.[207] Others felt that the

[201] See for example Alexei Eisner, *La 12ª Brigada Internacional* (Valencia: Prometeo, 1971), 36, as well as Hermann Teichmann's interview in Esteve Torres, *Recuerdos de brigadistas alemantes,* 367.
[202] César Covo, *¡Es la guerra, camarada! Memorias de un brigadista sefardí* (Valencia: PUV, 2018), 38-41.
[203] Erich Glückauf in Esteve Torres, *Recuerdos de brigadistas alemanes,* 116.
[204] See for example the interview with William Bede Picard, reel 3, 1999, IWM, CN: 18779.
[205] Walter Gregory, *The Shallow Grave: A Memoir of the Spanish Civil War* (Nottingham: Five Leaves Publications, 1996), 93.
[206] Petrus Laros in Esteve Torres, *Recuerdos de brigadistas alemanes,* 206.
[207] Herbert Grünstein in Esteve Torres, *Recuerdos de brigadistas alemanes,* 129; interview with William Edgar Williamson, reel 11, 1990, IWM, CN: 12385.

rank and file were themselves a mixed bunch. Heinrich Fomferra described the majority as 'lumpen' traitors who deliberated frustrated the Communist policy of forging Popular Fronts but admitted that there were a number of brave soldiers amongst their ranks.[208] In short, attitudes towards the anarchists were as varied as the volunteers who expressed them in the first place, and were liable – like all of their attitudes to war, politics and society in Spain – to be shaped by their pre-existing attitudes, wartime propaganda, and encounters both on and off the frontlines.

Fortunately for the volunteers, the Communist approach to antifascist warfare soon prevailed over the incompetent militias and treacherous leadership which they associated with the anarchists. 'In short', Frenchman Auguste Lecoeur wrote, 'we had arrived […] to set an example and confront them in the face of public opinion'.[209] In stressing the International Brigades' role in strengthening the war effort, however, volunteers like Lacoeur were liable to exaggerate the anarchists' opposition to military and political unification. Steve Nelson fell into this trap when he wrongly asserted that 'the anarchists did not want to be part of any government' and that 'they were also opposed to military authority, to general staffs, to training officers and whatnot'.[210] In fact, historians such as Julián Casanova, Pelai Pagès i Blanch and most recently Danny Evans have drawn attention to the passionate debates which took place in the anarchist movement regarding both processes, finally culminating in anarchist participation in Largo Caballero's cabinet in November 1936.[211] This extraordinary event was accompanied by a shift in the CNT's public rhetoric towards supporting militarisation, with the union leadership even putting the veteran activist Miguel González Inestal in charge of convincing the rank and file to accept martial discipline and military hierarchies.[212] This was, of course, all taking place at around the same time the International Brigades were being formed. In other words, the conflict between the foreign volunteers and the anarchists was never as straightforward, nor indeed inevitable, as many of the former made out.

Quite apart from how the volunteers felt, the leadership of the International Brigades made sure to celebrate anarchist co-operation in the formation of a strong Popular Army whenever they could. They even recast the anarchist militant Buenaventura Durruti, who had famously been killed on the Madrid front in November 1936, as a champion of precisely the kind of warfare the International Brigades had long called for. 'Durruti took to heart the hard lessons of the antifascist struggle', the authors of one article in the volunteers' trench press wrote, quoting the already-legendary antifascist martyr to the effect that 'we must create a Regular Army. We shall establish

[208] Heinrich Fomferra in Esteve Torres, *Recuerdos de brigadistas alemanes,* 100.
[209] Auguste Lecoeur, *Le partisan* (France: Flammarion, 1963), 65.
[210] Quoted in Miller, 'Fighting in Spain', 127.
[211] Pagès i Blanch, *War and Revolution,* 34-36 and 94-95; Danny Evans, *Revolution and the State: Anarchism in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-9* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2018) 45-46; 53-54.
[212] Casanova, *Anarchism, the Republic and Civil War Spain,* 124; Evans, *Revolution and the State,* 50.

an iron discipline. The main task is to crush Fascism, to defend Spain'.[213] Anybody reading these words might reasonable have guessed that Durutti was not an anarchist at all, but rather a card-carrying member of the Spanish Communist Party. The Commissariat worked hard to convince the volunteers as well as their Spanish hosts that, far from being at loggerheads with one another, close contact with their anarchist comrades was essential for the waging of a competent war effort. It was for this reason that Commissar John Gates wrote to the members of a CNT branch which had decided to sponsor one of the Brigades promising that the foreign volunteers would continuing working in favour of a loyalist victory. This evidence of cross-party co-operation was presented to the volunteers as an example of precisely the kind of antifascist unity they, and the Spanish Communist Party, had always called for.[214]

In order for these attempts to highlight antifascist unity between foreign volunteers and native anarchists to make any sense, it was first necessary to find a convincing explanation for those tensions which, quite clearly, continued to exist. The scapegoat was soon found in the form of 'Trotskyists' and 'fifth columnists'. [215] The POUM, a revolutionary organisation formed in opposition to the Spanish Communist Party by Andréu Nin and Joaquín Maurín in 1935, came under particular fire for sowing the seeds of political division not only throughout the Popular Army, but within the very ranks of the International Brigades. Lengthy internal reports and alarmist newspaper articles were written on the basis of nonsensical evidence alleging that members of the revolutionary party had infiltrated loyalist ranks with the express purpose of spreading disinformation about the foreign volunteers' intentions in Spain and, in this way, facilitating the decomposition of the unified antifascist war effort.[216] The claim that the POUM were working in favour of a fascist victory was made vociferously enough in the Brigades' written publications, illustrated propaganda and the political speeches of the commissars for it to become practically the *only* thing the volunteers knew about the group. It was also completely untrue.[217] Little wonder they remained completely unaware that the POUM in fact saw eye-to-eye with the International

[213] Anon., 'Buenaventura Durruti', *English VFL,* vol. 1, no. 26, 6 December 1937, 4, RGASPI, 545.2.362.

[214] Anon., 'Brigade to Reward UGT-CNT Workers', *Nuestro cmobate,* unnumbered, 29 May 1938, 2, RGASPI, 545.3.515.

[215] See for example an article in the main Communist Party newspaper blaming tensions between foreigners and anarchists on Trotskyists: anon., 'Todos los españoles honrados tienen en el trotskismo a un enemigo encarnizado', *Mundo Obrero,* fourth epoch, no. 421, 14 April 1937, 1.

[216] Anon., report on the XI Brigade during and after Teruel, undated, RGASPI, 545.3.82.

[217] For press reports on the POUM see anon., 'The POUM, supplier of arms to fascism', *French VFL*, 18 May 1937, no. 14, 6, RGASPI, 545.2.370 and anon., 'Le Trotskisme en action' , *French VFL*, 18 May 1937, no. 14, 7, RGASPI, 545.2.370. For a pamphlet produced by the International Brigade Commissariat against the POUM, see 'Contra los provocadores, los aventureros del P.O.U.M, los disgregadores, los favorecedores de atropellos en la retaguardia: ¡VIGILANCIA!', , CDMH, PS-Panfletos 419. See, also, the claim made by James Neugass that villagers and townspeople in Aragon were hostile to the International Brigades due to the POUM and other 'Trotskyists' spreading rumours in *War is Beautiful: An American Ambulance Driver in the Spanish Civil War* (ed. Peter N. Carroll and Peter Glazer) (The New Press, New York, 2008), 56.

Brigades on the need for traditional military discipline and had even lavished the foreign volunteers with praise for their exemplary wartime role in their main newspaper.[218]

The International Brigades' official line towards the POUM was borrowed wholesale from the Spanish Communist Party. In the wake of the deadly in-fighting which broke out between various Republican groups in the streets of Barcelona in May 1937, the Communists not only led the way in ensuring that the POUM received practically all the blame, but also played a key role in arresting, interrogating and torturing many of its members on trumped up charges of spearheading a fascist plot to destroy the Republic.[219] As the testimony of the American veteran William Susman makes clear, many of the volunteers simply took it for granted that 'Trotksyists' were at work throughout the Republic and, just as crucially, their own ranks. Speaking in the 1980s, Susman, who had been assigned to internal 'intelligence' work, recalled that 'the charges of Trostkyism, of spies on the left and so on were so rampant that one could work from early morning to late at night without catching up'. The fact that he 'never came close' to uncovering a single spy did not, in his words, 'diminish our hunt […] to find such people' given that 'we just *assumed* that they were there because after all there was supposed to be Trotskyites afoot, and where Trotskyites are afoot, can a spy be far behind? And all of us believed that with the *utmost* belief'.[220] The fear of 'Trotskyists' was only further encouraged by the term's ambiguity. 'I had only a rather hazy idea of the nature of the crime of Trotskyism', the Czeck artist Stephen Pollack would later recall, proving more confident in his knowledge that 'Trotskyite was the worst term of abuse in this army, and many political discussions in our battalion had ended with mutual charges of Trotskyism'.[221]

Just as the foreign volunteers compared themselves to the anarchists throughout their time in Spain, so too did many anarchists use the International Brigades as a foil with which to define their own approach to antifascist war. They did so both during the fighting and long afterwards, with leading figures in the movement such as Juan García Oliver penning memoirs in an attempt to explain, in predictably self-serving terms, why the struggle as they understood it was lost.[222] The arrival of masses of foreign fighters to Catalonia from October 1936 onwards was immediately greeted with trepidation, particularly given that the majority of the newcomers seemed to be either Socialists or Communists. The CNT had not yet made its controversial decision to enter Largo Caballero's cabinet, and the presence of these armed foreigners was identified as a potential menace to the anarchists' local grip on power. A report filed by the information service of the Regional Committee of Catalonia in January 1937 therefore drew attention to an office belonging to the Popular Army on Calle Clave,

[218] Bizcarrondo and Elorza, 'Imágenes desde la izquierda', 83.
[219] Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 680-683.
[220] Interview with William Susman, part 1, CDMH, PHO_ABAL_115.
[221] Quoted in Tremlett, *The International Brigades,* 302.
[222] Juan García Oliver, *El eco de los pasos: el anarcosindicalismo in la calle, en el Comité de Milicias, en el gobierno, en el exilio* (Barcelona: Ruedo ibérico, 1978).

Barcelona, which allegedly housed a 'suspicious quantity of arms' including around 500 rifles of Mexican and Russian origin. The office was also accused of attempting to poach members of anarchist confederations in order to transfer them to the International Brigades.[223] Such was the sense of conflicting interests between the foreign fighters and the native anarchists that the latter even tried poaching a number of newly-arrived volunteers for themselves.[224]

One of the anarchists' key complaint was that the foreign volunteers took up desperately-needed arms in a war which could have been fought perfectly well by readily-available reserves of Spanish manpower. 'We considered it unjust and a crime to leave our militiamen, who could not be matched for their bravery and their spirit, unarmed and simultaneously create huge foreign army Corps, provided with everything required and treated with favour' reflected Diego Abad de Santillán, echoing a sentiment that was common enough to become familiar amongst the foreign volunteers themselves.[225] It might be argued that, as an economist whose most senior position was a seat in the wartime Catalan Government, this criticism could be made at little personal cost. Yet it was also shared by Juan García Oliver, a key personality in the anarchist movement who went on to become a government minister in Largo Caballero's Popular Front Government in November 1936. 'The greatest assistance foreigners can give us is to fight in their own countries to force their governments to recognise our rights and give us the form of life which most suits us', he wrote in his memoir, assuring his readers that he repeated this precise argument when his government colleague, the Socialist Foreign Minister Julio Álvarez de Vayo, took him up on his well-known hostility to the foreign volunteers.[226] García Oliver and similar-thinking anarchists certainly stuck to their word insofar as they urged their own foreign sympathisers to engage in international propaganda work instead of coming to Spain.[227]

Foreigners were seen as unwelcome not only because they were unnecessary, but because the war was – as far as some anarchists were concerned – none of their business in the first place. García Oliver argued as much when justifying his decision to disobey Largo Caballero and block the volunteers' continued access to the Spanish

[223] Secretary of the Sección de Defensa José Grinfeld of the Comité Regional de Cataluña to the Sección de Coordinación e información de Barcelona, 6 January 1937, CDMH, 94C9.
[224] For recollections of this activity see Oskar Brandschädel and Herbert Jander in Esteve Torres (ed.), *Recuerdos de brigadistas alemanes,* pages 21 and 117 respectively; the interview with Coleman C. Persily, CDMH, PHO_ABAL_22 and Eisner, *La 12ª Brigada Internacional*, 41-42. Anarchist 'poaching' even occurred in Albacete in November 1936 according to Vital Gaymann's report into relations between the base and the Spanish civil and military authorities, RGASPI, 545.2.32.
[225] Diego Abad de Santillán, *Por que perdimos la guerra: una contribución a la historia de la tragedia española* (Esplugas de Llobregat, Barcelona: Plaza & Janes, 1977), 273. One volunteer who rejected this premise was Auguste Lecoeur in *Le partisan*, 65.
[226] García Oliver, *El eco de los pasos*, 272, 354.
[227] Kenyon Zimmer, 'The Other Volunteers: American Anarchists and the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939', *Journal for the Study of Radicalism,* 10:2 (Fall 2016), 27.

border in his memoir.[228] Other anarchists not only accused the International Brigades of meddling in Spanish affairs, but also spearheading a form of warfare which went against the interests and very character of the people in arms. For Abad de Santillán, one of the main errors of the Republican war effort had been to believe that a regular army of the kind eventually formed under the auspices of the Communist Party was the best means of defeating the enemy. 'Our war was not a war of one army against other armies, but rather the armed action of a people against its enemies' he wrote before concluding that 'a grave error had been committed in wanting to convert our war of guerrillas, a typically Spanish war, into a regular one'.[229] Ironically mirroring the International Brigades' own habit of speaking on behalf of the entire imagined antifascist community, Santillán stressed that the formation of a regular army and the underhand use of the foreign volunteers to carry this counter-revolutionary objective through did not even count on the support of most Spaniards.[230]

In addition to challenging the fundamental value of a regular army, some anarchists cast doubt on the basic premise that the foreign volunteers possessed the kind of martial discipline and military talent required to forge such an institution in the first place. Cipriano Mera, a veteran militiamen who had helped put down the military rising in July 1936, did not have particularly harsh words for the foreign volunteers who fought alongside him in Madrid but made a point of questioning General Kleber's decision-making in his subsequent memoir. In it, he claims – who knows with what truth – that an order for his men to launch an apparently suicidal attack across a hundred meters' worth of uncovered ground inspired him to march straight to the headquarters of the Red Army veteran to express his concerns. Only when Kleber explained that the attack was intended as a display of force did Mera give in, although he goes on to insist that this would not be the last time he accused the International Brigades' celebrated leaders of dubious decision making.[231] Much like Cipriano Mera, the anarchist militiaman Miguel García was eager to use his own frontline encounters with the foreign fighters to cast doubt on their military capabilities. Although he was on friendly terms with many of them, he made a point of stating that 'for all their vaunted discipline, it was they who suffered the first casualty for sheer irresponsibility' in the form of a drunken Czech volunteer who walked in front of the wall which protected him from the enemy.[232]

For those anarchists who remained staunchly opposed to militarisation, the creation of a regular army had nothing to do with the Republic's desire to win the war at all; instead, they regarded the move as a government ploy to re-impose state power and

[228] García Oliver, *El eco de los pasos,* 237.
[229] Abad de Santillán, *Por que perdimos la guerra,* 227.
[230] Ibid, 275.
[231] Cipriano Mera, *Guerra, exilio y cárcel de un anarcosindicalista* (Catalonia: digitised by the CNT, March 2006), no page number.
[232] Albert Meltzer (ed.), *Miguel García's Story* (Sanday, Orkney: The Miguel García Memorial Committee and the Cienfuegos Press, 1982), 49.

bring an end to the revolution.[233] The assumption that the Republican authorities had welcomed 'the invasion' of foreign communists to Spain in order to stifle anarchist power even led to one group of Barcelona anarchists to draw up ambitious proposals for their own volunteer force in spite of the dominant attitude that arms, rather than men, were needed. Anarchist survival itself seemed to be at stake, with the report's authors stressing how 'it cannot be tolerated that, once the war is over, there should 40,000 to 50,000 foreign communists' in Spain while they themselves lacked the necessary means 'to fight against them'.[234] Even those members of the movement who were won over to the idea of collaboration with the Republican authorities continued to look upon the International Brigades with a degree of suspicion. It was patently clear to García Oliver that the vast majority of volunteers were either Socialists or Communists arriving in sufficient numbers to be, in his own words, 'a danger'. This helps to explain his initial decision to order the anarchist militias controlling the borders to prevent outsiders from continuing to cross in Catalonia. He would eventually become convinced that the International Brigades constituted nothing less than 'a State within another State' which, in his new capacity as a government minister, was particularly alarming.[235]

## Conclusion

The sheer frequency with which well-known Republican personalities appear in the pages of the International Brigades' military press soon puts paid to the idea that the domestic politics of the Spanish Republic had no bearing on the volunteers' experiences of the war. The most sympathetic accounts of Spanish political figures tended to revolve around those who were regarded as contributing, in one way or another, to the formation of a regular army backed by a broad antifascist government. An interview with Álvarez de Vayo appeared in the *Volunteer for Liberty* in September 1937, for example, in which the Commissar of War was singled out as a key figure in 'moulding the political and moral character of the Popular Army' which the volunteers considered themselves to be a crucial part of, as well as drawing attention to his belief that class, political and national unity would prove key to that army's success. It was, of course, no coincidence that this was precisely the same blueprint for victory put forward by the International Brigades from the moment they were established.[236] The great irony of their constant calls for antifascist unity was that they did not easily coexist alongside other visions of war and revolution in Spain. This was, in other words, to be unity on the International Brigades' own terms – and, by extension, those of the Spanish Communist Party and its Fifth Regiment. Those groups who were seen to be prioritising workers' revolution, attempting to maintain military autonomy, seeking to monopolise Republican political posts and, most importantly, limiting the role of the

[233] Abad de Santillán, *Por que perdimos la guerra,* 227, 272.

[234] Sección Anarquista de Lenguas Esclavas, proposal to create foreign anarchist units in Spain to counter communist influence, Barcelona, undated, C. early 1937, CDMH, 94C10.

[235] García Oliver, *El eco de los pasos,* 327.

[236] anon., 'An Interview with Álvarez de Vayo', *English VFL,* 13 September 1937, 11-12, RGASPI, 545.2.362.

foreign volunteers were all regarded as standing not only in the way of the International Brigades, but in the way of the Spanish People and their chances of victory.

Not everybody who formed a part of the loyalist coalition was won over to this ultimately self-serving understanding of the Spanish Civil War. While the International Brigades were not quite the Comintern Army their critics occasionally made them out to be, they can certainly be regarded as one of many political and military interest groups which emerged in the wake of the military rising in July 1936 and sought to shape the antifascist war effort in their own image, always doing so – just like their counterparts throughout loyalist Spain – in the name of the 'Spanish People'. Whilst a cliched language of antifascist cooperation almost always predominated whenever the foreign commissars mentioned their Communist, Socialist and Anarchist allies in public, the volunteers' involvement in the loyalist war effort ultimately provoked a complex mixture of acquiescence, cooperation and outright conflict with the various political groups operating alongside them, as well as inspiring admiration, uncertainty and mutual suspicion in almost equal measure. The International Brigades' at-times fragile relationship with their wartime allies is, therefore, a cautionary reminder of the ways in which transnational fighting forces are often forced to situate themselves within the complicated socio-political contexts of their host countries. Although it did not always come naturally, the process was certainly not without its benefits. Above all, transnational encounters with the politics of wartime Spain served to reinforce the volunteers' understanding of themselves as disciplined antifascist soldiers fighting on behalf of the Spanish People in arms, thereby providing them with a crucial sense of legitimacy and motivation throughout the war – and, indeed, for decades afterwards.

## 3: ‘A Conscript, a Veteran and an International’ – The International Brigades and the Spanish Soldiers within their Ranks

### Introduction

By far the most striking way in which the International Brigades went about their self-assigned task of bringing fresh reserves of antifascist discipline, unity and volition to the ongoing struggle of the ‘Spanish People’ was by directly incorporating Spaniards within their ranks. That the very title of the famous fighting unit was, in the process, rendered inaccurate as early as 1937 is perhaps the greatest open secret of the Spanish Civil War. Open, because everybody who created, led and fought in the International Brigades was perfectly aware that within a few months of its inception most of the men who fell under its authority were not international volunteers at all, but Spanish conscripts. A secret, because practically none of the hundreds of historians who have written about the foreign fighters have ever paid meaningful attention to this glaring fact. Most histories of the International Brigades are not, properly speaking, histories of the International Brigades at all; they are not even histories of the various national units – the so-called British Battalion, for example – which made up the whole. They are, instead, inward-looking histories of the approximately 35,000 foreign volunteers who fought in Spain. Spaniards receive barely a mention, and when they do remain nameless. Anybody who might hope Spanish historians have stepped in to tell their story will be left disappointed given that what makes the International Brigades so interesting to scholars within Spain is precisely what makes them so interesting to their counterparts elsewhere: not the fact that they contained thousands of conscripts, but the fact that they contained politically-motivated volunteers who decided to participate in another country’s civil war.[237]

In the overwhelming number of cases, historians of the International Brigades have proven unwilling to devote more than a passing sentence or two to the Spaniards who came to form the bulk of the unit. Given this state of affairs, Rémi Skoutlesky’s decision to dedicate just five out of the 450 pages of his magisterial tome on the International Brigades to the Spaniards within its ranks might even seem generous.[238] The consequence of this historiographical oversight – whether it is intended or not – is to imply that the Spanish presence was an inevitable development forced onto the unit from the outside; a necessary nuisance which ran counter to its intrinsic character as a transnational, antifascist, voluntary fighting force. This was not how the Brigade Commissariat saw it, however, nor how many of the foreign volunteers came to feel by the end of their own service in Spain. It would not be an exaggeration to argue that

[237] See, for example, the Spanish-language essays included in Sánchez Cervelló and Agudo, *Las Brigadas Internacionales: Nuevas perspectivas en la historia de la Guerra Civil y del exilio*.

[238] Skoutelsky, *Novedad en el frente*, 280-284. A further seven pages are dedicated to relations between French volunteers and Spanish troops in Rémi Skoutelsky, *L’Espoir guidat leurs pas : Les voluntaires francais dans les Brigades Internationales, 1936-1939* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1998), 227-233, although little critical analysis is included.

the incorporation and subsequent assimilation of Spaniards became their main priority by early 1937, as the sheer amount of paperwork devoted to the issue in the Spanish and Russian archives makes abundantly clear. Certainly, this development was caused by events outside of the International Brigades' immediate control, not least huge losses suffered amongst the foreign volunteers and the impossibility of replenishing them with new arrivals from abroad. But it was also a development which the Brigade leadership sought to channel to their own advantage. The most compelling reason to take the presence of Spaniards in the International Brigades seriously is, therefore, the simple fact that the International Brigades themselves did.

This chapter argues that the arrival of massive numbers of conscripts led to a fundamental shift in the institution's self-assigned purpose in Spain. From now on, its leaders not only regarded the International Brigades as an elite unit of foreign fighters whose primary role was to hold the front against a technically superior enemy, but also as an enormous antifascist school which was uniquely placed to create a new vanguard of soldiers for the embattled Republic. Since the emergence of large-scale conscript armies in the wake of the French Revolution, one of the chief tasks of military leaders has been to convert civilians into soldiers willing to fight for an abstract cause.[239] Mirroring the nineteenth-century view of military institutions as 'schools for the nation', Commissar General Luigi Longo and his many subordinates set to work investing the latest arrivals with the sense that they belonged to a broader antifascist community fighting for its independence against a foreign invasion and, in so doing, hoped to convert them into committed citizen-soldiers.[240] He was, of course, far from alone in taking this approach. Although Francisco J. Leira Castiñeira has argued that the politically and socially heterogenous conscripts of the Nationalist Army were largely held together through a combination of vigilance, discipline and punishment, Miguel Alonso has convincingly highlighted the rebel leadership's attempts to socialize them into loyal citizens of the emerging Francoist state through a combination of training, political propaganda and promises to look after their material interests.[241] This chapter therefore contributes to emerging debates on the relationship between military institutions, political ideologies and combatant experiences in Spain and beyond.

The incorporation of huge numbers of Spaniards not only brought new opportunities, but also unfamiliar challenges. Frictions between troops from different national backgrounds were certainly not unique to Spain. Wherever foreign volunteers have found themselves – whether fighting in the Boer War of 1899-1902 or Spain between 1936-1939 – a sense of abstract solidarity with their fellow comrades in arms has seldom been enough to prevent the emergence of unhelpful feelings of national superiority, dissatisfaction with one another's military skills or protests over food and

[239] Ute Frevert, *A Nation in Barracks: Conscription, Military Service and Civil Society in Modern Germany* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2004), 2.
[240] Ronald R. Krebs, 'A School for the Nation? How Military Service Does Not Build Nations, and How It Might', *International Security*, 28:4 (Spring 2004), 85-124.
[241] Alonso Ibarra, 'La oferta del nuevo estado', 305-335; Leira Castiñeira, *Soldados de Franco*.

leave.[242] In the Arab-Israeli War of 1948, The Israeli government recognized the importance of managing relations between native soldiers and the volunteers who had come to fight by their side, knowing full well that complaints such as these could undermine the war effort.[243] In spite of the recent efforts of transnational historians to investigate encounters between foreign fighters and their native counterparts, only one study has taken a detailed look at the seemingly obvious case of the International Brigades – and it was published as recently as 2021. While making good use of first-hand testimonies to highlight rank and file attitudes, the author pays little attention to how the architects of the military unit initiated, regulated and represented encounters between the two groups, nor how they were mobilized to fulfil their changing social, political and military objectives in Spain.[244] This chapter seeks to draw attention to these issues by asking the very same question the International Brigades themselves faced: how does a transnational fighting force whose entire identity is based on the concept of international solidarity assimilate thousands of native fighters who inevitably arrive with their own pre-existing attitudes towards the war?

Answering this question necessitates the use of a wide range of sources – far wider than those typically used in the 'bottom-up' accounts of the foreign volunteers' experiences. These volunteers left behind an enormous trail of written and spoken testimony which was already of huge interest to historians decades before the dawning of the new military history drew their colleagues' attention to the combatant experience of war and battle in the 1970s.[245] The same cannot be said of the ordinary Spanish soldier, who has received fairly scant attention even though conscripts made up the majority of forces fighting the war on both sides.[246] Important exceptions to this rule can be found in the work of Michael Seidman and James Matthews, both of whom emphasize the crucial role of material factors in motivating troops in the Nationalist and Republican war efforts alike.[247] Two key reasons explain the historiographical gap. On the one hand, many conscripts were illiterate and left behind few personal accounts of the war.[248] On the other, the foreign volunteers have long been regarded

[242] Pretorius, 'Welcome But Not That Welcome', 122-149.
[243] Nir Arielli, 'The Reception of Foreign Volunteers in Israel During and After the Wars of 1948 and 1967', 374-390.
[244] Fraser Raeburn, 'The Surest of All Morale Barometers: Transnational Encounters in the XV International Brigade', *Contemporary European History*, 31:1 (2022), 85-99.
[245] For an overview of the new military history's advances by 1991, see Whiteclay Chambers II, 'The New Military History: Myth and Reality', 395-406.
[246] On the importance of conscripts, see James Matthews, 'Foot Soldiers for the Two Spains: Conscript Experience in the Spanish Civil War' in James Matthews (ed.), *Spain at War: Society, Culture and Mobilization, 1936-1944* (Bloomsbury Academic, London: 2019). Ángel Alcalde claims that Francoist soldiers were an 'implicit' presence in the historiography but not the source of specialist attention until the publication of his book. *Los excombatientes franquistas (1936-1965)* (Zaragoza: Prensas de la Universidad de Zaragoza, 2014), 9.
[247] See in in particular Seidman, *Republic of Egos* and Matthews, *Reluctant Warriors*.
[248] James Matthews, 'Letters from a Quiet Front: The Censored Correspondence of the Ejército de Andalucía during the Spanish Civil War', *Bulletin of Spanish Studies,* 94:3 (2017), 439-465. Alcalde

as antifascist heroes whose testimonies have a unique moral, as well as academic, premium.[249] Only two Spaniards left behind detailed accounts of their time in the International Brigades, the better known of which is the wartime diary of Valencian conscript Fausto Villar Esteban.[250] Both Cecil Eby and Fraser Raeburn have used this extremely rare source to gauge the feelings of Spaniards towards their international comrades, yet – as they both admit – it is ultimately impossible, not to mention reckless, to generalize about the experience of tens of thousands of soldiers on the basis of a single text.[251]

Combatant memoirs are clearly insufficient, then, for getting to grips with the huge role Spaniards came to play in the International Brigades. Fortunately, the Russian State Archive contain a wealth of documents pertaining to their wartime experiences, including their social and political backgrounds, their assimilation into their units, their performance in combat, their presence in officers' training schools and their promotions into roles of political and military responsibility. The Spanish Military Archive at Ávila, meanwhile, contains valuable deserter testimonies. The voices of Spaniards themselves can also be located in the dozens of surviving military bulletins and trench journals produced by the Commissariat. If the Republican Army had an unusually large print culture, this was all the truer for the International Brigades.[252] Their papers were produced with Spanish readers in mind, and they appeared in their pages constantly, either in the guise of collective statements from specific units, autobiographical profiles of individual soldiers or laudatory homages to fallen comrades. So far, the International Brigades' extensive press output has been used by historians for the almost exclusive purpose of investigating the foreign volunteers.[253] If used with care, however, these sources can also tell us a great deal about the experience of the Spanish combatants, too.[254] While they certainly sought to reinforce a partisan view of the war, it would be unwise to dismiss them on the grounds that they are a form of propaganda. Their content gives an excellent indication as to the military, social and cultural priorities of the International Brigades, as well as the kind of language, concepts and symbols the men were encouraged to use in order

laments the fact that Nationalist soldiers' letters are not a major presence in Spanish archives in *Los excombatientes franquistas,* 70.

[249] For a collection of volunteer testimonies published as a form of memory activism, see Adrián Bodek, *Memorias vivas.*

[250] These have been edited and published by Jesús González de Miguel in *Un español en el batallón Lincoln: Fausto Villar Esteban, campaña de Teruel y retirada de Aragón* (Madrid: Letrame Editorial, 2018) and are henceforth cited as 'Villar Esteban'.

[251] Eby, *Comrades and Commissars,* Raeburn, 'The Surest of All Morale Barometers'.

[252] On Republican print culture, see Carl-Henrik Bergström, 'Entrenching Democracy: Education and Cultural participation in the Spanish Republican Army, 1936-1939', *European History Quarterly,* 50:3 (2020), 442.

[253] For an example of a study of the International Brigade press which has nothing to say about the role of Spaniards in either the production or reception of print culture, see Mirta Núñez Díaz-Balart, 'Un cuadrilátero para el combate político: la prensa de las Brigadas Internacionales', *Ayer*, 56 (2004), 121-141.

[254] Bergström, 'Entrenching Democracy', 438-463.

to grapple with their place in the war. Like trench journals from the First World War, they therefore offer a unique window into 'the mental universe' of the low-ranking soldier.[255]

## I: 'We Have The Whole People Rising to Defend its Liberty, its Independence, its Future' – Arming the Nation

The principal reason why the Comintern decided to create the International Brigades was to provide the embattled Spanish Republic with a shock force of disciplined volunteers, preferably with military experience, who could help the multitude of independent militias fighting on the Spanish frontlines withstand a determined enemy.[256] In fact, few of the volunteers who began crossing the Pyrenees in October 1936 had any military experience to speak of; while the unit's highest-ranking commissars often stressed the importance of the Great War in providing their antifascist soldiers with valuable military knowledge, most were far too young to have fought at any point between 1914-1918.[257] All the same, the foreign volunteers were deployed in some of the bloodiest battle of the entire Spanish Civil War, beginning with their entry into besieged Madrid. Spaniards fought alongside them from the very beginning. By the last days of November 1936, a Spanish battalion by the name of *Asturias Heridas* was fighting under their command in the Spanish capital, but it was not until the second week of December when the first four Spanish Battalions were officially incorporated into the recently-formed Eleventh and Twelfth Brigades; these were the Battalions *Pacífico*, *Regimiento no. 1*, *Prieto* and *Pasionaria*.[258] These battalions had their own men, their own names and their own histories. During the first months of their existence, the International Brigades therefore maintained their unique status as a predominantly-foreign fighting force whose *raison d'être* was to provide skilled and motivated volunteers for the Republican war effort. With the onset of the new year, this started to change. What began as the tentative incorporation of isolated batches of Spaniards soon gave way to the reception and training of huge numbers of conscripts.

On the 16 January 1937, the Eleventh International Brigade received its first 'reemplazo' – reinforcement – of Spanish troops. These were needed to fill out the ranks of the Brigade, which had been hard hit in the Madrid fighting and was now focused on regaining its fighting strength from its base in Murcia. A total of 75 Spanish volunteers and 340 conscripts were distributed across its various battalions: the Thälmann Battalion received 200 Spaniards, the Comune de Paris Battalion 250, and

[255] Graham Seal, The Soldiers' Press: Trench Journals in the First World War (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Robert L. Nelson, 'Soldier Newspapers: A Useful Source in the Social and Cultural History of the First World War and Beyond', *War in History*, 17:2 (2010), 167-191.
[256] Kowalsky, 'The Soviet Union and the International Brigades', 681-704.
[257] Alpert, 'Una trompeta lejana', 225-238.
[258] Anon., commissarial report on the International Brigades, undated, RGASPI, 545.1.2.

the Edgar André Battalion 75.[259] Later on in the month, the Eleventh Brigade would receive an additional 1,300 men from the province of Ciudad Real who were similarly distributed across existing battalions.[260] By March 1937 the incorporation of Spaniards was following two forms. The first resulted in entire battalions such as the *Batallón Triana* from Seville, the *Batallón Domingo Germinal* from Malaga or the *Batallón PUA,* which had fought in Madrid, being incorporated wholesale into the International Brigades. The second saw large-scale reinforcements, received on a rolling basis from the recruiting centers overseen by the Ministry of War, being aggregated to existing units, albeit with their own companies and commissars.[261] The arrival of another thousand reinforcements in June 1937 finally saw Spanish conscripts become the majority of men within the Thirteenth Brigade; even though most were illiterate peasants, within just two months their correspondence – totaling an incredible 4,000 letters a day – was outnumbering that of the foreign volunteers and causing enormous pressures on the censorship service.[262] By the new year Spaniards were in a clear majority in all of the Brigades: at one point just 448 men in the so-called 'Garibaldi Brigade' were Italian, compared to 2,208 Spaniards.[263] In February 1938 the foreign volunteers, who would still have another seven months of service left before being withdrawn from Spain, had dropped to just 30% of the men within the supposedly 'International' Brigades.[264]

Given that the International Brigades' original architects had considered their key asset to the Republican Government as bringing motivated and skilled antifascist soldiers to the Spanish frontlines, it should not be surprising that initial reactions to the incorporation of Spaniards were, at best, uncertain. The fear that large numbers of inexperienced conscripts might dilute the *esprit de corps* of these predominantly foreign shock troops can be found in an early military report filed by Commissar General Luigi Longo. In it, he describes how several such conscripts had remained in their trenches when told to attack, failed to resist the enemy's artillery fire and even engaged in desertion and self-mutilation to avoid fighting. Those who *did* fight were so inexperienced that they ended up firing on their own men. Longo's conclusion could not have been more emphatic: 'it is indisputable that the rather increased percentage of these inexperienced and uneducated elements has reduced the combative spirit of our International Brigades'.[265] In a separate report from late November 1936, Longo

[259] Anon., 'Informe del periodo de reorganización en Murcia' in María Isabel Esteve Torres, *Documentos internos de la XI Brigada Internacional (1936-1938) – Archivo Federal de Berlín (Sección Sampo)* (self-published online, 2020), 12.
[260] Anon., Report on the 4th Battalion of the XI Brigade, 15 May 1937, RGASPI, 545.3.90.
[261] Anon., commissarial report on the International Brigades, undated, RGASPI, 545.1.2.
[262] Severin Eisner, manuscript for a brochure on the participation of the 13th Brigade in the Spanish Civil War, undated, RGASPI, 545.3.291; confidential report from the Commandant of the International Brigade base to Captain Gustincio, Director of Military Censorship, 20 August 1937, RGASPI, 545.2.158.
[263] Anon., 'Situacion en la XII Brigada "Garibaldi"', 7 January 1938, RGASPI, 545.1.21.
[264] Longo, 'Informe sobre la situación de las Brigadas Internacionales', July 1938, RGASPI, 545.1.3.
[265] Longo, 'Apreciación de la actuación de la 150 Brigada', undated, RGASPI, 545.3.291.

expressed his fear of incorporating too many Spaniards at once on the basis that 'this would completely change the purpose and the utility of our brigades' and that they 'were formed by men, professional soldiers or qualified soldiers, in order to serve as a model for our Spanish comrades who, for 60 years, have not had the opportunity to undergo major wars'.[266] In addition to betraying Longo's surprising ignorance of the thousands of Spaniards who had served in Cuba and North Africa in the past forty years, these words are particularly striking given that he would soon become the chief advocate of incorporating more, not fewer, native troops into the International Brigades.

Given that by the new year Longo was personally pressing the Republican Government to provide him with fresh batches of conscripts, the sincerity of his change of heart cannot be doubted. How, then, are we to explain it? Once it became clear that Spain was facing a prolonged war which would necessitate the use of conscripts on both sides, Longo and his colleagues throughout the International Brigades were faced with something of a dilemma. On the one hand, the incorporation of large numbers of inexperienced recruits could – as those pessimistic reports from late 1936 leave in no doubt – immediately undermine the Brigades' key advantage of possessing politically-motivated soldiers willing and able to lay their lives down for the Spanish Republic. On the other hand, they were fully aware of the importance of conscription in bringing forth a professional army which, under the authority of a single command, would be capable of posing a serious challenge to its formidable Nationalist counterpart. More urgently, they *themselves* would have to incorporate large numbers of conscripts if they were to retain the sheer numbers of men needed to keep their five Brigades at full strength. This is precisely why the issue became so acute following the brutal Jarama fighting of February 1937, when foreign losses simply could not be covered by new arrivals from abroad. The solution to the dilemma was, in theory, fairly simple. As Longo realized, these untapped reserves of conscripts may have been unmotivated and inexperienced at first, but they also represented enormous potential for the International Brigades on the condition that they were rapidly provided with the necessary military skills to fight a modern war. In this way, a problem which had to be confronted out of necessity could, in fact, be turned to the International Brigades' advantage.

The key challenge for Longo's subordinates in the Commissariat was to convince the foreign volunteers that, although it may at first have seemed like a sign of weakness, the arrival of considerable numbers of Spaniards was in fact a source of immense strength. They were even provided with handy manuals to help them in this task, the likes of which highlighted how the assimilation of Spanish reinforcements would contribute towards building precisely the kind of committed and capable antifascist army the International Brigades had always called for.[267] 'What joy for the comrades

[266] Longo, report for commissars of the 11th and 12 brigades, 27 November 1936, RGASPI, 545.1.36.
[267] See for example 'Guion de charlas políticas a explicar en las diferentes unidades de este centro de recuperación', 20 April 1938, RGASPI, 545.3.28.

of the Brigade to have among them a continuous reinforcement of healthy, conscious, honest comrades who inspire the greatest confidence' boasted an article in a French-language bulletin.[268] The fact that unity between the foreign volunteers and their Spanish hosts now extended to their own ranks was celebrated as a particularly positive step in the antifascist struggle.[269] 'I have found Spaniards from all over the peninsula, Italians, French, Americans, Portuguese, people of all nationalities' wrote soldier Valentin Calvet in one trench bulletin, adding that 'they are now all my *compañeros*'.[270] Such statements reflect an important shift whereby members of the International Brigades went from seeing themselves as an army *for* the people towards seeing themselves as an army *of* the people, one whose national composition better reflected the nature of the war as an overlapping struggle for national, as well as global, freedom from fascist tyranny. The International Brigades could, for the first time, claim that they were playing a unique role in transforming the 'Spanish People' into a unified nation in arms which, through the transfer of military and political knowledge, finally had the means of fighting for its independence, its dignity and its future. As Luigi Longo put it in October 1937:

> Since in their large majority our Brigades are now composed not of volunteers but of conscripts, there are some who doubt whether they can still be used as real shock brigades. This is a big mistake. In these new drafts which are now joining the Army, we have the Spanish people, in all its aspects, taking up arms. We have the whole people rising to defend its liberty, its independence, its future.[271]

All of a sudden, the same recruits who had been described as incompetent and inexperienced in the Commissar General's private reports were now being hailed as bringing fresh reserves of 'voluntad' to the military struggle being carried out by the Spanish People.[272] This word – which translates imperfectly to 'volition' in English – was absolutely crucial to the International Brigades' understanding of the war. Their propaganda constantly stressed that the citizens of the Spanish Republic knew exactly what they were fighting for and were therefore happy to join in the antifascist struggle being spearheaded by the foreign volunteers. The 'fascist' enemy, by contrast, relied on violence, coercion and the use of foreign mercenaries to wage bloody war against their brothers. When a new battalion of predominantly Catalan and Aragonese recruits was formed in the Twelfth Brigade, the news was announced to the veteran troops with the assurance that they were an example of 'conscious youth which takes up

[268] R. Vannier, 'Salut a nos nouveaux camarades', *Vers la liberte*, no. 35, 31 July 1937, 5, RGASPI, 545.3.192.
[269] Valentin Calvet, 'Mis compañeros', *Bayonetas Internacionales,* No. 10, first fortnight of August 1938, 15, RGASPI, 545.3.42.
[270] Ibid.
[271] Longo, 'New Tasks for the International Brigades', *English VFL*, 14 October 1937, 2, RGASPI, 545.2.362.
[272] A. Ruiz, 'Un recluta, un héroe', *Reconquista,* year 1, no. 2, 1 September 1938, 5, RGASPI, 545.3.22.

arms against the foreign invasion and which, along with their brothers from other countries, smiles thinking of the Republic and its glorious people's army'.[273] Pre-empting a criticism common to many other conflicts that late arrivals such as these had sneakily avoided making a personal contribution until being drafted in, various articles were printed in the International Brigade press claiming that they had in fact been engaged in important work in the rearguard.[274] In one case, representatives of the Spanish soldiers within the Garibaldi Battalion admitted that 'they have not yet known the pains and anxieties of battle' but stressed that they 'have not remained inactive in the rearguard nor indifferent to the great struggle against fascism'.[275] They may have been conscripts, but their enthusiasm for the loyalist war effort was never left in doubt.

Arming and training the 'Spanish People' was represented as the International Brigades' unique way of enabling Spaniards to realize their natural antifascist destiny. We have already seen how the foreign volunteers understood their struggle in Spain as being the extension of an antifascist fight begun elsewhere. As a result, they tended to regard themselves as well-equipped to offer their own radical life experiences, as well as the deeper revolutionary traditions of their home countries, to their Spanish comrades-in-arms. These volunteers were now encouraged to recognize that this process went two ways, with their trench publications occasionally highlighting how the latest Spanish arrivals also had much to contribute through their collective experiences both prior to, and during, the war. Hours of the commissars' training was spent on distilling a thousand years of Iberian history into a linear narrative of popular resistance and revolution, investing the national community – that is, the ubiquitous 'Spanish People' – with an eternally rebellious character in the process. 'The popular masses of Spain who have been fighting for years against fascism, whose movement of October '34 moved and excited us all, and who have been resisting the bandit aggression of international fascism for months have provided us with excellent fighters for our Battalion' stressed an article in one Italian-language paper, drawing the foreign volunteers' attention to the miners' revolt in Asturias three years earlier.[276] When Ludwig Renn addressed the recently-arrived members of the *Batallón Triana,* he assured them that the international volunteers knew their hometown of Seville as 'one of the cities with the greatest tradition and most arduous spirit of revolution' and encouraged them to spread their revolutionary ardour throughout the Eleventh Brigade.[277]

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[273] 'El cuarto batallón', *Il Garibaldino,* no. 76, 21 October 1937, 6, RGASPI, 545.3.192.

[274] See for example Germán Hernández Antón, 'Bravo por los Quintos!', *English VFL,* vol. 2, no. 13, 2 April 1938, 1, RGASPI, 545.2.362.

[275] José Plaza, 'Il salute delle nuove reclute al veterani della Garibaldi', *Italian VFL,* nos. 54-55, 8 January 1938, 4, RGASPI, 545.3.365.

[276] Anon., 'I nostri bravi compagni spagnoli', *Noi Passeremo,* no. 1, 27 February 1937, 1, RGASPI, 545.3.196.

[277] Ludwig Renn, *La Guerra Civil Española: Crónica de un escritor en las Brigadas Internacionales* (Madrid: Forcola, 2016), 411-412.

This romantic view of conscription as representing the will of the nation-in-arms was soon being challenged by the more prosaic realities of fighting a losing war. By the time hostilities were brought to an end in the spring of 1939 the Republic had summoned some 27 classes of reservists – around twice as many as the Nationalists. Men as old as 45 and boys as young as seventeen were called to arms, including within the International Brigades.[278] This did not go unnoticed. Sometimes, the young age of the new arrivals was cited as the ultimate example of antifascist volition. A press cutting on the volunteer Navarro Mota Francisco, born in 1921, celebrates the fact that 'he has always behaved with heroism and abnegation' and proven himself 'disciplined in spite of being so young'.[279] Some of the foreign volunteers were, by contrast, horrified at the mobilization of such young men. The American Abe Smorodin was on the verge of tears when he recalled, in an interview taped in the 1980s, how 'towards the end, we had kids as runners, you know fourteen and fifteen year old kids' who he could not bear to send into the line of fire. Racked with guilt, he finally ended up doing their work himself, risking rebuke from his superiors. When his interviewer interrupts to ask if they were really only aged fourteen, Smorodin admitted he did not know their exact ages but was emphatic that '*they were children, they were children*'. 'That was one of my bitterest experiences, having to give orders to these kids to go out and deliver a message', he recalled, blaming this not so much on human decision making as the grim realities of war when he concluded that 'I don't have to tell you, war is hell'.[280]

The incorporation of native troops into the International Brigades met with other obstacles, some of them beyond the immediate control of their leaders. First among them, as far as Luigi Longo was concerned, was the Spanish Government itself. In March 1937, for example, he could be found writing to the Commissariat General in Valencia in order to protest how multiple requests for Spanish reinforcements had gone ignored. When corresponding amongst themselves, Longo and his colleagues tended to blame this foot-dragging on fifth columnists and self-interested enemies of the people who, they claimed, had infiltrated the highest offices of Republican power and went about spreading the malicious lie that the International Brigades were in Spain to serve the exclusive interests of the Communist Party.[281] Another obstacle to the assimilation of Spaniards were the new arrivals themselves. This proved particularly true of those battalions which had been incorporated wholesale into the Brigades and continued to depend on outside units for their administration, arms and wages.[282] As if the logistical problems which this caused were not already enough of an annoyance, these battalions brought with them track-records of military service and a corresponding sense of group identity which had, in some cases, been forged in the

[278] Alpert, *The Republican Army in the Spanish Civil War*, 157.
[279] Anon., press cutting on Navarro Mota Francisco, undated, RGASPI, 545.2.175.
[280] Interview with Abe Smorodin, CDMH, PHO_ABAL_104.
[281] Longo to the Comisariado General de Guerra in Valencia, 31 March 1937, RGASPI, 545.1.20; Longo, *Las Brigadas Internacionales en España*, 173.
[282] Longo, *Las Brigadas Internacionales en España,* 199.

very first days of the war but was not always compatible with the International Brigades' own objectives.[283] It was neither militarily helpful nor in-line with the unit's underlying concept of a disciplined and unified war effort to have a group of Andalusian reinforcements expressing their desire to fight on the frontlines closest to their hometowns, nor to have anarchist reinforcements refusing to place themselves under foreign command and remaining in their barracks while the rest of their Brigade headed to the front.[284] The Commissariat had little patience with what it derided as a residual 'militia mentality', calling for an immediate end to 'battalion patriotism' for the sake of the greater antifascist good.[285]

As these examples show, the attitudes of the Spaniards who were incorporated into the International Brigades towards their new place in the Republican war effort were a great deal less predictable than those of their foreign counterparts who had, after all, travelled to Spain with the explicit intention of joining the unit. The latter had all chosen to go to war; for the average Spanish conscript, the war – in stark contrast – had come to them. For many, it must have been a serious and unwanted disruption in their lives. Fausto Villar Esteban regretted having to leave his mother and girlfriend behind when he himself was called up. The sheer unpreparedness of his fellow conscripts for what lay ahead is revealed by his recollection that many of them brought along unwieldly suitcases full of personal items they soon had to abandon; he himself had decided that should the war 'touch' him, he would travel lightly.[286] All the same, it would be a mistake to assume that Spanish conscripts were all equally unwilling to fight on the simple basis that they were drafted into the army. The detailed account of José García Antón is a cautionary reminder that not every conscript looked at their new military responsibilities with dismay. Even though he was a fervent supporter of the fascist Falange Party, he was thrilled to be able to embark on the adventure of war regardless of which side he fought for – particularly having spent the past few weeks hiding in his uncle's apartment in an upper-class neighbourhood of Madrid.[287] Other Spaniards were content to be fighting in a unit which provided them with food and a decent wage. Isidro Talavera, who was about 21 years old when he was called up, considered the foreign volunteers 'good people', not least because 'back then there was a scarcity of tobacco, and we never lacked for it, nor soap nor anything'.[288]

Like the anarchist militiamen who refused to leave their barracks, some of the foreign volunteers regarded the incorporation of Spaniards into the International Brigades as fatally undermining the basic character of their much-loved units. The feeling that they

[283] Longo, letter to the Comisariado General de Guerra, 3 March 1937, RGASPI, 545.1.20.
[284] Report on the meeting of political commissars held on 10 May, undated, RGASPI, 545.3.435; Longo, *Las Brigadas Internacionales en España,* 174.
[285] Anon,. report on the work of the International Brigade Commissariat during the Spanish Civil War, RGASPI, 545.1.2.
[286] Villar Esteban, 25.
[287] José García Antón, *Un español en la XIV Brigada Internacional: Vivencias de un lejano pasado* (Murcia: Diego Marin, 2004), 17.
[288] Isidro Talavera in Caridad Serrano, *Recuérdalo tú: una historia oral sobre la estancia de las Brigadas Internacionales en Madrigueras* (Madrid: AABI, 2003), 93.

were in Spain to continue an antifascist struggle begun in their home countries led some volunteers to regard their battalions as their own personal property which, as a consequence, ought to be overseen by themselves and themselves only. This was reflected in the resistance of several Hungarians to the appointment of a Spanish commander to the Rakosi Battalion, which had the result of splitting it into two opposing factions: the Spaniards and their preferred candidate for the post (Comandante Ortiz) and the Hungarians who supported their alternative (Commander Kepech). Foreign feelings of superiority all too easily fed into disputes such as these.[289] A damning report on the Fifteenth Brigade filed in January 1938 singled out the British Battalion for a national superiority complex which had not gone unnoticed amongst the Spaniards within its ranks.[290] At a meeting of communist representatives from across the International Brigades held that same month, two Spaniards spoke out against the foreign volunteers for their 'lack of attachment to Spanish comrades, for their isolation, and for their sense of being above everybody else'.[291] The Commissariat reacted by framing these feelings of national superiority as facilitating the work of the fifth column; whilst this was a stretch, they could certainly sow unhelpful divisions between soldiers who, according to the International Brigades' own propaganda, ought to have been united by their shared class interests.[292] Accepting the presence of Spaniards in the International Brigades was therefore not just a question of antifascist duty. It was also regarded as a question of national security and military effectiveness.

The Commissariat sought to put the brakes on feelings of independent authority, national superiority and battalion patriotism by constantly reminding their men that they were not only bound by a common antifascist purpose, but also by identical rights and responsibilities as soldiers. As we have already seen, the statute which formalised the International Brigades' place within the Republican Army in September 1937 stressed that its men were subject to Republican law and had to follow the orders of the General Staff with complete obedience.[293] The volunteers were to receive the same wage as Spaniards and wear the same uniform, with no party insignias permitted – in late 1937, special efforts were even made to ensure that the foreign volunteers and their Spanish comrades had the same trench coats.[294] When faced with disgruntled conscripts, the commissars stressed some of the same advantages of being in the International Brigades praised above by Isidro Talavera, including tobacco sent from abroad in a

[289] Anon., 'Informe General' on the 45 Division, 17 January 1938, RGASPI, 545.2.75.
[290] Anon., report on the XV International Brigade, 21 January 1938, RGASPI, 545.3.
[291] Longo, 'Informe sobre la situación política de la 45 División', 15 January 1938, RGASPI, 545.1.3.
[292] Anon., 'La fraternización internacional de nuestras Brigadas', *Charla del Día* no. 4, 12 April 1937, RGASPI, 545.2.374; Anon., 'Informe General' on the 45 Division, 17 January 1938, RGASPI, 545.2.75; Anon., 'La fraternización internacional de nuestras Brigadas', *Charla del Día* no. 4, 12 April 1937, RGASPI, 545.2.374.
[293] 'Proyecto de estatuto de las Brigadas Internacionales', Madrid 11 August 1937, RGASPI, 545.1.1.
[294] Anon., report on work of the International Brigade Commissariat during the Spanish Civil War, undated, RGASPI, 545.1.2.

spirit of 'international solidarity'.[295] The friends, families, and followers of the foreign volunteers who sent over cigarettes and other goods received letters informing them that, unless they were addressed to specific soldiers, they would be treated as 'aid without discrimination' and distributed between soldiers of all nationalities, including Spaniards.[296] Not only the foreign volunteers, but their supporters across the world were – in this way – made to realise that this was an antifascist fight being carried out by an army of, as well as for, the Spanish People.

Reminding the soldiers of their shared struggle was one thing; having them feel like integral members of the same war effort was another. One of the key tasks facing the leadership of the International Brigades was therefore to find ways of instilling these new arrivals with a sense of belonging. Instructions were issued to commissars which warned them that the conscripts must not feel like they were among strangers, but instead sense immediate camaraderie from their foreign counterparts. Concrete steps to be taken included the organization of receptions based on music, recitals and words of welcome from veterans, as well as talks from commissars, commanders and soldiers on the 'glorious combative traditions of the unit'.[297] The foreign volunteers were even encouraged to adopt a 'Spanish brother'. Commissar Frank Rogers chose Juan Pérez Martínez as his. 'I have shaken his hand and pledged to him that I shall not desert him in battle', he wrote in the *Volunteer for Liberty,* urging his compatriots to do the same.[298] Rather than being passive recipients of commissarial propaganda, the Spanish members of the International Brigades were encouraged to reflect on their privileged place within a new antifascist family through a variety of creative initiatives, including the formulation of collective pledges in which they promised to honor the heroic traditions of the 'veterans': 'words are not sufficiently eloquent to express all our joy at being joined to your battalion';[299] 'I am moved, especially by the Italians, many of whom have left their families in Italy at the mercy of the clutches of Mussolini the hangman';[300] 'greetings, comrades! The Spaniards of the 4th Company of machine-gunners feel honoured and proud that you share the cruel antifascist struggle with us';[301] 'for me it was a source of pride to join the international comrades to fight'.[302] Of course these statements are an example of military propaganda. All the same, they were written by real soldiers and – whether they exaggerated their feelings or not –

[295] Anon., report on work of the International Brigade Commissariat during the Spanish Civil War, RGASPI, 545.1.2.

[296] See for example anon., letter to the Friends of the Mackenzie-Papineau battalion, C. August 1938, RGASPI, 545.1.39.

[297] Virgilio Llanes, 'Instrucciones a los comisarios sobre la manera de recibir a los nuevos reclutas que se incorporan al ejército popular regular', September 1937, RGASPI, 545.3.50.

[298] Frank Rogers, 'My Spanish Brother', *English VFL*, 25 May 1938, 6, RGASPI, 545.2.362.

[299] Anon., 'Los nuevos camaradas del 3º batallón a sus camaradas veteranos', *French VFL,* no. 42, 17 June 1938, 11, RGASPI, 545.3.370.

[300] Antonio de Arco, 'Nuestros hermanos los internacionales', *Boletín,* no. 93 [sic], 10 August 1938, 2, RGASPI, 545.3.193.

[301] 4ª compañía de ametralladoras, 'A los camaradas internacionales', undated, RGASPI, 545.2.266.

[302] Gregorio López Cubillo, 'Mi primer combate con los "Garibaldinos"', *Italian VFL,* no. 71, 1 May 1938, 3, RGASPI, 545.3.365.

they show that they closely engaged with their new rights and responsibilities within the International Brigades.

Cross-cultural camaraderie was neither immediate nor guaranteed. For those Spaniards who worked in close contact with the foreign volunteers, language issues could lead to feelings of frustration and isolation.[303] They could, as one American who was hospitalized amongst Spaniards soon realized, go two ways.[304] A lack of Spanish made it similarly hard to feel at home when Herbert Grünstein was made lieutenant in a new division. He was, at first, saddened to leave the German Thälmann Battalion – a unit which he described as his 'family' – even though he soon came to enjoy his new role.[305] An even more common problem in forging a sense of camaraderie was the *lack* of contact. Jason Gurney recalled that in all the months he spent on the Jarama front nobody bothered to walk around the escarpment which separated the Americans from the Spanish battalion on their left flank. 'For all practical purposes', he reflected, 'we might have been fighting entirely different wars'.[306] Gurney's well-intended internationalism had come face-to-face with the more mundane fact that both the Spaniards and the foreign volunteers' sense of community continued to be delineated along national lines. This is plainly revealed by the almost complete absence of Spaniards in the memoirs and oral testimonies of the foreign volunteers, which – by contrast – make constant references to their compatriots, many of whom hailed from the same village, town or trade union.[307] Their desire to fight alongside their own countrymen became clear to Fausto Villar Esteban when he attended to a seriously wounded American at Belchite. Knowing he could die any moment, Esteban asked him if he wanted anything; his response was a nod of the head and the something along the lines of 'mi querer hablar con americano' – an attempt to say, in Spanish, that he wanted to speak to an American. He died shortly thereafter.[308]

While the soldiers' primary groups tended to be nationally homogenous, there were certainly moments in which both Spaniards and foreigners fought shoulder-by-shoulder. Ludwig Franken felt that the 600 international volunteers and approximately 250 Spaniards who had been based in the mountains near Granada had 'achieved firm unity' given that they 'fought together, ate together from the same pot' and 'slept side by side to heat ourselves up in the cold nights of the Sierra Nevada'.[309] Although Franken would probably have been unwilling to admit it, it was not necessary for Spanish members of the International Brigades to share in the antifascist politics of the foreign volunteers to consider them comrades-in-arms. José García Antón, the

[303] Villar Esteban, 80.
[304] Interview with Al Prago, CDMH, PHO_ABAL_84.
[305] Herbert Grünstein in María Isabel Estévez Torres, *Recuerdos de brigadistas alemanes,* 129.
[306] Jason Gurney, *Crusade in Spain* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), 142.
[307] Fraser Raeburn, 'Politics, Networks and Community: Recruitment for the International Brigades Reassessed', *Journal of Contemporary History,* 55:4 (2020), 719-744.
[308] Villar Esteban, 196.
[309] Alfred Kantorovicz (ed.), *Tschapaiev: El batallón de las 21 naciones. Presentado mediante descripciones de sus combatientes,* (translated by María Isabel Esteve Torres) (Valencia: AABI, 2022), 116.

fascist conscript mentioned earlier, was made a commissar after his fluency in French proved invaluable in interpreting between the foreigners and the new Spanish arrivals. 'In those days […] I identified with the unit which I now considered my own', he wrote in his memoir, adding that 'now I am *Comisario Pepe*, one more member of the Internationals who, as time went on, spoke and thought in French'.[310] Not everybody, of course, felt such strong feelings of belonging. Among them were those Spaniards who deserted to enemy lines – some of whom, interestingly, had political and military track records deemed to have been good, or even excellent, by their former commissars.[311] In the few surviving examples of the reports filed on them by the rebel authorities, political dissatisfaction with the foreign fighters does not emerge as a major reason for having abandoned their units. Instead, they drew attention to precisely the same series of complaints which might have been raised in any one of the Popular Army's units – a flagging loyalist war effort, a lack of leave and, all too often, terrible food.[312]

## II: 'We Ask of You, Veteran Fighters, to Continue Teaching us More and More' – A School for the Antifascist Nation in Arms

The next task, once the new recruits had been made to feel like valued members of the International Brigades, was to prepare them both politically and militarily for the waging of antifascist war. At a meeting of every International Brigade Commissar based in the Central Zone on the 2 March 1937 Longo encouraged his colleagues to consider their task not only as securing an immediate military victory, but also as making use of the volunteers' superior military knowledge to prepare Spanish troops for the continuing struggle against the Nationalists. In this way, he argued, they could directly contribute to the formation of a strong Popular Army.[313] This marks a watershed moment in the re-imagining of the International Brigades as not simply a shock force of foreign fighters, but also an antifascist school for the Spanish People in Arms. Longo regarded the key to success in this urgent task as being 'emulation'. Spaniards were expected to be willing students of the foreign 'veterans'; the foreign 'veterans', for their part, were expected to make use of their military experiences in Spain, as well as their exemplary antifascist *voluntad*, to act as role models for the Spaniards. As ever, these new responsibilities were reinforced in the International Brigades' press – preferably in the words of the two groups concerned. 'We have heard it said many times by our international comrades […] that our behaviour – that of the new recruits – has been excellent, and that we have quickly assimilated the teachings a number of instructors from this Brigade have imparted', wrote a conscript from the

[310] José García Antón, *Un español en la XIV Brigada Internacional*, 76.
[311] Anon., 'Parte Especial' on deserters, 11 October 1938, AGMAV, C.1096,21,4/d.3. The case of Luis Ribot Raset is particularly interesting. 'Información sobre las ultimas deserciones', 9 October 1938, AGMAV, C.1096,21,4/d.2.
[312] Anon., SIPM report on Spanish conscripts in the International Brigades, 28 May 1938, AGMAV, C.1973,3/d.3; Declaration of the desertor Eugenio Ovejero Cabañas, 3 January 1937, AGMAV, C.1396,27/d.18; Declaration of the deserter Diego Olmedo Morillas, 4 January 1937, C.1396,27/d.71.
[313] Longo, *Las Brigadas Internacionales en España,* 198.

Ninth Battalion, eagerly adding that 'we ask of you, veteran fighters, to continue teaching us more and more now that we have the luck to be by your side'.[314] This language of mutual responsibility was a constant feature of the Brigades' print culture from the spring of 1937 onwards.

Like countless military institutions before and after it, the International Brigades were faced with the immediate challenge of turning civilians into soldiers. The belief that Spaniards required teaching in the art of war, and that the foreign volunteers were well placed to do so, was ubiquitous at every level of the unit. For many of the foreign fighters, the problem ultimately came down to Spanish 'backwardness'. A French volunteer recalled how both he and his compatriots 'felt it necessary to point out to our brothers in arms their lack of tactical military knowledge' given that 'Spain, being a backward country, has not had a civic or military experience like France'.[315] The German volunteer Rudolf Engel blamed this lack of military experience on the fact that Spain, as he understood it, had not possessed an important army since the heydays of its global empire.[316] Many more pointed to their host country's more recent absence in the Great War; this was, of course, one of the main reasons for creating the International Brigades in the first place.[317] Bill Alexander not only shared in these attitudes towards Spain's preparedness for modern conflict (or lack thereof) but also highlighted the comparative aptitude of his British comrades for army life given that they came from industrial backgrounds, were familiar with modern machinery and were used to the discipline of the factory floor.[318] For many foreign volunteers, the inexperience of Spaniards was only a step away from incompetence. 'This Spain is really very inefficient, from an English standpoint', Ivor Hickman wrote in a letter dated October 1937, surmising that 'the Spanish conscripts who are training with us are fine fellows, but so damned inefficient'.[319]

The concern which Hickman expressed at the prospect of entering combat with the 'inefficient' Spaniards who had joined his battalion was precisely the kind of morale-sapping sentiment the Commissariat sought to deter. While admitting that the native troops required training, their alleged eagerness to learn from the veterans and contribute to the war effort was also emphasised; in this way, it was hoped that the foreign volunteers would be given fresh energies to impart their knowledge to their new comrades rather than deride them with unconstructive criticism. Many volunteers really did believe that the Spanish recruits brought fresh reserves of enthusiasm with them to their units, however much they may have needed channelling towards the waging of skilled warfare. The British volunteer Bob Clark was one of them, later

[314] Eulogio Villena, 'a los camaradas del 9º batallón', *Unidad,* October 1937, 1, RGASPI, 545.3.419.
[315] Paul Mège, 'Soyons Frères!', *Le soldat de la République,* no. 36, 1 July 1937, 4, RGASPI, 545.3.417.
[316] Rudolf Engel in Esteve Torres, *Recuerdos de brigadistas alemanes*, 57.
[317] Reinhold Henschke in Esteve Torres, *Recuerdos de brigadistas alemanes*, 144.
[318] Bill Alexander, *British Volunteers for Liberty*, 72.
[319] Ivor Hickman in John L. Wainwright, *The Last to Fall: The Life and Letters of Ivor Hickman – an International Brigader in Spain* (Basingstoke: Open Eyes Press, 2012), 47.

writing that 'the Spanish company were rather a mixed crowd and definitely needed a lot of training' but immediately adding that 'they were rather happy-go-lucky and immensely popular with the rest of the Battalion'.[320] Kuno Lützow may have recalled his guerrilla unit's wall newspaper calling on the foreigners to 'elevate the political and military level' of their Spanish comrades, but nonetheless described them as a 'bunch of extraordinary, brave and intelligent men' all the same. Many others agreed with his assessment of 'Spanish' bravery, the likes of which they understood as an atavistic aspect of the national character along with individualism, anarchy and – yes – inefficiency.[321]

How, exactly, did the International Brigades go about – as Lützow put it – elevating the 'military level' of the Spaniards? An essential pre-condition for 'emulation' was the system of mixed battalions. Whereas Longo had initially resisted the incorporation of Spaniards into international battalions through fear that they would dilute their fighting potential, he now encouraged precisely this process in the hopes that a 'core' of international veterans belonging to each unit would be able to make skilled soldiers out of their Spanish comrades. By August 1937 it had been decided that 'the experience of six months of combat with international volunteers and Spanish soldiers in the same Brigades has demonstrated the necessity, as a general policy, of the organization of mixed battalions between internationals and Spaniards'.[322] On several occasions, the incorporation of Spaniards into mixed battalions was taken as an emergency measure to overcome poor morale. In the Jarama fighting of February 1937, one Spanish battalion descended into panic before being blighted by an epidemic of desertions and self-injuries. Early the next month the decision was taken to dissolve it entirely and disperse its men among existing international units, although this process was frustrated by the onset of the Battle of Guadalajara.[323] Before long Spaniards not only had their own battalions throughout the International Brigades, but also represented considerable numbers of troops in battalions previously regarded as 'British', 'French', 'Slavic' and so on. To take just one example, by spring 1937 the Fifteenth Brigade had Spaniards in every one of its battalions: In addition to the 200 English-speakers of the British Battalion were 130 Spanish-speakers who were further organised into their own company.[324]

Mixed battalions were not an end unto themselves, but rather a means of making antifascist soldiers out of disinterested conscripts. Broadly speaking, two methods were used for raising the military level of the troops allocated to them. The first was

[320] Bob Clark, *No Boots to my Feet: Experiences of a Britisher in Spain 1937-38* (Shelton, Stoke on Trent: Student Bookshops Ltd., 1984), 32.
[321] See, for example, Alexander Szurek's description of the 'childish' courage of the Spaniards in *The Shattered Dream* (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1989), 185.
[322] Anon., 'Proposiciones sobre la organización de las Brigadas Internacionales', 11 August 1937, RGASPI, 545.1.1.
[323] Anon., report on the 4th Batallion of the XI Brigade, 15 May 1937, RGASPI, 545.3.90.
[324] Anon., numerical breakdown of the forces present in the 15th International Brigade, 11 May 1937, RGASPI, 545.3.433.

more indirect, and consisted of exposing the recruits to the military ethos of the International Brigades through speeches, meetings, rallies, bulletins and wall-newspapers. The training of foreign commanders and commissars stressed the need for a regular army in securing their victory over an organised and well-armed enemy, and this lesson was now to be passed on to the thousands of conscripts within their brigades, battalions and companies. In the words of one such commissar, Spaniards had to be made to realise that 'without discipline, without absolute obedience to the orders of the officers, there is no military organization'.[325] Hans Schaul considered the militia system which had emerged in the wake of the military rising in July 1936 as typical of the 'anarchic' Spanish character, and – within the pages of the newspaper he edited – called on everybody within his battalion to impose 'order' and 'discipline' at every opportunity. Unsurprisingly, anarchist troops were seen as being in particular need of these basic values. John Dunlop was charged with training a number of them in Tarazona. He claimed that they had been broken up and distributed among the international battalions because 'they were not prepared to accept military discipline […] and it was quite a problem to make them understand this', even if they were 'decent enough chaps generally speaking'.[326] Calls for 'disciplina' were so ubiquitous that the word became one of the few that foreign volunteers could recite in its original Spanish without hesitation.[327] For the new Spaniards, it became one of their unit's defining characteristics. Lorenzo Alberca, a native of Ciudad Real, recalled that 'they liked to do things today, not leave them tomorrow'. Moreover, they did so 'with lots of discipline'.[328]

The second, and more direct, means of raising the military level of the new conscripts was through their training. Time, as Longo realised, was not on their side. These men had to be provided with a rudimentary understanding of how to fight in a modern war as quickly as possible so that they could be sent into combat at the first opportunity. For this reason, the experience of the 'veterans' was considered all the more valuable.[329] One of the great ironies of this entire process was that the foreign volunteers themselves often complained of their brief and lacklustre training; those who had previously served in other military units tended to claim that their experiences in Spain were – in the words of the British Navy veteran Fred Copeman – 'not within miles' of what they had undergone in their former soldiering careers.[330] All the same, a huge swathe of the facilities and personnel belonging to the International Brigades were now put at the disposition of thousands of Spanish arrivals, with whatever they learned likely to have been a great deal more than they had known prior to being called up. Tellingly, the Russian machine-gun specialist Rodimitsev found that among the

[325] Anon., 'Conférence des commissaires des brigades Internationales', *Charla del Día*, 7 April 1937, 7, RGASPI, 545.2.374.
[326] John Dunlop in MacDougall, *Voices from the Spanish Civil* War, 47.
[327] Interview with Irving Goff, tape 1, CDMH, PHO_ABAL_135.
[328] Lorenzo Alberca in Caridad Serrano, *Recuérdalo tú*, 107.
[329] Longo, 'Two New Tasks Face the International Brigades', 13 December 1937, 5, RGASPI, 545.2.362.
[330] Interview with Frederick Copeman, Reel 5, 1978, IWM, CN: 794.

men he was sent were some who were 'so thoroughly civilian' that it took them a long time to get to grips with the basic handling of their weapons. His translator, María, even resolved to spend her nights studying the machine-guns so that she could be of better service.[331] Little wonder that, by the summer of 1937, one of the key functions of the International Brigade base at Albacete had become the training of Spaniards.[332] Come the winter, the men who were in training at nearby Madrigueras, the town which had initially hosted the British volunteers, were overwhelmingly Spanish; there were, in total, some 587 of them compared to just 149 Germans, 79 Austrians, 51 Scandinavians, 43 Dutchmen and 18 Swiss volunteers.[333]

Technical knowledge was not, by itself, seen as sufficient for the creation of soldiers willing to fight and die for the Republic. For the Spanish reinforcements to fully realise their military potential, it was essential that they knew exactly *what* they were fighting for. 'It is true that the war […] rapidly draws millions and millions of new men into political life' wrote Longo for the *Volunteer for Liberty*, adding that 'it is the task of all the experienced fighters in our Brigades to make these brave and conscious soldiers of the Republic'.[334] The new arrivals came from vastly different social, economic, cultural and political backgrounds to the predominantly young, urban, communist volunteers. By the end of December 1937 the 45th International Division consisted of 3,067 workers, but also 2,614 peasants and land-workers.[335] Peasants outnumbered workers in most battalions of the Twelfth Brigade, sometimes in considerable numbers – in the third battalion there were some 357 peasants compared to just 151 workers.[336] It did not go unnoticed that among the 1,000 Aragonese conscripts incorporated into the Thirteenth International Brigade in Ampolla in June 1937 were large numbers of agricultural labourers who were described as not only militarily unprepared, but also disinterested in the war.[337] The commissars agreed that most of the conscripts either did not understand the fundamental nature of the fighting (as, of course, they themselves saw it) or else did not show sufficient fervour towards its antifascist aims. As one of them complained at the time, 'they join the army without great enthusiasm, they do not sufficiently understand the character of the war as a war for independence and, finally, they feel a certain lack of trust in the International Brigades'.[338] Although

[331] A. Rodímtsev, *Bajo el cielo de España*, 36-37.
[332] Anon., 'Proposiciones sobre la organización de las Brigadas Internacionales', 11 August 1937, RGASPI, 545.1.1.
[333] Anon., 'Efectivo numérico por nacionalidades' in the Instruction Battalion of Madrigueras, 12 December 1937, RGASPI, 545.2.236.
[334] Longo, 'New Tasks for the International Brigades', *English VFL*, 14 October 1937, 2, RGASPI, 545.2.362.
[335] Report on the social and syndical composition of the 45th Division, December 1937, RGASPI, 545.3.32.
[336] Anon., 'Información estadística mensual del comisario de la Brigada XII correspondiente al mes de octubre de 1937', RGASPI, 545.3.161.
[337] Severin Eisner, manuscript for a brochure on the participation of the 13th Brigade in the Spanish Civil War, undated, RGASPI, 545.3.291.
[338] Severin Eisner, manuscript on the participation of the XIII International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War, undated, RGASPI, 545.3.291.

great energies would have to be invested at every level of the Brigade hierarchy to turn these men into Longo's 'conscious soldiers of the Republic', the new conscripts were treated as a *tabula rasa* through which motivated, class-conscious, antifascist soldiers would emerge in their thousands.[339]

One of the first steps taken towards turning peasants into antifascist citizen-soldiers was to convince them that their immediate interests lay in a Republican victory. This began no sooner than they arrived to their new headquarters and were greeted with impassioned speeches from their commissars on the meaning of the wartime struggle. One group was treated to a talk on what the subsequent memo described as 'the conquests of the popular revolution, conquests which will be confirmed and extended by our victory over fascism'.[340] As this revolutionary language betrays, the consolidation of parliamentary democracy was not the fundamental war aim presented to these troops; as we have previously seen, the foreign volunteers were themselves ambivalent about the entire concept of 'bourgeois democracy' as an end unto itself, often preferring to think of themselves as soldiers for a 'New Spain' which represented the interests of the Spanish toiling masses. To galvanise those masses into investing their every effort into securing a loyalist victory, the commissars had to adapt their message – and the language used to express it – to their audience. Longo repeatedly complained that the International Brigades' press did not reflect the lives and interests of its new members sufficiently, with his subordinates responding by issuing directives on the use of plainer language which would be more accessible to their new readership.[341] While the conscripts were certainly exposed to the same theme of international antifascist solidarity which the foreign volunteers so often invoked, they were also targeted with a carefully-crafted set of messages which homed in on the tangible benefits to be gained from victory. In an open letter to the 'peasant conscript', Mariano Pagano posed a series of rhetorical questions intended to make his readers reflect on the intersection of their individual interests with the greater antifascist struggle:

> Dear comrade peasant: today you are a soldier. Have you asked yourself […] why the Government of the Republic has called you to arms? […] Every peasant loves the earth, the good earth that he himself works, over which he sweats and from which he secures his food […]. Correct? This earth that the popular revolution has taken from the 'lord' and the *cacique* [a local political

[339] Anon., 'Conférence des commissaires des brigades Internationales', *Charla del Día*, 7 April 1937, 7, RGASPI, 545.2.374.

[340] , W. Sopzcyk, memo to the commissar of the 45th Division, undated, C. September 1937, RGASPI, 545.3.215.

[341] Longo to the commissar of the XIV Brigade, 2 June 1938, RGASPI, 545.1.38; M. Arpi Loza, 'La utilidad de la Prensa en el Ejército Popular depende de su justa orientación', 1937, 8, RGASPI, 545.2.321.

boss] and which you now have in your hands: but which, in spite of this, is threatened by those you yourself hate. Your earth.[342]

The clearest way of showing the new conscripts that the Republic was fighting for their individual well-being was through teaching them how to read and write. As Carl-Henrik Bergström has pointed out – and as the leaders of the International Brigades certainly understood at the time – the educational campaigns carried out within loyalist ranks were an important means of co-opting soldiers from various social and political backgrounds within a common war effort.[343] Both the objectives and methods of the Brigades' own literacy campaigns mirrored those to be found elsewhere in the Republican Army. So-called 'cultural militias' whose jobs and salaries depended on the Ministry of Public Education were crucial to their success. Altogether, they employed 2,200 teachers who provided classes to about 200,000 soldiers both at the front and in the rearguard.[344] Unfortunately, the precise numbers of men who were impacted within the International Brigades in particular is, given the scattered nature of the evidence, impossible to ascertain. What is beyond doubt, however, is the seriousness with which the Commissariat took the issue: on numerous occasions they set themselves the ambitious goal of completely eradicating illiteracy within their ranks, although this was often frustrated by the arrival of new men and a shortage of equipment.[345] At one point, an impressive 32 classes a day were being given within the Fourteenth Brigade, and by January 1938 a total of 2,000 classes had been given to illiterate men within the entire 45th Division.[346] Regardless of their actual results, the mere existence of these initiatives confirmed the ubiquitous narrative that the International Brigades were defending 'culture' in the face of fascist 'barbarism'.[347]

Literacy campaigns gave even the most unmotivated peasant a clear reason to be grateful to the International Brigades and, by extension, the Spanish Republic. In case they did not realise this for themselves, their superiors made sure to press the point home in their propaganda. 'Do you remember, comrade soldier who had been in the old army, the face which greeted you when you asked if you could please write a letter to your family, girlfriend, friends, and so on?' asked one *miliciano de cultura* in an obviously leading question to the Spanish readers of a trench bulletin.[348] This was not the only way in which beneficiaries of literacy drives were encouraged to reflect positively on how the International Brigades had empowered them as antifascist

[342] Mario Pagano, 'Carta a un campesino recluta', *Il Garibaldino,* no. 18, 28 october 1937, 6, RGASPI, 545.3.192.
[343] Carl-Henrik Bergström, 'Entrenching Democracy', 439-440.
[344] Antonio Castillo Gómez and Verónica Sierra Blas, '"If my pen was as good as your pistol': The Acquisition and uses of Writing on the Republican Fronts during the Spanish Civil War*'* in Martyn Lyons (ed.), *Ordinary Writings, Personal Narratives: Writing Practices in 19th and early 20th-century Europe* (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Large, 2003), 137-154.
[345] Anon, report on cultural work in one of the International Brigades, undated, RGASPI, 545.3.377.
[346] Longo, statistics on cultural work in the 45th Division between September and December 1937, 30 January 1938, RGASPI, 545.1.3.
[347] 'La fiesta del libro en el 2º Batallón', *Boletín,* No. 40, 17 June 1938, RGASPI, 545.3.193.
[348] J. Mangrane, 'Milicias de la cultura', *Venceremos,* no. 8, January 1938, 4, RGASPI, 545.3.343.

citizens. Among the first letters ever written by Fabio Caballero was one thanking his political commissar for organising the educative initiatives which he himself had benefitted from. It was reprinted in the French-language *Volunteer for Liberty,* and informed readers that its author – who had been illiterate only three months ago – could now write home to his family.[349] Spanish soldiers like Fabio were also encouraged to use their newfound skills of reading and writing to reflect more deeply on their place within the International Brigades. A competition was held to this end in March 1938 in which members of the Garibaldi Brigade were asked to submit articles describing why they were proud to belong to their unit. While anybody could write in, special prizes were available for submissions penned by formerly illiterate soldiers.[350] Although the Commissariat clearly used their literacy drives for overlapping political and military ends, it is worth mentioning that the results really were extraordinarily empowering for some of the soldiers who participated. Their letters home express joy at finally being able to read and write, with the censors noting that they had learned more in a few months of war than they had in their whole civilian lives.[351]

The Commissariat not only stressed the empowering nature of literacy, but also its consciousness-raising potential. 'The book is spiritual nourishment', the volunteer Paul Jorge wrote in an article concerning his battalion's library, arguing that 'it opens unknown horizons for us, it initiates us in the life of the social classes and its antagonisms, and what we think about with confusion is clarified with new light'.[352] The democratisation of *cultura* – 'culture' – was regarded as doubly important given that it could help to form capable soldiers. One member of the International Brigades felt strongly that, to use his own words, 'now that culture has ceased to be the monopoly of the great bourgeoisie and has been placed at the service of the people, it must be taken advantage of to forge men willing and capable of directing our army'.[353] Article after article stressed that the best soldiers were those who knew what they was fighting for – and to know what they were fighting for, it certainly helped to be literate. This theme was often reinforced in the writings of the men themselves. A letter written by Antonio López Hernandez appeared in the Italian edition of the *Volunteer for Liberty* describing how, by learning to read and write, he now fully understood the meaning of the war. 'When I was at home', the letter began, 'I only knew how to say – "There is a war: we are fighting against the fascists". That is all I knew of the war. Because I was illiterate, I was like a blind man who could not see and only knew what he was told'. All of that had changed as a result of belonging to the Popular Army. 'Today', he

[349] Letters written by Fabio Caballero, *French VFL,* no. 36, 15 March 1937, 12, RGASPI, 545.3.370.
[350] Anon., 'Para hacer los lazos más íntimos entre camaradas internacionales y españoles', 4 March 1938, RGASPI, 545.1.41.
[351] Report on Spanish correspondence for 20-31 October 1937, RGASPI, 545.2.159.
[352] Paul Jorge, 'Nuestro batallón tiene su biblioteca', *Unidad,* no. 7, 4 September 1937, 1, RGASPI, 545.3.420.
[353] A. Silva, 'La cultura al servicio del pueblo', *Orientación*, no. 14, 22 August 1938, 1, RGASPI, 545.3.738.

assured his readers, 'I know perfectly why we fight, against whom we fight, and who we defend'.[354]

Antonio López Hernández was precisely the kind of conscious antifascist fighter the Commissariat strove to reproduce all throughout the International Brigades. As dozens of character portraits in their various trench publications show, they certainly had some success. Like Hernández, a number of Spaniards were held up as role models for their comrades and compatriots. On some occasions, lists containing the names of those who had excelled in combat were printed; some had followed the orders of superiors, others had shown bravery while others still had performed well in specific military actions.[355] A list of 'comrades who give an example through their conduct and discipline' found itself in the newspaper of the International Brigades' cavalry unit, naming – amongst others – Mariano Llop, 'an observant and disciplined worker, the essential and necessary base for the good organisation of our young army'; Higinio Ramírez, respected for his 'good behaviour with all his comrades'; Blas Quiñones, whose 'conscience of an antifascist fighter is quite high', and Juan Ortiz, who carries out orders because he knows that 'it is not the time to dispute them, but rather execute them and get to work on them'.[356] Elsewhere, we learn that Lieutenant Santiago Montero of Transmissions was the youngest official in his brigade and treated his work with 'maximum responsibility', that Manuel López was a volunteer from the earliest days of the war who now gave classes to the illiterate men within his squad, and that twenty-five year old José María made use of his talents as a schoolteacher to work with illiterate peasants in various battalions. Then there were the hallowed few who died the deaths of antifascist heroes: twenty-seven-year-old conscript Diego Fernández Ruiz, for example, 'died fulfilling his duty before the fascist hordes on the Aragon front', tragically leaving behind a wife and son.[357]

As the proportion of Spaniards within the International Brigades increased, it became all the more essential to create militarily-skilled and politically-motivated cadres from amongst their ranks. The sheer military inexperience of the new arrivals, not to mention the outright resistance of many foreign volunteers to their promotion, occasionally frustrated the Commissariat's ambitions in this regard. The result, in the Fifteenth Brigade, was an utterly bizarre situation whereby foreign volunteers were at one point issuing commands to Spaniards who were nominally superior to them.[358] In spite of the huge numbers of native troops in the International Brigades, they were, at

[354] Antonio López Hernandez, 'Era analfabeto', *Italian VFL,* no. 88, 7 August 1938, 7, RGASPI, 545.3.365.
[355] Anon., 'Los mejores garibaldinos del 2º Bon', *Boletín,* supplement for no. 129, 17 September 1938, 3, RGASPI, 545.3.193.
[356] Anon., 'Camaradas que dan ejemplo con su conducta y disciplina', *Caballería Popular,* no. 3, October 1937, 4-5, RGASPI, 545.3.46.
[357] Anon., 'Soldados de la 45 Division', *Bayonetas Internacionales,* no. 8, second fortnight of June 1938, 14, RGASPI, 545.3.42; Anon., press cutting on Manuel López, undated, RGASPI, 545.2.175; Commissariat of War, XV Brigade, 'Book of the XV Brigade', 1938, 224, RGASPI, 545.2.405.
[358] Longo, 'Informe sobre la inspección afectada a la 35 División y al 2 Grupo de Artillería 'Skoda', 1 March 1938, RGASPI, 545.1.43.

first, thoroughly under-represented in positions of military and political authority.[359] As the war went on, however, the situation steadily improved and Spaniards from a range of political and social backgrounds eventually found themselves promoted. Many of the new Spanish commissars had been militiamen in the earliest days of the fighting. José Rot Crespo, for example, was a Communist Party member from the province of Cordoba who had been involved in the frontline struggle since the 19 July 1936; he joined the International Brigades in April 1937, participated in all its major combat operations, was made company commissar and was eventually promoted to commissar of the First Battalion of the Eleventh Brigade.[360] As the foreign volunteers prepared to leave the country, Spaniards from a diverse range of backgrounds were suggested as replacements. Some, like Sebastian Herreras, had fought on various fronts since 1936 and were affiliated to a socialist union. Others, like José Santacatalina, had joined the army almost two years later and were members of anarchist organizations.[361] Longo regarded the promotion of Spaniards to positions of authority as a key priority, not least because it represented clear evidence that the International Brigades were working hard to provide capable soldiers for the Republican war effort.[362]

Pinning down the precise military contribution made by the Spanish soldiers of the International Brigades is no easy task. There is plenty of anecdotal evidence that they did not always fight like the heroes they were invariably described as in their trench bulletins, but then again neither did the foreign volunteers. 'I was sent out with a Spaniard, a Catalan, to repair the wires', the American volunteer Duncan Keir recalled in the 1980s, 'and I got out there and they were shelling all over the place, I was scared to death, and the little Spaniard ran away, left me out there by myself'.[363] The Brazilian volunteer and former cadet Delcy Silveira recognised that individual acts of cowardice such as this could have a negative impact on the group as a whole; he took the International Brigades' much-vaunted commitment to 'discipline' seriously enough to point his gun at the head of 'one young Spanish soldier' who abandoned his position under aerial machine-gun fire with the threat that, unless he stood his ground, he would not hesitate to shoot him.[364] On other occasions, mass panic really did end up breaking out. In his wartime diary, Alvah Bessie described the 'first serious baptism of fire for our young Spanish *quintos* [conscripts]' during the Battle of the Ebro in August 1938. 'The Internationals went over, the leaders urged, threatened, kicked and shot (a

[359] Anon., 'Situación de la XIII Brigada "Dombrowski", 8 January 1938, RGASPI, 545.1.21.
[360] Anon., 'Relación del personal de Comisariado de la 11 Brigada Internacional', undated, 1937, RGASPI, 545.3.10.
[361] 'Biografía de los nuevos mandos', undated, C. late 1938, AGMAV, C.1096,22,2/d.5-8.
[362] Longo, 'El papel de las Brigadas Internacionales en la situación actual de Espana', *Elore*, No. 6, August 1937, 1-2, RGASPI, 545.3.355.
[363] Interview with Duncan Keir, CDMH, PHO_ABAL_131.
[364] Jorge Christian Fernández, *"Voluntários da Liberdade": Militares Brasileiros nas Forças Armadas Republicanas durante a Guerra Civil Espanhola (1936-1939),* (MA Thesis for the Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos, 2003), 224.

couple) of the Spanish kids, but couldn't get them to advance in the face of the m.g. [machine gun] fire', he wrote with what must have been quite some dismay. [365]

If Bessie's conclusion that 'their heart was not in it' was – on this occasion – probably fair, it should be pointed out that some of the volunteers had an unfortunate habit of generalising about the Spaniards' military effectiveness on the basis of isolated incidents such as these. José García Anton discovered this for himself when he kept overhearing his foreign comrades using the word *pingüinos* – penguins – to describe the Spanish troops, the obvious connotation being that they were cowards.[366] Far from being reliable evidence that Spaniards depleted the overall fighting power of their respective units, such comments instead reflect the volunteers' occasional tendency to overestimate their own military potential. In assessing the impact of native troops on the International Brigades it is worth keeping in mind the long-standing historiographical consensus that the unit's frontline contribution was no greater than that of its counterparts throughout the Republican Army. Nor, indeed, was it any worse – suggesting, in short, that 'emulation' was largely successful. This was certainly the view of the its chief proponent, with Longo proudly remarking, in August 1937, that 'the International Brigades have been able to directly contribute to the organisation and the technical and military education of thousands and thousands of new soldiers'. Even if public statements such as these were clearly intended to boost the volunteers' sense of usefulness to the wider war effort, he was not wrong.[367] Most obviously – and quite aside from their military prowess – those 'thousands and thousands of new soldiers' were essential in keeping the International Brigades' at full fighting capacity. One volunteer who recognised this was Bill Alexander. His words, which deserve quoting at length, seem a fitting way to end this chapter:

> Many writers on the International Brigades ignore the presence and role of the Spanish soldiers in them, and indeed the part played in the war by the whole Republican Army […] it must be continually remembered that after August 1937 the Spanish brothers-in-arms who fought shoulder to shoulder with the British in every battle usually formed the majority of the Battalion effectives. Without their courage, high morale and combative qualities, the British Battalion would have been able to achieve little. A more accurate title for the Battalion would have been the 'Spanish-British Battalion'.[368]

## Conclusion

The experiences of Spaniards in the International Brigades may have been lost amongst the incomparably better-known antifascist epic of the foreign volunteers, but

[365] Alvah Bessie in Dan Bessie (ed.), *Spanish Civil War Notebooks* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 182.
[366] Nick Gillain, *El Mercenario*, 39; José García Antón, *Un español en la XIV Brigada Internacional*, 168.
[367] Longo, 'El papel de las Brigadas Internacionales en la situación de España', *Venceremos,* no. 3, 11 August 1937, 1-2, RGASPI, 545.3.343.
[368] Bill Alexander, *British Volunteers for Liberty,* 144.

they are not particularly hard to find. Hundreds of their names appear in the unit's wartime publications, along with celebratory portraits of their antifascist volition in the rearguard as well as their brave performance on the frontlines. Many of these contain photographs of the men under question. They are pictured alone, in groups, with other Spaniards and with foreigners, armed and unarmed, while training, resting, celebrating and commemorating. They remind us that Spaniards were everywhere in the International Brigades, even if the names of their parents units – The Eleventh Thälmann Brigade, the Twelfth Garibaldi Brigade, the Thirteenth Dombrowski Brigade, the Fourteenth Marseille Brigade and the Fifteenth Abraham Lincoln Brigade – disguise this important fact. In one particularly striking photograph, three smiling faces look directly into the camera. The two figures on the left are about the same height, and look to be no older than teenagers. To their right is a taller, older man, wearing a distinctive cap. All three are in uniform, and all three have their arms around each other's shoulders. Above the photograph is a brief caption informing readers that they are 'a conscript, a veteran and an international' who 'symbolise, in our brigades, the potential of our army'.[369] By the time these words were printed, the International Brigades were no longer a vanguard of skilled foreign fighters who had come to the rescue of the embattled 'Spanish People' in their struggle against fascism. Instead, their commissars framed their utility to the Republic as providing the men, means and collective experiences of war and resistance required if the 'Spanish People' were to prove equal to the challenge of defeating the fascist enemy.

The commissars of the International Brigades mirrored countless military and political figures throughout history who have regarded their respective armed forces as 'schools of the nation' which can instil soldiers with a keen sense of citizenship. As Ronald Krebs has pointed out, historians have too often taken them at their word. Where is the evidence, he asks, that armies play such a crucial role in nation building?[370] The efforts of the International Brigades to convert generally apathetic peasants into conscientious antifascists with a direct stake in the Republican war effort deserve our attention because they were both unusually direct and particularly energetic. Rather than relying on the secondary civilising effects of bringing men from across the peninsula into a single institution beholden to government laws, regulations and military orders, this chapter has uncovered the striking manner in which the Commissariat set to work actively investing thousands of individuals with the feeling that their interests were represented by the Spanish Second Republic and under threat from a barbarous foreign enemy. The Spaniards' new place within an antifascist imagined community fighting for its national survival was reinforced through speeches, songs, classes, articles and competitions. Whilst it would be a mistake to assume that they all came out of this experience as either committed soldiers or conscientious antifascists, there is no denying their importance to the International Brigades'

[369] Anon., '¡Soldados resistir!', *Reconquista,* year 1, no. 2, 1 September 1938, 6, RGASPI, 545.3.22.
[370] Krebs, 'A School for the Nation?', 86.

continuing ability to wage war on the frontlines – and, indeed, understand their fundamental role in Spain.

## 4: ‘The Single Beast-Face of Fascism’ – The International Brigades and their Military Opponents in Spain

### Introduction

One of the most important ways in which the men of the International Brigades came to identify as soldiers engaged in a war of antifascist liberation was by making constant comparisons between themselves and the enemy. For the foreign volunteers, as well as most of their subsequent chroniclers, the nature of that enemy was never in doubt. Whenever and wherever the International Brigades are mentioned, the basic premise that they went to Spain to ‘fight fascism’ is almost certain to follow – it is, in fact, one of the few things which historians of the otherwise controversial unit tend to agree on, with even those who accuse it of being a ‘Comintern Army’ quick to point out that many of its individual members had the perfectly genuine, if in their view misguided, ambition of taking on fascists with a rifle in their hands.[371] According to Giles Tremlett, this ambition was, in fact, the *only* thing every one of volunteers reliably had in common.[372] The idea that the International Brigades fought fascism on the battlefields of Spain is, by now, such a truism that historians have seldom questioned exactly what the volunteers meant when they used the term. This is despite the fact that the concept has always been open to divergent interpretations, with historians of twentieth-century Spain themselves a long way from reaching any kind of consensus over whether or not it ought to apply to Franco’s Nationalists.[373] Rather than becoming embroiled in that particular historiographical debate, this chapter seeks to problematize the volunteers’ own use of the contentious term. In so doing, it represents the first serious attempt to demonstrate why, how and with what consequences they defined the military enemy in Spain.

If the volunteers were to succeed in fighting against an abstract ideology, they would first have to fight flesh-and-blood men like themselves. Given that violent encounters with the enemy were a direct consequence of their decision to take up arms in Spain – a decision which they and their admirers regarded as the very pinnacle of antifascist action – it is perhaps surprising that they are yet to form the subject of sustained scholarly analysis. This is all the truer given that these encounters are a recurring feature of many volunteer testimonies. Like soldiers in countless other twentieth-century wars, they received and returned long-distance artillery fire; they engaged in close-quarters combat; they saw their friends killed and responded in kind by shooting, bayoneting and blowing up enemy soldiers, and they witnessed the aftermath in the

[371] For an example of this approach being applied to a specific contingent of volunteers, see Eby, *Comrades and Commissars*, xii.
[372] Tremlett, *The International Brigades,* 5, 7.
[373] See Enrique Moradiellos, *Franco: Anatomy of a Dictator* (London: IB Tauris, 2018), 149-98 for an excellent summary of these debates.

form of dead or wounded bodies. Of course, not all of their contact with enemy soldiers was quite so violent. Most obviously, the volunteers took hundreds of prisoners, often congratulating themselves on their humane treatment of the fascist foe. These encounters give a human face to the volunteers' struggle against fascism and, in so doing, invite the historian to dig deeper into the relationship between abstract representations of the enemy and the lived experience of war.

By investigating cross-cultural encounters between the foreign volunteers and their military enemies this chapter seeks to understand what motivated thousands of men to engage in wartime violence in the first place, how they rationalized their actions while the war was ongoing and how they represented their behaviour after the fact. Much like those working on other armed conflicts, historians of the Civil War have tended to focus on propagandistic representations of the enemy which were mobilized by wartime elites as a means of rallying popular sentiment behind their cause.[374] More recently, Miguel Alonso – whose work is clearly influenced by the new military history and its emphasis on combatant experiences – has enriched this largely top-down perspective by arguing that Nationalist visions of the Republican enemy as a band of subhuman criminals facilitated the use of violence against individuals who, until very recently, were not considered mortal enemies but peaceful co-nationals.[375] The experiences and attitudes of the transnational soldiers of the International Brigades offer a unique opportunity to investigate how this now familiar process of 'othering' took place given that, unlike their counterparts in other conflicts – or, indeed, their native comrades in Spain – they were neither fighting for their own homeland nor compelled to do so by their respective governments.[376] While abstractions about the Nationalist enemy were certainly at hand by the time they arrived to Spain, this chapter will show how the foreign volunteers also engaged in their own creative process of 'making enemies' in such a way as to facilitate their participation in another country's civil war.

## I: 'Essentially Franco Was a Fascist' – Defining Fascism

The political dividing lines which predisposed the volunteers of the International Brigades to see 'fascism' at work in Spain were already in place long before civil war broke out in July 1936. With Mussolini having spent fourteen years at the helm of Italian politics by the time its first shots were fired, fascism, of course, was hardly a novel concept. It is nonetheless hard to imagine tens of thousands of foreigners volunteering for the Republican war effort if it had remained a purely Italian concern. What was required, instead, was for opponents of fascism to come to regard the movement as an existential threat to the international working classes and their hopes for a peaceful, prosperous and progressive future the world over. While historians

[374] See, most obviously, Xosé Manoel Núñez Seixas, *¡Fuera el invasor!*.

[375] Miguel Alonso Ibarra, 'Imaginarios del enemigo "rojo" en la Guerra Civil Española. Una aproximación desde la perspectiva del combatiente' in Pilar Folguera et al. (eds.), *Pensar con la historia desde el siglo XXI: XII Congreso de la Asociación de Historia Contemporánea* (UAM Ediciones, Madrid: 2015), 65-82.

[376] Richard Holmes, *Firing Line* (London: Pimlico, 1994), 361.

have long considered the early 1930s as the moment in which, for rather obvious reasons, this crucial shift took place, Kasper Braskén has convincingly pushed the origins of the transnational antifascist movement back into the preceding decade by showing how artists, intellectuals and politicians operated across national borders in their efforts to strategize against the new threat posed by *Il Duce* and his mass-mobilizing brand of right-wing reaction.[377] In 1922 the Comintern even formed an action committee which, from its base in Moscow, sought to facilitate national communist parties in organising the working classes against what was represented, from the very beginning, as an uncompromising mortal enemy. Propaganda was printed, directives were issued, funds were raised and new political alliances were formed to this end.[378]

While this early wave of transnational activism was essential in contributing towards the underlying sense of an antifascist 'us' and a fascist 'them' which would come to underpin the volunteers' later service in Spain, there is no doubting that it was the events of 1933, above all else, which finally convinced so many of them that fascism was an existential threat to the global left. Adolf Hitler's metamorphosis from the leader of a fringe political party to the *Führer* of the Third Reich dramatically put paid to Mussolini's long-standing claim that fascism was, in his words, 'not for export'.[379] As far as the future volunteers of the International Brigades could tell, fascism was not only for export – it was very much on the offensive. This particular point was driven home throughout the 1930s by the appearance of overtly fascist groups across Europe and beyond which, for all of their regional idiosyncrasies, made use of much the same repertoire of reactionary rhetoric, uniformed parades and street violence as their German and Italian counterparts. It was precisely this development – one which encouraged antifascists to turn away from regarding the movement as a uniquely Italian phenomenon towards regarding it as a universal menace which knew no national borders – which led the head of the Communist International, Georgi Dimitrov, to repeat previous warnings that a 'fascist offensive was underway' at the Comintern World Congress of 1935.[380] The military assault which took place against the Spanish Republic less than a year later was, for all of the volunteers of the International Brigades, simply the latest episode in that offensive.

[377] Kasper Braskén, 'Making Antifascism Transnational: The Origins of Communist and Socialist Articulations of Resistance in Europe, 1923-1934', *Contemporary European History*, 25:4 (2016), 573-696.
[378] Ibid, 579-580.
[379] Joseph Fronczak, *Everything is Possible: Antifascism and the Left in the Age of Fascism* (New Haven and London: Yale University press, 2023), 71-72, 110-111.
[380] Georgi Dimitrov, 'The Fascist Offensive and the Tasks of the Communist International in the Struggle of the Working Class against Fascism', Main Report delivered at the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International, 2 August 1935, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/dimitrov/works/1935/08_02.htm, accessed 7 September 2022.

The Mexican volunteer Juan Miguel de Mora was therefore right to stress how 'fascism, which extended across Europe like a stain of filthy bloodied mud, is the fundamental explanation for the International Brigades and the necessity which so many of us felt to fight against the assassins'.[381] It was, above all else, the intervention of a staggering 78,000 Italian soldiers, alongside some 19,000 German pilots, which convinced all of the volunteers that Spain was the latest country to fall prey to fascist expansionism. 'I went to war because Hitler and Mussolini were fascists and Franco united with them', the Dutch volunteer Theunis Mulder Kramer remarked, adding that 'we were fighting the fascists and their attempt to take control of the world'.[382] While the volunteers did not have access to the precise quantities of aid provided to Franco, the extent of foreign assistance was repeatedly confirmed throughout their time in the country. When they were not facing off Italian troops on the battlefield, they were taking cover from state-of-the-art German aircraft. 'Some perhaps prayed for a safe deliverance from the holocaust which engulfed us', Walter Gregory recalled of the enormous bombardments suffered by the British Battalion during the Battle of the Ebro, before assuring his readers that he instead 'cursed the Fascists […] and those back home who were too blind to see what was happening in Spain, with every blasphemy I could summon to my trembling lips'.[383] The American volunteer Henry Gilerawitz had an even rarer glimpse of the material assistance provided to Franco when he was taken prisoner during a series of retreats in the spring of 1937, recalling with visible stupefaction decades later how 'they took us back to these hills, and I tell you I never saw so much equipment in all the time I was in Spain', describing 'guns, ammunition, tents, man-power, in the fucking hills, just *loaded*'.[384]

For practically every one of the volunteers, then, the enemy in Spain was not an armed faction in a civil war at all but rather the same universal menace they had been warned about by the Comintern since the 1920s. This was, of course, a conclusion they reached before volunteering and certainly before they had any chance to familiarize themselves with the far more complex realities of a country which was, after all, at war with itself. Given that the voices of European volunteers are overrepresented in the documentary record and the historiography alike, it is easy to forget just how widespread this transnational understanding of Franco's Nationalists was. Nonetheless, in May 1937, we find none other than Mao Zedong sending an open letter to the Spanish People declaring, in no uncertain terms, that 'your struggle is our struggle' and that 'we are excited to learn that the International Brigades have been formed by many nationalities'.[385] Amongst them were a number of Chinese volunteers, as Mao well knew, although only twelve have ever been identified. The Communist Xie Wei Jin, an intellectual who had moved to France in 1919 as part of a work-study

[381] Juan Miguel de Mora, *La Libertad, Sancho,* 59.

[382] Theunis Mulder Kramer in Bodek, *Memorias vivas*, 82.

[383] Walter Gregory, *The Shallow Grave: A Memoir of the Spanish Civil War* (Nottingham: Five Leaves Publications, 1996), 130.

[384] Interview with Henry Gilerawitz, CDMH, PHO_ABAL_33

[385] Nancy Tsou and Len Tsou, 'The Asian Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War: A Report', *Science & Society*, 68:3 (2004), 343.

programme and, in 1923, was studying economics at Goettingen University in Germany, was one of them. With the rise of the Nazis, he fled to Switzerland and, in 1937, joined the International Brigades where he served as a commissar in an anti-tank battery. While recuperating from wounds sustained at Quinto, Xie received a red banner all the way from the city of Yan'an. Its message leaves no doubt as to who the volunteers and their supporters back home, from Brussels to Beijing, believed they were facing off in the Spanish trenches. 'Unite the People of China!', the banner began; 'Down with the common foe of mankind - the Fascists!', it added.[386]

No sooner had the volunteers arrived to the International Brigade base at Albacete than they were reminded that their enemy was the same 'common foe of mankind' alluded to by Xie Wei Jin's banner. 'The enemy came through to us sharply as being fascism and fascist rulers', the American volunteer John Tisa recalled of a speech he was given by André Marty upon his own arrival to the base.[387] In fact, the unit's commissariat was closely following the Republican Government's own lead in stressing how Spain was undergoing a 'fascist invasion', particularly following the arrival of the Socialist Juan Negrín as prime minister in May 1937. Some 15,000 flyers were produced which featured a dark beast with bloodied hands and a chest marked with a swastika balancing himself atop a globe, beneath which is a quotation from the Prime Minister claiming that 'our fight is not a civil war, it is a defense against foreign despotism and invasion in Spain'.[388] Printed propaganda was not the only way of driving this point home. At one point a theatrical performance entitled 'Franco's General Staff' in which the *Generalísimo* argues with Hitler and Mussolini over whose troops will be the first to enter Madrid was published, although it is not clear if it ever made it to the stage. While the three dictators are busy quarrelling, news of the Republican attack at Guadalajara arrives. Franco immediately asks for more help from his allies, both of whom stress their price of converting Spain into a fascist colony.[389] This particular battle had enormous resonance within the International Brigades; given the number of Italian troops who had participated on both sides, their trench press did not represent the hard-fought Republican victory as an episode in a civil war fought over domestic issues, but rather as a major blow against Mussolini himself.

If Hitler and Mussolini's support for Franco provoked genuine horror amongst the volunteers, it is important to note that it was often overlaid with profound excitement at finally having a chance to deal a direct blow against the fascist dictators.[390] For those of them who had been tortured, imprisoned or exiled as a result of their left-wing convictions in the years running up to the Civil War, taking up arms was an enormously empowering chance to settle personal scores. Wilhelm Jagow was one such

[386] Ibid., 346-347.
[387] John Tisa, *Recalling the Good Fight* (Massachusetts: Bergin and Garvey Publishers, 1985), 36.
[388] International Brigade Commissariat, Flyer quoting Juan Negrín, undated, RGASPI, 545.2.457.
[389] Cultural Commission of the International Brigades, programme of cultural events, undated, RGASPI, 545.2.69.
[390] See for example John Angus, *With the International Brigade in Spain* (Loughborough: Department of Economics, Loughborough University, 1983), 2.

volunteer, later reflecting that 'I was one of the many German antifascists who had already suffered fascism through my own flesh and, for me, it was clear that what was occurring in Spain was also my business'.[391] Whilst antifascist activism could take many forms, it was the possibility of firing a gun and inflicting the most literal damage possible to an all-too-familiar enemy which motivated volunteers like Jagow to enlist for the military struggle in Spain. So much so, in fact, that the individual charged with the important if decidedly inglorious work of recruiting volunteers from Cuba disobeyed orders from his superiors in the Communist Party so as to enlist for the frontline fighting already being waged by many of his comrades. His justification that 'the struggle against fascism was more important than discipline at that moment' perfectly encapsulates the importance volunteers like himself attached to individual antifascist action in its most martial form, even when – as on this occasion – their energies may have been more profitably spent elsewhere.[392]

This preference for direct action can be traced back to the fact that antifascism in all of its many forms had always been underpinned by the conviction that the only way to deal with such an unrelenting enemy was by fighting back.[393] This attitude owed its existence, in no small part, to the absolute centrality of violence not only within the fascist understanding of the world but also in the very way in which its followers conducted politics. Mussolini, after all, had not only encouraged his supporters to regard opponents of the regime as mortal adversaries, but also seen to it that they became targets of 'punitive expeditions' carried out throughout Italy in a bloody attempt to cleanse the body politic of the dreaded Marxist contagion.[394] If fascism had, in this way, declared battle, many of its opponents were only too keen to accept its decidedly zero-sum terms. Among them was Emilio Dal Col, a future member of the International Brigades who earned his antifascist stripes fighting in the paramilitary group *Arditi del Popolo,* described by one former member as a 'political army' engaged in war with the fascist state. Before long, many of Dal Col's future comrades-in-arms were becoming intimately familiar with the violent rhetoric, clandestine activity, military-style uniforms and face-to-face violence which accompanied the street battles breaking out between Communists and Fascists in towns and cities far beyond Italy's own borders.[395] A 1948

[391] Wilhelm Jagow in Esteve Torres, *Recuerdos de brigadistas alemanes*, 95.

[392] Interview with Casimiro Jiménez Medina in Muñoz-Rivero, *Los voluntarios Cubanos en la Guerra de España.*

[393] Fronczak, *Everything is Possible,* 48-49.

[394] For the centrality of violence to Italian Fascism, see Paul Corner, *Mussolini in Myth and Memory: The First Totalitarian Dictator* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 27-36.

[395] Fraser Ottanelli, 'Antifascism and the Shaping of National and Ethnic Identity: Italian American Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War', *Journal of American Ethnic History,* 27:1 (2007), 13. For political violence in the wake of the First World War, see Martin Conway and Robert Gerwarth, 'Revolution and Counter-Revolution' in Donald Bloxham and Robert Gerwarth (eds.), *Political Violence in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 151-154.To take a few examples of political violence in specific countries, see Daniel Tilles, 'Bullies or Victims? A Study of British Union of Fascists Violence', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions,* 7:3 (2006), 327-346; Chris Millington, 'Street-fighting men: Political Violence in Inter-war France', *The English*

booklet praised one Australian volunteer known as 'Big Bill' for being 'a good man with his fists when fists were needed', not least when he was defending workers' meetings against the Fascist New Guard. Whether his last words before leaving for Spain were really 'I hate fascism and am glad I am going to fight it with weapons in hand', there is no doubting that the Civil War offered volunteers such as himself a welcome opportunity to intensify an oftentimes violent struggle which had begun, in earnest, elsewhere.[396]

Direct Italian and German intervention was not the only reason why the volunteers were convinced they were fighting fascism in Spain. Crucially, in the years leading up to the Civil War, left-wing definitions of what constituted a 'fascist' had expanded to include reactionaries of practically all stripes. Writing in 1944, George Orwell – a man who, of course, had *himself* gone to Spain to 'fight fascism' – took issue with how the word was being levelled against individuals with vastly different social, religious, and political backgrounds, who professed mutually-exclusive beliefs, who belonged to a panoply of separate organisations and who behaved in quite different ways.[397] His complaint was not new. The fluidity of the term was very much apparent throughout Spain's Second Republic of 1931-1936, with commentators such as the philosopher Miguel de Unamuno noting its increased use as a convenient, and highly emotive, means of denigrating political opponents regardless of their actual beliefs.[398] This helps to explain why the role played by self-declared fascists ended up having very little influence on the volunteers' understanding of the Civil War. José Antonio Primo de Rivera, the leader of the Spanish Fascist Party, was certainly in touch with the would-be military rebels from his jailcell in Alicante, even circulating instructions to regional party leaders to collaborate with army commanders in rising up against the Republic.[399] All the same, the initiative, leadership and manpower behind the eventual revolt came, in the main, from disgruntled sections of the military. What united the rebellious officers was not their subscription to any specific set of political ideas so much as a desire to put an end to the left-wing Popular Front Government which had been elected into power in February. If few of the volunteers had much detailed knowledge about this background to the rising, even fewer still seemed to have considered it especially important.

Instead, the volunteers regarded the military rebels as 'fascists' on their *own* terms. 'Essentially Franco was a fascist', the British volunteer Jack Jones would claim years

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*Historical Review,* 129:538 (June 2014), 606-638 and Eve Rosenhaft, *Beating the Fascists? The German Communists and Political Violence, 1929-1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[396] Palmer et al., *Australians in Spain,* 15.

[397] George Orwell, 'What is Fascism?', *Tribune,* 1944, https://www.orwell.ru/library/articles/As_I_Please/english/efasc, accessed 22 January 2022.

[398] Hugo García, 'Was There an Antifascist Culture in Spain During the 1930s?' in Hugo García et al. (eds.), *Rethinking Antifascism: History, Memory and Politics, 1922 to the Present* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2016), 95.

[399] Stanley Payne, *Fascism in Spain, 1923-1977* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 197-207.

later, his use of the word 'essentially' hinting at the unimportance the foreign fighters assigned to the Spanish general's party politics.[400] No matter how broad the volunteers' definitions of fascism might have been, it is nonetheless important to recognize that their shared understanding of Franco and his Nationalist allies as part-and-parcel of the movement were almost always underpinned by a set of transnational attitudes towards class, power and politics. Whether or not the volunteers were familiar with the content of Georgie Dimitrov's 1935 speech to the Comintern World Congress, they would certainly have agreed that 'fascism in power' was best defined as 'the open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic and most imperialist elements of finance capital.'[401] Crucially, the coalition of reactionary forces commonly lumped together under the label of 'fascism' were seen to be hell-bent on keeping the working masses of Spain firmly in check. To directly quote one of their commissars, the volunteers' enemy during the war was 'the landowner who kills peasants with hunger; the loan shark who robs them of their sweat; he who wants to impose starvation wages; he who withholds culture from the people'.[402] For many of the volunteers, this was simply a Spanish variation on a long-familiar theme. As an American ambulance driver put it, 'we shoot at fascists but hit Hearst, Tammany, Girdler, Harvey, lynch-Senators, Liberty League Lawyers, injunction judges, "I am the law" mayors and all those who say "what's wrong with this country is that there's too much liberty"'.[403]

Important though these class-conscious definitions of fascism were in helping the volunteers to conceptualize the Nationalist enemy, their commissars were just as likely to represent the ideology in highly emotive tones centering on a series of human characteristics. It was cruel, it was coercive, it was obstinate and above all it was ugly. These ideological personality traits were brought to the fore in occasional illustrations within the volunteers' trench press which portrayed landscapes ravaged by the invaders or personified fascism as a horrendous beast. One drawing from a German-language paper shows an enormous ogre brandishing an axe while surrounded by destroyed buildings, crumbling masonry and dead bodies; meanwhile, a comparatively diminutive soldier is lunging his bayonet into his flabby chest with calculated calm and precision. 'We will rid the country of fascism', the caption reads.[404] While similarly unflattering depictions of the enemy are a feature of many wars, it is worth pointing out that this was not just cynical propaganda. After all, they responded to the volunteers' existing ideas of fascism as an inherently cruel ideology which relished in violence, death and destruction – ideas which, in turn, reflected the movement's quite genuine

[400] Jack Jones in Arthur, *The Real Band of Brothers*, 131.

[401] Dimitrov, 'The Fascist Offensive and the Tasks of the Communist International'.

[402] anon., 'Garibaldino español', *Italian VFL,* no. 67, 23 March 1938, 1, RGASPI, 545.3.365.

[403] James Neugass, *War is Beautiful: An American Ambulance Driver in the Spanish Civil War* (ed. Peter N. Carroll and Peter Glazer) (The New Press, New York, 2008), 124.

[404] The image appears in the German *Volunteer for Liberty*, no. 61, 1 January 1938, 4, RGASPI, 545.2.368.

fetishization of war ever since its founding.[405] These emotionally-charged impressions of the enemy were reinforced throughout their time in Spain. Not long before the Second World War would prove beyond any doubt that democracies are also capable of bombing innocent civilians, Nationalist raids carried out over Republican skies – including that which rained down on the International Brigades' own base at Albacete in February 1937 – were rallied as incontrovertible evidence of fascism's inherent depravity, with Harry Fisher describing how his 'theoretical' hatred for the ideology became all the more real once he had seen wounded children taking shelter.[406] Although Robert Stradling has astutely pointed out that several of the volunteers' eye-witness descriptions of enemy bombings contain enough inconsistencies to suggest considerable exaggeration and, at times, outright invention, there is no denying that the Italian generals responsible for no small number of them were both keen to inflict the maximum damage possible and expressed open glee whenever they succeeded.[407]

By defining fascism as inherently evil, the volunteers could rest easy in the knowledge that their own involvement on the Spanish frontlines was entirely legitimate. The underlying conviction that they were fighting a 'just war' was crucial in allowing them to regard their participation in the fratricidal violence taking place in Spain as both reasonable and necessary. While most of the volunteers were unlikely to be familiar with the long history of just war theory, they were motivated by much the same need to convince themselves of the righteousness of their involvement in frontline violence which had compelled many of its greatest thinkers since antiquity.[408] Even though they did not explicitly invoke the concept, they undoubtedly considered their war *jus ad bellum* on the grounds that they were not responsible for having started the conflict and were instead collaborating in the Spanish People's legitimate defense against foreign aggression. It was also *jus in bello* insofar as they were waging war within reasonable constraints against an unscrupulous enemy defined, as we have seen, by a tendency towards wanton violence.[409] On this particular point they drew on ideas about the appropriate role of combatants and non-combatants which had been crystallized by the First World War. In particular, they shared in an understanding of civilians as a distinct category of individuals who should support the war effort in the

[405] For the emergence of the 'spirit of the trenches', see R.J.B. Bosworth, *Mussolini's Italy: Life Under the Ditatorship* (London: Penguin, 2006),78-92.
[406] See reports on the bombing of Albacete from the head of the sanitary service, the guard service, and Captain Dr Bachrach, February 1937, RGASPI, 545.3.667. Harry Fisher, *Comrades: Tales of a Brigadista in the Spanish Civil War* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 49.
[407] Robert Stradling, *Your Children Will Be next: Bombing and Propaganda in the Spanish Civil War, 1936- 1939* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), 131-146; Edoardo Mastrorilli, 'Guerra Civile Spagnola, intervento italiano e guerra totale', *Revista Universitaria de Historia Militar,* 6:3 (2014), 68 - 86.
[408] For the history of just war theory, see Michael Howard, 'Constraints on Warfare' in Michael Howard, George J. Andréopoulos and Mark R. Shulman (eds.), *The Laws of War: Constraints on Warfare in the Western World* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), 1-11.
[409] For the distinction between these two kinds of 'just war', see Thom Brooks, 'Introduction' in Thom Brooks, (ed.), *Just War Theory* (Boston: Brill, 2012), 1-6.

rearguard but also be spared the kind of violence conducted, typically, on the frontlines.[410] The volunteers all agreed, for their part, that they were doing precisely that.

The fact that the Nationalists were so willing to bomb civilians in their unjust war of fascist aggression reinforced the volunteers' profound conviction that they alone defended the interests of the 'Spanish People'. Nowhere, at any point, did their wartime publications admit that large numbers of ordinary Spaniards supported General Franco. As far as the volunteers were concerned, genuine support for the 'fascists' was rendered all but impossible by the fact that the ideology was inherently unfavorable to working-class interests and therefore relied on violence, coercion and deceit for its survival. Alleged eyewitness reports of life in the Nationalist zone appeared regularly in the International Brigade press where, unsurprisingly, it was depicted as a hell-hole of civilian suffering in which every conceivable liberty had been violently stripped away by the fascist conquerors. Readers were left in no doubt that cities such as Malaga were now little more than German or Italian colonies.[411] 'We live in an unprecedented regime of terror', an unnamed man from Badajoz assured the readers of an Italian-language publication.[412] Arbitrary imprisonment, ritual humiliation and mass killing certainly took place in the Nationalist zone, impacting tens of thousands of lives.[413] These activities – whether real, exaggerated or invented by the volunteers' commissars – were always rallied as incontrovertible evidence that the International Brigades had come to Spain in order to guarantee the independence and well-being of the 'Spanish People' against a cruel and illegitimate fascist invasion. By contrast, the Republic's own atrocities – which, in the first weeks of the war in particular, were certainly not lacking – went almost completely ignored in both the volunteers' wartime writings and their postwar recollections.

## II: 'Trapped Into Fighting The Battle of the Dictators' – Imagining Enemy Soldiers

Fighting an ideology is not the same thing as fighting another person. Obvious though this may seem, historians have not yet investigated the relationship between the volunteers' understanding of an abstract 'fascist' adversary and their attitudes towards individual enemy soldiers on the ground. Who, in the first place, did they imagine

[410] Tammy M. Proctor, *Civilians in a World at War, 1914-1918* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 3-7.

[411] Amongst other examples, see anon., 'Exchanged Loyal Aviators Describe Tortures in the Fascist Prisons', *English VFL,* 9 August 1937, 3, RGASPI, 545.2.362; anon,. 'De Sevilla', *Il Garibaldino,* no. 10, 28 August 1937, 5, RGASPI, 545.3.192; anon., 'Medical Student Escapes to Our Lines and Reports of Terror in Saragossa', *English VFL,* 13 December 1937, 9, RGASPI, 545.2.362; anon., 'Life in Rebel Bilbao Today', *English VFL,* 14 October 1937, 13, RGASPI, 545.2.362 and anon., 'Malaga – A Martyred City', *English VFL*, 1 June 1937, 2, RGASPI, 545.2.362.

[412] Anon., 'Parla un evaso del campo ribelle di Franco', *Italian VFL*, no. 11, 15 April 1937, 4, RGASPI, 545.2.364.

[413] For a detailed if controversial summary of violence in the Nationalist zone see Paul Preston, *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain* (London: Harper Press, 2013), especially 131-220 and 428-470.

themselves to be fighting? Within months of the military rising the Spanish Civil War had become a struggle between two conscript armies, both of them dominated by Spanish soldiers.[414] The huge presence of native troops within Nationalist ranks did not, however, receive corresponding attention from the International Brigades' commissars in their wartime press reports, political meetings or speeches. Nor were the volunteers' own limited references to these Spaniards in their letters, memoirs and interviews an accurate reflection of their central importance to the rebel war effort. An obvious reason for this oversight is that they simply did not tally with their understanding of the war as a unified national struggle against foreign fascism. In an obvious attempt to overcome this, one Italian-language news bulletin claimed that an exorbitant 82% of Nationalist troops were foreign.[415] The provision of such figures was, however, highly unusual. If the volunteers were equally reluctant to break down the numbers of Spaniards fighting for Franco, it remains telling enough that some of them only realized of their existence when they began taking prisoners.[416] Far more references were made to the International Brigades' Italian and Moroccan adversaries, providing as they did more immediate evidence that Spain was being attacked by global fascism.

A key way of explaining away the existence of tens of thousands of Spaniards in the Nationalist Army was to allude to their supposed lack of enthusiasm for the 'fascist' cause. The commissars were informed, in the course of their political training, that although the Nationalists counted on the conscientious support of Monarchists, Falangists and Carlist *Requetés*, these were a fanatical minority who sought to impose their self-interested will on the ordinary soldiers fighting alongside them.[417] Ignacio Muñoz even assured the readers of one bulletin that the conscripts forced into Franco's ranks suffered the constant threat of being murdered by tyrannical fascists who watched over their every move.[418] Rather more surprisingly, similar claims were made about Franco's foreign troops, too. For Pietro Nenni, an Italian Socialist who wrote regular columns on the International Brigades throughout the war, the fact that the 'fascist totalitarian state is opposed to the concept of voluntaryism' was sufficient proof that the only *real* volunteers were those fighting for the Republic. Rather than constituting politically-motivated soldiers, rebel troops of all nationalities were widely regarded as fighting for their fascist commanders out of confusion, coercion, fear, or a combination of all three. 'How is it possible', asked Luigi Longo, 'to compare a Freedom Volunteer who left for Spain by his own decision, with the fascist warrior, sent by order, or enlisted under threat of poverty?'[419] Claims that the enemy soldiers lacked *voluntad,* or volition, were widely embraced by the antifascist volunteers.

[414] James Matthews, 'Foot Soldiers for the Two Spains', 1.

[415] Ignacio Muñiz, 'Combatientes españoles', *Noi Passeremo,* no. 1, 27 February 1937, 3, RGASPI, 545.3.196.

[416] Interview with John Edward Longstaff, reel 11, 1984, IWM, CN: 9299.

[417] Anon., manual for commissars, undated, RGASPI, 545.2.84.

[418] Ignacio Muñiz, 'Combatientes españoles', *Noi Passeremo,* no. 1, 27 February 1937, 3, RGASPI, 545.3.196.

[419] Longo, *l'Espagne Sous le Feu Fasciste*, undated, RGASPI, 545.1.72.

William Edgar Williamson, reflecting on the capture of Spanish prisoners at Belchite, concluded that they either loved the Republic at heart or else had no political feelings at all and were simply following orders.[420] In so doing, he was able to leave the ubiquitous claim that the International Brigades were fighting on behalf of Spaniards, as opposed to against them, untarnished.

As Williamson's anecdote suggests, the taking of Nationalist prisoners provided a key moment to reflect on the backgrounds and motivations of enemy soldiers. Aside from the fact that they could be easily represented as the shock troops of global fascism, one of the reasons why Italian troops received so much attention in both the International Brigades' wartime press and the volunteers' subsequent testimonies is because large numbers of them were captured throughout the war. This was particularly true during the Battle of Guadalajara in the spring of 1937. The first large group were captured on the 10 March when volunteers from the Garibaldi Battalion heard an enemy squad in a forest speaking Italian. They were close enough for the volunteers to encourage them to lay down their arms before taking them to a house hidden among the trees, where they proceeded to look over their personal documents and take individual statements. In so doing, they set a pattern which would be followed throughout the rest of the battle.[421] More Italians continued to surrender in the following days, including a group of a hundred holed up in a castle taken by soldiers of the International Brigades.[422] Such were the numbers of prisoners falling to the foreign volunteers that Longo reached out to his Spanish superiors stressing their potential usefulness for Republican propaganda.[423] Commissars were given direct instructions to disseminate prisoner declarations, photographs and speeches through whatever means possible, including radios and loudspeakers positioned at the front, as a means of hastening the decomposition of enemy ranks.[424]

As the Battle of Guadalajara raged on, a flurry of articles began to appear in the International Brigade press offering first-hand information into the backgrounds of the Italian prisoners.[425] Without exception, these concurred that they were mostly impoverished peasants who had been tricked into fighting through various false pretexts and had only been kept in the frontlines through violent coercion.[426] Evocative accounts of terrified prisoners who soon realized that they had fallen into friendly hands appeared regularly in the volunteers' journals, with some articles going as far to make the tenuous claim that they were nothing short of happy to have been captured. On the 11 July 1937, long after the fighting at Guadalajara, troops from the

[420] Interview with William Edgar Williamson, 1990, IWM, CN: 12385.
[421] Longo, *Las Brigadas Internacionales en España*, 222.
[422] Longo to the Comisariado General de Guerra, 14 March 1937, RGASPI, 545.1.20.
[423] Longo, undated report, C. march 1937, RGASPI, 545.1.20.
[424] Manual for commissars, undated, RGASPI, 545.2.84.
[425] See for example anon., 'Los prisioneros declaran', *Pasaremos,* no. 19, 20 June 1937, 10, RGASPI, 545.3.127.
[426] Ilio Barontini, 'Le prime battaglie di Guadalajara…', *Italian VFL,* no. 21, 27 May 1937, 4, 5RGASPI. 45.2.364.

Garibaldi Brigade participated in taking Villanueva del Pardillo and, with it, around 600 enemy prisoners who – in the words of a subsequent article – 'showed great joy at seeing themselves freed from a hateful slavery'. Apparently, 'both at the headquarters and on the trucks that transported them to Madrid, they cheered with frantic cheers to the Republic and greeted with raised fists all the passers-by they met'.[427] These themes would be repeated in the written and spoken recollections of many veterans, demonstrating how deeply they informed their understanding of the enemy not only during the war itself, but for years afterwards, too. Volunteers such as the Frenchman Léo Valiana were convinced that the Italian ranks were filled with 'unemployed people who had been promised work after their engagement', while others, including the Mexican volunteer Virgilio Fernández del Real, were certain that they had been deceived into thinking that they would be given land to work in Abyssinia.[428]

Once again, these claims that enemy soldiers lacked *voluntad* served the dual purpose of highlighting the nefarious nature of fascism as well as the legitimacy of the volunteers' own military struggle. It was for precisely this reason that the minority of volunteers who took prisoners themselves tended to recall the experience as an emotional reunion between long-lost proletarian brothers rather than a meeting of mortal adversaries. In his memoir, the International Brigade veteran Giovanni Pesce described a small group of Italians surrendering to his company, two of whom 'get to their knees, crying, begging for mercy'. Only after a long and patient explanation could the prisoners be made to realize that Pesce and his comrades-in-arms did not consider them enemies at all. The real enemy was, instead, the fascist leaders who had tricked poor Italians such as themselves into fighting against their proletarian brothers in Spain. [429] Accounts such as these also served to underline the volunteers' identities as compassionate soldiers waging a just war against an unscrupulous enemy. It was for precisely this reason that several of them commented with pride on how they selflessly shared their cigarettes and food with prisoners or, if they were responsible for providing medical attention, treated their wounds with disinterest. In a letter sent to an acquaintance back home, Hans Sauer even compared the luxury which surrounded the 'fascist' patients at his hospital near Barcelona with the grisly fate which awaited the antifascist volunteers if they fell into enemy hands.[430]

The commissars responsible for handling the International Brigades' prisoners were genuinely convinced that their interests, though they may not have been conscious of it at first, entirely overlapped with those of the antifascist volunteers. As both the British and Soviet authorities would go on to attempt with their own Italian prisoners during the Second World War, the International Brigade leadership immediately set to work

[427] anon. 'La conquista di Villanueva del Pardiglio', *Italian VFL,* no. 33, 16 July 1937, 3, RGASPI, 545.2.354.
[428] Léo Valiana in Gavas, *Le sel de la terre*, 107.
[429] Giovanni Pesce, *Un garibaldino en España: Memorias de un brigadista en la Guerra de España* (Madrid: Colección Atenea, 2012), 122.
[430] Hans Sauer in Esteve Torres, *Recuerdos de brigadistas alemanes,* 327.

trying to wean out the 'fascist' virus from the enemy soldiers.[431] One of the most striking examples of their efforts was a fortnightly bulletin produced by Italian prisoners under the title of *La Nuova Parola* ('The New Word'). In it, Mussolini's shock troops were encouraged to put their captors' ubiquitous claims that they had been tricked into fighting for a false cause in their own words. 'I was scared!' wrote one prisoner of his moment of capture. But instead of the death he had been promised by his fascist superiors, 'a hug, a kiss, a handshake, a promise and a few tears […] made two enemy soldiers great friends'.[432] The prisoners were expected to feel nothing short of gratitude for these displays of antifascist fraternity. 'The simple, tender act of these comrades communicated in the minds of the Italian prisoners the sense of fraternization that they had not yet experienced' wrote one of them in an open letter to the International Brigades which finished with the words 'we are grateful to you'.[433] 'Let us make ourselves worthy of the good they do us' wrote another, stressing that 'the cause for which they heroically fight is just, and holy, and indisputable'.[434] It is impossible, of course, to tell exactly how these prisoners really felt given that they were almost certainly writing under duress. Nonetheless, just as the Soviet Union hoped would be the case with their own Italian prisoners of war just a few years later, Longo fully intended for them to take their supposedly newfound convictions back home to Mussolini's Italy and, in this way, further the antifascist struggle taking place in Spain.[435]

In contrast to the volunteers' occasionally fraternal attitudes towards their Italian adversaries, the Moroccan troops fighting for Franco received very little sympathy indeed. The brutal colonial wars fought in the Rif mountains as recently as the 1920s had kept racialised stereotypes of barbaric 'African' cruelty alive and well in the Spanish popular imagination.[436] As terrified civilians fled the rapid, unstoppable and sanguinary sweep of Franco's African Army through southern Spain in the early days of the war, they took with them stories of rape, pillage and arson which both drew on, and fed into, these stereotypes.[437] The volunteers' familiarity with these horror stories meant that they had little sympathy for the Moroccan troops, or 'Moors' as they called them, by the time they encountered them on the frontlines. Karl Pioch had 'already

[431] Bob Moore, 'British Perceptions of Italian Prisoners of War, 1940-7' in Barbara Hately-Broad and Bob Moore (eds.), *Prisoners of War, Prisoners of Peace: Captivity, Homecoming and Memroy in World War II,* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), 36-39; Maria Teresa Giusti, 'Antifascist Propaganda among Italian Prisoners of War in the USSR, 1941-6' in Hately-Broad and Bob Moore (eds.), *Prisoners of War, Prisoners of Peace,* 77-89

[432] Anon., 'Chi credevo nemico!', *La Nuova Parola*, no. 1, 1 May 1937, 1-2, RGASPI, 545.2.405.

[433] 'The Prisoners', 'Alle Brigate Internazionali', *La Nuova Parola,* no. 2, 15 May 1937, 5, RGASPI, 545.2.405.

[434] Anon., 'Constatazion', *La Nuova Parola,* no. 2, 15 May 1937, 2, RGASPI, 545.2.405.

[435] Giusti, 'Antifascist Propaganda', 83-84.

[436] María Rosa de Madariaga Álvarez-Prida, 'Imagen del Moro en la memoria colective del pueblo español y retorno del moro en la guerra civil de 1936', *Revista Internacional de Sociología,* 46:4, (October 1988), 575-599.

[437] Sebastian Balfour, *Deadly Embrace: Morocco and the Road to the Spanish Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 278-299.

heard many things said' about the Moroccans before he saw them with his own eyes, 'none of them good'.[438] The British volunteer Harold Collins similarly admitted having 'heard terrible stories', with the result that the mere sight of their cavalry instilled him with horror.[439] His compatriot James Brown was so terrified of them – 'we knew what the Moors would do', he told an interviewer, 'cut your head off, didn't fancy that at all' – that he simply pretended to be a Nationalist soldier when he bumped into a group of them on the road outside Brunete.[440] Rumour and racist stereotyping, as opposed to any direct experiences of these troops' alleged propensity for extreme violence, shaped the volunteers' belief that they were motivated by little more than a primordial desire to slaughter innocent Spaniards.

The volunteers' representations of both the Italian and Moroccan troops tell us a great deal more about their own partisan attitudes, as well as the psychological need to imagine the enemy in a way which legitimized their own involvement in the war, than they do about the actual motivations of Nationalist soldiers. While historians such as Paul Preston have rightly emphasized that many of the Italians were driven to Spain by promises of pay and employment, it is important not to take Republican propaganda entirely at face value.[441] Recent research has presented a far more nuanced view of Italian combat motivation, not least by turning to the soldiers' own writings for evidence of their varied attitudes towards military service in Spain. Some of them seized on the chance to escape the monotony of civilian life and improve themselves physically and morally through combat; others considered their role in Spain as a job that simply needed doing; others regarded the war as an adventure; others loathed the violence and looked forward to returning home. Interestingly, some of their letters express pity towards Republican soldiers on the grounds that *they* were the ones who had been 'duped' into fighting for a false cause.[442] Javier Rodrigo has shown how some of the Italian troops conceptualized the war in similarly ideological terms as the International Brigades, only in their case they were defending spiritual civilization against materialistic Bolshevism.[443] In recent years it has become similarly clear that the combat motivations of the Moroccan troops were more complex than has often been assumed. Ali Al Tuma has shown that while terrible harvests and economic deprivation certainly played a huge role in encouraging thousands of Moroccans to answer the Francoist call to war, some of them were emotionally invested in the fight against the 'red' infidel, too.[444]

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[438] Karl Pioch in Esteve Torres, *Recuerdos de brigadistas alemanes,* 157.
[439] Interview with Harold Collins, reel 2, 1986, IWM, CN: 9481.
[440] Interview with James Brown, reel 4, 1976, IWM, CN: 824.
[441] Preston, 'Italy and Spain in Civil War and World War', 166.
[442] Mastrorilli, 'Guerra Civile spagnola', 68-86.
[443] Javier Rodrigo, 'A Fascist Warfare? Italian Fascism and War Experience in the Spanish Civil War (1936-39)', *War in History,* 26:1 (2019), 86-104.
[444] Ali Al Tuma, 'Moros y Cristianos: Religious Aspects of the Participation of Moroccan Soldiers in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939)', in Bekim Agai, Umar Ryad and Mehdi Sajid (eds.), *Muslims in Interwar Europe: A Transcultural Historical Perspective* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016), 151-177.

However they might have imagined the individual motivations of enemy troops, the volunteers of the International Brigades had all made an unwritten contract with themselves, their comrades and their superiors in Spain to fight them gun in hand on the battlefields and in the trenches. Their induction into the life of a frontline soldier was, for many, profoundly empowering. The moment when they first received their uniform, rifle, military identity card and all the other paraphernalia which marked out a member of the Spanish Republican Army from their non-combatant counterparts represents a clear 'before' and 'after' in their later recollections; a moment where they went from being largely passive civilians to antifascist soldiers with the ability to put a stop to Franco, Hitler and Mussolini. Donald Renton 'felt a real thrill of pride' upon receiving a Russian rifle 'on which one could depend for killing Fascists', reminding us that many volunteers continued to regard the soldiers in enemy ranks as 'Fascists' with a capital 'F' in such a way as to legitimize their own use of violence against them.[445] For the most part, however, the volunteers did not profess any special hatred for the men who might end up in their sights. Tellingly, an impressive 83% of the approximately 300 American volunteers surveyed by John Dollard in his 1943 study of fear in battle agreed that 'hatred is important to the effective soldier – but hatred of the enemy's cause, not of him personally'.[446]

While the commissars also seem to have recognised that hatred towards fascism was more important than hatred towards individual soldiers, they were fully aware of the potential tensions between the two. Given that they were up against a savage ideology which had to be defeated at all costs, whoever did not desert or surrender to the International Brigades had to be met with force of arms; crucially, this included those Spaniards, Italians and Moroccans who did not themselves identify with the fascist cause and might well be impoverished peasants from the volunteers' own towns and villages. In other words, any potential feelings of compassion towards the conned, coerced or cowed individuals within the enemy's ranks had to be subordinated to the primary aim of crushing fascism once on the frontlines by either taking those individuals prisoner or killing them. 'Thousands of our brothers have been trapped into fighting the battle of the Dictators', one of the volunteers' trench bulletins conceded, adding that 'many have deserted to us when the opportunity offered'. The main point of the article, however, was yet to come. 'While a man faces us across the trenches, weapon in hand, we must maintain a relentless and superior fire against him and the enemy apparatus as a whole', its author insisted, reminding readers – in no uncertain terms – that 'there can be no compromise with him while he is in arms against the people'.[447] For the most part, the volunteers willingly obliged. In an extraordinarily revealing poem first drafted in 1938, with which it seems fitting to finish this particular section of the thesis, Edwin Rolfe claimed that 'one does not hate the single visible

[445] Donald Renton in MacDougall, *Voices from the Spanish Civil War*, 22.
[446] John Dollard, *Fear in Battle* (New Haven: The Institute of Human Relations, 1943), 62.
[447] Anon., 'Fraternisation', *Our Fight,* no. 34, October-November 1937, 4, RGASPI, 545.3.513.

enemy face two-hundred meters away soon to be dead by a bullet […] we might have been, perhaps are, brothers […] one hates only the single beast-face of fascism'.[448]

### III: 'Shoot Him, Shoot Him!' – Lethal Encounters

How, then, did the volunteers respond to the need to use lethal force against other human beings who – by their own admission – might not even have been fascists? Killing may be one of the most obvious activities in which they participated, but it has never been the subject of sustained or systematic analysis in its own right. Historians of the Spanish Civil War in general have been slow to engage with the extensive historiographical literature dealing with soldiers' attitudes towards this most rudimentary of wartime activities, with Ángel Alcalde devoting just a single paragraph to the subject in a recent book exploring Francoist soldiers' lived experiences of war and combat. Alcalde invests the activity with an almost-innate mystery when he claims that killing is 'a dark spot in the heart of the experiences of war' when, in fact, there are a range of sources which permit us to critically engage with the ways in which soldiers prepared themselves for it, went about doing it and later rationalised and represented it.[449] The recent work of Javier Muñoz Soro is an important example of how we can probe attitudes towards killing, using as it does the censored correspondence of Franco's Italian soldiers. One of Soro's most interesting conclusions is that the experience of war largely consists of 'rapidly learning how to overcome the moral dilemma involved in killing'.[450] Just because the antifascist volunteers had a clear sense of the enemy in Spain did not make that moral dilemma any less pressing, nor any less worthy of our own attention as historians.

None of this is to suggest that recovering lethal encounters is a straightforward task. In the first place, few of the volunteers dwelt on the matter in any great detail either in their written memoirs or their oral interviews. The occasional and generally fleeting references which *are* made tend to be embedded within broader battle narratives – being fired on, firing back, taking cover, flushing out buildings or making a last stand in a ditch – in such a way as to reduce them, consciously or not, to the status of another mundane aspect of war which, we are left to believe, does not merit serious reflection. In the dozens of oral history interviews carried out with English-speaking volunteers in the decades following the war, both interviewer and interviewee alike are far more likely to refer to being injured, or the risk of death, than the more uncomfortable subject of killing. The reasons behind this reticence are unclear; perhaps it was considered too personal a topic, too taboo an issue or simply too self-explanatory to require further comment. To complicate matters further, those accounts of killing which do exist pose their very own methodological problems. As the volunteers themselves realised, the passage of time was detrimental enough to their ability to recall specific events without

[448] Edwin Rolfe, *Not Hatred,* Collected Poems (Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 196.
[449] Alcalde, *Los excombatientes franquistas*, 59.
[450] Javier Muñoz Soro, *Morir lejos de casa: Las cartas de los soldados italianos en la Guerra Civil española* (Madrid: Marcial Pons, 2022). The quotation can be found on page 11.

the added fact that those same events were often extremely chaotic and experienced in a state of high stress.[451] There is simply no guarantee that their later descriptions of combat, nor indeed of their feelings at the time, are an accurate reflection of their wartime experiences.

While there was general agreement that it was both desirable and necessary to engage the enemy with lethal force, the precise reasons why the volunteers did so were surprisingly varied. Motivations not only diverged from volunteer to volunteer, but were liable to shift for each one of them depending on time and place. Historians have long agreed that the abstract causes which first motivate soldiers to fight – whether they center on king, country, empire or a political ideology – tend to play a far weaker role once those same soldiers find themselves on the frontlines and feelings of loyalty to their comrades-in-arms take over.[452] The only dedicated study of combat motivation within the International Brigades, written by Josie McLellan on the basis of German testimony, argues that emotional ties to the 'primary group' were just as important in encouraging the foreign volunteers to continue their frontline struggle as they have been for their counterparts in countless wars before and since.[453] This is not to mention the role of raw emotion when soldiers are launched into the thick of battle, not least in those situations where life itself hangs in the balance and rational thought about the abstract reasons which may have led them to enlist gives way to an emotionally-charged struggle for survival. The recollections of volunteers from various countries show that their motivations for applying lethal force to the enemy could be extremely varied, with their antifascist ideology playing an ambiguous role. Away from the front, they recognized the need to kill in order to defeat fascism. Once at the front, they killed for the far more pragmatic reasons of avoiding being killed themselves, in order to secure an urgent military objective, because they considered it a necessary job or to satisfy the desire to avenge fallen comrades.

The volunteers' emotional responses to killing were as varied as the reasons for engaging in the act in the first place. These have long been the source of intense historiographical debate, with historians such as Joanna Bourke claiming that soldiers often enjoy carrying out acts of violence while those such as Dave Grossman have focused more on their reluctance to engage in activities which, he claims, they are

[451] For two American volunteers who acknowledge the occasionally unreliable nature of soldiers' recollections of combat, see the interviews carried out with William Susman, part 1, CDMH, PHO_ABAL_115 and Joseph Azar, CDMH, PHO_ABAL_6. For a discussion of the methodological issues of gauging motivation during combat, see Catherine Merridale, 'Culture, ideology and Combat in the Red Army, 1939-1945', *Journal of Contemporary History,* 41:2 (April 2006), 305-324; for a discussion of the methodological problems in understanding the 'mystery' of combat, see the same author's introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary History,* 41:2 (April 2006), 203-109.

[452] For a brief overview of different forms of combat motivation see Hew Strachan, 'Training, Morale and Modern War', *Journal of Contemporary History,* 41:2 (April 2006), 211-227.

[453] Josie McLellan, '"I Wanted to be a Little Lenin": Ideology and the German International Brigade Volunteers', *Journal of Contemporary History,* 41:2 (2006), 298.

psychologically predisposed against.[454] It would be a mistake to take the isolated statements of specific volunteers as evidence of one or the other of these views. The American ambulance driver and soldier James Neugass, for example, had few qualms admitting that 'we killed naturally and with constant gnawing desire to kill more and more', even if he couched this with the questionable claim that 'we hated death and war and we could never manage to think of ourselves precisely as soldiers'.[455] In spite of Neugass' use of the first person plural, he could not possibly speak on behalf of every one of his 35,000 comrades-in-arms. Some found killing unpleasant and challenging; others found it distasteful but necessary; others still outright enjoyed it. Some held a variety of different attitudes depending on where they were and who was in their sights. A whole range of factors determined these variations; factors which, in turn, overlapped and interacted with one another in different and unpredictable ways. There was the kind of killing being done; the emotional state of the killer; the identity of the individual on the receiving end; their own previous experiences of combat and the sheer force of their individual personalities.

The long-distance nature of the combat in which many of the volunteers were involved would prove key in enabling them to overcome the psychological barrier to killing, with the American volunteer Samuel Katzman speaking for many of his comrades when he assured an interviewer that he 'couldn't even see where the shooting was coming from' during the fighting around Gandesa in 1938.[456] In the first place, this helped dull feelings of empathy towards the anonymous mass of individuals in the opposing ranks. Just as importantly, it reduced the volunteers' sense of personal accountability for any fatalities they might have inflicted. Asked about the first time he 'saw a guy through he crosshair', the Swedish volunteer Conny Andersson could only respond that, although he saw men being shot down, he was entirely unsure if it was himself who was responsible.[457] The consequence, for volunteer Harold Collins, was that opening fire didn't 'mean much', while his Mexican comrade Juan Miguel de Mora went even further in claiming that 'to kill in a war is easy' given that 'only every once in a while you are conscious of having hit a human on target'.[458] The humanisation of the enemy, on however small a scale, could be an immediate impediment to this. Miguel de Mora discovered this for himself when, during the Battle of the Ebro, he locked his sights onto an enemy soldier desperately running for his life. With his finger already on the trigger, an inability to shoot seized him and resulted in the man getting away. When

[454] Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare* (London: Granta Books, 1999); Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychology Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (New York: Open Road Media, 1995).

[455] James Neugass, *War is Beautiful: An American Ambulance Driver in the Spanish Civil War* (ed. Peter N. Carroll and Peter Glazer) (The New Press, New York, 2008), 3.

[456] Interview with Samuel Katzman, CDMH, PHO_ABAL_56.

[457] Conny Anderson, translated interviews with Swedish volunteers, https://educationforum.ipbhost.com/topic/897-spanish-civil-war-oral-history/, accessed 5 December 2022.

[458] Interview with Harold Collins, Reel 2, 1986, IWM, CN: 9481; Miguel de Mora, *La Libertad, Sancho*, 86.

asked by his commander why he had ignored his cries to 'shoot him, shoot him!', Miguel de Mora could only respond, with complete seriousness, 'I don't know'. Tellingly, killing had become an ordinary activity which required no explanation; *not* killing was what required personal introspection and careful justification.[459]

Some volunteers, including those who thought little of taking pot-shots in the direction of the enemy lines, considered killing to be part of a 'job' that simply needed carrying out. The casualisation of extreme violence is a striking feature of one official account of the British volunteers' entry into Nationalist Belchite, published in the commemorative *Book of the XV Brigade* in 1938. The Battalion, we are told, was organised into groups to 'clean up the town street by street, house by house', including setting fire to buildings whose occupants offered resistance. Readers are informed that 'it was a tough job' given that 'the Fascists were resisting fiercely and we were fighting our way from street to street all that night and all next day'. That the volunteers' commitment to fulfilling their grisly mission is the main subject of attention – and indeed admiration – becomes clear with the article's assertion that 'we didn't have a minute's rest for two or three days and nights in a row, and we were all groggy with sleep'.[460] Of course, this extract reveals far more about representations of killing than it does the attitudes of the men involved at the time. Even these, however, could be profoundly influenced by the subordination of empathy towards the enemy to the single-minded ambition of carrying out a specific military assignment. This psychological strategy required some practice. Asked years later if shooting at someone for the first time was difficult, the Swedish volunteer Gösta Karlsson admitted that 'to go from shooting with a wooden plug to the real thing…it can turn out that way'. Nonetheless, he assured his interviewer that 'I saw it more as a job, actually' – one which, come the Battle of the Ebro, he was pleased to have mastered.[461]

The feeling that killing was a 'job' is particularly evident in Irving Goff's taped recollections of fighting alongside a guerrilla unit in Andalusia. The dehumanisation of faceless enemy soldiers, the urgent need to fulfil an essential mission and the sheer satisfaction of using specialist skills all overlap in the American's extraordinarily vivid descriptions of his work in the Nationalist rearguard. 'You couldn't hurry the job', Goff told his interviewer with a hint of professional pride as he described the laying of explosives across railway tracks. His satisfaction at watching one train get 'blown sky high' is clear in his tone of voice as well as his enthusiastic gesticulations. 'That was considered a huge success', he recalled. He also described the view from his binoculars as he watched another carefully-planned detonation stop a train about a mile away – *'WHAMO!'* – causing the locomotive to overturn and its carriages to pile up. He vividly recalled the two Swiss comrades who were working alongside him as being 'ecstatic' and 'leaping up *screaming,* swinging their hands, and *wow* what a thrill

[459] Miguel de Mora, *La Libertad, Sancho*, 86-88.
[460] Commissariat of War, XV Brigade, 'Book of the XV Brigade', 1938, 224, RGASPI, 545.2.405, 269.
[461] Gösta Karlsson, translated interviews with Swedish volunteers, https://educationforum.ipbhost.com/topic/897-spanish-civil-war-oral-history/, accessed 5 December 2022.

they got out of watching that train blow up'. The visual spectacle combined, once again, with the sense of a job well done – 'you know, seeing the results of your fucking work. And I was feeling the same way, I was screaming and yelling and more'. Goff was fully aware that people may have been killed as a direct consequence of his actions, but the euphoria of a successful mission seems to have overridden any concern for the loss of human life.[462]

At times, pleasure in a job well done overlapped with a more overt pleasure in killing. The British commander Fred Copeman's recorded testimony stands out for its utterly unflinching approach to the topic. For Copeman, killing was an enjoyable part of the work at hand; he therefore situates his descriptions of the activity within broader narratives outlining, in precise detail, the military movements and objectives of the men under his command. He recalled how, at the Battle of the Jarama in 1937, he informed the British volunteers to hold their fire as the enemy advanced on the basis that it would be far more efficient to kill them with a sudden sweep of machine-gun fire. An element of boyish expectation can be discerned in his recollection that 'now you're facing a good old bloody sailor mate, and you're gonna get the show of your life, you'll never see how many men you can kill in a short time'. Copeman described the results with obvious satisfaction, proudly assuring his interviewer that 'you've never seen a slaughter like it'. He was even thorough enough to shoot at the bodies lying before him in case they were feigning death to escape the carnage.[463] Copeman's attitude towards the violence he participated in during the Spanish Civil War is quite clearly inseparable from his personality – something which historians often overlook, but becomes particularly clear when dealing with recorded testimony such as his own. His boisterousness and enjoyment of storytelling, his self-aggrandizing sense of masculinity and militarism, his proud track record in the Navy and even his love of boxing all feed into the way in which he experienced, and later rationalised, his frontline service in Spain.

Fred Copeman was by no means alone in expressing all the enjoyment of a hardened soldier when it came to killing. For the Paraguayan volunteer José Aparicio Gutiérrez – a former lieutenant in the Republican Reserves during the Chaco War and now a Colonel in the Spanish Republican Army – there was significant professional satisfaction to be gained from the development of a powerful army capable of inflicting major damage on enemy troops. In a letter written during the fighting at Teruel in the winter of 1937, he claimed that 'it is beautiful fighting against fascism'. It is not clear whether he witnessed that fighting himself or not, but he certainly strives to paint a vivid picture for his reader when he describes how the bombardment of enemy positions caused the soldiers to rise 'like a single man' and 'begin running backwards in a veritable marathon'. He does not hesitate to mention that the result – a result he clearly approves of – was that 'of course a hundred will never run again, the tank and

[462] Interview with Irving Goff, tape 2, CDMH, PHO_ABAL_135.

[463] Interview with Frederick Copeman, Reel 2, 1978, IWM, CN: 794.

infantry fire having stripped them forever of the necessary breath'.[464] Bob Clark felt a similarly heady blend of power, excitement and sheer wonderment when he opened fire on 'what looked like black ants […] crawling up the valley' where he had been deployed. His awareness that there were flesh-and-blood men within the enormous mass of fleeing troops, as well as amongst the dead who littered the ground, is an important reminder that distance was not always an impediment to humanisation. 'How exhilarating it all was', he admitted, adding that 'I felt almost ashamed of myself when I remembered afterwards how full of joy I felt, how exalted, how terrible'.[465]

The volunteers' attitudes towards killing were not only determined by their own immediate circumstances, but also by the nature of the troops they were facing in any given moment. 'We jumped out of our trenches and rushed with a battle cry against the attacking Moors', wrote the Hungarian Bánffy János in 1938, until 'the sharp blade of our bayonets broke their charge'.[466] János' romantic conflation of martial heroism and intimate violence was facilitated by his reference to the hated 'Moors'. As noted above, these make far more appearances in the volunteers' recollections of combat than their Spanish counterparts not only because they were more easily discerned on the battlefield, but because they were also more easily villainised. 'The worst blokes we ever came across were the Moors the fascists had fighting for them', the British volunteer Tommy Kerr told his interviewer in 1988 – 'God, they were vicious'.[467] The assimilation of what one volunteer called the 'terrible stories' which followed these troops wherever they went were crucial in legitimising the violence used against them both for the volunteers' own benefit as well as that of their subsequent readers or listeners.[468] 'I had to fight them once or twice', Kerr recalled, openly adding that 'the thing is, we didn't waste any time with them – if we got hold of them, it was bang! And that's it'.[469] As we have already seen, the volunteers' attitudes towards their Moroccan adversaries were underpinned by a range of negative, and often inaccurate, stereotypes. This is not, however, to deny that they inspired genuine terror. Decades later, Abe Smorodin would confidently assure his interviewer that 'my worst single moment of shock and fright was my encounter with these guys, Moorish cavalry'.[470]

Hatred of the individual soldiers within enemy ranks may not have sustained the volunteers' willingness to fight in Spain nearly as much as their hatred against fascism in general, but it did play an important role in specific combat situations. A Russian officer who was responsible for training new volunteers in Tarazona encouraged the

[464] José Aparicio Gutiérrez, quoted in Gabriela Dalla-Corte Caballero, 'El brigadista paraguayo Emiliano Paiva Palacios, entre la defensa de la República española y el campo de internamiento de Gurs, Francia', *Temas Americanistas,* 36 (June 2017), 184.
[465] Clark, *No Boots to my Feet*, 51-52.
[466] Bánffy János in Györkei Jenő (ed.), *Magyar önkéntesek a spanyol nép szabadságharcában* (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1959), 71.
[467] Transcript of interview with Tommy Kerr, February 1988, Marx Memorial Library (MML), SC.vol.tke.3.
[468] Interview with Harold Bernard Collins, Reel 2, 1986, IWM, CN: 9481.
[469] Transcript of interview with Tommy Kerr, February 1988, MML, SC.vol.tke.3.
[470] Interview with Abe Smorodin, CDMH, PHO_ABAL_104.

men to feel direct hatred towards their opponents as a means of improving their military effectiveness: 'if we didn't show enough guts', recalled Irishman Bob Doyle, 'he'd grab the rifle himself, exclaiming, "you are volunteers; you are worth ten of the Fascists. Go into it with hatred and determination!", all the while showing us this on his features'. Doyle, for one, considered it a valuable lesson.[471] For many other volunteers, however, feelings of hatred were not something they deliberately mustered up prior to battle so much as experienced, in intense bursts, during the fighting. Dozens of American veterans agreed that the 'flare of anger' prompted by the death of comrades had little bearing on their longer-term desire to face battle in Spain, but certainly encouraged a desire for revenge in the heat of the moment.[472] Many of the volunteers freely admitted to this, including Englishman Walter Gregory as he recalled seeing his company commander get killed during the Battle of the Jarama. 'The heat of battle, anger and outrage at Bill's death, and the closeness of the enemy made me think that hand-to-hand combat was now the order of the day', he wrote in his memoir, 'and I prepared to meet my new adversary with my bayonet'. That adversary was, perhaps not incidentally, a Moroccan soldier.[473]

Heightened feelings of anger also underpinned what was by far the volunteers' most controversial use of lethal force – that is, their killing of enemy prisoners. Those who discussed the taboo topic in later years tended to blame such occurrences on the raw emotions of those involved, often pointing the finger at rogue individuals whose sentiments were not, we are led to believe, shared by the majority of volunteers. There is some fairness to this. Firstly, it was in the volunteers' own interests to live up to their self-image of being compassionate soldiers engaged in a just war, with the commissars occasionally reminding the men under their authority of the need to treat prisoners in line with the loyalist government's wartime stipulations.[474] Secondly, whenever executions *did* occur, it seems to have been shortly after the emotionally-intense experience of combat. Anger was certainly running high when six Nationalists were executed in the town of Villanueva de la Cañada on the 6 July 1937; the volunteers had just been forced to fire into a human shield composed of women and children.[475] In August that same year two civilians found hiding in a church in Quinto were shot, with as many as a dozen officers soon receiving the same treatment. This came on the direct orders of General Walter, keen to avenge the death of one of his fondest colleagues.[476] Following Quinto, a further 170 prisoners were shot at Belchite. Harry Fisher, on learning the names of those of his compatriots placed on the firing

[471] Bob Doyle, *Brigadista: An Irishman's Fight Against Fascism,* (ed. Harry Owens) (Dublin: Currach Press, 2006), 57.
[472] Dollard, *Fear in Battle,* 62.
[473] Gregory, *The Shallow Grave*, 48.
[474] Manual for commissars, undated, RGASPI, 545.2.84.
[475] Robert Stradling, *History and Legend: Writing the International Brigades* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 128-142.
[476] Tremlett, *The International Brigades,* 391; Baxell, *Unlikely Warriors,* 268.

squad for one particular officer, recognised that the event was sensitive enough for him to 'quickly' and 'intentionally' forgot them.[477]

## Conclusion

There is no denying that the volunteers of the International Brigades went to Spain to fight fascism. There is also no denying that historians of the famous fighting unit have often proven too willing to take this ubiquitous statement at face value. While there are certainly good grounds on which to classify Franco and his Nationalist war effort as 'fascist', the volunteers were not interested in using the concept as a neutral means of interpreting the violent events taking place in Spain. Nor should we expect them to have been; they were, after all, deeply-committed participants in those very same events. Instead, they used 'fascism' as a profoundly loaded exonym which enabled them to define the conflict – quite literally – in their own terms as a struggle for national liberation against a transcendental menace, much as the common description of the loyalists as 'reds' enabled the rebels to claim that *they* were the ones waging a just war on behalf of the national community. The politically-charged nature of these collective nouns, mobilised in the context of a total war of ideologies, has rightly seen them abandoned by scholars of the Spanish Civil War in favour of far more neutral alternatives – not least 'Republicans' and 'Nationalists'. However appealing the foreign volunteers' interpretation of the war may remain, it is important to remember that they made fascists every bit as much as they fought them. In this way, the volunteers of the International Brigades created their own preconditions for deciding to fight in the first place, for engaging in military violence once in Spain and for being able to rationalise their role in the hostilities afterwards.

For all of the volunteers, fascism was an existential threat which sought to pit the forces of capitalist reaction against the workers of the world. Their understanding of the concept was profoundly shaped by the transnational context in which they operated, with the growing menace of Hitler's Germany making it evident to many of them that their struggle against fascists back home was part of a broader struggle against fascists the world over. That the iniquitous ideology had worked its way into Spain was made clear to them through the socio-political make-up of the rebel coalition, their wartime behaviour and – most importantly – their reliance on massive amounts of support from Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini in the form of tanks, planes, pilots and foot soldiers. Crucially, however, the volunteers' hatred towards 'fascism' did not necessarily translate into hatred towards the individual men within the enemy's ranks. These individuals were invariably defined in a manner which was propitious to the volunteers' understanding of their own military role in Spain. Whereas they took pride in consciously fighting for the common good of the 'Spanish People', enemy soldiers were generally considered to be unwitting or unwilling shock troops dispatched on behalf of an ideology which, by its very nature, worked against their interests. The taking of prisoners was particularly important in this process. Crucially, however,

[477] Tremlett, *The International Brigades*, 401; Fisher, *Comrades: Tales of a Brigadista in the Spanish Civil War,* 77.

feelings of compassion towards flesh-and-blood individuals could not get in the way of the primary business of crushing the greater – if far more abstract – evil they were helping to import into Spain through force of arms.

As a result of their commitment to destroying 'fascism', most of the volunteers seem to have set aside whatever aversion they may have had towards killing fellow human beings. As the Swedish volunteer Gösta Karlsson put it, 'you went to Spain to help, and part of that help, when you were on the front, was to try and eliminate the enemy'.[478] In other words, the volunteers had made a contract with themselves to do whatever was necessary to defeat the 'fascist' menace they themselves had identified in Spain. One volunteer who drew attention to the occasionally unhappy tension which could arise between fighting an abstract cause and fighting other human beings was the American Harry Fisher. In the paragraphs of his memoir which are devoted to his first experience of combat, Fisher describes how it suddenly dawned on him how 'I wanted to do my share to try to stop the fascists, but in reality I knew I was more of a pacifist than a soldier', as well as his sudden feeling that 'I couldn't kill, and I didn't want to be killed'.[479] All the same, he drew on his every reserve of antifascist *voluntad* in order to continue fighting on the frontlines and, when necessary, both kill and risk being killed in future engagements. Fisher's feelings of guilt at being initially unable to face battle are an important reminder that these antifascist volunteers had a particular incentive to overcome any aversion to the grisly business of killing. After all, it was they themselves who had decided that fascism was at work in Spain – and they themselves who had come to the conclusion that the only way to stop it was through force of arms.

[478] Gösta Karlsson, translated interviews with Swedish volunteers, https://educationforum.ipbhost.com/topic/897-spanish-civil-war-oral-history/, accessed 5 December 2022.

[479] Fisher, *Comrades: Tales of a Brigadista in the Spanish Civil*, 56.

## 5: ‘¡Mucha Familia Buena!’ – The International Brigades and Spanish Civilians in the Provincial Rearguard

### Introduction

Encounters with friendly civilians would prove just as important as those sustained with the enemy in the making of the International Brigades’ vision of antifascist war. These have, in the main, been overlooked by historians who have proven more interested in their exploits on the battlefield than in their lives behind the lines. This imbalance has certainly not been limited to academia, either. One of the more unusual consequences to arise from the participation of around 35,000 foreign volunteers on the Spanish frontlines was to suddenly and irreversibly launch the unfamiliar names of the villages, valleys, rivers and mountain ranges where they fought into the vocabulary of their supporters across the globe; it was here, after all, that they reached the very pinnacle of their antifascist struggle by heroically risking their lives against the bombs and bullets of the invaders. ‘Caspe, Tortosa’, began a poem written by Fred Blaire about his brother William, an American volunteer lost in action in 1938, citing the names of two otherwise unremarkable locations where the Abraham Lincoln Battalion famously fought. ‘Those distant villages became as near to us as our own towns’, he wrote, adding that ‘we grew to know their names as well as names of towns and cities we lived in many years’.[480] In spite of the hard work of a handful of amateur historians to uncover the volunteers’ presence in the comparatively little-known localities of the Republican rearguard, they retain few indications that thousands of armed foreigners passed through their streets, squares and civil buildings in the course of the war. The implication is that they are simply not as important in understanding the volunteers’ antifascist struggle in Spain as the frontlines.

A tendency to define war in the narrow terms of frontline fighting has certainly not been limited to the International Brigades. Even in a context as thoroughly-studied as the Western Front, culturally-dominant images of brutal trench warfare have long overshadowed the more peaceful and even enjoyable encounters which unfolded between British soldiers and French civilians not far from the battlefields.[481] As a historian of those same encounters has argued, this long-running oversight is all the more unfortunate given that they are essential for gaining a full understanding of the soldiering experience.[482] The same is certainly true for the 35,000 foreigners of the International Brigades and their encounters with the civilians of Spain. The emphasis on combat in both first-hand testimonies and second-hand narratives sometimes disguises the fact that most of their time was spent in the rearguard, where the natural landscapes captivated their attention, where civilians of different ages and backgrounds became valued acquaintances and where the village streets became

[480] Fred Blair, ‘Our Brother Bill’, MML, SC/EPH/9/3.
[481] Craig Gibson, *Behind the Front: British Soldiers and French Civilians, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 13-14.
[482] Ibid.

places of work, rest and leisure. In contrast to all those existing studies into the International Brigades which have reduced rearguard encounters to a series of anecdotal interludes within otherwise familiar narratives of fighting fascism, this chapter treats them as fundamental to both the volunteers' identities and experiences and, by extension, much more closely linked to their frontline service than has hitherto been acknowledged.

By focusing on the provincial towns and villages where the volunteers formed, trained and rested, this chapter argues that rearguard encounters with civilians enabled them to imagine the antifascist community in arms in far more vivid terms than before their arrival to Spain. While a great many of them spent time in major cities such as Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia, it focusses on the provincial rearguard because it held such a unique place in the volunteers' vision of the war-torn country and the people who inhabited it. Above all, cross-cultural encounters in towns such as Albacete and villages such as Madrigueras enabled the soldiers to feel like welcome participants in what was, in reality, an enormously complicated civil war by giving the abstract 'Spanish People' a human face. This was not merely a question of legitimizing their presence in its violence, either. So far, historians have explained the volunteers' willingness to fight on the basis of their pre-existing ideological commitments, but their encounters with civilians remind us that the lived experience of war also fed into their sense of motivation as antifascist soldiers. Both face-to-face contact with Spaniards as well as representations of those same Spaniards in their extensive propaganda encouraged the men to continue the fight on the frontlines by relieving the boredom of training, providing them with a tangible means of building an antifascist Spain, enabling them to feel personally invested in the outcome of the hostilities and by convincing them that they had the conscious support of their foreign hosts.

## I: 'Picture Yourself Sitting Next to Me' – First Impressions

Encounters between the foreign fighters and Spanish civilians did not occur in a social, political or cultural vacuum. In his history of the British volunteers, James K. Hopkins argued that the rank and file's impressions of 'The Spanish People' were based on self-serving Communist propaganda rather than any meaningful face-to-face contact with Spaniards.[483] Michael Seidman has, with good reason, similarly claimed that the volunteers' preconceptions about the binary nature of the war in Spain – gleaned, in large part, from that propaganda – distanced them from the daily realities of the same people they had, allegedly, come to defend. [484] The American ex-Communist William Herrick would have agreed with both of these historians, stating that 'for nine months I lived under the aegis of Moscow-trained leaders, policed by men with guns on their hips', with the consequence that 'for the American who fought at the front […] Spain was really an abstraction; we knew and learned little about it, except what our ignorant and biased commissars told us'.[485] Certainly, this chapter will show how contact with

[483] Hopkins, *Into the Heart of the Fire,* 210-217.
[484] Seidman, *Transatlantic Antifascisms*, 28.
[485] Herrick, *Jumping the Line*, 220-221.

civilians was limited in both time and place, often restrained by language and to some extent regulated by commissars. Their understanding of Spain and Spaniards was unquestionably influenced by wartime propaganda, with whatever encounters *did* take place often being rationalized in deliberately self-serving terms. All the same, commentators have greatly exaggerated the difficulties of forging meaningful contact with Spaniards as well as underestimated the impact it could exercise on all those involved.

The veterans' own testimonies demonstrate a surprising lack of agreement over the extent to which they were able to strike up face-to-face encounters with Spanish civilians in the rearguard, even if they each – much like William Herrick – tended to generalize on the basis of their own relatively narrow experiences. What is beyond doubt is that that such contact was certainly possible provided the volunteers were willing and able to take the initiative. The British volunteer Albert Charlesworth admitted that his own lack of Spanish prevented him from making friends with members of the various communities amongst which he trained, but stressed that a number of his comrades had rather more success, surmising – rightly – that it was up to each individual to make contact if they wanted to.[486] The testimonies of both the volunteers and the Spaniards they met coincide in identifying a range of recurring situations which opened the way to amiable encounters, none of them prevented by the intervention of Herrick's gun-toting commissars. Children approached them for sweets, women offered to wash their clothes or do their cooking, and the volunteers themselves sought out wine, food, or even a haircut from locals. Whenever English-speaking veterans were given the opportunity to talk about their encounters with civilians in oral interviews carried out decades later, it becomes abundantly clear just how important they were. In fact, they could amount to some of the most touching and meaningful episodes of their time in Spain, often being recalled with enormous warmth in spite of the passing of the years.

Crucially, verbal communication was not required at all for the volunteers to form an impression of Spain's people, its history, its culture and – of course – its war. Much like the American GIs who were later stationed in Britain and failed to come into sustained contact with any locals, the many *brigadistas* who failed to speak to a single Spaniard in all their time in the country still formed a 'mental image' of their hosts as they trained in their villages, travelled through their countryside and witnessed their way of life in streets, squares and fields.[487] This process could begin as soon as they entered their first village and found themselves confronted with the realities of a country which, for the vast majority of the volunteers, was still a great unknown. Above all, Spain seemed remarkably old. Many commented on the fact that the villages had, in all outward appearances, barely changed since the Middle Ages. Al Prago, a self-confessed 'bug about Don Quijote', felt that the places described by Miguel de

[486] Interview with Albert Charlesworth, Reel 2, 1986, IWM, CN: 9427.

[487] The idea of a 'mental image' of a country and its culture is put forward by Peter Schrijvers in *The Crash of Ruin: American Combat Soldiers in Europe During World War II* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), 108.

Cervantes three centuries earlier seemed startlingly similar to the village of Madrigueras, in the province of Albacete, when he arrived there for training in 1937. 'The only basic difference', he stressed, 'was they had electricity'.[488] A profound sense of history could creep up on the volunteers in the most unexpected moments, as William Susman discovered during the Aragon retreats of 1937. Having taken shelter in a farmhouse, he decided to go upstairs where he discovered a chest filled with items related to Jewish prayer. The owners of the house, he realised, were Catholics who unknowingly continued the religious traditions of their ancestors by closing their shutters and lighting candles each Friday.[489]

For the thousands of young, working-class, urban volunteers who hailed from the other side of the Atlantic, encountering the Old World was tremendously exciting. Their admiration for the often-unspoilt beauty of their host country comes through clearly in their letters home, many of which contain point-of-view descriptions of rural scenery and village life. 'Picture yourself sitting next to me, your back against an old stone fence', urged Leon Rosenthall in one such letter, before describing 'the greenest of green meadows', 'the neat little village' and the 'little houses and clean streets' which for him recalled children's building blocks, but for others brought to mind a stage set, a film scene or a snowy Christmas card picture.[490] The villagers were a crucial part of this timeless landscape. Writing from the particularly remote region of Extremadura, Milton Wolff described his view of the village square from his window: a trough and a fountain, a farmer with his donkey, women in black, children playing. As these letters show, the volunteers were quite capable of imagining the rural rearguard as an idyll of timeless peace and harmony which bellied the fact that a 'fascist' invasion was wreaking havoc just a few miles away.[491] By taking this view of rural Spain as untainted by capitalism, industrialisation and social anomie, they had unknowingly become heirs to the nineteenth-century romantics who had taken the centuries-old 'Black Legend' of a backwards, cruel and hostile Spain and invested it with decidedly positive qualities.[492]

While the more picturesque aspects of village life clearly appealed to many of the volunteers, they co-existed with their knowledge that the locals suffered lives of back-breaking labour, crippling poverty and a lack of basic healthcare and education. Alfred Zarth believed that 'the population of the villages of La Mancha, Albacete, Burgos and La Rioja lived in those times in a manner unworthy of human beings', citing their lack of work, the primitive cabins in which they lived and the premature deaths of their children. To Zarth's relief, their resistance against this 'misery and oppression' had

[488] Interview with Albert Prago, CDMH, PHO_ABAL_84.
[489] Interview with William Susman, part 1, CDMH, PHO_ABAL_115.
[490] Leon Rosenthal, letter dated 8 February 1938 and Cecil Cole, letter dated 1 January 1938 in Nelson and Hendricks, *Madrid 1937*, 126; 124.
[491] Milton Wolff, letter dated August 1937 in Nelson and Hendricks, *Madrid 1937*, 110.
[492] Nigel Townson, 'Introduction: Spain: A Land Apart?' in Nigel Townson (ed.), *Is Spain Different? A Comparative Look at the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2015), 3.

gathered pace in recent years.[493] This conspicuous hardship was all the more striking for the volunteers because so many of them came from urban backgrounds. Even those volunteers who came from comparatively poor countries tended to be workers who had emigrated prior to their service in Spain. 75% of the approximately 5,000 Polish volunteers, for example, had emigrated from their home country before volunteering, with workers dominating amongst them. [494] Like the Poles, the Yugoslavians tended to be blue-collar emigrants, followed by miners, students and a smattering of intellectuals.[495] 'Like so many Spanish villages I was to see, Madrigueras was characterized by the squalor of its buildings and the almost unbelievable poverty of its peasants', the British volunteer Walter Gregory recalled in his memoir, claiming that this poverty was enough to make a working-class lad from Nottingham such as himself feel positively affluent by comparison.[496]

One volunteer who emigrated prior to serving in Spain was the Ukrainian Communist Konstantin Olynyk, born to poor peasants in the Austro-Hungarian village of Bukovina in 1904. At the age of 25, he travelled to Canada where he ended up working in the timber industry and as a truck driver delivering coal. One reason why Olynk remembered being so appalled by the poverty of the Spanish peasants was because it reminded him of conditions back in Bukovina. By contrast, he felt them to be incomparable with those in his adoptive Canada, even in the midst of the economic depression.[497] This shows just how shocking Spanish poverty could be even for those volunteers with prior experience of peasant life. Their descriptions of that poverty were certainly not disingenuous, with the culture clash between the urban fighters and their peasant hosts vividly recalled by a number of Madrigueras locals decades later; one such local still remembered a number of volunteers asking about the mule and primitive farming equipment kept outside his house, mimicking their shocked response – in pigeon Spanish – of '*mucho malo, mucho malo, en mi país mucho tractor*' (very bad, very bad, in my country many tractors). His conclusion was that, coming from more prosperous countries such as Germany, they must have considered the local village people 'retresados' – backwards.[498] One of his neighbours agreed, describing the volunteers as 'a hundred years ahead of us'.[499] The feeling that these men came from more 'advanced' countries is also betrayed, albeit more subtly, by the locals' insistence on referring to them as 'cultured' in their testimonies.[500]

The volunteers were under no illusions as to the underlying cause of this poverty. Spain, countless articles in their trench press informed them, was a country which had

[493] Alfred Zarth in Esteve Torres, *Recuerdos de brigadistas alemanes*, 315.
[494] Pietrzak, 'Poles in the Spanish Civil War', 167; Bartłomiej Różycki, 'Dąbrowszczacy i pamięć o hiszpańskiej wojnie domowej w Polsce Ludowej', *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość*, 1:21 (2013), 168.
[495] Lešnik, 'La Guerra civile spagnola', 44.
[496] Gregory, *The Shallow Grave*, 28.
[497] Myron Momryk, "For your Freedom and For Ours": Konstantin (Mike) Olynk, A Ukrainian Volunteer from Canada in the International Brigades', *Canadian Ethnic Studies,* XX:2 (1988), 124-134.
[498] The Monsalve family in Serrano, *Recuérdalo tú,* 24.
[499] Angelita de Ernesto, Foti, Teresa and Luz in ibid, 79.
[500] See for example Angelita de Ernesto in Serrano, *Recuérdalo tú*, 59.

remained under the yoke of parasitic priests, absentee landlords and corrupt capitalists until the merciful arrival of the Second Republic in 1931. No doubt influenced by this information, the villages through which they passed suddenly became microcosms of an entire country's historical injustices. This was, admittedly, based on a selective reading of Spanish history. While the poverty they witnessed was certainly shocking, Spain was not the same country it had been in the Middle Ages. If a majority of its intelligentsia had entered the twentieth century with the unshakeable feeling that their homeland was somehow 'inferior' compared to the rest of Europe, it was only because they insisted on comparing it with industrialized Britain, France and Germany.[501] Much the same habit is evident in Spanish history writing from the 1950s and 1960s, the likes of which tended to compare Spain to Northwestern Europe at the expense of recognizing how, for example, agricultural output had managed to keep pace with a considerable rise in the population by the turn of the century. At the same time, Spain had developed a sizeable middle class, spawned several large urban centers and achieved lower illiteracy than many other countries elsewhere on the continent.[502] While the 1930 census therefore showed that agriculture employed a minority of workers for the first time in Spanish history, the antifascist fighters mirrored many Western-European and North-American journalists covering the Spanish Civil War in seeking the 'authentic' character of the nation in its rural areas.[503]

Unsurprisingly, the volunteers were convinced that the solution to the peasants' misery lay in the defeat of fascism. As thousands of Spanish conscripts joined the International Brigades to cover its significant foreign losses, the Commissariat intensified their calls for the internal press to devote more attention to 'Spanish' questions, not least by informing readers of the gains which had been made by the peasantry as a result of the Republic's pre-war agrarian legislation as well as more recent wartime decrees. They invested this task with particular importance given that most of the new conscripts were themselves agricultural workers. Articles in various languages describing government attempts to free peasants from the feudal yoke by collectivising large landholdings, respecting small property owners, achieving record harvests and outdoing the Nationalists in keeping civilians fed appeared under titles such as 'Spanish Government Aids Starving Peasantry', 'The Antifascist Fight on the Wheat Field' and – perhaps least catchy of all – 'Peasants Establish New Collective Farm and Point to the Way of Social Abundance'.[504] The volunteers were wrongly led

[501] Townson, *Is Spain Different?*, 8**.**

[502] Álvarez Junco, *Spanish Identity in the Age of Nations*, 294; Edward Malefakis, 'The Second Republic: A Noble Failure?' in Nigel Townson (ed.), *Is Spain Different?*, 111; James Simpson, *Spanish Agriculture: The Long Siesta, 1765-1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 15.

[503] Julius Ruiz, Review of 'The Life and Death of the Spanish Republic: A Witness to the Spanish Civil War' by Henry Buckley, *The English Historical Review,* 129:540 (October 2014), 1240.

[504] Anon., 'Peasants Establish New Collective Farm and Point to the Way of Social Abundance', *English VFL*, 3 January 1938, 6-7, RGASPI, 545.2.362,; 545.2.362, anon., 'The Antifascist Fight on the Wheat Field', *English VFL*, 15 June 1937, 4-5, RGASPI 545.2.362 and anon., 'Spanish Government Aids Starving Peasantry', *English VFL*, 1 June 1937, 4-5, RGASPI, 545.2.362.

to believe that the peasantry of Spain constituted a homogenous mass which unconditionally supported the Republic because it had given them tangible rewards which the 'fascists', allied as they were with the parasitic capitalists and landowners, wanted to take away. Echoing this theme, Arthur Dorff recalled a supposed meeting with a Spanish peasant who expressed profound gratitude towards the International Brigades for fighting for a government which had given him a bed to sleep in – a bed which the same peasant claimed the fascists were none too happy about.[505]

Whether Dorff's meeting with the peasant really took place or not, volunteers such as himself clearly felt that the International Brigades were playing a key role in the wider emancipation of Spain's downtrodden masses. While many of them had gone to the war-torn country knowing little about its recent history, their encounters with the people and places of the rural rearguard often resulted in a direct sense of duty towards the mythical Spanish People and, with it, another reason to fight on. The German volunteer Fritz Mergen was sent to a village near Valencia where many of the locals were illiterate peasants who, he felt, 'were open towards us and told us about how the great landowners exploited them'. More than this, 'they helped us in what they could and were terribly happy to feel the solidarity of the International Brigades who fought against the common enemy'.[506] This must surely have been a source of considerable motivation for Mergen and his comrades. For many of them, the Civil War had become a conflict in which the Spanish People were not only working towards the defeat of the fascist invaders – as had always seemed the case – but also one in which, to use the words of American volunteer John Tisa, they 'aimed at wiping out their medieval past' in order to 'propel their country into the twentieth century'.[507] In short, Spain was no longer the incidental frontline to a broader struggle against fascism. It was also a country which deserved fighting for in its own right; one which they, the volunteers, were helping to emancipate from feudalism, obscurantism and medieval poverty.

The foreign volunteers did not limit themselves to observing Spanish life from afar. First contact between themselves and their native hosts made a great impression on everybody involved, although it was experienced in very different ways. The volunteers were under no illusions that the poor peasant villagers who gathered around them in places such as Mondéjar, a village in the province of Guadalajara where the Welshman Huw Alun Williams was in training with the Americans, had likely never seen a foreigner prior to the war.[508] This was particularly clear to those volunteers who were frequently on the move. American ambulance driver Louis Kenton was greeted by the sight of curious locals who stood and stared from their doorways as he approached an unnamed village having gotten lost on the nearby country roads, unable to muster little more than the words 'I'm English, International Brigade' in his halting Spanish.[509] For the volunteers, these places were launching pads to a war they

[505] Arthur Dorff in Torres, *Recuerdos de brigadistas alemanes,* 29.
[506] Fritz Mergen in Torres, *Recuerdos de brigadistas alemanes*, 246.
[507] Tisa, *Recalling the Good Fight*, 9.
[508] Interview with Huw Alun Menai Williams, Reel 3, 1988, IWM, CN: 10181.
[509] Interview with Louis Kenton, Reel 1, 2008, IWM, CN: 33028.

were all eager to become involved in; for the locals who lived there, conversely, the war had come to *them.* Decades later, these would still recall the arrival of the foreigners with reference to the agricultural calendar; Rosa de Quinti from Madrigueras was sure they had arrived to her village in the winter because it was the time of the rose harvest, while her then-seventeen-year-old neighbour, Dolores de Cartel, not only remembered them arriving when it was particularly cold but also described her feeling of surprise that the volunteers seemed so unphased by the weather.[510]

The recollections of these Madrigueras locals convey the clear impression that their relatively sedate rural lives were suddenly interrupted by the descent of hundreds of conspicuous foreigners onto their streets. Many were able to recall the precise house, workshop or store to which the new arrivals were assigned either to live, train, eat or work in, not least because they knew their owners. Emérito Martínez Jiménez remembered volunteers being billeted in the home of a certain Don Ángel, whereas his neighbour Juan Jiménez Ayuso – who himself had a commander living in his home – remembered a group of shoemakers being based in the house of a local named Humberto. Decades after they had left, Isabel Fuentes was still able to list a number of the places where the foreign soldiers had been based – including the houses of María Paños, Ángelito Navarro, and her own relative Luís – off the top of her head.[511] Sleepy village squares became places for the volunteers to relax and socialize, while the churches which had stood both literally and figuratively at the center of local life for centuries on end were suddenly used as makeshift canteens. The volunteers were particularly conspicuous as a result of the lack of working-age men in the rearguard. The German volunteer Erich Lisegang was by no means alone in having already noticed the large presence of women and children on the train journey to Albacete.[512] No matter where they were based, then, the volunteers were a difficult presence to ignore. The people of Madrigueras repeatedly pointed out that they looked different owing to their height and blonde hair, sounded strange because of their diverse languages, and even sang unfamiliar songs when they marched off to maneuvers.[513]

## II: 'We Might Have Been Their Own Sons Going Away There' – Individual Encounters and the Making of the Antifascist Community in Arms

Those of the volunteers who wanted to could, in the right circumstances and with the right approach, make direct contact with their Spanish hosts. Their respective military duties often impacted their chances of coming face-to-face with Spaniards, with ambulance drivers finding themselves in relatively frequent contact as they drove from place to place, sought out directions or looked for somewhere to spend the night.[514] Things were slightly different for the majority of volunteers who trained or rested in the

[510] Rosa de Quinti and Dolores de Cartel in Serrano, *Recuérdalo tú*, 194; 72.
[511] See Emérito Martínez Jiménez, Juan Jiménez Ayuso and Isabel Fuentes in Serrano, *Recuérdalo tú*, 35, 40 and 85 respectively.
[512] Erich Liesegang in Esteve Torres, *Recuerdos de brigadistas alemanes,* 212.
[513] See Angelita de Ernesto, Foti and Teresa in Serrano, *Recuérdalo tú,* 7, in addition to the Monsalve family and Dolores de Cartel in the same publication, pages 72 and 69 respectively.
[514] This is clear from Neugass' *War is Beautiful.*

same village for days on end. It did not take these long to realise that local life revolved around communal places such as the well, square or café, where their presence could attract the attention of curious locals and lead to spontaneous conversation. The soldiers' practical needs, along with the eagerness of the townspeople to accommodate them, often resulted in the first steps being taken towards face-to-face contact between the two groups. As Bill Alexander wrote in his history of the British volunteers, 'clothes were washed and repaired – though soap and thread had to be provided'.[515] The same volunteers who claimed to have been so taken aback by the strictly demarcated gender roles in Spanish villages were all too happy to adapt to local norms if it meant a fresh batch of clean clothes.[516] Commerce was particularly key to forging contact, as the Madrigueras locals well knew. Castillo Landete recalled the volunteers buying up all the blue thread from his mother's shop in order to make a flag, whereas Francisco Villa, a shop assistant and barber, managed to strike up friendships with a number of the British volunteers who sought out his services, oblivious to the fact that he was a fascist sympathiser.[517]

Language played an important but also unpredictable role in shaping relations with Spanish locals. The villagers often found it much easier to understand Italian volunteers given the similarity of the two romance languages, with French and Catalan speakers also likely to have understood each other with relatively little difficulty.[518] Volunteers from Spanish-speaking countries faced no linguistic obstacles at all. Many of the antifascist fighters took it for granted that the more limited their Spanish, the more limited their chances of making meaningful contact, but this was not entirely true. Many of them were able to rely on just a few basic words combined with pointing and gesticulating to communicate, particularly when they wanted to achieve a simple transaction such as purchasing a few oranges or a glass of wine. Other solutions were available, too. Conveniently enough, the Cuban volunteers of the XV Brigade were rarely far from hand when the Americans in Villanueva de la Jara, in the province of Castile-La Mancha, found themselves in a bind.[519] On other occasions the volunteers' limited Spanish could, if anything, contribute to the friendliness of their rearguard encounters. At one point, Walter Togwell found himself in a village shop attempting to buy some thread and a needle with the few Spanish words he knew. 'There was just a couple of women in there, and soon it was *crowded*', he remembered, recalling the situation as 'hilarious'.[520] As military leaders have recognised in the context of other twentieth-century wars, knowing just a few words can go a long way towards securing local goodwill; the handbooks which the American and British Armies produced for soldiers serving abroad in the Second World War did not seek to instil a comprehensive understanding of the foreign languages at hand, but rather a basic

[515] Alexander, *British Volunteers for Liberty,* 134.
[516] Crook, *Autobiography of David Crook*, 3-5.
[517] Castillo Landete and Francisco Villa in Serrano, *Recuérdalo tú,* pages 32 and 102 respectively.
[518] Pascual Castillo in Serrano, *Recuérdalo tú*, 32.
[519] Tisa, *Recalling the Good Fight*, 25.
[520] Interview with Walter Togwell, Reel 5, IWM, CN: 17494.

knowledge of a select few phrases. This, after all, would entail just the right level of investment of both time and energy to reap the desired dividends of securing local trust and, if possible, admiration.[521]

Encounters between volunteers and villagers in Spanish streets, squares and shops could – for the lucky few – lead to more substantial friendships which, in turn, went on to exercise a unique impact on the soldiers' understanding of the war and their own place within it. Inviting volunteers into family homes was a key way for locals with limited means to reciprocate their generosity, with the process taking on a self-perpetuating momentum: the volunteers helped carry the local women's jugs of water by the well, so the women helped wash their clothes; the volunteers would provide these women with some meat to thank them, and the women would cook it into a stew. 'Then', as David Crook put it, 'we would sit down with the family in their modest home and dig in'.[522] Children were particularly useful intermediaries in this process. The fact that they were often visibly poverty-stricken inspired the pity of many volunteers, the likes of whom were soon to be seen handing out coins, toys and ice-cream to their new admirers.[523] Encounters between the two were unhindered by the kind of embarrassment over using a foreign language which might arise with fellow adults and were, instead, spurred on by open, and entirely mutual, curiosity. So it proved when Englishman Tony McClean came across a girl aged around six at a village well who taught him the parts of the body in Spanish and got, as he laughingly recalled, 'a tremendous kick […] out of finding somebody who didn't know even these simple words'.[524] The popularity of the volunteers among these village youngsters surprised even themselves: one American veteran marveled at his comrade's ability to befriend groups of children who followed him around as though he was the 'Pied Piper', regardless of the fact that he spoke no Spanish.[525]

The volunteers certainly made a lasting impression on many of these children, some of whom still recalled them with wide-eyed-wonder decades later. Asterio Talavera, who was just ten years old at the time, remembered the foreign soldiers playing with the local youngsters of Madrigueras and buying them food outside the church. New contingents were met with enormous excitement and their every movement eagerly followed, with the children even accompanying the men to target practice and, on occasion, making toys out of their empty cartridges.[526] It was not long before they were asking their parents if their new acquaintances could come home for dinner. The boy who extended an invitation to volunteer Andrew Flanagan had seen his friends doing

[521] See in particular anon., *Instructions for American Servicemen in Iraq during World War II* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2007), 18-19.
[522] Ibid, 3-5.
[523] Sam Russell recalled village children being covered in sores on their legs and faces – see reel 2 of his interview, 1986, IWM, CN: 9484. Evidence of volunteers giving gifts to children can be found in too many sources to mention. For one example, see Alfred Amery's letter dated 13 May 1937 in Nelson and Hendricks, *Madrid 1937*, 99.
[524] Interview with Anthony McClean, Reel 3, IWM, CN 19991.
[525] Interview with Albert Prago, 1986, CDMH, PHO_ABAL_84.
[526] Emérito Martínez Jiménez and Asterio Talavera in Serrano, *Recuérdalo tú*, 35-36; 16.

the same, but his aunt – fearing another mouth to feed –scolded him for having done so. Much to his relief, Flanagan proved such a hit with the family that he ended up marrying the boy's cousin, who gave birth to a baby girl not long after. Unfortunately, Flanagan abandoned them both before the war's end and was never heard from again.[527] Dolores de Cartel similarly recalled her little brother bringing a foreign volunteer home, winning his mother over to the idea by stressing how clever he was. Cartel recalled the guest complimenting his hosts with the shaky phrase 'mucha familia buena!' – 'what a really great family!' – confirming, once again, that linguistic competence was far less important than the overall effort made to communicate.[528] Villagers like Dolores tended to explain the soldiers' warmth on the grounds that many must have left their own sons and daughters behind to fight. One local woman who was only sixteen at the time recalled the volunteer who stayed at her own house mispronouncing the word 'pequeños' – little ones – as he attempted to explain that he had children of his own.[529]

Sharing a meal in the homes of these poor villagers created a particularly deep sense of belonging.[530] For a few brief moments a week, these overwhelmingly young men were able to feel like members of a welcoming family, with the fact that they were sometimes sitting in the places normally occupied by children and grandchildren who were away fighting certainly not lost on them.[531] The seemingly innate ability of the villagers to 'make strangers feel like old, intimate friends' struck volunteers like Lee Royce all the more powerfully given their crippling poverty.[532] 'The Spanish civilians were marvelous, really marvelous', recalled one of his comrades, specifying that 'they were really good, especially the ones in the country, you know, the peasants in the country'.[533] Again and again, volunteer descriptions of the Spaniards who took them into their homes implied that they were simple, decent and generous folk who had been uncorrupted by the modern values of capitalist materialism and personal profit. Quite aside from these political overtones, many of them were truly amazed at their kind-heartedness. After several visits to his favourite family it dawned on the British volunteer George Leeson why they never laid the table for themselves: 'We knew damn well what was happening – they weren't eating. They gave everything they had to us'.[534] This seemingly unlimited kindness had to be handled with care. Accepting villagers' food meant eating into their limited stocks, but rejecting it meant hurting their feelings. Most seem to have ended up obliging their hosts.

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[527] Andréa Flanagan Cabañero and Olga Gascón Flanagan in Serrano, *Recuérdalo tú*, 115-117. For Flanagan's military records, see RGASPI, 545.6.134. Neither his wife nor his daughter knew what became of him after his departure.

[528] Dolores de Cartel in Serrano, *Recuérdalo tú,* 74.

[529] María de Rafaelillo in Serrano, *Recuérdalo tú*,, 97.

[530] Crook, *Autobiography of David Crook*, 3-5.

[531] George Felix, undated letter to a friend in Marcel Acier (ed.), *From Spanish Trenches: Recent Letters from Spain* (Cresset Press: London, undated), 83.

[532] Lee Royce, letter dated 4 July 1937 in Nelson and Hendricks, *Madrid 1937*, 7.

[533] Interview with George Leeson, Reel 2, 1976, IWM, CN: 803.

[534] Ibid.

Aside from being pleasant in their own right, these friendly encounters were useful for keeping the volunteers' morale high. At times, this could prove a relatively apolitical process. As one of them put it, 'I had a little social life, it broke the monotony of training'.[535] For some of the foreign soldiers, friendships with locals provided a welcome antidote to any creeping sensations of homesickness. Feelings of personal wellbeing quickly took on political overtones which could be equally crucial in keeping their antifascist fighting spirits high, however. In particular, a profound sense of having being adopted by the people of Spain convinced the volunteers that they had the natural, unconditional and conscientious support of a nation unified in the struggle against fascism. As they left for the battlefront clutching the packets of food given to them by their favourite families, many of the men really did feel like sons going off to fight for the fatherland. On leaving Madrigueras, Harry Fischer was struck by how the tearful locals 'acted as though we were their children going off to the front'.[536] George Leeson similarly told an interviewer that 'my last memory of Madrigueras there, is the entire village there *weeping,* weeping and waving at us…we might have been their own sons going away there'.[537] The volunteers' trench press deliberately took advantage of this deep feeling of belonging to reiterate the International Brigades' rightful place in the war, with one bulletin stressing that 'each of us remembers the fraternal welcome we received from the Spanish people' with the result that they felt that 'on this land we were not foreigners, but would instead find an alleviation of the sufferings of separation from our loved ones among our Spanish brothers'.[538]

While a sense of belonging is useful for all armies operating in foreign territory, that felt by the volunteers of the International Brigades was distinguished, as ever, by its antifascist undercurrents. This is not to say that they expected to have sophisticated political conversations with Castilian or Catalan villagers, knowing full well that their own ideological commitments were likely to have been far more clearly defined. Very often, the politics of their hosts seemed half-hearted at best. Ephraim Lesser noted that the family which he befriended had no interest in talking about such matters, which was no problem as far as he was concerned given that his main priority, at that moment, was winning the affections of their daughter.[539] Volunteers such as Lesser nonetheless took it for granted that the kindness displayed by the townspeople and villagers resulted from an underlying consciousness that the International Brigades were on their side, however crudely this might have been articulated. 'The People are 90 per cent against Franco', the Irish volunteer Frank Ryan wrote unambiguously from Albacete in January 1937 on the basis that he had encountered peasants who 'have enough to eat, for the first time in their lives'.[540] When asked if any Spaniards resented

[535] Tommy Bloomfield in MacDougall, *Voices from the Spanish Civil War*, 52.
[536] Fisher, *Comrades: Tales of a Brigadista in the Spanish Civil War*, 39.
[537] Interview with George Leeson, Reel 2, 1976, IWM, CN: 803.
[538] Anon., 'Les volontaires internationaux fraternisent avec la population espagnole', *Transports,* no. 2, 1 January 1938, 6, RGASPI 545.2.436.
[539] Interview with Ephraim Lesser, Reel 3, 1986, IWM, CN: 9408.
[540] Frank Ryan, Letter to 'Gerald', 3 January 1937, in Murray A. Sperber (ed.), *And I Remember Spain: A Spanish civil War Anthology* (Hart-Davis, Macgibbon, London: 1974), 38.

the International Brigades' participation in the war – a question which was not often put to the veterans – Huw Alun Williams responded that they were, on the contrary, entirely sympathetic because they hated Franco, 'el fascista'. As far as ordinary civilians were concerned, 'the enemy was bad; we were good'.[541]

What did Spaniards in the loyalist rearguard really think of their new neighbours? All of the available evidence suggests that relations were, for the most part, every bit as positive as the volunteers made out – although, as we will shortly see, occasional tensions could emerge as result of drunken, rowdy or abusive behaviour on the part of specific soldiers. As is so often the case, however, things become rather more complicated when it comes to politics. Practically the only testimonies we have from the Spanish side are those which were collected by Caridad Serrano in the early 1990s in Madrigueras, the likes of which have already been drawn on throughout this chapter and which, in the main, make frustratingly scant reference to political matters. In spite of the volunteers' allusions to class-conscious solidarity between themselves and the downtrodden masses of Spain, those interviewed seemed far more willing to frame their hospitality in traditional terms of common courtesy – albeit courtesy which was all the more happily extended given that their guests were so friendly (*amables*), polite (*educados*) and cultured (*cultos*).[542] While sometimes recognising that the volunteers were idealists fighting for a cause, these villagers did not describe the Spanish Civil War as a glorious antifascist crusade but rather as a fratricidal tragedy which they hoped would never again be repeated. María de Rafaelillo recalled the members of the International Brigades as being gentle and generous men but had nothing but harsh words for the war itself: 'but goodness me, goodness me…what happens at war! Oh, may nothing like it come again, you only have to know what happens!'.[543]

When we stop to consider the fact that the volunteers must have come into contact with tens of thousands of Spaniards throughout their time in the country, it becomes clear that these testimonies can only offer the narrowest of glimpses into how loyalist civilians felt about the International Brigades. Limited though they unquestionably are, just enough survive to show that Spanish feelings towards the war could be a great deal more ambivalent than the volunteers either realised or were willing to acknowledge. Then, of course, there is the question of outright opposition to the Republic and, by extension, the foreign volunteers. If this went unnoticed by the latter group, it was not because the 'Spanish People' were unified behind them, but – on the contrary – because they were at war with themselves. Take, for example, the case of Albacete. Although local right-wing and centrist parties had performed stronger than the left throughout the province in the February 1936 elections, the volunteers rarely asked themselves where their supporters had disappeared to; in fact, some 453 predominantly middle and upper-class civilians including landowners, artisans, civil servants, factory owners, professionals and merchants had been accused of assisting

[541] Interview with Huw Alun Menai Williams, Reel 3, IWM, CN: 10181.

[542] This apolitical reading of cross-cultural encounters can be found in most of the testimonies within Serrano, *Recuérdalo tú.*

[543] María de Rafaelillo in Serrano, *Recuérdalo tú*, 99.

the July rebellion and were swiftly brought before revolutionary tribunals.[544] The terror peaked in August 1936, some two months before the arrival of the International Brigades, when over 250 individuals throughout the province met violent deaths.[545] Open support for the political right throughout the loyalist rearguard was, in most circumstances, unthinkable, with British volunteer Sam Russell entirely right – and almost entirely alone – in acknowledging that 'anybody who may have felt hostile […] probably thought they were better advised not to show it'.[546] Not for nothing did Francisco Villa, the barber from Madrigueras, decide to keep his fascist sympathies to himself – even if these, it should be remembered, never stopped him from getting on perfectly well with many of the volunteers.[547]

If all of this presents a far more complicated picture of soldier-civilian relations than that gleaned from volunteer testimony alone, it is nonetheless worth pointing out that members of the International Brigades had good reasons to believe they had the 'Spanish People' on side. The tears shed by Spaniards at their farewell parade in Barcelona were real; the oranges they passed into railway carriages on the way to Albacete freely offered. Feelings of political unity, for their part, were reinforced by a common antifascist culture which centred on the raised-fist salute, proletarian greetings, renditions of revolutionary songs and the chanting of familiar slogans.[548] In a memoir published shortly after his military service in Spain, Chi Chang, a Chinese volunteer who had moved to the United States in 1918 in order to attend university, described driving a truck from Valencia to Albacete when he spied, through the olive trees, 'a donkey cart and a dark jacketed peasant'. 'To show his proud recognition of an International Brigade man', Chang continued, 'he raised his right fist high in the air and gave a long shout: *salud, camarada!*'.[549] That the descriptions of similar scenes of quotidian solidarity which frequently appeared in the wartime letters of the volunteers can be considered a form of low-level propaganda intended to rally support back home is certainly no reason to dismiss them out of hand. Even allowing for the possibility that their contents were entirely invented, the volunteers who signed them off no doubt felt that they spoke to the far deeper truth – as they would have had it – that the foreign fighters of the International Brigades were part-and-parcel of the Spanish People's heroic and unified struggle against fascism.

## III: 'Events Unworthy of Soldiers of the People' – Managing the Antifascist Imagined Community

[544] Manuel Álvarez Tardío and Roberto Villa García, *1936: Fraude y violencia en las elecciones del Frente Popular* (Madrid: Espasa, 2017), no page number; Francisco Sevillano Calero, 'La sublevación de julio de 1936 en Albacete', *Historia contemporánea,* 10:11 (1993), 131-148.

[545] Manuel Ortiz Heras, 'La justicia republicana en guerra: el Tribunal Especial Popular de Albacete', *Al-Basit: Revista de estudios albacetenses,* segunda época, year XXII (November 1996), 27 and 37.

[546] Interview with Sam Russell, Reel 2, 1986, IWM, CN: 9484

[547] Castillo Landete and Francisco Villa in Serrano, *Recuérdalo tú,* 32 and 102 respectively.

[548] García, 'Was There an Antifascist Culture in Spain During the 1930s?', 92-113.

[549] Quoted by Nancy Tsou and Len Tsou, 'A Chinese volunteer in the Lincoln Brigade', *The Volunteer,* 4 January 2013, https://albavolunteer.org/2013/01/a-chinese-volunteer-in-the-lincoln-brigade/, accessed 15 June 2023.

While spontaneous contact with Spaniards was freely initiated by many of the volunteers, its fundamental nature was both inescapably and indelibly shaped by the fact that they belonged to a military institution. The International Brigade Commissariat mirrored the leadership of many other fighting units throughout history who have made considerable efforts to manage relations between foreign soldiers and their civilian hosts. This had nothing to do with communist commissars seeking to impose dictatorial methods on their much-abused subordinates, but, rather, stemmed from exactly the same desire to win the personal trust and political loyalty of civilians which can be found in near enough any other twentieth-century total war. It is plainly evident, after all, that hostility from the men and women billeting your troops can hardly prove conducive to the smooth running of any army, antifascist or not. Just as importantly, winning 'hearts and minds' – to use a modern turn of phrase – was essential if local populations were to be convinced that the new arrivals were compassionate soldiers fighting on their behalf rather than foreign interlopers in a bloody spiral of intranational violence. By holding fiestas for civilians, staging political rallies, bringing in the harvest and punishing public misconduct from the soldiers, the commissars sought to fulfil a number of important wartime objectives. Above all, they hoped to win local trust, galvanize civilian energies towards an antifascist victory, create a sense of positive identity among the volunteers, and – just as importantly – legitimize their presence in Spain for both their own benefit and that of their hosts.[550]

The Commissariat, like the majority of the volunteers it was responsible for, was convinced that the International Brigades' antifascist objectives fully aligned with the social, economic and political interests of the locals amongst whom they operated. As far as they were concerned, securing good relations with the civil population was therefore a question of convincing these men and women of the self-evident truth that the foreign volunteers, along with the Republican Army more generally, were key allies in a shared struggle against the fascist enemy. A particularly striking example of this attitude can be found in a letter written by the volunteer Lawrence Kleidman following a visit to the Catalan town of Reus in December 1937. On previous visits he had found the place teeming with 'Trotskyists' hostile to the International Brigades, by which he almost certainly meant the anarcho-syndicalists who were such a major presence throughout Catalonia both before and during the war, but now – thankfully – good sense had prevailed and posters calling for unity could be seen everywhere. These, in his opinion, 'really expressed the real sentiment of the masses' who were 'rolling towards their revolutionary destiny like one man'.[551] The antifascist will of the masses, it seemed, had to be explained to them first.

Fortunately, the commissars had numerous options available to them in order to do so. Most obviously, they could arrange huge public meetings whenever they moved to a new vicinity in order to set out the volunteers' political and military objectives. Having

[550] Julia Welland, 'Compassionate Soldiering and Comfort' in Linda Åhäll and Thomas Gregory (eds.), *Emotions, Politics and War* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 115-127.
[551] Lawrence Kleidman, letter dated 18 December 1937 in Nelson and Hendricks, *Madrid 1937*, 122-124.

set up base in a small Aragonese village in September 1937, the leaders of one unit wasted no time in hooking up a loudspeaker in the *Plaza de la República* in order to call on locals to attend one such meeting that same night. Those that decided to go along were led in a mass rendition of The International before being treated to speeches from figures including a Galician soldier who had deserted Nationalist ranks and now regaled the crowd on the 'cruelties of the fascists'.[552] This kind of activity was by no means unusual. A photo showing dozens of women and children giving the Popular Front salute at a similar meeting in the Castilian village of Villatobas vividly demonstrates how such events, clearly attended by large numbers of people, provided a unique opportunity to create a sense of shared community between rearguard civilians and their foreign guests by drawing on the rich reserve of antifascist symbols mentioned previously, ranging from loyalist chants to revolutionary songs. On this particular occasion, a Spanish-speaking commissar took it upon himself to inform the locals of how 'it is absolutely necessary that we are all united, as much on the frontlines as in the rearguard', with a victory against fascism requiring 'the unity and harmonious collaboration' of all loyal Spaniards. By means of this antifascist hard sell, his listeners were immediately inducted into the International Brigades' understanding of how best to wage a victorious war in Spain.[553]

Other initiatives aimed at gaining the trust of the native population may not have been so overtly political in character, but they were still seen as crucial in convincing occasionally-apprehensive locals that the International Brigades had come in a spirit of friendship. In their speeches, news articles, internal reports and subsequent recollections, the volunteers proudly charted their help in cleaning streets, bringing in the harvest, combatting illiteracy, administering medical assistance, providing aid for refugees and sponsoring children's facilities. The impact of this humanitarian assistance genuinely moved many of the foreign fighters and became a source of lasting pride. In his memoir, Walter Gregory described how, when the British volunteers first arrived to Mondéjar, they made their battalion doctor available to anybody who needed him. His usefulness became particularly apparent when he successfully delivered a pair of local twins, leading Gregory to reflect that 'never in living memory had the birth of two babies at the same time proved so easy, and the simple, kindly people of Mondéjar were unable to conceal their delight'.[554] Gregory's description of the 'simple' locals was made in good faith, but nonetheless hints at how these activities were easily understood as a kind of antifascist civilising mission. The International Brigades were not only defending Spain; they were showing what was possible in a world where ordinary people were finally provided access to the most basic of services.

[552] Olek Nus, 'Nosotros y la población civil', *Venceremos,* no. 4, 22 September 1937, 6, RGASPI, 545.3.343.
[553] Anon. 'Un mitin de la Brigada', *Le soldat de la République,* no. 30, 1 June 1937, 1, RGASPI, 545.3.417.
[554] Gregory, *The Shallow Grave,* 77.

This work was far too important to be left to the volunteers to organise on their own; after all, large-scale cross-cultural initiatives demanded ambitious and very often costly planning. This was particularly true of the International Brigades' participation in the harvest. Individuals from various companies would volunteer to help, and were then organised into shock brigades overseen by designated comrades. The entire process was guided by local peasants who, unsurprisingly, knew more about the nature of the work than many of the city-born foreigners.[555] The results were impressive: in just two days of work no fewer than a thousand predominantly-Polish soldiers from the XIII Brigade helped collect 40,000 kilos of olives.[556] As well as aiming to demonstrate the soldiers' good-will, the commissariat hoped that these initiatives would help to convey the International Brigades' deeper antifascist aims. The readers of one trench bulletin were cautioned that 'there are still those who do not understand that our Army defends the interests of the entire People, particularly in the countryside'. The rather novel solution which it proposed was to 'constantly demonstrate, not only on the front but also in reserve and in the rearguard, that we are the sons of workers and peasants who have come here from every country to help construct a new and better Spain'.[557] Its author stressed that the volunteers' help in the countryside was the surest way of turning ambivalent civilians into enthusiastic supporters of the Popular Front.[558] The methods used to achieve this were not particularly subtle, with one set of instructions on organising the harvest specifying that the combatants were to 'politically exploit' their contact with Spaniards by emphasising the need for Popular Front alliances.[559]

The Polish volunteer and Communist exile Alexander Szurek was probably right when he claimed that it was not the 'politically sound' nature of this rearguard work which saw the volunteers eager to get involved, but rather the simple fact that they 'followed their feelings' of compassion towards the civilians they encountered in the rearguard.[560] The conspicuous hunger and sickness caused by the war shocked many volunteers, and caused at least one of them to question his own role in prolonging it.[561] In addition to hard-pressed locals, the volunteers increasingly came face-to-face with hungry, homeless and desperate refugees fleeing the Nationalist advance. David Goldstein was not the only volunteer to remember how 'children would come around with a tin can and look you in the mouth' begging for leftovers, with the situation even worse in cities where the combination of rationing and general food scarcity was

[555] Commissar of War of the 35th Division, report on help to be given to peasants on the collection of the harvest, 16 June 1938, RGASPI, 545.3.9.
[556] Anon., '40.000 kilos de aceitunas ha recogido la Brigada Dombrowski en tierras de Aragón', *Treball*, undated, RGASPI, 545.3.284.
[557] Anon., 'Asegurar una cosecha sin perdidas', *Pasaremos,* no. 20, 24 June 1937, 1, RGASPI, 545.3.127.
[558] Ibid.
[559] Commissar of War of the 35th Division, report on help to be given to peasants on the collection of the harvest, 16 June 1938, RGASPI, 545.3.9.
[560] Szurek, *The Shattered Dream,* 90.
[561] Thomas, *To Tilt At Windmills*, 94.

proving catastrophic.[562] That these scenes remained so firmly etched in the memories of individual volunteers shows just how moving they could prove. Humanitarianism, however, was rarely represented in the International Brigades' internal press as something which could be entirely separated from politics. When the Italian volunteers of the Garibaldi battalion donated some goods to nearby civilians, a corresponding news article stressed that it was, in part, the fulfilling of an antifascist duty. 'Because the *Garibaldinos* are men of the heart, antifascists, they do so with joy, regretting only their inability to alleviate so much pain and quickly repair the crimes committed by fascism', it assured any readers.[563]

If the much-publicized unity between the foreign volunteers and the Spanish People was to seem at all plausible, it was first essential that the men's actions matched their leaders' rhetoric. The commissars sought to manage relations between the two groups in a number of ways. In the first place, they had the volunteers internalize key norms of appropriate antifascist behaviour along with the basic understanding that their individual actions reflected on the entire unit and, by extension, the cause they were fighting for. Precisely the same tactic was used by both the British and American Armies throughout the Second World War, with numerous pocket guides providing clear instructions on how to behave in unfamiliar places and therefore avoid offending local sensibilities.[564] The enterprise was taken seriously enough for an extraordinary one million copies of *Instructions for American servicemen in France* to be requested by the British government in 1944, with the final version remaining top-secret until the Allied landings later that year.[565] These pre-emptive attempts to ensure there would smooth relations between combatants and civilians have a very clear precedent in the International Brigades' own printed propaganda; the only difference, of course, is that the volunteers were representing a global antifascist front rather than any one country. Getting drunk, stealing produce, starting fights and insulting locals were all seen as unworthy of an antifascist soldier, an insult to the military unit as a whole, and – most importantly – a direct threat to the broader war aims they were fighting for on the frontlines.

Speeches, military bulletins, posters and news articles were all used to educate the volunteers in what was (and more often was not) considered appropriate behaviour. Particular attention was devoted to drunkenness, as indeed it was in all of the Second-World-War instructional guides mentioned above.[566] The Commissariat certainly had plenty of work on their hands. One group of volunteers who arrived to the Catalan town of Figueres shortly after making the difficult journey across the Pyrenees found the

[562] Interview with David Abraham Goldstein, CDMH, PHO_ABAL_38.
[563] Anon., 'Una nueva prueba de solidaridad', *Boletín,* no. 43, 20 June 1938, 1, RGASPI, 545.3.193.
[564] See, for example, anon., *Instructions for British Servicemen in France, 1944* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2005), 40.
[565] Rick Atkinson, preface for *Instructions for American Servicemen in France during World War II* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), unnumbered pages.
[566] Anon., *Instructions for British Servicemen in France,* 38; *Instructions for American Servicemen in Iraq,* 15.

local wine particularly appealing and, like countless other arrivals both before and after them, soon discovered that it was as strong as it was cheap. The result was that 'singing became yelling' and 'dancing turned into brawls'. The next morning, a Spanish commander provided a speech which would – in all of its essentials – be repeated many times throughout the war, at once thanking the volunteers for their solidarity and, in the same breath, exhorting them not to disgrace themselves 'in the people's eyes'.[567] Where speeches failed, it was hoped printed propaganda would succeed. One pamphlet published by the International Brigade Commissariat showed the rebel general Quiepo de Llano vomiting into a radio microphone while a bottle of wine poured out from his hand. The example of the notorious general – famous for his vitriolic speeches exhorting rebel troops to rape women in the Republican zone – was, in this instance, being used to encourage the volunteers to reflect hard on the relationship between their personal behaviour and their status as loyalist combatants. To drive the point home, the words 'does it not make an antifascist soldier feel shame to seem like this drunk?' were printed across the page, along with the clear statement that 'alcoholism is disgraceful'.[568]

There were a number of reasons why drunkenness was taken particularly seriously. In the first place, drunken volunteers might give their hosts the misguided impression that they were faced not with a disciplined force of antifascists at all, but rather an unwelcome band of ruffians. The testimonies of some Madrigueras locals show that these fears were not unfounded. Ángel Villena, who was about ten at the time, recalled the French volunteers drinking so much wine that they often ended up smelling of it on the village streets. He even recalled a fight breaking out when a new group of international volunteers arrived, later blaming this on the role of alcohol in exacerbating pre-existing tensions between the different nationalities. Whether the brawl took place for the reasons he identified or not, it was clearly no secret that large quantities of cheap alcohol were often at hand and could, in some circumstances, lead to the volunteers disgracing themselves.[569] The Americans who replaced the French in the Aragonese town of Tarazona certainly picked up on the bad impression which had been left by their fellow antifascists, and many were keen to undo the damage.[570] While drunkenness in itself was seen as impermissible, it could invite particularly serious consequences if it caused public scandal. When three soldiers of the Fifteenth Brigade deserted and were placed in an instruction camp to 'redeem their crime', they ended up drinking, starting fights and, in the judgement of the subsequent report, 'covering the name of *international volunteer* with shame'. A High Tribunal called for their execution on the 20 April 1938, citing the fact that they had – to use the words of

[567] Szurek, *The Shattered Dream*, 88-89.
[568] 'El jefe fascista Quiepo de Llano que disparata cada noche en la radio y se emborracha cada día', CDMH, PS-Panfletos.
[569] Ángel Villena in Serrano, *Recuérdalo tú,* 44.
[570] Interview with Earl Payne, CDMH, PHO_ABAL_79,

the special order – 'damaged the union of the army with the people, which is the indispensable condition for defeating the enemy'.[571]

As the above penalty leaves in no doubt, the International Brigade leadership considered it essential to keep the volunteers, and their public behaviour, under close control. A spate of drunken incidents in Albacete led Commissar General Luigi Longo to write to the Civil Governor stressing that the minority who misbehaved were not representative of the force as a whole. He also informed him of a recent order for his subordinates in the Commissariat to explain the 'disastrous' effects of alcohol in a series of specially-organised meetings with the volunteers.[572] Finally, he highlighted what he regarded as some of the structural issues feeding into his troops' occasional misconduct. The existence of clandestine brothels and the availability of incredibly strong alcohol were of particular concern, and led Longo to call for an increase in local policing. One of the commissariat's key decisions was to set up their own 'Vigilance Battalions' responsible for reprimanding drunken and disorderly volunteers, with their right to use force of arms being restated in an internal report filed in June 1937.[573] The occurrence of a number of 'events unworthy of soldiers of the people' in the same month resulted in a clarification of the penalties to be incurred for drunkenness. Anybody found drunk in a public place was to be sent to a work company to undertake fortification in the rearguard under 'iron discipline'. Those who re-offended were to be considered unworthy of the Popular Army and repatriated to their home countries, while those who resisted arrest by the vigilance patrols were to be brought before the Popular War Tribunals in order to be judged according to the Military Justice Code. As ever, these directives were framed as necessary to avoid incidents which 'dishonour those who commit them, making them unworthy of figuring in the ranks of the International Brigades and the Spanish Army'.[574]

The leaders of the International Brigades took drunkenness particularly seriously if it resulted in direct harm to Spanish civilians. Any such situation could lead to a detailed investigation and, if serious enough, invite harsh punishment. In one internal report, filed by the British Commissar George Aitken, we learn that four French soldiers arrived 'scandalously' in the streets of Ambite, a village near the Jarama frontlines housing the Fifteenth Brigade's headquarters, where they went on to 'make a pass' at several local women. When a vigilance patrol asked them to leave the village they refused, were immediately arrested and were swiftly taken to the battalion commander. The whole time, the four men were described as resisting their superiors. In line with the above regulations, the report called for them to be brought before a

[571] Anon., 'Orden Especial correspondiente al 20 de abril de 1938 de la 35ª Division', AGMAV, C.1096,2,3/d.1

[572] Longo to the Civil Governor of Albacete concerning drunkenness in the International Brigades, 23 June 1937, RGASPI, 545.2.38.

[573] Anon., XV Brigade Report on the rights of the *patrullas de vigilancia*, 18 June 1937, AGMAV, C.4129,4.

[574] Anon., penalties to be incurred for drunken and disorderly behaviour, 18 June 1937, AGMAV, C.4129,4.

Popular War Tribunal, using the usual collective terms to highlight, in particular, 'the harm which their example does to the International Brigades and the Spanish Army'.[575] Another detailed report – this time into the actions of a certain José Sánchez – shows, yet again, the seriousness with which the International Brigades' leadership took drunken and disorderly behaviour if locals were negatively impacted. After questioning numerous people on the scene, it transpired that Sánchez (who despite his name was an English-speaking member of the Lincoln Battalion) had spent the day getting drunk before entering a civil guardhouse and demanding food from the woman who lived there. When she responded that she had nothing to eat, the soldier jumped up, flung his cash over the floor, grabbed her neck and knocked her down, leaving her fourteen-year-old son to chase him out and seek urgent assistance. One of Sánchez's superiors met with the Town Committee and assured them that definite action would be taken over the case, although its conclusion is unknown.[576]

Drunkenness was by no means the only issue which threatened to cause conflict with locals. Theft was also framed as a misdemeanour which undermined the International Brigades' collective reputation and therefore called for commissarial intervention. Surprisingly, not all cases were the result of a deliberate desire to commit wrongdoing. An internal order from June 1938 stressed that although a key precondition for positive relations with the civil population was the volunteers' careful respect for private property, several members of the International Brigades had been observed felling trees, destroying sowed fields and ruining haylofts. Worse still, they had, on occasion, done so in the presence of commanders or commissars who failed to reprimand them. The order suggested using politically-motivated peasants within the International Brigades to explain to their comrades from urban backgrounds how best to behave in the countryside.[577] A flyer which was printed exactly a year earlier shows that the problem of respecting peasant property was far from new. Addressing itself to the 'Soldier of the Popular Front Republican Government of Spain', it attempted, in English, to make its reader feel a sense of personal responsibility towards the Spanish peasant by urging him to 'be grateful for his efforts' and 'respect scrupulously his small property, his crops, his fields, his poultry, his flocks'. The flyer, which had a distribution of 5,000, ended by claiming that – just like drunkenness – 'stealing, vandalism, violations, and military braggadocio' were better suited to the 'hordes of Franco' than the 'soldiers of the people'.[578] The need to instil respect for peasant property was all the more important given that the International Brigade Commissariat was expending so much energy on convincing this very same demographic that the foreign volunteers had not come to Spain in order to take over their land, but rather defend them from their age-old capitalist exploiters.[579]

[575] George Aitken, report on drunk and disorderly volunteers, 18 July 1937, AGMAV, C.4129,4.
[576] Anon., 'The Case of José Sánchez', February 1937, AGMAV, C.2484,1/d.1-3.
[577] L. Varela, 'Orden interior 31, correspondiente al día 13 de Junio de 1938', RGASPI, 545.3.284.
[578] International Brigade Commissariat, flyer exhorting soldiers to respect peasants, June 1937, RGASPI, 545.2.457.
[579] 'Max', 'Nuestra ayuda para la cosecha', *Pasaremos,* no. 21, 2 July 1937, 8, RGASPI, 545.3.127.

On other occasions, however, a handful of volunteers quite knowingly engaged in theft. This was always the work of an unrepresentative minority and was treated with great seriousness by their superiors. When Albacete was bombed in February 1937, many members of the International Brigades turned their attention to providing emergency assistance to wounded civilians. Amongst those who chose not to was a volunteer from Alsace and another from Senegal who instead got drunk and, as the enemy planes wreaked havoc all around them, took advantage of the chaos to break open the door to a shop and steal some 25 watches. While the more superior of the two was threatened with the death penalty and the other with lifetime imprisonment, both men ended up getting off fairly lightly with isolation in either a work establishment or workshop.[580] An even more scandalous series of thefts took place in the International Brigades' prison at Castelldefels where the commander, the same Lantez we encountered in the second chapter of this thesis, stole livestock from the townspeople with the collaboration of his loyal band of lackeys. To make matters worse, they did so in mid-1938, when food was particularly scarce.[581] As far as historian Robert Stradling is concerned, the appalling conditions at the prison demonstrate that the International Brigades deliberately and systematically imported Stalinist terror into Spain.[582] In this instance, however, the available evidence shows that the unit's authorities took the accusations against Lantez extremely seriously and agreed, on the basis of their own investigation, that he was guilty as charged. At least on this occasion, keeping on good terms with the Republican authorities by showing them that the International Brigades respected the letter of the law was the chief priority.

## Conclusion

During the Spanish Civil War, Franco's propagandists worked hard to represent the International Brigades as a band of ruthless mercenaries hell-bent on bringing death and destruction to the peaceful, hard-working and pious people of Spain. In so doing, they sought to draw attention away from their own use of foreign troops and bolster claims that they alone represented the will of the national community.[583] The idea that the foreign antifascists subjected civilians in the Republican Zone to a reign of terror was sufficiently widespread for it to even appear in works of fiction printed in the rebel zone – the likes of which have, perhaps deservedly, long since been forgotten. In José Cirre Jiménez's 1938 novel *Memorias de un combatiente de la Brigada Internacional* (Memories of an International Brigade Combatant), the protagonist – a White Russian exiled in Paris – infiltrates the ranks of the unit only to discover, to his horror, that its

[580] Anon., report on the theft of a watch shop by two soldiers of the International Brigades, March 1937, AGMAV, C.1131,13/d.2.
[581] Anon., 'Informe sobre los hechos acaecidos en el Castillo de Castelldefels', undated, 1938, RGASPI, 545.2.150.
[582] Stradling, 'English-speaking Units of the International Brigades', 764.
[583] For the Nationalist view that they were defending the Spanish People against a foreign invader, see Xosé Manoel Núñez Seixas, 'Nations in arms against the invader' in Chris Ealham and Michael Richards (eds.), *The Splintering of Spain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 45-67.

members have come to Spain for the sole purpose of drinking its wine, damaging its property, robbing its locals and bedding its women.[584] Ten years after the International Brigades first entered action, the Francoist press continued to describe the volunteers as having 'sketched out a profound trail of tears and blood on the Spanish earth which it will not be easy to forget'. While conceding that some had been tricked into coming to Spain by 'red' agents, 'the immense majority' descended on the country because they were 'attracted by the potential for looting and pillage'.[585] The Francoist regime and its many apologists never specified the exact nature of the atrocities they implied occurred at the behest of the International Brigades. In fact, they never took place at all.

Widespread drunkenness, pillaging and violence did not transpire in the towns and villages where the International Brigades were based for the simple reason that any such behaviour would have completely run against their interests as a military institution operating in friendly territory. Whenever such incidents *did* occur – and they did – they were isolated, committed by an unrepresentative minority and harshly punished by the relevant authorities. None other than the fascist barber of Madrigueras who had befriended so many of the British volunteers rushed to their defence by stating that 'propaganda has inflated many things […] and made them out to be criminals' when, in fact, he felt that they were harmless idealists.[586] While historians have constantly downplayed the importance of rearguard encounters between the volunteers and their Spanish hosts, both the leaders of the International Brigades and the rank and file recognised them as crucial to the successful waging of antifascist war – as the Commissariat's considerable efforts to regulate contact between the two can leave in little doubt. The reasons were, on the one hand, practical. After all, the volunteers trained, rested and recuperated among Spaniards and any tensions would have threatened their ability to operate effectively as a military unit. But they were also ideological. The Spanish Civil War was regarded as a total war which left no room for civilian neutrality, and it was the volunteers' responsibility to win over 'hearts and minds' to the antifascist struggle through their good behaviour as well as a range of carefully-planned cross-cultural initiatives.

The volunteers' encounters with Spanish civilians and the places in which they lived were crucial in giving them a profound sense of belonging to the imagined antifascist community they all believed they were fighting for. In turn, this enabled them to further clarify their social, political and military aims in the country. For the volunteers, Spaniards were no longer an indeterminate mass threatened by fascism. Instead, they were hungry children in squares, washerwomen at wells and friends who invited them to break bread in their homes. They were the anonymous villagers who handed them gifts of wine and oranges when they passed through their train stations, and the familiar faces who bid them farewell as they left for the front amid an ocean of

[584] José Cirre Jiménez, *Memorias de un combatiente de la Brigada Internacional* (Granada: Editorial Prieto, 1938), 85-87.
[585] Anon., 'Aquellas brigadas internacionales…', *La Vanguardia Española,* 5 November 1946, 3.
[586] Francisco Villa in Serrano (ed.), *Recuérdalo tú,* 103.

antifascist salutes. They were at once an idyllic community standing strong against the corrupting values of modern capitalism and the pitiful victims of centuries of feudal exploitation. Solidarity with friendly children transformed into solidarity with specific families; solidarity with specific families transformed into solidarity with entire villages; solidarity with entire villages transformed into solidarity with a nation in arms. The volunteers ended up thoroughly convinced that they had the people on their side and, in turn, were motivated to continue their antifascist struggle on the frontlines. 'In Spain I lived through a great number of unforgettable displays of fraternal solidarity between us and the civil population', recalled the German volunteer Ernst Michel, adding that 'these encounters drove us on and gave us new strength to continue the fight against the common enemy'.[587] These words are not only a valuable reminder that the rearguard was an important presence in the volunteers' lives, but also that its connection to the fundamental business of fighting fascism was a great deal closer than it may, at first, seem.

[587] Ernst Michel in Isabel Esteve Torres, *Recuerdos de brigadistas alemanes*, 136.

## 6: 'Hello Boys!'– The International Brigades and Spanish Women

Women were an integral part of the antifascist community which the volunteers imagined themselves to be fighting for throughout their time in Spain, whether it was in the guise of the curious girls they flirted with in village squares, the heroic mothers who appeared in the pages of their trench press, the selfless workers whose delegations sometimes visited their units, or even the prostitutes whose services alleviated the boredom and brutality of war. Even though they are a recurring feature of the International Brigades' wartime propaganda as well as the volunteers' recollections of the conflict, these women are almost entirely absent from the vast majority of the secondary accounts outlining their military service. While historians' efforts to restore women to their rightful place in the history of war date back to at least the 1960s, it is to be regretted that they have barely impacted the way in which the history of the International Brigades has been written or, indeed, understood. This oversight might well be explained by the fact that the fighting unit consisted almost entirely of men, with historians' inward-looking emphasis on their backgrounds, motivations and experiences of training and fighting in a series of male-dominated environments often implying that women had no bearing on their transnational military service. An identical preoccupation with the largely male experience of combat certainly helps to explain the absence of women in a great deal of the traditional military histories written about other conflicts both before and after the Spanish Civil War. In recent decades, however, historians have made it abundantly clear that women's contact with military institutions has been an almost constant feature of armed conflict throughout the ages.[588] A close look at the enormous documentary record generated by the International Brigades shows that the Spanish Civil War was no exception, and that the volunteers' encounters with women ought to be the subject of sustained analysis.

Thankfully, historians have made important progress in recovering the role of women during the Civil War in general and, in so doing, made it possible to situate any such analysis within its appropriate social, political and cultural context. There is no doubting that the conflict had huge implications for millions of women who were mobilized into frontline action, political activism and rearguard work in what was regarded by both themselves and their male compatriots as a total war leaving no room for individual inaction.[589] In addition to being of enduring interest to professional historians, the iconic image of the armed militiawoman fighting at the barricades in July 1936 continues to form one of the most romantic and recognizable aspects of the Spanish Civil War for the modern-day public. Similar interest and indeed admiration has long

[588] Barton C. Hacker and Margaret Vining (eds.), *A Companion to Women's Military History* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), 1.
[589] Mary Nash, *Defying Male Civilization: Women in the Spanish Civil War* (Denver, Colorado: Arden Press, 1995).

been inspired by the foreign nurses who offered Republican Spain their services throughout the conflict.[590] Women played an important part within the International Brigades, too, although their role has long been overlooked by historians who tend to describe the institution through the eyes of those engaged in the primary business of frontline fighting – who were, incidentally, all men. Those historians who have very recently turned their attention towards the handful of women who worked for the transnational fighting unit in an administrative capacity and the dozens more who were employed by its dedicated sanitary service face the dual challenge of recovering their wartime experiences as well as overcoming a wider tendency to 'depoliticize' them by resorting to gendered stereotypes of female motherhood and passive martyrdom.[591] In reality, and as Mercedes Yusta has rightly pointed out, women were active contributors to the transnational antifascist movement all throughout the 1930s.[592] Those who worked alongside the International Brigades certainly saw their work as an extension of the transcendental struggle being carried out by the male fighters on the frontlines.

The role of foreign women within the International Brigades was certainly crucial, but it does not form the focus of the following chapter. What follows instead concerns itself with the relationship between foreign male fighters and native Spanish women. In addition to recovering a series of much-sidelined encounters, it seeks to demonstrate their fundamental importance in shaping the volunteers' overlapping identities as

[590] For a recent monograph on the militiawomen, see Ana Martínez Rus, *Milicianas: Mujeres republicanas combatientes* (Madrid: Catarata, 2018). For the trope of the *miliciana* in contemporary Spanish novels, see Cristina Ruiz Serrano, 'Ni cautivas ni desarmadas: la imagen de la miliciana en la narrativa contemporánea española', *Bulletin of Spanish Studies ,* 98:6 (2021), 945-970. For antifascist nurses, see Angela Jackson, '*Blood and Guts: Nursing with the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-39*' in Jane Brooks (ed.), *One Hundred Years of Wartime Nursing Practices, 1854-1953* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 165-188.

[591] On depictions of German-speaking female volunteers as little more than the spouses of antifascist men enaged in traditional female professions, see Renée Lugschitz, 'De l'ombre à la lumière Recouvrer la liberté et de nouvelles responsabilités: les volontaires autrichiennes dans la guerre d'Espagne' in Édouard Sill (ed.), *¡SOLIDARIAS! Les volontaires étrangères et la solidarité internationale féminine durant la guerre d'Espagne (1936-1939)* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2022), 101-110. Rémi Skoutelsky argues that stereotypes of motherhood and martyrdom are a major reason for the marginalisation of women's wartime humanitarianism in general, both in works of academic scholarship and in public memory. See his introduction to Sill, *¡SOLIDARIAS!*, 23-26. For the role of French, Yugoslavian and Italian women in the International Brigades, see, respectively, Édouard Sill, '«Nos camarades femmes» S'engager comme volontaire internationale en Espagne, un combat contre les siens? L'exemple des Françaises', 65-78; Hervé Lemesle, 'Les femmes parmi le contingent de volontaires de Yougoslavie', 79-92 and Marco Puppini, 'La lutte antifasciste comme opportunité d'émancipation féminine? Les femmes italiennes en Espagne pendant la guerre civile', 93-100. For a detailed summary of the International Brigade's sanitary service, in which many women – Spaniards and foreigners alike – worked, see Francisco Fuster Ruiz, *El Servicio de Sanidad de las Brigadas Internacionales* (Albacete: Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha and CEDOBI:, 2018).

[592] Mercedes Yusta, 'The Strained Courtship Between Antifascism and Feminism: From the Women's World Committee (1934) to the Women's International Democratic Federation' in Hugo García et al. (eds.), *Rethinking Antifascism,* 167-184.

antifascists, as soldiers and as men. In so doing, it draws attention to the fact that the International Brigades were, like most fighting forces throughout history, a profoundly gendered institution.[593] As David Alegre Lorenz and Miguel Alonso Ibarra lamented as recently as 2019, historians of modern Spain have largely overlooked the longstanding relationship between war and gender.[594] By uncovering the many aspects of the foreign volunteers' military service which were influenced by deep-set assumptions about appropriate 'masculine' and 'feminine' roles, it is to be hoped that this chapter plays a small role in filling in the historiographical gap. It will show that for all their rhetoric about building a 'New Spain' on the ashes of feudalism, exploitation and inequality, the volunteers continued to see fighting as a fundamentally masculine activity and, by extension, tended to regard Spanish women as the antithesis of the blood, dirt, filth and violence of the frontlines. [595] In this way, the same underlying tension between progressive politics and traditional attitudes towards gender which Frances Lannon argued was at work across the Republican political spectrum can be seen to have been very much present within the International Brigades, too.[596] For as long as the volunteers were in action, women played a unique role in giving them a clear sense of who they were and what they were fighting for as both men and antifascists – the two, as we will see, being quite inseparable.

## I: 'The Production Front' – Women and the Antifascist Imagined Community

When women appear in either the International Brigades' wartime propaganda or the subsequent testimonies of individual volunteers, it is often to reaffirm the foreign fighters' vision of the Spanish Civil War as a clear-cut struggle for antifascist liberation. For many of them, women – whether they were imagined as a vast collective or as recognizable individuals – would become a hugely emotive symbol of the abstract 'Spanish People' they imagined themselves to be defending from the invading forces of Hitler and Mussolini. This instrumentalization of Spanish women in order to define the Civil War in their own terms is plain to see in the volunteers' trench press, in which they typically appear in the stock role of wives, mothers or daughters who have been martyred by the fascist bombs which continued to fall indiscriminately on cities such as Barcelona and Madrid. If these images were a mainstay of International Brigade propaganda, it was because they so powerfully, and emotively, drove home the brutal nature of the enemy and the conversely just nature of the Republican war effort. Just in case the familiar photomontages of women desperately clutching onto their children beneath the shadow of Hitler's dive-bombers had failed to reaffirm exactly what the foreign volunteers were fighting both for and against, a French-language bulletin

[593] Rachel Woodward and Clair Duncanson (eds.), *The Palgrave International Handbook of Gender and the Military* (London: Macmillan, 2017), 2-3.
[594] David Alegre Lorenz and Miguel Alonso Ibarra, 'Guerra y género, mundo militar y sociedad: Experiencia bélica, guerras de ocupación, relaciones con la retaguardia', *Revista de historia Jerónimo Zurita*, 94 (2019), 9-25.
[595] Nash, *Defying Male Civilization,* 111-112.
[596] Frances Lannon, 'Women and Images of Women in the Spanish Civil War', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 1 (1991), 213-228.

reprinted a letter from one mother extolling her son to put a stop to 'this band of mercenaries, of assassins of women, children and old people'.[597] In this way, the waging of violent war in Spain was transformed into an essentially humanitarian activity carried out on behalf of society's most vulnerable members.

The almost ubiquitous representation of women as passive martyrs of fascism was, in essence, a reworking of the ancient trope of chivalry for the purposes of twentieth-century total war. It was based on two-overlapping, and deeply gendered, premises. Firstly, the belief – inherited, in part, from the Great War – that civilians constituted a discrete social category who had an indisputable right to be spared the kind of wanton military violence now being unleashed by the Nationalists over Republican skies.[598] Secondly, the belief that men ought to step in and fight on behalf of women who both could not and should not defend themselves from that very same violence. The volunteers of the International Brigades were only too happy to oblige in this latter regard. As Mary Vincent has argued, the emergence of the soldier as the ultimate 'masculine archetype' able to channel his supposedly inherent capacity for aggression towards societal transformation was yet another legacy of the Great War which made itself felt in Spain between 1936-1939.[599] In his recollection of a poster which showed a peasant woman's foot crushing a swastika, the Swedish volunteer Per Eriksson exposed the close association which existed between antifascism, masculinity and soldiering in many of the volunteers minds before they had even set foot in the country. 'The fact that they had shown a women's foot, swastika, pavement…and nothing else' led him to think that 'if the women can fight against fascism... well, hell...then we also should be able to'.[600] The 'we', of course, referred to antifascist men such as himself. Evidently, Eriksson not only felt that fighting fascism was a duty; it was also something which ought to come naturally to him as a man.

There was nothing inevitable about the volunteers' understanding of soldiering as an essentially male business. After all, a number of women had joined the workers' militias which helped to defeat the military revolt in cities such as Barcelona and Madrid early on in the war, almost immediately becoming one of the most striking and indeed enduring symbols of antifascist resistance to emerge from the entire conflict.[601] The symbolic power of the *miliciana* – which, in fact, far outweighed their purely military contribution to the loyalist war effort – makes it all the more surprising that only a handful of the men who belonged to the International Brigades ever referred to them. An obvious reason for this negligence is that by the time the first of the foreign units

[597] Anon., 'Lettre d'une mere a un volontaire', *A l'assaut,* no. 4, 25 February 1937, 3-4, RGASPI, 545.3.191.
[598] Proctor, *Civilians in a World at War*, 3-7.
[599] Mary Vincent, 'La reafirmación de la masculinidad en la cruzada franquista', *Cuadernos de Historia Contemporánea*, 28 (2006), 135-151.
[600] Per Eriksson, translated interviews with Swedish volunteers, https://educationforum.ipbhost.com/topic/897-spanish-civil-war-oral-history/, accessed 5 December 2022.
[601] Casanova, *Anarchism, the Republic and Civil War in Spain*, 109-110.

were formed in October 1936 the militias were being rapidly assimilated into a regular army which quite deliberately excluded women from frontline duties.[602] Since the Commissariat was always at pains to stress that the foreign volunteers were a loyal part of that army, it should not come as a surprise that instructions were issued to unit commanders as early as December 1936 reminding them that women were not permitted to engage in military activities and, furthermore, should be kept separate from the male soldiers. In January 1937 these commanders received further instructions to ensure that women working in the sanitary service wore 'the clothes of their gender' lest they give the false impression that they were active combatants.[603] The boiler suits and trousers worn by the original *milicianas* were a thing of the past; traditional gender roles, along with the outward signs of conformity which accompanied them, were back in full force.

The Commissariat seems to have regarded the exclusion of women from frontline fighting as a natural enough shift from the revolutionary experimentalism of the first days of the war towards a reimposition of rational 'order' for them to devote almost no attention whatsoever to the subject in their propaganda. Insofar as anybody mentioned the *milicianas* at all, it was to hold them up as an admirable example of antifascist volition rather than as a militarily important contribution to the war effort. This attitude is plain to see in British volunteer John Sommerfield's lengthy description of a poster he saw of one particular militiawoman which, he informs the reader of his memoir, struck him because 'it managed to express the vulnerable pride, the glance that was free, laughing, yet grave, the *air* of some of those militia-girls whom we saw in the streets, whose walk, whose figure and features were stamped with a peculiar strength and grace'.[604] One reason why the exclusion of women from frontline duties was thought to require little explanation was, perhaps, the assumption that men were naturally suited to fighting in a way that women were not. The martial values which underpinned the International Brigades' military culture were, for this reason, portrayed in deeply gendered terms; strength, decisiveness and a willingness to resort to legitimate violence were all brought to mind by illustrations of bare-chested, virile soldiers bayonetting a personified fascist ogre or else charging enemy positions. Here, the male body was itself represented as a key tool in the antifascist struggle.

Visual and textual representations of combat as an inherently male activity were not merely manifestations of shared, and just as often unspoken, assumptions about gender. Just as importantly, they were rallied in a quite deliberate attempt to mould the volunteers into motivated soldiers by conflating their responsibilities as antifascists, as soldiers and above all as men. In so doing, their superiors hoped that they would accept their new military duties with pride and perform bravely on the frontlines. One

[602] Nash, *Defying male Civilization,* 116.

[603] These directives are quoted by Édouard Sill in '«Nos camarades femmes» S'engager comme volontaire internationale en Espagne, un combat contre les siens ? L'exemple des Françaises' in Édouard Sill (ed.), *¡SOLIDARIAS! Les volontaires étrangères et la solidarité internationale féminine durant la guerre d'Espagne (1936-1939)* (Rennes : Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2022), 65-78.

[604] John Sommerfield, *Volunteer in Spain* (Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1937), 33.

military report written in the wake of the Battle of the Jarama even suggested reminding the rank and file of the need to honour their families back home as a means of impeding further displays of cowardice and desertion.[605] Letters from a range of women were published in the volunteers' trench press in a similar attempt to appeal to their sense of masculine duty and encourage them to continue the antifascist fight, however grueling it might have become. After ninety representatives from The Union of Catalan Women visited some soldiers from the Eleventh Brigade, two of them left behind a few words for a battalion bulletin which stressed the importance of traditional military values such as courage and discipline. Solors Bargallo claimed that 'the 41st Battalion of the Eleventh Mixed Brigade has seemed like one of the most exemplary to us, as much in discipline as in its effort towards victory', while her colleague Dolors Piera homed in on how 'with its constant activity, with its constant training, with its discipline' the battalion had paved the way for a Republican victory.[606] There was nothing unusual about the women of wartime Spain using militant language to signify their support for the frontline fighting; what was so striking about their communication with the International Brigades was the direct use of correspondence to directly spur on the waging of violent war.[607]

Another group of women whose statements were rallied by the Commissariat as a means of reminding the volunteers of their martial responsibilities were their own relatives. Various letters to husbands and sons fighting in Spain were republished in the unit's trench press, all of them encouraging the soldiers to continue fighting to the death against a fascist menace which threatened not only the women and children of the host country, but their very own families back home, too. Once again, many of these texts invoked the supposedly-masculine virtues of physical strength, military daring and fearless sacrifice as a direct reminder of their readers' overlapping responsibilities as family men and antifascist soldiers. These were all key themes in one particular letter sent by a French mother to her son in Spain, the likes of which was tactically reprinted in the bulletin *A l'assaaut* to inspire its readers in their ongoing struggle. 'Your courage will not be in vain', she wrote, 'and I have the hope that your will, your suffering, all that the horror of war can give in sacrifices, will provide you with victory because you must, at all costs, block their way'.[608] 'I cannot tell you anything more than to be honest and brave to the point of death' wrote another mother, Emma Joubert, to her own son.[609] Just as women across Europe had been encouraged to place their nation before their family when their sons and husbands were conscripted to fight in the First World War, so too did the International Brigades' wartime

[605] Anon., Report on the work of the International Brigade Commissariat, undated, 91, RGASPI, 545.1.2.
[606] Commissar of the XI Brigade, report on a visit from the *Unió de Dones de Catalunya*, 10 July 1938, RGASPI, 545.3.59; Commissar of the XI Brigade, Report on recent activities, 11 July 1938, 2, RGASPI, 545.3.59.
[607] Nash, *Defying Male Civilization,* 103-4.
[608] Anon., 'Lettre d'une mere a un voluntaire', *A l'assaut,* no. 5, 26 February 1937, 4, RGASPI, 545.3.191.
[609] Anon., 'Deuz lettres-Deuz mondes', *A l'assaut,* no. 19, 28 April 1937, 5, RGASPI, 545.2.191.

propaganda imply that the wives and mothers of the volunteers were right to subordinate their personal grief at being separated from their loved ones – in some cases permanently – to their unwavering commitment to the greater antifascist good.

The exclusion of women from direct participation in the supposedly masculine business of frontline fighting does not mean that the volunteers felt they had no role to play in the antifascist struggle whatsoever. On the contrary, the Commissariat were keen that these soldiers recognized the crucial, if gender-appropriate, part being played by women in the rearguard. While the women of wartime Spain were not organized into the kind of non-combatant production corps which typified the two world wars, they certainly engaged in important rearguard work such as the manufacture of munitions and uniforms.[610] The Commissariat made this known to the volunteers in a series of news articles which stressed women's eagerness to contribute to a unified antifascist effort by borrowing the same militarized language of 'the production front', 'the Stakhanovite rearguard' and 'work brigades' which had become common currency within Republican wartime propaganda.[611] Clearly inspired by Soviet iconography, the rearguard was represented in the pages of the volunteers' trench press as an industrialized landscape of huge factories and billowing chimney stacks. In one particularly striking image, about a dozen chimneys form the backdrop to a gargantuan worker bringing down a mallet on a diminutive fat man branded with a swastika.[612] To defeat fascism on the frontlines, it was clearly necessary to defeat it in the rearguard, too – not least by producing the war material required to counter Hitler and Mussolini's massive support for Franco.

The International Brigades' trench bulletins did not inform the volunteers of this impressive rearguard activity for the sake of it. Instead, such images and articles were intended to remind the frontline soldiers of their unique place within a wider antifascist community working towards victory without distinction of age or sex. Occasional visits from delegations of female factory workers or antifascist women's groups further drove this point home, as did the inevitable news reports which followed. The account which came on the heels of one visit from a commission of female factory workers from the 'heroic rearguard' in the spring of 1938 assured readers that Spanish women possessed 'a spirit just as highly combative as that which animates our soldiers', reminding the volunteers that they were crucial in producing the war material 'which is so necessary to reach our longed-for victory'.[613] These reminders were particularly important given the flagging state of the Republican war effort at that point. Commissars sought to inspire a sense of mutual responsibility between the two groups, not least through shared promises that they would do justice to each other's antifascist efforts. 'In the name of the 11th Battalion of the Twelfth International

[610] Alpert, *The Republican Army,* 167.

[611] Antonio Mares, 'El Trabajo de la mujer en la retaguardia', *English VFL*, year 2, no. 25, 19 July 1938, 7, RGASPI, 545.2.363; Nash, *Defying Male Civilization,* 120-121.

[612] *Italian VFL*, no. 23, 4 June 1937, 1, RGASPI, 545.2.364.

[613] 'Pacha', 'Nuestra juventud, vanguardia de la libertad', *Boletín,* no. 21, 29 May 1938, 1, RGASPI, 545.3.193.

Brigade, I, a soldier in the Popular Army, ask of you that with the daring and enthusiasm with which we take up the gun to defend our Spain […] you take up the switches to make the factories and workshops of war production function' pled one Italian volunteer in an open letter to the group known as Antifascist Women (*Mujeres Antifascistas*). He need not have worried. Upon visiting the Fifteenth Brigade, the very same women's group promised the soldiers that they would take their 'frontline spirit' back with them to the rearguard. [614]

## II: 'Some Sweetness That a Woman Can Add' – Women as the Antithesis of War

Imagining women's place in the antifascist war effort was one thing; meeting Spanish women on a face-to-face basis was quite another. The vast majority of the 35,000 or so volunteers would not come into contact with the antifascist women's groups, the delegations of factory workers or the martyred wives and mothers they frequently read about in their military bulletins. They were far more likely to encounter three key groups of Spanish women instead. Firstly, there were the female villagers in the places where they trained and rested. The young women of the rearguard, in particular, caught the eyes of many volunteers who were similarly aged themselves. Secondly, there were the nurses in the hospitals where they recovered from their injuries and ailments. These are a recurring feature of many of their recollections of the war. Lastly, but by no means least importantly, were the prostitutes who were doing a booming business in practically every town behind the lines and whose services many of the volunteers took advantage of. While some veterans commented on the antifascist attitudes of these women as well as their active efforts to contribute to the war effort, their principal interest in them seems to have resided less in their politics than in the emotional distraction they provided from the soldiering life. Above all, the volunteers associated the women they met with a whole panoply of pleasures which were all but impossible for them to access while fighting at the male-dominated front. These pleasures, in turn, were rooted in what the majority of the volunteers would have regarded as classic feminine traits such as their innocence, their cleanliness, their carefulness, their coquettishness and their physical beauty. In this way, visions of the rearguard and the frontline remained gendered even when they were at their least political.

As John Sommerfield's recollection of the *miliciana* who featured on the poster in Albacete vividly confirms, seldom does a woman appear in the volunteers' letters, memoirs and interviews without an accompanying comment on her physical appearance. It would not be an exaggeration, in fact, to describe this as one of the single most frequent tropes to be found in the dozens of testimonies the volunteers left behind. It makes no difference whether they are referring to village girls, nurses or even political figures. John Tisa was once in a meeting with the most recognizable woman in all of civil-war Spain – the communist orator known as La Pasionaria – yet he makes no comment on what she said, instead limiting himself to assuring his readers that 'with her fine aquiline nose, and smooth skin and features, she is a strong

[614] Anon., manuscript of a history of the XV Brigade, undated, 85, RGASPI, 545.3.475.

and handsome woman'.[615] Elsewhere in his memoir, Tisa affectionately recalls the Spanish teacher he had been provided by the British journalist Ralph Bates. While acknowledging that she was an enthusiastic Communist, he spends far more time discussing her appearance: 'she looks to be about only seventeen', 'she has brown eyes, black straight hair, bobbed in front and cut down just below the ears to look longer in the back', 'occasionally she wears horn-rimmed glasses', 'the red tint on her cheeks is natural, which accentuates her soft, pale face and small chin' and 'her body seems to fragile that I expect any one of her limps to just drop off'.[616] Very few of the volunteers had Spanish teachers, but they all admired the girls who inhabited the rearguard villages in similarly glowing terms. Tellingly, the only mention of Spanish women in Bill Alexander's history of the British Battalion limits itself to describing these girls as 'beautiful and exciting'.[617]

Given that Spanish nurses often came into daily contact with sick volunteers for weeks or even months at a time, it is perhaps unsurprising that they were the subject of particularly intense attention both during the conflict and in the subsequent recollections of their patients. These nurses were highly-trained staff engaged in a profession which, until the outbreak of civil war, had fallen almost entirely under the control of the religious orders.[618] Preoccupied as they were with the possibility for romance, few of the volunteers commented on the extraordinary fact that rather than serving the church, these nurses served the antifascist state. This preoccupation was certainly no secret, with a satirical article appearing in an English-language trench publication assuring its readers that 'the effect of the beard on nurses is well known to all'.[619] Individual nurses could capture the attention of the volunteers, as when an American ambulance driver described a certain Andrea as 'one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen' in a wartime diary entry.[620] On other occasions, it was the nursing staff as a collective which seized the volunteers' imaginations. 'The nurses were pretty, the food was good, but there wasn't much of it' remembered Alfred Amery of his stay in the International Brigade hospital in Alicante. More often than not, the Spanish women mentioned in these accounts tend to fit the trope of the exotic, dark-skinned Carmen – sometimes, their authors insisted that they had the name itself. 'I want to recall two nurses' wrote the German Fritz Rettmann: 'one was Carmen, a Spaniard just as they describe in the books: pretty, brunette, and passionate. The other was a young Spanish mother, a little fat and very caring towards the patients'.[621]

[615] Tisa, *Recalling the Good Fight*, 194.
[616] Ibid., 102-3.
[617] Alexander, *British Volunteers for Liberty*, 134.
[618] Dolores Martín Moruno and Javier Ordóñez Rodríguez, 'The Nursing Vocation as Political Participation for Women during the Spanish Civil War', *Journal of War and Culture Studies,* 2:3 (2009), 305-319.
[619] Anon., 'On Beards – A Reply', *English VFL,* 13 January 1938, 11, RGASPI, 545.2.362.
[620] Neugass, *War is Beautiful*, 78.
[621] Fritz Rettmann in Esteve Torres, *Recuerdos de brigadistas alemanes*, 382.

Aside from the fairly obvious role of the volunteers' underlying *machismo,* one of the reasons why they seem to have considered outward appearances as so worthy of comment is because they embodied, quite literally, a much-coveted escape from the male-dominated world of soldiering. The mere sight of a civilian woman could prove a huge novelty following weeks of seeing only other fighting men. Amongst the many volunteers to discover this for themselves was the boisterous American Earl Payne, whose delight at recalling the moment when the doors to his ambulance opened up 'and there's a very lovely young nurse' awaiting him is plain to see in his recorded interview. '*Heeello boys!*' were the telling words he used to describe his feelings in that particular moment. As Payne himself put it before breaking into uproarious laughter, 'we probably hadn't seen a gal for a few weeks or a few months'.[622] These encounters were underpinned by the usual assumption that the rearguard was a woman's place and the frontline a man's. Bob Clark claimed to have come across a young woman in an otherwise deserted town just prior to the Ebro Battle in late 1938 and was eager for any excuse to talk to her. 'The war at once became a hateful thing', he recalled. 'Like a stunning blow the realization that we were men without women; that women to the British Battalion were something vague and shadowy'.[623] There also exists, of course, the possibility that the entire episode was invented by Clark in order to make his wartime narrative more exciting. All the same, he draws a familiar division between the masculine realm of frontline soldiering and an untarnished, innocent and all-round more feminine civilian world which is, itself, extremely telling.

As was the case with Britons serving in France during the First World War, the chance of encountering women was one of the chief attractions of securing leave in a large city like Barcelona or Madrid.[624] Walter Togwell was on either a bus or a tram to the cinema with a small group of comrades when a woman stepped onboard, provoking comments from them all. They were shocked when she turned around and told them, in English, that 'chance would be a lucky thing' – suggesting, of course, that they had been commenting on her appearance.[625] The relief of seeing women after long periods spent in the company of other men was not only based on physical attraction, however. William Bede was under the impression that many of the men who frequented a brothel in the Catalan border town of Figueres did not go for sex so much as the simple pleasure of having a drink with a woman.[626] Many of the volunteers longed for a 'feminine touch' capable of countering the stifling company of their male comrades-in-arms. In a letter sent to his wife Juliet in November 1937, Ivor Hickman admitted that 'I miss woman's company terribly; I have had no company with any woman since I left you and men's company is lacking in some sweetness that a woman can add; at least you can add'.[627] The slim-bodied village girls and attractive brown-eyed nurses

[622] Interview with Earl Payne, CDMH, PHO_ABAL_79.
[623] Clark, *No Boots to my Feet*, 94.
[624] Craig Gibson, *Behind the Front*, 313.
[625] Interview with Walter Togwell, Reel 6, 1996, IWM, CN: 17494.
[626] Interview with William Bede Picard, Reel 3, 1999, IWM, CN: 18779.
[627] Ivor Hickman in Wainwright, *The Last to Fall*, 68.

described in detail by so many of the volunteers come across as untainted islands of tranquility, tenderness and affection in what was, without a doubt, a grim, dirty and thoroughly bloody conflict for many of the men fighting it. In short, they were invested with a serious of gendered characteristics which, in turn, served as a foil for the volunteers' own sense of martial masculinity.

The trope of the Spanish beauty who had mercifully succeeded in remaining untainted by the grim realities of modern war appears repeatedly in the volunteers' recollections; so much so, in fact, that it can be hard to judge whether or not the situations in which it manifests itself really took place. George Wheeler claims to have been taken in by one family while recuperating in a Spanish town. One night – or so he would have the readers of his memoir believe – he sat on their balcony with their daughter, 'Julia', watching an electrical storm. 'The dirt, the lice and the prospect of sudden death were features of a different world', he wrote, recalling that 'I was in the clouds with Julia, sitting hand in hand and at peace'.[628] The English novelist Laurie Lee took this same theme to its extremes in his own memoir, a potent mixture of fact and fiction which came out decades after the war had ended yet still succeeded in provoking the ire of many of his fellow veterans for its liberal handling of the truth.[629] Unquestionably falling into the category of fiction are Lee's lustful encounters with the teenaged 'Eulalia', a peasant girl who, he assures us in a manner which would undoubtedly have appealed to many of the nineteenth-century romantics who flocked to Spain, smelled of 'fresh mushrooms and trampled thyme'. Eulalia's miraculous appearances in the most unlikely of places not only helped Lee to hold his narrative together; they also enabled him to create a sense of blissful distance from the privations of war.[630] Once again, it is not necessary to establish the literal truth of these stories to grasp the symbolic importance the volunteers attached to women as the antithesis of the more uncomfortable aspects of frontline fighting.

Combined with sudden separation from their military units, the conspicuous presence of women in the International Brigades' various hospitals led many volunteers to think of their time recuperating from war wounds as a significant interlude from the masculine business of antifascist soldiering. The British sculptor Jason Gurney spoke for many when he described how 'I had come to identify myself with the Battalion so completely that it had not occurred to me that I could have any action apart from it'; the result was that 'the idea of spending an evening in female company, having a bath,

[628] George Wheeler, *To Make The People Smile Again*, (ed. David leach) (Newcaslte: Zymburg Publishing, 2003), 106.

[629] For a summary of the disagreements over Laurie Lee's participation in the International Brigades, see Richard Baxell, 'Laurie Lee in the International Brigades: Writer or Fighter?' in Jim Jump (ed.), *Looking Back at the Spanish Civil War* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2010), 157-176. Although some veterans claimed Lee never even belonged to the Brigades, Baxell shows that he was indeed a member of the unit even though he was rejected for frontline service owing to his epilepsy. For a vocal condemnation of Lee's book in which the author is described as a 'bastard' and a 'fucking liar' see James Nathaniel Moon's interview with the IWM, Reel 1, CN: 15729.

[630] Laurie Lee, *A Moment of War* (London: Penguin, 2004), 24-6; 65.

and sleeping in sheets seemed almost too impossibly remote to be real'.[631] The inviting appearances of the nurses seemed to be complimented by their caring attitude towards the sick volunteers. For some of the wounded men, their own bloodied and dirtied appearance could cause deep feelings of shame once they found themselves amongst these sisterly civilians. Karl Pioch was sent to the International Brigade hospital at Benicassim where he was soon being attended by a nurse. 'I was very confused and felt a great deal of shame before her', he confessed years later, especially given that he had always considered himself 'very scrupulous and very clean'. His hands were black from a combination of the sun and rifle oil, while his nails were filthy and broken; his clothes were so ridden with lice that they had to be stripped off and sent for washing.[632] Nurses were appreciated not just for their technical knowledge, then, but also for what the volunteers regarded as their singularly feminine quality of caring for the dirtied and damaged bodies of male soldiers.

### III: 'Just an Old Spanish Custom, Apparently' – Romance

The volunteers did not limit themselves to admiring nurses from their hospital beds. As in other conflicts both before and since the Spanish Civil War, the presence of thousands of young soldiers in a faraway country generated some exciting new opportunities for romantic encounters. Both the volunteers of the International Brigades and their civilian hosts soon caught onto this, with each of the two groups carefully weighing up the situation and attempting to steer it in the direction most favourable to themselves. No sooner had they arrived to the rearguard villages in which they had been sent for training or a few days' rest than the volunteers began to consider their chances of striking up romantic relationships with the local women, many of whom were not dissimilarly aged to themselves. Fred Thomas, in a diary entry penned shortly after arriving to Madrigueras, noted that 'the girls, up to about eighteen, are very pretty', adding that they 'are friendly up to a point but, naturally enough perhaps, are more than a little chary of chance acquaintances'.[633] In the last census, carried out in 1930, there were some 2,066 women in the village of Madrigueras out of a total population of 3,984; half of them were single.[634] In the entire province of Albacete, however, the numbers of unmarried women decreased sharply from the age of eighteen upwards.[635] While statistics are not available for the war, the presence of young women in the rearguard was – as we saw in the previous chapter – particularly conspicuous given that many men of working age were off fighting.

The reserved nature of the locals was noted by practically all of the volunteers who commented on the matter. Fred Copeman described falling for the daughter of a

[631] Jason Gurney, *Crusade in Spain* (Faber and Faber, London, 1974), 163.
[632] Karl Pioch in Esteve Torres, *Recuerdos de brigadistas alemanes*, 31.
[633] Thomas, *To Tilt at Windmills*, 19-20.
[634] 'Clasificación de la población de hecho por sexo, estado civil e instrucción elemental' for Madrigueras, 1930 census of Spain, Tomo III., Volúmenes regionales.
[635] Census results for Madrigueras, 'Clasificación por edades, año por año, combinada con el sexo y estado civil de los habitantes inscritos en la población de hecho', Tomo III, Volúmenes regionales, 1930, Instituto Nacional de Estadística.

schoolmaster in whose house the British Battalion's headquarters had been set up. 'Oh, but the Spaniards look after the girls you know, you can't mess around with girls in Spain, either they're in brothels or they're virgins, there's no half-and-half', he lamented in an interview conducted in the late 1970s, surmising that 'it was a bit *look at each other from a distance* […], that's how it was, [you] could never touch a girl, she'd never let you get near enough'.[636] Volunteers like Copeman quickly realised that the conservative mores of many a Spanish village made even the most innocent forms of intimacy close to impossible. The customs of small localities such as Madrigueras and Mondéjar, where the British volunteers trained, may have had little in common with those to be found in the large, industrialized and often cosmopolitan cities from which most of the volunteers heralded, but they were taken seriously enough by the locals to demand the respect of these foreign outsiders. A lack of Spanish was no impediment to picking up on native attitudes; indeed, for many volunteers, the secluded life imposed on village girls seemed to be part and parcel of the almost feudal conditions which continued to govern Spain. One volunteer wrote to a friend confessing that 'I have never before seen such rigid isolation or even suspected its existence', citing the fact that in the countryside 'the girl is nothing but a regular "family prisoner"' who 'never goes into the street alone'.[637]

The unprecedented movement of people brought on by the Spanish Civil War meant that the volunteers, as well as their hosts, were forced to navigate unfamiliar cultural waters when it came to encounters with local women. The profoundly gendered customs of small Spanish villages (and, indeed, many towns) certainly took getting used to, including by those who were invited into local homes to enjoy a meal only to find that the same women who had invariably cooked it did not sit with them to share in the food.[638] Anthony McLean, who received Spanish classes in the house of an old school-master in Albacete, was surprised to find that the Spaniard's wife and daughter remained seated out of the way whenever he was present. As McLean soon realized, women were quite literally kept in the background much of the time.[639] Instead of raising awkward objections, he and his fellow volunteers worked hard to respect Spanish customs, however anachronistic they seemed. For their part, some of the locals worked hard to keep control over the situation by preventing their daughters from forming close contact with the volunteers. The mother of Dolores Cartel, a Madrigueras local who was nineteen years old at the time, prohibited her from going to dances with the new arrivals;[640] María de Rafaelillo, who was around sixteen, recalled being kept at home 'always';[641] similarly, eighteen-year-old Angelita de Ernesto's father did not want his daughter going to see off contingents of soldiers as they left for the front, especially since she had already been scolded for staying out

[636] Interview with Fred Copeman, reel 5, 1978, IWM, CN: 794.
[637] George Felix, undated letter to a friend in Acier, *From Spanish Trenches*, 85-6.
[638] Interview with James Brown, reel 4, 1976, IWM, CN: 824.
[639] Interview with Anthony McLean, reel 4, 1983, IWM, CN: 19991.
[640] Dolores de Cartel in Serrano, *Recuérdalo tú*, 72.
[641] María de Rafaelillo in Serrano, *Recuérdalo tú*, 98.

with them until late. ‘Haven’t I told you to stay away from those people?’ she would recall her father imploring her when she was interviewed in the 1990s.[642]

In spite of their parents’ best efforts to keep them away from the unfamiliar (if admittedly friendly) foreigners, the arrival of the International Brigades was tremendously exciting for many of these young women. Although the antifascist volunteers would probably have disliked admitting it, the historian Ángel Alcalde has shown how Franco’s soldiers had a similarly ‘exotic’ appeal for young women whenever they found themselves in the Nationalist rearguard.[643] Angelita de Ernesto was convinced that ‘if all the internationals in Madrigueras had wanted to marry, not one of them would have remained single’.[644] She proudly recalled how two Frenchmen competed to take her out for a *paseo,* the evening walk traditionally enjoyed by young couples all throughout Spain. Apparently, she received a letter from a third Frenchman who had left for the front which contained the simple words ‘I love you and I will remember you always’ in addition to further letters and a photo from a hospitalized Hungarian, all of which she claimed to have burnt after the war ended with a crushing Republican defeat. One wonders whether all of these romantic escapades really took place. What is beyond doubt is that for young women like Angelita – women who, furthermore, were largely unused to men’s company, let alone that of exotic and often charming foreigner soldiers – even the most innocent of encounters could amount to terrific dramas.

While striking up romances was no easy task, it was certainly possible. A number of volunteers tried their hardest to strike a balance between wooing local women and respecting the villagers’ conservative sensibilities. This was not just a question of individual good manners; after all, the British volunteers received open warnings from their superiors to be conscious of the huge cultural differences between their home country and Spain, where women were not openly courted, in order to avoid alienating their hosts through careless behaviour.[645] As some of them discovered, the surest solution was to win the affections of the young woman’s family first. Bob Clark recalled the women of Tarazona as being shy and rightly surmised that ‘it was only by cultivating the friendship of the whole of a girl’s family that one could be in the slightest degree familiar’.[646] This certainly proved true for Harry Fisher. After being invited into the home of a local boy he had befriended, the volunteer from America suddenly found himself in the company of two young women. One of them, eighteen-year-old María, blushed when he walked in and greeted him with a shy ‘salud’. After dinner the entire family promenaded the town, with Fisher using the opportunity to take the girl by the hand. On a future visit to the family home, he felt bad at seeing María sitting meekly in a corner and resolved to invite her out to a movie. When he called on her that Sunday he discovered, to his surprise, the whole family waiting in their finest clothes.

[642] Angelita de Ernesto in Serrano, *Recuérdalo tú*, 61.
[643] Alcalde, *Los excombatientes franquistas*, 81.
[644] Angelita de Ernesto in Serrano, *Recuérdalo tú*, 76.
[645] Interview with Walter Togwell, reel 7, 1996, IWM, CN: 17494.
[646] Clark, *No Boots to my Feet*, 26.

They not only accompanied them to the showing, but sat between them the whole time. 'Just an old Spanish custom, apparently', Fisher surmised in his memoir.[647] Volunteers took what chances they could to pursue romance, but only by carefully navigating the unfamiliar waters of Spanish culture could they succeed.

What is so striking about the relationships which volunteers like Harry Fisher managed to strike up is just how platonic they tended to be. Sex was certainly not the primary motive for seeking them out. When Sam Lesser described going out to pick saffron on the outskirts of Albacete in order to get to know girls as 'more […] a joke than anything', he was probably speaking for most of the volunteers who sought warmth, friendliness and diversion through their contact with good-looking and similarly-aged women.[648] This certainly does not render whatever relationships *were* struck up as meaningless or insignificant, though. Their personal importance to the volunteers is left in no doubt by the fact that a small number of them took the rare step of getting married to the women they had met while in Spain. Many others who did not take this rather extreme measure nonetheless recalled specific sweethearts with enormous fondness decades later; in some cases, they even retained photographs of them in what must surely be one of the most poignant examples of their deep and personal commitment to the country and its people. In spite of the passing years, their names came to mind without any hesitation.[649] One American volunteer who fits within this category had become attached to a blue-eyed woman from Mallorca named María while engaged in political work in Barcelona. When he returned to Spain for an International Brigade reunion some forty years later, he managed to track her down and eventually became good friends with her whole family.[650] Romance, then, provided the International Brigades' with yet another means of getting to know the 'Spanish People' on a more personal level, as well as giving them a further reason to continue fighting for them on the frontlines.

## IV: 'Beware of Deadly Kisses' – Sex

Sigmund Freud was just one in a long line of writers who has theorised about the connection between war and sex. His argument that armed conflicts encourage societies to throw off the shackles of sexual repression has since been taken up by a number of historians, with John Costello arguing that the normalisation of killing and the proximity of death makes behaviour which might otherwise be considered immoral seem suddenly permissible. Soldiers themselves have often stressed the need for life-affirming intimacy in the face of widespread destruction and the possibility that they, themselves, might be killed at any moment.[651] As we have just seen, platonic romances with Spanish women were often described by the volunteers in these very terms. Nonetheless, there is no clear evidence that their sexual appetites, let alone

[647] Fisher, *Comrades: Tales of a Brigadista in the Spanish Civil War*, 35-37.
[648] Interview with Sam Russell, reel 2, 1986, IWM, CN: 9484.
[649] Interview with Fred Copeman, reel 5, 1978, IWM, CN: 794; Interview with Walter Togwell, reel 7, 1996, IWM, CN: 17494.
[650] Interview with Anderson, CDMH, PHO_ABAL_5.
[651] John Costello, *Love, Sex and War: Changing Values 1939-1945* (London: Collins, 1985), 10; 17.

activities, were increased by reason of fighting in Spain. Ivor Hickman was even surprised by the 'moral standards' of the men, guessing that the majority of them had remained celibate since arriving in the country.[652] The British volunteer Jason Gurney went even further in claiming that fighting a war *decreased* his sex drive. Given that Gurney described sex as having being one of his favourite pastimes while living amongst the bohemian circles of 1930s London, his admission that 'it was a strange thing' that he 'had not thought of women at all' since he arrived to Spain is an important reminder not to generalise about such a personal and private activity.[653]

Sex was certainly on the volunteers' minds, regardless of whether they pursued it with any seriousness or not. Just because a minority of volunteers expressed surprise at a relative lack of smut from their comrades does not mean it did not exist throughout the International Brigades.[654] The bawdier side of 1930s working-class culture manifested itself in jokes, songs and comments about women all throughout the war, with Alvah Bessie finding himself so fascinated by the lewd songs he heard his English-speaking comrades singing that he made a point of jotting them down in his diary. They shed an extremely rare window into the more private side of soldiering in the Spanish Civil War. No sooner had he arrived to Figueres than he heard some comrades singing that 'I once was as pure as the lily, and nobody called me a cow, my cunt was as sweet as a rosebud, look at the fucking thing now'. While he was awaiting repatriation in the Catalan town of Marsa months later he heard some Scottish volunteers singing a tune which contained the equally memorable lines 'the minister's son, he did a dead o' shame, he fucked a girl o' sixteen an' would nae see her hame'.[655] Performative masculinity was not limited to the foreign volunteers, either. The Spanish conscript José García Antón recalled being present in a rearguard town when a truck arrived with three dancers and a number of comics in the hopes of entertaining the troops. No sooner had they stepped onto the stage than a unanimous cry of 'get lost you queers, we want the girls to come out!' burst out from the audience. When an older woman obliged by stepping onto the stage, she was greeted with heckles along the lines of 'we want young lasses, get rid of these old whores!'.[656]

Both the availability and absence of sex could prove problematic for the International Brigades' Commissariat, the members of which took it for granted that the lack of wives and girlfriends in Spain would make itself felt among the volunteers in unhelpful ways. One trench bulletin urged them to avoid thinking about sex by remaining active in mind and body.[657] Another article pointed out, however, that this was not always easy given how all wars impose sexual abstention on men who, according to their age, are most

[652] Ivor Hickman in Wainwright, *The Last to Fall,* 137.
[653] Jason Gurney, *Crusade in Spain* (Faber and Faber, London, 1974), 164.
[654] Neugass, *War is Beautiful,* 58.
[655] Alvah Bessy, *Spanish Civil War Notebooks,* pages 3 and 126.
[656] José García Antón, *Un español en la XIV Brigada Internacional: Vivencias de un lejano pasado* (Diego Marin, Murcia, 2004), 83.
[657] Anon., 'Huye de cultivar en tu pensamiento preocupaciones sexuales', *orientación,* no. 6, 3 July 1938, 3, RGASPI, 545.3.738.

in need of satisfying their urges. The author was emphatic that 'the needs of the struggle ask of the soldier sacrifices and privations of every kind, but I sincerely believe that none of them reaches the cruel magnitude of sexual insatisfaction'. The consequence, he argued, was 'obstinate masturbation' – as evidenced by a case study involving the Eighteenth Brigade.[658] A certain Max Hoddan, writing for the same publication, agreed that the issue needed taking more seriously. In his opinion, it was 'necessary to explain the fact that masturbation is a perfectly harmless method of release' to volunteers who had been falsely informed that it was a dangerous activity.[659] For these medical specialists, an open attitude towards sexual matters was in keeping with the enlightened and progressive nature of the Spanish Republic. Commander Fred Copeman was also open about the issue, albeit in an interview conducted decades later, claiming that 'of course, whether you like it or no, if men don't have women, they have themselves you know – one of the facts of life'. Unlike Max Hoddan, however, he regarded this as undesirable on the basis that it supposedly sapped the men of their fighting energies – a point of view which he backed up with references to his expertise as a boxer.[660]

While they certainly went through extended periods of abstention, opportunities for sex were not entirely lacking. In fact, much as young American soldiers would discover in Second-World-War Europe, being far away from home and economically independent could create previously-unimaginable opportunities for sexual encounters of various kinds. For the volunteers of the International Brigades, this could begin even before they had crossed into Spain. Abe Smorodin admitted that, at the age of twenty, he was 'totally innocent of what life was like anywhere outside of New York'. The first time he saw a completely nude woman was while he was in a bar in Paris, still waiting to head to war, even if he remained far too timid to follow his fellow Americans upstairs.[661] Once they had crossed the border, the volunteers would be able to take advantage of the increased number of prostitutes operating all throughout Spain.[662] A group of Basque seminarians fighting for Franco were dismayed that the first question posed by their comrades whenever they entered a new town tended to concern the whereabouts of the nearest brothel; there is no reason why the antifascist volunteers would have been any less eager to avail themselves of paid sexual services, even if the private nature of the activity makes it impossible to ascertain even approximately how many did so.[663] The huge collection of medical files kept on the volunteers who were sent to hospital for venereal disease nonetheless makes it clear that the figure ran well into the hundreds. Given that they include only those who required

[658] O. Ramirez de Lucas, 'El problema sexual en los frentes de guerra', *La Voz de la Sanidad,* no. 17, 7 November 1937, 15.
[659] Max Hodann, 'The Sexual Problem in the Army', *La voz de la sanidad,* no. 20, 7 December 1937, 13-14, RGASPI, 545.3.739.
[660] Interview with Fred Copeman, reel 6, 1978, IWM, CN: 794.
[661] Interview with Abe Smorodin, CDMH, PHO_ABAL_104.
[662] Ángel Alcalde, 'Wartime and Post-War Rape in Franco's Spain', *The Historical Journal,* 64:4 (2021), 1071.
[663] For the Basque Seminarians, see Alcalde, *Los excombatientes franquistas*), 79-80.

hospitalisation in the year of 1937, the figure was certainly much higher still. The files make it absolutely clear that men of various nationalities – among them Spanish, French, Swiss, Italian, Yugoslavian, Belgian, American, English, Germans and Poles – happily availed themselves of paid sexual services, often without using contraception.[664]

Ironically enough, many of these men contracted their diseases while already hospitalised for war wounds. Given that the International Brigades' hospitals, convalescence centres and bases tended to be situated near towns where brothels were not difficult to find and that the men within them were all too eager to find ways of alleviating their boredom, this perhaps should not be all that surprising. Sneaking out to the town centre, buying a few drinks and visiting a brothel in fact became an enjoyable routine in its own right for some of the volunteers.[665] Joseph Garber was visibly amused as he recalled tricking his nurse into thinking that he was going for a walk when he was instead planning on heading to a brothel with his friends, remembering it – above all – as 'a lot of fun'.[666] While there was not much to do near the International Brigade base at Les Planes, a largely forested area just outside of Barcelona, the volunteers soon caught onto the fact that there was a small brothel right near the train station where – according to a Mexican volunteer – 'six young and pretty women would charge ten pesetas for "a little job"'.[667] A visit to the brothel not only became a key part of some volunteers' itinerary when they were on leave in Madrid, but could also be recalled in a perfectly matter-of-fact way alongside such simple pleasures as a stroll down the Gran Vía, a visit to the cinema, a trip to a bar and, perhaps – if you were anywhere near the Hotel Florida and had a bit of luck on your side – a run-in with Ernest Hemingway.[668] It would seem that most such volunteers were having far too much fun to reflect on the political implications of paying for sex in an antifascist war.[669]

As in countless armed conflicts, the prevalence of prostitution in civil-war Spain was such that the International Brigade leadership sought to formulate an appropriate response through a combination of education, prevention and regulation. Their motivations for controlling the soldiers' sexual behaviour were much the same as those to be found in the context of other twentieth-century wars, even if they were always framed in the Commissariat's patented language of antifascism. First among them was the fact that venereal disease took desperately-needed men out of action for weeks at a time.[670] At a meeting held in the summer of 1938 the commissar of the Fifth Corps

[664] Medical files outlining venereal disease in the International Brigades, 1937, CDMH, Seccion Militar, 4765/3, 4, 5, and 6.
[665] Herrick, *Jumping the Line,* 184.
[666] Interview with Joseph Garber, reel 7, 1991, IWM, CN: 12291.
[667] Moreno-Navarro, *Las Brigadas Internacionales*, 97.
[668] Interview with Henry Gilerawitz, CDMH, PHO_ABAL_33.
[669] An exception was John Tisa – although that did not stop him from visiting a brothel himself. See Tisa, *Recalling the Good Fight,* 77-78.
[670] Anon., 'Sobre la lucha contra las enfermedades venéreas en la guerra', *AMI,* no. 10, 1 March 1938, 9, RGASPI, 545.3.737.

of the Republican army expressed his alarm at the number of cases all throughout the 45th International Division.[671] As he pointed out, a key solution to the problem lay in reminding the soldiers that it was their antifascist duty to maintain good personal hygiene. 5,000 copies of a flyer entitled 'beware of deadly kisses' which were printed to this end warned soldiers that 'if after you have escaped fascist bullets you are incapacitated by syphilis it is sad, stupid and injurious to our cause'. The flyer highlighted both the personal and collective consequences of contracting venereal disease with its stark reminder that 'in the city a minute's satisfaction may cause you a whole life time of suffering'.[672] In spite of these visceral warnings, the commissars and the medical personnel who collaborated with them recognised that soldiers were likely to continue paying for sex all the same.[673] Much like a number of British officers who had served in the Great War, some even saw prostitution as favourable in so far as it provided an outlet for more-or-less unavoidable sexual impulses which, if left unsatisfied, might otherwise lead to unhelpful feelings of pent-up frustration.[674] The key, as far as these particular individuals were concerned, was to break down the shame of approaching the unit's doctors for prophylactics and, in this way, ensure that whatever sex took place was at least safe.[675]

No amount of prophylactics, however, could address the second major risk associated with prostitution. Once again, warnings against the 'fifth column' were an antifascist variation on a long-familiar theme – in this case, the trope of an enemy temptress using her powers of sexual persuasion to undermine the war effort.[676] The International Brigades' sanitary service even went as far as to accuse sex workers of deliberating spreading disease among Republican ranks in order to fatally weaken their fighting potential. This was not regarded as a mere question of individual initiative, but rather as a co-ordinated campaign of sabotage: 'It must be said that the enemy sometimes uses the special arm of contagion in order to infect the adversary's soldiers', warned an article in one of the volunteers' bulletins, 'and for this reason it makes use of suitable women'.[677] As well as deliberately spreading venereal disease, prostitutes were accused of spying in order to secure sensitive military information. French-speaking volunteers were warned in an article entitled, quite simply, 'The Enemy' to beware of 'the pretty woman who invites us to a drink in the bars and who smilingly asks us about

[671] Report on meeting of the *Comisariado* of the 5th Cuerpo, 9 June 1938, RGASPI, 545.3.381.
[672] Flyer cautioning the International Brigades against poor hygiene, Commissariat of the International Brigades, June 1937, RGASPI, 545.2.457.
[673] Again, this has been a feature of other wars. See Lisa M. Todd, 'The Enemy Lurking Behind the Front: Controlling Sex in the German Forces Sent to Eastern and Western Europe, 1914-1918' in Alan Beyerchen and Emre Spencer (eds.), *Expeditionary Forces in the First World War* (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing and Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 82.
[674] Gibson, *Behind the Front,* 315.
[675] Max Hodann, 'The Sexual Problem in the Army', *La voz de la sanidad,* no. 20, 7 December 1937, 13-4, RGASPI, 545.3.739; Anon., 'Sanidad del soldado', no. 6, 3 July 1938, 5, RGASPI, 545.3.738.
[676] Schrijvers, *The Crash of Ruin,* 102.
[677] Anon,. 'Sobre la lucha contra las enfermedades venéreas en la guerra', *AMI,* no. 10, 1 March 1938, 9, RGASPI, 545.3.737.

our men, our positions, or with beautiful promises attempts to make us desert our units'.[678] One of the International Brigades' most senior commissars described the brothels which had sprung up in Albacete as not only 'centres of infection' but also 'nests of agents', with this belief proving sincere enough for a small group of volunteers to be charged with keeping an eye on them and reporting anything suspicious.[679]

Not all of the sexual encounters which took place between soldiers and civilians were consensual. Only in recent years has the topic of wartime sexual violence begun to receive the attention it deserves, with research specific to the Spanish Civil War still in its infancy. Ángel Alcalde's claim that the conflict 'drastically' increased women's chances of being victims of sexual assault is important to bear in mind when dealing with the International Brigades, no matter how infrequently the topic arises in the testimonies of the volunteers and the subsequent historiographical literature.[680] In an unintentionally revealing letter to his wife, volunteer Ivor Hickman justified his belief that the 'moral standards' of his comrades were good on the basis that, in his words, 'I don't suppose the XV Brigade in all its history has had to deal with more than two or three rapes'.[681] While the figure of 'two or three' was clearly speculative, it serves as an important reminder not to treat the volunteers any differently to their counterparts in other wars even if the almost total lack of evidence makes it impossible to know just how widespread sexual violence was. Given that no official documents are available on the matter, we are left with second-hand recollections which go into very little detail and are almost impossible to corroborate. One Madrigueras local, for example, recalled being told by his mother that a volunteer lodged in a neighbour's house had attempted to rape his host before being dragged away by superiors and shot in the cemetery.[682] The British veteran Leslie Gibson, who was unique in broaching the topic in a subsequent interview, claimed that another volunteer raped a girl coming back from the village fields. Apparently, he was court-martialled, sentenced to death and shot by his own comrades.[683]

A particularly notable episode of sexual violence was brought to light by Justo Martínez Amutio, Albacete's civil governor and – as we have previously seen – an outspoken critic of the International Brigades. In his memoirs, Martínez Amutio described André Marty as a 'fanatical Stalinist, despotic, cruel and implacable' but nonetheless conceded that there was one particular occasion in which the French Communist had behaved admirably. According to the civil governor, 'two elements of the International Brigades […] committed a repugnant crime in the first days of February 1937, in the city park, of which the victim was a girl of twelve years'. All the volunteers in town were lined up to file past the girl, who, without hesitating, identified one of the guilty soldiers.

[678] Anon., 'El Enemigo', *Le soldat de la Republique,* no. 36, 1 July 1937, 5, RGASPI, 545.3.417.
[679] Report by Vidal on the International Brigades, RGASPI, 545.2.37.
[680] Ibid, 1060.
[681] Hickman in Wainwright, *The Last to Fall*, 137.
[682] Asterio Talavera in Serrano, *Recuérdalo tú*, 18.
[683] Interview with Leslie Gibson, Reel 1, 2008, IWM, CN: 33027.

According to Martínez Amutio, they were then shot.[684] As with other references to sexual violence within the International Brigades, there does not appear to be any more evidence concerning the matter. Just as lacking is the testimony of the victims themselves. The only exception to this rule can be found in the memoirs of Marion Merriman, the wife of the American commander Robert Hale Merriman, in which she describes being raped by a Slavic volunteer who had been assigned to accompany her on a trip. Terrified though she was by the experience, she kept it to herself feeling that it would be a burden on her husband at a time when what most mattered was winning the war.[685] This particular incident is mentioned by Giles Tremlett in his recent history of the International Brigades, the likes of which deserves singling out as the only major work of scholarship to address the issue of sexual violence in the eight decades in which historians, and other writers, have been investigating the foreign volunteers.[686]

## Conclusion

Women may be largely absent from the extensive literature dealing with the International Brigades, but they were certainly not absent from the volunteers' experiences of the Spanish Civil War. Historians have long shown just how central women have been to armed conflict throughout history, and this is all the truer for a total war such as that fought in Spain where the entire civilian community was mobilised in favour of a series of ideologically-driven objectives. As historians have long shown, women were central to the Civil War in numerous ways, whether it was by briefly fighting on the frontlines, working in rearguard industry or engaging in political activities in support of both belligerents. They were also victims of the breakdown in the use of violence against frontline soldiers and rearguard civilians which defined all of the other total wars of the twentieth century, with photographic evidence of Spanish women being subjected to Nationalist bombing raids in cities like Madrid and Barcelona soon became a mainstay of the International Brigades' abundant propaganda. Women were not only a conspicuous presence in the volunteers' trench press, however. They were rarely hard to find in many of the places where the foreign soldiers operated, whether it was in rearguard villages, loyalist cities or a whole series of hospitals and convalescence centres dotted across the Republican zone. As such, opportunities for friendship, romance and sex were never far from hand. The consequence, in short, is that the Commissariat could hardly afford to ignore the women of loyalist Spain, nor their direct and indirect relationship to the volunteers, even if their subsequent chroniclers have proved all too willing to do so.

Real and imagined encounters with Spanish women not only shaped the volunteers' day-to-day experiences of their host country in the form of their hospital treatment, rearguard romances and the pursuit of sex, but also fed into their vision of themselves

[684] Martínez Amutio, *Chantaje a un pueblo,* 369-370.
[685] Marion Merriman and Warren Lerude, *American Commander in Spain: Robert Hale Merriman and the Abraham Lincoln Brigade* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1986), 148-149.
[686] Tremlett, *The International Brigades,* 284-286.

as compassionate soldiers defending the ‘Spanish People’ in a just war against fascism. Their identities as antifascists, as armed soldiers and as fighting men were not only inseparable but based on a series of gendered assumptions about war and fighting consolidated through their contact with the women of the loyalist rearguard. In spite of the occasional nod towards the brave militiawomen who had fought at the barricades only a few months before their own arrival to Spain, none of the volunteers openly questioned the exclusion of female fighters from the emerging Popular Army. If anything, a deeply gendered understanding of women as untainted by the occasionally burdensome realities of frontline fighting is what tended to make them so attractive, in more ways than one, to so many of the volunteers who came into contact with them in the villages, towns, hospitals and even brothels of loyalist zone. If the volunteers believed that women had any role to play in the war at all, it was limited to the still-essential task of furnishing the frontline soldiers with desperately-needed arms and munitions through their work in the factories of the rearguard; through a combination of articles in their trench press and visits from female delegations, they were encouraged to consider the wives, mothers and daughters of the loyalist zone as an integral part of the unified antifascist community working towards its liberation from the foreign invaders. In recovering these much-sidelined encounters, it therefore becomes clear just how crucial the volunteers’ attitudes towards Spanish women could prove in their ability to make, and imagine, antifascist war.

## 7: ‘How the Children of Spain Should Make War’ – The International Brigades and Spanish Children

### Introduction

The totality of the Spanish Civil War as they understood it meant that the leaders of the International Brigades not only took an interest in the men and women of loyalist Spain, but its children, too. While the volunteers make only fleeting references to their encounters with children in their subsequent testimonies, a careful search through the dozens of military reports, balance sheets, personal files, letters, pamphlets, books, bulletins, speeches, drawings and photographs which have long sat unnoticed in the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History reveals that their superiors invested a huge amount of effort into establishing contact between the two groups. What they meant by ‘children’ was never explicitly defined, but those who found themselves the focus of the International Brigades’ wide-reaching work were invariably under sixteen and often much younger. As well as holding *fiestas* and distributing toys, clothes and food to hundreds – if not thousands – of grateful boys and girls across the loyalist rearguard, a whole series of long-term endeavours including the establishment of canteens (*comedores*), homes (*hogares*) and day-care centres (*guarderías*) for refugees and the children of loyalist soldiers were undertaken at often considerable expense. These institutions were established and overseen by the International Brigades but were run, on a day-to-day basis, by nurses, teachers and non-combatant volunteers. While only a small minority of the 35,000 foreign soldiers were directly involved in their day-to-day running, Spanish children were an important presence in many of their lives owing to widespread coverage of these activities in their wartime bulletins as well as frequent fundraising drives.

In late 1937 an article outlining some of these initiatives appeared in the *Volunteer for Liberty* which, looking back over eighty years later, seems particularly astute. ‘The achievements of the International Brigades on the battlefields’, its anonymous author pointed out in much the same way previous chapters of this thesis have, ‘perhaps tend to obscure the work of peace and friendship that they are performing at the same time’. ‘Nowhere’, the article contended, was this spirit of friendship more apparent than in their ‘concern for the children of Spain’.[687] That very same concern, amply documented in the archives, continues to rank amongst the least explored aspects of the International Brigades’ antifascist struggle. A rare attempt to remedy this was the publication of María Isabel Esteve Torres’ book *Children’s Homes and the International Brigades* by the Spanish commemorative organisation *La Asociación de Amigos de las Brigadas Internacionales* in 2014. Nonetheless, it consists almost entirely of translated primary material which, for all of its unquestionable importance,

[687] Anon., ‘Soldiers of the XI Brigade Maintain a Home for Children Who Are Victims of War’, *English-language VFL*, 27 December 1937, 8-9, RGASPI, 545.2.362.

receives only passing analysis from the author.[688] A similar lack of critical scrutiny is evident in Ajmal Waqif's two-page breakdown of a single primary source in a popular history article published by the International Brigade Memorial Trust in 2022, as well as in Robert Llopis i Sendra's 2020 study of the International Brigade hospitals in Benissa and Dénia, attached to which were two children's homes.[689] Far more analytical is the modest literature surrounding the activities of Alfred Brauner, the French volunteer who was placed in charge of the unit's work with children, often with a focus on his shifting approach to childhood trauma before, during and after the Spanish Civil War.[690]

With these few exceptions, references to the International Brigades' child-centred work have been limited to a casual sentence or two within some of the more general studies of children during the Spanish Civil War which, since the 1980s, have outlined, often in great detail, loyalist efforts to evacuate, house and educate the tens of thousands of orphans and refugees within their rearguard.[691] More recently, historians such as Verónica Sierra Blas have mirrored the efforts of their colleagues dealing with other twentieth-century conflicts by shifting the historiographical focus towards the lived experiences of the children themselves and have, as a result, managed to highlight the ability of even the youngest Spaniards to creatively engage with the upheavals taking place all around them in their hitherto neglected role as historical actors.[692] This chapter situates itself firmly with these attempts to reclaim children's agency, not least

[688] María Isabel Esteve Torres*, Los Hogares Infantiles y las Brigadas Internacionales, 1936-1939* (Valencia: AABI, 2014)

[689] Ajmal Waqif, 'For the Happiness of the Children of Spain', *¡No Pasarán!*, (May 2022), 8-9; Robert Llopis i Sendra, *Brigadistes: Les Brigades Internacionales a Benissa i Dénia: 1937-1938* (Valencia: PUV, 2020)

[690] See Yannick Ripa, 'Naissance du dessin de guerre Les époux Brauner et les enfants de la civile espagnole', *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, 89 (January-March 2006), 29-46; Ana Hernández Merino, 'Las hebras para hilvanar la vida: el dibujo del dolor', *Arteterapia*, 1 (2006), 79-96 and Rose Duroux and Célia Keren, 'Retours sur dessins: Fred/Alfred Brauner 1938, 1946, 1976, 1991', in Rose Duroux and Catherine Milkovitch Rioux (eds.), *Enfances en guerre. Témoignages d'enfants sur la guerra* (Geneva: L'Équinoxe/Editions Georg, 2013), 99-119.

[691] See for example Rosalía Crego Navarro, 'Las colonias escolares durante la Guerra Civil (1936-1939)', *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma, Historia Contemporánea*, 5:2 (1989), 319; Juan Manuel Fernández Soria, 'La asistencia a la infancia en la Guerra Civil: Las colonias escolares', *Historia de la educación*, 6 (2010), 96, 115; and Verónica Sierra Blas, *Palabras huérfanas: Los niños y la Guerra Civil* (Madrid: Taurus, 2009), 84, 98, 102. Although they do not mention the International Brigades, see also Sjaak Braster and María del Mar del Pozo Andrés, 'Education and the Children's Colonies in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939): The Images of the Community Ideal', *Paedagogica Historica*, 51:4 (2015), 455-477; Sergio Valero Gómez 'Educación republicana y politización', *Historia Social*, 94 (2019), 97-114 and Antonio Viñao, 'Politics, Education and Pedagogy: Ruptures, Continuities and Discontinuities (Spain 1936-1939)', *Paedagogica Historica*, 51:4 (2015), 405-417.

[692] Sierra Blas, *Palabras huérfanas.* Children's 'agency' is also the main theme in the same author's essay 'A Lost Generation? Children and the Spanish Civil War' in James Matthews, (ed.), *Spain at War: Society, Culture and Mobilization, 1936-44* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 158-76. Juri Meda discusses the growing interest in children's agency as seen through drawings in 'Los dibujos infantiles como fuentes históricas: perspectivas heurísticas y cuestiones metodológicas', *Revista brasileira de história da educação*, 14:3 (2014), 139-65.

by making use of their own letters and drawings. Just as importantly, it investigates the ways in which they were mobilised by adults in pursuit of specific war aims. In this regard, it builds on the efforts of Till Kössler to use children as a means of gauging the existence of a collective antifascist culture in the Republican rearguard.[693] Above all, the following paragraphs will demonstrate how the International Brigades instrumentalised this very specific demographic to imagine – and even more importantly fashion – the antifascist war effort in their own image.

In particular, cross-cultural contact with Spanish children – whether experienced in person or through the wealth of internal propaganda produced by the International Brigade Commissariat – fed into the volunteers' emerging identities as compassionate soldiers fighting for the survival of the Spanish People in a just, necessary and humanitarian struggle. In the memorable words of Alfred Brauner, the volunteers were not ordinary combatants at all but 'soldiers of culture' struggling for the freedom and happiness of a martyred community not only on the frontlines, but in the rearguard, too.[694] By framing their wartime role in these novel terms, both the volunteers and their superiors were adapting the long-standing trope of the 'military man of feeling' who fights out of a sense of duty to the young, elderly and vulnerable to the very specific circumstances of 1930s Spain.[695] In addition to providing them with a clear sense of moral and military purpose, this helped them to legitimize their participation in the violence unfolding throughout the country for their own benefit, that of their Spanish hosts and even that of international public opinion. As a result, it is safe to say that Brauner and his collaborators at every level of the International Brigades – not to mention their many supporters outside their ranks – proved to be unconscious heirs to those eighteenth-century military theorists who had sought to 'civilise soldiers' in order to render their activities more palatable to their civilian hosts and – to use a modern turn of phrase – win their hearts and minds over to their frontline struggle.[696]

In addition to feeding into the volunteers' understanding of the antifascist community in arms, children offered an unprecedented opportunity to shape it in their own image. Whilst they were certainly regarded as victims of fascism who needed to be protected from the direct harm of its indiscriminate violence, those who fell under the volunteers' care were fully expected to become class-conscious members of a broader proletarian collective which endorsed the war of annihilation the foreign soldiers were waging on the frontlines. Far from being considered passive civilians, they were encouraged to behave as model antifascists in the making and, in this way, prove themselves worthy

[693] Till Kössler, 'Children in the Spanish Civil War' in Baumeister and Schuler-Springorum, *'If you Tolerate This…',* (Frankfurt and New York: Campus Verlag, 2008), 101-132.

[694] The phrase is used in a leaflet produced by the *Comité Pro-Niños Españoles* in July 1938 and digitised in the periodical library (hemeroteca) of the Arxiu de la ciutat de Barcelona.

[695] For a compelling application of the concept of the 'military man of feeling' to the Crimean War, see Holly Furneaux, *Military Men of Feeling: Emotion, Touch, and Masculinity in the Crimean War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[696] For useful details on the work of these theorists in a German context, see Cornelis Van Der Haven, 'Military Men of Feeling? Gender Boundaries and Military-Civil Encounters in Two German Soldier Plays (1760-80)', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies,* 41:4 (2018), 511-26.

of the egalitarian 'New Spain' which would be built on the ashes of feudalism and fascism in the event of a Republican victory. Here, then, is a particularly clear example of the tension between the 'protection and politicisation' of children which historian Sandra Souto Kustrín has identified in the work of welfare organisations across the Republican rearguard.[697] Attempts to socialise young Spaniards into 'little comrades' owed a debt to progressive educational theories which had gained ground throughout Europe and were linked to long-standing attempts to create conscientious citizens through interventionist government policies.[698] For all of these important transnational influences, however, the International Brigades' child-centred initiatives were ultimately made possible by the Republic's own involvement in the lives of Spanish children from the earliest months of the Civil War onwards.

## I: 'The Mercenaries Destroy, the Volunteers of Liberty Rebuild' – Children and the Imagining of the Antifascist Community in Spain

Overlooked though they may remain, there is no denying that the commissars of the International Brigades went to great lengths to ensure that a range of encounters took place between Spanish children and the foreign volunteers right up until the latter were withdrawn from action. In addition to the lavish fiestas held in many of the localities through which the volunteers passed, the Commissariat saw to it that the long-term care of hundreds of boys and girls in the loyalist rearguard was also seen to. Their efforts fit firmly within a well-documented record of Republican intervention in children's lives in the form of mass evacuations to rearguard 'colonies' (*colonias infantiles*) responsible for housing, feeding and educating those under their care.[699] These initiatives benefitted from the wider advances which ideas concerning the state's responsibility to guarantee the welfare of children had made all throughout Europe by the time the Civil War broke out, even finding themselves enshrined in the relatively recent constitution of the Spanish Second Republic.[700] Just as well, given that within weeks of the failed military rising the loyalist authorities found themselves having to deal with unprecedented numbers of young people wandering the streets without homes or guardians, not least in Madrid.[701] With the siege of the capital showing no signs of abating, the government decided to initiate large scale evacuations to Valencia and Catalonia which impacted as many as 100,000 children between the months of October 1936 and March 1937 alone.[702] The first evacuees

[697] Sandra Souto Kustrín, *Paso a la juventud: Movilización democrática, estalinismo y revolución en la República Española* (Valencia: PUV, 2013), 237.
[698] Andy Byford, *Science of the Child in Late Imperial and Early Soviet Russia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 3-21.
[699] The relevant literature is sizeable but largely descriptive. For a good overview of the *colonias* see Rosalía Crego Navarro, 'Las colonias escolares durante la Guerra Civil', 299-328.
[700] Peter Anderson has very recently situated the war within an age of mass child removal. See *The Age of Mass Child Removal in Spain: Taking, Losing, and Fighting for Children, 1926-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021). For the civil war years see pages 162-163.
[701] Braster and del Mar del Pozo Andrés, 'Education and the Children's Colonies in the Spanish Civil War', 455-456.
[702] Ibid, 455.

were lodged with families, but they were soon being placed in group homes with up to a hundred residents each.[703]

Directly inspired by these domestic developments, the International Brigades became one of many military units, political parties, trade unions and humanitarian organisations backed by the Republican Government in providing assistance for children.[704] The most striking form taken by that assistance was their establishment of various homes and day-care centres. The International Brigades' first large-scale undertaking was an ambitious children's home set up in the expropriated palace of La Moraleja, near Madrid, which became responsible for the care of around sixty children who were mostly evacuees from the war-torn north of the capital. The symbolic connection between the volunteers and these children was reinforced by the fact that the premises had served as a base for German members of the International Brigades during the Battle of Madrid in late 1936.[705] The aptly-named *Hogar Ernst Thälmann* remained the International Brigades' flagship initiative, but it was far from their last. By the time the foreign volunteers were forced behind the River Ebro as a result of Franco's blistering Aragon offensive in the spring 1938, the Commissariat had set up a wide range of facilities tasked with looking after children and invariably attached to their various bases and hospitals throughout the rearguard. Wounded soldiers and nursing staff at the International Brigade convalescence centre in Benissa set up a home in an adjacent villa, with their colleagues in nearby Dénia establishing another.[706] Those at the International Brigade hospital in Benicàssim fitted out two villas for refugee children from Madrid and Asturias, with a third designated for the children of the Spanish nursing staff; in total, they looked after 160 children. Meanwhile, a volunteer base in Murcia known as Camp Lukacs opened its gates to a further 350 refugee children each afternoon, providing them with baths, classes, medical attention and fun activities such as puppet shows.[707]

By late 1937 the International Brigades' child-centred work had reached such proportions that the Commissariat decided to set up its very own *Comité Pro-Niños Españoles de las Brigadas Internacionales* (International Brigades' Committee for Spanish Children). As we have already seen, Commissar General Luigi Longo chose Alfred Brauner – a Frenchman who had gone to Spain to report on the war for a left-

[703] Juan Manuel Fernández Soria, 'La asistencia a la infancia en la Guerra Civil', 97.
[704] For groups operating in Spain, see Fernández Soria, 'La asistencia a la infancia en la Guerra Civil', 83-128. For international humanitarian assistance, see Gabriel Pretus, *Humanitarian Relief in the Spanish Civil War* (Edwin Mellen, New York and Ontario: 2013).
[705] Esteve Torres*, Los Hogares Infantiles*, 8-30.
[706] Alfred Brauner, 'Enfants evacues', *Ayuda Medica Internacional,* 1 January 1938, 14-15, RGASPI, 545.3.737; anon., 'Kinderheim "Solidaridad" im Genesungshospital Benisa', *German VFL*, 2 December 1937, 13, RGASPI, 545.2.367; letter to *l'office d'enfance*, 18 May 1938, RGASPI, 545.1.75.
[707] El Comité Pro-Niños de las Brigadas Internacionales, *Los niños españoles y las Brigadas Internacionales,* July 1938, RGASPI, 545.2.404, unnumbered pages; anon., report on the work of the *Comité Pro-Niños*, 13 July 1938, RGASPI, 545.1.76.

wing magazine while his wife worked at the International Brigade hospital in Benicàssim – to head the organisation. Both Brauner's left-wing credentials and his doctoral studies into children's education made him well suited to the work at hand.[708] Acting alongside him in the role of administrator was fellow volunteer Henry Stuart, a Communist Party member since 1934 and himself an orphan.[709] In early 1938 they were joined by the Polish nurse Anja Hammerman, who immediately prior to her arrival in Spain had been employed in a home for Spanish children not far from Moscow.[710] She was now charged with co-ordinating the committee's medical work.[711] Local sub-committees were also formed to elect individual members of the International Brigades to oversee each facility, the day-to-day running of which tended to fall to female volunteers attached to their various bases and hospitals.[712] Exactly how many of the foreign fighters came into contact with the children looked after in these facilities is impossible to say. Throughout 1937 alone some 7,575 men spent time at the nearby hospitals of Benicàssim, another 924 at Benisa and another 864 still at Dénia, suggesting that the figure ran into the hundreds.[713]

That both the intellectual inspiration and practical framework for the Committee's work lay in the Republican Government's own focus on children's welfare is left in no doubt by its founding charter, the likes of which made clear that it 'supports the efforts of the Government of the Republic to help the children of Spain'.[714] These efforts were represented as a major achievement which, in turn, reflected the inherent benevolence of the loyalist war effort when compared with that being carried out by the marauding fascistic invaders. In a contribution to a medical journal published under the International Brigades' auspices, Brauner expressed his view that 'if the Spanish Republic can be proud of a job, it can be […] the evacuation of children who were in territory threatened or occupied by the fascists', adding that 'the Minister of Public Education helped by […] the International Brigades have created a large number of children's homes where these little ones have enough to eat, education and joy'.[715] In order to bring these efforts to fruition, Brauner's committee continued the long-standing habit of collecting funds from the foreign fighters, with one particular drive managing to raise some 27,949 pesetas.[716] This money would prove indispensable

[708] Biography of Alfred Brauner in support of PCE application, undated, RGASPI, 545.6.1096.
[709] Biography of Stuart Henry, undated, RGASPI, 545.1.75.
[710] Biography of Anja Hammerman, undated, RGASPI, 545.1.76.
[711] Anon., report concerning personnel of the *Comité Pro-Niños*, 6 August 1938, RGASPI, 545.1.75.
[712] Anon., report on the personnel of *Pro-Niños* institutions, undated, RGASPI, 545.1.76.
[713] Anon,. 'Número de heridos en los hospitales de las Brigadas Internacionales […] durante el año de 1937', AGMAV, C.1094,11,1/ d.1.
[714] Anon, founding Statute of the *Comité Pro-Niños*, undated, RGASPI, 545.1.75.
[715] Brauner, 'Enfants evacues', *AMI*, 14-15, RGASPI, 545.3.737.
[716] Brauner, 'La Labor del Comité Pro-Niños Españoles', *Boletín: Diario del Comisariado del XII Brigada Garibaldi,* no. 92, 9 August 1938, 4, RGASPI, 545.3.193; for the efforts of different military companies at an International Brigade base in Olot to assist children see 'Todo para ayudar a los niños refugiados', *Nuestra Vida*, No. 6., undated, 11, RGASPI, 545.2.418; for an article which listed the amounts raised by each company of the H. Vuillemin Battalion, see 'Les filleuels de notre

for funding their costly initiatives. In the months of July and August 1938 alone the Committee spent some 50,000 pesetas on opening day-care centres, canteens and homes in the Catalan towns of Moya, Mataró, S'Agaro, Santa Coloma and Vic. Together, they looked after a combined total of at least a thousand children.[717]

As the founding charter of the *Comité Pro-Niños* established, the children cared for by the International Brigades were either the sons and daughters of soldiers fighting for the Republic or else refugees from war-torn parts of the country.[718] A scrapbook of letters and drawings produced by the children of the Mataró *guardería* around the autumn of 1938 offers an extremely rare glimpse into some of their experiences. They are refugees from Madrid, Bilbao, San Sebastian and Asturias, with ten-year-old Nati Elisburu from Mondragón, in the Basque Country, describing 'circling the world since the war broke out' and passing through Durango, Bilbao, France and Lleida before finally ending up with the International Brigades in Mataró. Nati claimed that the children had squandered time playing in the streets before they were 'brought together in the *guardería*', which – he wrote – 'for us is home'.[719] Ten year old Marcos recalled his hometown as being a 'working fishing village' with a 'happy population' until the 'fascists came to disrupt our happiness […] with the planes above, sowing bombs'. Like Nati, he was thrown 'from one town to another' until ending up in Catalonia.[720] By the time Nati and Marcos put their experiences to paper, refugee children had become a conspicuous feature wherever the International Brigades operated. In July 1938 the Committee counted an incredible one thousand refugee children in Vic, a further thousand in S'Agaro, 350 in Mataró, 128 in Moya, and another hundred in Olot.[721] Very often these were hungry, homeless and sick, leading the doctors and nurses working with the volunteers to administer on-the-spot medical examinations as well as establish permanent clinics for eye and skin disease.[722]

This mounting humanitarian catastrophe led the Committee to turn its attention away from model homes like the *Hogar Ernst Thälmann* towards large-scale facilities capable of administering aid to as many children as possible.[723] The shift would have been impossible without the assistance of a wide range of civil and military organisations. From their new base in Catalonia, the volunteers established a close working relationship with local Socialists, Anarchists, Communists and Antifascist women's groups in order to collect funds, find and fit out premises as well as secure

brigade', *Adelante: Journal of the XIII International Brigade,* no. 5, 4 July 1937, 5, RGASPI, 545.3.345.

[717] Brauner, report on relations between the SRI and the *Comité Pro-Niños*, C. August 1938, RGASPI, 545.1.76; anon., report concerning the personnel of the *Comité Pro-Niños*, 6 August 1938, RGASPI, 545.1.75; anon., report on the work of the *Comité Pro-Niños*, 13 July 1938, RGASPI, 545.1.76.

[718] Esteve Torres, *Hogares infantiles,* especially 30-35 and 54-56.

[719] Anon., album with letters and drawings of the children of Mataró, 11 and 22, RGASPI, 545.2.210.

[720] Ibid, 44.

[721] Anon., report on the work of the *Comité pro-Niños espanoles,* 1 July 1938, RGASPI, 545.1.76.

[722] Anon., report on the work of the *Comité pro-Niños espanoles*, 13 July 1938, RGASPI, 545.1.76.

[723] Anon., report on the work of the *Comité pro-Niños espanoles,* 1 July 1938, RGASPI, 545.1.76.

food, medicines and clothing.[724] The assistance of the Catalan regional government was invaluable, with requests filed for pillows, beds, shoes, kitchen utensils and even – at one point – no fewer than a thousand combs.[725] As we have seen in previous chapters, the International Brigades' political and military leaders were always at pains to stress that they were not an autonomous army operating on their own terms, but a proletarian vanguard spanning the entire left-wing spectrum and serving at the pleasure of the Spanish Republican Government. Their work with children would now prove key in furthering this narrative and, with it, the International Brigades' underlying legitimacy. Tellingly, if not particularly subtly, the home set up at Benissa was named *Solidaridad* (Solidarity) in honour of the various antifascist groups which had helped make it a reality.[726] As well as serving as useful propaganda, the establishment of such facilities – and, indeed, the provision of humanitarian aid to children in general – enabled the International Brigades to further the Comintern policy of forging the Popular Front coalitions they regarded as so essential for victory.[727] Even if they did not realise it, children were being instrumentalised by the transnational fighting unit in order to shape the political, as well as military, character of the antifascist struggle in Spain.

This was not the only way in which the International Brigades used their work with children to secure specific wartime objectives. Just as the commissars hoped that by helping to bring in the harvest they could win over conservative peasants in rural villages, so too did they hope that by holding *fiestas* they could convince even the most reticent civilians to accept the presence of the foreign fighters in their midst. The key to the much-coveted hearts and minds of many communities, as the commissars soon realised, were their children. Time and again, these were the undisputed guests of honour at a range of events held in the presence of uniformed volunteers which involved singing, dancing, game-playing and the distribution of toys, clothes, food and drink. While much of this activity was represented in the International Brigades' internal and external propaganda as motivated by the volunteers' instinctive love of children, more often than not they were carefully-planned affairs which cost considerable sums of money to carry out.[728] To take one particularly notable example, the staff responsible for the International Brigade hospital in the Catalan town of Vic served an afternoon meal to at least 1,500 children during a *fiesta* held in July 1938, distributing a whopping 600 litres of chocolate milk to the attendees with the help of the local

[724] Letter from *Socors Roig de Catalunya*, 11 August 1938, RGASPI, 545.1.76.
[725] Letter to the Consejaría de la Generalidad from the *Comité Pro-Niños*, 11 July 1938, RGASPI, 545.1.75.
[726] Anon., 'Kinderheim "Solidaridad" im Genesungshospital Benisa', *German VFL*, 13, RGASPI.
[727] John Sorkson, 'Americans and Canadians in the Internationals Brigades', undated article draft, C. 1937, RGASPI, 454.3.470.
[728] Evidence of this activity abounds in RGASPI. See for example Luis Encima, 'La fiesta del día siete', *Nuestra vida*, no. 6, 12, RGASPI, 545.2.418 and anon., 'Report on activities of the XI Brigade', RGASPI, 545.3.8. For a typical news report, see 'Un exemple de fraternisation', *French VFL*, 7 February 1937, 4, RGASPI, 545.2.370.

government and the communist aid organisation *Socorro Rojo Internacional*.[729] Given the enormous material shortages suffered by the Republic by that summer, the significance of this cannot be overstated.

Ideally, and as this thesis has repeatedly made clear, the civilians living in the villages where the various units of the International Brigades trained, rested and recuperated would not limit themselves to passively accepting their presence in the rearguard. Just as importantly, it was hoped that the soldiers' encounters with children would galvanise entire swathes of the population to support what all of the volunteers considered to be a zero-sum struggle against fascism. The commissar at the International Brigade hospital in Benicàssim was therefore thrilled to report that the wounded volunteers' work with children had helped to win the sympathy of townsfolk who, as far as he could tell, had voted in large numbers for 'the reactionaries and the fascists' in the elections of February 1936.[730] Other individuals responsible for the International Brigades' child-centred work similarly, and perfectly openly, described their efforts as invaluable when it came to channeling the political energies of Spaniards towards an antifascist victory, with one internal report on the creation of a children's canteen in Santa Coloma highlighting how it had been 'a tremendous factor in winning over indifferent sections of the population to the need for the […] struggle against fascism and its barbarism', concluding in no uncertain terms that 'if we have the children, we have the women'.[731] Even taking into account the probability that these commentators simply saw what they wanted to, there can be no doubting that they regarded children as the key to exercising a moral, as well as material, effect on the 'Spanish People' in what they considered to be a total war for national liberation which left absolutely no room for civilian indifference.

All of these activities – from the holding of local fiestas right through to the establishment of elaborate children's homes – carried enormous symbolic power. Luigi Longo publicly described the volunteers' concern for children as only natural given that so many of them had left their own sons and daughters to fight in Spain, mirroring the explanation which some Spanish villagers themselves gave for the soldiers' conspicuous generosity towards the youngsters who swarmed around them in the hopes of receiving some sweets, striking up a conversation in pidgin Spanish or watching them train in the fields.[732] To a limited extent, this was true. The writings of some of the volunteers certainly show that their own children were very much on their minds in Spain. 'To Keith and Carol', began one of them in a postcard celebrating the *Hogar Ernst Thälmann* and featuring a child's drawing of a boy sitting on a stool, before

[729] Letter from the delegate of the Vic children's home to Alfred Brauner, 21 July 1938, RGASPI, 545.3.708.
[730] Anon., Report on work at Benicàssim between December 1937 and January 1938, RGASPI, 545.2.72.
[731] Anon., 'Unser comidor der niños in St. Coloma del Farnes', 10 August 1938, RGASPI, 545.3.65.
[732] Anon., 'Quelques heures parmi les gosses de la XI Brigade', *French VFL*, 23 December 1937, 5-6, RGASPI, 545.2.370.

reminding its young recipients back in Britain to 'be good children and love mummy always'.[733] The fact of the matter, however, was that not nearly as many of the volunteers had left behind their own children as Luigi Longo liked to imply. If anything, the reason that so many of them had taken up arms in Spain was precisely the fact that they *did not* have family commitments holding them back from high-risk military service in a faraway country. Instead, representations of the volunteers as natural father figures served the decidedly political purpose of enabling the International Brigades to present themselves as 'military men of feeling' and, in this way, make an important case for the legitimacy of their antifascist cause.

Most obviously, representations of the volunteers as compassionate soldiers reinforced their constant claims that they were the natural allies of the 'Spanish People' in their struggle against a brutal fascist invasion. Their apparently instinctive love of children was constantly contrasted with the cold-blooded barbarism of the 'fascists' whose principal war aim, it was repeatedly implied, was to murder defenceless boys and girls as well as destroy their homes and schools. The juxtaposition was clear, constant and deliberate – not to mention extraordinarily emotive. Throughout the Civil War, both the Republican authorities and their international supporters mobilised images of bombed children as a means of provoking public disgust towards the enemy and, in turn, heartfelt support for their own cause.[734] The International Brigades invoked similar imagery – either through written text, photographs, or even by reprinting the drawings which the children under their own care sent to them – in order to justify the volunteers' ongoing participation in what was, after all, a foreign civil war. Brauner made it clear to Longo, in no uncertain terms, that the central message of the book he was preparing on the *Comité Pro Niños* was to be that 'the mercenaries destroy, the volunteers of liberty rebuild' and, in this way, suggest that the interests of children were best served by the antifascist cause.[735] The photographs of clean, well-dressed and smiling children playing in the fresh air, studying in bright classrooms and resting in immaculate dorms which appeared in the propaganda celebrating the International Brigades' own initiatives certainly reinforced this narrative. If the 'fascists' ruined the lives of children, the loyalists – chief amongst them the foreign volunteers – actively improved them.

Whilst the foreign volunteers' sympathy for Spanish children was certainly genuine, the idea of disinterested humanitarianism of the kind famously championed by Eglantyne Jebb in the wake of the First World War was of little interest to the commissars, propagandists, educators and nurses responsible for the International Brigades' own rearguard work. On the one hand, they agreed with the view – which had gathered pace in the preceding decade – that the violence and disruption of war

[733] 'Arthur', postcard to children, undated, Marx Memorial Library, SC/VOL/ART/3.
[734] See Stradling, *Your Children Will Be Next*.
[735] Brauner, letter to Longo concerning the creation of a brochure on the International Brigades and Spanish Children, 1 January 1938, RGASPI, 545.1.76.

can be detrimental to the welfare of children and, as a consequence, necessitated the intervention of adults. At the same time, however, they were deeply committed to the armed antifascist struggle being waged by the foreign volunteers on the frontlines.[736] Far from regarding children as a source of reconciliation between mortal enemies, they understood the International Brigades' own humanitarian initiatives to be a natural extension of that very same armed struggle. It is precisely this conflation of war, politics and humanitarianism – the likes of which can be detected in frequent representations of the foreign volunteers as hardened soldiers willing to use violence in the field as well as gentle fathers eager to protect children in the rearguard – which differentiated the International Brigades' child-centred work from that being carried out by other transnational groups operating in civil-war Spain such as the Red Cross and the Quakers.[737] When putting together his book on the *Comité Pro Niños*, Alfred Brauner made sure to prioritise those photographs which showed armed or uniformed volunteers surrounded by crowds of happy children as though this was the most natural environment for an antifascist soldier to find himself.[738] Nowhere is the trope of the 'military man of feeling' clearer than in the final product, sent out – free of charge – to civil and military figures throughout Republican Spain.

## II: 'How the Children of Spain Should Make War' – Forging the Antifascist Future of Spain

As well as helping to win the hearts and minds of their parents and neighbours – not to mention the sympathy of international observers – Republican children were *themselves* expected to regard the volunteers as 'soldiers of culture' protecting them from the evils of fascism. The first step in achieving this objective was to forge a sense of community between the two groups by orchestrating personal encounters in the International Brigades' hospitals, homes, canteens and day-care centres. The conversion of abstract solidarity with the 'Spanish People' into a shared sense of personal accountability was reflected in the language used by both the volunteers and the children to describe their presence in each other's lives, with one military bulletin stressing that it was 'no exaggeration' to describe a group of local refugees as 'our children' because they ate together in the same canteen.[739] Recalling a home sponsored by his own unit, German volunteer Albert Riebeling took pride in the fact

[736] For the emergence of transnational child-centred humanitarianism in the aftermath of the First World War, as well as Jebb's role within the movement, see Bruno Cabanes, *The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), particularly pages 248-299.

[737] This is not to suggest that supposedly 'neutral' organisations always managed to remain above the political fray of wartime Spain. for the Quakers' often frustrated attempts to remain politically impartial, see Daniel Maul, 'The Politics of Neutrality: The American Friends Service Committee and the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939', *European Review of History*, 23:1-2 (2016), 82-100. For a detailed, if largely descriptive, summary of international humanitarian responses to the Spanish Civil War in general, see Pretus, *Humanitarian Relief in the Spanish Civil War.*

[738] Brauner to Longo, 1 January 1938, RGASPI, 545.1.76.

[739] Anon., 'La vida de la 4ª Cia.', *Nuestra Vida*, No. 7, 1938, 9, RGASPI, 545.2.418.

that ‘they were our children, the children of the Second Artillery Group “Skoda” of the the Thälmann Battery’.[740] For their part, the girls who attended one particular children’s home adopted the habit of calling their favourite volunteers ‘uncles’ whenever they paid a visit, not unlike their counterparts at the children’s camp in Murcia who referred to the resident soldiers as ‘fathers’.[741] Even when they were not physically present, the foreign volunteers remained an inescapable feature of the children’s lives given that the facilities in which they were clothed and fed were named after them, that they were told about them by their caretakers, that they wrote letters for them, that they made collective pledges to them, that they created drawings for them and that they even exchanged gifts with them.[742]

The adults who were responsible for these varied activities hoped that the children’s feelings of friendship towards the volunteers would translate into a deeper sympathy for their political and military objectives. The claim made by one individual quoted in Alfred Brauner’s book on the work of the *Comité Pro-Niños* that ‘everything that may remind the children of the war and its horrors we try to keep away from them’ was quite simply untrue, and likely produced with the sensibilities of an international audience in mind.[743] In reality, there emerged a curious tension between the volunteers’ stated objective of physically shielding the children from the violence of total war and their concerted attempts to remind them that Franco’s Nationalists were monstrous barbarians who must be physically annihilated from the earth. This tension is plain to see in the speeches which the staff of various children’s facilities gave over *Radio Barcelona* on the occasion of their withdrawal to Catalonia. Hundreds of children were encouraged to gather around a radio set in order listen to tailored messages from familiar personalities who had, until very recently, been responsible for their care. Amongst them was Commissar Pimpaud of the International Brigade base in Murcia, the likes of whom wasted no time in explaining that the volunteers ‘continue the fight against very bad men who do much harm to children like you, by killing dads and also many little boys and little girls with big bombs’. His speech was loaded with violent language intended to provoke hatred for the enemy and support for a Republican victory.[744]

Nor were children expected to be passive recipients of these belligerent messages. Their direct, creative and sustained engagement with the International Brigades’ concept of antifascist warfare is made apparent by many of the sources they themselves produced, not least in the form of several drawings which have since ended up in the Russian State Archive. Since the 1920s, progressive educators throughout Europe had promoted drawing as a means of fomenting children’s capacity

[740] Albert Riebeling in Esteve Torres, *Recuerdos de brigadistas alemanes,* 362-363.
[741] Interview with Emil Miltenbeger in Esteve Torres, *Hogares Infantiles,* 54; Gusti Jirku, *Nuestra lucha contra la muerte: el trabajo del Servicio Sanitario Internacional* (unspecified place on publication: AABI, digitised, undated)
[742] Anon., ‘Nuestros Peques’, *Ádelante Palafox!* no. 2, undated, 5, AGMAV, C.1097,3,1/d.5.
[743] *Los niños españoles y las Brigadas Internacionales*, RGASPI, 545.2.404, unnumbered pages.
[744] Radio message from Commissar Pimpaud to the children of Murcia, May 1938, RGASPI, 545.1.76.

for self-expression, with liberal artists such as Maruja Mallo and organisations like the *Institución Libre de Enseñanza* bringing these methods into Spanish classrooms during the short-lived Second Republic.[745] The use of drawing continued into the Spanish Civil War, and has fascinated historians ever since. Depictions of bomber planes, ruined towns and queues for rationed food have long been rallied as direct testimonies of children's traumatic wartime experiences by a range of researchers who often situate their recovery of childhood voices within Spain's historical memory movement.[746] They have, consequently, been the source of substantial public as well as academic interest, as shown by the staging of an exhibition showcasing some 1,172 drawings and entitled 'In Spite of Everything, They Still Draw' at the Spanish National Library between November 2006 and February 2007.

Whilst many wartime drawings certainly testify to a range of horrendous first-hand experiences, it is important to avoid falling into the trap identified by Nicholas Stardgardt whereby the children who lived through them are automatically reduced to the zero-sum status of traumatised victims.[747] A more critical reading of their artwork can in fact tell us a great deal about their engagement with the socio-political environment in which they operated, with Sergio Valero Gómez doing well to remind us that most examples from the Spanish Civil War were not spontaneous creations at all, but rather commissioned by adults eager to socialise the children behind them into the partisan values of the wartime Republic.[748] In short, pedagogical and political objectives overlapped in the continued use of drawing in the Republican rearguard, as even the most cursory of glances at some of the illustrations produced by the children looked after by the International Brigades makes abundantly clear. Many of those drawn by the children based at the Mataró *guardería* reflect neither their author's first-hand experiences of violent conflict nor show any obvious signs of trauma. Rather than 'witnessing' war – to use a common historiographical cliché – they are imagining it with the help of imagery, symbols and language provided by their antifascist caretakers.[749] The result is a number of unwaveringly celebratory depictions of the

[745] Valero Gómez, 'Educación republicana y politización', 102; Roberta Ann Quance, 'Maruja Mallo and the Interest in Children's Art during the Second Republic', *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 90:7 (2013), 803-818.

[746] Núria Padrós Tuneu et al. studied drawings produced in one Catalan school as a means of gauging the daily lives of children in 'The Spanish Civil War as Seen Through Children's Drawings of the Time', *Paedagogica Historica*, 51:4 (2015), 478-495; for a more general study see Christian Roth, 'Trotz allem zeichnen sie: Der Spanische Bürgerkrieg mit Kinderaugen gesehen', *Paedagogica Historica*, 45, 1-2 (2009), 191-214.

[747] Nicholas Stargardt, *Witnesses of War: Children's Lives Under the Nazis* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005).

[748] Meda, 'Los dibujos infantiles', 161-162; Valero Gómez, 'Educación republicana', 97-114.

[749] The word 'witness' or 'witnesses' frequently appears in the titles of popular history books concerning children during war. See for example Nicholas Stardgardt, *Witnesses of War,* mentioned above; Emmy E. Werner, *Reluctant Witnesses: Children's Voices From the Civil War* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1998) and Svetlana Alexievich, *Last Witnesses* (London: Random House, 2020).

foreign volunteers in action which both applaud their heroic use of violence on the frontlines and show little pity for the individuals on its receiving end.

While they bear all the hallmarks of any child's imagination – they often take place in picturesque panoramas inhabited by hills, trees, castles and in one case an anthropomorphic sun happily contemplating the carnage below – these drawings also show just how closely their authors had assimilated the International Brigades' partisan version of the war. Take for example nine-year-old refugee Luís Fernández's depiction of two opposing hills. On one flies a flag bearing two swastikas, and on the other a Republican tricolour. Planes linger above, while heavy artillery pounds away below.[750] Here is the International Brigades' understanding of the conflict as a sovereign struggle against the fascist invader represented in child-like microcosm. Other drawings are not only partisan, but extremely violent. Miguel Gómez drew a band of Republican soldiers pursuing three Nationalists – identified by the obligatory swastikas on their uniforms – who have abandoned their rifles in a hurry to retreat. Far from decrying the horrors of war, its caption – 'the cowardice of the fascists' – celebrates the volunteers' martial heroism. In doing so, he has completely dehumanised the enemy in a way which would have been far less surprising if the drawing had been created by an adult combatant rather than an eleven-year-old child.[751] Enrique Onis, also eleven, drew an even more ferocious scene in which a volunteer is shown gleefully mowing down five men – again branded with swastikas – while a plane scores a direct hit on a sixth individual, the body of whom can just be made out in the midst of an inky blast.[752]

The writing of collective pledges and letters to the volunteers provided children with another opportunity to creatively grapple with the International Brigades' concept of antifascist war. The central themes of those which survive were clearly suggested by the adults whose idea it was to commission them in the first place, with a series of stock phases such as 'the Spanish people', 'fascist swine', 'invaders' and 'criminals' making repeat appearances.[753] As with their counterparts in educational institutions all across the Republican zone whose staff had been purged, killed or gone missing, these adults had no sympathy whatsoever for the Nationalists.[754] All the same,

[750] Anon., album with letters and drawings of the children of Mataró, 11, RGASPI, 545.2.210.
[751] Ibid, 7.
[752] Ibid., 9.
[753] See letters to the International Brigades from María Lopez ('Not just us but the entire Spanish people are very thankful towards you'), Teresa Salom ('You had gone to the front and fought for the liberty of Spain but those fascist swine have wounded you; and so you arrived to this hospital in Mataró where you have continued your great work, creating our day-care centre'), María Luia Mollado ('Just as Spain hates the invaders, so it knows how to appreciate and love those who have come to give their blood generously for our freedom') and a child without a clearly intelligible name who addressed the volunteers as 'you who with such dignity and so much warmth fight on our soil against those criminal invaders, who wish for nothing except for innocent blood to run and to destroy homes'. These can be found in the scrapbook of letter and drawings of the children of Mataró on pages 6, 30, 20 and 42 respectively at RGASPI, 545.2.210.
[754] Viñao, 'Politics, Education and Pedagogy', 47.

attempting to distinguish between their voices and those of the children is not only impossible, but perhaps misguided. Given that most of those children were refugees who had recently fled the rebel advance, depictions of the enemy as violent bullies only interested in doing them physical harm would certainly have helped them conceptualise their own tumultuous experiences of war.[755] Feelings of gratitude towards the volunteers for saving them from life in the fascist inferno were therefore likely to have been, at least in some cases, genuine enough. They were also just a small step away from indebtedness, as when ten-year-old María López, a refugee from Madrid, assured the soldiers that the children of Mataró owed them their 'lives and wellbeing'.[756]

The children did not have to rely on second-hand propaganda to gain a sense of the volunteers' wartime sacrifices. In particular, they were left in no doubt that the conspicuous disabilities of the wounded men had been inflicted by the fascist bullies out of little more than personal spite. Louis Habberman, the German volunteer who oversaw the Thälmann home in Madrid, had lost his leg in the Battle of Guadalajara and walked around the grounds on a crutch. Frequently photographed with crowds of affectionate children gathered around him, the uniformed veteran came across as the living embodiment of Brauner's 'soldier of culture' whose military service on the frontlines closely overlapped with humanitarian work in the rearguard.[757] Depictions of wounded volunteers in the children's letters and drawings reveal the impact their disabilities must have had on them. The girls of Mataró drew numerous scenes of daily life in their home and the nearby hospital featuring volunteers with broken arms, missing legs and bandaged heads.[758] Eleven-year-old Lola Tela addressed them as 'you who have come to fight for the liberty of Spain against those criminal fascists and who have to leave wounded, some without legs and others without arms'.[759] The adults responsible for children like Lola used the volunteers' conspicuous sacrifices as a means of eliciting sympathy towards their surrogate fathers and, in turn, hatred towards the enemy. Following a visit to some wounded soldiers, the children of the Santa Coloma home collaborated on a wall newspaper entry in which they expressed their desire to make good their sufferings and which deserves quoting in full:

> Poor comrades! Who came from everywhere to defend us against the criminal Fascists and who, now, in their beds, are suffering and dying. We, the little ones, will avenge our comrades, our fathers, and fascism will not be able to take root in Spain.[760]

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[755] Ibid, 22.
[756] Ibid, 6.
[757] Anon., 'Soldiers of the XI Brigade Maintain a Home for Children who are Victims of War', *English VFL*, 27 December 1937, 8-9, RGASPI, 545.2.362.
[758] Anon., album with letters and drawings of the children of Mataró, 30, 31, 32, 36, RGASPI, 545.2.210.
[759] Ibid, 14.
[760] Quoted by Lisette Vincent in her unpublished memoir *Histoire d'une colonie d'enfants espagnols*, March 1939, 67-68, RGASPI, 545.2.187.

Alfred Brauner considered it perfectly normal that these young Spaniards should want to contribute to the antifascist struggle. While working in Spain he resisted seeing children as passive victims of wartime violence and instead regarded them as political actors capable of confronting the dislocation forced onto them by fascism. In contrast to his post-war efforts to promote drawing as a means of overcoming trauma, he regarded the principal value of their artwork as testifying to fascist barbarity and, in this way, assisting the wider loyalist war effort.[761] This explains why, in the summer of 1938, he worked closely with *Socorro Rojo Internacional* to organise an exhibition of drawings intended to raise money and awareness for the Republic.[762] It certainly boded well that children's artwork had been publicly exhibited since the late nineteenth century and was enjoying unprecedented popularity by the time the Spanish conflict broke out.[763] Neither the partisan nature of Brauner's exhibition nor its political objectives were hidden from its young participants, with the written instructions adopting the tone of a military call to arms when they stressed how 'you can also help defend your country before the whole world' by exposing 'the true sense of the struggle provoked on our soil by the fascist invader'.[764] This language reflects an attitude towards children which was shared by many Republican educationalists, political organisations and government authorities. Just like adults, they too had to be mobilised in favour of a loyalist victory. A picture book created by the International Brigades Commissariat and entitled 'How the Children of Spain Should Make War' demonstrates this attitude well by reminding its reader that while their international friends are busy fighting fascism on the frontlines they too can play their part by studying, helping their neighbour and respecting nature.[765]

Daily life in the International Brigades' homes and day-care centres was tailored to encourage the boys, in particular, to aspire to the volunteers' example of martial antifascism.[766] Uniformed parades, team exercises, the singing of revolutionary songs and visits from well-known military figures all formed part of their daily regimes. The militarization of childhood was evident elsewhere in the Republican zone, not least in the form of the Communist 'Pioneer' groups which received frequent mention in the International Brigades' trench press. With their soldier-like outfits and military-style parades, the Pioneers (*Pioneros*) offered children an exciting opportunity to emulate

[761] Duroux and Keren, 'Retours sur dessins', 99-119.
[762] Information on the planning of the exhibition can be found in correspondence between *Socorro Rojo Internacional*, the *Comité Pro-Niños* and the International Brigade Commissariat in RGASPI, 545.1.76.
[763] Siân Roberts, 'Exhibiting Children at Risk: Child Art, International Exhibitions and Save the Children Fund in Vienna, 1919-1923', *Paedagogica Historica,* 45, 1-2 (2009), 171-190.
[764] Anon., Instructions for a drawing competition held by the *Comité Pro-Niños*, 21 July 1938, RGASPI, 545.1.75.
[765] Commissariat of the International Brigades, *Como los niños de España deben hacer la guerra*, RGASPI, 545.2.382.
[766] See, for example, the photos accompanying the article 'Gdy dabrowszczacy sa w rezerwie', *Polish VFL*, 5 June 1938, 1, RGASPI, 545.2.369.

the frontline fighters both they and their caretakers so admired. So too did their contributions to the wall newspapers which were deliberately hung at their eye-level at news kiosks across the loyalist rearguard. This cult of what one historian has termed 'infantile heroism and sacrifice' was not, however, universally accepted. Relatively recent understandings of childhood as a unique psychological phase which requires the exclusion of negative adult influences had gained enough traction by the 1930s for some members of the public – amongst them liberal educators influenced by anti-militarist sentiments – to criticise such blatant attempts to expose young Spaniards to the grim realities of war.[767] The International Brigades' collaborators expressed no such reservations. If anything, their own children's desire to emulate the foreign volunteers and wreak vengeance on the 'fascists' was cause for admiration, not concern. One news article described a boy who wanted to become a pilot in order to 'avenge' his mother and father who were killed in an air raid, as well as another who wanted to drive a tank. 'To him a tank is the maximum instrument of terror', readers were told. 'He saw several bearing down on his village in one of the early battles near Madrid, saw the destruction they grind out, and wants to turn the tables on the enemy.[768]

The girls under the International Brigades' care were also encouraged to take an interest in the war and, whenever possible, make a personal contribution to the antifascist struggle. Ten-year-old Pilar from the Santa Coloma home described the children responding to a government call to collect cloth and metal for the benefit of the foreign volunteers. This would have taken place at the behest of Lisette Vincent, a French Communist who had travelled to Spain with *Socorro Rojo Internacional* and was swiftly chosen to oversee the facility. Pilar wrote that 'we are small and we could not have a rifle like our fathers, but still we give to our heroes bombs [and] bullets to fight', surmising from her own experiences that 'we too do our antifascist duty'.[769] Yet, exactly as was the case with those who *were* old enough to have a rifle, this duty was divided along gender lines. In Cambrils, where the International Brigades had an instruction camp, they even installed a sewing workshop where women prepared clothes for 400 children using cloth provided by the *Comité Pro-Niños*.[770] Whilst they were certainly encouraged to think of themselves as active members of the antifascist imagined community, the girls who passed through the gates of the International Brigades' homes, canteens and day-care centres were not pictured marching, nor were they quoted describing how much they wanted to fight on the frontlines.

Getting children as young as eight to feel personally invested in the antifascist war effort was intimately linked to their caretakers' attempts to instil them with long-lasting political consciousness. In her unpublished wartime memoirs, Lisette Vincent

[767] Kössler, 'Children in the Spanish Civil War', 109-115.

[768] Anon., 'Soldiers of the XI Brigade Maintain a Home for Children who are Victims of War', *English VFL*, 27 December 1937, 8-9, RGASPI, 545.2.362.

[769] 'Pilar' in a booklet produced by the children of the Santa Coloma home, unnumbered pages, Centre d'Histoire Sociale (henceforth CHA), Fond André Marty, 2AM.4A.2,11/ds.18-19.

[770] Anon., report on the work of the *Comité Pro-Niños*, 13 July 1938, RGASPI, 545.1.76.

expressed her belief that the 'little ones' she was personally responsible for at the Santa Coloma home 'had to know why we fought and how we fought'.[771] This was not only seen as necessary for the success of the ongoing struggle against fascism, but also for the building of the antifascist 'New Spain' which would emerge in the event of a Republican victory. In this way, the militarization of childhood alluded to previously went hand-in-hand with its politicisation. The latter process had, in fact, already begun in earnest long before the outbreak of civil war under the auspices of youth groups such as the Communist Pioneers and their equivalents on the political right.[772] Attempts to create class-conscious 'little comrades' nonetheless reached particular intensity in the International Brigades' own homes and day-care centres during the conflict. As in dozens of Republican *colonias infantiles* across the rearguard, these served the dual purpose of housing and educating their members in accordance with the 'New Education' which, since the turn of the century, had used hands-on activities as a means of inculcating a sense of shared community, collective responsibility and active citizenship.[773] Key figures like Alfred Brauner, Anja Hammerman and Lisette Vincent were familiar with these progressive theories and now had an unprecedented opportunity to put them at the service of creating a new generation of antifascists.

While these individuals tended to imply that the children under their care possessed a latent class-consciousness, the reality is that they went to great lengths to instil them with their own deeply partisan values.[774] As was often the case with the International Brigades, their efforts were underpinned by a transnational communist culture and, in particular, an unwavering admiration for the Soviet Union. Articles detailing the happy lives of children under Joseph Stalin's benevolent rule were an occasional feature of the International Brigades' many trench publications, along with various photographs to back up their spurious claims. These make for particularly galling reading in our own knowledge that Stalin was in fact responsible for having brought death, destruction and suffering on an almost unimaginable scale to thousands of children in Ukraine as a direct result of his policies just a few years previously.[775] All the same, the Soviet Union was held up as the prime example of how an antifascist state was best equipped

[771] Vincent, *Histoire d'une colonie d'enfants espagnols*, 43, RGASPI, 545.2.187. for attempts to place the war at the centre of the educational curriculum in both zones see Antonio Viñao, 'Politics, Education and Pedagogy', 406.

[772] Sandra Souto Kustrín, *Paso a la juventud*, 238.

[773] Braster and del Pozo Andrés, 'Education and the Children's Colonies in the Spanish Civil War', 455-477. The article 'Soldiers of the XI Brigade Maintain a Home for Children who are Victims of War' explicitly refers to the implementation of progressive European educational methods in the Madrid home and can be found in the *English VFL*, 27 December 1937, 8-9, RGASPI, 545.2.362.

[774] One Brigade collaborator wrote that the children of *La Moraleja* 'write seriously and consciously like adults. The atmosphere of the war has made them encounter words which the young in normal circumstances would never think of. They are Little '*políticos*' who know very well the reasons for fighting'. Quoted in Esteve Torres, *Hogares Infantiles,* 26.

[775] See, for example, 'Les Enfants en U.R.S.S.', *French VFL*, 2 December 1937, 8, RGASPI, 545.2.370. Astronomical numbers of children faced starvation as a result of man-made famine in Ukraine. See Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (London: Vintage, 2010), 22-2 and, 48-52.

to ensure children's happiness while, at the same time, guaranteeing a ready supply of class-conscious citizens for the future. The children looked after by the International Brigades were themselves exposed to some of this grovelling propaganda, with those at the Madrid home receiving a letter from some Communist Youth in the Volga Soviet Republic. 'In contrast to you, who have to suffer from this terrible war, our life is beautiful and happy', their international comrades in the Pioneers had written, attributing this to the legacy of the October Revolution and, above all, 'the leader of the whole Russian people, Comrade Stalin'.[776]

Efforts to transform the children of the wartime Republic into 'little comrades' did not end there. Most obviously, the language used by those looked after by the International Brigades to describe daily life became loaded with political meaning as familiar concepts such as 'friendliness' and 'good behaviour' came to be understood in the communist terms of 'solidarity' and 'discipline'. While the children's letters and drawings make their knowledge of revolutionary symbols, songs and slogans perfectly clear, it is important to realise that their assimilation of this new language amounted to something far greater than a superficial shift in naming things. Instead, it speaks to the way in which their every action was regarded as having a transcendental impact on the broader antifascist family to which they now belonged. In a particularly revealing incident, a ten-year-old boy at the Santa Coloma home was charged with being a 'saboteur' for stealing money from the collective fund. Tellingly, the decision to expel the ashamed and sobbing child from the Pioneers was carried out not by his teacher but by his very own classmates, the likes of whom had organised themselves into a political assembly responsible for deliberating on precisely such issues. [777] Indeed, one of the most striking ways in which the politicisation of daily life took place was through the formation of various quasi-political committees, with the children of both Santa Coloma and Madrid appointing delegates for sport, hygiene and culture, referring to one another as 'comrade' and even contributing to wall newspapers just like those used at the front by the volunteers of the International Brigades.[778]

## Conclusion

Of all the many cross-cultural encounters the volunteers of the International Brigades were involved in during their time in Spain, those with the children of the loyalist rearguard are perhaps the most overlooked. The sheer breadth of the unit's child-centred work only becomes clear upon consulting the Russian archives, with a wealth of long-neglected documentation revealing that the foreign fighters engaged in such wide-reaching activities as holding lavish fiestas, distributing large quantities of clothes

[776] Anon., 'Unsere Kinder in Heim <<Ernst Thaelmann>>', *German VFL*, 19 July 1938, 18, RGASPI, 545.2.368.

[777] Vincent, *Histoire d'une colonie d'enfants espagnols*, 102-105, RGASPI, 545.2.187.

[778] These activities are described in anon., 'Soldiers of the XI Brigade Maintain a Home for Children who are Victims of War', *English VFL*, 27 December 1937, 8-9, RGASPI, 545.2.362; evidence of them can also be found throughout the booklet produced by the children of the Santa Coloma home, unnumbered pages, CHA, Fond André Marty, 2AM.4A.2,11 as well as Vincent's *Histoire d'une colonie d'enfants espagnols*, RGASPI, 545.2.187.

and food, donating huge sums of money, helping to set up homes and day-care centres, visiting children near their hospitals and reading about them on a weekly basis throughout the war. In addition to being interesting in their own right, the wider repercussions of these initiatives demand far greater attention than they have so far received from historians. In the first place, they allowed the International Brigades to achieve a number of practical objectives such as winning the trust of local populations and establishing tactical alliances with other Republican groups. They also enabled the volunteers to reimagine themselves as 'soldiers of culture' fighting on behalf of the Spanish People against a brutal fascist enemy. This, in turn, helped them to rationalise their presence in civil-war Spain within their own minds as well as further their claims that they were engaged in a just war for the benefit of their native hosts and their supporters across the world. In the process, frontline soldiering and rearguard humanitarianism came to be seen as two sides to the same antifascist coin, as the logo of the *Comité Pro-Niños* – two children sheltering between a helmet branded with the International Brigades' insignia – makes perfectly clear.

If the volunteers of the International Brigades were key in imagining the antifascist community in arms, it was the children under their care who played one of the most active roles in making it a reality. There is much, however, which we still do not know about their lives – and likely never will. That which we do know can be gleamed from archival sources which were initially produced, and later preserved, because they express a self-congratulatory view of the volunteers' work. While the dozens of photographs, internal reports, news articles, letters and drawings used throughout this chapter offer an invaluable glimpse into the lives of many children, they therefore remain just that – a glimpse. We still do not know the vast majority of their names, nor have any detailed information about their personal backgrounds, nor have a clear idea of how they spent much of their time under the volunteers' care, nor indeed have the slightest indication as to how they fared after the foreign fighters' withdrawal from Spain and the Republic's crushing defeat half a year later. Crucially, we do not know what their adult relatives made of the International Brigades' sweeping interventions in their lives, either. When the right-wing mother of an adolescent girl living in Madrid found out she had been practicing her French with the foreign volunteers lodged at some nearby barracks, she expressly forbade her to continue accepting their food on the basis that they were 'of the enemy'.[779] Whether this striking anecdote – recalled years later by the girl's much younger brother – is accurate or not, it is an important reminder not to take the political sympathies of the Spaniards who encountered the International Brigades for granted.

This also goes for the children they came into contact with. The various press reports which quote young Spaniards to the effect that they wanted to join the foreign volunteers in the heroic antifascist struggle on the frontlines are perhaps a better guide to the Commissariat's attitudes than they are of many Spanish children. Even those

[779] Luis Otero Fernández in Jorge M. Reverte and Thomás Socorro, *Hijos de la guerra: Testimonios y recuerdos* (Madrid: Temas de hoy, 2001), 204-205.

sources produced by the dozens of boys and girls under the International Brigades' care are – inevitably – imperfect guides to their attitudes towards the world around them. While they certainly demonstrate their capacity for wartime 'agency', the parameters of that same agency were ultimately determined by the adults who commissioned their letters and drawings in the first place, not to mention provided the language, imagery and concepts which underpinned them. This does not, however, undermine the sheer intensity of the International Brigades' efforts to engage children in a total war effort which they believed every citizen, young or old, man or woman, boy or girl, ought to contribute towards. By setting up canteens, establishing homes, running day-care centres, holding competitions, initiating correspondence and exchanging gifts, the foreign volunteers not only involved hundreds of Spanish children in a unique antifascist culture in the making, but succeeded in having them *engage* with that culture in varied, creative and meaningful ways. While it is, of course, impossible to enter the mind of a child who lived through a civil war over eighty years ago, it seems very likely indeed that the volunteers exercised an important impact on the experiences, identities and attitudes of a great many more Spaniards than has – until now – seemed the case.

## Conclusion: Making Antifascist War in Spain

By situating both Spain and Spaniards at the centre of our understanding of the International Brigades, this thesis invites an intriguing question. To whom, in fact, does the famous fighting unit belong? The obvious answer, to the neutral historian, might well be 'nobody'. But it has rarely proved so simple in practice. The foreign volunteers, along with their vivid example of antifascist action, have been claimed by quite distinct groups, for equally distinct reasons, ever since they first entered action. In the 1950s, hundreds of German Communists used their wartime service to construct an antifascist founding myth for the Democratic Republic; in the 1960s contributors to Yiddish publications framed the Jewish volunteers' experiences as a precursor to the community's resistance to the Third Reich's exterminatory policies; in the 1970s, Canadian veterans represented their participation in the Civil War as an extension of their home country's democratic traditions in an attempt to boost their campaign for military pensions.[780] More recently, the principal commemorative organisation dedicated to the International Brigades in the United States has taken to rallying the American volunteers' service as a key example of how to defend international human rights.[781] There is certainly a good case that the volunteers belong to the discrete histories of Jewish resistance, German communism, Canadian democracy and international humanitarianism. As this thesis has shown, there is a similarly good case that they also belong, more specifically, to the history of Spain.

Following the Republican defeat in 1939, many of the veterans would rightly insist that their wartime service had constituted a crucial component of Spain's twentieth-century past. They not only believed that they had participated in a major battle within the wider transnational fight against fascism, but also defended, rather more specifically, the interests of the 'Spanish People'. With Franco's death in 1975 and the subsequent transition to a parliamentary democracy, they could finally feel that the latter of those two overlapping struggles had, at long last, been vindicated. For all of them, the dictator had been a fascist imposter from the very beginning and remained one for the thirty-six years in which he ruled over Spain; no small number had campaigned against the regime throughout the preceding decades, not least by pushing for the release of political prisoners.[782] The veterans' sense of having been on the right side of history – Spanish history, in particular – was spectacularly reinforced in 1996 when 380 of them

[780] For the East German veterans see Krammer, 'The Cult of the Spanish Civil War in East Germany', 531-560 and Josie McLellan, *Antifascism and Memory in East Germany: Remembering the International Brigades, 1945-1989* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); for Jewish veterans see Gerben Zaagsma, *Jewish Volunteers, the International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 11; for the Canadian veterans see Matthew Poggi, 'Saving Memories: Canadian Veterans of the Spanish Civil War and Their Pursuit of Government Recognition', *American Communist History,* 12:3 (2013), 193-212.

[781] See the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archive's mission statement at https://alba-valb.org/who-we-are/about/, accessed 11 January 2023.

[782] Tom Buchanan, 'Holding the Line: The Political Strategy of the International Brigade Association, 1939-1977', *Labour History Review*, 66:3 (2001), 294-312.

returned to the country in which they had originally fought for the sixtieth anniversary of the war. Surveying the jubilant reception they received from political representatives, memory activists and members of the public at the many events held in their honour, one American concluded, not without some overstatement, that there was 'general unanimity of the Spanish people in warmly welcoming us as those who came in the 1930s committed to save Spanish democracy'.[783] In the eyes of the veterans, the united, authentic and antifascist 'Spanish People' were on their side in 1996 just as they had been in 1936.

Reflecting on a concert held in Madrid at which an astonishing 10,000 admirers gathered, one former volunteer wrote that 'we know for certain — as many of the speakers at the mass meetings told us so emphatically — that we are Spanish, now and in history'.[784] This feeling of honourary Spanishness was given a further boost by the government's offer of citizenship to the surviving veterans, although few of them accepted since it would have required turning in their existing passports. Regardless, the Republican orator Dolores Ibárruri's famous promise, made over sixty years earlier in her much-quoted speech at the International Brigades' farewell parade in Barcelona, seemed to have been fulfilled. 'Return to our side for here you will find a homeland', she had said, going on to assure the multitudes crowded into the city streets that 'those who have no country or friends, who must live deprived of friendship — all, all will have the affection and gratitude of the Spanish people who today and tomorrow will shout with enthusiasm, *Long live the heroes of the International Brigades!'*.[785] Of course, Ibárruri herself had little interest in parliamentary democracy for its own sake, remaining an unapologetic Stalinist until her death. As we have seen, many of the volunteers, if by no means all of them, were similarly ambivalent about the virtues of 'bourgeois democracy' as anything but a temporary stopgap against fascism. All the same, the sixtieth anniversary celebrations deftly incorporated the International Brigades within a half-century-long struggle for democratic government in Spain – a struggle which had been won in 1931, frustrated in 1936, lost in 1939, and had now, it seemed, been finally settled in democracy's favour.

Since the 1990s, the antifascist volunteers have come to form an important part of some Spaniards' attempts to reclaim their democratic past through grassroots activism, amateur history, local archaeology and the exhumation of mass graves – initiatives which picked up added momentum with the passing of the Socialist Party's Historical Memory Law in 2007. In our own century, a number of key civil-war locations

[783] Bill Susman., 'Spain's Media and the Brigades' Return', *The Volunteer: Journal of the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, Vol XIX, No. 1, (Winter 1996-1997), https://alba-valb.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Winter-1996-97.pdf, accessed 15 December 2022.
[784] James Benet, 'Now we are Spanish', *The Volunteer: Journal of the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, Vol XIX, No. 1, (Winter 1996-1997), https://alba-valb.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Winter-1996-97.pdf, accessed 15 December 2022.
[785] Dolores Ibárruri, Farewell speech to the International Brigades, Barcelona, 1 November 1938, https://archivo.juventudes.org/dolores-ib%C3%A1rruri-pasionaria/despedida-las-brigadas-internacionales, accessed 9 April 2023.

have been transformed into sites of secular pilgrimage which admirers of the foreign volunteers seek out in order to get as physically, emotionally and – it would not be an overstatement to say so – spiritually close to the antifascist struggle as possible. The son of the well-known American volunteer Alvah Bessie was present for one group tour which followed in the Lincoln-Washington Battalion's footsteps for the seventy-fourth anniversary of their retreat from Batea to Corbera. When, at a subsequent talk, Bessie asked members of the audience how many of them also had family members who had been involved in the war, around seventy or so people raised their hands.[786] Heritage tourism of this kind would be impossible without the close collaboration of local historians and archaeologists who are equally keen to uncover – in their case quite literally – the International Brigades' role in Spain. In 2014 Salvatore Garfi and Alfredo González-Ruibal launched the International Brigades Archaeology Project which encouraged the relatives of the volunteers to explore the places where they fought and, in this way, hoped to transform archaeology into a 'memorialising experience' whereby participants embark on a 'personal journey […] in which they […] get close to the very earth upon which their uncles, fathers and grandfathers fought and even died'.[787]

The starkest reminder of the volunteers' connection to the Spanish earth is the fact that many of them continue to lie beneath it until this day. The remains of three foreign fighters were discovered in 2015 to the east of Caspe, in the province of Zaragoza, by the self-funded grassroots organisation *Bajoaragonesa de Agitación y Propaganda*. Their reburial was a profoundly symbolic event, with the draping of the Republican tricolour over the three coffins proudly reclaiming the cause for which they had fought and fallen. That they were laid to rest in Caspe's cemetery, in accordance with the stipulations of the Historical Memory Law and with none other than the President of Aragon's Regional Government present, shows how much the International Brigades have been reintegrated as a desirable, important and indeed integral part of some collective memories of Spain's twentieth century.[788] Here is a deliberate attempt to undo what historian Alfredo González-Ruibal has described as the 'double absence' of the Republican dead during the Franco dictatorship. Double, not only because the triumphant Nationalists physically removed the bodies of the vanquished from view (amongst them, the approximately 400 foreign volunteers who had been buried in Madrid's Fuencarral Cemetery during the siege of the capital, later deposited at a nearby site which remains unidentified as of 2023), but also because they shunned any open acknowledgement of those same individuals and the causes they had fought

[786] Alan Warren, report on a 74th anniversary walk concerning the retreat of the Lincoln Washington Battalion from Batea to Corbera held in 2012, *https://pdlhistoria.wordpress.com/the-great-retreats/*, October 2012, accessed 15 December 2022.
[787] Salvatore Garfi, *Conflict Landscapes: An Archaeology of the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War* (Summertown, Oxford: Archaeopress, 2019), 6.
[788] Bajoaragonesa de Agitación y Propaganda, 'Combatientes Olvidados En El Frente Del Guadalope De 1938: Una Fosa En La "Cota 238", Caspe (Zaragoza)', 17 February 2016, http://www.bajoaragonesa.org/elagitador/combatientes-olvidados-en-el-frente-del-guadalope-de-1938-una-fosa-en-la-cota-238-caspe-zaragoza/, accessed 11 April 2023.

for (hence the Francoist authorities' removal of the plaque commemorating these particular volunteers, which was later restored in the early years of Spain's transition to democracy).[789]

As the aborted attempts of Spain's far-right Vox Party to have the Fuencarral memorial once again removed can leave in no doubt, not everybody is so convinced by these attempts to rehabilitate the memory of the International Brigades.[790] Writing in 1997, the Francoist historian Ricardo de la Cierva described the government decision to offer citizenship to the volunteers as an act of 'incomprehensible partiality and sectarianism' which went 'against THE HISTORY […] and being of Spain' (the capitals are his own).[791] At best, these commentators regard the volunteers as misguided interlopers on the grand stage of Spanish history; at worst, as Stalinist cronies who deliberately worked against the country's interests. Every now and then, their views make it into the national news. So it proved for one disgruntled member of the public who decided to open a legal case against Madrid's Complutense University shortly after they erected a monument to the antifascist volunteers in late 2011. Whilst he claimed to have been motivated by the seemingly apolitical fact that the authorities lacked the relevant planning permission, it is surely no coincidence that – as he happily informed journalists – he considered the International Brigades to be an 'invention of Stalin'. One wonders what this particular citizen made of the graffiti which appeared on the monument barely ten days after its unveiling and accused the volunteers of being 'asesinos' – murderers.[792] This particular claim – in all of its profound reductionism – is nothing new. Reflecting a revisionist interpretation of the war as a brutal struggle between two extremist ideologies which ultimately came at the cost of ordinary Spaniards, the writer José Cela had dedicated his 1969 novel *Vísperas* to 'the kids called up in 1937' and explicitly *not* to 'the foreign adventurers, fascists and Marxists, who got their fill of killing Spaniards like rabbits' and who, he presumably felt, had received more than their fair share of praise already.[793]

Given the emotionally-charged nature of the debate, there is little hope that commentators will reach any agreement over the extent to which the International Brigades 'should' be considered an integral part of Spanish history any time soon. There is simply no getting away, however, from the fact that the relationship between the foreign volunteers and their host country was a great deal closer, a great deal more

[789] Alfredo González-Ruibal, 'Absent Bodies: The Fate of the Vanquished in the Spanish Civil War' in Paul Cornish and Nicholas J. Saunders (eds.), *Bodies in Conflict: Corporeality, Materiality and Transformation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 169-183. For the Funecarral case, see Alberto Ortiz, 'El cementerio de Fuencarral, el último reducto madrileño de los brigadistas internacionales' *El Diario*, 30 March 2021, https://www.eldiario.es/madrid/cementerio-fuencarral-ultimo-reducto-madrileno-brigadistas-internacionales_1_7341306.html , accessed 11 June 2023.

[790] See the above article in *El Diario*.

[791] de la Cierva, *Brigadas Internacionales 1936-1996*, 21.

[792] Natalia Junquera, 'Escriben "asesinos" en el monumento a los brigadistas internacionales', *El País*, 2 November 2011, https://elpais.com/politica/2011/11/02/actualidad/1320238669_611773.html, accessed 12 June 2023.

[793] Quoted by Alberto Reig Tapia in Sánchez Cervelló and Agudo, *Las Brigadas Internacionales: nuevas perspectivas en la historia de la Guerra Civil y del exilio*, 10.

complicated and – to put it plainly – a great deal more interesting than has often been suggested. Sympathetic historians have long represented Spain and its national idiosyncrasies as a secondary backdrop to the International Brigades' transcendental struggle against a global fascist menace, while – as we have just seen – their detractors have generally argued that the country's interests were of little concern to the predominantly-communist fighting unit. In contrast, this thesis has sought to place Spain at the very centre of our understanding of that unit by recovering the much-overlooked cross-cultural contact which resulted from its deployment in the country. Encounters between soldiers and the communities, cultures, landscapes, politics and institutions of the various places which have hosted them throughout history have been an almost constant feature of war for as long as it has existed. If we are to achieve a complete understanding of both the soldiering experience and military conflict more generally, it is therefore essential that we take them far more fully into account. There is no good reason for the International Brigades to be exempt from this.

Anybody looking for such a reason might nonetheless argue that only a minority of the approximately 35,000 men who belonged to its ranks came into sustained contact with Spaniards throughout their time in the country – a point which some of the veterans themselves were only too happy to concede. This does not, however, mean that we should immediately dismiss cross-cultural encounters as an unimportant aspect of their military service. In the first place, those volunteers who *did* come into contact with Spaniards – however fleetingly – often drew important lessons about the war, and their own place within it, as a consequence of their experiences. By studying them, we are offered an important glimpse into attitudes towards soldiering which were, in all likelihood, shared by many of their comrades. Just as importantly, direct and long-lasting encounters were often not needed *at all* for the volunteers to draw important conclusions about the war in which they were engaged and the country in which it was taking place. Pre-existing attitudes, articles in their trench press, training in the rearguard, glimpses of loyalist towns and villages, stints in hospital, cartoons on wall newspapers, essay-writing contests, songs and poems, theatrical performances, photographs of civilians, frequent fundraising drives, news of enemy bombings, reports on the capture of prisoners, discussions with their comrades and speeches from their commissars all served as crucial windows into the history, politics, people and culture of Spain.

The fact that, when taken together, this wide-reaching contact with the Spanish Republic at war enabled the volunteers to form a powerful 'mental image' of their host country goes some way to justifying why the preceding thesis has been so keen to define cross-cultural encounters in the broadest terms possible. It has also considered them in the space of a single thesis, thereby departing from the approach taken by many existing studies of other twentieth-century wars which, often for good reason, limit themselves to specific forms of contact – be it soldiers' sexual encounters with women, their lethal encounters with enemy soldiers or their rather more friendly encounters with a host of political and military allies. The impression of wartime Spain

which emerged as a consequence of the antifascist volunteers' own transnational military service was, of course, both highly partisan and thoroughly self-serving – which is not, of course, to suggest that it was necessarily cynical or disingenuous. It was, however, carefully curated by the commissars – the same commissars who, it must be added, were key in setting the parameters for much of the face-to-face contact which took place between the volunteers and their Spanish hosts before going on to form the focus of their innumerable newspaper reports, internal memos and public speeches. To represent the rank and file as being in fundamental conflict with a legion of gun-toting superiors keen to keep the realities of Spain at a safe distance is, however, far too simplistic and ultimately misleading.

Spain, then, was clearly an important presence in the volunteers' lives. Its significance does not end there, however. It is worth recalling, at this point, the broader place which both real and imagined wartime encounters occupy in the popular imagination, particularly given that they have provided such rich material for artists, writers and filmmakers down the ages, starting – perhaps – with Homer's Iliad. Those who have turned their attention to Spain have been no exception – one does not need to look hard to find evidence of foreigners coming into all sorts of contact with the civil-war country in George Orwell's memoir *Homage to Catalonia*, Ernest Hemingway's novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls* or Ken Loach's film *Land and Freedom*. Interesting though they often are in their own right, it has been a major contention of this thesis that, in fact, transnational encounters amount to something far more significant than the stuff of popular fiction or the marginalia of non-fiction war writing. Most obviously, the success of any army stationed in friendly foreign territory will likely depend on close co-operation with government agencies and individuals, collaboration with native military forces, the navigation of unfamiliar customs and the establishment of friendly contact with civilians. It also often means regulating soldiers' behaviour to ensure that any talk of defending the citizens of the host country is not fatally undermined. A thorough dive into the archives has shown how these were all priorities for the leadership of the International Brigades, the likes of which worked tirelessly to initiate, regulate and rationalise encounters with loyalist Spain and its people.

In addition to these rather practical considerations must be added the role of transnational contact in shaping soldiers' wartime ideas, identities and actions. Above all, this thesis has sought to demonstrate how the volunteers of the International Brigades not only made war on the frontlines – an activity which has, by now, been exhaustively documented – but also in their own imaginations. As has been the case with countless armed conflicts both before and since the Civil War, the exact nature of the violence which took place in the peninsula has always been fiercely contested. Most obviously, Republican and Nationalist propagandists constructed a set of competing narratives which legitimised their use of military violence against individuals previously considered fellow Spaniards, generally by representing themselves as waging a unified war of national defence against a brutal foreign invasion. They were certainly not alone in these attempts to define the war in their own terms, with groups across the Republican spectrum often fighting for different social, political and even

military objectives in the first weeks of the conflict – albeit always in the name of the 'Spanish People'. Interpretations of the fundamental nature of wartime violence are also liable to shift after the fighting has ended, as the various postwar myths of national resistance to Nazi occupation would make clear in the wake of the even more catastrophic conflict which came on the heels of the Spanish Civil War – myths which, for their own part, conveniently sidestepped collaboration with the enemy and violence between co-nationals in a quite deliberate attempt to avoid embarrassing scrutiny.[794] As ever, Spain was no exception to the rule, with the Franco dictatorship moving away from its long-standing rhetoric of a holy crusade against 'Reds' and 'Atheists' towards that of a fratricidal struggle between 'Two Spains' in the 1960s on the basis of political expediency.[795]

These top-down interpretations of the Spanish Civil War are, by now, well known. What remains far more elusive is the way in which those responsible for waging it in the first place conceptualised both the immense violence tearing through Spain as well as their own place within it. What central *meaning* did soldiers and civilians attribute to the conflict, and with what consequences? The enormous quantity of primary material which the International Brigades generated makes them an obvious starting point for filling in this historiographical gap – although it must be stressed that the volunteers' unique degree of antifascist volition makes it difficult to compare their experiences with, say, those of the overwhelmingly-anonymous masses of Spanish conscripts fighting on both sides. This thesis has shown how before, during and long after their time in Spain, the volunteers of the transnational fighting unit were engaged in a creative process of imagining an antifascist community in arms as well as situating themselves at its vanguard in their self-assigned capacity as compassionate soldiers. For these volunteers, the war did not really amount to a struggle caused by Spanish factors, fought predominantly between Spanish people, nor waged for purely Spanish objectives. It was, instead, an existential struggle between a unified and sovereign people on the one hand and the global forces of fascism on the other. The volunteers, for their part, knew exactly where they stood in this 'just war' for the soul of the Spanish nation.

This narrative was not imposed on the rank and file by their military superiors in a one-way process. It was – to a very significant extent – of their own making. Their shared understanding of the enormously complex events taking place in Spain can be directly linked to a transnational antifascist culture which had first emerged in communist circles in the 1920s and had acquired particular cohesion with Adolf Hitler's rise to power in 1933. Crucially, it was repeatedly and emphatically reinforced throughout their time in the country. Wherever they looked and whatever they read, whoever they met and whenever they did so, the multinational soldiers of the International Brigades

[794] See Tony Judt, 'The Past Is Another Country: Myth and Memory in Postwar Europe', *Daedalus*, 121:4 (1992), 83-118.
[795] For an overview of the shifting narratives of the Spanish Civil War propagated during Franco dictatorship and beyond, see Michael Richards, *After the Civil War: Making Memory and Re-making Spain since 1936* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

were confirmed in their belief that they were playing a leading part in defending the unified national community against a familiar fascist menace. Their trench-bulletins celebrated their role in bringing much-needed reserves of antifascist discipline to a war effort which had, until then, been let down by the alleged technical incompetence and ideological egotism of the militias. Encounters with civilians in the provincial rearguard reminded them of exactly who stood to benefit from a streamlined war effort, with the sharing of food in local homes or the exchanging of antifascist salutes in public streets enabling many volunteers to put a face to the abstract community they had come to defend. More specifically, encounters with village girls, nurses and representatives from loyalist women's organisations reinforced the volunteers' sense of themselves as antifascists, as warriors and above all as men saving a martyred community from Hitler and Mussolini's bombs. Those with the enemy, meanwhile, convinced them that they were compassionate soldiers engaged in a just war for the Spanish People against unparalleled foreign tyranny.

Contact with Spain and Spaniards not only reinforced the volunteers' understanding of themselves as antifascist soldiers, but also permitted the International Brigades to directly shape the culture of their host country in their own image. Within months of creating their ostensibly international fighting force, influential figures such as Commissar General Luigi Longo began shifting its fundamental purpose away from providing elite foreign troops towards leading the way in the formation of a disciplined conscript army. The volunteers tended to regard their efforts, in this particular sphere, as largely successful – although they also caused a significant degree of friction with some of their loyalist allies whose visions of antifascist warfare did not necessarily tally with their own. The International Brigades' influence on Spanish affairs certainly did not end there. After all, Spaniards were outnumbering foreigners in many of its battalions come early 1937. These new arrivals found themselves on the receiving end of thorough-going attempts to socialise the passive civilians of Spain into politically-motivated antifascists and, by extension, transform them into capable citizen-soldiers willing to fight and die for the Republic. They were constantly exposed to propaganda extolling the heroic struggle of the Spanish People in arms, with hundreds of conscripts benefitting from literacy classes which encouraged them to creatively grapple with their new place within the antifascist imagined community. Contact with civilians in the towns and villages of the loyalist zone provided yet more opportunities to galvanise the 'Spanish People' in a zero-sum struggle between 'progress' and 'reaction', with children finding themselves the focus of concerted attempts to create antifascist 'little comrades' fit for a new Spain built on the ashes of fascism.

Only by recovering this rich series of cross-cultural encounters and placing them at the very centre of our understanding of transnational warfare does it become clear just how much Spain, that little-known corner of Europe when the rebels rose up in July 1936, exercised a deep and lasting influence on the experiences, attitudes, identities and actions of the thousands of foreign soldiers who made up the International Brigades. The country was certainly not incidental to their experience of war, even if it

was always regarded, above all else, as the frontline in a far wider-reaching struggle against Hitler, Mussolini and their reactionary allies the world over. Instead, it underpinned their soldiering experience at almost every turn – and continued to inform their memories of that experience for decades afterwards. By treating the volunteers' encounters with their host country seriously rather than shrugging them off as an incidental aspect of their antifascist military service, a slightly different image of the International Brigades emerges from that which, after eight-decades of non-stop research, we are by now used to. We already know, given the volunteers' own testimonies, that the 'good fight' of 1936-1939 would remain the defining moment of many of their lives. But while the Spanish Civil War certainly made them, it is important to recognise that they, in turn, made the Spanish Civil War. It is that making of antifascist war – not simply on the frontlines, but also in the minds of thousands of soldiers – that this thesis has, above all, sought to uncover.

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