

# Translating for the Legions of Babel: Spain 1936–1938

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## Abstract

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In this chapter I aim to trace underexplored aspects concerning the role of translators and interpreters in the International Brigades drawing on previous work on translation and conflict; historical accounts of the Spanish Civil War; monographic studies on the International Brigades; memoirs and narratives of foreign civil war veterans; and autobiographies by International Brigade translators. A special focus is given to the analysis of how competent translators and interpreters managed communication between brigaders of different nationalities; the multilingual publications edited by the battalions; the performance of their duties in heterogeneous military operations; and the impact of the translator's ideology in a climate of political division and suspicion which cast a dark shadow over the Republican war zone throughout the conflict.

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*To the Memory of José Espinosa Guerrero*

## Introduction

The International Brigades were a multinational armed force of 35,000 soldiers who, from late summer 1936, fought on the Loyalist side in the Spanish Civil War. They were mobilized from more than fifty different countries to support the Republican militia, assembled by unions and political parties to resist the military insurrection organized under General Franco, which very soon relied on the financial support of Mussolini and Hitler. Although the Loyalist Generals Vicente Rojo (2010: 471) and Enrique Lister (1977: 318) claim that the relevance of the Brigades to the outcome of a number of battles was exaggerated by propaganda, the Internationals filled, to various extents, the gap left by insurrectionists in the professional Spanish army until the Republic could rearticulate its own forces.

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Conservative historians (De la Cierva 1973; Vidal 1998; Moa 2003) usually depict the International

Brigades as a secret Red Army organized by the Communist International from Moscow. Kowalsky (2004a: 93–120) argues that they were part of a plan devised by Stalin to link the Spanish cause with the Soviet Union's purpose to create an alliance with the West against Hitler. McLellan (2004: 28) and Graham (2005: 122) both acknowledge communist activism as a driving force behind the Internationals, although they prefer to depict them as an army of exiles leading the first antifascist resistance movement in Europe. In canonical histories of the Spanish Civil War, translators and interpreters have, more often than not, been invisible or merely peripheral to other more central figures. Thomas (1961/2003: 233) and Alpert (2004: 210) briefly allude to the Soviet translators who arrived in Spain in late 1936, while Preston (2006: 251) mentions Loyalist minister Alvarez del Vayo as “the most elevated interpreter imaginable,” on the occasion of the official visit of the Russian ambassador to the Spanish premier Largo Caballero; Beevor identifies translator Constanca de la Mora as “the wife of the communist commander of the Republican air force, Hidalgo de Cisneros” (2006: 183).

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On the other hand, Johnston (1967), Skoutelsky (2006), Baxell (2012) and other International Brigade scholars have acknowledged the cardinal importance of translators and interpreters in organizing a contingent of volunteers whose diverse linguistic, cultural and ideological backgrounds could lead to confusion, chaos and defeat, while authors such as Zaro (1997), Kowalsky (2004b), Aizpuru (2009), Baigorri (2012), and Rodríguez-Espinosa (2016) have discussed the role of translators in the Spanish conflict with special reference to the translation of Spanish combat literature, the performance of Soviet military linguists, civil White Russians and Spanish interpreters, and the ideological constraints underlying their duties.

Drawing on previous work on translation and conflict (Salama-Carr 2007; Baker 2010; Inghilleri 2010; Footitt 2012; Ruiz and Persaud 2016), historical accounts of diverse aspects of the Spanish Civil War (Alcofar 1973; Núñez Díaz-Balart 2004, 2006; Preston 2009; Juárez 2009; Stewart and Majada 2014), monographic studies on the International Brigades (Johnston 1967; Castells 1973; Baxell 2004, 2012; Skoutelsky 2006; Eby 2007), memoirs and narratives of foreign Civil War veterans (Regler 1940/2012, 1959; Landis 1967; Gurney 1974; Monks 1985; Merriman and Lerude 1986; Fisher 1999; Wintringham 2009; Orwell 1938/2010), and autobiographies by International Brigade translators (Eisner 1972; Szurek 1989; Renn 1956/2016), I will trace underexplored aspects of the role of translators and interpreters in the International Brigades, with a special focus on the search for translators and a common language; the multilingual publications edited by the battalions; their performance of their duties in the warzone, and the impact of the translators' ideology in a politically complex scenario.

## The Search for Translators and a Common Language

An underground network following orders from the Comintern would dispatch the foreign volunteers across the Spanish border once they had been recruited at the headquarters of the French Communist Part, on Rue de Lafayette, and at the Maison des Syndicats, the trade union offices in Place du Combat, in the heart of the “Red” arrondissements in Paris. Many of them then spent some time at the garrison town of Figueres, or travelled to Barcelona, Valencia, or Madrid. Their journey came to an end in Albacete, the International Brigades' military base, where they were usually welcomed by their commander-in-chief, André Marty, whose speeches warned the recruits about the dangers of a lack of military and political discipline. Ludwig Renn, pseudonym of novelist Arnold Vieth von Golßenau,

commander of the Thälmann Battalion, recalls the shortage of officers and weapons, as well as the linguistic chaos which arose from having to transmit orders in different languages. Marty initially ignored this Babel-like confusion and refused to organize the troops by country, as he maintained that it was the mixing of nationalities that created an authentic international solidarity (Eby 2007: 144; Renn 1956/2016: 214), but from November 1936, and after the first defeats in Madrid, this idea of mixed international units was abandoned and the brigadiers were grouped into battalions according to their nationalities.

The 11th International Brigade, under the command of Romanian General Emil Kléber, was initially made up of the Commune de Paris Battalion (French and Belgians), the Edgar André Battalion (Austrians and Germans), the Dabrowski Battalion (Poles and Balkans), and the Garibaldi Battalion (Italians); the 12th Brigade, commanded by Hungarian Paul Lukács, consisted of the André Marty Battalion (French and Belgians), the Dabrowski Battalion (Poles and Balkans), and the Thälmann Battalion (Austrians and Germans); the 13th International Brigade, one of whose chief commanders was German Wilhelm Zaisser, was composed of the two Louise Michel Battalions (French and Belgians), the Chapayev Battalion or the 21 Nations Battalion (Poles, Hungarians and Balkans), the Henri Vuillemin Battalion (French and Belgians) and the Palafox Battalion (Poles and Jews); the 14th International Brigade, consisting mainly of French soldiers under the command of the Polish General ‘Walter’, was divided into the La Marseillaise Battalion, the Henri Barbusse Battalion, the Pierre Brachet Battalion and the Baillant-Couturier Battalion; and the 15th International Brigade, under the command of General Gal, consisted of the British Battalion, the Abraham Lincoln Battalion (mainly volunteers from the United States of America), the Dimitrov Battalion (Balkans), the Six Février Battalion (French and Belgians), the 24th Battalion (Cubans) and the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion (Canadians).<sup>1</sup> The nationalities within the Brigades would eventually vary throughout the Civil War, mainly due to the high number of casualties or to internal conflicts, as was the case of the Irish combatants who joined the North American Lincolns after abandoning the British Battalion, some of whose officers were accused of having participated in the assassination of Sinn Féin members in 1921 in Ireland (Baxell 2012: 133).

At the headquarters in Albacete, a complex administrative system was soon created practically from scratch, made up of qualified specialists in different fields, such as secretaries, telegraphists, stenographers, cartographers, mechanics, drivers, nurses, doctors, and military experts who were needed at the bases or in the units. Among them, the translators, interpreters or people who spoke foreign languages were scarce and of crucial relevance. As Salama-Carr notes (2007: 2), they would operate within networks of strict power relationships, under ideological constraints, in conditions of political unrest and censorship.<sup>2</sup> French was initially the official language of the Brigades, while in certain units German gradually took over and a knowledge of Russian became essential to communicate with the Soviet military advisors. These ‘universal’ soldiers ended up speaking a kind of argot made up of words from different languages: *bono*, for instance, meant “yes” or “ok”; *no bono*, “no”, or “bad”; and *saluqui* was used for *salud*, a way of saying “good-bye” in Spanish in the Republican zone (Skoutelsky 2006: 84; Castells 1973: 89).

Constancia de la Mora, Chief of the Foreign Press and Propaganda Office of the Loyalist government, and Lise Ricol, interpreter for André Marty, were two of the first linguists to perform their duties in the units in the early stages of the conflict (Bevor 2006: 181), but their role still did not match that of the typical military interpreters, whom Ruiz and Persaud (2016: 16) describe as members of the army, enlisted or conscripted, who are called on at every stage of a conflict. However, the pressing need for linguistic coordination between the battalions soon made those interpreters selected from among the polyglot officers indispensable among the higher ranks, with a capacity to combine their military

assignments and their translating skills. Joseph Dallet, the political commissar of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion, and Italian Vincenzo Bianco (Krieger), head of the 13th Brigade were praised by General Walter because of their ability to command troops in several languages. Volunteers of Jewish origin who spoke Yiddish as a lingua franca in the Polish Dabrowski Brigade also acted as translators because of their knowledge of languages and the ease with which they could learn Spanish. English novelist George Orwell (1938/2010: 23), who joined the militia of the Workers' Party of Marxist Unification

Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (POUM)

(POUM), recalls officer Levinski, a Polish Jew who spoke French as his native language; and Alexander Szurek (1989: 129), the translator for General Lukács in the 12th International Brigade, mentions captain David Kamy, a White Russian exiled in Europe, who was appointed assistant to Colonel Vladimir Čopić because he could speak in Russian, Arabic, Hebrew, Spanish and Yiddish.

In April 1937, Loyalist premier Largo Caballero, who had long sought to diminish the power of the International Brigades' war commissars, signed a decree according to which the Internationals were to replace the Spanish Foreign Legion, which had fought for the rebels since the early weeks of the *coup d'état*. From then on, the International Brigades were to be subject to the same code of military justice as the rest of the Republican units. Due to the large number of casualties suffered by the Internationals, the number of Spaniards who joined the Brigades increased, and thus Spanish was adopted as the official language, and foreign soldiers were encouraged to learn it in order to improve communication and avoid misunderstandings. Irish brigadier Joe Monks (1985) recalls one such misunderstanding when his comrade Renart lifted his companion Neville's rifle barrel just in time to save the life of a Spanish boy who was shouting "Villa Franca!"—the name of a village—when Neville thought he had been hailing "Viva Franco!"

The Spanish soldiers were astonished by the variety of languages spoken by the Internationals. They felt a special attraction for the Americans, whose culture some of the local recruits felt familiar with, having seen Hollywood movies which portrayed a society with customs, food and sports completely different to their own. Johnston (1967: 61) notes that in the Chapayev Battalion, composed of 21 nationalities, the Germans demanded coffee, whilst the other brigadiers preferred tea and the French insisted on drinking wine. A sergeant from the 12th International Brigade complained to his political commissar, novelist Gustav Regler (1940/2012: 351), that the Spanish soldiers forced him to prepare meals using olive oil; and Fisher (1999: 81), an Abraham Lincoln volunteer, remembers how they would be made fun of when eating corn on the cob, as the Spaniards considered it to be animal fodder. Orwell (1938/2010: 42) also recounts how the Spanish knew two expressions in English: *Ok, baby*, and a word used by prostitutes in Barcelona in their dealings with British sailors. Fisher writes about translator John Murra, whose skills were required by a Loyalist captain who asked him to explain the meaning of the word *fucking*, which was probably the only thing he understood in a dispute between Internationals: "You, Americans, are very strange. From your actions and comments, sometimes *fucking* is good, other times *fucking* is bad. From now on, there is to be no more *fucking* in this company" (1999: 136).

## The International Brigades' Multilingual Publications

In spite of several attempts to reorganize the International Brigades so as to achieve greater uniformity between the different nationalities and linguistic groups, difficulties in communication persisted within the Brigades, both in trivial and important matters. Aware of the power of information to combat enemy narratives, in February 1937 the political commissariat of the International Brigades ordered every brigade and battalion to publish periodicals, newspapers or journals so as to more

effectively disseminate the political and military doctrine to be followed by the volunteers. Gregoire André, who had been responsible for propaganda in the French Communist Party, issued a series of pamphlets with instructions on how to keep discipline and political orthodoxy in the troops. These included *Bulletin des Commissaires Politiques des Brigades Internationales*, which was translated into French, German and English, and *Le Volontaire de la Liberté*, with editions in German, Italian, English, Polish, Czech, and Serbo-Croatian (Núñez Díaz-Balart 2004, 2006).

By mid-1937, the International Brigades had published 71 newspapers, magazines or booklets which, together with books, radio broadcasts, documentaries and a public relations department, were intended to spread the Loyalist version of the conflict abroad or to any distinguished visitor arriving in Spain. These became part of a remarkably sophisticated propaganda machinery which was subject to governmental censorship in order to control the circulation of confidential military information and politically biased messages. The Propaganda Committee of the Republic also wanted brigadiers to be an example of discipline and solidarity for their Spanish comrades, many of whom had only learnt to read and write through the literacy programmes set up in 1937. The volunteers were given orders by their commissars to strengthen links with the Spanish people by taking part in sport, organizing libraries, and arranging music concerts, theatre performances and cinema screenings while on leave. Publications by the Brigades even prohibited troops from complaining about the food in the mess which, as previously noted, was not always to the taste of some of the brigadiers (Núñez Díaz-Balart 2004, 2006).

Printing multilingual newspapers required the joint efforts of highly competent writers and translators, such as the Americans Langston Hughes and Edwin Rolfe, the German Ludwig Renn, the Pole Szymek Krajewski, or the Italian Teresa Noce, all of whom contributed their texts and translations. Along with articles of a strictly military nature, the publications of the International Brigades portrayed Generals Kléber and Lukacs as the new antifascist heroes, and paid homage to the foreign “martyrs” who gave their lives for the freedom of the Spanish people. These newspapers and pamphlets not only informed readers about the international political situation—devoting special attention to the spread of Nazism in Europe, the policies of the Committee of Non-Intervention, the economic and military progress of the Soviet Union, or the leading role of the Communist Party of Spain (PCE) in the Republican army—but also warned recruits of the threats of Trotskyist conspiracies. Furthermore, they tried to counterbalance the pro-Franco propaganda in the British and American media, which portrayed Republicans as bloodthirsty and anticlerical (Núñez Díaz-Balart 2004, 2006).

Sometimes these publications were a cover for their own blatant propagandistic purposes, but on other occasions they tell us about the worthy humanitarian and solidarity work carried out, such as organising medical services for the

Ayuda Médica Internacional

Brigades. *A.M.I. Ayuda Médica Internacional*, a multilingual magazine edited by the Medical Service of the International Brigades, focussed on the work undertaken by different international organisations in creating health services, a children’s nursery, and hospitals. The Canadian Blood Transfusion Service—organised by surgeon Norman Bethune, an officer in the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion—appeared on the front pages of many Brigade publications as a result of the heroic work of the mobile blood transfusion teams which, with the assistance of linguists, saved the lives of hundreds of soldiers. Travelling in his own ambulance, Bethune would span the frontlines accompanied by two interpreters, Henning Sorensen, a communist militant and member of the Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy which supported the Republic, and Kajsa Rothman, a Swedish brigadier whose command of English, French, German and Spanish along with her embeddedness in the conflict helped to

increase the number of blood donors. Sorensen and Tim Buck, secretary of the Communist Party of Canada, later sent a report to the PCE accusing Bethune of allowing his liaison with Rothman to interfere with his political commitment, and of not providing the necessary funds for a new blood transfusion unit. Under threat of arrest, the surgeon attended an interview with Colonel Cerrada at the headquarters of the Military Sanitary Corps, with Sorensen acting as his interpreter. The meeting consisted of a series of hostile exchanges between Cerrada and Bethune in which Sorensen was forced to soften the latter's biting remarks when he tried to explain that their differences resulted from his failure to receive messages, his professional involvement in the aftermath of the Battle of Guadalajara, and the ever-present problem of the language barrier (Stewart and Majada 2014).

Bethune's unwillingness to incorporate his blood transfusion service into the Republican military sanitary corps resulted in him leaving Spain. Rothman had to face allegations from the secret service of being a spy, perhaps because of her old connection to the 'Iron Column', an anarchist militia unit. Even though she would be neither the first nor the last translator to be subjected to various degrees of ostracism, she continued to accompany famous writers and reporters from both Europe and the USA visiting Spain, in her capacity as a translator in the Department of Press and Censorship of the Republican government (Preston 2009: 137–138).

## Translators and Interpreters in a Complex Battleground

When they perform frontline duties to support dangerous battlefield operations, interpreters often share the burden of the responsibility carried by professional military personnel, and their involvement in such operations raises complex issues regarding the moral justification of their presence in the war zone (Inghilleri 2010: 183). In the particular case of the Spanish Civil War, international volunteers firmly believed in the justness of their contribution to the Loyalist cause, as torchbearers leading a major confrontation in the fight against fascism. The roles and status of a number of translators and interpreters can be traced in some of the memoirs and biographical accounts of the Spanish conflict, which recount the significance of their invaluable language skills in the organisation of the Internationals. Jason Gurney, of the 14th Brigade, calls them "one of the most remarkable collections of human beings in history" (1974: 171). Ludwig Renn thought his translator was "tireless" (1956/2016: 165) and "always willing to work, day or night" (484). Alexander Szurek praised the Polish interpreter Jeannette Oppman for translating General Walter's speech, full of vulgar Varsovian slang, after the fall of Bilbao in June 1937, and disapproved of Marty's abusive behaviour towards a German female translator who was simply talking to an old friend of hers. In June 1938, it was Szurek himself who translated the speeches delivered by Pole Bolesław Mołojec, known as "Edward", and by Russian Mikhail Kharchenko, at the celebration of the anniversary of the Palafox Battalion. He judged the speeches to be bad and repetitive, but after translating them into Spanish—a language in which he was not fully competent—he was ordered to translate another speech by Hungarian Commander Chapayev, of the Rakosi Battalion, who afterwards came over to him, shook his hand and said in Russian: "Thank you. You spoke better than I" (Szurek 1989: 155, 251).

Despite general recognition of the importance of their task, some brigadiers thought translators were a privileged caste who avoided the real dangers of battlefield duties. John Murra, for instance, revealed to Captain Wintringham of the British Battalion that he was seriously considering joining the front after a drunken American soldier had called him "a rear guard coward". Murra, an American of Jewish descent, had rendered John Dos Passos' *U.S.A Trilogy* into Romanian by the age of seventeen, and had become a translator in the central political command because of his fluency in several languages (Rowe 1984). Wintringham assured Murra that his task was of vital importance, and that he was anything but a coward (Wintringham 2009: 159).

A friend of Federico García Lorca, Gustavo Durán, a prestigious composer himself and film translator at Paramount Pictures in Madrid, was chosen by Kléber to act as his interpreter due to his organizational efficiency and because the General did not trust Colonel Vicente, his own French chief-of-staff previously appointed by Marty. In November 1936, Durán's language skills were challenged both in an interview with Largo Caballero, in which Kléber advised the Spanish premier to transform the non-professional militias into a regular army, and in the inspection of the defences then being built to stop the advance of the Nationalist troops on Madrid (Juárez 2009: 148–156).

Alexei Eisner was the translator for the Hungarian General Paul Lukács, Commander of the 12th International Brigade. Kléber sent Lukács a message in French which was translated by Eisner, in which he ordered Lukács to deploy his battalions in the University City of Madrid, where, as Regler (1959: 284) remembers, Kléber's men had been firing from behind barricades of bookshelves, cellar-windows, and the rooftops of a modern uncompleted centre of learning. Kléber had signed the message as Chief of the International Brigades, which Lukács took as an insult. He further feared that without further instructions and more weapons, his troops would end up being slaughtered. After consultation with political commissar Longo (Gallo) and Chief of Staff Lukanov (Belov), Lukács sent Eisner to the Palace of El Pardo where, in the presence of Kléber and his translator Durán, he delivered his official communication, in which Lukács agreed to send his men to the battlefield and requested new artillery. Eisner recalls in his memoirs that Lukács was later approached by the Spanish General Miaja, who wanted to sound out his opinion about Kléber. In Lukács's opinion, the 11th International Brigade under Kléber's command achieved a historic victory by stopping the enemy at the gates of the capital. Miaja finally interrupted the female interpreter who was rendering Lukács's unexpected reply, and abruptly put an end to the conversation by pointing out that Kléber's role as the saviour of Madrid had been unfairly exaggerated by the international press and the propaganda, to the detriment of the Spanish generals (Eisner 1972: 130–171).

Among the translators operating within the English-speaking battalions there were also volunteers from former Spanish colonies, such as the Cuban Rodolfo de Armas, who was killed in combat at Morata de Tajuña; and Filipino Manuel Lizárraga, liaison interpreter between General Lister's troops and the English Battalion at the battle of Jarama (Merriman and Lerude 1986: 89; Wintringham 2009: 287). As for the performance of interpreters, we also learn that, at this same battlefield of Jarama in February 1937, Captain Wintringham (2009: 250–262) had to rely on them to stop a Spanish Loyalist battalion of Maxim machine guns firing against his own men. Various linguists, including New York City court translator David Jarett (Zorat), delivered General Gal's controversial orders to Wintringham to resist at all costs at Suicide Hill, which prolonged the tragic massacre of three companies. On the other hand, in one of the few Republican victories of the time, Dave Doran, an American commissar of the 15th Brigade, called in an interpreter to render into Spanish a speech he addressed to the fascist forces defending Belchite, which succeeded in returning the city to Loyalist hands in August 1937 (Landis 1967: 301).

In spite of the publishing efforts of the political commissariat noted earlier, most brigadiers continued to ignore the intricate politics of the Spanish Republic, with a government composed of liberals, socialists and communists, not to mention other powerful groups of anarchists, Trotskyists, and Basque and Catalan separatists. As such, upon his arrival at the military fortress of Figueres, Eisner was surprised by the welcome speech given by the anarchist officer in charge of the garrison and translated into French by Bolek, a Russian of Jewish descent, in which he made it clear that only death and the curse of the proletariat awaited those who had travelled to Spain with the purpose of installing a communist dictatorship (Eisner 1972: 40). It was also through the testimony of a translator that

Renn got to know how anarchists repeatedly challenged the Loyalist military authority in Barcelona. Once in Madrid, the communist Wenceslao Roces,<sup>3</sup> translator of Karl Marx and undersecretary at the Ministry of Public Instruction and Fine Arts in the Republican government, blamed the anarchists for spreading the worst rumours about the situation in the city. He invited Renn to visit whatever he wished in Madrid, including the Royal Palace, which the communists hadn't looted, as had been claimed (1956/2016: 105). At the Brigades' headquarters, another translator revealed to Renn (1956/2016: 149) that Marty, later to be remembered as the "Butcher of Albacete", had arrested the head of the French-Belgian battalion for spying, as he was convinced that many of the volunteers who came to the base were fascist secret agents (Renn 1956/2016: 105, 149).

The Communist International attempted to recruit a significant number of the brigadiers among a widespread network of fellow travellers from the communist parties worldwide. In Paris, they were subjected to strict interrogations, aimed at eliminating possible "deviationists". However, the different nationalities and political ideologies of the volunteers, who were inspired in many cases by simple idealism, made it essential for political commissars to reinforce discipline. Despite the reluctance of the Republican government, the International Brigades ended up being controlled by a secret police force under the direct supervision of Soviet NKVD

People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs

[People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs] agent Alexander Orlov, the man behind the death of Andreu Nin in June 1937. As the leader of the Workers' POUM and founder of the Spanish communist movement, Nin had spent a decade in Moscow, where he worked in the Secretariat of the Communist International, until his sympathy for Trotskyism led him to be ostracised and deported. Back in Spain in 1930, Nin embarked on a prolific career as a journalist, literary critic and translator of classical and modern authors of Russian literature into Catalan—translations which are still published and read today (Figuerola 2016).

At the outbreak of the conflict, the Soviet Union had organised the secret Operation X, which cemented their solidarity with the Republican government by sending fuel, food, clothes, weapons, an expeditionary force of military specialists, and a support staff of translators, medics, engineers, maintenance workers, and sailors (Kowalsky 2004b). Such was the sympathy aroused in many Spaniards on the Loyalist side by the Russian people that, in November 1936, when the Brigades marched along the Gran Vía in Madrid on their way to their first battle with Franco's troops, they greeted them with clenched fists, hailing "Viva! Viva! The Russians have come!"

In politically polarized contexts, translators' performance is constantly under surveillance and, as Tymoczko and Gentzler note (2002: xix), many find themselves caught between the institutions in power and those seeking empowerment. In the case of the International Brigades, translators faced the dilemma of maintaining strict obedience to the ruling communist ideology, or becoming the victims of an obsessive spy hunt. As noted earlier, the presence of Soviet advisors in Spain made it necessary to rely on translators, some of whom were White Russians who had been in exile since the Revolution and were eager to return to their homeland. One such outcast, Eisner (1972: 148), writes bitterly about being under constant suspicion, as Soviet Chief of Staff Belov cared to remind him near the battlefield. German novelist Gustav Regler's own blind faith in communism was shattered when news of the execution of influential international communist leaders in Stalin's purges reached Spain in 1937. Regler warned Mishka, a White Russian he had appointed as General Lukács's orderly and translator, of the risks of returning to the Soviet Union: "He was intelligent and understood this; but at the sound of the workers' hymn all his longings awoke like a wound. He saluted as he listened, and I saw tears in his eyes" (Regler 1959: 309).

According to Beevor (2006: 220), in December 1936 the battle of Lopera, crucial for pegging back the advance of the Francoist troops, resulted in a complete disaster for the 14th International Brigade. During a visit to the battlefield, interpreter Szurek accompanied General Walter, who watched Major Delassalle, head of La Marseillaise Battalion, retreat from the front. After finding out that the French officer had abandoned his unit, Walter, assisted by Szurek, interrogated his soldiers, who declared strike action as they had not eaten in three days (Szurek 1989: 100). Szurek was also interpreting for Walter when Marty informed them that Delasalle would face a court-martial on January 1937 at the Brigade's headquarters in Arjonilla. Given the linguistic and legal complexities of the trial, Dutch polyglot Piet Jansen was called into interpret the proceedings into English and German for the president of the court, Joseph Putz, Commander of the Barbusse Battalion; prosecutor André Heussler, political commissar of La Marseillaise Battalion; and defence attorney Aldo Morandi. Charges of sabotaging the British Battalion's offensive at Lopera and deserting were sufficient for Delasalle to be condemned to death, but Marty found the French officer, who was not a communist, to be the perfect scapegoat for this military disaster and presented the court with an additional dossier, identifying him as an anti-Soviet intelligence agent in Romania and Bulgaria and a spy for the Francoists (Castells 1973: 62; Skoutelsky 2006: 146).

The bias demonstrated by interpreter Jansen in siding with those in favour of a verdict of treason rather than one of incompetent command is an example of how translators are often confronted with decisions charged with ethical, political and ideological implications. As Baker maintains, "there is no place in war for fluid, shifting identities, for split or even strained loyalties" (2010: 200). Alcofar (1973: 288) points out that, in an article he later published in the pro-Soviet weekly *Reynold News* in July 1961, Jansen further declared that Delasalle had betrayed his men by leaving his post while on night duty to go into Lopera, where the fascist commander was waiting for him. Baxell also refers to an account by Maurice Levine, political commissar at the British Battalion, who was told by Jansen that the French major had confessed to having spied against the Russians in Bucharest (2004: 62).

The International Brigades officially ceased to exist in September 1938, when Loyalist premier Dr. Juan Negrín announced at the League of Nations his government's unilateral decision to retreat them from all war zones. In the Battle of Ebro, Patricio Azcárate—liaison interpreter between the Spanish divisions and the Brigades, who would later on work with the League's international commission to organize their withdrawal from Spain—witnessed the loss of hundreds of brigadiers in what was meant to be their last theatre of operations before returning to their homelands. On 15th November 1938, when a farewell parade in the presence of Manuel Azaña, President of the Spanish Republic, was held for the volunteers in Barcelona, Dolores Ibárruri, the communist leader known as 'La Pasionaria', delivered a speech widely translated and long remembered among the Internationals, in which she respectfully claimed, "You are history. You are legend. You are the heroic example of democracy's solidarity and universality".

## Concluding Remarks

Although translation turned out to be of strategic relevance for the deployment of the International Brigades in Spain from 1936 to 1938, it was only when the high command acknowledged the Brigades' cultural hybridity and multilingualism by organizing the units according to nationalities that they began to articulate and understand what Footitt calls their real "identity" and the basis of their "legitimacy" (2012: 6). The lack of professionally trained war linguists made it necessary for the Brigades to recruit translators and interpreters mainly among bilingual and polyglot volunteers. They would make a decisive contribution, sometimes under very precarious conditions, to the organization

and administration of the high staff command, military training, medical services, legal procedures, and battlefield operations. Translators and interpreters in the Brigades, similar to most military personnel, were both praised and abused by their officers and respected by their comrades, although some of them were criticized for “avoiding” frontline action. Many of them also found themselves caught between high-ranking officers issuing conflicting orders, and witnessed the resentment which certain Spanish generals felt for their International Brigade counterparts.

A network of multilingual newspapers and periodicals, published by different Brigades under the strict control of the political commissariat, became powerful instruments for military indoctrination and propaganda. New war heroes and martyrs were born in the pages of these publications, which also encouraged brigadiers to establish stronger links with the Spanish population and counterbalance Francoist accounts of Loyalist religious persecution and brutality in the foreign media. However, more attention needs to be paid in further research to the role played by translation in book publishing, theatre performances, and audiovisual productions commissioned by the International Brigades, as well as to the intense collaboration between interpreters and foreign correspondents and to the contribution of literary translators to different wartime editorial projects.

While the International Brigades firmly believed in the justness of the Loyalist cause, which was to be the prelude to a colossal battle against fascism in many of their native countries, many international volunteers who arrived in Spain learnt from translators in their units about the entangled political disagreements which divided the ruling Loyalist coalition, as well as the challenges posed by anarchism, Trotskyism and regional nationalism to central government. Translators and interpreters also suffered the consequences of working within a polarized power structure in which political commissars were obsessed with eradicating any departures from Communist International doctrine. Translators became the victims of spy hunts, and were tools to serve political ends in interrogations and court-martials, which challenged their neutrality and called into question their reputation and status within the Brigades.

Biographical testimonies of translators are a primary source of information about the ethical dilemmas they encountered throughout the conflict. Fresh insights into their professional backgrounds may also increase our knowledge of the role played by translation in their political agendas during the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath. Ludwig Renn, for instance, commander of the 11th International Brigade, after more than a decade living in Mexico, returned to East Berlin in 1952, where he worked as a translator of Spanish literature for state-funded publishing houses. Renn’s war memoirs, as McLellan (2004: 153) recalls, were entirely rewritten as a result of East German official censorship to remove references to both his homosexuality and to Soviet military advisers in Spain. Alexei Eisner, General Lukács’s interpreter, became a victim of the Stalinist purges and was not allowed to return to Moscow until the late 1950s, where he worked as a translator and a journalist. Eisner’s personal account of the Spanish conflict, *La 12ª Brigada Internacional* (1972), would be the first book about the International Brigades published in Franco’s Spain by an author with no connections whatsoever to the dictatorship. It was translated by Arnaldo Azzati, a Spanish communist who had just returned to Valencia in 1971, after his own long exile in Moscow following the end of the Civil War.

## Notes

1. Castells (1973), Álvarez (1996), and Cerdón (2008) mention other minor military units, such as Brigades 86, 129, and 150.
2. Laspra-Rodríguez (2017: 201–231) has described a similar situation in a pivotal moment of

Spanish history when the multinational and multilingual character of the armies fighting in the Peninsular War turned translation and interpretation into indispensable tools for communication.

3. By 1936, Wenceslao Roces held the Chair of Roman Law at the University of Salamanca. He was the chief editor at influential publishing houses such as Cénit, mainly financed by the Soviet Union, and the translator of Engels, Lenin, Marx, and Stalin, among others. During his long exile in Mexico, he continued to be closely connected with the Communist Party of Spain (PCE) and to pursue his career as a university lecturer and translator.

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