

# Undigging the Past: The Lost Memory of Interpreters at the Battle for Málaga 1936-1937

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## Abstract

The fall of Málaga in the Spanish Civil War 1936-1939 was one of the first severe defeats of the Loyalist government. While the bombing of Guernica was immortalized by Picasso's iconic painting, the flight, in February 1937, of nearly 300,000 civilians heading east on the road from Málaga to Almería to avoid being caught between the advance of Moroccan regular troops and the attack of fascist aircrafts and warships has, for decades, remained repressed, silenced, or unremembered. Drawing on (un)published biographical accounts of Soviet military interpreters Mariya Levina and Elisaveta Parshina, and of Spanish civil interpreter and political activist Luis Abollado Vargas, in this paper we explore their performance as linguists and firsthand witnesses in the Battle for Málaga (July 1936-February 1937), with special reference to their ideological and professional profiles; the fulfillment of their duties on several battlefronts; and their assistance to withdrawing Republican military units and terrified civilians.

## Keywords

Spanish Civil War; Battle for Málaga; translation and conflict; ideology; military and civil interpreters

## 1. Introduction

Recent years have seen a slow but steady emergence of research (Zaro 1997; Kowalsky 2004; Martínez de Pisón 2005; Aizpuru 2009; Baigorri 2012, 2019; Rodríguez-Espinosa 2016, 2018, 2019; Wolf 2017; Orlova 2019) underlining the central performance of military and civil translators and interpreters in the Spanish Civil war and their decisive role in the Soviet military contingent, diplomatic assignments, the organization of the International Brigades, international sanitary units, the advance and retaliation of troops at the battlefield, secret guerrilla missions behind the lines, the translation of multilingual propaganda publications, or their sometimes ambiguous behaviour resulting from the ideological constraints underlying their duties.

Rundle and Rafael (2016:23-47) have discussed the asymmetrical relationship between “real” History and Translation Studies, by which a majority of “historical” researchers consider language mediation and translation as purely instrumental and as peripheral assets to their work, while only a few historians pay attention to the power of translation as an interpretative lens through which to reevaluate a historical object in new and interesting ways. The performance of translators and interpreters in the Battle for Málaga in the early months of the Spanish Civil War has so far remained tangential in the official historiography. Translators have had no place in the work of war historians Thomas (2001/1961:566) and Ramos (2003:414, 434), who only refer to the problems of communication between Russian adviser “Kremen” and Colonel

Villalba, a Republican commander with major responsibilities in the defense of the city. In a brief note to the Spanish translation (whose author's name is not even rendered) of the autobiographical account of Soviet interpreter Mariya Levina, Nadal (1991:236), relying, to a certain degree, on oral sources, briefly mentions the arrival in the city of Soviet military adviser "Kremen(g)" and two female interpreters, Levina and someone else whose identity remains unknown. Prieto and Baranquero (2007:17, 151) are the first to acknowledge Mariya Levina and Elisaveta Parshina's mission with their high officers on diverse Málaga battlefronts. Fernández and Brenes (2016:219-223) quote testimonies which recall an interpreter who worked closely by the side of a Russian adviser, referred to as "Coronel Kleber", the hero of the International Brigades in Madrid, who really never set foot in Málaga. As to Luis Abollado Vargas, another translator whose linguistic proficiency played a significant role in that same theatre of operations, while Barranquero (1994:20, 39) mentions both his role as an interpreter and a short account of the war in Málaga by Abollado himself entitled *La victoria imposible*, Nadal (2005/1984:236), Prieto and Baranquero (2007), and Fernández and Brenes (2016:292) just allude to him mainly as a consequence of his political responsibilities at the time in the Spanish Communist Party.

Oral and written testimonies of interpreters in conflict zones, in the opinion of Wolf (2016), are increasingly regarded as an invaluable source for the research and remembrance of traumatic events in history. Drawing on the (un)published memoirs and first hand biographical testimonies and accounts of Soviet military interpreters Mariya Levina and Elisaveta Parshina, and Spanish civil interpreter and communist activist Luis Abollado Vargas, in this paper we discuss their up to now long-neglected figures and their performance in the ranks of the Loyalist army in the crucial Battle for Málaga, with special reference to: (1) their ideological, academic and professional profiles; (2) their ample and complicated responsibilities within a complex hierarchical structure; (3) the fulfillment of their duties with prominent political and military authorities on several battlefronts, where they witnessed the clash between the conflicting political militias and the scarce and inefficient Republican troops; (4) their assistance both to the defeated military units in their withdrawal and to the civilian population fleeing for their lives along the road from Málaga to Almería; and finally (5) the exile of some of these Spanish interpreters in the Soviet Union after the victory of General Franco, their professional activities throughout World War II, and their subsequent work for Soviet cultural institutions and state publishing houses, or later on back in Spain.

## **2. The battle for Málaga (1936-1937): A campaign "fated to be lost"**

On the afternoon of the 17<sup>th</sup> July 1936, shortly after news of Franco's uprising in Spanish Morocco had reached Málaga, General Paxtot, senior officer in the city garrison, following General Queipo de Llano's instructions, declared a state of war and ordered Captain Agustín Huelin's company of scarcely more than 100 men to occupy strategic positions in the old quarter of the city. This plan was soon stopped by the counteroffensive of Republican militiamen from different parties and trade unions and of the Assault Guard, a police unit founded by the Republic in 1931, which, after a few hours of cross fire, prevented the rebel officers from taking over the Civil Governor's building. The colonel in charge of the Civil Guard, who had also joined the coup, was arrested by his own men. Early on the 18<sup>th</sup> July, the garrison surrendered after workers had surrounded the army barracks and set fire to a number of buildings (Beevor 2006:67).

At the centre of a long coastal strip starting no more than forty kilometres away from Gibraltar and continuing inland to the mountains of Ronda, Málaga was the most southward seaport in Spain still loyal to the Republic. US-American writer Gamel Woolsey, living at the time in the area nearby with her husband, British hispanist Gerald Brenan, walked through Málaga hours after the defeat of the insurrection and was shocked by the smell of ashes and cinders, the sight of rubble, bricks and twisted iron covering the streets, and by the destruction of half of the houses in Calle Larios, the city's main street, and of most of the villas in the fashionable Caleta-Limonar district (Woolsey 1998:57).

Foreign expatriates and members of the local upper and middle classes who were lucky to leave Málaga on board of British, US-American, or Italian warships became the source of unconfirmed rumours which described Málaga under the rule of a reign of red terror later on in July, where nuns were being killed and images burnt in churches and convents. According to Beevor (2006:96), however, there was little violence in Málaga before 27 July, when a nationalist aircraft raid bombed the market killing women and children. Conservative suspects held in prison then began to be shot and the hunt for the so-called "fascists" began. Some of them managed to find refuge in a number of consulates, such as the Mexican mission led by Porfirio Smerdou, or in houses owned by foreigners who flew their national flags in the hope of diplomatic immunity. More than 1,100 people were killed in the city between late July and the end of September 1936.

For members of the large working class of Málaga the Republican victory meant the starting point of a revolution. A new social, economic, and political structure, isolated from Loyalist Spain, emerged in the city in the course of the following weeks. Municipal and provincial civil authority was taken over by new committees of public safety integrated by

parties and trade unions of the Popular Front, such as the socialist Unión General de Trabajadores (UGT), the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) and the anarchist Confederación Nacional de Trabajadores (CNT), which now agreed to expropriate lands, crops, properties and factories from their former owners (Nadal 2005/1984:233; Prieto and Barranquero 2007:30).

This revolutionary state of affairs in a territory cut off from the reality of war was also a result of the neglect of the central government in Madrid, somewhat helpless at the growing power of anarchist organisations such as the Confederación Nacional de Trabajadores (CNT) and Federación Anarquista Ibérica (FAI). The danger of collapse in the long coastal front and the disorganization of its miscellaneous military units were probably the reasons behind the arrival in Málaga in October 1937 of Colonel Vasili I. Kisielov and Arturs K. Sprogis, the Soviet advisers who would extensively travel through the Southern Front with two military interpreters, Mariya M. Levina and Elisaveta Parshina.

Mariya M. Levina (1908-?) and Elisaveta Parshina (1913-2002) came to Spain as members of “Operation X”, code name of the Soviet plan to send military assistance to the Spanish Republic. This secret collaboration included combat equipment and a large contingent of military specialists, such as advisers, instructors, pilots, tankers, artillerymen, wireless operators, and codebreakers, as well as support staff of medics, engineers and linguists (Rodríguez-Espinosa 2016:24). Both Levina and Parshina were to be the first of at least 204 translators and interpreters shipped to Spain in the initial stages of the civil war with instructions to enhance communication between the Loyalist authorities and the Soviet military advisers.

Levina was trained as a linguist at the Institute of Foreign Languages in Moscow, where she specialized in French language and culture. Before her arrival in Spain, she had worked at the international state travel agency of the Soviet Union, “Intourist”. Also a graduate from the same institution as Levina, Parshina entered the country – as many other translators attached to military intelligence operations –, under the false name of Josefa Pérez Herrera. She was first appointed to the senior staff of the Loyalist air force in Albacete. Soon afterwards Parshina volunteered to join as an interpreter of the XIV Guerrilla Corps, a secret unit within of the German-Austrian XI International Brigade whose members were mainly Andalusian militiamen with scarce military training. Under the the command of Arturs Karlovich Sprogis, their mission was to implement disguised reconnaissance and sabotage behind the enemy front line (Parshina 2002:35; Volodarsky 2014:580).

Given the lack of expertise of some translators and interpreters, a number of them were forced to enrol on a three-month intensive course in Moscow, but Levina’s services as a military linguist in Spain were needed in such haste that she arrived on 14<sup>th</sup> November 1936 not having

an overall command of Spanish. After being initially attached to the Loyalist airfield during the siege of Madrid, she applied to Soviet chief military adviser in Spain, Ian K. Berzin “Grishin”, to be transferred closer to the war zone. Berzin, former head of Soviet foreign military intelligence (GRU), decided to put her language skills to the service of Colonel Kisielov, a veteran officer of World War I and the Russian Civil War who had been appointed military adviser to the city of Málaga. Since his arrival in the city by the second week of October 1936, Kisielov, whose *nom de guerre* was “Kremen”, had orders to make the popular militias fight like soldiers of a regular army. In the following weeks he would play an active role in their combat instruction, engaging professional officers of the old Spanish army and recruiting young commanders to lead the future military operations (Levina 1986/1975:134).

When both Levina and Parshina arrived in Málaga, they hardly knew anything about it except that it had been founded by the Phoenicians. While Levina was particularly impressed by its picturesque landscape and the slender rows of palm trees of its promenades and the rose bushes embellishing the houses, Parshina had heard about the Málaga sweet wine and was equally surprised by its pleasant weather, its lavish vegetation, and the almond trees in full bloom. However, in late 1936, as Prieto and Baranquero (2007:41-57) point out, more than 30,000 refugees from the lost Republican territory in the mountains had already fled into Málaga. The local committees found lodgings and food for many of these hungry and sick fugitives, while others gathered in abandoned churches, convents, or the cathedral, or occupied the houses in those wealthiest districts which had not been looted or destroyed. A new population of hungry and sick outcasts moved into the elegant quarters of the city. Campgrounds were built in the neatly trimmed gardens of the old villas, many of which held the headquarters of anarchists and communist organizations. The Soviet interpreters soon noticed the lack of a regular army, which seriously disturbed the performance of their units. The defense had been taken over by independent militia, created *ex nihilo* by the political parties that made up the Popular Front. Although everybody agreed that fascism could not win and that Spain should remain a democratic republic, high staff officers found it very difficult to impose their authority over such non-professional troops, either because they only obeyed their party leaders or, as in the case of the anarchists, they did not consider themselves subject to any kind of military discipline (Levina 1986/1975:132; Parshina 2002:26-29).

The revolutionary city also saw the emergence of new political figures who were to play a key role in the defense of Málaga, once the centre, now in decadence, of a bustling industrial and trading city, ruled since the 19<sup>th</sup> century by a bold cosmopolitan and polyglot bourgeoisie, knighted by the Spanish crown. Translator and interpreter Luis Abollado Vargas (1915-2005),

the Secretary of the Unified Socialist Youth/ Juventud Socialista Unificada in Málaga (JSU), the organization which unified young socialists and communists, and a member of the Militia Committee, was born in a working-class family in Peñaflor, a small village near Seville. Since his early youth, at the time of the proclamation of the II Republic, he became involved with the political activities of the Spanish Communist Party, then a powerful organization in Málaga, with an elected parliament seat since 1934 and nearly 3,000 members during the war. Abollado was an employee at the Industria Malagueña, where 2,000 women and men worked in one of Spain's largest textile factories, owned by the Larios family. During the last days of July 1936, the Casa Larios, the headquarters of Málaga's most important businesses, was burnt, and their textile manufacturing plant, now closed by their owners, was confiscated by the new revolutionary authorities and its former workers (Rodríguez-Espinosa 2000:249; Nadal 2005/1984:234).

Prior to this, Abollado's implication in the Revolution of Asturias in 1934 had forced him to leave Spain and travel to the Soviet Union, where he enrolled in the International Lenin School (ILS), the Comintern's highest educational institution devoted to training foreign party members, which forged everlasting bonds between the Soviet regime and the Spanish communists. He followed an ambitious and intensive school syllabus, emphasizing political economy, philosophy, history, strategies of organizational and party work, instruction in underground activities and even military training, which included map reading and the basics of shooting and street fighting. The curriculum was taught in several languages to hundreds of students from more than fifty countries, and Abollado spent part of his time there learning Russian, Italian and French. His command of foreign languages proved to be crucial for his close relationship with Soviet military adviser Colonel Kisielov (Kremen) and his translator, the aforementioned Mariya M. Levina, during the final weeks of the Battle for Málaga (Rodríguez-Espinosa 2000:249; Kirschenbaum 2015:4-15).

### **3. Mariya M. Levina, Elisaveta Parshina and Luis Abollado: Three interpreters operating at the fall of Málaga**

In his unpublished memoirs, a detailed account of his relationship as a interpreter with Kremen and of the events leading to the defeat of the Loyalist army in Málaga, Luis Abollado (2000) describes him as a stout blond man, rude in his manners and sanguine by temperament, whose false name meant "flintstone" in Russian, and as a very demanding high commander who would always finish any mission by saying in his native language "good work" or "bad work". Upon his arrival in Málaga, he addressed the Spanish troops at the popular militia

barracks, where Abollado, a member of the Committee of Militias, met the Soviet high rank officer and Mariya Levina, who was meant to act as his interpreter. The scarcity of qualified linguists, or their poor command of Spanish would soon force the Soviets to accept White Russians, foreign NKVD agents or international communists to reinforce communication with military personnel. Abollado volunteered to translate the Colonel's speech after taking notice of Levina's struggles understanding spoken Spanish, specially when pronounced with an Andalusian accent. He recalls that Kremen urged Spanish military commander Lieutenant-Colonel Romero Bassart to gather his high rank officers. Relying on the linguistic mediation of Abollado, he asked the officers there assembled their opinion about the way to proceed as to the three hundred kilometer poorly defended frontline that ran from Alhama de Granada to Estepona in the province of Málaga. Most of the officers believed that this tongue of land stretching out into the sea should be "a fence in which the anti-fascists would sell their lives dearly". On the contrary, Commander Mazuela, a former lieutenant of the Vitoria regiment, maintained that the strip of land should only be the starting point of a counteroffensive: "Kisielov [Kremen] congratulated Mazuela and made a brief comment approving his response. Eager to keep the purpose of his visit to Málaga secret, he disclosed nothing essential, but achieved his main purpose: the idea of an attack operation, although still very imprecise, had began to take shape in the minds of those men" (Abollado (n.d.):45).

In the company of Cayetano Bolívar, the communist Commissar of the Southern Front, the two interpreters (Levina translated from Spanish into Russian, and Abollado from Russian into Spanish), and the officers assigned to the Military Command, Kremen paid several visits to the scattered Republican positions in the mountain ranges surrounding Málaga. His meticulous inspection exasperated the officers of his entourage and embittered the local troops. Contrary to the opinion of the leaders of the anarchist militia, who accused Bolívar of appointing an excessive number of communist political commissars, in her brief memoirs of the period, Levina pays tribute to his active role in the failure of the fascist rebellion and his regular presence in the battlefield. He is described as doctor devoted to the poorest members of society and as a communist deputy of parliament whose efforts to establish a united army and obtain weapons and modern war equipment from Largo Caballero's government in Valencia would never be attended to (Abollado, forthcoming:45; Левина 1986/1975:133; Alexander 1999:233).

Levina and Abollado first travelled to the front of Estepona, where Kremen interrogated a deserter. Abollado recalls the suspicious lack of interest of the Loyalist military commander in the information achieved from the prisoner. On that occasion, Kremen made clear his

disapproval of the absence of discipline in the ranks, the deficient trenches and the parapets built to protect their positions. The adviser's expertise in weapons allowed him to repair thirteen Colt machine guns which had probably been sabotaged. The next step was to inspect the troops securing the positions in the mountains overlooking the Algeciras-Bobadilla railway. After spending the night in Cartajima, a caravan of horses and mules went up the steep hills carrying Kremen, his interpreters Levina and Abollado, commissar Bolívar and Pedro López, commander of the anarchist militia of Ronda. This column, known as the "Eaglets of Montejaque", comprised several hundred fugitives from the nearby villages of Ronda, including Pedro Flores Jiménez, nephew of the "last bandit of the Sierra Morena", who used to wear Pancho Villa hats and red and black handkerchiefs around their necks, had long beards, pistols hanging from their belts and rifles from their shoulders. López's men spent most of their time requisitioning goats, sheep and chickens from farms and villages, hunting boar or deer and sunbathing on the highest peaks. In the evening they would often leave the front line almost defenseless (Abollado n.d.:46).

The sight of an envoy from the only country that gave support to Loyalist Spain was received by these anarchists with exultation. Soviet presence in Spain was not perceived by the Loyalists to be an occupying force, and the political and revolutionary prestige of Russian, a language they could not understand but with the help of Abollado and Levina, provided it with the symbolic power of an emancipating proletarian lingua franca. However, the cheerful welcome of the anarchists also led to a boisterous demand for more weapons from the Soviet Union, to which Colonel Kremen just sharply answered: "The enemy has them. Steal them". Abollado then translated the interview between Kremen and López into Spanish. He critically recounts that, probably misled by the enthusiasm of his Spanish comrades, their eagerness to fight and their confidence in the Soviet Union, Kremen asked the anarchist commander if he did not think it was a shame to let the enemy use the railway to Ronda without any kind of opposition from his troops. López just said that, indeed, it was a shame that the fascists used the railroad without the opposition of his troops, somehow acknowledging their incompetence or indolence with no remorse (ibid.:48).

After leaving the Ronda sector, Kremen's inspection of the different fronts came to an end. Abollado was later called to translate at the meeting between the Soviet officer and commissar Bolívar, who was informed of the plan designed by the Loyalist General Staff to launch a distracting manoeuvre so as to force the rebels to withdraw troops from Madrid, lifting the siege on Malaga and, if all went according to plan, attack Granada. Kremen reckoned that Bolívar's six battalions and Pedro López's troops would be enough to cut the railway line in

several places near Ronda and advance a few kilometers further. In his memoirs, Abollado also claims that Kremen told Bolívar about the high fighting spirit he had observed among the forces at the Serranía de Ronda, and that commissar Bolívar objected that the anarchists were not at all reliable (ibid.:49-50).

Kremen next called for a meeting with the military liason committee of the Popular Front in Málaga. His purpose was to achieve a unified command of the different militias, which in the long run would contribute to the creation of a popular Republican army. The anarchist representative said that in order to give the committee an answer, their organizations needed a few months to hold a “regional plenary” of the different Spanish federations. These words reminded Kremen of Bolívar’s reluctance to cooperate with them. It was then decided that his plan would be carried out with or without the help of the anarchists, but, as Kremen had been sent too late to Málaga, it only reached the Republican High Command on 15<sup>th</sup> January 1937. While Kremen and Bolívar waited for a response from Valencia, events beyond their control developed. Abollado would learn through Bolívar that, without prior communication to the unified command, Lopez’s militia had attacked the front line near Ronda. His column was utterly defeated on 20th December, leaving a high number of casualties and prisoners. The Republican positions receded several kilometres and the chance of carrying out the manoeuver of taking the railway line was missed (ibid.:50-51).

Under the orders of General Queipo de Llano, led by Colonel Duque of Seville, a close relative to former king Alphonse XIII, the rebel forces planned a major campaign that started early in January 1937. Their target was to attack the western front and occupy the main cities of the coast. In the north, General Franco had engaged Colonel Roatta to join the offensive with his nine battalions of Italian Black Shirts and the Legionary Air Force. The Republican troops in Málaga totalled approximately 12,000 militiamen from different political parties and trade unions, led, during the final days of the battle for Málaga, by Colonel José Eduardo Villalba Rubio, the last of a series of high rank commanding officers. Only a third of his soldiers were armed with rifles, not always with ammunition; artillery was scarce and frequently not operative or ineffectual. In Valencia, Prime Minister Largo Caballero censured the disorganization of these defenders and warned deputy Bolívar that not a single rifle or cartridge more would be sent to Málaga (Thomas 2001/1961:566; Beevor 2006:223).

According to Soviet interpreter Parshina, on 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1937, commander Sprogis and his guerrilla fighters drove through the dark streets of Málaga. Republican militiamen did not first notice her presence upon their arrival at the garrison house. The Spaniards surrounded the Soviet expedition while the driver was effusively hugged, and Sprogis was subjected to a

battery of questions and a desperate request for weapons and ammunition. Latvian commander Sprogis made the interpreter visible by placing her in front of him and ordered her to translate. All heads turned to the Russian female officer as soon as she uttered her first words. The circle closed, everyone wanted to see the new linguist. Parshina was then introduced to José Muñoz García, the official head of the detachment, who was called “Trimotor” in reference to a three motor bomber. The interpreter could not understand him, although he spoke slowly. Sprogis just told Parshina that those miners and peasants, who had only joined their units recently, spoke Spanish with a very strong Andalusian accent, that understanding them was simply a question of time. Soon after this first encounter, Sprogis met up with Colonel Kremen, who had sent a report to Ian Berzin informing him that it was impossible for them to defend Málaga any longer (Parshina 2002:30-31).

Parshina goes on to recount that Sprogis’s detachment was finally entrusted with the dangerous task of destroying crucial pieces of infrastructure to stop the rebel army. She had already studied the maps for him and translated into Russian the names of the towns which Sprogis had written down with a pencil. Most of the secret operations of the guerrilla command were under his direct orders. Their mission was to blow all the bridges which led to Málaga on its eastern front and Parshina translated Sprogis’s instructions as close as possible to her inexperienced comrades, insisting on the word “cuidado”, specially when they had to manipulate the fuses and calculate the time of the detonation. She performed her duties as an interpreter in the company of gray-haired soldiers wearing overalls and espadrilles. They smiled but dared not speak to her. Because of Sprogis’s insistence in her learning Andalusian, she soon found out that they did not pronounce the “d” in the last syllable and started saying “cuidao” herself, and paying attention to other cultural differences she had not been aware of before (ibid.:35-42).

According to Parshina (ibid.:56), Sprogis’s last mission was to evacuate the military hospital on 5<sup>th</sup> February 1937. Upon their arrival, they learned that only a nurse had stayed behind with her patients. Sprogis ordered Parshina to translate that the wounded had to leave the place immediately. They had to get up from the beds, pull off their bandages and gather their belongings. Being captured by the enemy with bullet wounds meant a sure death. Those who could not get up looked helplessly at their comrades, not daring to ask for help. The nurse ran out of the room to return with clothes and bandages. The explosion of rage lasted little, the wounded were real soldiers and knew how to preserve their dignity.

On 7<sup>th</sup> February, just one day before Italian fascist forces made their entrance in Málaga, the political and trade union leaders of the defense committee, Colonel Villalba and Soviet

adviser Kremen held a meeting, most probably with the assistance of interpreters Levina and Abollado, in which they decided to evacuate the city and move headquarters to the only village nearby with a telegraph station, Nerja, on the eastern coast, from where it was possible to reach Almería, still under the control of the Loyalist government. Panic spread among the population of Málaga. In the previous months, stories of the atrocities perpetrated by the insurgent Moorish colonial troops in the surrounding towns had reached the city, and on his radio broadcasts fascist General Queipo de Llano had warned anybody who dared oppose him to “start digging graves”. Hundreds of demoralized retreating Republican militiamen and thousands of civilian refugees, mostly starving women, children and old people, fled Málaga in what was to be known as “La Desbandá”, on a 200 kilometre foot journey on the road to Almería to escape one of the cruelest waves of repression in the entire Spanish Civil war. Along the coast, the rebel navy shelled the refugees, while planes and tanks bombed and machine-gunned them. Approximately 80,000 people arrived in Almería, 20,000 returned to Málaga, and more than 5,000 died (Preston 2007:96-97; Palfreeman 2014:124-129).

In Parshina’s memoirs, we further learn that, after the retreat of the Republican army from Málaga, Sprogis and herself, as his translator, met up with Commissar Bolívar, a group of communists from the local party committee and a small detachment covering the withdrawal of the refugees, while the anarchists tried to steal their weapons and lorries. Once in Torre del Mar, Sprogis and Parshina went straight to the General Staff, lodged in a stone bunker by the sea. Inside its dark premises, crowded with civil and military authorities, the liaison officers brought news of the retreating detachments, most of which were out of control. Among the people sitting in the barracks, Parshina spotted Colonel Villalba. She also ran into her linguist colleagues Levina and Abollado, who had come down with tuberculosis, an illness he had probably contracted while working at the ‘Industria Malagueña’ textile factory. Sprogis helped Commissar Bolívar to organize the resistance against the advance of the enemy’s troops. Back on the road, Parshina saw crowds of civilians and militiamen carrying children and the sick in their arms. Fascist battleships suddenly approached the coast and started aiming at them. People tried to reach a part of the road as hidden away from the coast as possible. Parshina recalls that they had to leave their vehicle behind, lay on the ground and wait for the bombing to end. Once the vessels had pulled away, she found on the road the dead hand of a child coming out of a pile of rags. It was then that she claims to have realized that she was actually a soldier. In the afternoon, they stopped at Motril, where refugees from nearby villages were being picked up by trucks from Murcia. Sprogis and his men joined the local committee of the communist party in their effort to find gasoline and provisions and to organize the defense of Motril. Abollado

had volunteered as an interpreter to help them. The rest of their soldiers were allowed to search for their families and comrades (Parshina 2002:58-66).

#### **4. Landscapes after the battle: Tracing the lost trail of Levina, Parshina and Abollado**

Upon her arrival in Moscow in early 1937, the Soviet government awarded Mariya Levina the Order of the Red Star for her distinguished performance in the missions entrusted to her in Spain. After that, she worked for some time with Spanish refugee children sent to the Soviet Union by their parents during the civil confrontation. Elisaveta Parshina, her colleague while in Málaga. As Planells (2002) remarks, became one of the three first women to join SMERSH, acronym of “SMERt’ SHpionam”, “Death to Spies”. She operated within this and other military counter-intelligence organizations throughout World War II and the Cold War. Her final professional years were spent working in an institute for scientific research.

Following the Loyalist defeat in Málaga, Luis Abollado, as a member of the national committee of the Socialist Unified Youth (JSU), was named instructor at the school that the organization had opened in Valencia. The end of the war brought him, with many other thousands of Spanish refugees, to a concentration camp on the French border. Some time later, Abollado, in the company of a number of leading members of the Spanish Communist Party, travelled to the Soviet Union, where he eventually developed a promising career as an interpreter and literary translator in various Soviet news agencies, broadcasting services and state publishing houses (Rodríguez-Espinosa 2000).

Over the years, Levina, Parshina and Abollado wrote autobiographical accounts of their experience in Málaga during the war. Levina (1986/1975:134) asserts that Colonel Kremen’s work was received with gratitude by his Spanish comrades, although, according to Spanish Civil War historian Thomas (2001/1961:566), high officers such as Colonel Villalba were not that happy to follow the orders of the Russian adviser. The interpreter also remembers her shoes falling apart after two weeks in the mountains under the cold weather of January and the kind militiaman who brought her a parcel with woolen stockings, mittens, and a pair of new shoes one morning. Even though Abollado depicts Levina at their first meeting as an “inefficient” translator” (Rodríguez-Espinosa 2000), in his own account of the period, radio operator Lev Jurgues, one of Kremen’s Soviet assistants, describes Levina as a committed soldier who never refused any task assigned to her, and who bravely remained next to Kremen during the bombing raids over Málaga, under heavy artillery fire or a cannonade. After a long day’s work, she could translate operative and informative materials for her superior, and, although French was her main foreign language, she learned Spanish in a very short time. In her spare time, Jurgues

recalls how she read to them French books they had found in the house where they were staying. Levina translated directly into Russian while she read, and they were under the impression that she was an excellent literary translator (Xyprec 2007).

Parshina (2002:67), who ran again into Abollado on their withdrawal from Málaga, says that he spoke “a bit of Russian”, a statement which would not probably have made the young communist cadre happy. Her memoirs are also a further source of information of her relationship with Sprogis, the high officer who would eventually become her husband. Their first meeting, however, was a great disappointment for her because of his disapproval of having been assigned a female interpreter. Parshina was submitted to a short interrogation because her superior wanted to find out if she could hike in the countryside, shoot or if she would faint during a military operation. This cross-examination made her very angry, although she restrained herself from answering back as she wanted to join the guerrilla unit. Parshina did not approve either of Sprogis ordering her to prepare the food for his men at the end of a mission. However, she kept once more her thoughts to herself: “You could have also taken care of that yourself” (Parshina 2002:25, 43, 44).

In the USSR, together with Irene Falcón or Soledad Sancha, Abollado was to become one of the most relevant interpreters working by the side of the leaders of the central committee of the Spanish Communist Party in their meetings with Soviet apparatchiks and institutions. Early in 1947, Spanish communists performed their particular version of the Moscow trials, where Abollado was accused of being involved, with other relevant members of the party, in the “Lux conspiracy”, the secret complot planned to remove Dolores Ibárruri, La Pasionaria, the mythical leader of the party, from her executive positions. Along with other former members of the JSU, Abollado was banished from his positions and responsibilities and punished to work in the Stalin car factory in Moscow. He returned to Spain by the end of 1956 in one of the three expeditions sponsored by the International Red Cross in which the USSR and the Francoist regime agreed on the return of Spanish republicans. In the following years, in the company of Arnaldo Azzati, Lydia Kúper, José Laín, Isabel Vicente, Augusto Vidal, and other exiles, who would later on be known as the “Group of Moscow” (Rodríguez-Espinosa 2007), he started to translate a wide range of classic Russian authors. For leading publishers such as Manuel Aguilar in Madrid, Vergara in Barcelona, or Grijalbo in Mexico, he translated novels and short stories by Korolenko 1957, Chejov 1964, Dostoievski 1969, Makárenko 1970, Solzhenitsin 1972, Gladkov 1976, or Lermontov 1979, among others, most of which are still published and read today in Spain and Latin America. Abollado was really fond of talking about his experiences as an exile in the Soviet Union, specially to young audiences. In June 2002, the

University of Málaga and the Book Fair of the city paid a well-deserved tribute to him for his long and fertile career as a translator and interpreter (Rodríguez-Espinosa 2007; Rueda 2019).

Elisaveta Parshina worked as a close collaborator of Adelina Abramson, former Soviet interpreter in Spain and president of Archive, War and Exile (Archivo, Guerra y Exilio, AGE), an association founded in 1998 to preserve the memory of the Soviet contingent in the Spanish Civil war, the Republican exile, the International Brigades and the victims of Franco's dictatorship. In the hands of Parshina, Abramson and Dolores Cabra, the activities of the association particularly appealed to the younger generations of Spaniards, who had the opportunity to get acquainted with these last witnesses of the civil conflict through a number of public talks, interviews, memoirs and documentaries, such as Daniel Künzi's *Ernst Schacht, un pilote suisse avec les aviateurs soviétiques de la guerra d'Espagne* (2008), probably one of the earliest first hand recorded testimonies of these Soviet interpreters.

Spain's 2007 Law of Historical Memory was the official recognition of the country's need to unearth repressed episodes of its traumatic memory and history. In the last decades, the exhumation of unmarked mass grave sites in Málaga, where more than 4,000 people were executed and buried, and the placement of memorial plaques on the road to Almería have not only reclaimed the physical space where the tragic deaths of innocent people occurred in February 1937, but have also marked a milestone in the long-overdue process of national reconciliation. In their holistic approach to Military History, Kujamäki and Footitt (2016:69) assert that translators and interpreters are a crucial element in an overall linguistic landscape of war in which categories of "foreignness", identity and belonging are radically challenged. They claim that researching wartime linguists contributes to reevaluating their presence on the ground of conflict where troops were deployed, specially when they have been ignored in official military accounts, but also to exploring the embodiment of those disruptions which wars typically engendered in societies. Undigging the long-neglected testimonies of Levina, Parshina and Abollado during the Battle for Málaga in the Spanish Civil war not only involves rescuing their crucial role as language mediators in diplomatic meetings, military tactical advice, war instruction, battlefield operations, or undercover guerilla units, but also taking a further step forward in the recuperation of Spain's repressed, silenced and forgotten past.

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