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# Transnational Soldiers and Guerrilla Warfare from the Spanish Civil War to the Second World War

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“Because of Spain, we knew ten times more than any of the other guys”<sup>1</sup>

War underwent a profound political, technological and social transformation in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. One of the key elements in this transformation was the relationship between war and society. On the one hand, in “total war”, civilians became a strategic military target, which would explain the high number of civilian victims in the armed conflicts of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, there had been mass mobilization of civilians by national armies since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This gave rise to two, apparently contradictory, phenomena: the massive conscription of civilians and the rise of the volunteer soldier.<sup>3</sup> As states sought to strengthen patriotic feelings and border control, the phenomenon of transnational soldiers began to appear. These were men and women who fought, either voluntarily or under duress, for other countries but with different motives to those of mercenaries.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Irving Goff in Studs Terkel, *“The Good War”*: An Oral History of World War Two (New York: Pantheon Book, 1984), p. 492

<sup>2</sup> Peter H. Wilson, ‘European Warfare, 1815-2000’ in *War in the Modern World since 1815*, ed. Jeremy Black (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 209-211.

<sup>3</sup> Christine G. Krüger and Sonja Levsen, ‘Introduction: Volunteers, War, and the Nation since the French Revolution’ in *War Volunteering in Modern Times: From the French Revolution to the Second World War*, eds. Christine G. Krüger and Sonja Levsen (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 1-22

<sup>4</sup> Nir Arielli and Bruce Collins, ‘Introduction: Transnational Military Service since the Eighteenth Century’, in *Transnational Soldiers Foreign Military Enlistment in the Modern Era*, eds. Nir Arielli and Bruce Collins (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 1-12

This new civil element of war was particularly apparent in the ‘the wars of liberation’ in Spain, Russia and Prussia during the Napoleonic wars. Emulating the myth of David against Goliath, ordinary citizens organised national resistance efforts against the ‘foreign army’ through small irregular armed groups. Although guerrilla warfare was not new, its novel political and psychological aspects certainly were. The idea of people taking up arms and forming irregular groups to combat powerful national or foreign armies spread throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to become one of the major novelties of modern warfare.<sup>5</sup>

Guerrilla warfare is a strategy for irregular groups with limited resources, who use it to try to overcome the advantages of their powerful enemy. However, it can also be a military strategy in which the activity of irregular groups is combined with the conventional operations of a regular army. The Spanish Civil War and the Second World War (WWII) are two clear examples of a combined strategy of regular and irregular warfare, while most wars since the Cold War have exploited the potential of asymmetric warfare.<sup>6</sup>

The great innovation of the Spanish Civil War was the formation of elite groups specializing in sabotage and intelligence, under centralized military command. The potential of this strategy was developed later during WWII with a proliferation of these units in Great Britain (the British Commandos), the United States (Special Operations groups) and Germany (Brandenburgers). The two main Allied intelligence agencies, the British SOE and the American OSS, made

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<sup>5</sup> Camille Rougeron, ‘La dimension Historique de la Guérilla’, in *Les guerre irrégulières: XX<sup>e</sup>-XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle* ed. Gérard Chaliand (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2008), pp. 65-82.

<sup>6</sup> Ian F. W. Beckett, *Modern Insurgencies and Counter-Insurgencies: Guerrillas and their opponents since 1750* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. vii.

great efforts to promote this type of unit.<sup>7</sup> However, in 1939 the military experience and knowledge of guerrilla warfare was still quite limited.

The aim of the present article is to show how military institutions incorporated innovations in their tactics using the intermediary role of transnational soldiers in the Spanish War. Soviet advisers and instructors trained hundreds of Spanish and foreign volunteers on guerrilla warfare, transferring their knowledge from the Russian Civil War to the Spanish Civil War. After the war in Spain, thousands of Republicans fled the country, taking refuge in France, North Africa, the Soviet Union, Latin America, Britain and the USA. This enabled their networks, experiences and knowledge to be used by the allies to carry out guerrilla warfare in WWII. In order to provide detailed evidence of their importance this study consists of an analysis of networks, recruitment and training in Spain, USA and North Africa between 1936 and 1945. The accounts of some transnational soldiers, together with archive material from Russia, Spain, the UK and the USA have made it possible to complete this wide-ranging geographical itinerary of the transfer of guerrilla warfare during this period.

### **“I learned everything in Spain”: Transnational Soldiers in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939)**

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<sup>7</sup> David Stafford, *Britain and European Resistance, 1940-1945: A survey of the Special Operations Executive, with Documents* (London: MacMillan Press, 1980); Kermit Roosevelt, *War Report of the OSS: Office of Strategic Services*, 2 vols. (New York: Walker and Company, 1976); James Lucas, *Kommando: German Special Operations of World War Two* (London: Frontline Books, 2014)

“With guerrillas like Tschapaieff (...) the Bolsheviks won their civil war, the Chinese defend themselves with guerrillas and we must win this war with guerrillas”.<sup>8</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Alberto Bayo, later a guerrilla warfare instructor for Fidel Castro and “Che” Guevara, expressed himself with such conviction in a pamphlet entitled “*It will be a guerrilla war*”. Bayo aimed to convince the Republican Army’s general staff in October 1937 that they should double their efforts with regard to guerrilla warfare. “For 16 months of fighting we have worked hard with only a very small number of guerrillas as we have not acknowledged the importance of this policy or method of waging war”.<sup>9</sup>

Bayo’s report was accurate. Since the start of the war the Republicans had implemented guerrilla operations but not in a systematic or organized manner. This was mainly due to the crisis facing the Republican Army. The Spanish Civil War had started with a military coup, which led to a territorial and internal fracturing of the Spanish Army. Only a small number of officers stayed loyal to the government of the Second Republic. At the same time, workers’ organizations created their own paramilitary groups (armed militias) which competed with the remains of the Republican Army for the control of violence practices. During the first months of the war the Republican government faced an enormous challenge: to create a “popular army” to integrate both loyal officers and the autonomous armed militias.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Alberto Bayo, *La guerra será de los guerrilleros* (Barcelona: Imp. Myria, 1937), cited in: Francisco Cabrera and Domingo Blasco, *El frente invisible. Guerrilleros republicanos, 1936-1939. De los ‘Niños de la Noche’ al XIV Cuerpo* (Madrid: Silente, 2013), p. 140.

<sup>9</sup> Bayo, *La guerra*, p. 140.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Alpert, *The Republican Army in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 17-84.

This context explains the different facets of guerrilla warfare in the Republican Army during the Spanish Civil War. Between July and December 1936 there were two forms of guerrilla warfare. On the one hand, in territory occupied by the Nationalist army, groups of fugitives were organized to carry out acts of sabotage, although most were more concerned with mere survival. On the other hand, small militia units were formed to cross enemy lines and obtain information and carry out sabotage. Some of these groups were organized *from below* with full autonomy from the general staff although there were also some unofficial initiatives organized by the Republican Army.<sup>11</sup> Notable amongst these were the activities of the Soviet official Hajji-Umar Mamsurov,<sup>12</sup> who, from August 1936, advised and directed several guerrilla units in central and southern Spain.<sup>13</sup>

The Spanish Civil War was a laboratory for the Soviet Union to test new weapons and combat techniques.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, Soviet officials had a vital role in implementing guerrilla warfare in the Republican Army. In October 1936 the military attaché Vladimir Gorev and other Soviet advisors produced a report with the recommendation that a new Republican Army, based on the Red Army, should be created, suggesting the need to form guerrilla units for espionage and sabotage.<sup>15</sup> In December 1936, as a result of Soviet advice, Vicente Rojo, Chief of

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<sup>11</sup> Cabrera and Blasco, *El frente*, pp. 37-80.

<sup>12</sup> Mamsurov was a member of the Red Army from 1918, and later worked in the Soviet intelligence services. He became deputy chief of intelligence in the Soviet Central Partisan Staff during the Second World War. See: Boris Volodarsky, *Stalin's Agent: The Life and Death of Alexander Orlov* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 572

<sup>13</sup> Yuri Rybalkin, *Stalin y España: La ayuda militar soviética a la República* (Madrid: Marcial Pons, 2007), pp. 113-114.

<sup>14</sup> Rybalkin, *Stalin*, pp. 147-171.

<sup>15</sup> Stanley Payne, *The Spanish Civil War, the Soviet Union, and Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 164.

Staff for the defence of Madrid, officially ordered the creation of the first guerrilla units,<sup>16</sup> while, in January 1937, the president of the government, Francisco Largo Caballero, approved a plan to create guerrilla units within the Republican Army throughout the territory.<sup>17</sup> The process of militarization of the guerrilla units continued until February 1938 when the new elite corps (initially named Special Service Groups and later, Guerrilla Battalions), trained in guerrilla schools, were formed.<sup>18</sup>

The final stage, between February 1938 and March 1939, was the consolidation of guerrilla groups with the creation of the 14<sup>th</sup> Corps. This new elite unit, directed by Domingo Ungría, later to become a Red Army guerrilla in the Soviet Union during WWII, was integrated into the Republican Army.<sup>19</sup> Consisting of six divisions, its three main objectives were to: 1) obtain information on the enemy (intelligence), 2) destroy transport and communication infrastructure, military installations, etc. (sabotage) and 3) cause a popular uprising in the enemy rearguard (through propaganda and subversion).<sup>20</sup> However, it did not reach its peak of organization, training and experience until the Republican Army was practically defeated.

The slow pace of implementation of guerrilla warfare in the Republican Army was due to four key factors: 1) the complexity of creating a new popular army incorporating both professional soldiers and members of the militias; 2) the

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<sup>16</sup> Alpert, *Republican Army*, p. 71.

<sup>17</sup> Hernán Rodríguez Velasco, 'Las guerrillas en el Ejército Popular de la República, 1936-1939', *Cuadernos de Historia Contemporánea*, 33 (2011), p. 241.

<sup>18</sup> Cabrera and Blasco, *Frente invisible*, pp. 81-145.

<sup>19</sup> Ungría to Dolores, 30 March 1942. Madrid, Archivo del Comité Central del PCE (ACCPCE) Emigración URSS, Caja 100/2

<sup>20</sup> Alpert, *Republican Army*, pp. 265-266; Cabrera and Blasco, *Frente invisible*, pp. 174-177.

opposition of some Spanish military officers to the creation of guerrilla units;<sup>21</sup> 3) the poor tactical level of the obsolete Spanish Army;<sup>22</sup> and 4) the lack of relevant military experience of the majority of the Republican soldiers and officers.<sup>23</sup>

As a result, although some of the international volunteers lacked military experience, they made a notable contribution to the Republican Army. The Comintern's guidelines emphasized the importance of recruiting people with military experience. However, this requisite varied according to country and date.<sup>24</sup> This lack of consistency in recruitment resulted in a heterogeneous selection of international volunteers. For instance, most of the Polish volunteers lacked any military knowledge and only 34% of the Americans had had any kind of formal military experience.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, others had fought in the First World War, the Russian Civil War or in colonial wars, particularly the volunteers from Germany and Bulgaria.<sup>26</sup>

However, the Soviet contribution was the largest. It is believed that the Soviet Union sent around 4000 people to work in the Republican Army, of whom

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<sup>21</sup> Vital Gayman, 'La Base des Brigades Internationales', Moscow, Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) F. 545. Op. 2. D. 32

<sup>22</sup> Rybalkin, *Stalin*, p. 83

<sup>23</sup> Alpert, *Republican Army*, pp. 2, 23.

<sup>24</sup> Daniel Kowalsky, 'The Soviet Union and the International Brigades, 1936-1939', *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 19-4 (2006), p. 688; Nir Arielli, 'Getting There: Enlistment Considerations and the Recruitment Networks of the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War', in *Transnational Soldiers Foreign Military Enlistment in the Modern Era*, eds. Nir Arielli and Bruce Collins (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 224-225.

<sup>25</sup> Jan Stanisław Ciechanowski, 'La participación de ciudadanos polacos y de origen polaco en las Brigadas Internacionales', in *Al lado del gobierno republicano. Los brigadista de Europa del Este en la guerra civil española*, eds. Manuel Requena Gallego and Matilde Eiroa (Cuenca: Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, 2009), p. 101; Peter N. Carroll, *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 65.

<sup>26</sup> VVAA, *La solidaridad de los pueblos con la República Española* (Moscu: Editorial Progreso, 1974), pp. 65, 87, 102, 125, 154, 172, 193, 224-226; Ilya G. Dragomir Draganov, 'Los búlgaros en las Brigadas Internacionales' in *Al lado del gobierno republicano. Los brigadista de Europa del Este en la guerra civil española*, eds. Manuel Requena Gallego and Matilde Eiroa (Cuenca: Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, 2009), p. 167, 173-180.



600 were military advisors and instructors.<sup>27</sup> It is not known how many were directly involved in the development of guerrilla warfare in Spain but the profiles of some of these advisors show the great interest of the Soviets in this field. Although the extent to which General Alexander Orlov was involved in the promotion of guerrilla warfare in Spain is controversial, he undoubtedly put his long experience at the disposal of the Republican Army.<sup>28</sup> A more important part was played by advisors and instructors such as Naum Eitingon, Hajji-Umar Mamsurov, Kristofors Intovich Salniņš, Grigory Semyonov, Ilyá Starinov, Grigory Syroyezhkin, Guy Lazarevich Tumanian and Stanislav Vaupshasov, among others. In addition to their Soviet military academy training, they had experience of guerrilla warfare in the Russian Civil War, the Polish-Soviet War and the Chinese Civil War.<sup>29</sup> Eitingon, Orlov's deputy in Spain, was, according to his superior, "the man most responsible for developing the strategy for commando raids in modern times, and (...) the Spanish Civil War was the testing ground for the tactic long before the Second World War".<sup>30</sup>

The film *Chapaev*, based on the exploits of Soviet partisans in the Russian Civil War, was viewed with great enthusiasm by the Spanish and international soldiers who served in Spain. The US International Brigader Mito Kruth wrote to his wife after seeing the film in Spain: "We too will be little Chapayevs in our small way".<sup>31</sup> These new "Chapayevs" were trained in special schools, the most

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<sup>27</sup> Rybalkin, *Stalin*, pp. 114, 87-88; Kowalsky, 'The Soviet Union, p. 689.

<sup>28</sup> Edward Gazur, *Alexander Orlov: The FBI's KGB General* (New York: Carrol & Graf Publishers, 2002), pp. 48, 55-78; Volodarsky, *Stalin's Agent*, pp. 9, 171-172, 218, 324-325

<sup>29</sup> Cabrera and Blasco, *Frente invisible*, pp.103-105, 112-116; Volodarsky, *Stalin's Agent*, pp. 169-170, 187-188, 206.

<sup>30</sup> Gazur, *Alexander Orlov*, p. 60.

<sup>31</sup> Lisa A. Kirschenbaum, *International Communism and the Spanish Civil War: Solidarity and Suspicion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 122-127.

important sources for the transmission of guerrilla warfare. Orlov spoke of six schools in Spain, of which five have been identified: Benimámet (Valencia), Ciudad Lineal (Madrid), Extremadura, Jaén and Sant Cugat del Valles (Barcelona), all inaugurated between November 1936 and September 1937.<sup>32</sup> The most important was Benimámet, which imparted courses on explosives, weaponry, topography, military tactics and general history of guerrilla warfare to groups of between 20 and 25 students. On graduating, students joined guerrilla units where they received further training in reconnaissance, life behind enemy lines, ambushes and sabotage.<sup>33</sup>

Adelino Pérez, a guerrilla fighter in the 14<sup>th</sup> Corps in Spain and later a member of the French Resistance, studied at Benimámet. He remembers that among the instructors there were many Soviet military officials teaching guerrilla theory and tactics. “Benimámet is where I learned, and I learned so much (...) that I was later able to give classes on explosives and guerrilla warfare to those returning from the trenches. I taught in [the guerrilla school in] Madrid (...) and later in France”.<sup>34</sup> One of the Soviet instructors in Benimámet was Major Starinov, who was also the leader of the partisan movement in the Soviet Union during WWII. He stated in his memoirs: “I tried to transmit to the Spaniards the experience of partisan warfare which had been accumulated in our nation during the civil war”.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Gazur, *Alexander Orlov*, p. 60; Cabrera and Blasco, *Frente invisible*, pp. 181-184, 189-191.

<sup>33</sup> Ilyá Starinov, *Over the Abyss: My life in Soviet Special Operations* (New York: Ivy Books, 1995), p. 77; Anna K. Starinov, *Behind Fascist Lines: A Firsthand Account of Guerrilla Warfare During the Spanish Revolution* (New York: Ballantine Publishing Group, 2001), p. 25; Rodríguez, ‘Las guerrillas’, pp. 245-246.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Adelino Pérez Salva, in: José Antonio Vidal Castaño, *La memoria reprimida. Historias orales del maquis* (Valencia: Publicacions de la Universitat de Valencia, 2004), pp. 178-180.

<sup>35</sup> Starinov, *Over the Abyss*, pp. 77-78, 140.

Thousands of future guerrilla fighters who fought in Spain and in other countries during WWII passed through these schools. The total number of guerrilleros that fought in the Spanish Civil War is unknown. Orlov declared that around 14,000 Republican soldiers were deployed behind enemy lines,<sup>36</sup> although this figure appears rather high. What is known is that 3,480 guerrilla fighters belonged to the 14<sup>th</sup> Corps from February 1938 to March 1939.<sup>37</sup> Most were Spanish although some members of the International Brigades were also admitted. It is estimated that there were “hundreds” of transnational soldiers integrated into guerrilla units from 15 countries: Germany, Austria, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, United States, Finland, France, Hungary, Italy, Mexico, Sweden, Switzerland, Soviet Union, Uruguay and Yugoslavia.<sup>38</sup>

William Aalto, a 21-year-old working class Finnish-American, Irving Goff, a 26-year-old professional actor and acrobat and Alexandre Künstlich, a Jewish-American university student who abandoned his studies to become a trade unionist, were the only three Americans to form part of the guerrilla units. All were young New Yorkers and members of the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) since 1935. Although their personal files in the Comintern archives are not very detailed, they contain sufficient information for their paths to be followed throughout the war.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Gazur, *Alexander Orlov*, p. 60.

<sup>37</sup> Alpert, *Republican Army*, pp. 265-266.

<sup>38</sup> Starinov, *Over the Abyss*, pp. 97, 141; Cabrera and Blasco, *Frente invisible*, pp. 106-117; VVAA, *La solidaridad*, pp. 78, 127, 161-163, 315-316, 366.

<sup>39</sup> Carrol, *Odyssey*, p. 167; Bill Aalto (personal file) From 1 Feb. 1938 to 12 Dec. 1938, RGASPI. F. 545, Op. 6. D. 855; Irving Goff (personal file) From 4 sep. 1937 to 5 Jan. 1939, RGASPI. F. 545, Op. 6. D. 898; Alexandre Künstlich (personal file) From 1 Feb. 1938 to 9 July 1938, RGASPI. F. 545, Op. 6. D. 927.

Aalto and Künstlich arrived in Spain in February 1937 with Goff arriving a month later, just at the moment that the guerrilla schools were opening. Goff reported to the headquarters of the International Brigades in Albacete, where he became responsible for the transport of an Anglo-American group of volunteers. In October 1937 he joined the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) and must have arrived at one of the guerrilla schools at this time, probably Benimámet, due to its proximity to Albacete. On finishing his training in December 1937 he joined the guerrilla units of the Republican Party, reaching the rank of lieutenant. He spent six months as a guerrilla fighter on the Teruel, Levante, Córdoba and Motril fronts until May 1938.<sup>40</sup>

However, Aalto and Künstlich had rather more notable careers. The former was probably sent to Benimámet shortly after arriving in Spain. Although Künstlich's itinerary is not clear, it is reasonable to suppose that it was similar to that of Aalto. Both attained the rank of captain in the 14<sup>th</sup> Corps and became the leaders of several guerrilla units. Aalto stood out from the rest of his companions, as reported by International Brigades officials: "Comrade Aalto is the most outstanding American in this zone, both militarily and politically. He is undoubtedly one of the most outstanding comrades of all the Americans who have fought in Spain".<sup>41</sup> Such were his qualities that he became a guerrilla instructor at the Benimámet and San Cugat del Valles schools.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Bill Aalto. From 1 Feb. 1938 to 12 Dec. 1938, RGASPI; Irving Goff. From 4 Sep. 1937 to 5 Jan. 1939, RGASPI; Alexandre Künstlich. From 1 Feb. 1938 to 9 July 1938, RGASPI.

<sup>41</sup> Bill Aalto. From 1 Feb. 1938 to 12 Dec. 1938, RGASPI.

<sup>42</sup> Bill Aalto. From 1 Feb. 1938 to 12 Dec. 1938, RGASPI.

Aalto became legendary in Spain. For more than a year he organized groups of guerrillas in Teruel, Córdoba, Jaén and Granada. His main role was to carry out espionage and sabotage behind enemy lines, which he crossed on more than a hundred occasions. However, Aalto, together with Künstlich and Goff, are principally remembered for the attack on the fortress at Carchuna (Granada), the largest rescue operation of the Spanish Civil War. In May 1938 several guerrilla units composed of Spanish and international volunteer soldiers organized an attack in Francoist territory to free 300 Republican prisoners. As the fortress-prison was next to the sea they used motor launches to approach at night. The operation was a success: the 300 prisoners were freed and some Francoist soldiers captured. However, some guerrilla fighters, including Aalto, Künstlich and Goff were trapped in enemy territory. Three days after being posted as missing, news reached the base that Aalto and Goff had managed to escape by swimming for hours to reach the Republican zone. However, Künstlich was captured by the enemy and shot.<sup>43</sup>

Thousands of members of the International Brigades returned home or went to other countries with a wealth of military experience at the end of the Spanish Civil War. Many, including Aalto and Goff, made their experience available to their national armies or to resistance movements during WWII. “What do I know of guerrilla warfare? I learned everything in Spain.” – Goff would declare years later.<sup>44</sup> Military organisations such as the American OSS saw

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<sup>43</sup> Bill Aalto. From 1 Feb. 1938 to 12 Dec. 1938, RGASPI; Irving Goff. From 4 Sep. 1937 to 5 Jan. 1939, RGASPI; Alexandre Künstlich. From 1 Feb. 1938 to 9 July 1938, RGASPI; Milton Felsen, *Anti-Warrior: A Memoir* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1989), p. 87; Cabrera and Blasco, *Frente invisible*, p. 262-267; Carrol, *Odyssey*, pp. 167-168.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Irving Goff in Terkel, *Oral History*, p. 491

in those experienced men an opportunity to enhance their knowledge of guerrilla warfare in the context of World War Two.

### **‘I want all your ideas’’: Transnational Soldiers in the US (1941-1942)**

The neutrality of the United States in WWII between September 1939 and December 1941 slowed its development of intelligence and guerrilla warfare units. The British secret services, sure that the United States’ involvement in the war was inevitable, pressured their North American colleagues to start developing these types of activity. Following the German occupation of Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands and France in the spring of 1940, the Canadian spy William Stephenson –the inspiration for James Bond- organized a trip to Britain for President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s informal emissary: the lawyer and First World War hero William J. Donovan. A year later, following the German invasion of Yugoslavia and Greece, Donovan and Stephenson again travelled to Europe. On his return, Donovan was fully convinced of the need for a centralized intelligence agency in the United States and pressed Roosevelt to create it.<sup>45</sup>

On July 11<sup>th</sup> 1941 the president created the office of the Coordination of Information (COI) under Donovan’s direction. On June 13<sup>th</sup> 1942 this was renamed Office of Strategic Services (OSS), a similar agency to the British Special Operations Executive (SOE), created in July 1940. Between July and December 1941 Donovan’s COI worked very prudently, mainly offering help to the British

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<sup>45</sup> David Stafford, *Camp X: Canada’s School for Secret Agents, 1941-1945* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1986), p. 27.

intelligence services. It was in this context that Donovan first met Milton Wolff, a commander in the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War. The exact date of this first meeting is still bitterly debated. Wolff, a member of the CPUSA, maintained that it was “in the spring of 1941, several months before the invasion of the Soviet Union”,<sup>46</sup> when the German-Soviet Pact was still in force. On the other hand, other authors claim that the meeting must have taken place after June 22<sup>nd</sup> 1941, since the CPUSA and the Comintern would not have permitted meetings with the US intelligence services before this date. According to these authors the meeting must have taken place in November 1941.<sup>47</sup>

The available accounts and documents suggest that the first meeting was probably in August 1941. It was then that Donovan told Wolff that the British wanted to parachute guerrilla fighters behind enemy lines in Yugoslavia, Austria, Italy, Czechoslovakia and Poland to promote guerrilla movements.<sup>48</sup> For this reason they requested to be allowed to recruit US veterans of the International Brigades to work alongside the British secret services, particularly if they had southern or eastern European origins and/or linguistic abilities.<sup>49</sup> The first British plans to send help to the guerrillas in countries such as Yugoslavia materialized in August 1941, the same month that several US veterans of the International Brigades remember being informed of this first meeting.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Peter N. Carroll, Michael Nash and Melvin Small (eds.), *The Good Fight Continues: World War Two Letters from the Abraham Lincoln Brigade* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), pp. 5-6.

<sup>47</sup> John E. Haynes and Harvey Klehr, *In Denial: Historians, Communism & Espionage* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2003), pp. 127-130.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Milton Wolff in Terkel, *Oral History*, pp. 479-480

<sup>49</sup> Carroll, *Odyssey*, p. 244.

<sup>50</sup> Marcia Christoff Kurapovna, *Shadows on the Mountain: The Allies, The Resistance, and the Rivalries that Doomed WWII Yugoslavia* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), p. 83; Carroll, Nash and Small, *Good Fight*, p. 6.

Wolff told Donovan that he would need to make enquiries first. After obtaining permission from the Comintern, Wolff started a nationwide recruitment drive among International Brigades veterans.<sup>51</sup> Around September or October 1941, although the veteran Milton Felsen mentions November, several veterans recruited by Wolff met Donovan in New York. "I've been approached by British intelligence" –started Donovan. "They want certain of our guys to volunteer for their Special Forces units. It will be dangerous underground work. I don't have to bullshit you; things, as you know, are going very badly in the war. It's up to you, but it's a chance to get one more crack at Hitler."<sup>52</sup> Following the meeting Goff was recruited by the SOE on October 19<sup>th</sup> 1941 with the intention of sending him to Gibraltar to work undercover in Spain.<sup>53</sup>

However, everything changed on December 7<sup>th</sup> 1941. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour resulted in the United States entering the war and Donovan's agency decided to create their own special operations units. Shortly before the veterans had been due to depart for Britain, Donovan organized another meeting in Washington. "Listen", said the colonel, "I know who you guys are. Left-wingers, radicals, maybe even Communists, but I don't give a damn. I want you in this outfit, not in England. You're Americans, not limeys. We're in the war and you belong here."<sup>54</sup> From that moment, a group of veterans comprising the

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<sup>51</sup> Carroll, *Odyssey*, pp. 244-245; Interview with Milton Wolff in Terkel, *Oral History*, pp. 479-480

<sup>52</sup> Felsen, *Anti-Warrior*, p. 151

<sup>53</sup> Irving Goff. From 29 Oct. 1941 to 14 Nov. 1941, London, The National Archives (TNA). Special Operations Executive: Personnel Files Series HS9/594/4

<sup>54</sup> Felsen, *Anti-Warrior*, p. 152



former guerrilla fighters Aalto and Goff, along with Vincent Lossowsky, Milton Felsen, Alfred Tanz and Michael A. Jimenez were incorporated into the COI/OSS.

The veterans insisted on the necessity of organizing a group to carry out paramilitary and intelligence operations in Spain. Wolff suggested the Allies should attack Francoist Spain in winter 1941, believing that guerrilla warfare would find support among the population and that the guerrilla nuclei active since the end of the war would act as a base for the operation.<sup>55</sup> However, the ambiguous position of Franco, who declared himself to be non-belligerent while collaborating with the Axis powers, made the British and US governments wary, particularly their diplomats in Madrid. It was thus decided that there would be no intervention in Spain for the moment, although they began to draw up plans in case they were needed.<sup>56</sup>

In order to organize intelligence and sabotage units, Donovan needed to set up schools for training in guerrilla warfare. In August 1941 he had already requested help from the British to create a school, but not on US soil so as not to compromise their neutrality. Just two days after the attack on Pearl Harbour the British opened Camp X in Canada. During a period of more than two years around 500 British, US and Canadian students passed through the school.<sup>57</sup> However, the Japanese attack had altered the situation. Donovan now wanted a

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<sup>55</sup> Interview with Milton Wolff in Terkel, *Oral History*, p. 480; Interview with Irving Goff in Terkel, *Oral History*, p. 491; Carroll, *Odysey*, p. 248; Jorge Marco, 'The Long Nocturnal March: The Spanish Guerrilla Movement in the European Narrative of Antifascist Resistance, 1936-1952' in *Mass Killings and Violence in Spain, 1936-1952*, eds. Peter Anderson and Miguel Ángel del Arco (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 176-181.

<sup>56</sup> Antonio Marquina, 'The Spanish Neutrality during the Second World War', *American University International Law Review*, 14-1 (1998), p. 171; Richard Harris Smith: *OSS: The Secret History of Americas First Central Intelligence Agency* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), p. 77.

<sup>57</sup> Stafford, *Camp X*, pp. xvi, 28-29.

new training school on US soil to instruct his people in guerrilla warfare as soon as possible.

On that same December 7<sup>th</sup> 1941 Donovan presented Roosevelt with an extensive report recommending the creation of guerrilla units similar to British commandos and for which a special training school was required. Following Churchill's visit to Roosevelt at Christmas 1941, the president approved the budget for the project. On February 25<sup>th</sup> 1942 the COI received full authorization "to organize and conduct secret subversive operations in hostile areas". The Secretary of War agreed that Donovan be provided with 200 men to serve as instructors in the school a month later.<sup>58</sup> Meanwhile, Donovan requested help from his British colleagues owing to the US military's lack of knowledge of irregular warfare. The British provided advice and instructors such as Major Brooker, Lieutenant Colonel Skilbeck, and Major Dehn. However, they had little or no personal experience of guerrilla warfare.<sup>59</sup>

Under these circumstances veterans of the International Brigades, particularly those with experience of guerrilla warfare, became vital to the OSS. After the meeting Donovan took them up a mountain by limousine. From here they could see the site where the school was to be created. "This was a rich kids' camp," said Donovan to them. "We plan to make it into the main training area, and I want all your ideas, everything you learned about guerrilla war and

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<sup>58</sup> Stafford, *Camp X*, p. 57; Bradley F. Smith, *The Shadow Warrior: OSS and the Origins of the CIA* (New York: Basic Book, 1983), pp. 115-116.

<sup>59</sup> Stafford, *Camp X*, p. 83-84; John Whiteclay Chambers II, *OSS Training in the National Parks and Service Abroad in World War II* (Washington: US National Park Service, 2008), pp. 184, 211, 221.

underground operations in Spain."<sup>60</sup> On April 1<sup>st</sup> 1942 instructors, officers and men recruited by Donovan, among whom were former members of the International Brigades, started arriving at Catoctin Recreational Demonstration Area, a national park of 9,000 acres on the outskirts of Washington. This remote site, named Area B, became the first and largest guerrilla warfare training school on US soil.<sup>61</sup>

Nevertheless, the creation of the school was not without problems. The first groups of students arrived in May 1942 when nothing had yet been planned. Felsen admitted that "in the early spring of 1942, COI-OSS training was bizarre. From Donovan himself down, notions of who we were, what we were, and what we were supposed to be doing were at best foggy and at worst erroneous."<sup>62</sup> The most worrisome aspect was British and American instructors' lack of knowledge about guerrilla warfare. According to one of the early students in Area B: "Lectures on guerrilla warfare" were taught "by senior officers who had never seen this type of operation, or combat either for that matter. They taught it by the book, apparently an old Army manual".<sup>63</sup> Bob Farley, another International Brigades veteran who was a student in Area B, had to correct the instructors, pointing out their errors on several occasions.<sup>64</sup> In this context, International Brigade veterans played a crucial role in advising officers and instructors on irregular war. "Our opinions and experience seemed to be highly valued" –

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<sup>60</sup> Felsen, *Anti-Warrior*, p. 153.

<sup>61</sup> Whiteclay Chambers, *OSS Training*, pp. 107, 131.

<sup>62</sup> Whiteclay Chambers, *OSS Training*, p. 200; Felsen, *Anti-Warrior*, p. 155.

<sup>63</sup> William B. Dreux, *No Bridges Blown* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1971), p. 15

<sup>64</sup> Dreux, *No bridges Blown*, p. 15

remembered Felsen.<sup>65</sup> In that sense, in addition to transferring their knowledge as instructors, Aalto and Goff also recommended the translation of manuals on guerrilla warfare that they had studied in Spain, such as *On Guerrilla Warfare* by Mao Tse-Tung or the *Soviet Russian Guerrilla Manual*.<sup>66</sup> Both were translated from Russian to English thanks to a curious collaboration between two other transnational soldiers: the former Soviet General Alexander Barmine, who had fled the Soviet Union in 1933, and the Russian Prince Serge Obolensky, who was also a refugee in the US having belonged to the White Army. “There was nothing else in those days and we had to create it”- admitted Felsen.<sup>67</sup>

The school improved over the following months with the development of an ambitious syllabus involving intelligence and guerrilla warfare. The students learned to handle weapons from different European countries; how to use different types of explosives (dynamite, Molotov cocktails, etc.) to blow up train tracks, bridges and buildings; parachute rigging and jumping; close-combat techniques; radio communication, etc.<sup>68</sup> The veterans combined the roles of advisors and students in this second stage as they were learning techniques they had not come across in Spain, such as parachuting.<sup>69</sup> The school set up new training camps named Areas A, C, D and F, which specialized in different subjects.

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<sup>65</sup> Felsen, *Anti-Warrior*, p. 161.

<sup>66</sup> William Aalto and Irving Goff, ‘Guerrilla Warfare: Lessons in Spain’, *Soviet Russia Today* (October 1941), cited in Volodarsky, *Stalin’s Agent*, p. 330; Felsen, *Anti-Warrior*, p. 161.

<sup>67</sup> Donald Downes, *The Scarlet Thread: Adventures in Wartime Espionage* (London: Derek Verschoyle, 1953), pp. 81-82; Serge Obolensky, *One Man in his Time: The memoirs of Serge Obolensky* (New York: McDowell, 1958), pp. 343, 349; Patrick K. O’Donell, *OSS - Operatives, Spies and Saboteurs: The Unknown Story of the Men and Women of WWII’s OSS* (New York: Free Press, 2004), p. 8

<sup>68</sup> Whiteclay Chambers, *OSS Training*, pp. 114, 117, 150, 164, 249-251.

<sup>69</sup> Felsen, *Anti-Warrior*, pp. 155-158.

The school was notable for being transnational from its inception. On March 25<sup>th</sup> 1942 the Secretary of War decreed that “aliens and foreign nationals” could become officers in the US Army after passing through Area B where they were trained to lead “ethnic” raider units.<sup>70</sup> Consequently, the school provided training for agents of different nationalities who were then sent behind enemy lines in Europe: US, British, Thai, Norwegians, French, Russians, Yugoslavs, Spanish, Italians, Greeks, etc. In December 1942 these groups were renamed as Operational Groups (OGs).<sup>71</sup> This great diversity can be seen in the documentary film “*OSS Training Group*”, produced by John Ford at Area B in 1942. “In this group there are some who speak very little English. One of them has fought in four wars. Two of them are veteran guerrillas of the Spanish Loyalist Forces.” – said the narrator as masked recruits appeared on screen.<sup>72</sup>

The two “veteran guerrillas” were Aalto and Goff, who, in September 1942, after months advising and instructing, created a group comprising two more veterans of the International Brigades (Felsen and Lossowski) and four Spanish ex-combatants. At the beginning of 1942 Donovan had tasked Donald Downes, a professor of literature who had started working for the COI in 1941, to recruit Spanish refugees in Latin America. Through the networks of exiles he managed to recruit Ricardo Sicre – previously an instructor at the Osterley Home Guard Training School in London directed by the British veteran of the International Brigades Tom Wintringham-, Progreso Barrios, Francisco Tuesta and Miguel

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<sup>70</sup> Smith, *Shadow Warrior*, p. 116.

<sup>71</sup> Whiteclay Chambers, *OSS Training*, p. 196

<sup>72</sup> John Ford, *OSS Training Group* (OSS, 1942)

Chamorro.<sup>73</sup> “The teaching is good and we have learned a lot in spite of our ample experience.” –wrote Sicre to a representative of the Spanish Government in exile about his time at Area B.<sup>74</sup>

Spanish and International Brigade veterans were highly valuable to the OSS because of their first-hand knowledge of the tactics of guerrilla warfare, but also because of their knowledge of Spain. Indeed, after the veteran had made their contribution in the school as instructors, Donovan began to plan his first missions in the field. In September 1942 the unit was assigned to the Spanish Desk under the supervision of Downes.<sup>75</sup> Around this time Aalto put forward a precise plan for clandestine infiltration in Spain. However, this and other similar plans concerning Operation Torch were provisionally rejected.<sup>76</sup> The US and Britain, fearing that, after the liberation of North Africa, Hitler would invade Spain to take Gibraltar and Spanish Morocco needed to be prepared for this contingency. This required them to be prudent so as not to alter the precarious balance of Franco’s policy of non-belligerence.<sup>77</sup>

While the group was awaiting its definitive orders Aalto was expelled.

Years later, Felsen admitted that Aalto had been reported by his own comrades

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<sup>73</sup> Downes to Murphy. 14 Nov. 1942, Washington, National Archives (NA). Downes Papers. RG226 022 E136 Box 6 Folder 142; Ibárruri to Hernández. June 1942, ACCPCE. Dirigentes, Caja 31 Carpeta 12.1; Velao to Álvarez del Vayo, 16 Oct. 1942, NA. Downes Papers, RG226 OSS E136A Box 10 Folder 217; Downes to Velao. 7 Oct. 1942, NA. Downes Papers, RG226 OSS E136A Box 10 Folder 217; Stephen M. Cullen, *In Search of the Real Dad’s Army: The Home Guard and the Defense of the United Kingdom, 1940-1944* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2011), pp. 170-180.

<sup>74</sup> Sicre to Velao. October 1942, NA. Downes Papers, RG226 OSS E136A Box 10 Folder 217

<sup>75</sup> Smith: *OSS*, p. 48.

<sup>76</sup> Sgt. Bill’s Spanish Project. 2 Sep. 1942, NA. Downes Papers. RG226 OSS E136A Box 10 Folder 223; Canfield to Huntington. 8 Oct. 1942, NA. Downes Papers. RG226 OSS E136A Box 10 Folder 223.

<sup>77</sup> Anthony Cave Brown, *The Secret War Report of the OSS* (New York: Berckley Publishing Corporation, 1976), pp. 150-151; Arthur Layton Funk, *The Politics of Torch: The Allied Landings and the Algiers Putsch, 1942* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 1972), p. 93; F. H. Hinsley, F. H., *British Intelligence in the Second World War: Its Influence on Strategy and Operation* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1979), Vol. 1, pp. 252, 256-257.

from the International Brigades and the CPUSAE. Following a night when Aalto had openly shown his homosexuality by going to a hotel with a US sailor his companions went to Donovan's office to report him. According to Felsen, Donovan "seemed genuinely sorry to hear about Aalto, whom he liked and admired, but he assured us we had by all means done the right thing."<sup>78</sup> The homophobia of his comrades and the US Army thus prevented perhaps the biggest US expert on guerrilla warfare from taking part in any mission with the OSS during WWII.<sup>79</sup>

After the expulsion of Aalto, the group received three new members: Mike Jiménez, a former member of the International Brigades who was in charge of guerrilla communications in Spain, his brother James,<sup>80</sup> and Captain Jerry Sage, an ex-football star, who became the military leader of the group supervised by Downes.<sup>81</sup> The unit was finally given a mission: to go to North Africa "to establish an OSS unit as an integral part of the G2 of an army in the field".<sup>82</sup> They set sail for Algeria from New York at Christmas 1942.<sup>83</sup> Although eight of the eleven members had combat experience from the Spanish Civil War, the expedition was led by Downes and Sage, who lacked military experience but showed no signs of being left-leaning politically. The OSS was open-minded when it came to recruiting old left-wingers or even communists who could offer significant military experience and knowledge but tended to give them a low profile so as

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<sup>78</sup> Felsen, *Anti-Warrior*, pp. 88-89.

<sup>79</sup> Helen Graham, *The War and its Shadow: Spain's Civil War in Europe's Long Twentieth Century* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2012), pp. 85-87.

<sup>80</sup> Canfield to Huntington. 8 Oct. 1942, NA.; Downes to Murphy. 14 Nov. 1942. NA.

<sup>81</sup> Felsen, *Anti-Warrior*, p. 165;

<sup>82</sup> Downes, *Scarlet Thread*, p. 83.

<sup>83</sup> Downes, *Scarlet Thread*, pp. 85-86.

not to arouse suspicion in the War Department, who were not in favour of their recruitment.<sup>84</sup>

### **“What I had in mind: blowin’ up railroads”: Transnational Soldiers in North Africa and Italy (1942-1944)**

The group reached Algeria in January 1943 with the aim of setting up a guerrilla school to train Spanish refugees who were to be recruited throughout North Africa. On arrival they contacted the omnipotent conservative diplomat Robert Murphy, the man who had negotiated with François Darlan, commander of the French forces loyal to Vichy in North Africa, in November 1942.<sup>85</sup> As a result of these negotiations the majority of the Vichy regime’s prisoners were still in concentration camps and forced work battalions in the desert. Anthony Eden, the British Foreign Secretary, reported that in November 1942 Allied troops had found 7,100 political prisoners in North Africa: 3,200 Spanish, 900 French and 3,000 of other nationalities. Robert Murphy spoke of 9,000 in December 1942.<sup>86</sup>

The Spanish prisoners in the concentration camps were Republican ex-combatants who had fled to North Africa at the end of the Spanish Civil War. Amongst them were dozens of guerrillas from the 14<sup>th</sup> Corps of the Republican

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<sup>84</sup> Maurice Isserman, *Which Side were you on?: The American Communist Party during the Second World War* (Illinois: Illini Books, 1993), pp. 181-182

<sup>85</sup> Downes to Donovan. 26 Aug. 1943. NA, Downes Papers, RG226 055 Entry 136A; Smith, *OSS*, pp. 36-67

<sup>86</sup> André Moine, *Déportation et Résistance en Afrique du Nord, 1939-1944* (Paris, Éditions Sociales, 1972), p. 262; Anthony Eden. Political Prisoners and Internees. 3 Mar. 1943. House of Commons Debate. Vol. 0387 c521, available at: <http://liparm.llgc.org.uk/data/S5CV0387P0/S5CV0387P0-02044-02061.html>; Robert Murphy, *Diplomat among Warriors* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1964), pp. 149-150



Army who had managed to escape to Algeria in 1939.<sup>87</sup> Downes' group visited one of the camps in January 1943, discovering the terrible conditions under which the prisoners lived. The unit were shocked that this type of concentration camps could exist in an area under Allied command. Despite extremely poor health, many Spanish expressed their desire to join the Allied army and continue the fight against fascism.<sup>88</sup> During the first visit they were able to recruit sixteen Spanish ex-combatants to join the unit.<sup>89</sup>

However, this mission was temporarily interrupted by an incident in Madrid, where an OSS agent had been arrested, causing Franco to react angrily.<sup>90</sup> The British and US ambassadors, together with Murphy, tried to calm him and convince him that there would be no further Allied intelligence activity in Spain. This led to an argument between Donovan and Murphy in which the latter demanded that the former remove "those left-wing lunatics" from Algeria. According to Felsen, this was why Murphy ordered them to fight against Rommel's Afrika Corps at the battle of Kasserine Pass in Tunisia.<sup>91</sup> The group protested, arguing that it was inappropriate to send a highly-trained guerrilla group to fight on open ground in what was, furthermore, an insignificant battle. The order was not revoked and an officer even threatened Goff with court-martial

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<sup>87</sup> Starinov, *Over the Abyss*, p. 142.

<sup>88</sup> Committee of PCE in Oran to Central Committee of PCE. 13 Mar. 1943, ACCPCE. Emigración África del Norte, Caja 103.

<sup>89</sup> Jerry Sage, *Sage: The man the Nazis couldn't hold* (Pennsylvania: Miles Standish Press, 1985), pp. 64-65, 71-72; Felsen, *Anti-Warrior*, p. 167, 173 ; Downes, *Scarlet Thread*, pp. 110-113

<sup>90</sup> From mid-1942 several OSS agents were working undercover within the US embassy in Madrid without the knowledge of the ambassador or the consul. See: Emilio Grandío Seoane and José Ramón Rodríguez Lago, "1943: Franco Vs. Naciones Unidas. La guerra silenciosa de los servicios de inteligencia norteamericanos y británicos en España", *Diacronie. Studi di Storia Contemporanea*, 28-4 (2016), p. 7

<sup>91</sup> Felsen, *Anti-Warrior*, pp. 173-174.

if he disobeyed.<sup>92</sup> After almost a month of fighting in Tunisia, the group had lost Captain Sage and Felsen, both captured by the Germans, while several of the recently-liberated Spanish were wounded.<sup>93</sup>

Donovan travelled to Algeria to clarify the situation of his special group with Murphy as soon as he heard the news. The group soon recovered their autonomy and returned to the original plan: to organize a guerrilla school and train Spanish ex-combatants.<sup>94</sup> During the first months of 1943 the British and US military agencies recruited hundreds of foreigners in North Africa. The Spanish community was the largest in Algeria, and, having significant military experience, was in great demand. Interestingly, there is evidence to suggest that there was political bias in the recruitment by each intelligence service. The SOE preferred to recruit Spanish anarchists while the OSS mainly recruited communists.<sup>95</sup> The British had always been against the presence of communists in their intelligence and sabotage units. On the other hand, the ever-pragmatic Donovan always valued experience over ideology.<sup>96</sup>

Most of Downes' group were members of the CPUSA and the PCE and it was thus natural that they relied on the networks they trusted. The unit had managed to make contact with the clandestine PCE in North Africa in February

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<sup>92</sup> Sage, *Sage*, pp. 72-73; Felsen, *Anti-Warrior*, pp. 174-175; Downes, *Scarlet Thread*, p. 110; Coon, *North Africa*, p. 99.

<sup>93</sup> Felsen, *Anti-Warrior*, pp. 177-178; Sage, *Sage*, pp. 83-89; Coon, *North Africa*, p. 100.

<sup>94</sup> Carrol, *Odyssey*, p. 270.

<sup>95</sup> Eduardo Pons Prades, *Guerrillas españolas, 1936-1960* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1977), p. 71; Ramón Liarte, *¡Ay, de los vencedores!* (Barcelona: Ediciones Picazo, 1986), p. 92.

<sup>96</sup> Denis Smyth, *Diplomacy and Strategy of Survival: British Policy and Franco's Spain, 1940-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 38-39; Richard Baxell, *Unlikely Warriors: The British in the Spanish Civil War and the Struggle against Fascism* (London: Aurum Press Ltd., 2012), pp. 417-431; Smith, *OSS*, p. 11; Lawrence H. McDonall, 'The OSS and its records' in *The Secret War: The Office of Strategic Services in World War Two*, ed. George C. Chalou (Washington: National Archives and Record Administration, 1992), p. 93.

1943 through networks of exiles in Mexico and the US.<sup>97</sup> The recruitment system was based on a simple method whereby the PCE first drew up a list of the comrades they deemed most suitable for service in an OSS unit. Next, Downes' group searched for them in the concentration camps and secured their release.<sup>98</sup> Using this method, sixty men from at least eight camps in French Morocco and Algeria were recruited in the first two months. They were then organized into groups of radio telegraph operators, guerrilla fighters and the intelligence service.<sup>99</sup> However, this collaboration was based on mutual mistrust. The Spanish communists were wary of the OSS despite having comrades in their ranks while the OSS distrusted the communists. Nevertheless, both felt they had something to gain from this collaboration at the start of 1943.<sup>100</sup>

Downes' group were assigned to Massingham, a joint project of the SOE and OSS in Algiers, which opened in February 1943 and became the main command hub and training centre for special operations into southwestern Europe. The Spanish combatants recruited in the concentration camps were the first students and they "reflected the diversity of the world coalition against fascism".<sup>101</sup> In Massingham special agents of many nationalities were trained, but, as T.C. Wales emphasized, this pluralism was far from idyllic, leading to discord

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<sup>97</sup> Downes, *Scarlet Thread*, p. 110.

<sup>98</sup> Benaya to Central Committee of PCE. 19 May 1946, ACCPCE. Emigración Norte de África, Jacq 224.

<sup>99</sup> Committee of PCE in Oran to Central Committee of PCE in North Africa. 13 May 1943, ACCPCE. Emigración Norte de África, Caja 103.

<sup>100</sup> Benaya to Central Committee of PCE. 19 May 1946, ACCPCE; Central Committee of PCE in North Africa to Committee of PCE in Melilla. N/D, ACCPCE. Emigración Norte de África, Caja 103, Carpeta 2.1.1.

<sup>101</sup> T. C. Wales, 'The "Massingham" mission and the secret 'special relationship' Cooperation and rivalry between the Anglo-American clandestine services in French North Africa, November 1942–May 1943' in *The Politics and Strategy of Clandestine War: Special Operation Executive, 1940-1946*, ed. Neville Wylie (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 54.

and cultural misunderstandings. Major Peter Murray Lee, the British officer sent to Massingham to take charge of security at the school, was horrified to see “tiny hens (...) Spanish communist (...) –none of them were more than five feet tall”-, who “saluted with a closed fist”.<sup>102</sup>

As a result, Downes applied to set up his own schools to train the Spanish combatants. Downes' group had the necessary training. Thus, in March 1943, Mike Jiménez and his brother opened a communications school in Bainen Falaise, on the outskirts of Algiers. Thanks to the accounts of some of the students it is known that they studied radio reception and transmission, cryptography, security, intelligence, clandestine work, weapons handling and landings.<sup>103</sup> According to Downes, the quality of the school directed by the International Brigades veterans was higher than that of Massingham and consequently “other OSS desks were begging us to take their students”.<sup>104</sup> Downes' assertion may simply have been an exaggeration motivated by the context of strong competition that existed between the American and British military in North Africa at that time.<sup>105</sup> The SOE syllabus in communications of September 1943, produced just six months after the opening of Downes' School, displays a high level of knowledge in the subject.<sup>106</sup> However, it is also possible that Downes was not exaggerating, since in September 1943 the veteran Mike

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<sup>102</sup> Wales, Massingham, p. 54

<sup>103</sup> Military Trial. 11 Feb. 1944 to 16 Jan. 1945. Madrid, Archivo General e Histórico de Defensa (AGHD) Sumario 124,626 Caja 5458.

<sup>104</sup> Downes, *Scarlet Thread*, p. 112.

<sup>105</sup> Martin Thomas, 'The Massingham Mission: SOE in French North Africa, 1941-1944', *Intelligence and National Security*, 11-4 (1996), pp. 696-721

<sup>106</sup> Denis Rigden, *SOE Syllabus: Lessons in Ungentlemanly Warfare: World War II* (Richmond: The National Archives, 2004), pp. 115-122, 218-221

Jimenez was transferred to Italy and appointed as the new chief of Communications of the Fifth Army.<sup>107</sup>

The group also organized in parallel a school of guerrilla warfare in El Biar, in the suburbs of Algiers.<sup>108</sup> However, this location was deemed unsuitable and they asked Downes to move it. The G2 of the Fifth Army helped them to camouflage the new school, now situated 70 km from Oujda, a town close to the border with Spanish Morocco.<sup>109</sup> The school, officially named “Fifth Army Meteorological Station”, opened in May 1943.

The school had 12 instructors and taught cohorts of 50 students.<sup>110</sup> All were Spanish veterans with some, such as José Aranda, Joaquín Centurión and Francisco Bueno, having experience in guerrilla units. The duration of the courses depended on the knowledge and experience of the students. The school at Oujda taught topography, exploration, modern weaponry, military tactics, sabotage, demolition and explosives. In addition to the theory classes there were also practical sessions in the mountains around the school.<sup>111</sup> There was even a replica of the “house of horrors” from Area B in the US. This, in turn, was a replica of that of Camp X in Canada, which had been copied from a British model. It consisted of a special room for shooting practice involving targets appearing unexpectedly and mirrors.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Ellery C. Huntington Jr. to Brigadier General William J. Donovan, 25 December 1943. Washington, Central Intelligence Agency Archive (CIAA); OSS Fifth Army Mission, Roster, 30 October 1943 (CIAA) See online: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP13X00001R000100170009-7.pdf>

<sup>108</sup> Military Trial. 11 Feb. 1944 to 16 Jan. 1945, AGHD

<sup>109</sup> History of Bananas up to August 26, 1943. 22 Mar. 1944, NA. Downes Papers, RG226 055 Entry 136A.

<sup>110</sup> Downes, *Scarlet Thread*, p. 115.

<sup>111</sup> Military Trial. 11 Feb. 1944 to 16 Jan. 1945, AGHD

<sup>112</sup> Military Trial. 11 Feb. 1944 to 16 Jan. 1945, AGHD; Whiteclay Chambers, *OSS Training*, p. 41, 115, 127; Ford, *OSS Training Group*.

Although Downes' group had been training Spanish ex-combatants since February 1943 these could not be given a mission as there was an order not to carry out clandestine operations in Spain. However, this changed in May 1943 when the Fifth Army wished to deploy intelligence services in Spanish Morocco to obtain information on German schools of sabotage, movement of German personnel, locations of military installations and airports, etc. From May onwards, the group made forays into Spanish territory on the orders of Colonel William Eddy, an OSS officer in Algeria.<sup>113</sup> These special services discovered a Hispano-German spy network between Oran and Melilla, a German sabotage school in Melilla and a demolition school directed by the German Karl Frick in mainland Spain. Downes suggested sabotaging the Melilla school and assassinating Frick but General Mark W. Clark would not allow this type of action in Spanish territory.<sup>114</sup>

However, in June 1943, due to the success of these services, the G2 of the Fifth Army took the decision to authorize Downes' activities on the Spanish mainland.<sup>115</sup> They designed a plan of infiltration, named Operation Banana, with the intention of establishing a network of intelligence and radio operators along the Mediterranean coast of Spain (Málaga, Cartagena, Cádiz, Algeciras, Barcelona) and Madrid. The operation was named Banana after the code name for Málaga, the city to which the first unit would be sent.<sup>116</sup> When Downes relayed the news to the Spanish and International Brigades veterans in Oujda

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<sup>113</sup> History of Bananas up to August 26, 1943. 22 Mar. 1944, NA

<sup>114</sup> Downes, *Scarlet Thread*, pp. 106-107; Coon, *North Africa*, pp. 114-116.

<sup>115</sup> Downes, *Scarlet Thread*, p. 113.

<sup>116</sup> History of Bananas up to August 26, 1943. 22 Mar. 1944, NA

there was an explosion of joy. They had been waiting four years for the opportunity to again fight fascism in Spain.<sup>117</sup>

The team made two landings on the Málaga coast between June and September 1943. Each of these permitted the infiltration of three Spanish combatants trained at the schools in Algiers and Oujda: a pilot, a radio-telegraph operator and an intelligence agent. All six were members of the PCE and carried two machine guns, revolvers, two radio transmitters and a small sum of money. They also managed to infiltrate some agents through the border with Morocco and thence to the mainland. Communication between Málaga and Algeria started in July. Reports by radio were received in an office at the school in Oujda where they were translated from Spanish into English and sent to the G2. The information involved military positions, weapons and recruits in the Francoist army but was scarce and vague. The PCE had given other codes to the radio operators so they could send unofficial reports to the party, bypassing the OSS. The six agents encountered enormous difficulties as the PCE network in Málaga was virtually non-existent and they did not have the resources required to survive in secrecy.<sup>118</sup>

For the first landing Downes' group received help from Colonel William Eddy and Colonel Arthur Roseborough, who primed the British and US naval authorities. In fact, the first group was taken out to sea by the *Prodigal*, a boat belonging to the SIS.<sup>119</sup> In contrast, the second group had to confront the

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<sup>117</sup> Downes, *Scarlet Thread*, pp. 113-115.

<sup>118</sup> Military Trial. 11 Feb. 1944 to 16 Jan. 1945, AGHD; History of Bananas up to August 26, 1943. 22 Mar. 1944, NA; Downes, *Scarlet Thread*, p. 122

<sup>119</sup> History of Bananas up to August 26, 1943. 22 Mar. 1944, NA

authorities. Operation Banana had come to the attention of the British intelligence services, who reported it to the Foreign Office.<sup>120</sup> The British and US ambassadors in Spain, Samuel Hoare and Carlton Hayes, along with Robert Murphy were three enemies of clandestine operations in Spain. They demanded that the operation be cancelled. According to Downes, the British Foreign Office ordered that “no British vessels are to take any further clandestine landings to Spain”.<sup>121</sup> Consequently, the group decided to act autonomously and create their own “naval army” to carry out the operation. As there were a large number of Spanish Republican sailors in North Africa the group bought a boat and repaired it with their help. The first two attempts to embark were detected and stopped by British security, but, on September 23<sup>rd</sup>, they were able to escape detection and transport the Spanish agents to Spanish territory.<sup>122</sup>

This change of policy responded to the new scenario of the war in southern Europe, the centre of Allied operations since the liberation of North Africa. The fear of the German invasion of Spain had disappeared and Italy was now the priority. The invasions of Sicily and Corsica were planned in North Africa and the Allied central office needed the best special operations unit: Downes’ group. Goff, “one of the world’s most accomplished and renowned guerrillas”,<sup>123</sup> and Lossowski were ordered to recruit 75 Italian and American agents for the operation.<sup>124</sup> They eventually organized a group of 90 men, which included

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<sup>120</sup> Smith, *OSS*, p. 81

<sup>121</sup> Downes, *Scarlet Thread*, pp. 125-126.

<sup>122</sup> Military Trial. 11 Feb. 1944 to 16 Jan. 1945, AGHD; Downes, *Scarlet Thread*, pp. 126-127

<sup>123</sup> Carleton S. Coon, *A North Africa Story: The Anthropologist as OSS Agent, 1941-1943* (Ipswich, Gambit, 1980), p. 92.

<sup>124</sup> Smith, *OSS*, p. 119.



several of the Spanish recruits who had trained in the US and Algeria. The unit was sent to Sicily, from where it took part in the landing at Salerno on September 9<sup>th</sup> 1943.<sup>125</sup>

Downes' group established the OSS Fifth Army Headquarters in Amalfi immediately. Donovan appointed Downes as head of the OSS in Italy until he was replaced by Colonel Ellery C. Huntington Jr. in October 1943, while Goff and Lossowski's group were assigned to intelligence fieldwork. Donovan himself joined the group a few days before the invasion of Naples.<sup>126</sup> After the landing on the Italian mainland, Goff and Lossowski were assigned to the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 34<sup>th</sup> Divisions respectively in order to recruit, organise, equip and train the first six Operational Groups in Italy.<sup>127</sup> In the next two months, Goff and Lossowski "were almost continuously with 'combat teams' at front doing the work which proved to be our real 'entry ticket' to the Fifth Army show."<sup>128</sup> After these operations, Goff and Lossowski's group moved to the North and made contact with the PCI, advising them on guerrilla and sabotage operations. During the war in Italy, this group of transnational soldiers trained between 18 and 22 teams of radio operators and specialists in crossing enemy lines while also co-ordinating the

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<sup>125</sup> Whiteclay Chambers, *OSS Training*, 303; Max Corbo, 'The OSS around the globe', in *The Secret War: The Office of Strategic Services in World War Two*, ed. George C. Chalou (Washington: National Archives and Record Administration, 1992), p, 188.

<sup>126</sup> OSS Fifth Army Mission, Roster, 30 October 1943 (CIAA); Downes, *Scarlet Thread*, pp. 151-156; Smith, *OSS*, 88-89, 152

<sup>127</sup> Ellery C. Huntington Jr. to Commanding General, Fifth Army, 30 October 1943 (CIAA); OSS Fifth Army Mission, Roster, 30 October 1943 (CIAA) See online: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP13X00001R000100170009-7.pdf>

<sup>128</sup> Ellery C. Huntington Jr. to Brigadier General William J. Donovan, 25 December 1943 (CIAA) See online: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP13X00001R000100170009-7.pdf>

activities of the Italian partisans.<sup>129</sup> Donovan asked Goff directly about his connections with the Italian communists:

“I told him what the connections were all about and what I had in mind: blowin’ up railroads (...) He says: ‘But in your connection, make sure the Communist Party doesn’t come out ahead’. I said, ‘That’s valid. They’re out to win the war, we’re out to win the war. I’ll do the best I can to win this war’. He said fine, and left.”<sup>130</sup>

Meanwhile, in North Africa, the Spanish communists made the most of the training, infrastructure and weapons provided by the OSS and continued with the plans for Operation Banana independently. In November 1943 they managed to secretly send a new expedition with 5 machine guns and two radio transmitter-receivers. However, in February 1944 the Francoist police arrested all the agents who had arrived since July.<sup>131</sup> The PCE also created its own guerrilla training school in North Africa using the combatants trained by the Americans as instructors. Their aim was to infiltrate ten guerrilla fighters in Spain every two months from North Africa. However, between 1944 and 1946 they were only able to organize three landings of ten men each time.<sup>132</sup> Infiltration through the Pyrenees was much more significant over the next few years, although the lack of

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<sup>129</sup> Interview with Irving Goff and Vincent Lossowski in Terkel, *Good War*, pp. 214, 493-494, 496; Franco Giannantoni, *L’ombra degli americani sulla Resistenza al confine tra Italia e Svizzera* (Esizioni Essezeta-Arterigere, 2007), pp. 265-266; Peter Tompkins, *L’altra Resistenza. Servizi segreti, partigiani e Guerra de liberazione nel racconto di un protagonista* (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 2009), pp. 49, 111-112.

<sup>130</sup> Interview with Irving Goff in Terkel, *Good War*, p. 494

<sup>131</sup> Military Trial. 11 Feb. 1944 to 16 Jan. 1945, AGHD.

<sup>132</sup> Jorge Marco, *Guerrilleros and Neighbours in Arms: Identities and Cultures of Anti-fascist Resistance in Spain* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2016), pp. 51-53.

Allied support prevented the Spanish resistance from achieving the same success as partisan movements in the rest of Europe.

## **Conclusions**

This article has demonstrated how military institutions such as the OSS incorporated tactical innovations in guerrilla warfare using the intermediary role of veterans in the Spanish War between the experience of the Russian Civil War and World War II. Guerrilla warfare, as a combined tactic with the operations of a regular army, played a key role in the Second World War. However, knowledge of this type of irregular warfare among the Allied military before 1939 was very limited. The most experienced army in this kind of warfare was the Red Army, based on its experiences during the Russian Civil War. In this context, the Spanish Civil War was a crucial event in transferring knowledge of guerrilla warfare from the East to the West through transnational soldiers, advisers and instructors.

The Spanish Civil War was a laboratory for military strategies. The formation of elite guerrilla units integrated into the Republican Army was one of the major novelties. To a large extent, this took place as a result of the contribution made by Soviet advisors and instructors, who had been arriving since 1936 to help construct the new Popular Army. With their experience in the Russian and Chinese Civil Wars they were able to train thousands of Spanish and international guerrilla fighters. At the end of the Spanish Civil War thousands of these soldiers either returned to their own countries or emigrated to another,

where they subsequently contributed to the war effort during WWII, imparting their knowledge of guerrilla warfare.

This article has shown the important role of these transnational soldiers in the transfer of this military strategy. Although many international and Spanish volunteers with experience in the Spanish Civil War helped with the spread of guerrilla warfare in WWII, the contribution of the two North Americans Bill Aalto and Irving Goff was undoubtedly the most significant due to their participation in the formation and development of the OSS. Aalto and Goff were the two key figures in the creation of guerrilla schools, translation of the manuals and organization of the Operational Groups in the US, North Africa and Italy which crossed enemy lines throughout Europe. This article also shows that having experience was not sufficient for the transmission of this knowledge. This process required the support of international networks, recruitment processes and training schools provided by state institutions such as the Spanish Republican Army or the OSS.

It is here that William Donovan's exceptional vision was of fundamental importance. In contrast to the British secret services, the director of the OSS never allowed ideological prejudices to interfere with an individual's potential contribution. He knew perfectly well that the experience of those former International Brigaders in Spain had a great value for training in guerrilla warfare and sabotage. Thanks to his conviction, they were able to bring their knowledge and experiences from the Spanish Civil War to the Second World War via three continents: from Spain to the United States, from the United States to North

Africa, and from North Africa to Europe via different armies, schools and battlefields.