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‘Mucho malo for fascisti’: Languages and Transnational Soldiers in the Spanish Civil War

Maria Thomas (University of Exeter) and Jorge Marco (University of Bath)

‘Your language does not matter, / for free men speak one language alone. / That language alone now matters. / Here you have spoken / in thirty-eight different tongues, / but each vibrated with one impulse, / with only one passionate voice, / clamorous and pure, / that is the voice of the blood that sings.’¹

‘I hope the next war is in a country where I can speak the language. It makes it so much easier’.²

Traditionally, scholars have addressed the history of war from national perspectives. The nation state has regulated the lives of ordinary citizens for almost two centuries, something which has had an inevitable influence upon the agendas and perspectives of researchers. Until very recently, the transnational elements of wartime experiences have received fairly scant attention. However, in recent years accelerating process of globalization and migration have aroused an increasing interest in transnational studies, perhaps most notably in the field of war and conflict. From this perspective, a growing focus has been placed upon transnational soldiers – military conscripts and volunteers whose participation in conflict has crossed national, cultural and linguistic boundaries - from the French Revolution to the present day. Scholars of transnational soldiers have paid particular attention to the paradoxical situation which these soldiers faced in the context of modern warfare: thousands of foreign soldiers participated in new

¹ L. Pérez Infante, ‘Volunteers for Liberty’, in V. Cunningham, ed., *The Penguin Book of Spanish Civil War Verse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), 329-330

² Letter from Mito Kruth, 31 October 1937, in L. A. Kirschenbaum, *International Communism and the Spanish Civil War* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 95

national armies, which were one of the major instruments through which nation-states strove to 'nationalise' populations and forge national citizens.³

At the same time, another field of study has emerged over the last decade: that of languages in war. British historian Hilary Footitt has led an international group of academics who have developed a research agenda structured around the role of language in the military field. Working on the period from the nineteenth century to the present day, the group has underlined the crucial - and frequently overlooked - role played by language intermediaries, language contact, language practice and language policy in modern conflicts.⁴ Their work is characterised by the methodological integration of two disciplines that have traditionally been separated from one another: historians, who have paid little attention to aspects of language and linguistics, and translation scholars, who have not always positioned the linguistic elements of conflicts in their wider historical contexts. As Footitt explains, the aim is 'to see languages as integral to the constitution and development of each particular conflict'.⁵

Unfortunately, to date these two approaches have had little contact with each other. Studies on transnational soldiers tend to pay scant attention to the

³ N. Arelli and B. Collins, 'Introduction: Transnational Military Service since the Eighteenth Century', in *Transnational Soldiers: Foreign Military Enlistment in the Modern Era*, ed. by Nir Arelli and Bruce Collins (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1-12.

⁴ H. Footitt and M. Kelly, eds., *Languages and the Military: Alliances, Occupation and Peace Building* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); H. Footitt and M. Kelly, eds., *Languages at War: Policies and practices of Language Contacts in Conflict* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); H. Footitt and S. Tobia, *War Talk: Foreign Languages and the British War Effort in Europe, 1940-1947* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); J. Walker and Ch. Declercq, eds., *Languages and the First World War: Communicating in a Transnational War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), etc.

⁵ *Languages at War*, 3

crucial issue of language,⁶ while studies on languages at war have not sufficiently addressed the cultural and identity-related implications of the experience of fighting in another country. However, if scholars wish to analyse in depth the linguistic challenges, conflicts, limitations, opportunities and new identities of wars with high ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity, it is clear that both of these perspectives need to be taken on board.

In this sense, the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) is a perfect setting to study the role of language and transnational soldiers in armed conflict, and – more broadly – to expand existing understandings of transnational soldiers and the languages of war. As well as being a domestic conflict, the civil war was also profoundly international. In diplomatic, military and ideological terms, the Spanish war was the precursor to the wider conflicts which consumed the European continent during the Second World War. Clear evidence of this international nature can be seen in the participation of thousands of foreign fighters on the battlefield. It is estimated that some 78,000 Italians, 19,000 Germans, 10,000 Portuguese and a thousand soldiers from other countries, alongside around 70,000 Moroccans from the Spanish colonial army, fought for the Francoists.⁷ While around 2,000 of these soldiers arrived in Spain as volunteers, the vast majority were conscripts in their own national armies.⁸

⁶ A recent exception: Nir Arelli, *From Byron to bin Laden: A History of Foreign War Volunteers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 161-163

⁷ J. Casanova, *The Spanish Republic and Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 227

⁸ J. Keene, 'Fighting for God, for Franco and (most of all) for Themselves: Right-Wing Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War', in *War Volunteering in Modern Times: From the French Revolution to the Second World War*, ed. by Christine G. Krüger and Sonja Levsen (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 212

In contrast, the transnational soldiers who supported the Second Republic's war effort were practically all volunteers. The Republic's contingent of transnational soldiers, while smaller in size than the rebel one, was characterised by far greater linguistic diversity. In total, around 40,000 foreigners from 54 countries came to Spain to fight fascism. Most of them were soldiers, although some also volunteered in medical and auxiliary roles. By far the largest contingent of pro-Republican volunteers was formed by the International Brigades (IBs), units of the Republican Army created by the Comintern in September 1936 to mobilise volunteers from around the world in support of the Republic. Official statistics indicate that between 32,000 and 35,000 foreigners belonged to the IBs.⁹ Although the exact number of foreign volunteers who joined other units of the Republican Army is not known, it is unlikely that they numbered more than 3000. Additionally, approximately 4,000 Soviet civilians and military personnel were sent by Stalin to Spain to advise the Republican military.¹⁰

As a group, these transnational soldiers - many of whom were immigrants and political exiles – embodied a cultural hybridity which made them the antithesis of the ultranationalist, exclusionary political projects unfolding in Franco's Spain and across Europe.¹¹ Perhaps the greatest symbol of this hybridity can be found in the huge array of languages spoken by the soldiers, who

⁹ R. Skoutelsky, *L'espoir guidait leurs pas. Les volontaires français dans les Brigades internationales, 1936-1939* (Paris: Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle, 1998), 329-330

¹⁰ Y. Rybalkin, *Stalin y España: La ayuda militar soviética a la República* (Madrid: Marcial Pons, 2007), 114

¹¹ H. Graham, *The War and its Shadow: Spain's Civil War in Europe's Long Twentieth Century* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2012), 77, 83.

inhabited a space in which more than 30 languages came into contact with each other. However, despite the evident importance of language to the military organisation and daily experiences of these transnational soldiers, very few researchers have addressed the question of the linguistic aspects of the Republican war effort. There is an extensive bibliography of studies on foreign participation in the war in Spain, and particularly on the IBs. However, a widespread tendency to produce case studies of different national groups instead of analysing foreign participation as a whole has meant that questions of language contact and linguistic exchange have been left largely unexamined.

In the absence of detailed academic studies on the subject, scattered anecdotes contained in chronicles, memoirs and secondary sources tend to present two diametrically opposed visions of language contact in the Republican war effort: an idealistic image of a 'polyglot army'¹² whose members 'understand each other without needing to speak'¹³, and another more catastrophist vision, in which the transnational soldiers' chaotic 'babel of tongues'¹⁴ led to almost complete military inoperability. This article will demonstrate that these two representations are, in fact, far from incompatible. On the one hand, the dizzying mixture of languages present in the ranks of the Republican war effort, and particularly within the IBs, created serious and sometimes dangerous communication difficulties. In these circumstances, the IBs' initial linguistic

¹² G. Orwell, 'As I Please', *Tribune*, 15 September 1944 in G. Orwell, *Orwell in Spain* (London: Penguin, 2001), 3

¹³ Report 'Casa Verde', by Gustav Regler, Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) F. 545. Op. 2. D. 171

¹⁴ R. G. Colodny, *The Struggle for Madrid: The Central Epic of the Spanish Conflict, 1936-1937* (New York: Paine-Whitman Publishers, 1958), 74.

policy, rooted in a utopian, internationalist organisational vision, was abandoned by its high command in favour of a more pragmatic approach which improved military communication but reduced linguistic diversity within individual brigades. Language intermediaries – those who acted both formally and informally as translators and interpreters – occupied a crucial place in this evolving linguistic policy, and also played a key role in facilitating communication between Soviet and Spanish Republican military personnel. In this sense, the article highlights the role of translators as 'activists' instead of 'invisible' actors in the Spanish Republican Army. At the same time, it analyses the implications that linguistic policies and language contact had for transnational soldiers in terms of identity. At a grassroots level, we argue that ordinary soldiers' daily experiences of language contact and language exchange contributed to the forging of new linguistic forms which underlined both a strong sense of joint purpose and a shared antifascist identity.

The article, the first to address the question of language and transnational soldiers in the Republican war effort through the systematic study of primary material,¹⁵ is based on two main types of primary sources. On the one hand, it makes use of reports from the IBs, both from their high command and from lower ranking officers in the brigades and battalions. On the other, it uses materials produced by the soldiers themselves, either during the civil war (such as letters, newspapers and campaign notebooks) or after the conflict (memoir sources). This collection of sources has allowed us to analyse the IBs' language

¹⁵ One noteworthy exception to this dearth of scholarly attention is the chapter section by Kirschenbaum, 89-98

policies, the language practices and linguistic experiences of language intermediaries, and transnational soldiers' daily experiences of language contact, acquisition and exchange.

Organising the 'Tower of Babel': Language policy and international volunteers

The British international brigadier Tom Wintringham recalls entering a restaurant in Albacete, home of the IBs, in the autumn of 1936 and encountering a throng of recently-arrived volunteers who talked 'all the languages of Europe' as they waited for their midday meal.¹⁶ Transnational soldiers brought a linguistic symphony to Spain which included, in addition to some 30 European languages, others which would have sounded more exotic to Western ears, such as Turkish, Arabic, Chinese and Japanese. The heterogeneity of this 'babel of tongues' embodied the inclusive antifascist ideal which the volunteers had journeyed to Spain to fight for. However, it was also a cacophony that provoked such levels of confusion and misunderstanding that US brigadier Milton Felsen was left fantasizing about 'George Bernard Shaw's dream of an international language'.¹⁷ Indeed, references to the Tower of Babel, a biblical story which outlines the divine decision to provoke linguistic disunity in the people of the world, are a recurrent feature of the internal reports of the IBs and the memories of the volunteers.¹⁸

¹⁶ T. Wintringham, *English Captain* (Eastbourne: Faber and Faber, 1939), 25.

¹⁷ M. Felsen, *Anti-Warrior: A memoir* (Iowa: University of Iowa, 1989), 46

¹⁸ L. Longo, *Le Brigate Internazionale in Spagna* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1956), 80-81; Report 'Efemérides Noviembre 1936', RGASPI F. 545. Op. 2. D. 171; G. Sossenko, *Aventurero idealista* (Cuenca: Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, 2004), 133-134, etc.

Organizing this 'Tower of Babel' was not a simple task. Between July and September 1936, the transnational soldiers who arrived in Spain had to improvise solutions to overcome linguistic barriers. The first foreign volunteers joined the workers' militias that emerged after the collapse of the Spanish army provoked by the military coup of 17 July 1936. Some of them were emigrants living in Spain, but many were young antifascists who were in Barcelona to participate in the Popular Olympics that were due to begin on 19 July. In addition, news of the situation in Spain spread quickly throughout the world, and new volunteers arrived during the weeks following the coup.¹⁹ From the outset, the volunteers spoke a wide range of languages, but four were predominant: French, Italian, German and Polish. French quickly became the *lingua franca* among volunteers, and between foreigners and Spaniards. This occurred because French was the principal international language at the time, and also because most of the early volunteers were either French, or emigrants from various countries who had moved to live in France before volunteering in Spain.²⁰

In general, these early volunteers attempted to organise themselves by language and then to join Spanish militia units. However, in practice the small numbers of each linguistic group meant that several different nationalities often ended up joining together in the same unit. At the end of August 1936, a group of Germans formed the Thälmann Centuria in Barcelona. The Centuria then joined the Spanish Karl Marx Division and went to fight on the Aragon front.²¹ Another

¹⁹ Skoutelsky, 34-43

²⁰ *Le Brigade Internazionale in Spagna*, 45

²¹ Report 'Centuria Thaelmann', Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) F. 545. Op. 2. D. 171

of these early groups was the Gastone Sozzi Centuria, formed in Barcelona on 5 September and made up of Italian, Polish, French and Spanish volunteers. In Madrid, also in early September, a group of French citizens and Spanish emigrants who had been living in France created the Commune of Paris Centuria.²²

Faced with communication difficulties posed by their linguistic diversity, units containing transnational soldiers employed a series of improvised measures. The most basic level of communication was the gesture. Although George Orwell did not arrive in Spain until December 1936, his comical anecdote about how he managed to build a barricade with three Germans and a Spaniard despite the fact that they did not know each other's languages captures the nature of this rudimentary early communication.²³ Military operations, however, required more sophisticated communication systems. Transnational soldiers tried to improve communication by choosing commanders who spoke more than one language. This was the strategy of the Gastone Sozzi Centuria, which was commanded by a Catalan captain who spoke in French to the Centuria's foreign soldiers.²⁴ Another recurrent strategy was to use bilingual volunteers to translate orders into several languages.²⁵ This practice – as we will see in the following section – did not always facilitate understanding. Professional, trained interpreters were also employed during the period, although their use was most

²² Report 'Centuria Commune de Paris', Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) F. 545. Op. 2. D. 171

²³ Orwell, 84

²⁴ Report 'Primeros polacos en España'

²⁵ Report 'Irún', by P. Iwanowicz, Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) F. 545. Op. 2. D. 171

widespread within a segregated, elite sector of international participants in the Civil War: Soviet personnel who were present in Spain from the summer of 1936 onwards as advisors to the Spanish military.

As the number of foreign volunteers arriving in Spain increased, so did the linguistic challenges they faced. On 18 September, the Comintern initiated the recruitment of young antifascists with military experience to aid the Republican war effort, a decision which provoked a new wave of transnational mobilisation and the arrival of thousands of volunteers. The first volunteers arrived in Albacete, the headquarters of the new 'International Brigades' on 13 October. By the end of the month, they numbered 3,500.²⁶ The variety of languages they spoke was so wide that one journalist baptised Albacete the 'Babel of the Mancha'.²⁷ The key leaders at the Albacete base were Frenchmen André Marty and Vital Gayman ('Vidal'), Italians Luigi Longo ('Gallo') and Giuseppe di Vittorio ('Nicoletti'), Austro Hungarian Jews Manfred Stern ('Kléber') and Máté Zalka ('Lukács'), and German Hans Kahle. Most of them were polyglots, although among themselves they spoke in French, Spanish and Russian.²⁸ In fact, many IB officers had gained military experience in the Soviet Union and 'they habitually spoke Russian amongst themselves as a *lingua franca* and to distinguish themselves as an elite'.²⁹

²⁶ Report 'La Base des Brigades Internationales', by Vital Gayman, Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) F. 545. Op. 2. D. 32

²⁷ Ó. Ramírez de Lucas, 'Babel en la Mancha', *Defensor de Albacete. Diario Republicano de izquierdas*, 10 November 1937

²⁸ Testimony of Adela Ossart, in: S. Álvarez, *Historia política y militar de las Brigadas Internacionales. Testimonios y documentos* (Madrid: Compañía Literaria, 1996), 287

²⁹ J. Gurney, *Crusade in Spain* (Newton Abbot: Readers Union, 1976), 93.

The linguistic profiles of most of the foreign volunteers were, however, very different from those of their leaders. Russian-born brigadier Alexei Eisner describes the bewilderment of the Twelfth Brigade's transnational soldiers when their commander, Luckács, told them he was going to speak to them 'in the language of the October revolution', that is, in Russian. 'There were not even 30 people in the Brigade who could understand him.'³⁰ The volunteers' understanding did not appear to be much better in what was quickly becoming the official language of the IBs: French. British Brigadier Jason Gurney describes his arrival in Barcelona along with hundreds of other international volunteers. They were welcomed by André Marty, who 'stood yelling away at us in French, which the majority of those present did not understand'.³¹

For this reason, as soon as they arrived at the Albacete base, the volunteers were grouped together 'by national affinity or by language'. These groups were, according to Gayman, the basis on which the 'military units' were built.³² The IBs adopted the structure of the new *Ejército Popular* which the Republican Government began to organise in September 1936, integrating loyal units of the existing army and workers' militias into a new 'People's Army'. This new army was divided into brigades. The brigades were composed of battalions, which were, in turn, divided into companies. Over the course of the IBs' two years of organised participation in the Civil War, there were seven International Brigades. In this first stage, however, which lasted from October 1936 until March 1937,

³⁰ A. Eisner, *La 12ª Brigada Internacional* (Valencia: Prometeo, 1972), 74.

³¹ Gurney, 54

³² Report 'La Base des Brigades Internationales'

only the first five were created: the Eleventh, Twelfth, Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Brigades.

When Gayman outlined the commanders' attempts to organise 'military units' by language and nationality, he was referring to the companies and the battalions, not to the brigades. Each of the brigades at this time was composed of volunteers from multiple linguistic and national backgrounds. Historians have highlighted two factors which conditioned this linguistic organization: (1) the precariousness and speed with which the high command had to organise the volunteers in October 1936 in order to defend the capital, Madrid, from attack by Francoist troops, and (2) the irregular flows of volunteers from different linguistic backgrounds who arrived in Spain, which prevented the formation of linguistically homogeneous brigades. In this sense, historians have generally followed the arguments offered by Longo and Gayman in their reports and memoirs.

There is no doubt that both of these events had an impact on the linguistic organisation of the IBs, which existed in a constant state of reorganisation and flux determined by the needs of the war and the availability of transnational soldiers. However, we argue that, along with these factors, it is also necessary to take into account two other key elements that have received less attention: the disagreements regarding language policy which took place between the IBs' commanders, and the ways in which the realities of the war modified the previously-existent ideas of some leaders, facilitating the gradual implementation of changes in the linguistic organisation of military units. Longo and Gayman's

reports on the formation of the IBs, written months and sometimes even years after the events which they describe, are misleading because they obscure these discrepancies and construct a more favourable narrative which is coherent with the language policies that were implemented in April and August 1937.

Within the IB high command, there were two fundamental disagreements concerning language policy. One was over whether brigades, battalions and companies should be linguistically homogeneous, and the other revolved around the adoption of an official language. General Kléber was one of the IB leaders who, from very early on, defended the need to unite each of the brigades linguistically and to promote Spanish as an official language. With a long history of military experience, Kléber commanded the IBs at the Battle of Madrid in November 1936, where he observed orders becoming 'distorted in the babel of tongues'.³³ The lack of a common language was responsible for 'the difficulty in communications between the internationalist commanders or commissars and political officers who were also internationalist, and the rank-and-file Spanish army members'.³⁴

Kléber asked Marty to implement these language policies, but the head of the IBs possessed a radically different organisational vision. On 27 November 1936, Marty wrote a letter to the heads of the International Brigades which criticised Kléber's proposal vehemently because 'our internationals are not bands

³³ R. G. Colodny, *The Struggle for Madrid: The Central Epic of the Spanish Conflict, 1936-1937* (New York: Paine-Whitman Publishers, 1958), 74.

³⁴ Report 'An account by M. Fred on work in Spain', 14 December 1937, in R. Radosh, Mary R. Habeck, and G. Sevostianov, eds., *Spain Betrayed: The Soviet Union in the Spanish Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 345

of Landsknecht or Swiss in the armies of European feudalism, but international units of the Popular Front'.³⁵ Marty's linguistic policy was based on political rather than military criteria. The IBs should represent the ideal of internationalism, and the linguistic unification proposed by Kléber would 'risk breaking the international unity of the brigades'.³⁶ Marty's utopian vision prevailed over that of the more pragmatic Kléber, determining the language policy of the IBs between November 1936 and March 1937.

The triumph of this policy created a situation in which, to quote Kleber himself, 'it is almost impossible to command such brigades'.³⁷ The inoperativeness of the military units endangered the IBs' contribution to the Republican war effort. During this first stage, not even the battalions had achieved a degree of linguistic homogeneity: in December 1936, the Fourth Battalion of the Fourteenth Brigade was composed of 32 different nationalities.³⁸ At the end of January 1937, up to 15 different languages were spoken in the Third Battalion of the Eleventh Brigade.³⁹

The definitive proof that this language policy was inoperative in military terms was provided by the Battle of Jarama in February 1937. In the newly-created Fifteenth Brigade the 'common language' was French, a language that neither the soldiers, nor the battalion commanders, nor the brigade staff spoke fluently.⁴⁰

³⁵ Letter from André Marty to the Political Commissars of the XI, XII Brigade and the Base, 27 November 1936, Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) F. 545. Op. 1. D. 42

³⁶ *Ibid*

³⁷ Report 'An account by M. Fred on work in Spain', 312

³⁸ A. Swierczewski, M. Swierczewski and Z. Swierczewski, *Soldado de tres ejércitos. Karol Swierczewski, General Walter* (Madrid: AABI, 2007), 58

³⁹ Report 'Informe del Comisariado Militar de las Brigadas Internacionales' by Luigi Longo, Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) F. 545. Op. 1. D. 2

⁴⁰ Gurney, 96-97

Russian-born American brigadier George Sossenko describes how orders had to be translated orally into six languages, causing misunderstandings and ‘wasting time, which is such an important factor on the battlefield’.⁴¹ Consequently, the casualty count was very high, something which provoked an atmosphere of near-mutiny amongst the soldiers.⁴²

The lessons of the Battle of Jarama led to a change in the direction of the Brigades’ language policies. Despite the volunteers’ enormous linguistic diversity, it was possible to identify three predominant languages at that time. The Brigade commanders began to reorganise the soldiers, moving battalions between brigades and attempting to assemble groups of speakers of German (Eleventh Brigade), Italian (Twelfth Brigade) and French (Fourteenth Brigade). At the same time, a new Brigade which brought together volunteers from Eastern Europe was created. Eastern European soldiers were by far the most multilingual members of the IBs due to the multi-ethnic nature of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire and Russian influence in the region. It was common for Eastern European volunteers to speak at least two languages, which could include German, Romanian, Hungarian, Bulgarian, Slovak, Czech, Russian, Polish or Serbo-Croatian.⁴³ At the same time, the large numbers of Jewish volunteers who came to Spain from Eastern Europe transformed Yiddish into a common language for many brigaders.⁴⁴ This reorganisation ‘would link the international volunteers, as far as

⁴¹ Sossenko, 133

⁴² Report ‘A Documentary History of the XI International Brigade’, RGASPI. F. 545. Op. 3. D. 471

⁴³ See, for example, the multilingualism outlined in the personal files of Hungarian, Polish and Romanian volunteers: RGASPI. F. 545. Op. 6. D. 339; RGASPI. F. 545. Op. 6. D. 678; RGASPI. F. 545. Op. 6. D. 59a

⁴⁴ Graham, 82.

the point of view of languages is concerned,' Longo reported in a letter to Colonel Vicente Rojo, his Spanish superior, in April 1937.⁴⁵

At the same time, there was a longstanding debate within the Brigade high command over the question of whether to accept Spanish soldiers into International Brigade units. Marty argued against possible integration in November 1936, citing the Spanish soldiers' lack of military experience.⁴⁶ It is likely that his position was also driven by other political and cultural motivations. On the one hand, the wide ideological diversity of the Spanish soldiers, and the presence of anti-communist feelings among anarchists and non-Stalinist communists, could have represented - from Marty's perspective - a danger to communist hegemony within the IBs. At the same time, his proposal was made in a context in which many IB officials displayed contempt, and even 'colonial' and racist attitudes, towards Spanish soldiers. This matter, in fact, became one of the main problems in the IBs during 1937 and 1938.⁴⁷ However, at the end of the month, difficulties in recruiting sufficient foreign volunteers led to the integration into the IBs of the first battalions formed exclusively by Spaniards. However, Spanish and foreign soldiers were still not allowed to form part of the same battalions.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Letter from Luigi Longo to Colonel Rojo, 10 April 1937, Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) F. 545. Op. 1. D. 17

⁴⁶ Letter from André Marty to the Political Commissars of the XI, XII Brigade and the Base, 27 August 1936, Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) F. 545. Op. 1. D. 42

⁴⁷ Report 'An account by M. Fred on work in Spain', 313, 345; Report from General, Division Commander [illegible], November 12, 1937, in Radosh, *Spain Betrayed*, 260; Report by Arnold Reid title 'Algunos problemas de trabajo del partido en la XV Brigada', 1 December 1937, Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) F. 545. Op. 6. D. 1, etc.

⁴⁸ Report 'Informe del Comisariado Militar de las Brigadas Internacionales'

This policy changed in February 1937, when units containing Spanish and foreign soldiers, known as ‘Mixed Battalions’, were organised for the first time. The measure was adopted because there were not enough foreign volunteers arriving in Spain to fill the battalions, and in the following months it caused a radical change in the physiognomy of the IBs. By May, several battalions contained between 60 and 70 percent of Spanish soldiers,⁴⁹ and by July, international volunteers made up just 15 percent of the Eleventh Brigade.⁵⁰ This new idiomatic composition generated fresh communication problems. On the one hand, most of the officers did not know Spanish. On the other, orders were issued in the predominant language of each brigade, which was not known to most of the new soldiers.⁵¹

Faced with this situation, in August 1937 Longo proposed the ‘*españolización*’ (‘Spanishization’) of the IBs. His aim was to move existing language policy in the direction of bilingualism. The new brigades had to combine two official languages: Spanish-German (Eleventh Brigade), Spanish-Italian (Twelfth Brigade), Spanish-Slavic languages (Thirteenth brigade), Spanish-French (Fourteenth brigade) and Spanish-English (Fifteenth Brigade).⁵² By that point, in the absence of foreign volunteers Marty recognised the need to integrate Spaniards into the IBs, but considered the Mixed Battalions an error. In a meeting with two Soviet advisers at the end of August, he continued to insist that, due to Spanish lack of military experience, ‘the intermingling of

⁴⁹ Report ‘Informe del Comisariado Militar de las Brigadas Internacionales’

⁵⁰ Report ‘La Base des Brigades Internationales’

⁵¹ Report ‘Informe del Comisariado Militar de las Brigadas Internacionales’

⁵² Report ‘Proposiciones sobre la reorganización de las Brigadas Internacionales’, by Luigi Gallo, 11 de agosto de 1937, Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) F. 545. Op. 1 D. 1

internationalists with Spaniards in battalions' should not be allowed.⁵³

Nevertheless, Longo's proposal finally prevailed and the change of language policy was carried out.

In the following months, the International Brigade high command attempted to promote Spanish and strengthen it as an official language. As we will see in the final section, officers and commissioners were obligated to take Spanish classes, while internal bureaucracy increasingly operated in the local language. Transnational soldiers, although many were not able to master the language, began to communicate with their peers through phrases and keywords that allowed them to build a new common language. As Longo explained, the military operability of the IBs improved notably as a result of this linguistic reorganisation as 'the barriers constructed by linguistic difficulties start to fall down under the weight of the knowledge of Spanish'.⁵⁴ Despite these improvements, however, over the duration of the IBs' time in Spain, military communication would have been impossible without the work of language intermediaries.

Translating the civil war: the role and experiences of language intermediaries

The development of IBs into an effective, international military force would have been impossible without the translation and interpreting work carried out by language intermediaries. These intermediaries included bilingual and polyglot

⁵³ Report from Division Commander Meretskov and Colonel Simonov to Com. Voroshilov, 21 August 1937, in Radosh, 251

⁵⁴ Report 'Informe del Comisariado Militar de las Brigadas Internacionales'

volunteers who entered into formal, semi-formal and sometimes completely improvised translation and interpreting arrangements, as well as official, salaried interpreters and translators. As this section will demonstrate, their ability to move between and among languages transformed them into an indispensable element of the Republican war effort. This was true in the case of the IBs, but also in that of the roughly 4,000 Soviet military advisors who streamed into Spain from the summer of 1936 onwards.

The unique circumstances which surrounded the formation of the IBs – namely their hasty organization in response to the developing conflict in Spain – meant that their interpreting systems and translation practices were developed incrementally and ‘on the ground’, rather than forming part of a predetermined governmental or state policy.⁵⁵ Initially, this improvised strategy placed multilingual volunteers, rather than professional, trained interpreters, at the heart of translation practices. Although the myth of a polyglot army whose members were commonly ‘proficient in four or five languages’⁵⁶ has been an enduring one, in reality only a minority of volunteers knew more than one language when they arrived in Spain. Some members of this multilingual minority, as Longo indicated in one report, came from privileged academic backgrounds, while many came from immigrant families which had conserved their language of origin. Others had grown up in bilingual homes with parents who spoke different native languages.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ For other case studies of this phenomena, see *Languages at War*, 165.

⁵⁶ J. A. Myers quoted in Richard Baxell, *British Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War The British Battalion in the International Brigades, 1936–1939* (London: Routledge, 2004), 170 (n).

⁵⁷ Report ‘Informe del Comisariado Militar de las Brigadas Internacionales’

At the outset, these polyglot combatants provided a ‘convenient source of casual translators’ for battalion and brigade commanders, political commissars and Soviet advisors alike. Robert Gladnick, for example, a Russian-born US citizen who belonged to the Fifteenth Brigade, and who spoke German and had a developing knowledge of Spanish and French, acted initially as an impromptu translator to Russian general Dmitrii Grigorevich Pavlov. Similarly, US Finnish volunteer Rans Edward Arvola was occasionally relieved from his ordinary duties and summoned to translate for his battalion’s Scandinavian political commissar.⁵⁸ Bernard Knox found himself playing the role of interpreter when his group of a dozen British volunteers was assigned to the machine-gun company of the French Commune de Paris Battalion – which drilled in French, English and sometimes Spanish - in December 1936.⁵⁹

These initially informal, improvised translation activities were slowly incorporated into more official structures. Longo revealed that during the autumn of 1936, one of the urgent priorities for organisers at the Albacete base was to ‘get hold of some typewriters and some translators’ that would enable them to ‘find our way around in the language babel of the brigades’.⁶⁰ He subsequently asked for authorisation to ensure that there were sufficient translators on his office staff to translate between all the necessary languages.⁶¹ By early 1937, as historian Lisa Kirschenbaum indicates, language skills had

⁵⁸ Kirschenbaum, 91.

⁵⁹ Bernard Knox, ‘The premature Anti-fascist’, paper presented at the Bill Susman Lecture Series (King Juan Carlos I of Spain Center –New York University, 1998). Available at <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/scw/knox.htm>

⁶⁰ *Le Brigade Internazionale in Spagna*, 80-81; see also Report ‘Informe del Comisariado Militar de las Brigadas Internacionales’

⁶¹ Kirschenbaum, 91.

become a key requirement for the recruitment of functionaries to the Brigades' corps of administrative staff.⁶² Gurney explained that by January 1937 there were about fifteen interpreters on the Fifteenth Brigade's staff: 'None of them spoke less than five languages, some of them working happily in ten'.⁶³ William Rust, the *Daily Worker's* correspondent in Spain, recalled seeing some of these interpreters in action, noting that at meetings of the Brigade's British Battalion, speeches delivered in English were 'translated sentence by sentence into Spanish'.⁶⁴

While Gurney was keen to extol the virtues of this 'outstanding group of interpreters', he also recognised the multiple difficulties faced by them and by their colleagues working in other brigades. On the one hand, while the members of this polyglot group did enjoy official status as functionaries on the Brigade staff, they were also expected to double up as despatch riders, telephonists 'and anything else that was called for around the Brigade Headquarters', a commitment which probably left them with little time to hone their military interpreting skills.⁶⁵ Furthermore, it appears that many of the unit's hastily-recruited interpreters actually had 'only rudimentary knowledge of languages,' and had received no training at all, either in languages or in the complexities of written translation and oral interpretation. In Brigade briefings, meetings and training sessions, the use of these amateur translators to convey 'the babel of life

⁶² Kirschenbaum, 91.

⁶³ Gurney, 97.

⁶⁴ William Rust, *Britons in Spain: The History of the British Battalion of the XVTH International Brigade* (New York: International Publishers, 1939), 163-64.

⁶⁵ Gurney, 97.

and death information' necessary for effective military organisation could lead to significant misunderstandings.⁶⁶

In the highly testing circumstances of battle, interpreters' inexperience and dearth of preparation inevitably contributed to confusion and a lack of coordination. Gurney explained how word-of-mouth reports transmitted to Brigade staff members from the front 'frequently had to be orally translated into three languages without time for careful consideration of their wording. Misunderstandings were inevitable and sometimes resulted in absurd and impossible orders being conveyed to commanders at the battalion level'.⁶⁷ In the Twelfth Brigade, which contained battalions made up principally of Italian, French, German and Polish volunteers, Lukács delivered his commands in Russian. These were then translated into French by a staff officer, and subsequently translated these into German, Spanish and Italian. 'Unsurprisingly, commands often got muddled in the course of multiple translations.'⁶⁸

For interpreters and translators, further difficulties were presented by the unfamiliar barrage of military and technical vocabulary which they were called upon to translate.⁶⁹ This problem was by no means restricted to non-professional interpreters. Of the 204 interpreters sent to Spain over the course of the war to assist Soviet advisors in their communications with Spanish-speaking Republican

⁶⁶ Michael W. Jackson, *Fallen Sparrows: the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1994), 7.

⁶⁷ Gurney, 97-98

⁶⁸ Kirschenbaum, 91. For further observations on Zalka's linguistic situation see *Le Brigate Internazionale in Spagna*, 80-81.

⁶⁹ Jackson, 107.

military units, all had some level of professional training.⁷⁰ However, some of them confessed to finding their assignments extremely challenging. Anna Obrucheva, a trained interpreter with native fluency in Spanish who travelled to Spain in November 1936 to interpret for Soviet advisor and demolitions expert Il'ya Grigoryevich Starinov ('Rudolf Wolf'), discovered that she 'didn't have the necessary technical vocabulary' to explain 'such things as mines, fuses and explosives' to the Spanish Republican soldiers who Starinov was training in sabotage techniques. To make matters worse, the Spanish-language instructions for demolition work which she had been supplied with 'were written very formally with a large number of words that were incomprehensible' to her.⁷¹ Zakhar Plavskin, who in February 1938 was assigned as interpreter to a Soviet advisor attached to a tank division, panicked when he realised that 'I had no idea about vocabulary to do with tanks, either in Spanish or Russian!' In his first attempt to translate a conversation between his superior and a Spanish Republican military commander, he provoked generalised confusion and palpable irritation by mixing up the Spanish word for 'crab' (*cangrejo*) with a term used to describe the underside of a tank.⁷²

For both Obrucheva and Plavskin, these difficulties were gradually ameliorated as they studied the new vocabulary and formed relationships with the Spanish military personnel with whom they worked regularly. Many

⁷⁰ Z. Plavskin, *Les meves tres Espanyes. Memòries d'un brigadista soviètic a la guerra civil espanyola* (Calafell: Llibres de Matricula, 2011), 31; Álvarez, 256

⁷¹ A. K. Starinov, *Behind Fascist Lines: A First-hand Account of Guerrilla Warfare during the Spanish Revolution* (New York: Ballantine, 2001), 20 -23; I. G. Starinov, *Over the Abyss: My Life in Soviet Special Operations* (New York: Ivy Books, 1995), 75.

⁷² Plavskin, 39-40.

interpreters put together their own dictionaries of military terminology which could then be shared with the interpreters who succeeded them in their posts.⁷³ In Obrucheva's case, communication was also facilitated by the fact that by December 1936, Starinov had become more aware of the value of non-verbal communication in his training sessions, and was trying to 'speak less and show more, to have the men practice more'.⁷⁴ However, wider translation-related tensions persisted in the Soviet camp over the course of the USSR's involvement in the conflict. One area of conflict centred on Soviet advisors' apparent incapacity to learn Spanish, something which could provoke the bewilderment and even the exasperation of their interpreters. Obrucheva remarked that even though Starinov managed to 'express himself in a kind of Spanish' with his driver, he 'was just not up to grammar' and was thus rendered 'completely deaf and dumb' in her absence.⁷⁵

This Soviet linguistic incompetence appears to have been a widespread phenomenon: one 1938 Comintern report lamented that after a year in Spain, many Soviet personnel still could not 'take a single step without a translator'.⁷⁶ Another example of this phenomenon can be found in the case of the Latvian-born colonel Willhelm Ivanovich Kolman, Soviet advisor on the Southern Front. Kolman was entirely reliant on not one, but two, interpreters: one Russian-French and French-Spanish. For Kolman and his Spanish interlocutors, conversation was a highly laborious process by which 'the first interpreter

⁷³ *Ibid*, 256.

⁷⁴ *Over the Abyss*, 79; *Behind Fascist Lines*, 34.

⁷⁵ *Behind Fascist Lines*, 41, 46, 83; See also *Over the Abyss*, 107.

⁷⁶ Report by Colonel Grechnev, 1938, in *Radosh*, 495-496.

translated his Russian into French, and the second then retranslated the French into Spanish'. Spanish communications to Kolman then 'had to follow the same process in reverse'. This generated 'significant misunderstandings' as inaccuracies were magnified and information distorted as they passed along the impossibly clunky translation chain.⁷⁷ This elaborate procedure understandably exasperated Spanish military personnel: Kolman himself explained that 'just the appearance of my guard irritates the front commander, and when I begin discussions, he is clearly nervous, tapping the table with his fingers'.⁷⁸ Indeed, according to Obrucheva's memoirs, Kolman made several attempts to convince her to abandon her position with Starinov and come to work as his interpreter instead.⁷⁹

It is possible that Kolman's overtures to Obrucheva were also motivated, at least to some degree, by dominant preoccupations in the Soviet camp regarding the 'political unreliability' of interpreters, particularly those from non-Soviet backgrounds. One Comintern report from September 1937 warned against the dangers of 'fraternisation' between advisors and translators, and lamented that many 'internationalist' translators had not been subject to appropriate vetting procedures.⁸⁰ The attitudes of other Soviet personnel echo these suspicions. Plavskin felt that the simple fact of knowing both Spanish and Russian made him seem 'suspicious' in the eyes of his superiors.⁸¹ In March 1937, when José Sellés Ogino (nicknamed 'Chang'), a Spanish Japanese pilot from the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, was accused of being a Francoist spy by a political

⁷⁷ *Over the Abyss*, 98-99; *Behind Fascist Lines*, 77.

⁷⁸ *Behind Fascist Lines*, 84.

⁷⁹ *Behind Fascist Lines*, 84, 60, 165.

⁸⁰ Report by Party Organiser Krotov, 22 September 1937, in Radosh, 495-96.

⁸¹ Plavskin, 41.

commissar, one Soviet advisor remarked that: 'One needs to take care with people who speak many languages.'⁸²

In the first instance, these suspicions arose in the context of frantic anti-Trotskyist paranoia which gripped the Soviet Union during the 1930s, and which Soviet personnel transferred from the USSR to the Spanish conflict. For this reason, the Soviet authorities maintained firm control of the translators at their service in order to avoid any 'enemy' infiltration. Of the 204 translators used by the advisors sent from the USSR to Spain, 179 were Soviet citizens, and only 25 were foreigners.⁸³ The situation within the International Brigades was more complex, given that although there was a majority of Communist cadres, there were also a significant number of volunteers with other ideologies such as socialist, non-Stalinist communist or anarchist. In this context, the brigaders quickly became an object of suspicion to a majority Stalinist leadership.⁸⁴ Undoubtedly, language played a central role in the tension between the utopian vision of internationalism and the Stalinist fear of the enemy hidden among its ranks which pervaded the IB High Command. For this reason, over the course of the war, IB leaders reinforced the process of recruiting translators along political lines. At the same time, the translators were also an instrument of control of foreign volunteers. In this sense, from December of 1936 Longo pressured the

⁸² F. G. Tinker, *Some Still Alive* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1938), 226-227.

⁸³ Álvarez, 256

⁸⁴ Skoutelsky, 235-263

Spanish government to establish control over the censorship of the volunteers' letters, in order to identify hidden enemies within their ranks.⁸⁵

However, it is clear that suspicions regarding interpreters' loyalty also belong to a wider phenomenon by which wartime interpreters, whose position requires them to move 'between languages and societies' take on 'uncanny' or 'quasi-foreign' identities which cause them to be 'framed as outsiders, as marginal figures' by those who they work with.⁸⁶ While the multilingual context of the 'babel' of the Republican war effort undoubtedly softened the edges of these perceptions of the 'otherness' of language intermediaries to some degree, it certainly did not extinguish them altogether.

It is also important to note that Soviet concerns about 'political unreliability' revealed an expectation that these interpreters be not only loyal, but politically committed as well. In contrast to the now widely-shared conceptions of the importance of 'neutrality' for interpreters in conflict which arose after 1945, the translators who served the Republican war effort – both in the IBs and within the Soviet camp – did so from a perspective of 'activism' rather than 'invisibility'.⁸⁷ In this context, their work consisted not only of transmitting information and commands with accuracy, but also of underlining and reinforcing the Republican and antifascist identities they shared with Spanish

⁸⁵ Letter from Luigi Longo to Ministerio de Comunicaciones, 28 December 1936, Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) F. 545. Op. 1. D. 24; Report 'Proposiciones al Secretariado sobre el trabajo de la Comisión de los Extranjeros', 24 January 1938, Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) F. 545. Op. 6. D. 7; Report 'Informe del Comisariado Militar de las Brigadas Internacionales'

⁸⁶ Quotes from V.L. Rafael, 'Translation in Wartime', *Public Culture*, 19-2 (2007), 244; Hilary Footitt, 'Another Missing Dimension? Foreign Languages in World War II Intelligence', *Intelligence and National Security*, 25-3 (2010), 281; *Languages at War*, 11.

⁸⁷ On this spectrum see *Languages at War*, 201-202.

and foreign combatants. Between classes and operations, for example, Obrucheveva delighted in being able to translate Stavinov's tales of Soviet partisan action to the sabotage unit's members, an activity which undoubtedly made both sides aware of the commonalities of their shared political struggle and civil-war experience.⁸⁸

Much like Obrucheveva, one Italian interpreter described how the experience of translation also enabled him to transmit his own political convictions to others. In March 1937, when he was called upon to translate, from Italian into French, a welcome speech for new brigade recruits delivered by Italian socialist politician Alessandro Bocconi, he recorded that 'I translate and I add something of myself: my emotions.'⁸⁹ As the next section will indicate, for many initially monolingual volunteers who could not serve as language intermediaries, language contact and acquisition enabled them to establish and reinforce bonds with their Spanish and transnational comrades, allowing them to construct new forms of language which underlined their collective antifascist identities.

Language contact, language acquisition and linguistic hybridity: the making of a new language?

For many transnational soldiers, the experience of fighting in a foreign country whose inhabitants spoke an unknown language provoked not only misunderstanding but also frustration. These sentiments are displayed in numerous personal letters written by international volunteers. US volunteer

⁸⁸ *Behind Fascist Lines*. 90

⁸⁹ Report 'Llegan los voluntarios', by Adami, Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) F. 545. Op. 2. D. 171

Harry Meloff, answering a friend who had asked him if he had forgotten his English after four months in Spain, replied: 'The truth is I still do not know a word in Spanish. The real fact is that there are so many Americans here that the Spaniards learn our language faster than we learn theirs.'⁹⁰

In the early months of the IBs, foreign volunteers were able to inhabit a comfortable 'international bubble', leading lives which were isolated from Spanish – and Spanish-speaking – reality. However, from the spring of 1937, the number of Spanish soldiers in the IBs increased exponentially. By the end of the year, one Polish general was describing the volunteers as 'drowning in a mass of Spanish' and 'becoming lost in the surrounding Spanish masses'.⁹¹ This new situation provoked contradictory feelings which ranged from anxiety to enthusiasm. In one letter, the Finnish American brigadier Mito Kruth described his frustration and the stress of trying to learn Spanish, concluding: 'I hope the next war is in a country where I can speak the language. It makes it so much easier'. In contrast, Paul Sigel was excited: 'We are working with Spanish comrades now - really getting an excellent chance to learn the language (...) I have been waiting for this for some time.'⁹²

International volunteers used different informal learning methods to acquire Spanish skills, from reading the local press to conversing with native

⁹⁰ Letter from Harry Meloff, 6 May 1937, in C. Nelson and J. Hendricks, *Madrid 1937: Letters of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade From the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 145

⁹¹ 'Notes on the situation in the International Brigades Units in Spain', by Colonel Com. Sverchevsky (Walter), 14 January 1938, in Radosh, 448, 452-453

⁹² Kirschenbaum, 95

speakers.⁹³ 'It's really a lot of fun to learn the language' explained brigader Cecil Cole, who practiced his Spanish by speaking with local people.⁹⁴ Sigel explained how he and his fellow brigaders 'roam thru the stores with our English-Spanish dictionaries, incoherently mumbling to the storekeeper for awhile [sic], and then, of course, assist each other by pointing.'⁹⁵ However, sometimes Spanish adults could be wary of talking to foreigners, something which made it easier to establish contact with children, whose nonjudgmental curiosity removed cultural barriers. Alfred L. Amery recalls how 'I began to exercise my Spanish on a roguish boy of eleven (...) carrying my small dictionary, I managed by racing through its pages to answer questions and made an occasional, very difficult statement'.⁹⁶

The '*españolización*' of the IBs from mid-1937 offered volunteers a greater variety of formal learning opportunities in Spanish. One of the first initiatives, which began in April 1937, was the organisation of meetings at which brigaders read Spanish newspapers together 'to improve the contact between international comrades and our new Spanish recruits'.⁹⁷ The high command also organised a central library and smaller libraries in each of the battalions containing books in the IBs' dominant languages and Spanish materials which served as language-learning tools.⁹⁸ Using these libraries was the method chosen by volunteer Evan Shipman, who described his experience in a letter to his friend Ernest

⁹³ A. Bessie, *Alvah Bessie's Spanish Civil War Notebooks* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 10

⁹⁴ Kirschenbaum, 94

⁹⁵ Letter from Paul Sigel, 12 July 1937 in Nelson and Hendricks, 135-36.

⁹⁶ Letter from Alfred Amery, 13 May 1937, in Nelson and Hendricks, 100

⁹⁷ Report 'Informe de Camarada Regler, comisario de la XI Brigada,' 24 April 1937, Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) F. 545. Op. 2. D. 85

⁹⁸ Report 'La bibliotheque centrale', Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) F. 545. Op. 2. D. 99 ; Report 'Informe del Comisariado Militar de las Brigadas Internacionales'

Hemingway.⁹⁹ Some brigades also created cultural activities which facilitated language acquisition. The Fifteenth Brigade organised a group called 'Equipo XV' to promote knowledge of Spanish, French, English and German through events like music and theatre festivals.¹⁰⁰

The most comprehensive language acquisition method designed by the IBs were formal Spanish classes. One brigader wrote in his diary that from May 1937 'all orders, commands [are] given now in Spanish' in the Abraham Lincoln Battalion, so the commissars had to learn a 'minimum official Spanish to understand orders'.¹⁰¹ In October 1937 the obligation to learn Spanish was imposed on all political commissars and members of the General Staff of the Brigades.¹⁰² This measure was never extended to ordinary soldiers except in the case of those who belonged to the Thirteenth Brigade, where learning Spanish was compulsory from July 1937. It is possible that this decision was taken because the Brigades' members, who were predominantly multilingual soldiers from Eastern European countries, were accustomed to operating in more than one language.¹⁰³

The rest of the brigades promoted Spanish classes among the transnational soldiers, but on a voluntary basis.¹⁰⁴ To facilitate learning, some

⁹⁹ Letter from Evan Shipman to Ernest Hemingway, 14 March 1938, in Nelson and Hendricks, 305

¹⁰⁰ Report 'Equipo XV', Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) F. 545. Op. 2. D. 85

¹⁰¹ Anonymous diary of an Abraham Lincoln volunteer, Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) F. 545. Op. 2. D. 201

¹⁰² Report 'Plan pour les cours espagnols obligatoires pour les camarades de l'état-major et du Commissariat de Guerre de la Base', Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) F. 545. Op. 2. D. 81

¹⁰³ Report 'Informe del Comisario de la XIII Brigada Dombrowski', by Stopzcyk, Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) F. 545. Op. 2. D. 85

¹⁰⁴ Report 'Informe del Comisariado Militar de las Brigadas Internacionales'

brigades published materials such as the 'English-Spanish Grammar' handbook edited by the Fifteenth Brigade in June 1938. The book's introduction explained that: 'The basic knowledge of Spanish will admittedly eliminate many difficulties and problems that arise as a result of the language differences'.¹⁰⁵ Despite these multiple opportunities, some volunteers admitted that fluent Spanish continued to elude them. Toby Jensky acknowledged that 'I still do not read Spanish (...) I wish I could make myself sit down for an hour a day and study, but there's always something more pleasant to do. Maybe some day [sic] soon.'¹⁰⁶ However, other brigaders made an extraordinary effort to study every day in spite of their responsibilities and the exhaustion that war brought. 'It's making my stay here very pleasant', said Alfred Amery.¹⁰⁷

The degree of linguistic immersion experienced by volunteers was determined by individual personality and interest levels, but also by circumstance and environment. Finnish American volunteer Bill Aalto initially belonged to the IBs and later joined a predominantly Spanish-speaking guerrilla unit within the Republican Army. Aalto explained to a friend in July 1938 that he had become so immersed in Spanish that his English seemed to be disappearing: 'How about sending some papers or a magazine. I've almost forgotten to speak, to write or read English.'¹⁰⁸ The experience of 'forgetting' one's native language was also reported by volunteers from mixed-language or immigrant backgrounds whose civil-war experiences brought them into contact with languages they may not

¹⁰⁵ English-Spanish Grammar handbook, June 1938, RGASPI. F. 545. Op. 2. D. 414

¹⁰⁶ Letter from Toby Jensky, 21 June 1937, in Nelson and Hendricks, 247

¹⁰⁷ Letter from Alfred Amery to George and Lawrence, 13 May 1937, in Nelson and Hendricks, 100

¹⁰⁸ Letter from Bill Aalto, 31 July 1938. Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) F. 545, Op. 6. D. 855

usually have spoken on a daily basis. While in Paris on his way to Spain, US volunteer William Sennett, the son of Russian Jewish immigrants, wrote: 'I have been trying to talk in so many different languages that by the time I come home I'll be talking broken English. I get along best speaking German. It's somewhat like Yiddish.'¹⁰⁹ In a subsequent letter, he explained that: 'My Jewish comes in handy at times (speaking to Germans) but in Spanish I can hardly manage.'¹¹⁰

In the case of Yiddish-speaking volunteers, this contact with other speakers of the language enabled them to reaffirm their identities as Jews but also - in a situation where many Yiddish speakers in Spain were refugees from fascist and authoritarian regimes - their shared antifascism. According to US volunteer Wilfred Mendelson: 'The real international language here is Yiddish. Jews from Germany, France, England, Poland, Czech [sic], Hungary, Rumania, all the front ranks of the respective movements have come to battle the common enemy of the workers, and of the Jews as special oppressed minority.'¹¹¹ From the outset Yiddish functioned as a *Lingua franca* within the IBs for Jews from Eastern Europe and some western countries, particularly the US.¹¹² As British nurse Patience Darton observed, this transformed Yiddish speakers into crucial informal language intermediaries: 'you would always try to get a Jewish person

¹⁰⁹ Kirschenbaum, 83.

¹¹⁰ Letter from William Sennett, 9 June 1937, in Nelson and Hendricks, 301.

¹¹¹ Letter from Wilfred Mendelson, 22 June 1938, in Nelson and Hendricks, 40.

¹¹² Gerben Zaagsma, *Jewish Volunteers, the International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp.37-38.

who could speak Yiddish, to another Jewish person – it didn't matter if they were Romanian or Hungarian or what they were, you could get a common language.'¹¹³

Many volunteers reported that, as well as communicating in Yiddish and other minority languages, they frequently found themselves speaking a kind of hybrid language which contained words and grammatical structures from several different languages. Ukrainian-born party organiser Ben Gardner revealed that his reaction to the extreme situation of linguistic diversity he encountered in Spain was to 'speak English, Yiddish, Rus. & Spanish combined to some of our Internationals. It's a regular riot.'¹¹⁴ Finnish American volunteer Mito Kruth observed that the 'language' spoken at the Albacete base appeared to be an 'international jargon which slightly resembles French or Spanish.'¹¹⁵ Meanwhile, Soviet and Spanish military personnel who worked together closely got used to 'speaking a simplified Spanish-Russian argot' which contained Russified versions of Spanish military terms and where all Spanish verbs were employed in the infinitive.¹¹⁶ US brigadier Harry Fisher recalls that when he was approached by a local old man who enquired into how things were progressing at the front, he replied: 'Mucho malo for fascisti'. Despite the fact that he had used three different languages (Spanish, English and Italian) and committed two Spanish

¹¹³ Angela Jackson, *For us it was Heaven: the Passion, Grief and Fortitude of Patience Darton: from the Spanish Civil War to Mao's China* (Cañada Blanch/Sussex Academic Studies on Contemporary Spain, 2012),

¹¹⁴ Kirschenbaum, 94.

¹¹⁵ Kirschenbaum, 85.

¹¹⁶ Plavskin, 41.

grammatical errors in a four-word sentence, his interlocutor seemed to understand him and ‘hobble[d] away happily.’¹¹⁷

In this new linguistic environment, where translanguaging was the norm, grammatical rules had all but disappeared and new lexical creation was commonplace, even the most linguistically unaccomplished were able to engage in some level of communication in Spanish. Brigaders incorporated numerous Spanish ‘loanwords’ into their everyday vocabularies, developing a kind of ‘trench language’ in which Spanish and their native languages intermingled. Letters home from the English-speaking members of the Fifteenth Brigade reveal that frequently-used military terminology such as ‘*enlaces*’ (go between) ‘*pelotón*’ (squad), ‘*cabo*’ (corporal), ‘*chatos*’ (soviet aeroplanes) and ‘*golpe de mano*’ (surprise attack) had become firmly incorporated into soldiers’ daily vocabularies. Words which described geographical elements of the battlefield such as ‘*sierra*’ (mountain range), ‘*barranco*’ (gully) and ‘*loma*’ (hill) also appeared frequently in correspondence. Other Spanish terms which were used so frequently that they replaced their English equivalents tended to be either of a practical or interpersonal nature: they included ‘*amigo*’, (friend), ‘*sanidad*’ (health) ‘*ropa*’ (clothes), ‘*garbanzos*’ (chickpeas) and ‘*fiesta*’ (party).¹¹⁸

By far the most ubiquitous example of transnational soldiers employing a Spanish ‘loanword’, however, was ‘¡*Salud!*’, a greeting which denoted support for the Republican Government and which was employed throughout Republican

¹¹⁷ Letter from Harry Fisher, 19 June 1937 in Nelson and Hendricks, 105,

¹¹⁸ Nelson and Hendricks, 100, 111, 404, 407, 454, 467 etc.

Spain. More than any other word, ‘¡Salud!’ became cemented into international volunteers’ collective vocabularies; it was used constantly ‘by persons of all nationalities, even when speaking and writing in their own language’.¹¹⁹ When writing home, most US brigaders signed off with ‘Salud’.¹²⁰ Harold Smith reported that he was constantly exposed to the greeting: ‘Everyone has his fist in the air and you’ll probably “Salud” 100 times a day to 100 different people from kids of two up.’¹²¹ Canute Frankson, meanwhile, explained that: ‘It is used as a means of returning thanks and saying goodbye [sic]. The word really seems to adopt an historical meaning here in Spain’.¹²² The term ‘*camarada*’ (comrade), which was sometimes incorrectly masculinized as ‘*camarado*’, was also used constantly by international volunteers, as was ‘*no pasarán*’ (they shall not pass), a slogan coined during the siege of Madrid which became an instant means of communicating one’s commitment to the Republican war effort and wider antifascist struggle.¹²³

The new forms of language being created in Republican Spain were not purely verbal. As Smith’s observations reveal, ‘¡Salud!’ was invariably accompanied by the clenched-fist salute, an instantly-recognisable symbol of antifascist resistance and support for the Republic. These gestures not only transcended linguistic boundaries, they formed part of a new, transnational, non-verbal antifascist vocabulary. In the same way, music provided an instant means of affirming shared values and constructing collective identities. Accounts of

¹¹⁹ R. Dan Richardson, *Comintern Army: The International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War* (University Press of Kentucky, 1982), 37 (n).

¹²⁰ Nelson and Hendricks, 135, 149, 151, 154, 156

¹²¹ Nelson and Hendricks, 154.

¹²² Nelson and Hendricks, 343.

¹²³ Nelson and Hendricks, 241, 247.

international volunteers singing 'The Internationale' in a chorus of languages are almost as common as references to them greeting one another with '¡Salud!' At the end of an IB ceremony held in El Pardo in December 1936, for example, 'the revolutionary songs of each country were sung and the party ended with The Internationale, which each volunteer sang in his native language.'¹²⁴ The German writer Alfred Kantorowicz recalled that at the burials of fallen comrades, shared singing and gestures engendered an almost overwhelming sense of collective belief and purpose: 'With our fists clenched, in silence and staring at the coffins (...) then someone began to sing 'The Internationale' and everybody sang in German, Spanish, French, English, Italian, Polish, Hungarian, Czech, Yugoslav. And at that moment it was like an oath.'¹²⁵

Conclusions

In October 1938 the Republican Government, hoping to spark the multilateral withdrawal of foreign troops from Spain, ordered the disbandment of the International Brigades.¹²⁶ At the farewell ceremony held for the brigaders in Barcelona on October 29, US volunteer Mary Colow recalled watching 'these tough Yugoslavs, Germans, Americans' listening to the final speech delivered by Communist politician Dolores Ibárruri. 'I never had such an experience', he remembered, 'because these men, such tough fighters, every last one of them was

¹²⁴ Report 'Los comisarios en los primeros días de las Brigadas' by Vital Gayman, Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) F. 545. Op. 1. D.

¹²⁵ Entry for 26 November 1936, Diary of Alfred Kantorowicz, Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) F. 545. Op. 2. D. 171; see also M. Requena and J.M. Peláez, 'Memorias de vida: Albacete y las Brigadas Internacionales en el recuerdo de los Voluntarios de la Libertad', 213-14.

¹²⁶ M. Alpert, *A New International History of the Spanish Civil War* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), 166.

crying'.¹²⁷ These brigaders, who were listening to a speech delivered in Spanish, and who were surrounded by comrades in arms who came from more than 50 countries and spoke multiple languages, had fought to defend Republican democracy in a uniquely diverse linguistic setting which had provoked personal confusion and frustration, as well as enormous military challenges. However, the transnational, multilingual nature of the Republican war effort had also opened doors to new ways of communicating and new forms of language which had underlined and helped to forge collective Republican and antifascist identities.

Within the International Brigades, the military force which the majority of foreign volunteers belonged to, language policy developed in line with the changing circumstances of the Republican war effort. The fact that the IBs formed part of a revolutionary army which was being rebuilt by the Republic in the wake of the military coup meant that its structures and its often-unconventional policies were in constant evolution. In dealing with the huge proliferation of different linguistic groups within the IBs, commanders initially based their policies on an internationalist, utopian vision of military organisation which called for complete integration between soldiers from different linguistic and national backgrounds. However, the military inoperativeness provoked by this line of action led the high command to opt for a strategy aimed at bringing about greater levels of linguistic homogeneity, namely reorganising battalions into clearer linguistic groups and enforcing Spanish as the IBs' official language.

¹²⁷ W. Loren Katz and M. Crawford, *The Lincoln Brigade: A Picture History* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 71-72.

In spite of the natural difficulties created by operating in such a diverse range of languages, the IBs' commanders were able to overcome the Biblical curse of Babel and build an army which was both effective and profoundly international. This military effectiveness would have been impossible without the work of language intermediaries. Within the IBs, bilingual and polyglot volunteers were initially used as interpreters on an ad-hoc, informal basis, but formal structures which placed interpreters on the IBs' official staff were established during the first few months of the conflict. The challenges faced by these languages intermediaries – from a lack of formal training to the difficulties of translating military and technical terms - were manifold and not always surmountable. However, much like their counterparts working as interpreters to Soviet personnel, their translation activities served not only as a means of facilitating communication but also as a way of reinforcing their political commitment and underlining their deep implication in the Republican war effort.

For ordinary volunteers, who were initially bewildered by the extreme linguistic diversity of Republican Spain, language also became a means of affirming their commitment to the Republican cause and their collective antifascist identities. Many soldiers took advantage of informal and formal opportunities for language acquisition, something which is demonstrated by the ways in which Spanish 'loanwords' relating to military, personal and social aspects of daily life were incorporated into their native languages. At the same time, many soldiers from migrant backgrounds found themselves rediscovering or reconnecting with languages spoken by their families. Furthermore, the constant contact between multiple languages which characterised the Republican

war effort meant that many volunteers reported that they were now communicating in a wholly new way which saw words, phrases and grammatical structures from a variety of languages intermingling and melding together, supported by universally-understood antifascist gestures such as the clenched-fist salute.

This new language, a perfect symbol of the kind of cultural heterogeneity and hybridity which the Fascist political projects of interwar Europe sought to obliterate, would be used by transnational soldiers long into the future. Although some volunteers returned home in October 1938, many stayed on in Spain, fighting in different units of the Republican Army. For many volunteers, the 'oath' of commitment to the Republican and antifascist cause described by Kantorowicz lasted long after the end of the Civil War. During the Second World War, many transnational volunteers, together with their exiled Spanish comrades, brought their experiences and identities to the concentration camps and the resistance movements of their own and other countries. On the lips of these 'Spanci', a nickname for former IBs volunteers derived from various Eastern European languages, the new hybrid language forged on Spanish soil resounded across the mountains, forests and deserts of occupied Europe and North Africa.