

# Russia and the Russians in the Eyes of the Spanish Blue Division soldiers, 1941–4

Journal of Contemporary History

2017, Vol. 52(2) 352–374

© The Author(s) 2016

Reprints and permissions:

[sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav](http://sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav)

DOI: 10.1177/0022009416647118

[journals.sagepub.com/home/jch](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/jch)**Xosé M. Núñez Seixas**

Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich, Germany

**Abstract**

The Spanish ‘Blue Division’ has received significant historiographical and literary attention. Most research has focused on diplomacy and the role of the Division in fostering diplomatic relations between Spain and Germany during the Second World War. However, the everyday experience of Spanish soldiers on the Eastern Front, the occupation policy of the Blue Division and its role in the Nazi war of extermination remain largely unexplored. It is commonly held that the Spanish soldiers displayed more benign behaviour towards the civilian population than did the Germans. Although this tendency can generally be confirmed, Spanish soldiers were known for stealing, requisitioning and occasional acts of isolated violence; and also for the almost complete absence of collective, organized retaliation. Yet how did Spanish soldiers perceive the enemy, particularly Soviet civilians? To what degree did the better behaviour of Spanish occupying forces towards the civilian population reflect a different view of the enemy, which differed from that of most German soldiers?

**Keywords**

Blue Division, Eastern Front, Fascism, image of the enemy, Second World War, war violence

The *División Española de Voluntarios*, or Spanish Division of Volunteers, was set up by the Franco Regime in early summer 1941, to take part in the Russian campaign as a unit integrated in the German Wehrmacht. From 24 June through to the first week of July 1941, hundreds of volunteers joined what would become known as the *División Azul*: the ‘Blue Division’ (BD), which was initially composed of

**Corresponding author:**

Xosé M. Núñez Seixas, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Historisches Seminar, Geschwister-Scholl-Platz 1, Munich, 80539 Germany.

Email: [x.nunez@lmu.de](mailto:x.nunez@lmu.de)

around 17,000 soldiers. They were recruited by both the Spanish Fascist Party (the *Falange Española Tradicionalista y de las JONS*), known as the Falange, which provided most of the rank-and-file soldiers; and the Spanish Army, which supplied the officer and non-commissioned officer corps. High casualties on the harsh Eastern Front created the need for replacements and nearly 23,000 more volunteers were sent from Spain to Russia through late autumn of 1943. Almost 5000 soldiers died, and around 450 became prisoners of the Red Army. The Spaniards were deployed in the northern area of the Eastern Front, first on the Volkhov Front (October 1941–August 1942), and later at the southern corner of the siege of Leningrad (until March 1944).<sup>1</sup>

The Blue Division has received significant historiographical, literary and testimonial attention. Most research has focused on the role of the Blue Division in fostering diplomatic relations between Spain and Germany during the Second World War, and has adopted a mostly positivist bias centred on the analysis of military operations and diplomatic correspondence. However, the experience of Spanish soldiers on the Eastern Front, the occupation policy of the Blue Division and its role in the Nazi war of extermination remain largely unexplored. It is commonly held that the Spanish volunteers, much like the Italian soldiers, displayed more benign behaviour towards the civilian population than did the Germans. Although this tendency can generally be confirmed, both Italians and Spaniards were indeed undesired occupying forces within the context of a brutal war.<sup>2</sup> Spanish soldiers were known for stealing, requisitioning, rape and occasional acts of isolated violence; but also for the almost complete absence of collective, organized retaliation, for good treatment of Soviet prisoners, a low profile in the anti-partisan struggle, and their non-involvement in any direct or indirect participation in the Holocaust, albeit in an area where virtually no Jews remained after September 1941.<sup>3</sup>

To what degree did the Spanish volunteers share the intent of German soldiers during the Eastern war of extermination? How did they perceive the enemy, particularly Soviet civilians? To what degree did the better behaviour of Spanish occupying forces towards the civilian population reflect a different view of the

1 On the military history of the Blue Division, see X. Moreno Juliá, *La División Azul. Sangre española en Rusia, 1941–1945* (Barcelona 2004), J.L. Rodríguez Jiménez, *De héroes e indeseables. La División Azul* (Madrid 2007) and W. Bowen, *Spaniards and Nazi Germany: Collaboration in the New Order* (Columbia, MO 2000); also, from Russian historiography, see B. Kovalev, *Dobrovolci na cyzoy voynе. Ocerki istorii golyboj divizii* (Veliki Novgorod 2014) and A.V. Elpatevskij, *Golubaja divizija: voennoplennye i interirovannye ispancy v SSSR* (Saint Petersburg 2015).

2 See X.M. Núñez Seixas, '¿Eran los rusos culpables? Imagen del enemigo y políticas de ocupación de la División Azul en el frente del Este, 1941-1944', *Hispania*, LXVI, 223 (2006), 695–750; X.M. Núñez Seixas, *Die spanische Blaue Division an der Ostfront, 1941–1945. Zwischen Kriegserfahrung und Erinnerung* (Münster 2016, forthcoming), Chapter 6. On the Italians, see T. Schlemmer, *Invasori, non vittime. La campagna italiana di Russia 1941–1943* (Bari 2009 [Munich 2005]) and G. Scotoni, *Il nemico fidato. La guerra di sterminio in URSS e l'occupazione alpina sull' Alto Don* (Trento 2013), 218–23 and 286–300.

3 See X.M. Núñez Seixas, '¿Testigos o encubridores? La División Azul y el Holocausto de los judíos europeos: entre Historia y Memoria', *Historia y Política*, 26 (2011), 259–90.

enemy? Was it merely a result of the more static nature of the Northern sector of the Eastern Front, with less partisan activity than in the Ukraine or White Russia, combined with the lack of (or lesser importance of) radicalized and brutalized fighting conditions, as it also happened to other German Divisions?<sup>4</sup> In other words: if Spanish BD treatment of the Russian civilian population constituted an exception, to what degree was this caused by, or did it create, a different image of the enemy, one inherited from the Spanish Civil War but not radicalized by a biological worldview?

Setting aside for a moment the monumental suffering and the thousands of dead among the besieged civilian population in the city of Leningrad, the war in the northern sector of the Eastern Front from September 1941 was (in relative terms) far more static and somewhat less radical and brutal than in the centre and south, with less partisan presence. The Volkhov offensive (October–December 1941), as well as the battles of the Demyansk (February–April 1942) and the Volkhovskiy forest pocket (February–June 1942), the combats of the Lake Ladoga and others were certainly bloody battles, yet not all German divisions were affected to the same degree by the intensity of the combats.<sup>5</sup> Like the other divisions of the 16 and 18 Armies of the Army Group North, the Spanish soldiers preferred to make camp in Russian villages near the rear-guard. On the Volkhov Front, where the peasant population was particularly poor in 1940, cohabitation between peasants and occupying forces became particularly tight: with several soldiers occupying the miserable three- or four-space dwellings where a family also lived.<sup>6</sup>

The Spanish officers observed that the famished civilian population, subjected to German requisitioning, was much more concerned with survival than with patriotic resistance. For this reason, the villagers were quick to collaborate with these invaders. The peasant women would wash the soldiers' clothes, and the elders taught them how to build wooden shanties.<sup>7</sup> In such close quarters many *divisionarios* were practically adopted by these peasant families. Many of them saw in the *mamuskas* and their *izbas* a 'real extension of their own home'.<sup>8</sup> There were even

4 On the importance of situational factors for the brutalization of German soldiers at the Eastern front, see S. Neitzel and H. Welzer, *Soldaten. Protokolle von Kämpfen, Töten und Sterben* (Frankfurt am Main 2011), as well as J. Rutherford, *Combat and Genocide on the Eastern front: The German Infantry's War, 1941–1944* (Cambridge 2014). On indoctrination and its role in enhancing brutalization, see the classic view by O. Bartov, *The Eastern Front, 1941–45, German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare* (Houndmills/New York 2001 [1985]), as well as F. Römer, *Kameraden. Die Wehrmacht von innen* (Munich/Zurich 2012) and F. Römer, 'Milieus in the Military: Soldierly Ethos, Nationalism and Conformism Among Workers in the Wehrmacht', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 48, 1 (2013), 125–49.

5 See H. Kilian, *Wehrmacht und Besatzungsherrschaft im Russischen Nordwestern 1941–1944. Praxis und Alltag im Militärverwaltungsgebiet der Heeresgruppe Nord* (Paderborn 2012); J. Hasenclever, *Wehrmacht und Besatzungspolitik in der Sowjetunion. Die Befehlshaber der rückwärtigen Gebiete 1941–1943* (Paderborn 2010), as well as Rutherford, *Combat and Genocide*.

6 Addendum to the report of Captain Collatz for the XXXVIII Army Corps, 5 May 1942 (Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg im Breisgau, RH 26-250/3).

7 Colonel J. Roca de Togores, *Informe núm. 72 sobre la División de Voluntarios*, Berlin, 5 December 1941 (Archivo General Militar, Avila [AGMAV], 29/52/5/2).

8 M. Salvador Gironés, 'Cosas de por allá', *Blau División*, 166 (May 1973).

cases of unauthorized weddings between Spanish soldiers and Russian women. Generally, though, the tight living quarters, and especially food scarcity, led to daily quarrels and occasional threats by the occupying forces,<sup>9</sup> as the peasants hid their meagre reserves from the preying invaders.<sup>10</sup>

The relationships between Spanish soldiers and the civilian population in occupied villages comprised mostly of women, children, and the elderly, were cast in a very favourable and idealized light in post-1945 testimonies. They unanimously spoke of harmonious cohabitation, as well as full respect, appreciation and mutual solidarity.<sup>11</sup> The Blue Division's trench journal *Hoja de Campaña* introduced this imagery as early as 1943: the Russian villages had been peacefully occupied by soldiers, 'who were part missionary, part bohemian artist and another part globetrotter'.<sup>12</sup> However, this representation should be duly contrasted with testimonies published and written by *divisionarios* prior to 1945 – particularly in their letters and diaries – as well as the news articles of the time. The image found there conveys greater nuance and in some aspects resembles that of the German soldiers. The Spaniards, however, had not been subjected to racial indoctrination, lacked any previous contact with the Slavic East, and filtered their perception of 'Russia' and the Russians through their Catholic convictions. Many Spanish volunteers described the peasants' poverty in literary style, thereby crafting a singular image of the enemy.<sup>13</sup>

The journalist Jacinto Miquelarena was the first Spanish correspondent to visit the Russian Front, in August 1941. He enjoyed describing the poverty of the 'Smolensk Hotel' and how communism had 'created tattered beggars and scallywags like no other era'.<sup>14</sup> In the eyes of the Iberian volunteers who arrived a month

9 The soldier Joaquín Ros described in his diary the distrust with which the inhabitants of the *izba* assigned to him in Podberesie housed the Spanish troops; however, within a few days a certain degree of complicity had been established in relationships, especially with girls and children: see Diary of Joaquín Ros Cabo, entries from 15, 17 and 21 October 1941, in K. Cuerda Ros, *Diario de la División Azul. Un músico en el frente ruso* (L'Eliana 2013), 52–3.

10 For example, the volunteer Salvador Zanón admitted that in the *izba* occupied by his group in December, 1941, potatoes would disappear from the family, but 'the samovar was always full of sweet coffee, and they shared our bread, our rations and our mess portion' (War Diary of Salvador Zanón Mercado, Part V, entry from 22 December 1941). Two weeks later, he noted that the other soldiers had secretly entered a cellar in another *izba* where a Russian family stored their potatoes, though later they shared them with the same family. See 'Diario de la Campaña de Salvador Zanón Mercado (Part VI)', *Blau División*, 624–5 (July–August 2011), entries dated 22 and 24 December 1941, and 6 January 1942.

11 T. Salvador, *División 250* (Barcelona 1954), 355; testimony of José Luis Pinillos in A. Domingo, *Historia de los españoles en la II Guerra Mundial. Sus peripecias en todos los frentes y bajo todas las banderas* (Córdoba 2009), 192–3.

12 'Crónica fácil. "En la Calle del Pilar tiene usted su casa", *Hoja de Campaña* (31 October 1943).

13 J. Riudavets de Montes, *Estampas de la Vieja Rusia (recuerdos de un voluntario de la División Azul)* (Madrid 1960), 45–50; 'Cartas de Rusia', *Boletín del SEU de Madrid*, 12 (1942); J.E. Blanco, 'Pioneros contra Dios. Sentido antirreligioso de la educación rusa', *Arriba* (29 April 1944); HISPANUS, 'El ateísmo que vi entre los soviets', *El Español* (27 May 1944).

14 J. Miquelarena, 'El hotel Smolensko, hotel moderno', *ABC* (16 August 1941).

later, and many others after, Russians – including what was then Eastern Poland – represented a kind of step backwards in human history, as one Falangist wrote:

We see here ‘equality’ and ‘paradise’. Every person is barefoot, scarcely clad, and unaware of the most basic personal hygiene. The ‘people’, as they call the workers, live in wooden huts in the most miserable way imaginable, while the Commissars inhabit lavish palaces.<sup>15</sup>

As in the case of German and Italian soldiers, the reactions of the first Spanish volunteers to set foot on Soviet soil coincided in reporting the most basic element: filthy poverty. It was captured in watercolour by cartoonist and Blue Division volunteer Joaquín Alba (*Kin*) upon his return to Spain in 1943.<sup>16</sup> Antonio Aragonés condensed the ‘reality of the Soviet paradise’ into three words: ‘Misery, misery and misery!’ Private José Díaz wrote how ‘the miserable people truly lived in pigsties’, and Captain Ángel Muñoz described life in Russia as ‘a pendulum swinging between work and misery’, in ‘sordid’ towns where the rooms were ‘more fit for animals than people’.<sup>17</sup> The Falangist leader and volunteer Dionisio Ridruejo condensed into a few sentences all the meaning he attributed to the misery he saw:

Terrible, this life I see. Terrible misery, infra-humanity and desolation. This is a landscape of nothingness, and only the cities reveal that Europe was here, and then a Revolution with a dictatorship of the proletariat. The villages recall Ivan the Terrible, if anything...<sup>18</sup>

The tales told obviated the fact that this desolate panorama partially corresponded to the effects of war. It was all presented as an example of what communism would have caused in Spain had it triumphed in 1936, and throughout all of Europe had the Third Reich not *pre-emptively* invaded the USSR. In other words, the Bolshevik destruction of property, order and social values had condemned the Soviet peasants to an existence that could not be called living, which would be nourished by transcendent belief, but a vegetative state concerned only with immediate survival.<sup>19</sup> The Falangist volunteer José Luis Gómez Tello described a ‘Russian village’: Soviet materialism had turned the churches into warehouses and schools; the administrative headquarters consisted of a ‘cuboid form the colour of blood’, accompanied by a group of ‘ramshackle, dark and miserable’

15 ‘División Azul’, *Nueva Alcarria* (15 November 1941).

16 See the comic strips *Felicidad en los hogares* and *Apenas pisamos la primera carretera rusa, camino del frente, ya vemos lo que es el adelanto soviético* (Archivo General de la Administración, Alcalá de Henares, F/0474, IDD (03) 003.000).

17 ‘División Azul. Cartas de un voluntario’, *Nueva Alcarria* (14 March 1942); *El Alcázar* (7 March 1942); *El Alcázar* (3 February 1942).

18 J. Fuertes, ‘Lo que nos llega de Rusia a los falangistas. Sacrificio y entusiasmo de la División Azul’, *Arriba* (1 January 1942).

19 EL CORREO DEL ZAR, ‘División Azul. Comentario’, *Nueva Alcarria* (21 February 1942).

*kolkhoz* buildings. The peasants had stepped several centuries back in time and lived in an ‘infrahuman zone’ next to the Communist Party millionaires.<sup>20</sup> The wild beauty of the landscape contrasted with the poverty, sadness and squalor of the homes: a ‘sad, barren and unpleasant scenery’.<sup>21</sup>

Newly arrived *divisionarios* after 1942 expressed similar impressions of the front in their letters. They described the Russians as a people lacking hygiene; whose saunas seemed a ‘savage, primitive system’. A Corporal wrote how the Russians ‘are unacquainted with lights, electricity, European-style clothing, plumbing; their huts are poorly constructed of wood and full of misery, in short, words cannot describe what they call the “Soviet Paradise”’.<sup>22</sup> Personal diaries tended to be even more acerbic. Ensign Juan Romero wrote upon arriving at the front that the villages were ‘made of several wooden houses that looked more like stables’.<sup>23</sup> Corporal Jesús Martínez Tessier described his first impressions of the Russian peasants as he crossed what had been the border between Lithuania and the Soviet Union:

We began to see authentic Russians, dirty and impoverished. The villages and homesteads look completely wretched... The Russians were all beards and tall boots. The dirty houses must surely be full of parasites. The gates of Soviet paradise open before us.<sup>24</sup>

A few months later, upon arriving at the village where he would reside on the front, Lieutenant Benjamín Arenales also remarked on the contrast between the Soviet myth propagated by the left and the panorama he saw:

The village couldn’t possibly be constructed any worse. The houses are all made of wood, filled with a foul stench which I would not recommend, as the stables are in fact a room in the house. This is the Russian Paradise the Reds dreamed of!<sup>25</sup>

Published memoirs and other testimonies until 1945 all coincide regarding these images. Gómez-Tello considered the misery he saw in the Polish villages a luxury compared to the ‘infrahuman life of the Soviet peasantry’, permeated by a ‘bestial stigma’ upon their faces. José Ronderos was aghast at their lack of familiarity with technological advances considered commonplace in the West, as well as at their

20 J.L. Gómez Tello, ‘La aldea rusa’, *Enlace* (20 September 1942).

21 F. Izquierdo Luque, ‘Estampa de colores en el invierno blanco’, *Arriba* (26 July 1942).

22 Postcards from Blue Division volunteers, sent on 22 October 1941 and 19 December 1941, reproduced in M. Vázquez Enciso, *Historia postal de la División Azul. Españoles en Rusia* (Madrid 1995), 133 and 135; Vicente Rodríguez Vela to Lieutenant Colonel Leandro García González, 22 March 1942 (Museo del Pueblo de Asturias, Gijón, Fondo Leandro García González [MPA-FLGG]).

23 Juan Romero Osende, *Diario de Operaciones. Campaña de Rusia*, entries from 24 August 1941 and 17 October 1941 (Private Archive of Ms. Ana Romero Masía, A Coruña).

24 J. Martínez Tessier, *Diario de campaña*, entry from 14 September 1941 (Private Archive of Mr. J. Martínez Reverte, Madrid).

25 B. Arenales, *Diario de operaciones e impresiones*, entry of 25 May 1942 (Private Archive of Mr. Carmelo de las Heras, Madrid).

extremely frugal diet.<sup>26</sup> The Falangist José M. Castañón expressed the same views:

Unbelievable misery. The houses look like large wooden barracks, formed by one room in which the people and livestock and farming instruments live all stacked together. There are piles of hay that serve as beds... around the stove, which they built themselves out of tins that often cause intoxication; 90% of Russian villagers have never known any other sort of bed.<sup>27</sup>

Many of these descriptions were intended to convince any remaining USSR sympathizers in Spain of the error of their ways. This was the case of Corporal Adolfo Fernández Velasco, who wrote to the proletariat of Asturias and whoever else might be 'blinded by Marxist propaganda', telling how what he saw proved that communism was in fact a step backwards, and 'had turned people into beasts, filled with inhuman materialism'. The repatriated soldier Manuel Chiloechea also spoke to his fellow villagers of the 'miserable way in which millions and millions of Russians lived'.<sup>28</sup>

The common terms in the descriptions of these *divisionarios* referred mainly to overcrowding, bad smells, humidity. Unlike Germans, Spanish soldiers tended to contrast dirty/clean more than wet/dry. If any words stood out when describing Russia, they were undoubtedly *dirty* and *foul-smelling*. Montserrat Romeu, a nurse, described in her diary the unpleasant impression upon entering an *izba*: 'the stench is like a slap to the face, as with all Russian homes'. Gómez Tello vividly described it as a smell of the *Orient*, accentuating humidity and putrefaction: 'It smells Russian: rotten potatoes, *kapuska*, human misery, manure, and all manner of fermentation in an atmosphere that has not been ventilated for ten months'.<sup>29</sup>

Vaguely oriental phenotypes occasionally accompanied the descriptions, as Falangist Antonio Aragonés expressed in his impressions regarding the grimy inhabitants – with supposedly somewhat Asian features – of the Novgorod area:

From afar, they all look the same. If placed on the horizon at night, they would all have the same profile: tough riding boots, usually large and always dirty, breeches in different colours and genres fallen around the knees, a wool-lined tunic or long pelisse, up to the neck, and a black or khaki cap. Everything is grimy and broken. Their faces are all the same; round with olive complexion, brown or sometimes blond hair, a strong beard rounded at the chin, a dirty moustache yellowed from tobacco, sunken blue eyes and prominent cheekbones, tinting their faces with a sadly oriental air... All of them, young and old, look like Siberian Eskimos.

26 J.L. Gómez-Tello, *Canción de invierno en el Este. Crónicas de la División Azul* (Madrid 1945), 51; 'Cómo hablan del Mando los voluntarios de la "División Azul"', *Informaciones* (26 February 1942).

27 'La gloriosa División Azul', *El Norte de Castilla* (24 February 1942).

28 A. Fernández Velasco, *Apuntes de la División Azul* (La Felguera 1943), 9–11; 'Información de la provincia', *Nueva Alcarria*, 11 April 1942. See also J. Sánchez Carrilero, *Crónicas de la División Azul* (Albacete 1992), 75–7.

29 M.M. Romeu Fernández, *Relato de un viaje* (Ronda 2007), 57, entry dated 16 October 1941; Gómez-Tello, *Canción de invierno*, 50.

'Animalization' was another characteristic the Spanish occupants often perceived in the peasants. Russian homes were putrid inside: with animals and people living together in a 'human pigsty'. Antonio Aragonés spoke of how he won the trust of a 'human cub' with chocolate. Months later he described how the Russian women deloused each other, killing the insects with the same knives they used to cut bread. Jaime Farré ascribed the peasants almost apelike traits, describing the 'hovels' where they 'slept around the stove, all together; the parents hunted in their children's hair for lice at the same table where they would eat.'<sup>30</sup>

The astonishment of the Iberian volunteers at witnessing the misery of Soviet peasant life stems in part from the fact that many of these soldiers had urban origins and were completely unfamiliar with the rural context. The contrast did not seem quite as stark to those from relatively underdeveloped rural areas of Spain. This was the case for Joaquín Montaña, who compared the living conditions of the Russians with the peasants in his home county. Although the wooden *izbas* of the villagers were indeed less comfortable than the peasant homes with which he was familiar, he also understood that good stone houses could not be built in a land where stone was scarce. For this reason, he felt closer to the Russian villagers than many of the more urban *divisionarios*. The Galician peasant Roque Selas indicated the same, and even praised the warmth provided by the central stove in Russian homes. In many of them, he was also surprised to find quality clothing and porcelain.<sup>31</sup> Military engineer Alfredo Bellod and Major Joaquín de la Cruz also appreciated the rational structure of the wooden Russian homes, built to efficiently maintain a warm interior.<sup>32</sup>

However, through Spanish lenses, the spiritual indigence of the peasantry was even more disturbing than the material misery. The lack of religious values was starkly apparent – especially in the generations educated under Soviet rule – alongside the lack of progress and well-being. Sargeant Sánchez Aladro wrote how the Bolshevik 'materialist barbarians' had isolated Russia from the civilized world by suppressing all artistic and aesthetic expression. 'There is no philosophy here, only exact math and a compass; and absolutely no consideration for individualism'. Maths, but no notion of God or any sort of transcendence. Even in the libraries one could only find books on applied techniques. The socialist architectural style seemed materialistic and impersonal: 'On the inside men neither feel nor live, they

30 'Diario de un voluntario. Notas de mi macuto', *Nueva Alcarria* (20 December 1941); 'División Azul. Cartas de un voluntario', *Nueva Alcarria* (21 March 1942); J. Farré Albiñana, *4 infantes, 3 luceros* (Tétouan 1949), 92.

31 Memoirs of Joaquín Montaña, in R. Cela, *En Rusia con la División Azul* (Ponferrada 2010), 249–50; interview with Roque Laso and Manuel Varela (Archives of *Radio Nacional de España*, Ourense). An Andalusian soldier was not terribly surprised by the living conditions of the peasants. He felt the Russians were 'a people of great nobility': See J. Linares, *Más que unas memorias. Hasta Leningrado con la División Azul* (Madrid 2000), 138.

32 A. Bellod Gómez, *Soldado en tres guerras. Campaña de África. Guerra civil española. División Azul en Rusia* (Madrid 2004), 199–200; J. de la Cruz Lacacci, 'La casa de Nicolai Frederich', *Reconstrucción*, 34 (June–July 1943).



are like machines ejecting warped ideas'.<sup>33</sup> There was indeed a culprit for the desolate, materialistic, inhuman panorama the Spanish volunteers found in the Soviet Union: communism had preyed upon 'these poor, dirty, bearded *ruskis*'. Tricked by the regime, something even more painful than material misery was added: 'wretchedness of the soul'.<sup>34</sup> The Russian people could not even compensate their material deficiencies with a sense of transcendence. The Russian soul seemed 'sheep-like, almost unfeeling'. Stripped of their religion, 'their beastlike instincts run amok'.<sup>35</sup>

Atheism and the return to an almost natural state was correlated with a surprising lack of sexual morals, which many *divisionarios* attributed to the 'solvent' effect of communism that destroyed modesty along with tradition, rather than to the habitual permissiveness of rural life. Private Salvador Zanón wrote of his surprise upon meeting a Russian student for whom love was merely 'a sexual need to be satisfied like any other'. The 'Russian way' of love implied 'carnal relations from the very beginning'; the girls did not even bother to hide their relationships from their parents.<sup>36</sup> Ridruejo was scandalized by Russian weddings, which he described as a 'carnal zoology', with neither ritual nor modesty among peasant couples of any age.<sup>37</sup> Recalling a night in which a peasant couple shamelessly made love next to the Spanish soldiers sleeping in their *izba*, he concluded that in sexual matters the Russian people had degenerated to 'a beastly sexual impulse that goes so far as to be comical'. Spiritual misery and atheism led to 'the most appalling moral depravation', that even erased 'a mother's affection for her children'. Soviet communism sought 'free love... women as production instruments serving the proletariat'.<sup>38</sup>

Were these new images? Did the volunteers find, or think they found, confirmation of pre-conceived icons and stereotypes needed to consolidate the image of the enemy?<sup>39</sup> Russia, as its own nineteenth-century writers had depicted it, was as present in the Spanish mind as anti-communist indoctrination and the

33 Raimundo Sánchez Aladro to Joaquina Cabero, 17 February 1943 (MPA, R.6410, A6/15-5); V. de la Serna, 'Notas de un viaje a la División Azul', *Informaciones* (12 December 1941); E. Errando Vilar, *Campaña de invierno* (Madrid 1942), 118; A. Crespo, *De las memorias de un combatiente sentimental* (Madrid 1945), 178.

34 Vid. 'Lo que vimos en Rusia', *Hoja de Campaña* (23 May 1943); 'Miseria sobre miseria (El ayer de Rusia)', *Hoja de Campaña* (20 June 1943); C. Lamela, 'Yo era oficial del Zar', *Hoja de Campaña* (8 August 1943).

35 *Arriba* (13 March 1942); M. Timmermans Díaz, 'Recuerdos de un invierno en Rusia', *Arriba* (4 August 1942).

36 S. Zanón, 'La campaña de Rusia, un año después (IIIª y última parte)', *Blau División*, 615 (October 2010); M. Salvador Gironés, 'Anecdotario del Dr. Payno', *Blau División*, 185 (December 1974); war diary of Ramón Abadía, cited by L.A. Palacio Pilacés, *Tal vez el día. Aragoneses en la URSS (1937-1977), el exilio y la División Azul* (n.p. 2013), vol. I, 549.

37 D. Ridruejo, *Los cuadernos de Rusia* (Barcelona 1978), 172-3. Yet other testimonies were rather discordant in this sense: see S. Pardo Martínez, *Un año en la División Azul* (Valladolid 2005), 68-9, and P. Larraz Andía and V. Sierra-Sesúmagá, *Requetés. De las trincheras al olvido* (Madrid 2010), 371-2.

38 Letter of Dionisio Ridruejo to Marichu de la Mora, 19 September 1941 (Private Archive of the family Ridruejo, AFR1); I. Jiménez Andrades, *Recuerdos de mi campaña en Rusia* (Badajoz 1957), 39 and 51; Sánchez Carrilero, *Crónicas*, 25-27; J.L. Vascano, *Infierno en la estepa* (Valencia 1960), 84.

39 See W. Benz, *Feindbild und Vorurteil. Beiträge über Ausgrenzung und Verfolgung* (Munich 1996), 9-18.

identification of *Russia* with the Antichrist. More than one ‘cultured’ *divisionario* believed he had found affirmation of exotic, mystical images distilled from Russian literature, from Dostoyevsky to Tolstoy, which had been translated into Spanish in the 1920s.<sup>40</sup> This somehow provided a line of continuity from Dostoyevsky’s pan-Slavic expansionism to that of the Bolsheviks.<sup>41</sup> Dionisio Ridruejo wrote in September 1941 how ‘the people here seem like the characters in the novels we all so avidly read with eager sympathy, but without an adequate understanding of tragedy’.<sup>42</sup> José Luis Gómez-Tello was far more eloquent: ‘I became familiarized with the black and mossy environment of these people of lost humanity in the pages of Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy’. He found the substance of these literary characters in the mystical, ‘disorganized, wild exaltation’ of a people who had brought the Soviets to power, with ‘a soul burning with the wind of Genghis Khan’.<sup>43</sup> Alvaro de Laiglesia evoked similar images when describing the *izba* in which he slept; there lived a skeletal, paralytic old man assisted by ‘an old lady with a chickpea face and high boots made of grey felt’. Not even Dostoyevsky’s ‘exciting misery’ or Tolstoy’s ‘rascals and rogues’ could match this Soviet reality.<sup>44</sup>

Not only people, but also scenes felt like they belonged to a literary *déjà-vu*. The military surgeon Juan Pablo D’Ors wrote how ‘many of the events, characters and sceneries that are now a part of my life I had already lived in Gorki’s pages, under the vivid light of reality’. Enrique Errando found many parallels between the peasants he often met and those in Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). Other veterans voiced similar views years later: what they saw in Russia helped them understand the characters they were already familiar with through Russian literature: ‘Kindness, oriental fatalism . . . Respect bordering on servility’.<sup>45</sup>

These images were often used in Spanish anti-communist media, blending literary icons with political propaganda, and had already been embedded in the minds of many volunteers. They could even be reinforced by their families back home in Spain. In October 1941, Dolores Gancedo wrote from Toledo to her fiancé, the Falangist Alberto Martín Gamero, describing what she imagined the Russian people to be like, reflecting a mix of literary images and icons formed by anti-communist propaganda:

I liked it when you were in mainland Europe, but I don’t think you will enjoy Russia much. I have read some Russian novels, and I liked them, but ever since I read

40 See R.J. Fasey, ‘The Presence of Russian Revolutionary Writing in the Literary Climate of Pre-Civil War Spain, 1926–1936’, *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, XXXVI:4 (2000), 402–11, as well as G. Portnoff, *La literatura rusa en España* (New York, NY 1932).

41 E. Montes, ‘Drama y grandeza. De Dostoiévski a Stalin’, *Domingo. Semanario Nacional* (2 May 1937).

42 Letter from Dionisio Ridruejo to the editorial board of *Escorial*, 22 September 1941 (Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica, Salamanca, Fondo Ridruejo, MF/R 5912).

43 J.L. Gómez Tello, *Canción de invierno en el Este. Crónicas de la División Azul* (Barcelona 1945), 52 and 111–13.

44 A. de Laiglesia, ‘Estampas de la División Azul. La única retaguardia’, *Enlace* (28 June 1942); A. de Laiglesia, ‘La leyenda partida’, *Hoja de Campaña* (4 February 1942).

45 J.P. D’Ors Pérez, *Diario de un médico español en Rusia* (Madrid 1960), n.p.; Errando Vilar, *Campaña de invierno*, 255–6 and 260; *Hermandad*, II:4 (July–August 1958).

Chekov's *Ward n° 5* [*sic*], I feel terribly repulsed by Russia. I imagine it to be filthy and cold, how should I say, like the sticky, smelly cold of a dirty, greasy suit; or a butcher's cloak after unloading meat; that's the environment I imagine. I have also heard about the characters there, and that's how I imagine the peasants to be: incapable of becoming anything else, for serving as vassals won't sharpen the mind... though it seems those who do possess any intelligence use it for guile and trickery. Rasputin, Stalin, Lenin, I imagine them all with Alcalá Zamora's face.<sup>46</sup>

Another military surgeon, Captain Manuel de Cárdenas, described the atmosphere of the civilian population of Luga in a similar fashion, mingling poverty and stereotypes formed by images from Russian literature: 'From time to time, one sees an old *mujik*, with a white or blond beard, similarly long hair, and sad, light coloured eyes; they look like Christ's apostles... All look like they escaped from Tolstoy or Andreyev novels'.<sup>47</sup>

Yet, these scenes certainly seemed worthy of pity and curiosity rather than hatred and disdain; and the peasants' misery reinforced the most negative aspects of older stereotypes. For Federico Menéndez Gundín, the citizens of the USSR awoke his sympathy, rather than repulsion: 'Honestly, I thought the stories told in Spain about the Russian people were merely propaganda, but they fall short of reality. These people are dirty, poorly dressed... truly, they evoke more pity than hatred'.<sup>48</sup> In this way, a contradictory relationship was formed between the Spanish volunteers, or at least those most identified with the anti-Bolshevik *crusade*, and Russian civilians: one marked by certain disdain and a sense of superiority, but also by compassion and growing familiarity with the peasants who housed them. The common people with whom the *divisionarios* interacted were politically rather passive, and not communist for the most part.<sup>49</sup> Sergeant Manuel Martínez pointed out how the locals he met also hated Stalin's tyranny; he subconsciously identified the term '*Russian*' with '*communist*', thereby perpetuating the stereotypes inherited from the Spanish Civil War:

These Bolshevik villages are so underdeveloped it's frightening... The neighbours that did not evacuate want nothing to do with the Russians [*sic*], and if you ask them about Stalin, they will invariably reply that he should be hung from a tree, for these people have been severely grieved by the communist regime... They are good people for the most part, whom communism has condemned to remaining extremely backwards, and to living practically as slaves.<sup>50</sup>

46 Letter of Dolores Gancedo to A. Martín Gamero, Toledo, 22 and 23 October 1941 (Author's Archive). The Chekhov story she refers to is *Ward no. 6*. Niceto Alcalá Zamora had been prime minister and then president of the Spanish Second Republic.

47 War Diary of Manuel de Cárdenas (Private Archive of José Manuel de Cárdenas, San Sebastián), entry dated 21 April 1942.

48 War Diary of Federico Menéndez Gundín, entry dated 18 September 1941, in Cela, *En Rusia*, 143.

49 '¿Cuántos comunistas hay en Rusia?', *Hoja de Campaña* (3 October 1943); Gómez Tello, *Canción de invierno*, 124-6.

50 'Carta de Rusia. Lo que cuenta un voluntario de la División Azul', *Voluntad* (8 February 1942).

Falangist Eusebio Donaire declared similar opinions in January 1942. The ‘Russians’ (communists) were ‘beasts’ for subjecting ‘those poor people to Stalin and his henchmen’, to a ‘slavery’ that was the reality of the ‘Soviet Paradise’: ‘cold, dirty, loveless villages’.<sup>51</sup> Communism was perceived as a form of tyranny considered aberrant to European governments and civilization: a form of modern absolutism that had turned the once prosperous peasantry into the vassals of a totalitarian state.<sup>52</sup> This caused many volunteers to feel sorry for the population victimized by Stalin: ‘and lament a horribly oppressed people who must be liberated’.<sup>53</sup> The drawings for the *Hoja de Campaña* – certainly somewhat naive – often depicted quaint old men, jovial women and scenes from daily life, such as soldiers playing games with Russian children, and fraternizing with the peasants (Figures 1 and 2).<sup>54</sup> The vehement Catholic Corporal Guillermo Hernanz concluded that ‘the people I’ve met since arriving here are not nearly as bad as I was led to believe, they are simply unfortunate wretches condemned their entire lives (first by the Tsars and then by communism) to being horribly and truly oppressed’.<sup>55</sup>

The Spanish reading of the Russian countryside went beyond the scenario of an innocent people victimized in a triad of material misery, communism and historical fatalism. For many *divisionarios*, especially the Falangists, communism had prevailed in Russia because of the tormented Slavic soul: the product of an extreme climate, hostile landscapes and barren fields; a ‘godforsaken land, heat, mosquitos... this is a living hell’<sup>56</sup>. The Russian people were both deprived of civilization and made spiritually lethargic by the harsh physical environment: a ‘primitive land’, with only shanties ‘built simply as shelter from the terrifying winter, not intended as homes’. Those living there could be no more than ‘slaves to the harsh environment’, incapable of establishing an architectural style in stone. Indeed, the absence of stone construction reflected the Slavic ‘lack of traditional spirit’ or sense of ‘historical continuity and effort’. The land seemed to require a dictator capable of ruling the immense steppe.<sup>57</sup> The hardship of the Russian nature became, as in German accounts, a common feature of the Spanish volunteer’s perceptions. Since the nineteenth century, the theory of social hygiene had postulated cleanliness as a mark of civilization and bourgeois culture. Accordingly, a dirty, wretched people were so by nature and not by accident. Dirty, crude, primitive and uncivilized locals, or simply physically unattractive people, were

51 *Odiel* (15 January 1942).

52 See, for example, ‘Charlando con un labrador ruso. Impresiones de un soldado en la Rusia liberada’, *Hoja de Campaña* (26 September 1943).

53 Hispanus, ‘Cartas desde Rusia. Crisis moral’, *Lucha* (7 July 1943). See also C. Saldaña Escribano, ‘Unidades rusas que combaten por Europa’, *Haz*, IV:7 (September 1943).

54 See for example, *Hoja de Campaña* (13 December 1941); 11 January 1942; 5 August 1942; 19 August 1942; 26 August 1942; 18 November 1942; 21 March 1943; 31 March 1943, and 11 April 1943.

55 G. Hernanz Blanco, *Diario de Guillermo en Rusia* (Salamanca 2013), 46–7, entries dated 27–30 April and 1 May 1942.

56 Letter of Manuel Tarín to Remedios Rebollo, 5 June 1942 (Private Archive of Mr. Fernando Rebollo, Torrevieja, Alicante).

57 A. de la Iglesia, ‘Para la historia de nuestra División Azul. Su paisaje’, *ABC* (17 May 1942); J. Díaz de Villegas, *La División Azul en línea* (Madrid 1967), 45–6; Errando Vilar, *Campaña de invierno*, 61–2, 113 and 233.



**Figure 1.** Cartoon ‘Spanish volunteer and Russian peasant woman’

Source: First published in the BD trench journal *Hoja de Campaña*, 11 (11 January 1942).

not in the same league with *European invaders*. Many German and Italian soldiers expressed in their letters from Russia how the border between cleanliness and order – which they associated with the western world and masculinity – and dirtiness and disorder, now constituted the boundary between civilization and barbarianism.<sup>58</sup> The Spaniards were not substantially different in this respect. In fact, many officers

58 K. Latzel, *Deutsche Soldaten-nationalsozialistischer Krieg? Kriegserlebnis-Kriegserfahrung 1939–1945* (Paderborn 2000), 145–56; S.-O. Müller, *Deutsche Soldaten und ihre Feinde. Nationalismus an Front und Heimatfront im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Frankfurt am Main 2007), 175–94, and M. Kipp, *Großfreinemachen im Osten. Feindbilder in deutschen Feldpostbriefen im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Frankfurt am Main 2014), 47–110. See also G. Corni, ‘Briefe von der Ostfront. Ein Vergleich deutscher und italienischer Quellen’, in L. Klinkhammer, A. Osti Guerrazzi and T. Schlemmer (eds), *Die ‘Achse’ im Krieg. Politik, Ideologie und Kriegführung 1939–1945* (Paderborn 2010), 398–432; G. Corni, *Raccontare la guerra. La memoria organizzata* (Milan/Turin 2012), 37–8, and G. Vettorazzo, *Cento lettere dalla Russia 1942–1943* (Rovereto 2004). German soldiers expressed similar sentiments in their letters describing occupied Flanders and France during the First World War: see C. Nübel, *Durchhalten und Überleben an der Westfront. Raum und Körper im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Paderborn 2014), 267–70.



**Figure 2.** Cartoon 'Spanish volunteer and Russian peasant'  
 Source: First published in *Hoja de Campaña*, 8, 13 December 1941.

of the Blue Division had experienced similar sensations among the Berber population during their years in Africa.<sup>59</sup>

Similarly, *divisionarios* saw 'the river of resignation, the conformism of those poor people' and the submissive Russian character as the outcome of centuries of subjection to a despotism that was foreign to European tradition.<sup>60</sup> Their adaptation to tyranny had forged an indifference towards death – the end of an inane existence – which for their soldiers translated into an obstinate determination to fight to the end:

The Russian peasant is unlike any other man. One must take into account that until the last century slavery existed in Russia; perhaps this is one of the causes of the

<sup>59</sup> G. Nerín, *La guerra que vino de África* (Barcelona 2005), 204–6.

<sup>60</sup> The testimony of José Antonio Arellano, in *Hermanidad*, II:4 (July–August 1958).

complete bestiality of Russian peasants. Also the absolute misery of the countryside, the inhuman life they are accustomed to and have been for centuries, the despotism of all tsars, red or white, have created a special type of man, the most perfect undoubtedly for suffering the experience of Communist collectivization. They fight because they don't care, since death is ultimately for them the complete liberation from a life that has given them nothing.<sup>61</sup>

Antonio Aragonés expressed sadness for the 'misfortune of these people', but also asserted that they deserved their fate: 'I have no pity for these unfortunate Russian slaves, nor do I think anyone could. Are people with this spirit and psychology of resigned servility worthy of it?' Alvaro de Laiglesia saw Russian peasants as 'silent and mysterious... beings', content with basic survival. For this reason, he thought it best if these endearing but barbaric people did not 'get their claws into our civilization'.<sup>62</sup> Similar thoughts were expressed by Luis Riudavets de Montes, who from March 1943 was responsible for the custody of the Blue Division's prisoners. He described the Russian people as 'indifferent, fatalistic, fervent believers, almost fanatics' who, perhaps due to the influence of the climate or customs, were resigned to tyranny, whether of the aristocratic tsars or communist partitocracy: 'for this very reason, they bore the Revolution well. Another people would have grown weary of it years ago'.<sup>63</sup>

In summary, this people with Oriental cultural, spiritual and sometimes even physical features, accompanied by an instinct for subservience, lived in a state of barbarism, poverty and brutality. The ingrained servility of these Russians, with their 'prominent cheekbones [and] small, slightly slanted eyes', was attributed to centuries of tyranny by tsars and overlords. Such fertile ground had been ripe for manipulation by the Bolsheviks. Russians, 'whether communists or imperialists, are always slaves of a tyrant. This too is an oriental inheritance'.<sup>64</sup> It convinced the Spanish volunteers that they fought for a just cause. In fact, the same notion reverberated in the letters and testimonies of their German counterparts. They were engaged in a quasi-apocalyptic struggle against a ferocious enemy with essentially sub-human (according to some Germans) features.<sup>65</sup> More than one combatant expressed the conviction that he was serving Spain and Europe 'in this breach of Civilization'.<sup>66</sup>

61 F. Torres, 'La campaña de invierno para el ejército ruso', *ABC* (26 January 1943).

62 'División Azul. Cartas de un voluntario', *Nueva Alcarria* (21 March 1942); A. de la Iglesia, 'El infierno de los hielos soviéticos', *El Español*, II:12 (16 January 1943); A. de la Iglesia, 'Para la historia de nuestra División Azul. Su paisaje'. In the same sense, see P. Salvador, 'División Azul: Voz española en la batalla del mundo', *Hoja de Campaña* (9 May 1943).

63 Riudavets de Montes, *Estampas*, 21, 77.

64 Errando Vilar, *Campaña de invierno*, 112–13; J. Revuelta Imaz, 'Camisas azules en Nowgorod', *Pueblo* (28 July 1942).

65 S. Fritz, *Frontsoldaten. The German Soldier in World War II* (Lexington, KY 1995), 195–203.

66 Letter of Raimundo Sánchez Aladro to 'Mrs. Gold y Gold', 10 December 1943 (MPA, R 6410/A6/15-2).

Centuries of oriental despotism and an inhospitable physical environment could only result in a boorish, indifferent and submissive people. Members of the Division often described the Russians as lethargic, passive, indifferent and lazy. Sometimes they hinted at identification with Jewish stereotypes. Montserrat Romeu described a tailor in Porchow as ‘the classic Russian with small spectacles, a Russian blouse and Jewish look.’<sup>67</sup> For Martínez-Tessier, the characteristically ‘lazy movements’ of the Russians gave an impression of being ‘eternally fatigued’; indeed, the country itself seemed suspended in sleep. He also observed that ‘the locals are dressed in rags and in everything appear to belong to an inferior race’.<sup>68</sup> This comment carried more cultural than biological meaning. The cultural racism apparent in many testimonies echoed a historical and geographical determinism that recalls the attitudes of German and Austrian soldiers towards Russia and the Slavic East during the First World War: the reservoir from which new racist attitudes developed after 1920.<sup>69</sup>

Among the Russian people, however, more than one Spanish volunteer was able to appreciate human, even modern features. To begin, most peasants were literate, especially the younger generations. Some were surprised by the abundant community libraries, with plenty of popular literature but no pornography. In many places there were also gymnasiums.<sup>70</sup> Ridruejo described Russians as a medieval people who were blinded ‘by progress, machines, Darwin, suppression of the devil in love and the pedantry of the many school teachers provided by the regime’, resulting in something ‘abject and ugly’. Though communism had taught them to read, it had deprived them of their ‘last spiritual resources’, beginning with religious rites.<sup>71</sup> Others were pleased that there were still illiterate people in Russia who could not read the works of Marx, Lenin and Stalin, which filled the libraries of the *kolkhozes*.

After literacy, some volunteers noted two other anecdotal features: ‘They never strike their horses and they make wooden nests for birds; but they mistreated men...’<sup>72</sup> Even these more minute aspects spoke of the Russians as strange and de-humanized, treating animals as more worthy of respect than humans. They were a coarse people with endearing aspects and worthy of pity; but *strange* and

67 Romeu Fernández, *Relato*, 67.

68 Martínez Tessier, *Diario*, entry dated 19 September 1941. See also Martínez Tessier, ‘Desde la División Azul. Estampas soviéticas’, *SI. Suplemento semanal de Arriba*, 37 (13 September 1942).

69 See V.J. Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity, and German Occupation in World War I* (Cambridge 2000); V.J. Liulevicius, ‘Der Osten als apokalyptischer Raum. Deutsche Fronterfahrungen im und nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg’, in G. Thum (ed.), *Traunland Osten. Deutsche Bilder vom östlichen Europa im 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen 2006), 47–65; W. Dornik, ‘“Ganz in den Rahmen dieses Bildes hinein passt auch die Bevölkerung”. Raumerfahrung und Raumwahrnehmung von österreichisch-ungarischen Soldaten an der Ostfront des Ersten Weltkrieges’, in B. Bachinger and W. Dornik (eds), *Jenseits des Schützengrabens. Der Erste Weltkrieg im Osten: Erfahrung–Wahrnehmung–Kontext* (Innsbruck/Vienna/Bozen 2013), 27–43.

70 Letter from Private Carlos Juan, Minsk, 18 September 1941 (Archivo Histórico Municipal de Cádiz, Fondo General Varela, C. 115).

71 Letter of Dionisio Ridruejo to Marichu de la Mora, 19 September 1941 (AFRI); Andrés Oncala [D. Ridruejo], ‘Paisaje de la batalla’, *Arriba* (10 January 1942). See also Ridruejo, *Cuadernos*, 225–30.

72 A. Aragonés, ‘De la División Azul. Carta de un voluntario’, *Nueva Alcarria* (3 January 1942).



indecipherable to the Spaniards. This mix of exoticism, apathy and fatalism defined them as truly savage, incapable of self-governance: ‘Russians have the soul of a bandoneon’ wrote Errando, ‘and an infantile temperament. Like children, they are naive and cruel.’ Even their sad, melancholy popular music expressed the contradictory characteristics of the Russian psyche: theirs was a ‘martyred and complex’ soul.<sup>73</sup>

According to German propaganda, the ultimate objective of the *European crusade* against Bolshevism was to banish the threat to Europe of *Russia* – a synecdoche for the Soviet state. However, Spaniards seldom gave thought to what the destiny of the Soviet people would be once liberated, albeit with a few interesting exceptions. The Falangist volunteer Manuel Bendala acknowledged the unassailable legal basis on which the Third Reich could justify the appropriation of Soviet riches. He observed that in Russia there were no ‘intangible individual rights’. There were only ‘virgin elements that in the hour of peace would be handed over to those who thanks to their weapons had carried the breath of Europe to the place where hatred had flourished’.<sup>74</sup> Russia, however, should not only be ‘subjected but also divided’: the danger lay in communist appropriation of ‘Slavic messianism’.<sup>75</sup> The Soviet regime had brought its people out of centuries of lethargy and had advanced ‘by resuscitating all the atavisms and promising that the hardy, combative peoples of the steppes could bathe in Western blood’. However, the peaceful coexistence of Russian civilians and Spanish soldiers led Bendala to conclude that it was possible to incorporate the *Russian* peoples into European civilization. How? By economic subjection, tutelage and control of their aggressive nature through a much more benign combination of colonization and protectorate than that which the German occupying authorities had planned. This coincided with some of the tenets of Alfred Rosenberg:

The interposition or establishment of strong European colonizing nuclei – as is occurring with the Dutch, Germans and Romanians – the political independence of the Baltic states, of Ukraine and White Russia, disarmament and abolition of war industries; ...intensification of agriculture, which would need little more than the re-establishment of private property, direct European intervention in the industries to be preserved and perpetual concession of the oil wells to Europe.<sup>76</sup>

This more or less friendly colonization rested on an appraisal of the Slavs as a people not yet come of age, located on the lower rung of civilization. Europe should offer them tutelage and guidance – something akin to the colonized

73 Errando Vilar, *Campaña de invierno*, 250–51; ‘Crónica fácil. Un concierto’, *Hoja de Campaña* (30 May 1943); J.L. Gómez Tello, ‘Vida y guerra en el frente del Este. Nowgorod, la ciudad blanca de los españoles’, *El Español* (6 February 1943); M.J. Urmeneta, ‘Rusia, contradictoria–Novgorod’, *Blau División*, 592 (November 2008).

74 M. Bendala, ‘Política y guerra en el mundo. La juridicidad en la guerra de Rusia’, *Juventud* (30 April 1942).

75 ‘Rusia vista desde fuera’, *Juventud* (7 May 1942).

76 M. Bendala, ‘Rusia como misión europea’, *Haz*, IV:5 (June 1943).

peoples of Asia and Africa – with no clear indication of when emancipation would occur. The narratives of Division soldiers became amplified back in Spain. Domingo Lagunilla indicated in the weekly publication *El Español* that the history of the Slavic peoples had always been fraught with ‘ignorance and fanaticism, always the same savage primitive impulse’. The psychosocial explanation affirmed that Slavs were culturally inferior because they acted on ‘intuition, routine and submission’, they believed in ‘occult powers’ and ‘visionary messianic religions’. ‘For this reason, they are mainly inert, passive, resigned beings. The same duplicity with which Stalin sought to deceive Germany and the entire West can be found in the most miserable *moujik*’.<sup>77</sup>

An article published in the *Hoja de Campaña* went so far as to construct arguments similar to the biological-genetic tenets of National Socialism. The ‘Russian masses’ lived immersed in alcoholism, crime and sexual degeneration prior to the Bolshevik revolution. According to ‘all scientific laws of inheritance’, a people with alcoholic parents could only engender ‘deficient children with abnormal tendencies’. Communism easily took root in this fertile ground but further aggravated the degenerative state of the Russian people ‘by spreading pornographic novels and nudist associations and the theory of free love’. The malignant tumour, ‘the Marxist canon that threatened to place Europe in the hands of a congenitally defective race’, had to be extirpated ‘through a moralizing and sanitary labour’.<sup>78</sup> Some even rhetorically defended extermination; letters from Spain spoke of ‘the extinction of the faecal race of humanity, the enemy of all civilisation and progress... the nation of hatred incarnate and carefully organized against God’. In ironic analogy to the conquering of Jerusalem by Crusaders in 1099, one volunteer wrote from Minsk in September of 1941 that they hoped to make an offering to the memory of Falangist leader José Antonio Primo de Rivera – killed by the Republicans five years before – by ‘passing 200,000 women, children and elderly under the knife’ as soon as Moscow fell.<sup>79</sup>

This extermination rhetoric did not represent the dominant tone in the Falangist propaganda regarding the Eastern front. The Blue Division’s trench journal recalled on 12 October 1943 that race expressed ‘a homeland based first on blood’, but ‘also on mixed blood... From intense effusions of very diverse elements, Spain had forged its perennial racial bases’. These defined the Hispanic race in terms of culture, faith and external projection. Lenin and the Jews had erased ‘whatever is noble in mankind’ from the Russian people, but the youth of the *New Europe* would re-educate them and return them to Christian faith. They envisioned Spaniards treating the Russians as the sixteenth century conquistadors had

77 D. Lagunilla, ‘Los instintos primitivos de la raza eslava’, *El Español* (6 February 1943).

78 S.M.C.: ‘La morbosidad de la Rusia soviética’, *Hoja de Campaña* (5 September 1943).

79 Letters of the *Unión Diocesana de Juventud de Acción Católica* to General Muñoz Grandes, Sigüenza, 20 November 1941 (AGMAV 1979/6/1/5), and from Private Carlos Juan, 18 September 1941.

purportedly treated American natives: offering them bread and carrying God into their homes.<sup>80</sup> This was for them Spain's real work in Russia, which transcended the more insipid images of colonial mission held by some German officials.<sup>81</sup> Few noticed that the Soviet regime relied on patriotism to mobilize the population against the invaders, opportunistically invoking the very principles that the Iberians sought to restore.<sup>82</sup>

Many Division soldiers reacted to the Russian people in a manner resembling that of their contemporaries in Africa. When Falangist writer Ernesto Giménez Caballero visited the mass graves of Katyn, he noted that the Byelorussian landscape was covered with 'nomadic camps' and the houses gave off a 'dense odour, curdled, spicy, sticky: oriental, Moorish'.<sup>83</sup> Like the indigenous peoples of Guinea or Morocco, Russians were good-natured and indolent, but with customs inappropriate for civilization. They therefore required tutelage in order to access it.<sup>84</sup> This attitude represented an adaptation of the traditionalist concept of Hispanism that had been codified by the Catholic writer Ramiro de Maeztu in 1934. He had projected Spain as a benign, civilizing empire that extended the Catholic faith and the Spanish language, by which the subjects of any race could access salvation through works. In theory, all were equal; in practice, the hierarchical Catholic order divided both classes and races into those it considered culturally advanced or backward. Accepting these hierarchies meant accepting 'the world and civilisation'. However, the black Africans, the 'masses of the Orient' and the Jews were among the permanently backward races. European treatment of these and of certain social classes should be based on 'a charity and piety that equalize everything'.<sup>85</sup>

According to the *Hoja de Campaña* and to most Spanish volunteers, Russia could be *converted*. The option of conversion was available to the Russians also, as a key to their collective salvation. This marked a significant departure from the racial worldview of the Nazis that impregnated the perceptions of a great number of Wehrmacht soldiers, but was less distant from the individual perspectives of many German Catholic combatants.<sup>86</sup> They subscribed to the mission which during the summer of 1941 several Falangist journals and officers had imagined for the armies of Europe on Soviet soil. In this, the dominant tone in Catholicism

80 'La raza', in *Hoja de Campaña* (10 October 1943); G.G.R. 'Los bolcheviques, la imprenta y la religión', *Hoja de Campaña* (14 November 1943), and 'El comunismo, interpretación materialista de la vida', *Hoja de Campaña* (21 November 1943); Gómez Tello, *Canción de invierno*, 100; P. Martínez Cruces, *La Nueva Cruzada. División Española de Voluntarios* (Madrid 1942), 110–11.

81 See 'Sangre ibérica sobre el hielo de Rusia', *Arriba* (29 July 1942). For utopias based on the German 'cultural mission' in Russia, consisting in bringing 'order' to the East, see Kipp, *Großreinemachen*, 139–46, 176–82.

82 C. Alonso del Real, 'Diálogo sobre tema ruso', *El Español* (25 September 1943).

83 E. Giménez Caballero, 'En torno a Katyn. Visión de Rusia', *El Español* (8 May 1943).

84 See G. Álvarez Chillida, 'Epígono de la Hispanidad. La españolización de la colonia de Guinea durante el primer franquismo', in S. Michonneau and X.M. Núñez Seixas (eds), *Imaginario y representaciones de España durante el franquismo* (Madrid 2014), 103–25.

85 R. de Maeztu, *Defensa de la Hispanidad* (Madrid 1941[1934]), 67–8.

86 See some examples in N. Stargardt, *Der deutsche Krieg 1939–1945* (Frankfurt am Main 2015), 207–8.

resonated with the German right wing of the 1920s, and the view of certain Nazis such as Rosenberg, who distinguished between the Russian people and its regime.<sup>87</sup> After the soldiers, 'armies of missionaries' should be sent to Russia, to 'rescue the Russian lands from Bolshevism' and 'fulfil the justice of civilisation'.<sup>88</sup> Bring back the Russians to civilization also meant to restore them to Christ. Opportunistically, some held that the re-Christianization of Russia would become a key objective of the German occupation policy. The military chaplains of the Blue Division alluded frequently to the *holy* mission of re-conquering Poland and Russia for Christianity. After 1945, the BD veterans retained that sense of mission in religious offerings: recalling the 'friend Germany' and the 'Russian we sought to redeem'.<sup>89</sup> In fact, during their time in Russia Spanish soldiers participated in local religious ceremonies, infant baptisms or even Orthodox funerals.<sup>90</sup> In this they departed decisively from the biological-genetic racism of their Nazi counterparts. Spanish fascists did not regard the Russian people as a biologically and genetically inferior *race*. In contrast with many Wehrmacht combatants, the Spaniards did not consider regeneration impossible. The Russian people were susceptible to *spiritual* redemption, mainly through the re-establishment of religion as a substantive key aspect of the authentic tradition of the country.<sup>91</sup>

The Soviet victory over Germany was mostly regarded by Spanish veterans as their own and Europe's defeat. However, the parallel uncovering of the German policy of extermination of the Jews and other peoples forced the former Spanish combatants of the Wehrmacht to keep silent for at least one decade. From 1954 on, interest in the various forms of orthodox worship and the memory of the 're-birth' of religiosity among the Russian people during Spanish occupation gave some former combatants hope that Russia would overcome communism. Certain *ex-divisionarios* even suggested the possibility of a syncretistic fusion of Catholicism and Orthodoxy that could restore Russia to Christian civilization. The Russian people had re-discovered 'their traditions, through the pain of communist persecution' with the help of the occupying forces.<sup>92</sup> The language of social hygiene gave

87 See P. Aycoberry, 'Der Bolschewik', in E. Francois and H. Schulze (eds), *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte* (Munich 2003), 455–68; B. Quinkert, 'Aufruf zur Kooperation. Die deutsche Propaganda gegenüber sowjetischen Soldaten und Zivilisten', in B. Quinkert and J. Morré (eds), *Deutsche Besetzung in der Sowjetunion 1941–1944. Vernichtungskrieg, Reaktionen, Erinnerung* (Paderborn 2014), 196–215.

88 M. Penella de Silva, 'Reconquista del espíritu', *Destino*, 209 (19 July 1941); F. Vilanova i Vila-Abadal, *La Barcelona franquista i l'Europa totalitària* (Barcelona 2005), 125–8; 'Rutas', *Haz*, 3 (15 July 1941).

89 Regarding the supposed German commitment to re-Christianize Russia, see for example F. de Bolinaga, 'La ayuda a la Religión en Rusia y la aportación de la Iglesia española', *Lucha* (20 August 1943) and V. Jiménez Malo de Molina, *De España a Rusia. 5.000 kilómetros con la División Azul* (Madrid 1943), 120; the offering of Ramón Ruiz in May of 1959, reproduced in *Hermandad*, II:3 (May–June 1958).

90 J.M. Cuenca Toribio, *Conversaciones con Alfonso Armada. El 23F* (Madrid 2001), 37–8; A. Andújar, 'Otra vez Katia', *Hoja de Campaña* (1 August 1943); 'Han matado a una niña', *Hoja de Campaña* (15 August 1943); Sánchez Carrilero, *Crónicas*, 91–3.

91 F. Torres, 'Rusos en la retaguardia', *Lucha* (15 July 1943).

92 G. Alonso del Real, 'Un sargento español ante la Virgen de Kazán', *ABC* (21 May 1955); M. Atienza Espija, 'Recuerdos de Rusia', *Hermandad*, V:17 (December 1960–January 1961).

way to a quasi-ethnographic interest in Russia. Some veterans collected popular legends and stories heard from the inhabitants of Volkhov and the Leningrad region. These stories conveyed bucolic images of a pre-revolutionary Russia full of tsars, legendary battles, religious apparitions and peasant customs.<sup>93</sup>

From 1954 on, diverse nuances appeared with regard to Russia, which differed from the overwhelmingly stereotyped and negative image of the Soviet Union which was present in the propaganda and the media of the Franco regime. Among veterans a fascination grew for 'the immense and mysterious Russia... a strange people, introspective and religious in spite of the official atheism', who somehow blended 'love and hatred, tenderness and harshness, blood and smiles'.<sup>94</sup> It became a 'kind and apathetic' country that ex-combatants 'desired to re-visit under normal circumstances'.<sup>95</sup> Russian peasants were remembered as the double victims of the Bolshevik terror and the rigours of German occupation, which the Spanish war veterans tried to keep at a distance in their minds. The anti-communist ideal of 1936–9 was reinforced by recalling the misery of Russian peasants. Some veteran officers from the Russian Front, such as Colonel Díaz de Villegas, offered training seminars for Falangist authorities on the effects of communism in Russia. He did not emphasize the pseudo-Asian apathy of the Russian people, but the evils of the communist system that destroyed families and religion. Returning prisoners in 1954 used similar terms when remembering their dealings with Soviet civilians.<sup>96</sup> However, some ex-Division members remained convinced that the Russian people could never change due to their historical experiences, their 'anthropological structure and racial composition', their messianism and their impermeability to Western values.<sup>97</sup>

Ramón Serrano Suñer, the former (and Germanophile) Minister of Foreign Affairs, emphasized in 1959 that the Spanish combatants had gone to the USSR to destroy Soviet communism but not the Russian people. Individually, they saw 'the enemies they were facing more as victims of the ideological enemy than as the living incarnation of it.' The Cold War had confirmed to them that Soviet communism was the main enemy of Western civilization, European culture and especially Christian values. It remained an adversary that held its people in misery and apathy: an image confirmed by sporadic travel narratives of former Division members who visited the USSR prior to 1989.<sup>98</sup>

93 See for example the book of short stories by F. Bendala, *Leyendas del lago Ilmen* (Madrid 1944), as well as several of the largely fantastic recreations of Russian life by Riudavets de Montes, *Estampas*.

94 M. Álvarez de Sotomayor, *Generación puente* (Madrid 1991), 160–1.

95 J. Salas Iñigo, *Aquella Rusia* (Zaragoza 1988), 93; the testimony of Vicente Benedito, in *Hermanidad*, II:4 (July–August 1958).

96 'El comandante Palacios, en la Escuela Diplomática', *ABC* (23 March 1956).

97 J. Díaz de Villegas, *Lo que vi en Rusia* (Madrid 1950); J. Díaz de Villegas, *Rusia vista por dentro* (Madrid 1951); J. Díaz de Villegas, *La División Azul en línea*, 50–7; J. García Luna, *Las cartas del sargento Basilio* (Barcelona 1959), 38–9 and 121; M. Martínez-Mena, 'Pensar y vivir de un pueblo, con el cual los divisionarios simpatizamos', *Blau División*, 56 (April 1964).

98 R. Serrano Suñer, 'Hacia un patriotismo europeo', *ABC* (29 September 1959); M. Salvador Gironés, 'Cosas de por allá', *Blau División*, 54 (February 1964); J.A. Vidal y Gadea, 'Notas de un viaje a la URSS (III y último)', *Blau División*, 197 (December 1975); V. Mas, 'Dos viajes a Rusia', *Blau División*, 537 (April 2004).

Despite the fact that Blue Division veterans had great difficulties in coming to terms with the end of the Franco Regime and the transition to democracy in Spain, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the re-unification of Germany, and the almost immediate full ‘conversion’ of Russia and the other Eastern Bloc countries reinforced this line of argument.<sup>99</sup> *We were right*, stated the title of the memoirs of an active member of the Blue Division Veteran’s Association. After the fall of communism, former *divisionarios* re-encountered the Russian people and re-affirmed their convictions of 1941–3.<sup>100</sup> The *eternal Russia* had triumphed: it was the essence of a people whom only the Spaniards had perceived thanks to their religious sensibility and absence of racial prejudice. They had gone to the front ‘to liberate Russians from communism’<sup>101</sup> and this was their ultimate victory, as a veteran expressed through the mouth of a fictitious Russian pope:

Someday, God knows when, all this will end . . . And the eternal Russia will be rebuilt, though perhaps a bit smaller, reduced to what it was at the beginning of the sixteenth century. . . . Someday, we will rebuild Russia exactly, though perhaps smaller . . . than today, but more authentic. We have an old term to designate that rebirth, that reconstruction that will someday revive: *perestroika*.<sup>102</sup>

With this, the memory of the Blue Division found closure.<sup>103</sup> The veterans felt fully vindicated regarding their decision to volunteer 50 years earlier. They distanced themselves from the main features of German occupation, but took care not to excessively criticize or condemn their former comrades-in-arms. Reluctant to admit any excesses by the German regular army, they ascribed all atrocities to the SS and other ‘political’ units. Washed in the tides of time, the Blue Division remembered itself as cleaner than the ‘clean Wehrmacht’. This perception permeated Spanish public opinion and culture; it has endured beyond the nostalgia of Francoism to the present day.

### Biographical Note

**Xosé M. Núñez Seixas** obtained his Ph.D. at EUI Florence, and is Full Professor of Modern History at the University of Santiago de Compostela (on leave) and at the Ludwig-Maximilians University of Munich. He has published widely on the

99 See the empathetic testimony of J. Castelo Villaoz, *Otra vez en Grafenwöhr* (Alicante 1991), 66.

100 J. Espinosa Poveda, *¡¡Teníamos razón!! Cuantos luchamos contra el comunismo soviético* (Madrid 1993); G. Tremlett, *Ghosts of Spain. Travels through Spain and its Silent Past* (New York, NY 2008), 59–60, reproduces similar views expressed by the President of the Blue Division Veteran’s Association at that time, Juan Chicharro-Lamamié de Clairac..

101 See declarations of Angel Salamanca in *La Vanguardia* (13 October 2004).

102 E. de la Vega Viguera, *Rusia no es culpable. Historia de la División Azul* (Madrid 1999), 33–4.

103 For more details on the post-1945 veterans’ accounts, see X.M. Núñez Seixas, “‘Russland war nicht schuldig’. Die Ostfrontenerfahrung der spanischen Blauen Division in Selbstzeugnissen und Autobiographien, 1943–2004”, in S. Förster, K. Hagemann and M. Epkenhans (eds), *Soldat und Gesellschaft. Biographien und Selbstzeugnisse in der Militärgeschichte* (Paderborn 2006), 236–67.

comparative history of nationalist movements and national and regional identities, as well as on overseas migration from Spain and Galicia to Latin America, and the cultural history of war in the twentieth century. Among his latest books are *¡Fuera el invasor! Nacionalismo y movilización bélica en la guerra civil española 1936–1939* (Madrid 2006); *Patriotas y demócratas. El discurso nacionalista español después de Franco* (Madrid 2010); with J. Moreno (ed.), *Ser españoles. Imaginarios nacionalistas en el siglo XX* (Barcelona 2013); *Ícônes littéraires et stéréotypes sociaux* (Besançon 2013), *Las utopías pendientes. Una historia del mundo desde 1945* (Barcelona 2014) and *Camarada invierno. Experiencia y memoria de la División Azul, 1941–1945* (Barcelona 2016; German edition: *Die spanische Blaue Division an der Ostfront: Zwischen Kriegserfahrung und Erinnerung*, Münster 2016).