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“Spain is fighting for us”

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“Spain is fighting for us”

Representations of the Spanish Civil War by the German left in exile

Claudia ROESCH *

In this article, the press coverage of the Spanish Civil War by four German exile papers will be studied, raising the questions why the German left in exile was so much concerned with the conflict and how they connected the events in Spain with their own situation. Using Hayden White's concept of narrative tropes, this article demonstrates how the representations of Spain shifted from a romantic narrative to a tragic narrative, thus rendering Spain, as an imagined space, from a symbol of hope to a symbol of warning and despair. The focus will be put on the exile press coverage of three events: the outbreak of the war, the bombing of Guernica and the failure of the non-intervention committee. Arguing that Spain, as a battleground of international ideologies, was always connected by the Germans in exile to their own circumstances, the article shows that the exile writers were not concerned with the events in Spain as such, nor with the international dimensions of the war. Instead, they defined the Spanish Civil War as an international arena to pursue their own goals: to beat National Socialism and return to Germany.

“Spain is fighting for us”¹ read the headline of the German Social Democratic exile paper *Neuer Vorwärts* in September 1938. This paper covered the Spanish Civil War with great interest, as did comparable exile publications by political parties or single activists of the German Left. Spain was represented as battleground of the three big ideologies of the 20th century: liberalism, fascism and communism. As will be demonstrated in the following article, these papers did not

¹ ANONYMUS, *Spanien kämpft für uns*, in *Neuer Vorwärts* 272 (04.09.1938), p. 2: all translations of German primary sources are done by the author and the original quote is given in the footnotes.

interpret the Spanish Civil War as a single event concerning the inner development of Spain, nor did they focus exclusively on the international context of the conflict. Instead, they always connected their reports of the war with their own situation as dissidents in exile.

The German exile in the 1930s consisted of members of various political groups, who had to flee Germany after the Nazis' rise to power, as well as Jewish refugees and intellectuals faced with work prohibitions. This article will focus on the publications of four groups that make up a representative sample of the various opinions among the exile publishers; those are the Social Democratic publication *Neuer Vorwärts* (NV) issued in Prague, the *Neue Front* (NF) by the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party (SAP), the Communist publication *Deutsche Volkszeitung* (DVZ) and the *Neues Tagebuch* (NTB) issued by the left liberal independent publisher Leopold Schwarzschild, the last three all appearing in Paris. While the NV and NF had their own correspondents in Spain, the DVZ relied on the communist Agit-Prop network for information and eye-witness reports and the NTB often translated and commented articles appearing in the British and French press. In the years 1936-1939, the German exile groups in Paris considered themselves the only resistance against Hitler because they had lost contact with resistance groups within the German Reich by 1935. They aimed at forming a popular front exile government in Paris in 1937, this failure has been connected to the collapse of the popular front government in Spain².

The Spanish Civil War was one of the events most covered in the German exile press, especially in the years 1936 and 1937, when the Republican side still had a chance of winning the conflict. Little interest was shown to the political situation within Spain, whereas the international reaction to the war, the International Brigades and the modernization of warfare as practiced by the German Legion Condor were major topics of the reports. This micro-study aims at analysing what narrative tropes and representations of the Spanish Civil War can be found in the coverage of the German exile press. It relies on Hayden White's theory on metahistory³ and on Roger Chartier's concept of representation, which understands representations as «internalized intellectual schemata that produce the configurations through which the present can

² The ideological differences between the communist, social democrat and troskyist exile groups cannot be covered in this article. About the connection between the failures of a common German exile government and the the May riots of Barcelona 1937, see SCHWINGHAMMER, Georg, *Im Exil zur Ohnmacht verurteilt. Deutsche Politik und Parteien in der Emigration 1933 bis 1945*, in ROMBERG, Otto R. (ed.), *Widerstand und Exil 1933-1945*, Bonn, Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, 1985, p. 251.

³ WHITE, Hayden, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1973.

take on meaning, other human beings can become intelligible and space can be deciphered»⁴.

Thus, the article wants to show how Spain, as a country in conflict, and a battleground of international ideologies, was categorized and made intelligible by the Germans in exile by relating it to their own circumstances. Using Hayden White's concept of narrative tropes, I want to demonstrate how the representations of Spain shifted from a romantic narrative to a tragic narrative, thus rendering Spain, as an imagined space, from a symbol of hope to a symbol of warning and despair. The three events, which representations in the German exile papers will be studied, are the outbreak of the war, the bombing of Guernica, turning the Basque city into a symbol of the atrocities of war in general, and the failure of the non-intervention committee.

1. The Outbreak of the War

When the military coup of July 18th 1936 caused the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, all German exile papers studied in this article took side with the Republican forces, and they all agreed that the *pronunciamiento* had been planned and initiated by Italian fascist and German National Socialist agents, even though they differed in their interpretation of the events: the NF celebrated the outbreak of the revolution among the workers of Barcelona, the other papers kept silent about the collectivisations in Catalonia and Aragón, describing the fights as a defence of liberty and democracy. The popular front government was referred to as the legally elected government⁵ and as being supported by 95% of the Spanish people⁶. The fragmentation of the Spanish population into multiple left and right-wing groups was not discussed, just as atrocities committed on the Republican side were avoided. Those misinterpretations of the Spanish conflict, whether they were due to lack of information from Spain or due to “the pressure of narrativity”⁷ in the political context, show that the exile papers were

⁴ CHARTIER, Roger, *Cultural History: Between Practises and Representations*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1988, pp.4-5.

⁵ ANONYMUS, *Die Woche*, in NTB 4.31 (01.08.1936), p. 724.

⁶ ANONYMUS, *Spanien*, in DVZ 1.20 (02.08.1936), p. 2.

⁷ See Valentine Cunningham's theory of misinterpretation in war reports with regards to Georg Orwell's *Homage to Catalunya* who explains mistakes in the report by “1) sheer forgetfulness; 2) errors in matters of ascertainable facts; 3) instances of interpretative slanting of the author; 4) the interpretative expectations or competences [...] that readers bring with them to text; 5) the logics of writing, and of text and intertext, i.e. the pressures of narrativity.”: CUNNINGHAM, Valentine, *Homage to Catalonia revisited: remembering and misremembering the Spanish Civil War*, in *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* 65, 1987/3, p. 504.

not interested in an objective coverage of the conflict, but in propagating their own political standpoints. Thus, "Spain" was not understood as a real existing battleground of an atrocious civil war, but as an imagined space in which their own political utopia was fighting an antagonistic adversary. In this narrative, the geographical realm of Spain was stripped of its connection to reality, and turned into a symbolic arena for different feelings of the German exile community. How exactly those symbolic notions of "Spain" were constructed and what connections they had to real events, shall be explored in the following paragraphs.

With the outbreak of the Civil War, all papers agreed that 'Spain' had become a cipher for hope of the German exile community⁸, as Michael Mallmann has worked out in his study about interbrigadists from the Saar region. All exile papers were convinced that the Republicans would be victorious if the two Spanish camps were left to fight the war among themselves: «Republican Spain is strong enough to fight its own fascism without any outer help», the NV declared on August 16, 1936⁹. Reports from the battlefields in summer and autumn of 1936 were always reporting victories of the Republican army and keeping silent about gains by the insurgents, as the DVZ wrote in July: «larger fights will most likely only take place in the Southwest of Spain and Marocco»¹⁰, not to mention fights in the regions around Madrid and Asturias, and the success of the coup in Navarra and Castile (*Castilla*).

While optimistic about the victory of the republican forces, the exile papers took Spain as an example of «fighting democracy»¹¹. All papers read the conflict as a fight of good democrats versus evil fascists, thus it can be interpreted by way of Hayden White's romantic trope, in which the narrative is staged in this way that a heroic embodiment of good fights evil and prevails¹². Their idea was that once the Republicans would win over Franco supported by Hitler and Mussolini in Spain, the regimes in Germany and Italy would start to crumble as well.

⁸ See MALLMANN, Klaus-Michael, "Kreuzritter des antifaschistischen Mysteriums". *Zur Erfahrungsperspektive des Spanischen Bürgerkrieges*, in GREBING, Helga, WICKERT, Christl (edd.), *Das "andere Deutschland" im Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus. Beiträge zur politischen Überwindung der nationalsozialistischen Diktatur im Exil und im Dritten Reich*, Essen, Klartext Verlag, 1994, pp. 32-55.

⁹ BROUCKÈRE, Louis de, *Reise nach Spanien*, in NV 166 (16.08.1936), p. 3: „Das Republikanische Spanien ist stark genug, allein und ohne irgendwelche Hilfe gegen seinen eigenen Faschismus zu kämpfen“.

¹⁰ ANONYMUS, *Die Helden der spanischen Volksfront*, in DVZ 1.19 (26.07.1936), p. 1: „Zu Kämpfen grösseren Umfanges wird es voraussichtlich nur noch in Südwestspanien und in Marokko kommen“.

¹¹ ANONYMUS, *Olympia mit Bürgerkriegsbegleitung*, in NV 165 (09.08.1936), p. 1; „kämpfende Demokratie“.

¹² WHITE, Hayden, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1973.

All three papers highlighted defensive characteristics of the goals of the Republican side: democracy and liberty were to be defended against an insurgence of “international fascism.”¹³ The events on Spanish soil were seen as a sign that there was no automatism that would render all European democracies into fascist states, without a popular uprising, as it had happened in Italy, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Poland and Portugal.¹⁴ Of course, the notions of liberty and democracy of liberals, socialists, and communists differed, but they highlighted in several instances that the return of liberty to Europe is what was to be fought for. The communist journal DVZ published an article supposedly written by a member of the international brigades, who later turned out to be an impostor, in which he quotes the contemporary Ernst Busch song *Spaniens Himmel* [Spanish Sky] as a motivation for fighting: “Home is far away but we are prepared to fight and die for you, liberty!”¹⁵ Even though this article turned out to be fictitious, it illustrates very well the underlying narrative of the reports published in the exile papers. Democracy and liberty were to be defended against a fascist insurgence, and the fights were interpreted in an European context as the DVZ refers to the Spanish republican army as: “the heroic defenders of the Spanish Popular Front, the spearhead of European democracy of peace and freedom.”¹⁶

The papers, with the exception of the Trotskyist NF, remained silent to a possible socialist or anarchist revolution in the Republican parts of Spain, probably in order not to alienate a bourgeois clientele, with whom they were aiming to form a popular front exile government in Paris. Instead, especially the communists did not tire to point out the union of all leftist parties in Spain, as a major advantage in the civil war, and a spark of hope for the German left. The DVZ declared already two weeks after the pronunciamiento: “The Spanish popular front is victorious. The working population lead by communists, socialists and left republicans has defeated the united fascist - monarchist counter-revolution in the most strategic spots of the country.”¹⁷ Meanwhile,

¹³ ANONYMUS, *Ein schweres Jahr*, in NV 186 (03.01.1937), p. 1: „der internationale Faschismus“.

¹⁴ See ZUR MÜHLEN, Patrik von, *Spanien war ihre Hoffnung. Deutsche Linke im Spanischen Bürgerkrieg 1936 bis 1939*, Bonn, Verlag Neue Gesellschaft, 1983, p. 38.

¹⁵ See BUSCH, Ernst (ed.), *Canciones de las Brigadas Internacionales*, Madrid, Ed. Nuestra Cultura, 1978, p. 32; ‚GERRI‘ (GINSBURG, Martin), *Tagebuch eines internationalen Brigadiers*, in DVZ 2.37 (12.09.1937), p. 5: „Die Heimat ist weit / Doch wir sind bereit / Zu Kämpfen und sterben / Für dich, Freiheit!“.

¹⁶ ANONYMUS, *Offene Kriegshilfe Hitlers für Franco*, in DVZ 1.21 (09.09.1936), p. 1: „die heroischen Vaterlandsverteidiger der spanischen Volksfront, die Vorkämpfer der europäischen Demokratie des Friedens und der Freiheit“.

¹⁷ ANONYMUS, *Spanien*, in DVZ 1.20 (02.08.1936), p. 2: „Die spanische Volksfront ist siegreich. Das von den Kommunisten, Sozialisten, Linksrepublikanern geführte werkstätige Volk hat in entscheidenden Punkten des Landes die vereinigte faschistisch-monarchische

the NV highlighted the extraordinary character of the solidarity among the several leftist groups in Spain by quoting the Italian socialist leader Pietro Nenni: «The feeling of collectiveness – whose roots are unknown to us in Spain – places victory above individual sentiments»¹⁸.

By praising the collectiveness of the Spanish working class in the face of conflict, and not mentioning Spaniards who volunteered for the nationalist forces, they established a contrast to the situation of Germany in 1933, when there had been no visible unification of workers against the rise of the NSDAP to power. This shows how all coverage of the Spanish Civil War was directly or indirectly connected to the situation of Germany. A very direct expression of that sentiment can be found in the NV:

«The German socialist, who has remained connected to the fate of his country, hears much more in the noises of the Spanish Civil War. One follows the spirit of the fighters but one remains melancholic with the question: in which shape will liberty return to Germany one day?»¹⁹

Therefore, for the German in exile who followed the Civil War and even joined the International Brigades or POUM Militias²⁰, the question of returning home to a liberal Germany remained their priority. The DVZ writes in the obituary of the first member of the German Thälmann brigade to die: “He was a worker from Duisburg whose only wish it was to march through the Brandenburg Gate”²¹. The march through the Brandenburg Gate, which is turned into a metaphor for the re-conquest of Germany, bears a high symbolic value since the Nazi victory in the election of January 30, 1933 had been celebrated by a march of Hitler’s followers through that gate.

For the individual German socialist, whose dream it was to march victoriously through the Brandenburg Gate, it was easy to turn the conflict into a romantic trope of

Konterrevolution geschlagen“.

¹⁸ NENNI, Pietro, *Die siegreiche Verteidigung in Spanien*, in NV 168 (30.08.1936), p. B1: „Das Kollektivgefühl – dessen Wurzeln in Spanien wir nicht kennen –, trägt den Sieg über das individualistische Empfinden davon“.

¹⁹ HOWALD, Andreas, *Der Selbstschutz der Freiheit*, in NV 172 (27.09.1936), p. B1: „Der deutsche Sozialist, der mit dem Schicksal seines Landes verbunden blieb, hört aus dem Getöse des spanischen Bürgerkriegs noch viel mehr. Man geht mit den Kämpfern im Geiste mit, aber man bleibt von der Frage bedrückt: in welcher Gestalt wird einmal die Freiheit für Deutschland wiederkehren?“.

²⁰ Researchers estimate that 2800 fought in the International Brigades, about 2/3 of whom had been in exile before, see ZUR MÜHLEN, Patrik von, *“Hitler kann in Spanien geschlagen werden!” Die deutsche Linke im Spanischen Bürgerkrieg*, in LEGNER, Florian (ed.), *iSolidaridad! Deutsche im Spanischen Bürgerkrieg*, Berlin, Vorwärts, 2006, p. 89.

²¹ ‚GERRI‘ (GINSBURG, Martin), *Tagebuch eines internationalen Brigadiers*, in DVZ 2.37 (12.09.1937), p. 5: „Ein Arbeiter aus Duisburg, dessen einziger Wunsch es noch war, durch das Brandenburger Tor zu kommen“.

good winning over evil and 'Spain' into symbol of hope. The unresolved questions of land distribution, the role of the army and the church, regionalism and the other internal factors²² that lead to the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, were of little importance in that perception.

2. The Bombing of Civilian Targets

However, 'Spain' did not remain a symbol of hope for long. With the nationalist troops gaining more and more ground and the German Legion Condor's bombing of civilian targets, the Spanish conflict was turned into a warning against the atrocities of modern warfare. The bombing of Guernica on April 26th, 1937 was seen as the culmination of this tactic. Nevertheless, it was not interpreted as a single event, as it was in the international press,²³ but stood in a line reports of the bombings of Madrid and Getafe in the autumn of 1936, as well as Durango in April 1937. The reports of the bombings of civilian targets differed from other reports of the Spanish Civil War in their illustrations and in the language that they used. Pictures of destroyed residential houses of Madrid²⁴ and bombs with German labels²⁵ were shown in the NV, while the popular front magazine DVZ showed photographs of the destroyed monastery in Durango with dead nuns in it²⁶, and a photograph of a dead child of the bombing of Getafe, whose face was badly injured²⁷ from files of the Soviet journalist Mikhail Koltsov.²⁸

In addition to printing cruel pictures, the language of the reports became much more emotional with use of imagery, as opposed to reports from battlefields or international negotiations. The DVZ wrote about the bombing of Guernica in the following manner:

²² See GONZÁLEZ MARTÍN, Francisco Javier, *Guerra de Ideas, Herencia, Decimonónica y Cruzada Ideológica. Las Causas de la Guerra Civil Española*, in BULLÓN DE MENDOZA, Alfonso, TOGORES, Luis Eugenio (edd.), *Revisión de la Guerra Civil Española*, Madrid, Actas Ed., 2002, pp. 913-917.

²³ MONTEATH, Peter, «Guernica Reconsidered. Fifty Years of Evidence», in *War & Society*, 5, 1987/1, p. 79.

²⁴ ANONYMUS, *Weihnachten in Madrid*, in NV 185 (27.12.1936), p. 1.

²⁵ ANONYMUS, *Zeugnisse des braunen Verbrechens*, in NV 180 (22.11.1936), p. 1.

²⁶ ANONYMUS, *Die Schreckenstage der Katholiken von Durango*, in DVZ 2.16 (18.04.1937) p. 8.

²⁷ ANONYMUS, *Eine Bombe aus Hitlerdeutschland*, in DVZ 1.37 (29.11.1936), p. 8.

²⁸ The origin of the photo of child 95-21-136, called Teodoro Fort Blanco, could be traced back with the help of STRADLING, Robert, *Your Children will be Next. Bombing and Propaganda in the Spanish Civil War 1936-1939*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2008, p. 235.

“Germans [...] are hunting the innocent with their machine guns, let them run for their lives away from their engines, 1000 horse powers strong, encircle them like violent birds of prey. Men, women, children, old men, hold on to each other, fall to their knees, plead to God, beg the attackers for their lives. But those have blood in their eyes, the iron daggers of their machine guns drill into the soft, wretched flesh, into the helpless, defenseless human bundle.”²⁹

Through the use of the past historic tense, the reader is drawn right into the actions, by repeating the label of ‘human’ for the victims and the use of lexicon such as ‘the attackers’ or ‘birds of prey’ for the insurgents, a dichotomy between humans and the fascist aggressors is established. The comparison between German and Italian troops on the Nationalist side with birds of prey was a common simile: also the NV published a caricature showing two vultures, one with a swastika and the other with a fasces dropping bombs on Spain with the subtitles: “Vultures over Spain”³⁰ The aim of those reports was to represent the troops fighting on the nationalist side as dehumanized and to represent the bombing of Guernica, not as an attack on a centre of Basque nationalism³¹, but on humanity in general.

What is also noticeable about the reports of victims of the bomb war in comparison to obituaries of deceased interbrigadists, is not the heroic act of the individual but the sheer masses of victims highlighted: even the article illustrated by a photograph of a single dead boy, does not mention the boy’s name or address, which had been included in the Koltsov files³², but the caption reads: «A bomb from Hitler’s Germany murdered this child from Madrid as well as thousand of others».³³

Those victims of the bombing were not represented as heroes in the fight for liberty, but as the innocent, by-standing masses. Therefore, the romantic narrative of the Spanish Civil War was starting to crumble.

²⁹ EXELMANN, A, *Guernica!*, in DVZ 2.19 (09.05.1937), p. 1: „Deutsche [...]jagen vor ihren Maschinengewehren hilflose Menschen her, lassen sie [...] vor ihren 1000pferdigen Motoren um ihr Leben laufen, kreisen sie gleich gewaltigen Raubvögeln ein. Männer, Frauen, Kinder, Greise klammern sich aneinander, fallen in die Knie, flehen zu Gott, bitten die Rasenden um ihr Leben....Doch denen steht das Blut vor den Augen, die stählernen Dolche ihrer MG-Salven bohren sich in das weiche erbarmungswürdige Fleisch, in das hilflose wehrlose Menschenbündel“.

³⁰ See: ANONYMUS: *Die Intervention der NSDAP in Spanien*, in NV 166 (16.08.1936), p. B1: „Aasgeier über Spanien“.

³¹ For the symbolic meaning of Guernica for the Basque people see RAENTO, Pauliina und Cameron J. WATSON, *Gernika, Guernica, Guernica? Contested meanings of a Basque place*, in *Political Geography*, 19, 2000, p. 708.

³² STRADLING, Robert, *Your Children will be Next. Bombing and Propaganda in the Spanish Civil War 1936-1939*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2008, p. 235.

³³ DWINGER, Edwin Erwin, *Dunkle Wolken über Franco*, in DVZ 1.37 (29.11.1936), p. 8: „Eine Bombe aus Hitlerdeutschland mordete auch dieses Madrider Kind wie tausend andere“.

The exile papers all interpreted the bombing of Guernica as being aimed at civilian targets. Speculations that the Legion Condor had aimed at military targets near the city, but had missed due to fogs, were not found in the papers. All exile groups were outraged about the bombing of civilian targets, with the exception of the radical SAP, who in context of their revolutionary reading of the events saw the participation of women in the fighting militias as a proof that the Spanish Civil War was a true people's war.

The assaults on civilians were read in the context of the strategy of Total War, which had been popularized in Germany by Erich Ludendorff in 1935. Even though historian Roger Chickering has pointed out, that due to outdated tactics and the lack of modern weapons, the Spanish conflict cannot be interpreted as a version of Total War³⁴, but the characteristic that made the Spanish Civil War a Total War for the exile papers was the aiming at civilian targets during the bombardements. Accordingly, the NTB documented a bombing of Madrid in May 1937: «Almost exclusively civilian passer-bys, women and children, were hit by Franco's grenades. One can't deny that this strategy corresponds to the demands of 'Total War' as it is taught by Germany's and Italy's experts»³⁵.

For all exile papers, it was clear from the very beginning that it was the German Wehrmacht who had bombed the city of Guernica, despite speculations that the city had been put on fire by withdrawing Republican forces. With news of those acts of atrocities, the Germans in exile expressed a feeling of guilt for being German: «What a disgrace for every German! What a degrading shame for Germany!»³⁶

Nevertheless, they pointed out that it was not the average German who was to blame for the atrocities, as the NV declares: «This war of intervention is truly not a war of the German people»³⁷. The paper also emphasises that the German social democrats are not to be connected with the insurgents: «We, our friends, our comrades and like-minded people in Germany have nothing to do with those crimes and criminals. We are the enemies of a system, from whose beastliness the world and the German people have

³⁴ CHICKERING, Roger, *The Spanish Civil War in the Age of Total War*, in BAUMEISTER Martin, SCHÜLER-SPINGORUM, Stefanie (edd.), „If you tolerate this...“ *The Spanish Civil War in the Age of Total War*, Frankfurt am Main - New York, Campus 2008, p. 39.

³⁵ ANONYMUS, *Die Woche*, in NTB 5.18 (02.05.1937), p. 412: „Von Francos Granaten wurden so gut wie ausschliesslich zivile Strassenpassanten, Frauen und Kinder zerfetzt. Es lässt sich nicht leugnen, dass diese Kampftaktik den Ansprüchen des ‚totalen Krieges‘ entspricht, wie er von Fachleuten Deutschlands und Italiens gelehrt wird“.

³⁶ EXELMANN, A., *Guernica!*, in DVZ 2.19 (09.05.1937), p. 1: „Welche Schmach für jeden Deutschen! Welch entehrende Schande für Deutschland!“.

³⁷ ANONYMUS, *Die Anklage*, in NV 207 (30.05.1937), p. 1: „dieser Interventionskrieg ist wahrhaftig kein deutscher Volkskrieg“.

to be liberated»³⁸. The DVZ even went a step further to point out that Total War was a characteristic of fascism in general and not a strategy of the Germans: «Let's shout it in all the world, let's say it in thousand tongues, write it with thousand hands: It is not Germany, not its people, it is fascism and it is criminal in the same way in each country»³⁹.

Since the strategy of Total War and the bombing of civilian targets having been depicted as a major characteristic of fascism, the bombing of Guernica in specific and the Spanish Civil War in general was turned into a symbol of the atrocities of war and the dangers of fascism. The emotional coverage of the attacks on civilians appeared as a "propaganda gift"⁴⁰, as Ian Pattenson calls it, since headlines of those articles read: «Humans, the children of Spain beg for your help!»⁴¹ Those article echoed the headlines of famous propaganda posters that were found in the exile centres of London and Paris, reading: «If you tolerate this, then your children will be next»⁴², or «What are you doing to prevent this / Que fais-tu pour empêcher cela?»⁴³. On the one hand, the articles spoke to the German exile community to either join the international brigades or give donations for the Republican side. On the other hand, they were also meant as an appellation to the French and British government to actively get involved in the Spanish conflict in order to stop the killing of civilians and the spread of fascism.

4. The Politics of Non-Intervention

The Germans in exile strongly disagreed with the French and British policy of non-intervention and regarded the Non-Intervention Committee, (which also included the overtly intervening nations of Germany, Italy and the Soviet Union), as a «fiction»⁴⁴,

³⁸ ANONYMUS, *Die Anklage gegen Hitlerdeutschland – Das Dritte Reich und der spanische Krieg*, in NV 204 (09.05.1937), p. 1: „Mit diesem Verbrechen und den Verbrechern haben wir, haben unsere Freunde, Mitkämpfer und Gesinnungsgenossen in Deutschland nichts gemein. Wir sind die Todfeinde des Systems, von dessen Bestialität die Welt und das deutsche Volk befreit werden müssen“.

³⁹ EXELMANN, A., *Guernica!*, in DVZ 2.19 (09.05.1937), p. 1: „Rufen wir es in alle Welt hinaus, lasst es uns mit tausend Zungen sagen, mit tausend Händen schreiben: Es ist nicht Deutschland, nicht sein Volk, es ist der Faschismus und er ist in allen Ländern gleich verbrecherisch“.

⁴⁰ PATTERSON, Ian, *Guernica and total war*, London, Profile Books, 2007, p. 15.

⁴¹ ANONYMUS, *Menschen, die Kinder Spaniens flehen um eure Hilfe*, in DVZ 2.22 (30.05.1937), p. 8.

⁴² See TRADLING, Robert, *Your Children will be Next. Bombing and Propaganda in the Spanish Civil War 1936-1939*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2008, p. 3.

⁴³ See BAUMEISTER Martin und Stefanie SCHÜLER-SPINGORUM (edd.), *„If you tolerate this...“ The Spanish Civil War in the Age of Total War*, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Campus 2008, p. 10.

⁴⁴ ANONYMUS, *Die Woche*, in NTB 5.41 (09.10.1937), pp. 963-964.

«treason of Spain – treason of the European democracy»⁴⁵ or «policy of surrender to Hitler»⁴⁶. For all the writers, it was obvious that the non-intervention policy was not fully implemented on the Nationalist side and that this policy meant a huge disadvantage to the Republican forces. Especially, the loss of Asturias to the Republican side was interpreted in the exile press as being caused by the one sided non-support of the Republican troops by the Western democracies. «The Asturians were much more dependent on international aid than the rest of Spain»⁴⁷, the DVZ declared the NV was connected to the fall of Gijón to the international diplomacies in the following way:

In connection to the continuing crisis of the non-intervention policy the military events of Spain demand more attention. The army of General Franco has conquered Gijón und despite their bravery, the desperate resistance of the Asturian mine workers, who were badly equipped with ammunition and supplies in the mountains of Oviedo, has come to an end.⁴⁸

The conquest of Asturias held a special significance for the leftist activists, as this industrialized province had always been considered the stronghold of the left in Spain since General Franco's troops had put down their rebellion in October 1934.⁴⁹ Because of that history, the loss of Asturias for the Republican side highlighted the desperate situation of the Republic, since the province had been won by the Nationalists, due to the heavy German and Italian support. The tone of coverage shifted from optimism for a Republican victory, to pessimism and a desperate call for international help. In their writings, the exile commentator specially pointed out what a Nationalist victory would mean for the security of France: the NV published a caricature called «the new march»⁵⁰, showing a German and an Italian soldier crossing the Pyrenees from Spain

⁴⁵ ANONYMUS, *Der Verrat an Spanien*, in NV 255 (08.05.1938), p. 1.

⁴⁶ ANONYMUS, *London und die deutschen Friedensfreunde*, in DVZ 2.29 (18.07.1937), p. 1.

⁴⁷ ANONYMUS, *Von Annemasse bis Gijon*, in DVZ 3.44 (31.10.1937), p. 8: „Die Asturier waren [...] in noch viel stärkerem Masse [sic] auf die internationale Hilfe angewiesen als das übrige Spanien“.

⁴⁸ KERN, Richard (HILFERDING, Rudolf), *Das Spiel um den Frieden*, in NV 229 (31.10.1937), p. 1: „Im Zusammenhang mit der Fortdauer der Krise der Nicht-Interventionspolitik erheischen die militärischen Ereignisse in Spanien selbst erhöhte Aufmerksamkeit. Die Armee des General Franco hat Gijon erobert und der verzweifelte Widerstand der mit Munition und Material schlecht ausgerüsteten asturischen Bergarbeitern in den Bergen von Oviedo ist trotz ihrer Tapferkeit zu Ende“.

⁴⁹ See BERNECKER, Walter L., *Krieg in Spanien 1936-1939*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1991, p. 16.

⁵⁰ GEYER, Curt, *Wie die Achse wurde*, in NV 246 (06.03.1938), p. B2: „Der neue Marsch“.

into France with an airplane dropping bombs on the Eiffel Tower, the headline reading: «How the axis came into being – the destruction of security in Europe»⁵¹.

As mentioned above, fascism had been characterized as an expansionist regime, with the assumption that once all of Spain had been conquered by the Nationalist forces, it was presumed that France would be the next country to be attacked. Of course, since most of the German exile papers were published in Paris, this also related to the own personal security of the publishers.

While the narrative had shifted towards pessimism in the autumn of 1937, it turned into a tragic trope by 1938: by that time, not only the events on the battlefields of Spain marked the turning point, but the international context of European diplomacy. When in September 1938, the Munich Agreement between Hitler, Neville Chamberlain and Édouard Daladier was signed, it had also significant consequences for the Spanish conflict, as historian Enrique Moradiellos explains: “El desenlace de la crisis germano-checa a finales de septiembre de 1938 fue una auténtica sentencia de muerte irrevocable para la República y para la política de resistencia preconizada por el doctor Negrín.”⁵²

This connection between events involving Czechoslovakia and the Spanish Civil War was established by the NV in February 1939, when Britain and France recognized Franco as the official head of state: “The fate of the Spanish republic has been sealed in Munich [...] just like Czechoslovakia in 1938, they are writing off Spain now”⁵³ Also the NTB notes: “The Spanish democracy is condemned to suffer the same fate as the Czechoslovakian.”⁵⁴ Meanwhile, the DVZ again drew an analogy to the desperate struggle of the German exile to defeat National Socialism. In an article, which refers to the recognition of Franco as the Spanish head of state by Britain and France as “the new treason of the Munich group to the Spanish people's fight for independence”⁵⁵, the commentator writes:

For the German people, a victory of Hitler and Mussolini over the Spanish republic would mean the danger of being drawn into a war on Mussolini's side against France [...] Thus,

⁵¹ *Ibidem.*

⁵² MORADIELLOS, *Enrique, El reñidero de Europa. Las dimensiones internacionales de la guerra civil española*, Barcelona, Ed. Península, 2001, p. 231.

⁵³ ANONYMUS, *Das Spiel um Spanien*, in NV 296 (19.02.1939), p. 1: „Das Schicksal der spanischen Republik ist in München besiegelt worden [...] So wie im September 1938 die Tschechoslovakei [sic], so schreiben sie jetzt Spanien ab“.

⁵⁴ ANONYMUS, *Die Woche*, in NTB 7.8 (18.02.1939), p. 171: „Die spanische Demokratie ist jetzt verurteilt, das Schicksal der tschechoslowakischen zu erleiden“.

⁵⁵ ANONYMUS, *Madrid: Helden und Verräter*, in DVZ 4.12 (19.03.1939), p. 3: „[d]er neue Verrat der Münchener am Unabhängigkeitskampf des spanischen Volkes“.

the fight of the defence of the Spanish Republic is also a fight about the fate of the German people.⁵⁶

The non-intervention policy was interpreted by the exile papers as a blue-print «that in today's Europe a fascist is allowed to do anything»⁵⁷, meaning that another fascist expansion was expected to follow. The policy of the non-intervention committee had shown the Germans in exile that the Western Democracies were not interested in protecting a democratically elected government against fascist insurgents. Thus, they could draw the conclusion that in case of a German civil war of leftist groups against the National Socialists, they would not receive any support by the Western powers. Since autumn 1937 Spain had been turned into a symbol of delusion concerning the Western support for antifascist powers in Europe. The examples of Spain and Czechoslovakia made it clear to the German exile that Britain and France were more concerned with appeasement, than with the containment of fascism, and it became obvious to them that they were isolated in their resistance against the Nazi regime. Thus, the non-intervention policy not only meant a loss of hope for a Republican victory in Spain, but also a loss of hope to return home to Germany. Therefore, narrative of the Spanish Civil War became a narrative of tragedy, in which a permanent «state of division among men»⁵⁸, and a «resignation of men to their nature»⁵⁹ could not be overcome. At the same time, the German exile community gave up their attempts to unite and influence the French government to get involved in the fight against fascism, and instead withdrew into inner resignation.

5. Conclusion

As those three examples of the coverage of the Spanish Civil War in the German exile press show, the conflict had always been interpreted in a self-referential manner: the outbreak of the war became a ray of hope for the German dissidents, as it showed them that there was no automatism of European countries becoming fascist states, but

⁵⁶ ANONYMUS, *Madrid: Helden und Verräter*, in DVZ 4.12 (19.03.1939), p. 3: „Für das deutsche Volk würde der Sieg Hitlers und Mussolinis über die spanische Republik die Steigerung der Gefahr des Hineinreissens in den Krieg an Seite [sic] Mussolinis gegen Frankreich bedeuten [...] So geht es im Verteidigungskampf der spanischen Republik auch um das Schicksal des deutschen Volkes“.

⁵⁷ ANONYMUS, *Wildwest im Westmittelmeer*, in NV 219 (22.08.1937), p. 1: „dass im heutigen Europa alles erlaubt ist, wenn man Faschist ist“.

⁵⁸ WHITE, Hayden, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1973, p. 12.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*.

a chance of a popular front winning against nationalist insurgents. The bombing of Guernica was interpreted as an attack of international fascism against humanity in general, and served as a warning to the Western democracies of the atrocities of Total War. The failure of the non-intervention policy in connection to the Munich Agreement meant for the German exile community the vanishing of all hopes of international support and a return home to a liberated Germany. It became obvious to them that the idea of an international common front against fascism had been an illusion.

The representations of the actors within the Spanish Civil War show a classification of the world into three groups: the international fascist conspiracy that was making up the nationalist side in the conflict, the „fighting democracy“ which included the Spanish Popular Front and the German exile, as well as the Western powers committing “treason to democracy and liberty”. Since stratifications within the Republican camp and internal reasons for the outbreak of the war were ignored by the exile press due to «pressures of narrativity»⁶⁰, the coverage of the conflict was first turned into a romantic narrative of good prevailing over evil, which started to fall apart with the assault on civilian targets, and later became a tragic narrative of resignation of men to their nature⁶¹. It mentioned internal issues of Spain and the events taking place on the battlefields only as long as they fitted into this narrative. Thus, 'Spain' was rendered from a real geographical space where an atrocious civil war was taken place, to an imaginary landscape and utopian battlefield of ideologies. 'Spain' became a symbol of hope, of atrocities, and later of despair for the German exile community. In their reports, the exile writers were not concerned with the events in Spain as such, nor with the international dimensions of the war, but they saw the Spanish Civil War as an international arena to pursue their national goals: to beat National Socialism in Germany. They hoped to return home to Germany via Spain and when this route was blocked by the nationalist victories and the international non-intervention, their hope to achieve their main goal was shattered. Therefore, “Spain” shifted from a cipher of hope to a tragic narrative of despair.

* The Author

⁶⁰ CUNNINGHAM, Valentine; *Homage to Catalonia revisited: remembering and misremembering the Spanish Civil War*, in *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* 65, 1987/3, p. 504.

⁶¹ WHITE, Hayden, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1973, p. 12.

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