

## Chapter 8

# 'If my pen was as good as your pistol': The Acquisition and Uses of Writing on the Republican Fronts during the Spanish Civil War

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### The rifle and the pen

From the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War following the military uprising of July 1936, the republican government was convinced that battlefields, barracks, places of rest and recreation for the troops, and field hospitals were all sites where education and culture should be present. Fighting illiteracy in the army and raising the political consciousness of soldiers became two symbolic bastions of the republican armed struggle. Education and culture, seen as additional weapons in the fight against fascism, would transform the soldier into an active and intelligent protagonist. The provision of this combative form of education was entrusted to the so-called Cultural Militias, set up by a decree of the Ministry for Public Education on 30 January 1937.

According to the first clause of this decree, the Cultural Militias would appoint a 'body of teachers and instructors whose duty it is to provide basic education to those troops who need it, as far as the pressures of war permit, and in places dedicated to this purpose, taking advantage of the troops' moments of relaxation'. The Cultural Militias aimed to teach reading and writing to illiterate soldiers, to offer general instruction to the troops who already knew the rudiments of reading and writing, and to train future army officers. Together with these eminently pedagogical aims, the other axis on which their activities were based was the task of political training. The Cultural Militias were subject to the Ministry for Public Education, on which they depended for their jobs and salaries; nevertheless, at the front they had to respect military discipline and obey the orders of the officers in the units to which they were assigned. As a result, it is not surprising that they ended

up as part of a hierarchical structure, taking their place in the hierarchy according to their activities and their units (general inspectors, inspectors at the front, Divisional, Brigade and Battalion Cultural Militiamen, and so on).

The Cultural Militiamen assigned to a battalion depended on the number of illiterates in it. There were not always enough teachers in the battalions to meet the heavy demand for literacy skills in the Popular Army. This problem is clear from the notes which Ramón Costa made in his campaign diary, now preserved in the General Archives of the Civil War in Salamanca. His manuscript of 25 pages, measuring 21.4 cm × 15.4 cm, is grammatically correct, with good spelling and written in a clear hand. The diary records his activities in the Cultural Militias of the 18<sup>th</sup> Army Corps, as inspector at the front for the Army of the Centre during August and September 1937. It also includes comments on his personal and intimate life including the death of his mother. In these pages he meticulously notes the work done to date in each unit (courses, lectures, workshops, discussion meetings, libraries, poster-journals,<sup>1</sup> classes, and so on). He provides a brief professional biography for each member of the Cultural Militia working in these units, emphasising their professional ability to carry out the tasks entrusted to them, the material necessities available (such as reading primers, notebooks, pencils, boxes of chalk, rolls of butcher-paper, wall-charts and furniture) and the suitability or otherwise of the places they were given to work in.

The schools had to be set up in places of rest, in field hospitals and even in forward positions, but the work performed in them could not be identical. Whereas in the former it was possible to spend the whole day in cultural and pedagogical activities, at the front this might be impossible for entire days at a stretch, so that every moment was precious. They could not expect to have a fixed and stable classroom, but worked in any reasonably safe corner under cover from enemy fire, where the militiaman could gather together two, four or six soldiers, or as many as were there, to continue his teaching work. Miguel Núñez, a commerce student and a member of United Socialist Youth (JSU), participated in the civil war as an auxiliary to the Cultural Militia when only 16 years old. In an interview he gave Ronald Fraser he recounted that 'classes were given when and where possible, usually in the mornings and in the rough shelters put up by the men'.<sup>2</sup> Each

1 Newspapers posted on the wall for group reading.

2 Ronald Fraser, *Blood of Spain: The Experience of Civil War, 1936-1939*, Harmondsworth UK (Penguin), 1981, pp. 291-3.

time the unit moved, the equipment had to be left behind, and everyone had to lend a hand to set the school up again: '[Some] One found a pair of chairs, another a bit of chalk, another a piece of wood that would serve as a bench, or a bit of blackboard [...].'

The actual functions of the Cultural Militia were outlined in special regulations and circulars issued in the first months of 1937. The inspectors at the front were responsible for making sure that the army officers made it 'compulsory to attend classes, especially for the illiterate'. The battalion militiamen were responsible for organising the classes for individuals or groups, 'as they saw fit taking into account the battalion's situation and the circumstances of the war'.<sup>3</sup> Their teaching work consisted not only of giving first lessons in reading and writing, but also of organising short courses, discussions and lectures, promoting poetry and story competitions, putting on plays, broadcasting messages to the enemy via loudspeakers, helping to create a space for cultural activities and the soldiers' quarters, collaborating in writing trench journals, supervising the library if one existed, and creating poster-journals together with the soldiers. A member of the militia was also responsible for choosing the place where these cultural activities were to proceed. It should be calm, welcoming and preferably at a distance from the combat zone, so that it could be 'at once a school, and a place of recreation and good cheer', 'a centre of work and a place of rest after the fatigue of the campaign'.<sup>4</sup> The school had to be in good condition, well-equipped and decorated. For this purpose maps of Spain and Europe were published, and more than 20,000 exercise books were distributed to the armies, together with 4,000 metres of butcher-paper, and great quantities of pencils, notepads and pen-cases.<sup>5</sup>

- 3 *Circular Letter n° 2 of the General Inspector of the Cultural Militias*, in Christopher H. Cobb, *Los Milicianos de la Cultura*, Bilbao (Universidad del País Vasco), 1995, pp. 178–80; *Armas y Letras*, n° 1, 1st August 1937, in Christopher H. Cobb, *La Cultura y el pueblo. España, 1930–1939*, Barcelona (Laia), 1981, p. 428.
- 4 *Circular n° 5, Cultural Militias, Press and Propaganda Section*, Valencia, 22 June 1937, General Archives of the Civil War in Salamanca (Spain), P.S. Aragón, series R, box 50, correspondence of 145<sup>th</sup> Mixed Brigade.
- 5 *L'effort culturel du peuple espagnol en armes*, Paris (Ministerio de Instrucción Pública de la República Española), 1937, p. 14.

Meanwhile, the instruction given was supposed to be neither 'dry nor difficult', and based on the following method:

The teacher will write a word on the paper and tell his students to copy it. They will do so and once this first exercise is completed, they will go back and copy it letter by letter according to the instructions of the teacher, who will repeat the name of each letter over again. The work can be made more enjoyable by choosing words which are going to be useful in a military context, and by adding some explanatory comments. Thus if the word selected is *ant*, the militiaman might speak about the habits of these insects, the kind of life they live, how they organise themselves, etc. In this way a few minutes will pass. Then using the same subject-matter, they should make up a sentence, for example: ants help each other, which the students will again write out, repeating the previous process. And [the teacher should continue] in this way, with a series of words, phrases or sentences, remembering that it will always be preferable to use words with a revolutionary or moral content which help to give some human and political meaning, as well as a cultural one, for our combatants.<sup>6</sup>

This method is exactly the one laid out in the *Antifascist School Book* (*Cartilla Escolar Antifascista*), an essential tool for the work performed by the Cultural Militias at the fronts. It was published by the Ministry for Public Education to fulfil its mission of assisting the campaign for literacy. The preface demonstrated how the cultural struggle was closely identified with the struggle against fascism:

The cultural struggle of the Spanish people, whom the forces of reaction have kept in a state of ignorance and illiteracy, is inseparably linked to the ideological and political struggle against fascism. The Spanish people are taking up arms to uproot fascism. Teachers and all cultural workers must pay homage to their example, and they too must uproot fascism with books and the pen.<sup>7</sup>

The *Antifascist School Book* had a first print run of 150,000 copies, which was clearly insufficient for the rapid expansion of education at the fronts.<sup>8</sup> In it 'every lesson began with a sentence, which was then analysed and broken down into syllables and letters', before being used again to formulate new words and phrases. The specific examples used ranged from those

6 *Circular n° 5, Cultural Militias*, pp. 1–2.

7 *Cartilla Escolar Antifascista*, Valencia (Ministerio de Instrucción Pública), 1937.

8 Cobb, *Milicianos de la Cultura*, pp. 56–7 and 82.

which carried explicit propaganda for the Republic, its institutions and political policies, to those aimed at raising the morale of the army engaged in the heroic struggle against fascism. This book was complemented by the Ministry of Public Education's *Antifascist Arithmetic Book*, also drawn up by Mauricio Amster, which illustrated mathematical exercises with military examples: 'ADDING cartridge to cartridge we make a box of cartridges; WE ADD together our own forces against fascism and we will be invincible.'

We can measure the effectiveness of the struggle against illiteracy waged by the Cultural Militia by considering the statistics which testify to their legacy: they managed to create some 2,047 schools, which employed 2,200 teachers giving classes to about 200,000 soldiers, thus succeeding in teaching basic literacy to 150,000 republican soldiers. According to Augusto Vidal, over 1,000 schools were established in August 1937 alone, in which around 95,000 illiterates received instruction, with the result that a little over 13,000 learned to read and write in the course of the month.<sup>9</sup>

## Books for the front!

Schoolbooks were not the only kind of literature available to republican soldiers at the front. As well as the activities described above, the republican government tried to achieve two other objectives: to cater to the reading needs of the troops and to develop their literacy by making available various works of advice, general culture and entertainment. Popular Culture, a popular front organisation, had appeared in the elections of February 1936, although its real work of cultural dissemination took place in the war years. It employed a Library Section through which soldiers and the wounded could, without charge, borrow books, magazines and newspapers to occupy their leisure time and raise their consciousness. In Catalonia, this work was carried out by the Service of Libraries for the Front, subordinate to the Provincial Propaganda Office (Comisariado de Propaganda de la Generalitat), established on 5 October 1936. Its famous bibliobus, launched in May

9 Augusto Vidal, 'La lucha por la cultura en España. Informe del Camarada Vidal del Secretariado de la ITE', *El Magisterio Español*, n° 6774, 12 January 1938, p. 39.

1938, carried books to the front lines. The bibliobus delivered 2,191 volumes, 750 propaganda leaflets and various magazines.<sup>10</sup>

Popular Culture set up book depositories in Madrid and Valencia, from whence batches of about 120 books were circulated to the fronts, hospitals and soldiers' lodgings. These packets of books were supported by donations from the Ministry for Public Education, money collected from homes abandoned in the war zone, and donations from publishers, booksellers and individuals. Later the soldier-readers contributed to the diffusion of literature at the fronts by paying a subscription and holding fund-raising book parties which collected new subscriptions in the form of money as well as books for the army. The support of the press was fundamental in this cause, because newspapers would publish various announcements calling on all to assist in the struggle against illiteracy by sending second-hand books and magazines to the front:

Citizen: if you read magazines, when you have finished with them put them in the boxes for Popular Culture. For you this is a very small sacrifice; for us it means we can give the soldiers and the wounded some pleasure in their hours of rest.<sup>11</sup>

The content of the book parcels varied from place to place, depending on the library which was set up there and the nature of the reading public it served. Sometimes, books were sent in response to specific requests. On 28 April 1938, for instance, the Office of the 35<sup>th</sup> Division of the 5<sup>th</sup> Army Corps asked for books which contained: 'something to pass the time (novels), social content (essays and arguments), a scientific character (scientific popularisation), a cultural message (to support the work of the Cultural Militias) and works of a military character (tactics and topography)'.<sup>12</sup> Sometimes, the packets sent were all the same, and other material was added to

10 Nuria Ventura, 'En Cataluña: las bibliotecas como instrumento de libertad', in *Biblioteca en guerra* (catalogue of the exhibition at the National Library in Madrid, November 2005–February 2006), Madrid (Biblioteca Nacional), 2005, p. 358.

11 Juan Manuel Fernández Soria, *Educación y cultura en la Guerra Civil, 1936–1939*, Valencia (Nau Llibres), 1984, p. 59.

12 María C. Cugueró, María Teresa Boada & Vicenç Allu, *El Servei de Biblioteques del Front, 1936–1939*, Barcelona (Diputació de Barcelona), 1985, p. 76.

the books if it was urgently needed at the front, as outlined in the article written in August 1937 by Palerm Vich, inspector at the front, for the journal *Arms and Letters* (*Armas y Letras*), a mouthpiece of the Cultural Militia: 'In Barcelona some suitcases were made up for the trenches, which might take perhaps twenty books, inkwells, pens, pencils, paper and envelopes and military postcards.'<sup>13</sup>

Libraries were often set up in schools in underground dugouts in well-established fronts, or in houses near the trenches, and were entrusted to members of the Cultural Militia who used them for their intellectual work and teaching preparation. In *The Route* (*Ruta*), J. Delso de Miguel outlines the use soldiers made of libraries at the front:

Two large parallel tables with room for 20 comrades at each. A chest of drawers which filled the entire back wall of the cave and in it, volumes and more volumes, books and more books, pamphlets, magazines, newspapers. The angled ceiling, like an extension of the walls, was covered in posters which, arranged symmetrically from left to right, seemed like a procession of ideas which made the blood in our veins boil up with emotion. Sitting at the left-hand table, comrades silently read the paper or the book they hadn't finished yesterday [...]. In the corner at the end of the other table, comrades write to their mother, their girlfriend, to our paper, shaping their impressions, their deepest feelings on the page. And lastly, taking advantage of the remaining table space, three comrades with willpower and determination are interpreting and repeating the reading primer without interruption to ten or twelve others, until they learn off by heart the form and content of what they are being taught.<sup>14</sup>

To give an idea of the enormous work carried out by the library service of Popular Culture, one need only point out that in its first year of operation, up to March 1937, a total of 789 libraries were supplied at the fronts, in barracks, in hospitals and in soldiers' lodgings. The delivery of books, magazines and newspapers to the fronts was essential to support the campaign for literacy undertaken by the Republican Army. Moreover, it provided an incentive to read and encouraged soldiers to take an interest in books. They filled the soldiers' free time, kept them company in the loneli-

13 Palerm Vich, 'La cultura en los frentes', *Armas y Letras*, no. 1, 1 August 1937, in Cobb, *La cultura y el pueblo*, p. 431.

14 J. Delso de Miguel, 'Labor cultural de las Juventudes libertarias de los frentes', *Ruta*, n° 30, 14 May 1937, in *Biblioteca en guerra*, p. 327.

ness of the trenches, and helped to lift their morale and distract them in their quiet but stressful moments. And then there was the therapeutic role which reading played for the wounded, the beneficial results of which had been proved by American experiences in the First World War and demonstrated in many 'bibliotherapy' studies carried out in hospitals by British library specialists.<sup>15</sup>

### The notebooks of the 145<sup>th</sup> Mixed Brigade

The learning process took the form of a variety of exercises and scholastic activities corresponding to different levels of instruction, and determined by the knowledge that each soldier brought to the classes offered by the cultural militiamen which he attended in his battalion or unit. As in today's schools, the main instrument for learning and perfecting one's first words was the school exercise book. Thousands of these were distributed free of charge at the fronts to soldiers who wanted to participate in the literacy campaign. They clearly reflect the way the soldiers drove themselves to learn, and sought to realise their desire to escape from ignorance and understand their role in the war. In appreciating the importance of exercise books in republican schools at the front, we do not need to rely exclusively on allusions in circulars from the General Inspector of the Cultural Militia, the lists of school materials sent to the soldiers, and military bulletins and newspapers. Fortunately we also have some original examples of exercise books preserved in the General Archives of the Spanish Civil War in Salamanca.<sup>16</sup> These books were used in January and February 1938 and belonged to various soldiers of the 145<sup>th</sup> Mixed Brigade of the Popular Army: Ramón Barranco Valencia, Juan Salvador and Pablo Garí Camps, and José Cortés Sala. As well as these exercise books we have a large in-octavo notebook, with a black oilskin cover, belonging to Ezequiel Jané, in which only the first page has been used. It contains a request for materials, which makes one suspect that the owner was either one of the teachers serving in the 145<sup>th</sup> Mixed Brigade, or a soldier

15 Ventura, 'En Cataluña', pp. 354–5.

16 General Archives of the Civil War in Salamanca (Spain), P.S. Aragón, series R, box 50, correspondence of 145<sup>th</sup> Mixed Brigade.



who was given this work. But there can be no doubt that the request is for materials for the school attached to this Brigade:

School material needed: Covering for 4 blackboards, ~~writing pads~~, pencils both lead and coloured, pens, notebooks, antifascist school books, material (underneath) cardboard for the wall-journal, textbooks for preparing lessons, erasers, handwriting exercise books (underlining in the original).

We know very little of the three authors of the exercise books in question, and even this comes from the information they themselves provide. For José Cortés Sala, in fact, we have no data, and he leaves no personal trace in the few lessons he did. For Juan Salvador and Pablo Garí all we know is that they shared an exercise book, as the following note on page four indicates: 'Finished by Pedro Garí and started by Juan Salvador.' Handwriting analysis confirms this, given the difference between the lessons done up to that point and the ones that follow, completed in very different hands. While the first four pages of the exercise book reveal a cursive script produced in very clear and well-ordered handwriting, the following pages are written less neatly and the composition is not as attractive. We have most information about Ramón Barranco Valencia, whose notebook is the richest in terms of length and content. Thanks to one of the lessons he did, namely drawing up a job application letter, we know that Ramón Barranco was then 26 years old, was born in La Carolina (Jaén), lived in Barcelona, was called up in 1933 and enlisted in the Popular Army on 3 July 1937. He was in the Machine-gun Company of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of the 145<sup>th</sup> Brigade, in the 44<sup>th</sup> Division, and served in the Cultural Militia from 22 September 1937 to 26 January 1938.

The exercise books are ruled, in large in-quarto format, and belong to the category of *ad hoc* exercise books – those purpose-made by printers and booksellers specialising in scholastic materials.<sup>17</sup> Two of the books

17 María del Mar del Pozo Andrés & Sara Ramos Zamora, 'El cuaderno de clase como instrumento de acreditación de saberes escolares y control de la labor docente', in *La acreditación de saberes y competencias: Perspectiva histórica. XI Coloquio Nacional de Historia de la Educación*, Oviedo (Universidad de Oviedo – Sociedad Española de Historia de la Educación), 2001, pp. 481–501; and 'Los cuadernos de clase como representaciones simbólicas de la cultura escrita escolar', in Alfredo Jiménez Eguizábal et al., *Etnohistoria de la escuela. XII Coloquio Nacional de Historia de la Educación*, Burgos (Universidad de Burgos-Sociedad Española de Historia de la Educación), 2003, pp. 653–664.

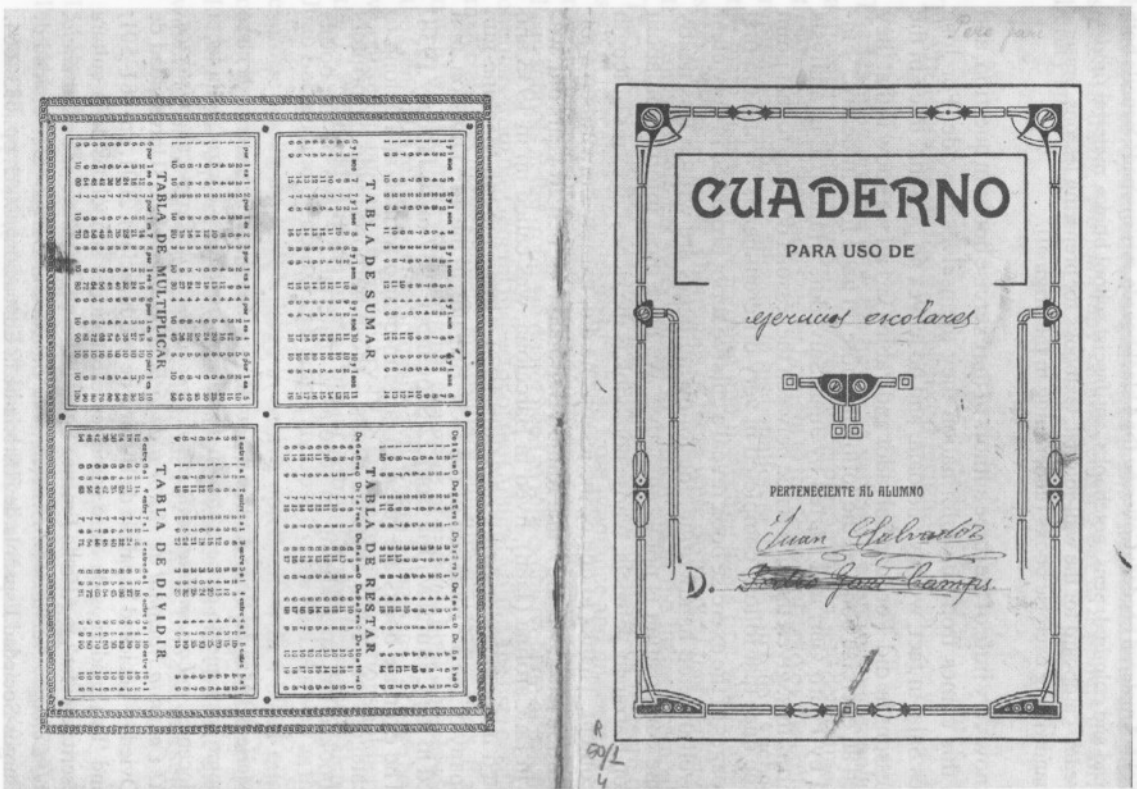


Illustration 3 – exercise book used by Juan Salvador and Pablo Garí Camps, 1938

(those used by Ramón Barranco and by Juan Salvador and Pablo Garí jointly) were produced by the same printer or print shop. Although its name is not given, the books have identical characteristics. Their front covers carry the same printed titles followed by the same blank spaces for the soldier to fill in: 'Exercise book for [...] [object of study]', 'Belongs to [...] [student's name]' (see Illustration 3). The back covers carry long tables of addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. The third notebook, whose contents correspond to José Cortés Sala's handwriting, was made by the printer Minerva Pont. It does not have the title 'Exercise Book' on the front cover but starts directly with the heading 'Student', followed by various lines starting with 'School' and followed by 'Grade'. The back cover also contains elongated addition and multiplication tables. These features lead us to suppose that the notebooks were not produced expressly for the soldiers, but were most probably surplus exercise books for primary schools which were sent to the front as donations by various printers and educational centres, or from various organisations.

The notebook, as evidence of acculturation to writing, as Jean Hébrard has defined it, is above all material support which shapes and controls the act of writing.<sup>18</sup> It implies tasks of composition and arrangement on the page, which can even be seen on the front covers, although the full dimensions of these tasks become clear on the pages inside. The soldier, just like any other student, first has to learn how to organise the different spaces on the page according to conventional rules: paragraph breaks, margins and blank spaces; headings or sub-headings; and dates and other elements which generally define the school day, indicate the type of lesson which is going on (e.g. dictation, prose composition, etc.), and thus order the disposition of the writing. Furthermore, each one of these activities and exercises obeys its own graphic logic: the arrangement of the writing varies considerably according to whether we are dealing with a problem or a letter, for example, as can be seen in each of our notebooks, because in each case they follow different rules (see Illustration 4).

In addition, the exercise books display a number of quite disparate activities, but on the basis of their content we can give a rough sketch of the

18 Jean Hébrard, 'Lo spazio grafico del quaderno scolastico in Francia tra Otto e Novecento', in Quinto Antonelli & Egli Becchi, eds, *Scritture bambine. Testi infantili tra passato e presente*, Rome-Bari (Laterza), 1995, pp. 162–8.

06-1-33

Hay un cordero que tiene que repartirse entre 9 personas y pesa 7<sup>5</sup> Kg. ¿Cuántas libras de carne tocarán a cada uno?

$$\begin{array}{r} 7^5 \text{ Kg} \\ \times 2^5 = 944 \\ \hline 375 \\ 150 \\ \hline 18^4 5 \text{ libras} \end{array}$$

$$\begin{array}{r} 1875 19 \\ 075 208 \\ \hline 3 \end{array}$$

Resultado 2<sup>6</sup> 8 libras por persona.

Corregir la b de las siguientes palabras concebía, vulmo, bivar, iba, avair, fumarava, amavilidad, vusto, vibliografía, marchaba, posibilidad, vagabundo, recibir, herbir, cabia, bebiamos, debemos.

concebía, bismo, vivir, iba, abrir, fumaba, amabilidad, vusto, bibliografía, marchaba, posibilidad, vagabundo, recibir, herber, cabia, bebíamos, debemos.

En una caja hay 250 huevos, en otra hay 1300 y en otra hay 600. Vendidos a 8<sup>45</sup> ptes la docena ¿cuánto valen?

$$\begin{array}{r} 250 \text{ huevos} \\ + 1300 \text{ " } \\ + 600 \text{ " } \\ \hline 2050 \text{ total de 3 cajas} \end{array}$$

$$\begin{array}{r} 2050 112 \\ 085 \text{ 170 ptes.} \\ 010 \\ 208 \\ \hline 3 \end{array}$$

08-1-33

$$\begin{array}{r} 190^8 \\ \times 845 \\ \hline 8540 \\ 6832 \\ 13664 \\ \hline 144326^0 \text{ Ptes.} \end{array}$$

Resultado 190<sup>8</sup> Docenas y valen 1,443<sup>26</sup> Ptes.

«Dictado»

Ya en mi edad pocas veces gusto de alterar el orden que en mi manera de vivir tengo hace tiempo establecido, y fundo esta repugnancia en que no he abandonado mis leyes ni un solo día para quebrantar mi sistema, sin que haya sucedido el arrepentimiento más sincero al desvanecimiento de mis engañadas esperanzas. Un resto, con todo eso, del antiguo ceremonial que en su trato tenían adoptado nuestros padres, me obliga a aceptar a veces ciertos convites a que parecería el negarse grosería o por lo menos, ridícula ofectación de delicadeza.

Illustration 4 – Pages from the exercise book used by Juan Salvador and Pablo Garí Camps, 1938

'inside history' of the schools at the front. They all include mathematical problems, dictations and a few exercises of composition, whose themes range from short items from geography or history lessons to advice on hygiene or the principles of geometry; while Ramón Barranco's notebook contains other material indicating his greater familiarity with written culture. If we dig into the exercise books and analyse their content, we can suggest a few important conclusions about the operation of the schools at the front. The pedagogy and training put into practice by the Cultural Militia in their classes, as well as the constant presence of the war, are visible in the material, in the specific styles of writing skills acquisition and the degree of familiarity with writing practices, and in the teacher's methods of intervention in the learning process as can be seen from the spelling corrections on many pages of the exercise books. Anne-Marie Chartier has shown that school exercise books are privileged sites for the study of the confrontation between theory, the most desirable education, and learning in practice, what really gets through in the end.<sup>19</sup> On one hand, the basic line the teachers followed at the fronts was to transform the war as a struggle against fascism into the focus of their teaching, so that the soldier would understand why he was risking his life on the battlefield and would receive political training. On the other hand, if anything, what we see in the exercise books analysed is that the war is made visible not so much in its most ideological aspects but rather at the level of daily life at the front. Ideology, in fact, is practically non-existent, except in one of the last dictations, barely ten lines long, in Ramón Barranco's notebook, devoted to antifascist policy. So, for example, the majority of the lessons and maths problems are connected with the battalions' supplies, leave, soldiers' pay, donations received from charities or food rations: 'You have to share 150 oranges between 4 soldiers in such a way that each one receives double the ration of the one before. How many does each soldier get?' Besides maths problems like this one, linked to the necessities of daily life, two notebooks contain specific activities aimed at teaching the rules of spelling, as we can deduce from the lessons devoted to the use of the letters b, h, j and v.

19 Anne-Marie Chartier, 'Travaux des élèves et cahiers scolaires: l'histoire de l'éducation du côté des pratiques', in Eguizábal et al., *Etnohistoria de la escuela*, pp. 23–40.

Dato:

Divido el número por Porciento que me dio  
 por tanto me dan menos rapido que se da de los  
 .leones, pero el solo cubre todas las tierras  
 trabajadas de noche a tierra, el menor número  
 de granos se puso a uso de 14, siendo el menor  
 y el que son vendidos, los otros se se separados  
 de de los otros de los habradores, convenientes  
 para trabajar en parte al resto...

El padre labrador agraviado por una tierra  
 de fuder y almanac lavaria, quedaba en lo que  
 trabajados por los operarios, el que gano con  
 trabajo que justificar su modo ya se se define  
 en sus cosas; aprobando la creencia de gado,  
 hay de los habradores, como un fin de apagar de  
 su de por parte - - - - -

Un fin de tener de pago de 100 de al mes, me se opte  
 que se ocurre en 11 por 30 para los trabajos me 5  
 por 30 para el A. R. 1 ante es la paga en trabajo  
 pero en compra tiene un 30 por 30 sobre el anterior  
 y me da de abarcar 90 - 1450  
 1.600 1450  
 50 - 140  
 80 - 1190  
 1450 - 745  
 1450 - 745

Solución

Ramón Barranco Valencia  
 natural barcelonés (1900) y de nacimiento  
 actualmente en Barcelona Coll Borras  
 Bogetell 58, de 85 años de edad, de estado  
 casado, inscrito en la Compañía de  
 Intelectuales del 3º Batallón, 135 Brigada  
 49 Divisyón con el sobre respectivo número  
 y me habiendo acaecido en el Diario  
 Oficial del Ministerio de Fomento  
 número del 12 de 1938, me acuerdo en virtud  
 de lo cual se concierne a un convenio para  
 la formación de 800 plazas de Oficiales  
 en Compañía del Cuerpo de Intelectuales  
 y concierne en mi los circunstancias y  
 requisitos que se me mandan circular,  
 respecto al número de. tengo de inscribirme  
 en la lista de los aspirantes a tomar parte  
 en dicho curso.  
 Por todo lo cual he anticipado los mas  
 expresados datos.  
 Salud y P. R. U. L. U. L. U.  
 Doctor, el 12 de mayo de 1938  
 Ramón Barranco

Illustration 5 – Ramón Barranco’s exercise book

It was not, however, simply a matter of learning spelling and maths. As Colonel Morriones of the 1<sup>st</sup> Army Corps wrote in an article that appeared in *Arms and Letters* on the occasion of the inauguration of the Madrid Soldiers' Home in July 1937, the Cultural Militias should ensure, mainly through their classes, that soldiers rapidly acquire the ability to adapt to the circumstances of war:

The work that is being done for the good of the cause gives me great satisfaction, but it may be that at the present time you are forgetting to pay much attention to technical details; to what should be learned before and after, and to the need to impart certain abilities as a basis for acquiring new ones. Don't forget, members of the Cultural Militias, that we are at war and in war we need soldiers and officers for our army.<sup>20</sup>

It was considered urgent, therefore, to train soldiers who were tactically and technically prepared for military life in the field. Among all the writing exercises related to military training, we have only found in the notebooks a few dictations devoted to poison gases and 'aggressive chemicals', their aim clearly being to warn soldiers how to react if they were sprayed with these gases, and what consequences might befall those who did not follow advice.

Looking further at the activities recorded in Ramón Barranco's notebook, which as we have mentioned is the most complete and varied of the three, we can outline a few features of soldiers' literacy on the republican front. Other sources tell us that the acquisition of basic competency in reading and writing was only the beginning of a much more comprehensive process of acculturation into writing practices, and this is borne out in this notebook. As well as the usual dictations, maths problems, copies and compositions, the student-soldier Ramón Barranco, like many of those who attended schools at the front, learned to use written culture more extensively. Above all, he applied it to resolve concrete daily situations. Thus the pages of his exercise book are a faithful reflection of many ordinary uses of writing in wartime. There are various military messages, certificates of service, a model receipt for diverse materials, and two job applications, one addressed to the Director of Popular War Schools and the other to the Minister for Defence (see Illustration 5):

20 *Armas y Letras*, n° 1, 1 August 1937, p. 4.

To His Most Excellent Sir, Minister of the Republic,

A Request

Ramón Barranco Valencia,

born Carolina (Jaén) and currently resident in Barcelona, 56 Barracas Bogatell Street, 26 years of age, married, enlisted in the Machine-gun Company of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, the 145<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 44<sup>th</sup> Division with due respect declares:

That there having appeared in the Official Diary of the Ministry for National Defence, n° 248, a circular in virtue of which a competition is announced to fill 800 positions for Campaign Officers in the Infantry Corps, and finding that I have the circumstances and requirements prescribed in the above-mentioned circular, I entreat your Excellency to include me on the list of applicants taking part in this competition.

For all of which please accept my most sincere thanks.

*Salud y República.*

Middle Sector, 10-2-1938

Ramón Barranco.

Nevertheless, we lack other models of more personal writings, although their presence at the fronts is well documented and their absence here may be solely attributable to the limitations of the sample. No doubt the most significant of these was personal correspondence, so necessary and indispensable in wartime to maintain the soldier's morale. Letter-writing practices were encouraged by epistolary manuals to guide the writer, present in the catalogues of libraries at the front, and in requests received by those responsible for sending books to the trenches.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, in the orientation notes sent to the Cultural Militia for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army Corps, dated 30 September 1937, it appears that the main aim was to get soldiers to learn to read and write a letter in three months, with specific recommendations for the type of letter concerned and a few examples of the most appropriate epistolary expressions. The desire to learn to write letters was, in fact, the main reason many illiterate soldiers attended the classes of the Cultural Militias, and its members, well aware of this, were conveniently able to tailor their lesson content to the soldier's primary need to communicate with his loved ones and to read what they sent him. In addition, knowing how to write opened up for all those who asked the possibility of a wartime godmother (*madrina de guerra*) who would give them advice and keep them enter-

21 Verónica Sierra Blas, 'La guerra en el tintero. Manuales epistolares para soldados', in *Pliegos de Bibliofilia*, n° 21, 2003, pp. 15–38.



tained in their idle moments with letters and gifts. Once the illiterate soldier had learned to write, the first thing he did was to send at least two letters to announce the event: one to his family, wife or girlfriend, and another addressed to someone in authority, usually Jesús Hernández, then Minister for Public Education, or La Pasionaria.<sup>22</sup>

These first letters from the soldier, his 'epistolary baptism', were further celebrated by their publication in the so-called trench journals (newspapers published for each unit, grouping or military corps), which greatly popularised the work of the Cultural Militias, by giving regular reports on how their work was progressing, the methods they used, the activities they promoted, and the results obtained. Making private letters into public documents had a double purpose: firstly, it encouraged everyone to see the importance and recognise the efforts of those comrades who had managed to win the battle against illiteracy. As Rafael Abella said, seeing yourself in print was a great source of pride for whoever had achieved it, and in the end it was also a way to be someone, to emerge from anonymity.<sup>23</sup> The determined effort which many made to escape from illiteracy was spurred on by the thought of reading their own name in the paper or of sending in a poem, a report, a short story, a history, a letter or some other written contribution. In addition, the letters became propaganda for the government, which used them to make the most of the achievements of the campaign against illiteracy waged at the fronts.

In this way, the soldier was immersed in a much wider world of writing. Together with letters, there were only a few distinctly private compositions, the chief example being the campaign diary. Other works with a more literary and artistic character, like poetry or drawings, might be produced for competitions. Whether in exercise books, letters, poems or other testimony, the fact is that many soldiers who enlisted in the Popular Army left some written trace. Thanks to the Cultural Militias, whose classes and activities contributed to their intellectual, political and military training, and also to Popular Culture, which made possible the dissemination of books, magazines, newspapers and other literature, these soldiers read and began to spell and recognise their first letters. The Republican Army therefore

22 A leading communist personality and charismatic orator.

23 Rafael Abella, *La vida cotidiana durante la guerra civil. La España republicana*, Barcelona (Planeta), 2004, p. 303.

fought fascism both with guns and with the pen, producing these well-known lines that the poet Antonio Machado dedicated to Lister: 'If my pen was as good as your pistol/ my captain, I would die happy.'<sup>24</sup>

24 Also the title of Fernando Díaz-Plaja, *Si mi pluma valiera tu pistola. Los escritores españoles en la guerra civil*, Barcelona (Plaza & Janés), 1979.