

Full title:

International Nurses to the Rescue: The Role and Contribution of the Nurses of
the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War

Short running title:

International Nurses to the Rescue

Abstract

Aim

To describe the life and work of the international nurses of the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War, and examine their role in relation to their contribution to Spanish nursing in this period.

Methods

This historical study is based primarily on the memoirs of the international nurses who joined the war health services of the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War. The evidence elicited from these sources was compared and contrasted with other contemporary documents in order to compare their perspectives with those of other contemporaries.

Results

The nurses of the International Brigades joined the front line health services as part of the mobile medical and surgical teams attached to the fighting units. They lived and worked under extreme conditions, often under fire. Their work whilst in Spain was not limited to care delivery but also included managerial and educational aspects. The international nurses' observations of Spanish nursing at the time were not always accurate, which may be explained by a lack of contact with qualified Spanish nursing staff due to a shortage of fully qualified nurses.

Conclusions

In the absence of the voices of the Spanish nurses themselves, the written records of the international nurses were invaluable to help analyze Spanish nursing in this period. Their testimonies are, in essence, the international nurses' legacy to the Spanish nurses who stayed behind after the departure of the International Brigadists, in 1938.

Key words

Diaries; history of nursing; international cooperation; warfare;

Introduction

I was going to Spain to play my little part towards shaping a decent world. [...] Save Spain, Save Democracy, Fight Hitler, Stop Fascism in Spain. Of this we talked and sang (Lini de Vries, 1979, pp. 189-190).

In this way American nurse Lini de Vries explains her personal reasons for going to Spain. For British nurse Noreen Branson “fighting for freedom was, by that time, something she’d become completely convinced about the need to do” (Jackson, 2002, p. 42). What compelled these women to leave their homes and families, and join the Spanish Republic in their struggle against General Franco’s forces? What was their contribution to Spanish nursing in this period? Whatever their motivations, the response of many nursing professionals from all over the world to the Spanish peoples’ call for help was overwhelming, and their work and support for the cause of the Republic highly valued. Eighty years after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War (SCW) (1936-1939), their generosity, courage and professionalism are still fresh in the memory of Spain.

This article will offer an insight into the life and work of the nurses of the IB during one of the most sanguinary conflicts of the twentieth century, and examine their role in relation to their contribution to shaping and developing Spanish nursing during this period.

Background

The causes of the SCW are extremely complex and are deeply rooted in the history of Spain. After a rather convulse nineteenth century, where liberal and traditionalist governments succeeded each other in an incessant pendulum-like movement, by the beginning of the twentieth century Spain was in a precarious position. For the working classes, poverty was so significant that thousands emigrated to America in search of fortune and a better life for themselves and their families (Carr, 2001). The gap between the landless laborers and the urban proletariat, and the privileged classes, was wider than ever. From an ideological point of view, the influence of the radical left on the working classes, and subsequent radicalization of the right, polarized the Spanish society. Thus, war started to appear as the inevitable consequence of a long and painful period of internal fighting and disagreement between social classes, political groups, the military, King and Church. Outright war began on the 18th July 1937 after a failed military coup led by General Franco (Beevor, 2007; Brennan, 2003).

The SCW was not just an internal affair but had global social and political repercussions. Chronologically placed between two world wars, politically situated between two rising powers, communism and fascism, ideologically loaded and religiously significant, the SCW did not leave the international community indifferent (Jackson, 2004; Moradiellos, 2002; Forrest, 2000).

Most international volunteers who went to Spain in aid of the Republic did so as part of the IB (Graham, 2005; Requena, 2004; Richardson, 1976); almost forty thousand men and women from fifty-two countries. The IB had their origin in the decision of the Comintern's executive committee¹ to recruit volunteers with military experience among volunteers of all countries to fight in the civil war for the democratically elected leftist Spanish government against Franco (Zaagsma, 2017; Kirschenbaum, 2015; Kowalsky, 2006; Jackson, 1994). Both international and local communist parties were charged with the recruitment and training of volunteers (Beevor, 2007). Upon arrival in Spain, the international brigadists were sent to the IB's Headquarters in Albacete, where they completed their training and were allocated to a brigade (McLellan, 2004).

Foreign involvement in the SCW was not limited to fighting, and many men and women took part in the conflict in non-military positions. Among the non-military volunteers who went to Spain were nursing staff:

About this time, anti-Fascist countries who could not make up their minds to send men were sending money and medical aid at last. Nurses and ambulances came from England. [...] All this was done with money given by the English workers in their poverty (Low, 1937, pp. 174-175).

¹ The Communist International or Comintern was an international communist organization that advocated world communism.

In contrast to the Spanish nurses, who left virtually no written record of their work during the war, the international nurses left an invaluable wealth of material documenting their roles and responsibilities, feelings, experiences, observations and personal opinions whilst in Spain. These documents offer a new and fresh insight into the evolution of nursing during the SCW, and are a faithful testament to these women's solidarity, courage and commitment.

Spanish nursing at the beginning of the twentieth century

Compared to other European countries like the United Kingdom, the professionalization of Spanish nursing in 1915 was a relatively recent feature of nursing's development (Collantes, 1915). This phenomenon can be explained by briefly revisiting the history of the profession. Although no official curriculum existed prior to this date, Catholic religious orders were able to maintain a steady and sufficient workforce of privately trained nurses. Furthermore, the degree to which nursing was visible within the Spanish health service and society in general was minimal due primarily to the rather limited role of women in society. As a result, nursing was seen as a nurturing, mothering, caring occupation, as opposed to a scientific discipline.

To further complicate matters; at the beginning of the twentieth century a so-called auxiliary healthcare profession practiced mainly by men, and now extinct, coexisted with nursing in Spain. Hierarchically placed below medicine and above nursing, the profession of *practicante* emerged in Spain as a result of

the combined events of a series of unique sociocultural characteristics, including Spain's strongly gendered social environment and a continuing dominance of traditional values, where the Catholic Church played a key role not only in religious matters but also political and social spheres. This had an impact on the way nursing work was divided between nurses and *practicantes*. Hence, aspects such as caring were designated to women and religious nurses (for example, tasks involving nutrition management and hygiene), while technical skills were assigned to *practicantes* (for example, minor surgery, bandaging and intravenous access).

Between 1915 and 1936 nursing continued to develop insidiously, although it never grew to the extent that it was able to challenge *practicante's* hegemony, either professionally or socially. This was probably due to a number of firmly set boundaries which transcended the professional sphere and encroached on class, gender, financial and even religious aspects.

Methods

Aims of the study

The aim of this paper is to describe the life and work of the British and American nurses of the IB during the SCW, and examine their role in relation to their contribution to shaping and developing Spanish nursing in this period.

Study design

The research underpinning this paper was undertaken using the historical method, which has been described as a valid tool for nursing history research (Lusk, 1997; Sarnecky, 1990). As part of the study it was necessary to examine the social history of Spain in order to contextualize the research, and understand cultural values, beliefs and other factors relevant to this investigation. This preliminary review of contextual elements unearthed a number of issues which then shaped the analysis and interpretation of the sources, namely religion, gender and the socio-political ideological milieu extant at the time. Hence, a conscious effort was made not to constrain the evidence collected with the inflexibility of a pre-determined model. Instead, it can be argued that this investigation was built from below; that is, from the sources themselves (Willig, 2001). In this case, the research translated into a conscious and systematic attempt to recover a somewhat hidden chapter in the history of the SCW as depicted in the international nurses' memoirs of the war.

Primary and secondary sources

Secondary data, defined as 'works that interpret or analyze an historical event or phenomenon' (Munhall, 2012, p.387), were obtained from a variety of libraries and scientific databases specializing in healthcare, history and sociology.

Primary sources including diaries, photographs, autobiographies and papers published in contemporary journals and magazines were collected from three major Spanish archives: the *Archivo General Militar de Ávila*², the *Archivo General de la Guerra Civil Española*³ in Salamanca and the historical database *Gazeta* of the *Boletín Oficial del Estado*⁴. Additionally, a search was carried out at the Royal College of Nursing Archive in Edinburgh (UK), where early volumes of the nursing journal *The Nursing Mirror* are kept. The issues published between 1936 and 1939 contained articles and news written by nurses about the SCW. They provided interesting descriptions of nursing care and nursing training during the conflict.

Of especial interest were the first-person accounts of the life and work of the nurses of the IB during the SCW. Among these there were documents written and published at the time of the events described in this paper (i.e. Low & Brea, 1937 and Martin, 1937); a personal diary written by Australian nurse Agnes Hodgson (1988) during the war but published some years later by Judith Keene;

² Translated as General Military Archive of Avila, this archive was created in 1993 and contains selected collections including the Spanish Civil War, Blue Division and National Militias. Other collections added later included Field Hospitals, Ministry of the Army, General Captaincies and Franco's Military House.

³ Translated as General Archive of the Spanish Civil War of Salamanca. This archive contains a wide range of different types of primary documents. Most of the documents collected were related to the Republican health and nursing services. This was due to the fact that the majority of documents held at this archive were compiled during Franco's dictatorship in order to gather information about the enemy. From 1975, after Franco's death, documents regarding the Nationalist forces were added to the main collection and, nowadays, the archive is used mainly for research purposes.

⁴ *Gazeta* is a historical archive containing both political and legislative documents published by the Spanish government between 1661 and 1959. *Boletín Oficial del Estado* is the title of the official state bulletin published by the Spanish government in order to disseminate laws and public acts. The contents of historical archive *Gazeta* have been digitalized and are freely available on the following link: <https://www.boe.es/buscar/gazeta.php>.

an autobiography by American nurse Lini de Vries (1979); and several first-person accounts written during the war period but published some years later (i.e. Murray, 1987; Inglis, 1986). These sources were retrieved from public libraries and are publicly available.

Several volumes from three periodic magazines, namely *Sanidad Popular*, *Ayuda Médica Internacional* and *La Voz de la Sanidad de la XV División*⁵, edited by the health service of the IB and published during the SCW, were reviewed. Kept in the *Archivo General de la Guerra Civil Española*, these journals were published in various languages, namely Spanish, English, German and French, as the public targeted by the journal were the international volunteers themselves⁶. Their historical value lay on the fact that they were an educational tool as much as an information dissemination one. In many cases, the articles included pictures, drawings and diagrams representing life at the front, and offered vivid and detailed descriptions of the various stages in the military health service of the IB as well as news and articles about the war, and very especially about the organisation and functioning of the frontline health services (Núñez Díaz-Balart, 2006).

⁵ Translated as: Popular Health, The Healthcare Herald of the XV Division and International Medical Aid, respectively.

⁶ The XV Division (also known as the XV International Brigade) was created after the reorganisation of the IB following the battles of Jarama and Guadalajara (February-March 1937) (Núñez Díaz-Balart, 2006), where high casualties were sustained by the international volunteers. By September 1937, the XV Division was comprised of a British Battalion, an American ‘Abraham Lincoln’ Battalion and a Canadian ‘Mackenzie-Papineau’ Battalion. Later on, they were joined by the multinational Dimitrov Battalion, a Balkan ‘Tchapaiev’ Battalion and two all-Spanish Battalions, ‘59’ and ‘Galindo’ (de Quesada, 2015).

Given the ideological nature of some of the sources consulted, whenever possible, the information collected throughout this investigation was contextualized and triangulated with other primary sources and secondary material (Lundy, 2008, p. 397).

Personal reflexivity

According to Ratner (2002, p. 1), “qualitative methodology recognizes that the subjectivity of the researcher is intimately involved in scientific research”. Therefore, recognizing the researchers’ potential for their own contribution “to the construction of meanings throughout the research process” (Nightingale & Cromby, 1999, p. 228) was key in the writing of this paper.

In order to elucidate how the authors’ personal subjectivity might have influenced the research, we had first to understand our own “position and positioning” (Macbeth 2001) with respect to the events discussed in this paper (Gerstl-Pepin & Patrizio 2009). As a Spaniard, the SCW is a topic which cannot, and does not, leave the first author (IAS) indifferent. More specifically, she sympathizes with the Republican cause. As British nationals without any previous in-depth knowledge of the SCW, the co-authors’ (CEH & AW) perspective was somewhat more neutral.

The fact that IAS’s knowledge of the SCW was certainly quite limited before commencing this investigation contributed to minimizing any initial partiality she might have exhibited. This was due to the fact that she was born in the

eighties, 5 years after Franco's death, with the Pact of Oblivion⁷ firmly in place. Respected by most, the Pact of Oblivion facilitated a peaceful transition to democracy and shielded the younger generations from the memory of war. This a priori lack of knowledge of the SCW allowed us to begin this research without any prior political or ideological inclinations for one or another party.

Having said this, it has been suggested in the literature that it is, in fact, impossible for historians to be totally dispassionate, and that history-writing is at its most convincing when the historian gives a clear indication of his or her own position or perspective on the issues under study (Cheng 2008, pp. 258-259; Jenkins & Munslow 2003, pp. 14-16). Therefore, it cannot be denied that all, but especially IAS, feel quite passionately about this period. In order to maintain the focus of the research on the evolution of nursing practice during the SCW, a conscious effort was made not to divert from the sources and thus end up favoring one side over the other.

Findings

First impressions

Volunteer [Spanish] nurses are requisitioned to assist, but from pictures which reach us it would seem that a great many women, and even young

⁷ The Pact of Oblivion or Pact of Forgetting was an unwritten agreement by all major political groups and parties to "bury" the events that took place during the SCW after Franco's death, in an attempt to avoid personal vendettas and reprisals, and facilitate a peaceful transition from dictatorship to democracy.

girls, prefer the role of belligerent to that of nurse, and their behavior reminds of the tricoteuses at the time of the French Revolution.⁸ [...] But no foreigners are able to enter Spain at the present time, and English nurses, however much they would like to go to the rescue of the wounded men, can do nothing (Anonymous, 1936, p. 37).

International nurses started to arrive in Spain not long after the above note was published in *The Nursing Mirror*. After a long and difficult trip from their country of origin, many international nurses recorded their first impressions of nursing and the Republican hospitals. Most of them were appalled at the state of the field hospitals, and shocked by the ‘horrible wounds awaiting attention’ (Inglis, 1987, p. 149) arriving directly from the front-lines. Lini de Vries (1979, pp. 204-205), described the first field hospital she was appointed to as follows:

⁸ This quote is an extract from an article published in the British journal *The Nursing Mirror* shortly after the beginning of the SCW. The article was not signed but, in all probability, it was authored by a British nurse who, probably influenced by the news reaching the UK at that time, was impressed by the role played by Spanish women during the first months of fighting. Women’s involvement in the SCW, particularly on the Republican side, was unprecedented in Spanish history (Durgan, 2007). In fact, the image of militia women taking up arms against fascism has become one of the most characteristic features of the SCW. However, most of them were sent back to the rearguard after the first weeks of fighting, with nursing becoming one of the most popular occupations for women to take up in order to continue to play an active part in the conflict:

Most of the nurses of our Division are former militia women who, as members of the units of our glorious Fifth Regiment, encouraged us during those bloody first days of fighting. Those girls, who were courageous enough to smile in the face of death, [...] were seen sullen and tearful when they were forced to abandon the front lines after the issuing of a ministerial order. However, wanting to be useful and stay close to their comrades, they joined the hospitals to carry out the delicate mission of nursing the wounded (Diazdeneira, 1937).

It was obviously a new school building, and we watched the children and teachers moving out desks, maps and books. [...] There was no heat, no plumbing facilities, no water, no electricity, no kitchen, no stove.

The reality of working on the front line

Descriptions of the work of the healthcare teams in the field hospitals were surprisingly varied, mostly depending on the type of publication, target audience and intentions behind the author's work. According to an article published in *Ayuda Médica Internacional*, the multilingual periodical of the healthcare services of the IB, Francoist field hospitals were nothing short of dreadful...

The fascist hospital-infirmery was a long, dark, dreary room (which used to be bakery). Eighty fascist wounded had been left behind, huddled together, two on a mattress made for one. The floor was damp and slimy with blood, foul-smelling sputum and vomitus. The air stank of urine and fetid pus. Every wound was infected. The dressings were hard, blood-stained. Tourniquets had been left on for 5-6 days, converting living human limbs into swollen claws purple black-hideous with huge blisters from which a thin stinking serum exuded. One of the wounded had gone mad with misery and pain, others cowered away from expected blows (Pike, 1938, pp. 13-14).

...Whereas things seemed to be rather more serene in the operating rooms of the IB, according to an article from *La Voz de la Sanidad de la XV Division*, the journal of the health services of the XV International Brigade:

The operating nurse is sorting the operating instruments on a glass-covered stand. While the surgeon is pulling on his rubber gloves, the nurse paints the region of the body that is about to be operated on with iodine. The operation begins. The instruments are handled with a slight tinkling noise. The assistant opens the skin and holds it open with clamps. 'Hurry, sister another clamp'. The intestines are exposed. 'Here, sister', and a piece of a shell falls into a basin with a metallic sound. The intestines are put back again. Now the sewing up of the incision begins. 'Sister, the clamps' (Anonymous, 1937a, pp. 6-7).

A description of Sonia Merims' work as nurse in charge of the American field hospitals in the Tarancón sector tells a different story altogether, and is probably the closest to reality:

The daily arrival of wounded made an indelible impression on me. During the period of a battle, ambulances kept rolling in constantly. The doctors, nurses and stretcher bearers are very busy. Up at 7 am to start the work; no one grumbles. Then the fascists came to interrupt our work. Two bombardments in one week. [...] The second invasion so completely demolished our hospitals, garage and storehouse, that we

had to set up new hospitals in another town. It was terrifying, it was ghastly, it was a nightmare. The personnel and wounded were saved. I was slightly wounded when leading a patient to safety (Merims, 1938, p. 12).

Training nurses in the battle line

Unlike, for example, the First World War's Western Front, which was a war of trenches and therefore relatively stationary, the fronts of the SCW were extremely mobile due to modern warfare. As a result, the field hospitals attached to the fighting units had to be dismantled, relocated and reinstalled within different sites including theatres, churches, caves, tunnels, trains and tents (Coni, 2008). As the international nurses recorded in their memoirs, soon after arrival at a new location, girls from nearby villages were recruited as temporary staff to help on the wards:

Wherever I have worked I have always had to help to train the young Spanish girls to be nurses. They were usually very adept in the practical work, although not so quick in the theoretical side of nursing (Urmston, 1939b, p. 435).

May Levine (1938, p. 19), a theatre nurse from New York, described the work of the Spanish girls as follows:

Most of the Spanish ‘chicas’⁹ had not had previous training in the field of nursing. They had to learn their jobs while doing their duty. To them, even more than the international nurses, should be given the greatest credit for the excellent work they have done in caring for the wounded and sick of the People's Army.

Furthermore, evidence was found that the international nurses helped to train Spanish girls not just informally in the field hospitals and surgical units, but also in nursing schools:

The University Hospital has one American head nurse Ruth Epstein who helped organize and taught at the first nurses' training school (Anonymous, 1938a, p. 11).

Working alongside war trained nurses and voluntary aides

As outlined before, Spanish war trained nurses and aides were often praised by the international nurses for their learning capacity, efficiency and enthusiasm. For some international nurses, their shared work and camaraderie with Spanish nursing staff developed into something more than a mere teaching and learning relationship:

Modesta and I vied with one another as to who could give the best backrub [...]. The other girls had not liked her much at first, because she

⁹ *Chica* is the Spanish term for girl.

was insistent and opinionated. I liked her for those very qualities and was delighted when she was assigned to me. I had studied three years to become a graduate nurse. In no time at all she had picked up the nursing skills and was invaluable. Despite our language barrier, we were close (de Vries, 1979, pp. 211-213).

However, the sources revealed international nurses' feelings about these girls were mixed. Some of them praised the girls' attitude and work capacity...

A base hospital was established in a small village about 30 kil. from the front and really could almost compare in its well set-up organization to one of our American hospitals at home. New nurses arrived to organize it, and with a staff of Spanish girls whose sincerity and willingness to work was really remarkable, the hospital started functioning (Freeman, 1938, p. 9).

...Whereas others complained about how difficult it was to work alongside non-trained staff and how one had to keep an eye on them continuously:

We have thirteen Spanish girls whom we are trying to train but the results have been pretty hopeless up to now. Most of the actual work was done by our handful (Martin, 1937).

In fact, their relationship was not entirely free from conflict as Agnes Hodgson (1988, pp. 144), an Australian nurse, recorded in her diary:

A meeting of nurses today to protest against various irregularities in the distribution of work and to clear up a slight misunderstanding between Spaniards and ourselves. All amicably settled.

Working alongside Spanish qualified nurses and *practicantes*

International nurses rarely discussed the professional figures of *practicantes* and qualified Spanish nurses in their diaries, letters and memoirs. Only Agnes Hodgson (1988, p. 118) mentioned *practicantes* in her war diary although, as she clarified in brackets, she was not very clear what their role was:

We sleep in a loft with mattresses on the floor. The two male members keep on the other side partitioned by a Union Jack. The Spanish doctors and *practicantes* (medical students) sleep in another dormitory.

Agnes did not consider herself to be hierarchically below *practicantes*, and thus did not accept these professionals' authority over her. Thus, in a further reference to four *practicantes*, she wrote:

Four *practicantes* arrived - awful bums and sissies. Everyone disliked them on sight and resented their intrusion. *Practicantes* at work – one told me I could give a lad Pantofon¹⁰ (Hodgson, 1988, p. 138).

¹⁰ Pantopon was the commercial name of an opioid analgesic manufactured by Roche and sold in the USA and Canada in the first half of the twentieth century.

References to qualified Spanish nurses proved to be extremely difficult to find. This may explain why some international nurses returned to their countries of origin convinced that there were no trained nurses in Spain (other than the nuns) prior to their arrival in the country:

We had many little Spanish nurses. Spain had no real trained nurses. They used the nuns. So these little girls only had about three months' training. But they were very keen and very good for the time they had trained (Murray, 1986, p. 69).

Withdrawal of the International Brigades and end of the war

On 21 September 1938, with the war nearly lost, the Spanish Government officially announced the unilateral withdrawal of the IB, along with their medical units (Alpert, 1994). An emotive farewell parade, witnessed by thousands of Spanish citizens, was held in Barcelona on 1 November (Junco, 2014). As the remnants of the IB reached the reviewing stand, they saluted Dolores Ibaruri¹¹, whose farewell speech perhaps best reflected the feelings of the Spanish people towards the brigadists:

They gave up everything, their loves, their countries, home and fortune;
fathers, mothers, wives, brothers, sisters and children, and they came and

¹¹ Dolores Ibaruri (also known as Pasionaria) was a communist politician of Basque origin, best known for her slogan: “no pasarán”/“they shall not pass”. During the SCW, she became perhaps one of the Republic’s most renowned orators. She was responsible for delivering the farewell speech and paying tribute to the volunteers of the IB (Nelson, 1996).

told us: 'We are here. Your cause, Spain's cause, is ours.' [...] You can go proudly. You are history. You are legend (Carroll, 1994, p. 20).

Many nurses left unwillingly, with some even articulating that the SCW was the most significant event of their lives (Murray, 1986; de Vries, 1979).

The end of the SCW was declared on 1 April 1939 (Alpert, 1994). Honors and decorations were awarded to those who helped Franco achieve victory, including nurses. A very different fate, which included prison sentences, death and exile, awaited those who fought for the Republic (Mangini, 1995).

Discussion

It is clear that, throughout their time in Spain, the nurses of the IB lived and worked under extreme circumstances, sometimes under fire. As described by the nurses themselves, the international healthcare teams, along with their ambulances and mobile hospitals, followed the international brigades they were officially attached to along the front-lines, where they treated not just their fellow countrymen but also Spanish soldiers, and even civilians in the quiet periods between battles (Murray, 1986). The field hospitals were established a short distance behind the lines and were able to accept patients within twenty-four hours of their arrival to a new post (Irving, 1938b).

Upon arrival to a field hospital, the patients were admitted and care was provided by the qualified nurses and doctors, aided by the auxiliary personnel,

some of whom were recruited and trained from among the local population (Urmston, 1939a). This organisation scheme was replicated on the Nationalist side, as confirmed by war trained nurse Priscilla Scott-Ellis in the war diary:

Here we have no girls to help as there is no village near, so we will have much more tiresome work, like having to get up early so as to give the breakfast and being continually in the wards to fetch bedpans or glasses of water, etc. (Scott-Ellis, 1995, p. 158).

This cyclical process of recruitment and training may have contributed to widening the gap between reality and the international nurses' perception of Spanish nursing during the Civil War. Often, their opinion of the aptitude and professionalism of Spanish nurses was often not the best, to the point that some of them concluded that there were no qualified nurses in Republican Spain (other than the nuns, who sided with General Franco) at the time of their arrival.

Whereas practically no evidence was left behind by the Spanish nurses to support or refute such observations, other documents suggested that there were qualified Spanish nurses working in both zones during the war, who were capable of performing their work to a high standard (Coni, 2009). In fact, it is known that not only religious but also secular nurses had graduated from the Spanish nursing schools since 1915, the year when the first official nursing curriculum was endorsed. In particular, from 1915 to 1936, there were a total of

6829 nursing student registrations in public universities across the Spanish territory (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 1943).

It is undeniable that there was a shortage of qualified nurses on both sides when the war broke out. This was due not only to the late professionalization of nursing Spain, but also to the drastic increase in healthcare necessities and demands that emerged from the war situation itself (Lannon, 2002). In order to alleviate this situation, short training courses aimed at providing them with basic nursing knowledge and skills were organised for volunteer women on both sides (Hernández-Conesa & Segura López, 2013). However, as argued by Nash (1995), the shortage of Spanish qualified nurses on the Republican side was more pressing than on Franco's side. This was due to the fact that, traditionally, 'nuns and religious institutions had formed the main core of nursing staff in many medical institutions' (Nash, 1995, p.151). Thus, with the Catholic Church supporting Franco's cause, 'most trained religious nurses abandoned their institutions in the territory under the republic' (Nash, 1995, p. 151) and joined the Nationalist war health service (Díaz-Sánchez, 2005). Other contemporary accounts of nursing care at the beginning of the war describe a very similar picture:

Before July, 1936, as in England before the 16th century, nursing was regarded largely as a form of religious devotion undertaken by monks and nuns. Some of these monks and nuns went over to General Franco's territory at the beginning of hostilities, others fled abroad, and

Government Spain was left with practically no nurses (Anonymous, 1939, p. 54).

The arrival of the fully qualified and experienced international nurses must have been welcomed by the Republican authorities who, understanding the value of a qualified nursing workforce, would have ensured that only unqualified personnel were assigned to support the work of these professionals. A list of personnel from the international hospital of Mataró (Catalonia) constitutes a good example of the above. It contains the names, gender, nationality and job description of 56 individuals, among whom there were 12 doctors, 2 *practicantes*, 22 qualified international nurses, 7 auxiliary nurses, one of whom was not Spanish (nationality not given), 1 Spanish orderly and 13 allied health professionals (Anonymous, 1938c). Additionally, as suggested by Casas & Miralles (2008), the medical and surgical teams of the IB were attached to the international fighting divisions and ‘had their own nurses and services’, which would have further prevented the nurses of the IB from sharing their workspace with a fully qualified Spanish nurse.

With regard to the relationship between nurses and *practicantes*, evidence of conflict was found not only on the part of the international nurses but also on the part of the Spanish nurses themselves. For the international nurses, who were neither familiar with the figure of *practicante* nor accustomed to taking orders from a fellow healthcare professional (other than a physician perhaps), the presence of *practicantes* in the field hospitals must have been, first, a

surprise and, second, an offense, especially if they attempted to exert any authority over them. This was clearly reflected in Agnes Hodgson's resentful diary entry detailing her encounter with one *practicante*. For the Spanish qualified and war trained nurses, the chaos and carnage which arose in settings where they worked contributed to a dismantling of the practice boundaries between them and the profession of *practicante*, and encouraged the first to extend their roles to the detriment of the second:

The incessant and continuous intrusions of the so called qualified Nurses into the professional area of Practicantes of Medicine and Surgery, to the extent that the first group clearly intends to displace the second from its current position, has put us in the position of having to appeal to you for help in order to establish clear limits between these auxiliary professions, which the obstinate nurses are not willing to acknowledge (Cordero & Momeñe, 1937).

Although the professional development of nursing in Spain at this time cannot simply be explained by the hard work of the international nurses as trainers and educators, as other events and the exigencies of war also played their part, it is important to acknowledge their unique contribution to Spanish nursing not just through their professional example but also through their efforts to encourage Spanish girls to become both competent nurses and independent women. Agnes Hodgson's description of a meeting between the international nurses and the Spanish war trained staff constitutes a good example. It was interesting to

observe that the main reason behind the emergence of conflict in this case centered on the division of labor. This could suggest that, as their knowledge increased and their nursing skills improved, Spanish war trained nurses started to see themselves as more than mere auxiliaries. More importantly, it can be argued that this emergence of conflict between the Spanish and international nurses is proof in itself of the development of Spanish nursing. Although these Spanish women may have been influenced by the revolutionary climate of the Republic, they had become confident enough to challenge the way in which more experienced qualified nurses distributed the workload. Similarly, the fact that the international nurses openly acknowledged both the general evolution of Spanish nursing and personal development of the Spanish women they had themselves trained reveals a qualitative change in nursing services as the war evolved.

The above, however, are only indicators -and not proof in itself- of the impact of the international nurses on Spanish nursing development. It will be difficult to prove the extent to which the nurses of the IB contributed to the advancement of Spanish nursing, partly due to the lack of testimonies from the Spanish nurses themselves. It is likely that plenty of individual Spanish nurses and aides, both war trained and unqualified, were inspired by the example of the highly trained international nurses, and that such influence was recorded in their own diaries and memoirs. This, however, may never be demonstrated as there are scarce diaries, personal testimonies and other materials available to researchers from

that time. This may be due to a lack of interest on the Spanish nurses and aides' part in writing about their experiences, or perhaps to a conscious effort not to disseminate the contents of such documents, especially considering that those who worked within the healthcare services of the Republic were persecuted and prosecuted as "traitors" by the establishment (Stafford, 2015; Atenza-Fernández, 2008; Barona-Villar & Bernabeu-Mestre, 2008). Collecting information from oral sources might have been an alternative, but the idea was discarded when we realized that we were too late, as all of our potential participants would have been well over ninety years of age.

Likewise, no trace of the presence of the nurses of the IB in Spain was found in the post-war documents consulted. This does not necessarily mean that their contribution to Spanish nursing as part of the medical and surgical teams was strictly limited to the conflict. Rather, it means that their impact on the nursing profession as a whole was perhaps limited by the unfavorable outcome of the war. The withdrawal of the international volunteers towards the end of the conflict, and the fact that they served on the losing side, meant that their work during the conflict was somewhat obviated when the nursing profession was restructured in the post-war period. Moreover, the longevity of Franco's dictatorship prevented the international volunteers from claiming any sort of achievement until many years after the bitter end (Carroll, 1994).

The impact and significance of war can bring about deep changes in the social, economic and political conditions of the areas involved, extinguishing pre-

established values and founding new ones in the gaps left by the first (Franco Rubio, 1982). In accordance with this idea, war could almost be represented as a bridge that connects the before and after circumstances of a particular society, human group or even a profession such as nursing. The nurses of the IB played their part in shaping and advancing Spanish nursing through their work and example; the necessities created by the war situation did the rest.

Limitations

Although a considerable number of primary sources were reviewed, there is a wealth of material written by or related to the nurses of the IB which could not be accessed due to both time and financial limitations at the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives at New York University Tamiment Library. The archives include a number of objects including a nurse's cape and a pin, photographs, both written and audio recorded interviews with nurse (and other medical personnel) veterans of the SCW, diaries, and letters written during and after the war. The materials are contained in 27 files and boxes classified by the veteran's name they relate to, and are available for consultation at the library upon request (Tamiment Library & Wagner Labour Archives, 2017). It is likely that these documents would be extremely useful in the future when looking at the sociopolitical status of the nurses of the IB and their involvement in issues other than health care.

According to Telge (1937), Head of the Medical Service of the IB, the medical service was comprised of 220 doctors, 580 nurses and assistants, and 600 stretcher bearers from over 25 different countries. Nevertheless, this research is based mainly on the testimonies of American, British and one Australian nurse, which may have limited the scope of this investigation. This was due to the impossibility of accessing any sources written or published by nurses from other nations. There could be a number of possible explanations for this. One, that said sources were written in the nurses' mother tongues and were never translated into English or Spanish; this would have significantly complicated the identification and access to these materials. Another reason is that, like the Spanish nurses themselves, these nurses did not choose to write or publish their letters, diaries and memoirs. However, this is unlikely as most of them would not have seen themselves in the need to hide their past as brigadists, except perhaps in the case of those whose country of origin was ruled by a radical rightist government after the war (i.e. Germany and Italy). Finally, the identification and collection of primary source materials pertaining to the role of the IB during the SCW was (and continues to be) led by individuals and organizations with a particular interest for, or political affinity with, the IB. This is the case of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives (2018), from the USA, and the International Brigade Memorial Trust (2018), from the UK.

Much has been written about the volunteers of the IB and their involvement in the SCW. However, the voices of the international nurses are not so often heard,

nor interpreted in the light of the ideological, sociopolitical context of the time. Similarly, the historiography of Spanish nursing during the Civil War is scarce and has been heavily influenced by what still is, in essence, an open wound in Spain's history. This complicated the discussion and interpretation of the results in the light of the literature.

Conclusions

Towards the end of 1938, with the war nearly lost, the Spanish Government sent the IB, along with their medical units, out of Spain. Many nurses left unwillingly with some even articulating that the SCW was the most significant event of their lives (Murray, 1986; de Vries, 1979).

It is known that these courageous women lived and worked under extreme conditions, often under fire. Their observations were mostly accurate and confirmed the cruel injuries received by soldiers and civilians alike, paired with the lack of much needed medical supplies and other resources. This situation persisted throughout the war.

Analyzing the testimonies of the nurses of the IB was extremely interesting, not only because they clearly described their role and responsibilities whilst in Spain, but also because they provided invaluable material to help analyze Spanish nursing during this period.

There is sufficient evidence to suggest that the nurses of the IB did contribute to the training of Spanish nurses during the SCW, and thus to their professional development. However, their absence from the sources after 1939 is most significant. It is suggested in this paper that their achievements and possible impact on professional Spanish nursing were obviated by Franco's regime after the war.

This historical account is, in essence, the international nurses' legacy to the Spanish nurses who stayed behind after the international volunteers were removed from Spain. It is uncertain whether the Spanish nurses' own voices will ever be heard. However, after Franco's rule of oppression and the subsequent instigation of the Pact of Oblivion¹², which even today still exerts some degree of power over the Spanish population, the possibility that the lost generation of nurses will forever remain silent cannot be discarded.

Disclosure

There was no conflict of interest that might influence the results or interpretation of the results.

Authors' Contributions

¹² The Pact of Oblivion or Pact of Forgetting was an unwritten agreement by all major political groups and parties to "bury" the events that took place during the SCW after Franco's death, in an attempt to avoid personal vendettas and reprisals, and facilitate a peaceful transition from dictatorship to democracy.

All the authors contributed to the conception and design of this study; I.A-S carried out the documentary search, analysed and interpreted the findings, and drafted the manuscript; A.W. and C.E.H. critically reviewed the manuscript and supervised the whole study process. All the authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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