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Publication date

2020

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Fighters across frontiers

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Citation for published version (APA):

Kruizinga, S., Diac, C., Acciai, E., Zaugg, F., Bikše, G. I., Manojlović Pintar , O., & Falkov, Y. (2020). 'For your freedom and ours!': transnational experiences in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-39. In R. Gildea, & I. Tames (Eds.), *Fighters across frontiers: Transnational resistance in Europe, 1936-48* (pp. 12-30). Manchester University Press.

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'For your freedom and ours!': transnational experiences in the Spanish Civil War, 1936–39

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In July 1936, over six thousand athletes from twenty-two different countries gathered in Barcelona to participate in the International Workers' Olympiad. Less a sporting event than a mass political rally, it was intended by its organisers to attract both more participants and more spectators than the official 1936 Olympic Games that were to be held in Nazi Germany from 1 August. These alternative Olympics were sponsored by the Popular Front government of Spain, made up of a coalition of liberal and leftist parties elected on an anti-fascist platform. The Barcelona Olympiad promised to be the vanguard of a powerful Europe-wide countermovement and drew the eyes of the European left-wing press.¹

On 19 July, however, the very same day the opening ceremony of the 'People's Olympia' was to take place, Barcelona was rocked by a military revolt. Rebel generals ordered its garrison to take control of the city as part of a coordinated strike against the Popular Front government.² In response, many international athletes helped the civilian population to resist, and together they fought off the Barcelona coup. In other Spanish cities, too, military revolts were quickly quelled. Only Seville fell to the rebels on 26 July, but this proved to be a turning point in the history of Spain. Its capture allowed rebel officers to airlift the Army of Africa, which they controlled, from Spanish Morocco to mainland Europe. There they were joined by about half the Spanish territorial army and the vast majority of its officers. The revolt now turned into a full-blown civil war in which the rebels enjoyed the support not only of most of the army and various rightist, monarchist and fascist political organisations but also of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. The forces of the Republic nevertheless resisted. Left-wing journalists who had come to cover a sports event became war reporters. News of Spain's resistance against a fascist takeover quickly

spread, and socialists, communists and other leftists all over Europe soon pledged their support.³

The threat of foreign intervention on both sides of the Spanish Civil War led the governments of Britain and France to propose a non-intervention agreement to localise the conflict and thereby, hopefully, prevent the outbreak of a second World War. While openly agreeing to the principle of non-intervention, however, Germany and Italy secretly continued to supply men, materiel and money to the rebel forces, while the Soviet Union supported the Republic. Joseph Stalin hoped to deter German aggression against the Soviet Union while highlighting the importance of communism in the fight against fascism. In order to entice Western democracies to join an anti-fascist defensive pact he decided against flagrant infractions of the non-intervention agreement, but on 18 September 1936 the Executive Committee of the Communist International (Comintern) instructed its non-Soviet member parties to start recruiting a volunteer force to fight in Spain.⁴ Comintern officials travelled to Spain to help create new International Brigades of the loyalist Spanish army, officially formed at Albacete, some 150 miles from Madrid, on 14 October 1936. The base was to be commanded by leading communists, and the Parisian offices of the French Communist Party (Parti Communiste Français, PCF) were designated by the Comintern as the transit point for recruits from all over Europe on their way to Spain. Its importance to international volunteers only increased from February 1937 when, as part of continuing international efforts to localise the Spanish conflict, the Franco-Spanish border was closed and the Spanish coast blockaded by an international fleet. From that moment, volunteers all but required the help of the international Communist Party apparatus to reach Spain.⁵

The International Brigades quickly became the default destination for international volunteers for Spain. Their recruitment drive stressed the fight against fascism as transcending narrow party-political boundaries, and they welcomed anti-fascists of many different creeds among their ranks. However, their creation by the Comintern polarised scholarly opinion on both its organisation, and its membership from the moment the Spanish Civil War ended. Were the Brigades composed of communists fighting to establish a 'Red' Spain? Were they innocent idealists duped by the Comintern into fighting for Moscow? Or were they simply committed, as Eric Hobsbawm put it, to 'the only political cause which, even in retrospect, appears as pure and compelling as it did in 1936', to halt the rise of fascism and Nazism before it was too late? Since the 1990s the opening of archives related to the Civil War has refocused research on the creation of collective biographies of national contingents of International Brigades, particularly those from the United States, France and the United Kingdom, in order to answer these questions.⁶

This chapter, however, seeks to explore another angle, and focuses on the International Brigades as a focal point for the diverse transnational experiences of those who volunteered. In choosing to fight for Spain, anti-fascists from all over the globe came together, each guided by a wide range of expectations and beliefs. On the Spanish battlefields, people came to different understandings of themselves and others, of their role in world affairs and of the meaning of anti-fascism, fascism and communism. Fighting a war far from their home and surrounded by 'otherness', they added new layers to individuals' already complex identities, and were propelled on new paths by the way they navigated the conflict and its confusing aftermath. Moreover, crossing paths in Spain was not always simple. It might also result in failures to communicate, misunderstandings, disappointments and even conflict, the aftereffects of which lingered long after the end of the war.

In order to explore these developments, we will follow eight very different and relatively unknown people who all travelled to Spain from far-flung parts of Europe in order to fight fascism, as they understood it. These were Aureliano Santini from Italy, Clara Thalmann from Switzerland, Galia Sincari from Romania, Žanis Folmanis from Latvia, Ljubo Ilić from Yugoslavia, Jona Brodtkin from the British Mandate of Palestine, and Jef Last from the Netherlands. They have been chosen not because they were crucial to the Spanish war effort, were uniquely present at key junctures of its history or are archetypal of different varieties of transnational experience. It is rather because, firstly, these eight have left testimonies which allow us to trace transnational 'lines' and 'nodes': that is, their routes into and through the Spanish conflict, and the hubs of transnational activity where these routes crossed with those of others. These allow us, secondly, to (re)consider key questions of agency and identity within the mass ideological conflicts of the twentieth century. Thirdly, these cases give us insights into the very different geographical and institutional contexts that shaped their anti-fascism, ranging from the Arab–Jewish conflict in Palestine and anti-Semitism in Romania to the experience of exile in Paris and an intellectual's disappointment in Stalin's leadership. Fourthly, their histories provide an implicit commentary on and even a correction to our understanding of the global anti-fascist solidarity movement for Spain which, until now, has been shaped primarily through British, French and American frames of reference.

Pathways to Spain

Anti-fascists broadly understood the Spanish Civil War as a local flash-point in a global war between fascism and its opponents. Victory or

defeat would therefore have consequences that far superseded the local Spanish context. Victory might mean that fascists everywhere would be on the defensive, even in Germany and Italy; defeat meant that the fascists would be emboldened, perhaps enough to launch a new world war. The International Brigades’ motto, *Por vuestra libertad y la nuestra* (‘For your freedom and ours’), reflected this connection between the Spanish struggle, the global ideological battle between fascism and anti-fascism (in whatever guise), and individual brigades’ own concerns about their present and future.⁷

Those who joined the International Brigades from an enforced exile, such as the young Italian communist Aureliano Santini, born in 1912, were perhaps most alive to this connection between the local and the global. As a ten-year-old, he saw Benito Mussolini’s Blackshirts burn the socialist party branch headquarters in his native Empoli, in Tuscany. Deeply shaken by this act of violence, Santini yearned for a chance to retaliate against the Blackshirts and at the age of eighteen joined an underground communist cell. After he was twice arrested and imprisoned, Santini decided to join other Italian communists in exile in France. In Paris, which had become the prime European hub for exiles fleeing persecution in the 1930s, the PCF played a key role in helping communists who were fleeing political persecution in countries with right-wing, fascist or Nazi dictatorships to re-establish a working political apparatus. Evidently impressing the leadership of the exiled Italian communists in Paris, Santini was chosen to study at the International Lenin School in Moscow, where the future cadres of the Party were trained. This gave him opportunities for both a Marxist-Leninist education and the practical acquisition of a working knowledge of German and Russian. Letters from the late 1930s to his friends and loved ones back in Italy testify that his separation from them heightened his feelings of urgency and that the struggle against fascism was at once Italian and global. When news of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War reached him, Santini was among the first to join the Giuseppe Garibaldi Battalion of the International Brigades, composed of Italian exiles.⁸ His letters to his girlfriend, who had begged him not to go, detail his belief that going to Spain was his duty as an Italian and a communist. ‘Could I be absent from a great fight like the one fought in Spain? No! I am happy to find myself here in the midst of the struggle’.⁹

Santini’s words will have sounded familiar to many Germans, Austrians, Yugoslavs and others who had been forced underground or into exile for their political beliefs, and who relished the fight against fascism. In Spain they could both engage their enemies in a fair fight and give their own dictators a bloody nose in the process. This realisation was sometimes not immediate. Ljubomir (‘Ljubo’) Ilić had voluntarily chosen exile, leaving his

native, impoverished Split (in current-day Croatia), where he was born in 1905, to pursue architecture studies in Paris. There he combined a cosmopolitan lifestyle with an interest in left-wing politics. He engaged with communism intellectually rather than emotionally, as Santini did, and in the early 1930s decided to join both the French and the Yugoslav Communist Parties, the latter having its headquarters in Paris because of political repression at home. Following the assassination of King Alexander of Yugoslavia in Marseilles in October 1934, during a state visit to France, Ilić was held for four months by French police and repeatedly beaten. This clearly had a radicalising effect on him, and after his release Ilić was one of the first Yugoslavs to go to Spain. According to his Yugoslav Communist Party file he did not volunteer as such but was ordered to go by the party-in-exile to prepare the ground for other Yugoslavs to follow.¹⁰

Žanis Folmanis, like Ilić, was an intellectual. An aspiring Latvian poet and writer, born in 1910, he joined a Riga communist cell when in May 1934 a coup installed a right-wing dictatorship led by Kārlis Ulmanis. After the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War Folmanis immediately set his sights on joining the International Brigades in order to defeat fascism both in Spain and internationally. This, however, was far from easy. Latvia's borders were heavily patrolled, and its accession to the international non-intervention agreement heightened government surveillance of potential Spanish volunteers. Folmanis nevertheless obtained a passport and bought a train ticket to Paris with money collected by Latvian chapter of the Comintern-affiliated International Red Aid, under the pretence of visiting the 1937 International Exhibition in Paris. Once there he used the underground 'railway' established by the PCF to shuttle volunteers across the Franco-Spanish border in secret, although for him the 'railway' meant crossing the Pyrenees on foot.¹¹

Galia Sincari, by contrast, was far from a devoted anti-fascist, let alone a communist. In her case, it was not personal or ideological convictions, nor any external pressure exerted on her by a political party or organisation that inspired her volunteering for Spain. Born in 1912 into the Jewish minority that lived in Bessarabia, she moved to the interior of Romania and worked as a nurse in a Jewish hospital in the Romanian town of Iași. She associated with communists socially, but a former colleague asserted in 1950 that communist colleagues had a hard time trusting her.¹² What is clear, however, is that early in 1937 she faced disciplinary actions at the hospital for allegedly socialising with communists, and that Iași was threatened by the anti-Semitic violence of the far-right Iron Guard movement. Vulnerable professionally and fearing for her safety, Sincari sought a way out. When she was approached by a communist handler who solicited her aid to fight for Spain, she accepted, although on condition that she

could say goodbye to her mother in Bessarabia.¹³ She undertook the trip to Paris at roughly the same time as Folmanis and using the same cover story. Sincari later testified that the shared experience of crossing the Pyrenean border brought together her rag-tag group of Europeans, who could not speak each other’s language, and resulted in joint celebrations when they finally caught sight of Spain.¹⁴

Galia Sincari was not the only woman to travel to Spain. About thirty women from Romania alone volunteered for the International Red Aid missions, the medical services of the Republican Army or the International Brigades. But not everybody accepted the contemporary gender norms that a women’s place in war was at home or in the hospitals. Clara Thalmann, born in Basel, Switzerland, in 1908, was one of them, although she conceded in later interviews that at the time she scarcely considered herself a trailblazer or even a feminist. Rather, she felt like a political outsider who had fallen out with the Communist Party in 1925 for sympathising with the so-called Left Opposition and its chief ideologue, Leon Trotsky. She was inspired by the powerful Spanish anarcho-syndicalist movement, which advocated a far more radical programme of revolution than the Stalinist Soviet Union. Its inclusion in the Spanish Popular Front government a sign that its economic-political principles might begin to shape the policy of a major European state. Her interests in Spanish ultra-left politics combined with her love of swimming to bring her to Barcelona in July 1936, where she was to compete in the Workers’ Olympiad. When war broke out she promptly joined the Durutti Column, a Spanish anarcho-syndicalist militia named after José Buenaventura Durruti Dumange, the anarchist militant who had prevented Barcelona’s takeover by rebel officers.¹⁵

Spanish resistance to fascism, at least to begin with, provided many of those who had become confused or disillusioned by left-wing politics with a simple, pure creed. Jona Brodtkin, born in 1901, was another of them. In his unpublished memoirs, as related to and recorded by a relative of his in 1982, he reveals that he had begun to doubt the party line before coming to Spain. Born a Jewish inhabitant of the Ottoman Empire, he became embroiled in the civil strife that rocked Palestine, administered as a mandate by the British nominally on behalf of the League of Nations, in the 1930s. A member of the local Communist Party, he and his fellow members were ordered to support the Arab inhabitants of Palestine in their anti-British and anti-Zionist revolt in early 1936.¹⁶ Faced with the prospect of either having to fight fellow Jews or being thrown out of the Party, many Palestinian-Jewish communists volunteered for what Brodtkin called the ‘Spanish democracy protection war’. Although his memoirs do not state this explicitly, Brodtkin may have been one of many who left

Palestine to fight a good, clean fight and at the same time escape ostracism by the Communist Party.¹⁷

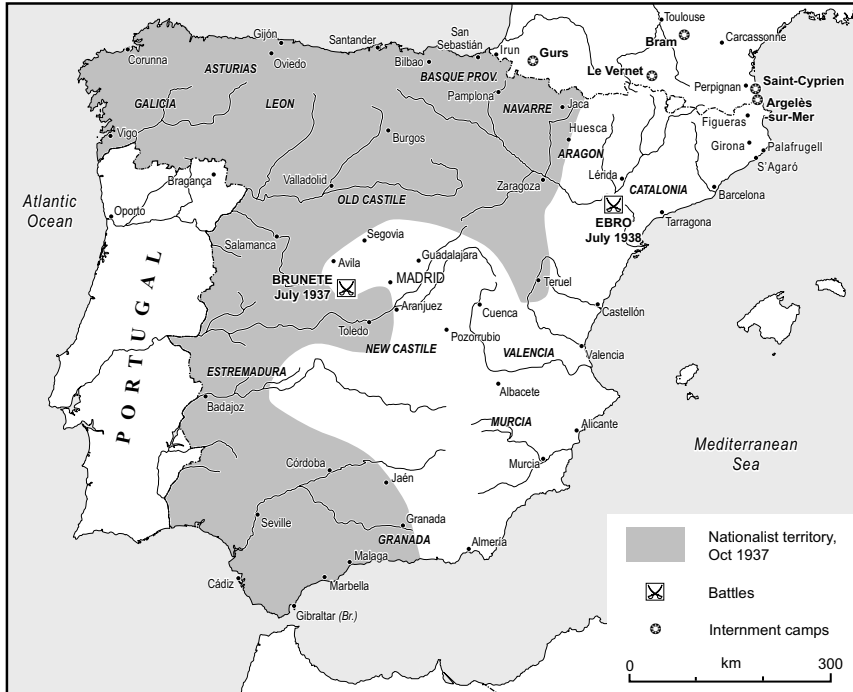
The disillusionment with Communist Party politics of the Dutch novelist Jef Last, born in 1898, likewise played a crucial role in his decision to embark for Spain. His disappointment originated in the Soviet Union, which he visited a number of times to write propaganda pieces about the miracles of communism for Dutch Communist Party newspapers. In his private diary, however, he confided that the visits had left him with the sense that Stalin had turned the Soviet Union into a virtual dictatorship where his will was law and the overbearing power of the state crushed humanity.¹⁸ He was nevertheless unwilling at this stage to take the ultimate step of leaving the party. In the 1960s, long after he had completed his break with communism, he explained:

One can simply cancel one's membership of a club or political party when one does not longer believe in what it stands for. But the Communist Party was something else: we felt it was the vanguard of the proletariat, and therefore History's inexorable will made tangible reality. Leaving the Communist Party meant being *extra muros* and nothing you said or did could ever make a real difference again. All you could do is stay within the Party, keep your discontent to yourself, swallow your pride and patiently await the day when the Soviet Union and the Comintern would be democratised.¹⁹

André Gide, the future Nobel Prize-winning French author and Last's lover, would later claim that Last saw in Spain a form of pure communism, untainted by the blemishes he had seen during his travels across the Soviet Union.²⁰ As if to underscore his independence from the party, Last used his own transnational connections to get to Spain: Gide introduced him to André Malraux, who was helping to organise the Spanish Republic's air force and managed to secure Last a seat on a plane heading towards the war.²¹

Transnational harmony and discord in Spain

The first volunteers to come to Spain after the outbreak of the Civil War in July 1936 formed volunteer 'columns' or 'centuria' or joined existing Spanish units. After the creation of the International Brigade of the Spanish Republican or People's Army in October 1936, most (but not all) foreign volunteers joined one of their battalions.²² The Brigade's Comintern-appointed leadership decided from the outset to group soldiers who spoke 'roughly' the same language together.²³ This copied Soviet nationality policy, which held that so long as the content of the message was socialist the language in which was spoken or written was immaterial.²⁴ It soon



1 Spain during the Civil War, 1937

emerged, however, that the realities of warfare and the uneven flow of recruits prevented gathering 'language groups' or nationalities together. Jona Brodtkin was sent by the Brigades' leadership not to a Palestinian or Jewish unit but to the Franco-Belgian 'Bataillon Six-Février', named after the fascist riots against the French Republic on that day in 1934. In other cases, people who spoke the same language were grouped together with others whose language or cultures were thought of as 'similar'. Dutchmen, for example, were put in German and French-speaking Belgian units.²⁵ Additionally, military necessity often forced transfers of recruits with particular technical and or tactical skills between units regardless of nationality or language concerns.²⁶ The Latvian writer Žanis Folmanis was one of them: he was assigned to the 3rd Kolarev Battery of the 1st Slavic Heavy Artillery Group because his military service in the Latvian army made him a suitable candidate in the eyes of the International Brigades' leadership.²⁷ The battery's members came from thirteen different countries. Neither Folmanis or any of the other twelve Latvians in his unit spoke the officers' Bulgarian or the Serbo-Croatian that was used by his instructors in topography and trigonometry – essential skills in artillery spotting. Common

ground was found, however, when Folmanis found out that one of his instructors, like him, spoke German.²⁸

Between October and December 1936, the International Brigade was joined by three others; a fourth followed early in 1937. Together, the four brigades participated in the successful defence of Madrid, providing much-needed enthusiasm, tangible signs of global support and manpower. However, the Civil War raged on, and the bloody battles that followed decimated the International Brigades, leaving about fifteen thousand or 70 per cent of its original members either dead or wounded. These mass casualties necessitated a thorough reorganisation of the brigades which was undertaken in May–June 1937. New units were formed from depleted old ones, and officers and experts were moved around.²⁹ At least theoretically the reorganisation adhered stringently to the principle of division along linguistic lines, since easily identifiable ‘national’ units created attractive possibilities for recruitment and political propaganda.³⁰ However, specialised combat, artillery and engineering units, and much of the administrative and support staff at Albacete, remained thoroughly ‘international’. There were simply not enough qualified pilots or artillery spotters from a single country or ethnic or linguistic group to justify splitting them up. Moreover, units from different national contingents continued to meet each other in transports, on leave, at the Albacete base, and, of course, on the battlefield.

Often these – sometimes brief – contacts with ‘others’ who shared the same broad anti-fascist agenda were later remembered as ‘real and touching’ instances of transnational solidarity, perhaps best symbolised by the communal singing of the *Internationale*. Socialists, communists and other leftists all knew the tune and could sing along in their own language, creating a transnational harmony. Deep bonds were created by wordlessly shared cigarettes, taking an active interest in other cultures by learning their particular swear words and, of course, being together under fire. However, living and fighting together created transnational discord as well as harmony. What the Italian International Brigades’ chief inspector Luigi Longo tactfully characterised as ‘differences in language, military experience, and customs’ produced numerous frictions both within and between units.³¹ Another, perhaps even more important, cause for transnational strife was the tension that could exist – and was often exacerbated over time – between the very different anti-fascisms of the volunteers and the political realities of Spain. These were sharpened by the prominent role played by the Communist International in establishing and maintaining the International Brigades.

Before the International Brigades were established the shape of anti-fascism in Spain, and who or what could be included in it, were not

clearly defined. This fluidity thrived in the, often chaotic, circumstances that characterised anti-fascist resistance during the first weeks of the Civil War. According to her husband Paul, Clara Thalmann navigated this chaos with ease, quickly establishing contact with both Spaniards and other European volunteers in the new *Grupo Internacional* of the anarcho-syndicalist Durutti Column. She relished the fight and only later realised that she too had been a witness or perhaps even a party to violent excesses. In 1984 she wrote: ‘Knowing what I know today I would not have agreed with ... for example, nuns and suspicious persons being shot immediately. This happened in the heat of battle and was the result of an angry discharge of a generation’s suppressed feelings of impotence towards their exploiters and the fascists who plotted the coup.’ What did change were her feelings about anarchism. Dismayed at the bickering and infighting, and impressed with the Comintern’s organisational prowess as evidenced in the creation of the International Brigades, she reported to Albacete to sign up in early 1937. The International Brigades, however, turned her away: women, she was told, had no place in a professional army. In desperation, she returned to the *Grupo Internacional* but here, too, most of the female fighters had been purged from the ranks. ‘The women who built barricades and dug trenches ... were now sent to hospitals’, she recalled bitterly in 1985.³² When during the so-called May Days of 1937 infighting between anarchists and communists led to street fights in Barcelona, Clara and Paul remained at the front. There they were detained by agents of Soviet intelligence. Held separately, they took to singing Swiss folk songs with lines subtly changed in order to keep each other informed of the line of questioning. They were released only following an urgent appeal from the Labour and Socialist International, and immediately left the country. Apparently, there was no longer a place in Spain for their brand of anti-fascism, which fell foul of both established political and gender lines.³³

The Dutchman Jef Last seemed to fit in much better. He was assigned by the Spanish Ministry of Defence to the Sargento Vazquez militia, consisting of communist day labourers from a Madrid slum. Last fitted in remarkably well with them, writing to his lover André Gide how much he enjoyed and admired their ‘simplicity, ... good cheer, enthusiasm and courage’.³⁴ Last’s new Spanish comrades came to appreciate him as well, admiring his willingness to learn the language and to throw himself into combat with almost reckless abandon.³⁵ It seems that Last had finally left behind his doubts and found companionship with ‘real’ communists, but his renewed commitment to the cause was not to last. Gide published two hyper-critical essays on the Soviet Union, and Last, whose friendship with and admiration for Gide was well known (even if their relationship was not), was forced by the Comintern to publicly denounce his lover at

the International Congress of Anti-Fascist Intellectuals, held in Saragossa in July 1937. Moreover, the Comintern made sure he was transferred from his Spanish unit to the International Brigades, where, he was told, Comintern representatives in Spain could 'better keep an eye on you'.³⁶ Last confessed in private letters that he agreed to this because he did not want to cause a row: the common anti-fascist cause was simply too important. For the Comintern, meanwhile, Last remained a troublesome but important asset. A prolific writer, public speaker and polyglot, he was frequently sent out on European propaganda tours to advocate the cause of the Spanish Republic.

On 1 March 1938, nonetheless, in the middle of one such tour of France, Belgium and Scandinavia, Last suddenly resigned his membership of the Communist Party.³⁷ At the time, he claimed that disappointment over the Soviet Union's unwillingness to firmly support the military effort of the Republic was at the heart of the decision. Later he would come to understand it as the logical conclusion of his growing disappointment with communism. However, letters to Gide testify that at the time there was another reason for his sudden decision: he found a new outlet, purer than the advocacy for Republican Spain now tainted by the political machinations of the Comintern, for his anti-fascism. In Madrid, he had been approached by the socialist International Transport Workers' Federation (ITWF) to spearhead a mission to Antwerp and Scandinavia in order to re-establish contact between the ITWF and German sailors' organisations. Naturally, the communist press in the Netherlands denounced Last as a traitor to the cause and a Trotskyite, while not so subtly suggesting that his failures of political understanding had their roots in moral and sexual deviancy.³⁸ Like Thalmann's, Last's brand of anti-fascism was, in the end, not deemed compatible with those espoused by the International Brigades and the Communist Party.

Whereas Last and Thalmann were set on paths away from the Civil War and communism, for Aurelio Santini the war served to confirm his ideological beliefs, and provided him with a career-making opportunity. After arriving in Spain in early October 1936, Santini quickly distinguished himself as a soldier of the Garibaldi Battalion. An engaging speaker, he was given an additional role as radio propagandist. On 28 March 1937, during one of his addresses, he gave his countrymen a message of hope:

A young Italian is addressing our martyred nation, Italy ... with a message from this great country, from all those young people fighting for its destiny. This message is to let all young Italians know our fight is in Spain.³⁹

In private letters to his girlfriend he added that he was immensely proud that his countrymen had heard him all the way back home and that he

was fighting for ‘the freedom and happiness of all people’ in Italy and Spain.⁴⁰ Both his military prowess and his successes as a propagandist were seemingly recognised and rewarded when, later in 1937, IB command sent him to the officers’ training school at Pozorrubio for specialised military and political instruction and Spanish lessons. He was then moved from his Italian unit to the 52nd Infantry Division of the Spanish People’s Army, where he was to instruct and inspire. Again, this move is highly indicative of the trust placed in him not only by the Comintern but by the People’s Army general staff as well.⁴¹

The Yugoslav communist Ljubo Ilić, too, saw his transnational experiences in Spain give his career within the party a significant boost. Even more so than Santini, he quickly developed into a commander of note, thanks partly to the contacts he made with high-ranking Spanish communists in the Quinto Regimiento de Milicias Populares, a communist paramilitary unit formed just after the outbreak of the Civil War. After the establishment of the International Brigades, he became first political commissar and then commander of his unit, which was part of the Dąbrowski Battalion of the XI International Brigade.⁴² A further indication of the faith placed in him by both his military and political superiors was that he, like Santini, was dispatched to Pozorrubio. Here the former student of architecture and French-speaking intellectual was discovered to have a talent for what we now would call irregular warfare. He received additional training by high-ranking Soviet officers in sabotage, infiltration and psychological operations. Ilić then went on to join a guerrilla unit operating behind enemy lines in Córdoba and Granada. After being seriously wounded during the August 1937 Saragossa Offensive, Ilić was withdrawn from active duty and appointed commander of the officers’ school in Barcelona, which gave him even greater international influence.⁴³

Where Santini and Ilić felt at home in the transnational environs of Spain and moved between different units and up the military and political ladder with ease, Galia Sincari had, at least to begin with, considerably more difficulty fitting in.⁴⁴ Upon arrival in Spain she was assigned to the Casa Roja hospital in Murcia, but she had no way of communicating with her Spanish-speaking colleagues. At first, she later recalled, she resorted to using a rudimentary sign language. Later, a German-American doctor took her under his wing and taught her some Spanish. Having found a way to communicate, Sincari seems to have been energised by the war both professionally and politically. Only twenty-five years old, she was appointed chief nurse and put in charge of the nurses’ training programme. She testified in 1956 that the Spanish wounded referred to her as ‘Madre’. ‘I was young, and proud, and at some point, I asked them why they would call me that. Did I look so old? They answered that they called me “Madre” as a sign

of gratitude, because I took care of them like their own mothers would.' Among those in her care was a fellow Romanian and her future husband, Mihail Burcă, wounded at the Battle of Brunete. It was hardly love at first sight, confessed Sincari later, as Burcă seemed interested in little else than politics. However, she quickly added, the pair did end up getting married in April 1938, whereupon Sincari joined the Spanish Communist Party (Partido Comunista de España, PCE) – perhaps, as we will see, more to please her new husband than out of a new sense of conviction.⁴⁵

The importance of hospitals as sites of transnational interaction and the importance of language skills are underscored by Jona Brodtkin's experience in Spain. After a mere twenty days at the front, his battalion was sent to join the Republican effort at the Battle of Jarama. 'We suffered heavy losses and had a plenty of dead and wounded comrades', he recalled, adding that 'our dressing stations soon became overburdened, and our understaffed units now freely intermixed.' In the midst of this transnational chaos, Brodtkin was hit in the leg and transported to the IB hospital at Tarragona, where his wound developed gangrene and his leg had to be amputated. From Tarragona, he was transported for continued treatment to the Casa Roja hospital, and then on to the IB hospital at Albacete base. Like the medical staff, the wounded formed quite a transnational group. Brodtkin soon became somewhat of a central figure, according to his own autobiography. His life in Palestine and in exile in Austria and France had made him a polyglot. In a Comintern questionnaire, which he completed in March 1938, he claimed to speak Yiddish, Hebrew, Arabic, German and French, which allowed him to act as a translator and, if needed, a mediator.⁴⁶ The ability to speak another language was certainly a boon in transnational Spain and often went a long way to increase transnational harmony. But being able to communicate did not in and of itself produce understanding, especially in situations where the hopes and dreams of individual volunteers clashed with an increasingly homogenising and communism-dominated anti-fascism.

Reimagining and reinventing Spain

In mid-1938, in a final effort to localise the war, the British and French governments put forward a plan to withdraw all non-Spanish troops from Spain. At first, the republican government balked at the suggestion, but on 21 September 1938 the Republican prime minister Juan Negrín announced a sudden reversal of policy. Recognising that the Popular Army could not hope to win the war against the rebels, who enjoyed tank and air superiority and were better trained and led, he hoped that if the rebels would have to make do without Italian and German help they might be inclined

to agree to a negotiated settlement.⁴⁷ By contrast, the Republican Army could easily do without the remaining International Brigades, who were by now largely a spent force. The Non-Intervention Committee facilitated an orderly retreat, at least for those brigades hailing from north-western European countries; the Central and Eastern European dictatorships simply refused to let their countrymen, who had often been stripped of their nationality, return home.⁴⁸

A significant number of International Brigades therefore simply ignored the 21 September 1938 order to retreat and disband. They could not go home and hoped to turn the tide on the battlefield at the eleventh hour. Žanis Folmanis made his way to Palafrugell in Gerona province where other Central and Eastern European International Brigades – Poles, Czechs, Bulgarians, Yugoslavs, Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians – had converged. From there, they hoped to march on Barcelona to defend it against the encroaching rebels who had begun an invasion of Catalonia in late December 1938. But rebel forces moved too quickly and Folmanis’s group instead moved to Figueres, where the republican government had relocated. They could not join in Republican Catalonia’s last stand, as the rebels mercilessly bombed Figueres’s communication lines, preventing them from reaching the city. Folmanis, like many others, therefore had no choice but to flee to France, where he arrived on 8 February 1939.⁴⁹

Galia Sincari’s hospital, meanwhile, had been evacuated to S’Agaró, two towns away from Palafrugell. In a 1956 interview she recalled longingly watching ships in its harbour, each one offering the tantalising possibility of rescue. When, instead, one such ship opened fire on the town, the hospital staff decided to join Folmanis and countless others and flee to France. So, when all the wounded and the civilians had left, and the dying had been euthanised, the remaining hospital staff huddled together in a single lorry and drove to France over roads crowded with refugees and under fire from rebel planes.⁵⁰

Aureliano Santini and Ljubo Ilić stayed behind. Now that they were officers in the Popular Army rather than in the International Brigades, the order to retreat did not formally apply to them. They served with the Republican forces to the very last, and bore witness to the final defeat of the Republic before making the desperate flight in the only direction open to them: the French border.⁵¹ Last was, as we have seen, denounced as a deserter, and the invalided Brodkin was part of the first wave of evacuees and had been granted a temporary stay in France to recuperate in a Parisian hospital.

After the collapse of the Spanish Republic there was no place for the volunteers who had come from all over Europe to fight for the anti-fascist cause. The outbreak of war in 1939 intensified nationalism and increased

intolerance of those who had willingly left their homelands to fight for a now discredited cause. France, though a republic, shut up in internment camps Spanish Republicans and International Brigaders who fled over the Pyrenees. A few volunteers tried to reach the Soviet Union, but in the era of the Great Purges they too were regarded with suspicion. The Soviet Union's Non-Aggression Pact with Nazi Germany shattered what remained of a Popular Front; although most Communist Party members remained loyal and trusted Stalin's tactical genius, it horrified those outside the Party. The defeat and occupation of so many European countries by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy demoralised the mass of citizens for a long time before, in the wake of the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, resistance movements began to push up tender shoots.

Our eight volunteers navigated these challenges in very different ways. Some kept the anti-fascist faith, others wavered, and a few lost it. All, however, survived the war – here they are, unfortunately, atypical – and were then faced by new political paradigms. Fascism and Nazism were defeated by the Allied powers. Communism, championed by the Soviet Union, was in the ascendant and came to power in East-Central Europe, keen to purge those who were considered to have betrayed it. In their political choices, and in the paper trail they left, they were obliged to tell their story not necessarily as it was but as it had to be in the Cold War world of post-1945. Reinventing a past as a resistance fighter was a question of political survival.

Alone of our eight characters, Ljubo Ilić needed no lies or omissions to prove his loyalty to the cause. He remained faithful to Comintern directives throughout the war, following the switch of Soviet policy from Popular Frontism to the 1939 Non-Aggression Pact with Germany, and from Allied warfare to the Cold War. He spent the war in France, initially in internment camps, where his experience in Spanish army command caused him to be looked upon for leadership, and then, after he escaped from prison in 1943, as commander of all foreign forces active in occupied France. Although the Comintern initially seemed to question his 'independent-mindedness' and his apparent inability to 'break with petty-bourgeois affections', his status as war hero cemented his political career in Soviet-aligned Yugoslavia.⁵² Politically he survived the Tito–Stalin split of 1948 and served his country as military official and ambassador, his service in Spain and France now reinterpreted as a heroic life in exile spent fighting for Yugoslav ideals and Titoism *avant la lettre*.⁵³

Aureliano Santini, by contrast, chose to omit certain details of his life story from the public record after the war, when he rose to a position of prominence in the Italian Communist Party (Partito Comunista Italiano, PCI). He glossed over the fact that he had petitioned the Fascist

government to be allowed to return to Italy from the French internment camps. He was even briefly drafted in the army of Fascist Italy upon his return, but deserted quickly after the Allies invaded Sicily without seeing any combat. He then became a chief organiser for resistance activities in his native Tuscany, where his Civil War-era experience with sabotage and guerrilla warfare proved extremely useful.⁵⁴

After fleeing to France Žanis Folmanis, too, was interned in a camp. In May 1939, like Santini, he begged the Latvian legation in Paris to allow him to return home and similarly managed to bury this embarrassing fact after 1945. His request, unlike Santini's, was quickly turned down, since the right-wing dictatorship of the day had no intention of allowing someone considered a dangerous left-wing radical back into the country.⁵⁵ However, the invasion and subsequent forced incorporation of the Baltic States into the Soviet Union in June–August 1940 suddenly changed Folmanis's legal position. He had become a Soviet citizen and was released and repatriated. He remained in contact with fellow Latvian veterans of the Spanish Civil War, and joined them in forming a volunteer battalion when the Germans invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941. Quickly promoted to battalion commander, he led his Latvian volunteers in rearguard actions, participating in the defence of Leningrad. He then joined the Latvian Rifles division of the Red Army as an intelligence officer, making handy use of his Civil War-era knowledge of topography and artillery spotting.⁵⁶ After the Second World War, now part of the ruling political elite, Folmanis finally embarked on the literary career of which he had dreamed before going to Spain. He published short stories and novels based on his experiences during the Spanish Civil War, highlighting his own efforts, and those of his Latvian countrymen, in the 3rd Kolarev Battery as paving the way for communism in their own country.

Galia Sincari, too, managed to reach France following the fall of Catalonia, but evaded internment. She found shelter in Saint-Privat, a village in the Hérault department whose socialist mayor sympathised with the plight of Republican Spain. It appears that only here, in exile, Sincari became a dedicated communist, celebrating May Day in 1939 together with her fellow communist refugees. Burcă joined her there in July 1939. He had been identified by Comintern as a future leader of the Romanian communist movement and was therefore allowed admission to the Soviet Union in order to receive additional political instruction and grooming. Sincari followed her husband to Moscow and spent the war years serving as a nurse in Soviet hospitals. In September 1947 Burcă was appointed deputy to the minister of the interior, which no doubt helped her to secure testimony from several former co-workers at the Iași hospital confirming her supposedly deep-rooted communist convictions; any evidence to the

contrary might be construed as a threat to their own career. In a meeting organised in 1956 for Romanian ex-International Brigaders, she claimed that her decision to go to Spain was the ultimate, and necessary, result of a life spent in service to the party, pointing to her membership of the PCE as proof.⁵⁷ In the Cold War context wartime collaboration with socialists and other non-communist leftists, and with Westerners in general, was interpreted by Stalinist hardliners as 'evidence' of treason.⁵⁸

Jona Brodtkin, like Burcă, was also regarded by Comintern as a good investment as a militant. This is made clear by the fact that he was not sent back to Palestine but was, instead, therefore transported from his French hospital to the Soviet Union for continued treatment and, more importantly, continued political instruction. The latter, apparently, he did not take. After the war, Brodtkin did not return to Palestine to become a leading revolutionary, but settled in Poland with his wife to live a quiet life. In 1968, however, he fell victim to an anti-Jewish campaign waged, as part of a complicated internal power struggle, by the Polish Communist Party. Despite the fact that Brodtkin did not occupy any position of power, political and media pressure forced him to emigrate to Israel.⁵⁹ There the Jewish International Brigades gained increasing recognition as Jewish resisters against Nazism and the Holocaust, whose fighting spirit was now embodied in the new state of Israel. Although Brodtkin, in his memoirs, expressed absolutely no interest in becoming a figurehead, Israeli memory politics turned him and his fellow Jewish Brigaders into symbols of national rather than anti-fascist resistance, conveniently ignoring the Communist Party politics that made many of them abandon partisan strife in Palestine for the Spanish Civil War in the first place.⁶⁰

Other former volunteers for the Spanish Civil War were even less lucky, falling victim to the national backlash in their home countries. Clara Thalmann was sentenced *in absentia* to a ten-month prison sentence by a Swiss court for attempting to recruit others to fight in Spain. After her release from Spanish prison she moved to France and largely kept her head down during the German occupation. She did not join any of the left-wing resistance cells, probably because of lingering disappointments over her experiences during the Civil War, but she resisted as she had fought in Spain: in her own way, by distributing leaflets and hiding Jewish refugees.⁶¹ After the war, Thalmann found fault with both ideological options on offer during the early Cold War. Instead, she and her husband bought a plot of land near Nice on the French Côte d'Azur and created their own perfect society in miniature, where the permanent social revolution they had fought for in Spain could finally be put into practice.⁶²

Others still fell into deep despair when confronted with the misery wrought by the Second World War. After the failure of his attempts to

galvanise support for socialism among German sailors, Last bore witness to the German invasion and subsequent occupation of the Netherlands in May 1940. He responded by descending into alcoholism and, albeit briefly, considering suicide. Fascism, he concluded, was unstoppable. ‘Everything I have worked twenty years for, everything I fought for, everything was lost, my best friends, my Spanish comrades ... lost or captured, everything was lost’, he wrote despondently. Early in 1941 he even toyed with the idea of joining a collaborationist political movement. Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union and the broadening of the Allied coalition gave him hope, and he decided to resist. But his status as a former communist made joining formal resistance movements difficult; distrusted by both mainstream socialists and communists, he only formally joined a resistance cell at the very end of the war.⁶³

Conclusion

The International Brigades fought for ‘your freedom and ours’. Their rallying call was, ostensibly, directed at all anti-fascists to join a battle *in* Spain but not purely *of* Spain: an essentially transnational battle cry. However, this transnational call to arms did not mean that everyone who heeded it saw the fight to preserve the Spanish Republic in quite the same terms. In fact, it was interpreted, and thus experienced, very differently through the prisms of equally different social, political and personal viewpoints, which were in turn shaped by diverse past experiences and expectations. The Spanish Civil War might be a chance to battle personal demons or fight a ‘good fight’, to hit back against stand-ins for local dictators, to partake in a revolutionary experiment, to prevent a fascist Spain from being a springboard for Hitler’s and Mussolini’s planned world domination, or some shifting combination of them. Given all of these meanings ascribed to the Spanish Civil War, it is no wonder that involvement in it could generate disillusionment and disappointment as well as enthusiasm or a renewed commitment to left-wing politics, especially communism.

Crucially, diverse transnational experiences of Spain often began before a would-be volunteer actually arrived there. They were often forged in transnational ‘nodes’ such as Paris, home of exiles, or the Moscow training institutes for communist cadre members. In other cases, they were shaped on the transnational ‘line’ from Paris to Spain, during the dangerous night trek across the Pyrenees. After the borders of Spain were closed by international agreement in early 1937 almost no-one made it to Spain without outside help, and the Comintern-organised ‘underground railway’ from Paris to Spain became even more crucial.

In Spain, the scope for transnational experiences within the International

Brigades were circumscribed by a number of different factors. The first was time. The creation of the International Brigades in October 1936, and their subsequent reorganisation in mid-1937, limited the scope for encountering other nationalities within single units – although not so for members of smaller national or language groups. The second was language ability, especially in mixed-nationality units. Some knowledge of a foreign language could be of vital help in connecting with others. The third was the growing professionalism of the International Brigades and an insistence on political reliability. Anti-fascism, which was never the same thing as communism, became ever more closely circumscribed as the Comintern-appointed International Brigades' leadership limited the ability of some anti-fascists to square their personal or political interpretations with the new realities of the war in Spain.

Finally, the transnational experiences undergone in Spain changed people. Fighters learned new skills, connected to existing networks or built new ones, and gained new appreciations of what it meant to be an anti-fascist. Some came away with their (party-) political convictions deepened, while others saw them shaken and, openly or privately, abandoned them. These effects continued to influence the trajectories of Spanish Civil War veterans during the Second World War they had fought so hard to prevent. After 1945 a carefully edited version of one's work in Spain might be useful to enable one to advance politically. Pressed into national or narrow party-political moulds, the global histories of the Spanish Civil War slowly became – to borrow a phrase from the Spanish Republic's most famous icon Dolores 'passionflower' Ibárruri – 'legend' rather than 'history'. It would take a long time for them to become history again.