

Michaela Wolf, Julia Kölbl, Iryna Orlova,
Dagmar Oswald (Hg.)

¿Pasarán?

*Kommunikation im Spanischen
Bürgerkrieg. Interacting
in the Spanish Civil War*



TRANSLATIONEN

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Interacting in the Spanish Civil War**

Julia Kölbl, Iryna Orlova, Michaela Wolf (Hg.)

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Interacting in the Spanish Civil War**

Translationen | #???

Gedruckt mit Unterstützung von:
Land Steiermark, Wissenschaft und Forschung



Universität Graz

UNIVERSITÄT GRAZ
UNIVERSITY OF GRAZ



Coverfoto: Werbeflyer mit dem Slogan ¡No pasarán! der antifaschistischen Volksfront in Spanien 1936, ©Mikhail Koltsov, 1.1.1936, Madrid

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

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www.newacademicpress.at

ISBN: 978-3-7003-2179-8

Gestaltung: Peter Sachartschenko
Druck: Prime Rate, Budapest

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¿Pasarán? Eine Einleitung¹

Im Spanischen Bürgerkrieg (1936–1939) standen einander die demokratisch gewählte Volksfrontregierung der Zweiten Spanischen Republik und die rechtsgerichteten Putschisten unter General Francisco Franco, die von Hitler und Mussolini gestärkt wurden, gegenüber. Die Regierung erhielt Unterstützung sowohl von der Sowjetunion und von Mexiko als auch von ca. 35.000 internationalen Freiwilligen, die vorwiegend von der Kommunistischen Internationale rekrutiert wurden und aus 53 Nationen stammten. Der Großteil der internationalen Freiwilligen kämpfte in den ebenfalls von der Komintern ab Oktober 1936 aufgestellten Internationalen Brigaden, die als Teil der republikanischen Volksarmee fast bis Kriegsende bestehen blieben.

Die Teilnahme an militärischen Aktivitäten innerhalb der Brigaden war ausschließlich Männern vorbehalten, wodurch sich in den verschiedenen Handlungsfeldern des Bürgerkrieges eine Genderspezifität entwickelte, die in weiterer Folge auch die Kommunikationshandlungen prägte. Während sich freiwillige Frauen vorrangig im Sanitäts- und Pressewesen bzw. in verschiedenen Administrationssparten engagierten, waren Männer in der Kommunikation innerhalb und zwischen den Truppen sowie im Rahmen der militärischen Ausbildung aktiv. In den Kontakt bzw. in das Zusammenleben mit der lokalen Bevölkerung waren hingegen sowohl Frauen als auch Männer involviert. Um der sprachlichen Diversität unter den Freiwilligen zu begegnen, wurden in einem ersten Schritt die Internationalen Brigaden vorwiegend nach nationalen bzw. sprachlichen Aspekten organisiert. In weiterer Folge wurde der Spracherwerb gezielt in eigens geschaffenen Kursen oder auch im Kontakt mit der einheimischen Bevölkerung in Angriff genommen. Jedoch reichten all diese Maßnahmen nicht aus, um Kommunikation in zufriedenstellendem Maß herzustellen, wie in der Erinnerungsliteratur von Spanienfreiwilligen immer wieder betont wird. Vielmehr wurde es – mit zunehmendem Kriegsverlauf – immer wichtiger, auf die Unterstützung von Dolmetscher_innen zurückzugreifen.

Diese und weitere kommunikationsstrategische Aspekte sind in der bisherigen Forschung nur sporadisch behandelt worden. Ziel dieses Sammelbandes ist es daher, einen multiperspektivischen Einblick in die komplexen Kommunikations- und Translationshandlungen des Bürgerkriegsalltages zu geben. Eine breit angelegte methodische Vorgehensweise gewährleistet dabei u.a. einen gezielten Zugriff auf bisher nicht oder kaum erhobenes facettenreiches Quellenmaterial. Die unterschiedlichen methodi-

1 Der Sammelband entstand im Rahmen des vom Jubiläumsfonds der Oesterreichischen Nationalbank geförderten und an der Universität Graz durchgeführten Projektes (Nr. 17780) „Dolmetschen und Übersetzen im Spanischen Bürgerkrieg, 1936–1939“.

schen Zugänge ermöglichen außerdem neue Sichtweisen auf den Umgang mit der sprachlichen Vielfalt und den damit einhergehenden Herausforderungen für die Translatorinnen und Translatoren und ihre Arbeitsweise sowie für die verschiedenen Translationssettings und die darin zutage tretenden Machtverhältnisse.

Mit Blick auf die notorischen politischen und ideologischen Konflikte im Bürgerkrieg soll das Publikationsvorhaben einen wesentlichen Beitrag zur Erweiterung und Vertiefung der diesbezüglichen Diskussion um eine kulturelle und sprachliche Dimension leisten. Die Mehrsprachigkeit des Bandes steht dabei für die vielsprachigen Solidaritätsbemühungen auf Seiten der Republikaner im internationalen Widerstand gegen Franco. Die Sprachen der Beiträge des Sammelbandes (Spanisch, Englisch, Deutsch) sollen einige der größten Sprachgruppen innerhalb der Internationalen Brigaden repräsentieren. Ebenso hat die Vielsprachigkeit der Brigaden zum Beschluss der Herausgeberinnen geführt, dass Zitate im Text in Originalsprache erhalten bleiben, während ihre Übersetzung in Fußnoten gesetzt wird. Abschließend ist es ein Anliegen, Dagmar Oswald unseren herzlichen Dank dafür auszusprechen, dass sie an der Herausgabe dieses Sammelbandes in der Anfangsphase beteiligt war und einen wertvollen Beitrag zur Konzeptualisierung geleistet hat.

Julia Kölbl, Iryna Orlova, Michaela Wolf

¿Pasarán? An Introduction²

During the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), the democratically elected Popular Front government of the Second Spanish Republic fought against the right-wing rebels led by General Francisco Franco. While the Nationalists were supported by Hitler and Mussolini, the Republicans were aided by the Soviet Union, Mexico and some 35,000 volunteers from 53 nations, who were mainly recruited by the Communist International (Comintern). From October 1936 onwards, the majority of the international volunteers served in the International Brigades that were organised by the Comintern and part of the Republican Army almost until the end of the conflict.

Within the Brigades, engagement in military activities was reserved for men only, which caused the Civil War's different fields of action to be gender-specific in nature, thus also influencing communicative actions. While women were primarily involved in the medical services, the press or in administration, men were active in the communication within and between the military units, as well as in the military training. Both men and women either interacted or lived with the local population. In order to counteract the volunteers' linguistic and national diversity, the International Brigades were firstly organised by nationality and language group. Subsequently, language acquisition was promoted by the creation of language courses and by interaction with the local population. Yet – as often described in memoirs of Spanish Civil War volunteers – all of these actions were insufficient to establish successful communication, which is why the support of interpreters became increasingly important during the course of the conflict.

These and other aspects related to communication strategies have remained nearly unexplored so far. Thus, the aim of this volume is to provide a multi-perspective view on the complex communicative and translatorial actions performed in everyday life during the war. The application of a variety of methods ensures the targeted access of the multifaceted and (practically) unexplored source material. The different methodological approaches also open up new perspectives on how linguistic diversity was managed and on the associated challenges for translators and their work as well as on the different translation settings and the power relationships that emerged within them.

By taking into account the notorious political and ideological conflicts which marred the Civil War, this volume hopes to be able to add a cultural and linguistic perspective to the study of the conflict. The aim of the multilingual composition of this

2 The volume has been edited as part of the research project (no. 17780) "Interpreting and Translating during the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939" at the University of Graz and has been funded by the Jubilee Fund of the Austrian National Bank (Jubiläumsfonds der Oesterreichischen Nationalbank).

volume is to reflect the international solidarity efforts of the supporters of the Republic in their resistance against Franco. The language of the papers included in the volume (Spanish, English, German) also represent some of the largest language groups within the International Brigades. Furthermore, the linguistic diversity within the Brigades has led to the editors' decision to maintain the quotes in their original language, with their translations being given in the footnotes. Finally, we wish to thank Dagmar Oswald for her commitment and valuable contribution to the conceptualization of this volume.

Julia Kölbl, Iryna Orlova, Michaela Wolf

¿Pasarán?

Una introducción³

En la Guerra Civil española (1936–1939) se enfrentaron el gobierno del Frente Popular de la Segunda República, elegido democráticamente, y los golpistas de derechas liderados por el general Francisco Franco y respaldados por los regímenes de Hitler y Mussolini. El gobierno republicano recibió el apoyo de la Unión Soviética, de México y de unos 35.000 voluntarios y voluntarias internacionales que, reclutados/as por la Internacional Comunista, provenían de 53 países. La mayoría de aquellos/as voluntarios/as luchó en las Brigadas Internacionales, que el Comintern había creado en octubre de 1936 y que formaban parte del Ejército republicano.

En los combates de las Brigadas Internacionales participaron exclusivamente hombres, por lo que en los diferentes campos de acción de la guerra se estableció una relación de géneros que influyó decisivamente en la comunicación. Mientras que las mujeres brigadistas trabajaban sobre todo en los servicios sanitarios, de prensa o en la administración, los hombres se encargaban de la comunicación entre las tropas y de la formación militar. Los contactos con la población civil los establecían tanto mujeres como hombres. Para afrontar la diversidad lingüística entre los/las voluntarios/as, las Brigadas se organizaron en un principio según la nacionalidad y la lengua de sus miembros. Más tarde se promovió el aprendizaje de las diferentes lenguas en cursos específicos o en contacto con la población autóctona. Sin embargo, aquellas medidas no bastaron para garantizar una comunicación satisfactoria, tal y como se menciona a menudo en las memorias de los miembros de las Brigadas Internacionales. Por ello, en el transcurso de la guerra se hizo cada vez más necesario recurrir a la labor de intérpretes.

Hasta ahora, esta labor y otros aspectos de las estrategias comunicativas en la Guerra Civil apenas se han analizado en las investigaciones especializadas. De ahí que este volumen pretende examinar desde múltiples ángulos científicos las complejas actividades de comunicación y traducción en el día a día de la Guerra Civil. Una metodología amplia favorece, entre otros aspectos, el acceso específico a fuentes primarias que hasta el momento no se han tenido en cuenta, a pesar de que aportan muchos datos nuevos. La diversidad de los planteamientos metodológicos facilita, además, nuevos conocimientos acerca del fenómeno del multilingüismo, de los retos a los que se enfrentaron los y las intérpretes, de su modo de trabajo, de los diferentes *settings* de interpretación y de las relaciones de poder que se establecieron.

Tomando en consideración los conflictos políticos e ideológicos de la Guerra Civil,

3 Este volumen se edita en el marco del proyecto de investigación (Nº 17780) “Dolmetschen und Übersetzen im Spanischen Bürgerkrieg, 1936-1939” (“Traducción e interpretación en la Guerra Civil”) de la Universidad de Graz, financiado por el *Jubiläumsfonds der Oesterreichischen Nationalbank*.

este volumen pretende aportar nuevos enfoques, centrados en las dimensiones cultural y lingüística, para ampliar y profundizar los debates sobre el tema. La variedad de lenguas del presente volumen refleja los esfuerzos de solidaridad multilingües en el lado republicano en su oposición internacional contra Franco. Así, las lenguas de los artículos de este libro (español, inglés, alemán) representan a algunos de los grupos lingüísticos más grandes en el seno de las Brigadas Internacionales. Este multilingüismo es también la razón por la que las editoras decidieron mantener las lenguas originales de las citas en el texto y acompañarlas con una traducción a pie de página. Para terminar, quisiéramos expresar nuestro sincero agradecimiento a Dagmar Oswald por su participación en las primeras etapas de esta antología y su valiosa aportación en su conceptualización.

Julia Kölbl, Iryna Orlova, Michaela Wolf

Strategien der Kommunikation

Ursula Stachl-Peier

“Skandinavernas kynne låg inte för preussisk disciplin och drill” – The Swedish Character is not Suited to Prussian Discipline and Drill

This paper explores the involvement of Swedish volunteers in the Spanish Civil War. Based on contemporary accounts, later interviews and (auto-)biographical writings published between 1937 and 2016, this paper first briefly describes the Swedish volunteers' social and political background and their motives for joining the fight against Franco. The volunteers' accounts are compared with Lise Lindbæk's history of the Thälmann Battalion. The focus of the analysis is on the Swedish volunteers' response to the multilingual and multicultural environment in which they found themselves, their shock and elation at their first confrontation with the “Babel of Languages”, and their strategies for overcoming communication problems and intercultural differences, above all those related to what Scandinavians commonly perceived as “Prussian cadaver discipline” in the German-led Thälmann Battalion which most Swedes joined.

Keywords: Swedish volunteers in the Spanish Civil War, multilingual communication, “Prussian” discipline, camaraderie and friendship

1936, när kriget i Spanien bröt ut, då resonerade vi kors och tvärs om vad som hände där nere. Jag vet inte, det är svårt idag att beskriva den atmosfär som härskade 1936. Du får komma ihåg hur det såg ut i Europa då. Den ena demokratiska regimen efter den andra hade försvunnit. Polen var halvfascistiskt, Finland var halvfascistiskt, Rumänien var fascistiskt, Tjeckoslovakien blev ju tilltufsad genom den så kallade Munchenöverenskommelsen, där Chamberlain lovade ”fred i vår tid”. Hela tiden tätnade det politiskt sett i Europa. Ljusen släcktes ett efter ett. Schuznick [sic], minidiktatorn i Österrike, slog ner arbetarklassen i Wien-upproret den 12 februari 1934. [...] men sen kom 1936 och Spanien, då folk gick ihop. Och då var det precis som man fick en saltvatteninsprutning — äntligen, äntligen, äntligen någonstans några som vill stå emot! Det är inte ödesbestämt ändå. Och man andades med bågge lungorna. (Bengt Segerson in Gustafsson/Karlsson 1992:11)¹

1 “When the war broke out in Spain, we discussed at length what was happening down there. I don’t know, it’s difficult to describe today the political climate in 1936. You’ve got to remember what Eu-

In 1937, Bengt Segerson left Sweden for Spain to join the International Brigades. After democratic governments throughout Europe had fallen in quick succession, left-wing parties were becoming despondent. So when the Republican government in Spain refused to surrender to the Nationalists in Spain and fought back, for Segerson this was the much-needed “salt-water injection” to rekindle hope that an international alliance of anti-fascist forces might be able to stop the advance of fascism.

This article explores the participation of Swedish volunteers in the Spanish Civil War. After a brief overview of the political situation in Sweden and the volunteers’ background, the focus is on aspects of communication. Drawing on (auto)biographical accounts and Lise Lidbæk’s history of the Thälmann Brigade, the article examines the volunteers’ perception of the often cited “Babylonian language confusion”, their attempts to overcome linguistic problems, the spirit of camaraderie and fellowship as well as frictions resulting from diverging expectations of discipline.

1. Political context

At the beginning of 1936, Sweden was ruled by a coalition government comprised of the *Socialdemokratiska Arbetarpartiet* (SAP; Swedish Social Democratic Workers’ Party) and *Bondeförbundet* (Farmers’ League) and led by Per Albin Hansson from SAP. In June, the government resigned and the *Bondeförbundet* under Axel Pehrsson-Bramstorp formed a “semesterregering” (holiday government) that was to steer the country until the scheduled *Riksdag* elections in September. When the Nationalist revolt broke out in Spain, official reactions largely followed habitual party lines. The *Sveriges Kommunistiska Parti* (SKP; Swedish Communist Party), which was affiliated to Comintern, called on the readers of its main paper to “med alla kraft stödjade den spanska arbetarklassens kamp mot den fascistiska reaktionen”² (Lundvik 1980:22). Per Albin Hansson’s response in an article in *Socialdemokraten*³ exhibited a wary ambivalence, which was in fact to dominate SAP’s official rhetoric throughout the Spanish Civil War. The liberal parties and press were uneasy at the prospect of a victory of the left. *Dagens Nyheter*, for example, was

rope looked like then. One democratic regime after the other disappeared. Poland was half-fascist, Finland was half-fascist, Rumania was fascist, Czechoslovakia was bruised by the so-called Munich Agreement when Chamberlain promised “peace in our time”. Things were becoming tougher all the time. One light after the other went out.

Schuschnigg, the mini-dictator in Austria, crushed the workers’ uprising of 12 February 1934 in Vienna. People were kind of paralysed. Was it inevitable that fascism won in all these countries? [...] But then came 1936 and Spain, when people united. It was like getting a saltwater injection – finally, finally, finally someone that resists! Not everything is lost. And people could take a deep breath”. (All quotations have been translated by the author).

2 “support the fight of the Spanish working class with all its might”.

3 *Socialdemokraten*, 22 July 1936, quoted in Lundvik (1980:21). Hansson also quickly recognised Franco’s regime after the end of the war (cf. Camacho Padilla/de la Asunción Criado 2018; see also Peix Geldart 2013; see Scott 2009 on divisions within the SAP).

unwilling to concede that the battle in Spain could be a fight for democracy and against fascism and predicted a long-drawn out war that would devastate Spain, yet in the end could only lead to a dictatorship, either black or red (Lundvik 1980:22; see also Camacho Padilla/de la Asunción Criado 2018).

In August 1936, the *semesterregering* signed the Non-Intervention Agreement. All left-wing parties condemned the decision which, they rightly feared, was going to curb the chances of the democratically elected government in Spain to defend itself. The “Spanish question” was also a recurring theme during the election campaign. In the elections, the SAP emerged as the big winner. *Sveriges Kommunistiska Parti* was also able to secure more seats, as was *Folkpartiet*; the big loser was the Right (cf. Lundvik 1980:33–41), who openly supported Franco. Per Albin Hansson was elected Prime Minister and again formed a coalition government with *Bondeförbundet*. Nervous about political developments in Germany and the Soviet Union and keen to appease the anti-left establishment at home, he continued to endorse the policy of non-intervention. In February 1937, he signed a law that made participation in the Spanish Civil War as a combatant a crime which carried a half-year prison sentence.

2. Sweden’s *spanienfrivilliga*⁴

Neither the Agreement, after which all passports were issued with a clause stating that these were not valid for entry into Spain (Gyllenhaal/Westberg 2008:124; see also Camacho Padilla/de la Asunción Criado 2018), nor the threat of incarceration proved effective deterrents.

Information about the Spanish Civil War was freely available throughout Sweden and disseminated above all by the *Svenska Hjälpkommittéen för Spanien* (SHfS) and its hundreds of local committees. These collected food, medicine and clothing for the Spanish people, arranged meetings, film showings and lectures by volunteers who had fought in the International Brigades or worked as doctors or nurses in Spain. They also published brochures and pamphlets as well as a regular bulletin, *Solidaritet* (cf. Lundvik 1980:82; see also Camacho Padilla/de la Asunción Criado 2018).⁵ The SHfS was exceptional in that it managed to unite all left-wing organisations including SAP.

Around 500 Swedish volunteers – figures vary between 501 in Lundvik (1980:119) and 550 in Lundberg (2001:44) and Gyllenhaal/Westberg (2008:116) – fought on the side of the Republic; fewer than ten Swedes joined Franco’s army (Lundberg 2001:8–

4 The term *spanienfrivillig/a* in this article is used to refer to Swedish volunteers fighting in the Spanish Civil War on the side of the Republicans.

5 The SHfS even ran several children’s homes in Spain and France, and together with Norway funded the establishment of a field hospital in Alcoy with around 700 beds (cf. Lundvik 1980:101; see also Lundberg 2001:109–125). Towards the end of the war, the hospital was repeatedly attacked by Italian bomber planes and had to be abandoned (Gyllenhaal/Westberg 2008:151).

9). The Swedish volunteers represented the biggest Scandinavian group in the International Brigades; around 500 Danish volunteers participated, 200 came from Norway, 250 from Finland and two from Iceland (Gyllenhaal/Westberg 2008:116). Around a third of the Swedish volunteers were killed in action or reported missing (Lundberg 2001:8–9).

It is generally estimated that around 95 per cent of the Swedish volunteers were workers (e.g. Lundvik 1980:122); very few were middle or upper class or intellectuals (cf. Gyllenhaal/Westberg 2008:126). The volunteers were drawn from all sectors and industries and included “sjömen, metallarbetare, grovarbetare, pappersarbetare, gruv- och skogsarbetare, textil- och lantarbetare, fabriks- och transportarbetare” (Rogeby 1977:142).⁶ The proportion of seamen was particularly high. Lundberg (2001:4) suggests one third; other figures are also cited. The reason typically given is that the seamen were used to working within international crews, spoke good English and were therefore not daunted by the prospect of engaging with the multilingual and multinational medley of people typifying the International Brigades. This is probably an overly simplistic explanation, as Lundvik (1980:122) also points out. Most of the Swedish volunteers that came to Spain in 1936 and 1937 joined the Ernst Thälmann Battalion,⁷ which was German-led and mainly comprised of German, Austrian, Scandinavian and Dutch volunteers. Knowledge of English was therefore of little help, as several also concede in their accounts (see below). A more likely explanation is that many of the sailors were members of the Communist Party who regularly met in Sailors’ Clubs where they heard about, and were recruited into the International Brigades (see for instance the interviews with Harry Ericsson in Nilsson 1972:117; Gustav Ericsson in Rundberg 1973:41, and Per Eriksson in Rundberg 1985).

In Sweden, too, it was above all the Communist Party that was proactive in recruiting volunteers. They maintained what Gyllenhaal/Westberg (2008:123) call a “masked recruitment office” in Stockholm which was headed by Knut Olsson, a member of the SKP’s Central Committee, who long denied his engagement (see Olsson 1937:123–124). The volunteers themselves were much less secretive about the organisational and financial support they obtained. Many accounts provide detailed descriptions of their visit to Olsson’s office in Stockholm where they were questioned about their motives, occupation and political affiliation, before being furnished with train and boat tickets, money for the journey and the contact address of the reception centre in Paris (see e.g. Gustav Ericsson in Rundberg 1973:55; Nilsson 1972).

Although financial assistance was available to all that needed support, irrespective of their political affiliation, few SAP members applied (Gustafsson/Karlsson 1992;

6 “seamen, metalworkers, labourers, paper-industry workers, miners and forest workers, workers in the textile industry and agricultural workers, factory workers and transport workers”.

7 Lindbæk (1939:145) points out that Thälmann also included Hungarian and Czech volunteers who, because they spoke (some) German, were considered “German”.

Gyllenhaal/Westberg 2008:123). This is perhaps not entirely surprising given the hostility between SKP and the other left-wing parties. As a consequence, the majority of Swedish volunteers were members of the Communist Party or the Swedish Communist Youth organisation (SKU, *Svensk Kommunistisk Ungdom*). This fact is proudly stressed by many of the communist volunteers in their accounts (e.g. Nilsson 1972:30; Per Eriksson in Rundberg 1985:57).

Whether it really was just “four or five” Swedish volunteers that were not communists, as Eriksson insists in a later chapter (Rundberg 1985:97), is doubtful, however. Conny Andersson, who is often depicted as the “only social-democrat” by other *spanienfrivilliga* (Nilsson 1972:66), presents a markedly different view of the volunteers’ political affiliation, stressing that it was above all their anti-fascist stance that counted (ibid.:69–70). Similar views are recited by other volunteers (e.g. Kurt Levander in Jändel 1996:108; Bengt Segerson in Sjöstedt 2009:24). Several Swedish volunteers (according to Gyllenhaal/Westberg 2008:123, at least ten) were SAC⁸ members and joined the anarcho-syndicalists.

When they returned home in 1938, the volunteers were given a triumphant welcome and hailed as heroes. Left-wing politicians and the press extolled their virtuous struggle and sacrifice and promised support, and the government decreed an *åtalseftergift*, deciding not to prosecute the volunteers that had defied the ban and joined the IB (Lundvik 1980:132; Scott 2009:224–225). The promises proved hollow, however, as the volunteers were soon to realise. With the Second World War looming and Sweden wedged between Hitler’s *Reich* to the south and a belligerent Soviet Union to the east, the Social Democratic government decided to tread a careful line. Communists were eyed with suspicion, not just during and after the war but for several decades.

The 1968 movement eventually rekindled interest in communist ideas in general, and in the Spanish volunteers’ struggle in particular (Scott 2009:226). In 1963, the *Svenska Spanienfrivilligas Kamratsförening* was formed. In 1975, the association started to collect money for a memorial to those that had lost their lives in Spain. *La Mano*, created by the sculptor Liss Eriksson, was officially unveiled in 1977. The dedication on the plinth reads:

AV 500 SVENSKAR SOM ÅR 1936-38 KÄMPADE FÖR SPANIENS DEMOKRATI
STUPADE VAR TREDJE.
DE GAV SITT YTTERSTA VID
MADRID, JARAMA, GUADALAJARA, BRUNETE, TERUEL, ARAGON, EBRO.
VANDRARE, STANNA – MINNS DEM MED STOLTTHET.⁹

8 *Sveriges Arbetares Centralorganisation*, Sweden’s Syndicalist movement.

9 “Of 500 Swedes who, from 1936 till 1938, fought for Spain’s democracy, one in three died. They gave their utmost at [the battles of] Madrid, Jarama, Guadalajara, Brunete, Teruel, Aragon, Ebro. Wanderer, stop – remember them with pride”.

In 1988, the surviving volunteers were invited to Barcelona where they were feted as heroes. In 1996, the Spanish government granted honorary citizenship to the surviving volunteers of the International Brigades. Today the memory of the Spanish volunteers is kept alive above all by the *Svenska Spanienfrivilligas Vänner* (SSV). Formed in 2002, it maintains an informative website and facebook blog. It also organises a commemorative ceremony at La Mano in Stockholm on 1 May each year (Svenska Spanienfrivilligas Vänner [2019]).

3. Hear the volunteers' voices!

The organisations that were most active in the aid campaign also ensured that the Spanish Republic's and the *spanienfrivilliga's* voices were heard in Sweden. *Sveriges Arbetares Centralorganisation*, in particular, played a leading opinion-forming role after the Franco-led revolt. Throughout the war, it reported on developments in Spain in a series of brochures and pamphlets published by its *Federativs förlag* (FF), the first of which came out in 1936, and was entitled *Bakom Barcelonas Barricader. Bilder från spanska inbördeskriget* (Österberg 1936).

The Swedish Communist Party likewise began to immediately curry support for the Republic's fight against the Nationalists and the Swedish volunteers in Spain. In 1937, SKP's publishing house, *Arbetarkulturs förlag*, published its first account of *spanienfrivilliga's* fate in *Svenska Frontkämpar i Spanien. Den Internationella Brigadens tappra hjältar*, which chronicles events in Spain leading up to the Civil War and the formation of the International Brigades. A year later, it published *Svenska frontminnen* by Sixten Olsson (later Rogeby).

Svenska Hjälpkommittéen för Spanien was no less productive. In 1937, it produced *Solidaritetens soldater* by Knut Olsson, in which he summarises his impressions after a visit to Spain. Also in 1937, it brought out *Spanska barn ritar om kriget* (Rothman 1937), a booklet put together by Kajsa Rothman and including photographs and drawings of Spanish children who were evacuated to Perello after the bombing of Madrid. Two publications that attracted widespread attention were *Till Madrid* (Johnson/Matthis 1937), and *I dag Spanien. Dikter och prosa, musik, teckningar* (Branting 1939), with contributions by Scandinavia's leading writers, poets and artists.

In 1939, Lise Lindbæk's history of the Ernst Thälmann Battalion, *Internationella Brigaden* came out in Swedish.¹⁰ Lise Lindbæk was a Norwegian journalist and editor of the Scandinavian Newsletter, which, as Olsson (1938:138) wryly comments, "sönderlästes omsorgsfullt och förmedlade engelska underhusinterpellationer, franska demon-

10 The book was first published in Norwegian under the title of *Bataljon Thälmann* (1938) and translated into Swedish by Per Meurling, the brother of Olle Meurling, a theology student from Uppsala who was one of the first Swedish victims in Spain.

strationer, tysk förvåning och konstant skandinavisk yrvakenhet till våra en smula ointresserade hjärnor”.¹¹

Then the volunteers’ voices went silent. For nearly 35 years, the general public had little or no interest in the *spanienfrivilliga* that had fought to save Spain’s democracy. This changed, as was intimated above, in the 1960s, when the *Svenska Spanienfrivilligas Kamratsförening* was formed and used its journal, *För ett fritt Spanien*, as a mouthpiece to propagate the volunteers’ voices.¹² The following three decades saw the publication of a wide array of books, both accounts based on interviews with the *spanienfrivilliga* as well as academic studies. In recent years, several literary treatments of *spanienfrivilliga*’s lives have been published which have attracted wide-spread interest.

4. Communication and non-communication

This chapter looks at the *spanienfrivilligas*’ own response to the multinational and multilingual reality into which they were plunged as soon as they boarded the train in Paris. It briefly recounts their initial shock at their first confrontation with the *språkförbistring* or “Babel of Languages” and efforts to overcome communication barriers, before summarising references to interpreters and interpreting. The main focus is on intercultural conflicts arising from the volunteers’ dislike of what they saw as an exaggerated emphasis on discipline, where the volunteers’ depictions are juxtaposed with Lise Lindbæk’s account in her history of the Ernst Thälmann Battalion.

4.1. Språkförbistring¹³ and multilingual drill commands

As indicated above, most *spanienfrivilliga* were workers with little formal schooling and, with the exception of the seamen, little or no experience of multilingual environments. For many, the multi-tongued chorus and “språkförbistring” that met them on arrival in Albacete proved overwhelming:

Sorlet stiger och sjunker; språkens mångfald ger intryck av en fullständig förbistring. Det blir nog marigt att samordna alla enheter vid fronten. (Andersson 1975:6–7)¹⁴

Andersson’s concern that the “språkförbistring” would hamper efficient coordination is

11 “was diligently read to bits and informed about debates in the English House of Commons, demonstrations in France, German amazement and constant Scandinavian stupification for our somewhat uninterested brains”.

12 Both the journal and the association existed until 1994.

13 “Babel of Languages”.

14 “The hum rises and falls; the multitude of languages gives the impression of complete chaos. It’s going to be tricky to coordinate all units at the front”.

echoed by others (see e.g. Olsson 1938:16). Their fears were not unfounded. According to Lundberg (2001:54) the Babylonian chaos was a major contributing factor to the high death toll amongst the international volunteers in the first months of the war, before they were reorganised along linguistic lines.

Most Scandinavians were assigned to the 11th Brigade, together with Germans, Austrians and Dutch volunteers. The Swedes who arrived in Spain in 1936 and 1937 joined the Ernst Thälmann or Edgar André battalions which had Scandinavian units.¹⁵ After October 1937, most Swedish volunteers in Thälmann as well as newly arrived compatriots moved to the Austro-German 12th February Battalion. In February 1938, the first Scandinavian battalion was formed. It was named Hans Beimler after the German Communist parliamentarian; most Swedes fought in the Georg Branting company, named after the head of the SHfS. There was also a Danish company called Martin Andersen-Nexö (after the Danish author), the Norwegian Egede-Nissen company, named after the leader of the Norwegian Communist Party, as well as Buenaventura Durruti, a Catalan Anarchist unit (cf. Nilsson 1972:234; Rundberg 1985:65; Gyllenhaal/Westberg 2008:143–144).

Several Swedes who were living in North America and spoke good English decided against Thälmann and joined, or tried to join, the American Abraham Lincoln Battalion or the Canadian-American MacKenzie Papineau Battalion (Nilsson 1972:165; Carl Mattson in Jändel 1996:120–121; Staf 1997:48; Gyllenhaal/Westberg 2008:127). For some it was perhaps less their good English language skills that led them to deselect Thälmann than their disillusionment with what they saw as overly strict German discipline (see below). Whatever the volunteers' motivation was, being able to work and fight alongside people who spoke a language they understood seems to have been reassuring (see e.g. Martin Dahlberg in *Arbetarkulturs Förlag* 1937:53; Sixten Olsson in *ibid.*:51; letters home of Gösta Hjärpe in Nilsson 1972:185). Even the "sjöman och esperantist" (seaman and esperantist) Nils Lätt (1938:8) found comfort in coming to a unit where he understood the language and met a fellow Swedish syndicalist.

Despite the formation of linguistically more uniform units, however,¹⁶ the volunteers' reality was a multilingual, multicultural medley in which various strategies were tried to overcome communication problems. Some volunteers used gestures and body language (e.g. Fritz Alstrand in a letter home from a field hospital in *Arbetarkulturs Förlag* 1937:49); others tried both gestures and a mix of words from a variety of "strange languages" (Olsson 1938:16; also Bengt Segerson in interview for SR 1977). Most combatants seem to have made an effort to quickly learn the drill commands in Spanish

15 That is to say, units comprising Swedish, Norwegian, Danish and Swedish-speaking Finnish volunteers. Most Finnish volunteers fought in the Abraham Lincoln and Georg Washington battalions where they joined Finnish-speaking US-American volunteers (see Lindbæk 1939; see Gyllenhaal/Westberg 2008:116).

16 This was the case initially. Later, international volunteers that had been killed or wounded were increasingly replaced by Spanish combatants, which resulted in further problems.

(e.g. Ragnar Skotte in Rogeby 1977:60). Some even added the German commands (e.g. Gustav Ericsson in Rundberg 1973:63) to be able to understand the German officers. At least one volunteer displayed greater ambition and learnt phrases for communication with the local population so as to be able to find out more about their traditions (Andersson 1975:9). Some volunteers describe how they enlisted the help of Spanish comrades who, in return, were instructed in military discipline and taught to read and write (Per Eriksson in Nilsson 1972:42).

Many volunteers also recount the elation triggered by the feeling of solidarity with people from all corners of the world, by the “uncontrollable force” of The “Internationale” when sung by a chorus comprised of twenty nationalities (Olsson 1938:99), and evenings of multicultural entertainment including the recital of a poem of Heine, anecdotes in French, Tyrolean songs, Danish hambo and a fiery Hungarian czarda (ibid.:14).

Specific language difficulties are rarely cited in the *spanienfrivilliga*’s histories. If mention is made, it is either in the context of an amusing anecdote or followed by an assurance that the problems were easily conquered. Stig Berggren (Jändel 1996:40), for instance, recalls an amusing incident when he was confused by the false friends *eine Stunde* (German: an hour) and *en stund* (Swedish: a while). He left after 20 minutes without the German captain he had chauffeured to Madrid when his client failed to return. Sixten Olsson remembers, with a twinkle in his eye, how his group could forget their German when they did not want to not understand orders (Olsson 1938:94; see also Murai 2011¹⁷).

4.2. Interpreters and interpreting

According to Lindbæk (1939:39), few Germans in the Thälmann Battalion spoke a foreign language. Swedish volunteers that were reasonably fluent in German could therefore be employed as interpreters. The use of interpreters in Thälmann is explained by Lindbæk as follows:

In every battalion HQ there is at least one interpreter whose tasks range from translating military orders to writing letters for loving couples. Most companies rarely have a really good interpreter. (Lindbæk 1939:93)

In the accounts consulted for this article, interpreters and interpreting are rarely mentioned. There are some exceptions, however. Per Eriksson had learnt German at school and reports that he was now “finally able to use the language lessons” to interpret for Ragnar Skotte after the latter was elected *kompanichef* (Nilsson 1972:42; Andersson 1975:14; Rundberg 1985:67). Bengt Segerson also had sufficient knowledge of German to be able to act as interpreter. What he himself thought of his efforts is described in self-lampoon-

17 Murai also discusses the *spanienfrivilliga*’s communication in the International Brigades citing further examples.

ing comments in a letter to his brother (Sjöstedt 2009:15). In another letter, he explains how he interpreted into "Scandinavian" during instruction sessions in which the volunteers were trained by the Russian-speaking Ivan in the use of the Maxim gun (ibid.:10). Karl Nilson, who was married to a Spanish woman, is mentioned as interpreter and Spanish teacher by Karl Staf (1997:56), and Carl Mattson referred to his work as a translator (Jändel 1996:123).

Lise Lindbæk, a Norwegian journalist, appears to have provided linguistic support to the Swedish volunteers on at least one occasion (Harry Ericsson in Nilsson 1972:120–121; see below). Another journalist that interpreted for the *svenskafrivilliga* was Kajsa Rothman (see Petrou 2008; Rodríguez-Espinosa 2018). As "the Swedish voice of 'Radio-Madrid'" (Jändel 1996:142), she became extremely popular amongst the Swedish volunteers who named their first heavy machine gun "Kajsa" in tribute to her. According to Per Eriksson, she was a "language genius" (Rundberg 1985:66). However, no mention is made of her efforts as language mediator in the accounts consulted for this article.

The settings in which the interpreters were employed appear not to have caused ethical dilemmas. The only reference to an interpreter who lied to save a volunteer's life is included in Arne Larsson's book *Knuten näve* (Larsson 1995:44). Larsson travelled to Spain via Germany and was stopped by the German police. He had just shown a (forged) letter stating that he was going to be employed as a chef, when the police detected a piece of paper showing that he collaborated with the Communist Party. He was saved by the interpreter who explained that it was a recipe.

4.3. Named compatriots vs. generic national groups

As described above, the Swedish volunteers were well aware of the risks inherent in miscommunication, but generally seem not to have been unduly concerned. Of course, language problems may have been downplayed by volunteers eager to project an image of communal feeling and harmony. However, it may also be true that the handful of drill commands in Spanish, German or other languages spoken by the officers, and everyday phrases they picked up was sufficient for all their communication needs. There are several good arguments that support this thesis. Firstly, the Swedish volunteers seem to have had little need and few opportunities for longer conversations with the volunteers from other countries. Generally they served in units with Swedes or Scandinavians, at times alongside friends from home.¹⁸ Secondly, contacts with Spanish civilians appear to have been rare and mostly limited to encounters with Spanish nurses and doctors in the field hospitals, as Bengt Segerson (SR 1977) notes with some regret,¹⁹ or with the

18 When a *spanienfrivillig* was appointed, or elected, *kompanichef*, *politkommissarie*, or *ljötnant* in a partisan group, he of course needed to acquire foreign language skills so as to be able to liaise and politically educate his unit (see Per Eriksson in Nilsson 1972:51; Gösta Andersson in Andersson 1975).

19 See however Lätt (1938) who became "kollektivbonde" (collective farmer).

local population during brief visits to villages when they foraged for food or joined in celebrations. For such occasions, (at least some) Swedes acquired the essential words and phrases from their Spanish comrades. Where their language skills did not suffice, the volunteers could call on the help of interpreters.

Thirdly, most non-Scandinavian volunteers²⁰ (with the exception of officers and some comrades that became friends) remain nameless, and the portraits of the different nationalities very generic and sketchy. The Austrians were jovial, “bold and brisk”, and kitted out in fantastic short sheepskin coats (Olsson 1938:139). The Hungarians were the best comrades, dutiful, prepared to “give their last drop of wine to a wounded or sick soldier, never used ten words where eight would do” (ibid.:96–97). The Garibaldi Battalion had the bravest soldiers, ardent antifascists, belying the pervasive image of Italians as “awful” soldiers (Per Eriksson in Rundberg 1985:75). And the Germans were “hårda” (“tough”, Gustav Fridén in Jändel 1996:59).

4.4. ‘Kamratliga svenskar’ versus Preussisk kadaverdisciplin²¹

Most Swedish volunteers had completed military service, where they were undoubtedly schooled in obeying military orders.²² Yet they still preferred comradely relationship built on trust and mutual respect. If an officer was a good military leader, true comrade and a Swede to boot, he could become something of an idol, as is illustrated by the many reverential tributes to Ragnar Skotte and Krister Reuterswärd (e.g. Røgeby 1977:60). By contrast, excessive control and strictness, especially if perceived as gratuitous, could be a major cause of friction, above all when imposed by German officers.

As mentioned, the majority of Swedish volunteers arriving in Spain in 1936 and before October 1937 joined the German-led Thälmann Battalion. What swayed them was the battalion’s reputation and excellent discipline, which the first volunteers saw as a kind of “life insurance” (Rundberg 1985:66). The circumstances are described by Per Eriksson in the following evocative account:

Många har frågat mig hur det kom sig att svenskarna hamnade i de tyska bataljonerna. Vi var ju sjöfolk och det hade varit naturligare att välja de brittiska eller amerikanska förbanden. Inte enbart därför att vårt yrkesspråk var engelska utan också därför att Tyskland hade varit den svenske sjömannens dödsfiende under det första världskriget.

Det gick till så här: Alla de internationella ställde upp i Albacetes

20 That other Scandinavians were not perceived as foreigners is also attested to by the following quote: “Danskarna och svenskarna hade mycket bra samarbete. De var som en nation, poängterar Gustav [Gunnarsson]”. (The Danes and the Swedes cooperated very well. They were like one nation, stresses Gustav [Gunnarsson]) (Jändel 1996:73).

21 Comradely Swedes against Prussian cadaver discipline.

22 Their military experience gave them a head start and several were immediately made commanders of smaller units (see e.g. Georg Ernstedt in Arbetarkulturs Förlag 1937:44) or acted as instructors in Albacete in the early months of the war (Arbetarkulturs Förlag 1937:28).

tjurfäktningsarena. Britterna för sig, fransmännen för sig, tyskarna för sig osv. Vi tillfrågades vem vi önskade förena oss med ("vi" var samtliga skandinaver, där svenskarna dominerade) och eftersom vi hade hört hur modigt och tappert Thälmannbataljonen hade försvarat Madrid så blev det den. Vi hade Skotte till kompanichef och en dansk hade blivit kompani-kommissarie. Båda tyckte att vi skulle ha större chans att lyckas hos tyskarna eftersom deras disciplin var bäst, god disciplin var den enda och bästa livförsäkring som stod att få. Dessutom var exercisen in den svenska armén snarlik den tyska/preussiska. Vårt kompani bestod of ca 60 svenskar och 30 danskar eller normän, resten var tyskar. (Ibid.)²³

Initially the atmosphere in the battalion appears to have been one of camaraderie and fellowship. Harry Ericsson warmly remembers Herman Wohlin, a Swedish combatant who became "pappan för alla där" ("he became the father for all"; Nilsson 1972:118), a "gråtpappa", who, according to Bengt Segerson, was listened to by the Germans and could therefore help when there was trouble (ibid.:233–234). Gustav Ericsson similarly recalls that the relationship between the officers and soldiers was informal and comradely. Thälmann's routines may have been influenced by the preponderance of German officers in the battalion, yet everything else, Ericsson is at pains to emphasise, built on companionship (Rundberg 1973:70). He was impressed by the comprehensive political schooling he received in the battalion (ibid.:63–64), yet even more so by the discipline the Germans introduced (ibid.:71). At times, however, the incessant "marscherande", target shooting by day and attack training by night, which was the officers' "A och O" (alpha and omega), seems to have become too much even for Gustav (ibid.:66), making his assurance that "Thälmann battalion was considered to be the best military unit in Spain" (ibid.:75) sound rather hollow.

Per Eriksson seems to have been more critical from the outset. Although he acknowledged the life saving potential of good discipline, and tried hard to convince his company of the advantages of obeying orders (Nilsson 1972:43), he was not afraid to defy the German officers when they overstepped their authority and harangued his group, who had just returned from the front, for not having properly buttoned up their uniform jackets (Rundberg 1985:79). After the grievances had been addressed he re-

23 "Many have asked me how the Swedish ended up in the German battalion. After all we were seamen and it would have been more natural to choose a British or American unit. Not only because our work language was English but also because Germany had been the Swedish sailor's deadly enemy during the First World War. This is how it happened: All the international volunteers came together in Albacete's bullfighting arena. The British formed a group, the French another, the Germans another etc. We were asked who we would like to join ("we" were all Scandinavians with the Swedish forming the biggest group) and since we had heard how courageously and bravely the Thälmann Battalion had defended Madrid, it was chosen. We had Skotte as commander and a Dane had been appointed commissar. Both thought that with the Germans we would have a better chance of winning since their discipline was best, good discipline was the only and best life-insurance you could get. Moreover, military drill in the Swedish army was similar to the German/Prussian drill. Our company was comprised of 60 Swedes and 30 Danes or Norwegians, the rest were Germans".

minded his company that all units included “idiots and nobrainers” and that the Germans were essentially good people (ibid.:80). What Eriksson did not mention was that many of the Swedish volunteers applied to be moved to other units (Gyllenhaal/Westberg 2008:140; see also Nilsson 1972:30).

Another Swedish volunteer who was initially impressed with the Germans’ thorough training was Bengt Segerson (Sjöstedt 2009:10–11). He, too, was to become more critical and defiant later. First, he used creative ploys to evade the German-imposed early-morning drill (ibid.:25), then, after his appointment as political commissar of the Swedish unit in the newly formed Georg Branting company, he was not afraid to take a vocal stand against what he perceived as nonsensical orders (Nilsson 1972:247).

A clash between German officers and the Swedish volunteers is also recounted by Harry Ericsson. After the battle of Guadalajara, the Thälmann Battalion was on the way to Brunete. Exhausted, the Swedes lay down for a short rest only to be promptly accused by German officers of being *sabotörer* (ibid.:120–121). The volunteers were lucky, Lise Lindbæk came to their rescue and interpreted their explanations (ibid.:121).

Whether it was in response to the Scandinavian volunteers’ critique of the Thälmann Battalion or simply the German officers’ desire to have a lasting record of their accomplishments is impossible to ascertain. Whatever its motivation may have been, the battalion commissioned Lise Lindbæk (1939:119) to write Thälmann’s history. In the book, Lindbæk repeatedly returns to the issue of discipline and its enormous significance in the fight against fascism. In the following quote she sums up Thälmann’s official line and the *svenskafrivilligas*’ response:

De viktigaste diskussionerna beträffande befälsformerna gällde ännu en gång det omtvistade ordet disciplin. Detta ord har helt olika klang på de skilda språken. För tyskar är det obetingat ett positivt begrepp, även om de flesta kamraterna föredraga ordet själv-disciplin framför ordet disciplin. Fransmännen rynka på näsan. Skandinaverna tycka inte heller om ordet; det påminner på ett obehagligt sätt om den tid, då de gingo i skolan. (Lindbæk 1939:137)²⁴

However, even Lindbæk feels forced to admit that the “Germans easily mistake discipline for bureaucracy” and has sympathy for other nationalities that can accept “discipline at the front”, but want to “enjoy their freedom and independence behind the front line” (ibid.). She seems convinced, though, that conflicts can be resolved with “jokes, many songs, much wine and laughter” (ibid.).

Her optimism proved misplaced, and the disagreements and conflicts did not go

24 “The most important discussions about forms of military command concerned once again the controversial word discipline. This word has wholly different connotations in the different languages. For Germans, it is an unreservedly positive concept, even though most comrades rather use the word self-discipline than discipline. The French turn up their nose. The Scandinavians do not like the word either; it reminds them in a disquieting way of their time in school”.

away.²⁵ Later in the book, Lindbæk (1939:159) states that in autumn 1937 the Scandinavians joined the Austrian 12th February Battalion (see also Nilsson 1972:30). The Austrians were, as has been mentioned, generally perceived as “mera smidiga än preussarna och lära sig snabbare att sätta sig in i andra folks språk och mentalitet” (ibid.:165).²⁶ They were also more relaxed about exercise and drill (Olsson 1938:102), and seemed similarly concerned about the well-being of their comrades as their Swedish comrades (Bengt Segerson in Nilsson 1972:225).

What is interesting about the Swedish volunteers' accounts of their problems with German discipline is that the officers' preoccupation with discipline is described solely as a nationality trait, and often set in contrast with the Swedish officers' “kamratlig” behaviour and the Austrians' casual yet at the same time caring approach. Other possible reasons for the Germans' insistence on *kadaverdisciplin* and harsh treatment of soldiers that violated military rules²⁷ are not contemplated, for instance, that the Germans may have followed Comintern guidelines. Carl-Gustaf Scott in his analysis of Swedish publications on the *spanienfrivilliga* contends that the volunteers “who left Spain completely disillusioned with the international Communist movement – which was a fairly common experience in other countries – are given no voice in Swedish accounts about the Spanish Civil War” (Scott 2009:229). The comments on German discipline found in the literature examined for this article also suggest that the castigation of Prussian discipline was more acceptable than criticism of communism. It fed a stereotypical image shared by many Swedes after the First World War, and by even more after World War II. Speaking out against Soviet (inspired) atrocities in Spain, by contrast, risked attracting the wrath of former comrades that chose to stay true to the official Soviet line (ibid.:228; see also interviews with Swedish volunteers in Jändel 1996, which contains many critical comments).

5. Conclusion and coda

The Spanish volunteers were well aware of the communicative challenges inherent in the kind of multilingual and multinational environment that the International Brigades constituted. Many recall both the shock and the fascination they felt when they were first confronted with the many-tongued “sorlet” and “språkförbistring” in Albacete. Yet they seem to have quickly devised successful strategies for communication with both com-

25 Thälmann was of course not the only battalion to impose hard disciplinary rules (see e.g. Elis Frånberg in Nilsson 1972:173).

26 “more approachable than the Prussians and more quickly learnt to understand other peoples' language and mentality”.

27 Gustav Fridén (Jändel 1996:59) for example mentions his dismay when he witnessed the execution of two soldiers who had probably “done something devellish” and concluded that the Germans were tough.

rades and the local population. Some used gestures and body language, others tried to memorise essential drill commands in Spanish and German and learnt useful phrases for casual conversations. Interactions with non-Scandinavians were, as was argued above, probably limited in extent. Only political commissars and officers needed to acquire more advanced language skills to be able to explain politics and disciplinary rules to the soldiers.

What caused more friction and proved more difficult to resolve were intercultural differences. The German officers' imposition of a strictly hierarchical structure, their preoccupation with exercise and drill and expectation of unquestioning obedience also behind the front line led to major irritation among the Swedish volunteers. They disliked what they saw as exaggerated disciplinary control and abhorred gratuitous punishment. They wanted a "kamratlig" relationship and officers that showed concern for their group's well-being.

The picture of the *spanienfrivilliga* painted here is of course no more "neutral" or "objective" than the volunteers' accounts themselves, or the Swedish studies consulted for this article. What the volunteers were prepared to (publicly) reveal, what the interviewers gleaned from the conversations and what the historians chose to comment on is coloured by ideological convictions and personal preferences. Many volunteers were very frank about the horror of the battlefield,²⁸ which they depicted in minute and gory details. Some describe the Fascists' savagery, contrasting it with their own superior humanity (e.g. Olsson 1938:106; Gustav Ericsson in Rundberg 1973:81). Many vent their frustration about the *kadaverdisciplin* which is explained solely in terms of a *Prussian* imprint on the International Brigades. What they do not address is possible disillusionment with the international Communist movement. It is difficult to know whether this was because the *spanienfrivilliga* were not given an opportunity to openly criticise Comintern, as Scott (2009:228–229) argues, or because many volunteers continued to be ardent communists after the war and were unwilling to reassess their past political allegiances since this was likely to tarnish the memory of their struggle to halt the spread of fascism.

What was beyond the scope of this paper was a comparison of the volunteers' accounts in the published literature consulted for this study with the volunteers' own voices in the recorded conversations. The unfiltered interviews might give different insights into the *spanienfrivilliga*'s retrospective assessment of their time in the International Brigades. It may also reveal new details concerning their communication strategies, the frequency and quality of interpreting as well as their efforts to learn the languages of the local population and non-Scandinavian comrades as they tried to overcome a *språkförbistring* that was both terrifying and elating.

28 See e.g. Olsson (1938) who very openly describes his first encounter with death at the front. In a radio programme broadcast by Sveriges Radio in 1956, Olof Jansson also recalls the chaos and meaningless loss of lives in the Spanish Civil War.

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