

Anthony Pym

Kölbl, Julia; Orlova, Iryna & Wolf, Michaela (eds) (2020): *¿Pasarán? Kommunikation im Spanischen Bürgerkrieg. Interacting in the Spanish Civil War*. Vienna/Hamburg: new academic press.

1/2021

DOI: 10.25365/cts-2021-3-1-11

Herausgegeben am / Éditée au /
Edited at the: Zentrum für
Translationswissenschaft der
Universität Wien

ISSN: 2617-3441



Anthony Pym

Kölbl, Julia; Orlova, Iryna & Wolf, Michaela (eds.) (2020): *¿Pasarán? Kommunikation im Spanischen Bürgerkrieg. Interacting in the Spanish Civil War*. Vienna/Hamburg: new academic press. 223 pp, ISBN 978-3-7003-2179-8.

The front cover of this book shows a photo with the banner “¡No pasarán!”, which proclaims that the Fascists “shall not pass!” – into Madrid, suggests the photo. Historically, the Fascists did take Madrid, then the rest of Spain, then other fascisms brought on the Second World War and some are behind virulent nationalisms today. The book’s title, just above the photo, nevertheless asks “¿Pasarán?” (Will they pass?), as if the fate of Spain’s Civil War had not been decided, as if the struggle were still continuing and the proclaimers were still fighting the good fight. That question is indeed written into the book itself as a collective project: just as the International Brigades brought together committed volunteers from many countries and numerous languages, so this book is the work of historians, critics and translation scholars from a lesser but similar range of countries and languages: the volume includes chapters in German, English and Spanish. In that sense, something of the struggle continues, or so the title might suggest.

So what form does this struggle take? This publication is one of the fruits of the exemplary research project “Interpreting and Translating during the Spanish Civil War 1936-39”, carried out in 2018-19 by a core team of four researchers led by Michaela Wolf at the University of Graz and funded by the Austrian National Bank. In addition to this collective book, the project produced an online database of more than 500 translators and interpreters, an online list of reference works, a multilingual cycle of films on the Civil War, a seminar with invited speaker Jesús Baigorri-Jalón, various conference presentations, and at least one doctoral thesis on the same thematic (which merits a separate review). This is exactly how translation history should be done: collectively, as a series of public events, and with lasting results that will be not only of genuine interdisciplinary interest but also of practical service to future historians.

That, however, does not explain why we should be interested in what now might seem a distant conflict? The International Brigades that fought on the Republican side in Spain brought together some 36,000 volunteers, mostly recruited by the Communist parties of some 53 countries. They were not only combatants but also worked in health and communication services, particularly the women volunteers. The volunteer brigades were formed in October 1936 and were disbanded in October 1938. During those two short years, attempts were made to coordinate military actions using a wide range of languages: French, Spanish, Russian, German, Swedish, English, Polish, and

many more. The general outline of their efforts had previously been revealed in ground-breaking spadework by Jesús Baigorri-Jalón and Marcos Rodríguez-Espinosa, and the general questions one might bring to bear on the topic are broadly those of the growing international research focus on languages at war. One might thus be legitimately interested in how these particular translators and interpreters fared, in their personal motivation and commitment, and indeed in their heroism. But other questions can also be asked.

The individual chapters range from vivid empirical description to unabashed idealization and occasional gratuitous theorizing, particularly with respect to a polyglot who actually did most of her translating after the war. At its best, the volume traces individual experiences by piecing together evidence from first-hand accounts (memoirs, diaries, official records, photographs) to compile a portrait of sorts: the above questions are answered, albeit mostly in ways that beg further questions. Michael Wolf's analysis of photographs of interpreters remains particularly poignant in this respect, capturing moments but constantly pointing to what remains unsaid behind the poses for history. Beyond that commendable attention to first-hand data, there is admittedly little common methodology on show here. Indeed, the contributors are probably as heterogeneous in approach as were those other mediators who went to Spain, perhaps united by lofty causes in both cases.

Little would be served here by me comparing chapters and awarding points. Instead, I am interested in reading the partial biographies as experiences not just of linguistic mediation but also of the various language policies that were used to coordinate the volunteers. The policies are not the prime focus of the volume, but they are there nevertheless. The very richness of the accounts invites such a mission, allowing one to see the organization of communication as far more than a mapping of abstract principles. Such a reading also makes it clear that translation and interpreting were part of a much wider historical experience of multilingualism.

So how could anyone organize so many volunteers to fight a war in so many languages in the space of just two years?

From the various accounts, it seems that the initial months were chaotic. French was a transitory lingua franca mostly because many volunteers were channeled to Spain through Paris. When they arrived in Spain, what happened? There are scattered accounts here of communication by gestures and body language, some quickly-learned Spanish for drill commands, and then all kinds of language mixes. Years ago, my sometime student Beatriz Iglesias-Lamas found traces of Yiddish being used as a lingua franca at Albacete, since many of the volunteers were Jewish. I am not at all upset that Yiddish is not mentioned in this collective volume, but the anecdote does underscore the way that the plethora of individual records that can be drawn upon necessarily reflect partial views of a very complex whole. The one thing that is clear from all accounts is that this initial chaotic phase led to miscommunication and high numbers of casualties among the volunteers: "the Babylonian chaos was a major contributing factor to the high death toll among the volunteers in the early months of

the war” (p. 22). As a policy option, a transitory preference for French then a joyous multilingual mix could not have lasted.

The first sign of any language policy to speak of would then be the organization of the volunteers along rough linguistic lines: the Lincoln Battalion for English, the Thälmann Battalion for German, and so on. Each battalion headquarters had at least one good interpreter, but beyond that, much communication was left to ad hoc polyglots (p. 71), which is where some of these personal histories come into play. That said, there are indications in this volume that the policy of separate languages for separate battalions was itself far from perfect. For example, within the mostly Polish Dąbrowski Battalion there was a company for Spaniards and Ukrainians and another for Jews (p. 25), introducing a principle of ethnic separation; the 129th Czech-Balkan Brigade actually used Russian as a lingua franca (p. 38), which would be a principle of Slavic integration; and although the Swedes in the German-speaking battalion reportedly had enough German to understand orders, they could conveniently forget German when they did not want to understand orders – they otherwise complained about excessive Germanic discipline and in any case were often seamen who were more at home in English (pp. 18-21). Within this regime of separate languages, translation played a role not just in communicating between the various groups but also in the internal propaganda. In particular, the newspaper *Le Volontaire de la Liberté* was published in French, German, English and then a tail of “other languages” (pp. 41, 52). This policy organized languages and in principle gave translators and interpreters clear functions to carry out.

The cracks in that policy might then be indicated by an order of March 1937 that instructed the international volunteers to learn Spanish. It would seem that this new policy was not merely linguistic but also political, as the Spanish commanders attempted regain control over very heterogeneous forces. When the International Brigades were disbanded in September 1937, they entered the Spanish Foreign Legion and thus became subject to the Spanish Code of Military Justice. Prior to that, there seems to be contradictory evidence of the extent to which the learning of Spanish was a successful solution. Some of the Spanish contributors to this volume note that the Spanish combatants and international soldiers lived together side-by-side on a daily basis (“convivencia diaria”, p. 58), whereas several of the international accounts indicate how little of the comprehension was actually linguistic. The examples given of Spanish lessons are very rudimentary, and a Pole, for instance, remarks in his diary that with Spaniards, “we understand each other so well without speaking any words” (p. 45). A certain solidarity of non-translation is indeed evident in an account of how moving the *Internationale* can be when sung by people from 20 countries, each in their own language (p. 23). Translation can be overrated.

Over and above those two distinct language policies, the most significant deployment of translators and interpreters was certainly for Russian. Stalin was not only the main supplier of arms for the Republican side (which had to pay in gold), but he also sent some 2,000 “advisors”, including 200 or so translators and interpreters, who were mainly employed in command centers in Albacete and Madrid. That would be a more

advanced stage of institutionalization, where some interpreters had official ranks. The role of the Russian interpreters is noted as being primarily between the Soviet advisers and the Spanish commanders (p. 49) and at least some had very little training in Spanish (pp. 70, 72), in some cases requiring supplementary ad hoc interpreters (pp. 71-72). The major Soviet presence is certainly mentioned in this volume; it comes out in the photos that Wolf analyses; yet Russian remains a significant absence, both among the languages of presentation and the selection of contributors. It is as if there were part of a collective memory that one would like to play down or perhaps even forget about.

To continue with a few aspects so clear that they are not seen, I remark the consummate ease with which the title, the contributors and possibly the readers of this volume assume that they are all on the one Republican side. The title actually does not specify that, if you read it carefully. There is no mention anywhere of the international troops and volunteers that fought on the Fascist side of the conflict, of the way their communication problems were addressed, and indeed of why some language policies might have had more success than others, on one side or the other. This facile assumption of a unified cause belongs very much to the ideological attraction of the Spanish Civil War: an international force, with intellectuals among them, opposed the one identifiable enemy, perhaps more clearly than in most other conflicts since then. And the one-sided focus on that opposition serves to unify the ranks, providing us with a noble past, addressing a struggle that in some respects continues. Translators and translation scholars still today face the forces of blind nationalisms, within many of our countries, and we are not exactly winning in our various attempts to promote notions of international justice.

This volume's almost natural silence with respect to the other side goes hand in hand with a certain failure to mention failure. There is just one passing mention of volunteers who left "completely disillusioned with the international Communist movement" (p. 28). One too easily forgets that in May 1937 Anarchists and Trotskyists were shooting at other Republican forces on the streets of Barcelona. One is reminded of the often wrongly cited text where Camus (1946: 9), nine years after the conflict, admitted that in Spain his generation had "learned for the first time the taste of defeat and discovered, with a surprise from which they have scarcely recovered, that one could be right and be vanquished, that force could subdue intelligence, and that there were cases where courage did not bring rewards. This probably explains why so many around the world have taken the Spanish drama as a personal tragedy" (my translation). I might also add that the tragedy continues underground for many in Spain as well. The village where I live, close to the closing Battle of the Ebro, was run by Anarchists who appropriated land and burned the church, then was later occupied by Italians, with atrocities on both sides, so children from some families are still told not to play with children from other families. Whatever foreigners make of a civil war, it is little compared to the long-term tragedy felt within.

If I have focused on language policy here, it is not to deny the courage of the international volunteers, the extreme fascination of their individual historical

experiences, and the clear success of this superbly collective research project. Yet it is to insist that part of our historical task must also be to recognize and analyze the causes of defeat. And that includes looking squarely at the communicative failures, including failure to understand the causes and languages of contemporary fascisms, the other side. We might then do better next time.

Reference

CAMUS, Albert (1946): "Préface". In: BATAILLE, G. (Ed.): *L'Espagne libre*. Paris: Calman-Lévy, 9-11.