

“Pasaremos“, the Journal of the Eleventh International Brigade

The Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) was not only the first military confrontation with fascism in Europe but, due to its international dimensions, a prelude to the Second World War (1939–1945). It was also a war of words and pictures. Some of them have been inscribed in collective memory which lasts to the present day, like the famous photograph, “A Loyalist soldier at the moment of death“ by Robert Capa or Ernest Hemingway’s novel “For Whom the Bell Tolls“.

It was the putsch by reactionary generals against the legitimate republican government on July 17th, 1936, that marked the beginning of the Spanish tragedy. The aim of the putschists, to win control of the whole country, failed at first because of the spontaneous mass action and armed resistance by leftist parties and organizations in the larger cities. The enemies of the Republic could rely on the Africa Corps, Moroccan mercenaries, the Spanish Foreign Legion and especially on the many army garrisons which decided to join in the coup d’état. The Republic disposed only of a few loyal army units and spontaneously emerging antifascist militias, far weaker than the putschists who could soon build up a powerful regular army with German and Italian help. In the long run the defendants of the Republic could not cope with this army. In spite of all their efforts the war ended with a victory of the putschists under the leadership of General Francisco Franco and the troops of his allies from Germany and Italy.

Whereas many foreigners participated from the start in the defense against the putsch, more and more people soon poured into the country to stand up for the threatened Republic. During the first months the international participants fought in various militia units. Parallel to this, the Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union decided, on August 4th, 1936, to assign to the Communist International the task of establishing an international corps of volunteers. Three days later the central committee of the Communist Party of Germany called upon all emigrated antifascists with any experience with weapons to support the armed defense of the Spanish Republic.

With the help of the 5th Regiment, made up of Madrid members of the Communist Party of Spain, and with the subsequent permission of the Spanish government to form international brigades, the provincial city of Albacete in La Mancha was chosen as the future administrative center of these units. The first volunteers arrived there on October 14th, 1936 and with them, by October 22nd, the first four battalions were organized. Luigi Longo, Inspector-General and General Commissar of the International Brigades (under the pseudonym “Gallo“), wrote later that “a huge military organization was materialized out of nothing“.

The Internationals from more than fifty countries were in need not only of weapons, ammunition, food and clothing but also of information. It was the duty of a press department in the Albacete Base, as the administrative center was called, not only to provide the volunteers with press materials, on the one hand, but also, on the other hand, to send the press of the Brigades to Spanish institutions, parties and organizations as well as to all those interested in other countries. It is quite amazing to see what efforts were made by the commissariats and the political leaders of the Brigades to provide their members with all kinds of information and press articles, for example the “Deutsche Volkszeitung“ (“German People’s Journal“), published in Paris and very popular with German members of the International Brigades. The

press department in Albacete, which was responsible to the War Commissariat of the Brigades in Madrid, made every effort, alongside its other duties, to see to it that all weapons groups and the different nationalities within the units were all taken into consideration in the composition of the publications.

In order to inform the international volunteers about the political and military situation in Spain, members of various units of the newly-forming International Brigades with journalistic experience took the initiative, in the very first weeks of the war, to put out battalion and company newspapers. These papers, produced mostly with very primitive methods at first, were then replaced by the official organs of the different units, following a common line in support of the Popular Front policy of the Spanish Communist Party. That meant giving lots of space to the United Front with the Socialists and Social Democrats while vilifying and opposing the leftist critics of the Popular Front policy.

Only one month after the creation of the Eleventh International Brigade in November 1936 a first provisional organ, "Le peuple en armes" (The People in Arms), was published. "Vers la Liberté" (Towards Freedom) appeared in January 1937 as the first official paper of the André Marty Battalion, followed in February by the journal of the Thirteenth Brigade, "A l'Assaut" (On Attack), and at the beginning of March by "Pasaremos" for the Eleventh Brigade, by "Le Soldat de la République" (The Soldier of the Republic) for the Fourteenth and "Dabrowszczak" and "Noi Pasaremo", two separate battalion papers. Finally, by the end of March, the Fifteenth Brigade got its official organ, "Notre Combat" (Our Fight).

The fact that the titles and often the contents of the Brigade newspapers in this period were in French was because of the major influence of the French Communists and their military in the first months, who tried to promote French as the language of command in the International Brigades. This dominance of French changed later when the Spanish Communist Party and especially the Spanish military command instituted Spanish as the required language for all units of the People's Army. At first the journal publishers had to cope with the problem of having members of different nationalities scattered through each Brigade, thus requiring different languages within each publication. This situation changed when volunteers with a common language or more or less understanding one language were concentrated in the different Brigades.

The first number of the official organ of the Eleventh Brigade, which is reprinted here, appeared on March 2nd, 1937. Most of the German volunteers were in this Brigade, but since the personnel department at the Base Albacete had assigned not only Germans, Austrians and Swiss people to it but also members of the so-called "German language group", there were also the Dutch and Scandinavians as well. Most commanders and commissars of the Eleventh Brigade, down to battalion and company levels, were German. Among the high-ranking German officers were Hans Kahle, Richard Staimer, Heinrich Rau, Ludwig Renn and Gustav Szinda.

Many members of this Brigade had arrived in Spain as early as the summer of 1936, others had already been living here in exile or had come to Barcelona to take part in the People's Olympiad, planned as a counter-event to the Olympic Games in Berlin in 1936 and due to start up just two days after the putsch began. In the first days of defense they joined together in antifascist militia units like the Centuria Thälmann, which took part in battles in Aragón and then, on October 13th, 1936, moved to Albacete and became the basis for the largely German battalion in the first International Brigade. With the numbering of Brigades by the Spanish People's Army

this Brigade received the number Eleven. Both in Spain and internationally it was often called the "Thälmann Brigade" and soon received an amazing amount of respect. After the Brigade was formed on October 24th it was sent almost immediately to the battlefield of Madrid, where it arrived on November 7th and got its baptism of fire on November 9th. The losses were very heavy, and remained heavy during the entire existence of the Eleventh Brigade. In the Madrid battle almost one third of its members were killed or wounded.

With the arrival of more volunteers, the Eleventh Brigade built up to a strength of 1468 combatants by March 1937, and as many as 1744 by April. With them together were about 600 Spanish fighters, most of them recruits but also some who had volunteered for the International Brigades. With fewer and fewer international volunteers able to get to Spain their proportion continuously increased. We estimate that by 1938 more than half the members of the International Brigades were Spanish.

Aside from a few rest breaks lasting only a few days the Eleventh Brigade was in the field practically without interruption until the withdrawal of all Interbrigades from the front on September 23rd, 1938. Most of the volunteers who then joined the so-called Second Service in January 1939, aimed at securing the evacuation of Republicans from Catalonia to France, also came from their ranks.

The title of the Brigade newspaper, "Pasaremos" ("We will come through"), expressed the optimistic belief in victory prevailing at the beginning of the war. The starting run counted 14,000 copies. This high circulation figure evidently reflected the intention of making "Pasaremos" a model for other Brigade papers. Since it contained articles in various languages, it was clearly meant for units which did not yet have their own papers or journals. In July 1937 7500 copies were published and in October 1937 there were 2500, a number which remained constant until the final issue of the journal in October 1938.

Responsibility for the paper rested with the commissariat of the Brigade, which also had a culture commission, also headed by a German. As we know from reports of the times the journal was read very intensively; if there was a delay in its arrival at the frontlines, perhaps because of rough, on-going battles, there were complaints about this almost as much as about failing provisions of food and ammunition.

The International Brigades, the Spanish People's Army and the Republic in general were supported by a notable list of national and international intellectuals, journalists and photographers, graphic designers and painters. This artistic vanguard vigorously declared its solidarity with the struggle against Franco fascism, and this was also reflected in the journals, papers, leaflets, brochures and books edited by the different units of the People's Army. Even today it is not only the contents which are fascinating but also the design and pictorial language found in these publications. Montage techniques like those of John Heartfield were utilized in expressive graphics. This is evidence of the great importance attached to enlightenment, agitation and propaganda, but also to the struggle against the illiteracy still so prevalent, especially among Spain's rural population.

Until now there have never been any reprints of a Brigade journal. Only in Italy, in 1973, there was a reprint of the "Militia popular", the journal of the 5th Regiment, edited by Vittorio Vidali, who was active in Spain under the name "Carlos Contreras". There has never been a full edition even of "Pasaremos" in any German library or

archive, not to mention that of any other Brigade journal. This gap is now being closed by the present volume. The reprint of all numbers of "Pasaremos" is not only important for libraries and scientific institutions but should be of great interest to everyone interested in history and to collectors of literature about the Eleventh and about the Spanish Civil War in general. Alone the illustrations in the journal are valuable and important, while the multi-language reports about the most significant battles of the war and also about the everyday life of the volunteers are an historical mine of information. Contributions were made by those with politically and militarily responsible positions in the International Brigades as well as by world-renowned journalists and writers, but also by ordinary volunteers, who probably put pen to paper for the first time in their lives.

Werner Abel

Übersetzung: Jochen Willerding