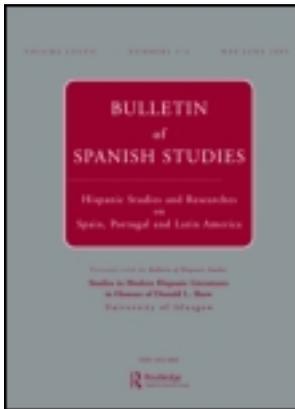


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Myths of the International Brigades

RICHARD BAXELL

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On 28 June 2011, a headline appeared in the *Daily Mail* claiming that, contrary to previous estimates, as many as 4,000 British and Irish volunteers had joined the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War of 1936–1939. Drawn from files of the British Security Services recently placed online by the National Archives in London, the total was nearly twice the number of previous estimates.¹ The story received extensive coverage across the media in Britain, even making the Channel Four news. However, it was not what it seemed; the list actually included not just volunteers, but ‘a number of writers, journalists and other visitors to Spain, plus a number who never fought’.² It was, in fact, but the latest in a long line of exaggerated claims dating back to the time of the Civil War itself, when Franco’s supporters in Britain had alleged that up to 100,000 foreigners were fighting on the Republican side.³ This was most certainly not the case; contemporary best estimates are that some 35,000 men and women served in the International Brigades, of whom approximately 2,500, rather than 4,000, were from Britain, Ireland and the Commonwealth. Meanwhile, nearly 20,000 Germans, 80,000 Italians and 75,000 Moroccans fought with Franco’s forces.⁴ The false estimate of the numbers of volunteers is one of many myths and inaccuracies which have dogged the International Brigades since their very creation.

The precise events surrounding the foundation of the Brigades in the late summer of 1936 were, for many years, shrouded in secrecy, fuelling speculation. However, the opening of the Moscow archives in the 1990s showed that much that had been written was ill-informed. They were not, as some historians have claimed, the brainchild of Maurice Thorez, the leader of

1 National Archives (NA) Kew. KV5/112.

2 Richard Baxell, ‘Have We Underestimated the Number of Volunteers?’ *International Brigade Memorial Trust Newsletter*, 30 (Autumn 2011), 9, and Tom Buchanan, ‘The Secret History of Britain’s Spanish Civil War Volunteers’, *The Guardian*, 28 June 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/jun/28/mi5-spanish-civil-war-britain?CMP=twt_gu> (accessed 24 April 2009).

3 Arthur F. Loveday, *World War in Spain* (London: John Murray, 1939), 134.

4 Report by General Walter, International Brigade Collection, Moscow 35082/1/95, cited in *Spain Betrayed: The Soviet Union in the Spanish Civil War*, ed. Ronald Radosh, Mary M. Habeck and Grigory Sevostianov (London: Yale U. P. 2001), 452.

the French Communist Party.⁵ Nor were they a ‘spontaneous’ creation by the volunteers themselves, as some Communist histories maintained; although there can be no doubt that the presence of foreign volunteers in Spain from the outbreak of the war played a vital part in their inspiration.⁶ In reality, as many had long argued, the International Brigades were a creation of the Comintern, the Communist International.⁷

The idea of raising an International Brigade of volunteers was first mooted at an extraordinary Politburo meeting in Moscow on 26 August 1936. Soviet military intelligence (GRU) reports arriving from Spain had demonstrated the dire position facing the Republic, and the fragmented state of the Republican military response to the rising was regarded by Moscow with alarm. Despite an international agreement not to intervene in the war, German and Italian involvement was dramatically increasing and the amateurish nature of the Republican militias suggested that they would not be able to defeat the experienced Nationalist forces. Likewise, the pivotal role played by the army in the rising meant that officers in the Spanish military, notwithstanding their proven record of loyalty to the Republic, came under suspicion. The inability of the Spanish Premier, Francisco Largo Caballero, to recognize the nature of the crisis facing the Republic did not help.⁸

Alarmed at the rapid progress of the Rebel forces, Moscow believed that the Republic should be supported—not replaced—by a People’s Army, which would include loyal members of the military. Instructions were sent out to European Communist parties to put pressure on their governments to assist the Republic.⁹ The role of the national Communist parties was crucial, for as the sole anti-fascist body capable of large-scale coordination across national borders, the Comintern provided the mechanism that made it possible to both recruit and enrol thousands of men and women from around the world and transport them into Spain.¹⁰ However, though the Comintern was responsible for the creation and organization of the International Brigades,

5 ‘Stalin’s decision [to support the creation of brigades of international volunteers] was eventually reached apparently as a result of a visit to Moscow on September 21 by Thorez, the French Communist leader’ (Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* [London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1961], 295).

6 ‘The idea of the International Brigade arose spontaneously in the minds of men who, up to July 1936, were engaged in peaceful pursuits, and were probably taking but little interest in the affairs of Spain’ (Bill Rust, *Britons in Spain* [London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1939], 4).

7 Interview with George Aitken, Imperial War Museum Sound Archive, London (IWMSA) 10357, reel 1.

8 Boris Volodarsky, ‘Soviet Intelligence Services in the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939’, PhD thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2010.

9 Ángel Viñas, ‘September 1936: Stalin’s Decision to Support the Spanish Republic’, in *Looking Back at the Spanish Civil War*, ed. Jim Jump (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2010), 129–55 (p. 134).

10 Review by Helen Graham of Antonio Elorza and Marta Bizcarrondo, *Queridos camaradas. La Internacional Comunista y España 1919–1939* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1999), *The Volunteer*, 23:5 (Winter 2001), 17–19.

it is important to understand that they did not create the international support for the Republic, nor a desire among individuals to volunteer to fight for it. Foreign volunteers had begun arriving in Spain right from the outset of the war and the Comintern adopted rather than created the notion of forming international columns of volunteers.

Before the formation of the International Brigades, volunteers for the Spanish Republican forces had tended to be young, middle-class and educated, who possessed the means to travel abroad: money, knowhow and, crucially for those from Britain, a passport. After October 1936 this was no longer the case, for Comintern money and contacts provided the means to transport recruits to Spain. Henceforth, volunteers were actually not particularly young: the average age of the British volunteers was twenty-nine. Nor were they middle class; despite W. H. Auden's remark that in Spain, 'poets were going off like bombs', the fighters in the International Brigades were overwhelmingly working class. One Scottish volunteer later stated pointedly that: 'I knew pitmen, shipyard workers—you read about all these poets who were there and all that, but I'd say the majority of the lads never met anyone like that'.¹¹

The picture of the volunteers as naïve, untrained soldiers, lacking any real military experience is another long-standing belief. It is not quite that simple. Certainly the military training the volunteers received in Spain was often wholly inadequate (as was the quality and quantity of their armaments). Yet, the level of military experience amongst the volunteers was higher than believed: almost fifty per cent of the British and Irish volunteers had some form of training before their time in Spain. Some had served in the Junior/Officer Training Corps at school or university, others in the Territorial Army, and there were a number of First World War veterans. However, as the members of the British Battalion found out to their cost in their first engagement at the Battle of Jarama in February 1937, in no way did this make them a match for Franco's elite Moroccan soldiers and Foreign Legion.

Not surprisingly, given the crucial role of the Comintern in recruiting volunteers for Spain, most of the British volunteers for the International Brigades were Communists, though there were also Labour Party members, and members of other left-wing groups.¹² No doubt the Communist Party was keen to ensure that a certain number of volunteers came from other

11 Don Watson and John Corcoran, *An Inspiring Example: The North East of England and the Spanish Civil War 1936–1939* (Newcastle: McGuffin, 1996), 66.

12 About two-thirds of the British, American and Canadian volunteers were Communist Party members; see Richard Baxell, *British Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War: The British Battalion in the International Brigades, 1936–1939* (Pontypool: Warren and Pell, in collaboration with the Cañada Blanch Centre for Contemporary Spanish Studies, 2007 [1st ed. London: Routledge, 2004]), 14–15; and Peter N. Carroll, *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade* (Stanford: Stanford U. P., 1994), 19.

political groups, to justify their claim that this was a genuine popular front of volunteers fighting for Spanish democracy. Therefore membership of the Party was not compulsory, as one British officer in Spain explained: ‘There was certainly no pressure whatever that I recall in the British Battalion to join the C.P., on the contrary, I hardly remember the topic being discussed’.¹³

Many of the Communists—particularly the trusted comrades who were appointed as military and political officers—were hard-line and doctrinaire and long-standing party members, convinced that the Soviet Union was the saviour of the Spanish Republic and of the international working class. However, by no means all the volunteers—even the Party members themselves—were ‘true believers’ and it would be a mistake to view the volunteers as a homogeneous bloc. In fact, as the British Security Services would later recognize, there was a schism in the Communist Party between the Soviet apparatchiks and those who saw the Party as the most effective force in a fight against fascism which was taking place across the globe.¹⁴ Many of the rank and file were recent recruits to the Party, and the young Jewish volunteer from London, David Lomon, was not alone in joining the Party in order to get to Spain. When he returned home in 1938 he promptly left and joined the Labour Party instead. Clearly for David Lomon, and volunteers like him, the relationship with the Party was essentially symbiotic.

The dominant position of Communists in the International Brigades has led some commentators to see them as ‘Stalin-controlled dupes betrayed by the Communists’ agents of Soviet expansionism and Stalin’s subversion of the Spanish Republic for his own ends.¹⁵ ‘Stalin’, it has been argued, ‘had every intention of achieving effective dictatorship in Spain, but behind an anti-fascist façade’.¹⁶ This is unlikely. In fact, as Daniel Kowalsky, Ángel Viñas and others have shown, Stalin’s purpose was not to turn Spain into a satellite state of the USSR, for this was not his game—at least, not in Spain and not in 1936. But neither, of course, were his actions the expression of international solidarity that some Communist accounts have suggested. In reality, Stalin’s main fear was German expansionism, and his support for the Spanish Republic was, at its most basic, a riposte to the intervention of the

13 John Angus, *With the International Brigade in Spain* (Loughborough: Loughborough Univ., 1983), 3.

14 During the Civil War in Spain these two belief systems were, more or less, able to co-exist, but the Hitler-Stalin pact in August 1939 and the Communist Party’s opposition to what they argued was an ‘imperialist war’ would shatter the peaceful coexistence between the two viewpoints.

15 The Brigades, ‘standard-bearers of the USSR’s international prestige [...] were agents of the Kremlin first and soldiers of the Spanish Republic only second’, argues Robert Stradling in ‘English-speaking Units of the International Brigades: War, Politics and Discipline’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 45:4 (2010), 744–67 (pp. 752–53).

16 James Hopkins, *Into the Heart of the Fire: The British in the Spanish Civil War* (Stanford: Stanford U. P., 1998), 151.

fascist powers in Spain. Rather than seeking to ensure a Republican victory, Stalin's aim was to prevent a Republican defeat. The International Brigades were fundamental to this, for they allowed him to covertly support the Republic, without upsetting the French and British governments, with whom he was trying to establish a collective alliance against Germany. Overt Russian involvement in Spain would jeopardize this, as would any sign that Stalin was fostering revolution (which, of course, was exactly why Nationalist supporters falsely accused him of doing so). Discreet assistance could help prevent another authoritarian right-wing regime on France's doorstep and, crucially, keep Germany embroiled in a costly war, far removed from Russian territory. As Helen Graham has argued, the Brigades were less about Russian imperialism than Soviet caution, 'part of Stalin's emergency planning' to avert disaster in Spain:

The Comintern provided the vital organisational mechanism that made it possible systematically to channel to Spain the military expertise of the international left in order to stave off imminent Republican defeat in the Autumn of 1936. But the political and social motives that took the Brigaders to Spain were as complex as those of the first volunteers who had gone to Spain without organisational back-up. Seen in their full historical context, the International Brigades were no more Stalin's 'invention' than was the dynamic of [the] European Popular Front itself.¹⁷

Within Britain other misconceptions have arisen, particularly relating to the composition of the Brigades. Over the years, accusations have been made that the volunteers were adventurers or mercenaries, that they had been duped, strong-armed, even kidnapped, that they had joined mainly to escape unemployment. Most of these claims have since proved to be baseless. Nearly two and a half thousand men and women from Britain and Ireland joined up and it is important to remember that they were not ordered to go; they were volunteers, who made a deliberate choice. While a small number admitted to being adventure seekers, this was not necessarily their only reason for volunteering and it is certainly not representative of the majority. Likewise, the volunteers certainly cannot be regarded as mercenaries. As Geoffrey Cox, a young war correspondent for the *News Chronicle*, reported:

The canard that the Column was a force of mercenaries lured to Spain by promise of big rewards has, now, almost died the natural death due to it. The men of the Column—when they accepted pay—got no more than the ten pesetas a day [...] which the ordinary militiaman received. But most

17 Graham, review of Elorza and Bizcarrondo, *Queridos camaradas*, 17.

of them received only a few pesetas when they went on leave to Madrid or their base.¹⁸

Many historians agree with him. Within the International Brigades, as Tom Buchanan has pointed out, 'pay was minimal and erratic' and certainly not sufficient to tempt men into risking their lives.¹⁹

The claim that the volunteers were duped or hoodwinked into volunteering was popular among contemporary critics. British pro-Franco newspapers, such as the *Morning Post* and *Daily Mail*, often maintained that those leaving Britain were misguided rather than heinous criminals, who had been promised safe work behind the lines, then dragooned into active service once they arrived in Spain.²⁰ This accusation was later supported by the memoir of Douglas Hyde, a senior Communist and subsequent convert to Catholicism, who claimed that 'when cannon-fodder was needed, one Party organiser's job was to go around the Thames Embankment in London at night looking for able-bodied down-and-outs. He got them drunk and shipped them over the Channel'.²¹ The right-wing press in Britain made much of this, despite furious denials by the British Battalion leadership in Spain and others. However, it is undeniable that the Communist Party's need to recruit meant that, as a senior British figure in Spain admitted, some volunteers 'were recruited in rather rotten circumstances. One or two we had that were recruited on Trafalgar Square at about two o'clock in the morning, but they weren't much bloody good to us'.²² The accusation was taken seriously by André Marty, the veteran French Communist in charge of the International Brigades in Spain. He wrote to Harry Pollitt, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Great Britain, insisting that 'Drunkards, down and outs, criminals and others of this character are not wanted here. There should be a stop to recruiting in hostels and parks, Embankments etc.'²³

Lurid claims that volunteers had been kidnapped are not to be taken seriously, nor are accusations of strong-arming. It is true, though, that, on occasions, individuals were approached and asked if they would go to Spain, but these were usually Party cadres who were being asked to take on political roles in Spain. Others were contacted because they possessed vital military skills, such as experience of the use of machine-guns. A few others were asked, usually dedicated Party activists, because they had no dependents. The London volunteer Fred Thomas was adamant that 'nobody cajoled,

18 Geoffrey Cox, *The Defence of Madrid* (London: Gollancz, 1937), 172–73.

19 Tom Buchanan, *Britain and the Spanish Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1997), 127.

20 'Britons Lured to Red Front', *Daily Mail*, 18 February 1937, p. 13.

21 Douglas Hyde, *I Believed* (New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1950), 60.

22 Interview with Will Paynter, IWMSA 10359, reel 2.

23 'Records in London—Observations' enclosed in Marty to Pollitt, 22 December 1937, International Brigade Collection, Moscow 545/6/87, pp. 39–40.

coerced or bullied me into making the decision [to volunteer]; certainly not the Communist Party, even though, at my request, they provided the means'.²⁴

That many of the recruits were unemployed has also been claimed, the implication being that they were escaping the misery of unemployment by running away to Spain. For example, the desire 'to get the hell out of the dole', was expressed by the Liverpool volunteer played by Ian Hart, in Ken Loach's 1995 film set in the Spanish Civil War, *Land and Freedom*. Though many of the recruits certainly had bitter, personal experience of unemployment, it is not the case that most were unemployed when they volunteered. The assertion by the historian K. W. Watkins that 'somewhere between an eighth and a quarter were unemployed, the rest relinquished their jobs, often secure ones, in order to go'²⁵ is supported by several other studies.²⁶

The decision to fight was not an easy one and, although taken in secret, was almost always a matter of conscience. There is an extensive literature which explains clearly why British men and women chose to volunteer for the International Brigades. As one of the commanders of the British Battalion explained, 'the British volunteers went to Spain because they understood that fascism must be checked before it brought wider repression and war'.²⁷ To these international volunteers, Spanish issues became European issues—those that volunteered to join the International Brigades did so because they saw it as an extension of their fight against Mosley's Blackshirts in Britain, a chance to strike back at fascism, to prevent it spreading any further across Europe. Jason Gurney, a sculptor from Chelsea, served with both the British and American battalions in Spain and explained the war's significance very clearly:

The Spanish Civil war seemed to provide the chance for a single individual to take a positive and effective stand on an issue which appeared to be absolutely clear. Either you were opposed to the growth of Fascism and you went out to fight it, or you acquiesced in its crimes and were guilty of permitting its growth.²⁸

The views expressed by Sam Wild, leader of the British Battalion during the latter part of 1938, are typical of many of the volunteers:

Well, to me it was elementary. Here was fascism spreading all over the world, the rape of Abyssinia, the rise of fascism in Germany and the

24 Fred Thomas, *To Tilt at Windmills: A Memoir of the Spanish Civil War* (East Lansing: State Univ. of Michigan Press, 1996), 4.

25 K. W. Watkins, *Britain Divided: The Effect of the Spanish Civil War on British Political Opinion* (London: Nelson, 1963), 168.

26 See, for example, Tom Wintringham, *English Captain* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939), 330.

27 Bill Alexander, *British Volunteers for Liberty* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1982), 30–31.

28 Jason Gurney, *Crusade in Spain* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), 36.

persecution of the Jews there, and the rise of the Blackshirts in Britain with their anti-Semitism, and especially their anti-Irishism. I felt that somebody had to do something to try and stop it.²⁹

Wild makes no distinction between fascism in Germany, Italy, Britain or, crucially, Spain; indeed they are clearly perceived as manifestations of the same evil. Italy, Germany, Portugal, Austria, and now Spain were all 'going fascist'. Obviously this explanation is overly simplistic and, with the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that the regimes of Italy, Germany and Spain were all markedly different. But, as A. J. P. Taylor observed, '[w]hat men believed at the time was more important than what was actually happening'.³⁰ Sadly, this is still the case for many, who continue to see the Brigades in simple binary terms. In general, critics have tended to focus on what they see as their political rather than military agenda.³¹ The harsh discipline and rigid political orthodoxy within the Brigades, maintained by the threat of prison camps—and worse—are seen as an extension of the suppression of the Catalan anti-Stalinist party, the POUM, in Spain, and the murderous show trials and purges occurring in the Soviet Union.

Within the International Brigades, discipline was maintained and imposed by a system of political commissars, a parallel political command, modelled on the Soviet Red Army. All units, from brigade down to company level, were allocated commissars who were, theoretically at least, expected to represent the Popular Front composition of the Brigades, where soldiers in uniform were not allowed to wear political emblems and all political meetings were forbidden without the express permission of the Ministry of War.³² It was a laudable policy, if somewhat undermined by the fact that every political commissar in the British Battalion was a Communist, and many were experienced Party cadres, educated at the Lenin School in Moscow.³³ On the battlefield military rank took precedence, though ignoring a commissar's advice was not an action to be taken lightly, for any mistakes would need to be explained in front of one's superiors, including more senior commissars. There is no doubt that their influence exceeded

29 Interview with Sam Wild, in *The Road to Spain: Anti Fascists at War 1936–1939*, ed. David Corkill and Stuart J. Rawnsley (Dunfermline: Borderline, 1981), 18–19.

30 A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914–1945* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1992), 395.

31 Some critics, somewhat anachronistically, situate the Brigades within Soviet history, post-Spain, comparing the commissars in Spain to those at Stalingrad and referring to the role of Spanish veterans in Eastern bloc regimes.

32 International Brigade Collection, Moscow 545/2/262, pp. 107, 109.

33 Senior British commissars who had attended the Lenin School included George Aitken, Bob Cooney, George Coyle, Thomas Degnan, Harry Dobson, Peter Kerrigan, Will Paynter and Walter Tapsell. See John Halstead and Barry McLoughlin, 'British and Irish Students at the International Lenin School, Moscow, 1926–37', Conference paper given at the University of Manchester, April 2001.

their rank and in certain situations commissars were permitted to overrule their military opposites, but it was a decision only taken in a dire emergency. The London sculptor Jason Gurney admirably summed up what was expected of a commissar:

The function of a Political Commissar at its best is very similar to that of a Chaplain in the British Army. His first job is welfare. He serves as a buffer between officers and soldiers, and functions as the source of moral authority. He endeavours to fulfil these tasks without possessing any kind of power. He cannot give orders but must operate entirely by virtue of persuasion.

However, as Gurney added, 'that is the theory: in practice he may be something approaching a Secret Police spy, of whom everyone is terrified'.³⁴ Just as important as any 'pastoral' role was the commissars' responsibility for keeping watch for, or on, malcontents, political dissidents, spies and traitors: 'Commissars must pay special attention to fight espionage and provocation in the ranks of the Army, cooperate with the command to maintain among combatants careful antifascist vigilance and train in the observance of military secrecy'.³⁵

Not that the commissars were the only ones keeping tabs on volunteers: three special brigades, composed mainly of German Communists, were charged with the identification and elimination of fifth-columnists and 'Trotskyists'.³⁶ As one disgruntled volunteer complained, 'The Communist Party had its members watching all the time, nobody being trusted, except those with membership cards of the Communist Party'.³⁷ A system of informers and spies existed within the ranks, including covert members of the SIM, the Republican Army's intelligence services, aided by agents of Soviet military intelligence (GRU) and secret police (NKVD). However, as a recent, ground-breaking study of the role of Soviet intelligence in the Spanish Civil War has shown, the notion that there was an army of NKVD agents operating throughout the Brigades, and Spain itself, is not supported by the evidence.³⁸

There were actually only a handful of NKVD agents and only six hundred Russian military advisors in Spain, over the entire course of the war. While they may well have been a significant addition to the Republican forces, there were simply not enough of them to control the war strategy. Any totalitarian aims of Stalin in Spain were rendered impossible by significant problems

34 Gurney, *Crusade in Spain*, 62.

35 International Brigade Collection, Moscow 545/3/479, p. 22.

36 Volodarsky, 'Soviet Intelligence Services in the Spanish Civil War', 297.

37 Anon., *In Spain with the International Brigade: A Personal Narrative* (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1938), 8.

38 See Volodarsky, 'Soviet Intelligence Services in the Spanish Civil War', 173–74.

associated with communicating with the USSR, by a critical lack of language skills and interpreters, and by logistical difficulties. Many of Stalin's demands were utterly unrealistic (as were some of the reports written for him by justifiably fearful subordinates) and should not be confused with what actually happened on the ground. The physical distance of Spain from Russia was key, meaning that 'the Soviet leadership could barely keep track of their own representatives on the ground, much less infiltrate and control the myriad institutions of Republican Spain'.³⁹ Soviet military documents show how little control they actually had over Russians in Spain, let alone events, despite overly positive assessments of their own successes. As Daniel Kowalsky argued in his study of Stalin's role in the conflict:

In every facet of Spanish involvement in Spanish affairs during the civil war, Stalin's position was never one of strength, but rather one of weakness, incompetence, inexperience and indecisiveness.⁴⁰

Gabriel Jackson's recent biography of the Spanish Premier, Juan Negrín, also presents convincing evidence that Russian influence on the Spanish Republic was not as powerful, or clear cut, as has been suggested.⁴¹

Yet it would be naïve to believe that Stalin's malicious and obsessive persecution of Communist heretics did not impact on Republican Spain and the International Brigades. There is no doubt that the Communists' discipline and, more significantly, the role of the Party as a conduit for Soviet aid, rapidly made them a powerful force on the Republican side. And it is now clear that, as many have long believed, Russian agents were indeed responsible for the murder of the POUM leader Andreu Nin.⁴² Within the Brigades themselves, Stalin's paranoia about so called 'Trotskyists' (a catch-all for any leftist political dissenters), led to many wrongly being accused of defeatism and worse. Volunteers suspected of holding 'deviant' political views, argued to be potentially undermining political unity within the Brigades, could find themselves victimized and punished. In particular, following the tumultuous events in Barcelona in May 1937, any sign of political non-conformism was likely to be seen as Trotskyism, and therefore dangerous, or even treacherous. Yet, it would also be a mistake to think that there was no tolerance of political unreliability—it was often referred to as a 'lack of political development'. Though 'true believers' were considered the

³⁹ Daniel Kowalsky, *Stalin and the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Columbia U. P., 2004), 448.

⁴⁰ Kowalsky, *Stalin and the Spanish Civil War*, 448.

⁴¹ Gabriel Jackson, *Juan Negrín* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press/Cañada Blanch Centre for Contemporary Spanish Studies, 2010).

⁴² The group responsible for the murder of Nin included the senior NKVD operative in Spain, Alexander Orlov, and the operation was led by NKVD assassin Iosif Grigulevich, a close associate of senior members of the Spanish Communist Party (see Volodarsky, 'Soviet Intelligence Services in the Spanish Civil War', 249–50).

ideal, many whose political development was seen as unsatisfactory were not only accepted into the brigades but received promotions. Even senior ranks could be criticized, but remain in post; senior British figures in Spain criticized for being politically 'weak' and 'undisciplined' included several battalion commanders and even the highest ranking British fighter, the 15th International Brigade Chief of Staff, Malcolm Dunbar.⁴³

Though harsh discipline could certainly exist within the Brigades, it should not be seen as evidence of the 'Stalinization' of Republican Spain. The Republic was in a bitter struggle for its very survival and there was a not wholly unjustified paranoia about spies. Therefore, despite their status as 'volunteers' (until they had joined up, at least), the deserters, the political deviants and trouble-makers, the drunkards and other malcontents were removed from the battalion and put where their 'lack of political development' could not detrimentally affect their comrades in arms. Harsh though it seems, these men were not repatriated, principally because requests for home leave were constantly being turned down from politically and militarily dependable volunteers, many of them with months of front-line service. To have refused to repatriate a 'good comrade', while sending home a 'Trotskyist' troublemaker was, perhaps not unreasonably, seen as setting an unpalatable precedent.⁴⁴ Hence deserters, trouble-makers and others 'who did not conform', as one British volunteer put it, were incarcerated.⁴⁵ While those with a previously good record were usually only fined or locked up for a short time, punishment meted out to recidivists could be rather more serious. Several British serial-deserters and trouble-makers ended up imprisoned in grim Republican jails (with little idea of when they might be released), in the concentration camp of Camps Lukács and, in the most serious cases, sent to join a punishment battalion digging trenches or clearing barbed wire in no man's land. Detractors claim that this was akin to murder and it is certainly true that the duties involved a very real danger of death or serious injury, but it is worth remembering that nearly one in five of the British volunteers was killed in Spain and nearly all were wounded at least once, so their chances in a labour battalion were probably not much worse than being on the front line.

While there is some evidence to suggest that discipline in some of the national units in the Brigades could be inexcusably brutal, reports of the use of executions, *pour encourager les autres*, are unfounded within the

43 Copeman was 'not developed politically', Sam Wild and Malcolm Dunbar were both 'weak politically', Jock Cunningham was 'theoretically absolutely crude' (International Brigade Collection, Moscow 545/6/118, p. 63; 545/6/215 p. 3; 545/6/126, p. 29; 545/6/121, p. 46).

44 Yet, despite the awkwardness it could cause, volunteers were repatriated, although some of them had committed misdemeanours during their time in Spain (International Brigade Collection, Moscow 545/6/156 p. 19; IBA MML Box 21, File B/2i).

45 Cyril Sexton, 'Memories of the Spanish Civil War', International Brigade Archive, Marx Memorial Library, London, p. 43.

British Battalion.⁴⁶ Despite pressure to set an example (following mass desertions at Jarama in February 1937, for example), the determination of the British leadership not to execute deserters was maintained throughout the war. While two members of the Battalion were executed in Spain, neither of them was shot for desertion. The first, who fought under the name 'Allan Kemp', had been caught with another volunteer attempting to desert to the enemy lines during fighting in the freezing conditions at Teruel in December 1938. When searched, Kemp was found to be carrying a map of the British machine-gun positions and 'was shot by firing squad [...] because in order to carry out his desertion he was prepared to betray the lives of his comrades by giving information to the fascists'.⁴⁷ The second was Maurice Ryan from Tipperary, an Irish corporal in the Machine-Gun Company. During the fighting in the summer of 1938, Ryan, who 'was flaying drunk' opened up his machine-gun on his own comrades.⁴⁸ There was already much suspicion surrounding Ryan, 'a very mysterious fellow', who had had a number of run-ins with the volatile battalion commander, Fred Copeman, and with the Machine-Gun Company's political commissar, who had complained that Ryan had refused to obey orders and threatened him with a hand grenade.⁴⁹ Ryan was charged with firing on his own comrades and, on 5 August 1938, he was taken for a walk by his battalion commander and adjutant and shot in the back of the head.⁵⁰

Some seventy-five years after the withdrawal of the volunteers from Spain, debates continue over the role of the International Brigades, with no sign of the arguments becoming any less heated. When a monument to the International Brigades was erected recently in Madrid's University City, it was almost immediately vandalized with red paint and *asesinos* daubed across it. Likewise, at a recent commemoration of the International Brigade Memorial Trust in London, a group of young Spaniards yelled abuse at the gathering crowd, protesting that the International Brigaders had gone to Spain in order to murder Spaniards. Meanwhile, many supporters see the International Brigades and the volunteers' fight against fascism as 'the last great cause' and have determinedly resisted any attempts to tarnish their shining reputation. Many, on both sides, resort to over-simplifications and, in Britain, a simplistic Manichean narrative of 'a battle of ideals' between

46 For example, one commander of the British Battalion claimed that he was told by the commander of the Franco-Belge Battalion that 'he had improved the discipline of the battalion since three of its members had been shot' (in Fred Copeman, *Reason in Revolt* [London: Blandford Press, 1948], 108).

47 Interview with Bob Cooney in *The Road to Spain: Anti Fascists at War 1936–1939*, ed. Corkill and Rawnsley, 121.

48 International Brigade Collection, Moscow 545/6/99.

49 Interview with Tom Murray, in *Voices from the Spanish Civil War: Personal Recollections of Scottish Volunteers in Republican Spain, 1936–1939*, ed. Ian MacDougall (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1986), 324.

50 Interview with John Dunlop, IWMSA 11355, reel 10.

fascism and communism in Spain continues to provide a neat justification for the government's refusal to aid Spain's democracy. 'We English hate fascism, but we loathe bolshevism as much. So, if there is somewhere where fascists and bolsheviks can kill each other off, so much the better', argued the British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin in 1936.⁵¹ All these years later little appears to have changed. In an online posting to an article in *The Spectator* on the International Brigades, one commentator argued, 'really that so few fought in the unenviable choice between the proxy war between Stalin and Hitler shows the innate good sense of the British public, who could smell rats better than the ideologues'.⁵² Another contributor agreed: 'The International Brigades were Stalin-controlled dupes betrayed by the Communists who increasingly controlled the Republic. They died in vain for a lousy cause'.⁵³ Many commentators clearly continue to see the International Brigades through the prism of the cold war, where a 'Comintern Army' was fighting in Spain so that Stalin could impose a People's Democracy on the country, similar to those established in Eastern Europe after the Second World War.⁵⁴

It is perhaps not surprising that the overwhelming proportion of Communists in the International Brigades, the imprisonments and executions, the rigid political orthodoxy, continue to influence commentators' perceptions of the Brigades. While few would support the view expressed at the time, that the members of the International Brigades were 'the sweepings of Europe [...] the dregs of society [...] scum [...] the riff-raff of Europe [and] the outcasts of society',⁵⁵ some of the more hagiographic accounts of the heroic 'volunteers for liberty' are just as suspect. Attempts to gloss over reports that some of the men serving in the British Battalion were drunks or criminals, or that others, terrified out of their wits by the appalling horrors of war, deserted, does not sully their reputation. They were, after all, volunteers who chose to risk their lives on behalf of the Spanish Republic, arguing that if they did not defeat Franco and his German and Italian backers in Spain, it would bring war, not peace.

51 Jill Edwards, *The British Government and the Spanish Civil War* (London: Macmillan, 1979), 38.

52 Richard Baxell, 'General Franco's British Foes', *The Spectator*, 29 August 2012, <<http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/books/2012/08/general-francos-british-foes/>> (accessed 24 January 2013).

53 Baxell, 'General Franco's British Foes'.

54 See, for example, Herbert Romerstein's *Heroic Victims: Stalin's Foreign Legion in the Spanish Civil War* (Washington D.C.: Council for the Defense of Freedom, 1994); Harvey Klehr, John E. Haynes and Fridrikh I. Firsov, *The Secret World of American Communism* (New Haven/London: Yale U. P., 1995) and, more recently, *Spain Betrayed*, ed. Radosh, Habeck and Sevostianov.

55 'The Ishmaels of Europe', in the British pro-Franco magazine *Spain*, 1:19 (February 1938), 8.

Many of the negative views of the International Brigades are tempered by the notion that the ‘iron discipline’ was driven by political, rather than military necessities. The rigid, hierarchical structure is seen as resembling that of the Red Army at Stalingrad where, for many Soviet soldiers, the choice was a simple one: to be killed by the enemy or to die at the hands of their own officers. Yet Madrid in 1936 is not Stalingrad in 1942 and the International Brigades were not the Red Army, despite the political commissars, the rigid political orthodoxy and the imprisonment of deserters and malcontents. Most of the volunteers accepted, albeit unenthusiastically on occasions, that both military and political discipline were necessary prerequisites for victory. If you listen to the men who actually served in the International Brigades, you discover that they could be, on occasion, a surprisingly democratic army. One anecdote by a young Jewish volunteer from London serves to demonstrate how harsh and unfair the discipline could be, yet at the same time reveals the exceptional nature of the Brigades:

[Fifteenth International Brigade Commander] Colonel Gal was quick tempered. We had just marched to the rear when suddenly Gal drew up in his staff car, got out and pounced on Frank Butler and myself. Holding his pistol to my head he shouted and cursed at us for being deserters and cowards, and had us both thrown into gaol. Imagine our feelings. We were dirty, unwashed and starving and thus we were greeted coming out of battle.

However, as the young Londoner discovered, despite Gal’s brutal reputation, this was not a cold decision taken by a Comintern henchman in order to impose Stalin’s iron hold on the Brigades. Rather it was a hasty decision made in the full heat of battle. On this occasion, once the heat had cooled, Gal reconsidered:

Next morning, Gal sent for us in his dug-out. There he stood before us an abject figure, tears in his eyes and asking our forgiveness. He told us he was ashamed of his actions and promptly made up for them by providing us with what we considered at the time to be the finest thing in the world—food, hot and appetising and plentiful. The question can be posed, in what other army would a high ranking officer bow his head and apologise to two ordinary soldiers?

‘This’, argued the London volunteer, ‘is why the International Brigade was different’.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ I am grateful to Dr Freddie Shaw for this information.