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# ‘Soldiers of Culture’ and their ‘Little Comrades’: The International Brigades and the Children of Civil War Spain, 1936–1939

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The volunteers of the International Brigades are well known for their participation in the battles of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), yet their encounters with the people, places and politics of Spain are yet to receive substantial attention from historians. This is the first interpretive analysis of their wide-reaching work with children, which spanned from the holding of fiestas to the establishment of costly homes. By considering these cross-cultural encounters, it highlights how they understood themselves to be members of a unified anti-fascist community in which Spanish children themselves had a key role to play. While these children were invariably regarded as the principal victims of ‘fascism’, they were also encouraged to take an active interest in the violent struggle of the Brigades as well as the building of an anti-fascist ‘New Spain’. Their own letters and drawings show the surprising extent to which the volunteers succeeded in their efforts.

## Introduction

Sometime in the autumn of 1938, with the Spanish Civil War dragging into its second year, a group of Communist Youth from Barcelona turned their attention to writing a letter in honour of the foreign volunteers of the International Brigades who, they claimed, had come to Spain to fight for their freedom, future and happiness. Established by the Comintern in October 1936 to assist the embattled Spanish Republic in its struggle against General Francisco Franco’s military insurgency, the Brigades had welcomed some 35,000 anti-fascists from across the world into their ranks by the time the children of the Ferrer Guàrdia Children’s Club (*Club Infantil Ferrer Guàrdia*) responded to the news of their imminent repatriation. ‘Neither Spain nor its children will ever forget those heroes who left their homes and their children in order to come and defend the liberty of The Spanish People and, with it, the wellbeing of its children’, they wrote.<sup>1</sup> While the memory of the International Brigades certainly lives on, their encounters with Spanish children have been almost entirely forgotten. This fits in with a broader sense of amnesia concerning the volunteers’ cross-cultural contacts with the people, places and politics of Spain which in turn stems from a long-standing tendency to frame their military service as just one chapter in a wider-reaching struggle against international fascism.<sup>2</sup> By drawing

<sup>1</sup> Letter from *Club Infantil Ferrer Guàrdia*, Centre d’Histoire Sociale (CHA), Fond Andre Marty, 2AM.4A.2, Box 11.

<sup>2</sup> For examples of narrative accounts which present the English-speaking volunteers’ fight in Spain as an extension of an anti-fascist struggle begun in their home countries see Richard Baxell’s *Unlikely Warriors: The Extraordinary Story Of The Britons Who Fought For Spain* (London: Aurum Press, 2014) and James K. Hopkins’ *Into the Heart of the Fire: The British in the Spanish Civil War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), both dealing with British volunteers; Cecil D. Eby, *Comrades and Commissars: The Lincoln Battalion in the Spanish Civil War* (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2007) for Americans; Hywel Francis, *Miners Against Fascism: Wales and the Spanish Civil War* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1984) for the Welsh, and Michael Petrou *Renegades: Canadians in the Spanish Civil War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008) for Canadians. Peter N. Carroll in *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade: Americans in the Spanish Civil War*

together two very distinct historiographical fields – on the one hand, that dealing with the International Brigades and, on the other, that dealing with children at times of total war – this article seeks to recover some of these transnational encounters and investigate the role they played in shaping the wartime experiences of soldiers and civilians alike.

Tellingly, encounters between the volunteers and children are only occasionally mentioned in the interviews, written testimonies and memoirs of the<sup>3</sup> veterans and, even then, they tend to amount to little more than brief interactions in village streets or squares. Given that these are the principal sources used to compile most accounts of their experiences, it is unsurprising that the subject of children has received so little attention. Yet a careful search through the dozens of military reports, balance sheets, personal files, letters, pamphlets, books, bulletins, speeches, drawings and photographs which have long sat unnoticed in the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) reveals that the Brigades invested a huge amount of effort into establishing contact between the volunteers and children in the Republican zone. What the volunteers meant by ‘children’ was never clearly defined, but those who benefitted from the Brigades’ wide-reaching initiatives were invariably under sixteen and often much younger. As well as holding *fiestas* and distributing toys, clothes and food to hundreds of grateful boys and girls, a whole series of long-term endeavours including the establishment of canteens (*comedores*), homes (*hogares*) and day-care centres (*guarderías*) for refugees and the children of soldiers were undertaken at often considerable expense. These institutions were established and overseen by the International Brigades but were run, on a day-to-day basis, by nurses, teachers and foreign volunteers. While only a minority of the foreign soldiers were directly involved in their running, Spanish children were a ubiquitous feature of their lives in Spain owing to widespread coverage of these activities in their wartime bulletins as well as frequent fundraising drives.

Why should this famous military unit have spent so much time and money on children in the rear-guard? While undoubtedly motivated by humanitarian concerns, the explanation ultimately rests in the International Brigades’ military objectives. Encounters with children facilitated contact with civilians, furnished opportunities to form alliances with other anti-fascist organisations and provided useful propaganda for the soldiers as well as their potential supporters abroad. Beyond these rather practical concerns lay the more novel ambitions of the International Brigades to contribute to Spain’s wartime culture. This is an aspect of their participation in the civil war which has long gone overlooked in favour of well-trodden debates about the men’s motivations in going to fight as well as their military experiences once they arrived in the country. Their leaders, however, rightly recognized that work with children provided an unprecedented means through which to participate in the construction of a ‘New Spain’, not least by galvanising the very same generation which would inherit it. In this way, their work fundamentally differed from that being carried out by other international organisations like the Quakers, the Red Cross or the Save the Children Fund. Instead, the Brigades can be counted among a wide range of groups which, as Verónica Sierra Blas has argued, mobilised children in favour of the Republic’s anti-fascist war aims.<sup>4</sup>

The ambition of this article is not simply to establish why encounters between the volunteers and children should have taken place, but rather to uncover the social, cultural and political consequences

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(Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994) is particularly culpable of conflating the volunteers’ own interpretation of the war as a struggle for the ‘Spanish People’ against ‘Fascism’ with the far more complex reality of the conflict, hinted at by his insistence on referring to the Nationalists as ‘Fascists’ as well as the Abraham Lincoln *Battalion* as a ‘Brigade’. Although considerably more balanced as a work of historical research, the subtitle of Baxell’s bestselling book on the British volunteers – ‘the Britons who fought for Spain’ – makes much the same mistake.

<sup>3</sup> For an informative if methodologically unimaginative survey of international humanitarian aid during the Spanish Civil War see Gabriel Pretus, *Humanitarian Relief in the Spanish Civil War* (New York and Ontario: Edwin Mellen, 2013). For humanitarianism in the wake of the First World War and the focus on children as a route to reconciliation, see Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2013), 83–7.

<sup>4</sup> Verónica Sierra Blas, ‘A Lost Generation? Children and the Spanish Civil War’ in James Matthews, ed., *Spain at War: Society, Culture and Mobilization, 1936–44* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 158–76.

for all those involved. Above all, the International Brigades used their work with children to construct an anti-fascist imagined community in which every member, young or old, had their corresponding rights and responsibilities. Encounters at every level permitted the volunteers to regard themselves as compassionate soldiers fighting for the survival of 'The Spanish People' in their struggle against a foreign 'fascist' invader. In so doing, they were adapting the long-standing trope of the 'military man of feeling' who fights out of a sense of duty to the elderly, young and vulnerable to the very specific circumstances of 1930s Spain.<sup>5</sup> Consciously or not, the architects of the International Brigades were heirs to the military theorists of the eighteenth century who sought to 'civilise soldiers' and in so doing render their activities more palatable to the civilians amongst whom they operated.<sup>6</sup> While compassion has typically been seen as a feminine emotion falling outside the 'rational' realm of male soldiering, its application in military contexts has often helped soldiers to win the hearts and minds of native populations, with Spain fitting squarely into this historical pattern.<sup>7</sup> In the words of Alfred Brauner, the French pedagogue placed in charge of the Brigades' child-centred initiatives, the volunteers were not ordinary combatants at all but 'soldiers of culture' struggling for a free, enlightened and humanitarian Spain on behalf of its civilians. In other words, the struggle against fascism on the frontlines was inseparable from that in the rear.

This is not only a study of soldiers. It is also a study of children which offers a unique window into the complex and sometimes contradictory ways in which European attitudes towards childhood manifested themselves in the specific context of total war. Historians have already shown how the mass carnage of the Great War ensured that ideas about children's right to be spared the kind of violence now intimately associated with modern 'total' conflicts were firmly established come 1936.<sup>8</sup> Whether they were nurses from Germany, soldiers from Poland or teachers from Spain, those responsible for the Brigades' initiatives shared the view that children were among the principal victims of 'fascism' who must therefore be urgently protected from its physical dangers. Yet visions of passive martyrdom overlapped with a second, very different, understanding of children's wartime role which held them to be active members of an anti-fascist community violently struggling for its freedom. Those who fell under the International Brigades' care were expected to become class-conscious members of a broader proletarian collective which endorsed the war of annihilation the volunteers were waging against the 'fascist' other. Attempts to socialise them into 'little comrades' owed a debt to progressive educational theories which had gained ground throughout Europe and were linked to long-standing attempts to create conscientious citizens through interventionist policies, not least in the form of the 'New Men' – and women – long since promised by the Russian Revolution.<sup>9</sup> It was, however, the very specific context of the Spanish Republic at war that set the parameters of the Brigades' work. In removing children to the rearguard, placing them in homes and colonies and imbuing them with progressive ideals of citizenship, its leaders were not only drawing on the long-term legacy of the reformist Second Republic but also following the direct lead of the wartime government.

While the association between war and childhood is longstanding, it is only in recent decades that historians have turned away from seeing children as passive victims of violence and instead invested them with a capacity to engage with wartime upheavals in multifaceted and creative ways.<sup>10</sup> In the case

<sup>5</sup> For a compelling application of the concept of the 'military man of feeling' to the Crimean War, see Holly Furneaux, *Military Men of Feeling: Emotion, Touch, and Masculinity in the Crimean War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> For more details on the work of these theorists in a German context, see Cornelis Van Der Haven, 'Military Men of Feeling? Gender Boundaries and Military-Civil Encounters in Two German Soldier Plays (1760–80)', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 41, 4 (2018), 511–26.

<sup>7</sup> Julia Welland, 'Compassionate Soldiering and Comfort' in Linda Åhäll and Thomas Gregory, eds., *Emotions, Politics and War* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 115.

<sup>8</sup> Dominique Marshall, 'Humanitarian Sympathy for Children in Times of War and the History of Children's Rights, 1919–1959' in James Marten, ed., *Children and War: A Historical Anthology* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 184.

<sup>9</sup> Andy Byford, *Science of the Child in Late Imperial and Early Soviet Russia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 3–21.

<sup>10</sup> Juri Meda, 'Los dibujos infantiles como fuentes históricas: perspectivas heurísticas y cuestiones metodológicas', *Revista brasileira de história da educação*, 14, 3 (2014), 139–65.

of Spain, Verónica Sierra Blas has drawn much-needed attention to the agency displayed by children all throughout the Civil War. This article continues her approach by drawing on entirely new archival sources which enabled the voices of Spanish children to finally be heard, most obviously through their booklets, letters and drawings. It contributes to an already rich literature on children and war by highlighting the sometimes contradictory identities they were assigned by adults which, in turn, profoundly shaped the emotional, intellectual and physical environment in which they operated, as well as the language, concepts and symbols they used to understand their place in the world. In the final analysis, the ‘Soldiers of culture’ regarded their ‘Little Comrades’ as victims of fascism who needed to be withdrawn from the physical scene of wartime destruction, yet also as agents in the making of their own anti-fascist future who would do well to recognise the violent struggle being carried out by the foreign volunteers on their behalf. In order to develop this argument, the following article begins by considering the Brigades’ attempts to situate themselves within an anti-fascist imagined community of their own making, before moving onto the ways in which children grappled with their own place in that same community.

### ‘The Mercenaries Destroy, the Volunteers of Liberty Rebuild’: Imagining the Anti-Fascist Community in Spain

The International Brigades’ approach to children is incomprehensible without taking into account their broader understanding of the Spanish Civil War. Depictions of the conflict as a national struggle for the liberation of the ‘Spanish People’ were common in both the government and rebel zones, with Franco’s Nationalists claimed to be fighting for a Spain free from Bolshevik communism, and the Republicans for a Spain free from Nazi and Italian fascism.<sup>11</sup> Although groups across the Republican spectrum adopted the latter view, the Communist Party proved to be among its most fervent proponents.<sup>12</sup> Given that the International Brigades were formed by the Comintern and largely run by card-carrying Party members, it is only natural that it should have exercised a significant impact on their own sense of purpose in Spain. The interpretation put forward by one volunteer that ‘it wasn’t a war of the Spanish People fighting against each other’ but rather one ‘of the Spanish People fighting for independence against Fascism’<sup>13</sup> may seem like an obvious oversimplification, but it was the same line propagated in Brigade newspapers, bulletins, speeches, posters, leaflets and even the men’s military training. Certainly, Mussolini’s gift to Franco of around 78,000 troops amounted to a de-facto war against the Republic, while Hitler, for his part, was keen to convert Spain into an informal outpost of his Nazi empire.<sup>14</sup> Yet the war remained, at root, a civil conflict. Encounters with children helped convince the foreign fighters, as well as their Spanish hosts, that they had every right to participate in its fratricidal violence.

This was not just a question of self-serving propaganda. The affection many volunteers felt towards children was genuine and often translated into everyday acts of generosity such as the distribution of sweets or ice-cream to groups of grateful youngsters. When later interviewed about their experiences, veterans tended to focus on what they expected to be of greatest interest to their listeners – namely, their frontline service. Yet when given the chance, a number recalled their meetings with Spanish children with obvious warmth. These were often underlined by mutual curiosity. One American marveled at his comrade’s ability to befriend groups of children who followed him around as though he was the

<sup>11</sup> Xosé Manoel Núñez Seixas, ‘Nations in arms against the invader’, in Chris Ealham and Michael Richards, eds., *The Splintering of Spain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 45–67.

<sup>12</sup> Igor Mednikov, ‘Los Límites de una renovación: la historiografía actual rusa sobre la Guerra Civil Española’, *Stud. Hist. H. Cont.*, 32 (2014), 411–26.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Ian MacDougall, ed., *Voices from the Spanish Civil War* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1986), 92.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Preston, ‘Italy and Spain in Civil War and World War’ in Sebastian Balfour and Paul Preston, eds., *Spain and the Great Powers* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 151; Pierpaolo Barbieri, *Hitler’s Shadow Empire: Nazi Economics and the Spanish Civil War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015).

‘Pied Piper’, regardless of the fact that he spoke no Spanish.<sup>15</sup> In spite of the language barrier, children proved to be relatively approachable. Englishman Tony McClean came across a girl aged around six at a village well who taught him the parts of the body in Spanish and got, as he laughingly recalled, ‘a tremendous kick [...] out of finding somebody who didn’t know even these simple words [...]’.<sup>16</sup> For the lucky few, these spontaneous friendships could win the much-coveted respect of their parents and even a place at the family dinner table.<sup>17</sup> In this way, abstract solidarity with the ‘Spanish People’ became a lived reality; some even came to feel like adopted sons of the villagers. British volunteer George Leeson told one interviewer that ‘my last memory of Madrigueras [...] is the entire village [...] weeping, weeping and waving at us! We might have been their own sons going away there’.<sup>18</sup>

Rather than settling for spontaneous encounters between the volunteers and their host communities, the leaders of the International Brigades went to great lengths to ensure that the two groups came into close contact. The task tended to fall to the ‘commissars’, politically-committed cadres whose job was to look after the wellbeing of the volunteers and ensure that they maintained a sense of anti-fascist motivation.<sup>19</sup> Films were screened, meetings held and the harvest brought in. Time and again, children found themselves at the centre of this cross-cultural work. Most notably, lavish fiestas were held in the localities through which the volunteers passed, with photographs of these cheerful events appearing in the main Brigade publication, *The Volunteer for Liberty*, as evidence of the friendship which united the volunteers to the ‘Spanish People’ and set them apart from the ‘fascist’ mercenaries.<sup>20</sup> At just one fiesta an incredible 600 litres of chocolate milk, 2300 bread rolls and 100 kilograms of marmalade were distributed.<sup>21</sup> These charitable activities were crucial in securing local goodwill. One commissar’s report described the population of a village as being under the yoke of the ‘merchant, the priests, and the mayor’ with the result that they were ‘very reserved’ towards the volunteers. The commissar saw to it that a children’s party (*fiesta infantil*) was arranged, with some 110 children – around a quarter of the population – finally attending. The volunteers played with them for two hours, much to the enthusiasm of their parents. In short, the community had been won over.<sup>22</sup>

As well as these relatively ad-hoc initiatives, the Commissariat saw to it that the long-term care of children was also seen to. Their efforts fit firmly within a well-documented record of Republican intervention in the lives of children in the form of mass evacuations to rearguard ‘colonies’ which were responsible for housing, feeding and educating those under their care.<sup>23</sup> The idea that the state had a responsibility to guarantee the welfare of children had gathered strength throughout Europe by the time war broke out in Spain and was even enshrined in the country’s recent constitution.<sup>24</sup> Almost immediately after the military rising, the Republican authorities found themselves faced with unprecedented numbers of young people wandering the streets without homes or guardians,

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Albert Prago, 1986, Centro Documental de Memoria Histórica, PHO\_ABAL\_84.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Anthony McClean, Reel 3, 1986, Imperial War Museum Collections [IWM], Catalogue No. [CN] 19991.

<sup>17</sup> Amery, letter dated 13 May 1937 in Cary Nelson and Jefferson Hendricks, eds., *Madrid 1937: Letters of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade from the Spanish Civil War* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 99.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with George Leeson, Reel 2, 1976, IWM, CN. 803.

<sup>19</sup> For a good overview of the commissar system, see James Matthews, ‘“The Vanguard of Sacrifice”? Political Commissars in the Republican Popular Army during the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939’, *War in History*, 21, 1 (2014), 82–101.

<sup>20</sup> Evidence of this activity abounds in the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History [RGASPI]. See for example Luis Encina, ‘La fiesta del día siete’, *Nuestra vida*, no. 6, RGASPI 545.2.418, 12, and *Report on Activities of the XI Brigade*, RGASPI 545.3.8. For reports in the *Volunteer for Liberty* see ‘Un exemple de fraternisation’, *French Volunteer for Liberty* [hereafter VFL], 7 Feb. 1937, RGASPI 545.2.370, 4.

<sup>21</sup> Letter to Alfred Brauner on a children’s fiesta held in Vich, 21 July 1938, RGASPI 545.3.708.

<sup>22</sup> ‘Informe sobre el trabajo de la XI Brigada entre la población civil’, 18 May 1938, RGASPI 545.3.59.

<sup>23</sup> This literature is extensive but largely descriptive. For a good overview of the *colonias* see Rosalía Crego Navarro, ‘Las colonias escolares durante la Guerra Civil (1936–1939)’, *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma, Historia Contemporánea*, 5, 2 (1989), 299–328.

<sup>24</sup> Peter Anderson has very recently situated the war within an age of mass child removal. See *The Age of Mass Child Removal in Spain: Taking, Losing, and Fighting for Children, 1926–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021). For the civil war years see 162–3.



particularly in Madrid.<sup>25</sup> Some were orphans of parents killed in combat, others refugees from rebel Spain, and others students from orphanages or schools whose caretakers had disappeared.<sup>26</sup> With the siege of the capital showing no signs of abating, the government imitated large scale evacuations to Valencia and Catalonia, with as many as 100,000 children being effected between the months of October 1936 and March 1937.<sup>27</sup> The first evacuees were lodged with families, but eventually they were placed in children's residences (*colonias infantiles*) consisting of between twenty-five and a hundred inhabitants.<sup>28</sup> Directly inspired by these developments, the International Brigades became one of many military units, political parties, trade unions and humanitarian organisations backed by the Republic Government in establishing aid for children.<sup>29</sup>

Their first large-scale undertaking was a home set up in the expropriated palace of *La Moraleja*, near Madrid, which was responsible for the care of around sixty children who were mostly evacuees from the war-torn north of the capital. The premises had served as a base for the Brigades' Thälmann Battalion during the Battle of Madrid. The home was, therefore, named in their honour.<sup>30</sup> By the time the volunteers were forced behind the River Ebro as a result of Franco's blistering offensive through the Aragon in March and April 1938, the commissariat had spearheaded an array of similar initiatives aimed at feeding, housing and educating children in facilities attached to their bases or hospitals. Wounded soldiers and nursing staff at the International Brigade convalescence centre in Benissa established a home in a nearby villa. Their colleagues in nearby Denia established another home for twenty-five children.<sup>31</sup> Those at the hospital in Benicàssim fitted out two villas for refugee children from Madrid and Asturias, with a third designated for the children of the Spanish nursing staff; in total, they looked after 160 children. Meanwhile, a volunteer base in Murcia known as Camp Lukacs opened its gates to 350 refugee children each afternoon, providing them with baths, classes and medical attention.<sup>32</sup> Significant numbers of international volunteers were based in the adjoining military facilities, yet exactly how many of them came into contact with the children is impossible to say. Throughout 1937 alone some 7575 men spent time at Benicassim, another 924 at Benisa, and another 864 still at Denia, suggesting that the figure ran (at least) into the hundreds.<sup>33</sup>

By late 1937 the Commissariat had set up an International Brigade Committee for Spanish Children (*Comité Pro-Niños Españoles de las Brigadas Internacionales*). That the inspiration for their work lay in the Republican Government's own emphasis on children's welfare is left in no doubt by the statement, made in its founding charter, that 'the Committee supports the efforts of the Government of the Republic to help the children of Spain'.<sup>34</sup> In a contribution to a Brigade newspaper, Alfred Brauner – the committee's leader and spokesman – wrote that 'if the Spanish Republic can be proud of a job, it can be [...] the evacuation of children who were in territory threatened or occupied by the fascists', adding that 'the Minister of Public Education helped by [...] the

<sup>25</sup> Sjaak Braster and María del Mar del Pozo Andrés, 'Education and the Children's Colonies in the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939): The Images of the Community Ideal', *Paedagogica Historica*, 51, 4 (2015), 455.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, 456.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 455.

<sup>28</sup> Juan Manuel Fernández Soria, 'La asistencia a la infancia en la Guerra Civil: Las colonias escolares', *Historia de la educación*, 6 (2010), 97.

<sup>29</sup> For groups operating out of Spain, see Fernández Soria, 'La asistencia a la infancia en la Guerra Civil', 83–128. For international humanitarian assistance, see Pretus, *Humanitarian Relief in the Spanish Civil War*.

<sup>30</sup> María Isabel Esteve Torres, *Los Hogares Infantiles y las Brigadas Internacionales, 1936–1939* (Valencia: Asociación de Amigos de las Brigadas Internacionales, 2014) 8–30.

<sup>31</sup> Alfred Brauner, 'Enfants évacués', *Ayuda Médica Internacional*, 1 Jan. 1938, RGASPI 545.3.737, 14–15; 'Kinderheim "Solidaridad" im Genesungshospital Benisa', German VFL, 2 Dec. 1937, RGASPI 545.2.367, 13; Letter to *l'office d'enfance*, 18 May 1938, RGASPI 545.1.75.

<sup>32</sup> *Los niños españoles y las Brigadas Internacionales*, July 1938, RGASPI 545.2.404; Report on the work of the *Comité Pro-Niños*, 13 July 1938, RGASPI 545.1.76.

<sup>33</sup> 'Número de heridos en los hospitales de las Brigadas Internacionales [...] durante el año de 1937', Archivo General Militar de Ávila [AGMAV], C.1094, 11, 1, document 1.

<sup>34</sup> Founding Statute of the *Comité Pro-Niños*, undated, RGASPI 545.1.75.

International Brigades have created a large number of children's homes where these little ones have enough to eat, education and joy'.<sup>35</sup> The Committee was responsible for maintaining existing homes and assisting those units who wanted to sponsor entirely new ones.<sup>36</sup> To do so, they continued the long-standing habit of collecting funds from the volunteers themselves, with one drive managing to raise an incredible 27,949 pesetas.<sup>37</sup> This money was crucial. In the months of July and August 1938 alone the Committee spent some 50,000 pesetas on opening day-care centres, canteens and homes in the Catalan towns of Moya, Mataró, S'Agaro, Santa Coloma and Vich. Together, they looked after a combined total of *at least* a thousand children.<sup>38</sup>

Detailed information on the day-to-day running of these establishments is, unfortunately, lacking. This extends to the children themselves, whose precise names and backgrounds remain, for the most part, unknown. Nonetheless, a combination of Brigade propaganda, internal correspondence and the children's own writings enables us to clarify the key demographics of those effected. As the founding charter of the Committee for Spanish Children makes clear, the children looked after by the International Brigades were either the sons and daughters of soldiers or else refugees from war-torn parts of the country. The children of the Moraleja home were represented as a sort of 'deserving poor' in the pages of the Brigade press given that their parents were either fighting for the Republic, stuck in 'fascist' territory or had been killed by the enemy.<sup>39</sup> Elsewhere, refugees constituted the main group of beneficiaries: 'we are refugee children who have come from all the regions of Spain', wrote those looked after at the Santa Coloma home.<sup>40</sup> By that time, the Nationalist advance through Aragon had uprooted thousands of civilians and channelled them to the towns and cities of Catalonia, where the scale of the humanitarian crisis was reflected in the work of groups like the Central Aid Committee for the Refugees of Catalonia (*Comité Central d'Ajut als Refugiats de Catalunya*) which, as early as February 1937, had placed 10,000 children in homes or colonies.<sup>41</sup> These events led the Brigades to shift their own attention away from 'model homes' like the *Hogar Ernst Thälmann* towards large-scale facilities capable of administering aid to as many children as possible.<sup>42</sup>

Refugee children were a conspicuous feature of life in wherever the Brigades operated. In July 1938 the Committee counted an incredible one thousand refugee children in Vich, a thousand in S'Agaro, 350 in Mataró, 128 in Moya, and 100 in Olot.<sup>43</sup> Very often these were hungry, homeless and sick, leading the doctors and nurses working with the volunteers to administer on-the-spot medical examinations as well as establish permanent clinics for eye and skin disease.<sup>44</sup> A scrapbook of letters and drawings produced for the volunteers by the children of Mataró offers a rare glimpse into their experiences. They are refugees from Madrid, Bilbao, San Sebastian, and Asturias. Ten-year-old Nati Elisburu from Mondragón described 'circling the world since the war broke out', passing through Durango, Bilbao, France and Lerida before ending up in Mataró. Nati claimed that the children had squandered time playing in the streets before they were 'brought together in the *guardería*', which – he wrote – 'for

<sup>35</sup> Alfred Brauner, 'Enfants évacués', AMI, 14–15, RGASPI 545.3.737.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Alfred Brauner, 'La Labor del Comité Pro-Niños Españoles', *Boletín: Diario del Comisariado del XII Brigada Garibaldi*, no. 92, 9 Aug. 1938, RGASPI 545.3.193, 4; For the efforts of distinct companies at an International Brigade base in Olot to assist children see 'Todo para ayudar a los niños refugiados', *Nuestra Vida*, No. 6., undated, RGASPI 545.2.418, 11; for an article which listed the amounts raised by each company of the H. Vuillemin Battalion, see 'Les filleuls de notre brigade', *Adelante: Journal of the XIII International Brigade*, no. 5, 4 July 1937, RGASPI 545.3.345, 5.

<sup>38</sup> Alfred Brauner, report on relations between SRI and the Comité Pro-Niños, C. Aug. 1938, RGASPI 545.1.76; Report concerning personnel of the *Comité Pro-Niños*, 6 Aug. 1938, RGASPI 545.1.75; Report on the work of the Committee Pro-Niños, 13 July 1938, RGASPI 545.1.76.

<sup>39</sup> Esteve Torres, *Hogares infantiles*, especially 30–5 and 54–6.

<sup>40</sup> Booklet produced by the *Hogar García Lorca*, CHA, Fond Andre Marty, 2AM.4A.2, Box 11.

<sup>41</sup> Fernández Soria, 'La asistencia a la infancia en la Guerra Civil', 90–6.

<sup>42</sup> Report on the work of the *Comité pro-Niños españoles*, 1 July 1938, RGASPI 545.1.76.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Report on the work of the *Comité pro-Niños españoles*, 13 July 1938, RGASPI 545.1.76.

us is home'.<sup>45</sup> Ten year old Marcos recalled his home-town as being a 'working fishing village' with a 'happy population' until the 'fascists came to disrupt our happiness [...] with the planes above, sowing bombs'. Like Nati, he was thrown 'from one town to another' until ending up in Catalonia.<sup>46</sup>

The International Brigades' facilities came under the direct command of their Committee for Spanish Children. Alfred Brauner, who had gone to Spain to report on the war for a left-wing magazine while his wife worked at the Brigade hospital in Benicàssim, was chosen by the chief commissar of the Brigades – The Italian Communist Luigi Longo – to head the Committee. Both Brauner's left-wing credentials and his doctoral studies into children's education made him well suited to the work at hand.<sup>47</sup> Acting alongside him in the role of administrator was fellow volunteer Henry Stuart, a Communist Party member since 1934 and himself an orphan.<sup>48</sup> In early 1938 they were joined by the Polish nurse Anja Hammerman, who immediately prior to her arrival in Spain had been employed in a home for Spanish children not far from the Moscow.<sup>49</sup> She was now charged with co-ordinating the committee's medical work.<sup>50</sup> Local committees were also formed to elect individual members of the Brigades to oversee each facility, the day-to-day running of which tended to fall to female volunteers attached to the International Brigades' various bases and hospitals.<sup>51</sup> The direct role of the volunteers tended to be more limited, if no less important, than that of their collaborators. We have already seen how wounded soldiers were particularly crucial when it came to collecting the funds necessary for establishing new homes and canteens.<sup>52</sup>

This activity would have been impossible without the assistance of a wide range of civil and military organisations. From their base in Catalonia, the volunteers established a close working relationship with local socialists, anarchists, communists and anti-fascist women's groups in order to collect funds, find and fit out premises, and secure food, medicines, and clothing.<sup>53</sup> In order to make their place within an imagined community of Spaniards all the more credible, the individuals working with the Committee made sure to highlight their spirit of anti-fascist co-operation. Brigade leaders were always at pains to stress that they were not an autonomous army operating on their own terms, but a proletarian vanguard spanning the entire left-wing spectrum and serving at the pleasure of the Republican Government. Tellingly, the children's home set up at Benissa was named Solidarity (*Solidaridad*) in honour of the various anti-fascist groups which had rallied behind the Brigades to make it a reality, with the *Volunteer for Liberty* reporting that its inauguration 'was the first and only' event to have taken place in the locality 'in which the representatives of all the anti-fascist parties sat next to each other in a brotherly manner'.<sup>54</sup> As well as serving as positive propaganda for the Brigades, grassroots work with children enabled them to further the Comintern policy of forging 'popular front' coalitions of liberal and left-wing parties which were regarded as essential for victory.<sup>55</sup>

Just like village *fiestas*, the establishment of formal facilities for children generated unique opportunities to establish contact with local populations. The commissar at Benicàssim highlighted the role of children in winning the trust of locals who had voted in large numbers, as he put it, for 'reactionaries and the fascists' in the last elections.<sup>56</sup> Evidently, the volunteers' work with children was not only intended to secure passive acceptance of their presence in Spain, but also active support for their military struggle. The Brigade Commissariat regarded the Spanish conflict as both a total war which

<sup>45</sup> Album with letters and drawings of the children of Mataró, RGASPI 545.2.210, 11, 22.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 44.

<sup>47</sup> Biography of Alfred Brauner in support of PCE application, undated, RGASPI 545.6.1096.

<sup>48</sup> Biography of Henry Stuart, undated, RGASPI 545.1.75.

<sup>49</sup> Biography of Anja Hammerman, undated, RGASPI 545.1.76.

<sup>50</sup> Report concerning personnel of the *Comité Pro-Niños*, 6 Aug. 1938, RGASPI 545.1.75.

<sup>51</sup> Report on the personnel of Pro-Niños institutions, undated, RGASPI 545.1.76.

<sup>52</sup> Alfred Brauner, report on relations between SRI and the Comité Pro-Niños, undated, RGASPI 545.1.76.

<sup>53</sup> Letter from Socors Roig de Catalunya, 11 Aug. 1938, RGASPI 545.1.76.

<sup>54</sup> 'Kinderheim "Solidaridad" im Genesungshospital Benisa', German VFL, RGASPI 545.2.367, 13.

<sup>55</sup> John Sorkson, 'Americans and Canadians in the Internationals Brigades', undated article draft, C. 1937, RGASPI 454.3.470.

<sup>56</sup> Report on work at Benicàssim between Dec. 1937 and Jan. 1938, RGASPI 545.2.72.



required the joint efforts of the front and the rearguard if a Republican victory was to be forthcoming, as well as a battle of ideologies which left no room for civilian neutrality.<sup>57</sup> Care for needy orphans and hungry refugees would prove absolutely key in galvanizing the political energies of Spaniards towards an anti-fascist victory. An internal report outlining the creation of the canteen in Santa Coloma stressed that it was 'a tremendous factor in winning over indifferent sections of the population to the need for the [...] struggle against fascism and its barbarism' and concluded in no uncertain terms that 'if we have the children, we have the women'.<sup>58</sup> Even taking into account the possibility that these commissars saw what they wanted to, there can be little doubt that they regarded children as the key to exercising a moral, as well as material, effect on the 'Spanish People' they imagined themselves to be saving from a fascist invasion.

Commissar General Luigi Longo regarded the volunteers' concern for Spanish children as only natural given that many of them had left their own sons and daughters to fight in Spain.<sup>59</sup> To a limited extent, this was true. One British volunteer, for example, sent home a postcard celebrating the *Hogar Ernst Thälmann* which contained a few touching words: 'To Keith & Carol, from daddy in Spain. Love to you both. Be good children & love mummy always'.<sup>60</sup> All the same, the International Brigades' child-centred initiatives were not nearly as disinterested as they were made to seem in the speeches of their commissars and the pages of their news bulletins. Ultimately, encounters with Spanish children enabled them to reinforce the volunteers' identity as 'soldiers of culture' fighting alongside the 'Spanish people' in a unified struggle against fascism and, in so doing, legitimise their participation in a divisive civil war. When Alfred Brauner set to work on a book celebrating the work of the Committee, he was keen to convey the message that 'The mercenaries destroy, the Volunteers of Liberty rebuild'.<sup>61</sup> Its numerous photos of volunteers surrounded by beaming children could leave no doubt that they were twentieth-century 'military men of feeling' who felt just as comfortable in the role of surrogate fathers as they did fighting fascists on the frontline. In fact, the two activities were intimately linked by the fact that they were photographed participating in their humanitarian activities while dressed in full uniform.<sup>62</sup> For the anti-fascist imagined community to become a reality, however, those children would themselves have a key role to play.

### 'How the Children of Spain Should Make War': Forging the Anti-Fascist Future

As well as helping to win the hearts and minds of 'The Spanish People', children were *themselves* expected to regard the volunteers as 'soldiers of culture' protecting them from fascism. A sense of shared community bound by mutual respect and duty was forged through personal encounters in the Brigades' homes, canteens and *guarderías*, as well as through the exchanging of gifts and correspondence. Members of one Barcelona youth club assured the volunteers that they could only imagine 'the joy of the little children when they received the milk' they had sent them, promising to fulfil *their* side of the anti-fascist bargain by holding the soldiers a festival whenever they returned.<sup>63</sup> The conversion of abstract solidarity with the 'Spanish People' into a sense of personal accountability was reflected in the language used to describe the presence of both the volunteers and the children in one another's lives, with one bulletin stressing that it was 'no exaggeration' to describe a group of local refugees as 'our children' because they ate together in the same canteen.<sup>64</sup> Meanwhile, the girls who attended one children's home adopted the habit of calling their favourite volunteers 'uncles' (*tíos*) whenever they

<sup>57</sup> *Our Bulletin*, RGASPI 545.1.66, 42.

<sup>58</sup> 'Unser comedor der niños in St. Coloma del Farnes', 10 Aug. 1938, RGASPI 545.3.65.

<sup>59</sup> 'Quelques heures parmi les gosses de la XIeme Brigade', French VFL, 23 Dec. 1937, RGASPI 545.2.370, 5–6.

<sup>60</sup> Postcard from British volunteer 'Arthur', undated, Marx Memorial Library, SC.VOL.ART.3.

<sup>61</sup> Brauner to Longo concerning the creation of a brochure on the International Brigades and Spanish Children, 1 Jan. 1938, RGASPI 545.1.76.

<sup>62</sup> *Los niños españoles y las Brigadas Internacionales*, July 1938, RGASPI 545.2.404.

<sup>63</sup> 'Nuestros Peques', *Ádelante Palafox!* no. 2, undated, 5, AGMAV.C.1097, 3, 1, document 5.

<sup>64</sup> 'La vida de la 4ª Cia.', *Nuestra Vida*, No. 7, 1938, RGASPI 545.2.418, 9.

visited.<sup>65</sup> Even when they were not physically present, the soldiers remained an inescapable feature of the children's lives given that the facilities in which they were clothed and fed were named after them, that they were told about them by their caretakers, and that they prepared letters and drawings for them.

Those responsible for the children expected their feelings of friendship towards the volunteers to translate into a deeper sympathy for their military objectives in Spain. The International Brigades, they were told, not only protected them from the horrors of fascism through acts of kindness in the rearguard, but also by fighting the foreign invader on the frontlines. The claim made by one individual quoted in Brauner's book on the work of the *Comité Pro-Niños* that 'everything that may remind the children of the war and its horrors we try to keep away from them' was untrue.<sup>66</sup> Instead, there emerged a profound tension between the volunteers' stated objective of physically shielding the children from the war and their concerted attempts to remind them that Franco's Nationalists were monstrous barbarians who must be physically annihilated. This tension is plain to see in the speeches which the staff of various children's facilities gave over *Radio Barcelona* on the occasion of their withdrawal to Catalonia. Addressing himself directly to children looked after by the International Brigades in Murcia, Commissar Pimpaud stressed that the volunteers 'continue the fight against very bad men who do much harm to children like you, by killing dads and also many little boys and little girls with big bombs'. His speech was loaded with violent language intended to provoke hatred for the enemy and support for a Republican victory.<sup>67</sup>

Nor were children expected to be passive recipients of these belligerent messages. Their engagement with the International Brigades' concept of anti-fascist warfare is made apparent by sources they themselves produced, including their drawings. Since the 1920s, progressive educators throughout Europe had promoted drawing as a means of fomenting children's capacity for self-expression, with liberal artists such as Maruja Mallo and progressive organisations like the Free Institute of Spanish Education (*La Institución Libre de Enseñanza*) bringing these methods into Spanish classrooms during the short-lived Republic.<sup>68</sup> The use of drawing in Republican schools and colonies continued during the war, too. Depictions of bomber planes, ruined towns and queues for rationed food have been rallied as direct testimonies of children's traumatic experiences by a range of researchers who often situate their recovery of childhood voices within Spain's historical memory movement.<sup>69</sup> All the same, it is important to avoid falling into the trap identified by Nicholas Stargardt whereby children are invested with the zero-sum identity of traumatised victims.<sup>70</sup> A critical reading of their drawings can tell us a great deal about the wider environment in which they operated,<sup>71</sup> with Sergio Valero Gómez doing well to remind us that most examples from the Spanish Civil War were not spontaneous creations at all, but rather commissioned by adults eager to socialise them into the values of the war-time Republic. In short, they contain a range of political messages which historians have, in the main, paid all too little attention to.<sup>72</sup>

Those produced at the Mataró *guardería* reflect neither their author's first-hand experiences of violent conflict, nor show any obvious signs of trauma. Rather than 'witnessing' war – to use a common

<sup>65</sup> Interview with Emil Miltenbeger in Esteve Torres, *Hogares Infantiles*, 54.

<sup>66</sup> *Los niños españoles y las Brigadas Internacionales*, RGASPI 545.2.404.

<sup>67</sup> Radio message from Commissar Pimpaud to the children of Murcia, May 1938, RGASPI 545.1.76.

<sup>68</sup> Sergio Valero Gómez, 'Educación republicana y politización', *Historia Social*, 94 (2019), 102; Roberta Ann Quance, 'Maruja Mallo and the Interest in Children's Art during the Second Republic', *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 90, 7 (2013), 803–18.

<sup>69</sup> Núria Padrós Tuneu et al studied drawings produced in one Catalan school as a means of gauging the daily lives of children in 'The Spanish Civil War as Seen Through Children's Drawings of the Time', *Paedagogica Historica*, 51, 4 (2015), 478–95; Christian Roth, 'Trotz allem zeichnen sie: Der Spanische Bürgerkrieg mit Kinderaugen gesehen', *Paedagogica Historica*, 45, 1–2 (2009), 191–214.

<sup>70</sup> Nicholas Stargardt, *Witnesses of War: Children's Lives Under the Nazis* (London: Pimlico, 2006), 10.

<sup>71</sup> Meda, 'Los dibujos infantiles', 161–2.

<sup>72</sup> Valero Gómez, 'Educación republicana', 97–114.

historiographical cliché – they are imagining it with the help of imagery, symbols and language provided by their anti-fascist caretakers.<sup>73</sup> The results are celebratory depictions of the foreign volunteers in action which applaud their heroic use of violence against a demonised ‘fascist’ other. While they bear all the hallmarks of any child’s imagination – they takes place in picturesque panoramas inhabited by hills, trees and castles – they also show how closely these young Spaniards had assimilated the International Brigades’ partisan version of the war, not least by rendering it as a sovereign struggle against the foreign invader. Take for example nine-year-old refugee Luís Fernandez, who drew two opposing hills. On one flies a flag bearing two swastikas, and on the other a Republican tricolour. Planes linger above, while heavy artillery pounds away below.<sup>74</sup> Other drawings are not only partisan, but extremely violent. Miguel Gómez drew a band of Republican soldiers pursuing three ‘fascists’ – identified by the obligatory swastikas on their uniforms – who have abandoned their rifles in a hurry to retreat. Far from decrying the horrors of war, its caption – ‘the cowardice of the fascists’ – celebrates the volunteers’ martial heroism.<sup>75</sup> Enrique Onis, also eleven, drew an even more ferocious scene in which a volunteer is shown gleefully mowing down five men – again branded with swastikas – while a plane scores a direct hit on a sixth individual.<sup>76</sup>

Letters offered children another space in which to grapple with the concept of anti-fascist war. Their central themes were clearly suggested by the adults whose idea it was to commission them in the first place, with a series of stock phrases such as ‘The Spanish People’, ‘fascist swine’, ‘invaders’ and ‘criminals’ making repeat appearances.<sup>77</sup> As in educational institutions all across the Republican zone whose staff had been purged, killed or gone missing, the adults responsible for the International Brigades’ work had no sympathy whatsoever for the Nationalists.<sup>78</sup> Yet attempting to distinguish between their voices and those of the children is perhaps misguided. Given that most of the children were refugees who had fled the rebel advance, depictions of the enemy as violent bullies only interested in doing them physical harm would certainly have helped them conceptualise their own tumultuous experiences.<sup>79</sup> Feelings of gratitude towards the volunteers for saving them from life in the fascist inferno were almost certainly genuine. They were also just a small step away from indebtedness, as when ten-year-old María Lopez, a refugee from Madrid, assured the soldiers that the children of Mataró owed them their ‘lives and wellbeing’.<sup>80</sup> This debt was most clearly expressed in the many letters expressing gratitude for monetary donations, including one which stressed how their teacher was finally able to make vital purchases of uniforms, shoes, belts and socks.<sup>81</sup>

The children did not have to rely on second-hand propaganda to gain a sense of the volunteers’ sacrifices in Spain. They were left in no doubt that their conspicuous disabilities had been inflicted by the fascist bullies out of little more than personal spite. Louis Habberman, the German volunteer who oversaw the Thälmann home, had lost his leg in the Battle of Guadalajara and walked around the grounds on a crutch. Frequently photographed with crowds of affectionate children gathered around him, the uniformed veteran came across as the living embodiment of Brauner’s ‘soldier of culture’

<sup>73</sup> The word ‘witness’ or ‘witnesses’ frequently appears in the titles of popular history books concerning children during war. See for example Nicholas Stardgardt, *Witnesses of War*, mentioned above; Emmy E. Werner, *Reluctant Witnesses: Children’s Voices From the Civil War* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1998) and Svetlana Alexievich, *Last Witnesses* (London: Random House, 2020).

<sup>74</sup> Album with letters and drawings of the children of Mataró, RGASPI 545.2.210, 11.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>77</sup> Album with letters and drawings of the children of Mataró, RGASPI 545.2.210.

<sup>78</sup> Antonio Viñao, ‘Politics, Education and Pedagogy: Ruptures, Continuities and Discontinuities (Spain 1936–1939)’, *Paedagogica Historica*, 51, 4 (2015), 47.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>81</sup> for a particularly effusive letter of thanks sent from one children’s home to a Brigade commander see ‘El trabajo de los garibaldinos en la retaguardia’, Italian VFL, 24 Sept. 1938, RGASPI 545.2.365, 8.

whose military service on the frontlines closely overlapped with humanitarian work in the rearguard.<sup>82</sup> Depictions of the volunteers in the children's letters and drawings reveal the impact these disabilities had on them. The girls of Mataró drew numerous scenes of daily life in their home and the nearby hospital featuring volunteers with broken arms, missing legs and bandaged heads.<sup>83</sup> Eleven-year-old Lola Tela addressed them as 'you who have come to fight for the liberty of Spain against those criminal fascists and who have to leave wounded, some without legs and others without arms'.<sup>84</sup> The adults responsible for children like Lola used the Brigades' conspicuous sacrifices as a means of eliciting sympathy towards their surrogate fathers and, in turn, hatred towards the enemy. Following a visit to some wounded soldiers, the children of the Santa Coloma home collaborated on a wall newspaper entry in which they expressed their desire to make good their sufferings:

Poor comrades! Who came from everywhere to defend us against the criminal Fascists and who, now, in their beds, are suffering and dying. We, the little ones, will avenge our comrades, our fathers, and fascism will not be able to take root in Spain.<sup>85</sup>

Alfred Brauner considered it perfectly normal that these young Spaniards should want to contribute to the anti-fascist struggle. While working in Spain he resisted seeing children as passive victims of wartime violence and instead regarded them as political actors capable of confronting the dislocation forced onto them by 'fascism'. In contrast to his post-war efforts to promote drawing as a means of overcoming trauma, he regarded the principal value of their artwork as testifying to fascist barbarity and, in this way, assisting the wider Republican war effort.<sup>86</sup> This explains why, in the summer of 1938, he worked closely with International Red Aid (*Socorro Rojo Internacional*) to organise an exhibition of drawings intended to raise money and awareness for the Republic.<sup>87</sup> In so doing, he could benefit from the fact that children's artwork had been publicly exhibited since the late nineteenth century and was enjoying unprecedented popularity by the time the Spanish conflict broke out.<sup>88</sup> Neither its partisan nature nor its political objectives were hidden from the participants, with the instructions adopting the tone of a military call to arms when it told children that 'you can also help defend your country before the whole world' by exposing 'the true sense of the struggle provoked on our soil by the fascist invader'.<sup>89</sup> This language reflects an attitude towards children which was shared amongst Republican educationalists, political organisations and government authorities. Just like adults, they too had to be mobilised in favour of a loyalist victory.

On the surface, the wartime responsibilities assigned to children were not dissimilar to what might have been expected of them in peacetime. Even the most quotidian of activities were framed as their direct duty to the foreign volunteers, with a picture book entitled 'How the Children of Spain Should Make War' demonstrating this attitude well. Its cover is dominated by an illustration of a uniformed boy sat atop a book with the word 'culture' emblazoned across it. He is wielding a toothbrush in one hand and, with the other, smashing a swastika with a flagpole bearing the Republican tricolour. Inside,

<sup>82</sup> 'Soldiers of the XI Brigade Maintain a Home for Children who are Victims of War', English VFL, 27 Dec. 1937, RGASPI 545.2.362, 8–9.

<sup>83</sup> Album with letters and drawings of the children of Mataró, RGASPI 545.2.210, 30, 31, 32, 36.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>85</sup> Quoted by Vincent in 'Histoire d'une colonie d'enfants espagnols', RGASPI 545.2.187, 67–8.

<sup>86</sup> Rose Duroux and Célia Keren, 'Retours sur dessins: Fred/Alfred Brauner 1938, 1946, 1976, 1991', in Rose Duroux and Catherine Milkovitch-Rioux, eds., *Enfances en guerre. Témoignages d'enfants sur la guerre* (Geneva: L'Équinoxe/Éditions Georg, 2013), 99–119.

<sup>87</sup> Information on the planning of the exhibition can be found in correspondence between Socorro Rojo Internacional, the Comité Pro-Niños and the International Brigades in RGASPI 545.1.76.

<sup>88</sup> Siân Roberts, 'Exhibiting Children at Risk: Child Art, International Exhibitions and Save the Children Fund in Vienna, 1919–1923', *Paedagogica Historica*, 45, 1–2 (2009), 171–90.

<sup>89</sup> Instructions for drawing competition, 21 July 1938, RGASPI 545.1.75.

the book reminds its young reader that while their international friends are busy fighting fascism they too can play their part by studying, helping their neighbour and respecting nature.<sup>90</sup> Its content echoes the attitude of Lisette Vincent, a volunteer teacher in the Santa Coloma home, who stressed that ‘these little ones had to know why we fought and how we fought’.<sup>91</sup> Daily life in Brigade homes and day-care centres was tailored to encourage the boys, in particular, to aspire to the martial example of the International Brigades.<sup>92</sup> Uniformed parades, team exercises, the singing of revolutionary songs and visits from well-known military figures all formed part of their daily regimes. Their desire to emulate the International Brigades and wreak vengeance on the ‘fascists’ was cause for admiration, not concern. The *Volunteer for Liberty* described one boy who wanted to become a pilot in order to ‘avenge’ his mother and father who were killed in a raid, as well as another who wanted to drive a tank:

To him a tank is the maximum instrument of terror. He saw several bearing down on his village in one of the early battles near Madrid, saw the destruction they grind out, and wants to turn the tables on the enemy.<sup>93</sup>

The girls under the Brigades’ care were also encouraged to take an interest in the war and, whenever possible, make a personal contribution to the anti-fascist effort. Ten-year-old Pilar from the Santa Coloma home described the children collecting cloth and metal for the benefit of their friends the foreign volunteers: ‘We are small and we could not have a rifle like our fathers, but still we give to our heroes bombs [and] bullets to fight’, she wrote, surmising from her experience that ‘we too do our anti-fascist duty’.<sup>94</sup> Yet, exactly as was the case with those who *were* old enough to have a rifle, this duty was divided along gender lines. While a number of militiawomen (*milicianas*) had famously participated in the street fighting during the first weeks of the war, the creation of the Republican Popular Army soon excluded them from an armed role in what was becoming an increasingly centralised military effort.<sup>95</sup> Traditional attitudes to gender ensured that every anti-fascist organisation in the loyalist zone backed the Republican Government in its call for women to dedicate themselves to work behind the lines.<sup>96</sup> The International Brigades were in full agreement, and borrowed the same militant language of the ‘production vanguard’ to frame women’s wartime responsibilities. In Cambrils, where the volunteers had an instruction camp, they even installed a sewing workshop where women prepared clothes for 400 children using cloth provided by the *Comité Pro-Niños*.<sup>97</sup> The girls in International Brigade homes were not pictured marching; nor were they quoted describing how much they wanted to fight.

Having children feel personally invested in the anti-fascist war effort was intimately linked to the International Brigades’ ambitions of imbuing them with long-lasting political consciousness. Attempts to create class-conscious ‘little comrades’ reached particular intensity in their various homes. As in dozens of rearguard *colonias infantiles*, these served the dual purpose of housing and educating children in accordance with the ‘New Education’ which, since the turn of the century, had used hands-on

<sup>90</sup> Picture book produced for children, RGASPI 545.2.382.

<sup>91</sup> Vincent, ‘Histoire d’une colonie d’enfants espagnols’, Mar. 1939, RGASPI 545.2.187, 43. for attempts to place the war at the centre of the educational curriculum in both zones see Antonio Viñao, ‘Politics, Education and Pedagogy: Ruptures, Continuities and Discontinuities (Spain 1936–1939)’, *Paedagogica Historica*, 51, 4 (2015), 406.

<sup>92</sup> See, for example, the photos accompanying the article ‘Gdy dabrowszczacy sa w rezerwie’, Polish VFL, 5 June 1938, 545.2.369, 1.

<sup>93</sup> ‘Soldiers of the XI Brigade Maintain a Home for Children who are Victims of War’, English VFL, 27 Dec. 1937, RGASPI 545.2.362, 8–9.

<sup>94</sup> Booklet produced by the *Hogar Garcia Lorca*, CHA, Fond Andre Marty, 2AM.4A.2, Box 11. Album with letters and drawings of the children of Mataró, RGASPI 545.2.210.

<sup>95</sup> Mary Nash, *Defying Male Civilization: Women in the Spanish Civil War* (Colorado: Arden Press, 1995), 111–12.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>97</sup> Report on the work of the *Comité Pro-Niños*, 13 July 1938, RGASPI 545.1.76.



activities as a means of inculcating a sense of shared community, collective responsibility and active citizenship.<sup>98</sup> Key figures like Alfred Brauner, Anja Hammerman and Lisette Vincent were familiar with these progressive theories and now had an unprecedented opportunity to put them into practice. Conveniently, they tallied extremely well with their ambition of forging an anti-fascist imagined community in which children, as much as adults, had their wartime rights and responsibilities. As ever, their efforts closely followed government guidance.<sup>99</sup> Not an idle moment passed in their homes, with leisure and learning fading into one as the children spent their days studying, exercising and carrying out their chores in close harmony with each other and their teachers.<sup>100</sup> As in other *colonias*, the fundamental objective was to create a sense of extended family between the children, their peers and their caretakers.<sup>101</sup> What differentiated the International Brigades' facilities was the presence of the foreign volunteers at the helm of this surrogate family unit. 'We were the work of the Brigades', claimed Lisette Vincent, proudly adding that 'everyone else was their comrades' but 'we were their family'.<sup>102</sup>

While Vincent and her colleagues implied that these children already possessed a latent class-consciousness, the reality is that they went to great lengths to instil them with their own partisan values.<sup>103</sup> Lisa Kirschenbaum has shown how the Brigades were underpinned by a transnational communist culture centred on key revolutionary anniversaries, shared symbols and respect for working-class martyrs.<sup>104</sup> The influence of this culture is plain to see in the running of their children's homes, where the staff were often card-carrying Communists.<sup>105</sup> An invasive cult of the Soviet Union existed, with the children looked after in Madrid receiving a letter from some Communist Youth in the Volga Soviet Republic describing their 'beautiful and happy' lives under 'Comrade Stalin'.<sup>106</sup> The language used by the children to describe daily life was loaded with political meaning, with familiar concepts such as 'friendliness' and 'good behaviour' now being understood in the communist terms of 'solidarity' and 'discipline'. The children's assimilation of this new language amounted to something far greater than a superficial shift in naming things. Instead, it speaks to the way in which their every action was regarded as having a transcendental impact on the broader anti-fascist family to which they now belonged. In a particularly revealing incident, a ten-year-old boy at the Santa Coloma home was charged with being a 'saboteur' for stealing money from the collective fund. The decision to expel the ashamed and sobbing child from the Communist Youth was carried out not by his teacher but by his own peers.<sup>107</sup> The children at *La Moraleja* went even further by forming quasi-political committees complete with delegates, general assemblies and the use of the word 'comrade'.<sup>108</sup> If the International Brigades were key in imagining the anti-fascist community in Spain, activities such as these reveal that it was the children under their care who played one of the most active roles in making it a reality.

<sup>98</sup> Sjaak Braster and María del Mar del Pozo Andrés, 'Education and the Children's Colonies in the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939): The Images of the Community Ideal', *Paedagogica Historica*, 51, 4 (2015), 455–77. The article 'Soldiers of the XI Brigade Maintain a Home for Children who are Victims of War' refers to the implementation of Europe's most progressive methods in the Madrid home and can be found in the English VFL, 27 Dec. 1937, RGASPI 545.2.362, 8–9.

<sup>99</sup> Founding Statute of the *Comité Pro-Niños*, undated, RGASPI 545.1.75.

<sup>100</sup> *Los niños españoles y las Brigadas Internacionales*, July 1938, RGASPI 545.2.404.

<sup>101</sup> Braster and Pozo Andrés, 'Education and the Children's Colonies', 460.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>103</sup> One Brigade collaborator wrote that the children of *La Moraleja* 'write seriously and consciously like adults. The atmosphere of the war has made them encounter words which the young in normal circumstances would never think of. They are little '*políticos*' who know very well the reasons for fighting'. Quoted in Esteve Torres, *Hogares Infantiles*, 26.

<sup>104</sup> Lisa A. Kirschenbaum, *International Communism and the Spanish Civil War: Solidarity and Suspicion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>105</sup> Booklet on the *Hogar Ernst Thaelmann*, transcribed in Torres, *Hogares Infantiles*, 4–34.

<sup>106</sup> 'Unsere Kinder in Heim <<Ernst Thaelmann>>', German VFL, 19 July 1938, RGASPI 545.2.368, 18.

<sup>107</sup> Vincent, 'Histoire d'une colonie d'enfants espagnols', Mar. 1939, RGASPI 545.2.187, 102–5.

<sup>108</sup> 'Soldiers of the XI Brigade Maintain a Home for Children who are Victims of War', English VFL, 27 Dec. 1937, RGASPI 545.2.362, 8–9; booklet produced by the *Hogar García Lorca*, CHA, Fond Andre Marty, 2AM.4A.2, Box 11.

### Conclusion: ‘We Want to Work and Afterwards Help Build Spain’

Over eighty years after the children of the *Club Infantil Ferrer Guàrdia* bade their foreign friends farewell, the huge interest which surrounds the International brigades shows no signs of abating. In spite of the tens of thousands of books, articles, interviews, documentaries and memorials which have been produced in relation to the volunteers ever since they first entered action, a long-standing preoccupation with the same familiar questions concerning their motivations, recruitment and battlefield experiences has continually relegated Spaniards to the role of an unimportant bit part in what was, in the end, their own civil war. Children represent a valuable opportunity to place the Brigades’ encounters with their host country centre stage, and, in so doing, answer Davide Rodogno and Nir Arieli’s recent call for historians to pay greater attention to the ‘receiving end’ of transnational military service.<sup>109</sup> While their own recollections of the conflict can leave no doubt that the underlying priority of the volunteers remained fighting the enemy on the frontlines, the International Brigades’ wide-reaching work with children not only permitted them to achieve a range of important practical objectives, such as winning the trust of local populations, but also reinforced their understanding of themselves as compassionate soldiers struggling for the independence of ‘The Spanish People’ in what was, in reality, a complex and fratricidal civil war. Ultimately, children played a unique role in convincing both the volunteers and their civilian hosts that they were ‘soldiers of culture’ whose humanitarian instincts stood in stark contrast to an enemy defined not in terms of specific political characteristics, but rather an ugly habit of bombing children and destroying their schools.

This article not only contributes to the literature on the volunteers but also to our understanding of children during twentieth-century total war. The fact that the International Brigades were a transnational fighting force composed of over fifty nationalities renders them an enormously useful case study into the ways in which attitudes towards children manifested themselves in a specific wartime context. Ultimately, a profound tension lay at the heart of the volunteers’ approach to those living through the Spanish Civil War. These were simultaneously represented as uprooted, hounded and terrified victims of fascism who needed to be withdrawn from the physical scene of fighting, while, at the same time, being considered politically-conscious agents who had a key role to play in the forging of their own anti-fascist future. The intervention of the International Brigades had an enormous impact on the way in which the children under their care conceptualised the war as well as their own place within it. Their physical environment, daily activities and even language encouraged them to think and feel like anti-fascist ‘little comrades’ bound to the ‘soldiers of culture’ by duty, friendship and mutual understanding. Rather than being passive recipients of these concepts, they were expected to pitch in to the collective enterprise of forging a ‘New Spain’ free from the fascist virus. As one child housed in the *Hogar Ernst Thälmann* succinctly put it, ‘we want to work and afterwards help to build Spain’.<sup>110</sup> That the International Brigades succeeded in their efforts is suggested by many such statements, not to mention the dozens of letters and drawings created in their honour. The volunteers always believed that they belonged to an anti-fascist community fighting for its survival against the forces of Franco, Hitler and Mussolini. Far more surprising – and, indeed, significant – is that the children often felt the same way too.

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<sup>109</sup> Nir Arieli and Davide Rodogno, ‘Transnational Encounters’, *Journal of Modern History*, 14, 3 (2016), 317.

<sup>110</sup> Esteve Torres, *Hogares infantiles*, 66.

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