

Fighters across frontiers

Transnational resistance in Europe, 1936–48

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‘For your freedom and ours!’:
transnational experiences in the Spanish
Civil War, 1936–39

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Franziska Zaugg, Ginta Ieva Bikše, Olga Manojlović Pintar
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In July 1936, over six thousand athletes from twenty-two different countries gathered in Barcelona to participate in the International Workers' Olympiad. Less a sporting event than a mass political rally, it was intended by its organisers to attract both more participants and more spectators than the official 1936 Olympic Games that were to be held in Nazi Germany from 1 August. These alternative Olympics were sponsored by the Popular Front government of Spain, made up of a coalition of liberal and leftist parties elected on an anti-fascist platform. The Barcelona Olympiad promised to be the vanguard of a powerful Europe-wide countermovement and drew the eyes of the European left-wing press.¹

On 19 July, however, the very same day the opening ceremony of the 'People's Olympia' was to take place, Barcelona was rocked by a military revolt. Rebel generals ordered its garrison to take control of the city as part of a coordinated strike against the Popular Front government.² In response, many international athletes helped the civilian population to resist, and together they fought off the Barcelona coup. In other Spanish cities, too, military revolts were quickly quelled. Only Seville fell to the rebels on 26 July, but this proved to be a turning point in the history of Spain. Its capture allowed rebel officers to airlift the Army of Africa, which they controlled, from Spanish Morocco to mainland Europe. There they were joined by about half the Spanish territorial army and the vast majority of its officers. The revolt now turned into a full-blown civil war in which the rebels enjoyed the support not only of most of the army and various rightist, monarchist and fascist political organisations but also of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. The forces of the Republic nevertheless resisted. Left-wing journalists who had come to cover a sports event became war reporters. News of Spain's resistance against a fascist takeover quickly

The 'Spanish matrix': transnational catalyst of Europe's anti-Nazi resistance

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During the night of 13 November 1941, a group of the Soviet South-Western Front officers gathered at the longwave radio station of the Russian city of Voronezh. The sweeping Nazi advance into the Soviet inland had not yet been stopped, and the Front engineering department's chief General Georgy Nevsky set aside his combat managing tasks in favour of a highly clandestine subversive operation. This was the wireless detonation of sophisticated radio-controlled mines in the Nazi-occupied Ukrainian city of Kharkov, some three hundred kilometres south-west of Voronezh. In the preceding months, a wide net of those mines had been carefully laid in Kharkov's centre and suburbs by a team of miners composed of Red Army soldiers and Spanish republican exiles – Civil War veterans who had been welcomed by Moscow in 1939–40 and authorised to join the Soviet anti-Nazi struggle. The detonation destroyed a series of important buildings and installations and killed dozens of the Nazi officers and soldiers. This was regarded by the Red Army command as a significant operational success. The Soviet commander, Colonel Ilya Starinov, himself a veteran of the Spanish Civil War, wrote in his postwar memoirs of the Spanish republicans, 'I bow low to them now, many years later, both to those who survived and those who died defending freedom and justice.'¹

The argument of this chapter is that so-called 'Spanish fighters' formed a matrix providing organisation, skills and motivation that catalysed local and national resistance in countries occupied by fascist and Nazi forces in a chain from France to the Soviet Union. They included both Spanish republican fighters and veterans of the International Brigades who had been forced to flee after the collapse of the Spanish Republic and in a position to offer leadership to disparate, emerging resistance

Transnational guerrillas in the 'shatter zones' of the Balkans and Eastern Front

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Having been a vast battlefield during the First World War and suffering smouldering conflicts in the postwar era, the Balkans' newly built countries sought to abstain from further international conflicts. They also built regional alliances to guard both against the return of the German, Austro-Hungarian or Russian empires, whose collapse had allowed them to establish themselves as states and to mitigate their own internecine rivalries. Thus a Little Entente was signed in 1920/1 between Yugoslavia, Romania and Czechoslovakia, and a Balkan Pact was agreed in 1934 by Yugoslavia, Romania, Greece and Turkey.

Mussolini, however, had different plans. He wanted to recreate a Roman Empire around a *mare nostrum* including the Adriatic coast.¹ At the crack of dawn on 7 April 1939 Italian troops commanded by General Alfredo Guzzoni invaded Albania. This was only the beginning of Italy's expansion in the Balkans: on 28 October 1940 Mussolini ordered an attack on Greece during the winter months. The campaign failed. In fact, Greek troops were even able to counterattack and to gain territory. Hitler, who was not amused, was forced to send troops to support his Axis partner.²

Desperate to ward off attack, the Yugoslav government signed the Tripartite Pact, which locked Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria into the Axis bloc on 25 March 1941. This was anathema to the Yugoslav opposition. Two days later, on 27 March, while Hitler and his Oberkommando der Wehrmacht, or High Command of the Armed Forces (OKW), were coordinating the last steps for Operation Barbarossa, anti-German officers of the Yugoslavian army launched a coup. They overthrew the cabinet of Dragiša Cvetković, forced Prince Paul Karadorđević to abdicate and crowned king the seventeen-year-old Peter II. Hitler, who counted on vassal states in south-east Europe to protect his flank for the upcoming

Afterlives and memories

Robert Gildea and Olga Manojlović Pintar with Mercedes Yusta Rodrigo, Jorge Marco, Diego Gaspar Celaya, Roderick Bailey, Jason Chandrinos, Cristina Diac, Zdenko Maršálek, Franziska Zaugg, Bojan Aleksov, Yaacov Falkov and Megan Koreman

In 1993 an elderly Frenchman, Jean-Baptiste Boyer, travelled to a ceremony in Slovakia which was recognising the role of foreign fighters in the Slovak national uprising. In 1944 he had been sent under Vichy's STO scheme to work for the Third Reich's war economy in a factory at Dubnica. As the Soviets advanced and the Reich collapsed, he escaped with a group of eighteen and joined the French Partisans of the Stefanik Brigade under Captain Georges Barazer de Lannurien, fighting to liberate Slovakia.¹

The final chapter explores how, when and where transnational experiences of resistance were acknowledged, whether in national, political or private communities, and how they changed over time. This may help us understand why people with experiences in transnational resistance did not easily become part of the public understanding of the war. Two strands will be followed. The first traces the afterlives of resisters with transnational experiences, that is, what direction their lives took after the Second World War. Clearly the historical context changed very quickly, as national liberation and victory in Europe gave way to the Cold War and wars of decolonisation. Resisters clearly had to navigate these challenges, some reinventing themselves in order to do so and some falling foul of changing circumstances. The second strand explores how transnational resistance was remembered over the period from the war down to the present. These memories are found at three different levels: at the level of the individual's own memory, articulated in memoirs or testimonies; at the level of the group or association to which they belonged and at some stage began again to remember their past as a group; and at the level of the collective memory of the society or country as a whole. This memory operated independently of the resisters themselves and may also be called the dominant narrative of the society or country. Such memories are in