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Fear and Loathing in Spain. Dutch Foreign Fighters in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939)

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Practical information

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Abstract

During the Spanish Civil War, about 700 Dutchmen fought to defend the Spanish Republic against a military uprising they, correctly, deemed the prelude to a Fascist dictatorship. They did so primarily as part of the International Brigades of the Spanish ‘Popular Army’. However, International Brigade command considered the Dutch volunteers’ military performance in Spain quite poor, especially in contrast to those of the German soldiers they often fought alongside with. In Summer 1937 it was therefore decided to create a separate Dutch unit – the “Seven Provinces” company of XII International Brigade – in an effort to boost both morale and combat effectiveness. This article analyses how the Dutch lived and fought in a transnational army, focusing especially on the period before the establishment of the Dutch unit. It suggests that the experience of Dutch volunteers, who were (small) minorities in multinational and multi-ethnic units, form a useful analytical lens to highlight the conflicts and compromises that are inherent in not only the International Brigades, but all foreign fighter forces – including those of the Islamic State. Furthermore, it argues that Dutch behaviours were contrasted unfavourably by the International Brigade command staff with those of the Germans with and under whom they often fought, creating an even more unwelcoming environment for many Dutchmen. The composition of the Dutch volunteer corps, made up mostly of non-communists, served to worsen the failures of intercultural communication. Finally, I argue that the creation of a (mostly) Dutch unit was, finally, the result of pressure from Dutch volunteers in Spain and Dutch Communist Party fears that the perceived failures of its efforts on behalf of the Spanish Republic would reflect badly on its political position both in the Netherlands and within the Moscow-dominated Communist International.

(289 words)
Keywords

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Note on contributor

Samuël Kruizinga is the sole and corresponding author of this article.

International Brigades as Foreign Fighters

During the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), thousands of non-Spaniards fought on the side of the left-leaning Spanish Government to prevent a takeover of the country by its enemies, a cabal of monarchists, militarists, aristocrats and fascists led by General Francisco Franco and supported by the majority of Spain’s army, Mussolini’s Italy and Hitler’s Germany. After the rebels’ initial uprising failed to swiftly capture Spain’s largest cities, the conflict quickly gained an important international dimension as news of efforts to resist what was framed as a Fascist takeover spread. Leftists in Europe and elsewhere sympathised with the Republican government and scattered initiatives were undertaken to send money, medical supplies, and volunteers to fight Franco. Meanwhile, Franco’s forces also gained international support, in the form of Italian and German regular army units as well as conservative or pro-Fascist volunteers. On the initiative of the British and French governments, most European states signed a Non-Intervention Agreement to try and localise the conflict and thereby, hopefully, prevent strife over Spain causing a second world war. Nevertheless, foreign volunteers kept finding their way to Spain, just as they would in other civil conflicts, notably in Syria and Iraq where thousands joined the forces of the Islamic State (IS) despite stringent state and international measures to stop them.

Even though they are ideologically lightyears apart, both the Islamic State’s jihadis and the volunteer members of Spain’s International Brigades are best understood as transnational phenomena, requiring both physical cross-border movement and a willingness to fight on behalf of a cause not defined by, linked to, or even condoned by one’s own polity. Even more crucially, their violent activities take place within improvised military organisations. In contrast to state-based armies, these do not possess a singular military culture – one instilled by training and formal doctrine, and derived from cultural conventions – to inform the values, norms, and assumptions that guide military action. Finally, both International Brigades (a term I will use, following contemporary convention, to refer to both military units active in the Spanish Civil War and members of those units) participated in activities deemed illegal by their home governments and were thus subject to censure as their governments had not formally taken a side in the conflict and could thus be considered neutral. The situation of modern jihadis is often the same. This also suggests that this type of violent transnational activism, which is increasingly referred to as foreign fighting, came into existence midway through the nineteenth century, when European states began to introduce laws to stop citizens from engaging in conflicts other than those sanctioned by their government.

Despite their transnational nature, historical studies of foreign fighters in conflicts such as the Spanish Civil War are generally (collective) biographies of foreign fighters from a single country. Meanwhile, social and political scientists have taken a more theoretical approach to understanding the present issues surrounding the mobilisation and return of the current generation of Islamist foreign fighters, attempting to create a profile of foreign fighters by way of statistical analysis of the make-up of national groups of foreign fighters in order to ascertain what variables (age, education, race) or pathways (religion, crime) explain membership in
foreign fighter groups. Curiously, both historical studies examining foreign fighters in the Spanish Civil War and contemporary analysis of (returning) jihadis fail to take into account the transnational aspect that is a key element setting these groups apart, by focusing on national contingents and backgrounds.

At first sight, this article does not break the established mould. It focuses on a specific national group within a larger transnational fighting force: the roughly 700 Dutchmen (and the dozen-or-so Dutchwomen) who travelled to Spain to fight Franco. But precisely because of their relatively small contribution (in absolute terms when compared to, among others, the 9,000 Frenchmen, 2,500 Britons and roughly 4,000 Germans fighting on the Republican side) their experiences provide us with more tantalising glimpses of the transnational dimension within the International Brigades than those of larger national groups. This is because the way the International Brigades were structured caused the Dutch, in contrast to larger contingents to be spread over different units, allowing us to compare and contrast their experiences on various fronts and with various cobelligerents.

In analysing the Dutch experiences fighting in Spain, this article employs a military culture approach, keeping in mind that in transnational armies – associated with transnational organisations rather than with states – the notion of a single military culture is highly problematic. It therefore focuses on three elements which serve to highlight the conflicts and compromises that I feel are inherent in any transnational organisation, let alone an army: the experience of living and fighting in a strange environment (in this case in Spain), the relationships between the different groups (in this case the Dutch and other national or ethnic groups with whom they were serving alongside), and the development of the formal organisations and institutions within which their military service took place. This article will highlight that these conflicts and compromises, in turn, impacted unit cohesion, discipline, and fighting performance, and that both their causes and effects reverberated far beyond Spain back to the Netherlands and even to Moscow.

Sources for analysing transnational conflicts and compromises in a foreign fighter army are few and far between. In the case of the Dutch fighters’ transnational experiences in the Spanish Civil War, few primary sources have survived the German occupation of the Netherlands during the Second World War. Party archives, diaries, and other materials were burned or lost; only scattered remains survive. Additionally, as part of an oral history project conducted by members of the Youth Wing of the Dutch Communist Party, some twenty former members of the International Brigades were interviewed in the late 1970s and early 1980s. These contain many interesting insights, both in what they reveal and what they conceal. They are also inherently contradictory, contain untruthfulness and evasion as well as ex-post facto glorification and denunciation. Finally, files of the Justice Ministry contain interviews carried out by Dutch police forces and border patrols with deserters after their return to Holland and, while the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History in Moscow holds Comintern and International Brigade command files related to the Dutch experience in Spain.

Living and Fighting in Spain

Transnational volunteer military aid for the Spanish Republic materialised almost immediately after rebel generals ordered troops to seize control of their barracks and of major cities on 17-18 July 1936. On 14 October a new ‘international’ unit of the Spanish Republican or People’s Army was formed at Albacete, some 150 miles from the capital, which would house the new international recruits and absorb most of the foreign fighters already in Spain. Its establishment was at the behest of the Soviet government, who sought both to support the Spanish Republic against German- and Italian-backed rebels but also to capitalise politically on the outpouring of popular support for Republican Spain. Its commander was the French communist and
Comintern secretary André Marty, who was assisted by an Inspector General, the Italian Luigi Longo (who went by the nom-de-guerre Gallo’). The Parisian offices of the French Communist Party, and its affiliated labour unions and front organisations, which catered both to French communist and the extensive communist exile community of the French capital, were designated as important way stations for recruits on their way from their home country to Spain. Here, they underwent (cursory) medical and political background checks before being shipped by boat, train and bus to Spain. From February 1937 onwards, when the French government closed the border to Spain and an international blockade of the Spanish coast was instigated to halt the flow of weapons and recruits into Spain, the only way to join the fight was to cross the Pyrenees at night in communist-organised convoys.11

The leadership of the international unit, appointed by the Soviet-dominated Communist International, decided at the very outset to create subunits of soldiers speaking the same or a similar language.12 This was in emulation of Soviet nationality policy, ‘socialist by content and national by form’. Each officially designated national group in the Soviet Union was allowed the development of its own language facilities, following Marxist dogma that as long as the content of the message was socialist the language in which it was spoken or written was simply immaterial.13 However, it soon emerged that the realities of warfare and the uneven flow of recruits prevented simply lumping countrymen together in their own unit. In other cases, people who spoke the same language were grouped together with others whose language or cultures were thought of by Comintern functionaries as similar, quite irrespective of how speakers of those languages or members of those cultures themselves felt.14 Additionally, military necessity often forced transfers of recruits with particular technical and or tactical skills between units regardless of nationality or language concerns.15

The first Dutch volunteers arrived soon after the Spanish Civil War broke out; they joined the militias spontaneously created after the July uprising. The impending siege of Madrid caused a surge in recruitment, while the incorporation of (most, but not all) foreign-dominated militias as part of the five new International Brigades raised the question where these recent Dutch arrivals would be placed. Judging from interviews conducted with surviving International Brigades in the late 1970s and early 1980s, most Dutchmen arriving in Spain in late 1936 or 1937 were assigned to the Thälmann Battalion, originally part of XII International Brigade but moved to XI International Brigade in November 1936. This battalion, named after the German Communist Party leader Ernst Thälmann who had been arrested in 1933 after Hitler’s rise to power, consisted mostly of German social-democrats and communists who had gone into exile. Others joined the Edgar André Battalion (XI International Brigade), named after a German Communist leader and political prisoner who was beheaded by the Nazis in early November 1936. This battalion also consisted mostly of Germans and other German-speakers, mainly Austrians. Other concentrations of Dutchmen could be found in the Sixth-of-February Battalion (XV International Brigade), named in reference to violent riots perpetrated on that day in 1934 by right wing protesters in Paris. The unit consisted mostly of Frenchmen and (mostly French-speaking) Belgians. There were also Dutchmen in the Chapayev Battalion (XIII International Brigade), which was later referred to as the Battalion of 21 Nations. Smaller concentrations of Dutchmen were seconded to specialised medical, logistical and artillery sub-units, or were seemingly randomly distributed amongst other mixed battalions.16

Spread out over multiple units engaged on different fronts, one cannot speak of a single Dutch Spanish Civil War experience. Yet there are interesting commonalities in the scattered personal accounts which survive. The first of these is that most Dutch volunteers almost all describe a sense of alienation, especially upon their arrival in Spain. Usually, they found themselves in an environment where few people, if any, spoke Dutch, the food and the landscape were unfamiliar, and the Spaniards welcoming but alien – and often very touchy. Piet Laros, one of the first Dutchmen in Spain, remembered his arrival in Valencia in early October
1936 as one characterised by disgusting soup (‘with olive oil, horrible!’), older women hugging him in the street and screaming encouraging cries of ¡No pasarán! (‘I didn’t know what that meant […] but it sounded great’) and a political speech by the mayor ‘lasting for more than an hour and a half, and I didn’t understand a single word’. For some, this sense of isolation lasted through their entire tour. Hein Garritsen, for example, was seconded to a unit where most of the soldiers were of Czech and Polish origin. Garritsen spoke only a little German, as did most of his fellow soldiers. He later testified to having felt very alone, with only his deep conviction that Fascism would be defeated to keep him going.

Another interesting commonality is the frequent mention of a lack of relevant military experience. Although some Dutchmen considered themselves successful soldiers, most highlight that they fought out of necessity and did not relish combat. None of the Dutchmen who had come to Spain had ever experienced combat before, and Dutch compulsory military training, which lasted only a few months, was widely considered useless in preparing them for the horrors of modern warfare. Moreover, most Dutchmen considered themselves anti-militaristic – both the Dutch Communist and the Social Democrat parties had long histories of pacifism – or felt that the Dutch, as representatives of a small, neutral country, were somehow naturally opposed to military violence. By the time of the Spanish Civil War, the Netherlands had not been involved in a European armed conflict for over a hundred years. We had never been in a war, and only received a minimum of military training, which didn’t help much. We had to learn tactics while doing, learn how to defend ourselves, and how to cope with actually being at war. That is not easy for a Dutchman’, writes Siep Adema. Sake Visser adds that ‘Dutchmen knew little of war, we have no [military] culture, and Wim de Jong describes the Dutch in general as ‘never really a military people’. In the interviews conducted with former Brigade members in the late 20th century, most confess to having had real difficulty being at war. Karel Neijssel, when asked by his interviewers whether he killed in Spain, answered only hesitantly:

Yes. Yes, of course you have to shoot with accuracy. If you see something move then you have to shoot with accuracy. Because it’s still, yeah… also you don’t really think about it. It has to be done. By the way this happens in every war, it also occurred in those few days here […] It was, war, it was a very bad thing, it awakens the bad instincts in people.

Only very rarely do Dutch International Brigade veterans confess to having felt joy in combat. One of the few that did is Jef Last, a Dutch poet and novelist who arrived in Spain in September 1936 and joined a Spanish militia, noted in the early 1940s in his (unpublished) autobiography that he approached the conflict with a combination, odd even to himself, of relish and fatalism.

I did not seek death. I have neither been overly careful nor incautious, but I fought well. When I was over there [i.e. in Spain], I strongly believed that everything I did to avoid danger would only bring it closer. I therefore did what I had to do. Only when eroticism and passion came into play [on the battlefield] I threw caution to the wind and danced on the edge of the volcano.

The point here is not that Dutch volunteers went to Spain reluctantly; surviving testimonies suggest that most volunteers were strongly committed to fighting fascism. But it is clear from these same testimonies that they considered themselves ill prepared for their role in modern warfare. The political organisation most closely associated with recruitment for the International Brigades, the Communist International and specifically its Dutch brand, could have played a critical role in preparing the Dutch volunteers, as best it could, for the realities of
war in Spain. But according to reports compiled in late 1937 by Dutch Communist Party officials, the majority of Dutch volunteers arriving in Spain were politically unaffiliated with communism. Out of the 350 Dutchmen on the frontlines at that time, the report stated, only 141 were Communist Party (CP) members, and amongst those 141 (the report does not specify how many) most were either recent or junior members. Simon Luitze, who was the most prominent Dutch member of the mixed-nationality Chapaev battalion, highlights that Dutch lack of experience with mass political or labour action (he alleged that most of the Dutchmen in his unit were not even Union members and worked predominantly in small shops) made it very difficult for them to understand the rites and rituals associated with the labour movement that were intimately familiar to many others in their unit.

All of this is not to suggest that feelings of isolation and being left out caused by ideological, cultural, and language barriers and compounded by being in an alien environment surrounded by the horrors of war, were either unique to Dutch International Brigade members or shared amongst all of them in equal measure. It does suggest, however, that it is impossible to discount the continued importance of communication (in particular that of foreign language proficiency) and the varying expectations and experiences foreign fighters bring with them to the battlefield when analysing transnational encounters.

**Dealing with Germans**

Most Dutchmen fighting for the Republican government in Spain in the Thälmann and Edgar André battalions served with and, in nearly all cases, under Germans. Most of these Germans had arrived in Spain from exile, and had experienced the horrors of Hitler’s regime first hand. Some of the Dutchmen who fought in Spain, in turn, had been active in communist or communist-affiliated organisations providing assistance to German political refugees in the Netherlands such as the Dutch chapter of International Red Aid (IRA). In fact, many former International Brigaders interviewed in the 1970s and 1980s told harrowing stories of their German refugee friends who had come into Holland illegally after having escaped Nazi concentration camps and often torture. These Brigaders cite their experiences with German refugees as key motivators for going to fight in Spain, where they hoped to stop Hitler and his Fascist allies before the evil that befell their German friends could take others, especially in German-neighbouring Holland. Their experiences with the IRA and with German refugees also provided them with some insight into the German exile community, and often a working knowledge of German as well.

Nevertheless, most Dutchmen in Spain did not have such prior experiences with the German exil or, as we have seen, with the transnational apparatus of communism. Even those that did, could not help but notice the differences between the German exiles’ attitude to the conflict and their own. The Germans are almost uniformly described as fiercely loyal to the anti-fascist cause. Of his German comrades in the Thälmann battalion, Frans Oord lauded their ‘discipline’ and capacity for ‘self-sacrifice’: ‘Good kids, all of them, who would lay down their lives if need be.’ Additionally, the members of the communities of German exiles in Amsterdam, Paris, Prague and elsewhere were lauded for their political acumen. Says Jan van Eijk in his post-war interview: Germans were ‘politically aware’ of (or, in today’s slang, woke to) the injustices caused by Fascism both in Germany, in Spain and everywhere around the world. Almost uniformly, praise for the ideological zeal of the German volunteers is contrasted with often scathing comments about how the Dutch were lacking in that regard. The Dutch paled in comparison because ‘they [i.e. the Germans] had been through so much, they had been through Hitler and all that shit’, argued Van Eijk eloquently, whereas most Dutchmen had led (comparatively) sheltered lives free from overt political persecution. Therefore, concludes Wim de Jong, the Germans fought as if they had nothing to lose.
All the Dutch kids in Spain, many of them communists but not all, had come to Spain because they believed it was the right thing to do, but they did not feel compelled or destined to do so. The German comrades did. They considered Spain their new or second home. [...] The Dutch did not worry about such things, thinking that even if worse comes to worst I will always find a way home. For most of them, the thought of not returning to Holland was an impossibility, no question about it.  

A 30 July 1937 letter from Jopie de Haas, a Dutch International Brigade, to his sister testifies to how the Dutch experience in Spain might differ from those of the German exiles. In the letter, Jopie contrasts the urgent need defend democracy with the personal sanitary and dietary sacrifices he has made:

> If I had known that it was so hot in Spain and that the food was so odd and that it gave me stomach aches, I would not have gone, but I did not [know]. [...] I will do my duty as long as I can, and then I will return home.  

Although some measure of praise for their German co-belligerents’ ideological zeal is near-universal in Dutch testimonies of the Spanish Civil War, this does not mean that they were admired, or even liked. Even if it was appreciated, either at the time or in hindsight, that iron discipline and ideological fervour went hand in hand, the Germans were often derided for having a ‘militaristic’ or ‘Prussian’ attitude ill at odds with perceived Dutch sensibilities. This cultural clash was the more keenly felt because in both the Thälmann and Edgar André Battalions, most of the officers were German. In stark contrast to the Dutch, Germans often had extensive military training in the Reichswehr, while some had served during the First World War. Their ideological and practical bona fides were noted by the International Brigade military leadership as well, leading to their swift promotions.

Piet Laros is only one of many who, decades after the end of the Spanish Civil War, still keenly remembered how he loathed his company’s commanding officer in the Edgar André battalion, one Reinhard Hofmann.

> Man oh man oh man oh man, don’t remind me. Sure, he was a good comrade, but all the yelling, we couldn’t take it. Well, I couldn’t and other Dutchmen couldn’t either.

Later in the interview, he explained why:

> “Stand at attention, left turn, right turn”, that was German, right, that German militarism, because Germans, whether they’re communists or socialists or something else entirely, once they see brass they switch on, turn into soldiers, that’s what Germans do. They’re disciplined, all right, but too much. We Dutchmen have often been annoyed by that, by our Germans.

A different Dutch approach to and appreciation of the conflict can also be gleaned in accounts of German commanding officers failing to see the humour in Dutch mischief or practical jokes. Frans Oord recalled that one time, while in reserve at the Guadalajara front, he and his Dutch friend Arie Favier saw a cherry tree on a farm down the road. Arie, having a hunkering for cherries, decided to scale the fence surrounding the farm, climb the cherry tree and pick some cherries. Upon returning to their unit, the commander, a German only identified in the post-war interview as “Heinz”, threatened to report him for insubordination. How dare he steal...
the property of the Spanish people? Did he not realise that stealing from the people was what Fascists did? The Dutchmen’s replied that it was all just a prank, but “Heinz” exploded with anger and accused the pair, and by extension all Dutchmen in the Edgar André Battalion, of lacking in both military and ideological discipline. Elsewhere, Favier tells of how he used to steal Germans’ wine bottles from their dinner table: ‘the Krauts reacted as being stung by a bee’. He and others also made it a point to identify themselves as Dutchmen rather than Germans when communicating (or attempting to do so) with Spaniards. ‘We smiled and […] repeated “Hollanda, Hollanda”’, says Arie van Poelgeest, ‘so they knew we were no Krauts.’

For sure, the Germans were not the only ones at the receiving end of Dutch criticism. The French and the Scandinavians, especially the Swedes, were singled out for being drunkards. And the Spanish are described as lazy, naïve, and as terribly bad at fighting their own war. One telling example of Dutch arrogance vis à vis their Spanish hosts is a (German-language) letter novelist Jef Last submitted to the Spanish Ministry of Defence after having spent a mere three months at the front with some helpful tips. Specifically, they argued that Spanish could use a Northwest-European lesson in ‘Pünktlichkeit und Verantwortungsgefühl’ (punctuality and sense of responsibility), as well as in basic hygiene.

Here, too, it is important to remark that often these types of suspicions and complaints were based on little more than gossip and national stereotypes, already well-established in the 1930s, e.g. of Germans as humourless professionals and the Dutch as laconic and blunt free-thinkers. In any case, this is not about truth, but about whether these perceptions might have had real-world consequences. And there is some anecdotal evidence that it did. First of all, some interviewees suggested that Germans were, or might even have been instructed to be, extra strict with the ‘undisciplined’ Dutch. More importantly, numerous testimonies point to the German International Brigade members, especially those that were fiercely loyal to the communist party line, interpreting Dutch attitudes to service in Spain as evidence of weakness, or even treason. Piet Laros, for example, mentioned several times that when the Dutch under his command did not follow Reinhard Hofmann’s orders promptly enough, he would accuse them of being ‘Feiglinge’ (cowards) or ‘Verbrecher’ (traitors), and those who reported to field hospitals after being wounded or falling ill were regularly accused of being ‘Simulante’ or ‘Fuszkranke’ (i.e. of faking it).

These attitudes combined with the aforementioned difficulties Dutchmen reported in adjusting to transnational warfare to increase the difficulties of serving in Spain for many Dutchmen. This is evidenced by the number of Dutch deserters, which was high enough to trouble the Comintern. The report submitted to them by Dutch Communist Party officials in late 1937 mentions that out of the 350 Dutchmen who had gone to Spain, 99 had deserted. In other words, the Dutch desertion rate by this time was more than 25 per cent! Hard evidence of the reasons for this mass desertion does not exist. Some police and security service records of interviews with deserters who were detained upon re-entering the Netherlands survive, but these naturally have to be read with caution. Because Dutchmen who signed up with the International Brigades voluntarily could be penalized for breaking Dutch laws against foreign enlistment, they had some incentive to lie about the circumstances that had brought them to Spain. Most framed their desertion as an escape from what was essentially false imprisonment in the International Brigades. But some freely admitted to having joined the International Brigades voluntarily. Amongst those that did, three reasons for desertion are frequently mentioned. The first is that they considered themselves bad Brigades, either because they didn’t fit in or they didn’t have what it took. Theo Gerritsen confessed that ‘I did not feel capable of taking human life’ and that being in Spain ‘wrecked my nerves’. Others deserted because they felt they were owed leave in their own country, and when that was refused they decided to strike out on their own. And a surprising number of others mention the harsh treatment meted out to them in Spain for what they considered to be minor infractions, such as being forced to dig...
trenches under enemy fire or sent off to what they referred to as Camp Lucas, a penal camp named after the commander of XII Brigade, Pavol Lukács.48

All of this suggests a connection between the specificities of the Dutch International Brigades (their lack of military training and experience in mass political movements, language difficulties, and their complicated and often fraught relationship with German exiles) and their performance. These issues did not go unrecognised: we have already seen that a late 1937 report submitted to the Comintern Executive pointed out many of these issues. But what, if anything, was done to improve both the performance and the standing of the Dutch in Spain – and, thereby, of the Dutch Communist Party in the Comintern?

The Comintern, the Dutch Communist Party, and the Dutch in Spain

In the Spanish Republican or People’s Army, units were commanded by officers but supervised by political commissars. This suggests the commissar’s role was a complicated one. They were supposedly both ombudsman to and responsible for the political education of the troops, all the while assisting the officer corps in the execution of their duties.49 In the International Brigades, formally units of the People’s Army, these political commissars had, in theory, an important role in turning volunteers from all over the world into one single, coherent and determined fighting force, both militarily and ideologically. When the International Brigades were created, the Comintern leadership immediately decided, following their emulation of Soviet nationality policy, to appoint political commissars from every country that supplied volunteers. However, the limited number of Dutchmen and the suspicions surrounding their personal and political reliability meant that only a few Dutchmen became commissars. Most Dutchmen report that their commissars, like their officers, were German, meaning that a great number of Dutchmen could not communicate with them directly. Tellingly, one of the first Dutch commissars, Arie van Poelgeest, mostly busied himself with interpreting between Dutch and German, and translating the German-language front-newspapers into Dutch.50

To compensate, the Dutch Communist Party sent two of its cadre members, Albert Potze (alias “Winter”) and Arie Jansma (alias “Summer”) to supervise the Dutch in Spain in February 1937. The idea was that they were to create a support network for the Dutch International Brigades spread out over different units, across multiple battalions and Brigades. The circumstances of their mission, however, quickly turned sour. Upon his arrival in Spain, “Winter” recalled in a 1984 interview, he was told that he was a representative of a small party from a small country, and shouldn’t get any ideas. “Summer”, meanwhile, was summarily dismissed, since two official Dutch representatives at the International Brigades’ Albacete headquarters were considered ‘too much’. Winter remained behind, but was confined to his desk. His requests to visit Dutch troops at the front were denied by the German officials of the political commissar branch: suppose he, a prominent cadre member, died, they put it to him, ‘we would get into trouble with your party!’51 The International Brigades interviewed in the late 20th century, who nearly all arrived in Spain in 1936 or early 1937, confirm that neither of them had ever seen Winter in the field.52

Interestingly, the notion that Dutch communists needed to be protected from themselves ran deep, not only in Spain but also in the Netherlands and in the Soviet Union. The Comintern Executive, dominated by the Soviet Communist Party, considered its Dutch branch a problem child. It was deemed either unwilling or too incompetent to follow the political tactic Moscow had been advocating since 1934: the establishment of a popular front of all political forces aligned against Fascism, including and ideally led by communists, as the only reliable bulwark against the advance of fascism both domestically and internationally. The Dutch Communist Party (CP), the Executive agreed, was seen as too divided by ideological rifts, and too small and too ineffectually led to form the vanguard of a Dutch Popular Front. From 1935 onwards,
the Comintern Executive began to dictate, then to micro-manage, its Dutch branch, going so far as to write the speeches to be delivered at its electioneering rallies. For the Comintern and its Dutch branch, the issue of Dutch engagement with Spain was therefore bound up with larger questions on the role of communism in the Dutch political landscape. This had two, seemingly contradictory, effects. First of all, the Dutch CP, after having received the official go-ahead from Moscow in October 1936, enthusiastically embraced the cause of Republican Spain to show that it was at the forefront of efforts to halt the European rise of Fascism, and could therefore be counted on as the driving force of a popular front in the Netherlands. At the same time, it recognised that it could not afford to send its few experienced cadre members to fight, and quite possibly die, in Spain: to fight for the establishment of a Popular Front at home, it would need these people in the Netherlands and alive. The care the Dutch CP took of not losing important cadre members to the fight in Spain is evidenced by their extreme reluctance to allow Leo Klatser, who was a photographer for the Party newspaper, to volunteer. When he finally received permission to embark for Spain, he was immediately sequestered by “Winter” and spent much of the war holed up in an Albacete office: he was deemed too valuable to fight. This might also explain the peculiar make-up of the Dutch contingent in Spain in 1936-1937, which, in stark contrast to those from other European countries, like Britain, France and Switzerland, was made up primarily of non-communists. Unwilling to risk their own, the Party recruited outside its base and accepted volunteers who did not share its ideological tenets, apart from a broad antipathy towards fascism.

Unfortunately, we lack solid evidence explaining why the Dutch Communist leadership then felt it could basically ignore the Dutch that had gone to Spain – except, that is, for sending out poor Winter out all by himself. It could be that they simply did not know, or that they assumed that whatever problems there might be in Spain were for the Comintern or the International Brigade command staff to solve. But this changed sometime in 1937. The fact that so many deserters returned to Holland was seized upon by the mainstream press to highlight the dangerous campaign of ‘impressment’ conducted by the Dutch CP, which, in turn, threatened to damage whatever hope remained for the establishment of a Popular Front. Moreover, it is quite possible that the issues raised regarding the Dutch performance reached Moscow, who in turn might have construed it as even more evidence that the Dutch CP was unable to handle its own affairs. Finally, it is equally possible that the Dutch CP began to realise that what little control they had over “their” International Brigades was slipping away. Although it is fragmentary, there is evidence to suggest that despite the general impression the Dutch made, there were also Dutchmen who served as exemplary soldiers. One of them was Piet Laros, who had been promoted to captain and had started rallying other Dutchmen to his unit. Evidence of his activities was also on display in Dutch newspapers and, possibly worse, in German-language front newspapers as well. A photograph of him, wounded in action and supported by two beautiful Spanish nurses with the slightly suggestive caption ‘Dutchman Pete is being abducted’, made the rounds, and the name ‘Dutchman Pete’ stuck. There was a problem, however: ‘Dutchman Pete’ was a former communist, who had torn up his membership card in public after having been denied permission to go to Spain.

An opportunity to tackle all these issues seems to have come in early summer 1937. By that time, the International Brigades (IB) had participated in the defence of Madrid and in the costly battles of Jarama (February 1937) and Guadalajara (March 1937), while some IB units were also at Brunete (July 1937). These left about 70 per cent or some 15,000 of the original International Brigade recruits either dead or wounded, necessitating a thorough reorganisation which was effected during May-June 1937. The reorganisation adhered even more stringently to the principle of division based on linguistic lines. Giving nationalities or ethnicities their ‘own’ unit allowed local CPs to promote ‘their’ efforts for the common cause, and it was also hoped that doing so would lessen the occasional strife between nationalities that had flared up
in the early months of the war. Around this time – available data from archival sources do not allow for a completely coherent chronology – several Dutchmen who served in XI Brigade were taken out of the line and told to report to what they referred to in post-war interviews as ‘Villa Alba’ near the Brunete front, by which they probably meant the village of Collado Villalba to the northwest of Madrid. There, they received additional training and instruction, including Spanish language lessons by novelist and polyglot Jef Last, and received copies of Dutch translations of the German front newspaper. This was done in preparation for the formation of a new unit which was to house all the Dutch fighting in Spain. ‘Dutchman Piet’, who was the best known and the highest-ranking Dutchman in Spain, was to be its commanding officer. He received visits from Winter and high-ranking CP members and apparently came to an understanding with them, leading to his membership being reinstated. The fact that he was allowed to convalesce in the Netherlands and received free medical care courtesy of the Party might have played a role in his decision. About eighty Dutchmen were then first collectively reassigned to Edgar André to serve in a mixed-nationality unit under Piet Laros until a renewed recruitment drive organised by the Dutch CP upped the numbers to company strength – although there were an unknown number of Spanish soldiers mixed in as well. To make sure the Dutch that were sent over were ideologically dependable, Winter was sent to Paris (the key waystation for Western European volunteers on their way to Spain) to inspect them. New Dutch political commissars arrived to serve the new company, which was made part of Edgar André battalion.

Most Dutchmen seem to have been very happy to transfer to the unit, if they had the chance. Some might just have been happy to be rid of what they considered German militarism. Others will have enjoyed the companionship of people who spoke their language or the possibility of a more direct connection between Spain and the home front provided through Dutch political commissars. Wim de Jong explains that ambition might also have had something to do with it: since all the command positions in the Edgar André and Thälmann Battalions were already taken up, mostly by Germans, there might be possibilities for promotion in the Dutch company. However, not all Dutchmen joined. According to Piet Laros, of the 120-130 Dutchmen gathered at Villalba some 80 signed up for the new unit. Others could not, because their skills made them indispensable to their current units, and others still did not want to, because they preferred the company of their transnational comrades.

The new Dutch company was named “Seven Provinces”, a name that recalled both the Dutch struggle for independence from Habsburg Spain (!) in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries resulting in the Republic of the Seven Provinces, and the recent (1934) munition on a Dutch Navy vessel, which had become a left-wing cause célèbre. The new unit saw action at the battles of Caspe (March 1938) and the Ebro (Summer 1938), before being retreated from the front as part of the agreement brokered by the Spanish Republican government to end international volunteer involvement in the war. The official Communist Party history of the Company suggests that the Company’s unofficial mission, to improve Dutch morale and combat efficiency and thereby the Dutch CP’s standing in both the Netherlands and in Moscow, was a success: its men, it argues, represented ‘the best parts of the Dutch people of the past, the present, and of the future’. And the CP’s final report on the Dutch volunteers to Moscow suggests that, once reorganised, they were ‘shining examples in combat’, and that ‘the military and political leadership and all the comrades in XI Brigade referred to them as to “our brave Dutchmen”’. Whether this is accurate is almost beside the point, as the Dutch unit’s military function was by now wholly subservient to its political function as a propaganda tool for Dutch communism directed both at the Dutch electorate and at Moscow.

Conclusions

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The transnational experiences of the Dutch in the Spanish Civil War, so far as can be glimpsed from the available scattered sources, suggests that a number of important aspects of foreign fighters, and the fighting they do, in general, that deserve more attention than they have received up until now.

First of all, this article has made clear that the Dutch brought a whole range of expectations, prejudices, and experiences with them to Spain that, on multiple occasions clashed with those of others. Dutch feelings of isolation, confounded by what they perceived as the essential alien-ness of both Spain and the exigencies modern war, were compounded by difficulties communicating with a German exile community, whose own expectations of the conflict and of volunteers’ conduct in it was quite different. The make-up of the Dutch contingent contributed to this, as it, in stark contrast to those of other European countries, was not dominated by communists. German officers, and IB command generally, interpreted Dutch Dutch attitudes as weakness, and occasionally, treason.

Secondly, the article suggests that analysing organisational and institutional changes in foreign fighter armies might be best understood as both the intercultural clashes and as major contributing factors. In the case of the International Brigades, the oft-neglected re-organisation in mid-1937 suggests that giving each nationality its own unit was seen as a way to solve problems, such as had occurred between the Dutch and the Germans, while also better advertising their accomplishments at home to the benefit of a local Popular Front (or, at the very least, the Communist Party). Meanwhile, the reorganisation served as a wake-up call back at the Amsterdam headquarters of the Dutch CP which, for reasons having to do both with its position within the Dutch political landscape and its fraught relations with the Communist International, saw its responsibility towards Spain mostly in sending others out while sparing loyal CP members for political battles at home. The role the Dutch CP played, or either refused or was unable to play, in providing the Dutch with services that would have helped them navigate the transnational battlefield, or with sending out people adequately prepared for a deeply-ideological conflict in the first place, is crucial. It sprang belatedly into action, and was forced to accept a popular captain it deeply distrusted to serve as the commanding officer of a newly-formed Dutch unit.

As a final point, this article serves as a reminder of the importance of analysing transnationalism and transnational lives from a variety of perspectives. Obviously, the analysis presented here could be much strengthened by including those from German International Brigades and from various levels of the International Brigade military command. Much remains to be done, but rethinking both the national, the transnational and the national-in-the-transnational in foreign fighter forces from a military culture perspective, this article suggests, opens up a wide range of new vistas for studying transnational violence.


6 Recent examples include Baxell, *Unlikely Warriors*; Skoutelsky, *L’espoir guidait leurs pas*; Carroll, *Odyssey*.

7 Bakker and de Bont, *Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters*; Rostami et al., ‘The Swedish Mujahideen’.

8 Recent works on Dutch International Brigades omit this transnational angle. See e.g. Koolen, ‘¡No Pasarán! – De Brigadisten’.

9 Compare e.g. Kirschenbaum, *International Communism*.

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The notion that the Dutch are an essentially non-military people is as pervasive as it is nonsensical, as the Netherlands has a rich history of warfare before 1815 and in fact continued to wage imperial war in the Dutch East Indies almost incessantly for much of the nineteenth century, the last campaign of imperial pacification only concluding in 1913. The point here is that the Brigades, as did many other Dutchmen, believed it to be true. See Klinkert, *Van Waterloo Tot Uruzgan*.


14 Kruizinga, ‘Struggling to Fit In’, 192–94.


16 Dankaart et al., *De oorlog begon in Spanje*, 74–75.


19 The notion that the Dutch are an essentially non-military people is as pervasive as it is nonsensical, as the Netherlands has a rich history of warfare before 1815 and in fact continued to wage imperial war in the Dutch East Indies almost incessantly for much of the nineteenth century, the last campaign of imperial pacification only concluding in 1913. The point here is that the Brigades, as did many other Dutchmen, believed it to be true. See Klinkert, *Van Waterloo Tot Uruzgan*.


24 IISH ARCH02806/44: Interview Karel Neijssel, 26-06-1985, 19-20


26 Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History [RGASPI] 545/6/399: Two reports by Janrik van Gilse (alias "Zuiderma") to Comintern Executive Committee, n.d. [November/December 1937].


28 Kruizinga, ‘Struggling to Fit In’, 191–93.


30 This was not necessarily justified, but the point here is the impression they made. See Berg, *Die Internationalen Brigaden*, 56–62.


32 Ibidem.


34 NA 2.09.99/80: Jopie de Haan to his sister, 30-07-1937.

35 See e.g. IISH ARCH02806/63: Interview Frans Oord 02-08-1984, 31; IISH ARCH02806/43: Interview Wim Jong, 08-03-1984, 14; L 00255-1257, folder 'Spanje': Jef Last to Ida Last-Ter Haar, 08-10-1937.


41 L 00255-1260, folder 'Documentatie Spanje (1)': Jef Last and Harry Domela, ‘Fronterfahrungen’, s.d. [spring 1937].

42 There is also evidence of similar strife between the Germans and the German-speaking Swiss, who the former considered as ‘second-rate anti-Fascists’, according to Ulmi and Huber, *Les combattants suisses en Espagne républicaine*, 159. Unfortunately, Ulmi and Huber do not expound on the real-world effects of this assumption.


References


