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REVIEW ARTICLE

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Languages, Interpreters and Armed Conflict: The Spanish Civil War

Languages in the Crossfire: Interpreters in the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), by Jesús Baigorri-Jalón, translated by Holly Mikkelson, Abingdon, Routledge, 2021, 248 pp., £130.00 (cloth), £36.99 (paper)

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> *War is father of all, and king of all. He renders some gods, others men; he makes some slaves, others free.*
>
> —Heraclitus

Languages in the Crossfire is an impressive and well-documented book written by Jesús Baigorri-Jalón, former professor at the University of Salamanca, and conference interpreter at the United Nations, and in a past life, second lieutenant (Spanish infantry) when conscription for military service was in force in Spain. Drawing on a combination of methods from history and interpreting studies, Baigorri-Jalón has done a commendable job in assembling the materials from archives, interviews with descendants of those who acted as interpreters, and interpreters' memoirs to pay tribute to all those invisible interpreters who facilitated communication during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). This was a civil, but also an international, conflict, which ushered in World War II. It was characterised by the participation of tens of thousands of people from many countries who spoke different languages and who fought for a common cause in a country painted in black and white where there was not much room for nuance, in a conflict that was "a patchwork of multifaceted identities navigating a labyrinth of social and cultural paradoxes" (161). The figures show this constellation of languages and nationalities: on General Franco's side, there were about 80,000 Italians, 80,000 Moroccans, 19,000 Germans, 10,000 Portuguese, and hundreds of fighters from Ireland, France and other nations. On the Republican side, there were over 35,000 fighters in the International Brigades (from more than 50 countries) and 2,000 Soviet advisers. The cosmopolitan nature of the military personnel necessarily led to different behaviours even if they shared the same cause. This diversity made communication extremely complicated and cumbersome, both among the various foreign combatants, on the one hand, and between them and the Spanish troops, local authorities, or civilian population, on the other. Eby's

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anecdote in which he mentions the "gibbering madhouse" that resulted from the intervention of twelve interpreters talking at the same time to interpret a keynote speech is very telling (7).

Against this backdrop, the need for interpreters was undeniable, as there were constant close encounters of many kinds between people who spoke different languages and who could not have possibly understood each other. That is why throughout the war the troops sent by Hitler were accompanied by some 650 interpreters, and the Soviet advisers were assisted by some 200 interpreters, half of them women. Those were people supposed to have been trained and to have practiced in various settings, mostly in peaceful environments. However, interpreters are seldom mentioned in the over 50,000 studies of the Spanish Civil War, which is one of the most researched historical events in academia. In the Introduction, Baigorri-Jalón acknowledges the interpreters' supposedly marginal role in the war and highlights the contribution that analysing the intervention of interpreters can make to the study of history, in general, and of this conflict, in particular. The invisibility of interpreters is probably due to the fact that (spoken) words are blown away with the wind; that interpretation has been performed by ordinary people who were usually taken for granted; or, as Baigorri-Jalón points out, due to the strategic, offensive or defensive, use of languages in war. This would be particularly the case if we accept that language is another weapon of war. As an example, Baigorri-Jalón explains in a previous work, "Wars, Languages and the Role(s) of Interpreters," how misunderstandings resulting from language differences were to blame for a debacle in the Turkish contingent during the Korean War (1950–1953), which registered a great number of casualties in the early stages of hostilities.

Languages in the Crossfire, which is the English translation of the author's *Lenguas entre dos fuegos: Intérpretes en la Guerra Civil Española (1936–1939)* (2019), comprises an Introduction, four chapters (on the role of languages in the war; the interpreter as agent of communication; interpreting settings; and a prosopography of interpreters) and an Afterword, in which he shares some reflections about the need for interpreters in the aftermath of the conflict. His valuable Preface to the English edition and the Translator's Introduction, by Holly Mikkelson, highlight some of the difficulties faced by the translator, who, similar to the challenges encountered by the interpreters depicted in the book, was confronted with words and expressions that were difficult, if not impossible, to translate. These two chapters also describe the collaborative atmosphere during the translation process, which was also critical in the Spanish Civil War, in that the interlocutors understood each other better the more they wanted to understand.

Baigorri-Jalón touches upon central notions that are found in current studies of interpreting in contemporary armed conflicts such as trustworthiness and loyalty to the users the interpreters serve, on whom they depend, and with whom they usually share the same ideology; the challenges faced by the interpreter (linguistic or otherwise); the interpreter's agency; the interpreter's accountability; or interpreting as a communicative act in which the main objective is often to accomplish the mission of the contingent.

He also highlights the complexity of the interpreter's positionality, particularly of those who suffered an asymmetrical power relation with their superiors (which was most visible in the case of the Soviet interpreters) who dictated the subaltern nature of their functions. Most interpreters might be seen as what Michaela Wolf calls "anti-heroes," persons "acting in daily-life situations in contexts of power and conflict, often connected with violence."[1]

One may wonder if interpreters were not combatants themselves, particularly given that they wore a uniform, identifying them as part of the contingent, and often accompanied the combatants to the front line. As a matter of fact, some of them were fighters, and the case of John Murra shows that he even "deserted" his interpreting job in order to go to the front.

An important component of the interpreter's positionality is the ideology in which they are immersed. Combatants in any war tend to create a set of beliefs, attitudes, motivations and emotions that become the sociopsychological infrastructure of their group, helping to defend what, for them, are legitimate objectives against a homogeneous and dehumanised "Other." Since most of the interpreters working in the Spanish Civil War ended up doing so not because they had trained as interpreters but because they spoke the relevant languages and, more importantly, because they believed in their side's cause, they had absorbed the narratives surrounding the conflict as constructed by their side. These interpreters were therefore influenced by and embedded in their group's ideology. Ideologies also help armed groups to cope with negative emotions, such as fear, and to develop positive emotions towards the members of the group which helps to strengthen their *esprit de corps*. As Baigorri-Jalón posits, drawing on a sociological study carried out by John Dollard and Donald Horton (1943) among 300 volunteers from the Lincoln Battalion interviewed a few years after their participation in the Spanish Civil War, "the soldier's identification with the cause before going into battle is one of the elements that help reduce fear and the impulse to desert" (29). This identification with a given ideology is always accompanied by tangible elements in the military world, such as myths, symbols and liturgy, that "help to define the spiritual context in which the military ethos unfolds," and that sometimes go beyond country or language borders.[2] Baigorri-Jalón notes the importance of sharing an ideology and symbols when he describes the cohesion created by the combatants of the International Brigades by singing "The Internationale" in many different languages.

Languages can indeed be seen as obstacles to, or as vehicles of, communication. Those who chose the latter and who acted as interpreters had learned their languages in various ways: in Spain, thanks to family contacts with Spaniards, by travelling through Spanish-speaking countries, or at school. Baigorri-Jalón states something that is widely recognised nowadays in conference interpreting contexts but not so much in others: that knowledge of languages is not enough to be able to interpret, and that interpreters need to understand the different values, customs and social capital of the interlocutors as well as their languages. And yet in armed conflicts today, as was the case in the Spanish Civil War, interpreters are still chosen and recruited because they speak the relevant languages, and *not* because they have experience as interpreters. The implications of not being a trained interpreter in the Spanish Civil War, but rather an accidental interpreter, meant that the knowledge of languages was unequal among them, often leaving a lot to be desired, given that they were constantly trying to cope with the situation and to keep their heads above water. In cases like this, the fidelity (or lack thereof) to the original message would depend on how well the interpreters understood the original message, and not so much on their deliberate attempt to adulterate it. At other times there was indeed a will to change the message by toning it down or by adding information, or by making small, deliberate errors here and there, which

resulted in substantial distortions. This is yet another consequence of lacking a code of professional ethics. Indeed, the stories told in the book lead one to think that, whilst they might have begun the war without one, interpreters progressively developed a code of ethics which was mainly based on common sense.

An interesting example that illustrates this point is when Elizaveta Parshina, a Russian interpreter, had to decide whether or not to provide an accurate interpretation of her superior's instructions, in which he explained how long it would take for a fuse to cause an explosion. She could choose between interpreting the instructions thoroughly or avoiding wasting precious time by shouting "two minutes!" thus causing the listeners to run away to avoid the explosion. As Lorenzo Silva notes in reference to situations in which military personnel do not speak the same language, "the situation makes any yelling, even if it is inarticulate, a most intelligible order."[3] Baigorri-Jalón mentions another example in which Parshina decided to omit sharing medical information between the chief of the General Staff and a doctor in the presence of the patient to protect the emotional integrity of the wounded patient and facilitate his recovery.

These instances show that interpreters made decisions by gut feeling. They learned by doing, in this school of interpreters that the war became, through a process of collective learning in their shared human endeavour, engaging in sense-making and placing themselves as a group in the world around them.[4] Inadvertently, interpreters, particularly those working for the International Brigades, created small, more or less effective, communities of practice in which learning was a social process which they used to negotiate their competence as they went along.

In fact, interpreters operated effectively as "Swiss army knives" in that they had to perform multiple tasks beyond interpreting: teaching beginner language classes, raising funds, writing letters for soldiers to their local girlfriends, translating and interpreting.[5] Interpreters also had to perform at different types of encounters, such as political meetings and discussions, negotiations, pep talks, orders, instructions and training sessions. These tasks were not the ideal of heroism that most foreigners had when they went to Spain to serve as combatants, even if they entailed many risks for the interpreters. More recent events, such as the conflicts in Iraq or Afghanistan, have shown that interpreters are exposed to real risks and dangers, and that the protection they receive is usually severely lacking. Baigorri-Jalón illustrates these risks through fascinating stories, such as the story of James Jump, an interpreter from the International Brigades, who was wounded while fighting in the Sierra de Pàndols. Interpreters were not only at risk of being injured or killed, but also of suffering from fatigue, stress or illness that came from the act of interpreting itself, from exposure to the vicissitudes of war or from related actions, such as travelling from one place to another. They were also at risk of attacks of an ideological nature, such as when they were accused of espionage.

What particularly struck me was that interpreting in many of these settings was not only dangerous but, given the proximity of death, also had extreme psychological implications. We hear of combatants who desperately needed someone who could speak their language before dying, and the loneliness felt by those who died untranslated. Lini de Vries, an American nurse of Dutch-Jewish descent, describes her last moments with a Dutch volunteer who begged her not to leave him to die alone:

> With a pinched throat and unshed tears, I sang to Peter [in Dutch] as softly as I could. … Doctor Barsky finished operating by candlelight as our lights went out. Silent sobs caught in my throat as I felt Peter's pulse fading to nothingness, to death. (209)

It is important to remember that communication goes beyond language and encompasses culture. The Spaniards' lack of cultural knowledge about the foreigners led to stereotypes and generalisations, which, alongside the perception of the other's identity, became more familiar as contact increased. The gender dimension of the misunderstandings between the foreign women, mainly the Soviet women, and the Spaniards generally, and Spanish women, in particular, reflected both the distant relations between the genders but also the cultural shock felt by women who came from very different social realities: it was in fact a clash between modernity and tradition. Not understanding each other was therefore not merely a consequence of not speaking the same language, but of belonging to very different cultures. Although the need of those involved in a conflict to acquire cross-cultural competence is today part of their military pre-deployment training, it was not so at the time. Similarly, there is growing recognition of the need for military personnel to know how to face critical situations in which the perceived behaviour of others is in conflict with personal and professional values. Interpreters played an essential role in building bridges between different cultures, helping the combatants to become more knowledgeable of the other's culture and worldview. All of the above shows that interpreters had to be ready and willing to perform various tasks, to be flexible and make situation-appropriate decisions, which meant assessing the risks, needs, challenges and objective(s) of the mission.

These varied elements flawlessly converge in the last chapter in which Baigorri-Jalón provides at times an individual and at times a collective prosopography of some of the interpreters who worked in the Spanish Civil War. It is worth mentioning his two paradigmatic narratives of interpreters performing their tasks in the context of the Condor Legion and in the International Brigades, as well as all the photographs inserted not only in this chapter but throughout the book which eloquently create a real image of these interpreters in our minds. This textual and visual wealth is the result of laborious research by the author to create this granular narrative of interpreters in the Spanish Civil War.

Finally, the Afterword allows the reader to better understand the reasons that led Baigorri-Jalón to undertake this challenging endeavour. He was not only interested in untangling the complex issue of language communication in the Spanish Civil War, but he also had a personal stake in the matter. Born fourteen years after the war officially ended, he experienced the outcomes of the war second-hand and witnessed the tragic silence imposed on the defeated after the war. Therefore, the author inevitably looks at the war through the rearview mirror of the present, but the strength of the book comes precisely from his closeness to some of those who lived through the war, as well as his approach as both a historian and as an interpreter.

Languages in the Crossfire is a revealing and comprehensive investigation into the role of language, interpreters and interpreting in the Spanish Civil War, and, indeed, the culmination of a lifetime of learning and thinking about what it means to interpret in armed conflicts. It encourages us to recalibrate the skills that interpreters need in such contexts, as well as the ethical principles that guide their work, which is necessarily intertwined with the ideological, cultural, historical and psychological realities of the warring sides of the conflict.

Notes

1. Wolf, "The Interpreter as 'Anti-Hero,'" 239.
2. Domingo Guerra, *Soldados*, 120 (my translation).
3. Silva, *Nadie por delante*, 51 (my translation).
4. Eckert, "Communities of Practice."
5. Hajjar, "Effectively Working with Military Linguists."

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