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Martin Moruno, Dolorès

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SALARIA KEA'S MEMORIES FROM THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

One of the first challenges that we had to handle, when we started to organize this conference, was the selection of an image that would represent humanitarian action during the Spanish civil war. As one of our main objectives was to identify the humanitarian agents who performed emergency relief operations -those “warriors without weapons” to whom the Red Cross delegate Marcel Junod referred in his book *Le troisième combattant*- we decided to look for a picture, rather than a poster or a drawing.¹

Photographs, furthermore, seem to be particularly relevant for the study of this war as it was the first conflict “to be covered in the modern sense by a corps of professional photographers”.² The large amount of images produced during the Spanish civil war, however, made it difficult to decide how we should approach them. Are pictures historical documents that could help us to reconstruct the agents, the practices and the spaces in which humanitarian action took place or they were rather the result of a propagandistic effort in order to mobilize international opinion?³ Shall we understand these images as a kind of text or better as objects that “affect us” by doing things like telling emotional stories that link our memories with the past?⁴

The choice of a photograph was not easy. Things became even more complicated as we were looking for a picture representing a woman, the forever forgotten humanitarian agent. Sebastien preferred a picture of a female humanitarian worker feeding children; something quite natural for somebody who has been

¹ Marcel Junod, *Le troisième combattant. De l'Ypèrite en Abyssinie à la bombe atomique d'Hiroshima*, Paris : Payot, 1947.

² Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003, 21. Caroline Brothers, *War and Photography. A Cultural History*. New York. Routledge, 1997.

³ Jennifer Tucker, Tina Campt, « Entwined Practices: Engagements with Photography in Historical Enquiry », *History and Theory*, 2009, 48:1-8.

⁴ Jo Labanyi, « Doing things : Emotion, Affect, and Materiality », *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* 11 (3-4), 2010. María Rosón, *Género, memoria y cultura visual en el primer franquismo*. Madrid: Cátedra, 2016, 11.

working on the development of food technologies. For me, an historian of medicine committed to Gender Studies, the target was clear: I wanted a nurse. Despite of our initial disagreement, we were not discussing about different types of women humanitarians. It matters little whether a woman is giving bread to a child or putting a bandage on a wounded soldier, as they are both, providing care. Care appeared as a fascinating practice that could be interpreted as a kind of weapon that gave women an agency while assisting the victims of the war. After long discussions, we found an amazing picture when surfing on the internet, a picture of a brave woman captured by the camera with a defiant look; a glamorous nurse who appeared just like a humanitarian heroine while performing surgery on a child. I should recognize that I felt in love with her at first sight.⁵ But, who was that girl? Why did she go to Spain? Where was she working? And overall, why did she seem so special?

As the Afro-American poet Langston Hughes wrote, this slender girl was special because of the chocolate color of her skin.⁶ Her name was Salaria Kea. She became Salaria Kea O'Reilly during the Spanish civil war, after having married John Joseph O'Reilly, an Irish ambulance driver belonging to the International Brigades. The ceremony was performed by a judge from the village of Saelices in the province of Cuenca close to the American Hospital, in which Salaria worked at Villa Paz, the old summer residence of King Alfonso XIII.

Furthermore, Salaria was special because she was a black woman with a strong character having struggled against injustice throughout her whole life.⁷ When Mussolini's troops invaded Ethiopia, she was one of the initiators of the fund-raising campaign in Harlem" and when "she had the chance to come to Spain to help the Loyalist government, (...) she came".⁸

Salaria was also proud to be the only Afro-American nurse, who joined the Third Medical Mission organized by the North American Bureau to Aid Spanish

⁵ Jill Lepore, «Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography », *The Journal of American History*, 88(1), 2001: 129-144.

⁶ Langston Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander: An Autobiographical Journey* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1956), 382.

⁷ See Peter N. Carroll, *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade: Americans in the Spanish Civil War* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994, 69.

⁸ Hughes, *op. cit.*

Democracy.⁹ She departed from New York on March 27, 1937, aboard the *Paris* together with other eight nurses, five doctors, a pharmacist, a bacteriologist, two ambulance drivers and a translator. She explained the reason that led her to join Edward Barsky's mission in a little book entitled *A Negro Nurse in Republican Spain*.

"What have the Negroes to do with Spain? (...) The answers are simple. Fascist Italy invaded and overpowered Ethiopia. This was a terrible blow to Negroes throughout the world (...) Italy advanced her troops to Spain. Here was a second small nation, feudal and undeveloped. Bitter resentment against Italy still rankled. The place to defeat Italy just now is Spain. The lynching of Negroes in America, discrimination in education and jobs, lack of hospital facilities for Negroes in most cities and very poor ones in others, all this appeared to them as a part of the picture of fascism".¹⁰

By choosing the picture of Salaria, a female antifascist activist we were challenging the idea that humanitarian action should be neutral to be properly called "humanitarian", i.e. not being politically engaged with one of the sides of the conflict. Why cannot we understand the American Bureau's mission as an humanitarian operation?¹¹ Is it because it only supported the Second Spanish Republic, which was a democratic government isolated by the main international powers having joined the Non-Intervention Committee or rather, because it was just an antifascist organization? Why cannot antifascists be humanitarians? Why not understand this humanitarian operation as means of

⁹ ALBA Collection, Fredericka Martin Papers, Box 14. MB Departures from Spain.

¹⁰ Salaria Kea, *A Negro Nurse in Spain*. New York: The Negro Committee to Aid Spain, 1938, 3. Fredericka Martin Papers. Series I: Medical Personnel: Biographical Files and Correspondence, 1936-1988. United States: Kee, Salaria: Pamphlet: "A Negro Nurse in Republican Spain" (Reprint of 1938 publication), 1977. ALBA.001, Box: 9, Folder: 32.

¹¹ This idea is supported by Rony Brauman, *La médecine humanitaire*. Paris : PUF and Gabriel Petrus, *Humanitarian relief in the Spanish Civil War (1936-39)* New York: Edwin Mellen Pr., 2013.

denunciation –a sort of *ingèrence humanitaire*– in the same vein as contemporary organizations like *Doctors without Borders*?

In any case, what I loved about Salaria is that she was an outsider even for the International Brigades. Sometime after the Spanish civil war, she would recognize that “she didn’t even know what a Communist was” (...) as she “though that it was for white people only, like the Mafia”.¹² Little by little, Salaria succeeded in conquering me. I realized that I was involved in a serious relationship with her, when I was taking a flight a month ago to travel to New York in order to find her picture. I needed to know more about her.¹³

It was, however, not easy as I thought. First of all, because I could not identify a sole trace of the picture that I was looking for in the archives. After having checked thirty boxes twice, I was only able to find one photograph, which seemed to have been taken just before or after the picture that I was looking for.¹⁴ I was desperate and beginning to think that my visit to NYC was a complete failure. I remember very well how Sebastien told me: « Don’t worry! Forget it! We can use another picture! » and how I really went mad...

I was at the point of breaking off my romantic relationship with Salaria, when an idea came to my mind: “Look at the negatives!”. And Salaria was there performing surgery with the doctor Albert Byrne!¹⁵ I was so excited that I ran to the NYU Department of Spanish Studies. There, Jo Labanyi gave me some good advice on how to go ahead with my research. If I wanted to contextualize my picture, I needed to meet some of the few specialists that had already worked on her. This is how I met James Fernández, the vice-chair of the Abraham

¹² Justin Byrne, « From Brookling to Belchite: New Yorkers in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade » in Peter N. Carroll and James D. Fernández, *Facing Fascism. New York and the Spanish Civil War*. New York. New York University Press, 2007, 79.

¹³ Salaria Kea could also serve in base hospital established in the region of Murcia. To go further, see Margarita del Valle García, “Salaria Kea. La enfermera roja que vino de Harlem”, *SEDENE*, n°26, 2007, 30-3.

¹⁴ Frances Patai Photographs. Series I: Prints Kee, Salaria, undated , 1937. ALBA.PHOTO.131. Box: 1, Folder: 15.

¹⁵ Frances Patai Photographs. Series III: Negatives. Kee, Salaria Inclusive, 1930s. ALBA.PHOTO.131. Box: 2, Folder: 5.

Lincoln Archives. The first thing that I asked him was if he was sure that the picture had been taken at Villa Paz hospital.

- “We are sure”-he told me- because Salaria appears in various films at Villa Paz. She was a great actress. Did you know that?”
- My reply was a bit confused: “Non, I didn’t know it”.
- “Yes, she appears in *Victoire de la Vie* or *The Good Fight*¹⁶... She posed for the camera as she were looking after a patient, when it was a fake. You should not trust very much on Salaria... Have you listened to her audio recordings when she was delirious at the end of her life?”
- “Non”- I answered, even more lost than before.
- Then, James explained me: “She suffered from dementia. She finished her life telling people that she was captured by the Nazis during WWII.

After my first appointment, I had just begun to realize that Salaria’s narrative was problematic. *A Negro Nurse in Republican Spain*, also has different versions, which reveal some contradictions. For example, it was not clear when she was captured by the Francoist troops somewhere near the Front of Teruel and how she managed to escape seven weeks before. Soon after, she would be wounded by a bomb, but we cannot find any information in the archives. Finally, she returned to New York, where she continued to raise funds for the Negro Committee Aid to Spain.

I started to wonder if Salaria was hiding something from me. The second person that I met, Julia Newman, the film director of *Into the Fire, American Women in the Spanish civil war* helped me to clarify some of my concerns. Julia did not have the opportunity to interview Salaria, as she died in 1990. She explained to me how she used some scenes from *The Good Fight*.¹⁷

- “Anyway”- she told me- “to speak with Salaria would not have changed things so much.
- “Why?”- I asked.

¹⁶ Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Victoire de la Vie* (1937).

¹⁷ Julia Newman, *Into the Fire American Women in the Spanish civil war* (2002); Mary Dore, Sam Sills, Noel Buckner, *The Good Fight. The Abraham Lincoln Brigade during the Spanish civil war* (1984).

- Well, you know... Salaria did not always use to tell the truth...
- "The same story, again"- I said to myself. I also explained to Julia that I had already met James Fernandez, who told me that Salaria suffered from dementia at the end of her life.
- "Well" -replied Julia. "Not only at the end of her life". I verified the exactitude of some facts with other volunteers of the Abraham Lincoln Brigades. For example, Salaria was not captured by the Francoists near Teruel. She was only lost...
- "Lost? This is not possible" -I answered to Julia. "She explained it in her narrative".
- "Sorry, Dolores, but Salaria was never captured nor wounded by a bomb...What you call her narrative is only a pamphlet, which was surely written by the Negro Committee. Salaria was a myth constructed to support the Negro cause".

I remember perfectly well how Julia said to me goodbye while repeating "Be brave, Dolores!" ... But how I could be brave after all that? The brave woman was Salaria, not me! I felt furious with her. What I was doing in NYC? Writing the memories of a woman suffering from dementia? She had been lying to me for months and, even worse, she had betrayed generations of historians, who had repeated the same story about her life.

The day before my departure from NYC, I started to realize the importance of my story with Salaria. I was no longer angry. I loved her as she was, even if she was not the humanitarian heroine that I had imagined at the beginning. I went to New York to find the picture of the only Afro-American nurse having volunteered during the Spanish civil war and I came back to Geneva with a human, all too human Salaria. What I will never doubt is that she was an excellent nurse and a great humanitarian, a warrior without weapons representing "global solidarity", this thing that is still today "a utopia"¹⁸. This

¹⁸ Slavoj Zizeck, *Against the Double Blackmail: refugees, terror and other troubles with the neighbours*. London : Penguin, 2016. « Maybe such global solidarity is a utopia. But if we don't engage in it , then we are really lost. And we will deserve to be lost ».

emotional story, which links our memories with the past, is my way to thank her for having helped those victims who suffered the Spanish civil war.