Pedagogies of resistance:
Spanish Republican wartime education from a European perspective

The Spanish Republican Army must not only be a training ground for soldiers, insisted the editors of the February 1937 issue of ¡Presente!, the trench journal for the Madrid-based 31st Mixed Brigade, but also ‘a school where soldiers become citizens [...].’¹ This idea, expressed as the blood-drenched battle of Jarama was raging southeast of the capital, was fundamental to the Republican war effort. For if the Republic was to survive the war, it had not only to mobilise militarily but also to modernise politically and entrench its legitimacy by prompting a change in the collective political imagination. Educational efforts in the army became one of the principal means by which the Republican government sought to achieve this goal.

By placing education at the forefront of its mobilisation efforts, the Republican government ostensibly adopted transformative war aims comparable with those of several other antifascist resistance movements formed during the Second World War. It also underwrote particular kinds of educational activities that were later used by the same European resistance movements, often to comparable effect. In Italy, Yugoslavia, and Greece, especially, partisan units fighting Nazi occupation placed great weight on frontline literacy classes as well as political training and participation, and they conceived of these activities as integral to their military mobilisation campaigns as well as long-term political goals.² By viewing educational activities in the Republican Army as tools of the long anti-fascist struggle of the 1930s and 1940s, then, this article seeks to analyse and evaluate Republican frontline education from a comparative perspective, focusing particularly on southern Europe.³ As this research is still in its early stages, I will only sketch out a few general problems and ideas, relating to the conditions of wartime education and the prominence of Communist Parties in this field. By drawing on army reports from the Army of the Centre, which was the locus of Republican educational efforts, the Republican military press, and recent scholarship on European resistance movements of the 1940s, I suggest that the use of frontline education as a mobilising tool responded to a particular set

² For a recent overview of European resistance movements, see Philip COOKE and Ben SHEPHERD (eds.): European resistance in the second world war, South Yorkshire, Pen & Sword Military, 2013.
³ In this sense, this article is also conceived as a contribution to the emerging comparative literature on antifascism. See, for example, Hugo GARCIA, Mercedes YUSTA, and Xavier TABET (coords.): Rethinking antifascism. History, memory, and politics, 1922 to the present, Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2016; and Michael SEIDMAN: Antifascismos: la lucha contra el fascismo a ambos lados del Atlántico, Madrid, Alianza, 2017.
of challenges obtaining to a comparable degree in civil war Spain and the southern European resistance movements. Such educational activities also infused mass mobilisation campaigns with radical political potential, even though the end results in some cases failed to meet the expectations of educational, military and political leaders.

The situation that the Republican government faced after the military coup of July 1936 was, of course, substantially different to that faced by subsequent resistance movements in countries occupied by the Nazis. Most antifascist resistance movements operated independently of established institutional structures, while the antifascist coalition in Spain was associated predominantly with the existing state, though only after it had undergone a gradual process of reconstruction. To secure broad support for a state-led war effort, the Republican government had to develop an effective response not only to the military insurgents and their Nazi and Fascist backers, but also to the revolutionary forces initially controlling public order and administration in many towns and cities held for the Republic. In this context, I contend, mass educational and cultural activities took on a vital strategic function, partly as tools to co-opt revolutionary energies. Educational and cultural activities became both – indeed simultaneously – a means to present the Republican government as a progressive force, committed to the egalitarian values cherished by revolutionaries, and a means to shape, in non-coercive ways, the outcome of a new progressive, democratic politics. These activities contributed to the vital task of fostering a new Republican war identity, capable of displacing – at least temporarily – other antagonistic political identities.

The ferocity of the well-known ideological political conflicts weakening the Republican camp must be understood as product of the cataclysmic upheaval generated by the war. As an editorial in the Madrid-based army journal *Aguilas de Robledo* pointed out, nothing could remain the same after a conflict like the Spanish war. ‘Wars do not leave social structures untouched. In our case, the war has not only altered existing social structures; it has left them in ruins. New structures must be created in their place. Everything will change [...]’. In the view of many, the military coup had shattered the legitimacy of existing social and political order, and the ensuing crisis inexorably intensified old political battles.

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5 S.a.: “Cultura”, *Aguilas de Robledo*, 2 February 1937.
In this general sense, despite the differences pointed out above, the heightened stakes of the Spanish conflict were analogous to the circumstances conditioning many Second World War resistance movements. A crisis or absence of legitimacy associated with the existing regime is common to all countries where antifascist resistance developed into mass movements with a radical political agenda. Italy suffered deep fragmentation after 8 September 1943, when the government signed an armistice with the Allied powers – a crisis that was exacerbated by the divisive impact and increasingly hollow legitimacy of Fascism and Fascist institutions. In Greece, the state largely collapsed with the German occupation in spring 1941. Here, as in Republican Spain in July 1936, the destruction of state administration generated both a sharpened crisis of legitimacy – already in motion due to interwar conflicts and the establishment, in 1936, of a conservative dictatorship under King George II and Ioannis Metaxas – and a real power vacuum allowing revolutionary resistance groups to erect alternative political and social structures. Similarly, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, beset by political strife and a royal dictatorship from 1929, saw an occupation-driven disintegration of state institutions in 1941, which prepared the ground for resistance movements with radical political agendas. The situation faced by antifascist resisters in France and northern Europe, where resistance movements lacked the mass character of their southern counterparts, only partially conforms to this description; hence they will not figure in this comparison. It may be suggested, then, that a high degree of state disintegration and significant de-legitimation of the existing social and political order were necessary conditions for revolutionary antifascist agendas to gain mass support. What followed from such disintegration was an exceptional expansion of the horizon of political possibilities, dramatically raising the stakes of ideological confrontations. And while the competition for direct political power was mostly to be settled militarily, the task of securing political legitimacy required propagandistic and educational work to give the expanded horizon of possibilities a new and relatively fixed definition.

Antifascist mass mobilisation operated on multiple levels to change people as well as the state. This dual ambition was most clearly and urgently articulated in above mentioned countries,

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9 Philip COOKE and Ben SHEPHERD (eds.): *European resistance...*, chapters 2, 4, 7 and 9. For reasons of space, I have also kept comparisons with the Soviet Union to a minimum.
10 Naturally, both conditions also obtained in many parts of Europe after the First World War, not least in Russia, which will be discussed below.
where the existing social and political order was perceived to be crumbling. Italian antifascists reflected on the need to re-educate the generation born and raised during Mussolini’s dictatorship, while Greek and Yugoslav partisans were energetic in their efforts to forge a new mass subject with skills and knowledge suited to their ideal post-war polity. In each case, the political goals of antifascists represented a complete departure from pre-war politics. In Spain, by contrast, it can be suggested that radical constituencies did not seek so much a rupture with the pre-war Republic as a fulfilment of its political promise – though this in itself was, of course, typically cast as a complete departure from earlier regimes, deemed oligarchical and irredeemably corrupt.

What these countries, including Spain, also shared were relatively low or uneven levels of social, political and economic integration, at least compared with northern Europe. Such disparities were naturally reflected in the social imaginaries of their populations, who often identified more readily with regional, religious or ethnic identities than political ones. Thus, for advocates of Enlightenment-based models of modernity (including liberalism and socialism), much remained to be done to forge a politically conscious yet loyal citizenry. From this perspective, the war offered an opportunity to make a great leap forward, to ‘catch up’ with countries (capitalist or socialist) perceived to occupy a higher, more advanced position on the scale of national development.

To achieve such ambitions and to secure sufficient support for the war effort in the immediate term, resistance movements had to adopt mobilisation strategies that could serve a mass political socialisation project while also drawing strengths from existing defensive energies, focused on the preservation of concrete localities, homes or existing ways of life. Among other things, this meant mobilising across class, gender, and ethnic categories, and the political organisations that often excelled in this task, while maintaining a coherent revolutionary identity, tended to be the southern European communist parties. Again, the precise situation facing the Spanish Communist Party in the civil war was significantly different to that obtaining elsewhere during the Second World War, but all Parties’ ability to speak to the concerns of various groups and accommodate a highly heterogenous membership base was crucial throughout. If in Spain cross-class collaboration was key to rapid PCE growth, the Yugoslav and Greek parties, for example, both derived decisive advantage from their multi-ethnic compositions, especially in geographical areas where political loyalties tended to be circumscribed by narrow ethnic and/or religious boundaries. It seems, in other words, that the

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11 Claudio PAVONE: *A Civil War...,* pp. 673-675.
13 A tension acutely observed by Pavone. See *A Civil War...,* p. 165.
14 Philip COOKE and Ben SHEPHERD (eds.): *European resistance...,* pp. 100f, 213-243.
cosmopolitan nature of communist politics could be paradoxical source of strength in areas dominated by tradition-bound constituencies.

To further mobilisation efforts, maximise political gain, and forge a cohesive political community out of its heterogenous and rapidly expanding support base, communist parties also made exceptionally efficient use of educational and cultural mobilisation programmes – another reason for their prominence in this analysis. In Republican Spain, an energetic team of Party members, led by Jesús Hernández, directed the wartime Ministry of Public Instruction and Fine Arts, which naturally aided the Party’s visibility in this area, but mass educational initiatives were a common feature of communist mobilisation across southern Europe in the 1940s. Their strength in this regard derived partly from the Bolsheviks, who delivered a whole catalogue of innovative mass mobilisation techniques – propaganda trains, ROSTA windows, literacy brigades, etc. – during the Russian Civil War. Many of these techniques were later adopted by political organisations of various ideological stripes, but the Communists, more than any other group, considered such activities as an integral part of their own political culture.

Following the Bolshevik example, as well as domestic antecedents in the case of Spain, communist antifascists invested considerable resources in adult literacy teaching. The Republican Culture Militias likely represented the most expansive effort in this regard, but similar initiatives were taken elsewhere during the Second World War, especially in southern European countries with high levels of illiteracy. Such activities were obviously crucial to military campaigns in which thousands of men with no prior military experience had to be trained to operate heavy weaponry or occupy positions of command. But they also signalled a desire to prepare the ground for a more inclusive post-war society – a key political aspiration of most antifascists in the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War. Naturally, this aspect features most prominently in official discourses relating to literacy campaigns. In Spain, where the Republican government needed to present tangible proof of its progressive intent in order to strengthen its legitimacy in the eyes of radicalised working-class constituencies, army commissars rarely missed an opportunity to remind soldiers of the importance of education as a prerequisite for both individual and collective emancipation. Many described the acquisition of literacy in near-lyrical terms. In an article that was typical in both content and tone, Filipe Molinero, Culture Militia teacher in the 29th Mixed Brigade, wrote of the joy one of his students must feel as he had ‘opened a window’ onto the world and abolished all ‘distances’ by learning to read

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16 For a detailed study of the Culture Militias, see Christopher COBB: Los Milicianos de la Cultura, Bilbao, Universidad del País Vasco, 1995.
and write. 17 The article was accompanied by a picture of the unsteady writing of the soldier in question, addressing his father in a short letter meant to demonstrate what he had learnt in the trenches.

Apart from highlighting the individual pride felt by learners, such stories also tended to describe educational activities as facilitating further individual self-development and social mobility. In a sense, expanded educational opportunities for individuals were presented as the primary means by which the Republic was to deliver on its progressive political promise. Yet the rhetoric around individual self-realisation and social mobility could be transposed to a collective level, too, and many commissars spoke of education as a route to active citizenship, sometimes in terms that carried an unmistakable revolutionary ring. In the inaugural issue of *La Voz del Combatiente*, for example, Eusebio Moya stressed that soldiers must prepare themselves for the responsibility of collective self-governance since after the war, they would occupy key positions in ‘town halls, factories and everywhere.’ 18

As indicated, such visions gained particular traction against a political horizon blasted wide open by war. But if war thus nourished revolutionary aspirations, it also inexorably shaped the methods and languages used to ensure such aspirations’ ultimate realisation. This was evident in Republican frontline education too, which was, for reasons of military necessity and political expediency, frequently described as an integral part of the military struggle against fascism. Commissars spoke of education as another ‘weapon’ against fascism, which was to be defeated with ideas as well as arms. Consequently, education had to be approached with the same mentality as any other aspect of the antifascist struggle. 19 It was something to be ‘conquered’, like a hill on a battlefield: to acquire it required ‘courage.’ ‘You have shown on many occasions that you are not cowards. Do not act like cowards now!’ , a commissar in the 29th Mixed Brigade blasted as he called on his soldiers to attend Culture Militia classes. 20 Thus, the very vocabulary of educational discourses was militarised and learning became a matter of soldierly discipline.

This encouraged not only forceful exhortations from commissars but also an almost boundless optimism regarding the potential results of the Republican educational programme. It was repeatedly

17 Felipe MOLINERO: “Labor cultural”, *Choque. Órgano del 10º batallón de infantería, 29ª Brigada*, 4 April 1937.
18 Eusebio MOYA: “Queda mucho por hacer”, *La Voz del Combatiente: Diario de los Comisarios de Guerra del Ejército del Pueblo*, 21 January 1937.
suggested that thirty days would be sufficient for an illiterate person to acquire full literacy. In an attempt to better the efforts of other units, the 28th Mixed Brigade set itself the goal of eradicating illiteracy in fifteen days only. Later they proudly reported that after eight days, not a single soldier in the unit remained unable to sign with his own name. Now that soldiers had the means of learning at their disposal, commissars and Culture Militia staff insisted, all that was missing was the will.

Such language, making an ostensibly emancipatory project subject to fierce military discipline, may well have appealed more to communists than anyone else. It certainly recalled the modus operandi of the Stakhanovite movement and ideas of ‘socialist emulation’ in the Soviet Union. According to communist propaganda, the spectacular industrialisation process initiated in the Soviet Union was in no small part driven by the indomitable enthusiasm of Soviet workers who, in their tireless efforts to contribute to the construction of socialism, constantly broke new individual and collective production records. A similar logic seemingly applied to what we may call ‘antifascist emulation’ in the Republican Army, at least in relation to educational activities. Considering the speed with which soldiers in the newly-formed Republican Army had to be trained, such discourses may simply have reflected an urgent necessity born of a desperate military situation, but the political culture of communists may have encouraged them to make a virtue out of necessity and see an edifying challenge in an otherwise intractable problem.

In the Spanish Republican Army, at least, a desire to foment a culture of emulation permeated all political-educational work. This was clear in the exhortations of commissars and Culture Militia staff. It was also evident in much of the Republican military press, which regularly included portraits of soldiers who embodied an antifascist ideal. The 12 January 1937 issue of *La Voz del Combatiente*, for example, included a portrait of a farmer from Las Rosales (Sevilla) who was fighting in the Republican Army. His biography cast him as a true ‘soldier of the people’, a man of humble origins who now performed heroic deeds on the battlefield. Through his actions, he proved himself to be a

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21 See, for example, “Acabemos con el analfabetismo” ¡Presente!, 6 March 1937; M. PÉREZ: “Reportajes de Guerra: Labor cultural”, *Leal. Boletín del 3º batallón, 29ª brigada*, 1 June 1937.
23 Of course, in this case, ‘literacy’ was defined simply as the ability to sign one’s name.
26 The Stakhanovite movement was a topic addressed in the talks commissars delivered before the men. See, for example, reports from the 113th Battalion of the 29th Mixed Brigade, February-December 1937. AGMAV, C.987,10, 5-6.
model defender of the Republic and an exemplary antifascist, setting a standard that others should follow.

On a theoretical level, it may be noted that such texts anchored an emerging collective Republican identity – an identity necessarily based on an abstraction – in concrete, individual examples, making the collective identity seem more authentic and real. But such texts also generated an ambiguity in military journals’ content that was critical to their educational mission. In the case of La Voz del Combatiende and many other journals, the stated ambition of the editors was to represent soldiers’ thoughts and experiences in a manner faithful to reality, yet the actual representations presented to readers were often highly stylised and idealised. This does not mean they were false and meaningless. Rather, they should be considered, as they no doubt were by the journals’ editors, to be edifying and meaningful images of becoming – images that simultaneously represent a fact (‘this is who we are...’) and an as-yet unrealised potential (‘...if we chose the right course of action’). Similar tensions between ‘the way one was and the way one ought to be’, Claudio Pavone observed, resulted from the ‘Soviet didacticism’ often employed in Italian resistance education.28 In both cases, no doubt, press images were important tools with which commissars sought to construct the antifascist soldier – and, by extension, the ‘authentic’ antifascist people – according to their scripted ideal.

To make this ideal seem less of an imposition from above, commissars and military newspaper editors constantly encouraged soldiers to contribute to the frontline press by sending their own edifying content. An editorial note in the 3 January 1937 issue of La Voz del Combatiende, for example, reminded readers that their articles and letters were vital to the publication’s work: soldiers should see in the publication’s pages ‘a reflection of their own experience in the line of battle’ and feel it ‘belong[ed] to them’ rather than being something ‘alien.’29 Similarly, the editorial in the 25 April 1937 issue of Leal, bulletin of the 31rd Battalion, 29th Mixed Brigade, stated that soldiers’ contributions should express opinions ‘without reservation’ and be sent to the journal in the knowledge that they would be ‘received with the greatest esteem.’30 Such collaboration did, of course, have an important practical value, as they added to army propaganda a horizontal dimension. As an influence on behaviour, peer pressure, even if indirect or imagined, can be more effective than the language of authority. It is also telling that many commanders stressed the importance of soldiers’ perspectives in smaller trench journals and wall-newspapers, where they would facilitate the commissars’ task of translating general slogans into understandable directives adapted to local conditions. Thus, there were direct military

29 S.a.: “Necesitamos la colaboración de comisarios y combatientes”, La Voz del Combatiende: Diario de los Comisarios de Guerra del Ejército del Pueblo, 3 January 1937.
reasons why participation in public debate, like participation in classroom education, were presented in the press as another antifascist duty.

But classroom education and participation in public debate were also indispensable means to realise, in the midst of the antifascist struggle, the aspiration to forge a new citizenry. Calls for soldiers’ contributions related, at least in part, to a genuine political desire to open up spaces where soldiers could practice their democratic rights. In the context of revolutionary antifascism, such desires evidently stemmed from a degree of humanistic idealism: many educators, officers, and political leaders on the left shared the assumption that political participation was the highest expression of human freedom. But it was also an instrument of soldiers’ schooling. Consequently, while practicing their democratic rights, soldiers were subject to a process of conversion. The political goal of participation, at least from many commissars’ point of view, was not primarily to affirm some unconditional value attached to pluralism or freedom of expression, but rather to mould the voice of soldiers, through non-coercive means, in order to achieve among the rank and file a hegemonic unity of expression.

Here, again, the general ideological outlook and political culture of the communists saddled them with intrinsic advantages, at least on a theoretical level. The positivistic conception of knowledge espoused by orthodox communism in the 1930s and 1940s Europe, together with communist parties’ often-noted stress on discipline, allowed communists to insist, without encountering any theoretical contradiction, that intellectual emancipation could only be achieved through strictly prescriptive political education. While principled liberal Republicans in Spain, for example, might have struggled to balance the unity needed for military efficiency against the pluralism required to maintain the Republic’s democratic credentials and legitimacy, no such trade-off was necessary from the ideological viewpoint of orthodox communist parties. Emancipation could only follow the correct interpretation of historical laws, which were best understood by the Party. Freedom, in this view, was entirely compatible with unquestioning obedience before superiors.

Of course, for soldiers who were persuaded, to some degree, by the communist interpretation of the antifascist struggle, such an order was not tyrannical. On the contrary, participation in educational activities and public debates could still be perceived as emancipatory. Documents to underline this fact in the Spanish context can be found in a call of wall-newspaper contributions written between January and May 1937, by men in the 73rd Battalion of the 19th Mixed Brigade, based on the Madrid front.\textsuperscript{31} The contributions show no signs of external interference, but the degree of conformity with official narratives is still, in some ways, remarkable. Apart from portraying the war as

\textsuperscript{31} AGGCE, PS-Madrid, 410, Exp. 38.
battle for popular sovereignty against a clique of fascist traitors, there are several letters stressing the need to obey orders and maintain the strictest discipline. It may be tempting to see such proclamations as products of self-censorship or pragmatic responses to top-down pressures, motivated primarily by desires of self-preservation or promotion in a rapidly changing social and political environment. Such considerations may have played a part, which makes it difficult to judge with any exactitude the sincerity of the opinions expressed. But it must be noted that that soldiers were not forced to write; the decision to write was theirs, regardless of motive. Had this conformist discourse strongly clashed with their own conceptions of the war, it would presumably have been easier to abstain from the exercise altogether – as many in fact did, seemingly without suffering any consequences.

Yet the political significance of these letters is not determined by their predictable conformist content. More important is that fact that they were mostly written by industrial or rural workers who appeared to have little, if any, prior experience of cultural production. One explicitly claimed to be contributing to a public debate for the first time in his life.\(^\text{32}\) ‘I’m neither a writer nor speaker’ was a repeatedly included phrase,\(^\text{33}\) and several authors added that they would like their grammar and spelling corrected, as they were but simple peasants ‘who have spent their lives working the land.’\(^\text{34}\) Noting this, it is important to remember, first of all, the courage it takes to write for an audience even though one has never felt neither capable nor entitled to do so. Psychological explanations are inevitably speculative, but these men must have been driven by an acute sense of duty. More importantly, they must also have had a sense that the political conditions which previously constrained their role in society – which gave them a fixed place in a social order – were now in the process of being reconfigured. There was, in other words, a genuine belief that the Republic represented some sort of deep change, or at least a credible progressive project, leading to greater social and political inclusion. By acting on that belief, these men took concrete steps to turn this project into actual reality.

That these men overcame likely internal resistance and doubt to write – as well as to fight – in support of the Republic also indicates that they took seriously the idea that education and political

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\(^{32}\) AGGCE, PS-Madrid, 410, Exp. 38, Folio 7. Industrial and rural workers likely constituted roughly three quarters of the unit. No such statistics is available for this unit in spring 1937, but figures from September-October 1938 show the battalion, composed of 528 men, to have had 381 (72%) manual workers. It may also be noted that 67 (12.7%) were registered members of the communist party and 60 (11.3%) members of the communist-controlled socialist youth.

\(^{33}\) AGGCE, PS-Madrid, 410, Exp. 38, Folio 1, 10, 13.

\(^{34}\) Another indication that these are not contributions by men used to writing for a public is seen in the chaotic syntax and spelling. AGGCE, PS-Madrid, 410, Exp. 38, Folio 13, 24, 26. The latter contributor even describes himself as ‘corta de inteligencia’.
participation was integral to the new Republican antifascist identity. It shows that they identified with
the Republican antifascist ideal and were receptive, to some extent, to the work army commissars and
cultural workers did. If, in this context, they echoed slogans crafted by commissariat, it was not
because of they had abandoned autonomous thought, but because such slogans served as adequate
linguistic constructions by which these soldiers could affirm their agency. Again, from this perspective,
the political constrains of wartime debates need not have been perceived as limiting: ‘Long Live the
Commissar and the Commandant for their success in creating free and honourable men’, added one
of the authors before signing off his contribution.35

Similar stories emerge from the antifascist resistance movements of the Second World War. In
September 1943, for example, Partisan women from Srem in Yugoslavia expressed delight at seeing
their contributions in a journal or wall-newspaper, and despite political constraints and persisting
gender discrimination, many Partisan women later remembered their participation in the resistance
as the most rewarding time of their lives, not least because they were granted an unprecedented
opportunity to play an active role in the political process.36 In relation to Italy, Pavone noted, in a
comparable tone, how the flowering of a trench and resistance press connected men and ideas in
ways that ‘favoured the widening and enrichment of the political meaning of the Resistance
process.’37

None of this should obscure the many limitations that conditioned wartime educational
activities devised by antifascist forces – limitations relating not only to matters of political control and
censorship but also to practical dynamics of provision and reception. As shown by ongoing political
sectarianism in Republican Spain and persisting gender discrimination everywhere, for example,
established behaviours and attitudes were not to be changed overnight. Yet there were also evident
limitations in relation to soldiers’ concrete engagement with frontline education. Constant appeals to
discipline and a spirit of emulation, appearing in the Spanish Republican frontline press from early
1937, suggest that satisfactory soldiers’ engagement with educational activities did not always come
spontaneously.38 The so-called ‘emulation contracts’ – statistical reports detailing all educational-

35 Folio 5-6
36 Jelena BATINIC: Women and Yugoslav Partisans: a history of World War II resistance, Cambridge: C.U.P.,
2015, p. 107, 164f.
37 Claudio PAVONE: A Civil War..., p. 203.
38 Instructions sent out to Culture Militia staff in the III Army Corps (III Cuerpo de Ejército) for October-
December 1937 specifically insisted that these organise competitions to stimulate emulation. AGMAV,
C.723,5,2. Essay and poetry competitions were also organised by trench journals, with varying success. The
inaugural (February 1938) issue of A Sus Puestos announced it would award a ‘Garcia Lorca’ prize to the best
essay contribution sent before the publication of its next issue. However, in the following issue, the editors
extended the deadline, as they had received hardly any submissions. The winner was finally announced in the
fifth issue of the journal.
political work supervised by Republican commissars – used by the 4th Division of the Army of the Centre also indicate a real gap between aspiration and reality. For example, figures from November 1937, relating to the 152nd Mixed Brigade, show that the attendance figures for ‘general education’ classes (cultura general) ranged between 41 and 94 soldiers in the whole brigade – a unit composed of 2,539 men (i.e. between 1.6% and 3.7% of men attended each time). Although the records do not indicate the number of teaching staff available, comparisons with other units in the 4th Division indicate that such attendance levels fell below the Culture Militias teaching capacity. Later reports from the commissar of the entire 4th Division suggest that the numbers did not substantially improve. On 26 September 1938, he wrote that attendance levels in most frontline classes was either very low or inexistent, though other daily reports indicate that the numbers could still fluctuate rapidly at this stage of the war.

If this impression is correct, it must be discussed, before concluding, why soldiers did not always avail themselves of the educational opportunities offered. In Republican Spain, despite the massive investments and efforts made in education, explanations could relate to the provision of teaching. Culture Militias staff faced numerous challenges, including logistical problems obtaining when delivering classes on active front lines. But they also had to teach a diverse student body of different abilities and levels of motivation. Not all Culture Militia teachers handled the challenge with adequate skill. A report written in summer 1938 by Joaquín Sánchez Revest, Culture Militia inspector for the Republican Army of the Centre, was highly critical of the pedagogy used in some frontline teaching. Discussing a class on electricity, for example, in which the tutor had explained theoretical models with ‘electric speed’, the inspector noted how many students benefitted little from the lesson, despite having a prior interest in the subject. ‘It was fun, but I did not understand anything’ said one when interviewed by the inspector the following day. ‘This gentleman thought he was in a university,’ said another, ‘his talk achieved nothing.’ Should such evaluations be common, it could hardly be surprising if attendance at frontline classes was relatively low.

Such problems were not, of course, unique to Spain. The question of how to provide technical and political education to recruits (or potential recruits) with little or no formal schooling had occupied left-wing activists since the Bolshevik revolution, if not earlier. Russian peasants complained to Bolshevik revolutionaries that they struggled to understand the words used in agitational talks. During the Second World War, the Yugoslav Partisans took care to use accessible language and

39 AGMAV, C.1084, 8.
40 AGMAV, C867, 9, 2.
41 AGMAV, C.378, 8, 40.
criticised activists who fell back on academic or ‘foreign’ phrases when addressing village communities. In Italy, the communists circulated pedagogical instructions explaining how to discuss politics with raw recruits without using alienating jargon. One division also published a ‘patriots dictionary’ to facilitate comprehension. Yet the problem of poor pedagogy persisted. Pavone quotes a commissar referring to a cycle of lessons on the French Revolution: ‘I’ve been informed that there was a crowd of attenders at the first two lessons, but mass desertion for the third. The way the theme was treated and the theme itself more than ever justify this desertion. I’ve had this course suspended immediately.’ Partisan press complaints regarding soldiers’ general disinterest in education seemingly told only part of the story.

That said, it is possible that many army and resistance recruits simply did not see the value in formal schooling. It may also be that recruits from underprivileged backgrounds suffered from low confidence in academic matters, making them more reluctant to risk exposing themselves to embarrassing failures in the classroom. Both factors may have combined and been particularly influential in older men; age was repeatedly mentioned in articles in the Spanish Republican military press as something that must not be considered an obstacle to learning.

Finally, in the case of the Spanish Republic, at least, the problem of low attendance levels must also be considered in the context of internal political conflicts and worsening war fortunes. Non-participation can be interpreted as an expression of dissent. To participate in such activities was to legitimise, to some extent, the political agenda of the government, and soldiers who supported other political options (or for other reasons opposed the government) may naturally have felt ambivalent about acting on commissars’ exhortations in relation to frontline education and political participation. But it must also be added that educational and cultural activities across the Republic declined after the departure of Jesús Hernández and his team from the Ministry of Public Instruction in April 1938. Obviously, this decline stemmed partly from dwindling resources, as the Republic was fighting an increasingly desperate struggle to survive. Yet interest in educational activities may also have dropped as the promises of a more democratic future became increasingly hollow in the face of inevitable defeat. Towards the end of the war, and through the camps of many Republicans’ post-war exile,

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43 Jelena BATINIC: Women and Yugoslav Partisans... p. 34.
44 Claudio PAVONE: A Civil War..., pp. 200-203.
education activities and cultural participation were seemingly maintained by increasingly small minorities of dedicated activists.47

Still, the final reflection on educational activities in the Spanish Republican Army and the southern European resistance movements should be positive. The benefits of literacy classes touched hundreds of thousands of people. Regardless of political trappings, these benefits could not be revoked by repressive post-war states. And for those – poor urban workers, peasants and marginalised women across southern Europe – who found in the extension of the press an opportunity to participate in public debates for the first time, the experience could be genuinely transformative and empowering.

47 Describing what was likely an increasingly common state of affairs, Cumbres, the newspaper of the Mountain Battalion, published in its July 1938 issue an article beginning with the candid recognition that the unit had, unfortunately, become used to the fact that ‘only five or six comrades make regular contributions to the wall-newspaper.’ José García HERA: “Sobre Murales”, Cumbres. Órgano del Batallón de Montaña, July 1938.