

BOOK REVIEW

Jesús Baigorri-Jalón. *Lenguas entre dos fuegos: Intérpretes en la Guerra Civil Española (1936–1939)* [Languages in the crossfire: Interpreters in the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939)]. Granada: Comares, 2019. 216 pp. ISBN 978-84-9045-840-2 (Interlingua, 225).

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In recent years, research on interpreting in conflict and war has experienced a boom that has manifest itself in the launch of a series of research projects, conferences and publications. Yet research in this field has so far been conducted mainly from a contemporary rather than a historical perspective. This imbalance could be attributed primarily to the difficulty of retrieving sources, as contemporary conflicts offer opportunities to conduct empirical research – for example, via interviews with the interpreters involved – whereas archives as the main source of historical research are rarely, if ever, organised in a way that would give scholars direct access to records of interpreting activity. Accordingly, the topic of language mediation has long been ignored in the explorations of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). The past few years have seen the appearance of a limited number of publications, among which Baigorri Jalón's book *Lenguas entre dos fuegos: Intérpretes en la Guerra Civil Española* is the first monograph.

Spain's Civil War included a confrontation of two international groups with opposing ideologies: the International Brigades, consisting of about 35,000 volunteers from all over the world who flocked to Spain to defend the Republic, together with about 2,000 Soviet military advisors and the supporters of the nationalist rebels under General Francisco Franco. These included some 80,000 Italians (*Corpo Truppe Volontarie*) 20,000 Germans (*Legion Condor*) – sent by Mussolini and Hitler respectively – and 80,000 colonial troops from the Spanish Protectorate in Morocco. As far as the nationalist camp is concerned, Baigorri Jalón's book concentrates on sources related mainly to the *Legion Condor*.

What makes this volume particularly worth reading is that it sheds light on the interpreters' activities on both the Republican and (part of) the nationalist side of the war; provides a vast number of examples of these activities; lays additional emphasis on female interpreters; draws on a multitude of sources (archival material, fighters' accounts and personal documents, inter alia) and includes historical data, where necessary. In the various sections, the book's 'intended' readership – scholars of History and Interpreting Studies, but also, and especially, a wider public interested in the Spanish Civil War – is made familiar with language

as both an obstacle and a valuable instrument in many forms of communication (Chapter 2); with detailed information on the interpreters' functions fulfilled throughout the war (Chapter 3); and with a typology of the settings and situations in which the interpreting activity took place (Chapter 4). Finally, in Chapter 5, the author offers a series of in-depth descriptions of various individual – and groups of – interpreters, descriptions that give these central agents of his book not only a face (including through photographs), but also a place in history. The epilogue sheds light on various interpreting activities in the immediate post-war period. The extensive list of primary and secondary sources testifies to the immense and laborious enterprise Baigorri Jalón has undertaken in writing this volume. An index with the names of 340 interpreters, including their affiliation in the war, completes the volume.

The close relationship between history and interpreting is explained by the author in the opening lines of his book. He reminds us that Herodotus wrote his narratives on Egypt (and presumably all his others) in the way they were transmitted to him by his interpreter(s). Therefore, the representation of history started with an act of interpreting – in both senses of the word. This, of course, holds true also for the depiction of the interpreting activities in the Spanish Civil War. With his book, Baigorri Jalón seeks to inscribe himself into a recent turn in military history that focuses on military personnel and, more importantly, on the intersections of military institutions with politics, the economy, society, nature and culture. This claim is ultimately met by the choice of the perspective under which the book's protagonists are methodologically dealt with. Drawing on various concepts from sociologically oriented translation research, the author delivers detailed information both on the nature of mediation between the various agents involved and, specifically, on the way in which the interpreters contributed to the unfolding of the conflict's events through their performative actions.

Consequently, the reader is familiarised with a series of facts and circumstances under which the interpreters performed their tasks and which contributed to shaping everyday life during the conflict. Generally speaking, the troops sent by Hitler and Stalin were accompanied by their own interpreters, who formed part of the units and were mostly uniformed. Their social function was therefore explicitly recognisable. In contrast, the volunteers of the International Brigades, who commanded more than one language, were mostly called on to interpret in an improvised manner. Many of them had acquired other languages by residing or working in different countries and undertook their mediating tasks in a spontaneous way, often with only basic language skills. Naturally, these ad hoc interpreters were quite rarely rewarded with social recognition. While a command of languages was certainly the main prerequisite for interpreting, the activity was also determined by a range of other variables, such as knowledge of the subject,

the specialised terminology, the accent, the register, the speed and the type of discourse adopted by the speaker(s).

Other aspects which more or less apply to interpreters from both the ideological and the military sides of the war include the selection of interpreters, the lack of professional training and the idea of loyalty towards their commanders and, in addition, the urgent need to adapt to the specific circumstances of the conflict. Most interpreters – with the exception of those sent by the Soviet Union – also served at the front, were involved in fighting, collaborated in preparations for various military and political missions and carried out both espionage and administrative tasks. In this context, the author also raises the question of the quality of interpreting. As there are no voice recordings of interpreters in action during the Spanish Civil War, the author had to rely on judgements expressed in memoirs by the interpreters themselves, or by third parties, in order to learn about their code of conduct.

The discussion of the various aspects of interpreting quality is underpinned by numerous examples, all but one of them stemming from the Republican side. This imbalance is also observable in other (sub)chapters and might be attributed to the unstable body of source material already mentioned. However, it highlights one of the few problems with this volume: namely, the handling of the two opposing ideologies in the war. Most of the war practices and interpreting activities are described as if they had been carried out by one and the same military side, without taking into consideration that the motivations behind the various activities were in most cases totally different. The interpreters from the International Brigades (and not the majority of those dispatched by the Soviet Union) travelled to Spain full of idealism and enthusiasm, participated voluntarily in the war and both fought and interpreted for a common anti-fascist cause under the motto of ‘no pasarán’ (they will not get through). In contrast, the nationalist ‘rebels’ commanded ordinary troops, some of whose members from the *Legion Condor* volunteered only because this was a way by which they could reduce their military service and also earn much more than their comrades stationed in the home country. Moreover, the fighters’ accounts differ widely when it comes to enthusiasm, solidarity, humour or singing, let alone issues related to literacy training or language learning and teaching. This is also borne out by the fact that where such aspects are mentioned, the examples mostly stem from the International Brigades (‘universal language of solidarity’; the ‘collective voice’ of the *Internationale*; the ‘language of companionship’, a kind of interlanguage called ‘trench Spanish’, etc).

Generally speaking, most of the examples in the book are drawn from accounts written by Interbrigaders, with a clear focus on English-speaking volunteers, rather than taken from memoirs by Francoists. Other specimens have been sourced from the archives and provide for a certain balance between the source

material of the Republican side and that of the nationalists. (For research on communication in the Spanish Civil War based on the memoirs of members of the International Brigades in 22 languages, see the project at the University of Graz; ITAT 2020).

The last chapter, with the appealing title ‘The thousand and one interpreters of the Spanish Civil War’, features the biographies of a series of interpreters from the various groups participating in the conflict. Dwelling on the motives for emigration, flight, sites of labour, family relations and adventures, this chapter enables the reader to traverse the history of a multitude of countries and cultures. It also permits the reader to perceive the great diversity of the interpreters’ social and educational backgrounds, in this way showing the astonishingly broad array of men and women that the Civil War brought together on each side, and wresting most of them from invisibility.

The book’s title appropriately hints at this focus on the war’s agents with the aim of making the ‘silent voices’ heard and giving them their appropriate place in history. (For a biographical database of more than 500 interpreters from 30 countries in the Spanish Civil War, see Kölbl & Wolf 2020.)

Finally, a minor point deserves mention. Throughout the book, where the author considers it necessary, he takes a step back and makes various detailed ‘conceptual clarifications’. These are concerned, for example, with the difference between interpreter and translator. On the one hand, he explains the problems that can possibly arise when one is searching for equivalents in a target language. On the other, he makes reference to today’s professional standards, including the need for professional training, the lack of norms of professional quality and of professional associations. Although the book is aimed at a heterogenous reading public, as emphasised in the opening pages, at times these explanations are reminiscent of a coursebook on interpreting and do not match the overall narrative style of the volume.

Nevertheless, this book is certainly a milestone in research on communication in the Spanish Civil War, and it will reach a much wider reading public in English translation (Baigorri Jalón 2021). The countless examples not only shed light on the vast diversity of the interpreters’ functions, but also allow for a very differentiated presentation of the interpreting activity, in this manner immensely enriching our knowledge of interpreting in conflict and war zones. When reading the book, the reader is sometimes tempted to imagine hearing the narrator’s voice – a sensation which entices one to eagerly continue reading.

References

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