Border crossings: thinking about the International Brigaders before and after Spain

I want to offer some thoughts about how we might frame the social and cultural history of the International Brigaders. Above all, I see them representing hybridity and heterodoxy: they embodied it, they often fought for it, in Spain and elsewhere, and they frequently suffered for it - those who survived the battlefields of Spain. What the Brigaders were 'about', consciously or unconsciously, was 'crossing the lines' which is, I think, as good a definition as one can find of how social change happens.

Among the approx 35,000-strong international force that fought for the Republic in Spain against Franco and his fascist backers there were volunteers from all over the world. But most – even in the two North American contingents - had their origins in Europe. A very high proportion of these European migrants were already political exiles. Not only Germans, Italians and Austrians, but also those from many other European countries dominated by right wing nationalist dictatorships, autocratic monarchies and the radical (fascist) right - including Hungary, Yugoslavia, Romania, Poland and Finland. The brigaders were part of a mass migration of people - mainly from the urban working classes - who had already left their countries of birth at some point after the First World War (sometimes before) either for economic reasons or to flee political repression - and frequently both.

In fighting fascism in Spain these exiles and migrants were explicitly taking up unfinished business that went back at least as far as the 1914-18 war. Its dislocations had brutalised politics, inducing the birth of the anti-democratic nationalisms that had physically displaced them. In a sense here I'm identifying in the Brigades the border-crossing revolutionary spirit of an earlier age: the ghosts of 1848 if you like. After the failure of the 1848 revolution, the *national* idea in Europe was increasingly co-opted into outright conservative state-building agendas. But the idea of travelling hopefully, of bearing change across borders lived on into the Brigades. And I think we can see this clearly if we explore the 'border- or 'line-crossing' potential in terms of social change related to race, gender and sexuality. But, politically, the Brigaders' own times (1918-45) were running against them. It was a world that far from opening up to hybridity, was

closing down ethnically, culturally and nationally - hence the reason the Brigaders would remain in some ways always political/existential outsiders wherever they resided, East or West.

The Brigaders were not only political soldiers. For this European civil war was, like Spain's own, also a culture war. And as a European civil war of culture, it was also a race war. This was not simply about German Nazism: so many of the European regimes from which brigader-exiles had fled after 1918 developed forms of politics/desired national 'order' based on ethnic segregation and `purification' - aimed both at racial and other kinds of minorities. (See Mark Mazower's seminal work, *Dark Continent. Europe's Twentieth Century*). In the traditional, rural-dominated societies that were still the norm in east Europe, these 'minorities' included the urban lefts. In Germany itself, the trade union movement that was the Nazis' *first* target cannot be described as a minority, it was a mass social force. But it's also true that the first German concentration camps set up in 1933 did incarcerate and persecute German outsiders, the different, marginal the hybrid, the heterodox (that culturally hybrid Germany represented so magnificently, for example, in the photography of August Sander). And the German international brigaders took to Spain at least one song - *Peat Bog Soldiers* (*Moorsoldaten*)- written by inmates of the first Nazi camps.

And while these first Nazi camps inside Germany didn't target Jews as Jews, nevertheless many Jewish people were among the incarcerated and once they were confined then their treatment was always among the worst. That there were so many Jewish volunteers in the Brigades – around a quarter of the total - is unsurprising if one considers *first* the long history of anti-semitism in the European continent and the way in which it was directly shaping the 'purificatory' and social darwinist politics of the European right after 1918 – which by the 1930s was explicitly manifesting itself in Spain too (in the Spanish right's resolutely anti-semitic discourse of the 'judeo-masonic-bolshevik conspiracy against eternal Christian Spain'). And, *second* one has also to compute the longstanding and strong radical political tradition among Jewish migrant communities (and not only the poorest) who had fled the pogroms and endemic discrimination in Russia and east

Europe – such as was the case of Bill Susman's own family, many members of which (including his own father and mother) made the journey from Russia to Connecticut.

Among the Polish brigaders in Spain too a high proportion were Jewish and a specifically Jewish company was formed within the Polish battalion where it attracted an international membership - included Jews from various European countries, and Palestine, but also others too, including a Greek, two Palestinian Arabs and a German who after deserting from the Nazi army insisted on serving with this Jewish unit. Its members would later fight (along with so many other International Brigade veterans) in the French Resistance and in other partisan conflicts of WWII. Most Jewish brigaders in Spain, however, did not fight in this Jewish company and many saw their antifascism as a more important mark of personal identity than their Jewishness (which in a sense is anyway probably better defined as their Yiddish cultural identity since it was inseparable from their *secular* internationalism. Zionism being too close to the other forms of nationalism they eschewed.)

In racial and cultural as well as political terms, then, the heterogeneity of the Brigades made them a living form of opposition to the principles of purification and brutal categorization espoused by facism and, above all, by Nazism. Nor was this just about doing battle with European demons (*aka* forms of brutal social categorization). The Abraham Lincoln Brigade itself, in which around ninety African Americans fought, was the first non-segregated American military unit ever to exist – the US Army itself continuing to operate segregation throughout the Second World War. Viewed through this optic, what the International Brigades symbolise is a certain spirit of future possibility. This same story of hybridity and difference as a form of 'social change in action' was also played out in resistance movements inside Europe during WWII. Indeed the French urban-based *MOI* (Main d'oeuvre immigrée, or migrant labour front) traced its origins to International Brigade veterans - mainly escapees from the prison camp of Gurs. As well as French and Spanish Republican fighters, MOI included Italians, Rumanians, Armenians, Poles, Austrians, Czechs and Hungarians. In the MOI too a great many, perhaps more than half, were Jewish. This profile put MOI under greater psychological

pressure than any other resistance organisation. A majority of its members were on the wanted list three times over: as leftists, as foreigners and as Jews. In Feb 1944 in Paris the occupying forces executed 23 MOI fighters from a group led by the Armenian poet Missak Manouchian (among the executed were several IB vets and a Republican Spaniard). The Nazis then plastered the walls of the city with the famous 'Red poster'. It was a clear attempt to delegitimise the Resistance through an appeal to French chauvinism which, of course, would certainly have found an approving resonance in France. For the Nazis' 'war against hybridity' wasn't really waged against the European grain at all. Though Hitler certainly ran with it, ethnic homogeneity as 'political coherence' (and psychological integrity) was an idea shared by very many people in European countries east, south, west and north. Indeed the myth of the ethnically homogenous European nation state had been most powerfully represented by the *western* peacemakers of 1918-19. For the message underlying all the elaborate and ultimately unworkable machinery of 'minority' protection (League of Nations etc) was that 'normality' and assuring a 'conflict-free condition' required ethnic homogeneity. Certainly in 1944 the French communist party understood the broader social and cultural currency of the Red poster and in a bid to build a national coalition around the Resistance played up its antifascism but *played down* its multi-ethnic composition.

Race, for evident reasons, also threads through the ongoing cultural border/line-crossing among North American Brigaders. Irv Goff, who had fought in the Republican guerrilla, was in the late 1940s a freedom rider *avant la lettre*, when as a cpusa district organiser in New Orleans, in his work to encourage black voter registration, he jeopardized his life on more than one occasion by ignoring southern racial customs. Goff was of course a highly disciplined party operative – but that's not the whole story of his line crossing/risk taking. These things are intrinsically tied up with the experience of 'Spain': a perfect illustration of which comes in another episode/event involving both Irv Goff and his comrade in the Republican guerrilla, Bill Aalto a working class Finnish-American boy from the Bronx, the tough, intelligent, street-wise kid who became a guerrilla captain and came out of Spain with the highest commendation of any awarded by the Comintern authorities to the Lincoln brigaders. One day, in the spring of 1940 while Goff and Aalto were on an

agitprop tour of American college campuses (speaking on behalf of Republican Spain/Republican prisoners and refugees.) they were parked in a car awaiting their driver near the campus of Ohio State, and, quite suddenly, Bill tells Irv Goff he's gay. That he should tell Goff with whom he had a close bond from the war in Spain perhaps doesn't seem too surprising to an audience in 2008. But remember this is 1940 not the 1970s (it's nearly thirty years before Stonewall, and Bill was revealing something that made him vulnerable, not because of how he felt about being gay (which was basically OK) but because it made him illegal). So the revelation has to be a kind of dare or challenge. Bill refusing to play by the rules, refusing to accept the need to compartmentalise his life any more. And why this timing? It was I think pretty conclusively related to his experience of the war. Let me try to rehearse this because it applies not only to Bill but also more widely to the Brigaders. For the war they'd fought to have meaning, then life had to change - it had to go beyond the sterility, colourlessness, 'inauthenticity' - not only of the political status quo but also of social convention. Ohio State is a kind of crossover for Bill Aalto. For the rest of his life, his chiding refrain to friends would always be 'you see life steady, but you see it small'. After Spain he was determined not to. And this story also serves to remind us more generally that gender and sexuality was one variety of border crossing that the 'old' left of the 1930s generally baulked at – a frontier/line-crossing too far. Look at what happened when Evelyn Hutchins applied to be sent to Spain as an ambulance driver. She came up against entrenched prejudice. The political left, though keen to further racial equality, could only conceive of recruiting women to Spain as nurses or support staff. In the end Hutchins won. But hers was an isolated victory – and when later Hutchins applied during IIWW to serve in the OSS (*Office of Strategic Services)* (i.e. force of irregular operatives being recruited by US authorities for service in occupied Europe) she was turned down flat.

And in the world order that emerged after 1945, the Brigaders found their heterodoxy/ difference to be, once again, surplus to the requirements of the new Cold War political and social order – West *and* East.

In the West, post WWII, the Spanish vets were, as is well known, viewed either implicitly or explicitly as 'restless subversives, politically untrustworthy/malcontent, unpatriotic, potentially traitorous' – the antithesis of the authorities 'ideal' settled, demobilised, compliant population from which they were silenced and excluded in various ways. In the Eastern bloc too, in spite of the apparent differences, things were really startlingly similar for many veterans. The fight against fascism became the foundational myth of the new socialist order emergent by 1949. But it was a very controlled and pared-down political narrative, rigorously policed by the state. So many 'real' Brigaders didn't fit its requirements. So, ironically, we get in East Germany the obsessive surveilling of the vets (the *Spanienkämpfer*), the very group which was supposedly the antifascist aristocracy of the DDR. They were closely observed as they wrote, and rewrote, to order their' official 'biographies', destined for public consumption/edification. This death by editorialisation, the bid to reduce every *Spanienkämpfer* to a two-dimensional Socialist Realist hero was, of course, another means of silencing them. It led to half a lifetime of limbo for one prickly, difficult and really rather wonderful dissenting *Spanienkämpfer,* Rudolf Michaelis. An anarchist, whose original profession was as an archaeological restorer at the Berlin state museum, Rudolf's life was traduced by every state. First he was confined in Nazi 'preventive custody'. He got out by the skin of his teeth and went into exile in Spain where he later joined the anarchist columns to fight against Franco. Involved in the anti-state 'May Days' rebellion of anarchists and dissident communists in Barcelona in 1937, he was imprisoned in a Spanish Republican state gaol. Released from there, and having taken Spanish citizenship, Rudolf fought on in the Republican army until 1939 when he crossed the frontier to join the Resistance in France. Later he crossed back into Spain where he was caught and imprisoned in a Francoist gaol for over 5 years, suffering repeated torture and finally being repatriated to Germany in 1946 where he ended up back with his family in Berlin. Rudolf Michaelis made a peace of sorts with the new state order of the DDR. Where else could he have gone? Though in joining the DDR's official state party, SED, he was cut dead by his anarchist comrades in the West. Later he was later expelled from the SED in 1951 as just too politically heterodox. Nevertheless, the DDR still afforded Rudolf a liveable life, both in material terms, and, crucially, it still offered him a means

of participating in a collective memory of what Spain had signified – which while very reductive, *was not a lie*. Nor did he suffer trial or imprisonment in the DDR - though some other East German dissident vets would do in the late 1950s. But inevitably Rudolf was confined to the margins. His life could not be represented, indeed was literally 'unspeakable' within either the state *Spanienkämpfer*, script – or the western Cold war narrative of 'eastern victims of Stalinism'. His story overflows these in every direction. Rudolf's memoirs were eventually published under a pseudonym in West Germany – but not until 1980. And in East Germany too, it was only in the late 1970s and 1980s that he was actually able to begin speaking about his experiences of the multiplicity of anti-fascist traditions – albeit in private talks only – as non-official, semi-public spaces for debate began to appear.

Elsewhere in the Eastern bloc, however, the whiff of cosmopolitanism that adhered to 'Spain' was a death sentence, very often literally. So many of those who were consumed in the trials and purges – above all in Hungary (1949) and Czechoslovakia (1952) had been in Spain and the very fact of having been there opened them up to charges of being, well, 'restless subversives, politically untrustworthy/malcontent, unpatriotic, potentially traitorous...'.(see aforementioned McCarthyite description!). In Czechoslovakia too in (Nov.) 1952 the Slansky trial focused on communists who had been Western emigrants, again many of them International Brigade vets. Artur London, the Spain vet who'd been through Mauthausen, was, when arraigned, the Czech under-secretary for foreign affairs. In his account '*On Trial'* what emerges with crystal clarity is the link between border-crossing and 'contamination' (the state authorities were obsessively concern that exiled communists had been 'turned' - by everyone so it seemed, Gestapo, French and US intelligence services. Just what had they *really* been up to in the cities of western exile or in the camps of France and Africa? The MOI (Main d'ouevre emigré) was uniformly seen as 'contaminated'/compromised (because of its contact with OSS) and thus its surviving veteran fighters were seen as suspect. And while this was at some level about tangible fears born of a sense of political vulnerability – there is also something else here – an echo of social darwinism; a fear of change/difference/complexity. Things which challenged the stability of the official state, by the challenge posed to social uniformity/

homogeneity – all of which was expressed as a fear of contamination. As a crucial element of this we must also note the intense anti-semitism which inhabited much of the onslaught against communist exiles and Brigade veterans during the purges and trials - Jews being then seen in the official Soviet optic as the epitome of untrustworthy, heterodox communists (i.e. untrustworthy *because* heterodox).

Thus state agendas sought to exclude/silence/pathologise the selfsame progressive, questioning dynamic that inhabited the International Brigaders – the very thing that had taken them to Spain in the first place. As the German writer and former Brigade commander, Ludwig Renn, commented in utter perplexity in the DDR in 1952: it seems that *'everything connected with [Spain] is cancelled. Supposedly this is happening because there were too many traitors there. I don't understand such points of view'*.

McCarthyism itself was not as immediately deadly as the east European trials – though it did certainly cause deaths, including some suicides. But state repression always takes its form according to local political culture. And there are many ways of 'killing' people without physically executing them or putting them in gulags. That is to say you can kill someone's spirit without physically liquidating them: by making them totally unemployable (as happened in some cases), or else unemployable in anything remotely approaching what they feel called to do by virtue of their talents. Reducing people to poverty, making life unliveable, getting them thrown out of their homes and thus indirectly often breaking up their families and their personal relationships – all of which did follow, as we know only too well, from McCarthyism's 'legal' repressive practices. Mexico, while in some ways it provided a refuge (though not a haven) for persecuted American radicals, also posed many fundamental existential problems, especially for the cultural workers who loomed large among this particular exile. The writer Howard Fast, son of a Russian migrant, and who himself served a prison term in 1947 as part of the Lincoln vets' Spanish refugee relief committee that refused to reveal to HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee) the names and address of its donors and supporters, wrote luminously about the significance of the Lincolns' leave-taking of Spain in his exquisite short story *Departures* which captures indirectly yet perfectly that central

feeling that so many vets the world over shared – namely that feeling of being burned by Spain, or transfigured , but never being the same for sure, and not being able to fit again, anywhere, ever – another kind of exile, to add to the territorial and political. In Fast's superb autobiography, *Being Red* (1990) he relates his encounter with his friend the screenwriter Albert Maltz, one of the Hollywood Ten – the film workers indicted for contempt during the late 1940s witch-hunt in Hollywood. Fast meets him in Mexico where, in spite of deep feelings of cultural alienation, Maltz has resolved to remain, so terrified is he of the potential effects of the draconian Communist Control Act of 1954. 'I have no roots here', he tells Fast: 'our lives are our language'. But Maltz has been so seared by his experience of prison that he just can't risk it again: 'I have to live, I have to find love. I have books that I must write'.

While the devastating experience behind those words is at one level quite far removed from Europe's concentration camp universe, they nevertheless put me strongly in mind of a sentiment expressed by the Hungarian poet Miklós Radnóti with whom I conclude my own short book on the Spanish civil war. Radnóti, who invoked Republican Spain and the friends who had died in combat there as symbols of what made the fight still worthwhile, wrote in July 1944, while imprisoned in a Nazi-controlled labour camp near Bor in Serbia and only months before he was himself killed by Hungarian guards on the prisoners' forced march in the wake of the retreating German army:

> Among false rumours and worms, we live here with Frenchmen, Poles,
> Loud Italians, heretic Serbs, nostalgic Jews, in the mountains.
> This feverish body, dismembered but still living one life, waits
> For good news, for women's sweet words, for a life both free and human.

'Spain' haunted Radnóti and Fast and Maltz as it haunted them all, because it was a site of possibility, of becoming. And that's why it haunts us still. For all the bleakness of its aftermath, it stands as a reminder of the possibility of becoming; of a 'journey without maps'; of the great Spanish poet of the exile, Antonio Machado's own reminder that the

road does not exist; we make it by walking; by crossing borders – that doing so hurts, but that it's also necessary; a human(e) imperative.
