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Elective and Experiential Affinities: British and American Foreign Correspondents and the Spanish Civil War

David Deacon

Abstract

This article examines the experiences, attitudes and perceptions of British and American correspondents who reported on the Spanish Civil War directly. The analysis shows that the international news net in the war was more extensive and effectively organised in Republican held territories; and that, taken overall, the political sympathies of the international news corps inclined more towards the Republicans. With some journalists, these reflected pre-existing political viewpoints, but in many cases these sympathies were forged through their experiences in Spain. The article concludes with a discussion of the impact these political positions had on journalists' interpretations of their professional roles and responsibilities.

Keywords: Foreign correspondents; international news; Spanish Civil War; propaganda.

Introduction

There are increasing concerns that standards of foreign correspondence in British and American news media are not what they were. Academic and journalistic sources have identified declining levels of foreign news coverage, decreasing editorial investment in foreign news desks, and, with the advent of new technologies and presentational formats, an emerging news culture that values immediacy over measured analysis (MacGregor, 1997; Fenton, 2005; Parks, 2002). In many of these accounts there is a palpable nostalgia for earlier times, when editors were supposedly less parochial, time pressures not as intense and being “right about the news” was at least as important as being the first to deliver it. However, although journalist memoirs from the past abound, there has been surprisingly little systematic research into the conditions and performance of journalists in earlier periods, particularly from before the 1950s, when the first sociological investigations into news production were conducted. This raises the possibility that in lamenting contemporary conditions we may be romanticising the past,

mistakenly assuming that “the best time is always yesterday” (Tatyana Tolstaya quoted in Lambert, 1990).

This article seeks to make a contribution towards the development of more historical perspective on this matter by examining the role of British and North American foreign correspondents in reporting the Spanish Civil War. There are two reasons why such a topic is of more than just intrinsic interest. The 1930s have been described as a golden era of Anglo-US foreign correspondence (Maxwell-Hamilton, 2005: 64; Cox, 1999: 249) and the Spanish Civil War was one of the biggest international news stories of that era (Sebba, 1994: 95).

Mediating Spain

The Spanish Civil War continues to exert an enduring fascination. This in part is explained by the material significance of the conflict, which began with the rebellion of Nationalist forces in July 1936 and ended with the defeat of the Republican government in April 1939. Advances in aircraft technology produced a qualitatively new mode of warfare, and as news spread of the bombing of civilians in Madrid, Barcelona, Guernica and elsewhere, citizens across Europe began to quail at what this might portend. Although labelled a civil war, it was a conflict that implicated all the major international powers of the day.

But the war was about more than power politics. From the outset, it was recognised as a battle of ideas, ideals and ideologies, which meant that issues of mediation and representation assumed crucial importance. A full assessment of the role of the international mainstream news-media in framing and informing public discourses requires many tiers of assessment, including examination of news coverage, analysis of the propagandistic activities of the protagonists and other sources with vested interests in the conflict, and investigation of the ‘in-house’ politics of the media organisations (see Deacon, forthcoming). Such a panoptic view is beyond the scope of this article, which is restricted to examining the attitudes and experiences of the British and American journalists who travelled to Spain to report the war directly. Much of the discussion draws on analysis of the profusion of memoirs published by these journalists during, or immediately after, the war. However, there are those who question their historical value. For example, in the opinion of the renowned Civil War historian Hugh Thomas “I cannot think of one which has stood the test of time” (Thomas, 2000: xi). In my view, criticism of this kind is directed mainly at the quality of the historical and political

analysis these accounts provide. There is no doubt that they lack historical perspective, are often partisan, and in fore-grounding the personal experiences of the journalists (many of whom were non-conversant with the culture, history and languages of the region) produced a restricted view of the general tide of events. Nevertheless, these criticisms do not refute their value as historical evidence. It is precisely the engagement and immediacy of these journalistic accounts that make them so valuable as material for historical analysis. As interventions *du jour*, they can be seen both as an information resource and as discourses that convey the “structures of feeling” (Williams, 1977) that pervaded the journalistic and political fields of that period.

In the analysis that follows I do not draw distinctions between the attitudes and experiences of UK and US based journalist, a conflation which may seem contentious to those who argue that there are greater professional and normative differences between the two journalistic cultures than is allowed for in the influential definition of journalism as an “Anglo-American invention” (Chalaby, 1996). This is because there I could discern no consistent pattern to the political and professional responses of journalists to the conflict on the basis of nationality. For example, American journalists could be as passionate and partisan about the war as British correspondents, just as British journalists could as readily invoke professional obligations to balance, impartiality and neutrality to defend their actions, as their American colleagues. Furthermore, British and American journalists co-operated closely together in their news gathering, sometimes out of choice and sometimes out of necessity, and many worked coincidentally, sequentially or interchangeably for British and North American newspapers. On several occasions, identical copy from them was published on both sides of the Atlantic. If national differences were evident in press reporting of the war, which is a moot point, then their principal manifestation would probably have been ‘up line’, in the strategic editorial planning of the news organisations themselves.

The article also focuses solely on the role of newspaper and Newsreel journalists, even though the Spanish Civil War has been labelled “the first radio war” (Davies, 1999) and witnessed the first ever live radio broadcast from a battlefield (Kaltenborn, 1937: 15). International broadcasting was still in its infancy during this period, and although several foreign correspondents contributed to Short Wave broadcasts from Spain, sanctioned by Republican and Nationalist authorities, these were only ever extra-curricular activities, and always secondary to their responsibilities as newspaper journalists. The broadcast organisations themselves had scant resources for direct international news gathering

activities during this period, and details from the BBC Written record archive show that their international news coverage was almost entirely reliant on processing material from international news agencies and other reliable news outlets.

The News Net in Spain

The Spanish Civil War may have been one of the biggest international stories of the inter-war period, but the Anglo-US news-net in the conflict was constructed in haste, limited in reach and of dubious tensile strength. In part this was a product of the marginality of the Iberian peninsula on the international news-beat at that time. Before the war, Spain was perceived internationally as a back-water of Europe – “remote and insignificant, her glory a thing of the past” (Shelmerdine, 2002: 367) – and this was reflected in a limited allocation of editorial resources in the region. In the early 1930s, international coverage of the Spanish newsbeat was mainly provided by free-lancers who had travelled to Spain on their own initiative (Buckley, 1940: 15). Two events prior to the war briefly created ripples of interest on the international news-beat: the armed rising of workers in the Asturias and Catalonia in 1934 and the victory of the Popular Front in the 1936 election (Delmer, 1961: 259; Buckley, 1940: 163; Knoblaugh, 1937: 31). But the fleeting presence of a few senior foreign correspondents did not lead to any significant structural deployment of editorial resources to the region prior to the rebellion.

The international news-net that was improvised to cover the Spanish Civil War was a conglomeration of stringers, special correspondents, staff reporters and agency reporters. ‘Stringers’ were those individuals who had only tenuous and temporary contractual relationships with news organisations. Many were inexperienced in news-gathering and their principal value was their serendipitous proximity to matters of international interest. ‘Special Correspondents’ were also employed on a free-lance basis, but unlike stringers these were often seasoned foreign correspondents with considerable experience in reporting international affairs and conflicts. Several worked for more than one news organisation at a time, and their established reputations and experience meant that their analyses carried considerable weight (Reed, 1936:211-215). ‘Staff correspondents’ were directly employed by news organisations and had most internal status within their organisation. ‘Agency correspondents’ worked for the international news agencies that established a presence of varying extensiveness in Spain.

Stringers played a very important role in providing coverage of events in Spain during the early stages of the war, although their significance receded as special

correspondents, agency reporters and staff correspondents started to arrive in numbers and the Republicans and Nationalists started to rationalise their accreditation and censorship practices. For example, William Sterling was employed as a lecturer at the International University of Santander in July 1936, having completed a doctoral thesis on Phonetics for a London university. When war broke he was recruited as a temporary correspondent for *The Times* and his experiences over the next few months proved traumatic. He struggled with the oppressive Nationalist censorship, endured patronising reproaches from the London desk for his professional inexperience, contracted paratyphoid, was injured in a crash that wrote off the paper's staff car and arrested as a spy by the Nationalist authorities. Nevertheless, he was *The Times*'s principal witness of the Nationalists' early assault on Madrid and the bloody aftermath of Franco's victory in Toledo. He was replaced by a staff correspondent in February 1937.

The collective presence of international journalists in Spain was at its apex in late 1936 and 1937. From late 1937 onwards many foreign correspondents left Spain, as other major international crises broke out across Europe and attracted their attention. The Japanese attack on China in mid 1937 and Munich crisis of 1938, in particular, displaced Spanish news considerably. Furthermore, one senses from the accounts that many journalists began to run out of new angles to take on the conflict. As Gramling notes in his early history of the AP news service, "The Spanish Civil War, like so many stories of long duration, temporarily had become a matter of routine interest by mid-December, 1937" (1940: 452). Although "the dogged, hopeless courage" of the Republic (Matthews, 1972: 47) retained news value, by 1938 only a minority of journalists doubted that the war had entered its end game or what the outcome would be.

There was also a numerical imbalance in the journalists covering each side of the war. At the time of writing, I have identified 163 correspondents that were present in Spain during the war and were paid for the provision of editorial copy by one or more UK or US news outlet. This is undoubtedly an underestimation of the actual number of British and American reporters that reported in Spain. Nevertheless, it can be claimed that the list contains the most memorable figures from that period, and therefore reveals something significant about the relative distribution of the editorial resources of the Anglo-US media in the war.

Fifty three percent of correspondents whose location could be firmly verified (n=133) reported solely from Republican sector, compared with 34 percent who worked solely in Nationalist-held territory. The remainder visited both sides at some stage, of

which most first visited Nationalist zones before entering the Republic (12 journalists compared with 6 who first reported from the Republic).

Two factors explain these differences. The first relates to the different attitudes of the combatants to foreign correspondents. Nationalist news management was autocratic and inflexible. Journalists that incurred the displeasure of the authorities could expect rough treatment and correspondents working for papers known to have pro-Republican inclinations were routinely denied accreditation. Intimidation and expulsion of correspondents were also evident in Republican held territories, but they were less concerted. Journalists required clearances and passes, but had more freedom of movement and if they worked together, then did so out of choice. The Republic was also prepared to tolerate the presence of journalists from papers known to support Franco, as well as journalists who had previously visited Nationalist sectors. Generally, Republican news management was framed by a political rather than military culture, which offered a more conducive environment for news-gathering.

The second reason for the greater journalistic presence in the Republic relates to technological factors. Franco's failure to capture Madrid and Barcelona at the start of the rebellion meant he failed to secure access to the limited number of international telephone lines running from Spain. This had major implications for the dispatch of news from each zone. In Madrid and Barcelona, censored reports could be read directly via telephone to news desks in London and Paris, whereas in Nationalist zones censored dispatches were sent by telegraph and often subject to unexplained delays. The Nationalists' disadvantage in this respect was even greater at the start of the war, as these cable connections took some time to set up and initially all editorial copy from the Nationalist zones had to be couriered by hand from Burgos over the French or Portuguese borders (Davis, 1940: 122; Cardozo, 1938: 63).

The combination of censorship regimes and the technical constraints on dispatching news from Spain also explains the tendency for journalists to cluster in particular areas. In Republican Spain, most journalists were based in Madrid, Barcelona and, to a lesser extent, Valencia; in Nationalist Spain, in Salamaca, Burgos and Vigo. These were the locations for the censors and the telegraphic and telephonic links, and journalists could not afford to stray too far from them. As Herbert Matthews of *The New York Times* remarked:

Neither side was equipped for transmission from the front. A correspondent on the Republican side had to return to Madrid, Valencia or Barcelona to cable or telephone his despatches. This cut down on the number of stories one could write and the continuity of a particular coverage. It also meant that despatches were often written under conditions of extreme fatigue.(1972: 21)

A key question is whether the statistical imbalance in the Republican and Nationalist news-nets had any parallels in other aspects of foreign journalists' engagement with the war, in particular their attitudes towards the combatants. It is to these matters that the discussion now turns.

Going Red? Journalists and their experiential and elective affinities

In March 1937, Virginia Cowles, a free-lance reporter for the Sunday Times and New York Times, made a car journey from Valencia to Madrid. Reflecting on her first impressions of the country, she later claimed "I had no "line" to take on Spain as it had not yet become a political story for me"(1941: 55). Among her companions was a Catholic priest who had been recruited to make propaganda lectures in France. During the journey he pressed Cowles about her political views, and reacted with scepticism to her noncommittal responses. "It is impossible to be nothing", he retorted. 'No-one comes to Spain without an *idée fixe*'.

Cowles's neutrality must have seemed strange to an active propagandist in a war that's gravity and polarity seemed to provide little room for moral or political equivalence. However, many correspondents, like Cowles, initially went to Spain for the story rather than the struggle. For example, Frances Davis rushed to Spain at its outbreak as an inexperienced free-lancer, and became an accredited correspondent for *The Daily Mail* almost by accident. She also had 'no line to take' at the start, and was more interested in the dramatic news-value of the rebellion. As she later conceded, "In this preoccupation with how to get to Spain, I had not asked myself who was at war" (1940:135).

It was not long before both women began to develop strong opinions about the protagonists. Writing of her experiences in Madrid, Cowles confessed "I took a great liking to the Spanish people" (1941: 35). She later reported from the Nationalist side, witnessing the end of Franco's Basque offensive, and spoke of her "revulsion" at what she witnessed on a press trip organized by the military to the front at Gijon (ibid.: 35).

Although Francis Davis only reported the civil war from Franco's side - and therefore had no equivalent opportunity for making direct comparisons – she, too, came to dislike the Nationalists and their supporters. She later wrote of her relationship with Captain Gonzalo de Aguilera, who was in charge of press relations in the North: “I know him for my enemy, and I am his. Everything that has made me is death to him; everything that has made him is death to me” (Davis, 1981: 159).

That both women came to sympathise with the Republic is perhaps not surprising, as they shared liberal backgrounds. But the conflict produced more dramatic, damascene conversions. Herbert Matthews of the New York Times arrived in Madrid in December 1936 as an “admirer” of Fascism having reported the Italian invasion of Abyssinia. He later wrote:

I know, as surely as I know anything in this world, that nothing so wonderful will ever happen to me again as those two and a half years I spent in Spain. (1946: 67)

Noel Monks of the Daily Express first reported the civil war from the Nationalist side in the Basque region, and then from Republican held territories in Bilbao and Madrid. As a tee-total Catholic, he was initially sympathetic to Franco, but as he later explained, “My six months in Franco Spain deeply shocked my religious sensibilities. And they were to receive further shocks when I went to Government Spain, but for totally different reasons” (Monks, 1955: 84). So transformative were these experiences, he later acted as press officer for Kathleen Atholl, the ‘Red Duchess’, who was fighting a by-election having resigned her Conservative parliamentary seat in protest at the British government's failure to support the Republic.

Other journalists with clear *elective affinities* at the start of the war may not have had their politics altered so dramatically, but also attest how their experiences affected their perception of the war. Sefton Delmer of *The Daily Express* was vehemently anti-Communist and sympathetic to aspects of the Nazi regime. Nevertheless, he later reflected:

Despite all I had seen of the brutality and contempt for justice of the Reds, despite my own antipathy to Marxism as a demagogic fraud, despite all this and much more, I nevertheless found I was being swept along in the exhilaration of Madrid's refusal to abandon the fight. I found myself sharing the thrill of the

reverses with which the Reds were inflicting on the side I would certainly have chosen had I been a Spaniard and forced to decide between the ugly alternatives of Franco and Caballero. (1961: 299)

Although there was also no shortage of idealists and ideologues among the international press corps on both sides who had their preconceptions and predispositions reinforced by their experiences, it is important to consider why it was that, when journalists' convictions did waver, develop or change as a result of their experiences, their sympathies inclined towards the Republic. Or, as a bemused Daily Telegraph correspondent reporting from the Nationalist sector put it more crudely to his colleague: "How is it, Mac, that there's a tendency on the part of newspaper reporters to go Red?" (McCullough, 1937: 109).

A range of factors explain the development and direction of these *experiential affinities*. We have already considered the different treatment accorded journalists in Nationalist and Republican zones which, respectively, had an antagonizing and placatory impact. But it was not just the oppressive news management of the Nationalists that alienated many foreign correspondents. Many were deeply shocked by the opinions voiced by senior Nationalists; in particular, their harsh contempt for the poor and the savage actions they condoned (Southworth, 1977: 48-51). Frances Davies recalled one senior press officer stating 'that the masses cannot be taught; that they need a touch of the whip for they are like dogs and will mind only the whip' (1940: 136). Similarly, Noel Monks was revulsed by the gleeful way the troops and politicians "bragged openly to me of what *they*'d done when they took over from the Reds ... I began to get strange qualms about this great Catholic country fighting for the faith" (1955: 79).

Contrastingly, in Republican held territories, many journalists found that the greater freedom they had 'to see things for ourselves' (Bartlett, 1941: 263) often challenged the simplistic caricatures of 'Red Spain' they arrived with. Noel Monks was surprised to discover he was able to celebrate Catholic mass freely in all Republican sectors he visited. Vernon Bartlett of the News Chronicle struggled to meet any Russians in Madrid, despite widespread media reports that they had flooded into the city. Herbert Matthews arrived in Madrid in a state of high anxiety:

Nobody had told me that I would find anything but a ruined and terrorized capital, ruled by Red gangsters and ready to fall prey to the army of

Generalissimo Franco. All that I saw in the succeeding days and weeks was a revelation to me (1938: 185-6)

Time and again in their accounts, foreign journalists in the Republic eulogize about the bravery, hospitality, optimism and stoicism of the ordinary people they encountered. To Matthews, “the nonchalance of the Madrileño was a staggering thing to behold” (ibid. 186). Virginia Cowles marvelled at how, ‘Even in their darkest hour they retained a sense of humour and a zest for living’ (1941: 35). Vincent Sheean of *The Chicago Tribune* believed the citizens of Madrid had “turned the brothel and shop window of feudal Spain into this epic... In this one place, if nowhere else, the dignity of the common man had stood firm against the world” (1939: 199). For those journalists who witnessed the war from both sides, the contrast between the humanity of the ordinary people and the hauteur of the military was stark. As Delmer remarked “About Red Madrid there was a sharp sincerity and peasant earthiness I never felt on the Franco side” (1961: 300).

A further factor that increased some journalists’ identification with the Republic was their relationship with the British and American volunteers who fought in its defence. The correspondents were fascinated by the activities of these fighters, because of the valuable local news angle they offered. Although some of the volunteers had reservations about consorting with journalists (Romilly, 1937/ 1971: 131) they often encountered journalists and even socialised with them occasionally. This physical and cultural proximity allowed journalists to gain insights into the personal biographies and motivations of these volunteers, and many were moved by their idealism and selflessness. Geoffrey Cox of *The News Chronicle* stated ‘It would be hard to find a body of British men to equal these first volunteers in the International Column’ (1937: 145). Herbert Matthews described the Internationals as “the finest group of men I ever knew or hope to know in my life” (1946: 92) and Vincent Sheean identified in their “courage and generosity... the hope of the world; I think the only hope” (1939: 70).

Which Republic?

To observe that the direct experiences of foreign correspondents in Spain often fostered greater sympathy towards the Republic begs a further question: which parts of the Republic did the correspondents identify with most closely? The Republic was a complex amalgam of communists (Stalinist and anti-Stalinist), socialists, liberals, regional Nationalists, anarchists and syndicalists, and these participants held very different

political visions of the purpose and conduct of the war. For the more radical elements, the war was about realising a genuine social revolution in Spain, based on the wholesale redistribution of land and the formation of collectives. For the more liberal and conservative elements the war was about preserving liberal democracy against Fascist aggression, a line supported by the Communists largely because of the geo-political interests of the Soviet Union at that time.

Although many correspondents were unconditional in their admiration for the ordinary people of the Republic, they were highly conditional in their views of their political leaders. Unsurprisingly, those journalists working for pro-communist newspapers or with formal Communist allegiances adhered to the party line. Joseph North reported from Spain on behalf the US *Daily Worker* praised the communists and socialists and criticised the anarcho-syndicalists and ‘the traitorous intrigues and subversive impeachments of the POUM¹, the Trotskyist formation which assailed the goals of the Popular Front by their vociferous insistence upon and immediate socialism.’ Arthur Koestler, who in 1937 was both a special correspondent for the News Chronicle and a covert member of the Communist party, had no compunction about labelling the POUM ‘Trotskyist’ and, along with the Anarchists, deeming them responsible for the ‘agitation’ in Barcelona (1937: 138).

But what of the views of journalists not working, either overtly or covertly, as Communist party members or fellow-travellers? In *Tree of Gernika*, George Steer, Special Correspondent for The Times, repeatedly expresses his deep respect and empathy for the Basque Nationalists and a grudging regard for the discipline of the socialist UGT. In contrast, he was bemused and alienated by the revolutionary fervour of the Anarchists (see Steer, 1938: 178). Noel Monks, like Steer, connected most strongly with the Basque Nationalists, and Henry Buckley shared Steer’s antipathy to the anarchists (1940: 275). Herbert Matthews lauded “the realism and discipline” of the Communists, and welcomed the suppression of the POUM and the Anarchists and the rise of “the better and more moderate elements – the Republicans, Socialists, small shop-keepers and landowners” (1938: 286).

What is striking from these accounts is the common ground that liberal and left-wing journalists shared in their factional affiliations. The radical components of the popular front were variously attacked as impotent, misguided, lawless and deceitful, and the assertion of Communist influence from mid-1937 onwards was welcomed as making the Republic more effective in resisting Franco, more ordered and, even, more

democratic. This counter-revolutionary consensus contrasts with an ‘Orwellian orthodoxy’ that has gained prominence in contemporary historical analyses of the war, which sees the suppression of the Anarchists and POUM in April 1937 as signalling the end of the ‘heroic’ phase of the conflict; the point at which political idealism and revolutionary optimism was crushed by Communist control (Buchanan, 1997).

Pressures on professionalism

If many journalists found it difficult to be dispassionate about the Spanish Civil War, what implications did these opinions have for their professional conduct in reporting the war? Schudson observes that journalists do not fake news, they make news (1991: 151). His point in drawing this distinction is that research that demonstrates the values and ideologies intrinsic to news production does not expose journalistic dishonesty, but rather highlights how journalists unavoidably ‘make meaning’ through their discursive activities. From this perspective, the normative professional ideals of Anglo-American journalism – of commitment to objectivity, neutrality and unprejudiced witness – are revealed as a philosophical impossibility.

However, war is a context where questions of journalistic fakery do retain significance. Authorities curb media autonomy through exceptional censorial powers, and coerce and recruit journalists into acts of deception to deceive and demoralise their enemies. Journalists often struggle to determine where their professional obligations end and their patriotic duties begin. Although such factors are evident in peace-time, it is in war that they acquire acute intensity.

Evans (2004: 35) describes the pressures of ‘propaganda’ and ‘professionalism’ that journalists confront at times of war. Journalists have most professional discretion in conflicts that have no direct implications for their nation of origin. Conversely, the graver the threat to national security, the more journalists will be expected to subordinate their independence to the propaganda needs of the nation. It follows, therefore, that the greatest tensions between professionalism and propaganda in war reporting tend to occur in those conflicts where serious national interests are at stake, but not matters of national survival. The Spanish Civil War was precisely such a conflict for British and North American journalists. Furthermore, it was a war where “the competitive ecstasy of hate” (ibid.) was particularly polarised and visceral, and the propagandistic pressure, as a consequence, intensive (see Kaltenborn, 1950:199-200).

Absolute propaganda and total professionalism are of course polarities on a continuum with many gradations. For this reason I extend the dichotomy to distinguish between journalists who acted as ‘Propagandists’, ‘Partisans’, ‘Sympathisers’ and ‘Agnostics’ in the Spanish war.

Propagandists

‘Propagandist’ is a term with plenty of negative connotations. My usage here is intended in a descriptive sense to identify those correspondents who were members or agents of a combatant force. On the Republican side, the distinction between correspondents and combatants sometimes became blurred. Louis Fischer and Jim Lardner (of the New York Herald Tribune) joined the International Brigades. Tom Wintringham, who was a key figure in their creation, originally entered Spain as military correspondent for *The Daily Worker*. Arthur Koestler later admitted that his connections with the Comintern gave him military authority in the Republic (Koestler, 1942). Several people who came to Spain later turned their hand to journalism. For example, Keith Scott-Watson resigned from the Tom Mann Centuria to assist Sefton Delmer at the Daily Express (Scott-Watson, 1937). He fled Spain under threat of detention for desertion (Delmer, 1961: 305), but later travelled to Barcelona as an accredited correspondent for the Daily Herald (Scott-Watson, 1939). Sam Lesser also joined the first British volunteers in Spain, was wounded and returned to Barcelona in 1937 to assist with short-wave propaganda radio broadcasts. This led to his recruitment as the Barcelona correspondent for *The Daily Worker*, under the by-line ‘Sam Russell’.

Many of these correspondents were Communist party members and they structured their news reporting in accordance with the requests, dictates and imperatives of the Party. Claud Cockburn of *The Daily Worker* was a particularly influential and controversial figure in this respect. His reputation as an able propagandist was acknowledged even in Nationalist circles (McCullagh, 1937) and he had no qualms about confecting stories for military and political advantage of the Communists. As he put it to Virginia Cowles “I am not interested in watching revolutions; my job is *making* them” (Cowles, 1941: 32).

There is some irony in this statement, as some of his most influential work was in legitimizing the suppression of the POUM and anarchists in Barcelona through the articles he published in *The Daily Worker* under his pseudonym ‘Frank Pitcairn’ (Orwell, 1937: 215-242). Among the specious allegations he peddled was a claim that the revolt in

Catalonia had been orchestrated directly by Hitler and Mussolini (e.g. “Pitcairn lifts Barcelona veil: Trotskyist rising as signal”, *Daily Worker*, 11 May 1937). On another occasion, he conspired with Otto Katz of the Communist *Agence Espagne* news agency in writing an entirely fictional account of an anti-Franco rebellion in Tetuán to persuade the French government to continue to allow the covert trafficking of military supplies to the Republic.

Because of the centralised and militarised structure of Nationalist forces, there were no US and UK correspondents who were, in strictly technical terms, members or agents of the insurgency. However, there were journalists and news organisations that colluded so closely with the Nationalists that it is legitimate to classify them in these terms. For example, at the beginning of the war *The Daily Mail* acted as though it was the de-facto London press bureau for Franco, and its correspondents were granted considerable privileges by the Nationalists as a consequence. One of its Special Correspondents, Cecil Geraghty, travelled extensively around Nationalist Spain and was invited by General Quiapo de Llano to make a Short Wave propaganda broadcast on behalf of the Nationalists. He also played a key role in publicising documents that were said to prove that radical insurrections were being planned at the time the army revolted (1937: 40-41; 214-219). History has exposed these forgeries, but as Southworth notes in his forensic dissection of the documents’ provenance and credibility, Geraghty’s willingness to publicize their contents reveals his eagerness “to find a justification for Franco’s revolt” (Southworth, 1999: 12). Ironically, Geraghty also participated in orchestrated attacks on the BBC by *The Daily Mail*, accusing it of a pro-left bias and citing news-talks on Spain as evidence (“Listeners’ Attack on BBC”, *Daily Mail*, 14/1/1937).

Partisans

Distinguishing between journalists as ‘propagandists’ and ‘partisans’ may seem like hair-splitting. However, I use the term partisan to identify those journalists who were passionately committed to one side, but had an associative rather than formal relationship with a cause or a party.

An example of such a correspondent on the Nationalist side was Francis McCullagh who represented a number of small newspapers dispersed across the British colonies. Although his book contains a litany of complaints about the frustration and inconveniences of reporting with the Nationalists, it also offers homage to the validity and morality of Franco’s rebellion, and ends with ‘with the cry: *Viva España! Viva el*

General Franco! Viva el Ejército Salvador. Arriba España! (1937: 32). In a similar vein, Theo Rogers, Spanish correspondent for the English language Philippines Free Press, concluded his book:

I have come out unequivocally for the side of General Franco...[W]hen all the wrongs and rights are weighed in an impartial scale, there can be but one decision. You must take sides. It is impossible to remain a straddler. (1937: 203-4)

In contrast to obscure figures like McCullagh and Rogers, some of the most influential and iconic figures of 20th century journalism can be classified as Republican partisans. Robert Capa believed strongly in the anti-fascist implications of the conflict. As Whelan notes “Throughout his career Capa maintained that he was unwilling to risk his life covering any war in which he did not love one side and hate the other” (2000: 4). Ernest Hemingway, too, was adamant about the rectitude of the Republican cause, as was Martha Gellhorn who covered the war for *Colliers* magazine. Her love for the Republic endured throughout her life, unaffected by the vicissitudes of historical revisionism (Sebba, 1994: 103).

Like ‘Propagandists’, ‘Partisans’ were not inclined to pay obeisance to conventional professional expectations of neutrality and even-handedness in their journalistic practice. Indeed, it was believed that observance of what Martha Gellhorn memorably dismissed as “all that objectivity shit” only served to muddy the realities of the war and give succour to the enemy (quoted in Morehead, 2003: 150). Instead, partisans cast themselves as impassioned witnesses, identifying with a moral rather than professional responsibility to communicate the horrors and significance of events in Spain. As the Paris Match correspondent, Louis Delaprée put it, a few weeks before his death in 1937:

All the images of Madrid suffering martyrdom, which I shall try to put before your eyes – and which most of the time challenge description – I have seen them. I can be believed. I demand to be believed. (1937: 21)

Delaprée’s remarks helps draw attention to another difference between ‘partisans’ and ‘propagandists’. With the latter, the emphasis was often upon the plausibility of an account, rather than its fidelity. Partisans, in contrast, retained concerns about truth through their work, asserting that this was attained through trusting their judgements,

observations and emotions, rather than adhering to the strategic rituals of ‘objective journalism’ and its reification of arid facts and accredited second hand opinion.

Having said this, there were also occasions when commitment to the cause led partisans to tailor their news gathering for political purposes. For example, Moorehead claims that Gellhorn, Hemingway and Matthews consciously avoided reporting republican persecutions, torture and execution for fear of the political damage it would cause (2003: 150). But here again there is a point of distinction with propagandists, as these constituted sins of omission, rather than commission, explicable in terms of the journalists’ emotional connection with the war (Knightley, 1975: 215).

Sympathisers

I use the term ‘Sympathisers’ to categorise those journalists who identified with particular protagonists, but whose ardour was more measured and conditional than the partisans. Most of the journalists who developed experiential affinities would be grouped under this category.

The different strength of their affiliation is significant because it had implications for the balance they struck between their professional practices and political sympathies. With partisans, the two were indivisible; with sympathisers there was a more conscious intention to retain some distance between them. For example, Virginia Cowles maintained a sense of obligation “to give both sides a fair hearing” (Sebba, 1994: 103) despite her personal dislike of the Nationalists. Lawrence Fernsworth, Barcelona correspondent of The Times and New York Times, was highly sympathetic to the Republic but felt obliged to report the elimination of the ‘enemies of the people’ in Barcelona at the start of the war:

I knew the facts would be harmful to the Republican cause for which, as an American, I felt a deep sympathy believing that in its essence the struggle was one for the rights of man. But it was the truth and had to be told. As a reporter I have never shirked at telling the truth regardless of whom it might please or displease. (1939: 46)

Agnostics

The final category of foreign journalists in Spain – ‘Agnostics’ – were those correspondents who did not connect to any significant extent with the politics of the

conflict but focused instead on its intrinsic value as a news story. This is a position where concerns about professionalism were dominant. Few of the journalists' accounts published in book form during and after the war could be said to typify this stance. The closest example I have found is Alan Dick's description of his experiences reporting the war for the Daily Telegraph from the Basque region of Nationalist Spain. Although in his concluding remarks he claimed "to feel deeply for the people of Spain" and for "their courage as they faced the mechanised might of Nazi-ism and Fascism" (1943: 153) his account has a descriptive, even anodyne, quality, recounting his working conditions and professional relationships, and saying next to nothing about the political issues at stake. As he concedes:

I have written lightly, perhaps frivolously, of my experiences during part of the Spanish Civil War. That is not because I did not appreciate the momentous issues involved in that fratricidal struggle... The reason is that I do not feel qualified to discuss the deeper meaning of the Spanish Civil War after a visit of only a few months, and then only to one side. I have attempted to give an objective running commentary on my own experiences. (ibid.)

Most news agency correspondents would be appropriately defined as 'agnostics', as their responsibility for providing spot and breaking news for diverse client news organisations required them to adopt an informational rather than analytical role, and demonstrate a greater "will to facticity" than other correspondents (Allan, 1995). Their values were concisely summarised by Francis Davis in her description of their arrival in the Nationalist zone in late 1936:

The string men who cover cheaply from the border are left behind, and the freelances and the colour feature men. In their place are the wire service men who beat every story into routine coverage and waste the least time and motion and words in telling it. (1940: 128-9)

Vice or Virtue?

Differentiating between the types of foreign correspondents in Spain allows us to clarify the contrapuntal relationship between professionalism and propaganda in the war and

the extent to which orientations to these two trends differed across the international press corps. The relationship between the professional and political activities of journalists also raises ethical questions, and there may be a temptation to characterise the continuum from ‘propagandists’ to ‘agnostics’ as a path from vice to virtue. Such a view is problematic for several reasons.

First, there is some question as to whether the interpretative agency and evaluative engagement of many of the correspondents actually violated objectivity norms in the first place. Foreign correspondents have always been permitted more freedom and autonomy than home correspondents and are expected to fulfil a role of ‘independent experts, free to make judgements, less as dependent and supervisable employees.’ (Shudson 2001: 164). In other words, political engagement was, at least to some extent, part of their brief.

Second, although some theorists wish to retain ‘objectivity’ as an ideal for journalistic endeavour (e.g. Lichtenberg, 2000) many studies have shown that the routine professional strategies by which this is pursued (facticity, neutrality, balancing) produce a highly structured discourse that tends to privilege accredited sources of knowledge and permits journalists to abdicate personal responsibility for their work (e.g. Gitlin, 1980, Tuchman, 1972). Indeed, it has been argued that formulaic observance of these professional principles can obscure, confuse and relativise important political issues. For example, Rosen claims that “journalism shows us that often balance is a flight from truth rather than an avenue into truth” (Rosen, 1993: 49).

To give an illustration of this point from the Spanish Civil War, strict observance of professional norms would have required that any report of the aerial attack on Guernica give equal prominence to Nationalist counter-claims that the destruction was wrought by retreating ‘Red’ forces, even though these were palpable falsehoods (Southworth, 1977). Such coverage would be ‘balanced’, but could it claim greater integrity and accuracy than the unequivocal testimony of George Steer, Noel Monks and the other correspondents who witnessed the immediate aftermath of the raid and did not baulk at apportioning blame? As Herbert Matthews noted bitterly about the editorial policy of the New York Times

The publisher laid down a mechanical, theoretically impartial, plan of operation – print both sides, equal prominence, equal length, equal treatment. This often meant equality for the bad with the good – the official handouts hundreds of

miles from the front lines with the eye-witness stories, the tricky with the honest, the wrong with the right. I say that not only I, but the truth suffered (1972: 39).

Third, in the case of the Spanish Civil War the middle ground between the warring factions was itself a highly politicised position. Dispassionate reporting that uncritically juxtaposed the claims and counter-claims of the protagonists invited a political equivalence that buttressed the non-intervention policies of the North European and American governments. Furthermore, it was starkly evident that this policy would work to the exclusive benefit of the Nationalists, and this appreciation stoked the ardour and anger of many foreign correspondents. Certainly, the British government were very keen to see ‘balance’ in coverage. For example, a letter in the BBC written archives records a meeting between the Director General of the BBC and Sir Robert Vansittart, then Permanent Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign Office held in March 1937. At this meeting Vansittart demanded that the BBC made sure that they gave “no more coverage to government news than insurgent news ‘irrespective of the amount that comes in’” (Secret memo from the BBC Director General to the Controller of Programmes, 9 March 1937, BBC Written Archives, R34/440)

Concluding remarks

This article has examined the experiences, attitudes and perceptions of the considerable number of British and American correspondents who covered the Spanish Civil War directly. The analysis shows that the international news-net in the war was more extensive and effectively organised in Republican-held territories; and that, taken overall, the political sympathies of the Anglo-US news corps inclined more towards the Republican cause than the Nationalists. These often reflected pre-existing political viewpoints (‘elective affinities’), but in many cases these sympathies were forged through correspondents’ experiences in Spain (‘experiential affinities’). One thing that most pro-Republican journalists shared was an antagonism towards the more revolutionary factions and ambitions of the Republic. The impact these political positions had on their interpretations of journalists’ professional roles and responsibilities varied. Some embraced partisanship, whereas others tried to separate their professional activities from their opinions. But even this professional response of balancing the competing perspectives had significant political implications in the war, as it buttressed the case for non-intervention.

It does not necessarily follow from this that Anglo-US news coverage showed a pro-Republican bias. The contributions of these foreign correspondents can only be considered a preliminary level of mediation, as in journalism, no copy is sacrosanct and is always ultimately subject to editorial selection and amendment. Furthermore, a significant amount of British reporting concerning the Spanish Civil War reporting was not conducted at the scene, but back in the UK and USA; as numerous other journalists and senior editors mused over where their nation's responsibilities and best interests really lay. Any appraisal of the overall political disposition of British and American news media demands a more extensive analysis that incorporates an investigation of actual trends in media output.

For this reason also, any historical comparisons drawn from this case-study must remain tentative. Even so, the findings raise critical questions about the performance of the international news corps in covering one the biggest news stories in what has been labelled a 'golden era' of foreign reporting. Without question, the Spanish Civil War generated some magnificent coverage written by some iconic figures, but there were also structural failings. News organisations did not appreciate the gravity of the Spanish situation before war broke out, and during the first crucial months often relied heavily on inexperienced correspondents. Draconian censorship practices in the Nationalist sectors impeded journalists' presence and performance across the conflict. And, although considerable editorial resources were in place in by mid 1937, these levels were not sustained as a considerable proportion of the international news-corps moved on to the next international crisis.

It is also striking how many contemporary concerns about the appropriate role and status of foreign reporting were also evident during this. For example, disagreements within the international press corps in Spain as to where their professional obligations ended and their political responsibilities began, anticipated, by some six decades, modern debates about the legitimacy of a "journalism of attachment" in which reporters set aside their pretence at objectivity and side instead with the victims of violence and conflict (see Bell, 1998). Additionally, there is an eerie contemporary resonance to the complaints of some foreign correspondents in Spain about their difficulties in convincing their editors of the significance of the issues they were reporting. In his last message to his editor, before meeting a violent death in a plane flight from Valencia, Louis Delaprée complained bitterly about the paper's preoccupation with the abdication crisis in Britain:

“You make me work for nothing but the paper-basket. Thanks... The massacre of a hundred Spanish children is less interesting than a Mrs. Simpson’s sigh” (1937: 47).

Of course, it would be specious to suggest that there have not been profound changes in the organisation, transmission and funding of foreign correspondence over the last seventy years. Nevertheless, these examples demonstrate that the development of greater historical perspective on journalistic practices depends on remaining alert to areas of continuity as well as discontinuity (Deacon et al, 2007: 170-1). For golden eras can tarnish on closer inspection, revealing what seem like contemporary crises as enduring dilemmas.

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Notes

¹The *Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista* was an anti-Stalinist Communist party formed in 1935. It was strongly opposed the popular front strategy advocated by the Comintern and the official Communist Party of Spain. It was suppressed by the Communists in May 1937.

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