British and American Volunteers and the Politics of Dress and Demeanour in the Spanish Civil War

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When ‘Nationalist’ forces rebelled against the democratically elected government of Republican Spain in July 1936, it precipitated a long and bloody civil war that ended only months before the Second World War began. The conflict was remarkable both for the extent of foreign participation – which included the material and monetary aid of governments (Hitler’s Germany and Mussolini’s Italy on the Nationalist side, and the Soviet Union for the Republicans) as well as various contingents of international volunteers – and for the revolutionary sentiments it inspired in sections of the Republican zone. The ideological implications of the conflict – the fascist-inspired Nationalists against the anti-fascist, democratic Republic – were also immediately apparent. Recent historiography, however, has moved away from an exclusively political analysis of the conflict to one focusing on cultural interpretations of the war. This article seeks to add to this growing historiography by examining the ways in which volunteers from Britain and the United States interpreted two potent cultural signifiers in Spain during the civil war: dress and demeanour.

Nearly sixty years after the defeat of Republican Spain by General Francisco Franco and his German and Italian allies, the Spanish Civil War endures as the iconic conflict of a profoundly politicised decade. The historian Robert Stradling has recently emphasized the extent to which the idea of ‘Spain’ has been exalted beyond its immediate historical context to encompass broader notions of political engagement, and anti-fascist solidarity in particular. The thousands of foreign volunteers who travelled to Spain to defend the Republic against the Nationalist insurgency – a movement which included many exiles from Hitler’s Germany and Mussolini’s Italy, but also men and women from France, Britain, the United States and as far away as Australia, New Zealand and Palestine – seemed to embody this spirit of self-sacrifice. These international volunteers have been variously romanticized, mythologized and demonised in the robust historiography surrounding the Spanish Civil War, much of it pioneered by British and American scholars. These various characterisations, however, were the result of an almost exclusive focus on the political implications of the conflict and the ideological positioning of the individuals taking part. Given its proximity to World War Two, such a concentration is understandable, and yet the conflict – as the culmination of internal tensions peculiar to Spain – was so much more than a precursor to that larger tragedy. Moreover, the story of the international volunteers in Spain is far from an uncomplicated episode of pure political commitment, of anti-fascist sentiment manifested in the archetypal war of conscience. Indeed, recent interpretations of both the International Brigades and the war itself have sought to include cultural aspects alongside the social and the political. In doing so, they have uncovered a richer, deeper, more ambiguous story than that of the traditional political narrative.

The interpretative possibilities flowing from this new approach are many. This article seeks to contribute to this evolving historiography by examining one small but significant aspect of the international volunteers’ experience in Spain; one intimately bound up with the social upheaval that accompanied the war, as well as the disposition of power within the Republican zone and the related ability to map hierarchies, to confer authority and to distinguish the orthodox from the unorthodox.
The following pages are an attempt to sketch the ways in which the international volunteers in Spain, and British and American volunteers in particular, used modes of dress and demeanour to interpret and to adapt to the military, political and ideological situation. Indeed, there is sufficient evidence to show that these things were fundamental to the conduct of both an anti-fascist war and a social revolution, and of great interest to these foreigners who came to work and fight alongside the Spanish Republicans. Accordingly, they are extremely useful in interpreting the culture inside the Communist-dominated International Brigades, and in piecing together the neglected experiences of the foreign volunteers who worked and fought alongside those activists determined to push through the social revolution in Catalonia and sections of the Aragonese countryside. The fractious political climate in the Republican zone demanded that such outward expressions of ideological affiliation be taken seriously. For the volunteers in the Brigades in particular, political orthodoxy required adherence to certain modes of behaviour. For those foreigners associated with the revolutionary parties in Catalonia, too, the urgings of ideology were deeply felt, though the desire to behave in a manner befitting revolutionaries increasingly competed with the need for self-preservation as political and military power was centralized and the parties of the dissident Left were brutally repressed.

Finally – and more broadly – an investigation of what I have designated as the ‘politics’ of dress and demeanour in relation to these volunteers not only indicates the essential interdependency of politics and culture during the Spanish Civil War, but also confirms that war is not simply a function of the state, made comprehensible by studying the movements of battalions, the rhetoric of the home front, or the oratory of politicians, but a complex and multi-faceted realm of experience and discourse, in which individuals seek status and legitimacy in numerous and frequently oblique ways. Similarly, the violence and upheaval of revolution is as much a cultural spectacle and a lived experience as it is a political event. For the British and American volunteers who fought on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War, then, it is clear that appearances counted. It is equally clear that this factor is crucial in understanding the motivations and experiences of these individuals.

I. Dressing the Part

The history of dress, as a history of the body and of the body politic, has only recently benefited from serious scholarly examination. Yet it has long been clear that dress functions as a potent signifier of political change as well as more diffuse shifts in power relations. The sans-culottes of the French Revolution, the black shirts of Fascist Italy, and the brown shirts and jodhpurs of the Sturm Abteilung in Nazi Germany all attest to the strength of dress as a political symbol. Dress is also linked to gendered identity, which in times of revolutionary change is often of acute political importance. Both these factors coalesce in the case of the Spanish Civil War and its attending social revolution. Dress was perceived by observers to be a sensitive barometer for reading the political climate during the revolutionary period in Barcelona, and the peculiar nature of the war fought by volunteers – with the element of uncertainty about the terrain of power and authority – made the politics of dress equally significant.

The historian Gerd-Rainer Horn has noted that for ‘observers of social revolution … the comprehension of … momentous events is greatly facilitated by the symbolism prevalent in the specific historical context, whether consciously recognised or not’. The writer George Orwell, who fought as part of an Independent Labour Party (ILP) detachment with the revolutionary, anti-Stalinist Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (POUM) in Aragon, saw such symbols everywhere, and used them to describe the Barcelona of December 1936 with a characteristic attention to detail. By this time, and as Orwell himself suspected, the revolutionary tide was already receding in Cataluña. Yet outwardly all the manifestations of the revolution remained: gutted churches, factory collectives, loudspeakers ‘bellowing revolutionary songs all day and far into the night’. Orwell, however, recalled that the crowds were the ‘queerest thing of all’:

In outward appearance it was a town in which the wealthy classes had practically ceased to exist.

Except for a small number of women and foreigners there were no ‘well-dressed’ people at all.
Practically everyone wore rough working-class clothes, or blue overalls or some variant of the militia uniform.\textsuperscript{12}

A number of foreign observers were moved to comment upon this new informality in dress and its political implications. The journalist Virginia Cowles was warned by friends in Paris to dress ‘shabbily’ in the Republican zone lest she be ‘bumped off’.\textsuperscript{13} The Austrian sociologist Franz Borkenau reported that there were apparently ‘no “bourgeoisie” whatever’ in Barcelona. People had stopped wearing hats altogether, a decision encouraged by the Catalonian government, the Generalitat, because according to Borkenau, it was feared that ‘it might look “bourgeois” and make a bad impression’.\textsuperscript{14} This was in stark contrast to Madrid, a city untouched by revolutionary fervour, where people still appeared carefully dressed in public.\textsuperscript{15}

It did not take long, however, for modes of dress in Barcelona to catch up with wider political developments that sought to centralize the war effort and curtail the power of anarchists, anarcho-syndicalists, and other revolutionary elements in Catalonia. As the influence of the Catalonian revolutionaries waned, Barcelona began to dress more like Madrid. The American Lois Cusick sensed this trend even before Orwell arrived in the city. In a letter home to her family in November 1936 she complained of ‘all these women roaming around in the streets in their fur coats and men in big expensive overcoats and shoes’:

Where, oh where are the overalls of yesterday? … I was all prepared to buy myself a lovely pair of overalls and a lumberjack, when I suddenly realised that no women were wearing them anymore, and besides that I have a job in the Generality, where people vie with each other dressing more elaborately, especially the women.\textsuperscript{16}

Mary Low, an Australian woman attached to the POUM and a friend of Cusick’s, also felt ambushed by the swift swing away from revolutionary attire. First, her wearing of the mono – the blue overalls of the working class – caused her to be snubbed in the Ministry of Finance. Then when she went to work for the Generalitat herself, a male colleague advised her to dispense with her alpargatas and overalls so as not to disturb foreign guests.\textsuperscript{17} Finally her partner, the Cuban revolutionary Juan Breá, also pressured her into dressing more appropriately.\textsuperscript{18} In the end, however, such concessions were unnecessary: Low lost her job when the POUM were expelled from the Catalonian government, though not before she had managed to horrify another male co-worker by addressing him out of habit as ‘comrade’.\textsuperscript{19}

As observers, Low and Cusick offer not only fascinating insights into the revolutionary mood and its eclipse in Barcelona, but also of the conflicted status of women in the Republican zone. This had not a little to do with the disruption of norms of behaviour and dress. Indeed, female dress, and female revolutionary behaviour in general, assumes a prominent place in the accounts of male volunteers amongst the Catalan revolutionaries. Women served a particular symbolic function, and the spectacle of a politically engaged woman, and particularly an armed woman, was the surest indicator of revolutionary success – or excess, in the case of hostile observers.\textsuperscript{20} The Spanish militiawoman, the miliciana, became iconic: she was the ‘Marianne’ of the French Revolution made flesh.\textsuperscript{21} And though, as Mary Nash has noted, gender politics in the Republican zone cleaved along traditional lines, with ‘Men to War Front, Women to the Homefront’ becoming the ‘dominant mobilizing slogan’ of the conflict, the miliciana retained a certain mystique.\textsuperscript{22} Indeed, the image of a young Republican woman wearing a mono and holding a gun had even entered the consciousness of a teenage daughter of the English upper class like Jessica Mitford. She was certain of the style of clothes she wanted as she planned to run away to Spain with her beau Esmond Romilly: ‘a brown corduroy ski suit with a military-looking jacket and plenty of pockets.’ Jessica had honed her fashion sense by ‘poring over pictures of Spanish guerrilla women fighters in the weekly illustrated papers’.\textsuperscript{23} Yet her notion of the appropriate, quasi-military attire owed as much to a propagated image of revolutionary Spanish womanhood as to reality. Nash argues that although a ‘small minority’ of women in Barcelona dressed in the mono, on the whole working-class women rejected such attire. Indeed, women who dressed in overalls were likely to be accused of ‘frivolity and coquetry’; of
being self-consciously fashionable. In this sense, kitted out in her ‘military-looking jacket’, Mitford was more likely to have appeared a fashion victim than a friend of the Spanish workers.

For female internacionales who did adopt the mono, however, such new conceptions of the female role could be liberating. A week after she moved into the POUM locale, Mary Low noticed that she had stopped looking in the mirror. Until that moment she had been ‘annoyed’ by the lack of interest shown by ‘revolutionary women’ towards their appearance. ‘Now I realised that one only bothers over feminine coquetry because of the shortage of larger interests allowed us in life under the capitalist regime’, she wrote. ‘Nobody dressed up during the revolution in Spain. They forgot to think about it.’ But ironically, such intimations of androgyny also appealed to a masculine audience. Women in uniform and women-in-arms fascinated male volunteers; they seemed to literally embody a paradox both alien and thrilling. As such, there was often a sexual undertone to the volunteers’ admiration. In his irreverent memoir the British poet Laurie Lee described how much he delighted in the company of ‘rollicking militia girls’, with their ‘small jungly bodies’, ‘split olive eyes’, and over-sized monos. These overalls were ‘so tightly belted at the waist, and deeply slashed at the throat’ that in Lee’s salacious imagination, the girls ‘appeared to have arisen half-naked from tumbled beds’.

Beautiful girls with big guns might also be a common cause for comment. Orwell recalled the sight of an Anarchist patrol car, which carried ‘a beautiful dark-haired girl of about eighteen … nursing a sub-machine gun across her knees’. Indeed, one of Orwell’s earliest experiences of the Spanish Civil War, one that he found ‘humiliating’, was being shown how to fasten his cartridge boxes by the Spanish wife of an English comrade. ‘She was a gentle, dark-eyed, intensely feminine creature’, he wrote, ‘who looked as though her life-work was to rock a cradle, but who as a matter of fact had fought bravely in the street-battles of July.’ Orwell reconciled this unsettling conjunction by suggesting that the baby she now carried ‘had perhaps been begotten behind a barricade’. Perhaps; but it is more likely that Orwell, like Lee, was titillated by the thought of the sexual and the martial colliding.

The Brigades also fostered their own politics of dress. While this served to create, confirm and maintain the hierarchies made manifest by the military command and the Communist-dominated commissariat, it also contained stylistic elements reminiscent of the revolutionary attire in Barcelona. One similarity was the lack of a coherent ‘kit’ for members of the Brigades, or indeed for any Republican soldier. In May 1937, the American volunteer John Tisa noted in his diary that one could ‘easily go mad trying to pick two identical Republican uniforms’. George Orwell thought that ‘multiform’ was the more appropriate term. Yet the heterogeneity had a common source: the various nationalities represented in the Brigades could be identified by the relics of their native country’s military past obtained from army surplus stores. Many American volunteers, for example, arrived in the ‘doughboy’ uniforms of World War One. Gradually these uniforms were supplemented – out of need or affectation – with berets and rope-soled shoes. Ponchos, leather jackets and great coats proliferated, as did helmets, peaked hats and caps. In so far as the Brigades proclaimed the volunteers to be fighters in an anti-fascist war, there was something undeniably right about the sense of improvisation and disarray that surrounded the question of uniforms. The volunteer whose canvas shoes poked out from under baggy trousers, who wore a button-down shirt with sleeves rolled to the elbows, was the antithesis of the smooth-cheeked, sleek, jack-booted fascist.

Not only could this haphazard style of dress be studied and mimicked – and thus command as much prescriptive force as a rigidly enforced uniform – but the piecemeal dress code also abetted the creation of a Brigade elite. Commissars in particular could advertise their position with specially made boots, a leather jacket or a Sam Browne belt. Indeed, for aggrieved volunteers, a dapper commissar epitomized the hypocrisy of the Brigade leadership. In their memoirs, two Americans who broke with the Communist Party after Spain used the politics of dress to great effect to convey the perceived distance between the Party elite, ensconced at Brigade headquarters in Albacete, and the rank and file. William Herrick recalled seeing a comrade who had left the lines to serve as an interpreter with the Russian Tank Corps wearing a ‘beautiful Harris tweed suit’ and carrying a side arm. By contrast, Herrick’s shabby appearance caused him to be refused service in a restaurant in the
once-proletarian Barcelona. The Party operative Sandor Voros was similarly critical of the young volunteers plucked out of the lines to become commissars, claiming that any sense of camaraderie was shed along with their soldier’s rags. One such volunteer appeared ‘smartly dressed in a tailored military uniform’, another took to smoking cigars, wearing a ‘fancy tailored uniform’ and sporting ‘the highest officer’s cap ever displayed in Spain’. Side arms in particular were the special privilege of the commissariat: when James Jump recalled his promotion to paymaster (which included the issue of a side arm), he titled the relevant section of his memoirs ‘I acquire a status symbol’. Yet the symbolism was far from empty. Side arms were all but useless in close combat; worn by the Brigade elite, they were less instruments of warfare than guarantors of discipline behind the lines.

Like the commissars, the military leadership of the Brigades was subject to sartorial scrutiny, though opinions varied as to exactly what particular modes of dress signified. The young British lieutenant Walter Gregory considered plain dress a sign of humility and came away from an encounter with General Miaja, the much-lauded ‘hero of Madrid’, charmed by the General’s lack of affectation. ‘He wore no gold braids or medals’, Gregory recalled, ‘and he left his hat and his bodyguard in the car.’ He seemed ‘a most kind and gentle sort of man.’ Of course, like the rank-and-file, these humble uniforms may have had as much to do with the lack of resources as with inclination. When Arthur Koestler met ‘General Julio’ (the Austrian Julius Deutsch), for example, he was puzzled as to why the General would not remove his ‘heavy military greatcoat’, despite the fact ‘there was a grilling sun and the sweat was pouring down his face’. ‘Only when I got back to the hotel did I learn the reason’, Koestler wrote. ‘He had his greatcoat and uniform cap and his white cotton gloves – but as yet no uniform.’

But styles of dress and behaviour were not always interpreted consistently. It was the very qualities lacking in Miaja that Gregory admired in George Nathan, the commander of the British No. 1 Company. Nathan, Gregory recalled, ‘looked every inch the military man from his neatly clipped moustache to the swagger stick which he never seemed to put aside.’ Continued Gregory:

No matter what the conditions, extreme heat or pouring rain, somehow he always managed to look as though he had just walked out of the officer’s mess at Sandhurst and on to the parade ground to inspect the troops.

George Nathan epitomizes the capacity of warfare to transform or disguise men by means of radical self-fashioning. Nathan was born into the Jewish working-class of London’s East End. He served as an officer in World War One and worked at a variety of odd jobs before he came to Spain. When he was offered command of the British No. 1 Company, Nathan transformed himself into the very model of an aristocratic British officer. The upper-class accent, the military bearing, and the immaculate uniform were attributes he had adopted, practised and honed. Moreover, the Battalion performed well under his leadership, an outcome observers ascribed to his infinite coolness under pressure. His pipe-smoking sangfroid during battle became legendary. The American commissar Steve Nelson wrote that ‘the rawest recruit couldn’t be afraid when Nathan was around’.

Yet for all his finesse, George Nathan could not entirely escape his past. During his earlier peripatetic phase Nathan had been a member of the Black-and-Tans, the notorious British units charged with keeping order in Ireland. He may even have carried out assassinations of prominent Sinn Feiners. When some Irish volunteers in the Battalion recognised him, Nathan was ostensibly ‘promoted’ to the general staff of the Brigades, away from the ire of his former charges. He was attached to the Fourteenth Brigade for a time, where rumours of his drinking and homosexuality tarnished his reputation in the last months of his life. After he died at Brunete in July 1937, however, Nathan was swiftly beatified.

It is very characteristic of the whole of Nathan’s life and of the civil war, that just before he died this bourgeois Liberal-democrat expressed the wish to speak with the Communist Party leader Harry Pollitt. I happen to know from conversations I personally had with George that it was his desire to become a member of the Communist Party.
In this instance, Nathan’s apparent epiphany was only enhanced by his former life as an agent of British imperialism. This was truly St. Paul on the road to Albacete.

II. Demeanour: ‘Real Communists’ and the Rest

If styles of dress held ideological implications, what about modes of behaviour? Though we should be wary of stereotyping Communists as humourless automatons and so sustaining myths of Cold War propaganda, we should also be receptive to evidence that a certain outward demeanour, presenting the individual as not only disciplined but obedient and optimistic, was encouraged by the Party in Spain and intimately linked to presumptions about political orthodoxy. This influenced the character of the Commissariat and in turn the nature of the expectations placed upon the volunteers.

The young British volunteer Esmond Romilly recognized this particular aspect of Communist Party discipline very soon after his arrival in Spain. He felt that ‘Real Communists’ could be readily distinguished from other anti-fascist volunteers by certain modes of behaviour. A Real Communist, Romilly wrote, was

a serious person, a rigid disciplinarian, a member of the Communist Party, interested in all the technical aspects of warfare, and lacking in any such selfish motive as fear or reckless courage.46

Their communism was a way of being: ‘a thing which lasted seven days a week’.47 Even so, Romilly’s ordering of traits is important – note that it is not membership of the Communist Party that heads Romilly’s list, but aspects of personal style. Romilly was in the company of several such men while living and fighting with a small group of Englishmen attached to the German Thaelmann Battalion, and his memoir Boadilla succeeds in conveying the friction caused by Real Communists living alongside individuals of an anti-authoritarian bent. For example, one volunteer who was ‘a bit over-cynical’ was frequently in trouble for cracking jokes, criticising the emphasis on discipline (he considered it ‘Prussianism’) and even for sitting with a girl on a train journey instead of with his comrades (who rectified the situation by placing him under military arrest).48

The young poet John Cornford also fit Romilly’s definition of a Real Communist, though his reputation for political commitment was established well before he left for Spain.49 As an undergraduate at Cambridge, everything about Cornford spoke of his commitment to communism. His friend Victor Kiernan recalled the way in which Cornford eschewed luxury, wore a ‘decrepit’ academic gown and used ‘a bread-knife to clean his fingernails with complete naturalness’.50 Cornford used college meal times for recruitment. Kiernan recalled:

He was always pulling up Socialists, himself included, who drifted into the comfortable habit of sitting together at dinner in Hall instead of scattering themselves and using the opportunity for a little propaganda.51

‘Comfortable habits’ were to be avoided at all costs: Cornford apparently harboured an ‘invincible distaste for small talk’ and would only attend parties to cultivate potential converts.52 Indeed, as Peter Stansky and William Abrahams have noted, Cornford’s identity became so subsumed in his political work that when he was killed in Spain in December 1936, the man eulogized by his Party comrades was almost unrecognisable to some who had known him ‘best and longest.’53 The contrast between the personal affection Cornford inspired and the political respect he commanded was characteristic of the intractable public face the young man consciously assumed. ‘The difficulty is that John was many-faceted, but preferred to behave as though he were not,’ write Stansky and Abrahams. ‘He wanted to appear single-minded, which made for efficiency at least.’54 His poetry, too, came to reflect this bifurcated impulse, strident political verses interspersed with tender love lyrics. One of his last and best poems, ‘To Margot Heinemann’, is a simple and moving evocation of fear before battle. There is no mention of the Party, but simply: ‘I am afraid to lose you, / I am afraid of my fear.’55 Yet it was John Cornford the committed politician – the Real Communist – whose image was lodged in the minds of contemporaries. As Eric Hobsbawn has recently recalled, Cornford was an evocative figure for socialist and communist students at Cambridge in the last years of the 1930s. Photographs
of Cornford hung in students’ rooms and formed part of an anti-fascist iconography, just as ‘the familiar photo of Ché Guevara’ would for students of a later generation.\footnote{66}

Next to the general requirement of disciplined political commitment, abstention – sexual or otherwise – was an important trait for Real Communists to exhibit and one exalted by the Brigades’ commissariat. Outwardly this was simply a question of keeping volunteers fit for battle, though it was related to a wider veneration of military discipline: venereal disease was a significant burden on the medical services and a soldier constantly drunk was a danger to himself and others.\footnote{57} In particular, the volunteers’ excessive consumption of alcohol was a thorny issue for the Brigade leadership. James K. Hopkins has noted that at least in the British battalion, ‘drinking problems’ were rife, though it is not entirely clear what magnitude of alcohol abuse this euphemism entails.\footnote{58} In any case, the combination of easy access to alcohol in surrounding villages, an alien culture in which wine was an integral part of the diet, and the stress generated by battle yielded predictable results.

Punishments for drunkenness varied, though its endemic proportions required a degree of toleration. Sometimes the leadership responded creatively: in James Jump’s unit, for example, a system was devised whereby moderate drinkers were to accompany heavy drinkers to ensure they returned to camp after nights out in a nearby village. Under this arrangement, Jump endured a number of outings with a drunken Scot, who, ‘like most of the Scots … would become sad, sentimental and homesick’ when drinking, and treat fellow revellers to tearful renditions of ‘My Ain Folk’.\footnote{59} Violent behaviour and absenteeism was frowned upon, however. A Finnish-American volunteer was arrested and eventually executed after a drunken rampage, for example, though Spanish soldiers had to be brought in to furnish the firing squad.\footnote{60}

Though concerns about drunkenness and venereal disease had a rational basis, some volunteers, especially those disappointed or disillusioned with the Brigade leadership, interpreted the push for abstinence as an attempt at politicising private life – perhaps not an unreasonable conclusion in view of the commissariat’s protean mandate. ‘Excessive drinking, like catching venereal disease, was looked upon as a danger not only to the individual but to the Spanish People’s Army’, Jump recalled. ‘The atmosphere was, in fact, quite puritan.’\footnote{61} This charge of ‘Puritanism’ was echoed by Sandor Voros, who repeated it when recounting the chequered career of a Native American soldier he knew only as ‘Oklahoma’, a volunteer who liked to drink and to gamble, both pastimes ‘considered to be vices by the fanatics in the party, who, like all fanatics, had a strong puritanical streak in them’.\footnote{62} Voros believed that Oklahoma ‘would have been turned over to the SIM and shot, except that he was totally “non-political” and a willing soldier who never grumbled and who accepted whatever hardships stoically’. The Battalion leadership made several attempts to get him to give up drinking, to little avail. Voros noted similar tendencies amongst the ‘prissy clique of YCLers’ (members of the Young Communist League) who served as the Party’s political ‘responsibles’ in the John Browne artillery battery. A dozen of the battery were seamen, and Voros recalled that their ‘uninhibited behaviour’ caused the YCLers ‘considerable concern’:

[They] constantly exhorted the men not to frequent the Spanish taverns and to stay away from the bordello; to conduct themselves with dignified austerity as befits Communists. The seamen who liked their vino and their women rebelled against this sanctimonious attitude. This led to constant clashes with the leadership who considered the seamen a blot on the working class.\footnote{63}

Voros claimed that the Brigade leadership even attempted to promote abstemious habits amongst the Spaniards. When the John Browne battery was stationed at Almansa, the Brigade leadership tried to cure the townsfolk of the siesta, that ‘inadmissible waste of productive time’, by marching the men through the quiet streets to the sound of blaring bugles.\footnote{64} The villagers were not impressed, and this clumsy attempt to educate the populace was abandoned.

Other facets of personal interaction were altered by the revolution and the civil war, and this held for the revolutionaries in Barcelona as much as for the volunteers in the International Brigades. Mary Low, for example, gives an interesting account of how gossiping was regarded amongst the POUMistas:
I was amazed at first at the lack of personal criticism, of personalities of any kind. Though even that crept in later, among so many other regrettable things. Once, during the first days, before I had got out of bad habits, I said, standing leaning on the rail of one of the galleries which overhung the central lounge: / ‘I don’t like H________ much, do you? There’s something disagreeable about him. / “I was met by a candid, anxious stare. / “Really? Did he say anything tendentious? I thought his position was absolutely sure?” / I felt foolish. / “I don’t mean that. I only meant I find him rather bad tempered.” / “Oh.” / Complete cessation of interest in the eyes, and my interlocutor turned away to something of more importance. / I learned not to do it.65

To emphasize how much she had triumphed over her ‘bad habits’, Low later criticised the ‘poor, grey-looking group’ of English journalists, who gathered at the Café de las Ramblas, for their focus on ‘personalities’ and ‘little individual hates’ which made them ‘a closed citadel, impenetrable to new life’.66

George Orwell also attested to a new emotional climate in the POUM militia. When some of his property was stolen in barracks, his officer immediately suspected a ‘wild looking boy from the back streets of Barcelona’ to be the culprit. The boy was strip-searched and found to be innocent, but Orwell was ashamed that he had ‘half believed’ in the boy’s guilt. Later, however, when the unit was at the front and Orwell got into an argument with another soldier, this boy was Orwell’s strongest defender. Orwell wrote that he was ‘touched’ by this episode, ‘[b]ecause in any normal circumstances it would have been impossible for good feelings ever to be re-established between this boy and myself’. Ordinarily slights would be remembered and resented. In Spain in 1936, however, ‘generous feelings and gestures were easier than they ordinarily are’:

I could relate a dozen similar incidents, not really communicable but bound up in my own mind with the special atmosphere of the time, the shabby clothes and the gay-coloured revolutionary posters, the universal use of the word comrade … Could you feel friendly towards somebody, and stick up for him in a quarrel, after you had been ignominiously searched in his presence for property you were supposed to have stolen from him? No, you couldn’t; but you might if you had both been through some emotionally widening experience. That is one of the by-products of revolution.67

Though Orwell’s account is highly romanticized, there is some evidence that such fraternal feelings, fruits of an ‘emotionally widening experience’, were reflected in patterns of speech. In a development similar to the tutoiement movement of the French Revolution, formal modes of speech in Castilian were replaced with informal ones to indicate the equality of the speakers.68 Don and Señor and usted were replaced with camarada or tu; salud replaced Buenos días. Informal modes of speech were to be found in the Brigades as much as the militias and revolutionary circles. James Jump recalled a commissar at the Republican headquarters in Tarazona complimenting his ‘pre-war Spanish’, but reminding him that ‘we don’t speak like that any more’.69

There was also a language of political orthodoxy. In the Brigades, much could be accomplished by the judicious employment of anti-fascist or Communist Party jargon. Sandor Voros, for example, recalled that ‘long-winded and stilted’ Marxist terminology never failed to convince the Party leadership to give ‘Oklahoma’ another chance.70 Since Oklahoma was a Native American, Voros ‘argued that we simply had to accept him as the product of his capitalist environment and the victim of our vicious colonial treatment of our Indians’ and that it was the ‘job of the politically more advanced comrades … to elevate his class consciousness’.

Such phraseology could quickly become formulaic and absurd. In Jump’s unit, a Spanish colleague would do an impression of an important English visitor addressing the Battalion with a vast array of platitudes:

Comrades, blah-blah-blah, freedom fighter, blah-blah, Spanish legal government, blah-blah-blah, Fascist criminals, blah-blah, traitor Franco, blah-blah, Italian soldiers, blah-blah, German planes, blah-blah, bloody murderers, blah-blah, victory will come, blah blah, freedom, blah blah, no pasarán.72

Just as words themselves changed, the manner of their delivery was also important, though as was the case with clothing, what was acceptable or unacceptable was not always predictable. The
American volunteer Joe Dallet, the college-educated son of a prosperous family, had adopted a new mode of speech when he became a communist: ‘deliberately ungrammatical’, as Steve Nelson described it, and peppered with profanities. Dallet went on to become a particularly autocratic and unpopular commissar, demonstrating that it was not enough to play at being proletarian if one was genuinely difficult to like. We can compare Dallet with someone like George Nathan, whose affectations – and upper-class affectations at that – only added to his renown.

Like George Nathan, George Orwell also provides a useful example for highlighting the ambiguous potential of performance in revolution and war. The ILP volunteer Stafford Cottman recalled that despite Orwell’s ‘cut glass’ Eton accent, which made him ‘rather superior sounding’, Orwell was an influential figure in the ILP unit. Cottman observed that Orwell’s patterns of speech were very similar to that of an officer in the English army: ‘a sort of gentle, accurate enunciation, always uttered in the same level tones, neither raising nor dropping the voice’, coaxing yet authoritative, and reinforced by Orwell’s apparent lack of pretension. ‘He was never prone to imitate or patronise,’ wrote Cottman. ‘I cannot conceive of him ever calling anyone “mate” or “brother”. He politely used your surname to everyone alike.’

Orwell’s swift promotion to cabot (sergeant) is indicative of the authority conferred by his demeanour. Similarly, Cottman’s description is significant for its insistence on both the tangibility of demeanour and its importance in understanding the behaviour of men at war.

III. Conclusion

One night in March 1938, during the retreat of the International Brigades from Aragon, Walter Gregory – the volunteer so impressed by the apparent humility of General Miaja – went out walking, away from his unit, in an attempt to ward off boredom and the cold. He was surprised when, only ‘a mile or so’ down the road from the Brigades’ position, he spotted what appeared to be a group of Nationalist soldiers setting up camp for the night. Instinctively Gregory wanted to turn and run, but, unsure if the sentry had seen him coming, he decided instead to ‘brazen it out’. Gregory then proceeded to act the part of a Nationalist officer with considerable aplomb. He squared his shoulders and marched towards the guard in his ‘best parade ground fashion.’ As the young man came to attention, Gregory inspected him briskly. He looked ‘confidently into [the sentry’s] face with as haughty an expression as I could muster’ and ‘barked’ questions, before ‘calmly … [moving] back into the shadows at a leisurely pace.’ As he sauntered away, Gregory prepared himself for the hail of bullets that would follow the discovery of his ruse. Instead, there was silence. He ‘ran like the wind’ back to his section.

Gregory had just given a thoroughly convincing performance as an officer in Franco’s Nationalist army, and he carried it off by using all the clichés he imagined embodied a fascist’s authoritarian arrogance. In constructing the parody that saved his life, Gregory was aided by elements of dress and demeanour that projected the sentry’s political allegiances and furnished Gregory with the material to literally ‘perform’ as a Nationalist officer. When the guard addressed him as ‘Señor’, Gregory was left in no doubt that he had in fact walked into a Nationalist encampment. Conversely, because Gregory ‘wore no badges of rank to distinguish me as a lieutenant (which was customary in the International Brigade)’, he was saved from immediate and explicit identification as an officer in the Republican Army.

The majority of British and American volunteers in Spain were rarely confronted with such a stark reminder of the importance of dress and demeanour in signalling political loyalties and evincing relationships to authority. The preceding analysis, however, has demonstrated the importance of modes of dress and demeanour for our understanding of the political and ideological climate prevailing in the Republican zone during the Spanish Civil War and the means by which British and American volunteers interpreted and related to that climate. Appearances counted, but they did so in often complex and contradictory ways – confirming comradeship or conferring authority, inviting suspicion or esteem. For the British and American volunteers in Spain, the politics of dress and demeanour were vital in legitimising their undertaking, confirming not only the centrality of
self-fashioning to waging war in a highly politicised and ideological context, but the necessity of regarding warfare and revolution as not only observable events, but also as lived experience.

Notes

3James K. Hopkins, Into the Heart of the Fire: The British in the Spanish Civil War, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1998 is an excellent example of this tendency, as is Stradling’s History and Legend (cited above), and Chris Ealham and Michael Richards’ collection, The Splintering of Spain: Cultural History and the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005 (see in particular their introduction, pp.1-20). Despite its declarative subtitle, Michael Seidman’s recent work, Republic of Egos: A Social History of the Spanish Civil War, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 2002, also sits comfortably within this new historiography.
10To anyone who had been there since the beginning it probably seemed even in December or January that the revolutionary period was ending; but when one came straight from England the aspect of Barcelona was something startling and overwhelming, see George Orwell, ‘Homage to Catalonia’, in Peter Davidson (ed.), Orwell in Spain, Penguin, London, 2001, p.32.
11Orwell, p.32.
12Orwell, pp.32-33.
14Franz Borkenau, The Spanish Cockpit, Faber & Faber, London, 1937, p.70. This eschewing of hats, unusual for the age, was noted by a number of observers: see Mary Low and Juan Breá, Red Spanish Notebook: The First Six Months of the Revolution and the Civil War, City Light Books, San Francisco, 1979, p.198; John Langдон-Davies, Behind the Spanish Barricades, Robert M. McBride & Company, New York, 1937, pp.123-124. Langdon-Davies noted, however, that workers in the hat and tie industries, who belonged to the CNT, were concerned about the implications of this prohibition for their jobs (p.124).
15Borkenau, p.123.
16Quoted in Horn, p.54.
17Low and Breá, p.207.
18This information comes from Lois Cusick, in the letter to her family previously quoted in Horn, p.54. Cusick writes that Breá ‘made Mary quit wearing her overalls and trouser suits three weeks ago.’
19Low and Breá, p.208.
20 As Nash argues, 'the belligerent image of the woman combatant in her blue overalls was predominant in the war posters and was presented as more propagandistic than the male images', see Mary Nash, *Defying Male Civilization: Women in the Spanish Civil War*, Arden, Denver, 1995, pp.50-51.


24 Nash, p.52.

25 Low and Breá, pp.40-41.


27 Orwell, p.107.

28 ibid., p.39.


30 Orwell, p.35.

31 The volunteer William Herrick, for example, was taken to an Army & Navy store to be kitted out, see William Herrick, *Jumping the Line: The Adventures and Misadventures of an American Radical*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1998, p.128.

32 Herrick, pp.185 & 218.

33 Sandor Voros, *American Commissar*, Chilton, Philadelphia, 1961, p.372. Sandor Voros epitomizes the difficulties of interpreting the memoirs of International Brigade volunteers. Though he worked in the Historical Bureau of the XVth Brigade he was clearly unimpressed but the conduct of the Party in Spain, and one is left to wonder at the accuracy of his stories. The tenor of the notes he kept in Spain, however, suggest he was disillusioned from early in the conflict. These are in the International Brigade archive in Moscow, see James K. Hopkins, *Into the Heart of the Fire: The British in the Spanish Civil War*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1998, p.397, n.41.

34 Voros, p.439.


36 General José Miaja was charged with the defence of Madrid in November 1936, after the Republican government relocated to Valencia.


39 Gregory, p.59.

40 See Hopkins, p.177.


42 See Robert A. Stradling, *The Irish in the Spanish Civil War*, 1936-1939, Mandolin, Manchester, 1999, p.153. See also Hopkins, p.400, n.115 for the evidence on which these charges are based.


44 Stradling suggests that Nathan died in ‘somewhat dubious circumstances’ – ‘a bomb dropped from a lone aircraft near Villanueva de la Cañada on the last day of the battle of Brunete’ – and may in fact have been put in harm’s way, see *History and Legend*, pp.43 & 214, n.84.

45 Marx Memorial Library (MML), International Brigade Archive (IBA), Box 21/3/30, Hugh Slater, ‘These Men Have Died’. A version of this is reproduced in Frank Ryan (ed.), *The Book of the XV Brigade: Records of British, American, Canadian, and Irish volunteers in the XV International Brigade in Spain, 1936-1938*, Frank Graham, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1975, pp.175-176. Stradling suggests however that Nathan would have wished to join the Party for ‘protection’ as much as political conviction, see *The Irish and the Spanish Civil War*, p.156.


47 Romilly, p.56.

48 ibid., pp.57-59 & 65.

49 Ironically, Cornford’s first weeks in Spain were spent fighting with the POUM before he returned to England to assist in recruiting for the nascent International Brigades. When he returned to Spain, he fought with other Britons who had come to Spain to join the Brigades, for a full account, see Peter Stansky and William Abrahams, *Journey to the Frontier: Two Roads to the Spanish Civil War*, W.W. Norton, New York, 1966, pp.311-390. As befitted a Real Communist, he was unimpressed by the apparent lack of discipline in the POUM militia, whose members he described as ‘left sectarian semi-Trotskyists’ (p.332).


51 Kiernan, pp.118-119.

52 Stansky and Abrahams, p.218.

53 ibid., p.208.
54ibid., p.208. For a less flattering picture of Cornford, see Stradling, History and Legend, pp.43-47.
55‘To Margot Heinemann’, extracted in John Corrifford, pp.248-249
57Reducing the incidence of venereal disease was a preoccupation not just in the International Brigades but the Republican zone generally, see Nash, pp.154-165.
62Voros, p.318.
63Voros, p.322.
64ibid., p.323.
65Low and Breá, pp.56-57.
66ibid., pp.65-66.
67George Orwell, ‘Looking Back on the Spanish War’ (1942), in Peter Davison (ed.), Orwell in Spain, Penguin, London, 2001, p.349. There is some contention over when this essay was written and 1942 is merely an estimate, see editor’s note, p.343.
70Voros, p.319.
71ibid., p.319.
72‘Jump Memoirs’, p.120.
73Steve Nelson, quoted in Carroll, p.160.
74Carroll, pp.160-162.
75Imperial War Museum Sound Archive (IWMSA) 9278, Stafford Cottman (1986), Reel 4 and Reel 5.
77Gregory, Shallow Grave, pp.104-105.
78Gregory, p.104.