LATVIAN VOLUNTEERS IN THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

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Abstract
The purpose of this article is to analyse the participation of Latvian volunteers in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). To examine this historical episode, diverse international archival sources have been processed, in order to produce a common narrative. This is a topic which had remained lost in the limbo of oblivion, however, on a documented basis is now possible to narrate the feats of the Latvian *brigadistas*\(^1\). While the authoritarian government of Latvia had declared itself neutral towards the Spanish conflict, it took place with the mobilisation of a particular generation made up of young men and women who understood this war as the beginning of an international struggle against Nazi-Fascist powers. These volunteers interpreted the war in Spain in a universal dimension – the Spanish Republican Army was assisted by volunteers from 54 nationalities out of the 56 recognised independent states of the time. Between 1936 and 1938, about 200 Latvians reached Spain and joined regular Republican military units: the International Brigades. They left their daily routines, families and homes in order to enlist in a foreign army to kill and die for. In Spain the Latvian volunteers distinguished themselves because of their idiomatic skills, medical knowledge and previous military experience (especially in the field of artillery). In numerical terms their participation was limited, but in percentage and narrative terms, their story is fascinating and illustrative. Volunteering for Spain was categorised as a serious felony by the Ulmanis regime. Taking sides in the Spanish Civil War was punished by the loss of citizenship penalty. Due to this fact, after Franco’s victory, a considerable number of the Latvian *brigadistas* ended up in French concentration camps until 1941. Not all the Latvian volunteers who fought for the Republican side served in the International Brigades. The Soviet Union was involved in the Spanish Civil War, and a whole intervention mission was launched under Stalin’s orders. Approximately, 2000 Soviet officers from different military fields, served in Spain as advisors, instructors or technicians. A considerable group of them were Latvians, who, by the way, experienced first-hand the horrors of the Great Purge. Despite being a tremendous and fascinating topic, the existing bibliography about it is very scarce. This study begins to fill this literature gap, joining together the existing materials, which combined with documentary sources allow one to make a social picture about the Latvians who volunteered for Spain in those uncertain times of the history in the late 1930’s.

**Keywords:** Antifascism, Comintern, International Brigades, Latvian volunteers, Non-Intervention Pact, Second Spanish Republic, Soviet participation, Spanish Civil War

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\(^1\) A member of the Spanish International Brigades (*Brigadas Internacionales*).
Introduction

On Thursday, 8 May 1941, an enormous crowd was walking to Riga Central Station, in total expectation. The multitude was formed by a large group of men in long coats and hats, women carrying flowers and an orchestra. At last, more than 4 years after their departure, twelve Latvian brigadistas were about to arrive back in their homeland. Their way back home had been even more tortuous than their initial outbound journey. When the train arrived at the platform, the multitude welcomed the cīnītāji very warmly, as heroes. Several photographers immortalised the scene. After the hugs and greetings, some speeches were given. They commemorated “the struggle of the international working class in Spain” – a Latvian leftist newspaper stated – “workers, artists, scientists, revolutionaries, old and young men from all over the world, both communists as well as progressives, volunteered in order to help the Spanish people to fight for freedom”.

This was a symbolic closure for the episode of the Latvian volunteers in the Spanish Civil War (SCW). The outbreak and dimensions of World War II in the Eastern front eclipsed it. However, after 1945, the Spanish Civil War began to be understood as the prelude for WWII. Actually, this consideration fitted very well in the Soviet narrative. The international mobilisation of volunteers for Spain developed into a prophylactic measure against fascism. During the next decades, the International brigadistas were included in the consecutive homages and cultural tribute in the whole Eastern Block, as a crucial part of the fight against Hitler.

The few themed books published about the Latvian volunteers were fruit of it. By the time of the warmth of the Khrushchev Thaw, some themed works about the Latvians in Spain surfaced. The first of them was “Viva república!” (Riga, 1957), which is in fact, the first historical work on the SCW in the Latvian language. It was written by Rudolfs Lācis, who fought in Spain. The work provides us a general picture of the background and development of the conflict, with constant references to the Latvian volunteers. A second work was published under the title: “Latvijas cīnītāji Spānijā, 1936-1939: atminas un dokumenti” (Riga, 1966), firstly in Latvian and later a Russian translation was published. This work was published by the Institute of History of the Communist Party of Latvia, and it is mainly a memoirs compilation of several brigadistas.

2 Their identities were Gurēvičs, Spalāns, Lipkins, Broziņš, Pūce, Folmanis, Kadiķis, Cielēns, Beniķis, Donchins, Markovņiks and Rozenbergs.

3 “Fighters” in Latvian.

4 Jaunais Komunārs, Nr. 110 (09.05.1941), p. 1.
The flame of the Latvian brīvprātīgie extinguished concurrently as they died out. The leap into capitalism and the regaining of the national sovereignty entailed a full renunciation of the former Soviet cultural narratives, and with that the story of the Latvian brigadistas was lost. For almost 40 years the topic passed out of all knowledge, until the opening of the former Soviet and Spanish archives took place. Thanks to both political transitions, it is currently possible to build up a scientific historical story, based on the relevant primary evidence of the time.

The Setting and Recruitment

The late 1930s were a period of upheaval throughout Europe. Faith in democracy was already sinking to the bottom. Authoritarian and totalitarian regimes were proliferating in Europe since the March on Rome in 1922, but the main rise of authoritarianisms took place during the thirties. Democracy only survived in those countries with a longer democratic tradition, such as France, United Kingdom or the Nordic countries, but even in some of them, the breach of fascism took place as a political alternative. The dimensions of this division between democracy and tyranny were such that by the end of the decade only 12 countries out of the 29, that composed Europe, retained a democratic system. The Baltic States were not an exception. Almost two decades after gaining their independence as democratic republics, due to the unfavourable context conditioned by the political polarisation of Central and Eastern Europe, all three Baltic nations acquired authoritarian regimes. Paradoxically, democracy in Latvia came to the end by the hand of one of the political key figures in the creation of the Republic of Latvia, the first and former Prime Minister, Kārlis Ulmanis. He carried out a coup d'état in May, 1934 and introduced authoritarianism in Latvia. At the end of the day, the European balance was in danger since Hitler launched his aggressive campaigns. In order to avoid the participation of third countries in the Spanish

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5 “Volunteers” in Latvian

6 Some authors, as George Von Rauch, have said that Latvia (like Estonia) was an “authoritarian democracy”. However, Ulmanis’ Latvia shared fascist features, as for instance: the chamber system in government, anti-Marxist speech and policies, ultranationalism, fascist aesthetics regarding uniforms and propaganda of the regime, cult of the personality of their leading figures, single ruling party. The control on education and press was also considerable. But unlike the best-known examples of authoritarianisms, the Baltic authoritarianisms did not practice a general or brutal violence policy against opposition and there was no physical elimination of political enemies, in any case there was a severe regime of censorship, political prosecution and imprisonment. Björn M. Felder and Paul J. Weindling (2013) have recently studied some of these aspects.
conflict and to keep the appeasement policy towards Germany (specially carried out mainly by United Kingdom), France proposed the creation of an international Non-Intervention Pact. Immediately several governments of Europe agreed this project and by 15 August 15, UK and France accepted to establish a committee. The decision was agreed by 27 European states, including Latvia. But it was never captured in a paper\textsuperscript{7}. In February 1937 Ulmanis’ Latvia passed a national decree in order to ban the organisation and participation of national citizens in the Spanish Civil War. In general terms Latvia fulfilled the Non-Intervention Pact during the three years of war. Only few episodic diplomatic or commercial dealings took place with both Spanish governments.

The Spanish Civil War gained, since its early beginning, the characteristic features of an international conflict. The rebellion, supported by Nazi Germany and Italy, faced a Spanish Republic isolated in the international negotiations. But, beyond the attitude of the European governments, thousands of citizens from all the countries supported the antifascist cause of the Republic. The participation of foreigner volunteers took place from the very outbreak. Until the summer of 1936, diverse foreign volunteers joined militia units, depending on their political similarity. Some others gathered because of their nationality. But the organised international mobilisation was the direct result of a Comintern\textsuperscript{8} decision. It organised the moral and material support that culminated in the foundation and recruitment of the International Brigades (IB): regular military units integrated in the Republican Army, formed by foreign volunteers from all over the world. About 200 men (and a dozen of women) were Latvians. Dreamy proletarians, peasants, doctors, intellectuals...all kinds of men and women were convinced: “fighting fascism in Spain was fighting their domestic fascism”\textsuperscript{9}.

The Comintern followed attentively the events which were taking place in Spain since the very beginning. Exactly two months after the outbreak of the coup, when it had already evolved into a war status, the Comintern approved “the gestation of an organised recruitment in all the countries of volunteers who counted on military experience in order to be sent to Spain\textsuperscript{10}”. The decision was made by the Secretariat of the ECCI\textsuperscript{11} on 18 September 1936, and it entrusted the organising tasks to the national

\textsuperscript{7} Aróstegui, Julio (1997).
\textsuperscript{8} The Communist International, abbreviated as Comintern.
\textsuperscript{9} Statement of most of the Latvians once arrived in Spain.
\textsuperscript{10} RGASPI/KOMINTERN/F.517/OP.3/D.15.
\textsuperscript{11} The Executive Committee of the Communist International, commonly known by its acronym, ECCI.
Communist Parties. The main tasks were given to the PCF, led by the distinguished Comintern agent André Marty. Along the antifascist bibliography, the creation of the International Brigades has been shown as a response of the international working class to the Non-Intervention Pact, but the formation of the International Brigade as an organised mobilisation was actually a direct result of Stalin’s change of mind towards Spain. A few days earlier, he had agreed to a wide involvement in Spain, but in secrecy Stalin encouraged and supported the recruitment and shipment of brigadistas. By the end of September “the Spanish comrades requested to intensify the shipment of volunteers, – Luigi Longo wrote – but few days earlier the Comintern had already decided to reinforce and to carry out a massive scale recruitment”. Longo also reveals that in every country a special committee was created in order to organise the transportation of its national volunteers. In 1933, the ECCI established an international committee against war and fascism: the so-called “Amsterdam-Pleyel committee”. It was the beginning of a complementary policy to the Popular Front’s strategy. The main goal was to create plural committees of international solidarity, but ruled de facto by the Communist Party. Since the outbreak of the Spanish conflict, these committees proliferated rapidly thanks to the work carried out by International Red Aid branches. Firstly, they carried out tasks related to economic donations, but after August 1936, due to the increase of foreign volunteers, the committees began carrying out recruitment tasks. The recruitment criteria for volunteers was very lax, and it was not allocated only for communists, it was allocated to all antifascist trends and no other political, national or racial criteria was applied. The French organisations played a very important role, co-operating in the organisation and shipment of volunteer groups to the Spanish borders. France became the key point for the final step into the Republican frontlines. It was a shuttle platform for the IB. In France two middle-bases were established: one in Marseille (for the maritime transportation) and another in Perpignan (for the land access). But, the political and clandestine organising work was carried out in Paris.

The recruitment process required a considerable economic funding and the most important thing: a clandestine framework to work under Ulmanis’ regime. Depending on the effectiveness of the Comintern in each country, the more complete would be each national network. In the case of the Baltic States, the Comintern was very active and involved

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12 The French Communist Party (French: Parti communiste français, PCF).
14 A donation list can be found in the Latvian War Museum.
15 Skoutelsky, Rémi (2006).
in the all three countries. Due to this fact, Latvia experienced a very wide social support towards the Spanish cause and the motto ¡No pasarán!\textsuperscript{16} was quickly adopted. Since September 1936, the Latvian Communist Party (LKP) committee got in touch with the communist organisations in Paris, where two Latvian activists were working as organisers for the internationalist effort, specially focused on communications and the shipment of antifascist volunteers from Eastern Europe. Their names were Masja Zilbermane and Janis Palkavnieks\textsuperscript{17}. Both were LSP activists (the Latvian branch for the Red International Help). It is not clear if they were sent to Paris or if they were already exiled. The author is personally inclined towards this second option. Anyhow, they were mainly responsible for the arrival of Latvian volunteers, and other Baltic nationalities. Their work was about facilitating the trip and the incorporation into the Spanish lines. The French organisations arranged two departure bases on the southern border, one for maritime transportation and a second one for land transport. But the trip previously included a whole system of combinations.

From Latvia the first step was usually to move to Sweden and Denmark, pretending to be tourists in order to evade authorities. From there, they headed to France through Central European countries. Obviously, Germany, where the Gestapo was already playing a horrifying role, was not on their plans, and they rather preferred crossing through the Czech Republic and Belgium. But, there were no safe stops. In September 1936 the Swedish authorities arrested a Latvian group of volunteers who were in their way to Spain.\textsuperscript{18}

Once they arrived in Paris, they were gathered and sent in small groups\textsuperscript{19}. Each one was formed by many different nationalities. Usually the Latvians never exceeded more than three volunteers per outbound group. Latvians and Lithuanians especially (and Estonians in less measure) used to meet in France and left together into Spain. Some of them carried their books and musical instruments\textsuperscript{20}. They were transported by train to Perpignan, a French city close to the Spanish border. The next stop was Figueras, a Catalanian city, where they used to arrive by train and sometimes in trucks. In Figueras they were concentrated and few days later taken to Albacete, where the Spanish Government had established the IB General Headquarters.

\textsuperscript{16} Spanish for “They shall not pass”.
\textsuperscript{17} RGASPI/KOMINTERN, F.545, OP.6, D.604/18.
\textsuperscript{18} Sugarman, Martin (2013), p. 79.
\textsuperscript{19} According to Longo (1966), by Autumn, 1936, every night were prepared and sent about 40 foreign volunteers.
\textsuperscript{20} Vidal Castaño, José (2004), p. 207.
Latvians and the International Brigades

Nowadays it becomes evident that the feats of the International Brigades (IB) have been subject to a certain degree of mystification, distorting their genuine social picture. Of course, it is a major task for the historian to make up a general outline about the (approximately) 35000 volunteers\(^{21}\) from 54 countries (out of the 56 independent and recognised countries within the League of Nations in 1936). But it is possible to point out some general characteristics and features about their socio-political picture: they were men and women from different races, social classes, religious beliefs and political convictions. Their link in common was the understanding of Spain as the first open battlefield where to fight International Nazi-Fascism.

As some authors have pointed out, the social picture of the IB is frequently shown among bibliography as too intellectual\(^{22}\), frequently omitting a more truthful analysis. This intellectual and romantic touch rests partially on the oversized picture broadcast by the constant appearance of characters such as Hemingway, Orwell, Malreux, Renn or Regler, who are some of the best known cases of international figures who supported the Republican cause, even though none of them joined the brigades. Many notorious figures of the IB count on well documented works while the general picture, composed mostly by anonymous volunteers has not begun to be fully approached until recently.

According to the documentation at the author’s disposal, it can be inferred that the Latvian volunteers can be divided in two different groups according to their identified professional status. The first and largest was formed by workers from manual labour fields. About 80% of them were factory workers, mechanics, painters, chauffeurs, and peasants; as well there is a registered case of a Riga tram driver! The second group was a minority, which included engineers, doctors, nurses, military officers of diverse rank, pharmacists and some people from the arts world. This second group of learned people, carried out their university studies in Western and Central European countries (such as France, Germany, Czechoslovakia and Austria), where they also began their political activity and learned other languages, which would be very useful later within the frame of the International Brigades. In fact, these international experiences and organisational contacts, with other European activists during the decade prior to the Spanish Civil War, meant a turning point in their lives and motivated them to join the Spanish cause some years later.

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\(^{22}\) Skoutelsky, Rémy (2006).
From a geographical point of view, they mostly came from the industrial cities of Latvia. Especially workers from Riga, but also from factories located in Daugavpils and Liepāja. Also there were volunteers from some flourishing urban areas as Valmiera or Ventspils, as well as from some other areas of the countryside connected to the railway network. At this point it is important to point out the decisive role played by the railways in the political and cultural spread throughout the Latvian countryside. However, there was a considerable number of Baltics who volunteered from their immigration destinations, where they have already fled to, especially since the 1929 crisis. Some Latvians came from the United States, such as Elias Begelman and Isadore Leavitt (aka “Jack Cooper”)23. Usually they were included in English-speaker battalions and counted as Americans or some time they were double counted which generates a problem for an accurate quantification. However, there were also Latvians who volunteered also from Soviet Union or from Central European countries where they were already exiled or studying.

The Latvians who fought in Spain were mostly born between 1905 and 1915, having an average age for enlistment of 27 years. There were some exceptions. The oldest volunteer was the General, Voldemars Ozols, who was born in 1884 and was 51 years old when he joined the IB. The youngest ones were in their teen years when they enlisted. They were born in 1917 and 191624. Only three of them were WWI veterans. These were experienced Red Army officers who served in Spain as members of the Soviet involvement mission. Their names were Jānis Tikīņš, the Latvian rifleman Jānis Artmanis25 and Augusts Ratnieks. However, the impact of

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23 Both were born in Riga and immigrated with their families in the early 30’s. The Abraham Lincoln Battalion Archive counts on files about both of them at the Taminent Library in New York. Under the entry name and code: “Elias Begelman Papers (ALBA.124)”, it can be found some correspondence and official documentations related to the IB. Also it can be found a photograph of Isadore Leavitt (Jack Cooper): “ALBA/Photo-nr/11-0147”.

24 The two youngest Latvian volunteers were both from Liepaja. They were Jascha Israelsen (1917) and Rudolfs Smits (1916). Israelsen joined the Republican Army in February, 1938, and was a private of the XIVth International Brigade (4th battalion, 2nd company). Rudolfs Smits fought in Spain between March, 1937 and February, 1939, as gunner of the Division of Artillery of the XIIIth International Brigade.

25 Jānis Artmanis, whose real name was Alfrēds Tiltiņš was born in 1897 in the region of Mežotne. He was the older brother of Pol Arman, Soviet tank commander who also volunteered for Spain. Jānis fought for the Russian Army during the Great War and later joined the Red Army during the Russian Civil War (1917-1922). He served in Spain between October, 1936 and May, 1937, as advisor in the Soviet mission. In November, 1937, he was arrested with other Soviet Latvian officers under Stalin’s purge orders. Condemned to 15 years of imprisonment, he died in 1941. He was rehabilitated during the Khrushchev Thaw.
the Great War was present in all of them. The majority of them were children who were raised in a society traumatised by warfare. Unfortunately, war had marked the prologue of their lives and for many it meant also its epilogue. The young Baltic States had been born during the last beats of WW1 and through National Independence Wars. Their sovereignty and independence was erased at the outbreak of WW2. This close relationship between the Latvian people and war can – only partially – explain the high rates of volunteer participation in the International Brigades. Many of them were too familiar regarding war.

From an ethnic approach, the Latvians composed a heterogeneous group that depicted the multi-ethnic society of Latvia at that time. There were mainly ethnic Latvians, Jewish (a very large group) and Latvians with Slavonic roots. It was the result of the Tsarist control in the Eastern Baltic shore since the end of the XVIIIth century. They all had a strong national feeling and affection for Latvia, the homeland of all of them, as it can be deduced from their letters.

For the great majority of Latvians who volunteered for Spain, their true profession was Revolution. Their personal records allow such a categorical statement. Most of the documented individual cases were committed political activists. Prosecuted, arrested and imprisoned in several different countries all over Europe. There was a large group of Latvians who dedicated their whole life since late childhood to communist activities, both in their motherland and abroad. As a result it is rare to find any volunteer among them with no police records. These personal files reveal that many of the Latvian brigadistas had lived in an intense political environment prior to the Spanish Civil War. So far, the most interesting files regarding their political background can be found at the RGASPI26. A considerable number counted a large number of arrests; two of them had been arrested 9 and 10 times each. Tired of being intensely prosecuted, they saw in Spain an open battlefield for their convictions, far away from hiding.

Concerning their political and ideological leanings, the Latvians volunteers (as for the other two Baltic nationalities) show a very homogeneous result: most of them with a defined and known ideology were Communist. Members of the national Marxist-Leninist parties, clandestine local brunches of the VKP(b). In Latvia the Communist Party (CP) was represented by the Latvijas Komunistiskā partija (LKP). Those who already had immigrated to America and elsewhere also joined different brunches of the CP in their hosting countries, most of which were inclined to the Soviets. There are not yet documented cases of members of other

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26 The Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, formerly the Comintern Archive, preserves the main documentary fund about the International Brigades and nowadays it stands for a mandatory visit for any researcher.
parties. Some of them collaborated also in the “MOPR” (Russian acronym for the “International Red Aid”). However this seems very compatible, since the political guidelines of the “MOPR” were under the direction of the CP. As it can be inferred from the Comintern’s files, some other volunteers had no defined ideology, but in their registration files they considered themselves simply as antifascistas. These same files also demonstrate that, during and (especially) after the Spanish Civil War, the Comintern carried out an intense work of “political evaluation” on the individuals who joined the IB, but on the Baltic volunteers in particular. This political supervision took place concurrently with Stalin’s Great Purge, causing the arrest and execution of a number of Soviet Latvian officers.

However, these International veterans were very valued by the Republican Army, at least as for leading the International Brigades and composing the General Staff. Actually all the IB were headed by foreign figures such as the brigade generals Hans Kahle, “Kléber”, “Gómez”, Dumont, “Lukács”, “Walter”, Copic, Cunningham, Ludvig Renn etc. They were exceptions because they were some of the few of the International volunteers who counted on previous military experience as officers. However, many of them reached officer and sub-officer ranks within the EPR27. Many Latvians reached officer positions.

Latvian Volunteers

Janis Benikis became Commander of an artillery division. Rudolfs “Wilks” Lācis28 achieved the rank of Major of the XIIIth IB. “Claudio Chispa”, whose real name was Aleksander Berzins, reached the rank of Captain and leaded the anti-tank battery of the Dumbrovski battalion from the XIIIth IB. Georgs Brozins, who became Captain after the Battle of Jarama, in February, 1937, was later promoted to Commander of the 341st battalion. He achieved also the officer rank of Chief of Infantry of the XVth IB. His main assistant was also a Latvian, Fricis Puce. There is also a large list of lieutenants and sergeants. The Lieutenant Aleksanders Ginsburg was commended for courage posthumously, after he was killed in action in the Aragon front. Another interesting case was Voldemars Ozols, a Red Army veteran who immigrated to France. According to some sources reached the rank of brigade general, but it still has to be confirmed. After the Spanish Civil War he ended up in a French internment camp and joined the Resistance.

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27 The People’s Republican Army, Spanish: Ejército Popular de la República (EPR).
28 His recruitment form is preserved at the Latvian Museum of War. Rudolfs Lācis wrote the first historical work in Latvian about the Spanish Civil War, entitled: “Viva repúbical!” (Riga, 1957).
After WW2 Ozols became professor at the University of Latvia. He died in 1949. One of the most notorious Latvian volunteers was “Egon Schmits”, whose real name was Mihails Švarcs. His previous military experience and his “political curriculum” were well valued by the IB General Staff, who promoted him to Captain after Jarama Battle, where he was wounded. He became Chief of the Sappers Company of the XVth IB’s engineers unit in order to carry out counterintelligence tasks. On August 18th, 1938, Švarcs was killed in action in the major Republican offensive over the Ebro river 29.

“On August 18th, about noon, I announced that Švarcs had fallen” – Peter Ludvig, who was head officer of fortifications from the XVth IB wrote on his memoirs. “We gathered around his corpse. We dug the grave and over it we built a memorial of 1.5 meters: a monument 30 which memorised and honoured the names of those comrades who had fallen fighting for the Sierra de Pandols.”

However, not all the Latvian volunteers served in military units. There were also a considerable number of doctors and nurses who worked in the “Servicio Sanitario Internacional” (ISS), an institution run by the IB Headquarters, which counted several hospitals over all the different fronts. By December 1936, the Republican troops planed a major offensive over Teruel front, in Aragon. Therefore, the IB Staff established in Benicassim a hospital the goal of which was to aid the foreseeable wounded troops for the battle. The creation of this complex became the corner stone for the establishment of an IB Health Service with its own hospital network. During the first months, this service worked at battalion and brigade levels. However, after the Battle for Madrid, the subsequent transfer of the government to Valencia and the overflowing of the hospital system into the Central front produced a saturation of the Albacete clinic, which became a hospital. However, it became evident that the Republican army required a well-organised and extensive network of hospitals through all the active fronts. Meanwhile the wounded brigadistas were dispersed in about 50 different hospitals and clinics 31.

The wounded that were hospitalised in Madrid were evacuated: the city was exposed to the daily bombings. In Murcia, the IB Staff established another hospital in order to relieve the occupancy rates. This hospital net is established concurrently when the largest number of Latvian volunteers joined the International Brigades in 1937, coinciding with the hardest battles. Many of them were wounded and were hospitalised at some

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29 His recruitment form is preserved at the Latvian Museum of War. Rudolfs Lācis directed the first historical work in Latvian about the Spanish Civil War, entitled: “Viva repúbical!” (Riga, 1957).

30 A picture of this monument can be found in Lacis, Rudolfs (1957), p. 99.

point. Mostly, they stayed at the hospitals placed in Santa Coloma del Farnés, Murcia, Farnés de la Selva, Benicassim, S’Agaró, Villanueva de la Jara, Mataró and Albacete. A considerable number of them were several times hospitalised. About 50% of all the Baltic *brigadistas* died or wounded in Spain.

However, the hospital network required more resources, both material and personnel. If by November, 1936, the IB counted on only one clinic with capacity for 30 patients, with 6 doctors and a handful of nurses, by the summer of 1937, the Republic had 21 hospitals (with an approximate capacity for 6000 patients) staffed by the ISS. As the horrors of the war intensified, the strengthening of propaganda campaigns took place. Especially they were carried out by Spanish institutions, the MOPR and the Comintern. It was the time of the photomontages. Hundreds of different posters, which showed the horror, lived by the civilian population in Madrid. Especially pictures of children were used. They were produced in several languages. They made an appeal for international solidarity, under slogans such as "What do you do to avoid this?".

It seems these campaigns were extraordinarily effective and supported. The recruitment of military and sanitary volunteers increased considerably in 1937. By the fall of 1937, the ISS was composed by more than 1500 doctors, nurses and ambulance drivers. There were Baltics among them! Latvian Jewish and Latvian women played a very relevant role.

**Latvian Jewish Volunteers**

Despite the fact that the total quantification of the Jewish group in the frame of the IB is still controversial and matter of discussion, generally, the historiography estimates this group at about 7000 persons. This high presence, about 20% of the total number of *brigadistas*, is obviously related to the large amount of political activism among the left-wing parties and Hebrew movements, which Jewish groups were involved in since the second half of the 19th century in Eastern Europe. Prior to WW2 in Latvia there was a large Jewish community. It was, almost totally, erased during the Holocaust. Riga was a political centre, due to its population

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32 A very nice picture of some Latvian volunteers at the Murcia Hospital during summer, 1937, can be found in the Latvian War Museum.

33 Ibáñez Sperber, Raquel (2006). It includes Jewish and people from Jewish roots. The most complete biographic dictionary is the work of Martin Sugarman: “Jews who served in The International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War”, which is mainly a compilation of Jewish IB members.

34 Some other authors estimates it up to 25% . For instance Fernández, Alberto (1975) or Medem, Gina (1937).
size and industrial life, for diverse Hebrew movements. The motivations of the brigadistas were always a personal issue, but it is possible to address some general causes that influenced Jewish volunteers in particular. Their reasons were not strictly religious, but they were mainly affected by the situation of their religious community at that moment.

To explain why there was such a massive Jewish enlistment in the Spanish Civil War, it is necessary to take a look back to the political development in the Europe of the thirties. Anti-Semitism was being reinforced and reincorporated as part of the right wing parties’ general speeches. It is a crucial factor. A considerable number of Jewish volunteers came from immigrant families, which were starting to suffer the social-political repudiation and prosecution in Central and Eastern Europe. In Latvia, the Jewish population became a tolerated ethnic minority, well recognised after establishment of the new independent state. During the 19th century, the Jewish community got very conscious about itself as an ethnic group. The formal foundation of the Latvian state was for many, as the Zionist movement, a divisor episode among the Jewish communities, which experienced a political diversification depending on national, religious and ideological identities. In the Baltic Sea Region during the Interwar period, the Jewish traditional communities experienced a crisis of values and political division. Especially the generation born during the first two decades of the 20th century intensified its role on politics. It took a major role in the urban and industrial areas. The Jewish political activists in the Baltic territories of the Russian Empire radicalised ideologically, especially from the 1917 Revolution on. During the Independence Era, they carried out relevant political activism, which can be appreciated in the Jewish publications and newspapers of the period. But by 1936, due to the consolidation of authoritarian regimes the ethnic minorities were less favoured and experienced more difficulties in their daily life, adopting an antifascist attitude and taking up a stance towards the Communist Party and other radical left-wing parties. However, in Spain, their ideological, national and social precedence was very diverse. Within the frame of the International Brigades they were divided by national affinity in battalions, but the use of Yiddish among sanitary personnel and officers has been registered35. The Hebrew volunteers even created their own military unit under the name “Botwin company”36.

36 The best description of this company can be found in González, Isidro (2004, pp. 286-294). The Botwin company was formerly named Second Palafox Battalion’s Company. It counted on about 150 soldiers and it lasted for nine months, until the Ebro offensive in September, 1938. This company published its own magazine in Yiddish.
Peisach Bernshtam held very important sanitary responsibilities during the Spanish Civil War. He was born to a middle-class family in Bauska in 1906. During the 1920s, Peisach moved to Vienna and later to Paris, where he carried out medical studies until he became a doctor in 1934. So far, in France, he had developed a considerable interest about politics and as soon as he got back in Riga he joined antifascist circles and established and ran a printing press in his own flat for two years. After the outbreak of Spanish Civil War, he got in touch with the Latvian supportive committee in order to volunteer for Spain. At that time, the Baltic Sea was well controlled by authorities, especially after the Non Intervention Pact was agreed, the prosecution of volunteers for Spain increased. His first trip to Spain via Stockholm was cancelled, the previous week the Swedish authorities arrested a group of Latvian volunteers. He finally arrived in Barcelona by May 1937, after have travelled via Tallinn-Paris-Marseille-Figueres. The process of the constitution of the ISS was being developed, and the first destination for Doctor Bernshtam was the central headquarters at Albacete. His first tasks were about checking up and approving the volunteers for military service. The middle of 1937 was the time when more foreign volunteers enlisted in the IB. At those days his unit examined about 200-300 men daily. By September 1937, he was finally sent to the front and during the next two years he served in the battlefronts of Ebro, Teruel, Belchite, etc. and in the IB hospitals of Alicante and Caspe. During these military actions, Dr. Bernstham was promoted to Captain in September 1938. But by 1939 the war was almost lost for the Republic, and, as many other Baltic volunteers, he crossed into the French border on February 1, 1939. He was placed in a concentration camp in Argelés sur-Mer, with a large group of Latvian volunteers. The situation in these camps was dramatic. For the doctors it became a new front where to help their comrades who were “exposed to the hunger, the cold and the illnesses”. In 1941 he was sent to the Soviet Union. He survived WWII and married a Catalanian woman with who he lived in Riga until the 1980’s. Then he moved to Barcelona with his family.

Latvian Women Volunteers

Despite the fact that most of the Latvian volunteers were men, there were also a dozen or so women among them. Their stories deserve their own lines. Spain became the first battlefield in history where women

37 Sugarman, Martin (2013), p. 79. This story is based on the memoirs of Simon Hirschman.
38 RGASPI/KOM/F545/OP4-D22. An interesting and dramatic tale can be found in a Lithuanian magazine written in the French concentration camp of Gurs. It is in Lithuanian.
volunteered in order to take an active part. WWI and the Russian Revolution changed definitively the role of woman in society. Since the incorporation of the women into the salaried labour system, the political dimensions of the female gender expanded. It’s most evident example: the right to vote. Universal suffrage was established during the 1920’s in several countries of the world. In Spain, it was adopted during the general elections of 1933. During the 1930’s in Spain the political parties and trade unions worked for equality. But with the Spanish Civil war began a new age for the women.

They broke gender limits and joined the militia units during the first months of war. It was the government of Largo Caballero which withdrew female troops from the front lines and they were incorporated to administrative, productive and interpretation tasks. For first time in History, women took part voluntarily in a foreign conflict, risking their lives for a major cause which they considered worthy. The women volunteers who came from the Baltic States mostly joined the ISS. But there were also women in the trenches during the first months of the war, organising the shipment of volunteers in secrecy, working for the SIM and even spies. Most of the Latvian women took part as personnel of the ISS. In 1937 the Spanish conflict went bloody – major offensives, the rebel bombings over Madrid, etc. The subsequent wounded and refugees configured a dramatic atmosphere which became the motivation for hundreds of volunteers to help the Loyalist population as nurses, doctors or mere volunteers. Not all the nurses and doctors were women, but most of the Latvians worked as doctors and nurses. The following three latvietes served as nurses in the International Sanitary Service: Dora Donda, Frida Marta Ginsburg and Civja Vospe. But there were quite a large number of women doctors from Latvia. So far five cases have been documented. Their names were: the sisters Braina and Miriam Rudina, Ela Aronovna, Sara Svalbe and Sara Gavrilovna. Actually, the Latvian women doctors composed the largest group (in percentage terms) out of all the nationalities which joined the IB.

The most illustrative example among the Latvian doctors is the personal case of Braina Rudina. She was a very politically active woman, who illustrates the degree of importance that some Latvian women achieved within the frame of the Republican ISS. Despite the fact that she used several


40 The Servicio de Información Militar (Military Information Service) or SIM.

41 Such as Lise Ricol, who worked for the International Liaison Department (Comintern) during the Spanish Civil War.
“nomes de guerre” (in Spain she was also known as Brain Voss or Rodin-Voss and by the Comintern she was also known as Marlena Nenadova), she was born as Braina Rudina Pedanova in Riga on June 11\textsuperscript{th} 1902 to a lower-class Jewish family\textsuperscript{42}. Similarly to her older sister Miriam, she carried out her studies in Germany, at the faculties of Berlin and Friburg between 1922 and 1927, when she became a doctor. During the next years she stayed in Germany, where she joined the KPD\textsuperscript{43} in 1931 and married Alfons Bergmann, a German former member of the RFB\textsuperscript{44} who later would also join the IB (as would her own sister). As soon as Hitler came to the power and anti-Semitism actions began in Germany and in that same year, 1933, she moved to Yugoslavia. There she kept on carrying out antifascist activism and in early 1935 she moved to work for a hospital in Moscow. Her effort in that hospital was such that she was considered worthy enough as to be awarded with a Stakhanovite medal\textsuperscript{45} for workers. In 1936 she went back to Belgrade, probably as Comintern agent, organising the transportation of volunteers from Yugoslavia to Spain. As result, she was arrested and imprisoned for 8 months. Meanwhile her sister Miriam and her husband had already joined the IB. Miriam, who was doctor as well, was promoted to lieutenant and head at the Albacete IB Hospital. In January 1938 Braina was released from prison and volunteered, arriving in Albacete on February 10\textsuperscript{th}, 1938, was promoted to lieutenant and became head of Villanueva de la Jara IB hospital, in the Catalonian front. Later, due to the Rebel advance in the front lines she became head of S’Agaró IB hospital. Because she was able to speak fluently Serbian, Russian, German, French and Spanish and she was considered a good doctor and organiser, she was promoted to Captain. At the end of the war she escaped to Moscow, where she lived until the outbreak of WWII for Soviet Union in 1941, when she joined the sanitary service of the Red Army. As soon as the war ended in 1945, she moved to Riga, her hometown, where she reencountered her sister. She died in Riga in 1973.

\textsuperscript{42} RGASPI: KOMINTERN/ F545/ OP6/ D606/40-44
\textsuperscript{43} The Communist Party of Germany (German: Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands, KPD).
\textsuperscript{44} The Roter Frontkämpferbund (German) – “Alliance of Red Front-Fighters”, abbreviated RFB
\textsuperscript{45} The Stakhanovite medal was established during the second Stalinist 5-year plan in 1935 as a new stage of the socialist competition. The Stakhanovite movement was named after Aleksei Stakhanov, who mined 102 tons of coal in less than 6 hours. That amount was about 15 times the usual quota. This medal became an award which provided political and social recognition within the Soviet community.
Latvians in the International Brigades

Taking into account the most shared characteristics and features from all the documented cases at the author’s disposal, it is possible to state that the perfect example of a Latvian brīvprātīgais was a young man between 21 and 26 years old, born into a working class family in some Latvian industrial area; raised up during the WW1 post-war and close to clandestine political movements since his teens. Probably he had already been arrested more than once by 1936. At the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, due to the intense supportive propaganda campaigns and after the decision of the Comintern, he joined the first wave of Latvian volunteers, which took place during the “optimistic times” for the Republican Army, before the major German-Italian support for the Rebels influenced, once and for all, the war in favour of Franco.

Language became an important problem during the first months after the creation of the brigades. Most of the volunteers only knew their mother tongue. There were several difficulties regarding organisation and communications, which were slow and problematic, until the incorporation of translators and interpreters. If with French and Italian volunteers, the communication was possible due to the short distance between these different Latin languages, with the Latvian volunteers it was only possible using interpreters. Some of them were Lithuanians who had lived in South America, where they had learned Spanish (a very large group of Lithuanians volunteered from Argentina), but some others were Poles or from other Slavonic groups who usually translated from Spanish into Russian. The Latvian language was only used in those units where there was a large gathering of latvieši, as in the artillery battalion of the XIIIth IB, which had the largest presence of Latvians among sub-officers and troops.

Actually, the Latvians played a very meaningful role for the Republican Artillery Park, which after the “coup” suffered a lack of organised and powerful battalions. The amounts of guns in both armies were scarce and these artillery cannons were very coveted. As result of the foreign aid, the Republican Artillery Park was enlarged by the massive incorporation of Soviet weaponry, ammunitions and other goods. Many new cannon models were imported from the USSR, but not exclusively Soviet models. All these Soviet war materials were accompanied with instruction guides in

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46 Longo, Luigi: “Las Brigadas Internacionales” (1966), p. 52. Longo, whose “nome de guerre” was Gallo, was the main supervisor and a key organiser of the International Brigades. His testimony, despite being a bit outdated, is still being mandatory for a basic understanding of this mobilisation of men from all over the world.

47 These Soviet exportations included Schneider howitzers (155 mm), Perm cannons (152 mm) and a large variety of models that vary between 105 and 75 mm.
Russian. Most of the Baltic brigadistas spoke Russian (either fluently or as mother tongue) and had basic military service. The young Baltic States had improvised modern armies and military service was mandatory, so many Latvian volunteers had already served in their national army and some of them in particular had served in artillery units. Such is the case of Leons Kleinmanis. Using a firearm was something that people – more or less – got used to in a couple of weeks, but being an artillery gunner required a wider military experience and discipline. There were several Latvian officers and non-commissioned officers. Jānis Benikis became commander of an artillery division, being one of those who achieved a very high military rank among all the Baltic volunteers. Also a Latvian Red Army officer was sent by the time of “Operation X” as an advisor for the Republican Artillery. His name was Vīlhelms Kumelans and his main orders were to instruct and organise the whole artillery division.

The End of the Spanish Civil War

The war was almost over. The Republican army was in retreat. Thousands were imprisoned, others executed. The fronts vanished. Meanwhile on October 18, 1938, a “Community Initiative to Reduce Violence” (CIRV) was sent by the League of Nations to Spain in order to supervise the withdrawal of foreign volunteers from the Loyalist army, as it was requested by the British government. The commission exited from their cars and saluted the Republican authorities. It was formed by several officers from different states, including the presence of the Latvian Colonel Jeske. After having fought in all the major operations of the Spanish Civil War – the Defence of Madrid, the battles of Jarama, Brunete, Belchite, Teruel, Aragon and the final offensive of the Ebro – the International Brigades were withdrawn. By the acceptance of this withdrawal, the Prime Minister Negrin aimed to gain diplomatic backing in the international arena, expecting that Franco also would get rid of his Italian and German troops or, at least, to re-establish the right to purchase war materials for the Republic. But that did not happen. Franco did not withdraw his international forces and the Republic was still not authorised to buy weapons.

A Latvian film really understood the true nature of this episode. The film was Noktirne, directed by Rostislav Goryayev in 1966, and inspired

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48 For some authors, as Daniel Kowalsky (2004), the withdrawal of the International Brigades is evidence of the weakness of Stalin’s international relations system in prior to WW2 Europe.

49 “La Vanguardia” (newspaper library): October 18, 1938.
by Žanis Grīva’s story. In one of its most impressive scenes it reproduces the farewell parade of the International Brigades, which took place on October 28, 1939. A street of Riga, splendidly decorated as the Avenida 14 de Abril in Barcelona recreates how the brigadistas marched for last time, acclaimed by thousands of civilians who see that their unique international defenders are leaving them. The beautiful scene ends with the sound produced by the weapons of the soldiers, who throw them into enormous piles. It was the sound of defeat.

With this parade, the Republic fulfilled the CIRV demands. The International Brigades were dismissed. In January 1939, the committee verified that at the time there were 12673 international volunteers on the Republican side. Most of them were evacuated between November 1938 and January. But not, however, all of them. What would happen with those whose countries were ruled by fascist and authoritarian regimes? What fate was waiting for the Latvians? Ulmanis’ regime passed a law in particular regarding the participation of Latvian citizens in the Spanish conflict. If the Baltic brigadistas would have gone back to their homeland they would have been arrested and imprisoned. After October 1938, about 6000 brigadistas were transferred to the 35th Division of the Spanish Republican Army. This explains why most of the Latvians did not leave. By the end of 1938, many Latvians asked to the Republican government for their repatriation. They stayed in Spain until February 1939, when the Francoist troops broke the front of Catalonia. Only when their capture was imminent, they left Spain together with half a million Spanish refugees who crossed the Pyrenees looking for a shelter far away from the horror. The time for exile had come.

**French Concentration Camps**

Once they crossed the border, the French authorities (gendarmerie and members of the Foreign Legion) detained and imprisoned civilians and

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50 Žanis Grīva was born in Talsi (Latvia) on November 24, 1910. He joined the LKP in 1934 and volunteered for Spain in January 1937, where he fought in the IB until February, 1938, when he was imprisoned in a French POW camp. His experience in Spain marked a turning point in his life that was immortalised in his literature. He is considered as one of the most notorious Latvian men of letters from all the Soviet era. He died in Riga, on June 14, 1982.

51 These reports can be found in RGASPI. They show a large variety of destinations, mostly: Mexico, Argentina and Soviet Union. But there are no confirmation letters for these applications.
soldiers in “internment camps”\textsuperscript{52}. The French government, at that time under right-wing influence, received them with hostility and considered them “undesirable”\textsuperscript{53}. The French border was closed. After Franco’s offensive into Catalonia, in February 1939, the Republican Northern army dispersed. The situation was dramatic; masses of Spanish families walking through the mountains, in the very depth of winter, carrying their suitcases and children. The photographic sources – like nowadays in other regions of the world – are the best testimony of the tragedy of exile. On February 5, 1939, due to the pressure of public opinion and the crowded situations that were taking place in the border access points, France finally allowed the massive internment of refugees. There were the Latvians among them.

The French authorities firstly separated troops from civilians, men from women and officers from their troops. With the International Brigades, they applied some particular criteria, usually gathering and concentrating every national group in one block. The memories of the Latvian and Lithuanian volunteers show and coincide in the mistreatment of the French authorities towards them. They “were abused, malnourished and guarded by Moroccans and Senegalese colonial soldiers”\textsuperscript{54}.

The first imprisonment destination for the Baltic \textit{brigadistas} was Argelés sur-Mer. This camp was established in the village, close to the Pyrenees and the Mediterranean coast, about 35 km from the Portbou border point. The first \textit{brigadistas} and Spanish refugees, who were sent to Argelés sur-Mer, experienced the prologue of a long and cruel captivity. The camp had no barracks where to shelter, just improvised walls and barbed wire. They were totally exposed to cold and mistral wind that continually triggered the sand from the beach. Colitis began few days after, which led to dysentery; then, parasites and typhoid. Several hundred of those who were wounded or sickened died in the following days. During the following months, the population of Argelés camp increased exponentially. Between 1939 and 1941 about 100 000 refugees were interned in the camp. Due to the excess and avalanches of refugees in the camp of Argelés sur-Mer, the French authorities arranged the construction of two more camps in

\textsuperscript{52} This euphemism was the term used at the time, but most of the bibliography coincides in pointing out its “concentration camp” nature. The photographs speak for themselves.

\textsuperscript{53} On November 12, 1938, the French government, headed by Édouard Daladier, had already promulgated a decree in which he mentioned the internment of “undesirable aliens” and proposed the “removal of all of them from the French territory”.

\textsuperscript{54} Under the title: “Už vielu: Lietuvių Savanorių Grupės Biuletenis”, it can be found a very relevant source about this episode. It is a periodical bulletin in which the Lithuanian volunteers relate information about their daily life and about some individuals in particular. From their stories it can be observed the hard life conditions of in the camp of Gurs, where diseases and misuse became usual.
the same area: Saint Cyprien and Barcarés. A considerable number of Baltic refugees were also concentrated in Saint Cyprien. The first interned refugees were forced to build the temporary barracks. They were made of wood, and their roofs of corrugated iron. They lacked heating, electricity and furniture. There were just rickety straw beds. The memories of the Baltic *brigadistas* confirm what looks obvious: they froze in winter and they suffocated during the summer. The nutrition of the prisoners was terrible. There was no cutlery and instead of it, the prisoners used wooden tools and metal tins to eat. All these conditions, in addition to the absence of sanitary resources, configured the perfect context for diseases proliferation. In October 1940, a devastating storm destroyed most of the barracks and the inmates were transferred to other camps.

In the case of the Baltic brigadiers, they were sent, especially, to Gurs. The camp of Gurs was open in April 1939, and it worked until July 1945. It became the biggest and most important internment camp out of the whole chain of camps which proliferated in Southern France. Between April 5 and 7, 1939, 18523 inmates were imprisoned in Gurs. 5558 out of them were IB members. As in Saint Cyprien, there were no barracks at the beginning, and they were built gradually by the inmates. The internees were distributed in about 400 barracks. Later some administrative barracks were built, as kitchens, warehouse, clinic, troop encampments, etc. Gurs became the main destination for the imprisoned Baltic *brigadistas*. The Latvians consist of 40 men. The Latvians established in Gurs their own Communist Party cells, wrote bulletins and organised lessons on politics and history.

The *brigadistas* were not the only Latvians who passed through Gurs at that time. The author has also documented the case of Anna Dziza (Riga, 1880) who died in Gurs in February, 1941. A Latvian Jewish woman, Tsipora Edelberg, also known as Tatjana Barbakov (Kurland, 1899) was imprisoned in Gurs in January 1940 and later sent to Auschwitz, where she was murdered in February 1944. Both Latvian citizens seem to have been imprisoned as result of the Nazi control of France.

By summer 1939, the situation of the *brigadistas* had not changed. They remained imprisoned in the camps of southern France, with most of the Baltics gathered in the camp of Gurs as were most of other national groups of *brigadistas* and political prisoners. Three days after

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57 One of the teachers was Alberts Spalans, former instructor of the XIII*th* IB.
58 Lachaire, Claude (1993). It includes attached lists of dead prisoners in Gurs.
the “Molotov-Ribbentrop pact” (August 23, 1939), Georgi Dimitrov, who was president of the Comintern and Manuilskii sent a letter to Stalin reporting the situation of the brigadistas in France. The letter is very enlightening. Both EICC figures demanded Stalin’s attention and “aid for the more than 4500 emigrants from states where communists have been driven underground” [47 of them were Latvians]. No bourgeois government wishes to receive them. Winter is now approaching. The prisoners do not even have barracks and live under open skies. The French bourgeoisie is deliberately supporting the physical destruction of these comrades. The extremes of imprisonment in the concentration camps are eating away the volunteers, but with very few exceptions, they are not grumbling, and are maintaining themselves steadfastly, like Bolsheviks.” Finally Dimitrov and Manuilskii beg Comrade Stalin, appealing to his “paternalist nature”. “Having exhausted all possibilities for achieving the liberation of these volunteers, we appeal to you, Comrade Stalin, with this favour. Won’t you allow into the USSR 3000-3500 former fighters of the IB, subjected to a thorough examination?”

As Kowalski states, there is no registered response from Stalin to this letter. This absence of a response could confirm the accusations repeated by part of the historiography through the decades: Stalin abandoned the brigadistas to their own fate, the same volunteers he had already supported to fight in Spain. If according to Kowalski there is no record that indicates Soviet measures towards the imprisoned brigadistas in France, the case of Latvians who arrived at the Central Station of Riga in May, 1941, shows something different. They were liberated through the Soviet negotiations and repatriated to Latvia, which was then under Soviet occupation. However, according to the documentation at the author’s disposal, some Latvians were released from the French camps in July, 1939. Such is the case of Eduards Upesleja, who was freed through Soviet diplomatic negotiations with the French authorities. However this case was a real exception. The slow process of their liberation evidences that – at least – for Stalin it was not at all a priority. The letter from Dimitrov and Manuilskii was taken into consideration. Negotiations between Soviet Union and French government must have taken place. At this point, it would be interesting to check the documentary archives of the Russian embassy in France, which keeps documentation related to the Spanish Civil War and is still not very well known for scholars. The issue regarding imprisonment and repatriation has still to be studied deeper.

60 Ibid., p. 702.
In July, 1940, an application letter was sent\(^61\) to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia, demanding the liberation of the \textit{brigadistas} who remained in the French camps. They were mostly liberated between 1940 and 1941. It was fruit of diplomatic negotiations between Soviet Union and France and, also, a direct result of Stalin’s annexation of the all three Baltic States in June, 1940. The new national Communist “puppet-governments” were installed in Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania with the total management by the Soviet authorities. The previous indifference towards the Latvian volunteers, which had characterised the attitude of the Ulmanis government, was replaced by the diplomatic support of the new Soviet rule. As Daniel Kowalsky has observed, the International Brigades were part of Stalin’s strategy in a double sense. On one hand in order to link the Republican cause to International Communism promoted by the Soviet Union, and on the other a way to improve relations between USSR and Western Europe against a feasible fascist offensive under Livinov’s plan for Foreign Affairs.

\textbf{Conclusion}

A wider discussion about the total quantification of the \textit{brigadistas} did not take place in the historiography until the very end of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. The Moscow documentation has enlightened this debate during the last two decades, discarding the numbers given by the previous historiography. These previous quantifications usually included lists of wounded, casualties, disappeared, individual reports, unit records, application forms for entry in the Spanish Communist Party, etc. Nowadays 35000 is the most accepted number of volunteers who joined the International Brigades\(^62\). This article also offers a precise number of Baltic volunteers: 892; but it must not be taken as unequivocal and definitive. If the exact quantification of the International Brigades in general is difficult, the case of the Baltic \textit{brigadistas} is not different. Their own features make even more difficult a very accurate calculation. The Latvians and Lithuanians, who had already immigrated, were very often double counted; both from their motherland as from their origin country. The case of those volunteers who came from

\(^{61}\) The letter was published by the left-wing Latvian newspaper: \textit{Brīvā Jaunatne} on July 5, 1940.

\(^{62}\) “RGASPI: KOMINTERN/ F.545/ OP. 2/ D. 108”. The document was recovered by Rémi Skoutelsky. It had remained for decades in the Cominter’s archive. This document, produced by the IB Albacete Headquarters, stipulates that until August, 1938, 32.256 troop volunteers had been registered in Albacete. This number does not include the tens of foreign volunteers who joined Anarchist or POUM militias (however there are not registered cases of Latvians in these units).
Southern American countries and had already taken Latin names and even adapted their surnames is especially chaotic. In addition, it is not clear enough yet, if under the label Bálticos are included also Finnish volunteers. In some relevant documentation, the Finnish are counted as Baltic. In some other they are counted as a separate group. However, this quantification of 892 Baltic volunteers does not include the Finns, who were included in the Scandinavian group. The author is inclined to think that over 200 Latvians fought in Spain between 1936 and 1939, including the Red Army officers. The International Brigades were involved in terrifying battles, and were often used as shock forces. Their instruction was usually brief and many of the volunteers went in action just few days after their first arrival on Spanish soil. Few of them could imagine such violent fights in the middle of a total war. However, their attitude was extraordinary, reaching in some particular cases sacrifice rates. The Baltics in particular suffered some of the highest casualties and wounded percentages: about the 50% of them were killed or wounded.

In numerical terms, the Latvian presence was very low and usually they were incorporated in units with a large diversity of participation. Actually, it is possible to state that the Baltic States were some of the nations with a higher participation – in percent terms per national population – in the International Brigades. The Baltic group would be placed as the third one, with a rate 0.018%. It is composed by the separate rates of Estonia (0.02%), Latvia (0.02%) and Lithuania (0.015%), and it is only exceeded by the country who gave the highest number of volunteers France (0.022%) and Belgium (0.02%). Therefore, despite being small states, the degree of social politicisation, authoritarian repression and Soviet influence in the Baltic States explain the high number of people who volunteered for Spain.

The military effectiveness of the IB has been also widely discussed in the historiography. The heroic episodes and actual sacrifice of the International Brigades are undeniable. But despite the fact that they functioned as vanguard in many of the hardest battles, their presence in the Republican Army had mainly a moral influence, besides a considerable military significance. In any case despite the fervent Communist spirit, which dominated in most of the volunteers, many were reluctant to impose and apply a certain level of military discipline, which made

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63 Latvian names as Kārlis turned into Carlos, Arturs – Arturo, Janis – Juan, etc. But these Spanish alias names were more often in officers and Soviet advisors than in the case of simple volunteers. At least they have become better known.

64 Some units composed by more than 20 nationalities. Such is the case of the “Batallón 21 naciones”.

the most obvious difference between the Rebel army and the Loyalist one. The participation of the Latvian volunteers in the Spanish Civil War was not determining at all, and its contribution to the Loyalist forces was modest. It was relatively important in the fields of artillery, instruction, health care and translation, but above all they gave moral support and put their country on the map for the Republican Spaniards.

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