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## **THE FORGOTTEN CONTRIBUTION OF WOMEN TRANSLATORS IN INTERNATIONAL SANITARY UNITS AND RELIEF ORGANIZATIONS DURING AND IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR**

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### **Abstract**

In this article we aim to describe the pioneering endeavours of translators and interpreters Aileen Palmer, Nan Green and Rajsa Rothman in two different periods of their lives, before and after the end of Spanish Civil War in 1939. In the first part of the article, we illustrate their personal, academic and professional backgrounds, as well as their duties as linguistic mediators within the foreign medical units integrated in the sanitary detachments of the International Brigades, or in the military health contingents of the Republican army during the Spanish

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civil confrontation, when most recruiting and learning happened in situ, in a time of scarce professional training. In the second part of the article, we outline their translating assignments after the conflict, with special reference to their presence in relief organizations which tried to help thousands of Spanish civil war refugees, and in humanitarian missions reclaiming fair trials for political prisoners in Franco's dictatorship, as well as to their ultimate professional practices in the state publishing houses of the communist parties of China and Vietnam.

Key words: History of translation and interpreting; female translators and interpreters; sanitary and medical translation; translation and conflict; Spanish Civil War.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Shortly after the military uprising of General Franco and a substantial part of the professional Spanish army in mid July 1936, the Loyalist government launched a worldwide plea for help. The Republic faced a desperate need to cover the pressing medical demands of the forthcoming war, with strategic military infrastructures outside Madrid and Barcelona eventually destroyed or taken over by the enemy, most doctors siding with the rebellious, nursing run mainly by religious institutions, and deplorable standards of hygiene

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across the country. Spanish Civil War historians Firth (1986) Mangini (1995) and Jackson (2002) reveal in their research the leading participation of women of many different political ideologies in the relief, medical and humanitarian missions which travelled to Spain. Isabel Brown, a relevant activist of the London Relief Committee for the Victims of Fascism, would be one of the first to respond to the call. As a leading member of the British Communist Party (BCP), she joined forces with other Labour Party and Trade Union representatives, medical authorities, Anglican Church ministers, intellectuals and peace campaigners to create a solidarity fund and set up the future Spanish Medical Care Committee (SMAC), which by the end of August was ready to send, on their first expedition, a convoy of Daimlers with plenty of medical supplies, surgical and camping equipment (Firth 1986, p. 43).

The British Medical Unit was the first foreign, fully equipped and adequately staffed medical unit of its kind to reach the Spanish battlefronts, but many other sanitary detachments from different parts of the world would travel to Spain providing similar medical aid and healthcare. In October 1936, the Canadian Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, among others, sent prestigious surgeon Norman

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Bethune, after raising thousands of dollars with the initial idea of setting up a hospital, and the American Medical Bureau (AMB), under the leadership of Dr. Edward K. Barsky, arrived in January 1937 (Firth 1986, pp. 48-49 and Palfreeman 2012, p. 27).

The group of volunteers sent to Spain with the British Medical Unit included four qualified surgeons and four student doctors, five nurses, six drivers, a photographer and two quartermasters. After an interview, two women with no previous sanitary professional experience, Rosita Davson and Aileen Palmer, were chosen to assist them, due to their command of French, German, Russian and Spanish, essential qualifications for the deployment of the unit in remote Spain, a country with a culture and a language unknown to most of the volunteers.

In this article, drawing on historical accounts on the foreign medical units deployed in Spain (Firth 1986; Jackson 2002; Casañ Ferrer 2006; Palfreeman 2012; Lethbridge 2013), studies on international sanitary personnel or translators (Keene 1987 and 1988; Preston 2002; Petrou 2008; Jackson 2012; Martin 2016) and memoirs and narratives of Spanish Civil War veterans (Jolly 1940; Merriman and Lerude 1986; Brauner 1991;

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Green 2004; Williams 2004), we intend to describe the work of translators Aileen Palmer, Nan Green and Rajsa Rothman in two different periods of their lives as marked by the end of the Spanish civil confrontation in 1939. First, we outline their biographies with special attention to their personal, academic and professional backgrounds, as well as to their responsibilities as translators and interpreters in the foreign medical units integrated in the sanitary detachments of the International Brigades, or later on in the military health contingents of the Republican army during the war, in a time of scarce professional training, when most recruiting and learning was done as they went along. Second, we describe their various translating assignments in the aftermath of the conflict, with special reference to their participation in relief organizations which would help thousands of Spanish civil war refugees, and in humanitarian missions reclaiming fair trials for political prisoners in Franco's dictatorship, as well as to their ultimate work translating for the state publishing houses of the emerging communist parties in China or Vietnam.

Along with Baigorri-Jalón and Takeda (2016), we agree that by studying the role of interpreters, “we are echoing their voices, their traditions silenced

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from standard history books, rescuing them from invisibility –or, more accurately, inaudibility— and adding their polyphonic sonority to the more general portrait, as a means to foster self- and collective recognition and identity” (2016, p. x). Accordingly, we believe that our historical research into the pioneering tasks, traced in the case studies discussed here, can help to enlarge the overall picture of what the practices of interpreting in various historical periods and places reveal about the profession as we know it today, and can be of special interest for both practising and would-be translators and interpreters.

## **2. CULTURAL AND COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS IN THE INTERNATIONAL SANITARY UNITS**

Translators and interpreters soon turned out to be a strategic priority in the articulation of the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War. The absence of professionally trained military linguists forced the Brigades to recruit polyglot volunteers to exercise their duties in the high staff command, military training schools, courts of justice and battlefield operations. However, the intercultural and linguistic mediators hired by the

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foreign sanitary units deployed in several battlefronts during the first weeks of September 1939, had to cope with a number of rather complex and specialized tasks related to the sanitary nature of their missions in which they not only endured psychological and emotional pressure but risked their lives. During the defense of Suicide Hill, in the Battle of Jarama, Captain Robert Hale Merriman, commander of the Lincoln Brigades, recalls his anguish when he asked for a stretcher for a wounded comrade at an infirmary where no one seemed to understand him: “Nobody paid attention to me. I then realized that they were French and Hollanders. I tried the sign language and my twelve words in Spanish. They thought I had gone crazy. Finally, a Hollander who could talk English came up to the station” (Merriman & Lerude 1986, p. 102). Palfreeman (2012, pp. 185-187) describes the communication problems encountered by British doctor, Alexander Tutor Hart hours before the Battle of Jarama, when confiscating an old aristocratic residence meant to be used as a hospital, as he ordered transfusion pioneer Reginald Saxton to threaten with arrest a caretaker who denied their entrance into the property: “In the difficulty of translation, Reg mistakenly told the man that he would be shot if he failed to comply

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their requests. A horrified Tudor Hart gave Reg a dressing down there and then”.

Aurora Fernández, a Spanish student from Madrid who volunteered in a medical unit, further recounts the language trials of English nurse Ada Hodson with a group of Spanish wounded soldiers who called her *curandera* (healer), instead of *enfermera* (nurse), probably because they had never been in a hospital before and were used to the women in their villages who knew about the curative properties of herbs and other non-professional healing methods. These soldiers were so grateful for Ada’s care and dedication that they started calling her *abuelita* (granny):

Ada liked it and thought nothing of it and always went happily and quickly to the side of the wounded who had shouted to the top of his voice, ‘A-bue-li-taaaaaa! One afternoon while we were having our cup of tea, Ada said with a very happy voice, ‘The wounded like me even if I don’t know how to speak Spanish, they call me ‘Florita’. We all kept silent, but a stretcher bearer who knew a little English began to laugh. ‘They call you “abuelita”, which in English is “granny”’. Ada, pale, almost crying, got up



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and as she was, with her white dress and apron, with her sandals, got out of the cave and left by the path going into the bright Spanish sun. ‘I am going to England’, she muttered (Jackson 2005, pp. 29-30).

New Zealander, Douglas Jolly, the head of a Mobile Surgical Unit composed of seven nationalities, who arrived in Spain in December 1936, also refers in his book, *Field Surgery in Total War* (1940), to the hardships caused by their incapacity to understand Spanish until they managed to pick up a smattering of it. However, fluency in a certain language could be the reason for being accused of being a fascist. Before joining the British, unit Australian nurse Agnes Hodgson was, for instance, called in for questioning by her own comrades because she spoke Italian and had lived some time in the country under the dictatorship of Benito Mussolini. Austrian-Jewish doctor Françoise (Fritzi) Brauner, who worked at the International Brigade Hospital in Benicàssim, in the province of Valencia, recalls the pressing need of the injured to be addressed in their own language: “When I went through my rooms from one wounded to another, often I had to change languages in each bed. For the wounded, especially for those who were without compatriots, it was

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very important that someone addressed them in their mother tongue to be able to express their concerns” (Brauner 1991, p. 340).

British nurse Patience Darton remembers her time at the hospital in Grañén, in the province of Huesca, when she felt she sometimes might have failed her duty as a nurse to convey a patient’s last words or wishes to their loved ones in their mother tongues and pays tribute to the memory of those mortally wounded combatants who might have died untranslated, being their wordless death a symbol of so many unsung soldiers:

We were very good with the Brigades in the hospitals about trying to get somebody who spoke their language, because that was always a dreadful thing with very ill people, dying people —they couldn’t speak— different tongues, you see. And that was where the Commissars came in. Very often there were a lot of Jewish people in the Brigades, a great many, and a lot of them spoke Yiddish and something else. And you would always try to get a Jewish person who could speak Yiddish, to another Jewish person —it didn’t matter if they were Romanian or Hungarian or what they were,

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you could get a common language, get a message if you wanted it, that they wanted to send home or say who they were something like that. But we had on the Ebro, in that cave, three Finns and nobody could speak anything to them... And we couldn't get anyone who spoke Finish and they weren't Jewish. Oh! I'll never forget them, they were such beautiful creatures, great blond things, you know [sigh] unable to say anything (Jackson 2012, p. 110).

Scottish epidemiologist Archivald Leman Cochrane's fluency in several European languages made his presence indispensable in any medical team. Although certain Spanish doctors and nurses working within international medical units, such as Catalan surgeons Josep Trueta and Moisès Broggi spoke English or French, many foreign volunteers, especially after Spanish became the lingua franca of the International Brigades, started learning the language, or any other which could improve their communication skills. Welsh paramedic Alun Menai Williams (2004, p. 167), for instance, who served with the Americans of the Washington and Lincoln Battalions at the Battles of Belchite and Ebro was studying Spanish just ten days after his baptism of fire. The Benicàssim Hospital and other

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medical institutions even managed to set up Spanish language lessons for their personnel and the military recovering in their wards (Casañ Ferrer 2006, p. 186).

In a letter to a friend, nurse Patience Darton reveals how she used to amuse her patients by confusing the word *casada*, “married”, with *cansada*, “tired” and shows her pride at the way in which her written Spanish has improved. Darton would soon start learning German and Spanish with the help of her colleague Rosalyn Smythe, administrator and interpreter at a 1000 bed hospital at Valls, near Tarragona. Later on, she found studying Catalan to be more useful for her, as many people only spoke that language in the area where she was based (Jackson 2012, pp. 111-112).

Physician Norman Bethune was the promoter of the Canadian Blood Transfusion Service (CBTS), a mobile blood bank which came to Spain to operate on a 600 mile battlefield. Soon after his arrival in November 1936, when Madrid was under the siege of Francoist forces, Bethune included versatile polyglots in his expeditions to transport blood bottles in his refrigerated trucks wherever it was required. During the Battle of Guadalajara, the mission was accomplished in collaboration with

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interpreter Henning Ingeman Sorensen, a Danish citizen established in Canada who, after travelling widely through Europe, Africa and North America, spoke several languages fluently, including Spanish:

There was a soldier with the International Brigades lying on a stretcher that no one could understand; he spoke neither English, French, Italian, nor German. He had been hit by a bomb and lost a hand and an eye in the battlefield. At the hospital it had been necessary to amputate his remaining hand. It was evident that he badly needed a blood transfusion. From his pallor and feeble pulse rate, Bethune estimated that he had lost at least two quarters of blood. He prepared the transfusion equipment, and then called to Sorensen for assistance. At the sound of the name, the wounded soldier turned to Sorensen and began to speak; he was Swedish. Sorensen translated: the man had been in Spain only three days. He had been wounded on his first engagement. He felt now only regrets: he was of no more use to his comrades; he had done nothing for the cause. Bethune and Sorensen looked at each

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other in frank astonishment (Lethbridge 2013, p. 161).

Bethune was not the only foreign medical chief officer to engage translators and interpreters to support the linguistic and cultural struggles of nurses, quartermasters, ambulance drivers or doctors in hospitals or front line missions. A high number of multinational translators and interpreters were soon to be appointed to the particular needs and tasks of the sanitary units. Australian Aileen Palmer, British Nan Green and Swedish Kajsa Rothman, among other women from different nationalities, were some of the many translators whose pioneering endeavours in the trenches of the Spanish Civil War eventually led them, in the aftermath of the conflict, to undertake other kinds of professional practices in relief and humanitarian missions.

### **3. AILEEN PALMER, NAN GREEN AND KAJSA ROTHMAN: THREE TRANSLATORS IN THE SANITARY UNITS OF THE INTERNATIONAL BRIGADES**

Aileen Palmer (1915-1988) was born in an Australian cosmopolitan middle class family and was raised by her parents, writers Janet Gertrude

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Higgins (Nettie) and Edward Vivian Palmer (Vance), in a progressive intellectual environment. During her education at the University of Melbourne, Palmer accomplished a competent command of French, German, Spanish and Russian, which was probably the main reason why she was hired as the personal translator of Austrian novelist and socialist activist Helene Scheu-Riesz. In the summer of 1936, Aileen Palmer was travelling through Europe with her parents when they decided to spend some time in Spain. While her mother and father were busy with their literary engagements, their offspring spent her days trying to disentangle the Spanish political labyrinth through a close reading of Catalan newspapers — which she sometimes translated into English— and meeting young politically active companions, such as Lisa Gedeke, a Finish polyglot. Her knowledge of languages and her left wing political activism, which had drawn her into joining the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) in the early 1930s, probably made her an ideal candidate for the job of interpreter at the Popular Olympic Games of Barcelona, when her application was received at the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia (PSUC), the Catalan communist party. Palmer was to have worked at the Popular Games, which should have taken place in Barcelona between 19th and 26th

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July as an antifascist response to the nazi Olympics held in Berlin in August of that same year, but the games were never to be celebrated because of the rebellion of General Franco and his comrades-in-arms on 18th July. Palmer's duties were, therefore, dramatically changed to act as an interpreter for the athletes of more than twenty international delegations stranded in the city and to send telegrams to their countries to say that they were out of danger (Keene 1987, p. 76 and Martin 2016, pp. 125-128).

Following the recommendation of the British consul in Barcelona, who warned her father about the presence of uncontrolled anarchist militia in Barcelona, Aileen Palmer, in the company of her parents, reluctantly left Spain on board HMS *London*, a Royal Navy warship. However, a month later she was back in the country in her capacity of interpreter of the first British Medical Unit sent to Spain. Palmer arrived in Grañén, a tiny village in the province of Huesca, chosen by Peter Spencer, Viscount Churchill, a prominent member of the Spanish Medical Aid Committee, and Kenneth Sinclair-Loutit, a medical student from Cambridge and administrator of the hospital, because of its strategic position a few kilometres behind the battle front. Palmer was the secretary and interpreter of



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Sinclair-Loutit, who would have to deal with an anarchist major who regarded the foreign medical facilities in Grañen as an interference of the Republican government, with the resentment of his working-class drivers and mechanics, and with the confrontation between communists and non-communists. Palmer then shared her translating engagements with Austrian interpreter Vita Felber, who had been under suspicion of being a spy, although she had returned stainless after being investigated in Barcelona. The Australian particularly disliked Felber, who was having a love-affair with nurse Doris Bird, while Palmer kept her lesbian sexual orientation much to herself:

Did Vita usurp her position as interpreter perhaps? Aileen was, after all, fluent in German and held the official position of interpreter for the unit. Or was she disapproving of the women because of her affairs with both women and men? Perhaps the sense of specialness her own awakening predilection for women had given her at school and university was being shaken in the raw and often brutal world she was plunged into at Grañén. Perhaps, realising that Nurse Bird was regarded by her

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colleagues with some derision, she had started to reflect on the moralistic attitudes of the Communist Party in general, particularly towards homosexuality (Martin 2016, p. 142).

In spite of accusations of being inefficient, probably because of her loyalty to Sinclair-Loutit, and recommendations of the communist member of the unit that she should be sent back to London once another linguist had taken over, Palmer's three months on the Aragon front were full of hard work as interpreter in several languages. She often travelled on ambulances to other villages in search of wounded soldiers as, apart from English and Spanish, there were also French, Italian and German volunteers fighting. On other occasions, her assignments included translating between doctors and patients in hospitals, or "the grim task of packing up and sending home the *efectos de los muertos*, the pathetic bundles of belongings of those who had died" (Martin 2016, p. 146).

In January 1937, Palmer's British Medical Aid Unit was integrated into the *Service Sanitaire* of the XIV International Brigade, the French-Belgian battalions. Together with her companions from Grañén, she travelled to different villages near

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Madrid in the Sierra de Guadarrama, where a new hospital was set up on 10th January. On the following day, the attack started and a growing number of casualties soon began to arrive. Palmer was called to interpret for two Polish doctors of the unit who spoke French and a little English and were concerned about starting a new hospital somewhere in Madrid: “By the end of January, Palmer was clearly exhausted, having been working on the front lines for five months straight. She was also suffering from having to adapt to a new regime and new people, especially as she was called upon frequently to interpret between French and English-speaking members of the service itself as well as helping to perform triage on the wounded soldiers who came from a variety of countries” (Martin 2016, p. 149).

Palmer’s unit was then moved to El Escorial to provide support to the casualties in the Battle of Brunete. Later on, she moved back to Huete, on the Aragon front, where she became secretary and interpreter of Dr. Leonard Crome, Chief Medical Officer of the 35th Division. In July 1938, when she was already in London and the Republicans tried to cross the river Ebro launching a major attack on the Francoist army advancing over Valencia, Palmer was replaced by Crome’s new

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assistant, Nan Green, with whom she would keep in touch in England for many years after the war (Martin 2016, p. 172).

Nan Green (1904-1984) was born in an Anglican family whose middle class standards of living declined when her father lost his job and fell ill in the early stages of the First World War. This process of proletarianisation would be the basis of her future left-wing sympathies, which made her join the BCP, together with her husband George. To make ends meet, Nan sold second handbooks and sandwiches at the Caledonian Road market, while George played his cello in different London movie theatres, cafes and orchestras. In February 1937, George took the decision to travel to Spain as a driver of the ambulances in the convoy of the Spanish Medical Aid, with nurses, doctors and stretcher bearers. Nan, who also agreed that it was the best contribution they could make to help in the international war against fascism, followed his steps in July as a member of the administrative personnel attached to the medical units (Preston 2002, p. 122).

Green's first responsibility was to be Assistant Secretary to Peter Harrison, a polyglot who spoke five languages, in an English hospital for wounded

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soldiers in Huete, in the province of Cuenca, where the administrator, the surgeon, the theatre and war nurses and ambulance drivers were initially mostly from Spain, England and New Zealand. In spite of the political clashes among the members of the unit, in which she suspected there might be British Foreign Office spies, much work was done in collaboration with the local women whose experience with nurses was limited to those nuns who mainly ran Spanish hospitals in those days (Green 2004, p. 74).

Green's close contact with native civilians and soldiers was probably the main reason why she decided to receive Spanish lessons in Huete, tutored by her deputy Pere Barat, during the scarce free time her other responsibilities left her:

My principal workmate was Pere Barat, a gaunt, frail-looking Catalan about thirty years old who had TB. Like many Catalans he spoke French and Castilian as well as his mother tongue, which is to some extent a mixture of the other two. In the scanty intervals of our work of keeping the hospital records, he patiently taught me Castilian (using French, which at that time I knew better). For my first lessons in what later

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became almost a second language to me and contributed to my subsequent history, I thank Pere (Pedro) for the kind, patient, persistent, thorough grounding he gave me, supplemented by study of a huge Jesperson Grammar (Green 2004, pp. 74-75).

In December 1937, Green was appointed Administrator of a hospital for convalescent patients at Valdeganga, in the province of Albacete, which had in the past been a health resort for rich people, although she would also team up with the new doctors and nurses from the British Medical Unit hospital which had just been established in the nearby village of Uclés. Her growing command of Spanish was probably the reason why she was given the responsibility of escorting an Australian lady, sent by a railway organization which had raised a large sum of money for her trip, to visit her compatriots who were serving in Spain. During the summer of 1938, Green became engaged as the secretary of Leonard Crom, Chief Medical Officer of the 35th Division Medical Corps, where her main duties were to translate the doctor's dispatches in formal Spanish, to keep the divisional medical records and to turn them into usable statistical information. Later on, the nearly forty doctors, stretcher bearers, drivers and office staff of

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the division moved near the front where the battle of the Ebro would take place. Crom was soon replaced by Spanish-Gibraltarian, Enrique Bassadone, a professional and efficient doctor who did not approve of women and always addressed her in Spanish “in the third person”, to which she replied in the second person, more usual in Republican Spain. Since the clash between the superior Francoist troops, backed with German and Italian war material, and the Loyalist forces, the hospital of the 35th Division was too close to the enemy lines and staff and patients had to quickly retire and cross the river. Before the battle came to an end, all members of the International Brigades were ordered to withdraw from their military and sanitary duties, being 22nd September the chosen date for the withdrawal of the British Battallion. Unfortunately, Nan Green’s husband, infantry sergeant George Green, died on the following day (Green 2004, pp. 80-97).

Kajsa Helin Rothman (1903-1969) was born in Karlstad, Sweden. After completing school, she moved to Paris, where she made her living as a nanny and a journalist. At twenty-two, she toured Europe and North Africa with a competitive dance group, but her manager ran away in Cairo with the troupe’s money. Later on, she travelled to

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Romania, were, once again, she found a job as a nursemaid. In 1934, Rothman started a travel agency in Barcelona. After the Fascist insurrection in July 1936, despite her lack of medical background, she volunteered for the Red Cross and for a Swedish charity. Later in October she joined a Scottish Ambulance Unit in Madrid, contributed to Radio Madrid's broadcasting services in Swedish and sent articles on the Spanish Civil War to the liberal Swedish newspaper *Karlstads-Tidningen* (Petrou 2008, p. 164-165 and Lethbridge 2013, p. 114).

In December 1936, Rothman approached Dr. Norman Bethune with the purpose of interviewing him for a book she was writing about him. A few days later, he hired her as secretary and interpreter at the Canadian Blood Transfusion Unit, which, with the funds provided by the Canadian Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy (CASD), he set up in a spacious apartment in one of the most affluent districts in Madrid. It was in these premises where Bethune's team of doctors, nurses and technicians would work hard in the laboratories, fresh blood storage rooms and transfusion wards with the aim of providing blood along the front. Bethune soon figured out the relevance of propaganda in his plans to establish a



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blood transfusion unit in Spain. While Sorensen, his Canadian interpreter, did not share Bethune's enthusiasm for such activities, Rothman happily engaged in short-wave radio programmes in several languages, and her close ties with influential foreign correspondents reporting from Madrid proved to be of great value as the unit's innovative nature and the Spanish conflict began to be known in other countries (Lethbridge 2013, p. 116).

Rothman's connections in diverse departments of the Loyalist government and her capacity to communicate in many different languages made her an essential asset in Bethune's pressing need to find suitable blood donors. Her detailed knowledge of Spanish maps and her familiarity with the exact situation of strategic country roads, bridges and crossings also turned out to be crucial to gather information about the medical demands of the numerous mobile hospitals and the frequent trips transfusion units had to make on powerful vehicles to distant battlefields. In March 1937, at the Battle of Jarama, for instance, and with the assistance of Rothman, Bethune delivered no less than nine refrigerators at front line hospitals to keep their supplies fresh, or made their way through the battle lines with transfusion instruments, syringes, cannulas, and a quantity of citrated blood (Petrou

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2008, p. 166 and Lethbridge 2013, pp. 114 and 147).

Bethune thought the Loyalist Ministry of War would, sooner or later, approve his plan to place a unified blood service under his command. Spanish Military Health authorities, however, believed that his Canadian Blood Transfusion Unit should be incorporated into a centralized blood transfusion institution run and staffed by a board of Spaniards. After Bethune's refusal to collaborate with this new scheme, high ranking military authorities and representatives of the Canadian and Spanish communist parties agreed that his drinking habits, his contempt for hierarchy and his arrogant behaviour were reasons enough to send him home. Rothman, for her part, maintained a difficult relationship with her colleague Sorensen, as he resented her invading his translation duties, and also with the Spanish doctors at the transfusion unit, who thought her love affair with Bethune interfered with their work. Her outspoken confidence, her dubious political affiliations and her overt sexual behaviour would make her the perfect scapegoat of the Trotskyite spy hunt set up by communist run Servicio de Investigación Militar, the Republic's intelligence secret police (Petrou 2008, p. 165 and Lethbridge 2013, p. 144).

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#### **4. TRANSLATING AND INTERPRETING FOR REFUGEES IN HUMANITARIAN MISSIONS, POLITICAL PRISONERS IN FRANCO'S SPAIN AND FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE NEW COMMUNIST PARADISE**

Franco's victory in Spain, the Nazi-Soviet Non-Agression Pact and the German invasion of Poland, which marked the beginning of World War II, would have a decisive influence in the future lives and activities of most of the translators and interpreters who performed their duties in international sanitary units during the Spanish Civil War. In the months to follow, Aileen Palmer, Nan Green and Kajsa Rothman became deeply committed to all sorts of political protests, refugee support missions and wartime engagements. In January 1939, together with Angela Guest, another veteran from Spain, Aileen Palmer threw red ink onto the doorstep of the British prime minister's residence at 10 Downing Street, while distributing leaflets hidden in copies of the *Ladies Home Journal*. The red ink, as Firth (1986, p. 138) points out, intended to represent the sacrifice of the Spanish people during

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the war and to be a warning of the terrible consequences for Europe of Chamberlain's appeasement policy. This action of protest was just one of her many eventual political activities on the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War. Given Palmer's knowledge of the language, Martin (2016, p. 184-185) recalls that, in 1939, the Australian Spanish Relief Committee sent her on a three week trip to Paris, Biarritz and Perpignan in order to inspect the internment camps where women and children from Bilbao, Lerida and Andalusia were being held, as well as to the concentration camp in Gur, near Pau, where members of the International Brigades and Republican soldiers had been confined after Franco's victory.

Upon her arrival in London, and via Labour MP, Leah Manning — the leading figure behind the evacuation of thousands of Basque children to England — Nan Green was approached by the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief (NJCSR), a British welfare and humanitarian organization led by Eleanor Rathbone, Katharine Stewart-Murray, Duchess of Atholl, and Wilfred Roberts, well-known MP, whose main purpose was to support Spanish Republican refugees. Manning, who thought Green's command of Spanish and knowledge of the political intricacies of Loyalist

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Spain made her the perfect person for the mission, called upon her in May 1939 to travel on a twenty day trip onboard the French vessel *SS Sinaia*, with the 2000 refugees who had been offered asylum by Mexican president Lázaro Cárdenas.

By the end of 1937, Swedish interpreter Kajsa Rothman had founded “Kajsa’s Milk Fund” to provide milk for the Spanish infants, and had been recruited by Swedish Relief for Spain, an organization which tried to raise funds for an orphanage institution for refugee children. She would, later on, write the text for a book which included some of the drawings the children had done about the conflict. In the final stages of the confrontation, she frequently travelled between Sweden and Spain until Franco’s triumph, when she crossed the French border in the company of thousands of refugees who left their country behind. Later, Rothman joined the International Commission which helped Republican refugees to find a new life in Mexico, where her language skills and large scale organizational skills had made her an essential component. Rothman stayed in Mexico working as an interpreter guide and a teacher in the city of Tequisquiapan, until her death in Cuernavaca in 1969 (Petrou 2008, p. 167 and Lethbridge 2013, p. 165).

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Once back in London in her position as Secretary of the International Brigade Association, Nan Green, who had spent part of the London Blitz as an Invasion Defense Officer, tried to find jobs and accomodation for Spanish exiles:

We published a monthly –*Spain Today*— the editorial committee was three, the despatch was done by me and anyone I could grab to tie up bundles or stick stamps on folders... I also helped the Spanish emigrant colony in London who not only ran a club for their compatriots in exile but issued news and trade union bulletins to be distributed in the Trade Union movement. I translated these at high speed into English, straight on to stencils— and here is where casting one’s bread on the waters has its reward: it gave me a facility and rapid Spanish-English translation that stood me in good stead much later as you shall read (Green 2004, p. 131).

Green’s experience as a translator and interpreter turned out to be the main reason why Manning and the suffragist and Roman Catholic secretary of the Save the Children Fund, Monica Whately, would

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later require her services on a trip they made to Madrid in 1946, with the aim of stopping Franco's appalling practices of trials in which a high number of political prisoners were often collectively sentenced as criminals. Their most important concern, this time, was the prison of Las Ventas, where school teacher, Isabel Sanz Toledano, typist Consuelo Alonso, and scientist María Teresa Toral, awaited trial after being accused of running an illegal underground organization which helped political prisoners (Preston 2002, p. 191).

Green travelled to Spain with a passport in which she used her second husband's surname to avoid being identified as Secretary of the International Brigade Association. Under the close supervision of the Francoist authorities, who assigned them an interpreter and secret police surveillance, Nan translated the interviews between Manning, Whatley and the prisoners, who discreetly revealed the lack of food for their children and who, in many cases, shared their dirty overcrowded cells, the tortures that were inflicted and the likely death sentences most of them faced. On their return to London, Green seemed satisfied with the outcome of their mission: "The three women received high sentences and the demand for death sentence was

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dropped. I like to think that our visit was instrumental in saving their lives, or at least in contributing to a milder sentence” (Green 2004, p. 141).

As Mao’s China kept a rather distant relationship with the outside world, the small number of foreign experts authorized to live in the country were limited to those individuals useful for the regime’s purposes, in accordance with the principle of *yang wei Zhong yong* (“using the foreign to serve China”). A few foreign doctors, who had been present during the Spanish Civil war, travelled to China to help in their war against the Japanese invasion, although none of them achieved, as Hooper (2014, p. 14) points out, the celebrity of Canadian surgeon Norman Bethune, whose name, after his death in 1939, was enshrined in Chinese Communist Party (CCP) mythology following the publication of Mao Zedong’s famous article ‘In Memory of Norman Bethune’, which became required reading for school children and adults. In the early 1950s, especially after the collapse of their links with the Soviet Union, China recruited groups of politically committed Western communists to cover teaching positions and translate their foreign language publications, which



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played an outstanding role in the state's propaganda.

In 1952, after being closely involved in the organization of the World Peace Conference of 1950, which was to be held in Sheffield (UK) but finally moved to Warsaw, Nan Green received an invitation from the CCP to work at the Beijing Asian Pacific Peace Conference in 1952 as an interpreter. Since Mao's rise to power, China had few diplomatic relations with Spanish speaking countries, and former International Brigaders with a knowledge of Spanish were therefore welcomed at the Congress, as Jackson (2012, p. 156) reveals, because the majority of the people who could speak the language at that time "were either Catholic priests or professional athletes –not the ideal candidates to present China's aspirations and political policies to foreigners". Green managed to put together, in a very short period of time, a small team of three Chileans, an Englishman, a Columbian, a Guatemalan, a Russian and a Spaniard, to deal with the simultaneous and consecutive interpreting at the different sessions of the conference and sometimes at important engagements, such as the meeting between the Chinese Foreign Minister, Chou En-lai and a Latin American diplomat.

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In 1954, Green was called back again to China to work as a translator for the publications of the State Foreign Language Press and for *China Reconstructs*, a magazine published under the patronage of Soong Ching Ling, chairwoman of the China Welfare Institute and vice president of the country. She claims to have enjoyed this work because it contributed to make communist China known in the rest of the world through what she describes as “the pure wells of English undefiled”:

My three colleagues were accustomed to use American-English and I fought constantly for the English spelling of things like Flow, Program, and for the abolition of *transportation* and other ‘-ations’ they fancied, on the specious grounds that if we were going to oppose American imperialism (as China, did, fiercely at that time) we had better not commit ‘cultural aggression’ and offend our English readers in other hands” (Green 2004, p. 181).

Other Spanish Civil war veterans, such as David Crook, Winifred Bates, Gladys Taylor, Aurora Fernández and Patience Darton, would also be among the interpreters and translators who worked

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in China during these years as language polishers for the CCP foreign propaganda institutions. Green and Darton, who were encouraged to stay as long as possible because of the problems the Chinese had recruiting suitable translators, left the country in the final years of the 1950s. However, the large number of restrictions resulting from the highly politicized environment in which everyday life developed in Mao's China, implied that the work of "foreign experts" would be completely penetrated by the dominance of the stringent ideology of the state, and in certain cases could end up in creating some kind of dissension among them. British translators David Crook and Gladys Taylor, for instance, were arrested in 1968 during the Cultural Revolution and spent a few years in prison accused of being spies (Brady 2003, p. 163 and Jackson 2012, p. 145).

After seven years in Mao's China, Nan Green spent some time working at the prestigious communist publishing company Lawrence & Wishart, where she revised original manuscripts and translated a few books, such as *Spain, 1936-1939* (1963), an account of the Spanish Civil War written by José Sandoval and Manuel Azcárate, members of the Central Committee of Spanish Communist Party (PCE); *Problems of Socialism Today* (1970), and

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*Eurocommunism and the State* (1977), both by Santiago Carrillo, General Secretary of the Spanish Communist Party (PCE). Translating the speeches of Fidel Castro was also a lucrative business of these years given the marathon length of the Cuban's allocutions. In 1962, during the miners' strike in Asturias, she returned to Spain to act as interpreter to a delegation of the National Union of Mineworkers which provided financial support to the miners. Green was also active through the International Brigade Association in raising money for observers to be sent to the trials of political prisoners such as Marcos Ana, who was liberated in 1961, or Julián Grimau, who was unfortunately executed in 1963 (Preston 2002, p. 198 and Martin Green 2004, p. xiv).

Green devoted her final years as Secretary of the International Brigade Association to setting up the archive of the British Battalion at the Marx Memorial Library at Clerkenwell Green, London. She died in 1984 and, some time later, her son scattered her ashes on Spanish soil, where her husband George Green, a former ambulance driver and International Brigade commissar, was killed at the Battle of Ebro in September 1938.

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In 1957, at the Third World Conference Against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs held in Tokyo, where she translated the speeches of the Spanish and French delegates, Aileen Palmer was also invited to visit China, where she travelled in the company of five other Australian delegates and was enthused by the peaceful reconstruction in which the Chinese people were engaged after 30 years of Japanese occupation and civil war (Martin 2016, p. 248). Back in London, Palmer had worked in an ambulance station during World War II until she returned in 1944 to Australia, where she gave some lectures, over the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), about her experiences in Spain. Throughout the years to come, Palmer's life was to be full of periods of depression and hyperactivity in which she held a string of odd jobs at the Australian Soviet House, the Athenaeum Library, a teaching position, etc, and also became an active protester against the USA intervention in Vietnam in the 1960s. In the late 1950s, Communist Party of Australia (CPA) journalist Malcolm Salomon asked her to translate five long poems by Vietnamese poet Tô Hữu, jailed in 1940 by the Japanese for his revolutionary activities. Palmer produced an indirect rendering based on the French version, which was published in a volume by the Foreign Languages Publishing House of

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Hanoi in 1959. Three years later, she was appointed to translate *The Prison Diary* (Yu-chung jih-chi) of Ho Chi Minh, the influential leader and President of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, a collection of 115 verses written during his imprisonment in Southern China between late August 1942 and mid-September 1943. Ho Chi Minh, who had been detained on the suspicion that he was spying for the Japanese, narrates his experiences in prison, as well as his hopes and expectations upon being released. Palmer was provided with an English word to word translation of the poems originally written in Chinese in which he declined the liberties of free verse in favour of the traditional versification of fixed rhyme and meter of the classical style. The poems were reviewed by the *The Times Literary Supplement* and republished in the United States by Bantam Books in 1971, with an introduction by *New York Times* correspondent in Moscow, Harrison Evans Salisbury, and reprinted several times in the following decades (Bradbury 2001, pp. 43-47 and Martin 2016, pp. 251-252).

Aileen Palmer's experience in Spain became a constant point of reference throughout her life. In 1964, the editor of the literary journal *Overland* published a selection of her poems entitled *World*

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*Without Strangers?* which show the influence that the Spanish war had in her life, specially in “Remembering García Lorca”, written in commemoration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the end of the civil confrontation. Her poetry became, as Campamà-Pizarro (2014, p. 4) rightly points out, the poetical and political tool through which she could express her opinions about the injustices that were taking place in other conflicts around the world, such as the Vietnam War.

As a consequence of a post-traumatic stress disorder, probably caused by the horrors she had witnessed in Spain, combined with a bipolar disorder and a concealed resentment towards her family, in the 1980s, Aileen Palmer spent long periods of her life in several psychiatric institutions where she was the victim of experimental shock treatments which aggravated her mental health until she finally passed away in 1988. However, Palmer still embarked on a number of never completed political and autobiographical writings and poetical projects in which, as she had written in 1962 to the Indian writer Mul Raj Annand, an international brigader and close friend of George Orwell whom she met in the Spanish Civil War, Spain stood out in her life like a beacon-light, as the time when

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they stood for the cause of all progressive mankind (Martin 2016, p. 279).

## **5. CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The female interpreters and translators, who carried out their duties within international sanitary units during the Spanish Civil War, performed their responsibilities by mediating between the local population and medical staff, patients and sanitary personnel and doctors of different nationalities. They accompanied wounded volunteers on ambulances to mobile hospitals, found their way through the battle lines to deliver medical supplies, or strived to convey the patient's last wishes in their own language. Most of them were also engaged in a number of tasks and challenges beyond their mere linguistic and cultural agency, such as nursing care, administrative and secretarial work, alluring high rank Spanish authorities and foreign journalists, sketching maps of the primitive road network of the country, delivering speeches on the radio, or dealing with the male chauvinism of certain doctors or politicians.

The translators studied in this article were mainly a group of versatile and dynamic polyglot women with diverse biographical profiles and professional



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backgrounds. Aileen Palmer was the only interpreter whose command of several foreign languages came as a result of her university studies, while cosmopolitan Kajsia Rothman's fluency in many of them was the logical consequence of having lived in different countries in the course of her life. Resourceful Nan Green, however, as other foreign members of the sanitary units, started learning Spanish during the war - in her case, with the help of a Catalan friend. Spanish was soon to become her most important language, besides her mother tongue, thanks to which she would make her living henceforth and fight her most significant political causes.

The connections of these sanitary wartime interpreters and translators with Loyalist Spain did not come to an end after the conflict. Back in their countries, most of them were recruited by relief organizations trying to help Spanish refugees. Aileen Palmer, for example, travelled to France, where more than 450,000 thousand Republicans had crossed the border, to report on the shortage of food and unhealthy sanitary conditions of the internment camps. Nan Green, for her part, played a crucial role in an audacious sea operation which transported 2,000 Republican refugees and asylum seekers to Mexico. During her trips to Franco's

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Spain, Green's interpreting skills also gave her the opportunity to speak against the lack of judicial independence at political prisoners' trials and their appalling conditions of life. Although further research needs to be done in this particular field, her testimony is a unique first-hand account which unveils the invisible role played by language intermediaries in the foreign opposition against Franco's dictatorship.

In spite of the fact that the Loyalist government was a conflicting mosaic of diverse political parties, communism was the prevailing ideology of most of the women translators and interpreters attached to the international sanitary units. Aileen Palmer, Nan Green or Patience Darton, among others would, later on, find in Vietnam or China new causes which reminded them of what they had fought for in Spain. Translating for Chinese state publishing houses and publications enhanced their role as members of a close network of activists recruited by a propaganda machinery designed to explain how Mao would lift China out of its poverty by constructing a new utopian socialist society. Nan Green's long relation with the Spanish Communist Party, her friendship with Dolores Ibárruri, the mythical leader known as Pasionaria, and Santiago Carrillo, the Spanish General

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Secretary, also made her the ideal person to translate books produced by members of the party.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

1. This article was supported by the Erasmus+ EC+ Project ‘Enhancing Communication: Research to Improve Communication for People with Special Needs and Development of ICT Resources and Tools’ [2015-1-ES01-KA203-015625], and by the Research Project ‘La Traducción de Clásicos en su Marco Editorial: una Visión Transatlántica’ [FFI2013-41743-P] (National Scientific Research, Development and Technological Innovation Plan), Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness of the Government of Spain [I+D+I 2013].

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