

# The Dutch Spainfighters: ‘People who did not think solely on a national level, but also internationally’

## *The role of national sentiments in a transnational environment*



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Image from IISG, CNDIBSBO, stuk 49,  
manuscript from Jacob Heshof.

Quote from IISG, CNDIBSBO, stuk 40,  
interview with Willem de Jong: ‘mensen  
die niet louter nationaal, maar ook  
internationaal dachten’

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## ‘Janus Leijnse, Syria-goer avant la lettre’<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, Dutch newspapers have been filled with headlines covering the stories of Syria-goers, Dutch citizens and residents travelling to Syria to join the ranks of jihadist groups. In 2015, which may have been the peak of Islamic State’s power, the number of Dutch Syria-goers, including women, was estimated at 220.<sup>2</sup> The media reports and contemplates on their motivation, radicalization, recruitment and the danger these fighters possibly constitute when they return to the Netherlands.<sup>3</sup> Politicians participate in heated debates on the status of the nationality and passports of Dutch Syria-goers.<sup>4</sup> The exact nature of the motives of these fighters and their actual actions, organizations and roles in Syria remain within the domain of speculation.

Partly due to the lack of reliable sources and information on the fighters in Syria, historical comparisons are frequently used in the media in order to explain the situation. After all, the voluntary participation of Dutch citizens in a foreign armed conflict is not a new phenomenon. The parallel with the so-called Spainfighters, a group of Dutch(wo)men who joined the Spanish Civil War in the 1930’s, has been drawn.<sup>5</sup> For example in the above-quoted headline of *De Volkskrant*, Janus Leijnse, one of the estimated 600 to 800 Spainfighters, is described as a Syria-goer avant la lettre. One of the reasons for this particular comparison is the supposed similarity between the intensity of the ideological conviction of the Spainfighters and the religious fanaticism of the Syria-goers. Another resemblance between the conflicts is the participation of Dutch citizens in a transnational army.

The Spainfighters were often men, and a few women, who felt attracted to the communist, anarchist or socialist traditions. Most left the Netherlands in 1936 or 1937 to go to Spain, which was the theatre of a violent civil war from July 1936 onwards.<sup>6</sup> The war started with the attempt of a number of nationalist generals, including José Sanjurjo, Francisco Franco

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<sup>1</sup> Bart Dirks, ‘Janus Leijnse, Syriëganger avant la lettre’, *De Volkskrant*, 03-01-2017.

<sup>2</sup> Edwin Bakker and Roel de Bont, ‘Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters (2012-2015): Characteristics, Motivations, and Roles in the War in Syria and Iraq’, *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27:5 (2016) 837.

<sup>3</sup> For examples, see Kristel van Teeffelen, ‘Syriëgangers lieten hun families meestal in verbijstering achter’, *Trouw*, 30-07-2018 and Afshin Ellian, ‘Vervolg Syriëgangers ook voor oorlogsmisdaden’, *Elsevier Weekblad*, 06-07-2018.

<sup>4</sup> For examples, see Maartje Bakker, ‘Kamermeerderheid voor wetsvoorstel ontnemen Nederlandschap’, *De Volkskrant*, 26-02-2015 and *Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal*, Kamerstuk 29754, nr. 454. Vergaderjaar 2017-2018.

<sup>5</sup> For examples, see Jan van Tienen, ‘Kunnen we de Syriëgangers beter begrijpen door te kijken naar de Nederlandse strijders in de Spaanse Burgeroorlog?’, *VICE*, 24-07-2016 and Koen Vossen, ‘Syrië als het Spanje van toen’, *Trouw*, 02-04-2013.

<sup>6</sup> Hans Dankaart, Jaap-Jan Flinterman, Frans Groot and Rik Vuurmans, *De oorlog begon in Spanje. Nederlanders in de Spaanse Burgeroorlog, 1936-1939* (Amsterdam: Van Gennep, 1986).

and Emilio Mola, to commit a coup d'état against the narrowly elected Popular-Front coalition government. The Spanish government at the time consisted of left-wing Republicans and was supported by socialists and communists. The group of generals had the objective of restoring order (and traditional values) in a country that had been tormented by strikes, riots and violent actions against the Catholic Church for years. With the help of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and the Spanish Army of Africa, the generals succeeded in occupying large parts of Spain. The coup failed, however, in the east of the country and in several large cities, such as Madrid and Barcelona, partly as the result of resistance from leftist militias. Although the break-out of the civil war had several root causes, many of them specific to the Spanish context, the general public saw and still sees the conflict as the first real clash between two blocks; between fascism and communism. However, it is important to note that both camps were not as homogeneous as the word blocks suggests. Anarchists, syndicalists, communists, moderate and revolutionary socialists and republicans united in the battle against the rebel generals, but in reality the common enemy was almost the only cement in their cooperation. The nationalist side was more united, but it was still built on a co-operation between among others Carlists, conservatives, Catholics and Falangists. Notwithstanding these nuances, for a wide array of Europeans and Americans, the Civil War in Spain formed the first battlefield of the clash between the ideologies of the near future in the 1930s.<sup>7</sup>

Volunteers from all over the world therefore flocked to Spain to participate in the war. The majority of these foreign fighters joined the Loyalist side, defending the left-wing Republican government, willing to combat Franco's and other nationalist troops.<sup>8</sup> Many volunteers, including the bulk of the Dutch Spainfighters, joined the International Brigades, the newly created foreign units supporting the Republican side. The International Brigades obtained a legendary status during the Republican defense of Madrid. In the November days of 1936 the capital remained in Republic hands, (partly) due to the employment of the International Brigades, possessing more military organization and discipline than the militias.<sup>9</sup>

In academic literature, the Spanish Civil War is generally considered to be one of the first wars with a substantial presence of highly ideologically motivated foreign fighters,

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<sup>7</sup> Antony Beevor, *The Battle for Spain: The Spanish Civil War 1936-1939* (London: Penguin Books, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> For an overview of the foreign volunteers on the nationalist side, see Judith Keene, *Fighting for Franco: International Volunteers in Nationalist Spain during the Spanish Civil War* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001). Only a handful of Dutchmen joined the nationalists, for an example see the case of Bob Dellelijm in *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 'Gesneuveld in Franco's leger', 01-12-1936.

<sup>9</sup> Beevor, *The Battle for Spain*.

particularly due to the International Brigades.<sup>10</sup> Next to military historians, scholars focusing on the concept of foreign fighters and academics concentrating on the role of ideology in war have thus been interested in the International Brigades.

Political scientist David Malet loosely defines foreign fighters as individuals fighting in modern civil wars, ‘if not in direct violation of the laws of their own country and the international community, at least acting against commonly accepted norms of military service under which individuals are presumed to owe allegiance to their own country and to fight on its behalf’.<sup>11</sup> As a general model, Malet holds that foreign fighters are recruited by using frames that portray the relatively distant conflict as a severe threat to a certain transnational identity group the fighters feel part of or closely connected to. These transnational groups usually form a minority group within their homeland. To them, the need for the use of ‘defensive’ force in another country in order to preserve the essence and existence of the transnational community is underlined. They decide to join the battle as foreign volunteers, because they are told (and believe) that their participation is necessary for the survival of their transnational group.<sup>12</sup> The model of Malet is useful in understanding in how general beliefs, ideological convictions in the case of the Spainfighters, can be turned into concrete actions. This thesis will use and elaborate on Malet’s model. Foreign policy researcher Ian Bryan also highlights the aspect of transnational identity in the motivation of foreign volunteers as he regards foreign fighters explicitly ‘not as agents of foreign governments’ as they leave their home country to fight for their transnational interests.<sup>13</sup>

In recent years, the amount of scholarly attention for the phenomenon of foreign fighters has also grown amongst historians. Although historian Marcello Flores points out that the term is difficult to define, especially when considered in an overview since the late Middle Ages, as the boundaries with concepts as mercenaries, colonial independence fighters and revolutionaries are blurry,<sup>14</sup> a consensus on the meaning of the term foreign fighters when it comes to the modern era has been established. Within the fields of political science and history, foreign fighters are generally seen as a violent kind of transnational activists, striving to reach their political goals and the defense of a shared identity not contained within the (social-

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<sup>10</sup> Marcello Flores, ‘Foreign Fighters Involvement in National and International Wars: A Historical Survey’, in Andrea de Guttry, Francesca Capone en Christophe Paulussen (eds.), *Foreign Fighters under International Law and Beyond* (The Hague: TMC Asser Press, 2016) 39.

<sup>11</sup> David Malet, ‘Why Foreign Fighters? Historical Perspectives and Solutions’, *Orbis* 54:1 2010 99.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 100 and David Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Ian Bryan, ‘Sovereignty and the Foreign Fighter Problem’, *Orbis* 54:1 2010 115-129.

<sup>14</sup> Flores, ‘Foreign Fighters Involvement’, 27.

cultural) borders of the nation-state, outside the usual political spaces whilst violating (legal) norms.<sup>15</sup> The foreign fighters go against the modern norm of citizens fighting in the service of their home country, created by the growing appeal of nationalism and the increasing power of the state to enforce conscription.<sup>16</sup> In this academic branch, scholars study the Spanish Civil War as one of the case studies within the larger frame of foreign fighters. Research by Flores and by historians Nir Arielli and Bruce Collins are examples of this current of thought.<sup>17</sup> In these studies, the International Brigades are often seen as an example of a novel, modern phenomenon of transnational volunteers for whom ideology, in contrast to financial incentives, played a major role in their motivation. This thesis will go into Arielli's classifications of foreign fighters, which shed light on the various kinds of possible relationships between foreign volunteers and their home state.

Other scholars focus more on the Spanish Civil War and the International Brigades as such and go into the motivation of the volunteers in more depth. By examining personal stories, Arno Lustiger provides the profiles of and the motives behind German and Austrian Jews in the International Brigade. He highlights the volunteers' willingness to fight for their convictions, combatting against the imperial anti-Semitism of the rebel generals.<sup>18</sup> Several other studies of specific, usually national, groups within the Brigades have been published.<sup>19</sup> One relevant example is the pioneering work of Hans Dankkaart, Jaap-Jan Flinterman, Frans Groot and Rik Vuurmans on the Dutch Spainfighters from 1986. Based on archival research and on interviews with a selection of surviving Spainfighters, Dankkaart et al. outline an image of the fate of Dutch volunteers, which did not receive much scholarly attention before the 1980's due to the impact of the Second World War. In a practical manner, they examine the reasons of the Spainfighters to go to Spain and to keep on fighting. While providing a wealth of factual information, Dankkaart et al. argue that the ideological convictions of the Spainfighters were the main motive. The exact mechanisms behind the activation of these convictions in order to actually go to Spain do not receive much attention in their work.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Samuël Kruizinga, 'Struggling to Fit in. The Dutch in a Transnational Army, 1936-1939', *Journal of Modern European History* 16:2 2018 183.

<sup>16</sup> Nir Arielli, *From Byron to Bin Laden: A History of Foreign War Volunteers* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2018).

<sup>17</sup> Nir Arielli and Bruce Collins (eds.), *Transnational soldiers: Foreign Military Enlistment in the Modern Era* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>18</sup> Arno Lustiger, 'German and Austrian Jews in the International Brigade', *The Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 35:1 1990 297-320.

<sup>19</sup> See for example Richard Baxell, *British Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War* (London: Routledge, 2004) or Peter Carroll, *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade: Americans in the Spanish Civil War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

<sup>20</sup> Dankkaart et al., *De oorlog begon in Spanje*.

Historian Josie McLellan provides another example of a national analysis as she wrote an article about the motivation of the German International Brigade Volunteers, with the meaningful quote ‘I wanted to be a Little Lenin’ in its title.<sup>21</sup> McLellan generally remarks that the volunteers of the International Brigades, both in the era of war and in hindsight, are seen as a movement of individuals motivated to fight oppression, fascism and dictatorship by some, while others regard them as a ‘Comintern army’, full of hardened communists directed by the Soviet Union.<sup>22</sup> Dan Richardson is a proponent of the last view. He argues that the Brigades were not a mere military force, but had an intrinsically political character. By using a top-down approach, Richardson claims the International Brigades functioned as an important political, ideological and propaganda instrument employed by the Comintern and Moscow for its own goals, both in- and outside Spain.<sup>23</sup> Later, more nuanced studies, such as the work of Eastern Europe specialist Frank Schauff, recognize the spontaneous start of Republican foreign volunteers, traveling to Spain more or less on their own to fight for their ideal. The Comintern then had to absorb and promote this movement in order to stay in their role of the left-wing avant-garde. Over time, the Comintern increased their level of control on the foreign volunteers, resulting in the organized International Brigades.<sup>24</sup>

Historian Samuël Kruizinga specifically connects foreign fighters as a distinct diachronic concept to an in-depth study of the Dutch International Brigadiers. He questions the dominant view of the Brigade as a highly ideologically motivated, truly transnational citizen’s army by focusing on the clash that arose between the ‘imagined communities’ of both the national and the transnational the Dutch Spainfighters (felt they) belonged to. According to Kruizinga, this clash is among others visible in the dominant Dutch media and political discourse on the Spanish Civil War. It emphasized the unique Dutch mission in European peacekeeping and it created the notion that the country was full of foreign elements smuggling weapons, goods and innocent persons to Spain. The dominant Dutch discourse conflicted with the recruitments efforts of the Comintern and the national communist party.<sup>25</sup>

This thesis aims to deepen the important theme stirred up by Kruizinga. While transnational history writing has justifiably been on the rise, moving away from the nation-state

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<sup>21</sup> Josie McLellan, ‘I Wanted to be a Little Lenin’: Ideology and the German International Brigade Volunteers’, *Journal of Contemporary History* 41:2 2006 287-304.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.

<sup>23</sup> R. Dan Richardson, *Comintern Army: The International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1982) 2.

<sup>24</sup> Frank Schauff, *Der verspielte Sieg: Sowjetunion, Kommunistische Internationale und Spanischer Bürgerkrieg 1936-1939* (Amsterdam: Campus, 2004) 178-199.

<sup>25</sup> Kruizinga, ‘Struggling to Fit in’, 184.

as the self-evident unit of analysis, it is important to stay aware of the great ability of in particular the twentieth-century state to create a defining and possibly decisive legal, cultural and emotional relationship with its citizens. The complex balance between the occasionally conflicting loyalties of citizens, ranging from feelings of nationalism to the appeal of ideologies with worldwide ambitions, and the connected advance of the nation-state as a dominant identity forming entity over the last two centuries is particularly revealing in groups of foreign fighters. While a substantial majority group of the volunteers in Spain supported communism or belonged to the left-wing social democrats and while they enthusiastically spoke of brotherhood, solidarity and shared ideals, the International Brigades were organized along national, or at least linguistic, lines.

In this regard, the cohort of the Dutch Spainfighters presents an enlightening case as the Dutch International Brigadiers experienced different organizational structures. The majority of the Dutch fighters were assigned to the German dominated XIth Brigade, while a small group was part of the Chapayev battalion, which held 21 nationalities in its ranks. Others joined specific parts of the International Brigades such as the artillery or the cavalry as a single person or in small groups, while some Dutch volunteers decided to fight for one of the many militias more or less ‘outside’ the format of the International Brigades. In the late summer of 1937, a Dutch company was formed within the Edgar André battalion. From March 1938 onwards, this unit, comprised of around 80 Dutchmen, a few dozen Spaniards and some Flemish, German and Austrian fighters, was known as ‘De Zeven Provinciën’, in reference to Dutch national history and in particular to the Dutch cruiser with its mutinous crew in 1933.<sup>26</sup>

While Kruizinga’s article reserves quite some attention for the Dutch press in general, the political and legal circumstances in the Netherlands and the directing efforts of the national communist party, this thesis strives to interpret the (military) political culture amongst the Dutch Spainfighters by zooming in on the internal micro-politics of these volunteer groups. It will thus take a different approach compared to Kruizinga. The thesis will adopt a suggestion made by historian Ferdinand Göhde in his article on transnational soldiers in the period of the Italian Risorgimento. Göhde argues that national discourse informed concrete practices and experiences in both sides of the armed conflict. In order to research and understand military and political culture, Göhde suggests that the analysis of the perceptions and experiences of individuals and small armed groups during the fighting is a fruitful approach to take.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Dankkaart et al., *De oorlog begon in Spanje*, 74-75.

<sup>27</sup> Ferdinand Nicolas Göhde, ‘A new military history of the Italian Risorgimento and Anti-Risorgimento: the case of ‘transnational soldiers’, *Modern Italy* 19:1 2014 21-39.

The specific focus of this thesis will be on the role of the Dutch national identity in the perceptions and experiences of a wide array of Dutch Spainfighters in order to understand how the volunteers dealt with the potential for clashes between the imagined communities of the Dutch nation-state and the border transcending, transnational appeal of their ideology. The thesis will thus cover communication and language issues, but it will also zoom in on more fundamental perceptions of Dutch Spainfighters. It will focus on their motivations, their perceived value and interpretation of Dutch citizenship and their experiences in an unknown environment. In contrast to Kruizinga, the thesis will not only take into account the volunteers that joined the International Brigades, supposedly a transnational army, but it will also include some experiences of the Dutch medical volunteers in its analysis. In general, this thesis aims to analyze the role of Dutch national identity in the experiences and perceptions of the Dutch Spainfighters.

Nationality and identity are slightly elusive concepts that can have a variety of meanings attached to them. This thesis does not aim to go into a debate on definitions, but it will highlight and operationalize a few aspects that are connected to both concepts. While discussing the motivation of the Spainfighters in the light of Malet's model, the focus will be on the Spainfighters' conscious construction of the 'right' meaning of the Dutch national identity in relation to their actions in Spain. The dominant view of the Spainfighters on their specific 'duties' as Dutchmen will be analyzed. The actual experiences of the Spainfighters during the war are studied in a more practical manner. What did it mean to be Dutch in an unfamiliar environment in Spain? The focus will be on the culture clash some Spainfighters experienced and perceived, which is likely to be similar to the general migrant experience. This aspect touches upon the more sociological sides of national identity. The last facet that will be highlighted relates to the administrative functions of nationality, such as passports and official citizenship.

In order to analyze the role of the Dutch national identity, this thesis will draw on a variety of primary sources. The Digital Platform Spainfighters, [www.spanjestrijders.nl](http://www.spanjestrijders.nl), will be used as a starting point. The website is set up on the initiative of journalist Yvonne Scholten and it is developed in collaboration with the International Institute of Social History (IISH). Its aim is to provide a biographical dictionary of all Dutch citizens who fought on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War. Another source is the archival wealth of the IISH itself. Examples that will be studied include an amount of personal letters of Spainfighters, which notably had

to pass the censorship apparatus of the International Brigades, and the Dutch front newspaper *Dagelijkse Berichten* that circulated on a daily basis within the Brigades, although the IISH only holds a somewhat random selection. The *Dagelijkse Berichten* consisted of around five pages of military news from Spain, general international news and messages from the Netherlands and Belgium. The archives of the Dutch communist party, the CPN, will also be studied. Moreover, the IISH also holds the transcripts of interviews with several surviving Spainfighters in the 1980s; these oral history sources were the initiative of Dankbaar et al.. Additionally, sources from the Dutch National Archive in The Hague, such as official reports on the Spainfighters from the Ministry of Justice and of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, will be examined. Several Dutch newspapers articles, in particular from the *Volksdagblad*, the communist newspaper publishing many letters and reports from Spain, will also be used. Paul de Groot, the CPN's political secretary, was the chief editor of the *Volksdagblad*.

On the basis of these sources, the thesis will pay attention to the experiences of a wide array of Dutch Spainfighters in a more or less chronological order. As such, the first chapter will be devoted to a condensed sketch of context. It will then zoom in on the role of ideology and national identity in the motivation of the Dutch Spainfighters to travel to Spain, building on and adding to the model of Malet. How did the Spainfighters perceive the relation between their transnational ideals and the Dutch interest? What mechanisms did the Spainfighters deploy to justify their participation in the Civil War? The second chapter focuses on the experiences and perceptions of the Spainfighters whilst in Spain. It will take into account a variety of issues, such as language barriers, discipline problems and the formation of the Dutch company. It will pay attention to the experiences of the non-violent Dutch volunteers and the creation of a Dutch hospital. The journey back from Spain to the Netherlands and the thoughts of the Spainfighters on the loss of their Dutch citizenship will form the topic of chapter three. Together, these three chapters will enable insights in the nature of the International Brigades, as national identity played a considerable role in the perceptions and experiences of the Dutch Spainfighters, and they will add to the understanding of foreign fighters. Their motivations are best explained by an interwoven blend of loyalty to a transnational community and the desired creation of the best possible future for the Netherlands. The case of the Spainfighters will therefore enhance the model of Malet.

## Chapter 1: Why Spain?: ‘Hitting Hitler in Spain signifies the defense of our fatherland’

In the chaotic days immediately after the attempted coup of the group of Spanish generals in July 1936, the newly appointed Republican prime minister José Giral Pereira decided to allow the distribution of weapons among civilians, arming in particular several left-wing militias linked to trade unions such as the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo.<sup>28</sup> During the mid-July days around half of the territorial army of Spain chose to side with the rebels. Among officers, this percentage of coup supporters was higher, severely reducing the capabilities of the remaining Republican army units.<sup>29</sup> Giral’s order contributed to the obstruction of the generals’ seizure of power in cities as Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia, but it also created opportunities for different political groupings on the Republican side, such as the anarchists, to arm themselves and to take effective control of areas as Aragon and Catalonia.<sup>30</sup>

These armed militias, of which most possessed an outspoken political color, rather spontaneously absorbed small groups of foreigners within their ranks from the start of the violent clash. These early foreign volunteers were usually emigrants, tourists or participants of the People’s Olympiad, which was planned to take place in Barcelona in opposition to Berlin’s Summer Olympics when the outbreak of hostilities started. Next to incorporation within the Spanish militias, separate foreign units such as the French century ‘Commune de Paris’ and the Italian ‘Giustizia e Libertà’ were quickly formed and joined the fighting. The foreigners present in Spain during the first acts of violence were quickly followed by volunteers who travelled to Spain on their own initiative, in particular many citizens of fascist or non-democratic states as Germany, Italy, Poland and the Balkan states.<sup>31</sup> However, Dutch citizens as Willy de Lathouder and Fanny Schoonheydt, probably the only Dutch woman taking up arms, were also fighters from the very beginning. Schoonheydt already lived in Spain as a journalist and was involved in the preparations for the People’s Olympiad, while it is likely that De Lathouder was the first Dutchman to travel to Spain to fight in August 1936, joining the Thälmann Centurio.<sup>32</sup>

Meanwhile, the governments of France and Great-Britain initiated a non-intervention agreement based on appeasement to avoid a European war on Spanish soil, which was signed in August 1936.<sup>33</sup> The agreement included the creation of the Non-Intervention Committee,

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<sup>28</sup> Beevor, *The Battle for Spain*, 62.

<sup>29</sup> Gerald Howson, *Arms for Spain: The untold Story of the Spanish Civil War* (London: John Murray, 1998) 28.

<sup>30</sup> Beevor, *The Battle for Spain*, 58–70.

<sup>31</sup> Dankart et al., *De oorlog begon in Spanje*, 30-31.

<sup>32</sup> See the profile of Willy de Lathouder in the IISH database on the Spainfighters. Retrieved on 02-11-2018 via <https://spanjestrijders.nl/bio/lathouder-willy-de/> and Yvonne Scholten, *Fanny Schoonheydt: een Nederlands meisje strijdt in de Spaanse Burgeroorlog* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 2011).

<sup>33</sup> Beevor, *The Battle for Spain*, 374.

which had the official support of most European countries, including Italy, Germany, the Soviet-Union and the Netherlands. The Dutch government at the time was a center-right coalition of Christians and Liberals led by prime minister Hendrik Colijn. For this administration, abiding to the long-standing Dutch neutrality policy, the decision to sign the Non-Intervention Agreement was a simple one. Although Dutch newspapers definitely reported on it, the situation in Spain was not a hotly debated issue in the Dutch Parliament at all.<sup>34</sup> From the start it was rather evident that the agreement did not deter Italy and Germany to send war material and combat troops to Spain. Later the Soviet-Union also exported weapons to the Republic.<sup>35</sup> In his memoirs written after the Second World War, Joachim von Ribbentrop, the German representative to the first official meeting of the committee in September 1936, wrote: ‘It would have been better to call this the Intervention Committee, for its members concentrated on defending or hushing up more or less cleverly their respective countries’ intervention in Spain’.<sup>36</sup> Historian Hugh Thomas therefore concludes that the Spanish Civil War can be in multiple ways seen as ‘more even than a European Civil War: it would be a World War in miniature’.<sup>37</sup> The involvement of other countries led to the situation that the most modern armaments and technological advances were employed on the battlefield in Spain, a country which until 1936 had been rather underdeveloped.<sup>38</sup>

In this context, the international communist movement organized in the Third International, known as Comintern, decided to actively but covertly support the Spanish Republic by sending volunteers raised by foreign communist parties.<sup>39</sup> Nonetheless, non-communist volunteers were also explicitly welcomed within the International Brigades as part of the adopted Popular Front strategy to attract and win over non-members who agreed with the communist party on particular issues. In the 1930s, opposition to fascism was the main theme within the Popular Front approach.<sup>40</sup> At the end of September 1936, the Comintern, in engagement with representatives of the Spanish Communist Party and with the involvement of the Soviet’s Ministry of Defense, thus decided to organize international columns out of all those who wished or could be persuaded to fight for the Republic. At first, the Spanish Republican government disagreed with the Comintern’s plans as the foreign units would not fall under

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<sup>34</sup> An annotated version of the contribution of Koen Vossen, ‘Nederland en de Spaanse Burgeroorlog’ to Hub Hermans (e.a.), *Een Nederlandse blik op de Spaanse Burgeroorlog* (Utrecht: Cervantes Instituut, 2006) 21-34.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Preston, *The Spanish Civil War: reaction, revolution and revenge* (revised and expanded edition) (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007) 150.

<sup>36</sup> Joachim von Ribbentrop, *The Ribbentrop Memoirs* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1954) 70-71.

<sup>37</sup> Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* (London: Penguin Books, revised 2001) 449.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 450.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 438.

<sup>40</sup> Archie Brown, *The Rise and Fall of Communism* (London: Random House Group Limited, 2009) 88–89.

direct Spanish command. However, after several deteriorations in the Republic's military situation, the new socialist prime minister Francisco Largo Caballero, president Manuel Azaña, who can be characterized as liberal Republican, and Cortes chairman Diego Martínez Barrio allowed the formation of the International Brigades on October 22.<sup>41</sup>

After this agreement, the Comintern went to work, operating from a central recruiting office in Paris, and instructed the national communist parties to deliver a certain number of volunteers.<sup>42</sup> The total amount of international volunteers joining the International Brigades is estimated to be around 42.000, although numbers ranging from 31.000 to 100.000 have been coined.<sup>43</sup> The French delegation was the most numerous, but volunteers from almost every European country, the United States, Latin-America, Africa and countries as India and China were present.<sup>44</sup> Of these volunteers, roughly 60% went to Spain as a communist and about 20% probably became communist during their time fighting in the Civil War. Most members of the International Brigades belonged to the working class, whereas several intellectuals also joined the fighting. For example, George Orwell was in a militia of the POUM, the Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista. The POUM was of a (supposedly) Trotskyist signature, collaborated with anarchist trade unions, and had a cumbersome relationship with the Spanish Communist Party, following a stricter Stalinist policy.

In addition to their working class background, many foreign volunteers were otherwise unemployed and of a young age, although a considerable amount was formed by First World War veterans.<sup>45</sup> The volunteers were incorporated within the organization of the International Brigades on the basis of nationality or language group. Initially, most Dutchmen thus fought in the German battalions 'Edgar André' and 'Thälmann'.<sup>46</sup> The International Brigades, operating from its base in Albacete, absorbed many of the early non-organized foreign volunteers, especially the ones already fighting in the foreign militias as the 'Commune de Paris'. However, throughout the war, handfuls of foreigners remained part of Spanish militias.<sup>47</sup>

The Dutch contingent of Spainfighters operated within the context roughly sketched above. Before going into the analysis of the perception and experiences of the Dutch Spainfighters in relation to their feelings of national identity, it has to be noted that the

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<sup>41</sup> Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 438-450.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Stanley Payne, *The Spanish Civil War, the Soviet Union and Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008) 165.

<sup>44</sup> Dankart et al., *De oorlog begon in Spanje*.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 441.

<sup>46</sup> Dankart et al., *De oorlog begon in Spanje*.

<sup>47</sup> Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 443.

International Brigades functioned in close collaboration with a larger movement of solidarity with the Spanish Republic, with the transnational army as its most radical expression. The Spanish Civil War triggered many Europeans to take action against the rise of fascism. Initiatives granting humanitarian, political and moral support for the Republic popped up and were more or less united from August 1936 onwards via the ‘Comité de coordination et d’information pour l’aide a l’Espagne républicaine’. The international committee and its national branches were also organized according to the Popular Front strategy. While highly regarded intellectual or artistic non-party members functioned as the bill boards of the organization, the actual work was mostly carried out by communists. The Dutch chapter of the international committee *Hulp aan Spanje*, ‘Aid to Spain’, operated in a similar manner, organizing protests against the non-intervention policy of the Dutch government and collecting money, commodities, medicine and food to send to Spain. As a third pillar of their work, these solidarity initiatives also acted as mediation agents for doctors and nursing personnel willing to travel to war-torn Spain, amongst them a few dozen Dutchmen.<sup>48</sup> These medical volunteers regarded themselves as soldiers. Although they were officially employed by the Republican government, they functioned as if they were part of an army unit.<sup>49</sup>

The Dutch Spainfighters, including the medical personnel, although not technically fighters, largely fit into the general picture of the foreign volunteers painted in the introductory paragraphs of this chapter. The majority was in their twenties or thirties, originating from a working class environment and had experience with unemployment. In addition, the roots of the stereotypical Dutch Spainfighter lay in the urbanized regions of the Western part of the Netherlands, although some left-wing Catholics from Noord-Brabant and Limburg also went to Spain to fight for the Republic.<sup>50</sup> Notable exceptions to this highly generalized profile were several intellectuals, such as Jef Last, and a handful of bourgeois doctors. The overwhelming majority of the Dutch Spainfighters arrived in Spain via Comintern structures, but it is possible that communist newspaper *De Tribune*, the precursor of the *Volkskrant*, was right when it reported that a few Dutchmen wishing to participate in the People’s Olympiad already joined

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<sup>48</sup> Dankaart et al., *De oorlog begon in Spanje*, 32.

<sup>49</sup> IISH, Collectie Nederlandse deelnemers aan de Internationale Brigades in de Spaanse Burgeroorlog (CNDIBSBO), stuk 66, testimony given by Trudel van Reemst – de Vries on 24-09-1982:

‘JJF: Maar jullie werden dus eigenlijk een beetje op hetzelfde niveau als militairen behandeld?

TvR: Ja natuurlijk, want dan kan niet anders. Ik bedoel, we waren ook militairen.’

and IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 57, testimony given by Noor Bergen-Diamant in 1983: ‘Je was in dienst van de regering, maar in feite toch van het leger, je zat gewoon bij een legeronderdeel.’

<sup>50</sup> IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 48, testimony given by Sake Visser in 1984: ‘De Hollanders waren allemaal links georiënteerd. Want er waren er ook wel bij die van katholieke afkomst waren. We hadden Brabanders en Limburgers ook bij ons.’

the street fighting in Barcelona in July 1936.<sup>51</sup> Several Dutchmen, around a few dozen, joined the Spanish militias.<sup>52</sup> For example, Piet van 't Hart, member of Henk Sneevliet's Revolutionair-Socialistische Arbeiderspartij, the RSAP, which was small anti-Stalinist communist party, became a member of a militia unit of the POUM. Van 't Hart was arrested and put in prison in May 1937 when the internal tensions within the Republican block led to a men-hunt directed at the supposedly Trotskyist and traitorous POUM members.<sup>53</sup>

Next to Dutch participation in the Spanish militias, a few members of the RSAP and a handful of Dutch anarchists joined the International Brigades. Although a group of non-politically organized Dutchmen was also enlisted in the International Brigades, the Dutch contingent in the Brigades, like the Brigades as a whole, is attributed a largely communist character.<sup>54</sup> The Dutch Spainfighters had no experience with actual military fighting, as the Netherlands did not participate in the First World War. Moreover, the Dutch volunteers did not live under a fascist regime, although many did see the danger of fascism via their contacts through the International Red Aid with (Jewish) German refugees and they were often involved in street fighting with supporters of the Dutch national-socialist movement.<sup>55</sup> To them, Spain was usually no more than a shape in a school atlas. So why did persons like Janus Leijnse, the Syria-goer avant la lettre, decide to trade in the relatively quiet Netherlands for a violent war in the unfamiliar country of Spain?

Answers to this question usually include a sense of adventure and a minor economic incentive, as many foreign volunteers were unemployed, but mostly highlight the ideological motivations of the Spainfighters. One English volunteer strikingly wrote about the motivation of his fellow foreigners: 'Undoubtedly the great majority are here for the sake of an ideal, no matter what motive prompted them to seek one.'<sup>56</sup> However, to simply suggest ideology per se as the explanation of the Spainfighters' motivation is not enough. As Nir Arielli rightly states in his article on the International Brigades: 'there were plenty of ardent antifascists in the world in the late 1930s, but not all of them went to fight for the Republic'.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, in his 2018 book on foreign fighters, Arielli firmly places the foreigners in the Spanish Civil War within

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<sup>51</sup> *De Tribune*, 27-07-1936.

<sup>52</sup> Dankaart et al., *De oorlog begon in Spanje*, 164.

<sup>53</sup> IISH, Archief Max Perthus, stuk 18, Aantekeningen en documentatie betreffende Spanje.

<sup>54</sup> Dankaart et al., *De oorlog begon in Spanje*, 64.

<sup>55</sup> For an example, see the profile of Willy de Lathouder in the IISH database on the Spainfighters. Retrieved on 20-10-2018 via <https://spanjestrijders.nl/bio/maaren-kees-van>.

<sup>56</sup> As quoted from Michael Jackson, *Fallen Sparrows: The International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1994) 52.

<sup>57</sup> Nir Arielli, 'Getting There: Enlistment Considerations and the Recruitment Networks of the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War', in Nir Arielli en Bruce Collins (eds.), *Transnational soldiers: Foreign Military Enlistment in the Modern Era* (Palgrave Macmillan 2013) 219-220.

the second ideological waves of volunteers. Within modern history, in which the foreign volunteers were seen as violating the norm of citizens only fighting for their fatherland, Arielli detects three ideological phases attracting foreigners to its cause. The first one, the battle between liberty and tyranny, includes the independence wars in Latin America and the Italian Risorgimento. The Spanish Civil War, the Russian Civil War and numerous Cold War clashes belong to the wave that ‘pitted the Left against the Right’.<sup>58</sup> The third wave is characterized as a clash of civilizations and has not ended yet, as it applies to the current war in Syria and to the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Yugoslavia.<sup>59</sup> So how exactly was ideology, on the basis of pitting the Left against the Right, able to draw left-leaning Dutch volunteers into the Spanish war? What mechanism was at work to convince Dutch citizens to travel to Spain to fight for the Left and what role played their Dutch nationality in this mechanism?

As shortly mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, David Malet offers a model for the recruitment of foreign volunteers and he uses the Spanish Civil War as a case study to make his point. He regards the war as a battle in which foreign fighters were recruited purely on the basis of their ideological affiliations.<sup>60</sup> He argues that in order to attract foreigners, recruiters, in this case the Comintern, reach out to non-domestic groups expected to be sympathetic to their side due to (elements of) a shared identity, a transnational relation, based on ethnic, religious or ideological ties. The recruiters spread the idea that a victory of their side in the conflict is highly important to the interests or even the survival of this shared identity, which usually forms a minority group within the home polity of the potential volunteers. The participation of the foreigners in the conflict is portrayed as necessary to overcome the severe threat to the actual ideology, religion or ethnicity that is shared. Malet states that the recruitment of foreign volunteers takes place via the social networks of these specific transnational communities. In this process, he argues that foreigners who decide to take up arms in a conflict away from their home, are generally more closely connected to the transnational identity subgroups than the wider national society they actually live in.<sup>61</sup>

Malet himself applies his theory to the Spanish Civil War. He typifies it as a non-ethnic intrastate war, as it was battle without a dominant ethnic aspect in it to draw in a transnational community based on sentiments of shared ‘blood’ and an ethnic tie to the Spanish soil. As such, the foreign volunteers can be considered ‘True Believers’ as they regarded ‘the local civil

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<sup>58</sup> Arielli, *From Byron to Bin Laden*, 39.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> David Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civic Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>61</sup> Malet, ‘Why Foreign Fighters?’, *Orbis*.

conflict as just one front in a larger, transnational struggle in defense of their group'.<sup>62</sup> According to Malet, the Comintern was highly successful in framing the Civil War as a conflict that was not only important to Spaniards, but also to communists, and moreover, to all antifascists in the world. The power of the Nationalists was portrayed as a danger to minorities far away from the Spanish earth, by purposely making the struggle of the Spanish working class coincide with the global sentiments of an inevitable battle between fascism and antifascism. On the basis of recollections of former, primarily American, International Brigadiers and propaganda material from the 1930's, Malet concludes that individual volunteers themselves felt part of the same transnational community as the Republican people of Spain. He labels the transnational identity of the volunteers an imagined community that implies a duty to its fellow members. Several statements of International Brigades veterans cited by Malet report that the obligations towards the transnational community were more powerful than their American national identity, which Malet takes as an indicator of the success of the recruiters.<sup>63</sup>

This mechanism, the transnational resonance of the meaning of the Spanish war, is absolutely and clearly present in the statements of the Dutch Spainfighters. However, this thesis argues that the Dutch national identity, which in this chapter in particular refers to the Spainfighters' conscious loyalty to the Dutch imagined community, played a much larger role in the decision to join the fighting in Spain than Malet claims in his general model. In a heavily entangled manner the Spainfighters tried to incorporate both the imagined community of the transnational anti-fascists and their national Dutch identity to motivate and justify their choice to come to Spain.

Firstly, some of the recruitment messages and copied or natural sentiments of the Spainfighters that support the thesis of Malet will be analyzed. In October 1936, Joseph Stalin sent a public telegraph to José Diaz, the leader of Spain's communist party, writing that the 'liberation of Spain from the yoke of the fascist reactionaries is not the private concern of Spaniards alone, but the common cause of progressive humanity'.<sup>64</sup> In the message of Stalin, it becomes clear that the scope of the conflict is widened from Spain to basically the whole anti-fascist world. Hence Malet's point, the packaging of the battle in a threat to the survival of a transnational community, is visible in some of the expressions of the Spainfighters. For example, in one of his many letters to his wife Ida ter Haar, Jef Last, who struggled with his sympathies for the Soviet Union at the time, writes from Madrid in November 1936: 'I know

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<sup>62</sup> Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity*, 93.

<sup>63</sup> Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity*, 108-109.

<sup>64</sup> As quoted from Thomas, *The Battle from Spain*, 447.

that if we maybe lose this conflict, very hard times will come for the working class, also in Holland.’<sup>65</sup> In this statement, the international proletariat and its ideals function as a transnational community that is in danger, because of the situation in Spain.

Similar sentiments can be found in letters from other Spainfighters. In a letter written in October 1937, when he had been in Spain for around five months, Jan Brillman replied to his son who wrote about the fatherland: ‘What nonsense. Can you help it that you happen to be Dutch, and not a Frenchman, Englishman or Spaniard? ... All of us have to work for the only goal, the liberation of the proletariat from the capitalist class.’<sup>66</sup> This quote reveals a truly transnational spirit, purely focusing on the imagined community of the proletariat. Spainfighter Harry Schoen echoes this belief in a letter to his mother dating back to July 1937, when Schoen had just arrived in Spain. According to his mother, Schoen was a full-blood communist. In the letter, he even adds to the loyalty towards the transnational working class community by calling the Soviet Union, instead of the Netherlands, the fatherland: ‘But now after a year of heavy fighting, we have succeeded in creating, with the help of the international proletariat and the great support of our fatherland, the Soviet Union, an army which will crush the international fascism.’<sup>67</sup> These quotes indicate the success of the message of anti-fascism. The Dutch Spainfighters did not pay much attention to the divisions within the two Spanish blocks. The nuances in the Republican faction, finally fighting each other briefly in Barcelona in May 1937, was not a hot topic for the Dutch volunteers as conscious efforts from the Republican government and the Spanish communist party were made to conceal the severity of the internal Republican struggle.<sup>68</sup>

Moreover, the Spainfighters were not at all occupied with questions about the ‘level of fascism’ of Franco and the nationalists. Franco was seen as a truly fascist enemy, end of question. This frame also fitted the Dutch and wider European atmosphere of the time. As political historian Koen Vossen explains, it seemed as if the world as the Spainfighters knew it was crumbling, because its fundamentals, liberalism and capitalism, turned out to be problematic.

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<sup>65</sup> Jef Last, *Brieven uit Spanje* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Contact, 1962) 40: ‘Ik weet dat we deze strijd misschien zullen verliezen en dat er dan heel moeilijke tijden komen voor de arbeidersklasse, ook in Holland.’

<sup>66</sup> See the profile of Jan Brillman in the IISH database on the Spainfighters. Retrieved on 01-11-2018 via <https://spanjestrijders.nl/bio/brilman-jan>: ‘Wat is dat voor onzin. Kun jij het helpen dat je toevallig Nederlands bent en geen Duitscher, Engelsman of Spanjaard? ... Allen moeten wij werken voor het eenige doel, de vrijmaking van het proletariaat tegen de bezittende klasse.’

<sup>67</sup> See the profile of Harry Schoen in the IISH database on the Spainfighters. Retrieved on 05-10-2018 from <https://spanjestrijders.nl/bio/schoen-harry>: ‘Doch nu na een jaar van zware strijd zijn we er in geslaagd met behulp van het internationale proletariaat en de geweldige steun van ons vaderland, de Sowjet Unie, een leger te scheppen waarop het internationale fascisme te pletter zal lopen.’

<sup>68</sup> IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 44, testimony given by Karel Neijssel on 21-10-1980: ‘Interne conflicten, zoals toen, wat in Barcelona is gebeurd, met de POUM enzovoorts, dat hoorde je eigenlijk maar zeer summier.’

The 1930's were portrayed as the era in which decisions of a major impact on the future had to be made. The rhetoric of these days was therefore focused on the following dichotomies, which were presented as inevitable choices: 'reaction or revolution, dictatorship or democracy, Mussert [referring to Anton Mussert, the leader of the Dutch nationalist-socialist movement] or Moscow, Catholicism or communism'.<sup>69</sup>

Despite the focus on the transnational laboring classes that can be found in the quotes above, most Spainfighters displayed a slightly different kind of rationale when they explain their motives. They emphasized the severe threat fascism, now on the attack in Spain, forms to the Netherlands, not to the transnational community of the laboring classes. Austrian International Brigades General Julius Deutsch, in conversation with Dutch communist journalist Nico Rost, supposedly declared that every nation, including the Dutch one, has its own Franco within the borders of their country.<sup>70</sup> Gerard van het Reve senior, under the alias of Vanter, wrote a book, almost like an adventure novel, about the experiences of the Spainfighters, full of proletarian patriotism. Van het Reve, who was still a convinced communist in the 1930's, wrote in an unusually nationalistic manner that the Dutch volunteers also fought for the freedom and independence of their own fatherland. The volunteers had Sea Beggars blood running in their veins and represented the best of the Dutch people from the past, the present and the future.<sup>71</sup> This term, proletarian patriotism, might be the key phrase in understanding the motivations and perceptions of the Dutch Spainfighters. In a brochure written by Jef Last in 1937, another example of references to Dutch history and the relation between the situation in Spain and the people of the Netherlands can be found: 'Those who wrestled the Republic of the Seven Provinces away from the tyranny of Spanish nobility and the pyres of the Inquisition, are now helping to maintain the Republic of Free Provinces in Spain.'<sup>72</sup> By referring to the Dutch Revolt dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, it suggested that the Spainfighters are the ones taking up the good old Dutch tradition of fighting against tyranny.

In letters to his family and to fiancée Sjaan, Spainfighter Pieter Pleun de Winter, who left Rotterdam to go to Spain in March 1938, wrote about a variety of topics, including his admiration for the camaraderie and passion for ideals he encountered in Spain. However, he also expressed his incomprehension of the lifestyle and thoughts of the different nationalities.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Vossen, 'Nederland en de Spaanse Burgeroorlog', 3.

<sup>70</sup> Nico Rost, *Van het Spaanse Vrijheidsfront* (Amsterdam: Pegasus. 1937) 52.

<sup>71</sup> Gerard Vanter, *Nederlanders onder commando van Hollander Piet in Spanje* (Amsterdam: Pegasus, 1939) 20.

<sup>72</sup> Jef Last, *Over de Hollanders in Spanje* (Amsterdam: Contact, 1937) 7: 'Zij die de republiek der zeven provinciën ontworstelden aan de tyrannie van Spaansche grandes en de brandstapels der inquisitie, helpen thans de republiek der vrije provinciën te handhaven in Spanje.'

<sup>73</sup> IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 50, letters from Pieter Pleun de Winter, 14-04-1938.

One part of his epistles, writing to his parents and brother Frans in April 1938, provides insight in his thoughts on the reason he took up arms in Spain:

‘If, however, the Spanish people suffer defeat, due to the enormous material superiority of the fascists, this will be the signal for the fascist murderers to select a new victim or victims, and who guarantees it will not be the Netherlands? This is even most likely and therefore all Dutchmen who are against fascism should unite to: 1. defeat and destroy the NSB, 2. help the Spanish people, 3. fight against Colijn, who paves the way for fascism.’<sup>74</sup> When analyzing this quote, it becomes clear that Pieter Pleun de Winter, like almost all Spainfighters, is permeated by the frame of anti-fascism. In this sense, Malet rightly points to transnational resonance of the anti-fascist message. However, Pieter Pleun de Winter does not (only) see fascism as a danger to a transnational community of the laboring classes, of democrats or of general left-wing supporters, but he also immediately and predominantly couples the message of anti-fascism to the fate of his own country and his own government. He mentions the desired defeat of the NSB, the Dutch national-socialist party, before the actual help to the Spanish people. As a third point of action, De Winter wants to fight Hendrik Colijn, the prime minister of the Netherlands during a long period in the 1930s. Hendrik Colijn was the leader of the protestant Anti-Revolutionary Party and in 1938 he was the prime minister of a Christian coalition. The statements of de Winter indicate a profound concern for the fate of his country. Therefore, in the case of the Spainfighters, Malet’s statement that foreign volunteers are more closely connected to a transnational identity than the national society they live in has to be qualified.

An article of Zuidema in the front newspaper ‘*El Voluntario de la Libertad*’, provides another example of the interlocking of two of the imagined communities the Spainfighters potentially belonged to. Zuidema was the pseudonym of Janrik van Gilse, who was one of the Dutch political commissars in Spain. Within the International Brigades, the political commissar focused on the political schooling of the volunteers, functioned as an intermediate between the soldiers and the officers on issues as temporary leaves and clothing and had a role in signaling potential spies.<sup>75</sup> In the article, which is unfortunately not dated, Van Gilse stated that the Dutch Spainfighters are not nationalists - referring to supporters of nationalism as ideology, not to the Nationalist side in the war - and they do feel one with all fighters in Spain. However,

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 04-04-1938: ‘Als de Spaanse bevolking echter de nederlaag lijdt, door de ontzagelijke overmacht aan materiaal van de fascistische moordenaars zijn om een nieuw slachtoffer of slachtoffers uit te zoeken, en wie garandeert dat Nederland daar niet bij zal zijn? Dat is zelfs hoogstwaarschijnlijk en daarom moeten alle Nederlanders die tegen het fascisme zijn, zich verenigen om: 1. de N.S.B. te verslaan en te vernietigen, 2. het Spaanse volk te helpen, 3. de strijd aan te binden tegen Colijn, die het fascisme in de hand werkt.’

<sup>75</sup> Dankkaart et al., *De oorlog begon in Spanje*, 97.

immediately after this part he noted that they, meaning the Dutch in Spain, are proud that Holland has produced such valuable sons that saved the honor and glory of the Dutch democracy. The title of the article ‘Hitting Hitler in Spain signifies the defense of our fatherland’<sup>76</sup> indicates how interwoven the message of anti-fascism, with Franco and Hitler being part of the very same fascism threatening Spain and the Netherlands, was with the future the Spainfighters’ home country. Fascism formed a severe threat to a transnational community based on the ideals of the laboring classes and on the principle of democracy, but it embodied even more than that.

Thus, this thesis argues that a majority of the Spainfighters consciously connected and united the interests of both their imagined communities, the international laboring classes and the Dutch nation, by focusing, in an entangled manner, on the danger that fascism entails for both. The message of anti-fascism was not only of importance to a transnational community, although the shared ideological identity between Republican Spaniards and the Dutch Spainfighters definitely mattered. The majority of the Spainfighters also expressed a direct connection to their home country. The situation in the Netherlands itself and the future of their country is of deep-seated importance to the Spainfighters, for many even more than the survival of a specific transnational community. The rhetoric is without a doubt focused on anti-fascism, international solidarity of the laboring classes and the suffering of the Spanish people, but it also contained a substantial amount of nationalism, references to national history and concern for the Dutch nation and its state. The message that Spainfighters should be seen as the best kind of Dutchmen, as the best patriots, is present in brochures, letters and in later interviews. This message is visible from the start of the war onwards, but gained strength as the war continued, possibly as a reaction to the negative atmosphere surrounding the Spainfighters in the dominant Dutch media discourse. In the 1980s interviews, Dankkaart et al. directly asked about the motivations of the Spainfighters and the role of Dutchness in their experiences in Spain. Although the rhetoric is slightly different, as the Spainfighters in the 1980s usually do not speak about themselves as the valuable sons of Holland with Sea Beggar blood running through their veins, the sentiment that going to Spain was part of aiming for the best future for the country is definitely detectable.

In this light, the relation of the Spainfighters to the Dutch national imagined community,

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<sup>76</sup> See the profile of Janrik van Gilse in the IISH database on the Spainfighters. Retrieved on 30-08-2018 via <https://spanjestridders.nl/bio/gilse-janrik-van> : ‘Hitler slaan in Spanje betekend de verdediging van ons vaderland’

in so far as it can even be seen as a stable, fixed entity, was not straightforward. They expressed worries about the course of the Dutch government. The sentiment that Colijn and his reactionary followers did not embody the true or the right Netherlands is clearly present. As such, the bulk of the Spainfighters felt connected and loyal to the Dutch nation and its future, but took on a critical stance towards the Dutch government. The Dutch Spainfighters can therefore be considered as an intriguing blend between two kinds of foreign volunteers, as categorized by Arielli. Although Arielli does not become too strict of an adherent to his own scheme, next to his characterization of volunteers within ideological waves, he also divides modern foreign fighters in four types, based on the relation with their home state.

On the one hand, Dutch Spainfighters can be considered examples of Arielli's so-called 'self-appointed ambassadors'. This category of volunteers takes on the work and actions they think their home country should be doing with regards to the conflict. The lion's share of the Spainfighters fundamentally disagreed with the non-intervention policy of the Dutch government and regarded their work in Spain as action that the government should support and undertake itself. A presumably 1937 brochure on Dutchmen fighting in Spain from an aid committee, calling for material support, cigarettes and reading matter, explained how the democratic countries of the world, with the notable exception of the Soviet Union, failed to support the Spanish people. It argues in favor of the democratic countries following the example of the Soviet Union in the Spanish war. In order to end the non-intervention policy, the democratic popular masses, in particular the Dutch one, have to pressure their political leaders into ending the weapon embargo for the Spanish Republic.<sup>77</sup> The bulk of the Spainfighters would have preferred government action, but the, in their eyes, reactionary government just stood by and let it happen, while the future of the world and the country was at stake.

On the other hand, the Spainfighters fall in Arielli's category of 'substitute-conflict volunteers'. These fighters view their participation in the foreign battle as a first blow against their true enemy at home. In a sense, this is evident in Van Gilse's article 'Hitting Hitler in Spain signifies the defense of our fatherland', as he seemingly argued along the following lines:

    Franco = fascism

    Hitler = fascism

    Franco = Hitler

    Hitler = enemy of the Netherlands [for many Spainfighters it was simply a

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<sup>77</sup> IISH, bro 1874/13, Brochure Nederlanders strijden in Spanje tegen de vijanden der democratie, 1937, 1-3.

matter of time before Hitler would invade, as fascism means war.<sup>78]</sup>

Franco = enemy of the Netherlands

In letters from Spainfighters from Zaankant, that were published in *Het Volksdagblad* in July 1938, a similar line of reasoning is articulated. The war in Spain is as by default connected to the fascist enemy within the Netherlands: ‘They [referring to Dutchmen in their home country] should continue the battle against Mussert on double speed. They must remember that he is the Dutch Franco and similarly, he will stick at nothing.’<sup>79</sup> Spainfighter Willem Christiaan van Veen also provided an expression of this sentiment as he wrote in a letter to his girlfriend Maria from November 1937 that he was excited to go to the battlefield. He wanted to give the fascists something that they promised to him in Amsterdam: ‘the bullet’.<sup>80</sup>

Once again, the Spainfighters blended different components in their choice to go to Spain as both the reasoning behind the ‘substitute-conflict volunteers’ and the ‘self-appointed ambassador’ type apply to their case. To simply name ideology as the main motivating factor for the Dutch Spainfighters does not do justice to the mechanisms at play in their choice. Their ideological beliefs were activated to make the change from being a citizen in one country to a fighter in another, by framing Franco as a puppet of fascism, which was as a danger to Spain, to the transnational community of the laboring classes *and* to their home country. Fighting the Nationalists in Spain was the way in which the future of the Dutch nation-state could be saved. In propaganda material and by the Spainfighters themselves, to go to Spain was seen as their duty as left-wing sympathizers and as Dutchmen.

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<sup>78</sup> IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 33, testimony given by Siep Adema in Groningen on 25-05-1984: ‘De theorie was, Nederland blijft neutraal, net als in de Eerste Wereldoorlog want Duitsland heeft invoerhavens nodig. Maar wij wisten wel dat dat niet zo was, dat het fascisme door zou gaan.’, IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 62, testimony given by G.J. van den Meijzenberg – van Boxel on 18-12-1980: ‘Ik bedoel, je wist toen allemaal, wat het voorland was en dat die oorlog naderbij kwam, en het gekke is, als je nu nog wel eens mensen van onze leeftijd, of in artikelen of in kranten, hoort zeggen, dat het was als een donderslag bij heldere hemel, dan denk je, nou, waar je praat over, wat een onzin, want die donderslag hebben we ijselijk lang van tevoren zien aankomen.’ and IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 37, testimony given by Arie Favier in Amsterdam on 21-02-1985: ‘Ik bedoel ik was geen helderziende, maar ik kon toen al wel op m’n klompen aanvoelen dat we vandaag of morgen die hele horde over Nederland en België en weet ik veel heen kregen. Die waren niet te stuiten. Maar daar was men hier helemaal niet van te overtuigen ... Ze luisterden ook helemaal niet.’

<sup>79</sup> *Het Volksdagblad*, ‘Brieven van Zaankanters uit Spanje’, 08-07-1938: ‘zij moeten de strijd met dubbele kracht voortzetten tegen Mussert. zij moeten bedenken dat dit de Hollandse Franco is en dat ook deze voor niets zal terug deinzen.’

<sup>80</sup> See the profile of Willem Christiaan van Veen in the IISH database on the Spainfighters. Retrieved on 12-08-2018 via <https://spanjestrijders.nl/bio/veen-willem-christiaan-van>: ‘Wij reizen dwars door Spanje waar onze krachten tot een offensief nodig zijn. Want we zijn zogenaamd de stootbrigade. Gelukkig gaan we gauw naar het front. Zodat ik die fascist kan geven wat zij mij in Amsterdam ook zo vaak beloofd hebben, namelijk de kogel’

## **Chapter 2: In Spain: the old dream of ‘workers of the world, unite!’ turned into reality?**

The first chapter aimed to analyze the role of the Dutch national identity in the question of why the Dutch Spainfighters joined the war. This chapter continues with the consequences of the choice the Dutch citizens made. What did they encounter in Spain? How did they perceive and experience the renowned solidarity and the celebrated unity of peoples, which was the message after the creation of the International Brigades?<sup>81</sup> Were the International Brigades and the various militias actually an embodiment of the Marxist rally cry ‘workers of the world, unite!’? What role did the ‘Dutchness’ of the Spainfighters play in their time in Spain? In this chapter, a number of issues in which the tension between and the merging of their transnational ambitions and what they themselves describe as Dutch qualities are highlighted.

As a start, during and after the journey from the Netherlands to Spain, usually via Paris and arriving in Albacete, the Spainfighters encountered practical difficulties, primarily based on language issues. Most Spainfighters were not highly educated, although several of them spoke German. In the beginning, the language issues often led to (small) misunderstandings. Especially for the medical staff, the language barriers led to difficulties in carrying out their work at the start. A group of seven Dutch nurses started their work in Spain in the second half of 1936 in the hospital of Onteniente, which had a social-democratic ethos and corresponding sponsoring. One of the nurses, Trudel de Vries, remembers their arrival in Onteniente when several Spanish nurses were waiting for them: ‘They were shouting ‘ay, que sympaticas’ and that meant ‘what a nice girls’, but we did not understand Spanish at all, so I just said ‘si si partido comunista’. I thought they meant sympathizing or something.’<sup>82</sup> This anecdote is an example of a small misunderstanding, but it indicates that at the start the nurses were completely unable to communicate with Spanish doctors and nurses. The Spanish nurses were often women from the village of the hospital and were quite often non-educated and illiterate, which led to difficulties during the transfer of patients and the execution of measurements. As a result, the Dutch medical personnel operated with a feeling of independence and quickly learned the basics in Spanish.

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<sup>81</sup> Carroll, *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, 12.

<sup>82</sup> IISH, Collectie Nederlandse deelnemers aan de Internationale Brigades in de Spaanse Burgeroorlog (CNDIBSBO), stuk 66, testimony given by Trudel van Reemst – de Vries on 24-09-1984: ‘En daar kwamen we midden in de nacht aan en er waren drie Spaanse verpleegsters die ons opwachtten. Er waren nog patienten. En die gilden maar ‘ay, que sympaticas’ en dat betekende ‘wat een aardige meiden’, maar wij verstonden helemaal geen Spaans, dus ik zei maar ‘si si partido comunista’. Ik dacht dat ze sympathiseren bedoelden of zoiets.’

The armed Dutch volunteers also experienced miscommunication. For example, while keeping watch, Theo van Hassel, who only spoke Dutch, took the ‘was ist?’ from his German comrade for fascist and therefore thought the fascists were coming. Van Hassel subsequently jumped out of his trench and ran. His comrade and many others followed his example. In the meanwhile, Van Hassel stumbled over a corpse and fell. The others then questioned what they were doing before they realized there was no enemy in sight.<sup>83</sup> Misunderstandings like this one, which eventually had no serious implications, were purposely limited due to the organization structure. In the International Brigades and in the militias, the commands were given in Spanish. These words, such as the combative *adelante*, were quickly learned by the Spainfighters during their days of the training in Albacete.<sup>84</sup> Moreover, in the *Dagelijkse Berichten*, language lessons focusing on Spanish - Dutch, were also published. Sentences breathing the left-wing ambiance of the International Brigades, as ‘*todos los trabajadores son hermanos*’, were translated into Dutch. The *Dagelijkse Berichten* was a front newspaper and combined military news, international news and ‘messages from the low countries close to the sea’, thus also catering to the Flemish Belgian volunteers.<sup>85</sup> According to the newspaper, it was important to practice with Spaniards to make the lessons more than a bourgeois language course. The cooperation of the Spanish comrades in the process of learning the language would help to make the unity of the internationals more and more firm, thereby laying the foundation for victory.<sup>86</sup>

Due to another conscious effort to limit the problems caused by language barriers, Dutch Spainfighters were initially mostly placed in German speaking battalions. Although all battalions still contained a wide variety of nationalities and languages, as Spaniards were part of all International Brigades battalions and Northern and Eastern Europeans volunteers were also ‘adopted’ by the largely German speaking battalions, in the recollections of former Spainfighters and in their letters, language problems do not take a prominent place. The few Dutch volunteers with foreign language skills, such as Willy de Lathouder and Arie van Poelgeest, translated important writings, read German newspaper articles out loud in Dutch and aimed to spread their knowledge.<sup>87</sup> In the end, the Spainfighters, including Theo van Hassel,

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<sup>83</sup> See the profile of Theo van Hassel on the IISH database on the Spainfighters. Retrieved on 26-08-2018 via [https://spanjestridders.nl/sites/default/files/docs/biografie\\_hassel.pdf](https://spanjestridders.nl/sites/default/files/docs/biografie_hassel.pdf), 42.

<sup>84</sup> For an example see IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 35, interview with Adriaan van Dijk, 07-12-1983 and 14-12-1983.

<sup>85</sup> IISH, ZK 27007, *Dagelijkse berichten van de Internationale Brigades*, nr. 1-2, 4-8, 12-14, 47, 51, 53-77, 86-87, 89, 91-92, 94, 96-101, 103-110, 122.

<sup>86</sup> IISH, ZK 27007, *Dagelijkse berichten*, nr. 56, 20-08-1937.

<sup>87</sup> IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 45, testimony given by Arie van Poelgeest on 30-11-1983: ‘Er kwam toch alle dagen nieuws, kranten kregen we: No Pasaran en Pasaremos van de XIde Brigade. Dan las ik dus die Duitse berichten in het Hollands voor. Want er kwamen natuurlijk een hoop Hollanders, die kenden niet zo best Duits en ik was een van de weinigen die het gelukkig een beetje kende. Dan bespraken we dat met z’n allen.’

were able to make themselves understood. Experience learned that certain words were understood by everyone, and a kind of international, slightly gibberish language, with a mixture of German, Dutch, Spanish and a bit of English, emerged.<sup>88</sup> Overall, the initial language barriers formed a handicap, but did not turn out unworkable and did not profoundly hinder the required cooperation and a certain feeling of unity.

The language did however seem to form an obstacle in creating a truly deep connection to the Spanish people.<sup>89</sup> In general, the Spainfighters believed, or wanted to believe, that the Spanish population was on their side. The Spanish people were regarded as a kind of a defenseless victim, having suffered a history of permanent oppression.<sup>90</sup> The cheering of the Spanish people when the Brigades marched by and the handing out of oranges at train stations are often cited by the Spainfighters in their letters and in later interviews. The forces of the Nationalists were presented and regarded as foreigners, as fascist Germans, Italians and Moors, referring to Franco's Moroccan troops, but not as Spaniards. In the column 'The anti-fascist laughs' of the *Dagelijkse Berichten* a joke about Franco-Spain was published: 'Franco would have long been in contact with the government, but it is not possible.' '??' 'He has no one who speaks Spanish.'<sup>91</sup> As this pun indicates, the Spainfighters were not very concerned with the disunity within the Spanish population, although concerns for the presence of the fifth column were occasionally expressed.

Most armed Dutch volunteers regarded the Spaniards in the Brigades as decent fighters, but some possessed rather weird Catholic tendencies and they did not display very well-articulated political stances.<sup>92</sup> The contact with the Spanish civilian population was usually rather limited, although many do report warmly on the hospitality of the Spanish,

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<sup>88</sup> See the profile of Theo van Hassel in the IISH database on the Spainfighters. Retrieved on 26-08-2018 via [https://spanjestridders.nl/sites/default/files/docs/biografie\\_hassel.pdf](https://spanjestridders.nl/sites/default/files/docs/biografie_hassel.pdf), 50.

<sup>89</sup> IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 63, testimony given by Frans Oord in Amsterdam on 18-06-1984: 'G: Maar je had geen gesprekken met Spanjaarden?

O: Niet met diepgaande woorden, we konden wel een beetje van trabajar en aqua is water en derecha en izquierda, die dingen leer je wel.' and see the profile of Willem van Hattum in the IISH database on the Spainfighters. Retrieved on 06-09-2018 via <https://spanjestridders.nl/bio/hattum-willem-van>: 'Wij hebben wat afgelachen. Prachtmensen. Je kwam er te weinig mee in contact om de taal te leren.'

<sup>90</sup> For an example, see IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 37, testimony given by Arie Favier in Amsterdam on 21-02-1985: 'De Spanjaarden zijn altijd onderdrukt geweest.'

<sup>91</sup> IISH, ZK 27007, *Dagelijkse berichten*, nr. 2, 12-06-1937.

<sup>92</sup> IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 42, testimony given by Anton Michels on 19-12-1983: '[Over Spanjaarden: ] Zelfs of je nou socialist bent of communist, maar Rooms waren ze. Het klinkt zo gek, maar het is wel zo. Het zijn allemaal katholiek-revolutionairen.', IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 63, testimony given by Frans Oord in Amsterdam on 18-06-1984: 'En het zat zo, ja in die tijd nog hadden die Spanjaarden, ja vooral de jongens die niet lezen en schrijven konden en die Rooms-katholiek waren opgevoed, een tank, he, ze schieten een tank in brand en dat gaat zo'n jongen lopen. .. En dan kwamen ze weer met hangende pootjes terug. En wat was nou het geval? .. Hij had een begrip van: hout kan branden, maar ijzer kan niet branden. Dat was een duivel, die geloofde in de duivel.' and IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 36, testimony given by Jan van Eijk in Landsmeer on 11-01-1985: 'die Spanjolen klitten toch meer op elkaar, en de vreemdelingen dan waren ook een beetje bij elkaar.'

comparing their willingness to share food and drinks with the aloofness of the Dutch.<sup>93</sup> A few Spainfighters had relationships with Spanish women; even marriages occurred. For example, Willy de Lathouwer married a Spanish nurse, Rosario Plana Sole, who was working in a hospital in Lerida De Lathouwer was in. He wrote to his sister: ‘if all goes well, you receive this letter as an aunt of a nephew of which you still have wait and see if he might be a Spaniard, Dutchman, Catalan or a Frenchmen.’<sup>94</sup> Apart from this exception, the Spainfighters described Spanish women, in particular the ones from the countryside they encountered close to the front, generally as prudish and watched over by family.<sup>95</sup>

Next to language differences, within the army cultural problems also arose. Clashes between the Dutch and Germans, displaying ‘Prussian militarism’ in the eyes of the Dutch volunteers, are mentioned in several letters and interviews.<sup>96</sup> The average Spainfighter seemed to have had difficulties with the discipline, advocated and enforced mainly by German volunteers. Jef Last wrote: ‘the strong friction between Dutch volunteers and their instructors that often exists, cannot be explained only by Dutch undisciplinedness, but also by a profound lack of humor and psychological insight among the Germans.’<sup>97</sup> The same sentiment, although expressed a little less eloquently, is disclosed by many others. The later commander of the Dutch unit, Piet Laros, who was a former anarchist turned communist in the early 1930s, admitted he just could not take all the shouting. Laros described the German volunteers as fanatics, aiming for victory at all costs. In their eyes, anyone who did not share this extreme sentiment was a coward.<sup>98</sup> In contrast to the Dutch volunteers, the German fighters felt bereft

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<sup>93</sup> IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 37, testimony given by Arie Favier in Amsterdam on 21-02-1985: ‘Spanjaarden zijn vreselijk gastvrij. Iedereen wordt liefderijk ontvangen en die krijgt te eten. Niemand praat over geld. Ze hebben niks, maar wat ze hebben, dat is voor iedereen. ... Spanjaarden hebben een heel goede mentaliteit.’, IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 36, testimony given by Jan van Eijk in Landsmeer on 11-01-1985: ‘Wij in Holland zijn kouwe kikkers, maar in Spanje delen ze echt hun snee brood met jou, dat doen wij in Holland niet zo gauw.’ and IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 33, testimony given by Siep Adema in Groningen on 25-05-1984: ‘Ik ging wel uit en ik kwam wel bij Spanjaarden. Ik sprak ook gewoon met ze, als je in het café kwam dan was dat heel amicaal. Maar nou echt om te zeggen, ik heb aan het Spaanse leven deelgenomen, nee.’

<sup>94</sup> See the profile of Willy de Lathouwer in the IISH database on the Spainfighters. Retrieved on 02-11-2018 via <https://spanjestrijders.nl/bio/lathouwer-willy-de/>.

<sup>95</sup> See the profile of Karel Neijssel in the IISH database on the Spainfighters. Retrieved on 08-10-2018 via <https://spanjestrijders.nl/bio/neijssel-karel/>: ‘In het achterland was er wel enig contact met de lokale bevolking, als ze de boeren gingen helpen.’ and IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 33, testimony given by Siep Adema in Groningen on 25-05-1984: ‘Contacten met meisjes waren lastig, het moest meteen serieus worden, met een chaperonne erbij. De verhouding van de Spanjaarden in die tijd toen was zo dat vader en moeder zich met de dochters volledig bemoeiden. Alleen in de grote steden was dat misschien anders, maar als je op het platteland kwam was het heel erg.’

<sup>96</sup> For an example, see IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 61, interview with Piet Laros on 10-04-1980.

<sup>97</sup> Jef Last, *De Spaanse tragedie* (Amsterdam: Contact, 1962) 116: ‘De sterke wrijving die hier dikwijls tussen Hollandse vrijwilligers en hun instructeurs bestaat, is niet slechts te verklaren uit Hollandse tuchteloosheid maar weldegelijk ook uit een sterk gemis aan humor en psychologisch inzicht bij de Duitsers.’

<sup>98</sup> For an example, see IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 61, interview with Piet Laros on 10-04-1980.

of a home country they could go back to.<sup>99</sup> For the German volunteers, the fight in Spain was of utmost importance as they had more at stake. Spainfighter Frans Oord remembered that in Spain a Dutchman was of a different character, cutting loose every once in a while, while the German volunteers were always tidy and correct. The discipline of the Dutch was rather freehearted; Oord's German commander Heinz even scolded a bit about the anti-militarism of the Dutch.<sup>100</sup> Even efforts to introduce the saluting of officers, not with the traditional hand on the cap, but with a clenched fist, the symbol of the Republican side, failed within the Dutch company.<sup>101</sup>

Towards the end of the organized foreign involvement in the war, the discipline of the Dutch company was still a topic of dissatisfaction. The German brigades and commandants were rather furious when the Dutch unit went to a gathering place without using the right military commands and without standing in attention. According to Theo van Hassel, the Germans wondered what kind of disorderly mess the Dutch company genuinely was.<sup>102</sup> The problems with discipline, the inexperience of the Dutchmen with actual warfare instead of the occasional street fighting (and maybe even the Dutch tradition of neutrality) led to a sentiment that the Dutch were just not made for fighting, although the Spainfighters were trying their best.<sup>103</sup> Willem de Jong described what a strange sight a group of Dutch soldiers marching was, as it had nothing to do with military discipline and the corresponding standards of tightness. 'That kind of military shabbiness, it has always been something that a Dutchman possessed. We have never been a truly military people'.<sup>104</sup> Spainfighter Siep Adema also stated that it was not easy for the Dutch to get used to the war situation.<sup>105</sup>

The image of the rather sloppy state of the discipline of the Dutch Spainfighters is confirmed in other sources. Next to the fairly propagandistic texts of Vanter and Last and the

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<sup>99</sup> Josie McLellan, 'I Wanted to be a Little Lenin': Ideology and the German International Brigade Volunteers', *Journal of Contemporary History* 41:2 2006 287-304.

<sup>100</sup> IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 63, testimony given by Frans Oord in Amsterdam on 18-06-1984: 'Duitse anti-fascisten en helemaal nooit niet kankeren, maar altijd even keurig. Ja, een Nederlander is anders van inslag, wij waren nog wel eens uit de band, ik zal niet zeggen, dat we kwaad deden, maar heel anders als nu waren wij ingesteld... Ja, maar die Duitsers. Wij, een Hollander, die heeft een andere discipline, dat verschil kon je dus wel iets merken. ... wij hadden een vrijmoedigere discipline dan hun. ... dat hij (Duitse commandant Heinz) ons eerst een beetje uitschold voor antimilitaristen.'

<sup>101</sup> IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 37, interview met Arie Favier in Amsterdam on 21-02-1985.

<sup>102</sup> See the profile of Theo van Hassel on the IISH database on the Spainfighters. Retrieved on 26-08-2018 via [https://spanjestridders.nl/sites/default/files/docs/biografie\\_hassel.pdf](https://spanjestridders.nl/sites/default/files/docs/biografie_hassel.pdf): 'Vooral de Duitse brigade ging tegen deze vertoning geweldig te keer en vroeg zich af wat voor een ordeloze bende wij wel niet waren.'

<sup>103</sup> For an example, see *Het Volksdagblad*, 04-08-1938.

<sup>104</sup> IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 40, testimony given by Willem de Jong on 18-01-1984: '...dat militair sjofele dat heeft een Hollander altijd gehad. Wij zijn nooit geen werkelijk militair volk geweest.'

<sup>105</sup> IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 33, testimony given by Siep Adema in Groningen on 25-05-1984: '...je moest helemaal in zo'n oorlogssituatie groeien. Dat is niet makkelijk voor een Nederlander.'

interviews with Spainfighters from the 1980's, in which the more nuanced focus is still on the ideals and determination of the volunteers, reports from the Centrale Inlichtingendienst, the Dutch intelligence agency, and the Comintern reveal a different side of the Dutch experiences in Spain. According to the Centrale Inlichtingendienst, the Dutch contingent was not only made up out of driven left-wing sympathizers and humanitarian nurses, but also contained persons that were characterized as rioter, criminal or psychopathic in their administration.<sup>106</sup> The reports of Comintern's secret agents describe the Dutch problems with military discipline and the bitter deception the harsh reality of the battlefield could be. It stated that desertion was more common amongst Dutchmen compared to other nationalities as almost one third of the volunteers deserted.<sup>107</sup> Psychological problems, such as depression and hysteria, also prevailed. In similar fashion as the Spainfighters themselves, the reporter concluded that warfare was simply not ingrained in the blood of the Dutchmen.<sup>108</sup>

German volunteer and devout communist Gustav Szinda, at the request of the Comintern, added information and descriptions to lists of Dutch volunteers in Moscow in 1940. Szinda was harsh in his judgment of the Dutch Spainfighters. He labeled most Dutchmen politically 'schwach und indifferent', also noting that alcohol abuse and desertion among the Dutch in International Brigades occurred more frequently compared to other nationalities.<sup>109</sup> The Spainfighters were aware of the desertion problem and its effect on the reputation of the Dutch. A published letter from March 1938 literally stated that the reputation of the Dutchmen was slightly damaged due to the many incidences of desertion as it expressed the wish to improve the name of the Dutch. The letter also provided a description of a speech of commander Piet Laros, known as Dutchman Pete in the Republican press. In the speech, Laros stated that they do not tolerate desertion as cowardice is not allowed and he tried to emphasize the braveness of many other Dutchmen: 'I am Dutchman Pete. It is said that I am a noble person,

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<sup>106</sup>The reports from the Centrale Inlichtingendienst can be retrieved via <http://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/rapportencentraleinlichtingendienst/data/IndexResultaten/IndexPersoon?reconstructieid=1642&persoon=ja> <http://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/pdf/cid/2200-2299/2232.pdf>, the Comintern reports via IISH, collectie Communistische Partij Nederland, *Kopieën van stukken m.b.t. de CPN uit Moskou*, stuk 1719 and 1720, microfiches nr. 399 and 400, for an example see 'Bericht über den 'holländischen Personalbestand in Spanien' and Vossen, *Nederland en de Spaanse Burgeroorlog*, 10.

<sup>107</sup> Examples of desertion can also be found in the IISH database, see for example the profile of Eliezer de Beer, retrieved on 21-05-2018 via <https://spanjestridders.nl/bio/beer-eliezer-de> and the profile of Anthon Bonnee, retrieved on 23-05-2018 via <https://spanjestridders.nl/bio/bonnee-anthon>.

<sup>108</sup> IISH, collectie Communistische Partij Nederland, *Kopieën van stukken m.b.t. de CPN uit Moskou*, stuk 1720, microfiche nr. 400, 'Bericht über die holländischen Freiwilligen in der Zeit vom November 1936 bis zur ihrer Zurückziehung'.

<sup>109</sup> See the IISH database via <https://spanjestridders.nl/internationale-brigades>.

but there are many Dutchman Petes here'.<sup>110</sup> In an article of the *Dagelijkse Berichten*, political commissar and editor of the front newspaper Janrik van Gilse also expressed his contempt for the deserters. He emphasized that as representatives of a small nation, the fellow comrades Dutchmen had to remember that the Dutchmen on the battlefield sent the message to the world that 'the country of butter and cheese also produces brave fighters'.<sup>111</sup>

In the brochure *Dutchmen fight in Spain*, the Dutch political commissar (it remains unclear which one it is) allegedly stated: 'The Dutchmen are yes, let me say it like this: real Dutchmen'. According to the commissar, the Dutch Spainfighters belonged to the group of average but decent fighters, which was impressive for a people so inexperienced with war. However, the Dutch were particularly well-suited for healthcare as they were known as a 'clean people'.<sup>112</sup> In a 'Aid to Spain' brochure on a 'Dutch' orphanage for Republican children in Spain, presumably published in the second half of 1937, Annie Romeijn-Verschoor wrote that the Dutch medical personnel was praised for their 'Dutch solidity'<sup>113</sup>. This firmness occasionally clashed with the Spanish lack of experience. Due to the enormous lack of qualified nurses in Spain, many local young Spanish women were trained by the Dutch nurses.<sup>114</sup> In general, the medical personnel had more interaction with the Spanish civil population compared to the armed volunteers. They helped local citizens with health problems, shared food from the Netherlands with the hungry from the nearby villages and organized evenings of entertainment for Spanish children, in particular the war orphans.<sup>115</sup>

After some time in Onteniente, the bulk of the Dutch medical personnel went to work in Villanueva de la Jara. The hospital was rebranded as the Dutch hospital, because the 'Aid to Spain' committee assumed responsibility for its performance. According to Jenny Schaddelee, every country took up a relation with a particular hospital, as it made it easier to raise material and financial help.<sup>116</sup> The aid from the Netherlands took many forms, including cigarettes and

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<sup>110</sup> *Het Volksdagblad*, 15-03-1938: 'Ik ben Hollandse Piet. Men zegt, dat ik een edel mens ben, maar er zijn hier vele Hollandse Pieten.' Een donderend applaus en een Internationale als de eed, dat de naam van de Hollanders, welke door vele deserties enigszins gedaald is, in de top van de Internationale Brigaden komt te staan.'

<sup>111</sup> IISH, ZK 27007, *Dagelijkse berichten van de Internationale Brigades*, nr. 104, 17-10-1937: 'Kameraden, de Hollanders aan het front hebben de wereld doen weten, dat ook het land van boter en kaas strijders weet voort te brengen, die bereid zijn hun leven te geven voor de vrijheid.'

<sup>112</sup> IISH, bro 1874/13, Brochure *Nederlanders strijden in Spanje tegen de vijanden der democratie*, 1937, 9: 'een zindelijk volk' and 'de Hollanders zijn, ja laat ik het zo zeggen, echte Nederlanders.'

<sup>113</sup> IISH, bro Sp 17, Brochure *Een veilig huis voor het Spaanse kind*, Picana, 1937, 13.

<sup>114</sup> Dankkaart et al., 128.

<sup>115</sup> IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 66, testimony given by Trudel van Reemst – de Vries on 24-09-1982: 'Want langzamerhand werd het voedselprobleem heel nijpend. ... En wij, van onze extra rantsoenen, als we wel eens een pakje kregen uit het buitenland en zo, dan maakten we wel kinderfeesten, dan nodigden we alle kinderen uit uit het dorp en dan maakten we van een pak chocola, dat een van ons dus gekregen had, een ketel chocolademelk met water.'

<sup>116</sup> IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 68, interview with Jenny Schaddelee in Amsterdam on 03-09-1985.

raiding material, but also cans of milk. In the war years, *'leche preparada en Holanda'* could be found anywhere in Republican Spain. In a kind of banal form of nationalism, the Dutch medical volunteers were very proud of these cans of milk, in a way a symbol of the Netherlands.<sup>117</sup> The wounded Dutch volunteers in Villanueva de la Jara, although the hospital remained open to many patients of a different background and its staff was at no point fully Dutch, also expressed a longing to the 'beautiful goods from their fatherland', as the Spanish food did not contain enough milk and in particular the taste of olive oil was hard to get used to.<sup>118</sup> In the home country, it was apparently of propagandist value to be able to state that the aid would go to 'our Dutch hospital', in the words of Trudel de Vries. Moreover, de Vries remembered that the 'own' hospital was also used to create a particular atmosphere for the volunteers, resulting into a Dutch environment for the Dutch personnel.<sup>119</sup> For example, when doctor Theo van Reemst suffered from jaundice, he went to the Dutch hospital out of own initiative, without official approval.<sup>120</sup> However, not all Dutch medical volunteers went to Villanueva de la Jara. Nurse Noortje Diamant deliberately did not look for contact with fellow Dutchmen.<sup>121</sup> Overall, the Dutch hospital was thus created to bring together the Dutch medical volunteers, which was - interestingly enough- necessary to boost the morale, and to increase the amount of aid from the home front.<sup>122</sup>

The same process of creating an own unit along national lines, although loosely defined, occurred within the International Brigades. The struggles of the Dutch Spainfighters, for example military discipline and the amount of desertion, led the Dutch communist party, supported by Janrik van Gilse, to suggest the creation of a Dutch unit, with a Dutch commander, that would fight alongside the German dominated units.<sup>123</sup> Ko Beuzemaker, the president of the Dutch communist party, went to Spain during the September days of 1937 and recognized the importance of a certain amount of nationalism.<sup>124</sup> It was used as a strategy to increase the level of combativeness of the Dutch. By clustering the Dutch volunteers together, their national feelings, apparently still of importance, despite the international character of the Brigades, were

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<sup>117</sup> IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 66, testimony given by Trudel van Reemst – de Vries on 24-09-1982: 'En in het hele land had je dus melk, 'leche preparada in Holanda, daar waren wij dus erg trots op. Blikjes melk.'

<sup>118</sup> *Het Volksdagblad*, 09-01-1939: 'Zij hebben altijd honger naar die schone zaken uit hun vaderland. Jammer genoeg kan het arme Spaanse volk hun dit niet geven.'

<sup>119</sup> IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 66, interview with Trudel van Reemst-de Vries on 24-09-1982.

<sup>120</sup> IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 65, interview with Theo van Reemst in Amstelveen on 19-11-1979.

<sup>121</sup> IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 57, interview with Noortje Diamant in Amsterdam on 19-11-1983.

<sup>122</sup> Dankkaart et al., 12.

<sup>123</sup> IISH, collectie Communistische Partij Nederland, *Kopieën van stukken m.b.t. de CPN uit Moskou*, stuk 1719, microfiche nr. 399, Zuidema to EKKI, 24-12-1937.

<sup>124</sup> *Het Volksdagblad*, 14-10-1937.

put to use.<sup>125</sup> The hope that the morale problems of the Dutch volunteers would dwindle if they fought together, is also visible in the amnesty Dutch deserters in captivity were offered on the condition they joined the ‘Zeven Provinciën’.<sup>126</sup>

The creation of the Dutch company was not only a top-down process. The bulk of the Dutch volunteers in the International Brigades joined the ‘Zeven Provinciën’ at some point, although others, such as Tony Mulder, did not feel the need to reach out to fellow Dutchmen.<sup>127</sup> The first issue of the *Dagelijkse Berichten*, the Dutch version of the German front newspaper edited by Janrik van Gilse, appeared in June 1937 and stated in its preamble: ‘For a long time, yes, actually as for as long as we are here, we have felt the need for our own bulletin ...’.<sup>128</sup> Gerard van het Reve sr. expressed a similar sentiment in his book, indicating the success of the national strategy within the Brigades: ‘Hooray, the Dutch company was formed: 83 Dutchmen, 6 Flemish Belgians, a few German-Austrians and Spanish comrades. Only now everyone was able to develop his strengths. The Dutchmen sang Dutch songs that they knew. They formed a beautiful choir. But more loudly than the songs from the fatherland, the cry: On to Saragossa! was heard.’<sup>129</sup> He also suggests that the source of the creation of the company was Piet Laros, as the book states that Laros wrote a letter to general Kleber, asking to send him to the Netherlands to organize a Dutch unit.<sup>130</sup> The *Volksdagblad* also wrote that the formation of an independent Dutch company was the dream of Laros from the first days onward. Just as Van het Reve, the newspaper referred to a letter from Laros to Kleber to ask for permission and co-operation in the creation of a Dutch unit.<sup>131</sup>

The founding of the ‘Zeven Provinciën’ can be seen as a sign that in reality it was difficult for the Dutch Spainfighters to live up to the transnational ideal of the International Brigades.<sup>132</sup> It would however be unjust to assign national feelings the main principal role in the story of the Dutch Spainfighters, as the prevalence of the rally cry on to Saragossa already

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<sup>125</sup> Dankaart et al., 90.

<sup>126</sup> IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 61, interview with Piet Laros on 10-04-1980.

<sup>127</sup> IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 43, testimony given by Tony Mulder on 29-02-1984: ‘Nee, helemaal niet. Ik had ook helemaal geen behoefte om met die Hollanders toen in contact te komen. Ik had m’n kameraden onder de Duitsers zitten daar.’

<sup>128</sup> IISH, ZK 27007, *Dagelijkse berichten van de Internationale Brigades*, nr. 1, 11-06-1937: ‘Reeds lange tijd, ja eigenlijk zolang we hier zijn, voelen we de behoefte aan eigen bulletin.’

<sup>129</sup> Gerard Vanter, *Nederlanders onder commando van Hollander Piet in Spanje* (Amsterdam: Pegasus, 1939) 64: ‘Hoera! De Hollandse compagnie was gevormd. 83 Hollanders. 6 Vlamingen. enkele Duits-Oostenrijkersen de rest Spaanse kameraden. Nu pas kon ieder zijn krachten ontplooiën... De Hollanders zongen Vaderlandse liederen, die ze kenden. Ze vormden een prachtkoor. Maar boven de liederen van het vaderland uit, klonk de kreet: Op naar Saragossa!’

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>131</sup> *Het Volksdagblad*, 30-12-1938.

<sup>132</sup> Kruizinga, ‘Stuggling to fit in’, 196.

indicates. Some Dutch volunteers regarded their experiences in Spain as refreshing and even liberating. A letter published in the *Volksdagblad* contains the following passage: ‘Boy, when you come from bourgeois Holland, it is wonderful to experience the free and rightful life under this regime, where our officers and doctors live with us as equal comrades, having equal rights.’<sup>133</sup> The Spainfighters’ letters and the interview contain quite a lot of expressions of international unity and solidarity. Jan van Eijk, who notably married a Spanish woman in Mataró in September 1938, stated in an interview in 1985 that as all volunteers were anti-fascists, they really were one. As such, he did not feel like a Dutchman fighting in Spain at all.<sup>134</sup> In a letter to his sister, writing from the Jarama front in June 1937, Spainfighter Siebe Dolstra also noted that he encountered a truly united front.<sup>135</sup> The letters of the Spainfighters fell under the censorship of the International Brigades, which may have led to a somewhat too positive description of the situation. For example, in the excitement of his first month in Spain in May 1937, Leo Klatser, a communist journalist, wrote to his sister Nora that Spain was a beautiful country: ‘The comradeship is exemplary ... Wine perfect and abundant. There is no unemployment! Weapons in perfect condition’.<sup>136</sup> In the first year of the war and/or in their first months in Spain, the enthusiasm amongst the foreign volunteers was abundant. However, due to the course of the war and the harsh reality of the battlefield, it gradually gave in to a more pessimistic view.

The issues treated in this chapter, such as the Dutch-German tension on the topic of discipline and the creations of a national unit and hospital after less than a year of war, serve to invalidate the myths surrounding the fulfillment of the transnational ideals the foreign volunteers embodied. Notwithstanding the statements of volunteers as Jan van Eijk and Siebe Dolstra, this thesis argues that the Dutch nationality and identity played a considerable role in the experiences of the Dutch Spainfighters. In Spain it became clear that the Spainfighters were willing to fight for a transnational ideal (although already combined with a profound concern for their home country as argued in chapter 1), but they were unable to fully merge into a

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<sup>133</sup> As quoted from Dankaart et al., *De oorlog begon in Spanje*, 111: ‘Een briefschrijver in *Het Volksdagblad*: ‘Jongen, het is heerlijk als je uit burgerlijk Holland hier komt, het vrije, van rechten rijke leven te zien onder dit regime, waar onze officieren, onze dokters bij ons en met ons leven met gelijke rechten en als gelijke kameraden’.

<sup>134</sup> IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 36, testimony given by Jan van Eijk in Landsmeer on 11-01-1985: ‘Je was toch echt één hoor, want we waren allemaal antifascisten. ... je voelde je eigen helemaal geen Nederland die in Spanje vocht’.

<sup>135</sup> IISH, CNDIBSBO, berichten over Siebe Dolstra, brief van Siebe aan zwager, zus en Beppie, Jaramafront 10-06-1937: ‘zoo je ziet het is hier werkelijk het eenheidsfront, niet in woorden maar in de daad.’

<sup>136</sup> IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 4, brieven van Leo Klatser, aan Nora Klatser, 18-05-1937.

transnational environment. The new environment confronted the Spainfighters with the differences between them, their German comrades and the Spanish population, thus reinforcing the idea of a kind of national spirit of the Dutch as a non-military and clean people. This confrontation with other cultures is related to a less conscious, more sociological side to national identity. Although this thesis does not include in-depth research on the experiences of volunteers of other nationalities, based on the Dutch Spainfighters it suggests that national identity played a bigger role in the daily routine of the foreign Republican volunteers than might be expected. If the experience of the Dutch volunteers turns out to be generic, the supposedly transnational movement of support to the Spanish Republic may in essence be partly built on national tensions and compromises.

### **Chapter 3: After Spain: ‘Look there is the steamboat from far-away Spain again’<sup>137</sup>**

The newly created Dutch company fought at the battle of the Ebro, in Teruel in February 1938, where it suffered heavy losses and its existence was not very long-lasting. This chapter analyzes the period from the withdrawal of the volunteers in the last quarter of 1938 until the Second World War. Once again, the role of the attitude of the volunteers towards their Dutch nationality will be analyzed. The chapter focuses on the experiences of the Dutch Spainfighters during the withdrawal of the foreign volunteers, their journey back to the Netherlands and the reaction to their loss of Dutch citizenship which they were confronted with as soon as they came back, thus paying attention to the more official and administrative sides of national identity.

After various severe deteriorations in its military and political position, the Republic was in dire straits in the summer of 1938. Prominent socialist Juan Negrín, who was more susceptible to the Soviet Union, had succeeded Largo Caballero as prime minister in May 1937. In September 1938, Negrín declared the unilateral withdrawal - as the nationalist side did not make promises about the pulling back of German and Italian troops - of the foreign volunteers in the International Brigades. According to historian Stanley Payne, the withdrawal was an attempt at a potentially necessary and helpful conciliatory gesture as arguments in the League of Nations proposing the withdrawal of all foreign combatants had been made. Moreover, he holds that the International Brigades by then did not form a powerful instrument anymore. During 1938, almost no new volunteers joined and the general morale of the foreign fighters was not as high as it had been in the early period. Although Negrín took the initiative of the withdrawal, he was not in the position to make this decision on his own, as the International Brigades were indirectly still a Comintern army. Payne therefore states that Moscow and the Comintern leadership agreed with the withdrawal of the Republican foreign fighters in secret.<sup>138</sup> Dankaart et al. also indicate that the military loss of withdrawing the Brigades was rather small, as the Brigades had around 13.000 foreigners in its ranks in September 1938, while the Republican army had grown to include an estimated 750.000 men.<sup>139</sup>

As a result of Negrín’s announcement, the countries that adhered to the policy of the Non-Intervention Committee and the Spanish war parties came to an agreement. In the case of the Dutch Spainfighters, this meant that the Dutch government would take care of the transport

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<sup>137</sup> Original Dutch tekst: Zie ginds komt de stoomboot uit Spanje weer aan, from a famous St. Nicholas song.

<sup>138</sup> Payne, Stanley, *The Spanish Civil War, the Soviet Union and Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008) 268-269.

<sup>139</sup> Dankaart et al., *De oorlog begon in Spanje*, 132.

of most of the remaining estimated 200 Dutch volunteers - as the foreign volunteers were often used as shock troops, the level of casualties, just like the desertion rate, was high - back to the Netherlands.<sup>140</sup> A few dozen of Dutchmen were not able to join this transport as they were prisoners of war, still part of a Spanish militia or because they decided to emigrate to countries as Mexico and Cuba.<sup>141</sup> Next to arranging the transport, the Dutch government, still formed by the conservative Christian coalition led by Colijn, agreed to abstain from the criminal prosecution of the volunteers, but the armed Spainfighters did lose their passports, their Dutch citizenship.<sup>142</sup> In article 7.4 of the Law on the Dutch nationality from 1892, it was already stated that the Dutch nationality is lost if one takes up arms in a foreign army without permission.<sup>143</sup> Moreover, in June 1937, the previous government headed by Colijn, based on a coalition between three Christian and two liberal parties, had specifically prohibited any act that aimed at entry into the service of one of the armed forces in Spain.<sup>144</sup> The medical personnel did not automatically lose their passport, as they strictly speaking did not take up arms. However, several of them, for example Trudel de Vries, did lose their citizenship as they were married to an armed Spainfighter. De Vries had married doctor and fighter Theo van Reemst in Spain.

The Spainfighters reported a varying degree of knowledge about this particular consequence of their actions. In a letter to his parents and brother, dating back to March 1938, Pieter Pleun de Winter asked his mother to keep the police out of the whole affair around his disappearance. He wrote that if the police got notice of his departure to Spain, they would assume he took up arms in foreign service, resulting in a loss of his Dutch citizenship. In the same letter, De Winter claimed he went to Spain for other work.<sup>145</sup> In other letters and in statements several Spainfighters who deserted gave to the Dutch consulate in Spain, the prospect of a job is often mentioned as their motive. Partly on the basis of these sources, many more conservative and mainstream Dutch newspapers, such as *De Telegraaf*, reported on and condemned the 'red recruitment practices'.<sup>146</sup> However, the Spainfighters' statements about

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<sup>140</sup> Kruizinga, 'Struggling to fit in'.

<sup>141</sup> Dankkaart et al., *De oorlog begon in Spanje*, 135-136.

<sup>142</sup> The Dutch National Archive, 2.09.99/113: Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Ministry of Justice, 28-03-1938 and The Dutch National Archive, 2.05.03/1681: Ministry of Foreign Affairs to ministry of Justice, 21-01-1939.

<sup>143</sup> *Staatsblad van het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden*, nr. 268, 12-12-1892, retrieved on 08-22-2018 via [http://www.vijfveeuwenmigratie.nl/sites/default/files/bronnen/Stbl\\_1892-268-nederlanderschap.pdf](http://www.vijfveeuwenmigratie.nl/sites/default/files/bronnen/Stbl_1892-268-nederlanderschap.pdf).

<sup>144</sup> The Dutch National Archive, 1571, *Staatsblad van het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden*, nr. 163, 11-06-1937.

<sup>145</sup> IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 50, brieven Pieter Pleun de Winter, 21-03-1938: 'Maar Moeder als ik U nog wat mag vragen, houdt de politie er vooral buiten, want de enigste die daar last van zal krijgen ben ik dan! Zij zullen beweren als zij horen dat ik op weg ben naar Spanje dat ik in vreemde krijgsdienst ga, ook al is het niet zo want ik krijg daar ander werk, en dan zullen ze mijn Nederlandschap afnemen. Dat zou betekenen dat ik niet meer in Nederland zou mogen komen en dat zal U toch zeker niet willen.'

<sup>146</sup> *De Telegraaf*, 19-08-1937.

jobs in Spain should not be taken too seriously. As the letter of De Winter, who clearly went to Spain to fight, demonstrates, many Spainfighters were aware of the risk they were taking by fighting in Spain and tried to cover themselves. Therefore, many Spainfighters put extra emphasis on the promises of work as the reason for their departure to Spain.

On the other hand, some Spainfighters seemed to be less aware of the political situation in the Netherlands. When asked about the danger the participation in the Civil War entailed with regards to coming back to Netherlands and his citizenship in the 1980's, Jan van Eijk replied that most of the Spainfighters were 'ordinary boys, knowing nothing about these things'.<sup>147</sup> Spainfighter Arie Kloostra cited another reason. In a 1981 interview, he remembered that during the time the Dutchmen were preparing to return to the Netherlands, different rumors were circulating. Kloostra thought that the League of Nations would guarantee a withdrawal of the foreign volunteers without any repercussions, including the loss of citizenship. Therefore, Kloostra was under the impression he would retain his passport.<sup>148</sup> Although arguably small, the group of Spainfighters that was not able to foresee the situation when they returned was in for an unpleasant surprise as they, and in the case they were married, their wives too, had been declared stateless.

Before the passports of the Spainfighters were taken away, the remains of the Dutch Brigade joined the farewell parade for the International Brigades, organized in Barcelona as the symbolic goodbye to the Republican foreign volunteers. Many Dutch volunteers held warm memories about this parade, which they regarded as a last sign of gratitude and honor from the Spanish people, although some had already left the country to go back to their Netherlands on their own initiative.<sup>149</sup> The words of Spanish communist leader Dolores Ibárruri, known as 'La Pasionara', spoken in the presence of thousands of tearful and cheering Spaniards, made quite an impression on the Dutch: 'Comrades of the International Brigades! ... You can go proudly. You are history. You are legend. You are the heroic example of democracy's solidarity and universality...'.<sup>150</sup>

The Dutch volunteers seem to have taken note of the words of La Pasionara as they left

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<sup>147</sup> IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 36, testimony given by Jan van Eijk in Landsmeer on 11-01-1985: 'F: Toen u naar Spanje toe ging had u toen een idee, dat het gevaar zou opleveren voor uw Nederlandschap? .. J: Dat wist niemand van ons, we kunnen wel groot op doen, maar de meesten van ons waren toch gewone jongens. Die soort dingen, dat wist je niet.'

<sup>148</sup> See the profile of Arie Kloostra in the IISH database on the Spainfighters. Retrieved on 10-11-2018 via <https://spanjestrijders.nl/bio/kloostra-arie>.

<sup>149</sup> For an example, see IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 65, interview with Theo van Reemst in Amstelveen on 19-11-1979.

<sup>150</sup> As quoted from Preston, Paul, *The Spanish Civil War: reaction, revolution and revenge* (revised and expanded edition) (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007) 150.

Spain without causing much trouble. Jenny Schaddelee remembered that although she was still occupied with the situation in Spain for some time, as it took her a while to acclimatize back in the Netherlands, it was rather easy to come back to the Netherlands.<sup>151</sup> Others also expressed the sentiment that they knew the war in Spain was lost before the announcement of the official withdrawal of the foreign volunteers.<sup>152</sup> When he was in the hospital after the battle of Brunete in July 1937, Spainfighter Willem van Hattum admitted he thought about returning to the Netherlands, because he regarded the war as a lost cause.<sup>153</sup> Due to these sentiments, the official journey back to the Netherlands did not form a big surprise. The majority of the Spainfighters do not describe it in highly negative terms.

The Dutch consul in Nice, Émile de Kuyper, was given the task to accompany the Dutch volunteers from Spain to the Netherlands. In a letter to John Loudon, the Dutch ambassador extraordinary in Paris, he reported in a positive manner about the behavior of the Spainfighters. He stated that the Dutch volunteers co-operated well after De Kuyper had promised that they would be able to celebrate St. Nicholas eve, the fifth of December 1938, in the Netherlands. De Kuyper informed the Spainfighters about the decision of the government to specifically prohibit participation in or promotion of demonstrations on their return. The Spainfighters arrived in Roosendaal by train and according to De Kuyper, they conformed to this order as they took off their insignia in the Spanish and red colors. Moreover, during their arrival, the Dutch Spainfighters did not sing the Internationale, but intoned St. Nicholas songs, in particular the appropriate 'Look there is the steamboat from far-away Spain again'.<sup>154</sup>

However, once in the Netherlands, the atmosphere was not as welcoming as the Spainfighters had hoped. They were immediately declared stateless and interrogated about their experiences. The CPN had organized a welcome tribute to the Spainfighters in the Krasnapolsky, a luxurious hotel in Amsterdam, but due to police presence, directing the Spainfighters to their home towns, it did not become a grand scale gathering. Paul de Groot, the party's political secretary, gave a speech in which he addressed the problems with the Dutch citizenship of the Spainfighters. De Groot expressed fierce indignation about the deprivation of civil rights: 'For these men, these best Dutchmen, we are obliged to fight for the restoration of their rights and citizenship!'. He also stated that he wished for the nationalist-socialist members

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<sup>151</sup> IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 68, interview with Jenny Schaddelee in Amsterdam on 03-09-1985.

<sup>152</sup> IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 63, interview with Frans Oord in Amsterdam on 18-06-1984.

<sup>153</sup> See the profile of Willem van Hattum in the IISH database on the Spainfighters. Retrieved on 03-08-2018 via <https://spanjestridders.nl/bio/hattum-willem-van>.

<sup>154</sup> IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 61, Aan J.Loudon, Hr. Ms Gezant te Parijs (Nice, 14 december 1938) van consul Em. De Kuyper (IISH stuk 61) Consulat des Pays-Bas, Nice, Dossier: Spaansche vrijwilligers, nr. 1884.

of ‘our’ country to be expelled from the community in exchange for the inclusion of the Spainfighters.<sup>155</sup> De Groot’s speech serves to illustrate that the Spainfighters felt part of the Dutch imagined community, but the bulk did have a different image of the content of this community than the Dutch government and the conservative majority of the country. In the eyes of the Spainfighters, the frame of anti-fascism was tied to the inclusion and exclusion in the Dutch community.

According to the 1980s memories of Spainfighter Arie Klooster, after the arrival in the Netherlands and the tribute in Amsterdam, the Dutch volunteers were continuously treated as criminals. They were obliged to report on a regular basis to the immigration police as they received a resident permit. They were not allowed to vote or to become a member of a political party. Employment became more complicated as the stateless Spainfighters needed a work permit before they could be hired. The intelligence service was also very interested in the Spainfighters, collecting their pictures and fingerprints and asking questions about communist contacts and addresses.<sup>156</sup> Spainfighter Karel Neijssel also remembered the questions of the intelligence service. He stated that he was asked what he would do when the Russians would attack the Netherlands. Although the CPN remained ambivalent on this topic, Neijssel replied he would of course fight the Russians if they came to the country uninvited, because he was a Dutchman.<sup>157</sup>

Like the statement of Karel Neijssel, the booklets of Jef Last and Gerard van het Reve also reveal that the deprivation of the Dutch citizenship was certainly annoying, but it did not severely affect the Spainfighters’ feelings of Dutchness, about their national identity. Last wrote that he laughed when he was told that he lost his Dutch citizenship as he argued that no one could take away his mastery of the Dutch language, or erase his memories of the Dutch clouds and sea. He argued that he was a Dutchman anyway, because he loved his country: its language, its history, its beauty and its brave, free people.<sup>158</sup> Van het Reve passionately rallied support for the restoration of the Dutch citizenship to the Spainfighters. He explained that the Dutch government renounced the best sons of the Dutch people. Their expulsion from the Dutch ‘*volksgemeenschap*’, the Dutch community, was unjustified as Van het Reve argued that the Spainfighters fought against forces that threaten the rights, freedoms and independence of the

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<sup>155</sup> *Het Volksdagblad*, 06-12-1938: “Wij zijn dezen mannen, dezen besten Nederlanders de strijd verplicht te zorgen dat zij in hun recht en burgerschap worden hersteld!”

<sup>156</sup> See the profile of Arie Klooster in the IISH database on the Spainfighters. Retrieved on 09-11-2018 via <https://spanjestrijders.nl/bio/klooster-arie>.

<sup>157</sup> See the profile of Karel Neijssel in the IISH database on the Spainfighters. Retrieved on 26-10-2018 via <https://spanjestrijders.nl/bio/neijssel-karel>.

<sup>158</sup> Jef Last, *Over de Hollanders in Spanje* (Amsterdam: Contact, 1937) 18-19.

Dutch people. He therefore made the appeal to all freedom abiding Dutchmen, ‘all friends of the peace and human civilization’, to demand Dutch citizenship for these ‘brave and noble representatives of the Dutch people’.<sup>159</sup> In a less propagandistic manner, when asked about the loss of his passport Spainfighter Siep Adema simply stated that he just not cared about that whole mess as he simply considered himself a Dutchman.<sup>160</sup>

From 1940 onwards, the German occupation of the Netherlands did not make life easier for the stateless Spainfighters. The Germans were not forgiving towards stateless ‘foreigners’, especially not towards the Spainfighters who had fought against fascism with striking determination. As the Dutch authorities kept records on the Spainfighters, it was not difficult for the German occupier to track down their names and personal information. Therefore, many former Spainfighters went into hiding and became active in, mostly communist, resistance movements to continue their battle against fascism.<sup>161</sup> For example, Piet Laros went into hiding in France. After a year, he came back to the Netherlands to participate in the resistance. However, as he was an icon of the Dutch Spainfighters in his capacity of commander Dutchman Pete, he was mentioned on several lists and brochures. He was arrested in 1942 and deported to concentration camp Buchenwald. He was interned there for three years and returned to the Netherlands after the Second World War. The Dutch citizenship of Laros was rehabilitated in 1946, but the case of Laros remained exceptional.<sup>162</sup>

In the early Cold War years, the communist sympathies of many former Spainfighters remained suspicious as the subsequent governments kept questioning the loyalty of communists to the fatherland. In the Cold War period, the anti-communist sentiments in Dutch society increased. Piet Laros faithfully continued to protest against the, in his eyes, ridiculous behavior of the Dutch governments. In the period after the Second World War, the Dutch government was formed by different coalitions with the cooperation between Willem Drees’ social-democratic Labor Party and the Catholic fraction as the center of gravity. Many former Spainfighters that remained stateless in the aftermath of the Second World War were frustrated as they received the same treatment, even from cabinets of the Labor party, as those from the ‘wrong’ side during the German occupation. Several debates in the Dutch Parliament, ranging from 1938 to 1969, when the eleven Spainfighters that were still stateless were offered the

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<sup>159</sup> Gerard Vanter, *Nederlanders onder commando van Hollander Piet in Spanje* (Amsterdam: Pegasus, 1939) 104-105.

<sup>160</sup> IISH, CNDIBSBO, stuk 33, in Groningen on 25-05-1984: ‘want ik heb me gewoon beschouwd als Nederlander en ik heb me van die hele rotzooi niks aangetrokken.’

<sup>161</sup> Dankkaart et al., *De oorlog begon in Spanje*.

<sup>162</sup> See the profile of Piet Laros in the IISH database on the Spainfighters. Retrieved on 03-11-2018 via <https://spanjestrijders.nl/bio/laros-piet>.

opportunity to hand in a request for Dutch citizenship as the criterion of ‘reliable’ political convictions to qualify for rehabilitation was removed, serve to illustrate the very gradual rehabilitation of the Spainfighters. In 1986, the Spainfighters’ change in the wider Dutch society from stateless residents to war heroes with a correct foresight was completed with a commemorative monument on the newly named ‘Spanje ’36-’39’ square in Amsterdam-North.<sup>163</sup> During the memorial of the start of the Spanish Civil War in 2016, Amsterdam’s Municipal Counselor Arjan Vliegthart of the SP, the Socialist Party, joined the ceremony on the square on the behalf of the City of Amsterdam.<sup>164</sup>

The perceptions of the Spainfighters surrounding the loss of their passports reveal the cultural and emotional ties the Dutch volunteers had with their home country. The majority of the Spainfighters certainly regarded the deprivation of the Dutch citizenship as an unjust consequence of their action. To them, it was annoying and it hindered their daily life, but it did not severely affect their feelings of Dutchness. It demonstrates their deep-seated feelings towards the Dutch imagined community, even though the Dutch government continued to distrust this group of ideologically motivated volunteers.

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<sup>163</sup> Koen Vossen, ‘Nederland en de Spaanse Burgeroorlog’ in Hub Hermans (e.a.), *Een Nederlandse blik op de Spaanse Burgeroorlog* (Utrecht: Cervantes Instituut, 2006) 34.

<sup>164</sup> Patrick Meershoek, ‘Begin Spaanse burgeroorlog herdacht bij monument in Noord’, *Het Parool*, 06-07-2016.

## Conclusion

By focusing on the experiences and the perceptions of the Dutch Spainfighters insight into the nature of the transnational community the Republican foreign volunteers supposedly were is obtained. It reveals how these men and women in practice struggled to connect the loyalties they felt to two of their identity layers. This thesis aimed to demonstrate that they felt loyalty both to the transnational community of left-wing sympathizers, with an emphasis on the ideals of the working classes, and the national Dutch community. By answering to the suggestion of historian Ferdinand Göhde by analyzing the actual perceptions and experiences of foreign fighters, this thesis, in particular chapter two, showed how practical cultural outcomes relating to the Dutch nationality and identity played a considerable role in the daily reality of the war in Spain. As the Dutch-German tensions regarding military discipline and the creations of a national unit, hospital and an own newspaper illustrate, most Dutch volunteers were unable to fully merge into a transnational environment. National identity and culture, considered in its practical sense, played a considerable role in the daily reality of the Spainfighters, as it does in a manner common to all (temporary) migrants, but it is especially relevant if the rather mythical image of the International Brigades as a classic example of a transnational army is taken into account. Although most foreign volunteers, irrespective of their nationality, shared several characteristics and experiences, such as their working class backgrounds and sympathies, the economic crisis of the early 1930's and the fear for fascism, the perceptions and experiences of the majority of the Dutch Spainfighters do not correspond to the image of being part of truly transnational army. As the case of the Dutch Spainfighters illustrates, the International Brigades provided space and even recognition for national identity as an organizing entity and as such functioned more as an ideologically motivated *international* army.

For this reason, this thesis suggests that the fundamentals of the supposedly transnational movement of support to the Spanish Republic may partly be built on national tensions and the resulting compromises. While studying transnational movements in the twentieth century, it therefore may be worth the effort to analyze the role of national identity, of national political culture. This thesis does not aim to diminish the value of a transnational focus in history; it rather directs at including national identity and political culture within the histories of transnational phenomena. Twentieth century transnational armies and wider movements should perhaps be conceptualized as a fabricate of different, occasionally clashing and often merging identities containing ties to different national sentiments and cultures.

Next to the topic of the International Brigades, this thesis also aimed to engage with the debate on foreign fighters. As analyzed in chapter one, the Spainfighters were, according to propaganda material but also to explanations given by the volunteers themselves, in theory able to connect and merge loyalties to the transnational group of the working class, or of left-wing idealists, and to their specifically constructed version of being part of the Dutch imagined community. By taking a closer look at the mechanisms used to motivate and activate the Dutchmen to take up arms and medical instruments in far-away Spain, to take on a role in a conflict they had no ethnic or cultural ties to, it becomes clear that their transnational ideals and interests were fluently connected to national concerns and sentiments under the header of anti-fascism. Although the shared ideological identity between Republican Spaniards and the Dutch Spainfighters definitely mattered and formed a shared transnational community in the sense of Malet's model, the message of anti-fascism was not only of importance to a transnational community. The majority of the Spainfighters also expressed a direct connection to their home country; the future of the Netherlands was of profound importance to the Dutch volunteers. This concern formed the most important reason to go to Spain for most Spainfighters, for many even more than the survival of a specific transnational community. In their eyes, Spainfighters should be seen as the best kind of Dutchmen, as the best patriots, because they were actually able to identify and act against the enemy of the Netherlands.

The emotional ties of the Dutch volunteers to their home country do not only play a role during their time in Spain, but are also visible in the perceptions of the Spainfighters surrounding the loss of their passports. The majority of the Spainfighters regarded the deprivation of the Dutch citizenship as an unjust consequence of their action. To them, it was annoying and it hindered their daily life, but it did not severely affect their feelings of Dutchness, of their Dutch identity. This demonstrates their deep-seated feelings towards the Dutch imagined community, even though Dutch governments continued to distrust this group of ideologically motivated volunteers as discussed in chapter three. While Malet focuses on transnational communities, this thesis thus advocates for the incorporation of the role of national sentiments in the analysis of foreign fighters. The motivation of the Spainfighters is closely linked to their national identity, which they tried to construct *in symbiosis* with their transnational thoughts via the message of anti-fascism. The inclusion of the role of national identity, the conscious manner in which the Dutch Spainfighters tried to unite the interests of two of their identity layers, provides deeper understanding of the motivation of the Spainfighters and therefore adds to the model of Malet. By blending the categories of Arielli and connecting them to Malet's thoughts on recruitment and motivations, the thesis revealed a

particular manner in which specific aspects of national identity can play an important role in a foreign conflict.

What do these insights in the experiences of the Dutch Spainfighters mean for the popular comparison between the volunteers of the 1930's and nowadays' Syria-goers? What does it mean to label Janus Leijnse a Syria-goer *avant la lettre*? The main reason for the parallel is the supposed similarity between the intensity of the ideological conviction of the Spainfighters and the religious fanaticism of the Syria-goers. The Syria-goers are often second or third generation immigrants with an ambivalent, complicated attitude towards the Dutch state and to national sentiments. As opposed to situation of the Spainfighters, ethnic-religious ties do play an important role for the Syria-goers. It is however assumed that the volunteers are fighting for a particular kind of 'holy purpose' in both cases. In this comparison, the conflicts deal with fundamental - and in the eyes of the volunteers universal - values that threaten to disappear or be oppressed by the actions of an enemy of the worst kind. This thesis showed that the Spainfighters participated in a foreign war not only due to an ideological sense of transnational necessity, but also out of a specific duty to their fatherland, captured in the frame of anti-fascism. Historical comparisons do not really enhance understanding when they are only employed to prove that it happened before, but the parallels can be highly useful when the topics are explored in depth, carefully pointing out similarities, variations and deviations. An in-depth analysis of the role of national identity in the experiences and perceptions of Syria-goers would therefore contribute to a better understanding of the current situation and reveal whether Janus Leijnse is a Syria-goer *avant la lettre* in this regard as well.

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