



The front page of the Norwegian newspaper *Arbeiderbladet* ("The Workers' Daily"), main organ of the Labour Party in the 1930s, on the first day after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War.

Sammendrag: Den spanske borgerkrigen i et nordisk perspektiv. Borgerkrigen i Spania 1936-39 kastet Europa ut i en krise som truet med å utløse en ny storkrig. Samtidig gikk det folkelige engasjementet i hvert land høyt, med "hjelp til Spania" som en populær sak i opinionen. For regjeringene i Skandinavia – alle sosialdemokratiske, alle relativt nyinnsett og støttet av et bondeparti – var dette et særskilt vanskelig dilemma, som forutsatte internasjonal ikke-innblending under britisk ledelse samtidig med at opinionen hjemme krevde økt engasjement. Denne artikkelen tar for seg situasjonen for samtlige nordiske stater vedkommende. Detaljene er for hver stat kjent fra en stor litteratur om landets forhold til Spania. Den settes her sammen til et nordisk helhetbilde, som blir understøttet av en utførlig felles-nordisk bibliografi om de enkelte land og borgerkrigen som følger til slutt.

Emneord: Skandinavia, Spania, borgerkrig, ikke-intervensjon, frivillige brigadet, kommunisme, fascisme

Fagfelleurdert

The Spanish Civil War in a Nordic Perspective

Abstracts: *The civil war in Spain from 1936–39 brought crisis to Europe with the frightening prospect of unleashing a new international war. At the same time the struggle gave rise to popular engagement with “helping Spain” becoming a popular cause in all countries. This presented a particular dilemma to the newly formed governments of Scandinavia – mainly Social Democrats with the support of the Farmers’ Party – which had to combine the principle of non-intervention under British leadership with handling an ardent opposition from the left. By focusing on the common Nordic traits in this situation, the present article explains what happened across Scandinavia during this crisis. The details are known from a large body of literature on each country’s relationship to Spain. By comparing these, the article provides its own biography of how the Spanish Civil War affected all the Scandinavian countries – the first all-Nordic bibliography on this subject.*

Keywords: *Scandinavia, Spain, Civil War, non-intervention, voluntary brigades, communism, fascism*



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The 1936–39 civil war in Spain aroused a huge engagement in the Nordic region, as well as elsewhere in Europe and North America. This was all the more remarkable as these countries’ connections to Spain seemed remote at the time, with the phenomena of mass tourism appearing only much later. Trade figures from the 1930s indeed show that the Iberian peninsula was of a modest importance to Denmark, Norway and Sweden – not to mention more distant countries like Finland and Iceland. This distance was made greater by religious differences as Spain was of course Catholic and the Nordic countries strongly Protestant. Still, popular engagement with what was happening further south in Europe was strong, with willingness to ‘help Spain’ emerging as a noteworthy trend in popular opinion. Interestingly, however,

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this engagement caused some severe political cleavages between the ruling governments and their opponents to the left – cleavages that may have influenced the long-term development of social democracy in the Nordic countries.

The details of what transpired in Spain and of how the war affected public opinion in the West are well known and indeed have been described in depth in a substantial body of literature from most of the countries involved.¹ In fact, no other event in the 1930s has attracted so many historians and commentators, not

to speak of the plethora of memoirs and recollections produced. Everywhere the dilemmas of governments caught between international obligation and popular sentiment have been traced in detail, as has the split in the national press between conservative and liberal or even socialist newspapers. The Spanish Civil War simply seems a favourite of historiography everywhere.

Looking at the literature from Scandinavia as a whole – including memoirs, political texts and historical treatises² – we can observe the uniformity of

Mediehistorisk Tidsskrift nr. 37-38, 2022, årgang 19, s. 70-83, publisert 09.09.2022.

Artikkelen finnes også som del av hele utgaven av Mediehistorisk Tidsskrift nr. 01-02, 2022,

url: https://medietidsskrift.no/content/uploads/pub/2022/09/NMF-tidsskrift-01-02_2022-web.pdf

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what happened in the main countries of the North. The abundance of books on the Spanish Civil War tells much the same story about government officials, party members and ordinary citizens trying to sort out what was happening with their lives and careers. The war represented a challenge for elites and parties alike, raising issues that had to be dealt with simultaneously – and in a very similar way in the Nordic countries. If we look closely at the details, however, we might discover a more general pattern of conflict between governments and popular opinion. Considering the Nordic countries as a unified entity and focusing on the many similarities in the literature describing the situation, we can see what sort of difficulties governments and governing parties alike faced when public feeling ran high – as it did during the civil war. These difficulties are particularly interesting as they involve various countries. There is, however, a caveat: The present chapter presents only a sketch based on what is known from government files and party sources quoted in the existing literature. Dealing with the problem in depth would require a series of new archival studies to complement what is presently known – a whole project, indeed. The chapter deals with the foreign policy positions of Nordic countries, caught as they were between international and domestic demands, rather than with propaganda and or persuasion from individuals on either side.

The outbreak

Some similarities are well known. At the time of the outbreak of the civil war in Spain, all the Nordic countries were governed by social democrats in coalition with agrarians (Sweden and Norway) or liberals (Denmark) under the socialist premiers Per Albin Hansson, Johan Nygaardsvold and Thorvald Stauning, respectively, with Aimo Cajander leading a coalition cabinet of agrarians, social democrats and conservatives in Finland and a similar coalition in place in Iceland.³

All of the governments found themselves facing strong left-wing reactions to the war in Spain, on the one hand, and international demands to maintain peace and tranquillity in Europe, on the other. This



*Per Albin Hansson, the Swedish prime minister of the 1930s.
Photo: Jan de Meyere/Stockholms stadsmuseum.*

only added to their problems, however. Whereas in the 1920s parties and governments alike had been in the grip of the First World War and the Russian revolution, the 1930s presented new challenges such as the rise of fascism and the deadly threat of a new, revanchist world war – amidst a serious economic crisis. Still, in these difficult times social democracy was *the* typical regime form in the North.⁴ The present chapter will address what role the Spanish Civil War may have played, including how the war was perceived among the Nordic labour elites at the time, with a particular focus on the conflict between the international policy of non-involvement, which called for doing as little as possible, and the domestic popularity in all countries of doing much *more* for Spain.

How the 'Spanish issue' was handled in the realm of propaganda and information – in relation to the public at home as well as to the world at large⁵

– raises the question of how *alike* the Nordic countries were at the time, especially in terms of public opinion and in relation to the more general theme of how modern welfare states might be linked internationally. The Spanish issue certainly affected the official positions of governments and political parties alike, most immediately by influencing how these regimes responded to the next great challenge – the Soviet and German attacks of 1939–40 – which in turn determined their international position (and possibly also their success) in the post-war area. In this respect, the Spanish Civil War served as a prelude to a greater catastrophe – the Second World War – as well as to the future of Europe.

Addressing these similarities leads to the question of general morals, that is to say of opinions shared by many, if not all, people. In the Nordic countries, the situation in Spain corresponded with a broader moral outlook as the military uprising and the putsch of the generals looked downright illegitimate from a Nordic perspective. Any democratic conviction would condemn such behaviour on principle. Even making certain allowances for the generals, since the Republican government’s Popular Front policies may have exceeded some of its rights according to democratic standards (for instance with the atrocities committed against the clergy by the Republican side), the principles of right and wrong would demand that such an uprising be condemned outright. At least as seen from the left-wing perspective, to which most Scandinavians, and certainly their governments, adhered. Viewed from the right, the picture appears more complicated, with some newspapers in the Nordic countries showing scepticism towards the Spanish government (the press in Scandinavia still maintained a strong party affiliation at the time).⁶ Diversity in press coverage mattered, including interpretations of the war news, such as whether a certain military event was considered a victory or a shameful retreat, and opinions as to which developments in Spain were newsworthy, and the diversity of political thinking and media coverage was very much the same in all Nordic

countries. The one exception might be Finland, which had experienced a civil war of its own in 1917–19, when the liberation from Russia caused a bloody settling of scores between the right and the left.⁷

Thus, the situation on the Scandinavian peninsula proper seemed pretty uniform. Like most Western governments, the Nordic leadership might have initially regarded the Franco uprising in the summer of 1936 as a typical Spanish *pronunciamento*, which was well known at the time as the normal Iberian way of staging constitutional shifts. Military *pronunciamentos* had taken place in Spain with some regularity over the previous hundred years. The uprising of July 1936, however, developed into something else: rather than a quick, albeit brutal, shift of governments, as was expected, a full-scale civil war erupted between the government and the generals, each commanding their own part of the country’s regular troops. Most Western foreign offices attributed this to a rather surprising willingness on the part of Madrid to resist the generals’ coup as it advanced from the north assisted by sympathetic allies from Italy and Germany. The reason for the government’s resistance against this

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assault was that it was also receiving outside support, namely from the Soviet Union, which quickly shipped armaments and military advisors to rescue the

Republic. Thus, the settlement in Spain was quickly backed internationally, with assistance from faraway countries like Soviet Russia and Germany that had no obvious ‘national interest’ in being involved in distant Spain but that represented different ideological poles – communism vs. fascism.

This type of ideological mobilization was something new in international politics. Formerly, countries had been ‘normal’ rivals like everyone else, such as Italy and Germany over Austria, for instance, or contestants in particular waters, like Italy and Great Britain in the Mediterranean or France and Spain in North Africa. Now instead a surprising ‘axis’ sprang up between Rome and Berlin and even Tokyo, indicating relations based on ideological similarities rather than national differences, whereas the Soviet Union

extended its new programme of assisting 'popular fronts' everywhere.⁸ This development was seen as threatening by the Foreign Office in London, which reacted against the ideological tangles like the one forming around its neighbour Spain. Thus, Great Britain immediately responded positively to the French prime minister's suggestion of inviting all European states – including the Scandinavian ones – to form a Non-Intervention Committee to uphold the international commitment to refrain from involvement in the Spanish imbroglio. A commission was set up in London by the end of August 1936 and started working on 9 September. By joining this initiative, all major European powers – even those who had participated in the coup – as well as smaller ones (i.e. the Scandinavian states) committed themselves solemnly to refuse export to Spain or her possessions of arms and matériel, including aircraft, so as to stay neutral in the ongoing civil war.⁹

The committee proved to be rather unpopular, however, as non-intervention was considered 'a leaky dam and the laughings-tock of Europe'.¹⁰ It could not prevent countries like Italy, Germany and Soviet Russia from continuing their engagement by twisting and turning international agreements, which in turn fuelled the ideological side of the conflict so as to arouse public opinion. By the autumn of 1936 there had been clandestine movements in many places around in Europe to counteract state neutrality by preparing military units to fight in Spain. The Comintern in particular engaged secretly in such efforts, helping national communist parties to set up brigades of volunteers, thereby circumventing state and international prohibitions. By late autumn they were ready to ship the first volunteers to the front to fight for the Republic (a reference to the constitutional change of 1931 when the Spanish monarchy ceased). At the same time, smaller bands of volunteers enlisted on the other side, the so-called nationalists, supported clandestinely by Italian and German troops, and even aircraft, to win over the country to

the side of the generals.¹¹

The unpopularity of international non-intervention was a heavy blow to governments, not least in Scandinavia, where social democratic leaders suddenly found themselves facing a left-wing opposition over the question of fascism, a cause about which they themselves might have had strong feelings, but where state interests required them to act with extreme caution. Tied as they were to their pledge of international neutrality, they had to apply their own prohibitive measures with a certain amount of caution to avoid stirring the leftist (or communist) cause further.

Governmental cooperation

Such was the general situation. When it comes to how this was seen and handled by the Scandinavians, one is first of all forced to note that cooperation was limited. Surprisingly (at least when compared to present-day arrangements) neither the social democratic parties nor the governments of the Scandinavian countries exchanged much information about the matter – even if their political experiences were much the same and left-wing opposition equally troublesome to all, cutting deeply into the labour rank and file.¹² In Sweden, the pro-Republicans were headed by no less than Georg Branting, son of that nation's first socialist premier and a well-known public figure.

After the Great War of 1914-18, the three countries had made similar entrances into international politics. All three were invited to join the League of Nations and did so separately. Although they shared many of the same reservations, as the League was an invention of the victors and they themselves had remained neutral, each country overcame its doubts by itself. Later, in the 1930s, there was a concerted action concerning the awkward principle of sanctions, but overall, there was a lack of real Nordic unity in Geneva. In August 1936, when invitations came to join the Non-Intervention Committee in London, the Nordic countries responded individually (presuma-

'Committees for Spain' sprang up all over Scandinavia and constituted the first ever 'solidarity movement' – a new phenomenon at the time

UT-SOLGT?

Arbeidstid utgjør en betydelig del av den samlede lønnsutbetalingen i et firma. Det er derfor viktig å sikre at arbeidstidene er riktig beregnet og utbetalt. Dette kan gjøres ved å bruke våre tjenester. Vi er spesialiserte på å hjelpe firmaer med å beregne arbeidstidene riktig, og å sikre at de er utbetalt i tide og på rett måte.

18. juli 1936

Aftenposten

15. are

Vannlednings-skade.

Forsikring dekket foretaksklig i det østlige Selskap i brønnen

Heimdals

O. KIERULF - ARKIBROT 12

Nr. 357; Aftennr. | Abonn. pris: Innenbys kr. 2.25 | Utenbys kr. 2.50 | Oslo, lørdag 18. juli 1936 | Abonn. pris: Utenbys kr. 2.25 | Aftennr. 77. årg.

Hvad foregår i Spania? Rykter om at Trotsky

Enhver forbindelse med utlandet avbrutt inatt. atter skal tre i aktivitet.

Vest-Europa skal vinnes for kommunismen.

Mange festligheter under den svenske eskadres besok.

Paris, 18. juli.

I et raskt utgjort utkast har den franske regjering besluttet å sende en ekspedisjon til Spania. Denne ekspedisjonen skal bestå av franske og spanske soldater, og skal ha til oppgave å bekjempe de fascistiske styrkene som har tatt kontroll over landet. Regjeringen har også besluttet å avbryte alle forbindelser med utlandet inatt, og å innføre en streng kontroll over alle utreise og innreise til landet.

Denne beslutningen er et svar på de rykter som har gått i gang om at den spanske regjering skulle ha inngått et samarbeid med de fascistiske styrkene. Regjeringen har også besluttet å innføre en streng kontroll over alle utreise og innreise til landet, og å innføre en streng kontroll over alle utreise og innreise til landet.

Trotsky, Dimitrov, Bucharin og andre i en eksekutivkomité.

Vest-Europa skal vinnes for kommunismen.

Oslo, 18. juli.

De tre ledende trotskyistiske teoretikere i Spania og Moskva, nemlig Leonid Breznev, Dimitroff og Bucharin, har sammen med andre trotskyistiske teoretikere og praktiserende arbeidere, utgjort en eksekutivkomité for den trotskyistiske bevegelsen i Vest-Europa. Denne komitéen skal ha til oppgave å koordinere og lede den trotskyistiske bevegelsen i Vest-Europa, og å innføre en streng kontroll over alle utreise og innreise til landet.



De svenske eskadrens ledere i Stockholm. I midten ser man den svenske eskadrens kommandant, kaptein Eriksson. Til høyre ser man den svenske eskadrens stabssjef, kaptein Eriksson. Til venstre ser man den svenske eskadrens stabssjef, kaptein Eriksson.

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Ny komité.

Oslo, 18. juli.

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Ulykken i Thessalon.

Oslo, 18. juli.

En ulykke har skjedd i Thessalon. En bil har kjørt av veien og har ramlet inn i et hus. Det er flere døde og skadde. Politiet er på stedet og undersøker saken.

Syd-Chinas generaler gir op.

Hele Kantons luftstyrke går over til Nanking

Hongkong, 18. juli.

Den kommunistiske hær i Syd-China har gitt opp. Hele Kantons luftstyrke går over til Nanking. Dette er et stort seier for den kommunistiske hær, og det viser at den nasjonale regjering er i ferd med å miste kontrollen over landet.

Sol og fest ved Levangerrutstilingens åpning



Levanger, 18. juli.

Åpningen av Levanger rutstiling ble en solfylt og festlig begivenhet. Mange mennesker deltok, og det ble holdt tale av lokale og utenlandske gjester. Det ble også holdt konkurranser og utdelinger av priser.

De tyrkiske tropper besetter Dardanellene mandag.

Arbeidet med befestningene begynner straks.

Constantinople, 18. juli.

De tyrkiske tropper har besatt Dardanellene mandag. Arbeidet med befestningene begynner straks. Dette er et stort seier for Tyrkia, og det viser at den tyrkiske hær er i ferd med å gjenopprette kontrollen over landet.

Trafikkstreik ved Østsjøbanen fra 10. august?

Oslo, 18. juli.

Det er fare for en trafikkstreik ved Østsjøbanen fra 10. august. Dette skyldes en uenighet mellom de ulike partene om betingelsene for en eventuell streik. Det er viktig å finne en løsning på dette problemet.

Varsel utsendt. Trafikanne anmodes om ikke i formye sine månedsbilletter.

De som har kjøpt månedsbilletter, blir bedt om å ikke bruke dem før 10. august. Dette er fordi det er fare for en trafikkstreik på denne datoen. Det er viktig å følge disse instruksjonene.

Feitartilleristøtte i Fredrikstad.

ALFRED J. BRYN - BRUNN PENTAGONER -

ALFRED J. BRYN, FREDRIKSTAD, N. O. SØLBERG, ANDRUS BRUNN.

Aftenposten, the leading Norwegian newspaper to the right, was obviously bewildered by the outbreak of the civil war: "What goes on in Spain?" its headline reads on 18 July 1936.

bly after some telephone calls between the foreign offices of Stockholm, Copenhagen and Oslo) with each giving its own separate reasons.¹³

During the Spanish war, the Nordic governments met and consulted during the yearly conference of their foreign secretaries, hosted in rotation in between them, and sometimes Spanish issues were discussed at those meetings. Two initiatives stand out in this respect – the possibility in 1937 of joint naval action to protect Scandinavian merchant ships against foreign (possibly Italian) piracy in Spanish waters and an effort the following year to persuade the Spanish generals to stop the war altogether. Neither came to anything, although the project of possible naval action led to a series of meetings, both official and informal, between the Danish, Norwegian and Swedish foreign offices. No official Nordic effort was pursued thereafter.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the Norwegian foreign secretary tried to raise the Spanish issue in the League's Assembly in the autumn of 1937, but as he lacked support, even from his fellow Scandinavians, he obtained nothing. His disappointment clearly played a part in his request to resign, which also came to nothing, as the prime minister insisted, he continue.¹⁵

Apart from this contact between foreign secretaries, the élites of the Nordic countries met at once or twice yearly meetings where political party, government and labour union officials came together ("De Nordiske Arbeiderorganisasjoners Samarbeidskomite", as it was called in Norwegian). At the meeting in August 1937 in Stockholm 'the Spanish problem' was briefly discussed among more important issues such as working time and wage demands.¹⁶ In the one meeting held in 1938, the topic of Spain came up in the more general discussion about international refugees and the international policy of non-intervention.¹⁷ As this policy was commonly seen as tantamount to a refusal of government help, it was controversial with the left and thus worth discussing by the Nordic labour regimes. The left wing of the labour movement wanted to help Spain by sending military assistance to the Madrid government and supporting the Republic's efforts to defend itself from the generals' revolt.

Meanwhile, the Soviet Union had succeeded in providing military assistance by setting up a foreign volunteer brigade of sympathetic freedom fighters. By 1937-38, this international brigade had welcomed approximately one thousand Scandinavians as volunteers for the Spanish republic, as compared to fewer than one hundred Scandinavians on the generals' side. The communists were successful through their international organization, the Comintern, although each national Communist Party (CP) acted largely on its own and certainly not with help from any government, within the common framework of the communist popular front strategy.

The Nordic CPs were all splinter parties from the social democrats, tracing back to the 1917 revolution and to the fierce discussions about the significance of that event for the West. Those of Sweden, Denmark and Finland dated from the revolution, whereas Norway's was not formed until 1923, when the Labour Party, which had been a member of the Comintern, withdrew leaving a splinter group – the NKP – behind. During the 1920s, the communists caused some stir in their national labour movements, but by the 1930s, and especially after their cooperation with the farmers around 1935, the left-wing CPs were less influential – that is until the outbreak of the Spanish conflict, when communists threatened to form large left-wing constellations prepared to fight fascism by force.

Prevention of travel to Spain

There is some difficulty in tracing in detail what actions the governments in the various countries took to prevent brigade fighters from going to Spain. The Nordic Ministries of Law might have had some consultations with each other in this matter but in general most countries responded to London's call by asserting that they already had national penal laws making it unlawful to recruit (or enlist) freedom fighters to serve abroad. Poland, Belgium and France were all eager to stop the flow of young men to Spain. Great Britain already had laws in place from the 1860s. Such rules were now universally applied. Recruitment, for instance within communist parties in Scandinavia, could thus be stopped by penal laws and the persons



Spanish loyalists (government troops) marching in the streets of Madrid on 16 September 1936. Photo: Mikhail Koltsov.

involved prosecuted, as happened in all countries. CP cells were monitored by the police and members duly arrested. The London agreement, however, intended to make it unlawful for any citizen to go to Spain to enlist in the war, or indeed to go abroad with the intention to fight in a particular country. But how could people be prevented from going? In France, guardsmen from the non-Intervention Committee were stationed throughout the Pyrenees to prevent Frenchmen from crossing. Scandinavian police officers took part in this operation, with Colonel Lunn from Denmark acting as chief administrator of the Franco-Spanish border and receiving thanks from the head of the committee, Lord Plymouth, for his prominent service in this respect.¹⁸ The border was far from sealed, however, and other countries could scarcely apply the same measure.

A general rule making it unlawful to go to Spain

to take part in this particular civil war was passed more or less universally in all the Nordic countries in February 1937, through an initiative from the London committee.¹⁹ While this made it possible for the police to arrest suspects when they were returning home, it could hardly prevent people from leaving in the first place. Some 500–600 sympathisers managed to leave from Sweden and 200–300 each from Denmark and Norway. Upon their homecoming in 1938 or 1939, these combatants were interrogated, but not prosecuted. In some other countries, however, Switzerland among them, returning fighters were arrested by the police and punished. The Swedish government even passed a formal amnesty.²⁰ Thus, although the signing of the non-intervention policy had made it illegal to fight in Spain, the Nordic governments hesitated to use their own laws to punish the *de jure* criminals when the war was over.



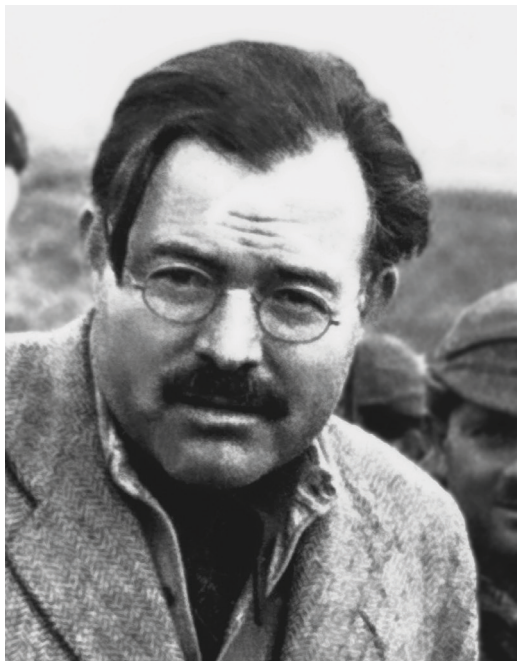
From the prelude to the Civil War: Nordic participants to the alternative Barcelona Olympics summer 1936 listening to records en route to Spain. Photo: Arbark/ Arbeiderbevegelsens arkiv.

The writers' war?

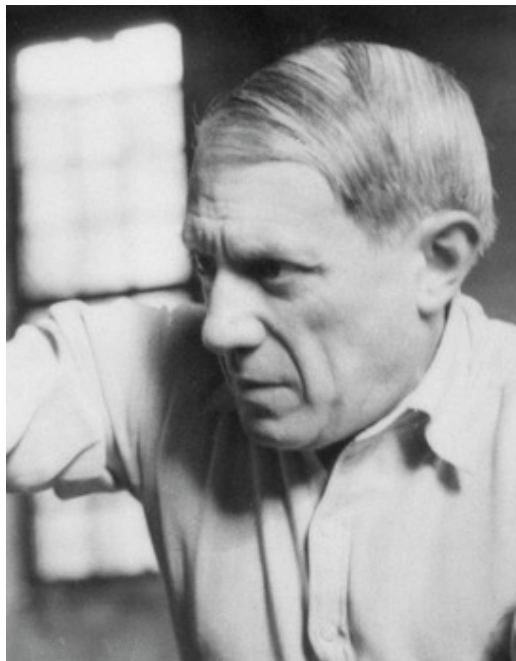
The role played by public intellectuals in the voluntary brigades has sometimes been connected with this policy. Indeed, the Spanish Civil has sometimes been labelled 'the writers' war' and excused – or at least explained – similarly for its ideological or cultural bent.²¹ But this is an exaggeration. True, the international gathering in Madrid the first summer included well-known figures such as Ernest Hemingway and R. W. Auden. The presence of Pablo Picasso and Andre Malraux adds to the impression that writers and artists flocked to the brigades. However, this was not the case in the Nordic countries. While well-known authors such as Selma Lagerlöf and Holger Drachmann made comments publicly on the conflict, actual recruitment to the brigades was mostly among ordinary working people, especially young seamen, rather than intellectuals. In Norway not a single member of *Mot Dag* (famous for its high-class academic membership with offshoots in Denmark) participated. This was the pattern all over Scandi-

navia. Moreover, only about a quarter of them were registered as CP members, and very few of them were unemployed, as a Norwegian counting shows.²² This adds to the impression that the brigades movement was a general left-wing opposition to the official position, and that it had to be handled accordingly – that is to say with caution to avoid labelling them as sheer outcasts and supporters of 'Moscow' when returning home (some 300 Scandinavians were killed in Spain and never came home). Indeed, the volunteers were generally welcomed back as heroes, even by social democratic officials, adding to the pride of the workers' movement – and indeed the left has viewed them as heroes to this day.²³

Passing laws without implementing them may seem pragmatic in a typically Nordic way. After all, there was no more civil war after spring 1939, and already from the autumn of 1938 it seemed clear that the generals would win. Spain was being taken over by the military and the huge foreign engagement had been all in vain. In fact, it was said, the brigade



The renowned writer Ernest Hemingway worked as a correspondent in The Spanish Civil War. Photo: Unknown.



Pablo Picasso, working on his famous painting "Guernica" in 1937. Photo: Unknown/ pablo-ruiz-picasso.net.

fighters had only prolonged the inevitable outcome and made the war longer than it otherwise would have been. 'We only lengthened it', was one American brigadier's assessment.²⁴

Still, the question of why the Spanish case engaged such a large segment of public opinion is a bit more complicated. In all the Nordic countries the labour-cum-agrarian governments had to navigate new waters with the emergence of 'international fascism' and the prospect of Spain's entrance into an alliance that could accelerate fascism's rise and even lead to a new world war. Thus, internal discussions in the media and elsewhere of what the struggle was really about, and why the war in Spain might be viewed as 'a rehearsal' for a more deadly enterprise, flourished. Particularly this goes with the need to understand the war as a contest of legitimacy, that is to say about the right of any opposition to attack an elected government, including in one's own country, where the conservatives and their press might try to undercut the legitimacy of a

social democratic government at home. In Norway, the main labour paper furiously objected that the right-wing *Aftenposten's* self-proclaimed 'impartial' coverage of the war in Spain essentially deemed the democratically elected labour government of Norway illegal.²⁵ The war in Spain thus pointed also to strictly to domestic politics.

The spectre of international fascism complicated the matter further. Originally, the principle of non-intervention in Spain rested on the very general assumption that 'no other country had *good reasons* to be concerned.'²⁶ Indeed, in Sweden, non-intervention was seen by the government as an instrument to keep *peace among nations*.²⁷ Nevertheless, it had to be practised with caution; thus the Swedes (like the other Nordic nations) opposed Italy's suggestion to extend non-intervention to prohibit the collection of funds for 'Spain' (mostly for the government) by popular committees. Let people express their opinions by offering slants at meetings, was the Nordic position, suggesting a concern for practical consi-



*Guernica, oil on canvas by Pablo Picasso, 1937, currently in the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid.
Photo: Unknown/Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía.*

derations. It would be very difficult to control such matters, they insisted. But as one Scandinavian historian observed, it would have been impossible for any Nordic government even to suggest a proposal like this, so strong was the desire among ordinary people to donate money to help.²⁸

Nordic governments indeed had difficulty fulfilling their obligation not only to hinder the recruitment of volunteers at home, not to mention to prevent them from travelling to Spain. When London asked that each country pass appropriate laws in January 1937, they responded accordingly, although with varying levels of debate: in Sweden and Denmark the prohibition laws were passed only after much debate, whereas in Norway and Finland it happened more silently. By and large, however, the Scandinavians acted loyally in accordance with the British leadership. If non-intervention was aimed at preventing the civil war from developing into a more sinister international conflict, it appeared to be a success as it managed 'to contain the Civil War to Spain', according to one verdict.²⁹ Moreover, when the Second World War started, it did not burst out of Spain but of Eastern Europe.

However, the gradual decline in the popularity of non-intervention gradually became less popular, as

evidenced in the 1938 Nordic labour meeting, was due to its lack of absolute success inasmuch as it did not work fully: The scarcity of resources caused by the embargo did not prevent the war from continuing with appalling cruelty from both sides. Worse, the London agreement could not prevent volunteers from taking part in the conflict, as thousands poured in from abroad to fight on both sides. In all, some 50,000–100,000 foreign fighters participated (the question of whether their participation was truly voluntarily, for instance from the Italian side, was raised but never answered). And the international perspective did not vanish – on the contrary, the merger of Italian fascism with German Nazism only intensified when Italy joined the German-Japanese Anti-Comintern Pact in 1938 and when with the developments in Austria and Sudetenland in 1938–39 further threatened peace.

The wider meaning

To grasp the wider meaning of the war to most Scandinavians, one undoubtedly has to look at public opinion, not only in terms of willingness to fight militarily but also in terms of engagement for humanitarian assistance to Spain. Such assistance showed

a degree of support that seems as astonishing as the willingness to fight physically. Large sums were collected in what could be seen as a competition between unions, associations and localities over who could be regarded as the best – which was eagerly followed by the press. Some ten million kroner left Scandinavia for the government in Spain, not a small contribution to the state budget. Internationally, even greater sums of aid to the Spanish government from organisations in Europe, South and North America and even Australia and New Zealand were channelled through the Second (democratic) International and the communist Comintern.

In addition to large organisations, many-folded local committees mobilised to collect funds. Such ‘committees for Spain’ sprang up everywhere in towns and hamlets all over Scandinavia and constituted the first ever ‘solidarity movement’ – a new phenomenon at the time.³⁰ They developed into chains of economic assistance though collections and begging at meetings which managed, surprisingly, to finance hospitals, doctors, nurses, ambulances and orphanages in Republican Spain. In Norway alone some one hundred committees for Spain were actively in operation during those three years, with somewhat fewer in Denmark but more than 400 in Sweden (many of them offsprings of local unions).³¹ Swedish and Norwegian committees cooperated in running a hospital in Alcoy, and Scandinavian-financed ambulances operated on all peninsular roads.³² A similar but much humbler humanitarian movement emerged to help famine-struck Russia in the 1920s, but the engagement for Spain was much bigger and stemmed from the obvious viewpoint of public morals in this case – a desire to support a government that had elected by the people and yet was being attacked by military generals. The case was morally unambiguous and led to widespread support for the Spanish government with an explosion of local committees set up for strictly humanitarian purposes.

The overwhelming support for the government’s side indicates that public opinion was not equally

divided. In fact, Franco’s side received little support compared to the Republic. There were no pro-Franco committees, only scattered arrangements, and few supporters who actually fought for the nationalist side. This was a general pattern in Europe, as well as in Scandinavia. Although Sweden fostered some political support for Franco and conservative newspapers hardly concealed their contempt for the popular-front Republic, not more than a dozen volunteers went off to Spain.³³ As late as 1957, the leading journal *Svensk Tidskrift* published a retrospective account of the Spanish war that denied any German bombing of Guernica in 1937 – one of fascism’s favourite fake news about the major event of the civil war. This kind of revisionist account was unheard of in the other Nordic countries, at least after Franco’s death. In Norway, the fascist leader Vidkun Quisling tried to pay tribute to the Nationalist side by printing newspaper stories sympathetic to Franco, along with small ‘nationalist’ sheets elsewhere. Moreover, he eagerly noted the constitutional changes Franco put in place following his victory to steer his country into a one-party authoritarian state, which lasted until his death in 1975.

In a broader context, however, the question of fascism intensified the moral discussions between left and right in all the Nordic countries, governments and parties alike, ranging from what was really newsworthy about the war to the more general question of how much legitimacy any government, including one’s own, had in a politically contested situation. How far is one obliged to go to defend a regime for general and more principled reasons? Fascism seems to imply that you could react beyond proportions in this respect, supporting for instance one’s own minorities in foreign nations and whenever it seems fit. Posterity, it would seem, agrees, suggesting an even harsher view of fascism attached to Mussolini or Hitler politically. This position, however, raises its own questions – as evidenced by the never-ending discussions at the time as well as in the doubts about the utility of ‘neutralism’ in international politics.

How far is one obliged to go to defend a regime for general and more principled reasons?

Notes

- 1 Key titles in the general literature emphasising the international aspects of the conflict are Beevor 2006, Carr 1984, Keene 2001, Payne 1995, and Thomas 2012.
- 2 See the comprehensive list by Dahl and Werenskjold 2022. As for Nordic titles of particular interest for the present chapter, see Lundgreen-Nielsen 2001 for Denmark; Almqvist 2003 for Finland; Svarvarsson 2006 for Iceland; Dahl, Hagtvet and Werenskjold 2019 for Norway; and Lundvik 1980 for Sweden.
- 3 Derry 2000
- 4 Sejersted 2011
- 5 Desmond 1982
- 6 The press' position is addressed in Lundgreen-Nielsen 2001 and Dahl, Hagtvet and Werenskjold 2019.
- 7 Augustsson and Lundgran 2014
- 8 Carr 1963
- 9 Gathorne-Hardy 1960, Watters 1971: 65 ff., Lundgreen-Nielsen 2001: 99 f.
- 10 Watters 1971: 406
- 11 The numbers of volunteers on each side are highly contested internationally but there seems to be agreement that there were around 35,000 International Brigade fighters in all; on Franco's side only some 1,200-1,500 volunteer members joined the Spanish Foreign Legion, in addition to 26,000 German Wehrmacht troops and a similar number of Italians. The Soviet contribution consisted of some 3,000 men (mostly advisors). See Gyllenaal and Westberg 2004: 111f. As for the Nordic countries, most authors agree on some 500 Swedish volunteers on both sides, 350 Danes and 250 Norwegians in addition to 10-29 Finns and some 5-6 Icelanders.
- 12 Scott 2009: 217-240
- 13 Lundgreen-Nielsen 2001: 99 f., Lundvik 1980: 155 ff., Dahl et al. 2019: 135
- 14 Lundgreen-Nielsen 2001: 130 ff., 227 ff.
- 15 Dahl et al. 2019: 153.
- 16 Labour's Yearly Report 1937, ARBAK
- 17 Labour's Yearly Report 1938, ARBAK
- 18 Watters 1971: 171, 175
- 19 Lundvik 1980: 155 ff., Lundgreen-Nielsen 2001: 120 f., Dahl et al. 2019: 130 ff.
- 20 Gyllenaal and Westberg 2004: 175, Lundvik 1980: 130 ff.
- 21 Risberg 1986
- 22 Kvaløy 1996: 76
- 23 Scott 2009, *passim*.
- 24 Dahl et al. 2019: 136
- 25 Dahl et al. 2019: 83
- 26 Gathorne-Hardy 1960: 434
- 27 Lundvik 1980: 156
- 28 Lundvik 1980: 156
- 29 Watters 1971: 406
- 30 Moen and Sæther 2009: 54
- 31 For Norway Dahl et al 2019: 287 ff.; for Denmark Lundgreen-Nielsen 2001: 259; for Sweden Lundvik 1980: 112
- 32 Rabo 2003
- 33 Lundvik 1980: 162

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