

Fighting fascism in the 'long' Second World War: A Transnational Approach to Resistance in Europe 1936-1948

Francesca Hooft

Results

The motivations for either going to Spain and becoming active in the resistance are diverse, but include both (socioeconomic) push and (ideological, professional, religious) pull factors. Ideological identities are important, but other identities and motivations prove important as well and coexist. The researched subjects were 'uprooted' from society, ideologically and/or socioeconomically. The period is a continuous battle, identities such as 'antifascist' often stay the same, however for some subjects actions change. This is mostly attributed to changing socioeconomic circumstances, being 'uprooted' is a crucial factor. This concept of transnational resistance proves multi-layered within my research: other identities prove more important than the national identity.

The Spanjestridders are transnational resisters, both geographically and ideologically.

'Spanjestridders' & identity

Whereas the Second World War in the Netherlands lasted from 1940 to 1945, there was a longer run-up period to the Second World War in Europe. Fascism was already successful in Italy, Germany and Spain.

Although the occupation of the Netherlands by the Nazi's started in May 1940, resistance to fascism in Europe started earlier. Approximately 800 Dutch citizens fought in the Spanish Civil War from 1936-1938/39 -most of them in the International Brigade of the republican army- against Franco. About half of them returned to the Netherlands, many were active resistance members.

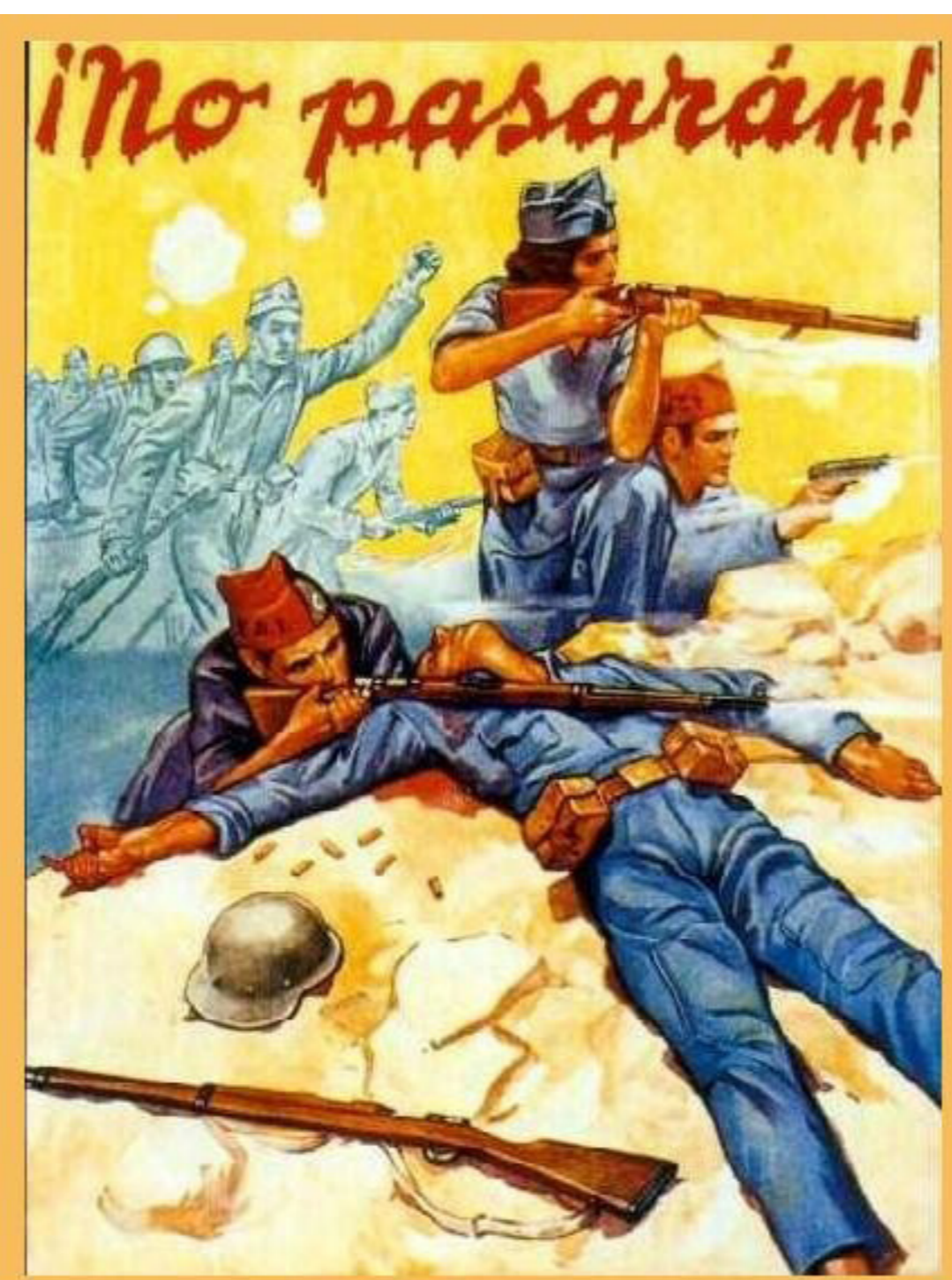
To what extent can their participation in the Spanish Civil War and the Dutch resistance be perceived as one single transnational battle? This group of 'Spanjestridders' was diverse in ideology, religion, gender and profession. My research is into the different identities these people have taken and attributed to themselves within their struggle throughout Europe. What meaning do these people give to their actions and how does this reflect on their (stated) identity?

A second, larger question I answer is whether we can consider the hardships for these people between 1936 and 1945 as one continuous –transnational- battle against fascism.

My research contributes to the larger debates on (transnational) resistance, antifascism and identity and proposes a new concept, that of 'uprootedness' to frame the resistance and its members.

Methodology

I have made extensive use of oral history. The interviews were conducted in the 1980s and 1990s, many years after the events took place. The narratives in these interviews were very layered. They showed not only the actions that these people had been involved in, but also how they had experienced them and how they remembered them. The interviews tell us why the interviewees remember something in a particular way. They show the way the Spanjestridders perceived themselves in retrospective, stating their identity both at the time of actions and the present alike and the way they give meaning to the past and their role in it. The boxes on the right show four quotes that give away the identity of the person and the meaning they give to the past.



Push and pull factors

"I thought, if we win I will stay there, a new fatherland, I won't come back. [...] maybe you had a chance of staying there, a new socialist world, like never seen before"

"I felt so rejected, and I had to live of my parents pocket. And then I read about the war in Spain, and that they were requesting volunteers, well then I went there. I thought: this society doesn't give us anything anyway. [...] in Spain the people were fighting for justice and a human living as well. Let me be able to do something. I felt like an outcast, kicked on the street without money."

Continuities and breaks

"I already stated, I have been in the resistance since I was twenty. When I came back, I knew what to do."

"But, I do have the feeling that, in Spain, the important foundations have been laid for the later resistance against German fascism."

Transnationalism

"Every soldier who fought for the republic knew what he was fighting for [...] that is why we went here as volunteers, to defend the Spanish republic, but not only that, to fight the battle against world fascism."

The giving of meaning

"I knew it was necessary to fight Germany, or at least fight fascism. When I went there I was convinced, following discussions with German emigrants, that if we did not save Spain we could not build a dam, then war and fascism will spread out to the whole of western Europe. Spain is a try-out, they are trying to see how far they can go within the international relations, and they are testing their modernised material."

This research project has been a learning experience, we were able to participate in an international Leverhulme/NIOD research project and contribute to their research. The lesson that stuck to me the most is time management. Whether it is was detecting the archives and sources or writing reports, it is important to take enough time for both and schedule buffer weeks; research take longer than expected.