

Brigadistes

“An extraordinary book. Perceptively written, beautifully translated and accompanied by wonderful photographs, it brings us close to the heroism and sacrifices of those who risked their lives in the fight against fascism.”

—Paul Preston, author of *The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution and Revenge*

“A beautiful, touching tribute to the everyday heroes who battled so bravely in the fight against fascism.”

—Maxine Peake, actor

“A real treasure that we can't stop exploring.”

—*La Republica*

“Real and very human ... Reliving these lives, today, is more important than ever.”

—*Cazarabet*

“Told with skill, sensitivity and rigor, [...] these are the stories that Jordi Marti-Rueda has been collecting for years. They fought for ideals in a battle against fascism – a global threat that remains to this day.”

—*El Temps*

“An excellent introduction to the world of the International Brigades.”

—*AB Origine*

“Brings us close to the most human face of war.”

—*El Salto*

Brigadistes

Lives for Liberty

Jordi Martí-Rueda

Translated from Catalan by Mary Ann Newman

Foreword by Jordi Borràs

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Foreword

Jordi Borràs

The Baron's vineyard was located at the foot of the Pàndols mountains, right next door to my childhood home. As children, we would play in those vineyards, and the past would always surface among the clumps of earth we threw at each other in our war play. From the compacted earth would emerge scraps of shrapnel, tins of food, or shell casings from the bullets of the war—the real war—that had butchered the region decades before. We barely had to scratch the surface for things to show up, including the bones of nameless soldiers whom no one had come to claim. It was the 1980s and the silence of a never-healed wound still floated over the village. Every so often, when we found a clip loaded with bullets, we would spend hours cleaning the rim of the cartridge by rubbing it over and over with a finger coated in spit. Little by little, the mud encrusted over half a century would vanish and, as if by magic, the year and the letters revealing its origin would appear. By the age of ten, we could already deduce which side any given bullet belonged to. We were thrilled when we found a special one, and everyone would run over to observe it like a treasure and guess at its provenance. The international footprint was patent in that little corner of the Baron's vineyard, where Russian or American bullets might appear, as well as remnants of Italian grenades and scraps of shrapnel from Italian or German mortars. If you were paying attention, and took the time to read some of the engraved stones scattered in different corners of the village, the footprints of those soldiers who spoke strange languages could be seen everywhere. From the gravestone of the Nazi aviator that lay for years in a corner by the *Escoles Velles* (Old Schools), to the plaque in the cemetery in memory of a brigadista from the Lincoln Battalion,

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who had died in combat at only twenty-two. The wound, always the wound. As children, those things led us to imagine war stories and their heroes, many of whom came from all over the world to combat the fascist monster that had used our land as its battlefield and as the training ground of a worldwide conflict that would soon leave Europe in ruins. Our grandparents from the villages of the Pàndols and Cavalls mountains had also been there at the Battle of the Ebre River. We pictured them fighting side by side with those noble and valiant young men who had left everything behind to take on the risks of a distant war.

What you will find in this book is precisely the noble spirit of those men and women who put their bodies in the path of fascist hatred. Many of those brigadistes came to our homeland with nothing to their names, with no other baggage than the impetus of their ideals, crossing Europe by bicycle or the Atlantic by ship, all uncertain as to whether they would return alive from beyond the Pyrenees. It was here where many of them infused words like liberty, solidarity, camaraderie, and anti-fascism with dignity. But they came to know other words, like terror, hatred, and death, as they were inscribed on their very own flesh. Words that mowed down the hopes, paths, and lives of many of those youths who threw themselves into the war against the triple Nazi-Fascist alliance of the troops commanded by Franco, Hitler, and Mussolini.

Brigadistes: Lives for Liberty is a book of literary and photographic portraits, sixty profiles accompanied by photographs that help us form a more precise sense of these characters. Written with impeccable style, these are true, poignant stories, as deeply powerful as the conviction that led their protagonists to take up their rifles in rocky trenches or drive ambulances as they dodged mortars in a country that was not their own. The brevity of the stories allows our imaginations to soar. To stop and take a breath between pages as we absorb these incredible stories, trying to rush beyond the limits of what is written to fill in the stories of lives deserving of a novel, of a widescreen movie, with popcorn in hand and eyes wide open with astonishment.

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These sixty portraits could be sixty volumes of memories of a series of characters who gave their all for freedom.

But eighty years after the end of the Spanish Civil War there are still those who would have us believe that books like the one you hold in your hands are a thing of the past; that the war came to an end, and Franco died, and Nazi-Fascism is nothing but an old memory to fill encyclopedias; and that the wound has long been cauterized, as if by magic, as a result of the transition to democracy sealed by the Pact of 1978. They are the same people who would have us believe that it's better not to muddy the waters, for fear of something like what happened when we picked up the clumps of earth in the Baron's vineyard—buried today under bricks, asphalt, and cement. For with very little effort, the land could regurgitate history, spitting out memories buried in the shape of shrapnel and the bones of soldiers hidden by the fallacy of the Spanish Transition to Democracy. This is why I am so certain that *Brigadistes: Lives for Liberty* speaks not only of the past, but also of an uneasy present that trains a mirror on the shame and silences of some, while reminding us of the danger we court if amnesia takes hold. It is no secret that, if we are not capable of understanding our own history, we will be condemned to repeat it. Let us read, then, because there is no greater vaccination against the virus of fascism than the knowledge of a past that should be more present than ever.

Introduction: Living and Reliving

I have often imagined a first encounter with the enigmatic English captain. A sort of formal introduction to the character. I have read so many stories that my imagination has elaborated, unwittingly, a sort of cinematographic traveling shot following the man's steps for the first time.

It is December and, on the outskirts of the town, amid the fields of La Mancha, the world is divided equally into land and sky—an endless blue in which a glassy sun hangs. To the left and to the right, the dry fields stretch until they merge with the sky. In the foreground, the four stone houses seem to prefer huddling together against the wind to blocking its path.

Accustomed to Irish winters, Frank doesn't seem put out. He hasn't even bothered to zip up his jacket. I slip into place by his side. "Poor Frank," I think. "The great Irishman, the hero of Limerick. A whole life against the British, and here they saddle him with an English captain. An irony of fate if I've ever seen one, hey, Frank? Worthy of a malicious screenwriter."

Frank doesn't notice my presence—neither he nor the handful of Irishmen beside him. They only have eyes for the man before them, far more interesting than me. I, too, look in his direction. It's hard to understand what he's saying because the wind carries his words off. Even so, he cuts a commanding figure. He bears no resemblance to the boys who have landed in this corner of La Mancha from the slums of London, Liverpool, and Dublin. It is not that George Nathan, as this is his name, is wearing more distinguished clothing. He, too, is wearing an old woolen sweater, pants dirty with dust, and worn-out leather shoes. But there is something that sets him apart.

He is tall and lean, with an aristocratic grace. His face is rather long and his nose seigniorial, touched off with a thin moustache, carefully trimmed as if it were a precious jewel. He holds a pipe

in his mouth, which gives him an air of distinction, and when he speaks he accompanies his words with an elegant gesture. As his voice is clipped by the wind, only syllables and fragments of words reach us, but they sound crystalline, enunciated with Shakespearean precision.

“Maybe that’s it,” I think. “Maybe this is why Frank is so riveted.” The contrast between the plainness of the clothing and the majestic air of the man wearing them. “A man of refinement dressed in garments that do not befit him. A romantic gentleman whom the novelist has placed in the wrong scene.”

Frank is still scrutinizing George Nathan’s face, his expressions, his speech, as if he wanted to decipher him. Beyond the fields framing the English captain, the four stone houses cower on the ground and the bell tower soars too high for so little a village.

And when the scene comes to an end, I confess that I do not know if the first encounter between these two personalities actually went like that. The man Frank Ryan regarded, or observed in a memory composed of fragments, was a character fit for a novel.

When the day to enter into combat arrived, his appearance had undergone a deep change. The London, Liverpool, and Dublin boys fell silent. He stood before them decked out in the uniform of the British Army, wearing an officer’s high boots, shined to a brilliant finish. A whistle graced his lips and he brandished an old-fashioned lord’s walking stick, as if he were a captain in an ancient war. His whole life had groomed him for this day.

From that moment on, each of George Nathan’s gestures would enhance this image. He walked through enemy fire as a romantic hero or a corsair from an Emilio Salgari novel might do. Tall and erect, indifferent to bullets, he led attacks and called his men to retreat to the sound of his whistle, mocking the enemy and cracking jokes to undo the thundering of the bombs. His temerity became the stuff of legend and was a balm to the boys who found themselves under fire for the first time. True to

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English custom, at lunch or teatime, he would sit down to a table set with clean linens even as mortar fire rained down.

No one knew much about him. They all knew he wasn't a communist, and he seemed to have no more ideology than the desire to combat fascism. Everyone knew he was homosexual and even though in the 1930s that was practically a crime, when it came to George Nathan, it didn't seem to matter to anyone. Fanciful rumors circulated about his past life and his reasons for going to war. It was said that he had served in Her Majesty's Guard, that he had refused to obey the order to open fire on British strikers, that he had torn up his uniform, that he had embarked for America, that he had lived like a vagabond, that he had become an impoverished laborer.

The biggest secret, though, exploded in the first days of 1937, when a grim rumor surfaced. It was said that, years before, during the Irish War of Independence, Nathan had formed part of an irregular company, organized by the British Government, which had fought the IRA activists and the population that sheltered them. The company in question were the Black and Tans, who had left a fateful memory in Irish homes everywhere.

The news almost caused an Irish revolt at the International Brigades base, and the old English captain was finally obliged to address the issue before an assembly of Irishmen. As for what was said, we have only the recollection of one of the men present. George Nathan admitted that he had served in the intelligence unit in the county of Limerick, the land of Frank Ryan. He also told them that he had matured, that they had all matured, and that now they were facing a common enemy who had to be defeated. Some of the Irish soldiers did not want to fight under the orders of someone who had been their parents' worst enemy in the past. Others, however, accepted his words; these were the men who, not incidentally, had come to know him under fire. The ones who had shared with him the experience of dodging bullets and mortar shells on the Jaén and Madrid fronts. And they had concluded that, if they had to confront the mechanized

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armies of Franco, Hitler, and Mussolini, the best way to do it was by that captain's side.

This is surely the greatest of the paradoxes associated with Nathan. Both that from their very first battles he had learned to admire the daring of the Irish soldiers; and that they, former IRA combatants, had come to regard him with warmth and affection.

Frank Ryan and George Nathan: impossible to find two more antithetical characters in those spheres. But the war of 1936 is fertile ground for irony because it attracted forty thousand souls from every continent, forty thousand stories, and forty thousand sensibilities, and placed them all in the same trench. Most of them formed part of the International Brigades; others, the Antifascist Militias or other units of the Republican army.

What you have here is a few of those stories gathered under the title "Brigadistes," even if not every protagonist belonged to the International Brigades. Sixty flashes of light, sixty brushstrokes, conjoined by one sole need and desire: to fight fascism and defeat it before it was too late. And today it is imperative to relive them.



**The Bravest Woman
in Barcelona**

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Fanny Schoonheydt couldn't understand how she had not been killed on the very first day. The army had spread through the streets of Barcelona and the city had hurled itself full bore upon the soldiers. She had not had time to change her clothes for the event. The *coup d'état* had surprised her wearing a yellow blouse and as the people stormed the barracks she felt her whole person was a luminous target. She concluded that the sight of a blonde girl wearing a yellow blouse scaling the roofs of the barracks must have made such an impression on the soldiers that they hadn't had time to take aim and fire.

Fanny had had a job on a Rotterdam daily newspaper, but she had not managed to realize her dream of becoming part of the editorial staff, a stronghold reserved for men. In the end, she had left her native Holland, which seemed flat and boring to her, and taken up residence in Barcelona, the least boring city in Europe, the refuge of Germans who had fled Nazism and a bubbling cultural cauldron.

A short time after the coup, she left for the Aragon front. The International Brigades didn't yet exist, but she didn't even consider waiting. She got her hands on a machine gun and didn't let go of it until she was wounded. The press showered praise on her. They christened her the machine gun queen and the bravest woman in Barcelona, and one journalist described her eyes as the reflection of a Nordic lake. "Foolishness," she replied. She hated to talk about herself or to be talked about, even more so if it was to make metaphors about her eyes. One of the people who came to know her was Marina Ginestà. She was the *miliciiana*, the militiawoman, who was immortalized in an iconic photograph from the first days of the war in revolutionary Barcelona: a young woman on a rooftop with the city at her feet, a rifle hanging from her shoulder and a shock of hair ruffled by the breeze, smiling for the camera. Maria Ginestà said of Fanny that it was hard not to look at her.¹ Because she was tall and blonde. And she smoked cigarettes. And because she did it unselfconsciously, at a time when in Barcelona no woman dared to light up a cigarette in public.



Painter and Milicianiana

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In a letter to a friend, Felicia Browne wrote to say that painting and sculpture were her life, but that she would abandon them if a greater cause demanded it. And that is what she did. A short time before the fascist coup d'état, she traveled from England to Barcelona to experience the People's Olympiad from close up. What she experienced instead was the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War and fighting in the streets. They didn't accept her in the medical corps, so she showed up in the offices of the Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya (PSUC—the Catalan Communist Party) to sign up for the militia. True to her word, she went straight to the Aragon front, carrying paper and charcoal pencils in her knapsack, and a rifle on her back.

It was not the first time she had faced fascism. Felicia had been born into a well-to-do family on the outskirts of London and had studied at a good art school. But later, while studying sculpture in Germany, uneasiness had filtered into the classrooms. She had seen how fascism was growing and slipping through the cracks, how the Hitler Youth showed off their uniforms and the voice of Hitler spread throughout the country. That was when she turned her gaze from plaster and stone sculptures and joined the first struggles against the Nazis on the streets of Berlin.

Near Tardienta, a month after the war broke out, she tried to help a wounded Italian friend. Both of them died under machine gun fire. A short time later, the British press announced the death of a young English woman, the first person from Great Britain to die in the war. Her fellow soldiers salvaged the drawings she had done in the weeks she spent in Barcelona and on the front. They were portraits of militiamen and women, and Aragonese peasants, figures with the vitality of the swift line of an ephemeral draft. If she had not stopped to help her Italian friend, perhaps they would have come to be paintings, on the day that art once again took up its rightful place in the life of Felicia Browne.