

A Short Review of the German Literature about the Spanish War



The German Writer Willi Bredel,
Captain of the Thaelmann Battalion, 1937

Sketch written by Herbert Schneider
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The most famous literature about the Spanish War for the political left was provided for the political left by English, American or French writers like Ernest Hemingway's „For whom the bell tolls“, Orwell's „Homage on Catalonia“, Malraux's „L'Espoir“ and Bernanos' „Les Grands Cimetières sous la Lune“. Such works with their international significance don't exist in the German culture although it exists a very important number of left wing but also bourgeois literature about the Spanish War. Two writers can be named as symbols for wide engagement of German writers on these themes: Bertolt Brecht and his play „The guns of Mrs. Carrar“ and the journalistic engagement of famous Thomas and Heinrich Mann for the Spanish Republic.

The German left wing and most of the liberal orientated writers emigrated after the takeover of the nazis. The Spanish War was for them a signal for the liberation of Germany. So the whole German emigration was engaged for the spanish people.

The main item was the description of the combat of the Spanish People and their confederates. So novels and short stories are the main instruments to express this item and a lot of works have a documentary character. Many works are journalistic and eyewitness accounts but on the other side many novels are very skillful.

A lot of communist German writers fought in the International Brigades, for example Willi Bredel, Alfred Kantorowicz, Bodo Uhse, Eduard Claudius, Ludwig Renn, Hans Marchwitza, Hanns Maaßen, Gustav Regler, Theodor Balk and others. During the war and in the years after the war they produced a lot of short stories and novels but also reports and diaries. They wrote during or some years after the war about their adventures and so these works are influenced by their personal impressions and often have a documentary character. But the view of the whole situation in Spain like Hemingway did it in his novel „For whom the bell tolls“ isn't presented in these novels. On the one hand you can get to know very directly the concrete situation at the front, on the other hand these novels have a singular view of the Spanish situation because they describe their personal experience. Often these novels have a character like a report. Only the book by Gustav Regler was translated into English and was published in 1940 under the title „The Great Crusade“. Other productions like Bredel's „Encounters near the Ebro“ or Claudius' „Green olives and naked hills“ have never been published in an English translation. Many writers who fought in the International Brigades wrote together with other fighters, always non-professional writers, the story about their regiment. These collective works are very interesting, because they give impressions about the war which you can't find in a scientific presentation and this kind of literature was immediate cultural mobilization. A famous example is compiled by Alfred Kantorowicz and named „Tschapaiew. The battalion of 21 nations“, another one is the work of Willi Bredel about the 11th International Brigade. Many writers worked in Spain for army newspapers or organized the political instruction of the fighters. These works often got lost. After the war, ex-members of the International Brigades wrote again about the Spanish war but then they focussed more on things behind the front, like Gustav Regler's „Juanita“ and Walter Gorrish's „I thirst“. Also some autobiographies were published, for example Gustav Regler's „Ear of the Malchus“ or Theodor Balk's „Whom don't strike the bullet ahead of Madrid“. A platform for these writers was the review „The Word“. The Word was one of the significant literary reviews of the German emigration published in Moscow. During the Spanish War, in this review were published more than one hundred novels, reports and poems about the Spanish War. But the editorial staff discussed very controversially particularly the writings, which often came unreflected directly from the front. In contrast to the writers from the front, communists artist like Franz Carl Weiskopf, Maria Arnold, Alfred Kurella, Friedrich Wolf who never visited Spain during the war wrote short stories and poems about the war in a more skillful way.

Many German writers, often communists, participated in the II. International Congress of Writers to defend the culture in 1937. Some of them came directly from the front, like Ludwig Renn or Hans Kahle, for others like Willi Bredel the Spanish visit was the trigger to join the International Brigades. Other German participants were Erich Weinert, Bertolt Brecht, Anna Seghers, Egon Erwin Kisch, Heinrich Mann, Kurt Stern, Bodo Uhse and Erich Weinert.

Some German writers and journalists like Carl Einstein, the Swiss Paul Thalman or Augustin Souchy were engaged for the Spanish anarchists and fought in anarchist militias. Einstein wrote about the Durruti column, Souchy and Thalman about the Spanish War and the anarchist revolution and collectivization.

Bourgeois writers, mostly non-fighters, have a different view of the Spanish War than their fighting colleagues. The bourgeois writers often showed the daily civil life behind the front and the impact of the war on the civil life, for example the air raid of Guernica in the novel of Hermann Kesten „Children of Guernica“ or the novel of Karl Otten „Torquemadas Shadow“, in which he described the spontaneous resistance of the poor on the island Majorca after the fascist coup d'etat. The conservative writer Franz Werfel wrote a satirical short story „Terrible legend of the crafty rogue“ which is an allusion to Franco. Another conservative orientated writer, Albert Vigoleis Thelen, wrote in his autobiography in a satirical style his escape from Majorca. Also communist writers who didn't fight in the International Brigades have a different view than their fighting colleagues. A good example is the communist writer Rudolf Leonhard, who visited Spain during the war and composed a lot of short stories.

Poems were provided by Erich Weinert and Ludwig Detsinyi who changed his name later into David Martin, Stefan Heym and Erich Arendt. A famous interpreter was the singer Ernst Busch. Poems are predominantly battle-songs which aim to raise combat morale and to encourage the soldiers. They became very popular because they were easy to understand and gave fellow-combatants the opportunity to relate to the subjects which were addressed. Everyday vocabulary, uncomplicated syntactical forms and a simplicity of composition intensify the impact of a poetry written for immediate use. Another important feature of the literature of the Spanish War becomes evident in the elegies. The traumatic experience of fascist air-raids and the death of fellow-combatants constitute the main subjects. An exception are the poems of Erich Arendt depicting a new, impressive world consisting of elements of Spanish history, landscape and revolutionary circumstances.

You don't find much plays about the Spanish War in German. Except the mentioned play of Bertolt Brecht, you find plays from Ludwig Renn (My mule, my wife and my goat), Friedrich Wolf (The Newa is coming), Willy Bredel (Jacinta), in some passages of „Margarethe Biswanger“ from Gustav Wangenheim and in some passages of Brecht's play „Fear and miserable of the Third Reich“.

A very important part of literature about the Spanish War is the journalistic work of writers or famous journalists like Egon Erwin Kisch, whose works have the character of literature, or of famous writers like the oldest children of Thomas Mann, Erika and Klaus, who visited Spain in the mid of 1938 and published a report in the review „The Word“. Also very interesting are the documentations written by Ernst Toller or Theodor Balk.

Another kind of literature wanted to enlighten about the political situation in Spain during the war. Franz Spielhagen (pseudonym of Otto Katz) „Spys and conspirators in Spain“, Arthur Koestler „Human sacrifice“ or Peter Merin „Spain between death and birth“, also the investigation of the sociologist Franz Borkenau, published in English with the title „The Spanish Cockpit“.

Only a few books for young people about the Spanish War exist in German. An important example was written by Ruth Rewald „Four Spanish boys“ It narrated the true story of four boys who flee to the XIII. International Brigades during their offensive in spring of 1937.

Also, there is a lot of literature in which the Spanish War plays a limited role. A good example is the novel „The volcano“ written by Klaus Mann, who described the situation during the exile of many German artists during the thirties. An important part of this novel described the dangerous situation for German emigrants during the fascist coup d'etat on the island Majorca. Many German emigrants were surrendered by the fascist government to the German nazis. After the war Willi Bredel integrated the Spanish War in his novel „The grandsons“, which is the third part of a trilogy about the political development of the German proletariat. He described in this novel his own situation as a commissioner in the XI. International Brigade. Another example is Anna Seghers „The big journey of Agathe Schweigert“. In the German literature exist some books in which the Spanish engagement of a protagonist is a special part of his socialization and a condition for his political orientation, for example in books of Hermann Kant like „The auditorium“ or „Okarina“ and Stephan Hermlin with „Sunset light“. Stephan Hermlin also published biographies with the title „The first line“ about German resistance fighters with three biographies about freedom fighters.

A particular item is the novel „We are utopia“ written by the Christian Stefan Anders who wrote it in 1943 when he lived in fascist Italy in the so-called inner emigration. The novel described a priest who is engaged for the republican army and became a prisoner of war. He has the possibility to kill the fascist commander and to save all the other prisoners but his Christian consciousness hindered him. The next day, he and his comrades were executed. This novel is a good example for the bourgeois insecurity with fascist matter.

About the different attempts of anti-fashist reconquest exist two publicatons, which were published in the German Democratic Republic: Hans Maaßen „The mass of Barcelo“ in which the fight of the Spanish people's Army in 1944 is described and Axel Frelau „Guerrillas in the mountains of Aragon“, which shows the fight of the spanish guerrillas in the late 40s. In Western Germany, after the Second World War books were published about the Spanish War but with a more individual view on the war. Books from Walter Lenz „Pito“, Rudolf Caltofen „Juanita“ or Imma von Bodmershof „The shave“ described with a more pessimistic view the possibility to change society like the left tried it in Spain. Even Frederik Hetmann „Bring the snow through the fire“ denied the difference between the left and the fascists. Sometimes during the sixties, when the politicization of the western German society started again after the prohibition of the Communist Party of Germany, writers like Peter Weiss and his book „Aesthetic of resistance“, Hans Magnus Enzensberger's „The short summer of anarchy“, Peter Härtling's „The spanish soldier or find and invent“ or the Austrian Erich Hackl who wrote about Austrian freedom fighters brought back the consciousness about the emancipatory character of the Spanish resistance against the fascist coup.

Altogether, the diversity of the antifascist literature about the Spanish War is clear. But nobody wrote an epic novel in which all the issues about the war were integrated. In German literature, the issues about the Spanish War are separated in many novels and short stories.



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