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Wars, languages and the role(s) of interpreters

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Introduction

In a paper I wrote some time ago (Baigorri 2003), I reflected on the idea that wars and other social cataclysms in the 20th century were a source of demand and supply of interpreters, and I gave a number of examples to illustrate this point. In my professional life I have met many interpreters, including some from the Nuremberg trials, who arrived at the trade by chance, because they had a knowledge of the languages required at the right place and at the right time. Their language acquisition process was often motivated by previous social and political events that had affected their lives. For instance, many of the interpreters who had Russian as one of their languages in Nuremberg or in the early days of the United Nations were born in Russia around the time of the Soviet Revolution and the subsequent civil war, left the country with their parents and ended up in Berlin or in Paris, among other places. They grew up as polyglots in their own homes and, thus, could provide linguistic services during the Second World War (WWII) and its aftermath. During the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) several thousands of children were sent abroad by their parents in order to protect them from the horrors of the bombings. Most of them reunited with their parents after the war ended, often after witnessing the outbreak of the Second World War, but around 3,000 of those children stayed in the Soviet Union, unable to return due to the world conflagration and the severance of contacts between the USSR and Franco's Spain. They became the *Hispano-Soviet* interpreters, as they were called, who helped Soviet advisers, engineers and armed forces in their missions to Fidel Castro's Cuba after the 1959 revolution. They had preserved their mastery of Spanish because they had been accompanied by Spanish tutors when they left Spain, and they had learned Russian from secondary school onwards. Many other interpreters acquired their languages as a result of a forced displacement of their families for political reasons, be it the Nazi *Anschluss* of Austria, or a military coup in Uruguay or in Chile... These and other examples led me to conclude that wars have been and –unfortunately– continue to be schools of interpreters.

Most of those who played the role(s) of interpreters during conflicts or immediately after, were called to carry out their interpreting duties on the basis of their functional bilingualism and trained on-the-job, giving up their linguistic activity once the war and its aftermath were over. Their sociological and personal situations differed widely, but their condition of go-betweens made them often unwanted for both warring parties. In this paper I will refer to some of the roles played by interpreters at different stages in war: the preparatory process, the war operations and the post-conflict period. Examples will be taken from, among others, the Spanish Civil War, the two World Wars, the Korean War and the Cold War.

The following anecdote told by Vernon Walters in his memoirs explains the way in which he –then a lieutenant– suddenly became an interpreter of a language he did not command, driven by the sole motivation of pressure from above (a colonel):

[April 1943] (...) We were taking three groups of Portuguese officers on an extensive visit in order to impress them with the growing power and determination of the United States and to convince them we would certainly win the war. (...) Colonel Leonard told me he wanted me there the following morning at nine o'clock ready to take this group around. I said to him that I thought there must be some misunderstanding since I did not speak Portuguese. He replied, "No, but you speak Spanish, French, Italian and all of that stuff, and you'll certainly understand what they are saying." I protested and said, "Colonel, I love to hear Carmen Miranda's songs, but I cannot understand what the words mean. I don't understand Portuguese." He then said, "Lieutenant, there is a misunderstanding. You seem to be under the impression that I am *inviting* you to be here tomorrow morning at nine o'clock. I am not. It's an order. See that you are here, and see that you are speaking Portuguese." (...) (Walters 1978: 61)

He was not the only one to be engaged for the task of interpreting at times of war. Here are the comments of someone who had to act as military interpreter in the Allied Control Authority with no previous professional training and without even knowing the situation in which he was called to interpret.

[July 30, 1945] (...) Forty-five minutes later I arrived at the American headquarters to learn that I was to be General Eisenhower's French interpreter at the first meeting of the Allied Control Council. The latter was and remains the top organization of the Allied Control Authority, which was created by the Potsdam Conference. The ACA was to become the *de facto* German government.

Thus I, who had never before been an interpreter except informally between American and French friends who did not understand one another, found myself thrust into the interpreter's role at a meeting of one the most important international political experiments ever attempted. Was I frightened? Not very much. On the other hand, I dare say, I had been so well anesthetized by my morning's experience that I was incapable of reacting keenly to new surprises. On the other hand I felt confident that I should be able to meet the demands of the approaching meeting, although I had not the slightest notion as to the agenda. Had I not studied and taught French for some ten years? Had I not spent several months in France? Had I not been told many times:

“Mais, monsieur, vous parlez très bien le français; à vrai dire, vous parlez *presque* comme un français.” The French are a very courteous people, you know. Certainly, in spite of my absolute ignorance of what was to be discussed, I felt that I would get along somehow.

I did get along somehow, but I assure you that it was not without considerable trouble. (...) (Archie 1949: 250)

Lastly, Richard Sonnenfeldt, who became chief interpreter for the American interrogators of Nazi leaders, illustrates his sudden metamorphosis in the army thanks to his potential linguistic skills.

Now just twenty-two, by a combination of natural gifts, hard work to acquire an American accent, and a series of chance events, I had been spotted as a bilingual soldier in the exact right place and moment. I was being plucked from utter anonymity as a motor pool private to be thrust onto the stage of postwar history: the trials of the Nazis. (Sonnenfeldt, 2006: 2-3)

These three quotations confirm the ordinary perception by would-be users of interpreters that anyone who knows the two languages involved –something those users can certify only for the language they share with prospective interpreters, but this is largely overlooked– or even a cognate language if need be, they are immediately qualified to interpret or translate between them. As if languages were abstract concepts and self-contained repositories that you command entirely and perfectly, irrespective of your educational background, your origin (and that of your interlocutors), or the subject you are dealing with, and as if the professional skills necessary to perform the task (code of ethics, moral stature, neutrality, self-confidence, etc.) were innate. These ideas differ from the rules and norms that regulate the professional functioning of translation and interpreting as we know it. We will see how military interpreters operated according to the best of their knowledge, which was not always adequate to meet current professional standards. This leads to the controversial issue of quality and user satisfaction –two separate concepts which often have blurred contours– but that goes beyond the aim of this article. The instruction received by Walters falls into the category of a military order which has to be obeyed on the basis of the chain of command, not on the logic or intrinsic value of the actual duty to be performed. Would the same colonel have ordered, with the same authority, a mobilised nurse to practice surgery on a severely wounded soldier? What if the soldier were the colonel’s son? Knowledge of languages by the military should be considered as important as the “development of a weapon, as important as the training of a man to fight in hand-to-

hand combat”, as American Congressman Leon Panetta put it in 1981.¹ That statement was made several decades –and quite a few American military missions and wars– after the moment in the early 1940s when the military branch realised how important it was to have language experts in their ranks.

It seems there are some particular features that can be attributed to military interpretation tasks. First of all, the military hierarchical chain of command can interfere in the appropriate performance of a professional duty, such as interpreting. When national security and the lives of many people are at risk, the loyalty test is sacred and cannot always be taken for granted. This is particularly delicate for interpreters working in the military intelligence service, but also for those who were recruited among groups of people who could be perceived as potential enemies. Suffice to mention the case of Japanese-Americans who were conscripted to perform linguistic duties directly from the detention compounds. These circumstances entail an element of additional stress and perhaps also an increased amount of self-censorship when translating.

Secondly, the reliance that high-rank officials may have on lower-rank personnel *specialised* in languages may bring with it a reversion of hierarchy (including that of age, gender and social class). Sonnenfeldt gave up his blue-collar duties in the truck pool to rub shoulders with generals and officers, with whom he was soon on first-name terms.² Something unimaginable in the normal circumstances of a military career. By the way, military interpreters were given military ranks and uniforms and they often had distinctive symbols to identify their corps. The hierarchical asymmetry among ranks was also subverted when encounters with enemy forces took place. Sonnenfeldt mentions an example in which he did not abide by German military practice when he participated in the detention of a group of Germans, including a high-ranking officer of the Nazi army and the latter complained of the fact that his status was not being respected when he was put in a truck with rank-and-file soldiers. Only the interpreter’s thirst for revenge for the atrocities the Nazis had perpetrated can explain his failure to perform his cultural brokerage abilities in this case, where he trespassed the non-

¹ ‘Language Skills Said to Dwindle in Armed Services’, *The New York Times*, January 4, 1981, quoted by Müller 1981: 368.

² Sonnenfeldt’s itinerary seems to be the opposite to the one observed by Müller (1981: 365): language specialists in units with few linguistic needs “often become “fifth wheels” or general-purpose “jeep washers.”” It seems rather a matter of scarcity of “expert” resources due to specific circumstances.

intervention and neutrality line and perhaps also the rules applicable to prisoners of war. This asymmetry, quite unthinkable except in war situations, can also be observed in photograph no 1 in which a British captain is talking with less martial demeanour than that shown by his interlocutor, a Japanese admiral.³ The little we can see of the interpreter in the photo shows that he surely stands in presence of his principals, as a result of his perceived lower position and, possibly, of his Japanese courtesy customs.

And thirdly, military interpreters were called to work at times of war in a great variety of situations which ranged from intelligence and counter intelligence activities (carried out from relatively comfortable military intelligence centres, sometimes located at the home front) to combat areas, including remote outposts and behind-the-enemy-line zones, where their services may have varied from regular liaison with allied troops to logistical dealings with local civil populations (photo no 2),⁴ and from interrogation of war prisoners to surrender of enemy units (photo no 3).⁵ The variable of the added stress of risking their lives should always be taken into account when considering their performance.

³ To view the photographs mentioned in this article, please refer to the Imperial War Museum links that are quoted in the footnotes, where the description of the contents of each item can be found. Photo 1: ITEM REFERENCE : SE 5174 (4 October 1945). Captain Scott-Bell DSO of the Royal Navy speaks with Japanese Admiral Kondo through an interpreter after the landing of Allied occupation forces at Saigon.

http://www.iwmcollections.org.uk/dbtw-wpd/exec/dbtwpub.dll?AC=GET_RECORD&XC=/dbtw-wpd/exec/dbtwpub.dll&BU=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.iwmcollections.org.uk%2FqryMain.php&TN=Unca t&SN=AUTO17294&SE=9871&RN=17&MR=25&TR=0&TX=1000&ES=0&CS=1&XP=&RF=allResults&EF=&DF=allDetails&RL=0&EL=0&DL=0&NP=1&ID=&MF=WPENGMSG.INI&MQ=&TI=0&DT=&ST=0&IR=177144&NR=0&NB=0&SV=0&BG=0&FG=0&QS=

⁴ Photo 2: Imperial War Museum photo collection. ITEM REFERENCE: CA 13 (December 1943). An RAF Sergeant interpreter discusses domestic business with Portuguese women who have undertaken laundry work for RAF personnel in the tented encampment at Lagens.

Link: http://www.iwmcollections.org.uk/dbtw-wpd/exec/dbtwpub.dll?AC=GET_RECORD&XC=/dbtw-wpd/exec/dbtwpub.dll&BU=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.iwmcollections.org.uk%2FqryMain.php&TN=Unca t&SN=AUTO17294&SE=9871&RN=15&MR=25&TR=0&TX=1000&ES=0&CS=1&XP=&RF=allResults&EF=&DF=allDetails&RL=0&EL=0&DL=0&NP=1&ID=&MF=WPENGMSG.INI&MQ=&TI=0&DT=&ST=0&IR=176306&NR=0&NB=0&SV=0&BG=0&FG=0&QS=

⁵ Photo 3: Imperial War Museum collection. ITEM NAME: MH 31610 (29 June 1951) A Korean interpreter for the Royal Canadian Regiment searches a North Korean prisoner just brought in by a patrol. Link: http://www.iwmcollections.org.uk/dbtw-wpd/exec/dbtwpub.dll?AC=GET_RECORD&XC=/dbtw-wpd/exec/dbtwpub.dll&BU=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.iwmcollections.org.uk%2FqryMain.php&TN=Unca t&SN=AUTO17294&SE=9871&RN=8&MR=25&TR=0&TX=1000&ES=0&CS=1&XP=&RF=allResults&EF=&DF=allDetails&RL=0&EL=0&DL=0&NP=1&ID=&MF=WPENGMSG.INI&MQ=&TI=0&DT=&ST=0&IR=158129&NR=0&NB=0&SV=0&BG=0&FG=0&QS=

Wars, languages and interpreters

Languages can be used as weapons and they certainly also go to war in conflicts where combatants cannot understand each other or cannot understand the people they make contact with, for example, local civilians. People who participate in wars as interpreters respond to the rules of supply and demand. They are rarely professional interpreters and end up playing that role by chance, simply because they have a functional knowledge of the languages involved. When I say functional knowledge I mean that they are able to keep open, *tant bien que mal*, the communication channel. In an overwhelming majority of cases, the day before they started interpreting they were not interpreters, translators or linguists. They had their civil job or their occupation in the military or elsewhere and they happened to possess a certain command of the demanded foreign language, which they had acquired for a variety of reasons (seldom learned as an academic subject). Most of the times they accept the new functions either because they cannot reject it, for reasons of the chain in the military command, or because it means an improvement in their military or social status and, often, better conditions of work and pay.

In a quick overview of the different settings in which interpreters are called to participate in war situations, I will present very broadly different stages of the course of action. The *preparatory process* of war requires interpreters in diplomacy and intelligence, and the recruitment of interpreters for these functions is done through selection, training and mobilisation. *Warfare* entails many complex arrangements and operations on land, at sea and in the air. Each of them can have different proportions of interpreting services, but, as a general rule, any campaign may require communications among military personnel who speak different languages (this is common in international conflicts), interactions with local civilians, propaganda activities (so-called psychological warfare), contact with prisoners of war, control of occupied territories, evacuation of non combatants, etc. The official *end of hostilities* requires interpreters to work in peace negotiations, in the management of mass population movements, the demobilisation, rehabilitation and reintegration of combatants in civilian life, the resistance or the liberation movements, etc. After the establishment of peace, there is a need for translation and interpreting services for the armistice negotiation and signing.

In some cases, occupation of territories ensues, with the sequel of reparations. And, finally, there is the *settlement of responsibilities* in military tribunals.

Without trying to be exhaustive, I will present examples of cases in which some of these interpreting situations took place. The development of events makes it difficult to make a clear distinction among different stages in wars.

Preparatory stage

If “war is only the extension of diplomacy by other means”, as Clausewitz said, it seems clear that diplomatic negotiations (even between two different warring parties in internal conflicts) usually precede the outbreak of hostilities. Ministries of Foreign Affairs use professional interpreters in their dealings with other counterparts. Those interpreters, staff or free-lance, have to pass a “loyalty test” before being employed. Loyalty applies both to their principals and to the transfer between languages. In diplomatic negotiations it is essential to trust the interpreter, the only person at the negotiation table who understands the two languages and cultures. When Churchill was visiting Stalin at the Kremlin, at a certain moment he needed to go to the restroom, obviously on his own. His interpreter, Birse, waited in the meeting room answering Stalin’s questions on how he had learned Russian, etc. When Churchill returned and saw them speaking he looked perturbed and Birse immediately reassured him with an explanation of the contents of his conversation with Stalin (Birse 1967: 104). A few years later, with the Cold War developing at full steam, George Sherry, a UN interpreter who was personally in line with the anticommunist Western positions, was accused by radio listeners of being a Soviet agent because of his vehement rendition of Vishinsky’s bombastic speeches against Western capitalism at the United Nations (Mehta 1962: 128). The fact of being faithful to the contents and to the tone of the original speech is what made him suspect of being “one of them”.⁶

⁶ Trust –or a clear alignment with the dominant ideology– was a key factor in the recruitment of interpreters for negotiations throughout the period of the Cold War (Baigorri-Jalón & Fernández-Sánchez, 2010). And it was not a trivial issue, particularly in historical episodes such as the period of McCarthyism. The issue of faithfulness to the principal is the subject of an ongoing debate on whether interpreters should act from within or from between (see for instance De Manuel et al. 2004, Baker 2006, Pöchhacker 2006, Baigorri 2007, Inghilleri & Harding (eds.) 2010).

Even though war has been the rule rather than the exception throughout the history of humankind, there always seems to be a sense of surprise when hostilities erupt and a frantic search for translators and interpreters has to be launched.⁷ We have all read articles in the press on how the demand for Arabic-speaking personnel skyrocketed in the United States *after* the beginning of the successive wars in the Gulf and Iraq, as if the US/Allied armed forces did not know beforehand that Arabic was the language spoken in that part of the world. This may confirm the idea that wars and other social cataclysms trigger the demand and supply of interpreters and other language experts. States with a well developed foreign service have professional interpreters for their diplomatic relations (Roland 1982), and they also have linguistic experts in their intelligence service, but the moment the war starts those services are utterly inadequate. Governments in need resort to anyone who masters the languages –even those perceived as enemies–, as well as to the initiation of language teaching programmes, but the immediate war needs may force them to cut or stop that training effort.

In the scramble for scarce language resources, there is an understandable penchant for hiring local personnel who have at least minimal facility in English. In Korea, we made use of 1,800 Korean Army officer-interpreters and numerous enlisted personnel and civilians. Of 228 Korean civilians working for/ the U.S. Eighth Army in June, 1953, 100 were subject to induction into the Korean Army. (Müller, 1984: 86-87)

The idea of the scarcity of language resources, as pointed out by Müller, has to do with the exchange value of language as a commodity that can be sold and bought. Its value would appear to depend on supply and demand. There is, however, an important modifier to normal market laws.⁸ In times of war, armed forces are invested with exceptional powers, which can be used to alter the normal trade relationships between seller and buyer. The examples of mobilisation of persons with linguistic skills goes from a standard announcement of the needs and a selection process to the specific training for military purposes and to the use for the war effort of forcibly interned potential enemies with the right linguistic skills.

⁷ Beach (2008) refers to the mobilisation of educated British civilians to use them as interpreters and intelligence experts (over 300 hundred in the British Expeditionary Corps) in World War I.

⁸ As an example of this, I can mention document Gijón K, C. 77, exp. 3, F. 1524 located at the Spanish *Centro Nacional de la Memoria Histórica*, in Salamanca, which describes the case of a young French medical doctor, who volunteered for the Republican government. The document transcribes the deposition of the said doctor in an interrogation in which he is asked not about his practise of the medical profession but about his interpreting activity from Russian.

This process can be illustrated with the case of the United States before and during World War II (WWII).⁹ Foreign language teaching had been neglected for many years in the United States (Girouard 1980).¹⁰

In 1944, there was a clear awareness of the importance for the armed forces of learning foreign languages:

Foreign languages are playing an important part in helping to win the war, and will play an even greater part in helping to establish the peace. According to army reports, one million soldiers have learned, as part of their army experience, a little of one or more foreign languages. (Lindquist 1944: 289)¹¹

And training programmes were established by the different branches of the US armed forces in a great number of academic institutions.

(...) the [US] Army Specialized (formerly ‘Specialist’) Training Program (ASTP) established approximately 500 intensive speaking courses in over 30 languages in fifty-five United States universities between April 1943 and April 1944, when the program was suddenly abandoned, owing to combat personnel needs. (Velleman 2008: 385)¹²

The saying “Keep your friends close and your enemies even closer” is attributed to Sun Tzu in *The Art of War*. The example of internment camps for potential enemies in Britain, Canada or in the United States during WWII is a clear application of that principle. Some 600,000 Italians, 300,000 Germans and 100,000 Japanese were registered as enemy aliens in the United States in over fifty detention and internment facilities in the US.¹³ Testimonies abound on the use made by the Allied armed forces

⁹ Moves to cover language needs during the Second World War were also made by other countries. For instance, Cherednikova (2008) refers to the effort made by the Red Army, which found itself with a huge shortage of interpreters in its ranks, to train 4,500 military interpreters throughout WWII.

¹⁰ Withington (1942: 63) stated: “We have always felt far away from nations which speak another tongue and have encouraged them (if they wish to communicate with us) to learn our language. We have never realized how much such isolationism handicaps us.”

¹¹ With the war effort new needs for bilingual or multilingual experts were felt: “...everyone recognized that the idea was worthwhile, imperative, important for winning the war, for collaboration with the civilian population of occupied territories, of enemy countries, and our allies, and for the securing of a lasting peace.” (Brandt 1944: 74-75). Hempel and Mueller (1959: 62) refer to the creation of the US Army Language School that “in October 1941, just prior to Pearl Harbor, and was then known as the Military Intelligence Service Language School”. Takeda (2007b: 14) also mentions this US “military intelligence training programme for personnel with Japanese language skills in preparation for an anticipated war with Japan.”

¹² Details of how courses were organised have been described, among others, by the Metropolitan Chapter of the American Association of Teachers of German (1942), Gordon (1943) and Clements (1945).

¹³ The Wartime Treatment Study Act is still pending of approval (2009) by the full United States Congress, due to the opposition of some Republicans on the Senate Judiciary Committee. (...)The bill addresses the World War II incarceration of thousands of German-Americans and Italian-Americans, many not released until several years after the conclusion of the war. (...) According to the “findings,”

of the linguistic skills of many of those prisoners when the demand for those services grew.

In the spring of 1941, a few alert Army intelligence officers realized that, if war came, the Army would need Japanese language interpreters and translators. After much delay, Lieut. Col. John Weckerling and Capt. Kai Rasmussen won approval to start a small school for training persons with some background in Japanese. On November 1, 1941, the school opened at Crissy Field in San Francisco with four Nisei instructors and 60 students, 58 of whom were Japanese Americans. The attack on Pearl Harbor confirmed the value of the program. During the spring of 1942, while evacuation was proceeding, the school was enlarged and transferred to Camp Savage in Minnesota (...)

The school, now renamed the Military Intelligence Service Language School (MISLS) and officially part of the War Department, began its first class at Camp Savage in June 1942 with 200 students. By the end of 1942, more than 100 Nisei had left for the Pacific. By Fall 1944, over 1,600 had graduated. When the school closed in 1946, after being moved once more to Fort Snelling, Minnesota, it had trained 6,000 men. Of these, 3,700 served in combat areas before the Japanese surrender. Ironically, the often-mistrusted Kibei –Japanese Americans who had received formal education in Japan– proved most qualified for the interpreter's task; most Nisei had too little facility with Japanese to be useful. (Justice Denied 254) <http://207.245.165.88/research/japanese-americans/justice-denied/>

The last comment from the previous quotation shows how difficult it can be to find a compromise between the two loyalties: (perceived) personal loyalty and loyalty to an accurate linguistic transfer –in this case the level of actual interpreting skills. This idea coincides with the following comments:

Many were recruited or conscripted for military service from behind the barbed wire of internment camps where their families remained confined. Japanese Americans with outstanding command of Japanese, even those who had gone to school or university in Japan (a Nisei subset known as Kibei), generally served under Caucasian officers less gifted in the language yet more likely to earn officer commissions. On the other hand, many Nisei linguists suffered from such handicaps as a rudimentary grasp of their parents' language, limited formal education, and poor proficiency in English. Beyond the sting of racism, Nisei linguists at the front often had bodyguards with them and ran the risk of friendly fire from fellow soldiers mistaking them for the enemy. (Mercado 2008: 25)

Cooperation between different armies also requires interpreting services. Even ideologically opposed countries, such as the Soviet Union and the German Republic of Weimar, cooperated in the 1920s as a way to emerge from the isolation imposed on

over 600,000 Italian-born and 300,000 German-born “resident aliens” were branded as “enemy aliens.” These Americans were forced to carry special Identification Certificates, their travel was limited, and some had their personal property seized. Much like the internment of the Japanese, many of these Italian and German resident aliens were forced to move, often leaving behind homes and businesses. See <http://www.suite101.com/content/the-wartime-treatment-study-act-a107341>.

them by the West European countries.¹⁴ The situation, as we know, changed dramatically a decade after these common military exercises, when the two powers became enemies after Hitler's skirmish of the short-lived agreement between Molotov and Ribbentrop.¹⁵

War operations

By way of example, I can mention the case of the International Brigades that combated in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). Volunteers on the side of the forces that remained loyal to the democratic government of the 2nd Republic came from many countries and spoke many languages. The same applies, by the way, to the rebels' armed forces, which also received a number of volunteers, apart from the regular troops sent by Germany and Italy to help Franco in his campaigns. They all needed liaison personnel –including interpreters– to carry out their duties

As for the help sent to the Republican Government by the Soviet Union, it is clear that Soviet military advisers, trainers, political commissars, etc. did not command the Spanish language to interact with their counterparts in Spain. Kowalski (2004) devotes a section of his book to the linguistic unit (translators and interpreters). He says:

Interpreters represented an even larger group of Soviet support staff in Spain. With few notable exceptions, the bulk of advisors and military specialists dispatched by Section X for service in Spain had no familiarity with the Spanish language. A large number of translators and interpreters were therefore essential for effective collaboration between Soviets and Spaniards. Gorev quite sensibly recommended that each advisor be given his own interpreter, but nothing remotely close to this goal was ever achieved. A total of 204 interpreters, most of whom were women, eventually served in Spain. Two of the interpreters were killed, and another was reported missing in action. In general, interpreters saw longer tours than pilots, tankers, and advisors; indeed, many served for an entire year. By all accounts, the group played a critical role in Operation X, but they were too few in number, and too insufficiently trained, to provide the level of coverage needed by the Soviet men on the ground. (<http://www.gutenberg.org/kod01/frames/fkod08.html>)

Most of the experts, including the interpreters, carried out a variety of activities, including frontline fighting. Moved by security and intelligence concerns, they usually adopted different names to mask, to the extent possible, their original personalities.¹⁶

¹⁴ Spalcke (1958) gives testimony of the experience as Red Army interpreter in military exercises with the *Reichswehr* between 1920 and 1933.

¹⁵ See Berezhkov (1994), who acted as interpreter in the negotiations of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

¹⁶ Daoud Hari (2008) narrates his various metamorphoses, including that of his name, in his book of memoirs on his interpreting duties in the Darfur conflict.

An attempt to open a language school in the Republic to cover linguistic needs ended in failure:

While the opening of a language school in the Republic might have seemed to some a solution to the critical shortage of translators, the general opinion expressed in confidential reports to Moscow was one of disappointment. One letter, written in late September 1937, offered the following withering progress report:

The problem of the translators is still not resolved. The organizational school here has not justified itself. Recruitment was unsuccessful, people were not vetted, the leaders of this school (Olga Nikolaeva and others) were not suited for their appointment. Now the school has been let out and enrollment has started again; a new leadership is being appointed.

(RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, del. 961, ll. 207-220, in Radosh et al. 2001: 288)

The same authors reproduce documents that attest to the communication barrier due to the *Babel* of languages:

I also pointed out that the formation of new brigades in Albacete based on the arrival of people from outside leads to the creation of a Tower of Babel in each of the brigades and battalions, where dozens of different languages are represented. It is almost impossible to command such brigades. One cannot rely on the objectivity of the translators in combat. The headquarters cannot issue orders in several languages. The Spanish language should be the common one for everyone, for a number of reasons, if only because everyone can learn the language easily. (Document 60, RGASPI, f. 495, d. 206, ll. 91-146. An account by M. Fred on work in Spain, 14 December 1937, Top Secret, reproduced by Radosh et al. (2001: 312)

Kowalsky also refers to the same communication difficulties:

A communications crisis was doubtlessly part of the problem; of the first naval advisors assigned to Spain, none knew any Spanish, and only one was given a translator. Despite the critical importance of organizing marine defenses at Cartagena, the Soviets delayed at least one month in sending a translator to work with the advisors. (Kowalsky 2004)

<http://www.gutenberg-e.org/kod01/frames/fkod26.html>

In fact, to avoid misunderstandings at best and total inefficiency at worst, there was a time in which the International Brigades had to be reorganised according to linguistic/cultural lines,

...By an order of April 20, 1937, the International Brigades became units of the regular army, and henceforth an ever-increasing number of their replacements were Spanish. Apart from that, the confusion resulting from the transmission of orders in several languages required the reorganization of the Internationals into brigades of the same or similar nationalities or linguistic groups. (Johnston 1967: 82-83)

While Soviet experts were arriving in Spain in 1937 in order to lend their support to the Republican legitimate government in many fields, including intelligence, the training of pilots, tank drivers, etc., several thousand Spanish children were evacuated from the

country, sent by their own parents to relieve them from the bombs and other horrors of the war. Some 3,000 ended up in the Soviet Union, where they grew up, suffered the atrocities of WWII and eventually became Hispano-Soviets, bilingual and bicultural citizens who many years later would become useful interpreters and translators for Soviet advisors in Cuba after Castro's revolution in 1959 (Baigorri 2003).

Failing to prepare the linguistic liaison and intelligence in international military operations can, indeed, be disastrous, as Müller says, referring to the Korean War, which was fought under United Nations command by an international force made up of military personnel from 22 countries.

Intelligence (...) is only one of several areas in which language competence can be crucial to the success of a military operation. Logistical support, civil-military relations, operational planning, psychological operations, even command and control can be heavily influenced by the ability to communicate across cultures. There is considerable information available on the language aspects of our involvement in 20th -century conflicts. A particularly fertile ground for research on language use is to be found among the chronicles of the Korean War, a conflict in which a United Nations command composed of elements from twenty nations sought to maneuver in an environment unfamiliar to all. (Müller, 1984: 82-83)

Despite the interest of studying military intelligence as an essential component of military operations, this area is usually overlooked by specialised research, as pointed out by Navarro Bonilla (2007: 179). Referring to the coalition that fought in the Korean War, Müller points out that a great number of casualties was registered among the Turkish contingent –a brigade– in the early stages of hostilities due to the lack of appropriate linguistic liaison services among various echelons at tactical level.

In the UN command in Korea, problems of understanding differed greatly among units, from extensive difficulties in the Turkish brigade and the French battalion to minimal difficulty in the Colombian battalion. At the first major action in which the Turkish brigade took part, at Kunu-ri against the Chinese, the Turks suffered losses of twenty percent in killed, wounded, or missing in action. Losses in communications and vehicles were first estimated at up to ninety percent (later revised slightly downward); only six artillery pieces were salvaged. The blame for this debacle was placed on misunderstandings resulting from language differences. (Müller 1984: 91)

Modern wars have been characterised by the growing involvement (and suffering) of civilians who, although not mobilised, participate willingly or unwillingly in the war operations. What has been called the “home front” played a very important role as a source of labour for war industries –and all industries to a certain extent become “war

industries” at times of conflict—, of support services to the military (from nursing to information to propaganda),¹⁷ and of a great array of supplies.

There is an interesting announcement made by the United States Army in 1944 to recruit personnel for the Women’s Army Corps (WACs):

Recently the Office of War Information released a special transcribed announcement for use by radio stations calling for WAC recruits.

The script read as follows:

ANNOUNCER: If you can say it in French.

FEMININE VOICE 1 : Alors mon ami, comment ça va?

ANNOUNCER: If you can say it in Spanish.

FEMININE VOICE 2 : ¡Buenos días, mi amigo! ¿Qué tal?

ANNOUNCER: Or, if you can say it in Russian, Chinese, Portuguese, German, Japanese, or Italian, you can say it for your country and for victory. Women who know these languages are needed by the Women's Army Corps as cryptographers, interpreters, and communication experts. These are vital assignments. You may be called upon to translate documents from allied and enemy countries. You may be the official interpreter between military men. Great responsibility is being given every day to WACs, not only in this, but in dozens of other types of work. There is real opportunity for women of courage and patriotism. If you want to do something that really counts, stop at your local United States Army Recruiting and Induction station and learn the complete story of the Women's Army Corps. This transcribed announcement is from the United States Army. (Lindquist 291)

This broadcast shows the needs of the US armed forces in various types of assignments during WWII, and how they seek resources among groups that traditionally were spared from military actions. Although the message may have a gender biased connotation from our present-day perspective, it is indicative not only of the dire needs of the US Army but also of the fields in which women were expected to act.

Occupation and prisoners of war

Interpreters were needed to communicate with the enemy in different positions that evolved through the war. Nazi occupation in France has been the source of a great deal of literature regarding the controversial topic of so-called collaborationists versus those

¹⁷ Cooperation by interpreters and translators in propaganda activities can be illustrated with an article by Herzstein (1989) devoted to anti-Jewish propaganda in the Orel region of Great Russia. As Maynard (1968: 137-138) said: “Language is the most pervasive, ubiquitous, and ethnocentric factor in our cultures. One can liken language to air—colorless, odorless, and necessary for survival; but language can also be likened to carbon monoxide, also colorless and odorless, but very poisonous.”

enrolled in resistance activities. The dilemma of the interpreter under such circumstances has been very well illustrated by Ott (2009: 72):

Throughout 1943–1944, Hochstrasser [Swiss interpreter] closely observed the actions, words, habits and liaisons of Laborde [a French double agent] and Dobershutz [a Nazi officer]; he had an ethnographer's eye for detail and in the post-liberation period revealed an astonishing capacity to recall what he had seen, heard and done during his employment by the Germans. Hochstrasser was no mere translator. He understood the psychological value of studying the behavior and mentality of those around him and also appreciated the importance of casual socialization with the Germans as a means of discovering their secrets, sorrows and weaknesses (...). For eight months, the Swiss interpreter and Otto Dobershutz worked side by side on an almost daily basis. As so often happened in relationships between wartime employers and their interpreters, the two men became well acquainted. Laborde was an intruder in their relationship and Hochstrasser envied his influence over Dobershutz. Self-interest, uncertainty, opportunism and ambivalence characterized their three-way relationship.

Occupation by foreign troops may bring with it a great variety of personal experiences. Just after WWII was over and peace was being implemented in the different territories occupied by the Allied powers, Czech and Slovak students showed an enthusiasm which found inspiration in the Soviet Komsomol organisation when they volunteered as interpreters for the Soviets occupying their country (Chotková 1983). A French perspective in this context is that of Bédarida (1989) as she recalls her memories from 1945 when she was sent as a young student to the French zone of military occupation of Berlin to play the role of interpreter.

Kaplan (2005) in an excellent research work on an ugly chapter of the history of the United States after the liberation of France, describes the biased way in which military justice was administered to prosecute American soldiers who were found guilty of crimes –mainly of a sexual nature– against local civilians. As she points out, 70 American soldiers were executed between 1943 and 1946 by the American Army. Although the US army was overwhelmingly white, almost all the soldiers that were executed were black. Kaplan uses, among other sources, the views of French interpreter Guilloux, who translated in the trials of two soldiers: one black and the other one white. Both were prosecuted for rape, but only the former was executed.

In its postwar report on sex offenses in the European Theater of Operations, the Judge Advocate Department acknowledged the extent to which translation problems had created obstacles in cases of sexual assault:

As was to be expected, much trouble was often experienced by interpreters in court-martial trials in the use of particular technical words like “penetration” when non-English speaking witnesses were on the stand, because of the

difficulty or impossibility of making a precise translation of the English word into the foreign languages.

A woman couldn't say to a court-martial, "He raped me," or, "He tried to rape me." To convict someone of rape, the burden was on the victim to prove that an actual penetration had taken place against her will. The victim of a sex crime was required to produce two kinds of testimony. She had to describe the incident of sexual violence using anatomically detailed language, and she needed to show that she had not complied with the sex act. Courts-martial of the 1940s were as bad as American civil courts in obtaining this information; both tended to put victims of sexual assault on trial along with the accused. The Judge Advocate understood the issue as a problem of translation. From the point of view of the foreign victim, the issue was respect. Noémie Bignon and her daughter had no way of knowing that a Zone Handbook for Allied officers had described Breton women as "naturally erotic," but they knew that they felt ashamed and misunderstood throughout the trial. (Kaplan 2005: 57-58)

The dilemma of interpreter Guilloux in the trial of the black soldier came from the fact that he "was caught between his duty to translate individual words and sentences and his desire to protect a woman who depended upon him for the very words she uttered" (Kaplan 2005: 60).

We can find people acting as interpreters for their fellow citizens in detention centres and even in concentration camps. For instance, Adams (1981) has published an interview with Werner Koch, a clergyman who played the roles of chaplain and interpreter in French POWs camps inside Germany during WWII. With the evolution of the war, the opposite could also happen. Former prisoners could be called to act as interpreters to interrogate their own or their families' former prison guards, in a move which could be defined as a shift of asymmetries.

The powerlessness of individual prisoners of war can be exemplified with photo no. 4, from the Korean War, where a North Korean prisoner is interrogated, while kneeling down on the ground with his hands behind his head, by a British and an Australian soldiers through the mediation of a Korean interpreter.¹⁸

¹⁸ Photo 4: Imperial War Museum Collection. ITEM NAME: MH33234 (October 1950) A British corporal and an Australian quiz a kneeling North Korean prisoner of war through an interpreter, during the advance of the United Nations forces northwards from Pyongyang. Link:

http://www.iwmcollections.org.uk/dbtw-wpd/exec/dbtwpub.dll?AC=GET_RECORD&XC=/dbtw-wpd/exec/dbtwpub.dll&BU=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.iwmcollections.org.uk%2FqryMain.php&TN=Unca t&SN=AUTO14303&SE=6363&RN=196&MR=25&TR=0&TX=1000&ES=0&CS=1&XP=&RF=allRes ults&EF=&DF=allDetails&RL=0&EL=0&DL=0&NP=1&ID=&MF=WPENGMMSG.INI&MQ=&TI=0&DT=&ST=0&IR=157962&NR=0&NB=7&SV=0&BG=0&FG=0&QS=

Postwar situation

The postwar situation has also numerous implications. The aftermath of wars can sometimes entail mass population movements, for example through exile or resettlements along new political or administrative borders. There is also the issue of demobilisation, rehabilitation and reintegration of combatants in civilian life, phenomena that often take place across political and language borders. There can be resistance pockets or liberation movements when territories previously occupied by an enemy are freed by national or international forces. In some cases, occupation of territories follows the end of hostilities, with the sequel of reparations, relations of occupying armies with local civilian people, relief operations, etc. And, finally, there is the settlement of responsibilities in military tribunals, with the string of actions, from detention and interrogation of prisoners in the search for evidence to turn them into defendants, to the court trial and the acquittal, imprisonment –even death– of those convicted.

Interpreters are often recruited because they "know" both the local language/dialect and English, the language of international relief operations, and not because they have been trained as translators or interpreters. It is safe to say that hardly any have undergone training in interpreting, as the results of the first phase of our project confirm. Thus, they lack both essential professional skills to perform adequately as interpreters, as well as the necessary professional ethics to support crisis management and humanitarian efforts in a stressful environment. (Moser-Mercer & Bali 2008)

The evacuation of foreign combatants from Spain a few months after the war ended received support from the League of Nations. In a document from the Archives of that Organisation we can find the following reference with the detailed number of meetings covered by a professional interpreter detached from the Geneva Headquarters:

From the 2nd to the 25th January, 1939, Monsieur CONFINO was called upon to act as Interpreter at 32 meetings of the International Commission for the withdrawal of non-Spanish Combatants. (...).¹⁹

Negotiations take place among the Allies, as can be illustrated by the successive summit conferences of Tehran (1943), Yalta and Potsdam (1945) after WWII, all of which needed the services of interpreters. But those negotiations also took place at lower

¹⁹ *Memorandum* of 18.4.39 from Mr. H. Villate to the Treasurer, the Internal Control Officer and the Chief Accountant, League of Nations Archives, Geneva, Dossier Confino.

levels, as shown for instance in a colour transparency (photo 5) from 12 July 1945 in which Field Marshal Montgomery appears decorating Russian generals at Brandenburg Gate in Berlin.²⁰ Churchill, on his way back from Yalta, stopped in Cairo, where he met with King 'Abd al-'Aziz Ibn Saud through the King's interpreter as shown in another photograph (photo 6) from the Imperial War Museum collection.²¹

The official end of hostilities requires interpreters to work in the armistice and later on in peace negotiations. An interesting study on the roles played by interpreters at the peace negotiations in Panmunjom (1953) which paved the way for the armistice after the Korean war can be found in Fernández Sánchez (2010).

Interpreting at the Nuremberg Trials has been studied among others by Gaiba (1998) and Baigorri (2000). Interpreting at the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal has been studied by Shveitser (1999) and Takeda (2007b, 2010). In fact, it has been said that the Nuremberg trials witnessed for the first time the use of simultaneous interpreting, although research carried out by several authors mentioned in this article, including this author, attest to the fact that the simultaneous mode had been used almost twenty years before Nuremberg. Many of the photos taken from that famous trial show defendants with their

²⁰ Photo 5: Imperial War Museum Collection. ITEM NAME:TR2918 (12 July 1945). Left to right: The Commander of the 7th Armoured Division, Major General L O Lyne; Marshal V Sokolovsky of the Red Army; the Deputy Supreme Commander in Chief of the Red Army, Marshal G Zhukov; Colonel General Melinius of the Red Army; the Commander of the 21st Army Group, Field Marshal Sir Bernard Montgomery; an interpreter from the Royal Engineers; and Marshal K Rossokovsky of the Red Army at the Brandenburg [*sic*] Gate after a ceremony in which Field Marshal Montgomery decorated the Russian Generals. Link:

http://www.iwmcollections.org.uk/dbtw-wpd/exec/dbtwpub.dll?AC=NEXT_RECORD&XC=/dbtw-wpd/exec/dbtwpub.dll&BU=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.iwmcollections.org.uk%2FqryMain.php&TN=Unca t&SN=AUTO14303&SE=6363&RN=193&MR=25&TR=0&TX=1000&ES=0&CS=1 &XP=&RF=allRes ults&EF=&DF=allDetails&RL=0&EL=0&DL=0&NP=1&ID=&MF=WPENGMSG.INI&MQ=&TI=0&DT=&ST=0&IR=0&NR=0&NB=7&SV=0&BG=0&FG=0&QS=

²¹ Photo 6: Imperial War Museum Collection. ITEM NAME: MEM 2179 (February 1945) Winston Churchill sits with King 'Abd al-'Aziz Ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia during lunch at Auberge due Lac, Fayoum, in February 1945. The King's interpreter is standing behind him. Link:

http://www.iwmcollections.org.uk/dbtw-wpd/exec/dbtwpub.dll?AC=NEXT_RECORD&XC=/dbtw-wpd/exec/dbtwpub.dll&BU=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.iwmcollections.org.uk%2FqryMain.php&TN=Unca t&SN=AUTO14303&SE=6363&RN=212&MR=25&TR=0&TX=1000&ES=0&CS=1 &XP=&RF=allRes ults&EF=&DF=allDetails&RL=0&EL=0&DL=0&NP=1&ID=&MF=WPENGMSG.INI&MQ=&TI=0&DT=&ST=0&IR=0&NR=0&NB=8&SV=0&BG=0&FG=0&QS=

headphones on and with a long wire hanging from them (photo 7).²² Those images are an excellent representation of the invisibility / inaudibility of interpreters, who are the missing (critical) link for communication to happen, the gatekeepers who are seldom seen in the Trial's photographs, as if their ellipsis or omission were a silent way –a sort of a semiotics of silence– to represent the actual bridge in the communication gap.

Debate and conclusions

If according to the standard scientific method, researchers look for the rule in a situation characterised by its complexity or heterogeneity, it seems clear that after showing a good deal of cases of war interpreters, the rule we would arrive at is that there is no rule that can be applied to all the situations. Or we should perhaps say that the norms governing the interpreting *trade* in situations of conflict are precisely the absence of solid rules that define interpreters' roles. Their rules of engagement are established by their principals on the basis of the perception the latter may have of the needs of linguistic exchange with allies or enemies.

The nature of the idea of an interpreter in conflict situations is so polysemic that we can hardly speak of a single profession, for two reasons: 1) because those who played the role of interpreters were more often than not “accidental linguists”, and 2) because they did not identify themselves with the notion of a profession, or even a trade. It would not have been easy even if they had tried, when we consider the different tasks they were called to perform. Sometimes they were guides, others they were cultural brokers or liaison officers or interrogators or court interpreters. But they also juggled with their languages in the spheres of intelligence, counterintelligence, propaganda, diplomacy, etc. Most of those who appear as interpreters in records of all types were mobilised only temporarily –just like their fellow citizens who were conscripted for military service–

²² Photo 7: Imperial War Museum Collection. REFERENCE NUMBER MH 17454. (1946) Kaltenbrunner in the dock at Nuremberg. Kaltenbrunner was head of the Reich Main Security Office (RHSA) and was hanged at Nuremberg. Link:

http://www.iwmcollections.org.uk/dbtw-wpd/exec/dbtwpub.dll?AC=GET_RECORD&XC=/dbtw-wpd/exec/dbtwpub.dll&BU=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.iwmcollections.org.uk%2FqryMain.php&TN=Unca t&SN=AUTO23421&SE=6403&RN=0&MR=25&TR=0&TX=1000&ES=0&CS=1&XP=&RF=allResults&EF=&DF=allDetails&RL=0&EL=0&DL=0&NP=1&ID=&MF=WPENGMMSG.INI&MQ=&TI=0&DT =&ST=0&IR=161971&NR=0&NB=0&SV=0&BG=0&FG=0&QS=

and demobilised immediately after the hostilities were over. Interpreters, like anybody else in war situations, in carrying out their tasks are moved by the principle of survival. The “language weapon” seems to produce fewer casualties than conventional –let alone atomic– weapons, but, as we have seen, it can also be quite influential in the development of operations. Practitioners enrolled in the military interpreting service were –and are– usually quite close to their military commanders or principals and, therefore, the job entails life risks, as unfortunately we are nowadays seeing almost daily in areas such as Afghanistan or Iraq.²³

Translation and interpreting always consist of an adaptation to local needs and local ears. If the military system is made up of a complex network of subsystems we can expect that interpreters were required to adapt to that complexity. With no theoretical preparation they utilised the tools that, according to their common sense, could help approach people from different languages as well as cultures. Interpreters were the gatekeepers in the communication sequence and, under military command but also based on their self social control, they alternated codes and strategies depending on circumstances, always trying to avoid getting drowned in an ocean of words or lost in translation.

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²³ See Moser’s project at <http://www.aiic.net/ViewPage.cfm/page2979.htm>

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