Still a ‘Spanish Red’? The communist past and national identity in the writing of Jorge Semprún

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Jorge Semprún was born into a privileged family in 1923; his father supported the Republican side at the outbreak of civil war in 1936, and became the government’s chargé d’affaires in the Hague. The family went into exile in Paris where Jorge attended lycée. After leaving school he became a philosophy student, before joining the communist resistance movement in 1942, aged eighteen. He is best-known for his writing about his incarceration in Buchenwald in 1944-5, and his subsequent memorialising of this critical experience (Le Grand Voyage [1963], Quel beau dimanche! [1980], L’Écriture ou la vie [1994] and Le Mort qu’il faut [2001]). However, Semprún also operated as a key leader of the Spanish Communist Party (Partido comunista español, PCE) underground organisation during part of the Franco era (1953-1963), and made frequent trips to Madrid to help organise the resistance to the regime, largely among intellectuals. He has recounted his experience as a clandestine PCE leader in the Autobiografía de Federico Sánchez (1977) and in the screenplay for the film La Guerre est finie (1966; dir. Alain Resnais).

Semprún has also used this work to explore questions of exile, memory and communist identity, and in particular to analyse his own subsequent estrangement from the communist tradition, which was fastened with his expulsion from the PCE in 1964, and confirmed subsequently as Semprún became convinced that the ‘party spirit’ with which he had been imbued had led to countless inhumane outcomes, for which he bore at least partial responsibility. After the transition to democracy, Semprún continued to explore and investigate these themes in his writing, and to divide his time between Paris and Madrid. He also became Minister of Culture in the Socialist administration of Felipe Gonzalez from 1988-91.

These cycles in life have been a constitutive part of Semprún’s journey, involving periodic travel and movement, both between north and south (Paris and Madrid), and between literary and political engagement.

Semprún has written extensively in an autobiographical register, chronicling his experiences in a range of formats: memoir, autobiographical fiction, essays and philosophical treatise. His reputation is particularly strong in Spain, France and Germany, where he remains a highly significant public intellectual, often in demand to discuss both the history of ideological conflict in the twentieth century (particularly the European experience of fascism and communism), and questions of contemporary European politics and identity. Although several of his key works have been translated into English, Semprún has been relatively neglected in the English-speaking world, in terms both of the popular reception for his oeuvre, and of scholarly investigation. It is contended here that in both the trajectory of his life, and in the literary presentation of these experiences, Jorge Semprún is a critical figure for our understanding of what Eric Hobsbawm characterised as the ‘age of extremes’. More specifically, reading Semprún can help elucidate many of the core issues facing historians of European communism, particularly in relation to its complex relations with national identity, democratic legitimacy and individual commitment.

The Spanish Civil War, or at least its outcome, has been at the heart of Semprún’s biography and his literature, and this article argues that the civil war was seminal in shaping his personal and literary trajectory. The defeat of the Republicans, and the subsequent Francoist regime, has been a constant aspect of Semprún’s political and personal identity. Semprún has used his literary narratives, whether in the form of memoir or autobiographical fiction (and often the two genres are mixed up within the same work, described as either a roman or a récit in the French), in order to revisit his experiences, sometimes on multiple occasions. He has sought to revise and renegotiate these experiences in the light of their sometimes traumatic effects, and this article contends that the notion of ‘exile’ has been critical to this endeavour. Whilst it is evident that Semprún has lived much of his adolescent and adult life in exile, as conventionally understood, there are also important senses in which he has lived in ‘exile’ with reference to two compelling experiences in his past: first, the period of his
incarceration at Buchenwald, and second, his years as a clandestine leader (and politburo member) of the PCE. As Michael Ugarte has pointed out:

He is an exile three times removed from the powers which cast him out: first, as an accompanying member of a family of exiles, second, as a survivor of a German concentration camp at Buchenwald, and finally, as the victim of expulsion from a party whose principles he upheld for over twenty years.\(^5\)

A ‘Spanish Red’, un ‘Rouge Espagnol’, ein ‘Rotspanier’

Semprún’s attitude towards national identity, and its complex relationship with an avowedly internationalist (indeed universalist) ideology in the shape of communism, is a critical element in his writing. Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, he is highly sensitive to the diversity within the international communist movement, despite his later critique of the essentially monolithic character of this movement. One of Semprún’s recurring criticisms of the stalinist trajectory of this movement, from the late 1920s onwards, is based upon his observation that ‘the Bolsheviks are the first to brandish the national flag, to try to monopolize the spirit of patriotism!’ Communism survived, according to Semprún (writing in 1980):

only because it turned its back on the idea of the universal Republic of the Soviets … It is a paradox, is it not, that Communism is playing a historical role only insofar as it is abandoning its original revolutionary aspirations and taking up the cause of the nation, the cause of a new Jacobin bourgeoisie!\(^6\)

Semprún displays himself contemptuous of this historical abandonment of the communist movement’s vocation, and he has deep-rooted personal motives for eschewing nationalist or patriotic fervour. As a political exile, he has lived consciously with a rejection of nationalism at the forefront of his identity; he chose to make of his exile a homeland, and he has maintained this suspicion of patriotism, even after his faith in the universalist aspiration of the communist movement collapsed in the 1960s. However, Semprún has consistently and faithfully identified himself as a ‘Spanish Red’, which may seem, on the face of it, in tension with his avowed refusal to embrace a national identity. This was a term he deliberately appropriated, after it was used disparagingly by many both in France (after his family left Spain soon after the outbreak of the civil war in 1936), and in the concentration camp at Buchenwald. This self-definition even survived his expulsion from the PCE, the death of Franco and the collapse of the international communist movement. When Javier Solana, the then Spanish Minister of Culture, called Semprún in 1988 to sound him out with regard to Prime Minister González’s idea of including him within his cabinet in a forthcoming reshuffle, there was a particular aspect of concern: ‘What nationality are you?’ asked Solana brusquely. Semprún, thinking this a matter of principle, rather than practicality, answered that he was apatride: ‘[I am] bilingual, therefore schizophrenic, therefore without roots. In fact, my patrie is not even a particular language [langue] … but language [langage] itself!’\(^7\) Elsewhere, Semprún has explained this idea of language as his true homeland, in terms of a ‘space for social communication, for linguistic invention: a possible fashion of representing the universe. And of modifying it also, even if only in a modest way, at the margins’.\(^8\) In this conception, language can act as an ‘anchoring mechanism’, providing some sense of continuity and stable identity. Arguably, the particular ‘language’ of communist discourse provided Semprún with something akin to such a mechanism, at least from the mid-1940s through until shortly before his expulsion. In Buchenwald, Semprún had been surprised initially by a German veteran’s use of the term ‘compatriot’ to describe one of his Spanish comrades; Semprún had consciously decided to eschew references to his maternal language and place of origin when he had been living in Paris before the occupation. He had vowed to himself that no-one would identify him as a ‘foreigner’ because of his accent. Except for poetry, which continued to link him with his childhood tongue, Semprún’s sense of Spanishness was left blurred, repressed and unspoken, at least until the PCE clandestine organisation took him under its wing in the camp.\(^9\) In fact, Solana only wanted to know which passport Semprún carried, for he could not be considered as a potential government minister unless he was a Spanish citizen. Semprún did have a Spanish passport, although he also had many of the necessary attributes to have become a naturalised Frenchman, should he have so desired. He had done most of his writing in French, he was a veteran déporté-résistant of the Second World War, he had been
married to a Frenchwoman (not once, but twice!), and he had been an exemplary taxpayer (at least since he had emerged from the ‘fiscal inexistence’ of his years as an underground communist leader in 1963).

However, Semprún had never sought to ‘become’ French in this formal sense; his identity had been as a ‘rouge espagnol’ immediately upon his arrival in France as a thirteen-year old refugee in 1936. In his first book Semprún put it like this:

It was at Bayonne, on the docks … that I learned I was a Spanish Red … There were big beds of flowers, and lots of summer vacationers who had come to see the Spanish Reds disembark … Since then, I’ve never stopped being a Spanish Red. It’s a way of life that was valid everywhere.10

And then again Semprún became a Rotspanier after his arrest and imprisonment by the Nazis: ‘I had always told myself that I would never abandon this identity under any circumstances. In a certain sense, it was an historic destiny that had been assigned to me. It was necessary that I embrace it’.11 That destiny carried with it certain risks, but it also enabled Semprún to be a part of a ‘fraternal and long-suffering community’. Thus, he has lived his life as a Spanish political exile, as a Spanish Red, and he has experienced this identity as an authentic homeland: ‘the years were going by, [and] I was more and more pleased to go by that name’.12 In the surprisingly sparse scholarly treatment of Semprún, this ‘red’ dimension of his identity has often been underplayed, in ... with regard to his communist past, but it is nonetheless limiting for a rounded interpretation of his life and work.

In 1995, Semprún was forced to ‘forsake his candidacy of the French Academy of Letters because of his unwillingness to renounce his Spanish nationality. Thus, although he has written most of his novels in French, Semprún cannot enter the French Academy, and, despite his Spanish citizenship, his oeuvre has often been read mainly within the French literary tradition’.13 Although profoundly interested in the politics and sensibility of exile, and the experience of a generation of Spanish Republicans who were forced to recognise their defeat after 1939, nevertheless Semprún is perhaps unusual in his insistence that conventional expressions of patriotism and nationalist fervour are both ideologically and practically suspect.

Semprún had travelled on French passports previously, but these were always false, a part of the everyday deception involved in the life of a clandestine militant. After his expulsion from the PCE, he had eventually been able to procure a genuine Spanish passport in 1967, and thus he was able to reassure Solana that he could take up the ministerial position he had been offered. When Semprún considered his motives for accepting the offer, he came to the conclusion that he wasn’t deeply attracted by the usual trappings of power, but he was fascinated by the language of power, which he understood as its essential dimension. Moreover, he had always had this fascination. Semprún has argued that, in terms of his own capacity to wield political power, he had in fact exercised greater political power (or, better perhaps, responsibility) when he had operated as an underground communist activist in Madrid in the 1950s, than he would have subsequently as Minister of Culture in the 1980s.14 Dozens, if not hundreds, of communist activists in Spain, whom Semprún had recruited into the oppositional network, had trusted him totally, and their hopes, dreams and certitude of victory were made incarnate in the shape of Federico Sanchez (one of his many noms de guerre). As Csilla Kiss has pertinently argued, amongst the many pseudonyms utilised by Semprún during his decade of clandestine activism, it is difficult for both the reader, and for the author himself, to determine which of these identities is ‘real’ and which artificial: ‘Semprún has several alter egos … but it is difficult to determine who is the alter and who is the ego.’15 He embodied the historical sense of mission of the party, and he not only held the effective power of life and death over these comrades, but he was also charged, on behalf of the PCE, with determining the state of their souls (i.e. whether or not they were ‘good’ or ‘loyal’ comrades, and whether or not they should be admitted, or retain membership, within the communist ‘elect’).

Later on, when Semprún himself would view this sense of ‘party-spirit’ as insidious, he would still hear the echo or find the trace of this ‘power of yesteryear’. He would sometimes meet erstwhile comrades from this period, people with whom he had shared an intensity of experience that would be difficult for an outsider to appreciate. The majority of these
individuals had either slowly distanced themselves from the PCE in the intervening years, or, like Semprún, been expelled for deviation from the party line. However, even though rarely, he would sometimes come across a ‘comrade’ who remained on the ‘inside’ looking out, who remained a communist activist. These people would look sadly at Semprún, not aggressively, but with a mixture of complicity and reproach; they acknowledged that he had run the same risks, that what they had shared was an authentic comradeship. Unlike some PCE leaders during the late 1950s, Semprún had not been holed up in a nomenklatura house in Prague, or even in the relative comfort of the Paris suburbs; instead he had risked all in the cause.

‘Why, they seem to ask, [did you] start out on this communist adventure only to abandon it?’ Semprún’s unspoken reply is to reflect that these ex-comrades must understand, deep down in their heart of hearts, that he did not abandon this path; rather, it is the communist adventure of days gone by that has abandoned them, both of them, whether in the party or outside it.  

Although Semprún has become publicly identified with a deep-rooted anti-communism (perhaps it would be better to say, anti-totalitarianism) since at least the 1970s, nevertheless one of the consistent preoccupations of his literature is the lost idealism and the terrible defeat of communism’s humanitarian and solidaristic promise. There are several parallels in the way that Semprún writes and thinks about the diverse dimensions of his past ‘lives’, whether in terms of his exile from Spain (and in particular his memories of his parents, and of his childhood in Madrid and the family’s summer vacations near Santander), or in terms of the traumatic memories of Buchenwald, or indeed in terms of his own communist commitment. Revisiting the meeting of the PCE Executive Committee in Prague in 1963 that confirmed Semprún’s expulsion (along with Fernando Claudín), he recalls the two contradictory emotions he felt at that time:

on the one hand, the certainty that an essential period of my life, no doubt the most important period of my life, the one that had brought me the greatest adventure and the most experience, was coming to an end. On the other hand, the intimate satisfaction of having been faithful to my most profound convictions to the very last, of not having betrayed that Communist freedom that had brought me to the party at the age of eighteen and that now, in obedience to an identical need for rigour and consistency, was driving me from the party.  

As with Semprún’s experience and memories of his time as a concentration camp inmate, so with his attitude to his life as a communist: once one has lived through a set of life-changing emotional commitments, and once one has experienced the traumatic effects of rupture or dislocation associated with the ending of such an experience – in short, once one is ‘living inside’ these memories and forms an historical understanding of them – then one can never fully regain the feeling of being on the ‘outside’, of living without them, even if one ‘survives’ or becomes publicly identified as an ‘ex-inmate’ or an ‘ex-communist’. Interestingly, from the perspective of his published work, we can see a parallel also in the length of time it took Semprún to ‘work through’ these traumatic experiences, before he committed himself to writing about them. It was eighteen years after his experience in Buchenwald before Semprún published Le Grand Voyage, and fifteen years after his expulsion from the PCE before he tackled this subject in Federico Sanchez. Ofelia Ferrán has argued, comparing Semprún and the poet Paul Celan, that they ‘end up suffering the same unstable relation between having been “inside” and later being “outside”, an instability that becomes a devastating form of “shelterlessness”’. This is one of the reasons for Semprún’s constant reworking of these traumatic experiences; perhaps not in an effort to resolve this instability, which is recognised as impossible, but because this feeling of not really belonging anywhere (except in language itself) provokes the necessity of revisiting these events and experiences.

Communism and morality in the concentration camp

Semprún himself has recognised that writing about the concentration camp is an infinite task, but in doing so he also writes about his communist past, a fact that has not been sufficiently appreciated in the scholarly treatment of his writing. Susan Suleiman has partially acknowledged this fact in her discussion of one of the themes that Semprún has returned to
on numerous occasions in his books about Buchenwald: his initial registration at the camp, and the actions of a German communist who may well have saved his life, although this remained unknown to him for many years. Suleiman emphasises the ‘endless revisions’ of his own texts that Semprún engages in, and his self-critical appreciation that the ‘necessity of artifice in literary testimony’ raises important questions concerning the nature of the reality that is being recounted. In reconstructing a conversation between former inmates at Buchenwald, held soon after the liberation of the camp, in which discussion centred on whether and how it would be possible to bear witness to their experiences, Semprún argued: ‘How do you tell such an unlikely truth, how do you foster the imagination of the unimaginable, if not by elaborating, by reworking reality, by putting it in perspective? With a bit of artifice, then!’

Suleiman illustrates the complexity of Semprún’s examination of the relationship between fiction and the truth in his testimonies, with a thorough airing of his published accounts of what we are drawn to understand as his own initiation at Buchenwald. He has recounted this episode on at least four different occasions, in three diverse settings. First, in Quel beau dimanche! Semprún’s character (known as Gérard Sorel in the resistance network) recalls his arrival at the camp, being forced to remove his civilian clothes, and to undergo various brutal initiation ceremonies, before finding himself required to give biographical details to a German. Although it was clear that this German was not a Nazi officer, his exact status remained uncertain. Gérard was asked for his occupation, and he replied truthfully that he was a student; the German was unhappy with this reply, and explained that it was far better in the camp to have a manual occupation, a trade, otherwise one’s prospects were certainly poorer: ‘The guy almost sounded angry. I got the impression that he wanted at all costs to find some ability in this twenty-year-old student who shook his head like an idiot’. But Gérard cannot come up with any practical skill, and eventually the German gave up and put his occupation down as ‘student’. This account was first published in 1980, but in 1994 Semprún returned to the same incident in L’Ecriture ou la vie: towards the beginning of the book, he recounts the same scene, although the context for the telling of the anecdote is quite different. Essentially, though, the outcome is the same, with the young man unable to understand what the German taking down his details was trying to tell him. Suleiman suggests that these different versions of the story are not accidental, but part of Semprún’s artifice; perhaps an implicit commentary on the fallibility of memory, or even the relative insignificance of what are apparently trivial details, compared with the overwhelming requirement to put forward a powerful and truthful testimony as regards the essential experience, or compared with the power of bearing reliable witness as a whole. Citing Charlotte Delbo’s witness account, None of Us Will Ever Return (Aucun de nous ne reviendra), Suleiman states: ‘although she was no longer sure that everything she said was true [vrai], she was certain that it was truthful [véridique].’

The third telling of this story of the arrival at Buchenwald occurs at the end of the same book. Here, Semprún discovers that he has apparently been telling and retelling a false account. Returning to Buchenwald in 1992 for the first time in forty-seven years, having previously refused to go back, he encounters a forty-year old guide (almost certainly a former communist from East Germany) who has read some of Semprún’s work, and was initially impressed with the accuracy of his memories. However, when Semprún tells his companions the story of his arrival in 1944, the guide produces a photocopy of his original registration card, the one filled in by the unknown German. The guide had read the earlier account in Quel beau dimanche! and had looked up the registration card in the files; in fact, the compiler had not written ‘Student’ for Semprún’s profession, but ‘Stukkateur’, a worker with stucco; in other words, a skilled craftsman. Almost certainly, due to this act of human solidarity on the part of the German inmate (almost certainly a veteran communist from the pre-war German party, the KPD, who had served in the camp administration) on his first night at the camp, Semprún had avoided being sent on a work transport to the Dora rocket factory, a notorious posting that would very probably have significantly reduced his chances of survival.

The critical point here is that Semprún was forced, in 1992 (after the definitive collapse of the Soviet Union and the international communist movement), to reopen the question of his attitude to communism, not in terms of the post-war regimes of ‘actually existing socialism’, but rather the idea of communism. For many years, he had excoriated the callous cynicism of communist political and strategic calculation, particularly with regard to the treatment of members of the party, considered expendable by both ruling and non-ruling parties. The power of communists,
once his own people, had been systematically used against fellow communists, and had broken many of those who had not been destroyed by service with the International Brigades in Spain, by the collaborationist authorities of Vichy France, or by the Nazi camps. Semprún has returned time and again to the killing of his comrade, Josef Frank, a Czech communist who had fought in Spain and also been deported to Buchenwald. After the war, Frank (deputy general secretary of the Czechoslovak communist party) was sentenced to hang as part of the Slánský trial in 1952, and Semprún has felt a burning sense of shame that he did not speak out at the time against what he knew to be lies. He had always vowed never to return to Buchenwald because his ‘pals’ wouldn’t be there any more, anyway. You would not find Josef Frank there, for example. He had been hanged in Prague, in his own country, by his own people, and his ashes thrown to the winds.24 With such knowledge, it might be expected that Semprún would subsequently simply condemn or renounce his communist past, and communism itself. Yet, whilst he makes plain, in the Autobiography of Federico Sanchez and What A Beautiful Sunday!, that the communist party is of no further historical use, nonetheless he refuses a blanket renunciation. He maintains an unbreakable attachment to both the communist ideal of human solidarity, and to his own past communist self, as well as to former comrades such as Josef Frank.

Returning to his discovery of the truth concerning his registration at Buchenwald, Semprún recognises that another German communist in a similar position, brutalised by years in the concentration camp system, and faced by a youthful, ignorant and bourgeois resistance fighter, wet behind the ears, might have decided simply to write down ‘Student’ and let Semprún find out the hard way what being in the camp was all about. Veteran KPD cadres were generally viewed by fellow inmates as ‘mad in an aggressive way’, due to the harshness and longevity of their experience in the concentration camps, in contrast to the recent arrivals from Nazi-occupied Western Europe. Many had been severely traumatised by the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939, and in any event their formation reflected the Class against Class period much more than the Popular Front era.25

And yet, my German Communist had acted like a Communist. What I mean is, in a manner befitting the idea of Communism, whatever its rather bloody, suffocating, morally destructive history has been … All the same, because he was a Communist, that anonymous German saved my life’.26

Semprún asks his contemporary readers to imagine how complex the history of communism in the camps was, ‘how sordid and heroic … how cruel and noble, how deadly and morally courageous’.27 This ‘partial revision of the harsh critique of communism that had governed Quel beau dimanche!’ does not mean that Semprún’s past affiliation to communist practice has been rehabilitated, but it does suggest that he is now ready to acknowledge the ‘burden of darkness’ that these communist cadres carried.28 In 1980, at the time of writing What A Beautiful Sunday!, Semprún acknowledged unreservedly that in the 1950s he had sacrificed the truth of the show trials for the sake of the party, and in some measure, for his own sake: at that stage, he could not envisage a future life outside the camaraderie of the communist fraternity, but submission to the line (and the lie of Frank’s guilt) was the only option other than renunciation. After his expulsion, he faces clearly the moral import of his previous position, but his rage and guilt are left in a vacuum, given that any hope of an ‘authentic’ communist movement has disappeared. Paradoxically, it is only after the collapse of the international communist movement that Semprún is forced to confront again the real hope that had existed in the communist ideal, and his personal commitment to that principle of human solidarity.

Semprún has also contemplated the nature of the Soviets he met in the concentration camp, those ‘terrifying real Russian[s]’, many of whom seemed to display a brutality and barbarism that was clearly inconsistent with the idealised image of the Soviet ‘New Man’ that represented the orthodox communist view of the period.29 ‘We couldn’t fathom how these young hooligans, full of individualistic and cruel vitality … could be the authentic representatives of a new society.’ One answer given at the time was that these individuals were only the ‘dregs’ or ‘waste product’ of the socialist construction; yet, as Semprún wondered quietly to himself, there did seem to be a real deluge of such ‘dregs’. However, the picture is yet again complicated by the story of a young Russian, working in the camp quarry, who, realising that Semprún (or the narrator) was unable to bear his heavy load, swaps his stone for a lighter one, thus ensuring he avoided punishment. At that time, Semprún saw such selflessness or goodness as
an example of the ‘New Man’, but he later concludes that this was borne of stupidity, naivety, an ‘innocent ideological blindness’. The real exemplars of Homo sovieticus should have been the prosecutor Vyshinsky or Pavel Morozov (the boy who denounced his parents to the authorities). He concludes by stating that ‘if I had plumbed this mystery of the Russian soul then and there … I would doubtless have spared myself a long detour (not without oases of courage and solidarity) through the deserts of communism.’ It is the parenthesis here that is critical for a full understanding of the complexity of Semprún’s relationship to his communist past, and his literary interpretation of the history of the movement more broadly.

The final telling (up until now) of the story of Semprún’s registration at Buchenwald comes in *Le Mort qu’il faut*. In this version, the narrator (Semprún) is forced to contemplate swapping identities with a young Frenchman of his own age, but a non-communist, who is on the verge of dying, François L, a *mort vivant*, a ‘living corpse’ (or in the parlance of the camp, a ‘Muslim’), and he has had none of the luck that readers of Semprún’s previous work know has come his way. The narrator recounts to François the story of his initiation, and the conversation with the veteran German communist, and the latter replies that he too answered ‘Student’ to the question regarding his profession. The person (also assumed to be a veteran KPD member) taking François’s details simply shrugged his shoulders, did not try to dissuade him, and subsequently, although he managed to avoid the transport to Dora, he ended up working at the camp quarry, under the direct orders of the SS. This was another terrible job, from which he could not recover his physical strength. Here, Semprún deliberately withholds the information that readers of *L’Ecriture ou la vie* already know: that he had not, in fact, been registered as a student. But, he alludes to it in the story of François L, his doppelgänger, who had no such luck.

Although we can read these accounts as narratives about the sheer significance of fate in the matter of life or death in the concentration camps, this article contends that Semprún also wants the reader to meditate upon the importance of collective organisation and the nature of political and human solidarity (which may on occasion overlap, but which are also often likely to be in acute tension with each other). He is profoundly interested in the question of the morality of communist political activity in the camps, and afterwards. In *Le Mort qu’il faut* Semprún rejects the idea that he should feel guilty for his survival, even though it is often considered an appropriate or worthy emotion to display. In the social hierarchy of the camp’s prisoners Semprún enjoyed several advantages: he could speak German well (due to his German governesses from his privileged childhood); he had been assigned (unknownst to him) as a skilled worker, and had ended up working in the Arbeitsstatistik (a desk job in the camp’s registration office, which at this time was effectively under the control of the clandestine communist organisation). He was also young and fit, and he belonged to a well-organised, established collective group (and a sub-group), based upon national and political allegiance (he was identified upon his arrival at the camp as a Spanish Red).

It is true that he didn’t form part of the ‘Red aristocracy’ of veterans who had in some cases been in the camp since the mid-1930s. He introduces the character of Kaminsky, a veteran German communist who had fought with the International Brigade in Spain. These hardened communists had wrested control from the ‘green triangles’ (the common criminals) in the prisoners’ administration of the camp during 1942. Semprún found himself subject to both the ruthless character and the political solidarity of men like Kaminsky. Kaminsky was dismissive of Semprún’s interest in the philosophical conversations that took place on Sunday afternoons in Block 56, but he was impatient not because he was a ‘lumpen’ proletarian, but because such intellectual discussion might detract from the only thing that really mattered inside Buchenwald: collective organisation and solidarity. Kaminsky was bemused, almost affronted, by the ‘Muslims’, who through their passivity indirectly challenged his understanding of the behaviour that was required for collective life and survival. The veteran communists were fearful of the influence of this lowly fringe of the ‘living dead’, because they symbolised the looming danger of defeat. Kaminsky accused Semprún of having petit-bourgeois tendencies, for wanting to share some bread with a French inmate who had given up the struggle, and abandoned himself to death. Kaminsky viewed such a gesture as ‘useless’: if there was a moral position to adopt it should not be based upon pity, compassion and still less upon individual moral choices, but instead it must be found in collective resistance and collective (communist) solidarity. Later on, and with an inevitably

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sardonic, but also nostalgic tone, Semprún summed up his reaction to this communist solidarity.

I was alone, I had only two eyes: the Party has thousands. I was alone, I had only an hour to live, the present: the Party has all the time in the world, the future. I was alone, I had only my own death to live through: the Party could live through all our deaths, it would never die.

The Spanish Civil War as a ‘Present-Absence’

Semprún explicitly compares this experience with the literary treatment of similar themes from the Spanish Civil War. In particular he refers often to André Malraux’s *L’Espoir* (1938), which Semprún had re-read shortly before his arrest by the Gestapo. The action in *L’Espoir* is set against the early struggles of the civil war, and Semprún recalls the character, Manuel, a young communist intellectual who becomes a military leader: ‘[Manuel] explained that he was in the process of losing his soul, of becoming less human, even though at the same time he was becoming a good communist and a good military leader’. Manuel had ordered the execution of some young anti-fascists who had deserted in the face of an attack by the overwhelming force of an Italian tank regiment. Semprún quotes Manuel’s words: ‘I was alone, I had only an hour to live, the present: the Party has all the time in the world, the future. I was alone, I had only my own death to live through: the Party could live through all our deaths, it would never die. But it was effective military leadership that was necessary if the Spanish people were to conquer in their struggle against fascism.

Ultimately, it is this experience of communism in the concentration camp that helps to forge in Semprún an idea of himself and of collective political action, an idea which leads him to volunteer as a clandestine militant of the PCE eight years after the liberation of the camp. His sense of belonging in Buchenwald, as a Spanish Red, permitted Semprún to reconnect once more with his memories of Spain, and of childhood. He stated that it was here, in a place of far exile (at ‘the East of forgetting’), among his ‘compatriots’, a word that he had allowed to fall into abeyance during his time in France, that he re-discovered the roots of his identity. Before his arrest and deportation, Semprún would have said that the Spanish language and ‘Spain’ tout court were left as a ‘present-absence’, as if his Spanishness was in a kind of coma. This changed dramatically with Buchenwald. His rediscovery of this Spanish identity, through his Red identity, was all the more affecting, he argues, for he was using the language of his childhood, not simply to conjure up a lost world, but also in the service of constructing the communist future.

With specific regard to the Spanish Civil War in his writings, and its relationship to this question of national and political identity, Semprún includes several direct references in his works, but these are often subsumed within his memories of childhood (and the Spanish locations of his early years), and of his parents. In particular, in *Federico Sanchez vous salue bien*, when Semprún is shown his ministerial residence in the Retiro district of Madrid, he feels the ‘heavy weight in his memory of half a century’ of time past. On the opposite side of the street is the Semprún family home, which the family had left in July 1936, for their annual holiday at Lekeitio, near Santander. They had left with the political situation tense, but unresolved; as he comments wryly: ‘it resolved itself in the blood and horror of a long civil war’. In *Communism in Spain in the Franco Era* Semprún recounts his dream of returning to the childhood summer residence on the Basque coast; he remembered the details of that summer of 1936, when ‘the mechanisms of daily life began to fail. The mail didn’t arrive, bread began to be in short supply … The most ordinary things began to involve problems.’

Semprún has had to rely on his memory of this period, for there ‘was no photograph left … no material trace, everything has been blotted out, obliterated by the Civil War, by exile, all you have left are the intermittent lightening flashes of memory …’. It was 1975, after Franco’s death, before he was able to make this trip back.

In Buchenwald, Semprún had realised the value of anger in maintaining the will to overcome the brutal conditions, and one of his favoured means of generating the necessary will to confront another day of ‘hunger and agony’ was to recite poems of the Civil War, by Rafael Alberti, César Vallejo and Miguel Hernández. In a similar vein, in Semprún’s novel the *Second Death of Ramón Mercader*, the protagonist recalls travelling through Belgium with his family in 1939, coming from the Hague, where Semprún’s father was, in fact, the chargé d’affaires of the Spanish Republic. The civil war was drawing to a close, it was all but lost, and the family were travelling on diplomatic passports of the Republic. The...
Belgian police who stopped them were suspicious and scornful; Semprún’s character says:

I could feel my blood boiling with a hatred – mingled with a childish sense of humiliation and frustration – which has remained with me ever since. A hatred that was very clear and precise, totally unyielding, and which warmed my heart.\(^{42}\)

Semprún’s father and mother appear as characters in this novel, and the imagined description of the former and his reaction to the imminent defeat of the Republic is captured with great poignancy:

a tall, gaunt figure, that sharp, bony face, that look which was sometimes charged with distress, sometimes direct and warm. That despair, almost palpable, that anguished melancholy, beneath an entirely courteous exterior.\(^{43}\)

In *Communism in Spain in the Franco Era* Semprún revisits his communist past, and his expulsion from the PCE. He spends a good deal of this book bemoaning the selective memory of many of his comrades, and in particular he reserves special scorn for the then General Secretary, Santiago Carrillo, who is chastised for his insistence, against all the evidence, that Franco’s regime would have been brought down by the mass action of a political strike, had it not crumbled with the death of the dictator. Semprún accuses Carrillo of promoting ‘unfulfillable desires’, and of a voluntaristic and subjective approach to the concrete historical questions that faced Spanish marxism during the Franco years.\(^{44}\) This was viewed as a ‘specific malady’ of the PCE, and its *fil rouge*, according to Semprún, was a blind faith in the imminent and inevitable triumph of the party’s strategy, the certainty of victory in the immediate future.\(^{45}\) The corollary of this non-marxist thinking in terms of the party’s attitude to its own past was that it developed an ideological approach to memory, rather than an historical understanding of its role, its mistakes and its accomplishments. For Semprún, therefore:

communist memory in reality is a way of not remembering; it does not consist of recalling the past but of censoring it. The memory of

Communist leaders functions pragmatically, in accordance with the political interests and objectives of the moment. It is not an historical memory, a memory that bears witness … it is a memory that bears false witness.

Semprún is committed to exposing this ideological memory, because a ‘party without memory, without the critical capacity to accept and make itself truly responsible for its own history, is a party incapable of developing a genuinely revolutionary strategy’.\(^{46}\) In 1977, this notion of a potential revolutionary party could still be seriously discussed, even by ‘apostates’ such as Semprún; little more than a decade later such a position appeared redundant.

Semprún also writes scathingly in the same book of the mythologising of the Spanish Communists in exile, in particular the older generation of civil war veterans with whom he used to meet regularly on the Boulevard de Sébastopol in Paris in 1947. With his friend, Benigno Rodríguez, Semprún would eat lunch (usually consisting of Spanish regional dishes) with esteemed figures from this generation, such as Antonio Cordón, Juan Modesto and Enrique Lister. This group ‘formed a large part of the staff-level Communist officers of the Republican Army; all of them heroes; all colonels or generals; and all of them graduates of the Frunze Academy in Moscow where they had continued their studies following their heroic defeat in Spain’.\(^{47}\) In an unusually ironic vein, Semprún continues:

amid the French beans and the sausages, amid the chickpeas and the choice bits of meat, listening to Líster winning *a posteriori* the battle of Brunete, let us say, or presenting the crossing of the Ebro by the Fifth Army Corps as the most brilliant military operation of the twentieth century, I gradually became certain of something I have never since had occasion to doubt, that the Spanish Civil War was something too serious to be abandoned to the ex-combatants of either side.

For Semprún, the civil war would merely be a mythology so long as it remained:

something that belonged to those who made it and who unmade us by making it so badly; that it would be history, in the end … only
when it … belonged to those of us who had not made it, to those of us who were crushed by the ideological weight of such a great legend marked by such contradictory signs …’.

For Jorge Semprún, his Buchenwald books are ‘linked by the interminable, uplifting and desolating work of not forgetting [anamnèse]’. We can finish by recognising that this can apply also to some other key themes of his work: the outcome of the civil war and his exile; his commitment to the communist party and its underground resistance; and, by no means least, his relationship to that Communist past, after his expulsion, and the later collapse of that tradition. He has recognised that he has been both ‘nourished’ and ‘devoured’ by his memories, but it is certain that, both in terms of the turbulent twentieth century history of communism, and its manifestation in the literary sphere, Semprún’s memories continue to be of the utmost relevance. He deserves a much more prominent place in the English-speaking world’s contemporary treatment of these critical issues, such as it is.

Notes

1. In this article, I have used the published translations in English of Semprún’s work, as follows: What a Beautiful Sunday!, London: Abacus, 1984. Translation: Alan Sheridan (originally published as Quel beau dimanche!, Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle, 1980); The Cattle Truck, London: Serif, 1993. Translation: Richard Seaver (originally published as Le Grand Voyage, Paris: Gallimard, 1963); Literature or Life, New York: Viking Penguin, 1997. Translation: Linda Coverdale (originally published as L’Ecriture ou la vie, Paris: Gallimard, 1994); Le Mort qu’il faut, Paris: Gallimard, 2001, has yet to be translated into English. Other references to Semprún’s works are from the French publications, and translated directly by the author. I am very grateful to both Csilla Kiss and David M Thomas for comments on an earlier draft of this article.


3. This experience is recounted in Semprún’s book, Federico Sanchez vous salue bien, Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle, 1993. This memoir has yet to be translated into English.


7. Semprún, Federico Sanchez vous salue bien, p15.


13. Ofelia Ferrán, “‘Cuanto más escribo, más me queda por decir’: Memory, Trauma and Writing in the Work of Jorge Semprún’, MLN, 116 (2001), 268.


18. There is a significant difference in the two cases, however. Although Semprún was undoubtedly traumatised by his expulsion from the PCE, there was also a highly practical reason for his decision not to write about this period, and his experience as a clandestine militant: he refused to publish anything that might endanger his erstwhile comrades, who maintained their underground work against Franco’s regime. Only after the dictator’s death in 1975, and the definitive transition to democracy, did Semprún permit himself to write and publish Federico Sanchez. I am grateful to Csilla Kiss for this point.

19. Ofelia Ferrán, “‘Cuanto más escribo, más me queda por decir’: Memory, Trauma and Writing in the Work of Jorge Semprún’, MLN, 116 (2001), 270.
27. Ibid, p302.
32. Semprún recounted how he had been interviewed, or vetted, by one of the leaders of the PCE’s clandestine leadership group some weeks after his arrival. He had been kept in Block 62, the quarantine block of the Little Camp, when he was unexpectedly visited by a Spanish party contact. His answers were clearly convincing, for he was subsequently transferred to the Arbeitsstastistik as a ‘representative’ of the Spanish Party. ‘It just happened like that. I had nothing to do with it; a sort of objective mechanism’ (*What A Beautiful Sunday!*, p17). Tellingly, Semprún says that he forgot to ask ‘Falco’, the PCE leader, how the organisation had come to know about him: ‘I forgot to ask the question because it had something personal about it’ (ibid, p18).
33. Semprún, *What A Beautiful Sunday!*, p17. This sentence was written in 1980, before the Communist Party did effectively die.
34. Semprún uses this term to describe his relationship to the Spanish language after his exile, but it is equally applicable to the civil war; see *Le Mort qu’il faut*, p104.
37. Ibid, pp103-6.
43. Ibid, p201.
45. Ibid, p61.
46. Ibid, pp182-3.
47. Ibid, p76.
50. Ibid, p198.