

Fanny Bré in the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939): The meaning of nursing care in the international brigades

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Abstract

Fanny Bré was a volunteer nurse in the International Brigades, who fought in the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) on the side of the democratically elected Republican government. The objective of this study is to understand the relationship between Bré's antifascist ideas, her conception of care and the activities she carried out in the Spanish hospitals of Casa Roja (Murcia), Villa Paz (Selices, Cuenca) and Vic (Barcelona). We use narrative biography to describe Bré's personal, political and professional trajectory. To do so, we conducted a content analysis of primary sources archived in Spain, Russia and France and secondary sources that emerged from a thorough literature review. We identified three thematic axes: (1) a concept of nursing in the service of the antifascist struggle, (2) nursing activity for high-quality care and (3) political action for improving hospital organisation and care. The interest of Bré's texts transcends the war in Spain because, in them, Bré questions the neutrality of care by revealing that care can itself be a political act.

KEYWORDS

ethics, history of nursing, political ideology, politics, warfare

1 | INTRODUCTION

Fanny Bré was a French nurse of Romanian origin who served in the International Health Service (IHS) of the International Brigades, during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), which resulted when fascist rebel military forces rose up against the democratically elected Second Republic. Our archival research has revealed two texts written by Bré about her experiences, which show her commitment

to the professionalisation of nursing, the French Communist Party antifascism and the Second Spanish Republic.

The first document, entitled *L'Infirmière Volontaire des Brigades Internationales* (sic) ('Volunteer Nursing of the International Brigades') (Bré, n.d.-a), explains how the nurses of the International Brigades could help the Republican cause against fascism. The second text, *Service Sanitaire. Murcie, Ville Paz, Vich (1936–1938)* ['Health Service. Murcia, Villa Paz, Vic (1936–1938)'], dated 8 September 1948, describes Bré's

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experiences in the hospitals of Casa Roja, Villa Paz and Vic. The wide coverage in popular media of the international nurses who travelled to Spain to serve during the Spanish Civil War (fiction, cinema, advertising, photography, etc.) has not been matched in scientific publications addressing the repercussions of their personal and professional trajectories. It was not until the late 1980's that scientific journals began to direct their attention to this group (Anton-Solanas et al., 2018; Gallego-Caminero, 2014; Gallego-Caminero et al., 2015; Nelson et al., 2020; Patai, 1989, 1995; Pérez-Aguado Mdel et al., 2010). A series of autobiographies (which began to be published 50 years after the end of the war) and biographies have helped to make visible the nurses of the International Brigades. The autobiographies include that of Vries (2009), Bingham de Urquidi (1975), Fyvel (pseudonym used by Penny Phelps, 1992) and Silverstein Blanc (1992). The biographies include that of the Australian nurse Agnes Hodgson, based on her personal diary (Keene & Pardo Lancina, 2005), that of the English nurse Patience Darton, who was interviewed by Jackson (2012) when she was in her 80s, that of the New Zealander Dorothy Morris (Derby, 2015) and the text dedicated to nurses of Jewish origin from Belgium (Tuytens, 2019).

Most of these publications refer to the democratic and antifascist motivations of the nurses of the International Brigades. Bré's texts stand out for the fact that she wrote them during and shortly after the war and described her own trajectory in the hospitals where she worked, making it possible to understand the connection she drew between nursing and antifascism. At the same time, her narratives invite us to reflect on the nonneutral, political aspects of nursing care. Although the name of Fanny Bré appears in different works on the Spanish Civil War and the volunteers of the International Brigades, we have focused on her own writings. The objective of this study is to identify the personal, political and professional trajectory of nurse Fanny Bré and to understand the link between her antifascist ideas, her conception of nursing care and the activities she carried out during the Spanish Civil War.

2 | BACKGROUND

The Spanish Civil War began in July 1936 with a military coup d'état, supported by the Church, the Spanish oligarchies and subsidies from Italy and Germany. The Nationalist rebels rose up against the Second Republic, a government elected a few months earlier by universal suffrage and formed by a coalition of leftist parties. The government's difficulties in maintaining order led to an armed conflict between proponents of a military rebellion and the defenders of the Republic. The war expressed intersecting conflicts across several axes, including social class, ideology and politics (Casanova, 2016). The conflict, in which half a million people died, had enormous social and political consequences, which continue to reverberate in contemporary Spain. The war constituted a rehearsal for the Second World War (Preston, 2006, p. 110) and gave rise to a long period of repression under the Franco dictatorship (1939–1975), forcing many Spaniards into exile.

To understand Bré's professional and political role in the Spanish Civil War, we must offer some background on the volunteers of the International Brigades. The Spanish Civil War represented a global

danger, and after the failure of the Nonintervention Agreement, signed at the end of August 1936 to stop Germany and Italy's expansionist policies, a large popular antifascist movement began (Montero, 2011). At the meeting of the Communist International (Comintern) held in Moscow in September 1936, the recruitment of foreign volunteers to support the Second Spanish Republic was endorsed and, on 22 October of that same year, Spain's democratically elected Republican government, the Popular Front, approved the formation of military units of volunteers, the International Brigades. Some 35,000 people of more than 50 nationalities, mostly belonging to the working class, came to Spain to fight with the Brigades (Eiroa, 2012).

In mid-October 1936, the International Brigades created the IHS, which would make it possible to group and track wounded foreigners and facilitate their communication with medical personnel and their families. It also created the first field hospitals for faster care on the Madrid front (Casañ, 2006). In addition to its medical functions of offering health care services to soldiers and treating the wounded, the IHS also engaged in cultural and political activities for the antifascist struggle and the defence of the Second Spanish Republic (Un Falso Concepto, 1938). The cultural and political activities were led by the political commissars of each hospital, and in August 1937, they were unified under the German Arthur Dorf, who became the general political commissioner of the IHS (Llopis, 2020). To support the morale of hospitalised soldiers and help them increase their political knowledge, the commissioners encouraged health professionals to participate in activities such as preparing newsletters, teaching courses, reading and discussing the daily press and galvanising artistic groups (choir, theatre, etc.).

Soon after the founding of the IHS, foreign nurses began to be incorporated into it. Some of them were already serving as nurses in their home countries and some trained as nurses there to prepare to join the war effort in Spain. Joining a war effort as a nurse has generally been an act of patriotism (Choperena, 2016; D'Antonio, 2002; Lee, 2006, 2008), a message that was used by the Nationalist (rebel) side of the Spanish Civil War (López, 2021, p. 147). However, given the global scale of the war, this was often not the case for volunteer nurses who worked on the Republican side. Rather, hundreds of nurses from around the world travelled to Spain to join the Republican side of the war effort not out of patriotism per se but rather out of a concern for larger ideological issues that reverberated in their home countries. Some trained nurses, like their fellow brigade members, were already working in the defence of democracy and antifascism, before participating in the Spanish Civil War. As indicated by the former brigadier Andreu Castells (1974, p. 16), men—and we can add women—'weren't dragged here by organised propaganda. Rather they moved on their own impulse: They did not come to fight for the Spanish Republic, but on the side of the leftist politics of their country'. In this line, the American nurse Ruth Davidow said that she arrived in Spain 'to protest against Roosevelt's policy of nonintervention' (Carroll, 2018, p. 273).

Although there are no general studies on the trade union or political affiliations of registered nurses who were part of the IHS, our archival research on nurses assigned to the International Brigades hospital in Vic (Barcelona), which operated from April 1938 to

January 1939, reveals that of the 46 registered nurses who worked there, 32 (70%) were members of a trade union or political party, of which 24 (75%) were members of the Communist Party (Sadurní-Bassols, 2022, pp. 106–108).

Some of the nurses who worked in the International Brigades maintained their ideological commitment throughout their lives after the war. Among this group were the Americans Irene Goldin, Selma Chadwick, Ave Bruzzichesi (Celada et al., 2009) and Hilda Bell, who participated in World War II. The latter left the Communist Party of the United States and continued her social activism by participating in different environmental and antinuclear movements and in demonstrations against the interventions of the United States in Vietnam, Cuba, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Iraq, Afghanistan and against the Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip (Lugschitz, 2012; Maglin, 2018; Schiborowski & Kochnowski, 2016; The Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, n.d.). Among European nurses, the Dutch nurse Dini Heroma (De Leede & Van Veen, 2021) and the Czechoslovak nurse Štefania Polakovicová (Wenzlová) (Schiborowski & Kochnowski, 2016) joined the Resistance against Nazism, while the English nurse Patience Darton participated in Mao's Cultural Revolution (Jackson, 2012).

The fate of many other International Brigades nurses was the French or German concentration camps. Some of them were able to escape, but others died there, such as the German Magdalena Berty (married name: Weber) who was executed on 22 April 1945, 3 days before the liberation of the Ravensbrück camp (Werner & Hilbert, 2015).

3 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

We have used the indiciary paradigm, in which, from both the ontological and the epistemological perspectives, it is essential to make 'explicit the point of view and the involvement of the author' (Serna Alonso & Pons Pons, 2000, p. 30), translated from the original Spanish. We therefore point out our inclination in favour of the cause of the democratically elected government of Spain's Second Republic.

We have used a narrative approach to reconstruct the biography of Fanny Bré from the available sources (Núñez, 2013; Santemas et al., 2017). Putting together the pieces of Bré's story in its sociohistorical context has allowed us to interpret her possible reasons for leaving France to join the Spanish Civil War effort and to make sense of how she understood nursing, politics and the relationship between the two. We have conducted a review of the historical literature and primary sources, cross-referencing them for veracity as much as possible. We used archival materials from the Russian State Archive of Socio-political History (Moscow), whose material is available online, and the Centro de Documentación de la Memoria Histórica (Salamanca) to obtain biographical information about Fanny Bré and to contextualise her reports about the organisation and functioning of the International Brigades and the IHS. Bré's text *L'Infirmiere Volontaire des Brigades Internationales* (n.d.-a) is a two-page typed document that ends with the following phrase: 'Nurse Fanny Bré' (Romanian from Bessarabia). We can confirm that it was written during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939)

because it is found in the Russian State Archive of Socio-political History between documents dated 3 March 1937 and 4 January 1939. The second text, *Service Sanitaire. Murcie, Ville Paz, Vich (1936–1938)*, is a 10-page report (with two pages numbered '7'). Dated 18 September 1948, the document is available online through the website of the Centre d'Histoire Sociale des Mondes Contemporains (Paris). It is also a typed document written in the first person, and, although there is no signature, the name 'Fanny Bré' appears typed on the cover. The triangulation of these two documents with others that we have consulted to construct Bré's biography suggests that they were written by Bré herself. The first text, *L'Infirmiere Volontaire des Brigades Internationales* (n.d.-a), documents the author's political vision regarding nursing actions and signals the value of nursing in rearguard hospitals, where we know that Bré worked during her time in Spain. Most nurses wanted to leave these hospitals to work on the war front in autochirs and field hospitals, because they felt that they could be more useful in such places (Patai, 1989). The emphasis that this author places on the importance of basic care in the rearguard is consistent with the perspective expressed in the second document, in which hygiene, nutrition, repositioning and the general comfort of the wounded are exalted as part of the antifascist struggle. In the second text, *Service Sanitaire. Murcie, Ville Paz, Vich (1936–1938)*, the hospitals at which the author describes working coincide with the hospital assignments listed for Bré in other sources (Boril & Edo, 1941; Weiner, 1971). Similarly, the author's account of illness and return to France coincide with that of another account about Bré. Because of the correspondences across these documentary sources, we treat the documents as written by Fanny Bré, although we cannot be fully certain that she was their author.

We have used the archival sources only for academic, non-commercial purposes, per our agreement with the Centro de Documentación de la Memoria Histórica.

4 | FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 | Biography of Fanny Bré in its sociohistorical context

Freda Osnas, better known as Fanny Bré, after her second husband Gaston Bré, was born in Călărași (Romania), on 15 October 1907 (Grason & Pennetier, 2019) to a Jewish family (Guerra, 2003). In 1926, she left Romania to move to Belgium (Boril & Edo, 1941), at age 19. There is no documentary evidence of why Bré chose to migrate to Belgium, but it seems likely that the anti-Semitic climate in Romania was a factor. During the 1920s, Romania suffered instability due to disputes between the incipient Catholic bourgeoisie and the Jewish bourgeoisie. The improvement of civil rights granted to the latter led to an increase in anti-Semitism. In 1922, there was an altercation between Christian and Jewish students of the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Cluj (Transylvania), following the refusal of Jewish students to perform dissections on Jewish corpses, an activity prohibited by Judaism. In this conflict, Christian students

exhumed several corpses from the Jewish cemetery and took them to the Faculty of Medicine. The revolt moved to the streets and other universities, producing an atmosphere of destabilisation that was exacerbated by the appearance of the Christian National Defence League. This group was created in 1923 and led by the antimonarchist, anticommunist and antisemitic Corneliu Zelea Codreanu (Veiga, 1989).

In Belgium, Bré worked as a seamstress while studying to become a nurse (Guerra, 2003). Although we found no documentation about the precise type of training that Bré received in Belgium, work by Joiris (2009) shows that nursing in Belgium in the 1920s was undergoing a period of change under the influence of the work of English nurses during the First World War (1914–1918). Nursing in Belgium was becoming more secular and more professionalised, as training improved, and an official nursing accreditation was created. Advances in medicine and changes in hospital environments, in which hygiene, disinfection, light and air were important, led to the need for trained auxiliary personnel who would be obedient and submissive, following doctor's orders. These requirements prevented the development of nursing care such as that conceived by Florence Nightingale, which focused on the development of observation skills, compassion and knowledge of hygiene and management within a professionalised field of nursing (Joiris, 2009).

During her stay in Belgium, Bré emerged as an activist. She joined the *Syndicat Socialiste* and in 1930 she was expelled from the country as a result of her political activity (although no record remains of the specific activities that led to her expulsion) (Boril & Edo, 1941). From Belgium, she moved to France, where she joined the *Confédération Générale du Travail Unitaire* (CGTU), joining the executive commission of the interunion committee of the eighth district of Paris. She also joined the *Parti Communiste Français* section for Paris' 8th and 10th districts (Boril & Edo, 1941).

Bré's immigrant status and her need to work were factors that likely led her to become involved in union work and politics. Both the CGTU union and the French Communist Party dedicated a lot of their efforts to the work of immigrants. The CGTU had an *Office Main-d'oeuvre étrangère* since 1926, a name that was changed to *Main-d'oeuvre immigrée* in 1932. Courtois et al. (1989, p. 29) attributed this change to the rise of fascism in France during the 1930s, giving right-wing connotations to the term 'foreigner'. 'Immigrant', in contrast, had more 'objective' and 'economic' connotations. A text written by Boril and Edo (1941) indicates that Bré was also affiliated with the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT), a circumstance that can be related to the disappearance of the CGTU, in March 1936, and the integration of all its members into the CGT. Trade union unification was a strategy of international communism to fight against the rise of fascism in Europe (Larousse, n.d.). Like the CGTU, the French Communist Party also created a central section for working among foreigners in 1926. Immigrant communists were to be affiliated with a party section or organised into subsections based on their nationality or language (Grumberg, 2021).

Despite the economic crisis experienced in France during the 1930s and the large number of foreigners who were in the country,

the arrival of Jews was not seen as a problem, since political asylum had a long tradition and therefore many Jews threatened in other countries were welcomed there. However, the rise of fascism provoked anti-Semitic and xenophobic demonstrations in 1934, following the 'Stavisnki Affair', related to the death of the Russian fraudster of Jewish origin Alexandre Stavinsky (Bouju & Dubois, 1992). It also resulted in insults and death threats by right-wing activists against the Jewish politician Leon Blum, after he won the elections as prime minister of the coalition of Popular Front parties in 1936.

Although the exact reasons why Bré decided to go to Spain in 1937 are unknown, it is likely that her decision was influenced by the rise of fascism, the economic crisis and her trade union and political activism. The nursing accreditation that Bré acquired in Belgium facilitated her entry into Spain, which, since the end of 1936, only women with a degree in medicine or nursing could enter (Huber & Hug, 2010). Although this rule was not strictly applied, women had to present a certificate proving that they had completed a nursing course. For this reason, while at the beginning of 1937, Swiss waitress Erna Tanner and dressmaker Frieda Scherrer did not manage to cross the French border (Huber & Hug, 2010), the student of German and Romance languages Dora Kaiser (maiden name Haut) crossed with no trouble, having taken a nursing course in Vienna (Filip, 2011).

With this life trajectory and ideological background and with her nursing accreditation, Bré joined the International Brigades at the rank of a soldier (Karp & Eloesser, n.d.). During the 18 months that she remained in this organisation, she was first assigned to the Casa Roja Hospital (Murcia), where she practised from 15 February to 26 October 1937. From there, she went to the American hospital at Villa Paz (Saelices, Cuenca), where she worked from 1 November 1937 to 8 April 1938. Finally, she was assigned to the Military Clinic of Vic (Barcelona), where she stayed from 11 April to early June 1938 (Bré, 1948).

Bré's report *Service Sanitaire. Murcie, Ville Paz, Vich (1936–1938)* (1948) allows us a glimpse of the precarious working conditions she and other nurses faced. Casa Roja Hospital (Murcia) had been set up in a recently constructed hotel, meaning that hot water was available in the rooms and therefore the hygiene conditions were relatively good (Bré, 1948, p. 2). Villa Paz Hospital (Saelices, Cuenca), however, had been set up in an old-fashioned mansion. It had serious structural deficiencies, despite having modern health equipment, including autochairs and mobile equipment that could be installed in the triage centres at the front:

The hospital was very poorly preserved, there was a lack of water, electricity and heating, only in the month of December was the heating installed. For the two rooms A and B where there are 60 wounded there are two toilets that are in the centre of Room A, where the seriously injured are located. The lack of water often prevents the evacuation of the excrement and patients breathe an unhealthy smell. (Bré, 1948, p. 5)

The cold in Cuenca, which had an average temperature of 7.2°C in November and 4.1°C in December, between 1931 and 1960 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 1963), led Bré (1948) to complain about the impossibility of heating the rooms occupied by the hospital and the terrible consequences that the cold had for many wounded: 'Rooms A and B where 90% of the wounded were nothing more than barns that could not be heated properly and a good number of our comrades contracted pulmonary complications often with fatal consequences' (Bré, 1948, p. 7b). The conditions of these units contrasted with those occupied by the staff, located on the ground floor: 'nice well-lit and spacious rooms (various bedrooms, dining room, ballroom, etc.) occupied only by the American staff. The Spanish staff was staying in a dormitory in an annex' (Bré, 1948, p. 7b).

At times, the urgent demand for places in which to care for the wounded led to the occupation of buildings that were still being converted into hospitals. At the beginning of April 1938, as Catalonia was about to be cut off from the rest of the loyalist territory, the International Brigades rushed to set up facilities there, including the Military Clinic of Vic. While the L'Escorial convent was being converted into a hospital, the hasty arrival of a large number of wounded soldiers forced it into operation without having completed the necessary structural reforms, nor having sufficient material and human resources. Bré recounted her arrival in Vic as follows: 'Mattresses were seized, our wounded installed. With boxes, we made cabinets to place the few health supplies that we had brought from Villa Paz. The doors that we didn't need were removed and these were used as tables' (Bré, 1948, p. 8).

The structural deficiencies and precarious conditions were also present in other International Brigades hospitals. For example, the American laboratory technician Dorothy Fontaine referred to the deficiencies presented by the American Hospital of Belalcázar (Córdoba), as it did not have running water or any cooling system to store blood for transfusions (Casillas, 2019). The lack of running water was also a problem at S'Agaró Hospital (Girona) and, according to the testimony of the Dutch nurse Johanna Boverkerk-Maas, sea water had to be used to wash the dishes and floors (Bussot, 2018). In any case, there were exceptions, such as Mataró Hospital, which had the necessary services and where the wounded and sick were well cared for (Xaubet, 2017).

Nurses and other women in caring roles have experienced shortages and organisational chaos in other wars, such as the American Civil War (1861–1986) (Choperena, 2016, pp. 61–64, 2021), the Spanish-American War (1898) (D'Antonio, 2002; Gassner, 2015), the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902) (D'Antonio, 2002) and World War I (1914–1918) (Brittain, 2019; Graupera, 2018). After the Spanish Civil War, nurses' difficult working and living conditions during World War II have been well documented (Donahue, 1985; pp. 414–415; Immonen, 2013; Manning, 1992; Terkel, 2015, pp. 178–180).

In Vic, Bré fell ill with dysentery and scurvy and was admitted to the sanatorium of Cabrils (Barcelona), which she left on 23 June 1938, despite not being fully recovered (Bré, n.d.-b; Jefe del Servicio

Sanitario Internacional, 1938). From this date until her return to France, in August 1938, Bré performed administrative tasks at the headquarters of the Foreign Medical Aid in Barcelona, at the request of Minkof (Bré, 1948), the nom de guerre of the Bulgarian doctor Konstantin Michev, who at this time was the assistant to the head of the Foreign Medical Aid (Casañ, 2006; Guerra, 2003), whom Bré knew. In terms of Bré's communist political activism, during her stay at the Hospital of Villa Paz, she filled out two applications to become a member of the Spanish Communist Party, the first on 21 December 1937 (Bré, 1937) and the second on 18 January 1938 (Bré, 1938), but we found no record of a response.

On her return to France, Bré continued the antifascist struggle by participating in the Resistance during World War II, as a member of the French Communist Party in hiding. As a result of this work, she was arrested by the special anticommunist brigade of the Préfecture de Police de Paris in March 1943. She was tortured on several occasions and imprisoned in the Parisian prison of La Roquette. After the war, she continued to belong to the French Communist Party and in 1978 she joined the association Amicale des Volontaires en Espagne Républicaine, which in 1996 was renamed Les Amis des Combattants en Espagne Républicaine (2019). Bré died in Drap (Alpes-Maritimes), on 5 January 1993 (Grason & Pannetier, 2019).

4.2 | Texts written by Fanny Bré: Conception of nursing and work in the International Brigades

Our analysis of Fanny Bré's texts reveals three themes related to her vision of nursing and her experiences in the International Brigades: (1) A concept of nursing at the service of the antifascist struggle, (2) nursing activity for high-quality care and (3) political action for improving hospital organisation and care.

4.2.1 | Concept of nursing at the service of the antifascist struggle

In the document *L'Infirmière Volontaire des Brigades Internationales* (Bré, n.d.-a), Bré described the concept of nursing as a humanitarian endeavour, in which providing care was a way of contributing to the antifascist struggle and the victory of the Republican army. At the beginning of the document, Bré (n.d.-a) specified the value that the volunteer nurses of the International Brigades should attribute to the wounded and/or sick soldiers and the need to attend to both their physical health and their morale:

It is to our hands that they bring the precious material, essential for our victory, the mutilated bodies of wounded fighters.

We have the noble task of repairing not only their bodies but also their morale. (Bré, n.d.-a, doc. 161)

Let us never forget that we have before us the Antifascist fighters, the revolutionaries detained at the height of their efforts by fascist bullets and machine guns, that despite the injuries to their inert arms and legs we have before us brains that can and must continue their work! (Bré, n.d.-a, doc. 162)

From this perspective, nurses could participate in the recovery of the wounded and favour their return to the battlefield, using two fundamental tools: the surroundings and the care provided. Therefore, Bré (n.d.-a, doc. 161) considered that any International Brigades hospital 'should represent for our comrade combatants both a relaxing and comforting asylum and the place where he is cared for'. According to Bré, in this environment, nurses had the obligation to prioritise individualised treatment of the injured and avoid routine activities that hindered their recovery. For Bré, an important step in achieving this environment was to change nurses' ways of talking: 'It is necessary for our nurses to remove from our vocabulary this phrase 'It's war!', behind which we sometimes hide our weaknesses' (Bré, n.d.-a, doc. 161). Bré implies that nurses used this phrase as an excuse for continuing to focus on specific care tasks rather than attending to the broader needs of the wounded and sick. Bré used an example to illustrate this type of practice: '... waking up the injured who are not in serious condition at six in the morning to take their temperature (following the established rules)' (Bré, n.d.-a, doc. 161).

For Bré, nursing care should attain good outcomes, both in physical terms and in terms of morale, despite the difficulties of the war. To achieve this goal, Bré (n.d.-a, doc. 162) proposed 'planning everything and a meticulous organisation of work' as in the following example: ... Combining different meals with the same vegetables and do not present the same dish for weeks to comrades who already have little appetite. Being ingenious with the small laundry room and especially with the little water we have at our disposal, so that all our wounded are clean in their beds. (Bré, n.d.-a, doc. 162)

Regarding care for soldiers' morale, Bré explained the importance of nurses encouraging them to participate in cultural activities:

At the moment [the wounded] cannot use lethal weapons, but they can still help the just cause by wielding these powerful weapons: the pen and the word. Let's interest them in cultural work, let's develop their minds, let's show them how much we want to support them [...]. (Bré, n.d.-a, doc. 162)

At the Casa Roja Hospital, Bré herself became involved in politico-cultural activities to encourage patients to join in, 'because the plates and splints sometimes force them to endure a long and depressing stay in bed' (Bré, n.d.-a, doc. 162). For Bré, providing care

also meant collaborating on hospital newsletters, singing in the choir that was created to promote unity among the brigadiers and reading and discussing with the wounded the news of the French newspaper *L'Humanité*. 'Reading our newspaper sparked discussions about events and everyone had reasons to fight harder for victory' (Bré, 1948, p. 3). Other International Brigades nurses also participated in politico-cultural activities in rearguard hospitals. At the International Hospital of Vic, Spanish nurse Encarnación Martos was part of the committee that published the bulletin *Resistir* [Resist], beginning in July 1938 (the last reference to the bulletin appears in September of the same year). Additionally, Spanish nurse Juanita Justo Poveda taught a class for illiterate women who worked at the hospital (Sadurní-Bassols, 2022, pp. 213, 219).

This view of nursing emphasises care for soldiers' bodies and morale, and the measure of success becomes the well-being, restfulness and mood of the injured. Bré's proposal is an example of how nurses put their profession at the service of their ideas (Lugschitz, 2012), aiming to provide the best possible nursing care given the circumstances, to contribute to the war effort (Gallego-Caminero, 2014). This view of nursing was shared by Belgian nurse Petronille Saloreá (1938) who worked at the Murcia University Hospital. In her article, *Une infirmière parle de son travail* ('A nurse talks about her work'), she explained to soldiers the importance of sterilisation in surgery and wound care, describing it as a contribution that nurses made to the antifascist effort (Sadurní-Bassols, 2022, pp. 120–121).

4.2.2 | Nursing activity for high-quality care

Fanny Bré's conception of nursing was reflected in her work at the hospitals of Casa Roja, Villa Paz and Vic. Below are some examples that appear in her report 'Service Sanitaire. Murcie, Ville Paz, Vich (1936–1938)' (1948) in which we can see activities aimed at improving the care of the wounded to 'return them to their brigade not only physically strong, but also with a moral and political consciousness even more powerful than before' (Bré, n.d.-a, doc. 162). Casa Roja Hospital was severely understaffed. Two doctors and three nurses treated 300 wounded. The rest of the staff consisted of an administrator, a cook and about 20 Spanish refugee women who worked as cleaners. The lack of qualified personnel and the need to improve care and rationalise work shifts, which could reach 20 h a day, led Bré to collaborate in an initiative to train the cleaning staff to provide nursing care. Despite difficulties due to the illiteracy of some cleaners and the lack of Spanish of the trained staff, the programme managed to train the cleaners in 'the rudiments (foundation) of the nursing profession, that is, knowing first of all how to transport a wounded person, make his bed, wash him, and finally offer initial treatment following hygiene principles' (Bré, 1948, p. 3). Such initiatives to train nonnurses in the basics of care were common in the IHS, and the American Ruth Epstein (Levenson, 1996) and the English Patience Darton (Jackson, 2010) also participated. Although in this hospital, Bré's petition to the manager enabled the hospital to

have access to a 'stock of pharmaceutical products that allowed us to ensure care within relatively good conditions' (Bré, 1948, p. 2), supplies were generally scarce in the IHS. Dorothy Fontaine described the situation as follows in an interview on Radio Madrid, 28 February 1938:

One heartbreaking thing about ordering from our central pharmacy was the lack of ready supplies. Frequently I would receive but half of what I had ordered. Of the supplies to be had in abundance in the United States we were forced to be content with in small amounts. Magnesium Sulphate, Boric acid, Morphine, and gauze. Items which at home are ordered by the hundred pounds are ordered here a few kilos at a time. (Miller, 1975)

At Villa Paz Hospital (Saelices, Cuenca), Bré recognised the work and commitment of 'Comrade Solario' to the wounded, in reference to the American Salara Kea, the only African American nurse who was part of the International Brigades (Ballesteros, 2008):

During the cold the water pipes broke, we got up at five in the morning to collect snow, melt it to be able to wash our wounded. Here I would like above all to cite the example of our Comrade Solario, the only black nurse with whom I worked and who had a great devotion to our wounded. (Bré, 1948, p. 7)

At the same time that Bré recognised the commitment of some nurses, she also wrote about the unfortunate consequences that the disorganisation of the nursing staff had on the care of the wounded at Villa Paz:

Comrade Jean Foliot, who was in a desperate state, was a matter of dispute among the nurses because he relieved himself in bed, this comrade died a week later. Comrade Lucien Foucaul of the eighth district of Paris was crying when nurse Edna fed him to eat faster, she pinched his nose so that he would open his mouth faster, this occurred three days before his death. (Bré, 1948, pp. 5 and 6)

Bré's complaint extended to the medical team. She described the negative effects that the frequent absences of the American surgeons had on the wounded: 'Bouche', in reference to Irving Busch, who was head of the American hospital services at the Villa Paz Hospital, between August and November 1937 (Guerra, 2003) and Edward K. Barsky, founder of the Medical Bureau to Aid Spanish Democracy and was head of American Team No. 1 (Guerra, 2003) and Foreign Medical Aid between May and June 1938 (Casañ, 2006):

Surgeons Bouche and Barsky spent most of the time travelling and the Hospital was run by two American

doctors who were not surgeons, but who learned surgery with our wounded.

So our comrades went to the operating table 5 or 6 times when once or twice would have been enough.

For major operations, such as limb amputations or trepanations, they were attended by Bouche or Barsky and sometimes they arrived too late... (Bré, 1948, p. 7)

Bré's description implies that the doctor's lack of surgical experience led to the wounded undergoing multiple surgical procedures.

Although it is clear that Bré and others incorporated politico-cultural activities into care to boost soldiers' morale, very little research has been done on the centrality of politico-cultural activities and the participation of health personnel and wounded people in them. A notable exception is the work of Lugschitz (2012) about American nurse Ruth Davidow's efforts to organise a competition at the Castillejo Hospital (Saelices, Cuenca) to end disputes between wounded soldiers of different nationalities. Another exception is research by Llopis (2020) that describes a meeting led by the German doctor Max Hodann, a specialist in child psychology, venereal diseases and sexology, in a meeting of the politico-cultural section during his stay as a convalescent at Dénia Hospital (Alicante) (Political action for improving hospital organisation and care). Bré's membership in the French Communist Party gave her access to power structures within the International Brigades and allowed her to work toward infrastructural, organisational and labour changes in the hospitals where she worked. As explained by Bré in *Service Sanitaire. Murcie, Ville Paz, Vich (1936–1938)*, she obtained responses from and sometimes the collaboration of the head of the IHS, Oskar Telge, nom de guerre of the Bulgarian doctor Tsvetan Angelov Kristanov (Guerra, 2003), his assistant Iaroslav Franek, nom de guerre of the Bulgarian doctor Peter Vasilev Kolarov (Guerra, 2003) and Zetar Minkov. These three doctors were members of the Communist Party.

Bré's political savvy was clearly demonstrated in an incident at Casa Roja. During her stay there, the Spanish staff went on strike to demand a salary increase. Bré spoke publicly against the strike, first at a meeting of the political delegates and then at a general assembly of the hospital staff. She argued that '...a strike in the conditions of the moment is to play into the hands of the enemy and the personnel of the military hospitals should be seen like soldiers at the front' (Bré, 1948, p. 4). After these meetings, most of the staff returned to work.

At Villa Paz Hospital, Bré noticed several problems. One problem was disorganisation in the nursing service, such that patients were not assigned to be cared for by a specific nurse. Instead, 'every day and sometimes on several occasions in the same day the assignments of the nurses were changed, which was a great detriment to the wounded' (Bré, 1948, p. 5). Because no single nurse followed any given patient, care routines were difficult to maintain: 'The wounded were dirty and, despite their short stay in our hospital, had sores on

the parts of the body that touched the bed' (Bré, 1948, p. 5). In November 1937, the month in which she arrived at Villa Paz, Bré denounced this situation to its director, Dr Busch, to whom she proposed '...that each qualified nurse be given a certain number of wounded'. In January 1938, the head of the IHS 'gave the order to distribute the work' (Bré, 1948, p. 5), that is to assign to each nurse a set of patients.

Another issue that Bré faced at Villa Paz was the difficulties of communication between nurses and the wounded: 'Most of the wounded were Frenchmen who could not be understood by American nurses' (Bré, 1948, p. 5). In this case, the recipient of the complaint was Dr Franek, assistant to the head of the IHS. At the end of her report, Bré reflected on the disadvantages of the current policy and how they might be addressed:

In the future we have to avoid letting hospitals function autonomously like ours here for the following reasons: since we have wounded people of different nationalities who cannot be understood by nurses who speak only one language, on the other hand the facts mentioned above show you the danger of this policy that has led to the great degeneration of this hospital, despite the small improvements made, it will be necessary to exchange the care staff, that is, to send us some nurses from other languages [...]. (Bré, 1948, p. 6 and 7)

Also at Villa Paz, Bré referred to the importance of working in favour of unity among the members of the different countries that were part of the International Brigades. Her words reveal that conflict between people of different nationalities was an issue that worried those responsible for this organisation: ... I took advantage of a meeting organised in the presence of the Secretary of the American CP [Communist Party], who visited us in December 1937, to raise again the question of 'the American republic within the Spanish Republic' and with his support I was able to straighten out this situation and organise a collective life. (Bré, 1948, p. 7b)

Among the nurses working at Villa Paz, Fanny Bré noted the lack of communication between American and Spanish nurses, the latter of whom had no training and were mostly illiterate. Bré (1948, p. 6) attributed this situation to the Americans' 'national chauvinism', an example of national identity as a source of unity among women (see Lee, 2008). However, Bré's assessment ignored social class and professional identity as factors contributing to relational conflicts among women during war time (see Braybon & Summerfield, 1987, p. 74–78). Through political education and the support of the secretary of the American Communist Party, who visited Villa Paz in December 1937, Bré reported that she was able to 'straighten out the situation and organise a collective life' (Bré, 1948, p. 7b), although

she did not report the specific actions taken. She expressed confidence that the nursing school that existed at the hospital before the war would be reopened and explained that, in the meanwhile, '... the Spanish comrades [female] worked with us and learned to be good nurses' (Bré, 1948, p. 6).

At the Military Clinic of Vic, Bré was commissioned by the Spanish Communist Party to take responsibility for the women of the hospital, and, later, to participate in organising a Committee of Antifascist Women in the city (Bré, 1948, pp. 8–9). The political commissar of this hospital, the Frenchman Maurice Sauvard, in his report to the Foreign Medical Aid, of 24 July 1938, wrote that contact had been established with 'Dones de Catalunya' [Women of Catalonia] (Sauvard, n.d., doc. 30), by which Bré and Sauvard were probably referring to the organisation *Unió de Dones de Catalunya* [Union of Women of Catalonia], created in November 1937 with the aim of bringing together Catalan antifascist women. This organisation was modelled after the *Agrupación de Mujeres Antifascistas* [Association of Antifascist Women], created in 1933 to organise antifascist women throughout the Spanish state.

Bré's experiences at the Military Clinic of Vic led her to denounce the disorganisation that reigned in the kitchen service, during a visit made by Antonio Silva, a member of the Central Committee of the Spanish Communist Party: '...the kitchen had to secure hot water for medical care, hot water bottles for those who had been operated on, etc., it was a real drama to get the bare minimum of hot water' (Bré, 1948, p. 8). In Bré's words, the result of the complaint was that... 'after doing an investigation it turned out that the cook was a fascist, measures were taken against him' (Bré, 1948, p. 8), although we found no reference to the measures taken.

Bré's political work as a member of the French Communist Party allowed her to be part of a network that facilitated her efforts to improve organisation and workplace climate in line with the values of the International Brigades. In addition, her commitment to the party led her to work on behalf of women. Bré's political activism and her profession as a nurse reveal the Communist Party's contradictory attitudes toward women, seeing them as 'emancipated militants and, at the same time, as bearers of traditionally feminine values' (Branciforte, 2009). For example, at the Second National Conference of the Group of Antifascist Women, held in Valencia in October 1937, the Hungarian nurse Anne Marie (who may have been Annamária Révez [Guerra, 2003, p. 408]) incorporated into her speech the image of the nurse as a mother figure. In her depiction, international nurses substituted for Spanish mothers, caring for their soldier-sons in field or rearguard hospitals (Nuestra delegación en la conferencia de las mujeres antifascistas, 1937). The image of motherhood was also used by the Republican government to mobilise women against fascism (Nash, 2006, pp. 68–70), and the care provided by nurses helped to overcome mothers' resistance to having their sons sent to the front. Despite the reduction of women's role to that of motherhood, which was powerful in antifascist propaganda, women like Fanny Bré continued to work as active members of the Communist Party, carrying out politico-cultural activities and strategies that contributed to improving the living conditions of the

wounded and of their nurses. In areas controlled by the Nationalist rebels, authorities also drew on the image of motherhood, but in this case, women only participated in auxiliary tasks that supported the war effort rather than being involved actively in politics, as on the Republican side (López, 2021, pp. 125–126).

5 | CONCLUSION

International nurses participated in the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) as a way to fight against fascism and to defend the Second Spanish Republic. Fanny Bré's account allows us to observe the political value that she attached to care actions during the war, illustrating the political nature of nursing care more generally. This political view of care, shared by other nurses of the International Brigades, expands our understanding of what motivates nurses to volunteer to work in armed conflicts. While nurses in other conflicts have often been motivated by patriotic feelings, the motives of Fanny Bré and others were internationally oriented. Bré and colleagues, through the care they provided, were working against fascism and the risk of a global conflict (which was already on the horizon and which eventually culminated in World War II). As we know, political structures—broadly conceived—condition who is able to provide and receive nursing care and what form that care will take. In this sense, Bré's story is a striking example of the interplay between politics and care: when Bré used her political contacts and savvy to advocate for patients and for the development of the nursing profession, she was simultaneously advancing an international political cause: the fight against fascism. The case of Fanny Bré invites further reflection on the intertwining of politics and care in other times and places to arrive at a fuller picture of political activism by nurses.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data derived from public domain resources: The data that support the findings of this study are available in the document 'Supporting information'.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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