Literary Mediation and Reception of Memories of War: Hallgrímur Hallgrímsson's 'Under the Republic's Flag'

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In 1941 a short text with an unusual story was published in Reykjavík. Its reception and afterlife in Icelandic literature are no less unusual and, we think, worth exploring as a case study in the workings of the cultural memory of a nation coming to terms with its entrance on the international stage. The text was called *Undir fána lýðveldisins* [Under the Republic's Flag] and was the autobiographical account of Hallgrímur Hallgrímsson (1910–1942), a young Icelandic labourer and communist, of his experiences as a member of the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War in 1937 and 1938. This text, although it is not particularly well known today and has not been the focus of any major study, has inveigled itself into Icelandic literature on war and trauma time and again since its publication, thus becoming part of cultural memory in a particular way. In this paper we aim to address Ann Rigney's question what role literary texts play in the formation of cultural memory by tracing the trajectory and transformation of Hallgrímsson's text in Icelandic literature and public memorial culture from 1941 to 2001 and beyond, adopting Rigney's diachronic perspective into the genesis and reception of the work in order to examine its role in 'memorial dynamics'.¹

Hallgrímur Hallgrímsson was born in 1910 in the eastern part of Iceland. He moved to Reykjavík in 1930 and became a member of the Communist Party and a union activist. He first came to the attention of the media and the authorities when he climbed on board the German cargo ship *Eider* while it was moored in Reykjavík harbour in 1933 and cut down its swastika flag. He went on to fight with the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) for two years in 1937 and 1938, and on his return he wrote long articles on his experiences which were published in a left-wing newspaper. He was jailed in 1941 for his part in the so-called 'flyer-case', where Icelandic union activists distributed flyers among British soldiers occupying Iceland at the time, warning

1 Ann Rigney, "Portable Monuments: Literature, Cultural Memory, and the Case of Jeanie Deans," *Poetics Today* 25: 2 (Summer 2004): 362.

them from taking on jobs while Icelandic workers were on strike. This, the government decided, amounted to inciting the soldiers to revolt against their superiors, and Hallgrímsson was jailed for his part in this for eighteen months, but was set free after eleven months in prison. It has been conjectured that the harsh sentence he received for what seems like a minor offense was in part retaliation by the government for his fighting in the Spanish Civil War, an act which the authorities had made illegal.² While in prison, he collected his articles and turned them into a book, which was published in August 1941. Shortly after being released from prison he was a passenger on board the fishing boat *Sæborg*, which disappeared off the east coast of Iceland after leaving harbour and was never seen again. It is thought that it was hit by a German mine – of which there were many in Icelandic waters at the time. His short life and fate is thus intimately entwined with world events at the time.

The text of *Undir fána lýðveldisins* is a gripping and well-written narrative. It is clearly focused and concentrated on Hallgrímsson's journey to Spain, his experience of the war and his journey back, with a few asides about the political and global situation at the time. Hallgrímsson explains in a brief introduction to the work that he 'is not a poet' and thus has made no effort to 'fictionalize' events even though those events 'could have been "imposing" if I had ridden Pegasus across the battlegrounds in the mountains of Aragon and vineyards of Catalonia.' Instead he chose to refer 'only to that which I experienced myself or had confirmed news of.'³ Despite his protestations of not being a poet, the text is carefully written and compelling. He has a particular knack for describing people and the physical environment and is able to convey complicated turns of events during shambolic and confusing battle scenes. Although he focuses very little on his inner life, he expresses convincingly his viewpoint of people, places, war, etc., throughout. The narrative is generally in chronological order with a clear focus on events, but there are instances towards the end of the text that show a more fragmentary type of narrative, describing a dreamlike state when the experiences he has had wash over him on the slow and arduous journey back across the French border:

Not to retreat, just replaced. – Sierra Caballs in good hands. Division de Campesino. – Away from the fire, to the hinterland, al la retaguardia. – Rest, rest, Descanso. – Reorganización? – Repatriación? – Going

2 Róbert Sigurðarson, *¡Viva la República! – ¡Viva la libertad! La participación de islandeses en la Guerra Civil Española*, BA-thesis in Spanish Studies, University of Iceland, February 2014, 34.

3 Hallgrímur Hallgrímsson, *Undir fána lýðveldisins* (Reykjavík: Björn Bjarnason, 1941), 7–8. All translations from Icelandic texts are ours.

home? – Out on the hill, looking out. – The boys' state of mind. – Morale. – Fighting morale, moral de combate. – A hurt mule in the valley, a kicking mule on open ground. – Machine gun fire from the summit. Rad-ad-ad-ad-ad.⁴

These descriptions represent disjointed but pressing memories in a mixture of Icelandic and Spanish: memories of particular events, but also the repetition of certain concepts and phrases that echo in his mind. These pages are, however, exceptions in the text. It is also interesting to note that the terms that he uses from the military and the war have carried on in other Icelandic works on the Spanish Civil War, including the novel by Álfur Gunnlaugsdóttir discussed in this chapter. In an appendix entitled 'Explanations of military terms,' Hallgrímsson points out that when 'an Icelander reads a war book, he constantly comes across words and concepts which he either does not understand at all or to a limited degree, – because we are a nation without an army and most things military are alien to us.'⁵ He is thus acutely aware that his military experience and knowledge is highly unusual in Iceland, as will be discussed further below.

The contemporary reception of Hallgrímsson's book is highly illuminating as regards the historical and political circumstances of the time. It seems that only one review was published, in a left-wing newspaper, and that a couple of newspaper advertisements for the work appeared. However, we have not been able to find any contemporary interviews or detailed articles on the work or on Hallgrímsson's experience. His obituary, which came only a year after the book was published, is in some way part of the reception of the work. All appeared in left-wing papers and all emphasized Hallgrímsson's idealism and his commitment to the fight against fascism. Einar Olgeirsson, the leader of the Icelandic Socialist party, says in Hallgrímsson obituary: 'The Icelandic state gave him a year's time in prison and took his human rights away, this man of all people, who had risked his life, almost the only Icelander to do so, to protect human rights against the attack of fascism.'⁶ Thus, the circumstances of the national politics at the time, Hallgrímsson's own particular circumstances (he was in prison when the book was published), his Communist credentials, they all colour the contemporary reception of the work.

There are several aspects of the reception of the text and the public discourse relevant to it that denote particular national frameworks. First, it is often not

4 Hallgrímsson, *Undir fána lýðveldisins*, 206.

5 Hallgrímsson, *Undir fána lýðveldisins*, 237.

6 Einar Olgeirsson, "Hallgrímur Hallgrímsson," *Þjóðviljinn*, 10 December 1942.

a discussion of the ideals or motivation to take up arms that is at the forefront of the reception of the writings of Icelanders who fought in the Spanish Civil War, but simply the fact that they had become soldiers – be it in the news of wounded men and how they generally fared, or in right-wing historians' notions of how they were being trained to take up arms for the communists in an expected revolution in Iceland.⁷ In order to understand the views and attitudes involved, we need to establish some historical facts. Iceland has never had its own military forces, and taking up arms was thus completely alien to people. During the first half of the twentieth century in particular, the idea took root that Iceland had always been a peaceful country without arms. For many people, peace and pacifism came to characterize Icelanders and Icelandic history, and they became part of collective memory and the national self-image. This idea crystallized in the 'neutrality' clause of the 1918 sovereignty agreement between Iceland and Denmark, where permanent unarmed neutrality became Iceland's official security policy. As Pétur Guðmundur Ingimarsson points out in his study on arms and security in Iceland during the struggle for national independence:

For many Icelanders there seems to have been a connection between the idea of neutrality and the idea of sovereignty. Sources from the 1930s also mention for instance the pacifism of the Icelandic general public, which the socialists were fighting for, and which included an antipathy to any kind of militarism and war.⁸

This also explains the complete shock of the Allied occupation of Iceland in World War II, when thousands of soldiers flooded the country.

The other point that needs to be made is that Spain was an incredibly important market for Icelandic goods before the Civil War, with a third of the country's exports from 1921 to 1935 going to Spain. Thus, as so often is the case, trade brought about transnational influences in places one would not necessarily suspect at first sight; alternative routes of memory across the Atlantic in this case. As Astrid Erll has pointed out, transnational memory not only pertains to our globalized world, but 'has a long genealogy' and it is 'a perspective of memory that can in principle be chosen with respect to all historical

⁷ See for instance Þór Whitehead, *Sovét-Ísland: Óskalandið* (Reykjavík: Ugly, 2010).

⁸ Pétur Guðmundur Ingimarsson, "Vopnlaus þjóð," BA-thesis in History, University of Iceland, 2011, 4. See also Guðrún Björk Guðsteinsdóttir, "Rediscovering Icelandic Canadian Pacifism," *Rediscovering Canadian Difference*, ed. Gudrun Björk Gudsteins (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2001), 50–60.

periods and with a view to both the synchronic circulation of representations (e.g. of “traumatic pasts”) as well as to the diachronic dimension of memory.⁹ This very important trade also influenced the attitude toward the Falangists in the right-wing press in Iceland. The Left often accused the Right of being in the clutches of the capitalists, which meant that markets mattered more than the fight against fascism. The fish traders tried, for instance, to get the Icelandic government to acknowledge Franco’s regime in early 1939, before the dissolution of the Spanish Republic, but were forced to wait until later that year.¹⁰ An indication of the importance of this market (which, we have to note, had been in decline for some time before the war), was when an Icelandic official was sent to Barcelona to secure deals in the middle of the shelling of the city in 1938, and then sent over to Burgos to attempt to sell fish to the Francoists.¹¹ The trade with Spain was thus of prime importance and obviously influenced the way in which the war was viewed, and also meant that Icelanders were better informed on Spanish politics than one may have assumed. Whether it has had any effect on how the war is remembered sixty years later is another matter.

In his study of the Spanish Civil War in contemporary newspapers in Iceland, Aitor Yraola explains that ‘the civil war had both a direct and an indirect impact, which caused upheavals and changes in society in the three years the war lasted.’¹² He also points out that news from the main events of the war was not censored or silenced, so Icelanders were relatively well informed. The ideological stance of each paper, however, dictated their sympathies with one or the other side.¹³ As Stefán Svavarsson notes, the Icelandic papers published sharp missives and debated the issues hotly in a manner which was later to characterize their writings during the Cold War.¹⁴ Thus, the reporting on the war was highly partisan, and the positions taken by each side, as well as the very sharp division between the Left and the Right that were to characterize Icelandic journalism and culture up until the very end of the Cold War, had already become prominent.

This is not to say that there was no censorship at all during this time. According to Yraola’s account the state radio had planned to broadcast a lecture by

9 Astrid Erll, “Traumatic Pasts, Literary Afterlives, and Transcultural Memory: New Directions of Literary and Media Memory Studies,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, vol 3 (2011): 5.

10 Stefán Svavarsson, “Spænska borgarastríðið í íslenskum samtímaheimildum,” *Sagnir* 26 (2006): 52.

11 Svavarsson, “Spænska borgarastríðið,” 52.

12 Aitor Yraola, “Íslensk viðbrögð við spænsku borgarastyrjöldinni,” *Skírnir* 163 (1989): 363.

13 Yraola, “Íslensk viðbrögð,” 374.

14 Svavarsson, “Spænska borgarastríðið,” 52.

Hallgrímsson on his experiences during the war in 1940, but it was postponed indefinitely as, at the time, the government was involved in negotiations with the Franco regime on the future of cod exports to Spain, and it was considered that the radio lecture might have a detrimental effect on the negotiations.¹⁵ Thus, it is evident that trade can both foster transnational memory and stifle or repress such discourse if it threatens that trade.

The third point that needs emphasizing is the stranglehold that the partisan outlook mentioned earlier had on politics, discourse and culture in Iceland in the postwar years. Claire Gorrara has pointed to the fact that, in post-war Europe generally, 'the politics of the Cold War conditioned, distorted or, in some cases, silenced processes of remembrance and commemoration of the past',¹⁶ and Iceland was certainly no exception: almost every single discussion was framed in partisan terms, and every 'national' memory seen in those terms until 1989. And to this day, partisan historiography has the power to re-ignite the debate, as did, for instance, the publication by right-wing historian Þór Whitehead on 'Soviet-Iceland', in which he claims that those Icelanders who fought with the International Brigades had in fact been sent there by the Soviet Union in order to train them for an armed revolution in Iceland. Jón Ólafsson, a philosopher and specialist in all matters Soviet, has argued that no documents (now accessible in Russian archives) support any of these claims – and thus the contest for a definitive version of national history continues.¹⁷

Fictions of Hallgrímsson

Guardian Angels

Two years after the publication of Hallgrímsson's memories in book form, and a year after his death, the novel *Verndarenglarnir* [The Guardian Angels] was published, the first work of fiction to have the Allied occupation of Iceland as its main topic. The author was Jóhannes úr Kötlum (1899–1972), a poet who originally had achieved recognition for his patriotic and nature poetry but whose work had become more socially engaged and revolutionary during the Depression. Like Hallgrímsson, Jóhannes úr Kötlum was a union activist and

15 Yraola, "Íslensk viðbrögð," 373.

16 Claire Gorrara, *French Crime Fiction and the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 7.

17 Þór Whitehead, *Sovét-Ísland* and Jón Ólafsson, "Landráðakenning Þórs Whitehead: Nokkrar athugasemdir við ritið *Sovét-Ísland: Óskalandið*," *Tímarit um félagsvísindi* 5–6 (2011–2012).

a member of the Communist Party, but he was also a committed nationalist and pacifist. In his highly polemical novel, which presents a fierce critique of war-mongering in general and the occupation in particular, Jóhannes úr Kötlum reworks Hallgrímsson memories and experiences through the medium of fiction, and makes them part of the anti-war, anti-colonial, anti-capitalist message underlying the work.

The story centres around an Icelandic family from a traditional Icelandic farm which acts as a synecdoche for Icelandic society as a whole, with the various family members representing different ideologies and attitudes towards the war and the occupation. The novel opens with Haraldur, one of the farmer's sons. He was a volunteer in the Spanish Civil War, fighting with the International Brigades and has recently returned, physically and mentally maimed: he is blind in one eye and suffers from amnesia and delusions. He no longer remembers his time in Spain as a soldier, but clearly suffers from survivor's guilt: he believes himself to be the one-eyed god Odin, looking for a way to bring his fallen warriors back to life. This opening scene featuring Haraldur is remarkable for several reasons. With no history of war or war literature on which to base his story, the author looks, firstly, to the old Icelandic texts relating the mythological tale of Ragnarök, where the gods fight their final battle against the forces of evil, and, secondly, to Hallgrímsson's recent experiences as a soldier in the Spanish War, which he weaves together to create the first work of fiction about the Icelandic experience of twentieth-century war. Furthermore, it represents the first attempt in Icelandic literature to mediate war trauma, an attempt that was not again pursued by an Icelandic novelist until several decades later.

As we discover in the course of the novel, Haraldur is the only survivor from a battle in which all his fellow soldiers were killed. The memory of this is so painful to him that it makes him physically ill and sets off his delusions. Clearly, he suffers from war trauma: he cannot remember the actual experience, yet he relives it over and over again through his delusions. According to trauma theory, the traumatic experience itself is beyond understanding and beyond language, it cannot be known or described, it is a memory that cannot be accessed yet continues to haunt its victim.¹⁸ The fragmented, obsessive nature of the final part of Hallgrímsson's original text quoted earlier can be seen as indicative of the traumatic nature of his memories. Lyndsey Stonebridge has pointed out that the idea that an impression can be both experienced and forgotten

18 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London: Routledge, 2008).

is central to trauma theory: 'trauma divides the mind not only from itself, but also splits it in time.'¹⁹ Although he lives with his parents and grandmother at the farm, participating in regular farm life routine to an extent, Haraldur does not really inhabit chronological time: his every thought and individual action revolves around the obsessive search for 'his' (Odin's) ravens. It was Freud who found evidence of how the psyche 'tried to master trauma retroactively by reliving unconsciously a catastrophe which could not be experienced fully first time around.'²⁰ Haraldur needs to believe that he is Odin, so that he can return to the battlefield every night to bring his fellow soldiers back to life: this is the only way in which he can reconcile himself with what has happened.

The Icelandic experience of World War II, however, was not one of battle but of military occupation by friendly forces, which raises the question why Jóhannes úr Kötlum would include traumatic experiences of the Spanish Civil War in his novel, and in such a prominent way. The most obvious answer seems to lie in the anti-war message of the novel. Hallgrímsson's experiences in Spain provided a recent, poignant example of the horrors of modern warfare from an Icelandic perspective. They demonstrated that even Icelanders, with their centuries-old history of peace, were no longer immune from wars elsewhere: the bellicose actions of the larger powers in the world now also affected them. As was mentioned earlier, Icelanders, with only a very few exceptions, had no direct experience of war. The horrors related to them in the media had always remained abstract. The initial reactions of many Icelandic people to the occupation of their country, in some cases naive, in others opportunistic, clearly were a source of grave concern for those who felt that the British military presence represented a breach of Iceland's declared everlasting neutrality and, rather than protecting Iceland, had dragged it into the war by making it a target. While the novel's allusions to Norse mythology turn the occupation into an event of apocalyptic dimensions, its fictionalized memories of Hallgrímur Hallgrímsson become a terrifying warning of the effects of war based on Icelandic experience, a war that was brought to Iceland against its will. Haraldur is an example of what will happen to Icelanders if they become involved in war. An important aspect of war trauma is to encounter an alien part of the self, not least the part that kills others, thereby destroying the fantasy of the self as peace-time subject.²¹ By becoming a soldier, Haraldur becomes, by extension, a killer. Thus, Jóhannes úr Kötlum transforms Hallgrímsson's narrative

19 Lyndsey Stonebridge, "Theories of Trauma," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of World War II*, ed. Marina MacKay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 196.

20 Stonebridge, "Theories of Trauma," 197.

21 Stonebridge, "Theories of Trauma," 197.

of his personal experiences into a moralizing story, offering a powerful image of recent events 'for ethical consumption' in the present.²²

Considering the strong pacifist stance of the novel's author it is noteworthy that both Hallgrímsson and the novel's character based on him, Haraldur, chose to join the Spanish Civil War as volunteers, fighting against fascism and for revolutionary change. In this respect, Hallgrímsson's model presented Jóhannes úr Kötlum with an ideological dilemma: he abhorred any form of war, but he was also a communist who strongly supported the cause of the worker and the fight for a better world. The reasons for Haraldur's participation in the war are played down in the novel. Significantly, the emphasis is, instead, not on the fight against fascism, but on the deception of the great powers, Great Britain in particular, for obvious reasons: the British were the original occupying force in Iceland. Much is made of the fact that, during the Spanish Civil War, they betrayed the International Brigades, as a result of which many were killed, among them Haraldur's fellow soldiers, and the war was lost. Great Britain and the other great powers are thus the enemy in the novel, at least on the surface: they are the symbols of belligerence, colonialism and capitalism. The Icelandic people on the other hand are their peaceful, innocent victims. This black-and-white picture is based in Icelandic partisan politics at the time. It reflects communist discourse, where the capitalist powers constituted the main enemy, but also nationalist discourse, which regarded Iceland as a powerless victim of foreign aggression throughout its history. From both perspectives, the Allied occupation of Iceland was seen as a profound betrayal of Iceland and everything it stood for.

This simplistic picture belies the complexity of the novel, however. Jóhannes úr Kötlum does not try to avoid the uncomfortable complications posed by his comrade's experience. Hallgrímur Hallgrímsson and the cause he stands for are betrayed by politics: the Spanish Civil War was lost not least because of power struggles and in-fighting among the leftist forces themselves. This is what happens in the novel as well. While the great powers and the foreign military are symbolic of an abstract enemy, the real enemy is to be found closer to home, personified in the novel by Haraldur's twin brother. Hákon is the novel's main villain: he is unrepentantly and unredeemably evil. He is not a soldier but a greedy opportunist who will support whichever cause he thinks will benefit

22 Rigney, "Portable Monuments," 380, 382. Rigney here relies in part on Hayden White's argument that there is a structural affinity between 'narrativizing' events and moralizing them, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

him. Before the occupation he supported Hitler, now he is an ardent supporter of the British. He works for the occupying forces, which makes him one of the wealthiest men in Iceland. He exploits his Icelandic workers, paying them wages with which they can barely feed their families. Significantly, he does so in happy co-operation with the leader of the workers' union. To complete his villainy, he pleads with his father to sell all his farmland to the British. Thus, Hákon is the enemy inside who betrays his country and his people, including his own family, to gain power and money.

The third brother, Máni, is the character in the novel who is betrayed by his own cause and his own leaders. At the start, he is an idealistic revolutionary poet trying to compose an ode in honor of Iceland's independence. When Iceland is occupied by the British army he is overcome by anger, frustration and guilt: not only has Iceland lost its independence again before even having gained it fully, it has been drawn into a world war by the great powers, and without any Icelander standing up to defend it except a few drunks by the harbour who are quickly arrested by the Icelandic police. On the contrary, most of his countrymen seem to welcome the occupiers and are in a rush to work for them, even the workers who are opposed to the occupation, as they can hardly live off the wages paid by Icelandic companies. Máni is dismayed and tries to convince them to fight for their rights rather than pave the way for the occupying forces. He is desperate to help them in their fight and comes up with the idea of appealing to the common soldiers in the army, who are also only pawns in the power games of the capitalists. He writes a flyer urging the soldiers not to do the work of striking Icelandic workers who are fighting for a fairer deal.

Thus, Jóhannes úr Kötlum fictionalizes Hallgrímsson's fight for workers' rights at home in Iceland in the form of a separate character in the novel. Like Hallgrímsson, Máni and his friends are arrested and sent to prison – although Máni's sentence is more dramatic and symbolic: he is transported to England. On board the army ship, as he sees Iceland disappear from view, Máni ponders the betrayal of the Icelandic government, willing to sell out its citizens to a foreign prison in order to protect the interests of the rich and powerful. And it is this betrayal that eventually convinces Máni to join the Red Army as a volunteer to fight for a better world. Considering that Máni clearly is the author's representative in the novel, his decision to take up arms despite his brother Haraldur's painful experience is remarkable. The 'flyer case' plays a crucial role in this respect: the betrayal of the capitalist establishment is considered to be of such a magnitude that it convinces even a profound pacifist like Jóhannes úr Kötlum to turn his fictional alter ego into a soldier, following Hallgrímsson's example in real life. This seems to suggest that, in the end, Jóhannes úr Kötlum may have seen it as inevitable that Icelanders would eventually be driven to

become active participants in war, now that the world and its wars had imposed itself on them. They have lost their innocence and become killers in a world characterized by deception and betrayal. This message is underlined in the rather melodramatic central tragedy of the novel, where the otherwise quiet and gentle Haraldur, in a fit of delusion, mistakes his sister's baby for a British officer and, considering it a representative of the British Empire, kills it.

Jóhannes úr Kötlum's novel thus constitutes a fictional mediation of Hallgrímur Hallgrímsson's memories and actions in the larger context of World War II and the British occupation of Iceland, all of which posed dramatic challenges to Icelandic identity and national self-image. Like Hallgrímsson's writings, the novel received few reviews, all of them political, and have since largely been forgotten. Its three original reviewers and, later, literary historians, focus primarily on the political message of the work, its anti-war critique, the communist views of the author and the nationalist polemic against the detrimental influences of a foreign military presence in Iceland, as well as its obvious flaws as a work of literature. The fact that it also constitutes the first Icelandic novel grappling with the fictional mediation of events and experiences which had not been dealt with in Icelandic literature before has gone largely unnoticed.²³ Cold-war partisan politics and its aftermath have meant that the challenging questions raised by Hallgrímur Hallgrímsson's experiences have not yet become part of the general discourse, as no serious study of his work, or of the influences he has had on for instance Jóhannes úr Kötlum's work exists. Instead it disappeared from view, from cultural memory, only to reappear at the start of the next century.

Across the River Ebro

The main protagonist in Álfrún Gunnlaugsdóttir's novel *Yfir Ebrofljótið* [Across the River Ebro] says at the beginning of the book:

It is strange how quickly wars are forgotten, people think first and foremost about rebuilding and erasing traces and in the end it is as if nothing has happened. Horrors are at best turned into ceremonies with speeches, marching bands, and flowers. They are buried everywhere, the boys from the Republican army, and not all of them in a graveyard. It is highly unlikely that one chances upon their graves with flowers.²⁴

23 See Daisy Neijmann, "'Óboðinn gestur.' Fyrstu birtingarmyndir hernámsins í íslenskum skáldskap." *Skírnir* 185 (2011). *Verndarenglarnir* was reviewed at the time by Kristinn E. Andrésson, Sigurður Helgason, and Sverrir Kristjánsson. It has been discussed since by Kristinn Kristjánsson, Sigbrúður Gunnarsdóttir, and Dagný Kristjánsdóttir.

24 Álfrún Gunnlaugsdóttir, *Yfir Ebrofljótið* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2001), 35.

Gunnlaugsdóttir's text is published in 2001, a crucial moment for 'historical memory' in Spain. It is the same year that Javier Cercas' novel *Soldados de Salamina* (2001; *Soldiers of Salamis*, 2004) is published, the first among many bestsellers in Spain on the Civil War and the Franco regime. It is also the time when, as Francisco Ferrándiz explains, Spain has 'seen the emergence of a surprisingly strong social movement, loosely founded on the idea of "recovering historical memory".' He explains that the 'recovery movement,' which has never failed to spark controversy, mostly focuses on: '(1) locating graves and exhuming corpses of the victims of Franco's repressive policies, both during the Civil War (1936–1939) and after Franco's victory, and (2) recording oral testimony from victims and relatives, mostly in digital video format.'²⁵ The exhumations have sparked controversy and debate, but the reappearance of these victims in the media through photographs has also meant that '[t]he buried bodies the graves contain have turned into *mute protagonists*, but extraordinarily significant, in the process known as the "recuperation of historical memory" in Spain in the twenty-first century.'²⁶ The bodies have come back to haunt Spanish society, and thus opened up the past, forcing a new negotiation of remembering/forgetting.

Gunnlaugsdóttir's protagonist, directly based on Hallgrímur Hallgrímsson, is, interestingly, also called Haraldur. What is more, he addresses his story to 'Máni,' in this instance not a personal name but the Icelandic word for the moon. These names alone thus establish a direct textual link between the two earlier mediations of Hallgrímsson's experiences. This novel, however, does not view these experiences in a contemporary setting but is retrospective for the most part. Haraldur is an old man who, alone in his Reykjavík flat, revisits his memories of his time in Spain, fighting with the International Brigades during the Civil War. Like Haraldur in *Verndarenglarnir*, he returned from the war with physical and mental injuries. He can no longer use his left hand (is it purely a coincidence that it should be his *left* hand?), and he has tried to forget everything concerning the war as the memories are too painful, even though this means that he betrays his promise to his friend Andrés before he died, that he would testify to what really happened.

Having reached old age and starting to lose his memory, however, Haraldur is beginning to realize that he needs to tell his story. Thus the novel goes back

25 Francisco Ferrándiz and Alejandro Baer, "Digital Memory: The Visual Recording of Mass Grave Exhumations in Contemporary Spain," *Forum: Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research* (Online Journal) 9.3 (2008): Art. 35, par. 10.

26 Francisco Ferrándiz, *El pasado bajo tierra Exhumaciones contemporáneas de la Guerra Civil*, Memoria rota. Exilios y Heterodoxias. Serie estudios 51 (Barcelona: Anthropos, 2014), 36.

and forth between past and present as Haraldur remembers. The descriptions of his experiences are extremely detailed, demonstrating the complexity of this war and challenging any black-and-white view. At the same time they are deeply personal, giving the reader an intimate insight into the personal experience of a large historical event which has overshadowed Haraldur's life ever since.²⁷ The emphasis in the novel is therefore not least on the consequences of these experiences: how does one continue to live with the trauma of war, the memory of fallen friends and the betrayal of ideals? Although the fascists and Nazis are the enemy that Haraldur and his fellow soldiers are fighting on the ground, the real enemy in the novel is politics, which will betray anyone and everyone.

The Icelanders who saw the horrors of war first-hand were very few in number. Those who made it back to Iceland had to try and readjust to everyday life in a society for which the war had meant unprecedented prosperity and progress rather than atrocities, suffering and starvation. This made the readjustment all the more difficult, as their experiences did not fit into Icelandic reality. In Iceland, there was no public story or memory of war veterans, war heroes or survival against the odds. While it is true that Haraldur himself tries to forget, it is just as true that there is no one who understands, believes, or even wants to listen to his story anyway. This becomes painfully clear when his brother-in-law, who does not know the first thing about war, accuses Haraldur of having betrayed his ideals. Instead, Haraldur concludes, people 'prefer to live with deception,' for 'the truth disturbs the peace.'²⁸

One Icelandic who experienced the horrors of the concentration camps was Leifur Muller. On his return he published his memories (*Í fangabúðum nazista* [In the Nazi concentration camps], 1945), which were re-written, expanded and re-published in 1988 (*Býr Íslendingur hér?* [Does an Icelandic live here?], with Garðar Sverrisson). In the later edition, Muller looks back not only on his time in the camps but also remembers what it was like to live with this experience, before and after camp syndrome and PTSD became recognized.²⁹ While Gunnlaugsdóttir relies on Hallgrímsson's memories for the descriptions of the war in Spain, she integrates Muller's experiences into Haraldur's account

27 Gunnþórunn Guðmundsdóttir, "Tregðan í frásögninni: *Yfir Ebrofljótið*," and Úlfhildur Dagsdóttir, "Flakkað um frásagnir: Minni, tími og stríð í skáldverkum Álfrúnar Gunnlaugsdóttur," *Rúnir: greinasafn um skáldskap og fræðastörf Álfrúnar Gunnlaugsdóttur*, ed. Guðni Elísson (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2010).

28 Gunnlaugsdóttir, *Yfir Ebrofljótið*, 436.

29 Leifur Muller, *Í fangabúðum nazista* (Reykjavík: Víkingsútgáfan, 1945); Garðar Sverrisson, *Býr Íslendingur hér? Minningar Leifs Muller* (Reykjavík: Íðunn, 1988).

of his life after his return from the war, for instance the fact that Haraldur always has clothes ready at the end of his bed in case he needs to get up in the middle of the night and leave.³⁰ Thus, the novel becomes, in Rigney's words, 'a fictional framework where different stories can be linked', as Gunnlaugsdóttir weaves together and re-mediate Icelandic memories of war, actual and fictionalized.³¹ Twenty years earlier, Gunnlaugsdóttir was the first Icelandic author after Jóhannes út Kötllum to write about traumatic war experience in an Icelandic context, in the short story 'I'. In this story, the figure of the soldier, and in particular his gun, becomes the trigger of both fascination and terror.³²

With her novel and earlier short story, Álfur Gunnlaugsdóttir contests Icelandic collective memory of both the Spanish Civil War and World War II. The Icelandic historian Guðmundur Hálfðanarson has pointed to the fact that World War II has been remarkably absent from Icelandic public consciousness and debate, and its discussion has remained quite low-key in Icelandic historiography. In Icelandic collective memory, too, World War II and the Allied occupation play only a very modest and muted role, as can be seen for instance from its virtual absence in Icelandic museum and public memorial culture. Hálfðanarson suggests this may be attributed to the fact that the Icelandic experience of World War II does not fit into the grand narrative of Icelandic history, which centres around the heroic battle for independence from foreign oppression, which in turn is considered essential for social and economic progress and welfare. During the war, however, it was in fact foreign occupation which brought wealth and modernity to the country and laid the foundation for the postwar development of Iceland as a modern nation. It is not least as a result of this that, in Hálfðanarson's words, 'interest in, or moral incentive of, rewriting the history of Iceland's participation in the Second World War, or to present an alternative narrative ... has been limited at best.'³³ Álfur Gunnlaugsdóttir on the other hand focuses on personal memory of the war, particularly memories which challenge the grand national narrative of, on the one hand, a military invasion by a foreign aggressor, and, on the other hand, the 'blessed war' that

30 Gunnlaugsdóttir, *Yfir Ebrófljótið*, 69, 360.

31 Rigney, "Portable Monuments", 378. Gunnlaugsdóttir published an extensive article based on her research into experiences of the Nazi concentration camps as related in three published memoirs (by Leifur Muller, Primo Levi and Jorge Semprún): "Í návist dauðans: frásagnir þriggja manna af dvöl sinni í fangabúðum nazista," *Ritið* 3.3 (2003).

32 Álfur Gunnlaugsdóttir, "I", *Af manna völdum* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1981), 7–14.

33 Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, "'The Beloved War.' The Second World War and the Icelandic National Narrative," *Nordic Narratives of the Second World War: National Historiographies Revisited*, eds. Henrik Stenius, Mirja Österberg, and Johan Östling (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2011), 89.

brought Iceland wealth, by placing it in a transnational context. In one interview after the publication of the novel, Gunnlaugsdóttir mentions the boom in memory texts in Europe and the interest in World War II at the millennium and confirms she is writing history from the inside, from the individual's perspective, through the lens of memory. As she explains:

The War had more impact on people than one thinks. People speak of the wartime lightly in Iceland, too lightly I think, because people were scared. The fear lives on with the children and has influenced the writers who want to review this period, even if simply for themselves. It is often said that people write to get rid of certain things [...] But my opinion is that if you forget the past something dies inside you. There are things that should not be forgotten, as that would be a sign of a certain type of death.³⁴

Here, the author clearly touches upon many issues with which we are familiar in the discourse on the millennial memory boom, but that had, until then and to a large extent since, remained outside the general discourse in Iceland. Interestingly, the interview was published in the newspaper *Morgunblaðið*, the same right-wing paper which supported Franco during the war and which usually has had very harsh words to write about those who fought with the International Brigades.

Seen in this light, one could say that the memorial process represented in *Yfir Ebroyfjótíð* through Haraldur represents an attempt to fragment a monolithic national narrative by rendering subjective experiences of war in the larger context of transnational memory. Textual ghosts from a past the nation has chosen to forget because they did not fit into the grand narrative of Icelandic history are brought back to life. Haraldur never wanted to 'bring the past back on himself';³⁵ only to realize in old age that it has continued to haunt him and has alienated him from those closest to him. His decision finally to tell his story is the long overdue testimony he had promised his dying friend. By bearing witness at last, he challenges deception and demands recognition on behalf of those whose suffering has been ignored and whose experiences and sacrifices have been forgotten. Similarly, the novel, in its fictional mediation of Icelandic memories of war, bears witness to 'forgotten' stories and experiences in national history and literary history, this time in the more receptive transnational

34 Fríða Björk Ingvarsdóttir, "Það veitir mér meira öryggi að leggja út í óvissuna," interview with Álfrún Gunnlaugsdóttir, *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins*, 22 December 2001.

35 Gunnlaugsdóttir, *Yfir Ebroyfjótíð*, 436.

context of the memory boom and the recognition of symptoms and long-term effects of war trauma.

It is significant that the novel ends with Haraldur, on his way home, thinking that he 'didn't know, and didn't want to know. That within a few months a world war would break out and the realm of death would take over. As it had in Spain under Franco.'³⁶ These final sentences directly link the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War, one directly following the other. These two international events catapulted Iceland into the modern age and into modern war. From this moment on, Icelanders had a share in international war, and had to face the fact that, as a nation, whether they liked it or not, they were no longer peace-time subjects 'north of war,' but participants in world events.³⁷

The publication of *Yfir Ebrofljótið* in 2001, twelve years after the fall of the Berlin wall, meant that an overwhelming sense of relief of finally leaving Cold War politics behind was still palpable in the country. It is, for instance, striking that the left – right, communist – fascist discourse is barely mentioned in the work, despite its centrality to the work itself, and neither are the trade interests. Instead, the novel clearly aims to rekindle forgotten memories among new generations of readers living in a global world and exposed daily to transnational memory through media such as literature, film, popular culture, social media and the Internet. This new readership has grown up with Iceland being a participant on the international stage, and is therefore much more likely to be receptive to viewing Icelandic memory in a transnational context and to explore the reverberations of world events at home in a new light.

It comes therefore as no surprise that the reception of Gunnlaugsdóttir's novel was very different from the works of Hallgrímsson and Jóhannes úr Kötlum. Other factors of course play their part in this, notably changes in the media: the advance of new media, the fading of partisan journalism and the advances in cultural journalism. The novel was widely reviewed in newspapers, magazines, literary websites and on TV and radio. It was nominated for several literary prizes, the most prestigious of which was undoubtedly the Nordic Prize for Literature. It seems to garner continued interest, for instance as the subject of a literary program on Icelandic National Radio in 2015. Its legacy, whether it will be constitutive of war memory in Iceland, is harder to gauge at this point in time.

³⁶ Gunnlaugsdóttir, *Yfir Ebrofljótið*, 456.

³⁷ 'North of war' (*Norðan við stríð*, 1971) is the title of an Icelandic occupation novel by Indriði G. Þorsteinsson which is structured on the trope of Icelanders always having believed their country to be too far removed ever to become a part of international wars.

Memorialization of Hallgrímur Hallgrímsson

The lack of any discourse on the memory boom in Iceland might perhaps lead one to believe that the country had not witnessed such a boom. This, however, would not be quite accurate. Ketill Kristinsson has studied, mapped and investigated the history of trauma memorials in Iceland in the twentieth century. He has travelled around the country, listed the memorials, their location, the year in which they were built, and their 'character', that is, the movement as seen elsewhere from the monumental to the memorial.³⁸ His chart of the building of memorials around the country demonstrates abundantly that Iceland followed many other countries in Europe and elsewhere in this matter. The huge increase in the building of memorials from the 1980s and onwards is unmistakable, as is the change in their form and location. The memorials mainly memorialize fishermen and others lost at sea, as well as those killed in natural disasters, in particular in avalanches which have contributed to a great loss of life in small villages in Iceland. One such memorial is the Memorial to Drowned Seamen in the Fossvogur Cemetery in Reykjavík. The history of the memorial is interesting, as it is in part based on one of the earliest trauma memorials erected in Iceland. The original was built in 1938 on the Tomb of the Unknown Fisherman in a clear echo of tombs of the unknown soldiers erected across Europe in the wake of the Second World War. There are no Icelandic war memorials (although there are foreign war memorials in Iceland); instead Icelanders have tended to regard those lost at sea as their fallen heroes. In 1996 additional structures were added to the memorial: low walls called the Waves of Memory. Here, relatives of those lost at sea could pay for their names to be edged on the 'wave' stones under a heading with the boat's name and the year in which it perished. In 2005 the Minister of Fisheries, Árni Matthiesen, supported the initiative to add the names of those who had been lost at sea during World War II, the first time a particular group had been specifically memorialized, paid for by the public. On one of these 'waves' the ship *Sæborg* and its crew can be found, with the name of Hallgrímur Hallgrímsson edged in the stone. Hallgrímsson's story has thus come back to haunt us, his story has become one of the stories that call on us to remember. Maybe it to a certain extent exemplifies Iceland's political, geographical and cultural situation in Europe: being very much on the margins, but nevertheless intricately involved in central events.

38 Some of the results are discussed in Ketill Kristinsson, "Eyrnamörk gleymskunnar: Nokkur orð um minnismarki," *Ritid* 13.1 (2013).

It is interesting to note that, while Hallgrímur's name on the memorial awards him certain recognition, it is only for his death at sea, not for his participation in the International Brigades or his fight for workers' rights. Outside of his literary contribution he is, in other words, only recognized as a victim, not an agent, and only within the context of public memorial culture in Iceland, which is, of course, tied to the grand narrative of Icelandic history. It is the literary works, which memorialize him and his 'afterlife as textual monuments' in Rigney's terms,³⁹ that provide the social framework for the memory of him as an active agent, a soldier, an Icelandic participant in an international conflict.

Conclusion

'Under the Republic's Flag: Memories from the Spanish Civil War' by Hallgrímur Hallgrímsson constitutes an intriguing example of a 'forgotten' text that refuses to go away. Its afterlife as a textual monument of personal memories and experiences that did not fit into the monolithic founding myth of the modern Republic of Iceland clearly demonstrates how, in Astrid Erll's words, 'the nation-centredness ... approach ... "forgets" the history of exchange within Europe.'⁴⁰ It makes it very obvious that memory of war and occupation, as well as trauma memorials are very much under-discussed and under-researched in Iceland, and need to be brought into the discourse of the past. Icelandic historiography, collective memory and national self-image have not yet undergone the kind of revision that has happened elsewhere, and a clear tendency to view Icelandic events and experiences almost exclusively from an Icelandic point of view remains. At the same time, Hallgrímsson's text has been the source of repeated attempts at 'reactualizing' his memories at important points in Icelandic history, always contesting the dominant national version of history and claiming recognition, a place in cultural memory. The afterlife of Hallgrímsson, in the form of various re-workings and re-interpretations of his memories, constitutes a poignant example of the formative role of international events in Icelandic history, personal and national, as well as of what can be gained by integrating national and European memory.

39 Rigney, "Portable Monuments," 372.

40 Erll, "Traumatic Pasts", 1.

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