

# Re-editing the Pacific War in Franco Newsreels (1941-1945)<sup>1</sup>

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The portrayal of the Pacific War was an unprecedented case in the history of the newsreel as the Allies and Japan mobilised the best operators and filmmakers and the most advanced film equipment of the time. Japan had a prolific newsreel industry which was dominated during the second-half of the 1930s by the main national news companies, *Mainichi*, *Asashi*, *Yomiuri* and *Dōmei* News Agency. Their production doubled with the outbreak of the war in China year, shifting from 195 newsreels before the “incident” to over 510 prints a week at the end of 1937. The competition among the four companies ended with the enactment of the Film Law (*Eiga Hō*) of 1939, which established that newsreel operations were combined into one company. In April 1940, the new Nihon News Film Company launched *Nihon News* (*Nihon Nyūsu*) whose screening was compulsory. This allowed the Japanese government to control information but also consolidated the production of non-fiction in Japan.

The vast amount of images shot by Japanese operators widely circulated across the world and became part of other editions overseas, including the German *Deutsche Wochenschau* newsreel, and even the enemy’s propaganda, such as the sixth episode of the *Why We Fight Series* a series, *The Battle of China* (1944), in which Frank Capra and Anatole Litvak used Japanese footage to explain the Nanking Massacre perpetrated by the Japanese army in 1937. Spanish newsreels became a privileged witness of this worldwide circulation images. They narrated the events of the Pacific War mostly with scenes shot by Japanese operators which reached Spain through Germany via *Deutsche Wochenschau* newsreels.

While unlike Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and the Portuguese Salazar Dictatorship, the Japanese government did not assist the military uprising against the Spanish Republic, it officially recognised the rebel government in December 1937, when the outcome of the



Spanish Civil War was yet to be decided. After three years of the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), Franco Dictatorship maintained good relations with the Japanese Empire during the early years. As a consequence, newsreels were unmistakably aligned with the Japanese stance. The most significant reportage of this period is *Un Año de Guerra en la Gran Asia Oriental* (*One Year of War in the Great East Asia*, a version of the German *Ein Jahr Krieg in Gross-Ostasien*,

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1942). This nineteen-minute piece consists of a voice-over elaborating a historical review of the last one hundred years, during which Japan is portrayed as constantly under siege by Britain and the U.S. The British colonies in China and the American possessions of Hawaii, Midway, Wake, Guam and the Philippines are depicted as a systematic march on Japan. As a consequence, the Japanese expansionism is regarded as a defensive act. The last part of the reportage presents the Japanese army “liberating” Burma in 1942 from the Western powers.

However, by February 1943, the Axis armies were in clear retreat and to guarantee the survival of his regime, Franco had no choice but to change its foreign policy in order to be in a better position before an increasingly probable Allied victory. The Spanish government officially transformed its ambiguous “non-belligerency”, which placed Spain at the threshold of entering the war, into “neutrality” in October 1943 and with caution, Franco initiated an apparent “defascistisation” of the dictatorship. Among other measures, the *Blue Division*, a unit of Spanish volunteers sent by to the Eastern Front to fight alongside the German Army was dissolved in November 1943. The fascist party *Falange* gradually lost power on press and propaganda and the new person in charge of the National Department of Film (*Departamento Nacional de Cinematografía*), Gabriel Arias Salgado, implemented a pragmatic propaganda strategy, shaping the representation of the war according to the developments in the world. From 1<sup>st</sup> January 1943, all newsreels and documentaries were banned and a new newsreel *NO-DO (Noticiarios y Documentales)* became the only one to be seen in Spain for the following four decades.

Unlike Japanese and German proactive propaganda, which needed to mobilise masses for the war, *NO-DO* sought to demobilise its audience. *NO-DO* visually projected the government’s contradictory strategy of approaching the Allies with a calculated ambiguity, trying a singular portrayal of World War II which fitted Franco’s idea of the three wars: First, the Eastern front between Germany and the Soviet Union, in which Spain was pro-Axis. Second, the European theatre between the Axis and the Allies in which Spain was neutral. Third, the Pacific War in which surprisingly, Spain was now pro-Allies. The changing stance towards the events in Asia was represented with a combination of footage shot by Japanese operators and that obtained by American and British operators working for *Fox Movietone*, which gained increasing prominence as the war moved forward. Adding material coming from the U.S. not only had political implications but also a powerful visual effect, showing events from the other side of the front. However, *NO-DO* did not take advantage of this circumstance to offer more accurate information of the war. On the contrary, the Spanish newsreel often pursued a misleading function by presenting decontextualised images, such as *Guerra en el Mar*, no. 33A, which is comprised of scenes on a battleship which one would guess is American, however, it is not mentioned where it is and against whom it is fighting either.

*NO-DO* continued using footage from the Japanese *Nihon Eiga-sha* newsreels such as in *Desembarco Japones en Islas Aleutianas (Japanese Landing at Aleutian Islands)*, a version of a *Deutsche Wochenschau* newsreel which was originally comprised of scenes filmed for *Nihon News* no. 174 entitled *Yamazaki butai gōdō ireisai (Yamazaki Military Units Memorial Service)*. This piece featured Colonel Yasuyo Yamasaki conducting a military

ceremony in a valley in the island of Attu, the Aleutian Islands, in March 1937 without providing any significant information about the developments of that front.

The next newsreel on Japan, *Desfile Hirohito (Hirohito's March-past)*, no. 46B, marks a change in the depiction of the Pacific War in Spain. This piece, which probably belonged to *Nihon News* no.136 titled *Daigensui heika shinrin rikugun hajime kanpei-shiki (His Majesty's New Year Military Review)* shot at Yoyogi Park, Tokyo, on 8<sup>th</sup> January 1943, fitted better within the views of traditionalist and monarchist elements of the Spanish Regime and shifted away from the fascist *Falangism*. *NO-DO* continued using German newsreels containing news about Japan, only to select the least newsworthy, such as training of candidates for the Japanese Marines in no.60; news recalling tourist reports, such as no. 99B portraying the Japanese parliament, Himeji Castle, sport competitions and children practising gymnastics; and citizens looking an eclipse with telescopes in no. 103B.

During the last months of the war in 1945, the sources used to edit *NO-DO* newsreels about the events in Asia changed dramatically and German/Japanese footage was completely replaced by American/British news. The last newsreel about the Pacific War shown in Spain was *Victoria sobre Japón (Victory Over Japan, NO-DO no.142A)* which announces the Japanese defeat and operates the definitive shift to transform the Japanese Empire into an enemy. *Victory over Japan* was released after Franco opportunistically declared war on Japan in 14 April 1945, using the Manila Massacre as a pretext. The film attempts to change the Spanish interpretation of the conflict retrospectively and offers a chronicle of all stages of the war through which the Japanese Empire is now represented as a bloodthirsty perpetrator of numerous war crimes. It starts with the occupation of Manchuria while the voice-over states, "Japan, the first of the aggressive nations of this war leapt fourteen years ago into an international campaign of conquest and plundering". This piece continues with an account of Pearl Harbour, which had never before been tackled in Spanish newsreels and is heavily criticised as "an unseen savage and infamous blow". However the aforementioned efforts to show through the newsreel rupture points with the Axis were enormously contradictory. Franco never removed his support for Hitler, and in fact, while Japanese defeat is openly depicted in this newsreel, the entrance of the Red Army into Berlin was never shown in Spain.

In conclusion, rather than a study of events, historical approaches to these images should take into account that newsreels are a product of their time. They are after all ideological constructions, however, far from being an obstacle to obtain insight into the past, their manipulations can provide relevant knowledge of the context in which they were used. To that end, it is crucial to understand that images travelled across the world and their meanings were adapted, renewed and eventually perverted in that journey. Newsreels are subject to synchronic interests of any kind and as a consequence, they are shaped by an everlasting process of creating meaning. Assessing this phenomenon helps to explain why this delocalised usage of images of the Pacific War tell us more about the changing interests of the new Spanish Dictatorship than about the events in Asia they are supposed to represent.

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