

**"You fight your own wars.
Irish defence of the Spanish Republic
at war. 1936-1939."**

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1. INTRODUCTION

The 1930s were a very political decade in Europe. As Eugene Downing put it: “It was a time when you had to be interested in politics, whether you liked it or not.”¹ Indeed it was a time when powerful and conflicting ideologies were on the rise everywhere.

On the one hand, the extreme right successes were embodied by the accession to power of Nazi Hitler and Fascist Mussolini. From demonstrations of physical force - street fighting, beatings of political opponents, March on Rome - to an aggressive use of power - Abyssinia, Anschluss - these movements showed their inexorable strength.

On the other hand, a reactionary movement to Fascism appeared. This anti-Fascist wave accompanied the progression of the left. The rise of militancy expressed itself in record levels of union membership and strike activity but also in the emergence of Popular Fronts, which were also symptomatic of the period. At the same time, the USSR had grown into a major power. Its influence was largely felt outside its closed frontiers, through the work and positions of the official Communist Parties, associated with the Third Communist International. The rapprochement of the Communist parties with social-democratic parties in the form of the Popular Fronts was a result of this.

Each European country witnessed these developments from within, as nearly everywhere there was a national variety of these antagonistic movements.

Be that as it may, the climax of this confrontational decade did not involve the foreign superpowers Nazi Germany and the USSR directly. The climax was reached in a peripheral country, with peripheral movements which were not directly linked either to Soviet Communism or to Nazism or pure Fascism. Franco’s side, as much as that of the Spanish Republic involved a wider range of political sensibilities than affiliation to a single doctrine. The variety and the complexity of the Spanish political reality resulted in the conflict being easily simplified to suit national representations. The two sides each other in Spain were to be found more or less everywhere else in Europe. They epitomised the dual confrontations of each country. This was the case in Ireland.

The debates over the fate of Spain soon led to the policy of Non-Intervention, with the different governments hoping this would be a rampart against a generalisation of the conflict outside Spain. This uneasy response was very quickly overcome by the strong reaction of the rank-and-file. In France, the subject was the cause of the demise of the Blum government, torn between Popular Front *camaraderie* and international diplomatic demands. In that, the creation of the International Brigades was a public defiance of national governments and international agreements.

Ireland’s response to the Spanish Civil War was a very peculiar one considering European responses as a whole. The moderate De Valera government, while agreeing to the European consensus of Non-Intervention, tended to favour the Nationalists. Irish society, clearly under the ever powerful Catholic Church, in its majority, supported Franco as the defender of a Catholic faith - thought to be in danger of eradication with the rise of progressive, Socialist or Communist movements. The general acceptance of the Spanish civil war as one between Catholicism and Communism owed much to the national press’ coverage of the events. This overwhelmingly pro-Franco atmosphere saw with overall approval the departure of 600 Irishmen to help the Nationalists. Those few who enrolled in the International Brigades did not receive the same judgement from their fellow countrymen. That there were more men leaving Ireland to fight on Franco’s side than on the Republic’s was in no way the case in other European democratic countries – only Germany, Italy and Portugal could claim this balance of enlistment for

¹ “España go bragh”, *The Tribune Magazine*, 25 February 1996, in ILHS archives.

Spain. In the midst of pro-Nationalist consensus, the Irish Labour movement – trade unions and Labour Party – in a majority followed the mainstream vision and did not voice, as its sister organisations did elsewhere in Europe, their support for the Spanish trade unionists and Socialists who were part of the Republican base. In this the Irish Labour movement also participated in the peculiarity of the Irish response. Hence the interest for that small section of the Irish population who took up the cause of the Spanish Republic.

Who were these hard-core supporters? What was the nature of their activity in Ireland and in Spain? What was the significance of their supporting the Spanish Republic in such a hostile context as the Irish one? What traces did they leave? This is the purpose of this dissertation.

Firstly, we will analyse the origins of the Irish left and the birth of the Spanish Civil War to best understand the various responses of the multiple Irish left on these events. Secondly we will deal with the efforts put in place by the Irish supporters of the Spanish Republic in a country that was very inimical to their trend and the cause they had chosen to fight for. Thirdly, we will focus on the experience of the Irish volunteers who risked their lives in enrolling in the International Brigades and travelling to Spain and their posterior celebration in Ireland.

PART I – THE IRISH LEFT AND THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

The 1930s was a key period all over Europe. As a result of economic crisis, most European countries witnessed new developments in their political lives, often characterised by the rise in support for the left – the “Front Populaire” in 1936 in France, “Frente Popular” in Spain, and the ever-increasing power of the USSR – while the far right spread in Italy, Germany, Spain, France and other countries. From 1936 onwards, these antagonistic movements opposed each other in a three-year long civil war in Spain. Local though the conflict might have been its echo in Europe was thunderous.

Ireland was no exception. The disturbances created by the Blueshirts, Ireland’s Fascist movement, mirrored the spread of Fascism at a European level. The Irish left was in a period of renewal, attempting to link Republicans and Socialists. This decade was also that of the triumph of Fianna Fáil, which would be Ireland’s most important party for decades to come.

In order to effectively analyse the Irish left’s response to the Spanish civil war, it is important to understand both the state of the movement in the thirties and the issues involved in the conflict.

The Irish left in the 1930s

Radical thinking in Ireland is the fruit of different traditions, theoretical bases and actions. Following the turmoil of the Civil war, Republicans and Socialists were obliged to redefine their objectives and reorganise their forces. However, radicalism had always been marginal on the Irish landscape and the political climate did not permit a real change in that trend.

Origins

The specificity of Irish history, which had been that of a colonised country since the 12th century, implied the emergence of a strong nationalist movement. Ireland had to deal with two currents of revolutionary thinking: national liberation and socialism. These trends did not appear concurrently, nationalism coming to existence before socialism. Their perspectives are quite different but Irish socialists tried to link the two struggles at different times.

The National struggle

Ireland underwent its first Anglo-Norman invasions in 1169. In 1609, the Ulster plantation was established mainly by Presbyterian Scots. The Reform having already taken place in England, the new settlers thus differed from the Catholic natives. This Protestant ascendancy quickly came to prevail over the Irish and was the source of religious sectarianism which would be a prominent feature in Irish political life for years to come. The Irish were deprived of the ownership of their main means of subsistence - their land. “By 1685, the settlers had expropriated nearly 80 per cent of the land.”² They were also deprived of political power. The dominance of the British in Ireland was sanctioned by the proclamation of the Act of Union between Ireland and Great Britain in 1800.

From the end of the 18th century that situation began to be seriously questioned through the appearance of nationalist movements. In the mid-nineteenth century the Fenians and the Irish Republican Brotherhood fought for Irish independence. The impact of the Great Famine (1846-1847) contributed to the development of a separatist

² Liz CURTIZ, *The Cause of Ireland*, Belfast, Beyond the Pale Publications, 1.

spirit. These revolutionary movements remained uncommon but they mark the beginning of an Irish nationalist consciousness. By the end of the 19th century, nationalists were calling for Home Rule for Ireland, that is to say the need for Ireland to have her own parliament to deal with domestic affairs, leaving foreign and imperial affairs to the central parliament in Westminster.

Alongside this development of a national consciousness through political claims, some thinkers realised that Ireland was also losing her specific cultural traits – the Irish tongue was less widespread, its literature, history, myths, music and sports were falling into oblivion. This Gaelic revival spread, through the formation of leagues and associations – the Gaelic league was formed in 1893, and even though declared as non-political it contributed to the further development of a national sentiment.

In 1905 Arthur Griffith created Sinn Féin in order to unite all separatist movements under the banner of one party. Sinn Féiners stood for the establishment of an independent parliament which would enable the Irish people to take charge of their own economic policy. Sinn Féin opted for passive resistance and refusal to attend parliament in London.

In 1916, part of the greater nationalist movement, i.e. the Irish Republican Brotherhood and Connolly's Irish Citizen Army united under a common project: proclaiming the Irish Republic while England was at war (England's difficulty having always been felt as Ireland's opportunity by nationalists). The rising was scheduled for Easter 1916. While it was a military disaster and its leadership was comprehensively suppressed – death sentences were pronounced – the main goal of the rising was achieved: the emotion provoked by the event popularised the claim for an Irish Republic.

What was to follow was a period of great upheaval. The war of independence against Britain was fought by Republican forces between 1919 and 1921. The year 1919 saw the creation of the Irish Republican Army and that of Dail Eireann, the then illegal Irish Parliament. The outcome of that war was a new statute granted to Ireland on 6 December 1921 by a Treaty signed in London. The birth of the Irish Free State offered a certain level of independence (though not total, as Ireland was still a Dominion, TDs were to plead allegiance to the British crown and Britain keeps naval and military bases in Ireland) to only 26 of the 32 counties. A part of Ulster stayed completely under British rule. This settlement, far from satisfying a large fringe of the Republican population, was the basis for a division in Irish politics that is still alive today. Partisans and adversaries of the Treaty opposed each other in a year-long civil war (from the 28 June 1922 until April 1923). The pro-Treaty side eventually emerged victorious but its opponents were not ready to give up the fight.

1926 witnessed an important scission in the Republican movement. Eamon De Valera, one of the leaders of the 1916 rising, left Sinn Féin to create Fianna Fáil - he refused Sinn Féin's abstentionist policy. The objectives of Fianna Fáil were the reunification of the country and the advent of the Republic, the restored primacy of the Irish language and economic self-sufficiency. To achieve this and to make its voice heard, Fianna Fáil was ready to take up seats in the house of Commons in London. The new party came out largely victorious in the 1932 elections. In 1936 it was still in power and dominant on the political scene, De Valera being Taoiseach of the Irish Free State.

Throughout these years the Nationalist movement was constructed with both political and military wing, embodied by the Irish Republican Army. The great majority of these movements stayed focused on claims for national independence but never put forward their social policy. While claiming to cross the class barrier, they were directed for the most part, at the middle class or the bourgeoisie. That situation started to be questioned by the appearance of social Republicanism which opposed bourgeois Nationalism. Social Republicanism was inspired by Socialist theory and was going to be looked upon as a potential ally by the young Socialist movement.

While there had been some premise of Socialist thought in early Republicanism James Connolly was the person who introduced Marxist theory in Ireland. He set about heightening the Irish masses' awareness of their own condition at the turn of the 20th century. Through his work, actions and articles he instilled his analysis of capitalism which, according to him, relies on the exploitation of a majority, the working class, by a minority, the bourgeoisie. These two classes have conflicting interests and clash in what is called class struggle. The final objective of this struggle is the advent of Socialism, that is to say a system in which production is made according to the needs of the majority of the people and not for the profit of a few. This is to be achieved by common ownership of the means of production. The Irish situation presented a trait that was also to be related to capitalism as it was under the domination of England. This he defined, as did Lenin, as the supreme stage of capitalism. Indeed to develop, capitalistic countries need to acquire new markets in under-developed countries. That was the case with England over Ireland and other British colonies. The originality and novelty of Connolly's thought was that in a country where a movement to get rid of the British oppressor was already present he linked the struggle for national independence to the struggle of the working class. To him, one struggle cannot succeed without the other. In *Socialism and Nationalism*, he wrote:

If you remove the English army tomorrow and hoist the green flag over Dublin Castle, unless you set about the organisation of a Socialist Republic your efforts will be in vain... Nationalism without Socialism – without a reorganisation of society – is only national recreancy.³

As a revolutionary organiser, Connolly did not content himself with elaborating already existing theories. Active in trade unionism, he also set himself the task of organising a revolutionary party in Ireland. On 28 May 1896 he founded the Irish Socialist Republican Party which was the first explicitly Socialist party in Ireland. In 1913 he contributed, with others, to the creation of the Irish Citizen Army, a workers' defence militia designed to protect the strikers during the Dublin lockout. His participation in the Easter rising with the ICA, and his subsequent death, will rank him amongst the martyrs of the Republican cause, even though his objective was the Workers' Republic.

Another important figure on the Irish Socialist scene is James Larkin who was at the origin of the first trade union to be neither craft based nor affiliated to British unions. The Irish Transport and General Workers Union was created in 1908 in Belfast. In 1913, Larkin headed the Dublin lockout, the greatest strike Ireland had ever known.

Once trade unions had been accepted, the time was ripe for the creation of workers parties. However their life spans in the 1920s were very short and they never succeeded in attracting the masses which they sought to represent. Among others, the first Communist Party of Ireland was created on 9 September 1921 - it affiliated to the third Communist International (Comintern). William O'Brien and James Connolly's children, Nora and Roddy, were among its founders. On returning to Ireland in 1923 after spending 10 years in the USA, Larkin refused to join the CPI and founded the Irish Workers League in September 1923. Still the Comintern ordered the dissolution of the CPI. May 1926 saw the birth of another organisation, the Workers Party of Ireland, which was also dissolved by the Comintern. Its leaders supported Fianna Fáil in the 1927 elections.

These political difficulties spilled over into the sphere of the trade unions. Over a dispute with O'Brien, Jim Larkin's brother Peter broke away from the ITGWU and formed the Workers Union of Ireland in 1924.

³ Henry PATTERSON, *The politics of illusion, A political history of the IRA*, Serif, London, 1997, 13-14.

1926-1936: the revival of the left

In the aftermath of the Civil War, the Republican movement seemed quite divided, especially after the founding of Fianna Fáil. As has been discussed above, the Labour movement, while much smaller, was also affected by factionalism. The years that followed paved the way for reorganisation. This was a time when outside elements contributed to the extension of support for the left in Europe. This pattern was also partly true in Ireland. Other specifically Irish traits can also explain the interest in leftist ideas.

Reasons for left-wing support

After the 1929 crisis in the United States, the world economy fell into severe depression. In Europe unemployment was soaring and the bulk of the people suffered highly from this. Ireland faces similar difficulties. Both the Free State and Ulster experienced record levels of unemployment. The agricultural decline in rural Ireland was not compensated by any employment growth in urban areas or by help from relatives abroad:

as the 1929 slump cut off emigration outlets in the USA (between 1926 and 1930 over 90,000 had emigrated there), there was a major decline in the remittances which had helped many small farmers to eke out their living.⁴

Poverty was widespread as the shadow of unemployment brought wages down.

These economic difficulties were coupled with no better social conditions. In towns, especially in Dublin, people had to cope with extremely poor housing conditions: “in 1938, a survey found 60 per cent of Dublin’s tenements and cottages, containing 65,000 people, unfit for human habitation.”⁵

Ireland still had to solve the nature of its link with Britain. It was widely felt that British domination was persistent, especially in the country where, according to the Treaty, farmers still had to pay land annuities to the British government. Even though the new Fianna Fáil government decided to tackle the issue as early as July 1932, it did not stop farmers from having to pay - the ‘economic war’ waged with Britain only involved the retention of the annuities for the benefit of the State and impinged upon the small landowners. Another matter of grief was the existence of a “disunited nation” according to the words of Sean Murray⁶, i.e. a formally independent state in the south and a colonial one in the north. This situation made for the feeling of an incomplete revolution that did not free Ireland from her former oppressor.

Until 1932, Ireland was governed by W.T. Cosgrave, and his government was seen as conservative and anti-social. The *Workers’ Voice* labelled it “Cosgrave’s starvation government.”⁷ A peak was reached when the Coercion Act was passed into law - some Republican and working class organisations and papers were banned. This repression was the reason for much political turmoil. Indeed activists viewed it as a way to muzzle part of the opposition. The *Workers’ Voice* then called for protest against what it called “a Fascist dictatorship.”⁸

Riposte to Cosgrave could also have come from the Republican sphere but the IRA proved to have its own limits as a purely military organisation. Additionally, the reticence of part of its direction to take a political leadership created a difficulty. As a matter of fact, most Republican aspirations were vested in Fianna Fáil, at least to get rid of the Cosgrave government. However once in power, after its electoral success of 1932, Fianna Fáil somehow disappointed an important fringe of the Republicans and of the working class.

⁴ Henry PATTERSON, *Op. Cit.*, 52.

⁵ R.F. FOSTER, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972*, Penguin Books, London, 688p., 538.

⁶ MURRAY, LARKIN, Mac KEE and the Communist Party of Ireland, *The Irish Case for Communism*, Cork, The Cork Worker’s Club.

⁷ NAI-JUS, File 8/691.

⁸ *Ibid.*

The simultaneous rise of Fascist bodies targeting working class organisations was the cause of fear as it was perceived as a potential threat to leftist organisations. It was an enticement for many to get involved in political activity.

Manifestations

After breaking from Sinn Féin and the second Dáil in 1925, a division occurred within the IRA concerning whether it should continue to act on a purely military level or weigh in on a political level as well. That question was raised recurrently during the 1930s. The prospect of military action being out-of-the way, many IRA units got involved in non-military activities. Under the influence of some radical characters, like Peadar O'Donnell, the army took a left-wing turn. From 1927 on, many IRA units took the lead in the campaign against land annuities, which had triggered off a year before in Donegal. According to Henry Patterson, this "agitation [...] attempted very clearly to link Republican objectives to a major social and political issue."⁹

In April 1931 the IRA made an attempt to create a political opposition by setting up a new organisation, Saor Éire, "to organise the 'revolutionary feeling' it believed was growing because of the economic crisis."¹⁰ Its programme, adopted at the IRA convention, went much further than usual, and used a much more radical rhetoric. Its avowed goal was "to achieve an independent revolutionary leadership of the working class and working farmers towards the overthrow in Ireland of British Imperialism and its ally, Irish Capitalism."¹¹

Following Fianna Fáil's victory, the IRA's motto was "Give Fianna Fáil a chance". But soon bitter disappointment within the army was felt against Fianna Fáil policy. In 1934 at the IRA Ard Fhéis (convention) a proposition was made to create a united front of the forces on the left, as an alternative to Fianna Fáil and to strongly oppose the far right. The proposition was defeated by only one vote. The followers of the proposition walked out to create Republican Congress in 1934. They included Nora Connolly-O'Brien, Michael Price, Frank Ryan, George Gilmore and Peadar O'Donnell among others.

Republican Congress, in its Athlone manifesto, proclaimed itself "so revolutionary that its achievement means the overthrow of all the existing political and economic machinery which at present holds this country and our people in subjection."¹² This united front – it was not a party - comprised of former IRA officers, leading members of Cumman na mBan¹³, non-organised Socialists, members of the Communist Party of Ireland and trade unionists. For the then CPI,

it represents a coming together on a common ground for action of the most militant elements in the nationalist labour movements around the question of the struggle against Fascism and the immediate economic issues of low wages, unemployment, child labour, bad housing etc.¹⁴

Republican Congress wanted to tackle the issues it felt were not dealt with either by the Government or by the IRA itself.

At the same time the Irish Labour movement seemed to be consolidating, with the development of basic working class organisations. Trade unions saw a rise in militancy and membership, with the recrudescence of strike activity, especially after Fianna Fáil's access to power.¹⁵ The climax was reached in Dublin in 1935: a

⁹ Henry PATTERSON, *Op. Cit.*, 37.

¹⁰ Brian HANLEY, *The IRA, 1926-1936*, Dublin, Four Court Press, 2002, 14.

¹¹ Sean CRONIN, *Frank Ryan*, p.34, in PATTERSON, *Op. Cit.*, 57.

¹² Tim Pat COOGAN, *The IRA*, London, Harper Collins Publishers, 107.

¹³ A Women's Republican organisation.

¹⁴ MURRAY, LARKIN, Mac KEE, and the CPI, *Op. Cit.*, 44.

¹⁵ Kieran ALLEN, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, London, Pluto Press, 48-49.

bitterly fought strike by Dublin Tram workers ended with a substantial victory. The ITGWU described it as “the most stubbornly fought in 20 years.”¹⁶

From 1930 to 1933 the small Communist movement was organised through the Revolutionary Workers’ Groups and the Preparatory Committee for a Revolutionary Worker’s Party in Ireland. In 1933, the new Irish Communist Party is created. These groups were all linked to the Third International, and stood by the Soviet Union and its successive policies. The 1930 Workers Revolutionary Party manifesto stated that

the party is fundamentally opposed to all other parties, whether these be defenders of capitalism, or the more dangerous middle-class opportunists, trade union bureaucrats and social-Fascists, who mouth revolutionary phrases, the better to deceive the workers and working-farmers.¹⁷

Nonetheless, the 1934 CPI sought rapprochement with these formerly despised bodies. Actually this attitude just reflected the changes of the Comintern policy which between 1930 and 1935 moved from a ‘class against class’ action to the anti-Fascist united front policy which aimed at having “no enemies on the left”. The CPI was a small but quite influential group, with few but efficient members who were often active in other organisations. The IRA was a target of the CPI’s entryism, as were trade unions, often considered as too bureaucratic and not offensive enough. Their influence was also very clear in the Republican Congress.

This new militant spirit was also manifest in the multitude of rank-and-file organisations which appeared throughout these years, often under the direction of leaders from the former organisations (IRA, Republican Congress, CPI). Such was the case at least of the Tenants League, which fought against evictions and for the improvement of housing conditions, unemployed movements, especially strong in the North – the unemployed marches of 1932 were one of the first movements that united both Catholics and Protestants in a common struggle in Northern Ireland.

Resistance to the extreme right was also very typical of the period. Clashes between IRA men and the Blueshirts were very common and reached a peak in 1933 and 1934. For Patterson “the struggle against Irish Fascism would displace the anti-annuities movement as the main mobilising issue for Social Republicanism.”¹⁸ In a leaflet addressed to the workers of Dublin on 25 May 1933 the Irish Revolutionary Workers Group warned them that

[the Blueshirts’] real aim is to smash all forms of working class expression and organisation. They are the organisers of Hitler in Ireland. They are your enemies. [...] They seek to divide your ranks and set you at each other’s throat in exactly the same way as the orange leaders try to divide the workers’ ranks in the North. [...] Organise the United Front of Ireland’s toilers against the progromists! Down with the gangster agents of Hitlerism!¹⁹

Indeed the Communist movement tries to organise this resistance in a “united front from below.”²⁰ In its 20 January 1934 issue the *Workers’ Voice* stated: “This is the task now facing the whole working class; employed and unemployed, labourer and craftsman, housewife and clerk – the creation of a powerful combination of the working class against Fascism.”²¹ This took place through the creation of anti-Fascist organisations like the Labour league against Fascism (in January 1934) and reviving the moribund Irish Labour Defence League (in February 1934). These mobilisations gathered numerous people - on 6 May 1934 10,000 demonstrated against the

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁷ NAI-JUS, *Op. Cit.*

¹⁸ PATTERSON, *Op. Cit.*, 63.

¹⁹ NAI-JUS, *Op. Cit.*

²⁰ Donal Ó DRISCEOIL, *Peadar O’Donnell*, Cork, Cork University Press, 82.

²¹ NAI-JUS, *Op. Cit.*

Blueshirts.²² Violence against the Blueshirts also attracted new members in the ranks of the IRA but opposing them in the streets was actually not a policy endorsed by the leadership.

The revolutionary press appeared alongside these new movements. *The Workers' Voice*, the organ of the Communist movement, was first published on 5 April 1930. The radicalisation of the IRA became evident in its organ, *An Phoblacht*, the editorship of which successively fell to Peadar O'Donnell and Frank Ryan between 1929 and 1933.²³ Not long after its creation, Republican Congress also published its own paper, *Republican Congress*, which did not last long.

... remaining marginal

In spite of all the progress made, the left remains a very weak political force as such. Several causes can explain that fact.

A minority movement

First of all, Irish society was hardly a progressive one in the inter-war period. The influence of the Church on many aspects of political and social life was still very strong. As expected, religious authorities showed little sympathy towards these new groups. Keogh reminds us that on 18 October 1931 a joint pastoral was read in every church. It denounced

the growing evidence of a campaign of Revolution and Communism, which, if allowed to run its course unchecked, must end in the ruin of Ireland'. Saor Éire was condemned by name as a 'frankly Communist' organisation trying to 'impose upon the Catholic soil of Ireland the same materialistic regime, with its fanatical hatred of God, as now dominates Russia and threatens to dominate Spain.'²⁴

Anti-Communism became the focal point of the Church's discourse. In March 1933 Cardinal MacRory, primate of all Ireland, called for a united front against Communists.²⁵ "Socialism and militant Republicanism" were chiefly denounced in the February 1936 Lenten pastorals.²⁶

The response of the Church to the left clearly helped to legitimise a growing red-scare. Anti-Communism was not an attitude only held by right-wing supporters. As Maurice Manning puts it "opposition to Communism was part of the general consensus of Irish politics"²⁷, even in the ranks of Fianna Fáil and of the Labour Party.

This popular anti-Communism became blatant when actions were taken to intimidate presumed socialists, and disrupt their premises and meetings. These tensions came to a head in March 1933, the climax being mobs attacking Connolly House and the Workers' College in Eccles St. (The 'St Patrick's League Against Communism', whose object was "to supply strenuous and efficient workers to Anti-Communism cause", through "prayer and [reliance on] the Sacraments" and whose members "pledge[d] themselves to resist Communism and 'No God Blasphemy' to the end of their lives", claimed no link with these demonstrations and attacks.²⁸)

This red scare was especially heightened by the spread of right-wing movements, some of them with Fascist tendencies, whose main goal was to put an end to the influence of Communism in Ireland. The rise in

²² ALLEN, *Op. Cit.*, 53.

²³ *Eilis Ryan In Her Own Words*, 1977 interview by Aodh Ó Canainn, in *Saothar* 21, 132.

²⁴ *Irish Catholic Directory*, pp. 622 and 623, in KEOGH, *The Vatican, the Bishops and Irish Politics, 1919-1939*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 180.

²⁵ Uinseann Mac EÓIN, *The IRA in the Twilight years, 1923-1948*, Argenta Publications, Dublin, 238.

²⁶ Mike MILOTTE, *Communism in Modern Ireland: The Pursuit of the Worker's Republic since 1916*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 167.

²⁷ Maurice MANNING, *The Blueshirts*, Dublin, Gill and MacMillan, 1970, 235.

²⁸ NAI-JUS, File 8/711.

militancy on the left was actually paralleled and even outweighed by far-right activity. The figures provided by Brian Hanley are striking: the IRA counted between 12,000 and 14,000 members between 1932 and 1934 while at their height the Blueshirts had 48,000, i.e. four times more.²⁹

Another factor that prevented a real progression of the left was the hegemony of Fianna Fáil on the Republican fringe of the population and even on radical elements. “For most Republican supporters - the small farmers and workers – the most appropriate mixture of social objectives and nationalism would be that provided by Fianna Fáil.”³⁰ Links between the IRA and Fianna Fáil were quite hectic. If double membership was common until 1927, it was forbidden after that date. Fianna Fáil’s pledge to national independence through the building of national companies and attendance to the Dáil seemed to seduce the electorate. The promise to release Republican prisoners was another incentive. De Valera’s party came out victorious of the 1932 elections, getting 49.7% of the votes and 77 of the 153 seats.³¹ For Keiran Allen,

This was a period when a powerful myth developed on the Irish left that Fianna Fáil was a ‘progressive’ party. There was a belief that the party was highly pragmatic and, if it thought it sufficiently popular, would even embrace milder forms of socialism.³²

Internal divisions

The weakness of the left was not only due to external factors. This period was also characterised as one of divisions between socialists and Republicans and within the Labour movement itself. This inability to unite prevented its further development.

When the IRA turned towards the left and to Social Republicanism under the influence of Peadar O’Donnell, the whole army did not follow suit and *An Phoblacht* – the IRA paper – ended not reflecting the views of all members. The leadership and some local sections remained aloof, if not in opposition.

Despite the attempts made, unity between Republicans and Socialists never fully existed. Saor Éire existed without the Revolutionary Workers Groups and Republican Congress without the IRA. The IRA forbade its men to be members of Republican Congress or CPI. O’Drisceoil talks about a “purge against CPI members”³³ and some members of Congress were tried *in absentia* by the IRA military council. This widening gap between Republicans and Socialists became obvious at the 1933 and 1934 Bodenstown commemorations when the IRA tried to evince the Communists from the events by seizing their literature.

Neither current ever seemed to agree on which policy to advocate. If most rank-and-file IRA men saw a real point in opposing the Blueshirts - an activity which seems to have been the main one in 1933 for IRA members - this went without the assent of the leadership. This very point led to the split at the 1933 IRA convention, several members walking out and creating the Republican Congress.

However Republican Congress itself was also a theatre for disunity. Created with hope and confidence, its first general assembly on 29 September 1934 showed its lack of cohesion. Two motions were presented to the vote. One advocated the Workers’ Republic as its first objective (Michael Price, Nora Connolly) while the other one saw the Republic as a first step to be built on afterwards (O’Donnell, Ryan, Gilmore). The vote was tiny and O’Donnell’s motion was chosen. Half of the delegates walked out and left the new movement in a very frail state.

²⁹ HANLEY, *Op. Cit.*, 16.

³⁰ PATTERSON, *Op. Cit.*, 56.

³¹ J.J. LEE, *Ireland, 1912-1985, Politics and Society*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, 179.

³² ALLEN, *Op. Cit.*, 38.

³³ Ó DRISCEOIL, *Op. Cit.*, 81.

The Spanish Civil War

By July 1936 the Irish leftist movement, as well as the international left, had to take sides in a faraway conflict – the Spanish civil war. It seems essential to fully grasp where this civil war came from, what was at stake, what were the two opposed camps. Local though the conflict might have been it did have repercussions on neighbouring countries and even further. To what extent did it weigh on international relations? How did most countries respond to this conflict? These are also matters of discussion.

The Spanish Republic

Birth of the Republic

At the beginning of the century, Spain could still be considered a backward country. Its economy was far from flowing and it had not reached the development of other European capitalistic countries yet – it essentially relied on the primary sector and suffered from poor industrialisation. In 1931, 45.51% of its population worked in agriculture, 25.51% in industry and 27.98% in services.³⁴ Thus it made it difficult for that country to assert itself successfully in the world market – it could only export low added value products and still had to import expensive manufactured goods. In spite of that low insertion in global economy, Spain was affected by the world recession following the 1929 crisis. The *peseta* – the Spanish currency – was very weak. Between 1929 to 1935 it lost 44.7% of its worth.³⁵ In addition to this, the country suffered from huge regional disparities. If the country was not well industrialised, two of its provinces – Catalonia and the Basque country - made the exception, the former with a strong metallurgical industry, the latter with a variety of small textile businesses.³⁶ Contrary to the national average cited above, 45% of Catalonian active population worked in industry.³⁷ It also happened that these two provinces were places of strong nationalist sentiment, with powerful movements claiming desire for more autonomy from the central government in Madrid. On a social basis, Spain had to deal with a very important poor working class composed mainly of agricultural toilers who were not landowners – 67% of the land was owned by 2% of all landowners³⁸ - and that are often subject to casual working. Unemployment was also a main feature in Spain. In 1934, 700,000 Spaniards are unemployed.³⁹ These workers, who were in precarious conditions, were becoming radicalised and a force to be reckoned with.

These unstable economical and social conditions were mirrored on the Spanish political scene. The nineteenth century had been the theatre for military coups, the '*pronunciamentos*'. This tradition was to be perpetuated in the following century, the most successful one being that of Miguel Primo de Rivera who set up a dictatorship under the auspices of King Alfonso XIII from 1923 to January 1930. By December 1930, the authority of the King was questioned both by the people and part of the army. He announced elections to be held in on April 12. Across the country many pro-monarchy candidates were defeated. This was a severe blow to the King who decided to give up the throne. On 14 April 1931, the Second Republic was declared. The first government of the Republic, directed by Alcalá Zamora, set itself important tasks like land reform and Catalonian autonomy. This change of power fostered real hopes in the working class but tended to scare the bourgeoisie, the army and the Church. These two classes would alternately be heard in the following years, with more or less success. While the

³⁴ James CORTADA, *Historical dictionary of the Spanish civil war*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 1982, 403, "Article – Population".

³⁵ Hugh, THOMAS, *Histoire de la guerre d'Espagne*, Tome1, Paris, Robert Laffont, 1961, 441.

³⁶ Pierre BROUÉ, Émile TÉMIME, *La révolution et la guerre d'Espagne*, Paris, Les éditions de minuit, 1961, 21.

³⁷ VILAR, *La guerre d'Espagne, 1936-1939*, Paris, PUF, 11.

³⁸ Eddie CONLON, *The Spanish Civil War – Anarchism in Action*, Workers Solidarity Movement, PDF version 2001, [<http://www.struggle.ws/pdfs/spain.pdf>, validity date: 17 Jun. 04, 15:45].

³⁹ VILAR, *Op. Cit.*, 9.

working class mobilised its forces - strikes were regularly held all over the country, the Asturias revolt in October 1934 being the most popular one -, the right attempted to undermine the progress made. In August 1932, general Sanjurjo's *pronunciamento*, prepared by monarchists and soldiers failed. In 1933, the popularity of the Azaña government was declining. The November elections witnessed a large-scale victory by the right. The two years of government by the centre-radicals (Lerroux) and the right are commonly referred to as the '*bienio negro*' – the two black years. Indeed the newly elected government put a halt to the land reform and stood for strong repression against leftist activists. Lots of them languished behind bars, including some famous political leaders. In December 1935, this offensive government was shaken by a financial scandal. On 4 January 1936 the *Cortes* – the Spanish parliament – were dissolved and elections held on 16 February. This was an opportunity not to be missed by the left to come back to power. The Republicans grasped it under the form of the Popular Front agreement.

The Republicans and the Popular Front

In the 1930s, the Spanish left is not homogeneous. It is characterised by a variety of sensibilities and parties.

First of all, Spain differed from other European countries by the vivacity of Anarchist thought. In 1936, two million workers were organised in the ranks of the two main anarchist organisations⁴⁰: the Anarcho-sindicalist C.N.T. (*Confederación Nacional del Trabajo*) which was a powerful trade union and the F.A.I. (*Federación Anarquista Ibérica*), a federation of Anarchist groups in Spain and Portugal. Their biggest centres of activity were industrialised Barcelona, with its concentration of urban proletariat, and rural Andalusia. This working class movement tends to reject the State as a tool of oppression and thus traditionally refuses to take in elections. Many Anarchist activists were jailed after the numerous strikes that took place during the Republic. This would be an important factor for the Anarchists' position facing the February elections.

As for the parliamentary parties on the left, the main one remained the Socialist party, the PSOE – *Partido Socialista Obrero Español*. Its members were rather divided - while being an openly reformist party, many activists followed one of its leaders, Largo Caballero, in his newly acquired revolutionary tendencies. The Spanish socialists seemed to agree on one point only: rejection of the right.⁴¹ The PSOE was organically linked to the main trade union, the UGT (*Unión General de los Trabajadores*) which had 1,250,000 members at the beginning of the second Republic.⁴²

Contrarily to other European countries like France or Germany, and because of the strength of the Anarchist movement, the Communist party was in no way a real force. In 1936 it had only 30,000 members - its development during the civil war would only be due to the part the USSR will take in the conflict.

We have already seen that peripheral Spanish areas were inclined towards nationalism. Autonomist parties were powerful in these regions and they often worked with parties on the left. In Catalonia, Luis Company's *La Esquerra* – Catalan for "the left" – was essentially present within the petty bourgeoisie. The Basque nationalists within *Euskadi*, a party founded on a religious (Catholic), political and ethnical basis⁴³, were strategically, rather than ideologically linked to the left.

The POUM (*Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista*), an anti-Stalinist Communist party remained very small with its 3,000 members in July 1936. It was essentially settled in Catalonia.

In January 1936, in preparation for the upcoming elections, these parties - except *Euskadi* which ran for election on its own - united around a political agreement, the Popular Front. Its main points were the release of

⁴⁰ THOMAS, *Op. Cit.*, Tome 1, 23.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴² SKOUTELSKY, Rémi, *L'espoir guidait leurs pas*, Paris, Grasset, 1998, 24.

⁴³ BROUE, TEMIME, *Op. Cit.*, 36.

political prisoners, land reform, the restoration of Catalonian autonomy and negotiation of other regional statutes.⁴⁴ The program also called for “the further Republicanisation of legal and economic institutions.”⁴⁵ Nothing too radical though – the agreement did not mention any nationalisation programme, for instance. The Popular Front motto was: “*Pan, paz y libertad*”, i.e. “Bread, peace and liberty”. Even if they found the objectives of the Popular Front too moderate, the P.O.U.M. and the followers of Largo Caballero within the Socialist party agreed to the electoral pact for one reason – the amnesty proposed for the 30,000 workers that were still imprisoned after the political repression of the last two years. What’s more, the Anarchists did not spread their usual watchword of abstention for the same motive. It is believed that this brought one and a half million extra-voters to these elections.⁴⁶

In the February elections, the coalition led by Manuel Azaña polled 4,176,156 voices, the Basque nationalists 130,000, the Centre 681,047 and the National Front 3,783,601.⁴⁷ This slight difference according to voices turned out to be an overwhelming majority in seats in the *Cortes*. Indeed the Popular Front had 278 deputies while the National Front kept a small 134 and the Centre 55.⁴⁸ This victory led to the formation of the first Spanish Popular Front government. Azaña, member of the *Acción Republicana*, was first head of government and became President of the Republic in May.

In the country, and especially in the countryside, these results created an enthusiastic atmosphere. The amnesty law was adopted immediately and Catalonia regained her 1934-lost autonomous statute. However, the newly elected chamber was soon overtaken by people’s expectations. The huge demand for reform expressed itself through revolutionary actions. Here and there agricultural workers occupied the land, numerous strikes were held all over the country and some churches were burned. This situation was not to the taste of the right. The idea of a military rising started making its way in the most decided spheres.

Enemies of the Republic

The Nationalists

The advent of the Second Republic in 1931 was not welcomed in all parts of Spanish society. If land reform was expected by many agricultural workers, the few but powerful big landowners felt threatened by it. The secularisation of public life on an anticlerical mode – separation of Church and state, secularisation of teaching, introduction of divorce, expulsion of Jesuits etc. - was also badly felt by the Church and the right. The right also disapproved of the establishment of the autonomous statute granted to Catalonia. On the far right this new regime was said to be illegitimate. Distaste for the Republic was becoming blatant through the development of monarchist or fascist movements. Even through their diversity, these movements agreed on common values: deep attachment to Catholicism and the Spanish Church and opposition to Marxism.

In the 1930s, the former king, Alfonso XIII, still had advocates. The monarchists united around their leader, José Calvo Sotelo. His party, the party of Spanish renovation was authoritarian and corporatist. Calvo Sotelo did not hide his admiration of fascism. In July 1936 he was the leader of the extreme right in the *Cortes*.

Another branch of Spain’s far right at the time was Carlism. Dating back to the 19th century, this traditionalist movement of Catholic conservatives - directed by Manuel Fal Conde - had followers amongst peasants in Navarre and in the minor nobility. The Carlists were famous for having a tough paramilitary militia, called the ‘*Requetes*’.

⁴⁴ THOMAS, *Op. Cit.*, Tome 1, 139.

⁴⁵ CORTADA, *Op. Cit.*, 401, “Article: Popular front (Spanish).”

⁴⁶ BROUE, TEMIME, *Op. Cit.*, 61.

⁴⁷ THOMAS, *Op. Cit.*, Tome 1, 142.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 141.

La Falange was an openly fascist party created in October 1933 by José Antonio Primo de Rivera – son of the former dictator. Until February 1936 it remained small and not influential – only a few thousand members, 1,000 of which were in Madrid.⁴⁹ Primo de Rivera kept constant relations with the future leaders of the upcoming conspiracy and the well trained Falangists who were to play an important part in the Nationalist camp in the civil war.

The first two years of the Republic are dominated by Republican power. In 1932, general Sanjurjo's failed *pronunciamento* was only a first coup. Exiled in Portugal, he was going to be one of the leaders of the 1936 rising against the popular front government.

Opposition to Azaña was clearly heard in the 1933 electoral results. The coalition of the parties from the right was victorious and the newly born CEDA – *Confederación Española de Derechas Autonomas* – led by José Maria Gil Robles became Spain's most powerful party. Contrarily to the above-cited movements, "the CEDA represent[ed] the legal way of having access to power to prevent what they called revolution."⁵⁰ This conservative Catholic party stood for a "corporative organisation of the economy", and opposed land reform.⁵¹ However, on the left the CEDA was viewed as a pseudo-fascist party and when in 1934 three of its members won ministerial seats in the radical government, it provoked insurrections over the country.

In this highly Catholic country, the Church was a powerful body. In 1930 it had 20,000 monks, 60,000 nuns and 31,000 priests.⁵² The Church owned a great part of the land. It also owned many schools and was responsible for the education of many Spaniards. Devout though the Spanish people may have been, the Church's influence was on the wane. The Church's siding with the bourgeoisie and landowners – politically it supported the CEDA⁵³ – made or a growing anti-clerical feeling over the country.

The Army was characterised by distrust in governments following the serious losses and defeats it had previously suffered in colonial battles. The *pronunciamentos* were often fomented within its ranks. One of the first reforms of the Republic was to purge the Army of some of its too numerous officers by incentive measures. Only Republican officers seized this opportunity. Consequently, according to Broué and Témime: "l'écrasante majorité des cadres, la totalité des grands chefs sont résolument monarchistes, partisans de l'oligarchie, adversaires de toute évolution, ennemis mortels de la révolution."⁵⁴ General Francisco Franco was one of these. In 1934 he was in charge of the repression of the Asturian miners on strike. Proving very successful in this task, he was named commander in chief of armed forces in Morocco in February 1935. The Popular Front victory left him aside as he became military commander of the Canary Islands, far away from the main land.

The Republic besieged: "el movimiento" and the start of the Spanish Civil War

The idea of a rising against the popular front government emerged as soon as March 1936 in military circles. General Sanjurjo, still exiled in Portugal, was the initiator and leader of the plot. He was in contact with other generals in Spain: Franco in the Canary Islands, Goded in the Balearics and Mola, the military governor of Pamplona. The former being on the mainland, he was the one who was most in charge of preparing the conspiracy. "By May [...] Spanish Army officers [began] their serious plotting to restore a more conservative government which could count on the support of the Church, the middle class, and the aristocracy."⁵⁵ "Order, peace and justice" was the chosen motto of the movement. The centre of activity remained Morocco, where many veterans

⁴⁹ BROUÉ, TEMIME, *Op. Cit.*, 35.

⁵⁰ TUÑÓN DE LARA, *Historia de España, Tome IX, La crisis del estado : dictadura, república, guerra*, Barcelona, Labor, 1981, 176.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁵² THOMAS, *Op. Cit.*, Tome 1, 55.

⁵³ SKOUTELSKY, *Op. Cit.*, 23.

⁵⁴ BROUÉ, TEMIME, *Op. Cit.*, 28.

⁵⁵ CORTADA, *Op. Cit.*, 402.

were still positioned from the Rif battles. This conspiracy was not only military as it was also supported by monarchists, Carlists and the Falange.

In Republican Spain the agitation on the side of the working class and on the left was answered to by provocations from the right, especially from the Falange – one example being the attempt at bombing Largo Caballero’s house on 15 March.⁵⁶ A succession of killings between the Falange and the *asaltos*, a pro-Republican police created under the Republic, leads the *asaltos* to kill José Calvo Sotelo, now leader of parliamentary opposition, on 12 July. This event horrified the right and precipitated the setting of a date for the proposed rising. The insurrection took place on 17 July in Morocco. On that day Mola, Franco and Sanjurjo master Morocco, the Canary Islands and the Balearics. On the 18th, generals rose all over the country. They were successful in Leon, old-Castile, Galicia and towns like Burgos, Salamanca, Cadiz, Seville, Granada and Avila. However they were defeated in Madrid, Barcelona and industrial towns in the north. The entire Army did not side with the insurgents as some generals, officers and soldiers stayed faithful to the government - numerous mutinies took place, especially in the Navy. This unsuccessful *coup d'état* divided Spain into two zones and two camps - Nationalist and Republican - and marked the beginning of a 30-month long civil war.

International impact

The European context

Having faced a world war between 1914 and 1918 and still suffering from the consequences of the economic crisis subsequent to the 1929 crash, the Europe of the 1930s remained very unstable – economically, socially and politically speaking.

This instability favoured fascist tendencies all over Europe. The beginnings of Italian fascism correspond to the times of Rivera’s dictatorship in Spain - Mussolini came to power in 1922. His regime was to last until 1945. In Germany Hitler became Chancellor in 1933 and installed a National-Socialist – Nazi - regime. Portugal was under Salazar’s corporatist rule from 1932 onwards. These are not isolated cases as fascist governments were also in place in Hungary and Greece. Elsewhere fascist upsurges took place: Belgium, Romania, Yugoslavia, Great Britain - Mosley’s British Union of fascists -, France, Ireland – O’Duffy’s Blueshirts –etc.

The very existence of the Soviet Union was also a decisive trait in that Europe. This was a time when the USSR still enjoyed a large prestige among the working class. Through the Comintern the European Communist parties set policies and strategies decided on in Moscow. The tactic of Popular Fronts is one example of it - this policy adopted at the 7th Congress of the Comintern in 1935: an alliance of communist and social-democratic parties – formerly labelled as “social traitors” - and trade unions against fascism. Distancing itself from a project of world revolution and from its former motto “class against class”, it was also a way for the USSR not to be isolated on the international political scene: fearing the development of Nazi Germany and fascist Italy, whose strong anti-Communism could be a threat, the Soviet Union was seeking alliances with democracies against the fascist danger. In France the “*Front Populaire*” dated back to July 1935. It was adopted and published in January 1936 and emerged victorious from the May 1936 elections.⁵⁷ The formation of the Popular Front government brought about enthusiasm in the working class. Thus Spain in the 1930s can be seen as a mirror of the European political life, with a much polarised political scene.

Knowing the high price of war, democracies - such as France and Great Britain – had a real fear of European tensions and the breakout of another world war. This partly explains their response to the Spanish conflict.

⁵⁶ THOMAS, *Op. Cit.*, Tome 1, 153.

⁵⁷ LEFRANC, Georges, *Article : Front Populaire*, CD ROM Universalis 98.

Responding to the conflict: foreign intervention and non-intervention

Before the beginning of the civil war, Spain was already closely surveyed at by neighbouring countries. The generals' rising made it the focus of European discussions.

Each of the two camps in Spain hoped for support from European countries. The Nationalists, some of whom had been in contact with Italy and Germany before the conflict, immediately turned to Hitler, Mussolini and Salazar. As early as 25 July 1936, Germany and Italy decided on an intervention – furnishing arms, planes or even soldiers.

When Franco commenced his fascist revolt against the democratically elected Government of Spain in July 1936 it was with an army of 75,000 Moroccan troops (which was airlifted by the German Luftwaffe). To his aid came the Italian fascist dictator Mussolini with 100,000 troops and the Nazi German leader Adolf Hitler with 50,000 men. The Portuguese fascist dictator Salazar also supplied several thousand troops.⁵⁸

However, the case for the Republic differed slightly. Legal though the government might have been, it represented a progressive vision which was far from shared throughout Europe. What is more, the start of the civil war made the government unable to control the situation – insurrection on the one hand and revolutionary fever on the other hand. For instance, the Giral government was compelled to dismiss the idea of a regular Army fighting the rebels and had to give in to the trade unions and parties which started organising militias, which were the ones to arm the workers. Lacking arms in the Republican camp, the government called on to the “brother” French government on 20 July. Indeed, the two countries had a mutual agreement on arms and Blum had no doubt on which side he had to be. On the 24th French arms were delivered to Spain. However, this was a difficult position for France. The right and far right were completely opposed to any form of support to the Republic and even the Popular Front majority remained divided on the subject. On top of that, France wanted to maintain cordial relationships with Great Britain which refused to take position on the conflict. The Tories in power actually tended to favour the Nationalists to the Republicans. Even the British Labour party had trouble defining its position on the question. The USSR and Mexico were the only two countries that actually stood by the Spanish Popular Front.

By the beginning of August, the French government proposed a non-intervention agreement to other European countries. On 9 September 1936 the first meeting of the non-intervention committee was held in London.

The International brigades

In July 1936 many foreigners were present in Barcelona for the workers Olympiads - a counter event to denounce the official ones that had taken place in Nazi Germany. Some of the participants took part in the street fighting on 19 July and some were going to stay during the whole period of the war. Other foreigners happened to be in Spain for holidays and witnessed the beginning of the war – this was the case of Peadar O'Donnell. These witnesses, returning home, often organised meetings in support of the Spanish Republic. The Spanish Republic had also taken in political refugees from Germany, Italy, and Eastern Europe. These people were the first foreign volunteers to help the Republican camp. At first they were included in Spanish brigades. News of the rising spread very quickly and individuals made their own way to Spain. For them it is a way to challenge their countries' involvement on what they saw as the wrong side, or to overcome non-intervention to defend the imperilled

⁵⁸ Manus O'RIORDAN, *A 50th Anniversary Lecture and Record Recital - Irish and Jewish Volunteers in the Spanish Anti-Fascist War* at the Irish Jewish Museum, Dublin, 15 November 1987, <http://members.lycos.co.uk/spanishcilwar/MoR1.htm> [added 28 Jul. 2000].

democracy and revolution. As foreigners grew more numerous they become organised according to nationality or language criteria.

At first the Spanish government was not favourable to the arrival of foreign volunteers. However, considering the absence of support the Republic got from other countries and the need for a stronger Army the government eventually accepted the idea on 22 October.

The necessity for proper organisation and commandment of the foreign volunteers was rapidly felt. The Comintern, first more inclined to consolidate its diplomatic relations with England and France, finally saw its interest in helping the Republican camp and was instrumental in talking the Spanish government into the need for the creation of International Brigades. The chosen base of the International Brigades was Albacete where the brigadiers were supposed to receive basic political and military training. The commander of the base was André Marty, a French Communist. It is believed that more than 35,000 brigadiers from more than fifty countries came to help the Republicans, organised in 23 battalions which formed 6 brigades. The peak of recruitment was reached in January 1937 when about 600 – 700 new volunteers arrive in Albacete each week. The influence of the Communist International in the International Brigades is undeniable. It provided for many senior officers, leaders, arms and political direction. It is the Communist parties all over the world that carried out the recruitment of the brigadiers.

Michael Jackson cites three justifications for the existence of the International Brigades: provide a model of military efficiency, to defend Madrid and to be a moral example of the cause of anti-fascism.⁵⁹ Indeed the men and women who made their way to Spain from abroad were often experienced volunteers – who were either in charge of the training of brigadiers and Spanish militiamen, or in commanding offices in the International brigades or in the popular army. Many of them were veterans of World War One or former officers from their national army. However, the appeal of the Spanish fight also attracted many untrained activists in the ranks of the International Brigades and it was not rare for combatants to arrive to the front without having ever handled a rifle. The presence of foreigners in Spain was also of importance as a morale booster for the Republicans. On the front, the International Brigades reinforced the regular – Popular -Army. They had a decisive role in the defence of Madrid, in the Teruel offensive or in the Jarama battle for example.

Being often placed on difficult fronts the international brigades suffer heavy casualties. Their mortality rate is believed to have be around one third.⁶⁰ Many international brigadiers later felt they were used as cannon fodder. By 1938 less and less recruits still made it to Spain. The losses in the International Brigades were gradually filled with Spaniards. Their dissolution was pronounced in autumn.

The left's responses to the Spanish Civil War: from reluctance to open support

The variety of the Irish left induced a variety regarding the attitudes that were going to be taken in view of the Spanish civil war. The inability to create a real Popular Front that would have united all the forces on the left in opposition to Fianna Fáil was merely symptomatic of a much divided left, whose divisions would become clear from 1936 to 1939. Out of the noisy campaign that was going to be waged in Ireland in favour of Franco, the voice of the left would struggle to be heard, because of its small base and its disunity. From a Labour movement that differed from its European counterparts in not taking up the cause of the Spanish Republic, to a Republican movement that focused solely on the national struggle, support for the Spanish workers that challenged Franco only came from the very restricted circles of the tiny Communist movement and the remnants of the leftist Republicans.

⁵⁹ JACKSON, Michael, *Fallen Sparrows : The International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War*, Philadelphia, American Philosophical Society, 1994, 99.

⁶⁰ JACKSON, *Op. Cit.*, 17.

The Labour movement

The Irish Labour movement can be described as the association between the trade unions and the Labour Party. The two were organically linked until 1930 when the Labour Party separated from the Irish Trade Union Congress. If they were theoretically independent from each other in 1936, strong connections still united them. Trade unions officials were often members of the ILP and vice versa.

In contrast to the other social-democratic parties linked to the Second International, the Irish Labour Party did not claim to be Socialist even if emphasising its commitment to the Workers' Republic, a phrase much reminiscent of Connolly. Absent from the united front initiatives of the left, the ILP regularly supported Fianna Fáil. According to Nevin, "[The ILP's] strategy was simply 'to push Fianna Fáil to the left.'"⁶¹

In respect of the trade unions, their influence was declining. Firstly because its "membership fell from 175,000 in 1924 to 92,000 within five years."⁶² Secondly for its lack of unity, as discussed earlier. This absence of cohesion was also noticeable in the variety of sensibilities present within the movement. Indeed the ultra left section that walked out of Republican Congress had actually joined the Labour Party. But these radicals were only the minority in a party that was deemed as quite conservative. The same pattern could be observed in the unions:

Larkin's Workers' Union of Ireland and Louie Bennett's Irish Women Workers' Union were fairly militant while unions such as the INTO were conservative and hostile to Socialism. Most fell somewhere in between and, like the Labour party, advocated moderate social democratic policies.⁶³

Despite these differences the 1933 Labour Party had taken a firm stance against one main enemy, Fascism, namely the Blueshirts in Ireland. However the situation in 1936 had changed slightly and the Labour's depiction of Fascism also differed. The Blueshirts were no longer seen as a danger in Ireland. "By 1936 the annual report of the Labour Party speaks of 'the disintegration of the Blueshirts movement' and opines that 'the menace to our liberties had practically disappeared.'"⁶⁴ The condemnation of Fascism thus operated on the international level only and was mainly directed to Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy. At the 1937 Labour conference the Rathmines and District branch submitted this motion:

Having regard to the spread of Fascism in Europe and of Fascist mentality in Ireland, this conference declares it determined opposition to a policy which has for its object the destruction of democratic control of the State, the negation of personal liberty, the abolition of the workers' right to organising in trade unions or politically, and as a first step in this direction the Labour Party should reissue and bring publicly before the notice of the Irish working-class its manifesto against Fascism of three years ago.⁶⁵

If all agreed on the Fascist menace some Labour members started vindicating a new enemy, for example the Tipperary branch, who wanted to amend the motion as follows: "(a) To insert after 'Fascism' the words 'and Godless Communism'; (b) To insert after 'Fascist' the words 'and Communistic.'"⁶⁶ In a country where hatred of Communism was quite widespread the Labour Party clearly wanted to distance itself from it, especially in a General Election year. William Norton, Leader of the ILP, claimed at this conference:

⁶¹ D. NEVIN, 'Labour and political revolution', in F. McManus (ed.), *The Year of the Great Test* (Cork, Mercier Press, 1967), p.61, in ALLEN, *Op. Cit.*, 38.

⁶² Fearghal McGARRY, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War*, Cork, Cork University Press, 182.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁶⁴ *Fifth Annual Report of the Irish Labour Party*, Dublin, 1936, 18 and 8, in V. GEOGHAN, *Cemeteries of Liberty: William Norton On Communism and Fascism*, in *Saothar* 18, 107.

⁶⁵ *Labour News*, 20 February, 1937.

⁶⁶ *Labour News*, *Op. Cit.*

It ought not be necessary at this hour of the day to introduce an Irish Labour Party Conference a resolution condemning Fascism and Communism. The community ought to know by now that the Labour Party condemns Fascism and Communism alike.⁶⁷

Nevertheless a report of William Norton's speech at the conference was later published. *Cemeteries of Liberty, Communist and Fascist Dictatorships* intended "to spell out the party's approach to Fascism and Communism."⁶⁸ This very point again led to more differences in the party. When one member declared that "Fascism ... [enslaves] the body... Communism ... [enslaves] body and soul"⁶⁹, William N. Maslin (Trinity College Branch) asked: "What is the real menace to the Irish Labour Party? Is it the Communist Party? I don't believe it is."⁷⁰

This uneasy approach explains the unclear stance of the ILP on the issue of the Spanish Civil War. Francoism, if assimilated to Fascism by Socialist parties in Europe, was never defined as such by the ILP and no official support was ever given to the Spanish Republican Government. The question seemed so controversial that it is only mentioned 4 times between 28 November 1936 and 2 April 1938 in the *Labour News*, the Party's weekly organ. The Labour TD's behaviour in the Dáil confirmed this approach:

Labour deputies voted against Fine Gael's motion to recognise Franco in November but offered no reason for their position. The only Labour TD to mention Spain, in the opening months of the war, William Davin, urged the Irish government to protest against the anti-clerical atrocities.⁷¹

This reaction was actually quite typical of many coming from the Labour movement. One member, Michael Keyes, was also a member of the Irish Christian Front, a pro-Franco body. Milotte sums up the Irish unions' reaction:

Among the trade-unions only the British-based Amalgamated Transport Union offered support to the anti-Franco cause - £1,000 for humanitarian relief – a move that led to several resignations and the self-dissolution of its branches in Galway and Tyrone. Even the executive of the Workers' Union of Ireland, with James Larkin's approval, banned its officials from speaking on anti-Franco platforms.⁷²

The very few in the Labour movement who took up the cause of the Spanish Republic were often met with contempt by their fellows. At the 1938 Conference of the Irish Labour Party, Conor Cruise O'Brien raised this point

This revolt against a democratically elected Government was supported by international Fascism with Nazi and Italian troops... The Fascist Generals, having failed to achieve their objectives by ballots turned to bullets. Every country which valued its freedom had a duty to hold out against the forces of Fascism in all their forms, even in Spain.⁷³

TD Charles McGowan's answer was that his statements were "of the kind that had brought the Labour Party into contempt throughout the whole of Ireland" and that they were spoken "in a manner that was calculated to harm the Party more than anything else, and he felt that he would be lacking in his duty as a citizen and as a Catholic if he did not enter a protest."⁷⁴

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ V. GEOGHAN, *Cemeteries of Liberty: William Norton on Communism and Fascism*, in *Sathoar* 18, 106.

⁶⁹ *Sixth Annual Report Of The Irish Labour Party Conference*, Dublin, 1937, p.132, in *ibid.*, 107.

⁷⁰ *Labour News*, *Op. Cit.*

⁷¹ *Irish Independent*, 13 September 1936, in MCGARRY, *Op. Cit.*, 183.

⁷² MILOTTE, *Op. Cit.*, 170.

⁷³ Manus O'RIORDAN, *Op. Cit.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

Labour and trade union members often put forward their religion in their rejection of Communism and non support for the Spanish Republic. In 1936 the Irish Trade Union Congress president's address states:

Neither Communism nor Fascism hold any solution to the social and economic evil of our country. Rather we must with confidence seek solutions on the lines adumbrated by Pope Leo XIII and by Pope Pius XI in the encyclicals dealing with the social question".⁷⁵ [...] The following year, when a speaker made reference to 'fascist Spain' he was denounced by the Labour TD Gerard McGowan, who claimed his faith had been insulted and that 'they were Catholic first and politicians afterwards'.⁷⁶ In line with the same philosophy, the Labour TD James Everett raised a question in the Dáil about the 'numerous Russian agents in various parts of the country who are suspected of having the intention of burning churches'.⁷⁷

These examples show the extent to which many Labour members had been receptive to the anti-Communist hysteria in the Free State. The Spanish Government being always wrongly presented as "Red" by the media and the Church could obviously not expect any support from the Irish Labour movement as a whole.

The Republicans

During the time of the Spanish Civil War the Republican sphere was at a standstill. On 18 June 1936 the De Valera government outlawed the IRA. By that time, its membership had fallen to only 3,844.⁷⁸ *An Phoblacht* was no longer published, which makes it quite difficult to analyse the army's response to the events in Spain. Its satellite organisations, Cumman na mBan, the Women Prisoners' Defence League, Cumman Poblachta na hEireann (new Republican party, political wing of the IRA, created on 7 March) were still active.

At the beginning of the Spanish conflict, most Irish Republicans considered it as quite foreign to Ireland's national interests. The fight for Ireland's freedom was to be fought for in Ireland. In a letter to O'Reilly on 17 September 1936, Frank Ryan, later leader of the Irish section of the International Brigades, wrote: "I wouldn't go to Spain nor to the USA, just now, because I feel I have to stand my ground here and rally our own. The frontline trenches of Spain are right here."⁷⁹ Two years later when captured by the Fascists and imprisoned in Spain, his case was advertised by *Prison Bars*, the organ of the Women Prisoners' Defence League. If the article clearly sympathised with Ryan's case, it still underlined the wrong direction Ryan had chosen in going to Spain, as it stated: "we regret that any Irishman should fight anywhere except directly against the British Empire till we have our own freedom."⁸⁰ The emphasis was definitely again on the task that is to be done at home.

Nevertheless the public involvement of Eoin O'Duffy and the Blueshirts in favour of the Nationalist side – with the organisation of an Irish Brigade to fight alongside Franco – clearly helped some Republicans to choose their side. If the pro-Treatyites supported the Spanish Nationalists they had to be opposed. Peadar O'Donnell believed that the Irish Republicans' view was that "they were not favouring or fighting alongside people who led the war against our own Republic in 1922-3."⁸¹ For McGarry, "much Republican hostility was based on personal animus towards O'Duffy and Belton. [...] But they were not criticised for their support of General Franco"⁸², which shows the extent of the concern for the Spanish Republic.

Another angle of the Spanish Civil War was the international management of non-intervention. Many countries sat on the non-intervention Committee and Ireland's participation was seen as an opportunity for her to

⁷⁵ ITUC, *Annual Report and Conference Proceedings* (1936), p.27.

⁷⁶ Labour Party, *Annual Report* (1938), p.193.

⁷⁷ *Dáil Debates*, Vol. 56, Col. 2150, 4 June 1935, in MILOTTE, *Op. Cit.*, 170.

⁷⁸ H. PATTERSON, *Op. Cit.*, 80.

⁷⁹ CRONIN, *Frank Ryan, The search for the Republic*, Dublin, Repsol, 1980, 78.

⁸⁰ *Prison Bars*, May 1938, in MCGARRY, *Op. Cit.*, 98.

⁸¹ O'DONNELL, *Salud ! An Irishman in Spain*, (London, 1937), pp. 239-40, in R. ENGLISH, *Peadar O'Donnell: Socialism and the Republic, 1925-1937*, *Saothar* 14, 1989.

⁸² MCGARRY, *Op. Cit.*, 97.

hold weight on the international scene. The fact to be sitting on the same board as Britain was also of importance to most Republicans, from the Fianna Fail government to the IRA. In November 1936, Maud Gonne MacBride asserted that “until the British Government decide[s] to recognise General Franco’s Government, the Free State ha[s] no power to recognise it.” This was to prove the “greater necessity for the IRA to continue the fight for the freedom of their country.”⁸³

Emphasising the Irish situation through the magnifying glass of a foreign dispute actually evolved into a strategy among Irish supporters of the Spanish Republic. To rally the support of Irish Republicans, the Spanish conflict was presented as a parallel to Irish Republican history. “For one thing, as Barry notes, the majority of the Irish people did not support the Irish Republic in 1922.”⁸⁴ The CPI and Republican Congress would use it to a great extent throughout the war as a form of counter propaganda, which we will deal with in part 2.

The formation of an Irish contingent to join the International brigade by the end of 1936, under the leadership of former IRA leader Frank Ryan, was going to contribute to some support among Irish Republicans. However the IRA leadership did not follow suit.

Barry’s view was that whatever the merits of the Spanish war, Irishmen had no business fighting there while their country was unfree. And so he issued an order that ‘any member of the IRA who even attempts to join any of the two groups about to intervene in the Civil War in Spain will be automatically dismissed from the Irish Republican Army.’⁸⁵

Despite this order, many IRA men still travelled to Spain. Former IRA members actually made up a good deal of the Irish section of the International Brigades.

At no point during the war did Sinn Féin show any support to the Spanish Republic, nor did it side with Franco. Some of its members were openly pro-Franco (Brian O’Higgins, Mary MacSwiney and J.J. O’Kelly)⁸⁶ while others appeared on pro-Republican platforms. Throughout the three years of the conflict traditional Irish Republicanism never voiced a clear stance on the issue.

This spectrum of views can be observed at a single meeting [*of the Women Prisoners’ Defence League*] in January 1937. The opening speaker, Alec Lynn, expressed the view that ‘it did not matter to the Irish people about the Spaniards killing one another, what he wanted was to see the English people killing one another’. The final speaker, Maud Gonne MacBride, however, appealed to the crowd to attend Fr Ramón Laborda’s (pro-Republican) lecture in the Gaiety theatre where ‘they would be told the truth about Spain, and the lying propaganda they read in the papers’.⁸⁷

Attempts were made by some within the movement to raise the awareness as George Gilmore and Owen Sheehy-Skeffington who wrote this notice:

In view of the success of the *Irish Independent*’s drive to organise under cover of a ramp against the Spanish Government, the anti-Republican forces in Ireland, and danger of its propaganda actually attaching to its campaign bewildered sections of Republican opinion unless some exposure of its role is attempted, a number of Republican people are arranging to meet.⁸⁸

But Spain never seems to have been a central issue to Irish Republicans. Support for the Spanish Republic among Irish Republicans came mainly from left-wing Republicans. The Republican Congress, in spite of its great weakness following the splits it had endured, was revived for the duration of the Spanish Civil War, thus giving it

⁸³ *Special Branch report*, 29 November 1936, NAI D/JUS D1/36, in *Ibid.*, 96.

⁸⁴ CRONIN, *Op. Cit.*, 108.

⁸⁵ CRONIN, *Op. Cit.*, 108.

⁸⁶ McGARRY, *Op. Cit.*, 96.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Irish Press*, 5 November 1936, in *Ibid.*, 94.

a new purpose. For the most part, this would be achieved by co-operation with the Communists who also take part in Republican Congress

The Communist movement

Even if the Communists were a very small force in Ireland in 1936 they were of great importance in respect of their response to the Spanish Civil War. They were the only part of the Irish political spectrum, with some left-wing Republicans, to wholeheartedly express their support for the Spanish Republicans. The Communist Party of Ireland and the Republican Congress are the ones who organised support at home through their press, through the creation of committees and they also led the formation of the Irish section of the International Brigades. The nature of their support, which was to evolve throughout the duration of the war, is of interest.

On 25 July 1936, i.e. one week after the rising of Franco in Morocco, *The Worker* published its first article about Spain. Entitled “Spain: The Workers Answer the Fascist Challenge”, it presented the conflict in class terms. On one side “the employers, landlords, Fascist monarchists and Army generals” we said to be leading a “counter-revolution”. On the other, the mass of the people:

The workers and peasants rallied swiftly to the defence of the Republic and democracy. They poured from the factory and fields to defend their liberties and the Republic. Workers militias sprang up in all towns. Sailors put their commanders under arrest and took charge of their warships themselves. The Fascist generals found they had to reckon with, not merely a government sitting in Madrid, but with the Spanish people with arms in hand.

The Government, if under threat, was not seen as a clear ally of the working class. It was said to be “neither Socialist nor Communist” but “Republican, with a middle class Premier” and criticised for its lack of reaction in the face of the attack: “the government hesitated; it took only half hearted measures”. The outlook was clearly internationalist and the Irish rank-and-file were supposed to stand by the Spanish people: “the heart of the working class in Ireland goes to our Spanish brothers and sisters” and “if they win, the encouragement it will give the workers of the world will be tremendous.”⁸⁹

This analysis, however, will evolve. If the CPI’s support of the Republican camp is unquestionable, its definition, as that of Franco’s side, was going to change. The deeper involvement of the Soviet Union in support of the Popular Front government resulted in the Spanish Communist Party taking much more influence than it originally had. Communists entered the government. Soon some methods were imported from the USSR, notably the pursuit of political opponents (Nin’s case being the most famous one). The strategy employed by the Spanish government to defeat Franco’s rising underlined the need for the defence of bourgeois democracy – while others advocated revolution. What had started as a popular armed reaction against the rising, on the base of local councils, union or party militias, gradually became a centralised and Communist-orientated management of the war. These changes were reflected in the *Worker*’s presentation of the events. Indeed the CPI stood by the Soviet Union and complied with the Comintern policy.

As the official response of the Comintern to the Spanish events filtered through, and as the fascists gathered actually *more* support from the Spanish middle class, the *Worker* abandoned its class-based analysis of fascism. Franco’s allies were no longer depicted as the employers and the landlords but as ‘a tiny clique of conspirators’ whose strength lay not in the support they enjoyed from the property-owning classes but only from the military aid they received from Hitler and Mussolini. The epithets now used to describe them – corrupt, reactionary, barbaric and anti-Christian, had been cleansed of all class connotations, while the whole outcome of the struggle, was not said to depend

⁸⁹ *Worker*, 25 July 1936.

on the militancy of the Spanish Workers but on which side – governments or fascists – had superior fire-power.⁹⁰

Later, after the Barcelona “May days” in 1937 - the confrontation of POUM and CNT-FAI activists against Communists in Barcelona - the *Irish Democrat* – the new joint publication of the CPI, Republican Congress and other socialist organisations in the North – presented the POUM as “a Fascist force in the rear.”⁹¹

Pete Jackson, in his study of the *Worker* claims that Milotte’s view is “an overstatement” and that the class-analysis of the beginning still remains relevant to the CPI as the war went on.

As the conflict developed, [the *Worker*] apportioned greater importance to foreign intervention than the strength of property-owning classes, but this was an accurate reflection of increased involvement by both Germany and Italy, which sung the tide in favour of Franco’s forces.⁹²

It would appear difficult to dissociate the views of the CPI and Republican Congress on the question of the Spanish war. If on the 16 September 1936, Republican Congress sent a telegram of “sympathy and support to the Spanish, Catalan and Basque people in their fight against Fascism”⁹³ which caused much public debate (response of Cardinal McRory in the national press, later answered by Frank Ryan) it was one of the only public actions on Spain that Congress seems to have taken on its own. Its weakness brought its members to work even more closely with the Communists. The attitude of the IRA on the subject also facilitated the rapprochement.

Spain provided a focus for the attempted revival of the united front, and it brought Congress back to life and into ever closer association with the CPI. The latter took the Popular Front line on Spain whereby bourgeois democracy, and not socialist revolution, was presented as the bulwark against fascism. Peadar O’Donnell and Congress supporters largely followed the CPI line on the war.⁹⁴

Even though in a minority, both groups were going to work hard with what little forces they had left to change the trend which was overwhelmingly pro-Franco in Ireland.

⁹⁰ MILOTTE, *Op. Cit.*, 172.

⁹¹ *Irish Democrat*, 8 May 1937.

⁹² P. JACKSON, ‘*A Rather One Sided Fight*’: *The Worker and the Spanish Civil War*, in *Sathoar* 23, 89.

⁹³ NAI-JUS, File 8/803.

⁹⁴ Ó’DRISCEOIL, *Op. Cit.*, 95.

2. AGAINST THE TREND: IRISH SUPPORT FOR THE SPANISH REPUBLIC

If enthusiastic support for Spanish Republicans was quite scarce in the left's ranks, it was even more of an oddity considering the Irish society's response as a whole. The conflict was erroneously presented as a fight between Catholicism and Communism. The fact that for many Franco's forces were defenders of the Catholic faith removed any doubts as to which camp to side with. The bond between Ireland and Spain as two traditionally Catholic countries was systematically stressed and allowed pro-Franco propaganda in Ireland to reach levels unequalled in other European democratic countries. The Communists and Republican Congress's analysis was in total opposition to this widely held vision. If defence of the Spanish Republic was the focus of the international left once the war had started the conflict tended to hold some characters that could be linked to the Irish Republican struggle. This was one of the tools used in the militant counter-propaganda by the anti-Franco campaign to attempt to change the views of the majority. For that, they mainly had to rely on their own forces and their own press. Solidarity with Spain expressed itself through the creation of ad hoc committees.

Mainstream view in Ireland

The main media of pro-Franco propaganda were the Church and written press. This hysteria took shape in the setting up of the Irish Christian Front, a one time mass organisation, and in the creation of the Irish Brigade against Communism that eventually fought in the ranks of the Nationalist army in Spain. Fine Gael, which represented the parliamentary opposition, campaigned actively for recognition of Franco. Under such circumstances, the government had to face the popular pressure to honour its commitment to non-intervention.

Moulding public opinion: the Church and the media

The Irish Catholic Church

Catholicism and the Church were still extremely powerful in 1936 in Ireland. Therefore, the Church's stance on the Spanish question inevitably influenced the Irish population as a whole, from the rank and file to the Government, from the political parties to the media.

Following the proclamation of the Spanish Republic in 1931, the Irish Catholic Church had been very critical of the new regime and the process of secularisation in Spain was seen to pose a real threat. On 30 August 1936, Most Rev. Dr. Wall, Bishop of Thasos explained the civil war in Spain in these terms :

In Spain churches have been destroyed and schools had been pulled down; nuns and priests were outraged and murdered-all the result of Bolshevik proclivities and because the children had come to maturity who had been taught that there was no God and no restraint on their morality.⁹⁵

If the Catholic Church could lose its influence in such a devoutly Catholic country as Spain, the Irish Church had reason to fear for its own authority. Thus, the July rising was explained, not as a coup against a democratically elected government but as a justified reaction against persecutors of the Catholic faith.

The upheavals of the civil war provoked extreme reactions in Spain, to which some symbols and representatives of the Church fell victim, not so much for religious reasons but for what the Spanish Church represented – i.e. massive land-ownership and more or less unconditional support for the upper classes. These events were given widespread coverage in Ireland - by the media, politicians and the Church - and mostly referred to as “the atrocities”, often to the point where nothing else relating to the Spanish case was actually discussed and

⁹⁵ “Record of Irish Ecclesiastical Events”, Irish Catholic directory and Almanac, 1937-38-39, in Michael O’RIORDAN, *Connolly Column*, Dublin, New Books Publications, 1979, 211-216.

the Nationalists' wrongdoings went unreported. At the beginning of the war, the Irish Church emphasised only this aspect of the conflict.

The account of the atrocities committed in Spain, as reported in the daily press [...] have filled the Catholic world with dismay, and by many it is feared that the Spanish disturbance may upset the fabric of European peace. At the moment Christian civilisation is passing through a crisis. The war in Spain is between Christianity and Communism.⁹⁶

At times these "atrocities" were presented in such a way that it could only fuel a growing hysteria :

It is impossible to speak or even to think, of these abominations without loathing, so utterly shameful and inhuman are they in their unmitigated beastliness. The orgies of the Roman amphitheatre in the pagan days of Nero, the bloodiest massacres of the French Revolution, had nothing more atrocious to show.⁹⁷

Following on from a reaction of self-protection – simple defence of the "defenders of religion" – came the decision by the Hierarchy to take a more political role later in the war to give its support and approval to the Nationalist cause. In the 1937 Pastorals, Bishop O'Kane of Derry justified the need for a rising:

A capable military leader [Gil Robles], with the majority of the electorate to support him, tried all constitutional means to restore freedom to the Spanish people an liberty to the Church, but in vain. Assassination of one of the most prominent Catholic statesmen [Calvo Sotelo], murder of priests and bishops and nuns, destruction of churches, suppression of religious rites, all has at length goaded the Catholic spirit to rebellion.⁹⁸

The Spanish Civil War was also another opportunity for the Church to express its aversion to Communism, and fear of its expansion: "The Catholic Church's overall view with regard to Communism was that it was Mexico yesterday, Spain today and Ireland tomorrow."⁹⁹ This vindication also operated in Ireland and those Irish people standing by the Spanish Republic were also highly criticised by the Hierarchy. In the national press, Cardinal MacRory had defined Republican Congress's message of support to the Spanish government as "a campaign that is carried out to destroy belief in God and in Jesus Christ, the Catholic Church and, what is more, to destroy every Catholic state in the world".¹⁰⁰

From this the Church developed a clear-cut attitude and used its influence to convert Irish Catholics to its own way of thinking regarding the conflict. The Spanish Civil War was considered a topic of great importance and was lengthily referred to in Catholic publications, at the pulpit and in the pastorals. Support for the Nationalists in Ireland was organised under consent of the Church which regularly insisted on the need for prayers in support of Franco's army and even organised a national collection outside churches on the 25 October 1936. The sum of £43,331 was eventually raised at this Church-sponsored collection. The Church helped the Irish Christian Front to a certain extent only – the hierarchy never really wanted to commit itself to a movement whose criticism of the Government's foreign policy it felt was too extreme. Individual priests went further than their superiors by blessing the Blueshirts' venture to Spain, a move which the Church did not officially support.

⁹⁶ 30 August 1936, Most Rev. Dr. Mageean, Bishop of Down and Connor, in a letter read at all masses in the diocese, in O'RIORDAN, *Op. Cit.*, 212.

⁹⁷ 30 August 1936, Most Rev. Dr. McNamee, Bishop of Ardagh and Clonmacnoise, in *Ibid.*, 212.

⁹⁸ *Irish Independent*, 8 February 1937, in McGARRY, *Op. Cit.*, 151.

⁹⁹ Doiminic BELL, *Irish Aspects of the Spanish Civil War*, University of Ulster BA (Hons.) Modern Studies in the Humanities, [<http://members.lycos.co.uk/spanishcivilwar/diss01.htm#Reactions>, consultation: 02 Jan. 03, 12:57]

¹⁰⁰ Frank Ryan's letter to MacRory published on 23 September 1936 in *Irish Times*, *Irish Press* and *Irish Independent*, in NAI-JUS 8/803.

The Media

The pro-Franco hysteria that characterised the Irish debates during the war cannot be solely explained by the position of the Church. The written press as a reflection of the different trends of opinion has to be taken into account. Three newspapers are of importance: the *Irish Independent* and the *Irish Press* because they had the largest readership. Although the *Irish Times* had a much smaller circulation (10 times less than that of the *Irish Independent* and *Irish Press*¹⁰¹) its coverage of the war in Spain balances out the widely shared extreme pro-Nationalist and anti-Republican outlook and legitimates the use of the term hysteria in relation to the average press coverage of the Spanish conflict in Ireland.

The *Irish Independent* was the paper that tended to reflect the views of the opposition party, namely Fine Gael. It is the paper that adopted the most extreme editorial line during the war. Not only the voice of Cosgrave's party – its editorial on 3 July 1937 described non-intervention as a "Deadlock"¹⁰² - but it also turned into the favourite medium for the Irish Christian Front, O'Duffy's Brigade Against Communism and the Church, offering them wide spaces and numerous articles in its pages. Pro-Nationalist and anti-Republican propaganda characterise the *Irish Independent* coverage of the war better than pure information.

Hatred of Communism had been a characteristic of the paper for a long time and it had appeared well before the start of the war. As early as February 1936, the new Popular Front government was described as a "group of bloodthirsty Bolsheviks, persecutors of Catholic nuns and priests"¹⁰³ and headlined as "RED RULE IN SPAIN."¹⁰⁴ It is no surprise then, that Franco's rising was welcomed from the beginning: "All who stand for the ancient faith and the traditions of Spain are behind the present revolt against the Marxist regime in Madrid"¹⁰⁵. The paper's interpretation of the conflict parallels that of the clergy:

For almost four months Christianity has been fighting for its life in Spain. The Communists in every country, and their sympathisers in the press, have propagated the lie that the fight is one between Fascism and democracy. It is not. It is a fight between the Faith and Antichrist.¹⁰⁶

This support for Franco reached even more dubious levels when an article questioning the attribution of the Guernica bombing to the Nationalists was published on 18 June 1937. According to Fr. Henry Gabana the Republicans were responsible and "their devilish inspiration was to destroy the holy town of the Basques and then accuse the Nationalists."¹⁰⁷

The *Irish Press* reflected De Valera and Fianna Fáil's view on the Spanish question. As for the *Irish Independent*, religion was thought to be at stake in Spain: "It is a question of whether Spain will remain as it has been for so long a Christian land or a Bolshevik and anti-God one."¹⁰⁸ The paper agreed with the Government's adoption of the non-intervention policy and criticised the *Irish Independent* and Fine Gael's urge to recognise Franco as Spanish Head of State:

¹⁰¹ McGARRY, *Op. Cit.*, 209.

¹⁰² *Irish Independent*, 3 July 1937, in [<http://members.lycos.co.uk/spanishcilwar/IrIndep.htm>, validity date 17 Jun. 04, 12:30].

¹⁰³ NESTERENKO, *International Solidarity with the Spanish Republic, 1936-1939*, Moscow, Progress Publishers, [<http://members.lycos.co.uk/spanishcilwar/ussr.htm>, validity date 17 Jun. 04, 12:30].

¹⁰⁴ Dermot KEOGH, *Twentieth Century Ireland, Nation and State*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 93.

¹⁰⁵ *Irish Independent*, 22 July 1936 in James BOWYER BELL, *The IRA : the Secret Army*, New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers, 1997, 131.

¹⁰⁶ *Irish Independent*, 6 Nov. 1936 in Richard ENGLISH, *Radicals and the Republic, 1925-1937*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 246.

¹⁰⁷ *Irish Independent*, 18 June 1937, in [<http://members.lycos.co.uk/spanishcilwar/IrIndep.htm>, validity date 17 Jun. 04, 12:30].

¹⁰⁸ *Irish Press*, 2 September 1936, in D. BELL, *Op. Cit.*

The ill-considered and insincere criticism which it levels at the government in this matter might equally well, be applied to the Vatican itself, which has so far refrained from taking the step indicated. But the opposition, often, on occasion and when it suits its own purpose, does not hesitate to be more Catholic than the Pope.¹⁰⁹

On the other hand, the *Irish Times* adopted a more neutral position. On 20 July 1936 the paper read: “it is of no importance to us in Ireland whether Spain decides to throw in her lot with Communism or Fascism; for either alternative is equally detestable to a people of a liberal tradition.”¹¹⁰ For Bell:

The *Irish Times*, supposedly the organ of the Protestant Ascendancy, [published] some of the most factual, balanced editorial analysis to be found in Europe; but there was no emotional commitment [...]. For the *Times* Spain was an international political issue, endangering European peace but not the Irish conscience.¹¹¹

However this voice was not to make itself heard in the wide and loud pro-Franco hysteria that the far right emphasised and that the Government did not manage to tone down.

Pressure from the right

The opposition

Parliamentary opposition to Fianna Fáil during the period 1936-1939 was vested in Fine Gael. Albeit quite weak through these years, Fine Gael, a relatively new party who did not poll particularly well in the 1937 general election, participated in the strong pro-Franco movement, the leadership of which often came from the ranks of the party. Fine Gael had always defined itself as Catholic and underlined its anti-Communism. From the outset of the war, Fine Gael expressed support for the Spanish Nationalists and its members were often the relay for the pro-Franco movement – namely the Irish Christian Front.

At first the conflict was presented by Fine Gael on purely political terms – the battle that was fought in Spain was one against Communism, “our most deadly foe” according to Cosgrave who also declared that “Moscow, Barcelona and Madrid form[ed] a common front.”¹¹² By February 1937, when the Non-Intervention debates were held in the Dáil, Fine Gael TDs had yielded to the general consensus that Spain was the battleground for the Catholic faith. James Dillon was one such TD: “There is no use talking in wild vapourings about Communism, Fascism, democracy or anything else. The issue in Spain, the fundamental issue is God or no God.”¹¹³

Even if the party did not always show total cohesion in the foreign policy debates, the overall Fine Gael attitude was to lobby for an early recognition of Franco – in the Dáil, in local councils, in the press – while at the same time supporting non-intervention. Dillon explained this in the debates: “I want non-intervention because I believe it will bring victory to the Burgos Government. If I believed that non-intervention meant that the Burgos Government would be defeated, I should be against non-intervention.”¹¹⁴ This attitude was not one of the most extreme, as commitment to non-intervention was challenged on the right on the grounds that it was the best way to ensure the Republicans’ victory.

The Irish Christian Front

¹⁰⁹ KEOGH, *Ireland and Europe, 1914-1948*, Dublin, Gill And Macmillan, 67.

¹¹⁰ D. BELL, *Op. Cit.*

¹¹¹ James BOWYER BELL, *Ireland and the Spanish Civil War*, in H.G. KLAUS, *Strong words, Brave deeds, The poetry, life and times of Thomas O’Brien*, The O’Brien Press, Dublin, 243.

¹¹² Dáil Debates 64, 1195-8 in McGARRY, *Op. Cit.*, 192.

¹¹³ KEOGH, *Op. Cit.*, 83-84.

¹¹⁴ Dáil Debates, 65, 920, in McGARRY, *Op. Cit.*, 193.

That the overwhelming support for Franco in Ireland was boosted by the Church and the media left a huge political vacuum that could be occupied by a cross-party organisation. Patrick Belton, a Fine Gael turned independent TD, took the lead in the setting up of a movement that started as a simple answer to the war in Spain but which soon went beyond its original purpose.

On 21 August 1936 the Irish Christian Front was created. If the religious aspect was clearly underlined in the very name of the organisation, anti-communism was also one of its major features: “The permanent work of the organisation is to make sure that Communism will be kept from our shores and that the fate of Spain will never be Ireland’s.”¹¹⁵ If the ICF mirrored the mainstream view of the Spanish issue, the message it conveyed was quite combative in tone:

The struggle in Spain is one not between two parties or two theories of Government battling for power, but a struggle between those who believe in God, and those who do not. The forces of anti-God must be crushed or they will crush all Christian peoples. The Patriot Armies of Spain are fighting for God and country, and their victory or defeat will be our victory or defeat.¹¹⁶

The reports of “atrocities stories” created huge sympathy for Franco that allowed the rapid development of this very new organisation – the *Irish Independent* announced that by September the ICF had received 5,000 membership applications¹¹⁷ and branches were created all over the country – in October 1936 there were already nine of them in Leinster, seven in Munster, two in Connacht and one in Ulster.¹¹⁸

The Christian Front’s *raison d’être* was that of interest or pressure groups: lobbying public bodies to influence their policy. This activity quickly developed from the beginning of the war. Local branches lobbied their local politicians so that many declarations of support for Franco be obtained. The Clonmel resolution, the aim of which was to “break relations with the Spanish Republic and to recognise the Franco regime”¹¹⁹ was one of many – some denounced the atrocities, others trade relations between Spain and Ireland etc.

If Fine Gael members often acted as go-betweens for the Front and elected bodies, in the early stages of the war some Fianna Fáil and even Labour delegates would support the ICF’s actions, as it seemed to epitomise a near consensus in Irish politics. The Christian Front regularly showed its strength by organising massive rallies: in September, 40,000 people attended an ICF meeting in Cork, the *Irish Times* believing it to be the “biggest public meeting to be held in the town.”¹²⁰ On 25 October between 40,000 according to the *Irish Times* and 120,000 according to the *Irish Independent* gathered in College Green, Dublin. These mass demonstrations could not be ignored by any political party in terms of their approach to the Spanish question.

The success, however, proved a very short-lived experience as the ICF did not manage to capitalise on this rank-and-file adhesion. Internal disputes on Belton’s leadership, an authoritarian man with Fascist tendencies who clearly wanted the ICF to play a more political role than was originally planned, (fear by opponents of Belton creating a new Catholic party) and a financial scandal on the destination of the money collected in October precipitated its decline.

The Irish Crusade Against Communism

While the ICF soared, another pro-Nationalist movement gained media attention. Eoin O’Duffy, a former Garda commissioner, but most importantly the former Blueshirt leader, made public his desire to create an Irish

¹¹⁵ *Irish Independent*, 24 August 1936, in NAI-DT, S9179.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ BOWYER BELL, *Op. Cit.*

¹¹⁸ McGARRY, *Op. Cit.*, 117.

¹¹⁹ BOWYER BELL, *Op. Cit.*

¹²⁰ *Irish Times*, 21 September 1936, in McGARRY, *Op. Cit.*, 117 & 283.

Crusade Against Communism, a revival of the Blueshirts that would help Franco's troops in Spain. The first appeal was made in the *Irish Independent's* columns on 10 August 1936. (The newspaper clearly helped O'Duffy's communication by publishing favourable articles on his plans).

Obviously O'Duffy shared the mainstream view on Spain and some of his motivations were very close to those advanced by either the clergy, the ICF or Fine Gael. Still, his convictions always appear more extreme and at that stage he can be described as Fascist – he was the founder of the National Corporate Party in June 1935, a tiny Fascist party. If anti-Communism was a popular phenomenon in Ireland, his was of an even more profound nature. Although Communism in Ireland counted very few activists, he thought Ireland to be under real Communist threat and he saw the Comintern as the enemy of humanity:

The Communist Party of Ireland is affiliated with the Communist International – the body directly responsible for what is happening in Spain today. The Communist, or Third International is mainly concerned with combating Christianity in every country in the world and in setting up the Russian standard or the 'United Front,' which we have heard spoken of in Dublin city at so-called 'anti-Fascist' meetings.¹²¹

He hardly hid his anti-Semitism when refusing non-intervention as a proposal made by "Monsieur Blum, Premier of France, Freemason, Jew, and Socialist"¹²² and did not rule out Fascism as such: "If these atrocities are carried out in the name of Democracy, then the sooner Fascism triumphs the better."¹²³ His wish not be associated with the ICF and the rejection of Fine Gael (of which he was a former member) show that he considered more could be done and through this venture wished his flagging political career to take a new start.

The massive brainwash on the Spanish issue ensured support for O'Duffy's brigade proposal from the outset. On 28 August 1936 O'Duffy claimed in the *Irish Independent* that between 6,000 and 7,000 applications had already been received¹²⁴ and some of them were very motivated: "I know that death may face many of us, but the cause is a glorious one."¹²⁵

O'Duffy's original wish to send 20,000 men to Franco lost some of its grandeur as only about 600 eventually made it to Spain - their Spanish experience will be discussed later. If the existence of such a brigade highlighted anything, it was the limits of the Government's non-intervention regulations.

The Government's position

Non-Intervention

As seen earlier, the fear of an extension of the Spanish conflict led to a very early call to non-intervention. France and Britain were the first proponents for a Non-Intervention agreement and formally adhered to it on 15 August, i.e. not even a month after the rising in Morocco. Rapidly other countries agreed to the concept – Germany and Russia included. Ireland joined the Non-Intervention pact on 25 August "in the conviction that it is in the interest of Spain itself, and [...] will best serve the cause of European peace."¹²⁶ At the first meeting of the Non-Intervention committee in London on the 9 September 1936, the Irish government was represented and "pledged £7,184 as a contribution towards the running costs of the committee for the first year."¹²⁷ To comply with this policy, a debate was held in the Dáil in February 1937 and a bill followed. The debates "were bitter, invoking base

¹²¹ *Irish Independent*, 10 August 1936, in NAI-DT, S9179.

¹²² *Irish Independent*, 20 August 1936, in NAI-DT, S9179.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 10 August 1936, in *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 28 August 1936, in *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 25 August 1936, in *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 26 August 1936, in McGARRY, *Op. Cit.*, 213.

¹²⁷ KEOGH, *Op. Cit.*, 67.

religious and political insults that showed the levels of misunderstanding, supported by passion, among TDs.”¹²⁸ Eventually “the Spanish Non-Intervention Bill was passed by seventy-seven votes to fifty with Labour voting with the government.”¹²⁹ The main points of the bill were the prohibition for Irish nationals to volunteer and service with the belligerents, the “restriction on the departure of citizens to Spain” and “the Power of Executive Council to prevent export of war material”¹³⁰ – which thus was not strictly prohibited. If breached the implications were to be as such:

Any member of the *Gárda Síochána* may arrest without warrant any person whom he reasonably suspects is committing or has committed an offence under any section of this Act.
Any person who is guilty of an offence under any section of this Act shall be liable—
on conviction thereof on indictment to a fine not exceeding five hundred pounds, or at the discretion of the Court, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years or to both such fine and such imprisonment, or on summary conviction thereof to a fine not exceeding fifty pounds or, at the discretion of the Court, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months, or to both such fine and such imprisonment.¹³¹

However these directives seem never to have been implemented. Keogh notices that “the authorities did little to stop [those who volunteered to fight in Spain].”¹³² Even if most of the enrolment coming from Ireland had taken place before the Bill, some Irish volunteers actually travelled between the two countries without a passport after the Bill – Ryan’s return for recovery from a wound in 1937 having been well publicised - , which shows the looseness of the law. This looseness was not only on Ireland’s side. Often regarded as a farce, Non-Intervention never prevented foreign intervention and the League of Nations was too weak at that time to do anything on the matter. The committee continued throughout the war and even if unsuccessful, it was defended until the end. In a speech in the League of Nations assembly on the second of October 1937, de Valera reasserted Ireland’s adherence to the principle of Non-Intervention:

We believe in the policy of non-intervention, because that policy respected the right of the Spanish people to decide for themselves how they should be governed and who should be their rulers ... We deplore the interventions and counter-interventions which make Spain a cockpit for every European antagonism. [...] [O]ur Government is not being committed to any policy of action which might result from the termination of the Non-Intervention Agreement.¹³³

The committee ended on 19 May 1939, six weeks after the end of the war and well after the recognition of Franco’s government by many states.

If non-intervention did not mean neutrality, it certainly shaped Ireland’s future tradition of neutrality on international matters.

Diplomatic relations

Ireland’s commitment to Non-Intervention did not imply the severing of diplomatic ties with Spain. In July 1936, Leopold Kerney, the Irish envoy to Spain, was out of the country but did not return to the Irish legation in Madrid, which was then in the Republican zone. From 1937 until the end of the conflict, the Irish legation was

¹²⁸ M. KENNEDY, *Ireland and the League of Nations, 1916-1946, International Relations, Diplomacy and Politics*, Irish Academic Press, Blackrock, 1996, 232.

¹²⁹ BELL, in KLAUS, *Op. Cit.*, 254.

¹³⁰ SPANISH CIVIL WAR (NON-INTERVENTION) ACT, 1937, *Irish Statute Book Database*, © Government of Ireland.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² KEOGH, *Op. Cit.*, 80.

¹³³ De VALERA, *Peace and War*, cited in KENNEDY, *Op. Cit.*, 233-234.

situated in St Jean de Luz. Avoiding both of the belligerent zones while staying close to the border was a solution other countries had chosen.

At first Ireland officially kept diplomatic relations with the legal Republican government but this attitude was strongly condemned by the opposition. In the Dáil, Cosgrave pushed for recognition of Franco, so did part of public opinion but: “it was not a question of sympathies, de Valera told the Dáil, but of diplomatic practice, and recognition was of a state and not a government.”¹³⁴ Nevertheless the sympathies of the Government seemed directed towards Franco. If never openly acknowledged, some understatements appear quite clear, such as de Valera’s answer to Dillon’s question on 18 February 1937 in the Dáil:

MR DILLON : Will the Minister inform us whether... our Government intends to accredit that Minister to the Spanish at Burgos?

PRESIDENT : If the deputy will look at the map he will see that St Jean de Luz is nearer to Burgos than it is to Valencia¹³⁵.

For Burgos, the question was of great importance with Franco having declared himself Head of State as early as October 1936. The legitimacy he would have acquired with an early recognition by foreign countries would have been very helpful for his side. Part of his staff was thus pressurising would-be friendly states. Ireland, as a Catholic country, was thought to be one of them.

El ambiente de amistad y simpatia que merece en Irlanda nuestro gobierno nacional y que acaba de reflejarse en actos como el del donativo de los catolicos irlandeses a la iglesia Española. La reciente visita de la delegacion, presidida por el Senor Belton, ha sido enviada para acumplir esa mision. Los ofrecimientos de colaboracion del Coronel O’Duffy y el tradicional intercambio cultural entre nuestras jerarquias catolicas de que es expresion elocuente la fundacion del Colegio de Nobles Irlandeses de esta ciudad de Salamanca, son circunstancias que unidas al ferviente deseo del gobierno de De Valera, tendente a manumitirse de la tutela de Londres, favorecerian el exito de una gestion diplomatica orientada en este sentido.¹³⁶

At that time, Kerney seemed to be in contact with the Nationalist forces rather than with the Republicans, despite the fact that diplomatic relations were to be kept with the Madrid government. The emphasis in his reports was always on the Nationalist side, which he clearly favoured.

I told [De Mamblas] [...] that the President himself had already stated that he had no doubt as to the direction of the sympathies of the majority of the Irish people; that I had no doubt myself as to where the sympathies of my government were, although I had not discussed this question officially at home [...] I reminded De Mamblas that, notwithstanding the links of history and religion that existed between the two countries, there was a very strong democratic spirit in Ireland, and therefore there would be a disposition amongst the Irish people generally to look askance at any regime in Spain which might appear to be imposed on the people following on what might by some be believed to be a purely military revolt.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ KEOGH, *Op. Cit.*, 68-69.

¹³⁵ *Dáil Debates*, 18 February 1937, in McGARRY, *Op. Cit.*, 206.

¹³⁶ “The atmosphere of friendship and sympathy that our national government deserves in Ireland has just been reflected in acts such as the donation of the Irish Catholics to the Spanish Church. The recent visit of the delegation, presided by Mr Belton, has been sent to accomplish that mission. The offers of collaboration of Colonel O’Duffy and the traditional cultural exchange between our Catholic hierarchies - whose eloquent expression is the foundation of the School of Irish Nobles in this city of Salamanca - are circumstances that, coupled with the fervent desire of the De Valera government to avail itself to be freed from the authority of London, would favour the success of a diplomatic handling orientated to this aim.” Salamanca, 19/11/36. German Baraibar, Secretario del Gabinete Diplomatico de S.E. Palacio de Monterrey, Salamanca, in NAI-DFA, File 119/17a.

¹³⁷ 6 March 1937, *Ibid.*

The rapprochement seemed quite close when the Department of Foreign Affairs sent Kerney on a visit to Nationalist Spain:

Please go to Salamanca to explore the situation close at hand and to secure material for a full report to enable the government to come to a decision about the recognition of the authorities there. See all authorities and all others who may be able to give information.¹³⁸

However some circumstances delayed Ireland's recognition of Franco. First the Government did not want to do so before the Vatican had done it. Secondly the bombing of Guernica on 26 April 1937 was a severe blow to the "Catholic" image of the Spanish Nationalists.¹³⁹ Thirdly Frank Ryan's capture on the 31 March 1938 and his subsequent imprisonment delayed the eventuality of recognition.¹⁴⁰ Ireland finally recognised Franco on 11 February 1938, shortly after the fall of Barcelona and before the fall of Madrid.

Reasons for support

Despite the fact that the absolute majority in Ireland sided with the Nationalist revolt, some elements in the left went against this trend and expressed fervent support for the Spanish Republic. Some chose the home front to organise solidarity with the Spanish workers and to convince their fellow countrymen of the righteousness of their fight, others made it to Spain to help the International Brigades alongside the Republican forces. In both cases the same question can be asked: what did Irish men and women see in a conflict that took place so far from their world and reality? In such an unfavourable context as the Irish one, what were the motivations for Irish activists?

Not long after the first Irish volunteers joined the International Brigades' training camp in Spain, Frank Ryan's statement summed up the different motives behind this venture:

The Irish contingent is a demonstration of revolutionary Ireland's solidarity with the gallant Spanish workers and peasants in their fight for freedom against Fascism. It aims to redeem Irish honour, besmirched by the intervention of Irish Fascism on the side of the Spanish Fascist rebels. It is to aid the revolutionary movements in Ireland to defeat the Fascist menace at home, and finally, and not the least, to establish the closest fraternal bonds of kinship between the Republican democracies of Ireland and Spain.¹⁴¹

Indeed, the Irish support for the Spanish workers has to be understood in its two dimensions. It was part of an international movement and mobilisation that saw a majority of the world's workers movement rally in favour of Spain. It also had a very deep Irish/national dimension that was both symptomatic of Irish politics and necessary for the left's leadership to interest a Republican-minded audience.

On the international left's agenda

Contrary to general opinion in Ireland, the struggle that took place between 1936 and 1939 in Spain was widely presented by the international left as a fight for democracy and against Fascism. The Popular Front Government represented democracy – it was seen as legitimate because elected and it represented hope with the social measures it had taken. This argument was the main motive for many foreigners to support Republican Spain (rapid spread of Friends of the Spanish Republic committees abroad) or to volunteer for the International Brigades. A resolution passed by a minority Fianna Fáil cumann followed this view and read:

¹³⁸ 8 March 1937, in NAI-DFA, File 119/17a.

¹³⁹ KEOGH, *Op. Cit.*, 90-91.

¹⁴⁰ see McGARRY, *Op. Cit.*, 226.

¹⁴¹ Frank RYAN, *Worker*, 19 December 1936.

This Cumann declares the tragic events in Spain. We are moved by the efforts of the Spanish Government and people in their defence of representative government and institutions. We pray that by perseverance and heroic sacrifice ordered conditions will be restored to beloved Spain.¹⁴²

The idea was that taking a stance against the Fascist attack on Spanish democracy was also a stance against Fascism at home. Everywhere Spain was the perfect example of the further advance of Fascism on a European level and the fear of a Fascist tide sweeping Europe was widely shared. The famous English posters reading “If you tolerate this then your children will be next” following Guernica’s bombing conveyed this feeling. Irish radicals’ fears followed a similar pattern, with the memory of the Blueshirts’ activity still very present (especially because they were revived in their venture for Franco). For Bill Scott, one of the first Irishmen to fight in Spain, it was a clear incentive for his departure to Spain: “A Fascist Spain would help them (Lombard Murphy, Belton and O’Duffy) to set their dictatorship over our country. That’s exactly why I went to Spain.”¹⁴³ His explanation echoed that of Paddy O’Daire, who claimed that he was fighting “so that my own people may be spared the horrors that the people of Spain are now enduring. That’s why I am here.”¹⁴⁴ Bob Doyle, in his memoirs, would not have contradicted them either:

Nuestra decisión de luchar en España surgió del reconocimiento del peligro Fascista, porque no debe olvidarse que la llegada al poder de los Nazis en Alemania era un hecho bien conocido por todos y que el General O’Duffy intentaba seguir sus pasos. Yo estaba convencido de que era real el peligro de que Irlanda se convirtiera en un país Fascista. Ésta fue una de las razones que me hicieron tomar la decisión de ir a España.¹⁴⁵

Fascism was a threat to everyone. A manifesto published by Frank Edwards and fellow Irish Brigadiers in October 1937 reported the Nationalists’ “atrocities” in the cultural field:

Are Irish teachers and others engaged in cultural work to take sides with those who aped Hitler-barbarism by burning the works of Spain’s greatest thinkers, who dragged Spain’s greatest poet, Federico Garcia Lorca, through the streets of Granada before killing him, who hurtled bombs upon the Prado?¹⁴⁶

Another claim was that it would severely undermine workers’ rights: “We are here because we are realists... If Fascism triumphed in Spain, it would be the beginning of the end for human liberty and progress.”¹⁴⁷

This representation of the conflict as one between Fascism and Democracy was not the earliest analysis advanced by the traditional left - Socialist or Labour Parties - and by the official Communist Parties. At the beginning of the war the struggle in Spain was simply presented as a class war. The fight of the Spanish proletariat was that of the international proletariat. Bob Doyle wrote: « No sabía mucho de ese país, pero de lo que sí estaba seguro era de que cada bala que yo disparara allí iría contra los terratenientes y los capitalistas de Dublín.”¹⁴⁸

¹⁴² *Worker*, 26 September 1936.

¹⁴³ Bill SCOTT, *Irish Democrat*, 27 March 1937.

¹⁴⁴ Ronan BRINDLEY, “Portrait of Paddy O’Daire”, in *Saothar* 17.

¹⁴⁵ “Our decision to fight in Spain came from the recognition of the Fascist danger, because one should not forget that the Nazis’ accession to power in Germany was a fact well known by all and because General O’Duffy tried to follow their path. I was convinced that there was a real danger that Ireland should turn into a Fascist country. This was one of the reasons that made me take the decision to go to Spain..” Bob DOYLE, *Memorias de un rebelde sin pausa*, Madrid, Asociacion de las Brigadas Internacionales, 54.

¹⁴⁶ Manus O’RIORDAN, *Frank Edwards: Portrait of an Irish Anti-Fascist*.

<http://members.lycos.co.uk/spanishcivilwar/Edwards.htm> [added 15 Aug. 00]

¹⁴⁷ HOPKINS, *Into the Heart*, 174 in McGARRY, *Frank Ryan*, 53.

¹⁴⁸ “I did not know much about this country, but what I knew for sure was that every bullet I would fire would be a bullet against the Dublin landlord and capitalist”, DOYLE, *Memorias de un rebelde sin pausa*, 54.

The fact that workers from all over the world supported their Spanish comrades was a demonstration of a tradition in the workers' movement: internationalism. For Michael O'Riordan: "We summarised that afterwards when asked why we went to Spain: that we had to carry out our solemn proletarian solidarity with our Spanish brothers and sisters."¹⁴⁹ If the workers won in Spain, it would be a victory for the workers of the world, Ireland included. Spanish trenches thus quickly became the new battleground for world revolution. In a letter to a friend, Patrick Keenan, a Dublin worker and International Brigadier, wrote: "This is an International war between the financiers and landlords and the workers, and I need not tell you how important it is for us to win."¹⁵⁰ Bob Doyle also invoked this international class bond:

With the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, we were able to identify with the struggle of the Spanish people. We thought that what was happening in Ireland and Spain was all part of the same struggle against imperialism and Fascism. Having a broad internationalist outlook we could no longer stand by and look on at the murder of democracy and the achievements the Spanish people had won.¹⁵¹

As the war went on, the Communist International took more and more control in Spain and took advantage of the situation and of its position. (The USSR was the only powerful country to supply the government with arms, money and senior officers.) Spain had to be a central issue for all the Communist parties around the world, as it was a priority for the Soviet Union. In August 1938, the *Worker's Republic* published this piece: "The liberation of Spain from the oppression of the Fascist reactionaries," in the words of Comrade Stalin, 'is not the private affair of the Spaniards, but is the common cause of all advanced and progressive mankind.'¹⁵²

The Stalinist methods were gradually imported to assure an unchallengeable leadership in the fight. The Spanish Communist Party and Comintern gradually took political control in the Republican zone (ministers, local bodies...). A political police force was created (on the model of the NKVD), workers' militias and POUM were forbidden (POUM was outlawed on 16 June 1937), trials of political opponents were taking place (reminiscent of the Moscow trials, assassination of POUM leader Andreu Nin on 20 June 1937). This evolution was taken into account by the foreign Communist parties and their vision of the conflict mirrored these developments. For Bowler, this was the case in Ireland:

Murray's criticism of the Spanish Popular Front Government, a Government which had done little to check Franco's progress and in the face of which workers and peasants had taken matters in their own hands, was soon abandoned in favour of an emphasis upon the need to defend social-democracy. He took his line from the Comintern, as Stalin's policy was to eliminate all leftist opposition to the Spanish Government, and the Moscow 'show trials' removed all political opposition in the Soviet Union.¹⁵³

These changes challenged the left's traditional position on the conflict as that of a struggle between democracy and Fascism, with the numerous undemocratic methods used by the Comintern. Because a large part of pro-Republican sympathies were controlled by Communist propaganda, the reasons for support evolved with the war.

In Spain, opponents of the Comintern influence consisted mainly of the POUM, Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists. For them, Franco's rising and attack was to be answered and won through revolution in the Republican zone. If the situation was ripe for revolution then revolution could not be postponed. This sector of the

¹⁴⁹ Michael O'RIORDAN, *Interview with Anti Fascist Action*, <http://www.geocities.com/irishafa/irishvets.html> [validity date 17 Jun. 04, 13:30].

¹⁵⁰ *Worker*, 16 January 1937.

¹⁵¹ EGAN, Eugene, *Ideals indecently buried*, in *Fortnight*, June 1993, <http://members.lycos.co.uk/spanishcivilwar/memoirs.htm> [added 5 Aug. 00].

¹⁵² *Worker's Republic*, August 1938.

¹⁵³ Stephen BOWLER, "Seán Murray, 1898-1961, And the Pursuit of Stalinism in One Country", *Saothar* 18, 1993, 41-53.

Republican movement in Spain also drew a current of sympathy from sister organisations outside Spain – even Ireland in a very reduced way. (Anarchists and POUM militias welcomed foreigners who did not necessarily fight in the CP led International Brigades – writer George Orwell is one example). From Ireland, four men joined a POUM militia. Jack White, an Irish anarchist who went to Spain with a Red Cross unit, gave his first impressions of Barcelona in a CNT-FAI paper and talked about “revolutionary solidarity”, “international solidarity of the working class”, “revolutionary honour” and “revolutionary order.”¹⁵⁴ An emphasis on revolution never echoed by his fellow Irishmen.

The Spanish fight as the Irish fight

If international political motives can explain the fact that part of the Irish left supported the Spanish Republic, they are not the only ones that counted. Irish radicals, as the right with the Nationalists, saw in the Spanish conflict a bond with Ireland and recognised in the Spanish workers’ struggle part of the Irish Republican struggle.

Despite their differences and the fact that the two countries are geographically removed, Ireland and Spain in 1936 had links that drew them close. These bonds were very important in the support Spain drew from Ireland because they allowed Irish people to understand the struggle and furthermore, to identify with it. The measures taken either by the new Spanish Government or by the workers themselves answered some of the battles fought in Ireland by the left republicans, mainly those for agriculture and national independence.

The strong campaign against land annuities had illustrated the importance of the agrarian question in Ireland, a country where agriculture was still pre-eminent. Peadar O’Donnell, leader of this campaign, was in Spain when the war broke out and he came back later during the war. What he saw of the agricultural reform taking place in Spain convinced him of the need for agricultural reform in Ireland. In his biography of Peadar O’Donnell, Ó’Drisceoil relates the importance of this aspect of the Spanish war:

At the beginning of September 1936 and [O’Donnell] addressed the large peasants’ conference that was held in Barcelona on 5 September. ‘I was sorely tempted’, he wrote, ‘to send telegrams to a few outstanding reactionary framers in Ireland to tell them that I would have much pleasure in conveying their greetings to the Anarchist Farmers’ Congress.’ [...] His account of the speeches and contributions, centring on the pace of collectivisation, reflects his own views arising from his Irish experience, where the large number of smallholders was similar to Catalonia. He instinctively sided with those who argued for a partial, staged collectivisation. Compromise was reached to allow those with small farms to continue to work them with family labour, while derelict farms and those of the enemy were to be collectivised, and no rents were to be paid to the landlords. The acknowledgement of the universal peasant ‘passion for a piece of land’ was, for O’Donnell, a victory for common sense, and highlights his pragmatic approach to the land question : strive for the collective ideal while allowing room for individualisation. The small farmer, he wrote in 1930, was ‘wedged into his holding... [G]uaranteed tenure of the working farmer must continue, for it is that ease and rest of mind that will enable his thoughts to ripen for collective effort.’¹⁵⁵

Very early on, Spain had developed Autonomist movements in its provinces that were heard for the first time with the Popular Front government. The struggle Catalan and Basque Nationalists had endured for the recognition of their autonomy from the Madrid government, of their national culture and language mirrored the Irish fight for independence from British rule. In a letter from the front published in the *Worker*, Frank Ryan claimed that the Irish fight for independence could not be fought under a Fascist regime and gave the example of

¹⁵⁴ Jack WHITE, “A Rebel in Barcelona”, first published in *CNT-AIT Boletín de Información*, No. 15, 11 November 1936, reproduced from *KSL* 14, March 1998, [<http://members.lycos.co.uk/spanishcivilwar/jwhite.htm>, validity date: 17 Jun. 04, 12:30].

¹⁵⁵ O’DONNELL, *Salud! An Irishman in Spain*, 162-170, *An Phoblacht*, 19 July 1930, in Ó DRISCEOIL, *Op. Cit.*, 96-97.

Catalonia: “Catalonia recognises that it must not wait until Franco reaches its borders.” And he asked: “Is Ireland to commit the error Catalonia avoids?”¹⁵⁶ This aspect was meant to appeal widely to the Irish Republican population. Stradling develops this idea:

Many other comrades in the International Brigades were motivated not only by class-consciousness, but also by (Irish) Republican sympathies, usually representing loyalty to the kith-and-kin experience, and often marked by specific resentments and inarticulate vendettas, which excited a hatred of the Irish ‘establishment’ and an instinctive empathy with Spanish Republicanism. [...] For many like O’Connor, the Spanish Civil War offered (amongst other things) a chance to reverse the decision of the war of 1922-23, to vindicate a cause which had been tragically overthrown by traitors who were – as he saw things – little less than agents of British imperialism.¹⁵⁷

In the anti-Franco propaganda the Spanish conflict was often introduced in Irish historical terms, a technique that intended to appeal to the Republican population in Ireland. Madrid and Barcelona are the “Dublin and Belfast of Spain”¹⁵⁸ and Franco’s rising is described as such:

This rebellion is not a rebellion such as Pearse and Connolly led here in 1916. It is a rebellion of the type that Carson, Craig and the Tory lords prepared against the Home Rule in 1912-1913. It is a rebellion of the type that Cosgrave and Mulcahy, in conspiracy with Lloyd George, carried out against the Irish Republic in 1922.¹⁵⁹

The Spanish Nationalist / Republican confrontation echoed the pro and anti Treaty factions of Ireland’s own civil war and O’Donnell claimed that this divide was revived once more between 1936 and 1939:

the active remnants of the once powerful political party which went down before the combined forces of De Valera, Irish Republican Army and Labour in 1932 rushed in quickly to lead the national indignation provoked by the atrocity stories. They made the issue very simple. You were either in favour of burning churches and all that or you were against burning churches and all that, and they called on every public man to speak out his mind. They voiced such a loud clamour that Republicans were embarrassed and could not rap back sharply, so they only sulked and said they were not favouring nor fighting anything alongside people who led the war against our own Republic in 1922-1923. And so Catholic Ireland spoke only through the anti-Republican leaders and organisations...¹⁶⁰

The resurgence of Ireland’s civil war differences became even clearer in the left’s response to O’Duffy’s decision to help Franco’s forces. Eoin O’Duffy represented the pro-Treaty side and his involvement in a foreign conflict could not have gone undisputed by the anti-Treatyites. Despite all the pre-cited reasons to support the Spanish Republicans, it seems that the former Blueshirts’ involvement was one of the major motives behind Irish involvement in favour of Republican Spain, especially for those who volunteered for the International Brigades. (O’Duffy announced his eagerness to form a brigade as early as August, while the International Brigade was only first referred to in the *Worker* in December). As Bowyer Bell puts it:

With Belton’s Treatyite Fine Gael types in the Christian Front and O’Duffy’s faded Blueshirts in the new Irish brigade, eager to crush the Spanish Republic, many IRA volunteers clearly felt that Madrid’s cause must indeed be worthy of any aid.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁶ *Worker*, 27 February 1937.

¹⁵⁷ Robert STRADLING, *The Irish and the Spanish Civil War*, Manchester, Mandolin, 139-140.

¹⁵⁸ *Worker*, 1 August 1936.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ O’DONNELL, *Salud ! An Irishman in Spain*, 239-40, in ENGLISH, “Peadar O’Donnell : Socialism and the Republic, 1925-1937”, *Saothar* 14, 1989, 54.

¹⁶¹ J.BOWYER.BELL, *The Secret Army*, New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers, 1997, 133.

O'Duffy's rallying of the Nationalists was feared to present a distorted image of Ireland. In January 1937 Charlie Donnelly, an international brigadier, wrote in his "Long Live the Spanish Republic!" editorial for *Irish Front*:

Since last we wrote Owen O'Duffy [...] and his Irish Fascist Brigade have joined the insurgent forces. [...] But if Franco receives support from O'Duffy and his gang, so on the other hand the Spanish people are receiving the support of world anti-Fascists [...] in an International Brigade There are men from Italy, Germany and Austria, countries already under Fascism, who have somehow contrived to escape from the concentration camps and prisons making their way to Spain [...] to prevent a repetition of the horrors caused by Fascism in their own countries. [...] *Under the command of Frank Ryan, a leader of the Irish Republican Congress [...] the Connolly Battalion has been formed and is playing a leading part in fighting the disgrace, the stain upon Ireland caused by O'Duffy must be wiped out.*¹⁶² [Emphasis mine, AD]

In some respects, the creation of the Irish section of the International Brigades was a means to prove the Blueshirts wrong on a foreign field. The first article that referred to Ryan's brigade in the *Worker* was entitled "Irishmen's reply to Franco and O'Duffy" and read "This is the reply of the Irish workers from Belfast to Cork to the shame brought on Ireland's name before the world by O'Duffy, Belton, and the *Independent* and their intervention on the side of Franco, with his Foreign Legionnaires and Moors."¹⁶³

In personal correspondence, Frank Ryan alludes to different reasons and firstly asserts that O'Duffy did not weigh on his decision to go to Spain:

What did I come out here for? To be another O'Duffy, directing his men from the rear?... We would be out here if there never was an O'Duffy. We smashed his attempts to set up a dictatorship in Ireland... We came here to fight Fascism; it's just an accident for us that O'Duffy happened to be here fighting for it!¹⁶⁴

However in a posterior letter to Kerney, written from the Spanish jails, he claims the contrary. This confidence from a man facing a death sentence presents a different point of view: "I didn't bring a batt(alio)n to Spain. I could have done so. In fact, I prevented many from coming. I was satisfied with just enough to offset the O'Duffy propaganda."¹⁶⁵

Finally, if the weight of religion was a common feature in both countries the Spanish reaction against the Church was not a uniting bond. Irish Republicanism in the 1930s still stressed its attachment to Catholicism as "in Ireland the Roman Catholic Church was identified in a very real way with the nation and national identity."¹⁶⁶ Thus the recurrent need, in the middle of religious hysteria, for pro-Republicans to justify themselves as Catholics. Michael Kelly, in a postcard he wrote from Spain to De Valera, exemplifies this need:

Dear President, I write to you as an Irish Roman Catholic. I appeal to you to stop O'Duffy sending his murderers here to Spain. Women and children are being murdered day and night by Franco. I am still a Catholic but I will give my life in defence of the Spanish Government.¹⁶⁷

Only Jack White clearly manifested his approval of the questioning of the power of the Church:

You are in advance of us in dealing with the clerico-fascist menace. Again and again in Ireland the revolutionary Republican movement comes a bit of the way towards Socialism and scurries back in

¹⁶² Manus O'RIORDAN, *Op. Cit.*

¹⁶³ *Worker*, 19 December 1936.

¹⁶⁴ Frank RYAN in his February 1937 letter to Gerald O'Reilly of the Transport Workers Union of America, cited in Robert STRADLING, *Op. Cit.*, 144.

¹⁶⁵ Ryan to Kerney, NAI, DFA A20/03, in McGARRY, *Frank Ryan*, 46-47.

¹⁶⁶ W.K. ANDERSON, *James Connolly and the Irish Left*, Blackrock, Irish Academic Press, 25.

¹⁶⁷ NAI-DFA, File 119/17a.

terror when the Roman Catholic Church losses its artificial thunder of condemnation and excommunication. [...] In Ireland as in Spain, it was the priests who started methods of fire and swords against the people. Yet they complain bitterly when their own weapons are turned against themselves.¹⁶⁸

Those who favoured the Spanish Republic in Ireland had still an important task to accomplish: convince their fellow countrymen that they were being lied to regarding the Spanish question.

Trying to change the tide

The revolutionary press: deconstructing the official discourse

Given the general atmosphere in Ireland regarding the war in Spain and the complete bias of the public debate on that matter, the radical left did not have many opportunities or means through which it could voice its support for the Spanish Republic. The sympathy of the best selling newspapers residing with the Nationalists, Republican Congress and the CPI could only rely on their own forces to publicise their views.

Radical movements have always highlighted the importance and need for the workers to have their own publications and press, as opposed to the “bourgeois” or capitalist press. A revolutionary newspaper helps the diffusion of revolutionary thinking and the formation of a political consciousness. It is a link between the activists of a political current but also between these activists and the sympathisers. For Lenin “a newspaper is not only a collective propagandist and a collective agitator, it is also a collective organiser.”¹⁶⁹

The interest of a study of the Irish revolutionary press on the Spanish war is then not only to analyse the political discourse of the Communists and their counter-propaganda but also to gauge the state of the radical left through that of its media.

Revolutionary press in Ireland between 1936 and 1939 took the form of three different publications. The *Worker*, covered the first period as it was published in Dublin from 11 July 1936 to 13 March 1937. A weekly duplicated bulletin, it ran for 35 weeks and replaced the *Irish Workers' Voice* as the organ of the Communist Party of Ireland. It was edited by Sean Murray, general secretary of the CPI, and its cost was one penny.¹⁷⁰ The *Irish Democrat* replaced the *Worker* as early as 27 March 1937. A joint publication of the CPI, Republican Congress and Northern Ireland Socialist Party, it was published in Belfast and set out “to express the opinions and demands of the progressive peoples.”¹⁷¹ The editorial board was composed of representatives from each party or organisation. Peadar O'Donnell was the first editor. Frank Ryan followed when on leave from Spain and Sean Murray took over when he went back to the front. Its demise was due to a political conflict on the Spanish question – the NISP who supported the POUM in Spain was outraged at an article qualifying this group as a “Fascist force in the rear” that the Catalan Government should “[crush] once and for all.”¹⁷² Its final issue appeared on 11 December 1937. From then on revolutionary press in Ireland was virtually non existent and had to rely mostly on pamphlets and letters to the editors. The *Workers' Republic* which appeared monthly between May and August 1938 was the last attempt by the CPI to create a revolutionary paper, but it was a failure. The short life expectancy and successive demises of revolutionary newspapers - for lack of funds and readership - reflect the difficulties of the Communist movement in Ireland at that time.

However weak these media were they are a valuable source as the main means to acknowledge the arguments used by those Irish who were in favour of a Republican Spain. Moreover the weakness of the movement

¹⁶⁸ WHITE, *Op. Cit.*

¹⁶⁹ LENIN, *Where to begin*, May 1901, www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/may/04.htm.

¹⁷⁰ P. JACKSON, *Op. Cit.*, 79.

¹⁷¹ Murray to O'Malley, 22 Dec. 1936, Cormac O'Malley papers, in ENGLISH, *Op. Cit.*, 246.

¹⁷² *Irish Democrat*, 8 May 1937.

itself did not allow much more work to be done and counter-propaganda was the principal task of pro-Republicans. For Ó'Drisceoil “the countering of [the atrocity story] propaganda provided the focus of pro-Republican activities in the opening months of the war.”¹⁷³ The radical discourse against the majority in Ireland had to be multi-faceted to be convincing. In his analysis of the *Worker* and the Spanish civil war Pete Jackson focused on four aspects of the CPI’s line: the class analysis of the war, the use of religion, the “countering of ‘reactionary forces’” and the criticism of Labour.¹⁷⁴ We have already seen the CPI and Congress’ analysis of the Spanish conflict and reasons invoked to stand by the Spanish workers but the task of the revolutionary press was to convince the workers that the Irish were being lied to. For that reason the editors chose to counter the average presentation of the war, to express critics to the various responses to the Spanish question in Ireland and to present themselves as the saviours of journalism and the Irish left.

If the war opposed two camps in Spain, Republicans and Nationalists, radicals refused to see the conflict as a civil war because of the intervention of foreign powers that gave the conflict an international dimension: “It is idle nonsense to regard the fight in Spain as a civil war. Hitler, Mussolini and Portugal have already intervened on the side of the rebels.”¹⁷⁵ These foreign interventions provided the argument that Non-Intervention was ineffective and had to be rejected. The agreement proposed by France and accepted by the USSR was often described as a “farce.” The different papers recurrently put the blame on Britain for this policy (not on Blum’s popular Front government nor on the USSR, or even on Ireland). Britain was even accused of favouring a Fascist victory: “The Chamberlain Government of Britain is deliberately creating a siege under cover of her Non-Intervention farce, in order to completely strangle the Spanish people.”¹⁷⁶ This technique easily relied on the old anti-British feeling still vigorously present in Republican circles.

The majority in Ireland was made to believe Spain was undergoing a religious war. To counter this, the left papers used different arguments. The CPI’s analysis of the conflict was always put forward. For this denunciation to be even more powerful, extensive coverage was given to pro-Republican priests. Father Ramon Laborda, a Basque Republican priest who came on a speaking tour to Ireland, was the subject of numerous articles. His declarations went against the atrocity stories: “I have been over the entire Basque Province. Not a single church has been burned or priest or religious molested.”¹⁷⁷ Rev Juan Garcia Morales’ appeal to the Pope was quoted: “You must know that many Spanish priests are on the side of the people, and with the people’s cause.”¹⁷⁸ Fr O’Flanagan, “the distinguished patriot priest”¹⁷⁹, took an active part in the pro-Republican campaigns in Ireland and his contributions to public debates were lengthily reproduced. Another method was to question the Christianity of the Nationalists. First of all as Franco troops were helped by a foreign legion and Moroccan troops, the papers often underlined the fact that the Nationalist rising could not be a Catholic crusade. This gave the *Irish Democrat* an explanation to a mutiny in O’Duffy’s ranks in Spain:

[T]hose of the Irish recruits [...] had honestly gone out 'to fight for the faith,' and [...] found themselves forced to consort, in the Foreign legion, with the godless scum of the earth waging a war with the assistance of the *Mohammedans*¹⁸⁰, not 'for the faith' but for Fascism.¹⁸¹

¹⁷³ Ó DRISCEOIL, *Op. Cit.*, 96.

¹⁷⁴ JACKSON, *Op. Cit.*, 79-86.

¹⁷⁵ *Worker*, 22 August 1936.

¹⁷⁶ *Workers' Republic*, May 1938.

¹⁷⁷ *Worker*, 21 October 1936.

¹⁷⁸ *Worker*, 19 December 1936.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ [Emphasis mine, AD] – Note the racist connotation of the word.

¹⁸¹ *Irish Democrat*, 24 April 1937.

Secondly the roles were reversed. The Nationalist, so acclaimed in the *Independent*, became the baddies. Atrocities committed in by Franco's troops were reported – they never were in the *Independent*. On the contrary Republicans were shown as heroes, far from the image they had in Ireland:

They have killed hundreds of children, nurses and wounded men. They have deliberately aimed at these hospitals and schools, for they are flying low at the time. [...] Our planes bomb munitions factories and aerodromes, but in no case have they attempted to bomb the civil population in Fascist territory. On our side we are given strict orders not to ill-treat prisoners. We have often taken wounded Fascist prisoners to hospital.¹⁸²

The description of foreign volunteers followed the same pattern. The cowardice of O'Duffy's men contrasted with the International Brigadiers bravery: "Against the courage, sincerity and sacrifice of the Irishmen who joined the glorious International brigade, the O'Duffy adventure pales into obscurity."¹⁸³

On the Home Front the three papers denounced the pro-Franco lobby and the near collusion of the Irish Christian Front, Blueshirts, Fine Gael, and the Church on Spain:

The smokescreen of 'Christianity' thrown up gave the discredited bodies of reaction here a new lease of life. Belton, O'Duffy, Mulcahy, the pro-Cosgrave section of the Irish hierarchy, trying to rouse support for the 'patriot' Franco and incidentally to begin a new and sinister attempt to muzzle Ireland under the yoke of Fascism.¹⁸⁴

The national press regularly came under attack for its coverage of the conflict:

The *Irish Independent* describes this carnage as a war to save Christianity. It applauds the butchers of helpless women and children, and hails their murderers as 'patriots'. If the Irish people could but for a moment peep through this screen of foul lies and see the awful truth of what is happening in Spain, the long and bloody record of Lombard Murphy's Fascist press would be brought to a speedy end.¹⁸⁵

The *Irish Independent's* anti-worker editorial line was underlined in a historical perspective – the reader being always reminded of the attitude of the paper during some of the Irish Labour movement historical dates, especially in 1916. The *Worker* often described the *Independent* as "the howler for Connolly's blood, a notorious enemy of the working class."¹⁸⁶ For Peadar O'Donnell "the *Independent* was viciously conducting a campaign to work up feeling in Ireland so that it could complete the job it had failed to do in 1913, 1916, and 1922."¹⁸⁷

The Irish Labour Party and Trade Unions who never showed support for Spain were also regularly severely criticised in the radical press: "the Labour leaders are silent while every principle dear to Labour is at stake."¹⁸⁸

These conclusions underlined the need for a different kind of press and information – supposedly fulfilled by these short-lived publications. "We wish [the *Irish Democrat*] all the success such a paper in Ireland deserves. We are sure that it will play a big part in combating the foul propaganda against Republican Spain."¹⁸⁹ They also stressed the need for a new united front in Ireland that would challenge the ILP on the left. (That was the task of Republican Congress that was not strong enough to realise it). As far as Spain was concerned the *Worker*, *Irish*

¹⁸² *Worker*, 2 January 1937.

¹⁸³ *Irish Democrat*, 17 July 1937.

¹⁸⁴ *Workers' Republic*, May 1938.

¹⁸⁵ *Worker*, 9 January 1937.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 21 October 1936.

¹⁸⁷ *Irish Press*, 6 November 1936, ENGLISH, *Op. Cit.*, 246-247.

¹⁸⁸ *Worker*, 29 August 1936.

¹⁸⁹ Jack NALTY and Paddy DUFF in *Irish Democrat*, 19 June 1937.

Democrat and *Workers' Republic* were the only organs that systematically passed all the pro-Republican information during the war.

Solidarity with the Spanish Republic

With a very small circulation the radical press was not a tool powerful enough to reach a large audience. Pro-Republican activists had to use other media to be heard by a different public to the readers of the radical press, who are often already converts to the cause. They tried to use the national press as much as they could. Public displays of solidarity with Spain were organised by the few pro-Republican committees and political groups and the publication of a pro-Republican literature was encouraged.

If Irish supporters of the Spanish Popular Front were conscious that the national media did not favour them and even slandered them they still knew that they had a right to answer the articles and could use the letters to the editors to have a wider readership. Cardinal McRory's public reaction in the *Irish Independent* describing Republican Congress's telegram of solidarity with Spain as a "scandal and an outrage"¹⁹⁰ was the opportunity for Frank Ryan to answer lengthily to the Cardinal personally and to have his answer published in several newspapers (of which the *Irish Times*, *Irish Press* and *Irish Independent*).

To the Editor of the *Irish Times*.

Sir, my association with a telegram of 'sympathy and support to the Spanish, Catalan and Basque people in their fight against Fascism' has been widely – and wrongly – interpreted as support for 'a campaign that is carried out to destroy belief in God and in Jesus Christ, the Catholic Church and, what is more, to destroy every Catholic state in the world.'

I claim the right to vindicate myself and, therefore, ask space for the following letter, which I have sent to His Eminence Cardinal MacRory.¹⁹¹

This letter contained all the arguments that were going to be used throughout the war and this multiple publication proved very efficient. For McGarry it was the "propaganda high-point in the left campaign."¹⁹²

The written medium was also used with the publication of several books and pamphlets by eminent leftist activists. In 1937 Peadar O'Donnell published a book entitled *Salud! An Irishman in Spain* which was a first-hand account of his experiences in Spain at the beginning of the war. It provided a different view of what was happening in Spain under the new government. The Chairman of the Labour Party of Northern Ireland, Harry Midgley wrote a pamphlet *Spain – the Press, the Pulpit and the Truth* "in defence of representative governments and democratic institutions"¹⁹³ that was hailed by the CPI as "brilliant". The CPI even took charge of its diffusion in the South¹⁹⁴ even though its author hated Communism.¹⁹⁵

As a large part of the left and Republican bodies did not support the Spanish Government one aspect of the pro-Republican campaign was to lobby these bodies from within. Most CPI and Republican Congress members and sympathisers were either members of a trade union, of the IRA or even of the Labour Party or Fianna Fail. The anti-Franco campaign encouraged them to accomplish an internal struggle in these bodies so that they should alter their position and pass resolutions of support for their Spanish comrades. On 1 August 1936 an editorial by Sean Murray ended with this appeal:

¹⁹⁰ *Irish Independent*, 21 September 1936, in McGARRY, *Op. Cit.*, 94.

¹⁹¹ *Irish Times*, 23 September 1936, in NAI-JUS, File 8/803.

¹⁹² McGARRY, *Op. Cit.*, 94.

¹⁹³ MILOTTE, *Op. Cit.*, 173

¹⁹⁴ *Worker*, 19 September 1936.

¹⁹⁵ MILOTTE, *Op. Cit.*, 173.

The Trade Union movement must find its tongue in support of the Trade Union movement in Spain. Raise the issue in all the branches of the Labour and Republican movement. Send greetings to the Republican and Labour Fighters in Spain.¹⁹⁶

Regular public meetings were organised under the auspices of the CPI, Republican Congress and pro-Republican Committees. These Committees were mainly Aid and Relief Committees and were animated by CPI and Congress members but also by non-aligned Republican and Socialist figures. The two main were Spanish Medical Relief Committee and the Irish Friends of the Spanish Republic (Spanish Aid Committee). The Spanish Medical Aid Committee had been set up in September 1936 by Robyn Tweedy, a CPI member, and merged later with the Northern Irish Spanish Medical Committee to form the Spanish Medical Relief Committee. The Irish Friends of the Spanish Republic (Spanish Aid Committee) was chaired by Hannah Sheehy-Skeffington and included John Swift (of the Bakers' Union), Nora Connolly O'Brien, Ernie O'Malley, Maud Gonne and Fr Michael O'Flanagan in its members. It developed international ties with the more popular pro-Republican in Europe.¹⁹⁷ It was also the main vector of women's participation in the left campaign through the Committee's offshoot Women's Aid Committee. Their aims were to collect money and goods (medical material, clothes, cigarettes etc.) for the Spanish people in the Republican zone but also for the Irish volunteers in the International Brigades. These committees managed to exist despite the departure of many valuable Irish activists to Spain.

The public meetings aimed at popularising the Spanish cause in Ireland and roughly the same rhetoric as that of the radical press was used. They were usually chaired by speakers from different organisations, with a preference for "legitimate" speakers. By legitimate is meant people who had a first-hand experience of Spain, be it Peadar O'Donnell or George Gilmore who had both been in Spain at the beginning of the war, international brigadiers on leave from Spain (Peter O'Connor, Frank Ryan, Bill Scott, Jim Prendergast, Donal O'Reilly...). The Basque priest Fr Ramón Laborda was invited to Ireland in January and February 1937, where he was not unknown as he had been part of the Spanish delegation for the Eucharistic Congress in Dublin in 1932. His interventions in support of the Spanish Republic and against the Irish Catholic hierarchy were expected to strike the devout Irish people:

He began his lecture at the Gaiety theatre with the sign of the cross: 'Thus did our ancestors open their assemblies and thus today the Basque Nationalist Party begins its deliberations.' He spoke of the healthy state of Catholicism in Euzkadi. He denied that because they fought Franco that that made them communists. How could it be a religious war, he asked, when the bishop of Vitoria and many other priests had been expelled from the diocese by Franco's troops? Fascism, he said, would not tolerate a church that was neutral in politics. He preferred a persecuted church than a church in Franco's pocket and he listed thirteen priests by name who had been shot by the fascists.¹⁹⁸

However he may have managed to embarrass the Government and the Church but "he made little dent on public opinion."¹⁹⁹ (In Belfast one of his meetings could not take place and another one was interrupted by opponents shouting 'Up Franco!'). Fr Michael O'Flanagan was another legitimate speaker as a figure of Irish Republicanism – he had been president of Sinn Féin but had been expelled from the party in early 1936 – and as a – suspended – priest. The *Catholic Herald* labelled him "the latest tool used by the Reds to prove that there is religious freedom in Barcelona."²⁰⁰ He was also instrumental in the leftist campaign towards the Irish Republican population in the

¹⁹⁶ *Worker*, 1 August 1936.

¹⁹⁷ McGARRY, *Op. Cit.*, 99.

¹⁹⁸ KEOGH, *Op. Cit.*, 79-80.

¹⁹⁹ Ó DRISCEOIL, *Op. Cit.*, 98.

²⁰⁰ *Catholic Herald*, 6 January 1939, in NAI-DT, File S11083.

United States, where he was sent on a speaking tour twice (in May 1937 and August 1938). His public involvement also embarrassed the Government.²⁰¹

Other media were used as a film entitled “Defence of Madrid” was shown in different meetings and an exhibition on Basque life had been opened by Fr Laborda in Dublin.

The end of the war saw an evolution of Irish solidarity with Spain: “there was a shift of attention from political concerns to humanitarian activities with the establishment in 1938 of the Food Ship for Spain Committee, which gathered relief supplies, and the broadly-supported Frank Ryan release Committee.”²⁰² (Frank Ryan had been captured by the Nationalist forces). These networks were also revived after Franco’s victory in support of the Spanish Republican Refugees in France, for whom more funds were collected.²⁰³

However the utmost sign of sympathy, support and solidarity with the Spanish Republic was that given by the men who volunteered for the International Brigades and followed Frank Ryan to the Spanish trenches.

²⁰¹ “The Taoiseach suggests that your Minister might consider the question of speaking personally to Father O’Flanagan, with a view to impressing him the impropriety, in the circumstances, of public utterances of the kind to which you refer.” 17 January 1939 in *Ibid*.

²⁰² Ó DRISCEOIL, *Op. Cit.*, 99.

²⁰³ *Spanish Civil War File*, Irish Labour History Society.

PART 3 – THE IRISH CONTRIBUTION TO THE INTERNATIONAL BRIGADES

The creation of an Irish contingent to serve with in the International Brigades was not an easy option considering the scarcity of anti-Franco elements in Ireland. Its very existence was in itself an achievement.

In what ways did the Irish volunteers correspond to the standards of the International Brigades? On the contrary what were the particularities of the Irish in this body? How did the Irish fit in the organisation of this army of volunteers?

We will discuss the origins of the Irish volunteers and the character of their leader, Frank Ryan, who had an unusual development after Spain. Their achievements in Spain in military and political terms will be looked at.

Finally the posterity of this Irish brigade in the collective memory – and its political legacy - will be compared to that of O’Duffy’s *bandera*.

The Irish battalion

Rank and file volunteers

Recruiting the volunteers

Republican Congress and the Communist Party of Ireland were the only two political organisations who voiced their support for the Spanish Republic and hatred of Franco. The reasons behind this have been explained earlier. Considering the small number of activists both bodies counted, their decision to recruit volunteers to join the International Brigades who backed up the Spanish government forces can be regarded as a difficult one. If the CPI followed the logic implemented by the Comintern the same cannot be said of Republican Congress and this is shown by the fact that both groups did not embrace the International Brigade venture simultaneously.

The Communists were undertaking the task assigned to Communist parties everywhere and were recruiting for the International Brigades. O’Donnell and others in Congress were initially lukewarm about the idea of losing the few activists they had to Spain.²⁰⁴

The public feud between Ryan and Cardinal McRory quickly raised the Spanish question to the top of Republican Congress’s priorities. O’Duffy’s brigade also did a lot to persuade some reticent radicals of the need to take the issue more seriously than originally thought. For McGarry “once Congress had committed itself to political support of the Spanish Republic it inevitably felt a need to respond in equal measure to O’Duffy’s commitment.”²⁰⁵ Nevertheless this commitment did not equal the CPI’s who was in charge of the whole recruiting process:

In September 1936 the decision was taken to form an Irish unit for the Spanish Republican army. The Communist Party of Ireland gave the task of recruitment and organisation to Bill Gannon, a party member who had considerable experience of political work in the Irish Republican Army and had been decorated with an Irish governmental medal for his distinguished record in the Irish national struggle.²⁰⁶

This was by no means an Irish specificity as the Comintern’s directives concerned the Communist Parties in every country. Eugene Downing, an Irish volunteer in the International Brigade, confirmed this:

To get to Spain you had to go through Communist Party channels, you couldn't just decide to go and travel on your own. You had to go to the CP offices in Litchfield Street, London, or via the Belfast

²⁰⁴ Ó DRISCEOIL, *Op. Cit.*, 98.

²⁰⁵ McGARRY, *Op. Cit.*, 50.

²⁰⁶ NESTERENKO, *Op. Cit.*

and Dublin office. You'd have a group leader appointed and then travel with him through Southern France. The French authorities must have known about the volunteers going to Spain because of the numbers of men passing through Paris and the South of France.²⁰⁷

His comrade Peter O'Connor, who worked in Britain at the time, also recalled how he joined the International Brigades through the CPGB:

We attended many meetings in support of the democratically elected Spanish Republican government. In our view, taking a stand against Fascism in Spain was the most important issue of the time. Johnny and Paddy Power, Jackie Hunt and I discussed it between us and we decided that we should all volunteer to join the International Brigade. We applied through the Communist Party and they made all the arrangements.²⁰⁸

Obviously some made their own way to Spain, especially at the outset of the war, but once the International Brigades had been established and the CP recruitment process systematised there was little space for improvisation. In his memoirs Bob Doyle recounts his hectic journey from Ireland to Valencia – via London, Jersey, St Malo and Marseilles. Once in the Republican zone he was sent back to Liverpool to get a CP accreditation and to be allowed back to Spain to take part to the fight.²⁰⁹

(This selection process enabled the CP not only to get rid of potential saboteurs or “fifth columnists” but above all to assure its political leadership in the International Brigades.)

Once the first volunteers had been recruited the journey to Spain was not an easy one. Before the implementation of Non-Intervention there was little to stop the volunteers from travelling to the continent. If endorsements for Spain were “withheld in all cases” from November 1936²¹⁰ the volunteers used loopholes. One was to ask for an endorsement to France, as the last step for International Brigadiers before Spain was the CP headquarters in Paris and because the border between France and Spain was quite loose. In October 1936 the Department of Foreign Affairs received passport applications from Christopher Conway and James Patrick Cummins who were suspected to be Communists:

I beg to inform you that Christopher Conway [...] has made application for a passport to travel to France, Italy, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland and Holland, for the ostensible purpose of visiting Lourdes. [...]

James Patrick Cummins [...] has applied for a passport for France for the ostensible purpose of visiting the grave of his deceased brother. [...]

Both Conway and Cummins are active members of the Communist Party of Ireland and Conway is also associated with the Republican Congress group. From information in this branch it would appear that both recently volunteered for service in Spain and it would appear that the object of these men in applying for passports is to make their way to Spain, via France. It was learned through a friendly source in the Communist organisation that this was the intention of these men.²¹¹

Despite the precautions taken their application was eventually accepted: “the Minister for Foreign Affairs [...] has no objections to passports being issued in these two cases.”²¹² Another way was to use the week-end ticket to

²⁰⁷ Eugene DOWNING, interviewed on Sept. 24th 2000 by Ciaran CROSSEY with John QUINN. [<http://members.lycos.co.uk/spanishcivilwar/EDInterview1.htm>, validity date: 17 Jun. 04, 12:30].

²⁰⁸ Peter O'CONNOR, *A Soldier of Liberty, Recollections of a socialist and an antifascist fighter*, Dublin, MSF Union, 13.

²⁰⁹ DOYLE, *Op. Cit.*, 54-60.

²¹⁰ NAI-DFA, File 102/21.

²¹¹ NAI-DFA, File 2/1043.

²¹² *Ibid.*

France that allowed Irish nationals to travel to the continent without a passport. This system caused some worries to the government until quite late in the war.²¹³ According to McGarry,

it has been suggested that De Valera's attitude was motivated by a desire to rid Ireland of troublesome radicals but ultimately (as with O'Duffy's volunteers) there was little the government could legally do to prevent volunteer travelling to Spain before the introduction of the Non-Intervention Act in February 1937.²¹⁴

The first group of volunteers left Ireland on 11 December 1936. There were around eighty of them and they were headed by Frank Ryan.

Who were they?

With the roll of honour of the International Brigades comprising atheist and Jew, a Church of Ireland clergyman and a former Irish Christian Brother, Communist activists, IRA veterans and a former Orangeman – the true Republican vision of Wolfe Tone was achieved in its ranks - the unity of Catholic, Protestant, and Dissenter under the common name of Irishman.²¹⁵

This idealistic depiction of the Irish volunteers in Spain by a veteran may sound like official CP history but it still conveys the spirit of this formation which included men from multiple backgrounds. Different perspectives have to be analysed to grasp the reality of the Irish contingent in Spain.

Defining an Irish volunteer proves the first difficulty because the Irish in Spain were not exclusively born and raised in Ireland from Irish parents. Many were emigrates in Britain, America, Canada or even Australia and came with the contingents from these countries. Others were born abroad of Irish parents. The various estimations allow between 144 and 400 Irish brigadiers.²¹⁶ The two reference books on Ireland and the Spanish Civil War agree on a figure around 200²¹⁷ but new research evokes a larger figure:

Today, after several researchers have worked through other archives now available, the list of confirmed Irish volunteers stands at over 275. (Confirmed Irish means that they were either born here [in Ireland] or had one Irish parent and that more than one source has been used to confirm they were in Spain.)²¹⁸

The volunteers who came from the Free State were mainly urban:

[they were] predominantly drawn from cities and large towns; Dublin, Belfast, Cork and Waterford accounted for 2/3 of the recruits. [...] left-wing organisations in Ireland were mainly urban-based. The Communist Party had no real existence outside Dublin and Belfast and RC fared little better with branches only in the cities, large towns and several traditional radical bases such as Achill and Castlecomer.²¹⁹

Volunteers from Ulster were also represented and around one third of the Irish actually lived abroad.²²⁰

²¹³ "I would [...] suggest that the danger of the week end ticket system might again be brought to the notice of the Non-intervention Committee." 03/05/38, Minister of Foreign Affairs, in NAI-DFA, File 110/133.

²¹⁴ McGARRY, *Op. Cit.*, 55.

²¹⁵ O'RIORDAN, *Speech at ILP conference*, 2001, <http://members.lycos.co.uk/spanishcivilwar/MoR-ILP%20Conf.htm> [added 24 Nov. 2001].

²¹⁶ O'RIORDAN, *Connolly Column*; BOWYER BELL, *The Secret Army*, 134.

²¹⁷ McGARRY, *Op. Cit.*; STRADLING, *Op. Cit.*, 137.

²¹⁸ Ciaran CROSSEY, "Spanish Civil War: New research on the Irish who fought for and against Franco", in *Socialist View*, 23-24, October 2003.

²¹⁹ McGARRY, *Op. Cit.*, 56.

²²⁰ McGARRY, *Op. Cit.*, 56.

The youth of the Irish volunteers did not differ from the average in the International Brigades: over 2/3 of the Irish were under 30.²²¹ Most of them were bachelors. Indeed political reasons were not the only ones behind a departure to Spain and it was easier for a young single man rather than a married one to leave. The fact to have a good position also held weight. If the Spanish Civil War has been portrayed as the war of the poets and writers (Lorca, Hemingway, Malraux, Orwell...) it would be wrong to draw a general conclusion from that, especially in the Irish case. Three writers went to Spain, but they were politically committed and not very famous as writers. They were Charlie Donnelly, Ewart Milne and Thomas O'Brien. The ideological struggle and the targets of the CPI mostly attracted lower-class volunteers: 66% were workers and 25% came from a rural background.²²² In any case the proletariat was more represented in the International Brigades than with O'Duffy's group.

No doubt that the average International Brigadier was an atheist but most of the Irish volunteers were Catholics. They also included some Protestants from the North and a Jew, Maurice Levitas.²²³

If "the collective political domination of all the International Brigadiers was [...] 'antifascista,'"²²⁴ most of the Irish had even clearer political views and they came from the Republican Congress, CPI or IRA ranks. Even though they were not all active members most of them were sympathisers of these organisations (the number of non-members being hard to assess as they were often not recorded) and were "highly politicised."²²⁵ Harry Kennedy²²⁶, who would later desert, told the Irish representative in Paris that

[he had] during the past few years taken a deep interest, both in Ireland and England, of "left-wing" propaganda. He was particularly influenced by the propaganda of Mr Frank Ryan and Mr Pollitt of the British Communist Party. He gradually became 'class conscious' and finally intervened actively in the Spanish struggle.²²⁷

Another particularity of the Irish in Spain was the importance of their military training. "Approximately half of the International Brigades recruits were, or had been, members of the post-civil war IRA."²²⁸ They were viewed as effective, compared to others International Brigadiers who had never handled a gun. The letters written by Frank Ryan from the front often underline this point: "the military training of our lads has been turned into good account. Our section is one of the mainstays of the Company."²²⁹ (If the involvement in the Irish National struggle was thought to be a bonus for the Spanish fight, the Irish in Spain were expected to take advantage of their Spanish experience once at home:

But, you must remember that all our years in the IRA were to good purpose; these lads are well-trained, and they'll never let us down. What comes from this scrap will be of good use in Ireland, too. Quite a lot of our crowd here were in the IRA right up to their departure; this will be the making of them.²³⁰

If one volunteer was to stand out from the anti-Franco campaign in Ireland, Frank Ryan would be the one. Not only for the political lead he played in the movement in Ireland but more importantly for his role as a leader of the Irish unit of the International brigades.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

²²² STRADLING, *Op. Cit.*, 137.

²²³ Many Jews went to fight in Spain for they really feared, with reason, the advance of Nazism in Europe. See Manus O'RIORDAN's *Lecture and Record Recital* at the Irish Jewish Museum, *Op. Cit.*

²²⁴ STRADLING, *Op. Cit.*, 143.

²²⁵ MCGARRY, *Op. Cit.*, 62.

²²⁶ Who is not listed in any of the lists established by McGarry, Stradling and Crossey.

²²⁷ NAI-DFA, File 110/110, also quoted in MCGARRY, *Op. Cit.*, 62.

²²⁸ MCGARRY, *Op. Cit.*, 58.

²²⁹ RYAN, 21 January 1937, in O'RIORDAN, *Op. Cit.*, 62.

²³⁰ RYAN to Gerald and Helen O'Reilly, 28 December 1936, in CRONIN, *Op. Cit.*, 85.

Frank Ryan, leader of the volunteers

“Ryan is considered one of the more heroic figure of modern Irish radicalism”²³¹ not only for the part he played in Spain but also for the political career he led before 1936. The end of his life spent in Germany is the subject of much polemic.

Irish Republicanism

Frank Ryan was born in 1902 at Elton, County Limerick. He developed an early interest in Ireland and Irish culture. He was notably a fluent Irish speaker and studied at University College Dublin from 1921 to 1925 in the department of Celtic studies. These were years of political development - he was an active member of the UCD Gaelic League and was part of the IRA officer training corps. Ryan was also responsible for a number of Republican publications, his first steps in a long-time interest and activity in journalism. His implication against the Anglo-Irish treaty in the civil war - he joined the East-Limerick Brigade of the IRA in 1922 - led to his imprisonment in June 1923.

In 1926 the general headquarters of the IRA named him adjutant of the Dublin brigade, which was the most important IRA brigade. He organised demonstrations and protests against O’Casey’s play *The Plough and the Stars*. In 1927 Ryan attended the anti-imperialist congress in Paris which was a major event in his political formation. Peadar O’Donnell claimed that “from then on he saw Ireland’s struggle being one with subject people all over the world.”²³²

In 1929 Frank Ryan succeeded Peadar O’Donnell as editor of *An Phoblacht* and was very successful in this task. Coulter, who was assistant editor declared that “[he turned] *An Phoblacht* from a quiet political review with organisation notes into as lively a political newspaper as I’ve seen. Circulation grew from a thousand a week to more than 40,000.”²³³ 1929 was also the year of his election to the IRA Army council. Ryan rediscovered inmate life in 1931 as he was imprisoned at Arbour Hill for two months for having published “seditious” articles in *An Phoblacht*. Saor Éire, the IRA’s attempt to create a political party was very short-lived in the midst of clerical pressure and red scare. This retreat from the executive was criticised by the radical section of the IRA, of which Ryan was a part. At the March 1933 Ard Fhéis Ryan proclaimed:

I thought of the I.R.A. in 1930-31 as a Citizen Army who knew what they wanted and were prepared to get it. It is strange that the programme that we decided on two years ago should meet with our indecision just now – it shows the defeatist spirit. How do our military men think that they can steer clear of politics?

The growing dissension in the IRA led him to resign from his position of editor in *An Phoblacht* and from the IRA executive in 1933. In 1934, Ryan was part of the section that left the IRA to create Republican Congress. He became one of the leaders of this new movement, being joint secretary with George Gilmore.

If Ryan associated with Communists in this movement and on other occasions, he was never a member of the CPI nor did he claim to be a Marxist.

The future lies in working-class rule. In my opinion, not in the Communism advocated today, but certainly in that direction... Eventually the gap between the CP policy on the one hand and the Fianna Fail and IRA policies on the other hand will be filled by a new movement.²³⁴

²³¹ McGARRY, *Op. Cit.*, 48.

²³² CRONIN, *Op. Cit.*, 24.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 25.

²³⁴ CRONIN, *Op. Cit.*, 65 in McGARRY, *Frank Ryan*, 39.

This gap was where Republican Congress was supposed to stand but few were ready to work for it and internal divisions weakened the already too weak movement.

Congress's commitment to stand against Fascism as well as its Republican outlook led the group to express its support for the Spanish Republic in September 1936. This telegram of support, composed by Ryan, was the spark that lit the anti-Franco campaign in Ireland. Very early on, Ryan shared the lead of this campaign - notably by defending this message against Cardinal McRory - with his comrades Peadar O'Donnell and George Gilmore. Nevertheless circumstances were to give him a much greater place.

Spain

Nothing particular played in favour of Ryan for him to be chosen as the leader of an possible Irish section of the International Brigades. He had no connections to Spain, where he had never been, and Spanish was unknown to him. Peadar O'Donnell had been to Catalonia at the beginning of the war and George Gilmore to the Basque country some time after O'Donnell. He was not an orthodox Communist, when the majority of the International Brigades cadres were under the orders of Moscow. Gilmore and O'Donnell were much closer to the Communist line than Ryan was. On top of that Frank Ryan suffered from severe ear problems - he was nearly deaf - which did not predispose him to that kind of task. Nevertheless O'Donnell was considered too old. "Gilmore was the obvious choice to lead it because of his military experience and record. Gilmore's broken leg made it impossible for him to go. That left Frank Ryan."²³⁵ For McGarry,

the choice of Ryan as a leader reflected his military experience, commanding presence and probably also his prominence as a Republican rather than a Communist. [...] Even after the split, Ryan, a brave and charismatic figure, remained popular among IRA members, a factor that led many of them to follow him to Spain despite remaining loyal to the IRA.²³⁶

Even if Ryan had first expressed his opposition to going to Spain he eventually made up his mind and accepted to lead an Irish contingent there. In his biography of the Republican leader, McGarry sums up the motives behind this acceptance:

Valentine Cunningham's observation that 'a convergence of personal and public crisis' led many to Spain provides a more rounded insight into Ryan's decision. The public crisis was the failure of Republican Congress and, for the time being, the left republican project. This was also a personal crisis, leaving Ryan without a political role or even a job. [...] Ryan also liked a fight, viewing violence as a sign of commitment and belief in a cause. It is likely that a combination of the virulence of the pro-Franco campaign, political factors and personal circumstances influenced Ryan.²³⁷

Once in Spain Ryan never held a command position. In his book, *With the Reds in Andalusia*, Joe Monks recalls: "to our amazement "Kit" Conway instead of Frank Ryan had been appointed Section commander."²³⁸ In the 15th International Brigade "his role was that of a publicist - writing, broadcasting, visiting the front to see conditions at first hand."²³⁹ For instance he edited the *Book of the XVth Brigade*. His main task was to liaise between the Irish and the Spanish and International Brigade authorities, and to protect his men as much as he could. Monks again writes:

²³⁵ CRONIN, *Op. Cit.*, 83.

²³⁶ McGARRY, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War*. 53.

²³⁷ McGARRY, *Frank Ryan*, 47.

²³⁸ MONKS, *With the Reds in Andalusia*, London, John Cornford Poetry Group, 1985, <http://members.lycos.co.uk/spanishcivilwar/Monks.htm>, [validity date: 17 Jun. 04, 12:30].

²³⁹ CRONIN, *Op. Cit.*, 100.

Frank Ryan brought his speech to an end with the astonishing statement that he was not coming to the front with us. [...] "Sorry boys that I am not going with you," he said. "You will obey orders and uphold the honour of Ireland. But do not be needlessly careless with your lives because Spain needs you, and above all Ireland needs you."²⁴⁰

Despite the fact that he told his parents that his deafness barred him from the command positions²⁴¹ the most likely reason for his not taking any grade in Spain must have been his non-affiliation to the Communist Party.²⁴²

Nevertheless the best duty he served in Spain does not seem to have operated on an official level but as leader of the Irish section - which never was an officially separated unit. All accounts by Irish volunteers recall Ryan's instrumental role in the cohesion of the Irish contingent and in maintaining its morale. His charisma seems to have impressed quite a few. Monks portrays a man who managed to motivate men in difficult circumstances:

Frank Ryan, with Jock Cunningham on the second day of the battle of Jarama, had appeared at the farmhouse which served as the Battalion's kitchen at the moment when General Gal, the Commander of the XV Brigade, was haranguing the stragglers and calling upon them to return to the firing line. Ryan and Cunningham actually led the march back to the line. Each time that Ryan shouted to the marching ranks: "Are we downhearted?" a forest of clenched fists was raised as, unafraid, the men answered with a resounding "No!"²⁴³

Michael O'Riordan describes him this way: "Frank Ryan, the spokesman and commander of the Irish in the Brigades, personified as no one else did the best militant and revolutionary characteristics of the Irish people."²⁴⁴

The Jarama offensive was a very heavy one and Ryan was wounded in the arm. He had to leave the front in March 1937 and was sent back to Ireland on convalescence. This convalescence was actually a very short one as Ryan took advantage of this time to publicise the fate of the Spanish Republic and to take up with former comrades. With Republican Congress he was active in the setting up of the *Irish Democrat*. But this interval in Ireland was also an occasion for a *rapprochement* with the IRA executive. Ryan even collaborated to *An Phoblacht* - the publication had been re-authorised during the run-up for the general elections. Ryan actually stood for these Dáil elections as a candidate in Dublin City South for the Dáil for the United Front Against Fascism – and polled only 875 votes.

Ryan went back to Spain to secure the fate of those Irishmen who were still there but that experience was shortlived. In March 1938 Ryan, as well as other International Brigadiers, was captured by Italian officers. He was taken as a prisoner in a Nationalist prison and sentenced to death. Ryan's fame ensured that a huge mobilisation occurred for his release - Release Frank Ryan committees were set up in Ireland and in the US. Many personalities played a part in this mobilisation – among whom famous Republicans like Hannah Sheehy Skeffington and Maud Gonne. Officials like Kerney and De Valera used their influence. More amazingly the Duchess of Tetuan Cardinal McRory, Eoin O'Duffy expressed their support.²⁴⁵ This pressure resulted in his death sentence being commuted to thirty years penal work in November 1939, a move which at the moment did not bring him much closer to Ireland. However German's interest in his case slightly changed the situation.

Germany

The high profile of Ryan ensured that he was well known of Franco who would not free him easily. The solution came from a lawyer hired by Leopold Kerney – who was very active in getting Ryan out of jail. De

²⁴⁰ MONKS, *Op. Cit.*

²⁴¹ CRONIN, *Op. Cit.*, 84.

²⁴² McGARRY, *Op. Cit.*, 49.

²⁴³ MONKS, *Op. Cit.*

²⁴⁴ O'RIORDAN, *Op. Cit.*, 56.

²⁴⁵ Ó CANNAIN, *Op. Cit.*, 137-138.

Champourcin had connections not only with Spanish Nationalists but also with Germany and suggested that the Gestapo might help in releasing Ryan from Spanish jails. Germany was at war with Britain and was looking at some plans to foment an operation with Irish Republicans against Britain. Ryan was thought to be a valuable middleman between the IRA and them. “Franco refused to release Ryan but permitted an ‘escape’. At 2 a.m. on 25 July Ryan was taken from prison and handed over to Abwehr (German military intelligence) on the French border.”²⁴⁶ He was subsequently brought to Berlin via occupied Paris. Very rapidly he was informed of a plan and met an Irish acquaintance.

In the summer of 1940 [Abwehr] had approved Operation Dove, a mission to send the IRA chief of staff, Seán Russell, to Ireland by submarine, and it was now decided that Ryan should accompany him. Russell, like most of the IRA leadership, saw the war as an opportunity to secure an ally against Britain and had spent several months in Germany studying sabotage techniques. Abwehr was unsure as to how Ryan, the socialist Republican dissident, and Russell, who typified the apolitical militarist IRA outlook, would react, but when they met on 4 August they agreed to travel together.²⁴⁷

However the journey ended earlier than expected with Russell dying at sea of a perforated ulcer. Ryan thought better not to terminate the mission to Ireland without Russell and decided to go back to Germany – anyway De Valera did not wish his return to take place during the war. From then on he stayed in Germany. From then on he stayed in Germany. He was forbidden to leave the country despite not being a prisoner. He explained his situation to Kerney in a letter dated November 6, 1941:

I am treated – not merely officially – as a ‘distinguished guest.’ (I use the adjective in all modesty. My status – that of a non-party neutral – is established. I act merely in a ‘consultative’ capacity. My views are asked when there are situations and news that require interpretation. [...] I am not working for anybody here. I am not working for – nor even in communication with any organisation at home. (I do not even know if such organisation is aware of my whereabouts).²⁴⁸

This part of Ryan’s life, his terminal years in Nazi Germany – he died from poor health in a sanatorium near Dresden on 10 June 1944 – remains partly mysterious on the actual role he did play. Historians argue on whether Ryan collaborated with Germany or simply waited there for the war to finish before returning to Ireland. In any case, the transition from fighting against fascism in Spain to being a “guest” in Nazi Germany is quite an odd one and one could have imagined such an end for a man of Ryan’s calibre.

Fighting in Spain

The body of the International Brigades was its own entity – the IB had their own rules and were quite distinct from the Popular Army they were supposed to support. Political and military leadership was assured by the Comintern which aimed at creating a model army:

This army, made up from politically variable individuals, understood itself to need uniformity in politics as a precondition of military effectiveness. It was a political army in the image of Trotsky’s Red Army, which defined itself and its objectives in ideological as well as military terms, in which the political commissar was as important as the field commander, and to which political education was as important as martial training.²⁴⁹

It is of interest to note how the Irish contingent merged in these brigades, which were composed of more than 50 nationalities. The early organisation of the brigades according to language criteria proved the first

²⁴⁶ McGARRY, *Op. Cit.*, 63.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁴⁸ CRONIN, *Op. Cit.*, 240.

²⁴⁹ From RICHARDSON, *Comintern Army*, 90-135, in STRADLING, *Op. Cit.*, 146.

difficulty and illustrated the fact that the unsettled National question was still a relevant issue in the Free State. The political behaviour of the Irish in a body that was very orientated towards a Communist vision is also to be examined, as is their military contribution.

The 15th International Brigade at Brunete, July 1937



Leading figures of the British Battalion in early 1937. From left to right: Battalion commander Wilf McCartney, Commissars Dave Springhall and Peter Kerrigan, Tom Wintringham and Frank Ryan.

British Battalion officers at Jarama

* All three documents available at http://www.international-brigades.org.uk/british_volunteers/.

Within the International Brigades

In the midst of a variety of nationalities and men, there were but few Irish in the International Brigades. The organisation numbered 5 brigades for most of the war and each was divided into battalions. The XV IB was supposed to be an English-speaking brigade incorporating volunteers from the United States, Canada and Europe – some were from Holland, others from Greece... The Irish were first attached to the British Battalion for practical reasons – there were not enough of them to form a separate unit. From the outset of their stay in Spain they regularly felt the need to express their nationality and nationalism. Various accounts relate the existence of Wolfe Tone and Easter 1916 commemorations with Gaelic dances²⁵⁰ as well remembrance ceremonies in the honour of James Connolly, whose name the Irish volunteers had chosen for their “unit.” On 12 May 1937, a resolution was pronounced at the Connolly commemoration, which identified Ireland’s struggle for freedom as part of an international fight:

We of the James Connolly Unit of the International Brigade, fighting alongside the democratic forces in Spain against International Fascism send revolutionary greetings to our Comrades in Ireland who are commemorating the 21st anniversary of the death of James Connolly, murdered on May 12, 1916, by the forces of British Imperialism. [...] We salute our comrades at home, who are carrying the struggle against Imperialism, native and British, and we call for a closing of the ranks against the Common enemy. We stand in silence here for two minutes to salute the memory of Connolly, and to all our Comrades who gave their lives in Ireland’s fight against oppression, and to the workers of the entire world who have died for freedom.²⁵¹

To be fighting alongside British workers was an opportunity to show the bonds of the International working class but many favoured a separate Irish unit. Moreover, the prestige of a distinct Irish unit would have been positive for the home front and would have encouraged support for Ryan’s followers in Republican circles.²⁵² In his New Year Day 1937 statement Ryan claimed that an Irish unit was on the way:

To all Irish comrades,

As most of you will have learned in the newspapers before leaving home an Irish Unit of the International brigades is being formed. It may be necessary to make clear to some why all Irish comrades are not just now together. The fact is that the military situation does not allow the war to be held up so that all Irishmen can be collected and formed into a unit. At the earliest possible opportunity, that will be done. The unit now at the front, the unit now in training and (that) of the comrades now on their way to us will now be united in one unit.

This unit will be part of the English speaking battalion which is to be formed. Irish, English, Scots and Welsh comrades will fight side by side against the common enemy, Fascism.

It must also be made clear that in the International Brigades in which we serve there are no national differences. We are all comrades.

[...]

If we stress the fact that we are Irish it is mainly to show the world that the majority of the Irish people repudiate Fascist O’Duffy and his mercenaries who are helping Franco and his Moors.

Finally we insist that the closest bonds of comradeship must unite us with all the fighters against Fascism from other countries. Rival national war-cries will never be raised on us.²⁵³

However this pious wish was not possible. “[Ryan] was unable to convince the brigade command to sanction a separate unit, given their insufficient numbers and the obvious logic of organising soldiers in language-based

²⁵⁰ Manus O’RIORDAN, *Op. Cit.*

²⁵¹ *Worker*, 12 June 1937.

²⁵² For this reason Ryan always exaggerated the number of Irishmen in his letters to Gerald O’Reilly, who was responsible for Clan Na Gael in the States and had disapproved of this venture. Similarly the revolutionary press in Ireland always referred to the Irish in Spain as a column, section or unit.

²⁵³ *Spanish Civil War File*, Irish Labour History Society.

battalions.²⁵⁴ The fact to be amalgamated to the British battalion caused problems to some Irish volunteers - many of them had a Republican background and shared a strong resentment towards the British. The presence of George Nathan in the British Battalion added to this sentiment as Nathan, a former Black and Tan during the Irish war of Independence, was found to be the murderer of the former Mayor of Limerick during the Tan War. He was obliged to explain his past and his political evolution to the Irish in Madrigueras:

Feeling that he was now a Socialist, and a brother in arms to fellow Socialists who not long ago had been just Nationalists, Nathan referred to the fact that he had served in Ireland with the Crown forces. He specified that he had been with military intelligence in County Limerick. His exact words were: "We have all grown up politically. We are Socialists together now." The meeting responded to the spirit of his speech and clapped him.²⁵⁵

Some politicised Irish volunteers clearly understood that explanation – and the fact that he was under the orders of “British Imperialism” – and even welcomed this development but Nathan in no way convinced them all.

Another problem with the British battalion was the supposedly humiliating attitude the CPGB leaders showed towards the Irish. One example was the anger felt when in mid-January 1937 a copy of the London *Daily Worker* reached the front with “a report of the heroic actions of the British at Lopera, but without mentioning any Irishman or Irish unit.”²⁵⁶ That kind of mistake seems to have been recurrent.²⁵⁷ In a letter to Gerald O’Reilly, Ryan expressed his exasperation at the British commandment and how “the representatives of the British CP wrecked the Irish Unit.” Some Irishmen whom Ryan trusted had been jailed, others suspected or deported. He went on:

To the International Brigades authorities I pointed out that Ireland’s nearest enemy is British Imperialism, that therefore Ireland’s nearest ally must be the British working class and that therefore the Irish and British must be side by side in the International Brigades. I was able to convict the British of having made a grave political error. [...] Some day I’ll tell you the whole sordid story of the political density of some so-call British revolutionaries. For the minute here’s one example: an English officer honestly trying to pay the Irish a tribute says to the men: “Men from England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, all of you are representatives of the British working-class’!!! The tragedy is, Gerald, that the English send out the worst officer-type. The leaders of the CP of Great Britain and the rank-and-file understand our (Irish) position. It just happened that we got in-between crowd of the swelled-headed adventurer type...²⁵⁸

This escalation had resulted in a meeting being called to decide whether the Irish should stay with the British Battalion or join the Americans in the Lincoln Battalion. (Ryan was in Madrid at the time) The majority chose the Americans – they joined them at their training base at Villanueva de la Jara on 20 January 1937²⁵⁹ - and this event is remembered as a political failure of the Irish in Spain. It shed light on the persistent weaknesses of the Irish left and that is how Peter O’Connor remembered it:

Whoever was responsible (for it), I believe that such a meeting should never have been called. About forty-five comrades attended and decided, by a majority of five, to join the Lincoln Battalion. The main reason given by those who voted for the Americans was the wrongs done to Ireland by the English in the past. They claimed that though they were anti-fascist, they still looked on the English as their enemy. Those of us who were not only class conscious but politically conscious as well [...] pleaded passionately for a distinction to be made between anti-fascist or working class comrades from England and British imperialism. [...] It was an understandable historical but political mistake that the vote went against us by such a small majority. [...] It was worth dwelling at length on this meeting because it was so important. We felt that any of us who came out of Spain alive would be

²⁵⁴ McGARRY, *Frank Ryan*, 49.

²⁵⁵ MONKS, *Op. Cit.*

²⁵⁶ STRADLING, *Op. Cit.*, 156.

²⁵⁷ McGARRY, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War*, 65.

²⁵⁸ Written in Paris early in March 1937, in CRONIN, *Op. Cit.*, 90.

²⁵⁹ O’CONNOR, *Op. Cit.*, 16.

better equipped to carry on the political fight together with our British comrades against our common enemy – British Imperialism.²⁶⁰

For McGarry, this meeting was very much reminiscent of the Republican Congress split in so much as it was once again revelatory of “the tension between the conflicting demands of nationalism and socialism, which had divided the Irish left throughout the 1930s.”²⁶¹

After this split at Madrigueras all the new volunteers arriving from Ireland were systematically placed in the British Battalion.

Political behaviour

The political reasons and motivations behind the Irish brigade have already been commented upon, as well as the political origin of the volunteers. This section aims to show that the political domination of the CP in the recruitment of the International Brigades in Ireland and its authority in Spain ensured the perpetuity of a Comintern-orientated line of the Irish Brigadiers once in Spain. The only slight difference the Irish manifested in comparison to the average International Brigadiers was perhaps the political immaturity that created the split between the Irish and British at Madrigueras and the attitude to religion in the midst of a predominantly anti-clerical environment.

The influence of the Comintern concerned Communists and non-Communists alike. The prestige the USSR gained, given that it was the only foreign country to bring support to the Republican zone and because of the propaganda it was able to spread in Spain, was paramount. It was not unusual to see the Spaniards welcome the International Brigades with cries of “*¡Vivan los Rusos!*”²⁶² whereas the Russians were only present in the brigade staff - never as simple soldiers. This admiration filters through into Bob Doyle’s account of his time in Spain. Emphasis is often put on the arms provided by the Soviet Union – this is understandable as the Republicans were poorly armed. Nevertheless his thoughts at Hajar while watching a Russian tank – “*me di cuenta del sacrificio que estaba realizando el pueblo soviético*”²⁶³ – stem more from an idealised vision of the Soviet part in the war than from the reality.

The CP’s leverage on the Irish volunteers is also clear in their judgements on the different factions of the Spanish Republicans, essentially on the Anarchists and POUM. The view they expressed on these two trends is also significant as neither were represented in Ireland. O’Drisceoil summed it up as such:

In general, the attitude of Irish Communists and Brigadiers was to regard the anarchists as generally sincere, if hapless, undisciplined and misguided, while the POUM was regarded as a fascist agent; its real sin, of course, was to be a Marxist organisation that rejected the authority of the Comintern and the Stalinist monopolisation of communist politics world-wide.²⁶⁴

Jack White was the exception that joined the Anarchists’ ranks and Peadar O’Donnell’s liking them was often ridiculed. The Anarchists were seen as not very valuable allies:

O’Daire, having been a regular soldier, suspected that the Anarchists would fail to think clearly in military matters. He did not blame the forty thousand men that had been overwhelmed by the Duke of Bourbon’s land, sea and air forces in February; what he did blame the Anarchists for was having eight months, July 1936 to February 1937, in which they could have planned and carried out attacks on the smaller Fascist posts. He claimed that that quantity of time had been wasted; and that there

²⁶⁰ O’CONNOR, *Op. Cit.*, 15-16.

²⁶¹ McGARRY, *Op. Cit.*, 66.

²⁶² « *Long live the Russians !* »

²⁶³ « I realised the sacrifice the Russian people were making. » DOYLE, *Op. Cit.*, 65.

²⁶⁴ Ó DRISCEOIL, *Op. Cit.*, 99.

would not be another time when the Anarchists would have numerical superiority. What had transpired in Malaga made O'Daire get on to evaluate the efforts of the Anarchists in Catalonia. He drew our attention to the fact that during that same eight months Barcelona had not sent adequate forces up the Ebro valley to eliminate the Fascists in Saragossa.²⁶⁵

As for the POUM, there did not seem to exist too harsh a word to describe them. Peter O'Connor later claimed it was "a scandalous sectarian section."²⁶⁶ The *Irish Democrat* which had described them as "a Fascist force in the rear"²⁶⁷ also published these lines: "The POUM rising in Barcelona failed in its objects. It has finished this disruptive group and the workers' organisations and the Peoples' Front comes forth strengthened."²⁶⁸ Indeed when referred to, the Barcelona May Days were quickly disparaged:

Springhall (*an English officer of the XV IB*) feared that there were political groups in Barcelona that if given a chance would do a deal with Franco: sign a separate peace in return for a free Catalan state; and ditch Republican Madrid. The Anarchist leaders who led the people successfully in the battle for the streets were sadly without policies when it came to the prime matters of government and the waging of military campaigns.

Or elsewhere:

It was about this time that we heard of the uprising in Barcelona and we viewed the situation in Catalonia coldly in the way it affected the military equation. It affected the Republican, anti-Fascist war effort badly. As Daly said, "A boy of eight could see that." Indeed, it was a disaster, not only for the future of the Spanish Republic, but also for the future of Catalan Anarchism.²⁶⁹

The fear of enemies from within encouraged by the Communists leaders (Stalin and Marty to name but two) seemed to be working as O'Connor described Albacete, the first town he saw in Spain, as "a haven for deserters, saboteurs, black marketers, spies, fifth columnists, and rumour mongers. It was the most demoralising place in Spain."²⁷⁰

The memoirs of volunteers and "official" history²⁷¹ also consistently omit to relate the difficult episodes of the war involving the CP. The role of a dictatorial political police in the Republican zone is never properly acknowledged when it was known at the time – it is not a recent discovery of historians. The report on Harry Kennedy states:

A secret police, similar in lines to the OGPU operates among the civilian population but more particularly among troops and something corresponding to a reign of terror, according to Kennedy appears to exist. He cited cases of brutal murders which, he stated, he had witnessed of soldiers, civilians and prisoners of war. [...] According to his statements, Kennedy became "suspect" on account of his apparent attachment to the Church and received repeated warnings from his comrades that he would certainly be "eliminated" by the secret police on the slightest pretext. He received such a warning shortly before he decided to desert.²⁷²

The death of Maurice Ryan, an Irish volunteer who was shot in the back by some Republicans, was officially said to have occurred in combat. (Apparently he was not killed for political reasons but for the trouble this undisciplined man brought within the brigade).²⁷³ Another mystery is that of the Irishman Brian Goold-

²⁶⁵ MONKS, *Op. Cit.*

²⁶⁶ Interview with McGarry, June 1995, in McGARRY, *Op. Cit.*, 70.

²⁶⁷ *Irish Democrat*, 8 May 1937.

²⁶⁸ *Irish Democrat*, 3 July 1937.

²⁶⁹ Joe MONKS, *Op. Cit.*

²⁷⁰ O'CONNOR, *Op. Cit.*, 14.

²⁷¹ I rely on the works by Monks, Doyle, O'Connor and O'Riordan.

²⁷² NAI-DFA, File 110/110.

²⁷³ See McGARRY, *Op. Cit.*, 77-79; STRADLING, *Op. Cit.*, 190-193;

Verschoye, a radio technician who came to Spain from Moscow and who ended in a Gulag for having expressed anti-Communist views.²⁷⁴

The centrality of the religious question both in the Spanish conflict and in Ireland's response to it placed the Irish Brigadiers in a difficult position in both instances. At home they had to fight the mainstream opinion of the conflict and justify their Christian credentials. The situation was different in Spain where part of the Irish could let go of their anti-clericalism – an attitude not really to be shown in Ireland – while other believers among the volunteers had to cope with the anti-clerical atmosphere. Indeed, if the atrocity stories told by the Irish press were very exaggerated and biased they still accounted for a part of reality, especially at the outset of the war. Priest and nuns were killed and churches burnt, if not to the extent told in Ireland. Joe Monks recalls the attention an English officer took for the Irish on that issue:

Dave Springhall made a point of calling the attention of the Irishmen to the advertising boards that bore business names, many having Jesus as the first name. He rightly suspected that the Irish would regard the popular use of Jesus as a practice bordering on sacrilege. They did, too. He asked about the reactions to the wrecked churches and the replies suggested that none of the Irish, particularly the non-believers, liked to look upon a desecrated church. Indeed one youth had been seen to physically close his eyes to such scenes as the demonstration went through the streets of Barcelona.²⁷⁵

However, most recognised the difference between anti-clericalism and anti-religious behaviour, all having been victims, directly or otherwise, of the rebuke of the Church at home for their political commitment. Thus Frank Ryan's attending mass in Madrid²⁷⁶ is to be seen in view of his rejection of the Nationalist cause as being that of religion. In a letter from Spain he wrote:

Around the barricades, are scattered sheaves of religious pictures. I pick up one. A composite photo of Franco, Christ and Mola – in that order. Ugh! What would Christ say to this prostitution of His teachings? [...] They're fighting for Fascism, not for religion. Catholic peasants would have only contempt for this juggling-up of a new Holy Trinity.²⁷⁷

Nevertheless, the weight of this question was still to be felt, as "the association of the Republican Government with anti-clericalism ensured a hostile reception for veterans returning to Ireland."²⁷⁸

Military contribution

The military role played by the International Brigades was not an insignificant one. Though they were first used as reserve troops, they were later used as shock troops and often spearheaded Republican offensives. The Irish contribution would be difficult to assess as such, as Irishmen did not form a separate section and were split mainly between two battalions of the XV IB. The combat in which they took part was fierce. The XV IB were principally instrumental in the defence of Madrid and the battle of Jarama, in the battle of Brunete, on the Aragon front and Aragon offensive and eventually in the Ebro battle.

and Eugene Downing interview, <http://members.lycos.co.uk/spanishcivilwar/EDInterview1.htm>, [validity date: 17 Jun. 04, 12:30].

²⁷⁴ See the extracts from the following books at <http://members.lycos.co.uk/spanishcivilwar/purge01.htm>, [validity date: 17 Jun. 04, 12:30].

MacEOIN, Uinseann, *The IRA in the twilight years 1923-1948*, Argenta Publications, Dublin, 1997; KRIVITSKY, W.G., *I was Stalin's Spy*, Ian Faulkner Publishing Ltd, Cambridge, 1992, Pages 115-116;

STAJNER, Karlo, *7000 days in Siberia*, [Translation : Joel Agee], Canongate Publishing Ltd, Edinburgh, 1971.

²⁷⁵ MONKS, *Op. Cit.*

²⁷⁶ STRADLING, *Op. Cit.*, 194.

²⁷⁷ CRONIN, *Op. Cit.*, 127.

²⁷⁸ McGARRY, *Op. Cit.*, 76.

Defence of Madrid

The first action of the International Brigades was the defence of Madrid which was a first objective for the Nationalists. It had a strategic and symbolic importance being the capital city and the seat of the Republican Government²⁷⁹ but also because there were Nationalist officers in Republican jails.²⁸⁰ This action started in November 1936 and was to last until March 1937 to end on a *status quo*. It was considered as *the* Republican military success. Indeed had they lost the Defence of Madrid they would have been unlikely to pursue the war effort for long in good conditions.

One of the most dramatic battles for the defence of the capital was the battle of Jarama in which several Irishmen were involved with the XV IB. This part was fought on the southern sector of the Madrid front and around 35,000 Republican effectives were concerned.²⁸¹ Quinn relates this event:

On February 6, 1937, Franco's army advanced into the Jarama valley in attempt to capture the road between Madrid and Valencia. Jarama was to become one of the bloodiest battle of the Civil War, lasting for a month. The opening action of the Republican forces involved the British Battalion under confused leadership taking on overwhelming opposition. Within a week, the Lincoln Battalion received orders to cut short its training and move immediately to join the battle. The more experienced men in the Irish column had already gone to the front, and indeed some of them had been killed. (...) The Lincoln's arrived at Jarama on February 23 with 450 men divided in two infantry companies – a machine gun unit and a group of paramedics and doctors. Both sides were dug into trenches at opposite ends of the valley. The terrain was rough and sparse, dotted with twisted olive trees and vines. Conditions were appalling, trenches filthy and both food and basic medical supplies were scarce. Despite the poor conditions morale was high and the volunteers fought as strongly as the ideals they held. Perhaps it was their ideals that encouraged their spirit to fight, for in reality their defence lacked good military tactics and thinking. Nevertheless, they held up Franco's offensive, but at great cost.²⁸²

Indeed this battle has been described as the most vicious fighting of the entire civil war and it claimed many lives. The Irish, led by Kit Conway, lost 19 or 20 men, which accounted for around 1/3 of the Irish dead in the course of the Spanish Civil War. (Frank Ryan was wounded in the arm on this battle.) Peter O'Connor remembers it as "a nerve-shattering experience." An extract from his Spanish diary on 26 and 27 February 1937 illustrates this:

We were holding the line. We didn't get anything to eat since the morning of the 23rd. It is now 26th February and all our canteens are empty. We fight our way back to the main line. The 27th February and we attack again, led by Eddie O'Flaherty and Paul Burns. Jackie Hunt from Waterford is wounded in the ankle, and Bill Henry, that great Protestant working class comrade from Belfast, was killed in the vanguard of the attack, together with T.T. O'Brien. We hold the line and consolidate our positions. The road to Madrid is safe. We settle down to a pinch of trench warfare, making the dugouts more liveable. Our main position is among the olive groves on the hill overlooking the villages of Marata and Chinchon, where we settle down to repulse attacks and counter attack.²⁸³

After this battle followed three months of trench-war in which some Irish volunteers took part. For Cortada this struggle "saved Madrid's lifeline."²⁸⁴

²⁷⁹ At least until they left for Valencia as early as 6 November 1936.

²⁸⁰ "Article: Madrid", <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/SPmadrid.htm>, [validity date: 23 Jun. 04, 10:40].

²⁸¹ CORTADA, *Op. Cit.*, "Article: Jarama, Battle of", 277.

²⁸² Raymond J. QUINN, *A Rebel Voice, A History of Belfast Republicanism, 1925-1972*, Belfast Cultural and Local History Group, Belfast, 1999, <http://members.lycos.co.uk/spanishcivilwar/Quinn.htm>, [Last updated, 5 Dec. 01].

²⁸³ O'CONNOR, *Op. Cit.*, 17-18.

²⁸⁴ CORTADA, « Article: International Brigades », *Op. Cit.*, 268.

Another important battle in the defence of Madrid was that of Pingarron Hill at which the Abraham Lincoln Battalion suffered 300 casualties on 27 February 1937. “On balance, the battle represented a defensive victory for the Republicans.”²⁸⁵

The battle of Brunete

The Irish in the International Brigades also took part in the Brunete offensive which lasted from 6 to 26 July 1937 and engaged 80,000 Republican troops – of which 25,000 would die in this battle²⁸⁶. The objective was to “relieve the threat to Madrid.”²⁸⁷ It was “the most massive military offensive to date in the cruel history of the Spanish Civil War.”²⁸⁸ In this fight the IB were used as shock troops and suffered heavy casualties - “The British Battalion was left with 42 out of 300 effectives, and the Lincoln and Washington battalions lost 50% of their men and were then merged together.”²⁸⁹ Seven Irishmen died. Peter O’Connor lived to recount the appalling conditions of the combat:

On July 14th we were withdrawn to the rear for re-organisation and on the 16th we left for the front again in the evening. We marched all night and reached the second line of reserve outside the village of Villanueva del Pardill at 9.00 a.m. the following morning. We moved up to the front line that evening. That day we experienced the heaviest aerial and artillery bombardment yet received during the war. One piece of shrapnel missed my head by inches and buried itself in the ground at my feet. We left this line for another part of the front twelve kilometres away. We marched all night through the soft sand. At the end my feet were raw and I had no socks.

I went into the battle immediately nearly collapsing with heat and exhaustion. We were still holding out. Both my feet had to be bandaged by First Aid Men. The scorching heat was unbearable. We held our advanced positions against heavy fascist counter-attacks in which they used aerial, artillery, anti-tank, and anti-aircraft bombardments. The fascists made a fierce attack on the morning of July 20th on our right flank using forty or fifty bombers, machine guns and tanks. Our flank gave way. We were parched from thirst. We had gone twelve hours at that point without a drink. A number of our Spanish comrades collapsed with the heat.²⁹⁰

In the end the Brunete offensive was stopped by the Nationalist forces.

On the Aragon front

The Aragon front had been established at the beginning of the war. The first offensive took place in June 1937 to prevent the Nationalists from entering Bilbao, which they eventually did on June 19th.

Another offensive on this front was the attack on the town of Belchite on 24 August 1937 by the Lincoln Battalion. It was a rapid success as Belchite was captured on 6 September but the advance did not last long as the town was then retaken by the Nationalists. According to Cronin, “the retreat became a rout.”²⁹¹

The next Republican offensive in Aragon was that of Teruel which started off with the capture of the town on 17 December 1937. The XV IB was called to reinforce the Republican Army. By that time the Nationalists controlled a majority of Spain and the Republicans had no choice but to attack and regain terrain. This advance allowed optimism in the Republican ranks. On 11 February Frank Ryan wrote to O’Reilly

Claims that our Brigade is wiped out are absolutely false. (Three times in six weeks Franco has claimed it.) We got a gruelling; but no leading casualties, and in fact less casualties than you’d

²⁸⁵ CORTADA, *Op. Cit.*, 277.

²⁸⁶ « Article: Brunete », <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/SPbrunete.htm>, [validity date: 23 Jun. 04, 10:40].

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁸ CORTADA, *Op. Cit.*, 94.

²⁸⁹ CORTADA, “Article International Brigades”, *Op Cit.*, 268.

²⁹⁰ O’CONNOR, *Op. Cit.*, 28.

²⁹¹ CRONIN, *Op. Cit.*, 132.

expect when you knew that the ground was absolutely pock-marked with shell-fire. (Absence of leading casualties shows the high level of training; in early days good men had to throw away their lives to compensate for the inexperience of others.) The capture of a town is certainly a moral victory but the greatest victory at Teruel was forcing Franco to use up all the troops etc. He had concentrated for another Guadalajara offensive.²⁹²

However, the enthusiasm was to be short-lived. The Republicans lost Teruel to Franco's troops on 22 February 1938 and this loss marked a turning point in the war in Spain, the advantage now clearly belonging to the Nationalists. On 15 April 1938, the Nationalist troops reached the port of Tortosa on the Mediterranean and thus cut the Republican zone in two.

It was on the Aragon front, at Calaceite, near Gandesa, that an International column was captured by Mussolini's "Black Arrows" in March 1938. The men captured - around a hundred - included Frank Ryan, Bob Doyle, Maurice Levitas, Dave Goodman from Britain and Max Parker from the US. They were jailed in San Pedro de Cardena.

The Battle of the Ebro

The last large-scale Republican offensive was launched in July 1938 with the Republican Army and the International Brigades. Over 80,000 Republican troops were involved and "the Nationalist Army had 6,500 killed and nearly 30,000 wounded."²⁹³ The crossing of the river Ebro and the successive captures of positions such as Gandesa and Hill 481 were overshadowed by the eventual retreat of the outnumbered Republicans by mid-November 1938. Here is an extract of an article written by Eugene Downing, one of the last Irishmen to arrive in Spain:

While holding Franco's forces along the line of the river Ebro the Government proceeded with the creation of a new Army – the Army of the Ebro. The 15th Brigade had suffered a severe mauling in the Aragon disaster (in which Frank Ryan was captured) but was now re-organised and the gaps filled with new recruits who continued, illegally, to cross the Pyrenees. Together with the other International Brigades, the XVth (comprising the British, Irish, Americans and Canadians) would be part of this new Army of the Ebro. [...]

Eventually the moment arrived for which all the training had been a preparation. This was the re-crossing of the river Ebro and the recapture in two days of territory in which it would take Franco four months to win back at a cost of over 30,000 casualties. [...]

On the second day after crossing the river and after minor skirmishes with isolated groups we had advanced to within a short distance of the town of Gandesa. The capture of this key town was vital to the success of the whole operation. But it was impossible to occupy the town without first dislodging the enemy from the hills which formed a natural defensive barrier in front of it. These hills were strongly fortified and the troops well dug in.

We, on the other hand, lay strung out along the top of the Sierra Cabels with some straggly bushes in front of us. How they managed to grow at all in the iron-hard ground is a mystery. [...]

The overwhelming weight of metal which Franco was able to bring to bear led inexorably to the gradual loss by the Republican Army of territory and their eventual retreat back across the river.

With the French frontier closed against the supply of arms to the Republic it was impossible to withstand the subsequent offensive against Catalonia. In a few months it was all over.²⁹⁴

The International Brigades did not see the end of fighting as they were called from the front in September 1938. The farewell parade took place in Barcelona on 28 October 1938

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 131.

²⁹³ "Article: Ebro", <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/SPebro.htm>, [validity date: 23 Jun. 04, 10:40].

²⁹⁴ Eugene DOWNING, "International Brigade volunteers and the Ebro." <http://members.lycos.co.uk/spanishcilwar/EDIBEbro.htm>, [validity date: 17 Jun. 04, 12:30].

Posterity

The difficulties faced by the Irish volunteers in the International Brigades in Ireland were extreme before leaving for Spain. Veteran Eugene Downing claimed that

under these circumstances to leave Ireland to join the International brigades was not only a highly conscious political decision but a remarkable act of defiance of the climate of opinion in the country which brought the individuals concerned not only into conflict with the community but in most cases with their own families as well.²⁹⁵

The conditions under which they left would not have changed radically on their way home. The study of their welcoming and their subsequent activity allows us to grasp the direct political consequences of their involvement in Spain.

On a longer-term basis the traces left by the two brigades that left Ireland to fight on opposite sides in the Spanish Civil War reveal the different places they have taken in the collective memory.

Coming back

A difficult return

The International Brigades were officially withdrawn from combat in September 1938 and gradually left Spain from this time onwards. The last Irishmen to return home arrived in Dublin on 21 December 1938.²⁹⁶ (Paddy Duff who had been wounded only arrived in early 1939). Those Irishmen, who, along with other international volunteers,

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁶ E. DOWNING interview, *Op. Cit.*



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Irish Veterans return from the Spanish Civil War

Banners calling for release of Frank Ryan, captured in March 1938.



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Peter O'Connor and Michael O'Riordan show Sean Butler the banner of the Connolly Column

²⁹⁷ <http://www.geocities.com/irishafa/irishvets.html>

²⁹⁸ http://www.international-brigades.org.uk/british_volunteers

²⁹⁹ <http://homepage.tinet.ie/~breadandroses/sb-photos.htm>

were still in jail, were exchanged against Nationalist prisoners and released in February 1939.

The enthusiasm expressed by Bill Scott in the *Worker's* pages ("You needn't mind who knows I am in Spain. I won't be ashamed to go back to Dublin when it is over for I am convinced now that we're going to win, and it's the most sacred cause in history to defend Freedom."³⁰⁰) hides a more cruel reality. The return home to a country that had mostly favoured Franco was by no means an easy one for the Irish anti-Fascists. Various testimonies indicate this. Peter O'Connor, who came back early from the front in October 1937, was appalled by the persistence of the anti-red propaganda relying on atrocity stories: "The Spanish Republican army had better use for its rifles and ammunition than [firing at statues]."³⁰¹ The problems encountered involved the impossibility of finding a job in a country gripped by unemployment - Frank Edwards, for instance, a teacher from Waterford, was blacklisted from any teaching position in any Catholic school in Ireland.³⁰² Facing the community also proved difficult for the veterans. Often the volunteer was not the only one to suffer from this as his family was also targeted. Michael O'Riordan recalls:

My parents [...] were not responsible for the stand I took in volunteering to fight in Spain, but they were nonetheless made to pay painfully for their son's actions. In August 1938, I was wounded outside Gandesa in the battle for Hill 481. Some time later, as I recovered in hospital, I was able to send a telegram to my Cork home on Pope's Quay in order to re-assure my anxious parents that I was safe and well. They were, of course, much relieved. But my genuinely religious mother also met the full venom of religious bigotry on her own doorstep when the postman who delivered that telegram spat out at her the curse: "*It's dead he should be, for fighting against Christ!*"³⁰³

The precautions taken by one volunteer on his way home in warning his family epitomise the complexity of the situation and even the risks the volunteers could face – the fact that this particular volunteer had joined the British Army earlier on added to it.

Dear Father,

I am glad to let you know that I am on my way home. I expect to go by London, I am not quite sure, a bunch of us is waiting here waiting for Passports from British Consul. [...] *all I want you to do is not to let anything be known that I left home to join the British as I deserted the Army in January 36 and left to Spain in December 1936 where I went you did not know anything about until you received a letter from Spain. I am only taking precautions no enquiries may be made.* [Emphasis mine, AD] So don't worry too much about it.³⁰⁴

In an ulterior letter to his father he wrote:

I don't want to go home and remain there because I know very well the misery people go through and unfortunately the way people are blinded in regard to the People of Spain. They only know one side of it but I happen to know both because I was on the right side and fought against the Priests that machine-gunned the poor women and children and I would be classified as a red.³⁰⁵

The indications of the Garda on this dossier show that there was an actual risk:

Prior to leaving Ireland – did not display any extreme political tendencies and certainly none of the tendencies now displayed in hid letters. *Should subject return to Thurles* (hometown, left in 1935 to join British Army, which he later deserted) *it is probable that he would require a measure of protection*, it is not considered likely that he will return there.³⁰⁶ [Emphasis mine, AD]

³⁰⁰ *Worker*, 19 December 1936.

³⁰¹ O'CONNOR, *Op. Cit.*, 30.

³⁰² Manus O'RIORDAN, *Op. Cit.*

³⁰³ O'RIORDAN, « Speech at ILP Conference », *Op. Cit.*

³⁰⁴ 05 October 1938, written from Marseilles, in NAI-DFA, File 210/64.

³⁰⁵ NAI-DFA, File 210/64.

³⁰⁶ NAI-DFA, File 210/164.

The impossibility of finding a job left some with but one option – emigration, mainly to Britain. A few Irish veterans from Spain (Paddy O’Daire, Alec Digges, Maurice Levitas, Jim Prendergrast and Paddy Roe MacLaughlin) actually served in the British Army during World War 2, a decision which they saw as the continuity from their participation to the war in Spain. These social issues were to be coupled with political ones as well.

Leaving a political void

Peter O’Connor’s optimistic spirit on his way back from Spain ignored another difficult reality for the Irish volunteers who were going home, namely finding a movement that was nearly dead.

I was going home with the pledge of the International Brigade on leaving Spain firm in my mind :
“we are returning to our respective countries, not for celebrations in our honour, not to rest, but to continue the fight we helped to wage in Spain. We are merely changing the fronts and our weapons.”³⁰⁷

The consequences of the departure of more than 200 committed activists – what most of the volunteers were – on the left were quite heavy. The moribund state of the progressive movement in 1936 had not been overcome in three years, and Spain actually accompanied this waning process.

During the time of the conflict activists were missed at home and the struggle on the home front became more difficult without them. “Eugene Downing, a CPI member who remained in Ireland until 1938 recalled: “Then the Spanish thing turned up. People started disappearing off to Spain. There were practically no activists left.”³⁰⁸ Beyond this their presence in the International Brigades inflicted even deeper traces to the Irish left as, not only were there many casualties in the Irish ranks (around 1/3 of the Irish contingent are believed to have died in Spain³⁰⁹) but many, as well, never returned to Ireland. Milotte adds: “Among the dead were some of the Communist Party’s leading personnel: Kit Conway, Frank Conroy, Liam MacGregor and Jack Nalty. Several Belfast Protestants, won over to socialism and republicanism through the Republican Congress, were also killed.”³¹⁰ Frank Ryan’s never returning to Ireland was also a severe blow. Potential leaders, like Charlie Donnelly, were also among the casualties. All these losses would be hard to make up for.

Nevertheless many agree on the idea that the movement was already lost in 1936. For O’Drisceoil:

The Spanish Civil War was a ‘last hurrah’ of the Irish inter-war socialist republican movement. Frank Edwards recalled the changed situation that met him on his return from Spain: “The Christian Front was gone, so too were the last fragments of Republican Congress. All my old friends retired to the sidelines. No political organisation existed in which they could play a part’. The loss of activists and leaders of the calibre of Charlie Donnelly and Frank Ryan was not something such a tiny movement could afford. Nevertheless the movement was already in terminal decline in 1936, and one interpretation of the exodus to Spain is that it represented an implicit admission of frustration and defeat at home. Eugene Downing of the CPI, who went in 1938, described it as ‘a kind of lifeline for frustrated left wingers. This is something we can do. This is where the battle is being fought’. Peadar O’Donnell was of the opinion that’ the left’s losses in the war did not hurt it decisively. It had already been weakened.”³¹¹

³⁰⁷ O’CONNOR, *Op. Cit.*, 29-30.

³⁰⁸ Interview with author, January 1996 in McGARRY, *Op. Cit.*, 99.

³⁰⁹ Ó’DRISCEOIL, *Op. Cit.*, 98.

³¹⁰ MILOTTE, *Op. Cit.*, 169.

³¹¹ Ó’DRISCEOIL, *Op. Cit.*, 100.

Organised radical activism could no longer take the pre-Spain forms as Republican Congress was no more and the CPI was merely but a name.³¹² In his study of Communism in Ireland, Milotte writes:

Party activity now consisted almost entirely of discussing what others were doing. The CPI's failure to win the allies it sought seemed to have produced a state of paralysis. The Dublin section, composed largely of former Republican activists whose anti-imperialism proved stronger than their loyalty to Moscow, virtually collapsed.³¹³

The activists that were left for the major part integrated larger bodies trying to build more radical trends within the trade unions and parties. Some CPI members integrated the formerly despised Irish Labour Party, of which Michael O'Riordan and Peter O'Connor. The latter joined in 1938 and justified this choice in his memoirs: "Several left-wing Republicans joined at the same time. I think it was Lenin who said that 'we must work with the tools at our disposal'. We thought appropriate to join the Party and work for Labour-Republican Unity."³¹⁴ These men were to count among the important figures the radical left in Ireland and Britain.

The two Irish Brigades remembered

The huge discrepancy regarding the perception of the two brigades going to Spain in 1936 was symptomatic of popular opinion. O'Duffy and his men, who were seen as defenders of the Christian faith, were blessed by clerics on their departure under the cheers and applause of the public. Conversely, the International brigadiers had to keep a low profile and each departure was to remain secret until the last minute. Two years afterwards, on the first coming homes, the tensions and excesses had already started to appease. O'Duffy did not receive the welcome home of a hero. This was just but the beginning of a reversing of trends which saw a reevaluation of the Irish responses to the Spanish Civil War.

O'Duffy's bandera

The achievements of O'Duffy's men in Spain did not equal the ambitions of their leader. His wish to raise a force that would have counted to fight alongside Franco was not fulfilled. From a promise to Franco that claimed 20,000 Irishmen would come to strengthen the ranks of the Foreign Legion³¹⁵, O'Duffy only managed to bring around 600. Once in Spain they failed to impress anybody. After a visit to the Irish in Cáceres, Fr Alexander McCabe, Rector of the Irish College in Salamanca, wrote in his diary:

'In modern Ireland there seems to be a lot of talk, claptrap and codology and this Irish brigade has been a regular frost and a complete washout... It is a pity that Jack Doyle, the comedian-boxer, did not join the brigade. It would help to make it complete. All crusades are like this... they begin to reckon up in pence what they have won or lost.'³¹⁶

The Irish never reached the front lines and the only war-like episode they were involved in was not a particularly glorious one:

their first engagement on February 18 (1937) was a tragedy of errors. A Francoist Canary Islands' unit mistook the Irish for the 'Internationals', because of their foreign uniforms and language, opened fire and killed two of them. O'Duffy's men were pulled back to men trenches on the Jarama front and on March 4 lost four dead to Republican artillery fire.³¹⁷

³¹² « The CPI, reduced to just twenty members by 1941, suspended independent activity." McGARRY, *Op. Cit.*, 81.

³¹³ MILOTTE, *Op. Cit.*, 181.

³¹⁴ O'CONNOR, *Op. Cit.*, 32.

³¹⁵ KEOGH, *Op. Cit.*, 94.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 95.

³¹⁷ CRONIN, *Op. Cit.*, 92.

Moreover they seem to have been quite an undisciplined bunch, with a leaning towards alcohol. Their presence soon became a nuisance for the Nationalists.

The personality of O’Duffy himself appears to have been a source of problems. He was believed to be a poor leader and to have used the Spanish conflict for his own credit and to boost his flagging political career. Franco and O’Duffy fell out with each other to the point that Franco ended up disapproving of the Irish being in Spain. A report by Kerney reads:

Nicolás Franco (brother of general) and General Franco have now sized up O’Duffy who they considered has bluffed much and promised much whilst performing little. They believe that his desire to return to Ireland is prompted by the approach of the general election, and they realise now that O’Duffy’s venture in Spain is a political one. They thought originally that O’Duffy had the military experience and science of a general; they now know, from conversation with him and otherwise, that his military knowledge is very limited. General Franco now refuses to see O’Duffy and is anxious to liquidate the whole affair as smoothly as possible. O’Duffy was in the habit of seeking special privileges for himself and for his men, and these were readily granted in most cases. This created ill-feelings in other battalions of the Tercio (Foreign Legion) who were not so favoured. O’Duffy seems to have completely lost credit with Franco, who now looks upon him as a bluffer if not a duffer.³¹⁸

Franco’s Irish volunteers were not as politically motivated as the International brigadiers and that affected their cohesion as a group. It is certain that not all of them were Fascists and many discovered that the reality of the Nationalist crusade in Spain did not correspond with its depiction in the press or by the ICF. That certainly made for a growing low morale in the Irish ranks which ended in mutiny and an early decision to return home, six months after setting foot on the Spanish land. As Manning puts it: “The virtual unanimity of the decision to return was hardly an indication of high morale or that the adventure had been an unqualified success.”³¹⁹

The return home of the volunteers did not take place in the same conditions as their departure and the contingent was quite divided. O’Duffy’s hope to build a political career out of this venture proved a misguided strategy. Some in Ireland were quite happy to get rid of him by his fighting in Spain. “As the *Round Table* correspondent expressed it: ‘The Government is hardly likely to invoke the Foreign Enlistment Act against General O’Duffy and his merry men, as they probably realise that Spain is the most suitable place for our Irish Don Quixote.’”³²⁰ He died in 1944 without having made the come-back he wanted to make.

The memory of the men of the “Irish crusade against Communism” has not been kept alive to this point and there does not seem to be anybody claiming O’Duffy’s political legacy – especially not in Fine Gael, a party to the creation of which O’Duffy contributed. This episode is felt as an error in history and the Blueshirts are discarded as an insignificant part of Ireland’s past. The horrors of Nazism and World War 2 reassessed the roles of Franco who had counted Hitler and Mussolini among his allies. The regime put in place subsequently to the Spanish Civil War, a dictatorship, ensured that the overall presentation of the conflict is now one of Democracy against Fascism – or at least dictatorship. Thus embarrassment prevails at the evocation of the Irish *bandera*, if not contempt or mockery, as that expressed by Brendan Beehan who immortalised O’Duffy and his men thus: “They certainly made history. They seemed to be the only army that went out to war, ever, and came back with more men than they set out with!”³²¹ The fate of the International Brigadiers is a complete different one.

The mythical “Connolly Column”

In his address to the Irish Labour Party Conference in 2001 Michael O’Riordan raised an interesting point: “It is [...] necessary to appreciate how far we International Brigadiers have travelled – from military defeat

³¹⁸ Report by Kerney, in KEOGH, *Ireland and Europe*, 92.

³¹⁹ MANNING, *Op. Cit.*, 206.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, 205.

³²¹ Hywel FRANCIS, “Review of Connolly Column”, *Saohtar* 6, 74-75.

in that Spanish war to our subsequent vindication not only by history but also by the acclamation of Spanish democracy itself five years ago.”³²² Indeed the men who were formerly outcast in their own country for their stance against Franco have gradually become part of a glorious historiography.

Firstly they made history because the episode of the Irish anti-Fascist contingent became a myth in the Irish left. This achievement in a supra-national struggle epitomises what the Irish left should be or should have been. It was the “elusive” Popular Front, one of the few events that managed to unite ranges drawn from the whole Irish working class – Catholic and Protestant, North and South, Republican and Socialist. This realisation also tolled the knell of the inter-war radical initiative that was social Republicanism. It is thus remembered as its last memorable initiative. Many commemorative plaques and memorials have been raised in their honour, often financed by the trade-union movement which, at the time, had refused them its support in Ireland.

As already discussed, the phrasing in which it is remembered, the “Connolly Column”, belongs more to the myth than to reality. The continuity of the use of this wording underlines the need for signs, proofs of unity for the Irish left – when referring to the “Connolly Column” you refer to a complete entity and not to splitting groups. Besides, a column in the International Brigades was a definite rank which was part of a greater organisation that was needed for the functioning of the whole system. For the Irish to be remembered as a column also means to be remembered as an active part of an international movement in which it had a useful role to play. Moreover the International Brigades have become a myth of their own as well, a reference for the working class movement over the world. By taking part in the International Brigades the Irish are part of the international working-class legend. The early perception of the Fascist menace gives them the title of “premature anti-Fascists”, a meaningful recognition having regard to the atrocities committed in the name of Fascism and Nazism. In a letter to the editor of the *Irish Post* entitled “Place in Irish History”, M.O. Callanain wrote in 1979:

I still feel that we should salute the heroic column of freedom fighters led by Frank Ryan against the barbarism of what is known nowadays as Nazism. With prophetic hindsight, men like Ryan realised that much more than Spanish Democracy was under attack. Human rights and decency were being assailed throughout Europe. Spain was simply the first battleground, the first rampart erected by the people against the state tyrannies which gave us Belsen and Buchenwald and such final atrocities as Hiroshima. [...] They deserve an indelible place in the memory of the Irish nation.³²³

In 1996, 60 years after the beginning of the war, the Spanish Government granted them honorary citizenship, an act that added even more to that posterior recognition.

The legacy of their leader, Frank Ryan, is widely claimed, from Republicans to Communists. Even De Valera himself at the end of his life claimed that he was a “great Irishman”: “Frank Ryan has always put Ireland first in everything he did or said, at home or abroad. He has learned his place in history.”³²⁴ He is mainly remembered as the champion of the Irish left, a true Republican hero, eternally regretted for the role he could have played to redeem the movement had he not died early. In 1940 the radicals were still waiting for his return to Ireland, as if waiting for a prophet: “Frank Ryan is the personification of this country’s fight against British imperialism, testified in many contests in the streets of Dublin, in Mountjoy, in his writings in *An Phoblacht*, the *Irish Democrat* in speeches and pamphlets.”³²⁵ His death in Germany in 1944 deprived the left of a charismatic leader. In 1979 his body was repatriated from Germany where he had been buried. Frank Ryan was again in the spotlights. An article from the *Irish Post* read:

³²² O’RIORDAN, *Op. Cit.*

³²³ *Irish Post*, 1 September 1979, <http://members.lycos.co.uk/spanishcivilwar/>.

³²⁴ Manus O’RIORDAN, “Frank Ryan – Patriot or collaborator?”, in *Irish Democrat*, London, May-June-July 2003, <http://members.lycos.co.uk/spanishcivilwar/Ryan1.htm>, [added 1 Mar. 04].

³²⁵ “Frank Ryan at liberty”, *Irish Workers Weekly*, Saturday, September 28, 1940, in NAI-JUS 8/803.

If Frank Ryan had not gone to Spain in September 1936 to fight on the Republican side in the Civil War [...] there would still be an important place for him in the pages of Irish history. [...] With his premature death, both Irish Republicanism and Irish Socialism lost their most important activist and political thinker since James Connolly.³²⁶

A reaction to this article also conveyed this feeling: "There have been few Irishmen of his stature in this century and he embodied the twin goals of Socialism and Republicanism, which may yet be called upon to save our beloved country."³²⁷ The vivacity of the arguments over his stay in Germany show the importance granted to the man.

Finally the "Connolly Column" has achieved the passage from history to popular culture, in the words of Christy Moore's famous song, *Viva La Quinte Brigada*, which celebrated the Irish Brigadiers as martyrs, in true Republican tradition:

Ten years before I saw the light of morning
A comradeship of heroes was laid
From every corner of the world came sailing
The Fifteenth International Brigade
They came to stand beside the Spanish people
To try and stem the rising fascist tide
Franco's allies were the powerful and wealthy
Frank Ryan's men came from the other side
Even the olives were bleeding
As the battle for Madrid it thundered on
Truth and love against the force of evil
Brotherhood against the fascist clan

Chorus:

Viva la Quinte Brigada
"No Pasaran", the pledge that made them fight
"Adelante" is the cry around the hillside
Let us all remember them tonight

Bob Hilliard was a Church of Ireland pastor
From Killarney across the Pyrenees he came
From Derry came a brave young Christian Brother
Side by side they fought and died in Spain

Tommy Woods age seventeen died in Cordoba
With Na Fianna he learned to hold his gun
From Dublin to the Villa del Rio
Where he fought and died beneath the blazing sun

Many Irishmen heard the call of Franco
Joined Hitler and Mussolini too
Propaganda from the pulpit and newspapers
Helped O'Duffy to enlist his crew

The word came from Maynooth, "support the Nazis"
The men of cloth failed again
When the Bishops blessed the Blueshirts in Dun Laoghaire
As they sailed beneath the swastika to Spain
This song is a tribute to Frank Ryan
Kit Conway and Dinny Coady too
Peter Daly, Charlie Regan and Hugh Bonar
Though many died I can but name a few

Danny Boyle, Blaser-Brown and Charlie Donnelly
Liam Tumilson and Jim Straney from the Falls
Jack Nalty, Tommy Patton and Frank Conroy
Jim Foley, Tony Fox and Dick O'Neill

³²⁶ « Frank Ryan comes home », *Irish Post*, 23 June 1979.

<http://www.geocities.com/irelandscw/PaperArticles/echoetc.htm>, [added 9 June 04].

³²⁷ Letter by Eoin MacNeill, *Irish Post*, 14 July 1979, <http://members.lycos.co.uk/spanishcivilwar/>.

CONCLUSION

In taking up the cause of the Spanish Republic the few Irish radicals accomplished much more than a simple task of international solidarity.

First of all, the struggle in favour of the Spanish front was a struggle on the home front. Being surrounded by a widespread misrepresented conception of the Spanish civil war, the anti-Franco campaign had to counter the arguments presented by all layers of the Irish society: from those of the clergy (God vs. anti-God) to those of the press overstating the Republican atrocities to best clear the Nationalists of any wrongdoings; from the indoctrinated masses to the Government that claimed that Non-Intervention was the best solution while favouring a victory by Franco.

Defending the cause of the Spanish Republic was also a fight that the Irish radicals waged within their own movements, within their own political families. The Irish left, in the general sense of the word, did not commit itself to support for Spain, unlike her European counterparts. The leftist section within Labour and even Fianna Fáil did not achieve recognition of their arguments but at least had the merit of raising the point in parties that were only too anxious to avoid the topic. If the trade unions generally did not support the Spanish Republicans there were a few individual victories in some trade unions under the influence of committed characters, like John Swift of the Bakers' Union, Christie Clark of the Irish National Union of Woodworkers or Bob Smith of the Plumbing Trade Union.

For those Irish who made it to Spain in the International Brigades the struggle they fought in a foreign dispute reflected the struggles that had participated in the construction of their own movement. As their venture was highly motivated by Eoin O'Duffy's own venture to Spain, their imaginary confrontation in Spain recalled to mind the real near-daily confrontations between the IRA and the Blueshirts that were typical of Ireland's political disturbances at the beginning of the 1930s. More strikingly, that there were two Irish brigades in Spain was an exportation of Ireland's own civil war on foreign fields, opposing pro-Treatyites and anti-Treatyites. In a certain way the discussions and split that occurred in the International Brigades, with the Irish leaving the British Battalion, was also reminiscent of Ireland's war of independence, and showed that, despite the fact that it had already taken place, the desire for independence from Britain still had to be fulfilled for some Irish.

Finally, for a movement on the wane, the very fact of undertaking a new campaign was also the mark of a struggle for survival. The struggle for Spain was the last political struggle waged by inter-war social Republicans. In this view the formation of an Irish contingent of the International Brigades was in itself a struggle for the movement to accomplish something extraordinary, in its etymological meaning, in order not to be forgotten. In that way it was a success.

Though it had only very few members, the influence of the Communist Party over this campaign in Ireland is undeniable, as is its influence in Spain. It had already been instrumental in the orientation of Republican Congress before the split. The strategy employed did not bear fruit as the 1937 electoral *debacle* showed – the CPI had withdrawn its own candidates in favour of candidates of an anti-Fascist Front. For Milotte this policy is to blame in the failure of the CP's failure at the time:

The Communist Party's twists and turns in the 1937-39 period had a devastating effect on party organisation – which virtually disintegrated. [...] The CPI's failure to win the allies it sought seemed to have produced a state of paralysis. [...] The sectarian riots in Belfast in 1935, the anti-Communist campaign in the Free State during the SCW; the unflinching hostility of the Labour parties, North and South; and the deepening of economic depression – all had undoubtedly taken their toll on the Communist Party. But pursuit of the ever-elusive Popular Front through the abandonment of militancy, couple with the subordination of all theory and practice to the foreign policy requirements

of the Soviet Union, had also contributed much to the near-collapse of the Communist movement in Ireland.³²⁸

In 1941 the Dublin branch of the CPI decided to put a provisory end to the party, thus admitting its own downfall. The resolution read:

This branch meeting after hearing a report on the situation in the country and the position in the labour movement endorses the decision of the national committee on the need to turn towards the organised working class as an urgent step towards the building up of a revolutionary socialist movement in Dublin.

To facilitate this objective *the branch meeting agrees with the national committee to suspend independent activity and to apply the forces of the branch to working in the Labour and trade union organisations* [emphasis mine, AD] in order to carry forward the fight against the heavy attacks now being launched against the workers. [...]

Finally having as an organised force in the past the members will in the new situation adhere to the principle of working in a conscious way in an organised manner to inspire the working class movement with socialist ideas and principles.³²⁹

The demise of such a milestone of the workers' movement could only augur ill for the fate of the Irish left as a whole.

³²⁸ MILOTTE, *Op. Cit.*, 181.

³²⁹ "A history of the Communist movement in Ireland",
<http://www.comunistpartyofireland.ie/history.html>, [validity date: 23 Jun. 04, 10:45].

	<i>July,</i> <i>20th</i>	First reports of the rising in Irish newspapers.		
	<i>August,</i> <i>1st</i>			French government appeals to implement Non-Intervention.
	<i>August</i>	O'Duffy forms the Irish crusade against Communism.		
	<i>August,</i> <i>15th</i>			Britain and France formally agree to adhere to the Non-Intervention Agreement.
	<i>August,</i> <i>21st</i>	Creation of the Irish Christian Front.		
	<i>August,</i> <i>25th</i>	Saorstát Éireann joins Non-Intervention Pact.		
	<i>August,</i> <i>28th</i>			Non-Intervention agreement signed in London by various countries.
	<i>September</i>	The CPI begins recruiting for the IB.		
	<i>September,</i> <i>9th</i>	Pro-Republican Spanish Medical Aid Committee established in Dublin		The Non-Intervention committee is created in London – 1 st meeting.
	<i>September,</i> <i>16th</i>	Republican Congress issues a telegram of support to the Spanish government.		
	<i>October</i>		Arrival of first Russian aid (arms and cadres).	Mussolini announces the formation of the Rome-Berlin axis.
	<i>October,</i> <i>1st</i>		Franco declares himself Head of State.	
	<i>October,</i> <i>22nd</i>		Republican government approves of the creation of the International Brigades.	
	<i>October,</i> <i>25th</i>	Tens of thousand gather at ICF meeting in College Green, Dublin. £43,331 are raised at the meeting and outside all Irish churches.		
	<i>November</i>	Cosgrave asks for recognition of Franco.	The IB start combat.	
	<i>November,</i> <i>20th</i>	O'Duffy leads "Irish Brigade" to Spain.		
	<i>December</i>		Organisation of mixed brigades of the new Popular Army	
	<i>December,</i> <i>12th</i>	80 volunteers led by Frank Ryan leave to defend the Spanish Republic.		
	<i>December,</i> <i>13th</i>	Another 30 volunteers leave from Belfast later on.		
	<i>December,</i> <i>13th</i>	Close to 600 Irish Brigade Volunteers leave Galway Bay.		
1937	<i>January</i>	The Basque priest Ramón Laborda comes to Ireland to express his support to the Spanish Republicans.		
	<i>January,</i> <i>31st</i>		XVth International Brigade formed.	
	<i>February</i>	Irish Friends of the Spanish Republic (Spanish Aid Committee) formed	Battle of Jarama.	

	February, 24 th	Spanish Civil War (Non-Intervention) Act		
	March	<i>The Worker</i> ceases publication. Peadar O'Donnell begins editing the <i>Irish Democrat</i>		
	April, 26 th		Bombing of Guernica.	
	May			Fr Michael Flanagan tours the US.
	May, 4 th		Uprising in Barcelona by POUM and Anarchists.	
	June, 19 th		Fall of Bilbao.	
	June, 22 nd	The Irish Brigade returns to Ireland.		
	July	General Election Campaign.	Battle of Brunete.	
	Late August		The XV IB is sent to the Aragon Front.	The Vatican gives de facto recognition to Franco. (28 th)
	August-September		Aragon offensive.	
	December-January	New Constitution for Ireland. The <i>Irish Democrat</i> ceases publication.	Teruel offensive. (Government forces) The Nationalists control 2/3 of Spain.	
1938	February, 22 nd		Nationalists take Teruel.	
	March, 31 st		Frank Ryan is captured with other IB by the nationalist forces.	
	April, 3 rd		Franco forces reach Catalan border.	
	April, 15 th		Republican territory cut in two by rebels.	
	July, 24 ^t		Popular army launches Ebro offensive.	
	August			Second US speaking tour for Fr Michael O'Flanagan.
	September, 21 st		Negrin announces the withdrawal of the IB.	
	September, 24 th			Chamberlain meets Hitler and Mussolini and signs Munich agreement.
	November, 26 th		End of Ebro battle. Popular Army retreats.	
	Late 1938	The Irish Food Ship for Spain is established.	Autumn : dissolution of international brigades.	
	December, 10 th	Return of Irish volunteers in Dun Laoghaire.		
1939	January, 26 th		Fall of Barcelona.	
	February, 11 th	Ireland formally recognises General Franco's government		
	February, 24 th			French government recognises Franco's regime.
	March, 15 th			Hitler occupies all Czechoslovakia.
	March, 28 th		Fall of Madrid.	
	April, 1 st		Occupation of Alicante's port End of Civil War.	

	May, 19 th		End of the non-intervention committee.
	September, 1 st		Germany invades Poland – start of Second World War.
1940	July		Release of Frank Ryan from Franco's jails. He is sent to Germany.

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