

Barry McLoughlin and Emmet O'Connor, *In Spanish Trenches: The Minds and Deeds of the Irish Who Fought for the Republic in the Spanish Civil War*, Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2020, pp. xxiii + 412, h/b, €30, ISBN 978 19108 20582

Any book about Ireland and the Spanish Civil War is necessarily a story about two republics: the Spanish Second Republic, which Irishmen fought both to defend and to overthrow, and the Irish Republic that was lost in the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. The putative link between the two is embodied in the figure of Frank Ryan, former IRA adjutant, prominent activist of the Irish Republican Congress, and leading Irish volunteer in the International Brigades. In practice, however, the Spanish Republic – associated with anti-clerical violence and the politics of the left – had few friends in the conservative, church-dominated Free State of the mid-1930s. Only some 240 to 250 volunteers joined the International Brigades from Ireland, far fewer than the 700 or so who fought for Franco in the Irish Brigade of Eoin O'Duffy (former leader of Ireland's Blueshirts).

Although there is already a substantial literature on this subject, notably Robert Stradling's *The Irish and the Spanish Civil War* (Manchester, 1999) and Fearghal McGarry's *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War* (Cork, 1999), Barry McLoughlin and Emmet O'Connor have now written what will surely be seen as the definitive account. These two scholars are eminently suited to the task. McLoughlin has acquired impressive expertise on the Comintern archives and published extensively on the international communist history of the interwar years, while O'Connor is a leading Irish labour historian whose father, Peter, was a volunteer in Spain and author of an important memoir (*A Soldier of Liberty*, Dublin, 1996). As one would expect, the book is based on prodigious archival research in Ireland, Russia, Britain, and elsewhere; the approach is rigorous and the authors are determined to cut a swath through the many myths that have attached to the Irish volunteers. For instance, there is an exhaustive analysis of the "mutiny" of January 1937 when a majority of the volunteers – initially placed in the English-speaking battalion – voted to join the American Lincoln Battalion instead. McLoughlin and O'Connor conclude that that this was not a nationalist rebellion against British domination, but rather that the British commissar, Dave Springhall, used the chance to get rid of unwanted elements from the battalion while Frank Ryan (who was only interested in fighting the 'common enemy – Fascism' [123]) was absent. Thereafter, the Irish were spread between the British and American units (with others of Irish origin fighting with the Canadian Mackenzie-Papineau battalion). The authors make clear that there was no single 'Connolly Column' (a phrase coined only in the 1970s), while acknowledging that the term still has value when describing the full extent of the Irish involvement.

The book opens with a detailed account of Irish politics in the 1930s. There is a separate chapter on Northern Ireland, and McLoughlin and O'Connor argue

that 'the descending fist of clericalism' (xx) in the Free State made the North the most liberal part of Ireland for the first time since partition. The point is an interesting one, although the fate of the Northern Ireland Labour Party politician Harry Midgley, an ardent supporter of the Spanish Republic who lost his Belfast seat in 1938 when Catholic voters turned against him and disrupted his meetings – indicates that such distinctions are relative. Thereafter, the core of the text offers a chronological account of the battles and campaigns of the Civil War. The authors make clear that their intention is to locate the Irish volunteers firmly within the history of the International Brigades, and of the military history of the war more generally. However, due to the way in which the Irish were spread across numerous units this becomes something of a general history of the XV International Brigade, and substantial passages make little or no mention of the Irish contribution. The final two substantive chapters deal with the fate of Frank Ryan after he was captured during the retreats of March 1938. There is a fascinating account of the Nationalists' interrogation and trial of Ryan – egged on by his enemies in Ireland – and the various attempts to secure his release by both the Irish and British governments. In fact, his 'release' was arranged by German Abwehr agents in July 1940. The authors insist that the subject of Ryan's links with Nazi Germany is an 'over-written topic' (368) and do not provide a detailed discussion of the final years of his life (he died in Dresden in 1944). This is unfortunate as they leave the reader on a tantalizing note that deserves fuller discussion: 'we believe that Frank Ryan was not a collaborator but rather an adviser to German foreign office experts' (369).

If the central parts of the book are somewhat burdened by the weight of a complex military and institutional history, this does not apply to the marvelously lively and thought-provoking conclusion which picks up on questions posed in the introduction. The authors note that although the Irish volunteers 'limped home to indifference' (xix), it is they and not O'Duffy's Brigade who have been widely celebrated and commemorated in modern Ireland, both North and South. However, they are critical of the way in which the volunteers have been appropriated in support of multiple modern political narratives. In particular, their commitment to anti-fascism in Spain has been emphasized over the volunteers' own political ideas and commitment to Irish Republicanism. Such an emphasis, McLoughlin and O'Connor argue, supports the idea that Ireland in the 1930s was 'isolated and introverted' (374), when the Connolly Column was in fact 'the last hurrah' (373) of the socialist republican tradition that had emerged in Ireland before the First World War and 'one of the great examples of Irish extroversion' (374). For left republicans, participation in the Civil War was 'an extension' (371) of battles in Ireland rather than a new departure.

In all, McLoughlin and O'Connor have written an excellent account of the Irish who fought for the Republic that, in its scope and scholarship, stands

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alongside the many books – thoroughly researched and objective in approach – that now cover many of the national contingents in the International Brigades.

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