

Giles Tremlett, *The International Brigades: Fascism, Freedom and the Spanish Civil War*, Bloomsbury, London, 2020; 696pp; ISBN 9781408853986, £25.00, hbk

Barry McLoughlin and Emmet O'Connor, *In Spanish Trenches: The Mind and Deeds of the Irish Who Fought for the Republic in the Spanish Civil War*, University College Dublin Press, Dublin, 2020; 412pp; ISBN 9781910820582, £25.00, pbk

No-one can complain about a shortage of books on the foreign volunteers who fought in the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39. One bibliography, according to Giles Tremlett's *The International Brigades*, lists 2,317 titles. It's a remarkable total for an army of just 35,000 individuals – there was more than twice that number of British troops deployed on D-Day alone. Their military impact in Spain's war was mixed, and they fought on the losing side, defending the Spanish Republic's elected Popular Front government against General Franco's insurgents. And yet, they retain a prominent position in the left's pantheon of heroes; in political discourse they continue to be held up as a shining example of anti-fascism and international solidarity, sometimes controversially (remember their invocation by Hilary Benn in 2015 when he was arguing in favour of RAF bombs on Syria); and, as both these books demonstrate, among historians their story is still being energetically researched, rewritten and contested.

Franco's victory was secured not only thanks to Hitler and Mussolini, who provided troops, aircraft and armaments aplenty, but also, more indirectly but no less devastatingly, courtesy of Britain's policy of appeasement. Under the guise of 'non-intervention' – or 'malevolent neutrality', as one historian has described it – the governments of Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain strangled the Spanish government with an arms embargo and ban on the sale of oil or any other products deemed to be potentially helpful for the war effort. Support from the Soviet Union, Mexico and the International Brigades ultimately succeeded only in prolonging the conflict. The ensuing Second World War and then the Cold War shifted attention elsewhere. A few memoirs of veterans were published. One, George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*, about the author's six months with the militia of the revolutionary POUM (Workers' Party of Marxist Unity), became the most widely read book on the war, its anti-communism conveniently in tune with prevailing orthodoxy. We had to wait until 1961 and Hugh Thomas's groundbreaking *The Spanish Civil War* for the first proper history. So concerned was Franco that he

set up a special unit in his Ministry of Information to counter the ‘illegal propaganda’ being spread in translated copies that were smuggled into the country.

In 1965 there appeared the first English-language attempt at a history of the foreign volunteers: *The International Brigades: Spain 1936-1939*, in which author Vincent Brome rightly cautioned that ‘any attempt to give a detailed account of all the battalions drawn from fifty nationalities would obviously involve a twelve-volume work’. Brome couldn’t have foreseen the extent to which interest in Spain’s war would grow following the Caudillo’s death in 1975. For scholars of the International Brigades, a key development came in the 1990s with the opening up of the so-called ‘Moscow Archive’, a vast trove of International Brigade records assembled by the Communist International (Comintern). The result has been a plethora of books about the International Brigades, of which *In Spanish Trenches* is only the latest example. We now have several books each on the British, Irish, Scots and Welsh, as well as histories of all the main national groupings and specialist studies of the Jewish, women and medical volunteers.

The International Brigades pulls together the main strands of these stories. The publisher’s claim that it is the ‘first major history of the International Brigades’ is questionable. Leaving aside Vincent Brome’s opening effort, we would also have to discount several non-English language studies, along with more narrowly focused books on the political and military significance of the Brigades. Tremlett’s book is nonetheless an impressive piece of scholarship, covering a vast and complex topic and drawing on archives and sources from around the world. However, it is necessarily still an overview, though a highly informative and entertaining one. To fill the gaps we must turn to books such as *In Spanish Trenches*, in which authors Barry McLoughlin and Emmet O’Connor have written a definitive account of the 247 Irishmen who fought for the Spanish Republic. ‘Irish’ is broadly defined as anyone born in Ireland. Barely a quarter of the Irish International Brigade volunteers travelled from Ireland; most were living and working in Britain, or else in Canada, the US and Australia. Nor was there a separate Irish unit for them in Spain. Most joined the British Battalion, others serving with American and Canadian battalions. The now commonly used ‘Connolly Column’ tag was applied retrospectively many decades later.

The ‘Irishness’ of the volunteers was significant, however, given the mood in Ireland at the time. Probably uniquely among Western democracies, public sentiment was overwhelmingly in support of Franco’s rebels.

Reflecting this, the much derided Irish Brigade of some 600 recruits mustered by Blueshirt leader Eoin O'Duffy to fight alongside the Generalísimo easily outnumbered their fellow countrymen in the International Brigades. The crucial factor here was the Catholic Church. There was outrage in Ireland at the atrocities committed against Catholic clergy by elements opposing Franco's attempted coup. Communism, meanwhile, with which the Spanish Republic was strongly identified, was denounced from the pulpits as 'satanic'. Though not in a majority, a large proportion of the Connolly Column were card-carrying communists. From an appendix listing each of the volunteers we also see that significant numbers were drawn from the IRA, the losing side in Ireland's own civil war of 1922-23, and from the more left-leaning Irish Republican Congress (IRC).

Among the IRA men was Frank Ryan, a veteran of that civil war and joint secretary of the IRC. He was regarded as the unofficial leader of the Connolly Column. At the Jarama valley south-east of Madrid in February 1937, when the British Battalion had been cut to pieces by Franco's Army of Africa, it was Ryan, with British Army veteran Jock Cunningham, who rallied its depleted, hungry and exhausted remnants and, surprising the enemy Moorish troops, managed to retake lost positions. The Madrid-Valencia highway remained in government hands and Spain's capital city was saved. That would probably have been enough to secure Ryan's place in the history books. Instead, it is the events leading up to his death from heart disease in Nazi Germany during the Second World War for which he is largely remembered.

McLoughlin and O'Connor devote two chapters and much of their epilogue to the controversy, attempting to answer their question: 'Why did Frank Ryan, a popular figure in [Irish] Republican and left-wing circles, agree to work for the fascist German State?' They lay out in detail what is known about how and why Ryan, captured in Aragón in 1938, was allowed to travel to Berlin after two years as a prisoner of Franco. His escorts were officers of the Abwehr, Hitler's military intelligence service, which was then working with diehard Irish republicans hoping to take advantage of the war to undermine Britain's presence in Ireland. In August 1940 Ryan boarded a U-boat at Wilhelmshaven with the aim of being landed in Ireland. The mission was aborted when his fellow ex-IRA companion, Sean Russell, died on board and Ryan refused to be put ashore alone. For the rest of his time in Germany he was dogged by ill-health, eventually dying in Dresden in June 1944. What are we to make of all this? Did Ryan put his Irish republicanism before his anti-fascism? Or was he a willing hostage, who used his potential value as an anti-British

asset as a means to escape his thirty-year sentence in Franco's gaols? Based on the incomplete available evidence, the authors, while admitting that 'the swastika will always stick to Ryan', conclude that he was not a Nazi collaborator, though he did act as an 'adviser' to his German liberators.

Ryan's story is not the only Connolly Column controversy. The decision by most of the Irish in the British Battalion to transfer to the Abraham Lincoln Battalion on the eve of the fighting at Jarama is another, jarring as it did with ideals of internationalism. McLoughlin and O'Connor blame the split on Communist Party of Great Britain officials in Spain, who exacerbated the unease felt by several of the Irish about the British Army record of some battalion officers by convening an unnecessary meeting to discuss the matter. Interestingly, Ryan was one of those who opted to stay in the British Battalion following the twenty-six to eleven vote in favour of joining the Americans.

A third controversy was the battlefield execution of Maurice Emmett Ryan, a middle-class volunteer with a reputation for drunkenness and insubordination, who like namesake Frank was from Limerick, but unlike him had no IRA or left-wing connections. Emmett Ryan was shot by his battalion commander in August 1938 during fighting at the Ebro. No offence was officially logged, and recollections by his machine-gun company comrades differ. Did he turn his fire on them? Was he unforgivably drunk or asleep? Or was he simply politically suspect? The authors are certain that Ryan was 'blind drunk' and concede that instant justice of this sort would have been meted out in Allied armies during the two world wars. But they also say the 'grizzly deed' – the only such execution in the British Battalion – was a stain on its record in Spain and was 'based as much on political paranoia as on military procedure'.

Individual stories like these, though they may illustrate the understandable political, national and class tensions within the Brigades, should not divert us from the big picture. The International Brigades were, as Tremlett points out, a unique phenomenon – unprecedented arguably since the medieval Crusades – as a truly international army of volunteers from sixty-five countries, which comprised three-quarters of all sovereign states in 1936. They were mainly working class, many of them hardened anti-fascists and political activists. Most were communists and had been recruited by communist parties under the direction of the Comintern. The central role of the Comintern and, by extension, Stalin and the Soviet Union in organising the International Brigades raises one of the principal concerns for Spanish Civil War historians. Should Stalin's involvement be taken at face value as a genuine, albeit self-interested, attempt to resist

the rise of fascism? Or, given this was also the time of the purges, was it a stratagem for imposing communist supremacy on the left and a prelude to the installation of a 'people's democracy' in Spain?

For most leading historians the evidence suggests that Stalin was motivated chiefly by the desire to prevent the balance of power in Europe shifting in favour of the Axis powers. Tremlett's scrutiny of the communist record in the International Brigades corroborates this interpretation. Important posts were held by Comintern officials, and this did raise suspicions that they were primarily in the service of Stalin. But in fact the Soviet presence in Spain was 'modest' and 'even the communist Brigaders were, first and foremost popular front anti-fascists and members of Spain's Republican army', he writes in a chapter tellingly titled 'Stalin Was Still a Saint'. Elsewhere the reader is told that some of those who travelled to Spain with no political affiliation 'soon came to appreciate the [communist] party's disciplined approach to warfare and joined the Spanish Communist Party'. Meanwhile fatal victims in Spain of the Soviet secret police, the NKVD, numbered little more than twenty, not the hundreds or thousands claimed by some. The best known of these was POUM general secretary Andreu Nin, whose militia, as Orwell witnessed, fought pitched battles with government forces on the streets of Barcelona in May 1937. Its other leaders, *The International Brigades* notes, were tried in open court and acquitted of the main charges against them.

Tremlett's narrative follows the chronology of Spain's unfolding tragedy. 'The volunteers remained absurdly brave', he notes at one point. 'This sense of suicidal bravado was even more pronounced amongst the officers, who were mostly either enthusiastic young idealists or dogged veterans of clandestine activity, police beatings and prison cells.' Decisive success on the battlefield was rare, though all the more satisfying when it came. Victory in March 1937 at Guadalajara saw the Garibaldi Battalion repulse an offensive spearheaded by Mussolini's troops. Among the Garibaldis were some Abyssinian volunteers. One, whose father had been hanged by Mussolini in the Italian invasion of his country, showed his delight by drawing his finger across his throat and proclaiming 'Mio giorno' (My day).

An estimated 9,000 Internationals lost their lives. Survivors returned, if they could, to their home countries; others, particularly the Germans, Italians and Poles, had no choice but to exile themselves. Many soon became leaders of anti-Nazi resistance and partisan movements. During the Cold War there was imprisonment and persecution in the McCarthy witch-hunts in the US, and suspicion and surveillance in Britain and

elsewhere in the West. Some veterans reached high office in Eastern Europe, though in Czechoslovakia and Hungary there were also Stalinist show trials and executions, while in Poland some former Brigaders faced antisemitic hostility (a third of the Poles in Spain were Jewish).

These were not uniformly 'good' people, Tremlett tells us early on. 'There were cowards, psychopaths and rapists in their ranks'. Both books offer us a picture of the Brigades stripped of the heroic veneer. Desertions were commonplace, though hardly surprising in a 'volunteer' army; discipline was often harsh; and morale, while sometimes very low, remained remarkably buoyant, given the successive defeats and terrible fatalities. Despite all this, the memory of the Connolly Column and other national contingents has now been embraced by the political mainstream and 'subsumed into myth'. The Jewish volunteers from Palestine, for example, who were reviled as 'red renegades' by their Zionist neighbours, are today celebrated as the first Jews to resist the Holocaust. There are forty-five memorials to the International Brigades in Ireland and just one, on a church pew in Dublin, to the much larger force that fought for Franco. In case we didn't already know why, Tremlett explains: in a binary war the Internationals fought on the right side 'against the most destructive and evil force' of the twentieth century. Or, as the Belgian-Jewish volunteer Piet Akkerman put it in a letter written only a few weeks before his death in January 1937: 'Please understand, mother. You need to know, that I have not come to Spain out of selfish interest. I just had no right NOT to come – on seeing that in Spain lay the powder keg that was about to set fire to the entire world, that would perpetuate oppression, scientifically institute mass murder, and trample and animalize the whole of humanity.'

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