

Blood of Spain

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The International Brigades: Fascism, Freedom and the Spanish Civil War, by Giles Tremlett, Bloomsbury, 696 pp, £16.99, 978-1408853986

In Spanish Trenches: The Minds and Deeds of the Irish Who Fought for the Republic in the Spanish Civil War, by Barry McLoughlin and Emmet O'Connor, University College Dublin Press, 412 pp, €30, 978-1910820582

In the summer of 1936 Barcelona prepared to host the “People’s Olympiad” as an alternative to Hitler’s Olympic Games in Berlin. In a train carriage full of athletes *en route* to the games, a young American poet and writer, Muriel Rukeyser, fell into conversation with a German exile, Otto Boch. Just short of their destination the train stopped; armed men appeared. Trouble in Barcelona? Which troublemakers this time? That day, as it happened, the dockers in the great Mediterranean port were on strike, anarchists had been arrested on suspicion of shooting policemen in a gun battle, weapons had been seized from militant right-wingers and the Catalan regional government had been forced to deny rumours it was arming workers’ militias against the threat of an army coup.

The six thousand sportsmen and women, some representing non-sovereign countries such as Algeria and Palestine, mirrored the fragile unity of the fractious Spanish left which had narrowly won the 1936 general election. As the visitors made themselves at home in Barcelona, right-wing plotters in the city and further afield were preparing to stage an armed uprising against the Popular Front government. On July 18th, army units rebelled in the faraway Canary Islands, Spanish Morocco and Seville. The next morning the rebels made their move in Barcelona. The “Olympiad” was cancelled, but the soldiers who took up arms against the government were quickly defeated by loyal units in the armed forces and the workers’ militias. To the amazement of many, women participated in the street fighting that day.

The right-wing rebellion immediately sparked a left-wing revolution in Barcelona: political violence was nothing new in Spain. Militiamen, and women, painted their acronyms on requisitioned cars, with guns jutting out of the windows like “porcupines”, and raced them around the city. Suspected rebels and their supporters were rounded up, and, not for the first time, churches were burned – in popular perception the Catholic church represented the oligarchy that had long ruled Spain. During Barcelona’s “Tragic Week” in 1909 workers’ organisations had defied a mass call-up of reservists to fight another colonial war. The army, playing its traditional role as that regime’s enforcer, killed seventy-five leftists, while eighty churches and religious buildings were set on fire in the city. Spain had become the global capital of anarchism; that philosophy had been imported from Russia, via Italy, and appealed to Barcelona’s industrial working class as well as to landless labourers in the poverty-stricken countryside. In the first half of 1936 there were seventy political killings each month across the country. This underlying battle pitched “the ordered, timeless hierarchies” of church, army and landowner against the urban proletariat and their peasant allies.

Following the July gun battles in Barcelona the “Olympiad” athletes sailed to France. But some stayed, women as well as men, including Boch, who was overjoyed to be able to give the raised fist revolutionary salute after three years of exile. From Moscow to Vancouver, Spain’s civil war became the burning political issue over the next three years, part of a bigger battle against the dark ideals of Hitler and Mussolini. “For most of the estimated 40,000 foreign volunteers who eventually came to fight in defence of the [Spanish] Republic it was,” Giles Tremlett writes, “when not their grave, the defining experience of a lifetime.” One of the first to take up arms in defence of the Republic, Boch was one of the first to die for it. Rukeyser often returned to Barcelona’s tumultuous July days in her poetry, when she “saw the future stand up / free and alive”.

The revolutionary mood ebbed when the priority became the creation of a centralised army, and official approval for women going to the front, for example, did not last. Women fighters had been more welcome in the less hierarchical militias not controlled by the communist party. One, poached from a unit where she had been confined to domestic duties, undoubtedly spoke for many in explaining that she did not want to be killed “with a

dish cloth in my hand". When instructions were given that women should not serve in fighting units, in October, hundreds later arriving from abroad were refused permission to be soldiers. Instead they were allowed to work as nurses in field hospitals.

The same month, a very brief meeting between the prime minister, Largo Caballero, and Comintern officials formalised the creation of the International Brigades. Most of the regular army were with Franco in his war against the government, and the Francoists threatened to sweep aside the poorly armed and undisciplined militias that stood between him and Madrid. The prime minister may not have been enthusiastic about a Comintern-led "army within an army", but communists formed the most efficient component of his "ragtag" forces that had come together in a matter of weeks. Caballero accepted the proposition put to him by the Comintern delegation. "It is good that you come to our aid," he told the foreigners, "given that this way you will be defending yourselves."

On a grim November day, seventeen weeks after a failed *coup d'état* turned into a civil war, Madridians rushed out to cheer an obviously foreign column of troops. One waiter shouted "the Russians have come", but an officer's order in German had to be translated into French and Italian. The volunteers of the Brigades made a good impression with the beleaguered citizens of Madrid, and they returned onlookers' greetings of "salud, salud" and the raised fist salute. The government had already moved to Valencia, and, Tremlett points out, the capital was "preparing for a siege – or for a defence that many, including Largo Caballero, expected to end swiftly in bloody defeat".

With Britain and France standing aside by adhering to the international non-intervention agreement, Europe's three dictators involved themselves in Spain's conflict. Many leading figures in the Republic's army had a Soviet "adviser" at their elbow, and some of the best-known commanders in the International Brigades were non-Russian Red Army officers, allowing Stalin to claim he was staying out of it. In all 2,105 Soviets passed through Spain during the war, usually no more than five hundred at a time. This relatively modest contribution in manpower stood in contrast to the 19,000 who served in Hitler's Condor Legion and the 76,000 Italians supplied by Mussolini. Up to three thousand volunteers for the anti-fascist "army within an army" were being organised by the time Caballero left his capital.

A senior French communist, André Marty, had been in charge of these preparations, with the help of Comintern military advisers. "The moody, blustering and insecure Marty was famous for his explosive temper," Tremlett notes, "and ability, in the words of one of those advisers, 'to turn a molehill into a mountain'. He was also one of [the] Comintern's seven secretaries, and his involvement was a sign of how seriously the organisation took this new project." Experienced officers in the Brigades were scarce and experience trumped political affiliation when it came to making senior appointments, with the exception of unit commissars. Almost as important a job as that of a commanding officer, this role, which focused on maintaining morale and discipline, was modelled on the structures of the Red Army. Commissars acted as a buffer between soldiers and officers, but at their worst they also played a sinister role as secret police spies, of whom everyone was terrified.

When the Francoist forces were driven back from the defensive line around Madrid, in a sector partly defended by the International Brigades, the Comintern propaganda machine manufactured the requisite heroes. The foreign volunteers and several equally inexperienced Spanish units had arrived without a minute to spare. "Franco's troops," Tremlett explains, "used to rolling straight through poorly prepared militia groups, had discovered over the previous days that Madrid's defenders were far better organised and more tenacious." The men of the first International Brigade were still learning, but they had proved their worth. "As tales spread and propagandists stepped in to magnify these achievements, a legend was born. The *brigadistas* were the saviours of [the city]."

The story of two brothers from Antwerp stands out in Tremlett's dramatic telling of the tragedy of the Republic and its international defenders. From a Yiddish-speaking family of Polish origin, Piet and Emiel Akkerman, like many other Jewish immigrants, found a cultural home in that city's left-wing milieu during the Depression years. In Belgium in particular, the far left attracted Jews because it worked hard to make the connection between antisemitism and fascism. Remembering more than fifty years of a wave of pogroms in Europe, Jews were overrepresented in the International Brigades. Piet had led a march of striking diamond workers earlier in 1936:

his police file recorded that he was “an excellent orator, who appears to have an honourable profession but, as soon as anything happens on the street, he is there”.

In a letter to his mother, Bluma, Piet wrote from Spain: “How could I hesitate, even with my scarce abilities, to help prevent another world war and to defeat fascism?” Emiel did not hesitate either and fell during the battle for Madrid. Piet was assigned to a French-speaking battalion, the André Marty, which performed extremely poorly in the early stages and was under its sixth commander when Piet became commissar. He prepared the battalion well, and on New Year’s Day it overtook a town in a well-executed attack ahead of schedule. The commander, however, failed to do his job in communicating his troops’ new position, and they were strafed by Soviet-piloted aircraft and shelled by their artillery. In another mix-up Piet was wounded when he got caught in an ambush by soldiers they were told were their own. He died the next day. Bluma Akkerman lost her remaining son a little more than a month after Emiel fell.

Frank Ryan played a legendary role in rallying shocked and exhausted volunteers of the British battalion during the Jarama battle in February 1937. He and the battalion commander, “Jock” Cunningham, persuaded men of various nationalities to regroup when a withdrawal became a rout. Spanish- and French-speaking volunteers did not know the words of the morale-boosting song Ryan succeeded in starting among the English-speakers, but they knew the tune. Singing “The Internationale”, Ryan and Cunningham led the men back to retake lost positions. This is Ryan’s version of the story, as related by Tremlett. Barry McLaughlin and Emmet O’Connor restrain themselves to writing that panicky *brigadistas* were stopped by their brigade commander, who warned them in a “stiff talk” that if they did not go back Franco’s forces would cut the crucial road link between Madrid and Valencia. In McLaughlin and O’Connor’s account the men returned “singing”, led by Cunningham and Ryan. But theirs is a more sober book.

In Spanish Trenches is also a meticulously detailed history of all the Irish who fought for the Republic in the Connolly Column – less than one per cent (32-35,000) of the total figure in the International Brigades – within the context of Irish, and Comintern, politics.

One oddity about Ireland’s engagement with the civil war is the number who followed Eoin O’Duffy to Spain. They were urged on by the powerful Catholic bishops and the popular *Irish Independent*, which published stories about church-burning and priest-killing. “It is possible that per capita the Irish accounted for more volunteers in Spain than any other nation,” McLoughlin and O’Connor suggest. “While most fought for Franco, and over half of those on the other side were expatriates, the contribution to the Spanish Republic from Ireland was remarkable for a country with a communist party of about 120 members, confined organisationally to Dublin and Belfast. It is a curiosity overshadowed in the non-Irish historiography by the tragicomic odyssey of General O’Duffy’s ‘Irish brigade’.” The seven hundred Catholic ultras who travelled to Spain with him were the best-known foreign volunteers in Franco’s army. But antisemites, Catholics or fascists from various countries in Europe also joined his cause, including White Russians who had fought the Bolsheviks in Russia’s civil war. The Jeanne d’Arc battalion comprised three hundred French. And one Englishman became an officer in the Spanish Foreign Legion.

When O’Duffy’s “brigade” made its ignominious return to Dublin, his adjutant, Thomas Gunning, remained behind to work as a propagandist. Unusually for an O’Duffyite, Gunning was a doctrinaire fascist. When Ryan was captured, Gunning lied about his past activities in Ireland in order to have him executed. He was accused of participating in the IRA killing of the retired vice-admiral Henry Somerville, in west Cork, in March 1936. (Ryan, heading up Republican Congress, had been out of the IRA for two years at that stage.) His accusers also claimed that he had received Soviet money in 1928 to promote communist causes, as stated in the Dáil at the time. They further alleged that Congress had aimed to persecute the church and that Ryan had boasted about the assassination of a Garda inspector. (Ryan pointed out that no Garda officer had been killed since Fianna Fáil came to power in 1932.) One Irishwoman who returned from Spain, having seen “the Reds” at work, appealed to Franco not to “release and send back to Ireland an influential leader of communism” – Ryan – because it “would indeed be a crime against God, and Ireland”.

Franco’s representative in Ireland, Juan García Ontiveros, had difficulty adjusting to diplomatic life in a democratic climate, and discovered that Ryan, the dictator’s most famous political prisoner, had friends in high

places. McLaughlin and O'Connor write that

He and the system he represented were praised profusely by the *Irish Independent*, but the new Minister had problems coming to terms with the right of assembly, association and free expression in his new posting, constantly complaining to External Affairs about the “Frank Ryan Release Committee” and consorting, almost exclusively, with Fine Gael notables, which ultimately did his standing little good. The Spanish Minister met de Valera for the first time in late May. It was an amicable exchange of views replete with well-worn clichés about the age-old bonds of friendship between two Catholic nations, until at the close of proceedings de Valera asked about Ryan. The Taoiseach emphasised Ryan’s “heroic status” but described his conduct as “irresponsible”. Ontiveros accorded little importance to de Valera’s view that Ryan’s release would be the proof of friendly relations between the states.

Ontiveros was not amused either when the feminist Hanna Sheehy Skeffington and Ryan’s sister, Éilis, went to the minister’s home to press Ryan’s case. He mistakenly saw Skeffington as “the soul and leader” of the Irish communist party, and described the dogged Éilis as “an insipid Miss”.

Franco eventually handed Ryan over to the Abwehr, the German military intelligence service, and the commander of the Irish *brigadistas* ended up in Berlin. For Ireland’s anti-republican historians, who do not examine whether Ryan had any choices in how he might escape certain death in Spain, this proves that Irish republicanism is incapable of being internationalist and socialist. Swastikas are sexy for some. McLaughlin and O’Connor dismiss this favourite criticism on the part of Ryan’s detractors: “The swastika will always stick to Ryan for the same reason that Adolf Hitler is rarely off our television screens and the Wehrmacht marches through our living rooms every evening. But Spain was a logical conclusion to the evolution of left republicanism, and the Connolly Column saw it as an extension of battles in Ireland rather than a new departure.”

Ryan’s open letter to Cardinal MacRory encapsulated the themes of the Irish supporters of the Popular Front government. Ryan took his religion from Rome, not his politics. He compared the bishops’ condemnation of the “Reds” in Spain, naturally, with their condemnation of Irish republicans during Ireland’s civil war, and highlighted the anomaly of using Moroccan Muslims as professional soldiers to defend “Christianity in Spain”. Ryan’s reply to MacRory compared the *Irish Independent*’s stories of atrocities committed by the forces of the Spanish Republic with the British army’s propaganda about German barbarism in Belgium, employed to recruit Irish Catholics during the First World War.

In the North, perhaps inevitably, the issues around Spain blended into local sectarian politics. News of anti-clerical atrocities served to reinforce the authority of the Catholic bishops, maintaining “jealous control” of their community, and a right-wing Catholic MP edited the dominant nationalist newspaper, the *Irish News*. The paper accused a Protestant clergyman who publicly criticised the church in Spain – it had been “hand in glove with those who have oppressed the peasants and other classes” – of making “groundless allegations against a great Catholic nation in its agony”. Another Protestant opponent of the church in Spain, and a trenchant critic of the civil war coverage in the *Irish News*, lost his seat in January 1938 when most Catholic voters deserted him. Harry Midgley of the Northern Ireland Labour Party had been harassed during the election campaign by crowds chanting “remember Spain” and “up Franco”. McLaughlin and O’Connor observe that in Northern Ireland criticism of Franco’s war “was quickly taken for anti-Catholicism by a people raw from the taunts of Orangemen, Blackmen, Purplemen and Apprentice Boys ...” Even in Belfast, however, there were those who, like Ryan, could separate their politics from their religion, and make the same decision Piet Akkerman made in Antwerp.

The historiography of the Spanish Civil War is voluminous, as the saying goes, but these two books are valuable additions to the canon. It is the least the *brigadistas*, and their supporters, deserve.

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