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Irish in the Brigades of Spain

Kevin Myers on 'definitive work' on the anti-fascist fighters who took on Franco

This work's cluttered cover-design - a sepia picture of the IRA hero Frank Ryan above a banner proclaiming, 'IRISH REPUBLICANS GREET SPANISH REPUBLICANS - SMASH ALL IMPERIALISMS' - is unpromising. Armed Irish republicanism has an almost Haitian ability to worship with vagarious simultaneity at rival shrines, including mass-murdering sectarianism, ostentatious Communion-gobbling Catholicism, sickly Bodenstown sentimentality and socialist self-righteousness.

The cover misleads: for *In Spanish Trenches* is unquestionably the definitive work on the Irish of the International Brigades in Spain. This excellent study does not purport to assess O'Duffy's anti-Communist volunteers, and I dislike its generic description of these hapless and inept gossoons as "fascist". With comparable inaccuracy, their Irish opponents are sometimes known as 'the Connolly Column': this was a highly imaginative PR term coined by Peter O'Connor in the 1970s to encompass disparate units and many different experiences. There was no such thing as the Connolly Column.

What made Spain's civil war so very terrible was the involvement of various powerful external forces; the colonial Army of Africa, Italian Fascism and Nazism supported the 'Nationalists' while the Soviet Union backed the 'Republicans'. But rather than arming the Republican government, as Mussolini did the Spanish Falange, Stalin simply sold it weaponry, and at exorbitant prices. Meanwhile, the International Brigades, recruited by the 'Communist International', consisting of anti-fascist volunteers from many countries, including a large Irish contingent, gave him a foreign policy on the cheap. It is easy - and metaphorically cheap - to call them 'communist dupes'. These were mostly honourable men doing what they perhaps naively perceived to be their duty, as, in their own way, the foreign anti-communists were doing theirs.

The latter rightly detested Stalin. Had he not created the artificial famine in the Ukraine that - we now know - killed some five million people between 1931-2? Then, between 1937-8, his secret police the NKVD individually executed 681,692 alleged (imaginary, though the NKVD's number wasn't) Trotskyites in the 'peacetime' USSR - which was far more than the total death-toll for the Spanish war. This, incredibly, included yet more 'Trotskyite' victims, as NKVD agents ruthlessly purged the International Brigades defending the Republic. The latter therefore stood no chance against Franco's savage alliance of Spanish Catholics, Italian

Fascists and African Muslims, a complex truth which defies the witless simplifications of the usual bishop-bashing Irish balladry about the war, complete with many angry guitar strumstrum-strums.

Irish republicans, though largely untouched by Trotskyism, succumbed to rather more parochial deviations: to Ryan's horror, some of them adamantly refused to serve alongside British volunteers.

The authors (unusually) exhibit some similar predispositions; observing that "ethnic prejudices (in the brigades) were common", they continue, (my italics): "Typically, Britons passed off friction with the Irish patronisingly as inevitable and understandable."

That ungenerous line, with those stereotyping adverbs, merits revising for the later editions that this book surely deserves, though it is a useful reminder of the venom that the war inspired. A former governess in Spain, Jane Brown, urged the Nationalists to execute the captive Ryan. "Why should he escape the punishment he merits?" she wrote from Kildare. "Is he afraid of dying?"

This work is honestly unsparing about the rape and murder by all sides, and its footnotes and appendix are utter treasure-troves. Here I stumbled across one 'Hugh O'Donnell', a Donegal-born member of the British Communist Party. Is he the same Hugh O'Donnell who, under the codename Seán O'Brien, spied on George Orwell for the NKVD? However, the authors don't say. They also (uncharacteristically) seem to have overlooked the Manchester-Irishman Henry Kelly VC MC, perhaps the only Great War Victoria Cross-winner serving with the Brigades. He also served in the Free State Army during the Irish Civil War, meaning that his enemies in Ireland in 1922 were his allies in Spain in 1938.

Similarly, in Spain Ryan fought alongside a former Black and Tan called Macartney and an ex-RIC Auxiliary named Nathan. At war's end, true to his delinquent vagaries, Ryan threw in his lot with the Nazis, dying in Germany in 1944. Meanwhile, his second-in-command in Spain, Terence Flanagan, as an officer in the Irish Army, ended up guarding former Brigade colleagues who were now IRA-internees. Three other comrades - Michael Lehane, Joseph Ryan and James Haughey - continued their personal war against Nazism in British colours, and in those colours duly perished (RIP).

Most of these people feature in the deeply-rewarding text but not, generally, in the index - which is traditionally the publisher's responsibility. Frank Ryan's name appears (perhaps a little too often?) around 750 times in the book: the index allocates just 11 page-numbers to him, and none to his various relatives who feature regularly.

The scholarship of the 25 years that the authors spent on this outstanding work irradiates every page; whereas the tragic index does not appear to have been prepared with the care it deserved. By whom? UCD?