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Book review: A definitive account of the Irish fighting in the Spanish Civil War

The authors of *In Spanish Trenches: The Mind and Deeds of the Irish Who Fought for the Republic in the Spanish Civil War* dedicate much attention to ex-IRA man Frank Ryan

REVIEW: BRENDAN DALY

Limerickman Frank Ryan and Londoner George Nathan were unlikely friends.

Ryan was an IRA veteran.

Nathan was a veteran of the Auxiliaries, the notorious paramilitary police unit in the War of Independence.

Nathan almost certainly participated in the murders of the sitting Sinn Fein mayor of Limerick and his predecessor on March 7 1921.

Yet Ryan and Nathan became friends when they fought alongside each other in the International Brigades – Nathan captained Ryan’s battalion – during the Spanish Civil War.

The men were part of 35,000 foreign volunteers from 65 countries who joined the International Brigades to fight the fascist forces lead by General Franco.

About 250 of the volunteers were Irish born.

Focusing on these men’s day-to-day experiences in the context of the war, *In Spanish Trenches* is a scholarly, comprehensive, and balanced account of a brutal conflict.

Franco’s attempted overthrow of the democratic Republican government in July 1936 triggered the war.

The USSR supported the Spanish Republic, but the scale of the weaponry and armed forces provided by Hitler and Mussolini ultimately decided Franco's victory in 1939.

The Communist International recruited and organized the International Brigades.

But only about half of Irish volunteers were communists.

The peculiar blend of communism and republicanism among Irish volunteers (many were IRA members) lent Irish involvement in the International Brigades a distinct ideological complexity.

Irish volunteers were typically in their late 20s and largely working class.

Most were wounded at least once.

About one third were either killed in battle or died from their wounds.

Since the mid-1980s, marking the role of the Irish in the International Brigades has enjoyed a resurgence and today 45 memorials are dedicated to their sacrifice.

But during the war, Irish public opinion overwhelmingly supported Franco.

The widespread murder of clergy – Republican forces executed 6,832 clerical victims by the war's end – created a febrile atmosphere in Ireland, and the Church helped create the so-called 'Irish Brigade': a battalion of 640 Irishmen, led by General Eoin O'Duffy, who went to Spain to fight for Franco.

Barry McLoughlin and Emmet O'Connor's book is characterised by its exhaustive record of individual battles.

It isolates the Battle of Jarama in 1937 when Irish volunteers were for the final time among "the last line of defence in the crucial stage of a major battle" as the pinnacle of Irish involvement in the war.

Maurice Emmet Ryan emerges as a particularly fascinating Irish volunteer.

Born to Limerick hotel-owners, Ryan was a heavy drinker and a linguist.

He claimed he was a “gigolo” and that his brother was fighting in Spain with O’Duffy.

Ryan was also the finest machine-gunner in the British Battalion.

But after Ryan got drunk during the Battle of the Ebro, his commander executed him with a bullet to the back of the head.

The authors devote considerable attention to the bitterly-contested figure of Frank Ryan – the leader of the Irish in Spain.

After Ryan was imprisoned in 1938, de Valera – Ryan’s former comrade during the Irish civil war – tried to arrange his release, but Ryan was extradited to Germany.

Debate rages around whether Ryan, in attempting to achieve Irish reunification, collaborated with the Nazis, but the authors conclude that Ryan supported de Valera’s neutrality policy and that Ryan was “an advisor to German foreign office experts” rather than a collaborator.

International Brigade veterans returned to an Ireland even more conservative than the one they left.

Defeated by Franco, few found employment and most emigrated.

Based on over 25 years’ work and archival research in five countries, *In Spanish Trenches* is unarguably the definitive account of the Irish in the International Brigades.