

4. Britain and the Spanish Civil War

Introduction

In understanding how the Spanish Civil War impinged on British attitudes to the threats to their peace and stability, it is useful to consider some parallels in the immediate historical background from the early 1930s, when, according to Paul Preston, civil war in Spain had already been declared.¹ Firstly, as we have seen, a degree of class warfare existed in Britain, with denigration of the working class, the poor and those dependent on the state. This hostility was even more extreme in Spanish society, where landowners and other employers used organs of the state to repress workers, and 'rebel leaders regarded the proletariat ... as an inferior race'. During the right-wing repression of democratic rights in 1934-36 miners in Asturias were described as 'putrefaction, scum, the dregs of humanity'. Secondly, in both societies left-wing political groups were well developed in defence of workers' rights, anti-capitalist and anti-fascist in rhetoric. Again, in Spain these had become more extreme and uncompromising in the form of anarchist and Trotskyist revolutionary and internationalist organisations. Thirdly, while British fascists called for cleansing and purification, Spanish Falangists called for extermination, especially of leftists and liberals, who were regarded as non-Spanish and barely human. From its inception, the Right was intent on eradicating the Republic: '[the Right] hated the Republic for being democratic long before it was able to denounce it for being anti-clerical'.²

A fourth connection was the presence of British individuals (volunteers and journalists), who made direct contact with events in Spain. While the reporters' experiences have received a lot of attention, the impact of their reports on British opinion, as Overy has pointed out, has been less closely examined, and will form the bulk of the next section of this study.

A final element in Spain formed a link between the social and political: a powerfully influential and reactionary Catholic Church. Though this was lacking in British society, its presence in Spain provided a focus for conservative British opinion and guaranteed a channel for pro-Nationalist supporters. In Spain the Church and the Catholic party CEDA warned that 'Spain has ceased to be Catholic', and would be destroyed by 'a secret alliance of Jews, Freemasons and Communist 3rd International',³ a fear that easily found an echo among the British Right, especially in the person of the Archbishop of Westminster, Arthur Hinsley.

4.1. English Catholicism

Adrian Hastings writes about the social and political split in the 1930s between the English Catholic elites, including the upper class and aristocratic families and intellectual converts, on the one hand, and the chiefly northern and Irish working class Catholics on the other. He sees the Spanish Civil War as 'a decisive catalyst in the parting of contemporary loyalties ... it placed almost all vocal English Catholics, clerical and lay, emphatically on Franco's side'.⁴ The upper level of the hierarchy 'was proving itself an easy bedfellow with fascism'. The socially elite Catholics followed Belloc's 'dream of some sort of righteous populist dictatorship', with his 'sneers at liberal democracy and anti-semitic jokes'. Even in February 1939 the *Tablet* could state 'No sane and instructed man would hesitate to prefer Fascism to Communism'.⁵ Hastings' conclusion damns this mentality:

'The almost criminal blindness to the evils of Fascism [was] stimulated by an all engrossing opposition to Communism. The fondness for Fascism derived not only from an 'enemies of ones enemies are ones friends' logic but also from two other sources- a natural sympathy for Catholic southern

¹ Anthony Beevor in *The Battle for Spain*, 2006 suggests: 'Any possibility of compromise had been destroyed by the revolutionary uprising of the left and its cruel repression by the army and Civil Guard. The depth of feeling was too strong on either side to allow democracy to work'. p. 38.

² Paul Preston, *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain*, (London: Harper Press, 2012), pp. xii, 90, 9, 14.

³ Preston, pp. 9, 4.

⁴ Adrian Hastings, 'Some reflexions on the English Catholicism of the late 1930's', in *Bishops and Writers: aspects of the evolution of modern English Catholicism*, ed. by Adrian Hastings, (Wheathampstead, Hertfordshire: Anthony Clarke, 1977), 107-125 (p. 118).

⁵ Hastings, pp. 115, 118, *ibid*.

Europeans from Italy to Portugal and decades of Bellocian indoctrination about the fraudulency of western democracy and the perils of semitic influence'.⁶

Not all prominent Catholics followed the official line. Eric Gill said "between Communism and Fascism I'm all for Communism", for which he was reprimanded by Archbishop Hinsley, 'though Catholics who associated with Fascists would surely not have been so treated!'.⁷

4.2. Catholic attitudes to Fascism

In the run-up to the Spanish Civil War, seen by some Catholics as the inevitable violent confrontation between faith and the anti-Christ, the *Catholic Herald* carried a large number of reports on international affairs and statements from Church authorities relating to fascism at home and abroad, the position of Catholicism and other faiths in Germany and above all the Church's attitude to Bolshevism in the USSR and its influence elsewhere. Being avowedly partisan in these debates, there is naturally in most cases an explicit statement of opinion determined by commitment to the faith or following papal encyclicals or other authoritative guidance.

The impression given by these reports is that, while all forms of communism and the Left were treated fairly homogeneously as evil, the attitude towards fascism was more ambiguous. Franco's Spanish 'crusade', being pro-Catholic, had to be supported and any violations committed by his forces against human decency should be denied, overlooked or excused: '[the actions of anarchists] elevated the Nationalist cause to the status of a real religious crusade against atheism and materialism'.⁸ The attack on Bolshevism was unquestioning, based on events in Mexico ('an immense pyre in which all the monuments of our history are reduced')⁹ and the duplicitous shift in Comintern policy towards supporting Popular Front movements: 'This change of tactics is so momentous that extraordinary vigilance is demanded in order to cope with the menace'.¹⁰

However, German fascism persecuted Catholics as well as Jews: 'The anti-Catholic and anti-Jewish campaigns are closely associated ... they attack the Church by bringing up allegations against converted Jews, claiming that by converting a Jew and accepting him into the Christian fold the Church is betraying Germany'.¹¹ Although there was also an anti-Bolshevik motivation behind many of the Nazi actions, Catholics could in all conscience oppose Hitler. One might see, therefore, in its pages an attempt to distinguish Franco from Hitler. The approach to Mussolini was less hostile, and inevitably made greater reference to the Pope's position living on the dictator's doorstep. 'Without pronouncing on any question of fact or attempting to judge finally whether Italy is right or wrong, he [Pius XI] exposed the principles on which such a judgment must proceed'.¹² Reporting of British fascism was also somewhat ambiguous. The language seems to have been chosen to tread a fine line, to avoid identifying themselves with either the anti-fascist protesters (Left-inspired) or the Blackshirts (clearly anti-democratic).

4.3. Archbishop Hinsley versus pro-Republican Catholics

An exchange of correspondence and meetings between Catholic trades union leaders and Archbishop Hinsley and his representatives at the end of October 1936 illustrate the other side of Hastings' Catholic social divide.¹³ This debate was initiated by a set of mildly expressed criticisms of the Church's position in Spain, focussing largely on the Spanish Church's association with the

⁶ Hastings, p. 122.

⁷ Hastings, p. 121.

⁸ 'Reasons for siding with General Franco', *Catholic Herald*, 4 December 1936.

⁹ 'Horrible limits of Bolshevism', *Catholic Herald*, 8 June 1935.

¹⁰ 'New Soviet Policy', *Catholic Herald*, 17 August 1935.

¹¹ 'New anti-Semitic campaign', *Catholic Herald*, 13 September 1935.

¹² 'The Pope declines an opportunity', *Catholic Herald*, 6 September 1935.

¹³ 'Spain and the Catholic Church. Report of interview between the Archbishop of Westminster and some Catholics associated with the Labour and trade union movement: inter-departmental correspondence', 4 November 1936,

<<http://contentdm.warwick.ac.uk/cdm/compoundobject/collection/scw/id/3413/rec/1>> [accessed 11 March 2013].

economically privileged, the landed and the reactionary classes in oppressing the poor and working class. The British labour representatives supported the democratic credentials of the Republican government and claimed that it was defending itself against a fascist rebellion. They were also at pains to demonstrate that the British movement had no sympathy with communism and barred communists from membership of its organisations. In reply, Hinsley, in his support of the Church in Spain, claimed that there was no real Fascism in that country, the Government had no legitimacy and, above all, the rebellion was aimed at combating the menace of communism. He is quoted by Hugh Thomas as describing the war as 'a furious battle between christian civilization and the most cruel paganism that has ever darkened the world'.¹⁴ His social views were made clear at the meeting, with his hatred of the word 'proletariat', 'because it suggested a pagan atmosphere, and the word rather tended to refer to the workers of Continental countries as if they were buck negroes of Jamaica'.¹⁵

At the same time a pamphlet was compiled by A. Ramos Oliveira and published in London by the National Council of Labour.¹⁶ In its introduction it aimed to present 'examples of how a very important section of conservative and Catholic Spain thinks and acts ... It is only just that Catholic declarations in support of the Spanish Government in its struggle to defend democratic rights ... should be made available in this country'.¹⁷ It reported the 'painful impression [produced by] the words with which the Pope has recently blessed the rebels'.¹⁸ The accusation that Pius XI and his Cardinal Secretary of State, Eugenio Pacelli, prior to his election as Pius XII in March 1939, had more than appeased fascist regimes, is the core of John Cornwell's damning account, *Hitler's Pope*. 'Pacelli was, of course, hardly unaware of the atrocities being committed on Franco's side, but the Caudillo had declared that "Spain shall be an empire turned toward God"'.¹⁹ A particularly vocal critic of the Catholic church and Pope Pius XII was H.G.Wells. In *Crux Ansata*, published in 1943, he states that 'the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church puts Faith before any other social or political consideration. ... The Catholic Church has worked for the destruction of that very liberalism which restored it to political influence'. He especially accused Pope Pius XII of being 'the open enemy of everything creative and reconstructive in the world, .. and tied himself irrevocably to the Axis' and 'it is necessary to insist on his profound ignorance and mental inferiority'. He is 'at once puerile, perverted and malignant'. He also sought to expose the false statements of Dean Inge (a conservative Anglican theologian) that 'one quarter of the priests and nuns in Spain have been murdered', supporting the Bishop of Chelmsford who had challenged Inge. The latter replied 'it is really rather horrible to find a bishop championing men who, acting on instructions from Moscow to exterminate the middle class, have slaughtered, at a low estimate, 200,000 helpless and harmless people'.²⁰

Wells' portrayal of Catholic culpability is in stark contrast to the pro-Vatican accounts, such as that by Alden Hatch and Seamus Walshe, which appears rather naïve as it compresses the key events into a few breathless lines:

'Civil war broke out in Spain, while France teetered on the verge of a state socialism with strong totalitarian tendencies. The Holy See recognised the Spanish Republic. Then, as radicals got hold of the Spanish Government, it turned against the Church ... From behind the impenetrable walls of the Kremlin the atheistic masters of Russia malevolently exploited every area of human misery for the purpose of their crusade against the Cross'.²¹

The significance of the British pamphlet is that it provided evidence of Spanish Catholic support for the Republic and highlighted the active involvement of priests: 'the priest ... whose hands might appear stained with blood. ... the memories of the peasants murdered by the legionaries and of the

¹⁴ *The Spanish Civil War*, Penguin 1977, p695.

¹⁵ 'Spain and the Catholic Church', p. 2.

¹⁶ A. Ramos Oliveira, *Catholics and the Civil War in Spain*, (London: The Labour Publications Department, 1936)

¹⁷ Oliveira, p. 1.

¹⁸ Oliveira, p. 3.

¹⁹ John Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII*, (New York: Viking, 1999), p. 175.

²⁰ Wells, p. 83, 84, 85, 92.

²¹ Alden Hatch and Seamus Walshe, *Crown of Glory: the Life of Pope Pius XII*, (London: Heinemann, 1957), p. 105.

women violated by the Moors ... [form] an insurmountable barrier between religion and the people'.²² Preston supports this view: the clergy urged congregations to fight and many priests were among the first to join the rebels 'cartridge belts slung over their cassocks, rifles in hand, they joyfully set off to kill reds'.²³

The debate over British Christian responses to the war was not confined to Catholics. A visit to Spain by the Anglican Hewlett Johnson, Dean of Canterbury, labelled the 'Red Dean', with his membership of the board of the *Daily Worker*, provided the occasion for yet more vituperation from partisan commentators. He wrote to the *Times* on the 5 May 1937 recounting the co-operative treatment he had received from the Government for his journey from France through Spain. He explained that he had received no such invitation from 'the insurgents', in order to counter accusations of 'wearing blinkers'. In response, Arthur Bryant²⁴ wrote: 'As at the present time there is no other way of travelling to Madrid from Toulouse except *via* Gerona [etc.], it would be interesting to know what the Dean means to convey to impartial British readers by this statement'.²⁵ It is possible that what provoked the Right was Johnson's praise for the *Times*' report from Guernica²⁶ shortly after he himself had witnessed the bombing of Durango.

4.4. Press reporting

Judging from its responses to the peace movements, it is tempting to expect the response of the British press to the Civil War to be entirely partisan and predictable. The key political forces exerted during the first half of the decade had produced, if not a totally polarised society, one with a tendency to take sides. This could be said of many democratic societies at any time in modern history, but at this time and place the stakes were perceived to be particularly high. Supporters of Franco were a small minority, but given their social and political prominence their impact was significant.²⁷ This was a time when bulwarks were needed, against 'rising tides' of Bolshevism, anarchy, fascism, Nazism, militarism or godlessness, and defensive modes of thought found in the Spanish Civil War food for the anti-fascist or pro-Republican Left, the pro-Franco Right and the pro-Franco Catholic press. It is harder to identify a clear middle ground, which appeared to be squeezed into obscurity.²⁸

4.5 Reporters' experiences in Spain

British reporters in Spain received very different treatment from the two sides. In rebel-held areas there was little freedom of movement and almost total censorship of critical reports. Even the Conservative *Daily Express* had its reporter expelled by the Nationalists for reports that were 'insufficiently favourable'.²⁹ On the Government side there was much greater access to real action and senior politicians, even when it resulted in accounts of civilian deaths. However, it is hard to make a balanced comparison, as numerically the great majority of journalists were ideologically pro-Republic.

Judith Keene gives us a deeper analysis of the conditions under which British visitors experienced the Nationalist side, contrasting the largely Catholic and partisan travellers with the professional journalists reporting back to their employer newspapers. Lay travellers lapped up the stories they were given of Republican atrocities and were easily influenced by Anglophile Spanish aristocrats. Visitors' prejudices found support in Spain, and none of the English Catholic propagandists seemed ever to have visited the Republican side, though they 'invariably contrasted Republican violence with the orderly Christian spirit that prevailed in Franco's Catholic state'. Arnold Lunn³⁰ 'made a distinction

²² Oliveira, p. 3.

²³ Preston, *Spanish Holocaust*, p. 182.

²⁴ Historian, Hitler apologist and co-founder of the Right Book Club.

²⁵ *Times*, 7 May 1937.

²⁶ Written by George Steer, see 3.8 below.

²⁷ Judith Keene, *Fighting for Franco: International Volunteers in Nationalist Spain during the Spanish Civil War, 1936-39*, (London: Leicester University Press, 2001), p. 47.

²⁸ *The Times* is consistently regarded as providing the most objective reporting of the Civil War.

²⁹ Paul Preston, *We saw Spain die: foreign correspondents in the Spanish Civil War*, (London: Constable, 2009), p. 115.

³⁰ Member of the Friends of Nationalist Spain.

between the “inevitable casualties of modern warfare” and the “deliberate massacre of innocent women and children”, and he was not optimistic about democracy at home, either, “if the sort of intellectuals favoured by the Left Book Club ever achieved power”.³¹

All foreign reporters were mistrusted by the Nationalist press officers, who attempted total control over what they saw and wrote. ‘Certain topics were absolutely forbidden ... no word at all of the presence of foreign soldiers ... or the execution of prisoners; or of terror behind Nationalist lines. ... Moors ... were to be described always as devoted God-fearing soldiers’. Press officers were free with their political opinions. Captain Rosales stated that ‘the masses need a touch of the whip for they are like dogs and will only mind the whip’. He ‘pointed out that Spain must be cleansed of the industrial proletariat and that the streets of Madrid would run with their blood’. It was not only franquista censorship and the Nationalist atrocities that chafed; the demands of employers could also prove too much for professional journalism. The journalist Frances Davis ‘less and less ... “liked the stuff the *Daily Mail* likes”. The paper’s editorial policy was always to refer to Franco’s army as the “Patriots” and the Republic as the “reds”’.³² She left Lord Rothermere’s employment.

4.6. Reporting the outbreak of hostilities

The first focus for news reporting was, naturally, the initial rebel uprising, and the following survey gives a picture of the range of British published opinion. On 20 July 1936 the initial action in mainland Spain and its colonies began to be reported in the British press. The ‘revolt’ by ‘rebels’ stationed in north Africa was perhaps unexpected by the British public, and, as a consequence, the early reports were underplayed, confused and reasonably objective. The *Daily Express* referred to activity in Spanish Morocco and throughout the mainland. Some activists were described as ‘Red militia’ supporting ‘Spain’s Republican Government’ against the ‘rebellion’ led by General Francisco Franco.³³ On the same day the *Daily Mirror*, reflecting the uncertainty over what was unfolding militarily, began its report with a personal story: ‘English Bride Is Wounded By Rebels’, mention of British warships standing by at Gibraltar to evacuate Britons being secondary.³⁴

Perhaps better prepared for the wider political implications, the *Daily Worker* on the 20 July could immediately describe the insurgency as ‘the Fascist attempt at seizure of power through a military revolt’ and to suggest that it would soon be put down: ‘the rebels were still holding out at various places as troops declared themselves strongly for the Republic’.³⁵ By 23 July positions in the press had already become more strident, presenting their respective entrenched standpoints. According to the *Daily Worker*’s analysis, quoting phrases from the *Daily Herald*, ‘the Spanish Socialists are now carrying out a ‘revolutionary policy’ and have abandoned their ‘faith in the democratic approach to Socialism’ ... and there is no other way forward in the present conditions in Spain except through armed struggle’.³⁶

Sarcasm seemed to be the preferred response for the British fascist press. ‘When we were hearing about the “workers” being driven out of Barcelona I could not help thinking about the Workers’ “Olympic” Games ... and one or two of them have probably broken records for everything from the 100 yards to the Marathon in their efforts to get out of Barcelona and indeed out of Spain’.³⁷ Providing ‘The Truth from Spain’, *Action* described the setting up of a provisional government, or ‘military directory’, by the Nationalist forces, with quotations from its manifesto: ‘Spain, face up to Marxism, Confront anarchy with law, and fill up the hateful abyss which separates Spaniard from Spaniard, with the fruits of reconstruction by solid Government work’.³⁸ Mixing an ideological riposte to such fascist rhetoric with counter-accusations of brutality, the *Daily Worker* filled its front page with dramatic reporting and appeals for solidarity. ‘If ever Fascism betrayed its extreme bestiality it is doing so now

³¹ Keene, pp. 52, 62.

³² Keene, pp. 69, 72, 71.

³³ *Daily Express*, 20 July 1936.

³⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 20 July 1936.

³⁵ *Daily Worker*, 20 July 1936.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Action*, 23 July 1936, UK Press Online, <<http://www.ukpressonline.co.uk/ukpressonline>> [accessed 26 March 2013].

³⁸ *Action*, 30 July 1936.

in Spain. Against the Spanish People's Front Government, elected in accordance with their democratic will and vote is arrayed the brutal and degenerate Moroccan army'.³⁹

On 20 July 1936 the *Manchester Guardian* reported a 'Revolt in Spain', and gave some detailed political background to the uprising (presumably, in the absence of any eye-witness accounts). From its Left perspective, it claimed that 'the armed forces in Spain have always been a political power, equalled only by the Church, and resentment at attacks both upon their own privileges and upon property generally has been growing throughout the summer'. Furthermore, 'the outbreak bears obvious resemblances to the Sanjurjo rising of August, 1932, when Civil Guard, police, and mob in Seville supported a non-Royalist general in a somewhat incompetent effort to achieve dictatorship'.⁴⁰ On the following day, the same paper could refer to 'a short-lived revolt in the Capital' and report that 'Control of Seville Radio Station Regained' from the rebels, who appeared 'to have made no headway'.⁴¹ Events were obviously moving fast, and by 22 July this pro-Republican optimism was fading: 'the revolt in Spain has now proved to be extremely serious ... a substantial part of the army, perhaps the bulk of it, has declared itself against the Left Republican Government'.⁴²

The *Times* saw from the start the danger to the government, 'fighting for its life against a wide military revolt led by a "turncoat General"'.⁴³ A pro-government optimism was, however, apparent in its leader the next day. 'What hope is there of the future? The revolt may succeed, though that is hardly likely unless the civilian population of the Right takes a strong hand in it. More probably, it will be suppressed, especially, as most soldiers in the ranks are said to incline to the Left'.⁴⁴ By 23 July the situation looked grim for the government, with more reliable reports from the first eye-witness accounts from 'Our Barcelona Correspondent', who had got across to France. He reported 'heavy loss of life', 'burning of churches' and 'insurgents ... moving on Madrid'.⁴⁵

Established later that year, the *Fighting Call* ran to two issues in October and November 1936. Its busy masthead lists several organisations responsible 'in confederacy': the C.N.T. – F.A.I. in Spain, the Freedom Group in London, the Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation, Glasgow. Two slogans appear: 'All Social Administration to the Communes', 'All Social Economy to the Workers'. Given its provenance, the content is largely predictable, with calls for workers' support and optimistic news about how close the fascists were to defeat. 'When this happens [taking key towns], the Fascists will have lost the war'.⁴⁶ A set of rules, with ominous implications, were printed for volunteer members of the battalions: 'The Militiaman is a volunteer but once joined up, his work as Soldier of the Revolution, is to take his place and do his duty'. Anyone failing to do so 'will be called to account by his battalion'.⁴⁷

The *Fighting Call*, as well as directly condemning fascists, also portrays the Church as complicit, as were British newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* for their stories of atrocities. They reported the Generalitat of Catalonia stating that 'the two special correspondents of the "Daily Mail" have completely repudiated the account of atrocities alleged to have been committed by Spanish Government troops ... Such stories are deliberately fabricated in an office which sees in Hitler and Mussolini the hope of humanity'.⁴⁸

This publication, along with the *Daily Worker* on the Left and the fascist press on the far Right, illustrate the problem in treating these extreme, politically committed sources as anything resembling the mainstream papers. A straightforward indication of this is that it is inconceivable that there would

³⁹ *Daily Worker*, 25 July 1936.

⁴⁰ *Manchester Guardian*, 20 July 1936.

⁴¹ *Manchester Guardian*, 21 July 1936.

⁴² *Manchester Guardian*, 22 July 1936.

⁴³ *Times*, 20 July 1936.

⁴⁴ *Times*, 21 July 1936.

⁴⁵ *Times*, 23 July 1936.

⁴⁶ *Fighting Call*, October 1936,

<<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/explore/further/digital/scw>> [accessed 13 March 2013].

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

be any deviation from the party line between such sections as news reports, editorials and letters to the editor and not simply because only the committed would read and write to these papers. As we will see, the Catholic press, though equally committed to an ideology, does not conform entirely to this stereotype.

4.7. Catholic reporting

The Spanish Civil War itself was heralded in the *Catholic Herald* from April 1936, with reports of anti-Church violence and the forced closure of Catholic schools.⁴⁹ Retrospectively, the election results that brought the Republican government to power in February 1936 were questioned.⁵⁰ Once hostilities had begun, the line taken largely focussed on alleged atrocities committed by Republican-aligned forces⁵¹ and followed a predictable path of anti-Communist rhetoric. One of the most significant and lengthy reports gave great prominence and authority to a speech from Franco, which announced 'We will apply this social justice lovingly, with understanding, and if necessary with a firm hand ... [at the end of] a war in defence of Christian civilisation'.⁵²

Broader perspectives were provided by reference to the plight of Protestant clerics⁵³ and support given to Franco by Moroccan Muslims,⁵⁴ in spite of a previous report claiming that the communist threat to Europe was the greatest since the Moors in the eighth century.⁵⁵ There was, however, questioning of the treatment by Nationalist forces of defeated Republicans. 'The cold-blooded slaughter which followed it [the taking of Madrid] must disgrace the memory of the patriots' rising for all time ... between hanging on to the bitter end and summary execution, if captured, against all the conventions of war, there can only be one choice for the defeated'.⁵⁶

James Flint⁵⁷ describes English Catholic views of the Spanish conflict through the words of a range of Catholic newspapers. These vary from the most traditional, conservative publications (and publishers) to more liberal views, and we see how divided the Catholic community was over the fundamental moral questions they faced. At one end of the scale, the Nationalist cause was seen simply as defending the interests of the Church. The principal criterion to be applied in taking sides was a government's willingness to guarantee the Church's freedom to practise and to educate its flock. From this standpoint, a communist-supported regime, however democratically elected, clearly would not do so, and the example of the Soviet Union was seen as instructive. On the other hand, there were supporters of the Republican cause among prominent English Catholics, who recognized that the Spanish government was attempting to introduce long-needed social reforms in a country bedevilled by centuries of vested, landed interests. In this argument, the concept of 'social justice' could have different interpretations: narrowly defined by Catholic self-protection or more broadly to encompass all humanity, Catholic or not.

4.8. George Steer of the *Times*

In the reporting of specific events (such as Guernica in April 1937 or the anti-POUM action in May of that year), the Spanish Civil War has become known through the writings of individual British participants, George Orwell being the best known, crossing the line between volunteer, journalist and political activist. Less well known, but given prominence in Paul Preston's *We Saw Spain Die*, was George Steer of the *Times*, strongly committed, though in an less conventional way, and in some respects more effective an advocate than Orwell.

⁴⁹ 'Spanish Catholic schools', *Catholic Herald*, 29 May 1936.

⁵⁰ 'The election of 1936', *Catholic Herald*, 28 August 1936.

⁵¹ 'Unspeakable horrors- Ear cut off and eaten', *Catholic Herald*, 18 October 1936.

⁵² 'Spain for the Humble', *Catholic Herald*, 9 October 1936.

⁵³ 'Order in recovered Spain', *Catholic Herald*, 11 December 1936.

⁵⁴ 'Moorish chief interviewed- Mahomet wants Christ to reign over Spain', *Catholic Herald*, 25 October 1936.

⁵⁵ 'Greatest danger since Islam', *Catholic Herald*, 7 August 1936.

⁵⁶ 'A scene more telling than atrocities', *Catholic Herald*, 21 August 1936.

⁵⁷ James Flint, "'Must God Go Fascist?': English Catholic Opinion and the Spanish Civil War", *Church History*, 56.3 (1987), 364-74.

Preston describes Steer as ideologically devoted to the Basque people, who were anti-Spanish and thus somewhat neutral between the Republican cause and the Nationalists'. Bilbao was open to supporters of Left and Right, providing freedom of movement and a degree of calm. However, whatever the Basque point of view, Steer was also strongly anti-fascist (having reported on Italian action in Abyssinia) and saw 'journalism as a vehicle both to expose and thus combat the horrors of fascism', 'a journalist must see that truth prevails'. Steer was instrumental in ensuring that the truth about Guernica became known, and his report in the *Times* on 27 April 1937, reprinted in *L'Humanité*, was read by Picasso in Paris two days later and led to him starting his painting on 5 May, exhibiting it in June. Such direct political impact was also felt in British government circles, when Steer attempted to influence a change in policy over protection for British shipping. The pro-Francoist British ambassador in Madrid, Sir John Chilton, had warned against navy involvement on the basis that Spanish ports were mined. Steer wrote to Philip Noel-Baker to contradict this claim.⁵⁸

4.9. Political reaction

The British government's official position *vis à vis* the events in Spain was non-intervention, a policy Chamberlain promoted strongly in European circles through the Non-Intervention Committee, set up in September 1936, and clearly in line with the general approach of appeasement. However, many of the British representatives on the scene were less detached. Their immediate reaction can be seen in diplomatic correspondence from Madrid and Barcelona. The chargé d'affaires in the capital, George Ogilvie-Forbes, himself a Catholic and formerly posted to the Holy See, painted a very negative picture of the situation, partly it seems to encourage British residents to leave Spain. He described a 'reign of terror'⁵⁹ and 'aristocrats being hunted and killed'.⁶⁰ A letter was printed in the *Times* on 3rd August 1936, which rather muddled the waters: 'Thirteen intellectuals have signed a manifesto saying that in the struggle they are on the side of the Government of the Republic and of the people, who, with exemplary heroism, are fighting for liberty'.⁶¹ Ogilvie-Forbes' formal report to London stated: 'A reliable British informant tells me recent letter of Spanish intellectuals in "Times" was written at the point of the pistol'.⁶²

At precisely the same time the British vice-consul in Barcelona, Edgar Vaughan, presented a more balanced picture. On the one hand, he emphasised the political and economic revolution caused by the workers' takeover of industry: 'Many employers have been assassinated, others have fled the country, and the remainder are in hiding, for they are powerless to resist their employees who are armed to the teeth'.⁶³ However, he was also able to analyse the wider political consequences: 'The army rising of the 19 July in Barcelona has been a tragedy for Catalonia. The Catalan Government restored to power following the Left victory at the elections of February were gradually establishing their control over the administration of the country ... In spite of their revolutionary past they showed signs of trying to maintain order and the rights of property'.⁶⁴ However, the heart of top-level British diplomats was clearly with the Nationalists. The ambassador, Sir John Chilton's 'contact with Franco's headquarters went well beyond the conventional cordiality of foreign representatives abroad ... [he was] intransigently opposed to the loyalists .. [and] habitually referred to [them] as "Reds"'.⁶⁵ Keene considers this fact, along with the position of the Duke d'Alba⁶⁶ in London, as *de facto* British government recognition of Franco's regime early in the conflict. Lewis H. Mates, while claiming that the various unofficial Aid Spain campaigns 'prevented the British government from more open support of Franco, short of actually supporting Franco militarily, it is difficult to imagine how the British

⁵⁸ Preston, *We saw Spain Die*, pp. 319, 310, 322, 321.

⁵⁹ W.N. Medlicott and Douglas Dakins, *Documents on British foreign policy, 1919-1939*, 2nd series (1929-38), (London: HMSO, 1979), p. 107.

⁶⁰ Medlicott and Dakins, p. 106.

⁶¹ *Times*, 3 August 1936.

⁶² Medlicott and Dakins, p. 107.

⁶³ Anthony Adamthwaite, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: reports and papers from the Foreign Office confidential print: Part II, Series F, Volume 27: Spain, July 1936 - January 1940*, (USA: University Publications of America, 1993), p. 9.

⁶⁴ Adamthwaite, p11.

⁶⁵ Keene, p. 47.

⁶⁶ Official representative of the Nationalists in London.

government could have been more pro-Franco, given how the sham of non-intervention effectively supported his forces and weakened the Republic'.⁶⁷

More evidence of British political reaction to events in Spain can be seen in a number of parliamentary debates, one of the most revealing taking place in the House of Lords on 26 November 1936⁶⁸ on a motion tabled by Lord Snell, with a pro-Republican slant. Lengthy contributions were made from both sides, and, while some were legalistic, high-minded and intellectual, half-way through the debate the basic divisions and partisanship became apparent.

There was a fundamental disagreement over the legitimacy of the Madrid Government and the duty of the UK Government to support it. Lord Snell said 'I am no Communist in social philosophy, and I am equally not a Fascist, but I do feel that the legal Government of Spain has been receiving very bad and shabby treatment'. The Marquess of Crewe recalled his schooldays (in 1871) and the sympathy at that time for the Communards in Paris. Lord Farringdon objected to the Republicans being labelled as 'Red' and to the epithet 'Russian pit'. On the other side, Lord Newton pointed to the illusion that members of the Spanish government were people like themselves. The motivation of the rebels was, above all, their revulsion 'at the idea of turning Spain into a Bolshevik state', and Lord Strickland considered the Government as 'also technically rebels'. Both sides accused the other of talking nonsense and brought in the action of the church (Farringdon: 'priests have been shot but priests have also shot other people'.) While there was support for non-intervention, the most forceful speech was made by Farringdon (who called it a 'farcical' policy). 'I do take sides in this matter; it seems to me that there is a right and a wrong'. 'The whole of this trouble is due to the fact that the Government have had no policy at all, that they never had a foreign policy ... and that the foreign policy ... has been run by a reactionary permanent official in the Foreign Office'.

Lord Newton's dismissal of Spanish Republicans as people 'not like us' is reminiscent of the Francoist view of Leftists as a class or even a race apart. Associated with this perspective on events in Spain was the 'Friends of Nationalist Spain'. This organisation was made up of politicians from both Houses, religious leaders, Anglican as well as Catholic, military men and British fascists. Their public statements were an amalgam of the core beliefs of all of these groups, and were reported in the Catholic press, for example the *Catholic Herald* of 10 December 1937. Nationalists were 'fighting the forces of anti-God'; Franco had the support of the majority of Spaniards; the reason that the Republic had gained so much support in Britain was solely due to their plundering of the nation's gold reserves to spend on propaganda, while 'Franco had no money at all to spend in this way'. Concentrating on the kind of evidence used by observers on both sides, General Groves contrasted the 'clean houses, clean people, happy people, order and tranquillity' with villages in Government hands 'disordered and dirty, slatternly people'. Six months later (17 May 1938) a meeting of the Friends in Scotland passed the following resolution:

'This meeting records its heartfelt sympathy with fellow Christians who are suffering such prolonged martyrdom, declares its firm conviction that there will be no peace in Spain or the Western Mediterranean until the forces of anarchy, tyranny and Communism are crushed, and expresses its earnest hope and confidence that the great majority of Spaniards now supporting the Nationalist cause will gain an early triumph for unity, order, liberty and religious freedoms for which they are striving with such heroism'.⁶⁹

A related organisation, the Basque Children's Repatriation Committee, targeted charities that helped to evacuate children away from the dangers of warfare. 'One member, the Tory MP Sir Nairn Stewart Sandeman, urged the public not to contribute any money to the "little Basque devils"'.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Mates, p. 136.

⁶⁸ House of Lords Debate 26 November 1936,

<<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1936/nov/26/spain>> [accessed 03/04/2013].

⁶⁹ 'Perthshire and the Spanish Civil War', <<http://www.alternative-perth.co.uk/spanishcivilwar.htm>> [accessed 31 July 2013].

⁷⁰ Tom Buchanan, *Britain and the Spanish Civil War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 90.

On the opposite side of British politics, within the Labour party were set up pro-Republican committees, whose discussions and differences are recounted by C. Fleay and M.L. Sanders.⁷¹ They highlight the gulf in attitude and ambitions between the party leadership, cautious and wary of the motives of mavericks such as Cripps, and the rank-and-file members, who felt instinctive solidarity with Republicans and a strong desire to do something. The Left as a whole had greater difficulty than the Right in establishing a unified position. They struggled to reach an anti-fascist consensus, with conflicting views of a Popular Front, opposed to re-armament and wavering on non-intervention. In this indecision the Labour leadership was influenced by a view that the British public were not ready for war and that public opinion was not committed to one side or the other in Spain. Given the clamour of anti-war and pro-peace-at-all-costs sentiments this is not surprising. Fleay and Sanders quote a damning view from Michael Foot: 'On the test of Spain ... the Bevin-Dalton leadership looked feeble almost to the point of deceit'. An opponent of Labour inaction, Sybil Wingate, concurred with this view in 1939: 'when Franco was massing his army for the last attack on Barcelona this [Spain Campaign] committee met and ... decided to raise more money for the Milk Fund, to organise the sending of Xmas parcels and to issue a Xmas card'.⁷² A delegate at the Labour conference in October 1936 delivered 'one of the most devastating attacks on the leadership's support for non-intervention. "You are beggared of policy at this moment ... When the last great war that is looming comes ... I hope then the Labour Party will have some other policy to offer than sympathy, accompanied by bandages and cigarettes"'.⁷³

Mates examines the grassroots activity in the North-East of England, describing the Spanish Medical Aid committees that were set up in the region, the strike by the crew of the SS *Linaria* (who refused to deliver nitrates to the Nationalists), the Basque Refugee Children's hostel in Tynemouth and the Tyneside foodships. He emphasises the separation of these initiatives from official Labour or other organisations, that they were far more motivated by humanitarian rather than political feelings, not necessarily pro-Republican or even anti-fascist. There was an attempt at neutrality when appealing for funds, medical supplies and clothes for 'the sufferers among the civilian population'.⁷⁴ However, there was political significance in relation to the Popular Front in these attempts to assist Spain, which 'all the local co-operation [i.e. among Labour, Communist and anti-fascists] to help Spaniards has proved it to be possible'. 'The Aid for Spain Campaign was the nearest thing to a People's Front that came about in Britain'.⁷⁵

4.10. Public reaction

Wingate claimed that there was in fact a popular majority in support of the Republican cause, citing the Gallup polls in 1938 and 1939. However, as we have seen, these data cannot support strong claims, based as they are on 1,000 interviews. There is an almost contradictory trend in terms of the specific focus on Spain. In 1937 there was one question; in 1938 three and none in 1939. It is perhaps fanciful to draw general conclusions from this (for example, that 1938 saw the culmination of the civil war and by 1939 the result was sealed and British concerns had moved on), but the details of the questions are of interest and provide an insight into contemporary attitudes. The use of the word 'piracy' might be regarded as rather loaded.

January 1937	"Do you consider that Franco's Junta should be recognized as a legal Spanish government?"	Yes: 14%	No: 86%	No opinion: 6%
February 1938	"Are you in favour of direct retaliatory measures against Franco's piracy?"	Yes: 78%	No: 22%	No opinion: 32%
March 1938	"In the present war in Spain are your sympathies with the government, with Franco, or with neither?"	Government: 57%	Franco: 7%	Neither: 36%
October 1938	"In the present war in Spain are your	Government:	Franco:	No opinion:

⁷¹ C. Fleay and M.L. Sanders, 'The Labour Spain Committee: Labour Party Policy and the Spanish Civil War'. *The Historical Journal*, 28, (1985), 187-197.

⁷² Fleay and Sanders, pp. 195, 194.

⁷³ Lewis H. Mates, 2005 p. 137.

⁷⁴ Mates, p. 120.

⁷⁵ p. 130.

	sympathies with Franco or with the government?"	57%	9%	34%
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It is true that a clear majority of those who had an opinion was with the Republic and virtually no sympathy for Franco can be identified, but 570 expressions of concern still do not amount to a popular mandate. Fleay and Sanders conclude that all the work of the Labour Spain committees 'had failed to increase that support between March and October 1938',⁷⁶ by which time it was, anyway, too late.

Conclusion

'Never since the French Revolution has there been a foreign question that so divided intelligent British opinion as this [the Spanish Civil War]'.⁷⁷ As has been shown, there were striking divisions among political parties, organs of the press, associations and individuals willing to take a public stand on one side or the other, making uncompromising public statements of these positions. Much of the debate in the first half of the 1930s (both pacifist and fascist) looked back to the immediate post-WWI past, but in the Spanish Civil War it was now dealing not with hypothetical struggles over the future of civilization but with actual real-life deaths and consequences very close at hand. These were brought closer to home by the immediacy of press reporting, travel and personal experiences: unique, perhaps, in British history, because the impact on the country was not the result of state-endorsed involvement in a foreign war, but bottom-up movements motivated by moral principles in support of both sides. The events in Spain formed a significant transition between the frantic anti-war activity of the early 1930s and the acceptance, almost welcome by some, of an all-out European war in 1939. From the diverse sources examined here, we can see how much the Civil War infiltrated into the consciousness of the British population, unlike any previous conflict on foreign soil. It has been shown that clear interconnections existed between the channels of communication (news reports, parliamentary debate and diplomatic correspondence) that tended to reinforce entrenched views. Although direct evidence of public opinion in the form of polls is not extensive, it is discernible throughout the ballots, newspaper editorials and letters to the editor. Much prominence has been given to the Catholic viewpoint, and this is partly due to the coherence and clarity of the connections among the Catholic sources emanating from official statements, the press and its readers. 'The pivotal figure ... was Archbishop Hinsley ... devoted to Franco's victory ... [and] almost all the English Catholic pro-Franco groups operated under Hinsley's aegis ... [who] maintained a constant and vigilant eye promoting Franco's side'.⁷⁸

Given press circulation at that time, almost no one could have remained unaware of the events in Spain as they unfolded. 'By the end of the 1930s, about 70% of the population regularly read a daily paper, and almost everyone saw a Sunday paper'.⁷⁹ After the hardening of attitudes during the 1930s, British opinion was confronted with real war in Spain producing a realisation that appeasement, the League of Nations, pacifism and other anti-war stances counted for very little. On the other hand, the BUF was soon to be proscribed and its leaders interned and any admiration for fascist solutions evaporated. 'On both sides [of the political divide] there was a similar intensity of feeling for what was seen as a fateful struggle between good and evil, and a shared conviction that neutrality was impossible'.⁸⁰

'For such groups [political minorities] ... the Civil War offered a cause that sustained them through a time of frustration and deadlock in domestic politics. Spain ... provided an opportunity for activists to throw themselves into a bout of campaigning unparalleled in inter-war Britain for its intensity and creativity, and not only using traditional forms of political protest such as demonstrations but also exploring the newly politicised field of large-scale humanitarian endeavour'.⁸¹ British supporters of Franco were a minority (a clear majority of the population consistently supported the Republican

⁷⁶ Fleay and Sanders, p. 195.

⁷⁷ Havighurst, p. 260.

⁷⁸ Keene, p. 51.

⁷⁹ Adrian Bingham, 'Monitoring the popular press: an historical perspective', *History and Policy*, (May 2005) <<http://www.historyandpolicy.org/papers/policy-paper-27.html>> [accessed 03 September 2013].

⁸⁰ Buchanan, p. 185.

⁸¹ Buchanan, p. 92.

cause), but 'their political impact ... was far from insignificant'.⁸² The debates among supporters of both sides in the Spanish conflict helped the British population to see the key issues that mattered.

'[The war] transformed public opinion because it awoke people to political consciousness who had been indifferent to politics before'.⁸³ By 1938, once the Spanish Republican cause was seen to be lost, the Civil War was no longer a distraction from the real business of confronting Germany. However, it is arguable that the hostilities in Spain (physical and verbal) had prepared the British people for the realities of modern warfare and the language that would be used to marshal the defences. Alarm at the extremely violent struggle on their doorstep perhaps contributed to creating the national unity needed for their fight back.

⁸² Keene, p. 47.

⁸³ Mowat, p. 578.