In Spanish Trenches, Irishmen Fought Against Fascism

BY UMA ARRUGA I LÓPEZ

After General Franco launched his military coup in July 1936, anti-fascists from around the world joined the International Brigades to defend the Spanish Republic. For the Irish volunteers, the fight against fascism in Spain was about upholding the internationalist spirit of Ireland's own revolt against empire.

Officers and members of the International Brigades who came as reinforcements to fight Fascism during the Spanish Civil War. (Keystone-France / Gamma-Keystone via Getty Images)

May 1938. A member of the Communist Party of Ireland, Eugene Downing from Dublin, sat in the same railway carriage as Irish International Brigaders Jack Nalty and Paddy Duffy. The three men were all traveling through France to fight fascism in Spain.

Downing was a new volunteer, while Nalty and Duffy were returning to the front. Impressed by the veterans, Downing wrote: "It is easy for the new recruit starting out as he is blind to the perils of the battlefield and to the terrible injuries and wounds that people suffer. Both Jack and Paddy were more than aware of the hardships that awaited them, yet they were still keen to return to battle. […] They had already played their part and they could have given up at this point. And yet, despite all this, they returned."

Downing's words count among the many testimonies in *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. A book twenty-five years in the making, it places the Irish stories within the whole history of the International Brigades, describing the battles and inter-battle periods in a more complete manner and with far more context than other books on the subject.

The authors make clear right away just how personal this research is for both academics: Emmet O'Connor's father, Sergeant Peter O'Connor, fought with the Abraham Lincoln Battalion in Spain, while in the 1980s Barry McLoughlin personally knew International Brigades veterans in Britain and Austria. But these personal connections to the stories shared in the book do not cloud their judgments; this is a complete history of the Irishmen who fought, and even died, on Spanish soil.

As the authors write in the introduction, their desire is to do justice to all — including those who deserted. People who, as they themselves put it, have been "often written out of history by 'true believer' narrators." This is, after all, a book about *all* the Irish who fought for the Second Spanish Republic.

Joining the Fight

The International Brigades had been created by the Communist International (Comintern) in Albacete in October 1936, three months after Franco's coup began the Civil War. Between thirty-five thousand and forty-two thousand volunteers, mainly communists, joined the International Brigades during the conflict. According to McLoughlin and O'Connor, the Irish accounted for more volunteers in Spain per capita than any other nation — though most of them fought for Franco, in Eoin O'Duffy's Irish Brigade.

Yet, the number of Irishmen who fought for the Republic is remarkable if we consider that at the time the Communist Party of Ireland (CPI) had only a hundred twenty members. Of course, not every Irish volunteer was a communist, just like not every International Brigader was. But the authors write that between 47 to 50 percent of Ireland's International Brigaders were communists, with some volunteers being members of more than one Communist Party (such as Jim Prendergast, a member of both the CPI and the Communist Party of Great Britain, CPGB).

Irish socialists took the Spanish Civil War as a signal to dig deeper into Irish heritage and tap the springs of revolt.

According to the authors, Irish socialists took the Spanish Civil War as a signal to dig deeper into Irish heritage and tap the springs of revolt. Irish socialists had no difficulty in reconciling their own anti-imperialism with what they regarded as their international duty.

For nonsocialists who joined on the Republican side, heading to Spain meant fighting for freedom of conscience and secularism. At the same time, there was also a fear of Ireland itself becoming fascist, especially at the hands of figures like O'Duffy. The existence of his Irish Brigade — a considerable group of Irishmen who went to Spain to fight for Franco — also triggered the response of the Irish left, both Communist and otherwise.

Francisco Franco in 1936. (Ullstein Bild via Getty Images)

On the Republican side, around forty Irishmen, including Frank Ryan, arrived in Spain in December 1936. According to Joe Monks, an Irish International Brigader, Ryan had personally led thirteen of those men into Spanish territory across the Pyrenees. More would join them throughout the conflict, also coming from places to which the Irish had emigrated, such as the United States, Australia, and Canada. A total of 247 Irishmen would fight for the Republic in the Spanish Civil War.

Within days of arriving to Spain, Frank Ryan was told to prepare the forty-three Irishmen for battle. They, like all other English-speaking soldiers, were initially included in the no. 1 company of the twelfth battalion of the fourteenth International Brigade.

This brigade was mainly formed by French and Belgian soldiers. Ryan was assured that they would be able to create an Irish unit inside the company, and the first unit of the company came to be known as Irish. However, this was not official. Frank Edwards, who was there at the time, wrote: “We were not there as a separate unit, we were part of a British company. Frank was fighting hard for a separate identity, but he was too optimistic.”

The first time that the Irishmen saw action was in the last days of December, in the small southern village of Lopera. They were ordered to recover the town and for that, they had to take the two hills in front of it. According to McLoughlin and O’Connor, the Irish gathered together to sing “Off to Dublin in the Green” and then charged up the hills shouting “Up the Republic!”

The fighting was grim, and it was made worse by their old weapons, inadequate clothing, and tactical mistakes. Following another attack on the nearby town of Las Rozas, out of the fourteen men that had crossed the Pyrenees, six had died on the battlefield or later from their wounds. The authors state that most of the Irish casualties were due to mistakes made in a tactical withdrawal.

Split

The survivors’ status soon changed. After the attack on Lopera and Las Rozas, the Irishmen joined the fifteenth International Brigade, which included Americans, Slavs, British, French, Australians, and others. An extremely interesting moment in the history of the Irish in Spain — and one that McLoughlin and O’Connor have researched and documented thoroughly — is the splitting of the Irish soldiers between the British Battalion and the Abraham Lincoln Battalion.

On January 12, 1937, a meeting for all the Irishmen was called. In it, a vote took place. Did they want to stay in the sixteenth battalion, which was popularly known as the British Battalion, or did they want to join the Americans? Many voted to join these latter (the Lincolns), causing a split.

The authors of the book believe that the reasons why the Irish voted to join the Lincolns are secondary: they mainly focus on *why the vote was even called*. They posit three explanations. One is that there was too much routine misconduct amongst the Irish — and the British weren't happy. Although there are reports that some Irishmen had disciplinary problems, this was hardly the case with everyone.

However, Dave Springhall, a political commissar of the British Battalion, wrote that the Brigade HQ wanted him to deal with national groups, in this case the Irish. It was Brigade policy to avoid divisions on national grounds because they compromised internationalism. According to the authors, it is plausible that Springhall used the misconduct of a few Irishmen to depict dissidents as criminals rather than political critics — and to call a vote to divide the Irishmen, so that the national question would not come up again.

The Irish War of Independence had happened not so long ago, and the memories of repression at the hands of the British were still fresh in some of the men's minds.

The second explanation of why the vote was held is the obvious one: the national question. Although they did not know exactly who called the vote (some thought it was Springhall), the Irishmen jumped at the opportunity of not being in the same battalion as the British. The Irish War of Independence had happened not so long ago, and the memories of repression at the hands of the British were still fresh in some of the men's minds — surely encouraging many to prefer to become part of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion.

The third and last explanation is Frank Ryan's own. Not being in the HQ during the vote, he was outraged when he found out that his men had been divided between two battalions. He believed that he had been sent away, and thus removed from the scene deliberately so that the representatives of the British Communist Party could wreck the Irish Unit.

Nonetheless, the authors believe that the most plausible explanation is their own. They believe that a political commissar such as Springhall — most likely the figure who called the meeting and vote — did not want the British battalion to include a sizable group of foreigners that weren't under party command (at least half of the Irishmen were not affiliated to a Communist Party) who were ready to flaunt their independence and be proud of their separate national identity.

If we take into account this last factor, then Ryan was somewhat right. Springhall — a CPGB member and a past delegate to the Comintern — seemed to want to wreck the Irish unit so

that they would not band together and thus not create a national identity problem for the British Battalion.

Thus, on January 12, 1937, twenty-four Irishmen transferred to the Abraham Lincoln Battalion while thirty remained in the British Battalion. Ten other Irishmen were away fighting when the split happened. According to McLoughlin and O'Connor, some Americans resisted the transfer "claiming that the Irish were a bunch of drunks who spent most of their time fighting among themselves." However, the Irish (and the Cubans) formed their own platoon in the No.1 Company of the Lincoln Battalion. The Irish would come to be called the "James Connolly Centuria."

Battles

In February 1937, the British Battalion, including the Irishmen who had stayed, were sent to Jarama to push the fascists back. Their countrymen who had joined the Americans were sent there a couple of days later. The British and Irish fought from February 12–14 in one of the hardest battles of the war. Facing Franco's elite Moorish and Foreign Legion soldiers, the men were sent out in an ill-planned advance with a lack of equipment and only three or four stretcher bearers in the battalion.

Members of the International Brigade during the Spanish Civil War. WIkimedia Commons

Of the around six hundred thirty men who participated in the attack, only eighty were totally uninjured by the third day of fighting. On February 14 — the last official day of the attack by the British Battalion — in a last attempt to fight off the fascists, Irishmen Frank Ryan and Joseph Cunningham gathered a group of the remaining men (including French and Spanish soldiers) and marched off, singing, into enemy territory. They managed to surprise the fascists and pushed them back, reestablishing the battalion's frontline near the road. A day later, Frank Ryan was wounded twice and subsequently evacuated. Nine Irishmen died during the battle or shortly after due to their wounds, including the much-admired Kit Conway.

The American Battalion and its Irish members led an attack on fascist forces from February 23–27. They faced the same conditions as their countrymen had faced earlier on. According to the authors, it was slaughter. They had no assistance and had to endure a heavy rain of shells and machine-gun fire. A hundred twenty-seven died (including at least four Irishmen) and two hundred were wounded in the Abraham Lincoln Battalion alone. Michael Kelly was nonfatally wounded after crawling back through the heavy rain to pull and rescue two Cuban comrades.

After Jarama came Brunete. The Battle of Brunete, which would last from July 6–25, 1937, would be the Republic's first offensive. Survivors from the republican side claimed that they won the battle because they gained fifty square kilometers of ground — but the cost was enormous, at between eighteen thousand and twenty thousand casualties. Thirty-three percent of the International Brigaders present were wounded or killed.

A newly arrived recruit from Canada was shocked by the sight of the survivors, stating "I could not remember seeing men quite so drained of all vitality in France in the First World War." Eight Irishmen were killed and at least thirteen were wounded. Six Irishmen deserted after the battle, but three were arrested and taken back into the British Battalion.

The failed offensives of Aragón and Teruel changed nothing in the course of the war, but this latter had cost the Republic sixty thousand casualties and massive amounts of equipment. Slowly but surely Franco saw himself and his armies winning across all of the Spanish territory — and his fascist forces made their way up from Aragón to Catalunya.

Frank Ryan, who had not been fighting with the British Battalion, attached himself as assistant commissar to the battalion in mid-March 1938. The Irishmen begged him to stay at the base, arguing that he was a far too important political asset to Ireland to die in the battlefields. Ryan, however, replied "wherever the lads are I will be with them." This would be his downfall. He was captured alongside 139 Internationals (including at least seven other Irishmen) by the Twenty-Third Italian Blackshirt Division. When the Italians asked who their officer was, Ryan stood up and gave his name and rank, despite the protests from his fellow soldiers.

The men were lucky: the Italians were eager to swap them with Italian POWs, and thus they were not executed on the spot. While they were being transported, Ryan yelled at the Italians to give the prisoners water and food, which they did. A Nazi officer approached Ryan and asked him why he was fighting in Spain and not in Ireland — to which Ryan replied that it was the same fight in both countries.

Twenty Irishmen were incarcerated in San Pedro de Cardeña, a monastery used as a prison by the Fascist forces. Thirteen were almost immediately released in exchange for Fascist POWs. Three others were also released. That left four Irishmen, including Frank Ryan, who made themselves the responsibility of the Irish Government. Ryan was recognized as leader of the Internationals in the jail.

In Spanish Trenches is a complete history of the International Brigades but with the Irishmen as the main characters. Men who fought, were wounded, died, or even deserted, in a war that was not Ireland's, but felt like it was.

The last time that the Irishmen saw action was at the Battle of the Ebro (July 25–November 16, 1938). The battle would be the Republic's last attempt at winning the war and stopping the Fascist advance. The Irishmen were involved in the fighting from the start, on July 25, 1938. Sixteen Irish volunteers had boosted the flanks of the British Battalion in May, including Michael O'Riordan.

During the first days of fighting, O'Riordan carried a Catalan flag into Catalan territory as a symbol of liberation from the Spanish Fascist forces. Fellow soldier Bob Clark remembers a peasant kissing the flag. But the campaign was a bloodbath. The Irish and British lost 80 percent of their men. Five Irishmen died on the last day of fighting for the Internationals alone, September 23.

The Irish that were not captured or too wounded to be moved left Spain in December 1938 after the Spanish government decided to send the Brigaders home. A hundred sixty-five of the two hundred forty-seven Irish soldiers survived. The fate of ten volunteers remains unclear while seventy-two were confirmed dead at the time.

Frank Ryan did not make it back to Ireland. He was released in 1940 to the Abwehr, the secret Nazi police. He agreed to work for them if he was released. However, he ended up refusing to spy for them and by 1942 he was a loose end not even suitable for active service. McLoughlin and O'Connor both believe that Ryan was not a collaborator but rather an adviser to German foreign office experts.

This book offers such a complete account of the Irishmen in Spain because it does not focus on them alone. They are situated within the broader context and history of both the Spanish Civil War and the International Brigades, giving us a full picture of those tragic years for anti-fascism. *In Spanish Trenches* is a complete history of the International Brigades but with the Irishmen as the main characters. Men who fought, were wounded, died, or even deserted, in a war that was not Ireland's, but felt like it was.