

IN SPANISH TRENCHES

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Review: Barry McLoughlin and Emmet O'Connor, *In Spanish Trenches: The Minds and Deeds of the Irish who Fought for the Republic in the Spanish Civil War* (UCD Press, 2020) – Maurice J Casey

On the 14th of April 1938, William McGregor, a young Dubliner with a background in the IRA and the Communist Party of Ireland, was killed in action while fighting in the Battle of the Ebro, a major battle in the Spanish Civil War. Later, in February 1939, an Irish Garda surveillance report mentioned an Irish radical's change of residence. The officer noted that Seán Murray - then a leading figure in Irish Communism - had left his usual residence due to a disagreement with the homeowner, Esther McGregor. The discord resulting in Murray's departure, the officer noted, was 'a difference with Mrs. McGregor over the death of her son, Willie, with the International Brigade in Spain'. This comment in a surveillance report suggests what makes Ireland and Spanish Civil War an absorbing topic: here was a conflict on foreign soil that ricocheted in Ireland in unexpected ways, like a Dublin mother's response to the death of her son in Spain upturning a living arrangement.

William McGregor is one name among more than 240 Irish volunteers listed in Barry McLoughlin and Emmet O'Connor's book *In Spanish Trenches: The Minds and Deeds of the Irish who Fought for the Republic in the Spanish Civil War*, recently published by UCD Press. *In Spanish Trenches* is a richly detailed study of the Irish who fought in the International Brigades, the Comintern-organised battalions of foreign fighters mobilised to defend Spain's democratically-elected government against a far-right military coup in 1936. Often referred to as the 'Connolly Column', the Irish *brigadistas* and the cause that engaged them has long attracted academic and public interest. Scholars including Fearghal McGarry, David Convery and Daniel Gomes, to name only a few, have explored the subject from a variety of angles including domestic reactions, the experiences of Irish medical personnel and Irish literary responses. Both McLoughlin and O'Connor have also previously contributed valuable and relevant studies.

In Spanish Trenches is the culmination of many years of research. The 'acknowledgments' section provides an interesting pre-history of the book project itself, which had its origins in visits to the Moscow archives undertaken by the authors in the 1990s. In its title, the book outlines an ambitious project: to chart both 'the minds' and 'the deeds' of the Irish who left behind Ireland or their site of emigration to participate in a foreign conflict. As the introduction explains further, the book sets out to detail each battle that featured Irish *brigadistas*, to do justice to those often ignored by partisan narrators, such as deserters and dissenters, and to place the Irish contingent within the political and military history of the International Brigades as a whole.

unfortunately rare in modern Irish history. While citations to the Comintern archives are now common in histories of the Irish left (thanks to McLoughlin and O'Connor's donation of their own research microfilms to Queen's University Belfast), *In Spanish Trenches* demonstrates how Irish historians can cast fresh light on the history of the left through linguistic skills and the use of foreign archives.

Irish memoirs of the Spanish Civil War are also cited throughout, including an Irish language memoir by Eoghan Ó'Duinnín. Judgement is provided on the relative merits of the memoirs. Joe Monks, we learn, contributed a gripping account while Ó'Duinnín's work shows his comrades 'to be more human than the stainless heroes of Legend.' The approach to the memoir literature is emblematic of the authors' broader engagement with the sources: balanced and critical.

In Spanish Trenches is handsomely produced by UCD Press and available at an accessible price. Many of the illustrations included will be unfamiliar even to those well-versed in this history. There are, however, a few issues with the index, which lacks some notable figures. Ormesby, for example, appears in the text but not in the index. Likewise, Nora Connolly O'Brien, Rosamond Jacob and George Nathan, each of whom are part of the narrative, do not register in the index. Mairin Mitchell is mentioned in the text on several pages but only listed in the index with a single page number. Such omissions can prove an obstacle to targeted research.

Although *In Spanish Trenches* is unlikely to be surpassed in its detailing of the 'who, what and where' of Irish involvement in the International Brigades, the broader topic will certainly inspire future dissertations and books. The commemorative culture of the Spanish Civil War in Ireland, explored by the authors in the epilogue, is deserving of further study. Further explorations of Irish diasporic participation in the conflict and Irish women's involvement in solidarity initiatives would be valuable. Future comparative studies between Irish and other foreign fighters could also yield new insights and *In Spanish Trenches* will be a useful companion for such comparative work.

McLoughlin and O'Connor's *In Spanish Trenches* will become indispensable for all who are interested in Irish participation in the International Brigades - and deservedly so. The vast array of archives consulted and the fluent interweaving of Irish volunteers through military, national and international contexts combine to create an accomplished work. Future scholars, influenced by emerging methodologies in the historiography of international communism, may yet find new stories to tell with the sources skilfully marshalled by McLoughlin and O'Connor. It is difficult to imagine how a more authoritative account of 'the deeds' of the Irish in the International Brigades could be told, but 'the minds' of these Irish fighters and those they left at home can still mobilise archival adventurers.

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