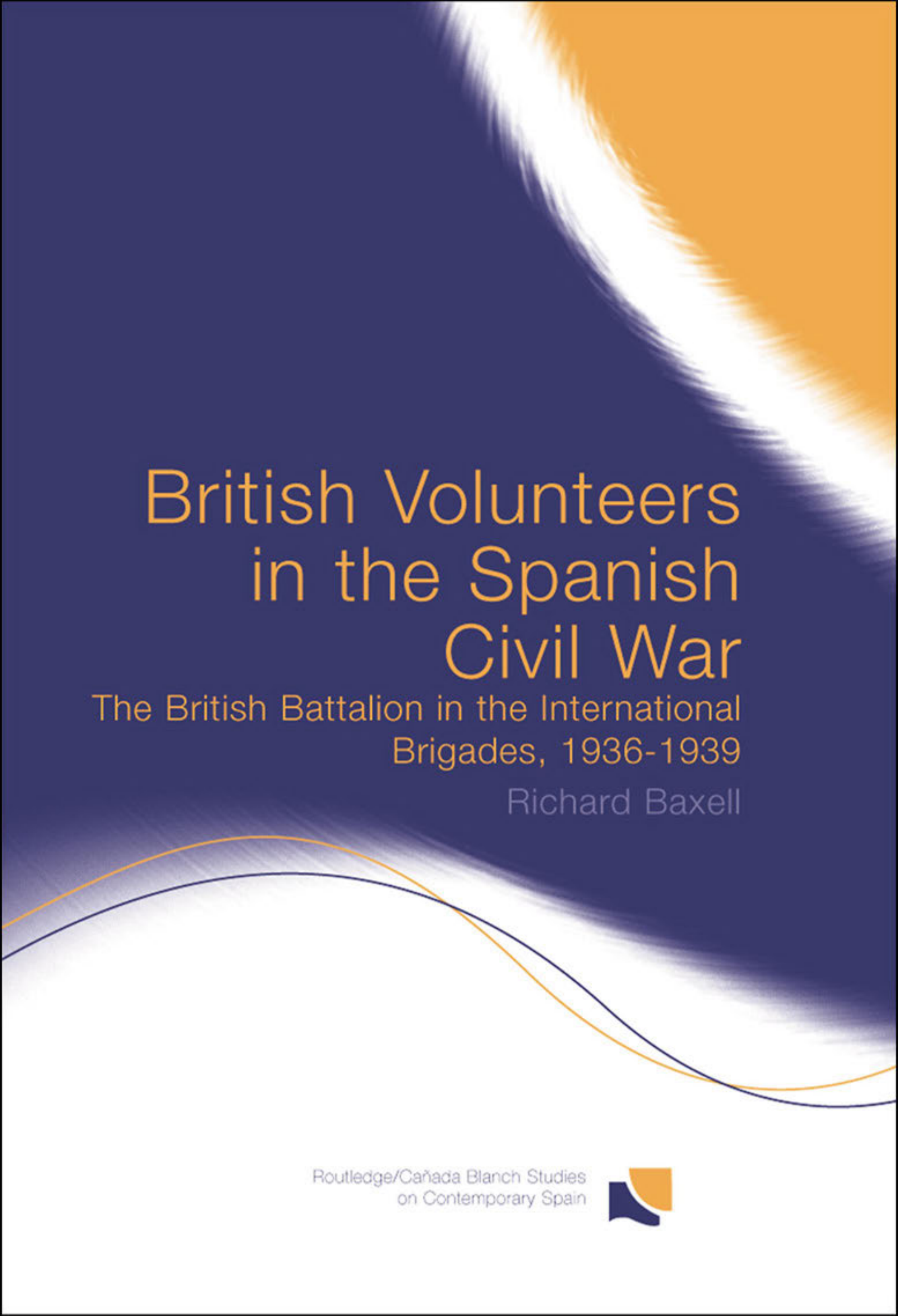


British Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War

The British Battalion in the International Brigades, 1936-1939

Richard Baxell

Routledge/Cañada Blanch Studies
on Contemporary Spain

Also available as a printed book
see title verso for ISBN details

British Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War

During the Spanish Civil War of 1936–1939, almost 2,500 men and women left Britain to fight for the Spanish Republic. This book examines the role, experiences and contribution of the volunteers who fought in the British Battalion of the 15th International Brigade, asking who were these volunteers? Where did they come from? Why did they go to Spain? And how much did they actually help the Spanish Republic?

The author begins with an analysis of the composition of the British contingent, before turning to an examination of the motivations of the volunteers. The volunteers' experiences within Spain are traced, from the first few who fought with the militia units in the defence of Madrid in the late summer and autumn of 1936, to the creation and development of the International Brigades in early 1937.

Finally, some of the more contentious issues surrounding the role of the volunteers in the British Battalion in Spain are tackled. The organisation of the brigade and the role of the Comintern, the maintenance of discipline, desertions, and the execution of volunteers are all closely examined. The book concludes that discipline was indeed tough in the International Brigades, particularly as all the members of the battalion were, after all, volunteers. However, *British Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War* argues that recent studies which purport to 'prove' that the brigades were the pliant instrument of the Comintern and/or Soviet policy have over-played the extent of 'Stalinist' control within the battalion, by showing that discipline was driven overwhelmingly by military, rather than political, necessity.

Richard Baxell studied history as an undergraduate at Middlesex University, before taking an MA in Computer Applications for History at the Institute of Historical Research. This book developed from research while reading for a PhD at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He is currently researching into the British volunteers' attitudes and experiences during the Second World War.

Routledge/Cañada Blanch Studies on Contemporary Spain

Series editors: Paul Preston and Sebastian Balfour
Cañada Blanch Centre for Contemporary Spanish Studies, London

1 Spain 1914–1918
Between war and revolution
Francisco J. Romero Salvadó

2 Spaniards in the Holocaust
Mauthausen, horror on the Danube
David Wingeate Pike

3 Conspiracy and the Spanish Civil War
The brainwashing of Francisco Franco
Herbert R. Southworth

4 Red Barcelona
Social protest and labour mobilisation in the twentieth century
Edited by Angel Smith

5 British Women and the Spanish Civil War
Angela Jackson

6 Women and Spanish Fascism
The women's section of the Falange 1934–59
Kathleen Richmond

7 Class, Culture and Conflict in Barcelona
Chris Ealham

8 Anarchism, the Republic and Civil War in Spain 1931–1939
Julian Casanova

9 Catalan Nationalism
Francoism, transition and democracy
Montserrat Guibernau

10 British Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War
The British Battalion in the International Brigades, 1936–1939
Richard Baxell

11 The Catholic Church and the Spanish Civil War
Hilari Raguer

Also published in association with the Cañada Blanch Centre:

Spain and the Great Powers
Edited by Sebastian Balfour and Paul Preston

British Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War

The British Battalion in the International Brigades, 1936–1939

Richard Baxell

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2004
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2004.

© 2004 Richard Baxell

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

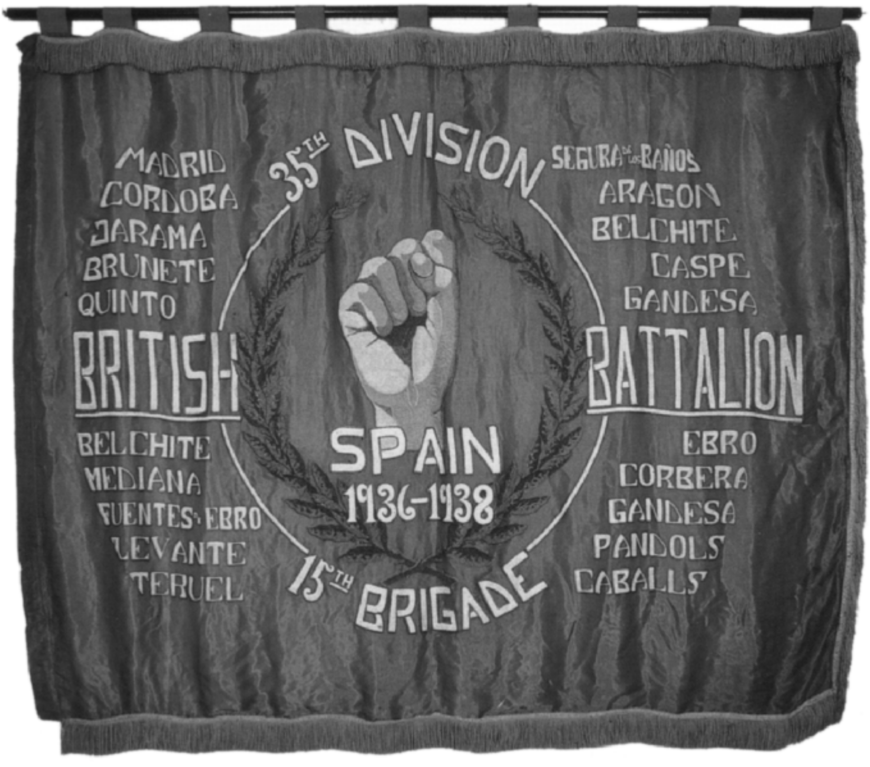
British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN 0-203-35710-8 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-66936-3 (Adobe eReader Format)
ISBN 0-415-32457-2 (Print Edition)

To the veterans of the International Brigades


35TH DIVISION
MADRID
CORDOBA
JARAMA
BRUNETE
QUINTO
BRITISH
BELCHITE
MEDIANA
FUENTES DE EBRO
LEVANTE
TERUEL
SEGURA DE LOS BAÑOS
ARAGON
BELCHITE
CASPE
GANDESA
BATTALION
EBRO
CORBERA
GANDESA
PANDOLS
CABALLS
SPAIN
1936-1938
15TH BRIGADE

The British Battalion banner, held in the Marx Memorial Library, London.

Contents

List of plates viii
List of figures ix
List of maps x
List of tables xi
Acknowledgements xii
List of abbreviations xiii

Introduction 1

1 Who were the British volunteers? 8

2 Why did they go? 25

3 Madrid, 1936: manning the Spanish barricades 47

4 Cerca de Madrid, 1937: the battle of Jarama and 'the furnace of Brunete' 66

5 Into Aragon, 1937–1938: Teruel, 'the great retreat' and the Ebro offensive 87

6 Prisoners of war 109

7 British volunteers for liberty or Comintern army? 130

Appendix 1: Commanders of the British Battalion 150
Appendix 2: Political commissars of the British Battalion 151

Notes 152
References and bibliography 201
Index 211

Plates

3.1 Bert Ovenden and Esmond Romilly 59
3.2 The Tom Mann Centuria 59
4.1 Senior battalion figures in early 1937 78
4.2 The British Battalion at Jarama 78
4.3 Advanced dressing station at Brunete 81
4.4 British transport lorry hit by shellfire at Jarama 81
5.1 Bill Alexander 97
5.2 Bob Cooney 97
5.3 Walter Tapsell 97
5.4 Sam Wild 97
5.5 Battalion officers in 1937 101
5.6 Bill Rust addresses the battalion 101
5.7 'Responding to a story in the *Daily Mail* that they had all been killed' 103
5.8 Battalion meeting 103
5.9 Training before the Ebro offensive 106
5.10 15th Brigade officers on Hill 481 106
6.1 Captured members of the British Machine-Gun Company 113
6.2 Released prisoners cross the border at Irun in May 1937 113
7.1 London memorial to the British volunteers killed in Spain 148

Figures

1.1 Date of arrival of the British volunteers 11
1.2 Ages of British volunteers 17
1.3 Geographical origins of volunteers 19
1.4 Numbers of volunteers per occupational sector 22

Maps

0.1 Military actions of the British Battalion in Spain 5
3.1 The rebels' advance on Madrid, October–November 1936 48
3.2 The rebels' direct assault on Madrid, via Casa de Campo, November 1936 55
4.1 The rebels' attempt to encircle Madrid, February 1937 68
4.2 The British positions at Jarama 71
4.3 The Republican Brunete offensive, July 1937 83
5.1 The Aragon offensive of August–September 1937 90
5.2 The Republican Teruel offensive, winter 1937–1938 93
5.3 The retreat through Aragon of March–April 1938 96
5.4 The Republican Ebro offensive, July 1938 102

Tables

1.1 Political affiliation (where given) 15
1.2 Ages of volunteers by proportion 16
1.3 Numbers of volunteers giving an address in a major city 19
1.4 The most commonly listed occupations 21
1.5 Trade union membership 23
2.1 British pro-Republican national daily newspaper circulation figures, 1936–1939 36
2.2 British Communist Party membership 41
3.1 ‘British’ members of the Tom Mann Centuria 50
3.2 British members of the Muerte es Maestro Centuria 51
3.3 ‘British’ members of No. 4 Section, Commune de Paris Battalion, 11th International Brigade 54
3.4 ‘British’ members of the English section of the Thaelmann Battalion, 12th International Brigade 57

Acknowledgements

My thanks go first to Paul Preston, Professor of International History at the London School of Economics, without whose constant advice, support and friendship this book would never have been started, let alone completed; also to Martine Morris and Clive Fleay of Middlesex University, for reawakening my interest in history in general, and for this subject in particular. The kind assistance given to me by the veterans and their families and members of the International Brigade Memorial Trust has, of course, been crucial, and I would particularly like to thank Sam Russell, Dave Marshall and Marlene Sidaway, Bob Doyle, John Dunlop, Chris Smith, George Wheeler, Dave Goodman, and Fred and Sadie Thomas. The staff of the Marx Memorial Library, the Imperial War Museum and the Public Record Office in London, the National Museum of Labour History and the Working Class Movement Library in Manchester and the Russian Centre for the Preservation and Study of Recent Historical Documents in Moscow all went out of their way to help me in my research.

A number of other historians have also assisted me in my research and writing, principally Martin Blinkhorn, Tom Buchanan, Helen Graham, Angela Jackson, Barry McLoughlin, Michael O'Shaughnessy, Robert Stradling and Natalie Suart. Likewise, David Leach, and the information he uncovered during the making of his documentary *Voices from a Mountain*, has also been extremely helpful. My thanks go to my mother who acted as proof-reader, to Iván Pliego Moreno and Beatriz Anson as impromptu translators and to Heather Barnett and Jeremy Scott, who very generously donated their skills and precious time to preparing the illustrations. Lastly, I would like to thank Jim Carmody, who has provided me with invaluable assistance throughout my research and devoted enormous time and trouble to helping eliminate any mistakes. Those that remain are mine alone.

Excerpts from James K. Hopkins, *Into the Heart of the Fire: The British in the Spanish Civil War*, Copyright © 1998 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Jr. University. Used with the permission of Stanford University Press, www.sup.org.

All plates used with the permission of the International Brigade Archive at the Marx Memorial Library, London, with the exception of plate 7.1 (photograph by the author).

All maps by Jeremy Scott.

Abbreviations

BUF	British Union of Fascists
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
IBA	International Brigade Archive, Marx Memorial Library, London
ILP	Independent Labour Party
IRA	Irish Republican Army
IWMSA	Imperial War Museum Sound Archive, London
LBC	Left Book Club
NMLH	National Museum of Labour History, Manchester
NUWM	National Unemployed Workers' Movement
POUM	Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista
PRO	Public Record Office, Kew
SWMF	South Wales Miners' Federation
TUC	Trades Union Congress
WCML	Working-Class Movement Library, Salford
YCL	Young Communist League

Introduction

In November 1996, 400 elderly men and women, including a number from Britain, gathered in a ceremony near the Spanish capital of Madrid to pay homage to their friends and comrades who had died fighting in the Spanish Civil War of 1936–1939. These were the surviving members of the International Brigades, the volunteers from around the world who had rushed to the country between 1936 and 1938 to fight for the Spanish Republic against its enemies from both inside and outside Spain. For many of these men and women, this was their first visit to Spain since the civil war, for they had refused to set foot there whilst the regime of General Franco, which so many of their comrades had died to prevent, still existed. However, following the death of Franco in 1975, a new democratic government had replaced the old regime, and, as a gesture of gratitude to the international volunteers who had come to Spain to fight the military uprising of 1936, the Spanish government offered citizenship to the surviving members of the brigades. So what did these volunteers do that was so significant such that, 60 years later, the few hundred still alive would be offered the citizenship of Spain? Who were they? Where did they come from? Why did they go to Spain? And how much did they actually help the Spanish Republic? These are some of the questions that this study will attempt to answer. First, however, an explanation of the events within Spain preceding the outbreak of civil war is necessary, for, whilst it is undeniable that the war developed an international dimension, it is inside Spain itself that the causes of the war were to be found.

The military coup, launched by a group of army officers against the Spanish government on 17 July 1936, was the culmination of a struggle for supremacy between two political blocs within Spain that were united by little except mutual incomprehension and enmity. That the Spanish government should be confronted by an armed insurrection came as no surprise to many observers; in the five years that the beleaguered Republican government had existed, it had faced mortal threats from both left and right. A military rising led by General Sanjurjo in August 1932, and a revolution in the Asturias and Catalonia in October 1934, may have been crushed, but the political and social forces that had been behind them most certainly were not. Indeed, the history of the Spanish Second Republic had been one of ever-increasing political polarisation.

Spain's Second Republic, *la niña bonita*, had been proclaimed following the municipal elections on 12 April 1931 that had been taken to be a plebiscite on the monarchy, and had recorded an overwhelmingly hostile vote against it. The king, Alfonso XIII, realising that he had lost not just the support of the populace but, crucially, the support of the military, fled Spain. For many Spaniards the birth of the Republic was celebrated by exuberant public rejoicing; this seemed to many to signal the beginning of the end for the powerful Spanish elites, and to offer a relief from abject poverty for millions of landless peasants. However, the Republic's attempts to reform powerful institutions like the church and the army, at the same time as challenging entrenched economic interests in the landed, industrial and banking oligarchies, never achieved the success expected by its supporters on the left, whilst antagonising its opponents on the right.[1] Separation of church and state, modernisation of the top-heavy army and attempts to reform the deeply unequal distribution of the land were all regarded with horror by the established elites. In addition, attempts to meet the demands for regional autonomy from areas such as the Basque Country and Catalonia further outraged the Spanish army, who believed in their duty to preserve 'the true and indivisible Spain'.

The situation did not take long to escape from the government's rather tenuous control. Anarchist and other anti-clerical elements demonstrated their opposition to the Catholic Church by burning churches. The government, unwilling to use the forces of order against workers, some of whom were their own supporters, sat on its hands. If the government's reformist programme had not already alienated the army and church, its inability, or unwillingness, to control its supporters guaranteed their opposition.

The army's withdrawal of support was made explicit in August 1932 with General Sanjurjo's *pronunciamiento* (military rising). The coup was a poorly kept secret and easily suppressed, but the event clearly showed that the Republican government faced deadly opposition from sections of the right in Spain. When the Republican/socialist government lost the elections in 1933 and was replaced by a conservative/reactionary government, many of the reforms were, at best, shelved or, in many cases, overturned. The left was not long in voicing its outrage. In October 1934, in the mining areas of the Asturias in northern Spain and in Catalonia, a general strike rapidly turned into armed insurrection. It was brutally suppressed by the army, with the help of Moorish troops from North Africa used for the first time in mainland Spain.[2] In the ensuing repression, Republicans and socialists across Spain were imprisoned, including almost the entire leadership of the socialist trade union the *Unión General de Trabajadores* (UGT).

In the Spanish elections held 18 months later in February 1936, a coalition of socialists and Republicans united in a 'Popular Front' won a narrow victory over the opposing coalition of the right and prepared themselves to revive the reformist programme of 1931. Meanwhile, elements of the Spanish right, who had lost any faith in the Republic, prepared for war. The murder on 13 July of Calvo Sotelo, a prominent Catholic conservative politician, by members of the Republican Assault Guard (itself a response to the murder the previous day of one of their comrades, Lieutenant José Castillo) served as the perfect excuse for the leader of the plot, General Emilio Mola. On the evening of 17 July 1936 the garrisons rose in Melilla, Tetuan and Ceuta in Morocco, and the revolt quickly spread to the mainland. In conservative areas of Spain such as Old Castile the rising was, in general, successful, but in other areas, including the major cities of Madrid and Barcelona, the generals met with bitter and effective resistance. However, though the coup was not successful in capturing Spain in its entirety, neither was it an outright failure. To a great extent the rebel and government forces were evenly matched: the Republicans held most of the navy, air force and territory, including the capital and the vital industrial regions of the Basque Country and Catalonia, whilst the rebels controlled the majority of the army, including the formidable Army of Africa – the Spanish Army's elite, battle hardened from the Morocco campaign – under the command of General Franco.[3] However, it was trapped on the wrong side of the strait of Gibraltar, and the Republicans controlled the vast majority of the navy.

At this point, forces outside Spain decisively altered the progress of the conflict. What began as a typically Spanish *pronunciamiento* quickly took on a significance beyond a domestic military rebellion against a constitutionally elected Republican government. Instead, it evolved from civil war into what Hugh Thomas referred to as 'world war in miniature', becoming 'the screen on to which foreigners projected their own concerns with such luminous clarity'.[4] Two events in particular had a profound effect on the development of the war. For the Nationalists, the airlift of Franco's Army of Africa by the German JU 52s and Italian Savoia-Marchetti S.81 bombers across the strait of Gibraltar was absolutely crucial,[5] whilst the involvement of the International Brigades in the battle for Madrid in the winter of 1936–1937[6] helped inflict the first real defeat on the rebels in their hitherto virtually unopposed march on the capital.[7]

These volunteers for the International Brigades came from countries across the world to help the beleaguered Spanish Republic, many of them with bitter experiences of fighting against fascism and with personal scores to settle. To these 'anti-fascists', Italy, Portugal, Austria and Germany had all fallen to fascism, and now Spain was similarly under mortal threat. Weary of this remorseless spread of right-wing ideologies through much of Europe, they felt that in Spain the tide might, at last, be stemmed. Thus many thousands volunteered to fight for the Republicans, the majority of whom served in the International Brigades.

The International Brigades were recruited and organised by the Communist International (the Comintern), which was quick to respond to the influx of foreign volunteers for the Republic. Originally reluctant,[8] Stalin was, by the end of September 1936, persuaded to support the idea of the formation of the brigades by Dimitrov, the head of the Comintern, and by several senior Russian generals, who realised the potential value of military lessons that might be learnt in Spain.[9] For Stalin, who was concerned at the extent of German and Italian help for the rebels and its potential severely to weaken France, the International Brigades offered an opportunity to support the Spanish Republican forces without intervening directly, thus reducing the risk of alienating Britain and France with whom he was trying desperately to establish détente. The recruitment of the International Brigades was coordinated by the Communist Party in France where, like Spain, a Popular Front government had been elected, and which was situated conveniently bordering

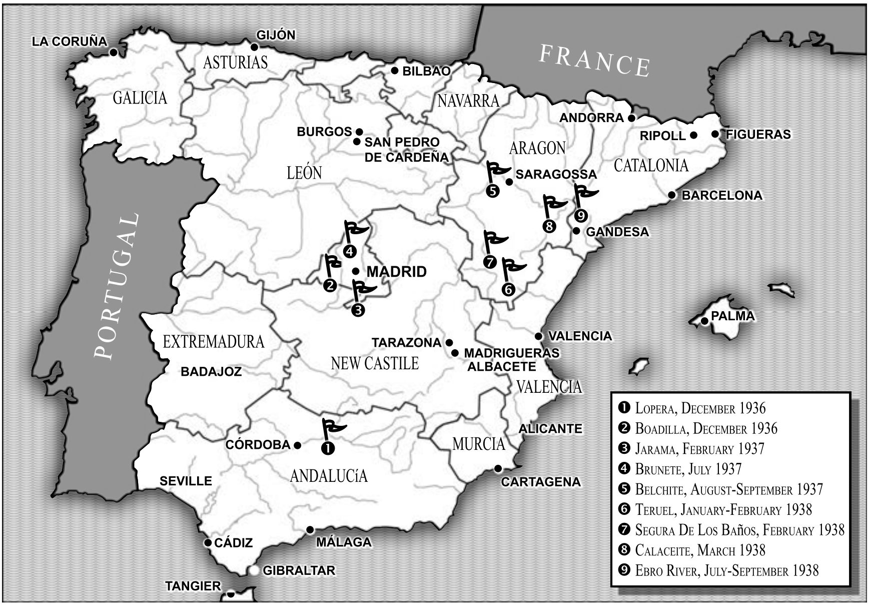
Spain. Besides, the French communist André Marty, who was later to play a central role as commander of the International Brigades' training base at Albacete, was a member of the executive committee of the Comintern.

This influx of foreign volunteers into Spain came despite twenty-eight countries signing up to an agreement of non-intervention in the war, initially proposed by France, strongly championed by Britain, and flagrantly ignored by, first, Italy and Germany and, later, Russia.[10] Meanwhile, the instigators of the agreement, determined to limit the war to Spain, set up the impotent 'Non-Intervention Committee' in London, under the hopelessly ineffective chairmanship of Lord Plymouth. The British government, fully aware that several countries were bypassing the agreement, turned a blind eye, and the Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, later remarked, 'better a leaky dam than no dam at all',[11] even though official documents confirm that the British government knew that the Nationalists were benefiting far more from the agreement than the Republicans.[12] As one commentator on the British government's reactions to the war has observed, 'the Foreign Office was less troubled by a war scare than a red scare.'[13]

Among the 3,000 foreign volunteers who had arrived in Spain to help defend the Spanish Republic in late 1936 were a number from Britain. Some are well known, such as the writer George Orwell, the Marxist intellectual John Cornford, and Esmond Romilly, the nephew of Winston Churchill; others are not so, such as William Gough, a metal finisher from Luton, and Phil Gillan, a lorry driver from Glasgow. Many more arrived in Spain to fight alongside them, and British volunteers were involved in many of the major battles in the conflict, from the defence of Madrid between November 1936 and March 1937 to the last desperate Republican assault across the River Ebro in July 1938. British casualties in Spain were to be high, with as many as one-quarter killed and over half of the total number of volunteers sustaining some kind of wound.[14] The last brigaders were withdrawn at the end of 1938 and returned to Britain in December just after the farewell parade in Barcelona, renowned for the impassioned speech of the communist deputy from the Asturias, Dolores Ibarruri, '*La Pasionaria*':[15]

> Comrades of the International Brigades! Political reasons, reasons of state, the good of that same cause for which you offered your blood with limitless generosity, send some of you back to your countries and some to forced exile. You can go with pride. You are history. You are legend. You are the heroic example of the solidarity and the universality of democracy . . . We will not forget you; and, when the olive tree of peace puts forth its leaves, entwined with the laurels of the Spanish Republic's victory, come back! Come back to us and here you will find a homeland.

For these British volunteers the task of joining the Spanish Republican Army was not necessarily an easy one, for the journey to Spain itself involved risking imprisonment, or worse. Before December 1936, when the Communist Party began recruiting in earnest, British volunteers with their own passports and money often travelled to Spain under their own steam.[16] However, following the British


LA CORUÑA
GIJÓN
ASTURIAS
GALICIA
BILBAO
FRANCE
NAVARRA
ANDORRA
BURGOS
SAN PEDRO DE CARDEÑA
ARAGON
RIPOLL
FIGUERAS
CATALONIA
LEÓN
SARAGOSSA
BARCELONA
GANDESA
PORTUGAL
MADRID
PALMA
VALENCIA
EXTREMADURA
TARAZONA
MADRIGUERAS
ALBACETE
BADAJOZ
NEW CASTILE
VALENCIA
ALICANTE
CÓRDOBA
MURCIA
SEVILLE
ANDALUCíA
CARTAGENA
CÁDIZ
MÁLAGA
GIBRALTAR
TANGIER
❶ Lopera, December 1936
❷ Boadilla, December 1936
❸ Jarama, February 1937
❹ Brunete, July 1937
❺ Belchite, August-September 1937
❻ Teruel, January-February 1938
❼ Segura De Los Baños, February 1938
❽ Calaceite, March 1938
❾ Ebro River, July-September 1938

Map 0.1 Military actions of the British Battalion in Spain.

government's implementation of the Foreign Enlistment Act on 9 January 1937 and the banning of volunteers under the Non-Intervention Agreement in February 1937, recruitment obviously had to become rather secretive.[17] Any person found guilty of an offence under this act could be punished by a fine and up to two years in prison,[18] though no one was ever actually prosecuted.[19]

For most of those who left for Spain from late 1936 onwards, the procedure for volunteering was very similar. Contacts would be made with the local Communist Party branch, which until February 1937, would send the volunteers to the party offices in King Street in London's Covent Garden, after which they were sent to a nearby office above what would later become the Dependents' Aid office at 1 Litchfield Street. Here they would be interviewed by R. W. Robson, known to all as Robbie, who would assess their suitability, in military and political terms.[20] Some potential volunteers were turned away for their lack of experience in either field, but political commitment was usually regarded as an acceptable surrogate for military experience. Volunteers were also turned away if they lacked credentials (membership of a trade union or appropriate political organisation), but if they returned they would usually be accepted, for, 'this would be taken as evidence of their sincerity.'[21]

Those accepted would be told to purchase weekend return rail-tickets from Victoria Railway Station to Paris, which did not require a passport. At the railway station somewhat ineffectual efforts by the British Special Branch would be made to dissuade the volunteers from travelling. One volunteer described how, 'Victoria

Station was as thick as flies on ground with special agent men and detectives, you could tell by their huge boots . . . But they could do nothing about it.'[22]

Some volunteers were followed, and the Communist Party and Dependents' Aid offices were kept under surveillance, but little was done seriously to prevent the volunteers from going.[23] Tommy James remembers that, though 'the CID fellows at Dover favoured us with a searching look', no attempt was actually made to prevent them leaving.[24] John Longstaff, who served as a runner with the British Battalion, remembered encountering a degree of hostility from a plain-clothes policeman, but little else.[25] These somewhat half-hearted efforts to thwart recruitment made little impact, for, as one of the British volunteers stated, they were confident that 'this was only intimidation. They had no legal right to do anything about it.'[26] As S. P. Mackenzie has shown, the authorities recognised that there were major legal problems in applying the 1870 Foreign Enlistment Act to volunteering for the Spanish war.[27]

At Paris they would be met by a Communist Party representative, who for a time in 1937 was Charlotte Haldane (under the pseudonym Rita),[28] wife of J. B. S. Haldane, the scientist, and mother of Ronnie Burgess, who served in the British Battalion.[29] In Paris the volunteers underwent a medical examination and further checks on their political reliability.[30] Volunteers would be given a stern lecture on the importance of avoiding establishments offering the temptations of sex and alcohol, though these warnings had a rather limited impact on some.[31] Care had to be exercised, for groups of volunteers would occasionally be arrested and repatriated after a stay in a French jail,[32] though many volunteers believed that the French police didn't make undue effort to catch them, and that many were sympathetic to their cause.[33] William Feeley, a glass-worker from St Helens in Lancashire, remembers being interrogated by a non-intervention observer in France who asked if they were on their way to Spain.

> They said, 'Well, where are you going?' So we said, 'Beziers.' 'And where are you going to after that?' 'Back to Paris.' He said, 'Not to Spain?' And they all had broad grins on their faces, [']cos they knew perfectly well where we were going. We put on an expression of horror at this, 'Spain, no, not likely!' And they all just burst out laughing and left us there.[34]

In any event, were a volunteer to be arrested and returned to Britain, his next attempt to get to Spain was likely to be successful.[35]

From Paris, until February 1937, they would travel to Spain by train, after which the usual route was to be smuggled in groups over the Pyrenees. The volunteers would be gathered together in groups from many different countries, 'Germans, Poles, Czechs, all sorts'.[36] Many volunteers describe the tough physical demands of the climb over the Pyrenees, which could last for up to 16 hours[37] – most of the volunteers were, after all, from an urban background – though some relished the climb, such as George Wheeler, who described it as 'exciting and exhilarating',[38] or Tom Murray, who managed to carry one volunteer, previously injured in Spain, for much of the journey.[39] Many volunteers describe how their eventual arrival was met with a mixture of relief and excitement that the exertion was finally over and they were, at last, in Spain.[40]

From the border they would then be taken by lorry a short distance to Figueras, the mustering point for volunteers entering Spain from the north, and then by train to the International Brigade headquarters at Albacete (roughly half-way between Madrid and Valencia), where volunteers would be processed and divided up by nationality. Until July 1937, British volunteers were then sent on to their base nearby at Madrigueras, after which it was transferred to Tarazona de la Mancha. At this point their military training, such as it was, would take place before they joined their comrades, the majority of whom fought as infantry on the front line. Here, as James Hopkins stated, the volunteers would find themselves in 'the heart of the fire'.[41] Few would escape unscathed.

1 Who were the British volunteers?

> Because they were so scattered, therefore, there are no statistics of the makeup of the English volunteers, nor is it possible to know exactly how many there were of them.[1]

Ever since the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War rather imaginative claims have been made, by both supporters and opponents of the Second Republic, of the level of foreign intervention for the Republic.[2] The following assessment written just after the war by Arthur Loveday, a British supporter of Franco, is typical: 'General Franco's staff put them at 100,000 men and other experts at from 50,000 to 150,000 . . . They were certainly as numerous and possibly more numerous than foreigners fighting for Franco.'[3] Likewise, in 1952 the Spanish Foreign Ministry estimated the numbers at 125,000, and Andreu Castells's work in 1974 on the Internationals put the numbers at around 60,000.[4]

These generous estimates probably make the mistake of including the large number of Spaniards in the International Brigades within the calculations. The experiences of John Peet, a member of the British Battalion who worked in the post office in the International Brigade base at Albacete, 'where all the names of the members of the International Brigades were card indexed', support this. Peet states that:

> There has never been, as far as I am aware, an accurate estimate of how many men served in the International Brigades . . . It wasn't easy to determine. I couldn't simply count the cards to determine how many men were there. The cards included not only the names of the International volunteers, but also of the very considerable numbers of Spaniards, who by January 1938, had volunteered or been drafted into the Brigades to make up the strengths.[5]

The International Brigades always included a number of Spaniards, 'the only way of replacing casualties',[6] particularly after September 1937 when the Republican government published a decree incorporating the International Brigades into the Republican Army[7] and ruled that there must be a Spanish battalion in every international brigade, a Spanish company in every battalion and a Spanish section in every company.[8] Most estimates now accept that between 1936 and 1938 over 35,000 people from perhaps as many as 53 nations left their homes to join the

Republican forces.[9] However, it should of course be remembered that even the most generous estimates of intervention for the Republic are dwarfed by the numbers intervening on the Nationalist side.[10]

Charlotte Haldane, who later became the honorary secretary of the Dependents' Aid committee, alleged that all foreign communist parties had been assigned recruitment quotas for the International Brigades.

> The Communist Parties were charged with the local and national organisation. The number of recruits each party had the task of raising was assessed according to its membership man-power and its sympathisers. The assessments were high; in many cases higher than the local Party leaders could possible attain . . . The British Communist Party was also given a quota to raise. It was one of the smaller and more insignificant of the European parties . . . It had been at first decided only to send unmarried men over twenty-one. But the smallness of their numbers compelled the British C.P., under orders from the C.I. [the Communist International], to furnish its quota of volunteers, to extend its recruitment among married comrades and the youth of the Young Communist League.[11]

This allegation is cited in several other works,[12] though there appears to be no source to substantiate this claim. Furthermore, R. W. Robson, who was responsible for recruiting the British volunteers, states that, though fewer and fewer volunteers were turned down as the war progressed, 'There was never any real pressure for recruits.'[13] Nevertheless, there have been suggestions made that Britain's quota was 1,000;[14] if so, even by the most conservative estimates, it more than doubled this number, with more than 2,300 British volunteers arriving in Spain.[15] Despite the belief of some of the earlier volunteers that they were signing up for a period of three months (a belief that perhaps might have been more strongly debunked by recruiters), in reality volunteers signed up for an indeterminate time, and since many were not travelling with passports, or had surrendered them to the recruiters, any volunteers who were to regret their initial zeal found themselves in a difficult position when travel in and out of Spain was later made very difficult.[16]

Despite Robson's claim that there was no real pressure on recruits, it is nevertheless clear that, as the war progressed, the high casualty rate had a negative effect on recruitment.[17] The original number of enthusiastic volunteers who arrived in December 1936 and January 1937 were decimated at Jarama, and by the spring of 1937 many potential volunteers had grown understandably less enthusiastic to become 'cannon-fodder'.[18] As R. Dan Richardson states:

> That steady reservoir of political émigrés and Communist militants which had supplied the bulk of the early Internationals had been, by the Spring of 1937, substantially exhausted . . . and the generally growing awareness that joining the Brigades was less a romantic adventure than a good way to die young played a part in reducing the numbers of men who might otherwise have been tempted to join.[19]