

Neutral Ireland? Irish Political and Public Reactions to the Spanish Civil War

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The Spanish Civil War is considered to be one of the most significant events in the inter-war period. Interestingly, the events between 1936 and 1939 reflect not only the formulation of power politics in Europe, but also the aims of the Irish¹ government in diplomatic terms. Irish participation in the Spanish Civil War attracted considerable attention recently. However, the Iberian events were not given primary importance in the history of Irish foreign policy. Anglo-Irish relations and the concept of Irish neutrality during and after the Second World War have been the key issues. Although it is a well-known fact in Irish historical circles that the overwhelming majority of the Irish population was supporting Franco because of religious reasons, other aspects such as the Irish government's adherence to non-intervention and the motivations behind it are mostly ignored. So I am inclined to think that it is worth examining the Irish reaction to the Spanish Civil War in its entirety; that is, paying attention to the curiosity of non-intervention as well. This is more than interesting as the "Irishmen were not, as yet, intervening in Spain; but few were neutral."²

In order to provide an insight into Irish public opinion, I based my research partly on the reports of contemporary Dublin-centred Irish daily newspapers, namely the 'conservative' *Irish Independent*, the 'republican' *Irish Press* and the 'liberal' *Irish Times*. All three took different stands on the Spanish Civil War. They showed great interest in Spanish events from the outbreak of the war and published news coverage and reports every day in the first one and a half year of the conflict. It was only after the end of 1937 that these became less frequent.

Irish public opinion as well as political circles may be classified into three groups: pro-Franco, pro-Republican, and those on the side of non-intervention. I am going to give an insight on Irish reactions to the Spanish Civil War via these groups. The first part of my study will focus on Franco's Irish supporters, describing the main tendencies that motivated the certain pro-Nationalist groups. The second part will be based on outlining pro-Republican Irish responses to the Spanish Civil War, presenting the special character of Irish republicanism as well. The third section is devoted to non-interventionists.

¹ The official name of the country between 1922 and 1937 was the Irish Free State, then the Constitution changed it to Éire. The title of the prime minister changed similarly; in 1937 the President of the Executive Council became to be called Taoiseach.

² J. Bowyer Bell, "Ireland and the Spanish Civil War," *Studia Hibernica* 9 (1969), 149.

The Irish Supporters of Spanish Nationalists

Due to the tragic nature of news coming from Spain, the vast majority of the Irish public opinion sympathized with the Insurgents. The main reason for this was the fact that the articles and news coverage of the *Irish Independent* focused on the losses of the Spanish Church and clericals in general. The *Independent* was the organ of the nationalist Catholic middle-class, influenced by the ideas of the Catholic Church. With reference to the Spanish Civil War, the paper held a strict religious view and thus backed the Nationalist cause. It was appreciated in conservative circles abroad as well; an Englishman, for instance, wished to “pay special tribute to the *Irish Independent* for the line it had taken in the Spanish crisis [because] it has been as Christian as [British] Catholic newspapers. The *Irish Press* is rather more like the English papers, with the honourable exception of the *Daily Mail*”³. On the other hand, the supporters of the Republican side often criticized the motivation and attitude of the paper. The well-known IRA man from the War of Independence, Ernie O’Malley argued that “the action of the *Independent* is a political one. It has no regard for Spain”⁴.

There was no wonder that the stories of tortured nuns and burnt churches caused heavy religious anxiety among the overwhelmingly Catholic Irish population. Besides up-to-date reports, several series of articles were published in the *Irish Independent*. These dealt almost exclusively with the “Red menace”; the idealistic past of Spain (“IN WAR-TORN SPAIN – HISTORIC SALAMANCA VISITED”); or the “TRUTH OF SPAIN”. The “Our Readers’ Views” section of the paper contained lots of Spanish topics as well. For instance on 19 August 1936 it dealt with “THE RED TERROR IN SPAIN”, while on 2 December 1936 it was published under the subtitle “IRELAND, SPAIN AND COMMUNISM”. Similar series appeared after 22 September 1936 as well; this was “THE TRUTH ABOUT COMMUNISM”. Its subtitle, “A FIERCE HATRED OF RELIGION” was very telling.

The supporters of General Franco comprised of all who alleged to “stand for the ancient faith and the traditions of Spain are behind the present revolt against the Marxist regime in Madrid.”⁵ Hence they were motivated by religious and not political factors in the first place. They regarded Franco as the defender of faith and religion. This is why the Irish Catholic Church also raised its voice on the side of the Nationalists both from the altars and in the Catholic press as well. Since there was no deep commitment towards democracy⁶ within the Church, the clergy could not be convinced by reminding them of the official politics adopted by the Vatican. The Primate of All-Ireland, Cardinal MacRory had a major role in the establishment of the Irish Brigade, by suggesting the recruitment of an ‘Irish crusade’ to help Spanish Nationalists. On 21 September he urged medical aid for

³ *Irish Independent*, 26 September 1936.

⁴ Mike Cronin and John M. Regan, *Ireland: The Politics of Independence, 1922-1949* (London: Macmillan, 2000), 82.

⁵ *Irish Independent*, 22 July 1936.

⁶ Fearghal McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999), 236.

Spain: "We should all pray for Spain and, if able to, we should all help from our purses, help her obtain war supplies – what I should say is medical supplies for her sick and wounded. I do not want to say anything about other kind of help. As Christians, if we are able, we should be prepared to render that help to her"⁷. Pastorals between 1936 and 1939 often referred to the events in Spain, always in favour of the Nationalists. A Galway priest, for instance, declared that "every man who fights for Caballero, Lenin, Trotzky, or Marx are fighting against Christ and for the devil"⁸.

The main reason for supporting the Insurgents was thus the defence of the faith, which was closely related to the exaggeration of the communist threat. As the biggest party of the Opposition, Fine Gael worded their fears, "Mexico yesterday, Spain today, Ireland tomorrow"⁹. The *Irish Independent's* readers' views were very similar to this; as one of them remarked, "Spain was a great Catholic country, but the communists had got a hold there: the same thing could happen in Ireland if the people were not careful"¹⁰. So the paper regarded the events in Spain serving as a "LESSON FOR IRELAND" because "they should burn into our very souls an abhorrence of Bolshevism in every shape and form. They should steel us to rigid determination to have no truck or truce with its crafty agents or its lying and insidious propaganda"¹¹.

It was not only the growing power and influence of the Soviet Union that worried the Opposition, but more importantly the spread of certain communist ideas, including atheism. That is to say, Catholicism for the Irish – unlike many European states – did not stand for old, feudal concepts but was much more deeply rooted in their traditions and everyday lives. Nevertheless, Eoin O'Duffy overemphasized the "red menace" and the leader of the Irish government, Eamon de Valera recognized this. In his opinion the Communist threat was exaggerated even in 1932, when he came to power with Fianna Fáil. But since then, as he said, they had seen "a gradual waning of the little strength that communism had"¹² in the country. This is why the government did not bring anti-Communist measures in legislation.

Shared historical ties were also one of the most frequently cited arguments for the pro-Nationalist side, going back as far as the Elizabethan era.¹³ However, Alexander J. McCabe, the rector of the Irish College in Salamanca, despised the exaggeration of historical links between the countries; as he put it, "if some of the people on the side of Franco read the history of Ireland from the days of O'Connell, Davis and Davitt they would regard us as very red"¹⁴. This is an argument to consider, as McCabe was closely

⁷ *Irish Press*, 21 September, 1936.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1 March 1937.

⁹ J. Bowyer Bell, "Ireland and the Spanish Civil War," *Studia Hibernica* 9 (1969), 145.

¹⁰ *Irish Independent*, 25 September, 1936.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 14 September, 1936.

¹² Dermot Keogh, *Ireland and Europe, 1919-48* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1988), 78.

¹³ Namely, after the Battle of Kinsale the Catholic Irish intelligentsia and nobility under the leadership of Hugh O'Neill fled from the Protestant English rule to Spain and found political asylum there. See Judith Keene, *Fighting for Franco. International Volunteers in Nationalist Spain during the Spanish Civil War, 1936-39* (London: Leicester University Press, 2001), 116.

¹⁴ Keogh (1988), 71.

related to the heavily anti-Republican Irish Christian Front (ICF); his statement that “thanks to Hitler, the Communists were driven back from Germany, thanks to Mussolini they were kept from Italy, and thanks to Franco, they will never come to Ireland”¹⁵, clearly illustrates his attitude. Despite this he still managed to word his opinion without bias. In addition to shared historical ties, the supporters of Nationalists (in this case, a Fine Gael member) often referred to the crusades and compared them with the Irish Brigade, saying that “there was no difference between the young Irishmen who at present go to fight for Christianity in Spain and the Crusaders who went from all over Europe to fight for Christianity in the Holy Land”¹⁶.

The most significant Irish supporters of the Insurgents were the members of the semi-Fascist Blueshirt organization¹⁷ on the one hand and the Irish Christian Front (ICF) on the other. But as they had different opinion for the nature of the help for the Spanish, the pro-Nationalist Irish population was far from being united for the cause. What is more, the Blueshirts themselves were also split on the eve of the Spanish Civil War¹⁸. According to Ned Cronin, the leader of the League of Youth, “the Irish Brigade [had] as much prospect of reaching Saragossa as it [had] of reaching the moon”.¹⁹ So it was not surprising that Cronin also tried to organize Irish support for Spanish Nationalists, although he imagined a different kind of help. He “suggested the formation of a national fund [...] to provide medical aid and other assistance for the Spanish rebels, so far as such assistance was not rendered impossible by the ‘non-intervention’ pact”²⁰. So it was more similar to the aims of the ICF than to O’Duffy’s.

In addition to the conflict with Cronin, O’Duffy and his Blueshirts’ relationship with Patrick Belton’s ICF²¹ was neither unclouded. The latter body was organized after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in order to “help the stricken people of Spain in their struggle against the forces of international communism”²², but according to Stradling, “they had nothing to do with Spain but aimed to initiate and co-ordinate anti-communist

¹⁵ *Irish Independent*, 26 October, 1936.

¹⁶ Keogh (1988), 84.

¹⁷ In the early and mid-thirties, the Free State – similarly to the majority of European states – also witnessed the emergence of extremists, though to a much smaller extent. The pro-Fascist O’Duffy, after he was dismissed from the leadership of the Garda Síochána (the Irish police force), joined the Army Comrades Association (ACA, later renamed to the National Guard, NG, and afterwards to the League Of Youth) and turned the body into a proto-Fascist, military group, who were publicly known as the Blueshirts. Inspired by Mussolini and the Italian Marcia Su Roma, in August 1933, O’Duffy organized a public meeting and a march which would have passed the Irish parliament buildings. In the end it was banned and the NG was proscribed. So the Blueshirts represented only a minor section of the right-wing ‘opposition’ (they were not yet present in the Dáil), but surprisingly enough, they were the ones to participate in the Spanish Civil War.

¹⁸ As a result of the Blueshirt-split, two groups emerged, one under the leadership of Ned Cronin (League of Youth), the other led by Eoin O’Duffy, called the National Corporate Party (NCP).

¹⁹ Robert Stradling, *The Irish and the Spanish Civil War, 1936-39* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 12.

²⁰ *Irish Times*, 22 August 1936.

²¹ The ideology of the movement was based on anti-Communism and corporatism.

²² *Irish Independent*, 22 August, 1936.

activity in the Free State"²³. Stradling's opinion is closer to that of the left-wing republican contemporaries of Belton. They declared that "the so-called Christian Front is a disguised Fascist organization, a puppet of the *Independent* newspaper trust and is in underhand league with General O'Duffy and his Fascist party [and] that this combination [...] is shamelessly and recklessly trying to use the name of religion to further the rise of the discredited Fascist groups in Ireland"²⁴. So they may be considered significant in terms of domestic policy as Belton wanted to use his organization most importantly against the Irish government. However, Belton's republican/socialist contemporary, Peadar O'Donnell argued that Belton gave his movement "some touch of a non-political appearance"²⁵.

The ICF did not approve of O'Duffy's plans about military intervention into Spanish affairs; Belton rather fancied humanitarian aid. Thus collections were organized on Sundays after masses, as a result of which more than £ 30,000 was raised, solely on 25 October, 1936.²⁶ In terms of public support, the movement can be considered as a success but not regarding its main objective, since they managed neither to introduce corporatism in Ireland, nor to make the de Valera government abandon their non-intervention policy. The *Irish Independent* always commented positively on the ICF; regarded their meetings of 15 November 1936 in Limerick and Roscommon as "magnificent demonstrations"²⁷.

The leader of the military supporters of General Franco was Eoin O'Duffy. Both his contemporaries²⁸ and many historians²⁹ had a low opinion on him, and his role at the birth of the Irish Free State, his active work as Garda Commissioner and his achievements in Irish sports life as the head of the Gaelic Athletic Association have been neglected.³⁰ Several factors motivated O'Duffy to organize the Irish Brigade. Stradling, by stressing the concept of crusades, states that the Brigade was not brought into existence for political reasons but for defending Catholic faith.³¹ O'Duffy himself also declared that he had "ceased all social and political manifestations, and [had] concentrated on one thing alone – on helping the cause of Christian Spain"³². In contrast, Augusteijn lists other factors as

²³ Stradling (1999), 12.

²⁴ *Irish Press*, 16 September 1936.

²⁵ Peadar O'Donnell, *Salud! An Irishman in Spain* (London, 1937), 240.

²⁶ On the subject of donations, funds, and the collected sums, see Keogh (1988), 72-77.

²⁷ *Irish Independent*, 16 November 1936.

²⁸ A Swiss journalist called O'Duffy 'marionett-like', the *Round Table* correspondent described him as 'our Irish Don Quixote', while in Salamanca he was considered as the 'queer fellow'. See Keene (2001), 115.

²⁹ Hugh Thomas refers to the Brigade as „O'Duffy's ill-fated blue shirts", while Mark Cronin calls their intervention as a „comical excursion to Spain". See *ibid.*

³⁰ On the relationship between Blueshirts and sports, see Mike Cronin, "Blueshirts, sports and socials," *History Ireland* 2/3 (1994): 43-47. Here the author stresses the importance of the movement as a social mobilizing force.

³¹ Stradling (1999), 109.

³² *Irish Independent*, 21 November 1936.

well that could make O'Duffy assemble his volunteers.³³ These include his commitment to fascism³⁴ but first and foremost his marginalization in Irish politics.

The most common reasons for volunteering in the Brigade were anti-communism, religious sentiments, fascist ideology or spirit of adventure. Gertrude Gaffney, the reporter of the *Independent*, provided an idealized picture of them when she alleged that "85% of them went because they thought it was up to them to fight for the Faith"³⁵. In the end an Irish brigade of 670 members joined the Spanish Nationalist Army. They formed the Fifteenth Bandera (Battalion) of the Tercio (Foreign Legion), which lay under the leadership of Yagüe. The Brigade had its own officers, cooks, doctors, priest, Spanish adjutants, and interpreters. They all were under the direction of O'Duffy, who was appointed as Inspector-General, owing responsibility only to Franco. The recruitment began soon after the General's proposal of 10 August; the first office in charge was opened on 15 August in Cashel and was followed by many others.

The majority of volunteers were from a rural background, both from the Free State (Tipperary, Kerry, Limerick, that is the middle- and south-western counties) and the Catholic population of the Six Counties (Longford, Monaghan and West-Belfast).³⁶ Not all of them were Blueshirts; some came from a republican or even a worker background. Though many of them said that they were free from political motives, they admitted feeling hostility towards Fianna Fáil and the IRA.³⁷ About one third of them came from farmer families; in addition the number of former soldiers and gardai.

Problems arose later because of the inadequate leadership of the Brigade. This was because O'Duffy appointed almost exclusively his own men that were faithful to him: Patrick Dalton as field commander, Sean Cunningham as second in command, Tom Hyde as commander with himself and the anti-Semitic Thomas Gunning as his secretary. The latter was the only one to speak Spanish among them.³⁸

The Irish volunteers were to face other difficulties before action as well. Firstly, they did not manage to embark on 16 October, 1936 near Waterford, owing to the work of the Non-Intervention Committee. Only later in mid-October did 700 volunteers left from Galway. The *Irish Press* gave an account of O'Duffy leaving Dublin with 40 of his men on 21 November, while due to the *Independent* "50 MORE IRISHMEN [WERE HEADING] FOR SPAIN". The latter reported the departure of another 84 volunteers on 28 November, all of whom "were presented with miraculous medals, Sacred Heart badges, and prayer books"³⁹. Another considerable-sized group (according to the *Irish Independent*, with 693 members⁴⁰) left on 13 December, again from Galway on the board of the German *Domingo*. The military training of the Irish Brigade took place in Cáceres, where

³³ Joost Augusteijn, *Ireland in the 1930s: New Perspectives* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2001), 126-7.

³⁴ On 10 August, 1936 he made the following statement to the *Independent*: „If these atrocities are carried out in the name of democracy, than the sooner fascism triumphs, the better.”

³⁵ Stradling (1999), 52.

³⁶ Keene (2001), 119.

³⁷ Augusteijn (1999), 132.

³⁸ Keene (2001), 121.

³⁹ *Irish Independent*, 28 November 1936.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 14 December 1936.

they stayed till February 1937. Here they attended mass every Sunday; this piousness astonished local people as this was very different from the attitude of the Spanish soldiers. Besides the disappointment with the nature of devoutness in Spain, several other factors made their presence in Cáceres more difficult. In addition to language problems, they had to face other difficulties as well. As a volunteer from Kerry said, they “were given no decent food or clothing and received hard bread and black coffee each day”⁴¹. However, alcohol caused the greatest difficulties. The Irish consumed too much wine which they were not used to, as a result they got drunk very often and this outraged the majority of the Spanish⁴². Gaffney, the reporter of the *Independent* commented on the question of alcohol from a different angle: in her opinion heavy drinking was not at all typical among the volunteers of the Brigade, as the Irish did not like wine in particular, and beer on the other hand was quit expensive, though.⁴³ In addition, they were not impressed by bull-fights, could not get used to siestas,⁴⁴ and complained of boredom as they had been still before action.

After the training in Cáceres the Bandera was sent to the Jarama front, where they arrived on 19 February 1937, after 26 hours on train instead of the expected 5 hours. They left for Ciempozuelos from Valdemora on that very day. At Ciempozuelos they found themselves in a gun-battle with Falangists from the Canary islands. The fatal misunderstanding demanded the lives Tom Hyde and Dan Chute.⁴⁵ In the *Irish Press*’ report the incident is referred to as “Irish Brigade loses in action”⁴⁶, while in the *Independent* it appeared under the headlines “TWO IRISHMEN KILLED. BRIGADE’S LOSSES AT MADRID”⁴⁷. The latter news does not suggest the volunteers’ military defeat.

The Irish Brigade fought their first battle at Titulcia on 13 March. Though they did not manage to capture the town, three Irishmen died in action. Afterwards they were called back to Ciempozuelos but were ordered to go back into action next day. However, O’Duffy refused this order but interestingly this was not sanctioned. They were moved to the La Maranosa sector on 23 March, where there was no active fighting. The most annoying inconveniences there were the lack of proper drinking water, continuing attacks of the Republican artillery, and according to volunteer McCullagh, “there was no tea, whiskey, or humour”.⁴⁸

The link between the *Irish Independent* and O’Duffy’s brigade had been obvious from the outbreak of the war. The paper, for instance, had a reporter (Gertrude Gaffney) sent to the Brigade in the Spanish Cáceres. Gaffney was privileged as the reporters of the *Irish Times* and the *Irish Press* were not given permission to approach the members of the Ban-

⁴¹ *Irish Times*, 23 June 1937.

⁴² The drinking habits of the Irish volunteers shocked Spaniards. McCabe (quoted by Keogh (1988), 82.) puts this down to the fact that „in Ireland people take a lenient view of drunkenness and a rigid view about sexual excesses. On the whole the reverse is exactly true in Spain”.

⁴³ Stradling (1999), 53.

⁴⁴ Keene (2001), 122.

⁴⁵ Augusteijn (2001), 135.

⁴⁶ *Irish Press*, 24 February 1937.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Augusteijn (2001), 138.

dera.⁴⁹ In addition, Eoin O’Duffy also favoured the *Independent* in many respects; it was not only once mentioned in the *Irish Press* that “the General had no statement to make”,⁵⁰ unlike in the case of the *Independent*. His letter to recruit volunteers for his ‘crusade’ was published here on 10 August 1936 and on 21 November 1936 his message about their aims (“TO FIGHT IN DEFENCE OF CATHOLICISM”) was also an exclusive cover in the paper. Furthermore, his activities including his trips to Spain and the process of recruiting were also reported in details. As for the aim of the Brigade, the spokesman of O’Duffy’s recruiting office summarized that it was to “help to put down Communism in Spain” and to do so, there was an urgent need “for the breaking-off of all trade and diplomatic relations [with the Spanish Republic] until the communist tyranny is ended”⁵¹. The paper exaggerated the significance of the Brigade in Spanish matters; for instance, when on 31 October 1936 the headline was “GENERAL FRANCO THANKS IRELAND-GRATEFUL FOR AID”⁵², the act itself meant much less in practice than the news suggested. Then the fact that on 15 March 1937 the Brigade was reported to have won Madrid Battle⁵³ was much more of an overstatement. The *Independent* backed O’Duffy and his men (referred to the group as “O’Duffy and his great warriors”⁵⁴) till the end despite the criticism – later even of other pro-Nationalist groups – against them.⁵⁵ Even their arrival back in Dublin was commented with warm welcoming words. Rumours began circulating as soon as the beginning of April⁵⁶. These were not without all foundations, as O’Duffy adhered himself to the six-month plan, which could not have been extended without difficulties due to the Non-Intervention Act of February 1937.⁵⁷ Both the Irish⁵⁸ and the Spanish staff found the *Bandera*’s return to Ireland a reasonable idea. First they travelled to Cáceres, then to Lisbon by train on 17 June, and in the end they sailed to Dublin on the *Mozambique*. Welcome plans for the Brigade were published in the *Independent* two days before their arrival⁵⁹. In the end 633 volunteers arrived on 21 June⁶⁰ and

⁴⁹ Stradling (1999), 229.

⁵⁰ *Irish Independent*, 19 September and 28 November 1936.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 13 August 1936.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 31 October 1936.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 25 March 1937.

⁵⁴ *Irish Independent*, 27 August 1936.

⁵⁵ Fine Gael, under the leadership of William Cosgrave, and the Irish Christian Front (ICF) led by Patrick Belton.

⁵⁶ 29 April 1937.

⁵⁷ Bell (1969), 157.

⁵⁸ O’Duffy in his letter to General Franco (9 April, 1937) asked for the exemption of his men.

⁵⁹ *Irish Independent*, 18 (under the subtitle “Call to the Public”) and 19 June 1937. What is more, the paper devoted a whole page to the repatriation on 22 June 1937. The headlines, “DUBLIN WELCOMES THE IRISH BRIGADE” and “MEMORABLE RECEPTION” were undoubtedly overstatements.

⁶⁰ *The Irish Press* gave an exact figure of the number of volunteers to be expected and also of other details of their arrival. However, the attention of the paper focused on de Valera’s electoral campaign tour in the country. See *Irish Press*, 18 June 1937.

were received in silence⁶¹, because – according to the French chargé d'affaire, François Brière – they were expected to fight on till the end.⁶² The signs of unity and solidarity were not perceived: the volunteers split and left the harbour in two groups.⁶³ This appeared in the news of the *Irish Times* under the headline “THE SPLIT IN THE BRIGADE”. The volunteers informed the reporter that their mission was only a political campaign and that they “never saw the Reds”. They also expressed their disappointment to the correspondent of the *Irish Press* to whom they told, “there was neither religion nor education in Spain”. The discontent with the leadership also seemed evident from the volunteers’ remarks: “the responsibility for the loss of our national prestige rests with General O’Duffy and a few of his officers”⁶⁴. The *Independent* did not mention such issues, though.

Practically the Irish Brigade did not contribute to Franco’s victory and the General “spent much more on maintaining the Irish Brigade in Spain than he ever received back”⁶⁵ Due to the report of the Irish envoy accredited to Spain, Leopold Kerney, on the Irish Brigade, by May 1937 “O’Duffy seemed to have completely lost credit with Franco, who [then] looked upon him as a bluffer if not a duffer”⁶⁶. Nevertheless, he stood up for them till the moment when it turned out that they were of no use. Then there were no more historical ties or shared sentiments; the Irish were considered only as undisciplined soldiers who were to receive their punishment and needed to be got rid of as soon as possible.⁶⁷ O’Duffy never admitted that his Brigade failed.

The Irish supporters of Spanish Republicans

The most dominant figure of pro-Republicans in Ireland was Frank Ryan. As he was far from being anti-clerical, religion was never neglected in his life; he stood for and symbolized the radical Catholic/republican⁶⁸ tradition. This is why Ryan and his fellow republicans developed good relationship with the Basques, who were well-known religious Catholics. José Aguirre, the leader of the Basque Nationalist Party had a high opinion on the religious attitudes of the Irish, as he argued, they wanted “a poor church preaching real Christianity”⁶⁹, just as they saw it in Ireland.

⁶¹ The report of the *Irish Press* contradicts this as due to that „the route was flanked by thousands of people, some of whom cheered the Volunteers.” See *Irish Press*, 22 June 1937.

⁶² Keene (2001), 127.

⁶³ Horan led one group, Sean Cunningham the other.

⁶⁴ *Irish Press*, 22 June 1937.

⁶⁵ Keene (2001), 128.

⁶⁶ Quoted by Keogh (1988), 92.

⁶⁷ Keene (2001), 129.

⁶⁸ By ‘Republicans’ in the Irish context I mean the opponents of the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 which divided the island and brought the Irish Free State into existence.

⁶⁹ Keogh (1988), 79.

Officially the Republican Congress (RC)⁷⁰ and the Communist Party of Ireland (CPI) backed the Spanish Government. The Irish left first sent George Gilmore to Spain in order to gain a clearer picture of the Spanish situation and to decide what kind of help may be the most useful for Republicans. After he got injured, Ryan took over his duty and started to recruit volunteers. Few of them were actually Communist; they did not regard the civil war in Spain as a struggle between god and atheism but that between democracy and fascism. Nonetheless the situation was more than complex as trade unions and local councils condemned red atrocities⁷¹, the Workers Party was not at all concerned with Marxist or communist ideology, and their leaders felt strong antipathy towards socialism. The only Labour member to mention the war in Spain was William Davin, who – surprisingly enough – “urged the Irish government to protest against the anti-clerical atrocities”⁷². The illegal IRA neither supported the cause of the Spanish Republic; they prohibited his members from volunteering by saying that their help is needed in Ireland (i.e. in the North).⁷³ Suggestion was made towards General O’Duffy as well, using the same argument “VOLUNTEERS NEEDED IN BELFAST MORE THAN IN SPAIN”⁷⁴. Referring to the War of Independence and the Irish Civil War was a common phenomenon for all sides that were interested in the Spanish crisis. What is more, some historians also tend to explain Irish interest in the Spanish Civil War with the continuation of the Irish Civil War. As Cronin remarked, “the Spanish Civil War provided an opportunity for Italians and the Irish left to fight their civil wars on Spanish soil”⁷⁵.

Thus the legacy of the Civil War in Ireland was made itself felt in connection with the Spanish Civil War as well. Both pro-Nationalists and pro-Republicans referred to the heroes of 1916 and used the events of 1916-23 – including Partition – as arguments verifying their moves in the Spanish Civil War. According to Peadar O’Donnell, the co-founder of the RC, the *Irish Independent* (the leading voice of the pro-Franco campaign) was “conducting a vicious campaign against the Irish people [...] in 1916, when it denounced that Connolly⁷⁶ be executed; and 1922 when it denounced republicans and pushed for acceptance of the Treaty. [...] It was the dirtiest kind of yellow journalism”⁷⁷. Frank Ryan,

⁷⁰ The non-militant Republican Congress (RC) was founded by ex-IRA men Frank Ryan, Peadar O’Donnell and George Gilmore, and was supported mostly by radical socialists and former members of the IRA. The main difference between the programmes of the RC and the IRA was that the former placed social reform above the fight against the Treaty. So the greatest challenge for the Irish left was – in addition to the lack of public support – the lack of cooperation among left-wing groups. The ban of the IRA in June 1936 made their situation even more difficult.

⁷¹ The *Irish Independent*, the well-known supporter of Nationalists, congratulated to the Irish Labour Party and the trade unions for not dealing with ‘the case of the left’. See *Irish Independent*, 8 September 1936.

⁷² *Irish Independent*, 13 September 1936.

⁷³ Bell (1969), 152.

⁷⁴ *Irish Press*, 27 August 1936.

⁷⁵ Cronin (2000), 84.

⁷⁶ The Socialist James Connolly, as one of the leaders of the Easter Rising, was executed by the British on 12 May 1916.

⁷⁷ Cronin (2000), 82.

journalist and leader of the Irish volunteers of the International Brigades, also often referred to the *Independent's* 'treason' in 1922. In his article on the bombing on Guernica – which is not signed but is attributed to him – he again referred to “the *Independent's* ramp as compared with its stand in 1916 and 1922 on the ‘executions’ [...]”⁷⁸. In addition to this, Ryan compared also the Church's attitude towards Spain and its stand in their Civil War. He argued, “when the Catholic clergy in Spain identify themselves with the Fascist rebellion against the people, it appears to me that [they] turn the churches into barracks, and just as I saw no legitimate reason why the Cosgrave government here should be supported by the Irish bishops in the war 1922-23, so I do not see a legitimate reason why the Spanish monarchy or Spanish fascists should be supported by the Spanish bishops today”⁷⁹. On the other hand the *Independent* was outraged that “the dead who died for Irish freedom would turn in their graves at the suggestion that Irish republicanism is to be compared with Spanish anti-God Communism”⁸⁰. So the paper was careful not to alienate ‘old-line’ Republicans.

Irish volunteers joined the International Brigades as well, which were set up with the help of the Comintern, on the basis of the French communist Thorez's idea.⁸¹ Altogether 35,000⁸² volunteers fought on this side, never more 18,000 at a time. The Irish, all of whom were alleged to have “experience of warfare in Ireland”⁸³ were placed into the British Battalion. The Brits were led by a former Black and Tan, Captain George Nathan, who had also been the member of the Dublin Castle Murder Gang in the Anglo-Irish War. His past made it difficult to get on well with the Irish unit⁸⁴, thus later he was replaced by the Irish Kit Conway. However, the actual leader of the Irish was Ryan, who happened to be an experienced journalist (the co-editor of the republican *An Phoblacht*). But as he was not a convinced communist, he was not trusted by the leadership of the Brigades.⁸⁵ It was in April 1938 that he was captured at the Aragon front and was not released until 1940.

The Irish supporters of the Spanish Government came mostly from big cities, with workers' background; as for their political beliefs, they were either IRA or RC members. Stradling refers to them as the “Communist Crusade”, as opposed to the “Catholic Crusade” of the Irish Brigade. This was, however, far from being the real case, since pro-Republicans included idealists, intellectuals as well as adventurers, but the majority was motivated by anti-fascist beliefs. In addition, domestic political issues also contributed to the emergence of this Brigade. As the Blueshirts openly supported General Franco's side, this served as the main motivating force to fight against the Insurgents. Despite criticisms, the Irish members of the International Brigades were not anti-religious; Ryan himself also

⁷⁸ Cronin (2000), 111.

⁷⁹ Keogh (1988), 79.

⁸⁰ *Irish Independent*, 6 November 1936.

⁸¹ Anthony Beevor, *A spanyol polgárháború* (Budapest: Európa, 2002), 263.

⁸² Data concerning the number of volunteers vary according to sources. Compare Beevor (2002), 264, and Stradling (1999), 145.

⁸³ Stradling (1999), 160.

⁸⁴ In the end he was just as hateful for the Irish volunteers of the International Brigades as O'Duffy. See *ibid.*, 153.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 160.

attended mass every Sunday while he was in Madrid (this of course was first-class propaganda at the same time, as Stradling highlights it).⁸⁶ Spanish Catholics were not at all as pious as Irish volunteers would have expected that; Peadar O'Donnell, writer and the co-leader of the RC on his visit to Spain observed that "Spanish Catholics do not seem to regard the Church with any of the awe so marked in Ireland. To them it is a sociable sort of place for talk as freely as in a café"⁸⁷.

The Irish team consisted of 150 republicans, 80 of whom left Dublin on 11 December. Their departure was reported in both the *Irish Press* and the *Irish Times*.⁸⁸ According to the *Times*, "the men left quietly and without any demonstration. 40 of them actually travelled on the same ship to Liverpool with General O'Duffy's volunteers"⁸⁹. Frank Ryan, their leader made a statement to the reporter of the *Irish Press*: "The Republican contingent besides being a very efficient fighting force, every member of it having been in action – is also a demonstration. It is a demonstration of sympathy of revolutionary Ireland with the Spanish people in their fight against international Fascism. It is also a reply to the involvement of Irish Fascism in the war against the Spanish Republic". He concluded by emphasizing, "We want to show that there is a close bond between the democracies of Ireland and Spain". This statement underlies the fact that Irish pro-Republicans were not thinking in terms of religion but democracy.

Altogether about 70 of them died in action, including the young poet, Charles Donnelly. Their base was appointed in Albacete, where international volunteers were trained. Here problems occurred in connection with oily food; dysentery was not uncommon among them. After training they moved to the village of Madrigueras, which was the centre of the XV Brigade (i.e. the British Battalion). The Irish and the British were put together because of linguistic reasons; this proved to be a serious mistake later on. The Irish were put into action already on 28 and 29 December, however, without success, since they could not take the village of Lopera. The Battle of Jarama was their first significant action, where the British Battalion stopped Franco's troops. The operations of 12-14 February were thus successful, but with losses: only 50 of the original 80 Irish volunteers stayed alive. In this battle the Irish were already split into two groups: the members of the Abraham Lincoln⁹⁰ and the British Government. The reason for the split was the disagreement with, and hostility towards British officers. The majority of the Irish volunteers, as former IRA-men, found it very difficult to follow the orders of an Englishman.⁹¹ Ryan's New Years message, 'To all Irish Comrades' was intended to ease nerves; than he reminded everyone that Fascism is the main enemy and that the International Brigades cannot be divided by conflicts.⁹²

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁸⁷ O'Donnell (1937), 23.

⁸⁸ Unlike the *Independent*, the *Irish Press* reported on Irish volunteers fighting on both sides in Spain.

⁸⁹ *Irish Times*, 14 December 1936.

⁹⁰ By the end of the battle of Brunete, July 1937, there had been hardly any Irish survivors left. See Stradling (1999), 172.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁹² *Ibid.*

The withdrawal of the International Brigades began after Negrín's speech of 21 September 1938. The Irish arrived back in Dublin on 11 November and the 44 returning volunteers were received by some 200 people at Molesworth Hall. The event did not have much press coverage in Dublin.

As far as the press was concerned, small socialist weeklies like *The Worker* and the *Irish Democrat* commented on Spanish events from the Republican point of view. After March 1937, Peadar O'Donnell became the editor of the latter, which guaranteed republican and socialist attitudes as he used to be the co-founder of the RC as well. Nevertheless, the low number of their circulation and their readers prevented them from gathering a considerable mass base for the Spanish Republic.

Non-interventionists

The Irish government found itself in a difficult position at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War as they had to consider more than one factors in their foreign policy. These were the relationships with Britain (and the Commonwealth), the Vatican⁹³, and the League of Nations (as an international meeting-place). During the years of the Spanish Civil War, the Fianna Fáil government loosened its ties with Britain⁹⁴. Although still being the member of the Commonwealth, the Free State took significant steps towards total independence. Paying much attention to British case did not mean pushing international issues such as the Spanish Civil War into the background, on the contrary. By performing autonomous foreign policy in Spanish matters, the Irish government indicated that independence from Britain was just a matter of time. But the Fine Gael opposition kept on bringing up the constitutional question even in connection with the Spanish Civil War, in order to prove that de Valera will not manage to bring an independent Irish republic into existence. According to J. Dillon, the Commonwealth "would consolidate Democracy against dictatorship" those days when "the light of democracy and freedom was being quenched throughout the nations of Europe". He went on saying that "if the independence and sovereignty of the country were to be maintained against the threats from all sides, and if the unity of the country were to be achieved in their generation, it must be done on the basis of membership of the Commonwealth of Nations"⁹⁵.

The Free State officially adopted the policy of non-intervention in the Spanish conflict. Many articles appeared in the *Irish Press*⁹⁶ explaining the nature of non-intervention,

⁹³ The policy of the Vatican was a crucial point in the Free State's handling of the Spanish matter, especially in the field of diplomatic recognition.

⁹⁴ First, the reference to the Crown was removed from the Constitution in 1936. Then in July 1937, a new Constitution was passed in the Dáil (which brought the independent Ireland, Éire into existence), and finally in spring 1938 the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which dealt with the status of ports in Ireland, was signed. The importance of the latter grew under the years of the Second World War.

⁹⁵ *Irish Independent*, 9 August 1936.

⁹⁶ The *Irish Press* was founded in 1931, a year before Fianna Fáil come to power. Its curiosity lies in the fact that one of its founding-members was Eamon de Valera, the leader of the government between 1932 and 1948. In spite of the obvious link between the paper and the party, it was empha-

namely that this served the best both Spanish interests and European peace. In connection with the Spanish Civil War, the paper “did not hide its concern for the victims of atrocities [...] but reported the conflict in a considerably more even-handed manner than the *Irish Independent*”.⁹⁷

The birth of the non-intervention policy in Ireland dates back to 14 August 1936, when Pierre Guerlet, the French representative in Dublin was contacted that the Irish government accepted the French appeal for non-intervention. On 25 August the Dáil took further steps and adhered to the ban on arms and ammunition to Spain. The following day the *Irish Press* issued a report on the position of de Valera’s government and the importance of the non-intervention policy. Besides emphasising the main goals of non-intervention, and that this was the policy to serve best the interests of both Spanish interests and European peace, it clarified that

“the government of the Saorstát Éireann, in common with the Irish people and the Christian world, are profoundly shocked by the tragic events that may have been taking place in Spain and by the excesses by which these events are reported to be accompanied. Their sympathy goes out to the great Spanish people in their terrible suffering. They earnestly hope that peace may soon be restored, and they would gladly participate in any practical effort directed toward that end. To those public bodies, however, and to others who have requested the government to sever diplomatic relations with the Spanish government the government of the Saorstát Éireann would point out that diplomatic relations are primarily between States rather than Governments, and that the severance of diplomatic relations between two countries would serve no useful purpose at the present time.”⁹⁸

It was not surprising to read the criticism of the Opposition in the *Irish Independent*, namely that with adhering to the non-intervention policy, the Free State Government “placed the communists on the same level as the defenseless of Christianity”. They did not regard non-intervention to be official as it did not “appear to have the force of law”, unlike the “Italian-Abyssinian conflict where sanctions against Italy took the form of a Bill”⁹⁹. As the Dáil was not in session at that time, there was no prospect of taking such measures then.

The Non-Intervention Committee was set up in London the next month, where the Irish were represented by John Whelan Dulanty, the Irish high commissioner in London. Like other small states, the Free State insisted on neutrality and non-intervention in order to minimize the conflicts in Europe that may count as threats to peace in the country. According to Bell¹⁰⁰, Irish participation in the Committee’s work was negligible, not because

sised in the first edition (5 November 1931) that the *Irish Press* was “not the organ of an individual, a group, or a party [but would be] a national organ in all that term conveys.”

⁹⁷ John Horgan, *Irish Media: A Critical History since 1922* (London: Routledge, 2001), 39.

⁹⁸ *Irish Press*, 26 August 1936.

⁹⁹ *Irish Independent*, 29 August 1936.

¹⁰⁰ Bell (1969), 147.

of the inefficiency of the Irish government or the delegate, but because administration and decision-making in the 26-membered Committee showed very slow progress¹⁰¹. Fine Gael surprisingly did not oppose the principle of non-intervention and thus the establishment of the NIC; unlike Belton from ICF, who had a low opinion on the NIC; he said it “composed of the Radical, Socialist and Communist nations in Europe”¹⁰².

In spite of domestic criticism, the Free State adhered to the principles and orders of the Committee; in the first year the country contributed to the work of the Committee with £ 7,184. The Dáil passed the resolution about the contribution on 9 April 1937. According to the *Irish Times*, the money was for the “scheme of observation of the Spanish frontiers by land and sea”, that is, for the Control Scheme, which came into operation later that month, on 22 April 1937.

As the reports of the *Irish Press* mostly reflected the views of de Valera government¹⁰³, it is not surprising to find several references to the Vatican’s Spanish policy between 1936 and 1939, as de Valera always considered the Pope’s steps determinant. The paper was aware of the critics of non-intervention; it reminded them to de Valera’s statement that diplomatic relations are primarily between states and not governments, always referring to the standing point of the Vatican. The first article on the issue, entitled “THE VATICAN AND SPANISH CIVIL WAR. THE POPE’S ANXIETY”, appeared on 6 August 1936. However, despite the arguments of the government and the *Irish Press*, the opposition often, and when it suited its own purpose, did not hesitate to be more Catholic than the Pope.¹⁰⁴ Thus de Valera let his paper adopt a “moderately pro-Catholic – but not pro-Francoist – sympathy”¹⁰⁵.

All in all, non-intervention served the interests of the government the most in the Spanish conflict. During the years of the Spanish Civil War, the de Valera administration managed to strengthen their position in domestic political grounds as well. The results of the 1937 elections also reflected that the government’s decisions (both in domestic and foreign policy) were supported by the majority of the Irish population. De Valera himself referred to this in his speech in the Dáil on 19 February 1937 when he said “the Government’s policy was the policy accepted by the vast majority of the Irish people [and added that] he had no doubt about that”¹⁰⁶. Fianna Fáil won, the ICF-leader Belton lost even his seat in the Dáil, unlike Ryan, who got in as a candidate of a United Front. The results proved that “the Irish simply refused to become involved in crusades to save either Christianity or democracy”¹⁰⁷ and also that “other matters such as the persistent crisis and the

¹⁰¹ Keogh (1988), 67.

¹⁰² *Irish Press*, 19 February 1937.

¹⁰³ However, naturally there were tensions in the *Irish Press* itself as well, not everyone supported de Valera with all his might; Aodh Blacam, for instance, was openly pro-Franco. His pamphlet, *For God and Spain* is a good example for pro-Nationalist voices.

¹⁰⁴ *Irish Press*, 25 August 1936.

¹⁰⁵ Stradling (1999), 16.

¹⁰⁶ *Irish Press*, 20 February 1937.

¹⁰⁷ Bell (1969), 158.

controversy over the new Constitution, had a greater impact"¹⁰⁸. Nevertheless it did not mean that Irish society was indifferent to the Spanish Civil War but rather that this was not something which could make people withdraw confidence from the ministry. So Irish people were very much aware of the advantage of the non-intervention policy: there had been no open clashes between the supporters of the two (the Blueshirts and the IRA) Paramilitary groups in Ireland. So de Valera did manage to get rid of those who posed threat to political stability in 1933-34 as Spain was an excellent way to "get rid of some of [the] wild men from both varieties."¹⁰⁹ And what is more, the country had actively participated in the maintenance of European peace (in spite of the obvious failure of the Non-Intervention Committee), which was a prestige for a small state to have her voice heard as effectively as did Ireland.

According to Bell, "Spain had never become a central issue in Irish affairs and other crises, other news, other disasters, attracted the attention of the press as well as the politicians and priests"¹¹⁰. In my view, the attention that the Irish public, politics and press paid to the Spanish crisis should not be underestimated because it proved that the country was not isolated from European events in spite of her main problem, Partition. Thus non-intervention policy in Ireland was not at all equal to indifference in Spanish matters between 1936 and 1939.

¹⁰⁸ Patrick Keatinge, *The Formulation of Irish Foreign Policy* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 1973), 172.

¹⁰⁹ Maurice Manning, *The Blueshirts* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987), 205.

¹¹⁰ Bell (1969), 157.