

NO PASARAN!



**The Story of the Irish volunteers
who served with the International
Brigades in defending the Spanish
Republic against International Fascism**

1936 - 1939

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Produced by THE BELFAST EXECUTIVE OF REPUBLICAN CLUBS

40 CYPRUS STREET

BELFAST



Frank Ryan
as an Officer in
in the 15th
International
Brigade.

Jarama Valley

Tune: Red River Valley.

Theres a valley in Spain called Jarama,
Its a place that we all know so well,
It was there that we gave up our man-hood,
It was there that our brave comrades fell.

Chorus:

We were part of the International Column
And we fought for the people of Spain,
And we swore in the valley of Jarama,
That Fascism never would reign.

We are proud of our Lincoln Battalion,
And the stand for Madrid that they made,
In defending the Spanish Republic,
They have slaughtered our 15th Brigade.
Chorus repeat.

Now Juan Negrin he is dead,
And fascism now rules in Spain
But the Spanish workers they are called
To the struggle for freedom again.

This pamphlet is dedicated to the memory of two Socialist
Republicans, killed by reactionaries at home and abroad.
Their fight is our fight.

*Volunteer Jim Straney, I.R.A., Ballymacarret unit, Belfast.
Killed in action with the 15th International Brigade, Spain 1938.

*Volunteer Tom Berry, IRA, Ballymacarret unit, Belfast.
Murdered by Provisionals, Belfast 1975.

J.K.H.

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Introduction

Today, forty years after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, succeeded as it was by a World War against fascism and its associated atrocities, the significance of the struggle in Spain, and the International Brigades might seem remote to some. However, it cannot be either for the Irish people or the Spanish themselves. With the death of Franco and the cry for justice in Spain, clearly the forces of democracy there are on the move. And, while the purpose of this pamphlet is to give a brief account of the battles in which the Irish contingent of the International Brigades were involved, we in Ireland cannot afford to lose sight of the lessons of the thirties, whether in terms of building Socialism, in exposing counter-revolution, or in realising the need for international solidarity in the face of the capitalist enemy. Once again, as in the thirties, the Irish people are faced with an economic crisis in which political and social repression of democratic forces is rampant, North and South. Once again, Socialist Republicans face the most difficult obstacles in advancing the cause of Socialism in Ireland, at a time when confusion among the mass of the people is further developed by organisations claiming to fight for the freedom of the Irish people.

In the 1930's, Socialist Republicians had to contend not only with a misguided element within the Republican ranks, but furthermore with the local equivalent of continental Fascism, the Blueshirts. These Irish Fascists of the thirties obscured the real meaning of the "national struggle", for they were racist, and viciously anti-Socialist. The Blueshirts served to undermine and attack the democratic struggle at a very crucial time, although

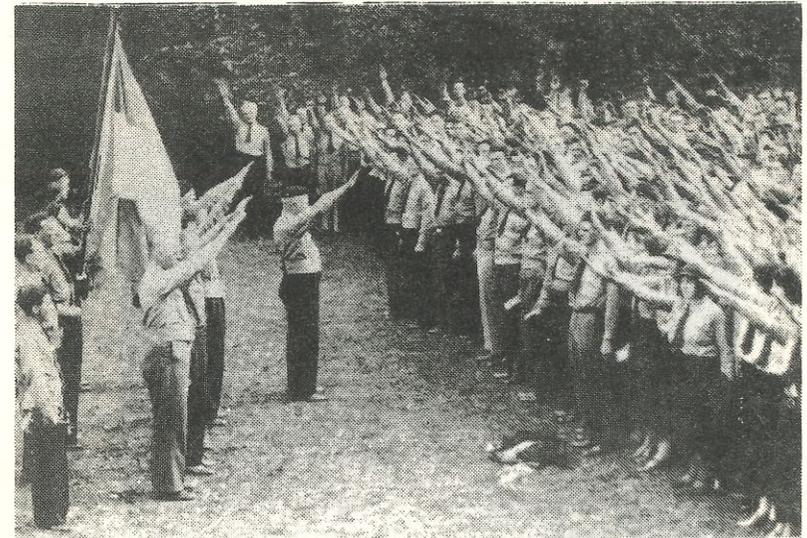
they failed to achieve their own objectives as an organisation. Today, the Provisionals, wrongly calling themselves the IRA and Sinn Fein, pose similar problems to Irish Socialist Republicans, both in political and economic terms. They too obscure the real meaning of national liberation, while they continue to undermine the democratic struggle, and provide the excuse for heightened State repression by acts of elitist terrorism.

In the 1930's, the stated aim of the "Blueshirt "National Guard" organisation had as one of its principal tenents.. "To oppose Communism and alien control and influence in national affairs and to uphold Christian principle in every sphere of public activity". Franco's stated aims were much the same. In a hysterical article condemning the Republican Movement, a writer in "Republican News" the Belfast Provo newspaper, stated.. "Too many people in Ireland are complacent about the real Communist threat that still exists here. Trained agents are busy in Dublin, Belfast and Cork.. They almost succeeded in taking over complete control of the Republican Movement.. In the name of our patriot dead, who asked for God's blessing on their arms, we cry out, "Wake up, wake up, Irishmen and Irishwomen, be active in protecting our Christian traditions and join in the struggle for freedom". When Joe Cahill, of the Provisional Army leadership visited the United States in 1971, he stated, "We want a Republic with no Socialist or Communistic ideas. Their representatives in the U.S, have consistently followed the same line, and during the Viet-nam war, the U.S. support group was well represented in the rightist American "Home with Honour", Rallies. Their U.S. newspaper, "Irish People", (not to be confused with the Dublin socialist paper of the same name), consistently supported the Vietnam war, and further in November 75, when Provos in Belfast attempted to wipe out the Official Republican Movement, the newspaper carried the triumphant head-line.. "Provisionals.. the wedge against Communism".

Blueshirts theoreticians such as Tierney or Hogan condemned the division of society into rival classes of employers and workers. This approach is very much re-echoed in the Provisional refusal to

take a class analysis of the Irish situation, hence their persistent references to " acommunity of self-governing communities", in which there is no reference to the particular class or class-alliance which would control their "Republic", Thus an article published by the Provos in the "Irish People", on May 25/75, stated "By revolution, I mean a revolution which establishes a community of self-governing communities in which people are increasingly controlling their lives. I believe that one of the principal causes why Socialism is failing to make head-way is the confused thinking of Socialists about the social class within the nation which the socialist revolution must put into power. They think that this class is the so-called working class, but the working-class is a minority of society. Consequently the appeal of the Socialist movement is directed towards a minority within each nation rather than a majority."

In the thirties, Tirmey, the Blueshirt theoretician, consistently emphasised that the Papal Encyclicals were the basis of Blueshirt theory, and he saw the object of the "Corporate State", as providing the "re-integration of Christian society, and its re-establishment on its old basis, strengthened and solidified". The



General Eoin O'Duffy and Irish Fascist "Blueshirts"

Provos in the seventies are equally anxious to establish their Christian connections. Thus "Eire Nua", their political programme, calls for "a reign of social justice based on Christian principles". A Provisional speaker at the 1975 Easter Commemoration in South Armagh, Maoliosa O' Hanlon, from Monaghan, stated that the main danger to democracy in Ireland springs from the "Marxist -Communists. He further stated.. "We should not try to separate love of God from love of our country", and then went on to state that "the social philosophy of the Provisionals is based on the Papal Encyclicals"

Thus, while the overall economic environment is now dis-similar to that of the thirties in Ireland, because native capitalism has given way to the Imperialistic multi-national corporations, at the same time, remarkable similarities do exist between the Provos of the seventies and the Blueshirts of the thirties. Those who point out that the Provos claim to want a "Socialist Republic", (usually carefully qualified as a "Federal Socialist Republic") would do well to remember that Hitler's party included the word "Socialist" in its title. In fact, Ruairi O' Brady's statement that "we don't even mention a United Ireland anymore", and the Provos general demand for a "Federal Ireland", is as much a departure from the classic Republican position as the "Blueshirt", call for "Dominion status". Where it exists, Provo theory is a curious blend of



Irish "Blueshirts" in Spain 1936

economic distributism with a federal political superstructure. Distributism is nothing new in Ireland, deriving originally from the papal encyclical "Rerum Novarum", of Leo 13, and later consolidated by Pius 11th in the encyclical "Quadregesimo Anno", of 1931. The theory was ardently taken up by the Blueshirts. Basically, distributism is a reactionary concept, for whereas socialism accepts the inevitable consolidation of capital, distributism opposes such progression, and consistently supports the small owner-employer as the alternative. In Ireland, this ideology demands a policy of decentralising finance, and thus the Provo theory of federalism and consequent de-centralisation emerges.

Significantly, in the thirties, O'Duffy, the Leader of the Blueshirts, was advised by Continental fascists that the only hope for fascism in Ireland lay in being able to seize hold of the "national struggle". Today, the Provos would appear to be attempting to follow where the Blueshirts failed, i.e. to seize hold of the anti-Imperialist struggle and pervert the forces of national liberation in a reactionary direction, theoretically and practically. Yet whatever the illusory rhetoric of their leaders, whatever frustrated message their gunmen write in the blood of the innocent Irish working-class, the Provos have no positive relevance in today's Ireland. They are a negative force, nurtured by the most vile and vicious politico-religious myths of the past. They will fail because economics and the political realities derived therefrom are against them.

The Provos, founded, armed and led by rank reactionaries, are standing in the path of historical progression, and inevitably they will be destroyed by that progression. For, clearly, despite the opportunistic jargon about Socialism, the Provos cannot escape the fact that as a result of their own political rationale, they are potentially a Fascist movement at a time when Fascism, in the classic model, cannot survive. Thus in this situation, where forces far beyond the simplistic naivete of the Provos have already determined the lines of the forthcoming battlefield, the Provos ultimate end, (and that of their Loyalist counter-parts), is written

large. For, while the Provos claim to be anti-Imperialist, yet they demonstrate, both in theory and practice, a singularly abysmal failure to understand the significance of Imperialism in Ireland. Thus the "Eire Nua", programme refers exclusively to "British" domination in the economic sense. The fact that U.S. investment in Ireland currently represents the fastest-growing foreign interest in this country is totally ignored, and thus there is a signal failure to point out that Imperialism in Ireland today is more accurately described as "Anglo-American", rather than simply "British". This simplistic approach by the Provos cannot totally be attributed to sheer political ignorance, and certainly it is no mere co-incidence that the major source of Provo weaponry and finance is the United States.

Despite the "Socialist" veneer that Trotskyist fellow-travellers attempt to paint the Provos with, the roots of the organisation are deeply entrenched in religious sectarianism. Yet, increasingly the operation of multi-national corporations in Ireland demonstrate that the division of the working-class on sectarian-religious grounds, (necessary in the "Hungry Thirties", the period of native capitalism), is no longer required, in the economic field at least. In fact, sectarian divisions are now seen as a hindering factor in rationalising and maximising production in the factories. Thus the party-political representatives of the multi-nationals, the "advanced capitalists", will increasingly take a stand against the traditional religious divisions in the north and the sectional groups and parties which seek to exploit such division. Similarly, class-conscious workers, as they realise the full significance of the multi-nationals will develop a heightened awareness of the need for workers unity against the common capitalist enemy. They too will move in opposition to religious sectarianism on the factory floor.

Thus a clear division can be drawn between the political representatives of capitalism in Ireland today, a line which does not correspond to the traditional loyalties. On the one hand, there are those who represent capitalism in its latest developmental

stage, while on the other are those unfortunates who will not see the writing on the factory wall, and seek to obscure it in workers blood, either metaphorically or literally. The advanced capitalists, the supporters of the multi-nationals, the modern Imperialists, and the ultimate enemy, obviously include Fine Gael, right-wing Irish Labour, the larger section of Fianna Fail, all in the South, the Alliance Party, SDLP, elements of the Official Unionists, and, for what it is worth, the Northern Ireland Labour Party. The UPNI is also in this camp, as a "Faulkner deviation" from the basic Alliance position. Backward elements of Fianna Fail in the South, the Official Unionists in the North, the Democratic Unionist Party of Ian Paisley, plus the Baird Axis, followed by the para-militaries such as the Provos, the UDA and the UVF all stand together, on this question at least. None of them have progressed far enough to understand that the days of capitalism in its native protectionist phase, have gone forever. The fact that these latter groups spend so much time in squabbling internally, or attacking each other either verbally or physically, is merely a reflection of the internal contradictions produced by their position, contradictions which will ultimately destroy them, and permit the inevitable victory of the "advanced capitalist" camp in this internal capitalist "war".

And in this situation, the Provos are a dying animal, wracked by internal disorders and unable to cope realistically with the real world. But like a mad dog in the throes of agony, the organisation is all the more dangerous for that. The damage the Provos have done, the damage they can do in undermining the unity of ordinary people against sectarian division, is considerable. And certainly the knowledge that the Provos are ultimately doomed to failure, is poor consolation to the working-class people, whether Protestant or Catholic, who are presently obliged to suffer the Provos meandering adventurism.

It is in this situation that Socialist Republicans must work, taking their specific tactics from the hard reality, and not shirking to learn from the past in pointing the way forward. And the thirties period is particularly relevant to us, for then, as in

the past ten years, there was a major upsurge for the Socialist cause. Thus much can be gained from the thirties experience, in consolidating the Socialist Republican organisation of today, and giving the Irish people a principled lead to Socialism. Having analysed the realistic basis of Imperialism in this country, the Republican Movement has a clear view of the enemy, and are aware that, as in the thirties, there cannot be any overnight solution. And, as in the thirties, the basis of the way forward for the Irish people lies in bringing together the strength of all the anti Imperialist forces. In 1934, Peadar O' Donnell of the Republican Congress stated.. "The way to build is to create committees of workers and small farmers to conduct workers and small farmers struggles, and to express the political aspiration of their growing forces in an urgent campaign to achieve the Republic. In this way, Irish capitalism will be exposed, and ever-growing power will rest in our committees of workers and small farmers". Today, our particular way forward, in a changing economic situation is to involve the mass of the people in primary struggle against the particular manifestation of Imperialism which most closely affects them, being clear all the while that the Socialist Republic itself can only be established by a dynamic movement under the leadership of the working class.

In the thirties, the vast potential of the Republican Congress clearly lay in the fact that it represented a coming-together of anti-Imperialist groups in a united Front organisation. That potential however was undermined from the start by ultra-left elements who confused revolutionary phrase-mongering with revolution itself. Here also lies a very clear lesson for us today in approaching the present situation, and in choosing our allies. Further, the absolute necessity of principled leadership, internal democracy and rigid Party discipline is the inevitable conclusion to be drawn from the diversion of the republican movement in the thirties towards the abortive English bombing-campaign and the inevitable down-turn for Socialist hopes in Ireland itself. Again, the very fact that, at a time when they faced the most vicious

repression at home, Irish Socialist Republicans were prepared to fight and die in Spain in the struggle against Fascism, crucially demonstrates the vital internationalist aspect of the Socialist Republican philosophy. The volunteers of the International Brigade left a memory to be cherished at home and abroad by those who volunteer today to play their part in the struggle for Socialism. The fight of the International Brigades is still our fight, whether in Ireland, Spain or throughout the world, and our victory will be their victory. Beir bua!

International Brigades

Forty years ago, Spain became the focal point for Europe and most of the world as rebel Army generals led by Franco moved to overthrow the Popular Front Government of the Spanish Republic. It quickly became clear that Spain was to be an experiment both in theory and practice for the international fascist movement. Franco received massive aid from the German Nazis and the Italian Fascists and as the so-called bourgeois democracies of Western Europe dithered nervously, or deliberately ignored the Spanish situation, the forces of European fascism moved in for the kill. In this desperate situation, the cry for help from the Republican forces of Spain was answered by democrats from fifty-seven countries, by men from all walks of life who left their homes and families to go and fight for democracy and international solidarity against Fascism in Spain. Many never returned. The International Brigades, as they were called arrived in Spain at a crucial time in the war, filling the gap, while more Spanish troops were trained. International casualties were immense, for in battle after battle the volunteers were used to hold crack troops of the new German Army, the Italian forces of Mussolini, the Spanish Foreign Legion, and the highly trained Moorish riflemen. Often the Brigades were inadequately equipped with poor weapons and not enough ammunition, and many of them only a minimum of military training. Nor were they super-human heroes, devoid of fear and emotion. Their humanity was their essential strength, a humanity that in the face of horrific carnage, despite paralyzing fear in many cases, sent them forward to fight, many to die. They fought courageously, and they left a legacy of international solidarity in the name of democracy for workers throughout the world to recall proudly.

Many of the men of the Brigades were refugees from the Fascist regimes of Italy and Germany, and clearly recognized the nature of the enemy they faced in Spain. Many fought a civil war, far from their homes, as for example the German "Thaelmann" Internationals facing German troops, or the "Garibaldi" battalion of Italian anti-fascists opposing Mussolini's crack "Black Arrows". In this situation, where thousands of volunteers arrived from all over the world, the Irish did not make a numerically very large contribution, relatively speaking. Yet the Irish were in action practically from the start to the end of the war, during which they distinguished themselves in several battles, and sustained heavy casualties.

The Irish came to Spain, fired by their experiences at home, alive to the reality of Fascism and determined to oppose it in the latest attack on democracy in Europe. In fighting for Spain, they were fighting for the rights of the Irish people in Ireland, and the rights of the working-class throughout the world.

Ireland in the thirties was overshadowed by the rise of Fascism in Europe, and in Ireland, anti-Socialist feeling was commonplace, confused as the people were by "De Valera Republicanism" on the one hand, and the "Free Staters", on the other. Ireland too, had her local equivalent of the continental Fascists, in the "Blueshirts" led by General O' Duffy, a former Free State soldier and ex-Commissioner of the police. On the outbreak of the Spanish war, a vicious attack on the legal government of Spain was immediately launched by the establishment press in Ireland. The "Irish Independent" announced on July 22nd 1936.. "All who stand for the ancient faith and traditions of Spain are behind the present revolt against the Marxist regime in Madrid." The Irish left, dominated by veteran Republicans like Frank Ryan and George Gilmore attempted to reply to these vicious attacks, explaining the international import of the fight in Spain, as Fascism prepared to smash democracy throughout Europe. The "Irish Independent", insisted that Ireland break relations with Madrid, and this proposal was pushed at various local government bodies.

Patrick Belton, of Fine Gael, founded the Irish Christian Front to "face the threat of international communism". The front gathered funds for the Spanish nationalists and held rallies in different parts of the country, supported by the Irish Catholic hierarchy. O'Duffy, somewhat discredited in Ireland because of his failure to live up to his extravagant promises, attempted to exploit the religious fervour, and announced that he intended to form an Irish Brigade, "to fight the communist threat in Spain". Ultimately, O' Duffy did lead a force to Spain, nick-named the "Rosary-bead Brigade", and blessed by the Irish hierarchy. But his "Brigade", numbering around 700 fought only two brief actions, the first by mistake with another Fascist unit from the Canary Islands, in which two Irishmen were killed. After the second action, O' Duffy's men refused to attack again in the face of Republican artillery fire, and they ultimately returned to Ireland, fighting among themselves. The Kerrymen formed one faction, according to a returned volunteer, and they fought with the rest.

But among some Irish people at least, the issues in Spain were clear. Speaking at a solidarity meeting on Spain in December 1936, Fr. Michael O'Flanagan, a priest whom the Irish bishops had attempted to silence, stated, "The fight in Spain is a fight between the rich, priveleged classes as against the rank and file of the poor, oppressed people of Spain. The cause being fought for in Spain is nearer to us than is realised. The Spanish Foreign Legion are to Spain what the "Black and Tans" were to Ireland." It was thinking like this that led many Irish Socialist Republicans to volunteer for the Irish unit, then being formed by Frank Ryan, to fight with the Internationals in Spain. Ryan, a veteran of the War of Independence in Ireland, stated in December 1936, before the main Irish contingent left for the front, "The Irish contingent is a demonstration of revolutionary Ireland's solidarity with the gallant Spanish workers and peasants in their fight for freedom against Fascism. It aims to redeem Irish honour, besmirched by the intervention of Irish Fascism on the side of the Spanish fascist rebels.

It is to aid the revolutionary meovment in Ireland to defeat the Fascist menace at home, and finally, and not the least, to establish the closest fraternal bonds of kinship between the Republican democracies of Ireland and Spain."

But before Ryan's contingent arrived in Spain, other Irishmen had found their way to Madrid. One of these was Bill Scott, a communist and veteran IRA man, whose father had fought with Connolly in Easter 1916. Scott linked up with other anti-Fascists of various nationalities, mainly German, and they formed a group later to be known as the 2nd Zug (section) of the "Thaelmann Battalion", named after the veteran German communist, Ernst Thaelmann. This group were active in the defence of Madrid in the early months of the war, in which fighting was as vicious and bloody as any of the later battles. The defence of Madrid relied on hastily formed peoples militias, with some Internationals among them. An observer described them, "Going up into the line were long files of civilians. They had no uniforms. Just ordinary suits and a rifle slung anyhow over the shoulder. Most of the rifles were aged and I should say were nearly as unsafe for the man who fired as for the enemy.. (The defenders)...just stayed doggedly in the positions in which they were put, and fired their rifles blindly at the foe, when they could see him."

The defenders of Madrid were bombed continuously by German pilots of the Nazi "Condor" Legion, who were interested in the possible reactions of a civilian population to concentrated bombing. (Spain was Germany's testing ground for the "Blitzkreig", tactics of the World War.) As Moorish troops fighting for Franco pushed past Durrutti's Anarchist "Iron Column", Bill Scott and his companions were moved up to the front as part of the newly-formed 12th Brigade, later known as the "Garibaldi". Savage hand-to-hand fighting followed, from room to room in Madrid University buildings. No quarter was given, and the death toll on both sides was high. One British volunteer with Scott left the following account of a break in the battle, which conveys the atmosphere. "By the open space lay two dead Fascists, one in the gutter, his head smashed open against

the kerbstone, the brains slopping out. A big lean dog with a famished look came up to the corpse, sniffed and began to lap at the mass of brains. One of the guards drew his automatic and put three bullets into the dog.. He stopped when he passed us, looked apol-
-ogetic and said.. "it has to be done..they get the taste for hum-
-an flesh".

After several days fighting, the Republican lines defending Madrid held back the Fascist onslaught and the Franco forces settled down for a longer war. But the defence of Madrid itself had proved the usefulness of the Internationals, since the 11th and 12th International Brigades had been vital in holding back the fascist push. The Brigades had fought with courage and determination alongside the Spanish militia-men. Among the casualties at Madrid in December were Tommy Patton of Achill, and William Barry, originally from Dublin.

The main Irish contingent along with hundreds of other volun-
-teers arrived in Spain in December 1936. They formed the James Connolly section of number 1 Company of the British and Irish Battalion,(also known as the Saklatvala Battalion), and after a couple of weeks training at Madrigueras, they set off for the front on Christmas Eve, 1936, heading towards Andujar and the Cordova front. It was a cold, star-lit night, and they went into action almost at once. They had difficulties from the start. William Rust from the "Daily Worker", wrote.. "On the evening of their arrival, the Battalion deployed to occupy firing positions, and firing started, but on the familiar lines of physical courage against modern weapons. Number 1 Company's machine-guns were 20-year old Chaucots, the majority of which jammed at the first shot. The rifles were even older, Austrian Steyrs, which for the lack of the special ammunition clips which should accompany them, had to be used as single-shot guns. Even then, many blew up in the firers hands."

Nevertheless, number 1 company went into action, and took a hill crest on the outskirts of Lopera, but within a few hours they were pushed back among the olive-groves. They held their ground. On the 29th December, a French battalion with artillery support attacked

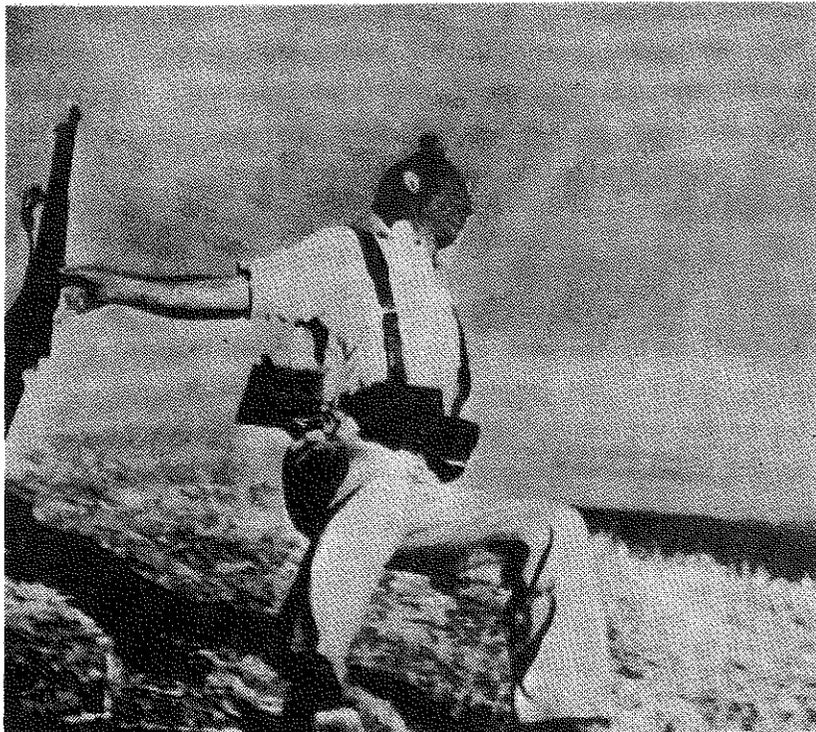
in a vain attempt to encircle Lopera. Number 1 company was bombed, shelled and machine-gunned, and after six hours of fierce fighting the company was forced to retreat. After a months fighting on the Escorial Road, they came out from the front and marched back to Madrigueras. Conditions at the front had been very bad, and the volunteers in the Brigade suffered both from the weather and disease. One observer described the scene during January 1937. "The soldiers were coughing and retching in slimy spasms, or gasping hoarsely from weary chests...(others)..were lying in a sodden trench, with a rattle in their throats..Hundreds were tortured by pitiless diahorrea...the fog crept farther under their water-logged blankets, up the sleeves of their uniforms, down to the skin, bitten raw by vermin. In their coughs could be heard the despair of creatures under torture". The Battalion had suffered 78 casualties, both dead and wounded. Among the dead were John Meehan of Galway, Frank Conroy from Kildare, Tony Fox, Mick May, Henry Bonar, Jim Foley and Tommy Woods, all from Dublin, all killed at Cordova in December. Denis Coady was killed in early January at Las Rosas.

JARAMA

Meanwhile at Madrigueras centre, more volunteers had been training for the Battalion. They had come from England, Scotland and Ireland, and by the end of January, 600 men, veterans and new recruits, left for the Jarama front, where one of the most famous battles of the war was to take place. A volunteer remembers.. "Early in the morning, we reached a farmhouse, and bivouacked in the orange-grove opposite. The wind was cold but dry. We could see lines of troops wending their way in single file along the edge of the road and up into the foothills. From the distance came the sound of gun-fire". In that valley of Jarama, thousands of men were to lose their lives as the Fascists tried to cut the roads leading to Madrid before the rains blocked the Tajuna and Jarama valleys in March. The Fascist forces included Spanish and Moorish infantry

German machine-gunners and snipers, with Italian and German aircraft. They were a highly professional, well-trained force. Republican forces had inadequate weaponry, insufficiently trained personnel and were probably out-numbered in fire-power, five to one.

Kit Conway, a Dublin building worker and active trade-unionist in the I.T.G.W.U. was in charge of number 1 company as the Battalion moved into position at the front along with a Franco-Belgian Battalion, and the "Dimitrov" Batt., composed of Balkans, Slavs and Austrians. They took up position on what was to become known as "Suicide Hill". On Feb. 12th 1937, the Fascists attacked along the Jarama River, up the line of the Tajuna valley, towards Morata. They were stopped by the International Brigades, who suffered very high casualties. On the 13th February, Moorish troops attacked the republican lines at dawn, but were held back by the machine-guns of the British and Irish volunteers. The machine-gunners fired for



"The moment of death" Republican Infantryman.

nearly half an hour as the Moors poured forward, and when the gunners stopped, in the words of a survivor, "the guns were throbbing with steam and the belts empty". Another volunteer later described an incident in the battle. "One individual who had obviously gone completely mad was rushing around enmeshed in a cocoon of insulated wire, and crying, "I have captured the Fascist communications, I have captured the Fascist communications". Eventually he leapt up on the parapet and was shot dead by a burst of machine-gun fire".

Later in the day, the Battalion were ordered to advance and attack, but were unable to do so because expected tank support failed to materialise and because supportive air bombardment of the fascist lines was inadequate. Then as the Fascists tried to break across the Jarama river towards Arganda bridge, they were again held by a counter-attack from the Internationals, but later broke across another bridge and advanced on Suicide Hill on which the British and Irish were positioned. As Kit Conway, in charge of no 1 Coy., rallied his men, he was shot several times in the stomach and died later. But the Fascists were held back. Then as the sun set, the Moors tried another attack. One account of the battle describes them "stepping across the crest of the hill, forming in to lines and marching down openly, as if on parade, their crimson lined cloaks flowing in the wind, their red turbans clearly visible." The Moors were silent at first, but as they moved to charge with fixed bayonets, they roared out their terrifying battle-scream.

Their intention was to over-run the Republican positions before night-fall proper. The Moors had a most fearsome reputation for the most brutal behaviour, decapitating and castrating the sick and wounded. But as they moved forward on this attack, they were cut down by the Republican machine-gunners.

The continuing battle was one of slaughter and carnage, and at one point, two days later, the Battalion broke and retreated in confusion before the Fascist machine-guns and deadly rifle fire. But the men were rallied again by Frank Ryan and Copeman, the British commander, who reminded them that the Madrid-Valencia road was absolutely essential for the defence of Madrid," the

heart and symbol of Republican resistance in Spain".

Frank Ryan himself later described the scene."Stragglers still in retreat down the slopes stopped in amazement,changed direction and ran to join us;men lying exhausted on the roadside jumped up,cheered and joined the ranks....I looked back,Beneath the forest of upraised fists,what a strange band!Unshaven,unkempt,bloodstained,grimy,But full of fight again."

The Battalion then started to build a defence line across the road with heavy stones,backed up by two French gun-crews with 75m.m. guns Finally,the Brigades continued to advance on the flank of the Moors who had broken through.After fierce fighting in which Lister's Spanish Brigade joined,the Moors were pushed further back.Further,North also,the Nationalist assault towards Araganda was halted and driven back to Jarama by the Germans of the 11th Brigade.

Meanwhile,on the 12th.Feb.,the newly formed American "Abraham Lincoln"Battalion,in which there were quite a few Irishmen who had transferred from the Saklatvala(British) Battalion,as well as other Irish-Americans,had also moved up to Jarama.They had had some weeks training at a base in Villanueva.On the way to the front,the lorries stopped in the mountains and all the volunteers fired five rounds,a vital exercise in view of the fact that many of the men had never fired a shot before.They then advanced towards Morata,and on the 23rd Feb.,they moved up to replace the 24th Spanish Brigade.The same day they went into attack,Paul Burns,an Irish-American volunteer later described the advance..:"over a field dotted by occassional olive trees with only the scant shelter of vineyards...Given a withered grapevine,a mound of earth,or the more pretentious shelter of an olive tree,and the boys dig in and open fire on the Fascists lines...The infantry continued to advance. Explosive bullets split the air and the machine-gun bursts raked the fields,From behind a group of trees,the Fascists increased their fire". John Scott, the commander of 1 Coy was badly wounded and his place as commander was taken by Bill Henry from Belfast, An observer described Bill Henry lying out in the open, attempting

to shield Scott as he lay wounded. Bill Henry himself was later killed at Jarama.

The Abraham Lincolns attack failed in the face of appalling fire-power of the Fascists,and because of inadequate flank- support for the Republican attack.Then,on 27th.Feb,the British and Irish Battalion moved up to the front line,and the Lincolns were placed in reserve behind them.Another attack was mounted.The Spanish 24th Brigade went over the top at 7.05a.m. but a hail of gunfire stopped them quickly.Another attempt two hours later also failed.The Lincoln Battalion were then ordered forward.Their commander was unwilling in view of the insufficient cover,but finally attacked.At 12.00,500 men,60 of them raw recruits,went over the top.The casualties were enormous.One volunteer later described "Group after group hopping the trenches,charging the Fascists who were only 250 metres away....Bullets strayed in our direction.... cross-fire from many machine guns created an impenetrable steel wall against our advance.Soon the calls for first aid came... Many were wounded just as they climbed the parapet to go over some



International Brigade Volunteers "Dinner at the Front"

wounded men crawled back to the trenches safely, but many others were killed in the attempt. The attack failed; 127 were killed, with over 200 wounded.

As both sides dug in, after Feb. 27th, Jarama became stalemate, claimed by both sides as a victory. Franco had advanced 15 kilometres, but the key Madrid-Valencia Road was still in Republican hands and Madrid had been saved from Fascist encirclement. Jarama was the first battle for the newly formed 15th Brigade which was made up by British, Irish, Americans and Spanish Americans. Casualties at Jarama Valley were very high and among the Irish who died there were Eamonn Mc Grotty from Derry, Charlie Donnelly, the Tyrone poet, Kit Conway, R.M. Hilliard, a former Church of Ireland clergyman from Kilkenny, Dick O'Neill, Bill Henry, Danny Boyle and Liam Tumilson, all from Belfast, Hugh Bonar from Donegal, Maurice Quinlan from Waterford and Michael Russell from Co. Clare.

BRUNETTE

In the last weeks of June 1937, General Miaja of the Republican Army grouped together the 2nd Army Corps, which included the 11th International Brigade, the 13th and the 15th. The Army was one of the best equipped and most impressive ever put into the field by the Republican Government, numbering over 50,000 men supported by 136 artillery pieces, 128 tanks and 150 aircraft. The aim of the projected attack was to drive down on Brunete from the North of the El-Escorial--Madrid road and attempt to cut off the Fascist besiegers of the capital from the west. At this time, the 15th. Brigade was commanded by Copic, a Croatian soldier who had been trained in the Soviet Union. His brigade was divided into two regiments, one led by the Englishman, George Nathan. This regiment included the Abraham Lincoln Battalion, commanded by Robert Merriman from the U.S., the George Washington Battalion led by Oliver Law, an American negro, and the Saklatvala (British) Battalion, led by Fred Copeman. (Nathan, Merriman and Law were all later killed in Spain).

At dawn on the 6th July 1937, Enrique "Lister", a Soviet trained Republican General, attacked with his 11th division. Within a few hours they surrounded Brunete. At first they were met only by weakened soldiers of the 71st Division of Franco's troops, supported by nine batteries of field artillery. The 15th Brigade was quickly called in to action, and after a long march throughout the night, the 2nd Battalion (British) moved up to attack the fortified town of Villanueva de la Canada. In an attempt to by-pass the town and cut the road behind, the Battalion came under heavy fire in ever increasing heat as the sun rose higher. Twenty men from the Battalion were killed before dusk fell. And at this time, the volunteers were amazed to see a small crowd of women and children move out from the town. Pat Murphy, from Cardiff, went forward to meet them. He then saw that a group of armed Italian fascists were hiding in the group. He ordered them to halt and drop their guns. The Italians then burst forward, throwing grenades and firing their weapons. Murphy himself was injured by a grenade splinter. Following this incident, however, the Battalion pressed forward on attack, and finally took the town, meeting the Dimitrov Battalion, who had fought their way in from the opposite end.



"Over the top"

Despite high Republican casualties, the whole offensive was temporarily successful. Brunete had fallen and the 15th Brigade continued to press forward. The attempt to take the vital "Mosquito Ridge" followed, an attempt that was frustrated from the outset by a heavy artillery bombardment that pinned the 2nd Battalion to the ground. "For two hours the shells whined and crashed, while the men, face downward, tried to burrow their way into the earth on both sides of the road-way, expecting every moment that the next shell would get them", reported William Rust, for the "Daily Worker". The Republican troops were short of food and water. Heavy bombardment kept the field kitchens to the rear, and stretcher-bearers could only move at night, so that the wounded were forced to lie in their own blood throughout the day. At night they were loaded onto the backs of mules, already soaked in human blood.

As the advance continued, the artillery barrage from the Fascists eased, and the 2nd Battalion relieved the Washington, with the Lincoln digging in on their left. But it became clear that the British Battalion were dangerously far ahead of the other Republican units, and as the Fascists counter-attack gained, the 2nd Batt. were forced to retreat after 48 hours. Casualties had been very high, and the British Battalion alone had been reduced from 630 men to 185. Over the whole period, 50% of both the Lincoln and Washington Battalions had been put out of action, and now both units were amalgamated as the Lincoln-Washington Battalion. Oliver Law, the black commander of the Washingtons had been killed, and lay on the battlefield for two weeks as the hot sun bloated his corpse, which was gradually eaten by decay and insects. The carnage and suffering were extreme, Ralph Bates the American political commissar of the 15th Brigade describes an incident on an inspection tour of the front line. "At the top of the slope there was a wounded comrade writhing beneath the bushes, his lips chewed to bleeding shreds. I drew my pistol and held it to his ear, and blessed him :

" with sweet death."

On the 13th July, after fierce fighting around Boadilla,

orders were given to dig in and hold. At the cost of very heavy casualties, the Republicans had gained a pocket of land 15 kilometres wide and 12 deep. On the 14th July, George Nathan, the British regimental commander was killed.

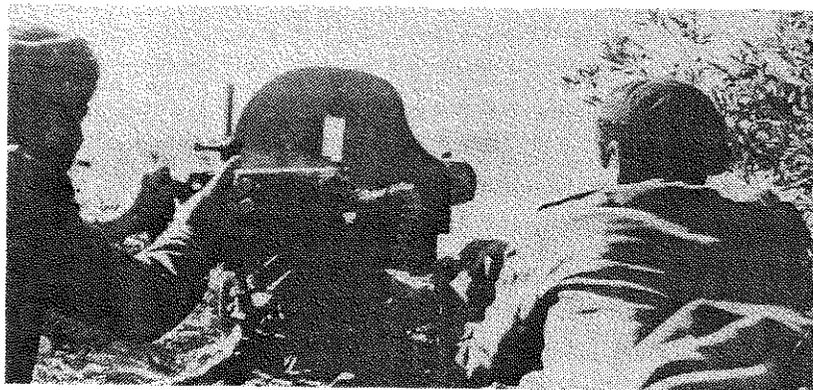
After three days lull in the battle, the Fascists gathered their reinforcements and counter-attacked. The Lincoln-Washington fought bitterly, retreating inch by inch. Milton Wolff, an American machine-gunner recalls... "We were loaded down with pre-World War Maxims, the Shields of which were Colt, vintage 1914. The men not engaged in carrying the guns carried 500 rounds of ammunition in addition to their rifles and 150 rounds of rifle ammunition... During the fighting the hills stank of burning sage and scrub oak, of dead men and animals cooking in the fierce July heat". Men went mad in the heat from lack of water and corpses bloated up like balloons.

Again both sides claimed Brunete as a victory. The Republican forces now held Quijorna, Villanueva de la Canada and Villanueva del Pardillo, but the battle had cost around 25,000 Republican casualties, while the Fascists had lost half that number. The International Brigades made up about one fifth of the total Republican forces at Brunete and after the battle, the British and Irish Battalion had only 42 out of the original 300 men left. Among the Irishmen killed were Thomas Morris, Willie Loughran and Willie Beattie, both from Belfast, William Davis from Dublin and Michael Kelly from Ballinasloe.

ARAGON

At the end of August 1937, the 15th Brigade moved forward along the Aragon front on a diversionary

offensive. The Brigade was now dominated by Americans, and the Lincoln-Washington Battalion was now led by Hans Amlie, an engineer from Wisconsin, who was later shot in the head at Quinto. A new battalion had also joined the Brigade, composed of Canadian Americans. This unit was called the MacKenzie-Papineau Battalion in memory of the leaders of the Canadian rebellion against the English in 1837. In the Aragon offensive, the International Brigades made up only one-twentieth of the entire Republican forces, and this "Army of the East" led by General Pozas was really a Spanish "Peoples Army", which now emerged for the first time. An important function of the International Brigades, that of giving the Republican Army time to train their own forces was being achieved and the importance of the Brigades diminished in proportion. Nevertheless, the Brigades were still to the fore. On the 25th August, 1937 a new diversionary offensive was launched in eight separate attacks against a front which consisted mainly of fortified strong points. The Yugoslav Dimitrov Battalion attacked Purburrell Hill and were followed by the Lincoln-Washington who moved up in the face of machine gun fire. Next morning the Lincoln-Washington attacked the town of Quinto, fighting from house to house with grenades and bombs. The 24th (British)



International Brigaders

Battalion also played an important part in taking Purburrell Hill. At this time they were commanded by Peter Daly a Wexfordman who was seriously wounded in the attack and who died later in hospital. After his death, another Irishman, Paddy O'Daire took over as Battalion commander. One volunteer, describing the advance, said.. "hell broke loose. The Fascist trenches near the summit became one line of continuous crackling machine-gun fire". But the attack was carried through to success. Scores of prisoners were taken, and several Fascist officers committed suicide.

BELCHITE

The attack on the fortress of Belchite followed, Belchite had been fortified under German Nazi direction and it was a complicated interlocking network of pill-boxes, trenches, iron-stakes, with machine guns, covering every approach. The town itself commanded the cross-roads from which deeper penetration of Aragon became possible. The Lincoln-Washington Battalion backed up the Spanish 32nd Brigade, and attempted to bomb their way forward. But the men were pinned down by very accurate sniper fire. At last however, the assault carried through, and vicious house-to-house fighting followed. When finally taken, Belchite had such a smell of death from corpses that Government burial squads digging to reach them were unable to remain without gas-masks".

After Belchite, the 15th Brigade were not involved in battle until October when the men were moved up to Fuentes del Ebro. An attack on the Fascist positions began on the 13th October, '37 across open ground. But air support and an artillery barrage did not take place. It quickly became clear that the attack could not achieve its objective, and soon after the 15th Brigade came out of the line.

TERUEL

The important battle of Teruel came at the end of Dec. '37. Teruel was a natural fortress and located in an area that was notorious for the worst winter weather in Spain. In falling snow, Lister's 11th Division advanced to encircle the town, and the encirclement was duly carried out on the evening of Dec. 15th. The siege of the town then started. On the 29th December '37 protected by the Nazi German "Condor Legion" air squadron, the Fascists launched a counter attack. At this time, a heavy blizzard fell, with snow covering roads to a depth of four feet and cold so intense that men had frost-bitten limbs amputated. The temperature fell to 18 degrees below zero, engines clogged up with ice, and vehicles were snow-bound. In these circumstances, the Fascists surrendered, and the Republicans occupied the town, becoming in their turn, the besieged.

On the 17th January, the Fascists counter-attacked to capture the heights overlooking Teruel. On the 18th the Republican lines broke and the International Brigades under General Walter moved into the battle. The British Battalion took up position in 3 feet of snow, occupying several mountain tops. On January 19th, the Fascists attempted to advance on Teruel. The machine gunners of no. 1 Company of the British Battalion and the Canadians from the Mac Paps halted them but at the price of high casualties. The Lincoln-Washington Battalion also moved up, to protect the walls of Teruel which had now become a battered heap of ruins. On the 3rd Feb. the 15th Brigade were relieved by Spanish troops, but on the 9th the Brigade was recalled to action as the fascists launched another attack and broke through Republican lines capturing Argente, Revales and Alfambra, north of Teruel. The final battle for Teruel began on the 17th Feb. 1938 as the Fascists attempted to encircle Teruel. By 20th Feb. rail and

road communication to Valencia were seriously threatened. The Republican forces then withdrew from Teruel, losing large quantities of guns, ammunition and no less than ten thousand dead in the battle. Irish volunteers killed at Teruel included Peter Glacken from Westmeath, Francis O'Brien and David Walsh from Ballina.

TERUEL to EBRO

Following the Fascist victory at Teruel, Franco launched another offensive in the Aragon which was badly fortified. On the 9th March, the Fascist attack began with an artillery barrage. Franco's forces now included many Italian Fascists and German Nazis and in the offensive were included two Messerschmitt groups of four squadrons, two Heinkel, 51 groups of 2 squadrons, a reconnaissance group of three squadrons and 4 bomber groups of three squadrons. A very large number of German tanks were also used. On the Republican side, the troops were tired and had inadequate replacements for equipment. On the first day of the offensive, Republican lines broke in front of Italian "Black Arrow" units and as Italian motorised units advanced, the battle became a rout of Republicans. North of the Ebro river, the 10th, 11th and 12th Army corps were smashed by the Fascists. At the start of the Fascist attack, the 15th Brigade were deployed in the area of Belchite, along with the 11th International Brigade. The U.S. Lincoln Battalion, along with the Canadian MacKenzie-Papineau Battalion (numerous Irishmen served in both) were ordered to defend Belchite itself. However after bitter house-to-house fighting, they were forced to pull out of the town on the afternoon of March 10th. In the subsequent fighting, many Republican units were surrounded and slaughtered, and Republican resistance was driven eastwards. On March 13th, the Republican Command ordered

all units to concentrate in the vicinity of Gaspe. The 15th Brigade formed up at Corbera to make a stand. Their numbers had been heavily depleted by the first few days fighting. Finally, the survivors of the 15th and 11th Brigades were surrounded on the hills near Gandesa. Some attempted to break through the fascist lines, many were slaughtered. A number were successful in breaking through the lines and crossing the Ebro river. Among those killed or captured was Frank Ryan, a veteran Republican who had led the Irish contingent to Spain in 1936. He was now Adjutant of the 15th Brigade, and was captured by an Italian Fascist unit who did not kill him immediately, as they usually did with International Brigade volunteers because they wished to exchange him for one of their own officers. But the exchange never took place, Ryan was first sentenced to death, later reprieved to life-imprisonment and finally died in Nazi Germany. (See later account).



"On the way back"

EBRO CROSSING

From this point on the main replacements in the International Brigades were Spanish. In July 1938 the last major battle of the 15th Brigade took place, aimed at launching a diversionary attack across the Ebro to relieve the pressure of Sagunto and Valencia. Spanish Republican troops crossed the Ebro at night, followed by the Canadians, British and Americans of the 15th Brigade. The British 2nd Battalion then advanced on Corbera, attacked Moorish troops, and thus assisted the 13th Brigade in taking the town. The 15th Brigade then advanced inland. Initially the Ebro advance was successful, although almost half of the men who crossed the river did not have rifles. The Republicans gained 270 square miles of territory in less than a week, and by August 6th, they held around 500 square miles over a 90 mile front. They took around 6000 prisoners. But casualties were high, and the Lincoln Battalion had lost 400 out of their 700 men by the time they reached the hills near Gandesa on August 6th. It was at Gandesa that the crucial battle developed. In very hot weather the brigades attacked without success. Fascist counter-attacks followed, mainly on fortified hill-tops. The 15th Brigade were concentrated against Hill 481, known as "the Pimple". They stayed there for five consecutive days. On the last day the 2nd (British & Irish) Battalion continued the attack for 12 hours, crawling nearer and nearer to the ridge under heavy fire. The area soon became known as Death Valley, and a volunteer of the Lincoln-Washington Battalion later described the scene. "The place stank with the smell of dead and decomposing bodies..... Sounds of men screaming "Socorro!" (Help) and groaning "Madre Mia" kept up all night....always the noise of rifles, machine-guns, hand-grenades and artillery. Men

were dead by the hundreds, mostly the enemy, and the bodies stank when you came close". On the 2nd August, the Republican advance was checked, and in a desperate attempt to hold the territory they had won, General Lister issued the order to all Republican troops under his command.. "If anyone loses an inch of ground he must re-take it at the head of his men or be executed."

Officers and men were shot for retreating. Sergeants were ordered to kill their officers if they attempted to retreat without written orders from their superiors. Finally, however, in the face of concentrated Fascist air and ground bombardment, the Republican leadership realised that retreat to their original positions was inevitable. Thus the last Republican re-crossed the Ebro river on November 15th, 1938, and the opposing forces settled in for another winter at war.

During the battle of the Ebro, the Republican Government had announced its intention of withdrawing the International Brigades.. "to dispel all doubts as to the completely national character of the cause for which the Armies of the Republic are fighting". On the 22nd September, 1938 the 15th Brigade went into action for the last time, suffering heavy casualties. In these last battles, Jim Stranney from Belfast (a former Q/M of the Ballymacarret unit of the IRA), Maurice Ryan and Paddy O'Sullivan were killed, while on the 22nd itself, Liam McGregor, a communist graduate of the Lenin School, Moscow was killed, along with Jack Nalty, a veteran who had come to Spain with the first Irish contingency in 1936.

On the 15th November 1938, the famous Spanish communist Dolores Ibarrui, "la Pasionaria" said farewell to the International Brigades... "You can go proudly. You are history, you are legend, you are the heroic example of democracy's solidarity and universality. We shall not forget you, and when the olive tree of peace puts forth its leaves again,

mingled with the laurels of the Spanish Republic's victory.....come back!"

Addressing the International Brigades, Luigi Longo, veteran Italian communist, and Inspector General of the International Brigades said... "We are returning to our homes proud of our duty well done, and proud of the glory that our acts have brought to our country and our people. We are leaving the trenches of Spain, but this does not terminate our struggle for liberty.....New and grand battles are awaiting us. We will face them with all our enthusiasm and with all the courage that has characterised us in all our battles, with all the military, political and organisational experience which we have gained through our contact with our Spanish brothers. Only the unity of all people can close the road to fascism. That is the lesson we are taking home from Spain. That is the lesson that we intend to impress on all our brothers at home".

In the spring of 1939, the Republican Army gradually faded away, as individuals at first, and then entire units left their posts. On March 28th, 1939, the Fascists entered Madrid: the capital of Spain. By the end of March, nearly all of the country was in Fascist hands. Finally in April 1939, Franco announced that the war was at an end. Hundreds of thousands of Republicans, both soldiers and civilians were rounded up by the Fascists. Some were shot at once, others were imprisoned for long periods. A conservative estimate of the number of executions and deaths attributable to brutal penal conditions would be 200,000 for the years between 1939 and 1943.

It quickly became clear that Spain was only the dress rehearsal for the World War that followed. Shortly after the end of the Spanish War and the collapse of the Republican Government, Hitler ordered his Army into Czechoslovakia, and Mussolini prepared to attack Albania. Fascism, nurtured in the blood of the Spanish people, was once again on the

march, a march that was to destroy millions of people before it was halted.

AFTERMATH

The Spanish volunteers returned to their various homes throughout the world, and many later served in the world war, fighting the Fascist enemy they had first met in Spain. One Irish survivor who never returned home, was Frank Ryan, the veteran IRA man who had led the original Irish contingent to Spain. When he was captured in action in 1938, Ryan held the rank of Adjutant with the 15th Brigade. Because of his rank he was not shot at once, but was held by his Fascist Italian captors as a possible hostage to exchange for one of their officers captured by the Republicans. Later, however, he was handed over to the Spanish troops and subsequently sentenced to death for "mass-murder and arson". For nine months Ryan waited for a firing squad in the death cell of a medieval Spanish prison. Each morning 9 out of the 18 prisoners in the cell were taken out and shot. Then the cell was re-filled. Ryan expected to die, but eventually international appeals saved him from being shot, and his sentence was commuted to life imprisonment.

However, in 1940, the German secret service had contacted rightist elements inside the Irish Republican Movement, in an effort to mount anti-British activity in N. Ireland. As part of a campaign intended perhaps to influence Irish Republican opinion towards the Germans, and possibly also to recruit agents, the Abwehr (secret service) arranged with the Spanish Government for Ryan to be handed over to them. This was duly done, Ryan having no choice in the matter. At this time, he was sick and almost deaf, and his one intention was to return home. After meeting Sean Russell, (a member of the rightist element of the Republican Movement which had carried out

bombing in Britain in 1939, and which was now willing to cooperate with the Nazis against England), Ryan embarked with Russell on a German U-boat, which was to land them in Ireland. However, Russell died en route, and Ryan was returned to Germany, where he was to remain as an involuntary guest of the Nazis until his death in 1944.

Because of Ryan's unrequested presence in Germany during these years, it has since been insinuated that he had compromised with the Nazis. Apart from the fact that there was little Ryan could do in the situation, being for practical purposes as much a prisoner as he had been in Spain, in reality, there is no basis for suggesting that he compromised his Socialist ideals. Contemporary evidence suggests the opposite. As a veteran IRA man from the Irish war of Independence, Ryan had no love for the British Government. Nevertheless he had no illusions about the Nazis. Helmut Clissman, a German secret-service agent who lived in the same house as Ryan later wrote..."In Germany, Ryan regarded himself simply as a stranger.



The Last Parade

He hardly came into contact with the Nazis. In addition, his deafness saved him a good deal. Ryan consistently emphasised his independence....he was extremely sensitive about German propaganda, and at the outbreak of the war with the Soviet Union, he sneered at newspaper reports which spoke of hundreds of thousands of prisoners taken in the great encirclement battles". Ryan was never reconciled to the Nazi regime, and he refused to write or speak on Germany's behalf. He was encouraged by the German invasion of the USSR because he maintained that the defeat of the Nazis was then a certainty.

On the 13th January, 1943, Frank Ryan collapsed with a stroke. His health had steadily degenerated since his original capture in Spain. Francis Stuart, an Irish writer and academic (who has also testified to Ryan's refusal to support the Nazis) later wrote.. "He went to various hospitals. It was a bad time to be ill. All hospitals were crammed full with wounded. Food was poor and scarce, and air attacks heavier and heavier". In June, 1944, after considerable suffering, Frank Ryan died at Dresden-Loschwitz. The cause of death was pleurisy and pneumonia. On the 14th June, this indomitable Irish Socialist Republican was buried in the local cemetery, where his remains still lie, his grave marked by a small wooded cross, inscribed with the name "Francis Richards," under which he was known in Germany, with his own name in Irish underneath.

One who came back...

PADDY MacALLISTER

One volunteer who did survive and return to Ireland, was Paddy Mac Allister, from the Lower Falls in Belfast. Paddy still lives there and vividly remembers his experiences in Spain. Born in 1909 in Lincoln Street, he came through the Fianna to the I.R.A. which he joined in 1926. But unemployment at home forced him to emigrate to Canada in 1928, and there he worked at a variety of jobs, for several years. Then in the thirties as the depression worsened in Canada, Paddy Mac Allister became involved with the relief-strikes of the unemployed in Vancouver, at a time when Protestants and Catholics in Belfast were uniting in the same fight. For these activities, Paddy was jailed twice in Canada, ending up doing three months in the county jail. In these circumstances, his soc-



Paddy MacAllister

ialist politics developed rapidly, and in 1937, Mac Allister left for Spain, along with a group who intended joining the International Brigades.

They sailed from Vancouver to Dieppe, and then transferred by train to Perpignan, where they waited to cross the Pyrenees in to Spain. Setting off at 8.00 at night, they walked for around 12 hours across the mountains. Paddy remembers particularly that they were 'nt allowed to smoke or talk, and had to walk in single file as they were smuggled across the mountain border from France into Spain. Remembering the long climb, he says.. "Every peak I saw, I thought was the last one, but there always seemed to be another in front, higher than before".

Finally the volunteers arrived at a training-base in Figueras , where they were issued with a uniform of sorts. All those who had come from Canada were assigned to the recently formed Mac Kenzie-Papineau Battalion of the 15th International Brigade. The Battalion was named in honour of two Canadians involved in the 1837 revolt against the British Government in Canada. The new recruits spent a couple of months at Figueras, where they were trained in weaponry drilling and fieldcraft. Paddy remembers that the weapons-instructor was a Russian soldier, who trained them on Soviet rifles and machine-guns, while the Political Commisar at the base was an Irishman, Jackie Powers from Waterford, whose job was to look after the welfare of the men, and to ensure that they understood the political relevance of their actions. Thus every unit in the Brigades had a political commissar attached, who held equal rank with the unit o/c. At Figueras, one of the training sergeants was Paddy O' Sullivan, who had served in the Irish "Free State" Army, and who was later to be killed in the Sierra Pandols, towards the end of the war. Mac Allister remembers him as "a real professional".

When the Fascist offensive started on the Aragon front on the 9th March 1938, the Canadian group were moved up. Paddy remembers that they were driven backwards and forwards across the country by lorry several times, "probably to give the Fascist spotter-planes the idea that there were more Republican re-inforcements

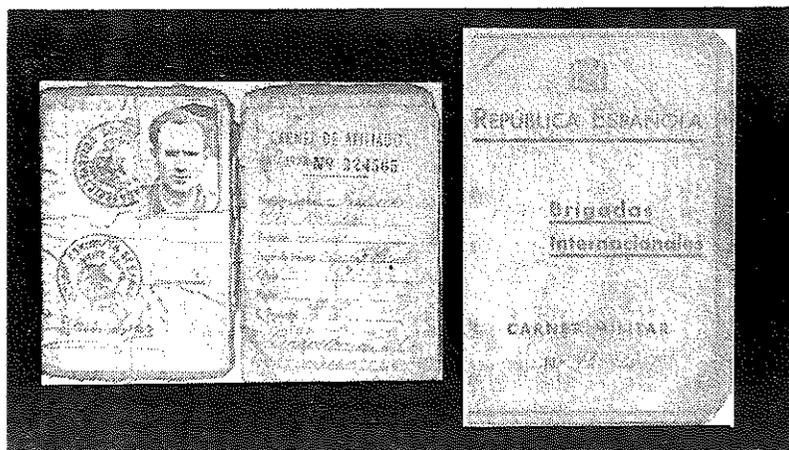
than there actually were". On the first day of action, their sergeant was killed by a bullet in the head. Gradually the Republican troops were forced to retreat, and the contingent Mac Allister was with ended up "digging in", along the banks of the Ebro river, where they stayed until July. During that month, the major Ebro offensive was launched by the Republican Army, and Paddy remembers crossing the river in a flotilla of small boats. As the Republicans advanced, at first they encountered little resistance, and they captured numerous Fascist soldiers. During the advance, however, a bomb hit a vine-yard beside the group, and although Paddy Mac Allister was 'nt wounded, five others near him were killed instantly. Among the casualties was Jackie Patterson, a Protestant from Dee Street on the Newtonards Road, Belfast. Mac Allister had first met him when both men were active on the relief committees in Canada. Paddy also remembers meeting Jim Straney from Ballymacarret who had been in the local IRA unit, and who was then with a different battalion in the 15th Brigade. Straney had only recently arrived in Spain, and Mac Allister remembers having a long talk about home. Jim Straney was killed in action the next day.

In general, Paddy recalls, their equipment "was 'nt great", and for example, the rifles they had tended to over-heat after a short time firing. Just before he left Spain, a new shipment of Czech weapons arrived, which Paddy considered to be "very neat" and which he regrets he never got the chance to use in action. The men at the front got the best of the food that was available, but Paddy remembers a diet of "beans, beans and more beans", and because the local water was disease-laden, the volunteers had to slake their thirst with local wine, which "was 'nt bad, but does 'nt compare with Guinness". Then on the retreat from the Ebro, Paddy and his group had nothing to eat for several days, and he still remembers a hastily-roasted leg of rabbit, presented to him by a French officer in the Brigades, "as the nicest thing I've ever tasted."

As the advance continued, there was a major battle in the Gandesa area, and in the end the Republican offensive was turned

into a Republican rout. Many of Mac Allister's comrades were slaughtered, and he himself was cut off in a small gully in the Sierra del Caballs with several others. As they attempted to get away, Mac Allister was hit three times, and although two of the hits were spent bullets and only stunned him, the third hit him in the arm. It was two days before he could get hospital treatment, and during that time, part of the bullet was sticking out of his arm. When he was finally admitted to hospital, Paddy read of the decision to recall the International Brigades, and thus, still recovering from his wound, he arrived in Belfast on Christmas Eve, 1938.

Today, he looks back on his experience in Spain all those years ago, and he says, "I don't regret it, I'd go again, but I'd be better prepared". His most prized possession is his Brigade identity card, which details his service. Nowadays, in retirement after 23 years in Belfast shipyards, he is a firm supporter of the civil rights movement, and recalls that in the days when the barricades went up in the lower Falls in '69, he did his stint as a vigilante like everybody else. Certainly the British Army take no chances with the 68-year-old veteran of Spain.. he has been interviewed by them several times since the start of the troubles. And as Paddy says... "The fight is the same today as it was in the thirties... it's a class struggle. Religion shouldn't come into it".



Brigade Identity Card

Title: No Pasaran! The Story of the Irish Volunteers
who served with the International Brigades
Organisation: Belfast Republican Clubs
Date: 1975

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