

Knockainey talk, 22.7.2017

## **Frank Ryan's role in the International Brigades, December 1938-June 1938**

Before I start I want to draw your attention to three matters:

- 1) Much of what I shall say is on the rollups which you can read during the break.
- 2) Many of the questions raised here tonight are dealt with in detail in my book which is on sale here tonight.
- 3) You might like to look at a video I made on Limerick men in the International Brigades. Just go to the Youtube page and type in "Limerick men in the International Brigades".

The International Brigades were set up in Albacete, south of Madrid, in October 1936. It was an initiative of the Communist International. Also in late October the first substantial Soviet arms shipments arrived in Spain, including the most modern fighters and tanks.

Here I point out some of the bases and battle sites. **(Image 1)**

The leader of the Brigades was a French Deputy, Andre Marty **(Image 2)**, who was also a member of the Executive Committee of the Communist International and a close advisor of Stalin's.

250 native-born Irishmen served in the Brigades which were soon incorporated into the Army of the Spanish Republic. Conditions of service were harsh with inadequate pay and food; unfavourable battle scenarios were the rule in situations where the Republicans were outnumbered and not as well-equipped as Franco's troops thanks to the massive influx of men and weaponry from the fascist states of Germany and Italy. As is known, the democracies of Britain and France hindered all attempts by the legal Spanish Government to purchase arms abroad, while at the same time doing nothing to stop Italian and German intervention.

The IB Irish contingent differed from others in at least two ways. First, only just over 40 per cent of the Irish were Communists, compared to 70-80 per cent from America or Britain. Not a few of the Irish had been in the IRA and/or Republican Congress or were members of the British or Irish labour parties. Second, the Irish went to Spain from all English-speaking countries: only about 60 from Ireland itself, over 160 from the UK, 12 from the USA, 30 from Canada and 3 from Australia. The volunteers came from 30 Irish counties, with large contingents from Dublin, Belfast, Cork, Derry and Waterford. Casualties among the Irish reflected the heavy "butcher's bill" of the Spanish war: over 70 were killed in battle, died from wounds, were posted as "missing believed dead", succumbed to disease or died from other causes. This is a mortality rate of over 30 per cent, twice the death toll of soldiers in WW1. Nearly every Irish volunteer was wounded at least once, and of the 30+ deserters,

most went back to the front later, with only 12 managing to get home with the assistance of Irish and British diplomats.

From his arrival in Spain on 15 December 1936 Frank Ryan was recognized as the leader of the Irish and was soon made Captain. **(Image 3)** His hearing impairment or heart condition did not seem to diminish his high standing for few foreigners reached his military rank. Furthermore, his status as a non-Communist did not diminish his authority; Ryan stayed in the leftwing Republican tradition and remained a practising Catholic. There were many like him in the Republican zone, as members of the Left Republican Party which was present in the Government He also had later the unofficial rank of deputy Commissar of the British battalion of the 15<sup>th</sup> Brigade. The British communist leader Harry Pollitt had requested of Marty that the all Irish be in one unit. However, once Ryan was in Spain, British communist commissars, we believe, engineered that he was separated from his men training in the village of Madrigueras near Albacete and they arranged his transfer to the 12<sup>th</sup> International Brigade (composed of Germans and French) on the Madrid front. This is due, I believe, to the notoriously negative attitude British communists leaders showed towards Irish Republicanism, fearing that the big IRA tail was wagging the diminutive Communist Party of Ireland dog. After all, most Irish Communists had an IRA record. So Ryan was shunted out of "harm's way" and seconded to the Political Commissariat of the Brigades, the propaganda department, where he excelled as a journalist and made several broadcasts on Radio Madrid.

Ryan visited the Irish in Madrigueras at Christmas before 43 of them were sent to the south near Cordoba, as part of the French 14<sup>th</sup> International Brigade. The CO of the Anglo-Irish No. 1 Company was George Nathan, a Londoner and ex-British Army officer **(Image 4)**. As Nathan had served in the Auxiliary Division of the RIC in Ireland in 1920/21, some Irish volunteers felt he was personally responsible for political assassinations. It is now widely accepted that Nathan was involved in the killings of the Limerick mayors in March 1921. Confronted with his murky past, Nathan admitted his guilt, said he had been under orders but was now putting his services at the disposal of the anti-fascist cause, not least because his people, the Jews, were being persecuted by Hitler. Frank Ryan and other leading Irish volunteers accepted Nathan's confession and came later to admire the Londoner's courage up to his death in action in July 1937.

The Lopera attack near Cordoba was a disaster and seven Irishmen were killed. When Frank Ryan was again in Madrid in January and the remnants of No.1 Company were fighting there, rows between Irish and British volunteers came to a head in Madrigueras village. This was ostensibly about excessive drinking and fighting. Not that the English or Scottish were better able to hold the cheap wine and spirits, the dispute was exploited by representatives of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), to get rid of the nucleus of Frank Ryan's supporters.

Wilfred McCartney **(Image 4a)**, another ex-Auxiliary, the commander of the British battalion being formed, had served gaol sentences for attempted theft of a jeweler (1926, 9 months)

and spying for the Soviet Union (1928, 10 years). In Spain he acted like a harsh WW1 British Army officer, gaoling men on minor charges, including two supporters of Frank Ryan, Donal O'Reilly and Terry Flanagan, the father of the actress Fionnuala Flanagan. Macartney was obviously unsuitable and was soon removed. Dave Springhall, 15<sup>th</sup> Brigade commissar in Madrigueras, was instrumental in getting rid of the most politically active Irish because they had little faith in him or McCartney.

Springhall called a meeting on 12 January and about 40 Irish voted by two to one to transfer to the American battalion in training nearby. This was totally against Frank Ryan's policy, who in a New Year's address to the Irish volunteers, had urged the Irish to fight alongside their British brothers until the Irish were strong enough to form their own company. Ryan and his closest allies protested and it was decided in Albacete on 2 February that the Irish should be re-united and placed under a Scottish comrade with military experience. Dividing the Irish was seen as a grave error by Albacete HQ and by some leading British communists in Spain, such as British battalion commissar George Aitken.

The compromise of 2 February was never put into effect because all volunteers were rushed to the front to head off the offensive when Franco's forces crossed the Jarama River south of Madrid. Their goal was to cut the Madrid-Valencia road. **(Image 5)** On the third day of action for the British battalion, 14 February, Ryan and Jock Cunningham rallied the troops retreating in panic, and re-occupied their previous positions. **(Image 6)** Ryan was wounded in the action, suffering a bruised leg and a bullet in his left arm. **(Image 7)** Ryan left Spain with two Irish volunteers for home leave in late February 1937, partly because his wound was not healing, partly because he wanted to rejuvenate left-wing Irish Republicanism by starting a new weekly paper (**Irish Democrat**). During his home leave from 10 March to mid-June, Frank Ryan reverted to type in a way: printing **An Phoblacht** for the illegal IRA and getting out the first number of **Irish Democrat** in late March. Ryan was appalled by the 30 Irish mortalities in Spain to date (Lopera, Madrid, Jarama) and actively discouraged recruitment of new volunteers from Ireland. He went to London for a weekend in April with Sean Murray, Ireland's leading communist, and was given £280 from the British CP to launch the Democrat.

Ryan worked night and day printing the paper but he did take part in the banned anti-Coronation (crowning of George VI) rally in Dublin on 11 May. The broadly-based Republican marchers were savagely beaten by the Gardai: Tom Barry's head was badly cut, and Ryan had his nose broken. Shortly after he returned to Spain in mid-June, Ryan began to arrange for the repatriation of those Irishmen who he felt had "done enough". Ryan was at the front during the battle of Brunete (July 1937), the first major offensive of Republican troops. Their task was to squeeze out the fascist salient to the west of the capital, but as you can see **(Image 8)**, their lines of communications were too long and the 15<sup>th</sup> Brigade never took Mosquito Ridge, their objective. The battle was fought in intense heat and the fascist forces had complete air superiority. The battle, like that of Jarama, was a draw, both sides were exhausted by the end of July.

Here we see Frank Ryan with a group of repatriation cases after Brunete. **(Image 9)** It is to his credit that about 40 Irishmen were demobilized and sent home in the second half of 1937. His second task was to re-build the British battalion after Brunete, when the unit was reduced from 400 to 42. His third task was to collect memoirs and photographs for the book he edited, **The Book of the 15<sup>th</sup> Brigade**, which was published in early March 1938. This involved more time spent at the headquarters of the Political Commissariat in Calle Velasquez 63 **(Image 11)** in central Madrid. This was probably Ryan's best time in Spain, whether he visiting the front **(Image 11a)** unsuccessfully wooing the female staff **(Image 12)** or enjoying a night on the town with Ernest Hemingway, that writer with a functioning hotel bathroom and an inexhaustible supply of whiskey **(Image 13)**.

With the **Book of the 15<sup>th</sup> Brigade** on the rolling presses, Ryan was planning to return to Ireland for St. Patrick's Day 1938 and there were vague plans to send him to the USA on a propaganda tour afterwards. However, republican lines broke in Aragon in the second week of March and all available IB men were sent to the front. Here we see the protracted line of retreat of the British battalion. **(Image 14)**

Frank Ryan did the decent thing and joined his comrades at the front, marching in the ranks without a rifle. The British battalion was sent ahead to hold a line outside the town of Calaceite and relieve men of the 11<sup>th</sup> Lister Brigade. However, that Spanish unit had retreated, the front was wide open. At dawn on 31 March the British and Irish ran smack into Italian armoured columns **(Image 15)**. We visited the area three years ago and found the bend in the old road where the disaster happened **(Image 16,17)**. Many were killed in the chaos, others took to the hills and over 100 volunteers from Britain and Ireland were taken prisoner. Almost all of them survived because their Italian captors were eager to exchange them for countrymen taken prisoner by the Republic. In contrast, most Americans captured during the March retreats by Spanish troops were shot on the spot.

Frank Ryan calmed his fellow POWs, gave them encouragement and assumed responsibility as an officer. The men were locked up in a church in Alcaniz and then taken to Zaragoza further north, where they were seen by journalists. So Ryan's family in Ireland soon learned of the tragedy and interventions by the Irish Government began immediately. Pleas for Ryan's release were later sent to Franco by public bodies in Ireland, member of the Dail, the House of Commons, the Papal Nuntio Pascal Robinson and even by Frank's old adversary Eoin O'Duffy. On 6 April over 600 Internationals (including Americans and Germans) arrived in San Pedro de Cardena, a disused monastery near the city of Burgos. **(Image 18)** Ryan was the recognized leader of the prisoners, who were frequently beaten and given starvation rations. There was no medical treatment, few toilets and only one water tap for hundreds of men who tried to wash without soap or towels. When the first British POWs were released for repatriation on 12 June, Ryan was led away separately by two armed guards and then by car to Burgos Central Prison **(Image 19)** where he was incarcerated until 25 July 1940. His trial on 15 June was a farce. Franco's military jurists charged Republican soldiers with "Rebellion", i.e. having defended the Republic they had "rebelled against the Spanish State".

The very opposite was the case of course, but the tribunals continued their deadly work until 1945, and about 20,000 shooting sentences were carried out after the war's end in March 1939. Frank Ryan's death sentence was based on his record in Spain, his return there from home leave and because he was a leading left-wing figure in Ireland. Denunciations from Ireland may have played a role. It was not until November 1939 that the sentence was commuted to 30 years' imprisonment. At the beginning, Ryan's cellmates were taken out daily to be executed. He was handed over to German intelligence on 25 July 1940, a solution in which he, the Irish Government or his tireless friend Ambassador Kerney played no part. For it was deal between the German and Francoist military intelligence services.