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‘The Spanish trenches are here in Ireland’: Frank Ryan and the lost mentality of the Connolly Column

Frank Ryan is a hero of the left. The Irish left doesn't have many heroes, not for want of material, but because the status requires persistent and public recognition, and the left doesn't feature much in the public narrative of Irish history. But Ryan has made it into the mainstream, and is celebrated in songs by the likes of Christy Moore and The Pogues. Undoubtedly the process has had everything to do with the Spanish Civil War. After decades of silence on Spain, 14 memorials to the Connolly Column were unveiled between 1984 and 2008, and I think we've had at least 14 more since then. Commemoration has usually more to do with the present than the past. It tells us more about politics than history. So the heroic status of Ryan is also testament to his relevance today.

Up to the 1980s, Ryan was iconic figure in the rockpool of socialist republicanism. Since then, he has become better-known, but as the leader of the Connolly Column. His early life in the republican movement is presented as a backdrop to his more illustrious career in Spain. Many see it as being in contradiction to his role as an International Brigader, and juxtapose the two. The first biography of Ryan, by Seán Cronin in 1980, was published by Sinn Féin/The Workers' Party and sub-titled *The Search for the Republic*. The most recent biography, by Adrian Hoar in 2014, was titled *In Green and Red*, making a distinction between socialism and republicanism. A similar approach was taken in Desmond Bell's 2012 documentary *The Enigma of Frank Ryan*. Bell also emphasised the Ryan who went to Nazi Germany after Spain. In *The Enigma*, Ryan tells his story in a series of flashbacks from his flat in wartime Dresden. Publicity for the film included a lot of Swastikas. Though I think Bell's motivation was simply box-office, it's a point that critics of republicanism like to make. Their argument is that Ryan's adventure in Spain was just froth. Republicanism's claim to be internationalist and socialist was a fraud, and Ryan exposed that in his decision to go with the Nazis. In *The Eagle Has Landed*, 'Liam Devlin' is a former IRA man, captured by the Falangists, who agrees to join a Nazi plot to kidnap Churchill. Unfortunately the German connection will always stick to Ryan, for the same reason that Adolf Hitler is rarely off our television screens and every evening the Wehrmacht marches through our living rooms.

But in this paper I'd like to address this question of nationalism and internationalism, and explore the mentality of the Connolly Column through the mindset of Ryan. And I'd like to argue that engagement with Spain was a logical conclusion to the evolution of left republicanism, and that the Connolly Column saw it as an extension of the struggle in Ireland rather than a new departure.

Frank Ryan

Ryan was born at Bottomstown, Elton, on 11 September 1902, the son of Vere and Anne Ryan. There were nine children in the family, five sons and four daughters. Both parents were National School teachers, and relatively well-off. Frank was educated at St Colman's College Fermoy, Rockwell, and UCD. In St Colman's he showed a rebellious streak and joined

the Volunteers. On leaving school, in the summer of 1920, he joined the IRA's East Limerick Brigade.

Why Ryan opposed the Treaty is not known. He was now in UCD, reading Celtic Studies. It might seem an obvious choice, given his militancy and the fact that from his family he had acquired a love of books and the Irish language. In fact he was somewhat unusual among republicans in his commitment to the language. Many leaders of the language revival movement took the pro-Treaty side, arguing that the language could not afford to wait another generation of struggle and it was vital to get a state up and running immediately. Republicans ended to be more interested in politics than culture. After further service with the East Limerick Brigade, a war wound, and internment, he was released in November 1923 and returned to UCD. He graduated in 1925.

Over the next 12 years, Ryan lived in Dublin, working as an Irish language teacher, a journalist, editing *Irish Travel* for the Tourist Board and *An tÓglach* for the IRA, and serving as adjutant of the Dublin Brigade, IRA. He was also consolidating his reputation as an orator, an organizer, and a man who was fearless in confronting the CID or the Guards. In 1930 he spent a few weeks in the US, speaking to Clan na Gael branches up and down the east coast.

In November 1925, the IRA declared its independence from Sinn Féin began to move left. Historians usually treat this process as the outcome of an internal re-thinking, under the influence of Peadar O'Donnell. O'Donnell regarded Sinn Féin too as narrowly political – its policy was simply to fight another civil war with the Free State – and felt the IRA could develop as a social movement without it. But the Communist International, or Comintern, was also a factor. The Comintern had been established in Moscow in 1919 as the controlling body of all communist parties. Lenin's idea was that it shouldn't be a talking shop like the social democratic international, but the general staff of a world party. Up to the late 1930s, it kept its affiliates on a fairly tight leash. Since 1924, the Comintern had recognised Big Jim Larkin's Irish Worker League as its Irish section. Big Jim could be a great leader, but he could also be very egotistical and jealous, and he was proving to be a difficult man to work with. This led the Comintern to try to by-pass Larkin by cultivating links with republicans. O'Donnell suggests that Ryan's intellectual evolution was very similar to his own: that republicanism led to anti-imperialism, which in turn led to socialism. O'Donnell claimed that the biggest influence on Ryan's contemporary outlook was the League Against Imperialism, which was a Comintern front. The League was founded at a meeting of the Congress of Oppressed Nationalities in Brussels in 1927. Ryan was present as an IRA delegate. That same year the IRA pledged support for Russia in the event of an Anglo-Soviet war.

These trends began to take shapes in the early 1930s. Comintern agents formed the Revolutionary Workers' Groups as a step towards the re-establishment of a CP free of Larkin's control. O'Donnell and Ryan promoted Saor Éire, as a broad-based left-republican movement. Unfortunately for the left, there was a significant shift in Papal policy in 1930. Up to this, there had been broad toleration of communism in the Free State. The Vatican regarded the Bolshevik revolution as an opportunity. It reckoned the Bolsheviks would displace the Orthodox Church, and economic problems would soon take care of the Bolsheviks. If the Vatican could get concordat from the Soviet government, allowing for the

creation of a Catholic hierarchy, it would open the door to the conversion of Russia. Moscow held out some hope of a concordat up to 1928 and allowed freedom of worship for Catholics, but in 1929 Stalin denounced religion as 'petty bourgeois deviationism'. Pope Pius XI replied in 1930 with a call for expiatory masses in all churches to atone for the crimes of Bolshevism. This gave Irish bishops the green light to attack the communists and crush related groups like Saor Eire. Republicans opposed the clerical assault to begin with, but by 1933 the IRA decided that the communists were more trouble than they were worth. When the second CPI was founded in June 1933, the IRA formally disowned communism as irreligious.

This posed a problem for Ryan and O'Donnell, both of whom wanted close co-operation with the communists. O'Donnell had offered to join the RWG in 1930 if they would make him leader – an offer Moscow rejected. It's likely that Ryan wanted the discipline and the international prestige associated with the Comintern. He had been shocked by the poverty in America that followed the Wall St crash, and saw Russia as a country of no unemployment and rapid industrialization. Like many republicans he saw the Bolsheviks as the experts in revolution. And it was easier to believe in a movement if it was part of a world project, which had succeeded in one sixth of the globe and was completing the job in the other five-sixths. But he didn't like the command structure or the blanket acceptance of Leninism that went with the CP. And he and O'Donnell were convinced that only an Irish spirit of radicalism could mobilize the people, as Davitt or Parnell had done, or as Sinn Féin had done in 1918. So what they wanted was a linkage of republicanism and communism.

In 1934, they proposed a Republican Congress to the IRA army convention. It was defeated, only by a very narrow margin and the IRA was moving left and trying to work with the Labour Party. But that was no use to Ryan or O'Donnell who wanted to work with the communist party. So they left the IRA to launch the Republican Congress.

The Republican Congress split at its first convention in September 1934 in Rathmines Town Hall. It was constituted as a united front, with affiliations from the CPI, tenants' groups, and trade unions. O'Donnell and Ryan wanted it to continue that way. Others, led by Michael Price wanted it to become a new political party. The Comintern feared the idea of a new left party, and was happy to back O'Donnell and Ryan. The problem was the slogan, always important for the communists. Ryan and O'Donnell wanted the Rathmines conference to commit itself to 'a Republic'. Price wanted it to demand a more radical sounding 'workers' republic'. Moscow wanted the CPI to back the Ryan-O'Donnell proposal, but didn't want to be seen to backing a 'republic' against a 'workers' republic'. Eventually, the Comintern decided that the CPI should put forward its own motion for a 'workers and farmers' republic'. The instruction was sent in a secret radio signal to Harry Pollitt, secretary of the CPGB. But it arrived too late, and Pollitt never passed it on to Dublin.

So in Rathmines, Ryan and O'Donnell called for a 'republic'. Price called for a 'workers' republic'. At this point the communists should have called for a 'workers' and farmers' republic'. But they didn't. They backed Ryan and O'Donnell, and their motion was passed. The Price faction walked out. The split and the intense anti-communist atmosphere made it difficult for the Republican Congress to operate, and it was virtually defunct by July 1936.

The CPI too had dwindled from 250 members on its foundation, to less than 100. Far from blaming each other, the Republican Congress and the CPI drew closer together in the face of adversity. The moreso as the CPI general secretary, Sean Murray, was an old IRA man and very close to O'Donnell.

With the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, O'Donnell was keen to help the Spanish Republic. Ryan declined initially, saying 'the Spanish trenches are here in Ireland'. In other words, he sympathised with the Spanish government, but felt the Irish should fight their own battles first. He said it was Cardinal McRory and his support for O'Duffy's Irish Brigade that persuaded him that there had to be an Irish response. O'Duffy himself was something of a hate-figure for republicans, blamed for the massacre of IRA prisoners at Ballyseedy during the Civil War and Garda harassment in his days as Garda Commissioner. In December 1936, Ryan personally led over 40 men to join the International Brigades.

Mentalities

There was no escaping the Spanish question in Ireland between the summers of 1936 and 1937. Per capita, Ireland sent more volunteers to the war than any other country; of course, most fought for Franco. That's always been a puzzle to historians who believe that Ireland was insular and isolated before we joined the EEC. Today the Connolly Column are perceived as prophetic forerunners of modern, liberal, secular Ireland: men who escaped the parochialism of Irish nationalism to embrace European anti-fascism. In Northern Ireland, it's emphasised that volunteers came from both traditions and found common ground in the fight against fascism. In reality, Northern volunteers came from different religious backgrounds, but they were almost all republicans. And southern volunteers, were definitely not modernists.

A good insight into the mentality of the Connolly Column is *Good-Bye, Twilight: Songs of Struggle in Ireland*, a collection of 75 poems and ballads by forty Irish writers and workers, all 'showing unmistakably out of the experience of the proletariat, that revolutionary poets, playwrights, and novelists are developing an art which reveals more forces in the world than the love of the lecher and the pride of the Narcissist'. The editor was Leslie Daiken, a Dublin Jew and Republican Congress activist. Daiken's introduction to *Good-Bye Twilight* actually attacked modernists. He saw himself and his fellow republicans as 'authenticists'. In other words, he was rejecting the idea that Irish culture was backward and needed cosmopolitanism, and arguing that the key to revolution in Ireland was to be found in its republican traditions. Attributing 'almost every anomaly in recent Irish social events...to the betrayal of the national aspirations by the Treaty of 1921 [his emphasis]', he delineated two main tendencies in Irish poetry: 'modernist' and 'traditionalist'. 'Modernism' was flight: 'traditionalism' was fight. 'Modernists' had tried to escape from Irish reality; their bourgeois aesthetic, cosmopolitanism, and 'fashionable anti-clericalism' amounted to a self-indulgent excuse for politics. However, according to Daiken, the sharpening economic crises were pushing the middle-classes to the left and bringing the 'modernists' into the organic struggle never abandoned by the mainly republican 'traditionalists'.

A similar sensibility is a feature of the satirical ballads on O'Duffy and the Christian Front by 'Somhairle MacAlastair', pseudonym of ex-IRA man Diarmuid MacGoille Phádraig. Most are hilarious. 'Ballyseedy befriends Badajoz', the title linking sites of massacres of Irish and Spanish republicans, is bitter:

O'Duffy calls his 'godly band' and leads them to the fray,
(They murdered Liam Mellows upon Our Lady's Day),
God help you, Spanish Connollys, if Lombard Murphy's crew
Should blood their drunken hellhounds and send them after you...

O'Donnell's was in Sitges, near Barcelona, seeking peace and quiet to write a book in July 1936. *Salud!*, an account of his time in Spain at the start of the war, is almost obsessive in finding parallels with Ireland. He opened the book with flashbacks to an episode in which he was caught up in a dispute over a sub-post office on Achill Island.

I can imagine few things more exciting than to watch the days unfold against home conditions under a foreign sky; your own village is most exciting when you meet it between strange mountains...I walked into a Civil War in Achill just as I walked into one in Spain, and it was the same Civil War...A picture of Achill is a map of Spain.

Wherever the Irish in Spain formed a critical mass, they did what they could to assert their distinctive politics. The James Connolly centuria commemorated Easter Week, 1916 on the Jarama front in March 1937, and organized a more official commemoration, with formal XV Brigade participation, on 12 May, the twenty-first anniversary of Connolly's execution. The gathering pledged to fight fascism internationally, and 'imperialism, native and British' at home. Just over a year later the Irish on the Ebro front marked the high point in the republican calendar with a ceremony for Wolfe Tone, founder of the United Irishmen. Drawing comparisons between Spain and Ireland became a theme of 'communist republicanism'. With their strong sense of history, republicans found all sorts of connections: O'Duffy and Franco; the misuse of religion by the bishops; the nationalism of the Irish, the Basques, and the Catalans; the struggle of the landless against landlords; stories of Republican atrocities and loyalist propaganda against the insurgents in 1798; and the hysteria for 'Catholic Spain' in 1936 and 'Catholic Belgium' in 1914.

As the war progressed, the CPI took an increasingly republican line, even to the point of jeopardizing the effort for Spain. The CPI's relations with the IRA improved when Tom Barry became chief of staff in June 1936. Barry ended the IRA's proscription on CPI membership—introduced in 1933—and the party found him 'very sympathetic and helpful'. During a convalescence back in Ireland in the spring of 1937, Ryan resumed collaboration with the IRA, for the first time since the split in 1934. He was also joined by his parents from Elton, for a time. In March 1937, the CPI retired its organ, the *Worker*, in favour of the *Irish Democrat*, which was published jointly with the Republican Congress and the Socialist Party, Northern Ireland. The *Irish Democrat* survived tensions over Spain. The Socialist Party was suspicious of communists and objected when Ryan followed the Comintern line and denounced the POUM as 'fascists in the rear'. It did not survive tensions over Ireland. Ryan

and the CPI complained of having to exclude IRA targeted material to accommodate the Socialist Party, whose membership was at once largely Protestant, anti-partition, and anti-IRA. The *Irish Democrat* collapsed in December when the cash-rich Socialist Party withdrew its support over the paper's republican slant. Ironically, the party's sizable war chest was the balance of compensation for the burning of its hall by loyalists in 1921.

Conclusion

Ryan had returned to Spain in June, rejecting pleas to stay in Ireland. Very conscious of the fact that in recruiting for the IBs, he had sent men to their deaths, and shocked by the casualty rate suffered by the Irish in the battle of Jarama, he insisted that he could not stay in Ireland and leave his volunteers in Spain. Today, he is remembered as a brave man, with the vision to see beyond Ireland and understand the dangers of fascism. Those who know him better will also know that he was a talented journalist and orator. But he deserves to be remembered too for his ideas, and he was a socialist republican. However popular or unpopular that might be, it was the truth.

Ryan explained his position in a broadcast on Radio Madrid on Sunday 31 October 1937:

I recall that when we came here first, a leading Irish newspaper...depicted us as idealists who went to fight other people's battles...

No interpretation could be more incorrect...

In the task of freeing Ireland in our generation, where was initiative shown – if not from men like Kit Conway, Charles Donnelly, William Beatty, Peter Daly and scores of other Irishmen whose graves are today on the battlefields of Spain? Just as these had the correct conception of a free Ireland – the conception of Tone, of Connolly, of Mellows, so they had a correct conception of Ireland's place on the earth.

For Frank Ryan, the Spanish trenches were always in Ireland.