“WE CAME BECAUSE OUR OPEN EYES COULD SEE NO OTHER WAY”:

THE LIVES AND EXPERIENCES OF THE INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEERS DURING THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

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SUBMITTED TO PROFESSORS LINDA GERSTEIN AND ALEXANDER KITROEFF
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF HISTORY 400b:
SENIOR THESIS SEMINAR

APRIL 25, 2014
ABSTRACT

The Spanish Civil War of 1936-1939 began as a military revolt by those opposed to the new left-wing Popular Front government, but the world soon interpreted it as a war between Communism and Fascism. This idea was reinforced by the support offered by fascist Germany and Italy to the rebel Nationalists, while the Soviet Union, through the Comintern, supported the beleaguered Spanish Republic. These nations quickly co-opted the conflict, using the Nationalists and the Republicans as proxies through which to fight their own ideological battles. While the Germans and Italians offered the Nationalists use of their soldiers, the Republic used the Comintern to attract an estimated 35,000 individuals from all over the world to volunteer to serve in the newly raised International Brigades. While the Nationalists did not actively search for volunteers, a number of individuals from an estimated 53 nations volunteered to fight for them.

In this thesis I shall examine the experiences and motivations of four volunteers – the ex-Irish Republican Army officers Eoin O’Duffy and Frank Ryan, who volunteered for the Nationalists and the Republicans respectively, and the Cambridge-educated English intellectuals Peter Kemp and John Cornford, who volunteered for the Nationalists and the Republicans respectively. Through an examination of these four lives, I shall show that, while they were for the most part deeply concerned by the situation in Spain, their decisions to volunteer were products of the political situations in their home countries of England and Ireland, and the Spanish Civil War served as a substitute for other wars that they were unable to fight.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the many people who helped me convert the germ of an idea one year ago into a full-fledged thesis. I would first like to thank the members of the Haverford History Department, who have provided me with support and encouragement during my four years at this school. This thesis would not have been possible without my First and Second Readers, Professors Linda Gerstein and Alexander Kitroeff, who guided me patiently through the thesis process. The idea from which this topic originated emerged during a class taken with Prof. Gerstein one year ago, and I would like to thank both professors for bearing with me as my topic changed frequently and dramatically over the course of the last year.

I would also like to thank my fellow History majors with whom I have gone through this experience, and especially my thesis buddies Ever Ramirez and Neilay Shah, for providing support and (generally constructive) criticism throughout this process. Finally, I would like to thank my family for everything.
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TIMELINE OF EVENTS

December 6, 1921  Anglo-Irish Treaty signed.

June 28, 1922  Irish Civil War begins.

May 24, 1923  Irish Civil War ends.

April 14, 1931  Second Republic established in Spain; King Alfonso XIII flees to Rome.

February 22, 1933  Eoin O’Duffy dismissed as Chief of Police of the Irish Free State; he subsequently enters politics.

November 19, 1933  The Spanish Confederation of the Autonomous Right wins the Spanish National Elections.

1934  O’Duffy’s fascist Army Comrades Association (the ‘Blushirts’) is banned.

February 1934  The Hunger Marchers pass through the University of Cambridge.

April 8, 1934  Frank Ryan leaves the IRA to found the left-wing Republican Congress.

1935  Sectarian violence in Belfast drives many Catholic residents of Northern Ireland south to the Irish Free State.

February 16, 1936  The Popular Front comes to power in Spain.

May 3, 1936  The Popular Front wins the French National Elections.

July 18, 1936  The Spanish military revolts against the Popular Front government; the Spanish Civil War begins.
August 8, 1936  John Cornford arrives in Barcelona.

August 14, 1936  Cornford enlists in the P.O.U.M. militia.

September 16, 1936  Cornford returns to England to raise fresh troops.

October 6, 1936  Cornford leaves England with six new volunteers.

November 1936  Peter Kemp leaves London for Spain.

December 20, 1936  Frank Ryan's Irish Brigade arrives in Spain.

December 22, 1936  Eoin O'Duffy's Irish Brigade arrives in Spain.

December 28, 1936  John Cornford is killed in battle near the village of Villa del Rio.

April 16, 1937  O'Duffy's Irish Brigade is disbanded.

April 26, 1937  The Basque town of Guernica is bombed by German and Italian airplanes seconded to the Nationalists.

March 31, 1938  Ryan is captured by Italian soldiers fighting for the Nationalists.

April 1, 1939  The Spanish Civil War ends with a Nationalist victory.

July 1939  Kemp leaves Spain.
INTRODUCTION

Tell them in England, if they ask
What brought us to these wars,
To this plateau beneath the night's
Grave manifold of stars –

It was not fraud or foolishness,
Glory, revenge, or pay:
We came because our open eyes
Could see no other way.

C. Day Lewis, *The Volunteer*, 1938

The outbreak of hostilities in Spain in 1936 would not have come as a surprise to many. The gap between the old landed elite and the poor peasantry was vast, and this was a nation deeply split along socio-economic and ideological lines. The success of the Russian Revolution of 1917 had proved to the world the viability of Communism, and with the formation of the Comintern in 1919 the Soviet Union began to play an active part in the spread of Communism across the globe. Leftwing political ideas and anti-monarchist rhetoric spread like wildfire across Spain, and with the proclamation of the Second Republic on April 14, 1931 King Alfonso XIII fled the country, settling eventually in Rome.

The Second Republic's early reforms were radical, and many accused it of being a Communist construct. While the right-wing Spanish Confederation of the Autonomous Right won the elections of 1933, this only led to an increase in working-class protests. The Second Republic was plagued by problems from its inception, but it was the formation of the Popular Front, a coalition of left-wing parties, that served as the catalyst for its downfall. Winning a majority of 263

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Members of Parliament to the right’s 156, the Popular Front won a landslide victory in the elections of February 1936. Members of the right saw the Popular Front as being a part of the Soviet Union’s stated goal of spreading communism across the world; a not unreasonable assumption, as Stalin was an advocate of the formation of Popular Fronts across Europe that would unite the parties of the left in order to contest national elections. While the proliferation of Popular Fronts in Europe was indeed encouraged by the Comintern, these coalitions were comprised of many more elements than just the Communists, including within their ranks liberals, socialists, anarchists and other members of the left. Those opposed to this leftward political shift turned to fascism, and the unpopular policies of the new Popular Front government led to the creation of the Falange, a right-wing party that rapidly gained popularity in the months after the contentious 1936 election.

The Popular Front government had succeeded in isolating itself from some of the most powerful factions in Spain. It had upset the Catholic Church by attempting to secularize the nation, the military establishment through a series of controversial reforms, including the forced retirement of a number of officers in a move perceived as being intended to reduce the political influence of the military, and the wealthy landholding class by nationalizing their estates and abolishing their special legal status. These groups were vehemently opposed to the Popular Front government that came into power in 1936, as well as to the various political groups on the left, and once Franco brought his army over from Morocco, they threw in their lot with him. The Civil War had begun.
The years between the world wars saw the allure of alternative political and economic ideologies such as Fascism, and especially Communism, grow across the world, as both intellectuals and members of the working class alike began to look consciously for alternative political systems. With the situation in Spain so perfectly portrayed as an attempt by the old Spanish elite and the fascist states of Europe to oppress the working class and prevent them from exercising their democratic rights, many across the world found themselves sympathetic to the cause of the Spanish Republic. While fascist Germany and Italy supported Franco’s Nationalists, the Communist Soviet Union was the only nation to actively support the Spanish Republic. While the Soviets did not send an army to Spain, their role in the formation of the International Brigades was a pivotal aspect of the war effort, both for its military as well as its propaganda value. The initial trickle of international volunteers had by the end of 1936 turned into a flood, even though travel restrictions enforced by the Non-Intervention Committee prevented many from reaching Spain. These volunteers came from a variety of backgrounds, and were drawn to the Civil War in Spain for a variety of reasons, many of which had little to do with Spain itself.

This war was the product of a pattern of historical events going back to the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789, and was a reaction to the complex socio-economic dynamics of Spain. However, the principal participants of the Civil War subscribed to modern political ideologies such as socialism, communism, anarchism and fascism, through which they interpreted the historical tensions that had led

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inexorably to the outbreak of hostilities. The international volunteers saw this war through the lens of these ideologies, and ignored the vast historical context in favor of more contemporary, and inherently incomplete, narratives that were influenced by the situations in their respective homelands.

It is doubtful that the Spanish Civil War would have acquired the degree of importance on the international stage that it did had it occurred in another decade. Europe in 1936 was a continent on the verge of another world war, and the states and political ideologies fighting for supremacy within it needed a venue in which to release the building tensions. Spain provided such an arena, allowing the Communist Soviet Union to wage a proxy war against the capitalist west, as well as against the fascist states of Germany and Italy. The factions of the Spanish left and right were pawns in this twentieth century Great Game between these three rising powers, each of which did its best to mobilize aid for their chosen belligerent.³ While Germany and Italy lent the Nationalists soldiers and military apparatus, the Soviet Union used the vast reach of the Comintern to muster support for the Republicans. The International Brigades supplied an invaluable military function for the Spanish Republic, especially during the early, confused, months of the war when it was in desperate need of soldiers to replace those who had defected to the Nationalists, while also providing important propaganda value for the Comintern.⁴

To the many Europeans who volunteered to fight, this war was to be the first blow against the rise of fascism at home. The Germans and Italians had already

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⁴ Ibid., 2.
experienced first-hand the terrors of Hitler and Mussolini, and many of the Brigades’ initial volunteers were drawn from among exiles from these nations already residing in Madrid. Exiles from Italy, Germany, and other nations ruled by fascist or authoritarian right-wing regimes were eager for a chance to fight fascism; in the words of Emilio Lussu, an Italian exile, “We had a greater need of going to Spain than the Spanish Republic had need of us.” Indeed, many of them believed that “to defeat Franco is to defeat Hitler and Mussolini.” In early September 1936, Randolfo Pacciardi, an Italian émigré, had raised the idea of forming a legion of Italian volunteers, independent of any of the rival parties that comprised the Popular Front, to fight for the left. However, Largo Caballero, the new Prime Minister of Spain and Minister of War, was opposed to this idea. As the Republic’s military situation steadily worsened, the need for external aid became apparent. Representatives of the Comintern travelled to Madrid on October 22nd, and Caballero caved, handing over responsibility for the formation of these Brigades to the Comintern. The Brigades, originally conceived as a tool of anti-fascism, were to now be created as a propaganda machine for the Comintern. Communist parties across Europe and North America were ordered to send ‘volunteers’ to Spain, and the steady stream of recruits encouraged others, not affiliated with the party, to volunteer. Not all party members who travelled to Spain could be strictly described as volunteers, but it would also be unfair to say that none of them had volunteered freely. In truth their numbers were a mix; while many were indeed sent, and were only too happy to

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7 Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 440.
oblige, many more were inspired to volunteer by the events in Spain, and by Communist propaganda.

United by the common enemy of fascism, the men who volunteered for the Spanish Republic were frustrated by international neutrality in the face of the blatant involvement of Germany and Italy.\(^8\) One such German émigré, Wili, volunteered because he believed that an injustice was being done to Spain, for the rest of Europe had abandoned the Spanish Republic so totally that it was impossible to even get into the country by legal means.\(^9\) The Englishmen who volunteered for the International Brigades were primarily working class, and were invariably Communist Party members involved in the nascent labor movement. However, within their ranks were a number of young intellectuals, drawn to the labor movement and to the Party from a theoretical standpoint, before gaining practical experience. The Irish saw the conflict in Spain as being a continuation of their struggle with the English to ensure the freedom of Northern Ireland, especially in the wake of sectarian violence in Belfast in 1935 that had forced thousands of Catholics to flee south to the independent, and predominantly Catholic, Irish Free State.

Far fewer numbers volunteered for the Nationalists, as they had not caught the imagination of the world in the quite the manner of the Republicans. However, the popular perception of the Republic as being Communist and anti-Catholic led many conservatives to side with Nationalists. Franco was a military man, not a politician, and so he was not as tied to any particular ideology as his Republican

\(^8\) Acier, From Spanish Trenches, 76.
\(^9\) Ibid., 88.
counterparts were. He was opposed to Communism and to the policies of the Popular Front government, and like many in Spain believed that the present political system would lead the country to ruin. However, he was not a fascist in the mould of Hitler and Mussolini, even though he did subscribe to many fascist views. Likewise, many of those who volunteered to fight for the Nationalists, like the Englishman Peter Kemp, were not themselves fascists, but merely political conservatives and anti-communists, or, like the Irishmen who volunteered for O’Duffy’s Brigade, Catholics angered by the violently anti-Catholic behavior of the Republicans.

To many of these volunteers, the Spanish Civil War was to serve as a substitute for other wars that they wished to have been able to fight, but could not. Whether it was to strike a perceived blow against fascism, communism, or a colonial power, this war was a rare opportunity for disparate groups to participate in a major European conflict between groups seen to be subscribing to the major rival political ideologies of the 1930s.

In my thesis I shall examine how these individuals and their motivations fit into the broader narrative of the 1930s, and particularly the connection of the civil war in Spain with the Irish Independence movement and with the growing English labor movement. For this purpose I shall be examining the experiences in Spain of four men – the Irishmen Eoin O’Duffy and Frank Ryan, and the Cambridge graduates Peter Kemp and John Cornford. While these volunteers were indeed concerned by the situation in Spain, the Spanish cause was secondary to that of their own causes – for O’Duffy and Ryan, that of the future of Ireland, and for Kemp and Cornford anti-
communism and anti-fascism respectively. In my thesis I shall be examining the manner in which their individual decisions to volunteer were deeply influenced by the political situations in their home nations, and in which this impacted their wartime experiences.

Chapters 1 and 2 will focus on O’Duffy and Ryan, the Irish politicians who chose to lead Irish battalions for the Nationalists and the Republicans respectively, in bids to increase their personal prestige at home as well as to reintegrate Ireland into the global community. O’Duffy and Ryan had fought on opposite sides of the Irish Civil War that had broken out after the formation of the Irish Free State in 1922, and had a long history of political enmity. I shall compare their experiences in Spain, as well as their motivations for raising these Brigades, in order to understand why their Brigades suffered such remarkably different fates.

Chapters 3 and 4 will focus on Peter Kemp and John Cornford, both recent graduates of Trinity College, Cambridge, who chose to travel to Spain and volunteer for the Nationalists and Republicans respectively. I shall compare their experiences in Spain, as well their motivations for volunteering, in order to understand why they chose to volunteer for the side that they did, and how they were affected by these decisions as the war progressed.
I. Eoin O’Duffy

The Irish people were particularly interested in the civil war in Spain, Ireland being a Catholic nation recovering from a bloody and divisive civil war of its own. While the Irish government, preoccupied with the problems of re-building a shattered nation, followed the international stance of non-intervention, the powerful Catholic Church of Ireland was a firm supporter of Franco’s Nationalists. Although most of the world saw the war as a struggle between fascism and the left, the Church interpreted it as a war on Christianity itself. The anti-clerical aspects of the Republican cause were played up, and by the fall of 1936 the increasingly vocal pro-Franco faction seemed to have won Irish sympathies. The Church’s stance was decisive, with many who had little knowledge of the situation instinctively following its lead. However, there were many who questioned the motives of those propagating the ‘Christian Front,’ speculating that this was a political maneuver designed to increase their own influence in Ireland, and had little to do with Spain itself.10

General Eoin O’Duffy was a former Garda Commissioner, the title given to the Chief of Police of the Irish Free State, who had entered Irish politics in the 1933 after being dramatically dismissed from his post by Eamon de Valera, the American-born President of Ireland.11 The Irish Free State had been created in 1922 as a result of the Anglo-Irish Treaty that developed out of the 1921 Truce between the British and the Irish that ended the Irish War of Independence. The Treaty provided the entire

island of Ireland with dominion status within the British Empire, while simultaneously providing the northern province of Ulster with the option to rejoin the United Kingdom, an opportunity that it promptly exercised. Many saw the ratification of this treaty as a betrayal of Ireland. These critics took particular offense to the provision allowing Northern Ireland to remain within the United Kingdom, and to the provision giving Ireland dominion status within the British Empire, rather than complete independence.

The once-united Irish nationalist movement was left deeply and irrevocably split, and anti-treaty members of the Irish Republican Army initiated an insurrection, aiming to reignite hostilities with the British in the hope of uniting pro-treaty and anti-treaty Irishmen against a common enemy and winning complete independence for Ireland. However, in the wake of increasing violence by the anti-treaty faction and under heavy pressure from the British government to assert his authority, Michael Collins, the leader of the Irish treaty deputation, made the decision to attack the anti-treaty forces and initiate the Irish Civil War in June 1922. By accepting British aid in the ensuing war, he earned for himself the enmity of many Irishmen, and was assassinated on August 22nd, 1922. The civil war ended on May 24th, 1923 with a victory for the pro-treaty forces. Although short, the war was bloody and costly, leading to the deaths of many public figures, while also incurring a high economic cost due to the material destruction resulting from guerrilla warfare. O’Duffy, a key lieutenant of Collins, had fought on the pro-treaty side, while a young Frank Ryan had fought for the anti-treaty IRA. The wounds of the Irish Civil
War did not heal quickly, and as Ryan’s political career grew he and O’Duffy became bitter enemies.

O’Duffy was appointed Garda Commissioner in September 1922, and remained in that position until his removal by de Valera in 1933. O’Duffy was well respected throughout Ireland and many sympathized with his dismissal; he was determined to capitalize on his standing within Ireland to re-launch his own political career. Pro-treaty propagandists had already begun to compare the state of Ireland with the worsening situation in Spain, and to accuse de Valera’s government of having Communist sympathies. O’Duffy, like Franco, had the loyalty of the police and the army, although the Irish government took an important step towards neutering his growing power by removing him from his post as Garda Commissioner; indeed, there had been rumors that O’Duffy had been plotting a coup. Fascist rhetoric was becoming commonplace among certain pro-treaty sections of Ireland, and private military groups like the Army Comrades Association (ACA), composed of pro-treaty ex-members of the IRA, began to flourish. O’Duffy took command of the ACA in July 1933, and encouraged the development of its fascist leanings. The Blueshirts, as its members became known, began to gain support across Ireland, and in 1934 the Irish government was forced to ban the organization. O’Duffy then went on to found the National Corporate Party, which ran on an anti-Communist platform and aimed to create a corporate state in Ireland. However, his fascist platform garnered little support in Ireland, and the rapid

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12 Ibid., 204.
13 Ibid., 196.
14 Ibid., 205.
disintegration of the party left him desperate for some means to regain his lost prestige in Ireland.

He saw in Spain a popular movement to which he could attach himself, and whose success he could use a springboard for future political campaigns. He saw in Spain a popular movement to which he could attach himself, and whose success he could use a springboard for future political campaigns.15 Appealing to the Irish people’s desire to fight communism and to defend the Church, he began in earnest the process of organizing an Irish Brigade to fight for Franco. O’Duffy received support for this venture from the Pope himself, meeting in secret with Cardinal MacRory, who, “under instructions from Rome – which regarded military support [for Franco’s Nationalists] from a non-fascist state as politically valuable... offered O’Duffy encouragement and financial support.”

O’Duffy was a well-respected figure throughout Europe, and an obvious figure to lead an Irish Brigade to fight for the Nationalists. His promotion to the rank of General within the IRA during the Irish War of Independence had made him the youngest general in Europe, a distinction that he held until the elevation to that rank of a young Spanish military prodigy, Francisco Franco. While his brand of fascism had ultimately failed at home, his work as the leader of the Blueshirts had obtained him respect in Europe, earning him the nickname ‘The Irish Mussolini.’17

At the same time, Frank Ryan, a member of the IRA who sympathized with the Spanish Republic, began to organize an Irish Brigade to join the International Brigades. Not only was Ryan keen to aid the Republicans, but he was also eager to ensure that the Irish were not represented solely on the Fascist side. Ryan believed

15 Ibid., 286.
16 Ibid., 285.
17 Ibid., 216.
in the importance of Ireland involving herself in world affairs, and that forming a Brigade would help the IRA to restore the “historical connection with the international struggle, that existed in the time of the [Society of] United Irishmen,” to a republican organization that, inspired by the American Revolution and with the aid of Revolutionary France, had instigated the Irish Revolution of 1798 while the English were in the midst of a war with France. The Easter Uprising of 1916 had occurred under similar circumstances to that of the United Irishmen, taking place with German help while England was embroiled in a war with Germany. Ryan considered the struggles in Ireland and Spain to be inextricably linked. However, the IRA disagreed, discouraging its members from joining either side. Tom Barry, an influential IRA leader, believed that the Spanish situation was irrelevant to Ireland, and that Irishmen should not be fighting another nation’s wars while parts of their own nation remained under British control. It is unlikely that many ordinary Irishmen sympathized with the Spanish Republic, as sermons from the pulpit had convinced most that the Republicans were anti-Catholic. Pro-Republican rallies were mobbed by Nationalist sympathizers, but Ryan believed that his faction had enough support among the Irish to justify his raising of a brigade.

Ryan and O’Duffy clearly had very different motivations for being in Spain, and it showed in their respective degrees of involvement. O’Duffy was a distant general, indifferent to his men and cultivating an officer class distinct from that of

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18 Cronin, *Frank Ryan*, 130.
19 Ibid., 125.
20 Ibid., 108.
21 Ibid., 108.
the rank and file.\textsuperscript{22} During his time in Spain he maintained a regular diary, in which he recorded his activities during his time in Spain. Although brief and lacking in much detail, the nature of the entries in his diary allow us to gauge his priorities in Spain. The entries are primarily concerned with public appearances, sightseeing trips to the countryside, social engagements and official felicitations. Nationalist Spain viewed him as a hero, and he basked in that adulation. He rarely mentions any training exercises or other military preparations, and it seems that they were conducted with minimal input from him.\textsuperscript{23}

Indeed, O’Duffy seems to have been oblivious to the tensions building within the ranks, and especially between two large personalities: those of his captain, Tom Gunning, and the chaplain, Father Mulrean. Mulrean and Gunning regarded the other with disdain, and saw each other as being to blame for the Brigade’s ills; however, the real problem lay in the rift developing between O’Duffy and Gunning. As one of the few Spanish speakers in the group, and widely regarded as “the brains of the Brigade,”\textsuperscript{24} Gunning was undoubtedly O’Duffy’s right hand man. He was able to turn a number of the officers against him, and was observed to have “contrived, so long as he remained O’Duffy’s secretary, to keep the Irish Brigade divided against itself.”\textsuperscript{25}

O’Duffy’s tendency to appoint his favorites to key positions caused a great deal of resentment, especially among those who harbored their own leadership

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 101.
\textsuperscript{23} McGarry, \textit{Eoin O’Duffy}, 294.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 295.
ambitions.\textsuperscript{26} This only served to exacerbate the tensions already present within the brigade, and to divide the officer class. With their leadership at each other’s throats and mired in a power struggle, it is little wonder that the soldiers quickly lost focus. The lack of scholarship on this brigade, and the paucity of memoirs written by its primarily working-class veterans, makes it hard to ascertain how many of these men were truly committed to the cause that they had ostensibly come to fight for, and how many were unwitting pawns brought here under false pretences. Frank Ryan, albeit a biased source, seems certain that “Not ten per cent of O’Duffy’s forces in Spain are Fascists; the rest of them are just dupes who go to ‘fight for the Faith.’”\textsuperscript{27}

O’Duffy’s diary reveals how little time he spent at the front or in preparing his men for combat; during the five weeks that his men were stationed at the front in Ciempozuelos, he made only six short visits.\textsuperscript{28} His visits to the front were as brief as they were infrequent, and he was careful to ensure that he was exposed to as little danger as possible. However, he was eager to portray himself as having frequently risked his life, and was noticed to embellish incidents of even the slightest danger to make them seem life-threatening in the re-telling. In one such instance, Fr McCabe recalled O’Duffy describing how, on a recent visit to the front, a shell exploded near him, and although it caused him no harm he had said that he had risked his life. He was out of touch with the situation on the ground, and “it did not

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 306.  
\textsuperscript{27} Acier, \textit{From Spanish Trenches}, 120.  
\textsuperscript{28} McGarry, \textit{Eoin O’Duffy}, 304.
seem to occur to O’Duffy – who described this incident in his diary as ‘My miraculous escape’ – that his men were routinely subjected to bombardment.”

Without a strong leader, the brigade lapsed into indiscipline. The men were frequently drunk, and their officers were too inexperienced to control them. While many had fought in the freedom struggle, their experience was limited to guerrilla warfare and infrequent ambushes. Few of them had ever served in an organized military, and even fewer had been trained at a military academy. Those in command could barely control the men, a situation that was only worsened once the officers themselves began to desert. The most disastrous of these desertions was that of Gunning, who took with him a number of the men’s passports as well as money that he had embezzled from the brigade paymaster. Gunning had also been in charge of posting the men’s letters home, but instead he had been pocketing the postage money for himself. The men of O’Duffy’s brigade were stuck in an alien land, fighting for a cause for which they had no particular sympathies, and inadvertently denied communication with their families. Little wonder, then, that they rejected Spanish culture and turned to alcohol.

Neither O’Duffy nor his men developed any appreciation for Spanish cuisine or culture. Spanish food had too much olive oil for their liking, and the tea was too weak. O’Duffy would later say that:

the only meals I really enjoyed were those cooked and served by our own volunteers – splendid soup, real Irish stew, nicely-boiled potatoes, and all free from olive oil.

29 Ibid., 311.
30 Ibid., 309.
31 O’Duffy, Crusade in Spain (Dublin: R. Hale Ltd., 1938), 110.
The men developed a dislike for the sport of bullfighting, seeing it as cruel and unsportsmanlike. On returning to the barracks, “a unanimous wish was expressed that Franco would abolish bull-fighting as a pastime in the new Spain.”

The longer that they were in Spain, the more the men began to doubt Franco’s regime. Indeed, their first taste of combat involved friendly fire, in which Nationalist troops, mistaking them for members of the International Brigade, opened fire, killing two Irishmen. It was only natural for the men to begin to distrust their Spanish allies, a situation not helped by the contrast between their relaxed and detached attitude towards the war, and the incredible intensity of the Tercio, the fearsome Spanish Foreign Legion to which they were attached. These men formed the elite divisions of the Spanish army, and they expected from the Irishmen an intensity that they could not hope to match.

The Nationalist army was brutal, to a degree that frightened and disgusted the Irishmen. Officers of the Tercio frequently whipped their own men, and Republican prisoners were executed frequently and openly. They were disappointed by the low attendances at church, and by the identification of the Catholic Church in Spain with the “rich and powerful, ‘even though that’s what the whole row is supposed to be about.’” The Irish Church was poor in comparison to the wealthy Spanish Church, and this was reflected in the social demographics and world views of their respective followers; indeed, the working class men of Ireland had inadvertently travelled to Spain to fight for the Spanish elite!

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32 McGarry, 299.
33 Ibid., 302.
34 Ibid., 296.
The men of the brigade were predominantly working-class in composition, and their experiences in Ireland had been of fighting against an oppressive English regime filled with ‘rich and powerful’ individuals similar to those they now seemed to be fighting for. As the complexities of the situation in Spain began to dawn on them, many began to question why they were here. The Spanish began to ask the same question about the Irish, who they had expected to be idealists and devout church-going Catholics. Instead, they saw before them a mob of drunks who spent far too much time frequenting brothels.\textsuperscript{35} The consequences were often embarrassing, as Lieutenant Pete Lawler recalls after attending a ‘\textit{vin d’honneur}’ held in their honor by Nationalist officials in Salamanca:

\begin{quote}
I knew it was going to be sheer bloody murder with the boys drinking all that wine on empty stomachs... Sure enough, when the time came to get back on the train the boys were so drunk it was all we could do to push them into it. And even that wasn’t the end of our troubles... all the time the band was playing, there was one of our lads – as drunk as a coot he was – leaning out of the carriage being sick all the [sic] down the neck of an old General. And the old boy – I was watching him – stood there like a rock at the salute through it all.\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

Little wonder, then, that Spanish enthusiasm for this brigade cooled quickly. O’Duffy denied these claims, but the evidence was there for all to see, that the men in his brigade were no longer committed to the cause, if they had ever been. Some, like Sam McCaughey the armory sergeant who “enlisted to extricate himself from bigamous marriages in Wexford and Portlaoise,”\textsuperscript{37} saw O’Duffy’s expedition as a convenient excuse to leave Ireland. Their inability to acclimatize to the culture, coupled with the worsening conditions to which they were exposed, saw morale

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{36} Kemp, 87.
\textsuperscript{37} McGarry, 298.
\end{footnotesize}
quickly plummet. The Brigade was ravaged by dysentery, with over 100 of the 700-strong contingent hospitalized. A third of the men were listed as being sick, their latrines were overflowing and their uniforms, of which they were only ever issued a single pair, were ragged.38 The men were unhappy, and the situation was miserable. Their complaints to O’Duffy went unheeded, and it became clear that he had little interest in leading the Brigade. By this point they had lost all respect for him, and behind his back he was known as “General O'Scruffy” or “Old John Bollocks.”39 Visitors to their headquarters in Salamanca testified to the manner in which his poor leadership hamstrung the mission: 

[The] ‘Brigade’ was in fact equal in strength to a battalion, but O'Duffy was granted the honorary rank of General in the Spanish Army. Few generals can have had so little responsibility in proportion to their rank, or so little sense of it. Whatever the ostensible purpose of the Irish Brigade, O’Duffy never lost sight of its real object, which was to strengthen his own political position. He therefore gave the most responsible appointments to his own political supporters, regardless of their military experience; one of the most important he gave to an ex-liftman from... Dublin, a man who knew nothing of soldiering and was prepared to learn nothing. In favour of such men as this he declined the services of experienced ex-officers who did not belong to his party.”40

Franco was not unaware of these developments, and as his patience with O’Duffy began to wear thin it seemed unlikely that they would remain beyond their initial six-month contract. Colonel John Yagüe, the commander of the Tercio, was a particularly ardent critic of the Irishmen. He found them to be incompetent and more concerned with Irish politics than with the war in Spain. He took grave offence

39 Peter Kemp, Mine Were of Trouble, 86.
40 Ibid.
to their rejection of Spanish cuisine in favor of more traditional Irish fare, and warned Franco about their intentions. “We are making ourselves the pawns of a political maneuver... which is very dangerous,” he warned Franco in his report, going on to recommend that the Irish Brigade be disbanded, and that its men be redistributed throughout the Tercio.\textsuperscript{41} The problem was clearly not with the men, but with the leadership – or rather the lack of it. As Franco considered this proposal, O’Duffy offered to disband the Brigade, and form a new Irish company from amongst those who wished to remain. Putting the question to the men, it was decided by 654 votes to 9 that they would return to Ireland. The expedition was a disaster, and the men left Spain feeling humiliated and disgraced.\textsuperscript{42} They believed, almost to a man, that the reason for their failure was the incompetence of O’Duffy, who provided a terrible example for his men by rarely being caught sober, refusing to learn any Spanish during their six-month stay, and behaving in an erratic manner.\textsuperscript{43}

The men of O’Duffy’s Brigade had unequivocally abandoned him. They felt betrayed, as they had been led to believe that they would be fighting “for Christ and Christianity against the devilish agents of Moscow”\textsuperscript{44} and that the Brigade would be a non-political entity, only to discover that O’Duffy’s “real object... was to strengthen his own political position.”\textsuperscript{45} He was unconcerned with the war in Spain, and was only interested in creating a heroic narrative for himself that would allow him to

\textsuperscript{41} Othen, 187.
\textsuperscript{42} Cronin, 116.
\textsuperscript{43} McGarry, 312.
\textsuperscript{44} Cronin, 116.
\textsuperscript{45} Kemp, 86.
regain prestige in Ireland. As Eamon Horan, one of the men under his command, wrote:

As far as myself and the men of Kerry are concerned, we have broken with General O’Duffy because we considered that we would be disloyal to our martyred dead if we allowed their martyrdom to be used for political purposes.46

In his memoirs, Crusade in Spain, released in 1938 after his return to Ireland, O’Duffy would attempt to rewrite history and hide the fact that the Brigade had been a disaster. The book is rife with excuses, and in it he denies that he had organized the Brigade to serve his personal political agenda, claiming instead that “there was no politics in the Irish Brigade,”47 and reiterating that they had gone to Spain in order to defend Christianity. The reputation of his Brigade, and that of O’Duffy himself, had taken a beating, and they were seen as a group of rowdy, uncontrollable drunks. Again, O’Duffy denies this, claiming that he “did not observe one member of the Brigade under the influence of drink at any time, and I was in close touch with all ranks.”48 However, his well-documented alcoholism meant that he was himself incapable of noticing the copious consumption of alcohol within the brigade, and that this statement might not be an outright lie, but rather a product of his inattentiveness.49 He attributed their tattered uniforms to the Spanish, who had provided them with a single pair made of poor material each at the start of their service, but had never replaced them. In spite of these hardships, “the Irishmen,

46 Cronin, 116-7.
47 O’Duffy, 116.
48 Ibid., 112.
49 McGarry, Eoin O’Duffy, 305.
because of their erect bearing and fine physique, to me looked smarter on parade than any other soldiers in Spain.”

As their commander, he was responsible for their conduct and bearing, and was eager to portray himself as having succeeded in raising an effective fighting unit worthy of respect back in Ireland. He attempted to cover up the brigade’s flaws and reclaim its image in the public eye, while simultaneously creating a heroic image for himself in which he had repeatedly risked his life at the front. As an excuse for his regular absence from the front, he writes that he “found it necessary to travel regularly from the front to Caceres, always eager for news of another landing from Ireland, to relieve our sorely tried men in the trenches.” This seems like a convenient excuse for his actions, as a number of sources testify to his incompetence as a commander. He relates another story to demonstrate his courage and concern for his men, in which, the morning after a tough battle, he hears that his men have been ordered to once again advance and take the town of Titulcia. Concerned for his men and eager not to allow them to be taken advantage of, he asks a number of officers, both Spanish and Irish, their opinions on the enterprise – all “were of the opinion that was no chance whatever of the success of the operation, and that in the attempt to carry it out there would be a huge loss of life.” His mind made up, he risks insubordination and confronts the commanding officer, General Saliquet, refusing to allow his men to fight. The general is taken aback, but clearly impressed

50 O’Duffy, *Crusade in Spain*, 112.
51 Ibid., 186.
52 Ibid., 162.
by his bravery, and calls off the assault.\textsuperscript{53} This episode is mentioned by no other sources.

O’Duffy uses his memoir to put forward an alternative narrative of the circumstances of their departure, one in which his men did not desert him, but were forced to leave due to unavoidable circumstances. The brigade had initially agreed to only come for six months, and:

Many volunteers had been able to make arrangements with their employers to have their positions kept open to them for six months, and about the end of April over a hundred officers, N.C.O.’s and men, made application to return to Ireland in May. In all cases they expressed their willingness to remain until the bandera was returning if that was my desire.\textsuperscript{54}

Contrary to other contemporary sources,\textsuperscript{55} he continues to claim that his men held him in high regard, and that:

Every man would have agreed at once to remain had I so urged. They deplored the circumstances which prevented them from participating in the final and victorious battle in the cause for which they had volunteered. Greater loyalty no leader ever enjoyed. I know they appreciated my efforts on their behalf, but I was unable to do half as much for them as they deserved.\textsuperscript{56}

This spelled the end for Franco’s Irish Brigade, as O’Duffy and his men hastily returned home only four months into a six month contract, the exercise an unqualified failure. While the men no doubt were hoping to forget this experience, O’Duffy seemed determined to use it to extract as much political capital as possible. His memoir, then, serves as his attempt to make excuses for his own failures, in a last-ditch effort to resurrect his stillborn political career.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 236.
\textsuperscript{55} Cronin, Frank Ryan, 116-7; McGarry, Eoin O’Duffy, 312.
\textsuperscript{56} O’Duffy, Crusade in Spain, 240.
II. FRANK RYAN

Frank Ryan’s path to Spain was very different from O’Duffy’s. He had fought for the IRA’s East Limerick Brigade during the Irish War of Independence, and had been opposed to the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1922. When the Irish Civil War broke out that summer, he left his studies at University College, Dublin, to rejoin his old Brigade in the IRA’s war against the pro-treaty forces, themselves led by many former IRA leaders.57 Ryan’s involvement in the Civil War led to his spending a few months in prison in 1923,58 an experience that would have done little to mend his relationship with the pro-treatyists. For the next decade, Irish politics were to be divided between those who were in favor of the formation of an independent Irish Republic, and those who wished to remain within the British Empire.59 Ryan began to rise through the ranks of the IRA, and in 1929 he was elected to the Army Executive, the body immediately below the Army Council.60

The advent of the Great Depression led to a growing fascination with Communism, and many anti-treatyists began to wonder whether this movement could help Ireland gain independence. In 1934 Ryan and other key leaders of the IRA left the organization in order to found a new left-wing (but not Communist) republican organization, the Republican Congress.61 The foundation of the Congress coincided with O’Duffy’s entrance into politics, and he and Ryan quickly became bitter rivals. However, the Congress failed to gain much support, and by 1936 it, like

57 Cronin, Frank Ryan, 20.
58 Ibid., 21.
59 Ibid., 22.
60 Ibid., 33.
61 Ibid., 50.
O’Duffy’s National Corporate Party, was defunct. So, by the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War Ryan was unencumbered by any political obligations, and perhaps, like O’Duffy, eager to find a way to regain prestige for himself in Ireland.

But Frank Ryan was a very different leader from Eoin O’Duffy. While the latter’s journey to Spain was in essence a political charade, the former wished to join the fight for liberty, seeing the battle in Spain as being another front of the Irish independence movement. He claimed that he was fighting for a greater purpose, and that:

The one consolation in all this slaughter is that it is in a great cause. Some men must die lest all men live slaves. I know it is hard for our people at home to realize why some of us, at least, must be here. So long as the national question remains unsettled, so long will Ireland fail to think fully international. And that is all the more reason why even a little group must force her to think internationally, by flinging their bodies into this fight.62

This is not to say that Ryan’s intentions were necessarily ‘pure;’ while he often criticized O’Duffy for having ‘duped’ his men into fighting for Franco under false pretences, he bristled at being referred to as a “British Communist leader”63 by the newspapers although he volunteered for the Soviet-led International Brigades. Indeed, after being captured by Nationalist forces in 1938, he was eventually smuggled into Berlin by German agents, where he remained until his death in 1944, technically a free man but unable to leave Nazi territory. The IRA, who were eager for Ireland to join the Second World War on the German side, considered him to be their representative in Germany.64 However, while he initially cooperated with the IRA and the Nazis, by 1941 he had decided that Ireland must remain neutral. The

62 Ibid., 116.
63 Ibid., 103.
64 Ibid., 192.
Nazis continued to consider him an integral element in their plans to convince the Irish government to join the war, but Ryan was no longer as helpful as he had once been.

Ryan’s socialist and anti-fascist beliefs had not diminished, but he believed that it was his duty to protect Ireland’s interests in any way that he could. This demonstrates that, in spite of his undoubted sympathies with the cause of the Spanish Republic, it was only important to him as long as it was of use to the Irish cause. This did not, however, prevent him from giving his all during his time in Spain, and he was a well-respected officer who led by example. In stark contrast to O’Duffy, who stayed as far away as possible from battle while simultaneously seeking to create the image that he was consistently putting his life in danger, Ryan fought on the front alongside his men. Indeed, when writing home to his parents he omitted to mention his injuries sustained in battle. His men saw and appreciated his resolve, and, as one noted:

Frank’s spirit is unbreakable... He has been at the head of his men in the thick of the fight... He has lost his best lieutenant (Kit Conway), he has seen his Column getting smaller every day, he has seen the grim determination of his small, but gallant, band of heroes to carry on to the end. They know Frank will never let them down; they would follow him to hell with rifles on their shoulders. He is determined to carry the flag of the Irish Column to victory or death.

His dedication is made all the more remarkable by the fact that his official role in the James Connolly Unit of the 15th International Brigade (or the ‘Connolly Column,’ as the Irish battalion was often know), was that of a publicist, not a combatant or an officer. His position was closer to that of a journalist than of a soldier, and he was

65 Ibid., 100.
66 Ibid.
charged with visiting the front lines to view conditions there first hand, before writing articles and broadcasting on Radio Madrid in an effort to attract new volunteers from America, Ireland and beyond. However, he insisted on being involved in the fighting, and since he was unattached to a single front-line unit he was able to move freely between them, helping out wherever he was needed most.67

The ghost of the First World War lay heavily on Ryan, and he was determined to fight this war differently. Born in 1902, he was himself too young to have fought in that war, but many of the volunteers – both among the Irish battalion and elsewhere in the International Brigades – had, and they saw it as a tragic event, with too many lives lost in vain. Around 200,000 Irishmen had volunteered for the British Army in that war, before talk of forced conscription and growing opposition to the war contributed to the Easter Rising of 1916. The founders of the IRA had cut their teeth in the Easter Rising, and James Connolly, after whom the Irish Brigade was named, was the Irish socialist leader who was executed by a British firing squad for his leadership of the Rising. The Irish believed that the First World War had not been just, and the men who had fought in it had been ‘duped’ into thinking that they were fighting to make the world “safe for democracy.”68 This war, on the other hand, would be different – there was a cause to fight for and lives would not be thrown away needlessly.

To Ryan and his men, the English elite was as much the enemy as the Nationalist forces. This lead to problems once the British Battalion, which Ryan’s Irishmen were invited to join, was formed. This union would have been mutually

67 Ibid.
68 Acier, From Spanish Trenches, 146.
beneficial, and while Ryan was in favor of it his men refused, unable as they were to distinguish “between anti-Fascist working class comrades from England – and British imperialism.”

The key problem lay within the officer class, with Ryan noting that:

> the English send out the worst officer-type. The leaders of the [Communist Party] of Great Britain and the rank and file understand our (Irish) position. It just happened that we got the in-between crowd of the swelled-headed adventurer type.

Many of these officers were uninterested in the Republican cause, and were rather adventure-seekers, ordinary Englishmen who found themselves in positions of power and had let it go to their heads. Like O’Duffy, they were indifferent to their men and engaged in the cultivation of an officer class distinct from the rank and file. Ryan, on the other hand was unafraid to break that barrier and to live and serve alongside the men under his command. His actions were a direct reaction to the behavior of the officer class during the First World War, which resembled that of O’Duffy and the English officers. Many of the soldiers fighting in the Brigades were veterans of the First World War, and while the world had changed much since then these men had not forgotten its lessons; they had felt let down by the aftermath, believing that their governments had misled them. This was their chance to fight a truly ‘righteous’ war, and have a hand in creating a better world.

Ryan maintained that, unlike O’Duffy, he had been very clear on the kind of soldier he wanted, and had warned them all beforehand of the harsh conditions in Spain in order to discourage adventurers and those unprepared to fully commit to

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69 Cronin, Frank Ryan, 92.
70 Ibid., 91.
the war. Indeed, he said that every one of his men had come to Spain of his own accord, because they considered it their duty to fight fascism, and that:

While it would be wrong to accuse me of bringing them here, I would never regret having done so. Our 50,000 who died in the Great War were sacrificed uselessly; no life given here is given in vain.\textsuperscript{71}

This was a bold claim, and it is doubtful that every one of these volunteers was as well-versed in the political intricacies of 1930s Spain as Ryan seems to have been. Indeed, a key aspect of his propaganda effort in Ireland and America was to compare the fight in Spain to that in contemporary Ireland, which proved especially successful among the Irish population in America. Many also saw parallels between the situation in Spain and that of Ireland in 1922, on the verge of its own Civil War.\textsuperscript{72}

Both nations were torn between socialist and fascist forces, and were similarly divided in a bitter struggle over the future of their nation. To Ryan and his supporters, the Spanish Nationalists were akin to the pro-Treatyists of 1922, a connection only strengthened by the participation of O’Duffy, a key pro-Treaty figure.

As part of his role as in the Connolly Column, Ryan needed to combat any newspaper criticism of the Brigades, as well as the strong IRA disapproval of his venture back in Ireland. As he recalled, while speaking on Radio Madrid on October 31, 1937:

when we came here first, a leading Irish newspaper - in an effort not to be too harsh on us - depicted us as idealists who went to fight other people's battles, - thereby implying that we are avoiding fighting for our own.

No interpretation could be more incorrect. We are realists.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 101.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 107.
In the task of freeing Ireland in our generation, where was initiative shown - if not from men like Kit Conway, Charles Donnelly, William Beattie, Peter Daly and scores of other Irishmen whose graves are today on the battlefields of Spain? Just as these had the conception of a free Ireland... so they had a correct conception of Ireland’s place on the earth.73

We see again his desire to connect the Irish and Spanish situations, a position which his detractors firmly disregarded. Ryan believed that Franco posed a credible threat to Ireland, and that “If fascism triumphs here [in Spain], Ireland’s trial will soon be at hand.”74 However, the Irish Republican Army did not consider the situation in Spain to be of any importance, and threatened to dismiss from the organization any members who joined either of Ryan’s or O’Duffy’s brigades. The IRA wished to remain neutral, but the Catholic Church’s vocal support for the Nationalists made Ryan eager to prove that the nation’s sympathies did not lie solely on the fascist side. Most of the men who fought in the Connolly Column had served with the IRA, and they were no doubt Catholics as devout as their compatriots who fought for O’Duffy. The key difference lay in their interpretation of their duties to the Church – while O’Duffy’s men leapt blindly to the defense of the Church (a decision they would soon come to regret), Ryan’s men had spent more time contemplating the differences between the two sides, and did not believe the Republicans to be the enemies of Christendom that they were being portrayed as being. Ryan appealed to the intellectual and liberal elements of the IRA, hoping to find support amongst those brave enough to disobey the Church.

73 Ibid., 10.
74 Acier, From Spanish Trenches, 120.
The growing Irish community in America proved to be a fertile recruiting ground for Ryan, and he worked hard to gain the support of the Irish-American community. He was desperate to visit America, but was unable to find the time or the funding for the journey across the Atlantic. In his attempts to gain Irish-American support he stressed the connection between Spain and Ireland, hoping to convince them that the fight for the Spanish Republic was a part of the fight for Ireland.\textsuperscript{75}

Ryan attempted to portray the International Brigades as a happy and united organization, and claimed that while he had “read of rows between American and French troops at the end of the Great War... I never saw rows in Spain between different nationalities.”\textsuperscript{76} However, other sources testify to the presence of such conflict,\textsuperscript{77} making Ryan’s statement either an attempt to cover up any strife within the Brigades, or a natural consequence of his roving role; constantly travelling between different fronts, it is possible that he was never in one place for long enough to detect any of these conflicts. It remains a hypocritical claim on the part of Ryan, for we know that he had witnessed first hand the tensions between his men and the English, and he himself was liable to judge the English officers based on little more than their nationality.

Ryan learned to hate the war, but the atrocities that he witnessed only strengthened his resolve to see it through.\textsuperscript{78} In Barcelona he had witnessed a

\textsuperscript{75} Cronin, \textit{Frank Ryan}, 102-3
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 103.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 125.
“particularly bad [air-raid] in which a school-full of children was wiped out,” and whenever the Nationalists captured a town they killed its Republican loyalists. However, the Republicans were no innocents themselves, and many of the stories of workers murdering priests were indeed true. The Nationalists, aware of the Republican troops’ growing reputation as anti-Catholics, began to fortify churches and monasteries in the hope that the Republicans would be forced to attack them, feeding the narrative.

Frank Ryan’s war ended on March 31, 1938 when he was captured during the Aragon offensive by the Nationalist army. While the International Brigades had long been able to hold off the Nationalists so far, their inferior numbers had begun to tell, and the Republicans had been unable to hold the line at the Aragon front. News of the Nationalist breakthrough, which succeeded in splitting the territory of Republican Spain in two, threw the Republicans into disarray, and reinforcements were rushed to the front. Ryan, who had been about to leave for Ireland, was called back to the front, and he set out for the town of Batea with 1500 new recruits. The British Battalion, with whom Ryan was now attached, was by this time comprised mainly of fresh and inexperienced new recruits. Few of the original volunteers remained, and those who did were exhausted and demoralized. As the men marched in the dark towards the town of Calaciete, the vanguard – with Ryan at the front - stumbled upon a battalion of Italians fighting for the Nationalists. Tired and

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79 Ibid., 126.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid., 127.
82 Ibid., 133.
confused, most of the forward company was captured.\textsuperscript{83} Ryan was now a prisoner of Franco, accused of murder and sentenced to death until the German government, aware of his political importance, smuggled him out of Burgos Prison and into Berlin in 1940.\textsuperscript{84} The men of the Connolly Column remained in Spain for only a few months after Ryan’s capture, and were repatriated to Ireland on September 24, 1938.\textsuperscript{85} While their service in Spain might have been complete, these men remained loyal to their old commander, and spent the next few years unsuccessfully agitating for Ryan’s release.\textsuperscript{86} Ryan did not survive the Second World War, dying in Dresden on June 10\textsuperscript{th}, 1944 while still a prisoner of Nazi Germany.\textsuperscript{87}

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 134-5.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 161.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 142.
\textsuperscript{87} Cronin, \textit{Frank Ryan}, 232.
III. PETER KEMP

Peter Kemp was born on August 19th, 1913, in Bombay, India, the son of a British colonial judge. He studied classics and law at Trinity College, Cambridge, and was a conservative and a monarchist. The prospect of a Communist victory in the Spanish Civil War alarmed him so much that he quit his law studies to volunteer for the Nationalists. However, while his politics were diametrically opposite to those of the volunteers in the International Brigades, his intentions were similar to theirs – to fight for the rights of an oppressed people, against a repressive regime. The difference lay in their interpretation of the two sides, for he had been deeply disturbed by reports of:

appalling scenes of mob violence throughout Government territory wherever the Reds took control. Priests and nuns were shot simply because they were priests or nuns, ordinary people murdered just because they had a little money or property. It is to fight that sort of thing that I am going to Spain.88

Like the Republican volunteers, he believed that the enemy vastly outnumbered his side. Both factions believed that their chosen belligerent lacked the international support possessed by the other, and was the underdog in this fight. Kemp believed that the Republicans had not only more troops89 than the Nationalists, but more ammunition90 than them as well. The Republicans also possessed technology that the Nationalists lacked, using flamethrowers and advanced mining technologies to drive them out of their fortifications.91 It was clear to Kemp that the Republicans

88 Kemp, Mine Were of Trouble, 8.
89 Ibid., 62. “they outnumbered us many times.”
90 Ibid., 61. “for every grenade we threw the enemy threw a dozen at us.”
91 Ibid., 63.
possessed an advantage, and he believed that it was his duty to help fix this imbalance.

Kemp’s Protestant background makes his decision to volunteer for the Nationalists rather than the Republicans even more unusual, not only because he clearly had no motivation to defend the Catholic Church from any Republican anti-clericalism, but also because the Spanish had a deep distrust of Protestants. The Spanish officers with whom he served were initially distrustful of him, believing all Protestants to be Freemasons, an organization damned in Continental Europe by its association with the Popular Front governments in Spain and France.\textsuperscript{92} It is indeed odd that a Protestant Englishman would volunteer for Catholic Spain in a time when popular distrust of Jews and Protestants was still high.

While Kemp had attended Cambridge and came from a similar background to many of those who chose to volunteer for the Republicans, his right-wing political views placed him in the minority amongst his peers. However, like them his decision to travel to Spain had much to do with the opportune timing of the war – he had just graduated from Cambridge, and yearned for adventure before he began his legal career. Like many at the time he did not think that the war would last more than a few months, and with the naivety of youth he discounted the danger of such an endeavor. While it was the romantic idea of war that inspired him to volunteer, his decision to fight for the Nationalists did have a strong basis in his own political beliefs. His generation was one consumed by the ideas of socialism and desperate to

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 113.
create a new world, and Kemp’s conservative ideologies were not popular among his peers.

Once in Spain Kemp had a choice of joining the Foreign Legion, or one of the Requete and Falange militias. He was attracted to the ideals of the Requetes, and initially joined them; however, after a while he realized that they lacked the discipline required for modern warfare, which he believed was possessed only by the men of the Foreign Legion – Franco’s crack troops. He was able to pull some strings and be transferred to the Legion, or the *Tercio* as it was often known, to serve as one of only three English officers in the Spanish Foreign Legion.  

Like all of the other Nationalist volunteers, Kemp knew in 1936 that his choice was not a popular one back home. We must then look at his memoirs, published in 1957, in this light, and attempt to understand the underlying motives behind his decision to publish them then. Apart from the natural urge to share one’s life story and hope to make some money from it, Kemp must have been eager to rehabilitate the image of the Nationalists, and through that of his experiences there as well.

The English political landscape had changed dramatically in the two decades since the Spanish Civil War, and the Cold War had led to a decline in public support for the left. With hysteria over the ‘Red Peril’ peril at its peak, many of those who had fought for the International Brigades found themselves hiding that piece of their past, afraid that it would lead to them being accused of spying for the Soviets. The high-profile defections of Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean to Moscow in 1951

93 Ibid., 31.
94 Ibid., 103.
had led to heightened suspicion of those who had studied at institutions like Cambridge during that period, and especially of those who had known connections with the left. However, since fascism was also now tainted by its association with Hitler and Mussolini, Kemp would have to tread carefully and ensure that he was not himself tainted by association. We see evidence of this imperative throughout his memoir, and he goes to great lengths to communicate to the reader that his support lay not with fascism, but with anti-communism. He is apologetic, and attempts to cover up his support for fascism, or at least to qualify it by reminding the reader how prevalent such ideas were before the Second World War. He recalls the political mood of 1936, by which year:

Hitler had achieved supreme power in Germany, but the full horrors and dangers of his rule were not universally apparent; indeed, he was often applauded in Germany and outside for ‘cleaning up the mess’ of the Weimar Republic and for his suppression of Communism.95

He frequently refers to incidents of Republican brutality that he had heard about during the war, and is eager to fight the narrative that the Republicans were innocent victims of Nationalist oppression. Instead, he sought to portray them as being equally culpable for the excesses of the war, and as being pawns of the Russians. On the topic of foreign assistance, he argues that:

The Russians did for the Republicans roughly what the Germans did for the Nationalists - they supplied technicians and war material of all kinds. In return they exacted a far greater measure of control over Republican policy and strategy than the Germans were able to obtain from Franco; the price of Russian co-operation was Russian direction of the war and the complete domination by the Communist Party of all Republican political and military organizations. Thus, not for the last time, Russia showed her allies her interpretation of the word ‘co-operation’.96

95 Ibid., 1.
96 Ibid., 30.
Kemp argues here that Russian support for the Republicans was far more intrusive than that of the Germans with the Nationalists, and carried with it a far greater loss of control. With Hitler and Mussolini defeated, was not Communist Russia now England’s greatest threat? Moreover, the United States had entered into a trade and military pact with Franco in 1953, and in 1955 Spain was admitted into the United Nations. Britain needed Spain as an ally in order to protect her interests in Gibraltar and the Mediterranean. Franco had no international ambitions, and his brand of fascism now posed little threat to the rest of Europe. Spain had also remained neutral during the Second World War, and should be cultivated as an ally, not an enemy. The Republicans, on the other hand, had been completely infiltrated by Communist spies, and were undoubtedly the enemies that anyone in 1950s England would expect a Soviet-backed regime to be. By calling attention to the Russian model of ‘co-operation’ with her allies, Kemp hoped to remind the reader of the Soviet Union’s history of co-opting national movements for their own ends. In his interpretation of events, then, he and the Nationalists had helped save Spain from Soviet control, an outcome that would have proved disastrous for England and the rest of Western Europe.

In order to uncouple the perception of Franco as a close ally of Hitler, he argues that it was only in order “to meet the threat of the International Brigades and increased French assistance to the Republicans [that] the Nationalists invoked the help of Italy and Germany.”97 This was not an alliance in the mould of that between Mussolini and Hitler, but rather a relationship forged out of necessity. Indeed, Kemp

97 Ibid., 29.
claims that Hitler and Franco had fallen out during the war, and that Hitler had attempted to replace him with a more amenable leader. In the spring of 1937 Franco faced a challenger for his position in the figure of Manuel Hedilla, a young leader of the Falange in Salamanca. Hedilla and his supporters were in awe of the Nazis, and were deeply influenced by the German ambassador, Wilhelm Faupel. While Hitler, through his ambassador, had undoubtedly encouraged the development of Hedilla’s brand of fascism, it was questionable as to whether the Nazis had a direct role in his failed bid for power, and it is a matter of debate as to whether Hedilla even had a hand in the revolt, with some sources claiming that he had taken the fall for the faults of others. Indeed, Franco and Faupel, the supposed instigator of Hedilla’s revolt, remained on good terms after Hedilla’s imprisonment.

Kemp suggests that their alliance was one of convenience, and that Franco should not be tainted due to his brief association with Nazi Germany. Indeed, Franco had remained neutral during the Second World War, despite strong pressure from the Germans to occupy Gibraltar and thus deny Britain access to the Mediterranean and to her colonies. While it could be argued that this was a result of Franco’s reluctance to involve Spain in the world war, Kemp contends that the decision to remain neutral was tantamount to a rejection of Nazi Germany.

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98 Ibid., 85.
99 Thomas, The Spanish Civil War, 618.
100 Ibid., 624. “So ended the so-called ‘Hedilla plot’, in which Hedilla was almost the only person not to have conspired.”
101 Ibid., 625.
Kemp argues that this second phase of the Civil War, one defined by international intervention, had been initiated by the arrival in Spain of the International Brigades. Many Spaniards were upset about this turn of events, and they considered the men of the International Brigades to be a particularly vile enemy, who, if captured, must be shot immediately. Since Kemp knew that this was not official policy, he inquired into why they continued regardless. The response of his commander, Cancela, is particularly revealing:

‘Look here, Peter’ he went on with sudden vehemence, ‘it’s all very well for you to talk about International Law and the rights of prisoners! You’re not a Spaniard. You haven’t seen your country devastated, your family and friends murdered in a civil war that would have ended eighteen months ago but for the intervention of these foreigners. I know we have help now from Germans and Italians. But you know as well as I do that this war would have been over by the end of 1936, when we were at the gates of Madrid, but for the International Brigades. At that time we had no foreign help. What is it to us if they have their ideals? Whether they know it or not, they are simply tools of the Communists and they have come to Spain to destroy our country! What do they care about the ruin they have made here? Why then should we bother about their lives when we catch them? It will take years to put right the harm they’ve done to Spain!’

He paused for breath, then went on: ‘Another thing; I mean no offense to you personally, Peter, but I believe that all Spaniards - even those fighting against us - wish that this war could have been settled one way or another by Spaniards alone. We never wanted our country to become a battleground for foreign powers. What do you think would happen to you if you were taken prisoner by the Reds? You would be lucky if they only shot you!’

Torres’ quiet voice interrupted: ‘If it comes to that, what chance would any legionary stand if he were to fall into their hands, especially into the hands of the International Brigades? We know what they did to their prisoners at Brunete and Teruel.’

By blaming foreign intervention for Spain’s ills, Kemp attempts to deflect the blame for the war’s trajectory from the Nationalists onto the Soviets, portraying the International Brigades as being Soviet agents. These statements would not have

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102 Kemp, Mine Were of Trouble, 29.
103 Ibid., 169.
carried sufficient weight if he had said them himself, but by quoting members of the Spanish military he is able to create the impression that this was a popular belief among Spaniards at the time. The men of the International Brigades might say what they like in response, but the prevailing anti-Communist mood in England in 1957 meant that it would have taken a brave veteran to surface into the public consciousness and dispute Kemp’s assertions.

The soldiers had no orders from the Nationalist high command to shoot the volunteers of the International Brigade, but they shot them nonetheless; indeed, Spanish prisoners (apart from officers, who were considered to be ‘traitors’ and were also shot) were treated fairly well. The soldiers understood that their Republican counterparts were merely following orders, especially since their ranks were filled with old men and teenage boys. The volunteers, on the other hand, had a choice, and they had chosen to involve themselves in another nation’s internal conflict. That choice had consequences, and there was a bitterness among the Nationalist soldiers towards them, for they believed that without the intervention of the International Brigades this war would have long been over, and they would no longer be forced to risk their lives and watch their friends die beside them. Again, as this was not an official policy, Franco could not be blamed, and it could be seen as a policy arising from the ranks, thus carrying more moral weight. This was not a political statement formulated by a ruling class, but an emotional one shouted vehemently by the people – this is our country, and we would rather fight this war on our own!

104 Ibid.
105 Ibid., 169-70.
However, like most strongly held opinions, this one too was characterized by a resentment towards foreign volunteers on the other side, and many Nationalist soldiers had the same reverence for volunteers like Kemp as their Republican counterparts had for the men of the International Brigades. Kemp relates an incident where he experienced this, while recovering in hospital after being severely wounded by a grenade near the village of Seros. He was recuperating in the General Hospital in Zaragoza when the Battle of the Ebro broke out, flooding hospitals in the region with wounded soldiers. With beds scarce, a young officer with the Requetes was brought into his room. He was excited to be sharing a room with Kemp, who had travelled so far to fight for Spain. One day Kemp awoke to find him gone; on inquiring with the nurses, he discovered that the hospitals were so full that they were forced to transfer some patients to another hospital. When they came to Kemp’s room to move him, the young officer insisted that he be transferred instead; as a foreign volunteer Kemp must have priority over a Spanish soldier like himself, even though he was in no better state to travel. He died on the way.\textsuperscript{106}

Kemp’s experience in Spain was overwhelmingly positive, so much so that his memoir is a ringing endorsement of the Franco regime. He praises Franco, and relates the story of his meeting with him, during which the General expressed his admiration for the English, and his desire to ally with them.\textsuperscript{107} This is clearly intended to warm the readers towards Franco; how could they not be pleased to hear that this man “regarded the British Empire as potentially the greatest bulwark against Communism in the world; but he doubted that the British were fully alive to

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 196.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 201.
the Communist threat.”108 This was a man who could be described as a ‘premature anti-Communist’ in the language of the late 1930s, and Spain was Soviet Communism’s first true foray into the political stage of Western Europe. By checking their advance Franco had done the capitalist world a great service, and yet he was humble enough to recognize the superiority of the British! He seemed genuinely interested in every facet of English life - political, social, and economic - and Kemp portrays him as a friend to the English. Indeed, in this light the overwhelming popular support amongst the English for the Republic seems foolish. The Communists were always going to be England’s enemies, but Franco was a man with whom they could have worked.

According to Kemp, on returning to England he came into contact with many disillusioned veterans of the International Brigades, who had come to understand the folly of Communism.109 While many of these volunteers did indeed leave Spain disillusioned, this had less to do with any significant changes in their political beliefs and more to do with a growing conviction that their governments had let them down and had abandoned the Spanish people to fascism. George Orwell, who had served in the P.O.U.M. (Workers’ Party of Marxist Unification) militia, wondered on returning home what it would take to raise England from her slumber. He feared that it would be the “roar of bombs,”110 that it would take something drastic to convince the inhabitants of the sleepy, peaceful, English countryside that this conflict affected them as well. It would only be when the inevitable occurred, and

\[^{108}\text{Ibid.}\]
\[^{109}\text{Ibid., 201.}\]
\[^{110}\text{George Orwell, \textit{Homage to Catalonia} (London: The Camelot Press, 1951), 248.}\]
the fascists turned their eyes towards England, that his countrymen would find in themselves the motivation to fight, but Orwell hoped that his nation would prevent much bloodshed by awakening to the fascist threat before it was too late. The Dutch volunteer (for the International Brigades) Jeff Last echoed this sentiment, arguing that the fall of Spain would leave Gibraltar vulnerable to the Germans, allowing them to isolate Britain from her colonies, and to provoke her into a world war. He had travelled to Spain to prevent that from happening, and he could not understand why the British could not understand that themselves. The failure of the western powers to grasp what seemed to be obvious to the volunteers was disheartening, and left them disillusioned.

Kemp argued that, rather than ignore the Spanish conflict, the British government had sided firmly with the left, seduced by:

the initiative and vitality of Republican propaganda in Britain - fortified, of course, by the growing fear of Germany; certainly the Republicans seemed to have the ear of Fleet Street, where the Nationalist voice was only the faintest of squeaks.

This sense of persecution, and of frustration with the reaction of the rest of the world to his chosen cause, is a running theme throughout Kemp’s work, and often resembles that of the volunteers on the Republican side. Indeed, their complaints are often of a similar nature, with both sides convinced that the other was better supplied and possessed more international support, due to which it was their moral imperative to volunteer for the underdogs.

\[111\] Acier, *From Spanish Trenches*, 58.

Kemp uses his memoir to change perceptions of the war, and of the two sides. While the international community believed that Spanish popular support lay with the Republicans, Kemp denies that, noting how the citizens of Santander lined the streets to welcome the Nationalist troops who had just 'liberated' them from Republican rule.\(^\text{113}\) Indeed, from what he had heard “Republican rule in Santander had been particularly savage; hundreds of Nationalist supporters were thrown to their death from the top of the cliffs near the lighthouse on Cabo Mayor.”\(^\text{114}\) He uses this incident to show us once again the strength of Republican propaganda – on his way into the city he had passed masses of Republican troops engaged in a disorganized retreat, while the British news concurrently claimed that “ten thousand Basque Republican troops had taken up defensive positions” on the road to Santander.\(^\text{115}\) Kemp bemoans the publicity given to the Republican story about Guernica, while the Nationalist version of events – that “the Republicans themselves had set fire to the town before leaving, just as they had burnt Irun, Eibar and Amorebieta in the course of their retreat through the Basque Provinces”\(^\text{116}\) – had been roundly ignored. Harold Cardozo of the Daily Mail, a reporter attached to the Nationalist army, entered Guernica within hours of its occupation by Nationalist troops, and while he saw evidence of aerial bombardment, the “majority of the burned houses... showed not the slightest signs of damage by bombing.”\(^\text{117}\) That the

\(^{113}\) Ibid., 100.

\(^{114}\) Ibid., 101.

\(^{115}\) Ibid., 102.

\(^{116}\) Ibid., 89.

Republican version of events was accepted so thoroughly at the expense of their own version angered Nationalist supporters like Kemp and Cardozo.

While the global press portrayed the Republican troops in a positive light, Kemp describes them as being a dangerous and unruly horde, who shot innocent civilians\(^{118}\) and burned priests alive\(^{119}\) whenever they captured a town. He criticizes them for being poorly trained and under-prepared, and blames the incompetence of their commanders – but this should not be surprising, for the vast majority of the Spanish army had defected to the Nationalists! With few professional soldiers and officers amongst their ranks, the Republicans were forced to populate their army with boys too young to be at war and men too old.\(^{120}\)

The Nationalist soldiers, on the other hand, were in his telling the finest soldiers in Europe. He describes the men of the Foreign Legion (or the *Tercio*), as being:

> virtually impervious to cold and hunger, danger and fatigue. As an Englishman I can only say that the thrill of serving with and commanding such troops was one of the greatest experiences of my life.\(^{121}\)

He notes that these men remained compassionate and level-headed, and that it was instead the priesthood who were bloodthirsty and eager for the war to continue. He recalls an argument between a group of *Tercio* soldiers and their battalion’s priest, Father Vicente, who “was alone among the party in his condemnation of all Reds as traitors who must be killed.”\(^{122}\) These soldiers were average men, and could perhaps

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\(^{118}\) Ibid., 39. “the Reds shot her husband. Poor man, he had never done them any harm.”

\(^{119}\) Ibid., 47. “*Milicianos* burnt the priest alive” in the village of Santa Olalla

\(^{120}\) Ibid., 73.

\(^{121}\) Ibid., 116.

\(^{122}\) Ibid., 76.
even understand where the Republicans are coming from - without condoning their views, of course. The priest, on the other hand, had an abstract perspective of the situation and viewed it from a removed position. To him, the Republicans had betrayed the Church, and as enemies of the Church they must be comprehensively eliminated lest they hurt her any further. The soldiers understood that, while "the Reds may be our enemies... they are Spaniards, and Spain will have need of men after the war."123

Kemp portrays the Nationalists as facing an uphill battle, and that:

On many occasions during [the war's] early days it was the courage and initiative of individual commanders that turned the scale for the Nationalists. At the end of the war, when I was in Madrid, I heard the comment of an Englishman who had witnessed both the Russian and Spanish revolutions: ‘If Franco’s generals hadn’t had more guts than the White Russian generals, Spain would now be Communist.’124

By comparing the Republicans to the Bolsheviks, he portrays the Nationalists as the heroic defenders of Western Europe, and through his association with them he too should be considered a hero. Kemp wishes to reclaim his experiences in Spain, and to earn appreciation for his efforts. His time in Spain had left him with an affinity for Franco’s regime, and 1957, in the middle of the Cold War, was as good a time as any to exploit anti-Communist sentiment.

123 Ibid.
124 Ibid., 32.
IV. JOHN CORNFORD

Tell the workers of England
This was not a war of our own making,
We did not seek it.
But if ever the Fascists again rule Barcelona
It will be as a heap of ruins with us workers beneath it.

John Cornford, *A Letter from Aragon*, 1936

The war in Spain caught the attention and fired the imagination of a nascent left-wing British intellectual class. The massive unemployment and vast income disparities in interwar Britain contributed to the growing popularity of socialism, and particularly of the Communist Party, in Britain. The watershed origin moment of this movement came during the General Strike of 1926, which forced the young intelligentsia to confront the realities of working class life. When the Hunger Marchers passed through Cambridge on their way to London in February 1934, they found their ranks swelled by students of the universities, eager to participate in a movement for political change. There seemed something disingenuous at first about these wealthy, privileged students joining the destitute Marchers, many of whom “could barely keep a straight face at the sight of their new undergraduate comrades singing, chanting, and marching with them.”

The proletarian struggle, and the conflict in Spain, served to fill a void amongst the young middle class and proletarian intellectuals. The need for

\[\text{\footnotesize 125} \text{ M.A. Sperber, ed., \textit{And I remember Spain: A Spanish civil war anthology,} (London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, 1974), 23.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize 127} \text{ Ibid., 21.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize 128} \text{ Ibid., 29.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize 129} \text{ Ibid., 30.}\]
something to believe in led many to Spain – the Republican cause helped provide their lives with a purpose in a time of great political and social upheaval, with some looking to the Party to serve as a moral compass, to be an institution of authority that would “lay down how it should be.”\textsuperscript{130} Mass disillusionment with the current system led many to search for alternative political ideologies, with Marxism in particular emerging as a popular choice.\textsuperscript{131} They threw themselves into this new cause; however, the slow pace of progress in Britain was discouraging. Frustrated with the lack of progress at home, they turned their eyes south, making Spain’s cause their own.\textsuperscript{132}

Unlike the previous generation, these individuals argued that it was no longer enough to merely pontificate from afar, and that intellectuals must leave their ivory towers because civilization itself was in peril.\textsuperscript{133} They believed in active participation, in part as a reaction to the apolitical Bloomsbury aestheticism of previous decades.\textsuperscript{134} The artist Felicia Brown considered the urgency of participating in this conflict to be far greater than that of merely creating art about it, and believed it to be the duty of the artist to participate in such a struggle; at some point, action must follow rhetoric.\textsuperscript{135}

The young, affluent, intellectuals who participated in this movement were also driven by a need to prove their leftist credentials to their working class comrades, and to show that their willingness to back their words with action. It was

\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 34.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 35.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., 33.
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., 40.
one thing to simply cheer on the Hunger Marchers, but quite another to actually volunteer to travel to Spain and risk one’s life for a cause.

Rupert John Cornford was born on December 27, 1915 in Cambridge, the second child of Francis Cornford, the famed classicist, and Frances Darwin, a granddaughter of Charles Darwin. In January 1933, after having completed his education at the Stowe School, a public school in Buckinghamshire, he travelled to London, where he would remain for six months. During that period he was enrolled temporarily at the London School of Economics, where he found himself at the centre of the London student movement on the Left. John quickly became involved in the movement, and was soon a member of a variety of left-wing and anti-fascist groups. It was during this period that he was able to see the Communist Party in action for the first time, and impressed by what he saw, he enrolled himself in the Young Communist League. While he had developed a theoretical interest in Communism during his time at Stowe, it was during this period in London that he became truly involved in political activities. His job for the party involved travelling to Trade Union Branches, where he would speak to working class men many years older than him, explaining to them, using research and statistics, that they were indeed being exploited, and that they were justified in going on strike. This job was particularly exciting for Cornford, as it allowed him to be directly involved in the labor struggle. Being allowed to speak at these branch meetings made him feel

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136 Peter Stansky, *Journey to the Frontier*, 140.
137 Ibid., 135.
138 Ibid., 189.
139 Ibid., 191-2.
“almost like being admitted” into their circle.¹⁴⁰ By the end of the summer of 1933, when he was to return to Cambridge to attend Trinity College, he was a dedicated member of the Communist party.

The Spanish Civil War broke out in 1936, by which time Cornford had just accepted the Earl of Derby Research Scholarship to remain at Trinity for another year. However, he was eager to participate in this struggle, and so in early August he made plans to travel to Spain for a week as a journalist to see the situation for himself.¹⁴¹ After a few days in Barcelona he travelled to the front, where he suddenly decided to join the P.O.U.M. militia – the very same militia that George Orwell would join a few months later.¹⁴² Writing home to his father in September his intentions become clearer:

After I had been three days in Barcelona it was clear, first, how serious the position was; second, that a journalist without a word of Spanish was just useless. I decided to join the militia.¹⁴³

On his way to Spain he had acquired a press card from the News Chronicle identifying him as a freelance journalist,¹⁴⁴ and from letters written to friends during this period it is evident that he did indeed intend to report on the situation in Spain before the language barrier proved too insurmountable for him to prove effective as either a reporter or a party functionary.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 194.
¹⁴¹ Ibid., 313.
¹⁴² Ibid., 316.
¹⁴³ Ibid., 318.
¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 315.
¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 319.
Cornford’s decision to enlist with the P.O.U.M. militia was an impulsive one,\textsuperscript{146} and he spent much time justifying it both to himself in his journal and in letters home to friends and family. He was unapologetic to all except his lover, Margot Heinemann, who he had effectively abandoned by volunteering, and in a letter to her he admits that:

> From the age of seventeen [he was now twenty] I was in a kind of way tied down, and envied my contemporaries a good deal their freedom to bum out. And it was partly because I felt myself for the first time independent that I came out here.\textsuperscript{147}

This desire for independence and adventure was similar to that of Julian Bell, who had passed out of King’s College, Cambridge, some years before, where he had been a friend and contemporary of the men who would later become known as the Cambridge Five. A nephew of Virginia Woolf, he was deeply influenced by her and the other members of the Bloomsbury Group, and was often considered to be a junior member of that group. Living in the shadow of individuals as influential as these nagged him, and he believed that:

> It was his obligation and test... to prove himself to himself, as a significant member of his generation who could make a contribution of example, experience and knowledge, rather then languish in a backwater, whether in London or China, as a mere second-generation and second-rate Bloomsburian.\textsuperscript{148}

Bell’s motivation to volunteer had less to do with the situation in Spain and more to do with a desire:

> to learn about modern warfare; quite logical, in the sense that the totalitarians, Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin, were using Spain as a laboratory, he was there to observe their experiments. Political subtleties and allegiances

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 328.  
\textsuperscript{147} Ibid., 330.  
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid., 398.
did not overly concern him. He had never thought of Spain as an incarnation of an ideal, nor had he been swept up in a rush of ideological enthusiasm - hence he did not run the risk of being disillusioned: only of being killed.\textsuperscript{149}

Indeed, he was a pacifist, and while he joined the International Brigades it was only as an ambulance driver. He knew that going to Spain "would set him apart from most of his literary contemporaries: the majority of volunteers for the International Brigade came from the working classes, not the 'Oxbridge' intelligentsia."\textsuperscript{150} His motivations for volunteering had far less to do with the situation in Spain, and more to do with the opportune timing of the civil war.

The motivations of Bell and Cornford must be compared to those of Peter Kemp, who was a contemporary of Cornford's at Trinity. Both being politically active members of the same college,\textsuperscript{151} they would have participated in many of the same debates, albeit often on opposing sides. It is fascinating, then, that they would both end up in Spain, following their positions in these debates to their logical conclusions. Having argued so strenuously for their chosen cause, both men would have felt the need to prove their dedication by volunteering to fight. This motivation would have had a stronger influence on Cornford than on Kemp, for as an affluent intellectual arguing for Communism Cornford needed to prove his working class credentials to his new comrades.

Both men had decided to fight not only because they believed in the cause of their respective side, but also because they were vehemently opposed to the other's politics. Communism and Fascism were bitter enemies, and Kemp was as ardently

\textsuperscript{149} Ibid., 411
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 396.
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., 242.
anti-communist as Cornford was anti-fascist. Both believed their side to be the underdog, and that members of the opposing faction were the only ones benefitting from international aid. The Republicans claimed that they needed the International Brigades because the Germans and Italians were supplying Franco with troops, arms and equipment, while the Nationalists contended that they only required foreign aid due to the presence of the International Brigades. The Spanish Civil War was rife with propaganda, and it is hard enough to separate fact from fiction now, let alone then. It is no wonder then that Cornford and Kemp could have had available to them the same information, and yet have interpreted them so differently due to their differing ideologies.

Once the initial euphoria of joining the militia had worn off, Cornford found himself depressed by the language barrier, which left him unable to converse with his fellow militiamen. He found within himself:

> the complete feeling of insecurity, new for me, but most workers have it from the day they leave school. Always in all my work before there has been the background of a secure and well-provided home, and friends that I could fall back upon in an emergency. Now that is no longer here, I stand completely on my own. And I find that rather difficult at first. But I shall manage.\(^{152}\)

He had found the independence that he desired, and soon had his first taste of battle as well. However, his impressions of the militia were mixed, and he found them to be:

> a curious mixture of amateur and professional. There is practically no shouting and saluting. When somebody is told to do something, he gets up to do it all right, but not in a hurry. Officers are elected by acclamation, and obeyed. About half the troops are more or less in uniform, in blue or brown overalls and blue shirts. The rest are more or less nondescript.\(^{153}\)

\(^{152}\) Ibid., 334-5.
\(^{153}\) Ibid., 334.
His experiences in battle had been frustrating; in the absence of a strict hierarchy, the militia’s attacks would fail after some promising starts. Cornford found this to be too anarchic, recognizing the need for “an example of small, disciplined formations under proper command.”154 Orwell, on the other hand, found the “democratic ‘revolutionary’ type of discipline [to be] more reliable than might be expected.”155 He understood the difficulties inherent in transforming a group of untrained peasants into military units, an endeavor made more difficult by the lack of resources available to the militia. Cornford had lived a privileged life, and he seems to have hitherto been blind to the struggles of the working-class men who he had come to fight for. Orwell, who was not himself a member of the proletariat, had had previous journalistic experiences, seen in 1933’s Down and Out in Paris and London, in which he described his experience living as a homeless man in those two cities, and in 1937’s The Road to Wigan Pier, a study into the lives of working-class Englishmen, which allowed him to understand their plight in a way that Cornford could not hope to match.

Cornford soon returned to England, ostensibly on a propaganda mission to recruit more men to form a battalion. While there, he was fiercely critical of the P.O.U.M., writing that:

Their militia is the worst organized on the Aragon front; even brave and intelligent leaders... are incapable of giving their troops proper political, military, or organizational training... [they] are incapable of a real sustained offensive through sheer inefficiency.156

154 Ibid., 356.
155 Orwell, Homage to Catalonia, 27.
156 Stansky, Journey to the Frontier, 363-4.
With that parting blow, he returned to Spain not as a member of the P.O.U.M. militia, but of the International Brigades. While the Brigades were better organized than the militia, their standards remained primitive in comparison to other contemporary armies, and Cornford quickly also became disillusioned with the inadequate training conditions offered to the volunteers. More worrying were the tensions that arose between the English and French volunteers, who found it hard to get along. Small problems such as what newspapers to order, or what kinds of food to cook, assumed great significance when forced to spend so much time together. The English in particular “were a national minority very hard to assimilate,” and were consequently moved frequently across the front, never able to remain for long at a single position.

Cornford disliked military life, and soon learned to “retreat into a massive apathy” or to see the humor in a given situation in order to retain his sanity. While he always seemed cheerful to those around him, it was merely a facade; he was haunted by the deaths of his comrades, and wrote in his journal: “We can do nothing to ease that pain/But prove the agony was not in vain.” He seems to have been close to the point of breaking, and had never fully recovered from a head wound sustained in battle. He was mentally and physically exhausted, but he remained unwilling to give up and return home, presumably considering that to be a humiliation.

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157 Ibid., 267.
158 Ibid., 369.
159 Ibid., 372.
160 Ibid., 387.
161 Ibid., 382.
John Cornford was an idealist, attracted to a romantic image of Communism developed in the rarefied atmosphere of English public schools and universities, and his association with the party limited to dealings with the trade unions of London. These were hardly indicative of the true nature of Soviet-style communism, and what little he saw in Spain left him disappointed. He was not prepared for what he was to experience, and was let down by what he saw. In a letter to Margot written soon before he died he refers to the Communist Party as his “only other love,” but the tone of the letter seems to indicate that he had not experienced in Spain what he had hoped to experience, and a sense of disappointment pervades this letter. He seems to have accepted the inevitability of his own death, and the dejected tone of this letter is a dramatic change from the vibrant, hopeful voice of his writings only a few short months before. He was killed in December 1937, the day after his twenty-first birthday in a poorly coordinated and failed attack on Nationalist lines, a scared young man only just beginning to realize that he had become involved in a situation far too complex for him to understand.

Franco had won a decisive victory, and the veterans of the International Brigades returned home dejected, angry with their governments for having betrayed the Spanish Republic. The English intellectuals who had once flocked to the left were left disillusioned with the movement, irreparably halting its growth. It is doubtful that many of them understood the gravity of their decision to volunteer,

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162 Ibid., 384.
163 Ibid., 389.
164 Ibid., xviii.
and those who returned to England alive would have been forced to question whether it had all been worth it after all.
CONCLUSION

The Spanish Civil War of 1936 to 1939 was an unprecedented event in the history of Europe. Estimates vary, but somewhere between 30,000 and 40,000 individuals from over fifty different nations travelled to Spain to fight for the beleaguered Spanish Republic, and in some cases for the rebel Nationalists. What was it about this war that captured the imaginations of so many, compelling tens of thousands of men who had no apparent connection to Spain and no obvious stake in the outcome to risk their lives – and in many cases die fighting – for a foreign cause? In 1936 the war in Spain seemed as if it was about to erupt into a world war, and these men believed that they were fighting the first battle in a greater war.

While these volunteers were indeed concerned by the situation in Spain, the Spanish cause was secondary to that of their own individual causes, political concerns originating in their home countries that had driven them to travel to Spain to fight some sort of proxy war. For many of these volunteers, the Spanish Civil War served as a substitute for other wars that they wished to be able to fight but could not. It would be simplistic to say that the Civil War was a fight between Communism and Fascism, but that was indeed how many of the individuals who volunteered for the International Brigades saw it – many of them were members of the Communist Party, and they believed it to be their duty to the international Communist movement to protect their comrades, wherever they might be, against tyrannical forces such as fascism.

John Cornford needed to fight in Spain in order to prove his working-class credentials. The Cambridge-educated son of a professor, he needed to prove – both
to himself and to his comrades within the Communist Party – that he was truly committed to the Communist cause, and that just because he came from a privileged background did not mean that he was blind to the vast inequality that he saw around him.

Eoin O’Duffy travelled to Spain for the sole purpose of enhancing his personal and political prestige in Ireland. He needed a popular movement to latch on to, and the Civil War occurred at an opportune time. His time in Spain was an unqualified failure, and he made a poor attempt of pretending that he had truly come to fight for the Nationalist cause. Indeed, Franco had deciphered his motivations fairly quickly, and he disbanded O’Duffy brigade within a few months of its arrival.

There is a slight similarity between the motivations of Cornford and O’Duffy, as they were both drawn to Spain by a need to enhance their prestige back home. However, while Cornford was a committed soldier for his chosen cause, O’Duffy was anything but. Cornford desired approval amongst his peers, and gave his life in the pursuit of that goal. O’Duffy, on the other hand, was a political creature concerned solely with spinning a tale of heroism for himself, while putting himself in as little danger as possible.

Frank Ryan believed that a Republican victory in Spain would serve as a blow against fascism across the world, and especially in Ireland. A fierce Irish nationalist, his sole aim was always the promotion of Irish interests. The ease with which he worked with the Nazis after being captured, even though he had been fiercely anti-fascist for decades, reveals to us a man for whom ideology was secondary, and to whom the improvement of his nation was of utmost importance.
Peter Kemp travelled to Spain because he was vehemently opposed to Communism. Troubled by the rise of the Communist Party in England, he believed that he could strike a blow against the movement by aiding in the overthrow of the Spanish Republic. The international repercussions of the Spanish Civil War were more important to him than the outcome of the war itself, for he hoped to hurt the spread of Communism and other radical left-wing ideologies not just in Spain, but across the world.

The Comintern served as a central controlling intelligence for the left, creating a single unifying (and compelling) narrative that influenced public opinion concerning the Spanish Civil War across the world. Since many of the volunteers for the International Brigades were affiliated with the Communist Party in some way, it was only inevitable that they would have come under the influence of similar narratives. While their backgrounds were different, they were united by their membership of a broader left-wing alliance, either as intellectuals associated with Communist, socialist or anarchist movements, or as working-class individuals affiliated with the same groups.

While the Comintern could mobilize tens of thousands of volunteers through the various national Communist Parties with which it was affiliated, the political right had no such central controlling intelligence. The closest the Nationalists had to such a body was the Catholic Church, and while the Church was indeed pivotal in bringing O'Duffy's Irishmen to Spain, it was unable to organize the kind of popular Crusade to fight for Franco's Nationalists that the Comintern was able to for the Spanish Republic.
This absence of a single body tasked with recruiting volunteers, on the right helps to explain the diversity of experiences and motivations amongst those who, like Kemp and O’Duffy, had volunteered for Franco. While O’Duffy and his men had been encouraged to volunteer by the Catholic Church, Kemp was unaffiliated with any organization and had come of his own volition. Indeed, since Kemp was a Protestant the Catholic cause would have meant nothing to him.

These four men had very different experiences in Spain, which tells us a great deal about the strength of their motivations to volunteer. Frank Ryan and Peter Kemp thrived in Spain, and while it is unsurprising that Ryan, a veteran of the Irish independence struggle with considerable experience in leading popular movements, felt at home leading a battalion in Spain, it is remarkable that the young and inexperienced Kemp was able to assimilate so well with the Spanish soldiers with whom he served. While Kemp's motivations for volunteering might have seemed superficial at first, the strength of character that he showed by remaining in Spain for the entire war reveals to us an individual deeply committed to his chosen cause.

John Cornford was unprepared for the Spanish Civil War, and while he believed that it was his duty as a member of the Communist Party to serve in Spain, he does not seem to have truly understood the impact of his decision until it was too late. He quickly wilted in Spain, as his romantic notions of war were smashed by the realities of the conflict. It is doubtful that the war had much of a lasting impact on the psyche of Eoin O’Duffy, who had travelled to Spain without any intention of participating actively. The lack of effort that he exerted during the war makes it hardly surprising that his attempt to lead a Brigade was such a disaster.
The Spanish Civil War coincided with the peak years of Communism as a force amongst the Western intelligentsia. We now know that what little was then known about the Soviet Union was strictly controlled propaganda, and the intellectuals of the 1930s did not yet know about the true nature of Stalin’s regime. The outside world knew nothing of, or chose to ignore, the Russian dissidents, and believed in the promise of the great experiment that was the Soviet Union. However, the returning volunteers of the International Brigades had been left demoralized by their experiences in Spain, and had begun to show the first signs of the wider discontent with Communism that would be seen in later years, as exemplified by 1949’s *The God That Failed.*

The Spanish Civil War meant many different things to many different people, and the strength of their convictions led tens of thousands of individuals from all over the world to travel to Spain, participating in the internal conflict of an alien land. Many of these men died there, sacrificing themselves for what they believed to be causes worth dying for. In an age as cynical as ours it is important that we remember them, for the courage that these ordinary men showed in travelling to a distant land to fight for their convictions should never be forgotten.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


