



# ÉIRE, ESPAÑA, AND THE CONNOLLY COLUMN

WRITTEN BY

**UMA ARRUGA**





S

pain, 1936. A conspiracy against the established Spanish Second Republic is being engineered. The head of the conspiracy, which would end up being a coup d'état, was General Mola, aided by other important Spanish military figures such as José Sanjurjo, Gonzalo Queipo de Llano, Juan Yagüe, and Francisco Franco. The coup d'état started in the Spanish colonies of Ceuta, Melilla, and Tetuán in the afternoon of the 17th of July, 1936, and carried on into the rest of Spain on the 18th of July. Since it initially failed to succeed in all of the Spanish peninsula, a civil war ensued.

The reactions of Irish society to the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War were widely influenced by both the Catholic Church and the newspapers' reports of the time, which focused solely on atrocities committed by Spanish communists and anarchists to members of the Church—some of which were fabricated. Eoin O'Duffy (founder of the fascist association commonly known as the Blueshirts, the political party Fine Gael and later the National Corporate Party in 1935) was a strong voice in favour of the Alzamiento, the Spanish coup d'état. The National Corporate Party's (and thus O'Duffy's) final act (before its disappear-



### The Spanish Civil War

*The Guerra Civil Española* emblemized class struggle, and gained international recognition as a an important struggle between the forces of progress and reaction.

ance in 1937) was to organise support for Franco and the rebels in Spain. General Eoin O'Duffy led around 700-800 Irishmen to fight against the democratically established second Spanish Republic. These men would form the Irish Brigade.

Although O'Duffy was an open and proud fascist, the support that the Spanish rebel forces received from the majority of Irish society

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was backed by a Catholic sentiment and not a political one. The Irish Church was prominently anti-communist, influencing society, both publicly (in mass) and privately (during confession). According to Donal Donnelly, "the Irish public were subject to persistent propaganda designed to paint the Spanish Republic as anti-Catholic... Many of the wildest, most blood-curdling incidents reported were fabricated or exaggerated."<sup>1</sup> Although the Irish

### The Fascist O'Duffy

28 January 1890 – 30 November 1944



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government had the official say in the matter, the Church carried an unofficial, personal stance on the subject that people were more willing to listen to. Phil McBride, a member of the Irish Brigade, told an interviewer that his parish priest encouraged his enlistment to O'Duffy's brigade. The same priest told a friend, during confession, that McBride was doing a fine thing because he was "going to fight anticlericalism in Spain."<sup>2</sup> Confession was an effective way for priests to privately influence men, and the defence of Catholic Spain was recommended as an adequate penance for their sins.<sup>3</sup>

Clerical, pro-Nationalist (how the Spanish rebels described themselves) magazines were also very popular. These cheap magazines would spread false and exaggerated reports of the Spanish Republicans' crimes against nuns or priests. A particularly gruesome and exaggerated (invented) tale comes from *The Cross*, which related how a Spanish Republican woman bit into the neck of a priest and drank all of his blood.<sup>4</sup>

The Irish government, led by Éamon de Valera, decided to stay neutral and participate in the European Non-Intervention Agreement. Nonetheless, while the official position of the government might have been one of neutrality,





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de Valera did not ignore the overwhelming pro-Franco sentiment of Irish society. Franco was unconditionally recognised by the Irish Free State at midnight 10 February 1939, more than a month before the British and French government and almost two months prior to the end of the Spanish Civil War.

Due to the framing of the conflict as inherently religious, O'Duffy's Irish Brigade, which only spent a few months in Spain and saw almost no action, was widely supported by Irish society. Due to the fact that O'Duffy appealed to the men's faith and not politics, the Brigade members held varying political views, and some had even fought each other during the Irish Civil War. It was considered a Catholic brigade by Irish conservatives, sent to Spain to save the Spanish Church, which was allegedly under attack by the communists. For example, Phil McBride, one of the Irish Brigadiers, claimed in a radio interview with Jim Fahy broadcasted by RTE Radio in 1988 that "if they had left the priests and nuns alone, I wouldn't have went there". Nonetheless, the Church and the Brigadiers were pro-Franco, and fascism was openly accepted. While it is true that not all Catholics who joined the Brigade were fascists, all the fascists were Catholics. Despite being framed as a Catholic Crusade, O'Duffy was himself a fascist, there-

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### O'Duffy's Irish Brigade

Returning to Ireland after a failed Spanish campaign.

by steeping the organization in fascist values and putting it to work for a fascist cause.

The Irish Brigade was an overall failure: excessive drunkenness due to the cheap Spanish wine, mutinies, refusal to go back to the battlefield, fights between members due to differing political views. Not even Franco, the person they had gone to Spain to to help, was happy with them. According to historian Tim Fanning:

**The Irish Brigade was an ill-conceived adventure and its officers woefully unprepared. Less than a handful of officers had any idea about the historical and political**

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context of the war. Only one or two of them could speak Spanish or made any attempt to learn it. More forgivable, perhaps, was their lack of military preparedness. Arthur O'Farrel, who was on O'Duffy's staff, told [Father] McCabe after the brigade had gone home that the Irish officers could not read a map, knew nothing about triangulation or range-finding and some of them couldn't understand how a shell could be fired directly to a target out of sight. [...] That lay with O'Duffy, who deceived the nationalist high command about the military training of his officers and men.<sup>5</sup>

However, amidst the overwhelmingly conservative climate fostered by the Church, a different group of men, inspired by radically different ideals than those in the Irish Brigade, decided to travel to Spain. A few years back, the IRA had suffered one of its many secessions. In an anti-Treaty IRA convention in 1934, Michael Price, IRA's director of training, proclaimed that the Irish Republican Army should strive to create the Irish Republic that James Connolly had wanted to establish. His vision of an Irish Republic was influenced by his Marxist ideology, an ideology that Price's supporters in the 1934 con-

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vention, including Frank Ryan, also subscribed to. However, Michael Price's proclamation was met with a heated argument by those opposed to Connolly's vision, and Price ended up withdrawing from the convention. Peadar O'Donnell and George Gilmore, two of Price's supporters, claimed that the IRA should create a Republican Congress which would support the creation of a Communist movement in Ireland (following the example of the international United Front and the Comintern). Nonetheless, their calls fell on deaf ears, triggering the secession of O'Donnell, Gilmore, Frank Ryan, and Michael Price from the IRA. On the 8th of April, 1934, the Republican Congress Bureau Committee was formed in a meeting attended by approximately 200 former IRA officers, members of the Communist Party of Ireland, soldiers of the republican women's organization *Cumann na mBan*, and several trade unionists. The new Republican Congress Bureau Committee had the obligation to form a Republican Congress and create a manifesto. Thus, the Republican Congress (*An Chomhdháil Phoblachtach* in Irish) was created. The political organisation's ideology was established as Marxist-Leninist, and it served as





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an attempt to join Republicanism and Socialism in one organisation.

Nonetheless, *An Chomhdháil Phoblachtach* was a short-lived organisation. Outnumbered and repressed by fascist and Catholic organisations such as the Blueshirts and the National Corporate Party, their Marxist ideology was repudiated by the vast majority of Irish society. Their last campaign was the organisation of support for the Spanish Republic at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936. Frank Ryan, one of the founders of the Congress and ex-IRA member, travelled to Spain with around 80 other Irishmen to fight for the Spanish Republic. These Irishmen would be known as the Connolly Column. They were Irish Republicans, communists, socialists, and even anarchists. These men did not subscribe to the ideology of the overwhelmingly conservative Irish society of the time, and therefore saw the conflict through a political, rather than a religious, lens.

In September 1936, the Irish branch of the pro-Republican Spanish Medical Aid Committee was founded by the Communist Party of Ireland and the Republican Congress. However, the committee was not popular amongst Irish society. With the creation of General Eoin O'Duffy's Irish Brigade, Ireland's leftists realised a more direct action had to be taken.

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Bill Scott, an Irishman who had found himself in Barcelona during the Alzamiento and immediately joined the fight against fascism, frequently wrote home to his friends, including Séan Murray, the general secretary of the Communist Party of Ireland (CPI). In his letters he would describe the situation of the Spanish Republicans who were fighting against Fascism and the horrors the Spanish civilians had to endure. In one of those letters quoted in the *The Irish Worker's Voice*, the CPI's official newspaper, Scott wrote:

**I was free for a few days and decided to see Madrid. Here is what I saw: On December 4th, thirty low flying Fascist planes loomed over the city as if considering where to release their loads of death. Suddenly, a succession of terrific explosions shook the city, and dense volumes of smoke were seen rising about a mile from the centre. I went to the scene of the raid. I saw firemen and militiamen endeavouring to rescue dying men, women and children from the burning pile, which half an hour before had been a block of tenement flats. I saw the mutilated bodies of children wedged between heavy**

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beams. In the midst of the street I saw what on examination proved to be a child's cot containing a mangled body. People in adjoining streets, not fortunate enough to be killed outright, were blinded and shell-shocked by the explosions.<sup>6</sup>

Scott's words were a wakeup call for Irish leftists. Thus, the idea of creating an Irish Unit of the International Brigades came to life and recruitment and logistics fell into the hands

### Frank Ryan

Top right, pictured alongside Joe Ryan and other colleagues from the International Brigade.



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of Bill Gannon, a popular ex-IRA veteran member of the CPI. Tommy Woods, a seventeen-year-old Dubliner who had learned to use weapons with Na Fianna Eireann (the Republican Boy Scouts) left a letter for his mother after enlisting. In this letter, he wrote that the Irishmen, including himself, "are going out to fight for the working class" and that it was "not a religious war, that is all propaganda."<sup>7</sup> On the 12th of December 1936, Frank Ryan left Dublin with a group of approximately 80 other Irishmen. Many more other Irishmen would join them in the following months, travelling to Spain from Ireland and places such as Australia or the United States of America, where they had been forced into exile after the Irish Civil War.

Frank Ryan, a respected ex-IRA member and one of the founders of the Republican Congress, was unanimously regarded as the leader of these departing Irishmen. Due to his nationalist, anti-British, and anti-treaty views, Ryan was imprisoned many times, including once when he was arrested due to his involvement in the Irish Civil War. He spent 1922 and 1923 at Harepark Internment Camp and was one of the last prisoners to be released. Other legendary anti-treaty IRA members





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such as Kit Conway and Jack Nalty joined Frank Ryan in the Spanish Civil War. Ryan, however, was regarded by the Irishmen as their commanding officer. Unlike Eoin O'Duffy, Frank Ryan was present in the front, fighting alongside the other Irishmen and the International Brigadiers.

A few days after leaving Ireland, the men arrived at the International Brigade headquarters in Albacete. The Irishmen were sent to the base of the English-speaking Brigade, which in December 1936 was only formed by the British Battalion. By February 1937, however, it would be known as the XV International Brigade, formed by men from other English-speaking countries such as the United States of America along with Belgian, French, and Balkan soldiers. The base was located in Madrigueras, thirty kilometres north of Albacete, and served as a military training camp. Their commander was Captain George Nathan, a British army veteran. Being part of the British Battalion, however, did not sit well with the Irishmen. They were (ex-) IRA members, soldiers who had led a war against the British occupational forces in their homeland, and having to obey British officers went against what they had fought for in the Irish War of Independence. Tensions heightened between the Irish and the British when it was discovered that George

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### The Black and Tans

Ever the enemy of the working peoples and revolutionaries in Ireland.

Nathan, their commander, had been an important member of the Auxiliary Division of the Royal Irish Constabulary—an imperialist paramilitary unit that worked closely with the Black and Tans, and had personally murdered two Sinn Féin members in 1920.<sup>8</sup>

Class solidarity and the fight against Fascism, however, were regarded by some of the Irishmen, such as Charlie Donnelly, as more important than the historical enmities. Frank Ryan, although himself a dedicated Irish Republican, tried to defuse the tension addressing the problems in a New Year statement:

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**An Irish unit of the International Brigades is being formed. [...] This unit will be part of the English-speaking Battalion which is to be formed. Irish, English, Scots and Welsh comrades will fight side by side against the common enemy-Fascism. It must also be made clear that in the International Brigades in which we serve there are no national differences [...]. For the sake of the people of Spain and the success of the fight against Fascism -and in the name of the folks at home whom we must never disgrace, I ask for a complete unity and the fullest concentration in this, the decisive fight for the liberty of the human race.<sup>9</sup>**

On Christmas Eve, 1936, forty-five volunteers of the Connolly Column started marching towards the front alongside the 12th French Battalion of the XIV Brigade and the First Company of the British Battalion. They were ordered to take part in the southern offensive, which aimed to take back the village of Lopera. Nathan had selected Kit Conway, and not Frank Ryan, to lead the Irish section of the Battalion, to the consternation of Irish soldiers such as Joe Monks.<sup>10</sup> Frank Ryan, in turn, was shipped off to help the 12th International Brigade in the Madrid

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front, and the Irishmen who had not volunteered for this counter-offensive, around forty, remained in Madrigueras. The marching brigadiers came under fire during their journey to the southern Córdoba front, and it was only then that the Irishmen realized the poor condition of their weapons. The Irish carried trench-helmets, grenades, gas masks and 250 rounds of ammunition; however, their Chauchat machine guns continually jammed and their old Austrian rifles were single shot. While covering from the Fascist fire, they also observed the Republican artillery shells were inadequate: two out of five shells did not explode. The Irishmen stayed in the proximities of Lopera in the Córdoba front for almost a month before being transferred to the Madrid front, where Fascist Italian and German troops were attempting to capture the capital. The Connolly Column had lost eight men in Córdoba, including seventeen-year-old Tommy Woods.

While Frank Ryan was fighting in Madrid and the bulk of the Connolly Column found itself along the Córdoba front, the remaining Irishmen in Madrigueras were sent off to the Abraham Lincoln Battalion, the North American Unit of the International Brigades. Accounts of why they were sent off





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vary depending on the source. Some say the Irishmen voted to join the North Americans because of their animosity with their British comrades. Other sources, such as Frank Ryan himself, claim the British disposed of them to eliminate the tension they created between the soldiers. Ryan joined the members of the Connolly Column who were still in the British Battalion during their journey to the Madrid front, where he had been during the past month. They took part in the capture of Majadahonda and the battle in Las Rozas, where they lost one more soldier, Dinny Coady.

However, it was in the Battle of Jarama where the Irishmen suffered the most. The Battle of Jarama was part of Franco's new offensive to take the Spanish capital. After the failure of the first Madrid offensive in November 1936, the fascist forces had regrouped and developed a new strategy. Their new plan included cutting the road that linked Madrid with Valencia. Franco's attack started on the 6th of February, 1937, with five brigades of the Nazi Condor Legion and several Moorish squadrons which added up to around ten thousand troops. Six days later, the Fascist forces had captured Pingarrón Hill, the geographically dominant hill providing a clear view of the area surrounding the road. It was on the same day, the 12th of February,

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that approximately sixteen hundred men of the XV International Brigade, including forty Irishmen, jumped out of their lorries and into the main road a few kilometres from the village of Morata de Tajuña.

It was there, amongst the olive groves and irregular terrain, that the XVth International Brigade made contact with the Fascist soldiers. They would be the only ones standing between the fascists and the capital. The Irishmen, led by Kit Conway, were included in the first Company of the British Battalion. It was the first Company to clash with the enemy, a platoon of Moorish regulars. The Irishmen and the other soldiers from the XVth International Brigade endured heavy fire in an area which offered virtually no cover. Their own rifles and Maxim guns were practically useless because they had been given the wrong ammunition. Carnage ensued from the lack of ammunition and solid cover. Amongst others, the Irishmen lost Kit Conway, who had led them in Córdoba, Majadahonda and Las Rozas. Nonetheless, while only 25 percent of the First Company and 33 percent of the whole Brigade were still in the line at the end of the 12th of February,<sup>11</sup> the XVth International Brigade succeeded in stopping the advance of

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Franco's troops. They also inflicted great casualties in the Fascist ranks, which could not be easily replaced because they were Franco's elite troops.

After all the losses, the men's morale was low. On the 14th of February, after having their lines undermined and their troops overwhelmed by a new attack, Ryan, alongside János Gálicz and fellow Irishman Jock Cunningham, led 140 men of the British Battalion back towards the enemy. They forced the Fascist troops to fall back, all while singing the Internationale. Ryan, who fought alongside his men, was wounded a day later, on the 15th of February. In a letter he

### The Connolly Column

Young leftist militants in España.



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sent to his friend General O'Reilly, written on the 5th of March 1937, he recalled the events:

**I got a slight flesh-wound in the arm from a bullet which went through the head of a man beside me. It made me - even gentle me! - fighting mad. [...] Half an hour later a tank shell burst beside me and I got a wallop in the left leg that knocked me down. [...] There was no blood. It must have been a stone thrown by the shell. I limped for a few minutes, then I felt OK. [...] Shortly after I got a bullet through the left arm. It's a clean wound, high up, and will be OK in a few weeks.**<sup>12</sup>

The Abraham Lincoln Battalion, and thus the Irishmen of the Connolly Column who had joined them, also fought in the Battle of Jarama. They faced the same fate as their British Battalion counterparts, losing hundreds of men on the last day of fighting alone. Charlie Donnelly, a young poet from Killybrackey, fought with them. A Canadian soldier, quoted in Joseph O'Connor's book about Donnelly, recalled:

**We ran for cover, Charlie Donnelly, the commander of an Irish company is crouched**



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**behind an olive tree. He has picked up a bunch of olives from the ground and is squeezing them. I hear him say something quietly between a lull in machine gun fire: 'Even the olives are bleeding.'**<sup>13</sup>

A few minutes later, he was struck by machine gun fire three times, including his head. He died instantly. It was the last day of the Battle of Jarama. The fighting lasted for 21 days (from the 6th to 27th of February), but the men, including the Irish, stayed in the trenches of the Jarama front for approximately three months. Nineteen Irishmen were killed in action, and around 20 thousand men were lost.<sup>14</sup> Just over fifty of the approximately eighty Irishmen who had crossed the Pyrenees with Ryan were alive after Jarama. Both sides suffered substantial losses, and no explicit victor was proclaimed. The Republicans, however, managed to clear the Madrid-Valencia road from Fascist troops—an action which was regarded as a strategic victory for the Spanish Republic. In the Jarama front trenches, the Irishmen celebrated their national festivities. A concert was held in honour of the anniversary of the Easter Rising. On May 12th, a ceremony was held on the 21st anniversary of James Connolly's execution, attended by soldiers and officers from all the nationalities present. It was during this time

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### Irish Volunteers

The *XV Brigada Internacional* was a mixed brigade, fighting for the Spanish Republic, against the fascists, in the Spanish Civil War. Alongside the British Battalion and the North American Lincoln Battalion, the International Brigade also included two non-English speaking Battalions: a Balkan Battalion and a Franco-Belgian Battalion.

in the trenches that the anti-Fascist Irishmen came the closest to a direct confrontation with O'Duffy's Bandera. The Irish Communist Tom Murphy recalled in a 1996 interview:

**Our trenches were maybe a few hundred yards away. Frank Ryan used to speak on the speaker, he says 'Irish-**

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**men go home! Your fathers would turn in their graves if they knew that you'd come to fight for imperialism. This is the real Republican army, the real, the real men of Ireland.**<sup>15</sup>

Although there is evidence of both Irish sides being in close proximity, there is no evidence whatsoever of them actually engaging in combat with one another. In March 1937, around the time of the Battle of Jarama, a pro-Spanish Republic newspaper called *Irish Democrat* was set up in Ireland by the small community of leftist activists that had remained there. The newspaper was the only way the Irish soldiers had to tell their stories of their fight in Spain. After Jarama, the Irishmen were faced with the Brunete Offensive. The offensive was an attempt by the Republic to ease the Nationalist pressure around Madrid, and it took place from the 6th to the 25th of July, 1937. It was the first real offensive launched by the Republicans, who had been on the defensive since the start of the Alzamiento. The XV Brigade played an important part in the Battle of Brunete, especially in the taking of the city itself. The Irishmen had been split into three different sections of the XV Brigade. Peter O'Connor recalls a feeling of loneliness as he, at some point, found himself to be the only Irishman on the Brunete frontline.<sup>16</sup> The attack start-

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ed on the 6th of July at 5 a.m. Although the Republican forces made great progress in the first few days (such as taking Brunete, Villanueva de la Cañada and Quijorna) of the offensive, the Fascists' counter-attacks were fierce and they ended up winning the battle. Franco had access to Nazi planes and pilots, giving the fascist forces a clear advantage. The planes would constantly strafe the Republican soldiers, making it almost impossible to find cover. The heat, shortage of food, and water scarcity also took a toll on the Republican soldiers. Peter O'Connor recorded in his diary in an entry for July 20th:

**The Fascists made a fierce attack this morning on our right flank using 40 or 50 bombers, machine guns and tanks. Our flank gave way. We are retreating slowly. The heat is terrific. We are parched with thirst, we are now 12hrs. without drink. Some of our Spanish comrades have collapsed with the heat. The bombardment and machine-gunning from the air by Hitler's Junkers is terrible. It is the most demoralising of all, but still our troops are holding heroically under the strain.**<sup>17</sup>

The human cost of the Republic





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was around twenty-five thousand men, including seven Irishmen from the original Connolly Column.<sup>18</sup> Major George Nathan was killed by an air bombing on the last day of the battle. Frank Ryan had not fought with his men in the Battle of Brunete. He had been stationed at the International Brigades HQ in Albacete, where he had taken over the propaganda and publicity work. The Irishman and his fellow soldiers rested during the first weeks of August but found themselves in the Aragon front by the end of the month. The Spanish Republic's new offensive aimed to apply pressure to, and possibly capture, the city of Zaragoza. The XV Brigade's objective was to take the town of Quinto. The Nazi soldiers belonging to Franco's ranks had heavily fortified Porburell Hill, on the outskirts of the small town. The Republican forces, however, managed to take Quinto and Porburell Hill. Peter Daly, Battalion Commander, was fatally wounded during the first days of the assault on Porburell. By taking the Hill's fortress, the Republicans had forced the Fascist line to retreat to the town of Belchite.

After intense fighting which cost several lives, including those of two Irishmen, the Fascists surrendered Belchite on the 6th of September. After Belchite's fall, the XV Brigade was moved into reserve but returned to the Aragon front on October 12th.

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The renewed Republican attack failed, but the XV Brigade was kept on trench duty until they were relieved by new Spanish troops. The XV Brigade, including the few Irishmen still alive and not hospitalised, were allowed to rest until the first days of January 1938, when they were moved to take part in the Battle of Teruel. On the last days of 1937 and the first days of 1938, the Republican forces had managed to take the city of Teruel. On the 17th of January, however, Franco launched a counterattack to take back the city, and the XV Brigade was taken out of reserves. The battle would last three months and would end with the recapture of the town by Fascist troops. Three Irishmen lost their lives in the Teruel fighting. March 8th, 1938, saw the launch of the biggest Fascist offensive on the Aragon front. Franco's forces, besides the Spanish and Moroccan troops, including several Nazi airplanes, four battalions from the Nazi Tank Corps (with 45 tanks in total), and the Fascist Italian "Black Arrows" Division.

The Republican soldiers, especially the XV International Brigade were exhausted and ill equipped after the Battle of Teruel, and their lines broke quickly. The fascists overran the Republican positions,

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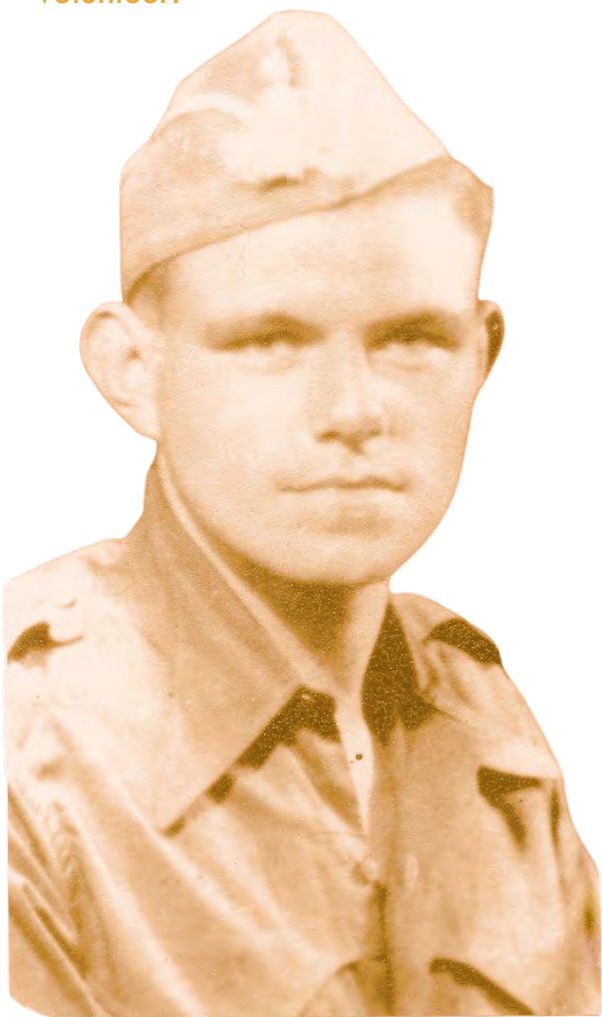


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and again, three more Irishmen lost their lives. It was during this Nationalist offensive that Frank Ryan was captured by the Italian fascists. In the spring and summer of 1938, hundreds of new volunteers joined the International Brigades, including

### A Young Michael O'Riordan

Founder of the Communist Party of Ireland, and International Brigade volunteer.



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four other Irishmen. Amongst them was Michael O'Riordan, one of the founders of the Communist Party of Ireland. These Irishmen and the other volunteers joined the XV Brigade during their rest in between the Aragon front battles and their last battle: the Battle of the River Ebro. On the 24th of July 1938, the XV International Brigade was ordered to cross the Ebro River as part of the last Republican offensive. The aim of that offensive was to surprise the Francoist troops all along the Ebro River, to reconnect Catalunya with the rest of the Republican zone, and to alleviate pressure on Valencia. The Battle of the Ebro would last from July to November of 1938. The failure of this last major offensive would mark the beginning of the Republic's final days. On the night of the 25th of July, the International Brigadiers crossed the river. The British Battalion Commander, Sam Wilde, handed a Catalan flag to Michael O'Riordan for him to carry through and across the Ebro river and into the Fascist occupied territory of Catalunya.<sup>19</sup> The International Brigadier's main objective was to take Hill 481, which was highly fortified by the Fascists. The Republican soldiers, however, were at a clear disadvantage. Thirteen hundred Nazi and Italian





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planes were used against them, and during the whole Battle of the Ebro, Franco's troops had a superiority of 15 to 1 bomber planes, 10 to 1 fighter planes and 12 to 1 heavy artillery.<sup>20</sup> In other words, Franco controlled the sky and subsequently, controlled the ground with the planes' bombs and machine guns.

After five days of intense fighting to take Hill 481 and after losing multiple men, the attack on the fortified hill was called off. Three Irishmen had lost their lives in the struggle. August 2nd saw a hold on the Republican advance and on the 3rd of August Franco launched a counter-attack. The XV International Brigade alternated between fighting and being pulled back into reserve. Their troops were weakened by all the struggles they had taken part in. They were exhausted, both mentally and physically. On the 21st of September, Dr. Juan Negrín, the Prime Minister of the Spanish Republican Government announced that the International Brigades were to be withdrawn and the soldiers repatriated. The XV International Brigade, including the last few surviving Irishmen, however, were pulled into the Battle of the Ebro once more on the 23rd of September. It would be their last fight for the Spanish Republic. It was on this last day that Jack Nulty was killed. Nulty had been one of the original Connolly

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### The Battle of the Ebro

The longest and the largest battle of the Spanish Civil War, taking place between July and November 1938 along the lower course of the Ebro River.

ly Column members and had returned with his fellow Irishmen after being hit in Córdoba. Liam McGregor also lost his life on that last day of fighting.

The Irishmen and their fellow soldiers officially left the front after midnight on September 24th, 1938. On December 7th, after many popular ceremonies in their honour, the XV International Brigade left Spain. One badly wounded Irishman, Paddy Duffy, had to be left behind. The Irish and British volunteers took boats to Newhaven from France and then a train to London's Victoria Station. Some Irishmen decided to

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stay in London due to the prospect of being treated like pariah in Ireland. They were afraid of not finding any jobs due to the fact they were anti-Fascists who had fought for the Reds in Spain—a likely outcome in a society where the basis of the Spanish Civil War was actively misframed as being a religious conflict. Only seven Irishmen, including Michael O'Riordan, returned to their Ireland. They were the last Irishmen to return home.

However, Frank Ryan never made it back to Ireland. An American International Brigadier, who was also taken prisoner by the Italian fascists, remembered a dramatic moment of Ryan's captivity:

**They brought up Frank Ryan and about thirty British prisoners. A Fascist officer demanded to know who their commanding officer was. Captain Ryan immediately stood up. The English prisoners -all of them were in pretty bad shape, but fearing for Ryan's life they all shouted, "No, Frank! No! Sit down!" But Ryan simply said: "I am." [...] The Italian officer told us that Gandesa had fallen. Ryan didn't believe him and told him so. At that point another officer joined us. He was German-Gestapo. He told us who he was. He got into a discussion in English with Cap-**

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**tain Ryan - about why he was in Spain, etc. Frank told him - spelled it out for him; then asked the Gestapo officer what he was doing in Spain. The officer said simply: "You're a brave man", then turned around and left us.**<sup>21</sup>

The Italian Black Arrows positioned Ryan in front of the prisoners and tried to force him to do the Fascist salute. Ryan refused. They positioned a firing squad in front of him and mocked an execution. Ryan still refused. The only reason why he wasn't executed was because he was a high-ranking officer and they hoped to exchange him for Italian and German prisoners of war. He was first taken to a concentration camp set up in Miranda del Ebro, then a detention centre at San Pedro de Cardenas. Later, he was transferred to the Central Prison at Burgos, a prison built for 500 men but that held more than five thousand men. It was 1940 when he was sentenced to die by a Court Martial. In Ireland, however, a Release Frank Ryan Committee had been created, and their efforts did not go in vain. They forced Éamon de Valera to intervene, and Ryan's death sentence was commuted to 30 years in prison. He spent two years and four months in the Bur-





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gos before he was handed over to the Germans. The Abwehr, the Nazi military intelligence agency, wanted to use Ryan, a famous Irish Republican, to undermine the British. Despite opportunistic efforts by those that likely sided with Italian fascists, there is no evidence nor records of Ryan voluntarily collaborating with the Nazis. In January 1943, while still in Germany, his health deteriorated due to the conditions he had endured while being Franco's prisoner. After an apoplectic fit, he lived in pain until his death on June 10th, 1944, aged 41.<sup>22</sup> He was originally buried in Dresden. His remains were repatriated in 1979, and now lay in Glasnevin Cemetery in Dublin.

In the 1930s, the Spanish Civil War was regarded by the majority of Irish society as a war against Catholicism. This framing of the conflict, which served the Fascist cause, was in stark contrast to that of the Irish left. In the words of Peadar O'Donnell, "All wars are fought between devils and angels; war propaganda remains the most monotonous of all human cries. Pens sprinkle soot or halos."<sup>23</sup> However, many years have passed since the end of the conflict, and the studies that arose about the Spanish Civil War and the news that came from Franco's dictatorship changed the opinion of Irish society and institutions. The Irish members of the International Brigades, who were

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### The International Brigades

As an important component of the war effort, the International Brigades not only offered logistical and combat support, they emblemized international proletarian and working class solidarity.

once ostracised by Irish society, are now remembered and even commemorated in some instances. The same cannot be said of the members of the Irish Brigade.

The Irish Labour Party, which was anti-communist and did not support the Irish International Brigadiers at the time, now has a

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## UMA

picture of said Brigadiers in its headquarters in Dublin. The Irish Trade Unionists, which had demanded the Irish Government cease relations

### A Tribute to Internationalism

A Belfast City Hall stained glass, commemorating the Irish antifascist involvement in the International Brigades.



## ARRUGA

with the Republican Spanish Government, have now funded many of the memorials scattered all over Ireland. As of 2020, the author of this article has counted 38 memorials (including murals, plaques, headstones, bridges, etc.) for members of the Connolly Column (who fought and even died in Spain), in both the Irish Free State and the occupied Six Counties. Most of these memorials are funded by the local communities of these brave Irishmen. For example, Dooega Achill Island, in County Mayo, has a memorial dedicated to Thomas Patton, who was born there. The memorial was unveiled in 1984 and funded by the community. There are also memorials funded by public institutions. At Belfast City Hall, we find a coloured glass window dedicated to the International Brigades. It was unveiled in 2015 and funded by Belfast's own City Council. At University College Dublin there is a commemorative plaque in memory of Charlie Donnelly, the young poet who died in Jarama and had previously studied at UCD. Funded by the University, it was unveiled in 2008. Donnelly is also the protagonist of a memorial plaque for the International Brigadiers fallen in Jarama found at the site of the Jarama Battle.

Frank Ryan's resting place at Glas-





## CONNOLLY

nevin Cemetery has a memorial headstone with an inscription in Irish. The translation goes as follows: "Francis Ryan. Born in Elton, County Limerick 1902. Died in Dresden, 1944. His body was brought back to his homeland on 22 June 1979. He fought for freedom in this country [Ireland] and in Spain. May God reward him. (Translation by the author of the article)." Such praise is a world away from the pro-Fascist narrative that was propagated at the time of the conflict. In contrast, there is only one small memorial belonging to a member of the Irish Brigades: a plaque in Dublin to the name of Gabriel Lee, who fought for Franco and died in Spain in 1937. Eoin O'Duffy is also buried in Glasnevin Cemetery, but no memorial headstone decorates his resting place. It therefore seems that, with the exception of ultra-conservative elements that still valorize the likes of O'Duffy, history has absolved the brave Connolly Column while the Irish Brigade are now regarded not as soldiers for religious freedom but as thugs for fascist oppression.

### Endnotes

1. Donal Donnelly, in the foreword to *Salud!* by Peadar O'Donnell, 2020 (1937), Friends of the International Brigades in Ireland, p.6.

2. Stradling, 1999: p. 3

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3. *Ibid.*, p. 10
4. McGarry, 1999: p.143
5. Fanning, 2019: p. 179-180
6. Scott: 1936
7. O'Riordan, 2005: p. 65
8. Irish Press: 26 March 1961
9. Ryan, New Year's Day 1937
10. Monks, 1985: p. 8
11. Stradling, 1999: p. 167
12. Cronin, 1980: p. 97-98
13. O'Connor, 1992: p. 105
14. O'Riordan, 2005: p. 73/77
15. Stradling, 1999: p. 3
16. O'Riordan, 2005: p. 88
17. *Ibid.*, p. 88
18. *Ibid.*, p. 84
19. *Ibid.*, p. 126
20. *Ibid.*, p. 127
21. Qtd in O'Riordan, pp. 119-120
22. O'Riordan, 2005: pp. 151-157)
23. Peadar O'Donnell, *Salud! An Irishman in Spain*. 2020 (1937), Friends of the International Brigades in Ireland, p. 10.

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