

Wales/Basques Notes

In a period of just a few months in 1937, some 20,000 children were evacuated from the Basque region of Spain to spare them from the dangers and horrors of the civil war then raging there.

France took by far the majority _ proximity and also Popular front govt In France sympathetic to the republicans who had won the elections in 1936 which the Generals were attempting to overthrow.

But UK took nearly 4000. I want to explore how that came about and how those children came to arrive on Br shores.

After the stalemate in the war in Spain during winter of 1936/7 spring began with Franco decision to defeat the republican control of a narrow strip along the bay of biscay coastline from Vizcaya westwards to Asturias. Gen Mola the general with responsibility for North broadcast

I have decided to end rapidly the war in the north. If surrender is not immediate I will raise Vizcaya to the ground. I have the means.

Moorish and Italian troops brought into the front line Airport built in Vitoria for the squadron of German squadron known as the Condor Legion.

Durango 31 March 250 killed a similar number died subsequently from wounds

STEVENSON suggests to AGUIRRE surrender

No way will Aguirre to that

Stevenson suggests evacuation THATS another matter, ACCEPTABLE

8th April STEV wrote to FO. About his proposal for evacuation. French support.

Ended with need for naval escort.

Told to forget it. Told in no uncertain terms. Not to bring I up again and certainly not to give any indication to Basque govt that this was a possibility.

Not Govt policy.

Ambassador Sir Henry Chilton strongly advised against it. A staunch unashamed supporter of Franco. Accepting children from Basque Country would break the Non-intervention treaty!

NON INTERVENTION

Eden in his memoirs:

“An improvised safety curtain, tattered and full of holes no doubt, but better than total war in Spain and a European war out of that.”

Resistance also from Admiralty.

They didn't want to risk their ships; they had been told that the area around the northern ports had been mined and to go anywhere near was therefore dangerous. Strongly advised British merchant shipping to stay clear.

WHY didn't PM BALDWIN. Bomber will always get through

Possible that it could all have ended there

But for one thing - the bombing of Guernica on 26 April.. when for several hours wave after of a German bombers dropped high explosives and incendiary bombs on this ancient town which had a special symbolic significance for the Basques and was in no way a military target.

The following day detailed accounts appeared in The Times and The Daily Express. The following day news was world wide. So too were the expressions of horror.

Franco issue a denial. It was his forces it was Basque arsonist who had blown up their own town and set fire to it. It was a ridiculous claim.

In the FO Eden immediately telegraphed Chilton. Chilton simply repeated Franco's explanation (from across the border he was in no position to do anything else).

But Stevenson had walked amid the ashes and the ruins the following morning and sent detailed report. He ended by repeating his request for evacuees to be allowed to come to UK and to come under Royal Naval escort. Even if only a few thousand before it is too late. Ended with him stressing the need for Royal Naval escort.

KEY DOCUMENT. Eden put great store by Stevenson's report. And by the man himself. Similar views. Chilton complained that ST was not impartial - rich from him - but true. Biased towards the Basques. SO too was Eden. Said so in the House of Commons , Much closer to what we in Britain would recognise more than anything in Republican Spain. Racial stereotype?

Following day in London, 28 April, the national JCSR submitted a formal request. That

On 29th it was accepted by the Govt., but only in principal:

Some children - number was not specified. Subject to 3 conditions

No political discrimination

It was subject to the NJC submitted a costed plan that would need to be approved by HO

No public money.

NJC accepted those terms. Advertisement for funds in Times 1 MAY
appealed for funds

Then everything happened at great speed.

Stevenson was informed and plans were afoot in Bilbao. Assistencia was swung into motion. Political parties involved. Parents started signing up.

A medical team from Britain were there conducting medical checks on the children being signed up because of anxieties raised by Dept of Health - contagious infections problems - bombing - forced to do it at night.

Plans submitted to HO on 10th May.

NJC argued ok for 2,000 children. It had raised £12,00 and a further £5,000 promised from TUC

6th May NJC asked Baldwin for a Govt contribution - pound for every pound raised by Committee. Proposal was rejected.

Mid May request for doubling - Dr ELLIS flew back to UK to urge doubling of numbers

Stevenson had reported he was being inundated with requests..

Govt agreed with a murmur.

21 MAY HABANA set sail

Escorted by Royal Oak and two destroyers.

Arrived evening of 22nd

SOUTHAMPTON

Farmer BROWN lends the Committee fields on his farm

500 Bell tents and cooking equipment etc. rented from the War

Department. Rented, of course - not loaned - no public money was to be spent!

Their sojourn in UK had begun.