

## The Basque Children - The End of the Spanish Civil War and the Beginning of Exile for the Niños

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I'd like to start with this front-page from the Francoist newspaper *ABC* from the 2 April 1939 which proclaims General Franco's victory in the Spanish Civil War of 1936-1939. The text at the bottom boasts that the 'red army' has been disarmed, rounded up, and trumpets that the war is over. This is why, of course, this March and April we are commemorating the 80th anniversary of the end of the conflict. The date marks the victory of Franco's troops and their allies from Nazi Germany and Mussolini's Italy against the elected centre-left government of the Spanish Second Republic.<sup>1</sup> It also represents a victory dreaded by anti-fascist groups across Europe, including in the UK where tens of thousands of people donated money to support the Republic and around 2,000 people volunteered to fight Franco in the international brigades that brought together volunteers from 53 countries.<sup>2</sup>

But without becoming too philosophical, I am not convinced that late March 1939 is exactly when the war finished, or at least not in the whole of Spain. In fact, the Civil War grew into a steady process of occupation and once Franco's forces rolled into one area of Spain the fighting, if not the violence, stopped. The *ABC* map tells the story. To name just three big cities: Málaga fell in

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview see Sebastian Balfour and Paul Preston (eds), *Spain and the Great Power in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> On British aid to Spain see Jim Fyrth, *The Signal was Spain. The Spanish Aid Movement in Britain, 1936-1939*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1986). Tom Buchanan, *Britain and the Spanish Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Angela Jackson, *British Women and the Spanish Civil War* (London: Routledge, 2002). Linda Palfreeman, *¡Salud!: British Volunteers in the Republican Medical Service during the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2012). Emily Mason, *Democracy, Deeds and Dilemmas: support for the Spanish Republic within British civil society, 1936-1939* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2017). The best studies of the British volunteers in the International Brigades are Richard Baxell, *British Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War: the British Battalion in the International Brigades* (Pontypool: Warren & Pell, 2007). Richard Baxell, *Unlikely Warriors: The British in the Spanish Civil War and the Struggle against Fascism* (London: Aurum, 2012).

early February 1937, Bilbao in June 1937 and Barcelona in January 1939.<sup>3</sup>

Even though the war did not end at the same time for all, we can detect a common pattern underlying the end of the war in cities such as Málaga and Barcelona. Ordinary people were all-too-frequently killed or injured as the frontline advanced across their home towns. A tragedy made worse by the fact that military commanders did not always shy away from causing such suffering. One of the most infamous examples occurred in Málaga in February 1937 when observers at the time estimated that 20,000 people fled the city towards government-held Almería.<sup>4</sup> The road they followed hugged a narrow strip of land between the coast line and mountains and those scurrying for their lives endured pounding from the sea by Franco's navy. The Canadian doctor Norman Bethuane witnessed the suffering at first hand and described what he saw as "the most terrible evacuation in modern times". Let me provide you with a quote from Bethuane to give you a sense of what he meant:

"[There were] thousands of children, we counted five thousand under ten years of age, and at least one thousand of them barefoot and many of them clad only in a single garment. They were slung over their mother's shoulders or clung to her hands. Here a father staggered along with two children of one and two years of age on his back in addition to carrying pots and pans or some treasured possession."<sup>5</sup>

The British writer T.C. Worsley had volunteered in Spain to help with blood transfusions and witnessed the refugees arriving in Almería. He left us with the account of a child he rescued:

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<sup>3</sup> An overview of the occupation in Peter Anderson, *Friend or Foe: occupation, collaboration and selective violence in the Spanish Civil War* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> An outstanding study in Lucía Prieto Borrego y Encarnación Barrangquero Texeira, *Población y guerra civil en Málaga: caída éxodo y refugio* (Málaga: Diputación de Málaga, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Norman Bethune, *The Crime on the Road Malaga-Almeria. Narrative with graphic documents revealing fascist cruelty*, (Madrid, Publicaciones Iberia, 1937), no page numbers.

“Once I noticed a little boy who could not have been more than eight, standing swaying with his finger in his mouth, looking vacantly at the lorry. Thinking that he was lost, I went over to him and asked where his mother and father were. The child who could only speak in a hoarse whisper answered unemotionally and dully, “Dead, all dead.” He had walked from Malaga by himself. Five days on the road, alone and without food. And now he was complaining of the cold. I picked him up and put him into the cabin; it was at least warm there. He dropped instantly asleep.”<sup>6</sup>

Children also fell victim to front-line bombing and never more infamously than in the attack on the Basque town of Guernica between 4.30 and 7.00 pm on the afternoon of 26 April 1937.<sup>7</sup> Again, we possess graphic testimony that speaks so much to the horror of the war and its effect on children. It hails from a book compiled by the activist and novelist Yvonne Kapp (Cloud) who worked with Basque refugees from Spain and later with Jewish refugees from Czechoslovakia. This is part of the account she took from a Basque child who had found sanctuary in the UK

“There was the mother with two children and the old grandmother. The planes circled about the wood for a long time and at last frightened them out of it. They took shelter in a ditch. We saw the old granny cover up the little boy with her apron. The planes came low and killed them all in the ditch, except the little boy. He soon got up and began to wander across a field, crying. They got him too. It was terrible; we were both crying out so much we could not speak.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> T. C. Worsley, *Behind the Battle*, (London: Robert Hale Limited, 1939), p. 205.

<sup>7</sup> On the bombing see Xabier Irjuo Ametzaga, *Gernika, 1937: the market day massacre* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2015). On the cover up of the bombing see Herbert Rutledge Southworth, *Guernica Guernica!: a study of journalism, diplomacy, propaganda and history* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).

<sup>8</sup> Yvonne Cloud, *The Basque Children in England. An Account of their Life at North Stoneham Camp*, (London: Victor Gollancz, 1937), pp. 56-57.

The end of fighting did not bring an end to the suffering: a fact which further brings into question of when the Civil War finished. Let's take the example of the city of Málaga conquered with the great help of Mussolini's Italian forces but largely occupied by Franco's own men. In March 1937, a couple of months into the occupation, Mussolini's personal representative in Spain, the Fascist Roberto Farniacci, complained vociferously that Franco had embarked on a senseless policy of vengeance.<sup>9</sup> The Italians estimated that 5,000 people had lost their lives in Málaga, although we now know that the figure stands at 7,000.<sup>10</sup> Knowledge of such slaughter soon spread across Spain and the disconcerted Basques in particular worked hard with the Vatican to negotiate a surrender with guarantees for the civilian population.<sup>11</sup> They also began mass evacuations in case no terms could be won to protect civilians. Historian James Cable estimates that over the summer of 1937, 100,000 people fled from northern Spain, mostly to France.<sup>12</sup>

The front-line violence, repression and exile smashed apart families. Take the case of E.B. (her full name cannot be given for ethical reasons) whose two sons were evacuated to the United Kingdom. The British government would not allow parents to join their children and she fled to France. Even as late as June 1945 she had heard nothing from her husband since the fall of Bilbao in June 1937. This surely meant that he had either been killed on the front-line or in violence behind the lines.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> John F. Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 191.

<sup>10</sup> On the repression in Málaga see Antonio Nadal Sánchez, *Guerra Civil en Málaga* (Málaga: Arguval, 1984). Encarnación Barranquero Texeira, *Málaga entre la guerra y la posguerra. El franquismo*, (Málaga: Arguval, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> Fernando de Meer, *El Partido Nacionalista Vasco ante la Guerra de España (1936-1937)*, (Pamplona: Universidad de Navarra, 1992), pp. 298-474. María Luisa Rodríguez Aisa, *El Cardenal Gomá y la guerra de España. Aspectos de la gestión pública del Primado 1936-1939*, (Madrid: C.S.I.C., 1981), pp. 204-228. Alberto de Onaindía, *Hombre de paz en la guerra*, (Buenos Aires: Editorial Vasca Ekin, 1973)

<sup>12</sup> James Cable, *The Royal Navy and the Siege of Bilbao*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 150.

<sup>13</sup> Fundación Universitaria Española, Fondo Niños Vascos, N.V. 2.1, British Consul Bilbao to Mss M. Picken, NJCSR, 30 June 1945.

Poverty also trapped many of those who suffered the violence. The case of M.R.S. illustrates the point. She was a thirty-eight-year-old housewife and mother of eight children when her husband was murdered by Franco supporters at the start of the war in the city of Pamplona: an area where 3,000 were gunned down behind the lines. In December 1936, the local mayor wrote

“she has absolutely no means to support herself...neither has she any relatives who can help her with her eight children, the oldest of whom is fourteen and the youngest just one-month old”.<sup>14</sup>

M.R. was forced to place her children in Francoist care homes. This was precisely the fate that many of Franco's opponents feared. The avant-garde writer Carlotta O'Neill suffered years of imprisonment from the start of the Civil War after her husband went before a firing squad for his opposition to the Francoists. While she served time, her two daughters went into a Francoist care home. Their treatment there plunged Carlotta into the depths of despair and she bemoaned care homes

“with pictures of Franco on the wall, hymns sung in the morning and evening while making the fascist salute, being made to parade like Nazi-fascists and the constant humiliation inflicted by those men who killed their father”.<sup>15</sup>

Parents, then, and particularly politicised parents from the centre-left, had much to fear from the approach of the front-line and Francoist occupation. Viewed from this perspective it is easier to understand why some would choose to send their beloved children abroad without them. To do so they would need the help of compassionate aid workers dedicated to rescuing those in peril.

One example comes in the Quakers who in early 1936 had representatives in Spain carrying out missionary work but who

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<sup>14</sup> Archivo de la Administración de la Comunidad Foral, Junta de Protección de Menores de Navarra, 215389, Exp. 275 de 1936.

<sup>15</sup> Carlota O'Neill, *Una mujer en la Guerra de España*, (Madrid: Oberon, 2003), p. 192.

turned to charity work on behalf of the victims of war once the conflict started in July 1936. The Quakers focused on providing food and milk to the population and particularly to children judged most vulnerable to disease as well as the long-term ill-effects of the poor diets caused by the conflict.<sup>16</sup> In Barcelona the Quakers opened a milk distribution centre in the poor Fifth District where

“Mothers who had searched in vain for any kind of food suitable to give a young child would come weeping to the director of the canteen, showing babies with wasted limbs who could not possibly be refused admission”<sup>17</sup>

Support also came from the National Joint Council for Spanish Relief. It came into the world in November 1936 as a cross-party committee formed by MPs such as Eleanor Rathbone but soon became an umbrella group that brought together 800 organisations including the Quakers, Save the Children, The Salvation Army and the Catholic Church. These groups sent food, powdered milk and clothing to Spain often with funds donated by masses of ordinary people.<sup>18</sup> One of the National Joint Committee’s first acts was to help evacuate thousands of children from Madrid in the autumn of 1936. Many of these children went to Barcelona or Valencia and by January 1937 the government Council of the National Protection of Childhood had 7,000 children under its wing.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Wilson, Francesca. *In the Margins of Chaos: recollections of relief work in and between three wars*. London: John Murray, 1944). Howard E. Kershner, *Quaker Service in Modern War* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1950). Farah Mendlesohn, *Quaker Relief Work in the Spanish Civil War* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> Friends Service Council, *Quaker Service in Spain 1936-1940* (London: Friends Service Council, No date), p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Mason, *Democracy, Deeds and Dilemmas*, pp. -11-12. Fyrth, *The Signal Was Spain*.

<sup>19</sup> Edith M. Pye, *Report on a Visit to Spain* (London: Friends’ Service Council, 1937 [January], p. 6. OCEAR {Ministerio del Trabajo y Asistencia Social. Dirección General de Asistencia Social OFICINA CENTRAL DE EVACUADOS Y ASISTENCIA A REFUGIADOS), núm 6, 1/12/1937. *The World’s Children. The Official Organ of the Save the Children Fund and of the Declaration of Geneva August 1937*. Norah Curtis & Cyril Gilbey, *Malnutrition (Quaker Work in Austria 1919-24 and Spain 1936-39)* (London: Oxford University Press, 1944), pp. 44-53. Library of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain, FSC/R/SP/1, Jacob to Fred Tritton, 12/10/ 1936.

Aid workers associated with the National Joint Committee found they could collaborate with the Basque regional government to help evacuate youngsters. The Basque government enjoyed tremendous independence from Madrid because it was largely cut off from the rest of government-held territory. The Basque government had also largely come under the control of the Basque Nationalist Party, the PNV. By the 1930s, the PNV had fallen under the influence of Christian Democrats who opposed the violence and militarism of fascism and shared a fervent belief in defending human life as well as enforcing the laws of war.<sup>20</sup> In February 1936, the PNV leader, José Antonio de Aguirre had declared

“we want to end this barbarous struggle and the savage cruelty demeaning of civilised countries. Let’s put an end to reprisals, cruelty, torture and everything that is making Spain the most backward nation in Europe”<sup>21</sup>

During the war, the PNV also set out to protect Basque children from Francoist occupation and strongly criticised the Francoist

“effort to inculcate in young people, and above all in Basque children, those ideals that contradict the essentially democratic spirit of the Basques, and to impose a totalitarian authoritarianism”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Santiago de Pablo and Ludger Mees, *El péndulo patriótico. Historia del Partido Nacionalista Vasco, 1895-2005*, (Barcelona: Crítica, 2005), pp. 141-169. A. de Lizarra, *Los vascos y la República española. Contribución a la historia de la Guerra Civil 1936-1939*, (Buenos Aires: Editorial Vasca Ekin, 1944). Manuel de Irujo, *Un vasco en el Ministerio de Justicia. Memorias I*, (Buenos Aires: Ekin, 1976)

<sup>21</sup> Cited in J. Tusell Gómez, *Historia de la Democracia Cristiana en España II. Nacionalismos vasco y catalán, los solitarios. La Guerra Civil* (Madrid, 1974), p.107.

<sup>22</sup> Sabino Arana Fundazioa, AV EBB 0391 – 4, Folleto ‘Sobre la evacuación y repatriación de los niños vascos’, p. 19.

Activists from the National Joint Council and representatives of the Basque government managed to overcome British government opposition to the evacuation of Basque children to the United Kingdom. Between September and December 1936, the Basque government took under its charge 30,000 children who had fled the Francoist advance from areas such as San Sebastián. The duty to protect children in Spain soon turned into the desire to evacuate overseas. Especially after Bilbao suffered a bombing attack in early January 1937 and the Basque authorities began to register the names of children whose parents hoped to evacuate their offspring to France. Some children left in early March 1937, but huge evacuations to France started when the Francoists launched their offensive against the Basque country on 31 March 1937.<sup>23</sup> General Mola led the advance and helped deepen worries in leaflets dropped on the Basque Country which warned that “If your submission is not immediate, I will raze all Vizcaya to the ground...I have the means to do so.”<sup>24</sup>

The British presented a thorn in the side for those hoping to evacuate children from such terrible threats. The British had not accepted refugees since the First World War. The far-from compassionate British press had even balked at helping child refugees during and after the First World War. On 19 November 1921, during the Russian Civil War, the *Daily Express* had run a story with the headline ‘Charity Begins at Home’. A key part of the article read:

“We have taken exception to the appeal of the “Save the Children” and other funds, the object of which is to minister to foreign needs. We do so because we consider that all our

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<sup>23</sup> Jesús J. Alonso Carballés, 1937. *Los niños vascos evacuados a Francia y Bélgica. Historia y memoria de un éxodo infantil, 1936-1940*, (Bilbao: Asociación de Niños Evacuados el 37, 1998), pp. 53-55. Dorothy Legarreta, *The Guernica Generation. Basque Refugee Children and the Spanish Civil War*, (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1984), pp. 15-21.

<sup>24</sup> George Steer, *The Tree of Gernika: A Field Study of Modern War*, (London: Hodder and Stroughton, 1938), p. 159.



resources, private as well as public, are needed to relieve the distress which exists among our own people. The “Save the Children” Fund is specially concerned with the relief of the Russian famine. The extent of that calamity is questionable, but however great it may be, we contend that this is not the moment for appeal to be made for money to be sent out of the country.”<sup>25</sup>

For its part, the British government, although it did contribute funds towards humanitarian relief in Spain, consistently refused to bear the cost of supporting refugees escaping war and repression.<sup>26</sup> British decision making reflected the lack of compassion in influential circles. It also stemmed from a reluctance to upset the Francoists who opposed the evacuations because they argued their military advance presented no threat to civilians. Franco’s men also maintained that the refugee issue was invented to discredit the insurgents. The Francoists further claimed sovereign control of the seas and resented any attempt to break the blockade they had mounted on the northern coast to starve their opponents into submission.<sup>27</sup>

The Basque government worked to overcome the opposition of His Majesty’s government by liaising closely with the compassionate British consul in Bilbao, R. C. Stevenson. On the 8 April 1937, Stevenson cabled London pressing the government to accept the Basque suggestion of large-scale evacuation. The Royal Navy, however, did not want to put its ships in harm’s way by flouting the Francoist blockade. Equally, the Foreign Office feared it would be drawn into ever-large humanitarian rescue work. In the meantime, a scandal had broken in the British press over the great British merchant fleet being pushed about by the relatively puny Francoist navy. In the furore, the British

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<sup>25</sup> *The Daily Express* 19/11/1921.

<sup>26</sup> Example in The National Archives (TNA), Public Record Office (PRO), FO 371 21371 W 11350, Minute 10/06/1937.

<sup>27</sup> Example in TNA, PRO, FO, 371 21369 W 8502 FO to Chilton 30 April 1937.

government undertook to deploy the Royal Navy to protect ships evacuating refugees to France.<sup>28</sup>

By late April 1937, the Basque government had also convinced Leah Manning, a National Union of Teachers activists prominent in National Joint Committee, to travel to Bilbao to help with the evacuation of children.<sup>29</sup> The crucial development came on 26 April with the bombing of Guernica: the first mass destruction of an open European town by aerial bombardment. The atrocity caused an international scandal and in the United Kingdom, where the public feared that major British cities would be next, sentiment grew in favour of the evacuation of children to the United Kingdom. Under pressure, on 29 April the Home Office granted permission for Basque children to be brought to the UK, provided the children were repatriated as soon as possible, children were brought from families across the political spectrum and that the government would not defray the costs.<sup>30</sup> In response, the National Joint Committee founded the Basque Children's Committee to raise funds and organise the evacuation. According to the *London Times* at 7.30 am on 23 May 1937, 3826 child refugees, fifteen priests and sixty Catholic teachers arrived aboard the *Correo de Habana* at Southampton dock.

The children were met both by the compassion and prejudice that continues to shape the lives of those refugees who make it to British shores. The children were taken first to a make-shift camp at North Stoneham, just a few miles from the dock. On 24 May the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* reported that the nearly 4000 children were “tucked in warm blankets in the serenity and security of the English countryside.” By 25 May, the children were settling into the camp although *The Times* reported that the Air Ministry had banned aircraft from flying over the camp, as the children were terrified of planes which they believed had pursued

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<sup>28</sup> For an overview see Cable, *The Royal Navy*.

<sup>29</sup> Leah Manning, *A Life for Education. An Autobiography* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1970), p. 123.

<sup>30</sup> TNA, PRO, FO 371 22614 W 8 629 Home Office to Roberts 29 April 1937.

them from Spain. By the 25 May, local groups of the Basque Children's Committee had started coming forward with offers to help house groups of children. The Leeds Children's Aid Subcommittee had proved willing to take on 200 of the children. An old hostel was being fitted out in Scarborough to house a further 200 children and committees had been set up in Harrogate and Wakefield.

But prejudice also coursed through British veins and the *Gloucester Citizen* reported on 28 June that Sir Oswald Mosely contended that no help should be afforded to Basque children while there were British youngsters starving. This lack of compassion for those from overseas was not confined to Fascists like Mosley. Instead it fed into wider political prejudice against groups of children considered to be 'reds'. The children themselves who had fled highly politicised Spain had helped consolidate this impression with their gestures of the clenched-fist salute. But political prejudice also meant that their understandable trauma was read as red barbarity. We can see this on the night of Saturday 19 June 1937. Bilbao had fallen that night and the children had been horrified by the possible fate of their parents who might fall victim to Franco's death squads or who could easily be killed as civilians retreated from Bilbao towards Santander where they hoped to escape by sea.

Yvone Cloud (Kapp) described the scene after the children were told of Bilbao's fall

"A loud shriek went up, followed by a dreadful wailing, a mourning and a lamentation, punctuated by cries of "Mother" which lasted for many hours...unforgettable scenes of weeping and despair, the tragic swaying and moaning and cries which rose to hysteria."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Yvonne Cloud, *The Basque Children in England. An Account of their Life at North Stoneham Camp*, (London: Victor Gollancz, 1937), p. 41.

We also have the voice of some of the children who explained their horror in a letter to Neville Chamberlain sent the following day in which they stated

“We have heard with great sorrow that our mothers, sisters, and dear grandparents, very full in years, have been criminally bombarded by Franco’s aircraft while they were escaping along the road from Bilbao to Santander... We have also heard that the English ships will not escort those people who cannot escape by road... as they once escorted us”<sup>32</sup>

Such feelings led to three hundred children breaking out of the camp, some wailing and sobbing.

Hostile newspapers went to describe this and similar disorders as riots. *The Catholic Universe* had this to say after disorder broke out at the Scarborough home:

“the lawlessness which has appeared is the direct outcome of the Godlessness with which the children have been impregnated... an appalling aspect of the matter is that sensitive, well-bred children are mixed up, in camps throughout the country, with the rebel element...”<sup>33</sup>

The Basque Children’s Committee argued that only a few boys had been involved and that guardians had swiftly restored order. But the children were soon to become swept up in political disputes that left little room for nuance. Following the capture of Bilbao, the Francoists launched a campaign for the repatriation of the children. The context for this campaign comes from the denial of Francoist atrocities. Franco’s propaganda machine was engaged in this campaign on several fronts: the denial of the Guernica bombing stood out, but so too did the denial that the

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<sup>32</sup> Passages from the letter cited in *Belfast Telegraph*, 21/06/1937.

<sup>33</sup> *The Catholic Herald*, 30/12/1937.

Francoists had carried out mass killings of Catholic Basques – and several PNV-supporting priests had been done to death by the Francoists to the great annoyance of the Pope. The Francoists also hoped to portray their occupation of Bilbao as peaceful and orderly and this formed part of their strategy to gain diplomatic recognition of insurgents which in turn would entitle them to the recognition of belligerent rights from the British. The presence of Basque children, many of whom were Catholics, and who appeared too terrified to return home undermined Francoist claims to have carried out an orderly occupation and to be involved in a war in defence of the Church.<sup>34</sup>

In early July 1937, the Francoists launched a massive propaganda and diplomatic offensive calling for the return of the children. They also began to search out the lists with the names of the children and to pressure relatives to sign requests for the return of their children. The Basque Children's Committee resisted partly for political reasons – some of its members felt that returning the children would equate to diplomatic recognition for the rebels and some at the grassroots could not bear the idea of sending children back to those they regarded as Fascists and who they feared would try to inculcate the children with militaristic values.<sup>35</sup>

A series of ethical and practical matters also stuck in the mind of Committee members. They knew that many parents were in exile, others were under arrest and others still had been killed. They also knew that many parents had become impoverished by the Francoist repression and could not care for their children. They further held evidence that Francoists were forging requests for the return of the children. The Committee therefore demanded convincing evidence of parental consent and safety before it would send children back. In the meantime, the right and Catholic press tried to whip up sentiment in favour of repatriating the

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<sup>34</sup> A discussion in Peter Anderson, 'The Struggle over the Evacuation to the United Kingdom and Repatriation of the Basque Refugee Children in the Spanish Civil War: Symbols and Souls', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 52, 2 (2017), pp. 297-318.

<sup>35</sup> Anderson, 'The Struggle over the Evacuation'

children. On 23 July 1937, the *Catholic Herald* proclaimed that the children had been sent to England “for no other purpose that to foster British sympathy for the Valencia government” and offered “to pay up to £1,000 towards any expenses incurred in repatriating the children”.

The BCC remained firm and studied each child’s situation carefully and allowed children to return whose parents they believed had genuinely and freely consented. By April 1938, nearly a full year before the official end of the Civil War, 1,722 children had returned to Spain. In October 1938, the Committee continued to maintain 1,700 children in a network of 45 homes because, in the Committee’s words, “their parents are themselves refugees, in prison or missing.” Even as late as mid-1939, months after the end of the conflict, the BCC felt it could not repatriate 577 of the remaining 1054 children because their parents were variously in exile, missing, imprisoned or dead.<sup>36</sup> We have the testimony of one of these children who remained in the UK who stated

“Mother had refused to sign the form claiming us, even though she had been visited by a priest and an official, who had threatened to imprison her and take her other children away...She said that if we returned, we would all starve, but her signature was forged.”<sup>37</sup>

The experience of those who stayed in the UK but who returned to Spain from the late 1940s helps further show how war and exile uprooted and reshaped lives. Let me take just a few cases in the short time left to me to illustrate this point. Some certainly returned with a sense of relief if rather inevitably changed by the experience. One girl wrote back to the Committee that she had settled down and was very happy, although she missed her

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<sup>36</sup> Anderson, ‘The Struggle over the Evacuation’

<sup>37</sup> Cited in Natalia Benjamin, (ed.), *Recuerdos: Basque children refugees in Great Britain. Niños vascos refugiados en Gran Bretaña*, (Oxford: Mousehold Press, 2007), p. 113.

English carer, and was getting on very well with her Spanish'.<sup>38</sup> Ángel Macias wrote in 1947 to say that "I am getting on fine as I am with my mother" but complaining of living conditions in Franco's Spain, noting that "our ration has been cut again" and that they had to buy all their food on the black market.<sup>39</sup>

Others, or their carers, however, proved less keen to end their 'exile'. In 1945, one mother wrote from Bilbao asking after her daughter of whom she had received no news for more than six years. The child's foster parents wrote back saying that the daughter had forgotten her Spanish and could only write in English. A letter was sent to the British consul in Bilbao who translated its contents to the mother, although he chose not to tell her that the English foster parents had changed her surname.<sup>40</sup>

Others found the return to Spain much more difficult. One boy wrote from Spain in 1947 stating that after ten years "Everything is so strange" and "I don't seem to be able to settle down here at all".<sup>41</sup> Another young man writing in 1947 stated simply "My father is a fool" and that "Spanish people talk all day and night" concluding that "maybe later I shall like Spain". A second young man wrote even more bitterly in 1948 requesting the committee "Please come to see me quickly because my mother is killing me", adding "If I live in Spain much longer I shall commit suicide."<sup>42</sup> In 1950, two brothers aged 27 and 2 decided to return to the UK and stowed away on a ship and sought out the help of the family that had helped them after their evacuation to the UK.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Fundación Universitaria Española, Fondo Niños Vascos, Caja 3, Expediente 1, N.V., 3.1, Letter from Rosario Incesa, Spain Somorrostro No date

<sup>39</sup> Fundación Universitaria Española, Fondo Niños Vascos, Caja 3, Expediente 1, N.V., 3.1, Letter of Ángel Macias to Mss Picken, 18/10/1947

<sup>40</sup> Fundación Universitaria Española, Fondo Niños Vascos, N.V. 2.1, BCC to Graham Consulate in Bilbao July 24 1945.

<sup>41</sup> Fundación Universitaria Española, Fondo Niños Vascos, Caja 3, Expediente 1, N.V., 3.1, Anonymous letter from Bilbao 15.11.147 to Miss Picken.

<sup>42</sup> Fundación Universitaria Española, Fondo Niños Vascos, Caja 3, Expediente 1, N.V., 3.1, 1948, Juan Luis Sánchez to Miss Picken, Santander, No date, 1948.

<sup>43</sup> Fundación Universitaria Española, Fondo Niños Vascos, Caja 3, Expediente 1, Reference 19 October 1950.

To conclude, scholars of refugee issues tend to stress either the uprooting caused by fleeing a home country or the forging of new connections and new and co-existing identities. Our present-day media, meanwhile, tends to stress the threat to the public purse and to jobs and services. This discourse of threat, however, co-exists with one of potential sympathy for refugees as shown by the response to the Syrian child Alan Kurdi whose three-year-old and drowned body appeared photographed in the international media in September 2015. As I am sure you all know media representations can flip between the two poles of threat and sympathy.

What lessons can we draw about all this from the case of the Basque children who came to the UK in the Spanish Civil War? I think one of my first answers would be that the Spanish Civil War can tell us something about compassion. At the time, significant groups of people recognised the horror of the Civil War and its effects on civilians. Executions, jailings, the strafing of civilians and most of all bombing all generated horror. But this compassion worked through political pressure groups, mostly anti-fascist ones associated with the National Joint Committee. A combination of political pressure and political opportunity opened up by the bombing of Guernica alongside a feeling that the British were being pushed around by the tin-pot Franco allowed this compassion to win over public opinion and government opposition to bring about the evacuation. But politicised compassion also came up against political prejudice and efforts to vindicate Franco. I have carefully studied the archival record of the dispute that ensued and it is my firm conviction that the Basque Children's Committee worked hard to return children to families when it could but to protect other children from a return to an uncertain future or with what they saw as the danger of passing into a Francoist care home.

For many Basque children, then, their exile began and ended before the official end of the Spanish Civil War. For others, their time in the United Kingdom continued well into the late 1940s or even permanently. For those who returned in the late 1940s it is



hard to speak of exile in the sense simply as separation from the homeland. Instead, many children learned a new language, some forgot their first language and forged both new relationships and habits. They began to identify strongly with their British identity and for many the return to the difficult context of Franco's Spain provoked ambivalent feelings.

The Spanish Civil War, then, represents the humanitarian catastrophe of modern and total war. It also encapsulates the contest over support for refugees that further marks our age. More than this, it reminds us of the human cost of war: of mothers who could only keep in contact with their children through letters read to them, and with crucial omissions, by the British consul and of families both uprooted and reshaped sometimes in challenging new ways. It also contains within it the story of a massive British response to Europe's inter-war crisis of fascism a full year before the Kindertransport: although Spain's story is often eclipsed by the even-greater horrors of the Holocaust.