

The 'Red Duchess' - Katharine, Duchess of Atholl

By Mike Levy

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'Red Duchess' or 'Fascist Beast' – the Duchess of Atholl was called both by her many opponents. Katharine Marjory Stewart-Murray (known to friends as 'Kitty') may strike one as an unusual figure in the rescue of thousands of refugee children from the Basque country in Spain to a safe haven in Britain. An undoubted aristocrat living on a 200,000-acre estate in Scotland, Conservative M.P., an investor in Jamaican sugar plantations, an opponent of Indian constitutional reform - she nevertheless took up an active position on the side of the Republicans during the Spanish Civil War and firmly stood against the policy of appeasing Mussolini and Hitler – a stance which cost her a political career when she became the only M.P. to resign a seat in protest after the Munich Agreement.



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Katharine was born in Edinburgh in 1874, the eldest of three sisters, daughters of Sir James Ramsay, the tenth baronet of Banff; they were small children when their mother died. A budding composer, she was educated at the Royal College of Music where she was a contemporary of Ralph Vaughan Williams. Yet a career as musician was not as this young woman took up a lifelong interest in politics.

In 1899 she married John Stewart-Murray, the son of the Duke of Atholl and became Duchess on her father-in-law's death in 1917. Her husband – known as 'Bardie' - had pursued a military career; Katharine volunteered to work in field hospitals during World War I – an activity that was recognised with a damehood in 1918. ⁱ Bardie became an M.P. in 1910 and campaigning for her husband gave Katharine a taste for party politics. After the war she was persuaded by Lloyd George to stand for parliament and at the age of 49 was elected as M.P. for Kinross and West Perthshire in 1923, the first woman member from Scotland.

Her interests and talents in public service were soon recognised and she was offered the role of parliamentary secretary to the Board of Education between 1924 and 1929 – one of the first women to hold a post in government. In many areas, but not all, she was politically and socially conservative and published works generally cautious about women's emancipation believing that a radical shift in the education of women should precede full voting rights.

Possessing a determined character and a mind at ease with intricate detail of any argument, she was driven to the cause of international justice and opposition to oppression wherever it manifested itself. Thus she railed against the tyranny of Stalin's regime in the Soviet Union as well as roundly criticising the cruelties meted out by the Nazis in Germany. In 1929, she declared fervent opposition to the practice of female circumcision in British colonial countries in Africa and joined Eleanor Rathbone in a campaign to stamp it out. This was a particularly brave move given the social norms of the time though fearlessness was one of the Duchess' consistent qualities.

The Duchess of Atholl was a friend and close ally of Winston Churchill and a determined opponent of the appeasement of Hitler and Mussolini. In 1935 she organised the translation into English of the full, unexpurgated edition of Hitler's 'Mein Kampf'. She

believed it was vital that English speakers should understand the full picture of Hitler's beliefs. She contributed to a series of pamphlets offering authoritative translations of what she called, "the more alarming passages" in the book.

It was her fierce opposition to Franco and his fascists in Spain that brought her to wider public recognition. The Spanish Civil War brought her into conflict with her own government which had taken a cautious 'Non Interventionist' approach to the conflict in terms of refusing arms supplies to either side. This would not do for the doughty Duchess. Her trips to Spain made her ever more determined to oppose General Franco and his actions. She recognised that the British Government's refusal to sell arms to the democratically elected government in Spain was grossly unfair given that Germany and Italy were fully arming Franco. She wrote to the prime minister seeking a lifting of the arms embargo on the Republican government and asking,

'is it really consistent with the tradition of fair play on which we pride ourselves that, having for nearly two years deprived a recognised Government of its right under International Law to buy arms which to defend its people against invaders assisting a military rebellion, we should now acquiesce in the continued aggression of those invading forces until they have finished their terrible work?'ⁱⁱ

Such appeals fell on deaf ears; her sharp and politically focused mind saw, as many others did not, the dangers to British interests of turning a blind eye to the Spanish fascists,

'If General Franco should be victorious, he will owe his triumph so almost entirely to the help he has received from Italy and Germany, that though he may cede them no inch of territory, he will be unable to refuse them the use of his ports and airbases in the event of war. In that case the overseas communications of France and Britain [...] could be gravely menaced.'ⁱⁱⁱ

In January 1937, Katharine was elected chairman of the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief; her committee also consisted of the M.P.s Ellen Wilkinson, Wilfred Roberts, Eleanor Rathbone and the former parliamentarian Leah Manning. In April 1937 on behalf of her committee, she led a fact-finding delegation to Spain which also included Wilkinson, Rathbone and Dame Rachel Crowdy (a senior figure in the League of Nations). Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden supported the trip as it was connected with relief work but warned the Duchess not to visit Madrid as it was too dangerous. The Duchess thanked Eden for his support, promised not to create extra work and anxiety to British consular officials in Spain over their safety, told him that the Duke of Atholl shared his concerns about Madrid but promptly ignored all such advice.

One reason for her determination to go to Spain and see what needed to be done, was the constant messages and telegrams she was getting from British sympathisers with the Spanish government appalled at the brutal war and its effect on innocent civilians. One telegram to the Duchess cabled to the House of Commons read,

'HOSPITALS OVERFLOWING MUTILATED VICTIMS LAST BOMBARDMENT HEARTRENDING SCENES MOTHERS ATTEMPTING IDENTIFY CHILDREN AMONGST MANGLED REMAINS MORTUARY WHICH I VISITED PERSONALLY VERITABLE SHAMBLES [...] ARDENTLY DESIRE YOU SAVE VICTIMS ESPECIALLY CHILDREN FROM FURTHER FRIGHTFULNESS COULD YOU ARRANGE FOR SOME 2000 TO BE RECEIVED IN BRITAIN SCOTTISH AMBULANCE GLADLY MAKING ALL ARRANGEMENTS HERE.'^{iv}

Such reports ensured that the Duchess was determined to see for herself what was happening in Spain and do something to save the children. Not everyone in Britain supported the trip. A fellow Tory M.P. Alfred Denville criticised her involvement in the trip, 'in company with a couple of the extreme element...to help the Communist Government of Spain.'^v Many of her own constituents in Perthshire were against her visit to Spain and she was clearly at odds with many in local party especially after the trip. One senior member of the Perthshire Tories said that he would rather have Hitler or Mussolini than a 'Communitic government' as the latter posed a bigger threat to world order. The Duchess was advised by her constituency chairman to confine her activities to the relief of civilians and not to interfere in political arguments about Franco. He worried else that the local association might break up unless she kept her counsel about Spain. Typically, the Duchess refused to budge and did her best to reassure,

'I am sorry that you hear of objections from constituents about my visit to Spain but I hope these will gradually lessen I think public opinion down here is turning a good deal since the destruction of Guernica, and I hope that my letters to the newspapers will help to enlighten opinion a little'^{vi}

This fracture with her local party would become unbridgeable in the following year. She began to receive offensive letters from constituents accusing her of being in the pocket of the Red Army; one told her that, 'You have far outstepped the action that is right for a private member to take in a matter of foreign policy'^{vii}

In April 1937, the delegation travelled by train and plane to Spain and arrived in Madrid amidst a barrage of constant shelling by Franco's Nationalist army. One bomb went off in an adjoining street while the party were having lunch. A journalist with the group whispered to a colleague, 'Keep the Duchess and Miss Rathbone here for a bit. It's nasty. They've got to clean bits of a man off her car.'^{viii}

The delegation witnessed the mass bombings, destruction of buildings and the suffering of the locals, especially the poor. They saw how food queues were deliberately targeted by Franco's army. Ellen Wilkinson got permission to tour the front line trenches around Madrid while the Duchess went to interview the vicar-general of the city. Leaving the capital for a trip to Valencia, the Duchess had a brief but memorable exchange with a general fighting for the Republic. He told her, 'You are a Duchess and we welcome you for your sympathy. But here in our ranks I started life as a shepherd boy ... and now I am General in the People's Army.' The Duchess replied with a smile, 'How interesting and how like Scotland. From there a boy from a simple peasant hut became Prime Minister of Great Britain, and another peasant boy became one of Europe's most famous poets.'^{ix} She was referring to Ramsey MacDonald and Robbie Burns.

In Valencia, then capital of the Republic, the delegation were given access to anyone they wished to see. One of those calling on the Duchess and Ellen Wilkinson, was Dolores Ibarruri known as 'La Pasionara'. She was an iconic figure: a heroine of the Spanish Civil War and famous for her Republican slogan, 'No Pasaran!' The Duchess was reluctant to meet her but when she did was somewhat overwhelmed by her presence. ^x The Duchess was struck by La Pasionara's

'lovely brown eyes, straight nose – oh, excellent features altogether. She is a woman whom people would gather round in any drawing-room...Yet three years ago she was a miner's wife simply looking after her home and family.'^{xi}

Back in Britain, the Duchess broadcast an appeal on the BBC in support of the children of Madrid. Her book, 'Searchlight on Spain' sold over 100,000 copies and it was at this time in the late 1930s that she was given the nickname, 'The Red Duchess.' The magazine Spectator commented that there had been, "nothing in recent parliamentary history to compare with the evolution of the Duchess." One day a press agency rang her to offer a large fee for Spanish relief if the Duchess would write an article entitled, 'Why I am a Communist'. The infuriated Atholl replied, 'No, but I'll write one on why I am not a Communist'.^{xii}

Undismayed by any press criticism of her stance in favour of the Spanish refugees, she spoke at innumerable fund raising rallies and events. She also knew how to use her networks of influential people to help raise money for the children. In Britain and North America, she engaged in an exhausting tour of public halls and stages to denounce the actions of Franco's armies particularly in its disregard for the care of civilians. One lunch given by the American 'Spanish Children's Milk Fund' in her honour in New York was attended by Dorothy Parker, George S. Kaufman and Ernest Hemingway.^{xiii} This message to a member of the Privy Council also illustrates her methods, 'Our Committee for the Basque Children also wants to know whether you would be ready to sign an appeal on the children's behalf to be sent to City men. We want names that will carry weight in financial circles'^{xiv}With Leah Manning, they were, de facto, the key figureheads of the remarkable rescue programme that brought nearly 4,000 Basque children to safety in Britain. The Duchess headed the national committee set up to support the Basque children; it coordinated a huge national effort of local committees, volunteers and philanthropists. She proudly told a local newspaper, 'It is a credit to the true humanity latent in everyone that the Basque children are now here through the concerted efforts of people holding widely divergent views.'^{xv}

Spain was not the only thing on the mind of Katharine Atholl. With the occupation by Hitler's armies of the Rhineland in 1936, the Duchess had firmly sided with Winston Churchill on a firmer line against German aggression. She embarked on a lecture tour on board a cruise ship the subject being 'modern dictators'. She was discomfited to find that in the audience was Unity Mitford, a well-known supporter of Hitler who told the Duchess that in her opinion, the Fuehrer was a fine leader.

Back in Britain, arguments raged over which country was the greater danger to Britain: Russia or Germany. Against many of the established figures of the day, the Duchess was convinced that Hitler posed the more serious threat. Her vocal opposition to the Nazi regime did not always win friends in Britain: she was removed as joint president of the Christian Protest Movement which wanted to concentrate criticism on religious intolerance in Stalin's Russia. The Duchess' bond with Eleanor Rathbone grew ever closer in the late 1930s, one which grew into a warm friendship (despite their very different views on many social issues).

The Duchess of Atholl was never afraid to speak out against Hitler. One polite luncheon party ended with the Duchess in fierce argument with Lord Queensborough, a Tory supporter of the Nazi leader. She went on to make speeches in the House of Commons in support of the smaller countries of Europe that found them threatened by Nazi militarism. As a result she led an official parliamentary delegation to Yugoslavia,

Romania and Czechoslovakia; she was accompanied by Eleanor Rathbone and Lady Layton. She rightly assessed that the most immediate danger lay in the large German population of the Czech Sudetenland. As she wrote in her memoir,

'But the great lesson of our trip had been the danger faced by Europe as a whole. Half the continent, it seemed to our party, was trembling in the balance between dictatorship and democracy, and to a large extent the issue might depend on whether we supported the democratic forces.'^{xvi}

In the autumn of 1937, she also embarked on a speaking tour of Austria on behalf of the International Peace Campaign. Her audiences, mainly men, were mostly trade unionists and she could feel their tension given Hitler's intentions towards their country. She had congenial talks with anti-Hitlerites but worried later about their eventual fate under the Nazis. Eschewing the prime minister's claim that Czechoslovakia was a country about which we knew little, the Duchess embarked on a series of thoroughly researched talks on the history of the land and its 'liberty-loving' peoples. She warned Chamberlain of giving concessions to the Nazi-supporting German Sudetens. Speaking just before the prime minister's visit to Hitler in September 1939 when there was much talk of giving the local people a plebiscite on the future of the Czech lands, she remarked,

'nothing will satisfy them but actual annexation to Germany, and since Monday we have heard much of the terrorism and violence on the part of the Sudeten German which would, I fear, make any plebiscite a mockery even if international politics were sent in to keep order [...] who could tell what threats and inducements might not be made [...] by fanatical Nazis?'^{xvii}

With the prime minister already in Germany to meet Hitler, she issued this warning of pogroms to come informed, as she was, by her many contacts in Central Europe and her forensic research into the truth of any political situation,

'It may be a difficult matter to ensure the safety and well being of Czechs and Jews in German districts, as the Henlein (leader of the Sudeten Nazis) party have (sic) half a million storm troopers, who practised much intimidation during recent municipal elections, and today are terrorising alike loyalist employees, workers, farmers and peasants'.^{xviii}

On a suggestion in the spring of 1939 to hand some African colonies back to Hitler's Germany (as a way of placating Hitler's ambitions), she wrote,

'Handing over territory to her (Germany) – and handing over territory means handing over human beings, knowing what we do of the brutalities of the Nazi regime, have we any right to expose other people to this danger?'^{xix}

She believed that Germany could have more access to the raw materials she needed but only when 'Europe is free from the grave menace' and as part of a collective security arrangement. These and other views were largely ignored by the political elite. In the spring of 1938, the Duchess' patience with her party's line on Franco, finally ran out. She resigned the Conservative party whip so that she could speak more freely. Her very traditional constituency party of Kinross and West Perthshire were not pleased and decided to field another candidate at the next election. In the summer of 1938, she gave her name as patroness to support those men injured in Spain fighting for the International Brigade and was accused by fellow Conservatives of recruiting young men

for the Brigade, in effect breaking the law (it was an offence to encourage the recruitment of Britons in foreign wars). Her constituency's decision to drop her at the next election, led the Duchess to resign her seat and fight a by-election on the issue of appeasement. She decided to stand as an Independent and sought re-election in her own constituency as a supporter of Churchill's policy of resisting Hitler's advances in Europe. Despite vigorous support from many influential figures of the day, Chamberlain's government and his party machine threw everything they could at defeating the Duchess. She had daily telephone calls from Churchill offering his moral support; he wrote to her, 'Your victory as an Independent member [...] can only have an invigorating effect upon the whole impulse of Britain's policy and Britain's defence.' Churchill, however, refused to come and speak in her constituency, advised against such a move by his own party whips.

In the event, she narrowly failed to regain her seat much to the huge delight and relief of Chamberlain and his many supporters who in the autumn of 1938 hailed him as the great 'Man of Peace'. She received a telegram from a member of a Scottish landowning family who lived in the Ipswich area: he told her that news of her defeat brought him great pleasure and that perhaps now she would send home the Basque children in Suffolk (the presence of these children in Britain had not been universally popular). Ignoring this and other calls, with the outbreak of war in September 1939, the Duchess opened her castle at Blair Atholl to receive 40 Basque children and some mothers. She delighted in their sense of wonder at enjoying the ponies on the estate but also rolled up her sleeves to treat the many cases of head lice suffered by the young children. She was also concerned with the quality and supply of helpers in Scottish hostels looking after British evacuated children in wartime. Had more trained staff been available, she said, she would have offered places at Blair Atholl for up to 80 children from Glasgow. Her solution was typically pragmatic as her letter to the Scottish Office shows,

'May I therefore suggest that a small corps of about fifty women be enrolled, in each evacuation area, starting from the age of seventeen, and that these be given a short period of training in existing hostels? [...] The women should be chosen for their love of children or for their experience.' [...] I would suggest that a Warden, in view of her responsibilities, should be paid no less than 30/- a week'^{xx}

The defeat at the by-election and her husband's growing ill health, served to reduce the public activities of the Duchess. She spent more time at the castle but her political activism was far from over and her commitment to Spain remained undimmed. . She continued in her active role as President of the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief. One of her last letters in this role went out to financial supporters as a bulletin in November 1946. In it she remarked,

'It is easy to see by Press Reports from Spain that there is little hope of a really settled life there for some time to come and our responsibilities towards the young Spanish refugees still in this country are not yet at an end. [...] Please do send what you can to help us carry on our big undertaking of 1937 until such time as we can relax our efforts with the satisfaction of a job well and truly done'.^{xxi}

During the war she became Hon Sec. of the Scottish 'Invasion Committee' whose duties were to dig trenches and block the road of any invading force. The Duchess threw herself into this with her usual vigour though in the end no defensive trenches were dug. When later in the war news came out of the mass atrocities carried out by the Nazis, she

spent a lot of her private income on assisting refugees. With the support of the Foreign Office she broadcast a message of support in the autumn of 1944 to the Poles resisting the Germans in Warsaw. She was also very concerned for those suffering at the hands of the Soviets. Just before the war ended, the Duchess of Atholl, chaired the British League for European Freedom, a post which she held up to her death in 1960. Its aim was to support people in all countries where freedom was threatened; it documented deportations forced by the conquering Soviet army; a resolution preventing such actions was sent to the nascent United Nations. The Duchess, ever vigilant to the prevailing moods of the political class wrote, 'Gratitude for the Soviet army's help during the war had persuaded many people to blink at the truth, and few of them knew of the terror many Russian war prisoners showed on being sent back to their country.'^{xxiii} Asked to do so by the Polish Government in Exile, the Duchess published another Penguin special, 'The Tragedy of Warsaw and its Documentation', one of the first accounts of the heroism and subsequent betrayal of the Polish resistance fighters. In the 1950s, her anger at social injustice was turned against communists for their treatment of people in Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland. She championed the cause of refugees from those countries. Perhaps the most accurate assessment of her character was made by one of her friends, Mary Stocks, 'The Duchess opposed cruelty with a consistency which bred indifference to the political colours of its perpetrators.'^{xxiii}

Health and memory failing towards the end of her life, she still had a burning sense of right and wrong. At the launch of her last book, a memoir published in 1958, some two years before her death, she told her audience, 'I have enjoyed the battles of my life'.^{xxiv}

ⁱ Much of this biographical material from Emma Cowing, *Scottish Daily Mail*, 21 Feb 2017.. She also quotes William Knox, 'The Lives of Scottish Women: Women and Scottish Society 1880-1980.'

ⁱⁱ Duchess of Athol papers, nra980/22/18 letter to Chamberlain, 23 April, 1938

ⁱⁱⁱ Duchess of Atholl Papers, nra 980, broadcast in the USA, September 29, 1938.

^{iv} Atholl Papers, nra980/23/2, date and sender unclear.

^v Matt Perry, 'Red Ellen' Wilkinson, Her ideas, movements and world', Manchester UP, 2014.

^{vi} Atholl Papers, nra980/22/18 letters from and to James Paton, May 1937

^{vii} Hetherington, *Against the Tide*, p. 191

^{viii} Parry, p. 316

^{ix} Parry, p. 318

^x Atholl, 'Working Partnership', p. 211

^{xi} Atholl papers, Australian newspaper cutting, nra980/23/2

^{xii} Atholl Papers, *ibid*

^{xiii} Atholl papers

^{xiv} Atholl Papers

Wandsworth Borough News, 11 Jun. 1937, p. 9. Cited on Basque Children's Association website.

^{xvi} 'Working Partnership', 1958 p ??

^{xvii} Duchess of Atholl Papers, nra980/2/2, Blair Atholl Castle Archive.

^{xviii} Duchess of Atholl Papers, nra 980, Broadcast speech 12 Sep 1938, Montreal.

^{xix} Atholl Papers, nra 980/40, 1 June, 1939

^{xx} Duchess of Atholl papers, Duchess to Thomas Johnston MP, 27 Oct 1941

^{xxi} University of Warwick, TUC Collection, <http://mrc-catalogue.warwick.ac.uk/records/TUC/A/12/946>

^{xxii} S J Hetherington, *Katharine Atholl, Against the Tide*, Aberdeen UP, 1989, p. 222

^{xxiii} S J Hetherington, *Katharine Atholl, Against the Tide*, Aberdeen UP, 1989 p. xiii