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THE MANY HISTORIES OF THE BASQUE REFUGEE CHILDREN IN BRITAIN

Abstract

The history of four thousand refugee children who came to Britain from the Basque Country during the Spanish Civil War only began to receive sustained attention during the 1980s, nearly fifty years after the event. This development is connected to the controversial movement to recover historical memory in Spain and the gathering of testimony from the former child refugees as they have passed from middle to old age. In Britain, historical studies of popular responses to the Spanish Civil War have revealed national and local aspects of the ways in which the children were perceived and treated by their hosts. This article reviews how the history of the Basque children, or niños vascos, who came to Britain has been forgotten and recovered across a variety of academic and public discourses. It concludes with suggestions for future research directions and some reflections on the nature of commemorative activity and the use of historical examples to inform debate in the present.

Key Words: refugee children, history, historiography, memory, identity, war, trauma, exile, separation, Spain, Britain, Basque Country, Spanish Civil War

On 21 May 1937 four thousand children, aged between five and fifteen years old, embarked on the steamship *Habana* at the port of Santurce near Bilbao. Their parents remained in the Basque Country, then a major theatre of the Spanish Civil War. After a two-day voyage the *Habana* docked at Southampton. In the following weeks the children, or *niños vascos*, were distributed in groups to 'colonies' across England, Scotland, and Wales, along with the 118 *auxiliars* (young women helpers) and 96 *maestras* (female teachers) who had accompanied them from Spain. Although Helvecia Hidalgo, then aged fourteen, recalled her mother calling *sólo por tres* *meses* (only for three months) to her as she boarded the ship, by July 1938 over half of the young refugees were still in Britain (Bell, 2007, pp. 14, 133). Helvecia was one of approximately 250 of the *Habana's* child passengers who did not return home after the Civil War ended in 1939, owing to the establishment of a right-wing dictatorship in Spain under the victorious General Francisco Franco.

Bell (2007, p. 9) describes the *Habana's* arrival as 'the largest single influx of refugees into this country and the only one to consist almost entirely of children'. They formed part of a wider evacuation of over twenty thousand Basque children, with France admitting the greatest number. Although the British government reluctantly permitted entry for four thousand *niños vascos*, it refused to provide them with financial support and insisted upon their repatriation 'as soon as conditions permitted' (Buchanan, 1997, p. 110). The children were therefore dependent on the generosity of private individuals, businesses, and other organisations, including religious and political groups. Reflecting on the scale of the popular response, which ultimately involved the establishment of approximately one hundred 'colonies' across the country, Fyrth (1986, p. 242) labelled the story of the Basque refugees 'an epic of the British people's history'. Yet, for many years, 'this episode was neither incorporated into mainstream history nor dealt with at an official level, which amongst the *Niños Vascos* led to a feeling of being *los olvidados* (the forgotten)' (Sabín-Fernández, 2011, p. 22). This roughly correlates with how the popular memory of the Kindertransport of mainly Jewish children from Nazi Europe in the late 1930s has developed over time, as this also involved 'intense contemporary engagement, followed by a period of amnesia, and then the present abundance of memory' (Kushner, 2006, p. 145).

Interest in the *niños* has expanded significantly since the 1980s, partly because a number of them have 'only recently begun to talk openly and publicly about their experiences, with an aim to preserve, disseminate and transmit their life stories to younger generations' (Pozo-Gutiérrez and Broomfield, 2012, p. 10). Franco's death in 1975 did not suddenly make it easier for those who had experienced the Civil War and subsequent dictatorship to share their memories. As Spain transitioned to democracy, 'a collective decision was made, for political purposes, to place a particular construction on that past, to suppress or de-emphasize those memories felt to be likely to endanger stability and consensus, and to foreground those likely to promote "reconciliation"' (Davis, 2005, p. 867).

The voices of the *niños vascos* were among those marginalised by the unspoken *pacto del olvido* (pact of forgetting), yet along with separation and exile, they had endured various traumatic experiences before, during, and after their evacuation. These included food shortages in wartime Bilbao and bombing raids carried out by aircraft and pilots supplied by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy in support of Franco. Some children suffered the loss of family members, while relatives who were considered politically undesirable by the Francoists risked imprisonment or worse. Familial correspondence during exile was unpredictable, and parents sometimes became refugees themselves. Children who were repatriated to Spain often faced an uncertain future, while those who remained in Britain endured the ongoing pain of estrangement.

Fifty years after the outbreak of the Civil War, Spain's entry into the European Community in 1986 symbolised its post-Franco rehabilitation and encouraged attempts to engage with marginalised discourses. In the Basque Country, this prompted the formation of the *Asociación de Niños Evacuados el 37* (Association of the Child Evacuees of '37) to facilitate commemorative activity, including annual reunions of a festive and public character (Alonso Carballés, 2011). A 'major reunion' of *niños* in 1987 marked 'their entrance as a collective into the public arena' and formed 'a milestone in the history of the collective memory of the Basque child exile' (Sabín-Fernández, 2011, p. 22). Gregorio Arrien, the Association's president, has collated documentary materials and has authored various historical works on the *niños vascos* (Arrien, 1988; 1991; 2014). More broadly, Spain continues to grapple with the contested legacy of the Civil War and dictatorship: the 2007 *Ley de la memoria historica* (Law on historical memory), which seeks to acknowledge those who had suffered, has been criticised both for going too far and not far enough (Pozo-Gutiérrez and Bloomfield, 2012, pp. 10-11).

Given the sensitive conditions in post-Franco Spain, it is perhaps unsurprising that the first major work on the *niños* originated from the

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Basque diaspora. *The Guernica Generation* was written by Dorothy Legarreta (1984), whose Basque father had emigrated to the United States in 1917. The title refers to the notorious German bombing raid on Guernica on 26 April 1937, which catalysed the international campaign to evacuate children from the Basque Country. Legarreta assessed the experience of the *niños* who went to various countries, including France, Belgium and the Soviet Union. Most significantly, she recovered and foregrounded the voices of over one hundred of the children, including twenty-six who were sent to Britain. She interviewed them as middle-aged adults between 1979-80:

> Without exception, all of those questioned commented that no one had ever interviewed them before about their exile. Many felt somewhat resentful that their sacrifice during the Spanish Civil War had been so totally ignored for more than forty years (Legarreta, 1984, pp. 332-333).

Some remarked it was 'only with their adulthood and parenting that they realized the true significance of their sojourn abroad' (Legarreta, 1984, p. 325). This included resentment about the neglect of their education while in exile, and the lack of careers advice. Many wept as they recalled painful or poignant moments. Those who stayed in Britain articulated a sense of permanent estrangement from those who had returned, which sometimes included family members, and mentioned their guilt at not having shared life under the dictatorship. Legarreta suggested that the children's specific experiences offered a general model for reducing the trauma of childhood separation and exile. However, she also hypothesised that specific Basque cultural traditions, including early admission to adulthood and a long tradition of 'lending' children, contributed to the fortitude of the *niños* during and after their exile.

The Guernica Generation's narrative vividly illustrates childhood life in wartime Bilbao, followed by an account of the hastily-convened arrangements that brought the *Habana* to Southampton. Legarreta highlights some of the agencies who supported the children in Britain, notably the non-governmental and cross-party National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief (NJC) and its offshoot, the Basque Children's Committee

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(BCC). Propaganda efforts emphasised the historic amicability of Basque-British relations but a 'wide mental gulf between children and organizers' quickly emerged at the reception camp at North Stoneham near Southampton (Legarreta, 1984, p. 112), where the British adults were unexpectedly confronted by children with strong political views. Unrest at the camp generated negative publicity, with right-wing newspapers focusing on the behaviour of the older boys, although one *niño* suggested to Legarreta (1984, p.125) that the alleged 'delinquency' merely consisted of 'normal boyish pranks'. It proved increasingly difficult to sustain popular support for the children, which declined during 1938-39 amid divisive debates over the question of their repatriation.

Adrian Bell's *Only for Three Months* first appeared in 1996 with a second edition published in 2007. It is the standard book-length account on this subject and builds substantially upon Legarreta's chapter on the *niños* in Britain. Bell shares Legarreta's focus on recovering the children's voices and conducted his own interviews with several *niños*, together with research into contemporary government records, personal papers, press reports, and the archives of organisations such as the BCC. The first half of the book is a detailed account of the evacuation and subsequent life in the reception camp and colonies, while the second part predominantly focuses on the life experiences of the children who did not return to Spain. Bell also provided the narrative spine for *The Guernica Children* (2005), a documentary film combining archive footage, dramatic reconstructions, and interviews with the now-elderly *niños*.

Beyond the accounts provided by Legarreta and Bell, other historians have explored British reactions to the *niños* in more depth. Initially, this formed part of wider analyses of what Alpert (1984, p. 423) has called the 'edifice of humanitarian aid' that emerged in Britain during the Spanish Civil War. In contrast to the government's non-intervention policy in Spain, members of the public and a range of organisations contributed to numerous relief causes. The historiography of this phenomenon has shed light on the ways in which the *niños* were perceived by 'ordinary' Britons; the administration of their stay at the national and local level; and, ultimately, how they became the object of political controversy. Observing the relative lack of outrage at previous humanitarian tragedies in the Civil War, including

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refugee crises, Alpert (1984, pp. 431-32) argued that the initial broad sympathy for the *niños* primarily reflected a belief in a specifically Basque (rather than Spanish) alignment with British values. To sustain public support, the BCC made a 'sincere attempt at apoliticism' in its activities (Alpert, 1984, p. 434). Nonetheless, and perhaps inevitably, the children's continued presence became a divisive political issue, especially over the question of their repatriation to Spain.

Drawing upon the historical context of the 'cult of childhood' that developed from the late nineteenth century, Anderson (2017) frames the repatriation controversy as a transnational battle for nothing less than the minds and souls of the young refugees. The Republic and its supporters in Spain and Britain used the evacuated children as a powerful symbol of Francoist violence against civilians 'behind the lines'. For counter-propaganda purposes, the Francoists therefore sought the prompt return of the niños to the Basque Country (which had fallen to Franco in summer 1937). They found allies among Britons who, having expected pious young Catholics, disliked the reality of the refugees' political and atheistic identities, and feared that many of the children's guardians in Britain were causing further damage to their impressionable souls. Conversely, the BCC worried that the children would face Francoist 're-education' upon their return to Spain.

The motives of Britons who supported the *niños* more generally has polarised historiographical debate. Fyrth (1986) suggested that the various grassroots Spanish relief efforts – including for the Basques – reflected political solidarity with the Republic and represented an anti-fascist 'Aid Spain' movement, comprising otherwise heterogeneous elements of British society. Buchanan (1991, p. 70) countered that such a movement 'did not exist'. Instead he explained the children's popularity primarily in terms of their humanitarian appeal, albeit this could prove 'brittle', when faced with negative publicity or complaints that the Basques received more aid than poverty-stricken British youths (Buchanan, 1988). Buchanan (1988, p. 156) also sought to recover the 'central, but understated, role' of the British labour movement (such as the Trades Union Congress) in the BCC, in contrast to Fyrth's emphasis on grassroots action and Legarreta's tendency to equate the BCC with the 'essentially middle-class' NJC.

Local studies on the Basque children have alluded to the Fyrth-Buchanan debate. Watson (2005) suggests humanitarian considerations and political motives coexisted in productive ways in Cumbria and the North East. Jump's (2007) study of the Oxfordshire Basque colonies concluded that the plight of the *niños* could not be depoliticised, and the campaign to support them represented the humanitarian veneer of pro-Republic opinion. More generally, Mason (2017) has analysed support for the Spanish Republic within Britain's expanding interwar civil society and advances a more nuanced interpretation of the relationship between political and humanitarian motives, as these did not exist as a dichotomy. The *niños* are not Mason's primary focus, although she highlights the contributions to Spanish relief efforts provided by groups that have been neglected by historians, including pacifists, the Co-operative movement, and Christians of various denominations.

Contemporary 1930s constructions of childhood and national identity also shaped popular responses to the Basque children. Myers (2000) suggests that British refugee policy was influenced by the predominant *tabula rasa* view of childhood, which considered children to be more adaptable and malleable than adults, and therefore more suited for evacuation to Britain. Newspapers reinforced the characterisation of Catholic Basque identity as passive and pious, and sentimentalised the children as 'stricken waifs', ignoring the diverse cultural capital that the *niños* brought with them as well as disconnecting them from the political controversies of the Civil War (Myers, 2009). The plight of the *niños*, according to Myers (1999a), provided a 'discursive space' for the demonstration of supposedly 'English' virtues, including kindness. Conversely, a specifically Anglican construction of English national identity generated some misgivings about the 'suitability' of Protestant England for what were believed to be predominantly Roman Catholic refugees (Myers, 1999b). Ironically, when the presence of left-wing and atheist views among the children exposed the weakness of these representations, popular sympathy diminished, although Myers (1999b, p. 277) further suggests that the refugees' 'cultural capital' facilitated the development of 'flexible identities' that helped the *niños* 'come to terms' with their exile. Using the case study of Birmingham, Myers (2009) demonstrated that people who *continued* to support the children were those who understood their plight outside of mainstream discourses of English identity, and tended to belong to groups within civil society that provided educational opportunities and discursive spaces for the critical assessment of wider European events. Similarly, the adults who ran the Cambridge colony employed a child-centred pedagogy, which not only helped to solve behavioural issues, but also demonstrated a transnational connection between progressive education ideals and methods in both England and the Spanish Republic (Myers, 1999a; Hawkins, 1999, pp. 102-108).

On the theme of national identity, Davies (2011) has suggested that Welsh responses to the children were shaped not only by the analogous historical experiences of the Basque Country and Wales, but also by a genuine sense of kinship as well as economic links. This generated widespread goodwill and solidarity towards the *niños* who stayed at Welsh colonies, although this was not universal, especially after a well-publicised incident of disorderly behaviour at Brechfa in July 1937. Gray (2008) has explored Scottish connections to the Spanish Republican cause, including a short overview of the only Basque colony in Scotland at Montrose (pp. 113-115) and brief references to BCC activity in Edinburgh and Glasgow (pp. 109, 111).

It is clear that the children, as a highly visible symbol of the Civil War, provided a major vehicle for popular engagement with Spain, across the spectrum of British interwar opinion. In 1999, as part of a study of twentieth-century refugee movements to Britain, Kushner and Knox reflected on the distorting effect of the Basque children's legacy. They suggested '[n] o other refugee group has received so much attention locally either at the time or in subsequent popular and official memory' and '[a] process of selective memory has operated enabling the Basques to be remembered partly at the expense of other refugee groups' (Kushner and Knox, 1999, p. 125). Yet at roughly the same time, Natalia Benjamin, the daughter of a Spanish refugee who had taught *niños* at the Langham colony in Essex, was worried that the children's story remained 'virtually unknown in Britain' and 'valuable archival material was being lost' (Benjamin, 2007, p. 6). Consequently, in 2002 she co-founded the Basque Children of '37

Association UK. The Association (now called BCA'37 UK: The Association for the UK Basque Children) provides a network for *niños* and their families and is a mainspring of public history activity. Its research and education agenda incorporates commemorative work, often in collaboration with community groups, such as exhibitions and the installation of plaques, usually at the sites of former colonies. The Association's website (www.basquechildren.org) is an online repository of articles and research guidance, and provides information on recent news and events, which sadly includes a growing number of obituaries of *niños*.

Alonso Carballés (2011) suggests that associations, in both the Basque Country and Britain, have facilitated consciousness among the *niños* of belonging to a historical group, and have encouraged a sociability of memory, in which scattered individual memories are forged into a collective imagined community. Sabín-Fernández (2011) has also explored how the group identity of the *niños vascos* has been constructed via commemorative practices, and the various agendas involved. For example, she contends public events in Britain are often supported by institutions and the media, and tend to have a celebratory nature, i.e. emphasising the generosity of those who supported the *niños* in the 1930s, which depoliticises and neutralises the historical context. Some of the *niños*, including those who do not engage with public events, told Sabín-Fernández how they felt about the ways in which their story has been told. Some expressed disillusionment with the role of external agendas, including academia and the associations. Others complained about the selective editing of their testimony. *Sabín-Fernández* (2011, pp. 190, 192) nonetheless concludes that the *niños* and their descendants represent powerful 'historical monuments' with the ability to challenge dominant discourses, and they should seek to mould their own identities, free from 'imposed categorisations and dichotomies dictated by agendas external to them.'

Memory forms a problematic element in the testimony of the Basque children. In adulthood, one of the 'boys' suggested '[t]here are some things we have forgotten [...] and some things we have deliberately forgotten' (Bell, 2007, p. vi). Ramón Santamaría mentioned during an interview that 'the memories that one has as a child have to be considered with caution, because I am no longer a child. I am 83 years old' (Pozo-Gutiérrez and Broomfield, 2012, p. 49). Meanwhile, the construction of collective memory among the *niños* has led to the 'creation of a mythology particular to the group', which has leached into individual stories (Sabín-Fernández, 2011, p. 146). For instance, the widely-repeated idea that the children were leaving their parents 'only for three months' appears to be 'a construct which has been developed as a strategy to cope with the distress of the separation' (Sabín-Fernández, 2011, p. 146).

The intersection of individual and collective memories underpins various edited volumes of testimony that have appeared since 2007. Benjamin (2007; 2012) has compiled memories solicited from the niños seven decades after their arrival in Britain, along with some reminiscences of those who encountered them. They are organised alphabetically to provide a 'patchwork of collective experience' rather than a formal narrative (Benjamin, 2007, p. 5). Pozo-Gutiérrez and Broomfield (2012) have produced a thematically-organised oral history based on '30 in-depth life story interviews' of Basque children who came to Britain, including fascinating material on pre-war childhood memories. Their volume demonstrates that, despite being known as 'Basque children', the young refugees possessed a 'very diverse range of regional and cultural roots' from across Spain (Pozo-Gutiérrez and Broomfield, 2012, p. 13). In reconstructing their pasts, however, the *niños* consider the 'Basque children' label an important part of their collective identity and a source of pride (Pozo-Gutiérrez and Broomfield, 2012, p. 180).

The story of the Basque children has also prompted a range of creative interpretations, including drama (Murray, 1990), illustration (Phelps, 2017-), and fiction (Simmons, 2017). These provide further evidence of the diverse ways in which the history of the *niños* in Britain has been recovered since the 1980s. Many other unexplored avenues remain. Although a number of geographically-specific studies have appeared since the start of the century, including Buckinghamshire (Gulland, 2014), Cumbria and the North East (Watson, 2005) Leicestershire (Graves, 2016; 2017), Oxfordshire (Jump, 2007), and Wales (Davies, 2011), significant gaps remain in the history of the *niños* at the local and regional level. Painstaking research in local archives is required, both to reconstruct local charitable networks and to reveal the ways in which communities represented and responded to the children. More comparative work across time and space is also needed, particularly comparisons of the *niños* to other large-scale movements of child refugees. Investigations into the role of kindness and compassion could reinvigorate the debate over the motives of ordinary Britons in supporting the children, as well as providing insights into the ways in which the young refugees *experienced* charity beyond simplified constructions of 'gratitude'.

Given that so much British involvement in the Spanish Civil War was non-governmental, the future perhaps lies in studies of the transnational networks that developed as a result of the children's evacuation and exile, such as the links between British and Spanish supporters of progressive education. Finally, there has been little analysis of the interactions between the *niños* and British children. A move away from the dominant paradigm of viewing the refugee children's experience almost exclusively through the prism of their relationship with the adult world could reveal hitherto unknown elements of their lives in exile.

The history of the *niños vascos* continues to be told via commemorative events. Such activity often has a celebratory character, but these occasions should not remove or oversimplify the difficult and problematic elements of the children's stories and memories, and should avoid romanticising what the *niños* experienced. More broadly, there is also danger in invoking so-called 'lessons from history' by drawing facile comparisons between the four thousand Basque refugee children of 1937 and the vast numbers of people across the world who have been forcibly displaced from their homes in the present. As Reinisch (2015) has warned, historical parallels that are removed from their specific contexts can be misleading if not counter-productive in seeking to alleviate modern refugee crises. An acceptance of the complexity and diversity of historical experience is a prerequisite if case studies from the past are to inform the treatment of child refugees in the twenty-first century.

The author would like to thank Maureen Haaker and Harvey Osborne for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

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