

The Basque Children in Wales

The depth of solidarity for the Spanish Republic in Wales was probably unrivalled anywhere else in Britain.

A broad swathe of Welsh people identified with a particular side in a struggle in a far-away country that had no direct bearing on their daily lives.

There was a marked contrast between the response in Wales and the `scrupulous neutrality` of the British government (see Adrian`s contribution).

Wales knew which side it was on. "Suffering Spain" was a just cause. Franco was Hitler and Mussolini`s nominee.

This feeling intensified after the attack on Guernica and the blockade of Bilbao.

The children who arrived in Wales were the beneficiaries of a period of intense political campaigning.

Links between Wales and Spain were strengthened by the tragic symmetry of the Austurian miners` revolt and the Gresford mining disaster when 244 men died. Both events happened in 1934.

The Franco putsch provoked immediate and huge demonstrations in Wales. 10,000 in Neath within days of the coup. Also in the Rhondda, Aberdare etc.

Aid Spain movements sprang up across Wales. In the north there was a well organised Welsh Ambulances for Spain fund.

There were pithead collections. Petitions. Door to door collections.

Sea captains from Swansea and Cardiff ran the blockade of Bilbao.

The writer Lewis Jones dropped dead of exhaustion after addressing thirty meetings in a single day.

The International Brigade sent 174 Welsh volunteers to Spain 122 of them miners.

The children who arrived here were the physical embodiment of a struggle against Fascism.

Their presence at concerts, football matches and rallies spread the message.

Many in Wales identified with the children, not just sympathised with them.

There was outrage at a system that had also wounded them. A miner asked `why fight Fascism ?` replied, "Because the Powell Dyffryn Coal Company is Fascism".

Wales was experiencing terrible levels of poverty. Unemployment levels were 50% in parts of Wales. Rickets, malnutrition, and tuberculosis were commonplace. Public assistance was cut.

It would have been wholly understandable if folk with so little had pleaded they had more pressing concerns than the struggle in Spain. Instead, it fostered a sense of solidarity with those engaged in an even greater struggle elsewhere.

The greatest champion of Republican Spain was the South Wales Miners` Federation but support went beyond the political left.

There was a consensus amongst the Welsh political, academic and business class in support of the Republic. It united people as diverse as Lloyd George, Aneurin Bevan, Frederick Rees (Principal of Cardiff University) , the philanthropist Lord Davies and the entrepreneur John Emlyn Jones.

The Basques had a particular resonance in Wales and there were obvious cultural similarities between the two nations.

There was righteous anger at the attempt by a more powerful aggressor to crush the liberty of a small heroic nation. The Basque government was indisputably democratic and reasonable.

Also, there were well established economic links. Welsh coking coal was sent to Bilbao and Basque iron ore to Cardiff.

As a result of these links Spanish communities had grown up in Cardiff Dockland, Dowlais and the Swansea coalfield.

There were four colonies in Wales in Caerleon, Swansea, Old Colwyn and Brechfa.

Cambria House

A place out of the ordinary run by remarkable people. Maria Fernandez and Cyril Cule.

Mighty football team, Concert Party, a Journal.

A place of solace and sanctuary.

(See Gail`s contribution.)

Sketty Park House

An elegant mansion outside Swansea.

Wonderful reception for the 84 children.

Legacy of Potato Jones who ran the Bilbao blockade.

A tidal wave of giving came from a wide range of local organisations who contributed to the Mayor`s fund. Lord Davies and his sisters gave £2,000.

Tin Plate workers in Llansamlet made regular work-place deductions.

A civic project. Well run and professional. Many staff were from the local Spanish community others came with the children.

Many of the children were traumatised. Some dug tunnels in the grounds.

Roofree House – A former girls` school.

Home to twenty young refugees until October 1938

Charitable, non-political approach – humanitarian. Bank managers, Scout Leaders, Station masters.

Quiet decency – balm for children who relived the horrors they had experienced.

But also, an ideological imperative by Douglas Hyde, local Communist Party organiser

Money never plentiful. No major backers.

Some hostility from locals. Apologetic tone to appeals for donations, particularly after the incident in Brechfa.

Brechfa.

A cold, inhospitable, disused training camp. Beautiful but remote.

72 boys traumatised and uprooted were deposited there. Four staff. Sandwiches and an urn.

Bilbao had already fallen. So, a return home seemed impossible.

Altercation with a visiting angler staying in the Forest Arms Hotel. The older boys retaliated to a beating and attacked the Inn and Ty Mawr next door. Breaking windows with stones.

The police arrived. Boys chased and beaten. Fifteen `ringleaders` were arrested and sent back to France.

The incident was seized upon by the Press and those who had never wanted the children here in the first place. Children demonised as troublemaking, ungrateful Reds.

Afterwards there was much greater support from the local community in nearby Carmarthen and a reorganisation of the camp by the National Joint Committee. The boys were moved to Bronwydd mansion in September.

Conclusion – Wales can be proud of the kindness and solidarity it showed.

There was generosity of spirit and of purse.

An earlier age illuminates our own.

Hywel Davies July 2022