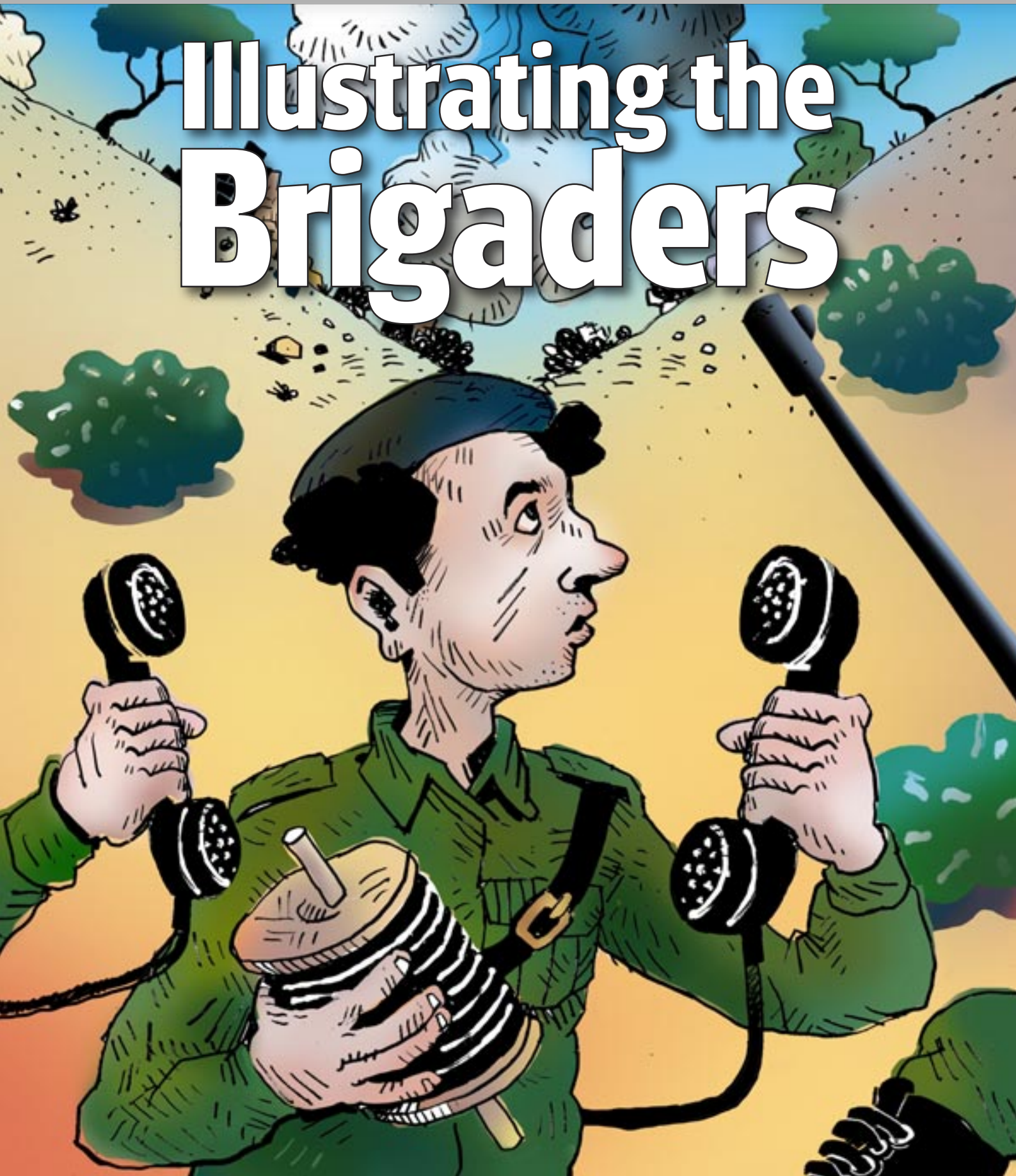




# ¡NO PASARÁN!

International Brigade Memorial Trust • 1-2023 • £5

## Illustrating the Brigaders





# Choose your IBMT t-shirt



The IBMT has a range of t-shirt designs highlighting the contributions of volunteers from Ireland, Scotland and Wales (below).

We also have a t-shirt featuring the iconic emblem of the International Brigades, in a variety of colours (left).

All t-shirts are on sale for £20 (plus £3.99 p&p) in a range of sizes (S-5XL) and are made from ethically sourced cotton.

The t-shirts are produced in partnership with specialist radical apparel outfitter Red Molotov. All proceeds from sales help fund our vital commemorative and educational work.

To place an order online go to the Shop page of the IBMT website:  
[www.international-brigades.org.uk/shop](http://www.international-brigades.org.uk/shop)







◀ Cartoon of International Brigader Les Starr, as illustrated by his grandson Josh Knowles. See page 12.

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Robert MacDonald



**ARTEFACT:** Members with the Republican flag flown from Madrid's Telefónica building during the civil war. The flag is held in the Working Class Movement Library in Salford.

# Manchester welcomes Annual General Meeting

The IBMT's 2022 Annual General Meeting was held on Saturday 15 October, as part of a weekend of activities across Manchester, which included tributes, talks on anti-fascist memory, socials, singing and a tour of the People's History Museum archives.

The morning of the AGM began with a talk by Begoña del Castillo of the Comisiones Obreras Spanish trade union federation. She spoke about the civil war in historical memory and its relationship with the current political situation in Spain.

In reference to the unaddressed legacy of Francoism in Spain, she quoted the Argentine poet Juan Gelman: 'When wounds do not heal, they turn a society gangrenous. A wound that is falsely healed is still infected.'

The AGM was formally opened by the Lord Mayor of Manchester, Councillor Donna Ludford. Tony Lloyd, MP for Rochdale (previously Manchester Central) and a long-time strong supporter of the IBMT, was also in attendance and spoke words in honour of the International Brigades and the cause of the Trust.

There was also a talk delivered by IBMT members and historians Mike Wild, Tony Fox and Michael Crowley. They described the stories of Young Communist League activists from Manchester's Cheetham Hill, their role in the Kinder Scout Mass Trespass of 1932, their clashes with Mosley's fascists and their eventual journey to fight in Spain.

Over 40 members were in attendance at the AGM itself. The meeting approved the Executive Committee's report of activities for the past 12 months as well as the financial accounts for the year and finally listened to a membership strategy report which then opened into a discussion about financing the future of the IBMT.

Mike Arnott, Megan Dobney, Jim Jump and David McKnight were re-elected to the IBMT's Executive Committee and Luke O'Riordan was

CONTINUED OVERLEAF



Tony Lloyd MP.



◀ Donna Ludford, Lord Mayor of Manchester, and Sean McHale, Councillor and Lord Mayor's Consort, with 'The Nurse Who Became a Spy' by Chris Hall, about Manchester International Brigade nurse Madge Addy.



Begoña del Castillo.



The International Brigade Memorial Trust keeps alive the memory and spirit of the men and women who volunteered to fight fascism and defend democracy in Spain from 1936 to 1939

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#### Founding Chair Professor Sir Paul Preston

**Patrons** Professor Peter Crome, Professor Helen Graham, Ken Livingstone, Len McCluskey, Christy Moore, Jack O'Connor, Maxine Peake, Baroness Royall of Blaisdon, Mick Whelan

**Historical Consultant** Richard Baxell

## NEWS

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elected for the first time.

The AGM was followed by a film about the return of the British Battalion prepared by Marshall Mateer, IBMT Film Coordinator. Members then enjoyed a buffet dinner and a musical performance of modernised Spanish Civil War-themed songs by Edward Upward and his band. The evening concluded with a quiz and raffle draws.

The weekend ended on the Sunday with a guided tour and showcase of the archival objects and records from the International Brigade and Spanish Civil War archives held at Manchester's People's History Museum.



▲ Kate Armstrong holding a tablet featuring a portrait of her great uncle, Manchester volunteer Alec Armstrong.

► Lisa Croft, grand-daughter of Brigadier Archibald Williams, presents her painting in tribute to the Manchester volunteers to raffle-winner Denis Lenihan.

◀ Attendees pore over International Brigade records at the People's History Museum.

# Waiting for clarity on new citizenship rights

Spain has approved its long-awaited Democratic Memory Law – a sweeping piece of legislation designed to dismantle the legacy of the Franco dictatorship.

The law came into force on 21 October. Among other things, it allows the children and grandchildren of Spanish exiles to apply for Spanish citizenship. One consular source told the IBMT that within days of it being passed, scores of people started applying at Spanish consulates around the world.

But the descendants of International Brigaders will have to wait a while longer.

While the new law offers them citizenship too, the rules on how they can apply have yet to be worked out and it could be months before they are.

Once established, the families of the more than 2,000 Britons who served in the International Brigades should be able to apply for citizenship, as long as they can prove they have 'worked continuously to spread the memory of their ancestors and defend

democracy in Spain'. Applicants will not have to renounce their current citizenship.

The IBMT had been pressing for these measures ever since plans for the law were first published in 2020.

The law (20/2022) replaces and builds upon the Historical Memory Law introduced by the PSOE socialist party government of José Luis Zapatero in 2007. That legislation granted unconditional Spanish citizenship to surviving International Brigaders and in June 2009 a ceremony was held at the Spanish embassy in London to confer citizenship on nine veterans.

The new Democratic Memory Law allows the children and grandchildren of Spaniards who were driven into exile 'for political, ideological or belief reasons or sexual orientation and identity' to seek Spanish citizenship.

So too can the sons and daughters of Spanish women who lost their nationality by marrying foreigners before the 1978 constitution came into force.





# Magazine to go digital – print copy now optional

From the May 2023 issue onwards, *iNo Pasarán!* will be distributed to IBMT members as a digital magazine, accessible online via computer, tablet or smartphone by any individual member as soon as the issue goes to press.

Print copies of each issue will still be available to those members who want them, at the cost of £5 per issue. The IBMT hopes that this optional charge will allow it to cover the increasing costs of publishing a high quality printed magazine, while also recognising that many members will be happy to read it online.

IBMT Secretary Megan Dobney said: 'This decision was not taken lightly and we understand the inconvenience of even an optional charge in the midst of a cost of living crisis.'



'However, following discussions by the Executive Committee and consultation at the Annual General Meeting, we believe this is the best way to secure both the future of the IBMT magazine and the financial health of the Trust. The Trustees hope that members continue supporting the IBMT and join us in embracing the new online version of the magazine.'



◀ Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez (left) with relatives of the victims of the civil war and Franco period at Spain's first national day of remembrance on 24 October 2022. The ceremony was held at the National Music Auditorium, Madrid.

to take the lead in the search for the disappeared.

- Orders a census of all victims of Francoist repression and promotes the setting-up of a national DNA bank of victims.
- Declares the illegality of the Franco regime and its special courts and annuls their sentences.
- Redesignates Franco's former tomb and basilica at the Valley of the Fallen (Valle de los Caídos) – which was built by Spanish Republican prisoners and will now be renamed the Valley of Cuelgamuros – as a centre for the furtherance of democratic memory.
- Requires democratic memory material to be included in school curricula to promote truth, justice and reparation.
- 31 October will be declared a day of remembrance for all victims of the war and dictatorship.
- 8 May becomes the day of remembrance for exiles from the war.

Even though the law is now in force, the IBMT will monitor developments closely and keep members informed of how and when the families of Brigaders can apply for citizenship. The Trust hopes the rules governing those applications will be established before November this year, when Spain is due to hold a general election.

Finally, the sons and daughters of Spaniards who were granted citizenship under the 2007 law can now apply for citizenship themselves.

The new law was approved despite stiff opposition from right-wing parties. Spain's former conservative Prime Minister José María Aznar described it as a 'nonsense drafted by terrorists and agreed with terrorists'.

But the legislation had the backing of the

ruling PSOE under Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez and its junior left-wing coalition partner, Unidas Podemos. Support also came from some Basque and Catalan nationalists and separatists.

The new legislation includes a raft of measures designed to unpick the legacy of Franco's dictatorship. The law:

- Gives families the right to know what happened to victims of the Franco dictatorship, with central government ordered

GIDEON LONG

# Your local IBMT affiliated memorial group

Several independent locally-based International Brigade memorial groups have sprung up around the country in recent years. The IBMT welcomes this development and supports their work.

IBMT affiliation costs £30. You can affiliate through our website here: [www.international-brigades.org.uk/membership](http://www.international-brigades.org.uk/membership).

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# NEW YEAR MESSAGE



### ◀ MARLENE SIDAWAY:

Performing on stage in 'The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel', currently on tour.

# Looking to the future

Dear IBMT member,

After the Covid years, 2022 was a year when we were finally able to meet again, enjoy each other's company and more importantly remember and celebrate the International Brigaders in the way we have done since the IBMT was formed.

Beginning with the Len Crome Memorial Conference in Edinburgh in March, the commemoration in London's Jubilee Gardens in July and the AGM in Manchester in October, things were almost back to normal – but lockdown has left its mark, often in unexpected ways. Events are now

**'We are embracing new digital technology and recognising that many people are quite happy to keep in touch via their computers, smartphones and other devices.'**

being filmed and shared online, thereby reaching many more members and supporters. An example is the 'IBMT Conversation' between our Founding Chair, Professor Sir Paul Preston, and Professor Helen Graham, chaired by our Historical Consultant, Richard Baxell. These have proved very popular and we hope they will continue.

We also have a growing number of affiliated memorial groups who stage their own events – talks, film shows, commemorative gatherings, concerts etc, all of which can raise funds for various projects and also support the IBMT. You'll find their contact details on this page.

The IBMT has made great strides in the work we have been able to do in recent years, spreading the word in education and publishing as well as nourishing a network of people who make sure that

the memory of the Brigaders and their efforts to defeat fascism continue to be an inspiration for future generations.

In order to do this, we need to increase our income. It's not easy to ask for more financial support in these difficult times but our wider purpose is paramount, at a time when every news bulletin gives evidence of the inequality and injustices that thousands of people are suffering.

We are also embracing new digital technology and recognising that many people – though not all – prefer or are quite happy to keep in touch with the IBMT via their computers, smartphones and other devices. If you haven't already done so, take a look at our revamped website. We now plan to put the magazine online, while still leaving members with the option of receiving a printed copy (see page 5).

When we started the Trust, there were over two dozen British and Irish veterans left. They had taken the decision that the memory of their comrades should continue for as long as possible, and there were many bereaved family members who agreed with them. These strong and purposeful people were the key to the formation of the Trust and many continue to work for it today.

During the last few months I have been touring around the country with 'The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel' and I've been delighted to catch up with many of these friends, whose commitment to the IBMT is as strong as ever.

Please be as generous as *you* can with your time, energy and financial support. Share the story, join an active group, recruit friends to the IBMT. Do whatever you can to help us to continue our work. We have come so far in the last 20 years and our work continues. Thank you and all good wishes for 2023.

*Marlene Sidaway*

IBMT President



# Pendle and the struggle in Spain

Drawing from his studies into Pendle's connections to the Spanish Civil War, **LEWIS ASHWORTH** presents profiles of those International Brigaders that left the east Lancashire region to fight fascism in Spain.



▲ Photo of James Bridge, taken from his International Brigade *carpet*, provided by his great-granddaughter Christine White.

During the inter-war period Pendle, then the constituency of Nelson and Colne, was a hotbed of radical politics, earning the area its designation as a 'Little Moscow'. Progressive sentiments meant that when the Spanish Civil War broke out, there was notable interest in the area for supporting the anti-fascist struggle.

Five local men volunteered and there was an extensive Aid Spain movement. This research was undertaken for my undergraduate dissertation, through which I uncovered volunteer David Hartley King's connection to Pendle.

The first volunteer was **John Jolly** (1894-1981), who had connections with both Nelson and Burnley. He had served in the First World War as part of the East Lancashire Regiment, being awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal. Later he served in the Royal Army Medical Corps.

## Weaver

Jolly was a weaver and a member of the Nelson Weavers' Association. A Labour Party member, he was politically active and joined the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in 1936. Jolly volunteered following an appeal by left-wing journalist HN Brailsford. Edith Jolly, his wife, became active in the Aid Spain movement in Nelson and Burnley. Arriving in Spain in December 1936, Jolly spent much of the war working at the American Hospital of Villa Paz,

Saelices. Writing home in 1937, he said: 'If we die out here it will be for a good cause: one of the best. We must keep the Flag of Freedom flying.' In November 1937 he joined the Communist Party of Spain. Jolly was repatriated in October 1938 and, on returning, attended local meetings and raised money for disabled volunteers and dependents of those killed.

**James Bridge** (1901-1981) was born in Barnoldswick and, at the age of 16, lied about his age and joined the army serving in the First World War. In the 1920s he was in the Tank Corps and afterwards lived in Nelson.

Bridge joined the CPGB, resulting in him being blacklisted by local textile manufacturers and forcing him to travel for work.

Arriving in Spain in January 1937, he fought at the Battle of Jarama and was wounded. In the *Nelson Leader*, he penned an account on Jarama, 'Through hell for Arganda Bridge'. Bridge wrote: 'VC's don't count in this war; all we want is fascism smashed forever and a decent home for our families.' Writing to a friend in Nelson in March 1937, he described the situation: 'These last three weeks we have lost some good boys, but Franco has lost more than we have.' In June



◀ David Hartley King while he was serving in the Royal Marines. Provided by Lynne Strickland, great-niece of King.

at Madrid he was again wounded and was repatriated in late July.

**David Hartley King** (1907-1991) was born at Salterforth and in his youth was a weaver. From 1919 to 1924 he was a member of the Nelson Weavers' Association. From 1924 until 1931 he served in the Royal Marines, afterwards settling in Sutton, Surrey. Before volunteering he was employed as a mechanic by Russian Oil Products in Battersea. King was active in trade union and political circles. In 1933 he joined the Transport and General Workers Union and was the delegate to the local trades council. Additionally he had been an organiser with the unemployed workers' movement.

Initially a member of the Labour Party and writing for the branch newspaper, by 1934 King had joined the CPGB. He was the branch secretary when he attended the 1937 party congress. Furthermore, he was the assistant secretary for the Sutton Spanish Aid Committee. On arriving in Spain in May 1937, he was

**'If we die out here it will be for a good cause: one of the best. We must keep the Flag of Freedom flying.'**

assigned to the Anglo-American John Brown Battery at Almansa, where he was promoted to sergeant and was an artillery instructor. King was noted for having exemplary moral and political conduct.

In September 1937 he joined the Socorro Rojo Internacional (International Red Aid). He applied to join the Spanish Communist Party in April 1938 and was repatriated in early 1939.

**George Buck** (1915-1958) was from Nelson and was a member of the Iron Moulders' Union but had no political affiliations.

CONTINUED OVERLEAF





# The forgotten warrior



It is now nearly 90 years since the end of the Spanish Civil War and memoirs and biographies continue to be added to what is already an impressive and valuable library. Yet gaps still remain; for example many British senior figures in Spain never wrote memoirs, including Sam Wild, the longest serving British Battalion commander, and Peter Kerrigan, the highest ranking political commissar. Nor is there much on another senior officer, who the former volunteer, *Daily Worker* journalist and IBMT Chair, Sam Lesser, argued had showed 'remarkable powers of leadership' in Spain. The name of the officer was Major Ronald Malcolm Loraine Dunbar.

While the majority of volunteers for the International Brigades hailed from working-class backgrounds, Malcolm Dunbar most decidedly did not. Born a leapling in 1912, he was the son of Sir Loraine Geddes Dunbar, formerly the Secretary and Treasurer of the Bank of Bengal in Calcutta. Malcolm was educated at the prestigious English public school of Repton, gaining a place in 1930 at Christ's College, Cambridge to read

IBMT Historical Consultant **RICHARD BAXELL** presents the story of British volunteer Malcolm Dunbar. Highly respected at the time for his service as commanding officer of the Anti-Tank Battery and later as chief of staff to the 15th Brigade, he is oddly under-remembered today.

economics and history. Like many of his peers, Dunbar involved himself in left-wing politics at university and was a member of what was described as the 'advanced aesthetic set' (likely a coded reference to his homosexuality).

After graduation Dunbar moved to London, where he began work as a journalist and photographer. Having joined a number of anti-fascist protests in the capital, in October 1936 Dunbar was working as a reporter for Century Press when he was arrested at the anti-Mosley demonstration in Cable Street. Though his press credentials enabled him to be released quickly, the protest clearly made a powerful impression, for Dunbar later explained that it was this that lay behind his decision to volunteer to fight in Spain.

Though not a Communist Party member Dunbar was accepted for the International Brigades, probably due to time in the Officers' Training Corps at Repton and his good command of French. He left London on 5 January 1937, arriving in Spain four days later. After a brief period of training at the volunteers' base in Madrigueras, Dunbar

joined the British Battalion at the Battle of Jarama in mid-February. Serving as a rifleman, Dunbar was one of very few to get through the three days of bloodshed unscathed. His superior officer reported, in fact, that he 'conducted himself very bravely' and Dunbar was given a field promotion to section leader, responsible for up to a dozen men. However, Dunbar's initial period of service ended three days later, when he was badly wounded in the arm.

## Intelligence

After he returned from three weeks convalescence, Dunbar's obvious intelligence and aptitude for languages led to him being sent to officers' school. When a new elite artillery unit was formed in June, Dunbar was quickly promoted to lieutenant and appointed its first commander. The British Anti-Tank Battery, as it became known, was formed too late to be involved in any of Jarama's major actions, so the gun crews had to be satisfied with taking the occasional pot-shot at the Rebel

CONTINUED OVERLEAF



▲ A copy of Dunbar's International Brigade carnet.

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

lines. Dunbar ingeniously devised a series of ramps so that the guns could fire off a few shells before quickly being moved back out of sight. The unit soon built up a reputation for being highly effective; even the notoriously 'rough and ready' Battalion Commander, Fred Copeman, admitted that the 'Anti-Tank company were bloody good...and they had plenty of courage'. Accounts by members of the Battery make clear that this reputation owed much to Dunbar's skilful leadership.

Wounded again at the Battle of Brunete in July, Dunbar was recommended for the prestigious

## 'Accounts by members of the Anti-Tank Battery make clear that [its] reputation owed much to Dunbar's skilful leadership.'

Republican Navalperal medal. He returned to the front in September, joining the Brigade staff as Commander of Operations. However, during the Battle of Teruel, fought in temperatures that sank to 20 degrees below zero at night, Dunbar was hospitalised with jaundice, keeping him out of action until the following spring. He returned to find the Republican forces facing their most serious challenge of the war. Flushed with his success at Teruel, Franco had launched a colossal offensive against the Republican forces in Aragón. With the Rebel forces outnumbering the defenders by almost five to one, what began as a series of breakthroughs swiftly turned into a rout, as the Republican lines virtually collapsed.

### Defence

Dunbar rejoined the British as they were fighting a last-ditch defence of the Aragón town of Caspe. Wounded once more during the battle, Dunbar returned to the front nine days later, only to be wounded yet again during a catastrophic ambush by Italian troops outside the small Aragón village of Calaceite. Having been patched up at a field dressing station, Dunbar insisted on returning to the front, joining a group of volunteers attempting to make a defensive stand on the road to the east of Caspe. However, in real danger of being overrun, the group were urgently forced to retreat, only finding sanctuary on the other side of the River Ebro. Dunbar's exemplary leadership under almost impossible conditions during the retreats led to his promotion to 15th International Brigade Chief of Staff.

On 24 July 1938 Republican forces triumphantly crossed the River Ebro, over which they had been forced to flee only two months earlier. Dunbar had been closely involved with planning and executing the ambitious offensive, though other senior members of the 15th Brigade were beginning to worry that Dunbar was not



Dunbar as Major of the 15th International Brigade.

the leader he had been. While his military skills were still *sin reproches*, the tough American commissar, John Gates, worried that Dunbar was physically and emotionally exhausted.

On 7 September Dunbar was badly hurt when a five-inch Nationalist shell exploded right in front of the Brigade staff's position. The wound kept him out of action for two weeks and by the time he returned the International Brigades were preparing themselves to be withdrawn from the war. Following one last action on 22-23 September, Dunbar and the other volunteers were finally taken out of the line. A week later, on 1 October 1938, several officers were presented with certificates at a Brigade lunch in recognition of their 'outstanding work' in Spain. The first to receive his was Malcolm Dunbar. Two weeks later there were a number of promotions; both Dunbar and the British Battalion's commander, Sam Wild, were promoted to Major. In what may have been seen as the highest accolade, Dunbar was one of five British volunteers to receive a signed note from La Pasionaria.

There is little doubt that Dunbar's military prowess was widely admired. Arthur Olorenshaw, in charge of the English Section at the Officers' School between April and August 1937, described Dunbar as

'one of the best [Comra]des to have been in Spain' and Milton Wolff, commander of the Lincolns, thought him one of the two best soldiers in the entire 15th International Brigade. However, while Dunbar was generally respected and admired, few accounts suggest that he was warmly liked. The sensitive, highbrow and intensely private Dunbar seems to have felt uncomfortable in other people's company and his aloofness, even if due more to social awkwardness than snobbishness, did not always endear him to his comrades. Nor was he entirely trusted by his political superiors; even as late as July 1938, having been accepted into the Spanish Communist Party at the beginning of the year, Dunbar's political work was still being described as 'weak' and 'undeveloped'.

Despite the criticisms, the Spanish war clearly enabled Dunbar to develop a hitherto untapped talent for military command. The sculptor Jason Gurney had known Dunbar in London, finding him 'a very elegant and evidently rich member of the local intelligentsia...an amusing, if somewhat cynical, character with whom to

## 'The Spanish war clearly enabled Dunbar to develop a hitherto untapped talent for military command.'

have a drink.' Yet when the two met again in Spain, Gurney found him 'totally different to the one I had known in the King's Road...It sounded very strange to hear the King's Road Malcolm ranting on about the necessity for organisation and discipline.'

Dunbar's remarkable transformation from intellectual aesthete to courageous warrior was elegantly summarised by the American historian James Hopkins: 'For certain individuals circumstances could produce a costume of the moment, and Spain was the greatest theatre in the world.'



**LEADERS:** From left, Malcolm Dunbar, *Daily Worker* journalist Bill Rust, 15th Brigade Commander Vladimir Čopić and Hugh Slater, second in command of the Anti-Tank Battery.



# Three tributes to the fallen



**GERRY BURNS**, a writer and IBMT member, presents poems he composed in memory of those who fought fascism and died supporting the Spanish people in the civil war.

The tragedy of the Spanish Civil War has long struck a chord with me and the belief that this was where the spread of fascism could and should have been stopped in its tracks, before it was able to spread its poisonous dogma across the world.

Giles Tremlett's 2020 tome, 'The International Brigades: Fascism, Freedom and the Spanish Civil War', helped to give me the impetus to write these poems on various aspects of the civil war.

I am a poet based in County Armagh, Northern Ireland. My work has appeared in numerous journals, including *Poetry Ireland*, *Books Ireland*, *Crannog*, *Black Mountain Review* and even, on one memorable occasion, in a Bolton Wanderers match programme!

I've taught creative writing in a number of areas across Northern Ireland, mostly on behalf of the Workers' Educational Association. In 2007 I was awarded the prestigious Feile Filochta prize at the annual Dun Laoghaire Poetry Festival.

I have also been involved for quite a few years in the Republican socialist movement and for a time was editor of a monthly journal, *The Plough*.

## No Pasarán



these are not our sacred dead  
who lie here, in this Valley of the Fallen,  
our nameless heroes lie in unmarked graves.

who are these ghosts approaching in the sun?  
they died fighting not for justice with their tanks and  
guns, these grim spectres are not our sacred dead.

our defiant volunteers who beat back wave on wave  
of pitiless attacks, and died, fighting for Europe's soul,  
these,  
our nameless heroes, lie in unmarked graves

blitzkrieg and blanket bombing of whole towns  
became the norm, strategies to be used again, across  
the globe, no, these are not our sacred dead

these brave men and women fought and died to stop  
the fascist creed of terror in its tracks, yet these,  
our nameless heroes, lie in unmarked graves

the world looked on, disinterested, as Franco and his  
generals  
imposed fascism on Spain, and helped it spread, like  
fire, no,  
these are not our sacred dead,  
our nameless heroes lie in unmarked graves;

## Even the Olives

*In memory of Charlie  
Donnelly, killed at the  
Battle of Jarama,  
fighting fascism in the  
Spanish Civil War, 1937*



Making my way along the Trassey Track again,  
ravens circling above the Gap, ill-humoured,  
barely tolerating my presence here today,  
or so it seems,  
the mountains darker, slate-black,  
sullen almost on this bleak autumnal day,  
sheep, like some stragglers from a battle  
that's been lost somewhere,  
trudge single-file along the swollen river's edge  
as I go up, the winds getting stronger,  
the cold biting more deeply;  
feeling somewhat sick at heart,  
knowing full-well the reason why,  
I'm hoping that the mountain air  
might clear all thoughts of war and death  
in the Ukraine,  
instead it brings to mind another war  
and with it thoughts of you, moving  
without question, back up again  
into those ochre hills, towards the fateful Front,  
all bridges back behind you burned;

'death comes in quantity' you had written,  
'from solved problems on maps', and death, inevitably,  
claimed you there, at 22, among the olive groves,  
where death was everywhere, the ground blood red;  
they say that just before the bullets struck,  
you held a bunch of damaged olives in your hands,  
'look,' you said, 'even the olives are bleeding';

further up now as the winds began to ease  
cold mist came down, so I gave up thoughts  
of getting to the mountain tops and turned around,  
wishing that you might have done so too,  
but you were never one for turning, were you?  
not even at the very Gates of Hell;

## Witness

*Hemingway at the Ebro*



And so you left Key West with Martha,  
left your wife, your old life, and flew to Spain,  
with the bridges still intact but with trouble coming  
so everyone said, and they were right  
you were stepping into history, you said,  
stepping in and stepping down,  
without a second thought, into that confused abyss  
between actuality and adventure;

filing your reports and stories from the Front,  
you played the part there of a man at war,  
but at ease,  
just as you were with those behind the lines  
where life went on, as it must, war or no war;  
in the bars, talk was cheap, your tales of derring-do,  
the fighting at the Front and the questionable virtues  
of the other men's wives;  
but you were present at the Ebro, that final bloody stand,  
and were, they say, among the last to leave,  
crossing the river, tearfully, with countless bodies  
floating by, knowing that the war  
you'd come to tell the heedless world about,  
was lost.



## Illustrating the Internat

Artist **JOSH KNOWLES** is producing a graphic novel that tells the story of his grandfather, International Brigader Leslie 'Les' Starr, to be published this year. He is interviewed here by IBMT Executive Officer Ajmal Waqif.

### Tell us who you are and what you do.

I'm an artist and illustrator interested in the connections between pop culture, mythology and social history. I grew up in Manchester with my mum and older brother. I'm currently working on a graphic novel about my grandfather, who served in the International Brigades in 1937-38.

### How did you first find out about the history of the International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War?

I first learnt about them through my maternal grandfather, Les Starr. Although he didn't talk about it much, we all knew he'd gone to Spain to fight the fascists. I certainly didn't hear about it at school or on TV – just bits and pieces in conversation and pop culture references.

I'm learning a lot now I'm looking for the





◀◀ Artwork depicting the anti-fascist struggles in Manchester's Cheetham Hill area in the 1930s. British Union of Fascist supporters, brandishing far-right *Action* newspaper, clash with local Young Communist League members with copies of their newspaper, *Challenge*, Les Starr among them.

◀ Author Josh Knowles at work on the graphic novel in his studio.

# ional Brigades

details. I've found the more I know the more there is to know.

## Tell me about your grandfather: What is your connection to him and his life?

Les was an imposing but benign figure in my childhood. He was stoic and serious but not scary – he didn't talk that much to us as kids – that was grandma's role. Though in the background, he looked after us all. He wasn't really one for the limelight, although he was well recognised when we were out and about. He loved his garden and playing cards with friends. He was an ordinary unassuming man but went through some extraordinary hardships and challenges through tough and changing times.

From a Jewish migrant family, Les was one of six children. He started work at 13. Both his

parents died by the time he was 16. There was no NHS or welfare state at that time and there was mass unemployment due in part to the Great Depression. He was fighting Mosley's Blackshirts on his doorstep. Then he volunteered to fight Franco in Spain. He

**'It's also a story that carries a strong and specific identity: Jewish, Mancunian and working-class.'**

returned home to marry an Irish girl and settle down, only for the Second World War to break out, turning his life upside down again. After all that he just wanted a quiet life with his family and friends in a place he could call his own.

I wanted to record Les's experiences to preserve our family history. As time went on it occurred to me it was also a reflection of a bigger story, the rapid and volatile shifts in the social and cultural landscape of the early to mid-20th century. It's also a story that carries a strong and specific identity: Jewish, Mancunian and working-class.

I finally began the writing process in late 2019. I started out with a handful of family anecdotes and letters, a cigar box of old documents, some photos and a couple of audio recordings.

Since then I've met with historians and visited various library archives. The Northwest Film Archive have 1930s film footage and documents regarding meetings and demos Les attended in Manchester (where he was arrested more than once). I've had guidance from IBMT members Mike Wild, Tony Fox and Michael Crowley amongst others. The Manchester Jewish Museum are also supporting me to finish and launch the novel.

I only wish Les was alive now so I could ask  
CONTINUED OVERLEAF

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

him more questions. We only talked of his past briefly when he was alive.

I know he was connected to the Cheetham Branch YCL Challenge Club. He arrived at Albacete for training in September 1937 (after his cousin Edward Starr had fought and returned home following a gas attack on Suicide Hill during the Battle of Jarama). He completed training and joined the Transmissions Brigade on 17 September 1937.

I don't think Les was a natural warrior or ideologist, but in my mind his commitment to travel to Spain was heroic in itself. He volunteered

**'I don't think Les was a natural warrior or ideologist, but in my mind his commitment to travel to Spain was heroic in itself.'**

to endure the hardships of travel, military life and war. When I look at the bigger picture, I see an impulsive but unsure young man, trying to grow up and find his way in life against wave after wave of fascist aggression and socio-economic hardship. He did what he could to fight back, protect his place and people and lived to tell the tale.

**What made you want to represent your grandfather's story and his time in Spain in the form of a graphic novel?**

I'd like to understand more about his experience

in Spain as a Mancunian in a foreign land, fighting a war in a language he didn't understand.

**Why is it important to continue to remember the International Brigades and their legacy?**

I want to communicate how older generations fought so we could have a better life. It's important to value the things they made happen, such as workers' rights, the welfare state, social equality, a more democratic and diverse social landscape.

It's hard to comprehend what our parents and grandparents lived through and the strength in spirit they had to stand up for their rights. Times continue to change and if we're not mindful we'll lose the stories of sacrifice and heroism that connect us collectively to this ongoing journey to democracy, equality and human rights. If we lose sight of the history we may lose the future too. It's up to all of us to tell the stories, protect and build on those hard-won rights. Les stood up to fight for the things that make life better for everyone.



◀ Les Starr before departing for Spain.

▼ Les Starr, in the centre of the back row wearing a beret, with civilians and volunteers in Spain.



**M**y father Jim Higgins was born in London in 1907, schooled in Manchester and Bristol, and sailed to Canada at 21. During the Great Depression, he was blacklisted by employers for his union organising. By 1937 he was with the International Brigades in Spain; a machine gunner in the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion.

It was all because of a stranger in the Basque Country that I found myself in Spain in October 2022, there to launch the Spanish edition of my father's book, 'Luchando por la Democracia: Memorias de un Activista Canadiense en la Guerra Civil Española'.

The stranger's name was Juan José Ibañez Esnal. He had read the English edition – 'Fighting for Democracy: A Canadian Activist in Spain's Civil War' – when it was published in 2020 and had reached out to thank my father through me. It was a sentiment I'd heard from other Spaniards so I wasn't surprised.

The next day, though, I was in disbelief after Juan José followed up with an offer to translate the book into Spanish – he was serious. It helped that he had time due to Covid lockdowns but, beyond that, he had unwavering commitment. Five months later it was completed.

When I asked about his motivation he responded:

*'I think it's important for Spanish speakers to read the story of your father. Many Spaniards don't know their own history. They only know what it's like to live in a democracy. It's my humble way to thank your father for coming to Spain. Why would someone who lived thousands of miles away risk his life to help us? I find it heroic and incredible; and an easy way for Spaniards to be inspired to do something heroic themselves.'*

### Manuscript

With manuscript in hand I began searching for a publisher. Less than a year later, in late September 2022, the Spanish edition was published by the University of Zaragoza Press. I quickly made plans to be in Spain. Publishers don't often get involved with book launches these days so I was on my own when it came to expenses; but not the organisation. My social media contacts in Spain – strangers, really – came through. I presented the book at six events and gave interviews for TV, print and online publications.

The first few days I was taken around the Ebro region by Spanish Civil War guide Alan Warren and interpreter Antonio Serrano. Local historian Joan Antonio Montaña organised events and arranged interviews in Corbera d'Ebre and Gandesa. Joan also showed me the route my father would have taken to the first aid station in Corbera after he rescued a boy from the deluge



# Meeting strangers in Spain

## JANETTE HIGGINS

reflects on her tour of Spain, promoting the Spanish edition of the memoir of her father, the British-born Canadian International Brigader Jim Higgins.

released by a bombed water tank in late July 1938.

It took more than one incredible coincidence but that 'boy' – Manuel Alvarez – finally found his saviour in 1978. It had turned out to be Jim Higgins and their reunion was international news.

In 1980 Manuel's book, 'The Tall Soldier: My 40 Year Search for the Man who Saved my Life', was published. It was later translated into Spanish and I was chuffed to meet some of Manuel's relatives when they came to my talk in Gandesa.

Alan Warren showed me things that gave extra meaning to my father's story. These included the Mora d'Ebre bridge (since rebuilt) that was blown up shortly after he and 19 other Canadians crossed it on 3 April 1938, a typical house on the Ebro River where my father and José Díaz Artacho had routed enemy spies just before the Battle of the Ebro, and the village of Azuara. There I met Erik Artigas, a young film maker producing a docudrama about the fighting in that area.

Erik had tracked me down a few months earlier because my father was one of the few Brigaders who wrote about it. He showed me where a dramatic episode in the book occurred. Sure enough, there were the exposed 'humps and hollows' that my father had described with bullets coming at him from both sides as he got his machine gun out to where he'd have cover to stall the enemy. And there was the church tower where he was observed by his captain, Rafael Buch Brage; certain he'd been injured as he stumbled twice.



◀ Janette Higgins speaking to assembled crowd in Malgrat de Mar.

▶ Janette at the launch event in San Sebastián on 24 October.

▶▶ Activists Alan Warren and Antonio Serrano greeted Janette with the Mac-Pap flag at Madrid's Barajas Airport.



A couple of days later I was taken by Rob MacDonald to Malgrat de Mar, Catalonia. He showed me his sculpture commemorating the local fishermen who saved Brigaders from the torpedoed wreckage of the *Ciudad de Barcelona* and described how he and others have involved the residents, especially children. It's an inspired project with big ambitions.

**‘Why would someone who lived thousands of miles away risk his life to help us? I find it heroic and incredible.’**

A highlight was my live Catalan TV3 interview with journalist Xavier Graset. It was facilitated by Jaume Claret Miranda, who wrote the introduction to 'Luchando por la Democracia'. I was grateful for the opportunity to thank Jaume in person.

The next day I got lost on the metro and was late for an event sponsored by AABI – the

Association of Friends of the International Brigades. I arrived out of breath, was pushed onstage, and said my piece to the huge crowd.

Then it was off to the Basque Country. It was important for me to be in San Sebastián, where Juan José Ibañez lives with his family. Juan José and I spoke at an event, complete with music and poetry, organised by the FEC (Critical Studies Foundation) and Arantza González of Izquierda Unida – the United Left.

In Valencia I was given a Spanish Civil War tour by Mariado Hinojosa, who does much work commemorating the International Brigades. Finally, in Madrid, I met up with Almudena Cros, who also does tours and is active with the city's chapter of AABI. The next day I attended another AABI event at Madrid's second Brigader memorial near University City.

As I reflect back on this once-in-a-lifetime journey, I am struck by the kindness of all those strangers in Spain, with a special place in my heart reserved for Juan José Ibañez. Carrying my father's story forward is an honour and a privilege; *my raison d'être*. I think they sense that. No longer strangers, they buoy me up, as the good and generous friends they are.



**'Hampshire Heroes: Volunteer Fighters in the Spanish Civil War' by Alan Lloyd (The Clapton Press, 2022).**

Alan Lloyd's 'Hampshire Heroes' is the product of years of work and tells the stories of some 40 volunteers from his home county.

The scale of the research is impressive for its breadth and depth, contacting over 100 relatives, friends, librarians and archivists across the world, as well as the major sources at the Marx

**'Lloyd packs many diverse and extraordinary lives – the highs and lows of human existence – between the pages.'**

Memorial Library, the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History and the Tamiment Library in New York.

Keeping the narrative of the civil war to a minimum, Lloyd ties in the accounts of each volunteer's life and contribution with the chronological progression of the war.

Lloyd packs many fascinating, diverse and extraordinary lives – the highs and lows of human existence – between the 136 pages.

# Preserving the pea



Raymond Cox.

Some of the best known are Bill Alexander, who became a commander of the British Battalion and kept the International Brigade Association together in its later years, while David Guest was an outstanding mathematician



Stan Harrison.

who taught and wrote about Marxism for the Communist Party. Many volunteers had been active in labour movement and anti-fascist struggles. Half of those from Hampshire were members of the Communist Party or Young Communist League. A third of the Hampshire volunteers were killed in the fight for democracy



**'Single to Spain & Escape from Disaster' by Keith Scott Watson (The Clapton Press, 2022).**

Keith Scott Watson was a London sculptor and one of the first British volunteers to serve in the Spanish Civil War. In October 1936 he joined the Tom Mann Centuria which, after being folded into the German-speaking Thaelmann Battalion, fought in the defence of Madrid in November. By the end of the year he had left the volunteer forces to be a journalist. He is consistently at the heart of the war, both fighting on the front line and observing the challenges of running a state at war.

I pre-ordered 'Single to Spain & Escape from Disaster', enticed by the fact that Watson 'saw action at Cerro de los Angeles.' This is where

# Flawed but fascinating witness

Middlesbrough International Brigader David Marshall, who I have been researching closely, was severely wounded. I was expecting to find fresh insights into Marshall's time in Spain and, like two earlier Clapton Press publications – Esmond Romilly's 'Boadilla' and Jan Kurzke's 'The Good Comrade' – I was not disappointed.

By the time I'd read the first chapter I realised this book was radically different to the other two memoirs. Keith Scott Watson's prose lacks the poetic beauty of Romilly's writing and it does not match the intimate detail or empathy found in Kurzke's. Yet he gives us an account of an impressive range of events. Unlike the others, Watson is witness

to the civil war at the start and, significantly also, at the ultimate end, firstly as a combatant and then as a journalist.

It is this focus on the raw immediacy of his experience of the

**'Watson is able to foreground the horrors of modern warfare without being salacious.'**

war which makes this publication invaluable. The author seems to not have time to reflect and think about the civil war in a wider sense. This is a gritty and in some places unpleasant read, with many disturbing details.

Watson does not seek to eulogise and a lot of what he writes can be off-putting. His arrogance and antisemitism are apparent. I seem not to be alone in finding him difficult to like: David Marshall, who served with him, said he was 'a bloody fellow' and worse. But there is little doubt that he was a key witness to major aspects of the war. 'Single to Spain' was first published in 1937 and 'Escape from Disaster' in 1939. The first covers his time in Spain up to his departure from the Thaelmann Battalion and his finding a job as a journalist in Madrid, eventually being employed by Sefton Delmer.

Watson's description of events brings the conflict down to the level of the individual at risk of injury or



# ce of Europe

David Guest greets Harry Pollitt, Communist Party of Great Britain General Secretary, in Spain.



and to stop fascism in Spain.

Raymond Cox, one of the first two volunteers killed defending Madrid before the formation of the British Battalion, told his family 'that by fighting for the Spanish government against the forces of fascism I shall be helping preserve peace throughout Europe'. Other volunteers

would echo his call for international solidarity.

The medical services were indispensable to the war effort. Two Hampshire women who were nurses and a doctor enlisted as medical volunteers, while young journalist Stan Harrison, later a chief sub editor at the *Morning Star*, became a stretcher-bearer at the Battle of the

Ebro, which claimed the lives of four Hampshire volunteers including Guest.

Mentioning the child refugees evacuated from the Basque Country following the bombing of Gernika leads on to the work of John Langdon-Davies and Eric George Muggeridge, who set up Parents Plan for Children in Spain, now Plan International. This was vital humanitarian work often overlooked in accounts of the war in Spain.

'Aid to Spain committees sprang up in towns

## 'The Hampshire Foodship to Spain and other initiatives brought vital aid to the Spanish people.'

and cities across the UK,' Lloyd writes. The Hampshire Foodship to Spain and other initiatives brought vital aid to the Spanish people. Meetings addressed by key figures in the labour movement publicised this work.

Lloyd mentions the recruitment of foreign pilots by the Spanish Republican government when many of their own flyers had deserted to the fascists. Two of the four Hampshire pilots lured by lucrative contracts were killed early on.

'Hampshire Heroes' would make a valuable addition both to those with a particular interest in the Spanish Civil War and the role of the International Brigades and as a lively introduction for those new to the subject.

**PAULINE FRASER**

death by a distant enemy; an ordinary person terrorised by bombers screaming overhead. He does not focus on the social, economic or the political aspects of the siege of Madrid. Instead he describes how he is personally inconvenienced by the fascist bombing campaign. He is in a privileged position: eating in the best restaurants, mixing with top government officials. Yet at the same time he is a witness to brutal devastation.

'Escape from Disaster' begins with his return to Spain in 1939. The International Brigades have been disbanded and the Republic faces defeat. This is a different Watson: he is less self-centred and more empathetic – put simply, he has matured. His account of the evacuation from Barcelona into

France is harrowing, comparable to the last sections of Constanca de la Mora's 'In Place of Splendour'. The later Watson is able to foreground the horrors of modern warfare without being salacious.

Editor Simon Deefholts' afterword is a wonderful conclusion. Without excusing Watson's early indiscretions, he explains how his writing and behaviour in Spain fits a pattern; he sought sensation throughout his life. As Simon records, he had a 'predilection for dangerous places: Danzig after the Germans went in; Rome as Mussolini declared for Hitler; Athens as Metaxas breathed his last; Cairo during WW2.' I personally may not have warmed to the author, but this is a valuable addition to anyone's library of Spanish Civil War memoirs and complements the existing range of memoirs.

**TONY FOX**

**MADRID:** Republican forces holding a trench at the Battle of University City during the defence of Madrid, November 1936.





**'Comrades Come Rally! Manchester Communists in the 1930s and 1940s' by Michael Crowley (Bookmarks Publications, 2022).**

Some years ago, observing a meandering academic discussion on the Communist Party's contribution to the war in Spain, I witnessed a dramatic intervention from an elderly woman who, rising to her feet, commanded instant attention. 'Never forget', she said, in a voice trembling with emotion, 'Young Communists bled for Spain!'

Now Michael Crowley's excellent new book about Manchester Communists in the 1930s and '40s echoes that reminder: no matter how you look at it, it was members of the Communist Party of Great Britain, and especially activists in the ranks of the Young Communist League, who took the lead in organising and mobilising anti-fascist

**'The YCL shamed those on the left whose contributions were limited to hand-wringing platitudes about peace.'**

opinion. In doing so, they shamed those on the left of British politics whose contributions were limited to hand-wringing platitudes about peace. Communists backed up their beliefs with brave and decisive action and ultimately – almost to a man – those who joined the International Brigades in Spain were killed or wounded fighting for those beliefs. Their names have become legend: Bert Maskey, Clem Beckett, George Brown, Eddie Cantor, Victor Shammah, Eddie Swindells, Jud Colman, Joe Norman, Benny Goldman, Maurice

# Manchester youth bled for Spain

Levine, Bernard McKenna, Sam Wild. Tellingly, Crowley quotes Brigaders who lived long enough to take part in the last clashes on the Ebro as having given up hope of ever getting home.

## Young

Stories about the young men and women from Manchester who got stuck into the fight against fascism have come down to us in all kinds of ways: letters, diary notes and anecdotes, as well as sound recordings made long after the event. By weaving them all into an overarching narrative Crowley establishes a context which adds extra lustre to their memory.

Nor does it omit those comrades, who, for one reason or another, did not travel to Spain and were left to fight their corner at home: Vic Eddisford, Benny Rothman, Hugh Scanlon, Evelyn Taylor, Bessie Wild (née Berry), Frances Dean, Sol Gadian, the sisters Clyne.

Sons and daughters of first generation Jewish immigrants deservedly feature prominently in Crowley's account. Their unswerving determination not to tolerate the persecution which had driven their parents from the shtetls of the Russian empire and the horrors of Nazi Germany underpinned the Communist Party's anti-fascist agenda.

Crowley conveys the sheer energy of youngsters like Cantor and Rothman who, as members of Cheetham Hill's Challenge Club, took on the might of the landed aristocracy to fight for

Street rally held on New Bury Road by Cheetham Hill Challenge Club in support of a 'Foodship for Spain' in December 1936.

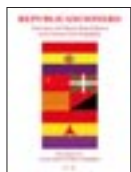


countryside access. Their efforts culminated in the Derbyshire Mass Trespass of 1932, later described as the most successful example of direct action in British history – but only after its leaders, including Rothman and Jud Clynes, had been jailed by a vindictive establishment.

I would have liked to have learned more about the tensions which must have arisen between these revolutionary youngsters and their orthodox elders. But when, decades later, the protagonists themselves accounted for their actions, this aspect of their lives seems to have been all but blotted out by their recollections of war and politics.

Crowley acknowledges the rich vein of source material mined from the Working Class Movement Library in Salford. Its founders Eddie and Ruth Frow are themselves an important part of the story; tireless figures in the landscape of restless

# The Republican songbook



**'Republicacionero: Canciones del Bando Republicano en la Guerra Civil Española' edited by Juan Fran Núñez Parreño (TRE, 2022).**

Juan Fran Núñez Parreño has compiled a catalogue of lyrics to 287 songs from the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War. Included alongside the book is a CD with recordings of 261 of the songs.

They would have been chanted by fighters

as they marched and sung in the trenches to rally the fighters in the heat of battle. Many songs were intended to instil courage and a sense of anti-fascist duty.

Often the songs also worked as political propaganda, helping to popularise the ideas, principles and programme of the Republic and the trade unions and political groups aligned with it. In the chaos of the civil war, they served to spread hope to the people in the firing line of Franco's fascist armies.

The origins of the compositions are

varied. Many are from anonymous or unknown sources: folk tunes adapted to the civil war context or political chants generated in the heat of the labour and social movements of the early 20th century.

## Composed

Others were composed by poets, writers and musicians from the Spanish Republic and beyond. Indeed, though the majority (154) of the civil war songs are Spanish in origin, the selection reflects the international diversity of the anti-fascist volunteers. Regarding the languages represented, the collection includes songs in German (48), French (15), English (15), Russian (14), Catalan (8), Italian (8),





◀ Aid for Spain rally in Fallowfield, Manchester, held on 18 June 1938.

agitation against the pervasive poverty and injustice of the 1930s. 'Comrades Come Rally' also benefits enormously from Crowley's research in the 1990s, when he was able to interview surviving comrades who had fought the Blackshirts, Hitler and Franco.

Here are the personal stories of men and women from humble backgrounds whose bravery and dedication to their beliefs was expressed through their involvement as members of the Communist Party. Their participation in strikes (for which they were frequently victimised) and demonstrations, their involvement in the National Unemployed Workers' Movement, and then in the various Aid Spain campaigns, is inspirational.

Crowley's narrative is also enriched by information garnered from sons and daughters of Brigaders. Time heals but truth will out. Crowley

reflects on 'temporary' desertions of volunteers and the circumstances leading to the execution of Irish Brigader Maurice Ryan.

#### Stories

These individual stories, woven together, beg interesting questions: who knows what might have happened if Manchester's young Communists had not stood up to Oswald Mosley and his British Union of Fascists? It was their courage and willingness to suffer injury at the hands of Mosley's thugs that thwarted fascist efforts to take over the streets of Manchester's Jewish quarter in Cheetham Hill.

Benny Rothman was even thrown from the balcony at a Mosley rally, his fall broken by landing on a hapless Blackshirt in the hall below. Along with similar gallantry shown by comrades in

London's East End, these visible acts of opposition helped turn the tide of public opinion against Mosley. It led eventually to the outlawing of his movement and, crucially though belatedly, discredited the policy of appeasement towards Hitler.

Full marks to Crowley too for writing an excellent summary of the miasma of conflicts within Spanish society which followed the declaration of the Second Republic in 1931. Notwithstanding abrupt changes in timeline and the relatively narrow parameters of his subject, Crowley's learned analysis of national and

## 'Who knows what might have happened if Manchester's young Communists had not stood up to Oswald Mosley and his fascists?'

international events provides essential context without losing sight of the everyday struggles of political life in Manchester.

He also gets my thanks for putting forward – between the lines – an explanation of why some surviving Brigaders such as Maurice Levine were allowed to serve in the British armed forces during the Second World War while others were not. Attempts by Sam Wild and others to volunteer were cruelly rejected, not so much because of their service in Spain but because they had been prominent opponents of the war until Hitler's invasion of Russia.

**ROBERT HARGREAVES**

Asturian (7), Basque (6), Polish (4), Galician (2), Arabic (1), Czech (1), Dutch (1), Hungarian (1), Swedish (1) and Yiddish (1).

## 'The songs were intended to instil courage & a sense of anti-fascist duty.'

Of the English-language songs, there are the traditional Brigader and socialist anthems: 'The Internationale', 'Jarama Valley', 'The Red Flag', but there are lesser-known English versions of anti-fascist protest or folks songs written or adapted



▲ Cover art of 'Songs for Democracy' by the communist German composer Ernst Busch, a 10" vinyl album of International Brigader songs in English and German, produced in 1940.

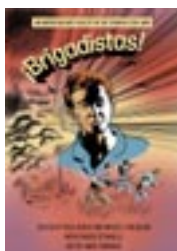
around the time. These include Ernst Busch's 'Song for Spanish Democracy' and 'The Four Generals', 'Peat Bog Soldiers' and the Soviet anthem 'Comrades, the Bugles Are Sounding'.

Núñez Parreño is explicit about his hopes for compiling these civil war anthems. This isn't the simple curiosity of cultural history or musical antiquarianism. Listening and sharing these songs is intended both as a way to remember those who spilled their blood and died defending the socially progressive Spanish Republic against the forces of fascism, but also to rekindle and carry forward their ideals of freedom, equality and fraternity into the future.

**AJMAL WAQIF**



**'iBrigadistas! An American Anti-fascist in the Spanish Civil War' by Miguel Ferguson and Anne Timmons, edited by Paul Buhle and Fraser Otanelli (Monthly Review Press, 2022).**



## Anti-fascist action heroes

**T**his graphic novel follows the heroic adventures of a trio of fictional International Brigade volunteers from the United States. Over the course of the story our heroes find themselves at the centre of iconic events, fight alongside well-known International Brigaders and bump into the great political figures of the 1930s and the Spanish Civil War.

It opens in 1935 in New York City, during the darkest days of the Great Depression. Abram 'Abe' Rubenoff, Jack Tigher and Julius Goldstein, a gang of working-class Jewish young men from the Brownsville neighbourhood of Brooklyn, defend their neighbours from evictions, clash with police and attend local Young Communist League (YCL) meetings.

Abe, who is based primarily on Lincoln volunteer Abraham Osharoff (1915-2008), is brave, kind and politically conscious. He speaks eloquently about unemployment and the failures of capitalism at a YCL street rally. Later he leads a raid to remove the Nazi flag from the SS *Bremen*, the swastika-flying German cruise ship, which docked in Brooklyn on 18 July 1935. This part is

**'Anne Timmons' art is brilliant, her style consciously evoking the 'golden age' of comics in clean and dramatic tones.'**

based on a real protest carried out by New York communists, a few of whom later fought in Spain.

Early in the narrative Abe meets Caroline, an Irish-American girl involved in the Catholic Worker Movement. Over discussions of faith, socialism and the Easter Rising, the pair fall in love.

Abe's friend Jack is initially less political, but he's a rebel by nature. Throwing himself into the simmering ethnic conflicts of New York City, he is shown clobbering an antisemitic policeman and antagonising groups of Italian-Americans.

Julian is a YCL member alongside Abe. At one meeting they are informed about the formation of the International Brigades and hear of the plight of the Spanish people from a representative of the Republic, a man named Pablo Aragon. Shortly afterwards the trio set off for Spain.

The SS *Volendam* takes them from New York City to Marseilles, where they are feted by French workers. They then travel on the ill-fated *Cuidad de Barcelona*, which of course is sunk by an Italian torpedo off the Catalan coast, but our trio survive. They rendezvous with the 15th International Brigade, camped at Tarazona de la



Mancha in Albacete, and meet Lincoln Battalion commander Oliver Law.

Meanwhile Caroline, wracked with uncertainty about how Abe is faring and determined to help in her own way, enlists and heads out to Spain as a medical volunteer.

From there the heroes are involved in various battles, skirmishes and side-adventures. The focus is initially on the actual Brunete campaign, but the story eventually veers into the rollicking realms of pulpy historical fiction. Their nemesis throughout is a fictional Nazi German officer of the Condor Legion, the merciless Lieutenant Streicher, who leads Rebel operations in the region.

One of the more thoughtful themes of the story is the way racial and ethnic hierarchies and divisions are levelled by a shared hatred of fascism and the force of solidarity. The Brooklyn boys initially reject Pablo Aragon's plea on behalf of the Republic, pointing out Spain's historic persecution of Jews: 'why should any of us risk our lives for your cause?'. Abe is convinced after seeing a report of the bombing of the Basque town of Gernika, with Aragon explaining: 'the people who butchered the Jews during the inquisition, they are the same kind of people who

**'One theme of the story is the way in which hierarchies and divisions are levelled by a shared hatred of fascism and the force of solidarity.'**

do this. This is who we fight'.

Jack, previously prejudiced against Italians, marches alongside his Garibaldi Battalion comrades. The white American volunteers feel 'proud to serve under' the African-American Oliver Law. Two fictional Brigaders – who could certainly pass as real ones – the Irish Johnny and the English Hawkins find it difficult to work together. Later, to overcome pre-battle nerves, the two break out into a rendition of the Irish Republican song 'Kevin Barry', with the Mancunian Hawkins revealing that his mother is in fact Irish. One of the real Lincoln Battalion cooks, Japanese-American Jack Shirai, makes an appearance. He prepares Southern biscuits and gravy for the unit, to Oliver Law's approval ('just like in Texas eh').

In the introduction to the novel, author Miguel Ferguson quotes Abe Osheroff on the realism of the narrative, that it 'bent, but did not break, the rubber band of truth'. The weakest parts of the comic are when believability is entirely thrown out, and the rubber band of truth snaps in the process of squeezing in a famous figure or plot convenience.

The most egregious example is when Abe and Jack wander around Barcelona looking for supplies and run into Ernest Hemingway and Martha Gellhorn in a bar. After toasting the Lincoln volunteers, Hemingway treats them to a whisky and interviews them, but it suddenly devolves into a fisticuffs as Jack steals canned beef and chocolate from the acclaimed writer. The depiction is all the more odd as the final page of the comic is a panel with Hemingway quoting his 'For Whom the Bell Tolls'.

In this way, the weaker points of 'Brigadistas' are arguably a product of the format itself. The work is not subtle: events and conflicts are spelled out in comic book simplicity, the form and timeline of the war is highly abstracted for the sake of the plot and characters – many of them cameos of real volunteers – are flattened into archetypes.

That being said, there are many strengths to the presentation of this story as a graphic novel. Anne Timmons' art is brilliant, her style consciously evoking the 'golden age' of comics in clean and dramatic tones. The simplicity of the story, as well as the excellent historical summary provided in Fraser Ottanelli's foreword, also make it a useful, accessible introduction to the International Brigades. There is, as the afterword by Paul Buhle suggests, something inherently comic-book-worthy about the anti-fascists who volunteered for Spain. Theirs is a story of ordinary – not invincible – people pushed into performing heroic and terrifying feats of bravery for no gain but the greater good. It is to Ferguson and Timmons' credit that they really do capture this truth in the book.

**AJMAL WAQIF**





◀ Ruins of the old town of Belchite in Aragón, destroyed in the course of the Spanish Civil War in August-September 1937. The street leads towards the site of the Plaza Mayor and the old City Hall.

town, where some of the Lincoln Battalion broke through during the Battle of Belchite.

Conflict archaeology was not the primary reason for the dig and many of the group knew nothing about the Spanish Civil War when they arrived. But it was impossible to escape its presence in the shadows of the ruins. Personal research led me to discover that the group regularly walked past the location on Calle Mayor where James 'Jim' Coomes of the British Battalion died. Coomes was one of 40 volunteers in the Anti-Tank Battery of the Brigade. He commanded one of the battery's three 45mm guns and entered the

**'Many of the group knew nothing about the Spanish Civil War. But it was impossible to escape its presence in the shadow of the ruins.'**

town from the archway at Plaza Goya with the crew guiding it along the Calle Mayor.

Encountering a Nationalist barricade by a fork in the road 50 yards from the Plaza Mayor, the gun crew courageously flipped off the defence's sandbags and fired at the old City Hall; the Nationalist headquarters. Coomes was killed by returning machine-gun fire. He was the only one of the British volunteers to die in Belchite during the battle because they were in reserve at the time. According to a newspaper article Coomes was buried in a marked grave just outside of the town.

There was little time to think about conflict though, as our second task was to clean the street which ran from the Calle Mayor to San Salvador, removing stones and levelling the dirt path. The street started as Calle Señor, became San Juan and was named San Ramón by the time it reached the plaza. Prior to the civil war the streets were lined with shops and houses. Nationalist troops used them to escape from the town in September 1937 after Republican troops gained ground.

The trip was my first experience of practical archaeology. On reflection it was hard work but also informative and often an emotive experience. There was research to do, oral histories to record and ceramics to label. We received several visits from curious TV crews and local journalists. Inevitably the project took place under the watchful eye of the local community who showed immense interest when joining site tours and shared their knowledge of life in the old town.

*Hazel Perry is a historian of modern Britain and recently completed a PhD on Peterborough trades council, working-class politics, the local Aid Spain committee and the International Brigades.*

## Unearthing Belchite

**HAZEL PERRY** reports on an archaeological dig in the ruins of Belchite and reflects on the town's civil war history.



For two scorching weeks in July 2022 I joined a small group of archaeologists in Aragón, northern Spain, for an excavation project at Belchite. The ruins of the old town are considered a 'living' monument to the horrors of the civil war.

Aragón is the driest part of Spain. A landscape of flat, dusty plateaux giving way to small hills, punctuated with olive groves and the occasional town or village. It was easy to imagine the Romans settling there and evidence of it was common. Roman ceramics were seen in abundance lying on the surface of ploughed fields. Although there were Roman materials used in the most substantial buildings in the old Belchite, nobody could ascertain the town's origins. The oldest and most abundant material found on the dig were Moorish ceramics.

It is well known that the old town was destroyed during the Spanish Civil War and in the late 1930s Republican prisoners of war were forced to rebuild a town next door. The new Belchite was based on a model grid pattern of traditional white-washed two

and three storey houses with the focal point, a central square containing the City Hall, close to the church. The archaeology group stayed in an apartment on the edge of the new town a few minutes' walk from the old one.

There were two specific tasks for the archaeologists which centred on the medieval heart of the old town. The first was to remove the dirt and rubble from Plaza San Salvador to reveal the surface of early medieval cobblestones.

The next task was to profile the individual stones using trowels. When overnight rain washed all the dust away it was wonderful to see that the smooth stones were an array of colours including grey, red and yellow.

### Plaza

About two thirds of the plaza was cleaned in total. Because of the fragile state of the ruined buildings (a former mosque, hermitage and prison) the group couldn't get too close to their remains.

There were interesting features in the plaza's stonework: shallow craters where the larger stones were missing and replaced with rubble. The gaps also contained a few pieces of shrapnel, a bullet case and possibly part of a hand grenade.

It just so happened that the plaza was the location of a barricade during the civil war placed at the head of the Calle San Roque. The barricade was strategically located close to the north-east entrance to the old



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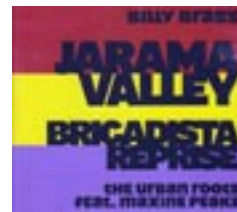
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