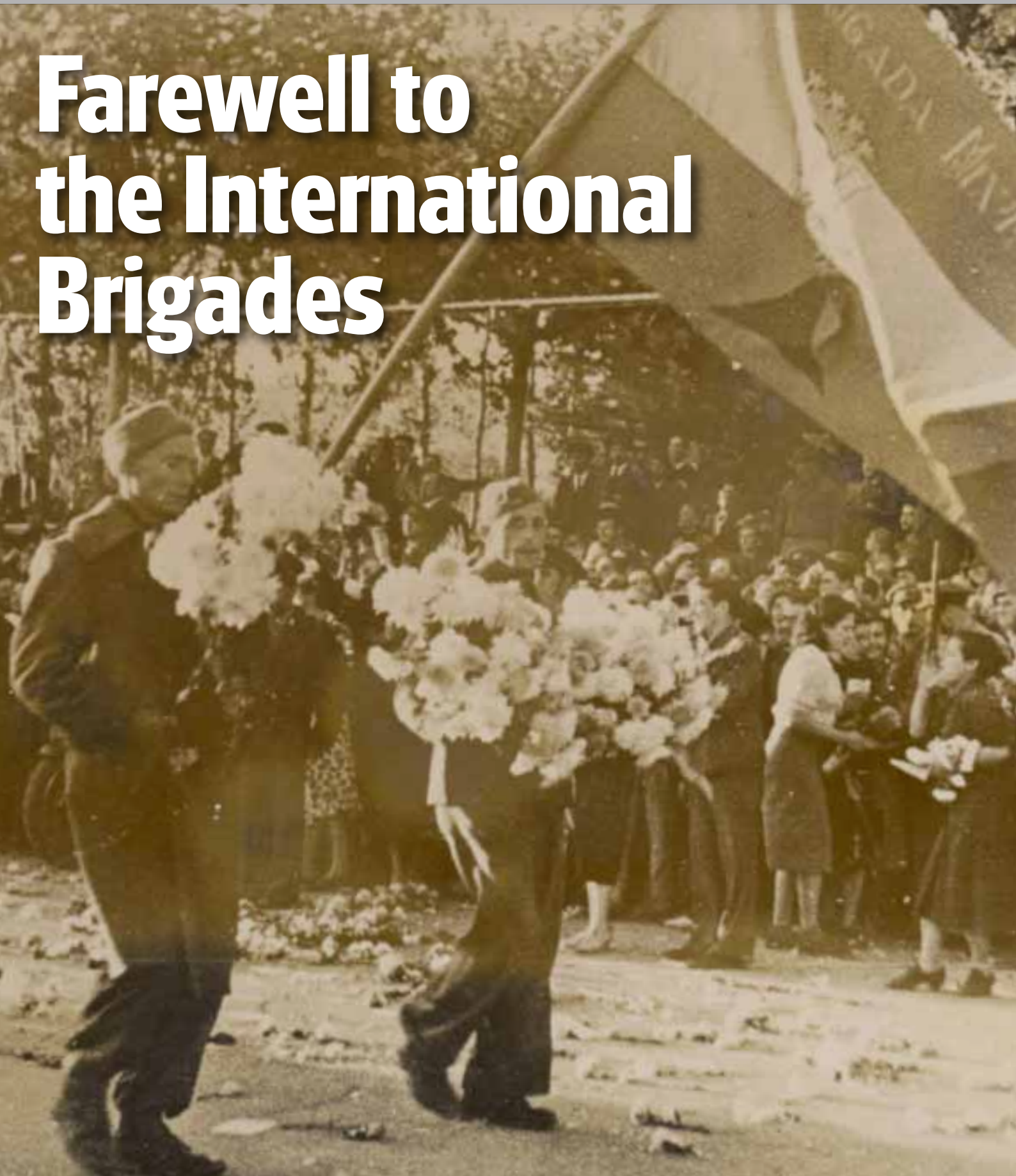




¡NO PASARÁN!

International Brigade Memorial Trust ● 3-2022 ● £5

Farewell to the International Brigades



INTERNATIONAL BRIGADE MEMORIAL TRUST

www.international-brigades.org.uk

WEEKEND OF EVENTS IN MANCHESTER

14-16 OCTOBER 2022

(non-IBMT members are welcome to attend all events)

PROGRAMME

FRIDAY 14 OCTOBER

UNISON North West offices,

Arena Point, 1 Hunts Bank M3 1UN

7 pm - 9 pm: Welcome reception with free buffet.

All welcome but confirm attendance with

doloreslong@fastmail.fm by 30 September

SATURDAY 15 OCTOBER

Manchester Conference Centre and Pendulum Hotel,

Sackville Street, Manchester M1 3BB

10.30 - 11.30 am: Guest speaker: Begoña del Castillo,
Confederación Sindical de CCOO (Spain)

11.30 - 11.45am: Break

11.45 - 1 pm: From the Challenge Club to Spain.

- Tony Fox, Michael Crowley, Mike Wild

1.00 - 2.30pm: Lunch. Make own arrangements or
can be ordered in advance by 30th September with
doloreslong@fastmail.fm £9 payable on day

2.30pm: Annual General Meeting

4.30pm: Film screening 'The International Brigaders Return'

6.30pm: Evening buffet meal (free), but confirm
attendance with doloreslong@fastmail.fm by
30 September

7pm-10pm: Social, quiz and music

SUNDAY 16 OCTOBER

11am-1pm: Tour of People's History Museum, Left Bank,
Spinningfields M3 3ER Meet at the PHM

TRAVEL AND ACCOMMODATION

Manchester Conference
Centre and Pendulum
Hotel is walking distance
from Piccadilly Station
and Chorlton Street Coach
Station

Booking code for B&B at the
Pendulum Hotel: **GAO2714**

The code expires on 30 September.

Contact: **0161 955 8062**
stay@pendulumhotel.co.uk

Cheaper accommodation
may be available in other
city centre hotels:

- **Ibis Manchester Centre**,
Princess Street, Charles
Street M1 7DG
- **Premier Inn**, Portland
Street, M1 4WB
- **Holiday Inn Express**, 2
Oxford Road, M1 5OA

For further information
contact Dolores Long
(doloreslong@fastmail.fm) or
Hilary Jones (hilary.m.jones@btinternet.com).



Magazine of the International Brigade Memorial Trust

No.61 ● 3-2022



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¡No Pasarán! (formerly the *IBMT Magazine* and the *IBMT Newsletter*) is published three times a year. Back numbers can be downloaded from the IBMT website. All content is the © of the IBMT and credited contributors and cannot be reproduced without written permission. Views expressed are not necessarily those of the IBMT.

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International Brigade Memorial Trust

www.international-brigades.org.uk

President of RMT
Alex Gordon speaks at
the commemoration.

Annual commemoration honours volunteers' trade union legacy

On 2 July over 100 supporters gathered at the International Brigade Memorial on London's South Bank to pay their respects to the 2,500 volunteers from Britain and Ireland who fought fascism in the Spanish Civil War. The event was the first restriction-free commemoration in three years.

The event was punctuated with musical performances by folk duo Na-Mara, who played 'Jarama Valley' and led on a collective rendition of 'The Internationale'.

Wreaths were placed by affiliated and friendly organisations and individual attendees were given the opportunity to lay their own flowers and make dedications.

The first guest to speak at the commemoration was Elizabeth Estensen, actress (*The Liver Birds*, *Emmerdale* etc) and daughter of Teesside International Brigader Otto Estensen. She spoke about her father's life, his time in Spain as part of the 15th International Brigade's Anti-Tank Battery and the British Battalion and her memories of him in his later life. A transcript of Elizabeth's dedication to her father is available on the IBMT website.

Carmen Kilner of the Basque Children of '37

Association followed, sharing the story of the mass evacuation of nearly 4,000 child refugees from the Basque region 85 years ago. Her mother was a schoolteacher who accompanied the children from Bilbao to Southampton. Kilner drew parallels between the historic and modern treatment of refugees.

Neil O'Riordan was invited to deliver a tribute to his father, the late Manus O'Riordan – former IBMT Ireland Secretary, and grandson of Irish volunteer Michael O'Riordan. He concluded by laying a wreath, along with his brother Luke.

The final speaker was RMT President and IBMT Trustee Alex Gordon. He paid tribute to the railway workers and merchant seamen – such as Otto Estensen – who joined the International Brigades and their political legacy in the labour movement. Below is an edited excerpt of what Gordon said:

I bring solidarity greetings from RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch and my union's National Executive Committee to this celebration of the 15th International Brigade volunteers organised by the International Brigade Memorial Trust here beside Ian Walters' sculpture in Jubilee Gardens on London's South Bank.

I am grateful to Jim Jump, Megan Dobney and the Trustees of the IBMT for the invitation to address this year's commemoration of the International Brigades volunteers. If you are not already an IBMT member – a wonderful organisation founded to celebrate and commemorate the men and women from these

CONTINUED OVERLEAF



Flowers and wreaths placed
before the Jubilee Gardens
memorial.



NEWS

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

International Brigade Memorial Trust

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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

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

islands who volunteered to defend the Spanish Republic against the fascist forces that came to crush their democracy in 1936 – then please take this opportunity today to join us.

In the entrance lobby of Unity House – the RMT head office near London's Euston Station – is a plaque bearing the names of 113 former members of the National Union of Seamen and the National Union of Railwaymen – our forebear unions.

Since that plaque was unveiled in June 2004 by the late, great Jack Jones, the then-President of the International Brigade Association, the names of several other volunteers from our unions who joined the 15th International Brigade have come to light. So the total number of NUS and NUR members who volunteered to fight in Spain

because – in the words of the poet Cecil Day-Lewis, as inscribed on the Jubilee Gardens memorial, their 'open eyes could see no other way' – is over 120.

They were seamen like Otto Estensen, who joined the National Union of Seamen Middlesbrough branch in 1925 at the young age of 15. They were railway engineers, workshopmen, trackworkers – railwaymen of all descriptions.

My union is proud to honour them. RMT is also proud to be affiliated to the IBMT and of the tremendous work they continue to do to commemorate our members and the other volunteers who came from such a wide diversity of backgrounds. The work of the IBMT in recording our history is particularly important at this time when historical revisionism has become a veritable



◀ Clockwise from top:

- Luke and Neil O'Riordan lay a wreath in tribute to their father Manus O'Riordan
- Lucy Craig, daughter of nurse volunteer Thora Silverthorne, makes a dedication to her mother
- Folk duo Na-Mara perform 'Jarama Valley'
- Carmen Kilner speaks about Basque child refugees.



Andrew Ward

industry in academia and the mass media.

We rely on the IBMT and other truth-tellers to remind us, and you, that the volunteers from these islands were forced to travel to Spain clandestinely and with considerable difficulty, because the official policy of the Tory government in Britain in 1936 was appeasement of fascism dressed up with the euphemism of 'non-intervention'.

In reality, the faction of the Tory party that

'The commitment to the cause of democracy of these volunteers began long before Spain and continued long after the civil war ended.'

controlled British foreign policy sought an accommodation with Hitler, Mussolini and their fascist allies; an accommodation that allowed Italy to invade Ethiopia and German and Italian troops to support Franco's coup in Spain while permitting Britain to maintain its global empire.

The volunteers of the 15th International Brigade who we commemorate today were challenging the state policy of those politicians who two years later would become known as 'the men of Munich'.

We also celebrate the fact that the commitment to the cause of democracy of these International Brigade volunteers began long before Spain and continued long after the civil war ended.

To give just one example, Jim Prendergast (who died in 1974) was a communist, civil rights activist and leading figure in the National Union of



Elizabeth Estensen and James Otto Allen prepare to lay a wreath in memory of their father and grandfather Otto Estensen.

Railwaymen. Jim joined the Irish section of the International Brigades, wrote for the *Daily Worker* (today's *Morning Star* newspaper) and later founded the Connolly Association in 1938 to support Irish immigrants in Britain and was editor of the newspaper *Irish Freedom*.

In 1966, as Secretary of the Marylebone branch of the National Union of Railwaymen Jim Prendergast led a successful campaign to end racial segregation (the 'colour bar') in British Rail. One of his NUR branch members, a guard named Asquith Xavier, was refused promotion on the grounds that he was a black man. Jim marched his members out of Marylebone station and

down the Euston Road to confront the Executive Committee of the NUR in their then headquarters opposite Euston Station.

Unsatisfied with the response from the union, Jim then went to the *Daily Mirror* who led with the story of Britain's shameful racist employment practices. The British Railways Board promptly retreated and appointed Asquith Xavier as an Intercity guard at Euston – the position he had applied for.

Jim's combination of clarity of analysis and direct action forms part of the legacy of the International Brigades that we celebrate here today.'



Notice of nominations for AGM

The IBMT's 2022 Annual General Meeting will be held in Manchester on 15 October as part of a weekend of commemorative, educational and social activities (see inside cover).

The main items on the agenda include a presentation on the financial future of the IBMT and its fundraising options, approving the annual report and accounts and electing members of the Executive Committee.

Nominations are invited for candidates to fill five vacancies on the Executive Committee (EC). Should six or more IBMT members accept nomination, a ballot will be held among members attending the AGM. The five vacancies arise because Mike Arnott, Megan Dobney, Jim Jump and David McKnight will have completed their terms of office by the AGM and they will therefore step down and an election, in which they are

permitted to stand, along with other IBMT members, will take place.

An additional position remains vacant due to the death of Manus O'Riordan late last year.

All IBMT members may nominate fellow members to serve on the EC. Nominations must be made in writing and received by the Secretary by 8am on 29 September 2022. The names of the candidates will be published on the IBMT website in advance of the AGM.

Proposals for agenda item 'Any Other Business' must be received in writing by the Secretary by 8am on 6 October.

Send nominations and proposed agenda items by email (these will be acknowledged) to: secretary@international-brigades.org.uk or by post to: IBMT Secretary, 37a Clerkenwell Green, London EC1R 0DU.

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.

DIRECTORY

● Aberdeen XV International Brigade Commemoration Committee

Contact: Tommy Campbell
tommy.campbell01@outlook.com

● Belfast International Brigade Commemoration Committee

Contact: Ernest and Lynda Walker
lyndaernest@btinternet.com

● IB Cymru

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● Hull International Brigades Memorial Group

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thehutpeople@gmail.com

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● Sussex Brigaders Remembered

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pbf262@myphone.coop

International Brigade Memorial Trust

www.international-brigades.org.uk

NEWS

Closing the IBMT budgetary gap

A message from IBMT Trustee Alan Lloyd...

A lot of work is being done by the Executive Committee of the IBMT to identify measures to close the gap between our income and expenditure. In order to avoid difficult decisions about the magazine and the other activities we organise and promote during the year, the easiest method to close this gap is to increase our income.

There are two simple ways in which readers of the magazine can really make the difference here. The first is for every member to recruit just one other person into the IBMT, maybe to pay their first year subscription as a birthday present or something similar. The annual rate for a standard membership is only £25.

The second method is to propose that your trade union branch or region affiliates to the IBMT. I am delighted to write that my own branch has just taken the decision on a motion which read: 'That the Unite SE 6236 Branch affiliate to the International Brigade Memorial Trust at a cost of £100 per year (to include £50 donation)'. This will be done by direct debit which will ensure that annual renewals are automatic unless a decision is taken to do otherwise.

We currently only have 10 national trade unions affiliated along with five regions and

around 80 branches, and yet the link between our trade unions and the cause of the IBMT was forged in Spain, with the



overwhelming majority of British Brigaders being active union members before they left to fight.

The most famous of these was, of course, Jack

Jones, who returned from Spain in September

1938 and went on to become General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers' Union.

In my own research on Brigaders from Hampshire, among those who fought and died in Spain, there were members of the Shop Assistants' Union, the National Painters' Society, the Association of Architects, Surveyors and Technical Assistants, the Amalgamated Engineering Union and the TGWU.

Your assistance can really reinforce the labour movement link by greatly increasing the number of branches, regions and national organisations who are affiliated. This will not only painlessly solve the financial problem but give us many more outlets to publicise our work and further increase our individual membership.

Cardiff honours Welsh volunteers

On Saturday 16 July friends and supporters gathered at Cardiff's Cathays Park to pay tribute to the International Brigades.

The event was organised by the IBMT-affiliated Welsh International Brigade memorial group IB Cymru. It was hosted on the day by Dafydd Trystan of the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol (Welsh National College), who spoke in English, Welsh and Spanish. British and Spanish supporters were in attendance.

Guests invited to speak included Rob Griffiths of the Communist Party of Britain and Marc Bilbao Asensio from the Communist Party of Spain. Both speakers emphasised the



▲ Attendees with, from left, the banner of Cardiff's Côr Cochion (Red Choir), the IBMT Wales banner and a Welsh Communist Party banner.

danger of fascism in the past and the present and celebrated the enduring contribution of the Welsh International Brigaders to the anti-fascist cause. The event concluded with musical renditions led by Côr Cochion (Red Choir).

Flying our banner high at Durham

The IBMT banner was met with applause and chants of 'No pasarán' from the crowd in attendance at the Durham Miners' Gala on Saturday 9 July.

Over a dozen members and supporters from across the country marched with the iconic banner during the annual labour movement festival.

At the Trust's stall the IBMT contingent shared stories of the



International Brigades with the public and offered a range of books and merchandise for sale.

One of the supporters who marched beside the IBMT banner was Phil Saint, nephew of Thornaby

volunteer Joseph Myles Harding, who was killed at the Battle of the Ebro in September 1938.

'It was a real pleasure to bring some of my family along, most for the first time, and they loved it. I got

◀ IBMT members and supporters march the streets of Durham with the IBMT banner, dressed in the colours of the Spanish Republic.

▼ IBMT stall at the gala.



quite emotional as we marched past the County Hotel and heard the genuine applause in solidarity for the sacrifice my uncle Myles made in Spain,' Saint said. 'I felt very proud of him.'

No Pasarán Raffle 2022

There's less than a month left to enter the IBMT's annual raffle. Supporters can buy tickets (£1 per ticket) online via RallyUp.

The winner of the first prize will receive **£500** in cash. The second prize is **six bottles of Spanish wine**. There are a host of other prizes for runners-up.

All raffle proceeds help fund the IBMT's educational and commemorative work.

Tickets can be bought from:

<https://www.go.rallyup.com/ibmt>



**Raffle draw
15 October
2022**



My biographical novel 'From Here to Obscurity' (2001) focused on the now lost vibrant Yiddish-speaking Jewish community of the East End of London between 1933 and 1945. In that book I provide a personal recollection of my witnessing as a ten-year-old child, the return of the British contingent of the International Brigades from Spain in December 1938.

I was unable, until now, to find corroboration of my own eye-witness account. Much of my research was completed in libraries before the electronic era. Both the Cooperative Wholesale Society (CWS) and Attlee's biographer said they had no knowledge of the event as I reported it, and so it pleased me to recently learn about the IBMT and discover through their website that my account is indeed accurate, even if it differs in one detail.

The IBMT website, in a narrative accompanying the film of the Brigaders' return, states that 'The volunteers...are taken by bus for dinner at the headquarters of the Cooperative Wholesale Society in Prescott Street, Whitechapel'. Whereas it is likely that the volunteers were taken by bus to Gardiner's Corner where they probably dismounted and regrouped to march in orderly fashion down Leman Street (not Prescott Street) to the CWS headquarters at number 99, where I was standing to witness their arrival.

The following is the account I give in 'From Here to Obscurity':

Yulus was on his way home from Hebrew lessons at Talmud Torah on Christian Street. It was a dark winter's evening and the pavements and roads were wet from an earlier rainfall. They glistened from the reflected street lights. The wheels of vehicles swished as they passed him on the road. Windscreen wipers were still operating to remove the splattering spray whipped up when passing through puddles or by preceding vehicles. Yulus kept away from the kerbs to avoid being splashed. He had also to keep away from the grey brick walls when passing under the railway arch in Hooper Street, as they were dripping wet. They always seemed wet and steamy, even on dry days. As he turned into Leman Street, he could hear the sound of a brass band.

There in the distance, marching along the wet road from the direction of Gardiner's Corner, he could now see a column of men silhouetted against the brighter lights of that junction. A group of people had congregated outside the headquarters of the Cooperative Wholesale Society whose main entrance was at 99 Leman Street. He joined the group as they all turned to greet the column of men marching towards them. Marching is perhaps too martial a term. True, the band was marching, but behind them came a motley crew of men, some in khaki uniforms and others in civilian clothes. All seemed bedraggled. Many were out of step, so that their heads bobbed up and down, totally out of unison. It was the British Battalion of the International Brigade. The volunteers were returning home, saddened by the success of Franco and his



▲ Stills from the documentary 'Welcome to the International Brigade' (1938) featuring crowds and (bottom left) Clement Attlee, leader of the Labour Party, greeting the British Battalion upon their return.

The return of the British Battalion

As a child **YOEL SHERIDAN** witnessed the British Battalion's return to London in December 1938. Here he shares his first-hand account of the iconic event.

fascist forces in the Spanish Civil War. They were saddened even more so by the loss of so many of their comrades in that bloody conflict.

A car overtook the advancing column and came to a stop outside the CWS entrance. A small dapper figure stepped out of the now open rear door of the car and

'Behind them came a motley crew of men, some in khaki uniforms and others in civilian clothes. All seemed bedraggled.'

strode quickly into the building. That was Major Attlee, someone said. Another said that he must have come to greet the remnants of the Brigade. Yet another said that one company had adopted his name after he visited the volunteers in Spain earlier in the war.

Yulus found himself standing next to a middle-aged man who was holding a photograph of a young man. As the first contingent of returning volunteers arrived at

the entrance, its leader stood aside and directed the tired marchers into the building. The middle-aged man approached the leader and, while showing him the photograph, said in a low voice that it was his son. He mentioned his name and asked whether the leader had any knowledge of him, because he had not heard from his son for some time and was anxious as to his well-being. No, I'm afraid not, came the soft reply, try the next contingent.

Yulus' curiosity was further aroused. He continued to stand by the man with the photograph as he approached one returning volunteer after another. Each gave a negative reply. How was it possible, said the man in desperation, for a person to disappear in this way? The volunteer to whom this question was addressed could only bow his head and shrug his shoulders. The crowd outside the building dispersed and Yulus made his way home, hoping against hope that the father would be reunited with his son. Is it really possible for a person to disappear in this way? he asked when he got home. I'm afraid so, was the reply that he received. In war, anything can happen.'

A cockney Muscovite in Spain

Securely stored and accurately catalogued in the International Brigade Archive, within the Marx Memorial Library in London, is an unpublished manuscript by Spanish Civil War volunteer Percy Ludwick modestly titled 'Notes of a Muscovite'. Modest, in my opinion, as the 250-plus typed pages are no simple notes but a compelling autobiography of a life anything but ordinary. While there have been many memoirs written about the Spanish Civil War by British and Irish volunteers, only a few stand out as exceptional. What makes the writings of Percy Ludwick so fascinating is that unlike many of the British volunteers his journey to join the fight to defend the Spanish Republic was far from conventional.

This unconventionality at first glance is surprising. Pinkus 'Percy' Ludwick was born in October 1908. His parents were Jewish immigrants from Minsk, Belarus, and settled in the London Borough of Stepney in the heart of the Jewish East End. It is not known what his father did as a profession although one could speculate that he worked in one of the hundreds of workshops in the garment trade. Percy describes his parents as 'believing in socialism' and as a young boy he attended Socialist Sunday School. The abrupt change in his life trajectory occurred in April 1917

'His skills as a civil engineer brought him to the attention of the authorities who suggested he should volunteer to fight in Spain.'

when his father was deported back to Russia for being a conscientious objector, under an agreement with the Kerensky provisional government. The family would never see him again.

After the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917, his father joined the Red Army and would later die of typhus in a Polish prisoner of war camp in 1920. That same year, for reasons unknown, Percy's mother decided to return with the family to what was now the Soviet Union. Aged 12 years old, the young Percy, along with his cockney accent, did well at his new school and by his early 20s was training as an engineer at the prestigious Gubkin Institute in Moscow.

In 1936 his skills as a civil engineer and perhaps his background of living in England brought him to the attention of the authorities, who strongly suggested he should volunteer to fight in Spain. It was pointed out that his skills were easily transferable for military

Drawing from research in the Marx Memorial Library's archives, **DAVID GRANT** sketches the life story of Percy Ludwick, a Soviet International Brigader and engineer originally from the East End of London.

purposes. Recruited alongside other Russians and 'internationals' he was not permitted to have time to think about the proposal but answer either 'yes' or 'no'. He answered in the affirmative, having already been inspired by the speeches he had heard in Moscow by the Spanish communist poet Rafael Alberti and the writer María Teresa León. Prior to his departure he met Harry Pollitt, which as it turned out would not be his last meeting with the General Secretary of the British Communists.

Percy arrived in France on a Russian ship in mid-1937 and then took the typical volunteer route of departing Paris by train, crossing the Pyrenees and on by lorry to Figueres, Barcelona and eventually the training camp at Albacete.

Training

After a brief stint at officer training school in Pozorrubio, Percy, now a lieutenant, found himself laying barbed wire in front of the trenches on the front-line and machine-gun pavilions. His criticism of the condition of the existing fortifications and suggestions as to how they should be improved were well received by General Walter, the commander of the 35th International Division, and he was sent to join the *zapadoras* company, the sappers, in Ambite, who were supporting the 15th International Brigade. The sappers were mainly made up of recruits from Valencia and Percy writes in glowing terms of their bravery and good humour. At this time Percy got to

▼ The Gubkin Institute in Moscow.



Percy and his partner Sasha defending Moscow during the Second World War.

meet and know fairly well British Battalion commander Fred Copeman and his lieutenants Bill Alexander, Sam Wild and George Fletcher.

As Percy did not effectively join the 15th Brigade until December 1937 he had missed the big engagements of Jarama, Brunete, Quinto and Belchite. However, he was soon to find himself fully involved in the major offensive at Teruel, which began on 17 December. Percy describes the early success of the offensive in detail as well as the consequences of the Rebel counterattack. A defensive perimeter was held by the British Battalion for 10 days before being forced to withdraw, with over 150 casualties. Percy was relieved from the front on 3 February 1938 only to be sent straight back from Valencia to try and prevent further attacks. However, Teruel was lost on 22 February 1938. The battle as we know exhausted the resources of the Republican forces and the casualties were enormous.

The perspective Percy offers in his manuscript of the Battle of Teruel is original and compelling. Having the benefit of being fairly mobile in his role of building defensive fortifications, as well as his close contacts with various commanders, he provides us with not only a sense of what it was like being there but an overall perspective of the military situation. He speaks with emotion of his close friend Paul Festerling, a German communist engineer who like Percy was sent directly from Moscow to offer technical support to the embattled Spanish Republic. At one point although not in the same brigade (Paul was carrying out similar duties commanding a team of sappers supporting the 11th Brigade) he recounts with deep affection watching him from a short distance, in the heat of battle looking 'stressed and nervous'. They did not even have time for a brief reunion.

The quality of Percy's memoirs is acknowledged by historian of the British volunteers Richard Baxell, who referred to the manuscript in his book 'Unlikely Warriors'. The detail he offers the reader as a military

CONTINUED OVERLEAF

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

engineer with special responsibility for defensive fortifications provides us with an original perspective of many of the key and defining moments of the civil war.

Franco wasted little time after Teruel and immediately began a new offensive in Aragón. Percy at this time fell ill with a high fever. Upon rejoining the brigade he witnessed the 11th, 13th and 15th Brigades of the 35th Division fighting a rearguard action while retreating. At Caspe, Percy narrowly avoided being captured by the enemy. Soon after Calaceite fell on 31 March 1938, with heavy losses sustained by the British Battalion. Chaotic scenes ensued at Mora de Ebro on 1 April, when the destruction of the bridge by Republican forces left some stranded Brigaders to navigate their way across the river. However, by 25 July the International Brigades were involved in a new offensive, with Percy heavily involved in the coordination of the crossing of the Ebro, by boat and pontoon bridge, of 3,000 men of the 13th Dąbrowski Brigade.

Ebro

The Battle of the Ebro raged on for months as Republican forces tried to push towards Gandesa. Facing aerial and artillery bombardment with little cover, the 15th International Brigade, including the British Battalion, suffered many casualties in their attempts to capture the hill ranges overlooking the town.

In late August 1938, in the midst of the fighting, Percy led the task of building a monument to his slain comrades: 'We built a small mausoleum on which we engraved the names of the men of the 15th International Brigade who had fallen in the Ebro operation.' Percy's concrete slab monument was rediscovered in 2000 in the Sierra Pandols range and indeed stands to this day.

Word reached Percy by 22 September 1938 that the International Brigades were to be withdrawn – a last throw of the dice of the Negrín government to secure effective non-intervention. On 28 October Percy took part in the 'farewell march' in Barcelona and witnessed La Pasionaria's famous speech. He made his way along with others across the border into France and from there by train and boat to London's Victoria Station, where he and other volunteers were met by enthusiastic crowds.

Given some financial support by Harry Pollitt and the Communist Party, Percy attended various meetings in support of the Spanish Republic throughout 1939. At this time he applied for a British passport, his application being supported by Willie Gallagher MP and his former East London primary school teacher, but his heart was set on returning to the Soviet Union.

He applied for a Soviet visa and had to convince an incredulous Soviet official that he was a long-term resident of the Soviet Union and had studied at the



◀ Republican infantry, engineers and International Brigaders assembling a pontoon bridge to cross the Ebro river in the morning of 25 July 1938.



▶ The Sierra Pandols memorial (left) and the grave of 15th Brigade captain Egan Schmidt constructed by Percy Ludwick, photographed by Harry Randall of the International Brigade Photographic Unit in August 1938.

Tamiment Library

Gubkin Institute, having to describe in great detail the characteristics of the building and its exact location.

Upon his return Percy lived with his partner Sasha at her mother's apartment and they both went on to serve with distinction in the Red Army during the Second World War, exploits that space does not permit to recount. After the war he taught English at the Potemkin Pedagogical Institute in Moscow. He rarely spoke of his Jewish origins apart from some observations about Mosley and the British Union of Fascists operating in the East End of London during the 1930s and the personal consequences for

'Percy [was] heavily involved in the coordination of the crossing of the Ebro by boat and pontoon bridge.'

himself of Stalin's antisemitic purge in the early 1950s. Percy was dismissed from his post in 1952 and was unable to work for five years, which brought with it great hardship. By 1957 he was employed by Radio Moscow (an English-language service, later renamed Radio Moscow World Service) where he was to remain for 25 years.

In the post-communist years Percy maintained a steady correspondence with former Brigaders as well as their respective veteran organisations, notably the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives (ALBA).

In his published letters he rails against the 'new capitalist Russia' of the early 2000s and how this had reduced his economic circumstances to one of extreme poverty. Certainly Percy's final days were not ideal; he died in September 2001, a week before his 93rd birthday. It is a shame that a life so full of personal sacrifice in the hope of a better world should not have ended with a little more comfort and security than it eventually did.

Peter Carroll, historian and editor of ALBA's periodical, *The Volunteer*, knew Percy, having dined with him in Madrid, visited him at his apartment in Moscow and crossed his path at various veteran events. He recently wrote a poem entitled 'A Wound in the Heart', that mentions Percy by name. A short tribute also appears in *The Volunteer* from his American friend and Lincoln volunteer Len Levenson, who praised Percy's commitment to educating the younger generation about the lessons of the Spanish Civil War and acknowledged the devotion of his wife, Sasha. A short obituary appeared in the Spanish daily *El País*, where his contribution to supporting the Republic as well as his involvement in the Spanish section of the Soviet Veterans' Association after the war was recognised.



◀ Original memorial dedicated to the volunteers of the 15th International Brigade killed at the Battle of Jarama, erected in 1937.

This allowed me to delimit the location of the specific sector of the battlefield where the burial of the volunteers took place. I then collected all the photographs of the memorial taken at the time, both those published and known, as well as those taken around it. After several months of searching, I located an unpublished 1938 aerial photograph taken by the Condor Legion that proved indispensable in unravelling and confirming the memorial's location.

Using design software, I made a three-dimensional model from the existing photographs to study the layout and orientation of the olive trees shown in the photographs, comparing it with the layout shown in the 1938 photograph. The shadow cast by the trees and the human figures in one of the photographs was studied, coinciding with the time zone and orientation in which the photograph was taken.

As a final and essential step, I carried out intensive fieldwork to identify and delimit a candidate strip of land that met the necessary characteristics dictated by the previous points.

Once this strip of land had been delimited and a location proposed, I made an exhaustive comparison with existing photographs that matched the features of the terrain. This of course had to account for the significant transformations the terrain had undergone over the past century. I then proceeded to photomontage and merge the old photographs with the modern shots, which revealed an extraordinary similarity.

As a result of this study, after 85 years of being lost, the unequivocal location of the British Battalion memorial at the Battle of Jarama has been discovered and its mystery unravelled.

As it is a burial place it was brought to the attention of the Spanish authorities, who have approved a project to carry out a geophysical study to locate graves and possibly exhume the remains of the Brigaders buried there.

Until the authorities undertake this work, the location of the site will remain hidden so as to preserve it from acts of vandalism. Once safe to reveal, the IBMT, in recognition of its help and its commendable work in keeping alive the legacy of the volunteers, will be one of the first organisations to be informed.

Finally, I would like to highlight the symbolic significance of this location. The memorial served as a very early and important tribute to those who fought and died at the Battle of Jarama. Its rediscovery should serve to honour and uphold their struggle for freedom and democracy.

José María Olivera Marco is a researcher and author specialising in the Spanish Civil War.

Finding the first memorial

JOSÉ MARÍA OLIVERA MARCO reports on his project to locate the site of the lost memorial built by the 15th International Brigade in the immediate aftermath of the Battle of Jarama.

On the afternoon of 29 April 1937, Fred Copeman and George Aitken approached a stone monument in the shape of a five-pointed star. Standing in a line were the men of the British and Spanish companies that made up the British Battalion at the time. At each point of the stone star stood a soldier with his head bowed and his rifle turned downwards. Around this stone cairn were numerous graves carefully decorated with flowers. This was the memorial erected at the site of the Battle of Jarama by the British Battalion in honour of their fallen comrades.

A few weeks after this event, on 17 June, the British Battalion departed the Jarama front, leaving behind the bodies of numerous comrades who had fallen during the battle. The Spanish soil served as a shroud for these volunteers who came to Spain to fight for freedom and democracy.

‘Spanish authorities have approved a project to locate graves and possibly exhume the remains of Brigaders.’

The memorial remained standing and intact until the end of the war but was completely destroyed thereafter, as were the markers on the numerous graves around it. Time and oblivion erased all traces of



▲ Olive groves on the Jarama battlefield.

it. Only a handful of anonymous photographs and a brief reference found in the Russian archives are the sole graphic and written evidence of its existence.

At the beginning of 2021, I started a research project whose purpose was to find the exact location of the legendary monument. I began by searching and analysing the documentation of the Republican side contained in the archives of the Spanish Civil War, as well as the information of the Francoist units that had to face the British Battalion, offering interesting data for the research. I carried out a review of the abundant bibliography written by the British volunteers who took part in the battle, which, together with the previous documentation, helped me to map the movements of the British Battalion from February to June 1937.

Dolores Ibárruri's famous words dedicated to the International Brigades are in the 'Penguin Book of Modern Speeches'. One French video channel places her speech in the top 10 'Great Speeches in History'. A recent anthology ranks it alongside historic addresses by Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, John F Kennedy, Winston Churchill and other luminaries as one of the '50 Speeches that Made the Modern World'.

But were the memorable words of Ibárruri, better known as la Pasionaria (the passion flower), ever actually spoken by her? Astonishingly, the answer is no, according to a new biography of Ibárruri that has been published in Spain.*

What is certain is that copies of the text, translated into English and French, were handed to International Brigaders before leaving Spain. Inside the booklet was a signed portrait of Dolores Ibárruri.

Pasionaria was a Spanish Communist Party (PCE) member of the Cortes (Spanish parliament) and probably the Spanish Republic's most effective orator. Credited with first using the battle-cry '¡No pasarán!' (they shall not pass) at the outset of civil war in July 1936, she is also remembered for saying: 'It is better to die on your feet than live on your knees.'

Ibárruri was in Barcelona on 28 October 1938 to attend the farewell parade of the International Brigades. But her fiery public speaking skills were not deployed on that day.

International Brigade volunteers marched down the Avenida 14 de Abril – better known now as the Diagonal – past a podium on which she stood with other Spanish Republican political and military leaders.

'It came as a great surprise for me to discover that Dolores did not give a speech that day, as has been said so many times.'

Among them was Prime Minister Juan Negrín. Three days beforehand he had announced that the international volunteers would have the right to claim Spanish citizenship once the war in Spain was over. A month earlier he told the League of Nations in Geneva that the Republic had decided to withdraw all its foreign volunteers. It was a doomed attempt to put pressure on Hitler



Composite photo of Pasionaria delivering a speech.

Great speech, but were the words ever spoken?

Quoted countless times and regularly recited at public events, Dolores Ibárruri's valedictory to the International Brigades is rightly regarded as a brilliant piece of oratory. But new research in Spain suggests that the speech in Barcelona on 28 October 1938 was never actually made. **JIM JUMP** reports.

and Mussolini to pull their forces from Spain.

Not only did Pasionaria not address the departing Brigaders, says Amorós in his new book, but no-one did, not Negrín, Manuel Azaña, President of the Spanish Republic, nor Lluís Companys, President of Catalonia. All of them watched the march-past with Ibárruri from a platform near the presidential palace in Pedralbes Gardens.

It was an emotionally charged event nonetheless. An estimated 200,000 well-wishers lined the Diagonal. Amid an 'ocean of flowers' tossed by the crowd, thousands of leaflets were scattered from the



◀ Mario Amorós with his new biography of Dolores Ibárruri.

skies by the Republican airforce. They contained a poem dedicated to the fallen volunteers by Miguel Hernández.

But there were no speeches. Reports in the next day's newspapers – *Frente Rojo*, *El Socialista*, *Mundo Obrero* and *La Vanguardia* – made no mention of any. It was usual for *Mundo Obrero* and *Frente Rojo* to reproduce important speeches in their entirety.

In fact, according to Amorós, the text of Ibárruri's address was written immediately after Negrín's announcement of the standing-down of the Brigades on 21 September. The original French and English versions both carry the dateline 'Barcelona, September, 1938', and the booklet in which they appeared was printed in Paris.

Who wrote it? We cannot say for sure, says Amorós, who is also the author of biographies of Salvador Allende, Pablo Neruda and General Pinochet. In the absence of any contradictory evidence, however, we can only assume the words were penned by Pasionaria herself. He told the IBMT that it came as 'a great surprise for me to discover that Dolores did not give a speech that day, as has been said so many times'.

He added: 'The next day's press leaves no room for doubt about this. And it was really difficult to explain the origin of her famous and wonderful text about the Brigades.'

Dolores Ibárruri (1895-1989) was born into poverty as the daughter of a Basque

'An estimated 200,000 well-wishers lined the Diagonal. Amid an ocean of flowers tossed by the crowd...'

miner and was jailed on several occasions for her political activities. She went into exile in 1939 and returned to Spain in 1977, when she was once again elected to the Cortes for the PCE.

None of these revelations about her best known speech diminishes the eloquence of her words. We can only imagine their power and beauty had they been delivered by her in person in front of the departing volunteers.

* '¡No pasarán! Biografía de Dolores Ibárruri, Pasionaria' by Mario Amorós (Ediciones Akal, Madrid, 2021).



FAREWELL: International Brigaders marching down the Diagonal.

'All Barcelona bared its head and wept'

Extract from 'In Place of Splendour' by Constanza de la Mora, who headed the Spanish Republic's Foreign Press Bureau...

The parade began with a detachment of picked soldiers and sailors from the People's Army. I could not keep the tears from my eyes. Our army looked so strong, so well trained, so healthy. Our soldiers marched smartly, with their heads up, often singing as they passed. The people knew we were still holding at the Ebro, and they cheered these troops madly.

But alas, I knew our position was already untenable – most of the guns these paraders carried were for looks only. Every gun that

could still fire was at the Ebro and they were not enough.

And after the Spanish soldiers came the Internationals. They were greeted with touching and profound enthusiasm. From the start of the march girls piled flowers in their arms. They carried no guns, but roses and great sweet-smelling blooms covered their hats and battered old uniforms. Many of them had little Spanish boys perched on their shoulder – so one day when the boys grew up their mothers could say: 'When the International Brigades carried you down the avenue in the parade!'

I think I have never ever seen such enthusiasm. The Spanish people said goodbye to the friends from abroad with a mighty display of gratitude. And when, at the speakers' platform, they blew taps ['the Last Post'] for the Internationals who would never return home but always stay with us in Spain, all Barcelona bared its head and wept.



◀ Pasionaria's speech as it appears in the booklet given to departing Brigaders.



PRISONERS: Brigadiers of the No.2 Machine-Gun Company, including Stan Giles, were captured at the Battle of Jarama on 13 February 1937 and held at the prisoner of war camp in Talavera de la Reina.

WAITING TO BE SHOT

In December 1997 British Brigadier **STAN GILES** wrote the following previously unpublished account of his time in a fascist prison in Talavera de la Reina. He wrote it as part of a letter calling for a memorial to be built in the town to remember those volunteers and Republicans imprisoned and executed there. A copy of his letter is now in the International Brigade Archive held by the Marx Memorial Library.

I joined the International Brigade (British Battalion) in December 1936; I was smuggled through France and then the Pyrenees, finally ending up in a town called Albacete and billeted in the bullring. We were given our uniforms and taken to a small town called Madrigueras. We were quite a raggle-taggle lot at first but we participated in parades and were drilled by ex-army men. It was some time in February 1937 when we were issued rifles and a couple of days later were sent to the front. About 75 of us, as far as I can recall, arrived in a place called Jarama. I could elaborate but it's not relevant to my story.

On 13 or 17 February (either date could be correct) we were surrounded and captured by the fascists. As there were about 75-100 of us there, I guess they thought we would pose a threat, so the order of the officer in charge of the fascists was to thin us out. I was standing next to a Greek comrade named Catsonaris (I never forgot his name) and a burst of fire from a sub-machine gun blew him away. Arthur Fry, our commanding officer, was wounded; Sgt Major Dickenson was shot in cold blood – I could go on but you can guess the rest.

Twenty-one men ended up being made prisoners of war and taken to a town called Talavera de la Reina and promptly jailed in a disused brick factory which already housed about

100-150 Spanish civilians who had been tried and found guilty or were awaiting sentencing. Most were to be executed by firing squad. We had the privilege of attending our own trial which was conducted only in Spanish. Of course we didn't understand what was going on but the word 'muerte' was shouted out quite a bit.

Trial

The trial took about two or three days. The outcome was that we were to be executed. In the meantime two more prisoners arrived which brought our number to 23 or so. After that time we tried to keep our spirits up with sing-alongs, games etc. Bert Levy, a Yank, seemed to take charge.

The building where we were held was in two sections. The space between the buildings was for trucks to enter to pick up their loads and really this is where my story begins. Every morning two names would be called out; then two Spanish civilians would appear in chains and two priests would meet them and escort them to a waiting truck with an armed guard – sometimes it would be four per day. This was a daily procedure of four months in duration. As time progressed, Bert Levy asked the guard if we could go outside on some kind of work party (the idea was to get the lay of the land with the possibility of an escape). To our surprise we were given mattocks and escorted by a guard to a lonely stretch of country road and told to clean the ditches. Every morning after that about a dozen of us formed up for a work party and marched out of town. To get to where we were working was about a 15 minute walk and we had to pass a bunch of houses.

Now let me digress. The place where we were imprisoned was absolutely crawling with lice and was in a mess. So, periodically, we would borrow a Spanish cigarette lighter, take our pants off and burn the lice eggs that were buried in the seams. It

wasn't long before I had burnt through the stitches and all I was left with were two flaps on each leg. I couldn't go out in this state, so I got some rags and cut some strips, made a couple of holes in my pant leg, threaded the rag through and tied it. That kept the flaps together and away I went on the work party. It wasn't long before the women whose houses we passed were screaming out to the guards about my nakedness. I admit you might have seen some thigh but that was all. The women raised hell about how they had to keep their young girls' eyes covered.

'The armed guard prodded me along and took me into the cemetery proper, threading our way through the graves.'

One day two civilians appeared in chains with the priests and an armed guard. Then my name was called, although I did not recognise it because they could not pronounce my name in English. Anyway, the guard grabbed me and shoved me in the wagon. At that point I could not have described my thoughts. I was 19 years old and they were going to execute me. I was to be the first. I had managed to say goodbye to a few of my comrades before the guard hustled me to the truck.

The armed guard in the truck kept staring at me and the two priests were consoling the two civilians while administering the last rites. In a few minutes the truck came to the cemetery, went through a side entrance where a bunch of soldiers stood laughing and joking (they looked and

behaved as if they had been drinking, which they most probably had). I got out of the truck and the armed guard prodded me along and took me into the cemetery proper, threading our way between the graves.

I cannot describe my thoughts and feelings then, just waiting for a bullet in the back of my head. We stopped and a volley of shots sounded from where we had come from and then the guard made all kinds of menacing gestures, like pulling a finger across his throat and pointing a pistol at me. He prodded me back to where the firing squad was and I was told to take my pants off. I did this and a soldier handed me an almost new pair of black corduroy pants splatted with blood. He told me to put them on; they fit me. He then gave me a pair of *alpargatas* (running shoes) and they also fit me. My thoughts were racing through my mind – they're dressing me up to look like a Spaniard before they shoot me.

They manhandled me into the truck and took me back to the prison where all my comrades hugged me and said how they were ready to blow the prison up when they took me. I guess I wasn't away more than 20-30 minutes but the entire time was hell. They had waited for a condemned man about my size who was to be executed so I could use his clothes. The men were stood up against a wall in the cemetery, executed and then thrown into a big mass grave.

Recap

It's 11 years ago now since my wife and I went to Spain to recap the events in my life, the year before the 50th anniversary. We visited Madrigueras and it hadn't altered. Talevera had altered, but I drove straight to the cemetery. It was full of graves which were covered in flowers and many monuments had been erected. However, upon walking to the place where the executions took place, the area that they had used for a mass grave was walled off with a four-foot wall. The ground had never been cultivated. There was no marker, no monument, no flowers, just a bare neglected area.

I went looking for the cemetery groundsman and found him. I asked him why that place wasn't used. Of course my Spanish was nil and his Spanish was *muy rapido*, but all he kept saying was *muy malo, mucho mal*. My wife and I spoke to a lady about my age and I tried to make myself understood but failed. However, she did understand 1936 to 1938 – the dates I had been there. She and her son agreed to take me to the prison but it turned out to be a different one. When we parted she took hold of my hands and wished me good luck.

◀ The captured machine-gun company were transported by truck to Talavera de la Reina.



‘Don Henry’ is an opera that tells the true story of a student from the United States who fought in the Spanish Civil War against Francisco Franco’s fascist forces in the 1930s.

The work examines the eponymous protagonist’s commitment to the cause of equality and freedom for which he gave his life, telling the story through historical documents and lyrical commentary. The primary source of text for the *libretto* (the opera script) is poetry written by those who witnessed the Spanish Civil War and contemporaneous historical documents. The added narrative elements place the listener firmly in a twenty-first century setting by imagining what Fox News-style coverage of the Spanish Civil War may have been like.

Cause

The impetus for creating a piece that examines the cause of anti-fascism is the increasing visibility and normalisation of white nationalism in the US. In 2018, neo-Nazis and American white nationalists ran for political office more than any other time in the history of the country.

According to Paul Robeson, the African-American opera singer and activist whose career spanned the 1920s to 1960s, artists

‘The work examines the eponymous protagonist’s commitment to the cause of equality and freedom’.

must take sides: ‘Every artist, every scientist, must decide now where [they stand]. [They] have no alternative. There is no standing above the conflict on Olympian heights. There are no impartial observers...through the propagation of false ideas of racial and national superiority, the artist, the scientist, the writer is challenged. The battlefield is everywhere. There is no sheltered rear.’

His words call on all artists to use their place in the public sphere responsibly. ‘Don Henry’ is a response to Robeson’s decree.

Don Henry was a University of Kansas (KU) student whose ideals led him to fight in the Spanish Civil War. He became a member of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade that fortified the Spanish Republican forces. Don was a young man when Mussolini and



Don Henry.



Frank Nawrot.

Opera tells tale of American anti-fascist

Kansas City-based **FRANK NAWROT** explains why he has written an opera inspired by the brief life of a Kansas University student who joined the International Brigades and died in Spain.

Hitler rose to power. He and others from around the world travelled to Spain to help prevent another fascist government from taking hold as they had in Italy and Germany.

‘It did not take long for Don Henry to see the front line of the war after his arrival to Spain.’

It did not take long for Don Henry to see the front line of the war after his arrival to Spain in the summer of 1937. Sadly, he died from a wound sustained at the Battle of Belchite that September.

After his death, the House Un-American Activities Committee was provided evidence from the KU Board of Regents based on the latter’s investigation at the university and in Don’s hometown of Dodge City, Kansas.

The investigation uncovered that Don had become a member of communist organisations at the university and that his ideological leanings contributed to his decision to risk his life in the Spanish Civil War.

See <https://franknawrot.com> for more about Frank Nawrot’s music. The recording of ‘Don Henry’ is available now on all podcast platforms. Readers may listen to a track from the recording called ‘Die for Me’ here: <https://franknawrot.bandcamp.com/track/die-for-me-from-don-henry>.

Saving lives: Poleniño, El Shatt and beyond



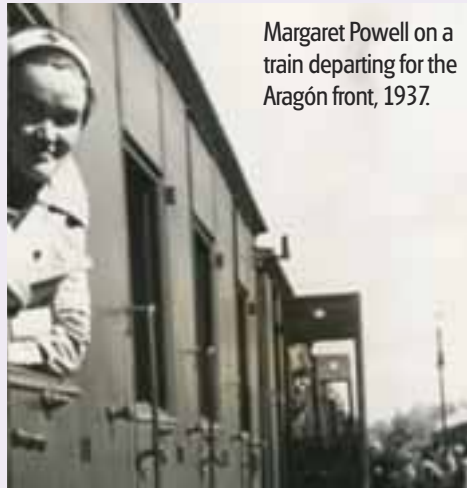
'Margaret Powell: An Extraordinary Life' by Ruth Muller (Crickhowell District Archive Centre, 2022).

This is a short biography of the fascinating life of Spanish Civil War nurse volunteer Margaret Powell (1913-1990), written by her daughter.

Lily Margaret was born into a farming family at Cwm Farm in Llangenny, Breconshire. She attended the small village school, one where Welsh speaking children from the surrounding hills were forbidden to use their mother tongue and beaten if they did. Margaret recalls how she got the usual caning from her teacher: 'ten smart cuts on my hands but I never flinched or cried because I knew that that was what he wanted', an early indication of the strength of character and bravery she would display throughout her life. Margaret left her Welsh home at age 16 and by 23 had qualified as a State Registered Nurse, gaining valuable experience in London hospitals as well as an awareness of the changing political situation: 'It was in a London hospital that I read about Hitler, and felt for the first time the evil that this hated name stood for.'

On a holiday in Germany she recalled 'memories of jack-booted feet' and 'seeing gatherings of Nazis'. An article on the Spanish Civil War in the *Daily Worker* alerted her to the need for volunteer doctors and nurses. She left London for Spain two days before her 24th birthday, a courageous decision for a young woman and one that was to transform her life.

Her front-line experiences as a nurse in Spain, working under the most arduous conditions, are



Margaret Powell on a train departing for the Aragón front, 1937.

touchingly described: 'I used to see trucks full of young men going up to the front and, though I was very irreligious, I prayed for them and thought of their families. And I used to wonder how soon it would be before the mules carried them back to us.' She recalls how the men carried small, white beautifully embroidered pillows given to them by their mothers or sweethearts.

A report by Winifred Bates on Margaret's work stated: 'She regards political work amongst the soldiers and nurses as important as medical work. Speaks good Spanish. An asset to Spain and the revolutionary movement'. And it was in Spain that she met Sam Russell, known then by the surname Lesser, a young ex-International Brigader turned journalist whom she was to marry 13 years later.

After her return from Spain, Margaret's life continued to be just as challenging and adventurous. With the end of the Second World War in sight, she joined the United Nations Refugee and Rehabilitation Association and in 1944 left London for Cairo to work in the El Shatt refugee camp in the Sinai Desert – a camp of over 20,000 Yugoslav refugees. VE Day in May 1945 found her: 'dancing in the cobbled streets' of Jerusalem.

By April 1946 she was working in the displaced persons' camps of southern Germany. She recalls: 'Those two years were a nightmare, trying to nurse back to health young people so ill with tuberculosis as to be certain to die' and 'helping to bring into the world babies whose mothers often did not have the

strength to survive.' An entry in her diary in 1947 records '*mal sueno noche pasado*' (bad dream last night) – hardly surprising given the memories she must have carried of her battle-front work in Spain and experiences in the camps. Christmas 1947 saw her travelling by train and ship across Europe before returning to London.

Back in London, and having qualified as a health visitor, Margaret at 38 was now married to Sam Russell and pregnant with her first and only child, Ruth. For a woman who had lived her life so bravely and independently and travelled so widely, adjusting to her new life must have been difficult. Sam's work as a poorly paid journalist took him away frequently on foreign work assignments, leaving Margaret to juggle home, childcare and political work. Being monitored along with Sam by MI5 must have only added to the challenges.

Back at work in 1955, Margaret must have felt

'She regards political work amongst the soldiers and nurses as important as medical work...An asset to Spain and the revolutionary movement.'

her life was getting back on track before Sam took up the post of Moscow correspondent for the *Daily Worker* and Margaret and Ruth set sail for Leningrad.

Ever resourceful and determined, Margaret found work at the Foreign Languages Publishing House and the English-language service of Moscow Radio. Although life was busy she enjoyed outings to the ballet, theatre and exhibitions as well as socialising with Spanish communist refugees and the British-Soviet defectors Donald and Melinda Maclean.

Margaret had retained her love of independent travelling and in her final months in the Soviet Union she travelled alone to Kiev, Yalta and Odessa, an opportunity to reconnect with her younger, more adventurous self.

In London again Margaret found work as a health visitor in Hackney and, even though she was dealing with serious personal medical issues, maintained her involvement and interest in politics. Margaret's contribution to the fight for democracy in Spain was recognised in 1976 when presented with the Medal of Loyalty: 'For having given your courageous services as a nurse in the Republican army'.

Margaret died in 1990. A woman from a working-class family in a small, rural Welsh village who had the courage, confidence and independence to live the life she led deserves wide recognition. The memoir is a welcome contribution to the often overlooked lives of women.

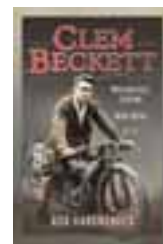
DOLORES LONG

◀ Powell with daughter Ruth (front, middle) and Sam Russell (back, centre right) with international delegation, Sochi, Russia, October 1956.

ANTI-FASCIST SPEEDWAY ACE



▲ Dirt track rider collectible cigarette card featuring Clem Beckett, printed in 1929.



'Clem Beckett: Motorcycle Legend and War Hero' by Rob Hargreaves (Pen & Sword Books, 2022).

Some IBMT members may know of Clem Beckett from the wonderful Townsend Theatre Productions 2016 tour of 'Dare Devil Rides to Jarama' that told some of his story. Despite its rather military sounding title this book tells a north of England story of working-class individualism and commitment to the cause of communism during the turbulent times of the 1920s and 1930s. As such it fills in the gaps of writer Neil Gore's theatrical production.

'Clem's chance came when the units he was part of were moved to defend Madrid against the fast-approaching Rebel forces.'

Born in 1907, Clem grew up in an Oldham terraced house and had to go out to work at the age of 12 to help support his family after his father abandoned them – simply failing to come home after his service in the First World War.

Briefly a textile engineering apprentice and then blacksmith, Clem became fascinated with mechanical things, despite his love of horses, and began riding motorcycles at the age of 14. Within a year or two he and a close friend's skills had improved to the point that they were servicing and repairing bikes as a side business in their spare time. He was also game for any challenge whatever the cost in terms of hard knocks – endemic to motorcycles that were both dangerous and unreliable. Adored by the girls, the group of boys were acquiring a reputation for reckless adventure as they rode their bikes on the moors surrounding Oldham. Clem's bravery and resilience were also a strong feature of his character – in his mid-teens he literally wrestled an out-of-control Alsatian dog into submission and as a blacksmith he was not scared of those horses that dangerously refused handling.

Clem was also taken with the poverty and injustice that surrounded his life and, influenced by a socialist in his work, attended a mass meeting addressed by communist Tom Mann in 1924. He joined the Young Communist League, remaining a Communist Party of Great Britain member until the end of his life. However, the direction that brought him fame at a very young age was through motorcycle sport.

In the 1920s motorcycling was dominated by the better off and there was resistance to the hurly-

burly and working-class appeal of speedway when it was brought over from Australia towards the end of the decade. Clem's skills soon developed to the point that excuses for absence from work to compete in meetings began to wear thin and his choice to leave his blacksmith job for professional speedway was not difficult. His earnings for the time were good – enough to purchase and maintain the bikes needed for this fast-growing sport and – importantly – support his mother.

Clem was a natural and showed no fear on the sometimes dangerous tracks that sprang up in the north of England. Some were composed of the cinder whose customary use had been imported with the sport; one was located on a disused rubbish tip; cans and bottles provided additional hazards for riders. Injuries were commonplace and, sadly, fatalities on some courses like the Audenshaw one a few miles from his home in Oldham.

Commercial interests soon took over as the sport grew in popularity and Clem helped organise a riders' union to defend their earning ability and promote safety. Barred from competition by increasingly dominant corporate interests, Clem took up riding on the 'Wall of Death' in fairgrounds, regularly adding to his growing list of injuries. In April 1932, as vice-president of the communist front organisation, the British Workers Sports Federation (BWSF), Clem helped organise the mass trespass on Kinder Scout that was led by his Manchester comrade Benny Rothman.

In 1932 Clem visited the USSR as the only motorcycle sportsman within a BWSF sports delegation, thrilling large crowds with his demonstrations of speedway techniques. He had visited the continent regularly as a speedway rider and his flair for languages made such trips easier and helped him achieve some independence whether or not, as on this occasion, it really fitted with the aims of the tour organisers. Although it was to be many years before speedway became popular in the Soviet Union, Clem can be credited with giving the country its first taste of the sport.

Hargreaves has to be congratulated for the detail his researches have revealed (previous accounts of Clem written soon after his death were tinged with idealised propaganda). This is certainly the case with the chapters of the book that cover the final period of Clem's short life.

For young communists like Clem, going out to Spain to fight fascism in 1936 was a natural duty: very brief territorial military experience as well as personal prestige and physical qualities ensured that he was selected by Communist Party General Secretary Harry Pollitt. He and others who arrived in 1936 were assembled into what would emerge as the British Battalion of the International Brigades. However, to start with – and much to his dismay,

Clem was ordered to undertake motor maintenance duties behind the lines and had to frustratingly watch comrades march off to some of the early battles.

Clem's chance came when the units he was part of were moved to defend Madrid against the fast-approaching Rebel forces. They were deployed to the Jarama Valley in what became a decisive and successful battle in February 1937. By this time Clem had been given responsibility, with the aristocratic author Chris Caudwell, for their unit's only machine gun. This was an old French Chauchat weapon –

‘Clem and Chris stoutly covered their comrades’ retreat until their gun jammed.’

notorious for its difficulty in operation and tendency to jam. Despite their very different class origins, Caudwell (this was his pen name, and he was otherwise known as Christopher St John Sprigg) became firm friends and comrades. Poorly led at senior command level, their unit's involvement in this early stage of the battle was disastrous in the face of Franco's experienced Army of Africa. When their position was overrun to much loss of life, Clem and Chris stoutly covered their comrades' retreat until – goes one account – their gun jammed. The

pair died together, holding the slopes of what became known as Suicide Hill, after the rest of the unit had either been killed or had successfully escaped.

The bodies of Clem and Chris could not be recovered and to this day their graves, like others, remain undiscovered and unmarked in the dust of Spain. Back home they were celebrated as anti-fascist heroes: a huge public meeting in honour of fallen local men, with prominence given to Clem Beckett, was held in Manchester's Coliseum and addressed by the great and the good, including actress Sybil Thorndike. In all, six Oldham men lost their lives in Spain. They and the four survivors were soon forgotten as Europe lurched into the Second World War.

Hargreaves points out the little-known fact that Jarama, which was a successful encounter for the Republican forces, was the first major defeat of a fascist army on the European continent.

Not all readers will agree with Hargreave's ambiguous and perhaps simplistic take on the communist politics of the inter-war period, but none will doubt his service in giving us a well-researched and full account of the larger-than-life story of Clem Beckett. He also brings to life an unusual aspect of the almost forgotten contribution of the young men and women who fought fascism before it became popular and unavoidable.

COLIN TURBETT

Communists for Spain



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

In this new history of the Communist Party of Great Britain in Manchester, author Michael Crowley tracks the major political events and upheavals of the 1930s-40s through the eyes of individual members.

The book follows the struggle against mass unemployment, the fight against fascism in Britain and in Spain and through to the end of the Second World War. Crowley draws from his research at Salford's Working Class Movement Library, using the words of key political figures, derived from interviews, letters, published and unpublished memoirs and other primary sources, to flesh out a narrative.

One of the Manchester communists in focus is Sam Wild – the last commander of the British Battalion of the International Brigades. The Communist Party led the effort to recruit British volunteers to fight in defence of the Republic during the Spanish Civil War. Wild and many of his fellow Manchester volunteers had come together through their involvement with the Cheetham Hill branch of the Young Communist League and some had led demonstrations in the city against the British Union of Fascists in the early 1930s.

Using the voices of the Manchester Brigaders and many others involved with the



Sam Wild.

Communist Party in Manchester, including folk singer Ewan MacColl and trade unionist Hugh Scanlon, Crowley presents a lived history, from the shop floor in Trafford Park to the front line in Jarama.

Witness to world-shaking events

'I Saw Democracy Murdered: the Memoir of Sam Russell, Journalist' edited by Colin Chambers (Routledge, 2022).

This book constitutes the memoir of the International Brigader and communist journalist Sam Russell (1915-2010) – known by the surname Lesser during his time in Spain. It is based on interviews with him made by Chris Myant and Colin Chambers, who edited the final copy.

The book covers his experiences during the Spanish Civil War, his time as a journalist at the *Daily Worker* and *Morning Star*, and his later disillusionment with Stalinism. In his capacity as a journalist, Russell travelled extensively and was frequently a front-row spectator at significant historical events, from the formerly occupied Channel Islands at the end of the Second World War to the show trials of communists in eastern Europe in the 1950s.

Many of his generation lived sheltered lives and saw very little of the blood-soaked times they lived through. A few saw a great deal of it, but very few saw as much as Sam Russell.

His Orthodox Jewish parents came from a little Polish village called Ropczyce, just down the road



from Auschwitz. They fled the persecution there to arrive in Britain before the First World War. Russell was born Manassah Lesser in 1915, but anglicised his name to avoid crude discrimination and to be accepted as a *bona fide* British citizen.

He came to communism fighting anti-semitism on the streets of London's East End, and, in the 1930s, went to fight for democracy in Spain and

'Many of his generation lived sheltered lives and saw very little of the blood-soaked times they lived through... very few saw as much as Sam Russell.'

became a reporter there. His vivid account of the Spanish Civil War is probably one of the most riveting and informative yet. After returning to Britain from Spain he thought he would be called

up, but the armed forces were not keen on recruiting known communists to their ranks. Instead he went to work in an engineering factory where he was also blacklisted.

Reporter

He later joined the *Daily Worker* as a reporter and was appointed foreign editor in 1959. Although Russell had no proper training, he turned into a fine writer, with a journalist's eye for both the stories and the colour that brings them alive. He was able to bring alive the horror and squalor of war, and, as Francis Beckett says in his introduction, 'I doubt whether the human story of the defeat of democracy in Spain has ever been told better.'

Sam, like so many other communists and sympathisers of that era, set out with complete faith in Stalin's Soviet Union and held a concept of communists as a select group of humanity, with impeccable principles, who fought selflessly for the good of all of us.

Such attitudes accrued as a response to the Bolshevik revolution and the establishment of the 'first workers' state' in the Soviet Union. It was reinforced by the role played by the Soviet Union and communists in general in combatting the rise



'Voluntarios por la Revolución: La milicia internacional del POUM en la Guerra Civil Española' by Andy Durgan (Laertes, 2022).

Books about anti-fascist foreign volunteers serving in non-International Brigades units are quite thin on the ground. Orwell's 'Homage to Catalonia' – his personal account of his time in Spain fighting in the POUM (Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista) militia has dominated the field. John Cornford, poet and communist, who later died fighting in the International Brigades, served in the POUM and described a chaotic action at Perdiguera. I myself wrote two books on British and Irish volunteers who served in the ILP (Independent Labour Party) contingent.

There have been some personal accounts of foreign volunteers who worked for the POUM such as Mary Low and Juan Brea and a biography about Orwell's commander Georges Kopp by Wildemeersch. But no one has undertaken any detailed study of foreign anti-fascist volunteers outside the International Brigades until now.

Andy Durgan's book on the international anti-fascist volunteers who served in the POUM makes

Victory and revolution

use of material from the Soviet archives and includes previously unpublished information. The book does cover the ILP contingent, but they formed less than 10 per cent of the foreign fighters in the POUM. Durgan does not make Orwell's account of his time in Spain a major pillar of his story of the international volunteers in the POUM.

Biographies

There is a chapter on the ILP contingent and brief biographies of each volunteer. New material from the Soviet archives includes the details of the interrogation of Georges Kopp and shows the role of ILP volunteer Frank Frankford in the arrest of Kopp. There is also a discussion about the issue of whether Bob Edwards, ILP leader in Spain, was a KGB spy later in his life.

Perhaps as many as 500 foreign anti-fascists joined the POUM. The author identifies 367 of them from 28 different nationalities and there is a brief biography of each one. They belonged to a mass of small socialist parties such as the Italian Maximalist Socialist Party, German Socialist Workers' Party (SAPD) and the French Socialist

Workers and Peasants' Socialist Party (PSOP).

These parties were all members of the London Bureau, an International that included both the POUM and the ILP. Among the foreign volunteers

'No one has undertaken any detailed study of foreign anti-fascist volunteers outside the International Brigades until now.'

there were also small numbers of militants from Trotskyite organisations.

The largest number of volunteers by nationality were Germans (104), followed by Italians (82) and then French (39). British and Irish volunteers are listed at 38. Many of the foreign volunteers were of Jewish origin.

To give you a flavour of the kind of little-known foreign volunteer that Durgan has discovered is the German, Hans Reiter. He arrived in Spain in 1935,

of fascism. This idealised image began to fall apart with Stalin's purges, and then the Soviet invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Although in his reports from these places, Sam still maintained, even if increasingly reluctantly, the party line.

Maybe, in his retirement, he wished he had rebelled and not allowed his reports to be mangled. But here we get the full benefit of what he saw and heard. As the chief foreign correspondent for 40-odd years on the *Daily*

Worker and Morning Star, he experienced history on the front line. Beginning in Spain, then the Second World War, the Soviet Union shortly after Stalin's death and Khrushchev's 'secret speech' denouncing his crimes, the invasion of Hungary, the Prague Spring, the fall of Allende's government in Chile to the rise of Solidarnosc in Poland. A whole number of those of Sam's generation devoted

their lives to the communist cause, and often endured persecution, blacklisting, economic hardship and ostracism.

To accept that your beliefs, dreams and hopes have been illusory is a difficult pill to swallow. Some, like Sam, became bitter and tended to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Others just gave up and joined the other side, while yet others fought on, still with blinkers in place, refusing to recognise reality.

These are the very moving reminiscences of a man who devoted his life to telling the truth as he saw it and also didn't shrink from fighting on the front line in the cause of human liberation from tyranny.

They were often bitter and traumatic experiences, revealing how idealism and a crusading spirit can inevitably be broken on the relentlessly indifferent wheel of history.

This autobiographical account of a fascinating life will be essential reading for scholars and activists with an interest in the Spanish Civil War, the history of 20th century communism and British radical history.

JOHN GREEN

◀ Sam Lesser (Russell), aged 95, in front of a replica tapestry of Picasso's 'Guernica' displayed at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, in 2009. Inset: Russell during the Spanish Civil War.



Mika Etchebéhère.



POUM militia assembled at the 'Lenin barracks' in Barcelona, 1936.

having previously served in the Foreign Legion. In the civil war he firstly commanded a POUM machine-gun squad and took part in fighting around Quicena, a village in the province of Huesca, in September 1936. He then became the commander of the POUM shock troops who were known as the *batallón de choque*, 'the shock battalion', from February to June 1937.

Later in the civil war he became a major in the Republican Army, rising to be the commander of the 97th Mixed Brigade in 1938. After the civil war he was interned in a camp in Algeria until 1942 from where he joined Leclerc's famous 'Free French' armoured forces and took part in the liberation of Paris in 1944.

The book looks at the military organisation of the POUM and its lack of arms. The author lists the military actions involving POUM forces – several of which involved significant losses – and shows Orwell makes several mistakes in his account of an action fought in March 1937. Durgan shows that the POUM militia were better organised and disciplined than Orwell suggests.

By June 1937 it seems the POUM 29th Division had become an effective military force when they briefly captured enemy positions on Loma de las Mártires – the nearest the Republicans got to recapturing the strategic town of Huesca. They were ordered to retreat and suffered heavy losses including some international volunteers.

Louis Levin and Margarete Zimbal. He also mentions the small number of female foreign volunteers who served at the front, with a chapter on the Argentine militant Mika Etchebéhère, who led a POUM militia column near Madrid after the death of her husband.

Durgan's book is meticulously researched and for the first time provides a detailed account of those international anti-fascist volunteers who fought against fascism and for the revolution in the POUM militia. The book is in Spanish and hopefully soon an English version will become available, making the story of these remarkable men and women open to a larger audience.

CHRISTOPHER HALL

One day, towards the end of July, the Spaniards yelled that the fascists were coming. Harry Gross sprang upon the parapet firing at the enemy. John Ireland and I were firing as fast as we could with our rifles. On the right there was an enemy officer or NCO directing the troops forward. I set my sight for 200 yards and took a bead on him. To my satisfaction I saw him go down.

We seemed to have held them to our front, but we could see our right flank was crumbling. Then we no longer heard the sound of our light machine gun and

‘With our machine gun out of action, they began to advance towards us. They were throwing hand grenades. Others followed with rifle and bayonet.’

found that Harry was dead. We tried to fire the gun but the pan was empty. After fitting a new one we tried again, but it still would not fire. It looked like it had been dropped in the sand and grit and needed a good clean. We were too pressed for things like that. Our Spaniards were now all either dead or wounded, and the wounded were trying to make their way to the rear.

The enemy had by now outflanked us and were beginning to climb the ridge behind us. With our machine gun out of action, they began to advance towards us. They were throwing hand grenades. Others followed with rifle and bayonet. John Ireland and I were now being fired on from the front, the right flank and the rear. My rifle became so hot that I had to knock the bolt up with a stone to insert more cartridges. Our two rifles did not seem to be making much difference to the advancing troops.

Retreat

We could only retreat down to the Guadarrama and up the ridge further down the valley. We agreed that since we were on our own and being shot at from three sides it was no use staying. We went down into the valley with bullets cracking around our ears and puffing up the dirt around our feet. We climbed the hill to the right, went down the other side and up another slope. When we reached the top we found some of the British Battalion there, taking pot-shots across the valley.

Further up the ridge, on to our right, there appeared some figures and I started firing at them. I knew this must be the enemy that had outflanked our previous post. Someone said: ‘Don’t fire. They’re on our side.’ In fact they were an enemy fighting patrol with a spotter for their artillery as well. Soon shells began to fall amongst us. Those that remained moved back down the reverse slope, though still followed by the shelling.

John and I moved down and found a deep dug-out, which we occupied, taking turns to rest or to be on

Panic at Brunete

After recovering from a shoulder injury at the Battle of Jarama, machine-gunner **CYRIL SEXTON** was sent to rejoin the British Battalion during the Battle of Brunete in the summer of 1937. In scorching heat, he manned a gun post above the dried-up Guadarrama river near Villafranca del Castillo with Harry Gross, John Ireland and some Spaniards. In this edited extract from his unpublished memoir, he described what happened.



◀ Cyril Sexton in February 1937, recovering from a bullet wound in the shoulder at Jarama.

lookout. Around this time John was wounded in the upper arm. I went with him to what we thought was the rear and found an ambulance, which took him, leaving me on my own. Stuck with no one to talk to, no knowledge of where anyone was and not a soul in sight, I felt really lonely. It was the enemy airforce that made me pull myself together. They came over and started dropping bombs around me, and that concentrated my mind in a moment.

I began making my way back to where I thought our reserve position would be. Going along the woody valley of the Aulencia river towards Villanueva de la Cañada on the left, I was overtaken by lots of

panic-stricken troops dragging their mules with them. I stood aside to let them pass and went on myself. When I came to the head of the valley there were mounted military police trying to get some order into the troops. It didn’t seem as if they were having any success, when another lot of planes came over and dropped their bombs, causing more panic.

Leaving this turmoil I continued along the road to Villanueva and found a couple of others from the battalion and joined up with them. In the meantime, the enemy air-force was having a field day, dropping their bombs on vehicular traffic and with their fighters strafing anything that moved. We crossed the road and the other two said they knew where the cookhouse was and this was always the rallying point. When we arrived there we were soon joined by the rest of the battalion. How few of us remained. When we were counted there were only 42 of us.

Croydon-born Cyril Sexton (1913-2005) was a gardener when he joined the International Brigades. As well as Jarama and Brunete, he also saw action at the Ebro, where he was again wounded. After service in the Far East with the British Army in the Second World War, he became a station staff worker for London Underground. He died in retirement in Tenerife in the Canaries. A copy of his Spanish Civil War memoir is in the Marx Memorial Library in London.



◀◀ Pictured in Albacete early in 1937, from left, John Ireland, Cyril Sexton and two Canadians: Bill Brennan and Nick Harbocian, who was killed at Brunete.

◀ With Michael Economides (right) in Benicassim in the spring of 1937.

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