

WOMEN AND THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

A four-lesson unit aimed at Year 9 students in Key Stage 3

This unit complements the teaching resource on the international-brigades.org.uk website titled 'Why did so many people volunteer to fight in the Spanish Civil War?'

BIOGRAPHIES

Marguerite 'Madge' Addy (later Holst / Hansen)



Born 1904, Chorlton-cum-Hardy, Manchester. Arrived in Spain in 1937 to work for the Republican medical service and was posted to Aragón. Later head nurse at the hospital in Uclés, Cuenca. Her arm was broken during an air raid, and she briefly returned to England, where she spent the time collecting vital provisions for the hospital. Returned to Spain on the ship *Stanleigh* that was running the blockade of Republican ports. Upon arrival she took with her 50 refugees from Barcelona to the hospital, where she remained until it was no longer possible to stay. She was one of the last nurses to leave

Spain, experiencing problems in securing an exit visa from the Franco administration. Returned to Britain in June 1939. In the Second World War worked undercover in France for Britain's Special Operations Executive, helping Britons escape from enemy-occupied France.

Katherine Atholl (née Ramsay)



Born November 1874, Edinburgh. Studied at Wimbledon High School for Girls and later piano at the Royal College of Music. Married the Marquis of Tullibardine and upon his ascension to a dukedom, she assumed the title the Duchess of Atholl. Elected Conservative MP for West Perthshire in 1923. Served as a junior education minister between 1924-1929. During the Spanish Civil War she was heavily engaged in committee work and was chair of the

National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief and the Basque Children's Committee. She visited Spain and raised questions about the war in the House of Commons. She lost her parliamentary seat in 1938 after leaving the

Conservatives and standing as an independent, partly over her stance on Spain.

Winifred Bates (later Sandford)

Born in December 1898 in London, Winifred taught in the East End of London during the 1920s. Both she and her husband Ralph Bates were members of the Communist Party. Winifred worked in Republican government's propaganda and information services in the Ministry of Information, firstly in France between August-November 1936 and then later in Barcelona and London. She returned to Spain in July 1937 to work for the Spanish Medical Aid Committee. In 1939, Winifred was engaged in speaking tours in the US and Britain to raise funds for Jewish refugees.

Doris 'Elaine' Bell

Born in October 1907 in Malta. Trained as a nurse in Edinburgh. One of four nurses to leave London on 26 August 1936 as a member of the first British Medical Unit. Some sources cite her arrival as being 27 December 1936. She worked with the unit at Grañén, Huesca.

Doris Bird



Born in 1900 in Birmingham. She was a probationary nurse at Paddington Hospital, London, when she left to serve with the English Red Cross during the First World War. Later qualified as a nurse at Acton Hospital in West London and served in Abyssinia, present day Ethiopia, in 1935 during the Italian invasion. One of four nurses to leave London on 26 August 1936 as a member of the first British

Medical Unit. Worked with the unit at Grañén, Huesca, where she was noted for her courage and hard work.

Aileen Barbara Briscoe

Born in October 1913 in Bromley, Kent. Qualified as a nurse at King's College Hospital, London, where she worked between 1933-1937. She arrived in Spain with her friend, nurse Margaret Finley, in August 1938. Served with the International Brigades medical service at the hospital in Mataró, Barcelona. She remained there until the repatriation of the International Brigades in November/December 1938.

Felicia Browne



Born in February 1904, Thames Ditton, Surrey. Attended Slade Art School and studied metalwork in Berlin. A talented artist, she joined the Communist Party in 1933. She was touring Spain at the start of the civil war and decided to join a militia. Part of a mission to blow up an enemy munitions train, she was killed on either the 22 or 23 August 1936 in Aragón. It is believed

she was trying to help a wounded comrade at the time. She was the first British volunteer to die in combat. Her art work has been posthumously published and appreciated.

Isabel Brown

Born in December 1894 on Tyneside. Attended teacher training college in Sunderland. Joined the Labour Party in 1918. Became secretary of her local Communist Party branch and visited Moscow in 1924. She was imprisoned during the General Strike of 1926 for speeches during a public meeting. During the Spanish Civil War she was famous for her inspirational speeches at fund-raising events and rallies held in Britain. She also played an important role in the running of the Spanish Medical Aid Committee. For several years after 1940 she was the Communist Party's National Women's Organiser.

Patience Darton (later Edney)



Born in Orpington, Kent, in August 1911, she trained as a nurse in London. Went to Valencia initially to nurse volunteer Tom Wintringham, former British Battalion commander in Spain, who was seriously ill then. Worked in medical units in Aragón, Brunete, Teruel and the famous cave hospital near la Bisbal de Falset, near the

Ebro. In 1996 she returned to Spain to participate in a ceremony to confer former volunteers with Spanish citizenship. During the visit she passed away, aged 85.

Margaret Finley (later Duncombe)



Born 1913 on the Isle of Wight, she qualified as a nurse in 1937 at King's College Hospital, London, between 1933-1937. Later trained as a surgical nurse at Royal Masonic Hospital. Travelled to Spain with her friend Barbara Boscoe in August 1938. Served with the International

Brigades medical service at the hospital in Mataró, Barcelona. She remained there until the repatriation of the

International Brigades in November/December 1938. Upon her return to Britain she travelled the country raising funds for Spanish refugees. Returned to France in early 1939 and worked for the British Committee for Spanish Refugees in the refugee camps. In 1946 she became the Latin American Secretary for the United Nations.

Nan Green (née Farrow)



Nan Green was born in November 1904 in Beeston, Nottinghamshire. She followed her husband George Green to Spain, where he was killed at the Ebro in September 1938. She helped organise the Valdeganga convalescent home with Frank Ayres. She served as a medical administrator at Huete, Valdenganga and Uclés, then on the Ebro front. At the end of the civil war she accompanied a group of Republican child refugees to Mexico. From

1943 until 1950 she was the secretary of the International Brigade Association and again between 1966 until her death in 1984. Between these two spells she worked in the peace movement, interpreting at conferences and spent many years in China working for the Foreign Languages Publishing House in Beijing.

Rosamund 'Joan' Harrison (later Smith / Smyth)

Born in December 1904 in Folkestone, Kent. Qualified as a nurse at the Radcliffe Infirmary, Oxford in 1935. Arrived in Spain in May 1937, facilitated by the Spanish Medical Aid Committee. Rosamund was attached to the 35th Division. Married British Brigadier, Richard Smith while both were in Spain on active duty. She emigrated to Australia in 1956.

Dolores Ibárruri



Born in December 1895 in Gallarta, Vizcaya, Basque Country, Spain. Political activist in the Communist Party of Spain (PCE). Known as 'La Pasionaria' (passion flower), she was famous for her passionate speeches during the Spanish Civil War in defence of the Republic, with the declaration '¡No pasarán!' (They shall not pass). After the war she escaped from Franco's forces and lived

abroad in exile, for 35 years in the Soviet Union. She was general secretary of the PCE from 1942-1940. She returned to Spain in 1977, two years after the death of Franco, again became an elected deputy [MP] in the Spanish parliament [Cortes] and died in 1989, aged 93, in Madrid.

Louisa Catherine Jones (née Freeman)

Born in November 1904 in King's Cross, London. Qualified as a nurse at St Mary's Hospital, London. Arrived in Spain in April 1937. Worked in the hospital in Uclés and was repatriated in February 1938. Continued to campaign for the Spanish Republic after her return to Britain.

Leah Manning (née Perrett)



Born in April 1886 in Droitwich, Worcestershire. Attended Homerton Teacher Training College, Cambridge. Worked as a teacher in the same city. Married Will Manning around 1913. Joined the Independent Labour Party and later Labour Party. Served as a Labour MP for Islington East between

1929 and 1931. Was President of the National Union of Teachers (now known as the NEU) and joint secretary of the Co-ordinating Committee against War and Fascism. Went to Spain in 1934 as part of an investigation into the suppression of the miners' uprising in Asturias. During the civil war she played a leading role in national committees and visited Spain on several occasions. She was also a key figure in facilitating the arrival of Basque child refugees and was involved in their subsequent care. In 1945 she was elected to Parliament as a Labour MP for Epping and held the seat until 1950. In 1966 she was made Dame Commander of the British Empire. A Life in Education: An Autobiography was published in 1970.

Ethel 'Molly' Murphy (née Morris)



Born in Leyland, Lancashire, in March 1890. Active suffragette. Member of the Labour Party and Socialist League. Visited the Soviet Union in 1926. Arrived in Spain in January 1937 and was the nurse in charge of the wards at the

15th Brigade hospital at Torrelodones, north-west of Madrid. Returned to England in August 1937.

Annie Murray (later Knight)

Born in April in Tornaveen, Aberdeenshire. Joined the Communist Party in 1935. Trained as a nurse and arrived in Spain in September 1936, making her one of the earliest volunteers. Her brothers George and Tom Murray were also serving volunteers in the British Battalion, and both survived the civil war. Sent to Spain by the Spanish Medical Aid Committee, she served at Huesca, Lerida and at the Ebro. She was one of the last volunteers to leave Spain, being repatriated in May 1939.

Penny Phelps (later Feiwel)



Born in April 1909 in Tottenham, London, she left school, aged 13. After several jobs she trained as a nurse at Charing Cross Hospital. After working in St Albans, she volunteered to nurse in Spain in 1937. Worked in various

units and was in charge of containing an outbreak of typhoid in the Garibaldi Battalion of Italian volunteers. In 1938 she was severely injured in a bomb blast and was taken back to England for surgery. During her recovery she met and married Dr Michael Feiwel.

Lily 'Margaret' Powell (later Lesser)

Born Llangenny, South Wales, in March 1913. She initially worked as a nurse in a tuberculosis hospital in Black Notley, Essex. In 1936 she trained as a midwife. Upon completing her training she left for Spain in 1937, working as a nurse, mainly with Spanish medical units in Aragón, Teruel and at the Ebro. Remaining with her Spanish comrades in the detention camps in southern France after the defeat of the Republic, she was found by Quakers who facilitated her repatriation to Britain. Margaret was created a Dame of the Order of Loyalty to the Spanish Republic by the Spanish Republican government in exile. In 1950 she married British International Brigader Sam Lesser.

Clara 'Joan' Purser

Born in January 1911 in Willersey, Worcestershire. Trained as a nurse and volunteered to work in Spain, being sent by the Spanish Medical Aid Committee in January 1937. She remained in Spain until September 1938. Married British Battalion volunteer Alan Gilchrist.

Isabel Brown

Born in December 1894 on Tyneside. Attended teacher training college in Sunderland. Joined the Labour Party in 1918. Married Ernest Brown in 1921. Became secretary of her local Communist Party branch and visited Moscow in 1924. She was imprisoned during the General Strike of 1926 for speeches during a public meeting. During the Spanish Civil War she was famous for her inspirational speeches at fund-raising events and rallies held in Britain. She also played an important role in the running of the Spanish Medical Aid Committee. For several years after 1940 she was the Communist Party's National Women's Organiser.

Thora Silverthorne (later Sinclair-Loutit / Craig)



Born 1910 in Abertillery, South Wales, into a mining and later communist family. Trained as a nurse at the Radcliffe Infirmary, Oxford. Known there as 'Red Silverthorne' due to her outspoken political views. Went to Spain as a nurse with the first British medical contingent in August 1936. Worked as a theatre nurse, mainly with the Catalan surgeon, Dr Moisès

Broggi, at the hospital in Grañén. Upon her return to Britain she continued nursing and was active in trade unionism. After the Second World War she was secretary of the Socialist Medical Association that played an important role in lobbying for a National Health Service.

Beryl 'Joan' Smithson

Born in March 1913 in East Rudman, Norfolk. Trained as a nurse at the Royal Victoria Hospital, Netley, near

Southampton. Sent to Spain by Spanish Medical Aid Committee after volunteering. Served at Grañén. Repatriated in December 1938.

Frida Stewart (later Knight)



Born in November 1910 in Cambridge. Studied violin at the Royal College of Music and in Germany. Joined the Communist Party in 1936. Founded Aid Spain committees in Hull and York. Asked to drive an ambulance to Spain in 1937. Worked in a children's hospital in Murcia, then helped journalists in Madrid. Also made radio broadcasts from Spain. Upon her return to Britain, she

visited refugee Basque children's homes to write reports for the Basque Children's Committee and also organised concerts to raise funds. At the end of the Spanish Civil War she visited detention camps in southern France to assist refugees from Spain.

Gerda Taro (née Porhorylle)



Born in August 1910 in Stuttgart, Germany. Gerda was a war photographer covering the Spanish Civil War. She was the partner of the famous photographer Robert Capa. Many of his photos are also credited to Taro. She was killed at the Battle of Brunete on 26 July 1937, aged 26. The circumstances of her death have been the subject of controversy, but the evidence

suggests it was a tragic incident involving a tank and the vehicle she was travelling in. It is believed she was the first female war correspondent to be killed while working.

Lillian Urmston (later Buckoke)



Born near Stalybridge, Lancashire, in June 1915. Trained as a nurse at a local hospital, where she qualified as an SRN and took a course in tropical medicine. She then trained as a midwife. Joining the Territorial Army Nursing Service in 1935, following a brief stint as a staff nurse in a nursing home, she arrived in Spain in June 1937. She served on the Aragón front, in Teruel and the railway tunnel 'hospital' near Flix. She was held in the detention camps in southern France at the end of the civil war until her release and repatriation was arranged.

Francesca Wilson



Born Newcastle upon Tyne in 1888. Studied at Cambridge and worked as a teacher in various locations before joining the Friends War Victims Committee, run by the Quakers. During the Spanish Civil War worked with refugee children in Murcia, where she founded a children's hospital. Also worked to support orphaned boys who were temporarily settled in Crevillent, Alicante. After the

civil war she worked with refugees in southern France. In 1945 she became chief welfare officer for the UNRRA United Nations refugee agency, engaged in supporting concentration camp survivors. Author of *Margins of Chaos* (1944) and *Aftermath* (1945).

● More biographies of British women (and men) who volunteered to go to Spain during the Spanish Civil War can be found by searching this database compiled by the International Brigade Memorial Trust:
<https://international-brigades.org.uk/uncategorized/the-volunteers/>



Six British nurses in Spain, including (first on the left) Margaret Powell, who is profiled on page 3.