

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?'

HISTORICAL ENQUIRY DOCUMENT Sources and Questions

Context

This unit encourages you to explore both the reasons women from around the world decided to volunteer to support the Spanish Republican government in its struggle against the military insurrection led by General Francisco Franco and the contribution they made both at home and in Spain towards the cause of anti-fascism and democracy.

Why learn about women and the Spanish Civil War?

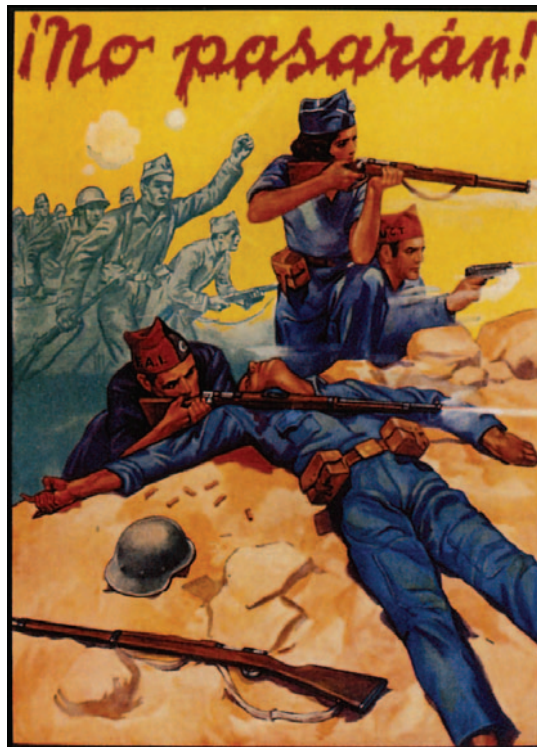
This is an important topic that has been overshadowed by those who were directly involved in physical combat during the civil war. However, many men and women who served during the civil war also took part in World War Two, which followed shortly afterwards and where in many cases their skills and experiences were put to good use in the fight against Hitler and the Nazis.

It is hoped that the exploration of the past from diverse perspectives ensures that the history you study is inclusive, promotes your school's values and embraces equality, tolerance and diversity.

The topic can be taught as a non-statutory unit in Key Stage 3 as part of 'Challenge for Britain, Europe and the Wider World, 1901 to the present day'.

Key words

Republic, insurrection, political, fascism, anti-fascism, democracy, equality, traditional roles, gender, militia.



Conceptual focus

In addition to acquiring knowledge about the Spanish Civil War, students will develop the core skills of explanation, cause and consequence and source analysis (including interpretation).

Background

The Spanish Civil War (1936-39) was a military revolt against the democratically elected Republican government of Spain, supported by conservative elements within the country. When an initial military coup failed to win control of the entire country, a bloody civil war ensued, fought with great ferocity on both sides. The Nationalists, as the rebels were called, received aid from Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. The Republicans received aid from the Soviet Union as well as from the International Brigades, composed of volunteers from many parts of Europe, including Britain and Ireland, the United States and other countries around the world.

Spanish women at first took up arms to defend their towns and cities against fascism, as well as on the battlefield. But after a few weeks they were prohibited from doing so by the Republican army. Many women from around the world volunteered to support the Republican government, mainly in the medical services and in clerical jobs. In Britain and Ireland women campaigned to raise funds to support the Republic's medical services and helped child refugees and the families (dependents) of volunteers fighting in Spain.



SOURCE A



Spanish woman taking up arms in 1936 following the military uprising.

● Question 1

What can we learn from Source A about the role of women in the early days of the Spanish Civil War?

SOURCE B

Felicia Browne – Militia fighter from Britain

She was killed in August 1936 while going to the aid of a wounded militia fighter.

▶▶ *The first British volunteer to die in Spain was the artist and sculptress Felicia Browne. She studied at the Slade School from 1924 to 1926, where her contemporaries included William Coldstream, Nan Youngman, Claude Rogers, Clive Branson (who was to serve in the British Battalion in Spain) and Henry Tonks.*

Youngman said, 'Felicia was much more aware of the political situation than any of us. In 1928 she went to Berlin to study sculpture, living with unemployed fellow artists. Witnessing the Nazis come to power led her to the Communist party, which she joined in 1933.'

Felicia Browne possessed a strong dislike of privilege... She donated her personal fortune to refugees. She was killed while taking part in a dangerous raid to sabotage an enemy train.

– Extract from James Hopkins, *Into the Heart of the Fire: The British in the Spanish Civil War* (1998).

SOURCE C

Penny Phelps – British volunteer nurse

She was killed in August 1936 while going to the aid of a wounded militia fighter.

▶▶ *It didn't dawn – I wasn't consciously aware – I didn't go to Spain for any political reasons – there was a need somewhere. I mean, it's like you see a gap and you think, 'Oh, dear, that's dangerous' or 'they need help, and so I thought I would perhaps help in some small way.*

– Extract from Angela Jackson, *British Women and the Spanish Civil War* (2002).

● Question 2

Look at Sources B and C. Explain in which way the two sources differ regarding Felicia Browne and Penny Phelps's attitude towards politics.

SOURCE D

Leah Manning's autobiography

Leah Manning was at various times a teacher, a Member of Parliament (MP) and a trade union leader, who was very active in support of the Spanish Republic. In her autobiography, *A Life for Education* (1970), she writes about Isabel Brown.

▶▶ *Whilst I had been absent from London, the Committee [the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief], with which I was to be most closely associated during the Spanish war, had been formed. Isabel Brown, a dedicated communist, had been receiving sums of money from all over the country to be used for Spanish relief. Medical aid was urgently needed – doctors, nurses, trucks and their drivers and supplies of all kinds. Isabel set about finding people willing to sit on an all-party committee who would undertake the task of raising funds, interviewing personnel and sending all these things and people to Spain. She brought together the Spanish Medical Aid Committee. We had three doctors on the committee, one representing the TUC [Trades Union Congress], and I became its honorary secretary. The initial work of arranging meetings and raising funds was easy. It was quite common to raise £1,000 at a meeting, besides plates full of rings, bracelets, brooches, watches and jewellery of all kinds.*

● Question 3

How useful is Source D in understanding the importance of Isabel Brown's role in supporting the Spanish Republican government?

SOURCE E

The clenched fist salute was the traditional sign of solidarity with workers around the world.



Celebrating the successful fund-raising for a fully equipped ambulance to be sent to Spain.

● Question 4

What can we learn from Source E about the role British women played in supporting the Spanish Republican government during the civil war?

SOURCE F

Here is a secondary source, *British Women and the Spanish Civil War* (2002) by Angela Jackson, discussing the role of Leah Manning (a former MP) in bringing Basque child refugees to Britain.

▶▶ *Leah Manning was in the Basque Country [a northern province of Spain] preparing the children for evacuation and sending telegrams to British MPs and religious leaders imploring [strongly asking] for support. The British government was less than enthusiastic about granting permission for refugees to come to this country... but eventually reluctantly agreed to allow the entry of 4,000 children with their teachers and priests.*

SOURCE G



The ship La Habana, docked in Southampton on 23 May 1937 carrying Basque child refugees.

● Question 5

How is the information in Source F supported by the photo in Source G? Explain what additional information you might need to know more about how and by whom the children were cared for once they had disembarked [left the ship].

SOURCE H

Molly Murphy, a British nurse, describes the conditions of a hospital where she volunteered.

▶▶ *Everything here was in short supply and especially nurses. Regulation hours of work meant all hours... Always the water had to be carried, rarely less than a quarter of a mile. There were no windows. All had been shattered by blasts from bombs. One had to get used to the breezes blowing through the place... to bats flying around at night, to living with wounded men groaning with pain, to working until one was completely exhausted.*

– Extract from Angela Jackson, *British Women and the Spanish Civil War* (2002).

SOURCE I



Salaria Kea, an American nurse, assisting in the operation on a child somewhere in Spain during the civil war.

● Question 6

What can we learn from sources H and I about the conditions many volunteer nurses had to endure and what they witnessed?

● Question 7

Extended task: Using all the sources, A to I, your Knowledge Organiser, the mini-biographies and what you have learnt from the PowerPoint, explain the role of women volunteers during the Spanish Civil War.
