

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?'

TEACHER READING

Brief background to the Spanish Civil War

The war began in July 1936 as a result of a failed uprising of rightwing forces against the democratically elected government of the Spanish Republic, a 'Popular Front' coalition made up of the Socialist Party and a number of small left-of-centre Republican parties.

The rising was initially defeated by the people in many of the major cities, including Madrid and Barcelona. However, with the support of Hitler's air force, General Franco was able to transport the Army of Africa across the Strait of Gibraltar into mainland Spain. From that point on the attempted coup became a full-blown civil war that lasted until March 1939.

The war followed a period of political instability and social division that intensified from the founding of the Second Republic in April 1931. Spain was both a growing industrialised country but also across its regions a highly agrarian one, where its peasantry was landless and lived in poverty. Illiteracy was extremely high and, where there was education, it was controlled by the Catholic Church.

The Church was very powerful and had much influence both at a state level and in the thousands of Spanish villages across the country. Expressing what they regarded as traditional values, they were suspicious of any social movement that threatened their authority.

The Spanish army had suffered numerous setbacks since its defeat in the Spanish American War of 1898. It had managed to avoid becoming embroiled in the First World War, but its officer class struggled to find a role for itself or able to maintain its prestige. Only the Army of Africa had succeeded in holding on to a semblance of its traditions, following years of fighting in Morocco between 1921-1926 in what was known as the Rif Wars. The army was deployed by Spain's Centre-Right government in 1934 in brutally suppressing a miners' strike in the province of Asturias. It was General Franco who commanded the troops on that occasion, a foretaste of the future dictator's ruthlessness in dealing with political and military opponents.

The policies of the newly elected Popular Front government, elected in February 1936, raised expectations for land reform and for an overhaul of the country's education system. However, the government's plans were not fully thought through and one of the

consequences was a further widening of division across Spanish society. Frustrated by the perceived slow progress of change, landless peasants began to take matters into their own hands, seizing land; while, on the Right, alarm bells were sounded by talk of reforming the army and cutting the numbers of commissioned officers. The Church spoke out against government plans to reform education and condemned the practice of divorce that had been legal in Spain since 1932.

Women join the fight against the generals

In the first days of the civil war, women fought alongside the men, taking up arms that had been distributed by the authorities to prevent the army from seizing power by force. Formed into fighting militias, these groups became the main focus of organised resistance against the rebel troops. Women also took up fighting positions on the front line. British artist Felicia Browne fought in the early days of the war and became the first British volunteer, male or female, to be killed. It was reported she was going to the aid of a wounded fighter while on a mission to blow up a troop train when she was shot.

Despite the heroic actions of many female fighters, by September 1936 the Republican government forbade women from fighting and disbanded the militias. Reverting to traditional gender roles, the government declared: 'Men to the war fronts, women to the home front'. There was little public outcry over this change in policy. One woman who stood out as defiant was Dolores Ibárruri, a leading member of the Spanish Communist Party, known as La Pasionaria (the passion flower).

On the side of the military rebels, now known as the Nationalists, the belief was promoted that the role of women was solely as 'homemakers'. However, for the duration of the civil war many young women served as distributors of food to the soldiers, as well as staffing the many hospitals in the Franco-occupied zones. Any thought of equality or expanded educational opportunity in these areas was extinguished by the Franco-led junta.

The call for volunteers

By late 1936 the call had gone out worldwide for volunteers to help the beleaguered Spanish Republic. A

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few had already found their own way to Spain or had been in the country at the time of the military uprising. In October, the newly formed International Brigades began to receive thousands of male volunteers willing to fight against fascism, including 2,500 from Britain and Ireland.

Committees in support of the Spanish government sprang up across Britain, including the Spanish Medical Aid for Spain Committee, which sent out the call for doctors, nurses and medical support volunteers such as drivers and mechanics. Women from all social backgrounds responded. Many were already qualified nurses and would find themselves on the front line assisting in surgery or converting buildings or any available space into hospitals or field dressing stations.

Not all the women volunteers were political. Some were members of the Communist Party, but others simply wanted to help as they felt there was a demand for their expertise. They came from all corners of the globe, including a large contingent from the United States, Canada, Latin America, Australia and Europe.

What did the women volunteers do?

Nursing clearly was the role that was most dominant among the women volunteers. Working in highly stressful circumstances, they had to treat an enormous number of casualties often with only rudimentary equipment and a terrible shortage of medical supplies. Others who were stationed in hospitals or convalescent wards away from the front line had a slightly easier time, but were always a target for aerial bombing by the enemy. Nurses sometimes took on the role as drivers to ensure the hospital had a supply of food or other essential supplies. Women such as Nan Green also served as hospital administrators, ensuring that the facilities ran as smoothly as possible.

In addition to supporting the medical services, women served as translators, interpreters and clerical and administrative workers. Others worked with refugee children, offering shelter and support; a few worked as paid or unpaid journalists or as photographers.

Volunteering in Britain

In Britain, women were heavily involved in the various Aid Spain campaigns. Isabel Brown was a leading light on the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief, speaking at numerous fund-raising rallies. Well known political figures such as Eleanor Rathbone, the Duchess of Atholl, Ellen Wilkinson and Leah Manning also lent their support to the cause against Franco and visited Spain to see the situation at first hand.

At a local level many women were involved in fund-raising activities. This involved organising a fund-raising event or simply collecting tins of food or warm clothing to be sent to the volunteers fighting in Spain. Charlotte Haldane helped set up the Dependents and Wounded Aid Committee with the aim of supporting families where a

loved one and wage earner had gone to fight in Spain and had been killed or returned wounded and was unable to work.

Another important role was those women who supported the Basque Children Refugee Committee. In May 1937, 4,000 Basque refugee children arrived in Southampton on the ship *La Habana* from the port of Santurzi in Bilbao. They were housed initially in camps and later with host families or in especially acquired buildings. Many women volunteers were involved in administering and coordinating their arrival and caring for the children during their time in Britain.

Legacy

The events that women volunteers experienced would have a profound and sometimes traumatic impact on their lives. In addition to witnessing terrible scenes, a consequence of war, the volunteers often had difficulties finding their way home in the wake of the defeat of the Republican government. Others had endured the emotional turmoil of losing a partner killed in action. In early 1939, volunteers were caught up in the full-scale retreat of the Republic's army and exodus of thousands of refugees fleeing across the border into France. Several found themselves held in internment camps in southern France, unable to leave. British volunteers had to be rescued by British consular officials who were often unsympathetic to their plight.

Upon returning to Britain many resumed their careers as nurses. The skills they had learnt in Spain would in some cases be called upon again during the Second World War. Women volunteers also continued the political struggle against fascism, while others drifted away from organised politics.

Further reading

- Jim Fyrt, *The Signal Was Spain: The Spanish Aid Movement in Britain, 1936-39*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1986.
- Jim Fyrt and Sally Alexander, *Women's Voices from the Spanish Civil War*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1991.
- Angela Jackson, *British Women and the Spanish Civil War*, Routledge, 2002.
- Angela Jackson, *'For Us It Was Heaven': The Passion, Grief and Fortitude of Patience Darton from the Spanish Civil War to Mao's China*, Sussex Academic Press, 2012.
- Emily Mason, *Democracy, Deeds and Dilemmas. Support for the Spanish Republic within British Civil Society, 1936-1939*, Sussex Academic Press, 2017.
- Linda Palfreeman, *Salud!: British Volunteers in the Republican Medical Service During the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939*, Sussex Academic Press, 2012.