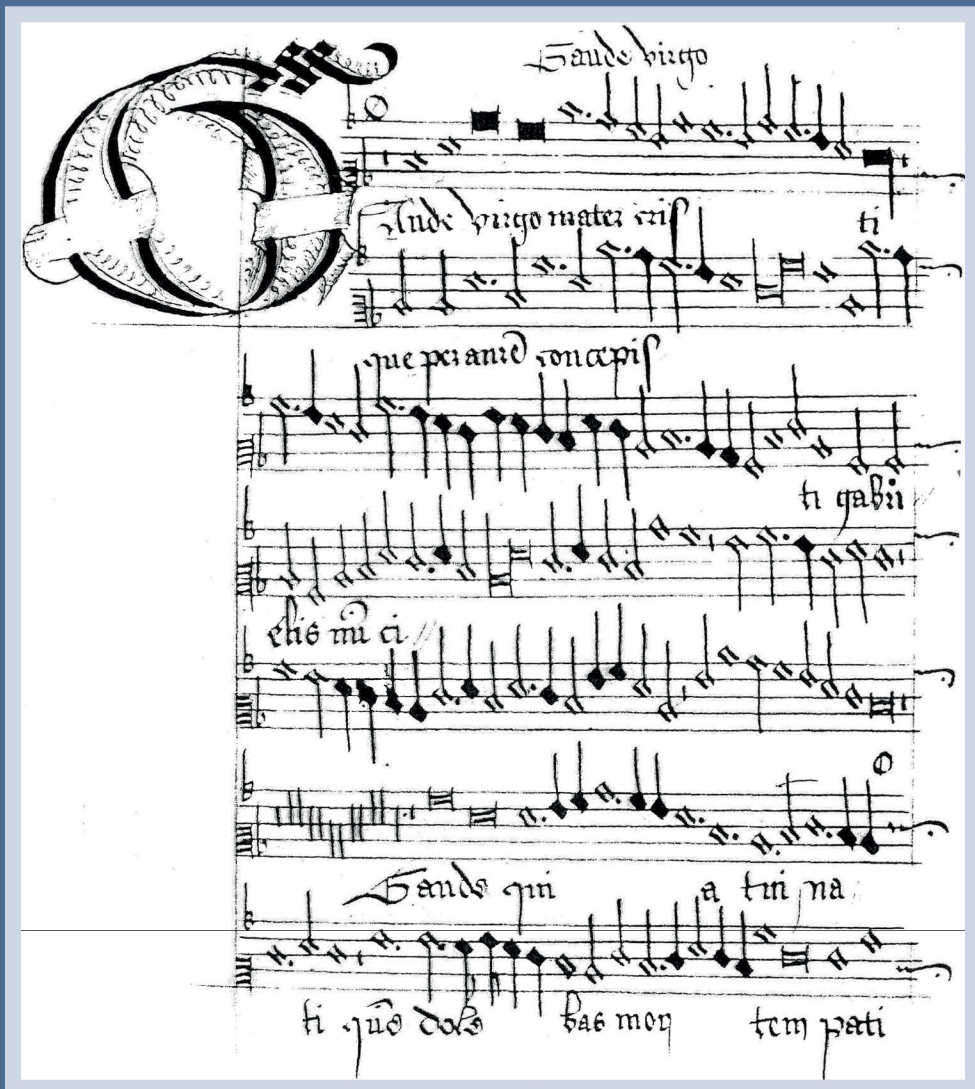


The Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society



Front cover: Opening page of the Antiphon Gaude Virgo Mater Christi
(Harley MS. ca. 1530, British Library).

MEN OF CLEAR VISION: FREDERICK SYKES, ROY WATTS AND THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

Henry Brown and Adrian Pole

In essence it was a class war. If it had been won, the cause of the common people everywhere would have been strengthened. It was lost, and the dividend-drawers all over the world rubbed their hands. That was the real issue; all else was froth on the surface.¹

George Orwell on the Spanish Civil War

In July 1936 sections of the Spanish military rose against the Republican government of Spain, plunging the country into three years of civil war. Italian and German support for the rebels convinced many people in Britain, including in Leicester, that Spain's battlefields were a crucial front-line against fascism. As many as 2,500 men left the country to join the International Brigades, a volunteer fighting force established by the Comintern (Communist International) early in the war. Among them were Leicester men Frederick Sykes and Roy Watts. They were killed fighting in two of the war's bloodiest engagements – the Battle of the Jarama in 1937 and the Battle of the Ebro in 1938. This essay is the first attempt to show exactly why, and in what context, the two chose to fight. It will also detail the conditions they encountered once they arrived in Spain and the circumstances of their deaths.

INTRODUCTION

On Saturday 18 July 1936, the *Leicester Mercury* informed over 65,000 readers² that a military revolt in Melilla, the most important town in Spanish Morocco, had failed. 'Army In Morocco Tries to Rebel', ran the front-page headline. 'Government Rounding Up Fascists: Back To Normal Soon'.³ Despite initial claims that the situation was under control, the rebellious officers had in fact managed to secure the town by the time the newspaper went to print. Garrisons throughout mainland Spain soon began declaring for the rising, plunging the country into three years of brutal civil war.⁴ The self-styled 'Nationalists', led by a ruthlessly ambitious general by the name of Francisco Franco, claimed to be saving Spain from the civil disorder that had gripped the nation since the election of a 'Popular Front' government of liberal and left-wing parties that spring. Franco's victory in April 1939 brought

¹ George Orwell, 'Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War', *Essays* (London, Penguin, 2000), pp. 227–8.

² Steve England, *Magnificent Mercury, History of a Regional Newspaper: The First 125 Years of the Leicester Mercury* (Newtown Linford, Kairos Press, 1999), p. 53.

³ *Leicester Mercury*, 'Spanish Military Revolt Fails', 18 July 1936.

⁴ Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* (4th edn, London, Penguin, 2003), hereafter 'Hugh Thomas', pp. 203–9.



Fig. 1. 'British Members of the International Brigade from Spain, on arriving in Leicester to-day ... to the War Memorial and paid tribute to the memory of three Leicester colleagues who fell in the Spanish War.' Picture shows them gathered at the shrine as Bob Cooney deposits a wreath. *Leicester Mercury*, 3 February 1939.

democracy in Spain to an abrupt end and opened the way for a military dictatorship that would last for almost four decades.

British reactions to the Spanish Civil War were mixed. Many people regarded the conflict as an all-out battle between communism and fascism. 'We English hate fascism', declared foreign minister Anthony Eden, 'but we loathe Bolshevism as much. So, if there is somewhere where fascists and Bolsheviks can kill each other off, so much the better for us'.⁵ This attitude was fundamental in the government's decision to remain neutral and embark upon a policy of 'non-intervention' in Spain, a choice fully supported by many across the country. 'With Europe a seething cauldron of suspicion and strife', explained one Leicester local, 'it behoves the Englishman to set an example and remain calm and aloof from the events which threaten to land all nations into war'.⁶ The foreign minister, however, was mistaken. The Spanish government was actually a broad coalition of liberal and left-wing parties in which

⁵ Quoted in Richard Baxell, *Unlikely Warriors* (Paperback edn, London, Aurumn Press, 2014), hereafter Richard Baxell, 'Unlikely Warriors', p. 44.

⁶ *Leicester Mercury* correspondence, 'Call to Sanity', 12 August 1936.

the Communists only played a small part. The Fascists, meanwhile, were just one of several reactionary groups Francisco Franco had successfully rallied under his crusading banner. The *Generalísimo* himself was largely uninterested in the niceties of political ideology, and had no qualms whatsoever in eliminating the leader of the Spanish *Falange* (conservative Spanish political party, active between 1933 and 1934) in the process of consolidating power into his own hands.⁷

Others in Britain regarded the military revolt as an attempt to snuff out the life of a democratically constituted government. ‘The Spanish people elected their government in a free and honourable fashion’ wrote one local to the *Leicester Mercury*. ‘A feudal minority turns its Foreign Legion – of most evil repute – upon these helpless citizens. It also receives help from outside rulers, who do not hesitate to break the ordinary law of nations, as well as the Covenant of the League, by such treachery to a fellow member.’⁸ German and Italian support for Franco in the form of tanks, planes and troops convinced many people on the left that Spanish democracy was set to be the latest victim of unchecked fascist expansionism in Europe. Thousands of volunteers from across the world decided to take up arms in defence of the Republic, believing that by doing so they could strike an overdue blow against Hitler and Mussolini, and therefore save their own countries from the fascist menace.

Most of these men joined the International Brigades, a volunteer force established by the Comintern in the first weeks of the war. At least 32,000 individuals from 53 countries passed through its ranks, with as many as 2,000 serving at any one time.⁹ Of the 2,500 British men who joined, 500 never returned.¹⁰ Six individuals from Leicester are known to have gone to fight. Frank Farr, Arthur Henderson and Alec Adderley all returned to Britain after their front-line experiences, whereas Frederick Sykes and Roy Watts were both killed within months of their arrival in Spain. The fate of Jack Watson remains less clear. He may have been killed on the Pozoblanco Front, but the evidence remains unclear. Whether they came from Leicester, London, New York or Havana, all of the volunteers regarded the Spanish Republic’s struggle for survival as their own. ‘Never before’, argued Leicester volunteer Frank Farr, ‘has there been such international unity in a single cause’.¹¹ He was probably correct.

Frederick Sykes and Roy Watts were both working-class activists who arrived in Leicester with long track records of labour militancy behind them. Like many other volunteers, they participated in fundraising efforts for the Republic before making the momentous decision to take up arms in its defence. Their deaths instantly transformed them into anti-fascist martyrs back home. A pledge of ‘let us be worthy of him’ was printed on a memorial card for Roy Watts when it became known

⁷ Paul Preston, *Franco, a Biography* (Paperback edn, London, Fontana Press, 1995), hereafter Paul Preston, ‘Franco’, pp. 255–70.

⁸ *Leicester Mercury* correspondence, ‘Problem of Intervention’, 24 August 1936.

⁹ Antony Beevor, *The Battle for Spain, The Spanish Civil War 1936–1939* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2006), hereafter ‘Antony Beevor’, p. 157.

¹⁰ Richard Baxell, ‘Unlikely Warriors’, p. 6.

¹¹ ‘Lessons from Spain’, Frank Farr, International Brigades Archive (IBA), Marx Memorial Library, London, United Kingdom, SC/VOL/FFA.

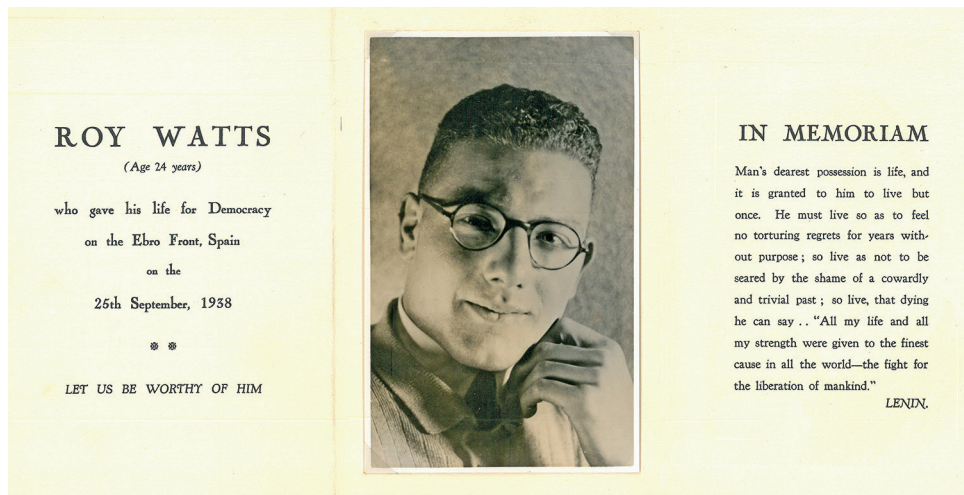


Fig. 2. Roy Watts Memorial Card, Photo and commemorative quotation, Leicester Public Records.

that he had died fighting 'for democracy' on the Ebro front in 1938.¹² The myth of the Brigades has grown ever since, with British commander Bill Alexander arguing against all evidence that 'these men, deprived of weapons by the Tory government, were able to stop the professional armies of three dictators for nearly three years'.¹³ Although the military contribution of the volunteers was rather more limited than Alexander would like to have believed, there is no denying that their example continues to strike a chord for many people in Britain and beyond. In March 2018 around 120 individuals from across the country came to Leicester to attend the unveiling of a memorial to the volunteers in the city's marketplace.¹⁴ 'Defeat fascism by any means necessary' are the unambiguous words inscribed at the foot of the stone.

Over 80 years have passed since the deaths of Roy Watts and Fred Sykes on the battlefields of civil war Spain, and yet no adequate attempt has been made to explain who they were or why they went to fight. The varied responses unleashed by the war in Leicester have been ignored, while the situation they encountered once they arrived has received almost no attention. This essay is not another attempt to render homage to Leicester's volunteers, but rather an overdue effort to place them in their appropriate historical context. It will show that the two men – both of them Communists – were driven by a profound sense of political purpose, which led them to their eventual deaths in a brutal foreign war.

¹² Memorial card for Roy Watts, Public Records Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland, hereafter Leicester Public Records, Wigston, United Kingdom, DE8642/4.

¹³ Quoted in Valerie Grove, *Laurie Lee, the Well-Loved Stranger* (London, Penguin, 2000), p. 491.

¹⁴ <<http://www.international-brigades.org.uk/content/unveiling-leicester-plaque>> Unveiling of Leicester Plaque, accessed 31 March 2019.

PART I
FREDERICK SYKES

The Republic Besieged: July 1936–February 1937

Early life and politics

Frederick Sykes, a 29-year-old clerk living at Gopsall Street, Leicester, departed for Spain in the winter of 1936. He was killed just two months later as Republican forces fought desperately in the Jarama Valley to prevent Franco's Nationalists from encircling Madrid.¹⁵ His service with the International Brigades was in many respects the logical end of a life spent in perpetual revolt against authority. He was born in Sheffield on 13 September 1907, the son of working-class parents about whom little is known. Both his father, an engineer labourer, and his mother, a silver burnisher, died when he was still a young child. He was sent, like many other local children with no carers, to the Blue Coat school on Psalter Lane.¹⁶ Named after the distinctive blue and yellow uniforms worn by their students, these Charitable institutions were established to house fatherless and orphaned children all over the country. The Sheffield school had been established in 1706, moving to its new purpose-built premises in 1911.¹⁷ It was here, in the strict hierarchies of conservative education, that Sykes first encountered what he later called the 'worst ruling class ideas'.¹⁸

The school was run in a strict military fashion, with the children obliged to march from room to room in perfect time and eat their meals in total silence. The code of discipline was harsh even by the standards of the time, with caning being used to punish the most minor of transgressions.¹⁹ One Sheffield local remarked years later that, if she misbehaved as a young girl, her mother would threaten to send her to the Blue Coat.²⁰ Every Sunday the boys were paraded to the parish church before local dignitaries seeking recognition for their charitable works.²¹ Although Sykes admitted to retaining religious influences into early adulthood, he reacted against the stifling atmosphere of his upbringing and described himself as an 'instinctive rebel' from his earliest days.²² In this regard he had something in common with many other future Communists, who, in the opinion of Marxist intellectual Phillip Toynbee, were partly motivated by a hatred of 'parental and school authority'.²³

¹⁵ 'Tributes to Leicester Man Killed in Spain', *Leicester Mercury*, 19 July 1937

¹⁶ Party Biography for Frederick Sykes, hereafter 'Party Biography for Sykes'. Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), Moscow, Russia, 545/6/206.

¹⁷ www.picturesheffield.com/frontend.php?keywords=Ref_No_increment;EQUALS;y02883&pos=2&action=zoom Class of 1918, *The Boys Blue Coat School, Psalter Lane with George Alfred Hampshire highlighted*, accessed 1 August 2019.

¹⁸ 'Party Biography for Sykes', RGASPI, 545/6/206.

¹⁹ < <http://www.villagepublications.co.uk/bradway/buglelocalhistorywin00.htm>>, 'Blue Coat Charity School', *Bradway Bugle Internet Edition Winter 2000*, accessed 01 August 2019.

²⁰ <<https://www.sheffieldforum.co.uk/topic/145398-bluecoat-school/>>, 'Bluecoat school', accessed 1 August 2019.

²¹ 'Blue Coat Charity School', *Bradway Bugle Internet Edition Winter 2000*.

²² 'Party Biography for Sykes', RGASPI, 545/6/206.

²³ Richard Baxell, 'Unlikely Warriors', p. 21.



Fig. 3. Dormitory of the Blue Coat School, Psalter Lane, Sheffield Local Studies Library: Picture Sheffield y02880.

Sykes took his first political steps at the age of 21 when he joined the Transport and General Workers Union, which, under the leadership of staunch anti-communist Ernest Bevin, was rapidly becoming the largest trade union in the country.²⁴ He also became a member of the Independent Labour Party, serving as branch secretary for Derby and Luton.²⁵ The ILP had dedicated itself to ‘Socialism in our time’ in 1928, calling for a sweeping range of labour reforms, including higher unemployment benefit, mass nationalisation of British industries and a living wage.²⁶ This radical legislative programme stood in stark contrast to the timid ‘gradualism’ of the Labour Party and clearly appealed to Sykes. He would nonetheless leave the party in 1930, just two years after joining, ‘disillusioned’ with its ability to represent working-class interests.²⁷ That same year he embarked upon several years of itinerant employment in Sheffield, Birmingham, Northampton and eventually Leicester. He worked in various positions ranging from a clerk, engineer, fitter, salesman and factory bell leader, all the while continuing his working-class activism wherever he went. It was whilst defending impoverished tenants against unscrupulous bailiffs in the London

²⁴ ‘Party Biography for Sykes’, RGASPI, 545/6/206.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Richard Baxell, ‘Unlikely Warriors’, p. 18.

²⁷ ‘Party Biography for Sykes’, RGASPI, 545/6/206.

borough of Chelsea that he first came into contact with the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB).²⁸

In the early 1930s the Communists numbered a miniscule 2,500 members at most.²⁹ They were isolated by their stubborn refusal to co-operate with potential allies on the left, loyally adhering to the Comintern policy of ‘class against class’, which held that social democrats were as much the enemy as fascists in the global struggle against capitalism. It was only with the rise of Hitler and the onset of massive German militarisation that Stalin realised the extent of his international isolation, and began to call on Communists everywhere to forge broad left-wing alliances against the growing threat of right-wing extremism.³⁰ The British Communist Party sought to attract more members, and ‘Popular Front’ governments were elected to power in both France and Spain. Sykes’ decision to join the Sheffield branch in February 1931, at a time when the Party still regarded ‘bourgeois democracy’ with overt hostility, was an indication of his revolutionary attitude to labour relations.³¹ It also set him on a path to confrontation with those he saw as political sell-outs, whether they were union bosses, the wider public or even the police. The first sign of trouble came almost immediately when the Transport and General Workers Union expelled him for organising disturbances in the catering unions.³² His new political allegiance had marked him out as a potential infiltrator, whose removal was deemed necessary if a dreaded Communist takeover of the Labour movement was to be prevented.

Leicester, Communism and Fascism

Sykes arrived in Leicester, a city of over 200,000 people and expanding,³³ in May 1932.³⁴ The Midlands town had escaped the worst deprivations of the recent economic crisis, but it was still marked by the grinding poverty of the times. Contractions in the textile and shoemaking industries had resulted in 16,000 unemployed workers by 1932, and although that figure would fall in the following years, at least 10,000 remained without work in 1939.³⁵ Sykes, who was already well-versed in the art of working-class activism by the time he moved to the city, became responsible for the local branch of the National Unemployed Workers Movement.³⁶ Edwin Peacock, a bricklayer from Bedford who had himself moved to Leicester in 1922, described the movement ‘as a fair size’. Designated members ‘would visit the boards of guardians, someone or other on behalf of individuals, and display their

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Richard Baxell, ‘Unlikely Warriors’, p. 18.

³⁰ Orlando Figes, *Revolutionary Russia, 1891–1991* (London, Pelican, 2014), pp. 293–6.

³¹ ‘Party Biography for Sykes’, RGASPI, 545/6/206.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ ‘The City of Leicester: Social and administrative history since 1835’, in *A History of the County of Leicester: Volume 4, the City of Leicester*, ed. R. A. McKinley (London, 1958), pp. 251–302. *British History Online* <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/leics/vol4/pp251-302>>, accessed 1 August 2019.

³⁴ ‘Party Biography for Sykes’, RGASPI, 545/6/206.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ ‘Party Biography for Sykes’, RGASPI, 545/6/206.



Fig. 4. Yards of Nos 28 and 30 in St Peter's Lane <<https://www.leicestermercury.co.uk/news/history/gallery/the-slums-of-leicester-541382>> 'The slums of Leicester'.

opposition to the government'.³⁷ The movement was given a considerable boost by the introduction of means testing in the early 1930s. Although members held regular meetings outside the Fish Market, it was the hunger marches which most effectively drew attention to their cause. The legendary 1934 march passed through Leicester and a number of volunteers helped to wash the feet of the participants.³⁸ Marching together for a shared purpose helped to forge a sense of radical working-class solidarity, the likes of which would later draw hundreds of men to fight in Spain.³⁹

After just two years in Leicester, Sykes was again on the move. He relocated to Birmingham where he successfully campaigned for local labour rights in his capacity as District Unemployed Leader. He also became the secretary of the Birmingham Unity Council, a body representing the collective demands of the city's workforce, as well as a member of the Amalgamated Engineering Union. The latter seem to have viewed Sykes as a rising star and presented him with an award for recruiting

³⁷ Interview with Edwin Peacock, taped at the interviewee's home on 13 January 1986, East Midlands Oral History Archive (EMOHA), Public Records Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland, Wigston, United Kingdom, accessed 9 August 2019 via <<http://specialcollections.le.ac.uk/digital/collection/p15407coll1>> LO/237/188.

³⁸ Ned Newitt, *A People's History of Leicester, A Pictorial History of Working Class Life and Politics* (Derby, Breedon Books, 2008), hereafter Ned Newitt, 'A People's History of Leicester', p. 132.

³⁹ Walter Gregory, *The Shallow Grave, a Memoir of the Spanish Civil War* (Nottingham, Five Leaves, 1996), hereafter 'Walter Gregory', p. 166.

no fewer than 26 new members to union ranks. He had an unparalleled opportunity to put his organisational skills to the test when he helped to arrange a May Day strike at the Lucas motor components factory with the help of the Communist Party.⁴⁰ The majority of the factory's 7,000 employees participated in the action, several of whom were arrested in confrontations with the police.⁴¹ Sykes was also sent to Northampton to support the United Counties Busmen in their campaign for improved working conditions, where the obvious disdain he displayed towards his anti-communist trade unionist colleagues drew harsh criticism from fellow organisers.⁴²

By the summer of 1936, Sykes was back in Leicester and living just a few minutes' walk from the city centre at Dryden Street.⁴³ The entire area, a squalid slum once renowned for its large number of second-hand shops and the attendant crowd of hawkers, tramps and homeless, was cleared just three years later and is now dominated by Lee Circle.⁴⁴ Upon his return, Sykes was appointed organiser of the local Communist Party.⁴⁵ The timing was significant, since Leicester Blackshirt Walter Gough established a branch of the British Union of Fascists that same year.⁴⁶ By modelling their organisational structure on the Nazi Party and canvassing for support in the city's neighbourhoods, the original group of seven fascists soon managed to recruit around 450 individuals to a total of three branches. They could even count on the support of various members of the local business community.⁴⁷ For the next few years Leicester's Blackshirts would come into frequent conflict with their left-wing neighbours, with violence breaking out on numerous occasions.

Despite their irreconcilable disagreements over policy, both groups placed enormous faith in the power of oratory as a means of winning public support, with Walter Gough even being sent to the Warwickshire countryside to attend a crash-course in public speaking led by William Joyce (later to emerge as 'Lord Haw Haw').⁴⁸ The heart of Leicester's soap-box culture was undoubtedly the marketplace, described by one socialist as the 'working man's university'.⁴⁹ 'Sunday morning it was just like Hyde Park corner', another local remembered. 'There was tremendous interest in these sorts of things.' In a time long before widespread television ownership, weekend speeches outside the Corn Exchange were, for many locals, the cheapest entertainment available.⁵⁰ Gough claimed that, prior to the arrival of the Fascists, the market was mostly filled with Communists and 'religious cranks'.⁵¹

⁴⁰ 'Party Biography for Sykes', RGASPI, 545/6/206.

⁴¹ 'Birmingham Strike to End This Morning?', *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 02 May 1934 and 'Protest Against Police', *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 10 May 1934.

⁴² 'Party Biography for Sykes', RGASPI, 545/6/206.

⁴³ 'Arrested from Platform in Market-Place', *Leicester Mercury*, 14 September 1936.

⁴⁴ Ned Newitt (ed.), *The Slums of Leicester*, (Nottingham, DB Publishing, 2013), p. 61 and p. 189.

⁴⁵ 'Party Biography for Sykes', RGASPI, 545/6/206.

⁴⁶ Interview with Walter Gough, taped at the interviewee's home on the 22 November 1983, EMOHA, LO/058/009.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Interview with Mr and Mrs R. V. Walton, taped in the interviewees' home on 12 January 1984, EMOHA, LO/070/021.

⁵⁰ Interview with Henry Riley, taped on 28 February 1984, EMOHA, LO/077/028.

⁵¹ Interview with Walter Gough, EMOHA, LO/058/009.

Although the Blackshirts eventually succeeded in drawing crowds of 300 or 400 at a time, they learned to expect a considerable degree of ‘rough stuff’ from their political opponents and had to be moved to the nearby Haymarket, not far from where Sykes lived.⁵²

Leicester’s Communists certainly earned their reputation for riotousness. In July 1936 commotion broke out in the market when a number of cars tried to pass through one of their meetings. Blows were exchanged with the motorists – one of whom was a well-known confectioner – and numerous market stalls were overturned.⁵³ Another example of disorder followed that August. Frederick Sykes was preparing a stage made of wooden-trestles when a local inspector asked him to move aside, informing him that he was blocking a public through-way. Sykes loudly told the officer that he and his colleagues were ‘going to have their meeting’ regardless. He was seized the moment he began to address the assembled crowd of around 300 people, cries of ‘at ’em boys’ rose up from a number of hostile spectators. A local anti-fascist, Guy Paget, defended Sykes at the subsequent trial for disorderly behaviour, arguing that the inspector had violated Sykes’ freedom of speech. Paget also made the bold claim that the constabulary were mounting a sustained campaign of provocation against the activities of the local Communist Party.⁵⁴ Sykes, like hundreds of other Communists across the country, felt little more than contempt for the forces of law and order that seemed always to side with their Fascist adversaries.

Leicester and the War, 1936

The Spanish Civil War broke out with the rising of the officers in Melilla on the 17 July 1936. Leicester’s Fascists sided instinctively with the rebels and even dubbed their local headquarters ‘the Alcatraz’ in homage to the fortress – or Alcázar – of Toledo, in which supporters of the military rebels were besieged throughout the first month of war.⁵⁵ The city’s Communists, on the other hand, supported the embattled Republic. They took their cue from the Comintern, which since 1934 had come out in favour of ‘bourgeois democracy’ as a necessary bulwark against fascist expansionism in Europe.⁵⁶ The mere mention of the war caused a peaceful Blackshirt meeting outside the Haymarket to turn violent on 31 August. The Fascist speakers, each of whom was surrounded by a number of ‘attendants’ as well as a circle of police officers, were drowned out by cries of ‘Rats!’ and ‘Long Live Spain!’ from certain members of the audience. Almost 40 minutes of incessant heckling finally forced the Blackshirts to abandon their meeting and retreat to their headquarters in Churchgate. They were hounded down Humberstone Gate and past the Clock Tower by angry demonstrators, who, along with a significant crowd of onlookers,

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ ‘Exciting Scenes in Leicester Market place’, *Leicester Mercury*, 17 July 1936.

⁵⁴ ‘Arrested from Platform in Market-Place’, *Leicester Mercury*, 14 September 1936.

⁵⁵ Interview with Walter Gough, EMOHA, LO/058/009.

⁵⁶ Richard Baxell, ‘Unlikely Warriors’, p. 19.

managed to bring tram and motor traffic to a standstill.⁵⁷ Further violence at the Haymarket erupted just two weeks later when a certain Mr. Goodacre stepped forward to challenge a Fascist speaker on the Italian use of poison gas in Abyssinia. The cry of ‘What about Spain?’ suddenly rose up from the crowd causing a furious melee to break out, throwing Mr Goodacre to the ground and fracturing his ankle. A dozen police rushed forward, seeking to avoid serious injuries, and began to escort the speakers back to their headquarters. They were again pursued by the restive crowd.⁵⁸

Although an imperfect guide to what might be called ‘public opinion’, the correspondence section of the *Leicester Mercury* demonstrates that the city’s locals held a wide variety of attitudes to the war. For many people, early reports of ‘red atrocities’ in the Republican zone reinforced the impression that civilisation south of the Pyrenees had completely broken down. Randolph Churchill spoke for many when he described the war as just ‘a bunch of bloody dagoes killing each other’.⁵⁹ One Leicester resident urged a marketplace speaker to join his ‘comrades’ in Spain so that he might participate in ‘the orgy of rapine and the savage slaughter of humanity’ she imagined to be taking place there at the behest of his ‘Russian paymasters’.⁶⁰ The war was dismissed as a sanguinary Mediterranean squabble of little interest to the level-headed Englishman. ‘How can the average Leicester man or woman understand the problems peculiar to their European neighbours?’ pondered one *Mercury* reader. ‘How can they pass judgement on the fiery Fascists or the Moscow-inspired Communists in war-rent Spain without study of the causes of the conflict?’⁶¹

This was precisely the view sardonically summed up by the editor of the *Leicester Mercury* in late August: ‘Spaniards, it seems, are to be treated after the fashion of the Kilkenny cats. Are they killing one another off? Well, much the less trouble for everyone else.’⁶² Despite widespread ambivalence towards events in Spain, there were those in Leicester who were deeply alarmed by the actions of the rebel generals. Isabel Ashley, of Stoneygate Road, was adamant that the Spanish people had ‘elected their government in a free and honourable fashion’. As far as she was concerned, responsibility for the bloodshed lay squarely with the military insurgents.⁶³ ‘In trying’, wrote another reader, ‘to discover who are the guilty culprits of this awful carnage of slaughter, we must without prejudice, go to its first cause’. He went on to argue that the reforming attempts of the liberal Republican government had ‘brought together the large landowners, industrialists, and heads of the Catholic Church’ in an attempt to influence the rebellious officers. It was they ‘who struck the first blow’, and they who must be held accountable, not seditious ‘Communists’.⁶⁴

⁵⁷ ‘Blackshirt Meeting Uproar’, *Leicester Mercury*, 18 August 1936.

⁵⁸ ‘Leicester Man Injured at Political Meeting’, *Leicester Evening Mail*, 31 August 1936.

⁵⁹ Richard Baxell, ‘Unlikely Warriors’, p. 44.

⁶⁰ ‘Market Place Speakers’, *Leicester Mercury*, Correspondence section, 13 August 1936.

⁶¹ ‘Call to Sanity’, *Leicester Mercury*, Correspondence Section, 12 August 1936.

⁶² ‘The Problem of Non-Intervention’, *Leicester Mercury*, Correspondence section, Editor’s Leader, 22 August 1936.

⁶³ ‘The Problem of Intervention’, *Leicester Mercury*, Correspondence section, 24 August 1936.

⁶⁴ ‘Fiat Justitia’, *Leicester Mercury*, Correspondence section, 14 September 1936.



Fig. 5. Albert Hall, <<http://www.nednewitt.com/whoswho/H.html>>
‘The Who’s Who of Radical Leicester: Albert Hall’.

Republican sympathisers began fundraising for the Spanish government almost immediately. Like thousands of other individuals from across the political spectrum, Frederick Sykes dedicated himself to ‘aid Spain’ activism, intended to raise the public’s awareness of the situation in Spain and convince them that democracy itself was at stake. The Leicester Committee in Aid of Spanish Democracy was established on 24 October 1936 in open support of ‘anti-fascist fighters’ and ‘victims of Franco’ in Spain.⁶⁵ It was chaired by local Communist Albert Hall, a veteran activist who had campaigned for improved rents on the Braunstone Estate earlier in the decade. Its secretary was Victor Lenthall, a fellow Party member. A National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief was formed three months later in the hopes of uniting the 150 local organisations which had sprung up in the wake of the military rebellion.⁶⁶ Although claiming their objectives were ‘non-political, non-sectarian, and humanitarian’, the National Committee’s leaders, much like Albert Hall, were motivated by a deep and unwavering sympathy for the Republic.⁶⁷

Madrigueras

Despite the efforts of ‘Aid Spain’ activists up and down the country, the Nationalist war machine showed absolutely no signs of slowing down by late 1936. A growing number of individuals felt a profound need to do something more. By late August, several British nationals had died fighting for the Republic. Sykes, whose only living relative was a brother back in Sheffield, had no dependants to restrain him from

⁶⁵ Cover letter written by Albert Hall and Victor Lenthall accompanying the Balance Sheet of the ‘Leicester Committee in Aid of Spanish Democracy’, 25 March 1938, hereafter ‘Balance Sheet Cover Letter’, The Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland, DE8642/2.

⁶⁶ Tom Buchanan, *Britain and the Spanish Civil War* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997), hereafter ‘Tom Buchanan’, p. 98.

⁶⁷ ‘Report on the work of the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief’, October 1937, IBA, SC/EPH/2/1/2.

taking up arms himself.⁶⁸ In December he and his room-mate Jack Watson left their home at Gopsall Street in Leicester to join the volunteers in Spain.⁶⁹ The first stop on his route would have been the Communist Party Headquarters in Covent Garden, where hopeful volunteers underwent a gruelling interview process to determine if they were suitable fighting material. He would then have made his way to Victoria Station, where Special Branch officers were charged with looking out for likely volunteers before passing their details on to MI5.⁷⁰ Sykes would then have crossed over to Paris where Charlotte Haldane, feminist author and International Brigade receptionist, was charged with assessing the health of each volunteer. Haldane was mostly unimpressed by what she saw, later claiming that ‘years of depression and dole’ had forced many men into enlisting with the International Brigades without serious consideration of what they were fighting for.⁷¹

Once their enlistment was confirmed, the recruits could finally embark for war-torn Spain. In late 1936 and early 1937 it was still possible to take the train or bus across the Pyrenees before arriving at Figueres, the first major city south of the border.⁷² Sykes arrived on 26 December 1936.⁷³ Volunteers were debriefed in the castle of Sant Ferran, a sprawling military fortress situated on the edge of town, before departing for Brigade Headquarters at Albacete the next day. Sykes gave the staff at Albacete little to remark upon: ‘29 years old, only speaks English’.⁷⁴ Although a company of British men had been serving in Spain for the past two months, the extraordinary influx of foreign volunteers in the first winter of war had soon necessitated the creation of a larger, independent fighting unit. The British Battalion of the International Brigades was duly created on Christmas Day 1936, a day prior to Sykes’ arrival.

The training of the overwhelmingly inexperienced recruits took place at the small town of Madrigueras, not far from Albacete. Most of the town’s 6,000 inhabitants were landless labourers who had spent their lives working for absentee landlords. Their new neighbours moved into a number of properties which had been expropriated from Nationalist sympathisers in the early days of the war. Even the Church had been converted into a communal canteen, offering the new arrivals a constant reminder of what they were fighting for.⁷⁵ Nottingham volunteer Walter Gregory remembered Madrigueras as being ‘characterized by the squalor of its buildings and the almost unbelievable poverty of its peasants’.⁷⁶ He and his companions struggled to settle into their new surroundings. They had little idea of how to cook the oily Spanish food, while a terrible lack of water made their lives

⁶⁸ ‘Doncaster Man Killed in Spain Fighting’, *Sheffield Daily Independent*, 9 July 1937.

⁶⁹ List of English volunteers, RGASPI, 545/6/91.

⁷⁰ Richard Baxell, ‘Unlikely Warriors’, p. 69.

⁷¹ Tom Buchanan, p. 127.

⁷² Richard Baxell, ‘Unlikely Warriors’, pp. 78–9.

⁷³ List of English volunteers, RGASPI, 545/6/91.

⁷⁴ Combatant File Card for Frederick Sykes, RGASPI, 545/6/206.

⁷⁵ Richard Baxell, ‘Unlikely Warriors’, p. 120.

⁷⁶ Walter Gregory, p. 28.

misery.⁷⁷ To their relief the modest pay of five pesetas a day at least guaranteed them a steady supply of the local red wine.⁷⁸

The physical discomfort of those first weeks at Madrigueras was compounded by lacklustre training. To begin with, the volunteers were given no rifles, and were instead issued with a single blanket and a makeshift uniform. They were divided into three companies of around 100 men in addition to a larger machine gun company, each under command of a lieutenant and political commissar charged with the 'moral' education of his men. Each of these four companies consisted of three sections commanded by a sergeant, followed by platoons of seven or eight men commanded by a corporal. Communist intellectual and *Daily Worker* correspondent Tom Wintringham was appointed Battalion Captain. Nobody wore badges to designate rank, resulting in constant confusion over the chain of command.⁷⁹

Sykes was assigned to 20 Group, 7 Section of No. 3 Company.⁸⁰ He was commanded by Bill Briskey, a bus driver from London who had also arrived to Spain in late December. Briskey was totally lacking in military experience and had only been given the post because of his dependable Communist Party record. Walter Gregory described him as 'a quiet, gentle sort of man, a most unmilitary type'.⁸¹ Fortunately for Sykes, Briskey proved to be a natural tactician.⁸² Nonetheless, the Battalion's early preparations at Madrigueras were a sorry affair. Wintringham, who prided himself on his own military knowledge, described training as 'pitiable in the extreme'.⁸³ Equipment was still desperately lacking. The M1895 Colt-Browning machine guns with which they had been provided were highly unreliable, while their stash of eight PM1910 Maxim guns, though serviceable, were missing their feeding mechanisms.⁸⁴ Moreover, they had to be constantly water cooled a feature bound to prove a nuisance during the approaching Spanish summer. It was only in February that the Battalion at last received reliable guns in the form of several Russian Mosin-Nagant M91/30 rifles, although ammunition shortages meant a maximum of ten rounds were supplied to each volunteer during training. Bullets were not the only necessity sorely lacking at Madrigueras: Wintringham despaired at the absence of the most rudimentary items, whether they were binoculars, compasses or even maps.⁸⁵

Remarkably, the absence of meaningful military training did not seem to concern the Brigades' commanders. It was naively assumed that military discipline would follow on from a sense of political duty. To that end, the Battalion's political commissars were given the task of constantly reminding the volunteers precisely what they were fighting for, keeping spirits high even when physical comfort was

⁷⁷ Walter Gregory, p. 31.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁸⁰ 'Party Biography for Sykes', RGASPI, 545/6/206.

⁸¹ Walter Gregory, p. 31.

⁸² Tom Wintringham, *English Captain* (London, Faber and Faber, 2011), hereafter 'Tom Wintringham', pp. 77–8.

⁸³ Richard Baxell, 'Unlikely Warriors', p. 126.

⁸⁴ <<https://www.amber-online.com/collections/no-pasaran-part-2/>>, 'No Pasaran – John Henderson & Frank Graham', accessed 5 August 2019.

⁸⁵ Richard Baxell, 'Unlikely Warriors', pp. 129–30.



Fig. 6. Image of the British at Jarama <<http://www.richardbaxell.info/jarama/>>
‘The British Battalion at the battle of Jarama’.

at its lowest.⁸⁶ Short biographies were compiled of the men in the hopes of gaining a better understanding of their practical and political mettle. Sykes was questioned on his class background, political influences and union record. The conclusion was that his party training had been ‘very sketchy and spasmodic’.⁸⁷ Nonetheless, he was set aside as a ‘a dependable type’, even if he was ‘slow to perceive certain inconsistencies, particularly of speech’.⁸⁸ A brief note was made attesting to his political competency and recommending him as a ‘political agent’.⁸⁹ Whatever this would have amounted to in practice is impossible to say because, after only six weeks of training, the men of the British Battalion were sent north for their first action on Spanish soil.

The Battle of the Jarama

Republican troops in Madrid had repeatedly repelled Nationalist attacks against the Spanish capital throughout the bitterly cold months of January and February 1937. General Franco was therefore more determined than ever to capture the city before the coming spring. By cutting the road to Valencia, he would be able to deprive Madrid of essential troops, supplies and armaments, thereby bringing the tenacious Republican resistance to an end. To accomplish this, Franco put General Varela in command of a force of 25,000 men – a total of five brigades – with aerial and tank support supplied by the Germans. The offensive began once the freezing winter rains had ended on 6 February. Nationalist forces swept all before them and soon

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

⁸⁷ ‘Party Biography for Sykes’, RGASPI, 545/6/206.

⁸⁸ Lists of personnel of the XV Brigade RGASPI, 545/3/456.

⁸⁹ Combatant Card, Frederick Sykes, RGASPI, 545/6/206.

came into sight of the Jarama river. On the far bank, rising steeply from the flat river valley, were the hills of the Sierra Pingarron. The crucial Valencia Road lay beyond them to the east.⁹⁰

The Chief of the Republican General Staff, General Rojo, hurriedly organised a force to hold the line. The XV International Brigade was sent into action and with it the 600 men of the British Battalion. Fred Sykes and his fellow volunteers left Madrigueras that day, making their way slowly towards the front in a blacked-out train. They arrived at the desolate village of Chinchón in the early hours of 7 February. The Battalion were condemned to wait out the next four days in the ‘filthy little dump’, with little to distract them but distant flashes of artillery fire and the occasional dog fight in the skies above.⁹¹ On the night of 11 February, they finally left Chinchón for the village of Morata de Tajuna, immediately behind the front. The volunteers were served coffee as dawn broke over the nearby hills. They then began marching up the nearby hills of the Sierra Pingarron, expecting to take up a reserve position. By 10:00 the following morning they had crested the peaks of the Sierra to reach a plateau studded with olive groves. Beyond lay yet another line of hills, punctuated in the centre by a lone white farmhouse. Behind lay the Jarama river and the advancing Nationalist Army.⁹²

As they began their descent into the river valley Sykes’ company were approached by a ‘breathless messenger’ who informed the dumbfounded volunteers that the front-line had already been broken.⁹³ The Nationalists, who had seized a crucial bridge the night before, were crossing the river in force at that very moment. No sooner had the volunteers received the news than they were hit by a barrage of enemy fire. Although they had no way of knowing it, the 600 men of the British Battalion were confronting a brigade of 5,000 Moroccan troops. Situated on the extreme left of the line, No. 3 Company were the sole barrier between the Nationalists and the open flank of the XV International Brigade. The hopelessly inexperienced volunteers watched in horror as the enemy poured in their hundreds across the bridge and into the olive groves spread across the valley floor.⁹⁴

The Battalion retreated to the heights above. Facing them were the Moroccan *Regulares*, tribal mercenaries flown across the Straits of Gibraltar in German aircraft to fight for the Nationalists in their war against the Republic. These fearsome veteran troops who had learned how to master low-lying terrain through years of colonial war with the Spanish, now began to move steadily up the slope towards the British under the cover of their machine gunners. One section began to circle around No. 3 Company and collided with a small detachment holding the flank. The British scattered back up the slope, pursued by unrelenting fire. The Battalion’s eight Maxim guns had been left in reserve, forcing the volunteers to rely on their next-to-useless Colt-Brownings and single-shot Soviet rifles. The Nationalists advanced to within

⁹⁰ Antony Beevor, p. 209.

⁹¹ Walter Gregory, pp. 33–43.

⁹² Richard Baxell, ‘Unlikely Warriors’, pp. 139–42.

⁹³ Walter Gregory, p. 43.

⁹⁴ Richard Baxell, ‘Unlikely Warriors’, p. 144.

30 yards of No. 3 Company, but Briskey's men held the line.⁹⁵ The casualties were considerable and Briskey himself was shot as he tried to relay news of the surprise attack to his returning messenger.⁹⁶

With the thin British line all but overrun, Wintringham had no choice but to order all three companies to fall back to a spur of ground on the far side of the plateau. By now he had just 125 unwounded men at his disposal.⁹⁷ The Nationalist brigade now swept down Suicide Hill towards the remnants of the Battalion. Behind them was the headquarters of the XV Brigade. If the British had given way the formation would almost certainly have collapsed in confusion, leaving a gap with which the Nationalists could have achieved their objective of cutting the road to Madrid. At this crucial moment, Wintringham recalled, their machine guns 'woke'. Captain Fry, of the machine-gun company, gave the order to open fire at point blank range. The *Regulares*, silhouetted atop the hills, were an easy target and it was now the turn of the British to inflict punishing casualties, throwing the enemy back beyond Suicide Hill. The British guns, after almost seven hours of continuous combat, at last fell silent.⁹⁸

The volunteers of No. 3 Company who had managed to survive the day's carnage found their way back to British lines in scattered groups as the daylight faded. Their first military engagement had been a rude awakening to the realities of modern warfare; 30 of them congregated by the battalion cookhouse demanding to leave the lines. It was no use, however, and the Battalion Commissar forcibly ordered them back into action.⁹⁹ The *Regulares* resumed their attack early the next day. Soon after fighting began, a small group of Nationalists disguised as prisoners managed to creep towards the British lines. They turned their guns on No. 2 Company and captured 30 men. The British were now driven with heavy casualties from the hard-won spur to a sunken road further back.¹⁰⁰ A Birmingham survivor later claimed that they had taken 300 casualties in the first two days. He recognised Fred Sykes as one of the men wounded on the second day of action.¹⁰¹

The following day the Nationalists came forward with tank support, forcing the 160 survivors of the British Battalion to retreat down the Morata road in panic. Wintringham had been seriously wounded, leaving the herculean task of raising the Battalion's fighting spirit to Frank Ryan and Jock Cunningham.¹⁰² The pair rose to the challenge and led the British back towards the enemy singing the *Internationale*. 'Are we downhearted?' Cunningham called out regular intervals. 'No!' came the defiant response of his survivors.¹⁰³ The *Regulares* responded by digging in at Suicide Hill. Across the front the Nationalists had stalled against the

⁹⁵ Tom Wintringham, pp. 79–80.

⁹⁶ Walter Gregory, p. 48.

⁹⁷ Ken Bradley, *The International Brigades in Spain* (London, Osprey, 1994), p. 22.

⁹⁸ Tom Wintringham, p. 91.

⁹⁹ Richard Baxell, *British Volunteers, The British Battalion in the International Brigades 1936–1939* (Routledge, London, 2004), hereafter Richard Baxell, 'British Volunteers', p. 73.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 74

¹⁰¹ 'Saw His Friend Executed in Spain', *Birmingham Gazette*, 1 June 1937.

¹⁰² Richard Baxell, 'British Volunteers', p. 76.

¹⁰³ <<http://irelandscw.com/ibvol-Monks.htm>> 'With the Reds in Andalucía', accessed 5 August 2019.

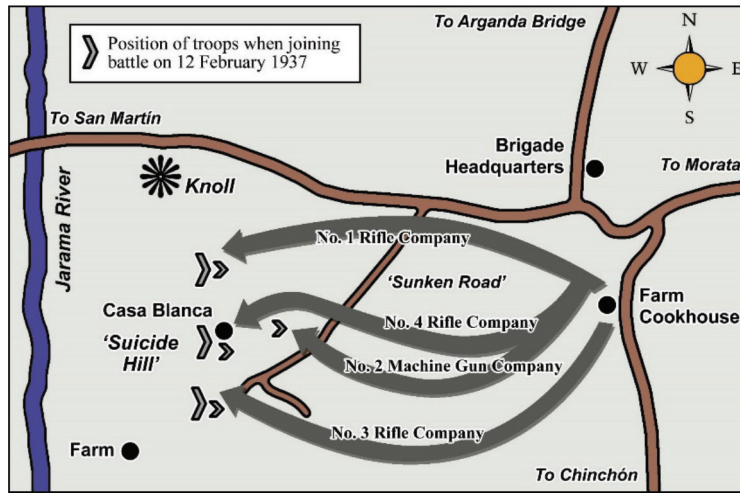


Fig. 7. Jeremy Scott, Map of the Jarama <<http://www.richardbaxell.info/jarama2016/>> 'Jarama, Brunete and the Valley of the Fallen,' accessed 6 August 2019.

solid Republican front-line. Subsequent counter-attacks by the Republicans failed to retake lost ground, but inflicted such heavy casualties that the Nationalists declared the action '*el día triste del Jarama*' – 'the sad day of the Jarama'.¹⁰⁴ At enormous cost, the Republic had halted the Nationalist advance and inflicted serious losses on their opponent. Most importantly, the Valencia road remained in government hands.

The Republican high command, however, was only willing to consider the battle a victory once they had prized every inch of ground back from the Nationalists. By this time, both sides had dug defensive trench lines to safeguard against further assaults. On 27 February, General Gal ordered the XV Brigade, including the exhausted British Battalion, on to the offensive. Gal's aim was to drive the Nationalists from the high ground which they occupied back down into the river valley. It was apparent to every one of his front-line troops that such an operation would be madness. Gal ignored the protests of his stunned officers and the attack went forward, spearheaded by the American volunteers of the newly formed Abraham Lincoln Battalion. Vital artillery and aerial support were nowhere to be seen. Nationalist machine guns opened fire, killing 12 British volunteers instantly.¹⁰⁵ Another 20 were killed later as Gal ordered them to push on with the hopeless attack. The Americans fared worst of all that day: 120 of them were killed and 175 were wounded, totalling some 6 per cent of the entire Abraham Lincoln Battalion.¹⁰⁶ Like the British before them, they had been used as shock troops in a poorly orchestrated action which failed to secure any

¹⁰⁴ R. Dan Richardson, *Comintern Army: The International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War* (Kentucky, University Press Kentucky, 1982), p. 84.

¹⁰⁵ Richard Baxell, 'British Volunteers', p. 79.

¹⁰⁶ Hugh Thomas, p. 491.

major territorial gain for the Republic. Frederick Sykes, who had been wounded on 13 February, had evidently made his way back into the line of fire. At some point in the day's chaos he was killed.¹⁰⁷ He was one of 225 British men who died in the Battle of the Jarama.¹⁰⁸ He was 29 years old.

Death and legacy

News of Sykes' death would not reach Leicester until mid-July 1937. The Leicester Spanish Aid Committee responded with a memorial meeting in the Market Square. For his left-wing comrades back home, Sykes was converted into a political martyr. One local Communist remembered that 'Sykes would always be in the forefront where danger was concerned', adding that the Leicester Communist Party had 'lost its finest comrade and its finest trade unionist'. A local councillor attended the memorial and declared that Sykes' sacrifice 'should not be made in vain'. Not all eulogies were so unconditionally favourable. The President of the Leicester Trades Council hinted at Sykes' adversarial relationship with the unions by claiming that the two 'did not see eye to eye politically', although he too shared in the general belief that he had made an important sacrifice that should not go forgotten. The meeting closed with calls for the National Government to lift their arms embargo on the Republic.¹⁰⁹ For Leicester Communist Roy Watts, the ongoing policy of non-intervention was the principal barrier to a Republican victory. He would follow in Sykes' footsteps and leave for Spain in February 1938.

Local socialist Edwin Peacock knew all three of the Leicester men who fought and died in Spain. He would like to have volunteered himself, but his family obligations prevented him from doing so. He took up the pen, rather than the rifle, in the fight against fascism. Perhaps he had Frederick Sykes in mind when he wrote the following poem about the Spanish War:

The sun still shines o'er hill and valley,
 the wind still blows across the plane,
 the raindrops still fall in countless numbers upon the hallowed Earth of Spain.
 While either dead, who died for freedom,
 not for the Spanish folk alone, but that we may shed our blindness and by our
 future acts atone, for the shame of our inaction, in our brother's darkest hour,
 when urging, pleading, even praying to purchase arms, give us the power.
 Time still passes with its moments, life still progresses on its way.
 And if we emulate those who lie there, there yet shall dawn a brighter day.
 Have courage brother, do not falter, although the task is hard and long,
 n'er forget, before 'tis over, the victory goes to those still strong.
 Both in faith, and in spirit, when all that seems lost and hopes depart,
 leaving one important thing remaining: a stoic, courageous, valiant arm.¹¹⁰

It is in the 'hallowed Earth of Spain' that Frederick Sykes remains to this day. The fate of his friend Jack Watson remains less clear. The Leicester Mercury claimed that

¹⁰⁷ 'Doncaster Man Killed in Spain Fighting', *Sheffield Daily Independent*, 9 July 1937.

¹⁰⁸ Antony Beevor, p. 211.

¹⁰⁹ 'Tributes to Leicester Man Killed in Spain', *Leicester Mercury*, 19 July 1937.

¹¹⁰ Interview with Edwin Peacock, EMOHA, LO/237/188.



Fig. 8. Jack Watson pictured in ‘Second of Two Friends Killed in Spain War’, *Leicester Mercury*, 16 December 1937.

he died on the Pozoblanco front in the South of Spain in November 1937, although little more information is available on the matter.¹¹¹

PART II ROY WATTS

The Spanish Republic’s struggle for survival: February–September 1938

Roy Watts, a 24-year-old furniture salesman at the Leicester High Street Co-op, reached Spain on 14 February 1938.¹¹² A year had passed since the British Battalion saw its first action at Jarama, leaving time for the Nationalists to gather both men and momentum in their campaign of no-quarter to rid Spain of liberal and left-wing elements. Franco’s seizure of the northern coast had left him in control of the country’s iron and coal deposits, which would prove indispensable in paying for the tanks and planes sent by his allies Hitler and Mussolini. Republican leaders, faced with a rebel army which now equalled them in terms of armed men, continued to pin their hopes on ‘set-piece battles’ which might encourage the European democracies to come to their assistance.¹¹³ In mid-December, Colonel Vicente Rojo deployed 40,000 Republican troops in an attack against Teruel, a bleak town in a freezing-

¹¹¹ ‘Second of Two Friends Killed in Spain War’, *Leicester Mercury*, 16 December 1937.

¹¹² Combatant file card for Roy Watts, RGASPI, 545/6/212.

¹¹³ Antony Beevor, p. 313.

cold province which, in the process of the devastating two-month battle, would experience temperatures of 18 degrees below zero.¹¹⁴ Government forces entered the streets of the city on 21 December and were still desperately holding on when Roy Watts left Leicester to join them. Their dogged resistance collapsed exactly one week after he set foot in Spain. Although both sides had suffered horrendously in the battle for Teruel, the tide had begun to turn irreversibly in Franco's favour.¹¹⁵

Early life and politics

Roy Theodore Watts was born on 13 September 1913 in Aldrington, Hove.¹¹⁶ He was the second son of hairdresser's clerk George Victor Watts and his wife Ivy Kingscote Davies, a textiles worker from Gloucestershire. At the age of 26, George was sent to France as a gunner with the Royal Field Artillery, where he suffered a severe gunshot wound to his right arm and damage to his right leg before finally being discharged in 1919. He was provided a weekly pension of 8 shillings a week, as well as an additional 4s 8d to support his wife and children.¹¹⁷ The family lived at 12 St Leonard's Avenue, a modest terraced street in the industrial area of Portslade-by-Sea, a little less than three miles from Brighton city centre.¹¹⁸ As a young man, Roy moved to Portsmouth where he found employment with the Portsea Island Mutual Co-Operative Society. He became an active member of the local working-class movement, joining the Portsmouth branch of the Shop Assistants' Union and sitting on the Executive Committee of the Portsmouth Trades Council. He even chaired the local Clarion Cycling Club, a left-wing movement founded in the late nineteenth century under the motto 'fellowship is life'.¹¹⁹

It was no doubt a search for political fellowship that motivated Watts to join the youth wing of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in 1932.¹²⁰ The CPGB had established the Young Communist League (YCL) 11 years previously with the intention of recruiting a new generation of revolutionary leaders, but by the middle of the decade it had become all too clear that it would remain a fringe sect incapable of appealing to the majority of working-class youth unless a major effort was made towards 'brightening' its public image. From 1927 onwards the League began to place a far greater emphasis on social and cultural activities, doing away with tiresome political readings at branch meetings in favour of comradely discussion and debate.¹²¹ Young radicals like Watts were provided with ample opportunities to meet like-minded individuals in an informal setting, whether it was during a football

¹¹⁴ Hugh Thomas, p. 770.

¹¹⁵ Paul Preston, *The Spanish Civil War, Reaction, Revolution and Revenge* (updated 80th anniversary paperback edition, London, William Collins, 2016), p. 282.

¹¹⁶ Copy of birth certificate for Roy Theodore Watts, UK General Records Office, Southport, United Kingdom, accessed by Alan Lloyd in 2007.

¹¹⁷ WWI Service Record for George Victor Watts, British Army WWI Service Records, The National Archives of the UK, London, digitised via *ancestry.co.uk*.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ 'Young City Man Killed in Spain', *The Portsmouth Evening News*, 18 October 1938.

¹²⁰ List of Arrivals to Spain for February 1938, RGASPI, 545/6/89.

¹²¹ Thomas Linehan, *Communism in Britain, 1920–1939: From the Cradle to the Grave* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 53–5.

match or a hike in the countryside. The rebrand was a modest success and, by 1933, YCL membership finally exceeded 1,000.¹²² Calls for anti-fascist unity appealed enormously to new recruits, who managed to bring the total number of members up to 2,000 by 1935.¹²³ Many of these would go on to fight in the Spanish Civil War, including nine of the 31 Britons who crossed into Spain on the same day as Watts.¹²⁴ Two of the League's most gifted leaders, William Rust and Walter Tapsell, became important figures in the British Battalion.

One of the Communist Party's greatest attractions was its call for direct action against fascism, even if this often amounted to little more than hooliganism at Blackshirt rallies.¹²⁵ Entire contingents of the YCL went to Mosley's London speeches to cause trouble.¹²⁶ Watts and a close friend decided to attend one of his massive meetings at a theatre in Portsmouth, where they managed to disrupt proceedings by throwing leaflets over the balconies before a group of 'stewards' seized him and dragged him down the long central staircase, ripping his coat in the process.¹²⁷ Similar scenes would occur throughout the country, including in Leicester, where Mosley spoke on a number of occasions.¹²⁸ A 1935 rally at Granby Halls was attended by some 2,000 people, many of whom arrived with the sole intention of causing a scene. Guy Paget, who would later defend Fred Sykes at his hearing for unruly behaviour, managed to draw attention away from Mosley by standing on his chair and yelling abuse.¹²⁹ Although Walter Gregory, a Nottingham clerk who would go on to volunteer in Spain, admitted that Communist tactics 'had little effect upon the fortunes of the Fascist cause in Britain'.¹³⁰ Nonetheless, they would give many future volunteers a tantalising taste of having 'done something' against the rise of Mosley and his supporters. For many left-wing radicals, disrupting Blackshirt rallies in Britain was a crucial step on the road to fighting fascism in Spain.¹³¹

Watts was an articulate public speaker who delivered a series of lectures at Southsea Front in the summer of 1936.¹³² A talk at Milton Church Hall on 8 June received a glowing mention in the *Portsmouth Evening News*, which informed readers that the young speaker had delivered a 'most interesting speech' about working conditions in factories across Britain. He 'made excellent comparisons between a wealthy town like Brighton and a poorer class of town such as Southampton' and had no problems answering questions from the audience.¹³³ Watts' ability to argue a case comes through clearly in his letters from Spain, in which he writes in an elevated prose style embellished with poetic imagery. His faith in the power of the written and spoken word as a political weapon was shared by many of his working-class

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹²⁴ List of Arrivals to Spain for February 1938, RGASPI, 545/6/89.

¹²⁵ Richard Baxell, 'Unlikely Warriors', p. 20.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹²⁷ Letter from Joan Hill to Alan Lloyd, 11 February 2008, private collection of Alan Lloyd.

¹²⁸ Ned Newitt, 'A People's History of Leicester', p. 142.

¹²⁹ Interview with Walter Gough, EMOHA, LO/058/009.

¹³⁰ Walter Gregory, p. 173.

¹³¹ Richard Baxell, 'Unlikely Warriors', p. 41.

¹³² 'Young City Man Killed in Spain', *Portsmouth Evening News*, 18 October 1938.

¹³³ 'Comrades' Circle', *Portsmouth Evening News*, 9 June 1936.

contemporaries, who spent extended periods of unemployment reading in public libraries or attending evening classes led by the Workers' Educational Association.¹³⁴ Leicester bricklayer Edwin Peacock was a keen writer whose poems highlighted the plight of Britain's poor and downtrodden, touching on themes such as imperial war and a lack of quality healthcare. Watts would get to know him personally when he left Portsmouth and moved to the Midlands town shortly before the outbreak of war in Spain.

Leicester and the Spanish Republic, 1937–38

Roy Watts arrived to Leicester at some point between 1936 and 1937. He secured a job in the furnishings department of the High Street Co-op and moved in with Roland Walton, a maverick Communist and one of the city's most vocal anti-fascists.¹³⁵ The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in July galvanised the city's radical left into organising support for the embattled Republic, particularly following the creation of the Leicester Spanish Aid Committee in October. A varied calendar of social events such as a Whist Drive, a film screening, and no fewer than four separate dances, converted the committee into Leicester's principal source of information on the war and helped to bring the plight of the Spanish Republic to the wider public's attention. By March 1938 they had raised an impressive £97 in cash and the equivalent of £300 in food and clothing.¹³⁶ Donations in kind were crucial, as they meant working-class families with limited means could also help out.¹³⁷ By far the largest cash amount – more than £30 – came from weekly door-to-door collections, suggesting that political radicals were not alone in their anger over what was happening in Spain.¹³⁸ In true popular front spirit, the volunteers were happy to accept help from anyone willing to give it. The Leicester Youth Peace Council, who were supported by the likes of the Bishop of Leicester, not only donated £3,¹³⁹ but succeeded in raising ten times that amount themselves as part of a nationwide campaign to collect food and money for the children of Spain.¹⁴⁰

Despite the impressive sums raised, the committee's repeated claims that the people of Leicester had a direct stake in the survival of Spanish democracy came up against widespread indifference. Local Blackshirt Walter Gough thought that 'the public in general had not the slightest interest in what was going on in Spain', adding that 'no matter how you tried to whip up enthusiasm, they were more concerned with domestic problems'.¹⁴¹ Edwin Peacock, who was sympathetic to the Republic, agreed: 'They didn't realise actually what was going on. No, I don't think they

¹³⁴ Richard Baxell, 'Unlikely Warriors', p. 15.

¹³⁵ Taped Interview with Roland Walton, 1981, Private Collection of Ned Newitt.

¹³⁶ Balance Sheet of the Leicester Spanish Aid Committee, 25 March 1938, hereafter '1938 Balance sheet of the Spanish Aid Committee', Leicester Public Records, DE8642/2.

¹³⁷ Tom Buchanan, p. 96.

¹³⁸ 1938 Balance Sheet of the Spanish Aid Committee, Leicester Public Records, DE8642/2.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ Circular letter of the Leicester Youth Peace Council appealing for funds for the children of Spain, 1938, Leicester Public Records Office, Wigston, DE8642/1.

¹⁴¹ Interview with Walter Gough, EMOHA, LO/058/009.

really grasped the situation.¹⁴² George Orwell, who despaired at the British public's detachment from the Spanish war, suspected that the actual amount donated to 'Aid Spain' funds probably amounted to less than half of what people spent on their weekly trips to the cinema.¹⁴³ As the Nationalist war effort gained momentum throughout 1937, the humanitarian situation behind Republican lines began to deteriorate catastrophically, with rebel advances leaving the population dependent on foreign food imports for survival. 'We have evidence', Victor Lenthall warned, 'that the Spanish Republic population is being literally starved into submission'.¹⁴⁴

This was precisely Franco's intention when he launched a naval blockade of Republican ports in early April. Neville Chamberlain responded by ordering all British ships to withdraw to nearby St Jean de Luz, warning that any vessel which entered the exclusion zone was to do so at its own risk. There was uproar in parliament. Many MPs were alarmed by the threat posed to British economic interests in Spain, where expensive iron ore was awaiting export that very moment.¹⁴⁵ Others objected to the government's inaction on moral grounds. A letter of protest, written by members of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, was reprinted in the *Leicester Mercury* later that month. 'As women we protest against the attitude of the government in concurring in the idea of blockade as a normal incidence of the waging of war', the letter began. 'In the distorted limbs and swollen bodies of starved children lies a life-long curse whose shadow may fall even upon those children's children.'¹⁴⁶ Roy Watts was disgusted by the whole affair. 'The record of Chamberlain is one of horror and shame', he wrote several months later, 'and to condone the death of his own countrymen, by refusing to protect British shipping is the most underhand deliberate betrayal of the English people'.¹⁴⁷

Non-intervention had long come under criticism, with the the editor of the *Leicester Mercury* arguing against the policy as early as August 1936:

If nation were ranged against nation the rest of the world would lose no chance to intervene for the purpose of restoring peace and goodwill. But this supreme calamity that can befall a helpless people, this struggle which seems likely to destroy the chance of any real freedom in Spain for at least a generation, must be treated as beyond the reach of intervention.¹⁴⁸

By the following year abundant evidence of German and Italian support for Franco had left the policy's credibility in pieces. 'Of course', Leicester socialist Arnold Granger remarked, 'the intervention of Italy and Germany, by sending over squadrons of supposedly volunteer airmen, had a big impact on that war'.¹⁴⁹ The bombing

¹⁴² Interview with Edwin Peacock, EMOHA, LO/237/188.

¹⁴³ George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (Penguin Classics Edition, London, Penguin, 2000), p. 218.

¹⁴⁴ Balance Sheet of the Spanish Aid Committee, Leicester Public Records, DE8642/2.

¹⁴⁵ Hugh Thomas, p. 602.

¹⁴⁶ Reprinted letter from the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, *Leicester Mercury* correspondence, 21 April 1937.

¹⁴⁷ Copy of letter from Roy Watts circulated by the Leicester Spanish Aid Committee, 16 July 1938, hereafter 'Letter to the Spanish Aid Committee', Leicestershire Public Records, DE8642/3.

¹⁴⁸ 'The Problem of Non-Intervention', *Leicester Mercury* correspondence, Editor's Leader, 22 August 1936.

¹⁴⁹ Interview with Arnold Granger, taped at the interviewee's home on 20 June 1984, EMOHA, LO/106/057.

of Guernica by a combined total of 43 German planes on 26 April reinforced his support for the Republic. The calamitous event, which was reported in the *Leicester Mercury* the following day, led to an international outcry. 'No more will be heard now concerning Franco's generosity in saving religion, and his gentlemanly ways in dealing with his enemies', predicted one Leicester local. 'No more will his Fascist friends in England be able to hold up their heads, after hearing of the dastardly deeds done in his name.'¹⁵⁰ The charade of non-intervention continued regardless. Albert Hall left the Labour Party in protest, while members of the Leicester League of Youth broke with the official party-line by openly siding with the Republic.¹⁵¹ Nobody was more outraged than Roy Watts, whose decision to fight in Spain was motivated by a profound sense of solidarity with the country's seemingly abandoned masses.

Roy Watts' War

Despite the momentous challenges faced by the Republic by early 1938, Watts remained convinced the Nationalists could still be defeated. His time in the Communist Youth had taught him that a popular front of liberal and left-wing parties could successfully resist fascism wherever it rose up. He also believed that the democratic unity of all 'progressive' people in Britain would be enough to bring down the appeasing government of Neville Chamberlain and therefore clear the way for a Republican victory.¹⁵² His decision to risk his life fighting in a foreign war was an act of personal rebellion against non-intervention and a symbol of working-class solidarity with the Spanish Republic. 'Because the fight of the Spanish workers is also our fight', he explained, 'and because the peace of the world is at stake, I am happy to be able to show to the Spanish people, by my example, that although our Government has hindered them, we in the working class are solid in support'.¹⁵³

Watts only told a handful of people that he was going to fight in Spain. He informed his housemate Roland Walton as well as the president of the local co-operative party, Sam Adams.¹⁵⁴ He left his girlfriend, 24-year-old Phyllis Rowe of Early Howe Street, behind in Leicester. Following the implementation of the Foreign Enlistment Act in January 1937, the majority of British volunteers who got as far as the Pyrenees had to cross into Spain on foot. The perilous mountain journey was a serious test of physical endurance, especially in the cold winter months. Even with his past as a keen cyclist and champion swimmer, Watts was taken ill soon after his arrival on 14 February.¹⁵⁵ The Nationalists recaptured Teruel the following week. Franco decided to maximise his advantage by launching a fresh offensive towards the Mediterranean Sea, thereby cutting Republican Spain in two. On 7 March his army began to sweep through the Republican-held province of Aragón.

¹⁵⁰ 'Guernica', *Leicester Mercury* correspondence, 30 April 1937.

¹⁵¹ Interview with Dorothy Shilcock, at the interviewees home in Leicester on 2 August 1987, EMOHA, LO/389/340.

¹⁵² Letter to the Spanish Aid Committee, Leicester Public Records, DE8642/3.

¹⁵³ 'City Man Fighting in Spain', *Leicester Mercury*, 5 April 1938.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Nationalist troops, numbering at least 150,000, including substantial numbers of Italian and Moroccan infantry, were deployed with the support of hundreds of aircraft.¹⁵⁶ Only half of their war-weary Republican adversaries even possessed rifles.¹⁵⁷ The British Battalion at Belchite was quickly overwhelmed and began a disorganised withdrawal eastwards, abandoning one of their anti-tank guns and destroying the other in the process. Leicester volunteer Frank Farr was injured in his first action as an infantryman when his unit was ambushed by Italians later that month.¹⁵⁸ Roy Watts left hospital and headed for Brigade Headquarters at Albacete as soon as he heard about the offensive.¹⁵⁹ It is likely he was sent to the nearby town of Tarazona de La Mancha for training, which, at this point, amounted to little more than marching and drilling with wooden rifles.¹⁶⁰ About to be cut off from the rest of Republican Spain, the base closed down on 19 March and transferred north to a suburb of Barcelona.

Exactly where Watts was during the Republican retreat is impossible to gauge from the available sources. Nonetheless, his early experiences in Spain confirmed his belief that the country was suffering ‘a cruel and barbarous Fascist invasion’.¹⁶¹ A month of war had left him in no doubts as to the awesome superiority of the Nationalist Army. ‘The Spanish people’, he wrote in March, ‘are battling for liberty against the tremendous arms, forces of aeroplanes, and thousands of regular troops which Germany and Italy have poured into Spain’.¹⁶² In early April the remnants of the British Battalion crossed the River Ebro and blew the bridges behind them. After reaching the sea on 15 April, Franco suddenly turned his attention away from Catalonia in order to focus south on loyalist Valencia. The unexpected decision infuriated his German and Italian advisors, who had wanted to push onwards towards Barcelona. In a letter sent to the Spanish Aid Committee in July, Watts conveyed the misleading impression that Spanish heroism, rather than Franco’s military decision-making, had checked the Nationalist advance:

The end of March witnessed the forces of fascism gloating over their anticipated triumph. Franco was boasting that within a week he would be in Barcelona, but on the banks of the Ebro and the Segre the people of Catalonia knitting even more closely the bond of unity with the rest of Spain stood firm and held up the fascist war machine.¹⁶³

This dramatic portrait of popular heroism makes no mention of widespread support for the Nationalists, let alone the fact that both sides were relying on mass conscription to sustain their military efforts by late 1936.¹⁶⁴ The Spanish Civil War amounted to little more than a violent, unwanted intrusion into the lives of

¹⁵⁶ Antony Beevor, p. 324.

¹⁵⁷ Hugh Thomas, p. 777.

¹⁵⁸ ‘Lessons from Spain’, Frank Farr, IBA, SC/VOL/FFA.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ Ian Macdougall (ed.), *Voices from the Spanish Civil War, Personal Recollections of Scottish Volunteers in Republican Spain, 1936–39* (Edinburgh, Polygon, 1986), p. 266.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ Letter to Spanish Aid Committee, Leicester Public Records, DE8642/3.

¹⁶⁴ James Matthews, *Reluctant Warriors, Republican Popular Army and Nationalist Army Conscripts in the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 216.

thousands of ordinary Spaniards, forced to fight for one side or the other simply because they happened to live in either government or rebel territory in the summer of 1936. For Roy Watts, however, it remained a heroic struggle for civilisation itself.

Life behind the lines

The British Battalion had very nearly been wiped out in Aragon, but with the Nationalist Army now focused on Valencia a period of much-needed rest could begin for the volunteers. Training and rifle-practice distracted them from the previous month's catastrophe, with new arrivals boosting the Battalion's strength after the crippling losses of the retreat. Food was scarce, but parcels from Britain raised spirits. As is often the case in war, tobacco was a particularly coveted luxury. Watts, unsurprisingly, was thrilled to receive a package of around 200 Co-op made cigarettes from an unknown Leicester benefactor. 'You can bet that they most welcome', he wrote.¹⁶⁵ As the Battalion gathered its former strength behind the safety of Spain's second-longest river, he was finally able to take full stock of his surroundings. He wrote a letter to the Secretary of the Portsmouth Trade Council, allegedly while sitting on the 'top-most turret of the ruins of an old Spanish castle', describing life behind the lines.¹⁶⁶

Watts began his letter by describing the gains made by Spanish peasants in recent years, before reminding his readers back in England that these would all be lost unless urgent action was taken to defeat Franco. 'The peasants roll away in the new collective farm, and the children play their games', he explained. 'Lying here basking in the warm sunshine under a cloudless sky, it is difficult to realize that not so many kilometres away, proceeds one of the most frightful and foulest wars in history.' Watts was in rhetorical full-flow. He clearly regarded himself as an emissary for the Spanish working-classes whose first-hand experiences of fascist aggression might help to rally much-needed support back home in England. The real purpose of the letter becomes clear when he uses his unique experiences in Spain to plead for more assistance:

Having come face to face with the realities of Fascist aggression in this country, it is difficult to find words that will adequately describe one's hatred against those responsible for so much bloodshed, misery, and distress. I now know of the terrible sacrifices and hardships our fellows and the Spanish are undergoing. I know, too, that if the people and comrades at home were faced with the same realisation they would redouble their efforts to help.¹⁶⁷

Nonetheless, his spirits remained high. At one point he even managed to secure a copy of the *Leicester Mercury*, reading to his pleasure that Roland Walton, his former housemate, had been challenged to a debate by a local Blackshirt.¹⁶⁸ A small amount of the money collected by the Leicester Spanish Aid Committee went on sending out papers to volunteers in Spain, which no doubt helped to provide some

¹⁶⁵ Letter to the Spanish Aid Committee, Leicester Public Records, DE8642/3.

¹⁶⁶ 'Spanish War Experiences', *Portsmouth Evening News*, 14 May 1938.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

small relief from the tension and tedium of life behind the Ebro.¹⁶⁹ Watts also had access to the *The Daily Worker*, which, as the official paper of the Communist Party, gave its readers an enormously exaggerated impression of the Republic's fighting chances.¹⁷⁰ It nevertheless helped to keep the volunteers up to date on the political situation both in and outside Spain. Roy Watts continued to be frustrated by the stubborn refusal of the British government to come to the Republic's aid and called on his friends back home to forge a broad left-wing alliance against Chamberlain, thereby ensuring the 'eternal gratitude of the Spanish people' as well as freeing themselves forever from the threat of fascism.¹⁷¹

Despite the obvious challenges ahead, the British volunteers had good cause to be optimistic by late July 1937. The Battalion had finally regained its former strength of around 500 men, the majority of them newly acquired Spanish recruits.¹⁷² Among the more recent arrivals was Alec Adderley, a dyer from Huddersfield who had worked in Leicester for the last nine months.¹⁷³ On 22 June, Watts had been transferred back to the Transmissions Unit, in which he had served previously, from his posting with the Anti-Aircraft Battery.¹⁷⁴ His job, one of the riskiest in the entire Battalion, was to lay down, alter and repair telephone lines both behind and on the front-line, under enemy fire if necessary. Doing so left little time for taking cover, leading volunteer Frank Graham to argue that the company 'gets none of the glamour of the war but risks most of its dangers'.¹⁷⁵ Russian-born Communist Jim Ruskin, a telephone engineer who had lived most of his life in London, was Company Captain. Ruskin's ability to speak five languages rendered him an enormous asset to the Battalion, in which he had served since early 1937.¹⁷⁶ He was a brave and decisive leader who earned the respect of his superiors for his technical knowledge and political conduct alike.¹⁷⁷ Watts would continue to serve under him for the rest of his time in Spain.

The final push

From June onwards training had turned increasingly to the crossing of dry river beds. The reason became clear the following month, when Republican plans to launch an enormous offensive across the River Ebro, in an effort to reunite Catalonia with the rest of Republican Spain, were finally announced to the troops. The men of the British Battalion were pleased to find out that their time of rest had come to an end. Walter Gregory wrote proudly that 'we knew that it would be our own efforts that

¹⁶⁹ 1938 Balance sheet of the Spanish Aid Committee, Leicester Public Records, DE8642/2.

¹⁷⁰ Letter to the Spanish Aid Committee, Leicester Public Records, DE8642/3.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² Richard Baxell, 'Unlikely Warriors', p. 323.

¹⁷³ Letter to the Spanish Aid Committee, Leicester Public Records, DE8642/3.

¹⁷⁴ Combatant File Card for Roy Watts, RGASPI 545/6/212.

¹⁷⁵ Frank Graham, *The Book of the XV International Brigade, records of British, American, Canadian, and Irish volunteers in the XV International Brigade in Spain, 1936-1938* (hardback reprint, Frank Graham, 1975), p. 233.

¹⁷⁶ Biographical extracts for Jim Ruskin pertaining to the year 1936, '*Extractos de la biografía escrito el 15-9-36*', RGASPI 545/6/195.

¹⁷⁷ Volunteer report for Jim Ruskin, undated 1938, '*Averiguaciones sobre los cuadros*', RGASPI 545/6/195.

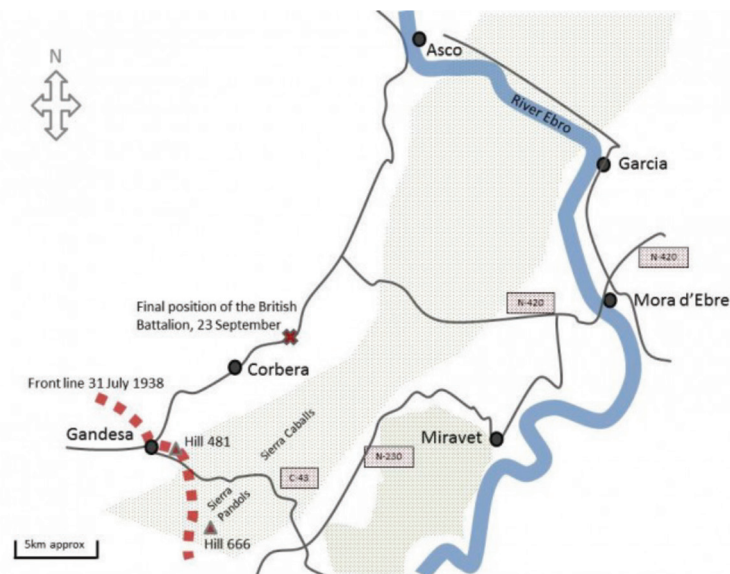


Fig. 9. Jeremy Scott, Map of the Ebro <<http://www.richardbaxell.info/ebro/>>, 'Map of British involvement in the Ebro offensive, 25 July to 23 September 1938', accessed 6 August 2019.

would determine whether or not the plan would work and we were prepared to give of our all'.¹⁷⁸ Advanced units of the 80,000-strong Republican Army began to cross the river in the early hours of 25 July.¹⁷⁹

The Republicans managed to recapture an impressive 800 square kilometres of territory within just 24 hours, but Nationalist bombing raids on the river crossings soon stretched their supply lines to the limit.¹⁸⁰ The tired and thirsty men of the British Battalion struggled onwards to the small but strategically vital town of Gandesa, some 25 miles from the river, but suffered enormous losses in their attempts to capture a nearby hill known as 'the Pimple'. For all of Walter Gregory's initial optimism, the Republican advance had been checked by 2 August and the British Battalion were placed in reserve four days later. Instead of pulling back, the Republican high command continued to send troops across the river and into the slaughter. Spanish Premier Juan Negrín was so desperate to secure foreign assistance that he refused to acknowledge defeat even when it seemed most imminent.¹⁸¹

In the second week of August the Nationalists launched a massive counter-attack in the mountains of the Serra de Pandols, and the British Battalion were again sent into action. The impenetrable, rocky earth of the surrounding countryside made it impossible to dig adequate defences with which to take cover from Nationalist

¹⁷⁸ Walter Gregory, p. 116.

¹⁷⁹ Antony Beevor, p. 350.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 352.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 355.

planes, flying up to 200 at a time and dropping in excess of 5,000kg of bombs each day.¹⁸² Not even the longest-serving British volunteers could claim to have witnessed anything approaching the scale of destruction unleashed in the following weeks. Alec Adderley, the Leicester dyer whom Watts had met the previous month, was wounded by a trench mortar and removed from the line. He was later punished for attempting to leave hospital.¹⁸³ In the meantime the Battalion moved north towards the rugged Serra de Cavalls, where they would find no respite from the awesome superiority of the Nationalist war machine. ‘The ground trembled and heaved, and clouds of swirling dust reduced visibility to a few inches’, Walter Gregory remembered. ‘Some perhaps prayed for deliverance from the holocaust that engulfed us; I cursed the Fascists and the non-intervention committee, and those back home too blind to see what was happening in Spain, with every blasphemy I could summon to my trembling lips.’¹⁸⁴

The battered Battalion were put back into reserve a week later, but their position continued to suffer non-stop bombardment. The exhausted men, worn down by several weeks of gruelling warfare, were given no relief from the constant threat of Nationalist air attack and artillery fire. At some point between the 22 and 23 September a nationalist bomb scored a direct hit on the abandoned farm-house being used as a base by Transmissions. Roy Watts was sheltering inside, along with 27-year-old Joseph Harding from Middlesbrough. With them were two unidentified Spanish soldiers. By the time their bodies were dug out from the rubble all four were dead.¹⁸⁵

Watts had been in Spain for over seven months, travelled through most of Republican territory, and even been taken prisoner once.¹⁸⁶ He had been hospitalised three times, once for fever and twice for shrapnel, but had otherwise escaped mostly unscathed.¹⁸⁷ He was a matter of days, if not hours, from taking part in the British Battalion’s final action. At the time of his death, Republican leaders were placing their greatest hopes for survival on the outbreak of a wider European War in which, it was hoped, the Spanish conflict would be subsumed¹⁸⁸ precisely the state of affairs most British volunteers had come to Spain to *prevent* happening. It was a cruel and tragic end to Roy Watts’ fight against fascism.

Aftermath

The Battalion’s last engagement, fought on 23 September, was a total catastrophe. The British flank was quickly overrun by Nationalist troops, leaving the men dangerously exposed to enemy tanks and artillery. They were caught in the midst of relentless machine-gun fire which seemed to come from all directions. Those that

¹⁸² Richard Baxell, ‘Unlikely Warriors’, p. 338.

¹⁸³ Demobilisation Questionnaire for Alec Aderley, 2 November 1938, RGASPI 545/6/2.

¹⁸⁴ Walter Gregory, p. 130.

¹⁸⁵ Letter from Peter Kerrigan to Harry Pollitt, 27 December 1938, hereafter ‘Kerrigan to Pollitt’, IBA, SC/IBA/5/2/1938/27.

¹⁸⁶ ‘Leicester Man Killed in Spain’, *Leicester Mercury*, 6 October 1938.

¹⁸⁷ ‘Leicester Man Killed in Spain’, *Leicester Mercury*, 6 October 1938.

¹⁸⁸ Hugh Thomas, pp. 821–2.



Fig 10. Members of the XV International Brigade, possibly the English Battalion, being farewelled during the Battle of the Ebro in the football field of Marçà, October 1938, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Members_of_an_international_battalion_in_the_football_field_of_Mar%C3%A7%C3%A0.jpg.

managed to find cover in the shallow trenches were quickly overrun and forced to defend themselves in brutal hand-to-hand combat. Communication completely broke down and the order was given to retreat;¹⁸⁹ 132 individuals had gone missing, 31 had deserted, 24 were wounded and 14 were killed. The Battalion had been reduced to just 173 men: 58 were British and 115 were Spanish conscripts.¹⁹⁰ Upon their return they were informed of the Spanish government's decision to remove all volunteers from Spain. It was Negrín's desperate last bid to secure foreign assistance for the Republic. 'The irony of it', *Daily Worker* correspondent Peter Kerrigan noted, 'is that this last action took place on September 23, the day *after* Dr. Negrín's speech at Geneva, which announced the repatriation of the volunteers'.¹⁹¹ Adderley and Farr both left Spain in December leaving the battle of the Ebro to continue raging on without them until the last Republican troops recrossed the river on the 16 November. It had been the longest and bloodiest engagement of the entire Spanish Civil War, lasting 113 days and resulting in over 100,000 casualties.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹ Richard Baxell, 'Unlikely Warriors', pp. 341–3.

¹⁹⁰ Kerrigan to Pollitt, MML, SC/IBA/5/2/1938/27.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² Beevor, p. 358.

Leicester Communist William Duncan received notification of Watts' death from the Central Committee of the Communist Party on 5 October.¹⁹³ An hour later Albert Hall announced the news to a stunned audience of young Communists in the Secular Hall. Among those present was Watts' girlfriend Phyllis Rowe, who was so distressed by the announcement that she had to be escorted out of the hall altogether. She had only recently received a letter in which Roy expressed his hopes of returning to Leicester and resuming old friendships; Her father George had even expected a wedding engagement. William Duncan had received a similarly optimistic letter only a few days previously. 'War being what it is', Watts had written, 'one cannot make forecasts with any great certainty, but I expect and hope to be back in England by Christmas'.¹⁹⁴ Contrary to claims made by the *Leicester Mercury*, there is no way he could have known about the Spanish government's plans to withdraw foreign volunteers. If he expected to return to Britain, it was because he was still confident of a Republican victory. Any lingering hopes of defeating the Nationalists turned to dust early the next year, however, when Francisco Franco's troops marched triumphantly into Barcelona. By April 1939 he had won the war and could settle into a dictatorship that would last for almost four decades.

CONCLUSION

In May 1939 a memorial service for Frederick Sykes and other fallen Brigaders was held at Birmingham Town Hall. A certain Mr William rose to speak in honour of the volunteers. 'Those British youths who died in the Spanish Civil war', he began, 'were not, as some people thought, rag and bobtail. Those youths were the very cream of the British Labour Movement'.¹⁹⁵ His statement encapsulates an important truth about both Fred Sykes and Roy Watts. The two men had long histories of labour militancy even before they arrived in Leicester, and both regarded the outbreak of war in Spain as an opportunity to continue their personal fight against fascism. Their decision to take up arms in a foreign war did not stem from naivety or romanticism, but rather a set of deeply held political beliefs. They thought that by going to Spain they would be able to defend the liberties of working-class people all across Europe, including in Britain, from the fascist threat Chamberlain seemed all too ready to ignore. 'I hardly need remind you', Watts wrote in July 1938, 'that the banks of the Ebro, are also the doorsteps of our homes in England too'.¹⁹⁶

The nature of the sources relating to the two men differ enormously, making it difficult to formulate any kind of sustained comparison between their attitudes and experiences. It is nonetheless clear that they shared a number of important qualities. Both were Communists who had committed themselves to the 'Popular Front' policy of forming broad, democratic alliances against fascism. In spite of the Comintern's temporary détente with democracy, however, both men remained uncompromising political radicals until the end. They thrived in the politically explosive atmosphere

¹⁹³ 'Leicester Man Killed in Spain', *Leicester Mercury*, 6 October 1938.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ 'Memorial Service to Four Birmingham Men', *Birmingham Gazette*, 1 May 1939.

¹⁹⁶ Letter to the Spanish Aid Committee, Leicester Public Records, DE8642/3.

of the early 1930s, and did not shy away from violent clashes with their Fascist or conservative counterparts. Although some Leicester locals regarded the Communists as noisy hot-heads incapable of formulating any practical policy whatsoever,¹⁹⁷ the impressive sums collected by the Spanish Aid Committee throughout 1937 and 1938 demonstrate that many were, in fact, talented grass-roots activists. Sykes was a particularly effective organiser whose leadership skills even earned the respect of his anti-communist colleagues. Watts shared his enormous faith in the ability of the spoken word to transform people's political beliefs and mobilise support for a number of causes. His speeches in Portsmouth and letters from Spain demonstrate that he was a talented communicator who knew how to convey a message passionately and, above all, effectively. Both men were regarded as natural leaders with promising futures in the labour movement until their lives were cut short in Spain.

The Spanish Civil War was a defining moment in British Labour politics. Thousands of individuals, all of them disgusted by the government's hypocritical policy of non-intervention, threw themselves into 'Aid Spain' activism in an attempt to combat widespread apathy towards the Republic's plight. Sykes was involved in local fundraising activities before going to fight, whilst Roy Watts wrote letters to the Leicester Spanish Aid Committee from behind the front-line later on in the war. For both men, the immensely confusing conflict boiled down to a simple formula. As far as they were concerned, Franco's Nationalists were unrepentant Fascists drawing on the armed might of Italy and Germany to crush the democratically-constituted government of Spain. It was this clear-cut vision of a Manichaeian struggle between civilisation and barbarism that motivated them to risk their lives on behalf of the Spanish Republic. They were by no means alone, with thousands of volunteers from around the world seeing the war in exactly the same terms.

Once in Spain the often inexperienced men of the International Brigades were used as disposable shock troops against an opponent that possessed every conceivable military superiority. Sacrificing thousands of volunteers on the battlefields of the Jarama and the Ebro did not save the Republic, but it did prolong its agonising defeat. Watts' enormously inflated accounts of Spanish heroism were part of a deliberate attempt to rally continued support back home, but did not, by any means, give an accurate impression of the Republic's fighting chances. 'Since our advances', he wrote in one letter, 'the Fascist fury seems to know no bounds'.¹⁹⁸ It is unclear what advances he could possibly have been talking about. General Franco's desire to prise the Republicans from every inch of territory certainly grew throughout the war, but this was more as a result of his long-term strategy of 'cleansing' Spain of any conceivable opposition than the brave but ultimately doomed resistance of the International Brigades. For all the impatience of his Italian and German advisors, Franco ended up winning the war in exactly the manner he had intended – through a long war of attrition in which the seeds of a long-lasting dictatorship were sown.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁷ 'Market Place Speakers', *Leicester Mercury*, Correspondence section, 13 August 1936.

¹⁹⁸ 'Leicester Man Killed in Spain', *Leicester Mercury*, 6 October 1938.

¹⁹⁹ Paul Preston, 'General Franco as a Military Leader', *The Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* (sixth series, 1994), p. 23.

The deaths of Watts and Sykes on the battlefields of a foreign country turned them into working-class martyrs back home, and ensured they would be remembered by the local labour movement for years to come. On 2 February 1939 about a dozen surviving members of the British Battalion marched through Town Hall Square to lay a wreath in their honour.²⁰⁰ Among those present was Frank Farr, the London-born mechanic who had left his home at 13 Imperial Avenue three years earlier to join an ambulance unit on the Aragon front before eventually volunteering for the International Brigades. He had returned to Britain profoundly disillusioned with the manner in which the loyalist military effort had been run.²⁰¹ In spite of the catastrophic losses sustained by the government throughout 1938 and early 1939, the fight for the Republic continued in Leicester. Roy Watts' words became his own epitaph in a memorial card circulated after his death. 'Many of our best comrades have already fallen', the message read, 'and we do not hide the bitter pain of their loss, but their deaths call not for mourning but for action against fascism'.²⁰²

In 1993 the Leicester Socialist Centre erected a plaque in Victoria Park's Peace Walk commemorating Sykes, Watts and Watson. The City Council and International Brigades Memorial Trust unveiled a second memorial outside the Corn Exchange in 2018. It is located in the same spot where Sykes had been arrested for delivering a speech in a public through-way 82 years previously. Leicester anarchist Lyn Hurst was one of the 120 individuals present at the unveiling. 'By placing a lasting memorial to these three men in the market', he explained, 'we are reminding the citizens of Leicester that we all need to be vigilant against fascism and remember the sacrifice made by the International Brigades'.²⁰³ In Spain itself the British volunteers remain steeped in controversy. A plaque commemorating the Battle of the Ebro which was erected in the Sierra Pandols in 2005 was subsequently smashed by neo-fascists. It now resides at the Marx Memorial Library in Clerkenwell, London. Roy Watts is among the 90 members of the British Battalion listed on the shattered metal sheet.

Attitudes towards the International Brigades may remain polarised, but there is no doubting that his death just like that of Fred Sykes was the result of a life spent struggling for the liberation of the British working-class. 'For many men who went it wasn't a sense of adventure by any means', wrote volunteer Jack Jones years after the war. 'It was a feeling we were on the right side – the side of justice.' These powerful words do most certainly apply to the two young men from Leicester.

APPENDIX 1: BALANCE SHEET FOR THE LEICESTER COMMITTEE IN AID OF SPANISH DEMOCRACY WITH MODERN CURRENCY CONVERSIONS

The following balance sheet, published in March 1938, covers the period from 12 January 1937 to 28 February 1938. The equivalent amounts for the year 2017 are

²⁰⁰ 'In Memory of Leicester Men Killed in Spain', *Leicester Mercury*, 3 February 1939.

²⁰¹ 'Lessons from Spain', IBA, SC/VOL/FFA.

²⁰² Memorial card for Roy Watts, Leicester Public Records, DE8642/4.

²⁰³ <<http://www.international-brigades.org.uk/content/unveiling-leicester-plaque>> Unveiling of Leicester Plaque, accessed 31 March 2019.

indicated within brackets. The totals have been calculated according to the value of the pound in 1935. The largest single amount (around £1,526.21 today) was raised in house-to-house collections, conducted by unpaid volunteers on Sunday mornings by car or handcart.²⁰⁴ The largest source of expenditure (around £512.96 today) was on the printing of literature intended to convince locals that they had a stake in the Spanish Republic's fight for survival. 'You now realize the horrors of modern war', claimed one leaflet circulated some time in 1938 to inform locals that a collector would call. 'Do you realise that the Spanish people have, for over two years, suffered these horrors in defence of THEIR FREEDOM and YOURS?' it asked. Locals were encouraged to offer food, clothing and money. 'Tinned milk, canned meat, non-perishable foods' and 'clean, serviceable clothing' were all welcomed.²⁰⁵ Some three tons of food and clothing, together valued at £300 (a staggering £15,198.78 today), was successfully raised between January 1937 and February the following year.²⁰⁶ It is likely that many of these donations came from poor, working-class families who could not offer any money, but wanted to help out in whatever way they were able.²⁰⁷ The full statement is as follows:

EXPENDITURE²⁰⁸

Corn Exchange Meeting, 19/12/1936: – Additional Net Expenses: 1.3.9 [£60.16]
 Conference & Film Display, 6/12/1937: 1.7.0 [£68.39]
 Open-air Meetings: 1.6.6 [£67.13]
 Printing, Duplicating, Literature etc.: 10.2.6 [£512.96]
 Stationery, Postage & Pdge., Carr., 'Phones etc.: 7.9.11 [£379.76]
 Storage and Cartage of Goods sent to Spain: 1.7.10 [£70.51]
 Newspapers to Comrades in Spain: 6s [£15.20]

DONATIONS & GRANTS

British Youth Peace Assembly, Spanish Foodship Committee: 3.1.0 [£154.52]
 Spanish Youth Foodship Committee: 13.5.0 [£671.28]
 National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief: 5.0.0 [£253.31]
 Spanish Medical Aid Committee: 10.2.0 [£511.69]
 International Brigade, Dependents' & Wounded Aid Committee: 36.10.0 [£1,849.18]
 Cash in Hand, Cd.Fwd. to 1/3/1938: 1.14.1 [£86.34]

INCOME

Cash in Hand, Bt.Fwd. from 11/1/1937: 2.16.4 [£142.70]

²⁰⁴ Interview with Albert Hall, taped at the interviewee's home on 24 February 1984, EMOHA LO/076/027.

²⁰⁵ Leicester Spanish Aid Committee Leaflet, undated 1938, IBA, SC/IND/JFY/3/5.

²⁰⁶ Balance Sheet cover letter, Leicester Public Records, DE8642/2.

²⁰⁷ Tom Buchanan, p. 96.

²⁰⁸ 1938 Balance sheet of the Spanish Aid Committee, Leicester Public Records, DE8642/2.

Conference and Film Display, 6/2/1937: –

Delegates' Fees & Visitors' Tickets: 3.4.6 [£163.39]

Collection: 8.5.3 [£418.60]

Whist Drive, Social & Dance, 24/4/1937 (Nett): 5.16.8 [£295.53]

Coronation Dance, 12/5/1937 (Nett): 2.7.2 [£119.48]

Social & Dance, 2/12/1937 (Nett): 2.7.2 [£119.48]

Open-air Meetings, Market Place, Collections: 7.11.10 [£384.61]

Co-op Hall, Public Meeting, 17/1/1937, Collection: 2.8.6 [£112.86]

Clarion Cycling Club, Donations, Proceeds of Dance: 2.5.2 [£114.41]

Donations from other Organisation: 9.3.8 [£465.25]

Donations from Individuals: 8.5.4 [£418.81]

Collections sent from Organisations & Works: 5.19.19 [£303.34]

House to House Systematic Collections: 30.2.6 [£1,526.21]

Literature Sales: 14.9 [£732.07]

(Total) 92.15.7 [£4,700.43]

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