

Leicestershire People and the Spanish Civil War

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Until a group of reactionary officers rose up against Spain's democratic government in July 1936, events south of the Pyrenees received precious little attention in the British press. The revolt failed, plunging Spain into a three year civil war, leading the national newspapers to reinforce their limited presence in the peninsula. (1) Though unable to secure their own scoops, local newspapers played an important role in keeping the British public updated on the war's progress. Both the *Leicester Mercury* and the *Leicester Evening Mail* devoted considerable column-space to Spain until the Czech crisis diverted the world's attention elsewhere in October 1938. Reliable news was at first hard to come by, especially for regional papers with no independent resources in the country. The crushing of the military revolt in cities such as Barcelona and San Sebastian had been followed by outbreaks of revolutionary violence in which workers took control of private property, production, and even policing. Horrified British nationals sought refuge in Gibraltar or France, from where they provided journalists with the kinds of atrocity-stories their editors back home relished. (2) Accounts of fratricidal bloodshed, more often based on unsubstantiated rumour than corroborated fact, were particularly rife on board the Royal Navy ships sent to evacuate Britons from Spain. Several examples were reprinted in Leicester as 'first-hand authentic accounts'. (3) They conveyed the unambiguous impression that civilisation had completely broken down in the government zone, no doubt reinforcing Randolph Churchill's dismissal of the conflict with his remark that it was nothing more than 'a bunch of bloody dagoes killing each other'. (4)

A surprising number of Leicestershire people were in Spain at the time of the military rising. Their sensational eye-witness accounts of war and revolution were guaranteed to boost newspaper circulation at a time of fierce competition for readers. Dramatic headlines may have done little to explain the complex political situation, but they were sure to tantalise audiences whose appetite for all things 'human-interest' seemed to know no end. Although all of the accounts share an underlying sense of high adventure, reactions to events varied enormously depending on the individual. Some had lived in Spain for years and had watched as the country slipped steadily into civil war, whereas others were visiting on short-term business trips. Others were on holiday, including those enjoying the seaside pleasures of San Sebastian when street warfare suddenly

burst into their lives. All of their remarkable stories demonstrate just how diverse and surprising the links between Leicestershire and Spain were at the time, as well as how varied responses to the Spanish Civil War could be.

Whilst the British press may have been caught off-guard by the outbreak of war, Barcelona-based Leicester businessman Albert Holland had been anticipating violence for the previous two years. Holland, the son of a well-known member of the Leicester Board of Guardians and a former Anstey grocer, had been appointed as director of the Boston Blacking Company in Barcelona in 1925. (5)

Relations between the city's employers and workers were historically fraught. Between 1919 and 1922 Barcelona's bourgeoisie watched in horror as open class-warfare between anarchist revolutionaries and hired gunmen spilled into the streets. Demoralised by poor wages and attracted by the language of revolution, disgruntled workers signed up to the anarchist unions in record numbers. It was with enormous relief that Spain's middle-classes welcomed the dictatorship of Miguel Primo de Rivera, Spain's 'iron-surgeon' in 1923. Increased industrial production and an ambitious project of public works were not however enough to save the dictatorship from the impact of economic depression in 1929. Primo stepped down the following year. (6)

In 1931 the Second Spanish Republic was proclaimed. The King, whose credibility had been destroyed by his support for the dictatorship, left Spain for good. The expectations of the working classes were raised by promises of social reform, and Barcelona was once again the scene of revolutionary activity. Relations between Albert Holland and his employees deteriorated catastrophically. Holland describes how for himself, things became impossible:

They tried to force conditions until we could stand it no longer. One of the conditions was that extra workpeople should be set on despite the fact that, according to the business we were doing, we should have been on short time. Eventually, there was a strike. I was threatened. Several times, I was shot at in the street but escaped and eventually, I got a fresh crowd of workmen who were really good fellows.

By 1933 unemployment in Barcelona had reached unbearable levels. Holland's decision to recruit blackleg labour was bound to provoke a hostile reaction from his

workers. Nonetheless, the increase in mutual hostility was not just confined to his factory. All over Spain employers were locking up capital in an attempt to undermine the Republic. The anarchists were equally unwilling to compromise, especially when a right-wing government was voted into power that year. Revolutionary fervour reached a peak in 1934 with the staging of a country-wide general strike, which, although a total failure in Barcelona, stoked middle-class fears of a 'Bolshevik' revolution breaking out on their own doorstep. When a coalition of liberal and left-wing parties was elected to government in February 1936, the political right and a considerable section of the army were aghast. General Emilio Mola began to plan the overthrow of the Republic that Spring. (7)

The garrison at Melilla in the Spanish Protectorate of Morocco was the first to rise. Communication with the town soon broke down, and the *Leicester Mercury* had to rely on a government broadcast to clarify the situation in its front page report the following morning. 'The Government', the paper claimed, 'has the situation in hand, and will shortly

**ARMY IN MOROCCO
TRIES TO REBEL**
**Infantry Sent By Troopship To
Suppress Rising**
'VERY SERIOUS FIGHTING'
**Government Rounding Up Fascists:
Back To Normal Soon**
A MILITARY revolt at Melilla, the chief town in Spanish Morocco, has failed.

**"Fascist Revolt" Scare:
Telephone Ban**
A REVOLT by part of the Army in Spanish Morocco has failed, the Spanish Government claims.
Rumours were rife to-day of a Fascist revolution in Spain during the night, but this morning, when the Spanish Embassy in London managed to get in touch with Madrid by 'phone, after much delay, it was learned that there had been a military revolt at Melilla, in Spanish Morocco, and that all was quiet in Spain.

The Leicester Mercury and the Leicester Evening Mail reporting on the rising at Melilla in Spanish Morocco, 18th July 1936. (Reproduced by permission of the Leicester Mercury.)

announce the situation normal'. (8) The military rebels had in fact secured the city by the time the article went to print. Unarmed civilians living in the lower-class districts had been unable to offer any serious resistance to the rising, and those who were captured were shot. Lists of trade-unionists and left-wing party members were compiled, and widespread arrests were made. The pattern of repression set in Melilla was soon replicated elsewhere in Morocco in Tetuan and Ceuta. Within days, Spanish Morocco had fallen to the rebels, with garrisons throughout peninsular Spain soon following suit. (9)

Leicester missionary Gertrude Hubbard was in Tetuan at the time of the rising. Though a British Mission had been set up in the area in 1889, Hubbard herself had worked in Spanish Morocco for over forty years. 'Miss Hubbard is believed to be the only missionary in North Africa practising dentistry', the *Leicester Mercury* informed readers in an article published on the 22nd July. 'Her dental work among the Moorish natives has earned her widespread gratitude'. (10) Having been caught in the midst of the Berber war for independence in the 1920s, Hubbard was no stranger to military conflict. Her brother, a magistrate in Leicester, was nonetheless deeply worried when news of the military rising reached him. The Leicester Post Office agreed to send an outgoing cable but could give him no assurances that it would reach its destination. 'I have tried getting cables through to Tetuan but it is a town of silence to the outer world', he despaired. The city would remain firmly in the hands of the military rebels throughout the war.

Albert Holland and his wife were on holiday in Menorca when the officers of Melilla revolted. They were woken from their siesta by the frightened hotel manager, who explained that a British officer was waiting for them in the lobby. The officer had been instructed by the consul at Barcelona to evacuate the couple from the island, giving them just five minutes to pack their things before boarding the Royal Navy ship awaiting them at port. They were just two of the 12,000 individuals evacuated from Spain by the Navy between August and October 1936. (11) After passing through several ports en route to Barcelona, the HMS Grenville finally arrived at its destination. Albert Holland was forbidden from stepping ashore. Having defeated the military rising at the cost of around 500 dead and 3,000 wounded, the overwhelming force of arms now lay with the city's anarchists. (12) Small business owners who had employed only a few men were liable to harassment or even assassination for being 'bourgeois capitalists'. (13) Albert Holland was informed by his manager that the head of the agency which had supplied him with his replacement workers had been found with his throat cut. Even the factory watchman had been killed.



Albert Holland – who was alleged to have been ‘number one’ on a certain communist ‘blacklist’ – with his wife Amy outside their home on New Walk, Leicester, after being evacuated from Spain, Leicester Evening Mail, 15th August 1936. (Reproduced by permission of the Leicester Mercury.)

An anonymous Leicester businessman arrived in Barcelona during the second week of August. (14) To cross into Spain from France he had risked walking through the train tunnel at Port Vendres, carrying his baggage in one hand and a torch in the other, ignoring warnings that his attempt would be suicidal. He was greeted on the other side by a frontier guard of fishermen who attempted to read his passport upside-down before directing him to a hut. After waiting in suspense for several hours, the businessman was taken to the town hall of Port Bou where he managed to convince the president of the local ‘communist committee’ to grant him a pass to Barcelona. He hitched a ride to the Catalan capital in the goods car of a train carrying troops to the front.

He immediately aroused suspicion on arrival at Barcelona by asking for a taxi ride to the city centre. The *Leicester Mercury* article of August 4th explained why:

Little did he know then that in the whole of the city there was not a solitary wheeled vehicle that had not been commandeered. In the streets everyone was wearing their oldest clothes, and all attention was focussed on him as he walked along wearing a collar and tie. Later he dispensed with this, managed to go without shaving, wore a Communist cap he picked up, and felt safer and more at home. A communist pass, secured by somewhat irregular means, was also a help.

The businessman was in fact witnessing the outbreak of a spontaneous workers’ revolution. His overwhelming impression was one of chaos and disorder. He assured the *Leicester Mercury* that adolescents could be seen ‘roaming the streets with their fingers on the triggers of rifles, only wanting to hear a remark they did not appreciate for them to fire’. Groups of armed workers were heading off to the front, but ‘they had no leaders, wore no uniform, conformed to no word of command’. Religion had no place in the

new revolutionary order, as he saw for himself when a group of militiamen trashed the apartment of some friends when they discovered a picture of the Holy Family.



An account of conditions in Barcelona in August 1936 from an anonymous Leicester businessman, Leicester Mercury, 4th September 1936. (Reproduced by permission of the Leicester Mercury.)

Though for many the revolution amounted to little more than senseless destruction, for others it was a testimony to the organising potential of the working classes. Businesses large and small were collectivised or requisitioned, with revolutionary worker committees replacing conventional business boards. Remarkably, most industries had resumed production within ten days. It was even possible to take the tram to the newly collectivised cinemas. (15)

Stella Smyth, a 24 year-old typist employed by a London firm, arrived in Barcelona at a similar time to the Leicester businessman. (16) Frustrated by the contradictory radio reports they had heard while on holiday in the Pyrenees, she and her two friends decided to go and see what was happening for themselves. Shops, markets, and the post office remained open as usual, and the locals seemed good-humoured. 'We have been treated always with perfect courtesy', Smyth cheerily assured her parents in a letter sent back to the Braunstone Estate in Leicester. 'The only sign of anything unusual is the absence of the Civil Guard, the members of which, we are informed, have been sent to the front against the Fascists. Their duties are taken over by ordinary citizens, mostly workmen, and perfect order is maintained'. Stella and her friends left Barcelona after one week, unable to get their banknotes accepted anywhere. The twenty pounds they had left between them was almost confiscated at the French border, but after considerable explanation the money was returned and the group found accommodation in France. 'The worst thing about it', Stella despaired, 'is that we cannot get back if we wanted to. I feel just like an exile. Even now I feel homesick for Spain, it is a country that you can just love. To leave all that good humour and friendliness was like parting from a friend'.

Unlike Stella Smyth, Albert and Amy Holland couldn't leave the revolutionary city behind them soon enough. They sailed on to Marseilles and then travelled to Paris, arriving 'completely done up'. They set foot in Leicester in the same clothes in which they had left Spain, and on arriving in Leicester, moved into a house on New Walk. They regarded victory for rebels as their only hope of return. The businessman, who was evacuated on the HMS Shropshire, agreed that 'the only hope for Spain' was 'a stern dictatorship'. Nonetheless, he made a point of countering some of the more exaggerated claims of revolutionary violence that were circulating in the pages of British newspapers. Eighteen-year-old Philip Hammond, who had joined the navy immediately after leaving Avenue-Road School in Leicester, wrote a harrowing letter aboard the British cruiser HMS Devonshire in which he described priests being decapitated in public and nuns being stripped and driven through the streets naked. Although Hammond probably never witnessed such scenes himself, his letter was reprinted in the *Leicester Mercury* on the 4th August 1936.

(17) A few days later, the *Leicester Evening Mail* described Barcelona as the 'city where no one smiles'. (18)

The curiosity which inspired Stella Smyth to see the revolution with her own eyes was certainly exceptional. Few of the 200,000 or so foreign tourists who flocked to Spain each year during the first five years of the Spanish Republic paid much attention to the country's politics. 8,000 Britons were present when the rising took place, many of them concentrated in coastal resorts such as stylish San Sebastian. (19) In an attempt to promote tourism, the Republic had eliminated visa restrictions for a number of European countries. Sir Henry Chilton, the British Ambassador, was himself in San Sebastian when war broke out, leaving the 300 Britons in Madrid with an embassy lacking almost all of its staff.

Before he could declare the city for the rising, the Military Governor of San Sebastian was put under arrest by loyal Republicans. Revolutionary committees promptly set about arresting wealthy tourists and local right-wingers.

A number of tourists were swept up in the subsequent street warfare, including Stella Essex of Leicester. (20) Her account of the unexpected events, printed in the *Leicester Mercury* just over a week later, is permeated with an element of high adventure: 'My holiday will live forever in my memory', she declared. 'It was a thrill from beginning to end'. Essex was with a group of English tourists when the rising suddenly broke out. Realising the danger they were in, they boarded a train for France, only to be ordered off before it could leave the station. They were marched back to their hotel between armed guards whilst bullets were reported to have zipped by their heads. 'Miss Essex', the article continued, 'brave as she had proved herself to be, shuddered as she recalled the street warfare which transformed San Sebastian from a city of gaiety into a zone of death'.

Despite the horrors of the street-fighting taking place just outside her window, Essex felt a surreal detachment from the events around her. 'We were spectators of a real revolution – an affair like a film, which made us forget our own peril'. One day she made a reckless dash for the British Consulate, squeezing into doorways to dodge passing bullets. On arrival, she was informed that it would be impossible to get a message out of San Sebastian. After several run-ins with the armed militia, the party were eventually put on a lorry headed to the frontier. 'On the way there were occasional shots. It was the most thrilling ride I have ever had' she claimed.

Tourists like Stella Essex may have fled at the first possible opportunity, but for those with homes and families in Spain, the decision to leave was far harder to make. Mrs R. P.

Leicester Stead and Simpson employee Stella Essex's story appeared in the Leicester Mercury, 30th July 1936, along with a report on the evacuation of T.D. Kingdom, son of the headmaster of the Wyggeston School, Leicester. (Reproduced by permission of the Leicester Mercury.)

**Death Defied
In Dash To
Consul**

**WYGGESTON HEAD'S
SON RESCUED**

A pretty Leicester girl defied death in dramatic street scenes at San Sebastian, while on holiday in this city of bloodshed.

She told a thrilling story of her adventures to the "Leicester Mercury" on her return.

It also became known to-day that Mr. T. D. Kingdom, son of the headmaster of the Wyggeston Boys' School, was evacuated from Santander by a British warship.

THE Leicester girl who escaped from the perils of San Sebastian is Miss Stella Essex, of 33, Central-road, off Fosse-road North, Leicester, a clerk in the invoice department at Messrs. Stead and Simpson's, Belgrave-gate, Leicester.

"My holiday will live for ever in my memory," she said. "It was a thrill from beginning to end.

"When civil war broke out I was staying with a party of English tourists at an hotel in San Sebastian.

His wife suddenly heard shots fired from the centre of town after dinner on the 18th July, which marked the start of the military rising.

The rising in Málaga was crushed the same day, and the city remained in Republican hands for the next seven months, hopelessly isolated by both its revolutionary situation and its mountainous geography. Fears of invasion and the constant threat of aerial attack kept its people on edge. As the rebel army approached, tens of thousands of civilians fled the city on foot, following the coast up to Almería, while rebel ships bombed them from the sea. (22) Málaga presented an appearance of total desolation by the time Italian units marched into the city centre on the 8th February 1937.

There was very little resistance, and only one Republican journalist to report it. Mrs Jones was reportedly appalled by the version of events given in the English press. 'There has been a great deal of exaggeration and untruth in the English papers that has made our blood boil, for we know you would be reading them and believing every word', she wrote to her father. 'Believe me, Málaga was taken very quietly. There was no defences, no killing or massacres in the streets and the Reds did not carry out a systematic pillage and arson campaign. What they did, though, was to take almost every car, lorry, cart and even horse cabs in which to flee along the coast'. (23)

Jones, whose father was a well-known Loughborough journalist, lived with her family in Málaga. The health benefits of the city's temperate winter climate had long attracted visitors from Britain – enough for Consul William Mark to obtain royal permission to build a British Cemetery there in 1831. 'El cementerio Inglés' contains the remains of Joseph William Noble, Mayor of Leicester between 1841 and 1859, who perished during a cholera outbreak in 1861. The British community was still going strong in the 1930s.

In spite of Málaga's revolutionary reputation, first-time visitors were seriously considering buying property there in the spring of 1936. Life for the British colony continued to revolve around games of bridge at the club, friendly visits to the neighbours for tea, and motoring trips around the neighbourhood. (21) One of the community's better known members was writer and fringe member of the Bloomsbury Group, Gerald Brenan.

**Leicestershire Woman's
Story Of Malaga**

**NO MASSACRE AFTER CAPTURE, SHE SAYS:
33 JUDGES TO TRY SUSPECTS**

A DIRECT contradiction to many of the reports that have been published in England concerning the recent capture of Malaga by Spanish insurgents, is contained in a letter received by Mr. H. W. Cook, the retired Loughborough journalist, from his daughter, Mrs. R. P. Jones.

Mrs. Jones's home is in Malaga, but she has been living with her family at Gibraltar during the Spanish war.

Mrs. Jones says that her house and an oxide factory in which her husband is interested, together with their car, are all safe.

Flight of the Reds

She adds: "There has been a great deal of exaggeration and untruth in the English papers that has made our blood boil, for we knew you would be reading them and believing every word.

"Believe me, Malaga was taken very quietly. There was no defence, no killing or massacres in the streets, and the Reds did not carry out a systematic pillage and arson campaign."

"What they did, though, was to take almost every car, lorry, cart and even horse cabs in which to flee along the coast.

"Now Malaga is going through the process of being combed out. Anyone seen in the street has to show papers and explain all about himself, and there are three tribunals and 33 judges to try the cases of suspects."

An account in the Leicester Mercury, 26th February 1937 of the rising in Málaga based on information from Leicestershire woman Mrs R. P. Jones. (Reproduced by permission of the Leicester Mercury.)

Mrs Jones was not in fact present in Málaga at the time of its capture. She and her family had already relocated to Gibraltar at the start of the war.

The Rock soon become crowded with refugees shuttled in by the Royal Navy. Journalists seeking sensationalist copy had little difficulty finding it, and enjoyed the added benefit of being free from government censorship. Whilst the revolutionary violence in the first weeks of the war had certainly been atrocious, an oxide factory in which Mrs Jones' husband was interested remained safe, as did their house and car. Describing the situation since February, she wrote ominously that 'Málaga is going through the process of being combed out. Anyone seen in the street has to show papers and explain all about himself, and there are three tribunals and 33 judges to try the cases of suspects'. These trials were nothing more than summary court martials, often trying defendants in groups to save time. Within seven weeks, the Nationalist occupiers had tried 3,401 individuals and executed 1,574 of them, with additional judges being brought in from Seville to cope with the workload. (24)

Conclusion

As in the national press, early coverage of the Spanish Civil War in the *Leicester Mercury* and the *Leicester Evening Mail* often appears to have prioritised rumour over fact, a bias determined not so much by political priorities as by the available sources and a desire to secure readers. The eye-witness accounts of Leicestershire people themselves were, on the other hand, remarkably varied: Stella Smyth assured her father that Barcelona was safe and pleasant not long after Albert Holland and his wife had fled the city for their lives. An anonymous businessman openly sided with the military rebels, but advised the public to be cautious of exaggerated horror stories. For tourists such as Stella Essex the war was, above all else, a thrilling adventure. All of their testimonies demonstrate the diverse and surprising connections between Leicestershire and Spain in 1936, shining a light on some of the varied reactions to a war that still continues to divide opinion.

The Spanish Civil War showing the initial rebel zone (hatched on map) in July 1936. (Modified extract from [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:General_map_of_the_Spanish_Civil_War_\(1936%E2%80%939339\).svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:General_map_of_the_Spanish_Civil_War_(1936%E2%80%939339).svg) author FDRMRZUSA under Wikimedia Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 License.)

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