

Madam Chairman etc..

I have been given the privilege of saying a few words about the events that led to the evacuation to Britain of 4000 children from the Basque country in May 1937.

The story might be said to begin in March of that year, when, after a first winter of stalemate around Madrid, General Franco ordered his forces to direct their attention towards the north. General Mola, placed in charge of the northern campaign, at once proclaimed:

I have decided to terminate rapidly the war in the north...if surrender is not immediate, I shall raze Vizcaya to the ground. I have the means to do so.

Within a matter of days, the means at his disposal had been put to work. In the early morning light of 31 March a detachment of the Condor Legion – the German squadrons that were serving with the Nationalists – bombed the small town of Durango: a total of 127 bodies were collected from the wreckage of the town; a further 121 died later in hospital. Systematic aerial bombardment of undefended targets which had no military significance – a rationally calculated move to undermine an enemy's morale by terrifying its civilian population – was warfare of a new kind.

But surrender? There was no surrender, nor any likelihood of it. There was, however, a keen interest in securing the evacuation of women and children from the war zone. President Aguirre of the newly established Basque regional government discussed this with Ralph Stevenson, the British Consul in Bilbao, and Stevenson submitted the idea to the Foreign Office. Furthermore, he was able to report the willingness of the French Government to cooperate in such an evacuation. His proposal met with no enthusiasm in London. In fact he was mildly reprimanded for having taken this initiative and firmly instructed not to pursue the idea.

One might have thought that the Prime Minister would have viewed the proposal with some sympathy. Stanley Baldwin had the most morbid dread of this new threat of aerial warfare. 'The bomber will always get through,' he had correctly forecast. But Baldwin was not interested. 'The climate here would not suit them,' he said. And in the Foreign Office the argument was that evacuating non-combatants – 'useless mouths', as our Ambassador described them – would contravene the treaty of Non-intervention.

So there the matter might have rested. There might have been no evacuation. We might not all be gathered here today, but for one event. And that event was, of course, the bombing of Guernica. Guernica changed everything. General Mola's boast was not idle: the town was razed completely and an unknown number perished in the flames.

Set against what was soon to befall cities across Europe, Guernica was relatively trivial, but it was the first – ‘the first blitz of the Second World War’, Anthony Eden later remarked – and, being the first – it had the power to provoke revulsion. Stevenson had walked among the ruins and the ashes and his report to the Foreign Office ended with a plea:

I have, though, strong views on the question of evacuation of women and children, even if it is only a few thousand and if anything can be done in this respect before it is too late, so much the better.

In many ways, it seems to me, Stevenson was the unsung hero of this whole episode for there is no doubt that Foreign Secretary Eden put great store by this report, from a man whom he described as ‘well balanced and impartial’.

Simultaneously, in London, the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief was petitioning the Government to grant approval for an evacuation of children from Bilbao. This committee had been formed at the end of 1936 to coordinate all the voluntary relief activity being undertaken by a plethora of political and non-political organisations. Its inspiration was the Liberal MP Wilfrid Roberts, a Conservative MP, the Duchess of Atholl, chaired the committee. and it contained a wide shade of political opinion and humanitarian interest.

And in the immediate aftermath of Guernica, in the two or three weeks when the frightful agony that had been inflicted upon that little, hitherto unknown town was still vivid in the public imagination, the National Joint Committee was able to take the initiative and obtain approval for a limited evacuation from the region.

Approval was granted just three days after the bombing of Guernica, but that was only approval in principle: it was not until the middle of May that the Government’s agreement was finally obtained and cabled to Stevenson in Bilbao. Long before then, however, the process that was to lead to the evacuation had built up an irresistible momentum of its own.

On the first of May the National Joint Committee had announced the impending evacuation in *The Times* and appealed for funds. Within a fortnight it had received donations of £12,000 and a promise of a further £5,000 from the Trade Union Congress. The Home Office had demanded detailed plans for as to how the children would be looked after; by the 10th May Wilfred Roberts was submitting them.

With all this going on in Whitehall what was happening back in Bilbao, where the bombers were getting through every day, several times every day? There Leah Manning, another of the resourceful and energetic women on the National Joint Committee, was negotiating with President Aguirre and other members of his Basque Government, broadcasting regularly on Bilbao Radio to publicise the evacuation, and coordinating the details of its organisation

with the Asistencia Social. Consul Stevenson cabled the Foreign Office to report that he was being inundated with requests from anxious parents. Also there were two English doctors, sent by the National Joint Committee to conduct the medical examinations of the thousands of children whose parents had already signed them up for the evacuation.

Not surprisingly, within the Foreign Office there were fears that the National Joint Committee was planning the *fait accompli* of – as they put it – ‘several shiploads of refugees at Portsmouth, whom it would then be impossible to turn away without a public outcry’.

In the midst of all this frantic activity one senior official in the Foreign Office wrote a long memo in which he advised the Government to make up its mind between the conflicting pulls of humanitarian concern and adherence to the letter of non-intervention:

If they are going further, they ought to make their attitude clear publicly beyond all doubt, and thus show at least that they are acting on their own initiative and not in response to outside pressure, and that they regard humanitarian work as more important than Non-Intervention.

His advice was ignored. The Government’s attitude was never made unambiguously public. Only in the privacy of the Ministerial Committee on Foreign Policy, which met on the day the before the 4,000 children boarded the Habana, was it conceded that the Government’s agreement to admit the children from Bilbao had been wrung from them by outside pressure.

One consequence of this was the extraordinary way in which the competing pulls of humanitarian concern and the Non-intervention treaty came to be reconciled.

The Government agreed to allow 4,000 children to come to Britain. Furthermore, on the insistence of Anthony Eden – and he was one of the architects of Non-intervention, remember – it committed itself to providing Royal Navy escorts to any refugee ship, no matter where it was destined – Britain, France or Russia. And had it not been for that, very few of the thousands who did escape to safety from the Northern ports would have got away because Nationalist warships were constantly patrolling the Bay of Biscay. And yet, when the children arrived in Britain not a penny of public money would be made available to them. That was the condition that the National Joint Committee had to accept – they alone would be responsible for every aspect of their maintenance. Even the tents that were used in Eastleigh to accommodate the children when they first arrived had to be hired – not borrowed – from the War Department. No other country which provided sanctuary to the Basque children interpreted the Non-intervention treaty in that way, not imposed that stipulation upon them.

But 4,000 children did arrive and, in due course, they were dispersed into some 70 locations, the length and breadth of Britain – from Plymouth to Montrose, from Cardigan to Ipswich. The Catholic Crusade of Rescue took some 1,200 into its existing orphanages where they were supported by donations from parishoners; the Salvation Army took 400 into its hostels in East London, and two and a half thousand went into so-called colonies set up and run by ad-hoc local committees. It was those amateur committees who looked after the children and raised the funds to do so – through public meetings, door to door collections, flag days, and by persuading individuals and organisations to sponsor a child. And they continued to do so, when weeks turned into months, and months into years.

The best advice the Natinal Committee could offer the local committees was 'try to ensure the widest possible base of support', And they cited the case of the colony in Barnet where the committee had engaged the support of some 40 organisations – each of the major political parties, three local churches, the Quakers, the British Legion, the Odd Fellows, and so on.

Without doubt motivations varied. For some the call was a purely humanitarian one - these were just children and the victims of their parents' war. For others it was political – these were the victims of the rising tide of European fascism, and helping them was one small but practical way of confronting that menace. But whatever the motivation, the Basque children survived by the generosity of tens of thousands of ordinary British people who came from all walks of life.

And naturally, the first place where that was demonstrated was here, in Southampton, where the children first stepped ashore. Reading the pages of the Southern Daily Echo for those months in 1937 you get a sense of the detail of that – the meetings in the Guildhall to raise funds; the appeals for volunteers - labourers, plumbers, carpenters – to prepare the reception camp; the requests for blankets, cutlery, clothes and toys. And the reports of individuals – the baker who would prepare 50 loaves a week; the women at the Corporation Baths who volunteered to do the camp laundry; the taxi firm that would loan cars; the philanthropist who offered a house to serve as a sanitorium; the firms that supplied gifts; the shoe makers union that supplied 1000 pairs of boots. And so on.

It was on the basis of that kind of spontaneous generosity that the Basque children were destined to survive the next few months or years. And it is that which we wish to remember here today.