

Aid Spain Movement 1936 – 1939

The popular response in Britain to the Spanish Civil War. The popular movement to raise awareness about the war and to collect money to support the Basque Children, Medical, and Food Aid.

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Introduction

This year marks the eightieth anniversary of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. Though Britain was not involved militarily there was activity across Britain in support of the Government of the Second Republic. The war lasted three years with the insurgent army of General Franco supported by his allies in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. The elected government of Spain had few allies, just the Soviet Union and Mexico. The rest of Europe and America did not intervene.

For the first time in Europe ‘total war’ was waged by the insurgents against the army of the Republic and the civilian population that had voted for and supported it. This included bombing of the civilian areas of cities, blockades of ports and sinking of merchant ships to disrupt food and medical supplies, and the extra judicial killing of non combatants. These were what we would now consider War Crimes and they were widely covered in the newspaper and radio reports of the time in Britain. These reports informed the public and shaped public opinion. Broad based support for the people of Spain was galvanised and then mobilised by the political parties of the centre and the left, the churches, working class organisations including trade unions and co-operative societies. Initially this focused on medical aid for the army of the Second Republic and many towns organised collections to send ambulances to the war zones. Volunteer nurses and doctors also went to Spain and looked after the wounded developing new methods of organising and delivering care – triage of casualties and battle field blood transfusions. As the humanitarian crisis worsened in 1937 with more children, women, and the elderly suffering, the focus shifted to supporting refugees firstly by raising money to support food aid. This aid then moved on to campaigning to allow refugees to enter the country. This was a successful campaign to change government policy. On the 23rd May 1937 nearly 4,000 children from the Basque Country in northern Spain were allowed refuge in Britain on the conditions that they were supported by public subscription and fund raising, and not by central or local government. The Basque Children’s Committee (BCC) which had been established by the Committee for Spanish Relief set about the task with diligence. These three different strands of popular activity constitute the Aid Spain Movement.

The People’s History Museum (PHM) in Manchester¹ archive material on Aid Spain to which I wish to extend my thanks for their care of the items referred to in this article. The archive holds much information about the Basque Children and the support given to them and the activities to raise awareness and funds to support humanitarian relief.

Medical Aid

On the initiative of the Communist Party of Great Britain Medical Aid Committees were set up in towns and cities from August 1936. One of the most successful was in Manchester and Lancashire which saw 8 fully equipped ambulances going to Spain with cash to support their work².

Examples of the national fundraising work are held in the PHM archive.

Food Aid

The war disrupted food supplies and a major focus of Aid Spain was sending food and in particular tinned milk to supplement the diet of non combatants. Children’s letters to the organisers of the Food Ships remark how they welcomed the milk and felt much more energetic as a result. Money was collected by street and door-to-door collections, selling milk tokens in co-op shops, and food stamps. Examples of these as well as the publicity leaflets are in the PHM archives.



Total War

April 1937 saw the bombing of Guernica and following this war crime the Basque Government appealed to nations to provide refuge to its children. The response by Aid Spain was to support fact finding visits to Bilbao by Leah Manning and others. These reported on the terrible impact on non combatants and their accounts were widely quoted in the press alongside other first hand accounts by

journalists like George Steer. The war in Spain was also the first war covered by photo journalists using the new technology of 35mm film and single lens reflex cameras which produced un-posed high definition pictures. With this evidence there was a ground swell of public opinion which changed government policy to allow the children into Britain. Government policy did not change in respect of the fact that the children would have to be supported by local fund raising.

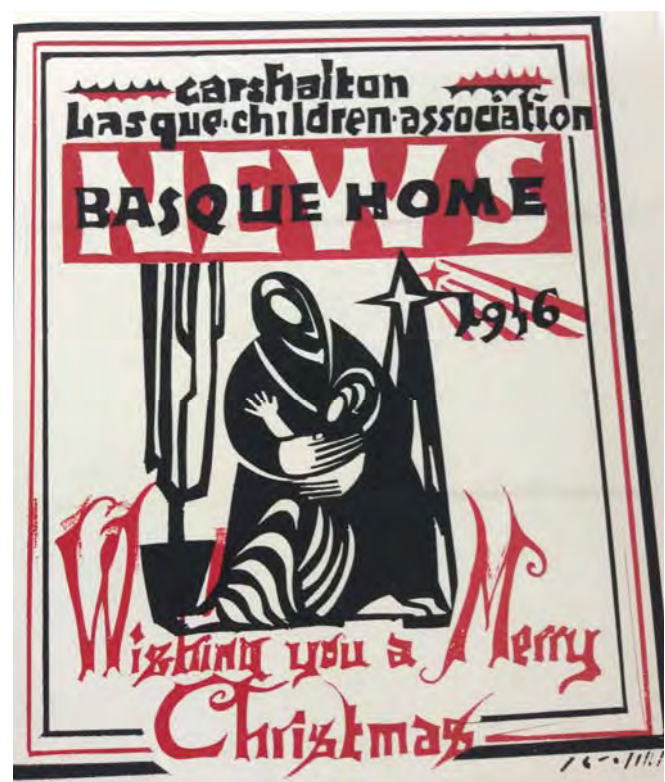
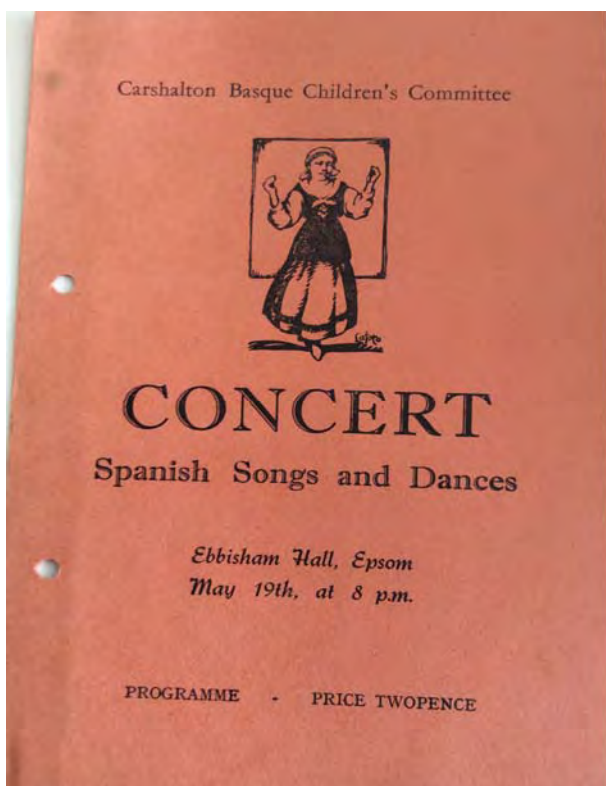
The Basque Children

The Basque Government required that the children remain in family groups and that their language and culture should be protected. In consequence the children had to be accommodated in group care homes not private fostering. The BCC coordinated the activities of local committees to whom the job fell of making arrangements for these homes and for the education of the children,

Campaigning material had been produced towards the end of 1936 which reported on the war and aimed to influence public opinion. Once the children had arrived this turned to the task of raising the funds to support the children and their accompanying adults. 'Adopt a Child' schemes were also used and an example of the collecting card used is held by the PHM archive.

Examples of the material held in the archive are a Christmas Card produced by the Carshalton Colony as late as 1946 and concert programmes. The children made costumes and learnt traditional songs and dances for these performances.

The children started to go home from 1938 onwards although some 400 were still in Britain after the end of the Second World War. These remaining children had been supported through this long period of exile though the number of Colonies had greatly reduced. The Basque Children's Association was founded in 2002 with the objectives of supporting research into the children and their supporters, and telling their story.



Conclusion

Aid Spain was broad in its support and ambitious in its objectives. Many of the individuals involved kept lifelong friendships with the children they had supported and went on to support progressive causes. The children who came on the ship *Habana* arriving on the 23rd May 1937 have told their story ^{4,5} and are remembered by their families. The material held in archives adds to that story and will enable new generations to interpret the events for their own times.

The world is not free from conflict and war crimes continue to be committed producing new misery and suffering. Europe and the Middle East is currently experiencing its own refugee crisis which is met by a popular humanitarian response. Each crisis is unique and of its time but some of the approach and campaigning of Aid Spain in telling the story of people's suffering and building broad inclusive support organisations are relevant today.

1 People's History Museum, Left Bank, Manchester, M3 3ER

2 Jews and other Foreigners Williams, Bill (Manchester University Press 2011)

3 [basque children.org](http://basquechildren.org)

4 Only for three months Bell, Adrian (Mousehold Press 2007)

5 The Guernica Generation Legarreta, Dorothy (University of Nevada Press 1984)