

“What were the British motivations for and against receiving Basque refugees during the Spanish Civil War?”

Central to Britain’s relationship with the Spanish Civil War was the two-way temporary migration of roughly equal numbers of people. Approximately 4,000 British adults volunteered to serve in Spain’s civil war, the vast majority on the side of the Republican Government, and most notably around 2,300 in the International Brigades.<sup>1</sup> At the same time nearly 4,000 children came to Britain as refugees from the Basque region.<sup>2</sup> The majority of international volunteers went to fight and possibly die for a cause they believed in; the children were sent by their parents in the opposite direction in the hope they would survive.

This essay will focus on the 3,826 children, 95 teachers, 15 priests and 120 adult volunteer helpers<sup>3</sup> who sailed on the S.S. Habana from Bilbao on 21 May 1937, arriving at Southampton Docks the next day. This group, which collectively became known as the “Basque child refugees,” represent the only reception of any significant number of Basque refugees by Britain during the Spanish Civil War, and do therefore provide the lens through which to explore this issue. They acted as ‘a political catalyst, innocently serving to confront the appeasement of some, test the professed neutrality of many, and provide an illustration of benevolence essential to others.’<sup>4</sup> In total 30 refugee ships made 70 trips from Basque ports, taking over 150,000 Basques and internally displaced Spaniards to France, Belgium, the USSR, Mexico and various other countries.<sup>5</sup> Of these 33,000<sup>6</sup> were children, of which just the 3,826 went to Britain, crammed onto the one ship.



Basque Child Refugees on the S.S.Habana, 21/22 May 1937. Courtesy of the Basque Children of '37 Association UK.

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<sup>1</sup> R. Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain Between The Wars* (Allen Lane, 2009); p.321.

<sup>2</sup> Basque Children of '37 Association UK leaflet

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> D. Legarreta, *The Guernica Generation: Basque Refugee Children Of The Spanish Civil War* (University of Nevada Press, 1984); p.xii)

<sup>5</sup> Rankin, N., Transcript of ‘G.L.Steer And The Basque Children In 1937;’ lecture, London, 15/10/ 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

There are a number of reasons for looking at the motivations within Britain for and against receiving the Basque child refugees. Firstly, this represented an exceptional event; not only was it, 'the biggest single influx of refugees in British history,'<sup>7</sup> but the Basque child refugees were 'amongst the earliest victims of the fascist dictators and harbingers of a world war that created an unprecedented forty million refugees in Europe alone.'<sup>8</sup> Secondly, despite the Spanish Civil War being arguably one of those aspects of Twentieth Century European conflict most pored over by historians, whilst a number of pieces of research explore aspects of the British motivations for and against the Basque child refugees being given sanctuary, there is no overarching consideration of these motivations.

Thirdly, the issue of child refugees seeking sanctuary from the indiscriminate bombing of urban areas in their home countries, and the issue of migration generally, are as topical and divisive now as they were when the Basque child refugees docked at Southampton nearly 80 years ago. Lastly, there is something of a local link to the Institute of Historical Research, as Virginia Woolf wrote, in reference to Basque child refugees being disbursed after their arrival to different locations around Britain, that she saw '...a number of the children marched through Bloomsbury...impelled by machine guns in Spanish fields...to trudge through Tavistock Square.'<sup>9</sup>

This essay will focus on British society rather than British politics. It will argue that beyond the party political structures, motivations amongst the electorate for and against the initiative were divided along predictable ideological lines, and that the Catholic Church in Britain faced both ways in quick succession. A further segment of society that was neutral towards or appalled or confused by the horror and complexity of the Spanish Civil War responded positively to what was seen to be a significant, overt humanitarian need that had arrived on their shores, aided by a sense of shared fate following the Luftwaffe's bombing of the Basque town of Guernica. The essay will further explore the rational opposition to the initiative on humanitarian grounds, and that motivations in support of receiving the Basque child refugees were closely linked to the description and subsequent perception of the child refugees as specifically Basque, as opposed to Spanish. Lastly, it will be shown that the humanitarian motivation of at least some British people to support the Basque child refugees was, consciously or unconsciously, a means through which to satisfy and reinforce their own developing sense of munificent national identity.

Whilst sharing the rest of Spain's Catholic religion, the Basque region on its north coast had a distinct ethnic identity, a source of wealth through its relatively industrialised urban areas, a source of contact and trade with the outside world through its ports, and a desire to achieve greater political autonomy. For this last reason therefore, the Basque Nationalist Party (Partido Nacionalista Vasco, or PNV), sided with the Republic rather than General Franco's Nationalist insurrection, in the correct belief that it had 'something to fight for, which it could not otherwise have gained,' given Franco's 'absolute commitment to a unitary state.'<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> J. Fyrth, *The Signal Was Spain: The Aid Spain Movement In Britain 1936-1939* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1986), p.225.

<sup>8</sup> K.P.F. Myers, 'Englishness, identity and refugee children in Britain, 1937-1945' (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Coventry University, 2000), p.3; (E. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*, (Michael Joseph, 1994), p.51).

<sup>9</sup> Overy, *Morbid*, p.325; (J.Mephram; *Virginia Woolf: A Literary Life* (London, 1991); p.166.

<sup>10</sup> E.A. Peers, 'The Basques and the Spanish Civil War', *Irish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 25, No.100, (December 1936), p.544

The Basque region was in a state of conflict from virtually the start of the insurgency against the Republican Government. 40,000 Basque civilians crossed into France to avoid the conflict in the first six weeks of the war,<sup>11</sup> but the conflict in the region intensified in March 1937 when Franco abandoned his attempt to capture Madrid and transferred much of his military resources to the Basque region, intent on securing its natural resources, industrial capacity, and its sea ports. The Luftwaffe's bombing on 26 April 1937 of Guernica, a town of special cultural significance to the Basques, and just 23 miles from Bilbao, was the single-most important factor in the generation of a large-scale humanitarian impulse to respond to the plight of civilian victims of the Spanish Civil War. Up to 1,600 civilians were killed and 900 wounded,<sup>12</sup> and 'nine houses in ten (were) beyond reconstruction,' according to the British Consul who visited Guernica after the bombing.<sup>13</sup>

George Steer's exclusive account of the bombing in *The Times*' 28 April edition 'was on the breakfast table of every important person and many less so.'<sup>14</sup> On 6 May newsreel footage screened in cinemas showed Guernica's ruins to a voiceover of: 'the most terrible air raid our modern history can yet boast...this was a city and these were homes, like yours'.<sup>15</sup> Widespread public revulsion was generated across Britain, reaching beyond those sections of society already committed to the Republican cause. With Bilbao already under attack throughout the Spring of 1937, with 159 insurgent air raids in just one month,<sup>16</sup> the Guernica bombing was seen as a harbinger of what could happen to Bilbao. It compelled the Basque Government's President Aguirre to broadcast just hours later for foreign governments to receive evacuated civilians from the city. Then as now, Britain was a preferred destination for refugees, as within two weeks 20,000 children were signed up by their parents to go to Britain.<sup>17</sup> In response to this, the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief (NJCSR), the main body in Britain coordinating humanitarian aid in support of the Republican Government, submitted a request to the British Government that a total of 4,000 children<sup>18</sup> should be allowed to come.

The British Government sanctioned the initiative, made the journey practically possible through providing safe sea passage, laid the ground rules in terms of temporary leave to remain, set the amount of funds to be provided by civil society for the ninos' welfare, and established that the political balance of the human cargo should reflect party political representation within the Basque Government, assessed by how the children's parents voted in the previous election. The British Government did however not "receive" the Basque child refugees, as the cost of chartering the *Habana* was met by the Basque Government, the cost of sustaining the refugees whilst they were in Britain fell on its civil society, and the cost of repatriation, when the time came, fell on the Basque Children's Committee (BCC), a less partisan body set up by the NJCSR to run the project. Similarly Britain's political parties largely found the Spanish Civil War, and its manifestation on Britain's shores in the shape of the Basque child refugees, an annoyance, irritation and distraction compared to the issue of Non-Intervention and the expansionist policies and programme of Nazi Germany; they too, therefore, largely fall outside the scope of this essay.

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<sup>11</sup> Legarreta, *Guernica*, p.14.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p.32.

<sup>13</sup> Overy, *Morbid*, p335 (N. Rankin, *Telegram from Guernica: The Extraordinary Life of George Steer, War Correspondent* (London, 2003), pp.119-124).

<sup>14</sup> M. Alpert, transcript of 'The Blockade of Bilbao' lecture, London, 21/6/2008.

<sup>15</sup> Overy, *Morbid*, p.335.

<sup>16</sup> Legarreta, *Guernica*, p.30.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p104; (p.4, Euskadi Roja, 7 May 1937)

<sup>18</sup> Fyrth, *Signal*, p.221.

For the general public with an ideology or a political preference, the issue of whether and why the Basque child refugees should be supported was relatively clear-cut, as battle lines between the broad left and the right were already well-established over the previous year since the Spanish Civil War broke out. In Cambridge for example, ‘the pro-Republican cause was shared by the trade union movement, local Labour Party, university socialist and liberal clubs and local peace organisations... vs. the local Catholic Church authorities which organised the meetings in support of Franco’.<sup>19</sup>

The Basque Government expressly stated at the outset of its desire for the receiving of its civilians to be seen as a humanitarian gesture outside of politics. In response the BCC created an humanitarian relief programme designed to appeal to a wider constituency of support. Despite the BCC’s public emphasis on humanitarianism, the precise motivations for receiving the Basque child refugees into so-called “colonies” were a moveable feast. For some on the Left, the “ninos,” (Spanish for “children”) as they came to be known, were the human manifestation in Britain of opposition to European Fascism, the poster boys and girls for their cause. Some felt even more strongly; George Steer regarded the evacuation of children and women from Bilbao as ‘the British contribution to the defence of Bilbao.’<sup>20</sup> He had support for his viewpoint from the opposite end of the political spectrum; the pro-Franco Sir Henry Chilton, British Ambassador in Spain, considered ‘the removal of useless mouths from the area of combat around Bilbao was liable to prolong the city’s resistance’.<sup>21</sup>

For many supporting the Republican cause, receiving the Basque child refugees was a practically achievable humanitarian act which also had propaganda value. For nearly a year, since the war started, the NJCSR had been developing creative appeals in support of Republican Spain and it seems inconceivable that elements of it didn’t appreciate the value of having the Basque children in Britain to present a clear fundraising proposition. Pretus argues that the NJCSR felt both horror at the bombing of civilians in Bilbao, but also that British involvement in the evacuation could possibly influence British policy towards Spain. The struggle to win the support of the democratic powers had guided Republican policy, and that of its supporters’ activities, from the outset of the war, and the presence of the Basque child refugees in colonies around Britain would certainly bring the war to the attention of the public.<sup>22</sup> This could have been a private organisational motivation but the publicly displayed motivation was one of humanitarianism; certainly the politicisation of the Basque child refugees was not in the interests of the broad Labour movement, as it did not want to offend the views of Catholic working class Labour voters.<sup>23</sup>

On the one hand, the British working class had reason to identify with the Republic and consequently be supportive of the Basque child refugees, as workers were fighting a protracted struggle for democracy and workers’ rights. On the other however, a period of civil disorder had followed Franco’s military uprising in July 1936, with massacres of real or perceived enemies on both sides. On the Republican side this manifested itself in violent

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<sup>19</sup> Overy, *Morbid*, p.329.

<sup>20</sup> Legarreta, *Guernica* p.101; (letter from Steer to Noel-Baker, 8/5/1937).

<sup>21</sup> S. Bishop, ‘Was The Arrival Into The UK And Subsequent Care Of 4,000 Basque Refugee Children In May 1937 An Example Of British Benevolence Or Political Manoeuvring’ (MA History Dissertation, University of Sussex; 2003-4), p.13; (HO 213/287).

<sup>22</sup> G. Pretus, *Humanitarian Relief in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939)* (Edwin Mellen Press, 2013), p.257.

<sup>23</sup> T. Buchanan, ‘The Role Of The British Labour Movement In The Origins And Work Of The Basques Children’s Committee 1937-9,’ *European History Quarterly*; Vol. 18, (1988), p.170.

anti-clericalism by uncontrolled militias; a total of nearly 7,000 Catholic officials, including bishops, were murdered in the Republican zone and countless churches burned before the Republican Government re-asserted its authority.<sup>24</sup> Very few of these atrocities had been perpetrated in the Basque region, but the distinction was not always made. These events created a conflict between the faith and political allegiance of working class Catholics in Britain when considering whether or not to support pro-Republican initiatives, which the Basque child refugees could be perceived to be an extension of.

The Catholic Church in Britain, and the Catholic press, developed an almost schizophrenic response to the Basque child refugees, best summed up by Britain's chief prelate, the Archbishop of Westminster, Arthur Hinsley, who wrote to each archdiocese appealing for funds to keep the 1,200 Catholic child refugees in Catholic orphanages and convents. 'As you know, a great number of little children have been brought to England from Bilbao. We did not bring them and many of us think they ought never to have been brought. However, they are here now. Not one of us, surely, can dare to turn them away.'<sup>25</sup> The financial response was generous, but essentially self-serving. As the Archbishop explained in an open letter printed on the front page of the Catholic Herald on 21 May 1937, the Catholic Church understood the evacuation of the children as necessary to allow the children to continue practising their faith. 'They are being sent over to England from the pre-eminently Catholic Basque Country. They are being sent to us and committed to our care so that their faith may be safeguarded.'<sup>26</sup> This was a rather selective interpretation of what the Basque Government had requested, which was that the Basque culture of the children should be preserved.

A similar dynamic to the broad Labour movement's caution played out in the Catholic press. The Catholic Herald, the Tablet, Universe and Catholic Times railed against the Basque child refugees coming, but all to varying extents initially, grudgingly, recognised the need to provide for them once they landed, although their subsequent criticism would only serve to undermine their own fundraising in support of maintaining the Catholic colonies. In the same way that the Labour movement had to be mindful of its Catholic vote in its support for the Republic, the Catholic press could not afford to alienate its working class readership by being too damning of the refugees; 200,000 out of 500,000 Catholic households in Britain received a Catholic paper.<sup>27</sup>

What made the sustaining of the *ninos* feasible, given the Government's stipulation that the BCC commit to providing 10 shillings (the pre-decimal equivalent of 50p at 1937 prices) for the upkeep of each child per week,<sup>28</sup> was the involvement of countless civil society organisations drawn to the humanitarian call. AJP Taylor called them, the '...great army of busybodies...the active people of England...(which)... protected animals and children'.<sup>29</sup> In Southampton for example, a broad coalition of local organisations as diverse as Boys Brigades, Cycling Clubs, Cooperative employees, teachers, one small Labour Party ward, one

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<sup>24</sup> A.M. Moreno, *Historia de la persecucion religiosa en Espana 1936-9* (Madrid, 1961), quoted in Frances Lannon, *Privilege, Persecution and Prophecy: The Catholic Church in Spain, 1875-1975* (Oxford, 1987), p.201, in T. Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War and the British Labour Movement* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), p170.

<sup>25</sup> Legarreta, *Guernica*, p.119.

<sup>26</sup> Myers, 'Englishness', p.187.

<sup>27</sup> Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War*, p.171.

<sup>28</sup> A. Bell, *Only For Three Months: the Basque Children in Exile* (Mousehold Press, 1996), p.27.

<sup>29</sup> AJP Taylor, 'English History, 1914-1945' (Oxford, 1965), p175, quoted in H. McCarthy, 'Associational Voluntarism in Interwar Britain,' p.47, in M. Hilton and J. McKay (eds.), *The Ages of Voluntarism: How We Got to the Big Society* (Oxford, 2011).

trade union, and other interest groups, funded and ran a colony for Basque child refugees.<sup>30</sup> These new local coalitions of amateur humanitarianism, without any previous experience of responding to the needs of refugee children, had a very different view of the appropriateness of receiving the Basque child refugees to the professional humanitarian organisations.

The most experienced humanitarian organisations involved in direct non-partisan relief to children in Spain and other countries were the Quaker-based Society of Friends and the Save the Children Fund; representatives of the Society were responding to the needs of children in colonies in Catalonia four or five times the number transported on the Habana.<sup>31</sup> In contrast to the pro-Republican organisations which dominated the NJCSR and BCC, both the Quakers and Save the Children opposed the evacuation of the Basque children. One of the leading opponents was Alfred Jacob, who administered the Friends' programme of work with the colonies of internally displaced Spanish children in Catalonia. He questioned 'the excessive cost involved in transporting considerable numbers of Spanish and Basque children abroad...(depriving)...others of badly needed food and medical aid, in addition to the problem of maintaining public interest in, and financial support, of the children after the initial enthusiasm wore off.'<sup>32</sup> Jacob further argued that it was psychologically healthier for the children to remain in Spain, and that the motives of those who wished to take children abroad, but who were less willing to maintain a child in Spain, were questionable. Formally, the declared policy of the British Society of Friends' Friends Service Council (FSC), which administered its overseas work, was that children could best be helped by relief work within Spain itself.<sup>33</sup> By late April FSC Spain Committee minutes show that the NJCSR was seeking the FSC's advice on bringing the ninos to Britain; the FSC counselled them against this and promoted the possibility of accommodating the Basque child refugees in colonies either in the South of France or Catalonia, supported by British funds.<sup>34</sup> By the Committee's next meeting on 11<sup>th</sup> May, the NJCSR was going ahead and asking the FSC and Save the Children Fund to send a representative to sit on the newly formed BCC.<sup>35</sup> Minutes of its meeting a fortnight later recorded that 'some members of this committee still have grave doubts as to the wisdom of bringing the children to this country. In view however, of the fact that they are already here, we decide to accede to the request to appoint a representative (to the BCC).'<sup>36</sup>

The Save the Children Fund mirrored these concerns but was even more outspoken in its initial opposition, mainly through the extremely forthright pronouncements of its Secretary, Lewis Golden. In a note of their conversation, J. Cooper from the Home Office wrote on 4<sup>th</sup> May that: 'for his part he would sooner see them die in their own land than rot slowly in exile where they deteriorate physically, morally and mentally.'<sup>37</sup> With the arrival of the ninos on 22<sup>nd</sup> May, both of these organisations found themselves bounced into supporting the Basque child refugees, albeit far more at a local level than from central funds. For a few weeks at least however, the right-wing of Britain's Conservative Party, the generally pro-Franco

<sup>30</sup> T. Buchanan, 'Britain's Popular Front? "Aid Spain" and the British Labour Movement,' *History Workshop Journal*; Vol. 31 (Spring 1991), p.70.

<sup>31</sup> F. Hale, *Waging Peace In The Spanish Civil War: The Relief Efforts Of The British Quaker Mission*; <https://www.researchgate.net>; p.13.

<sup>32</sup> F. Mendlesohn, *Quaker Relief Work In The Spanish Civil War* (Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), p.160. (Alfred Jacob to Fred Tritton, 16/1/1937; FSC/R/SP/1/1).

<sup>33</sup> Bell, *Three Months*, p.16.

<sup>34</sup> Minutes of the Friends Service Council Spain Committee 1936-1940, (Committee Minutes 27/4/1937).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, (Committee Minutes 11/5/1937).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, (Committee Minutes 26/5/1937).

<sup>37</sup> Bell, *Three Months*, p.233.

Roman Catholic Church in Britain, the Society of Friends, and the Save the Children Fund were all on the same side of the argument, albeit for different permutations of reasons. Perhaps however this most professional wing of the humanitarian response would at least to some extent be vindicated; some of the Basque child refugees subsequently questioned the wisdom of being removed to Britain, as opposed to a less dangerous part of Spain, because of the dislocation it caused from their parents.<sup>38</sup>

There were however also genuine questions and concerns about receiving the Basque child refugees from within the labour movement and that section of the press that was sympathetic to its interests. The Jarrow March had only occurred seven months before the S.S. Habana docked, and the food, clothes, shelter and general attention paid to the *ninos* by predominantly middle class civil society institutions in communities where the colonies were based led to complaints within the Labour movement that the children were being given privileges over and above those children from areas stricken by unemployment.<sup>39</sup> Just the day after the children arrived, in an article otherwise sympathetic to the *ninos*, the *New Statesman and Review* commented that children of the 1.7 million British unemployed were also suffering, and that the ten shillings per week allowance was more than that provided for per child in unemployment benefit.<sup>40</sup>

Nevertheless, there was support amongst the working class, who gave despite their own needs, their attitude typified by a woman from the North-East of England whose husband was unemployed: 'our bairns need help, we just cannot keep them as we should, but our bairns don't have to be targets from bombs, machine guns and the like.'<sup>41</sup> By the end of 1937, 90 colonies had been formed for the children across Britain;<sup>42</sup> support varied from place to place, but only Jersey formally refused the BCC a place for a colony, ostensibly due to the damaging impact of French immigrants who had 'overrun' the island many years previously.<sup>43</sup>

A further reason for the strength of support for the receiving of the Basque child refugees was because the British identified with the Basques. This had two dimensions, the first related to a sense of shared fate as fellow civilians anticipating the bombing of their homes and cities, and the second, related to a sense of shared identity, based on perceived positive national attributes. And the perceived negative attributes of Spaniards.

Ever since the First World War, when German Zeppelins had dropped bombs on London and other towns on the east coast of England, there had been a growing dread of worse to come.<sup>44</sup> This sense of foreboding was given credence by the then Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin in his 1932 "A Fear for the Future" speech to Parliament, where he acknowledged through use of the phrase "the bomber will always get through," that regardless of air defences, sufficient bomber aircraft will survive to destroy cities.<sup>45</sup> The ongoing development of a new generation of long-range bombers capable of carrying ever-increasing payloads continued to feed a sense of public alarm throughout the 1930s. With the widely reported bombing of

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<sup>38</sup> Pretus, *Humanitarian*, p222.

<sup>39</sup> Buchanan, 'Role of the British', p.166.

<sup>40</sup> Legarreta, *Guernica*, p.211. (*New Statesman and Review*, 24/5/37 p.1).

<sup>41</sup> B. Williams, *Jews and Other Foreigners: Manchester and the Rescue of the Victims of European Fascism, 1933-1940*, (Manchester University Press, 2011), p.172. (*Evening Chronicle* 24/6/1937).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, p.110 (*Manchester Guardian* 9/7/1937).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>44</sup> Rankin, Lecture transcript.

<sup>45</sup> Overy, *Morbid*, p.334.

Guernica, and without the benefit of hindsight, it was logical for the British public to anticipate that Bilbao would suffer a similar fate to Guernica, and empathise based on the fate they feared for themselves if another European war did come.

Secondly, British civil society was moved to receive the Basque child refugees based on who they were, as well as who they were not. The reality was that a significant proportion of the child refugees on the S.S. Habana were not ethnically Basque,<sup>46</sup> due to migration from elsewhere in northern Spain to Bilbao for work over previous years, and due to internal displacement caused by the war. This diversity is significant because neither the NJCSR prior to the arrival of the Habana, nor the BCC subsequently when seeking to garner support for the ninos, sought to recognise this, and instead portrayed the exodus as Basque and majority Catholic. The staunch advocate of the Basque refugees, the Liberal MP Wilfrid Roberts, stated in correspondence with the Home Office that the 'majority of the children will come from Catholic families.'<sup>47</sup> Myers suggests 'it seems...that a policy decision was taken to present the children to the population of Britain as Basque'<sup>48</sup> as 'an attempt to establish children's suitability for exile.'<sup>49</sup> Myers does however admit to a lack of documentary evidence of such a policy decision.

This approach by the NJCSR and BCC, however it was arrived at, was central to the success of the initiative. Fundamentally, the Basque region was held in much higher regard by British people than the rest of Spain, not least because Britain had a history of conflict with Spain, and now there was a viciously fought civil war which only served to feed much of the British public's existing opinion of Spain as 'a primitive, cruel, and superstitious country, where people killed bulls - and each other - with great savagery,'<sup>50</sup> and a significant proportion of whom were anarchists, a belief that was just not understood in Britain. Even Leah Manning, who played a pivotal role in lobbying the British Government to facilitate the removal of the Basque child refugees from Bilbao, admitted to having pre-conceived notions of Spain before she visited the country for the first time in 1935, including gypsy girls, bull fights, torture and inquisitions.<sup>51</sup>

In contrast, Basques were 'moderate, pious, and hard-working people who had managed to avoid the excesses of the rest of Spain and wanted only to be left alone'<sup>52</sup> Even Anthony Eden, the British Foreign Secretary, said in Parliament on 20<sup>th</sup> April 1937, just days before consenting to the facilitation of the Basque child refugees' journey to safety: 'If I had to choose in Spain, I believe that the Basque Government would more closely conform to our system than that of Franco or the Republic.'<sup>53</sup> Further, the Basques had within living memory of most Britons shown their worth and loyalty to Britain, with Basque ships having, not always successfully, run the gauntlet of German submarines to bring vital iron ore to Britain during the First World War.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Legarreta, *Guernica*, p.100.

<sup>47</sup> Myers, 'Englishness', p85.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p.150.

<sup>49</sup> Myers, 'Englishness', p.186.

<sup>50</sup> Alpert, Lecture transcript.

<sup>51</sup> T. Buchanan, 'A Far Away Country of Which We Know Nothing...? Perceptions of Spain and its Civil War in Britain, 1931-39', *Twentieth Century British History*; Vol. 4, 1 (1993), p.8; (Leah Manning; *What I Saw in Spain* (London, 1935), p.20).

<sup>52</sup> Buchanan, *A Far Away Country*, p.7.

<sup>53</sup> Alpert, Lecture transcript.

<sup>54</sup> Myers, 'Englishness', p.85.



This affinity with the Basque region was particularly keenly felt in Wales, which was to provide four colonies for 230 of the Basque child refugees.<sup>55</sup> Both entities had flags of red white and green, both had nationalist political parties, both had populations of around 2.5 million, shared landscapes of mountains, valleys, rugged shorelines and heavily industrialised urban areas, both had struggled to survive in the shadow of more powerful and populous neighbours, both felt they occupied corners of Europe, and they had both experienced recent cultural renaissances.<sup>56</sup> More tangibly however, Wales and the Basque region were long-established trading partners, with Welsh coal heading to the Basque region and the aforementioned Basque iron ore heading for Wales; British capital invested there, and there was some inter-marriage and migration in both directions. Welsh miners' 'proud history of internationalism'<sup>57</sup> was also a factor, with the Welsh Miners' Federation financially supporting the *ninos* colonies in Wales.

Neither the bombing of Madrid from November 1936 onwards, nor the refugee exodus from Malaga early in 1937, had led to evacuation being contemplated by Spain or suggested by potential host countries. These victims had been Spanish, not Basque.

A further move away from altruistic motives for receiving the Basque child refugees was that in responding positively to the *ninos*' plight, the provider of the succour felt more fulfilled in themselves, as having conformed to a cultural tradition and sense of national identity, or level of expectation. Myers describes the middle and upper class philanthropists who dominated British civil society's humanitarian response to the Basque child refugees as 'artisans of national identity'<sup>58</sup> He proposes that the alleged violence of the Spanish gave the English an opportunity to 'espouse and practise the kindness and sympathy for the underdog'<sup>59</sup> that was arguably a unique English characteristic. In a letter to *The Times* a local Rector, having just visited the Stoneham Camp reception centre where the *ninos* were first located after arriving in England, confessed that he felt 'proud as an Englishman'<sup>60</sup> that the Basque child refugees had been given sanctuary. A local councillor, James Watts, was moved to say at a garden party in support of Ashton-under-Lyne's colony, that 'we English have always been proud that our island has provided asylum for fugitives from other lands'<sup>61</sup> It was no doubt sincerely said, but was at best self-mythologising and at worst delusional, given the mere trickle of refugees that arrived on Britain's shores following the succession of 'Aliens' Acts passed in Parliament before and after the First World War.

For the great majority of the Basque child refugees, their sanctuary and asylum came to an end, as it was always recognised that it would. Most people's estimate for the Basque child refugees length of stay in Britain had been just three months, but the first group of 152 *ninos* didn't return to Bilbao until 12 November 1937, with another 500 more the following January.<sup>62</sup> By mid-1938 it was clear there were about 1,800 children whose parents were separated, could not be traced, or were not in a position to look after them, including 1,000

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<sup>55</sup> H. Davies, *Fleeing Franco: How Wales Gave Shelter to Refugee Children From the Basque Country During the Spanish Civil War*, (University of Wales Press, 2011), p.v).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* p.10.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* p.5., Will Paynter Foreword to H. Francis *Miners Against Fascism: Wales and the Spanish Civil War*, (Lawrence and Wishart, 1984)

<sup>58</sup> Myers, 'Englishness', p.74.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p.89

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p.90. (*The Times*, 18/6/ 1937).

<sup>61</sup> Buchanan, Lecture transcript, (*Manchester Guardian*, 26/7/1937).

<sup>62</sup> T. Buchanan, *Britain and the Spanish Civil War* (Cambridge University Press, 1997) p.115.

whose parents were in Catalonia;<sup>63</sup> this rather validates the view of the Friends Service Council and the Save the Children Fund that it would have been more appropriate for at least some of the Basque children to have gone there. That said, only eight of the Basque child refugees died in England,<sup>64</sup> a vastly smaller number than would probably have died or been injured if they had stayed in Bilbao whilst Franco's forces and the Luftwaffe were bombing the city. By the time the Second World War broke out in September 1939 1,155 remained.<sup>65</sup> Although war-time Britain was generally a less safe place than Spain, it was no longer possible to safely transport the *ninos* out of the country. At the end of the war many went to a number of different countries, but 250 chose to make Britain their home.<sup>66</sup>

In conclusion, there were both ideological and humanitarian arguments for and against bringing the Basque child refugees to Britain; the ethnic identity and religious affiliation of the refugees served to be a factor in shaping these views, and this was well-appreciated by the NJCSR and the BCC. The *Habana* had carried just 3,862 children and its human cargo started to return home within six months; only 6.5% of the *ninos* were to ultimately stay in Britain. However, the significance of the Basque child refugees was out of all proportion to their modest numbers and the limited amount of time that the vast majority were in Britain. Over the previous thirty years, since the passage of the succession of Aliens' Acts in Parliament, refugee numbers arriving in Britain had been negligible. In the years immediately prior to 1937, only small numbers of refugees had been accepted by Britain from countries under Nazi rule, but in late 1938, whilst the *ninos* were being repatriated, the British Government began the evacuation of 10,000 Jewish children<sup>67</sup> in the aftermath of the Nazis' 'Kristallnacht.'

Whether these *ninos*, victims of fascism, opened the door for others, is worthy of further study.

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<sup>63</sup> Legarreta, *Guernica*, p257.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, p.225.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, p.222.

<sup>66</sup> Bell, *Three Months*, p.8.

<sup>67</sup> N. Brewer, 'Intervention?: British Politics And Basque Refugee Children During The Spanish Civil War' (Senior Thesis 2006); p.43.

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