

THE BLOCKADE OF BILBAO

The important work done by this Association has revealed a great deal about the arrival and the experiences of those Spanish children who disembarked from the liner *Habana* at Southampton when it arrived from Bilbao on 23rd May, 1937. However, for the significance of the arrival of the Basque children to be fully appreciated it needs to be put into its specifically British context. For Great Britain to admit four thousand refugees in 1937, on the understanding that they would be looked after by volunteers and maintained by private financial contributions, was by no means a concession that one could have reasonably expected. After nearly a century during which Britain had been a refuge for people fleeing all the reactionary regimes of Europe, including Spain, the *Aliens' Act* of 1905 had closed the gates. The exception and thus the only precedent that can be quoted happened in August 1914 at the outset of the First World War, when several thousand Belgian refugees fled from the advancing Germans and were received in this country with the great approval of the newspapers. But Belgium was our ally in the Great War. Indeed, the immediate reason for declaring war had been to protect Belgian neutrality and to maintain British policy of keeping the Channel coast in the hands of a friendly Power. But Spain, in contrast, 23 years later, was far away. Britain had no obligations to Spain. The Spanish Civil War was an internal matter. In any case, much British public opinion thought that Spain was a primitive, cruel, and superstitious country, where people killed bulls - and each other - with great savagery. At the beginning of the Spanish Civil War in summer 1936 all the European powers agreed in August 1936 to a policy called 'Non-Intervention', according to which nobody might sell arms to either side in Spain. Non-Intervention was very popular in this country even when it

became well-known that Germany and Italy were ignoring the agreement and shamelessly supplying Franco with war material. Furthermore, and this is an important point for the subject under consideration, the *Merchant Shipping (Carriage of Arms to Spain) Act* of December 1936, forbade British merchant ships to carry war material to Spain from anywhere in the world and obliged the Royal Navy to stop and search British ships which were suspected of carrying arms to Spain. In short, British neutrality in Spain, that is to say, keeping as far away from the Spanish war as possible, was the major plank in the edifice of British policy.

So actually the admission of the Spanish children in 1937 was not to be expected, and the impression received from reading Foreign Office and Home Office documents is that official consent to admitting the Basque children was an example of the Government being overwhelmed by the pressure of public opinion and being forced to do what its own advisers argued was not really a very good idea: that is, admitting Spanish refugees to the United Kingdom.

The particular pressures which made the weight of public opinion so irresistible must, therefore, be investigated. There were two major issues, to my mind. The first was the naval blockade to which Bilbao was subjected by Franco in April 1937, while the second was the shock administered to British public opinion by the bombing of Guernica on Monday 26th April.

The Blockade of Bilbao

On 21st March, 1937, Franco abandoned his attempts to take Madrid, transferring the weight of his attack to the Northern provinces, that is the Basque Country, Santander and Asturias which, separated from the rest of the territory of the Republic, had defeated attempts at military insurrection by pro-Franco officers.

Franco's first goal was to take Bilbao, a city of great industrial wealth, with its iron and steel complexes, its iron ore, its large and skilled population, and a port which was much nearer to the military fronts than the distant ports in Galicia, which were already in Franco's hands and through which German war material was supplied to the insurgent armies.

British attention now became focused on the Basque Country. Significantly, there was a difference between British opinion about Spain in general and British perceptions of the Basques in particular. The Basques were seen as being traditional and Catholic, but Catholic in a socially modern way rather than according to the image that the Spanish Catholic Church had in Britain, where the school history curriculum taught about the Inquisition, the Armada and Philip II and people were generally suspicious of, if not hostile to, Catholics. Furthermore, the Basque Country had, like Britain, a mixed agricultural, fishing, mining and industrial economy, Basques were seen as enterprising and not very like the rest of Spain as it was perceived in Britain. Furthermore, the murders of clergy and the desecration of churches that had taken place in Madrid, Barcelona and other parts of the Republican Zone, and had been widely publicised, had shocked British public opinion. It was important that very few such outrages had taken place in the Basque Country.

There were, moreover, important economic links between Britain and Bilbao. Ever since the second half of the 19th century, ships had been sailing from British ports to Bilbao with high-grade coal, usually from South Wales, destined for the iron and steel factories - the *altos hornos* - and they had brought back iron ore for British industry. There were British communities in Bilbao and Basque ones in South Wales. People had intermarried. During the first World War, only twenty years earlier, still well within adult memory, the Basques had been pro-Allied. German submarines had torpedoed ships sailing to Britain belonging to the well-known Basque Sota-Aznar shipping line. Ramón de la Sota, one of the owners, was awarded a knighthood and when the British Consul in Bilbao presented it to him he said:

‘Those of us who were here during the War well remember how Señor de la Sota’s ships with their valiant crews, sailed laden with iron ore for England, braving the submarine campaign throughout the conflict;.....’

All these factors, specific to the relationship between Britain and the Basques, came together in 1937 to make the Basque people an object of sympathy and one with which the conservative British middle class could feel much empathy. As for the political side of this view, it was expressed by Anthony Eden, the Foreign Secretary, in Parliament on April 20th, 1937, at the height of the crisis which would create a public mood for the acceptance of child refugees. This is what Eden said:

‘If I had to chose in Spain, I believe that the Basque Government would more closely conform to our system than that of Franco or the Republic.’

This, then, was the background in April 1937 against which the British Government considered whether and how to protect British merchant shipping against Franco's blockade.

The blockade was an issue of maximum importance. The British merchant fleet was the largest in the world. Because of the Spanish Civil War, many ships had come into use again after the Great Depression of the early 1930s. Sailors were back at work, and many foreign ships had re-registered under the British flag. This of course was important for the British economy, as was the increase in trade. It was vital that British shipping be protected, and the protection of British merchant ships was the fundamental obligation of the Royal Navy, still the most powerful and respected in the world.

At the beginning of the war the British Government insisted that neither side in a civil war had the right to interfere with neutral ships sailing to an enemy port. This was the most important question in this whole matter. In an international war, both sides can claim what are called 'belligerent rights', which means that either side may, according to international law, confiscate the cargoes of neutral ships which are sailing to the other side. Britain, for example, had blockaded Germany during the 1914-1918 war with grave effect. In London, - and Britain - made the decisions because she had the biggest Navy as well as the largest merchant fleet - it was felt that unless both sides or neither in Spain were given the same right to blockade, Britain would be contravening the non-intervention agreement, even though everyone knew that the Republic was the legal and recognised government and Franco the insurgent. However, to give blockade rights to both sides would mean allowing

Republican warships - and the Republican fleet was much larger than Franco's - to stop German and Italian cargo ships taking armaments to a Franco port, and it was feared that this would bring about the very major European war that the Non-Intervention agreement was intended to prevent. That was the dilemma. As yet, there had been so serious problems, given that the Republic had accepted that it would not be allowed to blockade Franco's ports, and so far Franco had not imposed a blockade on his enemies. But the issue was about to arise.

In March 1937 Franco declared a blockade of the Northern coast of Spain. Could he do this, in practical terms? In the Bay of Biscay he had the battleship *España*, the cruiser *Almirante Cervera* and a destroyer, the *Velasco*, as well as several smaller armed merchant ships. If these ships maintained their very energetic activity they would indeed be able to maintain an effective blockade.

British policy was that no Spanish ship should be allowed to stop a British merchant ship 'on the high seas' as the expression was. But this did not apply to the sea just off the coast, called 'territorial waters', where it was the strongest party which had authority. This was the Basque Government which kept the sea free of mines and had powerful coastal artillery which kept Franco's warships well away. So, provided the Royal Navy protected British merchant shipping up to the three-mile limit, Franco's blockade would not have much force.

The *Merchant Shipping (Carriage of Arms to Spain) Act* of December 1936, required the Royal Navy to stop and search British merchant ships to see if they were carrying prohibited war material to Spain. Consequently, the Royal Navy could guarantee that

British merchant ships going to Bilbao were carrying either food or raw materials and not prohibited war material and that Franco ships had no right to stop them .

To sum up, British citizens were forbidden to sell arms to Spain and British ships were forbidden to carry them from anywhere to Spain. That was the definition of non-intervention, and at the same time the British Government would not grant either of the two sides in Spain the right to blockade foreign shipping. Consequently, the Royal Navy would continue to protect British merchant ships against a Spanish blockade, but only as far as the limit of territorial waters. Inside territorial waters any hostile ships would come under the fire of the coastal artillery, so Franco's ships stayed at a distance.

The problem became serious in the spring of 1937. Rations in Bilbao were low, a little milk, a few eggs, chickpeas, a little cooking oil. Franco's view was that food was essential, as it indeed was, in maintaining Basque resistance, even though, according to the letter of the non-intervention regulations, it was not prohibited. Nevertheless, the insurgents had to be able to strangle Basque resistance, but how far would they risk challenging Britain ?

It was then that the first incident occurred. On 6 April 1937, a British merchant ship, the *Thorpehall*, bringing rice from Alicante to Bilbao, and which had already been searched by the Royal Navy, was stopped by a Franco armed merchant ship, the *Galerna*. Two British destroyers protected the *Thorpehall*. Then the Franco cruiser *Cervera* came in sight. One British destroyer prepared for combat, placing itself between the *Thorpehall* and the *Cervera*. Three more British destroyers arrived. For

the whole of that Tuesday 6th April, the *Cervera* threatened to stop the *Thorpehall*, while the British captains used their diplomatic skills to avoid a serious incident. Finally, the destroyers escorted the *Thorpehall* as far as the three-mile limit, and the *Cervera* turned back.

That solved that particular problem, but clearly there were going to be more incidents, because Franco's view was that any supplies, including food, for the enemy were tantamount to intervening on their side.

The next day, Wednesday 7th April, the British Cabinet met at 10, Downing Street.. Ministers were divided. The First Lord of the Admiralty, Sir Samuel Hoare, who was a supporter of Franco and later ambassador to Spain from 1940 onwards, wanted Britain to give Franco - and presumably the Republic, whose record so far had been unimpressive - belligerent rights to stop neutral ships. He thought that for the Royal Navy to escort merchant ships to Bilbao with supplies constituted clear intervention against Franco. In contrast, the Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, was sympathetic to the Basques, but more importantly he wanted it to be quite clear that blockades were not acceptable. British public opinion, in any case, was outraged that the greatest navy in the world should not be allowed to protect British shipping against Franco's handful of ships, so Eden's views prevailed and the Admiralty was obliged to reinforce the British flotilla in the Bay of Biscay with the most powerful ship in the world, the battlecruiser *Hood*. Eden's view was that it should be absolutely clear that the Franco navy would be sunk if it fired on a British ship. The threat of massive force was the best way to avoid an incident.

Meanwhile, however, the British Government agreed that the Royal Navy should advise British merchant ships not to try to get through Franco's blockade and reach Bilbao, but to drop anchor in the French port of St. Jean de Luz, just over the frontier, and wait until the situation was clearer. But it was obvious that this could be only a temporary solution. There was room in the French port only for a certain number of ships, and of course they wanted to land their cargo in Spain and get paid and run back to England.. If they had perishable cargoes, such as food, it would go bad because the ships were not refrigerated.

On the Sunday of that tense week, 11th April, ministers were called back from their country weekends to a long and complicated meeting . The British Government faced a dilemma. It was intolerable that Franco should try to enforce a blockade, but on the other hand for the Royal Navy to escort ships through his blockade was tantamount to intervention on the anti-Franco side. So what could be done ? In the end, a message was sent to Franco to say that His Majesty's Government would not tolerate any attempt to interfere with British merchant ships. Nevertheless it would advise British ships that there were dangers in approaching Bilbao against which the Navy could not protect them.

Now, as the parliamentary opposition - Labour and the Liberals - saw, this statement was untrue. What were the dangers ? The Basque coastal artillery and the sweeping of mines kept the sea close to the coast clear of danger. On the high seas, that is outside territorial waters, it was Navy's role to protect British ships. So the next day, Monday 12th April, in the House of Commons, the Labour opposition gave notice of a motion to censure the Government. The Labour Leader, Major Attlee, said that the Navy

should do its job: protect British ships on the high seas and ‘about their lawful business’ . Even though its large majority ensured that the motion of censure was defeated, the situation was very embarrassing for the Government. Public opinion was very excited. Could the Royal Navy - asked the press - not defend British merchant ships against three out-of-date Spanish warships?

So what exactly was the situation ? Was it safe for merchant ships to go into Bilbao ?

The captains of ships anchored in St. Jean de Luz were receiving contradictory messages from Irún, just inside Spain, where the frontier was in Franco’s hands, as well as from emissaries from Bilbao, who said that it was quite safe to sail to the Basque capital. As a result, some of the British skippers wondered whether they should risk the overnight journey to Bilbao. One of them, who became a legend, known as ‘Potato’ Jones because of his cargo, sailed out of the French port after making some very belligerent statements in a South Wales newspaper, talking about the defeat of the Spanish Armada. However, from being the hero of the newspapers, Potato Jones became an object of derision, because he did not go to Bilbao. News about him went from the front page to the back until some days later he landed his now elderly potatoes at Alicante. It was another ship, the *Seven Seas Spray*, under Captain Roberts, who made the overnight trip on the night of the 19/20th April and was received apotheosically as his ship, carrying urgently needed food, sailed up the ría, the estuary, into Bilbao. In the next few days several other ships reached Bilbao, escorted up to the three mile limit by British warships.

However, all would not stay smooth. On 23rd April the Franco armed merchant ship *Galerna* fired at a British merchant ship, the *MacGregor*. A Royal Navy destroyer

aimed its guns at the *Galerna*. The Franco cruiser *Almirante Cervera* moved towards the British destroyer. Would the *Cervera* sink the British destroyer and risk being smashed to pieces by the massive guns of the battlecruiser *Hood*?. Admiral Blake, in command of the Royal Navy flotilla, and the captain of the *Cervera* kept their heads until the *MacGregor* reached the three-mile limit, when the coastal batteries opened fire, at which the Franco ships sailed away. In the following week eight more British ships arrived in Bilbao. The blockade had been, effectively, broken.

Guernica

All this time, the general feeling in Britain was angry and jingoistic. It reinforced the general British sympathy for the Basques. However, it was the outrage of the bombing of Guernica, on 26th April 1937, that created that huge wave of feeling which made public emotion so strong that the Foreign Office and the Home Office were unable to resist the demand that Britain should receive at least some refugees. The account of the bombing of Guernica, published in *The Times* on the morning of 28th April, sent by George Steer, the young South African journalist who wrote a book about the battle for Bilbao called *The Tree of Gernika*, is highly relevant here..

Insert extract on Guernica

This article was on the breakfast table of every important person and many less so. It was read on the trains into work. It lay on the desks of high officials in the Home Office, and the British consul in Bilbao confirmed its truth. The bombing of Guernica

had great effect on influential opinion, especially when the British authorities rejected Franco's claim that Guernica had been destroyed by Basque military forces in retreat. However, it was not only the humanitarian aspect of the bombing of Guernica that shocked British opinion. In 1937 the development of air forces was creating major alarm about the threat of bombing directed against civilians. Stanley Baldwin, the Prime Minister, had prophesied that 'the bomber would always get through'. Madrid had been bombed, although the state of the art Russian fighters that the Soviet Union had supplied suggested that Baldwin's pronouncement was not completely justified. Guernica seemed much closer home than Abyssinia, which had been bombed by the Italians, precisely because of that empathy with the Basques that I described earlier. So the demand to get at least women and children away from the bombing echoed in British consciences. Yet even so, actually to admit refugees here was something that the Government found hard to accept. Very wisely, the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief, which sent its letter of appeal to *The Times* in early May, decided to limit its welcome to children and only the essential adults to accompany them.

To conclude, Franco's blockade of Bilbao failed, although traffic gradually lessened. But by the end of the war, two years later, in March 1939, the British attitude to Spanish refugees had hardened, and the documents clearly illustrate the Government view that Britain could not afford to anger Franco as she had in 1937 by escorting evacuation ships and by admitting refugees. This was of course a different British Government, with Neville Chamberlain as Prime Minister and Lord Halifax at the Foreign Office, and they were concerned to get on well with Franco, the new ruler of Spain. And so hardly any refugees from Spain were allowed to come to this country.

