

## **G.L.STEER AND THE BASQUE CHILDREN IN 1937**

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Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, and thank you Natalia for that kind introduction. It's a great honour to be asked to give the third annual lecture to the Basque Children of '37 Association and to follow in the footsteps of such distinguished *hispanistas británicas*. The first lecture in this series, you will recall, was by Dr Tom Buchanan and last year's was by Professor Paul Preston. There is something else that also links all three of us: both Tom and Paul have written acute and penetrating essays on the journalist George Lowther Steer, who is the subject of my talk today.

Tom's essay, 'Journalism at War: George Lowther Steer, Guernica and the Resistance to Fascist Aggression', appeared in his 2007 book *The Impact of the Spanish Civil War on Britain*, and Paul's essay, 'The Sentimental Adventurer: George Steer and the Quest for Lost Causes', in his 2008 book about foreign correspondents in the Spanish Civil War, *We Saw Spain Die*. Both these fine articles used new sources that I had not consulted or known about in my biography of five years earlier, *Telegram from Guernica*, and they threw fresh light on this young journalist's involvement with the Basque country.

Now what I want to try and persuade you this afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, is that G.L. Steer also played a pivotal role in the evacuation of some 4000 children to Britain in May 1937, the historic event of nearly 75 years ago that led to the organisation that joins us all here today.

So, first of all, who was George Lowther Steer? He was born over a hundred years ago, on 22 November 1909, in South Africa, in the city of East London, which faces the Indian Ocean. He was the only child of the Managing Editor (then Chairman) of the *Daily Dispatch*, the Eastern Cape's liberal newspaper, later edited by Donald Woods, whose

friendship with Steve Biko was portrayed in the Richard Attenborough feature film *Cry Freedom*. Little George learned to read from newspapers and was marked out for journalism from the start. He was ferociously bright, ‘small-bodied and fox-featured’ as one man described him, a winner of scholarships to Winchester College and Christ Church, Oxford where he graduated with a Double First in Greats or Classics in 1932. He did not get a fellowship at All Souls, nor manage to join the *Manchester Guardian*, but returned to South Africa to become a cub reporter on the *Cape Argus*. Steer called himself ‘a South African Englishman’ and it’s important to remember that 4 out of his 5 published books were about Africa. Anyway, having served his colonial apprenticeship on the Cape Town evening paper, he returned to England to become the London correspondent of a British provincial newspaper, the *Yorkshire Post*. If you were an ambitious reporter from the outer reaches of the British Empire and Dominions, Fleet Street was the place where you had to be. Noel Monks, Alan Moorehead, Chester Wilmot and other wild colonial boys all followed the same path to the heart of journalism.

George Steer’s great break was being appointed Special Correspondent of *The Times* and being sent off to Ethiopia in the summer of 1935, just before Mussolini’s troops invaded the land then known as Abyssinia to create by force *Africa Orientale Italiana*, the colony of Italian East Africa in the Horn. Steer reported the Italians’ use of gas and bombing from the air to defeat the almost mediaeval armies of Ethiopia, stories which ran both in *The Times* and *The New York Times*. He also later wrote a book about the war called *Caesar in Abyssinia*. The title was sarcastic: Steer did not see the invasion of Ethiopia as an extension of the Holy Roman Empire, unlike his journalistic rival, the Catholic convert Evelyn Waugh, whose own (pro-Italian) non-fiction book on the conflict, *Waugh in Abyssinia*, came out at the same time as Steer’s, at Christmas

1936. Later, of course, Evelyn Waugh turned this tragic war into a black comedy for his great novel about journalists, *Scoop*, (or *Noticia Bomba* as it's known in Spanish.)

As a competitive journalist, the most important thing Steer did in Ethiopia was to get close to the *Negusa Nagast*, the King of Kings, the Emperor Haile Selassie. By being partisan rather than distant and 'objective', Steer got better access to information, intelligence and news. By becoming trusted as an honest broker, he got exclusives and scoops for *The Times*. He was, if you will, a propagandist for Haile Selassie. I see nothing wrong with this, by the way. I believe, and have stated often, that most news is propaganda, without honestly stating that it is.

Propaganda does not automatically mean 'lies' as some British journalists would have you believe. It is not always the opposite of truth. It is merely the propagation of a belief system, a point of view. You can propagandise for the truth and for decency too. *Propaganda* in Spanish only means 'advertising', so it may be best to see it as a branch of rhetoric, of persuasion.

What Steer did was make himself a trustworthy channel of the Emperor's point of view, as someone who was fair but broadly sympathetic. I stress this because one of the reasons that Steer did so well in the Basque country is that he repeated the 'open sesame' trick of direct contact with the leader through his relationship with José Antonio de Aguirre, the *lehendakari* or first president of the Basque republic, Euzkadi. But this is to jump ahead of myself just a little...

When Mussolini's army conquered Ethiopia in May 1936, George Steer was expelled from the country. He had been among the first of the journalists to get in and was now among the very last to leave. (The Italians accused him of being a spy, incidentally, a charge which will regularly recur in his story.) During the fall of Addis Ababa, brilliantly

described in his book, *Caesar in Abyssinia*, he married a journalist for a French newspaper, Margarita de Herrero y Hasset, inside the besieged British Embassy compound. ‘Gunfire accompanied the popping of champagne corks’ as one paper put it. (Born in Pau to a Spanish father and an English mother, Margarita de Herrero was one of the first women war-correspondents.) Back in London, Steer was at Victoria Station to meet Emperor Haile Selassie entering into his British exile at Bath.

In the summer of 1936, the Nazis held the Olympic Games in Berlin and the Spanish Civil War broke out with the military coup of 18th July. George Steer, now a bit of a star at *The Times*, was sent down to Franco-Spanish border at Irún to report the first skirmishes between the Republican government loyalists and Franco’s rebels. He also saw some of the 100,000 refugees fleeing from the war by crossing into France.

‘Their clothes: old, neat and well-washed, like the clothes of all Spaniards. In bundles tied with rope, or pathetic crumpled suitcases made of brown stuff like carton, cheap muck for the poor. Then their few animals... their iron bedsteads and their bed-clothes. Their few pictures...’

In the autumn of 1936, George Steer left the staff employment of *The Times* and went down into Nationalist-held territory in Spain where the German Nazis and the Italian Fascists were assisting the Spanish military rebels. We know that Steer was in Burgos and in Toledo and that he logged the extra-judicial killings in two small towns, Venta de Baños and Dueñas, just south of Palencia. But he was eventually expelled from Francoist Spain and in the middle of January 1937 he got himself by sea into the besieged Basque republic, Euzkadi, which had been granted its statute of autonomy by the Cortes of the Spanish Republic three months earlier, in October 1936. He went up the Nervión into Bilbao, a grimy industrial city, crammed with thousands of refugees. There he met the Basque Nationalist President Aguirre at the Hotel Carlton and was given *carte blanche* to report whatever he wanted.

This kind of journalistic freedom, more like the old days in Addis Ababa, was what George Steer appreciated. It was far better than the rigid control and censorship of the Franco side, which had expelled him. Steer the reporter saw the good and the bad in the Basque country. He saw the orderly way the Basques organised food, shelter and medicine for refugees (rationing was essential because the country was besieged by land and sea) and how the Basques' wartime multi-party coalition government worked together cohesively, unanimously and humanely for their little nation. And he saw the ugly chaos when public order slipped. Steer was allowed to investigate the Larrinaga prison massacre, an episode in early January 1937 in which over two hundred Francoist prisoners were murdered by a lynch-mob driven mad by aerial bombardment and hunger. It is significant, I think, that the Basque authorities were transparent about this event and that President Aguirre both acknowledged the failing and apologised for the lapse in public order that allowed it to happen, and they permitted public funerals of the victims. (You will find no such example on the Franco side, and Republicans in Madrid censored news of massacres like Paracuellos.)

George Steer's tour was cut short by bad news from London. His wife was desperately ill and he had to dash home. The Basques - who liked him as an honest fellow - laid on a fast trawler to get him to Bayonne and settled his unpaid bill at the Hotel Torrontegui in the Arenal. Steer got back in late January to find that his wife of nine months and their unborn child had both died in the London Clinic. Terrible, appalling news: he was distraught. Then he heard that many of his Ethiopian friends had been murdered in the Italian reprisals after the attempted assassination of Marshal Rodolfo Graziani in Addis Ababa. The psychological effect of these bereavements was profound. I think it made him more sensitive to the sufferings of others, particularly women

and children, and also more indifferent to his own. The sudden deaths made him reckless, ready to die, because he felt he had nothing left to lose.

After two grievous months, George Steer brought Margarita's body down to Biarritz where she was buried among her family on the 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1937. Immediately after the funeral, Steer went down to the frontier with Spain. Although he was not on the staff of *The Times*, or under contract, he started filing reports to them from the Basque country.

General Emilio Mola had just opened his offensive in the north. Three days earlier, on 31<sup>st</sup> March 1937, the rebel air force of Italian and German aeroplanes had bombed the Basque town Durango, killing priests, nuns and congregations at prayer. (Rebel radio propaganda then alleged that Communist Basques – *rojos separatistas* - had locked the victims in the churches and burned them to death.) There were British witnesses to this attack, including the 'Red Dean of Canterbury', Hewlett Johnson, and the philosopher John Macmurray whose thinking later impressed a young Tony Blair, but there were no journalists among them so the alarming news of the bombing did not travel internationally, or immediately. In fact the witnesses' stories of Durango did not appear in the British press until the weekend before the bombing of Guernica. But in the Basque country the fear of aerial bombing spread.

On the 6<sup>th</sup> April 1937, Steer got a lift on the British destroyer HMS *Brazen* from France into Euzkadi. He saw the Royal Navy scare away Franco's warships and the German pocket battleship *Graf Spee* from harassing a British ship, the *Thorpehall*, which was bringing food to Bilbao. In early to mid-April 1937, we have to remember, the big story was the so-called 'blockade' of Bilbao. With the advance of the Francoist forces into Alava and Guipuzcoa, thousands of refugees had poured into Vizcaya. One hundred thousand, two hundred thousand, even three

hundred thousand - I have seen different figures quoted – however many, there were many more mouths to feed and supplies were running short.

Franco's forces controlled San Sebastian and had severed the railway line from France, so no food could come by land. Franco's ships were trying to prevent cargo ships from supplying any ports but their own along the north coast of Spain. The Francoists claimed, untruthfully, to have an effective blockade of warships and mines on all seaward approaches to Bilbao. In a fateful Cabinet meeting on the evening of Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> April, Stanley Baldwin's conservative British government agreed with this assessment and decided to keep all British ships out of Bilbao. The Board of Trade sent out the order to all British-flagged ships that 'the British government desires them not to enter Basque ports'. The Royal Navy –the greatest navy in the world - was ordered not to protect anyone on the high seas going to Basque ports, but only to warn them that any such voyage was at their own risk.

The British government's official policy was Non-Intervention in the Spanish Civil War. But stopping food ships getting to Bilbao was plainly a massive intervention. As the Labour Party leader Clement Attlee, the Leader of the Opposition, remarked in the House of Commons on 14<sup>th</sup> April, "This is a very friendly action to General Franco." Attlee then read out a message from "Señor Jose Antonio de Aguirre, who is president of the Basque Republic, part of the Spanish Republic." The message started: "The Basque government, fighting for democracy and Basque liberty..." and went on to state that there was no blockade, there were no sea-mines and no ships were being fired on or none detained in the territorial waters outside Bilbao. But foreign ships were unwilling to enter Bilbao, said Aguirre, "due to the inability of the British fleet to protect them on the high seas. The Basques, therefore, appeal to your

sense of justice and fair play... Do not forget that Basque shipping worked for Great Britain throughout the difficult days of the Great War.”

This is quite true. The Basques lost 30 ships and more than 100 sailors running the German submarine and naval blockades in order to supply iron and minerals, food and fuel to Great Britain in the First World War of 1914-18. One great Basque ship-owner who gave over his whole fleet of more than fifty ships (and lost 13 of them to submarines) was given an honorary knighthood in 1921 for his wartime efforts on Britain’s behalf, thereby becoming Sir Ramón de la Sota y Llano, KBE.

Clement Attlee, the Labour leader who would later in 1937 visit the British battalion of the International Brigades in Spain, and who would make an impassioned speech in front of Picasso’s *Guernica* when it was hung in London’s Whitechapel Gallery in January 1939, now asked, “Are the government pro-Franco? We must remember that the First Lord of the Admiralty – [the politician in charge of the Royal Navy, in this case, Sir Samuel Hoare] - was the man who trailed the honour of this country in the dust over Abyssinia.” This was a reference to the Hoare-Laval Pact of 1935, which, you will recall, was a dodgy Franco-British appeasement deal to stitch up the Ethiopians in order to keep the Italians sweet and thus, the British establishment hoped, to keep *Il Duce* Mussolini out of the embraces of *Der Führer* Hitler.

Well, was Attlee’s question right? Was the Conservative government of Stanley Baldwin pro-Franco? One could equally ask: was the Pope a tiny bit Catholic? I think it pretty hard to deny that many on the government benches were extremely sympathetic to a right-wing military rebellion, which was being presented to them as pro-Catholic and anti-Communist. (And two new books published in 2011 – *Franco’s Friends* by Peter Day and *La conspiración de General Franco* by Angel Viñas – would seem to bear this thesis out.)



Major Attlee's dander was up. "The position is that this brave people, the Basques, who are old friends of ours, are fighting for their liberty... Are we going to sit by and help in the murder of another free people? ... [The government] are asking British sailors to stand by and watch while men, women and children are starved to death, with the government preventing those who would go to help them."

Sir Archibald Sinclair, the Liberal leader, now waded in with another fine speech. "Is it action to make Non-Intervention effective against Germany and Italy? Not at all. It is a further encroachment on the rights of the Basque government to buy arms and ammunition, to get recruits and to take delivery of foodstuffs they have paid for." Sinclair said the population of Bilbao was around 400,000 including refugees and that the military there were between 20 and thirty thousand.

Jimmy Maxton, the Scottish radical, bluntly pointed out that the British government was afraid of Hitler and Mussolini.

Philip Noel-Baker then added his voice, pointing out that this was the first time since 1588 that a Spanish armada had menaced British ships. Philip Noel-Baker was a great League of Nations supporter and internationalist, the only man ever to win both an Olympic medal (silver, 1500 metres, Antwerp, 1920) and a Nobel Prize (Peace, 1959). He had won his Labour seat at Derby in 1936 on the issue of supporting Abyssinia and he had known George Steer since he was an ambitious undergraduate at Oxford. Noel-Baker and Steer were hand-in-glove, working together, and as we shall see in the following week in Parliament, their friendship (with Steer's direct supply of information) had an effect on government policy.

On Monday 19<sup>th</sup> April, Sir Samuel Hoare stated: "It is the view of the naval authorities that an effective blockade exists at any rate at present off the coast of Bilbao." The next day, A.V. Alexander, MP for

Hillsborough, Sheffield, rose to refute him. Albert Alexander was a man who'd emerged from the Co-Operative movement, which became affiliated to the Labour Party in 1927. The son of a blacksmith, he would go on to hold Sir Samuel's current job, First Lord of the Admiralty, three times, including in the Second World War, under Winston Churchill. But in April 1937, he was the Labour spokesman on Foreign Affairs and he stood up holding a piece of paper. Alexander said "I have a cable addressed to my Honourable friend the member for Derby [Philip Noel-Baker] by an important correspondent from Bilbao who is known to the Foreign Secretary [Anthony Eden]. I do not want to quote his name but I will inform the Right Hon Gentleman about him afterwards. [The cable] was received at 4 o'clock today."

This cable described the arrival of the first British food ship to break the blockade of Bilbao. Registered in Cardiff, it was captained by a Cornishman called William H. Roberts and was carrying 3,600 tons of food, wine and olive oil from Valencia. "I personally accompanied the *Seven Seas Spray* into harbour at 8.30 this morning," the writer of the cable declared, "huge crowds cheered, waved handkerchiefs and shouted *Vivas* for the English sailors and for liberty".

Alexander then read out another cable from the same anonymous correspondent, describing the naval and coastal defences of Bilbao that were keeping the insurgent ships at bay, a message which ended bluntly: "Everybody here knows that there is not the slightest danger, and that the blockade is made of paper and exists only in the hopes of Salamanca and the imagination of Whitehall."

I need hardly tell you, ladies and gentlemen, who this outspoken anonymous correspondent in Bilbao is. But consider what George Lowther Steer is doing at this moment. A 27-year-old freelance journalist, only contributing to *The Times*, is intervening in a

Parliamentary debate, helping the opposition by supplying them with ammunition in order to try and change government policy. Yes, Steer has filed a brilliant and moving piece on the arrival of the *Seven Seas Spray* in Bilbao for *The Times*, an event that will unleash all the other food-ships to make the journey, but that story will only come out in tomorrow's newspaper. That is too late, when the parliamentary debate is now, today. So, in the manner of someone in our day tweeting instead of typing out copy for a news story to be filed through the usual channels, Steer jumps the gun (and beats the time-lag) by sending a telegraphic cable to Noel-Baker at 4pm, which Albert Alexander, the Shadow Foreign Secretary, is able to read out at 7pm in the House of Commons.

At the end of chapter 16 of his great book about the Basque war, *The Tree of Gernika*, George Steer laid out his credo and his pride:

I take to myself the credit that I, before anyone else, exposed the fake in the blockade and recovered the truth. A journalist is not a simple purveyor of news, whether sensational or controversial or well-written or merely funny. He is a historian of every day's events and he has a duty to his public. If he is kept from his public, he must use other methods *-[like going direct to Parliament]-*; for as a historian in little, he belongs to the most honourable profession in the world, and as a historian must be filled with the most passionate and most critical attachment to the truth, so must the journalist, with the great power that he wields, see that the truth prevails. I did not rest until I had torn this falsehood to pieces.

A week later came the shattering event that tested this credo to the limit: the bombing of Guernica on Monday 26<sup>th</sup> April 1937. There is a great deal to say about the bombing of Guernica, but this is not the time and the place. 2012 is the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the event and I daresay much more will be said then. I just want to note a few key points.

Firstly, the air-attack, by German and Italian bombers dropping high explosive and incendiaries and German and Italian fighter planes machine-gunning fleeing civilians, was terrifying. It frightened people. We don't know how many were killed – the Basque government said 1600, Steer reckoned only 'hundreds' – but the psychological impact, the

‘terror’ that the attack induced in overcrowded Bilbao was enormous. People wanted to escape, to get away. And the Basque government reacted accordingly.

In his radio broadcast that night, President Aguirre appealed for the women and children of the Basque country to be protected from “the destructive instincts of mercenaries in the service of Spanish fascists”. *Quiero creer que las naciones acudirán en auxilio de mas de trescientos mil mujeres y niños que vienen a refugiarse en Bilbao. Nada pedimos para los hombres...* (“I want to believe that other countries will come to the rescue of the more than three hundred thousand women and children who have taken refuge in Bilbao. We ask nothing for the menfolk...”)

So international evacuation was immediately linked to the destruction of Guernica. The planning already in hand was now accelerated. The process had actually started the month before, with an experiment in March 1937, when 450 Basque children were sent north to the island of Oleron in France and the Casa Dichosa. But this tiny trickle of refugees would soon become a flood.

Jesus María de Leizaola, Euzkadi’s Minister for Culture, later recorded that the Basque government’s decision to evacuate women and children was taken at the first cabinet meeting after Guernica was fire-bombed, adding that up till then the idea had been resisted. The shocking example of Guernica, together with the fearful prospect of Bilbao being razed to the ground, as threatened by enemy propaganda leaflets dropped from the air, persuaded the *consejeros* to take action.

The second point I want to make is one that Steer made: that the bombing of Guernica was an atrocity that produced a wave of horror in those who were sympathetic to the victims, but also a defensive firestorm of lies by the perpetrators. George Steer’s own role in the first wave of pity and horror was crucial, (as was his repudiation of the second wave of

falsehoods.) ‘The bombardment of Gernika,’ Steer wrote in his book, ‘was undoubtedly the most elaborate attack upon the civilian population staged in Europe since the Great War... Its international repercussions were immense.’

G.L. Steer did not witness the actual bombing, although he was attacked by fighter-planes that day at Arbacegui-Gerrikaiz nearby and saw the German and Italian bombers heading for the Gernika inlet. Like the other five foreign journalists, he visited the burning town late at night. That meant he was too late to file for Tuesday’s paper, but he could spend that day, the 27<sup>th</sup>, in going back to Guernica in daylight and composing and reworking his report for Wednesday’s *Times*. He was not the first with the story, Christopher Holme of Reuters, Keith Watson of the *Star* and Noel Monks of the *Daily Express* beat him to the punch, but Steer’s was undoubtedly the best account, rightly considered one of the classic dispatches of the Spanish Civil War. ‘The Tragedy of Guernica’ was the ‘turnover article’ in *The Times* on Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> and made the front page of *The New York Times*. The news caused outrage: people in the UK, the USA, France and elsewhere, were shocked by the violent destruction of a whole town and the deliberate cruelty to civilians.

On Friday 29<sup>th</sup> April 1937, in the House of Commons, Hugh Dalton pressed Anthony Eden. “General Mola has declared he intends to raze Bilbao to the ground. What will His Majesty’s Government do?” Eden gave a weaselly answer: “HMG deplores the bombardment of the civilian population in Spain wherever it may occur and whoever may be responsible.” This reply sought to establish a spurious ‘balance’ by making a moral equivalence of three Republican bombs dropped on Motril with a ferocious and concentrated three-hour attack by Interventionist foreign aviation on the Basque town that symbolised their democracy.

Sir Archibald Sinclair of the Liberals protested the machine-gunning of civilians from the air and Philip Noel-Baker (once again) asked the Foreign Secretary to “convey to General Franco the fact that public opinion in this country is perhaps more deeply stirred by this matter than it has been by anything for many years.”

It wasn't just ‘the usual suspects’, the left-wingers, the supporters of the Republic, trade unionists and students who were aroused by the news from Guernica. Monarchists and churchgoers and moderate conservatives were indignant too. (Explosives respect neither age nor tradition; bombs are the crassest kind of modernity.) All decent people, and many of them women, felt outraged by the attack on innocent civilians. Ever since the First World War, when German air-ships and aeroplanes had dropped bombs on London and other towns on the east coast of England, there had been a growing dread of worse to come. ‘The bomber will always get through’ said Stanley Baldwin despairingly in 1932. And now the nightmare was unleashed, horrifically and bloodily, against a small country town on market day. Guernica caused a tsunami of revulsion against the Nationalists. According to KW Watkins’ pioneering study of the effect of the Spanish Civil War in the UK, *Britain Divided*, no other incident in the entire war generated so much heat as the destruction of Gernika.

By Monday, 3<sup>rd</sup> May, a week after the bombing, the British Government was reacting to the furore and revising its policies. The Francoists and their friends abroad were already rowing back too: they denied bombing Guernica and claimed that the Basques had torched the place themselves. To a barrage of questions about what had happened at Guernica, Eden the Foreign Secretary said that “information was not yet complete and he was not in a position to make a considered statement”. This answer is, how shall I put it? ‘economical with the *actualité*’. One

presumes that the Foreign Secretary was in touch by cable with the British Ambassador to Spain, Sir Henry Chilton, then residing on the Franco-Spanish border at Hendaye. Sir Henry was a conservative sort of chap; his American counterpart, US Ambassador Claude Bowers, records him as habitually referring to the Republicans as 'Reds', but this British ambassador had two trustworthy sources of information about Guernica.

First, the British consul in Bilbao, Ralph Stevenson, had visited the town when it was still burning on Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup>, driven there by his Basque pro-Consul, Angel Ojanguren. In his letter of 28<sup>th</sup> April to Sir Henry, Stevenson described the destruction, by blast and incendiary bombs, of nine out of ten houses in a town swollen with refugees to more than 10,000 inhabitants and the possibility of more than a thousand dead. He stated that there were probably more than fifty planes in the assault on Gernika and that some of them machine-gunned civilians as they fled.

Secondly, Chilton also spoke to the *Daily Telegraph* correspondent Philip Pembroke Stephens on Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> May. The Francoists had captured Guernica on Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> April and had escorted 'friendly' journalists around the ruins. One party included the Italian fascist Sandro Sandrini and the Briton Pembroke Stephens, both of whom would be killed later that year, while reporting the brutal Japanese invasion of China. It was suggested to these correspondents touring Guernica that there was a funny smell of petrol about and that the big holes in the streets were because landmines had been placed in the sewers and that Asturian miners had used dynamite inside the houses and that the retreating Basques had burned their own town down and were now viciously blaming the destruction on the Nationalists.

But Philip Pembroke Stephens saw through this smokescreen. He was an honest reporter who had replaced Sefton Delmer as the *Daily Express* correspondent in Nazi Germany, only to be expelled later for

writing articles sympathetic to persecuted Jews. Pembroke Stephens had no doubt that there had been an air-raid on Gernika. He told Chilton that he saw unmistakable bomb-craters and ‘no evidence of Government destruction’. These were German and Italian air-tactics, he said. He thought the main object of the raid was ‘to make a warning demonstration of frightfulness’ to Bilbao. He asked the ambassador not to use his name otherwise he would be barred from reporting from Franco’s camp.

Other appeals had reached the British authorities. Later on Monday 3<sup>rd</sup> May, Anthony Eden told the House of Commons: “The Basque Government have approached His Majesty’s Government stating that they desire to evacuate from Bilbao women, children and old people threatened by the approach of the war zone to the city and requesting the protection of His Majesty’s ships for the purposes of the evacuation. Assurances had been received that HM British Consul would supervise the evacuation and that all creeds and political beliefs would be accepted. Final arrangements had not yet been made for the admission of Basque children, but a committee had been set up, making itself responsible for their care in this country.”

The Labour MP Ellen Wilkinson stood up. ‘As I have a telegram here saying that 4,000 children are ready to sail, does this mean that as far as the Foreign Office is concerned, [we] are ready to admit them provided the arrangements of the committee are carried through?’

Eden in his role of Foreign Secretary replied carefully, ‘What I am concerned with is the protection of these ships on the high seas. The admission of these children to this country, of course, is not a matter for me.’

In general, the British government did not want Basque refugees (‘putting all your Basques in one exit’ as Winston Churchill joked to complacent Conservative chortles) and was determined not to use



taxpayers' money towards their reception and upkeep. But the government eventually bowed to public and political pressure to do something for the children, at least give them permission to enter, if private subscription took care of them. I believe that G.L. Steer's impassioned reports from Bilbao about what was happening to civilians in the Basque country helped to keep that pressure up. Certainly, Father Gregorio Arrien, the great expert on the Basque evacuations, thinks that G.L. Steer 'stirred the conscience of the nation.'

The committee that Anthony Eden mentioned was the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief chaired by that formidable woman, 'the Red Duchess', Katharine Stewart-Murray, the Duchess of Atholl, an upper-class Scottish Unionist who was neither a suffragette nor a feminist but who knew how to boss Tory men about like their old Nannies did. She was fresh back from a visit to besieged Madrid and got the National Joint Committee to set up a Basque Children's Committee to deal with this crisis.

Meanwhile Steer was also helping another battleaxe on the ground in Bilbao. That tremendous busybody Miss Leah Manning, the secretary of the Spanish Medical Aid Committee, a sub-committee of the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief, had arrived in Bilbao on 24<sup>th</sup> April, after the Basque delegation in London had arranged for her to fly from St Jean de Luz. Following the bombing of Guernica, she met *Lehendakari* Aguirre who told her he wanted to evacuate 4000 children aged between five and sixteen on the liner *Habana*, together with teachers, helpers and priests. This was twice as many children as she had expected, but she got approval from the Labour MP Wilfrid Roberts back home to go ahead with planning and preparing for this number to be housed in summer camps. £7000 had been raised by subscription in England to look after them and more money was coming in.

In her unreliable autobiography, *A Life for Education*, written years after the events, Leah Manning tells how she accomplished her task almost single-handed, in spite of the obstructiveness of the British Consul in Bilbao, and the thwarting attitude of the Home and Foreign Offices in England. Her account is unfair to Ralph Stevenson. The Consul may have been a stickler for procedure, but it is clear from his letter to Ambassador Chilton and from other documents that he himself had proposed the evacuation of women and children as early as April 8<sup>th</sup>. What Stevenson did say was not humanly possible was getting the Royal Navy to evacuate 250,000 people. Manning says she obtained good help from Angel Ojanguren and the journalists Philip Jordan and George Steer. But above all she praises Asistencia Social, the welfare ministry run by the socialist Juan Gracia Colls in the coalition government. Asistencia Social is the name on all the labels of the children, and it kept scrupulous records of who they all were. But other ministries pulled together too. This was the Basque government at its very best, looking after its people. Gracia had links with leftists and trade unions abroad, but Cultura, under the Catholic lawyer Jesus María de Leizaola, weighed in with volunteer teachers. Sanidad looked after the vaccinations, weighing and measuring of every child. Two British doctors, Richard Ellis and Audrey Russell, checked every child. The ministers came down to the quayside to see their children of their nation off. There were tearful scenes.

Leah Manning called the system enlightened and scrupulously fair and she praised the orderliness of the evacuations, which began on the 6<sup>th</sup> May and lasted until the 12<sup>th</sup> June. Thirty ships made seventy trips, taking old people and young people, the halt and the lame, to France, to Belgium, to Great Britain and to the USSR. The figures are huge, over 150,000 Basques of all ages, of whom 33,000 were children. The great majority of the children, 20,000, went to France, 5000 to Belgium, 4000

to the UK and nearly 3000 to the USSR, children of Communists mostly, who could not get back for over 20 years.

The 10,000-ton transatlantic liner *Habana* sailed for Southampton on 21<sup>st</sup> May with nearly 4000 children separated from their parents. The *Royal Oak* and a British destroyer escorted them, and the Bay of Biscay produced its worst weather. “The next fifteen hours are best forgotten,” wrote Dr Ellis, “Four thousand wretchedly seasick children crowded into an old boat whose very latrines are apt to regurgitate in sympathy, are not a pretty sight.” Leah Manning wrote: “For two dreadful days and nights Richard [Ellis], Audrey [Russell] and I slithered from one pool of diarrhoea and vomit to another, giving drinks of water and assuring them that it wasn’t the fascists who had stirred up the waters against them.”

“ Suddenly the whole ship listed to one side as four thousand children crowded the rails and deck and rigging to wave frantically to a blue strip on the horizon. “*Inglaterra! Inglaterra!*” I only trusted they would find the welcome there for which they hoped.”

And at Southampton on 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1937 the bunting from the coronation of King George VI was still flying and the Salvation Army brass band was pumping out hymns on the quayside.

My story really ends here, but I’d like to leave the last word on the Basque boys and girls to George Steer, who did so much to help them get to England. In *The Tree of Gernika*, G.L. Steer wrote of their reception:

‘The feeling of ordinary English people for the Basque children was reflected in their gifts: taxi-drives from a Southampton taxi-company, fifty loaves of bread weekly from a Southampton bakery, free laundry on Sundays by the employees of the Southampton Corporation wash-houses, nominal rent for a camp of thirty-six acres, voluntary labour of all kinds, a daily ration of chocolates, 20,000 oranges, boots and underclothing.

‘Later more distinguished persons were to notice that these war-terrified children sometimes stole apples, broke windows with stones, teased little girls and on one occasion used knives upon a cook who had inadvertently first cut one of their number. The anti-Red herring fleet came out to drag again.’ {He means the right-wing newspapers began stirring up trouble, painting the kids as leftist terrorists.} Steer wrote sarcastically: ‘It is well known that no English children do anything of the kind. In my own youth I always refused to receive stolen goods, reported other boys who did nasty things immediately to my mother, would not touch girls with a bargepole and fell off apple trees whenever I tried to climb them. In this way I kept carefully out of the Juvenile Courts, and it was only when I was at Oxford that I first heard the sound of broken glass.’

Thank you very much.

(6,450 words)