

An Unexpected Journey

The Reception, Treatment, and Government and Media Response to Spanish Refugees in Britain in 1937

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Abstract

The bombing of Guernica in Spain in 1937 resulted in the British government's involvement in the Spanish Civil war, despite the non-intervention agreement with France and other European countries. This dissertation will illuminate the importance of the British public and the media in influencing the government's change of policy which eventually led to the authorisation and the evacuation of 4,000 Basque children (Niños Vascos) from the north of Spain to Southampton. The refugee operation was supported and funded by private funds raised by aid committees and volunteers to save children from the horrors of war. Special attention in this paper has been drawn to the detailed media coverage of the bombing, which helped raise awareness among the British public. Through the study of testimonies from the Niños Vascos, articles and letters in archives and other studies on the subject, it has become clear that the response to what was considered the largest single intake of refugees in British history, was profoundly divided, but also that when the media and the British public collaborated, they had the ability to influence the government's policies.

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Abbreviations:

BCC	Basque Children's Committee
NJCSR	National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief
SCRC	Spanish Children's Repatriation Committee

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Introduction

On 23 May 1937, an estimated four thousand Basque refugees, most of them children from the ages of four to sixteen, landed on the Southampton Docks. Initially, the children were only meant to remain in Britain for three months, but most children stayed in the country for two years, for a variety of reasons.¹ In total, around 3,860 children boarded the *S. S. Habana* ship, accompanied by ninety-five teachers, fifteen priests and 118 female volunteers.² Approximately 200 children who had registered for the evacuation remained in Bilbao for unknown reasons.³ The 20th Century has come to be referred to as the century of refugees, with many examples of mass refugee movements taking place, such as the one that will be discussed in this dissertation.⁴ It was during this period in which refugees, for the first time, began to play an essential role in the world of international and domestic politics, which will be shown to a certain extent in this work. Adrian Bell stated in his book *For Only Three Months* that the arrival of the Basque children was ‘the largest single influx of refugees in the history of Britain and the first one to be made up of primarily just children’.⁵ It was also the first one to rely on voluntary help on such a large scale.⁶ Despite the significance of the evacuation the topic remains relatively understudied

¹ K. Myers, *History, Migration and Childhood: Basque Refugee Children in 1930s Britain*, *Family & Community History*, Vol. 3/2, (2000), p. 147

² A. Bell, *Only for Three Months* (Norwich, Mousehold Press, 2007), p. 9

³ G. Arrien. El Exilio Vasco en Gran Bretaña, 1937-1940. En el 75 Aniversario de las Evacuaciones. *International Journal on Basque Studies*, 56/2, 2011, p. 701

⁴ K. Myers, *Englishness, Identity and Refugee Children in Britain, 1937-1945*. (Coventry, Coventry University, 2000)

⁵ *ibid*, p. 7

⁶ J. Fyrth, *The Signal Was Spain: The Spanish Aid Movement in Britain, 1936-39* (New York, St Martin's Press, 1986), p. 225

perhaps because it has been overshadowed by the outbreak of the Second World War.

On 17 August 1936, both Britain and France, amongst others, officially decided to follow a policy of non-intervention in the Spanish Civil War, resulting in the non-intervention agreement.⁷ The agreement was supported by 27 countries in total. Its aim was to stop the war from spreading to the rest of Europe. Germany and Italy were keen on not letting the Republicans win and supported Franco's Nationalists, while the Soviet Union was a supporter of the Spanish Republic. Britain was the only country that remained true to the agreement although they did little to enforce it.

Newspaper articles from the time suggest that from the onset of the Spanish Civil War, the public did not unanimously give their support for Britain to get involved in yet another conflict. Following the bombing of Guernica 26 April 1937, however, there was a rapid change in attitude and the public urged the British government to play their part and offer aid to those in need. Archival research of letters sent between government officials suggests that the government became aware of this support from the public. The extent of which this ended up influencing the government policies regarding the Spanish Civil War and the Basque refugees is up for debate, however. The bombing of Guernica 'changed everything', according to historian Adrian Bell, as it caused an outcry around the world and was perceived by some to be but a taste of what was in store for the Basque region. In the hours after the attack, the President of the Basque Country, José Antonio Aguirre, issued a radio broadcast in which he appealed for foreign governments to provide aid and

⁷ W. Laird Kleine-Ahlbrandt, *The Policy of Simmering: A Study of British Policy During the Spanish Civil War*. (Netherlands, Springer: Science & Business Media, 1961), p. 11

protection for the Basque population who were under threat.⁸ Britain, while initially reluctant due to adhering to the non-intervention agreement, eventually gave their approval for the evacuation of 4,000 children on 17 May 1937, perhaps because it was regarded as a humanitarian action instead of a political one. Several aid organisations were set up during this period that were instrumental in bringing the children to Britain, most notably the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief (NJCSR), which in turn set up the Basque Children Committee (BCC). These Committees were responsible for the arrangement of the arrival of the Basque children.⁹ Additionally, the role of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) should not be understated, as they were also important in the establishment, administration and funding of the BCC.¹⁰ Despite the BCC's best efforts, however, the reasoning for the acceptance of the refugees became diluted with both the Left and the Right having different arguments.

The story of the Basque children remains relatively understudied compared to other events of the time, but over the last years, it has begun to receive more recognition. This is one of the main reasons why I was drawn to the topic and why I hope that my dissertation will provide some new and insightful information regarding their initial reception in Britain, primarily focusing on the media and the portrayal of the refugees. I will be looking at what the initial reaction to and response of the Basque children was and how the detailed coverage of the bombing of Guernica, before their arrival, led the British public to sympathise with the children. To get as broad of a

⁸ D. Legaretta, Hospitality to the Basque Refugee Children in Belgium, *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, 1-2 (1987), p. 277

⁹ K. Myers, *History, Migration and Childhood: Basque Refugee Children in 1930s Britain*, *Family & Community History*, Vol. 3/2, (2000), p. 149

¹⁰ E. Wood, *Aid to Spain*. Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, 2017 [<https://warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/explorefurther/digital/scw/more/aid/>, accessed 1 March 2018]

view as possible, I will look at government policies, newspaper articles and first-hand accounts from the evacuees themselves. These will be the three chapters in the dissertation, with each section looking at the Basque refugees from a different perspective. What is perhaps most interesting about this event is the juxtaposition in the government response and the public response. By researching and comparing newspapers from the Right wing and the Left wing I also hope to find out if there was perhaps a difference in the reception of the children depending on different groups of the population.

The kindness of the public is evident when observing the documents regarding the reception of the refugees and the construction of the camps, all done by volunteers.¹¹ By looking at archives, it is revealed that many British families offered to provide shelter and food for the children if they could not find accommodation elsewhere. The government, in contrast, did not believe that the children should be evacuated to Britain but instead somewhere closer to the Spanish border where it would be easier to repatriate them later. Furthermore, they were also keen on abiding by the non-intervention agreement and did not want to spend any money hence why the children had to be funded privately.

The historiography of this topic tends to focus on either the memory aspect of the refugees, meaning the aftermath of their evacuation or on the reasons for their arrival. Laird Kleine-Ahlbrandt's and Dorothy Legaretta's books are examples of this. By basing a lot of this work on primary sources from and around 1937, I hope to add information regarding the initial treatment and reception of the Basque children to the already expanding historiography. Adrian Bell's *Only for 3 Months* and Dorothy

¹¹ The Association for the UK Basque Children, *History of the Colonies*, Basque Children Organisation, 2010. [<https://www.basquechildren.org/colonies/history>, accessed 18 February 2018]

Legaretta's *The Guernica Generation* provided a lot of useful information, and both were invaluable sources for this work.

How does this dissertation differ from others? While other works have looked at government policies and covered the accounts of the children themselves, such as Natalia Benjamin's book of accounts by sixty-two surviving Basque children and Tom Buchanan's book that aims to reinterpret the British labour's response to the Spanish conflict,¹² this dissertation will compare the government response and the public response to see how they may have influenced and affected one another.

Furthermore, it will also analyse different newspaper articles from the period and the way they reported on the child refugees. Some may even have purposely spread false information.

In terms of primary sources that will be used in the first chapter of the dissertation, the National Archives contained a vast array of official documents and letters from MPs which I found most useful when writing the section regarding the government response to the Basque children. It was especially insightful finding out how there was a lack of efficient communication between the government and the committees. This work will emphasise that several individuals within the government played a crucial role in the evacuation, focusing on Wilfrid Roberts, secretary of the NJCSR and Leah Manning, former Labour MP. Newspapers, such as *the Guardian*, *the Daily Mail* and *the Catholic Herald* played an essential role in influencing public opinion. The second chapter of this dissertation will look at different newspaper articles to compare the various reports and approaches that were implemented. Additionally, it

¹² T. Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War and British Labour Movement*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991) p. 1

will also look at other local newspapers articles from the time to give a more detailed account and closer analysis. According to an article from *the Guardian* from 2017, *the Daily Mail* was known for being especially hostile towards the Basque children, repeatedly sending reporters to report on the children's misbehaviour.¹³ *The Catholic Herald* was also known for being critical of the children.

The Modern Records Centre in the University of Warwick included personal letters and works by Wilfrid Roberts, MP and Secretary for the NJCSR which was insightful and valuable since he played such a pivotal role in the evacuation. The Hartley Library in Southampton University was most helpful in finding first-hand accounts from the children, with their library containing several oral testimonies from the surviving Basque refugees themselves in which they discuss their time in Britain extensively, which is what I will be writing about in the third chapter of this work. Legaretta's book also contains various first-hand accounts from men and women who sailed on the *S.S. Habana* in 1936 and provides insight into what the children made of their evacuation and time in Britain as well as the difficulties that the volunteers and workers faced. Although it is a valuable source for this dissertation, it is important to mention that these accounts come years later with retrospect meaning that some of these stories and memories may have become diluted.

¹³ S. Martinez, *The Reception of Basque Refugees in 1937 Showed Britain at its Best and Worst*. *The Guardian*, 2017. [<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/22/the-reception-of-basque-refugees-in-1937-showed-britain-at-its-best-and-worst>, accessed on 11 February 2018]

Chapter 1: The Government Response and Committee Work

While the relationship between the United Kingdom and Spain was not the most stable one when the Spanish Civil War broke out, the relationship between Britain and the Basque Country was regarded as a special one that went back over a century. This was primarily due to trade whereby Britain exported coal in exchange for Basque iron ore.¹⁴ The Basque region was therefore seen as an important trading partner. Historian Michael Alpert states in his work *Los Niños Vascos en Inglaterra* that Britain believed that the Basques resembled themselves more compared to the rest of Spain.¹⁵ Another reason why the Basques were more highly regarded was due to their efforts in the First World War to continue to supply British ports, even though it went against Spain's policy of neutrality.¹⁶ In the UK, there was the knowledge that there was a distinction between the Basque country and the rest of Spain, at least amongst politicians. Dorothy Legaretta mentions that Anthony Eden stated in a speech on 20 April 1937, just six days before the bombing of Guernica, that 'If I had to choose in Spain, I believe that the Basque government would more closely conform to our system than that of France or the Spanish Republic'.¹⁷ Tom Buchanan also suggests that the two had a special relationship stating that their

¹⁴ D. Legaretta, *The Guernica Generation: Basque Refugee Children of the Spanish Civil War*. (Nevada, University of Nevada, 1985), p. 99

¹⁵ M. Alpert, *Los Niños Vascos en Inglaterra*. (Sabado Gráfico, June 1975)

¹⁶ D. Legaretta, *The Guernica Generation*, p. 103

¹⁷ *ibid*

efforts during the First World War did not go unnoticed and was 'remembered with gratitude in Britain in 1937 when Bilbao was under attack'.¹⁸

Initial Government Concerns

One of the earliest official written proposals for the evacuation of the children to the UK came in a letter on 27 April 1937 from Wilfrid Roberts to The Right Hon Sir John Simon, Home Secretary, a mere day after the bombing of Guernica. Roberts wrote on behalf of the NJCSR, stating that it cooperated with the Society of Friends and Save the Children Fund. The letter is interesting because it shows that the initial plans for evacuation were vastly different to what ultimately occurred on 23 May. An appeal was issued for funds for the maintenance of the children, in either Britain or France, in groups of perhaps fifty or more, in suitable homes. Roberts emphasised the fact that the proposal already had the approval of the Basque representatives.¹⁹ He concluded the letter by stating that there was a matter of urgency and that the committee did not wish to make final arrangements without the approval of the Home Office.²⁰ To put some pressure on the British government, he stated that several thousand refugees had already arrived in France and Belgium, and countries in Scandinavia were also making plans for their evacuation.²¹ One of the most significant questions is why it took so long to evacuate the children after the bombing of Guernica. This letter was sent a day after the attack took place and still, the

¹⁸ T. Buchanan, *Britain and the Spanish Civil War*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 4

¹⁹ The National Archives (TNA), MH 57/322, *Letter to the Right Honorable, Sir John Simon of the Home Office from Wilfrid Roberts from the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief, 27 April 1937*.

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid

children did not get evacuated until almost a month later. Katharine Murray, the Duchess of Atholl, chairwoman of the NJCSR also published a letter on 1 May 1937 in *the Times* urging the government to authorise their evacuation. According to Natalia Benjamin, Anthony Eden was unable to decide on the matter in the House of Commons on 3 May 1937 meaning that the children had to stay in Bilbao for the time being.

In the report of the proceedings of a deputation with the Home Office on 14 May 1937, the NJCSR made their sentiments clear, believing that the government should be giving more assistance than it had at that point. Stanley Baldwin wrote to Roberts on 11 May 1937 and stated that both himself and the British government had 'grave doubts as to the desirability on practical grounds' regarding the evacuation of such a large number of children, focusing on the differences in the climate, food and culture.²² The last notes of the deputation are an excellent example of how members of the BCC, in this case, Wilfrid Roberts, expressed their disappointment in the government for not prioritising the evacuation.

Wilfrid Roberts wrote a letter addressed to Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin on 13 May 1937, stating that his committee was thankful for the British government being prepared to co-operate 'in an international effort for humanitarian purposes'.²³ The evacuation of the children, initially only 2,000 were expected, was officially authorised by the Home Office on 15 May.²⁴ The number doubled later, on the 17 May 1937, thanks in large part to Leah Manning who convinced them to increase the

²² TNA, MH 57/322, *Letter from Stanley Baldwin to Wilfrid Roberts*, 11 May 1937

²³ The Modern Records Centre University of Warwick, MSS 308/3, *Letter from Wilfrid Roberts and the NJCSR to Stanley Baldwin*, 13 May 1937

²⁴ The Modern Records Centre University of Warwick, MSS/21/2573, N. Benjamin, *The Basque Children in Great Britain*, 2010, p. 2.

figure²⁵. After Roberts expressed his gratitude, however, he went on to state that given the ongoing circumstances the British government 'will recognise that the present situation of Bilbao calls for more speed than could be obtained by such international action. A large section of the British public appears to share this view'.²⁶ This was not the first time in which a member of the Committee thought that the British government avoided prioritising this issue enough and being criticised for being slow in their decision making. Because of this, the Committee decided to take some of the matters into their own hands and made their arrangements which they hoped would be sanctioned in the interview with the Home Secretary the following day.

Assistant Secretary G. D. Roseway told F. R. Hoyer Millar, Esq, Assistant Private Secretary, on 11 May 1937 that he did not believe the children would be arriving in Britain in soon.²⁷ The fact that a mere 12 days later the children arrived in the Southampton docks shows how misinformed many of the officials were. When researching the topic, there seemed to be a misconception that the British government did not want to let refugees in. While this is true, to a certain extent, it is also important to mention that there were political individuals, albeit few, who continually pressured the government into doing more to help the children.

Not everyone was convinced that bringing the children to Britain was a good idea. The Chancellor of the Exchequer stated in a conversation with the Home Secretary on 14 May 1937 that despite being sympathetic to the children, he believed that 'the bringing up of the children as institutional children for an unspecified time in a foreign

²⁵ *ibid*, p. 4

²⁶ *ibid*

²⁷ TNA, MH 57/322, *Letter from G. D. Roseway to F. R. Hoyer Millar, Esq, 11 May 1937*

country seemed to be a fearful responsibility'.²⁸ Sir Walter Citrine, General Secretary of the TUC, argued that nowhere in Spain could be guaranteed to be safe from an attack by Franco.²⁹ Dr Stock stated that he wanted the committee to guarantee that it would take full responsibility for the medical arrangements that were required in Stoneham Camp. Interestingly, it was stated in a conference in the Home Secretary's room on 18 May 1937 that acquiring nurses for the camps would not be a problem since many nurses had already signed up to offer their services³⁰. This further shows how a lot of people in Britain were willing to provide aid in any way they could to the innocent children of the Spanish conflict. The British public was more engaged in the issue than the government, based on sources such as this, offering their services in return for nothing.

One of the letters from the government to Wilfrid Roberts, from 18 May 1937, starts by reiterating what the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, had already stated in a previous letter. It emphasised that it was not in the children's best interest to come to their country, despite the fact that the Home Office had already approved the evacuation a day prior.³¹ The letter recommended that they instead be evacuated to somewhere more familiar and geographically closer, such as the south west of France which would facilitate the repatriation process. Whether the government sincerely believed that it would be better for the children to travel to France or whether they simply did not want the responsibility of the children, and also be forced

²⁸ TNA, HO 213/288, *Note of Proceeding of a Deputation from the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief 14 May 1937*, p. 3

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 4

³⁰ TNA, HO 213/288, *Note of Conference Held in the Home Secretary's Room, 18 May 1937.*, p. 2

³¹ TNA, HO 213/288, *Letter to Mr. Wilfrid Roberts, 18 May 1937* p. 1

to get involved in the Spanish conflict reluctantly, is debatable. Four days prior Miss Rathbone, a member of the BCC committee, had given two reasons for why France was not a better choice. Firstly, she argued that areas close to or around Spain were 'likely to be saturated'.³² Secondly, by this point France had already accepted over 10,000 refugees and, unlike in Britain, they were the responsibility of the French government. Wilfrid Roberts had already stated as early as 6 May 1937 in a letter to the Prime Minister that the French government had 'taken responsibility for the whole organisation and for the financial responsibility'.³³ He added that following a meeting with the members of the committee, 'it was felt that under the circumstances we ought to ask the British government to do more than merely give its approval to the voluntary effort of which we are capable'.³⁴ He believed that without the help of the government, a problem of this large scale could not be handled just by voluntary action. This, of course, proved to be wrong, to a certain extent, since the government provided virtually no help at all. Roberts further pressurised the government into action by stating that the members of the committee thought that it was important for Britain to keep its reputation of providing humanitarian work in Spain.³⁵ The letter emphasised the fact that the committee would be entirely responsible for the children perhaps to be able to argue in the future that they were still abiding by the non-intervention policy.

³² TNA, HO 213/288, *Note of Proceeding of a Deputation from the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief*, 14 May 1937, p. 5

³³ TNA, MH 57/322, *Letter from Wilfrid Roberts to the Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin*, 6 May 1937, p. 1

³⁴ *ibid*

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 2

The letter backs up the argument that had it not been for the persistence of the committee, the evacuation would most likely never have taken place. A day before the letter was written, Roberts had a number of interviews with the Home Office in which he had to give assurances that he and the committee would agree to the conditions of the agreement to authorise the *S.S Habana* to sail to Southampton.³⁶

One of the main requirements was that the committee had to accept 'full responsibility for the medical arrangements of the Stoneham Camp' and that it was only to be used as a temporary camp, for no longer than a few weeks, until other accommodations had been found. The Home Office also emphasised that 'the financial responsibility in all matters regarding the Basque children rests upon your committee' and that there would be no charges on public funds.³⁷ The records show that the government was not in favour of accepting the children initially, but thanks to the aid committees and its members they managed to convince the government to allow them entry, albeit reluctantly.

Committee Work and Public Opinion as a Pressure Point for the Government

'Guernica changed everything', wrote Adrian Bell when speaking about the moment in which the British government went slightly against the policy of non-intervention, which they had been so keen to keep intact.³⁸ On 26 April 1937, Guernica was the casualty of one of the first systematic air bombardments in history, which resulted in the deaths of an estimated 300 civilians. Historian Kleine-Ahbrandt stated that this

³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 5

³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 6

³⁸ A. Bell, *Only for Three Months*. (Norwich, Mousehold Press, 2007)., p. 4

incident left the British public in shock with 'feelings of horror and disgust'.³⁹ George Steer's extensive coverage of the bombings proved to be very emotive and struck a chord in the hearts of the British public. This will be discussed further in the second chapter. As shown above, following the bombing of Guernica the British government granted permission for British activists from the BCC to evacuate nearly 4,000 children from the Basque Country to the United Kingdom. Historian Peter Anderson emphasised its significance because it marked the first time since 1914 that the British government provided sanctuary to a group in danger of their lives and deprived of private means.⁴⁰

The importance of the Spanish aid committees in influencing the British government to act cannot be understated. Peter Anderson stated that it was a collective effort of British charities and political activists to bring the children to Britain.⁴¹ As the archival research of official letters has shown, without the consistent pressure put on by the Spanish aid committees the children's evacuation to Southampton would have been most unlikely to have ever occurred. A clear example of this was Leah Manning, who worked closely with President Aguirre and the British consul of Bilbao, Ralph Stevenson who proposed the evacuation to foreign secretary Anthony Eden.

Manning was instrumental in organising the evacuation of the Basque children. She was one of the first committee members to arrive in Bilbao to finalise the evacuation

³⁹ W. Laird Kleine-Ahlbrandt, *The Policy of Simmering*, p. 50

⁴⁰ P. Anderson, The Struggle over the Evacuation to the UK and Repatriation of Basque Refugee Children in the Spanish Civil War: Symbols and Souls, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 52 (2) (2017). p. 307

⁴¹ *ibid*

plans.⁴² Archival evidence shows how she wrote to the government persistently to get them to accept the terms of the evacuation. A telegram from Manning addressed to Sir John Simon, the Home Secretary at the time, from 14 May 1937 is a good example that showcases her persistence and invaluable work for the evacuation. The telegram stated that it was impossible for the Home Office in London to realise the 'intense anxiety which is being felt' in Bilbao, adding that the 'fate of four thousand children who have been promised evacuation to Britain' was in their hands.⁴³ Manning's language was emotive and, it is clear that she was pleading for the government to approve of the evacuation as soon as possible since it was believed that an attack on Bilbao was imminent. According to her, Ralph Stevenson had at this point yet to receive authorisation from the British Foreign Office. Natalia Benjamin states that the Home Office gave their approval for doubling the number of children three days later on the 17 May 1937, largely thanks to Manning's persuasiveness. She finished off her telegram with a powerful plea by stating that she begged the Foreign Office 'in the name of civilisation and humanity to obtain this authorisation immediately'.⁴⁴ Such emotive language must have put the British government under pressure to act fast.

The telegram is interesting because it shows that the evacuation of the Basque children may not have been a priority for the British government at the time but that there were still, nonetheless, MPs such as Leah Manning who did everything they could to evacuate them as soon as possible. Just a day later Manning sent yet another telegram along with Dr Ellis, a Scottish doctor who had come to Bilbao to

⁴² R. Bill and S. Newens, *Leah Manning*. (New York, Square One Publishers, 1991), p. 44

⁴³ TNA, HO 213/288, *Letter from Leah Manning to Sir John Simon*, 14 May 1937

⁴⁴ *ibid*

give examinations to the children before embarking on the voyage, and Dr Russell, British doctor, to the Home Office. The first line states that while the volunteers and workers had been trying to arrange the evacuation, there was a 'desire to let you (Sir John Simon) know the state of desperate anxiety'.⁴⁵ The Telegraph concluded with quite a powerful statement, where she stated, 'Cannot overemphasise state of deprivation and danger existing here and bitter disappointment to those who are relying upon British undertaking'.⁴⁶ Clearly showing her disapproval, like Wilfrid Roberts had done before, over how the British government had dealt with this issue thus far. It is also further proof of Manning's perseverance.

Manning also played an essential role in informing and influencing public opinion in Britain regarding the horrors that the innocent children were experiencing. Having gained support from *the Times*, the newspaper published a letter that described in detail the tragedy of the bombing that had occurred.⁴⁷ Furthermore, it also pleaded for the public to help raise and donate funds to facilitate the evacuation of the children.⁴⁸ The letter was, additionally, accompanied by the signatures of a number of politicians, not just from one particular party but rather from a wide range.

Amongst these politicians was Irene Ward (Conservative MP), Megan Lloyd-George (Liberal MP) and Ellen Wilkinson (Left Labour MP). This shows that, while the Conservative Party was reluctant in accepting the refugees, there were several MPs from different parties who supported the evacuation. Historian Jim Fyrth stated that one of the main features of the evacuation campaign was its 'political and social

⁴⁵ TNA, HO 213/288, *Letter from Manning, Dr. Ellis & Dr. Russell to Sir John Simon*, 15 May 1937

⁴⁶ *ibid*

⁴⁷ D. Legaretta, *The Guernica Generation*, p. 103

⁴⁸ *ibid*

breadth', the other being the great involvement of the working-class.⁴⁹ The importance of this letter cannot be underestimated since it appealed to people from all classes and encouraged them to do all that they could to help the children escape the horrors of Spain. Legaretta stated that it had 'a tremendous effect' and eventually led to the raising of £17,000, which is the equivalent of over one million pounds in today's terms.⁵⁰ Wilfrid Roberts admitted in a deputation from the NJCSR with the Home Secretary on 14 May 1937 that he had not anticipated for the response to the plea for funds to be as great as it turned out to be and thus, as a result, this led to the plan of increasing the number of children.⁵¹ The funds had been continually increasing since the end of April, arguably due to the detailed coverage of the bombing of Guernica which gained traction mainly from the TUC and the Catholic community. The committee claimed that by mid-May, it had already raised £17,000, including a promise of five thousand pounds from the TUC. Roberts stated that the funds for the children were coming in surprisingly fast, with the committee receiving approximately five hundred pounds per day.⁵²

Overall, based on government records one gets the impression that there were a lot of unnecessary meetings regarding the same thing. The evacuation could have been organised a lot faster if the government had considered it to be a priority. As early as 6 May 1937, Wilfrid Roberts had informed Stanley Baldwin of the matter of urgency surrounding the evacuation. Even going as far as warning the British government that if a further attack took place in Bilbao 'as a result of any delay on our part, we

⁴⁹ J. Fyrth, *The Signal Was Spain*, p. 22

⁵⁰ D. Legaretta, *The Guernica Generation*, p. 102

⁵¹ TNA, HO 213/288, *Note of Proceedings of a Deputation from the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief*, 14 May 1937, p. 4

⁵² TNA, HO 213/288, *Letter from NJCSF to Home Secretary*, 10 May 1937

would have failed to carry out the serious responsibility we have undertaken'.⁵³ It is evident that the British government was not keen on accepting the children, wishing to abide by the non-intervention agreement. The tireless effort by the committees and the fact that they stated that they would be able to take care of the children without government aid meant that they did not have much of a choice but to allow them to enter Britain.

⁵³ TNA, HO 213/288, *Letter from Wilfrid Roberts to the Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin*, 6 May 1937, p. 4

Chapter 2: The media influence

The main way in which this dissertation differs from other previous works is that it puts a significant focus on different newspaper articles from the time, to get a better understanding of what the initial reaction and reception was towards the Basque children. John Randolph Hubbard wrote that news regarding the Spanish Civil War was virtually unavoidable to the British public since they could be found everywhere. He stated that 'The Halls of Parliament, Trafalgar Square, the Albert Hall reverberated with dramatic perorations inspired by the Spanish struggle'.⁵⁴ Hubbard later added that newspapers at the time attempted to appeal to all different classes of the British public and that the Spanish conflict ultimately led to both some of the best and the worst 'reporting in British journalistic history'.⁵⁵ Regardless, it is undeniable that the British press played an important role in influencing public opinion regarding the evacuation of the Basque refugees. Additionally, the newspapers were also a good way for the public to issue their opinion and have their voices heard. Numerous examples will be discussed that showcase the varying ways in which the children were portrayed by different newspapers. Nevertheless, it is difficult to state whether there was a definite Left-Right bias although there was an evident difference in the way in which some newspapers, such as *the Catholic Herald* and *the Guardian*, reported on the Basque children.

⁵⁴ J. Hubbard, *British Public Opinion and the Spanish Civil War*. (Austin, University of Texas, 1950), p. 4.

⁵⁵ *ibid*

Reporting of the Guernica Bombing

As mentioned in the first chapter, the British government was initially against the evacuation of the children to Britain. In late March, the Basque government issued a request for the NJCSR to 'send medical supplies and food into Euzkadi'.⁵⁶ No further action was taken by the British government, who wished to wait for *the Times* correspondent George Steer to return from Bilbao, to get an overview of what the ongoing situation was there.

There was one event that completely altered things, which was the bombing of Guernica. In the immediate aftermath of the bombing, the Franco regime attempted to place the blame on the Republicans whom they alleged had set the town on fire.⁵⁷ Towards the end of April, following the bombing of Guernica, Steer returned to Britain and his extensive coverage of the conflict and the bombing that had occurred was given the front-page by *the Times*.⁵⁸ This caused great awareness to the British public who had been somewhat uninformed regarding the conflict in Spain and according to Legaretta, it galvanised the public opinion.⁵⁹ Historian K.W. Watkins also agreed with this statement, stating that the British press during this period 'inflamed British opinion'.⁶⁰ Steer reported that civilians were unable to escape the town because in between the aerial bombardment they were attacked by other fighter planes with machine-guns. He stated that 'the fighters (Heinkel fighters), meanwhile, plunged low from above the centre of the town to machine-gun those of

⁵⁶ D. Legaretta, *The Guernica Generation*, p. 101

⁵⁷ A. Bell, *Only for Three Months*, p. 4

⁵⁸ D. Legaretta, *The Guernica Generation*, p. 101

⁵⁹ *ibid*

⁶⁰ K. Watkins, *Britain Divided: The Effect of the Spanish Civil War on British Political Opinion*. (Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 1976), p. 50

the civilian population who had taken refuge in the fields'.⁶¹ This was significant because it meant that there was no escape for the civilians from the fire in the town, they were trapped in flames.

After the aerial bombardment ended, Steer entered the town to find that virtually all houses were falling apart, if they had not already done so. The fire and flames were in fact so aggressive that it was impossible for the firemen to enter and put out the fire. The detailed account of innocent civilians, and especially children, led to public outrage which in turn forced the British government to offer aid to the Basque children. This further shows how the media can inspire remarkable changes. The importance of Steer's report cannot be overstated since this occurred at a time when newspaper correspondents were pivotal in spreading the news. His detailed report meant two things. Firstly, there was now no denying of the Italian and German involvement in the conflict. Secondly, as Adrian Bell stated, Franco's officers' claims that the town had been burnt down by the Basque were quickly debunked, emphasising the importance of his report.

Criticism of the Government in the Media

Unlike in Britain, the refugees in France were the responsibility of the government which took full financial responsibility for them. On 30 September 1937, *the Guardian* published an article by Commander H. Pursey R. N. entitled *The Generosity of France – British Neglect*. Commander Pursey, who played a vital role in evacuating 60,000 refugees from Bilbao, criticised the British government for simply not doing enough and not playing their part in the conflict. He compared the French efforts to the British by stating that there is a 'stark contrast' between the two and that the 4,000 children in Britain have been 'maintained from private sources and have not

⁶¹ *The Times*, 27 April 1937

cost the government a penny'.⁶² The Commander was also highly critical of Britain's withdrawal from the naval protection that it had previously given for the Spanish *Habana* ship, which carried refugees, with the withdrawal coming at a most unfortunate time. According to the article, this proved devastating since it meant that *the Habana* ship could not be protected when carrying refugees. This led to tens of thousands of Spanish refugees to be faced with 'unnecessary suffering' and essentially meant that they now had to be evacuated in slow cargo ships.⁶³ A separate article from *the Guardian* also criticised the British government for not doing more and emphasised the fact that the few refugees that did come to Britain were maintained at private expense. The writer suggested that to help, Britain should either let more refugees into the country or give financial assistance to facilitate their transport to France. This would not be in breach of the non-intervention agreement, at least no more than 'in permitting private organisations to send aid for non-combatants in Spain' which had been the case for most of the conflict.⁶⁴ Criticism of the government was not limited to just *the Guardian*, as other newspapers were vocal about their disapproval of the Government's actions. Local newspaper *Nelson Reader* argued that the worst part about the conflict were the countries, such as Britain, that merely looked on⁶⁵. It added that the government had thus far not been 'particularly generous' to those who sought refuge in Britain.⁶⁶

⁶² *The Guardian*, 30 September 1937, p. 13

⁶³ *ibid*

⁶⁴ *The Guardian*, 24 August 1937, p. 18

⁶⁵ *The Nelson Reader*, 1 July 1938, p. 16

⁶⁶ *ibid*

Articles and letters in Favour of the Basque Children

Newspapers were used by committees to appeal for funds not merely nationally but also locally. An article from *the Sussex Express* regarding twenty Basque children who came to a camp at Blackboys aimed to appeal to the public for funds. The woman who cared for the children at the camp stated that while the BCC contributed to their cost, it would be most helpful if the readers of the newspaper contributed to the cost of milk and food, adding that if the response was positive enough they could take in even more children. Furthermore, there was also a plea for the local people to lend out their cars to take the children on a field trip to the sea.⁶⁷ The article portrayed the Basque children in a very positive manner by stating that despite the children having only been in the country for a short time, they were 'quickly picking up English ways'.⁶⁸ It becomes apparent that some government officials were aware of the public opinion, in a letter Roberts told Stanley Baldwin that 'we (the committee) believe that in desiring to save Basque children from the horrors of bombardment we represent a very large body of opinion in this country'.⁶⁹ The public opinion can, therefore, be seen as a crucial variable in the government decision making policy, at least during this period. Wilfrid Robert attempted to use it to his committee's advantage to get the government to help in the evacuation.

In an attempt to defend the children, the Duchess of Atholl argued in an article in the *Lancashire Evening Post* that 'under these circumstances, we could not be sure British boys would always be what we would wish them to be'.⁷⁰ One of the main

⁶⁷ *Sussex Agricultural Express*, 9 July 1937, p. 8

⁶⁸ *ibid*

⁶⁹ The Modern Records Centre University of Warwick, MSS 308/3, *Letter from Wilfrid Roberts and the NJCSR to Stanley Baldwin*, 13 May 1937

⁷⁰ *Lancashire Evening Post*, February 8, 1938, p. 7

reasons for the criticism of the children was that many believed that the people in need in Britain should be looked after before people from another country, a recurring theme that was found in several newspapers. This article also dealt with this issue, liberal politician Parkinson Tomlinson stated that he wished to respond to the citizens who had said that there were many appeals in England that should be given attention before Spain. Tomlinson answered the question eloquently by stating that 'Many of the brightest pages in English history show the sympathy which has been extended by Britishers to people abroad'.⁷¹

A lengthy article from *the Montrose Review* mentioned how the children had been very mature and had not misbehaved despite their horrible past experiences. It does mention one bad incident which was an altercation between Spanish and British children. The article does, however, point out that the fight only started because some British boys entered the camp and threw stones at the Basque children.⁷² It goes on to emphasise the fact that the Basque children are 'not on exhibition' and should be treated respectfully.⁷³ The Duchess of Atholl reflected on the criticism by stating that 'It is a great pity that this spirit of hostility should have arisen, I feel sure that if our critics could only see for themselves how well and happy these children are they would realise how great a work of kindness and mercy is being done.'⁷⁴ Atholl mentions that one of the most important outcomes of the evacuation to Britain, in her eyes, was the strong relationship that the children were able to create with those who were in close contact with them. This will be discussed further in the third

⁷¹ *ibid*

⁷² *The Montrose Review*, 24 September 1937, p. 5

⁷³ *ibid*

⁷⁴ *The Guardian*, 23 May 1938, p. 12

chapter where letters from children to British workers suggest that a lot of these strong relationships were made during their time in Britain.

Articles and letters Against the Basque Children

A letter from the NJCSR to the editor of the *Guardian*, written by British journalist G.T. Garratt, is interesting because it shows that not everyone was supportive of the Basque children in Britain. Natalia Benjamin stated that in *the Guardian* it led to an 'anti-refugee feeling'.⁷⁵ Many called for the repatriation of the young refugees, which culminated in the foundation of the Holman Gregory Commission which in turn led to the formation of the Spanish Children's Repatriation Committee (SCRC). The purpose of this new organisation was to judge the authenticity of applications sent from Bilbao for the return of the children. A letter from the NJCSR to the editor of *the Guardian*, from 7 March 1938, regarding the repatriation of Basque Children, shows the precautions that were taken. Garratt begins by stating that the SCRC's, an organisation that was set up by the Duke of Wellington, only activity seemed to be attacking the people responsible for the Basque Children in England.⁷⁶ He stated that the BCC never deviated from their initial plan but emphasised the fact that they could only repatriate the children if they were sure that they would, in fact, be returned to their parents or another family member.⁷⁷ Garratt criticised the Duke of Wellington's committee for their only objective being to return the children where they came from, without any confirmation that their parents remained there and were not in exile or dead. This would have led to devastating consequences, as this, according to Garratt, would have resulted in the 'permanent estrangement of the

⁷⁵ T. McVeigh, 'Basque Child Refugees Meet for Final Reunion, 75 Years After Arrival in Britain'. *The Guardian*. 25 March 2012

⁷⁶ *The Guardian*, 7 May 1938, p. 14

⁷⁷ *ibid*

children from their parents'.⁷⁸ The SCRC continued to push for their immediate repatriation, but alas, to no prevail. This letter from *the Guardian* shows that there were some deep-rooted conflicts within Britain regarding what to do with the children. While the British public was generous and kind for the most part, there were exceptions in places such as Derby. For example, according to an article from *the Daily Telegraph* from 17 June 1937, the Ruling Counsellor of Derby rejected an appeal from the Mayor of Derby asking for help in caring for the Spanish children.⁷⁹ According to an article from *the Guardian* from 2017, *the Daily Mail* was known for being especially hostile towards the Basque children, repeatedly sending reporters to report on the children's misbehaviour.⁸⁰ *Daily Mail* and *the Catholic Herald* articles from mid-1937 suggest that this statement was true. There is an apparent tonal difference in the language that is used when the refugees are described by *the Guardian* and *the Daily Mail*. One of the newspapers that was most critical of the children and most supportive of their repatriation was *the Catholic Herald*. According to Gary Willis, the Catholic press developed what he refers to as 'an almost schizophrenic response' to the evacuation of the Basque children to Britain.⁸¹ There are some potential reasons for this, the main one being that the Church thought it would be better to care for the poor British children before giving aid to children from another country. A question that arises after researching the Catholic Churches' hostile response to the evacuation of the Basque children is why they decided to get

⁷⁸ *ibid*

⁷⁹ *The Daily Telegraph*, 17 June 1937, p. 5

⁸⁰ S. Martinez, 'The Reception of Basque Refugees in 1937 Showed Britain at its Best and Worst'. *The Guardian*, 22 May 2017

⁸¹ G. Willis, *What Were the Motivations for and against Receiving Basque Refugees During the Spanish Civil War*. (University of London, MRes, 2012), p. 5 [<https://www.basquechildren.org/-/docs/articles/britishmotivations>, accessed on 19 March 2018]

involved in the first place. In the early discussions regarding the evacuation of the Basque children, the Church had purposefully not taken part in them. It was not until the Archbishop of Westminster, Arthur Hinsley, received a request from Señor Lizaso, the Basque government's delegate in London, made it clear that they wanted the Catholic church to be involved in some way.⁸² Hinsley reportedly stated that despite not being in favour of bringing the children to Britain they could not simply send the children away because of that. 'We did not bring them, and many of us think that they ought never to have been brought. However, they are here now. Not one of us, surely, can dare to turn them away'.⁸³ Adrian Bell uses the same quote in his book, but contrary to Legaretta states that it was the Bishop of Hexham who said that in an article in *the Tablet*.⁸⁴ Tom Buchanan stated in his book that there were approximately 500,000 Catholic households in Britain, out of which 200,000 received that Catholic Herald.⁸⁵ According to Buchanan, the Catholic Herald had to be wary of not being too critical of the Basque children, fearing that it could result in its working-class readers distancing themselves from the newspaper.⁸⁶ As Gary Willis correctly points out, parallels can be drawn between the Catholic press and the Labour party, at the time, whereby both were careful not to alienate a crucial section of their supporters.⁸⁷

An example of Catholic support for the children's repatriation can be found in an article from October 1937 following the resignation of Canon Craven, representative

⁸² A. Bell, *Only for Three Months*, p. 69

⁸³ D. Legaretta, *The Guernica Generation*, p. 119

⁸⁴ *The Tablet*, 19 June 1937, as cited in Adrian Bell *op. cit.*, p. 69

⁸⁵ T. Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War*, p. 171

⁸⁶ G. Willis, *Motivations*, p. 5

⁸⁷ *ibid*

of the Archbishop of Westminster. The reason for his resignation was due to his disapproval of the repatriation procedure of the BCC, although he had not raised any objections prior. Members of the committee expressed their surprise at his resignation and found it difficult to grasp why he opposed their repatriation procedure since they merely wanted to make sure that they were returned to their rightful parents and 'ensure that each application was an authentic request from a parent'.⁸⁸

According to the article, in one case four different people asked for the return of one boy and, furthermore, the two parents of the same boy had made 'conflicting requests'.⁸⁹ The relationship between the BCC and the Catholic Church was a fragile one at best. The BCC wanted to provide the children with a better life, without the constant fear of being bombarded from the air by Franco's bombers, while the Church's hierarchy supported Franco's insurgency. These two clashing ideas and values meant that there were many disagreements between the two.

Portsmouth Evening News issued an article that included the sentiments of a mother who stated that she did not think it to be fair for the Basque refugees to receive gifts and food supplies when there were many British children who went to school with 'little food and no soles to their shoes'.⁹⁰ Another hostile article directed at the Basque children came from the *Yorkshire Evening Post* in which they presented the 'full story' of a so-called outbreak by the refugees in a camp. The children had, allegedly, stoned a cottage after the cottager had 'smacked' one of the Basque children for fighting with his own child.⁹¹ It claimed that the story would be of special

⁸⁸ *The Guardian*, 14 August 1937, p. 13

⁸⁹ *ibid*

⁹⁰ *Portsmouth Evening News*, 2 June 1937, p. 3

⁹¹ *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 26 July 1937, p. 7

interest to the public of Huddersfield since they were about to receive several Basque children. A man named Harry A. Ducksbury warned that if the children were to be brought there 'they will undoubtedly be a nuisance and will cause a great deal of damage. It would be better if the money which it is proposed to spend on these children were devoted to giving a holiday to some of our own poor children'.⁹² This statement gives a clear indication of the mind-set of a lot of British people at the time, arguing that the funds that were being raised should be spent elsewhere on the needs of British children instead.

A letter published by *the Guardian* accused the right-wing press of fabricating stories and merely wanting the Basque children to return to their country. G.T. Garratt wrote a letter to the editor of *the Guardian* entitled *The Campaign for Wholesale Return*, stating that the refugee children had fallen victims of 'a virulent campaign from the extreme Right of the English press and from our drawing-room Fascists'.⁹³ The entire letter was directed at the unfair criticism that the children had received and aimed to give the correct information, believing that a large proportion of the British public had not been well-informed regarding the issue at that point even though the children had received a good deal of publicity. He claimed that the misunderstanding was 'deliberately fostered for political reasons'.⁹⁴ Garratt was highly critical of *the Daily Mail's* attempts of making a small incident into a big story and use it as an excuse to criticise the children, 'deliberate writing up of such tiny incidents as are inevitable when a large number of foreign children' come to a foreign land.⁹⁵ An example of

⁹² *ibid*

⁹³ *The Guardian*, 21 February 1938, p. 18

⁹⁴ *ibid*

⁹⁵ *ibid*

this comes from an article from *the Daily Mail* from early June 1937, in which they claimed that there had been a typhoid scare in the camp holding the Basque refugees, claiming that there were up to as many as 20 cases of children with typhoid. A large number of newspapers came to the defence of the children by denying the false information that was being spread, such as *the Hampstead Telegraph* in which it was stated that 'there are only three cases of typhoid fever in the camp, and not 20 cases, as has been stated in some circles'.⁹⁶ Whether this was a case of the media lying about statistics and overestimating the number of typhoid cases purposely to spread fear amongst the British public is up for debate, but some believed that these sorts of stories were written with the aim of influencing the British public against the refugees. Medical reports from the camp suggest that it had a 'good health record', contrary to what certain newspapers tried to claim.⁹⁷ Jim Fyrth also agrees with the accusation. Even though the children misbehaved at times, the small incidents were blown (up) out of proportion in the press. There was an apparent press campaign against them in Britain⁹⁸. Señor Licazo claimed that reports such as these had been greatly exaggerated.⁹⁹

A separate letter from the same date directed at the Repatriation committee, this time written by a civilian, stands out because of its emotive language when criticising the committee and a letter that they had published a week prior. Firstly, the civilian, T. S. Rothwell, accused the Repatriation committee of presenting false remarks such as the claim that the people of Bilbao should have no fears of aerial-bombardment

⁹⁶ *The Hampstead Telegraph*, 4 June 1937

⁹⁷ J. Fyrth, *Aid for Spain*, p. 229

⁹⁸ *ibid*, p. 228

⁹⁹ *The Guardian*, 14 August 1937, p. 13

since the orphaned children will 'have the loving care and attention of their fellow-countrymen'.¹⁰⁰ Rothwell made a valid point by adding that it these so-called 'fellow-countrymen' were the reason as to why many of these children had become orphaned. While the committee claimed itself to be a humanitarian one, and not political, MP Sir Nairne Stewart Sandeman, who was part of the committee and the founder of the committee 'Friends of Nationalist Spain', was quoted making remarks about the children which did not fit well with their image of humanitarianism. Sandeman reportedly stated in a speech, 'do not pay a single penny towards the upkeep of these Basques...they are a pretty expensive cup of tea'.¹⁰¹

As has been shown, the media played a vital role in informing the British public and in raising funds for the upkeep of the children. There is an apparent difference in the way in which a variety of newspapers reported on the children. One of the main difference between *the Guardian* and *the Daily Mail* reporting was in their portrayal of the refugee children. *The Guardian*, for example, saw it as Britain failing these children because of a lack of funding, amongst other things, whereas *the Daily Mail* portrayed it as the British people against them (the refugees) and argued that although they may have deserved help, it should not be considered a priority for Britain. Furthermore, the newspapers also reflect the internal divisions in Britain at the time, as the Basque children's arrival could be regarded as a trigger for discussions of broader issues, morally, economically and ideologically. Watkins argued that the British public had not been so divided from a conflict since the French Revolution, putting into perspective the gravity of the situation¹⁰². While there

¹⁰⁰ *The Guardian*, 21 1938, p. 18

¹⁰¹ *ibid*

¹⁰² K. Watkins, *Britain Divided*, p. 11

were apparent divisions between the Right and Left, it is often forgotten that there were also 'bitter differences' within both sides.

Chapter 3: First-Hand Accounts from the Niños Vascos

When discussing the reception of the Basque refugees in Britain, it is essential to include first-hand accounts from some of the children themselves. *Southampton University's Hartley Library* included several valuable oral testimonies from the children themselves, many of which provided new information that is not found in most books. Furthermore, by researching oral testimonies from the refugees, one is presented with a more balanced view of their reception in Britain. Chapter one and two discussed how the British government and public interpreted the arrival and reception of the Basque children. This chapter will be from the perspective of the children themselves, as well as the volunteers. An interesting point is made by historian Kevin Myers, in which he refers to an incident that occurred shortly after the arrival of the children. Upon arrival, all children were immediately medically tested before being allowed to disembark the *S.S. Habana*, due to a fear of a spread of diseases. Following this, the children's clothes had to be replaced which led many of them to get upset over the loss of their clothing, although there is no recorded account of this by the children in the sources used in this dissertation.¹⁰³ Though this incident may be overlooked and seem insignificant, Dorothy Legaretta argues that it led many of the children to distrust the people in charge of the camp.¹⁰⁴ Unlike many of the points that she raises in her book, however, she fails to mention the children's protests towards this action. Myers makes an interesting point by noting that if

¹⁰³ K. Myers, History, Migration and Childhood: Basque Refugee Children in 1930s Britain. *Family & Community History*, 3:2, (2000), 147-157, p. 147

¹⁰⁴ D. Legarreta, *The Guernica Generation*, p. 108

historians disregard the children's demonstrations against this action, for example, there is a chance that the children will be portrayed as submissive and compliant when in truth, this was not the case.¹⁰⁵ Therefore, it is important to include the children's first-hand accounts to get a complete overview of the subject.

Evacuation and Initial Reactions to Britain

Southampton's University Hartley Library included several insightful oral testimonies, who were interviewed mostly by Natalia Benjamin. She also used a collection of memoirs and published them in the book *Recuerdos*. One of the oral testimonies that stood out the most was with a man named Felix Amat, who was eleven years old when he evacuated to Southampton. He was one of the many who ended up staying in Britain for many years after the conflict had ended. His accounts of the event revealed a lot about what the children made of the evacuation and how it took longer for some than others to adjust to their new surroundings. Amat recalls that, initially, the children were told that they would only be away from home for a short period, no more than three months. As the situation in Spain worsened, however, it became apparent not just to the committee workers but also the children, that they would have to stay in Britain longer than they had initially anticipated. Most of the children went back, while the ones that could not return were fostered out. He recalls that the reason why he was not returned to Spain was that the BCC in London could not get in contact with his mother and did not know what her whereabouts were. His older brothers, who had stayed behind in Bilbao, told Felix not to leave and claimed that even during wartime, Britain was a better place to live.¹⁰⁶ The children, according to most accounts, were unaware of the severity of the situation in Spain and saw the

¹⁰⁵ K. Myers, *History, Migration and Childhood*, p. 152

¹⁰⁶ Hartley Library, The University of Southampton: Archives and Special Collections, MS 370/16 A4148, Oral Testimonies from the Basque Children (2007)

journey to Britain as an adventure, believing that they would return home soon. Similarly, to most of the other recollections, Felix stated that the journey was arduous and that 'we were all sick, it was terrible'.¹⁰⁷ To raise funds for the refugees, some of the children toured around Britain, including Nottingham, dancing and performing. Even though they were children of a young age who had to work and dance to raise money, they did not feel exploited nor did they see it as a job. The children enjoyed themselves, and Felix eventually met his foster parents through performing. 'This is probably new to you', he stated as he claimed that not many children were housed by the Peace Pledge Union (PPU) but in Nottingham, it was relatively regular. The group was spread out across the country and was 'against war and against participation in war'.¹⁰⁸ The PPU played an important role in many cities and, for example, maintained the refugee house in Colchester by raising funds for their upkeep. Therefore, it is surprising that the PPU is rarely mentioned in the books covering this subject.

A prevailing sentiment amongst many of the Basque children is a sense of loss of their old lives in Spain. For many, this was the only negative consequence of having to evacuate to Britain. Josefina Stubbs, another Basque refugee, stated regretfully that 'we were so busy with our own lives in a way that it never entered our heads to ask our parents what really happened. They could have told us a lot'.¹⁰⁹ Initially, Josefina and her sister were told by her father that they were going to Russia for no more than three weeks. Due to an unexpected air raid, while queuing to register,

¹⁰⁷ *ibid*

¹⁰⁸ N. Benjamin, *Recuerdos: Niños Vascos Refugiados en Gran Bretaña*, (Norwich, Mousehold Press, 2007), p. 89

¹⁰⁹ Hartley Library, The University of Southampton: Archives and Special Collections, MS 370/16 A4148, Transcription of Mrs Josefina Stubbs interview, (2007)

they were forced to leave and come back when registration opened again. As a result, they were put on the next ship which happened to be heading to Britain. A few weeks later the ship was ready to disembark to Britain, with the long wait perhaps being a result of the British government not giving authorisation until later than expected.

A common theme found in almost all the recollections was that upon arrival in Southampton, the children were greeted by cheers and flags. The children immediately felt the kindness of the British public. Once they got to the Stoneham camp, the children had to wait until other accommodations were found. Yvonne Cloud, Assistant Secretary of NJCSR, revealed that in the first days the camp was split into political sections including Basque Nationalists, Socialist, Communist to avoid any altercations.¹¹⁰ This proved to be controversial but necessary at the time.¹¹¹ Felix was soon transferred to a camp in Langham for two years with several other children, which he later referred to as 'the greatest two years of my life'.¹¹² The house in which they were staying in was unlike anything the children had seen before, it included cricket and tennis courts, which led children to shout, 'this is paradise'.¹¹³ This shows how the incredibly hard work that British committee workers and volunteers put in ultimately paid off.

¹¹⁰ Y. Cloud, *The Basque Children in England: An Account of Their Life at Stoneham Camp*. (London, Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1937), p. 52

¹¹¹ *Hampshire Magazine*, 2 December 1978.

¹¹² N. Benjamin, *Recuerdos*, p. 9

¹¹³ *ibid.*, p. 8

Natalia's book *Recuerdos* includes countless examples of the children being taken back by the generosity of the British people. Manuel Leceta Ortiz, who was also taken to Langham, emphasised that the evacuation showcase the kindness of the British public on a massive scale, adding 'I would like to put on record that the British were magnificent towards us'.¹¹⁴ It is noteworthy to state that not all children were as lucky as Felix and Manuel. Josefina Stubbs, for example, was moved to a house in London which was not as pleasant as the previous camp, stating that it felt like a prison.¹¹⁵ Josefina eventually had to be moved to another house as she became ill from the smog and began losing a substantial amount of weight. In general, the houses that were run by local committees tended to be the best ones for the children while homes in conservative areas, such as Hexham, suffered from the lack of local support.¹¹⁶

The Basque Children and the British Workers

Despite the press's campaigns against the children, the volunteers found the children courageous and admirable.¹¹⁷ Dorothy Lageretta's book regarding the children includes several interesting and invaluable photographs and documents. As mentioned in chapter two, many friendships blossomed between the Spanish children and the British volunteers and workers who took care of them. A document that particularly stood out was a copy of a letter from an unnamed Basque boy addressed to Dr Richard Ellis where he expressed his relief and delight over the fact

¹¹⁴ *ibid*

¹¹⁵ Hartley Library, The University of Southampton: Archives and Special Collections, MS 370/16 A4148, Transcription of Mrs Josefina Stubbs interview, (2007)

¹¹⁶ J. Fyrth, *Aid for Spain*, 234

¹¹⁷ *ibid*, p. 228

that he had been told that he did not have to return to Spain. The boy wrote, 'Esta mañana cuando me ha venido a decirme que no iba a España no sabes la alegría que he cogido. Muchas gracias'.¹¹⁸ This translates to 'when I was told this morning that I did not have to return to Spain I was overjoyed. Thank you so much'. The letter shows how many of the children preferred to stay in Britain rather than returning to their home country. For many, there was perhaps nothing to return to in Spain. Additionally, it also shows the strong relationship that a lot of the British workers and volunteers had forged with the Basque children. The child refers to Dr Ellis as 'the bear', most likely a nickname that was given to him by the Basque children. Maria Teresa Grijalba Subirón had fond memories of Britain, and moreover its people. She stated in *Recuerdos* that she was thankful to Britain 'for the warm and considerate welcome that her people extended to us. We were not provided for directly by the British government but by popular subscription and voluntary gifts from English friends'.¹¹⁹ It is important to mention, however, that she gained knowledge of this in retrospect most likely and was at the time unaware of the governments' reluctance to providing aid. Yvonne Cloud stated that the main quality of character which was mentioned by all workers was the children's great reasonableness and intelligence.¹²⁰ Furthermore, the children's adaptability continuously surprised adults during their time in Britain.¹²¹

The announcement that Bilbao had fallen on 19 June 1937 led to a dilemma amongst the volunteers and workers, who were also gravely affected by the news,

¹¹⁸ D. Lageretta, *The Guernica Generation*, p. 200

¹¹⁹ N. Benjamin, *Recuerdos*, p. 77

¹²⁰ Y. Cloud, *The Basque Children*, p. 32

¹²¹ *ibid*

over whether they should wait until the next day to inform the children, it was also suggested by some not to tell the children at all.¹²² The majority decided it was best to inform them on the same day, resulting in 300 children running out on the street 'without purpose or direction to fall down there and cry'.¹²³ While the volunteers struggled initially to contain the children, they were eventually able to comfort them despite the language barrier. According to Yvonne Cloud, the British staff worked tirelessly until 4 am to make sure that no child was missing, going on to praise the workers' dedication. While some British newspapers reported that the Bilbao population had 'welcomed Franco' happily, this reaction shows that that was far from the truth.

Miguel San Sebastian Perez recalled that the owner of a pub in London that he was taken to by one of the workers in the camp refused to accept his money for food, fully aware of his situation.¹²⁴ Incidents such as these were not rare, with Miguel stating that it was 'absolutely typical of the attitude of the British general public'.¹²⁵ His only bad memory of Britain was when himself and his sister were repatriated, which Miguel still today cannot comprehend since no one in Spain had asked for their return. Unlike in Britain, Miguel states, there was no sense of freedom in Bilbao. His account of returning to Spain does put into perspective how fond the children became of Britain. These little acts of kindness help portray the generosity of the British public in ways that books perhaps cannot.

¹²² Y. Cloud, *The Basque Children*, p. 44

¹²³ *ibid*, 46

¹²⁴ N. Benjamin, *Recuerdos*, p. 77

¹²⁵ *ibid*

Memories of Repatriation

According to historian Peter Anderson, Arthur Hinsley, Archbishop of Westminster, was left with no choice when he was asked by Home Office Secretary Sir John Simon if he would help look after the children. He reportedly felt pressured and stated, 'we have not had a say in their coming... and we must look after them' according to the *Catholic Herald*¹²⁶. Although he was heavily involved in bringing the children to the UK, Hinsley soon began to support their repatriation as pressure increased from Spain to return the children, arguing that they were being educated by revolutionaries and 'turning them against society and the faith'.¹²⁷

Antonio Maseada, member of the repatriation service in Spain, stated, 'Our sacred mission is to recover for God and Spain the souls of these children who have been poisoned for so many years by anti-Catholics and anti-patriotic ideas'.¹²⁸ Hinsley was, allegedly, unhappy with the Catholic children. An example of this came in August 1937 when he stated that the evacuation had taken place 'from motives of a political nature', meaning that Britain was trying to incriminate the Nationalists for their crimes.¹²⁹ He was keen on ridding himself of the Spanish children, regarding them as a threat to Catholic values and believing that many of them were 'tainted with communism'.¹³⁰ In addition to this, he also had financial doubts, as the initially

¹²⁶ *Catholic Herald*, 29 April 1937

¹²⁷ P. Anderson. The Struggle over the Evacuation to the UK and Repatriation of Basque Refugee Children in the Spanish Civil War: Symbols and Souls, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 52 (2) (2017). p. 307

¹²⁸ Archivo General de la Administración. (AGA). (09) 01117.012, 51/21122, 1940, as cited by Peter Anderson *op.cit.* p. 307

¹²⁹ FO 371 21374 W 16052/37/41 Hinsley to Sir Samuel Hoare, 17 August 1937, as cited by Peter Anderson *op.cit.* p. 307

¹³⁰ P. Anderson, *The Struggle over the Evacuation*, p. 307

planned short-term evacuation proved to be longer than presumed. He was worried about the £500 that was being spent every week for the children by his church¹³¹.

Luis, one of the children who evacuated to Britain in 1937, explained in *Only for Three Months* that he had initially been reluctant to leave Spain for Britain. Ironically, later when Luis was told that there was a boat ready to take children back to Spain, he escaped the colony that he was living in to hide in the forest nearby until he was sure that the boat had already left.¹³² Luis recalled that he stole some bottles of milk and ran into the New Forest. 'I knew when the boat was leaving and I came back to the colony only when I knew the boat had left'.¹³³ This was, according to Bell, just one of the countless examples of the Basque children attempting to avoid repatriation. In some cases, the children were not as lucky as Luis was and ended up getting caught while trying to hide or escape. Events such as these made their way to the public's sphere and resulted in the BCC convincing the Home Office to allow refugees of the age of 16 to decide for themselves whether they wished to return to Spain or stay in Britain.¹³⁴ Bell adds that Luis' 'act of defiance was also an act of obedience' since his father had prior to his escape warned him by sending him a copy of a newspaper article reporting on Franco's speech regarding the repatriation of the children in Britain.

In short, the parents of the evacuees did not wish for them to return and opposed repatriation due to fear of their children being put in alternative homes in Spain and raised with different political beliefs. This helps explain the Home Office

¹³¹ *ibid*

¹³² A. Bell, *Only for Three Months*, p. 10

¹³³ *ibid*

¹³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 11

representative's stance on repatriation in July 1937. It was stated that parents in exile or other 'are neither able nor want to have them back at present'.¹³⁵ British supporters of repatriation, on the other hand, agreed with the notion that children were being corrupted in Britain while also arguing that Nationalist care homes could provide a comfortable and safe environment.¹³⁶ By 23 July 1937 tensions were at an all-time high. By this point, *the Catholic Herald* was working with the Franco regime by publishing what it claimed to be signatures of parents for having their children returned home. The BCC, in contrast, was worried that the signatures had been falsified or that the parents were forced to ask to bring them back. According to one of the child refugees, Felix Amat, this claim could indeed have been valid. Stating that his mother had been threatened by a priest and an official with imprisonment to sign the form for their return.¹³⁷

The reason why oral testimonies were used in this paper was that, although Natalia Benjamin published several of the children's memoirs in her book, they provide something that one cannot get from a book as easily perhaps. Oral testimonies provide a more humanistic view of a topic, and at times it is possible hear their emotion in their voice. The findings in this chapter suggest that from the moment of their arrival, the British public behaviour towards them was exemplary for the most part. The children were at the time unaware of the governments and the churches opposition of their evacuation, but a common theme found in most testimonies was the negative aspects of the repatriation period. Interestingly, this chapter also reveals

¹³⁵ FO 21373 W 14853, Cranborne, 29 July 1937, as cited by Peter Anderson *op.cit.* p. 310

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 311

¹³⁷ N. Benjamin, *Recuerdos*, p. 113

some information regarding the volunteers and their struggles and difficulties, which have often been overlooked in most works regarding this topic.

Conclusion

Spain and Britain have often been economic or naval rivals and have not often seen eye to eye. The evacuation of the Basque children to Southampton is somewhat different and contradicts the previous notions regarding British and Spanish antagonism. What this event proved, above all else, was that the British public and media could influence the government and inspire change. Both the general public and several newspapers played a vital role in bringing the children to Britain and, perhaps just as importantly, made them feel welcome. The adaptability of the children, who had to leave everything behind, was nothing short of remarkable in the eyes of the British workers.

This dissertation has emphasised, throughout, that if it had not been for the relentless hard work from the aid committees, such as the BCC and the NJCSR, the children would most likely never have been evacuated to Britain. The government was strictly against the idea of allowing the Basque children to come to Britain for many reasons, most specifically because of their wish to adhere to the non-intervention agreement and to maintain good relations with the Spanish leader, Francisco Franco. Based on documents and letters found in the National Archives, the government also stated that they did not see Britain as an appropriate destination for the Basque children, suggesting France or a region in Spain not controlled by insurgents as an alternative.

Whether Britain should adhere to the non-intervention agreement became a prevalent political issue that deeply divided the British public.¹³⁸ Furthermore, it could

¹³⁸ K. Watkins, *Britain Divided*, p.73

be argued that the evacuation and arrival of the Basque children led to discussions of broader ideological matters. The media primarily reflected this as it became apparent that there were deep divisions within Britain between those supporting the Nationalists and those defending the Republic. The church's support of Franco and the Spanish aid committee's opposition of the insurgents are illustrative examples of the contrasting opinions.

Consul Ralph Stevenson played a crucial role and was, according to Adrian Bell, the unsung hero of the evacuation. He proved to be very influential in both London and Bilbao.¹³⁹ Based on my research, however, I would suggest that there was more than one unsung hero in this event, as it was a collective effort of the British public and individual MPs, to name a few, the Duchess of Atholl, Leah Manning and perhaps most importantly Wilfrid Roberts. Politicians were astonished by the response from the public. Wilfrid Roberts expressed his surprise at how fast people were donating to the cause, raising £17,000 much quicker than anticipated.¹⁴⁰ Letters and documents show that these individuals played a crucial role in organising and convincing the government to allow for the evacuation to happen. On 17 May 1937, the British government approved the evacuation, albeit reluctantly, and stated that the government would not financially support the children. The British public played a crucial role in this process. Through the reporting of the bombing of Guernica, covered extensively by British journalist George Steer, the UK citizens became aware of the horrors that the people of the Basque country were experiencing and thereby leading the public to sympathise with the Basque people. The role of the

¹³⁹ Modern Records Centre University of Warwick, MSS 21/3573, *Newsletter Basque Children of '37 Association UK*. Southampton, Basque Children Association, 2004, p. 8

¹⁴⁰ TNA, MH 57/322, Note of Proceedings of a Deputation from the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief, 14 May 1937, p. 4

media cannot be understated since they were not only crucial in influencing public opinion but also used by aid committees to raise funds for the Basque children. While most newspapers, such as *the Guardian*, portrayed the children positively, there were also several newspapers that were more critical. *The Catholic Herald* and *the Daily Mail* were especially hostile towards the refugees, reporting on their misbehaviour and at times even spreading false information, although it is difficult to say whether this was done purposely. Furthermore, there is also an apparent tonal difference between the Right wing and Left wing media, although it is at times difficult to identify.

The testimonies of the children suggest that the initial public reception of the evacuees upon arrival in Southampton was positive. One of the leading proponents in support of the children's repatriation was the Catholic Church, with some considering the children to be a threat to Catholic values. Also, a repatriation committee was created with its sole purpose being to legitimise the requests from Spanish parents for the return of their children. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the repatriation movement was how it showed and unravelled the disunity in Britain.¹⁴¹

Certain aspects of the evacuation deserve further exploration, such as the role of the Catholic church in the repatriation of the Niños Vascos and their relationship with the Nationalists. The struggles that the British volunteers faced while taking 4,000 children under their wings is another interesting aspect that could be studied further. Identifying the vast contrast between the public opinion and the government response, and the ability of civilians to influence policymaking is both interesting and

¹⁴¹ P. Anderson, *The Struggle over the Evacuation*, p. 307

inspiring. The power of both the public and the media managed to raise awareness and more importantly the funding of the evacuation and the upkeep of the children. The government's involvement, on the other hand, was minimal and several pro-nationalists lobbied for the Basque children to be repatriated to Spain as soon as possible. It was partly because of the public demand that the Niños Vascos were able to stay in Britain. In conclusion, it appears that the Basque children were treated with kindness and open arms by the majority of the British public. This paper showcases, not only the protectionist politics run by the government at the time, but most importantly the humanitarian qualities of the British citizens and their joint forces with the press that resulted in the change of policies. Testimonies from the Niños Vascos serve to prove this: 'I would like to put on record that the British were magnificent towards us'.¹⁴²

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¹⁴² N. Benjamin, *Recuerdos*, p. 8

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