

# The Basque Refugee Children in Oxfordshire during the Spanish Civil War: Politically Charged Project or Humanitarian Endeavour?

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## SUMMARY

*The seventieth anniversary of the docking of the SS Habana at Southampton with about 4,000 Basque refugee children on board was celebrated at Southampton Solent University in May 2007. The children had escaped from the Spanish Civil War (1936–9) after the bombing of Guernica. Cora Portillo (née Blyth), who had worked with some of the children at Westfield House, near Bampton, Oxfordshire, was the guest of honour. Four years earlier she had unveiled a commemorative blue plaque at Westfield House, which, under the name of St Joseph's, had been home to some forty refugee children. The subject of the Basque refugee children is clearly one of growing interest.*

*The escapees were sent to about seventy 'colonies' throughout the country to be cared for by local committees. This article focuses on those in Oxfordshire – at Aston, Faringdon, Shipton-under-Wychwood, and Thame. It will examine the reception of the children and the care given to them locally, their political views, and the debate which ensued about their repatriation. This will enable an assessment of the extent to which their Oxfordshire hosts were acting from purely charitable, humanitarian motives, and how far they were driven by politics.*

The Spanish Civil War, between the left-wing Republican government and General Francisco Franco's right-wing rebel coalition, started in July 1936 with an attempted military coup against the government. Military risings throughout the country triggered a brutal war between the insurgents, who were supported by the Catholic Church and the far-right Falangists, and supporters of the Republic, including the Basque government, which had been formed in October 1936 with limited devolved powers. Franco's rebel troops, with help from his allies Hitler and Mussolini, were eventually to emerge as victors over the Republican government in April 1939. Franco was to rule Spain as dictator until his death in 1975.

The British government adopted a policy of apparent neutrality by refusing to sell arms to either side. A non-intervention declaration was signed by twenty-seven countries in August 1936 and took the form of an agreement not to interfere in the conflict directly or indirectly.<sup>1</sup> Even when Germany, Italy, and the Soviet Union flagrantly ignored the agreement, British policy remained unchanged. A combination of an eagerness to avoid war through appeasement, an ideological abhorrence of communism, with which the Republic was associated, a desire to protect British investments in Spain, and the hope of not inflaming public opinion at home encouraged the British government to maintain its policy of non-intervention.<sup>2</sup> The aid granted to Franco by the Fascist dictators far outweighed the arms sold by the Soviet Union to the Republic.<sup>3</sup> The policy of non-intervention and the British government's refusal to change tactics in the face of Fascist intervention helped to secure the defeat of the Republican government.

The rebel offensive in northern Spain in the spring of 1937 made necessary the evacuation of tens of thousands of Basque refugees. On 26 April the German Condor Legion assisted the rebel

<sup>1</sup> J. Edwards, *The British Government and the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939* (London, 1979), pp. 40–5.

<sup>2</sup> E. Moradiellos, *La Perfidia de Albi6n. El Gobierno Británico y la Guerra Civil Española* (Madrid, 1996), pp. 16–26.

<sup>3</sup> P. Preston, *A Concise History of the Spanish Civil War* (London, 1996), p. 115.

forces by bombing the market town of Guernica. The razing of Guernica shocked the world, as it was the first complete destruction of a civilian target by aerial bombing.<sup>4</sup> As rebel troops closed in around Bilbao, and the threat posed to women and children in the Basque country by food shortages and further bombing campaigns heightened, the Basque President, José Antonio Aguirre, appealed to various countries to take Basque refugees. Nearly 20,000 Basque children were to be evacuated altogether in 1937, many going to France and Belgium, with some finding refuge as far afield as Mexico and the Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup>

In the case of Britain, Leah Manning of the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief (NJCSR) travelled to Bilbao in April at the request of the Basque delegation in London and began a campaign to persuade the British government to take some of the young evacuees.<sup>6</sup> Despite opposition from the Foreign Office, as well as organizations such as the Save the Children Fund, the British government eventually agreed on 29 April to receive the children.<sup>7</sup> However, as negotiations continued, conditions were imposed. While Manning managed to persuade the government to accept 4,000 rather than the original 2,000 refugees, and the upper age limit was extended to 15, ministers insisted that the political background of the children should be in proportion to the parties represented in the Basque parliament, that there be more girls than boys, that the NJCSR provide 10s. a week per child, and that repatriation should begin as soon as possible.<sup>8</sup>

On 23 May, 3,861 Basque children refugees, along with 95 women teachers, 120 young women helpers, and 15 priests docked in Southampton on the *Habana*.<sup>9</sup> Before the children had arrived the Basque Children's Committee (BCC) was formed to take responsibility for their care. The committee, chaired by the Conservative, but strongly pro-Republican, peer the Duchess of Atholl, included representatives from the TUC, the Catholic Church, and the Salvation Army, as well as the three main political parties. The BCC was formed by the NJCSR, with which it maintained close links. A separate committee, without the NJCSR's ties to the Communists, was considered necessary to attract wider support, for instance, from the TUC.<sup>10</sup> The BCC helped to co-ordinate the camp set up to care for the children upon their arrival at Southampton. It then had the job of arranging accommodation for the children by negotiating with the Salvation Army, which agreed to take 450, and the Catholic Church, which took 1,200.<sup>11</sup> The BCC then encouraged the formation of local children's committees before the distribution of the rest of the refugees in small groups throughout the country in the following months. Numerous colonies were set up in the course of 1937, most of which were in the Home Counties, but four of which were in Oxfordshire.

The National Government's insistence that the Basque refugees be maintained by the BCC placed central importance upon the participation of the British public in the care of the children. It has been suggested that only the French Revolution had a comparable effect on British public opinion.<sup>12</sup> While the Francoists certainly had their supporters, particularly on the right and within Catholic communities, what was perhaps most striking was the level of pro-Republican sympathy. Two opinion polls were taken during the war. The first, in February 1938, revealed fifty-seven per cent preferred the Republic, compared with only seven per cent who favoured Franco.<sup>13</sup> In the

<sup>4</sup> Preston, *Concise History*, pp. 4–5.

<sup>5</sup> Dorothy Legarreta, *The Guernica Generation: Basque Refugee Children of the Spanish Civil War* (Reno, NV, 1984), p. ix.

<sup>6</sup> R. Bill and S. Newens, *Leah Manning* (Harlow, 1991), p. 44.

<sup>7</sup> Tom Buchanan, *Britain and the Spanish Civil War* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 110.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>10</sup> Tom Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War and the British Labour Movement* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 163.

<sup>11</sup> Adrian Bell, *Only for Three Months: the Basque Children in Exile* (Norwich, 1996), p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> K. W. Watkins, *Britain Divided: the Effect of the Spanish Civil War on British Political Opinion* (London, 1963), p. 11.

<sup>13</sup> Moradiellos, *La Perfidia de Albi6n*, p. 244.

second poll, in October, the majority siding with the Republic increased to fifty-eight per cent.<sup>14</sup> Although this by no means indicates that the majority actively supported the Spanish Republic, it certainly suggests that a strong preference existed.

Support for the Republic in the face of non-intervention expressed itself in numerous efforts to help the Spanish government, which Jim Fyrth terms the 'Aid Spain' movement.<sup>15</sup> Communities set up their own committees to raise funds and collect food and clothes for the Republic. On a national level, over two thousand men and women volunteered to serve in the International Brigades; the NJCSR organized food ships to be sent to Spain, while the Spanish Medical Aid Committee co-ordinated voluntary medical units, the first of which left for Spain in August 1936.<sup>16</sup> It is estimated that about £2,000,000 was raised in aid of the Republic.<sup>17</sup> By comparison, humanitarian assistance for the rebels was very limited, consisting of a few relatively unsuccessful initiatives co-ordinated by the Catholic Church.<sup>18</sup>

While many of these 'Aid Spain' efforts can be seen as humanitarian responses to the war, in the majority of cases they were directed towards the Republican side, thus taking on political significance. Explicitly humanitarian appeals were made to attract support to these pro-Republican activities. The Oxford University Peace Council campaigned to send food to Republican Spain, and in a pamphlet wrote that 'this is a humanitarian cause to which, we hope, members of all parties and of no party will feel an obligation to contribute generously.'<sup>19</sup> Oxfordshire had its own 'Aid Spain' movement. While the Mayor's Spanish Relief Fund collected contributions,<sup>20</sup> the Oxford Co-operative Society held a 'milk for Spain' week,<sup>21</sup> and the Amalgamated Engineering Union contributed by making splints to send to Spain.<sup>22</sup> The pacifism of much of the British left during the mid-1930s meant that support for the Spanish Republic was often embodied in such humanitarian endeavours and appeals, the nature of which, however, should not detract from their political motivation. Grass-roots voluntary activity relating to the Spanish Civil War was already under way when the Basque children were distributed around the country. The maintenance of the Basque children, while not constituting aid to the Republic, is thus often considered part of this wider, pro-Republican 'Aid Spain' movement.

Any study of the Basque children in Oxfordshire has to be seen within the context of the 'Aid Spain' movement and the historiographical disagreement surrounding it. In particular, Tom Buchanan and Jim Fyrth have engaged in a debate about the nature of the 'Aid Spain' movement which touches upon the central humanitarian and political issues. Fyrth presents the 'Aid Spain' efforts very much as a cohesive national movement, encompassing people from different social classes and political and religious persuasions.<sup>23</sup> He emphasizes its significance as an essentially political phenomenon: the participants in the various elements of the 'Aid Spain' movement were making a political gesture, if not in direct support of the Republic, at least in opposition to Fascism.<sup>24</sup> Buchanan challenges Fyrth's interpretation, asserting that many people were apathetic towards the Spanish Civil War, and that in a majority of the endeavours for the Spanish Republic

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Jim Fyrth, 'The Aid Spain movement in Britain, 1936–9', *History Workshop*, 35 (1993), pp. 153–64.

<sup>16</sup> Jim Fyrth, *The Signal was Spain. The Spanish Aid Movement in Britain 1936–39* (London, 1986), p. 43.

<sup>17</sup> T. Kushner and K. Knox, *Refugees in an Age of Genocide: Global, National and Local Perspectives during the Twentieth Century* (London, 1999), p. 106.

<sup>18</sup> Buchanan, *Britain and the Spanish Civil War*, pp. 118–19.

<sup>19</sup> Bodl. John Johnson Collection, Street Propaganda Box 3, Pamphlet of Appeal from Oxford University Peace Council.

<sup>20</sup> *Oxford Times*, 11 June 1937, p. 18.

<sup>21</sup> Ruskin College Library (hereafter RCL), Oxford, MSS 8/26 (Oxford Trades and Labour Council Minutes 1935–40), Minutes of Meeting of 1 Dec. 1938.

<sup>22</sup> RCL, MSS 12/2 (Arthur Exell File), *Daily Mirror*, 27 July 1981.

<sup>23</sup> Fyrth, *The Signal was Spain*, pp. 20–1.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 29.



Fig. 1. Map of Oxfordshire (post-1974), showing the location of the colonies.  
(Map drawn by Rhona Walker.)

a minority of local activists headed the campaigns.<sup>25</sup> Neither historian denies the breadth of support for the Basque children, but while Fyrth considers it a sign of the scope of the Popular Front against Fascism in Britain, Buchanan regards it as evidence of the wider humanitarian appeal of the refugee children. What follows is an attempt to discover how far these conflicting interpretations applied to Oxfordshire by looking at the extent to which the politics of the civil war affected the reception of the Basque children, how much the response to the children can be considered a part of a wider pro-Republican 'Aid Spain' movement, and whether the refugees' humanitarian appeal as young non-combatants, whose refuge in the country had been ratified by a non-interventionist government, served to override such political tensions. But perhaps it

<sup>25</sup> Tom Buchanan, 'Britain's popular front? Aid Spain and the British Labour movement', *History Workshop*, 31 (1991), pp. 64–70.

should be borne in mind that humanitarian and political motivation are by no means mutually exclusive, as political concern is often touched by humanitarianism, and a humanitarian response can be influenced by political factors. This is particularly the case with appeals for aid in response to the Spanish Civil War, which were so often both pro-Republican and humanitarian in nature.

#### RECEPTION OF THE BASQUE CHILDREN AND ATTITUDES TO THEM IN OXFORDSHIRE

There were colonies for the Basque children in Oxfordshire at Aston, Faringdon, Shipton-under-Wychwood, and Thame (see Fig. 1). The colony at Aston was situated at St Joseph's House, a former children's home ten miles from Oxford.<sup>26</sup> It was to accommodate forty children: twenty-five girls and fifteen boys, who arrived on 23 June 1937.<sup>27</sup> The home at Aston, often referred to as the Witney colony, absorbed children from other colonies when they closed down, such as the one at Thame.<sup>28</sup> The Aston colony's closure went unreported, but references to the colony in the local press disappear in October 1939, about the time it shut down, along with many other colonies. This was just after the outbreak of the Second World War, when most of the children were repatriated to Spain.

In March 1938 Lord Faringdon permitted a group of Basque boys to stay in a cottage on his estate at Faringdon, in the south-west of Oxfordshire.<sup>29</sup> This colony housed about twenty-five boys.<sup>30</sup> As is evident from the minutes of the BCC, the accommodation at Faringdon was soon considered inadequate for the children over the winter,<sup>31</sup> so they were moved to St Michael's House at Shipton-under-Wychwood, to the north-west of Witney, on 10 January 1939.<sup>32</sup> Here they remained until it closed, as recorded by Luís Santamaría, a refugee at this colony, in October 1939, when some of the remaining refugees were transferred to Aston. They stayed there until it too closed about a fortnight later.<sup>33</sup> At Thame, in east Oxfordshire, fifty girls were housed at Rycotewood, the old Thame Poor Law Institute.<sup>34</sup> Arriving on 19 June 1937 from Southampton, they stayed there until the colony closed on 28 December 1937, when the children either returned to Spain or were relocated to other colonies.<sup>35</sup>

The appeals made on behalf of the Basque children at Aston, Faringdon, Shipton-under-Wychwood, and Thame were of a consistently humanitarian nature. Members of local committees would use the local press to ask for financial contributions and volunteers to help with the care of the children. All these appeals uniformly and explicitly denied the role of politics in the project surrounding the children and presented it as a purely charitable enterprise. The *Thame Gazette* praised those volunteering to care for the children and their 'humanity which ultimately outweighs political and religious differences'.<sup>36</sup> The Mayor of Chipping Norton wrote in the *Chipping Norton Advertiser*, appealing for 'gifts either in money or in kind' for the undertaking of caring for the Basque children, described as 'non-political and non-sectarian'.<sup>37</sup> The *Oxford Times* reported that 'in a letter appealing for public support, the North Oxfordshire Basque Children's Committee

<sup>26</sup> *Witney Gazette*, 25 June 1937, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> *Oxford Mail*, 24 June 1937, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 29 June 1938, p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> M. Murphey, 'The exiles of Eaton Hastings', *Basque Children of '37 Association: UK Newsletter* (Sept. 2004), p. 4.

<sup>30</sup> *Chipping Norton Advertiser*, 13 Jan. 1939, p. 1.

<sup>31</sup> Modern Records Centre (hereafter MRC), Warwick University, MSS 292/946/39 (Basque Children's Committee Minutes 1937–38), Minutes of Subcommittee Meeting of 8 Nov. 1938.

<sup>32</sup> *Witney Gazette*, 13 Jan. 1939, p. 4.

<sup>33</sup> Luís Santamaría, *Unpublished Memoirs* (1996) [Held by the Basque Children of '37 Association], p. 145.

<sup>34</sup> *Thame Gazette*, 22 June 1937, p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 28 Dec. 1937, p. 5.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 15 June 1937, p. 4.

<sup>37</sup> *Chipping Norton Advertiser*, 30 July 1937, p. 4.



Fig. 2. Group of Basque refugee boys at St Joseph's House, Aston.  
(Copyright of Oxfordshire County Council Photographic Archive – Cyril Arapoff.)

emphasise the non-political and non-sectarian nature of the scheme'.<sup>38</sup> A statement from the letter was subsequently quoted, asserting that 'we are not concerned to argue about the rights and wrongs of the war in Spain'.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, a letter from the vice-chairman of the Mayor's Spanish Relief Fund expressing support for the project of caring for the Basque children was featured in the *Oxford Mail*. He wrote that 'there is neither political nor religious bias in the organization' at Aston and professed 'the belief that their maintenance is an immediate and humanitarian work of concern to all Oxford citizens'.<sup>40</sup> Upon the formation of the Chipping Norton Basque Children's Committee the *Oxford Mail* reported that 'the Chairman stressed the non-political character of the work and appealed for the practical sympathy of humanitarians'.<sup>41</sup>

Repeated efforts were made to present the reception of the Basque children in Oxfordshire as a politically neutral project. The continual emphasis on the non-political character of the work carried out for the children in Oxfordshire is, in part, a reflection of the nature of the scheme and the way it was perceived. But those directing the appeals had an obvious interest in presenting the project as non-political. Pragmatically it made sense to deny any political partisanship in order to attract greater levels of support and further legitimize the cause in aid of the Basque children. Furthermore, the continual efforts made to present the children as divorced from the politically charged Spanish conflict suggest that such persuasion was considered necessary to attract support beyond a core of left-wing and pro-Republican activists.

The Oxfordshire local press presented the children as a humanitarian cause by depicting them as young, politically innocent victims caught in the crossfire of the Spanish Civil War. Described as 'little Basques'<sup>42</sup> and 'little outcasts',<sup>43</sup> the youthfulness of the refugees influenced the way they were perceived. In an interview with Fyrth, Arthur Exell, a Communist who worked in the Morris Motors factory at Cowley, hypothesized that the management of the factory allowed the Basques to visit, and provided tea for them, because of their youthful appeal.<sup>44</sup> In the *Oxford Mail* they were described as 'unfortunate child victims of the war'<sup>45</sup> and the 'little group of innocent victims of the war'.<sup>46</sup> Their innocence and misfortune in the Spanish conflict was thus highlighted, further detaching the children from the political tensions associated with the war. Mr Bovington's appeal on behalf of the children was reported in the *Chipping Norton Advertiser*, in which the children were described as 'terror stricken beings'.<sup>47</sup> Evidently the youth of the refugees, along with their status as non-combatants who had been subject to the horrors of war, gave them additional humanitarian appeal. These conditions made a charitable response more likely, and the local press published numerous reminders of these circumstances, in particular from those keen to attract support in appeals to the public.

Perhaps one of the most striking features of the presentation of the children in the local press is the repeated emphasis on their Basqueness. Almost always referred to as the 'Basque children', rather than as 'Spanish refugees', the children were very much associated with their perceived nationality. Headlines such as the *Thame Gazette's* 'Basque Children Entertained' appeared frequently in the local press.<sup>48</sup> Not only this, but emphasis was placed upon national characteristics and traditions. An article in the *Chipping Norton Advertiser*, reporting on a concert given by

<sup>38</sup> *Oxford Times*, 25 June 1937, p. 17.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Oxford Mail*, 6 Aug. 1937, p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 16 Oct. 1937, p. 6.

<sup>42</sup> *Thame Gazette*, 15 June 1937, p. 4.

<sup>43</sup> *Witney Gazette*, 23 July 1937, p. 3.

<sup>44</sup> Imperial War Museum (hereafter IWM), Sound Archives, London, Fyrth Collection (1982–86), 13809/2 (Arthur Exell interview).

<sup>45</sup> *Oxford Mail*, 23 June 1937, p. 7.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 25 Aug. 1938, p. 4.

<sup>47</sup> *Chipping Norton Advertiser*, 14 Jan. 1938, p. 1.

<sup>48</sup> *Thame Gazette*, 13 July 1937, p. 4.



Fig. 3. Two girls from the Aston colony, showing the humanitarian appeal of the young refugees.  
(Copyright of Oxfordshire County Council Photographic Archive – Cyril Arapoff.)

the children, described their ‘gaily coloured national costume’.<sup>49</sup> Stereotypes of the Basques as an ethnic group influenced the reception of the refugees. ‘The natural talent of the race’ was referred to in an article in the *Oxford Mail*,<sup>50</sup> while a letter to the editor of the paper described the Basques as ‘a small and peace-loving people’.<sup>51</sup>

This emphasis on the Basque nature of the child refugees is significant for two reasons. Firstly, many of the children were not, in fact, ethnically Basque, but rather Spanish children who had been evacuated from the Basque country. Santamaría, one of the refugees of Spanish origin who stayed at Shipton-under-Wychwood and later at Aston, commented on the fact that his fellow refugees had a mixture of Spanish and Basque names.<sup>52</sup> Evidently few of the children spoke Basque, as suggested by an appeal in the *Witney Gazette* for Spanish language books.<sup>53</sup> Secondly, a focus on the refugees as Basque arguably served to detach them further from the Spanish conflict, along with the often negative stereotypes held by the British regarding the Spanish. An emphasis on the Basqueness of the refugees in Oxfordshire can be seen as reinforcing the humanitarian nature of the scheme. Apparently the British associated Spaniards with cruelty, intolerance, and fanaticism.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>49</sup> *Chipping Norton Advertiser*, 14 Jan. 1938, p. 1.

<sup>50</sup> *Oxford Mail*, 17 Aug. 1938, p. 3.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 23 Sept. 1937, p. 4.

<sup>52</sup> Luís Santamaría interview with author, 13 Dec. 2005.

<sup>53</sup> *Witney Gazette*, 11 Sept. 1939, p. 6.

<sup>54</sup> Moradiellos, *La Perfidia de Albión*, p. xi.



The Basques, on the other hand, were seen as hard working and devout, with conservative rural values.<sup>55</sup> Buchanan suggests that the Basques were considered an ‘innocent party’ in the civil war.<sup>56</sup> Ethnic difference and a perceived contrast in national character set the Basques apart from the Spaniards in the British public mind, making it more likely that they would be viewed as separate from the other protagonists of the war.

The Basque children in Oxfordshire were not only presented, but were also frequently viewed as being a predominantly charitable and a-political cause. A meeting was held by the Oxford University Labour Club in March 1939 at which it was agreed that the club’s publication *Forward* would be ‘a paper of general, and not primarily political interest’ and would include features attracting a wider audience such as ‘a write up of the local Basque camp’.<sup>57</sup> Clearly, the Basque children were considered a topic with appeal beyond the political. This is supported by evidence regarding members of the public who lacked direct connections to the Basque cause and who were not therefore interested in making appeals. Gordon Howard in the *Oxford Mail* praised the ‘charity-minded people’ who were caring for the Basque children.<sup>58</sup> Mr Lickorish, managing-secretary of the Banbury Co-operative Society, was cited in the *Chipping Norton Advertiser* as ‘speaking of the non-political public spirit which allowed the work to be carried out at the Aston colony’.<sup>59</sup>

A wide range of different events was organized to raise funds for the maintenance of the Basque children. A garden fête was reported in the *Thame Gazette*, which included a performance by a group of Basque refugees and raised £13.<sup>60</sup> Similarly a dance was held at the Randolph Hotel in aid of the Basque colony at Shipton-under-Wychwood on 12 May 1939.<sup>61</sup> Not only were events held to earn money for the children, but outings and entertainment were organized to keep them occupied. While Christmas parties were arranged,<sup>62</sup> children were accompanied to the annual Witney Feast,<sup>63</sup> and the refugees took part in football matches against local teams.<sup>64</sup> Cora Portillo (mother of Michael Portillo), an undergraduate at St Hilda’s College, Oxford, recalls taking the refugees at Aston on a day trip to the seaside.<sup>65</sup> The children were very much involved in activities central to the local rural communities. For instance, the Basque girls at Thame participated in the village’s centenary celebrations alongside local school children.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, the events held to raise money for the children were invariably reported as popular and successful. A report of a concert given by the Basque children in the *Witney Gazette* included the observation that ‘every available inch of space was filled in the Church House, Witney, on Friday night’.<sup>67</sup> In addition, the Cowley car worker Exell, who helped to arrange events for the children, commented that ‘every hall we ever booked was packed to capacity’.<sup>68</sup>

The Basque children were a very conspicuous presence in Oxfordshire: numerous events were organized on their behalf, and they were invited to, and often played a central role in, community-based activities. Individuals could participate in the project surrounding the Basque children in

<sup>55</sup> M. Alpert, ‘Humanitarianism and politics in the British response to the Spanish Civil War’, *European History Quarterly*, 14 (1984), p. 432.

<sup>56</sup> Tom Buchanan, ‘A far away country of which we know nothing? Perceptions of Spain and its civil war in Britain, 1931–1939’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 4 (1993), p. 6.

<sup>57</sup> Bodl. MS Eng.d.3365 (Oxford University Labour Club Minutes, 1939–43), Minutes of Meeting of 5 March 1939.

<sup>58</sup> *Oxford Mail*, 23 Sept. 1937, p. 4.

<sup>59</sup> *Chipping Norton Advertiser*, 3 Sept. 1937, p. 6.

<sup>60</sup> *Thame Gazette*, 3 Aug. 1937, p. 4.

<sup>61</sup> *Oxford Mail*, 13 May 1939, p. 6.

<sup>62</sup> *Chipping Norton Advertiser*, 19 Nov. 1937, p. 4.

<sup>63</sup> *Witney Gazette*, 16 Sept. 1938, p. 6.

<sup>64</sup> *Oxford Mail*, 16 Oct. 1937, p. 6.

<sup>65</sup> Cora Portillo interview with author, 9 Dec. 2005.

<sup>66</sup> *Thame Gazette*, 27 July 1937, p. 6.

<sup>67</sup> *Witney Gazette*, 3 June 1938, p. 6.

<sup>68</sup> IWM, Sound Archives, 13809/2.

many different ways, from buying a raffle ticket at a local fête to volunteering to drive some of the children to the seaside.

#### WHO SUPPORTED THE BASQUE CHILDREN?

People from across the social spectrum in Oxfordshire became involved in the care of the Basque children. Individuals from diverse professional and socio-economic groups participated in the project. A subscription list for the Basques at Thame was headed by a £5 contribution from Lord Nuffield,<sup>69</sup> while fellow peer Lord Faringdon not only provided the Basques at Faringdon with accommodation, but also supplied the children with provisions such as milk and eggs free of charge.<sup>70</sup> In addition, the local fire brigade put on a party for the children at Aston,<sup>71</sup> and traders from the Covered Market in Oxford donated food at Christmas.<sup>72</sup> Cora Portillo recalls that Mr Tidy of the local bicycle shop contributed by giving bicycles to the children at Aston.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, Mr Thursdon, one of the show proprietors at the Witney Feast, gave the children free fairground rides,<sup>74</sup> and the film competition at the fête put on for the refugees at Shipton-under-Wychwood was organized by the *Witney Gazette* film correspondent.<sup>75</sup> Clearly, a broad-based coalition, encompassing a range of people and organizations, came to the aid of the refugees. In addition to this diversity, institutions and figures central to the local communities contributed. The Mayor of Chipping Norton set up a fund for the adoption of two Basque children at Aston in October 1937,<sup>76</sup> while the local rating committee exempted those at the Aston colony from payment on the grounds of poverty.<sup>77</sup>

Non-political organizations gave their support to the Basque children in Oxfordshire. The Salvation Army took part in a concert in aid of the children.<sup>78</sup> Similarly the First Witney Scout Band played at a dance for the refugees,<sup>79</sup> and the local Cub group donated the produce of its harvest festival.<sup>80</sup> It seems that the additional humanitarian appeal of the children, given their youth and non-combatant status, could serve to legitimize the participation of these non-political groups. Nationally, too, such organizations contributed to the aid of the refugees. While the Salvation Army ran its own colony of 450 children in east London,<sup>81</sup> local Scout groups helped to set up the reception camp at Southampton.<sup>82</sup> Significantly, in Oxfordshire at least, these groups were not central to the maintenance of the children, but rather made gestures at particular events, such as concerts held by the Basques.

Some local churches and religious groups also supported the Basque children. The contributions of Bampton and Lew churches were credited in the *Oxford Mail*.<sup>83</sup> A letter also appeared in the same paper from the finance chairman of the North Oxfordshire Basque Children's Committee, thanking the Woodstock Road Baptist Sunday School for their collection of toys.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore,

<sup>69</sup> *Thame Gazette*, 16 Nov. 1937, p. 4.

<sup>70</sup> Marx Memorial Library (hereafter MML), International Brigade Memorial Archive, London, Box B/1, File D/2 (Fyrth's questions answered by Walter Leonard).

<sup>71</sup> *Witney Gazette*, 30 Dec. 1938, p. 4.

<sup>72</sup> *Oxford Mail*, 24 Dec. 1938, p. 4.

<sup>73</sup> Cora Portillo interview, 9 Dec. 2005.

<sup>74</sup> *Oxford Mail*, 15 Sept. 1937, p. 5.

<sup>75</sup> *Witney Gazette*, 21 April 1939, p. 5.

<sup>76</sup> *Chipping Norton Advertiser*, 24 June 1938, p. 1.

<sup>77</sup> *Witney Gazette*, 1 April 1938, p. 4.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 19 Nov. 1937, p. 4.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 3 June 1938, p. 6.

<sup>80</sup> *Oxford Mail*, 5 Dec. 1938, p. 5.

<sup>81</sup> J. M. Casas and P. C. Urquijo, *El Exilio Español (1936–1978)* (Barcelona, 2002), p. 55.

<sup>82</sup> Bell, *Only for Three Months*, p. 56.

<sup>83</sup> *Oxford Mail*, 12 Oct. 1938, p. 3.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 29 Dec. 1937, p. 4.

the Bicester Congregational Sunday School had donated £10 6s. to the refugees by the end of 1937.<sup>85</sup> A dance was also organized for the children by the Witney Toc H group, an egalitarian Christian association.<sup>86</sup> In addition, the vicar of Bicester, the Revd W. O'Reilly, sponsored the Basque girls at Aston's concert.<sup>87</sup> Some were involved more heavily in caring for the children, such as the Revd J. Lopes, who was one of the first to welcome the children at Aston into their new home.<sup>88</sup> Evidently, nonconformist Christians worked alongside those from the Church of England to assist the Basque refugees in Oxfordshire. The participation of these churches, not overtly political institutions, underlined the extent of the support that the Basque children attracted.

So far no evidence has emerged of Catholic churches in Oxfordshire supporting the maintenance of the Basque refugees. Nationally, however, the Catholic Church, despite at first opposing the evacuation of the children, agreed to help the Catholics in the group.<sup>89</sup> The BCC was keen to incorporate the Catholic Church into its efforts for the children, and eventually 1,200 of them were taken in at various convents and Catholic orphanages throughout the country.<sup>90</sup> Catholic papers such as the *Catholic Times* and *The Universe* raised funds for the Catholic Basque colonies.<sup>91</sup> The Church thus made a significant contribution in agreeing to care for the Catholics among the refugee children, if somewhat exclusively. This was notable, given that British Catholic communities were divided over the issue of the Spanish Civil War, due to the pro-Francoist stance of the Spanish Catholic Church and the fact that attacks on churches and the killing of priests and nuns in the Republican zone had been vividly reported in the British press.

Isolated examples can be found of pro-Francoist individuals participating in the project surrounding the Basque children in Oxfordshire. Lord Nuffield, described as a pro-Francoist by Exell, invited a group of Basque children to visit his Morris Motors factory, providing them with refreshments.<sup>92</sup> A meeting took place at Chipping Norton to launch the Mayor's Fund for the Relief of the Basque Children, in which Miss Dickinson, described as 'a supporter of Gen. Franco', gave a speech congratulating volunteers working for the children at Aston.<sup>93</sup> Her name is mentioned too in the *Witney Gazette* as one of the individuals to welcome the children to their home at Aston.<sup>94</sup> While these individuals' willingness to participate indicates that the humanitarian nature of the appeal for the Basque children attracted a diverse range of people, one must remember that they were exceptions. Most of those involved were from politically neutral organizations or had actively pro-Republican associations. The fact that Miss Dickinson was publicly displayed at community events suggests that she was being used to exemplify the politically broad appeal of the Basque children and, in particular, to legitimize the setting up of the Mayor's Fund. She can thus be seen as part of the attempt to widen the support for the children and justify their presence in the country by presenting the care of the refugees in Oxfordshire as a non-political endeavour, acceptable to those with differing perspectives on the civil war.

Students and members of staff from Oxford University contributed significantly to the maintenance of the Basque refugees in Oxfordshire. Cora Portillo recounts that her Modern

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 7 January 1938, p. 3.

<sup>86</sup> *Witney Gazette*, 3 June 1938, p. 6.

<sup>87</sup> *Oxford Mail*, 13 July 1938, p. 3.

<sup>88</sup> *Witney Gazette*, 25 June 1937, p. 3.

<sup>89</sup> Buchanan, *Britain and the Spanish Civil War*, p. 110.

<sup>90</sup> Casas and Urquijo, *El Exilio Español*, p. 55.

<sup>91</sup> Buchanan, *Britain and the Spanish Civil War*, p. 119.

<sup>92</sup> IWM, Sound Archives, 13809/2. Martin Pugh draws attention to Lord Nuffield's Fascist sympathies in his book *'Hurrah for the Blackshirts!' Fascists and Fascism in Britain between the Wars* (London, 2005), pp. 121, 153, 270. He points out that Nuffield was a member of the Anglo-German fellowship in 1936 and donated money to Oswald Mosley's New Party.

<sup>93</sup> *Chipping Norton Advertiser*, 22 Oct. 1937, p. 1.

<sup>94</sup> *Witney Gazette*, 25 June 1937, p. 3.

Languages tutor encouraged her to visit the Basque children at Aston to teach them English and practise her own Spanish. She was soon staying one night a week at the home and playing an active role in caring for the children.<sup>95</sup> Undergraduates from St John's, St Edmund Hall, and Keble helped as interpreters upon the arrival of the children at Aston.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, the minutes from a Corpus Christi College JCR meeting in January 1938 reveal that a couple of colleges had already agreed to adopt a Basque child, a request having been circulated throughout the university.<sup>97</sup> University societies participated too. The Oxford University Peace Council sponsored a concert at the Oxford Town Hall held by the Basque children from the colony at Cambridge.<sup>98</sup> Support in the university extended beyond the student community. Miss Darbishire, the Principal of Somerville College, attended a meeting at New College in December 1938, which resulted in the agreement to adopt five of the Basque boys staying at Faringdon,<sup>99</sup> and the Bursar of St Hugh's College, Miss Thorneycroft, volunteered to help, making a speech when the boys at Shipton-under-Wychwood held an 'at home'.<sup>100</sup>

Many of the participants mentioned above were also involved in other 'Aid Spain' initiatives. The Principal of Somerville College, as a member of the Oxford University Peace Council, made appeals for the sending of food ships to Republican Spain.<sup>101</sup> Miss Thorneycroft of St Hugh's College signed an appeal from the University Spain Campaign asking for donations 'to assist the Spanish Government to provide the food, clothing, and medical supplies necessary for the people of Spain'.<sup>102</sup> Cora Portillo, too, favoured the Republicans in the civil war.<sup>103</sup> This suggests that, for some at least, the appeal of the Basque children went beyond that of helping innocent child non-combatants, politically divorced from the Spanish Civil War. Rather, it is likely that the children were considered another element in a wider 'Aid Spain' movement broadly sympathetic to the Republic.

Members of the Oxfordshire Labour movement, both from the local trade unions and the political parties, contributed to the care of the Basque children. The Oxford branch of the National Union of Vehicle Builders decided to donate £1 to the BCC at a meeting on 2 February 1938.<sup>104</sup> The Faringdon branch of the Labour Party entertained the Basque boys from the local colony with comedy sketches and musical performances.<sup>105</sup> On the departure of the boys from Faringdon, the Wootton and Buscot local Labour parties held a farewell party.<sup>106</sup> Prominent individuals within the movement also became involved. As Exell pointed out, Mr and Mrs Lower of the Oxford City Labour Party helped to form a committee to aid the Basque children housed locally.<sup>107</sup> Notably Lord Faringdon, a Labour peer, allowed a group of Basque boys to be accommodated on his estate. Exell records that Mr Pakenham, later Lord Longford, who was elected as Labour Councillor for the Cowley and Iffley ward in a by-election in 1937,<sup>108</sup> actively collected money for the children.<sup>109</sup>

<sup>95</sup> Cora Portillo interview, 9 Dec. 2005.

<sup>96</sup> *Witney Gazette*, 25 June 1937, p. 3.

<sup>97</sup> Oxford, Corpus Christi College Library, E/2/1/3, Minutes for Meeting of 23 Jan. 1938.

<sup>98</sup> *Oxford Mail*, 2 Dec. 1938, p. 5.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 9 Dec. 1938, p. 7.

<sup>100</sup> *Chipping Norton Advertiser*, 23 June 1939, p. 1.

<sup>101</sup> Bodl. John Johnson Collection, Street Propaganda Box 3, Pamphlet of Appeal from Oxford University Peace Council.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, Pamphlet of Appeal from University Spain Campaign.

<sup>103</sup> Cora Portillo interview, 9 Dec. 2005.

<sup>104</sup> RCL, MSS 52/2 (National Union of Vehicle Builder's Oxford Branch Minutes 1935–50), Minutes of Meeting of 2 Feb. 1938.

<sup>105</sup> *Oxford Mail*, 13 May 1938, p. 8.

<sup>106</sup> *Faringdon Advertiser*, 13 Jan. 1939, p. 4.

<sup>107</sup> IWM, Sound Archives, 13809/2.

<sup>108</sup> F. Pakenham, *Avowed Intent: an Autobiography of Lord Longford* (London, 1994), p. 77.

<sup>109</sup> MML, IBMA, Box B/4, File N/2 (Arthur Exell, 'Spanish Civil War and Oxford').

The involvement of the Oxfordshire Labour movement is particularly significant when placed in a national context. At first the TUC and Labour Party officially favoured the National Government's policy of non-intervention. Support for such a policy was, however, rejected at the Labour Party's Edinburgh conference in October 1936. The ambivalent attitude held by the leadership of the Labour movement towards the conflict in Spain was further evident in its stance towards various 'Aid Spain' initiatives. Little was done officially to mobilize the Labour movement in favour of pro-Republican campaigns. For instance, the activity of the Spain Campaign Committee, established just after the Labour Party's Bournemouth conference of 1937, was limited.<sup>110</sup> Labour and TUC leaders were fearful of Communist infiltration and domination of such initiatives in the context of the Communist Party's policy of Popular Frontism.<sup>111</sup> In addition, as Buchanan argues, there was a 'political logic' behind such caution, as the movement was weak, keen to maintain its hierarchical structure and gain legitimacy by not offending the government.<sup>112</sup> However, the Labour movement nationally, as in Oxfordshire, played a key role in supporting the Basque children. Two TUC representatives sat on the BCC, on condition that the committee had no direct association with the Communist Party, and a 'Save the Basque Children's Fund' was launched.<sup>113</sup> TUC leaders were clearly keen to embrace the opportunity to make a gesture in the 'Aid Spain' movement towards a project with wider humanitarian appeal that lacked direct association with the Communists.

At grass-roots level, however, the Oxfordshire Labour movement openly supported the Republic and sponsored other 'Aid Spain' initiatives. On 3 June 1937 the Oxford Trades and Labour Council resolved to send Prime Minister Baldwin a resolution proposing that Britain 'accord its full support to the rightful government of Spain instead of its Fascist aggressors as at present'.<sup>114</sup> Moreover, on 19 August 1936 the Oxford City Labour Party resolved to send £2 to the Spanish Relief Fund.<sup>115</sup> It was agreed at a meeting of the Oxford Trades and Labour Council on 6 October 1938 to grant £1 to Voluntary Industrial Aid for Spain.<sup>116</sup> The involvement of the Oxfordshire Labour movement in helping the Basque children was consistent with the stance of the national leadership, which was particularly attracted to the cause due to its humanitarian appeal. It must also be seen, however, in the context of the local unions and parties contributing to the wider 'Aid Spain' movement, suggesting sympathy for the Republic.

Individuals and groups that overtly supported the Republic contributed, often in roles of considerable responsibility, to the maintenance of the Basque children in Oxfordshire. The Communist Party of Great Britain had supported the Spanish Republic from the onset of the civil war. In Oxfordshire leading Communist Abe Lazarus, who collected money for the International Brigade Dependents' Fund,<sup>117</sup> made an appeal for the Basque children during the interval of one of their concerts,<sup>118</sup> while Exell, also a member of the party, adopted a Basque boy known as 'Chatto' from the Faringdon colony.<sup>119</sup> Patrick Early, Chairman of the North Oxfordshire Basque Children's Committee, was referred to in the local press as 'the prospective independent progressive candidate' for North Oxfordshire, opposed to appeasement and non-intervention.<sup>120</sup> As Exell records, he also ran the Witney Aid for Spain Committee,<sup>121</sup> and Cora Portillo recounts that his family, owners of the Early blanket factory, donated red blankets to all the children at

<sup>110</sup> Buchanan, *Spanish Civil War*, p. 118.

<sup>111</sup> Fyrth, 'The Aid Spain movement', p. 159.

<sup>112</sup> Buchanan, *Spanish Civil War*, p. 33.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>114</sup> RCL, MSS 8/26 (Oxford Trades and Labour Council Minutes 1935–40), Minutes of Meeting of 3 June 1937.

<sup>115</sup> RCL, MSS 27/1 (Oxford City Labour Party Minutes 1935–38), Minutes of Meeting of 19 Aug. 1936.

<sup>116</sup> RCL, MSS 8/26, Minutes of Meeting of 6 Oct. 1938.

<sup>117</sup> RCL, MSS 8/26, Minutes of Meeting of 14 Jan. 1937.

<sup>118</sup> *Oxford Mail*, 24 May 1938, p. 3.

<sup>119</sup> MML, IBMA, Box B/4, File N/2.

<sup>120</sup> *Witney Gazette*, 18 June 1937, p. 6.

<sup>121</sup> IWM, Sound Archives, 13809/2.

Aston.<sup>122</sup> Winifred Carritt, Chairman of the Oxford Basque Children's Committee,<sup>123</sup> whose sons Noel and Anthony Carritt joined the International Brigades,<sup>124</sup> was a member of the Oxford University Spanish Democratic Defence Committee, which campaigned to send an ambulance to Spain.<sup>125</sup> Lord Faringdon who, as has already been observed, made significant contributions to the care of the Basque children, also took in various prominent exiled Republican intellectuals, such as Luís Portillo (later husband of Cora).<sup>126</sup> Walter Leonard, the director of the colony at Faringdon and then Shipton-under-Wychwood, had previously worked in a hotel on the Costa Brava used as a resting place for members of the International Brigades.<sup>127</sup> Meanwhile, the Revd N. Hayward, who chaired the committee for the Basque children at Shipton-under-Wychwood,<sup>128</sup> also chaired a local Spanish Relief committee.<sup>129</sup> Evidently many prominent figures with the most responsibility in the care of the Basque children in Oxfordshire were expressing their sympathy for the Spanish Republic through their involvement in other, more highly politicized and strongly pro-Republican, voluntary activities.

The vicar of Shipton-under-Wychwood, the Revd W. Winsor-Cundell,<sup>130</sup> refused to join the local committee to support the children and was instead replaced by the Revd Hayward of Milton-under-Wychwood.<sup>131</sup> If the care of the Basques was a purely humanitarian endeavour, such a prominent local figure would have had no qualms about joining the committee.

The breadth of the support generated for the Basque children in Oxfordshire is indicative of their humanitarian appeal. However, it is significant that so few pro-Francoists played a role, and that their participation was highlighted in the local press and at local community meetings. In addition, non-political organizations played a relatively minor part in the care of the children. Many, most notably from the university, the Communist Party, and the local Labour movement, along with prominent figures in local committees, were simultaneously involved in 'Aid Spain' efforts. It has been suggested that politicization in 'Aid Spain' initiatives was minimal, due to 'the exhausting amount of practical work required'.<sup>132</sup> However, it would be difficult to deny that in making a decision to give up their time and money to send food and medical supplies to Republican Spain, these people were not politically motivated. Their sympathy for the Republic is likely to have coloured their decision to become involved in the care of the evacuees from the civil war. Arguably this core of pro-Republicans actively recruited a wide range of people, firstly for pragmatic reasons, because the support was necessary, but secondly for political reasons, to demonstrate the extent of the support for 'Aid Spain' initiatives broadly sympathetic to the Republic.

#### POLITICAL TENSIONS AND THE REPATRIATION DEBATE

The political views held by the Basque refugees were significant, given the insistence of the British government that the children should be drawn from families with a range of political loyalties. The intention was that this requirement would make the gesture of accepting the refugees appear politically neutral.

<sup>122</sup> Cora Portillo interview, 9 Dec. 2005.

<sup>123</sup> *Oxford Times*, 7 Oct. 1938, p. 14.

<sup>124</sup> R. Baxell, *British Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War* (London, 2004), p. 81.

<sup>125</sup> Bodl. John Johnson Collection, Street Propaganda Box 3, pamphlet of appeal from Oxford University Spanish Democratic Defence Committee.

<sup>126</sup> Luís Santamaría interview, 13 Dec. 2005.

<sup>127</sup> MML, IBMA, Box B/1, File D/2.

<sup>128</sup> *Chipping Norton Advertiser*, 13 Jan. 1939, p. 1.

<sup>129</sup> *Oxford Mail*, 9 Dec. 1938, p. 3.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 20 March 1939, p. 4.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 11 Jan. 1939, p. 4.

<sup>132</sup> Buchanan, 'Britain's popular front?', p. 71.

In Oxfordshire the refugees were politically aware and predominantly anti-Fascist. The *Oxford Times* reported that a group of children ‘had found an advertisement with a caricature of a soldier, and they were waving clenched fists and shouting “Franco”’,<sup>133</sup> Exell recalled that the young man in his care, ‘Chatto’, was highly politically literate and fiercely pro-Republican.<sup>134</sup> In addition, Cora Portillo recounted that the children at Aston thought that Franco would be defeated, and that the older ones were aware of how ‘stingily’ they had been treated by the British government.<sup>135</sup> Santamaría recalls that the refugees at Shipton-under-Wychwood and Aston, where he stayed, were, as a whole, anti-Fascist.<sup>136</sup> His unpublished memoirs explain how contact with exiled Republican intellectuals like Luís Portillo, who helped teach the refugees at Shipton-under-Wychwood, meant the boys began to ‘odiar (con sentido adulto) a los instigadores nacionales e internacionales de esa tragedia’ [hate (in an adult sense) the national and international instigators of this tragedy].<sup>137</sup> Yvonne Cloud also records in her account of life at the camp in Southampton that the children, most of whom had been trapped in a war-zone, had been deeply affected by their experiences.<sup>138</sup> They feared the aeroplanes that flew over the camp and were devastated by the news of the fall of Bilbao.<sup>139</sup>

The question of when the young refugees should be sent back to Spain highlighted the political divisions surrounding them, both nationally and in Oxfordshire. Soon after the fall of Bilbao the Conservative National Government and the Catholics began to call for the repatriation of the refugees. In particular, Father Gabana, a Catholic chaplain sent by the Pope to Bilbao to aid repatriation efforts, and Felix Sturupp, correspondent of *The Universe*, applied pressure on the BCC for the repatriation of the children by providing it with lists of hundreds of children who could be returned.<sup>140</sup> A predominantly pro-Francoist Repatriation Committee was subsequently formed under Sir Arnold Wilson, a Conservative MP.<sup>141</sup> Many officials of the BCC, such as the Liberal MP Wilfrid Roberts, opposed immediate repatriation and questioned the validity of claims that so many of the children could safely be returned to their parents.<sup>142</sup> The issue of repatriation was highly divisive along political lines: as Franco demanded the return of the children, many pro-Republicans feared for the well-being of the children upon their arrival in Spain. The first group of children was repatriated in November 1937, and others continued to return to Spain at regular intervals thereafter.<sup>143</sup>

On 25 March 1938 the *Oxford Times* reported the return of thirteen of the refugees staying at Aston,<sup>144</sup> and later that year, on 29 November 1938, the BCC minutes recorded that Carlos Urutiaga Martínez, Anastasio Becerra López, and José Luís Beracieta from the Faringdon colony had been selected for repatriation.<sup>145</sup> Heated debate surrounded the repatriation of the Basque refugees in Oxfordshire. The Secretary of the Spanish Children Repatriation Committee wrote to the *Oxford Times* pressing for the return of the children.<sup>146</sup> He wrote: ‘They were originally brought to this country under the auspices of the Basque Children’s Committee, though there

<sup>133</sup> *Oxford Times*, 25 June 1937, p. 17.

<sup>134</sup> MML, IBMA, Box B/4, File N/2.

<sup>135</sup> Cora Portillo interview, 9 Dec. 2005.

<sup>136</sup> Luís Santamaría interview, 13 Dec. 2005.

<sup>137</sup> Santamaría, *Unpublished Memoirs*, p. 140.

<sup>138</sup> Y. Cloud, *The Basque Children in England: an Account of their Life at the North Stoneham Camp* (London, 1937), p. 50.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>140</sup> Buchanan, *Britain and the Spanish Civil War*, p. 114.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>144</sup> *Oxford Times*, 25 March 1938, p. 5.

<sup>145</sup> MRC, MSS 292/946/39, Minutes of Subcommittee Meeting of 29 Nov. 1938.

<sup>146</sup> *Oxford Times*, 30 Sept. 1938, p. 18.

was no need to do so.<sup>147</sup> In reply, the Chairman of the Oxford Basque Children's Committee defended the evacuation of the children and emphasized that the children would be returned only when the conditions were right.<sup>148</sup> Similarly a letter signed 'Sympathiser' was sent to the *Oxford Mail*, criticizing the 'undignified haste' with which many Conservative MPs hoped to return the refugees to Spain, describing it as 'proof of their lack of any sympathy with the victims of Fascist aggression'.<sup>149</sup> In response, a letter signed 'Just as Sympathetic' insisted that the children should soon be returned as the 'dangers are now passed'.<sup>150</sup> A meeting which took place in Shipton-under-Wychwood in March 1939 illuminated the extent of the tensions generated by the repatriation debate. The meeting was attended by some sixty people and was addressed by the Secretary of the Basque Children's Repatriation Committee, Mr Loveday.<sup>151</sup> His speech, which included allegations against the Spanish Republic, 'caused frequent interruptions', and the audience expressed 'violent opposition to the idea of repatriating the Basque children'.<sup>152</sup> The article, which reported the meeting under the headline 'Shipton Uproar', concluded that 'Shipton-under-Wychwood and the neighbouring villages have been outstanding in the help which they have given to the starving population in Spain'.<sup>153</sup>

The case study of Oxfordshire reveals that repatriation could have unfortunate, sometimes tragic results. A report was given to the BCC on those previously repatriated from the colony at Faringdon.<sup>154</sup> Domingo Tomás was one of many who was said to have been confronted with poverty and hardship in Spain. He is described as, 'Had work, now has none. Very poor'.<sup>155</sup> The boy that Exell adopted, known as 'Chatto', is reported to have committed suicide, throwing himself out of a train rather than returning to Francoist Spain.<sup>156</sup>

## CONCLUSION

A study of Oxfordshire is not a perfect microcosm of aid for the Basque children. Inevitably local differences influenced the way the children were received and by whom. For example, the case of Oxfordshire fails to reveal the role that the Catholic Church played in maintaining the children in other local communities. In addition, the Basques in Oxfordshire were accommodated in small, rural communities, while in Cambridge, for instance, they lived in the city.<sup>157</sup> Oxford University also had a small but active Communist Party, its membership reaching a peak of 200 in 1937.<sup>158</sup> Perhaps most significantly, Oxfordshire in the 1930s was relatively affluent and conservative, with a small, but growing, Labour movement in Oxford itself. It is likely, therefore, that the experience of the Basques in Oxfordshire differed from those in colonies in areas with more radical political traditions, such as in the East End of London. Despite this inevitable level of local variation, an understanding of what took place in Oxfordshire highlights some of the wider political and humanitarian issues surrounding the refugee children.

The Basque refugee children undeniably had humanitarian appeal, as was evident in their presentation in the local Oxfordshire press as non-combatant child victims of war, whose

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 7 Oct. 1938, p. 14.

<sup>149</sup> *Oxford Mail*, 1 July 1937, p. 4.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 2 July 1937, p. 4.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 4 March 1939, p. 7.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> MRC, MSS 292/946/39, replies to circular on repatriation of 11 Oct. 1938.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> MML, IBMA, Box B/4, File N/2.

<sup>157</sup> Fyrth, *The Signal was Spain*, pp. 236–7.

<sup>158</sup> P. Toynbee, 'Journal of a Naive Revolutionary', in P. Toynbee, ed., *The Distant Drum: Reflections on the Spanish Civil War* (London, 1976), p. 146.



Basqueness further dissociated them from the politically charged conflict in Spain. Continually stressing the non-political aspects of the project, the local committees in Oxfordshire successfully attracted a wide range of people and organizations to help to maintain the children. Money was raised and the children entertained in various popular community-based initiatives. The nature of the project, centred on children and ratified by a non-interventionist government keen to keep out of the conflict in Spain, gave the Basque children in Oxfordshire additional humanitarian appeal, attracting wider support than did other, more overtly pro-Republican initiatives.

This broad humanitarian appeal is not incompatible with a recognition that the political issues surrounding the Spanish Civil War significantly influenced the reception of the Basque children in Oxfordshire. A majority of the prominent figures in the local committees and those heading the individual colonies had strong links with other 'Aid Spain' initiatives which gave support to the Republic. This considerable overlap suggests that the care of the refugees was, in fact, part of a broadly pro-Republican 'Aid Spain' movement, even if it was at the lesser end of the political spectrum. Decisions to become involved in the project in Oxfordshire were certainly made with reference to the Spanish conflict. While some refused to participate at all, it is likely that others from non-political organizations, such as the Salvation Army, decided to play a role due to the relative detachment of the children from the politics of the civil war. The nature of the project of caring for the children was unavoidably coloured by the anti-Fascism of the young refugees. Ultimately the debate over the repatriation of the children highlighted the extent to which the Basques became a politically divisive issue in Oxfordshire.

As is evident from the case study of Oxfordshire, support for the Basque children did not represent a Popular Front against Fascism, with participants solely motivated by sympathy for the Republic. However, the politics of the Spanish Civil War could not be separated from the plight of the young refugees. The project centred on the Basques was politically charged, and their upkeep can be seen as the humanitarian face of a pro-Republican 'Aid Spain' movement.

