

A haven for refugees and an ambulance: Wandsworth's response to the Spanish Civil War

As Britain faces pressure to receive still more refugees from Syria and elsewhere, *Neil Robson* explores how the borough responded to the challenges of a comparable period of overseas turmoil eighty years ago.

No other foreign conflict – not Hungary in 1956, not Vietnam, not Bosnia – has had such an impact on British popular sympathy. Even while it raged the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39 was recognised as a foretaste of the immense horrors that would come if Europe were once again engulfed in conflict. By the mid-1930s the public in Britain had become gripped by a dread that war in the near future was a certainty.¹ The identity of the enemy might not yet be obvious and the ensuing awfulness virtually impossible to imagine, but the outbreak of war in Spain was seen as the beginning of a slide towards an almost-inevitable catastrophe. ‘How to resist the ascendancy of Fascism in Spain,’ that was the conundrum, and the repercussions were widespread. Attitudes swiftly crystallised and feelings crossed party lines, taking broadly – though not entirely, of course – the view that Spain’s left-wing Republican government stood for democracy while General Franco’s royalist Nationalist movement stood for Fascism. That Britain was a constitutional monarchy and the mid-1930s were witness to a string of hugely popular royal celebrations was an irony that seems to have passed many by. It was a confused debate with none of the ‘right versus wrong’ certainty of the later fight against Nazism, and yet the response across the country was one of solidarity and generosity, driven by a subconscious attempt to keep the ultimate terror at bay. Here is an exploration of the impact of the Spanish Civil War on the Borough of Wandsworth, given context by comparison with the activities in neighbouring Battersea, which at that time was a separate municipal borough. Here too is a reflection on what lessons may be drawn today from the actions of our predecessors eighty years ago.

Within months of the start of the fighting in 1936 the Wandsworth Trades Council and the Borough Labour Party had set up an ‘Aid for Spain’ Committee, and in January 1937 it launched a high-profile appeal for donations. Chairing that public meeting was the local Labour councillor, Eleanor Goodrich, and in her address she set targets of a ton of food, any amount of clothing, and £500 (about £35,000 in today’s terms) for an ambulance to be commissioned as a special gift from the people of Wandsworth for duty in Spain.² Just as activists in Battersea made use of the Communist Party People’s Bookshop at 115 Lavender

Hill with women sitting in the window knitting for Spain,³ so the Wandsworth committee set up its headquarters in a shop on Tooting High Street. There they decorated its window 'from the roof to the floor with huge posters', and negotiated the agreement of 150 shopkeepers to encourage their customers to buy and donate food to the cause. That said, much of the fundraising was to take the form of door-to-door collections. In early-February the Communist *Daily Worker* reported that one hundredweight of tinned food, 50lbs of baby food and over £110 had already been donated, much of the latter in small change. In Roehampton £9 15s (£9.75) was collected from the London County Council's Dover House Estate alone.⁴ Elsewhere, the Labour League of Youth joined forces with the Young Communist League, raising substantial amounts from the sales of their paper *League* in Wandsworth High Street, Tooting Broadway and at Clapham Junction.⁵

By the summer 15cwt of tinned milk and food had already been sent to families in the war zone, and more than £250 collected towards the cost of the ambulance.⁶ Battersea too was determined to raise funds for a motor ambulance, and the two vehicles as part of a group of four left London on 9 February 1937, prematurely in both cases, it has to be admitted, since Battersea's was not finally paid for till August 1938, and the subscription for Wandsworth's gift was probably not fully raised till a similar date.⁷ No final figure for the campaign in Wandsworth has yet been discovered, though in Battersea the Aid to Spain committee claimed in February 1939 that it had collected over £1000 since the war began, and in October 1939 a closing figure of over £1170 was reported.⁸ From a preponderantly-poor borough, that was a substantial sum.

But comparisons between the achievements of the two boroughs are inevitably problematic. In addition to their sizes, a key factor is their differing political mix, though the council elections of November 1937 provide a valuable indicator of that mix. Of the nine wards in the Borough of Wandsworth the election that autumn produced no change, seven of the wards being held by the Conservatives and two by Labour. In Battersea where there were also nine wards, there was a Labour gain in St John's giving that party seven wards to the Conservatives' two.⁹ However, when a by-election for the Wandsworth Central parliamentary constituency had been held a few months earlier, Labour gained a narrow victory by overturning the 4300 majority of the previous Conservative incumbent, the recently-deceased Sir Henry Jackson.¹⁰ So the situation in Wandsworth was not without its fluidity.

At this stage it is only right to introduce two local political figures who held themselves in a state of permanent contention, the Liberal campaigner, Lady Layton, and the Conservative MP for Putney, Marcus Samuel.¹¹ Typical of their disharmony was their acrimonious exchange of statements in the *Wandsworth Borough News* in March 1937. In her capacity as chairman of the Putney branch of the League of Nations Union, Dorothy Layton argued robustly against the whitewashing of the atrocities being committed by the Nationalist forces, and pleaded for more support for the Republican government and a Spain freed of units of German and Italian troops. This was an easy ball for Samuel, a man who gave one of the aspects of his career in *Who's Who* as 'criticising Socialist fallacies'. In a scornful rebuttal Samuel talked of 'economies of the truth', adding that 'these ladies' – by which he meant Layton and her secretary/colleague, Elsie Salaman – 'seem to see everything *couleur de rose* on the Red side'.¹² The public rancour between Samuel and Layton continued throughout the following year, the former being greatly aided by the strongly-Conservative stance of the *Borough News*. Throughout this entire period centre-left activists struggled to get their voices heard within its pages, a factor that undoubtedly hampers a closer following of the Aid for Spain campaign in Wandsworth.

On 26 April 1937 the Luftwaffe carried out a merciless bombing strike on the Basque town of Guernica. In the aftermath of outrage amongst the democracies the decision was cautiously taken by Britain to grant entry to some 3800 children from the region, and in May these young refugees – sons, daughters, orphans – undertook an appalling journey on the liner *SS Habana* to a safe welcome at Southampton. Traumatized, bewildered and recovering from sea-sickness, they were settled temporarily in a camp just south of Winchester.¹³ The plea had already gone out for suitable semi-permanent accommodation till they could be repatriated, and over twenty towns and cities applied to receive them. One such offer came from the Putney and Barnes branch of the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief, and a home was created for twenty Basque refugee children (some reports say twenty-two) in two unoccupied houses at nos. 170 and 172 West Hill at the junction with the Upper Richmond Road. There, comparatively happy unlike in some of the other 'colonies' across the country, they learnt English, followed other studies, and played outdoor games in the grounds of nearby Whitelands College.¹⁴

A highspot during their stay in Wandsworth was a fundraising fête for Spanish Medical Aid on 17 July 1937. This was held in the grounds of Dorothy Layton's 'Oriental bungalow style' home, Brett House at 198 West Hill, on the corner of Putney Heath Lane opposite Holy

Trinity Church. Some 500 people attended, playing tennis, participating in competitions, and relaxing to a variety of entertainments. Amongst the performers were the Spanish guitarist, Pascual Pardillos, and Emma Marqués who, attired in national costume, ‘enchanted the company with the rhythm and grace of her Spanish dances’. Also present was the Spanish ambassador, Pablo de Azcárate, who spoke warmly of the help being extended from right across Britain to the people of Spain.¹⁵ Later he approached Jean Day, an 11-year-old schoolgirl from Southfields and the daughter of a committed local Labour activist. Mistaking her for one of the Basque refugees he addressed her in voluble Spanish, a slightly disturbing experience, she later recalled, since it was most unusual for a British child ‘to be spoken to in a foreign language’ at that time.¹⁶

No comparable colony was set up in Battersea, and the later fate of the Wandsworth refugees is currently unknown. The West Hill establishment was always intended to be a stop-gap of no more than about three months. Some of the children were perhaps relocated at the larger homes in Brixton or Kingston, whilst in the country generally the slow process of repatriating children began from the late-summer onwards.¹⁷ Some couldn’t return, of course, as their parents had been killed or had fled as refugees themselves. By mid-1939 around a thousand of the children remained (estimates vary), though a tiny number continued to live in this country right down to our own time, a touching legacy of British kind-heartedness.¹⁸

Tracking the differing anxieties and loyalties during this period is a complex task. The Catholic church in Britain, for instance, initially took its lead from its counterparts in Spain. There, appalled by the Republican attacks against its churches and congregations, it supported the Nationalist rebels, but here, after the atrocity of Guernica, the attitude of many of its adherents shifted to one of committed involvement in caring for the refugee children, the much-praised contribution of the Catholic Ladies’ Guild at West Hill being a case in point.¹⁹ Goodrich herself pointed out a further paradox in a speech at Wandsworth Town Hall in June 1937: it was, she said, a sign of the desperate situation in Spain that the Catholic population over there was prepared to send its children to a Protestant country.²⁰ A waverer coming in the opposite direction was the left-wing writer, George Orwell, who travelled to Spain to fight for the Republican cause only to become disillusioned by the murderous infighting amongst its Communist supporters. His 1938 book *Homage to Catalonia* captures his journey from exhilaration to disenchantment.

It was not only at the insistence of intellectuals and do-gooders but also the involvement of individuals across widely differing social divides that gave the Aid for Spain movement such traction in Britain. In a national statement in June 1937 the progressive Conservative campaigner, the Duchess of Atholl, highlighted the breadth of support with these words: 'It is a credit to the true humanity latent in everybody ... that [the Basque children] are now here through the concerted efforts of people holding widely divergent views.'²¹ Meanwhile, at the very top, the Conservative government in Britain feared that supporting the Republican movement would encourage a Communist Spain, and consequently held fast to a policy of 'non-intervention'. True to form, Marcus Samuel toed his party's line, and endorsed the statement made by the Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, in Geneva in May 1938 that the Spanish people had a right to self-determination uncompromised by any further presence of foreign participants.²² Thus the dangerous strategy of appeasing Fascist dictators found yet another loyal adherent.

One of the enduring aspects of this period is the British participation in the International Brigade. Many of those who enlisted were writers and intellectuals, it is true, but the majority of the 2300 volunteers were working-class.²³ In Battersea something like seventeen men and women joined the brigade, six of whom lost their lives.²⁴ The figure for Wandsworth is similarly inconclusive, though in June 1939 the *Daily Worker* reported the efforts of nine volunteers from the borough to raise a fund in memory of the four men from the borough who had died: the writer, Ralph Fox, who was killed in Andalusia in December 1936; Monty Mandell, who was killed north of Madrid in February 1937; Tom Loader who died of fever in a Madrid hospital at the end of 1937; and Wally Tapsell who was killed in Aragón in April 1938.²⁵

One of those survivors could well have been John Longstaff, a member of the National Unemployed Workers' Movement, who was wounded three times in Spain and did not arrive back in Earlsfield until the end of 1938.²⁶ Another was possibly George Rolfe of 25 Charlwood Road, Putney. In February 1937 aged only 20 he went off to fight in Spain, seeing action outside Madrid where he 'stopped a spent bullet'. Following his discharge from hospital he was taken prisoner by the rebels and shipped across the Mediterranean to a labour camp in Spanish Morocco. From there he escaped, crossed the border into French Morocco and, after a tortuous nine-week voyage, landed back in Britain that September. Adventure indeed for one so young, but he arrived home penniless, jobless, and still suffering from his leg injuries.²⁷

By the autumn of 1938, however, the international scene in Europe had considerably deteriorated, and it felt as though all that the public had dreaded was about to come true. The signs had been apparent from the beginning of the year. At a League of Nations Union meeting in Ravenna Hall, Putney in February 1938 the Manchester MP, John Clynes, remarked that ‘the events of the last few years – Manchuria, Abyssinia [i.e. Ethiopia], Spain, China – reminded us how near war was to Great Britain, and the daily fears [have] increased’.²⁸ By the end of September 1938 trenches had been dug in Wandsworth’s parks and commons large enough to shelter 15,000 people ‘caught in the streets’ by an air raid, and the Mayor, George Morris, at the brink of despondency offered this prayer to the residents of Wandsworth: ‘May God’s guidance and comfort be given to us all in these troublous times.’²⁹ A fragile peace survived, though interest in the Spanish fight was becoming eclipsed by fresher horrors. In January 1939 the new mayor, William Bonney, appealed for offers of ‘hospitality or maintenance for child as well as adult refugees’. By that he no longer meant Catholic Basques but Jewish Poles and Czechs, the makings of the still-revered *Kindertransport* scheme.³⁰ When that same month the Battersea Aid to Spain committee launched yet another door-to-door drive the *South Western Star* challenging the campaign’s continued worth. ‘Unfortunately, these impulsive actions have perhaps only served to prolong the suicidal struggle in Spain,’ the editor wearily remarked.³¹ On 27 February 1939, as mounting numbers of Londoners volunteered to train as fire fighters, ambulance drivers and air raid wardens, the Prime Minister announced in the House of Commons to opposition cries of ‘Shame!’ that the United Kingdom had decided to recognise General Franco’s government as the government of Spain. Almost immediately, in a disparaging tone towards his opponents and still blind to the atrocities on, admittedly, both sides in the war, Marcus Samuel made reference to ‘Franco’s reasoned and humane declaration to the Catalans on the day that Tarragona fell [offering them ‘generosity and justice’ if they surrendered]’, adding, ‘Not one of the Socialists, although invited to do so, had the decency to go and see the state of affairs in Franco territory.’³²

Britain’s recognition of the Nationalists as victors sent the Wandsworth branch of the Communist Party of Great Britain into despair. Appealing for renewed support for the now-beleaguered Government forces it cried out, ‘To the people of Wandsworth we say, “It is not too late to save Spain, Britain and peace.”’ Amid confusing times of mixed responses and dwindling interest, this was a final bid to stave off the inevitable.³³ Spain was now a lost cause; as the European war approached, all eyes turned away from the peninsula’s plight,

leaving *el Caudillo* free to mete out his harsh reprisals in the form of forced labour, concentration camps, and executions well into the 1940s.³⁴

Katherine Atholl, it will be recalled, wrote of ‘the true humanity latent in everybody,’ and so it is scarcely surprising there should have been some sort of response to the call for Spanish relief in Wandsworth, though it was not a given that it should be quite so fulsome. In reality, the residents of this relatively well-heeled borough showed a level of compassion much above what might have been expected. This may well have been partly driven by the hope that here was the last chance to save themselves from the same fate as the Spanish people’s, yet their achievements must be judged against a backdrop of right-wing voices from parliament down to the ever-loquacious local MP for Putney declaring their resistance to support for Spain’s *elected* left-of-centre government. Food and clothing had flooded in, and large amounts of money were raised to ease the suffering in Spain. Wandsworth offered succour, albeit briefly, to a group of refugees, most of whom had seen sights that even now defy description, while at least nine local men went off to fight against a political philosophy which in their view was too dreadful to contemplate, a number of them failing to return as a consequence. Of notable significance was the role played by women in spearheading the district’s humanitarian response, hampered though they were by lean coverage of their exertions in the local press. There is inspiration to be found in these initiatives of eighty years ago as we today face similar issues in world affairs that demand compassion at very least, if not some stronger form of action. Wandsworth’s answer to the Spanish Civil War may not have been the borough’s finest hour, but it certainly ranks as one of its most generous moments.

Notes

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Jean Day’s programme for the fundraising fête at Brett House in July 1937, together with some associated ephemera, is now in the Wandsworth Heritage Service collection at Battersea Library, as is a copy of Lord Layton’s biography of his wife.



Four ambulances including the ones from Wandsworth and Battersea lined up in New Oxford Street ready for departure to Spain in February 1937. (*Daily Worker*)



Dorothy Layton in January 1939 during a 'campaign for peace' visit to the United States. (From Walter Layton's biography, *Dorothy*)

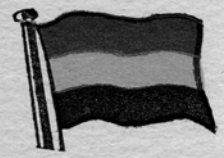
P. Pardillos
Salud

[Handwritten signature]

A GARDEN FÊTE for
SPANISH MEDICAL AID

[Handwritten signatures]
J. V. Jordan
W. J. ...

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Sidney J. ...



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D. Aguirre

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M. Alvarez Chap.

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Helen M. ...

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W. I. Layton

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S. D. Hayter

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[Handwritten signature]
E. Goodrich

[Handwritten signature]
Amelia ...

THIS PROGRAM WILL ADMIT, PRICE
ONE SHILLING. CHILDREN HALF PRICE

[Handwritten signature]
Tom ...

[Handwritten signature]
Emma Marqués

Cover of the programme for the Aid for Spain fundraising fete at Brett House in July 1937 showing the following autographs of interest: (at the top) the guitarist, Pascual Pardillos; (to the right of the flag) the Spanish ambassador; (two below his) Dorothy Layton; and (below hers) Eleanor Goodrich. At the bottom is the signature of the dancer, Emma Marqués.

George Rolfe, an International Brigade volunteer from Putney, photographed in 1937 sporting a Basque beret. (*Wandsworth Borough News*. Copyright holder sought without success)



References

- ¹ Sources for the substance to this paragraph and other background details: Buchanan, Tom, *Britain and the Spanish Civil War* (CUP, 1997), pp. 1-5; Fyrth, Jim, *The Signal was Spain: the Spanish aid movement in Britain 1936-39* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1986), pp. 19-42, 304-11; Overy, Richard, *The Morbid Age* (Allen Lane, 2009), pp. 315-38; Squires, Mike, *The Aid to Spain Movement in Battersea 1936-39* (Elmfield Publications, 1994), pp. 1-8.
- ² *Wandsworth Borough News (WBN)*, 8 Jan. 1937, p. 3 & 19 Feb. 1937, p. 4. Eleanor Goodrich (1888-1988), Labour councillor for Tooting Ward, 1934-1953; first woman Mayor of Wandsworth, 1947-49; vice-president of the Wandsworth Historical Society for over sixteen years until her death in 1988.
- ³ Sean Creighton, pers. comm., 19 Apr. 2016.
- ⁴ *Daily Worker (DW)*, 2 Feb. 1937, p. 3 & 6 Feb. 1937, p. 3.
- ⁵ Recollections of Wally Nesbit, Battersea Arts Centre, 13 Dec. 1982 in *Battersea & Wandsworth Labour & Social History Newsletter*, no.13 (Oct. 1983). Cf. a similar alliance in Battersea, Buchanan, p. 74.
- ⁶ *WBN*, 2 Jul. 1937, p. 10; programme for the Spanish Medical Aid garden party at 198 West Hill, 17 Jul. 1937, back cover.
- ⁷ *DW*, 10 Feb. 1937, p. 3; Squires, pp. 13-17.
- ⁸ Squires, pp. 24-25.
- ⁹ *South Western Star (SWS)*, 5 Nov. 1937, p. 1; *WBN*, 5 Nov. 1937, p. 16.
- ¹⁰ *WBN*, 30 Apr. 1937, p. 1.
- ¹¹ Layton, Walter, *Dorothy* (Collins, 1961), p. 113-117; Pottle, Mark, 'Layton, Eleanor Dorothea, Lady Layton (1887-1959)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, www.oxforddnb.com/, accessed on 14 Dec. 2016. Marcus Samuel (1873-1942), nephew of the previous MP for Putney, Samuel Samuel, obit. in *WBN*, 6 Mar. 1942, pp. 1 & 4. In it his obituarist described him as 'a strong critic of Socialist doctrines'.
- ¹² *WBN*, 12 Mar. 1937, p. 23 & 19 Mar. 1937, p. 8.
- ¹³ For impressions of the situation surrounding the refugees' arrival: the website of the Basque Children of '37 Association UK, www.basquechildren.org/; 'Tragedy of Civil War: Basque refugee children arrive in England', British Pathé archive, www.britishpathe.com/, 27 May 1937, film ID. 919.16, accessed on 15 Dec. 2016.
- ¹⁴ *SWS*, 9 Jul. 1937, p. 5 & 30 Jul. 1937, p. 1; *WBN*, 9 Jul. 1937, p. 4.
- ¹⁵ Layton, *Dorothy*, p. 72; *SWS*, 23 Jul. 1937, p. 6 which included a cheerful photograph of a group of the refugee children, though regrettably its quality is too poor for reproduction; *WBN*, 30 Jul. 1937, p. 7. For a biography in Spanish of Pablo de Azcárate y Flórez (1890-1971) visit <https://es.wikipedia.org/>, accessed on 12 Dec. 2016.
- ¹⁶ Jean Day (1926-2013), pers. comm., 27 Oct. 2007.
- ¹⁷ For correspondence on the colonies in Brixton and Kingston: *WBN*, 25 Mar. 1938, p. 4 & 7 Oct. 1938, p. 17. Interestingly there is no mention of the Wandsworth colony on the www.basquechildren.org/ website.
- ¹⁸ For further detailed information about this entire period visit the outstanding digitised archive 'Trabajadores: the Spanish Civil War through the eyes of organised labour' via the University of Warwick, Modern Records Centre website, www2.warwick.ac.uk/. See also Buchanan, pp. 111-16. 'Town's welcome to refugee children 75 years on' in *Local History News*, winter 2014, p. 17 mentions a former refugee then aged 90 and still living in south London.
- ¹⁹ Fyrth, p. 36; Overy, pp. 319-20; *SWS*, 9 Jul. 1937, p. 5.
- ²⁰ *WBN*, 18 Jun. 1937, p. 3
- ²¹ *WBN*, 11 Jun. 1937, p. 9. Katherine, Duchess of Atholl (1874-1960) was chairman of the national Basque Children's Committee at the time.
- ²² *The Times*, 12 May 1938, p. 8; *WBN*, 20 May 1938, p. 10.
- ²³ Buchanan, pp. 126-27; Overy, pp. 321-22. See *WBN*, 29 Oct. 1937, p. 12 for comments by Eleanor Goodrich on the significance of the International Brigade. For further archived material see 'Information guide no. 5: Spanish Civil War, 1936-39' on the People's History Museum website, www.phm.org.uk/.
- ²⁴ Squires, pp. 44-47. Of the Battersea volunteers one notable example is George Wheeler whose book *To Make the People Smile Again: a memoir of the Spanish Civil War* (Zymurgy, 2003) was reviewed in *WH* 82 (2006), pp. 18-19.
- ²⁵ *DW*, 26 Jun. 1939, p. 5. Details verified against the Roll of Honour on the International Brigade Memorial Trust website, www.international-brigades.org.uk/, accessed on 12 Dec. 2016. Squires includes Fox amongst his list of 'Battersea Volunteers'.
- ²⁶ Sean Creighton, pers. comm., 19 Apr. 2016, describing a letter he received from John Longstaff in 1986.

²⁷ *Daily Express*, 13 Sep. 1937, p. 6; *WBN*, 17 Sep. 1937, p. 2. A plaque in memory of the International Brigade volunteers from Battersea and Wandsworth was installed in the entrance to the head office of the Public and Commercial Services Union in Falcon Road, Battersea in 2006.

²⁸ *WBN*, 4 Mar. 1938, p. 23.

²⁹ *WBN*, 30 Sep. 1938, p. 2.

³⁰ *WBN*, 13 Jan. 1939, p. 11.

³¹ *SWS*, 27 Jan. 1939, p. 4.

³² *The Times*, 28 Feb. 1939, p. 14; *WBN*, 10 Mar. 1939, p. 14.

³³ *SWS*, 10 Mar. 1939, p. 3.

³⁴ For a more nuanced summary of this later period see Buchanan, pp. 189-92.