

## An Account Adrian Bell

I have been given the privilege of saying a few words about the events that led to the evacuation to Britain of some 4,000 children from the Basque country precisely 75 years ago.

The story might be said to begin in March of 1937, when, after a first winter of stalemate around Madrid, General Franco ordered his forces to direct their attention towards the north. General Mola, placed in charge of the northern campaign, at once proclaimed: "I have decided to terminate rapidly the war in the north...if surrender is not immediate, I shall raze Vizcaya to the ground. I have the means to do so."

Within a matter of days, the means at his disposal had been put to work. In the early morning light of 31 March a detachment of the Condor Legion – the German squadrons that were serving with the Nationalists – bombed the small town of Durango. A total of 127 bodies were collected from the wreckage of the town; a further 121 died later in hospital. Systematic aerial bombardment of undefended targets which had no military significance was warfare of a new kind: it was a rationally calculated move to undermine an enemy's morale by terrifying its civilian population.

But surrender? There was no surrender, nor any likelihood of it. There was, however, a keen interest in securing the evacuation of women and children from the war zone. President Aguirre of the newly established Basque regional government discussed this with Ralph Stevenson, the British Consul in Bilbao, and Stevenson submitted the idea to the Foreign Office. Furthermore, he was able to report the willingness of the French Government to cooperate in such an evacuation. His proposal met with no enthusiasm in London. In fact he was mildly reprimanded for having taken this initiative: consuls are not expected to seek so shape foreign policy, still less are they expected to assume the authority to discuss controversial proposals with foreign governments. He was firmly instructed not to pursue the idea.

On the face of it, one might have thought that the Prime Minister would have viewed the proposal with some sympathy. Stanley Baldwin, after all, had the most morbid dread of this new threat of aerial warfare: "The bomber will always get through," he had so correctly forecast more than 5 years earlier. But Baldwin was not interested. "The climate here would not suit them," he said. And in the Foreign Office there was stiffer opposition. There the argument was that evacuating non-combatants – "useless mouths", as our Ambassador described them – would contravene the treaty of non-intervention.

So there the matter might have rested. There might have been no evacuation and we would not all be gathered here today, but for one event. And that event was, of course, the bombing of Guernica. General Mola's boast had not been idle: the town was razed completely and an unknown number perished in the flames.

Set against what was soon to befall cities across Europe, you might say Guernica was relatively trivial, but it was the first – "the first blitz of the Second World War", Anthony Eden later remarked – and, being the first, it had the power to provoke widespread revulsion. Guernica changed everything.

Consul Stevenson, who had walked among the ruins and the ashes the following day, submitted his detailed report to the Foreign Office, and, ignoring his earlier reprimand, he ended it with a plea:

"I have, though, [he wrote] strong views on the question of evacuation of women and children, even if it is only a few

thousand and if anything can be done in this respect before it is too late, so much the better."

In many ways, it seems to me, Consul Ralph Stevenson was the unsung hero of this whole episode. He made the cause of rescuing Basque children in peril his own, and in so doing he was hugely influential both in Bilbao and in London. Meetings of the Basque Government would be suspended to receive him and his reports were quoted at British Cabinet meetings. There is no doubt that Foreign Secretary Eden came to regard him very highly, and would have put great store by his report on the destruction of Guernica.

But now Stevenson's was no longer a lone voice. Simultaneously, in London, the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief was petitioning the Government to grant approval for an evacuation of children from the area around Bilbao. This committee had been formed at the end of 1936 to coordinate all the voluntary relief activity being undertaken by a plethora of political and non-political organisations. It was chaired by a somewhat maverick Conservative MP, the Duchess of Atholl, and its principal secretary, was the Liberal MP Wilfrid Roberts. I was delighted to learn that Mr Roberts' daughter, Joanna Matthews, is here today, because when I first became interested in this story she was kind enough to allow me access to her late father's papers. They were, of course, of enormous help in piecing together the story, but what they also revealed, through the countless letters he wrote over many years was a man of such steadfast dedication and concern for the plight of those children from the Basque region.

So then, in the immediate aftermath of Guernica, in the two or three weeks when the frightful agony that had been inflicted upon that little, hitherto unknown town was still vivid in the public imagination, the National Joint Committee was able to take the initiative and obtain approval for a limited evacuation from the region.

Approval was, in fact, granted just three days after the bombing of Guernica, but that was only approval in principle: it was not until the middle of May that the Government's agreement was finally obtained and cabled to Stevenson in Bilbao. Long before then, however, the process that was to lead to the evacuation had built up an irresistible momentum of its own.

By the beginning of May, The National Joint Committee had established a Basque Children's Committee, announced the impending evacuation in *The Times* and appealed for funds. Within a fortnight it had received donations of £12,000 and a promise of a further £5,000 from the Trade Union Congress. The Home Office had demanded detailed plans from the Basque Children's Committee as to how the children would be looked after before final approval for the evacuation would be granted; by the 10 May Wilfred Roberts had prepared and submitted them. Then the Ministry of Health raised fears that the Basque children might be carrying infectious diseases; immediately the Committee dispatched two English doctors to Bilbao to conduct medical examinations.

With all this going on in London, what was happening back in Bilbao, where the bombers were getting through every day, several times every day? There Leah Manning, another of the resourceful and energetic women on the National Joint Committee, was negotiating with President Aguirre and other members of his Basque Government, broadcasting regularly on Bilbao Radio to publicise the evacuation, and coordinating the details of its organisation with the Asistencia Social. As if any further pressure was needed, Consul Stevenson cabled the Foreign Office to report that he was being inundated with requests from anxious parents. Not surprisingly, within the Foreign Office there were fears that the National Joint Committee was planning the *fait accompli* – as one official put it – "several

shiploads of refugees arriving at Portsmouth, whom it would then be impossible to turn away without a public outcry”.

In the midst of all this frantic activity one senior official in the Foreign Office wrote a long memo in which he advised the Government to make up its mind between the conflicting pulls of humanitarian concern and adherence to the letter of non-intervention. His advice was ignored. The Government's attitude never was made unambiguously public. Only in the privacy of the Ministerial Committee on Foreign Policy, which met on the day before the 4,000 children boarded the *Habana*, was it conceded that the Government's agreement to admit the children from Bilbao had been wrung from them by outside public pressure.

One consequence of this, though, was the extraordinary way in which those competing pulls of humanitarian concern and the Non-intervention treaty came to be reconciled. That is, if “reconciled” is the right word, because what resulted was a conflicting, incoherent set of policies.

On the one hand, the Government agreed to allow 4,000 children to come to Britain. But then, when the children did arrive, it insisted that not a penny of public money would be made available to house them, to feed them, to support them. That was the condition that the Basque Children's Committee had been forced to accept – that they alone would be responsible for every aspect of the children's maintenance and for meeting the cost of it. Even the tents that were used – just up the road in Eastleigh – to accommodate the children when they first arrived had to be hired, not borrowed, hired from the War Department.

No other country which provided sanctuary to the Basque children interpreted the non-intervention treaty in so narrow a way, even though they knew full well how widely it was being flouted by other countries, nor did any other country impose such parsimonious conditions upon them.

But then, on the other hand, it was at the instigation of Anthony Eden – and remember, he was one of the principal architects of the non-intervention pact – that the government committed itself to providing Royal Navy escorts to any ship of any nationality carrying refugees, no matter where it was destined, be it to Britain, to France or to Russia. This was one of the requirements that Consul Stevenson had argued for when he made his proposal to the Foreign Office, because Nationalist warships were constantly patrolling the Bay of Biscay seeking to turn back any refugee ships. And Eden acted upon it, ignoring the protests from General Franco and facing down the stubborn objections raised within the British government by the Admiralty. Through the spring and summer of 1937 some 100,000 refugees escaped from the Northern ports of which 89,000 were escorted by British warships. Were it not for that policy it's doubtful that we would be here today. The fact is that the *Habana* would simply not have got through.

But with a Royal Navy escort it did, and so 3,826 children did arrive and, in due course, they were dispersed into some 70 locations, the length and breadth of Britain. The Catholic Crusade of Rescue took some 1,200 into its existing orphanages where they were supported by donations from parishioners; the Salvation Army took 400 into its hostels in East London, and two and a half thousand went into so-called colonies set up and run by ad-hoc local committees. It was those amateur committees who looked after the children and raised the funds to do so. They did that through public meetings, door to door collections, flag days, and by persuading individuals and organisations to sponsor a child. And they continued to do so, when weeks turned into months, and months into years.

The Basque Children's Committee advised the local committees “to try to ensure the widest possible base of support”, and they cited the case of the colony in Barnet in North London, where the committee had engaged the support of some 40

different organisations, each of the major political parties, three local churches, the Quakers, the British Legion, the Odd Fellows, and so on.

Naturally, the first place where those practical gestures of humanitarian support and solidarity with the children were demonstrated was here, in Southampton, where the children first stepped ashore. Reading the pages of the *Southern Daily Echo* for those months in 1937 you get a sense of the details: the meetings in the Guildhall to raise funds; the appeals for volunteers, labourers, plumbers, carpenters, to prepare the reception camp; the requests for blankets, cutlery, clothes and toys. And then the reports of individuals: the baker who would prepare 50 loaves a week; the women at the Corporation Baths who volunteered to do the camp laundry; the taxi firm that would loan cars; the cinema owner who gave free passes on a Saturday morning; the philanthropist who offered a house to serve as a sanatorium; the firms that supplied gifts; the shoe makers union that supplied 1,000 pairs of boots. And so on.

It was on the basis of that kind of spontaneous generosity from thousands of ordinary people from all walks of life, sustained not just for the three months that everyone had anticipated, but over years, that the Basque children were destined to survive.

As for the Basque Children's Committee itself, charged by the Government with total responsibility for their maintenance and ultimate repatriation, it continued to fulfil this duty of care until 1951. Only then did it wind up its operation, after 14 years, by which time the oldest children still remaining in this country had reached adulthood. It could reasonably be said to have completed its responsibilities, and to have done so honourably.



Bernardo Fernández with Adrian Bell