

## Commemorating a truly international volunteer army

Seán Dowling, from Castlecomer, left Dublin on the Liverpool boat in February 1937. He wasn't travelling to Britain for a job. He was going to war. He would be numbered among 320 Irish volunteers who fought in defence of the Spanish Republic during the 1936-39 Civil War. In this venture he was joined by three other Kilkenny men: - Michael Brennan, also from the Castlecomer area, and brothers, George and Michael Brown, Inistioige born & Manchester reared.

What made these men give up their work, leave friends and family, and move to a war situation where their lives were endangered and for many death beckoned. They were committed to support the lawfully elected Spanish Government in its campaign against fascism and military aggression. In this the 320 volunteers & both resident in Ireland or members of the 'Irish Diaspora' from the far-flung corners of the globe - were part of a 45,000 strong army of private individuals from all walks of life resolved to stem the rise of fascism. The majority of these volunteers served with the International Brigades, others were involved with various militias, and still more were engaged in medical and other support services. Over 55 different nationalities were represented.

What moulded the attitudes of these Irish volunteers? Ireland in the 1920s-30s had just gone through the War of Independence, Partition and its own Civil War. Coupled with the political scars these events had left on the people, there was widespread economic hardship and deprivation, leading to massive emigration to Britain, North America and further abroad. In the 1920s, 220,591 people left Ireland for America alone.

The early decades of the nineteenth century were also marked by political, social and economic upheaval worldwide. By the 1930s much of Europe was still attempting to come to terms with the impact of World War I, the Russian Revolution, and, more recently, the economic collapse after 1929. Across the continent there were a number of contrasting political beliefs finding expression in a strong labour movement and rising reactionary-fascist forces. Widespread unemployment and Hitler's rise to power were depressing factors for anyone on the Left. However, victories of left of centre governments in France and Spain in 1936 gave hope that working people could advance again. Almost as soon as it had arisen, this hope was dashed with the military attack on the Spanish Government by army elements. This development shocked millions of working people around the world and prompted many to pledge their support to the Spanish people in the most practical way possible at the time, by standing shoulder to shoulder with the Spanish working class and the nationalists of the Basque and Catalonian regions in face of the combined might of the Franco-led Spaniards aided by Hitler and Mussolini. Of the 320 Irish volunteers, 82 paid the ultimate price & one in four & a statistic which held true for the Kilkenny volunteers as George Brown was killed in action on July 6th 1937.

Who were these four men connected to Kilkenny? Michael Brennan from the Castlecomer area was just 15 when he went to Spain and was sent back home after a few months because he was too young. [The youngest Irishman to die was Tommy Wood of Dublin, who was just 17 when he enlisted, having lied about his age.] Seán (Jack) Dowling, from Ardra, Castlecomer, was 26 when he arrived in Spain in early February 1937. He had been an active member locally of the Republican Congress before moving to Dublin. Seán was in Spain until the very end of the service of the International Brigades in December 1938. The records in Spain are confused and fragmentary but they seem to indicate that he spent quite a lot of time working in the medical staff at several hospitals. This was usually the sort of job given to men who were themselves recovering from wounds.

While Michael Browne was among the first group of British-based volunteers, arriving before the International Brigades were set up. He joined the No. 1 Coy. XIV Battalion at Lopera in late December 1936, a battle where the newly arrived volunteers were brutally attacked by the fascist troops. Having gone through this battle, Michael returned to Britain, where he was interviewed by the Daily Worker about his experiences in Spain.

While Michael Brennan represented the young and enthusiastic volunteers, George Brown was a well-established leader of the workers' movement in Manchester. He is on record as being the most senior member of the Communist Party of Great Britain to be killed in action in Spain. He was a full-time worker for the Party and a member of its national leadership, the Central Committee.

George Brown arrived in Spain in late January 1937 and was already in battle and wounded by February 11th. In Spain he was appointed a Political Commissar because, as one author says, he 'had a mastery of the well-turned phrase and sharp retort, but also had what every successful working class leader required, the ability to put in simple everyday terms the principal issues of the day'.

Despite, or possibly because of his leadership position as a Commissar, Brown refused a safe position when it came to the fighting in Brunete. In fact before this he had a post in the office of the International Brigade in Madrid and asked to be allowed to go up to the front to join the troops. George left the safety of this behind the lines post to go into battle in May 1937. Early July found him engaged in the battle at the village of Villanueva de la Canada. Mick O'Riordan gave this version of his death. He states that George was wounded at Brunete and that he was summarily shot by retreating Fascists as he lay disabled on the road side.

Irish volunteers in the Spanish Civil War played a vital role in the defence of democracy and represented workers' solidarity in action. These men and women had said that they were taking part in the struggle against fascism, and that should Franco win, the world would go to war. Five months to the day from Franco's declaration of victory, Hitler plunged the world into war. In World War II young Michael Brennan took up the struggle against fascism again, this time on the front-line in North Africa. Seán Dowling also served with the RAF in WW2, and after it took part in an international solidarity delegation to offer support to the new Left government in Yugoslavia, headed, as it turns out, by another Spanish Civil War veteran, Tito.

Was the sacrifice worth it? The International Brigades have rightly been credited with preventing the easy victory expected by the fascists. Wars, though, should not be looked at through rosy glasses. The Irish soldiers in Spain were volunteers, they put their lives on the line, and a quarter paid the ultimate sacrifice, with dozens others being badly wounded, physically and mentally. It was the last time a truly international volunteer army went to war. For their commitment and courage these volunteers deserve our deepest thanks, and the very least we can do is insure that their contribution to the struggle for a better world will never be forgotten.