Estudios Irlandeses, Issue 21.2, 2026, pp. 29-42.
https//doi.org/10.24162/EI2026-15118
AEDEI

"Do your Bit at Home!": Irish Women and the Spanish Civil War

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Abstract. This article examines Irish women's perceptions of, and contributions to, the Spanish Civil War. It seeks to showcase the range of Irish women's opinions on the nature of the war, highlighting the political, social, religious and international terms in which they framed the conflict. The article then explores Irish women's contributions to the war, focusing upon their efforts to organise fundraisers and public meetings at home or provide medical relief behind the frontlines in Spain. As it shows, whilst some Irish women took sides, providing support for either the Republican or Nationalist camp, others chose not to, opting instead to provide humanitarian aid on an impartial basis. In doing so, the article sheds light upon two underexplored dimensions of the Irish response to the Spanish Civil War: the contributions made by women and the provision of neutral humanitarian aid.

Key Words. Spanish Civil War, Ireland, women, transnational fascism, communism, humanitarianism.

Resumen. Este artículo examina las percepciones y contribuciones de las mujeres irlandesas a la Guerra Civil española. Su objetivo es mostrar la diversidad de opiniones que estas mujeres tenían sobre la naturaleza del conflicto, destacando los marcos políticos, sociales, religiosos e internacionales desde los que lo interpretaron. A continuación, el artículo explora las contribuciones de las mujeres irlandesas a la guerra, centrándose en sus esfuerzos por organizar recaudaciones de fondos y reuniones públicas en Irlanda, así como en la prestación de ayuda médica en la retaguardia en España. Como se demuestra, mientras que algunas mujeres irlandesas tomaron partido, apoyando bien al bando republicano o al nacionalista, otras optaron por no hacerlo y eligieron, en su lugar, ofrecer ayuda humanitaria de manera imparcial. De este modo, el artículo arroja luz sobre dos dimensiones poco estudiadas de la respuesta irlandesa a la Guerra Civil española: las contribuciones de las mujeres y la provisión de ayuda humanitaria neutral.

Palabras clave. Guerra Civil española, Irlanda, mujeres, fascismo transnacional, comunismo, humanitarismo.

ISSN 1699-311X

Introduction

In late January 1937, the *Irish Times* printed an urgent appeal for contributions to alleviate the suffering of non-combatants in Spain. In it, five Irish women requested donations of blankets, warm clothing, non-perishable food and medical supplies which they would then collect and post to the main offices of the Neutral Relief Fund in London, an initiative established along cross-religious lines. The Fund, readers were informed, distributed donations in the parts of Spain "where the needs [were] greatest, without regard to creed or politics"; the supplies donated from Ireland[1] would be no exception (*Irish Times*, 23 January 1937: 4). It is not known whether this appeal attracted a generous response but the plea, itself, provides insights into Irish women's underexplored contributions to the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) and the international networks in which they operated. It also reveals another dimension to Irish responses to the conflict, one that was based on a non-partisan humanitarian impulse to alleviate the hardships of victims of war.

Much has been written about Ireland and the Spanish Civil War from a variety of academic disciplines. Emerging from this body of literature is the consensus that Irish public opinion overwhelmingly favoured a Nationalist victory because of the strong Catholic ethos and anti-communist sentiment in Irish society at the time (McGarry 1999, 2001 and 2002; Zách 2006, for example). Scholars have examined the Irish response from the perspective of the press, the government, the Catholic clergy and the men who volunteered to fight in Spain – predominantly for the Nationalists but also, in fewer numbers, for the Republicans (McGarry 1999 and 2002; Zách 2006; O'Brien 2017; Fanning 2019; Lugschitz and García-Avilés 2020). Within these broader examinations, sporadic references are made to women but significant gaps remain in our understanding of how they interpreted and contributed to the conflict. Recently, there has been an emerging interest in exploring the literary works of Irish women writers relating to the Spanish Civil War (Mittermaier 2013; Davison 2017; Asensio Peral and Fernández Sánchez 2023). However, these studies typically focus on one writer or one particular work and do not consider the variety of ways in which women interpreted and engaged with the war.

This article fills this lacuna by emphasising Irish women's voices in public discourses about the Spanish Civil War. In doing so, it contributes to existing studies which highlight the different ways in which the war was framed by Irish audiences. The article then explores the various contributions women made to the war: as nurses or relief workers behind the frontlines in Spain or as fundraisers and campaigners at home in Ireland or elsewhere. The article argues that women's perceptions of, and contributions to, the Spanish Civil War highlight and cut across several important themes prevalent in interwar Europe: transnational fascism, communism, land redistribution, and humanitarianism.

Background to the Spanish Civil War

The origins of the Spanish Civil War were rooted in social, political and economic issues that had been troubling Spanish national life for decades. Space precludes a thorough examination of these causes here but it should be noted that the Second Republic was born in 1931 into (or rather born out of) a fragmented Spain characterised by political instability, uneven economic development and social strife (Payne 2012: 8-11). It also came into existence at a turbulent time internationally as the Great Depression dealt a blow to global trade networks (which affected Spain's agricultural exports) and as authoritarian regimes replaced fledging democratic governments in various countries across Europe. That said, after years of political instability

[1] The name of the twenty-six county Irish Free State changed in 1937 to *Éire* (Ireland).

under the Restoration Monarchy (1874-1931, which included General Miguel Primo de Rivera's dictatorship from 1923-30), there was a sense of enthusiasm in Spain about democratic change – at least among those outside of the traditional ruling elite (Casanova 2010: 19).

The new Republican government (made up of a left-wing alliance between 1931-33) set Spain on a course of liberal reform: enfranchising women, legalising divorce and civil marriage and enacting a programme of land transfer were just some of the measures introduced which signalled this new liberal departure in Spanish politics. The monarchy, Catholic Church and armed forces were the institutions most affected by the Republic's programme. In April 1931, King Alfonso XIII fled the country, renouncing his claim to the throne (Payne 2012: 11). The Catholic clergy were aggrieved by the loss of educational influence and government subsidies that came with the Republic's secular policies. These "secularising reforms", as Helen Graham notes, also "upset deeply Catholic sensibilities" among middle-class conservatives (2005: 10). The army, whose prestige had taken a hit after its defeat in the 1898 Spanish-American War and more recent failures in Morocco, was subject to downsizing, funding cuts and investigations into promotions earned in battle under the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera. To add further insult to injury, the Republic granted the Basque Country and Catalonia regional autonomy, a move which to the army represented an attack on Spanish unity. An unsuccessful coup in 1932 marked the first military strike against the Republic (Balfour 2002: 237-46).

But while the Republic amassed opponents among the conservative quarters of society, it also attracted criticism from the radical left. To anarchists who called for a violent revolution and the destruction of the state in favour of trade unions, the Republic's reforms did not disrupt the political and social order nearly enough. Socialists, for their part, took issue with the slow pace of change, particularly in relation to land transfer (Ribeiro de Meneses 2001: 15-18). Divisions on the left contributed to the victory of the centre-right and right in the 1933 elections. This conservative government was bent on suspending the reforms introduced in the last two years by the previous administration and responded to revolutionary activity by socialists in the October Revolt in Oviedo in 1934 with military force. However, the left did not have to wait long before the pendulum swung back in its favour as the February 1936 elections produced a narrow victory for the Popular Front (a loose alliance which included republicans, socialists, and communists). In the months that followed, a wave of strikes, land occupations and political violence engulfed the country (Payne 2012: 38-40). It was in this volatile political and social climate that a group of generals hatched plans for another coup, one that sought to put "back into their bottles the political genies of democracy, civilian rule, workers' rights, and regionalism unleashed by the Republic" (Ribeiro de Meneses 2024: 130).

Such plans materialised on 17-18 July 1936 when army officers led an uprising in the Spanish Protectorate of Morocco. While the insurrection spread to mainland Spain and the Canary and Balearic Islands in the following days, divided loyalties within the military meant that the insurgents initially failed in their objective to overthrow the government (Graham 2005: 21). The result was civil war which played out over three long years between two broad coalition forces, generally referred to as the Republicans and the Nationalists. While the fighting was contained to Spanish soil, foreign intervention was found on both sides, albeit in unequal proportions. The Popular Front government in France proposed a policy of non-intervention, an agreement which almost all European countries accepted (the dictatorships of Germany, Italy, Portugal and the Soviet Union included). Despite this, Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy supplied the Nationalists with arms and men, while Portugal provided logistical support. The Soviet Union came to the Republicans' aid – albeit after some initial delay – through the provision of military equipment and personnel as well as technical expertise (Leitz, Balfour and Preston 1999: 130, 173; Payne 2004: 153-56). The Spanish Civil War captured the attention of audiences globally, a point made not least evident by the thousands of international volunteers and soldiers who fought in the war. Less than 1000 Irishmen were among them:

around 700 on the side of the Nationalists and fewer than 200 defending the Republic (McGarry 1999: 17, 49). Indeed, there was much public discourse about the Spanish conflict in Ireland and women's voices were found on either side of the debate.

Irish Women and Public Debates Surrounding the Nature of the Spanish Civil War

In April 1937, Nora Connolly-O'Brien, Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington and Catherine Lynch were among the well-known names on the Irish political left who gathered in Dublin to bid farewell to Father Ramón Laborda, a Basque priest who had just completed a four-month lecture tour of Ireland.[2] Laborda's tour sought to dispel popular tropes in pro-Nationalist propaganda that cast General Francisco Franco (leader of the Nationalists from September 1936) as a Christian patriot and the war as a crusade against communism (McCreanor 2022: 147-48). This was certainly a difficult task given the influence of the Catholic Church and staunch anti-communist sentiment in Ireland at the time (O'Connor 2014: 64-68). Whilst Laborda's message did not find fertile ground in Ireland, it did find a sympathetic ear among the marginalised left – the most vocal of whom, at least on the matter of the Spanish Civil War, were in the room with him that day in Dublin. For them, the war was not religious but political. Speaking at the event, Connolly-O'Brien depicted the conflict as "a fight for freedom against the tyranny of Fascism". "That fight", she warned, "is coming to us, and we should be prepared to make as good a fight as the Spanish people are making" (*Irish Press*, 19 April 1937: 2). It should be noted that by this point the potential of the fascistic Blueshirts, under the leadership of Eoin O'Duffy, of posing a destabilising political threat had waned (Regan 1999: 370-71).[3] Furthermore, in interpreting the war as an ideological clash between democracy and fascism, Connolly-O'Brien

[2] Connolly O'Brien (1892-1981) was born in Edinburgh, Scotland. Her father was James Connolly, the socialist and revolutionary who played a major role in the 1913 Dublin Lockout and the 1916 Easter Rising. Connolly-O'Brien was influenced by her father's socialist and republican views. After her family moved to Ireland in 1910, she joined Na Fianna Éireann and later Cumann na mBan. Following the Easter Rising, she undertook a lecture tour of the United States, raising support for the Irish republican cause. When she returned to Ireland, she became involved in the Communist Party of Ireland and, in 1926, she co-founded the Workers' Party of Ireland. During the 1930s, she worked for the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union. See Lawrence William White's *Dictionary of Irish Biography* entry, available online at https://www.dib.ie/biography/obrien-nora-connolly-a6489.

Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington (1877-1946) was born in Cork, Ireland. A committed suffragette, she co-founded the Irish Women's Franchise League in 1908 to lobby for women's right to vote. She also played a prominent role in the republican movement and following the Easter Rising she went to the United States to campaign for support for Irish independence. Following her return to Ireland, she stood as a Sinn Féin candidate in the 1919 elections. She was politically sympathetic towards socialism and in 1908 she founded the Irish Women's Workers' Union. Later in 1930, she undertook a study visit to the Soviet Union. Through her activism, Sheehy-Skeffington became involved in various other national and international organisations including the Women's Prisoner Defence League, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and the Women's Social and Progressive League. See Maria Luddy's *Dictionary of Irish Biography* entry, available online at https://doi.org/10.3318/dib.008106.v1.

Catherine Lynch was born in Pennsylvania in the United States to Irish parents. She trained as an osteopath in Los Angeles before moving to Paris after the First World War. During her fifteen years in Paris, she made regular visits to Ireland before deciding to move there more permanently. She travelled a lot throughout her career, visiting England, Egypt, Palestine, Rome, Syria, Spain and Turkey. She first became interested in the Irish nationalist cause after hearing a lecture in the United States about the Sinn Féin movement. During her time in Paris and Ireland, she became well-known among Irish nationalist circles (*Irish Independent*, 15 December 1933: 5; *Irish Press*, 10 June 1936: 5).

[3] There have been scholarly debates about whether the Blueshirts can be accurately described as fascist. For some of this discourse see Mike Cronin (1995) "The Blueshirt Movement 1932-5: Ireland's Fascists?" *Journal of Contemporary History* 30 (2): 311-31. https://doi.org/10.1177/002200949503000206 and Tim Ellis-Dale and Séan Donnelly (2024) "Style over Substance? The Blueshirts and Transnational Fascist Culture." *Irish Studies Review* 32 (3): 432-45. https://doi.org/10.1080/09670882.2024.2371069.

overlooked the various political hues represented in both camps and the tensions that this complex amalgamation of actors generated. But issues of accuracy aside, the significance of Connolly-O'Brien's remarks lies in the international terms in which they framed the conflict. She described fascism as a transnational phenomenon and noted Ireland's susceptibility to its influences. This was a popular theme put forth by the pro-Republican lobby, which was heavily shouldered by the Women's Aid Committee of the Irish Friends of the Spanish Republic. For instance, at its September 1937 meeting, the Women's Aid Committee passed a resolution which declared "that the present war in Spain is a conflict between the forces of Spanish democracy against the agencies of a brutal Fascism, Spanish and International". It called on "Labour and Republican movements of all shades to unite their efforts in a common struggle against 'all attempts […] to set up an Imperialist-Fascist dictatorship in Ireland"' (*Irish Press*, 4 September 1937: 18). Again, the focus here is placed on the ideological nature of the war in Spain as well as its supposedly imminent political ramifications for Ireland.

Some observers recognised that events in Spain were more complex and could not be encapsulated in solely political terms. Mairin Mitchell, a writer of Irish descent who had spent time in Spain before hostilities broke out, placed emphasis on the social issues at play. In September 1936, she published a piece titled "The Struggle in Spain" in *Ireland-Today*, a short-lived journal (printed between 1936 and 1938) which provided a platform for commentators whose views lay outside the conservative editorial line of mainstream Irish newspapers. Mitchell, unlike Connolly-O'Brien, was not a socialist activist. In fact, Katrina Goldstone has noted how "she did not fall into an easily classifiable political category" (2021: 145). Still, she was sympathetic towards the Spanish Republic, which put her views at odds with the general public and mainstream press in Ireland.

Mitchell identified land agitation as one "of those forces of social conflict which are the background to the present war" in Spain (*Ireland-Today*, September 1936: 11). In fact, she argued that an "agrarian revolution" had been playing out in Spain since the very establishment of the Second Republic (although it should be noted that tensions surrounding land ownership predated this) (Graham 2005: 5). Mitchell was referring to the Republican government's 1932 Land Reform Acts, which facilitated the breakup of large estates and the redistribution of land among rural labourers. Mitchell rightly noted that the transition of power to a centre-right government the following year suspended these developments. With an anti-reformist and sympathetic government now behind them, landowners in southern Spain pushed back against reforms and labour demands, opting instead to reduce wages and lengthen working hours (Puche and González Martínez 2018: 11). Mitchell complained that wages were now simply insufficient to sustain large families and that the unemployed were dying "of empty stomachs" (*Ireland-Today*, September 1936: 12-13). The military coup of July 1936, she continued, resulted from the Popular Front's commitment to oversee the transfer of land that had been initiated by the Reform Acts of 1932. Most army officers, she said, were "drawn almost exclusively from the class of landowners" and were rebelling "against the confiscation of the big estates" (*Ireland-Today*, September 1936: 13). As such, she refuted the idea that the rebels were waging a crusade in defence of Catholic interests and argued, instead, that they were motivated by the desire to maintain the social status quo.

Mitchell's comments on land redistribution would no doubt have struck a chord with Irish audiences, given the importance of the land question to pre- and post-independence Irish politics (Dooley 2004: 185). When travelling throughout southern Spain, Mitchell noted herself how much she was "reminded of Irish social problems". She contended that it was not an "overstatement to say that 'Up the Republic' in Ireland, means at bottom what 'el reparto' or 'divide the land' does in Spain". And, she was not the only one to draw parallels between the land question in both states. Spanish workers, she continued, took an interest in various social issues affecting Ireland, the transfer of land to smallholders being among them (*Ireland-Today*,

September 1936: 14). Their curiosity about the Irish land question is a reminder of the common social issues that were playing out in many European countries after the First World War and highlights the attention which the Irish approach to land redistribution garnered abroad.

Mitchell was not alone in questioning the religious line in Nationalist propaganda. As Ute Anna Mittermaier highlights, the Irish writer Kate O'Brien implicitly did so too in her travelogue *Farewell Spain*, when she commented upon the presence of Moroccan troops in the Nationalist camp (2013:163). Presumably recognising that her views did not align with the broad consensus in Ireland, O'Brien felt the need to caveat her description of events in Spain. She emphasised that she was not a communist; rather, she merely respected the democratic will of the Spanish people to elect the government they so wished and the right of that government "to defend itself against military Juntas, the Moors and all interfering doctrinaires and mercenaries" (O'Brien 1937: 123).

However, not everyone saw the Nationalists' campaign as an assault on democracy. In fact, Aileen O'Brien (no relation to Kate O'Brien), the organising secretary of the largest pro-Franco lobby group in Ireland, the Irish Christian Front, discarded this as a moot point. In her view, the incumbent Spanish government was communist and since "democratic principles [had] no place in the communist faith", it was "absurd [even] to mention them". She dismissed any argument that the social reforms introduced by the Republic were evidence of its democratic basis as mere "sugar-coating of the Communist pill" (*Irish Times*, 4 September 1936: 8). In an article for the *Irish Catholic*, a Kathleen Jackson echoed similar sentiments. Whilst displaying somewhat more awareness than O'Brien of the social tensions in Spain, Jackson claimed that liberal reforms were just the "mask" behind which communists promoted "Satanism" (*Irish Catholic*, 1 October 1936: 1). In O'Brien's eyes, those who said otherwise were mere "apologists for the Spanish Government [who were] not facing the real issue" of the conflict which was "between paganism and Christianity". In a statement to the *Irish Times*, she warned readers that a Republican victory would see the end of "public practice of religion and worship of God" and the forced deconsecration of churches. But that was not all: she claimed that the "Spanish Soviets" would "make Spain a jumping-off ground for the conquest of other countries" and Ireland, given its Catholic ethos and close proximity to Spain, was next in line (*Irish Times*, 4 September 1936: 8). In the same way then that Nora Connolly-O'Brien spoke of an imminent fascist threat to Ireland in the event of the Republicans' defeat, Aileen O'Brien declared that communism would be on Ireland's doorstep in the event of a Republican victory. But O'Brien's claim was not unique. For instance, Bàrbara Molas' study on "transnational Francoism" highlights how members of the Friends of Nationalist Spain, a pro-Franco Christian lobby group which was first founded in England in October 1937 and later expanded to Scotland and Canada, also made claims about the international threat which a Republican victory posed, only this time to Britain. Like O'Brien, they viewed the Spanish Civil War as a struggle for the survival of Christianity and believed that in supporting Franco, they were essentially "defending" Christian values in Great Britain (Molas 2021: 168).

In Ireland, O'Brien had been waging a campaign exaggerating the so-called communist threat even before the Spanish Civil War had broken out. In 1935, with the help of her sister Barbara, she organised an anti-communist exhibition under the auspices of the pro-Deo society, a Christian organisation based in Geneva which aimed to combat the spread of communism. O'Brien, who was originally born in California and raised in Chile but whose grandparents came from county Clare in Ireland, became associated with the group whilst studying in Europe. When her family moved to Ireland in the mid-1930s, O'Brien took on the role as the society's Irish representative and it was in this capacity that she travelled the length and breadth of the country with the exhibition (*Waterford News and Star*, 24 May 1935: 3; O'Brien 1936: 448). The exhibition focused upon anti-clerical atrocities during the Russian Civil War (1918-21). The O'Brien sisters typically accompanied the exhibition with free public lectures, hoping to

convince the Irish people of their belief "that Militant Atheism is a fact, not just a vague unreal idea" and that "the people of Catholic countries" in particular, had "a very definite duty to take part in a Catholic Action campaign" to combat communism (*Irish Examiner*, 9 April 1935: 14; *Irish Examiner*, 18 May 1935: 10).[4] Judging by her statements on the Spanish Civil War, she believed the time had come for Irish people to take up their role in this campaign.

However, not everyone agreed that Irish people should focus their attention on events in Spain when there were still matters at home which required their full attention. This was at least the general feeling among the Women Prisoners' Defence League (WPDL). The WPDL was established in 1922 by Maud Gonne to raise awareness about the welfare of republican prisoners interned in Mountjoy Jail. Committed to this goal, the WPDL did not dedicate its platform to debates about the Spanish Civil War. On the occasion that speakers referenced the war at meetings, it was in connection to the republican campaign at home for a united Ireland. For instance, at a September 1936 meeting, Gonne addressed the news about Eoin O'Duffy's attempts to raise an Irish Brigade, stating "that the people here had neither men nor money to spare, to help anyone, until their own country was free" (Garda Síochána Report, 6 September 1936, NAI JUS 8/425). Gonne had also mentioned the Spanish conflict the week before but was rather vague about her views, stating that "there [was] so much press and propaganda in existence" that one could not possibly "understand […] the conditions there, or which side is right" (Garda Síochána Report, 30 August 1936, NAI JUS 8/425). However, it was not long before she gave insight into where her sympathies lay. When closing a WPDL meeting on 17 January 1937, she encouraged those present to attend Father Ramón Laborda's lecture that evening in the Gaiety Theatre (Garda Síochána Report, 17 January 1937, NAI JUS 8/425). Moreover, in May 1938, the WPDL's mouthpiece, *Prison Bars* (which was edited by Gonne), printed a message of support for fellow republican Frank Ryan following his capture and imprisonment by Franco's troops. The piece reiterated the WPDL's "regret that any Irishman should fight anywhere except directly against the British Empire till we have won our own freedom" but applauded Ryan, nonetheless, for his "brave and unselfish" contribution to the Spanish conflict. The WPDL called on Irish communities in the United States to use their influence to ensure that Ryan and other prisoners of war were accorded proper treatment since, it claimed, "the helpless position of Éire in regard to foreign affairs, makes it impossible […] for its representative in Spain, Mr. [Leopold] Kerney [sic] to do much" (*Prison Bars*, May 1938: 2). This statement of support was directed more towards Ryan rather than the Spanish Republic. It also highlighted the group's hostility towards Éamon De Valera's government, underscoring the point made by McGarry that Irish responses to the civil war shed more light on the Irish rather than Spanish context (1999: 98). Indeed, whilst Gonne may have appeared sympathetic to the Spanish Republic, efforts to help its cause would not come at the expense of her republican goal at home.

Taking Action: Volunteering, Organising and Fundraising in Support of Spain

In January 1937, the *Offaly Independent* featured an article which reported on a meeting of the county's Board of Health. During the meeting, the Board noted the concerns of a local doctor surrounding what he described as a severe flu epidemic in the town of Edenderry and the lack of nurses to help cope with the situation. Curious as to the sudden shortfall in staff, a Mr. O'Connell asked "[w]hat had happened [to] all the nurses who had been looking for employment up to recently?", to which a Mr. Adams sarcastically responded that "[t]hey have gone to Spain" (*Offaly Independent*, 30 January 1937: 7). Adams' passing comments should be

[4] Catholic Action organisations first emerged in the nineteenth century in response to the growing influence of liberalism, socialism and communism and other political ideologies that promoted anti-clerical policies. Whilst initially slow to develop in Ireland, Catholic Action groups became more popular during the interwar period.

taken for what they were: a simple jest. They tell us nothing about the number of Irish women who volunteered as nurses in the Spanish Civil War, the side, if any, they chose to support and the motivations underpinning their decision to do so. It is likely that the shortage in staff was due to illness and not a sudden decision on the part of local nurses to uproot for Spain. Still, Adams drew attention to an often-forgotten element of Irish contributions to the Spanish Civil War: the involvement of Irish women. This was not restricted to administering medical aid alone. As this section will show, Irish women were also involved in fundraising and campaigning on both a political and non-political basis.

Historians have often focused on the Irish men who served on the battlefields in Spain. However, behind the frontlines were thousands of women from within and beyond Spain who volunteered in hospitals, relief stations and food distribution centres (Jackson 2002; López, Mirón-González, Castro and Jiménez 2021). Irish women were among those who provided medical assistance but the few studies that have shed light on their experiences have focused upon those who served the Republican cause. While exact figures are difficult to discern, Irish women can be traced on both sides of the conflict. We currently know of at least two Irish nurses who supported O'Duffy's Irish Brigade. In February 1937, several newspapers reported the departure of one E. MacGorisk from county Kildare and one B. Mulvaney, a trained nurse from county Meath. They departed alongside Father O'Daly from Enniskillen and thirteen members of the Dublin-based St. Mary's Pipers' band (*Irish Independent*, 20 February 1937: 11). Without sufficient sources, it is difficult to know why both women volunteered. However, MacGorisk's earlier association with the League of Youth (formerly known as the Blueshirts) could offer some insights. In 1934, she served as the secretary of the Broadford Branch of the women's unit helping to raise funds for the cash-strapped organisation (*The Blueshirt*, 22 December 1934: 7). Perhaps then, MacGorisk volunteered to follow some of her former Blueshirt members out of a conviction to do her part in the so-called fight against communism.

At the same time Mulvaney and MacGorisk left Ireland to join O'Duffy in Spain, Mary Elmes and Kathleen McColgan joined the University Ambulance Unit, established by Sir George Young in London. Both women were educated to university level, Elmes having graduated from Trinity College Dublin and McColgan from Oxford University, but neither had formal medical training. When Elmes arrived in Spain in February 1937, she was first posted to a food station in Almería before being assigned to a children's hospital in Murcia where she provided administrative assistance. In January 1939, she moved to Alicante where she was attached to the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker-run organisation (Finn 2017: 41-49). McColgan, for her part, served as a general relief worker in Quaker hospitals based in Almería and Murcia. In Spring 1938, she left Spain to deliver talks in Belfast on behalf of the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief (an umbrella organisation established to bring together political and non-political organisations working to combat the suffering of Spanish victims of war). Shortly after, she returned to Spain where she remained until February 1939 (Convery 2010: 42-43). Both McColgan and Elmes were attached to medical units run by the Quakers, who had a long tradition of providing relief on a non-political basis. The Spanish Civil War was no exception. That said, while the Quakers worked behind both Nationalist and Republican lines, Gabriel Pretus notes that many involved in Quaker relief activities in Spain were in fact sympathetic towards the Republican camp (2013: 203).

As stated above, there were also cases in which Irish women joined medical relief units that were overtly pro-Republican. Hannah (Ruth) Rutledge Ormsby from county Sligo, Ada Foxlee from county Donegal and Dr Catherine Lynch from Dublin are just three examples. Ormsby was attached to the Spanish Medical Aid Committee, a British relief organisation established in August 1936 by Isabel Brown, a committed member of the Communist Party of Great Britain (Alpert 1984: 423). Ormsby worked as a theatre nurse in Aragón, before moving to Barcelona where she lost her life because of a tragic fire which broke out in an apartment

block that was being used by the British Medical Unit (Convery 2010: 43). Foxlee trained as a horticulturist before pursuing a career in nursing at St Thomas' Hospital, London. During the opening stages of the civil war, she worked as a nurse in the British-American Hospital in Madrid (*Belfast Newsletter*, 28 November 1992: 2; *Sunday News*, 29 November 1992: 7). Lynch, for her part, trained in osteopathy and moved between Ireland, France and the United States with her practice. In 1938, she travelled to Perpignan, a French town close to the Spanish border which was an important point for refugees fleeing over the Pyrenees in the later stages of the war (*Workers' Republic*, 1 July 1938: 12; Soo 2013: 42). She made the sudden decision to leave for France after receiving a letter from an American aid worker stationed there describing how useful someone with her expertise would be (*Workers' Republic*, 1 July 1938: 12). Not much information is available regarding Ormsby and Foxlee's decision to work behind the Republican frontlines in Spain. In Lynch's case, her decision was based on a humanitarian impulse but her political sympathies were firmly with the Republican camp. This she expressed through her earlier involvement with the Women's Aid Committee, delivering speeches, organising meetings and holding fundraising events (*Irish Press*, 19 April 1937: 2; *Workers' Republic*, 1 July 1938: 12). Indeed, it was in campaigning for, rather than in the provision of, relief that most Irish women's contributions to the Spanish Civil War were found.

The Women's Aid Committee was the backbone of the pro-Republican lobby in Ireland whilst some 200 Irishmen were at the front fighting with the International Brigades. Founded in 1936, its aim was "to provide aid and comforts for [these] Irishmen". As the war progressed, the purpose of the Committee's funds expanded to include support for their families and the volunteers returning from Spain unemployed, wounded or disabled (*Irish Democrat*, 21 August 1937: 1; *Workers' Republic*, June 1938). When Frank Ryan was captured, funds were also used "to render him whatever assistance possible" (Women's Aid Committee pamphlet, NLI, MS 41, 204/2). The committee appealed for donations on a political basis. As mentioned, it saw the war as a struggle for the survival of democracy against the forces of fascism and this message was expounded at every opportunity. For instance, the Committee issued the following appeal in the *Irish Democrat*: "Are you against Fascism?" then "Do your Bit at Home" for the Spanish Republic in its struggle for democracy by donating to the Women's Aid Committee (12 June 1937: 5). Such appeals were met with both support and criticism. For example, upon hearing of the Committee's fund for victims of the Guernica bombing in April 1937, Mairin Mitchell wrote to Sheehy-Skeffington with a contribution to the fund and some brief comments about the parallels between Ireland and the Basque Country (*Irish Democrat*, 5 June 1937: 2). However, some months before, Sheehy-Skeffington had received an anonymous letter which criticised her appeal to "Irish Catholics to support the Legion of Satan!" despite "all the evidence of the evil campaign of Hellish Bolshevism". By "evidence" the writer presumably meant the subjective and sensationalist anti-clerical atrocities being reported in the pro-Nationalist Irish press. In any case, the letter went on to deliver an ominous warning: "a day of judgement is coming, and all your ill gotten money will avail you nothing on your Death" (Unsigned letter, 18 January 1937, NLI, MS 41, 203/1). Although working against the general public mood and clearly arousing the ire of some impassioned onlookers, the Women's Aid Committee continued to organise meetings and fundraisers in support of the Spanish Republic, and the Irishmen who had gone to defend it, until the International Brigades were disbanded in late 1938.

The Women's Aid Committee was also engaged with, and contributed to the work of, international organisations providing assistance to the Second Republic. For example, in March 1937, Sheehy-Skeffington was selected to represent the Women's Aid Committee at the National Conference of the Friends of the Spanish Republic in London (*Irish Press*, 8 March 1937: 10). Additionally, the suffragist Katherine Gillett-Gatty sent money on behalf of the Irish Friends of the Spanish Republic to the Spanish Medical Aid Committee in Britain to help

purchase equipment for its hospital in Spain (cheque from Katherine Gillett-Gatty, 18 January 1937, NLI, MS 41 204/4).

But, for all its efforts, the Committee could not match the kind of funds being raised by the pro-Franco lobby in Ireland, collections for which were organised in communities across the country (Convery 2012: 215). In Bandon, County Cork, for instance, several women established a committee to raise both "[m]oney and help" for the Nationalists. Reciting once again the religious line, they appealed for "the co-operation of all creeds and classes […] in this great fight for Christianity" (*Southern Star*, 19 September 1936: 2). The Catholic Church played a crucial role in fundraising for the Nationalists. Tim Fanning and McGarry note Aileen O'Brien's involvement in negotiating the controversial transfer of national church gate collections to the Irish Christian Front (2019: 130; 1999: 125-6). Shortly thereafter, O'Brien left the Irish Christian Front on bad terms. However, this did not mark the end of her pro-Nationalist activities. The following year, she conducted a lecture tour in the United States. Her lectures painted an unrecognisable picture of Franco as "a shy man without personal ambitions", a description that would not hold up to an examination of his military career (*Boston Globe*, 6 April 1938: 7). The Catholic press in the United States gave publicity to her ventures there, but journalists at home did not.[5] By this point, Ireland's initial "obsession" with events in Spain, as Daniel Convery notes, had waned (National Catholic Welfare Conference News Service, 4 March 1939: 13; Convery 2012: 215).

Finally, outside of the pro-Nationalist and pro-Republican divide, appeals for funds were also raised in Ireland on a non-partisan basis. An important organisation in the provision of neutral relief was the Save the Children Fund (SCF). The SCF was originally founded in Britain by the social reformer Eglantyne Jebb against the backdrop of the devastation of the First World War. Its aim was "to preserve child life wherever menaced by conditions of hardship or distress and to raise the standard of childcare and protection throughout the world". Like the Neutral Relief Fund mentioned earlier, the SCF sought to carry out this mission "irrespective of race, country, or creed" (The Nineteenth Annual Report of the Save the Children Fund, 1938: 5). As Emily Baughan has noted, the SCF adopted an international focus and in 1920, Jebb founded the Save the Children International Union (SCIU) in Geneva as "an umbrella body that drew together the efforts of child welfare societies from across Europe" (2021: 31). Jebb founded the Irish branch a year later. It set to work on providing relief for victims of the Volga famine (1921-23) but, as Anna Lively has explained, its focus soon shifted to domestic matters, particularly alleviating the plight of children in the west of Ireland (2025: 6-14). Several months after the Spanish Civil War had erupted, Katherine Monahan, secretary of the Irish Save the Children Fund (ISCF), wrote to the editor of the *Irish Times*. Her letter contained an appeal for funds on behalf of the SCIU to help in reuniting some 1200 Spanish children with their families who had been separated when hostilities first broke out. The appeal stressed the point that the SCIU's work was "carried out in an absolutely impartial manner". Monahan added a message of her own which reminded readers of the help the SCF had provided to Irish children in the past as well as the work it had done for children as far away as Japan and China. This time, she continued, Spanish children were in need of assistance and called on "every Irish lover of children to give generously" (*Irish Times*, 12 October 1936: 5).

However, Spanish children were not the only or even the primary focus of the ISCF: Irish children were. Whilst the war raged on in Spain, much of the group's efforts were directed towards improving the conditions of schools in the west of Ireland. It raised grants to provide heating and cleaning services and successfully lobbied the government to fund a midday meal scheme. It was also concerned with children's judicial matters, campaigning through the Joint Committee of Women's Societies and Social Workers for the "appointment of an extra woman

[5] The exception was a March 1939 *Irish Press* article which reported on a riot breaking out at O'Brien's lecture in Los Angeles between attendees and pro-Republican supporters who were protesting outside (9 March 1939).

probation officer to the children's court at Dublin" (Collated volume of *World's Children*, June 1938: 134, SCF/P/2/WOR/18/9). Furthermore, the ISCF chimed in on moral debates in Irish society. At a meeting of the national committee in June 1938, for example, members raised their concerns about the apparent demoralising effect cinema was having on Irish children (*Irish Times*, 1 June 1938: 5). Despite the group's focus on domestic concerns, the ISCF's appeal for Irish people to do their part in the provision of relief for Spanish children sheds light upon Irish involvement in international humanitarian networks during the interwar years. Moreover, it underscores another dimension to Irish people's response to the war in Spain; one that was based along impartial rather than partisan lines – a subject certainly worthy of further study.

Conclusion

Irish women perceived and contributed to the Spanish Civil War in different ways. They supported both warring parties by providing medical aid behind the frontlines in Spain or by raising funds at home. Some chose not to take sides, opting instead to help non-partisan humanitarian campaigns. Taken together, Irish women's responses to, and involvement in, the Spanish Civil War intersects with and sheds light upon important themes in interwar Europe. Nora Connolly-O'Brien, Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington and Aileen O'Brien's descriptions of the war in political and international terms highlights the fragmentary political context of later interwar Europe. All three argued that the war posed an imminent threat to Ireland. That threat came in different ideological guises. For Connolly-O'Brien and Sheehy-Skeffington, a Republican defeat in Spain would result in a war against fascism in Ireland. For O'Brien, a Republican victory would bring the "communist menace" to Ireland's shores, if, she feared, it was not there already. Despite their different political outlooks, all three looked upon extreme ideological movements in the interwar years as transnational processes to which Ireland was not immune. And, all three engaged with transnational networks designed to combat their spread. The nature of the Spanish Civil War, of course, cannot be explained in such simple political terms. However, the actions and words of these women highlight the fears among some that Ireland, although on the periphery of Europe, was as much at risk of being swept up by the rise of extreme ideological movements as any other country in interwar Europe.

Mairin Mitchell's account of the origins of the Spanish Civil War focuses upon the social and economic inequalities affecting interwar Spain. Her encounters with Spanish workers, with whom her sympathies lay, highlight the common social issues at play in interwar Europe and set the subject of land redistribution in an international context. The latter's interest in the acquisition of land by small Irish farmers demonstrates the international attention which Irish Land Reform Acts attracted. While contemporaries like Mitchell acknowledged the international interest in the Irish land question, historians have yet to explore fully how it was interpreted and contextualised by other European states and societies as they dealt with similar processes at home. Such studies could reveal more about Ireland's political, social and economic connections with Europe in the interwar years.

Finally, Irish women's involvement in the provision of relief in Spain offers insights of Ireland's participation in international humanitarian networks during the interwar years. Further examinations of Irish women who volunteered as nurses or general relief workers are needed to reveal more about their experiences in Spain, the motivations underpinning their actions and the international aid networks in which they were involved. The case-study of the Irish Save the Children Fund uncovers underexplored neutral responses in Ireland towards the Spanish Civil War. Any mention of Irish neutrality in the conflict in the literature to date is confined to De Valera's commitment to non-intervention. However, investigations into Irish participation in non-partisan aid organisations offer insights into the role humanitarianism played in Ireland's perceptions of its position in international affairs during the interwar years.

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Received: 01/10/2025 Final version accepted: 15/02/2026

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