

Fighting fascism, then and now

It was the International Brigades' Memorial Day in Jubilee Park beside the Thames in London. It was a hot day with no breeze, "a Spanish day", one of the Brigaders said. Like the others, all in their eighties and older, he took shelter in the shade and rested on his walking stick. He wore his red beret. Twenty yards away, tourists waiting to board the London Eye, the great ferris wheel built for the Millennium, looked bemused at the elderly men in their berets, and the rest of us, without knowing who we were, what the men had done and why we were celebrating them.

Between 1936 and 1939, the International Brigade fought in Spain on the side of the Republican government against the fascist forces of General Franco. There were British, Americans, Irish, Canadians, Australians and others. They were very young and all volunteers, determined to stop fascism in its tracks. They made a difference.

Although the government eventually fell, in February 1937, the 600-strong British Battalion of the XVth International Brigade stopped Franco's advance on Madrid. Four hundred were killed, wounded or captured in four days' bloody battle, Madrid was spared. There were many battles like that. Sam Russell, a Brigader, described eloquently how on the Sierra del Pandols, "there was not enough soil to bury the dead, so we covered them with stones". The poet Martin Green who had written of his father, George Green, stood at the edge of the crowd. George was killed when Martin was four years old. For his father, he wrote:

You had no funeral nor hearse
No grave except the place you fell
No dirge but a soldier's curse
And an explosion tolled your knell ...

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I was a boy too young
To take the blow that felled
The tree that was your man.

On this warm Saturday 67 years on, we stood and sang a tribute to them. To the tune of “Red River Valley”, we sang the song of their battle for Madrid and to which they marched and rallied:

There’s a valley in Spain called Jarama
It’s a place that we all know so well
It is there that we gave of our manhood
And so many of our brave comrades fell.
We are proud of the British Battalion
And the stand for Madrid that they made
There we fought like true sons of the people
As part of the Fifteenth Brigade

Now that we’ve left that dark valley of sorrow
And its memories we ne’er shall forget
So before we continue to this reunion
Let us stand to our glorious dead.

And we stood and remembered them. Jack Jones, the president of the International Brigade Memorial Trust, read out the names of his comrades who had died since their last reunion: Charlie Matthews (who had been reported killed on the battlefield in 1939 and whose obituary had appeared in his local paper) and Cyril Sexton, who was wounded at Jarama and went on to fight at Aragon, Belchite, Gandesa and Ebro where he was wounded again. Last April, he died at the age of 91.

I was given the honour of describing the meaning of the Brigaders’ heroism today.

I thanked David Marshall, an International Brigader who had put my name forward and whose poetry had been an inspiration for what I wanted to say.

This is what I said: I first understood the importance of the struggle in Spain from Martha Gellhorn. Martha was one of my oldest friends. She was one of the greatest war correspondents and is remembered for her dispatches from Spain during the Civil War. In November 1938, she wrote this:

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“In Barcelona, it was perfect bombing weather. The cafes along the Ramblas were crowded. There was nothing much to drink: a sweet fizzy poison called orangeade and a horrible liquid supposed to be sherry. There was, of course, nothing to eat. Everyone was out, enjoying the cold afternoon sunlight. No bombers had come for at least two hours. The flower stalls look bright and pretty along the promenade. ‘The flowers are all sold, Senores. For the funerals of those killed in the eleven o’clock bombing, poor souls’. It had been a clear and cold day all yesterday ... ‘What beautiful weather’, a woman said, and she stood, holding her shawl around her, staring at the sky. ‘And the nights are as fine as the days. A catastrophe,’ she said ... everyone listened for the sirens all the time, and when we saw the bombers, they were like tiny silver bullets, moving forever up, across the sky.”

How familiar that sounds. Barcelona. Guernica. Hiroshima. Vietnam. Cambodia. Palestine. Afghanistan. Iraq.

Martha never tired of explaining why people fought for the Republic, “the Causa”, and why going to Spain was so important. She wrote of the International Brigade: “Whatever their nationality, whether they were Communists, anarchists, socialists, poets, plumbers, middle-class professional men, or the one Abyssinian prince ... they were fighting for us all in Spain.”

The enemy then was fascism, out-and-out fascism. Armband wearing, strutting, ranting fascism.

The enemy then was a great world power, rapacious, with plans of domination, of capturing the world’s natural resources: the oil fields of the Caspian and the Middle East, the mineral riches of Africa. They seemed invincible.

The enemy then was also lies. Deceit. News dressed up as propaganda. Appeasement. A large section of the British establishment saw fascism as its friend. Their voice was a section of the British press: The Times, the Daily Mail.

To them, the real threat was from ordinary people, who were dreamers, many of them, who imagined a new world in which the dignity of ordinary life was respected and celebrated. Some were wise dreamers and some were foolish dreamers, but they understood the nature of fascism, and they saw through the lies and the deceit and the appeasement.

They also knew that the true enemy didn’t always wear armbands, and didn’t always strut, or command great rallies, but were impeccable English gentlemen who supported ruthless power behind a smokescreen of propaganda that appropriated noble concepts like “democracy” and “freedom” and “our way of life” and “our values”.

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Does all this sound familiar?

I ask that question, because when I read the aims of the International Brigade Memorial Trust, I was struck by a reference to “the historical legacy of the men and women who fought with the International Brigades against fascism ...”

The “historical legacy” of the International Brigade, as Martha Gellhorn wrote, is that they were fighting for us all. For me, that means a legacy of truth – a way of seeing through the smokescreen of propaganda, including and especially the propaganda of our own governments: a legacy of confronting great and rapacious power in whatever form it appears.

That legacy is needed today more than ever. Impeccable gentlemen now invade defenceless countries in our name. They speak of freedom and democracy, and our way of life and our values. They don’t wear armbands and they don’t strut. They are different from fascists. But their goals are not different. Conquest, domination, the control of vital resources.

When the judges at Nuremberg laid down the ground rules of international law following the Second World War, they described an unprovoked, violent invasion of a defenceless country as “a crime against humanity, the paramount war crime.”

The world is a very different place from Barcelona in 1938, and from the Sierra del Pandols, and the Valley of Jarama, and all the battlefields of Spain, but the legacy of those who confronted fascism then endures as a warning to us all today.

It is a warning about sinister power behind democratic facades that uses the battle cries of democracy. It is a warning about messianic politicians, apparently touched by God, and about appeasement and truth. And it is about moral courage: about speaking out, breaking a silence. I salute those of you International Brigaders who are here today, who did more than speak out. I thank you and your fallen comrades for what you did for us all, and for your legacy of truth and your moral courage. La Lucha continua!