

Australian Participation in the Spanish Civil War

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Abstract

A small number of Australians participated directly in the Spanish Civil War without the sanction of their Government. A few lost their lives. This article discusses some of the motivating factors that encouraged these people, both educated and uneducated, to become willing participants in a war that did not directly concern Australia. It will be shown that there was a complexity of reasons for their participation dependent upon the point in which their personal lives had reached.

This paper has been peer reviewed

Spain, a country many thousands of miles from Australia attracted at least 66 Australian men and women to become directly involved in the Civil War between 1936 and 1939. Their roles varied from front line duties to humanitarian aid. This essay proposes to investigate what motivated these men and women to risk their lives in a war in which Australia was not officially involved. It will be contended that Australian writer Nettie Palmer's assertion that they went "because they saw a fight between freedom and tyranny" is simplistic with the real reasons far more complex.¹ Certainly, historian George Esenwein believes foreigners had little knowledge of the complexities of the causal factors for the war, and therefore depicted the war as Communism against Fascism.² Judith Keene believes for some it was a "juncture" in their personal lives that motivated them.³ The task of gaining an insight into their individual personalities and motivations is not easy, and will require reference to more recent literature on motivational studies. Difficulties also arise owing to a lack of official records because of

secrecy at the time associated with the Communist Party and the formation of the International Brigades. In addition, many volunteers were born overseas but lived in Australia prior to the commencement of the Spanish Civil War. They volunteered in Australia, and were therefore considered ‘Australian’. There will also be a brief overview of the Spanish Civil War, and a *précis* of the International Brigades and the Spanish Foreign Legion.

The failed military coup or *pronunciamiento* that took place in Spanish Morocco (17-18 July 1936) was the catalyst that set Spain on the path of a civil war which lasted for nearly three years.⁴ The coup was an attempt to oust the Republican, government seen as Left wing, and was widely reported in the popular press.⁵ General Francisco Franco subsequently became leader of the Nationalists and utilized the Fascists, in particular the aid of Germany and Italy, to achieve the establishment of a dictatorship.

While the *pronunciamiento* heralded the War, George Esenwein states the War’s origins “had sprung from deeply rooted domestic issues”.⁶ Esenwein adds that these were a complexity of “social, economic and political circumstances”.⁷ Author Ronald Fraser agreed, believing “the weakness of capitalist development” was a contributing factor as Spain had once been a powerful nation but entered the twentieth century industrially backward.⁸ This had additional ramifications as the Spanish Government, unable to manufacture its own armaments, required the assistance from Russia for the supply of arms.⁹ In Fraser’s opinion, the burgeoning proletariat during the period of industrialization created additional political pressure and an associated “socio-political crisis” which could only be solved by a civil war.¹⁰ Martin Blinkhorn also asserts the “gross maldistribution of wealth”, and the powers of the “Church, army and monarchy” were contributing factors that created additional social tensions.¹¹

However, while composed of foreigners from various countries of the world, the International Brigade, according to R. Dan Richardson, represented a “great crusade” of the “response of world democracy to the threat of fascism”.¹² Richardson added that they were a “propaganda instrument ... used by the Comintern for its own purposes”.¹³ Indeed British sculptor and Spanish War participant, Jason Gurney believed, in hindsight, the volunteers “were the victims of a vast propaganda conspiracy”.¹⁴ At the time, the volunteers had thought they were fighting for the cause of democracy against Fascism. Gurney further stated:

Nobody was concerned with the facts of the situation. The war became the microcosm of all the ideological divisions of the time – freedom and repression, constitutional and arbitrary authority, nationalism and internationalism, the people and the aristocracy, Catholicism and Marxism ...¹⁵

Harry Browne states the International Brigades were believed to have been composed of “middle-class intellectuals”,¹⁶ however, this has been refuted in recent years. Esenwein and Adrian Shubert, for example, said the “vast majority ... [were] working class”.¹⁷ They added that famous “artists, poets and writers” became “identified with the conflict”.¹⁸ Antony Beevor asserts this was because the “intellectual minority” were able to tell about their experiences in books, newspapers or film which were readily published for the public, thus giving a false impression of the composition of the International Brigades, and of the Civil War.¹⁹

On the opposite (Nationalist) side of the conflict was the Spanish Foreign Legion led by General Franco. According to John Galey and Luis Bolin, the legion was established in 1920 and was composed of highly trained and disciplined professional soldiers with some volunteers.²⁰ Historian Judith Keene believes their

ideology was to “save the Church” and “defeat Communism”.²¹ One known Australian, Nugent Bull from Sydney, volunteered.²² Bull was a devout Catholic, and was highly influenced by his teacher, Brother Gerard, an “activist in Catholic intellectual circles”.²³ Keene adds Bull followed events in Spain closely, and “attended the Domain [in Sydney], spiritedly supporting Catholic speakers and heckling the Socialists and those of the Left”.²⁴ His character was described as extroverted.

Keene notes Bull was single, the son of a Sydney undertaker, when he joined the Spanish Foreign Legion on 16 October 1937 in Spain.²⁵ In the 1930s, Bull had taken over the management of the family firm after his father suffered a stroke. Keene believes his “more flamboyant manner” in the business may have displeased his family so that when his elder brother returned, Bull was relieved of his position. He then kept books for several other businesses, but Keene believes his life had become unsettled, perhaps aimless. This may have provided the impetus for Bull to participate in the Spanish Civil War – or, as Keene notes, it was a ‘juncture’ in his life. He left for Italy in July 1937 and remained there for several weeks before crossing into Spain via France to enlist.²⁶

Meanwhile, in Sydney in August 1936, the Spanish Relief Committee was formed.²⁷ Despite first impressions that it was a humanitarian group seeking funds to assist the Spanish people during the war, it acted as a front for the Communist Party of Australia to recruit volunteers for the International Brigade.²⁸ According to Browne, “communist-inspired organisations” throughout the world were used for recruitment. Richardson added that there were “quotas”, and communist parties “began using and expanding their existing organizational networks for recruitment” purposes.²⁹ Richardson also stated the aim was to attract non-communists so as not to deplete the already converted as the

attrition rate through injury or death was high.³⁰ The *Workers' Weekly* reported that at their second meeting, it was also decided to raise funds to send a Red Cross Unit, comprising four registered nurses to Spain.³¹

However, the exact number of Australians involved in the Spanish Civil War is unknown, and may never be known, due to a lack of documentation. Academic, Dr. Venturino Venturini adds many left “secretly and furtively” for a war in which Australia was not officially involved.³² In addition, some Australian participants were already overseas when war broke out. Others made their way independent of the Spanish Relief Committee’s recruitment drive, and may have included Spanish and Italian immigrants who had not yet been naturalized as Australians. Amirah Inglis believes 66 Australians were involved, which contrasts with Palmer’s initial estimate of 44.³³ International Brigader, Sam Aarons, noted several other Australians including a Clive Smith who is not mentioned in Inglis’ list.³⁴

Venturini names 65 who fought on the Republican side.³⁵ Inglis also states over one third of the volunteers were born overseas, that is outside of Australia.³⁶

It is contentious as to what motivated the volunteers. Political theorist Michael W. Jackson suggests they found in Spain what they could not find in their home countries, and that was “meaning and purpose into their lives”.³⁷ He adds “they were no longer exiles, misfits, or strangers, [but] a community wherein they had a place and a task to perform in the fighting”.³⁸ Psychologists E. Gil Clary and Mark Snyder believe volunteering is a means of escaping from personal problems and therefore has a protective function.³⁹ The Australians who went to Spain were highly motivated as there were difficulties in getting there. As well, there were a number of

possible influential factors that occurred at a vulnerable time in their lives which propelled them. Keene believes it was a complex combination of personal and political reasons that motivated some to participate.⁴⁰

Those who went did so without the blessing of the Government as Australia was aligned with Britain's non-intervention policy. The Prime Minister, Joseph Lyons, stated in Parliament on 9 October 1936:

I have already declared that the policy of the Commonwealth Government in regard to the Spanish conflict is one of strict neutrality, and have appealed to the Australian public to refrain directly or indirectly from taking any partisan measures. The Commonwealth Government has no reason to believe that this appeal will not be respected.⁴¹

Further, on 23 October 1936 in the House of Representatives, the Minister of Health, William Hughes, was asked if he knew of the “four Sydney nurses who have volunteered for Red Cross work for the Spanish Government”, to which he replied:

I have seen the paragraph to which the honourable member has directed my attention. I have my own opinion of these nurses, whom, happily I do not know. While I should be prepared to exercise my powers of persuasion over them, and, if necessary, offer them inducements to remain in Australia, officially I have no authority over them.⁴²

In addition, travelling to Spain was not easy for Australians. Diane Menghetti states that “distance and costs” were deterrents to many who would have otherwise volunteered.⁴³ Frank Huelin, from Sydney, stowed away on a ship from Brisbane, but was discovered in Jamaica and sent back.⁴⁴ Huelin, an itinerant, told a Brisbane magistrate that:

I believe in democracy ... The Spanish Government and people are defending world democracy. It was my job to help them.⁴⁵

Western Australian, Charles McIlroy, admitted to authorities he had “stowed away on a boat”.⁴⁶ In contrast, English born Charles Walters, formerly a fur trapper from Myponga in South Australia, and later, unemployed of Tasmania, worked his passage to London, and from there to Paris posing as a tourist.⁴⁷ Lloyd Edmonds, though, was in London planning to study at the London School of Economics when he decided to join the International Brigade.⁴⁸ Writing to his father, Edmonds said “the fever of war has been getting into my blood”.⁴⁹ Documents in the British archives state that on 12 May 1937 he was “en route for Dunkirk thought to be going to Spain”.⁵⁰ In contrast, four Australian nurses had their passages paid by the Spanish Relief Committee.⁵¹

Communism and trade unionism also played major roles in the psyche of individuals. It is a fact that most of the Australians directly involved in the War were Communists or trade unionists.⁵² Even three of the four nurses of the Red Cross Unit were influenced by Communism or Socialism, the exception being Agnes Hodgson who, according to Keene, had “no contact with the Australian political Left”.⁵³ Hodgson had previously nursed in Italy and was eager to return to Europe. She was fluent in Italian which had made her head nurse, Mary Lowson, suspicious Hodgson was a Fascist.

However, the Great Depression was of even greater significance in Australian lives. Stuart Macintyre believes the Depression forced “communism and liberal capitalism into an alliance against a common enemy” - Fascism.⁵⁴ Perhaps more salient was that Communism provided unemployed itinerants with a sense of

“purpose and companionship” at a time in their lives when they were considered outcasts by many.⁵⁵

Additionally, Inglis described many of the volunteers as “battlers who had struggled through the deeply hard times of the depression”.⁵⁶ However, David Malet, a political scientist, believes volunteers were reacting to the Depression, and therefore unemployment, by using the fight against anti-fascists as a means of expressing that reaction.⁵⁷ Malet wrote of American volunteers as being “radicalized by the Depression” and this was true of the Australians.⁵⁸

As well, Menghetti said many Australian Catholics supported Franco as they believed the “civil war was part of a communist plot to infiltrate and control Western Europe”.⁵⁹ Keene refers to the defence of the Catholic Church as part of “a larger crusade”,⁶⁰ and adds “Franco and the Nationalists were a powerful symbol for pious Catholics”.⁶¹ During an interview with historian Wendy Lowenstein, Niall Brennan thought young Australian Catholics in the 1930s had a “ghetto mentality” and “defended anything that was done in the name of the Church”.⁶² Australian Catholic newspapers, such as Adelaide’s *Southern Cross* and Melbourne’s *The Advocate* were influential in reporting deplorable acts of violence against Spanish clerics.⁶³

Further, Franco’s supporters, who Keene said were a “diverse group”, had a “visceral hatred of Communists” and thus perceived the Spanish Republic as equating with Communism.⁶⁴ Historian, Gabriel Jackson, has noted the destruction of the Spanish churches and the murder of the priests “had brought the Spanish priesthood to the side of the insurgents in a simple reflex of self-defense”.⁶⁵ Not all Catholics, though, were on Franco’s side. Participant Ron Hurd was a self-professed “Roman Catholic” who opposed Fascism

in the belief of “freedom and the rights of man”.⁶⁶ Professor Ross Fitzgerald notes:

The Catholic hierarchy’s strident denunciations of Communism reflected in part is uneasy awareness that a significant section of the Catholic community still gave its support to the Left and did not heed Church dictates about how to act politically.⁶⁷

Additionally, while Beavor agrees that unemployment was an issue, he adds volunteers were in search of excitement.⁶⁸ Elizabeth Burchill, an Australian registered nurse who answered an advertisement in England, appears to have been motivated by a quest for “adventurous nursing”,⁶⁹ and “humanitarian concerns”.⁷⁰ In her memoirs, Burchill stated she “considered early that nursing did not mean staying in one place”.⁷¹ She added:

The Civil War had been raging in Spain for some time and the opportunity to become involved in a foreign country at war seemed unmatched for adventurous nursing”.⁷²

For nurse Mary Lawson, membership of the Communist Party was a major impetus. Lecturing in Australia during and after her duty in Spain, she saw the fight as one against Fascism.⁷³ However, Lawson’s sister reported Mary as having had “an adventurous disposition since childhood”.⁷⁴

On the other hand, Nurse May Macfarlane gave two reasons for going to Spain:

Firstly, ... every assistance should be given to the Spanish people who are fighting to defend their constitutionally elected government, and secondly, ... the result of the Spanish Civil War will be felt all over the world.⁷⁵

Inglis believes Macfarlane's political beliefs were influenced by Mary Lawson, her head nurse.⁷⁶ Lawson, Macfarlane, and New Zealand born Una Wilson, had worked together at Lidcombe Hospital in Sydney when they decided to volunteer for the Red Cross Unit as a means of escaping intolerable nursing conditions.⁷⁷ Keene added "Spain was a juncture in their lives providing an opportunity to travel and use their skills in a just cause".⁷⁸

In contrast, Ernest Barrata was representative of North Queenslanders who responded to the war. Italian by birth, but a naturalised Australian, Barrata became a Communist Party member and was involved in the 1935 sugar strikes.⁷⁹ Menghetti believes a key factor was Italians and Spaniards from the sugar growing district were "strong anti-fascist[s] before the Spanish war".⁸⁰ The working class Italians had experienced Fascism before emigrating to Australia, so perceived the threat to democracy as real.⁸¹ A letter published in *The West Australian* from an unknown Italian was quite clear in his belief that war was about the fight for democracy against Fascism, and Spanish people "hate[d] Fascism like poison".⁸²

Communist Lloyd Edmonds, a former Melbourne school teacher and secretary of the Victorian Industrial Teachers' Union, had initially been a member of the Australian Labour Party.⁸³ Edmonds had been raised in a unionist and socialist environment.⁸⁴ Macintyre believes Edmonds joined because of a "feeling of obligation".⁸⁵ In another case, Inglis mentions volunteer Jack Franklyn as having read "robust anti-clericalism and socialism" since 1920.⁸⁶ An enigmatic figure, Jack Franklyn, was believed to have served in the First World War in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), or the British Army, and on his return from Spain, to have enlisted in the second AIF. Palmer also stated he was born in Lancashire, but other records give his birthplace as Sydney. It is

therefore difficult to trace Jack Franklyn before or after the Spanish War. It has, however, not been confirmed he served in either the Australian Army or the British Army. There is therefore a suspicion Franklyn may have been using an alias, or constructed a biography, with a heroic persona, to suit the time.

In a letter published in 1938 Franklyn admitted he went to fight Fascism.⁸⁷ He later stated:

I fought fascism as a trade unionist, as a member of the International Brigade in Spain, I know it is my duty now to fight wherever fascism rears its ugly head.⁸⁸

There were other similar stories. Ken McPhee, aged 23 of Sydney, when asked why he went said:

Because the Spanish people were fighting for freedom, and if we couldn't help them through our governments at least I could help by fighting with them.⁸⁹

Sam Aarons, who, according to Macintyre was a Jewish member of the Communist Party of Australia, saw the International Brigaders as anti-fascist fighters.⁹⁰ Aarons, in a letter to the *Workers' Weekly* in December 1937, wrote of having witnessed the bombing of a school in Barcelona. He said:

It is then that one knows such a surge of hatred against this bestiality which seeks to engulf the world. It is then that I want to be able to talk to the Australian people because I feel I MUST convince them of the need for unity to destroy finally such monsters.⁹¹

In his reminiscences in 1973, Aarons believed the start of the Spanish Civil War “aroused world-wide interest”, and also happened at the time the World Olympiad was due to start in

Barcelona.⁹² The World Olympiad was an “international labour sports movement” organized in opposition to the Berlin Olympics “as an expression of international working-class solidarity”.⁹³ It attracted unionists, socialists and communists from around the world. According to Aarons, those athletes remaining in Spain, after the start of the Civil War, became part of the International Brigade. Aarons stated the events that had occurred in Spain had “shocked him considerably”.⁹⁴ As to why he enlisted, Aarons said:

I thought that it was all very well to say you are opposed to fascism and that fascism must be halted, but maybe I should do something about it myself.

However, when delving more deeply into Aarons past, it appears he had an unsettled life. Melbourne born Aarons had worked as a civil servant in Sydney after the First World War.⁹⁵ Aarons said that he “was fed up with being a civil servant” as “they had ink in their veins and red tape all round them”.⁹⁶ He returned to Melbourne to work with his father, but owing to disagreements, he left. In 1923, Aarons joined the Communist Party of Australia in Melbourne and later returned to Sydney. There, he went into business with his brother-in-law opening a “string of While-U-Wait shoe repair shops”.⁹⁷ It was not until late 1927 that Aarons became deeply involved with the Communist party after he witnessed a demonstration protesting against the executions of two American anarchists.⁹⁸ Aarons became a committed Communist, and the Depression saw the Communist party focus on the rights of the unemployed, as well as protesting against Fascism.⁹⁹

Bill Young, who died in Spain, was quoted when leaving Australia as saying “I hate fascism and am glad I’m going to fight it with weapons in hand”.¹⁰⁰ Also killed was Bill Morcom who had a “devotion to the working-class movement, [and] to the Communist Party”.¹⁰¹ As well Harry Hynes, who too was killed, went because

“he loved liberty, and was an implacable foe of the exploiters”.¹⁰² Unemployed Charlie Walters said he hated Fascism.¹⁰³ He later added he “wouldn’t mind dying for democracy”, although he was one of the lucky ones to have survived the war and was repatriated back to Australia.¹⁰⁴

Committed Communist, Jack Stevens, “active ... in Sydney and in the Northern N.S.W. coalfields” was killed in Spain. English born, Stevens founded the Western Australian branch of the Communist Party “rallying the unemployed”.¹⁰⁵ In a tribute to him of his work in Western Australia, Australian author and Communist, Katharine Susannah Pritchard wrote:

Shabby and hungry, he struggled against tremendous difficulties in the work he had undertaken. Very little money could be raised for it, in those days; and he spent every available penny on organisation work and propaganda.¹⁰⁶

While political doctrine was the most influential factor, caution must be made when accepting this at face value as political theorist Professor Michael W. Jackson recounts the story of a British volunteer who used the excuse of anti-fascism to fend off questions of why he really volunteered.¹⁰⁷ Inglis reports that, while researching more recently released documents from the Comintern archives, “all volunteers gave ‘anti-fascism’ as their motivation”.¹⁰⁸ As these were Communist documents, it could be expected that the Australians would give anti-fascism as their reason. Most of the Australian population were exposed to the same influential factors, yet only a select few decided to act upon their beliefs by participating. Esenwein and Shubert believe personal reasons were motivational and could include persecution.¹⁰⁹ Paul Preston identifies some volunteers were unemployed, while others were adventurers, and the decision to go was a “conscious choice”.¹¹⁰

Bolin, however, believed some were a mixture of misfits of society, and ex-prisoners as well as those wanting to “atone for past misdeeds”.¹¹¹

Alternatively, behavioural theorist Samuel Shye asserts “volunteering is altruistic ... and ... it serves the interests of the volunteer”, therefore it is necessary to also assess what is gained from the experience.¹¹² Those who returned home were accorded a heroes welcome. For example, Ron Hurd was described by Inglis as a “tough adventurer”, with a “pugnacious personality”.¹¹³ Hurd had been a seaman and trade unionist both in Australia and the United Kingdom. On returning injured from Spain, Hurd became a spokesperson for the Spanish cause, touring Australia, giving lectures on behalf of the Spanish Relief Committee, and feted wherever he went.¹¹⁴ In a letter to the editor of the *Tasmanian Advocate*, a supporter said Hurd equated what he and other Australian volunteers were doing as maintaining the “traditions of the A.I.F. in the Great War.”¹¹⁵

In conclusion, while the *pronunciamiento* signalled the start of the Spanish Civil War it was not the cause, a fact which many failed to realize. They believed the war was a battle for democracy against Fascism the latter of which posed a threat to the world. Australians went to Spain without the sanction of the Australian Government. Most were also Communists or trade unionists. However, it is apparent there were other motivational factors which induced their participation, and these generally related to their personal lives. The Depression created unemployment and a sense of isolation for some, but the Spanish Civil War offered an opportunity to perform a useful and seemingly worthy function, with a sense of comradeship, and being welcomed as heroes on their return home. Thus Palmer’s assessment of why they went was simplistic. It is also apparent that this topic is worthy of further research.

About the Author

Bronte is a hospital trained Registered Nurse and Registered Midwife, and completed a Diploma of Applied Science (Nursing) in 1985, and a Bachelor of Arts majoring in History and Archaeology from Flinders University in 2010. She is completing a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) at Flinders University. Her main interests are Australian and British history; Medical, Nursing and Midwifery history, and Genealogy. She has a strong interest in South Australian History in general, and has completed for submission an Honours thesis on an aspect of midwifery history at the Destitute Asylum in Adelaide.

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- ⁷⁷ Inglis, *Australians in the Spanish Civil War*, p. 62.
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