

OXFORDSHIRE AND THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR 1936-39

Liz Woolley, a specialist in the history of Oxford and Oxfordshire, gave a fascinating talk to the Peace Group in May about Oxfordshire's involvement in the Spanish Civil War, 1936 – 1939. The war began when a right wing coup against the democratically elected government met with armed resistance from socialists and republicans. 28 countries, including the UK and France, signed a non-interventionist pact which outraged many in this country who were fearful of the rise of fascism and horrified by the indiscriminate slaughter and suffering inflicted on civilians. 35000 volunteers, including 2,500 from Britain and Ireland, joined International Brigades and travelled to Spain. Many joined the fighting on the front line, others gave medical support as doctors, nurses or ambulance drivers. Others were reporters and administrators.

Thirty one volunteers went from Oxfordshire of whom 6 were killed. They came from a great variety of backgrounds, from car workers to Oxford University Dons and students. Some were Quakers, whose motivation was humanitarian, others were communists or socialists with a more political motivation, but all were united against Franco and the nationalists. Liz described the personal stories of many local individuals which were very moving.

There was huge support from their families and communities back in Oxfordshire. Here too, town and gown worked together to provide aid and raise awareness. The national 'Aid for Spain' organisation raised £2 million by 1939 and in Oxford the Mayor set up the 'Spanish Relief Fund'. There was a 'Shop for Spain' on George Street; local engineer Arthur Exell made splints with metal rods donated by the University; Harley Davidson bikes were sent from the US, converted in Oxford and smuggled to Spain under sacks of potatoes; Mrs Carritt, whose 2 sons had gone to fight, held knitting classes at her house in Boars Hill to make blankets. Safe passage was provided by the International Brigade in Spain for 14 young republicans who were accommodated at Old Prebendal House in Shipton-Under-Wychwood. The University had become more left wing in the early 30s and there was rising political awareness and strong anti-fascist feeling. There were academic refugees who gave eye witness accounts and in 1938 a delegation of students visited Spain. Edward Heath and Dennis Healey, both students at the time, were heavily involved in student activities to raise funds and awareness.

In 1937 with the terrible destruction of Guernica, 4000 Basque children were evacuated and arrived here by ship, against our government's wishes. They were housed in 'colonies' including Thame, Shipton-Under-Wychwood, Aston and Buscot Park in Oxfordshire. Here the 2nd Lord Faringdon Gavin Henderson, a pacifist, socialist and keen supporter of the Spanish Republican cause, took in about 40 children and employed Luis Portillo, father of Michael, as a teacher. He also gave shelter to exiled writers including Arturo Barea who is commemorated with a plaque on the 'Volunteer' pub in Faringdon.

The International Brigade Memorial Trust has raised money for a plaque to remember those from Oxfordshire who volunteered and all who supported them at home. They hope to site it by South Parks in Oxford and have it dedicated in spring 2017.

If you would like to know more, Liz Woolley has co-written a book '*No Other Way: Oxfordshire and the Spanish Civil War, 1936-39*' which is for sale in Blackwells. After such an interesting talk. I would highly recommend it.

Faringdon Peace Group meets on the first Wednesday of the month in the Friends Meeting House, Lechlade Road. All are welcome to our next meeting when Nigel Day from Oxford will be talking about 'Trident Replacement – the most important vote this year'. Our Grand Peace Fete will take place on 2nd July, 2 – 5 at Clock House, Coleshill. More details from Karen Vogt: 01367-241707, karen@vogt.org.uk