

NO PASARAN!

Liz Wells

During the Spanish civil war new small lightweight cameras, like the Leica and Rolleiflex, facilitated 'action' photography. The photographs offered a previously unknown sense of immediacy. Robert Capa's famous shot of a soldier at the moment of death would not have been taken with more cumbersome equipment.

Despite extensive exposure to war photography and the 'image fatigue'

effect, the photographs taken during the civil war in Spain still offer powerful testimony to the strength of a people caught up in mass struggle. In the current exhibition this is emphasised through grouping photographs thematically: refugees, street fighting, the front, etc. We see the brutal consequences of war: mummified bodies of nuns exhumed and displayed in Barcelona; soldiers looting; the ravaged streets of Toledo. We see women soldiers at the front. We see wounded civilians, exhausted refugees. . .

No Pasaran! is a touring exhibition of the work of seven photographers organised



Victim of the Bombing of Lerida by Augusti Centelles



Estremadura Front, 1936 by Hans Namuth Georg Reisner



Soldiers Looting by Augusti Centelles

by the Arnolfini Gallery in Bristol. Close inspection reveals some important differences in style and subject matter. Clearly everyone visited the front, but Capa and Taro worked there extensively; Centelles is remarkable for portraiture; Seymour became internationally famous for work on civilian daily life during the war.

Catalan photographers Campana and Centelles were immediately involved. Others went to Spain for different reasons, but chose to stay on because of their sympathy with the republican cause. The work was risky. Gerda Taro, one of few women war photographers, left Germany in 1933 only to be killed in action in Spain in 1937.

No Pasaran! will be at Mappin Art Gallery, Sheffield until August 10. Then it will tour to: The Gallery of Photography, Dublin Sept 29-Oct 25; Newlyn Orion Gallery, Penzance November 1-29 and Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter Jan 31-Feb 28 1987.

FREEDOM SONGS

Roy Palmer

'If you're frightened, bloody well sing'. The advice was given at the battle of Jarama by Sam Wild to men of the British battalion fighting in Spain for the republic. And sing they did, on the march and at rest, on ceremonial occasions and even in battle.

The war in Spain began 50 years ago, on 18 July 1936, with an attempt by officers of the extreme Right to seize power from the elected centre-left government. It was not so much a civil war in the usual sense as a war between the mass of the Spanish people and the bulk of the army. The insurgents received massive and continuing support in men and material from Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy. The republican government had some help from the USSR and from foreign volunteers organised mainly in the International Brigades.

Well over 1,500 books in English alone have been written about the Spanish conflict. The part played by songs might seem trivial, but the Spanish war commissariat considered it important enough to publish in 1938 a collection in 16 languages of songs sung by the International Brigades.

Everybody knew the *International*, which often rang out in several different languages at once. After that, each national contingent had its own repertoire of re-

volutionary and socialist songs. The British sang *The Red Flag*, the Germans, *Die Rote Fahne*, and the Italians, *Bandiera Rossa*, which were more or less the same in title but quite different in substance.

Marching songs have a special appeal to soldiers, lightening as they do the weary miles. The anti-fascist Germans, many of whom had been living in exile in Spain, had their own specially-written songs. One of these, *United Front*, was written by Berthold Brecht and set to music by Hans Eisler.

John Sommerfield heard the Germans of the famous Thaelmann column singing in Madrid in 1937, and was deeply impressed: 'They marched magnificently, singing one of Eisler's marching songs, their voices loud and beautifully together, the words of the song and the beat of the marching feet all together making one single noise. It was a song they had sung before on demonstrations in Germany. . . . It was the voice of free Germany, and they were singing it again going up the front and knowing better than any of us what they were fighting against'.

One of the German songs, *The Peatbog Soldiers*, was written in 1933 by an unknown prisoner in the Borgermoor concentration camp. At first the Nazi guards tolerated something which seemed apoli-

tical, but the message of hope in the last verse was sung with such gusto that the song was later forbidden. A released prisoner brought it out. In Spain it was passed on, and many British brigaders learned it there.

In turn, English speakers contributed songs which were taken up by the Germans, and by others too, including the Spanish - and every battalion of the International Brigades had Spaniards in it. There were versions in several languages of *Hold the Fort*, a union song based on an American hymn. Bob Doyle heard it sung by the British anti-tank squad during the battle of Belchite, and Bill Alexander remembers it to the unlikely accompaniment of recorder and spoons while marching to the cookhouse for meals.

We'll meet today in freedom's cause and raise
our voices high;
We'll join our hands in union strong to battle
or to die.
(Chorus) Hold the fort for we are coming,
union men be strong.
Side by side we battle onward, victory will
come.

Stern sentiments of this kind were widespread, but there were also humorous songs. In one version of *Casey Jones* the superhuman engine-driver is killed while strike-breaking, then goes to heaven where he scabs on the angels who happen to be on strike. Some of the volunteers had seen service in the first world war, and they took to Spain songs like *Tipperary* and *The Quartermaster Stores*, the latter being likely to appeal to the grouching soldier of any army. The Irish in Spain had songs of their own struggles: *Off to Dublin in the Green* was an IRA remake of a British army recruiting song; *Connolly's Rebel Song* was written by James Connolly, a socialist executed by the British after the 1916 rising in Dublin.

The songs mentioned so far, however, relate to Spain only by having been sung there, but songs specifically about the war quickly emerged. The German political commissar in 1936 was Hans Beimler, one of the few ever to escape from Dachau, and his death in action was commemorated in a fine song by Ernst Busch.

He had to leave his homeland,
Because he was a freedom-fighter.
In Spain's bloody streets,
For the rights of the poor,
Died Hans, the commissar.

To strike up a song seemed a quite unremarkable thing to do. J H Bassett recalled: 'One evening, we were sitting along the



Anarchist Militiaman and Family by Augusti Centelles (1936).

CHANNELS

kerb of the main street, waiting for the cinema to open. The men began to sing in every language'. The British, he said, sang: 'We came to sunny Spain to make the people smile again/And to chase the fascist bastards over hill and over plain'.

Perhaps the most famous song in English of the Spanish civil war was *There's a Valley in Spain called Jarama*. The fighting at Jarama went on for several months in 1937 and settled into a routine of trench warfare. The British battalion suffered heavy casualties and, save for a brief respite on 1st May, remained in the line for 73 days. The song was written in the trenches by an ex-regular soldier from Glasgow, Alec or Alex McDade, to the tune of *Red River Valley*, a popular American song of the 1920s and 30s. The words are far removed from the cynicism of most first world war songs, but they nevertheless express a certain war weariness.

There's a valley in Spain called Jarama,
That's a place that we all know so well,
For 'twas there that we wasted our manhood
And most of our old age as well.

As Bill Alexander says, the song 'was sung in many versions,'some ribald, some se-

rious, and was taken over by all the nationalities'. The version which has now become very well known is much more solemn than the original and there have been suggestions that the words were deliberately doctored, yet the revision seems to have been openly done, and intended to enable the song to serve at commemorative meetings, as the last verse makes clear.

All this was of course unknown to the volunteers singing outside the cinema in 1938. Bassett's account continues: 'One tune, in Spanish, everybody sang. When the polyglot army sang *The Crossing of the Ebro* with its plaintive "Ay Manuela, ay Manuela", the shivers ran up and down my spine and I knew that I have found a small place in history'. The song came out of the long and bitter battle of the Ebro in 1938, and was a remake of another piece in praise of the 15th brigade - the one to which the English-speaking battalions belonged.

The British, normally so reticent linguistically, enthusiastically learned songs in Spanish like *Si Me Quieres Escribir* ('If you want to write to me'), *El Quinto Regimiento* (described by Hugh Thomas as 'one of the great revolutionary songs of all time') and

Los Cuatro Generales (an expression of defiance towards the four insurgent generals, Franco, Mola, Varela and Queipo de Llano) and the sprightly *Viva la Quince Brigada* itself.

The last song was among those sung on the highly emotional parade of the International Brigades when the people of Barcelona turned out to bid them farewell. They were withdrawn at the request of the Spanish government in the vain hope that the gesture would cause Britain and France to abandon the non-intervention policy which starved the republic of arms, and was a major factor in its defeat.

Some 500 men, over a quarter of the British volunteers, died in Spain. Of the rest, only about 200 are still alive. Most look back with great pride: 'I never met any to compare with the International Brigade', said one veteran, Thomas Bloomfield. Mary Brooksbank included this verse in a love song, *The Dundee Lassie*: 'I'm chumming wi' a lassie, they ca' her Jeannie Bain;/She says she'll never marry, her lad got killed in Spain./I often hear her speak about a place they ca' Teruel,/And she is a winder intae Craigie's Mill'.

★ POPULAR FRONT ★ THE PARTY ★ ★ ★ ★

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