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THE STRUGGLE OVER THE EVACUATION TO THE UNITED KINGDOM AND REPATRIATION OF BASQUE REFUGEE CHILDREN IN THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR: SYMBOLS AND SOULS

INTRODUCTION

On 26 April 1937 General Franco's German and Italian allies in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) pounded the Basque town of Guernica. In the furore triggered by the aerial bombardment, the United Kingdom (UK) government granted permission for British activists from the Basque Children's Committee (BCC) to evacuate nearly 4,000 children from the Basque Country to the United Kingdom. For the first time since 1914, His Majesty's Government (HMG) offered sanctuary to groups in danger of their lives and bereft of private means. Significantly, too, the evacuation of these youngsters broke new ground for a country that could boast precious little tradition of offering refuge to minors. For historians Tony Kushner and Katharine Knox the evacuation marks one of the great chapters in the unfolding of the refugee crisis of the twentieth century.¹

We enjoy many fine studies both of the watershed evacuation effort and the battle for repatriation launched by the Francoists after they had definitively conquered the Basque Country on 2 July 1937.² These works, however, focus most of all on the danger of front-line bombing, refugee work or the domestic British political context. This approach has left three areas awaiting greater study. First of all, the concentration on bombing means that historians have neglected the role played by controversy over violence behind the lines in both the evacuations and calls for repatriation. Secondly, the repatriation literature centres on the actions of the British activists who resisted Francoist efforts to return children to Spain. As a result, the

role of British rightists in backing the repatriation campaign deserves much deeper study if we are to better understand the Basque refugee issue. Thirdly, historians have tended to view the impact of the Spanish Civil War on the United Kingdom through the lens of British politics rather than the entangled relationship between rightist groups in England and in Francoist Spain.

The article shows that the struggle over the Basque children became so important not simply because of the bombing of Guernica, but also because the youngsters grew into symbols of Francoist violence behind the lines. This repression was long silenced and it is timely to place the history of the children fully in this context. The controversy about evacuation and repatriation also became wrapped up in a battle for control of the children's minds or souls. This struggle to form children is gaining growing attention in the Spanish and wider European historiography and it is also timely to place the young Basque refugees in this context. The historian Ricard Vinyes, for instance, argues that the Francoist authorities anticipated that a good proportion of children repatriated to Spain would belong to parents who had perished, suffered imprisonment, exile or poverty. These children, therefore, stood in great danger of passing into Francoist care homes. Vinyes further argues that parents who had backed the government against Franco and whose children went into such care lost their right to bring them up according to their convictions. Although historians have not examined the repatriation struggle through this lens before, controversy over this very danger sat at the heart of the repatriation dispute.³ Importantly, British advocates of repatriation became entangled in these Spanish conflict as they became immersed in a battle for control of youngsters that pitched sections of the right against the centre and left in both Spain and the UK.

SYMBOLS AND SOULS

The controversy over the evacuation and repatriation of Basque children emerged from a long conflict for control of children and their development as emblems of innocence. At the start of the nineteenth century, children formed economically valuable contributors to family income whose poor life expectancy made it emotionally difficult for parents to forge bonds with them. As survival rates improved and schooling became compulsory, better off parents could afford to invest in their children who they increasingly regarded as emotionally priceless. In this environment, towards the late nineteenth century in Spain, as in other parts of the world, a cult of childhood developed as anthropologists, psychologists, educational theorists and legislators across the political spectrum pointed to the particular vulnerability of children, the need to protect them from a potentially corrupting environment and to preserve their innocence by delaying their entry into the pernicious adult world.⁴

Spaniards kept a keen eye on such developments and in the early twentieth century enacted a series of laws that reserved special protection for children. The Church had long run care homes for children and during the nineteenth century the state too began to provide some social services. From 1918, however, and inspired by perceived best practice abroad, state care grew steadily more important through a system of children's courts (Tribunales Tutelares de Menores). These courts sought to reform rather than punish children and relied on a number of their own care homes, medical experts and social workers who could help them oversee the reshaping of the child.⁵ Officials concerned for the health and vigour of the future nation also founded a series

of rural holiday, educational and recuperation homes for children known as colonies.⁶

Using such state institutions, officials began to take children into care from parents they deemed morally unfit and whose homes they believed constituted a dangerous environment for the future stock of the nation. Under the authoritarian rule of General Primo de Rivera between 1923-1930 children were often taken into care for the religious failings of their parents, but under the Republic between 1931-1936 greater stress was placed on physical, psychological and sexual abuse.⁷

During the Civil War, the battle for children's souls and minds that sat at the heart of the evacuation and repatriation controversy grew more acute. Teachers on government side, for instance, sought to turn children into free-thinking and self-conscious proletarians who would oppose fascism and reject Church dogma.⁸

Similarly, the Republican Fiesta del Niño ('Festival of the Child') reviled fascism while promoting a moral universe in which human life enjoyed genuine respect and which would make all war impossible. These supporters of the Republic contrasted their humanity with the barbarism of the Francoists who placed the cult of violence before the development of intellectual life. The Catholic Basque nationalists belonging to the PNV (Partido Nacionalista Vasco) especially railed against the Francoist mind-set and criticised 'militaristic barbarians' who put rifles in the hands of young children trained in paramilitary youth groups breaking the divine preaching of Christ that 'thou shall not kill'.⁹

The Francoists also saw themselves as fighting a tremendous battle for the soul of children. As the Francoist school inspector Alfonso Iniesta put it

while they propose the supposed respect for the child's conscience, we see the need for dogma...against their theories of rational paganism, we affirm the faith.¹⁰

Francoists widely shared this view. The magazine *Fotos* celebrated the return of children from their foreign sanctuaries as 'the reconquest of souls'. Glorifying in Republican children cleansed of the political ideals popular in the government zone, the magazine's journalists praised the winning back of the 'Spanish citizens of tomorrow'.¹¹ From the start of the Civil War, care homes played an important role in this project. Both the Church and Franco's fascist-leaning Falange party through its charitable arm *Auxilio Social* (Social Help) ran institutions that took charge of vulnerable youngsters from families that had opposed Franco and had suffered physical or social repression. Children in these homes faced concerted efforts to turn them away from the 'murderous' values of their parents and towards what was represented as the 'true' values of Spain.¹²

During the Civil War, the contrast between the innocence lauded by the cult of childhood and the purported murderous cruelty of the enemy allowed for powerful images and slogans that proved too tempting for either side to squander.¹³ Supporters of the Republic, for instance, infamously extracted tremendous propaganda value out of the bombing of Getafe in the autumn of 1936 by producing a poster featuring pictures of dead children with the slogan: if you tolerate this your children will be next.¹⁴ Followers of the government also used children to criticise Francoists killings behind the lines. The magazine *Crónica*, for instance, included a report from Barcelona in early January 1937 during the 'Week of the Child' which featured a large photograph of children from other parts of Spain who had become separated

from their parents and were in government care. The photograph captured the politicised children as they gave the clenched-fist salute. Text accompanying the image warned that the fate of their parents would never be forgotten. The authors were referring to the murder by Franco's supporters of tens of thousands of political opponents.¹⁵

The Francoists similarly exploited and politicised children to drive home their message about the killings carried out behind the lines by their opponents. A classic example hails from a booklet issued by authorities in Galicia in 1937. Here insurgents were caring for children from Madrid who had been holidaying in the region at the start of the Civil War in July 1936 and since then had been separated from their parents. The authors stated that their purpose was to show the contrast between the insurgents' exemplary care for youngsters compared with the barbarous treatment meted out by their Republican opponents. They went on to assert that while they were looking after these children so well, their own parents behind Republican lines (where around 50,000 people were murdered) were being assassinated. The authors also used the children to deny accusations of atrocity committed by their side. One girl from Madrid looked after by the Francoists was quoted as stating that she had heard lots of accusations about the violence behind the lines but that 'it was all lies' and people should come and see how the Francoists were looking after them to understand this.¹⁶

During the Civil War, these politics of childhood would become caught up in a long-term disagreement between Catholics in the centre-right PNV and members of the Spanish Catholic right over the use of violence. During the February 1936 elections,

for instance, the PNV leader José Antonio de Aguirre criticised the drift of right-wing politicians toward violence and protested that in the Basque Country

we want to end this barbarous struggle and the savage cruelty demeaning of civilised countries. Let's put an end to reprisals, cruelty, torture and everything that is making Spain the most backward nation in Europe.¹⁷

The tensions over violence became much more significant in the early Civil War. The conflict would bear witness to the murder of nearly 7,000 members of the clergy in the government zone. This violence, the insurgents argued, formed part of the 'Red terror' that they had risen to nip in the bud. By the autumn of 1936, important bishops had begun to back the rebels in the defence of the faith and what they labelled as a crusade against the Godless horde.¹⁸ Across Spain, and the world, Catholics began to rally in support of the insurgents. In the UK Archbishop Hinsley, for instance, held in August 1936

[w]e cannot fail to have a practical sympathy with our fellow-Catholics who are suffering so cruelly in many parts of the world. In Spain we hear that Priest and Nuns have been massacred, Churches and Convents destroyed. Hatred of religion has become the cult of neopaganism. When the world divides itself into warring fractions, it unites against God's Church.¹⁹

The rebels, however, remained sensitive to exposure of their own killings. In August 1936, for instance, Franco's troops racing towards Madrid from southern Spain captured Badajoz. Here they carried out a terrible atrocity and on 17 August 1936 The

Times carried the story of the shooting of 1,200 people in the city. In response to such damaging stories, the Francoists set up a propaganda unit in October 1936. One of the leaders of the unit, Captain Luis Bolín, spent part of his time trying to force journalists to retract stories about the massacre at Badajoz.²⁰ Despite such denials, in recent years historians have finally demonstrated that in one of Europe's largest inter-war slaughters the Francoists killed at least 130,000 people and imprisoned hundreds of thousands more during and after the Civil War.²¹

The criticisms made by the PNV of Francoist violence helped turn Basque nationalists in the Bilbao area into an acute embarrassment for the insurgents. One reason for this is that the Basques, and in turn their children, represented a challenge to the Francoists because they did not share the general opprobrium reserved for other supporters of the government. Instead, the Basques were widely regarded both within Spain and abroad as Catholic, anti-Communist and fervent opponents of the 'Red terror'.²² In fact, PNV opposed violence on principle and became involved in many efforts at mediation, prisoner exchange and preventing arbitrary killing. It rarely wasted an opportunity to highlight and end the Francoist murders.²³ Not that the PNV enjoyed an untarnished reputation. Its members frequently grossly exaggerated the number of killings carried out by the Francoists, kept their own hostages and their tardy response to attacks on insurgent prisoners held in their jails led to the murder of hundreds of their opponents.²⁴

Nevertheless, the PNV leader José Antonio de Aguirre repeatedly discomfited his opponents by highlighting the repression the Francoists desperately hoped to hide. In late December 1936, for instance, he gave a speech denouncing the murder of eleven

priests aligned with the PNV who were killed extra-judiciously in the autumn of 1936 and whose murder the Francoists had tried to keep quiet.²⁵ In his speech Aguirre also highlighted the large numbers of refugees who had entered his government's territory after they had fled the violence. The scale of the refugee problem proved humiliating for his opponents. When the Francoists occupied San Sebastián in the autumn of 1936, for instance, only 12,000 of its 80,000 inhabitants remained with the rest taking flight. On the back foot, Francoists claimed that the vast bulk of these refugees had fled not because they were petrified by Francoist violence behind the lines, but because government forces obliged them at gunpoint to leave behind their homes and livelihoods.²⁶

The flight of innocent children, and especially Basque children, and their growing importance as symbols of atrocities became particularly disconcerting for the Francoists. By December 1936, the regional Basque government had evacuated 30,000 children from areas about to fall to the Francoists. They housed many of these child refugees in the government zone in a network of colonies which generated significant public interest and came under the control of teachers dedicated to turning them into self-conscious proletarians.²⁷ The Francoist school inspector and propagandist on child policy Alfonso Iniesta also accused the government of carrying out similar evacuations from Madrid to spread a series of black legends about the murderous nature of the insurgents. In the government zone, he charged, the press claimed that children in Francoist territory witnessed almost daily executions in the street. For Iniesta, such acts formed part of a propaganda campaign that also saw children prised from the arms of their parents on the false pretence of danger.²⁸ Similarly, the Jesuit propagandist the Reverend Father Isidoro Gríful argued that

Franco's opponents on the government side sent letters to refugee children describing 'horrific and fantastic crimes committed, they said, by the Nationalists [insurgents] against members of their own families.' He held too that some children had been convinced that their 'parents had been barbarously murdered by the Nationalists, even though this was not the case'.²⁹

THE BOMBING OF BILBAO AND THE CONTROVERSY OVER EVACUATION

Tensions over the control of children and discomfort with their power as symbols of Francoist atrocities came to a head with the bombing of the Basque town of Guernica. The bombing hit the headlines of papers around the world after foreign reporters led by George Steer of The Times exposed the attack on the civilian population. Many observers feared the bombardment marked a watershed and anticipated the horror awaiting Europe's major cities should another war between the major powers break out.³⁰

Keen to protect the purity of their crusade, and mindful of the need to fight according to the rules of war if they were to secure much-needed belligerent rights, the Francoists moved quickly to deny that they had carried out the bombing. Luis Bolín took charge of the cover up and he and his acolytes argued the 'Reds' had set fire to the town and that insurgent planes had not flown on that day.³¹

Despite the long-since-disproved denials, children stood out as symbols of the horror of terror against the civilian population and their testimony could prove devastating for the Francoists. One of the youngsters eventually evacuated to the United

Kingdom, for example, gave the following testimony to a British supporter of the Republic

[t]he planes, five of them, circled round us for about twenty minutes on and off. We hear the machine-gun rattle, but they didn't hit us. We saw terrible things...We saw a family of people we knew from our street run into a wood. There was the mother with two children and the old grandmother. The planes circled about the wood for a long time and at last frightened them out of it. They took shelter in a ditch. We saw the old granny cover up the little boy with her apron. The planes came low and killed them all in the ditch, except the little boy. He soon got up and began to wander across a field, crying. They got him too.³²

The dispute over evacuation developed in this febrile atmosphere. The evacuations came about through the labours of the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief (NJCSR) which sprang into life in December 1936 when a cross-party group of MPs and charities such as Save the Children united their forces. Among its many endeavours, it helped fund colonies for refugee children in Spain and from February 1937 it pressed for evacuations.³³ On 24 April Leah Manning, a leading Labour Party activist and former president of the National Union of Teachers, arrived in Bilbao at the invitation of the PNV. The dominant group within the Basque regional government, the PNV, was eager to send children to safety as was the Spanish government worried by the threat posed by bombing to civilians.³⁴ Manning's chances of overcoming UK government opposition to the potential costs of bringing children to the UK were transformed by the bombing of Guernica on 26 April. On 27

April, the NJCSR seized on the outrage caused by the bombardment and the opportunity created by Manning's presence in Bilbao to press HMG to back its plans to evacuate children. With British public opinion outraged, on 29 April the Home Office granted its approval with the proviso that the NJCSR 'repatriate these children to Spain when conditions in that country made such a course possible' and that the government would not defray costs. The NJCSR then created the BCC from a broad coalition of centre and left-wing activists, charities and religious groups, including Catholics, to care for the evacuated children.³⁵

British Catholics became involved in the evacuation scheme through their entanglement with Spanish Church figures and therefore with Francoist politics. The Archbishop of Westminster, Arthur Hinsley, had become drawn into the evacuation campaign after the Bishop of the Basque dioceses of Vitoria, Mateo Múgica, issued a plea for help. The Francoists had cajoled Múgica out of Spain for his defence of the clergy supporting the Catholic Basque Nationalist Party (PNV).³⁶ From his exile in the Vatican, however, on 28 April Múgica sent out an appeal for Catholics to care for evacuated children which the British *The Tablet* published on 8 May 1937. Hinsley felt Múgica's entreaty imposed a duty of care upon him. He was also concerned that Catholic children should find homes with those of their faith.³⁷

Meanwhile, Wilfrid Roberts, backbench Liberal Party MP and the heart and soul of the BCC, believed that Hinsley's support would make the work of his Committee 'very much easier' and pressed HMG for Catholic participation.³⁸ In the midst of this pressure, and once the children had set sail, the Home Secretary, Sir John Simon, invited Hinsley to his office and appealed to him to help look after the children. This

left the Archbishop with little option but to care for 1,200 of the refugees identified as Catholics and whose faith he undertook to defend.³⁹ Hinsley's resentment at being railroaded into caring for the children comes across when he declared in late April 'we have not had any say in their coming...and we must look after them'.⁴⁰

At 7.30 am on 23 May 1937 3,826 child refugees, fifteen priests and sixty Catholic teachers aboard the *Correo de Habana* arrived in Southampton.⁴¹ Francoists argued they had offered to set up a safe zone for civilians that made the evacuations unnecessary, but the UK government concluded this was both an insincere and impractical suggestion it chose not to pursue.⁴² Crucially, the Francoists felt the evacuation brought unwelcome attention and propaganda to both atrocities and efforts to capture children's souls taking place behind their lines. The Francoist press, for instance, complained that the 'Reds' bundled 'Spanish' children abroad wielding what they described as the false accusation that if the youngsters did not escape they would have their throats cut to slake the blood lust of 'fascist criminals'.⁴³ The authorities also claimed leftists were maintaining that the real reason for the evacuation was the 'fascist danger' and that parents preferred to keep their children abroad rather than allow them to become exposed Francoist doctrines and practices.⁴⁴

Capturing the souls of the evacuated children did indeed stand at stake for Spanish Francoists and their conquest of Bilbao gave them the opportunity to control the offspring of their enemies. Múgica's replacement as Bishop of Vitoria, for instance, claimed that the evacuated children were Christians and it was the duty of the Church to bring them back to Spain from the care of those abroad who supported the Spanish government.⁴⁵ A member of the team the Francoists put together to repatriate the

children using the state institutions for child care developed earlier in the century, Isidoro Gríful, further argued that the children had already been corrupted by the politics of their families and by the revolution taking place in the 'Red zone'. But he also held that the separation from their families took place as part of a scheme to make it easier for the children to succumb to the 'revolutionary virus'. He further contended that in the children's colonies revolutionaries were educating the youngsters and turning them against society and the faith. In order to win back the souls of these children it was necessary to separate them from this pernicious environment and bring them back to the Fatherland.⁴⁶ As Antonio Maseada, head of Franco's repatriation service, put it 'our sacred mission is to recover for God and Spain the souls of these children who have been poisoned for so many years by anti-Catholic and anti-patriotic ideas'.⁴⁷

In the UK Archbishop Hinsley was also dissatisfied with the Catholic children he had felt obliged to take into his care. In August 1937, for instance, he contended that the evacuations had taken place 'from motives of a political nature', which was shorthand for trying to incriminate the Francoists in atrocities.⁴⁸ Unlike the Francoists, who wanted to gain control of Spaniards lost to their enemies, however, he aspired to rid himself of foreign children he considered a threat to Catholic values. He had discovered that the ostensibly Catholic children in his care had lived in, and absorbed, the highly politicised atmosphere of war-time Bilbao and the Basque Country. This led him to conclude that many of the children had arrived not as part of his flock but instead 'tainted with communism'.⁴⁹ Even worse, in a British Catholic strain of thinking that directly echoed the Francoist line, were those children under the care of 'Red families'. These children, some Catholics claimed, were being turned into 'little

Communists and haters of Christ'. For his part, Hinsely also harboured financial reasons for press for repatriation. Initially the children had disembarked for a three-month period. As time passed, he grew more concerned about the £500 to £600 his Church spent each week maintaining its share of the refugees.⁵⁰

THE REPATRIATION BATTLE

Unsurprisingly, both British and Spanish Francoists called for repatriation soon after the insurgents conquered the whole Basque Country on 2 July 1937. The origins of this transnational repatriation campaign reveal the way Spaniards and Britons became entangled with one another. It began with the Falange's undercover representative in London, F. G. Sturup, a British citizen who had spent most of his life in Spain.⁵¹ Sturup wrote to José del Castaño, the head of the Falange [Franco's fascist-leaning party] Foreign Service, on 1 July 1937 complaining about the 'red propaganda' being carried out in the UK by those caring for the children. By the 2 July, he was proposing the Falange should begin its own campaign advocating that this 'will bring us many sympathisers'.⁵² Leading the way, on 2 July he published an article in the British Catholic newspaper *The Universe*. Sturup claimed to enjoy warm relations with Catholics in the UK and on 2 July an article also appeared in *The Catholic Herald* asking why the children were still being kept in the UK when Bilbao 'is now normal and in a state of security and plenty'. Accordingly, the paper argued there could be no reason to stop the children returning.⁵³ This would become the steadfast position of the British repatriation lobby and rested on the assumption that the end of front-line fighting meant that parents were now safe from physical and economic repression. The argument also lay on the belief that Francoist-controlled children's homes were

normal institutions. As we shall see, Franco's opponents rejected all these assumptions. They feared many parents had suffered execution, imprisonment and economic marginalisation or had gone into exile and were frequently in no position to care for their children. Opponents also believed that parents would not wish their offspring to end up in Francoist care where they would be brought up in the values they had struggled against.

On 12 July, Sturup received instructions from Castaño to ignite his campaign while the Falange in Bilbao began to press parents whose identity they knew to petition for the return of their children.⁵⁴ The Falangist press in Spain and sections of the Catholic media in the United Kingdom now combined forces. The Falangist *Diario Vasco* invited parents to send names of their children to the editors who would forward them to the offices of *The Universe* in London. Here staff would put in train arrangements for their repatriation. As the Francoist press boasted, 'Catholic bishops of the United Kingdom are prepared to cooperate in bringing about immediate repatriation'.⁵⁵ The *Catholic Herald* also offered up to £1,000 to help cover the costs of repatriation.⁵⁶

Meanwhile, Falangist newspapers in insurgent Spain pressed ahead with a propaganda campaign to bring back the children. *La Voz de España* proclaimed on 16 July that the parents whose children the 'Red separatists' had torn from their arms should make themselves known. As the campaign developed, the Francoists lambasted the pernicious environment being made in the UK for the children. They alleged that their guardians sent the child refugees to political meetings where they were presented as symbols of Francoist atrocity. They further claimed that this propaganda work went to such extremes that some children were led to believe the Francoists had murdered

their parents.⁵⁷ The Francoists then added another series of accusations about the nature of the evacuation to the charge sheet. The parents had not been told where their children were living, their offspring were ill fed, poorly clothed and housed in miserable conditions.⁵⁸ It is true that the children very much feared their parents would be slaughtered behind the lines and indeed many became deeply upset when they heard Bilbao had fallen and in good measure because they feared for their parents' safety.⁵⁹ But the other accusations all stand disproven.⁶⁰

The PNV also exploited the issue to launch a propaganda campaign which would eventually draw in the BCC A captured party document revealed that the PNV's London office alone boasted eight expert writers and some skilled lobbyists who exploited atrocities and the fate of children to the hilt.⁶¹ From early August, the PNV urged parents in exile whose children had been evacuated overseas to write objecting to the swift repatriation of their children. It had soon garnered 650 parents' signatures.⁶² In a few months, thousands of parents had written to the PNV.⁶³ In Barcelona, where many Basque parents had fled, the PNV ensured that the press printed names of children and asked parents to write directly to the BCC in London instructing that their children 'don't move from England' in order to 'block this fascist manoeuvre'.⁶⁴

The BCC soon became embroiled in this transnational dispute that put Francoist violence centre-stage. On 12 July, the BCC informed HMG that it would support repatriation 'if conditions are suitable' and that it could be established the parents wanted their children back 'without any pressure being brought to bear upon them'.⁶⁵ A measure of political sympathy came into play here as the BCC also wanted to resist

repatriation because the PNV had sent the children as the legitimate government and to return them to Franco would amount to recognition of his regime.⁶⁶

Beyond this, the BCC felt it had a duty to the parents who had entrusted it with the guardianship of their children and who like the Committee wanted to keep the children out of the clutches of Francoist educators. The Duchess of Atholl, a leading member of the BCC and who believed Francoism represented the destruction of culture and decency, for instance wrote to Anthony Eden, the Foreign Secretary, in October 1937. In her missive she outlined her belief that before the children were repatriated the Committee required proof that the parents wished to see their children returned and evidence of the ability of families to care for their children. Atholl feared that if this were not done, children could be sent to people who were not their parents. She also worried that the child refugees could return to find their parents in exile. In a nod to the role of the BCC in the battle of children's minds she also feared they could be sent back to an education system designed to 'rectify the ideas in which they had been brought up' or be placed in Francoist orphanages and brought up as Fascists.⁶⁷ The charge had real resonance for many parents who had supported the government and loathed the prospect that their offspring could end up being educated in Francoist ideas. Female prisoners, for instance recoiled at the knowledge that they could be separated from their young children by prison staff who argued that their young ones required 'redeeming from the nefarious education given to them by their infidel parents'.⁶⁸

Historians now know that the Francoists took at least 30,000 children from political enemies and brought them up to oppose their parents' ideas.⁶⁹ This new knowledge helps us place the repatriation struggle in a wider European context of battles for

possession of children and their souls that have recently gained increasing attention from historians.⁷⁰ At the time, however, the BCC staked its claims on the evidence it had to hand while also motivated by its partisan reluctance to recognise the Franco regime, its desire to respect parental wishes and its wish to keep the children out of the insurgents' control. It recognised, for instance, that large-numbers of parents were in exile in Catalonia 'where the conditions are appalling and [the parents] would rather their children were in safety in England'.⁷¹ Equally the BCC felt it would be wrong to return children whose parents were in exile in France because they would end up in Francoist orphanages where they could be brought up in values their parents opposed. The Committee also worried that parents were coming under undue influence to ask for the return of their children. One father in France, perhaps inspired by PNV propaganda, had written to the BCC stating his wife had been forced to ask for the return of their children and that he could not allow them to go 'back to the butchery of those criminals'.⁷²

For Francoists, Basque nationalist propaganda made the parents the victims and pawns of the PNV and its propaganda campaign.⁷³ This perspective, however, risks ignoring the genuine reasons parents had for supporting the PNV position and opposing repatriation. Indeed, the persecution, poverty, exile they suffered alongside the deep political commitment of many would indicate that large numbers of parents had no shortage of reasons to object to repatriation. These factors help explain the assessment by the British Foreign Office's representative on the ground in July 1937 that parents suffering repression or exile in all probability 'are neither able nor want to have them [their children] back at present'.⁷⁴

By contrast, British supporters of repatriation proved sympathetic to the argument that the children were being corrupted in the UK and to the Francoist assertion that their souls could be better protected in Spain. They also argued that Francoist care homes provided safe environments for the children. For these reasons they contended that it would be easier for the children's parents to be found if the children were sent back to Spain regardless of whether the parents had requested their return.⁷⁵ They also pushed for the children to be sent to care homes if necessary and contended that Francoist social welfare organisations 'were efficient and could be trusted not to discriminate in their treatment of the children on account of the acts or politics of their parents'.⁷⁶ This view rode roughshod over the objections of PNV supporters to the militarism, anti-enlightenment ethos and battle for the soul that characterised Francoist care homes and its desire to protect parents' rights to bring up children according to their convictions.

By 23 July, tensions were mounting. Working with the Francoists, the Catholic Herald had printed what it had said were requests of parents for the repatriation of their children. The BCC worried that the Francoist propaganda campaign over repatriation was accompanied by efforts to forge the signatures of parents or the placing of undue pressure on parents and had rebuffed the requests. There is evidence that this could indeed be the case. One of the child refugees, for instance, as an adult has testified

[m]other had refused to sign the form claiming us, even though she had been visited by a priest and an official, who had threatened to

imprison her and take her other children away...She said that if we returned, we would all starve, but her signature was forged.⁷⁷

Fearful that such abuses could be taking place, the Committee argued that British diplomatic staff in Bilbao needed to vouch for signatures. The Catholic Herald then announced that it had notified the parents of the need to write to the British 'consulate' and observed that '[t]he Nationalist [Francoist] authorities have also been informed of this procedure and have expressed gratitude for the work that is being done by the Catholic Herald'.⁷⁸

In an effort to calm the waters, Lord Cranborne, Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, met BCC representatives on 29 July 1937. At the meeting a row erupted that pitched the BCC and the Foreign Office against the Francoists and their British advocates. The quarrel revolved around both the speed and nature of any future repatriation. The BCC aspired to send a representative to Bilbao who could assess the applications. Like the BCC, Cranborne opposed returning the children 'too soon', but also proved keen to improve relations with Franco and argued the youngsters should not be held in the UK once the 'danger' had passed. Cannon Craven, administrator of the Catholic charity the Crusade of Rescue and Archbishop Hinsley's representative on the BCC, contended, however, that children of parents who could not be identified should be returned to Spain and be 'handed over to General Franco's representatives'.⁷⁹ In early August, the BCC informed Hinsley that the parental applications they had received appeared of 'doubtful authenticity'.⁸⁰ To overcome such problems, the BCC, which could not gain Francoist approval to send

its own representative to the Basque Country, hoped to verify applications through a representative from the Quakers bound for Bilbao.⁸¹

The British Catholic lobby meanwhile became caught up in a mainly Spanish political struggle pitching the Church against the Falange (which suffered an uncomfortable relationship with the Church). In early August, Hinsley expressed his distaste for the Falange by informing the BCC that ‘Catholics have nothing to do with Mr. Sturup’.⁸² Hinsley’s declaration was partly motivated by the appointment of a Papal Apostolic Delegate to Bilbao in August 1937. Msgr. Antoniutti arrived with a 300,000 lira donation from the Pope to help cover the costs of repatriation and begrudging that the evacuations had taken place for ‘propaganda’ reasons. The Pope also cabled Hinsley instructing him to press HMG to ensure the children returned to Bilbao.⁸³

Antioniutti swiftly dispatched his representative, the Spaniard Father Enrique Gábana, to London to press for repatriation. Gábana would involve Britons in his Spanish disputes. Before the Civil War, he had served as chaplain to British citizens in Barcelona, but from the start of the conflict dedicated himself to public speaking on behalf of the rebels in the UK in which he denied insurgent atrocities.⁸⁴ Arriving in the UK on 5 September, Gábana did his best to secure control of child policy for the Church from the Falange. He asserted he was ‘the only accredited person acting for the Government [insurgent administration] for the return of the Basque children’ and that he enjoyed Hinsley’s blessing. Gábana also refused to cooperate with Sturup and accused him of working for a ‘political party. Gábana then exposed the undercover Sturup as a Falangist. Craven helped Gábana in his quest by denying Sturup

permission to visit children housed in Catholic institutions while bestowing free and open access upon Gábana.⁸⁵

By mid-September, the BCC in London had begun combing for accuracy a list of around 600 children's names with parental requests for repatriation supplied by Gábana. Gábana had revealed some of the shortcomings of his list when he let slip that the 'task of authenticating and witnessing the signatures of each parent...would have been extremely difficult'. His credibility also crumbled when the FO revealed that neither its ambassador to Spain, Sir Henry Chilton who had fled to safety just over the French border in Hendaye, nor T.W. Pears, the British commercial representative who had taken charge of UK diplomatic dealings in Bilbao Sir Henry Chilton., had 'vouched for the accuracy' of the Gábana list, despite the priest's repeated claim that they had done so.⁸⁶ In reality, Pears, who was denied the status of Consul by the Francoists furious at British help in evacuation work, found his position in Bilbao too precarious for the Foreign Office to risk allowing him to judge the lists. Accordingly, the Francoist hostility towards the British government effectively stymied progress. This was because the BCC, which in the face of Francoist opposition had not managed to place either its own or a Quaker representative in the Basque Country, had indicated that the signature of Pears in Bilbao would have provided an adequate guarantee for the children's return. This would simply mirror the BCC's practice of relying on British officials when returning children to parents in exile in France and reflected the pleasure the BCC took in returning children to parents in other circumstances.⁸⁷

Hinsley, however, strongly backed the Francoist position and berated the BCC for the delay he attributed to its unnecessary insistence on installing a representative in Bilbao. He reiterated his stance that the holdup stemmed from political motives, by which he meant exploiting the children as symbols of Francoist atrocities. He also minimised the importance of the Francoist repression by focusing on the end of front-line violence and insisting that 'order and peace' reigned in the Basque Country. He further argued that revived 'social services' were in place in Bilbao, by which he meant Francoist care homes. He went on to declare that '[o]rphans will be given special care by the present Government and by charitable institutions'.⁸⁸ In addition, Hinsley pressed the BCC to invite parents who did not want their children to return to state this clearly so all the others could be returned. The BCC feared to do this because it felt it would render parents vulnerable to Francoist retribution.⁸⁹

Tensions mounted further after scrutiny by the BCC uncovered a raft of problems with different lists that the Francoists had provided. The BCC revealed that of the 832 applications for return in its hands, it judged 493 authentic and 339 unauthentic. Difficulties included the parents' address not being provided, the applicants omitting the identification number given by the Basque authorities to evacuated children and mistakes spelling children's names. The committee also had other reasons for fearing malpractice. One woman wrote from France explaining her husband had been imprisoned in Laredo jail and insisting that 'under no circumstances does she wish the six children to return to rebel territory without her'.⁹⁰ All of this meant that the BCC was deeply aware of the danger that children could be sent back to 'people who were not their parents'. The BCC also feared that there would be 'no guarantee how they

[the children] might be treated and that the ‘real parents’ could later write to them from France or Catalonia.⁹¹

In order to fight and marginalise the BCC, Franco’s representative in London, the Duke of Alba, working hand in hand with Hinsley, had by 2 October set up a proxy Repatriation Committee (RC). Founded at Hinsley’s residence, the RC was made up of British personalities and was chaired by the Duke of Wellington.⁹² Hinsley wasted little time in announcing he would only deal with the RC and the parents.⁹³ The Repatriation Committee took a hard Francoist line arguing that the evacuations had taken place on false pretences, because Franco had offered a safety zone, that the irregular nature of the evacuation made it impossible to trace many parents, that Francoist orphanages did not discriminate against the children of the defeated and that many guardians were set on turning the children into ‘rabid little communists’ and that the youngsters were told ‘lurid tales’ about General Franco.⁹⁴

Eager to find a solution, the BCC reached out to the Francoist groups. On 4 October, it proposed the formation of an ‘independent and semi-judicial Commission’ to ‘decide on the merits of each individual request’. The result was the Gregory Commission which on the evening of 28 October ruled that ‘500 or more’ of the children should be ‘embarked at the earliest possible date’ accompanied both by Gábana, the officials from the BCC and in liaison with the RC. These BCC representatives should then ‘take part in handing over said children’.⁹⁵

The BCC quickly arranged for the return of the first batch of 160 children on 12 November. The plan envisaged that welfare experts Dr Norman White and Dame

Janet Campbell would accompany the children to Bilbao. They were to remain there for a short time 'to arrange for systematic methods of returning those children whose parents are still in Bilbao and have definitely asked for the return of their children'. Gábana also accompanied the children. The Repatriation Committee, however, intervened with the Spanish authorities and ensured that the BCC representatives could not stay for long. In this way, the RC helped stymie BCC efforts to verify parental requests in Bilbao which the Francoists also scotched by refusing to work with the 'political' Children's Committee.⁹⁶

Hinsley backed the RC through 1938 as it continued to press its demands to the BCC for indiscriminate return. In September 1938, the RC wrote to Eden's replacement as Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, arguing that 'even if parents cannot be traced at the moment, they are more likely to be found if the children are sent back'. In fact, British diplomatic staff noted that they had reason to believe that at this stage the Franco administration in Spain wanted to let the matter drop and held little interest in 'children whose parents could not be found or whose parents were on the other side'.⁹⁷

Nevertheless, by early April 1938 a total of 1,722 children carefully selected by the BCC had returned to Spain of whom 1,681 had travelled to the Basque Country and forty-one to government held Barcelona. The evidence demonstrates the authorities went to some effort to return the children to their parents.⁹⁸ The safe return to parents partly reflected the fact that the BCC remained robustly opposed to indiscriminate repatriation. For this reason in October 1938, it continued to maintain 1,700 children in a network of forty-five homes. These children it considered had to remain in the

UK because conditions were still too unsafe to return to Bilbao ‘because their parents are themselves refugees, in prison or missing’.⁹⁹ Indeed, the secondary literature shows that many who remained hailed from families with killed, executed, imprisoned or marginalised parents.¹⁰⁰ The scholar Dorothy Legarreta reports that in mid-1939, the BCC felt it could not repatriate 577 of the remaining 1,054 children because their parents were variously in exile, missing, imprisoned or dead.¹⁰¹ Once the Second World War broke out, the FO became keen to keep Franco out of the conflict and encouraged, until the fall of France, more repatriations. By this time, Save the Children’s representative who had spent some time in Francoist territory, had made her way to Bilbao. Here Dr Annmarie Byloff, took some care to investigate fresh repatriation claims.¹⁰²

Beyond this, however, the repatriation to families reflected official Francoist child-care policy. This was to return children to the families and then to use social services to oversee the moral and political development of the children. For this reason, careful records were kept of repatriated children who would be classified according to their re-educational needs and sent into the Francoist school or training deemed best for each child’s redemption. If after this placement, and repeated social worker visits to the family, the child was felt to be in danger of moral, religious or political corruption, Franco’s state arranged for the youngster to be taken into care using the institutions developed earlier in the century.¹⁰³

CONCLUSION

The evacuation of the Basque children forms a watershed moment in twentieth century refugee history that historians have linked to the bombing of Guernica. But we need to reconsider its context. In recent years, historians in Spain have done much

to reveal the long-hidden Francoist repression and it is timely to place the crucial story of the Basque child refugees in the context of the insurgents' mass violence and not just their bombing of civilians. Basque children became powerful symbols in this regard because the PNV had made a vigorous stand against violence behind the lines and because Francoists feared that evacuations drew attention to murders by their own side. From this perspective, repatriation could demonstrate that there was no substance to claims that the children's parents were at risk of being murdered.

The documentary record also reveals that the government side prized the special value of children as symbols of Francoist violence behind the lines. The international publicity they produced proved damaging to the Francoists who were seeking belligerent rights and international recognition while seeking to deny atrocities such as Guernica, Badajoz and the murder of Basque priests. Accordingly, while the evacuation represented a major defeat for the Francoists, the repatriation campaign offered an opportunity to nip in the bud government propaganda and to rebuild the insurgents' reputation abroad.

The aims of the PNV, however, went beyond damaging the Francoists' reputation. Although the Basque nationalists suffer a tarnished reputation, they did boast a long pedigree of humanitarianism and forged a strong reputation in the conflict for seeking to end violence. The PNV also used the children as part of a consistent tactic to secure a propaganda victory as well as to expose and stop the Francoist atrocities both on and behind the lines. Undoubtedly the PNV exploited children for its own ends, but it also battled on behalf of parents who did not want their children to return. In fact, many parents had good reason to object to

repatriation. In a number of cases they had put their lives on the line to defend PNV or central government ideals and had little desire to see their children brought up in Francoist values. This was particularly the case because large numbers of parents were in exile and unable to look after their children while others suffered jail and poverty. These factors made it more likely that their children would be forced into Francoist care. For its part, the BCC, although overtly partisan recognised the threat to the parental right to control the education of the child and this is a fundamental reason why it opposed indiscriminate repatriation but fully supported discriminate repatriation.

It is clear that Francoists did indeed desire to capture the souls of the children. This means that we need to locate the repatriation struggle in a wider European conflict over the possession of children and their minds that in recent years has gained more attention from historians. We should, however, exercise caution in doing this. As we have seen, most of repatriated children returned to their families. An important reason for this was that the BCC forestalled the return of the most vulnerable children. For the Francoists, however, the wider goal was to repatriate the children of their opponents to Spain where they would place them with their families but re-educate the youngsters in Francoist schools and place them under the gaze of the regime's social workers. Accordingly, we need to take care with Ricard Vinyes' argument about repatriation leading to Francoist care homes. Certainly, many children lay in danger of entering care homes, but many more entered into the orbit of the regime's social services which explicitly aimed to remould the youngsters through a programme of monitoring and re-education.

The Britons who backed the return to Spain of the children of Franco's enemies have been neglected in the literature. Studying their actions to help the Francoists gain control of their opponents' children, however, shows that we cannot understand the history of the young Basque refugees only by focusing on bombing, refugee work and domestic British politics. It is also clear these Britons became entangled with Francoist actors in Spanish struggles over children as symbols of atrocity and the desire to capture their souls.

They also brought with them their own concerns about the fear of Communism, dislike of the politicisation of children in the government zone, horror at the attacks on the Spanish Church and the need to defend the faith. This helps explain, however, how they could work with and advocate for Francoists. Caught up in the politics of childhood that crossed borders and the political spectrum, like their Spanish colleagues they saw the evacuation and BCC-sponsored care of the children as an unwelcome opportunity to tell 'lurid tales' about Franco. They also shared with the Francoists a revulsion against both the political ideals and the atheism of the parents of many of the children. More than this, they believed that significant numbers of those caring for the children in the UK were damaging the souls of the youngsters. Accordingly, frustrated by the BCC refusal to hand over the names of the parents, the British advocates argued that if relatives could not be located the children should be repatriated to the Francoist care homes loathed by many parents. They preferred this to leaving the youngsters in the care of the guardians the parents had chosen when they consented to the evacuation. In this sense, they ignored objections of government-supporting parents to the militarism of the regime's education and

became caught up in the battle for souls that had developed since the start of the century and which hardened during the Civil War into a crucial part of the conflict.

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- ⁸⁴ E. Gábana Pbro, *Mi campaña en Inglaterra*, (Barcelona 1939), 66-68, 16-19, 28, 34-35, 104-106.
- ⁸⁵ *Catholic Herald*, 17/09/1937. Gábana to Gomá, diciembre de 1937, *Archivo Gomá* 8, 685. AGA (09) 017.012, 51/21121, CN, 1973, Inglaterra, Salidas, 21/09/1937. Gábana to Gomá, diciembre de 1937, *Archivo Gomá* 8, 686.
- ⁸⁶ MRC, MSS 308/3/RO/20/1, Roberts to Lizaso, 17/09/1937. *Catholic Herald*, 17/09/1937. FO 21377 W 18793/37/41, Pollock to Cooper, 11/10/1937. W 1972/37/41 FO to Roberts, 15/10/1937.
- ⁸⁷ FO 21377 W 18585, Pollock 17/10/1937. 371/21380 W 22755/37/41
- ⁸⁸ MRC, MSS 308/3/RO/2.1, Hinsley to Roberts.
- ⁸⁹ The position in, MRC, MSS 308/3/RO/9-i, Roberts to Atholl, 21/08/1937. Gomá and Hinsley in *Sociedad de Estudios Vascos*, San Sebastián, Fondo Manuel de Irujo, Caja 25, Expediente 3, Folio 282.
- ⁹⁰ Report on Gábana's Repatriation list for the Executive of the BCC, FO 21377 W 18585/37/41, 7/10/1937.
- ⁹¹ FO 21377 W 18586/37/41, Atholl to Eden, 2/10/1937.

⁹² FO 21376 W 18373/37/41, Wellington to Cranborne, 2/10/1937. Full membership in FO 371 21377 W 18763. Gábana dates the founding of the RC at 11 October. Gábana to Gomá, diciembre de 1937, Archivo Gomá 8, 688.

⁹³ Catholic Herald, 15/10/1937.

⁹⁴ Catholic Herald, 14/07/1939.

⁹⁵ FUE, N.V. 2-1, BCC to FO, 4/10/1937. MMLIBMA, Box 1/C/6.

⁹⁶ FUE, N.V., 2-1, Garrat to Montagu-Pollock, 8/11/1937. Gábana a Gomá, op. cit., p. 693.

⁹⁷ FO 22613, 1/10/1938, 371 22614 W 14388/9/41, Walter to Hinsley and Spanish Children Repatriation Committee, 8/11/1938.

⁹⁸ FO 22607 W 4510. Hoare, 4/04/1938. Western Mail and South Wales News, 1/12/1937. FO 371 22605 W 2605, Graham to Eden, 8/2/1938. FUE, N.V. 2.1, Pollock to Garratt, 10/3/1938. FO 21379 W 21422/37/41, Chilton to Eden, 23/11/1937. AGA (09) 017.012, 51 211121, Cartas Familiares, 26/07/1940.

⁹⁹ MMLIBMA, Box 1/C/7f, Bulletin of the National Joint Committee, No. 15, September 1938 and No. 16, October 1938.

¹⁰⁰ Arrien, Niños vascos, 166. Benjamin, Recuerdos, 14, 17, 29, 96. Bell, Only for Three Months, 31, 207-208.

¹⁰¹ Legarreta, Guernica Generation, 221-222.

¹⁰² Legarreta, Guernica Generation, 223-224.

¹⁰³ Junta Provincial de Protección de Menores de Madrid, Memoria, 1939-1940, 36-44.