

# **‘In war-torn Spain’ – the politics of Irish press coverage of the Spanish civil war**

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## **Abstract**

The Spanish civil war was a conflict that acted as a touchstone for the divisions within Irish society. As a newly-independent state that was 93% Catholic, reporting a conflict that involved, on the one hand, an armed rebellion against a democratically elected government, and on the other, the killing of clergy and the burning of churches, proved divisive.<sup>1</sup> The decisions by Ireland’s three national newspaper titles to send correspondents to Spain only further polarised opinion as their reportage reinforced divergent opinions on the origins and meaning of the conflict. The examination, through digital archives, of the activities of these correspondents sheds new light on the experiences of war correspondents in this conflict and on the ‘newspaper war’ that sought to influence public and political opinion on it. Similarly, the reactions to these reports give an insight into how divisive the conflict was within a state seeking to bed down its own democratic institutions.

## **Introduction**

The context of the Spanish civil war is well documented (Jackson, 1965; Bolloten, 1991; Garrioch, 1993; Thomas, 2003; Casanova, 2005; Preston, 2006 and 2009; Beevor, 2007). As noted by Garrioch (1993: 3–4), the Spanish military’s long tradition of intervening in national politics ensured that one coup followed another: between 1814 and 1874 there occurred 37 attempted coups. In September 1923 the military, led by General Miguel Primo de Rivera, overthrew the parliamentary government, installed Primo de Rivera as prime minister and suspended the constitution. The centrality of the Catholic Church in political life had equal longevity. As noted by Jackson (1965: 48) ‘for over a thousand years the church had been, aside from the Monarchy, the most powerful single institution in Spain’. It played a central role in the education system and had significant investments in numerous industries: one estimate put the church as owning one-third of the country’s total wealth in the early twentieth-century (Brenan, 1960: 47–48). This, along with the fact that the church had established its own trade unions, put it at odds with the political left and ‘anticlerical riots were a widespread phenomenon at times of political crisis’ (Garrioch, 1993: 6).

In 1930, amid the global economic depression, de Rivera resigned and when anti-monarchist candidates won a majority of votes in the April 1931 municipal elections King Alfonso XIII left the country, paving the way for the Second Spanish Republic. The new government adopted a constitution that established freedom of speech and association, granted universal suffrage and secularised education. It also required religious orders to register their property, income and investments with the state, restricted church ownership of property to what was necessary to its functions and brought the church within the ambit of the taxation system (Jackson, 1965: 48). Agrarian reform proved less easy and amid increased violence two elections followed in quick succession. The 1933 poll resulted in the election of a centre-right administration that used the military to suppress a revolt – led by miners – in the Asturias region in October 1934 (Garrioch, 1993: 14). The 1936 election resulted in the formation of a

government supported by a Popular Front of socialists, communists and republicans that faced opposition from the 'National Front' grouping that consisted of monarchists as well as centre-right and far-right parties. As violence between all sides escalated, on 17 July 1936 the military staged another coup thus beginning a three-year civil war.

In the fledgling Irish state – established following a struggle with Britain and the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921 – the Spanish conflict facilitated the renewal of left and right organisations and the re-amplification of left–right political discourse. On the left – always a tiny minority on the Irish political stage – stood the remnants of the Republican Congress, an unsuccessful initiative to steer the IRA towards constitutional politics (Coogan, 2003: 213). On the right stood the remnants of Eoin O'Duffy's 'Blueshirt' movement – an ex-servicemen's association that initially found purpose in protecting the pro-Treaty Cumman na nGaedheal party's meetings after the anti-Treaty Fianna Fáil party had assumed power in 1932 but which soon adopted the trappings of the far-right movements then emerging across Europe (Cronin, 1997). In 1936, Duffy would lead an Irish Brigade of seven hundred men to Spain to fight for Franco. For Irish political movements the Spanish conflict was, as J. Bowyer Bell (1969: 141) noted, whatever they wanted it to be: it was a war where 'Fascism fought Democracy or God met the anti-Christ or Tradition wrestled with Revolution'. These dichotomies were reinforced by press coverage of the conflict. As David Deacon (2009: 66) has observed 'from the outset it was recognised as a battle of ideas, ideals and ideologies, which meant that issues of mediation and representation assumed critical importance'. In Ireland the mediation and representation of the war was the source of much division as each of the three national newspaper titles adopted distinctive editorial stances – stances buttressed by the reports filed by the correspondents that each title sent to Spain.

At that time, the Irish daily newspaper market consisted of three national titles. With its origins in the Parnell–O'Shea divorce scandal the *Irish Independent* had been re-launched by entrepreneur William Martin Murphy in 1905 as the newspaper of conservative Catholic Ireland. Murphy was, as Yeates (2014: 14) has observed, 'intensely Catholic, nationalist and conservative' and this worldview established the *Independent* as the very profitable voice of conservative, Catholic Ireland. Throughout the 1920s the *Irish Independent* devoted two full-page length columns every year to the Catholic hierarchy's Lenten pastorals, which were often buttressed by an editorial, such as that of 1924, which noted that the pastorals reminded Catholics 'of the fundamental truths of their religion and of their obligatory Christian duties' (3 March 1924). Edited by Frank Geary, who steered the paper amid the seemingly unbreakable symbiotic relationship between church and state, the *Irish Independent* wore its Catholicism on its sleeve – a policy that that reached its political and commercial zenith during the Spanish conflict. In 1955, as the title prepared to celebrate fifty years in business, Dublin's Catholic Archbishop John Charles McQuaid publicly praised its 'policy of distinctive loyalty to the Church' (*Irish Independent*, 3 January 1955). Having supported the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 it backed, though was never formally tied to, the pro-Treaty Cumman na nGaedheal (later Fine Gael) party. In circulation terms, the *Independent* boasted daily sales of 123,000 in 1935 (O'Brien, 2001: 55).

For its part, the *Irish Press* was established in 1931 to represent the worldview of Eamon de Valera and the defeated anti-Treaty side of the civil war, which, in the guise of Fianna Fáil, took power in 1932. Edited initially by party stalwart Frank Gallagher, its first editorial noted somewhat fancifully that it supported Fianna Fáil only because its philosophy and aspirations were the same as those espoused by the paper (5 September 1931). As the organ of de Valera and Fianna Fáil it took particular care during the 1932 general election campaign to report

that the party's policies were compliant with Pope Pius XI's encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (4 February 1932). Articulating a radical, though Papal-compliant, alternative to the status quo, the *Press*, with a circulation of 95,000 copies per issue in 1935 (O'Brien, 2001: 55), played a central role in bringing Fianna Fáil to power in 1932 and keeping it there: so much so that de Valera observed that 'if the paper were to disappear, the government would disappear with it' (O'Brien, 2001, 49). In essence, the paper was 'a de Valera mouthpiece' (Coogan: 1993, 444–45) that faithfully reflected his non-interventionist stance on the Spanish conflict.

The third national title, the *Irish Times*, established in 1859 as a pro-union organ, represented the worldview of southern unionism and in the new Irish state sought to oppose legislation that might impinge on the civil rights of this minority. Among the many issues it editorialised against in the 1920s were compulsory Irish in national schools, the prohibition of divorce, and the Censorship of Publications Act 1929 (O'Brien, 2008). Although highly critical of de Valera for this opposition to the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, when Fianna Fáil took power in 1932 the *Irish Times* gradually made its peace with the new dispensation, a process helped in no small way by the appointment of R. M. Smyllie as editor in 1934, de Valera's banning of the IRA in 1936, and de Valera's refusal, in the early years of the Spanish conflict, to be coerced by conservative forces, both clerical and lay, into recognising Franco as the legitimate Spanish leader. Circulation-wise, sales of the *Irish Times* stood at 25,500 per issue during the 1930s (O'Brien, 2008: 82). It was within this press environment that the meanings of the Spanish civil war was debated, contested, and argued about as all titles sought to confer preferred meanings on the causes of the conflict.

### **Irish press reaction to the conflict**

In the words of J. Bowyer Bell (1969: 140), the *Irish Times* published 'some of the most factual, balanced editorial analyses to be found in Europe'. As Brown (2015: 161) put it, the *Irish Times* 'saw the conflict in Spain as essentially political and rooted in the complex history and social conditions of Spanish life'. It was staunch in its support for the democratically elected socialist-republican government that had come to power in 1936 and outlined how it viewed the background to the conflict:

At the last general election a Government was returned to power in a perfectly democratic way. It was a Republican Government, with certain leanings towards Socialism; but nobody could question its credentials . . . The Government admittedly was anti-clerical, as most Left-wing administrations on the Continent are. It incurred the wrath of the priesthood as well as of the grandees...and its attitude towards Church property very naturally gave grave offence in sacerdotal circles...The big landowners and monied classes took sides with the Church, and the stage was set for a bitter struggle between the Popular Front and the allied forces of Conservatism (*Irish Times*, 5 August, 1936).

It was aware, however, that this was not a universal view and alerted its readers to how news from Spain was becoming 'increasingly untrustworthy'. The Spanish conflict was being 'distorted grossly by Europe's yellow press' in which the elected government was 'been made to appear as the usurping party while the rebels are hailed as patriotic heroes' (11 August 1936). There existed, it declared, a 'deliberate effort to represent the war as a resurgence of the "Catholic" against the "Red" spirit', whereas the conflict was really between 'a Fascist junta which seeks to impose a military despotism upon the country and a population which has tasted, for the first time, some of the sweets of democracy, and does not

wish to forego them' (19 August 1936). Seeking to situate the conflict within the long-view of Spanish history it noted that the conflict had 'its roots deep in Spanish history' and that the violence was 'being directed not against religion, but against the Spanish clergy, who always have identified themselves with the aristocracy and land-owning classes'. It was, it intoned, the duty of all 'and particularly of responsible newspapers, which exert so much influence on public opinion – to try to find out the truth about events in Spain, and above all to avoid hysterical over-statements which are calculated to create an atmosphere of hatred and ill-feeling' (26 August 1936). The notion that the conflict was 'a clear-cut conflict between good and evil, between light and darkness, between religion and anti-Christ' was, it declared, 'grotesquely untrue' (19 December 1936).

For its part, the *Irish Independent* adopted a polar opposite view which, according to Bell (1969: 143), 'seemed more like politics than principle, an effort to take partisan advantage of religious feeling'. For the *Independent*, it was neither the proprieties of democracy nor the threat of fascism but the fate of the Catholic Church that informed its editorial ethos. In an early editorial on the conflict it resolutely outlined where it stood:

It is, in fact, a fight to the death between Communism and the combined forces of the Right for control of Spain . . . Either the Right will triumph and a military dictatorship will emerge and strive to bar the advance of the Bolshevistic movement which has already gained such a considerable hold upon the people of the Peninsula, or, the Left will come out victorious and open up the way for a Spanish Soviet State upon the Russian model . . . All who stand for the ancient Faith and the tradition of Spain are behind the present revolt against the Marxist regime in Madrid (22 July 1936).

It criticised those who viewed the conflict as 'nothing more than an attempted military coup by disgruntled army men against a duly elected Government of the people'. The election in February 1936 had, it maintained, been followed by 'a constant succession of murders and outrages committed with absolute impunity against priests, nuns, and Catholic and Conservative citizens generally'. The conflict was, it declared, 'a struggle to the death between Christianity and Communism'. On one side were the insurgent who stood for 'the Catholic and national ideals which animated the life of Spain when she was one of the greatest of European states' while on the other stood 'an unholy alliance of Communists, Anarchists, and anti-Christian revolutionaries of every sort and description in Spain'. Declaring its support for those who opposed the 'Red assassination squads who slaughter defenceless nuns and priests, who loot and burn the convents and churches, who desecrate the tombs of the dead, and who destroy the property of the living' the *Independent* asserted that it spoke for 'the overwhelming majority of the Irish people' (6 August 1936). In a sideswipe at the *Irish Times* the *Independent* noted how 'certain journals in this country, erstwhile if not at present pillars of robust Conservatism at home, are now so pro-Anarchist and Pro-Communist that these eulogies of these new-found allies must surely startle their regular readers' (22 August 1936).

In stark contrast, the *Irish Press* sought, in sympathy with the Irish (Fianna Fáil) government's position of non-intervention, to adopt a neutral ethos. In its first editorial on the conflict it noted that most of what was being defined as news was 'largely based on the stories, coloured or exaggerated, according to their personal leanings, of refugees belonging to one or the other camp'. Spain, it concluded, was 'now divided into two camps in which the most unrestrained passions and the most intense hatreds prevail'. On one side stood the Government under the aegis of which 'churches have been burned, schools secularised,

Communitistic schemes carried out, and a reign of terror culminating in murder by its agents instituted'. On the other stood those 'who were victims or the witnesses of the terrible deeds [who were] ready for any desperate measures to overthrow such a system of tyranny, sacrilege and spoliation' (23 July 1936). Throughout early-August 1936 by-elections consumed the attention of the *Press* but it returned to the issue of Spain in late August after the *Irish Independent* called on de Valera's government to 'sever diplomatic relations with Madrid, and express its abhorrence of the horrible deeds committed by the forces waging war on Christianity' (*Irish Independent*, 22 August 1936). Noting that not even the Vatican had taken such action the *Press* declared that the *Independent*, 'when it suits its own purpose, does not hesitate to be more Catholic than the Pope' (28 August 1936). Two days later, it accused the *Independent* of attempting 'to brand all those who refuse to share in its hysteria as enemies of the Church in Spain' and of seeking 'to make party capital out of the terrible sufferings of the Spanish people' (31 August 1936).

### **The correspondents**

To get first-hand accounts of what was happening in Spain and to buttress their editorial stances, each of the three national titles dispatched correspondents to Spain. In August 1936 the *Irish Times* editor R. M. Smyllie sent Lionel Fleming, a reporter who had joined the paper in 1934, 'to go down on the Republican side' with the instruction that he did not care what conclusions were reached so long as they were honest. In his memoirs, Fleming recalled this experience:

So I did go down and tried to be honest, chronicling the fact that the Republicans were burning down churches and that many of them were addicted not only to Communism but to the far more fascinating and attractive ideal of anarchy . . . But I did also put on record the fact that this was a legitimate struggle, both against the evils of Nazism and Fascism (which were to become very obvious indeed in the succeeding years) and the claim of the Catholic Church, that it should be allowed to control almost every aspect of Spanish life. The parallel, I suppose, was fairly obvious, though I had not contrived it (Fleming, 1965: 169).

In an advert promoting Fleming's ten-part series the *Times* declared that his articles would 'give an impartial, but vivid, account of his experiences in Spain, and, as he is the only Irish journalist in the country, they will be of great interest to every reader' (26 August 1936). Fleming spent three weeks with republican forces in Barcelona and touring the Aragon front. Reflecting the communication difficulties facing journalists covering the conflict his first dispatch never reached the *Irish Times*: a fact acknowledged by the paper as it published what it referred to as his 'first article received' (27 August 1936). This report portrayed Barcelona as being relatively calm 'thanks to the amazing discipline of the militia'. This calmness, Fleming observed, had not been guaranteed as the government had armed civilians, many of whom were members of different trades unions and the result 'might have been an orgy of personal vendettas and looting'. However, as Fleming saw it, 'thousands of men – and even boys of fourteen and fifteen – carry guns, but there is no murdering or pillaging' (27 August 1936). His second article convened bluntly what he viewed as the origins of the conflict:

In its simplest terms, it is an effort by the established Government of Spain to put down an insurrection, and, as such, the effort ought to claim the sympathy of all foreigners. When the army officers attempted their *coup de main* last month, they rose against a democratic Government, and their position is as indefensible as would be the position of Communists who tried to seize power by force in Great Britain, or an IRA

which made the attempt in Dublin. For many people this point is obscured by the fact that it is also a struggle between Communism and Fascism (29 August 1936).

While Fleming acknowledged the ‘melancholy fate of the churches’, he also acknowledged the calm atmosphere within the city as people adjusted to life under the anti-Fascist militia. As he observed, ‘hammer and sickle badges, scarlet ties or handkerchiefs’ were in great demand as were ‘volumes of Karl Marx and periodicals of savage cartoons about Fascism or the Church’ (1 September 1936). As he and three other journalists moved towards the Aragon front he found that everywhere they went they met helpful militia who pointed them in the right direction and offered them wine. ‘These militia-men’, Fleming concluded, ‘may be cruel in war’ but they were also ‘amazingly friendly’ (7 September 1936). He also described the plight of government forces – its advance towards Saragossa had stalled as had its attempt to take Huesca because of their lack of artillery and tanks. Even their armoured cars were, Fleming observed, ‘ordinary lorries, sheeted with metal which is heavy enough to reduce the effective power of the engines by about half, and yet thin enough to allow a bullet to pass through almost without interruption’ (8 September 1936). Having reached the front, Fleming met ‘dozens of Frenchmen, Belgians, Englishmen, and Italians’. While the English and French nationals seemed to be there ‘for fun’, the Italians and Germans were, Fleming found, ‘mainly composed of young men who have been badly treated under the Fascist *regime* of their own countries, and who have conceived an implacable hatred of Fascism which is not excelled by the Spanish themselves’ (9 September 1936). Both sides, Fleming reported in another article, were ‘absolutely merciless’ in their treatment of prisoners. He felt compelled to emphasise the behaviour of both sides as people talked of ‘government “atrocities” as if all the rebels wore kid gloves’ (10 September 1936). Addressing the role of religion in the conflict he noted that only two of the fifty or so churches in Barcelona had not been burned down – a result of people believing that the church had for decades supported the landowning classes, had helped in plotting the rebellion, and had allowed churches to be used as munition dumps. Investigating each allegation in turn, Fleming concluded that:

the material power and wealth of the church in Spain provided one reason for the outrages. The church, as a body, was very wealthy – it was one of the largest landowners in the country – and any Socialist or Communist movement would tend to class it automatically with “the moneyed classes”. It was not to be expected that the Left wing element in Spain, with its revolutionary schemes for social change, would be content to leave the church in the full enjoyment of its property while industrialists and other “capitalists” were expropriated.

In relation to the church being implicated in the rebellion, having spoken to journalists who were present during the fighting Fleming concluded ‘very reluctantly that there are grounds for this incredible statement’. As to the killing of priests, Fleming noted that ‘most of the stories are only too well founded’. Summoning up the origins of the conflict Fleming concluded that ‘rightly or wrongly, the people believe that the rebellion was due to the Army officers and the priests, acting together’ (16 September 1936).

Prompted, most likely, by Fleming’s series, in early 1937 the *Irish Independent* dispatched a female reporter, Gertrude Gaffney, to Spain. Gaffney, the paper’s women’s editor, was an experienced journalist who had worked on numerous journals and crossed the border from France into Franco-held northern Spain. Her thirteen-part series, published through February and March 1937, was promoted by the *Independent* as ‘a first-hand, authentic account of conditions behind the war-fronts in Spain’ (19 February 1937). But in contrast with

Fleming's series her articles did not in any way inquire into the origins of the conflict. Instead, they replicated the paper's position that the conflict was an easily understood battle between what Gaffney referred to as 'Nationalists' and 'Reds'.

For the most part, Gaffney's series consisted of wordy articles that sought to stress the commonalities between Spain and Ireland. These included detailed descriptions of the Spanish countryside – its 'fields as green as any in Ireland' (22 February 1937), its houses with 'religious statues or small shrines' (23 February 1937), and the Irish College at Salamanca (25 February 1937). There was, however, no sign of the Irish flag: on several occasions Gaffney remarked that while German and Italian flags flew alongside the Spanish flag on public buildings the Irish flag was 'conspicuous by its absence'. This disappointed Gaffney who claimed that 'for a small and poor country we have until now done in our own way a great deal for Nationalist Spain' (23 February 1937). Referring to the presence of German and Italian military personnel, Gaffney reported that 'everybody knows that they were only permitted there long after the Red side had imported Russian and French aid so considerable that something had to be done to counteract it' (25 February 1937). Oblivious to the irony, on arriving in Salamanca Gaffney went to visit Franco's headquarters which, she informed readers, was located in the Bishop's Palace (25 February 1937).

Unsurprisingly perhaps, Gaffney spent time with Eoin O'Duffy's Irish Brigade in the city of Caceres and devoted three of her articles to exalting the merits of the brigade. Escorted throughout by her former *Irish Independent* colleague Tom Gunning who had travelled to Spain as O'Duffy's right hand man, Gaffney was at pains to stress how well the men looked ('they looked so much bigger, broader, and more rugged than the small-boned, slender Spanish soldiers with their girlish faces and big dark eyes, most of whom looked so young and immature'), as well as how well fed and how well paid they were (Gaffney mentioned the issue of pay as she was aware that 'a great many people are under the impression that the Irishmen in the Foreign Legion are not being paid at all'). According to Gaffney the men had fully embraced the credo of the Legion – 'he must never complain of pain, of hunger, or thirst, or lack of sleep' – though these are the reasons why the Irish Brigade returned home four months later (1 March 1937).

While Gaffney noted she had expected to find a band of adventurers, she had instead found a 'bandera of crusaders . . . men who had come to Spain to fight for Christianity – and for nothing else'. This, she declared, was 'no army of disillusioned unemployed, but of men who had left parents, and wives, and families [to] fight for Christianity and all that it stands for against a Bolshevism that would rob the world of the inspiration of Christ and rob man of the right to his own religious belief' (2 March 1937). Seeking to reassure those very wives left behind in Ireland Gaffney reported that the men found 'the Spanish Senorita was very stand-offish compared to her Irish sister' and that while the men 'were without fear of fighting the Reds they were fearful of the bonds of a Spanish betrothal ceremony, a far more serious affair than our engagement and far more difficult to break' (2 March 1937).

There was, however, one complaint: the men were 'disappointed because they had received practically no letters or newspapers since they left Ireland' (2 March 1937). Having made enquiries with Franco's headquarters Gaffney was assured that the mail had been 'misaid en route', had been found in Lisbon and would be sent to the men immediately (2 March 1937). On this issue, Gaffney liaised with the press office of Franco's headquarters and even went so far as to provide the press office with a copy of a letter that had been sent to the *Irish Independent* from the wife of one Irish Brigade volunteer. As the press office official noted:

In this letter, the spouse of an Irish soldier serving here in Spain complains bitterly of not having received news of her husband for more than three months. Miss Gaffney stated that this is just one of a multitude of similar letters that have been received by the editorial staff of the newspaper, albeit none of which may yet have been published.<sup>2</sup>

Gaffney's final report on the Irish Brigade focused on the unveiling of a commemorative plaque to the brigade at the local Franciscan Church – and the all day celebrations that followed (3 March 1937). Given the uncritical nature of her series it is no wonder that in his book on the exploits of the Irish Brigade O'Duffy observed that Gaffney's articles 'were eagerly read in Spain and brought comfort to many an anxious Irish parent at home' (O'Duffy, 1938: 115).

At the *Irish Press*, an editorial interregnum allowed for some innovative reporting of the conflict. Following the resignation of the paper's founding editor Frank Gallagher in June 1935, running the paper on a daily basis fell to managing editor, Chris O'Sullivan, an Australian journalist with Irish connections. Even after Gallagher's successor, John Herlihy (a 71 year-old journalist who would himself be replaced in 1938) was appointed in December 1935, O'Sullivan continued as managing editor. Born in Sydney to an Irish father, O'Sullivan had worked on several left-leaning newspapers in Australia before travelling to Ireland where he worked first on the *Irish Times* and then on the *Irish Press*. As managing editor, it was O'Sullivan who decided to assign an undercover reporter to travel to Spain with volunteers for Duffy's brigade. As part of the preparations O'Sullivan wrote a letter to a cable company authorising it to send from Spain and Portugal any cables lodged by his reporter. The reporter, Bernard James Gannon left Ireland with a group of ninety men headed for Spain via Lisbon. They arrived in Lisbon on 17 December 1936 and it was from there that Gannon sent his first report back to Dublin.

His first report, headlined 'From a Correspondent', concerned the fate of Commandant Edmond John Cronin, founder of the Army Comrades Association (ACA). As the ACA had morphed into the Blueshirts and came under Eoin O'Duffy's leadership Cronin had lost faith in O'Duffy. In September 1936 Cronin issued a statement in which he castigated O'Duffy's Spanish adventure as 'mock heroics' and observed that 'an Irish Brigade has as much prospect of reaching Saragossa as it has of reaching the moon' (*Irish Press*, 22 August 1936). Nonetheless, in November 1936 Cronin sailed from Liverpool 'to offer his services to General Franco with a view to organising a second brigade'. But having arrived in Lisbon, Cronin, at the behest of O'Duffy, was refused permission to enter Spain (*Irish Press*, 21 December 1936). While in Lisbon, Cronin encountered Gannon who had recently arrived in the city disguised as a volunteer for O'Duffy's brigade. Unaware that Gannon was an *Irish Press* reporter, Cronin opened up about his experiences. Under the headline 'Blueshirt Chief's Amazing Allegation', Gannon recounted how, on Cronin's arrival in Lisbon 'a prominent member of the O'Duffy Brigade approached him, informed him that his arrival in Spain was resented and that he (the informant) had instructions not to help him in any way'. While the Spanish Counsel eventually issued him a visa to enter Spain, he was met at the border by insurgents and refused entry. Cronin told Gannon that 'the Commander at Badajoz, an insurgent stronghold, had orders not to let him (Cronin) through, and that, if he did get into Spain, the orders were to shoot him'. Thereafter Cronin returned to Ireland, accompanied by Gannon (*Irish Press*, 24 December 1936).



However, when Cronin saw his story splashed across the front page of the *Irish Press* he issued a statement denouncing what he referred to as ‘the distorted and grossly exaggerated report of an alleged interview’. Accusing the *Press* of being ‘anxious to damage and damn the cause of the Spanish patriots’ Cronin described the interview as ‘a diabolical attempt on the part of the *Irish Press* to stab in the back the Catholics of Spain’ and its use of an undercover reporter as a ‘villainous scheme, unscrupulously planned and played by the *Irish Press*’. According to Cronin, he had figured out that Gannon was not who he said he was and that after confronting Gannon the latter had admitted to being a *Press* reporter. According to Cronin, Gannon had told him that ‘he was sent out and paid by the *Irish Press*, that he enlisted with the Irish Brigade under a false name . . . and claimed that he was justified in what he did if the officers in charge of the brigade were so careless in the selection of their volunteers’. Describing Gannon as ‘an imposter, a spy on his own countrymen in a foreign land, paid by and sent out by the *Irish Press* for their own very sinister purposes’ Cronin declared that the use of such journalistic tactics would only result in ‘horrors and abominations’ in public life (*Irish Press*, 29 December 1936). In response, the *Irish Press* took the opportunity to mock both O’Duffy and Cronin. While it noted that O’Duffy was ‘in the full blaze of military glory’ it accused Cronin of being ‘at his wits end to explain to the Irish public the cause of his personal discomfiture and the reasons for his hasty, and if truth must be told, rather ignominious exit from Portugal’. In relation to Gannon it stated simply (though disingenuously) that he ‘did not represent the Irish Press, that his fare was not paid by this paper [and] that he apparently undertook a free-lance enterprise of his own’ (29 December 1936).

### **Reaction to coverage**

For its pro-Franco coverage, the *Irish Independent* earned praise from leading members of the hierarchy. In August 1936 the Bishop of Killaloe, Michael Fogarty, expressed his ‘warm appreciation’ of the *Independent’s* ‘uncompromising denunciation of the brutal outrages which have been going on in Spain under the aegis of the so-called legitimate Government’ (*Irish Independent*, 18 August 1936). In his 1937 review of Irish newspapers, prominent Jesuit Rev Stephen Brown, declared that the *Independent* ‘alone among the metropolitan dailies, took definitely the side of the Spanish national army against the Socialist-Communist-Anarchist combination [and] gave the Irish public the full fact about the persecution of the Church and the atrocities committed against priests and nuns’ (Brown, 1937: 49). But the *Independent’s* coverage was not universally praised. In his ‘Foreign Commentary’ column in the monthly periodical *Ireland To-Day*, Owen Sheehy Skeffington noted how the *Independent* had ‘demanded in 1916, in a famous editorial, the execution of Connolly and the other Irish Revolutionaries, who had dared to defy the powers that were. Rebels in Spain, however, provided they are on the side of the landlord, are respectable’ (*Ireland To-Day*, September 1936: 5).

For its coverage of the conflict, the *Irish Times* came in for sustained criticism from religious and lay groups. In an open letter to the paper (republished with glee by the *Irish Independent*) Rev Stephen Brown sought ‘to protest in the strongest possible manner against the attitude taken up by [the *Irish Times*] with regard to the Spanish struggle’. Only those ‘blinded by religious or class prejudice’ could, Brown asserted, doubt ‘that the real issue there is Communism versus Christianity’ (*Irish Independent*, 22 August 1936). From there on relations between the *Times* and the church worsened. As recalled by Lionel Fleming, the publication of his articles from Spain had prompted a swift response:

The publication of my first articles was followed by the arrival, in our office, of a very polite priest. He told Smyllie [Fleming's editor] that, by pure chance, he had been talking to several of our more prominent advertisers, who had hinted that, unless the *Irish Times* discontinued this series of articles, they would feel compelled to withdraw their custom. He spoke, said the priest, as a well-wisher of the paper; he would not like to see the *Irish Times* lose money. He was shown the door (Fleming, 1965: 170).

The warning was anything but hollow: on the day Fleming's first article was published, Hugh Allen of the Catholic Truth Society, wrote to the president of Blackrock College and chairman of the Catholic Headmasters' Association, John Charles McQuaid, to suggest that the Catholic Headmasters' Association might now agree to put that paper out of bounds for members of the Association, as far as advertisements of their schools are concerned'. Describing the *Irish Times* as an 'anti-Catholic organ', Allen noted that if all headmasters – who advertised their schools in the *Times* to attract the business of well-heeled Catholics who bought the paper – agreed to boycott the title then the need to advertise in it would disappear.<sup>3</sup> When his proposal was put on the agenda he again wrote to McQuaid. Describing the *Irish Times* editor, R. M. Smyllie, as 'a Mason [whose] actions are taken in sympathy with Masonic brethren in Barcelona', Allen calculated that, during school recruitment season, the paper would carry £175 worth of Catholic school advertisements each day.<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, the Headmasters' Association decided to leave it to each headmaster to decide his own course of action. Nonetheless, the motion had an effect: throughout August 1936 it carried twenty-eight adverts for Catholic schools and in September a further eight adverts. But during the same period the following year it did not carry any adverts for Catholic schools (McGarry, 1999: 165). Interestingly, in November 1937 Lionel Fleming addressed Trinity College Dublin students on his experiences in Spain in which he observed that 'the movement against the church in Spain started from the same basis as the anti-landlord movement here. It started because the church was an immensely wealthy landlord in a poor country and because the church had control of education in a country in which the people were illiterate'. While his address was reported on by the *Irish Independent*, it was ignored by the *Irish Times* (*Irish Independent*, 20 November 1936).

At the *Irish Press* a change in personnel occurred. For his decision to send an undercover reporter to Spain, the paper's managing editor, Chris O'Sullivan was unceremoniously sacked by the title's controlling director, Eamon de Valera in early 1937. Recalling the circumstances of his sacking many decades later O'Sullivan remembered that it was at a board meeting that de Valera 'asked me why I had written a letter to a cable company authorising it to send from Spain and Portugal any cables lodged by a man I sent over there, without consulting the general manager. I said "I just didn't, that's all, I was managing editor, I figured that was my business". So I was fired'. As recalled by O'Sullivan he had already been threatened by the Catholic Church and de Valera's action was inevitable:

The fact that I was not a conformist, not a Catholic, wasn't seen going to church, went against me. The priests actually threatened – they made me an offer with one hand and threatened me with the other: they said if you don't send your children to Church, things will be very difficult for you. I was just, what you might call, what is called, a free thinker: but I did not want to be under the thumb of the Church . . . And they actually visited me at my home and said "you don't go to church, you don't send your children to Church" . . . The Church put pressure on de Valera to get rid of me [and] they found an excuse for firing me.<sup>5</sup>

Despite O’Sullivan’s sacking, some of the paper’s columnists remained unhappy with the paper’s coverage. In February 1937 columnist Aodh de Blacam wrote to Cardinal MacRory ‘about the difficulty of getting the Spanish case made clear’ in the paper and asked MacRory to contact de Valera to make him aware of how his newspaper was ‘poisoning the well’ of public opinion. But as McGarry (1999: 165–166) has pointed out ‘the assertion that the newspaper followed a “red” policy on Spain is wholly misleading’.

### **Conclusion**

The Spanish civil war was a conflict that acted as a touchstone for the divisions within Irish society. In a state characterised by religious homogeneity, any conflict that involved a revolt against a democratically elected government and reports of the killing of Catholic clergy was bound to stir emotions. Each of the three national titles framed the conflict through its own unique editorial ethos. For the *Irish Times*, the conflict could not be comprehended without first understanding the political-economy of Spanish society. Thus the *Times* put its emphasis on explaining the context of the conflict in terms of the relationship of the Catholic Church with the Spanish state and in defending the right of democratically elected governments to govern. In stark contrast, the *Irish Independent* portrayed the war as an easily understood conflict between communism and Catholicism: context in terms of the structure of Spanish society and the various forces at play were studiously ignored in the paper’s emotive-laden coverage. For its part, the *Irish Press* walked a non-intervention tightrope as advocated by the Irish government. As the *Press* viewed matters, both sides were at fault and the Irish state should not become involved.

The decision by each of the titles to send correspondents to Spain only reinforced these positions. While Lionel Fleming of the *Irish Times* found that those fighting on the republican side viewed the Catholic Church as an ally of the rebels, Gertrude Gaffney of the *Irish Independent* praised the virtues of the Irishmen who had enlisted in O’Duffy’s Irish Brigade. In contrast, the *Irish Press* utilised an undercover reporter to ridicule those who had gone to Spain to fight for Franco – much to the chagrin of the paper’s controlling director and the country’s prime minister, Eamon de Valera.

While these divisions were keenly felt in the early months of the conflict and resulted in a backlash against some publications, as time progressed other issues intervened to negate the divisions. In February 1937 the Irish parliament passed a non-intervention act that criminalised the enlisting of personnel in foreign forces. The following June, after chaotic attempts to engage in action, the bulk of O’Duffy’s Irish Brigade returned home and as Bell (1969: 158) observed, ‘neither the praise of cardinals nor the editorials in the *Independent* . . . could cover up the transformation of the great crusade, started with such high hopes and pious idealism, into a futile and chaotic disaster’. As the months passed, interest in the Spanish conflict declined as wider war clouds gathered. On 11 February 1939, the Irish government recognised Franco as the leader of Spain. But by then the attention of all Irish newspapers had long switched to the looming European-wide conflict.

### **Notes**

1. For figures on the religious composition of the Irish state see <http://www.cso.ie/en/census/censusvolumes1926to1991/historicalreports/>
2. Spanish National Archives, AGMAV, C. 2379, 156, 23/4, Memo date 29 March 1937.
3. Dublin Diocesan Archives, McQuaid Papers, Allen to McQuaid, 27 August 1936.
4. Dublin Diocesan Archives, McQuaid Papers, Allen to McQuaid, 5 September 1936.

5. National Library of Australia Oral History and Folklore Collection: interview of Chris O'Sullivan conducted by Andrew Reeves, 26 July 1978.

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