

Remembering and Forgetting the Kerry Dead of the Spanish Civil War

Denis Casey (denis.casey@mu.ie)

The city of Cáceres in western Spain does not feature prominently as a holiday destination for Irish people, unless you are a diehard *Game of Thrones* fan or a historian interested in Irish involvement in the ‘last great cause’, the Spanish Civil War (1936–9).

Idealists from around the world fought and died in Spain’s fields, mountains and plains, some for its democratically elected Republican government and others for the nationalist/fascist rebels under General Francisco Franco, with men from Kerry on both sides of the divide. In Ireland, the struggle was widely promoted as a ‘crusade’ in which the rebels were ‘defending’ the Catholic Church against the ‘godless communists’ (really a moderate socialist government), and public fervour encouraged enlistment in an Irish brigade under ex-Garda Commissioner Eoin O’Duffy. Among those who followed him to fight for the rebels were four Kerry volunteers, who are still buried in Cáceres.

The Kerry Casualties of O’Duffy’s Brigade

Approximately 700 Irish volunteers under O’Duffy arrived in Cáceres for training in December 1936, and on 16th February 1937 they were ordered to the Madrid front. Their first taste of combat did not bode well for their short time in Spain. Near Ciempozuelos (about 30km south of Madrid), the Irish encountered a nationalist unit from the Canary Islands, and attempted to identify themselves as comrades. The Canary Islanders did not buy it, and in the ensuing firefight the first Irish casualties were Tom Hyde of Cork and Dan Chute of Tralee, along with two of their Spanish liaisons/translators. O’Duffy arranged for their funerals to be held in Cáceres, and attended by major dignitaries, including the mayor, military governor and bishop.

While ‘friendly fire’ accounted for Dan Chute, it was Republican bullets and shells that dispatched John McSweeney, Bernard Horan, and Tom Foley (also all of Tralee) on 13th March. The Irish had been tasked to cross the Jarama river and capture the village of Titulcia, 5km to the southeast of Ciempozuelos, but failed to do so. Nonetheless, a positive spin was put on the action, and the *Irish Independent* even reported that the Irish had won a battle near Madrid! By coincidence, Irish members of the International Brigades, who fought on behalf of the opposing Republican government, were already posted nearby, and the battle for the Jarama was immortalised in the song *Jarama Valley*, which was subsequently recorded by Luke Kelly of *The Dubliners*.

Needing to Forget

O'Duffy's men saw no further direct action and left Spain under a cloud in June 1937, having lost 15 of their number to friendly fire, enemy fire, and illness, and came home to a muted response. Both official Ireland and the wider public — which had been so vocal in encouraging them to fight for Franco — largely ignored them. Their memory survived little better in the land in which they had fought.

After the end of World War II, Franco decided it was in his best interest to downplay the foreign support he had received, especially from the defeated fascist powers, Italy and Germany. This also meant that foreign volunteers such as those who fought with O'Duffy's brigade were quietly forgotten, and when Franco received a Garda delegation to Spain in the 1950s, no mention was made of their former commissioner.

After Franco's death in 1975 and Spain's rapid transition to democracy, all political parties and society in general entered into a *Pacto del Olvido* ('Pact of Forgetting'), in which a *let-sleeping-dogs-lie* policy was followed. The future was more important than the past, and court cases, prosecutions, etc. for previous crimes were avoided. Unlike other countries such as South Africa, where a Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established, Spain waited almost a generation to engage with its Civil War legacy. Forgetting the likes of Dan Chute, John McSweeney, Bernard Horan, and Tom Foley, was part of a larger process that helped Spain transition from one of Western Europe's last and largest military dictatorships to one of its key democracies.

Beginning to Remember

In the year following Franco's death, Cathal O'Shannon produced *Even the Olives are Bleeding* for RTÉ, in which he interviewed surviving Civil War participants, and filmed on location in Spain. The Irish tombs in the Cáceres cemetery are clearly visible in one shot, but in 2005 these were emptied along with various other nationalist Civil War dead, and their bodies removed and buried beneath a collective monument in the oldest part of the cemetery, where their names are recorded on black marble slabs on the ground. That monument bears the inscription *Militares fallecidos en campaña. Como valientes lucharon y como heroes murieron* ('Soldiers fallen on campaign. As brave men they fought and as heroes they died'), and deliberately avoids mentioning any dates or campaigns, clearly not wishing to advertise that those who lie there fought for the fascist forces.

Directly over the wall stands a monument with no such reticence: a series of standing iron sheets, engraved with the names of over 700 civilians, from teenagers to pensioners, executed for their republican ideals, both during and after the war. As many were executed in that one town as O'Duffy led to Spain, and while Horan, McSweeney, Foley and Chute may have died almost 90 years ago, in Spain the war goes on.

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About the Author

Denis Casey holds a PhD from the University of Cambridge, is a member of the Irish Association of Professional Historians and a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society.