

**Intervention?:
British Politics and Basque Refugee Children
During the Spanish Civil War**

Senior Thesis
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On May 23 1937 at 7:30 in the morning, 4000 Basque children accompanied by *señoritas*, Catholic priests and auxiliaries arrived at Southampton in the United Kingdom on the *SS Habana*. Mattresses lined the decks though there was still insufficient room for the children to lie down and sleep comfortably. Many of them were weary, sleep deprived and sea-sick. Yet the arrival at Southampton was exciting for the children. The port had been recently decorated for the king's coronation, and many of the children believed these extravagant decorations to be in their honor, adding to the excitement of their arrival and forging distinct memories. The children were greeted by doctors who gave them food in hopes of relieving their sea-sickness. Although the voyage was difficult, the unpleasantness was minimal compared to the experiences the children had had in war ravaged Spain. These children were being evacuated from the destructive bombs, extreme hunger and death wrought on the Republican Basque Country by the Nationalist Army during the Spanish Civil War. This evacuation was part of a larger humanitarian aid movement, and thousands of other Basque Children were evacuated primarily to France, the Soviet Union, and Belgium and in lesser numbers to Mexico, the United States, Switzerland and Denmark.

This story of the Basque refugee children takes place in the context of international political turmoil and many have commented that it was the precedent to World War II, a battle in which democracy fought fascism. With the ascendancy of fascism, the Spanish Civil War gave fascist forces an opportunity to practice and perfect battle tactics and equipment that they would use later in World War II. Germany especially had the opportunity to strengthen its military by fighting in the Spanish Civil War.

This story of evacuation of the Basque children to Britain during the Spanish civil war touches on many themes inherent to the interwar period in Europe such as the battle between

fascism and democracy, non-intervention and isolationist policy, humanitarian sympathy and aid, and political debate and policy. When placed in this broader context, the policy of allowing 4,000 children refugees into Britain becomes historically significant. The importance of this event, however, is not reflected in the historical literature. The literature fails to mention how the British policy of Non-Intervention, which essentially controlled *all* British foreign policy, affected the evacuation of the Basque children at three levels: in the government, in the public, and in the committees and volunteers that directly dealt with the children.

To begin a historiographic discussion on the evacuation effort, it is necessary to examine the history of British aid to Spain during the civil war as well as Britain's Non-Intervention Policy. *The Policy of Simmering*, by WM Laird Kleine-Ahlbrandt, and *The Signal Was Spain: The Aid Spain Movement in Britain 1936-1939*, by Jim Fyrth, together give a comprehensive view of British public opinion during the Spanish Civil War and very clearly discuss the significance of this public opinion on official government policy. They also complement each other because each explains how the British, although unsuccessful in influencing the outcome of the Spanish Civil War, achieved their goals of providing aid to the Spanish, upholding Spanish dignity, and containing the conflict to Spain through the policy of Non-Intervention.

The Policy of Simmering, by Kleine-Ahlbrandt, is a study of British policy during the Spanish Civil War and how it was affected by its foreign and domestic relations by using extensive primary research from sources such as government documents, memoirs, newspapers and annuals. The author argues that in terms of Britain's policy of Non-Intervention, Britain was successful. The author also proves in his book that although the policy of Non-Intervention helped Mussolini and Hitler form closer ties, Britain was still successful in containing the war to

Spain and was also successful in diminishing the strength of Italy's forces, which caused Italy to be less significant in World War II.

Jim Fyrth also argues that the Aid Spain Movement¹ was successful in achieving their policy during the Spanish Civil War. The author argues that the Aid Spain Movement wanted to provide aid for the Spanish, both in Spain and in Britain. Through this movement, many different organizations traveled to Spain to provide services and aid to those in need. A large number of Quakers were involved, setting up colonies in Spain, mostly in Catalonia, to take care of Republican fighters. The International Brigades also traveled to Spain to fight on the side of the Republicans, proving especially helpful in keeping Madrid in Republican hands for so long. Fyrth also mentions the "Bilbao Babies Policy" that brought 4,000 Basque Children² to Britain to live in colonies and be looked after for nearly three months until they were repatriated to Spain, met their parents in exile in a different country, or continued to live in Britain. The author argues that through this movement and in contributing money and other resources to these individual aid movements, the British public became highly politicized in favor of the Republicans and the Left wing government. This politicization ultimately morphed into an anti-fascism sentiment and unified many that would fight against fascism in the years to come during World War II. Like Kleine-Ahlbrandt, Fyrth argues that the British sympathies were ultimately capitalized upon after the Bombing of Guernica, and gives a comprehensive view as to how the British were reluctant at first to support the war, but driven by human sympathy, rallied to organize a mass movement to provide aid to the Spanish.

When read together, Fyrth and Kleine-Ahlbrandt successfully depict the aid movement in Britain, domestically and internationally. Kleine-Albrandt focuses more on the international

¹ The Aid Spain Movement was a voluntary movement that raised supplies and money to send aid to Spain.

² Jim Fyrth, *The Signal Was Spain: The Aid Spain Movement in Britain 1936-1939* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1986), 220-242.

implications of British action during the Spanish Civil War and how these actions would affect Britain and the rest of Europe during World War II, discussing British policy in the larger diplomatic context and analyzing the consequences of Britain's Non-Intervention policy. Fyrth gives a more comprehensive view of the aid given to Spain and the domestic ramifications of British policy on the British public. Kleine-Ahlbrant and Fyrth give insight as to the motivations and modifications of the British public opinion and the official policies of British leaders and the implications of these policies for Europe as a whole. Particularly, they explore the implications for World War II—fitting within a broad understanding that sees the events of the Spanish Civil War, in many ways, as a precursor to the events of World War II.

These books provide insight to the British political scene in the 1930's and throughout this discussion a predominant theme emerges: the British were very committed to their Non-Intervention policy. This policy caused a withdrawal of active military aid to Spain and was the cause for much smaller private mobilization by the British public—sending food and supplies, and evacuating 4,000 Basque children. They also point out that it was not until the bombing of Guernica that British public opinion shifted in favor of aiding Spain, which ultimately was the contributing factor in the evacuation of the Basque children. It is interesting to note, then, that there are only two definitive books dealing specifically with the Basque children's evacuation, which was one of the more unique British efforts to provide aid to the Spanish.

The Guernica Generation: Basque Refugee Children and the Spanish Civil War by Dorothy Legaretta, is the definitive scholarly study on the Basque Refugee Children. Seemingly, Legaretta is really the first historian to take on the study of the Basque Children (as they are still called today) and their experiences in Spain, in their host countries, and in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War. Legaretta's study is an analysis of oral interviews with various Basque

Children. Throughout the book, Legaretta uses their stories to form a narrative of the events and experiences of the Basque Children as a whole. Through these interviews, Legaretta formulates a series of criteria that can be used to determine the overall experience of the Basque Children in their host countries. She concludes that a child had a good experience in their host country if their first impression of the country was good, they were well fed, if the host country accepted them, if there were mentors present, if the children were able to maintain speaking their own language, if some sort of culture and religion was maintained while the children were in the host country (many Basques were very Catholic—and the presence of this religion played a factor in their overall experience).

While Legaretta's study ultimately gives the field of study the most comprehensive information about the Basque children refugees' experiences in general, she does not provide a detailed study of the political implications of the Basque children in specifically England. Through her criterion of a successful stay in a host country, she concludes that in Britain it was overall a good experience.³ Where Legaretta is successful in providing information about the Basque children's stay in England, she does not provide analysis of the British Non-Intervention policy and the Basque Children, two elements that are very much connected as British Non-Intervention provides the framework that made the evacuation possible. The act of evacuation is inherently interventionist in that it requires people to be taken out of the conflict and dealt with in an area outside of the conflict.

In the Preface of Adrian Bell's *Only For Three Months: The Basque Children in Exile*, the author states that he has read *The Guernica Generation* and believes that it answers many

³ Dorothy Legaretta, *The Guernica Generation: Basque Refugee Children of the Spanish Civil War* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1986), 297-333.

questions, but “Like all good books though, it serves to raise as many questions as it answers.”⁴ He cites specifically the 250 children that stayed behind in England after the Spanish civil war ended, and states that his book would be an attempt to describe the actual experiences of those children.⁵ Bell successfully depicts the actual events of the Basque children in England. He discovers that, once there, the children had a variety of experiences. Bell pays more attention to the Non-Interventionist policy when he notes that no camp was funded by the British Government, all camps were forced to fund themselves, through donations from community members and organizations. Through focusing on the camps, Bell further displays how the movement to aid the Basque children was a movement of the private citizens and not the British government. It should also be noted that not all of Britain accepted the Basque refugees openly, and Bell successfully demonstrates this. Bell’s discussion of public support and opposition puts into perspective the arguments for staying out of the Spanish conflict. Bells does offer information about the Non-Intervention policy, but does not directly connect the two, nor show how the Non-Intervention policy affected the movement to evacuate the children.

These books complement each other in a way that together provides a detailed description of the evacuation of the Basque children to Britain and how that fit into the larger context of the humanitarian efforts to evacuate Basque children. These books also work in tandem to recount very specific experiences encountered by the Basque children in Britain, to give an idea of how the systems of humanitarian aid worked, and the benefits (and even drawbacks) the children experienced as a result of their evacuation to Britain. Together, these books provide an invaluable amount of material for a study of this event with limited resources for first hand accounts from Basque children. They also interpret and analyze these stories

⁴ Adrian Bell, *Only for Three Months*, (Norwich: Mousehold Press, 1996), i.

⁵ *Ibid.*

within a historical context, providing a narrative of what happened to these children from 1937 and after.

By examining these sources, a noticeable pattern develops as the sources come together to tell a comprehensive story about Britain's aid to Spain during the civil war and how that aid ultimately manifested itself by the means of an evacuation of 4,000 Basque children from the terrible conflict. A common theme expressed throughout the body of works expresses the idea in one way or another, that the British were concerned with maintaining their Non-Intervention Policy, containing the war to Spain and ultimately providing aid in the least aggressive means possible: by sending food, supplies and services, and by allowing 4,000 children to take refuge in their country. The purpose of this examination is not to criticize the amount of British participation in saying that they could have given more help, as one may be apt to do, but to understand the motivations behind their actions, and that through the actions they took, they were able to appease the public, give aid to Spain, and maintain their Non-Intervention treaty. The literature consistently suggests that after the bombing of Guernica, British public opinion shifted significantly in favor of aid to Spain, but the question still remains, why at this moment? Surely there had been horrific events happening in Spain during the war—the literature suggests that the war was brutal indeed. What needs to be examined that historiographically has not been demonstrated, is how the evacuation of the children to Britain fits into the politics of the Non-Intervention treaty and the policy of appeasement that Britain so diligently adopted and more specifically, how Non-Intervention allowed the government to remain neutral yet appease a public who was calling for action of humanitarian aid towards the Spanish by evacuating 4,000 children refugees to Britain.

The political situation in Spain during the 1930s was one of significant ideological conflict between the right and the left. Through a series of elections during the Second Republic (1931-1939) power alternated between monarchist conservatives and reformist leftists. The political polarization between the opposing ideologies created a situation of open conflict in Spain throughout the 1930s that ultimately led to the Spanish Civil War which lasted from 1936 and 1939. In 1936, President Alcalá dissolved the Cortes (Spanish Parliament) and called for another election in an attempt to reunite the Republic.⁶ He did not foresee that this action would incite a bitter and heinous civil war that would last the next three years.

The Socialist Party joined the Popular Front (Republican) Government, giving them the extra votes needed to win the election of 1936. The Popular Front victory strained tensions between the two sides. Supporters of both the left and the right took to the streets, fighting, mobbing, looting and rioting. People were murdered and political figures assassinated. Moreover, workers also participated in the chaos, striking and paralyzing the Spanish economy.⁷

In July of 1936, General Francisco Franco, a reactionary military leader opposed to the Republican government, seized the opportunity that the chaotic atmosphere provided and led right-wing nationalists in an insurrection from Morocco, where he was stationed, to overthrow the left-wing Popular Front Government. He was ultimately victorious and subsequently presided over Spain as dictator from 1939-1975.⁸

In the civil war, politically conflicting ideological sides fought for control of the government. The left-wing Popular Front Government included such political parties as the Socialists, Communists, Republicans and Anarchists. These groups cooperated to govern Spain

⁶ For more on the Second Republic see: Antony Beevor, *The Spanish Civil War* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 27-36.

⁷ For more on the Popular Front Government and Victory see: Antony Beevor, *The Spanish Civil War* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 39-50.

⁸ For more on Generalissimo Francisco Franco and the insurgency see: Antony Beevor, *The Spanish Civil War* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 51-61.

during the civil war. The Popular Front was supported not only by the leftist political parties, but also by urban workers and landless peasants. The right-wing Nationalist Government was dominated by the Falange Party, the *Unión Militar Española* (Spanish Military Union), the Monarchists, and the Fascists. Traditional elites such as the landed gentry and clergy also supported the rightist insurrection. The divisions also occurred religiously. The right was very Catholic, while the left was more secular. Regional issues caused exceptions to this generalization. The conservative Basque Country, for example, sided with the Popular Front because under the Popular Front they were given autonomy and allowed to exist as a distinct regional state. As the conflict continued, divisions between the two sides became more distinct and the battle between them even more brutal. The escalation of fighting caught the attention of audiences worldwide as the Spanish Civil War became a prominent topic of public discourse as well as government debate; and the British case was typical.

The British political scene in the 1930's was one of recovery. The British were not only still recovering from World War I, they were in the midst of the Great Depression, and had no intention or financial capability of being involved in another war. Yet despite this political situation, the British were very interested, if not obsessed, with the Spanish Civil War and the events surrounding it. They spent much of their time from 1936-1939 creating, debating, and implementing a Non-Intervention Treaty that they would encourage other European countries to sign. They also debated their own public's voluntary involvement in the war through relief and humanitarian organizations, as well as the 4,000 Basque Children that were evacuated to spend nearly eight months in their country in 1937.

Although the Spanish Civil War was one of the main political events that predominated British public discourse, the British Government had no intention of getting involved with the

war. With France, they spear-headed the efforts to persuade the countries of Europe to sign a Non-Intervention Treaty in which they all pledged to stay out of the Spanish Civil War. Perhaps more significant in the long term was that the Non-Intervention Treaty stipulated that participating countries could not send troops nor sell arms to either side. It also prohibited participating countries to send humanitarian aid to a specific side of the conflict. Although all of the countries in Europe signed the Non-Intervention Treaty, Germany and Italy, with established fascist dictatorships, actively sent support to their fellow-traveler Francisco Franco in Spain. This direct intervention of Germany and Italy in the Spanish Civil War on behalf of the Nationalists created a delicate diplomatic situation.⁹ Were Britain to be involved militarily in Spain, the potential for the conflict to extend beyond the borders of Spain and into the rest of Europe was quite significant. The British government and public wanted to avoid war at all costs, which prohibited them from intervening in the Spanish Civil War and was one of the main reasons that they so staunchly advocated the Non-Intervention Treaty.

It was, in fact, a German military action that resulted in one of the most horrific events of the Spanish Civil War, an event that shocked the Western world and motivated it to help the non-combatant victims of the civil war. On April 26, 1937, the German Condor Legion, in support of Franco, attacked the Basque city of Guernica. This aerial attack had a profound effect on British and world opinion. Soon after the carpet-bombing of Guernica, countries worldwide began accepting refugees into their borders, despite the Non-Intervention Treaty. Over 40,000 Basques were evacuated to at least six different countries, the majority of them to France. They were also evacuated to the Soviet Union and Belgium and in lesser numbers to the United States, Switzerland, and Denmark. If possible, entire families were evacuated together. The majority of

⁹ Antony Beevor, *The Spanish Civil War* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 121.

these refugee families fled to France, Spain's neighbor to the north, but a good deal were also evacuated to the other European countries willing to accept them.¹⁰

Britain, due to its Non-Intervention Policy was very reluctant to accept refugees, yet the bombing of Guernica shocked the Britons and public opinion shifted dramatically in favor of providing more aid to the Spanish. Leah Manning, a Member of Parliament (M.P.) who played a great role in organizing efforts to provide aid for the Spanish and who would later be a significant figure in the effort to evacuate 4,000 Basque children to Britain, remarks in her autobiography that Britain had always had a special connection to the Basque Country in Spain and when the Queen visited Spain, she stayed in Bilbao.¹¹ This admiration for the city continued throughout the civil war as the British read accounts in their daily newspapers. As the war continued, Franco turned his sights to the Basque Country which held most of Spain's iron-ore deposits. The north also housed most of the industrial capability of Spain. For these reasons, and also a "badly needed prestige victory," Franco attacked the Basque Country, stating that it would only take him three weeks to conquer it.

In an effort to weaken the citizens in the Basque Country, more specifically the main city of Bilbao, Franco ordered the blockade of a British ship bringing humanitarian supplies (which was not in violation of the Non-Intervention Treaty because it was a private merchant, not a government sponsored ship) in mid April. One of the Basque merchantmen, tired of waiting for the supplies to arrive, decided that he was going to fight against the blockade to obtain the much needed supplies. The merchant and two other ships, sailed out into the harbor to meet the supply ship but were attacked, losing nearly all of their crews. This act demonstrated the severity of

¹⁰ For more on the overall evacuation efforts of the world to accept these refugee children, see: Dorothy LeGaretta, *The Guernica Generation: Basque Refugee Children of the Spanish Civil War* (Reno, Nevada: University of Nevada Press, 1984).

¹¹ Leah Manning, *A Life for Education* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1970), 122.

Franco's resolve in defeating the Republicans in the Basque Country. A hunger crisis quickly spread through the city of Bilbao, while it remained under attack by aerial bombardment with German planes. These actions resonated in the hearts of the British public. While they had always admired the Basques, they began to view the Basque people as courageous and heroic, willing to stand up to Franco. Discussions were also held in Parliament about the extent of the involvement of British entities in the Spanish Civil War. Mr. Rickards, a Member of Parliament (M.P) from Skipton, made a point about food contribution when he asked the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Eden, "whether there was anything in the non-intervention agreement to prevent Russia or France sending food to Bilbao," and when Mr. Eden replied no, Mr. Rickards asked "Is it not a fact that this country is the only country that is sending food to Spain at present?" to which Mr. Eden replied, "So far as I am aware, that is so."¹²

However, this was not enough for much of the British public. When the British Parliament announced that it would not authorize the navy to protect and escort ships through the harbor to deliver foodstuffs to the Basque Country, the British public expressed outrage. Meetings of protest were organized by Leah Manning and her colleagues which raised thousands of pounds for assistance to Bilbao and the monetary contributions were used to develop a traveling hospital to treat persons injured by the aerial bombs in the Basque Country.¹³ Members of the National Joint Chief Committee for Spanish Relief and the Spanish Medical Aid Committee¹⁴ also held meetings in which they raised¹⁴ money to send humanitarian aid to the Basque Country and Bilbao.¹⁵ The National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief was founded at

¹² "Evacuation of Basque Children: British Protection at Sea," *The Times*, 04 May 1937, sec. A, p. 8

¹³ Manning, 122-123

¹⁴ The National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief and the Spanish Medical Aid Committee were not official Committees of the National Government and did not receive funding from the Government for their operation. They were run with volunteer positions using donated money.

¹⁵ "From Bilbao to Kent: Plans for Rescuing Basque Children," *The Times*, 08 May 1937, sec. E, p. 16.

the end of 1936 as a group to coordinate the civilian relief efforts for Spain. As early as February in 1937, the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief began discussing the evacuation of Basque children. This discussion, however, was tabled, to be brought up again a month later when the Basque government sent a request to send humanitarian supplies to Bilbao. The discussion was tabled again until the end of April and the aftermath of the bombing of Guernica.¹⁶

A week after the blockade incident and the bombing of Guernica, at the end of April, a Spanish man met Leah Manning at her residence asking for assistance in evacuating Basque children. Leah Manning traveled to Bilbao to request for the evacuation of children to England saying, “I’m here at the request of the Basque Government, through their Delegation in London, and I propose to evacuate Basque children to England for dispersal throughout my country until Franco is defeated. All I ask you [President Aguirré’s secretary] to do is to present me to President Aguirré.”¹⁷ She met with President Aguirré and when she asked how many children he wanted evacuated, he replied “4,000... They’ll be in family groups, aged between five and sixteen, and they will be in the charge of their priests and teachers—about 300 adults.”¹⁸

Leah Manning commented about how indignant she was with the reluctant government at Westminster to grant permission to bring the children to Britain. She reflects in her autobiography on the efforts at home to bring the Basque children to Britain writing, “With the support of a vast number of influential people in England, on whom I rained innumerable telegrams, I declared I would leave with 4,000 children arranged in family groups aged five to sixteen and 300 adults to care for them.”¹⁹ The National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief also

¹⁶ Legaretta, 100-101.

¹⁷ Manning, 124.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 125

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 127.

supported Leah Manning's efforts in Spain. They hastily formed a Basque Children's Committee to deal with the evacuation of the children. The chair of the committee was the Duchess of Atholl, an avowed Tory and nicknamed the "Red Duchess" by the British press for her support of the Republicans in Spain. The Committee also consisted of a balance between liberal and conservative members: Mr. Tewson, of the Labour Party, Wilfred Robers, a Liberal M.P., Eleanor Rathbone, a Communist M.P. from the Labour Party, Captain MacNamara, a Tory, Canon Craven from the Roman Catholic Archbishop's office, and Colonel Gordon, a member of the Salvation Army.²⁰ Mr. Wilfred Roberts, a Member of Parliament and the joint honorable secretary of the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief remarked in Parliament that he "wanted to bring as many Basque children as possible out of the hell of Bilbao to a camp in Kent. It was planned to distribute the child refugees to institutions, and perhaps to private homes" and that "it was hoped to send out a British ship to fetch the children within the next couple days."²¹ The Archbishop of York and Dr. Scott Lidgett, supporting the proposal to bring the children to Britain, also voiced their condemnation of the bombing of open towns to the Parliament and the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief. The statement was read by Miss Eleanor Rathbone, M.P. The statement read:--"Even were it possible to evacuate all the children, it would not detract greatly from the wrongfulness of bombing open towns. We feel that every effort should be made to prevent such a bombing."²² Here another point of contention is demonstrated; this statement is a statement of protest to the Non-Intervention policy, criticizing the Government's refusal to take military actions to prevent a bombing like Guernica all together. For some, helping the Basque children was a means of intervention that circumvented official government policy and thus inherently served as a criticism of it.

²⁰ Legaretta, 127.

²¹ "From Bilbao to Kent: Plans for Rescuing Basque Children," *The Times*, 08 May 1937, sec. F, p. 16.

²² *Ibid.*

Guernica was a horrific and devastating attack on a city full of innocent, non-combatant citizens. The tactics of this attack had never before been seen by the European public and were a result of the German experimentation with the technique of carpet bombing. Conventional aerial bombs were combined with new, small incendiary bombs that lit uncontrollable fires that burned for days and consumed much of the town. The attack lasted for over two hours and occurred on a Monday afternoon—the traditional weekly market day when many local farmers and nearby villagers were in town for commerce. Guernica was not a military target, there were no troops stationed there, and it was not located in a strategic position. Franco included this attack in his quest for the Republican controlled industrial Basque province. It was also said that he was quite angry with the predominantly and strictly Catholic region for siding with the Republicans in favor of regional autonomy. It is estimated that approximately 1,654 were killed and 900 wounded and thousands fled to Bilbao.²³ This attack shocked the Western world and affected public opinion on the Spanish civil war worldwide as they read eye-witness accounts in their newspapers, even though Franco officially denied responsibility for the bombing.²⁴

Leah Manning had a chance to witness firsthand the devastation and destruction that her fellow Britons were reading about in the newspapers. Shortly after she arrived in Spain, with her Basque and British companions, she drove to Guernica, a couple days after it had been bombed. Reflecting in her memoirs, Leah mentions that the sight of Guernica, “cannot be described in words; only Picasso’s ‘Guernica’ can depict its stark horror.”²⁵ Others at the time tried to express the devastation in words. British citizens heard about Guernica from the major newspapers such as *The Times* and *The Manchester Guardian*. George L. Steer, a special correspondent for *The Times* was stationed in Spain and sent stories home to be published in the

²³ Beevor, 166.

²⁴ LeGaretta, 32-33.

²⁵ Manning, 126.

paper and later authored a book about the horrific event.²⁶ Eye-witness accounts were also reported, like that of Father Onaindia, a Canon of Valladolid,

The people were terrified. They fled, abandoning their livestock in the market place. The bombardment lasted until seven-forty-five. During that time, five minutes did not elapse without the sky's being black with German machine-gun fire, the ordinary bombs, and finally incendiary. The planes descended very low, the machine-gun fire tearing up the men, women and children. Before long it was impossible to see as far as five hundred yards, owing to the heavy smoke. Fire enveloped the whole city. Screams of lamentation were heard everywhere, and the people, filled with terror, knelt, lifting their hands to heaven as if to implore divine protection.²⁷

Father Onaindia's reports to Catholic groups in England and France not only affected people, they also undermined the official Nationalist position that the Basques had set Guernica on fire themselves, which had a significant affect on the British and French attitudes towards the Nationalists as well.²⁸ These reports, combined with the continuing reports of civil war atrocities, motivated the efforts to raise humanitarian aid. They also contributed to the growing public sentiment that Britain, or at least the Britons, should do more to help the Spanish in the turmoil. This can be seen in a letter sent to the editor of *The Times* on May 1. This letter, from many notable M.P.s from all the major parties and prominent citizens like the Duchess Katherine Atholl, Wilfird Roberts, Ellen Wilkinson, and Eleanor Rathbone,²⁹ stated,

The description in your columns to-day of the total destruction by bombing of Guernica... must shock all humane persons irrespective of their political sympathies. With regard to the Spanish conflict, those of the signatories to this letter are divided.³⁰ Our one object here is to appeal to give generous support to an effort which the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief is anxious without a moment's delay to put on foot—to remove to safety the largest possible number of those children who have already been

²⁶ To read George L. Steer's first hand account of the bombing of Guernica see: George L. Seer, *The Tree of Gernika: a Field Study of Modern War* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., 1938).

²⁷ As quoted by K.W. Watkins, *Britain Divided: The Effect of the Spanish Civil War on British Political Opinion* (London, New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., 1963), 52.

²⁸ LeGaretta, 33.

²⁹ These people also continued to be very involved in the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief, the Basque Children's Committee, and many other humanitarian aid and relief efforts

³⁰ These people also signed the letter: Noel-Buxton, Arthur Salter, Irene Ward, Megan Lloyd George, John Withers, Harold Nicolson, Themla Cazalet, Philip Noel-Baker, Anthony Crossley, Lytton, Patrick Hannon, David Grenfell.

left homeless, many of them orphans, by the destruction of their town, or who are menaced with a similar fate if there is a repetition of this terrible method of warfare.³¹

The letter also states that the plans for removing the children were progressing rapidly in order to evacuate them at the earliest possible time.³² It is important to note the bi-partisanship of the members of the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief, this bi-partisanship demonstrates the organizations true intentions of humanitarian aid and neutrality and is important considering the governments insistence on neutrality that continuously was the subject of debate throughout the episode of the Basque children. In *The Morning Post*, W. Craven-Ellis, a Tory M.P., wrote in a letter to the editor, “But this work of evacuating women and children so that they may escape the horrors of bombardment is not a question of politics. It is a simple, humanitarian issue; and one in which we should all welcome the opportunity to co-operate.”³³ The reaction of these M.P.s as well as the public to the events of Guernica is apparent in these letters.

Guernica was viewed as pivotal. The British public had been constantly confronted with stories of the Spanish civil war, and much of this information was about the atrocities committed by both sides. Pamphlets were published that collected the atrocity stories from various newspapers. These pamphlets, using stories from major British newspapers, recounted the horrors of the Massacre at Badajoz, the battle at Irun, Priests Shot by Rebels, the Red Cross being deliberately targeted, and others:

From *The Times*, Aug. 17, 1936: “Insurgent forces, stormed Badajoz on Friday evening.... All the militiamen and Government supporters, whom the insurgents found with arms in their hands or suspected of having taken part in the fighting, were immediately shot.”

From *The Times*, Sept. 5, 1936: “The Foreign Legionaries and Moroccan troops are said to be sparing not a single man, woman, or child who falls into their hands [in Irun].”

³¹ National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief, letter to the editor, *The Times*, 01 May 1937, sec F, p. 17.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ “Case of the Basque Children: Not a Question of Politics,” *The Morning Post*, 1937.

From *The Daily Herald*, Nov. 13, 1936 “The priest, who was in charge of a local cemetery, appealed to General Queipo de Llano to lessen the number of death sentences. ‘It pains my heart,’ he said, ‘to have to administer the last rites to so many sons of the Church’ . . . Next day the priest himself was executed after a farcical ‘trial’ on a charge of being a Loyalist sympathizer.³⁴

But by far, the reports of the aerial bombardment of civilians that became increasingly common as the war continued, struck the British public as the most horrific of the atrocities and laid the groundwork for their eventual outrage at the bombing of Guernica. These stories described the aerial bombardments much like the accounts of Guernica. The planes flew low, killed and wounded mostly women and children that were out shopping in the market districts of the city, and attacked places that did not pose any threat militarily nor were tactical or strategic areas.³⁵ This literature of atrocity, coupled with the ultimate atrocity of Guernica, motivated the public to support the evacuation of children refugees to Britain.

Planning, urging and debating for the evacuation continued. Leah Manning remarks how surprised she was by the efficiency of the Basque Government in organizing the mass evacuation of over 40,000 Basques. Careful records of each evacuee were kept by the *Asistencia Social* and the office tried to maintain the right psychological approach with the evacuees—creating an environment in which the citizens believed that “evacuation was the safest single precaution their Government could take on their behalf.”³⁶ The Basque Government was clearly very interested in evacuating their citizens from the dire war conditions.

The Basque Government managed the evacuation effort through the uncertainty of the war, knowing that Bilbao could fall to the Nationalists at any possible moment. They also encountered resistance from the foreign governments that would be accepting their citizens.

Leah Manning reflects that Britain was one of the worst, writing in her memoirs, “The Basques

³⁴ The Communist Party of Great Britain, *Save Peace! Aid Spain!* (London: The Marston Printing Co., 1937), 3-12.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Manning, 128.

had no sympathy either from the Home Office or the Foreign Office...They changed the ages; they changed the policy of receiving the children in family groups; and they demanded that the London Committee should guarantee them ten shillings per week per head for each child.”³⁷ The final point was of great controversy because Britain was recovering from the Great Depression, and many of their own children needed assistance to receive basic necessities. The British Government had previously stated that they expected British children could survive off of five shillings a week.³⁸ This effort also demonstrates the Government intransigence to bringing refugee children to Britain. They proposed that the children be cared for with ten shillings a week, because the question of British poverty remained a tense topic in the public forum.

The idea that the Basque children were causing a controversy in Britain can be seen in the Parliamentary debate. The House of Commons, as reported in *The Times*, held quite a few conversations about the Basque children before they arrived in Britain. One of the major concerns that had a lot to do with the Non-Intervention Treaty was making sure that the children evacuees were “persons of all political creeds” and that the Basque Government would make sure that these guidelines were strictly followed. In a Parliamentary discussion Mr. Eden, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, explained that the Basque Government had approached the British Government asking to evacuate women, children, and old people threatened by the air raids. He then assured that the Basque Government had agreed to allow a British consul to observe the operation to “ensure that impartiality was being strictly observed.” He continued to state that the Government had approved British naval ships to escort any ships leaving Bilbao with non-combatant refugees on board. They informed the Nationalist authorities of their plans as well. Mr. Eden then finished his discussion by responding to a question asking him the

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 127.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

specifics of the Basque children's stay by saying "What I was concerned with was the protection of the ships in the high seas. The admission of the children into this country, of course, is not a matter for me."³⁹ The final part of his discussion demonstrates the British Government's reluctance to be involved completely. Although they approved the use of ships to escort the refugees, their aid does not extend further than this action, leaving the responsibility of the Basque refugee children in the hands of private parties, and private funding.

In the Basque Country too, Leah Manning remembers reacting to the British Government stipulations regarding the Basque refugees. In her memoirs, she comments on the situation by stating,

Allocation of *evacuados* from among the political parties was in strict proportion to their electoral representation in the Basque Government. The British Government, whose navy had come to protect the evacuation ships, also insisted 'that persons, supporting General Franco should be included in the party if they desired evacuation.' They need not have bothered to make such a ridiculous provision. To us there were neither Anarchists nor Nationalists—only people in danger of their lives asking for safety.⁴⁰

In this manner, the question of impartiality was very much stressed and compatible with the desire for Non-Intervention. In fear of retribution for, or accusations of, helping one side more than the other, Britain made it very clear that they were aiding refugees on the basis of impartiality. This theme repeated itself consistently throughout the literature of aid pamphlets, speeches, editorials, letters, and would also appear later in the repatriation debates over the fate of the children.

On April 29, 1937, Sir John Simon, the Home Secretary, wrote a letter to Mr. Wilfrid Roberts, a Labour M.P., granting facilities for the refugee Basque children. In his letter, he stipulated "that the number of children brought to this country would be in strict accordance with the means your committee had at its disposal, and there is no charge on public funds for their

³⁹"Evacuation of Basque Children: British Protection at Sea," *The Times*, 4 May 1937, sec. A, p. 8.

⁴⁰ Manning, 129.

maintenance”⁴¹ He also stated that he hoped that the children would be repatriated as soon as wartime conditions in Spain permitted.⁴² These stipulations were recurrent themes throughout the Basque children’s residence in Britain, and would repeatedly be used as points of contention in debates regarding their tenure there. At this point in time, the British public as well as M.P.s from all parties were supporting the plans of the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief to evacuate the children to Britain as well as France and Belgium.⁴³

After this approval from the Home Secretary, preparations for the Basque children accelerated. It was established that the 4,000 Basque children would arrive at Southampton, where they would be examined medically once more, treated for any ailments or pestilence, grouped into tents and quarantined for a brief period of time as organizers would separate them into different groups to be transported to different colonies throughout England. This camp would be developed in a 30 acre field in North Stoneham donated by Mr. G. H. Brown.⁴⁴

Some of this divisions occurred before the children arrived. On May 14, *The Times* reported that “The Archbishop of Westminster has intimated that the Roman Catholic Church will take care of 1,000 of the children and the Salvation Army will look after about 400.”⁴⁵ Excitement for the arrival of the children was also expressed. Dr. Hinley, a physician that would be caring for the children wrote, “We are most anxious to help in this work of saving and of caring for the poor victims of the cruel war. I have a list of our schools where boys and girls could be housed. I am quite sure that our different organizations and societies will gladly help in this good work.”⁴⁶ More and more camp locations were donated during the preparation for the

⁴¹ “Refugee Basque Children: Home Secretary to Give Facilities,” *The Times*, 30 April 1937, sec. C, p. 18.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ “Care of Spanish War Victims: 4,000 Basque Children Expected,” *The Times*, 14 May 1937, sec. C, p. 14.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ “Dr. Hinsley and Basque Children,” *The Times*, 07 May 1937, sec. D, p. 18.

children, as *The Times* reported. On May 10, the paper reported that “30 children would to go to a camp on the Berkshire Downs provided for them by the Berkshire section of the National Joint Committee for Spanish relief.”⁴⁷ This article also placed emphasis on the fact that the children were orphans whose parents were killed in aerial bombings and mentioned that the camp hoped to house 100 children eventually. *The Daily Telegraph*, reported that Mr. James Maxton, a Labour M.P. and Mr. Fenner Brockway, secretary of the Independent Labour party offered a house and furniture and supplies to care for fifty refugee children.⁴⁸ There was also some concern over how many children would be evacuated at once. Many speculated that the children would come in two separate voyages, but near the actual departure date, May 21, it was reported that they would come all at once.⁴⁹

While awaiting the arrival of the Basque children, the colony at Southampton busily gathered materials and supplies and set up the camp for the children. The committee also received odd contributions. The King’s Coronation Ceremony was to be held around the time that the children would be arriving to Southampton. *The Times* reported that “Nearly three-quarters of a mile of London’s West-End Coronation decorations are shortly to be used as blankets for the 2,000 Spanish Children who are expected to arrive in Britain from Bilbao this week.”⁵⁰

The Times was closely following the process of the evacuation and reflected Britain’s anxiety of their arrival. Almost daily, it reported the progress of the committee working toward the evacuation of the children. It followed the preparations at home and abroad; recounting the actions taken to prepare the camp for the children, but also focusing on the medical committee to

⁴⁷ “Basque Children’s Camp on Berkshire Downs,” *The Times*, 10 May 1937, sec. A, p. 13.

⁴⁸ “Preparations for Basque Children: Offer of a House,” *The Daily Telegraph*.

⁴⁹ “Care of Spanish War Victims: 4,000 Basque Children Expected,” *The Times*, 14 May 1937, sec. C, p. 14.

⁵⁰ *The Times*, 17 May 1937, col. C, p. 17.

be sent to Bilbao, as well as tracking the *SS Habana*, the cruise liner that would bring the children to England, and other ships transporting refugees to other countries. In the days before the evacuation to England, the *SS Habana*, under British escort, transported 3,000 non-combatant refugees to France.⁵¹ Three French ships transported 2,000 old men, women and children to France. In this situation, however, the refugees could pay for their evacuation and had the means to support themselves in France. These refugees were also mostly from parties of the right.⁵² This report offered a contrasting view to the British public by emphasizing that not all refugees were poor and starving. It also gave emphasis to France's neutrality; because these refugees were paying to travel to France, it was acceptable that they were mostly from parties of the Right. *The Times* also informed the public that two doctors and two nurses would travel to Bilbao to "eliminate by medical examination all children likely to prove unfit for admission into this country on their arrival."⁵³ The children's health was a great concern in the eyes of the British public and government, and would continue to be a point of contention.

On May 21, 4,000 children refugees departed from Bilbao on the *SS Habana* and headed towards Southampton. On board were Mrs. Leah Manning and the commission of doctors with their assistants "who had medically examined the children in accordance with the instructions of the Home Office and the Ministry of Health."⁵⁴ Escorting the *Habana* were two British naval warships that also escorted two liners headed to France out of the bay.⁵⁵ Ronald Monson, a *Daily Telegraph* Special Correspondent tracked the voyage and reported, "the spectacle of 4,000 children and 200 adults packed into a ship meant to accommodate 1,500 was an extraordinary one...mattresses covered every inch of the deck space and the floors of the cabins, passage-ways

⁵¹ "Bilbao Refugees in France: Voyage Under British Escort," *The Times*, 08 May 1937, sec C, p. 13.

⁵² "2,000 More Refugees Leave Bilbao," *The Times*, 10 May 1937, sec A, p. 13.

⁵³ "Bilbao Refugees in France: Voyage Under British Escort," *The Times*, 08 May 1937, sec C, p. 13.

⁵⁴ "Basque Children for England: Departure of 4,000 Refugees," *The Times*, 22 May 1937, sec B, p. 11.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

and holds, it was impossible for all to lie down.”⁵⁶ He also reported that the children were weary from not being able to lie down and sleep, but generally excited to embark on a new adventure and escape the war zones of the Basque Country. They were well cared for by nurses on the ship, and Mr. Monson, reports surprise at the extraordinary order that Leah Manning had achieved in such a chaotic situation.⁵⁷ They arrived in Southampton, two days later, on May 23 at 7:30 in the morning. Dr. H.M. Williams, Medical Officer of Health for Southampton, along with immigration officers went aboard the *SS Habana* to make preliminary medical examination rounds, and give food to the children, many of whom were sea-sick. Dr. Williams found 500 children “highly suspect” with the potential need to be isolated until recovered from their illnesses. He found one serious case, Felix Gonzalez, who was taken to a hospital for surgery. The rest of the children remained on board, awaiting disembarkation. Disembarkation was a lengthy process because each child had to be thoroughly medically examined and the total operation took about two days. Each child was identified with their name, age, and next of kin on a bracelet that was worn at all times.⁵⁸ The organizers of the camp at Southampton were well prepared for the arrival of the children.

Once the children were in the camps, there were plenty of volunteers to help. The town of Southampton held a meeting upon the arrival of the children where representatives of all religious and political opinion were present. Captain J.R.J. Macnamara, a Tory M.P., on behalf of the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief, requested more aid from the town. £157 was donated, a taxicab company lent 10 cars to be used to transport the children from the ship to the camp and/or hospitals if necessary, 50 loaves of bread per week were promised to the camp and

⁵⁶ Ronald Monson, “4,000 on Way to England: Sleeping on Decks and Stairs,” *The Daily Telegraph*.

⁵⁷ Ronald Monson, “4,000 On Way to England: Excited Children,” *The Daily Telegraph*.

⁵⁸ “Refugees from Bilbao: Basque Children at Southampton, a Well-Organized Camp,” *The Times*, 24 May 1937, sec. C, p. 11.

the employees at the Southampton Corporation washhouses volunteered to work on Sundays to do the washload of the children's camp, free of charge. There were also many other gifts and services promised by other parties.⁵⁹

Volunteers were ready and willing to contribute to the Southampton camp in whatever way possible. Mr. H.W.H. Sams, the camp director, obtained a large volunteer force to help with the day to day operations of the camp. University professors, artisans, Boy Scouts, Girl Guides, Boys' Brigades, plumbers, and other skilled men labored in their free time to set up the basic infrastructure of the camp, providing it with water, rubbish disposal, and cooking areas. Many women also volunteered their time to sort the donations made to the camp. Through volunteers, a hospital was established at the camp. While these volunteers helped with the daily tasks of the camp, they also helped organize the disembarkation process, and got the children to settle into their tents and feel at home at the camp.⁶⁰

As the children settled into the camp, operations continued to run smoothly, and *The Daily Telegraph* reported that "two days in the sunshine, surrounded by cool English meadows, have worked wonders for under-nourished bodies and fear-haunted minds."⁶¹ The children followed a strict schedule which included time for eating breakfast, lunch and dinner (English food that was a little strange to them, but filled their stomachs) time for lessons, time for cleaning the camp, time for religious observation, and time for recreation.⁶² No visitors were allowed in or out of the camp, in order to strictly regulate the camp and prevent children from being unaccounted for. The British were quite surprised at the general health of the children,

⁵⁹ "Refugees from Bilbao: Basque Children at Southampton: Work of Landing," *The Times*, 24 May 1937, sec. C, p. 11.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ "All Now Happy in Camp," *The Daily Telegraph*, May 1937.

⁶² *Ibid.*

who had been in dire war conditions in the Basque Country for quite some time, and only a few of them were in poor health due to malnutrition.

The war conditions affected the children in different ways. The lines of division politically affected these children at an unusually young age and children that were of Republican background could not mix with children of Nationalist background. The children were separated into tents according to their political affiliation after some of the children from different sides got into a fight. They were very politically conscious undoubtedly due to their parent's political affiliations.⁶³ The children also panicked every time an airplane would fly overhead. This reaction was also undoubtedly related to the aerial bombings experienced in Spain. Interpreters attempted to explain to the children that the planes were British and were not going to attack them, but many of the younger children could not understand this idea—they believed that the aircraft had followed them from Spain. The Air Ministry issued an instruction to pilots to avoid flying over the camp at Southampton while the children remained there.⁶⁴

Accommodations continued to be made to house children at various colonies throughout Britain. Different groups and relief organizations volunteered to house as few as 40 and as many as 200 in donated houses and camps around the country while the Roman Catholic authorities worked on finding homes for 1,200 children and the Salvation Army found homes for 1,400.⁶⁵

Children that were sick and/or weak were sent to Moor Hill, a house on the outskirts of

⁶³ Legaretta, 109.

⁶⁴ "Basque Children's Fear of Aeroplanes: Ministry's Instruction to Pilots," *The Times*, 25 May 1937, sec. B, p. 13.

⁶⁵ "Homes Found for Basque Children," *The Daily Telegraph*. It should also be noted that the Roman Catholic authorities and the took charge of so many children because the children were themselves Catholic. There was great concern for the children to be able to continue to practice their religious faith while in Britain, and by placing them in the hands of Catholic authorities, this was much more assured. This is, however, not to say that other religious groups did not participate in the evacuation effort and did not provide homes for the children, they did and the Salvation Army is a good example of this. Emphasis has been placed on the Catholic efforts to demonstrate a sense of obligation the church felt to support the effort and keep the children in Catholic influence.

Southampton set up as a rehabilitation center for the children to become well before being sent to a colony.⁶⁶

The health of the children and the possible spread of disease was an issue of much parliamentary and public concern. *The Times* reported that, “While the Government was not responsible for the initiation of this plan of evacuation it had taken every precaution to make sure that our own people should not be infected by any disease that might be brought.”⁶⁷ The British expected the children to be plagued with a variety of diseases and were very cautious to plan for them to spend enough time in quarantine as to not spread diseases to the British. In particular, the members of Parliament feared that the children would bring trachoma, a contagious eye disease which ultimately led to blindness, “that was known to ravage Northern Spain.”⁶⁸ The National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief, however, during their medical examinations, looked specifically for this disease. They remarked that it was not common in the Basque Country, and that the two cases that had been discovered in the potential refugees had been excluded from the evacuation and that they had taken all precautions to make sure that all children with contagious or infectious diseases were excluded. The committee stated that it was prepared to take full responsibility for the care and maintenance of the Basque children in Britain.⁶⁹ The committee’s precautions were very effective because medical officers in charge of the examinations upon disembarkation, however, were “surprised to find how little their experiences in a beleaguered city had affected the health of the children.”⁷⁰ In the end, there were only “five cases of typhoid fever, two cases of diphtheria, and three cases of measles”

⁶⁶ “Basque Children’s Fear of Aeroplanes: Ministry’s Instruction to Pilots,” *The Times*, 25 May 1937, sec. B, p. 13.

⁶⁷ “Parliament: A Temporary Camp,” *The Times*, 02 June 1937, sec. A, p. 18.

⁶⁸ “Parliament: Basque Children: Fear of Eye Disease,” *The Times*, 02 June 1937, sec. A, p. 18.

⁶⁹ “Parliament: Government Assurances,” *The Times*, 02 June 1937, sec. A, p. 18.

⁷⁰ “Parliament: A Temporary Camp,” *The Times*, 02 June 1937, sec. A, p. 18.

among the children and these cases were isolated to prevent further infection in others.⁷¹ This was very important in the legitimization of the effort because the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief demonstrated to a very concerned Parliament that it had listened carefully and followed instructions.

The case of Parliament's concern with the health of the children demonstrates many recurrent themes regarding the Basque children. Parliament wanted it expressly clear that they had no part in the evacuation of the children to Britain, and that should one or more of the children be sick and contaminate citizens of Britain, the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief should be held responsible. They also wanted to demonstrate that they prohibited any political propagandist use of the children in any way and assured that this was true by stating that the children could not speak English anyway.⁷² They wanted to make sure that their stance of neutrality remained despite their implicit support in allowing the evacuation of the Basque children refugees. Along with this, they reassured the public that the care of the Basque children cost the government nothing, and that the children were being supported entirely by the volunteer organization National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief.⁷³

Within a month, nearly all of the children had been placed in homes or colonies throughout the country. *The Times* reported: "More than 1,200 Basque Children are being removed at the rate of 100 a day from their camp at North Stoneham, near Southampton, to Roman Catholic Homes throughout the country."⁷⁴ The children were only allowed to leave the camp after they had been examined by the local health authorities. The children were transported to the various homes and colonies in large groups, supervised by a Basque priest or

⁷¹ "Basque Children in England: General Health Satisfactory," *The Times*, 08 June 1937, sec. A, p. 9.

⁷² "Basque Children Refugees: Lords on Health Precautions: Official Assurance," *The Times*, 26 May 1937, sec. G, p. 16.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ "Homes for Basque Children," *The Times*, 02 June 1937, sec. A, p. 18.

teacher who gave their guarantee that the group would not participate in propaganda of any kind, and these Basque priests or teachers would continue to supervise them in their new locations.⁷⁵

This mandate was enforced by Parliament, who continued to be cautious to ensure that the children were not in the country as a promotion for either political side.

Many of Parliament's issues would remain points of contention throughout the children's residence in England, and would especially escalate after the fall of Bilbao. On June 19, nearly three weeks after the children's arrival in England, Bilbao fell to Franco's Nationalists. Many of the children were still at the camp in North Stoneham. The children's reaction to this event was one of horror and disbelief. Upon hearing the news, the children shrieked and cried through the night crying themselves to sleep. Some of the older boys tried to leave, with the intention of getting on a boat and heading back to Spain, but they were rounded up by the guards. Pro-Francoist press establishments were able to manipulate this event, painting the children as "reds" and "communists." They attempted to demonstrate that because the children were mourning the fall of Bilbao to the Nationalists, they were undoubtedly Republicans. This manipulation also implicitly implied that the children had been brought to Britain as a propagandist and biased stunt to gain support for the Republicans in Spain and undermined the consistent denial of the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief and the Basque Children's Committee that the children had been brought to Britain for humanitarian aid. Neutral supporters of the children began to drop some of their support over the summer. At this point, the Basque Children's Committee decided to bring in thirteen army officers to help run the camp. This had a negative effect on the children. One Basque boy remarked to a British eye-witness, "You bring us here and feed us, but you don't give our parents weapons. You make us orphans."⁷⁶ For the children,

⁷⁵ "Parliament: A Temporary Camp," *The Times*, 26 May 1937, sec. A, p. 8.

⁷⁶ Legaretta, 115.

they could not understand the government's neutrality. Yvonne Cloud, a volunteer at the camp, remarked,

To the Basque children over here it is naturally inconceivable that anyone should have taken the trouble to remove them from the hell of daily and hourly bombing, should have brought them so far, into a strange land, should provide them with good food and good clothes, in peace, and yet not be their staunch allies. Neutrality, in the children's present situation, has no meaning at all.⁷⁷

The British Government had implicitly supported bringing the Basque children to England, and while their support was very limited, they generally accepted that the children were to stay in Britain for a short while. Debate in Parliament was about the policies of bringing the children to Britain, and if an M.P. were to express his or her disapproval of the situation, or desired to raise controversy concerning the children, he or she would do so in an indirect way, bringing up the issue of health, partisanship propaganda, or source of funding for the children. There was also little negative opinion of the overall effort by the British public. Letters to the editor were generally in favor of the action. In general, Britain remained supportive of the evacuation.

For the Basque children, life in the colonies throughout Britain was good. The children were fed well, kept up with their lessons, and were even taught English. A film of highlights was produced and sent home to the mothers to give them a view into their children's new lives in Britain. Many of the children began to learn English. In recreation time, the children formed soccer teams and even played against local neighborhood teams. At some of the camps, the children even organized themselves to perform dances for their neighbors, hand-sewing folk costumes to accompany their dance routines. In some camps, the children charged money for these shows, and used this money towards sustaining the camp. Visitors from the communities would come and visit the children, and in some cases take the children home with them for dinner, or to other events in the community like plays and sporting events. Some of these

⁷⁷ Yvonne Cloud, *An Account of Life at North Stoneham* (London, Victor Gollancz, 1937).

visitors became very fond of the children, and when the issue of repatriation was raised, volunteered to adopt them. Overall, the camps ran smoothly and the children comported themselves well.

There were a couple of exceptions, however, but these did not harm the mission of the overall effort. Rarely, children were placed in colonies that were run down, poor, and could not provide the same care for them that other colonies were able to do. The Basque Children's Committee, a sub-committee of the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief that oversaw the Basque children and paid close attention to all of the camps, moved the children from poor camps to better camps when unsuitable conditions were discovered. There were also a few instances of violent and disorderly behavior, mostly by older boys. For example, while the children were still in Southampton, some of the boys took to slashing tents with knives and even hitting female teachers.⁷⁸ The other incidents mostly resulted from being placed in poor camps where they were not provided with adequate supplies, or had nothing to do. Some of the boys stole clothes, others roamed around the city, begging for cigarettes and pennies. These same children also took their aggression further when they marched through the city, breaking some windows and stole cars.⁷⁹ Corporal punishment was banned in the colonies, and as a result, the boys responsible for the incidents were repatriated to Spain via France.⁸⁰

After the fall of Bilbao in mid-June, Parliamentary opinion and public opinion began to divide on the issue of the Basque children. The Pro-Nationalist and Pro-Republican opinions differed in terms of what should be done with the children. Because Bilbao had fallen, and the Basque Country was now in control of the Nationalists, the province was seen as politically and militarily stable. The Basque children had been brought to England to rescue them from the

⁷⁸ "Basque Children's Camps: Story of the 'Incidents,'" *The Times*, 11 August 1937, sec. C, p. 7.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ "The Basque Children: Disorderly Boys to Leave England," *The Times*, 29 July 1937, sec. E, p. 16.

political instability and treacherous war atmosphere. These two conditions no longer existed and in the minds of many M.P.'s and others in the British public, Britain no longer needed to protect the children from a dangerously unstable situation. They began to urge the Basque Children's Committee to repatriate the children. Meanwhile, there were other M.P.'s and citizens that subscribed to the belief that the children should not be repatriated and should stay in Britain.

British public support for the children in the colonies, like the war on Spain, was divided, and the arguments followed a basic structural pattern—they surrounded the themes of religion, politics and British neutrality, and humanitarianism. After the fall of Bilbao, support became consistently more divisive. Public opponents of the children argued that the British could not even afford to feed their own poor children with tax dollars. Supporters responded to that argument by saying “the children have come as our guests and not to receive relief from our taxes.”⁸¹ Opponents suggested that the children were brought to England as a propagandist tool, while supporters consistently maintained that the children had been brought over regardless of political or religious creed.⁸² Supporters also suggested that the English would expect other countries to provide them the same hospitality had the situation been reversed. They also suggested that the public should be proud knowing that they had provided hospitality to children who desperately needed to escape from aerial bombardment and dire war conditions.⁸³ Catholic opponents proposed that the children were being placed in care of people that did not understand them and that they were not maintaining Catholic influence.⁸⁴ Supporters argued that the

⁸¹ H.G. Peile, letter to the editor, *The Times*, 18 June 1937, sec. C, p. 18.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ P.E. Byrne. S.M., letter to the editor, *The Times*, 26 June 1937, sec. C, p. 10. While the Catholic authorities continued to support the evacuation of the Basque children, after the fall of Bilbao, Catholic opponents of the evacuation and supporters of repatriation became more vocal, not unlike the other opponents of the children in Britain. Because Franco was staunchly Catholic and wanted to make Spain's government a Catholic government (whereas the Republican government had been secular the Catholic supporters of repatriation desired that the

Catholic officials and Salvation Army found homes for nearly half of the children and that they were receiving religious instruction from Basque priests. They even attacked, “Perhaps Father Burn and any other people who have the same concern for the welfare of these children will be good enough to cooperate with those of us who have saved at least some lives out of the wreck.”⁸⁵ The Basque Children’s Committee was consistently attacked for its actions yet it continued to provide care for the children, regardless of the criticism.

The debate continued, mostly between Catholic opponents and the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief. Luis Calvo urged for the repatriation of the children in September, showing that the debate continued until the end of the year. He stated that while it was honorable for Britain to support these children while the Basque Country has under political and military turmoil, with recent stability, “Franco claims these children, as he feels it is his duty to endow them with a religious and Spanish upbringing. Their families also claim them...by what right are they being detained in England when the Spanish authorities ask for their return?”⁸⁶ He continued to cite the dining-rooms that the “Social Assistance” has organized, and that he is convinced that the whole effort of evacuation was political propaganda.⁸⁷ Betty Arne, representing the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief wrote a letter in *The Times* as a response to Luis Calvo in which she said that the committee had received 39 requests from parents for the return of their children. She also stated that any authentic requests would come to them. She reiterated that the effort was non-political.⁸⁸

children return to a Catholic government. They were also probably pro-Francoist in certain ways because he did place such an emphasis on having a Catholic national government.

⁸⁵ Luis Calvo, letter to the editor, *The Times*, 02 July 1937, sec. D, p. 12.

⁸⁶ Luis Calvo, letter to the editor, *The Times*, 03 September 1937, sec. B, p. 8.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Betty L. Arne, letter to the editor, *The Times*, 06 September, 1937, sec. B, p. 8.

The Parliamentary debates also clearly demonstrate the tensions between the supporters of the refugee children and the supporters of repatriation. The dilemma of children being sent back to a still at war Spain, where they may or may not be reunited with their parents became a major point of debate between members of Parliament, and very much reflected the varied opinions of the members. The debate extended to many sessions until most of the children were eventually repatriated. By examining these Parliamentary debates, much can be observed as to why Parliament was concerned with maintaining governmental neutrality. Their body was divisively split on many different issues concerning the Spanish Civil War, and consequently the evacuation of the Basque children.

The first official mention of repatriation in Parliament occurred on July 28. Mr. Donner, a Tory M.P of Basingstoke, asked the Secretary of Foreign Affairs if, in light of the fall of Bilbao and the apparent safe conditions there, arrangements were being made to return the children to Spain. Miss Eleanor Rathbone, a Communist Labour M.P., responded to this question by pointing out that the parents “might be subjected to ill-treatment and even death if they expressed their real opinions on the suitability of conditions in Bilbao.”⁸⁹ Mr. Gallacher, a Communist M.P. of Fife, added “many of the parents have been killed or are in flight...there can be no question of sending the children back.”⁹⁰ In the same Parliamentary debate, one of the M.P.s asked if the Prime Minister could take some steps to discourage the repatriation of the children to Spain. This question was actually met with loud opposition jeers, displaying the majority thought of the Parliament: that the children should be repatriated as soon as possible. When another M.P. noted this, the House of Commons cheered. Another interesting point brought up

⁸⁹ “The Basque Children: Question of Return,” *The Times*, 29 June 1937, sec. E, p. 10.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

in this debate, meant to cause a stir in the discussion, occurred when an M.P. asked why it was that Catholic members of the House were so anxious to get the children back to Spain.⁹¹

Lord Newton, a Tory M.P., became a strong advocate for repatriation and repeatedly brought up the issue in Parliament, asking specific questions to demonstrate his favor of the children being repatriated as soon as possible. In his first plea for repatriation of the children he asked if any of them had expressed interest to be repatriated. He also remarked that it seemed that a great number of refugees were Nationalists, because the Nationalists in Spain outnumbered the Republicans. Since these refugees were Nationalists, he said, they should be repatriated to the Nationalist Bilbao. He also made quite a controversial statement in saying that if no Nationalists were found in the refugee children, that the committee was misled and had brought a group of persons to Britain to be used for Anti-Fascist propaganda, while the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief had been very cautious to remain nonpartisan and neutral in their treatment of the children. He pointed out that the French had started to send back their refugees, and that money for maintaining the children in England was probably short. Finally, he questioned the neutrality of the whole effort, “he could not understand how anyone could contend that it was consistent with strict neutrality.”⁹²

Lord Atholl was not able to be in Parliament the day that Lord Newton made these statements in the House of Lords and wrote a response to his statements in *The Times*, using it as a medium to demonstrate arguments as so many other citizens had. Lord Atholl pointed out that some of the children had Fascist parents, but they were in the minority, which was proved by the “universal distress shown when the large number of children still in camp were informed of the

⁹¹ “The Basque Children: Documents of Identity,” *The Times*, 29 June 1937, sec. E, p. 10.

⁹² “Parliament: Basque Refugees: Lord Newton’s Plea for Repatriation,” *The Times*, 09 July 1937, sec. A, p. 8.

fall of Bilbao.”⁹³ Atholl points out that France took a large number of refugees, 23,000, and asks, sarcastically, if it was too much for Britain to accept 4,000. Atholl also reminded the readers, and subsequently the Parliament, of the interest in the British public, as many people had volunteered to sponsor children monetarily, in their homes, or through other organizations. He also used language to remind the public of the horrors of aerial bombardment and Guernica by saying, “but the deliberate massacre of children both in and away from the immediate area of hostilities is something entirely new among civilized people, and as a British soldier, I feel that the action of the National Joint Committee was, under the circumstances, fully justified.”⁹⁴ Supporters of the evacuation consistently maintained that they were providing care for the children for humanitarian aid, and yet were constantly criticized for their actions, actions that they saw as necessary in the effort to provide humanitarian aid to people who desperately needed it.

Lord Newton later continued arguing for repatriation. In November, he “said that it was impossible for the Government to disclaim responsibility. If they had not given their consent the refugees would not have landed in this country.”⁹⁵ He also said that as far as he knew, not repatriation attempts had been made, and claimed once again that the children had been brought to Britain as “red propaganda” largely because the Duchess of Atholl “had so strong an admiration for the Soviet system.”⁹⁶ Lord Listowel affirmed that attempts were being made to repatriate the children. He reported that the committee was doing everything it could to return the children to their parents, but also that they continued to have the best interest of the children in mind. He said that an “inquiry had been made to ensure that the children did not fall into the

⁹³ “The Basque Children,” *The Times*, 13 July 1937, sec. D, p. 10.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ “Parliament: Government Reply,” *The Times*, 03 November 1937, sec. A, p. 7.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

hands of other people or find on their return that their parents were not there, had probably died, and they had no where to go.”⁹⁷ Under the criticism by the supporters of repatriation, the Basque Children’s Committee worked diligently to repatriate the children in the safest manner possible.

At the end of 1937 and into 1938, because support for repatriation overpowered the opposition of it, the repatriation of the Basque children was full force. The National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief, and the Basque Children’s Committee perfected a system of repatriation, just as they had developed a system of evacuation. They established two conditions on which the children would be repatriated. These conditions were that “there should be a minimum war risk, and that the parents should genuinely and individually ask for their children.”⁹⁸ They also stated that they had never considered repatriation *en bloc*. The Committee also reported that many of the children did not want to go back, and begged to be allowed to stay in Britain.⁹⁹

Yet as the Committee continued its efforts of repatriation, supporters of repatriation consistently criticized the Committee, urging them to expedite the process. On January 29, 1938, the Basque Children’s Committee reported that they had “reached the definite stage in the work of sending home those Basque children whose parents have asked for them.”¹⁰⁰ They displayed some of the issues that they had been dealing with such as doubts about the authenticity of the request letters. “There were a number of doubts about the [letters] handed to us. In certain cases the applications purported to be signed by both parents, though it was known to the committee that one of the parents was in France, and in certain instances, the absent parent had definitely

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ “Basque Refugee Children: Committee’s Policy,” *The Times*, 27 November 1937, sec G, p. 8.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Basque Children’s Committee, letter to the editor, *The Times*, 29 January, 1938, sec. B, p. 8.

requested that the child should not be returned.”¹⁰¹ The Committee explained the conditions of their process of repatriation further, informing that many of the parents were refugees themselves, and that they were making every attempt possible to maintaining the children until their parents were in a position to receive them. The Committee ended their letter with “when we saved the children we undertook that they should never become a charge on the rates. We have honoured this undertaking; and we appeal to British generosity to enable us to maintain them until they can be reunited with their parents or guardians.”¹⁰² The response to this letter by critics was overwhelming, and quite negative.

Mr. Arnold Wilson, who argued that the process of repatriation should be expedited because “the longer they stay here, the more difficult it will be for them to go back to their old life.”¹⁰³ He also claimed that it was not the duty of the British to take care of the children anymore, and that the Apostolic Delegate in Bilbao would be able to care for them in the stabilized Spain.¹⁰⁴ A. Pastor criticized the committee because “the requests for evacuation, made under the Basque authorities, were *a priori* considered genuine and acted upon; the requests for repatriation made under National rule were *a priori* considered spurious until proof to the contrary had been obtained.”¹⁰⁵ The Basque Children’s Committee argued that since these critics had not funded the children, and since the Committee had entirely funded the children, that the Committee would “pursue energetically our policy of reuniting them with their parents as rapidly as is possible and safe.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Arnold Wilson, letter to the editor, *The Times*, 01 February 1938, sec. C, p. 8.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ A. Pastor, letter to the editor, *The Times*, 02 February 1938, sec. C, p. 8.

¹⁰⁶ Basque Children’s Committee, letter to the editor, *The Times*, 07 February 1938, sec. D, p. 10.

In the end some six hundred children remained in England after the end of the Spanish civil war. These children remained in colonies, lived in adoptive homes. They worked, went to trade schools and some even fought for the British in World War II. By the end of World War II, 410 of the original 4,000 Basque children remained in Britain. These children were usually over fourteen and had no family remaining in Spain.¹⁰⁷ The Basque Children's Committee, in this sense, was successful in their aims of repatriation, making sure that the children they sent back were sent to their actual families. Yet even in 1939 after most of the children had been repatriated, the issue of repatriation was still brought forth occasionally. Lord Newton inquired in late November as to how many of the children had been repatriated.¹⁰⁸ Arthur Loveday, a citizen, pointed out that the remaining children were using £500 and £750 a week, money that could be used for the support of poor Britons.¹⁰⁹ The Basque Children's Committee was still consistently defending themselves against attacks concerning the speed in which they repatriated the children. Until the end, the Basque Children's Committee insisted that they were taking precautionary measure to ensure that the children were being repatriated to their families.¹¹⁰ They maintained that they had continued upholding their original promises of keeping the children in their faith and saving them out of humanitarian effort. They also maintained that it was impossible to repatriate all of the children because some of their parents had been exiles in France, or had died in the war, thus 410 children remained in England.¹¹¹ It is also very important to the Basque Children's Committee, and the Basque children themselves, funded the episode entirely, without the aid of the government as they had promised originally. Donations

¹⁰⁷ Legaretta, 134.

¹⁰⁸ "Parliament: End of the Session," *The Times*, 24 November 1939, sec. A, p. 3.

¹⁰⁹ Arthur F. Loveday, letter to the editor, *The Times*, 14 November 1938, sec. C, p. 6.

¹¹⁰ Basque Children's Committee, letter to the editor, *The Times*, 27 November 1939, sec. C, p. 4.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

to the Basque Children's Committee raised nearly half the costs of maintaining the children, and the children's concerts raised a good third of the funds to maintain themselves.¹¹²

. The Non-Intervention policy affected the episode of the Basque children refugees at all levels: the government, the public, and the committees and volunteers that dealt with the children. This can be mirrored in the Parliamentary debates, and public discourse. The Committees and volunteers consistently maintained that the evacuation effort was one of basic humanitarian aid and that they were not favoring one side over the other. This is reflected in pamphlets that they distributed, asking for money, as well as their public statements.¹¹³ In looking at the evacuation of the Basque children as a case study into Britain's humanitarian aid attempts, much can be observed, and it can be concluded that on both sides of the split in public opinion, their objectives were successful. If Britain's goal was to remain in the Non-Intervention treaty, yet appease the public shift towards aiding the Spanish after the bombing of Guernica, it succeeded. By stipulating that the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief had to entirely fund the effort to evacuate the children, and repatriate the children, the Government absolved itself from the responsibility by physically removing refugees from a conflict in which it was not directly involved. By stressing continuously the notion of neutrality in the selection and maintenance of the refugees, the British Government avoided being labeled partisan in the Spanish conflict. The action of implicitly supporting the evacuation also did not get Britain involved in the Spanish conflict, especially when compared to the actions of Italy, Germany and Russia. While the Non-Intervention Treaty did influence the conflict in Spain by not providing aid to the Republicans to fight back, or, by not providing aid to the Nationalists to help them be victorious sooner, the evacuation for 4,000 children to Britain did not influence the overall

¹¹² Legaretta, 134.

¹¹³ The Basque Children's Committee, "You Can't Help Liking Them: 2000 Children: The Faces Behind the Refugees," (London: Basque Children's Committee, 1937).

outcome of the war in these ways. After the Basque Country had fallen to Franco, the issue of repatriation was apparent for Franco, but it was not one of his priorities, and it did not cause him to engage in physical conflict with the countries that were holding refugees at the time. On the whole, the British Government was successful in appeasing the public, and overall, not intervening in Spain.

If the goals for the British public, some M.P.s and various humanitarian groups were to provide aid to Spainards, they succeeded as well. This success is evident in the amount of money and volunteers available to the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief. As the result of a Government unwilling to provide additional aid, the organization sponsored as many children as they could. Not only did they provide care to the maximum number of children their circumstances would allow, they provided them with excellent care—feeding them adequately, giving them enough time to socialize, educating them, keeping them in familial groups, recognizing their religious practices, etc. They also were able to meet the demands of President Aguirré, who in the beginning had only requested that 4,000 children be evacuated to Britain.

The evacuation of 4,000 Basque children fit into the Non-Intervention treaty and the public discourse in a versatile and multifaceted way. It aided two separate spheres in achieving their very different goals. While the British Government was isolationist and did not want to get involved in the Spanish conflict in any way, by allowing the Basque children to be brought to Britain, they supported the effort. Yet they also supported the ideals of the other side. As the conflict wore on, and the heightened sympathy for the war and the Basque children subsided, the Government engaged in a debate concerning the repatriation of the children. By that time, there was strong support for the repatriation and a majority of the children were sent back. This was not, however, done arbitrarily, and the Basque Children's Committee was able to highly regulate

the process of repatriation so that any child that had no living parent, or who would be sent back to extremely dire conditions was delayed. There were quite a few Basque children who managed to remain in Britain, and eventually even fought for Britain in World War II.

Another aspect to this discussion provides some insight into the British perception of the episode as a successful endeavor. In late 1938, merely months after most of the Basque children were repatriated, the British Government began evacuations of 10,000 Jewish children in reaction to Kristallnacht, a horrific attack on the Jewish community in Germany. These evacuations lasted well into 1939, until the declaration of war. It is also interesting to note, that this episode of evacuation *also* fit into the policy of Non-Intervention and appeasement. The British were continuing their policy of Non-Intervention in the Spanish Civil War, which was on-going, and expanded this policy to appease the demands of Hitler, with whom they were not interested in waging a war. In the fall of 1938, just as the debate of repatriation was on-going, Britain appeased Hitler's demands at the Munich Conference in which they granted him rights to the Sudetenland, an area of Czechoslovakia with large numbers of Germans, that Hitler claimed was originally Germany's land, and he wanted it back.

By evacuating the Jewish children in the Kindertransport, Britain could once again appease the public by advocating the government humanitarian aid while not actually being militarily involved in conflict. In hindsight, the British should have intervened in Spain, and should have not appeased Hitler. By not doing so, they allowed fascism to win in Spain. They also allowed Hitler ample opportunity to perfect his new war techniques which would make him a difficult opponent in World War II. The strategies that he perfected in Spain added strength to his powerful military that conquered countries all over Europe. The success of the evacuation of the Basque children gave the British an example of how they could creatively avoid military

conflict yet appease pressure from their own public to do something and they repeated this strategy with Hitler. The two situations were very different, however, in that the Spanish conflict was a battle for control of the Spanish Government while World War II was a battle for European domination. The policy of appeasement and Non-Intervention did not work as well for Britain in regards to Hitler as it had in dealing with the conflict in Spain. Unfortunately, it would also end up harming the British in the end, as they were drawn into war against a powerful opponent, that by nature of their policy of Appeasement and Non-Intervention, had the opportunity to strengthen its position and become even more powerful in its fight against the British. This policy of Appeasement and Non-Intervention policy had dire consequences in the years surrounding World War II. In light of the success of the Basque Children Refugees, Britain believed that once again their policy of Non-Intervention, yet intervening in such a way that they provided humanitarian aid would successfully quell the conflict they wished to avoid. Unfortunately for the British (and the rest of the world) the situations were very different, and their assumption very wrong.

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