

'Everything you have done for us Spanish children will live in our memories for ever'

The Spanish Civil War 1936-1939

In July 1936 sections of the military and right wing forces revolted against the Spanish government. It was the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, a war that lasted until 1939. The official line in many countries was non-intervention but the situation aroused strong feelings in many people, which resulted in a great popular commitment to the cause of the Spanish people. Solidarity work took various forms at both organisational and individual level. Solidarity organisations were set up in many countries. The Labour Movement Archives and Library (ARAB) has extensive material relating to this subject. The material is included in various organisational and personal archives, collections and in the library.

The Swedish Relief Committee for Spain

Svenska hjälpkommittén för Spanien SHfS [the Swedish Relief Committee for Spain] was established in Sweden in the year the war broke out. The Committee, whose fonds at ARAB consists of five volumes, was founded by a number of social democrats at a meeting on 9 October 1936 including such well-known names as Professors Herbert Tingsten and Israel Holmgren. The social democratic Member of Parliament, Georg Branting, was appointed chairman. An appeal was formulated at this meeting which was signed by the participants. Later it was topped up with the signatures of many representatives of Sveriges socialdemokratiska arbetareparti SAP [the Social Democratic Party of Sweden], Sveriges kommunistiska parti SKP [the Swedish Communist Party], Socialistiska partiet SP [the Socialist Party] and the syndicalist organisation Sveriges arbetares centralorganisation SAC [Swedish Workers Central Organisation]. The appeal was launched and after just a couple of months a considerable sum of money had been received, illustrating the tremendous interest in the relief campaign.

Landsorganisationen LO [the Swedish Trade Union Confederation] started its own collection on 4 August 1936, the proceeds of which were passed on to Internationella Solidaritetsfonden [the International Solidarity Fund]. The SAC and Kvinnokommittén för Spaniens barn [the Women's Committee for the Children of Spain] were also involved in relief work. Many well-

The evacuation of Madrid. Franco's attack on Madrid began in November 1936, but it took until the end of March before the nationalists could enter the capital.

known politicians, union representatives and the cultural world supported the SHfS's work, but there was also a tremendous input from ordinary men and women. Bertil Lundvik writes in his book *Solidaritet och partitaktik* [Solidarity and Party Tactics]:

It was by no means unimportant that there were many collections. The background was political. And the consequences were political. The SHfS passed on the majority of the receipts via the International Co-ordinating Committee or its agency in Paris. This committee commanded a dominant position in Spain and was recognised as the official aid agency of the Spanish government.¹

The Committee was to have 431 local committees throughout the country.

Medical care

The Committee had already embarked on its relief shipments by December 1936. They consisted of medical equipment such as stretchers, bandages and dressings and subsequently even ambulances. With the exhortation 'Give the Spanish people a hospital' the Committee appealed for the raising of SEK 200,000 to equip and install a hospital.² In collaboration with the Norwegian Relief Committee a hospital was later established in Alcoy, between Valencia and Madrid. Its first director was Nils Silfverskiöld who had been involved in the Support Committee right from the start whilst the staff came from Norway and Sweden. It was provided with equipment, surgical instruments, reserves of provisions and five cars. It was intended at the outset for 125 beds but in the end there were around 650. It was opened in April 1937 and in August of the same year its management and operation were transferred to the Spanish state: however, even after that transfer consignments of medical equipment were sent from the Norwegian and Swedish committees. At the end of the war it was bombed, probably by an Italian bomber.

Like many other German emigrants Doctor Max Hodann was involved in the struggle for the Spanish people. He went to Spain in 1937 to work in a republican hospital while at the same time working as correspondent for the Norwegian newspaper, *Arbeiderbladet*. In *Sådant är Spanien* [Such is Spain] he describes his stay. There are a number of volumes of material about Spain in Max Hodann's papers.

The children

Sporadic groups of refugees from Spain crossed the French border at the end of 1936. The great flood came in the spring of 1937 and the refugees included thousands of children. The Committee had resolved as early as the winter of 1936/1937 to establish a home for the evacuated children. The Swedish couple, Siri and Olof Aschberg facilitated its achievement by granting the use of their chateau outside Compiègne, the Château de la Brévière. They also financed the furnishing and operation of the children's home. It was run by Swedish staff under the management of a board whose membership included Rina Branting, Siri Aschberg and representatives of French union and women's organisations

In the wake of the children's home in the Château de la Brévière, many others followed with the support of the Swedish committee. Jean Longuet, Karl Marx's grandson,

who was mayor of Châtenay-Malabry where the home was located, opened the fifth. The other Swedish children's homes were in the environs of Paris and in the south of France. In all there were ten in France and two in Spain. To supply the homes with food and the other necessities required for the thousand or so children that lived there the Committee recruited foster parents in Sweden who undertook to pay SEK 55 per month for a child in France and SEK 40 for one in Spain. The Spanish Committees in Gothenburg, Värmland, Stockholm, Skåne and Västmanland all used this method to support their children's homes. Other groups and organisations such as newspaper publishers, teachers associations, youth and union organisations became fosterers too. One example is the

In the summer of 1938 Catalonian children presented a drawing to the Swedish lawyer Georg Branting, in gratitude of the Swedish aid. Photo collection of the newspaper Arbetaren.

Scania-Vabis local union branch in Södertälje, which provided for 13 children in one year. The children wrote letters and sent drawings to their foster parents to thank them for all the help they received. Many of these have been preserved at the Archives.³ The children drew pictures of the war but also of their dreams. Guillermina Ortiz wrote from the home in Asnières:

*Thank you so much for the seven kronor you sent me. Everything you have done for us Spanish children will live in our memories forever, we will never forget you. I just wish that when the war ends you could come to Spain to see how beautiful it is.*⁴

In the homes the children were taught about Sweden in various ways, like reading and discussing Nils Holgersson. Many of the children wrote to Selma Lagerlöf saying how much they appreciated the books and many illustra-

ted them. An excerpt from another letter reads:

*Dear Mrs Lagerlöf
I write to you on behalf of all the Spanish children in this colony supported by the Swedish to tell you just how delighted we were with the book 'Nils Holgersson's wonderful journey through Sweden' ... Old Akka who took the white goose under her wing is a lovely character.⁵*

The children also described life in the home. In 1937 the la Brévière home celebrated a Swedish Christmas with the help of gifts sent from Sweden. One of the children, Maria del Carmen Merín, described it thus:

How happy we were at that moment, and when we were all together. But when we came up to our rooms, there were still many who felt as I did despite everything these kind people are doing and have done for us. I couldn't help taking out my father's picture and telling him, lonely as he is, about this Swedish Christmas that we have enjoyed so much.⁶

The children's drawings caused quite a stir at an exhibition entitled 'Our Spanish children' in Stockholm in 1938.

Kajsa Rothman

Kajsa Rothman's work also made a considerable contribution to the children's cause. She published the book *Barnen ritat om kriget* [Children's drawings of the war] which was distributed and sold throughout the country. Material relating to her efforts appears in many of the archives and collections.⁷

She found herself in Spain when war broke out, but previously she had worked as a nursemaid in France. Later as a marathon dancer she toured all over Europe. At the end of the tour the manager disappeared with the cash and the dancers had no pay. Kajsa went to Romania as a nursemaid with the same family as she had worked for in France. After

three years she moved to Spain and started a travel agency.

When the war broke out she was the first Swedish citizen to enlist as a volunteer. She worked as a nurse and on convoys of the wounded from the front. She wrote from Spain to the *Karlstad-tidningen* and took part in Radio Madrid's Swedish broadcasts. She was also in contact with Svenska Spanienhjälpen [the Swedish Relief for Spain] and worked with them. She was involved in and started children's homes financed from Sweden. In 1938 Kajsa came to Sweden and made a tour, lecturing on the situation in Spain in an effort to invigorate the solidarity work. On her initiative a special fund was established called 'Kajsas mjölkfond [Kajsa's milk fund]' the proceeds of which were used to buy milk for babies in Spain.⁸

After a period in Sweden she returned to Spain and at the end of the war fled to France like many others. Thence she moved on to Mexico where she lived until her death on 31 October 1969, at the age of 66.⁹

Volunteers for Spain

The volunteers who went to Spain as soldiers constituted another form of solidarity by joining the fight for democracy on the spot. They came from more than 50 countries and formed the International Brigades as they were known. These consisted of around 35,000 men and around a further 5,000 enlisted in other parts of the republican army. That does not include the nurses, doctors, engineers, etc., who worked for the republicans. Much has been written about the volunteers in Spain. As early as 1938 Sixten Olsson wrote *Spanska frontminnen* [Recollections of the Spanish front]. The Norwegian journalist Lise Lindbæk described the

Swedish volunteers in the *Internationella brigaden* [International Brigade] published in 1939 while Göte Nilsson's book based on interviews with nine volunteers was published in 1972. There is a chapter on the volunteers in Bertil Lundvik's dissertation *Solidaritet och partitaktik* of 1980 and in recent years *Spaniens sak var vår* [The Spanish cause was our cause] and *Kämpande solidaritet* [Struggling Solidarity] have appeared.

*Their contribution in Spain is probably the greatest voluntary effort in recorded history, if you consider the number of countries represented. The commitment the Spanish cause aroused can most obviously be compared with the Vietnam movement, but it exceeded this in its extent, its intensity and in its armed involvement,*¹⁰

wrote Richard Jändel in his book *Kämpande solidaritet*.

Around 520 young people went from Sweden. However, the first to travel from Sweden with the intention of reporting as volunteers were a group of German syndicalists. Nevertheless the majority of the Swedes were communists. It was Knut Olsson, a communist active in Relief for Spain, who dealt with the practical preparations for those who wished to go. He was later to become the secretary of *Frontkämparnas stödfond* [the Frontline Fighters Support Fund].

'Indeed everyone went to Paris, not Spain. There was, of course, a non-intervention pact – travelling to Spain could mean six months in prison. The headquarters for relaying all volunteers to Spain was in Paris', Knut Olsson relates in *Spaniens sak är vår*. 'We never carried any records', he says, 'nor did any of the Swedes travel from Sweden. A group, many of whom were seamen, went ashore in Spain.'

The majority of Swedish volunteers were to join the Georg Branting company of the 11th International Brigade. Stig Berggren was active politically in the Swedish Socialist Party. At the end of 1936 he travelled

was later transferred to the hospital in Mataró. One of the ambulances he drove was a gift to the Spanish republic from the American actors Gary Cooper and Myrna Loy, another was donated by students and employees at Harvard University in the USA. There are photographs and amongst other things certificates and movement orders in Stig Berggren's papers.

Ernst Ingvar Karlsson, a mineworker from Sollefteå, also went into the 11th Brigade. Amongst his papers are some letters his mother set to the front:

*Dear Ernst! I'm dropping these lines in hope that they may reach you. I hope you are alive somewhere in Spain. ... I fervently hope that you will achieve victory although it is very often distressing to think of your having to go away so unexpectedly.*¹¹

A third of the volunteers were killed in action and many were wounded. The brigades were disbanded in 1938 and the Swedes returned home in a number of batches, the last at the end of 1939. The volunteers continued their fight after their homecoming and, in April 1939, *Svenska frontkämpförbundet* [Swedish Frontline Fighters League] was founded which was later to become *Svenska Spanienfrivilligas kamratförening* [Swedish Volunteers for Spain League of Comrades]. There are 50 volumes in its archive consisting of, for instance, minutes, annual reports, correspondence, cashbooks, interviews, photographs and two banners.

*From the outset the organisation took on a federal character. At a general meeting on 12 December 1938 it was debated whether we should try to form an intra-Scandinavian association from the start or be content with a national one. The resolution was for the latter and it was constituted at a conference on 29 April 1939, with 10 representatives from Stockholm, 6 from Gothenburg, 3 from Norrland, 2 from Southern Sweden and 1 each from Dalarna, Värmland and Västerås taking part. The guests at the conference included the lawyer Georg Branting, Danielsson – chairman of *Spanienveteranernas stödfond* [the Spanish Veterans Relief Fund], Dr. Nils Silfverskjöld and Per Moen from the Norwegian fraternal organisation.*¹²

Outside the hospital at Mataró. The Swedish Spain-volunteer Stig Berggren drives an ambulance donated by the Harvard University in the USA.

with SEK 60 and a ticket to Paris, paid for by the party. He was in Spain for 25 months in which time he worked as an ambulance driver. He started in the 11th Brigade and

Thus wrote Sixten Rogeby, Spanish volunteer, in a memorial publication in 1961.¹³

The first issue of *För ett fritt Spanien* [For a Free Spain], the newspaper of the Swedish Volunteers for Spain League of Comrades, appeared in 1963. The last issue was published in 1994 when the league was disbanded. As a

memorial to those who died in Spain, the monument La Mano was erected in Katarinavägen, Stockholm in 1977. Union and political representatives supported a fund, which had started in 1975 on the initiative of the League of Comrades. The same year a competition for the design of the monument was announced. Nearly 90 proposals were received and an expert jury chose La Mano by the sculptor Liss Eriksson. A majority of Stockholm's city councillors decided that the city itself should foot the bill for the monument and the monies collected were then sent to the resistance movement in Spain.

Frontline Fighters Support Fund

The Swedish Frontline Fighters Support Fund was set up in October 1937, at first to help the volunteers in Spain. The organisation sent gifts to the front, such as clothes, shoes, books, chocolates and cigarettes. Subsequently, it was involved with returning volunteers, paid for medical attention and hospitalisation and helped them out with money. The Support Fund resulted from the initiative of the communists but had wide union support – 25 union chairmen signed its first appeal for aid.¹⁴ Its chairman was V. O. Danielsson of Svenska Metallindustriarbetareförbundet [Swedish Metalworkers' Union], its secretary Knut Olsson, and treasurer Nils Löfstedt from the Stockholm branch of the Seamen's Union. The Frontline Fighters Relief Fund's records consist of 9 volumes.

Collection of clothes and other thing to be sent to Spain, Stockholm in the autumn of 1936. Photo: Arvidson Foto.

Swedish Workers National Organisation

The syndicalist movement's organisation Sveriges arbetares centralorganisation SAC [Swedish Workers National Organisation] had direct contacts with the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo CNT [National Confederation of Labour] and with Augustin Souchy, a German refugee who was their intermediary. He took on the job of organising a relief operation in the Scandinavian countries and, on 8 August 1936, wrote a letter to John Andersson and Albert Jensen from Lyon saying:

I have taken on the job of getting in touch with the SAC on CNT's behalf. The aim is to set in motion a powerful world-wide propaganda machine on behalf of Spain. ... It would be nice for us in Spain to know whether you can do anything to further the struggle.¹⁵

John Andersson replied on 18 August:

I can inform you that in the last few days we have issued a circular to all the district committees, and branches saying that the word is eve-

NOTES

1. Bertil Lundvik: *Solidaritet och partitaktik* [Solidarity and party tactics]. Uppsala/Stockholm, p. 113.
2. Leaflets in the Stockholm Spain Committee.
3. Spanish Civil War [collection], Georg Branting's papers, Knut Olsson's papers.
4. Svenska hjälpkommittén för Spanien [Swedish Relief Committee for Spain] Vol 3.
5. *Solidaritet* [Solidarity] no. 3 1939.
6. *Solidarity* no. 3 1939.
7. Spanish Civil War [collection], Swedish Relief Committee for Spain, Knut Olsson's papers.
8. Material in the collection The Spanish Civil War.
9. Kerstin Gustafsson and Mekki Karlsson: *Spaniens sak var vår* [The Spanish cause was our cause]. Stockholm 1992.
10. There is material on Lise Lindbæk in Max Hodann's papers.
11. Richard Jändel: *Kämpande solidaritet* [Struggling solidarity]. Stockholm 1996.
12. Sixten Rogeby's papers is at ARAB.
13. Gösta Hjärpe's papers vol 2.
14. Lundvik, p.128.
15. SAC vol FXIV:1.
16. SAC vol FXIV:1.
17. Augustin Souchy: *Vorsicht Anarchist. Ein Leben für die Freiheit. Politische Erinnerungen* [Take care, Anarchist. A life for freedom. Political reminiscences]. Darmstadt 1977, pp.103-123.

rywhere to collect money on behalf of the CNT.¹⁶

On 8 September 1936 Augustin Souchy was in Stockholm. The SAC's working committee held an extraordinary meeting at which he outlined the situation in Spain; however, he also visited the Swedish Trade Union Confederation.

Souchy writes about Spain in his memoirs *Vorsicht Anarchist. Ein Leben für die Freiheit*. [Take care, Anarchist. A life for freedom].¹⁷ Moreover, in the SAC's fonds there is also Souchy's correspondence with Solidaridad Internacional Antifascista [International Antifascist Solidarity]. There is also material on the SAC's contacts with Spain in Helmut Rüdiger's archive. Rüdiger, a German emigrant, was one of the secretaries of the AIT.

The poster collection

The poster collection relates to and gives a vivid impression of the tremendous international commitment to the people of Spain. There are hundred-odd posters from Spain in Spanish and Catalan. They come from the Confederación

Nacional del Trabajo (CNT), the Unión General de Trabajadores UGT [General Workers' Union], the Federación Anarquista Ibérica FAI [Iberian Anarchist Federation], Socorro Rojo Internacional [International Red Aid] and from the government's various ministers. The Swedish posters were published by the Swedish Relief Committee for Spain, SAC, the Swedish Frontline Fighters Support Fund, Syndikalistiska ungdomsförbundet [the Syndicalist Youth League], the Swedish Communist Party, etc.

The Spanish Civil War collection [1936-1939]

This is a comprehensive collection consisting of 45 volumes, principally printed material in various languages. The material throws light on various aspects of the commitment to and events of the Civil War. It contains, for example, leaflets, newspaper clippings, theatre programmes, advertisements of meetings and lectures, a range of writings, children's drawings and photographs. In the library there are many titles (approx. 500) on the Spanish Civil War in a number of languages. These are mainly books, but there are other publications such as booklets, essays and periodicals.

ARCHIVES WITH MATERIAL ON THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

Gösta Andersson - 2 volumes
Stig Berggren - 2 volumes
Gustav Blomberg - 3 volumes
Georg Branting - 13 volumes (out of 42), documents concerning the Spanish Civil War and children's drawings
Per Eriksson - separate volumes
Gösta Hjärpe - 4 volumes
Max Hodann - isolated volumes
Ernst Ingvar Karlsson - < 1 volume
International rescue committee - 1 volume
Carl Mattson - 2 volumes
Nyköping Local Spain Committee - 1 volume
Knut Olsson - isolated volumes
Sixten Rogeby - isolated volumes
Kajsa Rothman - < 1 volume
Helmut Rüdiger - isolated volumes
The Stockholm Spain Committee - 1 volume
Spanish Civil War 1936-1939 [collection] - 45 volumes
Svenska frontkämparnas stödfond [Swedish Frontline Fighters Support Fund] - 9 volumes
Svenska hjälpkommittén för Spanien [Swedish Relief

Committee for Spain] - 5 volumes
Svenska Spanienfrivilligas kamratförening [Swedish Volunteers for Spain League of Comrades] - 50 volumes
Sveriges arbetares centralorganisation [The Swedish Workers Central Organisation] (SAC) - isolated volumes in correspondence with the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo [National Confederation of Labour] (CNT), with 'Solidaridad Internacional Antifascista [International Antifascist Solidarity]' and arranged by subject relief for Spain
Södra förstäädernas Spanienkommitté [Southern Suburbs Spain Committee] - < 1 volume

LITERATURE

Björk, Kaj: *Spanien i svenska hjärtan*. Stockholm 2001
Olsson, Sixten: *Spanska Frontminnen*. Stockholm 1938
Lindbaek, Lise: *Internationella brigaden*. Stockholm 1939
Lundberg, Lennart: *Svenskarna i spanska inbördeskriget 1936-1939*. Göteborg 2001
Lundvik Bertil: *Solidaritet och partitaktik*. Uppsala/Stockholm 1980
Gustafsson, Kerstin and Karlsson, Mekki: *Spaniens sak var vår*. Stockholm 1992
Jändel, Richard: *Kämpande solidaritet*. Stockholm 1996

Lucy Viedma is an archivist.

