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80 YEARS SINCE JARAMA: BATTLE'S TALE ECHOES TODAY

While the world obsesses about parallels with the 1930s, **KIRON REID** remembers a bloody episode in the Spanish Civil War, 80 years ago this month, worthy of quiet reflection



"There's a valley in Spain called Jarama..."
And 80 years ago this month, 600 British and Irish men filed hurriedly into it, to hold the line against General Franco's forces as they attempted to encircle Madrid.

There, they fought amid stripped olive trees to blunt the advance and prevent the city from falling. It was the first major action of the British Battalion in the Spanish Civil War. And one which came at great cost. Of the 600, 157 were killed.

It was also the battle which helped define the legacy of the Brigades, for many of those who survived left behind accounts of the clash.

Albert Charlesworth, for instance, a metal polisher from Oldham, later described the almost surreal experience of being sent in, to stem the Francoist advance: "It was a nice day, beautiful day. There was the sun... We weren't being fired on although firing seemed to be taking place... I thought so anyway. But it wasn't until eleven o'clock in the morning that I realised that the birds that were singing were bullets whistling past and there was a fierce battle going on."

It was men like Charlesworth, from working class areas, who made up the bulk of the International Brigades, as well as a

few socialist intellectuals and dreamers who went to Spain to support the Republic. The writers like Laurie Lee and George Orwell became famous, justifiably so, as did the poet Stephen Spender, and Trades Union leader Jack Jones. But many others deserved to become better known.

The Battle of Jarama has three poems dedicated to it in the Penguin Book of Spanish Civil War Verse, though the work which most evokes the action was the anthem, *Jarama Valley*, written by the men themselves and sung to the tune of Red River Valley: "There's a valley in Spain called Jarama / It's a place that we all know so well, / For 'twas there that we gave of our manhood, / And most of our brave comrades fell".

The battle began on the morning of February 6, 1937. Having failed to take Madrid by storm the previous November, the nationalists planned to attack across the river Jarama and take the Madrid-Valencia road, severing the capital's lifeline and causing its collapse.

The Republican lines buckled under the offensive, which was supported by German forces, and the nationalists – elite Spanish Legionnaires and soldiers from Morocco – secured bridgeheads across the river.

On February 12, the British Brigade was sent up to the front, to hold a position

JARAMA VALLEY

The earliest known version of the lyrics was written by Alex McDade, a Glasgow labourer who served with the British Battalion – part of XV International Brigade – and was published in *The Book of the XV International Brigade* by the Commissariat of War in 1938.

By then, he was dead. He had been wounded at Jarama, but was back in action at the Battle of Brunete, in July 1937. He was wounded again and died from his injuries in a Glasgow hospital. He had been a political commissar, responsible for the men's welfare, and the song's cynical, grumbling tone certainly appealed. It has long been sung at commemorative events and has been covered by Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger. Spanish, Russian and German versions were also sung.

(1) Members of the British Battalion, 15th International Brigade, displaying their banner. Photo: PA Archive

between the Franco-Belgian Battalion and one from the Balkans, the Dimitrov Battalion.

Furious and confused fighting followed throughout the day. The nationalists, who almost surrounded the British position, were crack troops from the Army of Africa. The volunteers were largely untested, and lacking in training and equipment.

By nightfall, the Francoist attack had been blunted, but more than half the British Battalion had been lost – 375 of the 600, including almost every officer. The poet Christopher Caudwell and Clem Beckett, a celebrated dirt-track rider, were among those killed. The British called the position they had fought for Suicide Hill.

Bitter fighting continued the next day, with around 30 volunteers captured when their position was surrounded. Others were killed in a doomed attempt to rescue them.

Tom Wintringham, the battalion's commander, was also injured. By the end of the day, only around 160 remained in the British line.

On the third day, the line finally broke, under an attack from tanks and artillery. Small groups of British volunteers drifted back to the cookhouse, behind the lines, to be told they were the only soldiers between the nationalists and the Valencia road.

So the shattered men turned around and marched back to the front, supposedly singing the Internationale as they went and picking up other stragglers on the way.

The episode became known as the "great rally" and though it may sound suspiciously like the invention of Communist propagandists, has been corroborated by many witnesses.

The rally worked too. The rebels, believing the fragile returning units to be reinforcements, returned to their own positions and allowed the British to regain theirs on the hill. Over night, the Republican line was reinforced. Both sides dug in.

The battle continued, through February, with further attacks and counterattacks followed, but the front lines ossified. The nationalists could not be dislodged from their footholds across the river, but neither could they get near the Madrid-Valencia road.

As a result of the stalemate, the area lost its strategic significance, and the focus of the war shifted elsewhere. But for the International Brigades – and even those who joined it later – Jarama still loomed large.

Bob Clark, of Liverpool, arrived in Spain six months after the battle, but heard an account from a friend: "They fought off the

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(2) Men of the British Battalion in Spain, circa 1937. (3) British volunteers punching the air at Victoria Station, after returning from the conflict



most desperate of attacks from masses of Moors and the dive-bombing of their positions, together with shell-fire and mortar fire. Although many of our lads gave their lives, the enemy slowly and painfully were nearing the highway... At last the line broke... The men of the British Battalion began joining this disorderly retreat, when suddenly around the bend of the road came marching, tired and wounded men trying to keep step to the tune of a mouth organ. They were marching towards the enemy... the British commander gave the order to deploy... With the rattle of their obsolete machine-guns the remains of the International Column, with the Spaniards, advanced against the enemy... the Valencia highway was saved. The cost to the British was tragic. Although the war was to continue for many more months, never in any future battle were they to suffer so grievously. This story of Jarama had a great effect on me and also on the rest of the lads who had gathered round to listen. We realised that we had a tradition to follow."

Indeed, some who went to fight, like Frank Deegan, a Liverpool Irish unemployed movement activist, were inspired to do so by tales of Jarama. And those stories have endured.

In 1986, on the 50th Anniversary of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War former International Brigaders in Liverpool met at the Trades Union Resource Centre for a commemoration.

I had got into the Spanish Civil War through reading *Homage to Catalonia* in my private school in the north Liverpool

suburb of Crosby and went along to that commemoration and was not only the youngest person present but the just about the only one not wearing a red star badge on their overcoat. At that age I knew I disagreed with their politics but it was impossible to doubt the passion and unswerving devotion to remembering their struggle and the lost comrades in arms.

The veterans sang Jarama. The song ends:

"We swore in that Valley of Sorrow
"That Fascism never should reign."
I think they also sang the original irreverent version which was not the one circulated by the authorities:

"There's a valley in Spain called Jarama,
"That's a place that we all know so well,
"For 'tis there that we wasted our manhood,
"And most of our old age as well."
There is a current vogue for searching for parallels between the 1930s and today. And there has also been a long history of mythologising the Spanish Civil War. There were atrocities by both sides, and infighting among the Republicans gave Britain and France an excuse to do nothing.

This month, though, it is enough to remember the young men – idealists, dreamers, anti-fascists – who died among the olive groves in a dusty river valley, so that fascism never may reign.

■ Kiron Reid is a former law lecturer and is an international election observer with an interest in history. He also volunteers at Zaporizhzhya National University, in Ukraine

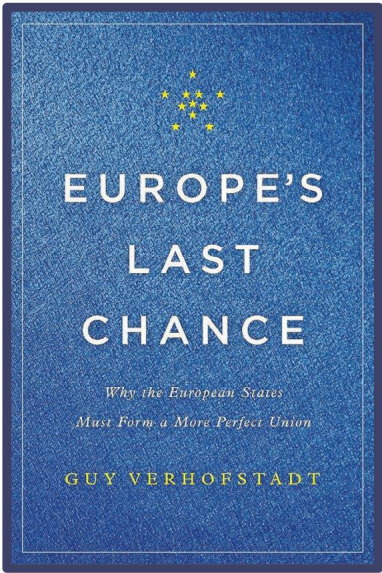
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