

# The Sylvia Pankhurst Memorial Lecture 2004

## *Sylvia Pankhurst and the Spanish Civil War*

Given by Professor Richard Pankhurst at Wortley Hall, Sheffield on Friday 17 September 2004

My mother, the former Suffragette, Sylvia Pankhurst, became an Anti-Fascist as early as 1919 when, visiting Bologna in northern Italy, she saw Fascist squads beating up their opponents and members of the public. Her opposition to Fascism became more active after Mussolini's March on Rome in 1922, and the Fascist murder of the Socialist Deputy, Giacomo Matteotti, in 1924. To focus on the plight of the latter's widow Velia Matteotti, and on the oppressive character of Italian Fascism in general, she founded an Anti-Fascist pressure group, the Women's International Matteotti Committee.<sup>1[1]</sup>

Throughout this time she regarded Italy as the first "victim" of Fascism, but, aware of the chauvinistic and militaristic character of the movement, was convinced that there would soon be further victims.

Watching Mussolini's preparations for an invasion of Ethiopia, she rallied to that country's support, wrote letters on the subject to the British and international press, and in May 1936 founded a newspaper, *New Times and Ethiopia News*, [often abbreviated *NT & EN*] in Ethiopia's defence.<sup>2[2]</sup> She was to edit it for twenty years,

She and her newspaper took a keen, and committed, interest in the Spanish Civil War. Within a few weeks of Franco's rebellion on 18 July 1936 she was writing and speaking against the Falangists. In an editorial entitled "The Fascist World War. Ethiopia and Spain", which appeared on 1 August, she declared: "We are in the world war of Fascism against Democracy". Recalling that the Italian Dictator called it a war of the "Dissatisfied "Nations" against the "Satisfied", she continued:

"This war began in Ethiopia; now it has spread to Spain, where the Government democratically elected by the Spanish people, in constitutional form, is being attacked by the Fascists, who were defeated at the ballot box. The Spanish Fascists would already have been defeated in the test of force which they had chosen, were it not that they are being assisted by the fascist powers outside. Italy and Germany are assisting them..."

Discussing the Spanish Fascists, she declared that they would:

"...fail before the massed determination of the Spanish people - notice that even women have sprung without hesitation to the barricades - if the Spanish Government is given fair play. If it is debarred from purchasing munitions, and if the rebels are provided with a plentiful supply Fascism will triumph in Spain as it has in Ethiopia, though not for ever..."

---

<sup>1[1]</sup> R. Pankhurst, "An Early Anti-Fascist Organisation: The Women's International Matteotti Committee", *Socialist History* (2001), XIX, 1-29.

<sup>2[2]</sup> R. Pankhurst, "Sylvia and New Times and Ethiopia News" in I. Bullock and R. Pankhurst, *From Artist to Anti-Fascist* (London, 1992). See also R. Pankhurst, *Sylvia Pankhurst. Counsel for Ethiopia* (Holywood, California, 2003)

As for the role of aviation in the conflict then taking place in Spain, she added:

"It is the air arm which counts in Spain, as it counted in Ethiopia, and there is evidence that the Italian dictatorship is supplying its Fascist ally with aeroplanes and that the German ally is supplying cash".

Turning to the international propaganda scene, and the excuses offered for ignoring the rights of first the Ethiopians and then the Spaniards, she declared:

"People stood by while Ethiopia was vanquished: this is only Africa, this is not a White Man's country. They listened to the Italian propaganda: these are primitives, their customs are barbarous. Now people stand aside again: they do not like Spanish politics: these are a disorderly people fighting among themselves; they are Anarchists, Socialists, Reds, strikers; it does not matter to us...

"Meanwhile [she continued] the Fascists consider it *does* matter and are supplying all they can to their own side.

"It was the same in Italy when Fascism started the war there; the Christian Democrats of Don Sturzo's Popolari, the old Liberals of Giolitti, the Free Masons, the old, tolerant type of Conservatives, all said: it is only the Socialists and other Reds, the Trade Unionists and the Co-operatives who are attacked; and then one by one, each of them went down before the bludgeon, the rifle and the repressive antics of Fascism, their organisations were suppressed, their leaders imprisoned or compelled to flee".

She turned, in conclusion, to the crucial question of the position of France. She recalled that the French "Popular Front" Government of Léon Blum, had been elected on the slogan "Fascism is the Enemy", but had "permitted itself to be intimidated into sacrificing Ethiopia" - and she asked: "Will Mr. Blum and his colleagues be intimidated into sacrificing Spain?"

Later that month Sylvia was herself directly confronted by a question of Anti-Fascist tactics in relation to the Spanish civil war. On 25 August Stafford Cripps, an influential Left-wing Labour Member of Parliament (and future Minister) wrote to her, saying that he understood her opposition to the Fascist invasion of Ethiopia, but continued:

"I do not believe it is possible to rouse anti-fascist feeling on this issue now while the Spanish issue is just beginning to exercise the minds of the British workers. The latter [i.e. the Spanish Civil War] has a more obvious working class interest and I should hesitate to do anything which would detract from keenness on the Spanish issue..."

Sylvia entirely rejected this argument. Writing back to Cripps on the following day, she observed:

"With regard to Ethiopia and Spain, it seems to me that the more we press both questions home, the more we show what Fascism is really doing in the world. I hope you will find time to glance at 'New Times and Ethiopia News' weekly, because we always have much information there about what Fascism is doing in Italy and other countries, which does not appear elsewhere. Our correspondent, Luce, scans all anti-fascist publications, and also has contact with Italy so as to be able to keep us informed of what is going on. We also get

the first news which is available about the doings of Fascism in Africa, and we have a good deal of exclusive matter from Spain".

Some of the paper's other readers argued from the opposite point of view. They held that supporters of Ethiopia should not allow themselves to be contaminated by association with Spanish "Reds".

Sylvia rejected this argument no less vehemently. writing in her newspaper, on 10 October:

"Despite the opinion expressed in some quarters to the contrary, the Spanish Civil war is a matter of importance for those who support the cause of Ethiopia".

The paper, though primarily devoted to Ethiopia, thus consistently published articles on Spain, not a few by Spanish Republicans, with titles such as "The Civil War in Spain", by "A Spanish Woman in Spain"; "The Present Spanish Conflict, by Ferdinando de Cos Rios, a Professor at Madrid University and former Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs; Commentary on the struggle by Victoria Kent, a Deputy for Jaen; and "For What and for Whom is Spain Engaged in a Civil war?" by a Spanish Mining Engineer's Wife?".

Publicity was also given, notably in the issue for 12 September 1936, to the Italian Anti-Fascists who had gone to fight in defence of the Spanish Republic. They included Carlo Rosselli, founder of the *Giustizia e Libertà* movement, who had coined the Anti-Fascist slogan "Today in Spain; tomorrow in Italy" - and was later to be assassinated on Mussolini's orders.

Sylvia's own position was made clear in an Editorial which appeared 5 September 1936 in which she declared:

"... the Spanish Government is short of arms and munitions... despite the neutrality agreement engineered by France, the insurgents continue to receive supplies of munitions and trained men from Germany and Italy... In a country which has no large factories for manufacturing arms and munitions, this state of affairs can have but one outcome, if permitted to continue unchecked. despite the valour and heroism of the people, the engines of modern warfare in the hands of a minority of trained persons must overcome them in the end..."

Drawing attention to the fact that the British Parliament was in recess at this crucially important moment, and that the issues of Ethiopia and Spain would soon be discussed at the League of Nations Assembly, due to meet in only a few weeks time she continued:

"It is a thousand pities that Parliament is in recess when this struggle is being fought out at the expense of the Spanish people..."

"Justice for Ethiopia and Spain should take first place on the agenda of the forthcoming meeting of the League of Nations. Unless the League can secure the maintenance of the democratic principles on which it is based, and prevent the indefensible attacks which the Fascist Dictatorships are making on peaceable populations outside their own territories, it has become valueless for all practical purposes".

Writing a few weeks later, on 17 September, she declared that it had been "proved beyond the possibility of doubt" that the so-called Non-Intervention Pact had been "systematically broken by Italy, Germany and Portugal". The Western

Democracies were allowing Spain to perish, while the Russian, for its part, was following "a purely nationalist policy".

On British policy, with which she was mainly concerned (and indeed trying to influence), she wrote:

"Though Government spokesmen, one and all, pledge their devotion to democratic government, they are not prepared to take any serious step to defend it when the democratic government which is fighting for its existence happens to be composed of parties other than their own...

"Britain [she concluded] has failed in the two great cases of Ethiopia and Spain to rise to the lofty part world democracy expected of her".

In a further editorial, on "The Spanish Civil War", which appeared on 11 November 1936, she declared:

"Madrid, as we write, still holds out against the greatly superior arms of the rebels. The pitiless bombardment of the Fascists is in striking contrast to the forbearance of the Government troops...

"The tragedy of the Spanish conflict is that Fascist propaganda and Party prejudice against a popular front government have raised a smoke-screen of false atrocity stories behind which the freedom of a people has been betrayed".

Numerous other articles in the newspaper, including official Spanish Government statements, drew attention to continuous German and Italian involvement in the war, and emphasised that the supposed Non-Intervention was a sham.

As the struggle in Spain intensified *NT* & *EN* devoted many pages to reports, and later actual photographs, of Falangist atrocities. The front page of the issue for 21 November 1936 thus carried, in very bold type, the words, "FASCISM AT WORK", above photographs of five Spanish children killed by Rebel Forces on 4 and 7 November, with supporting evidence from the Generalitat de Catalunya.<sup>3[3]</sup> The front page of the issue for 12 December, bearing the same heading, was largely occupied by three photographs of the bombing of Spanish schools.

The paper also ran an on-going series of news articles entitled, "What We Hear From Spain". Space was likewise given to pro-Republican propaganda articles. One, in remarkably optimistic vein, from the Madrid Regional Defence Committee, published on 30 January 1937, bore heading, "Madrid has Forgotten Fear", and declared:

"Bombs are whizzing through the air, grenades are being dropped everywhere, machine guns are playing their melodies [but] we have the people behind us. Victory belongs to us. Madrid has forgotten fear!" Another enthusiastic message came from Carlo Rosselli's Italian Anti-Fascist colleague Francesco F. Nitti, who was quoted, on 12 February 1937, as anticipating "the victorious end of this

---

<sup>3[3]</sup> The subsequent publication of one of these photographs in the London liberal daily, the *News Chronicle*, led to some controversy, at the conclusion of which the critics were obliged to accept the photograph's authenticity/ See *NT* & *EN*, 20 March 1937.

war, waged by the people for its liberty, for the liberties of world-wide democracy, for justice to all peoples".<sup>4[4]</sup>

Other articles in the paper, appearing on 27 February 1937, included a passionate account of The Women of Spain, by Sylvia's old friend, the French Feminist Andrée Forny, and the letters from Barcelona of Piero Jacchia, a prominent Italian Anti-Fascist in London - and former reader in the British Museum - who died in battle.

Sylvia, fully committed to the Spanish Republican cause, at about this time began a long public controversy with a Conservative pro-Franco Member of Parliament Alfred Denville as to its legality which the latter rejected. The debate began in the issue of *NT & EN* 17 April 1937, and continued for almost five months.

Particularly poignant was paper's issue of 8 May 1937. Headed "Guernica... City of Silence and Death", it carried a picture of the bombing, and an article on the "Guernica Tragedy", which stated that "to refuse arms to the Spanish Government, which is legally entitled to buy them, is to intervene on behalf of the rebels".

Support for Spain and other "victim nations" was likewise voiced in Sylvia's editorial for 7 September 1937. Headed, "Ethiopia... Spain,... China" , it declared: "The Assembly of the League of Nations approaches. As in letters of fire are looming above it the names of the tragic war victims - Ethiopia, Spain, China...".

Travelling to Geneva later that week, to report on the discussions at the League Assembly, as well as to lobby delegates, she devoted twelve long columns in her issue of 25 September to a report on the debate on Spain, with full coverage of the speech of the Spanish representative Juan Negrin. The next issue, for 2 October 1937, carried the slogan: "The League MUST Defend Ethiopia, Spain and China"

In the Spring of 1938 *NT & EN* began to publish a series of exclusive articles by the Left-Wing American woman author Nancy Cunard, who at about this time joined the paper's editorial board. Cunard's articles dealt with such subjects as the Republican victory at Teruel and the Falangist bombing of Barcelona. Another of her articles, which appeared on 17 September, bore the heading "Great Britain Can Stop the Strangulation of Republican Spain. An Earnest Appeal for Action", while yet another, on 3 December, declared that "In Republican Spain, Men Fight - Women Organise".

The paper later initiated a great Trafalgar Square Demonstration in London, on 13 March 1938. Supported by a broad coalition of socialist, trade unionist, liberal, pacifist, anti-fascist, feminist and Africanist organisations, it was described as the largest demonstration held in Britain since the time of the Suffragettes prior to World War I, and was attended by around 40,000 people. Speeches were delivered, and resolutions passed, on a wide variety of Anti-Fascist issues. People attending were invited to make a personal pledge agreeing in part to "support collective security" and work "for the saving of democratic Spain".

---

<sup>4[4]</sup> Nitti, by then a Major in the Spanish Republican Army, later wrote a lengthy article on Barcelona, then, as he called it, "the capital of fighting Spain" in the issue of 11 June 1938.

The military situation of the Spanish Republic by the end of the year 1938 was, however, fast deteriorating; and it became clear that Barcelona was about to fall. Sylvia joined a large women's delegation which was granted the rare privilege of visiting the Foreign Office, where they were received by the Under-Secretary Mr. R.A. Butler, on 23 January 1939. The event, which was organised by the All London Aid Spain Council, was attended by some forty women, among them Mrs. C.R. Attlee, wife of the Labour Party leader; the Liberal woman leader Lady Violet Bonham-Carter; the author Vera Brittain, and two women Members of Parliament, Eleanor Rathbone and Ellen Wilkinson.

Sylvia took a prominent role in the discussion, which she later publicised in her paper. She began by asking the Minister whether the British Government was willing to send along the Royal Navy to protect British ships then taking food to Catalan. Butler refused, on the grounds that this would mean involvement in the Civil War, to which she retorted that she saw it as no more than an act of mercy. She then asked, should Barcelona fall, whether the British Government would be prepared to allow Spanish refugees to enter the country? She was supported by Eleanor Rathbone M.P., who declared that it would be tragic if those who had fought so heroically should be "left to be butchered". Sylvia then raised the question of Anti-Fascist Italian and Anti-Nazi Italian German volunteers who had fought against Franco, and could therefore not return to their own countries. Would the British Government be willing to give them asylum? To these questions Butler made only evasive replies (a kid of response for which he was renowned), declaring that the British Government's policy was "to prevent the Civil War becoming an international war" - to which Sylvia interjected, "It is an international war!" 5[5]

Her views on the Civil War were further elaborated in that week's issue of *NT & EN*, for 28 January 1939, which bore the by then hopelessly optimistic banner heading: "REPUBLICAN SPAIN MUST BE SAVED". In that week's editorial, entitled "SPAIN'S AGONY - OUR PERIL. TREACHERY TO PEACE", she wrote:

"The armies of Italy and Germany have swept with destruction over industrious Catalonia, laying her waste as other fair Spanish provinces have previously suffered.

"Barcelona, as we write, is under shell-fire, her suburbs invaded, her airport captured. Children and adults, soldiers and the refugees, to whom Barcelona has been so generous, literally die of want.

"What a spectacle! Starved of food, starved of arms, the valiant defenders of a peaceful and unprepared nation meet the highly mechanised might of two armed Powers.

"The Leader of the opposition, the Trade Union Congress, have pleaded with Mr. Chamberlain: 'Give them bread! Give them arms!' Deputations of people of every rank and profession plead without end. It is vain.. the dictators have their way... The massacre goes on.

"'We are impartial', declare the apologists for this policy. Impartial! A democratic nation impartial when the very foundations of world democracy are under

---

5[5]*NT & EN* 28 January 1939

attack! No; this is not impartiality! It is support for the dictators of a most disastrous kind!

"Let the issue be clearly faced. A bitter struggle is being fought to decide whether the old Spain of artists and dreamers, toilers and visionaries, the Spain of Cervantes and Velasquez, shall free her masses from obscurantism and penury and raise them to a higher standard of life; or whether she shall be transformed into an aggressive military dictatorship".

The fast ensuing collapse of Republican resistance filled her with despair. In her editorial of 4 February 1939, entitled "THE AGONY OF SPAIN, The Shame of Her Betrayal", she declared:

"We send our sympathy to Republican Spain for her deep sorrow, our admiration for her great courage.

"The agony of Barcelona weighs on the heart. The hunger-stricken city, cruelly outclassed in armament, bombed and bombarded till she fell".

In a subsequent editorial, that of 4 March, which appeared after the Anglo-French recognition of Franco's victory, she wrote at greater length. Discussing the events in Spain in the light of her own passionately held political philosophy, and in a sense also that of her democratic-loving parents, she headed it "ETHIOPIA AND NOW SPAIN", and observed:

"As it was with Ethiopia, so now it is with democratic Spain, she is declared conquered and superseded. Her conqueror is officially recognised by the two great powers most responsible for the Covenant of the League of Nations and for something yet more vital than that - the preservation of democracy in Europe.

"Britain, the mother of Parliaments, Britain, whose whole history has been a long struggle for human right and the democratic ideal, as embodied in those historic instruments the Magna Charta, the Bill of Rights and the Representation of the People Acts of 1832, 1867, 1885, 1917 and 1928, has dealt a blow at all constitutional liberty by the recognition of a rebellion, fought with the aid of foreign powers to overthrow the verdict of the Spanish people at a general election.

"France, whose revolution dethroned autocracy, and established democratic government, and the recognition of the essential Right of man and the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity, not for France alone, but for all Europe, has cast herself from the high place she occupied in the spiritual leadership of Europe".

This Anglo-French recognition of Franco's military victory was, she forcefully concluded, no less than a "crime against civilisation".

She returned to the Spanish issue in the following issue, for 11 March 1939. In it she devoted two tightly packed pages to a detailed report on the House of Commons debate of 28 February, in which Labour and Liberal had critics attacked the British Conservative Government's recognition of the Franco regime.

In that issue she expressed her own most personal feelings on the issue:

"We are sad, terribly sad. The cause of human progress has suffered another awful reverse in the recognition of Franco's rule by the British and French Governments, and by the tragic events in Madrid.

"Our heart is with the vanquished and the dead.

"Our grief is beyond words. Yet we must persevere. We must struggle on. Never despair, never waver. Courage and again courage!

"It is now, in these dark hours, we are needed, all of us who care and will. Now the clarity and firmness of our convictions is put to the test.

"Republican Spain is down, bombed and shelled down, by the arms and munitions of Italy and Germany and the devilish destruction of their alien planes: starved and strangled by the callous and cruel sham which is mis-named non-intervention".

Though the war in Spain had come to a tragic end, Sylvia and her paper campaigned actively for the country's refugees many of whom had been detained, under terrible conditions in a French concentration camp in Perpignan some 30 kilometres north of the Spanish frontier. In raising this humanitarian issue she had once again the invaluable cooperation from Nancy Cunard, who travelled to Perpignan, and wrote several poignant and very informative articles. A front page article for 25 February 1939 thus carried the heading "TERRIBLE PLIGHT OF SPANISH REFUGEES". Later articles by Nancy Cunard described equally distressing conditions at the Argelès and Collioure camps, and difficulties encountered by members of the International Brigade, as well as reports in the issues of 12 and 26 August, of mass arrests, persecution and prison torture in Franco's Spain.

With the ensuing outbreak only a week or so later of the European war *NT* & *EN*'s involvement in Spanish affairs came to an almost inevitable end.