
THE ENIGMA OF FRANK RYAN

PART ONE

by Michael McInerney

The date is August 4th 1940. The scene: the historic Wilhelmstrasse, (Germany's White House or Downing Street). Hitler, now master of Europe, including La Belle France, is making final plans for the next battle, the invasion of England.

Ribbentrop, Nazi Foreign Minister, enters with his Under-Secretaries of State. With them are War Office personnel - General Raedar, General Keitel, Admiral Donietz (Admiral-in-Chief of U-Boat Fleet), Admiral Conaris, (Chief Intelligence (the Abwehr), Lt. Colonel Lahousen (Head of Abwehr Sabotage) and S.S. Colonel Veesenmayer (Irish Advisor Foreign Office). The subject for discussion is "Ireland - Its role in the English Operation".

First, there is a short discussion, Ribbentrop presiding, and then a low-sized, mild-looking but sturdy man, an utterly complete stranger to most present, enters. He is greeted by Ribbentrop and introduced as Herr Sean Russell, Chief-of-Staff of the Irish Republican Army (Whermacht). He is greeted warmly and shown to a seat.

Another stranger, obviously a foreigner then enters, guided by an official. He is exceptionally tall, strongly-built, yet gaunt and pale, and clearly not at ease. Even before he has taken a seat, however, he and the first stranger recognise and greet each other with excited cries of 'Frank', 'Sean' as they embrace, talking away, ignoring everybody else. "Frank" is then shown to a seat and introduced to the whole company as Herr Frank Ryan, an heroic fighter against England in the Irish War of independence. He also is greeted warmly.

Sean Russell's presence in such politically strange company might have surprised few Irish people with any knowledge of the Easter Rising or awareness of the IRA connivance with the Germans at that time. But how did Frank Ryan get there? The question was on all political minds in Ireland and in a few other countries at that time. Only ten days earlier he had been Major Ryan of the Spanish Republican Army, the last international anti-fascist prisoner of Franco, captured in fighting against Germans, Italian and Spanish fascists, and sentenced to

The Ryan family in Bottomstown, Elton, Co. Limerick could be described as comfortable - even middle class. All the five boys and four girls received secondary education, three of the girls became nuns, two of the boys doctors, and for a brief period Frank believed he had a vocation for the priesthood. That very brief vocation came from the intense education on the twin struggle of Ireland 'for Faith and Fatherland', from a Father Roche in St. Colman's College, Fermoy.

That education merged well with the history of Ryan's early youth. The new national movement of physical force, after the tragedy of Parnell, the Boer War, the defeat of Home Rule, and the outbreak of the Great War between Germany and the British Empire, were almost a prologue to his own life.

The heroism, the tragedy and glory of the Easter Week Rising, as portrayed by Father Roche, made a deep impression on the youngster of 13 years and, somehow the effort of Casement to obtain help from the Germans, loomed large. Of earlier history, Father Roche did not neglect the Spanish Armada. Ryan's later career made its own history and reflected in many ways his educational background.

death but defying his captors in questions from even the German Gestapo.

The mystery of Ryan's presence at that Nazi meeting, and the mystery also of his later journey in a German U-Boat with the same Sean Russell - and Russell's death in that tragic journey - has remained unsolved for almost 40 years. His later 4 year stay and death in Germany on the return of the U-Boat added to the mystery.

Ryan was widely known and loved in Ireland as a leading IRA writer, speaker, left-wing advocate of Saor Eire and of the many social issues of that time, until that day in July 1940 when he was removed from Spain. Ever since, however, his popularity has been clouded somewhat by the German question mark. Why did he go there? How did he, an avowed anti-fascist, survive among such political criminals? Did he hold on to his principles? The only reply one can attempt to give is to sketch an outline of his life's work and principles from his early membership of Fianna Eirean and the IRA in 1919, while still a boy in Bottomstown, Elton, Co. Limerick.

It is the only full answer that can be essayed. Within it, however, may be found the one single emotion that unites most Catholic Irish men and women and also some Protestants. It is the emotion that was dominant in 1919-21, in 1939 to 1945. It is the emotion that Tom Barry, Sean MacBride, Rory O'Connor and others sought to exploit in that famous IRA Convention, when Barry - in vain - proposed that the IRA should resume the war against the English. (Indirectly, however, the proposal led to the Civil War). Stalin exploited the same emotion in 1941 when he turned the Russian defence into a 'Patriotic War' against the German assault.

It is an emotion which is often abused in peace time to divert generous minds from serious social issues and needs into channels far removed from those issues.

In Ryan's most dynamic activity in Ireland almost all his energy was diverted into grappling with those very social issues and maintaining that their resolution could also solve any remaining national questions.

In Fermoy he met the famous Malone brothers of Tipperary, who soon introduced him to Sinn Fein and the junior IRA, the Fianna. He joined the East Limerick IRA in late 1920, while only barely 18 years old and still at college, and took part in the Tan War until the Truce. In the Civil War, however, he parted with his hero Michael Collins and though not attracted to Liam Mellows and Rory O'Connor, of the Four Courts IRA, he joined with Liam Lynch and de Valera after the Four Courts attack by the Provisional Army of Collins, Griffith and Mulcahy.

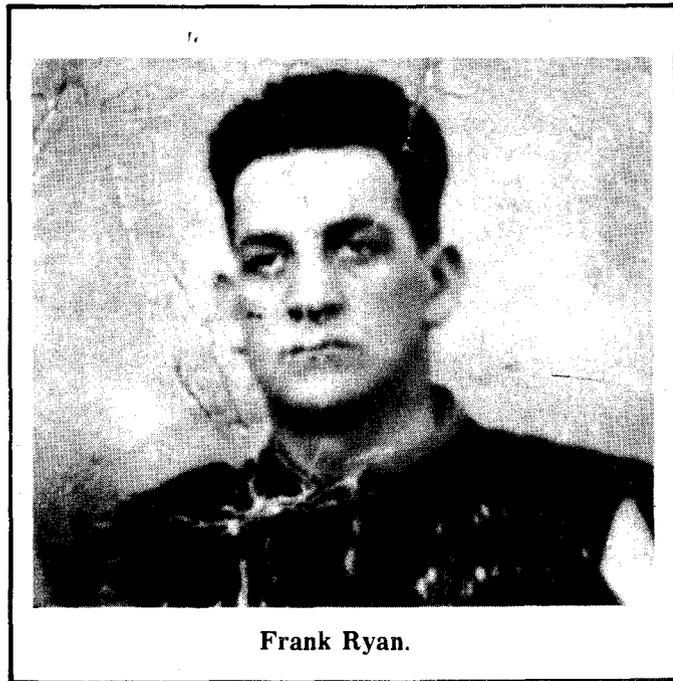
Then followed capture, internment and after the Civil War ended, release, in September 1923, just in time to resume his studies on the opening of the 1923-24 term at University College, Dublin. Ryan, through scholarships, had secured free education through St. Colman's. From there he gained another scholarship to enter U.C.D. in September 1921, but the Civil War and internment had interrupted his studies. It is worth noting that the Limerick County Council, though opposed to his politics, renewed his scholarship after the Civil War.

He completed his Degree in Celtic Studies, with Honours, in 1925 and began study for a Master's Degree. Political activity crowded out his life so much, however,

that he never completed those studies. He became quickly known as a brilliant public speaker, organiser, writer, Gaelic scholar, teacher, and propagandist. By 1926 he was writing for *An Phoblacht*. Through the crisis of the IRA break with de Valera and the formation of Fianna Fail, Ryan stuck to the IRA refusing all promises and offers of position, money and influence.

His reason? By now he had become a republican socialist. Always inclined towards the left, in spite of his physical force idealism, he saw that de Valera was ignoring the terrible poverty, the bad housing conditions, the unemployment and the emigration.

Now working closely with Peadar O'Donnell, the well-known socialist, former trade union organiser, school-teacher and writer, Ryan had also moved to the left. Their work for the small farmers, now under government pressure to pay land annuities arrears, had aroused rural Ireland, and de Valera, now seeking state power was forced to pledge reforms. Ryan was busy helping O'Donnell, building a left wing in the IRA, urging the conservative IRA into a social-revolutionary body and to give up the gun. Arguing that if they concentrated on land division, jobs, houses, security, improved education, old-age welfare they would make contact with Protestant workers in the North and create an all-Ireland organisation.



Frank Ryan.

De Valera, on the other hand, was now using the North for political advantage in the South, to divert the people from urgent social issues to nationalist issues that would widen, not narrow, the antagonisms in the North.

The left made real progress and now the IRA had contacts with the Soviet Union, radical rural groups in France, Germany, Italy and Britain. At home junior IRA officers were prominent at unemployed marches, tenant protests and with small farmers on the annuities issue. Soon the IRA had a new radical programme that frightened the life out of the Cosgrave Government and the Church.

That new 1931 programme named 'Saor Eire' was to mark an important watershed in Irish politics. Cosgrave imposed new security laws. Soon hundreds, including Frank Ryan, were in jail while all radical newspapers, meetings and marches were banned and there were hints of 1922-type executions. The IRA was denounced by Church and State as communist, "working to establish a Soviet satellite" in Ireland. Cosgrave, believing that de Valera, because of his defence of the IRA in the Dail, had been discredited by the new radical IRA, declared a

general election, confident of victory. But this strategy was defeated by his own tactic of linking de Valera with the IRA. He claimed he wished to see a stable government elected in 1932 to welcome the Eucharistic Congress and the functions to mark the 1,500 anniversary of St. Patrick's arrival in Ireland. Cosgrave's wish was fulfilled but not as he planned.

That tough campaign had stimulated all IRA volunteers and republican supporters to work for de Valera, and in March 1932 Cosgrave was defeated and with Fianna Fail in power, de Valera became parliamentary resident of the executive council. Soon the Oath was abolished, the Governor-General gone and the Treaty rewritten.

Again Ryan resisted the allurements of office. He was now dedicated to moving the IRA to the left as the social opposition to de Valera and it was in this situation that the events which mapped Ryan's road to Spain and to Germany took place.

With de Valera's rise to power the left social forces in the State grew rapidly, with the rise of a Communist Party, anti-imperialist groups, unemployed workers associations etc. and hundreds of IRA volunteers. The leadership believed that too many were becoming interested and began an anti-communist campaign similar to that of the Church and the British and Irish capitalist press. Ryan refused to go forward for election to the executive in protest against the right-wing policies as editor of *An Phoblacht*. Soon he, O'Donnell and Gilmore put forward a proposal at the 1934 Army Convention to call a "Republican Congress" that would unite all republicans, radicals, trade unionists in a "great social-revolutionary body" with social aims that would help to forward unity between Catholic and Protestant workers in the North. The motion was for such a Congress was defeated by a single vote, but O'Donnell, Ryan, Gilmore and others went on to form their own Congress.

Ryan for some years now had been noting the threat of fascism in Italy and of nazism (and Hitler) in Germany. He had become the most prominent opponent of the newly-formed Blueshirts, led by General O'Duffy, even though the official IRA leadership had banned volunteers from anti-Blueshirt demonstrations. Now the left clashed with orthodox republicanism and with the Catholic Church because of the left's opposition to Mussolini in Abyssinia and Japanese fascism in China. And in the Republican Congress newspaper of the same name, it continued its anti-fascism. By this time Ryan, O'Donnell and Gilmore and all who had joined the Congress had been expelled from the IRA.

The Congress weekly newspaper continued its campaign against the official IRA leadership, ridiculed its articles, its physical force, gun and bomb policies, "as activity that belonged to a 'relic', not to serious politics." To give some examples: **What monsters of treachery to the revolution have been created, again and again, behind the shadow of the gun; what fine generous honesty can misinform itself under the shadow of its glamour? The IRA leadership, instead of rousing the people on social issues were busy 'forming fours' in a corner of a field. The Army Council saw the issues merely as the right to hold arms and thus threw away the support of the people and any hope of becoming the alternative to de Valera and his conservative policies.**

The campaign against the Congress and its supporters reached a new crescendo when in September they decided to send an Irish Unit to Spain after General Franco had launched an all-out military attack on the Republican Government. He had early allies in Hitler and Mussolini, with their tanks and armies. Ryan was chosen to lead the Irish Unit and he and about 80 men left for Spain on December 11th. (They had been preceded by General O'Duffy, of the Irish Christian Front a week later. The Christian Front members described them-

selves as the Irish Brigade. They were, however, to remain only six months in Spain, becoming disillusioned with Franco (Ryan and his men remained for almost two years, Ryan rising to the post of Major and Adjutant on the General Staff.) His international career had begun.

Ryan had left Ireland with a national reputation. He was one of the most popular republicans but no longer the republican who believed in the isolated use of the gun or bomb, but one who wished to win the support of the people for social reform. With that support, but in circumstances, as in Spain, where progress was blocked by wealthy property elements backed by the national army of the wealthy, he was prepared to fight with a people's army to end all wars. He was still, however, Irish of the Irish, fighting in an international war for democracy and socialism.

Students, volunteers, socialists, communists, and women friends still remember him. "A giant of a man in every way: careless, gay, but serious when necessary, dark hair with a permanent fringe, slightly deaf." Sheila Humphreys, a beautiful Cumann na mBan girl, recalls him as always in great form, extraordinarily generous and ready to give away his last penny, always ready for divilment. Peter O'Flynn, who loved him, recalls their many 'nights on the town'. Others speak of his serious disappointment when he was in love with a close woman relative of Kevin Barry, the boy hero.

Ryan's national reputation was to reach international fame from his record in Spain. He became widely known. It was an important historical event, since apart from a small group that went to Garibaldi's aid in 1848, it was the first ever Irish unit to go abroad in support of a radical, democratic or progressive cause. All others like "the Wild Geese" had fought for old feudal or monarchical causes of France, Spain, Austria, and England.

Almost every county, including Limerick, was included. Ryan was the great hero of the famous Battle of Jarama, in which, though wounded, he had rallied his men. He has described the battle himself.

The description is included in the "History of the Fif-

teenth Brigade", of which Ryan was the editor. In a retreat the battalion of the British, Irish and Americans had left a dangerous gap vital to the defence of Madrid:

The men appeared to have reached the end of their tether through heavy casualties, worn out by three days of gruelling fighting, lack of food. They had suffered more than flesh and blood could stand. I hitched my own rifle to my shoulder and some of the men noticing this stumbled to their feet, formed a line of four and I remembered an old Irish trick. I jerked my head back and shouted 'Sing up ye sons of guns' and they did. We marched back up the road into the olive groves. At last we are on the ridge. Flat on the ground we fire into the groves. We are advancing. We are in the olive groves. We were to hold that line - the gap of danger.

At Jarama, however, the Irish lost some 27 men, their best; men like Kit Conway from Tipperary, Bob Hilliard, a former Protestant clergyman from Tralee, young Charles Donnelly, the young Northern poet who gave the title 'Even the Olives are Bleeding' to Cathal O'Shannon's RTE Programme. Others to die were Leo Greene, Paddy McDaid from Dublin, and Protestants and Catholics from Northern Ireland. Others who had died earlier, Tommy Patten from Achill, and Bill Barry from Dublin, among the very first to volunteer independently and who died in those October days when Madrid was in deadly peril. At Las Rozas, Mick May, Tony Fox, and other Dubliners, including Dinny Coady, a former IRA officer, were killed. Jim Woulfe of Limerick died too, but two other Limerick men, Gerald Doyle of Upper William Street and Jim Tierney, though badly wounded, survived to return home.

Waterford sent the three Power brothers, Peter O'Connor, and Frank Edwards, all of whom won fame, and Roddy Quinlan, who died at Jarama.

Ryan wrote: "The Irish had a splendid record. They won glory at Jarama, Brunete, Las Rozas, the Ebro ... all honour to those who died for Ireland but even greater honour for those who died here for the greatest cause in the world, the liberation of mankind." When someone wrote that he had broken the old tradition for not fighting



Frank Ryan (right, second row) during the Spanish Civil War.

on the side of England's enemy, he described such an attitude as 'canned nationalism'. The Irish in Spain were fighting for the working people everywhere, those in Ireland and everywhere else.

A significant extract in the light of today's (1979) Northern tragedy is as follows: The use of armed force is the last act not the first, in a revolutionary situation ... unless there is the necessary preliminary work and struggle to secure the full support of the people for social change, then it amounts to 'just playing at soldiers' and it results in yet another glorious failure ... Congress is the united front, the fighting formation adequate to this stage of the struggle - drawing the whole strength of Republicans to the workers of the countryside and the towns. The Republic would be shaped by the forces working to achieve it. The Republic cannot be achieved by a national 'Salvation Army'. It can be achieved only by the genius of a whole people in action, North and South.

At that time and later Ryan was convinced that 'republicanism and nationalism applied without militant social democracy could add up to fascism and become a disguise for sectarianism'. It was that theory that caused him to break with the IRA in 1934 and caused him to make the effort to build up in Ireland a united front against Blueshirt fascism as well as striving to change the whole social and political character of the IRA.

Frank Ryan's attitude to the North is indicated by articles written on the Belfast riots of July 1935: In October 1932 Catholic and Protestant workers united in mighty protest and won a great victory (The Relief Riots of October 1932). But this time it is Protestant workers against Catholic workers. This time it is the maniacs of Belfast, slitting one another's throats ... Belfast workers: We care not whether your war-cry is 'To Hell with the Pope' or 'To Hell with King Billy'. When the last blow is struck, and the last coffin gone to the graveyard, neither set of maniacs wins. When you have slaughtered enough of one another, back you will be driven to your slums, back to work at low wages ... Let the Popes and King Billy rest in peace. Stop this mad strife.

As far back as 1929 Ryan protested at the role of religion in the national problem. England and Ireland were at war when both countries were Catholic. The IRA was excommunicated by the Church in 1922 when both sides in the Civil War were Catholics. The Penal Laws would have been applied in 1690 even if the Irish people had not been Catholic. These penal laws were applied in 1922 and 1690 against those who wanted separation from England.

Congress attitude towards the North, towards religion and towards fascism was to yield surprising results when, in February 1936, the Spanish republicans, socialists, democratic conservatives and liberals, won a great victory within a Popular Front. In Ireland the Catholic Church, led by Cardinal MacRory, launched a vigorous campaign against the new Spanish Government, declaring it to be Communist, atheist and anti-God. The Republican Congress, on the other hand, hailed the downfall of the old feudal regime of monarchists, landlords and the Spanish Army, and MacRory turned his fire on them. Soon, an Irish Christian Front sprang up inspired by Church and press propaganda consisting of many Blueshirt leaders, to support the cardinal and denounce the new menace to religion, the Spanish Republican Government. Ryan and his men risked bodily injury as well as fierce invective in their efforts to rally support for the Spanish Republic.

After two tough years in Spain, broken only by sick leave in Dublin (when he met Sean O'Casey who begged him to remain at home), Ryan was captured by Italian troops at Aragon, in March, 1938. He was sentenced to death after a Court Martial, during which he defied the Court, but was saved after the intervention of de Valera



A charcoal drawing of Frank Ryan.

and other international pressure, but also because the Italians hoped to exchange him for another prisoner.

In March, 1939, however, Franco won total victory and, though he celebrated this by executing thousands of Spanish republicans, he began to release International Brigade prisoners. Mysteriously, however, he held on to Ryan, who was the last international prisoner in Spain by March 1940.

By August 1939 the whole world was shocked by the Non-Agression Pact between Hitler and Stalin. The two most bitter enemies - the leading communist and the top fascist - had become allies. The world anti-Fascist Front had been shattered. All Communist Party and other left-wing forces in the democratic countries withdrew from the Anti-Fascist Front. When world war broke out in September the left forces everywhere treated it as an old-style imperialist war, like that of 1914.

In Spain's jails, however, the enemy had not changed. Franco and Hitler, who supported him, remained the enemy. That applied also to Ryan, but now Germany became England's enemy, while Ireland was under threat of invasion from England, who needed the Irish ports to cope with Hitler's U-Boats. That was the situation facing Ryan at a time when all his high hopes for Spain and his return to Ireland for new endeavours had been shattered and when his hero Stalin seemed to have deserted the workers of the world.

Was his fate now to lie in a Spanish fascist jail to serve the thirty years sentence imposed after the death verdict had been commuted? And at a time when his own country was in real danger. The one thought filling his heart was - somehow to return to Ireland and play his part in possibly, its greatest national crisis ever.