The Last Crusade: Limerick's role in the Spanish Civil War

The Spanish Civil War will be remembered by history as one of the great tragedies of our time. A bitter and bloody conflict, the repercussions of which still resound throughout contemporary Spain, it pitted Spaniard against Spaniard and brother against brother in a three-year long struggle which would leave Spain with the legacy of a tattered social fabric and a ravaged and impoverished country.

Indeed, the fact that Spain has risen almost phoenix-like from the ashes of the Civil War carnage to take her place once more amongst the European family of nations has been one of the great political and social miracles of the latter half of the twentieth century. However, on the part of many historians and commentators, contemporary interest in the Spanish Civil War has not centred on the Spanish experience or the effect of war in contemporary Spanish society although it would be foolish to belittle these obviously important issues.

On the contrary, the Spanish Civil War has been of fascination to many due to its international and ideological nature. Seen as a proxy war between the minions of communism and a new world order against the old forces of tradition, religion and capitalism, Spain immediately became the chessboard for an international struggle of conflicting ideologies, a struggle which would evolve into the epicentre of global power during the Second World War and in its final metamorphosis bring the world close to Armageddon in the heady days of the Cold War which have left such an indelible imprint on our recent history.

That Spaniards would be the original pawns in such a dangerous endgame seems quite absurd today given Spain's geographical and political isolation from the epicentre of global power during the centuries directly preceding the outbreak of the Civil War. Moreover, it seems doubly absurd on first glance that Limerick, a geographically isolated provincial city on the Western seaboard of a still fledgling Irish state with an avowed anti-colonial and proud policy of neutrality would also seem quite absurd today given Spain's geographical and political isolation from the epicentre of global power during the Second World War and in its final metamorphosis bring the world close to Armageddon in the heady days of the Cold War which have left such an indelible imprint on our recent history.

That Spaniards would be the original pawns in such a dangerous endgame seems quite absurd today given Spain's geographical and political isolation from the epicentre of global power during the centuries directly preceding the outbreak of the Civil War. Moreover, it seems doubly absurd on first glance that Limerick, a geographically isolated provincial city on the Western seaboard of a still fledgling Irish state with an avowed and proud policy of neutrality would also seem quite absurd today given Spain's geographical and political isolation from the epicentre of global power during the Second World War and in its final metamorphosis bring the world close to Armageddon in the heady days of the Cold War which have left such an indelible imprint on our recent history.

Yet, as this article will show, Limerick, its elected representatives and its people did play a definite and active role in the Spanish Civil War. This role may not have been of great military significance but it was one of political importance and in the light of recent studies on the Spanish Civil War and De Valera's Ireland, it is undoubtedly a role which deserves a fresh historical investigation and appraisal. This study of Limerick's role in the Spanish Civil War may not help us to unravel the tangled web of the Spanish conflict but it does help us to reach a deeper understanding of this historical period in Limerick and the interaction of the city with developments in Irish society.

When the Spanish Civil War broke out on the 18th of July, 1936 with General Franco's revolt in Spanish Morocco, Limerick was a depressed industrial city in Ireland which was dominated in many ways by the dual spectre of economic and political dependence on the old colonial power, Great Britain and the social hegemony of the Catholic Church, which since independence had assumed a status of almost native nobility, exercising immense power as the only stable force in the uncertain power vacuum in the socio-political and cultural arena which had been the logical legacy of the Irish Civil War and the pyrrhic victory of the Free State forces.

Indeed, the Catholic Church is the key factor in any attempt at the comprehension of Limerick's role in the Spanish Civil War. In order to understand this factor more fully, one must look at the respective trajectories of the Irish and Spanish states in the years preceding the outbreak of hostilities in Spain. For centuries, the Irish had suffered religious persecution under an imperial yoke and as such, it is no surprise to find widespread Irish sympathy with the Spanish Catholic Church as tales of "wanton destruction of church property" and "priceless church ornaments and statues ... being burnt on the streets" were reported in the early days of the conflict. The paradoxical fact that the imperial yoke in Spain, as represented by Franco and the Bourbon monarchy, was supported by the Catholic Church is largely irrelevant as justification was achieved for the Irish crusade by supplanting the British oppression in Ireland with that of the Russians in Spain and the Spanish Civil War was quickly perceived in Ireland as the first step by the Russian communist empire in their aim of world domination.

Furthermore, the bitter Civil War in Ireland had left the Irish Catholic Church in a position of increasing power. The Church's deliberately ambiguous position with regard to the War of Independence and the Irish Civil War had allowed it to maintain its power-base as the fundamental and centrifugal reference-point in Irish society. Nowhere was this more evident than in the pious and conservative city of Limerick. Many Irishmen had died...
in the preceding years over what would become in time an empty oath of allegiance, but there is no doubt that Church backing for a military cause could, if properly orchestrated, be a much stronger rallying cry.

This crusader mentality was endemic in Irish society and was used by both political factions after the Irish Civil War as a unifying beacon for Irish society. In later years, this mentality would find a more peaceful outlet in missionary activities but in 1936, from the moment the Spanish nationalist struggle was supported from the Irish pulpit, it was surprising to find that Irishmen would be willing to sacrifice their lives on a foreign battlefield in order to support those who opposed the forces which this pulpit represented.

It could even be argued that English dominance of the Crusades of the Middle Ages through figures such as Richard the Lionheart, was a logical development in the Spanish conflict and simply an Irish response, although markedly inferior from a numerical point of view, to the ill-fated Spanish Armada of 1588.

As has already been stated in this article, the Spanish Civil War quickly became an international war of perceived ideological differences; left versus right, old versus new, them against us. Here, it is fundamental to state that the majority of the nationalist Irish volunteers in the Irish Brigade and for the purposes of this article, those from Limerick, showed very little ideological conviction with regard to the conflict. Most were neither supporters of Fascism or advocates of lay Catholic organisations such as Opus Dei. Neither were they the victims of the economic depression which had blighted 1930’s Ireland.

For example, among the fifty plus Limerick volunteers, only one, Pat Coffey from the Sandmall, was unemployed at the time, well below the national average. Furthermore, we also know that Coffey was a prominent athlete and was unmarried.

The Limerick and Irish volunteers on the Republican side were simply soldiers of the cross answering the call of the pulpit. The question of adventure is also one which must not be disregarded completely, but the over-riding factor was the ideological differences; left versus right, Comunist Parties with deep ideological convictions about the significance of the Spanish conflict. However, in a Limerick dominated by the Catholic Church, their numbers were small. Efforts had been made to equate the situation of Ireland with that of Catalonia under Madrid dominance and in 1932, De Valera had written to Juan Fabregas, later to be the Catalan Councillor for Economics stating that “the desire for liberty and independence of the Catalan people had the warmest sympathy of the Irish people and their President.” Yet, the call of the Church was far stronger and by 1936, there was no government support for the democratically-elected Republican Government in Madrid and the civic reception granted by the Lord Mayor of Dublin, Alixe Byrne, to O’Duffy’s brigade on their return from Spain was another tacit reminder of where the power really lay in Irish society.

However, Frank Ryan from Elton in Knocklong was to become perhaps the most famous Irish combatant in the Spanish Civil War and his imprisonment by the Francoist forces earned considerable sympathy coverage in the local and national press. Jim Woulfe from Newcastle West was another Republican volunteer. A card-carrying Communist Party member who had emigrated to Canada, he was tragically killed in the Battle of Belchite on the Aragon Front on September 3rd, 1937. Gerard Doyle, a Sexton Street C.B.S. student from Limerick who had worked on the Shannon Scheme from 1927-29 before emigrating to England, was another Limerickman who fought on the Republican side. He had joined the Communist Party in Birmingham in 1936 and he was imprisoned in Spain after his capture on the Jarama Front in March, 1938. The Limerick Leader of Oct. 27th, 1938 reports how he had been later freed from the nationalist concentration camp of San Pedro de Cardena in the Francoist heartland of Burgos.

The role of the Republican volunteers from Limerick in the Spanish Civil War should never be ignored or belittled, but from an objective perspective, one must point out that they were greatly inferior to the Limerickmen who enlisted and fought in O’Duffy’s Irish Brigade. Indeed, the fifty Limerickmen who fought in O’Duffy’s 600-700 strong battalion made up one of the largest single contingents from any Irish region and this reinforces Limerick’s 1930’s reputation as a bastion of church power and conservatism.

The aforementioned religious aspect of the conflict is reiterated by the in control P.J. Cleary from William Street, who would later become a Franciscan, and Pat Heaphy from Scarteen near Knocklong, who was training to be a priest with the Oblate Fathers when he enlisted in O’Duffy’s Brigade. Of significance, Heaphy never completed his religious studies and joined the R.A.F. in World War Two before eventually settling down to work as a bank clerk in England. He is buried in Emly.

The youngest volunteer in the Irish Brigade was also a Limerickman, Christopher Whelan from O’Connel Avenue, who was the drummer-boy for O’Duffy’s battalion. He was personally presented to General Franco in Spain and later became a successful building contractor in Limerick.

The profile of the Limerick volunteers is thus a kaleidoscopic one but on the passenger lists of the S.S. Ardeola and S.S. Urn which brought the Limerickmen to Spain via Portugal, one finds several common trends. All were Catholics and most seem to have come from respectable and relatively prosperous backgrounds. There is a mixture of former National Army servicemen such as William Delaney from Ballycurrane and Catholic Boy Scouts alongside tradesmen and the enigmatic Christopher O’Sullivan from Nicholas St., whose wife never knew he had been in Spain, but the common bond between them was that they had gone to War.

As already stated, only one, Pat Coffey from the Sandmall, was unemployed. Most were single and most were under the age of thirty with little military experience. Their addresses in Limerick were varied Roxboro appear several times. Paul Sheehey from Garryowen, John Quilty from Lisnagry and Thomas Fennell from Rathkeale were all the sons of publicans and the profile of the volunteers was definitely not one of poverty. William McSweeney from Rathuard was an electrician while the Fitzgerald brothers, Frank and Sean, although originally from Cappagh in Waterford, were later to become prominent in Limerick business circles with Frank purchasing a shop on the Ennis Road and Sean setting up their first car-hire business in Limerick.

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The Limerick volunteers in O'Duffy's Brigade left Ireland in December, 1936. J. Ryan, who was in charge of recruitment of the Irish Brigade in Limerick addressed the first contingent before departure. The Limerick Chronicle of Dec. 19th, 1936, reports his description of the volunteers as "true soldiers of the cross...and apostles to a foreign land ...whose wounds for Christ the King will one day be the trophies of their victory". In conclusion, Ryan stated to the eager contingent how they were "a credit to the old Catholic city of Limerick, to the Catholic Church and to their country".

The actual military contribution of the Irish Brigade was in fact minimal. On arrival in Lisbon, they were despatched to Caceres in Extremadura, an area which had seen some of the bloodiest fighting and massacres in the war. Their lack of training and the leadership of the increasingly megalomaniac O'Duffy hampered any serious Irish involvement in military manoeuvres, but their contribution was always going to be far more propagandist than in the trenches.

Strangely, the Spanish Republican forces "had a whole-hearted respect for the Irish Brigade" as was reported in the 22nd June, 1937, edition of the Limerick Chronicle, but this was due to the fact that a 60-strong group of Irish Republican volunteers had routed the far numerically superior 7th Bandera of the Francoist forces and they erroneously equated the military skills of their Irish comrades with that of their countrymen in the Francoist ranks.

On his return to Ireland, Sgt. Paul Sheehy of Garryowen spoke primarily of Irish cooperation with the ultra-Catholic requetes or Carlist troops from Navarra and the Limerick Chronicle of 22nd June, 1937, reports how Sheehy declared that the Carlists were "the finest soldiers anyone could meet and treated the members of the Brigade as brothers". He continues to say how "every morning, they had mass about 8:30 celebrated by a Carlist priest, Father Alonso". Indeed, the Church of Santo Domingo in Caceres had a special plaque erected that is still there today and which commemorates the devout nature of the Irish Brigade who used to pray there.

The Limerick volunteers of the Irish Brigade left Lisbon for Dublin with their fellow combatants on June 19th, 1937. They had seen real battle action and had been mostly involved in skirmishes and cleaning-up operations after the Madrid offensive. On arrival at Alexandra Basin in Dublin on 22nd June, 1937, the Irish Brigade was met by a large crowd with a significant police presence which was due to fears of O'Duffy's capacity to arouse political unrest. Once again, they sang "Faith of our Fathers" before departing for a civic reception in the Mansion House which had been granted by the Lord Mayor of Dublin, Alfie Byrne.

In the days that followed, the Limerick volunteers gradually returned home and on June 28th, 1937, the Limerick Leader published a letter from the legendary Willie Whack Gleeson from Mary St., who spoke of the "brave men who represented Limerick on the Madrid front" and "who have returned home victorious and unscathed and stronger in the Faith of our forefathers due no doubt to the cause in which those 'Soldiers of the Cross' enlisted". Gleeson's sentiments and his call for employment for the ex-volunteers was echoed by the Catholic Church and officialdom. Indeed, it was the Bishop of Limerick who had pointed out in his pastoral letter of February 7th, 1937, how "the Christian nations of Europe were not united as one man against the spirit that emanates from Moscow and Madrid" and there was little sympathy for the besieged civilians in Madrid and the food shortages which were threatening to bring famine to parts of Republican Spain.

It is pertinent to point out that there had been anti-Blueshirt riots in Limerick in August, 1933 and that there were several clerics, such as Fr. Michael O'Flanagan, who championed the Republican cause but on the whole, Limerick in the 1930's was a bulwark of Catholic hegemony even within an Irish context and the actions of Limerick Corporation in 1939 bear tacit witness to this.

After the return of O'Duffy's volunteers to Limerick in the summer of 1937, the war dragged on in Spain. Newspaper coverage continued but the worsening political situation in the rest of Europe began to take prominence.

On the Republican side, there were reports on the release of Gerrard Doyle along with the normal despatches. The Elton volunteer, Frank Ryan, still remained incarcerated and on March 25th, 1939, the Limerick Chronicle published a letter to the editor from the Frank Ryan Release Committee but there was no editorial response even though the war would end only five days later with Franco's forces finally entering Madrid and the capitulation of the Republican forces.

Limerick's last act in the Spanish Civil War had taken place a couple of months previously as it became the first city in Ireland to recognize Franco's new nationalist government on the capture of Barcelona in January, 1939. The Limerick Chronicle of January 28th, 1939, reports how at a meeting "Limerick Corporation congratulated General Franco on the capture of Barcelona and on his fight for Christianity and freedom and requested the Government to recognise the administration of the Patriot Leader". The records show that Mr. J. Dalton proposed this
The menace of Non-Intervention in Spain has been carried another step forward. Fascist munitions, while being Spanish war, are being furnished by the Fascist powers, to the Fascist rulers, is now facilitated by being assured that the Spanish people, on whom the war is being waged, are being strengthened. The Fascist powers, by furnishing munitions to the Fascist rulers, continue to supply their own needs.

In previous paragraphs, the Spanish issue was described as well-studied by the industrialists, who adopt as their watchword: "England's money is Ireland's friend." England has not only hampered the Spanish Republic in trying to destroy the Fascist triumphs, but is also helping to starve the Spanish people. Deserted Spanish towns and villages are sent out to Spanish workers, not to protect British shipping, but to prevent them from going to Spanish Government ports. Franco could not countenance this; England enjoys it for him. Yet, there are industrialists who wish to help Spain, on the plea that they "will wait to see what side England takes!"

A Coronation Warning

Respectability is all in England at the present time for the Coronation in London. Northern Irish workers are even less enthusiastic than their Southern comrades. In Belfast and Derry, Carnival Day means a holiday, in most cases without pay. A holiday without pay in Dublin will hardly be attempted.

The cross-class press campaigns to build up religious feelings, in the circumstances—understandable. There is just a danger that such campaigns, in giving exaggerated reports of Imperialist sympathies in Ireland, may be a help to Fascist friends. In Dublin and Cork, certain large stores have-as yet discreetly-staged monarchist emblems, hoping for the demand the newspapers say there is. In the words of a publicist, we know these stores and their potential Conservative clientele will avoid angering the people.

The workers of Ireland, North and South, and a good number in Britain itself, will ignore these displays and realise they are still occasion for Imperialist propaganda. In the interests of big business, we are glad to note that Labour and anti-imperialist demonstrations have been arranged for Dublin and that Northern workers will remain at their trade. In Croppyland, Ballykinl and Co., will not use the Coronation to bolster up their falling political fortunes.

May 12 has another significance for us. It is the anniversary of the execution of James Connolly, Irish Socialist leader.

Bewley's Berlin Blunder

Mr. D. J. Bewley, in his recent Pre-Naad speech, while advocating his Berlin representation, it was private. In parliament he has made excuses for Mr. Bewley, who he said was merely being "courteous." He denied Labour leader Norton's assertion that Mr. Bewley's speech "greatly misrepresented the position of the Irish people and was calculated to cause the opinion that a section of them endorsed the policy of religious persecution carried out in Germany."

Now if a Free State Minister had been similarly "courteous" to Stalin, whose policy there would be. But, when it's Hitler—not even one postal letter results.

One fact is obvious: Mr. Bewley is no fit representative of any section of our people. The only amendment honourable for this insult to Ireland is his recall from Berlin.

Support the Building Workers

The stoppage in the Building Industry in Dublin and Cork is the result of the clash between strikebreakers and strikers. The Government, when it's Hitler—not even one postal letter results.

To the lashings of the Catholic clergy in Ireland, output as well as press has thundered forth the lie that Fascist General Franco fights for Christianity, and especially for Catholicism, in Spain. The truth is that the whole Church is divided, the hierarchy, and some priests supporting Fascism; many power priests standing by the people.

The police in the above picture together with their pikes, are fighting against Fascism. Irish daily newspapers have not publicised this, or similar, photos, and have slavishly ever, or suppressed, verified reports of the murder of anti-Fascist priests in Spain, and the bombing, by Fascist reprisals, of Churches and Convents with resultant casualties among priests and nuns.

And because the Irish Democrat declares the truth on Spain, because it is shown that Diaries as well as newspaper-kings can tell lies—and are telling lies about Spain—it likes to face the full fury of discredited Fascists and pro-Fascists, vilified as well as lay.

Already, it has been decided that the paper that tells the truth must be suppressed. So, a campaign is about to begin in the Irish Democrat and its printers. Newsagents have been warned not to stock this paper. People who get work done by our printers are "advised" to go elsewhere.

So be it. We can fight it that sort of a war line. And, we won't be beaten.

And, you, reader, will you play your part? Push the sales of this paper. Get on new readers, new agents. Give your custom to the newspapers who speak the Irish Democrat.

Dulcethistle to our Defence Fund. Send a subscription, no matter how small, and thus ensure the existence of an associated press.

And—even if we do give this free ad, to our printers—we ask you to read your pillars' orders to them. You will get your work done quicker, efficiently and at a moderate cost by Irish Trade Unions Engineers. Against the Fascists! For a free press! Get to work now!
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had lasted 986 days and had left Spain the
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1939, a letter in Spanish dated February
21st, 1939 how it
given their position on the Spanish conflict
8. Both sides used the "pacto de olvido"
expression of "enthusiastic congrat-
Limerick's role in it remain today as a
paraphrase an Irish Republican volunteer,
even the olives bled.7

NOTES AND REFERENCES
1. The authors of this article have made
deliberate attempt to avoid footnotes
where possible, given the nature of the
publication, as the nature of the
article would demand countless
references and this is not in spirit with
the style of the publication. However,
we would like to extend our thanks to
the countless people who made this
article possible. We are very grateful
for the interviews given by so many
volunteers from both sides and their
relatives and friends, along with the
personal correspondence and
archives which have entrusted
to Mr. Des Ryan. In Ireland, we are
sincerely grateful to the Franciscan
Archives, the Limerick Leader and
Limerick Chronicle, the City Library,
Limerick Museum, the University of
Limerick library, and the Limerick
Corporation archives. In Spain, we
proudly acknowledge the kind
assistance of the Library of the
University of Valladolid, the National
Library of Spain and the Archivo
Historico de la Guerra Civil in
Salamanca. We also acknowledge the
kind help of Mr. Barry McLoughlin in
Vienna and the Russian Spanish Civil
War archives in Moscow.
2. Des Ryan is an employee of Limerick
Corporation and an independent
historian. His main interests lie in
Limerick and the Spanish Civil War
and the history of the Jews in
Limerick City. Dr. Barrie Wharton is a
lecturer in Spanish in the Department
of Languages and Cultural Studies at
the University of Limerick. He has
published books and articles both in
Spanish and English on the Spanish
Civil War and Francoist Spain.
3. See Limerick Chronicle, Oct. 20th,
1936.
4. See Juan Fabrega's 1932 book,
Irlanda I Catalunya, published in
Catalan. In 1921, John Langdon-
Davies had also lectured in Catalan in
the town of Vich on the subject of
"The Irish Sinn Fein Movement".
5. See his Lenten Pastoral Letter of
February 7th, 1937.
6. The original of this letter is contained
in the archives of Limerick Corp-
oration.
7. The phrase "even the olives are
bleeding" was said to have been
uttered as he was shot by the Irish
Republican volunteer, Charles
Donnelly. He was also a promising
poet and he was killed on the Jarama
front on February 26th, 1937.

motion of congratulations and that Mr. M.
Hartney seconded it. A bouquet of flowers
was sent to General Franco and the last
act of the Crusade had taken place.
Neither did Limerick's actions go
unnoticed in Spain. On February 18th,
1939, a letter in Spanish dated February
3rd was received by the Mayor of
Limerick from none other than the new
Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs in
Burgos. In the letter, Franco's gratitude to
Limerick for its "enthusiastic congrat-
ulations" is communicated along with the
new Cadillo's "most friendly greetings".6

The Limerick Chronicle responded to
the letter in the manner to be expected
given their position on the Spanish conflict
and stated on February 21st, 1939 how it
was "very gratifying to know that Limerick
was the first place to extend felicitations to
the Nationalist leader on his magnificent
achievement". Furthermore, the report
ends by stating how it was "sincerely
trusted that the Corporation would soon
be able to transmit a similar message on
the capture of Madrid and the end of the
Civil War".

The Limerick Chronicle's prophecy came
to pass and Franco entered Madrid
on March 28th, 1939. Two days later, the
Republican forces surrendered. The war
had lasted 866 days and had left Spain the
ravaged and divided carcass of what had
once been a united country. It had also
divided Europe but a far bigger conflict
was now looming on the immediate
horizon and the perceived ideological
conflict which had begun in Spain would
now become a distinct reality as the
Second World War engulfed first Europe
and later, the globe.

Paradoxically, neither Spain or Ireland
would take part in this war but Franco did
not forget his Irish allies and strong
bonds between the respective Church
hierarchies in both countries made
Ireland one of the few friends of Franco's
parish state.

Limerick continued to conserve a
reputation for conservatism and
catholicism as Franco's correspondence
passed into the Corporation records.
Frank Ryan was finally released in the
spring of 1949 with the aid of Nazi
Germany and was taken to Berlin. His
health had suffered greatly due to his
imprisonment and he died a broken man
in Dresden on June 10th, 1944.

On the O'Duffy side, the volunteers
had already settled back into civilian life
by 1939. Sgt. Paul Sheehy went to work in
Mattersons. P.J. Mangan from the
Blackboy Pike went back to his job as a
postman in the G.P.O. James Fahey from
Rosbrien, the only Nationalist volunteer
who hadn't returned home in 1937, went
to England where he enlisted in the
British Army and was captured during the
North African campaign. A prisoner of war
in Nazi Germany, he was finally liberated
by Russian forces and when he returned
Limerick many years later, he got
employment at the Limerick Telephone
Exchange in Roches Street.

Over the next sixty years, Franco and
De Valera would both die. Ireland would
become an independent republic and
Spain would transform itself into a
democratic nation. In both countries, the
power of the Catholic Church would see
itself radically decline with widespread
changes in their respective societies.

In Spain, a "pacto de olvido" or
agreement to forget would initiate a
collective amnesia with regard to the
Spanish Civil War in order to achieve some
sort of national reconciliation. In Ireland,
the episode would also become in many
ways a historical embarrassment and Irish
and Limerick involvement would become
portrayed as a historical anomaly of little
real significance in the socio-cultural or
political development of our society.

However, the Spanish Civil War and
Limerick's role in it remain today as a
telling reminder of the power of religion in
our societies and the capacity of this
power to both inspire souls and engender
hatred. The tragic destiny which befell
Spain in 1936 could easily have happened
in Ireland in the same era and as the bitter
wounds of the Spanish Civil War finally
heal, it may be pertinent to strive that no
ideology, institution or entity will ever
have the same power again which would
pit men from Caherconlish and Cordoba
against men from Navarra and Newcastle
West on a foreign battlefield where to
paraphrase an Irish Republican volunteer,
even the olives bled.7