

Frank Ryan & Collaboration: *a reassessment*

by Enda Staunton

The death of Frank Ryan in Loschwitz Sanatorium outside Dresden in June 1944 three months before his forty-second birthday, brought an end to a life which spanned four wars and read like a film script. Born near Knocklong, County Limerick, he joined Fianna Éireann while still a schoolboy and saw active service in the War of Independence. His career at University College Dublin, where he enrolled in September 1921, was interrupted by the outbreak of civil war the following June. Interned by the Free State authorities as an IRA activist, he resumed his studies upon his release in November 1923, graduating two years later.

Throughout the following decade Ryan was active on the left wing of the Republican movement, as joint editor of *An Phoblacht* and as a founder member of the short-lived radical ginger group, Saor Éire. In 1934 Ryan, Peadar O'Donnell, George Gilmore and others withdrew from the IRA when their call for a Republican Congress, a successor organisation to Saor Éire, was narrowly defeated at an Army Convention. They founded the Congress outside the Republican Movement in October 1934 but within a year it had foundered. The atmosphere of clericalist anti-communism which made it, like Saor Éire before it a non-runner, was to find its fullest expression with the outbreak of civil war in Spain on 17 July 1936.

Spanish Civil War

The year's end saw eighty Irish volunteers under Ryan's command arriving in Spain to participate in the defence of the Republic. Wounded at the battle of Jarama in February 1937

Drawing by
Goico Aguirre,
a fellow
prisoner
in Burgos.



he returned home to convalesce, was nominated for Dublin South in the general election and lost his deposit. On resuming active service in Spain he was captured by the Italians on the Aragon front in April 1938 and sentenced to death by a Francoist court-martial. The sentence was commuted to thirty years imprisonment following intervention by de Valera's government. An international campaign for his release met with success two years later when Helmut Clissman and Jupp Hoven, both serving members of the German counter-intelligence unit, the Abwehr, who had known Ryan when in Dublin as exchange students, interested the Abwehr head and organiser of German aid to Franco, Admiral Canaris, in his case.

Released into German custody, Ryan was brought via Paris to Berlin where he was reunited with his former IRA opponent Sean Russell. Canaris arranged for their transport to Ireland on a German U-boat on 8 August 1940. When Russell died on the voyage from peritonitis, the submarine with Ryan on board returned

to Germany. A later proposal to land him by air in County Roscommon fell through due to the impending invasion of the Soviet Union. Ryan enjoyed the status of 'distinguished guest' in Germany until his failing health gave way for the last time in June 1944. An attempt to return his body to Ireland for the thirtieth anniversary of the Spanish Civil War proved unsuccessful due to political differences between his family and the organising committee. Finally, in 1979, he was re-interred in Glasnevin Cemetery. Due to the circumstances and location of his death doubts have continued to surround his name.

Proponent of a 'Gaelic Vichy'?

In March 1945 the New York based American Committee for the Release of Frank Ryan wrote to Éamon de Valera expressing their concern at rumours regarding Ryan's death in Germany and asking for clarification of the circumstances lest his 'splendid reputation as a fighter for free-



Frank Ryan in the uniform of an officer of the army of the Spanish Republic.

dom' should be damaged. Since then these doubts have found their way into scholarship both at home and abroad. To Eric Hobsbawm he epitomises the paradox of left wing nationalism and is mentioned in the same breath as Subhas Chandra Bose, organiser of the Japanese-sponsored Indian National Army. To a recent Southern Irish historian he was the proponent of a 'Gaelic Vichy', to another Belfast-based political scientist his presence in Germany clinches the argument of radical republicanism's inherent lack of progressiveness. In a recent article in the journal of the Westport Historical Society, Ryan was bluntly castigated as 'a stool pigeon for the Nazis'. How true are these interpretations?

Certainly there can be little doubt that in the strict sense of the word

he did 'collaborate' in the preparation of reports and the giving of advice which he considered favourable to Irish neutrality. But as Hugh Seton Watson has pointed out at least five types of wartime collaboration, by no means mutually exclusive, can be distinguished. First there were those who assisted the Axis powers from patently Fascist sympathies, Quisling in Norway for example. Second were the national minorities like the Flemish and Bretons who saw in German support an opportunity for national liberation. Third, were defeatists who saw Axis victories as irreversible and felt an accommodation had to be made with the new Fascist order. Fourth were men like General Nedic of Serbia and the authorities in the Channel Islands who interposed themselves between the occupation authorities and the civil population to mitigate the severity of the regime. And final-

ly there were former resistance fighters like the Yugoslav Chetniks whose opposition to the social radicalism of their ex-comrades led them down the path of collaboration.

IRA dealings with Nazi Germany clearly belong in the second category, which explains the warm welcome from Irish Republicans for refugees from Breton and Flemish German Army units given sanctuary in Ireland by de Valera after the war. But was Ryan in this category? If so, he was clearly at odds with the views of his Republican Congress colleague, George Gilmore, who condemned not only IRA dealings with the Nazis but the precedent of seeking help with a reactionary power set by the 1916 men in their approaches to the Kaiser's Germany.

Gilmore's hostility to right-wing Republicanism had in fact lead him to oppose their intervention in the 1935 Westminster election campaign and to seek an alliance with Nationalist MPs to pre-empt it. But there is no evidence that Ryan was party to the dealings between Russell and Von Ribbentrop or that he was anything more than a passenger on the abortive submarine journey home. The testimony at Nuremberg of Canaris's second-in-command Edwin Von Lahousen indicated friction between the two men (which fuelled the baseless allegation that Ryan had killed Russell). Still less is there any reason to believe that Ryan's anti-Fascist and socialist stance was abandoned or even modified with the passage of time. He accepted German aid to liberate him from the hell of a Spanish gaol at a time when a temporary truce had been negotiated in the struggle between Communism and Fascism in the Nazi-Soviet pact.

Patronage of Canaris

Francis Stuart, himself a Franco supporter, acknowledged Ryan's respect for the Royal Air Force during the Battle of Britain, a sympathy which only wilted in the face of the horrific Allied air onslaught after 1942. He later recalled Ryan's attempts to disillusion him as to the nature of the Nazi regime. Others have attested to his elation at Red Army victories and his rejection of a request to join Stuart, William Joyce ('Lord Haw Haw') and others on the Rundfunk Broadcasting Service, a request made by the Gaelic scholar Dr Hartmann (familiar to generations of Irish

schoolchildren from Micí Mac Gabhann's *Rotha Mor an tSaoil*). Perhaps the most telling evidence to-date for the consistency of Ryan's Spanish Civil War attitudes comes from a Berlin Legation annexe to the Frank Ryan file not made available to Sean Cronin at the time he was completing his biography of him in 1980. Contained in that file is a cipher telegram obtained confidentially from the German police in response to a query on Ryan dated 12 April 1944, two months before his death. The reply conveyed verbally on 15 July stated that 'all that is known of him is that he is a Communist and stood in the Dáil elections of 1937'. That a person of such views could survive in Germany at the time, is a tribute to the patronage provided by the Abwehr and its head, Admiral Wilhelm Canaris. An officer of the old school, Canaris had become disillusioned with the Nazi regime he had helped to power and participated, albeit with reservations, in the resistance to Hitler from 1938 onwards. Throughout the war he had battled for the autonomy of the Abwehr against Heinrich Himmler's attempt to extend the SS empire by incorporating the Abwehr into the Reich Security Head Office (RSHA, *Reich Sicherheit Haupts Amt*) a department of the SS under Ernst Kaltenbrunner. In February 1944 Canaris lost that battle with the dissolution of the Abwehr and his own transfer to the economic wing of the armed forces. With that amalgamation all documents of the Abwehr passed into the hands of the Gestapo, those on Ryan among them. It is hard to see how otherwise an inquiry about him through police channels made under his real name, could so easily have penetrated the Abwehr supplied alias of 'Frank Richards' under which he had operated throughout his time in Germany and which was inscribed on his tombstone there. It was perhaps fortunate for Ryan that he died when he did. A little over a month after his death the resistance to Hitler struck with the unsuccessful bomb plot of 20 July 1944. In the aftermath of vengefulness Hitler destroyed all opposition. Canaris ended up in Flossenburg concentration camp where he was executed the following April.

In a television documentary Fran-

Frank Ryan with Abwehr agent **Helmut Clissmann**, who engineered his release from Spanish custody.

cis Stuart later recalled that towards the end of his life Ryan was worried about arrest by the Gestapo. In that event it is doubtful if Veessenmeyer, the demonic SS official seconded to Von Ribbentrop and the Reich's 'expert' on small nations, could or would have protected him. One thing is certain however, in such circumstances while his end might have been less peaceful his posthumous reputation would be infinitely more secure.

Enda Staunton holds a doctorate on Northern nationalism.

Further reading:

S. Cronin, *Frank Ryan: the search for the Republic* (Dublin 1980).

M. O'Riordan, *The Connolly Column* (Dublin 1979).

R. Fisk, *In Time of War: Ireland, Ulster and the price of neutrality 1939-45* (Dublin 1983).

H. Seton Watson, *The East European Revolution* (London 1950)



(Above) **Heinrich Himmler**, head of the SS, battled with Canaris, Ryan's protector, for control of the Abwehr.

