
‘Shanghai–Madrid Axis’?

Comparing British Responses to the Conflicts in Spain and China, 1936–39

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Think in this year what pleased the dancers best:
When Austria died and China was forsaken,
Shanghai in flames and Teruel retaken.
W. H. Auden, ‘In time of war’¹

Abstract

*The impact of the Sino-Japanese War on Britain has generally been overshadowed by the impact of the Spanish Civil War, which broke out a year earlier. Indeed, the only book on the subject, Arthur Clegg’s *Aid China* (1989), is subtitled *A Memoir of a Forgotten Campaign*. Yet, for a few months in the autumn of 1937, these two campaigns achieved a kind of parity in British public perception. British opinion was united in condemnation of the Japanese bombing of Chinese cities, and, at its peak, the ensuing campaign attracted a broader range of supporters than the movement in solidarity with the Spanish Republic. For instance, the Archbishop of Canterbury publicly criticised Japan’s actions in a way that would have been unthinkable in the case of Franco’s Spain. Moreover, some acts of solidarity with China (such as the refusal by British dockers to load Japanese ships) went beyond what the supporters of the Spanish Republic could hope to achieve. This article makes a comparison of the two campaigns, and examines the interconnections between them. It not only sheds new light on the ‘forgotten’ campaign for China, but also asks why Spain – unlike China – became the ‘Great Cause’ of the later 1930s.*

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¹ W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, *Journey to a War* (Faber & Faber, London, 1939), 280.

I

The Spanish Civil War (July 1936–March 1939) has often been described as the ‘last great cause’, a term popularised by Stanley Weintraub in a book of that name published in 1968. Indeed, such was the political and emotional impact of the civil war on British opinion that it appeared to place other campaigns of the period – notably that in support of China during its prolonged conflict with Japan – in the shade.² Arthur Clegg, a veteran of the China campaign who went on to write its history, conveyed this sense of historical neglect in his choice of title, *Aid China 1937–1949: A Memoir of a Forgotten Campaign* (1989). He noted that, apropos the large number of books that had recently been published on the 1930s: ‘In some of them, the British campaigns to aid the Spanish Republic or Czechoslovakia get a worthy mention . . . Aid to China hardly figures at all, even in autobiographies and biographies of those who were active in that campaign’.³ Yet, whatever its subsequent neglect, China was certainly not ignored at the time and, for a brief period at least, Spain and China enjoyed a kind of parity of treatment in Britain. Indeed, in the autumn of 1937 the two conflicts often seemed to be viewed through bifocal lenses, especially in the left-wing press.⁴ From September onwards the Labour Party’s *Daily Herald* ran a regular item entitled ‘Two wars at a glance’, which summarised the latest battlefield information in both countries. A cartoon in the communist *Daily Worker* depicted heavily-muscled Chinese and Spanish workers at either end of a ‘Shanghai–Madrid Axis’, offering more substantial resistance to the ‘Rome–Berlin–Tokyo Axis’ than the cowardly British government. Other cartoons from the period likewise yoked the two conflicts together,⁵ and similar examples can also be found in the rhetoric of the time. Speaking at an event to mark the exhibition of Picasso’s ‘Guernica’ at the Whitechapel Gallery in January 1939, for instance, Clement Attlee, leader of the Labour Party, appealed to the meeting to wake up to the reality of ‘war in Spain, war in China’.⁶ A few months earlier, Harry Pollitt, General Secretary of the Communist Party, had told his party congress that ‘the real Britain is the Britain that has sent food, money and medical supplies to Spain and China’.⁷

At first sight the differences between the two campaigns are undoubtedly more evident than the similarities. In the case of Spain, some 2500 British volunteers served

² Japan had occupied Manchuria 1931–2. The formal – if undeclared – Sino–Japanese War is conventionally dated to the ‘Marco Polo Bridge incident’ of 7 July 1937 and its aftermath.

³ Arthur Clegg, *Aid China 1937–1949: A Memoir of a Forgotten Campaign* (Beijing: New World Press, 1989), 179.

⁴ Hilary Spurling uses the term ‘mental bifocals’ to describe the outlook of the American writer Pearl Buck (who was born and raised in China in a missionary family), *Burying the Bones: Pearl Buck in China* (London: Profile Books, 2010), chap. 2.

⁵ *Daily Worker* 24 Aug. 1937. A cartoon in the *Daily Herald* (20 Oct. 1937) presented Spain and China as twin war clouds – and recommended that the best way that British voters could assist the cause of ‘Democracy’ was to support Labour in forthcoming municipal elections.

⁶ British Movietone News, 5 Jan. 1939 (I am grateful to Marshall Mateer for this reference).

⁷ Communist Party of Great Britain, *For Peace and Plenty: Report of the fifteenth Congress of the C.P.G.B.* (Paulton and London: Purnell and Sons, 1938), 39.

in the International Brigades and their associated medical units; many intellectuals rallied to the Republican side and affirmed their support in the influential pamphlet *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish War* (1937); some 4000 Basque refugee children were cared for by churches and voluntary organisations on their arrival in Britain in May 1937; and there was a broad solidarity movement organised by a range of committees at the national and local levels.⁸ By contrast, the extent of support for China appeared to be of a distinctly lesser order. No British volunteers went to fight for China, although a British committee did arrange for a few doctors from the International Brigades (mainly of central European origin) to be sent to China in May 1939, after their evacuation from Republican Spain.⁹ There was a vigorous and innovative solidarity campaign organised by the China Campaign Committee (CCC), which achieved considerable success in promoting an awareness of China's plight.¹⁰ For instance, the first 'China week' in February 1938 was marked by some sixty meetings and two hundred and eighty poster parades across Britain.¹¹ However, the support for China at the local level was geographically uneven, and the success of the committees in Manchester, Merseyside and London was not matched in other large cities.¹² Moreover, support ebbed and flowed sharply over time, and by July 1939

⁸ The literature is now considerable: for introductions, see K. W. Watkins, *Britain Divided: The Effect of the Spanish Civil War on British Political Opinion* (Thomas Nelson, London, 1963), and Tom Buchanan, *Britain and the Spanish Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). For the British volunteers, see James K. Hopkins, *Into the Heart of the Fire: The British in the Spanish Civil War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), and Richard Baxell, *British Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War: The British Battalion in the International Brigades, 1936–1939* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004). For trade union and regional activism, see Tom Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War and the British Labour Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), Lewis Mates, *The Spanish Civil War and the British Left: Political Activism and the Popular Front* (London and New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2007) and Hywel Francis, *Miners against Fascism: Wales and the Spanish Civil War* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1984).

⁹ Clegg, *Aid China*, 183–5; Angela Jackson, 'For us it was heaven': *The Passion, Grief and Fortitude of Patience Darton: From the Spanish Civil War to Mao's China* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2012), 137; The National Archives (Kew) (TNA) KV2 / 1603 (Alexander Tudor Hart file); Cambridge University Library (CUL), Needham papers, C13, P. D'Arcy Hart to Needham, 14 Sept. 1942. Conversely, at least one British member of the International Brigades, Joe Hinks, claimed to have served in the 'Chinese Red Army' (John Sommerfield, *Volunteer in Spain*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1937, 55). However, he may have been glamorising his military record as his personal file in the Moscow archives simply notes that he had served with the British infantry in 'China. N. . Frontier, India' (sic). I am grateful to Richard Baxell for sending me a copy of this document.

¹⁰ For a full account of the CCC's work, see Clegg, *Aid China*, passim, and Tom Buchanan, *East Wind: China and the British Left, 1925–1976* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), ch. 2.

¹¹ Clegg, *Aid China*, 54.

¹² Much depended on local circumstances. For instance, the activist John de Courcy Ireland attributed much of the success of the Manchester committee to the involvement of Leonard Behrens, a leading local textile manufacturer and philanthropist, and the *Manchester Guardian* journalist and China specialist H. J. Timperley (see de Courcy Ireland's manuscript on 'Campaigning for China in Northern England and Ireland, 1937–1939', c. 1980, Marx Memorial Library [MML], Clegg papers). A very successful committee was initiated in Bournemouth ('not exactly a Labour stronghold') by Innes Herdan (see Jackson), who had befriended Chinese students while at Oxford and then spent a year in China in 1936–7. It was reported that the Bournemouth campaign had sold more copies of Lawrence and Wishart's pamphlet *China* than any communist party branch except Glasgow, London and Liverpool: *Discussion*, 3, 1 (1938), 6.

one internal critic described the campaign as being ‘all head and no body’.¹³ Finally, British intellectuals were appalled by Japanese atrocities in China, but they did not see the conflict as the hinge on which civilisation turned: there was no *Authors Take Sides on the Sino-Japanese War*.¹⁴ Indeed, the Chinese cause can sometimes seem like a pale imitation of its Spanish counterpart. The writer Jack Lindsay, for instance, wrote a well-known poem for ‘mass recitation’, *On Guard for Spain!*, which was immediately published in March 1937 and has been widely anthologised since. However, the text of his subsequent work *Agony of China*, which was performed in December 1937, has never been published.¹⁵

Yet on closer inspection ‘Aid China’ fares rather better. The China campaign burnt with a great, if short-lived, intensity, in response to the shocking news of the Japanese bombing of Chinese cities in the autumn of 1937. In late September the Labour MP Philip Noel-Baker reported on a series of open-air meetings in his Derby constituency where the Chinese war was, he claimed, the only subject that reduced a street full of people to hushed silence.¹⁶ Some 8,000 people bought tickets for a mass protest meeting on 5 October 1937 at the Royal Albert Hall, organised by Sir Walter Layton (the proprietor of the *News Chronicle*). The rally was a remarkable piece of political theatre, which opened with a screening of the film *Bombs on China*. The 200-watt loudspeakers – said to be the biggest ‘talkie-wiring job’ so far attempted in Britain – boomed out to ‘probably the greatest single film audience ever assembled’. The film presented footage of ‘the tattered remnants of buildings in Shanghai, the litter of wounded and dying in the streets . . . the hopeless flight of refugees . . . There were occasional bursts of applause, occasional half-smothered cries of sheer horror’. The timing was, of course, significant as the bombing followed hard on the heels of the aerial attacks on Guernica and other Basque towns and cities between March and June 1937, and appeared to represent a new level in fascist aggression. The Earl of Lytton (who had led the League of Nations’ commission to Manchuria in 1931–2) told the meeting that: ‘Everything which the Japanese are doing today they could find precedents for in Spain and in the Mediterranean’.¹⁷ Although many similar rallies were held for Spain, this one arguably had a greater significance as it could claim to demonstrate truly national support for China. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, for instance, was disconcerted by the decision of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Cosmo Lang, to take the chair and to deliver a speech. While Chamberlain did not go so far as to appeal to Lang not to take part, he did ask him – at a private meeting

¹³ MML, Clegg papers, report of the CCC ‘conference on China work’, 16–18 July 1938.

¹⁴ The closest approximation was the book edited by E. R. Hughes, *China Body & Soul* (Secker and Warburg, London, 1938), especially the chapter by Harold Laski, 74–88.

¹⁵ Valentine Cunningham, *The Penguin Book of Spanish Civil War Verse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), 253–63; *Daily Worker*, 4 Dec. 1937. Lindsay was a British-based Australian. See Don Watson, ‘Jack Lindsay: Poetry and the Spanish Civil War’, in Robert Mackie, ed., *Jack Lindsay: The Thirties and Forties* (University of London, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, Australian Studies Centre, Occasional Seminar Paper 4, Nov. 1984), 61–73.

¹⁶ Churchill College Cambridge, Noel-Baker papers, NBKR 4/64, Noel-Baker to Gerald Barry, 27 Sept. 1937

¹⁷ For reports of the meeting, see *News Chronicle*, 6 Oct. 1937 and *Daily Herald*, 6 Oct. 1937.

a few days beforehand – to be very careful with his choice of words. In the event, although Lang did not call for commercial sanctions against Japan, he urged collective action against aggressors and, more optimistically, ‘the “total abolition” of bombing aircraft’.¹⁸

The Royal Albert Hall meeting provided a powerful focal point for the China campaign: so much so that fears were even expressed that Spain might be ‘forgotten’ in the excitement over China. Dorothy Woodman, the secretary of the CCC, warned a rally in Trafalgar Square a few days later that, in demonstrating their sympathy for China, ‘we must not relax our efforts on behalf of Spain’.¹⁹ In a column written in early October, Kingsley Martin, the editor of the *New Statesman* and Woodman’s partner, reflected on the fact that an acquaintance – an otherwise apolitical publican’s wife – had been deeply moved by a photograph showing a Chinese child killed by a bomb. She now favoured a boycott of Japan. ‘Why did Guernica,’ he asked, ‘which seemed to me to be the most horrible, because the most gratuitous and cold-blooded of all crimes, not stir the public mind while the massacres at Nanking and Canton do?’ In answering this question he noted the absence of counter-propaganda from the Right, and the fact that British opinion was ‘solidly on the side of the Chinese’. Even the right-wing press had realised that Japan no longer had any regard for British interests in China. ‘It is only on such occasions when the idealism of the Left coincides with the interest of the Right [as it had done in response to the ‘Hoare-Laval pact’ for the partition of Abyssinia in December 1935] that Britain ever moves effectively’.²⁰

Martin’s analysis is persuasive, as the Chinese cause certainly had a far less divisive impact on British opinion than that of the Spanish Republic. Japan stood accused of a murderous onslaught against Chinese civilians, at a time when the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and its communist (CCP) rivals had temporarily united against a common external enemy. Moreover, Japan’s actions threatened long-standing British strategic and economic interests in the Yangtze valley, and diplomats, businessmen and clergymen frequently sympathised with its plight. The Anglican Bishop of Hong Kong, R. O. Hall, was not only ‘terribly upset’ at the Japanese bombing of Canton in June 1938, but spoke at a protest meeting and personally delivered food, bedding and smallpox vaccine to the city after its fall.²¹ The journalist Vernon Bartlett noted in early 1938 that British sympathy for China in Hong Kong was ‘much greater than I had dared hope’, and that, unlike in Spain, the Royal Navy was ‘very bitter’ about the situation.²² By contrast, the Spanish Republican cause was tainted by the anti-clerical violence and revolutionary disturbances that had accompanied the opening months of the civil war, which also threatened British economic interests.

¹⁸ For Lang’s undated account of his meeting with Chamberlain on 3 Oct. 1937, see Lambeth Palace Library, Lang 6, fols. 46–7.

¹⁹ *Daily Worker*, 8 Oct. 1937 (John Strachey) and 11 Oct. 1937 (Dorothy Woodman).

²⁰ *New Statesman*, 2 Oct. 1937.

²¹ David M. Paton, *RO: The Life and Times of Bishop Ronald Hall of Hong Kong* (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1985), pp.98–102 (citing the diary of Hall’s secretary Amy Corney).

²² Churchill College Cambridge, Noel-Baker papers, NBKR 4/70, typescript ‘Notes from Hong Kong’, 15 Feb. (1938). Underlining in the original.

In addition, the British supporters of the Republic were divided between a majority who backed the inclusive Popular Front strategy of the Republican government and a minority (principally represented by the Independent Labour Party) who favoured the revolutionary politics of the Spanish Anarchists and the Marxist POUM party.²³ Unlike over Spain, therefore, there was no clash of opinions within Britain over the Sino-Japanese War, and (unlike in the early 1930s) no politicians were willing publicly to support Japanese expansion as a force for stability in the Far East. Moreover, whereas British religious sentiment had been divided over Spain (with the Catholic Church providing the most reliable basis of support for Franco's Nationalists) it was largely united in criticism of Japan. Archbishop Lang's prominent role at the Royal Albert Hall would have been inconceivable in the case of the Spanish Civil War. This high level of support from religious communities was partly due to the long tradition of British missionary involvement in China, but it also reflected a widespread (and somewhat patronising) belief in the innocence and defencelessness of the Chinese people. Even the *Catholic Times*, a strongly pro-Franco paper, criticised Japan for bombing indiscriminately, although (doubtless fearing a precedent) it objected to the demand for sanctions to be imposed.²⁴

There are a number of further interesting areas of difference between the two campaigns. First, the public face of the China campaign was rather middle class, whereas that of the Spanish campaign was more proletarian. If the abiding image of the former was one of clergymen and politicians' wives demonstrating for a boycott of Japanese goods outside high street shops, that of the latter was of the working class housewife donating her last tin of condensed milk, or of the worker giving his unopened pay packet.²⁵ And yet, there was in fact more direct industrial action by workers over China than over Spain. In July 1937 Harry Pollitt had received no response when he called upon dockers and other transport workers to refuse to load German and Italian ships 'so long as intervention in Spain continues'.²⁶ In the autumn of 1937, however, there was a series of well-publicised instances of dockers refusing to unload Japanese ships and cargoes in Southampton, Middlesbrough and London.²⁷ On each occasion vessels were turned away, much to the concern not only of the shipping companies, but also of the transport workers' union (T&GWU) which refused to make the actions official. The dockers were lionised on the Left, but were ultimately isolated and, in some cases, blacklisted by employers. Even so, it is noteworthy that effective industrial action was possible over China, but was not over Spain.²⁸ The 'blacking' of ships trading with Franco's Spain remained a distant goal for pro-Republican campaigners apart from in exceptional circumstances. Hence, in

²³ See Buchanan, *Britain and the Spanish Civil War*, ch. 3, esp. pp. 72–8.

²⁴ *Catholic Times*, 1, 8 and 15 Oct. 1937.

²⁵ For the former, see the photographs in Clegg, *Aid China*, between pp. 64–5; for the latter, see Douglas Hyde, *I believed* (London: The Reprint Society, 1952), 59.

²⁶ International Press Correspondence, 17:30, 17 July 1937, 668.

²⁷ For a detailed account, see Buchanan, *East Wind*, ch. 2.

²⁸ There is not sufficient evidence to permit a full understanding of this difference, but the following points were surely significant. First, Japan's actions in the autumn of 1937 were widely presented as barbaric and requiring an immediate response. For instance, Pollitt spoke of Japanese bombing arousing

the best-known case, that of the SS *Linaria*, British sailors refused to sail the vessel to Franco's Spain because its cargo of nitrates might have been used in the manufacture of explosives.²⁹ Within some trade unions militants even took advantage of support for action over China to broaden resolutions to include demands for a boycott of Franco's Spain.³⁰ When Trevor Stallard, the communist who led the boycott in Southampton, was interviewed in 1982 he recalled the 'exciting, militant, lively mood' among his fellow dockers: 'There were actions in support of Republican Spain as well as the boycott of Japanese goods'.³¹ However, only the action in support of China brought significant results.

The respective roles of the Spanish and Chinese immigrant communities in solidarity work are also worthy of comparison. There was, of course, an important distinction to be drawn between a civil war and a national struggle for survival. The Chinese community in Britain was united and mobilised by the war with Japan – arguably, as never before or since. Many patriotic organisations sprang up, dedicated to humanitarian relief in China, which brought together businessmen, students and intellectuals. A particularly active group gathered around Professor Shelley Wang, an exiled radical who played a central role in the CCC, and the Chinese formed a visible, if somewhat marginal, presence at pro-China rallies.³² Arthur Clegg successfully enlisted the support of the Chinese community in Limehouse during the dockers' boycott campaign.³³ By comparison, although there was a large Spanish community in Britain – boosted by refugees – it was deeply divided and did not play such a central role in the campaign. Cardiff's substantial Spanish population, for example, was 'split down the middle' on lines of class and religion, while Spanish seafarers stranded in British ports were also politically divided.³⁴ Although the Spanish Embassy provided a focal point for pro-Republican influence and propaganda, it was challenged by an energetic and well-funded Francoist campaign, especially once the Duke of Alba was

'white hot hatred' in Britain (*Discussion*, II:5, Oct. 1937). Second, Japanese shipping represented a less complicated target than trade with Franco's Spain, which was already governed by the Non-Intervention agreement. Third, although the dockers' actions appear to have been spontaneous, similar actions against Japanese ships in Australia and elsewhere had been receiving substantial coverage in the left-wing press during the preceding months.

²⁹ See Buchanan, *Spanish Civil War and the British Labour Movement*, 210–15.

³⁰ See for instance the discussion at the Annual Assembly of Delegates of the train drivers' union (ASLEF) conference 23 May–3 June 1938, conference report, and pp. 629–30.

³¹ MML, Noreen Branson papers, A35, typescript of Alan Merson's interview with Stallard, 13 Oct. 1982.

³² Gregor Benton and Edmund Terence Gomez, *The Chinese in Britain, 1800-Present: Economy, Transnationalism, Identity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), esp. 239–40. The back page of the *Daily Herald* (18 Oct. 1938) carries photographs from a Trafalgar Square rally. A series of portraits of Chinese men and women – listening attentively as they 'heard horrors condemned' – is presented alongside images of the rally.

³³ Clegg, *Aid China*, 49, and George Matthews' obituary for Clegg in *The Independent*, 16 Feb. 1994.

³⁴ Rob Stradling, *Wales and the Spanish Civil War: The Dragon's Dearest Cause?* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), 73–4. For the Spanish refugees and sailors, see Luis Monferrer Catalán, *Odisea en Albión; Los republicanos españoles exiliados en Gran Bretaña (1936–1977)* (Madrid: Ediciones de la Torre, 2007), esp. 32–6 and 52–6. (I am grateful to Hugo García for this reference).

installed as the official ‘Agent’ of Franco’s side in June 1937.³⁵ The campaigns for both China and Spain were affected by the British government’s strong, if not always even-handed, discouragement of political activism by refugees and visitors, which also applied to the Labour Party. The Labour conference in October 1936 had been swayed to reject the British government’s policy of non-intervention in the Spanish Civil War after an emotive speech by the Spanish socialist Isabel de Palencia. A year later Philip Noel-Baker politely turned down the offer of a speech by a visiting Chinese academic on the grounds that: ‘we shall perhaps not stage a meeting like that of the Spanish fraternal delegates last year, because we think that it may have better effect upon public opinion if we adopt our resolutions without influence from “foreigners”’.³⁶

A third difference concerns the cultural articulation of the Chinese and Spanish Republican causes within Britain. Spain, of course, enjoyed a high level of support from British intellectuals, and campaigners could also draw on a stock of powerful visual images provided by Republican artists and propagandists. Picasso’s ‘Guernica’ toured Britain between October 1938 and February 1939, and attracted thousands of visitors when it was exhibited at the Whitechapel Gallery. Again, however, the cultural impact of the civil war in Britain could be divisive. Supporters claimed that the Republic had preserved Spain’s artistic heritage from enemy bombardment, but opponents pointed to the massive and deliberate destruction of religious art in the Republican zone during the opening months of the war.³⁷ Moreover, the civil war coincided with heightened tensions in anti-fascist artistic circles between the surrealists and advocates of a more direct, social realist style. For instance, Picasso’s cartoon-like etching ‘Dream and Lie of Franco’ was bitterly attacked by left-wing critics such as Anthony Blunt for merely offering a vision of ‘useless horror’. It was, according to the Chinese artist Jack Chen, ‘far less comprehensible than Goya’s work in denunciation of war’.³⁸ The Chinese government, by contrast, had developed an effective strategy of ‘cultural diplomacy’ during the 1930s,³⁹ which emphasised both the antiquity of China’s civilisation and the growth, during recent decades, of an avowedly modern culture. This distinctive fusion of old and new was perfectly embodied in the revival of realist woodcut art as a weapon in the anti-Japanese struggle. Moreover, in Jack Chen, the Chinese cause possessed a highly effective international cultural ambassador. Chen, a member of the Chinese diaspora who came from mixed Chinese and Trinidadian parentage, had learnt his trade as a graphic artist in the Soviet Union. He worked closely with the Artists International Association

³⁵ The two campaigns are described in detail in Hugo García, *The Truth about Spain: Mobilizing British Public Opinion, 1936–1939* (Sussex Academic Press, Eastbourne, 2010).

³⁶ Churchill College Cambridge, NBKR 4/64, 2 Oct. 1937, Noel-Baker to Mrs Margaret Delisle Burns.

³⁷ García, *The Truth about Spain*, 158–64 and Robert Stradling, *History and Legend: Writing the International Brigades* (University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2003), esp. pp. 1–21.

³⁸ See Valentine Cunningham, ed., *Spanish Front: Writers on the Civil War* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1986), 213–22, and Chen’s hostile comments in *Artists News Sheet*, Jan. 1938, 4–5.

³⁹ Robert Bickers, *Britain in China: Community, Culture and Colonialism, 1900–1949* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 230–2.

(AIA) in Britain, and organised its ‘5000 years young’ exhibition of Chinese art in November 1937. He subsequently exhibited in Paris and the United States, and in June 1938 completed the cycle by bringing Spanish Republican posters to be exhibited in Canton.⁴⁰ If Chinese cultural propaganda lacked the profile of its Spanish counterpart, it arguably expressed a more coherent visual style and an even more direct political message.

The shock of the Japanese bombing swiftly diminished after the autumn of 1937, and the excitement and urgency of the Royal Albert Hall rally was not sustained. A CCC news sheet later remarked that there had been a ‘thrill of horror’ at the first aerial attacks, but, now that they had resumed, the British press was silent.⁴¹ In June 1939 the China Defence League complained that the recent bombing of the new Chinese capital Chungking (in which thousands had died) had been greeted with indifference after the attacks on Nanking, Guernica and Barcelona.⁴² Meanwhile atrocities carried out by Japanese soldiers, such as the ‘rape of Nanking’ in December 1937, were not reported with any depth or accuracy in Britain. Information (including eye-witness testimonies and even film footage) emerged slowly in the course of 1938, minimising the impact. The fears about China overshadowing Spain were swiftly reversed – by the spring of 1938 the concern was that the multiple crises in Spain, Austria and Czechoslovakia were leaving little room for China. In April, John Strachey – the British left-wing intellectual who most fully appreciated the significance of China during the 1930s – confessed that in recent weeks, ‘preoccupied with Spain and Central Europe’, he had let his ‘activities on behalf of China slip into the background’. However, he reflected that these priorities may well be wrong, and that until recently China’s resistance had appeared to be the ‘high point’ in the struggle against fascism.⁴³

II

These two campaigns were clearly interconnected in the anti-fascist rhetoric of the period and, at times, almost interchangeable. Victor Gollancz, for instance, offered to pay 2/6d to either Spanish or Chinese relief for every new member of the Left Book Club (LBC) recruited by a club member. Both conflicts were presented in very similar terms: as a ‘fascist’ assault on a united people, as ‘people’s wars’, and even as confrontations between barbarism and civilisation. In the words of *Left Review* in December 1937: ‘Spain and China are our affair . . . what is being destroyed there is not merely their cultural achievements, but part of the common heritage of all peoples’. The Liberal Party leader Sir Archibald Sinclair told parliament in March 1938 that ‘we see, through the hail of bombs in China and Spain and the rumbling of the tanks

⁴⁰ See Yuan-Tsung Chen, *Return to the Middle Kingdom: One Family, Three Revolutionaries and the Birth of Modern China* (New York: Sterling Publishing, 2008), 304–11; *Left Review*, Nov. 1937, 575–6; Israel Epstein, *People’s War* (Gollancz, 1939), 309.

⁴¹ Undated CCC news sheet [1938–9] ‘The news we do not hear’.

⁴² Rhodes House, Oxford, Fabian Colonial Bureau papers, 162/2.

⁴³ *Daily Worker*, 19 April 1938.

in the streets of Vienna, the tide of anarchy rising and engulfing civilisation in those countries'.⁴⁴ A comment made by a British volunteer serving with the International Brigades – in a private letter to his wife that was intercepted by British intelligence – typifies this approach: 'The struggle against Fascism here in Spain and the fight of the Chinese people against Japanese aggression in China are the most important points in the struggle against Fascism throughout the world'.⁴⁵ Tom Wintringham, a former commander of the British battalion, took this linkage a step further when he told his mother in July 1937 that: 'In the autumn we'll clean up this war [in Spain] and next spring I'll go to China and settle things there'.⁴⁶

Despite this even-handedness, however, how far could the two conflicts truly be equated? There is no question that the example of the Spanish Republic was inspirational to the Chinese resistance. In May 1937, even before the outbreak of open war with Japan, Mao Tse-tung stated in a message addressed to 'the Spanish people' that the Chinese Communist Party was 'emulating you . . . by struggling against Japanese Fascism . . . Each day our press here in the Soviet regions published reports and articles about your struggle'.⁴⁷ In 1938 the defenders of the city of Wuhan enthusiastically identified with the defence of Madrid in their slogans and marching songs. Hankow (part of the Wuhan conurbation) was often referred to as 'the Madrid' (or 'the Barcelona') of China.⁴⁸ This perception was enhanced by the presence in the city of filmmaker Joris Ivens, photographer Robert Capa, and poet W. H. Auden, all of whom had recently spent time in Spain. However, there is little evidence to suggest that Spanish Republicans drew reciprocal inspiration from China's resistance. A rare exception is a famous propaganda poster which depicted a Chinese member of the International Brigades alongside volunteers of other races.⁴⁹ In reality, however, it has been estimated that there were only some 100 volunteers of Chinese origin in the Brigades (out of a total of circa 35,000), most having come from France and the United States rather than directly from China.⁵⁰

Moreover, a number of examples show how, for an international audience, the importance attached to the Spanish cause *within China* served primarily to amplify the importance of Spain rather than China. In the autumn of 1936 the American journalist Edgar Snow arrived in the remote Chinese communist base of Yen-an, and went on to write his famous account *Red Star over China* (published in Britain, to

⁴⁴ *Parl. Debates*, 14 Mar. 1938, col. 60.

⁴⁵ TNA KV2 / 606 (William Morrison's file), letter of 20 Jan. [1938].

⁴⁶ Letter sent on 31 July 1937 from Albacete, Spain, in Tom Wintringham's papers, King's College London, 1/2/2. I am grateful to David Haycock for this reference.

⁴⁷ *International Press Correspondence*, 17:26, 19 June 1937, 595. Ominously, Mao had added that: 'Your struggle is similar to our own in the Far East because, apart from other similarities already mentioned, there are traitors and Trotskyists hiding in our ranks, just as in yours'.

⁴⁸ Stephen R. Mackinnon, *Wuhan 1938: War, Refugees, and the Making of Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), see, for instance, 79 and 93; *New Statesman*, 25 June 1938, 1061.

⁴⁹ 'Todos los pueblos del mundo estan en las brigadas internacionales al lado del pueblo espanol' (available at www.alba-valb.org/resources/media/All_the_peoples_of_the_world2.jpg/view, last visited 28 Mar. 2012)

⁵⁰ See Gregor Benton, *Chinese Migrants and Internationalism: Forgotten Histories* (London: Routledge, 2007), 63–71.

rapturous acclaim, by the LBC in 1937). Snow noted the ‘intense interest with which the Reds followed the events of the Spanish civil war’, with lectures, demonstrations and public discussions.

It was quite surprising to find, even far back in the mountains, Red farmers who knew a few rudimentary facts about such things as the Italian conquest of Abyssinia and the German–Italian invasion of Spain, and spoke of these powers as the ‘Fascist allies’ of their enemy, Japan!⁵¹

One of the photographs reproduced in Snow’s book depicts a banner which salutes – in an approximation to Spanish – ‘les pueblos bravissimos de la España’. However, the fact that the banner was not in Chinese indicates that it was not intended for a Chinese audience, but that China was being used as a means to transmit a message of solidarity to an international audience, thereby bolstering the Spanish cause. Similarly, a front-page story in the *Daily Worker* claimed that new lyrics had been given to a patriotic Chinese song. Now, when ‘China’s masses . . . fill the streets for an anti-Japanese demonstration’, their song ‘unites the struggle of East and West’. The new words were translated as: ‘Arise and shatter Franco; Arise, ye Spanish people! Fight against those who betray your homes! For life and freedom! Defend Madrid!’⁵²

One further example of this peculiar triangulation between Spain, China and British anti-fascism concerns the LBC. The organisation, founded in May 1936, had swiftly grown to encompass some 50,000 members. In January 1938 Victor Gollancz read out a telegram from Mao Tse-tung at an LBC rally in which the Chinese communist leader praised the ‘vital role’ of the club in mobilising opinion against ‘imperialist world war’.⁵³ Soon afterwards John Strachey (who, with Gollancz and Harold Laski, formed part of the Club’s three-man directorate) met the British battalion of the International Brigades on the ‘bleak plateaus of Teruel’ in Aragon. He was delighted to discover how enthusiastically the British volunteers supported the LBC, and this – taken alongside Mao’s message – moved him deeply:

I had the overwhelming impression that the foundation and extraordinary development of the Left Book Club was already a world event. News of it was heartening men who were fighting desperately amidst the mountains of western China. There in that enormously remote part of the world, which, till a few years ago, very few of us knew anything at all about, were men who not only had heard of the Left Book Club, but knew exactly what it was, what it was doing: men who, as Mao Tse-tung’s message showed, had an accurate political appreciation of the Club.⁵⁴

His discussions with the volunteers at Teruel (where the Republic had won a rare, if temporary, victory) appeared to vindicate that judgement, no matter how far it truly described Mao’s understanding of the situation in Britain.

The Chinese cause, therefore, generally took a supporting – sometimes fanciful – role in the anti-fascist politics of the period. Arguably, however, one can find a more genuine interweaving of Spain, China and British anti-fascism at the level of the individual lives and careers of particular activists, intellectuals and writers.

⁵¹ Edgar Snow, *Red Star over China* (London: Left Book Club, 1937), 379–80.

⁵² *Daily Worker*, 23 July 1937. See also *International Press Correspondence*, 17:34, 14 Aug. 1937, 775.

⁵³ *Manchester Guardian*, 17 Jan. 1938.

⁵⁴ *Left News*, March 1938, 725.

It was, of course, by no means uncommon for those who had been involved in the Spanish Civil War to be attracted to China after the victory of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949. For instance, two medical volunteers who had served in Spain, Nan Green and Patience Darton, went to work in the People's Republic of China in the 1950s, as did the former Political Commissar and Soviet spy 'Dave' Springhall.⁵⁵ However, such experiences were essentially discrete and separated by a gap of at least a decade. The following passages, conversely, concern individuals whose activities – albeit in very different ways – actively combined the Spanish and Chinese causes, in such a way as to provide mutual reinforcement to their anti-fascism.

The most celebrated British left-wing visitors to China at this time were W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, who had been commissioned to write a travel book about an Asian country of their choice by Faber & Faber in 1937. They opted for China on the grounds that it was not only by then 'one of the world's decisive battlegrounds', but also that 'unlike Spain, it wasn't already crowded with star literary observers' such as Ernest Hemingway and André Malraux. As Auden reputedly quipped: 'We'll have a war all of our very own'.⁵⁶ The two men set off in January 1938, sent on their way with farewell parties and press coverage reminiscent of Auden's departure for Spain a year earlier. The fact that Auden had spent time in Republican Spain (although the exact details of what he did there remain unclear), and that Isherwood had not, clearly influenced the relationship between the two men and forms a discernible undercurrent in their book *Journey to a War* (1939). Isherwood had missed his chance to visit Spain late in 1938 when, somewhat reluctantly, he had agreed to accompany Auden on a cultural delegation but the plans fell through due to a delay in obtaining travel permits. *Journey to a War* suggests that in China Auden rather tiresomely traded on his Spanish experiences – hence, his sangfroid in the face of Japanese bombing in Canton could be easily explained: 'He had been in Spain'. Whereas Isherwood (terrified by Stephen Spender's tales of night bombardment in Spain) slept fitfully during their visit, Auden slept the deep sleep of the 'truly strong'. The photographer Robert Capa requires little further introduction than that: 'He has been through most of the civil war in Spain'. Isherwood clearly felt stung to compete with Auden as he wrote that, when travelling to the front line, 'my own beret, sweater and martial boots would not be out of place in Valencia or Madrid'.⁵⁷ When *Journey to a War* was published its authors were, understandably, attacked from the Left as being preoccupied with their 'own psychological plight', and 'playing

⁵⁵ See Nan Green, *A Chronicle of Small Beer: The Memoirs of Nan Green* (Nottingham: Trent Books, 2004) and Jackson, 'For us it was heaven'. Jackson points out that Darton had volunteered unsuccessfully to join the party of doctors who went to China in 1939 (p. 137).

⁵⁶ Christopher Isherwood, *Christopher and his Kind, 1929–1939* [1977] (London: Minerva, 1993), 257. For the context, see Hugh Haughton, 'Journeys to War: W. H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood and William Empson on China', in Douglas Kerr and Julia Kuehn, eds, *A Century of Travels in China: Critical Essays on Travel Writing from the 1840s to the 1940s* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 147–62.

⁵⁷ Auden and Isherwood, *Journey to a War*, 32, 75, 53, and 104.

at being war correspondents, at being Englishmen, at being poets'.⁵⁸ However, the fact that their style of writing was self-mocking and lacking in gravitas does not mean that the two men were dilettantes. Nor, for that matter, were they merely transferring the Spanish struggle into an Asian context, as they returned deeply committed to the Chinese cause. This much is apparent from the recently released Special Branch reports of the public meetings, organised by the CCC, which Auden and Isherwood addressed in London on their return.⁵⁹ And although Isherwood later claimed that he renounced anti-fascist politics when he and Auden sailed for the United States in January 1939, he was still able to write to Edward Upward a few months later that their time in New York was one of 'press interviews, photographs, dinners for Spain, luncheons for China'.⁶⁰

For another wartime visitor, the journalist Charlotte Haldane, China represented something of a consolation for the loss of her close involvement with the Spanish cause. Haldane was at this time a member of the Communist Party and married to the renowned left-wing scientist J. B. S. Haldane. She, like her husband, had been an active supporter of the Spanish Republic since the outbreak of the civil war, and was closely involved in organising support for the International Brigades. (Her sixteen-year old son Ronnie Burghes had been one of the early volunteers). In 1938 she was, according to her account,⁶¹ edged out of the International Brigades Dependants and Wounded Aid Committee by Harry Pollitt and assigned instead to campaigning for international women's rights. It was through this connection that she met Chinese delegates at a congress in Marseilles, and was asked if she could 'do for the women of China what you have done for the women of Spain'. Soon afterwards she was invited to China on Comintern business, but also with accreditation from the *Daily Herald* and the CCC. She took with her drugs to assist the work of Dr Robert Lim, head of the Chinese Red Cross and a former pupil of her father-in-law at Edinburgh University. In September 1938 Lim wrote to J. B. S. Haldane that 'I had already heard that you were in Spain – but I had not expected that it would be our good fortune to be able to have the aid of a "Haldane" in China!'⁶² On her return she wrote a letter to the Spanish communist leader Dolores Ibarruri ('La Pasionaria') describing the war-work of the Chinese women. Ibarruri replied that it filled her 'with emotion to learn of the interest of our Chinese sisters in the women of Spain and in our war'. Both were fighting for independence, 'against foreign invasion, and for world democracy'.

The Cambridge biochemist Joseph Needham was deeply involved in radical Marxist (and Christian Socialist) politics at Cambridge in the 1930s, although never a member of the Communist Party. He helped to arrange the care of a group of Basque

⁵⁸ Randall Swingler in *Daily Worker*, 29 Mar. 1939.

⁵⁹ TNA KV2/2588 (Auden's MI5 file), reports dated 4 and 27 Nov. 1938.

⁶⁰ Peter Parker, *Isherwood* (London: Picador, 2004), 445, citing letter of 6 Aug. 1939.

⁶¹ Unless otherwise stated, this section is derived from Charlotte Haldane, *Truth Will Out* (London: Right Book Club, 1949), 139–75. See also Angela Jackson, *British Women and the Spanish Civil War* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 224–5.

⁶² University College London, Haldane papers, Box 15, 29 Sept. 1938, Lim to Haldane.

refugee children in a nearby village, and played a prominent role in organising the Cornford-MacLaurin fund, which raised money in memory of two Cambridge students who had died fighting in Spain. In an autobiographical article Needham identified 1937 – when his future second wife Lu Gwei-Djen and other Chinese research students arrived at his laboratory in Cambridge – as the ‘great turning point in his life’. Indeed, China subsequently became his ruling passion: he learnt Chinese, visited China between 1942 and 1946 as part of an intergovernmental programme of scientific co-operation, and devoted the rest of his life to writing and researching his multi-volume *Science and Civilisation in China*. However, it is worth noting that, according to Needham, Lu Gwei-Djen decided to study at Cambridge because ‘she noticed in an advertisement that Joseph was Treasurer of the Cornford-MacLaurin Fund . . . This was one of the reasons which decided her on the Cambridge Biochemical Laboratory, and looking back now, it seems an essential thread in the network’. On another occasion he stated even more explicitly that it was ‘this indication of my sympathies . . . which led the Chinese to Cambridge’.⁶³ Therefore, Needham’s turn to China was, in some respects, a product of his anti-fascist activities during the Spanish Civil War. Furthermore, like many of his generation, Needham continued to look back on the civil war with particular passion and fondness. For instance, in a lecture that he delivered in 1968, in the shadow of both the Chinese Cultural Revolution and the events of May 1968 in Paris, he clearly still saw Spain as a benchmark of revolutionary commitment: ‘It may be that the May revolution in France will be as instructive and far-reaching in its theoretical consequences as the Spanish Civil War’.⁶⁴

Before departing for China, Needham had made the acquaintance of David Crook, who had recent experience of both Spain and China and was currently undergoing military training in Great Yarmouth.⁶⁵ Crook had been a volunteer in the British battalion of the International Brigades, and appears on MI5’s recently published lists of Britons travelling to Spain with the single handwritten comment: ‘Communist’.⁶⁶ While in Spain he read Snow’s *Red Star over China*, and later commented that ‘few books had gripped me more’.⁶⁷ In February 1937 he was sent into action at the battle of the Jarama. One of his abiding memories was of the population of the village of Madrigueras turning out to see the British volunteers leave for the front – many of the women weeping. Crook was wounded at the Jarama, and subsequently recruited to serve Soviet intelligence in Barcelona, spying on other foreigners in Spain. In 1938 he was sent to China to spy on Frank Glass, an American

⁶³ ‘Henry Holorensaw’ [Needham’s pseudonym], ‘The Making of an Honorary Taoist’, *The Caian*, 1994–1995, 127–8; Joseph Needham, in K. G. Robinson, ed., *Science and Civilisation in China*, Vol. 7 ‘General conclusions and reflections’, part 2, 199.

⁶⁴ Needham papers, Needham Research Institute, Cambridge, lecture notes SCC2/383/2, 1968.

⁶⁵ CUL, Needham papers, C11, [1942?], Crook to Needham.

⁶⁶ TNA, KV5/112.

⁶⁷ *Hampstead Heath to Tian An Men: The Autobiography of David Crook*, available at www.davidcrook.net (last visited 28 Mar. 2012), ch. 4, 6. Patience Darton later recalled that *Red Star over China* was ‘one of the books being passed around in Spain’ and was widely read by the British volunteers (Jackson, *For us it was heaven*, 125).

Trotskyist in Shanghai. Posing with some enthusiasm as an anti-Stalinist (he was, as he put it, ‘on the road to Trotskyism’), he agreed to write an article for Glass comparing the wars in Spain and China: twin Republics assailed by fascism and betrayed by the Soviet Union.⁶⁸ His cover was so deep that even in the 1960s old comrades considered that there was ‘something very, very unexplained about his position after Spain until he turned up in China’.⁶⁹ After wartime service with the RAF in the Far East, Crook and his Canadian wife Isabel returned to China and became long-standing members of the British expatriate community in Beijing, where they worked as teachers and writers. In 1978 Crook revisited Spain, now seeing his time with the International Brigades as ‘a moral high point in my life . . . my heart was pure’, even if it did lead to the career in espionage which he now repudiated.⁷⁰ Crook’s Spanish experiences were burned into his memory: for instance, in November 1958 the Crooks were sent to do a stint of manual labour in a Chinese village during the Great Leap Forward. As they left the village the population turned out to see them go and Crook was powerfully reminded of the peasants of Madrigueras: ‘I saw again the old Spanish woman who wept as she thrust oranges into my hands’.⁷¹

Robert Payne, a Cornish-born journalist who worked for the *News Chronicle* in Spain during the civil war, felt this layering of memories even more powerfully than Crook. He largely avoided the fame enjoyed by many of the correspondents in Spain, but he was just as assiduous in mythologising that conflict – in 1963, for instance, he described the civil war as ‘Homeric’ in its intensity.⁷² Payne subsequently spent some years in China during the Second World War and the civil war which closely followed it. He was an immensely prolific writer who wrote over one hundred books, including a series of published diaries from China. The reader of his *Chungking Diary* (1945) is immediately struck by the repeated references to Spain. In part, this could be seen as pulling rank, like Auden, but these comments also suggest a man constantly haunted by his Spanish experiences: bifocalism again. When staying in a small inn, for instance, Payne writes that the courtyard resembled a Spanish patio, ‘and it needs only a few palms and a whispering fountain to make me think I am once again in Catalonia listening to General Modesto outlining the course of the war in Spain’. On another occasion a Chinese dawn – ‘so victorious, so clean and so still’ – resembles for Payne ‘nothing so much as the tanks of the *anarquistas* advancing towards Tarragona’. And a lyrical description of the countryside around Chungking and the Yangtze in

⁶⁸ Ibid., ch. 4, II.

⁶⁹ MML, International Brigade archive, Box 40, File C, 10 Oct. 1966, Nan Green to Sam Wild. Green, who had served as a nurse in Spain and later lived in Beijing (1953–60), refers to Crook only as ‘the chap from China’. She added that: ‘He hasn’t been near me . . . I know too much. He tried in 1949 to get me to write him a letter of recommendation to the Chinese; all I could write was a statement that he was in the IB. He wanted more’. It is not clear whether she was referring here to Crook’s ‘turning up in China’ in 1938 or 1947.

⁷⁰ Crook, *Autobiography*, ch. 14, 10.

⁷¹ *Labour Monthly*, Feb. 1959.

⁷² Robert Payne, *The Civil War in Spain, 1936–1939* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1963), 20.

September 1943 suddenly elides into this passage, whereby the two conflicts actually merge into one:

Once in Spain, travelling from Barcelona to the Ebro front, I have known the same excitement of sunrise, when the earth appears to be bathed in molten metal. There was the same shining in the air, the same air of continual and effortless expectancy, the same delight in pure being, the same feeling that the people were living their lives in an atmosphere of pure freedom . . . But what was so curious was that even the landscape seemed the same; the same reddish-yellow earth, the same aeroplanes hidden in the fields, the same small clumps of deep green trees . . . Even the river, though twenty times broader than the Ebro, looked familiar, and I began to search for the stumps of the stone bridge which Italian airmen and Asturian dynamiters had destroyed between them one day in May [1938].⁷³

III

In 1946 Payne visited Yanan and interviewed Mao Tse-tung. As the conversation was 'running into generalities', Payne mentioned the failure of the Republic in the Spanish Civil War 'as it fought against the massed artillery of the Germans. I had been there'. Payne's point was that, as China drifted into civil war, Chiang Kai-shek's government forces enjoyed a similar military advantage. However, Mao's response was something of a put down: 'Spain is not China. There were only 8,000,000 people fighting against Franco, but the Chinese liberated area numbers a population of 130,000,000. The Spanish Republic fought for three years. We have fought for twenty-one years'.⁷⁴ A somewhat similar comparison was drawn shortly after the end of the Spanish Civil War by Freda Utley, a former communist and leading British opponent of Japanese expansionism. She praised the 'stoicism' of the Chinese people and pointed out that there were fifty million Chinese refugees: 'a figure so colossal that the sufferings of Jews, Czechs and Spaniards seem small in comparison'. China had survived a war, she added, which would 'break a Western people'.⁷⁵ This provokes the thought that Spain may have been the 'great cause' of the later 1930s, but that in the longer-term China's was perhaps the greater cause. Indeed, given that by 1937–8 Moscow was beginning to prioritise China over Spain (it was, after all, far more central to the defence of the Soviet Union), why did the world communist movement not do more to reorient its campaigns? Had 'Spain' become so freighted with political and emotional baggage that it was impossible to change course? Developing that line of thought, one might also ask why China did not become a great cause like 'Spain': indeed, why did China not become 'China' – instantly recognisable, with no suffix required? Some of the more glib explanations can be discounted – for instance, Capa's comment that he

⁷³ Robert Payne, *Chungking Diary* (London: W. Heinemann, 1945), 427, 230, 404–5. Conversely, Julian Bell, who had recently returned from China when he volunteered to work with a medical unit in Spain, wrote that he was 'for ever being reminded of China' in Spain (Cunningham, *Spanish Front*, 284). He was killed at the battle of Brunete in July 1937.

⁷⁴ Robert Payne, *Mao Tse-tung: Ruler of Red China* (New York: Schuman, 1950), 217; see also Payne's *Journey to Red China* (London: W. Heinemann, London, 1947), 88.

⁷⁵ *New Statesman*, 8 July 1939, 42.

'had found the Chinese face unsatisfactory for the camera, in comparison with the Spanish'.⁷⁶ All of the evidence suggests that representations of human suffering in China were every bit as powerful as those in Spain. Even so, the question remains of why support for China did not go far beyond short-lived indignation, however fleetingly powerful?

One explanation concerns the narrative context, the means by which these sister-conflicts came to be understood in Britain. China inevitably suffered from being a non-European conflict with an immensely complicated history – after all, the British Left had become accustomed since 1927 to seeing China's leader Chiang Kai-shek as a fascist, and in the 1930s (both before and after the Nazi seizure of power) his principal source of external support had been Germany. The group that British activists tended to identify with in China, the communists, were now in formal alliance with the KMT but largely autonomous and operating in a remote area of China. Although China had been a Republic since 1911, effective parliamentary democracy on a basis of universal suffrage had never become established, and there was no focus for democratic legitimacy comparable with the Spanish Republican constitution of 1931. While certain elements of the narrative applied to both cases, such as the emphasis on the peasant majority's quest for land or the idea of a 'new' society emerging from the war-torn wreckage of the old, the Spanish Republic told a better and more intelligible story. Indeed, China's very ability to fight on despite accepting huge defeats and casualties may well have made the Chinese cause less easy to understand in Britain. After all, the war in China did not end when the 'Chinese Madrid' fell: the Chinese merely pulled further back into the vast interior and turned to guerrilla warfare. Ultimately, moreover, Europe still took precedence. When Auden and Isherwood heard the news of the fall of Austria, while visiting Hankow in March 1938, they were distraught. Faced with the prospect of a war in Europe, 'what does China matter to us in comparison with this?' If they were killed on the Yellow River Front, they concluded, 'our deaths will be as provincial and meaningless as a motor-bus accident in Burton-on-Trent'.⁷⁷ Following the outbreak of war with Germany in September 1939 Fritz Jensen, one of the Austrian doctors sent to China after the Spanish Civil War, was desperate to return to Europe and the 'greater and more important frontline which is . . . likely to turn into the decisive fighting sector of the fight of my whole life'.⁷⁸

There was also a more practical dimension. Aided by geographical proximity, Spain had the tremendous advantage of immediacy and accessibility. Spain was only a Channel-crossing and a rail journey away, whereas, for most travellers, China was still many weeks away by boat. Spain was a magnet in a way that China could never be. Hence, in December 1936 Harry Pollitt sent a telegram to Moscow that stated: 'Send [comrade] Shields to London to work on the *Daily Worker*; Our staff seriously

⁷⁶ Auden and Isherwood, *Journey to a War*, 165.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁷⁸ Jensen to Len Crome (from Hunan), 16 Sept. 1939. I am grateful to Angela Jackson for this quotation.

depleted through comrades going to SPAIN'.⁷⁹ The steady traffic of volunteers, journalists, medical staff and political delegates, backwards and forwards between Spain and Britain, which did so much to fuel support for the Spanish cause, could not be replicated for China. Moreover, in Spain, as Auden famously wrote, 'our thoughts have bodies': it was a place where wishes could become reality. In October 1935 the communist journalist Ralph Fox (an expert on East Asia history who was said to have been 'longing to go to China' at the time of his death in Spain⁸⁰) wrote a column on the occasion of trade unionist Tom Mann's eightieth birthday. He asked why there was no regiment in the Chinese Red Army named after Mann, the great 'Empire breaker' who had visited China in 1927.⁸¹ Nothing appears to have happened in response; in Barcelona, however, the first British volunteers formed the 'Tom Mann Centuria' during the summer of 1936.

In addition to questions of proximity, relevance and narrative force, it should also be noted that the very problems which confronted the Spanish Republican cause in Britain also strengthened it. Would Spain have become a 'great cause' without the deaths of hundreds of British volunteers, the polemics that raged in the local and national press, the animosity that was at times displayed towards the Basque refugee children, the attacks from Catholic pulpits and newspapers, and the British government's support for non-intervention, a policy that was flagrantly cheating the Republic of access to arms? Supporters of the Republic, united all too often in loss, not only knew who their enemy was in Spain, but also who their enemy was in Britain. By contrast, China lacked this essential grit. The best-known western 'martyr' in China was not British but Canadian: the surgeon Norman Bethune, whose 'spirit of absolute selflessness' was immortalised in Mao's famous eulogy of 21 December 1939.⁸² Many years later, Joseph Needham commented that the China Campaign Committee was a 'great feature of life in the England of those days in the thirties'.⁸³ This is perhaps overly generous, but there is no doubt that Arthur Clegg and his colleagues had organised an effective campaign that had greatly raised the profile of China within Britain. It was not, however, a campaign that possessed the essential attributes of a 'great cause'.

Arguably, neither war made a decisive impact on the British consciousness. Nancy Johnstone, who ran a hotel in Republican Spain and returned briefly to Britain in April 1938, commented that the people she met were not interested in either conflict, and banished concern about the bombings in China with the thought that 'they are only Chinese. Look at the awful things that happen to them in earthquakes'. It was, she continued, 'only slightly different with Spain. Spain was much nearer than China.

⁷⁹ TNA, KV2/2801, Pollitt to Moscow, 15 Dec. 1936.

⁸⁰ Ralph Bates, 'My friend, Ralph Fox' in John Lehmann, TA Jackson and C Day Lewis, eds, *Ralph Fox: A Writer in Arms* (New York: International Publishers, 1937), 8.

⁸¹ *Daily Worker*, 28 Oct. 1935.

⁸² Bethune had, of course, initially served in Spain: see Michael Petrou, *Renegades: Canadians in the Spanish Civil War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008), 158–68.

⁸³ Needham's 'Foreword' to Clegg, *Aid China*, 6.

Spaniards, while only just removed from Negroes, were Europeans'.⁸⁴ Charlotte Haldane wrote of her return to Britain in the winter of 1938/9 that 'Western Europe was too busy to worry about the Chinese tragedy . . . China was too far away, and the calamities there were of too vast and impersonal a scale to arouse much public or even private interest'.⁸⁵ Ultimately, as Johnstone divined, Spain was different from China – or at least sufficiently 'European' for its plight to capture a section of the British public's attention. China, conversely, simply became woven into the tapestry of the 1930s – just one of many betrayals along the road to war that had started with Japan's occupation of Manchuria in 1931. As Harry Pollitt put it in September 1940, '[i]f we had done our international duty by the Chinese and Spanish peoples, the wail of the siren would not now have become the most familiar theme tune we all know'.⁸⁶

Even so, while China could never command the same level of support as Spain within Britain, the evidence presented here suggests not only that such support was far from negligible, but more importantly that the Spanish and Chinese causes were more interconnected than has previously been acknowledged. The anti-fascism of the later 1930s was genuinely global in its scope: indeed the term 'the global Popular Front' has recently been coined (albeit principally with regard to the photography of Robert Capa in Spain and China) to illuminate these interconnections.⁸⁷ Spain and China could never be equal, but neither could they be wholly compartmentalised from each other. The fact that in the later 1930s fascism posed the greatest threat, and generated the sharpest crises, within Europe, has served to conceal this important point. A comment by the veteran international trade union organiser George Hardy in February 1939 shows how these disparate threads could be drawn together. Hardy had spent time in Shanghai in the late 1920s and a decade later carried out trade union work for the China Campaign Committee, during which time his son died fighting with the International Brigades in Spain. As the war in Spain drew to a close he wrote that: 'Let us learn the lessons from Spain. Assist China now to obtain an early victory against the menace of Fascism in the Far East, which is simultaneously, the defence of the people of Europe against fascist aggression, directly involving the British (sic)'.⁸⁸ The China campaign may have been 'forgotten', but the interconnections between the anti-fascist causes of the later 1930s certainly deserve to be recognised and explored – if only because the evidence is so richly present in the cartoons, the speeches and the literature of the time. Auden and Isherwood's prose was too portentous to make the point with any subtlety: 'History, grown weary of Shanghai,

⁸⁴ Nancy Johnstone, *Hotel in Flight* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939), 165 (I am grateful to Angela Jackson for this reference).

⁸⁵ Haldane, *Truth Will Out*, 175.

⁸⁶ *Daily Worker*, 12 Sept. 1940.

⁸⁷ 'China and Spain, 1936–1939: Capa and the Global Popular Front' was the title of a conference organised by Columbia University and the International Center of Photography on 23 April 2011.

⁸⁸ *World News and Views*, 19:5, 4 Feb. 1939, 98.

bored with Barcelona, has fixed her capricious interest upon Hankow'.⁸⁹ Far more effective was Auden's poetry:

And maps can really point to places
Where life is evil now:
Nanking; Dachau⁹⁰

**'Axe Shanghai-Madrid'? Une
comparaison des réactions
britanniques aux conflits en Espagne
et en Chine, 1936–39**

L'impact de la guerre sino-japonaise en Grande Bretagne s'est généralement trouvée éclipsée par celui de la guerre civile espagnole de l'année précédente. En effet, le seul livre à en traiter, *Aid China* par Arthur Clegg (1989), porte le sous-titre *A Memoir of a Forgotten Campaign*. Pendant quelques mois de l'automne de l'année 1937, ces deux campagnes atteignaient pourtant une sorte de parité dans la perception britannique. Le public s'unissait à condamner le bombardement japonais des cites chinoises, et à son apogée, la campagne qui s'en suivit a gagné un soutien plus important et plus large que le mouvement solidaire de la république espagnole. L'archevêque de Cantorbéry, par exemple, a ouvertement critiqué les actions japonaises, ce qui aurait été impensable dans le cas de l'Espagne de Franco. Les sympathisants de l'Espagne ne pouvaient espérer bénéficier de certaines actions solidaires offertes à la Chine (les dockers, par exemple, ont refusé de charger les navires japonais). Cet article compare les deux campagnes de soutien et examine leurs liens. Ce faisant, il ramène à la lumière la campagne oubliée pour la Chine, et demande comment l'Espagne, à la différence de la Chine, est devenue la 'grande cause' de la fin des années 1930.

**'Achse Shanghai-Madrid'? Ein
Vergleich der britischen Reaktionen
auf die Konflikte in Spanien und
China, 1936–39**

Die Wirkung des Japanisch-Chinesischen Kriegs auf Großbritannien wird im Allgemeinen von dem tiefen Eindruck überschattet, den der ein Jahr zuvor ausgebrochene Spanische Bürgerkrieg hinterlassen hat. Das einzige Buch zu diesem Thema, *Aid China* von Arthur Clegg (1989), trägt denn auch den Untertitel *A Memoir of a Forgotten Campaign*. Gleichwohl nahmen beide Kriege im Herbst 1937 in der Wahrnehmung der britischen Bevölkerung für wenige Monate in etwa den gleichen Stellenwert ein. Die Bombardierung chinesischer Städte durch die Japaner wurde in Großbritannien einhellig verurteilt, und in ihrer Hochphase fand die daraufhin entstehende Bewegung zur Unterstützung Chinas einen breiteren Rückhalt als die Solidaritätsbewegung für die spanische Republik. Die öffentliche Kritik des Erzbischofs von Canterbury an den Kriegshandlungen Japans beispielsweise wäre im Fall von Francos Spanien undenkbar gewesen. Einige Solidaritätsbekundungen für China (wie die Weigerung britischer Hafentarbeiter, japanische Schiffe zu be- und entladen) gingen weit über das hinaus, was die Befürworter der spanischen Republik sich erhoffen konnten. Dieser Beitrag stellt einen Vergleich zwischen beiden Bewegungen her und untersucht die Verbindungen zwischen ihnen. Er wirft nicht nur neues Licht auf die 'vergessene' Unterstützungsbewegung für China, sondern geht auch der Frage nach, warum Spanien und nicht China zum großen würdigen Ziel – der 'Great Cause' – der späten dreißiger Jahre wurde.

⁸⁹ Auden and Isherwood, *Journey to a War*, 50.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 274.