

## THEY WENT TO SPAIN

*by Mike McCormack AOH Historian*

Napoleon's failed invasion of Russia in 1812 was a turning point in the Napoleonic Wars, leading to his abdication and restoration of the Bourbon monarchy. Russia then played a central role at the post-war Vienna Congress of 1814 as a leader of anti-revolutionary forces. This suited the Bourbon kings who once again ruled and allowed the formation of the French Communist Party (PCF). Then, in 1920, after the death of Lenin, his successor Josef Stalin established a new ideology for the Communist International. He called it Marxist-Leninism and redefined the theories of both Lenin and Marx to establish a new meaning to benefit establishing a global Communist world. It reformed civil law, made marriage secular between social-and-legal equals, facilitated divorce, legalized abortion and voided the political power of the upper and middle class and privately owned businesses. The Marxist-Leninist world view was totally atheist denying religion in the affairs of human society. The PCF as the French Section of the Communist International adopted the new ideology. In 1921, they spread it to Spain where the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) was founded. The PCE was legalized by the Second Spanish Republic in April 1931 and gained much support. Soon the Republic began introducing the atheistic doctrines of the new Communist ideology. In May 1931, anti-clerical violence broke out all over Madrid and south-west Spain. The government's slow response disillusioned the population and reinforced their view that the Republic was determined to persecute the Catholic church. In December a new reformist, liberal democratic constitution was declared and included strong provisions to secularize the previously Catholic country by abolishing Catholic schools and charities; many committed Catholics strongly opposed. Churches were closed down, unspeakable atrocities were committed against priests and nuns and sacred artifacts were destroyed or stolen. Then in July 1936, a rebellion was led by General Francisco Franco which marked the beginning of the Spanish Civil War.

Due to international politics at the time, some saw it as either a class struggle, a religious war, a struggle between dictatorship and democracy or between fascism and anarchism. In reality it was the result a polarization of Spanish life and politics that had developed since the introduction of communism. On one side, the Nationalists were mostly Roman Catholics, ranking members of the military, middle-class landowners and businessmen. On the other side, the Republic was supported by urban workers, agricultural laborers and members of a newly educated lower class.

The war became notable for the passionate political division it inspired and for the many atrocities that occurred, on both sides. Organized purges occurred in Republican areas to eliminate suspected opposition and revenge killings took place in areas controlled by Franco's Nationalists. As the execution of thousands of priests and nuns took place, New York's Archbishop Cardinal Hayes asked New Yorkers to cry for Spain. The Church hailed Franco as a deliverer but never sanctioned violence in retribution for the atrocities against his followers. While Stalin sent volunteers and weapons to the Republicans, many nations officially took a neutral stance. That neutrality faced serious opposition from sympathizers in the U.S. and other European countries leading to International Brigades. Thousands from all nations voluntarily went to Spain to aid in the fight on either side.

The new Irish Free State joined an International Committee for Non-Intervention and passed The Spanish Civil War (Non-Intervention) Act in 1937 making it a punishable offence to travel from Ireland to Spain for any who would volunteer to serve in Franco's cause. However, while the IRA sent 300 men to support the Republicans, former IRA General Eoin O'Duffy led 700 Irishmen to fight for Franco as a result of the violence being perpetrated against Catholics and clergy. By the end of the war, more than 6,000 Irish had volunteered in the Christian cause creating unofficial Irish involvement in the Spanish Civil War on both sides. County Councils passed resolutions of support for Franco and requiem Masses were said for the fallen showing the support of the Irish people for the cause of Spain's persecuted Catholics though today's Irish government will not recognize that. Of 500,000 deaths in the War, 200,000 were combat-related: 110,000 Republicans and 90,000 of Franco's Nationalists, the rest were civilians, but the destruction of a world-famous library's priceless manuscript collection is lamented by historians to this day. Another Irish Free State legislation, the Merchant Shipping Act of 1937 restricting Irish shipping to Spain was finally repealed 80 years ago on 27 April 1939 after Franco's forces defeated the Republicans. Franco set up a military government under which the PCE was repressed with specific laws banning Communists. General Franco ruled anti-communist Spain until his death

in November 1975 and was always grateful to the Irish who followed O'Duffy and were proud to claim, "*We went to Spain!*" which had a special meaning in the 1940s; it wasn't just for a holiday! The Irish volunteers who were ready to fight Communism in Spain were convinced that the cause of Franco was the cause of their Church and rose to its defense; every Hibernian should be able to relate to that.