

# Art of the Basque Children

Making sense of their and their families experiences of the Spanish Civil War through artistic activity

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June 2016

## Introduction

2016 marks the eightieth anniversary of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936. The war started with a military uprising led by General Franco with the objective of overthrowing the democratically elected Republican Government and was to last for three years. The war evolved over its duration and for the first time in Europe 'total war' was waged against the supporters of the government. This included bombing civilian areas of cities, blockades of ports and sinking of merchant ships to disrupt food and medical supplies, and extra judicial killing of civilians and prisoners of war. These would be recognised as War Crimes now.

Nearly 4000 children accompanied by Maestras (qualified teachers), Auxilares / Senioritas (unqualified carers) and priests from the Roman Catholic Church came to Britain. Arriving on the ship *Habana* from Bilbao on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May 1937 the children were aged from 6 to 16 years and were initially housed in a large tented camp near Southampton at Eastleigh. Starting in a few weeks and over the period of a couple of months the children all moved from the camp to Colonies. They were in groups of between 10 and a few hundred and were entirely supported by non governmental ad hoc committees or the Catholic Church. By the end of the Second World War all but 400 had returned to Spain or rejoined their families in exile. Throughout their time in Britain their care was coordinated by the Basque Children's Committee (BCC) but each Colony was the responsibility of a local group.

## The Basque Children's experience of war

In the early months of 1937 the insurgent army had advanced towards the heavily populated and industrialised Basque Country and its largest cities Bilbao and San Sebastián. Their war effort here was supported by Nazi Germany's Condor Legion who bombed and then fire bombed towns like Guernica and other smaller towns and villages. Bilbao also suffered daily bombing raids.

The response of the Basque Government was to organise its defence by creating an army and to organise shelters and civil defence for its non combatant citizens. The ports had been blockaded for months, merchant shipping was attacked and as a result food and medical supplies were not sufficient for the resident population swelled by refugees fleeing from the advancing armies of General Franco.

News of the evacuation of children to Britain – other children went to France, Belgium, and the Soviet Union - was met by parents with enthusiasm because they wanted safety for their sons and daughters. The separation from their parents was however a traumatic experience for the children. Many travelled without siblings, though many were accompanied by brothers and sisters. Brothers over the age of 16 years stayed and were involved in the war. Babies and children aged five and under stayed with their families.

The children arrived in Britain and the BCC had agreed with the Basque Government that family groups be kept together and that their language and culture should be protected by housing and having lessons in Spanish. Offers from families to foster individual children were declined at this time.

As the days turned into weeks and months the children were kept informed of events in Spain – the fall of Bilbao was met with widespread distress. News of family members was given to the children whether it was good or bad. The BCC records the following about children in their care in the Didsbury Colony in Manchester 1:

Burgos Urriaga children Juan Jose, Natividad & Carmen aged 12, 11, & 8  
Mother in Bilbao writes regularly, father dead

Jose Alonso Portela aged 16

No Father, mother was seriously ill in March, in Bilbao

And from the Watermillock Colony in Bolton:

Castilejo Villa children Maria Rosa aged 15 and Ascunsi6n 11

Family reunited in France. Father in touch with Basque Delegation to arrange for children to go to Biarritz

Lopez Gonzalez children Dolores aged 10 and Jose L 11

No father. Mother has returned to her old home. Desierto (deserted)

### **People's History Museum, Manchester (PHM)**

Pictures representing a range of styles are held in the archive of the People's History Museum from a number of un-named Colonies. The children's art was an important activity and was created by children aged from 6 years to 16. They include, collage, binka or threading silks through holes in card, pencil tracing and shading, and war scenes probably themed around the Battle of the Ebro.

### **Art as therapy**

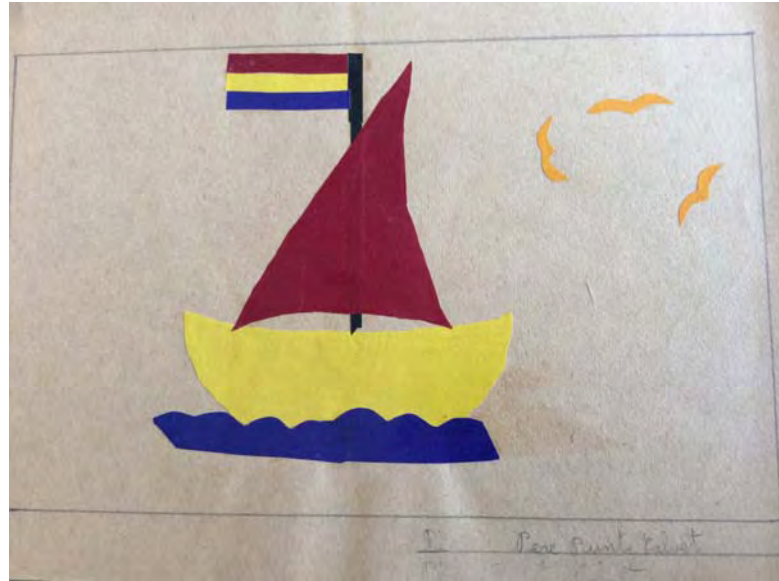
The quiet activity of creating pictures of different forms is a relaxing and calming pursuit which gives the child the opportunity to chat whilst they are creating. These children had experienced war and the trauma associated with war and will have benefitted in a healing sense from what we would now all traumatic stress.

The pictures of war are violent but carefully constructed with great detail. They show the partisan nature of the children in that they include both sides and identify their side with the Republican Flag. They also include representations of ambulances and the evacuation of the wounded on stretchers because these children's families had direct experience of the individual consequences of war.

I include examples of each of the main styles.







In 2017 the Basque Children's Association will be commemorating the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of the Basque Children. I hope to be able to include more of the pictures held by the People's History Museum on the association's web site. For further information about the history of the children go to the association's website [basquechildren.org](http://basquechildren.org)

Other sources in which the Basque Children have their voice are Dorothy Legarreta's, Adrian Bell's and Natalia Benjamin's 4 books.

1 list of children to return to Spain PHM (BCC 1938)

2 The Guernica Generation Legarreta, Dorothy (University of Nevada Press, 1984)

3 Only for three months Bell, Adrian (Mousehold Press, 2007)

4 Recuerdos: Basque children refugees in Great Britain Benjamin, Natalia (Mousehold Press, 2007)