

# The International Brigades: Fighting Fascism [C1]

Il giornalista e storico britannico Giles Tremlett ha scritto il libro definitivo sulle esperienze degli uomini e delle donne di tutto il mondo che si recarono in Spagna per combattere il fascismo durante la Guerra Civile.

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Between 1936 and 1939, some thirty-five to fifty thousand men and women from around the world volunteered to fight in the Spanish Civil War. They travelled to Spain as part of the International Brigades and [took up arms](#) against the forces of Spanish general Francisco Franco. Speaking different languages, [lacking](#) military experience, and armed with inferior weapons, the Brigaders [made up](#) (to a degree) for these disadvantages with their [astonishing](#) bravery as well as their capacity to improvise: heavy library books, for example, were [repurposed](#) as sandbags by [machinegun crews](#).

## STORIES OF WAR

These fighters of fascism would have no doubt appreciated Giles Tremlett's book *The International Brigades*. The [hefty](#) tome is more than five hundred pages long and includes hundreds of [footnotes](#) detailing extensive source material. The British historian, a former journalist for *The Guardian*, has spent much of his working life in Madrid. Previous books include *Ghosts of Spain* (2012), which sought to unearth difficult truths about the country's painful past.

## HUMAN STORIES

On presenting *The International Brigades*, Tremlett began with the joke that "It would have stopped the bullets"! However, as he told *Speak Up*, he felt it important that the subject matter be treated with rigorous attention to fact and detail. As with his previous book, his [aim](#) was to do justice to the many human stories that make up the Spanish character today. He began by talking about how his books reflect both the past and the present. **Giles**

**Tremlett (British accent):** I've always been a historian, a secret historian, shall we say. They say journalism is there in the the first version of the first draft of history. So I think maybe I just drifted backwards in time. My first book was really about how the present meets the past. You know, the present day Spain and and how it relates to its history. And that has inevitably taken me down that track, which is fantastic. **IN CONTEXT** According to Tremlett, the subject of the International Brigades serves to explain both the global events that preceded the Spanish conflict and the World War that came after it. **Giles Tremlett:** Well, I've been meeting members of the Brigades on and off for about twenty years as a journalist, and was always fascinated by them. And it struck me as a very good way of writing about the 1930s, writing about Spain, and writing about the Spanish Civil War in its international context, as a war which, while it was a civil war here in Spain, was also an international war in the sense that it was a clash between the great ideologies of the day. What [historian Eric] Hobsbawm calls the Age of Extremes, I think. And so it's the sort of curtain-raiser to World War Two in that sense, and really sort of crystallises all the looming confrontations, or the actual confrontations of the 1930s and of what's really the sort of post-World War One, which never quite gets sorted out.

## **SOURCE MATERIAL**

Tremlett's extensive research took him all over the world, but the real treasure trove was made available digitally. **Giles Tremlett:** Well, I was very fortunate in that the main and best source appeared online just as I was starting, and that's the Comintern — the International Communist — library in Moscow, and the actual International Brigades records were taken there, or some of them. So that's a good half a million pages of documentation which suddenly become ultra-accessible. Even going to Moscow would have been extremely difficult because it's very slow in the archive to get all that material up. So I was very fortunate to have kind of instant access to that. And apart from that, I went to archives in Warsaw, Amsterdam, London, New York, Stanford, Salamanca, Madrid, and various other places.

## COLLECTIVE MEMORY

This chapter in history pervades the collective memory. We asked Tremlett why. **Giles Tremlett:** The contemporary observers struggled to find anything to compare the International Brigades with in their own experience or in history, and in fact turned back to the Crusades to find an example of another international volunteer army. So just the idea that people were volunteering to go and fight for a cause in another country was itself pretty exceptional. In British history or literary culture people were always amazed by Lord Byron going to fight in Greece. And this was, you know, thirty five thousand Lord Byrons. I'm not saying they're all poets because they weren't, they were mostly working-class men and women, but that was pretty exceptional. And then secondly, because the Brigaders themselves saw themselves as fighting a war against international fascism. They could see that Hitler and Mussolini were on the other side sending troops, sending air units to help the nationalist Francoist side. So they saw themselves as fighting a battle against global fascism. And of course, three years later, that's what everybody was doing, or everybody in most of the Western democracies were doing. So they were sort of right before their time. And I think that is one of the reasons people see them as special. Nobody knew at the time that the Holocaust was coming up, but that's, in very simplistic terms, what they were fighting against.

## POLARISED

Writing about Spain, even as a foreigner, can place one in a vulnerable position, as Tremlett discovered. **Giles Tremlett:** I've certainly offended lots of people with the book. I've been called everything from a communist cockroach to a fascist sympathiser. So, you know, people are easily offended by the Civil War in multiple ways, and one just really has to ignore them and plough on with whatever oneself thinks is an intellectually honest approach, and accept that people have different opinions and everything is open, open to criticism. And that's really a constant of writing about history in Spain — not just for foreigners, but for Spanish historians as well, because it's a bit of a battlefield. There's not much agreement in Spain about what the past

means and even some disagreement about what the past actually was. So it's a very [sore](#) and difficult area.

## CONTROVERSY

As such, Tremlett's book has caused controversy. However, as he explained, if you're offending people on both sides of the argument, then you're probably [on the right track](#). **Giles Tremlett:** I also think Spaniards are very respectful of historians as a whole. If like me, you've written a book with, you know, a hundred pages of [footnotes](#) at the end, I think they can also accept that you've done the work properly and that maybe they might disagree with the interpretation, but that doesn't mean that it won't be an interesting thing to read. Even if it is simply to end up disagreeing with it. But, yes, from the more kind of radical people whose [take](#) on history is led by the [gut](#) — [shall we say](#)? — well, yes, if the insults come from both sides, well, that's fine by me.

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# Glossary

- **took up arms** = prendere le armi
- **on and off** = ogni tanto, di tanto in tanto
- **sore** = dolorosa
- **shall we say** = possiamo dire
- **treasure trove** = scoperta del tesoro
- **aim** = obiettivo
- **drifted backwards in time** = essere trasportato indietro nel tempo
- **repurposed** = convertire
- **hefty** = corposo
- **footnotes** = note a piè di pagina
- **machinegun** = mitragliatrice
- **it struck me** = mi è sembrato
- **plough on** = andare avanti lo stesso
- **curtain-raiser** = avanspettacolo
- **cockroach** = scarafaggio
- **made up** = compensare
- **crews** = ufficiali
- **clash** = scontro
- **to get all that material up** = registrare, archiviare
- **gut** = viscere
- **sorted out** = risolvere
- **take** = interpretazione
- **astonishing** = sorprendente
- **draft** = bozza
- **looming** = imminente, incombente
- **on the right track** = sulla strada giusta
- **lacking** = mancare
- **taken me down that track** = mi ha portato su quella strada
- **pervades** = pervadere