

Reassessing the Humanitarian Activism of Eleanor F. Rathbone in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1937



Figure 1: Elliot and Fry; Eleanor Florence Rathbone; year unknown;
Photographs Collection, National Portrait Gallery.

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Civil War, 1936-1937

Rebecca Mundill

This thesis is 12,500 words long excluding the bibliography and the front matter

This thesis is dedicated to Dr Robin Richard Mundill
1958-2015

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List of Abbreviations

BCC	Basque Children's Committee
NJC	National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief
NUSEC	National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (formerly known as the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies)
POUM	Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (The Worker's Party of Marxist Unification)
SCA	Special Collections and Archives (at the University of Liverpool)
SMAC	Spanish Medical Aid Committee

Map of Spain

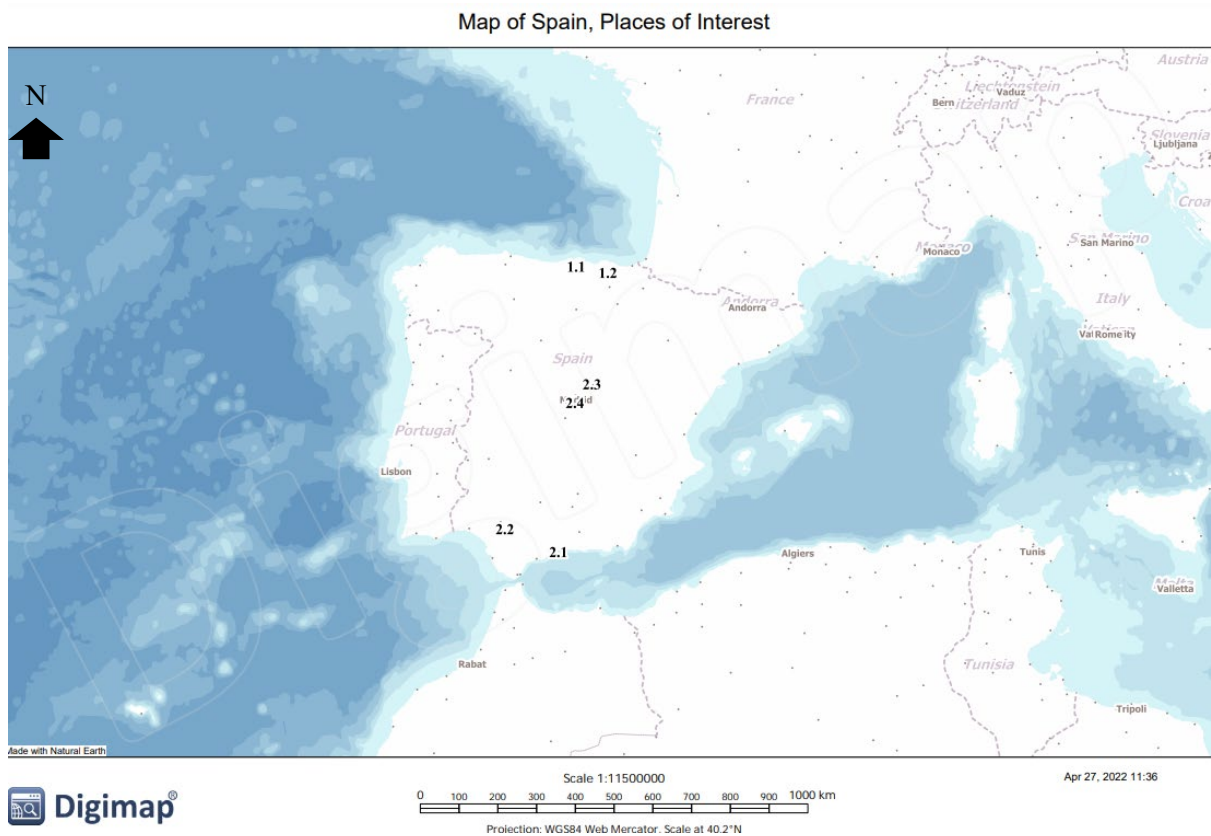


Figure 2: Author; Map of Spain, Places of Interest; 2022; DigiMap.

Key

1.1: Santander blockade

1.2: Bilbao

2.1 Malaga (location of Arthur Koestler's arrest by the Nationalist Army)

2.2 Seville (location of Arthur Koestler's imprisonment)

2.3 Jarama (Suspected Battle in which Halcrow Verstage was killed – February 1937)

2.4 Brunete (Battle which the Roll of Honour found that Halcrow Verstage was killed - July 1937)

Introduction

‘Were I to begin the tale of those who have worked with you and who admired you where would I stop’,

Mary Stocks, *Eleanor Rathbone: A Biography*, 1949.¹

Eleanor Rathbone’s near forty year career in politics is remembered for her many achievements. Rathbone (1872-1946) has previously been commended for her work as the first woman representative in Liverpool City Council from 1909-1943, for her leadership of the NUSEC 1919-1928, for her life long campaign for Family Allowances and as an Independent MP in the British Parliament from 1929 until her sudden death on the 2nd of January 1946. As her first biographer, Mary Stocks, observed, detailing Rathbone’s career and her many achievements is almost impossible.²

Rathbone was born into a wealthy Liverpool family. Her father William was a merchant and Liberal politician. After attending Somerville College Oxford, Rathbone began her political career in local government as a representative for Granby Ward in Liverpool City Council. William, whom Rathbone greatly admired, raised his eleven children on the notions of ‘what ought to be done must be done’ and fulfilling ‘unsuspected obligations’.³ These family mottos undoubtedly shaped Rathbone’s initial political career on a local level and then both nationally and internationally as a parliamentarian. As the unknown author of her obituary in

¹ Mary Stocks, *Eleanor Rathbone: A Biography* (London, Gollancz, 1949), p.8.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, p.33.

the *Manchester Guardian* wrote, Rathbone ‘spent her life in the effort to improve the world for others’ and she was truly dedicated to the causes she supported. ⁴

In response to the challenge of examining and recognising Rathbone’s vast career, Stocks, Johanna Alberti, Susan Pedersen and Susan Cohen have all written lengthy biographies.⁵ However, in doing so, they covered Rathbone’s political and humanitarian contributions in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) sparingly, leaving them obscured by Rathbone’s other more prominent political achievements. This thesis seeks to re-examine Rathbone’s work in the first year of the war to posthumously accredit her for the extent of her humanitarian work and support for the Spanish Republicans. Whilst historians and her biographers have framed her work in this war solely around the committees she was involved in, this thesis proposes that Rathbone was a distinctive and pioneering humanitarian activist who went beyond expectations to provide aid to victims of the conflict. It will reassess Rathbone’s work by examining how she combined her dislike of the British government’s non-intervention policy with her own humanitarian activities before assessing her overlooked work to prove that the Spanish Civil War was an important and decisive moment in her political career. This re-examination will add another, more detailed, dimension to the contemporary memory of Eleanor Rathbone.

Rathbone was a firm believer in democracy, peace and liberty and these, alongside the beliefs in public duty and service that she inherited from her father, shaped her response to the Spanish Civil War.⁶ Together with her stance against non-intervention, she responded to the British Parliament’s lack of involvement in the war in a direct and compelling manner that

⁴ Unknown Writer, “Obituary: Miss Eleanor Rathbone”, *The Manchester Guardian* (3rd of January 1946), 3.

⁵ Mary Stocks, *Eleanor Rathbone: A Biography* (London, Gollancz, 1949); Johanna Alberti, *Eleanor Rathbone* (London: Sage Publications, 1996); Susan Pedersen, *Eleanor Rathbone and the Politics of Conscience* (London: Yale University, 2004); Susan Cohen, *Rescue the Perishing: Eleanor Rathbone and the Refugees*, by Susan Cohen (Elstree: Valentine Mitchell, 2010).

⁶ Pedersen, pp.279-280.

highlighted the government's general nonchalance for the war. To her, the Spanish conflict emphasised how non-intervention and appeasement were ineffective when facing Fascism.⁷

Historiography:

There are two fundamental components in the historiography of this reassessment of Rathbone as a humanitarian activist in the Spanish Civil War. The first element is how her biographers have analysed her work and the second is how historians have examined women as humanitarians in the Civil War and more broadly in the early 20th century.

Feminist biographers see themselves 'engaged in the act of rescue'.⁸ This is certainly true of Rathbone's four biographers who, from 1949 to 2010, sought to keep Rathbone's legacy alive in contemporary memory. Stocks' 1949 biography is principally a narrative of Rathbone's life and is a more of subjective rather than an objective account of her career.⁹ Her work also pays little attention to Rathbone's activities in the Spanish Civil War. That being said, as Rathbone's friend and colleague, she was the closest of the biographers to Rathbone. This means that her record is useful in gauging how Rathbone was received in the 1940s. Moreover, Alberti wrote her biography in 1996 and separated Rathbone's career into gendered and non-gendered categories.¹⁰ Reliant on Rathbone's published writings as source material which mostly evidences Rathbone's career pre-1930, Alberti places little emphasis on Rathbone's triumphs in both the Second World War and, crucially to this thesis, the conflict in Spain. In response to these biographies Pedersen's 2004 biography primarily presents Rathbone as a

⁷ Rachel Reeves, *Women of Westminster: The MPs who Changed Politics*, 2nd edn (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), p.54.

⁸ Jenny Coleman, 'Vested Interests: The Con Artist, the Historian and the Feminist Biographer', *Auto/Biography Studies*, 25:1 (2010), 18-31 (p.18).

⁹ Stocks, *Eleanor Rathbone: A Biography* (London: Gollancz, 1949).

¹⁰ Alberti, *Eleanor Rathbone* (London: Sage Publications, 1996).

feminist and largely overlooks her work as a humanitarian activist in Spain and her focus on providing relief for refugees in her late career.¹¹

Finally, Cohen has given the most recent attempt to evaluate Rathbone's life.¹² Her 2010 biography takes a 'detective style' approach in patching together Rathbone's career.¹³ Using the term 'humanitarian activist' that was first employed in connection with Rathbone by Brian Harrison and Sybil Oldfield, Cohen examines Rathbone's aid to refugees as a whole.¹⁴ She places the most emphasis on Rathbone's work with Jews in the lead up to and during the Second World War. While Cohen does include a brief assessment of Rathbone's humanitarianism in the Spanish Civil War, she only connects it to her attitude in favour of collective security and does not fully detail the extent of Rathbone's achievements in Spain. Furthermore, any reference to the war in Spain is overshadowed by her detailed study of Rathbone's work with Jewish refugees. Cohen, who is the co-founder of *The Remembering Eleanor Rathbone Group*, wrote that it was this work that 'presaged a shift in the focus of her humanitarian activism, as she moved away from domestic concerns, concentrating on foreign affairs and the looming international crisis'.¹⁵ This thesis will argue against this, emphasising that it was her humanitarian activism against Fascism in the Spanish Civil War that started this change of focus towards foreign policy.

¹¹ Pedersen, *Eleanor Rathbone and the Politics of Conscience* (London: Yale University, 2004).

¹² Cohen, *Rescue the Perishing: Eleanor Rathbone and the Refugees*, by Susan Cohen (Elstree: Valentine Mitchell, 2010).

¹³ Tony Kushner, 'Foreword', in *Rescue the Perishing: Eleanor Rathbone and the Refugees*, by Susan Cohen (Elstree: Valentine Mitchell, 2010), pp. ix-xiii (p.x).

¹⁴ Brian Harrison, *Prudent Revolutionaries: Portraits of British Feminists between Wars* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp.99-104; Sybil Oldfield, *Women Humanitarians: A Biographical Dictionary of British Women Active between 1900 and 1950* (London: Continuum, 2001), pp.190-2.

¹⁵ Susan Cohen, 'In Memory of Eleanor Rathbone, so-called "MP for Refugees"', *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe*, 50:2 (2017), 6-14 (p.7).

Linda Mahood has pointed out that biographies are ‘written in response to the political and social climate which the biographers find them in’.¹⁶ With this in mind, this thesis aims to react to Rathbone’s activities in the early part of the Spanish Civil War by applying it to recent research that has gendered humanitarian aid in the early 20th century. It is not a biography but it does seek to play the role of the historian as an investigator of forgotten knowledge, to bring this overlooked period of Rathbone’s career to light and to frame her as an important humanitarian activist in the Spanish conflict.¹⁷

Moreover, historians of humanitarianism and internationalism have previously noted how the First World War changed the humanitarian field for women and allowed them to become more involved.¹⁸ Despite this, Róisín Read has noted that historians have been slow to make gender a central theme in their analysis of humanitarianism and to adopt this as a central part of their analysis.¹⁹ In response to this, Esther Möeller et al have examined the ‘empowering potential’ of being a woman involved in humanitarianism during and after during the First World War.²⁰ This is true of the humanitarian response to the Spanish Civil War. Angela Jackson made an early attempt to analyse humanitarianism through gender roles in the conflict in 2002. Despite covering a range of women’s roles in both Spain and in Britain, she found that British women who stayed at home were traditionally cast as fundraisers.²¹ In addition to this, more recent attempts in line with the current boom in analysing

¹⁶ Linda Mahood, *Feminism and Voluntary Action: Eglantyne Jebb and Save the Children: 1876-1928* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.216.

¹⁷ Jo Labanyi, ‘History and Hauntology’, in *Disremembering the Dictatorship: The Politics of Memory in the Spanish Transition to Democracy*, ed. by Joan Ramon Resina (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 65-82 (p.69).

¹⁸ Leila Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women’s Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp.13-48.

¹⁹ Róisín Read, ‘Embodying Difference: Reading Gender in Women’s Memoirs of Humanitarianism’, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 12:3 (2018), 300-318 p.300.

²⁰ Esther Möeller, Johannes Paulmann and Katharina Storning, ‘Introduction’, in *Gendering Global Humanitarianism in the Twentieth Century: Practice, Politics and the Power of Representation*, eds. by Esther Möeller, Johannes Paulmann and Katharina Storning (Berlin, Springer Nature, 2020), 1-32 (p.2).

²¹ Angela Jackson, *British Women and the Spanish Civil War* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp.124-125.

humanitarianism through gender, have enhanced this work. Historians, have demonstrated that women largely participated in caregiving roles.²² Comparing Rathbone's humanitarian activism to these more traditional humanitarian roles will highlight that she does not fit into this paradigm.

Finally, Abigail Green has found that, 'much work remains to be done on politics and activism' in the humanitarian field.²³ With that in mind, attention must turn to the 'upper class Western women' who had the financial means and status to devote themselves to humanitarian causes in the early 20th century.²⁴ Rathbone, due to her upbringing and political connections, falls into this category as does Eglantyne Jebb of Save the Children and, in the case of the Spanish Civil War, the Duchess of Atholl. Building on Eric Ryan-Inkson's recent repositioning of the Duchess of Atholl as an 'influential humanitarian' in the conflict and Mahood's study of Eglantyne Jebb, this thesis will illustrate how Rathbone's humanitarian activism both corresponded and differed to this model of humanitarian woman.²⁵ Thus, Rathbone's activism in Spain will be given the recognition that it deserves.

Sources and Methods:

To many, Rathbone has remained an elusive character. After her death, many of her private documents were burnt by her companion, Elizabeth Macadam, and Rathbone's London office

²² Roseanna Webster, "'A Spanish Housewife is Your Next Door Neighbour": British Women and the Spanish Civil War', *Gender and History*, 27:2 (2015), 397-416 (p.409).

²³ Abigail Green, 'Humanitarianism in the 19th Century Context: Religious, Gendered, National', *The Historical Journal*, 57: 4 (2014), 1157-1175 (p.1167).

²⁴ Dolores Martín-Moruno, Brenda Lynn Edgar and Marie Leyder, 'Feminist perspectives on the history of humanitarian relief (1870–1945)', *Medicine, Conflict and Survival*, 36:1 (2020), 2-18 (p.4).

²⁵ Eric Ryan Inkson, 'A Historical Repositioning of the Duchess of Atholl as an Influential Humanitarian During the Spanish Civil War', (published thesis, Leeds University, 2018) in <<https://albavolunteer.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Ryan-Inkson.pdf>> [accessed: 20th March 2022]; Mahood, p.216.

was destroyed during the Blitz. However, the University of Liverpool Special Collections Archive holds the *Papers of Eleanor Rathbone* which were of fundamental importance in assessing Rathbone's activities related to Spain. Two uncatalogued reels of microfilm hold sources ranging from private letters, parliamentary notes and reports.²⁶ This thesis is largely based on the evidence found within these. Whilst Rathbone's biographers and some Civil War historians such as Tom Buchanan have drawn on some of these documents before, many of them have been disregarded or overlooked.²⁷ No previous study has specifically dedicated itself to Rathbone's humanitarianism in Spain so these sources have generated little interest from past historians.

The documents showed Rathbone's communications with diplomats, cross party colleagues and members of the Nationalists army. The volume of letters found in the microfilm reels captures her persistence in pressuring the government's stance on non intervention and her commitment to giving humanitarian aid when they failed to. Similarly, personal letters show a more emotional side to Rathbone. Additionally, the reports and parliamentary notes illustrated how Rathbone used information that she gathered through her communications to give to parliament and the public. A full examination of the hundreds of documents in the *Papers of Eleanor Rathbone* would go beyond an undergraduate thesis. However, those used in this thesis highlight the true extent of her work.

In order to contextualise these sources, supplementary newspaper articles from 1936 and 1937 were studied as well as the works of Spanish Civil War historians and humanitarian historians. These were very useful in framing Rathbone's beliefs against non intervention and

²⁶ SCA, RPXIV.2 Public Correspondence and Papers: Files; RPXIV.210-2.14, Spanish Civil War c.1936-1940; SCA, RPXIV.3.4 General Papers; RPXIV.3.55-3.5 (6-85), Notes and Questions made by Eleanor Rathbone in Parliament.

²⁷ Tom Buchanan, *Britain and the Spanish Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.34.

in helping to explain her work in Spain. Moreover, by comparing Rathbone to pre-existing models of humanitarian women, this thesis will show how Rathbone's work was exceptional. This will show that her feminism and political position added a unique dimension to this model of humanitarian women and allowed her to respond differently to her contemporaries.

As discussed earlier, this thesis takes the form of an investigation and a reassessment of Rathbone's humanitarian activism. Using this framework and these sources, the thesis will focus on the first year of fighting in Spain in order to recognise her achievements which have not previously been fully assessed. By contextualising Rathbone against other women humanitarians in the war, it will reveal the true extent of Rathbone's dedication to helping victims of the Nationalists and warning the British parliament and government about the dangers of Fascism.

Contents:

Chapter 1 draws on Rathbone's work as the leader of the Committee of Enquiries into Breaches of International Law Relating to Intervention in Spain (1936-1937) and her humanitarian assistance during the Santander blockade (April – October 1937). It seeks to show how Rathbone's abhorrence of the Conservative government's decision to observe the Non-Intervention Agreement when evidence that she collected proved that Germany and Italy were breaking the pact. In turn, this will show how Rathbone's political beliefs merged into her public actions in administering aid to Spain and how she rallied the public response to parliament and how she acted against the government. Through analysing the pressure Rathbone applied to Parliament as an Independent MP, backbencher and feminist, it will demonstrate how her activities differentiated her from the traditional image of humanitarian

women and will examine in detail her humanitarian activism in her official duties during 1936-1937.

Chapter 2 will investigate two overlooked examples of Rathbone's interactions with the public to prove her dedication to public service. Firstly, an examination of her correspondence with Austrian Jews, Arthur and Dorothea Koestler, will demonstrate how Rathbone's humanitarian aid was not limited to Spanish refugees and British people in Spain. Secondly, by studying her interaction with the Verstage family, it will aim to show how Rathbone's abhorrence of suffering influenced her humanitarianism. This chapter will convey how Rathbone was at the forefront of international humanitarianism and worked across party lines both nationally and internationally to administer relief work. The way she responded to these personal appeals for her help will demonstrate how her sense of moral obligation drove her humanitarian responses in the Spanish Civil War and give her full recognition for actions that have previously been understated by historians and biographers.

Chapter 1

Challenging the Politics of Non-Intervention:

Eleanor Rathbone, the British Parliament and Public Opinion, 1936-1937

‘The attitude of the responsible Ministers, has, rather, been like that of a fastidious gentleman walking with averted nose past a butcher’s shop’,

Eleanor Rathbone, *War Can be Averted* (1938).¹

On the 17th of July 1936, after a Nationalist army rebellion in Morocco started initial stages of fighting in the Spanish Civil War, Stanley Baldwin’s Conservative government, and much of the British public, regarded the conflict as inconsequential to Britain and its foreign policy. When the Spanish Empire fell apart after ‘el Desastre’ of 1898 (when Cuba won its independence) and because of their neutrality in the First World War, Spain lost much of its international power and status. It was distant from Britain’s geopolitical radar, meaning that many remained unperturbed by the July military coup. A Pathé newsreel report from the 3rd of August 1936 urged Britons to be ‘thankful that we live in a country where men are free to express their political opinions without being shot, where internal strife is a thing unknown’ highlighting Britain’s general nonchalance and even disdain towards the early events in Spain.²

¹ Eleanor F Rathbone, *War Can Be Averted: The Achievability of Collective Security* (London: Gollancz, 1938), p.66.

² A. Aldgate, *Cinema and History: British Newsreels and the Spanish Civil War* (London: Scolar Press, 1979), p.107.

By September 1936, Britain with 26 other countries (including Italy and Germany) had signed the official Non-Intervention Agreement in the Spanish Civil War. In theory, this meant that none of them would become involved in the conflict.

Historians such as Tom Buchanan have pointed out that, due to frustrations with this policy of non-intervention, new movements in which ‘female politicians were particularly prominent’ emerged to intervene in the Civil War.³ Rathbone was at the forefront of this. She had been one of seven women to be elected into Parliament in 1929 as an MP for the Combined English Universities and was the only woman Independent MP at this time. Even as a backbencher she was still one of the fourteen women parliamentarians and among the minority who challenged the male dominated parliament’s policies towards the Civil War. However, as this thesis will examine, she not only played a crucial role in political discourse and holding power to account, she also, quite uniquely, played a critical role in humanitarian efforts to provide Spanish Civil War relief.

Rathbone was one of the most vociferous condemners of non-intervention. Throughout the Civil War, she publicly criticised the government’s decisions in parliament and in her own publications and letters to the press. Whilst Italy and Germany set about breaking the pact and arming the Nationalists, Rathbone set about providing aid for Spain. From England, she worked to secure the arrival of British shipments to Spain in order to save and provide relief for refugees in a conflict which eventually descended into ‘the prelude to the Second World War’.⁴

However, as previously mentioned, Rathbone was not the only woman parliamentarian who focussed their time on Spanish Civil War relief. The Duchess of Atholl (MP for Kinross and West Perthshire) worked closely with Rathbone in administering aid. The two worked

³ Tom Buchanan, *Britain and the Spanish Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.65.

⁴ Andy Durgan, *The Spanish Civil War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p.1.

together in the NJC and BCC with Rathbone as the vice-chair under the Duchess' leadership. Eric Ryan-Inkson has previously drawn attention to the Duchess' role as a humanitarian during the Spanish Civil War and this chapter aims to enhance his work to give full recognition to Rathbone for her own achievements.⁵ Rathbone's politics as a suffragist, feminist and social reformer set her apart from the Duchess who was a Conservative and famously anti-suffrage.⁶ By the time the Civil War erupted, Rathbone had already had a life-long career in social reform which positioned her well for intervening in government policy during the conflict and for administering aid. Biographers have previously drawn conclusions about Rathbone's humanitarianism in Spain from her work in aid committees with a large emphasis being placed on her work with the NJC in rescuing 4,000 Basque refugees from Spain. In response to this, this chapter seeks to reassess in more detail Rathbone's public activities and official responsibilities between 1936-1937. It will examine the political and diplomatic channels that Rathbone used to provide humanitarian relief and will uncover the lengths that Rathbone went to challenge parliament and provide aid to Spain. This will prove her significance as a woman humanitarian activist in the period. It will also demonstrate how she overcame the inherent societal power dynamics of the early 20th century to fulfil this role.

While historians have argued that women traditionally pursued fundraising roles as humanitarians in the Spanish Civil War, this chapter seeks to explore how Rathbone did more than just raise money for Spanish relief.⁷ It will challenge this by explaining how Rathbone's constant challenges to British government policy separates her from these more traditional humanitarian women who raised money and provided care. Finally, it will show that her

⁵ Eric Ryan Inkson, 'A Historical Repositioning of the Duchess of Atholl as an Influential Humanitarian During the Spanish Civil War', (published thesis, Leeds University, 2018) in <<https://albavolunteer.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Ryan-Inkson.pdf>> [accessed: 20th March 2022].

⁶ Ibid, p.12.

⁷ Angela Jackson, *British Women and the Spanish Civil War* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.124.

unwavering stance against non-intervention and that her unique position as a feminist and Independent MP allowed Rathbone to become a powerful voice in Parliament and public life.

In order to achieve this, firstly, the chapter will outline the politics behind the non-intervention policy and Rathbone's reaction to them. Secondly, it will trace Rathbone's work on the Committee of Enquiry into Breaches of International Law Relating to Intervention in Spain (1936-1937) and how she used their findings to elicit a public response. Thirdly, it will closely consider how Rathbone used political and diplomatic ties to administer aid and to attempt to convince a dismissive parliament of the ineffectiveness of the Nationalist Santander blockade and encourage the public to act on the emerging refugee crisis. This will recognise the significance of Rathbone's humanitarian activism in the Spanish Civil War.

Rathbone's Intervention

On the 15th August 1936, during the first month of fighting in Spain, Britain signed The Non-Intervention Agreement. The concept of non-intervention was started by Léon Blum's Socialist government in France who had been asked to aid the Republicans in early July. Blum's government refused this as it did not want to risk a conflict with Germany and Italy without British support. His solution was to encourage an international agreement and by September 1936, a Non-Intervention Committee had been founded in London. Rathbone and some of her contemporaries including the Duchess of Atholl were outraged by this especially as it had become increasingly evident that Italy and Germany were providing aid to Franco's rebels. However, the British government failed to respond to the breaking of the agreement. In her 1938 book *War Can be Averted: The Achievability of Collective Security*, Rathbone alleged that the Conservative government had a pro-Franco bias and accused them of facilitating

‘breaches of humane customs’ in their dealings with Spain.⁸ This book was part of the *Left Book Club* movement founded in 1936 by publisher and humanitarian Victor Gollancz which aimed to ‘oppose inequality, war and fascism’ and provide a platform for ideas negated by a deeply conservative media.⁹

Rathbone’s decision to publicly condemn an all-male government in such a fashion might be perceived as bold in a period where women’s position in society was seen to be beneath that of men. Dierdre Beddoe’s research into women’s positions found that, in the inter-war years, the media cast women solely as housewives and mothers and any alternatives to this stereotype were presented as ‘wholly undesirable’.¹⁰ Beddoe’s findings may be an overstatement and generalisation as some women, mostly from the middle class, were able to break this stereotype. However, it is useful in understanding the gender roles that were prescribed to women at the time. Beth Jenkins has since found that women who entered careers in the public sphere also faced marginalisation. She notes that ‘the default embodied professional remained absolutely male’.¹¹ In addition to this, the women activists such as Eglantyne Jebb who formed humanitarian organisations or those who became lobbyists for peace were also side-lined by a patriarchal society in which ‘men were determined to bar women from active involvement in foreign policy and diplomacy’.¹²

Whilst Rathbone undoubtedly faced this marginalisation in a majority male government it did little to deter her determination and activism. Stocks clarified this in her biography, recalling how Rathbone’s ‘imperturbable unconcern with sex’ made it easy for her to work

⁸ Rathbone, p. 67.

⁹ *The Left Book Club Today*, < <https://www.leftbookclub.com/about> > [accessed on 31 March 2022].

¹⁰ Dierdre Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty: Women between the Wars, 1918–1939* (London: Pandora, 1989) p. 8.

¹¹ Beth Jenkins, ‘Gender, Embodiment and Professional Identity in Britain, C.1890-1930’, *The Journal of Society and History*, 17:4 (2020), 599-515 (p.510).

¹² Ingrid Sharpe and Matthew Stibbe, ‘Women’s International Activism during the Inter-War Period: 1919-1939’, *Women’s History Review*, 17:2 (2017), 163-171 (p.164).

with men.¹³ Therefore, her feminist beliefs put her in a position to challenge a male dominated parliament and, on occasions, even condemn their political decisions. This is useful in explaining Rathbone's fearlessness to pressure parliament's policy of non-intervention. This ability was perhaps due to her earlier experience as the only women member on Liverpool City Council in 1909, her experience as a suffragist and a leader of NUSEC. In parliament, her tenacity and persistence in lobbying led her to be a prominent backbencher. Indeed, Rathbone's presence in Parliament was so felt that it would make ministers 'duck behind doorways when they saw her coming', illustrating her authority and status as a woman and a backbencher in a male dominated sphere.¹⁴

Challenging Parliament Opinion: Non-Intervention as a breach of International Law, October 1936 - May 1937

On the 3rd of October 1936, just 11 weeks into the fighting, The Committee of Enquiry into Breaches of International Law Relating to Intervention in Spain published their first report. Rathbone was the only woman to be on this committee and led the 7 male members who included Labour MPs, the first ever Spanish professor at the University of Cambridge, pacifists and disarmament campaigners and John Langdon-Davies who founded the organisation that is now *Plan International*.¹⁵ Their October report listed detailed examples of how Germany and Italy had broken the pact of non-intervention and given arms to the Nationalists. Their 16 page October report concluded that 'the supply of arms assistance to the rebels...is a gross violation

¹³ Mary Stocks, *Eleanor Rathbone: A Biography* (London, Gollancz, 1949) p.48.

¹⁴ Rachel Reeves, *Women of Westminster: The MPs Who Changed Politics*, 2nd edn (London: Bloomsbury 2020) p.48.

¹⁵ Report and Findings of Committee of Enquiry into Breaches of International Law Relating to Intervention in Spain, Philip Noel Baker, 3rd of October 1936, Archives of the Trade Unions Congress, Warwick Digital Collections.

of International Law and must be likely to endanger peace throughout the world'.¹⁶ By leading this committee, Rathbone placed herself at the heart of pressuring the government's stance. Her leadership and research for the report meant that the committee presented an informed attack on the government's non-intervention policy that was based on eye-witness accounts of German and Italian intervention in Spain. Although this failed to change parliament's stance, Buchanan points out that it did impact public opinion. He notes that the publication of the October report triggered a growing concern in the public for international peace and security.¹⁷

Rathbone's reaction to non-intervention is unsurprising. All of her biographers have previously positioned her as a new woman and a new feminist in the period after women gained enfranchisement. Beddoe's assessment on the splintering of feminism after the outbreak of the First World War had divided feminists into those typically middle class women who supported the war effort and those who supported pacifism and peace.¹⁸ While there is no evidence to show that Rathbone was a pacifist, her humanitarian work in Spain, the views expressed in her book: *War Can Be Averted: The Achievability of Collective Security* and her work in the Committee of Enquiry into Breaches of International Law Relating to Intervention in Spain, demonstrates her deep concern with advancing the cause of peace. However, the way Rathbone rejected the government's policy was not a particularly pacifist approach as she continuously attacked them publicly and in parliament and lambasted the non-intervention policy. In her book she went as far as likening them to 'a housewife anxious to be rid of a litter of unwanted kittens, who, as she hands them over to the executioner, remarks perfunctorily, "poor little things"'.¹⁹

¹⁶ Ibid, p.16.

¹⁷ Buchanan, p.26-31.

¹⁸ Beddoe, p.136.

¹⁹ Rathbone, p.66.

Furthermore, the levels to which she went to condemn non-intervention make her stand out also from women in the field of humanitarianism. Joy Damousi's research into the role of Australian aid worker, Esme Odgers, in the civil conflict has highlighted the gap in research into the women who worked on the front lines of humanitarian aid. She found that Odgers' role in providing aid for children and rebelling against her government's stance on non-intervention 'involved providing emotional sustenance' rather than being a political rebellion.²⁰ In accordance with this, Roseanna Webster has demonstrated that 'British women concerned with Spain were emphasising their role as nurturers in relation to those across borders' and thus conforming to the traditional representation of women humanitarians.²¹ On the other hand, Rathbone's initial work on Spanish relief was more related to a clash of political and moral ideologies. This is seen in the conclusion of the May 1937 report made by her committee which stated that the British government had an 'obligation of honour on this nation' to respond to Italy and Germany breaking the agreement.²² Therefore, Rathbone's fervent attempt to prove that both countries had broken International Law in their intervention in Spain in the political sphere sets her apart from other female humanitarians of the time. Unlike those others, Rathbone was in a unique position to employ her political power in parliament, and draw on its information resources and communication networks. Her subsequent interruptions in parliament demonstrate this.

To pressure the government into changing their stance on non-intervention and to expose German involvement in the infamous destruction of Guernica, Rathbone repeatedly questioned the Foreign Secretary, Antony Eden, about the breaches of the agreement. On the

²⁰ Joy Damousi, 'Humanitarianism and Child Refugee Sponsorship: The Spanish Civil War and the Global Campaign of Esme Odgers', *Journal of Women's History*, 32.1 (2020), 111-134 (p.111).

²¹ Roseanna Webster, "'A Spanish Housewife is Your Next Door Neighbour': British Women and the Spanish Civil War", *Gender and History*, 27:2 (2015), 397-416 (p.409).

²² SCA, RPXIV.2 Public Correspondence and Papers: Files; 'The Committee of Enquiry into Breaches of International Law relating to Intervention in Spain: May 1937', RPXIV.210-2.14, Spanish Civil War c.1936-1940.

24th of May, just under a month after the attack on Guernica, Rathbone asked Eden if the Non-Intervention Committee were considering the presence of German aircraft over Spain.²³ As the war progressed, Rathbone's interruptions in parliament became more frequent: in 1936-7 she asked 89 questions and in 1937-8 she raised 100 of them in a bid to challenge the government's stance.²⁴ Putting Eden and parliament on the spot in such a way was a clear strategy in trying to influence them and shows that she could be dogged in condemning and disagreeing with a majority male parliament. In one of her most famous speeches she blamed the fall of the North of Spain completely on the government's non-intervention policy.²⁵ In response to her questions and speeches, the Conservatives would resort to barracking in a 'sometimes utterly outrageous' way.²⁶ In spite of this, her determination and persistence to condemn non-intervention had some impact. In November 1937, after the Labour party Annual Conference in Bournemouth, the party was instructed to 'undertake a nationwide campaign forthwith to compel the government to abandon the Non-Intervention Agreement'. This marked a clear change in policy as until this time, the Labour Movement was staunchly for non-intervention.²⁷ Although it is impossible to prove how much Rathbone's work contributed to the change in policy, her repeated questions and speeches in Parliament and her work in the Committee of Enquiry into Breaches of International Law Relating to Intervention in Spain kept the issue of non-intervention at the forefront of debate.

This section has demonstrated how Rathbone's beliefs caused her to stand up to Parliament despite their reactions to her. She continuously pressured the government as she

²³SCA, RPXIV.3.4 General Papers; '24th May 1937', RPXIV.3.55-3.5 (6-85), Notes and Questions made by Eleanor Rathbone in Parliament..

²⁴ Susan Pedersen, *Eleanor Rathbone and the Politics of Conscience* (London: Yale University, 2004), p.281.

²⁵ Ibid, p.288.

²⁶ Paula Bartley, *Ellen Wilkinson: From Red Suffragist to Government Minister* (London: Pluto Press, 2014), p.81.

²⁷ Spain Campaign Committee: Draft Circular, November 1937, Archives of the Trades Union Congress, Warwick Digital Collections.

saw Italy and Germany's support for the Nationalists as a breach of International Law that threatened global peace and gave rise to the Fascist powers. The fact that a world war broke out soon after proves that she was not wrong in this judgement. Similarly, this section has conveyed that Rathbone's resolute courage in publicly challenging non-intervention distinguishes her from other humanitarian women of the time.

'What ought to be done must be done' – The Santander Blockade, April-October 1937

Prior to the publication of the May report from the Committee of Enquiry into Breaches of International Law Relating to Intervention in Spain, Rathbone acted on her pro-intervention stance and intervened as a humanitarian in the events which were unfolding in the north of Spain. In April 1937, Franco announced that he would stop all ships entering ports in Northern Spain to prevent the citizens from receiving much needed food and to starve the area into submission. Preston has argued that this 'put to the test British commitment to non-intervention' as innocent Basque civilians were suffering.²⁸ The Basque government soon chartered British merchant ships to provide medical relief and to feed their starving public. The British government was forced to navigate these circumstances whilst protecting their ships from increasing Nationalist attacks.²⁹

During this time, the British government received reports of the Nationalists bombing their merchant ships and soon forbade them from entering the 3 mile limit of the coast of Spain in case of attack, ceasing the recovery process. Whilst Preston presents a detailed account of the blockade in the north of Spain, he fails to consider the impact of Rathbone's response to this political decision. She was infuriated with the lack of government support for the emerging

²⁸ Paul Preston, 'Britain and the Basque Campaign of 1937: The Government, The Royal Navy, The Labour Party and The Press', *European History Quarterly*, 48:3 (2018), 490-515 (p.496).

²⁹ Ibid.

refugee crisis in the North. Correspondence that she had received from José I. de Lizaso, the Representative to the Basque Government in the Spanish Embassy, had shown her that the news reports of the blockade were inaccurate and that the ports were protected by Republican ships.³⁰ In Lizaso's words, Santander was 'only blocked in the minds of those who do not wish to further the work of the evacuation of the civil population of the city'.³¹ Furthermore, Rathbone's parliamentary notes show that 'the Red Cross had declined to work in Spain' and were not offering relief.³² Enraged by these facts, Rathbone began pressuring Parliament to supply humanitarian relief to the refugees, to withdraw their blockade warnings and to give naval protection to any British merchant ships that could not get through. According to her, the refugee crisis emerging from the Santander blockade 'could be averted by a simple uncostly change in policy' namely intervening in Spain.³³

In accordance with the Rathbone family motto 'what ought to be done must be done', this section will discuss how Rathbone acted on her beliefs by managing aid to Santander whilst publicly condemning her government's stance and raising awareness of the refugee crisis and conditions in Santander. Her biographers have acclaimed Rathbone for her part in the evacuation of 4,000 Basque children refugees with the NJC. However, this section seeks to convey how Rathbone did more than just this and used her own diplomatic contacts to gather information on the blockade and its impacts. Communications with her own connections provided her with evidence of the falsity of the blockade which she could use to inform the public whilst simultaneously using her connections to send medical aid to Santander through

³⁰ SCA, RPXIV.2 Public Correspondence and Papers: Files; 'Letter from José I. de Lizaso, 9th of July 1937', RPXIV.210-2.14, Spanish Civil War c.1936-1940.

³¹ SCA, RPXIV.2 Public Correspondence and Papers: Files; 'The Refugee Question at Santander: British Responsibility for Impending Disaster', RPXIV.210-2.14, Spanish Civil War c.1936-1940.

³² SCA, RPXIV.3.4 General Papers; '5th July 1937', RPXIV.3.55-3.5 (6-85), Notes and Questions made by Eleanor Rathbone in Parliament.

³³ SCA, 'The Refugees Question at Santander: British Responsibility for an Impending Disaster'.

the NJC. This will add a more detailed record of Rathbone's humanitarian work in the Santander blockade to her remembrance.

Throughout this period, Rathbone was in constant communication with two men: Commander Harry Pursey, a Naval officer placed in Santander, and Lizaso. With reports from them both, she gathered information that she could use to pressure Parliament and to encourage the public to act. In July 1937, 20 out of the 26 parliamentary questions Rathbone made were related to the Santander crisis with her asking repeatedly for a more effective evacuation of refugees and for an enquiry into the warning for British ships not to enter the zone.³⁴ Moreover, a letter from Rathbone to an unknown British newspaper dated from the 9th of July 1937 illustrates a summary of her findings and her solutions.³⁵ In this letter she made a plea for public opinion to influence the government's stance on the matter. She detailed the emerging refugee crisis and attacked the British government's failure to lift their blockade warning on Santander. Concluding her letter with a solution, she suggested that the British government extended naval protection to British ships and the others that carried refugees right up to Santander. She claimed that the Basque government would welcome it and that there was nothing for Franco to object to as he wanted to keep Britain on side.³⁶ The language in this letter contradicts Jackson's view that Rathbone 'rarely deployed the emotional weapons in the reformer's armoury'.³⁷ This is because it is direct whilst maintaining a level of emotional intensity. She warned that the human toll of the situation 'as terrible and on a far larger scale than Guernica' to attract public sympathy and attention.³⁸ Moreover, her offering of a well-informed practical solution still demonstrates that her responses to Spain were practical and

³⁴ SCA, RPXIV.3.4 General Papers; '1st July - 30th July 1937', RPXIV.3.55-3.5 (6-85), Notes and Questions made by Eleanor Rathbone in Parliament.

³⁵ SCA, 'The Refugee Question at Santander: British Responsibility for an Impending Disaster'.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Jackson, p.145.

³⁸ Ibid.

distinguishes her from the more traditional representations of humanitarian women. The fact that Rathbone wielded her diplomatic connections in Pursey and Lizaso to give aid, gather information and form solutions shows that she could balance her political activism with her humanitarian responses. Thus, she acted on both of her responsibilities simultaneously to intervene in Spain when Parliament failed to.

While her efforts to change the government's positioning on the Santander blockade were unsuccessful, her work in publicising the refugee crisis in Santander prompted a public response, particularly from those on the left. Jim Fyrth has detailed the emergence of the Aid to Spain movement in the public sphere. He argued that the public participated in this movement due to their awakening to 'the nature of Fascism, to the dangers of the Axis Powers and the true character of the appeasers'.³⁹ Fyrth also noted that donating or participating in these groups became a political act because they were 'probably organised by people of left sympathies on behalf of people with a left-wing government opposed by the British government'.⁴⁰ Whilst Fyrth's argument may be a generalisation, there is evidence that shows that Rathbone did appeal to a leftist and more liberal audience for support. Rathbone's work in Santander is an example of the politicisation of public aid and of inciting the public to act against government policy. A letter by her published in *The New Statesman and Nation* on the 3rd of July 1937 shows this. It condemns non-intervention and criticises the government's failure to act in Santander and hints at their pro-Insurgent sympathies.⁴¹ The fact that this was published in a Leftist newspaper drew on their opposition to the Conservatives whilst informing them about the Santander blockade. Through this, Rathbone was able to condemn the

³⁹ Jim Fyrth, 'The Aid Spain Movement in Britain, 1936-39', *History Workshop*, 35:1 (1993), 153-164 (p.162).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Eleanor Rathbone, "Non Intervention", *New Statesman and Nation* (Jul 3, 1937), 11-12.

government's failure to intervene in Spain whilst eliciting a humanitarian response from the public.

Finally, in response to the amount of British people who became involved in humanitarian aid in this period of fighting, Buchanan observed that it 'emphasised the fundamental inability of the British state to control its own citizens'. Raising the public's concern about this is clearly down to Rathbone's political action in the early part of the war. Stocks wrote that her 'policies at home or abroad were almost always constructive', because she was wholly successful in drawing to public attention the failures of British government policy in the Civil War.⁴² Thus, this section has exposed how Rathbone acted on her beliefs on non-intervention when the British government failed to and how she informed and rallied the British public. This analysis goes beyond assessing the success of her work in saving 4000 refugees from Bilbao on which historians have previously concentrated. It how she used diplomatic ties to inform the public about the government's lack of action and give accurate reports about the developing situation, in turn, prompting them to show solidarity with Spanish victims of the Nationalist army.

Conclusion

By engaging with the *Papers of Eleanor Rathbone*, biographical studies of Rathbone, Spanish Civil War studies and British political history, this chapter has shown how Rathbone's stance against non-intervention transcended into both her parliamentary and her public activities in dealing with the Santander blockade. The extent to which she pressured the government and her tenacity in challenging their stance on Santander and to change public opinion mean that she was a leading humanitarian activist in the war. It also separates her from other humanitarians at the time as she balanced her politics with her humanitarianism and was a key

⁴² Stocks, p. 227.

player in both fields. As she was one of a minority of women in Parliament, it is easy to assume that Rathbone's voice was often overshadowed. However, her questions and speeches in parliament surrounding non-intervention meant that she repeatedly drew attention to issues in Spain. Furthermore, her work on the Committee of Enquiry into Breaches of International Law Relating to Intervention in Spain shows that she was not intimidated by a male dominated political sphere. Overall, her beliefs against non-intervention positioned her at the forefront of the political and humanitarian responses to the Spanish Civil War.

Chapter 2

Eleanor Rathbone's Unsuspected Obligations in the Spanish Civil War:

Responses to personal appeals for assistance in the Fight against Fascism, 1937

‘I want to express my deepest gratitude for the generous help you gave in obtaining my release, and the kind assistance you accorded my wife in her great anxiety’,

Arthur Koestler, 31st of May 1937.¹

Throughout the war, Rathbone received numerous letters from individuals and associations seeking her personal aid. Occasionally, specific cases and situations were brought to Rathbone's attention by her contemporaries such as Isabel Brown or F.H Brown.² Each letter and individual case drew on Rathbone's ethos of fulfilling ‘unsuspected obligations’ and her sense of public service, both of which she inherited from her father.³ By examining Rathbone's unofficial duties in providing aid in the Spanish Civil War, this chapter will enhance 21st century understanding of Rathbone's character, depicting her as a dutiful and reliable figure who took it upon herself to help the public. It will also show that her humanitarian aid in the

¹ SCA, RPXIV.2 Public Correspondence and Papers: Files; ‘Letter from Arthur Koestler, 31st May 1937’, RPXIV.210-2.14, Spanish Civil War c.1936-1940.

² SCA, RPXIV.2 Public Correspondence and Papers: Files; ‘Letter from Isabel Brown, 10th March 1937’, RPXIV.210-2.14, Spanish Civil War c.1936-1940; SCA, RPXIV.2 Public Correspondence and Papers: Files; ‘Letter from F.H Brown, 12th April 1937’, RPXIV.210-2.14, Spanish Civil War c.1936-1940.

³ Mary Stocks, *Eleanor Rathbone: A Biography* (London: Gollancz, 1949), p.33.

civil war did not just concentrate itself on Spanish refugees but extended to helping foreign journalists and British personnel in Spain. To do this, she crossed party lines, negotiated with Nationalists and drew on the international community.

The chapter will focus on Rathbone's interactions with Dorothea and Arthur Koestler. Arthur was a renowned Austrian journalist who was arrested in Malaga by Nationalists on the 9th of February 1937 on suspicion of spying and later sentenced to death.⁴ It will demonstrate Rathbone's involvement in his eventual release which was motivated by her fervent beliefs in justice, freedom and democracy.⁵ Through an analysis of Rathbone's part in this humanitarian juncture, the section will show that she is an example of a more modern humanitarian who was more focussed on human rights as opposed to charity work.⁶ This will also separate her from more traditional humanitarian women who were motivated by care and charity.

After this, the chapter will explore a more sensitive side to Rathbone's humanitarianism by showing how she helped Mrs Dorothy Verstage find out about the death of her 22 year old son, Halcrow. Halcrow was a member of the SMAC and was placed on the Madrid front in February 1937. Despite finding out that he was missing, Mrs Verstage had no confirmation of his death and, through F.H Brown, appealed to Rathbone for assistance in April 1937. By assessing her communications with the Verstage family, this section will demonstrate Rathbone's abhorrence of any form of human suffering and will show how she went beyond her duty to help this family.

Neither of these examples of Rathbone's aid have been previously examined by historians or Rathbone's biographers. In this sense, this chapter will adopt the role of Walter

⁴ Unknown Writer, "Journalist who Escaped Death", *Evesham Standard and West Midland Observer* (22nd of May 1937), 7.

⁵ Susan Cohen, *Rescue the Perishing: Eleanor Rathbone and the Refugees* (Elstree: Valentine Mitchell, 2010), p.87.

⁶ Bruno Cabanes, *The Great War and The Origins of Humanitarianism: 1918-1924* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p.3.

Benjamin's historian who 'looks for significance in fragments and details normally overlooked' to recognise the true extent of Rathbone's humanitarian work.⁷ Although this notion is normally applied to the history of popular culture, it is useful to take this stance in investigating the importance of these elements of Rathbone's humanitarianism that have been previously overlooked.⁸ Through this analysis, the chapter will prove that Rathbone was a truly dedicated pioneering humanitarian activist who was prepared to work with either side of the conflict and the British political sphere to help others. By exploring these individual examples, this chapter will show how committed Rathbone was to alleviating suffering as she often took on more than one responsibility at once as these two examples are very close to each other in time. Finally, a comparison of her motivations for helping others will once again distinguish her from more traditional models of humanitarian women. Overall, the following examinations will posthumously recognise Rathbone for the work that she did for the Koestlers and the Verstage family.

Rathbone and International Volunteers in the Fight against Fascism

Before considering the ways in which Rathbone unofficially responded to these personal appeals, it is necessary to examine why everyday British civilians and foreign reporters and journalists found themselves in Spain and in the fight against Fascism. The British government imposed the Foreign Enlistment Act of 1875 as part of their Non-Intervention Agreement to make it illegal for British men to volunteer to fight in Spain. Despite this, around 2,400 men still joined the International Brigade although figures are unknown due to the fact that no official records were kept as a response to the imposition of this Act. The majority of these

⁷ Jo Labanyi, 'History and Hauntology', in *Disremembering the Dictatorship: The Politics of Memory in the Spanish Transition to Democracy*, ed. by Joan Ramon Resina (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 65-82 (p.69).

⁸ Ibid.

men were from industrial backgrounds who had solidarity with Trade Unionism.⁹ Many of them had connected the Republican Struggle with that of the working-class and communism and found themselves aligned against the Fascist cause made up of ‘Upper Classes, the Clergy and the Army’.¹⁰ Tom Chivers (a civilian volunteer for the BCC from Teesside) stated in an interview with the BBC, that to him ‘there was a difference, in the ’14 war it had been a straightforward thing in one sense, but now you had the politics coming into it, here was something that was aimed at the working class themselves’.¹¹ This explains why most civilians became involved in the internal Spanish conflict as they believed that by volunteering they could combat Fascism and diminish its threat to international stability.

However, Chris Richards and Michael Ealham have warned of the dangers of oversimplifying the Spanish Civil War into dual frameworks such as democracy v fascism or modernity v tradition. They argue that these over-simplified frameworks fail to incorporate the various social revolutions that occurred in the period and generalise the two opposing sides.¹² Nevertheless, understanding the war in these ways is useful in capturing the reasons that empowered civilians to volunteer on the Republican Side in their masses. To prove this, George Orwell, who was in Spain as a journalist but later joined POUM, remarked that when the fighting began in July, ‘it is probable that every anti-Fascist in Europe felt a thrill of hope. For here at last, apparently, democracy was standing up to Fascism’, capturing the mood of those who joined up in what they viewed as the fight for democracy.¹³ As Tom Buchanan has noted,

⁹ Colin Williams, Bill Alexander and John Gorman, *Memorials of the Spanish Civil War* (Stroud: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1996), p.xii.

¹⁰ Xosé-Manoel Núñez Seixas, ‘Nations in Arms against the Invader: on Nationalist Discourses during the Spanish Civil War’, in *The Splintering of Spain: Cultural History and the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939*, eds. by Chris Richards and Michael Ealham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp.45-68 (p.47).

¹¹ Tom Chivers, No Pasaran 16217; date unknown, Imperial War Museum.

¹² Chris Richards and Michael Ealham, ‘History, Memory and the Spanish Civil War: Recent Perspectives’, in *The Splintering of Spain: Cultural History and the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939*, eds. by Chris Richards and Michael Ealham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1-23 (p.1).

¹³ George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (London: Penguin Books,2000), p.198.

solidarity with the Republic was inspired by the notion that a better society was being created in Spain, ‘from oppression and disunity to national pride and liberation’, a democracy that seemed ‘superior’ to British democracy.¹⁴ This, therefore, explains why foreign volunteers got caught up in an internal civil war which, with the exception of Italy, Germany and the Soviet Union, their governments had no interest in joining.

Whilst this explains the type of individual Rathbone tasked herself with helping, attention needs to be turned to her own support for the Spanish Republic and the reasons she was moved to help individuals unofficially. Throughout the 1930s, Rathbone was renowned in the British Parliament for being anti-Fascist, Rachel Reeves labels her alongside the Duchess of Atholl and Ellen Wilkinson as one of the ‘unsung heroines’ of the anti-appeasement movement in the fight against Fascism.¹⁵ This explains her allegiance to the Spanish Republic and links to her care for humanity and unsuspected obligations. Similarly, Rathbone’s undeniable care for others and desire to serve the public in her ‘unsuspected obligations’ also elucidates her reasons for helping those who volunteered in the fight against Fascism in Spain. As Pedersen has noted, ‘there are people around the world today who owe their lives to the strength of her convictions’.¹⁶ Moreover, Cohen refers to Rathbone as the ‘so called MP for refugees’ due to her quest to save those in need and has commented that Rathbone’s work during the Second World War ‘presaged a shift in the focus of her humanitarian activism’ that moved her from internal concerns to foreign affairs.¹⁷ However, by analysing how Rathbone helped the Verstages and the Koeslters, this chapter will expose

¹⁴ Tom Buchanan, *Britain and the Spanish Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.4.

¹⁵ Rachel Reeves, *Women of Westminster: The MPs who Changed Politics*, 2nd edn (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), p. 53.

¹⁶ Susan Pedersen, *Eleanor Rathbone and the Politics of Conscience* (London: Yale University, 2004) p.1.

¹⁷ Susan Cohen, ‘In memory of Eleanor Rathbone, so called “MP for Refugees”’, *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe*, 50:2 (2017), 6-14, p.7.

that it was in fact Rathbone's work with individuals in the Spanish Civil War that caused this shift in her humanitarian work. Thus, this work foreshadowed her future campaigns and work as the 'moving spirit' of the National Committee for Rescue from Nazi Terror to help Jews escape Nazi Germany during the Second World War.¹⁸ By examining examples of Rathbone's aid that have not been previously assessed, the chapter will offer new insight into Rathbone's humanitarian work in the Spanish Civil War and her modern day memory.

Eleanor Rathbone and Arthur Koestler's release from a Nationalist Prison: her response to Dorothea Koestler's appeal for aid, March-May 1937

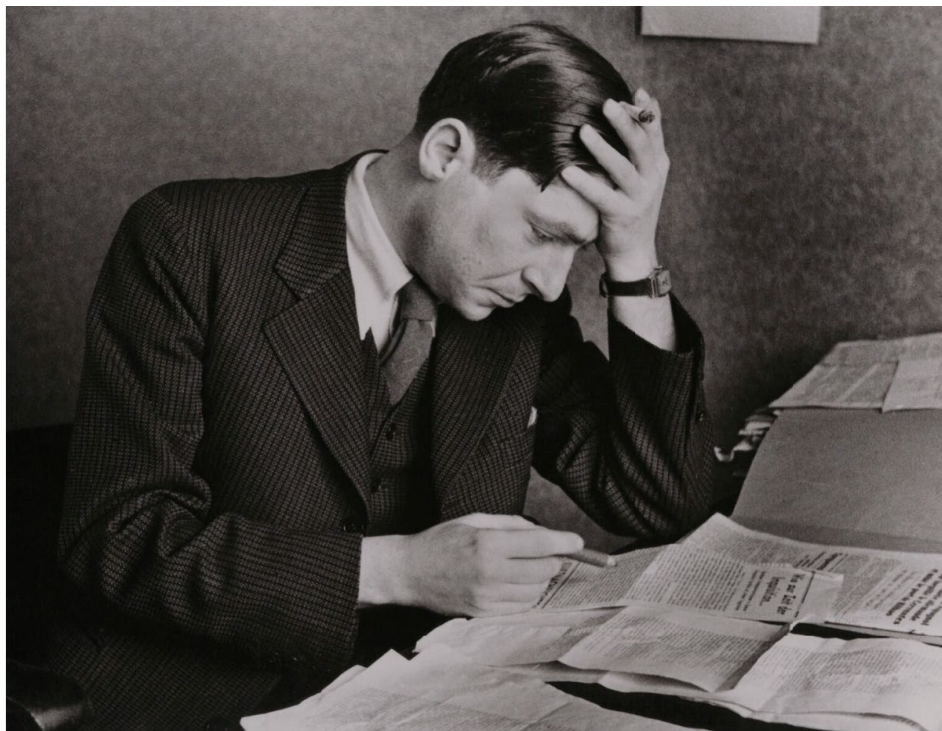


Figure 3: Fred Stein; Arthur Koestler; 1937; Photographs Collection, National Portrait Gallery.

In March 1937, Rathbone became embroiled in helping to rescue Arthur Koestler from a Nationalist prison in Seville and in helping his wife, Dorothea to stay in England while she

¹⁸ Pedersen, p.328.

waited for his return. Both Austrian-born Jewish Communists, Koestler had gone to Spain as a correspondent for the British newspaper, the *News Chronicle*.¹⁹ Arthur was stationed in Malaga when it fell to Nationalist troops on the 8th of February 1937. He was first placed in a Nationalist prison in Malaga and then in Seville where he was ‘sentenced to death for espionage’.²⁰ Crucially, he had previously given evidence of German and Italian intervention to The Committee of Enquiry into Breaches of International Law Relating to Intervention in Spain.²¹ By his own account, Koestler’s public denouncement of the Non-Intervention Agreement was ‘grand enough for me to be condemned to death by a Franco court martial’.²² Rathbone became aware of his imprisonment in a letter from Isabel Brown (a well known Communist in Britain) who put her in touch with his wife, Dorothea.²³ It was Rathbone’s beliefs in justice and democracy that involved her with the Koestlers. In a letter to Nancy Astor she wrote that his release would be an ‘act of humanity’ and in the letter she notes that the press associations regarded Koestler’s detainment as ‘an inadmissible violation of the rights and safeguards of the journalists’ profession’.²⁴ To provide help for the Koestlers, Rathbone acted in two ways. Firstly, she intervened diplomatically between England and Spain to recover Arthur and secondly she worked with the Home Office to renew Dorothea’s stay in England while she waited for Arthur’s release.

Rathbone was one of the 58 British MPs who ‘bombarded Franco with telegrams and letters of protest’ surrounding Arthur’s death sentence.²⁵ Correspondence between her,

¹⁹ Arthur Koestler, *Spanish Testament* (London: Gollancz, 1937), p.178.

²⁰ Unknown Writer, “Journalist who Escaped Death”, *Evesham Standard and West Midland Observer* (22nd May 1937), p.7.

²¹ Cohen, p.87.

²² Koestler, p.254.

²³ SCA, ‘Letter from Isabel Brown, 10th March 1937’.

²⁴ SCA, RPXIV.2 Public Correspondence and Papers: Files; ‘Letter to Nancy Astor, 8th April 1937’, RPXIV.210-2.14, Spanish Civil War c.1936-1940.

²⁵ SCA, RPXIV.2 Public Correspondence and Papers: Files; ‘Carbon of Crossley letter to Marquis de Moral, 16th March 1937’, RPXIV.210-2.14, Spanish Civil War c.1936-1940.

Anthony Crossley (a Conservative MP) and the Marquis de Moral, a Nationalist who worked closely with Franco, demonstrates Rathbone's activities.²⁶ It also shows how she worked across party lines by working with Crossley and negotiating with her enemy to facilitate Arthur's release. In a letter sent on the 14th of March from Crossley to the Marquis, Crossley revealed that he and Rathbone had persuaded Dorothea to make her husband pledge that he would not 'abuse those who released them as an act of grace' if the Marquis could use his power to prompt Franco to release Koestler.²⁷ Moreover, a letter from the 8th of April 1937, reveals Rathbone had also reached out to Nancy Astor requesting that she approached the Infanta Beatriz to use her influence to secure Arthur's release.²⁸ This letter shows Rathbone's persistence in handling the situation as she requests that Astor does not mention her own name to the Spanish princess as it was 'better not to seem as though it was the same person "always bothering"'. This highlights her determination to help Arthur as she simultaneously used her contacts to facilitate his freedom. Both letters demonstrate that Rathbone was willing to work with through political divides (Crossley and Astor were both Conservative MPs) and communicate with the enemy (the Marquis was a Nationalist whereas Rathbone was pro-Republican) to administer humanitarian aid.

Furthermore, her involvement in this event shows that Rathbone was a more modern humanitarian who worked on the premise of 'human rights' rather than 'charity'.²⁹ This distinguishes her from other more obvious humanitarian activists like Eglantyne Jebb who were motivated by religion to help others.³⁰ On the contrary, Rathbone was motivated by her

²⁶ Scott Ramsay, 'Salamanca, May 1937: The Eighth Marquis del Moral and the Turning Point in General Franco's Foreign Policy Towards Great Britain in the Spanish Civil War', *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 2021, 1-28 (p.1).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ SCA, 'Letter to Nancy Astor, 8th April 1937'.

²⁹ Cabanes, p.3.

³⁰ Linda Mahood, *Feminism and Voluntary Action: Eglantyne Jebb and Save the Children: 1876-1928* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.188.

ultimate belief in justice and democracy. Michael Barnett has argued that Jebb was ‘attracted to humanitarianism because it allowed her to act outside of former politics’, Rathbone’s humanitarianism was the opposite of this.³¹ She knew that her dealings with Arthur were both political and humanitarian move as his death sentence was international news that would have repercussions on the Civil War and international relations. This is demonstrated in her letter to Astor as she wrote that Koestler’s release was ‘in the interest of General Franco himself’ because he wanted to earn British support.³² Similarly, her use of her political and diplomatic communications also show that her humanitarianism was firmly grounded in the political sphere. Finally, the fact that Rathbone worked with Spain to assist Arthur cements her position as a modern humanitarian activist. Keith Watenpaugh claims that ‘a final element of modern humanitarianism was the anticipation that the international community... could and would take action on behalf of humanitarian concerns’.³³ Rathbone’s work in pressuring Koestler’s release through Anglo – Spanish relations means that she falls into Watenpaugh’s observation.

Arthur arrived safely back in Britain on the 14th of May 1937 after spending 102 days in Nationalist prisons.³⁴ On the 31st of May he wrote to Rathbone ‘expressing his deep gratitude for the generous help you gave in obtaining my release’. This confirms Rathbone’s humanitarian role in saving Arthur’s life. In the epilogue of his 1937 book, *Spanish Testament*, which details his experiences as a journalist and prisoner in Spain he wrote that ‘the efforts made on my behalf... were a trial of strength between the democratic public opinion... and Franco’s dictatorial machine’ and that those who helped him came ‘forward in defence of

³¹Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (London: Cornell University Press, 2011), p.86.

³² SCA, ‘Letter to Nancy Astor, 8th April 1937’.

³³ Keith Watenpaugh, ‘The League of Nations Rescue of Armenian Genocide Survivors and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism’, *The American Historical Review*, 115:5 (2010), 1315-1339 (p.1320).

³⁴ Koestler, p.240.

justice'.³⁵ This emphasises that Rathbone acted not just to save his life but also as a defender of justice.

Before Arthur Koestler arrived in England, Rathbone wrote to the under-secretary at the Home Office on the 19th of March 1937 to approve a passport and extended residency for Dorothea Koestler.³⁶ The letter captures Rathbone's persistence in her activities as she admits at the beginning that she had already telephoned the under-secretary the day before requesting help for Dorothea. Her response to Dorothea's appeal helps to show a more personal and human nature to Rathbone and demonstrates her dedication to humanitarianism. It shows her sense of obligation to act where she deemed necessary immaterial of nationality or belief.

Rathbone's interactions with the Koestlers indicates the extent of her humanitarianism in the Spanish Civil War. This section has highlighted how she used her connections to respond to personal appeals for aid and how she was motivated to help individuals by her belief in justice.

Halcrow Verstage and a mother's plea for help, April 1937

'Dear Miss Rathbone,

How grateful I am to you for the trouble you have taken to get information about my son',

Dorothy Verstage, *Letter to Eleanor Rathbone*, April 26th 1937.³⁷

³⁵ Ibid, 283-284.

³⁶ SCA, RPXIV.2 Public Correspondence and Papers: Files; 'Letter to Under Secretary of State for Home Affairs, 19th March 1937', RPXIV.210-2.14, Spanish Civil War c.1936-1940.

³⁷ SCA, RPXIV.2 Public Correspondence and Papers: Files; 'Letter to Dorothy Verstage, 23rd April 1937', RPXIV.210-2.14, Spanish Civil War c.1936-1940.

On the 13th of April 1937, Rathbone travelled to Madrid in an all-party committee of women. Joined by the Duchess of Atholl, Ellen Wilkinson (Labour MP) and Dame Rachel Crowdy (a humanitarian and member of the League of Nations), Rathbone and the group went with the aim of finding evidence of German and Italian intervention and to report on the conditions in Spain.³⁸ They visited hospitals and schools and spoke with prisoners of war in Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia and even were bombed in Madrid.³⁹ To degrade and diminish their work an MP referred to the group as a ‘monstrous regiment of women’. However, this did not deter them and they set up the Parliamentary Committee for Spain after their return.⁴⁰ Historians have previously examined this trip but have failed to acknowledge the work that Rathbone did independently to the rest of the committee.

The day before she left, Rathbone received a handwritten letter from F.H Brown, the Honorary Secretary of the East Indian Association, which put her in contact with Dorothy Verstage, who had lost her son in Spain.⁴¹ This section explains how Rathbone secured information about the death of Verstage’s son, Halcrow. Ten days later, on the day she returned from her trip, Rathbone sent a letter directly to Mrs Verstage explaining how her son died. In Madrid, Rathbone had come into contact with a group of Englishmen in the International Brigade who had seen Halcrow in the days before his death. In a three page letter, she informed Mrs Verstage that Halcrow had died on the 10th day of a battle she thought was near the Guadarrama Mountains. She believed this to have been on the 17th or 25th of February.⁴²

³⁸ Jackson, *British Women and the Spanish Civil War* (London: Routledge, 2002) p.143.

³⁹ Daniel Pastor García and Manuel González de la Aleja Barberán, ‘Las Protagonistas Británicas en la Guerra Civil Española, in *Hasta pronto, amigos de España: las Brigadas Internacionales en el 80 aniversario de su despedida de la Guerra Civil: 1938-2018*, eds. by Franciso Alía Miranda, Eduardo Higuera Castañeda, Antonio Selva Iniesta (Albacete: Cedobi, 2019), 93-111 (pp.93-94). Translated by Author.

⁴⁰ Angela Jackson, p.146.

⁴¹ SCA, ‘Letter from F.H Brown, 12th April 1937’.

⁴² SCA, ‘Letter to Dorothy Verstage, 23rd April 1937’ p.1.

Rathbone detailed that Halcrow, ‘had just taken his wounded to the clearing station and started off again to the front’ when he was struck in the head by a bullet and referenced that, like other volunteers, he was in Spain ‘fighting for liberty and democracy’.⁴³ Rathbone concluded that these were true by stating that ‘there is no doubt whatever about the facts. They were quite well known to all these men’ and wrote that Halcrow was popular with the men she had spoken to.⁴⁴

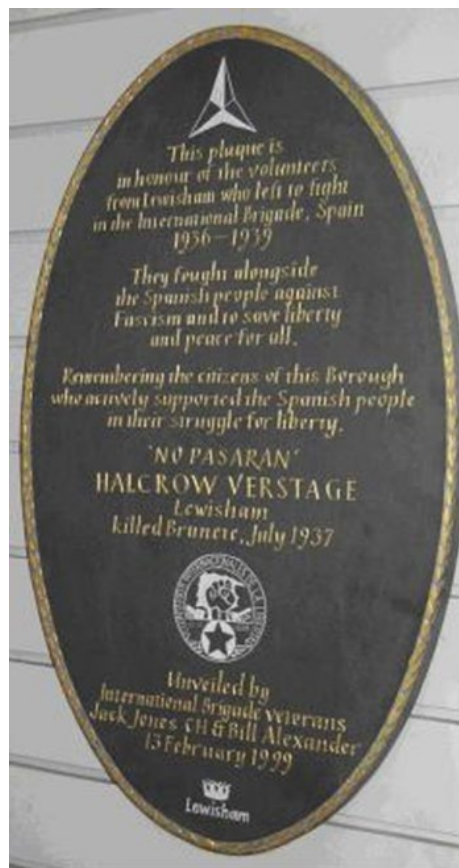


Figure 4: Unknown; Halcrow Verstage Memorial; 1999; Catford, <http://lewishamwarmemorials.wikidot.com/memorial:catford-spanish-war-memorial> > [accessed 20th March 2022].

⁴³ Ibid, p.2.

⁴⁴ Ibid, pp.2-3.

The information in this letter suggests that prior portrayals of Halcrow's death are wrong. In the roll of honour at the end of their book commemorating the International Brigade in the Civil War Williams et al named Halcrow, whose body has never been recovered, as having died in July 1937 in the Battle of Brunette on the Madrid Front.⁴⁵ The evidence in Rathbone's papers prove that this cannot be true as she wrote to Mrs Verstage in April 1937 confirming her son's death. This also shows that the details on Halcrow's memorial in Catford, London are inaccurate (see Figure 4). Rathbone's findings demonstrate that Halcrow died in February 1937 in a battle on the Madrid front. It is likely that this was during the Battle of Jarama in February.⁴⁶

Whilst Rathbone's correspondence with Mrs Verstage suggests that Halcrow's memorial is incorrect, it also demonstrates the depth of her humanitarianism and her dedication to the field. Unlike her activities with the Koeslter's this action was not politically grounded but was based on the notion of 'unsuspected obligation' to the public and Rathbone's genuine detestation of suffering: near the end of her career she reminded parliament that 'all suffering is individual suffering' and, crucially, 'all responsibility is individual responsibility'.⁴⁷ She reserved her emotions for humanitarian causes. This illustrates why she stepped forward to help Mrs Verstage to trace her son's fate when the SMAC had failed to provide her with any information.⁴⁸ Moreover, during the Spanish Civil War, there was no official tracking system in place to help relatives find their missing loved ones. Due to the passing of the Foreign Enlistment Act as part of the government's non-intervention, it was too dangerous for the International Brigade to record who had volunteered and the SMAC, as Mrs Verstage points

⁴⁵ Williams, Alexander and Gorman, p.155.

⁴⁶ Preston, *A Concise History of the Spanish Civil War*, p. 126.

⁴⁷ Brian Harrison, *Prudent Revolutionaries: Portraits of British Feminists between Wars* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p.117.

⁴⁸ SCA, RPXIV.2 Public Correspondence and Papers: Files; 'Letter from Dorothy Verstage, 26th April 1937', RPXIV.210-2.14, Spanish Civil War c.1936-1940.

out, was too preoccupied with their activities to provide information.⁴⁹ Thus, in some sense, Rathbone's initiative in tracing Halcrow's death was pioneering and demonstrates how she went beyond her duty to serve the public as a humanitarian. Shortly after she returned to Britain, Rathbone became a Vice President of the SMAC. Whilst there is no evidence to show that it was her interaction with the Verstage family that caused her to do this, it seems too coincidental to not have been partly due to Mrs Verstage's appeal for assistance.

Furthermore, some might use this example to categorise Rathbone into the more traditional model of humanitarian woman as it shows a more sympathetic and caring side to her work. While it definitely does convey a more sympathetic side to a woman who has been remembered as 'a very hard woman', this would be an inaccurate assumption.⁵⁰ Unlike women such as Frida Stewart, who mainly organised care for refugee children in Britain during the Civil War, providing this and emotional support was not the main reason why Rathbone found herself in Spain in April 1937.⁵¹ She was there for political reasoning whilst her work for Mrs Verstage was an unofficial duty to a member of the public and became an 'unsuspected obligation' on her trip. The political and humanitarian motivations that explain her trip are highlighted by her activities once she returned to England. The day she returned from Spain, she immediately began questioning the Foreign Secretary about acting on breaches on the Non-Intervention Agreement.⁵² This proves that whilst she unofficially aided Mrs Verstage in her trip to Spain, her main motivations were to gather evidence to promote political and humanitarian action in Spain.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Harrison, p101.

⁵¹ Linda Palfreeman and Jon Arrizabalaga, 'Frida Stewart in Spain: Administering Humanitarian Aid during the Spanish Civil War', *Journal of Iberian Studies*, 33:2-1 (2020), 227-240 (pp.233-236).

⁵² SCA, RPXIV.3.4 General Papers; '26th April – 24th May', RPXIV.3.55-3.5 (6-85), Notes and Questions made by Eleanor Rathbone in Parliament.

While Buchanan has used Rathbone's letter to Mrs Verstage as evidence of the conditions in the Republic, he simply refers to her as a 'grieving mother' and does not investigate the full story.⁵³ An examination of the correspondence between Mrs Verstage and Rathbone demonstrates the extent to which Rathbone went to help members of the public. Moreover, the fact that she balanced this with her official responsibilities as a humanitarian activist during the trip demonstrates her true dedication to helping others.

Conclusion

Through adopting the role of Benjamin's historian and investigating overlooked sources in the *Papers of Eleanor Rathbone*, this chapter has recognised a new layer to Rathbone's humanitarianism in Spain and her dedication to public duty. By supplementing the letters that discuss Halcrow Verstage's death and Arthur Koestler's arrest with pre-existing research done by Pedersen and Cohen and accounts discussing civilian participation in the Civil War, this chapter conveys Rathbone's ability to collaborate across party lines both nationally and internationally. Moreover, her quick response to these personal appeals reflects her obligation and dedication to the public. This illustrates that contrary to earlier representations of her humanitarian aid in Spain by historians and her biographers, her work extended to aiding men and women from different nationalities and not just to Spanish refugees. Similarly, it proves how international foreign affairs became a central part of her humanitarian activism in the Spanish Civil War. Finally, the chronological proximity of both appeals for aid highlights how Rathbone balanced responsibilities at the same time, again illustrating her commitment to providing help and her abhorrence of suffering. Overall, through an investigation of these two examples, this chapter shows that Rathbone was a truly dedicated humanitarian activist.

⁵³ Buchanan, p.34.

Conclusion

Previous examinations of the life of Eleanor F. Rathbone and the historiography of women's humanitarian efforts in the Spanish Civil War have neglected to demonstrate the broad extent of Rathbone's humanitarian activism in the conflict. This thesis has closely re-assessed her humanitarian efforts in the first year of fighting to prove the relevance of her work in terms of the Civil War and, more broadly, to women in the humanitarian field. Using evidence from the *Papers of Eleanor Rathbone*, it has examined her humanitarian activism in Britain and her responses to personal appeals for assistance. By largely basing the re-examination on sources such as letters, newspaper articles and reports, this thesis has brought to light important information about Rathbone's near 40 year career in politics. Most significantly, it has detailed another dimension to her humanitarian activism which has previously been centred around her response to the Nazi regime during the Second World War. Through this, it has demonstrated the origins of Rathbone's fight against Fascism and her work in foreign policy which occupied the majority of her final ten years of life.

The overriding message from the examinations presented in both chapters is the amount of work that Rathbone took on and the extent of her dedication to her roles. The assessment of how she applied her beliefs against non-intervention to her parliamentary and public activities demonstrates how Rathbone worked to raise public awareness on the emerging refugee crisis in Santander and the Republican cause. Furthermore, her unending attacks on the non-intervention policy challenged Parliament and kept the matter at the forefront of debates during the period. This shows her commitment, not only to her beliefs, but also to justice and democracy. On the other hand, the investigations into her work with individuals exposed a more personal side to Rathbone's humanitarian activism. Through evaluating her response to

personal appeals for assistance, the thesis has conveyed the extent of Rathbone's public service and her care for others, showing her to be a true and committed humanitarian figure. Finally, the chronological proximity of the events discussed in each chapter highlights the extent of her responsibilities in Spain and how she managed each one with full adherence.

The decision to solely focus on the first year of fighting was intended to show the origins of Rathbone's humanitarianism in Spain and to detail her activities in full. Furthermore, due to the amount of source material in the *Papers of Eleanor Rathbone*, an analysis of the first year of the conflict proved sufficient enough to evaluate her importance as a humanitarian activist. Whilst it is true that the rising power of Adolf Hitler in Germany began to occupy the minds of the British public and parliament in the final years of fighting in Spain, Rathbone still remained committed to her humanitarianism related to this conflict. In order to further assess her significance as a humanitarian activist, more research into Rathbone's work as chair of the British Committee for Refugees from Spain would be required. Her work in this committee, which was established in early 1939, would convey again the international level of Rathbone's humanitarian activism.

Nevertheless, the evidence provided in this thesis recognises that Rathbone was a prominent humanitarian activist in the first year of the Spanish Civil War. By investigating the origins of her humanitarian intervention, it demonstrates how she used her political agency alongside her dedication to public service to administer relief to all victims of the Nationalist army. Similarly, her commitment to alleviating individual suffering whilst managing her official commitments to the relief committees which she was vice chair of is admirable. It is this that also separates her from other celebrated humanitarian women from the Civil War and from the early 20th Century. Unlike women who have previously been associated with more traditional forms of providing humanitarian aid, Rathbone balanced her time administering relief whilst pressuring the British government's stance on non-intervention. She devoted her

time to foreign policy, her fears surrounding the rise of Fascism and her care for others. Furthermore, she employed her feminist values and her unique position in Parliament as often the sole Independent MP to work with and lobby fellow parliamentarians.

In conclusion, this thesis has explored an overlooked dimension of Rathbone's career as an MP, social reformer and humanitarian. By assessing the significance of this work in her career, it has posthumously recognised Rathbone for her commitment to public service, the struggle against the rise of Fascism and aiding victims in the Spanish Civil War. Overall, her unwavering commitment to the Republicans and anti-Fascism and the full extent of her work signifies that she was a prominent figure in the beginning of the Spanish conflict. Therefore, illustrating the importance of this conflict in Rathbone's career and explaining why her work as a humanitarian activist in the first year of the Spanish Civil War must be fully recognised and celebrated in her modern day commemoration.

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