The Irish Presence in the Spanish Military

16th-20th Centuries

Introduction by Justin Harman, Ambassador of Ireland

That there exists a special empathy between Spain and Ireland is beyond doubt. The reasons for this affinity are complex and stem from legends of a common origin to the deep historical links that developed over centuries. Salvador de Madariaga in his volume “Character and Fate in Europe” stated that the Irish are in reality Spaniards who took the wrong direction and found themselves mistakenly in the North! There is familiarity in both countries with the legends that the first Celtic inhabitants of Ireland came from the Iberian Peninsula, legends interestingly supported by recent research. While trading links from the earliest times were followed by growing religious ties, the relationship with Spain deepened significantly from the 16th century with the arrival of Irish refugees from the wars of religion and colonisation. The generosity afforded by Spain to these exiles, not least the assistance provided to the network of Irish Colleges which created educational opportunities not available in Ireland, and the manner in which these exiles repaid with loyalty and industry a debt to the Spanish State, notably through military service, has been documented.

I congratulate the Spanish Military History Commission in selecting Ireland as the subject of the first volume in its new series on the presence of foreigners in the Spanish Military since the 16th century. Irish participation in the Spanish army is undoubtedly one of the most important seams of our multifaceted historical partnership. As remarked by Hugo O’Donnell, Duke of Tetuán, Irish involvement was generally not mercenary in motivation. Ireland was a country considered by Spain to have a shared identity of values and aspirations (indeed I believe this remains the case).

This volume, containing contributions by noted scholars covering five centuries, represents a significant addition to the growing volume of rich historical research. It complements the 2007 project which involved the Spanish Ministry of Defence, Trinity College Dublin and University College Dublin, which produced a CD Rom on ‘The Irish Presence in the armies of the Hispanic Monarchy, 1580 – 1818’. That project, which brought to light biographical information concerning approximately 20,000 Irishmen in the Spanish services, was coordinated by Dr Oscar Recio Morales who was research fellow on the TCD-UCD ‘Wild Geese Regiments database Project - Irish officers and soldiers in the Spanish Service 1560 – 1810’ which was funded by the Irish Council for the Humanities and Social Services. It also complements the comprehensive work of Eduardo De Mesa Gallego on ‘The Irish Tercios in the Spanish Military Revolution 1621 – 1644’, a volume for which he was awarded a Ph.D. by UCD in 2012.
In this volume, Enrique García Hernán has made a valuable additional contribution to research on the first units in the Spanish military made up of Irish exiles from the middle of the 16th century. Beatriz Alonso charts the scale of integration of the Irish in the Spanish military through the 17th century, both on the Iberian Peninsula but also in Flanders and elsewhere, and the loyal and honourable service given to the Spanish Crown. Declan Downey’s comprehensive analysis of the history of Irish regiments in the Spanish Bourbon Army from 1700 to 1818 is followed and complemented by the very valuable study by Don Hugo O’Donnell of three regiments (Irlanda, Ultonia and Hibernia) with particular emphasis on their role in the context of Spain’s War of Independence.

While the role of the Irish in Spanish regiments through to the 19th century has been the subject of earlier work, the topic of Irish military engagement in Spain in the 20th century has been less well-developed. I am therefore particularly appreciative of the contribution by Mervyn O’Driscoll and Dermot Keogh of University College Cork which focuses primarily on Irish participation on both sides of the Spanish Civil War. This contribution, based on new primary research, provides a valuable fresh perspective on the motivation of the participants who fought both with the Nationalist forces as well as those who arrived in Spain to support the Second Republic, including the story of Frank Ryan. I am hopeful their contribution will provide the basis for more detailed research on Irish-Spanish military relations in contemporary times.

The wealth of the historical links between both countries cannot be taken for granted and unquestionably requires continued active research by scholars in both countries. Much new material has been unearthed and major advances have been made over the past 20 years. There has been a significant increase in the number of major historical research projects and publications by Spanish and Irish scholars and academic institutions. A dynamic group of young researchers has succeeded in revolutionising the panorama of historical scholarship. This work is taking place in the context of the Council of Spanish Irish Historical Studies, consisting of the Royal Irish Academy, the Spanish Royal Academy of History, and Spain’s Higher Council for Scientific Research (CSIC), which was established on the occasion of the visit to Spain of the President of Ireland in March 2011. The aims of the Council are to develop cooperation and provide an effective advisory structure for the coordination and promotion of collaborative research projects.

The Irish Embassy in Madrid over recent years has been actively supportive of the growing volume of historical scholarship, including through financial assistance for the biannual Congress of Irish and Spanish Historians. I am delighted to maintain this involvement with active support for the present volume. I express my appreciation to the Spanish Ministry of Defence and the Commission of Military History, to the coordinator of this volume Don Hugo O’Donnell, and to each author for their valuable contribution.