

# THE ENIGMA OF FRANK RYAN

90 min creative documentary film

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Frank Ryan as a volunteer in the East Limerick Brigade of the IRA during the War of Independence

## SYNOPSIS

Frank Ryan's life (born Limerick 1902, died Dresden 1944) remains an enigma. The teenage IRA volunteer, irregular in the Civil War, dissident republican socialist of 1930s Dublin and International Brigade volunteer who fought fascism in the Spanish civil war, ended his life working for the Nazis in wartime Berlin. How could this be?

The historical record is sketchy. Ideological disputes have further obscured our understanding of the man. For some republicans he remains an icon – an activist who sought to give the physical force tradition a socialist conscience. His activities in Germany are quietly put aside. For revisionists, on the other hand, his activities and very presence in Hitler's Berlin token the reactionary character of militant nationalism and its willingness to compromise with fascism.

Our film offers no explanations. It refuses to become embroiled in the ideological mud slinging. It offers neither historical investigation nor journalistic enquiry. Rather, it draws upon the imaginative resources of drama and on the power of the documentary image to explore a human story of truly tragic proportions.

Drawing upon the letters, journalistic writings and the testimony of his contemporaries, we have fashioned a script which explores and hopefully illuminates the enigma that was Frank Ryan.

## THE ENIGMA OF FRANK RYAN

### TREATMENT

The story of Frank Ryan's action packed, and complex life is told through a rich mix of re-enactment, interview testimony and documentary film and photography. These elements are combined within an engaging script that seeks to illuminate this complex life and reveal the man behind the public face. Our script is based on the letters of Ryan, on his journalistic writing and on the written records and testimony of his friends and contemporaries.

Ryan's story is narrated in the first person. The prematurely aged and terminally ill (he was just 42 when he died) radical looks back on his life. He seeks to document this with the assistance of a young German radio producer Hans Hartman. Hartman had studied in Ireland before the war and become completely fluent in Irish. Subsequently he had been appointed to look after the radio station that broadcast German propaganda to Ireland in Irish – *Irische Redaktion*. Hartman sought to involve Ryan in the radio station and as with the other attempts to get Ryan to cooperate with Nazi plans for Ireland, Ryan sought to maintain his independence from German control. This encounter between the ailing political activist and the young radio editor with a love of Ireland provides the frame within which Ryan story unfolds. As the relationship between Ryan and Hartman develops Ryan, now living an isolated life, reflects on his current predicament - a former communist now dependent on Nazi hospitality. He seeks information from Harman about what the regime is up to.



Hans Hartman 1944



German WWII Radio Station

The story begins with Hartman convincing Ryan to collaborate with him on his radio station. Ryan agrees to be interviewed for a possible programme. Hartman's interest is in Ryan's account of the struggle for Irish independence and his leadership of a

dissident Republican movement. Ryan's interests lie more in the events of the Spanish civil war and what has happened to him since then.

Hartman encourages Ryan to record his story on an early tape recorder. Ryan begins his tale with his early adventures in the IRA as a schoolboy as the war of independence begins. His career as a republican soldier really begins with the Civil War. This raged in Ireland in the immediate aftermath of the British withdrawal and disagreement within republican ranks about the Treaty. This had established an Irish Free State but with constitutional ties to the British empire. Ryan fought for an anti-Treaty side inspired by De Valera's rhetoric. He was imprisoned by the Free State authorities who were to triumph in the Civil War. This was to be only one of a number of periods of incarceration for Ryan in a long career as a dissident. Prison provided the young radical with opportunities for study and the chance to refine his analysis of the wrongs inflicting Irish society. Frank returned to full time study at university after the war but was already active in a republican movement trying to recover from military defeat and anxious to develop a social programme. While at University College Dublin and active in the Irish language movement, he became acquainted with Eamonn De Valera.



Ryan (top row 2nd right) in company of De Valera at UCD 1926

We pick up Ryan's story as he gives a rousing address to a meeting of a militant Irish language organization. He is watched from the side of the hall and questioned by a striking young woman, Rosamund Jacob. She asks him how women will fare in the brave new Gaelic world he envisages. He prevaricates. Later we discover the two are lovers as Ryan appears under her window at midnight and is let in. Their night of passion however is cut short as Ryan departs to make a printer's deadline at the republican newspaper he now edits - *An Phoblacht*. Jacob, an agnostic of Quaker

background, a feminist and a committed socialist, represents a critical voice probing and questioning Ryan's romantic nationalism.

Working late into the night for the paper Ryan is disturbed by the arrival of Special Branch officers. They assault and arrest him, seizing his copy. He is thrown into jail on a trumped up charge in a general round up of republican activists by the Free State government. In prison he joins a 'dirty protest' organised by the IRA prisoners - a campaign for political status. He becomes re-acquainted with republican activist George Gilmore, another critical voice who comes to shape Ryan's political philosophy. He comes under the influence of this articulate radical with a protestant background and fiery socialist politics.

Eamon De Valera and his Fiance Fáiil party are elected in 1932 on a ticket of constitutional republicanism,. Dev signs Ryan's release. He has known and admired the young man since Ryan was a student at UCD. However Ryan and his radicals represent a threat to the nationalism of De Valera's new party, particularly as Ireland sinks into economic crisis. De Valera's ambivalence towards the dissident is revealed at several points within the film. Ryan is a serious idealist and a charismatic figure, De Valera is drawn to these features of Ryan's personality. His heart is in the right place. On the hand. Ryan and the militant republicanism he represents, is a potential threat to the De Valera's project of building the new state on conservative social principles. Ryan and the other IRA prisoners are released and are mobbed by the public as they emerge from Arbor Hill prison. Ryan knows he can expect nothing more from Dev.

Ryan heads for the US on a speaking tour. The suffering of working people in the US in Great Depression has a profound impact on him. His politics shift significantly to the left. He returns to Ireland determined to transform the republican movement into a socialist party capable of addressing the social ills of the day.

He experiences implacable opposition from the old guard of the IRA who conspire to remove him from the editorship of *An Phoblacht*. The radicalized editorial group running the newspaper meet to discuss how to meet this threat. They realise a new political grouping is needed to galvanise republicanism around a socialist agenda. Ryan is summoned to meet his nemesis - Sean Russell Quarter Master General of the IRA. Their paths will cross on a number of occasions throughout the film. Russell, a traditional physical force republican of conservative disposition, demands Ryan's resignation. Ryan willing agrees and announces he is also leaving the IRA.

He returns to his office at the paper to pack his things. Rosamund Jacob calls to see him and tries to persuade him to abandon his political plans and go away with her. Ryan rejects her advances and plunges himself into organising the new party – Republican Congress.

We return periodically to the frame of the film and Hartman's interview with Ryan in Berlin as the young German tries to understand the complexities of Irish politics.

Hartman is tempted to draw parallels with the period leading to the rise of the Nazis. Ryan for his part wonders why Hartman a Celtic philologist by training and an idealistic nationalist, joined the Nazi party. Ryan is greatly irritated by Hartman's attempt to link fascism and Irish nationalism.

Ryan relates the story of the radicalised protestant workers from Belfast who had rallied to the Republican Congress banner but who were attacked by the old guard IRA under Sean Russell's command in a confrontation at the march to the grave of Irish patriot Wolfe Tone which took place in 1934 at Bodenstown cemetery. The confrontation sees Ryan and Russell at each other throats again and serious violence is only just averted.



Republican Congress contingent from the Shankill march to Bodenstown

The Catholic Bishops denounce Republican Congress as a communist threat and in this still deeply conservative country, the new party can make little headway. Dissillusioned Ryan plunges himself into international politics. The context is Spain and the fascist revolt against the democratically elected Republican government. While the extreme right in Ireland organises pious Catholics to go and fight for Franco, Ryan helps organise an Irish contingent to join the International Brigade of volunteers rallying to the Republican cause.

Ryan says farewell to his lover Jacob. She informs him that his nemesis Sean Russell has travelled to America to raise money to fund a planned IRA bombing campaign in England. For Ryan, Russell is beyond contempt.

As Ryan is now straying into the part of his story that is politically problematic for a Nazi party stalwart like Hartman, the radio editor aborts the interview. Ryan is also beginning to interrogate Hartman about what the Nazis are up to both with regards Ireland and is asking about their murderous policies towards the Jews. Hartman is evasive. Ryan asks for instruction on how to operate the tape recorder and persuades Hartman, who has a great respect for him, to leave the machine with him. Ryan begins to dictate his own story into the tape recorder. He starts with his experience in the Spanish civil war.



Magnetopone recorder



Ryan with an International Brigade comrade

Making good use of the available archive sources, we follow Ryan's account of his enlistment in the International Brigade and the arrival of the Irish volunteers who are consigned to a British battalion. This causes friction and Ryan has his first skirmish with communist intransigence as the battalion commander throws him into the cooler for protesting about the Irish squad's English commander, a former Black and Tan. A rapprochement is organised and the Irish agree to march with the English. The battalion is thrown into the battle at Jarama in which the Republican forces try to stop Franco's army from breaking through to Madrid. Over archive footage and tightly constructed re-enactment Ryan details the battle and his role in it. The fascist threat to Madrid is repulsed but Ryan wounded. He writes to Jacob from hospital in Alicante and plans to return to Ireland.

He arrives back in Ireland and turns up on Jacob's doorstep needing a bed. Jacob welcome him warmly but relations between them are strained. There is no real intimacy. Jacob informs Ryan that Sean Russell is back for the US with dollars to re-arm the IRA and that he wants to meet him.



Sean Russell in the US 1937



Ryan in Spain woos Senorita 1937



Major Ryan, Republican Army



Ryan with Hemingway, Madrid 1937

Ryan has a clandestine meeting with Russell in a Dublin park. Russell begs him to return to the ranks of the IRA and lead the new campaign planned. Ryan laughs in his face.

Ryan and Jacob visit the movies and see a news reel reporting significant Francoist advances in the war. Ryan feels he must return to Spain. Jacob urges him to stay.

At a farewell party he weeps uncontrollably knowing he faces almost certain death if he returns to Spain. But he feels a deep obligation to return.

Ryan returns to Madrid a city under virtual siege but which still enjoys a lively nightlife. He drinks with Earnest Hemmingway, attends the theatre and flirts with a Spanish beauty.

With the dramatic news that Franco has broken through the Republican lines at Tereul, he volunteers to go to the front again. In the chaos of a battle in which the Republican front line collapses, he is captured by Italian fascist troops. He is held in a barbed wire enclosure in the raging heat, then transferred to Burgos prison. Fellow International Brigade members are being shot in cold blood on a daily basis. Conditions in Burgos prison are barbaric and the threat of immediate execution hangs over Ryan.



Ryan (front row, third from left) in Burgos Prison

In Dublin De Valera approaches the Papal Nuncio to put pressure on Franco to release Ryan. A campaign for his release gains cross party support in Ireland. Franco refuses to grant the release but his sentence is commuted to life imprisonment. Irish consulate official Leopold Kerney under instructions from De Valera visits Ryan in jail and brings him news of the outside world. The second world war has broken out. Germany is marching triumphantly across most of Europe. France is occupied.

Now receiving English newspapers, Ryan reads of the IRA bombing campaign in England which kills five innocent people in Coventry. He flies into a rage cursing Sean Russell and his mindless militarism. His fellow English prisoners try to console him.



De Valera instructs his officials to explore the possibility of getting the German authorities to bring pressure on Franco to release Ryan. Franco stubbornly refuses to budge.

Ryan is sprung from his Spanish prison in an operation organised by German military intelligence. Kerney watches the whole clandestine operation from a safe distance. Ryan is drugged and bundled into a car and then driven through the Pyrennes to the French border. There he is handed over to a contingent of German Abwehr Officers (Military Intelligence). He is then taken to Paris, now under German occupation. There he is met by Helmut Clissman, an Abwehr officer who lived in Ireland before the war. Ryan knows Clissman and his Irish wife well and trusts them. Clissman explains that Abwehr II want Ryan to travel to Berlin and work for them advising on their Irish operations. Ryan is suspicious but seems to have little real alternative other than to cooperate with the Germans. Russia has now signed a non-aggression pact with Germany and Britain is now completely isolated. There is the distinct possibility that the Germans might support De Valera or the republican movement to forcefully end partition.



Ryan in Paris after his release from Burgos Prison



Ryan and Helmut Clissman, Paris 1941

Ryan travels overnight to Berlin. There he meets with Veesenmayer a high ranking German diplomat who is Hitler's coup d'etat specialist. Veesenmayer is scheming to foment republican activity in Ireland against the British in Northern Ireland. In a classic coup de theatre Veesenmayer brings Ryan face to face with his former nemesis Sean Russell. The IRA leader has also been helped by Veesenmayer to get to Berlin. Veesenmayer has plans for each of them. Russell has been enthusiastically receiving German instruction in use of explosives prior to a planned return to Ireland organised by the Nazis. Ryan is initially cold towards Russell, who he holds responsible for the disastrous bombing campaign in England and for a host of other militaristic ventures which have made a laughing stock of republicanism.

Sean Russell (left) in the US

Russell tries to convince Ryan to return with him to Ireland in the U Boat the Germans have placed at their disposal to transport them home. Ryan is extremely reluctant to commit himself to this course of action but as a communist sympathiser with a long record of anti-fascist activity he realises he is at considerable risk in Germany without the protection of a powerful figure like Veesenmeyer. Reluctantly he agrees to travel with Russell to Wilhemshaven to board the U Boat for Ireland. Russell agrees to fully brief him on board.



Edmund Veesenmeyer



Hans Hartman's Irish Registration Papers 1937

No sooner has their voyage begun than Russell begins to complain of severe stomach cramps. His condition quickly worsens. Ryan alarmed at Russell's condition requests that they put ashore so that the IRA leader can receive medical attention. This request is refused. By now Russell is in agony and clearly in mortal danger. He still has not confided in Ryan the nature of their mission. Only miles from the west coast of Ireland Russell dies in Ryan's arms. The captain demands to know Ryan's intentions. Does he still plan to land, now alone. Ryan seeks advice from Abwehr headquarters in a morse exchange. None is forthcoming. The U Boat is requested to resume its anti-shiping duties. Ryan is in despair. The U Boat makes its way back to Germany via France and Ryan finds himself back in Berlin where he is interrogated by the Gestapo who are anxious to know how Russell died. The Gestapo remain completely unaware of Ryan's political past. Veesenmeyer makes it clear that he expects Ryan to take over Russell's role liasing between the Nazis and the IRA in Ireland with a view to instigating military action against the British with German backing.

Ryan seeks reassurances from Clissman with regards his safety but clearly it is Veesenmeyer who is calling the shots.

As the German army focuses on an assault on Soviet Russia the significance of covert operations in Ireland decreases. Ryan is being well looked after by the Nazis and is afforded the privileges of a high ranking diplomat. However he is underemployed and in constant fear of being uncovered by the Gestapo, despite Veesenmeyer's patronage.

He agrees to assist in the formation of an Irish brigade recruited from captured prisoners of war of Irish origin who had served in the British forces. It is planned this brigade will eventually return with him to Ireland and assist him in covert operations in the north. Ryan travels to Friesack, the POW camp when the men are held with Clissman and his colleague Jupp Hoven. In the camp one of the prisoners who has volunteered in Spain recognises Ryan. Confronted with the sight of these ragged emaciated men Ryan, with his own vivid experiences as a POW, is mortified. He begs Clissman to get him out of the place. They drive off with Ryan greatly distressed. On the return journey to Berlin they pass by Ravensbruch woman's concentration camp. Ryan asks if this another POW camp, the others are evasive knowing fully the horrors that lie within the perimeter fences of Ravensbruch.

Back in Berlin Ryan seeks explanation about what he has seen. None are forthcoming from Veesenmayer or the others. In desperation he interrogates Hans Hartman at one of their interview sessions. Hartman is also evasive but Ryan begins to realise that the rumours he has heard about the camps may well be true. He turns on Hartman and throws him out of his apartment.



William Joyce 'Lord Haw Haw'  
Captured by British troops



Ravensbruch Women's Concentration Camp

Unable to get out of Germany and now completely dependent on the Nazis for his existence, Ryan begins to withdraw from the world. His health starts to fail and rapidly. With the Allied air raids now a nightly occurrence Berlin is becoming a dangerous and a hungry place.

Irish ambassador in Berlin Warnock informs De Valera in Dublin that Ryan's condition is a terminal one and requests that he be allowed to return to Ireland via Switzerland and Portugal. De Valera refuses the request.

Ryan is now almost completely deaf. Nightly he sits alone in his darkened apartment as Allied bombing raid rage outside his window. At first he seems to be oblivious of the ferocious raid. He walk to the window of his apartment and stares into a night sky

aflame with explosions. He slowly and deliberately closes the shutters, sits down in his armchair and rocks to and fro.



Frank Ryan's passport photo taken only months before his death in 1944+

