

A Spanish Civil War Engineer Saves Thousands of Ramsgate Lives Garry Saunders March 2026

Town Twinning stems from something shared, recent research links Ramsgate to Barcelona from tragic times, strategic bombing practices – terrorising civilians, destroying infrastructure, food stocks and supplies as integral to military actions.

General Franco's coup-de-tat against the Spanish Government in 1936 was supported by mass bombing from the Italian and German air forces led, mostly, by Wolfram von Richthofen (PhD in aeronautical engineering) cousin of Manfred ("Red Baron").



Wolfram von Richthofen in 1939, newly promoted to Major General after his return from Spain. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Wolfram's view that "air forces will target the local and sectorial reserves, and make no allowances for the civilian population" was implemented in Spain. His dive bombing and carpet-bombing tactics were preparation for the coming European war.

The Catalan Government appointed engineer Ramon Perera to manage and direct Barcelona's air raid precautions.



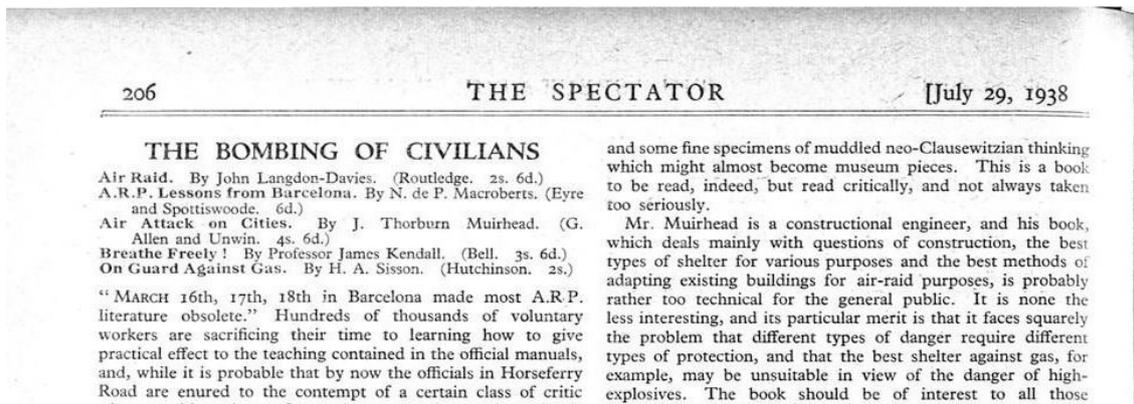
All images of Ramon Perera courtesy of Ana Sanchez

He analysed bomb fall trajectory, destructive capacity, bomb weight and detonation height. He explored materials that could resist the extensive air raids by travelling to bombed areas in his SKODA car.

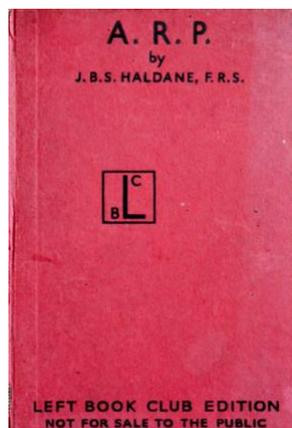


He worked with unexploded bombs to relate bomb type and size to the effects. This informed his designs for the, near, 1400, Barcelona shelters.

UK engineers like Noel MacRoberts, Cyril Helsby and Jack Haldane visited Perera to understand his work, challenging UK Government policy by publicising Perera's findings.



1938 saw presentations to the Institution of Structural Engineers, many government ministries, Scotland Yard and London City Council. Jack Haldane's "ARP" pamphlet made issues in his Left Book Club book widely available.



WW1 veteran, Noel MacRoberts published his report *A.R.P. Lessons from Barcelona* in the Spring of 1938.

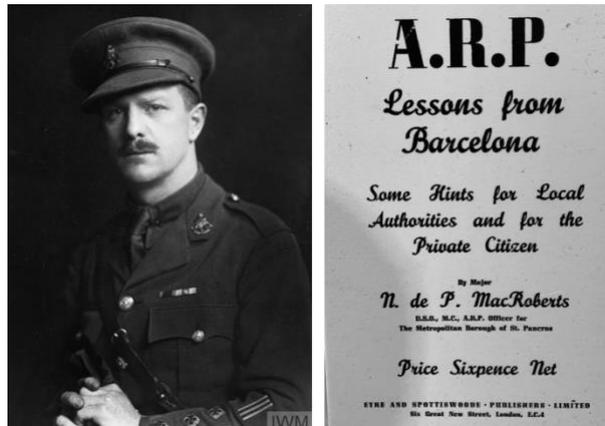


Image of Noel MacRoberts courtesy of The Imperial War Museum

UK Government policy refused funding for communal bombproof shelters, responsibility for civilian protection rested with individuals. But Ramsgate’s engineer, Richard Brimmel had Perera’s designs in mind such as the “5 min rule”, depth of tunnel and the gallery construction under roads. Brimmel saw ARP in humane and technical terms unlike the Government.

With execution by Franco a real threat Perera was spirited out of Spain to London by the MI6 agent Donald Darling in January 1939 following pressure by Cyril Helsby.

Perera lectured and wrote articles to publicise Barcelona’s ARP experience. The difference is stark:

Barcelona	London
1936 Population 1 million	1936 County of London 4 million
194 Air Raids over 713 days	85 Air Raids over 250 days
Average of 1 raid every 4 days	Average of 1 raid every 3 days
2,500 dead & 3,200 injured	30,000 dead & 50,000 Injured



Cyril Helsby, Ramon and his wife Pilar in London

Ramon worked at an agricultural machinery factory, and lived with Pilar in Beckenham. The house was destroyed by a V1 in 1944 but they rebuilt it with décor in the "Catalan style" with items sent to them by Ramon's brother, living in Gràcia.

In 1961 they moved to Ilford, Essex to be closer to Ramon's work at British Sterilizer Co Ltd where, in 1973, he patented his disinfection system.



Perera in March 1986.

Little has been found about Ramon and Pilar but he died at home on 24 November 1988, aged 81, from a heart attack and twelve hours later Pilar died. She had stomach cancer and a degenerative disease but Catalan sources suggest they had a pact to die together.

The Franco regime tried to delete everything about Perera's shelters but could not have predicted the activities of a Birmingham born woman, Valerie Gay Powles. She was an English teacher and community activist who moved to Barcelona in the 1970's. In 1995, a glass factory was demolished in Montjuïc. Powles saw a "hole in the mountain" and, being fearless, went inside to find an opening to an ARP shelter from the Civil War. This was due for demolition so she alerted the administration and, although initially without success, her persistence paid off in the end.

In 1998, with a group of local people she founded the Poble-sec Historical Research Center (CERHISEC) and in 2007 the Association for Historical Research and Documentation of the Civil War and Poble-sec. In May 2002 she co-authored the book *El Refuge 307 - La Guerra Civil al Poble Sec 1936-1939*. In 2023, a square in Poble Sec was named after Powles, honouring her work as a historian and activist.



Images from Barcelona websites acknowledging the importance of Valerie Powles