



ISABEL

Oyarzábal

Isabel Oyarzábal Smith

First woman labour inspector and first woman Ambassador of Spain

Málaga, 1878 – Mexico City, 1974

With a highly diverse and heterogeneous facet as a feminist and republican activist, Isabel Oyarzábal developed to her utmost potential in a men's world. She educated herself in humanism and was part of the bourgeois and feminist cultural circle in Madrid in the early decades of the twentieth century as a prominent member of the Asociación Nacional de Mujeres Españolas (National Association of Spanish Women) and the *Lyceum Club*.

Both are spaces which promoted new social gender relations, the dignification of women's work and comprehensive education from a bourgeois vantage point which translated into a kind of acknowledgement of female authority in public and private spaces, albeit not without reservations. The education of working-class women was a particular focus of her international lectures and essays (1920-1929).

With her multifaceted education and her strong political connections, she was a member of the UGT trade union and the PSOE political party since 1931, and earned the personal trust of politicians the likes of Francisco Largo Caballero, Luis Araquistáin and Julio Álvarez del Vayo. She focused on criticism of the overall lack of social assistance with a combative discourse in which she exposed the shortcomings of social laws, the miserable living conditions of the working class and their repercussions on woman and children.

She was the first Spanish woman to secure a position as a Provincial Labour Inspector (1933) and the first woman ambassador of Spain who occupied the post of envoy and ambassador of the Second Republic in the Spanish legation in Sweden and Finland (1936-1939). She also participated as an expert in international laws on child and female labour at the International Labour Organisation (1931) and the Society of Nations' Committee of Experts on Slavery (1934-1938). Her contributions were aimed at dealing with issues related

to child slavery, forced labour and the condemnation of slavery practices which some ventured to call undercover prostitution.

She was the author of autobiographical novels and evoked her inner life with some anguish in three major publications written in exile, *I Must Have Liberty* (1940), *Smouldering Freedom* (1945) and *Alexandra Kollontay* (1947), which are a perfect synthesis of an exile's experience. Her status as an exiled republican intellectual took root in Mexico, where she was a member of and spokesperson for the Junta de Cultura Española (Spanish Board of Culture). Her life history is a paradigmatic example of a republican who was left without a republic.

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