

# "Shouts from the Wall," an exhibit of Spanish Civil War posters - Fascinating artifacts from a momentous struggle, and crude apologetics for Stalinism

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The poster exhibit 'Shouts From The Wall,' sponsored by the Abraham Lincoln Brigades Archives (ALBA), Spain's Ministry of Culture and various US foundations, made a brief stop at Detroit's Wayne State University in late July. The exhibit traveled to several universities in Pennsylvania in August and will continue at various other American universities and museums through June 1999.

Displayed are propaganda posters brought home by the American veterans who fought in the Spanish Civil War of 1936-1939. Most of the posters were drawn from a collection supervised by the Abraham Lincoln Brigades Archives (ALBA) and housed at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts. A few posters from the Special Collections Division at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, which were issued by the Spanish government at the time, were also displayed. In addition, a large wall newspaper and some documentary photographs from the famous war photographer Robert Capa were included in the exhibit. Capa's most famous photograph showing the instant of death of a Spanish Republican fighter is included.

The Abraham Lincoln Brigade consisted of American volunteers who were sent to Spain as part of the International Brigades. An appeal had been made by the P.C.E. (Spanish Communist Party), through its spokesperson in parliament, Dolores Ibarruri. Volunteers in Spain came from a wide range of class backgrounds, political outlooks and regions. While the great majority were personally heroic and dedicated to the fight against fascism, they became pawns of the Stalinists' counterrevolutionary political and diplomatic

maneuvers.

The Spanish Civil War began in July 1936 when General Francisco Franco, a fascist military leader, rejected the results of elections which had installed a bourgeois democratic coalition government five months earlier, and launched a military rebellion to overthrow the Republican government in Madrid. The Spanish working class and peasants, oppressed for generations by the capitalists and rich landlords, responded with a wave of massive struggles, posing the alternative of socialist revolution or monarchist-fascist reaction.

But the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow opposed the revolution. It used its control over the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) to defend capitalist rule in Spain, in part to curry favor with the British and French governments. The PCE ordered workers to cease their revolutionary demands because, they claimed, workers needed the support of the 'anti-fascist' capitalists to defeat Franco. But the Republican government, controlled by the bourgeoisie, expended far more resources to defend capitalist property from the threat of an aroused working class and peasantry, than it did to fight Franco's forces. Leon Trotsky, the leader of the international socialist opposition to Stalinism, warned that the strangling of the revolution would only lead to the victory of fascism.

Throughout the civil war, the Loyalist government, with the active participation of Stalin's secret police, the GPU, labeled socialist workers as 'Trotskyite-fascist agents,' and imprisoned and murdered them. By 1939, with the revolution crushed, the grossly underarmed and ill-equipped republican fighters were overwhelmed

by the Spanish fascists, who enjoyed the backing of Hitler and Mussolini. The defeat strengthened the hand of fascism throughout Europe and paved the way for the outbreak of World War II.

The collections in the various archives provide a priceless store of documents that are important for an understanding of one of the key events that shaped the twentieth century. However the material selected and the way it is presented reveal a very definite bias, namely the attempt to whitewash the political role of Stalinism. The Stalinist-dominated VALB (Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade) rehash the same political mantras from the 1930s to defend popular front policies and brand Trotskyism as 'ultraleftism' and an agency of fascism.

Each poster is captioned in Spanish or Catalan, with English translations, and each category is introduced with a large wall plaque. One plaque explains that the posters were an important part of the propaganda campaign by the Spanish Loyalist government and various political organizations during the years of the civil war. They were aimed at the vast and largely illiterate peasantry and at influencing world public opinion to support the Loyalist government.

The exhibit posters and a wall newspaper are grouped into 'Art and Politics,' 'The Struggle Against Fascism' and 'Four Artists.' The four artists whose work reflects the popular artistic styles of the period are: Jose Bardasano, Josep Renau, Sim (Rey Vila) and Ramon Puyol.

Only two posters in the exhibit created by anonymous artists bear the initials of the POUM (Partido Obrero de Unificacion Marxista). One has the caption 'Socialism Is Liberation.' There is no explanation of the POUM, a centrist political party which was brutally suppressed by the Stalinists, and whose leader, Andres Nin, was tortured and murdered in a Stalinist prison in Spain.

Three posters by Ramon Puyol, the surrealist artist, bear the initials S.R.I. These are the initials of the Comintern Red Help Association. Here the Stalinist perspective is crudely and openly presented. Puyol's poster entitled 'El Izquierdista' (the Ultraleftist), is featured on the front page of the exhibit brochure without even its identifying caption. The caption reads: 'The ambusher wears many disguises to assassinate from undercover! We annihilate him wherever we find him!' The grotesque character is obviously meant to be

a Trotskyist accused of 'double-dealing' with the capitalists and who should be hounded and murdered. The caricature has four arms; three fists, two arms in a handshake behind his back, and wears a hammer and sickle on his chest. Inside his belly a capitalist sits comfortably in a chair. His overall appearance is one of devilish and elfish mischief.

Puyol's posters underscore the political line of the exhibit. The accompanying brochure praises this grisly propaganda for the Stalinist death squads: 'With Ramon Puyol, a political satire at once caustic and whimsical takes over.... His portraits, simultaneously grotesque and playful, leave us uncertain whether we should be charmed or scandalized. But the fugitive wit is never separable from social and political critique. Puyol's is a rogue's gallery of ordinary, everyday villains, class types who exaggerate every feature of their social positioning.'

It is no honor to those honest men and women, who sacrificed to fight in the Brigades, to prevent the burning political lessons of the defeats of the 1930s from being assimilated today. While 'Shouts from the Wall' presents important archival material, it serves to obscure and distort these experiences, rather than illuminate them.

*For further reading on the Spanish Civil War, this author suggests 'Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain' by Felix Morrow and 'The Spanish Revolution (1931-1939)' by Leon Trotsky. Both are available from Mehring Books.*

*Also suggested is the 1995 film 'Land and Freedom' directed by Ken Loach.*

*There are several web sites where posters from the Spanish Civil War can be seen. These include: Brandeis University Special Collections web site ([www.library.brandei.edu](http://www.library.brandei.edu)), an anarchist site called Art for @ Change at the University of California of San Diego (<http://www.UCSD.edu>) and the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives ([www.alba-valb.org](http://www.alba-valb.org)).*



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