

# A major exhibition on the Spanish Civil War

"Dreams and Nightmares"—at the Imperial War Museum, London, until April 28, 2002

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The Spanish Civil War, which began in 1936, inspired a generation of workers, artists and intellectuals. The struggle to defend republican Spain against the fascist *phalange* headed by General Francisco Franco drew to its banner the most self-sacrificing representatives of that generation. Their bloody defeat heralded the wider conflagration that was then to come in World War Two.

"Dreams and Nightmares", now showing at London's Imperial War Museum, was conceived to mark the sixty-fifth anniversary of the arrival in Spain of the International Brigades—volunteers from France, Germany, Italy, Britain, the United States and many other countries—who fought against the fascists. The exhibition explores the impact of the Spanish Civil War on artists, writers, photographers and intellectuals, as well as ordinary civilians.

In July 1936, General Franco rejected the results of the elections that had installed a republican coalition government five months earlier, and launched a military rebellion to overthrow it. Under Franco's leadership, the Spanish bourgeoisie and wealthy landowners directed their armed forces in an assault against the economic, political and cultural organisations of the working class, who responded with a wave of struggles. This clash of opposing class forces in Spain starkly posed the alternative of socialist revolution or monarchist-fascist reaction.

"Dreams and Nightmares" has assembled many art works from museums, archives and private collections in Britain, the United States, Germany, France and Spain. Also included in the exhibition are International Brigades' memorabilia—letters, medals, memorials and other ephemera—as well as Spanish artefacts: a coin salvaged from the ruins of Guernica; a campaign map used by Franco; the shirt worn by a Basque soldier who was killed in the war; fragments of masonry and a bread ration from the siege of Alcazar, drawings of the conflict by Spanish children.

The material presented is a priceless record, helping to form an understanding of one of the key events that shaped the twentieth century. Of particular interest are the rooms dedicated to art and literature, which contain exhibits from world-renowned artists and intellectuals who were inspired by the fight against fascism.

No other domestic conflict, apart from the 1917 Russian Revolution, attracted such a vast number of leading artists and intellectuals. This can only be explained by the fact that the Spanish events were seen not only as a fight against the scourge of fascism, but also as a struggle motivated by higher social ideals—for socialism. The exhibits on display in the art and literature rooms are inspiring. Every artist and intellectual who supported the fight against Franco is represented by a piece of his or her work, offering a unique insight into the calibre of those who lined up behind the Spanish cause.

The exhibition begins with a 1937 poster by Joan Miró entitled "Aidez l'Espagne" (Help Spain), which shows a Catalán peasant raising a defiant

fist. The poster was the outcome of an abortive commission to design a French stamp whose proceeds would go to support the Spanish Republic. Another of his drawings, "The Giant Awakening", supplements it.

Other artists on display include British surrealist painter Stanley William Hayter, who worked to smuggle out refugees, Ramon Goya, Edouard Pignon ("Homage to the miners of Asturias") and the noted sculptor Henry Moore ("Spanish Prisoners", and a drawing for Spanish Prisoners Appeal). Moore became involved in supporting the Republic after signing the Surrealist Manifesto in 1936, which urged the British government to end its policy of non-intervention in Spain. Also showing is a Sculpture (Helmet Head), part of "Large figure in a Shelter", which was commissioned from Moore by the Guernica authorities for a memorial sculpture installed in 1990 in the town. Rene Magritte's "Le Drapeau Noir" (The Black Flag) is a picture of a black/bluish/greenish threatening sky covered in strange flying shapes. The caption explains, "It is thought that Magritte painted this work in response to the bombing of Guernica in April 1937. He later stated in a letter to Andre Breton that the picture 'gave a foretaste of the terror which would come from flying machines'."

There is a mask of Neville Chamberlain (the British Prime Minister at the time) made in 1938 by F. E. McWilliams. It is one of the masks worn by English surrealist artists in a protest against the British government policy of non-intervention.

There follow a couple of paintings by Salvador Dali, the main one entitled "Espagne" is an oil painting featuring the outline of a woman leaning on a tall, narrow chest of drawers, one drawer is open, out of which a red scarf hangs. Only the lower part of the woman's body is clothed. The fighting scenes leading on to a typically Spanish village in the background form part of the woman's naked upper torso. Dali spent the Civil War years in the US. In the early 1930s, his interest in Hitler had angered many of his surrealist friends, who were socialists. His attitude to the Civil War was equally dubious. Although his sister was arrested and tortured, his best friend and idol, the poet Federico García Lorca, was shot, and the peaceful world of his childhood lay ruined and depopulated. The surrealists finally broke with him, when the painter declared his support for Franco in 1939. In 1955, he returned to Spain and in the 1970s painted a portrait of Franco's granddaughter, not only delivering the painting personally to the *caudillo*, but also publicly endorsing him.

The exhibition's most notable absence is "Guernica", which Picasso was commissioned to paint as a large mural for the Spanish Pavilion at the Paris International Exhibition in 1937. It took as its theme the near destruction by German bombers of the small Basque town of Guernica. Picasso refused to allow the painting to be shown in Spain until after the death of Franco in 1975. However, the organisers have managed to obtain one of Picasso's other related paintings, "Femme en Pleurs" (Weeping Woman). The usher standing next to the painting informs onlookers that it

is worth £10 million.

Painted in 1937, the Weeping Woman is Dora Maar, Picasso's lover at the time who was sympathetic to Trotskyism and was deeply involved with events in Spain. During the war, Picasso refused to depict events literally. He would say, "The war is in everything I do". Accompanying the Weeping Woman are two other of Picasso's works: a large drawing—"Horse and Mother with Death Child"—one of his many studies for Guernica, and etchings satirising Franco.

The exhibition contains a wonderful collection of photographs by Robert Capa and Gerda Taro, Capa's girlfriend, who was killed in the Battle of Brunete. These include Capa's famous "Death of a Militiaman," which captures the very instant that the republican fighter is shot during an attack near Cerro Muriano in Cordoba. There are also other photographs by David Seymour and Agusti Centelles.

Other important items being shown include the manuscript of "The House of Bernada Alba", on which Lorca was working shortly before his murder at the hands of the fascists in 1936, as well as a drawing by him "Face with two arrows". Included in the display are a poem, "The Crime", dedicated to Lorca by the Spanish poet Antonio Machado; a milk churn used by the wife of Miguel Hernández to smuggle out his poems while he was in prison; the typescript of Bertolt Brecht's play "Señora Carrara's Rifles"; musical manuscripts relating to the Spanish Civil War by the British composer Benjamin Britten, and Samuel Barber.

Letters, passports, diaries and other items represent some of the other intellectuals involved in the Spanish Civil War such as Laurie Lee, author of "Cider with Rosie"; Stephen Koesler, the Hungarian writer who reported on the Civil War for the *News Chronicle*; George Orwell, who went to report on the fighting in 1936 as a member of the Independent Labour Party, but then joined the militia of the POUM (Workers Party of Marxist Unification). Orwell was wounded by a sniper in 1937 near Huesca. On his return home he wrote "Homage to Catalonia", exposing the betrayal of the revolution by the Stalinists. Also to be seen are news dispatches sent from the Spanish battlefields by the American writer Ernest Hemingway, who wrote "For Whom the Bell Tolls," a novel set amidst the Civil War. Other artists and intellectuals represented include Pedrero—with his famous poster "El Generalísimo," which shows figures depicting the army, the bourgeoisie and the Church marching behind Franco, who is shown as a Swastika-wearing skeleton—José Bardasano, Edward Burra, Jaume Solá, Pierre Daura, José Moreno Villa, David Seymour, C Day, Joan Borrás Casanova, Julio González, Alexandre Calder, John Armstrong, José Antonio and Aurelio Arteta.

Javier Bueno's large canvass "The Spanish Soldier" concludes the exhibition. It portrays a large figure of a man in a poncho holding a gun with his left hand and catching his own blood streaming from his head with the other.

It hangs next to a roll call listing the names of International Brigade fighters who fell victim to Franco.

It is very noticeable that whereas the republican side includes work by many significant artists and intellectuals of the early twentieth century, there is nothing of artistic merit on the side of Franco. While hundreds of young men and women from around the world rallied to the International Brigades to defend republican Spain, those who came from abroad to aid Franco are represented in the exhibition by two aristocratic English women, a Welsh fascist and a company of Irish Catholic soldiers.

The small number of exhibits representing the fascist side include Franco's personal shield; his armchair; his notes on a copy of a non-intervention treaty signed in 1938; the microphone that he used for his broadcasts; his baton, medals and a cast of his right hand made at the time of his death in 1975. The artistic contribution of Francoite Spain includes a gaudy and idealised picture of Franco in all his regalia, 21 framed photographs of fascist women, lithographs of the fascist song "Cara al Sol" and various propaganda posters.

Many artists and intellectuals died fighting in Spain. Some of those remembered in the exhibition are Julian Bell, a writer aged 29, killed while driving an ambulance at the battle of Brunete in 1937; the writer Christopher Caudwell, also aged 29, killed in action on February 12, 1937 outside Madrid and John Cornford, the British poet, who was just 21 when he was killed on the Cordoba front on December 28, 1936. Others, such as the Spanish poet Miguel Hernández, were captured by the victorious fascist forces and left to die in their prison cells.

"Dreams and Nightmares" provides a welcome opportunity to review the events that surrounded the Spanish Civil War, how they developed historically, and above all why the struggle against fascism and for socialism was defeated. However, this cannot be understood within the narrow terms in which the exhibition itself is framed. Mounted as it is by the Imperial War Museum, the analysis presented in the exhibition and its accompanying catalogue concentrates overly on military tactics. To the extent that political issues are referred to, it approaches the Civil War from the standpoint that what was at stake was the defence of bourgeois democracy from fascist reaction, both in Spain and throughout Europe. The argument is advanced that the Spanish Civil War was lost because of the divisions among the left antifascist forces—"between the Communists, the middle class Republicans and moderate Socialists who were rebuilding the state apparatus to make a priority of the war effort, and the anarchists, Trotskyists and left Socialists who wanted to put the emphasis on social revolution".

The exhibition does point to some of the problems faced by those who fought against Franco in the Spanish Civil War: Moscow's reluctance to support the Republic and its later advocacy of the Popular Front of all supposedly anti-fascist forces is referred to at several points during the exhibition. Also noted are some of the Stalinist bureaucracy's crimes against the Spanish workers and peasants. While the German and Italian fascists provided Franco with state-of-the-art weaponry, Moscow sold the Republicans out-of-date arms at extortionist prices—but only after the Kremlin had insured the shipping of Spain's gold reserves to Russia. But this falls far short of providing a real explanation of the criminal role Stalinism played in the Spanish defeat, condemning the Stalinists only for having not prosecuted the military struggle on behalf of bourgeois democracy with sufficient vigour. As for the Trotskyists and others arguing for a revolutionary struggle for socialism, the exhibition suggest that this was somehow equally divisive and a diversion from the necessary war effort.

Only an international revolutionary programme could have united the workers and peasants of Spain with those of the other European countries, including Germany and Italy, and defeated fascism for good. Instead, the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union did everything in its power to prevent social revolution in Spain and therefore ensured the victory of fascism. Utilising its enormous political influence internationally, combined with the terror apparatus of the GPU secret police, it worked to subordinate the independent struggle of the Spanish working class to the interest of the bourgeoisie. This was achieved primarily through its advocacy of the Popular Front with the supposedly democratic sections of Spanish capitalists and landowners. Moscow insisted on the preservation of capitalist private property and that nothing should be done to alienate the "democratic" imperialist powers of Europe such as Britain and France. Those who fought for the political independence of the working class, or in any way conflicted with Stalinism, faced brutal suppression, prison, torture and assassination.

The Popular Front served to politically behead the Spanish revolution, in a situation where virtually the whole of the Spanish capitalist class supported fascism and was intent on smashing the workers' movement. At the same time the Stalinists were advocating the Popular Front in Spain, they were liquidating the entire leadership of Lenin's Bolshevik Party in the Soviet Union, during the infamous Moscow Trials and

political purges of 1937 and 1938. Stalin's aim was to convince the imperialist powers that he was not in the business of "exporting revolution," by slaughtering its most able advocates. Leon Trotsky, co-leader of the Russian Revolution and leader of the Marxist opposition to Stalinism was himself finally assassinated in Coayacan, Mexico in 1940. It was from the Spanish Communist Party that his assassin, Ramon Mercader, was recruited.

Trotsky constantly warned the Spanish working class leaders of the counterrevolutionary nature of the Kremlin bureaucracy and its policies. In his article "The lessons of Spain: the last warning", written on December 17, 1937, he wrote: "The theoreticians of the Popular Front do not essentially go beyond the first rule of arithmetic, that is, addition: 'Communists' plus Socialists plus Anarchists plus liberals add up to a total which is greater than their respective isolated numbers. Such is all their wisdom. However, arithmetic alone does not suffice here. One needs as well at least mechanics. The law of the parallelogram of forces applies to politics as well. In such a parallelogram, we know that the resultant is shorter, the more the component forces diverge from each other. When political allies tend to pull in opposite directions, the resultant may prove equal to zero... The modern history of bourgeois society is filled with all sorts of Popular Fronts, i.e. the most diverse political combinations for the deception of the toilers... There can be no greater crime than coalition with the bourgeoisie in a period of socialist revolution."

The larger leftwing groups, such as the POUM, ignored Trotsky and the smaller groups of revolutionists who did heed his warnings were not able to construct a revolutionary party in time. The international working class thus lost an opportunity to deliver a body blow to the forces of reaction that could have changed the course of world history. Instead, Spain became the antechamber to the bloody slaughter of the Second World War, while the Spanish workers and peasants were to suffer forty years of Franco's junta.

The historical consultant for the exhibition was professor Paul Preston, from the London School of Economics, who specialises in contemporary Spain, the history of the European left and fascism. His books include: *Franco: A Biography* (Harper Collins, 1993) and *Comrades: Portraits from the Spanish Civil War* (Harper Collins, 1999).

For details of "Dreams and Nightmares" see:  
<http://www.iwm.org.uk/spanishcivilwar/index.htm>



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