

Seventy years since the Spanish Civil War

Right wing in Spain attempts to rehabilitate Franco

Part One

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On November 20, 1975 Spanish dictator General Francisco Franco died. Unlike Adolf Hitler, whose dreams of a “Thousand Year Reich” ended as the Soviet Red Army entered Berlin in 1945, or the Italian fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, who was hung upside down by partisans in a Milan market place, the dictatorship established by Franco (1892-1975) survived for nearly 40 years.

Yet some 30 years after his passing, the Franco period has become the subject of an increasingly bitter “history war” within Spain. On one side stand often-serious historians who are generally sympathetic to the Popular Front government of bourgeois republican parties elected in 1936, led by President Manuel Azaña and supported by the Socialist Party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español—PSOE) and Communist Party (Partido Comunista de España—PCE). On the other side stand the right-wing “revisionist” historians supported by sections of Spain’s ruling elite, who are seeking to revive the old fascist myths that portrayed Franco as the saviour of democracy.

In truth, Spain’s history cannot be properly understood from either of these two standpoints. It was not at heart a question of Franco versus the Popular Front. Rather, what took place in Spain was a counter-revolution, prepared by the Popular Front and consummated by Franco’s coup, whose consequences continue to reverberate to this day.

What cannot be disputed is the terror unleashed after the Spanish garrisons were instructed to seize the cities on July 17, 1936. Franco oversaw the execution by the Nationalist Army and Falangist death squads of approximately 300,000 political opponents, the imprisonment of 500,000 more, and the forced exile of another 500,000 during and after the Civil War (1936-1939).

He used slave labour to rebuild Spain’s infrastructure and construct a gigantic monument to the Nationalist victory, the Valley of the Fallen (Valle de los Caídos), which now houses his tomb and the tomb of José Antonio Primo de Rivera, the founder of the fascist Falange.

Under Franco, the country’s cultural institutions were purged. Nearly all of the nation’s university lecturers and journalists were removed and 7,000 school teachers were imprisoned. Many were executed using a much-favoured method—the garrote. Political parties and trade unions were outlawed and a massive, repressive state apparatus was built to stamp out opposition and dissent.

To this day, tens of thousands of Franco’s victims lie in unmarked mass graves outside the main cities of Spain. Yet nobody has ever been prosecuted for these crimes, nor have the sentences passed by Franco’s military tribunals been overturned. Successive governments have refused to support the small groups of volunteers who have tried to exhume the

bodies.

While the revisionist historians are unable to ignore the atrocities, they seek to justify them instead. One such historian, a favourite of the right-wing Popular Party (PP), is the former Maoist Pio Moa. In his latest book, *Franco—a Historical Balance*, Moa tries to justify the repressive measures carried out by the dictatorship. Noting that Franco’s uprising against the Popular Front government was fundamentally directed at the working class and the “multifarious revolution” it had undertaken, he identifies the PCE as the leadership of this revolutionary movement and claims that if the Communists had been successful the repression would have been much greater.

Moa uses the stock-in-trade falsehoods of the right wing, equating communism with the counter-revolutionary and nationalist dictatorship established by Stalin in the Soviet Union. But the usurpation of power by the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union involved the destruction of all those genuine Marxists who fought for the perspective of world socialist revolution that had inspired and guided the 1917 Russian Revolution. It was a conflict that witnessed the transformation of the parties of the Third (Communist) International into counter-revolutionary instruments of the Soviet bureaucracy.

Between the opening of the Moscow Trials of the Old Bolsheviks in August 1936 and the assassination of Leon Trotsky four years later, every significant representative of Marxism in the Soviet Union was executed. In Spain, the PCE and Stalin’s secret service (GPU) death squads directed their repression at all their left-wing opponents, particularly the supporters of Trotsky, in order to bring the revolutionary movement of the working class back under the control of the liberal bourgeois forces in the Popular Front, and prevent a social revolution that would have radicalised Europe and threatened the rule of the bureaucracy in the USSR. It was the betrayal of the revolution by Stalinism, aided and abetted by social democracy and the anarchists, which enabled Franco to succeed.

Moa’s work is ideological propaganda in defence of fascism. That he is able to present such a perspective as serious history, however, is due in part to the pact of silence about the Franco era that the PSOE and PCE made with the political representatives of the fascist regime during the transition from dictatorship to parliamentary rule in the 1970s. They feared that the revolutionary struggles that erupted in neighbouring Portugal in 1974 as the fascist regime there disintegrated would spread to Spain and rekindle the struggles that were left unresolved since the defeated revolution.

While the right wing feels emboldened enough to rewrite history, it warns its left opponents in the political establishment not to break their pact of silence. Such a warning came from one of the most notorious

representatives of the fascist regime, Manuel Fraga, Franco's ex-information minister, who instead of spending the last decades in jail, has spent most of them as president of the Galician autonomous government. He founded the hated Francoist Popular Alliance and moulded it into today's PP.

After remarking, "I have no doubt that the judgment of history on Franco will be positive," he warned PSOE Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero not to give in to pressure to compensate the victims of the Franco regime. "It is best to leave the dead in peace. History needs to be respected, but it should not be opened up again," he said. (1)

The PSOE's response to Francoism

Fraga need have no fear. Diego López Garrido, PSOE general secretary, declared that Franco was "part of pre-history" and chose to focus on celebrating the 30th anniversary of Juan Carlos I's crowning as the king of Spain.

By promoting the democratic credentials of the king, groomed since childhood by Franco to be his successor, the PSOE and the PCE-led United Left (Izquierda Unida—IU) lend credence to the argument that Franco's dictatorship was the necessary precursor to the establishment of a parliamentary monarchy in 1978.

Spanish daily *El País*, founded in 1976 during the transition to democracy and a close supporter of the PSOE, published a 72-page eulogy to the king entitled "El Rey del Cambio" (The King of Change). It included contributions from Felipe González, PSOE prime minister from 1982 to 1996, the ex-general secretary of the PCE, Santiago Carrillo, and Miguel Primo de Rivera, the brother of Falange founder José Antonio Primo de Rivera.

Gaspar Llamazares, the IU leader, declared in *El País* that despite the king being Franco's chosen successor, it did not stop his party "valuing the services rendered by the king during the transition and especially during the coup of February 23, 1981" (2)

Llamazares is referring to the occasion when army officers, led by Lieutenant-Colonel Antonio Tejero, stormed a televised session of the new Spanish parliament and held deputies hostage for several hours. Llamazares's remarks are a stark reminder that the PCE rallied behind the king as the Franco regime came to an end and helped the bourgeoisie prevent the working class from overthrowing capitalism and settling accounts with fascism. During the abortive coup of 1981, the Stalinist PCE organised mass demonstrations together with the PSOE in support of the king Juan Carlos.

Spain at Franco's birth

The Spain into which Franco, the son of a civil servant in the naval office, was born in the year 1892 had, as Karl Marx pointed out, long since "exhibited all the symptoms of an inglorious and protracted putrefaction." (3)

In 1898, Spain suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the newly emerging imperialist power, the United States, and lost almost all of its remaining colonies, including Cuba. At that time, Spanish agriculture accounted for over half the national income and almost two-thirds of exports, and was concentrated in large and medium-sized estates. Although most of the population lived on the land, the majority were landless wage labourers or sharecroppers subsisting and working in the

most primitive conditions.

Spanish manufacturing, concentrated in Catalonia and the Basque Country, had expanded between 1898 and 1918, generating explosive struggles by the working class. The working class movement exhibited a strong tendency toward anarchism, expressing itself most strongly in influence of the anarcho-syndicalist National Confederation of Labour (Confederación Nacional del Trabajo—CNT), which was founded in 1911. The CNT's wide influence was due in part to the fact that followers of the anarchist leader Bakunin had older roots in Spain than the Marxists. However, it was also a result of the policies of the social democratic PSOE, founded in 1879 by Pablo Iglesias, and the General Workers Union (Unión General de Trabajadores—UGT), founded in 1888, and later the PCE.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the PSOE shared the "two-stage" perspective of the other social democratic parties of the Second International, according to which countries with a belated capitalist development and lacking the economic prerequisites for socialism would first have to go through a bourgeois-democratic revolution. There would follow a protracted period of capitalist rule involving republican forms of government, land reform, and separation of church and state before there could eventually be a socialist revolution. In this two-stage theory of revolution, the role of a Marxist party was limited to using the pressure of the working class to force the liberal bourgeoisie into an alliance so as to complete the bourgeois-democratic revolution.

However, Trotsky, in his theory of Permanent Revolution, first formulated in 1905, insisted that the starting point of any perspective had to be the international development of capitalist economy and the world class struggle, and not the economic level or internal class relations of any particular country, which were only a specific expression of these international tendencies.

In the epoch of imperialism, with the world's markets and resources divided between the major powers, the bourgeoisie of the more backward countries could no longer carry out the tasks once associated with the democratic revolution. They feared the independent action of an already developed working class far more than the threat from the old feudal order or from the imperialist powers.

Only the working class could carry out the democratic revolution, but having taken power, it could not limit itself to democratic tasks. It would be compelled to carry out measures of a socialist character. The limitations on the construction of socialism imposed by backwardness and isolation could be overcome only through the development of the revolution by the working class in the more advanced countries, culminating in a global socialist transformation.

In Spain, the task of carrying out a social revolution was posed clearly. Its economic and political development had been highly uneven, involving all sorts of compromises with the old feudal order, and had given the military great political weight. (Some 50 *pronunciamentos* or coups took place between 1814 and 1923 in support of one ruling faction or another.)

Spain was, nevertheless, a capitalist power ruled by a bourgeois-landlord class that still had colonial possessions in Africa. Its ruling elite was far more concerned with suppressing Spain's highly militant working class than eliminating feudal remnants and perfecting Spanish democracy. Particularly after the Russian Revolution of October 1917, preventing a revolutionary struggle by the working class became the essential aim of all sections of the ruling elite, whether or not they were formally democrats.

The development of the workers' movement in Spain

With the outbreak of the First World War, the parties of the social

democratic Second International rallied to the defence of their own national states. (In neutral Spain, the PSOE supported Britain and France). The end of the war saw a wave of revolutionary struggles sweep across Europe, reaching its high point with the October Revolution.

The PSOE leader Iglesias is said to have sunk into a deep gloom on hearing of the Bolshevik victory and the enthusiasm with which it was met by the Spanish working class. The country's first nationwide general strike took place in the same year, and there were rural revolts by landless labourers and insurrections in the cities, leading to a state of war being declared in Barcelona. There were ten changes of government in the period 1919-1921, known as the "three Bolshevik years."

Franco, who had been sent to Morocco in 1912 as a young military officer, where he fought in a brutal colonial war, showed his value to the ruling classes by applying the lessons he had learnt in North Africa to suppressing the struggles of the Spanish working class. Brought back to mainland Spain, he participated in the murderous assault on the 1917 miners strike in Asturias in which eighty workers were killed. Soon after, he was rewarded with an appointment as second-in-command of the newly formed Spanish Foreign Legion and gained a reputation for his ruthless terror methods against tribal fighters in North Africa.

The revolutionary wave in Europe was defeated, either through the betrayal of the social democratic parties or the inexperience of the young Communist parties. But in Spain, the "Bolshevik years" had had a profound effect on the PSOE, and a split within its ranks led to the formation in 1923 of the Communist Party of Spain (PCE). This included a faction called the Oposición Comunista Española, led by Juan Andrade, that was sympathetic to Trotsky's Left Opposition in the Soviet Communist Party.

The Left Opposition was formed in 1923 in response to the growth of bureaucracy within the Bolshevik party and took up the fight against Stalin's theory of "socialism in one country." This theory advanced the reactionary and nationalist position that the Soviet Union could realise socialism within its own borders independently of the struggles of the international working class. The growth of a bureaucracy within the Bolshevik party and the state apparatus fed upon the protracted isolation of the Soviet Union that was bound up with the defeats of the European revolution—particularly in Germany in 1923, where the leaders of the Communist Party failed to mobilise the working class for the seizure of power.

The bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet Union fatally affected the prospects for world revolution. Under the influence of Stalinism, the Comintern rejected the perspective of Permanent Revolution and adopted a two-stage theory of revolution, which justified collaborating with bourgeois forces and politically subordinating the working class. The most disastrous example of the application of this policy occurred in China, where the Communist Party was instructed to subordinate itself to the bourgeois Kuomintang, leading to the bloody defeat of the 1927 revolution. In the same year, Trotsky and the Left Opposition were expelled from the Russian Communist Party and the sections of the Comintern were purged of their supporters.

Primo de Rivera's coup

During this period, the bourgeoisie took advantage of the ebbing revolutionary wave to mount an international offensive against the working class. In Italy, the king appointed Benito Mussolini as prime minister in 1922, after tens of thousands of his fascist supporters marched on Rome. In Spain, General Miguel Primo de Rivera, backed by the industrial bourgeoisie, carried out a coup in 1923 sanctioned by King

Alfonso XIII, initiating seven years of military dictatorship. In 1928, Rivera's regime recalled Franco, who by now was commander of the Spanish Legion in Morocco, to Spain and amalgamated the four military academies into one under his directorship.

The world economic crisis that ushered in the Great Depression in 1929 had a huge impact on Spain. As Trotsky explained, just as with previous military regimes that had struggled to satisfy the appetites of the ruling class out of a meagre national income, Primo de Rivera "fell even without a new military coup, he simply deflated, like a tire that runs over a nail." (4)

To be continued

Footnotes:

- (1) Tremlett G., "Silence Over Franco Broken by New Spanish Generation," November 20, 2005, *The Observer*
- (2) *El Pais*, November 23, 2005
- (3) Marx K., Articles on revolutionary Spain in the New York Herald Tribune 1854
- (4) Trotsky L., "The Revolution in Spain," January 24, 1931, in *The Spanish Revolution (1931-1939)*, published by Pathfinder Press, New York, 1973, Page 72.



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