

Seventy years since the Spanish Civil War

Right wing in Spain attempts to rehabilitate Franco

Part Two

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With the fall of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship in 1931 and the exile of King Alfonso XIII, the Spanish working class embarked on its “multifarious revolution.” All the objective conditions existed for such a social transformation to take place: Spanish capitalism was collapsing under the impact of the world economic recession, the dictatorship had fallen, throwing the ruling class into disarray, and the Spanish bourgeoisie faced the most militant working class in Europe.

However, these extremely favourable conditions were squandered by the leaderships of the workers’ movement—the Socialist Party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español—PSOE) and the Communist Party (Partido Comunista de España—PCE).

Led by Manuel Azaña, the Republican-PSOE government, elected with a huge majority in 1931, faced opposition from the start from the working class and peasantry for its failure to carry out its promises of land reform and improved working conditions. The power of the Army was left intact and pledges to limit the privileges of the Church were watered down. Instead, increased repression was directed at the working class and peasantry and eruptions of militancy, such as a general strike in Seville, were brutally suppressed by the Civil Guard.

The government’s actions led to the loss of much of its support amongst workers, and encouraged the growth of right-wing parties representing the landowning oligarchy, big business, and the Church, which looked to the Army to defend their privileges. The largest of these parties was the extreme conservative Catholic coalition, the Spanish Confederation of Autonomous Rightist Groups (Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas—CEDA). The fascist Falange was formed by José Antonio Primo de Rivera, son of the dictator, and called for a “mass nationalist revolution.” The dictator’s finance minister José Calvo Sotelo set up the monarchist Renovación Española, which combined fascist ideology with calls for the military to install a dictatorship.

In 1933, faced on the one hand with a number of attempted military coups, and on the other with an increasingly combative working class, the Republican-PSOE government collapsed. A right-wing coalition government was formed, led by Alejandro Lerroux’s Radical Party but dependent on the parliamentary support of CEDA. It proceeded to undo Azaña’s limited social reforms, restore the power of the Church and prepare for civil war. The entry of three CEDA ministers into the government in October 1934 precipitated an uprising in Asturias and the proclamation of an independent republic of Catalonia.

Having seen in Franco an intransigent opponent of revolution, the Lerroux government dispatched him to quell the Asturian uprising. Using the terror tactics he had developed in the colonial war in Morocco, he

ordered planes to bomb working class districts and brought over the Foreign Legion—the first time it had been used on the Spanish mainland—to crush the rebellion. Over 5,000 people were killed and 30,000 arrested. Franco demanded the government apply “exemplary punishments to the rebels” and “castigate energetically those who have encouraged the revolution.” (1)

In May 1935, the government was reorganized and CEDA acquired five cabinet posts. José María Gil-Robles, the CEDA leader, was made minister of war and immediately appointed Franco as chief of the general staff. Franco set about purging the military and made contact with the Unión Militar Española, the secret organisation of monarchist officers closely linked to Calvo Sotelo’s Renovación Española. Plans to bring in the African Army in the event of further unrest were updated.

By the end of 1935, there were over 30,000 political prisoners, and Luis Companys, former president of Catalonia, ex-Premier Azaña, and PSOE leader Francisco Largo Caballero stood trial.

The policy of the “Popular Front”

In the midst of these events, the Nazi leader Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany. The policies of the German social democrats and the pro-Stalin leadership of the German Communist Party led to the disaster of Hitler coming to power without any significant resistance from the powerful German working class. This marked a decisive turning point in the evolution of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union and its affiliated Communist parties.

Adhering to the Stalinist policy in the early 1930s of “social fascism,” which equated social democracy with the Nazis, the German Communist Party had refused to form a united front with the millions of social democratic workers. Its policies paralysed the working class, under conditions where the social democratic leaders were hostile to any revolutionary struggle against the fascist threat. This paved the way for Hitler to come to power.

Confronted with a serious threat from a powerful Nazi regime for which his own policies were centrally responsible, Stalin responded by tying the defence of the USSR to political alliances with the imperialist democracies—Britain, France and the United States. This orientation was unveiled at the Seventh Congress of the Comintern in 1935 with the policy of the “Popular Front.”

The Communist parties were instructed to ally themselves with the

parties of the “democratic” bourgeoisie. Parties, politicians and governments were no longer to be defined by the class interests they served, but by whether they were “fascist” or “antifascist.” In this way the political independence of the working class and the goal of socialism were sacrificed on the altar of Soviet foreign policy.

Thus, the role of the Soviet regime in world affairs assumed an openly counterrevolutionary character, which was to find murderous expression in the extermination of Old Bolsheviks in the Moscow Trials (1936-1939), the hunting down of Stalin’s revolutionary opponents abroad, and, finally, the 1939 Stalin-Hitler Pact.

The International Left Opposition led by Trotsky concluded that the Stalinist betrayal of the German working class and the refusal of any national Communist Party to oppose the line of Moscow or even demand an international discussion meant it was no longer possible to reform the Comintern. It was necessary to build a new, Fourth International and fight within the USSR for a political revolution to overthrow the bureaucracy as an essential component of the world revolution.

Within Spain, the party of the International Left Opposition was the Izquierda Comunista Española (ICE), led by Andrés Nin, a founding member of the Spanish Communist Party and secretary of the Communist International’s Red International of Labour Unions.

From the time Nin became a founding member of the International Left Opposition in 1930, Trotsky conducted a sharp but patient struggle with him over the fundamental questions of Marxist programme and tactics. In particular, Trotsky warned Nin about his reluctance to collaborate internationally and advised that he not underestimate the numerically weak PCE, because behind it stood the power of the Soviet bureaucracy.

Trotsky advised the ICE to work in the radicalised left wing of the PSOE, particularly its youth section, and amongst the anarchists, in order to build a united front of workers’ parties in opposition to the Stalinist Popular Front and its alliance with bourgeois parties.

The ICE was able to grow rapidly because of dissatisfaction with the PSOE’s collaboration with the Republicans and the anarchist policy of isolated uprisings. But Nin’s nationalist and opportunist tendencies were to prevail, and rather than orienting towards the most militant workers, the ICE fused in September 1935 with Joaquín Maurín’s Workers and Peasant Bloc to form the Workers Party of Marxist Unification (Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista—POUM). Maurín was a supporter of Nikolai Bukharin’s Right Opposition to Stalin and an opponent of the Left Opposition.

Nin’s decision to join forces with Maurín represented his decisive break with Trotskyism. One consequence of this orientation was that it enabled the PCE to join up with the PSOE youth movement, significantly extending the Stalinists’ base, with disastrous consequences for the Spanish revolution.

Franco’s coup

Following elections in February 1936, a Popular Front coalition government was formed involving the PSOE, the PCE, separatist and Republican parties. The right wing demanded the outgoing government stay in power and declare martial law, but when Franco was ordered to impose it, only a few garrisons responded. Faced with a mounting wave of strikes, land seizures and riots, the Popular Front programme signed by the PSOE, the PCE and the POUM pledged to maintain “the public peace” and declared itself against redistribution of land and free from the “social or economic motives of class.”

Even as Franco was voicing his pro-fascist sympathies, the Popular Front took barely any action, out of consideration that it might need the

Army as a counterweight to the revolutionary masses. Franco was simply removed to the Canary Islands, where he was able to continue the arrangements for the coup being prepared by General Emilio Mola and backed by the Catholic Church, the big landowners and the most powerful sections of finance and industry.

On July 17, 1936 the coup was launched. The Republican government deliberately downplayed Franco’s uprising, saying it was “exclusively limited to certain cities of the protectorate zone [Morocco] and that nobody, absolutely nobody on the peninsula [mainland Spain] has added to such an absurd undertaking.” (2)

While the government sought an agreement with the fascist generals, the workers in Barcelona, followed by those in the other major cities, rose up and besieged the barracks. A situation of dual power developed rapidly, with the workers occupying the factories and the peasants taking over the estates and forming committees and collectives. They armed themselves in the face of opposition from the government and formed soldiers’ and workers’ militias and anti-fascist committees. The most important, the Central Committee of Antifascist Militias of Catalonia, became the authority in the province—completely marginalising the Republican government.

Only the supporters of Trotskyism fought for the independent revolutionary mobilization of the working class against the Popular Front and the carrying through of the socialist revolution. They called for a united front of the anarchists and the POUM and the formation of soviets, but neither of these parties was prepared to take leadership into their own hands.

At this stage, Franco’s social base was so small that he required the assistance of Germany and Italy to transport the Army of Africa from Morocco to the mainland. Franco himself remarked that the Civil War would be “immensely difficult and bloody. We haven’t got much of an army, the intervention of the Civil Guard is looking doubtful and many officers will side with the constituted power.” (3)

Even in Morocco, Franco’s supposed stronghold, his influence could have been broken had the government granted freedom to the country and encouraged a popular uprising.

Franco could rely on Italy and Germany, however, to send planes, tanks and tens of thousands of “volunteer” soldiers. Hitler supported Franco because Germany wanted to test out its military strength and gain access to Spain’s abundant iron reserves, needed for Germany’s rearmament programme. A prolonged conflict in Spain, Hitler also hoped, would divert British and French attention from Germany’s military build-up.

In contrast, the Soviet Union kept its aid to the Republican government to a minimum, providing sub-standard arms and demanding payment in gold or raw materials. Within Spain itself, the Moscow bureaucracy instructed the PCE to order workers to drop their demands, and set the GPU secret police the task of physically eliminating its opponents on the left.

Arguing that the war against Franco had to be won before there could be any talk of revolution, the Stalinist bureaucracy sought to quell any independent action by the working class lest it jeopardise winning the support of the “anti-fascist” imperialist powers. The Stalinists spread rumours that the POUM and the CNT were infiltrated by fascist agent provocateurs and declared that both were “objectively fascist.” PCE secretary José Díaz wrote, “Our principal enemies are the Fascists. However, these not only include the Fascists themselves, but also the agents who work for them... Some call themselves Trotskyites... If everyone knows this, if the government knows it, why doesn’t it treat them like Fascists and exterminate them pitilessly?”

With the aid of the Stalinist bureaucracy, the Popular Front was able to disband the workers’ militias and strengthen the Republican Army, reinstate press censorship and hand back to the bourgeoisie the farms and factories seized by the workers and peasants.

This calculated demobilising of the revolutionary movement strengthened the fascists. In September 1936, the Nationalist generals proclaimed Franco commander-in-chief of the Army (Generalísimo), and a few days later he assumed the title of Head of State, despite holding less than a third of the countryside and none of the major cities.

Franco took control of the various right-wing parties and their militias, including the war-swollen Falange, and fused them into a single fascist party, the Falange Española Tradicionalista de las Juntas de Ofensiva Nacional-Sindicalista (FET y de las JONS), also known after 1945 as the National Movement, with himself as leader, or Caudillo. That title was a reference to the mediaeval warrior-kings of Spain, and equivalent to Hitler's title of Führer and Mussolini's Duce. Over the next forty years, Franco was to play off against each other the monarchist and fascist factions in the National Movement, the two having been brought together by their common fear of the revolutionary working class.

Defeat of the revolution

Franco came to the fore because he was the most resolute and consistent proponent of war against the working class. As Trotsky explained, the superiority of this "insignificant" figure lay in his "clear and definite programme: to safeguard and stabilize capitalist property relations, the rule of the exploiters, and the domination of the Church and to restore the monarchy." (4)

None of the leaders of the major workers' organisations were prepared to act in so determined a fashion against capital and the bourgeoisie. In September 1936, the POUM joined a Popular Front government in Catalonia and Nin became minister of justice. One of the first actions of the new government was to set about dissolving the revolutionary committees and ending the situation of dual power. Within three months, the POUM had been expelled from government.

Soon after, in May 1937, the POUM leadership betrayed the insurrection of the armed workers of Barcelona. What started as a spontaneous rebellion against an attack by the PCE-controlled police on the telephone exchange, occupied by the anarchist CNT since it was recaptured from the fascists the previous year, rapidly became a citywide battle against Republican government forces. The anarchist left wing and the Bolshevik-Leninists (supporters of Trotsky) called for soviets and the seizure of power. However, the POUM and CNT leaders capitulated and agreed a worthless truce, ordered their militants to abandon the barricades and allowed government forces to occupy the city.

Seizing the advantage, the government ordered a crackdown on the POUM and the CNT. The POUM was declared illegal and its leaders, including Nin, arrested and murdered by the Stalinists, as were many Trotskyists, including Trotsky's former secretary Erwin Wolfe.

Despite a membership of some 40,000 workers in Catalonia, the POUM never called for the formation of soviets, the overthrow of the Popular Front regime, or a workers' government, thereby creating the political conditions for such an outcome. Trotsky described the POUM as a left-centrist organisation because, although it readily adopted in words the programme of socialist revolution, its "fatal malady" was its inability to draw "courageous tactical and organisational conclusions from its general conceptions."

Instead of adopting a "pitiless manner of posing the fundamental questions and a fierce polemic against vacillations" (5), the POUM pursued an opportunist policy of seeking to be friends and advisers to the leaders of the larger workers' organisations. In that way, the POUM played a critical role in the defeat of the Spanish revolution.

By 1939, with the revolution crushed, the ill-equipped Republican

fighters were overwhelmed by the Nationalists, who were soon recognised as the legitimate government by France, Britain and the United States. Pope Pius XII sent a congratulatory message to Franco saying, "Lifting up our hearts to God, we sincerely thank Your Excellency for the desired Catholic victory in Spain. We pray that this most beloved country, once again at peace, will return with renewed vigour to the ancient and Christian traditions which made her great." (6)

Franco proceeded to destroy every aspect of the workers' organisations and systematically reduce the working class to an amorphous mass of individuals. Hundreds of thousands were imprisoned, tortured and executed in an orgy of repression that was to last nearly forty years. The privileges of the Church were restored and it was made illegal to publish works of religion or philosophy without its approval.

This defeat strengthened the hand of fascism throughout Europe and paved the way for the outbreak of World War II. Stalin, having failed to form an alliance with France, Britain and the US even though he had worked to sabotage the Spanish revolution, and having purged the Red Army, signed the infamous "non-aggression" pact with Hitler on August 24, 1939. A week later Germany invaded Poland and the slaughter began.

Franco intended to enter the war on the side of the Axis powers, hoping in return to win French colonies in North Africa and economic aid and military assistance from Hitler. However, the destruction and exhaustion resulting from the Civil War meant that Spain was forced into neutrality and reduced to secretly organising 19,000 troops into the notorious Blue Division that fought with the Nazis against the Soviet Union. Britain and the US sought to enforce Spain's neutrality by threatening to blockade food and oil supplies, thereby worsening the famine conditions and provoking bread riots.

The PCE ignored its own counter-revolutionary role in Franco's victory and tried to shift responsibility onto the Allied powers. Santiago Carrillo, who later became PCE general secretary, wrote, "[I]t is clear that at that time the European bourgeoisie would not have tolerated a situation in which a small isolated country like Spain could victoriously carry through a socialist revolution. The proof of this is that in spite of all our precautions, we were in the end defeated by the European and international bourgeoisie." (7)

To be continued.

Footnotes:

- (1) Preston P., *Franco*, Fontana Press, 1995, page 106
- (2) Morrow F., *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain*, New Park Publications, England, 1963. Also <http://www.marxists.org/archive/morrow-felix/1938/revolution-spain/index.htm>
- (3) Preston P., *Franco*, Fontana Press, 1995, page 129
- (4) Trotsky L., "The Tragedy of Spain," in *The Spanish Revolution (1931-1939)*, Pathfinder Press, New York, 1973, page 330
- (5) Trotsky L., "The Culpability of Left Centrism," in *The Spanish Revolution (1931-1939)*, Pathfinder Press, New York, 1973, pages 342-346
- (6) Seldes G., "The Roman Church and Franco," *The Churchman*, December 1978, page 10
- (7) Carrillo S., *Dialogue on Spain*, Lawrence and Wishart, 1974



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