

# Congress held in Madrid on 70th anniversary of Spanish Civil War

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The three-day congress held last week in Madrid on the 70th anniversary of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War was one of the largest and most heavily attended academic and intellectual events in Spain in recent memory.

Over the course of three days, nearly 200 scholars presented papers in close to 40 separate workshops. Nightly public sessions addressed by prominent Spanish and international historians filled the auditorium of the Spanish capital's *Círculo de Bellas Artes*.

Popular interest in the proceedings clearly reflected an increasingly tense political situation in Spain itself, where unresolved issues regarding the crimes carried out by the military and the fascists 70 years ago during the civil war and under the ensuing four-decade dictatorship of Francisco Franco have become a focus of bitter contention.

On the eve of the congress, Spain's Catholic bishops issued a provocative missive denouncing the Socialist Party government.

"Our recent history," the bishops write, "is more agitated and convulsive than would be desirable. A society that had seemed to find the road to its reconciliation returns to finding itself divided and in confrontation. A utilization of historical memory, guided by a selective mentality, once again opens the old wounds of the Civil War and revives sentiments that had seemed to have been overcome."

The document referred to the savagely repressive Franco dictatorship merely as the "previous political regime that lasted for 40 years." Neither in this document, nor anywhere else, has the Spanish Catholic hierarchy acknowledged the Church's responsibility for supporting Franco's coup and promoting the military repression of the country's working people as a holy crusade.

The intervention of the clerics comes in response to growing popular demands for an accounting for the crimes of the dictatorship, which killed and imprisoned hundreds of thousands after Franco's army prevailed in the civil war. In recent weeks, relatives of the victims have unearthed the bodies of close to 1,000 people who were summarily executed and thrown into mass graves.

In response, the Socialist Party government of Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero has proposed a conciliatory "law of historic memory" that has simultaneously provoked the ire of the right and failed to satisfy the demands for justice of the survivors of the dictatorship's victims. (See "Spain: Socialist Party government betrays victims of Franco's dictatorship")

Papers presented at the congress addressed a wide variety of topics, including the war's antecedents; foreign intervention; military, social and economic conditions; the role of the Church; repression and exile; and the conflict's impact on and reflection in literature, art and the cinema.

However, despite the undeniable breadth of the enterprise, as a whole it failed to seriously come to grips with the profound political and historical issues posed by the Spanish Civil War and its place in the global development of the bloody events of the twentieth century.

While a number of the papers submitted to the congress included

valuable studies of the civil war's impact in different regions and social spheres, others reflected the post-modernist tendency in academia internationally to seek ethnic, gender-based, and psychological explanations for historical events. What was lacking—almost without exception—was an attempt to address more global political questions such as the revolutionary character of the class struggle in 1930s Spain, the political and social conflicts within the Republican camp, and the nature of Soviet policy in relation to the Spanish Civil War.

The intellectual tone of the congress was set by the principal speaker at the opening session, Jorge Semprún. A former leading member of the Stalinist Spanish Communist Party who was expelled from the organization in 1964, Semprún went on to become the Spanish minister of culture. He is best known for his writings dealing with his own experiences as member of both the anti-Nazi French and anti-Franco Spanish underground movements, and as an inmate at the Buchenwald concentration camp. He was nominated for academy awards for writing the screenplays for the films *La Guerre Est Finie* and *Z*.

The thrust of Semprún's remarks was to challenge the contention that Franco's coup was a response by decisive sections of Spain's ruling classes to the perceived threat of a social revolution by the Spanish working class.

"The idea that the fascist insurrection was a reaction against a Bolshevik revolution is one of the most absurd things ever to have been written in Spanish," he declared.

Semprún initially directed this charge against what he termed "pseudo-historical revisionism"—referring to right-wing apologists for Francoism like Pio Moa and Cesar Vidal—and insisted that the war waged against Franco's forces was a "just war" in defense of both "a legitimate parliamentary regime" and "social justice."

He went on, however, to declare that "the thesis of Trotsky that the civil war would have been won if the revolution had not been betrayed" was false. He further asserted that the politics of Stalin and the Spanish Communist Party were correct, even if the methods they used to implement them—assassination and mass repression against left-wing opponents and radicalized sections of the working class—were "infamous."

While acknowledging Stalin's "obsession" with Trotsky and his dispatch of the Spanish Stalinist agent Ramón Mercader to Mexico to assassinate the revolutionary leader in 1940, Semprún insisted, "Stalin in 1936 was correct; the war in Spain was not a socialist revolution but a defense of democracy."

This explicit attack on Trotskyism and defense of the politics—if not all of the methods—of Stalinist counterrevolution at the outset of a congress on the Spanish Civil War co-sponsored by Spain's Ministry of Culture had an explicitly political rather than a historiological character.

The assertion that no revolutionary situation existed in Spain in the period leading up to the civil war prefaced another conclusion on Semprún's part: not only was the civil war inevitable, but so was the victory of Franco's fascist-military coup.

This same essential theme was echoed by a number of the leading historians who spoke at the conference, most of whom evinced a pronounced tendency to write off the possibility of a socialist revolution in Spain in 1930s. While they quite correctly indicted the governments of Britain and France for refusing to arm or support the Republic against the fascist coup, they treated the policies of the Soviet regime essentially uncritically. The relationship between the Republican government and the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union was evaluated solely from the standpoint of Soviet military supplies, rather than the counterrevolutionary role played by Stalinism in Spain and its catastrophic consequences.

An uncritical attitude toward the policies of both the Spanish Republican government and the Stalinist bureaucracy was combined with a groundless near-total silence on the role of the POUM (Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista), a party with a membership of some 40,000 workers in Catalonia, which became one of the principal targets of Stalinist repression.

When an Italian historian, Gabriele Ranzato of the University of Pisa, suggested in one of the main public sessions that the reason Britain and France refused to provide aid was that they saw a threat that power in Spain was falling into “the hands of the masses in arms” and that Franco’s revolt had “unleashed the revolution he wanted to prevent,” he was attacked by fellow panelists.

The only participant to openly challenge the perspective outlined in the opening session was Ann Talbot, a historian and correspondent for the *World Socialist Web Site*, who was invited to submit a paper to the congress.

Her paper, entitled “Republican Spain and the Soviet Union: Politics and Foreign Intervention in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-9,” argued that the relationship between the Spanish republican government and the Stalinist bureaucracy arose out of the conflation of parallel interests.

For its part, the Spanish republican bourgeoisie wanted not only Soviet weapons to combat Franco, but also the power and prestige of Moscow behind it in confronting and suppressing the revolutionary movement of the Spanish working class.

As for Stalin and the bureaucracy, from the standpoint of Soviet foreign policy, they wanted to limit the expansion of German and Italian fascism. Even more important for the bureaucracy, however, was forestalling a successful revolution in Spain, under conditions in which the Stalinist regime was engaged in a ferocious purge and suppression of revolutionary and internationalist cadres who were identified with Trotsky. What both the Stalinist bureaucracy and the Spanish republican bourgeoisie shared was an interest “in strangling the emerging social revolution in Spain.” Talbot’s paper drew upon material from Soviet, British and US archives that demonstrates the awareness and fear within both the imperialist centers and Moscow of the revolutionary situation in Spain. This material also confirms the drive by the Stalinists to crush this movement and restore private property and the power of the bourgeois state in Spain. “The fundamental reason for the defeat at the hands of fascism was that the Soviet Union destroyed the social force that animated military resistance,” Talbot’s paper argued. In presenting her paper, Talbot noted that its entire thesis had been attacked in the opening report to the congress. “In such a situation, one is left with two choices, either pack your bags and go home or enter into the fray.” She made it clear that she intended to do the latter and fully expected that her position would provoke controversy and attack.

This was quickly confirmed in the question-and-answer session, in which Angel Viñas, a prominent Spanish historian, rose to challenge the paper. Viñas, in addition to his academic pursuits and authorship of several books on the Spanish civil war, is a leading state figure in Spain, having served in various ministries, as well as at the International Monetary Fund and as the European Commission’s ambassador to the United Nations.

Viñas, a self-avowed admirer of the role played by the right-wing Socialist Party president, Juan Negrín, accused Talbot of dealing not with “the civil war, but an ideological war.” He also challenged her use of documents, targeting, in particular, the writings of Burnett Bolloten, who covered the Spanish Civil War as a correspondent for United Press International. That Bolloten, who had sympathized with the Communist Party before witnessing the betrayal of the Spanish revolution, did not source his work in archives but rather in contemporary news accounts discredited his account, according to Viñas, despite his eyewitness relation to the events.

He also charged that the documents cited from the Soviet archives, including an initial anxious report from the Comintern’s representative in Spain that the workers had seized control of virtually all the means of production and that the “machinery of the state is either destroyed or paralyzed,” were selective and misleading.

Also included in Talbot’s paper were documents demanding that “Trotskyists,” a term used by Moscow to describe the POUM and virtually any opposition from the left, were to be destroyed and “liquidated.” That such orders were being sent during the period of the Moscow Trials and a virtual bloodbath against the revolutionary elements in the USSR itself leaves little room for misinterpretation.

Finally, Viñas challenged Talbot’s citation of a document sent from Moscow just weeks before the crucial May 1937 events in Barcelona, calling upon local Stalinist agents to “hasten and provoke” a government crisis. She stated that this document tended to confirm charges made by the POUM and the anarchists that the Stalinists had deliberately provoked a confrontation and uprising in order to provide a pretext for changing the government and launching a ferocious crackdown on the left. Within weeks, the POUM was outlawed and its leader, Andres Nin, was arrested, tortured and murdered.

Viñas declared that he had “personally examined” the documents contained in the Soviet military intelligence archives and that none of them substantiated Moscow’s involvement in provoking the Barcelona events.

In reply, Ann Talbot defended the validity of the documents cited and declared that Viñas seriously underestimated the significance of the Stalin bureaucracy’s struggle against Trotskyism.

A member of the audience also challenged Viñas, saying that he was staggered to hear the professor dismiss the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy’s responsibility for the repression in Barcelona. He cited the systematic kidnapping and murder by the Stalinist secret police of Trotskyists and other socialist opponents of Stalinism in Spain, including not only Nin, but also Trotsky’s secretary Erwin Wolff, Austrian socialist Kurt Landau and many others. “Spain was a testing ground for Stalinist counterrevolution,” he said.

The role of the GPU-NKVD, the Stalinist Soviet secret police, he added, was well-documented, including by the testimony of Alexander Orlov, the NKVD liaison to the Republican government.

The congress closed Wednesday night with a packed public session addressed by the veteran US-born historian Gabriel Jackson and the Spanish historian and the congress’s convenor, Santos Juliá.

Jackson compared the “levels of inhumanity and cruelty” reached in the Spanish Civil War and the period following the assumption of power by Franco with the present situation in Iraq. He spoke at some length as well on the importance of the universalist values and conceptions of human rights established during the Enlightenment.

Santos Juliá refuted the conception that the Spanish people had adopted some kind of collective amnesia about the civil war and Francoism, insisting that both had been under continuous discussion since the death of Franco more than three decades ago.

He described how his own generation, born in the immediate aftermath of the civil war, had been indoctrinated that the war had been waged for

Spain's salvation against a largely guilty population that had nearly surrendered their nation to godless communism.

He explained that the "tragic and horrible" experience of poverty and repression suffered by the masses of Spanish people in the 1940s and early 1950s clashed so openly with this myth of the civil war that it began to break down.

While initially the response of young people, he indicated, was to reject the civil war and its results and desire to "be like the rest of Europe" instead of being ruled by a fascistic autarchy, by the 1960s there was a growing demand to know what had really happened.

While the amount of material submitted to the congress was voluminous and indicated the popular interest that exists in the Spanish Civil War, it would seem that many prominent Spanish historians have underestimated the immense revolutionary potential of the 1930s and ignored the profound problems of revolutionary leadership within the working class. These complex events have been treated largely as a matter of state, military and diplomatic policies, rather than from the standpoint of political and social conflicts and class relations.



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