

Introductory remarks by World Socialist Web Site correspondent at Madrid congress on Spanish Civil War

Our reporter
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A three-day conference was held in Madrid between November 27 and 29 to mark the 70th anniversary of the Spanish Civil War. An account of the meeting, "Congress held in Madrid on 70th anniversary of Spanish Civil War," can be read at [here](#).

Nearly 200 scholars presented papers in close to 40 separate workshops, and nightly public sessions were addressed by prominent Spanish and international historians.

The principal speaker at the opening session, Jorge Semprún, a former leading member of the Spanish Communist Party who went on to become Spain's minister of culture from 1988 to 1991, framed his remarks as a rebuttal to the argument that Franco's coup was a response by sections of Spain's ruling classes to the threat of a social revolution by the 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, adding that "the thesis of Trotsky that the civil war would have been won if the revolution had not been betrayed" was false. Even if the methods the Stalinists employed to implement their policies were "infamous," he said, "the politics of Stalin and the Spanish Communist Party were correct: The war in Spain was not a socialist revolution but a defense of democracy."

This perspective was challenged by Ann Talbot, a historian and correspondent for the World Socialist Web Site, whose paper, "Republican Spain and the Soviet Union: Politics and Foreign Intervention in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-9," argues for the thesis rejected by Semprún.

Below, we publish the remarks made by Talbot in introducing her paper, which were framed as a rebuttal of Semprún's remarks.

I would like to introduce my paper by saying that it is very rare to take one's seat at the inaugural session of a conference and find that the main themes of one's paper are under attack from so eminent a figure as Jorge Semprún. That was the experience I had in the opening session of this conference.

Under those circumstances, one has only two alternatives. Either one packs one's bag and goes home, or one enters into the fray. I propose to take the latter course and address the issues that Jorge Semprún raised in his opening address. In doing so, I hope I can appeal to the spirit of cordiality that Professor Santos Julia asked us to observe yesterday, although I have to say that last night's public lecture has left me prepared for some lively discussion.

Jorge Semprún raised three points that relate directly to my paper. First, that no revolution was possible in Spain. Second, that the Civil War, although it was a just war, was doomed to failure because Franco was determined to win at all costs. And third, that the crimes of Stalin can be separated from the other policies of the Soviet Union.

I contend, and my paper presents the evidence to support this thesis, that a revolution took place in Spain in July 1936. That revolution was the culmination of several years of political struggle that we can trace back to 1931. It established a form of dual power, similar to that which existed in Russia between February and October 1917.

This revolution was strangled by the efforts of the Kremlin, by means of the most ruthless repressive measures. Far from the Civil War being doomed to failure, any objective observer of Spanish events in the late summer of 1936 would have assumed that Franco's forces were heading for defeat at the hands of the workers' militias, and that Western Europe was about to experience its first successful proletarian revolution.

All revolutions, if they are to survive, must mobilise the social forces that the revolution has unleashed. Not only does this enable it to mount military resistance, but it transforms the political composition of the international situation.

We might think of France—when the armies of revolutionary France abolished serfdom, they were unstoppable—or of the American Civil War, an even closer parallel. Britain was unable to intervene, as its government would have liked, on behalf of the South because a large section of the British population, especially cotton workers in the northern mill towns, supported the abolition of slavery and the victory of the North.

A revolutionary regime is capable of driving deep wedges between the social classes in countries that want to see it crushed. This was what Trotsky had done at Brest-Litovsk.

I make no apology for bringing the name of Leon Trotsky into the discussion, because Semprún has already done so. Trotsky is relevant to the Spanish Civil War because he had led a revolution, built a revolutionary army and won a civil war. Semprún seems to believe that only the right is convinced that they can succeed and are capable of carrying out a successful political strategy. The case of Leon Trotsky demonstrates that this is not so. The cause of revolution can be successful given appropriate leadership.

Trotsky is also significant in any discussion of Spain because he was a factor in the situation. The name of Trotsky had become, as he himself recognised, a “terminological convenience” for revolution. The name of Trotsky was inseparable from revolution. As I say in my paper, the remarks of the French Ambassador Coulondre to Hitler in August 1939 are well known, but are worth repeating. Coulondre warned Hitler “...at the end of a war the sole real victor would be M. Trotsky.”

We heard in Semprún’s lecture about Stalin’s “anti-Trotsky obsession,” and that certainly existed. My paper discusses it in some detail. It is one of the most striking features of the documentary material that has emerged from the Soviet archives.

Trotsky and the struggle against Trotskyism was the subject of dinner table gossip and of discussion in the highest bodies of the Soviet state. Trotskyism features in reports sent back from Spain and in orders dispatched from Moscow to its representatives in Spain. The general theme of those orders is that Trotskyism must be liquidated. The word is precise—“liquidate.”

And that was what Moscow’s representatives in Spain did. They liquidated the Trotskyists. Trotsky’s secretary Erwin Wolf was murdered. In Switzerland, Ignace Reiss was killed by assassins who could be traced to Spain. Ramon Mercader was trained at Albacete before he was sent to Mexico to murder Trotsky.

Andres Nin, leader of the POUM, was murdered. Nin had long since broken with Trotsky, and the POUM was by no means a Trotskyist organisation, but Moscow could not tolerate any opposition. There was always the danger that it would encourage revolutionary ideas among workers.

In Barcelona, in May 1937, Moscow moved to destroy all trace of opposition in the working class and to gather state power into its own hands. The documents now available from the Soviet archives make it clear that the Soviet Union launched a provocation in Barcelona that aimed to prevent the emergence of genuinely revolutionary leadership.

It was a tactic that came close to failing. Reports sent back to Moscow show that the entire transportation system was in the hands of the workers. Given the word, they could have seized power. Instead, they were told to agree to a ceasefire. The result was a pogrom of revolutionaries in the days that followed.

As I explain in my paper: “In Spain we see the most finished expression of the Kremlin’s Popular Front policy, which it adopted after the rise of Hitler. Abandoning its previous ‘class against class’ policy of the ‘third period,’ the Soviet Union began to build popular fronts with bourgeois parties in a supposedly common struggle against fascism.

“The development of the French Popular Front had been assured with the signing of the Franco-Soviet Pact of 1934, which overcame the misgivings of the non-Communist parties to an alliance with the French Communist Party (PCF). When French Foreign Minister Laval called on Stalin to order the PCF to drop its opposition to the army budget, Stalin replied, ‘I agree.’

“A joint communiqué was issued declaring, ‘M. Stalin understands and fully approves of the policy of national defence carried out by France in order to maintain her armed strength at the level required for her security.’ A new patriotic tone subsequently emerged in the propaganda of the PCF, and when a general strike

broke out in May-June 1936, Maurice Thorez, the leader of the PCF, brought it to an end in order to preserve the Popular Front.

“The Popular Front has been called ‘a valuable counterbalance... to the disastrous impression left by the Russian purges.’ Certainly, the Popular Front seems to have dissuaded French liberals from protesting about the Moscow trials. But the dominant impression created in the minds of hard-headed Western politicians by the spectacle of the purges must have been that Stalin had indeed put world revolution behind him.

“As he told a Western reporter in 1936, the identification of the Soviet Union with world revolution was no more than a tragic-comic misunderstanding. In a very real sense, the purges were the proof that Stalin was in earnest about Popular Front politics.

“By murdering and imprisoning Trotskyists and old Bolsheviks, Stalin demonstrated that he had broken decisively with the revolutionary perspective that Trotsky epitomised. The leaders of the Spanish republican and socialist parties had every reason to suppose that if they could succeed in establishing a similar alignment with the backing of Moscow, it would provide them with a political weapon against militant workers.”

There was nothing inevitable about the failure of the Spanish revolution. It died on the streets of Barcelona in May 1937 and in the prisons of the Stalinist secret police. The International Brigades that had defended Madrid were purged. Officers were shot for Trotskyism, soldiers were interrogated and imprisoned—all of them committed socialists and internationalists. The results of that repression were disastrous for Spain.

As I wrote in my paper: “In July 1936, the untrained workers of Barcelona were able to turn back the army of Franco without Soviet arms. In November, workers’ militias and hastily assembled brigades of international volunteers were able to save Madrid after the government had fled. All of the demagoguery at the disposal of the Soviet Union could not conjure up that quality of resistance again once the mass of the Spanish population knew that even victory would not give land to the peasants or place the factories in the hands of the workers.”

Once the revolutionary spirit was crushed, there could be no effective resistance to Franco. The results were disastrous for Spain, but they were also disastrous on a global scale, because the Spanish Civil War was one of the formative events of the twentieth century. Had the left won, we would be looking back at a very different twentieth century today.



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