An exchange on the Spanish Civil War: Socialism or a bourgeois republic?

11 April 2007

Below we publish an email from a reader and a reply by WSWS writer Ann Talbot. (See "Eric Hobsbawm on the Spanish Civil War: an anti-historical tirade" *and* "Introductory remarks by World Socialist Web Site correspondent at Madrid congress on Spanish Civil War"*)*

Thank you for the two pieces on the Spanish Civil War. I do think that there is a lot of argument by assertion in the critique of Hobsbawm and Semprún. I doubt if the so-called revolutionary workers could have turned back Franco's military forces.

In any case I would have been satisfied to have seen the bourgeois Republican Government defeat the insurgency led by Franco. That would have led to a weakening of the reactionary Roman Catholic Church and Spanish Aristocracy, with an opportunity created for leftist working groups to advance a radical agenda under a Republican Government.

In sum, a bourgeois Republican government would have been a lot better for the left to advance a radical program as no opportunity to do so was possible under the take no prisoners Franco regime.

RLB

Thank you for your comments.

You doubt that the "so-called revolutionary workers," as you put it in your email, could have turned back Franco. But that is exactly what they did.

On July 17, 1936 General Franco issued his manifesto. Most of the army went over to him. He would undoubtedly have taken control of the state had it not been for the workers who resisted the coup and defeated in it Barcelona, Madrid, Valencia, Malaga and numerous other towns and villages. Workers took over factories, public transport and utilities, sailors seized their ships, and peasants occupied the land.

The Republican government had neither army, nor police—those indispensable instruments of sovereignty. It was dependent for its very survival on the workers' militias.

A situation of dual power had come into being, such as that which existed in Russia between the revolutions of February and October 1917, or in Germany in 1918-19. Legal authority remained with the Republican government, but actual power had passed into the hands of new, improvised revolutionary institutions—an embryonic workers state.

President Luis Companys reputedly told a group of anarchists the day after the uprising, "Today you are masters of the city and of Catalonia....You have conquered and everything is in your power. If you do not need me or do not want me as President of Catalonia, tell me now and I shall become just another soldier in the struggle against fascism."

Companys, a wily political operator, was forced to recognise that on July 19, 1936 Spain had undergone a revolution.

You say in your email that you would have been satisfied to see the Republic defeat Franco, but it was under the Republic that Franco was allowed to consolidate his position in the army. Ever since it was created in 1931 the Republic had shown itself incapable of resolving any of the economic, social or political problems that confronted Spain. The tasks you refer to—which are essentially democratic tasks—had fallen to the working class because the Spanish bourgeoisie was politically bankrupt.

Franco's attempted coup was not the work of a few isolated officers and nor did it resemble the previous occasions when the military had intervened in Spanish politics. It was a fascist coup. As in Italy and Germany, it expressed the inability of the capitalist class to deal with the crisis they faced in any other way than by entirely crushing the working class. Spanish workers' organisations had continued to exist under military

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regimes before, but under Franco they were destroyed.

In so far as the Republic brought in reforms, it was under pressure from the workers and peasants or, after July, to the extent that they were forced to recognise the actions that the workers' militias and councils had carried out on their own initiative. As the Republican government regained power in the weeks following the revolution, the progressive measures that had been introduced were revoked.

The government was able to regain power in this way only because workers' leaders agreed to join the government. Andres Nin of the centrist Party of Marxist Unification (POUM) declared that Spain did not need soviets, which was in effect to recognise the right of the Republicans and Socialists to rule Spain. As for the anarchists of the CNT and FAI, they continued to denounce all states while joining the government that systematically dismantled all the workers' militias and councils.

Nin followed their example and accepted a place in the Catalan government. In doing so he violated a body of revolutionary experience going all the way back to the Paris Commune, which demonstrated that workers cannot merely take hold of the existing state machinery but have to construct their own state that reflects their independent class interests. Nin justified the POUM joining the government because he claimed it had a socialist orientation. But once he had given it the authority it otherwise lacked, the gains that workers had been made were rapidly whittled way.

The political orientation of the Republican government is revealed clearly by its reliance on the Soviet Union. After the rise of Hitler, Stalin adopted the policy of building Popular Front blocs with bourgeois parties and stepped up his efforts to form alliances with the Western democracies in what he hoped would be a common struggle against fascism. To this end, the Communist Parties of the Third International were obliged to reject revolution, suppress working class struggles and to become patriotic defenders of the nation state. In the Soviet Union Old Bolsheviks and oppositionists were forced to make false confessions and condemned in a series of show trials. In Spain we see the most finished expression of those policies, as Moscow directed all its efforts to crushing the revolution.

The Stalinist secret police systematically kidnapped, imprisoned, tortured and murdered those who opposed their perspective. In May 1937, they crushed opposition in Barcelona. Nin himself was tortured to death because he would not provide them with the confession that would have been necessary to conduct a show trial for the benefit of the international press. Far from the Republic offering the best opportunity for the left to advance a radical programme, as you suggest, it turned to the Stalinists to murder its left critics and terrorize the workers and peasants. In its moment of crisis, Stalin offered the Spanish Republic the political authority of the state and party of the October Revolution, which he had usurped, combined with his experience as an executioner and the apparatus of the GPU.

The liberal preconceptions with which you attempt to analyze the Spanish Civil War are thoroughly abstract, producing an entirely unhistorical picture of events. This was a civil war and in a civil war politics are decisive. If I might refer you to an example with which you are perhaps more familiar: in the case of the American Civil War Lincoln's decision to emancipate the slaves was a turning point. It was instrumental in mobilising support within America, not least behind Confederate lines, and in mobilising support for the Union internationally.

The only programme that could have been successful in Spain was one that offered social liberation to the workers and peasants. A socialist programme would have undermined Franco's support in the areas he held and in the colonies from which he drew his troops. And most importantly it would have transformed the world situation. When you so lightly dismiss the revolutionary capacity of the working class, you have clearly not considered that this is an international class. Had a revolutionary leadership emerged in Spain that reflected the interests of the working class as well as Lincoln reflected the progressive interests of his class, the history of the twentieth century would have been very different.

Yours sincerely,

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