Recycling Stalinist lies about the Spanish Civil War

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El Escudo de la Republica by Angel Viñas (Barcelona: Critica, 2007)

History books are seldom just about the past. They inevitably reflect, for better or worse, something of the consciousness of the time in which they are written. This is certainly true of Professor Angel Viñas's latest book about the Spanish Civil War. The character of the times in which it has been written indelibly colours the book.

What that character is was indicated by an August 24 article in the *Financial Times* in which journalist David Gardner drew attention to a small incident that recently took place in Madrid. Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero and Mariano Rajoy, leader of the opposition Popular Party, met for a summit at which they intended to formulate a cross-party policy on the Basque question now that ETA has ended its ceasefire. Zapatero extended his hand to Rajoy as they met on the steps of the Moncloa Palace and Rajoy, whose party is the lineal descendant of Franco's party, hesitated to take it.

It was, said Gardner, "a lamentably accurate snapshot of the descent into incivility of Spanish public life." So sharply polarised has Spanish public life become that the "visceral idiom of 'the two Spains' of the 1936-9 civil war" had been revived.

Gardner was quick to point out that eventually the two men did shake hands for the cameras and that Spain was not on the brink of armed conflict, but his instinct was correct in identifying the mounting political tension in Spain. The cartoon that accompanied the article showed Zapatero and Rajoy standing on either side of a chasm filled with the dead. The relatives of those killed by the fascists are demanding the bodies be identified and exonerated. As many as 500 mass graves have been opened in Andalusia alone.

Under these circumstances the superficial courtesies that normally smooth social and political life tend to be suppressed as an apparently simple gesture is burdened with the weight of history. The same re-emergence of the visceral antagonisms of the Spanish Civil War are evident in Angel Viñas's new book and, it must be said, the same descent into incivility is evident in the professor's behaviour toward his colleagues.

His manner has gone beyond the cut and thrust of academic debate and has descended on the Internet, in print and in person into what can only be described as bullying. At a conference to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Spanish Civil War in Madrid last year he harangued the Italian historian Gabriele Ranzato in public because he had dared to suggest that a revolution had taken place in Spain during the 1930s.

After delivering a paper at the same conference on the joint effort by the Moscow Stalinist bureaucracy and the Spanish Republican government to strangle the revolutionary movement of the working class, I was on the receiving end of a similar ear-bashing from Viñas.

With the air of one who is in possession of a great secret, he declared that he had evidence that the May Days, the workers' uprising in Barcelona in 1937, was a provocation organized by the Italian fascists. There was an almost audible intake of breath, as the audience waited to hear what this evidence might be. No serious historian would make such an assertion without evidence, *ergo* Viñas must have evidence. The conference book stall sold out of Viñas's latest book as his fellow historians rushed to buy it. But Viñas did not deal with the May Days in that volume, [1] the first in what is to be a trilogy covering the history of the Spanish Civil War. We had to wait for this, his second volume, *El Escudo de la Republica*, before we became privy to this recondite and much heralded new material. I leafed through the book in expectation of some startling revelation, as many others must have done.

Unlike Keats, no new planet swam into my ken on first looking into *El Escudo* although I must confess that I may have looked around "with wild surmise" because the promised new documents simply were not there.

Professor Viñas is a distinguished historian who occupies a chair at the ancient Complutensian University of Madrid. He advises the Ministry of Economics. He has served as a diplomat to the European Union and the United Nations. Such distinctions impose an obligation of veracity. A man of his distinction not only should not, but could not be doing what Viñas evidently was doing. Viñas was simply recycling the old Stalinist lie that the May Days insurrection was a fascist provocation.

He had no new evidence, no new documents, no new archival material, and no new revelations. He was blatantly reasserting the propaganda that had been put out by the Stalinists in defence of the Popular Front Republican government of Spain and asking his readers to accept it as historical analysis.

His account of the May Days could have been read in the pages of the *Daily Worker* or any other Stalinist newspaper at the time. The closest precedent is to be found in the articles of the Stalinist hack Claud Cockburn who loyally followed the Moscow line that the POUM (Party of Marxist Unity) were Trotskyists and Trotskyists were fascist agents. Cockburn claimed that German and Italian agents poured into Barcelona where "in co-operation with the local Trotskyists" they were to "prepare a situation of disorder and bloodshed" in which it would be possible for the Germans and Italians to land forces on the Catalan coast. "The POUM, acting in co-operation with well known criminal elements, and with certain other deluded persons in the anarchist organisations, planned organised and led the attack in the rearguard". [2]

What in fact happened in the May Days?

Street fighting broke out in Barcelona when Republican government forces tried to seize the telephone exchange from the workers who were occupying it. The telephone exchange had been under the control of the workers since July 1936 when they defeated Franco's attempted coup. The Republican government had collapsed, and power fell into the hands of the workers who set about creating committees to organise production and distribution collectively and militias to defend their revolution.

A situation of dual power had been created comparable to that in Russia between the February and October 1917 revolutions. But in Spain instead of the workers taking state power as they did in Russia, the leaders of the Anarchists and the POUM entered the Republican government. In so

doing they rejected the lessons of a century of socialist experience and gave the Republic a political authority that it could not have won in any other way. Consequently the political conquests that the workers had made in July 1936 were whittled away over the ensuing months.

The process of counter-revolution was slowest in Catalonia, the industrial region of which Barcelona was the capital, and which was a centre of proletarian power. The telephone exchange remained a powerful symbol of the revolution and a strategic objective in the counter-revolution. On Monday May 3, 1937, Chief of Police Rodriguez Salas ordered Republican forces to seize it. The workers occupying the telephone exchange resisted. Within minutes truckloads of workers and youth arrived to help in the defence of the building. A general strike began as thousands of armed workers came out onto the streets where they threw up barricades.

The Assault Guards and the National Guards of the Republic were powerless and surrendered. By the night of May 3 Barcelona was effectively under the control of the workers. They could have taken power, but instead their leaders ordered them to cease fire. The Republican government on the other hand was making ready to bomb the working class districts of Barcelona and despatched warships to the port.

As the fighting continued throughout Tuesday and Wednesday, the workers' militias discussed returning from the front to defend the revolution, but their leaders dissuaded them. The news that 1,500 more Assault Guards were on their way, reached Barcelona the next day.

Their passage through Catalonia was made possible by the leaders of the Anarchists who worked feverishly through Thursday night to arrange a ceasefire. By Friday morning, as government forces marched into the city, the fighting was dying down. Within the next few days, an estimated 12,000 troops, armed with the latest weapons, arrived in Barcelona to take control of the city and suppress any opposition. Workers were disarmed and mass arrests began.

In the wake of the May Days, the Stalinists were able to engineer the appointment of the right-wing socialist Juan Negrín as prime minister. [3] On his first day in office he banned *La Batalla*, the newspaper of the POUM [4], and the party was outlawed. The leaders of the POUM were arrested and taken to secret prisons run by the Stalinist secret police, the GPU. The party's most prominent leader, Andres Nin, was separated from the others and was interrogated for three days. When he refused to confess to being a fascist agent, he was tortured to death and his body buried secretly. The GPU then ordered German International Brigade volunteers to storm the prison where Nin had been held. To give the impression that the Gestapo had come to release him, they left Nationalist bank notes, Falangist badges and false documents behind them.

Viñas claims that the prime beneficiaries of the May Days were Mussolini and Franco. He offers no evidence to substantiate this claim. The fascist forces made no military advance in the following days. Franco did not capture Barcelona until January 1939. He resisted repeated urging from his Nazi backers to attempt to take it earlier. His reluctance to venture into this stronghold of the proletariat is incomprehensible if his agents had been strong enough to manufacture the May Days. When we consider that the end result of the suppression of the May Days was to place Negrín in power and to end the situation of dual power, both objectives long sought by Moscow, the idea that a fascist provocation was involved is ludicrous.

For decades Viñas has asserted that Negrín was the great statesman of the Spanish Republic and, had he only come to power sooner, might have saved the Republic. He rejects his predecessor Largo Caballero's account of the struggle between the two men as hopelessly biased against Negrín. Viñas maintains that as finance minister Negrín was correct to send the gold reserves to the Soviet Union, and as premier he was ignorant of the bloody character of the regime he led. While Stalinist agents rounded up, imprisoned, tortured and killed those they regarded as Trotskyists and Anarchist "uncontrollables," Negrín, according to Viñas, remained oblivious to the slaughter and unsullied in his democratic credentials.

In *El Escudo* Viñas goes beyond even this tendentious defence of his hero.

"In my opinion," Viñas writes, ignoring the well-established evidence to the contrary, "the idea cannot be ruled out that Fascists and pro-Franco agents were at work in the Barcelona powder-keg."

He then proceeds to make the most outrageous statement. "The Libertarian movement had seen itself infiltrated by agents and spies," which he writes was "easier to do than in other organisations with a better sense of discipline. Something similar had happened, although perhaps to a greater extent, with the POUM, internationalist and very open to the recruitment of foreign volunteers."

How many base insults and slanders can one level at the Spanish mass movement in one sentence? The Libertarian movement in Spain was a massive organisation of workers and peasants affiliated to the CNT. [5] As for them being undisciplined, that is a slander against the anarchist workers and peasants who strove to organise production and distribution, welfare and the war effort through their committees. Their sense of discipline was of the highest order.

When we come to the POUM, one can make many criticisms of its political perspective and actions, but Viñas's jibe at the party of Andres Nin, a heroic leader of the Spanish working class who died at the hand of Stalinists, leaves a nasty taste in the mouth. The POUM are being condemned, not for their real faults, but for not being Spanish enough. For Viñas this party is tainted by its association with the workers and intellectuals who came to Spain from all over the world to risk their lives in opposing fascism and fighting for socialism. His accusation that the POUM was open to infiltration by fascist agents because it drew foreigners to its banner smacks of the very worst traditions of Spanish chauvinism.

Viñas then begins to construct his case that the May Days were a fascist provocation. "There emerged from the fertile imagination of Mussolini, nothing less than the idea of deforming and bloating 'the May events' presenting them as a revealing example of a bloody chapter in the struggle between the Communists and the Libertarians," he tells us melodramatically. But what does Viñas's melodrama really amount to? Mussolini's secret police were certainly interested in what was going on in Spain. This has been well known for some time. Viñas is not telling us anything new here. A letter from Trotsky to Catalan-French Trotskyist Jean Rous was discovered in the archives of the Italian secret police by the historian Paulo Spriano and published in 1971. Rous was in Barcelona negotiating with the POUM on Trotsky's behalf about the possibility of him being granted asylum in Catalonia.

Viñas does not appear to be aware of the Rous letter, nor does he offer us any original material. Instead he relies entirely on secondary sources. In itself there is nothing wrong with this. All historians rely to some extent on secondary sources since no one can be an expert in every area. But what he does with these secondary sources is not within the bounds of acceptable professional behaviour. Viñas uses them to create the impression that the latest research backs up his assertion that the May Days were the result of a fascist provocation when in fact it does not.

We have only to read the historians he cites to realise that he is misusing them. Viñas takes his account of Italian covert activities from Mauro Canali, who has written a study of Mussolini's security services. [6] The "fertile imagination of Mussolini" is Canali's phrase, but he is referring to a document dated June 11 1937, that is a month after the May Days. Canali is not attempting to show that Mussolini was responsible for provoking the May Days but that he hoped to capitalise on the conflict. Indeed, if we are to draw any conclusion from the evidence that Canali presents it would be that, far from seeing the resurgence of revolutionary activity in Barcelona as an opportunity, it was the counter-revolutionary

repression that followed it, as the Stalinists took control of the city, to which Mussolini responded.

Viñas then turns to a book by Morten Heiberg and Manuel Ros Agudo [7] that appears to be more promising for his case. Heiberg and Ros Agudo claim that "The contacts across the enemy lines that maintained members of the Catalan Fifth Column, seem to have played a not inconsiderable part in the disturbances."

The authors offer three pieces of evidence to substantiate this allegation. They cite firstly a report from Nazi General Wilhelm Faupel of conversations he had with Franco and his brother Nicolas. Secondly, they refer to a conversation between Italian foreign minister Count Galeazzo Ciano and Franco's ambassador in Rome Garcia Conde. Thirdly, they refer to a telegram from Nicolas Franco to Commander Julian Troncoso ordering him to tell the supporters of Estat Catala (a Catalan separatist party) to "begin the action on the frontiers and Barcelona."

Faupel's memo on the May Days was sent on May 11 1937. That is to say it was sent after the May Days. It therefore cannot demonstrate that Franco had prior knowledge of the uprising. The document is well known. It was published in 1946. Faupel reported that Franco claimed "the street fighting had been started by his agents" and that "they had in all some thirteen agents in Barcelona."

The Stalinists have used this document for the last 60 years to "prove" that the May Days were a fascist provocation. It does nothing of the kind. As every serious historian has always recognized, it was an empty boast, and one that did not impress Faupel at the time.

We know that there were Francoites in Barcelona because they emerged to loot and murder the inhabitants after Franco captured the city, but Viñas simply does not present us with any compelling evidence that they were a significant factor before that. The evidence for the work of Stalinists agents in that city is much stronger. We can name them; we can trace their previous and subsequent careers and identify their activities in Barcelona. Nothing comparable exists for fascist agents.

The discussion between Ciano and Garcia Conde is of a similar order to the Faupel report. Ciano claimed the May Days as the work of Italian agents: "the important thing now was to intensify and accelerate our offensive," he told Garcia Conde, "taking advantage of the situation of revolt in Catalonia." Like the Faupel report, it post-dates the May Days and, also like the Faupel report, it fails to provide any concrete evidence to back up the claims it contains. This is another example of fascist boasting.

The order to Troncoso is potentially more promising. But it cannot possibly be the signal for the May Days. Even if the Francoists had operational agents in the Estat Catala, this middle class separatist party did not have a following in the working class and could not have brought thousands of them out on the streets of Barcelona. Viñas is asking us to believe that a handful of fascists could have mobilized the workers of all Barcelona's proletarian districts and the militias. The sheer logistics of such a scenario are beyond belief, even before we begin to think about the politics of it. When their own leaders could not stop them fighting for a week, how did fascist agents based in a different party unconnected with the working class persuade the workers of Barcelona to begin fighting?

Heiberg and Ros Aguda themselves deliver the coup de grace to Viñas's theory. They have to admit that their evidence does not provide incontrovertible proof of a fascist provocation. They write, "the fact that the enemy could benefit from a bloody uprising in Barcelona does not suffice to attribute the responsibility for what happened to General Franco and his allies." It most certainly does not. Needless to say, Viñas does not reproduce their cautionary remark. His readers will only discover it if they read his source for themselves.

What then of Nin? The Stalinists claimed that Nin was an agent of the Gestapo. Viñas does not follow them in this. On the contrary he condemns Alexander Orlov, whom the Kremlin sent to Spain as head the Soviet secret police, for killing Nin. He speaks of Orlov as "a compulsive liar, bent on immortalizing an image that does not resemble reality at all." He then adds that Orlov "must not have thought that some of his secrets, jealously guarded in the KGB archives, would end up coming to light, or that there might be documents in the Spanish archives to go with them."

Having raised these archives, however, Viñas offers no new insights or revelations and appears to be using another secondary source—a book by John Costello and Oleg Tsarev, which draws on material in the KGB archives. Costello and Tsarev have demonstrated as conclusively as is possible on the basis of the available evidence that Orlov was responsible for the murder of Nin and may even have been present when his body was buried. [8]

Viñas does not deny the murder of Nin, or that the GPU was responsible for it. But he seeks nevertheless to absolve his hero Negrín of blame. Since Negrín was head of the Spanish government at the time, this is a tall order. Certainly Negrín was embarrassed by the death of Nin. It hampered his attempts to develop closer relations with the Western democratic powers. Nin was an internationally known figure. A stack of telegrams on Negrín's desk testified to the extent of the diplomatic problem. But as the historian Burnett Bolloten has written, "Negrín's indignation over the disappearance of Nin was fleeting." [9]

Whatever inconvenience Nin's death may have occasioned, the benefits that Negrín's government accrued from it were far more substantial. The proletarian stronghold of Barcelona was firmly under the control of the Republic, the working class had been suppressed and the POUM liquidated. Nin's murder served as a warning to any emerging leaders of the working class. Nor was Negrín an unwitting beneficiary Orlov's action. It was Negrín's government that issued a decree authorizing secret tribunals modelled on those of fascist Italy, and it was Negrín's government that outlawed any criticism of the Soviet Union after Nin's death.

I have dwelt at length on the threadbare case Viñas presents because he makes such bold claims about his own unimpeachable use of sources. He boasted in *El Pais*, the Spanish daily, that he had spent a great deal of money to gain access to difficult archives. Unlike other historians, he claimed he never manipulates the data. Yet when we examine his use of the evidence closely we can see that all this bravado and self-promotion are an attempt to cover up a piece of thoroughly unscholarly behaviour.

Why should a distinguished historian risk his reputation in this reckless way? Viñas's behaviour only becomes comprehensible when we consider the social and political tensions to which Gardner's article in the *Financial Times* alludes. In this public climate Viñas feels confident that he will not be called to account for breaching the conventions of scholarly debate. He is gambling that enough historians, journalists and public figures will realise that his thesis reflects their interests for his misuse of historical evidence not to matter.

Gardner writes of "the two Spains." There is a certain truth in this conventional view of the division between the Francoists and the Republican forces who made up the two sides in the Civil War. But there is another, and more profound, divide. The divisions within the Republican forces were, in the last analysis, even more significant in the final defeat of the Republic at the hands of Franco than that between the Republicans and the fascists.

The revolution that Viñas wants so vigorously to deny was a reality in Spain. But without a revolutionary leadership that was conscious of its tasks, the working class was unable to consolidate its power. In the course of the winter of 1936-7, the power of the workers was eroded and the embryonic state institutions that had been created in the form of workers' committees supplanted once more by the Republican state. In that task the Republicans had the assistance of the Stalinists, who transplanted the repressive machinery of the Moscow Trials to Spain.

The May Days marked the culmination of the process by which a bourgeois state reasserted itself in Spain and crushed a proletarian

revolution. The defeat of the revolution ensured defeat at the hands of Franco because it disillusioned, demoralised and disorganised the working class and peasants whose desire for social equality had been the source of resistance to fascism.

When Viñas claims that the workers uprising in Barcelona was the result of a fascist provocation, he is instinctively returning to the lies that the Stalinists fabricated to justify their actions in defence of the Popular Front because the same contradictions that gave rise to a revolution in Spain in the 1930s are emerging again.

More than a generation of fascist repression, followed by a pact of silence about the events of the Civil War has done nothing to remove the contradictions within Spanish society. The relative prosperity that Spain has enjoyed since it joined the EU has only translated those social contradictions to a higher level. A young and restive working class dismissed the Popular Party government in 2004, it demanded that Spanish troops be withdrawn from Iraq and it is unwilling to countenance the demands of the Catholic Church for control over education and family life, or the glorification of dead fascists.

If the Socialist Party was the initial beneficiary of the electorate's turn to the left, the Socialist government now finds itself in the uncomfortable position of having to control that leftward movement or face the wrath of the right. Viñas's book is an indication that there are those within the Socialist Party who would like to make it clear that they have the stomach for action of the kind that Viñas's hero Negrín presided over in Barcelona.

Notes:

1. Angel Viñas, *La Soledad de la República*, (Barcelona: Critica, 2006).
2. *Daily Worker* 11 May 1937
3. Juan Negrín was Finance Minister under Francisco Largo Caballero and then replaced him as prime minister in May 1937, a post which he held until the defeat of the Republic.
4. Workers Party of Marxist Unification, Partido Obrera de Unificacion Marxista
5. National Confederation of Workers, Confederacion National del Trabajo
6. Mauro Canali, *Le spie del regime*, (Bologna: Società editrice il Mulino, 2004).
7. Morten Heiberg and Manuel Ros Agudo, *La Trama Oculta de la Guerra Civil: Los servicios secreto de Franco, 1936-1945*, (Barcelona: Critica, 2006).
8. John Costello and Oleg Tsarev, *Deadly Illusions*, (London: Century, 1993).
9. Burnett Bollotten, *The Spanish Civil War: Revolution and Counterrevolution*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), p. 531.