

The Spanish Civil War by Andy Durgan

Britain's SWP lends credence to Stalinist line on Spanish Civil War—Part 1

Ann Talbot

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Andy Durgan, *The Spanish Civil War* (New York, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007)

This is the first of a two-part review.

The Spanish Civil War generates a massive body of historical work every year. This book stands out and merits attention because Andy Durgan is associated with the British Socialist Workers Party. He spoke on Spain at Marxism 08, the SWP's annual summer school in London. He has written what is often regarded as the definitive account of the Party of Marxist Unity (POUM) and the Left Opposition in Spain for *Revolutionary History*. [1] It is posted on marxists.org, giving it a certain authoritative status in many people's eyes. His role as historical adviser to Ken Loach's film *Land and Freedom*, which has done much to revive interest in the Spanish Civil War among young people, has consolidated Durgan's reputation as the historian of the non-Stalinist left in Spain.

At the outset, it will help to put the events with which the book deals in their historical context. The Spanish Civil War is one of the formative events of the twentieth century. Upon its outcome hung the fate not just of Spain, but of Europe as a whole because victory there would have been a signal of resistance to workers elsewhere on the continent. Workers in Germany and Italy, where fascism had already come to power, would have been inspired by the success of the Spanish working class. France, which was on the brink of revolution in 1936, would almost certainly have become directly involved in events in Spain. The entire course of European history would have been different if fascism had been defeated in Spain. Certainly, it would have been almost impossible for Hitler to launch a European-wide war when he did.

Perhaps most significantly, the reinvigoration of the revolution in Europe would have undermined the position of the Kremlin bureaucracy whose strength grew in proportion to the defeat of social revolutions internationally. Stalin would have found himself confronted with a resurgent Russian working class.

Leading businessmen and politicians were acutely aware that they faced the threat of proletarian revolution in this period, and, as the contemporary press demonstrates, they focused their anxieties on the person of Leon Trotsky, whose responses to each stage of the unfolding pre-war political crisis were followed avidly in the pages of the leading newspapers. Trotsky was out of power, a wandering exile, with a small number of followers. But if the Russian Revolution had taught the European political elite one thing, it was that a revolutionary leader whose programme articulated the needs of masses of people could go from obscurity to power with great rapidity when a revolutionary situation unfolded.

The Spanish Civil War was the culmination of a slowly emerging revolution that began in 1931 with the overthrow of the monarchy and the creation of a republic. Over the following years, there were periods when the revolutionary upsurge was quelled by repression, as it was in the

infamous *biennio negro*, and explosive periods of revolutionary action when workers and peasants fought back against the mine owners and big landowners. This was not a rapid revolution like the Russian Revolution, which went from the overthrow of the Czar and the establishment of a bourgeois republic under the Provisional Government to a workers' state in the space of one year. In Spain, the revolution developed at a different and slower tempo because there was no revolutionary party present at the first outbreak of the revolution as there had been in Russia, where the Bolsheviks had already established a significant social base among the working class in 1917.

In July 1936, the working class of Barcelona resisted the attempted military coup led by General Francisco Franco. The Popular Front Republican government collapsed in the face of this coup and power fell into the hands of the workers, who set up committees of action and militias. But in Spain, unlike Russia, there was no party that was prepared to take power. The most militant sections of the working class were organised by the Anarchist union federation, the CNT, which rejected any form of state power, even a workers' state. The Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) was part of the Popular Front government against which Franco revolted and had refused to arm the workers in its defence. The Communist Party of Spain (PCE) was small, had little support in the working class and was committed to the Popular Front.

A small group of Left Oppositionists led by Andres Nin expressed their agreement with the revolutionary programme that Trotsky advocated, but refused at every crucial moment to put such a programme into action. They adapted themselves to the left nationalism of the Catalan Workers and Peasants Party (BOC) of Joaquin Maurín with which they eventually merged to form the Party of Marxist Unity (POUM).

The POUM was critical of the Popular Front, but still joined it. In 1936, Nin became a minister of the Catalan government, giving it an unwarranted political credibility that allowed it to claw power back from the workers' committees. In the weeks following the revolution of July 19, 1936, the bourgeois state was able to reassert itself thanks to the support of the CNT and the POUM. The process culminated in the May Days of 1937, when the Catalan government and the Spanish Republican government, backed by Moscow, bloodily suppressed the working class of Barcelona and strangled the revolution.

The action was justified at the time, and since, by the claim that those who led the working class in Barcelona were fascist agents attempting to disrupt the Republican war effort from behind the lines. Historians have continued to defend the Popular Front government in exactly the same way. The Spanish historian Angel Viñas recently claimed the May Days were the result of a provocation by Italian fascists. The British historian Eric Hobsbawm defended the actions of the Popular Front in an article in the *Guardian* only last year. The attitude of an historian to the Popular

Front and the May Days is a touchstone issue in assessing any account of the period.

Despite the classic work of Burnet Bolloten [2] and the more recent account of Antony Beevor [3], which provide an objective account of the role of the Popular Front and Moscow's part in suppressing the Spanish revolution, it would be true to say that the dominant position among historians is one of support for the Popular Front accompanied by a strong tendency to minimise Moscow's culpability. Paul Preston and Helen Graham are the two British specialists in the history of the Spanish Civil War who are identified most closely with this position. They both defend the actions of the Popular Front government and, while regarding the repressive role of the Stalinists as regrettable, consider it to have been a somewhat secondary factor.

What then is Durgan's approach to the Popular Front? In a glowing review of Durgan's book in the SWP's *International Socialism* magazine, Chris Ealham wrote, "For all the thousands of books published on the Spanish Civil War," "few studies of the conflict's origins, course and consequences are as valuable and welcome as this current study." [4]

Ealham makes a point of noting that Durgan distinguishes himself not only from the right-wing historians who have attempted to rehabilitate the memory of Franco, but also from the historians who are supporters of the Popular Front.

"While attacking revisionists for their misrepresentation of Republican politics," Ealham writes, "Durgan has clearly endeavoured to challenge the analysis of the most outstanding historians of the civil war—Helen Graham and Paul Preston being the most obvious examples in the UK—who are more sympathetic to the Popular Front."

This statement is, to say the least, misleading. A careful study of the densely footnoted text shows that, far from opposing these two historians, Durgan's analysis obsequiously follows that of Preston and Graham on every major point.

Durgan follows Graham in framing his account of the Spanish Civil War in terms of what he calls "The Challenge of Modernisation." He stresses the backwardness of the Spanish economy that remained predominantly agricultural and of a society that continued to be dominated by the Church. He defines the Civil War "as an 'agrarian war' fought and won for the latifundistas [big landowners]."

This characterisation of the Civil War is either so general as to be meaningless or it is seriously misleading. Of course, the Spanish economy was backward in the 1930s. Industrial development was limited and Spanish agriculture was dominated by the big landowners, the Church among them, and these were the right-wing social forces that backed Franco. But if we leave our analysis there, then we have not accounted for the extraordinarily developed revolutionary capacity of the Spanish working class and sections of the peasantry. Nor have we acknowledged the international significance of the events that unfolded in Spain.

Capitalism develops unevenly, but it also develops in a combined way so that even a backward, agricultural country finds itself drawn into the global capitalist economy. This often results in its industry, agriculture and the classes associated with them taking on characteristics that reflect, not the general level of backwardness, but the most modern forms of production. Once it is stripped of its adornments, Durgan's thesis amounts to the tautological statement that Spain came to be dominated by the political representatives of the big landowners because it was dominated by big landowners.

Spain could be described as facing a challenge of modernisation at any time from the seventeenth century to the present. But such a description would tell us very little about the specific historical processes at work. We get no sense of the historical dynamics of the situation from Durgan's account. The theory of twentieth century modernisation is essentially a non-class theory of history applied to the century that saw the most intense class struggles.

Durgan's conception of the relationship between class and society is derived ultimately from the anti-Marxist conceptions of the sociologist Max Weber, who developed an ahistorical view of society as a series of static ideal types. This approach proved influential for self-declared Marxists such as Louis Althusser, who developed an approach known as structuralism, which has been a major theoretical influence on the SWP.

This theoretical background allows Durgan to adopt Graham's theory of modernisation without as much as a hiccup. The Spanish Civil War, according to Graham, was one of many European civil wars that reflected differing responses to modernity.

"All these European 'civil wars' (because civil wars can take many forms)," she writes, "had their origins in the cumulative, political, social and cultural anxieties provoked by a rapid, uneven and accelerating modernisation (that is, industrialisation and urbanisation) occurring across the continent. All those who supported Spain's military rebels in 1936 had in common a fear of where change was leading—whether their fears were of material or psychological loss (wealth, professional status, established social and political hierarchies, religious or sexual [i.e., gendered] certainties) or a mixture of these things." [5]

The theory of modernisation is an explicitly non-class theory of history. The division between modernising and non-modernising social forces is largely arbitrary and subjective. The Church, big landowners and fascists might be counted among the anti-modernisers, while democratic, republican and liberal politicians or businessmen are regarded as modernisers. But there is no reason why fascists cannot be classified as modernisers under some circumstances, given that their regimes develop industrial production under capitalism. Certainly some authors from this school of thought have applied the designation to Hitler's regime.

According to the theory, the series of revolutionary upheavals that followed the 1917 Russian Revolution—1918 and 1923 in Germany, the *biennio rosso* factory occupations of 1919-1920 in Italy, the British general strike of 1926, and the French general strike of 1936, to which we might add events outside Europe such as the Shanghai Commune of 1927—were all part of a crisis of modernisation and not expressions of a struggle between the proletariat and capital.

Graham does not explore the question, but one would have to ask in what sense the Russian Revolution itself could still be seen as a proletarian revolution? If one accepted Graham's characterisation of the inter-war period, then the October Revolution would have to be some peculiar variant of the crisis of modernisation.

What the significance of the theory of modernisation is for the history of the Spanish Civil War becomes very clear in an article that Graham wrote about the Barcelona May Days. [6] The May Days are the incident that forms the centrepiece of Loach's film. On May 3, 1937, Republican forces attempted to seize the Barcelona telephone exchange from the workers who had been in control of it since the previous July. Workers rushed from the surrounding areas to defend the telephone exchange and threw up barricades when news of what was happening spread. By that night, Barcelona was under their control. The working class could have taken power in Barcelona at this point, but the leaders of the CNT and the POUM refused to give the order. Only a small group of Trotskyists active in the POUM and an Anarchist group known as the Friends of Durruti called for the workers to overthrow the government.

As the Republican government made preparations to bombard the working class districts of Barcelona, the leaders of the Anarchists negotiated a ceasefire that allowed thousands of Republican and Assault Guards to enter the city and regain control. Workers were disarmed and arrested. Many of the leaders of the POUM disappeared into secret prisons run by the GPU, the Stalinist secret police, whose power had been increasing since the previous autumn. Now, as the Stalinists engineered the appointment of the right-wing socialist Juan Negrín to the premiership, they had a free hand to torture and murder at will. The machinery of the

Moscow Trials was recreated in Spain, and Andres Nin became its victim when he refused to provide the necessary confession for a show trial that would have presented this internationally known revolutionary as a fascist agent.

But for Graham, the bloody events that took place in Barcelona were merely the continuation of inter-organisational disputes from an earlier period. She makes a point of rejecting the idea that the Comintern and the Stalinist secret police had anything to do with the murders and the arrests of workers' leaders.

"The May Days cannot," she writes, "then, be reduced to a Cold War parable of an alien Stalinism which 'injected' conflict into Spanish Republican politics. The Comintern's 'clean-up' of dissident communists in Barcelona in May and June 1937, morally unattractive though it was, constituted but one strand in a more complex picture."

The "Cold War parable" in question, she makes clear in a note, is that of Burnett Bolloten. It is, writes Graham, "the central, unchanging thesis of Burnett Bolloten's *oeuvre*—from the *Grand Camouflage* (1961) through to *The Spanish Civil War, Revolution and Counterrevolution*, published posthumously in 1991. What Bolloten has done is to construct a teleological narrative."

What Bolloten actually did was to demonstrate, on the basis of a careful study of the available evidence, that the May Days were a continuation of the Stalinist bureaucracy's struggle against Trotskyism. His conclusions have since been borne out by material from the Soviet archives and confirmed by other historians. With her reference to the Cold War, Graham is, by implication, reviving the old Stalinist charge that Bolloten was a CIA agent because he dared to criticise Moscow.

Graham concludes: "The Barcelona May Days of 1937 were ultimately about brutal 'modernisation.'"

The repression of workers and their political parties in Barcelona, she maintains, was a necessary task if the Spanish state was to be strengthened, capitalist control of national economic production was to be ensured and social discipline was to be enforced on the working class. The working class, according to Graham, were opponents of modernity in Barcelona because they insisted on establishing militias, taking over factories, workshops and farms. Indeed, according to this theory, the working class, the POUM, and the Left Opposition can all be categorised as opponents of modernisation in so far as they opposed the Popular Front. The secret prisons, torturers, executioners and lie machine of the Stalinist bureaucracy, were, by contrast, forces of modernisation.

There are uncanny similarities between Graham's account of the May Days and the Stalinist claim that the POUM and the Trotskyists were fascist agents. Graham is too prudent an historian to go along with that allegation, which has been repeatedly refuted, but she is quite prepared to depict workers and revolutionary leaders as being in some objective sense reactionary and, one would have to suppose, serving the cause of fascism unknowingly by their attempts to defend the gains of the July 19 revolution.

Durgan's debt to Preston and Graham is extensive. He writes that it is now possible to speak of "a series of Spanish wars." This is a reference to Paul Preston's *The Spanish Civil War* (2006), which Durgan rates as an excellent work—or to a "war of cultures"—a reference to Helen Graham's *The Spanish Civil War*, which again Durgan dubs "excellent." He regards Graham and Preston's view that there were multiple wars as "clearly an advance on the bi-polar view of the 'two Spains,' often presented in earlier histories whereby a 'liberal, progressive and secular' Spain was locked in mortal combat with a 'traditional, conservative' and Catholic Spain." Recent historians, he writes, prefer to think of three Spains—the third being that which sided with neither contender and attempted to steer a centre course." Again this is Paul Preston, who argues this in *Comrades* (1999).

Durgan's attitude to the Spanish revolution is summed up well in his

account of the explosive revolutionary upsurge of workers in the early 1930s. He is very critical of the CNT for organising armed insurrections. These insurrections were "called by relatively few activists and without consulting the membership in any serious way. The result of these abortive uprisings was hundreds of casualties and arrests, the closing down of many union centres, a steep decline in dues-paying members and exacerbation of existing divisions in the workers' movement."

Surely this is the authentic voice of the trade union bureaucrat. What could be worse than a decline in the number of "dues-paying members" of a trade union? Perhaps one thing could be worse. The uprising resulted in the undermining of "the credibility of the Republican prime minister and principal architect of the reform process, Manuel Azana." He cites Preston's *Comrades* on this point.

Durgan continues to follow Preston and Graham in his analysis of the Popular Front. He makes a point of denying that the formation of the Popular Front was influenced by Moscow. It was, he argues, a product of domestic Spanish politics "despite its obvious similarity to the broad anti-fascist alliances of the same name now advocated by the Communist International (Comintern) in Moscow."

This is a remarkable statement and one that is entirely contradicted by the historical evidence. He cites Graham, *The Spanish Republic at War*, and contrasts her line with that of Burnett Bolloten, who devoted himself to uncovering the murderous role of Stalinism in the Spanish Civil War. Careful scrutiny of Durgan's footnotes reveals not a single positive reference to Bolloten's magisterial work.

To be continued

Notes:

1. Andy Durgan, "The Spanish Trotskyists and the Foundation of the POUM," *Revolutionary History*, Vol. 4, Nos.1-2.
2. Burnett Bolloten, *The Spanish Civil War: Revolution and Counterrevolution* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991).
3. Antony Beevor, *The Battle for Spain: The Spanish Civil War, 1936-9* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2006).
4. Chris Ealham, "Revolution and reaction in Spain," *International Socialism*, Issue: 117.
5. Helen Graham, *The Spanish Republic at War 1936-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
6. Helen Graham, "'Against the State': A Genealogy of the Barcelona May Days (1937)," *European History Quarterly*, Vol. 29(4), (1999), 484-542.



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