

The Spanish Civil War by Andy Durgan

# Britain's Socialist Workers Party lends credence to Stalinist line on Spanish Civil War—Part 2

Ann Talbot

17 September 2008

Andy Durgan, *The Spanish Civil War: Studies in European History* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007: New York, New York)

*This is the conclusion of a two-part review. The first part was posted September 16.*

The one point at which Andy Durgan challenges Paul Preston and Helen Graham's view of the history of the Popular Front is in relation to the electoral tactics that the left and republicans pursued in 1933. Many historians, Preston and Graham among them, have blamed the defeat of the left in the 1933 elections on their divisions and suggested that if they had been able to form a Popular Front at this earlier stage they might have won and prevented the rise of the right. By contrast, Durgan argues that the figures show that even if they had formed a Popular Front alliance they would still not have won the election of 1933.

Durgan's disagreement with Preston and Graham on this point tells us a lot about his attitude to the role of political consciousness in the historical process. For Durgan, the most significant point about a Popular Front is not what effect an alliance of workers' parties with liberal and republican parties had on the political consciousness of the working class, but whether or not it could win an election.

Durgan's account of the military conduct of the civil war itself reflects the influence of Preston. His explanation of Franco's refusal to take Barcelona, which would certainly have ended the war and his decision to head south for Valencia instead which was, he admits, "one of the most unexpected decisions of the war" follows Preston's *Franco*.

Preston argued that Franco took this decision because he was concerned that even if he attempted to seize Barcelona there would still be many armed Republicans in Central and Southern Spain. Preston and Durgan reject the more obvious conclusion that Franco did not attempt to take Barcelona, as his Nazi allies urged him to do, because in Barcelona he would have to deal with the most militant section of the Spanish working class.

When he finally comes to the fall of Barcelona in 1939, Durgan writes, "Barcelona fell to Franco's troops on 26 January, provoking a massive exodus of civilians towards the frontier. Internal political strife, systematic attacks on the gains made by the revolution, aerial bombardment and increasing food shortages had all combined to undermine the spirit of resistance of 1936."

Who made those attacks on the gains of the revolution? Who killed the revolutionary leaders? Durgan does not tell us. He does not even ask the questions. The whole historic episode is presented as tragic and entirely natural process whose causes we do not need to seek. We get no sense of the life and death struggle that was fought out in the May Days or the problems of revolutionary leadership in such a knife edge situation. It

must be said that even the Sandhurst-educated military historian Beevor, who has no pretensions to left-wing politics, offers a better account of these political questions than Durgan.

For Durgan, the outcome of the struggle in Spain was largely determined by the question of foreign intervention or lack of intervention. "The Civil War's causes were essentially internal," he writes, "but its outcome was largely determined by the intervention, or non-intervention, of the great powers of the time."

Again this follows Preston closely. The question of the outcome of a revolution is not really a political one at all, according to this reasoning. Workers may rise in revolt, but the success or failure of their revolution is determined within the chancelleries of the great powers and is not in their own hands and certainly has nothing to do with the political perspective of workers' parties.

Leon Trotsky (1879-1940), was the co-leader of the 1917 Russian Revolution, socialist opponent of Joseph Stalin, founder of the Fourth International, and strategist of world socialist revolution.

Prime Minister Leon Blum who headed a Popular Front government in France, Durgan maintains, would have liked to intervene, but clashed with his generals over the issue. That, however, is exactly what the Popular Front, whether in Spain or in France was about. A Popular Front government kept the generals and all the institutions of the bourgeois state in place. Durgan may wish to deny the connection between the Popular Front in Spain and the Popular Front in France, but the connection is present in his own narrative.

Just how closely Durgan now aligns himself with Preston and Graham and their support for the Popular Front is clear when he comes to the question of dual power.

A situation of dual power exists when the institutions of the bourgeois state continue in being, but organs of workers' power have come into existence alongside them. It is a temporary situation that must be resolved in favour of one or other class. In Russia it was resolved by the October Revolution when the Provisional Government was overthrown. Such a situation emerged in Spain on July 19 1936, when workers rose up to resist the attempt of the army to seize power. The Republican government was reduced to a shell without any of the coercive apparatus it needed to maintain its power. Real power fell into the hands of the workers, but over the course of the following months that power was whittled away because the workers' parties, including the POUM, joined the government and helped it to re-establish control. It was a struggle that reached its culmination in May 1937 when the state moved against the last vestiges of workers' power in Barcelona.

Durgan denies that there was a state of dual power in Republican Spain

and rejects any comparison with Russia in 1917. In doing so, he is aligning himself with the Stalinists who denied it at the time and have continued to do so ever since. Durgan's denial of the existence of dual power is an acceptance that the Popular Front government was the only legitimate and the only possible form of government in Spain at that time. A proletarian revolution was simply not on the agenda in Spain, as far as Durgan is concerned.

Durgan's book reflects the rightward evolution of an entire layer of intellectuals who would at one time have associated themselves with left-wing politics and would even have identified themselves as revolutionaries. The book represents a shift away from the positions that Durgan expressed in his account of the POUM in *Revolutionary History*. Then the SWP hero worshiped the POUM and glorified their political errors. Now Durgan is happy to accept Graham's modernisation thesis, which depicts the POUM as a reactionary force opposing modernisation.

The fact that Ealham has to claim in his review that Durgan opposes Graham and Preston and their support for the Popular Front suggests that the SWP is still not ready to go along with this position in its public utterances. But Durgan's position is a more accurate reflection of the current politics of the SWP and the essentially middle class liberal character of this party.

It is, however, possible to see the beginnings of this trajectory in Durgan's earlier work. Durgan referred to "Trotsky's extensive and generally excellent writings on Spain between 1930 and 1940" in his history of the foundation of the POUM and was somewhat critical of the POUM's decision to join the Popular Front. But even then he was uncomfortable with Trotsky's attitude toward POUM leader Andres Nin. Trotsky's criticisms, Durgan wrote, "seem particularly harsh."

A dispassionate study of Trotsky's letters to Nin would not suggest any undue harshness in his attitude. The most striking characteristic of the correspondence is the extremely patient way in which Trotsky attempted to explain his analysis of the Spanish situation and what he thought Nin should do. As late as June 1936, that is, six months after the POUM joined the Popular Front, Trotsky did not rule out reconciliation with Nin if he was prepared to raise the banner of the Fourth International unambiguously in Spain. Even two weeks after Franco's coup, Trotsky told Victor Serge, "If Nin today were to pull himself together and realize how discredited he is in the eyes of the workers, if he should draw all the necessary conclusions, then we would help him as a comrade." [7]

These were hardly the words of someone who was sectarian in his attitude to the POUM or motivated by personal animosities, as Durgan suggests. Trotsky had the very greatest respect for Nin, but Durgan can only see the conflict between the two men in personal terms and denies that principled political questions were involved. Neither can Durgan accept Trotsky's criticisms of the Catalan nationalist Joaquin Maurín, leader of the Workers and Peasants Party (BOC), with which Nin combined to form the POUM. Durgan concludes that "it is apparent from Trotsky's writings that he was only superficially aware of what Maurín was arguing."

Trotsky had a very sound appreciation of Maurín's politics and a clear-sighted view of where Nin's adaptation to Maurín and the national milieu was heading. Maurín, Trotsky warned, was attempting to disguise national separatism as communism and adopting left-wing slogans in order to get close to the Anarcho-syndicalists of the CNT.

The crucial question to which Trotsky repeatedly returned was internationalism and the need for a revolutionary party to work in the closest collaboration with its international co-thinkers and under the discipline of an international organisation. "Undoubtedly you agree," Trotsky writes, "that as socialism cannot be built in one country a Marxist policy cannot be pursued in one country alone." [8]

Nin's resistance to Trotsky's attempts to develop an international orientation among the Spanish Left Oppositionists led in 1935 to fusion

with Maurín's Workers and Peasants and Bloc and within a year to them joining the Popular Front. The Popular Front government that came to power in 1936 made vague promises of reform, but it maintained the capitalist system and left the officer corps intact—allowing Franco to launch a military coup a few months later.

The working class resisted the military coup, but their own leaders prevented them from consolidating their hold on power and creating a workers' state in Spain.

"The Spanish proletariat," Trotsky wrote, "displayed first rate military qualities. In its specific gravity in the country's economic life, in its political and cultural level, the Spanish proletariat stood on the first day of the revolution not below but above the Russian proletariat at the beginning of 1917. On the road to its victory, its own organizations stood as the chief obstacles. The commanding clique of Stalinists, in accordance with their counter-revolutionary function, consisted or hirelings, careerists, declassed elements, and in general, all types of social refuse. The representatives of other labor organizations—incurable reformists, Anarchist phrasemongers, helpless centrists of the POUM—grumbled, groaned, wavered, maneuvered, but in the end adapted themselves to the Stalinists." [9]

Durgan always rejected this analysis. But if he was to have any credibility on the left he could not ignore Trotsky, so he was obliged to pay tribute to him in his *Revolutionary History* article. Now, nearly two decades later, Trotsky only merits two passing references in Durgan's latest book. This is simply not acceptable. Trotsky was an active participant in the events about which Durgan is writing and, as someone who had led a revolution and led a revolutionary army to victory, was one of the most qualified to comment on events in Spain. Durgan's cavalier dismissal of Trotsky points both to his failure to get to grips with the issues involved in the Spanish Civil War as an historian, as well as to the political evolution of the SWP.

The fact that one of the SWP's leading members can write about the Spanish Civil War in this way without producing a political rift indicates how far the party has moved to the right over the years since Durgan wrote his piece on the POUM for *Revolutionary History*. He was critical of Trotsky then and rejected Trotsky's analysis of the world situation and the course of the revolution in Spain, but he did not align himself directly with the Popular Front in the way he has done in this book by adopting the theory of modernisation.

Not only has the SWP not challenged Durgan's analysis of the Spanish Civil War, but they have gone so far as to claim that Durgan opposes Preston and Graham. This can only be interpreted as a cynical attempt to mislead a new generation of young people who come to this book seeking a guide to the increasingly complex literature and source material from the period. Durgan's book is aimed at first year university students, senior high school students and their teachers. The effect of this book can only be to perpetuate a false historical perspective and consolidate Stalinist lies that have been repeatedly refuted by reputable historians.

*Concluded*

**Notes:**

7. Leon Trotsky, *The Spanish Revolution, (1931-1939)* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973) p. 233
8. *ibid* p. 176
9. *ibid* p. 322



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**