

The Spanish Civil War and the Popular Front

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In 2006 the *World Socialist Web Site* was invited to submit a paper to a major conference in Madrid that was held to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Spanish Civil War. The invitation was a recognition of the extent to which the WSWS has established itself as the authoritative voice of Trotskyism and that it was the natural place to turn for a distinctively Trotskyist perspective on the Spanish Civil War. It was also indicative of the extremely tense state of class relations in Spain and the emergence of a genuine hunger for historical knowledge about this seminal period.

Shortly before the conference the Spanish bishops had issued a statement condemning the Socialist Party government for reopening "the old wounds of the Civil War." The government has enacted a "Law of Historic Memory" which seeks to contain the demand for knowledge about the crimes of the Franco regime but has nonetheless enraged the right wing.

The conference was well attended and in addition to the academic seminars, public sessions were held every evening that filled a large theatre in the centre of Madrid.

The opening address to the conference was given by the writer and former minister of culture Jorge Semprun, who denounced what he called "the thesis of Trotsky that the civil war would have been won if the revolution had not been betrayed." Stalin and the Spanish Communist Party, he declared, were correct, although he deplored their methods. With few exceptions, the historians who spoke at the conference concurred and were uncritical of the policies of the Popular Front Republican government and dismissed the idea that a revolution was occurring in Spain during the 1930s.

The paper I gave on behalf of the WSWS provoked a sustained attack from one of Spain's leading historians, Professor Angel Viñas. Viñas went so far as to claim that the May Days, the working class uprising that took place in Barcelona in May 1937, was provoked by Italian fascist agent provocateurs. As a member of the audience said at the time, it is astonishing that anyone could attempt to dismiss the Stalinist bureaucracy's responsibility for the repression in Barcelona since it is so well documented. Viñas has since attempted to substantiate this allegation in a book in which he recycles the old Stalinist lies.

This is not a purely Spanish phenomenon. Earlier this year, the historian Eric Hobsbawm published a defence of the Spanish Popular Front in the *Guardian* in which he launched a savage tirade against anyone who has attempted to give an objective view of the Spanish Civil War. "The only choice" he wrote, "was between two sides, and liberal-democratic opinion overwhelmingly chose anti-fascism." The only people who cannot see that, and who could not see it at the time, he claimed, are those who look at the Spanish Civil War from "a Trotskyist sectarian angle." What Hobsbawm is defending and what Viñas and Semprun defend is the Popular Front.

Spain is the most complete expression of the Popular Front policy that was initiated by Stalin after Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933. It was imposed on all the Stalinist parties at the seventh and last congress of

the Comintern in 1935. It meant that Communist Parties renounced the objective of proletarian revolution and instead engaged in cross-class collaboration with liberal, republican or social democratic parties in a supposedly common struggle against fascism, and committed themselves to the defence of their own nation-states.

While the Stalinists had, as other speakers have shown, pursued mistaken policies that had led to the betrayal and bloody defeat of revolutions in the past, with the Popular Front they became for the first time a consciously antirevolutionary force because it was impossible for them to maintain an alliance with capitalist parties and at the same time encourage revolution even in a purely verbal, platonic way. Previously they could be characterised as bureaucratic centrists who vacillated and hesitated where revolution was concerned, but now they were a definitely counter-revolutionary tendency. Revolution had to be stamped out with the utmost ruthlessness.

The Soviet intervention in Spain can best be understood as an attempt to strangle a developing revolution, to physically liquidate its leading representatives, terrorize wider layers of workers and peasants and prevent their spontaneous revolutionary strivings from acquiring a more politically conscious form.

The electoral agreement which became the Popular Front in Spain was signed in January 1936, but its origins go back much earlier than that—to 1931 and the beginning of the Spanish revolution. By the time the Popular Front agreement was signed, Spain had been undergoing, with many ebbs and flows, a revolution for four years, since the monarchy was overthrown in 1931. That might seem a long time, but the tempo of revolutions is not always and everywhere the same. The French revolution had been in progress for nearly four years before it reached its climax when the Jacobins came to power. In the case of Russia, the tempo was much faster, partly because the Bolshevik Party already existed on the eve of the revolution and because of the First World War. In Spain there was no revolutionary party and no war. The tempo of the revolution was correspondingly slow.

In 1931 a republic was established that abolished the monarchy, separated church and state, dissolved the religious orders, secularised education and granted autonomy to the nationalities. These were democratic measures comparable to those introduced by all previous bourgeois revolutions, but this was not the 18th century. Even these most modest democratic measures threatened the existence of capitalist private property.

Land reform and religious reform challenged not just the wealth of the Church and the landowners, but of the financial and business elite to which they were connected by indissoluble class ties. The democratic programme of the republic foundered on the rooted opposition of these privileged layers.

Almost as soon as it came to power the republic showed itself to be incapable of carrying out democratic measures. The workers and peasants who had brought it to power became increasingly alienated from it. Within weeks it had imposed martial law to clamp down on street demonstrations. The liberal republican government struggled on for two years before it was replaced by a right-wing government which reversed

the reform programme and suppressed the working class and peasants in the most brutal fashion.

But from the outset the republic had shown itself to be incapable of resolving any of the issues that faced Spanish society in a progressive manner. The liberal bourgeoisie in the Popular Front were no more than the shadow of the bourgeoisie. Most of the bourgeoisie, the Church and the military were already in the process of going over to fascism. That was why the Popular Front in Spain came to be so thoroughly dominated by the Stalinists. The republicans and the Socialists were political phantoms who were able to act only because of the political support they had from the Stalinists.

The only class that was capable of resolving the great questions facing Spanish society was the working class because it had no vested interest in private property. Already in May 1931, Trotsky was anticipating a second revolution which would be a revolution of the proletariat leading the poor peasants behind it.

For that reason Stalin's turn to the Popular Front threw a lifeline to the liberal bourgeoisie of the republican and social-democratic parties in Spain. The Popular Front offered them the means to contain the revolutionary movement of the working class and peasants within a parliamentary framework and ultimately to suppress it.

While the Popular Front's defenders may deplore the methods of the Stalinists and attempt to claim that the leaders of the Republic were ignorant of them, there is a necessary connection, both in logic and historical causation, between the Popular Front and the crimes of Stalinism. Both the leaders of the Spanish Republic and the Stalinists had a shared interest in suppressing revolution and defending private property in Spain.

Stalin was determined to make his peace with the Western democracies—Britain, France and America—who he hoped would defend the Soviet Union against attack from Nazi Germany. In pursuit of that alliance he was prepared to butcher the Spanish revolution so as to prove that he was a reliable ally for the imperialist powers. The Republican and Socialist politicians, who were equally determined to defend private property and prevent revolution, found in Stalin, as Trotsky put it, "an experienced executioner with the authority of a revolutionist."

The Spanish Popular Front cannot be understood in a purely national context. The Popular Front in France provided the model for all other Popular Fronts. Hitler's rise to power caused panic among the French bourgeoisie. Edouard Herriot, the leader of the Radical Party, went to Moscow straightaway in 1933, where he was warmly welcomed by Stalin.

The signing of the Franco-Soviet pact in 1934 paved the way for the creation of the French Popular Front. When the French foreign minister Laval insisted that Stalin reinforce this pact of mutual assistance by ordering the French Communist Party to approve the measures which the French government had taken for national defence, Stalin said, "I agree." Stalin and Laval issued a joint communiqué which stated, "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."

We've already spoken about August 4, 1914. This was an event of the same character. Stalin was solidarizing himself politically with the French government and insisting that the French Communist Party do the same.

In Spain, the impetus for the Popular Front came from the left Republican Manuel Azaña. With the example of France before him, Azaña had every reason to believe that Moscow would provide a reliable international ally and give him a lever to use against the Spanish working class.

For the republicans and the Socialists the attractions of the Popular Front are evident, but what about the POUM? The POUM was formed in 1935 with the fusion of Andrés Nin's party, the Left Communists, and Joaquín Maurín's Workers and Peasants Bloc. As Trotsky wrote at the

time, "The former Spanish 'Left Communists' have turned into a mere tail of the 'left' bourgeoisie. It is hard to conceive of a more ignominious downfall." The POUM was the prime example of a left-centrist party in this period.

After corresponding with Nin for a number of months, Trotsky came to the conclusion that "Nin, honest and devoted to the cause, was not a Marxist but a centrist." The POUM was incapable of drawing courageous tactical and organizational conclusions from its general conceptions. It played a vital role in giving the Popular Front a left cover.

Nin was an internationally known revolutionary. His presence alone would have been an assurance to the most class-conscious workers that the Popular Front was a revolutionary alliance. He had attended the founding conference of the Red International of Labour Unions in 1921 and became its assistant secretary. He joined the Communist Party and was elected to the Moscow Soviet. His opposition to Stalinism was long established. He was expelled from the party and sacked from his job for his support for Trotsky in 1928. Unable to return to Spain because of his political activities, he stayed in Moscow and was saved from prison only by his international reputation. Forced to return to Spain in 1930, Nin was imprisoned. His reputation was unimpeachable.

Trotsky and Nin corresponded for almost three years after Nin's return to Spain. Their correspondence was expressed in the friendliest terms, but, in reality, it was a constant polemic. It has been claimed that Trotsky was too harsh in his judgement of Nin. But the most striking characteristic about the letters that Trotsky wrote to Nin is the extremely patient way in which he sought to explain his analysis of the Spanish situation and what it was necessary for Nin to 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."

Throughout the correspondence, Nin expressed his agreement with the programme of the Opposition but consistently refused to draw the necessary conclusions from it. The crucial question to which Trotsky returned again and again 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. In March 1932 Trotsky wrote a letter to the Left Opposition in Spain welcoming the fact that they had been able to convene their first conference, in which he stated:

"Another question to which I would like to call your attention touches upon the international character of our work. Opportunists like Maurín and his Madrid imitators built up their entire policy on their national peculiarities. Not to know these peculiarities would of course be the greatest idiocy. But underneath them we must know how to discover the motivating forces of international developments and grasp the dependence of national peculiarities upon the world combination of forces. The tremendous advantage of Marxism and hence of the Left Opposition consists precisely in this international manner of solving national problems and national peculiarities.

"For your young organization a particular task is carefully following the work of the other sections of the International Left Opposition in order always to do your work in conformity with the interests of the whole. Without international criteria, without regular international links, without control over the work of a national section, the formation of a true proletarian revolutionary organization is impossible in our epoch."

In another letter from the same period Trotsky makes a similar point more briefly. "Undoubtedly you agree," he writes, "that as socialism cannot be built in one country a Marxist policy cannot be pursued in one

country alone."

As early as 1931 Trotsky was aware that there was a danger of the Spanish comrades adapting to Maurín. Maurín, Trotsky warned, was attempting to disguise national separatism as communism and adopting left-wing slogans in order to get close to the anarcho-sindicalists of the CNT. By December 1932, Trotsky was criticizing Nin much more directly for the national isolation of his group and his adaptation to Maurín. The International Left Opposition had just held an impromptu conference in Copenhagen where Trotsky had gone to give a lecture. Other European sections had sent delegates, but not the Spanish comrades.

"I take the liberty," Trotsky wrote, "of expressing my certainty that the leading Spanish comrades if they had locked themselves less into their environment and had shown more interest in their international organization would have found their way to the Copenhagen consultation without difficulty."

"But that is precisely the chief misfortune of the Spanish Opposition," he went on, "that its leaders have persistently kept their organization away from the internal life and the internal struggles of the other sections, and thereby have shut it off from an irreplaceable international experience. But in so far as the Spanish section through its official position was after all compelled to mix into international questions, its leaders, influenced neither by the experience of the other sections nor by the public opinion of their own organization, let themselves be guided by personal connections, sympathies or antipathies. For a Marxist analysis of the situation and of the differences of opinion, they substituted all too often—we must say it openly—a petty bourgeois psychologizing and sentimentalising. So it was in the case of the Catalan Federation (Maurín) where several Barcelona comrades' confidence in 'friendly personal relations' for a long time took the place of a principled struggle against petty-bourgeois nationalism and thereby put a brake on the development of the Left Opposition in the most decisive period."

Setting out the tasks of the Left Opposition in Spain, Trotsky warned, "In Catalonia, where the proletariat offers a natural milieu for the rapid growth of Bolshevik-Leninist influence, the leading comrades lost time in an inexcusable manner. Instead of coming out openly under their own banner even as a small nucleus, they played hide-and-seek with principles during the most critical months of the revolution, first engaging in diplomacy with the petty-bourgeois nationalist and provincial phrasemaker Maurín and then hanging on to his tail."

This long period of adaptation to the national milieu and Nin's resistance to Trotsky's attempts to develop a more international orientation among the Spanish Left Oppositionists led in 1935 to fusion with Maurín's Workers and Peasants Bloc and then within a year to them joining the Popular Front.

The Popular Front made vague promises about cheap credit for the peasants and higher agricultural prices, neither of which could be kept even if the government was prepared to resist the pressure from the landlords and banks; and it explicitly rejected the nationalization of the land, which was the only way in which the land question could have been solved. It also rejected the nationalization of the banks.

The banking system was to be brought under control, the programme of the Popular Front declared, but not the control of the workers. This was to be government control—that is to say, the political representatives of finance capital were supposed to exercise control over their own banks.

The foreign policy of the Popular Front was to be conducted in accord with the precepts of the League of Nations.

In every respect it was a programme that aimed to defend the interests of capital and was identical to that of the French Popular Front.

When the French Popular Front was elected in May 1936, its capitalist orientation was immediately expressed by the way in which the Communist Party brought to an end a general strike which had revolutionary implications. Trotsky hailed the strike as the beginning of

the French revolution. The conservative French paper *Le Temps* agreed with him and warned that the mass strikes and occupations represented "practice manoeuvres of the revolution."

The French Communist Party brought the strikes to an end, telling the workers that they had won a decisive victory when they gained a limited range of reforms. The behaviour of the Stalinists in France was a forewarning of what their role would be in Spain. It also meant that when the Spanish working class turned to France for help, it received none. When they betrayed the revolutionary movement of the French workers in 1936, the Stalinists deprived the Spanish workers and peasants of an ally in a neighbouring revolutionary state.

The election of the Popular Front government in Spain was followed by a renewed revolutionary upsurge. The POUM could have been at the head of the revolutionary movement in Spain by now, but instead it had let an exceptional revolutionary situation slip away and pursued a false and criminal line in joining the Popular Front.

Trotsky warned that the government would use the forces of the state to repress the workers and peasants. He wrote "The workers' organizations, however, remain completely enmeshed in the nets of the Popular Front. The convulsions of the revolutionary masses (without a programme, without a leadership worthy of confidence) thus threaten to throw the gates wide open to the counterrevolutionary dictatorship."

As Trotsky explained: "The question of questions at the moment is the Popular Front. The left centrists seek to present this question as a tactical or even as a technical manoeuvre, so as to be able to peddle their wares in the shadow of the Popular Front. In reality, the Popular Front is *the main question of proletarian class strategy for this epoch*. It also offers the best criterion for the difference between Bolshevism and Menshevism. For it is often forgotten that the greatest historical example of the Popular Front is the February 1917 revolution. From February to October the Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries, who represent a very good parallel to the 'Communists' [i.e., Stalinists] and the Social Democrats, were in the closest alliance and were in a permanent coalition with the bourgeois party of the Cadets, together with whom they formed a series of coalition governments. Under the sign of this Popular Front stood the whole mass of the people, including the workers', peasants' and soldiers' councils. To be sure, the Bolsheviks participated in the councils. But they did not make the slightest concession to the Popular Front. Their demand was to break this Popular Front, to destroy the alliance with the Cadets, and to create a genuine workers' and peasants' government."

This was written on July 16 and the next day Franco launched his military coup. The Popular Front government which the POUM had helped to put in power had left the army and the officer corps intact. This was not an accidental oversight, but reflected the fact that when it was forced to make an alliance with the left and workers' organizations, the ruling class needed the military more than ever if it was to protect private property. This had been part of the perspective of Popular Frontism from the very beginning, when Stalin had assured Laval that the French Communist Party would accept all the measures he felt it was necessary to take for national defence. Stalin hoped that he could rely on the French army to defend the Soviet Union against Nazi Germany and was prepared to leave it intact whatever the cost to the French working class. In Spain, the POUM had participated in the Popular Front which had, Trotsky wrote, "maintained the military caste with the people's money, furnished them with authority, power and arms, and given them command over young workers and peasants, thereby facilitating the preparations for a crushing attack on the workers and peasants."

The Popular Front government took no steps to resist the launching of the fascist military coup in July 1936 and refused all demands to arm the workers. But in Barcelona, which was one of the most industrialised cities of Spain, the working class resisted.

The largest working class organisation in Catalonia was the Anarchist

union federation of the CNT (Confederación Nacional del Trabajo—National Confederation of Labour). The influence of the Socialist Party and the Communist Party was small compared to that of the POUM. Workers commandeered arms, explosives and motor vehicles. They called on the soldiers to refuse their officers' orders.

Inspired by their example, workers in Madrid and Valencia did the same. The Asturian miners sent a column of 5,000 dynamiters to Madrid to assist. In Malaga, the workers had no access to arms at first and used petrol to set fire to barricades around the military barracks. The sailors took control of their vessels. The Popular Front government was left without an army, without a police force, without border guards or any means of imposing its authority. At national, regional and local municipal levels, the machinery of the state had collapsed in the face of the fascist uprising.

The entire apparatus of the state had disintegrated, and its role was assumed by improvised committees as workers took control of the factories and began to organise the towns and cities, while in the countryside peasants began to occupy the land and set up collectives. The continued military campaign against the fascists was in the hands of workers' militias, which went on the offensive and extended the revolution into the territory they recaptured.

Writing about this experience later, Trotsky said, "The Spanish proletariat 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."

In Russia, the Bolsheviks had not been able to address the question of collectivising the land immediately, but in Spain, the peasants themselves, who had been highly proletarianised by the development of capitalism, began to collectivise the land. Franco had precipitated the revolution he had hoped to avert.

The Republicans and the Socialists were perfectly well aware of where real power lay. President Luis Companys told a group of anarchists on July 20: "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 had been a union lawyer and knew his business. He was prepared to accept the workers' committees as the de facto power in Catalonia until he could undermine them and restore the bourgeois state.

But the Spanish workers' state remained embryonic. What had emerged in Spain was a situation of dual power. Felix Morrow, the author of *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain*, writes of the Revolution of July 19, but it was an incomplete revolution that remained balanced on a knife-edge. None of the parties, certainly not the POUM, called for the workers' committees to be centralised in nationwide soldiers' and workers' councils. Instead, the committees remained localised and scattered. The government was able to use its control of the national bank and gold reserves to exercise financial control. The POUM and CNT never attempted to take over the banks.

Over the course of the next seven weeks, the workers' organisations drifted closer to the Republic because, in not building soviets, the POUM had tacitly recognised the right of Azaña, Companys and the rest to rule. On September 7, Nin himself had called for the bourgeois ministers to be overthrown, but by September 18, the POUM position had changed. Its newspaper declared that the left republican movement was "of a profoundly popular nature." It now claimed that the Popular Front government could ensure socialism.

Nin drew the logical conclusion and joined the Catalan government. This was a violation of a century of accumulated revolutionary experience. Marx had recognised at the time of the Paris Commune that the working class could not simply lay hold of the existing state

institutions, but had to replace them with a new form of state that reflected its own class interests. The Bolsheviks had not entered the Kerensky government even when it was menaced by Kornilov.

One of the first actions of the new government in Catalonia was to dissolve the revolutionary committees that the workers had set up on July 19. This was the first great advance of the counter-revolution. It was followed by a decree disarming the workers.

In the course of the next 8 months, the Madrid and Barcelona governments whittled away the gains that the workers had made in July. Nin's presence gave it the authority to take these steps. The process of counter-revolution moved most slowly in Catalonia, but the direction was the same as in the rest of Republican Spain.

By December, when it was no longer needed, the POUM was expelled from the government at the insistence of the Soviet consul, Antonov-Ovseyenko. But Nin had learnt nothing and was still saying that Spain did not need soviets. His criticisms of the government were really advice to it, and while he called for workers' control of the army, he respectfully asked the government to achieve this. Weeks before the state turned its guns on the workers of Catalonia, Nin was still arguing that the workers would take power peacefully. He remained committed to the perspective of the Popular Front.

In March 1937, Trotsky warned: "If this policy [of the POUM] continues, the Catalan proletariat will be the victim of a terrible catastrophe comparable to that of the Paris Commune of 1871." His words proved all too prophetic.

In May, the government and the Stalinists launched a military assault on the Barcelona telephone exchange, which had been occupied by the workers since July 1936. Not only was it the visible symbol of dual power, but it was also a strategic building, control of which allowed workers to monitor the telephone conversations of government ministers. The Republican government would never be in control of Barcelona if it did not regain control of the telephone exchange.

The attempt took the leaders of the POUM and the CNT by surprise, but it provoked massive resistance from the working class, which spontaneously rose up in defence of the gains of the revolution. All the evidence now available confirms that it would have been possible for the workers to take power, but instead the leaders of the POUM and the Anarchists consistently called for a ceasefire during the week of street fighting that followed. Only the small group of Bolshevik-Leninists affiliated with the Left Opposition, some rank-and-file members of the POUM and the Anarchist Friends of Durruti called for the workers to take power and denounced the call for a ceasefire.

On May 3-4, the city of Barcelona was in the hands of the workers. That night, the executives of the POUM and the CNT, FAI (Federación Anarquista Ibérica—Iberian Anarchist Federation) and Libertarian Youth met in joint session. Julián Gorkin later recalled, "We stated the problem in these precise terms: 'Neither of us has urged the masses of Barcelona to take this action. This is a spontaneous response to a Stalinist provocation. This is a decisive moment for the Revolution. Either we place ourselves at the head of the movement in order to destroy the internal enemy or else the movement will collapse and the enemy will destroy us. We must make our choice revolution or counterrevolution.'"

One could not put it more clearly and they did indeed make their choice.

"We did not feel ourselves spiritually or physically strong enough to take the lead in organising the masses for resistance," a member of the POUM executive said afterwards. The POUM executive admitted, "It would have been possible to take power, but our party, a minority force within the working class movement, could not assume the responsibility of issuing that slogan."

Had they called for the workers to take power, small party or not, the workers of the CNT who were far to the left of their leaders would certainly have listened to them. The POUM itself had perhaps 40,000

members and a militia column of 10,000.

But if the workers of Barcelona had taken power, as both the POUM and the CNT leaders admit they could have done, wouldn't they have been isolated? Not at all.

If a workers' republic had been declared in Barcelona, it would have had a galvanising effect on the French working class. It would have been very difficult for the Popular Front government in France to maintain an arms embargo with its own working class aroused. Workers and peasants in the rest of Spain, in both the Republican and the Nationalist areas, would have responded if the Barcelona workers had undertaken socialist measures that put the factories in the hands of the workers and the land in the hands of the peasants. Franco's army would have crumbled, especially if a workers' republic had declared its support for colonial self-determination. Such a slogan would have had an impact not only on Spain's colonies but on those of Britain and France as well.

A civil war is not fought by military means alone. It needs a political strategy. History has many examples of this. Lincoln's abolition of slavery was described by one European politician as "the maddest and most infamous revolution in history." Yet it proved to be the means of winning support behind enemy lines among the slaves as well as internationally. The cotton workers of the English mill towns demonstrated in their thousands in support of the abolition of slavery and the victory of the North. The British government did not dare intervene on behalf of the Southern slave owners. In Barcelona, the POUM had no such revolutionary strategy.

When a ceasefire was eventually agreed, it proved to be the prelude to a bloody purge of all opposition elements in Barcelona and elsewhere in Spain. The POUM was accused of having organised a putsch in collusion with the German, Italian and Francoist secret police. Its press was banned, Nin was arrested and the organisation outlawed. The leaders of the POUM were taken to a Stalinist prison in Madrid—a former church in Calle Atocha.

Nin himself was separated from the others and taken to Alcalá de Henares, where he was interrogated for three days. When he refused to confess to being a fascist agent, he was tortured to death. His body was buried on the outskirts of the town. 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.

After Nin's death, Trotsky described him as "an old and incorruptible revolutionary." The members of the POUM, Trotsky said, "fought heroically on all fronts against the Fascists in Spain." But in joining the Popular Front, participating in the Popular Front government of Catalonia and refusing to call for the workers to take power in Catalonia in May 1937, Nin had committed a betrayal that proved fatal not only to himself but to the Spanish revolution.

In the ensuing weeks, the Stalinist secret police rounded up all opposition elements in Catalonia, imprisoned and tortured them, and executed many thousands. A Special Tribunal for Espionage and High Treason was established to try the POUMists and Anarchists accused for their part in the insurrection. Almost all of those sent for trial in this tribunal were found guilty. Others disappeared like Nin into the secret prisons of the GPU—the so-called Preventorios. Some 20,000 prisoners were sent to labour camps. Survivors reported sleep deprivation, denial of food, fake executions, isolation, confinement in cramped spaces, mutilation, denial of medical attention, total darkness, blinding lights, near drowning and, of course, beatings.

The repression had begun long before the May Days. Alexander Orlov, the head of the GPU in Spain, sent a number of agents into Barcelona with orders to fraternise with the POUM and identify targets for kidnapping or assassination. Erwin Wolf, Trotsky's former secretary, was assassinated in

Spain. An English volunteer, David Crook, later recalled how he was recruited from the International Brigade for special work. His account of his life gives us a good impression of how the GPU's operations in Spain fitted into the wider counter-revolutionary campaign that had its most public face in the Moscow Trials.

Crook was sent to the officer training school at Albacete where he was taught Spanish by Ramon Mercader, who was later to assassinate Trotsky in Mexico. From there he went on to Barcelona to spy on the POUM and its British supporters from the Independent Labour Party (ILP). Crook ingratiated himself with Eileen Blair, George Orwell's wife, which gave him the opportunity to steal documents from the ILP offices. When the POUM leaders were arrested, he was planted in the same prison cell to gather information. He also played a part in the kidnapping of the Austrian socialist Kurt Landau.

From Spain, Crook went on to Shanghai, where he spied on suspected Trotskyists. We can see from Crook's account of his life that the May Days were not a one-off, isolated event, but were part of a much wider and long-prepared campaign that was to have global ramifications. Spain became a training ground for Stalinist spies, provocateurs and assassins. When Ignace Reiss, the Soviet secret service agent who broke with Stalin, was assassinated in Switzerland, his assassins left behind a Spanish-made overcoat when they fled. Eric Hobsbawm describes his youthful experience of the Popular Front in Paris in carnival-like terms, but in reality the Popular Front was inseparable from the repression of the Moscow Trials and Spain.

Some historians claim that there were never more than 20 or 40 GPU operatives in the whole of Spain. That figure seems at variance with the evidence, and in any case ignores the Stalinists who, while not members of the secret police, were nonetheless engaged in wiping out oppositionists. The Communist Party of Spain was small in 1936, but within a year it had become the most powerful party in the Popular Front. It had grown partly by absorbing the Socialist Party's youth movement, but also by recruiting peasants who were dissatisfied with collectivisation and even *caciques* in the rural areas, in addition to civil servants, magistrates and army officers in the towns. In these social layers, the GPU found the human material for its work: among them were gangsters, racketeers and former fascists, all of whom found a natural home in the Stalinist apparatus of terror.

Nor was the repressive activity of the Stalinists confined to Catalonia. José Cazorla and Santiago Carillo, both central committee members of the PCE (Partido Comunista de España—Communist Party of Spain), illegally seized workers who had been acquitted by the popular tribunals in Madrid and sent them to the front line to serve as human "fortifications." The CNT newspaper *Solidaridad Obrera* identified a network of private prisons "operating under a unified leadership and on a preconceived plan of national scope."

As military defeats followed one upon another, an air of panic began to pervade the Stalinist military command, which became pervasive after the crushing of the Catalanian working class. Soviet intelligence reports speak of a "disease-carrying bacillus" among the International Brigades. One near-hysterical report described how an entire company was disarmed and arrested and their officers shot. A supposedly large-scale "Trotskyist spy and terrorist organisation" was exposed in the 14th brigade, and a man died under interrogation. André Marty, the French Comintern leader who was responsible for organising the International Brigades, admitted to having shot 500 International Brigadiers. This is one tenth of the total death toll among the International Brigades.

All of these crimes were carried out under the auspices of the liberal, "democratic" Socialist and Republican politicians of the Popular Front. Their defenders claim that they were ignorant of what the GPU did, but the historical record refutes this claim. An interesting document that records a conversation between a Soviet adviser and President Juan

Negrin in December 1938 throws some light on the attitude of the Popular Front government toward democracy.

In this conversation, Negrin seems to have mapped out a post-war political strategy that involved a one-party state—"It might be called the national front or the Spanish front or union," said Negrin. His projected regime would have been under the leadership of a military figure. For Negrin and the other leaders of the Republic, democracy might be desirable, but the real question was order and the suppression of the revolt from below. For that, an alliance with the Kremlin was essential and they were willing to give the repressive apparatus it had created in the struggle against Trotskyism the free run of Spain if that was the only way private property could be defended. The GPU merely acted as the most resolute arm of the Popular Front.

At the end of 1937, Trotsky wrote in "The Lessons of Spain: A Last Warning," "When the workers and peasants enter on the path of *their* revolution—when they seize factories and estates, drive out the old owners, conquer power in the provinces—then the bourgeois counterrevolution—democratic, Stalinist, or fascist alike—has no other means of checking this movement except through bloody coercion, supplemented by lies and deceit. The superiority of the Stalinist clique on this road consisted in its ability to apply instantly measures that were beyond the capacity of Azaña, Companys, Negrin and their left allies."

In Spain, Trotsky wrote, two irreconcilable programmes confronted one another. There was the programme that consisted of "saving *at any cost* private property from the proletariat, and saving *as far as possible*, democracy from Franco; and on the other hand, the programme of abolishing private property through the conquest of power by the proletariat. The first programme expressed the interests of capitalism through the medium of the labour aristocracy, the top petty-bourgeois circles, and especially the Soviet bureaucracy. The second programme translated into the language of Marxism the tendencies of the revolutionary mass movement, not fully conscious but powerful. Unfortunately for the revolution, between the handful of Bolsheviks and the proletariat stood the counter-revolutionary wall of the Popular Front."

The heroism of the Spanish workers and peasants, and of the international volunteers who flocked to Spain, is all too often used as a means of covering up the real character of Popular Front politics, and anyone who criticises the Republic and its supporters is accused of besmirching the reputation of these selfless fighters. In reality, the reputation of those heroic figures is better served by an objective examination of the history and particularly of the Popular Front.

In this lecture, I have attempted to show that a successful proletarian revolution was possible in Spain and that the reason it failed was not that the Spanish proletariat was immature or the economy too backward or the international conditions unfavourable, which are the reasons so frequently given, but because of the existence of the Popular Front. The Spanish masses remained enmeshed in the Popular Front until it was too late because no genuinely revolutionary leadership was built.

The party that was in the best position to do so was the POUM, but it proved to be the chief obstacle to the building of a revolutionary party. Had it adopted an intransigently revolutionary policy, the POUM would have found itself at the head of the working class in May if not before. An enormous responsibility for the defeat in Spain falls on the POUM and its centrist politics. The masses, as Trotsky said in one of his last writings, sought to blast their way to the correct road, but they found it impossible to build a revolutionary leadership in the heat of revolution. Had the Spanish revolution succeeded, the history of the twentieth century would have been immeasurably different.



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