

British Trotskyists challenge falsification of Spanish Civil War history

Our reporter
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The Spanish Civil War “remains very much a burning issue of contemporary political significance,” an audience at the British Academy heard Professor Paul Preston of the London School of Economics say introducing an evening discussion entitled “Civil War and Foreign Intervention in Spain” on April 2.

Professor Preston was chairing a panel made up of Professor Angel Viñas of the Universidad Complutense de Madrid and Professor Helen Graham of Royal Holloway College, London. The meeting was to commemorate the end of the Spanish Civil War on March 31, 1939.

“Political debate today in Spain still rages around issues of the Spanish Civil War and particularly,” Professor Preston noted, “that has been the case over the last six or seven years.”

“The generation of what one might call the grandchildren of the Civil War have started to ask questions,” he stressed. Scarcely a village in Spain is now without a Group for the Recovery of Historical Memory who are excavating unmarked mass graves. (See video: “‘So many thousands of unknown nameless people’—Franco’s mass graves”)

“The controversy,” he continued, “has been an important part of the political tension that surrounds elections in Spain and it’s as burning today as it was at the death of Franco.”

These were the issues that he proposed that the panel and the audience should discuss.

From the start, the discussion at the British Academy took on an explicitly political character and reflected the highly polarised character of contemporary Spanish politics.

Preston set the tone by condemning George Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia*, a book which gives an account of the Spanish Civil War based on Orwell’s personal experiences in Spain and particularly of the May Days or May Events in Barcelona. Orwell wrote his book to expose the role that the Stalinists were playing in suppressing the Spanish revolution. The Stalinists and their allies tried to prevent the book’s publication at the time. Over half a century later, the discussion at the British Academy demonstrated that the question of Stalinism’s role in Spain and the events in Barcelona remain as controversial as ever.

Events in Barcelona

Barcelona was the city at the heart of the proletarian revolution in Spain. In July 1936, when the Spanish generals tried to overthrow the Republican government in a military coup, the workers of Barcelona rose up against them. Local and national government collapsed, leaving power in the hands of the workers, who created committees to organise production and distribution and militias to defend their revolution. Spain was in a situation of dual power after the attempted military coup. The Republican

government had lost all authority. But the workers’ own organisations were not prepared to take state power and instead joined the Republican governments in Catalonia and Madrid. The presence of workers’ leaders gave these institutions a veneer of credibility that they would otherwise have lacked. Over the coming months the Republican authorities reasserted themselves.

This creeping counter-revolution was slowest in Catalonia and Barcelona where the working class was strongest. But by May 1937 the Catalan regional state and the authorities in Madrid, buoyed up by support from Moscow, were confident enough to attempt to regain control of this working class bastion. On May 3 the Republic police chief attempted to seize the telephone exchange, which had been in hands of workers since the previous July. Several days of street fighting followed, during which key working class leaders were assassinated.

Once the leaders of the main working class organisations—the Anarchist trade union federation known as the CNT and the POUM (Party of Marxist Unity) a smaller centrist party—had persuaded their members to cease fire, there were mass arrests. Most prominent among those arrested was Andres Nin, the leader of the POUM, who disappeared into one of the numerous secret prisons run by the Stalinist secret police, where he was tortured and murdered. Thousands of ordinary members of the POUM and CNT were arrested and brought before tribunals on charges of high treason. It is estimated that 20,000 people were held in labour camps after the May Events. Assassinations and unexplained disappearances continued, among them Irwin Wolf, who had been Trotsky’s secretary, and who went to Barcelona after the May Events to help regroup the Trotskyists.

Orwell himself, who was serving with the POUM militia, narrowly escaped from Spain. Other British volunteers were imprisoned and one died when he was refused medical treatment. Preston condemned Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia* as a book “which gives an erroneous impression and one that’s been picked up in a lot of historiography that the Spanish Republic was defeated because of its internal divisions.”

This idea persisted, he claimed, because of “semi-racist myths about the Spanish character. Spaniards are thought to be disorganised and anarchic, so being told that the Republic lost the War because of disorganisation fits very well.”

He then claimed that those who point to the atrocities committed against the POUM and the CNT are part of “the strange phenomenon of right-wing historians crying crocodile tears for Trotskyists and Anarchists.”

They do so, Preston maintained, because it gives them the opportunity to denounce the Spanish Republic for seeking an alliance with the Soviet Union.

Both the other speakers on the platform agreed with this perspective which, as Professor Graham admitted, rather limited the possibility of discussion. All three speakers essentially accepted a view of the Spanish Civil War that was developed by Stalinist propagandists at the time and was intended to defend the Republican government against its critics on

the left. Any criticism of this line was regarded as a reversion to Cold War ideology.

The May Days were, Graham told the British Academy audience, a “Crucial moment in the reconstruction of the Republican state.”

“[T]he significance of May 1937,” Graham maintained, “is that you’ve got the beginnings of a unified judiciary, a police force, an army, the Republican government has taken control of the border posts from the Anarchist militia.”

There was “a certain amount of strong-arming” involved in this reconstruction of the state. “But the Republic does get its act together. It does reconstruct the state.”

This reconstruction, she claimed, allowed the Republic to go on resisting for another two years. But what she and the other two speakers repeatedly returned to was that even then the Western democratic powers would not intervene to help the Republic. Britain, France and the United States maintained a policy of non-intervention while secretly assisting Franco.

Faced with the continued refusal of the Western democracies to support them, the Spanish Republic began to ask only that they should put pressure on Franco and his Nazi backers to reach a negotiated settlement. The two years of resistance which Graham regards as justification for crushing the revolution were years in which the Spanish Republic was seeking a settlement with Franco and attempting to rebuild a bourgeois state apparatus to suppress the revolutionary movement and socialist aspirations of the working class.

All three speakers were at a loss to explain the intransigence of Britain, France and the US. Yet the reason why the Western powers would not allow arms supplies through to the Spanish Republic, as they were legally obliged to do, is well documented. They were acutely aware that a revolution was in progress and that the Republican politicians had no power to prevent it. Even with the backing of the Soviet Union, the successful suppression of the revolution was not assured. Franco’s policy of exterminating all opposition, with the help of the Nazi war machine, seemed to the fine democratic politicians of the West the safest option when faced with a revolution unfolding under their noses in Europe.

If the actions of the British and French governments, in particular, seem to have been against their own interests, since they allowed Germany to alter the balance of power of Europe, then their policy must be understood within the context of the threat of revolution. Neither the British nor French political class believed that Hitler would be so reckless as to launch a European war that could only increase the likelihood of a revolutionary upsurge. They had not forgotten the lessons of the First World War and the Russian Revolution.

Platform challenged

The unanimous position of the platform was challenged by three questioners from the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Ann Talbot was the first questioner. A frequent correspondent of the WWS, she presented a paper at the three-day congress held in Madrid on the 70th anniversary of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in November 2006. The paper, entitled ‘Republican Spain and the Soviet Union: Politics and Foreign Intervention in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-9,’ had addressed many of the issues raised in the British Academy discussion but from a very different perspective. (See “Congress held in Madrid on 70th anniversary of Spanish Civil War” and “La España republicana y la Unión Soviética: política e intervención extranjera en la Guerra Civil Española, 1936-1939”)

It argued that the relationship between the Spanish republican government and the Stalinist bureaucracy arose out of the conflation of

parallel interests. The Spanish republican government wanted Soviet weapons to combat Franco and needed the power and prestige of Moscow to suppress the revolutionary movement of the Spanish working class. The Stalinist bureaucracy wanted to limit the expansion of German and Italian fascism which presented a threat to the survival of the Soviet Union, but they were also engaged in a ferocious purge and the suppression of revolutionary and internationalist cadres who were identified with Trotsky. The Moscow Trials began in August 1936. Both the Republican bourgeoisie and the Stalinists had a shared interest in strangling the emerging social revolution in Spain.

The paper drew on material from Soviet, British and US archives to demonstrate that both the Western governments and Moscow were aware of the revolutionary situation in Spain. Talbot demonstrated that the Stalinists had striven to crush this movement and restore private property and the power of the bourgeois state in Spain. She concluded, “The fundamental reason for the defeat at the hands of fascism was that the Soviet Union destroyed the social force that animated military resistance.”

In her question to the platform, Talbot drew attention to the frequency with which the speakers had referred to Trotsky. “The name of Trotsky,” she said, “had become identified with the very act of revolution. When the French ambassador went to speak to Hitler before the outbreak World War II, he warned him that if he provoked a war the only person who would benefit was Trotsky. What he meant was that war would provoke a revolution.”

At this point Preston interrupted and demanded of Talbot that she ask a question.

She replied, “There are two questions in fact and they’ve already been raised by the platform. Why didn’t Franco go faster? Why was he going centimetre by centimetre? The Germans thought he should go faster. His military advisers thought he should go faster. Why didn’t he attempt to take Barcelona after the May Days? And why didn’t the British intervene? I would suggest it’s for the very same reason. And this is the question. Is it not because there was a revolution going on? That was why the British wouldn’t intervene and that was why Franco had to go so very, very slowly.”

Preston’s response was a tautology. “The reason why Franco didn’t go faster was that the strategy was to go centimetre by centimetre,” he said. The conception that there was a revolution going on in Spain was, he claimed, “the most extreme tabloid exaggeration.” He denounced “the notion that, as it were, there is a kind of unified revolution. These guys are not Bolsheviks.”

He sneered at the notion that it was possible to conduct a revolutionary war: “There is no Ho Chi Minh trail across the Pyrenees.”

When Vicky Short, another correspondent of the WWS who writes on Spanish issues, identified herself, as they had requested her to do, it provoked an outcry from the platform. Preston demanded to know how many people from the *World Socialist Web Site* were present.

Short put her question nonetheless. “The question is,” she said, “that every speaker has minimised the role of Moscow in the Spanish Civil War, but I think the evidence of the Soviet archives has shown beyond all doubt that the Stalinist bureaucracy was attempting to strangle a revolution in Spain and the latest material entirely bears out Trotsky’s characterisation of the Stalinists as the butchers, the executioners of the revolution. Now is your argument consistent with this evidence?”

Viñas’s reply was immediate and revealing. “There was no way to have a revolution and win a civil war,” he insisted, “and it wasn’t an execution by Moscow at all. It was generated by the Spanish politicians from the very beginning from Largo Caballero onwards, from September 1936, by Largo Caballero with a certain caution because he needed the support of the CNT, the Anarchists. After the May Days in Barcelona, without the support of the Anarchists and without the POUM, the Republican strategy was in favour of winning the war. A war is a war, is a war.”

Preston had attempted to cast doubt on the reality of the revolution, but Viñas was clear that there had been a revolution and that the Spanish Socialist Party had been intent on putting it down, an action which he regarded as entirely justifiable in order to win the war.

When another member of the audience attempted to ask a question Preston demanded, “Can you say what Trotskyist faction you’re from?” In the face of repeated interruptions from the platform Paul Stuart of the WSWs put his question. He noted that “Professor Viñas has described the May Days as being inspired by fascists or organised by fascists.”

“Professor Viñas did not say that!” Preston interjected.

Stuart continued, “This is a fabrication that was put forward by the Stalinists at the time. Claud Cockburn made this accusation in the *Daily Worker*. What I’d like to ask is how can Professor Viñas maintain such a blatant historical falsification, which is not backed up by any historical facts whatsoever?”

Viñas had asserted at the Madrid conference that the May Events were provoked by Italian fascists. He cited his own book on the question in which he wrote “In my opinion the idea cannot be ruled out that Fascists and pro-Franco agents were at work in the Barcelona powder-keg.”

He identified these agents as Anarchists and members of the POUM. “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.”

He cited two sources to substantiate this claim—the Italian historian Mauro Canali and a book by Morten Heiberg and Manuel Ros Agudo. Neither of these books provides any evidence to back up the claim that fascist agents played any significant role in the May Events. The only evidence either book offers, which predates the May Events, is an order sent from Nicolas Franco to Commander Julian Troncoso in which he tells him to mobilize a Catalan nationalist party called Estat Catala. But this order could not have been the signal for an uprising in Barcelona because Estat Catala was a small, middle class party that had no support in the working class. It defies belief that such an organisation could have brought thousands of workers on to the streets. Talbot pointed this fact out in a review of Viñas’s book and he was at pains to minimize the significance of his theory when he answered Stuart at the British Academy. (See “Recycling Stalinist lies about the Spanish Civil War”)

At that point Preston moved to wrap up the discussion and gave the closing words to Graham, who dismissed the suggestion that the Stalinists had suppressed a revolution as “a conspiracy theory.” The May Days, she insisted, was “a Catalan battle” and to suggest that Moscow had played any role in the events in Spain was “colonialist.” Becoming increasingly heated, she demanded, “Let’s leave Stalin out of it,” and concluded, “It’s not modern historiography, okay.”

It must be said that if modern historiography has no place for a serious study of the role of the Soviet bureaucracy in suppressing revolutionary movements in the course of the twentieth century, then there is something seriously adrift in modern historiography. If historians do indeed “leave Stalin out of it,” as Graham enjoins them to do, then they cannot begin to understand the course of events from 1936 onwards. Whether one examines the political history of particular countries or looks at the situation in international relations, the counter-revolutionary role of Stalinism is one of the main determinants of recent history.

Historians who have approached the question of the Spanish Civil War from an objective standpoint have all recognised the murderous and self-interested role that Stalinism played in that struggle.

At the level of interpretation, history is inevitably partisan. Historians of different political persuasions will come to radically different conclusions about the same period. But nonetheless there is a factual basis to all history on which objectively minded historians can agree. The central

aims and the role played by the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Spanish Civil War are well documented. As archives in the former Soviet Union and the West have been opened up, a much clearer picture has emerged of a counter-revolutionary force intent on liquidating those they labelled Trotskyists and, by the mid-1930s, preventing revolutions that might disrupt Moscow’s foreign policy.

This new archival material has confirmed Trotsky’s characterisation of the Stalinists as the executioners of the Spanish revolution. It was in Spain that the GPU machine was constructed that would later murder Trotsky in Mexico. A whole generation of spies and assassins was trained there. To deny the reality of the process by which the Stalinists liquidated their enemies in Spain and beyond is a serious falsification of history.



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