Exhibition of photographer Agustí Centelles in Barcelona: Many unanswered questions about the Spanish Civil War

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Agustí Centelles: A photographic history. The thirties, *at the Fundació Vila Casas, Barcelona until February 10, 2013*

Valencia-born photographer Agustí Centelles (1909-1985) certainly ranks with Robert Capa, generally recognised as one of the greatest photojournalists to cover the Spanish Civil War. Some of Centelles's most memorable images are among the 100 or so now on display at the Vila Casas Foundation in Barcelona, the first exhibition of his work since his death in 1985.

The photos are a unique record, but an opportunity to shed light on the Civil War, one of the great and tragic events of the mid-twentieth century, and the ultimate fascist victory has been missed in the current show.

Those unfamiliar with the complex history will leave the exhibition little the wiser as to why people in Spain in the 1930s were fighting and what they were fighting for. The exhibition's failure is bound up with unresolved questions of Spanish and European history—in particular, the betrayal and defeat of the revolution by the Stalinist-led Popular Front government and the divisive effects of nationalism.

Without doubt, Centelles had an uncanny ability to be at the right place at the right time. His subjects appear unaware of his presence. The photographs on display have a remarkable ability to convey movement, with their unusual angles, and make brilliant use of light and shadow.

Centelles was fortunate to receive a first-class training from Catalan cinema pioneer Ramón Baños and artist Josep Badosa. He also took an interest in photographic developments internationally and made skilful use of the new lightweight Leica camera. Centelles explained, "While my colleagues waited patiently for the news with their huge cameras and magnesium cartridges I went out looking for it, I created it".

"A true photographic newsman has to be a good hunter with boundless intuition", he added.

The first room in the Barcelona exhibition displays 20 photos from the period of the Spanish Republic (1931-1936) following the fall of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship, the landslide victory of a Republican-Socialist Party (PSOE) government and the exile of the king. This was the beginning of the Spanish revolution.

Half the photos depict beauty contests, boxing matches, fiestas and sporting events. One memorable image shows a group of priests led by the right-wing Bishop of Barcelona Manuel Irurita [1] as they parade arrogantly along the street in their finery. Centelles captures them as they all lean to the left at the same time, almost hovering in mid-air.

The other half of the photos in the room deal with political events. The earliest picture dates from 1931 and shows Francesc Macià, leader of the Catalan Republican Left (ERC) and president of the Catalan government (Generalitat) from 1932 until his death in 1933, at just the moment he steps out of his car to preside over the Flag Ceremony held to replace the monarchist flags with republican ones.

The Republic, ever since its creation in 1931, proved incapable of resolving the economic, social and political problems that confronted Spain, problems that could only solved by the working class through a social revolution. The government's actions led to the loss of much of its support and paved the way for the election of a conservative coalition government in 1933. The appointment of right-wing Catholic ministers in October 1934 precipitated a social explosion across Spain, including the uprising of the Asturian miners. The exhibition ignores this broad movement, referring to the events solely as the "1934 Catalan Nationalist Uprising".

The Republican government sent in the army to suppress the revolutionary movement. Centelles's picture from October 1934 memorably captures that moment of tension as a lone young policeman in the centre of Barcelona begins to raise his rifle towards a crowd of workers grouped together in the distance.

Following elections in February 1936, a Popular Front coalition government was formed, comprising the Communist Party (PCE), the Socialist Workers Party (PSOE), separatist and Republican parties.

Nothing is said in the exhibition about the origins of the Popular Front, but they lay in large part in the Seventh Congress of the Comintern in 1935. Stalin, responding to the threat from the Nazi regime in Germany, for whose coming to power his own policies were centrally responsible, now linked the defence of the USSR to alliances with the imperialist democracies—Britain, France and the United States.

The various Communist parties were instructed to ally themselves with the parties of the "democratic" bourgeoisie—in Spain, particularly the ERC led by Lluís Companys, feted today as a hero of Catalan nationalism—sacrificing the political independence of the working class and the goal of socialism on the altar of Soviet Stalinist foreign policy and the bureaucracy's national interests.

Centelles recorded the celebrations following the Popular Front victory and the release of leaders imprisoned after the 1934 uprising, including Companys [2], who comes across as a feeble individual, travelling in an open-top limousine, grasping the side door and clutching a handkerchief to his mouth. [Photo here.]

The second room of the exhibition, "July 19: Start of the civil war," consists of 14 photos. In response to the launching of a coup by General Francisco Franco in 1936, the workers in Barcelona, followed by those in the other major cities, rose up and besieged the barracks. Franco's coup showed that the bourgeoisie was incapable of overcoming the crisis it faced other than by crushing the working class.

Centelles was the only reporter to photograph in those early days, taking pictures of the makeshift barricades, the first casualties of the civil war and the occupation of strategically important buildings including the

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telephone exchange.

The Popular Front government was forced to disband the hated army and became dependent for its survival on militias, heavily drawn from the anarchist CNT and FAI and the centrist Party of Marxist Unification (POUM), led by former Trotskyist Andres Nin [3]. A situation of dual power came into being. Legal authority remained with the Republican government, but actual power had begun to pass into the hands of new, improvised revolutionary institutions—an embryonic workers' state.

In order to suppress the workers' movement and prevent a social revolution that would have radicalised Europe and threatened the rule of the bureaucracy in the USSR, the PCE and Stalin's secret service (GPU) death squads directed their repression at their left-wing opponents, particularly the supporters of Trotsky. For their part, the POUM and the CNT refused to consolidate workers' factory committees and militias into a workers' government, and joined a bourgeois government that was simultaneously suppressing the workers' revolution.

The third room in the exhibition, "The Battle Front", shows photographs after Centelles had joined the Stalinist-controlled Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia (PSUC) [4] and the newly created Generalitat Propaganda Commission. He was sent to report on the Aragon front, composed mainly of anarchist and POUM militias bitterly opposed to attempts to disband and incorporate them into the newly created bourgeois "People's Army".

Most of the photographs here are from the bloody battles at Teruel and Belchite, but one intriguing photo shows PCE member General Pozas [5], commander of the Eastern Army, reviewing troops from the anarchist Durruti Column, which had been recently assimilated into the People's Army and renamed the 26th Division. The reconstitution of the army, began in October 1936, would be almost complete by mid-1937.

More than half the photographs in the exhibition are in the fourth room, "Portraits from the battle front", and the fifth room, "The Home Front". They are almost all of PSUC and ERC leaders in the Popular Front, but there are occasional photographs from the lower ranks, including two soldiers reading the ERC paper *Ultima Hora*. There a few photographs of the anarchist leader Buenaventura Durruti shortly before he left for Madrid and met his death, and one of the author George Orwell towering above his fellow volunteers as they train in the POUM's Lenin Barracks.

Of particular interest are the photos of a meeting called by Companys after the May 1937 uprising, captioned "The Stalinist PSUC gained the upper hand with the disappearances, both physical and political, of Trotskyist and anarchist groups and individuals". This is the only reference in the whole exhibition to the counter-revolution. Another shows the mother of Ramon Mercader, the future assassin of Leon Trotsky, helping to dismantle barricades after the workers' uprising.

During this period, Centelles was to join the Special State Information Department (DEDIDE) and in March 1938 the Military Information Service (SIM), by then firmly under the control of the Stalinists. It had thousands of agents, a huge budget and ran its own prisons and concentration camps, arresting and executing opponents without investigation or trial. The centre of its operations was in Barcelona at La Tamarita, a small villa with an interrogation (torture) centre in the basement and backed onto the Soviet Consulate.

Centelles was manager of the SIM photographic archive at La Tamarita. This of course raises the question as to what sort of work he was engaged in, but this is pursued only tentatively by the exhibition organisers.

In his contribution to the catalogue, Josep Maria Casasús i Guri, head of the Journalism Department at Pompeu Fabra University, asserts that "his [Centelles's] professional merits should not be diminished by the fact that, in certain cases, and even in his entire output, there may be observed the results of technical operations that are ethically dubious from the perspective of today's codes of conducts; or by the fact that in the later stages of the Spanish Civil War his work was conditioned by his, probably unavoidable, professional recruitment into both the republican propaganda services…and into the military information services under Stalinist leadership".

Along with thousands of others, Centelles fled to France in 1939 just hours before Barcelona fell to Franco's forces and took with him a suitcase full of negatives. He was to spend the next seven months in refugee camps in France, first in Argelès-sur-Mer and then in Bram, where he continued to take photographs, including three in the exhibition. He also took ID card photos for the camp commanders.

In 1946, Centelles returned to Barcelona and gave himself up to the Francoist authorities. He was released and, although deprived of his licence, was able to work in commercial and advertising photography for leading Spanish companies. In 1976, with the death of Franco and the transition to bourgeois democracy, Centelles returned to France to retrieve the negatives he had left there during his exile.

After the transition, the Catalan authorities bestowed the highest honours on Centelles as they attempted to co-opt him into the Catalan heritage industry. They were outraged when Centelles's sons sold thousands of photographs in 2009 to the Spanish Culture Ministry for €700,000, instead of donating them to the region, and were left scrambling around for the 100 now on display at the Vila Casas foundation.

Notes:

[1] Irurita was a right-wing opponent of the Popular Front. Some claim he was assassinated in 1936, but others says he lived several more years. He is currently being considered for beatification by the Vatican.

[2] Exiled after the civil war, Companys was captured and handed over by the Gestapo to the Franco regime and executed by firing squad in 1940.

[3] Nin declared that Spain did not need soviets, in effect recognising the right of the Republicans and Socialists to rule the country. He followed the example of the anarchists, who joined the government whilst continuing to denounce all states, and became minister of justice in September 1936. One of the first actions of the new government was to set about dissolving the revolutionary committees and ending the situation of dual power.

[4] The PSUC was created on July 23, 1936 a few days after Franco's coup, through the fusion of the Catalan sections of the PCE and PSOE and two smaller parties. This suggests Centelles was a founding member. The PSUC initially comprised fewer than 2,500 members, but it leapt to 50,000 within months as it became the main bulwark against the social revolution.

[5] Pozas was a key figure in the crushing of the May 1937 uprising. What started as a spontaneous rebellion against an attack by the PCE-controlled police on the CNT-occupied telephone exchange rapidly became a citywide battle against Republican government forces. Seizing the advantage, the government ordered a crackdown on the POUM and the CNT. The POUM was declared illegal, and its leaders, including Nin, were arrested and murdered by the Stalinists, as were many Trotskyists, including Trotsky's former secretary, Erwin Wolf.

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