

En Lucha's Andy Durgan: Historical distortions to justify political betrayal of Spanish workers

Part two

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This is the second of a three-part article on the distortions of the lessons of Spanish history by En Lucha's Andy Durgan. The first part was posted November 7.

In December 1933, Workers' Alliances (WA) were created to oppose the Lerroux government and the prospect of CEDA being brought into government. The Socialist Workers Party of Spain (PSOE), which had replaced its "parliamentary road to socialism" policy with the "insurrectionary path", became the main party in the WA.

However, when Lerroux gave in to CEDA demands and appointed three CEDA ministers on October 1, 1934, the PSOE dropped its revolutionary rhetoric, declaring a "peaceful general strike" for October 6 and doing everything possible to limit the action to putting pressure on the government. It never attempted to organise a militia or plan an insurrection. When finally the workers went out in Madrid without the PSOE, the social democratic party abandoned them to their fate. It was left to the working class in Asturias to launch an insurrection.

Durgan whitewashes the role of the PSOE and creates a fictitious "unity" in the WAs, writing, "The miners were at the centre of this movement. This was due to their traditions of struggle, a crisis in the mining industry, and the unity of workers' organisations in the Workers' Alliances.

"Such alliances had been formed throughout Spain. But only in Asturias did they include both the powerful anarchist union the CNT, the socialist UGT, as well as communists and revolutionary socialists."

The rebellion was crushed after two weeks by the army led by General Francisco Franco, who became known as the "Butcher of Asturias".

"The miners were finally defeated by overwhelming force," Durgan concludes.

This is untrue. The working class could have dealt with the army. The problem was that, in the absence of a revolutionary party, the PSOE's betrayals meant that the Spanish workers fell back on anarcho-syndicalist leadership and forms of struggle.

Durgan bolsters the anarcho-syndicalists, hiding their role in politically preparing the way for the brutal suppression of the rebellion. He writes that there existed in Asturias "a revolutionary

committee based on delegates from the unions and workers' parties," which "declared that the region was now a Socialist Republic".

What Durgan calls a "Socialist Republic" was a bourgeois regime under the leadership of the UGT-controlled Asturian WA, supported by the anarcho-syndicalists. The latter's refusal to take power allowed the PSOE/UGT to isolate the rebellion and ensure its defeat.

In Asturias, the "communists," as Durgan calls the Stalinists, joined the WAs only after twice rejecting an invitation, declaring them, in line with "Third Period" Stalinism, full of "social-fascists", "anarcho-fascists" and "Trotskyite-fascists". Only after Moscow began its "Popular Front" period did the Stalinist Communist Party of Spain (PCE) join the WAs, with the objective of getting closer to the PSOE's right wing.

The criminal role played by the Comintern in Germany and its refusal to give a political accounting had convinced Trotsky that it was not possible to reform it. The defence of the programme of international socialist revolution, he insisted, could be carried through only through the construction of a new, Fourth International in opposition to Stalinism.

Once again, Durgan makes no reference to this seminal experience. He moves seamlessly from the events in 1934 in Spain to those of 1936, as if Trotsky's struggle was of no relevance. He fails to utter a word about the role played by the Stalinist-inspired Popular Front, consisting of a section of the liberal bourgeoisie in alliance with the PCE, the PSOE and the centrists of the Workers Party of Marxist Reunification (POUM).

Durgan writes: "For two weeks the miners held out against the army in the mountain valleys and the provincial capital Oviedo" before being defeated and suffering "appalling repression" by Franco's forces—with two thousand murdered and many more imprisoned and tortured."

He notes the inspirational role they played during the civil war that broke out in 1936, before they were once again "overwhelmed by the fascist forces in October 1937."

Not once is there any political accounting of the defeat of the miners and the Spanish working class due to the counterrevolutionary role played by the Popular Front. Elected on February 16, 1936, the coalition of left and republican parties played the role of keeping the class struggle within limits that did not challenge the existence of capitalism. While condemning the CEDA coalition and demanding the

release of political prisoners and the restitution of reforms, the Popular Front, led again by Azaña, rejected nationalisation of the land and private property.

Within hours of the February 16 election result, Franco and other generals attempted a coup, but failed. Azaña refused to remove them from their positions, simply posting them elsewhere.

While the workers parties were not prepared to take action against the bourgeoisie, the bourgeoisie was preparing its action against the working class. Just months later, in July, Franco initiated a coup d'état and the three-year civil war began.

Durgan doesn't even acknowledge the existence of the POUM. This cannot be put down to a lack of historical knowledge on his part. This is not the first time the *World Socialist Web Site* has had recourse to refer to his work. In a review of his book, *The Spanish Civil War*, in 2008, Ann Talbot cited an article written by Durgan in 1990 on the POUM for *Revolutionary History*. [3]

Talbot explained that Durgan "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." [4]

"Trotsky only merits two passing references," Talbot noted. One was to admonish Trotsky for being too "harsh" on the leader of the POUM, Andres Nin.

Trotsky had conducted a protracted theoretical and political fight against the centrist positions of the POUM and its leader, Nin. A former Communist Party member, Nin had broken with the Comintern in 1930 and was to become leader of the young Spanish Left Opposition.

Trotsky had great respect for Nin, but although he had broken with the Stalinists, Nin refused to declare for the Fourth International. Instead, he merged the Communist Left of Spain with the Workers and Peasants Party, led by Joaquin Maurin, and allied with the right opposition in Russia led by Nikolai Bukharin to form the POUM.

At the centre of Trotsky's struggle with Nin was the need to construct a revolutionary party in Spain that worked in the closest collaboration with, and under the discipline of, an international organisation, as against the building of a national organisation through an opportunist blunting of political differences.

While criticising the Popular Front, Nin joined it as a minister in the Catalan government, thereby giving legitimacy to its paralysing role. Trotsky explained that it was the POUM that played the critical role in the defeat of the revolution:

"To the left of all the other parties in Spain stood the POUM, which undoubtedly embraced revolutionary proletarian elements not previously firmly tied to anarchism. But it was precisely this party that played a fatal role in the development of the Spanish revolution. It could not become a mass party because in order to do so it was first necessary to overthrow the old parties and it was possible to overthrow them only by irreconcilable struggle, by a merciless exposure of their bourgeois character.

"Yet the POUM, while criticising the old parties, subordinated itself to them on all fundamental questions. It participated in the "Popular" election bloc; entered the government that liquidated workers' committees; engaged in a struggle to reconstitute this governmental coalition; capitulated time and again to the Anarchist leadership; conducted, in connection with this, a false trade union policy; and took a vacillating and nonrevolutionary attitude toward the May 1937 uprising.

"From the standpoint of determinism in general, it is possible, of course, to recognise that the policy of the POUM was not accidental. Everything in this world has its cause. However, the series of causes engendering the centrism of the POUM is by no means a mere reflection of the condition of the Spanish or Catalan proletariat. Two casualties moved toward each other at an angle, and at a certain moment they came into hostile conflict". [5]

in commonIncredibly, Durgan keeps silent about the part played by Stalin's murderous secret police, the GPU, and its impact on the Spanish workers' movement.

The GPU carried out a campaign of assassinations against anybody opposing Stalin's political line. This was particularly directed against the Trotskyists, who were calling on workers to base their struggle on an international revolutionary programme against the policies of class collaboration on the one hand and Franco's fascist thugs on the other. The cowardly murders by the GPU included the torture and killing of Nin, which took place just as the first Moscow show trials in 1936, with Trotsky as the main accused in *absentia*, were underway.

Implied throughout Durgan's article is the demoralised middle-class position that it is impossible to take up the fight against capitalism and fascism on a socialist programme, because you will be defeated in the end. You will certainly be defeated if you start, as he does, with a belief that capitalism is all-powerful and not rent by explosive contradictions. Durgan uses the cowardice and servility of the social democratic, Stalinist and centrist leaders of the Popular Front to deny the objective revolutionary role of the working class.

Trotsky wrote powerfully on the responsibility of leadership:

"The historical falsification consists in this, that the responsibility for the defeat of the Spanish masses is unloaded on the working masses and not those parties that paralysed or simply crushed the revolutionary movement of the masses. The attorneys of the POUM simply deny the responsibility of the leaders, in order thus to escape shouldering their own responsibility. This impotent philosophy, which seeks to reconcile defeats as a necessary link in the chain of cosmic developments, is completely incapable of posing and refuses to pose the question of such concrete factors as programs, parties, and personalities that were the organisers of defeat. This philosophy of fatalism and prostration is diametrically opposed to Marxism as the theory of revolutionary action". [6]

To be continued

Notes:

[3] Andy Durgan, "The Spanish Trotskyists and the Foundation of the POUM", *Revolutionary History*, Vol. 4, Nos.1-2. (1990)

[4] Ann Talbot, "*The Spanish Civil War* by Andy Durgan: Britain's SWP lends credence to Stalinist line on Spanish Civil War". (September 16, 2008)

[5] Leon Trotsky, "The Class, the Party and the Leadership", 1940, *The Spanish Revolution (1931-39)* pp.420-21 (Pathfinder 2004)

[6] *ibid.* pp.421-22



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