

Conscience and Conflict: British Artists and the Spanish Civil War

Paul Mitchell
19 January 2015

Pallant House Gallery, Chichester until 15 February; Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle, March 7-June 7, 2015

Conscience and Conflict is the first major exhibition to look at the response of British artists to the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939).

The war erupted following the launching of a military rebellion by General Francisco Franco, to which the Spanish working class and peasants responded with a wave of struggles posing the alternative of socialist revolution or monarchist-fascist reaction.

The aim of the exhibition, according to the organisers, is to “reveal how a generation of British visual artists were drawn to engage in the conflict, either by fighting in the war themselves, providing artistic manpower for relief campaigns, or creating independent works of art that made fierce political statements.”

The exhibition is ambitious for such a small local gallery. On display are works, many unseen publicly since they were first created, by a wide range of realist, surrealist and abstract artists. They demonstrate how the momentous interwar years between 1918 and 1939 galvanised artists into political commitment.

Inspired by the Bolshevik revolution and appalled by the rise of fascism and the deprivation caused by the Great Depression, many turned to the left. A few managed to get to Spain to join the 2,500-strong British contingent of the International Brigades, while others, including Henry Moore and Jacob Epstein, were denied visas by the British government.

The selflessness and heroism of these artists is epitomised by the poignant self-portrait by Felicia Browne, the first British volunteer to die in the Civil War. Several of Browne’s drawings of Republican soldiers and Spanish peasants are on display.

The exhibition shows the tremendous influence that Pablo Picasso had on British artists.

On display is *Weeping Woman* (1937), which draws on the imagery of the famous anti-war painting *Guernica* (1937), Picasso’s protest against the German bombing, ordered by Franco, of the Basque town. *Guernica* went on show in 1938 in Britain and had an immediate impact, as can be seen from many of the works exhibited at the Pallant House gallery, including FE McWilliam’s *Spanish Head* (1938-9) and John Armstrong’s paintings of bombed buildings (1938).

Also on display is a set of Picasso’s prints, *Lie of Franco*, which brilliantly satirise the dictator as a grotesque Don Quixote figure pillaging and raping Spain.

Spain’s old masters also provided inspiration. Francisco de Goya’s *Disasters of War* (1810-20) prints depicting the death and destruction wrought by the French invasion of Spain were first shown in Britain at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1938. The style of El Greco is obvious in three remarkable paintings, including *Family of Beggars* by Ursula McCannell, who is now 91 but began painting in Spain in 1936 at the age of 13.

A room in the exhibition is devoted to the works of the surrealists, including several by Stanley William Hayter (1901-1988). However, the abstract imagery expressed, for example, in *Paysage Anthropophage* (1937) fails to capture the power of *Guernica*.

Other artistic styles in the exhibition include the sentimental Madonna-like lithograph by Frank Brangwyn, designed for the “non-political and impartial” Spanish General Relief Fund, and the Socialist Realist style of paintings of Clive Branson (1907-1944). His *Demonstration in Battersea* (1939) depicts a Communist Party protest with the flag of the Spanish Republic and the Union Jack placed centre stage—indicative of Stalinist Popular Front politics.

This small and un-remarked detail illustrates one of the main problems with the exhibition—its failure to provide a coherent and objective historical/political context for the artwork presented.

Ignored is the central reason for the defeat of the Republic and the shattering of the hopes of the artists—Stalinism. The defining words Popular Front and Socialist Realism barely merit a mention. Instead, we are presented with the Stalinist/liberal line that the Spanish Republic was defeated because of the non-intervention policy of Britain, France and the United States. A fight against fascism, not a revolution, was taking place.

The “necessities of the war effort,” we are told, meant the Popular Front government had to “crush” the “revolutionary hopes” and the “exciting experiment” of collectivisation of industry and agriculture. (Quoted from historian Paul Preston, author of the foreword to the exhibition catalogue. For more on

Preston's apologia for Stalinism, see: "British Trotskyists challenge falsification of Spanish Civil War history").

The Popular Front policy was initiated the year after Hitler came to power in 1933. Stalin wanted to make his peace with the Western democracies, hoping they would be allies in defending the Soviet Union against attack from Nazi Germany. Around the world, Communist Parties were ordered to collaborate with liberal, republican or social democratic parties in a supposedly common struggle against fascism and in defence of their own nation-states. In this way, the political independence of the working class, the goal of socialism, and the aspirations of many of the artists in the exhibition were sacrificed on the altar of Stalinist foreign policy.

In Spain, the Moscow bureaucracy instructed the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) to order workers to drop their demands, and the GPU secret police was given the task of physically eliminating its opponents on the left. With the aid of the Stalinist bureaucracy, the Popular Front was able to disband the workers' militias and strengthen the Republican Army, reinstate press censorship, and hand back the collectivised farms and factories, paving the way for Franco's victory in 1939.

The fundamental reason for the defeat was the destruction by Stalinism of the social force that animated military resistance, but an enormous responsibility also falls on the leaderships of the Anarchist trade union federation, known as the CNT, and the POUM (Party of Marxist Unity), a smaller centrist party. By joining the Republican governments in Catalonia and Madrid, they gave them a veneer of credibility they would otherwise have lacked and tied the working class to a government that was, in Trotsky's phrase, "the shadow of the bourgeoisie"—dedicated to the defence of Spanish capitalism in the name of "democracy."

Only the small group of Bolshevik-Leninists affiliated with the Trotskyist Left Opposition, some rank-and-file members of the POUM, and the Anarchist Friends of Durruti fought for the working class to take power.

In Britain, the Communist Party (CP) directed its efforts to putting pressure on the British government to drop its non-interventionist policy and developing an alliance with members of the ruling elite who were opposed to the policy of appeasement with Hitler. It attempted to subordinate workers, intellectuals and artists to the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief, created in 1936 on a "purely humanitarian and non-sectarian," i.e., non-political, basis, following an all-party parliamentary visit to Spain. The committee was chaired by the Conservative MP Katharine Stewart-Murray, Duchess of Atholl.

The CP also sought to control art production and promote "national" culture through the International Organization of Artists for Revolutionary Proletarian Art, and its slogan: "The International Unity of Artists against Imperialist War on the Soviet Union, Fascism and Colonial Oppression."

By 1935, in line with the Popular Front policy, its name was changed to Artists International Association (AIA), and its slogan became "Unity of Artists Against Fascism and War and the Suppression of Culture." The AIA criticised Picasso's work as "disillusioning" and "inaccessible to any but the elite," but there were huge crowds when it went on display.

The exhibition catalogue mentions, briefly, the opposition to the Stalinist line on art expressed in the "Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art" and the creation of the International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Art, but does not explain their real significance. Written in 1938 by exiled Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky, French Surrealist poet and thinker André Breton, and Mexican artist Diego Rivera, the manifesto remains the most eloquent expression yet produced of the common interests of the artist and the revolutionary Marxist, declaring, "Our goals: the independence of art—for the revolution; the revolution—for the liberation of art once and for all."

The manifesto understood that artists were attracted to organisations like the AIA because of their resources and the prestige associated with the Russian Revolution. "It was only natural," it explained, that the artist "should turn to the Stalinist organisations, which hold out the possibility of escaping from his isolation." But it warned: "[I]f he is to avoid complete demoralisation, he cannot remain there, because of the impossibility of delivering his own message and the degrading servility which these organisations exact from him in exchange for certain material advantages. He must understand that his place is elsewhere, not among those who betray the cause of the revolution, and of mankind, but among those who with unshaken fidelity bear witness to the revolution; among those who, for this reason, are alone able to bring it to fruition, and along with it the ultimate free expression of all forms of human genius."

The "hesitancy" of "certain surrealists" in Britain to understand this warning and define their position towards Trotskyism was criticised by Breton in a letter: "To Our Friends in London." These elements continued to remain in the orbit of Stalinism, marching in the 1938 London May Day Procession in protest at appeasement policies with masks depicting Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and the production of a Surrealist Manifesto, *We Ask Your Attention*, designed by Henry Moore, which is a deferential appeal to the 1937 AIA Congress.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact