

In Exile: A Family Film—Refugees from the Spanish Civil War

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23 June 2018

Directed by Juan Francisco Urrusti

The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), which ultimately resulted in the victory of Francisco Franco's fascist forces, claimed the lives of over 1 million people and turned 500,000 more into refugees. Of these half a million, some 20,000 found refuge in Mexico under the left-nationalist government of Lázaro Cardenas. As the far-right gains strength in Europe and refugees scour the globe in search of asylum, the lessons of these past historical experiences today take on fresh urgency.

From Mexican documentarian Juan Francisco Urrusti (born 1954) comes *In Exile: A Family Film*, which traces the story of his grandparents and parents as they live and fight during the Spanish Civil War and later become political exiles in Mexico. It is an engrossing work, combining family home movies and photos with newsreel footage and contemporary interviews with the director's family and their milieu in modern-day Mexico and Spain.

The viewer is left with an indelible portrait of not only the times but of the human beings who fought fascism and strove to create a better world in the first several decades of the last century. Though not without significant limitations, *In Exile* is a powerful reminder that the great questions of war and authoritarianism that defined the 1930s and 1940s are alive and well today.

In Exile starts with an overview of Spain in the early 20th century. In the words of one interviewee, "the heinous Spanish clergy" controlled everything. Heinous and wealthy. In the midst of the opulence of the clergy and the ruling elite as a whole, however, the vast majority of the Spanish population lived in extreme poverty. One interviewee observes that in Spain the rural proletariat "toiled in the fields from dawn till dusk." In the factories, 12-hour shifts were commonplace.

By the 1920s Spain was ruled by Miguel Primo de Rivera, a right-wing general who dominated the country as a dictator. His authoritarian rule helped discredit the Spanish ruling class, and other figures and parties began to contest for power. We see footage of Francisco Largo Caballero who was the leader of the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) and later prime minister of the Second Spanish Republic.

Unfortunately, much more could have been said about these political figures and parties, and the viewer is largely left to fill in the blanks. What is one to think when one of Urrusti's interviewees says "I believe the Socialist Party back then was a lot different from the Socialist Party of today"? This (under)statement is true enough when one considers the extreme right-wing trajectory of the PSOE, but, unhappily, there is no elaboration.

Also problematic is the use of the term "liberal democracy" to describe Spain's Second Republic, which came to power in 1931 after the collapse of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship and the exile of King Alfonso XIII. Spanish capitalism, under the impact of the Great Depression and the fall of the dictatorship, faced a fiercely militant, socialist-minded working class. All the objective conditions existed for a massive social transformation.

Spanish Republicanism, which was opposed to the monarchy and the church, was even more opposed to the working class taking power as in Russia in 1917 and was determined to prevent a Bolshevik-style revolution from occurring at all costs.

In early 1936, the Popular Front, an alliance of the Stalinist Communist Party of Spain, social democrats, anarchists, nationalists and liberals, narrowly won the national election. Although not mentioned in the film, Spain would prove to be the most complete and most disastrous example of the Popular Front policy initiated by Stalin after Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933.

In 1935, the seventh and last congress of the Communist International (Comintern), entirely under Stalinist control, instructed all the Communist Parties to enter into "Popular Front" alliances with bourgeois-liberal, republican and social democratic parties as a supposed defense against fascism and war. In practice, the "People's Front Against Fascism and War" meant the subordination of the working class to the bourgeoisie in each country and the betrayal of revolutionary opportunities in Spain, France and elsewhere.

In Spain, following the 1936 election, the landowners and other reactionary elements immediately begin sabotaging the Republic and carrying out repression. In the province of Seville, in southern Spain, trade unionists were rounded up and shot, as were people who simply didn't go to church.

Franco and his fellow military leaders plotted against the Republic. A military coup was scheduled for July 18 (it actually broke out a day earlier). It is worth noting, although *In Exile* also does not mention this, that for two days the bourgeois Republican government denied the existence of a coup and attempted to negotiate with the coup plotters behind the scenes, all the while refusing to arm the working class.

The workers begged the government for arms, but were forced to wait three days. We see footage of popular militias. The working class in Barcelona, Madrid and Valencia spring into action against the military and the fascists, blocking the coup from victory. But the workers and oppressed rural population were prevented from carrying through a social revolution by the Stalinists and social democrats.

Urrusti's grandfather was in the Republican army and asked the militias to spare the lives of fascist troops. One interviewee explains that his father, a government telegraph operator, was shot for refusing orders from the fascists, and two of his uncles perished in this way.

A veteran of the International Brigades is also interviewed. This force was made up of 40,000 volunteers from 50 countries committed to the defense of the Republic, but was heavily composed of left-wing fighters, many of whom wanted revolution in Spain. "At first there were only foreigners" in the brigade, a man tells the camera, "but as casualties mounted, they stopped coming." We see the graves of the volunteers from England, America and elsewhere.

In Exile fails to mention one of the principal reasons why the foreign fighters "stopped coming." In October 1938, the Republican government

under Juan Negrín complied with the demands of the Non-Intervention Committee, primarily organized by the British and French governments, that the brigades be withdrawn. Those governments claimed such an action would force Hitler and Mussolini to withdraw their own forces, but of course it did no such thing.

It is critical to take into account the sharp contrast between the cynical use the Soviet and Spanish Stalinists made of the International Brigades and the anti-fascist, self-sacrificing sentiments of many of their members. Volunteers who were suspected of sympathy for Trotsky, or simple opposition to Stalinism, were subjected to being purged, arrested and shot by the NKVD (Soviet secret police). The more politically pliable were mobilized to suppress the working class during the May Days in Barcelona in 1937, when workers took up arms against the bourgeois Republican government.

With the Non-Intervention Pact, the Western “democracies” abandon the Spanish Republic, *In Exile* tells us. Even the League of Nations refuses help. For the uninformed viewer, this again needs elaboration, or correction. The bourgeois democracies were far more terrified of the Spanish working class and the possibility of social revolution than they were of a fascist victory.

Mexico and the Soviet Union were the only countries that provided any aid to the Republic, but this paled in comparison with the assistance, in the form of thousands of troops, modern military equipment and air power, that came from Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy for Franco’s army.

The infamous Condor Legion, made up of German air force and army personnel, along with the Italian Legionary Air Force, bombs the town of Guernica, on a Sunday morning in April 1937 when the market is in full swing. Urrusti’s family members recall how they barely survived the bombing, in which some 50 tons of explosives were dropped in three hours. One interviewee remembers how “my mother was hanging clothes,” and the next moment, “she comes in with blood over her face.”

Urrusti’s mother is interviewed and she recalls her family’s flight into France. Hundreds of thousands of Spanish refugees would remain in what were essentially French concentration camps. While the authorities mistreated them, Urrusti’s mother remembers how “[French] people would bring us gifts, and adopt children.”

Urrusti’s family embarks on the ship *Sinaia*, bound for Mexico. Despite the perilous conditions, the exiles establish a daily newspaper on the ship and organize a band and dances to keep their spirits up. When they arrive in Veracruz on the Gulf of Mexico, they are greeted with open arms by the local population, although demagogues, with ominous parallels to today, agitate against the “plague of Spanish refugees.”

With the fall of the Spanish Republic in April 1939 and the victory of Franco, the stage was set for World War II. Thousands of Spanish Republicans joined the French Resistance movement to fight the Nazis.

The first military units to liberate Paris were made up of Spanish Republicans, who expected to march on to their home country and overthrow Franco, but the Allied powers prevented them and ordered them to stay 150 kilometers from the Spanish border.

Urrusti’s mother remarks bitterly “I cannot forgive the liberal, democratic countries” for this treachery. With the advent of the Cold War in the 1950s, Franco’s Spain was regarded as an important bulwark against Communism and the US provided aid to the regime in return for military bases in the geostrategically critical Iberian peninsula. We see photos of Franco surviving into old age, posing with French president Charles de Gaulle and US presidents Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford.

The Spanish people endure the bestial Franco dictatorship until 1975. Baltasar Garzon, the jurist who investigated Franco’s crimes and is today the head of Julian Assange’s legal team, observes, “The tragedy of Spain is that Franco’s trial and execution is still waiting.”

From the political-historical point of view, the central flaw of Urrusti’s

documentary is that it does not adequately explain why fascism triumphed, but instead falls back on the empty argument that “the left was divided.” This is the main liberal-Stalinist falsification in regard to the Civil War repeated ad nauseam in countless history books, school textbooks and so on.

In fact, Stalinism played a counterrevolutionary role in Spain. The bureaucracy in the Kremlin, allied with important sections of the Spanish bourgeoisie, was terrified at the prospect of a working class revolt and did everything in its power to suffocate revolution.

All of this was foreseen and opposed by Leon Trotsky, co-leader of the Russian Revolution with Lenin, who recognized that a successful struggle against Franco *required* the mobilization of the workers and rural poor to overthrow capitalism in Spain and link up with the European and international working class in the struggle for world socialist revolution.

In a brilliant 1931 essay, “The Revolution in Spain,” Trotsky wrote, “Now even less than in the nineteenth century, can the Spanish bourgeoisie lay claim to that historic role which the British or French bourgeoisie once played. Appearing too late, depending on foreign capital, the big industrial bourgeoisie of Spain, which has dug like a vampire into the body of the people, is incapable of coming forward as the leader of the ‘Nation’ against the old estates even for a brief period...”

“The question of whether the present revolutionary convulsions can produce a genuine revolution, capable of reconstructing the very basis of national existence, is consequently reduced to whether the Spanish proletariat is capable of taking into its hands the leadership of the national life. There is no other claimant to this role in the composition of the Spanish nation. Moreover, the historic experience of Russia succeeded in showing with sufficient clarity the specific gravity of the proletariat, united by big industry in a country with a backward agriculture and enmeshed in a net of semi-feudal relations.”

This outlook is foreign to *In Exile*, which remains at a superficial level. The filmmaker’s inability or unwillingness to explore the historical questions in a more profound fashion harms the overall artistic and intellectual impact of his work.

In any case, the current political situation looms large in the conclusion of the film as we see Syrians in a refugee camp. Urrusti narrates, “As years go by, humankind becomes dehumanized and immigrants and refugees become marginalized, but this has always been a right-wing effort.”

The images of Urrusti’s family and their comments are especially moving. They strike one, especially by today’s standards, as personalities of substance. Urrusti’s achievement is that he attempts to place these individuals and their fates in an overall historical perspective. The film ends by dedicating itself “to the victims of fascism” and to those who “resist” it today.



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