

Jacobin glorifies Dolores Ibárruri, Stalinist executioner of the Spanish Revolution

Part one

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This is the first part of a two-part article. The second part will be published on Thursday, December 24.

On December 9, *Jacobin* magazine, which is closely linked to the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), published an article titled “La Pasionaria, Heroine of the Spanish Civil War.” The occasion was the 125th anniversary of the birth of Dolores Ibárruri, gushingly described by the author, British historian Paul Preston, as “an inspirational Civil War heroine and a universal earth-mother figure.”

The article is an exercise in historical falsification, political cover-up and Stalin-era hagiography. It was accompanied by a second article (“La Pasionaria, Spanish Anti-Fascism’s Greatest Orator, Remained Defiant in Exile,” by Lisa A. Kirschenbaum), which provides a feminist slant to the whitewash of Ibárruri and Stalin’s GPU murderers.

Preston’s pro-Stalinist presentation of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), elaborated in a number of books, is summed up in the *Jacobin* article by his reference to the “May Days” uprising of workers in Barcelona between May 3 and May 8, 1937 as “infamous.”

The general strike by the Barcelona proletariat, the most militant section of the Spanish working class, was deliberately provoked by the bourgeois Republican Popular Front government of Catalonia, at the instigation of the Communist Party of Spain (PCE) and Stalin’s NKVD/GPU operatives in the country. It was done to justify the unleashing of murderous repression in the name of “defending the republic” against alleged Trotskyist and anarchist agents of military coup leader General Francisco Franco and his German ally Hitler.

The crushing of the Barcelona uprising, in which at least 1,000 militant workers were killed, was followed by a months-long campaign of mass arrests, torture and murder that targeted Trotskyists, anti-Stalinist militants of the centrist POUM (Workers’ Party of Marxist Unification) and anarcho-syndicalist workers in the National Confederation of Labour (CNT). Andreas Nin, former leader of the International Left Opposition in Spain and head of the POUM, was arrested and horribly tortured before being murdered by Stalin’s thugs. Another victim of the mass purge was Trotsky’s secretary, Erwin Wolf, sent to Spain after the May Days to rally the Trotskyist forces in the ongoing fight against the Stalinist betrayal of the revolution.

During the months of June and July 1937, the Popular Front government in Madrid, politically controlled by the Kremlin and the PCE, liquidated workers’ militias under the control of the POUM and the anarchists that were stationed at the fronts of Aragon and Huesca. The Stalinist suppression of the Barcelona working class and ensuing blood purge broke the back of the revolution and ensured the victory of Franco’s fascist forces, which was finalized with the unconditional surrender of the Republican government on March 31, 1939.

Ramon Mercader, the GPU operative who murdered Leon Trotsky in

Mexico in August 1940, cut his teeth as a Stalinist killer during the mass repression in Spain.

None of this is even mentioned in the *Jacobin* article. Both the revolutionary upsurge of the Spanish workers and poor peasants and its bloody suppression by the Stalinists and the Popular Front government are ignored. So too is Ibárruri’s prominent role in the liquidation of Trotskyists and other anti-Stalinist militants, based on a filthy libel of all left-wing opponents of the bourgeois republican government as agents of Franco and Hitler.

One finds a far more accurate and honest presentation of events in the Wikipedia post for Ibárruri. It notes that Stalin’s chief GPU agent in Spain, Alexander Orlov, “used the same methods of terror, duplicity and deception that were employed [within the Soviet Union] in the Great Purge (1936–38).”

It quotes a speech by Ibárruri following the suppression of the May uprising in Barcelona in which the “earth mother” declared:

The Trotskyists have long been transformed into the agents of fascism, into the agents of the German Gestapo. We saw this on the ground during the May putsch in Catalonia; we saw this clearly in the disturbances that occurred in various other places ... Trotskyism must be rooted out of the proletarian ranks of our Party as one roots out poisonous weeds. The Trotskyists must be rooted out and disposed of like wild beasts.

Following her flight from Spain shortly before the surrender of the Popular Front Republican government to Franco, Ibárruri for many years headed the PCE in exile in the Soviet Union. She continued to propagate the counterrevolutionary Kremlin line and promote the cult of Stalin until the mass murderer’s death. She supported the Stalin-Hitler pact in 1939 and the arrest and execution of PCE members in exile in the USSR at the hands of the GPU in the 1940s and early 1950s. She returned to Spain in 1977 following the death of Franco to participate in the establishment of a new bourgeois setup that provided amnesty to the fascist criminals and allowed them to retain their positions of wealth and power.

Jacobin’s choice of Professor Preston to write its panegyric to Ibárruri was a politically conscious decision. In April of 2009, Preston moderated a panel discussion at the British Academy held to mark the 70th anniversary of Franco’s victory in Spain. He set the tone for the presentations by professors Angel Viñas and Helen Graham by attacking George Orwell’s damning exposure of Stalinist crimes in Spain, *Homage to Catalonia*, based on Orwell’s personal experiences as a member of a POUM militia in Catalonia. Preston then attempted to prevent a member

of the British Socialist Equality Party in the audience from asking a question. In responding to her assertion that the panel members were ignoring the fact that the Spanish Civil War coincided with a social revolution of the workers and poor peasants, he called the very notion of a Spanish revolution “the most extreme tabloid exaggeration.”

It is not possible here to deal in detail with the events of the Spanish Civil War. However, it is a matter of historical record that the military coup against the Republican government launched by Franco on July 18, 1936 was initially repulsed in most of the country not by the bourgeois government, but by the working class.

The vast bulk of the military and the most decisive sections of the bourgeoisie lined up behind Franco. When the Republican government, desperately seeking an accommodation with the fascists, initially refused to give arms to the workers, the workers rose up, first in Barcelona and then in cities and villages across the country and took matters into their own hands.

Workers set up committees to operate key utilities and communications facilities and formed militias to fight the fascists. The revolutionary movement that began on July 19, 1936 established a situation of dual power, in which real power was in the hands of the workers. However, they were blocked by their parties—the Socialist Party (PSOE), Communist Party (PCE), POUM and CNT, all of which supported the liberal bourgeois-led Popular Front—from taking political power into their own hands.

There followed months of efforts by the government, urged on by the Stalinists, to whittle away the workers’ hold over elements of the economy, crush insurgent peasants who had seized the estates of the great landowners, and dissipate the revolutionary wave. This culminated in the May Days events, precipitated by the decision of the Catalan government to retake control of the telephone exchange in Barcelona.

The Popular Front government in Spain, as well as its counterpart formed the same year in France, represented the application of the policy adopted by the Comintern at its Seventh Congress in 1935 (which Ibárruri attended). Stalin reacted to Hitler’s coming to power in 1933 by abandoning the ultra-left policies that had led to the defeat of the German working class and adopting the class collaborationist call for “People’s Fronts against fascism and war.”

In an attempt to induce the Western imperialist powers—Britain, France and the US—to join an alliance with the Soviet Union against the fascist powers—Germany and Italy—Stalin ordered the Communist parties to support and, where possible, join capitalist governments led by liberal sections of the bourgeoisie. Flowing from the anti-Marxist, nationalist program of “socialism in one country” proclaimed by Stalin in 1924, the policy of the Popular Front meant, in practice, the renunciation of socialist revolution. In the name of defending “democracy,” the Communist parties defended bourgeois property and the capitalist state against the revolutionary movement of the masses.

The working class was subordinated to the supposedly “progressive” bourgeoisie and its revolutionary aspirations sacrificed to the diplomatic needs of the Soviet Union, as perceived by the ruling bureaucracy. The latter was driven not by the interests of the working class, but by the preservation of its own privileges, which, based on the property relations established by the 1917 revolution, were directly threatened by fascism.

In his dealings with Western imperialism, Stalin was explicit in his repudiation of world revolution. In a March 1936 interview with Roy Howard of Scripps-Howard Newspapers, the following exchange took place:

Howard: Does this, your statement, mean that the Soviet Union has to any degree abandoned its plans and intentions for bringing about world revolution?

Stalin: We never had such plans and intentions.

Howard: You appreciate, no doubt, Mr. Stalin, that much of the world has long entertained a different impression.

Stalin: This is the product of a misunderstanding.

Howard: A tragic misunderstanding?

Stalin: No, a comical one. Or, perhaps, tragicomic.

The Popular Front and Stalinist counterrevolution in Spain

Under conditions of a world Depression that was driving the working class into revolution across Europe and internationally, the implementation of the Popular Front required the Communist parties to unite with the bourgeoisie in carrying out counterrevolutions. The chief target of this strategy was the Trotskyist movement, which implacably and consciously opposed the Stalinist betrayal of the October Revolution and fought for the program of world socialist revolution upon which the revolution had been based.

In Spain, the counterrevolutionary role of Stalinism on the international stage found its most naked expression. Writing in December of 1937 (“The Lessons of Spain: The Last Warning”), Trotsky explained:

The reasons for the rise of the Spanish Popular Front and its inner mechanics are perfectly clear. The task of the retired leaders of the left bourgeoisie consisted in checking the revolution of the masses and thus in regaining for themselves the lost confidence of the exploiters: “Why do you need Franco if we, the republicans, can do the same thing?” The interests of [Spanish President] Azaña and [Catalan President] Companys fully coincided at this central point with the interests of Stalin, who needed to gain the confidence of the French and British bourgeoisie by proving to them in action his ability to preserve “order” against “anarchy.” Stalin needed Azaña and Companys as a cover before the workers: Stalin himself, of course, is for socialism, but one must take care not to repel the republican bourgeoisie! Azaña and Companys needed Stalin as an experienced executioner, with the authority of a revolutionist. Without him, so insignificant a crew never could nor would have dared to attack the workers...

The left Socialists and Anarchists, the captives of the Popular Front, tried, it is true, to save whatever could be saved of democracy. But inasmuch as they did not dare to mobilize the masses against the gendarmes of the Popular Front, their efforts at the end were reduced to plaints and wails. The Stalinists were thus in alliance with the extreme right, avowedly bourgeois wing of the Socialist Party. They directed their repressions against the left—the POUM, the Anarchists, the “left” Socialists—in other words, against the centrist groupings who reflected, even in a most remote degree, the pressure of the revolutionary masses...

This political fact, very significant in itself, provides at the same time the measure of the degeneration of the Comintern in the last few years... This has acted to fix definitively the counterrevolutionary character of Stalinism on the international arena. (Leon Trotsky, *The Spanish Revolution (1931–39)*, New York, 1973, pp. 310–11)

Trotsky elsewhere summed up the essence of the Popular Front as the alliance of bourgeois liberalism with the GPU.

No less important than geopolitical considerations in the Stalinist

program of the Popular Front were internal questions. The Stalinist regime was a regime of acute crisis. The bureaucracy headed by Stalin was a parasitic tumor on the body of a workers' state created by the conscious revolutionary intervention of the working class into political life, under the leadership of a revolutionary Marxist party, the Bolsheviks.

The ruling bureaucracy lived in constant fear of an uprising by the Soviet working class, whose indignation over the usurpation of its political power by a corrupt and unaccountable elite was deep and irreconcilable. The Stalinist ruling clique was acutely aware that a successful proletarian revolution anywhere in the world, and, above all, in the advanced capitalist countries of Europe and North America, would revive the revolutionary confidence and consciousness of the Soviet masses. The program advanced by Trotsky for a political revolution to overthrow the bureaucratic regime, restore workers' democracy and return to the strategy of world socialist revolution would acquire mass support.

Between August 1936 and March 1938, a series of three show trials, known as the "Moscow Trials," were staged by Stalin. Virtually all of the leaders of the October Revolution and Lenin's Bolshevik Party confessed, under torture, to plotting with Nazi Germany and other foreign and domestic enemies to overthrow the Soviet Union and assassinate Stalin. These monstrous show trials were the domestic counterpart of the counterrevolutionary policies carried out under the banner of the Popular Front on the international arena.

The chief defendant was Leon Trotsky, living in exile first in Norway and then in Mexico, who was convicted and sentenced to death in absentia.

The trials were the public face of the "Great Terror"—a multi-year wave of mass arrests, murders and deportations to labor camps by means of which hundreds of thousands of genuinely socialist Communist Party members, intellectuals, scientists and artists were exterminated, in what the International Committee of the Fourth International has called a "political genocide."

The united front vs. the Popular Front

The Stalinists falsely presented their Popular Front policy as an extension of the "united front" tactic introduced by Lenin and Trotsky at the Third (1921) and Fourth (1922) Congresses of the Communist International. In reality, the Popular Front was a policy of class collaboration with a section of the bourgeoisie, and therefore diametrically opposed to the united front, which was a means for the revolutionary Marxist party to take the initiative in uniting all sections of the working class in struggle against the whole of the bourgeoisie.

The foundation of the united front tactic was the political independence of the working class from all factions of the capitalist class and the international unity of the working class. The difference between the united front as elaborated by the Comintern under Lenin and Trotsky and fought for by Trotsky in the struggle against fascism in Germany, on the one side, and Stalin's Popular Front, on the other, was the difference between revolution and counterrevolution.

Ever since the 1930s and to this day, opportunist and revisionist tendencies have sought to disguise political adaptation to Stalinist and social democratic organizations, pro-capitalist trade union bureaucracies and bourgeois liberals as the application of the "united front" policy. This terminological sleight of hand is employed to aid in confusing and strangling workers' struggles.

Lenin and Trotsky fought for Communist Parties to adopt the united front tactic at a time when the initial wave of proletarian revolutions in

Europe, following the October Revolution of 1917 in Russia, had been defeated, due primarily to the immaturity and mistakes of the revolutionary leaderships. Under conditions of a highly fragile and temporary restabilization of European capitalism, they stressed the need for the parties of the Third International to first win the allegiance of the masses before launching the struggle for state power.

To this end, they advised that the parties in France and Germany in particular call on the social democratic parties and reformist and anarcho-sindicalist trade unions to join in a united front with the Communists to carry out specific joint actions to defend the workers' organizations against attacks from the fascists and the capitalist state and to fight for basic social demands. The preconditions for such united fronts were the full organizational independence of the Communist Parties and full freedom of criticism of other workers' organizations in the united front.

The united front was defined as an agreement for joint action between mass working class organizations. There would be no mixing of banners and no watering down of the revolutionary program of Marxism. The slogan was "March separately and strike together."

In his theses "On the United Front" from March 1922, Trotsky wrote of the united front tactic in France:

One of the most reliable methods of counteracting inside the working class the moods and ideas of the 'Left Bloc,' i.e., a bloc between the workers and a certain section of the bourgeoisie against another section of the bourgeoisie, is through promoting persistently and resolutely the idea of a *block between all sections of the working class against the whole bourgeoisie*. [Emphasis in the original]. (Leon Trotsky, Marxists Internet Archive)

Far from offering any sort of political amnesty, the revolutionary party would by means of the tactic demonstrate in action and before the eyes of the entire working class its readiness to lead and take decisive action in defense of the class and expose the vacillations and capitulations of the reformist leaderships, in the process winning over critical sections of the social democratic workers to the Communist Party.

As early as September 1930, Trotsky agitated for the German Communist Party, dominated by Stalinist handraisers, to abandon its ultra-left "Third Period" policy of refusing to collaborate in any way with the Social Democrats while branding them as "social fascists," and to adopt the tactic of the united front to unite the working class in struggle against the growing menace of Nazism. Trotsky and his supporters in Germany advanced this policy following national elections, held under conditions of deepening depression and surging unemployment, which recorded a nearly 16 percentage point rise in the Nazi vote.

Stalin and the German CP leadership rejected this policy, concealing behind ultra-left rhetoric a fatalistic acceptance of the inevitability of a fascist victory, combined with an adaptation, in a sectarian form, to the Social Democratic leadership. The result, against which Trotsky had repeatedly warned, was a catastrophic defeat for the German and international working class.

To be continued.



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