

The contemporary Relevance of Felix Morrow's *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain*

Our reporters
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Felix Morrow's *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain* is one of the oldest, yet also one of the most relevant books on the Spanish Civil War, stated Peter Schwarz, a member of the *World Socialist Web Site* International Editorial Board, at a symposium in Berlin.

It not only masterfully describes the events, but also analyses them from a Marxist standpoint: "The Spanish Civil War thus remains not merely an event of the past, but becomes a strategic experience for the international working class, containing important lessons for today, when fascist movements are once again rearing their heads everywhere," he said.

Mehring Verlag, which republished a German-language edition of Morrow's book in 2020, was invited to present it at a two-day symposium on 18–19 July, organised in Berlin by the Münzenbergforum, the association "Fighters and Friends of the Spanish Republic 1936–1939" and the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation to mark the 90th anniversary of the outbreak of the war. We are reproducing Schwarz's full talk here as a video.

Schwarz briefly explained the origins of the book, which was written as events unfolded. At the time, Morrow was a leading member of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), the Trotskyist party in the USA, which worked closely with Leon Trotsky. In January 1937, shortly after the start of the Spanish Civil War, Trotsky was granted political asylum in Mexico, where he was able to speak freely and wrote numerous articles, letters and analyses on the Spanish Civil War himself. Morrow's book was, in a sense, a collective work of the Fourth International.

"Marx regarded history as the history of class struggles," said Schwarz. "Morrow takes the same approach. He is not blinded by empty labels—'Republic,' 'Democracy,' 'Popular Front.' He does not judge the actors by what they claim about themselves. He looks beyond the labels and examines the social classes and interests that clash in irreconcilable conflict.

"Fascism—embodied in Spain by General Franco—was no accident," emphasised Schwarz. "It was the result of the irresolvable crisis of capitalism, in which the bourgeoisie could no longer make any social concessions and could only maintain its rule by crushing the workers' movement." He quoted from the chapter "Why the Fascists Revolted":

Frano's programme is identical in fundamentals with that of Mussolini and Hitler.

Fascism is that special form of capitalist domination which the bourgeoisie finally resorts to when the continued existence of capitalism is incompatible with the existence of organised workers. Fascism is resorted to when the concessions, which are a product of the activities of trade unions and political parties of labour, become an intolerable burden on the capitalist rulers, hence

intolerable to the further existence of capitalism. For the working class, at this point, the issue is inexorably posed for immediate solution: either fascism or socialism.

Spanish capitalism had arrived at this point when Franco revolted.

Frano's fascist uprising on 17 July 1936 had been preceded by five years of bitter class struggle, which had led to the overthrow of the monarchy, repeated uprisings and bloody massacres of workers and peasants. The global economic crisis had further exacerbated social tensions. In April 1936, following the electoral victory of the Popular Front in Spain and France, a powerful wave of strikes developed, starting in Madrid and sweeping across the whole country. At this point, the Spanish capitalists came to the conclusion that democracy was untenable: "Frano staged a coup—and the capitalists, the large landowners and the Catholic Church rallied behind him almost unanimously," said Schwarz.

Frano's uprising, he argued, had left only two alternatives: "Victory for fascism or an uprising by the working class, rallying the peasants to its cause. To achieve this, however, it needed a programme that met the social needs of the workers and peasants: the expropriation of large estates and the distribution of land to the peasants; the overthrow of capitalism and workers' power."

The revolution, Schwarz emphasised, did not fail due to a lack of fighting spirit among the Spanish workers. They demonstrated an immense willingness to make sacrifices. Around 60,000 volunteers from all over the world rushed to their aid. "If Frano triumphed nonetheless, it was not because of a lack of fighting spirit among the workers, but because of the failure and betrayal of their leaders. The decisive factor in this was the Popular Front."

The Popular Front and Stalinist Terror

Schwarz quoted from Trotsky's article "The Lessons of Spain—The Last Warning," which was included in the new edition of Morrow's book. Trotsky summarises the stance of the Popular Front's supporters as follows:

According to the Socialists and Stalinists, i.e., the Mensheviks of the first and second instances, the Spanish revolution was called upon to solve only its 'democratic' tasks, for which a united front

with the ‘democratic’ bourgeoisie was indispensable. From this point of view, any and all attempts of the proletariat to go beyond the limits of bourgeois democracy are not only premature but also fatal...

The demand not to transgress the bounds of bourgeois democracy signifies in practice not a defence of the democratic revolution but a repudiation of it. Only through an overturn in agrarian relations could the peasantry, the great mass of the population, have been transformed into a powerful bulwark against fascism. But the landowners are intimately bound up with the commercial, industrial and banking bourgeoisie, and the bourgeois intelligentsia that depends on them. The party of the proletariat was thus faced with a choice between going with the peasant masses or with the liberal bourgeoisie.

Socialists, Stalinists—as well as the anarcho-syndicalist trade union CNT and the centrist POUM—opted for an alliance with the liberal bourgeoisie. Or, to put it more accurately—as Trotsky put it—with the “shadow of the bourgeoisie.” For the overwhelming majority of the exploiters openly defected to Franco’s camp, whilst using Azaña, Companys and other bourgeois politicians who headed Popular Front governments “to paralyse, undermine and then stifle the socialist movement of the masses in the ‘Republican’ territory.”

“Paralyse, undermine, stifle,” said Schwarz, “is no exaggeration, but is to be taken literally. Wherever revolutionary workers took the initiative, the Republican government cracked down on them. This reached its climax in Barcelona in May 1937, when the central government, in an attempt to wrest control of the telephone exchange from the anarchists, provoked an uprising and crushed it bloodily.”

The POUM was subsequently banned, and its leader, Andrès Nin, was murdered by the Stalinists. It was the turning point of the Civil War. The suppression of the working class by the Republican government paved the way for Franco’s victory and the establishment of a dictatorship that lasted for almost 40 years.

Stalinism played a central role in the Popular Front. Representatives of the Stalinist secret police, the NKVD, defended the bourgeois Republican regime using the most brutal methods of repression, which Trotsky described in the following words:

The hounding of ‘Trotskyists,’ POUMists, revolutionary Anarchists and left Socialists; the filthy slander; the false documents; the tortures in Stalinist prisons; the murders from ambush—without all this the bourgeois regime under the republican flag could not have lasted even two months.

This was no “mistake,” but a deliberate policy. Stalinism had developed into the most significant counter-revolutionary force within the labour movement.

Schwarz briefly summarised how, in the 1920s, the Stalin regime, acting as the representative of a privileged bureaucracy, usurped power, rejected the prospect of world socialist revolution and suppressed the Left Opposition, and how it ultimately perpetrated a “political genocide” that wiped out an entire generation of Marxist revolutionaries, devoted socialists, capable engineers, scientists and Red Army officers. The number of victims of the Great Terror of 1937 and 1938 is estimated at over one million.

“One cannot separate the Popular Front policy from the Great Terror,” emphasised Schwarz. “They are two sides of one and the same coin. The Stalinist rulers had come to the conclusion that any revolutionary uprising

anywhere in the world would shake their own privileged rule, and sought their salvation in alliances with the ‘democratic’ imperialist powers and, when this illusion was shattered by the Munich Agreement, in an alliance with Hitler.”

The defence of bourgeois rule in the mortal crisis of capitalism demanded the ruthless suppression of every form of social and political opposition. Under these conditions, “democratic” bourgeois rule could only pave the way for fascism by paralysing, disarming and suppressing the working class. This is precisely what happened in Spain.

CNT and POUM

Schwarz also addressed the role of the anarcho-syndicalist CNT and the POUM, without an understanding of which one cannot draw the lessons from Spain: “By joining the Popular Front, they played a central role in suppressing the revolution.”

Once again, Schwarz quoted Trotsky, who accused the anarchists of “ignoring everything that was happening beyond the confines of the trade unions—among the masses, in the political parties and within the state apparatus”:

Had the Anarchists been revolutionists, they would first of all have called for the creation of soviets, which unite the representatives of all the toilers of city and country, including the most oppressed strata, who never joined the trade unions. The revolutionary workers would have naturally occupied the dominant position in these soviets. The Stalinists would have remained an insignificant minority. The proletariat would have convinced itself of its own invincible strength. The apparatus of the bourgeois state would have hung suspended in the air. One strong blow would have sufficed to pulverise this apparatus...

Instead of this, the anarcho-syndicalists, seeking to hide from ‘politics’ in the trade unions, turned out to be, to the great surprise of the whole world and themselves, a fifth wheel in the cart of bourgeois democracy. But not for long; a fifth wheel is superfluous...

In opposing the goal, the conquest of power, the Anarchists could not in the end fail to oppose the means, the revolution.

Trotsky wrote of the POUM:

Politically, the POUM remained throughout much closer to the People’s Front, whose left wing it covered, than to Bolshevism. If the POUM nevertheless fell victim to a bloody and perfidious repression, it was because the People’s Front could fulfill its mission of stifling the socialist revolution only by cutting off, bit by bit, its own left flank.

In the final analysis, despite its intentions, the POUM proved to be the chief obstacle on the road to the construction of a revolutionary party.

Lessons for today

Concluding his speech, Schwarz addressed the contemporary relevance of the lessons from Spain. He said that the international crisis of capitalism had reached such proportions that it was driving the capitalists back towards fascism, citing Trump, Meloni, Le Pen and the rise of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) as evidence.

Admittedly, much has changed since the Spanish Civil War. “There are no longer any workers’ parties worthy of the name. Stalinism has collapsed; social democracy is a right-wing, bourgeois party; and the trade unions have definitively turned their backs on the class struggle. They are committed to social partnership and organise mass redundancies throughout industry and cuts to social services.”

But the working class, too, has changed: “It is a powerful social force, more international, extensive and closely networked than ever before. On a global scale, it numbers in the billions. Over half of humanity now lives in cities.” Workers are being confronted ever more openly with the fact that they have no future under capitalism, as it has nothing to offer them apart from war, oppression, poverty and unemployment.

“A tiny oligarchy has concentrated all of society’s wealth in its hands,” emphasised Schwarz. “There has never been such a level of social inequality. And social inequality is incompatible with democracy. It drives the masses into struggle.” He pointed to the mass demonstrations against ICE’s terror in the US, waves of strikes in Italy and Belgium, and the Gen Z protests in Africa.

“The fact that the former workers’ parties have gone completely to the dogs does not mean that the laws of class struggle have been abolished,” he concluded. “The class struggle is driven by the incompatibility of social production—which is more globally integrated than ever before—with the private ownership of the means of production.”

He quoted from an article analysing Trump’s preparations for dictatorship, which had been published that day on the WSWS:

The breakdown of democracy is the political expression of the breakdown of the social order—a society split between a handful of billionaires and the mass of working people. Democratic rights cannot coexist with inequality on this scale. The turn to dictatorship is that of the entire ruling class, Democrats included, who differ with Trump over tactics, not over the defence of the oligarchy.

The defence of democratic rights is inseparable from the fight against the oligarchy and the capitalist system itself. The same forces driving the ruling class toward dictatorship—war, inequality, the collapse of its legitimacy—are driving workers and youth into struggle, as the opposition to ICE, to the war and to the union bureaucracy already shows.

Schwarz concluded that this is also how the fight against the AfD must be understood. The rise of the far-right party, he argued, is an expression of the German bourgeoisie’s turn towards dictatorship. It is not an foreign body in this society, but is deliberately promoted and built up from above. “The AfD can only be fought using the means of class struggle. The struggle against fascism is not a question of electoral arithmetic, but of class dynamics.”

Referring to the Left Party, he said: “Anyone who claims that the AfD can be fought through an ‘alliance of all democrats’—through an alliance with the CDU, the SPD or the Greens, who have been carrying out attacks on the working class for years—is lying. You cannot fight the AfD in an alliance with these parties. The struggle against the AfD is inextricably linked to the building of a movement within the working class that represents its social interests and fights against war and capitalism. These are the fundamental lessons for today that can be drawn from the Spanish

Revolution and its defeat.”

Lively discussion

A lively discussion ensued following the lecture. In particular, participants in the symposium who were close to the Left Party or anarchism were clearly annoyed that Schwarz had denounced the betrayal of Stalinism and the role of anarchism, and had drawn lessons for today from historical experience.

Right at the start, the moderator pointed out that Morrow had written his book in the US and had not been in Spain in person. He also claimed that the Stalinist show trials had taken place much later.

Schwarz rejected this. Trotsky, he said, had been the main defendant in the trials and had devoted much of his work throughout the Civil War to refuting the false accusations and slander. “The connection between the Moscow Trials and the Spanish Civil War was obvious.” It had also been common knowledge that the Stalinists were torturing and murdering people behind the front lines. Orwell and Hemingway also wrote about this, he added.

Reiner Tosstorff, a professor of history who has researched the Spanish Civil War, clarified that the first Moscow show trial took place in August 1936 and the second—“at which Spain was also explicitly discussed”—in January 1937. He confirmed that Morrow maintained close links with Spain. He had visited Morrow in 1980, while conducting research for his doctoral thesis, and had studied his archive at the New York Public Library. This archive contained extensive correspondence from Spain as well as collections of Spanish newspapers that had been sent to Morrow.

Dieter Nelles, who had just given a lecture on the Wuppertal anarcho-syndicalist Fritz Benner, denounced Morrow’s book—without saying a single word about its content—as “armchair analysis at the desk of the world revolution, without any concrete reference to the conditions in Spain.” He expressed outrage that Schwarz could “put this forward with such conviction 90 years on.” He then railed against Trotsky for having crushed the Kronstadt uprising of 1921.

An elderly participant, whose parents had worked as doctors in the International Brigades, attempted to play down the counter-revolutionary role of Stalinism. Life in the Spanish and International Brigades had been characterised by “an immense sense of solidarity” that “overshadowed everything,” he claimed.

Yes, there had always been changes of personnel and rumours—“things that, in the greater struggle and in terms of our objectives, really did not play the role that people today attribute to them, based on knowledge—or even fabricated knowledge—and ignorance, and which could have been overlooked at the time.” He did not wish to claim that Stalinism had not played a terrible role, “but this account is, to my mind, too heavily influenced by the Trotskyist perspective. We don’t know how Trotsky would have acted if he’d been victorious.”

Now, he concluded, the focus is on the fight against the AfD. “And I must say, whatever the case, today we must, above all else, prevent the AfD from gaining a position of power anywhere, even if that means cooperating tactically with the SPD, the Greens and—if necessary—the CDU as well. We’re not staging a world revolution these days. What we can do—and this is what Mamdani is trying to do in New York—is to change the living conditions of his voters. If Die Linke were actually to manage to form a government in Berlin and bring about changes in the housing market, that would already be a major achievement.”

Another panellist described Schwarz as a “hardcore Trotskyist.” In order to “redeem the honour of Trotskyism,” he said he wanted to point out that, fortunately, this represented only a tiny remnant of what is

actually discussed within various Trotskyist currents. He was apparently referring to the pseudo-left groups that call themselves Trotskyists and operate within the Left Party. While the Stalinists had indeed acted ruthlessly and unscrupulously, he argued, they had clear ideas and worked purposefully, whereas their left-wing opponents had no realistic alternatives.

Schwarz had little time to respond to the contributions. He vehemently rejected the accusation that Morrow had not been qualified to write about the Spanish Civil War because he had not been in Spain himself: "If that were true, there would be no such thing as historical scholarship. There are very few historians who write about events they have witnessed first-hand. Based on a meticulous study of the facts, testimonies and documents, it is perfectly possible to arrive at a correct, objective assessment. On that basis, one would also have to disqualify Marx, Lenin and many others who analysed international events while in exile."

Regarding the accusation of being a "hardcore Trotskyist," Schwarz said he regarded it as a compliment. Marx and Engels, Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin and Trotsky had also had to put up with similar accusations; they were repeatedly denounced as completely unrealistic and as sectarians because they did not compromise on their principles.

"I adhere to the principle put forward by Karl Liebknecht, who said: 'First clarity, then unity'," explained Schwarz. "Without a clear political perspective, the working class cannot fight; above all, it cannot win. To develop this perspective, one must learn from history."

In response to the call to join forces with all other parties to prevent an AfD election victory, Schwarz replied: "I just want to ask one question about that. How can one explain that in Thuringia, where the Left Party held the Minister-President for ten years, the AfD now stands at 40 per cent? And who privatised the flats here in Berlin? Wasn't it perhaps the PDS [the Left Party's predecessor] in the Wowereit Senate? In reality, it is precisely this mixture of left-wing rhetoric and right-wing policies that breeds the frustration which the AfD exploits."

He repeated: "The fight against the AfD is not a question of parliamentary arithmetic, but of the dynamics of the class struggle." When he and others of his generation entered politics in the 1970s, they were electrified and inspired by the major strikes in the steel industry and the public sector. "Today, every conflict—even when, as in the case of VW, 100,000 jobs are at stake—is immediately buried and resolved behind closed doors. Then a redundancy plan is negotiated, preventing any spontaneous resistance from arising. That strengthens the AfD."

In response to an interjection from the audience that it was the workers themselves who did not want to fight, Schwarz replied: "That is an insult to the workers. You cannot hold them responsible for the betrayal of their leaders."



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