

Ken Loach's *Land and Freedom*: The Spanish revolution betrayed

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Since the fall of the Eastern European regimes six years ago, innumerable works of history, essays, newspaper and magazine articles, television documentaries, plays, novels and films have appeared seeking to drum home one central message to masses of people: any attempt to alter the existing social order is either utopian or malicious.

Land and Freedom, British director Ken Loach's film about the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39, says something quite different. It says that the present state of affairs was not inevitable, and that the working class is capable of uplifting and liberating itself. It says further that the cause of the failure of the Soviet Union lay not with socialism, but Stalinism.

A single film, or even a dozen films, cannot overcome by themselves the prevailing confusion arising from the widespread identification of socialism and Marxism with their opposite--Stalinism. But to the extent that tens of thousands of people are exposed to a conception of critical events of the twentieth century which opposes the prevailing version, this must improve the political atmosphere. This is no small matter. Loach and screenwriter Jim Allen deserve full credit for having undertaken and carried off this film in the face of many difficulties.

Land and Freedom has already provoked great interest and widespread political discussion in Spain and Britain, and it will no doubt do the same wherever it is shown. It merits the widest possible audience.

The filmmakers' primary concerns are to establish that a revolutionary situation existed in Spain in 1936, to lay bare the role of Stalinism in betraying the Spanish workers and to convey the enormous consequences of that treachery.

The film begins in the present: a young woman in Liverpool discovers after her grandfather's death that he fought as a volunteer in the Spanish Civil War. The film transports us back to 1936. We see what befalls David (Ian Hart), a young unemployed worker and British Communist Party member, as he sets off for Spain and joins the fighting.

More or less accidentally, David ends up in a detachment loyal to the leftist POUM. After a number of experiences with this unit, including the seizure of a town from the fascists, he receives a wound and is sent to Barcelona for treatment.

The POUM militia, as well as other forces who retain their independence from the Communist Party Stalinists, have been increasingly deprived of weapons by the authorities. Once in Barcelona David succumbs to political pressure and signs up with

the Stalinists' International Brigade.

The next sequences take place during the May Days in 1937, a working class uprising in Barcelona against the popular front regime. David sees for himself that the republican government and its Communist Party allies are defending the capitalist status quo. He tears up his party card and heads off to rejoin his old comrades. After a battle in which POUM forces, desperately short of supplies, defeat the fascists, units of the republican army arrive to arrest the POUM leaders and disperse the militia. David returns to England. A voice-over explains that the Spanish revolution could have been won but for Stalinism and that such a victory would have changed the course of the twentieth century.

The film concludes in the present with the old man's funeral. His granddaughter makes a short speech in which she explains her faith in the struggle for socialism.

The great value of Loach and Allen's film lies in its critique of Stalinism *from the left*. In opposition to nearly all of what is currently written or filmed, *Land and Freedom* traces the brutality and totalitarianism of the Soviet regime and its various national agents to their antisocialist, antirevolutionary character. Stalin is portrayed as the great enemy of Marxism and revolution that he was, sabotaging the Spanish workers struggle in the interests of an alliance with Britain, France and the US.

In general, the filmmakers approach their material in an honest and straightforward manner. Their fundamental instincts and concerns are healthy. They explicitly advance the ideals of solidarity, selflessness and collective action. This is a courageous act in and of itself these days.

Certain moments in the film stand out. In one extended scene, villagers, with the participation of David and his comrades, hold a meeting in the old landowner's house to discuss collectivizing the land. One peasant, supported by an American member of the militia, opposes the proposal. He argues that he is more prosperous than the others because he has worked harder and that individual effort ought to be rewarded. After a thorough and democratic discussion, the villagers reject his views.

The execution of a priest as a fascist informer is convincingly presented. The hostility showered upon this representative of social and political reaction by the local peasants rings true, as does the hatred and fear etched on the priest's face.

The funeral of the old man which concludes the film, a succinct and unsentimental scene, is perhaps its most moving sequence. Suzanne Maddock, in a small role as Kim, the granddaughter, is very compelling.

It would be misleading, however, to suggest that the film is entirely successful. Some of the problems are related, directly or indirectly, to the present political conjuncture.

The inability of Loach, a director of considerable international stature with three decades of filmmaking behind him, to raise a few million dollars for this project--at a time when the average Hollywood production costs upwards of \$30-40 million--speaks volumes about the current state of the film industry.

As Jim Allen explains in the interview which accompanies this review, financial difficulties obliged the filmmakers to scrap a number of crucial sequences. This does make itself felt. Too often significant events are referred to or described rather than shown on screen.

But not all the film's structural flaws can be blamed on a hostile political climate and investors' tight-fistedness. In the accompanying interview Allen refers to the danger of "giving lectures," of turning characters into one-dimensional spokesmen for particular conceptions, which, as he notes, produces "bad writing, bad art." The problem of "tendentious writing," as Engels termed it in the 1880s, is a genuine one: how to advance definite historical or political conceptions and, at the same time, create characters with independent and spontaneous existences of their own, so that a work is not pat and predictable.

Allen refers to the problem, but he did not solve it in his own script. If the film does not reach the heights of great drama, and it does not, it is precisely because the characters never entirely come to life. They remain, to too large an extent, merely social or political types.

This is, to a degree, understandable. The determination to expose decades of lies by the Stalinists and to respond to the post-Soviet falsifiers is the driving force behind *Land and Freedom*. A work of art, however, does not stand or fall on its good intentions alone, but on its ability to dissolve its politics into its poetry, so to speak. In this film, character and emotional relations are clearly subordinate to a political conception. As a result, the drama suffers. Certain subplots--for example, David's affair with a female militia member--seem external, somewhat cliched and, therefore, in the end, unmoving.

Then there are the problems posed by Ken Loach as a director. What one brings away from *Land and Freedom*, as is the case with every one of Loach's films (*Kes*, *Family Life*, *Looks and Smiles*, *Riff-Raff*, *Ladybird*, *Ladybird*), is a strong sense of the director's sympathies for the oppressed and his opposition to the cruelties of capitalism. Those are worthy sentiments.

Loach is a devoted and talented practitioner of a naturalistic style. Events are staged to look as if they were not staged. The spectator is meant to feel like an accidental observer of "real life." The results of this approach are sometimes quite powerful, if the human subject or situation is sufficiently engrossing.

Loach is advanced by uncritical admirers as a filmmaker who represents the principle of objectivity in cinema. But objectivity, in art too, requires partisanship. One cannot help but harbor the suspicion that Loach's "objectivity" is composed in part of at least two, not entirely wholesome, ingredients: (1) the dead weight of empiricism and obsession with naturalistic detail which dominates the British film and television world; (2) an artistic personality

which sometimes confuses passivity in the face of difficult dramatic choices with "letting events flow."

This suspicion is only confirmed by a viewing of *Land and Freedom*. The film is very much a hybrid. Faced with a politically coherent and intelligent, but perhaps uninspired, script, and an international cast of uneven quality, Loach fails to subordinate the whole to a singular vision. As always, the director is neither sufficiently the documentarian nor the dramatist.

The political weaknesses of the film are more complex. The filmmakers have chosen to adopt an uncritical attitude towards the centrist POUM. That is naturally their right, but the hostile judgment of Marxists on that organization is unequivocal. To their credit, Allen and Loach put substantial elements of Trotsky's analysis of the Spanish revolution and Stalin's role into the mouths of POUM members.

The filmmakers evince, in a number of ways, what can only be described as a middle class radical approach to politics. The manner in which the film frames the controversy between the POUM militants and the Stalinists over the sort of army required for the defeat of fascism, for example, seems almost to argue for amateurism against professionalism. The film's attitude toward the role of women bespeaks a quasi-feminist outlook. This is no crime, but it feels forced and weakens the film.

The problems are real, but so is the achievement. In making *Land and Freedom*, Loach and Allen have produced the first major film which tells the truth about the crimes of Stalin against the working class and socialism. This is a genuine breakthrough.

The existence of the film and the reception it is receiving help to refute the lie that socialism and revolution are dead issues. The response to *Land and Freedom* reveals significant popular interest, perhaps semiconscious at this stage, in the great events of this century in general and in its betrayed revolutionary opportunities in particular.

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