The Spanish Civil War and the Popular Front

Part two

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The Popular Front government took no steps to resist the launching of the fascist military coup in July 1936 and refused all demands to arm the workers. But in Barcelona, which was one of the most industrialised cities of Spain, the working class resisted.

The largest working class organisation in Catalonia was the Anarchist union federation of the CNT (Confederación Nacional del Trabajo—National Confederation of Labour). The influence of the Socialist Party and the Communist Party was small compared to that of the POUM. Workers commandeered arms, explosives and motor vehicles. They called on the soldiers to refuse their officers' orders.

Inspired by their example, workers in Madrid and Valencia did the same. The Asturian miners sent a column of 5,000 dynamiters to Madrid to assist. In Malaga, the workers had no access to arms at first and used petrol to set fire to barricades around the military barracks. The sailors took control of their vessels. The Popular Front government was left without an army, without a police force, without border guards or any means of imposing its authority. At national, regional and local municipal levels, the machinery of the state had collapsed in the face of the fascist uprising.

The entire apparatus of the state had disintegrated, and its role was assumed by improvised committees as workers took control of the factories and began to organise the towns and cities, while in the countryside peasants began to occupy the land and set up collectives. The continued military campaign against the fascists was in the hands of workers' militias, which went on the offensive and extended the revolution into the territory they recaptured.

Writing about this experience later, Trotsky said, "The Spanish proletariat displayed first rate military qualities. In its specific gravity in the country's economic life, in its political and cultural level, the Spanish proletariat stood on the first day of the revolution not below but above the Russian proletariat at the beginning of 1917."

In Russia, the Bolsheviks had not been able to address the question of collectivising the land immediately, but in Spain, the peasants themselves, who had been highly proletarianised by the development of capitalism, began to collectivise the land. Franco had precipitated the revolution he had hoped to avert.

The Republicans and the Socialists were perfectly well aware of where real power lay. President Luis Companys told a group of anarchists on July 20: "Today you are masters of the city and of Catalonia.... You have conquered and everything is in your power. If you do not need me or do not want me as president of Catalonia, tell me now and I shall become just another soldier in the struggle against fascism." Companys had been a union lawyer and knew his business. He was prepared to accept the workers' committees as the de facto power in Catalonia until he could undermine them and restore the bourgeois state.

But the Spanish workers' state remained embryonic. What had emerged in Spain was a situation of dual power. Felix Morrow, the author of Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain, writes of the Revolution of July 19, but it was an incomplete revolution that remained balanced on a knife-edge. None of the parties, certainly not the POUM, called for the workers' committees to be centralised in nationwide soldiers' and workers' councils. Instead, the committees remained localised and scattered. The government was able to use its control of the national bank and gold reserves to exercise financial control. The POUM and CNT never attempted to take over the banks.

Over the course of the next seven weeks, the workers' organisations drifted closer to the Republic because, in not building soviets, the POUM had tacitly recognised the right of Azaña, Companys and the rest to rule. On September 7, Nin himself had called for the bourgeois ministers to be overthrown, but by September 18, the POUM position had changed. Its newspaper declared that the left republican movement was "of a profoundly popular nature." It now claimed that the Popular Front government could ensure socialism.

Nin drew the logical conclusion and joined the Catalan government. This was a violation of a century of accumulated revolutionary experience. Marx had recognised at the time of the Paris Commune that the working class could not simply lay hold of the existing state institutions, but had to replace them with a new form of state that reflected its own class interests. The Bolsheviks had not entered the Kerensky government even when it was menaced by Kornilov.

One of the first actions of the new government in Catalonia was to dissolve the revolutionary committees that the workers had set up on July 19. This was the first great advance of the counter-revolution. It was followed by a decree disarming the workers.

In the course of the next 8 months, the Madrid and Barcelona governments whittled away the gains that the workers had made in July. Nin's presence gave it the authority to take these steps. The process of counter-revolution moved most slowly in Catalonia, but the direction was the same as in the rest of Republican Spain.

By December, when it was no longer needed, the POUM was expelled from the government at the insistence of the Soviet consul, Antonov-Ovseyenko. But Nin had learnt nothing and was still saying that Spain did not need soviets. His criticisms of the government were really advice to it, and while he called for workers' control of the army, he respectfully asked the government to achieve this. Weeks before the state turned its guns on the workers of Catalonia, Nin was still arguing that the workers would take power peacefully. He remained committed to the perspective of the Popular Front.

In March 1937, Trotsky warned: "If this policy [of the POUM] continues, the Catalan proletariat will be the victim of a terrible catastrophe comparable to that of the Paris Commune of 1871." His words proved all too prophetic.

In May, the government and the Stalinists launched a military assault on
the Barcelona telephone exchange, which had been occupied by the workers since July 1936. Not only was it the visible symbol of dual power, but it was also a strategic building, control of which allowed workers to monitor the telephone conversations of government ministers. The Republican government would never be in control of Barcelona if it did not regain control of the telephone exchange.

The attempt took the leaders of the POUM and the CNT by surprise, but it provoked massive resistance from the working class, which spontaneously rose up in defiance of the gains of the revolution. All the evidence now available confirms that it would have been possible for the workers to take power, but instead the leaders of the POUM and the Anarchists consistently called for a ceasefire during the week of street fighting that followed. Only the small group of Bolshevик-Leninists affiliated with the Left Opposition, some rank-and-file members of the POUM and the Anarchist Friends of Durruti called for the workers to take power and denounced the call for a ceasefire.

On May 3-4, the city of Barcelona was in the hands of the workers. That night, the executives of the POUM and the CNT, FAI (Federación Anarquista Ibérica—Iberian Anarchist Federation) and Libertarian Youth met in joint session. Julián Gorkin later recalled, "We stated the problem in these precise terms: 'Neither of us has urged the masses of Barcelona to take this action. This is a spontaneous response to a Stalinist provocation. This is a decisive moment for the Revolution. Either we place ourselves at the head of the movement in order to destroy the internal enemy or else the movement will collapse and the enemy will destroy us. We must make our choice revolution or counterrevolution.'"

One could not put it more clearly and they did indeed make their choice. "We did not feel ourselves spiritually or physically strong enough to take the lead in organising the masses for resistance," a member of the POUM executive said afterwards. The POUM executive admitted, "It would have been possible to take power, but our party, a minority force within the working class movement, could not assume the responsibility of issuing that slogan."

Had they called for the workers to take power, small party or not, the workers of the CNT who were far to the left of their leaders would certainly have listened to them. The POUM itself had perhaps 40,000 members and a militia column of 10,000.

But if the workers of Barcelona had taken power, as both the POUM and the CNT leaders admit they could have done, wouldn't they have been isolated? Not at all.

If a workers' republic had been declared in Barcelona, it would have had a galvanising effect on the French working class. It would have been very difficult for the Popular Front government in France to maintain an arm's embargo with its own working class aroused. Workers and peasants in the rest of Spain, in both the Republican and the Nationalist areas, would have responded if the Barcelona workers had undertaken socialist measures that put the factories in the hands of the workers and the land in the hands of the peasants. Franco's army would have crumbled, especially if a workers' republic had declared its support for colonial self-determination. Such a slogan would have had an impact not only on Spain's colonies but on those of Britain and France as well.

A civil war is not fought by military means alone. It needs a political strategy. History has many examples of this. Lincoln's abolition of slavery was described by one European politician as "the maddest and most infamous revolution in history." Yet it proved to be the means of winning support behind enemy lines among the slaves as well as internationally. The cotton workers of the English mill towns demonstrated in their thousands in support of the abolition of slavery and the victory of the North. The British government did not dare intervene on behalf of the Southern slave owners. In Barcelona, the POUM had no such revolutionary strategy.

When a ceasefire was eventually agreed, it proved to be the prelude to a bloody purge of all opposition elements in Barcelona and elsewhere in Spain. The POUM was accused of having organised a putsch in collusion with the German, Italian and Francoist secret police. Its press was banned, Nin was arrested and the organisation outlawed. The leaders of the POUM were taken to a Stalinist prison in Madrid—a former church in Calle Atocha.

Nin himself was separated from the others and taken to Alcalá de Henares, where he was interrogated for three days. When he refused to confess to being a fascist agent, he was tortured to death. His body was buried on the outskirts of the town. The GPU then ordered German International Brigade volunteers to storm the prison where Nin had been held. To give the impression that the Gestapo had come to release him, they left Nationalist bank notes, Falangist badges and false documents behind them.

After Nin's death, Trotsky described him as "an old and incorruptible revolutionary." The members of the POUM, Trotsky said, "fought heroically on all fronts against the Fascists in Spain." But in joining the Popular Front, participating in the Popular Front government of Catalonia and refusing to call for the workers to take power in Catalonia in May 1937, Nin had committed a betrayal that proved fatal not only to himself but to the Spanish revolution.

In the ensuing weeks, the Stalinist secret police rounded up all opposition elements in Catalonia, imprisoned and tortured them, and executed many thousands. A Special Tribunal for Espionage and High Treason was established to try the POUMists and Anarchists accused for their part in the insurrection. Almost all of those sent for trial in this tribunal were found guilty. Others disappeared like Nin into the secret prisons of the GPU—the so-called Preventoriums. Some 20,000 prisoners were sent to labour camps. Survivors reported sleep deprivation, denial of food, fake executions, isolation, confinement in cramped spaces, mutilation, denial of medical attention, total darkness, blinding lights, near drowning and, of course, beatings.

The repression had begun long before the May Days. Alexander Orlov, the head of the GPU in Spain, sent a number of agents into Barcelona with orders to fraternise with the POUM and identify targets for kidnapping or assassination. Erwin Wolf, Trotsky's former secretary, was assassinated in Spain. An English volunteer, David Crook, later recalled how he was recruited from the International Brigade for special work. His account of his life gives us a good impression of how the GPU's operations in Spain fitted into the wider counter-revolutionary campaign that had its most public face in the Moscow Trials.

Crook was sent to the officer training school at Albacete where he was taught Spanish by Ramon Mercader, who was later to assassinate Trotsky in Mexico. From there he went on to Barcelona to spy on the POUM and its British supporters from the Independent Labour Party (ILP). Crook ingratiated himself with Eileen Blair, George Orwell's wife, which gave him the opportunity to steal documents from the ILP offices. When the POUM leaders were arrested, he was planted in the same prison cell to gather information. He also played a part in the kidnapping of the Austrian socialist Kurt Landau.

From Spain, Crook went on to Shanghai, where he spied on suspected Trotskyists. We can see from Crook's account of his life that the May Days were not a one-off, isolated event, but were part of a much wider and long-prepared campaign that was to have global ramifications. Spain became a training ground for Stalinist spies, provocateurs and assassins. When Ignace Reiss, the Soviet secret service agent who broke with Stalin, was assassinated in Switzerland, his assassins left behind a Spanish-made overcoat when they fled. Eric Hobsbawm describes his youthful experience of the Popular Front in Paris in carnival-like terms, but in reality the Popular Front was inseparable from the repression of the Moscow Trials and Spain.

Some historians claim that there were never more than 20 or 40 GPU
in the rural areas, in addition to civil servants, identified a network of private operatives in the whole of Spain. That figure seems at variance with the evidence, and in any case ignores the Stalinists who, while not members of the secret police, were nonetheless engaged in wiping out oppositionists. The Communist Party of Spain was small in 1936, but within a year it had become the most powerful party in the Popular Front. It had grown partly by absorbing the Socialist Party's youth movement, but also by recruiting peasants who were dissatisfied with collectivisation and even caciques in the rural areas, in addition to civil servants, magistrates and army officers in the towns. In these social layers, the GPU found the human material for its work: among them were gangsters, racketeers and former fascists, all of whom found a natural home in the Stalinist apparatus of terror.

Nor was the repressive activity of the Stalinists confined to Catalonia. José Cazorla and Santiago Carillo, both central committee members of the PCE (Partido Comunista de España—Communist Party of Spain), illegally seized workers who had been acquitted by the popular tribunals in Madrid and sent them to the front line to serve as human "fortifications." The CNT newspaper Solidaridad Obrera identified a network of private prisons "operating under a unified leadership and on a preconceived plan of national scope."

As military defeats followed one upon another, an air of panic began to pervade the Stalinist military command, which became pervasive after the crushing of the Catalonian working class. Soviet intelligence reports speak of a "disease-carrying bacillus" among the International Brigades. One near-hysterical report described how an entire company was disarmed and arrested and their officers shot. A supposedly large-scale "Trotskyist spy and terrorist organisation" was exposed in the 14th brigade, and a man died under interrogation. André Marty, the French Comintern leader who was responsible for organising the International Brigades, admitted to having shot 500 International Brigadiers. This is one tenth of the total death toll among the International Brigades.

All of these crimes were carried out under the auspices of the liberal, "democratic" Socialist and Republican politicians of the Popular Front. Their defenders claim that they were ignorant of what the GPU did, but the historical record refutes this claim. An interesting document that records a conversation between a Soviet adviser and President Juan Negrin in December 1938 throws some light on the attitude of the Popular Front government toward democracy.

In this conversation, Negrin seems to have mapped out a post-war political strategy that involved a one-party state—"It might be called the national front or the Spanish front or union," said Negrin. His projected regime would have been under the leadership of a military figure. For Negrin and the other leaders of the Republic, democracy might be desirable, but the real question was order and the suppression of the revolt from below. For that, an alliance with the Kremlin was essential and they were willing to give the repressive apparatus it had created in the struggle against Trotskyism the free run of Spain if that was the only way private property could be defended. The GPU merely acted as the most resolute arm of the Popular Front.

At the end of 1937, Trotsky wrote in "The Lesssons of Spain: A Last Warning." "When the workers and peasants enter on the path of their revolution—when they seize factories and estates, drive out the old owners, conquer power in the provinces—then the bourgeois counterrevolution—democratic, Stalinist, or fascist alike—has no other means of checking this movement except through bloody coercion, supplemented by lies and deceit. The superiority of the Stalinist clique on this road consisted in its ability to apply instantly measures that were beyond the capacity of Azaña, Companys, Negrin and their left allies."

In Spain, Trotsky wrote, two irreconcilable programmes confronted one another. There was the programme that consisted of "saving at any cost private property from the proletariat, and saving as far as possible, democracy from Franco; and on the other hand, the programme of abolishing private property through the conquest of power by the proletariat. The first programme expressed the interests of capitalism through the medium of the labour aristocracy, the top petty-bourgeois circles, and especially the Soviet bureaucracy. The second programme translated into the language of Marxism the tendencies of the revolutionary mass movement, not fully conscious but powerful. Unfortunately for the revolution, between the handful of Bolsheviks and the proletariat stood the counter-revolutionary wall of the Popular Front."

The heroism of the Spanish workers and peasants, and of the international volunteers who flocked to Spain, is all too often used as a means of covering up the real character of Popular Front politics, and anyone who criticises the Republic and its supporters is accused of besmirching the reputation of these selfless fighters. In reality, the reputation of those heroic figures is better served by an objective examination of the history and particularly of the Popular Front.

In this lecture, I have attempted to show that a successful proletarian revolution was possible in Spain and that the reason it failed was not that the Spanish proletariat was immature or the economy too backward or the international conditions unfavourable, which are the reasons so frequently given, but because of the existence of the Popular Front. The Spanish masses remained enmeshed in the Popular Front until it was too late because no genuinely revolutionary leadership was built.

The party that was in the best position to do so was the POUM, but it proved to be the chief obstacle to the building of a revolutionary party. Had it adopted an intransigently revolutionary policy, the POUM would have found itself at the head of the working class in May if not before. An enormous responsibility for the defeat in Spain falls on the POUM and its centrist politics. The masses, as Trotsky said in one of his last writings, sought to blast their way to the correct road, but they found it impossible to build a revolutionary leadership in the heat of revolution. Had the Spanish revolution succeeded, the history of the twentieth century would have been immeasurably different.

Concluded

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