

Spanish officer corps hears lecture justifying Franco coup and dictatorship

By Alejandro López
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On March 8, historian Stanley Payne gave a lecture at the Spanish Centre for National Defence Studies (Centro de Estudios para la Defensa Nacional—CESEDEN) legitimising the coup of General Francisco Franco in 1936 that sparked the Spanish Civil War and brought to power a 40-year fascist dictatorship.

Apart from senior Spanish officers, the audience included Pio Moa, a revisionist pseudo-historian who has justified the repression by the military during the Civil War and the dictatorship. Other attendants were Ignacio Cosidó, general director of police, Agustín Conde Bajón, a former parliamentarian of the right-wing Popular Party (PP), Fernando de Paz, an adamant defender of Franco and member of the ultra-right party VOX, and Hermann Tertsch, a right-wing journalist.

During the lecture “Towards the 18th of July”, Payne blamed the Popular Front government formed by social-democratic, Stalinist, anarchist, and centrist POUM forces in 1936 for the “destruction” of democracy. He claimed that the Republican government under Manuel Azaña “wanted a military uprising” and that the February 1936 elections that gave a majority in parliament to the Popular Front forces were a “democratic fraud.” They aimed, Payne asserted, to “create the conditions for imposing a monopoly of the left.”

Payne then praised General Franco as a “very prudent and professional” soldier, who rejected the coup until he understood there was no alternative.

He claimed the coup was a response to the climate generated by the Republican government, stating that “Those who do not want a counterrevolution, should not start a revolution.”

The CESEDEN, evidently fearing that an event airing the fascist sympathies of sections of the officer corps would provoke anger and concern across Spain, sought to block reporting of the event.

One journalist from *La Marea* described how the soldiers asked him, “Are you a journalist? You can’t come in. The Ministry of Defence has not authorised journalists to come in.” When the paper contacted the Communication Department of the Ministry of Defence, they stated that the “conference is public, but that they would not allow anyone to record the session.” In the end, the journalist was able to enter on the

condition that he left behind his mobile and any other recording equipment.

Eldiario.org explained its journalist “was forbidden to take any photographs, and during the conference, a soldier confiscated the laptop until the end of the conference.”

This is not the place to review all of the historical lies involved in Payne’s presentation of the leader of a fascist coup as “prudent,” or of the Popular Front as carrying out a revolutionary policy. The WSWs has written extensively on the historical issues involved, in “The Spanish Civil War and the Popular Front.” Suffice it to say that the army’s attempt to block reporting of the event testifies to its own awareness that Payne’s pro-fascist arguments could withstand a public historical debate.

The Payne lecture was not a scholarly but a propagandistic event. Payne spoke in the fourth month in which Spain has not had a government, since the December 20 elections produced a hung parliament. This political crisis is the outcome of years of escalating economic collapse and social misery, as unemployment affects 23 percent of the population (53 percent among youth), and more than a quarter of the population lives in poverty.

The glorification of a fascist coup, coming amid the rise of neo-fascistic tendencies across Europe, is a warning: layers within the army brass have begun contemplating, and seeking to fashion justifications for, a military intervention into Spanish political life, should they deem it necessary.

Ominously, given his remarks supporting a fascist coup against the Popular Front, Payne recently spoke about today’s conditions, comparing the Popular Front of the 1930s to “the possible pact between the PSOE [Socialist Party] and Podemos, the two big parties of the left today.”

Podemos and the PSOE, which are political descendants of the Stalinist and social-democratic parties of the Popular Front, are far to the right of the parties of the Popular Front in the 1930s, which had a mass base in the working class. The Popular Front was the instrument through which the Stalinist bureaucracy and bourgeois parties in Spain tied a revolutionary upsurge of the working class to the bourgeois Spanish Republic and then suppressed the revolution. This led to the defeat of the Republic by Franco’s forces in the Civil War.

The PSOE and Podemos—like Podemos’s Greek ally, the Syriza government—are bourgeois parties aiming to form a pro-austerity, pro-war government to continue imposing austerity on the workers. The record of the Syriza government underscores that such parties will impose draconian austerity and implement the dictates of the banks and of NATO by themselves, without the need for the army to threaten or mount a coup to obtain the policies desired by finance capital.

They have deep ties to the officer corps and have sought to stifle popular opposition to fascist sentiment in the ruling class. Shortly after the launching of Podemos in 2014, its leader, Pablo Iglesias, declared his willingness to talk with all factions of the ruling establishment. He boasted that Podemos was ready “to talk to the PSOE and to the PP, because responsibility to the state moves us. ... We are not sectarian. On programmatic issues, we will not have problems with anyone.”

Nonetheless, under conditions where discontent in the working class with the entire political establishment is taking on explosive dimensions in Spain and across Europe, Payne’s pro-fascist remarks to the officer corps are a warning. Faced with an unprecedented crisis and unsure of what will occur, the army is preparing itself to use bloody and ruthless methods to defend the capitalist order.

Payne’s lecture is a qualitative development of a long series of previous attempts to rehabilitate Francoism. Payne, born in the US in 1934, is a member of the Royal Spanish Academy of History and a regular contributor to the right-wing daily *ABC* and *El Mundo*. He has written more than 20 books on Spanish history. His positions have shifted ever more to the right since the 1939-1978 Franco dictatorship, and particularly in recent years, when he publicly supported Pio Moa.

Such efforts have gone hand in hand with an offensive by PP-led governments to rewrite history. The PP has given a diploma of honour to representatives of the Brotherhood of Combatants of the Blue Division (Hermandad de Combatientes de la División Azul), which fought alongside the Nazi army on the Eastern Front during World War II, and the Ministry of Defence has actively been involved in the repatriation of the remains of these soldiers from Russian soil.

At the same time, it has scrapped the budget to uncover the remains of victims of the fascists during the civil war and refused UN recommendations to uncover the remains in mass graves. It also provided hundreds of thousands of euros to fund the Spanish Biographical Dictionary, a collection written by prominent revisionist historians who drafted many chapters rewriting the history of the Spanish Civil War and the Franco dictatorship.

The Payne lecture also has exposed the bankruptcy of the PSOE, Podemos, and their various political satellites. The effect of decades of domination of what passed for “left” politics by the PSOE and groups like Podemos has been to eliminate public opposition to pro-fascist sentiments within official politics.

Five days before Payne’s lecture, the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory (Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica—ARMH) published an open letter demanding the Ministry of Defence ensure that the lecture not take place.

The ARMH warnings went unheeded. Not one party raised a protest. *El País*, typically considered to be Spain’s newspaper of record, did not publish anything; the right-wing newspapers *El Mundo*, *ABC*, *La Razón*, and *El Español* remained silent, continuing their support for the Franco regime.

This silence exposes the role of Podemos in flirting with the armed forces and stifling anti-war sentiment in broad layers of the population. Since its foundation, Podemos has created branches within the army, entered into talks with military associations to hear their demands, and defended Spain’s membership in NATO. It even ran General Julio Rodríguez, who led the Spanish army in the US-led war in Libya in 2011, as a candidate in Zaragoza province.

Podemos has yet to comment on Payne’s remarks, leaving it to its regional Catalan branch, En Comú Podem, to put forward a few tepid criticisms of the lecture.

En Comú posed two written questions to the caretaker PP government: first, whether the lecture violated the mandate of parliament’s Constitutional Commission of 2002, which unanimously adopted a resolution rejecting the violent seizure of power or its justification; and second, why the computer of the *eldiario* journalist was confiscated.

The government ignored En Comú, however, declining to answer its questions.

Manifestly, these questions were designed not to provoke opposition to pro-fascist sentiment in the army, but to provide political cover for En Comú, so it could say that it had raised criticisms of Payne’s lecture.

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