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# **The Spanish Civil War**

**by Ella Rule**

“The toilers of the Soviet Union only fulfil their duty when they give aid to the Spanish revolutionary masses. They are aware that the liberation of Spain from the persecution of Fascist reactionaries is not a private cause of Spaniards, but a universal cause of the whole of advanced and progressive mankind”

**Joseph Stalin, 15 Oct 1936**

**Presentation to the Stalin Society, March 1991**

Ella Rule made this presentation on the *Spanish Civil War* to the Stalin Society in March 1991. It has now been included in the book *Trotskyism or Leninism?* by Harpal Brar. The following pages are thus a reproduction of Part V of that publication, namely chapters 16 and 17.

The differences between Trotskyism and Leninism on many fundamental questions are dealt with in this book and are recommended reading for all who are involved in the working-class movement. The other Parts of the book are:

**Part I:** On the vanguard party of the working class, and Lenin's theory of revolution versus Trotsky's theory of 'permanent revolution';

**Part II:** Socialism in one country;

**Part III:** The Moscow Trials;

**Part IV:** Two line on the Chinese revolution - the line of the Comintern and the line of the Trotskyist opposition;

**Part VI:** Collectivisation;

**Part VII:** On the mechanics of class struggle under the dictatorship of the proletariat

### **Trotskyism or Leninism?**

**by Harpal Brar**

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## **[Chapter 16]**

# **Background to the Spanish Civil War**

## **Condition of the Spanish workers and peasants**

For over two centuries the Spanish people had been straining against the stranglehold of feudal landlordism to bring Spain into the modern world, but in one way or another the feudal landlords had been able to retard the rise of the bourgeoisie, the development of capitalism, and hence the development of the working class. In this way, the Spanish economy grew more and more backward in relation to the modern world and more and more helpless in the face of competition from countries where the bourgeois revolution had been completed. As a result the condition of the Spanish people deteriorated steadily both relatively and absolutely. This is how Frank Jellinek described the situation in the 1930s:

*"Spain is a country of hunger: mainly of sheer physical hunger, but also of hunger for land.*

*"A population of which nearly 70% lives on the land possesses almost none of it. 65% of the population held 6.3% of the land, while 4% of the population held 60% ...*

*"... The Duke of Medinaceli owned 79,146 hectares, two and a half million Galician peasants owned 2.9 million," (p.33).*

*"In this land, which the Moors considered the earthly Paradise and treated with the utmost care ... the cultivated surface totals 22 million hectares, the uncultivated 24 million...*

*"The causes of this monstrous wastage can be found in the political and economic history of the Spanish ruling classes. Deforestation, the conversion of arable land into steppe and of agricultural soil into grazing grounds, enclosures, absentee landlordism, the lack of a strong internal market owing to the incredibly low wages paid, the struggle first between agricultural and stockbreeding interests, then between agrarianism and industry, combined to ruin the country" (ibid p.34).*

By the 1930s the question of the Spanish bourgeois revolution was the almost universal agenda for the Spanish people, but it had powerful enemies. Foremost among these, of course, were the big powerful aristocratic landowners, which included the Catholic Church - especially the Jesuits. The

aristocracy could secure any election result they wanted through the power they wielded over the peasantry (this influence being known as *caciquismo*) and could thereby ensure firm control over the machinery of state, and the Church controlled virtually all education of children and exerted a powerful ideological influence over Spanish people.

*"The struggle between wheat-cattle [agrarianism] and textiles-steel [industry] had profound social and political effects. A decrease in agricultural prices and a rise in wages would favour industry by strengthening the internal market. Simultaneously it would strengthen the petty-bourgeois and proletarian movements which grew up within the industrial drive to power and used the victories of the big bourgeoisie to open up for themselves new possibilities for expansion. Thus it was necessary for the feudal agrarians to keep the country as impoverished as possible, and in this they were entirely successful" (ibid p.35).*

*"With almost entire control of Spanish politics, the agrarians could fight off the threat from industry almost as easily as they had crushed commerce in the 16th century," (ibid p.36).*

Various foreign imperialist countries had acquired interests in Spanish concerns, such as mining and even the national telephone service, and they too had an interest in maintaining Spain in a relatively backward state so that there would be no threat to their investments. Frank Jellinek points out (p.278):

*"The development of native Spanish industry must necessarily have brought not only competition with the foreign interests but also, as the Governing Board of Rio Tinto [an English company] repeatedly complained to its shareholders, a revolutionary atmosphere. It was essential, therefore, to see that the plus-value should be neutralised by exportation of capital". Suffice it to say that is exactly what was done.*

For those who desperately longed for progress - above all the working class and the peasant masses who bore the brunt of Spain's backwardness in the squalor and poverty that made up their everyday lives, but also the more energetic and daring elements of the national bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie, especially those concentrated in the industrially-developed regions of the Basque country and Catalonia, there seemed to be little hope of breaking loose from these iron shackles. Many had tried and failed. But in the early 20th century at last signs began to appear that things might change.

Clearly Spanish workers and peasants could not but fight back against those whom they saw as responsible for the harshness of their lives. The Spanish national bourgeoisie too, in a typically indecisive manner, also sought to create the conditions for its own further development. Ideologically, however, until the 1930s the working class was numerically weak and tended to imbibe the petty-bourgeois anarchist concepts that were so prevalent in Spain, as described and explained by Engels in *The Bakuninists at Work*. In the late 1920s and 1930s, however, under the influence of the world communist movement whose impact was so enhanced by the Soviet Union's October Revolution, the Spanish working class began in a modest way to develop its independent working-class party and its independent working-class line. From modest beginnings, Spanish communism had by the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War become a force to be reckoned with, and throughout the war its strength grew to become the dominant force in Republican politics. Hence the growth and the political maturation of the Spanish working class became an important impulse for social change.

At the same time the hopeless economic decadence and corruption of Spanish society ensured that the working class received a good schooling for revolution as is clear from the following description by Raymond Carr of the situation following the First World War:

*"Whereas the Second World War entailed privation that hid faults in the social structure in a common misery, the war of 1914-18 brought a prosperity that exposed them. As a neutral power, Spain, from 1915 to 1918, experienced boom profits and a spectacular rise in prices. Catalan [textile] mills supplied French soldiers, the disappearance of cheap Welsh coal stimulated feverish activity in the Asturian coalfields ...*

*"Certainly much of this activity represented quick profits rather than sound expansion ... The real secret of Spain's wartime prosperity was the reversal of the terms of trade for primary products and the high prices her textiles could command ... it was reflected, therefore, in the price of the peseta rather than in an industrial break-through. These conditions made possible a repatriation of the national and railway debt and fostered the growth of the power of the great banks.*

*"The war boom and the dramatic price rise unsettled all labour relations. Wages rose rapidly, especially in the Asturian mines and among unskilled workers in Catalonia and the industrial North ... but some workers experienced no gain in real wages ... and this at a time when employers, it was*

*assumed, were making vast 'speculative' profits. These conditions favoured a rapid growth of organised labour at a moment when the war was making Spain ungovernable by parliamentary methods" (p.497-499).*

If the war and rising prices had led to unrest, the end of the war intensified contradictions a thousand-fold:

*"The post-war contraction of the European market brought crisis to Spain. The marginal Asturian mines closed down. The end of a war which had supported an enormous increase in shipping brought correspondingly enormous losses as freight rates fell. Many companies found themselves crippled by the expense of ships built in the boom; the ships were laid up and the Bilbao yards lay idle; the new steel mills found no demand for their products. Landowners, who had brought marginal land into cultivation, allowed it to revert to scrub pasture. Thus agricultural under-employment aggravated unemployment in towns.*

*"Falling prices and unemployment, therefore, lay behind the revolutionary strikes of 1919-23 ... Employers argued that unless they broke the unions, the unions would break them by demands which, if satisfied, would drive them out of business," (p.509).*

Troops were sent to suppress strikes bloodily and mercilessly. From 1919-25 there ensued what Carr terms a Labour War, which was characterised not only by major strikes and by street fighting in Barcelona between workers and police, but also by assassinations of political leaders on both sides. As electors grew more and more angry at the situation in which they found themselves, the ability of *caciquismo* to guarantee a 'safe' election result seemed doubtful. The ruling classes felt that parliamentary democracy had to be suspended, and it was suspended in 1923, by means of a military coup (at which the 'constitutional' monarch of Spain, Alfonso XIII, connived) that installed a military dictatorship under General Antonio Primo de Rivera.

The installation of a military regime did not, needless to say, improve matters. The military were entirely in the pockets of the feudal aristocracy, whose ideology permeated every pore of the officer corps. General Primo de Rivera was no more enlightened than one could in those circumstances expect from a military appointee. He took measures to suppress the masses which were quite mindlessly and unnecessarily reactionary: these measures included suppression of the petty-bourgeois Catalan nationalist movement, suppression of all democratic rights such as the right to trial by jury and the

freedom of the press, and the wholesale persecution, imprisonment and exile of workers' and peasants' leaders. As conflict became ever more acute the ruling classes saw that military dictatorship was making things worse rather than better and decided to make Primo de Rivera into a scapegoat while they tried to think of some other way of saving their privilege and power. Hence both the army and the king turned against Primo de Rivera, largely in an effort to absolve themselves from blame, and by 29 January 1930 the General was forced to resign. He died in Paris later that year.

His resignation came too late to save the monarchy, which followed Primo de Rivera into exile fifteen months later, in April 1931. This followed municipal elections on 12 April which proved the people to be completely hostile to the monarchy because of its support of the military dictatorship. The ruling classes saw the sacrifice of the monarchy as the only way of buying time in which to try to dissipate or divert the hostility of the masses away from the crumbling feudal edifice.

## The Republic

The masses were for the time being diverted. Indeed, they went wild with joy. Then a full general election was held on 28 June 1931, which further confirmed the results of the April municipal elections: 117 Socialists, 93 Radicals, 59 Republican Radical Socialists, 27 Republican Action, 27 Right Republicans, 33 Catalan Nationalists, 16 Galician Nationalists and other anti-Monarchists 28. The Monarchists could only muster 85 seats between them. But in spite of the fact that the government was made up, as a result of these elections, of relatively progressive elements, it proved quite helpless when it came to making any fundamental change in the class nature of the Spanish state.

David Mitchell writes that after the first Prime Minister Alcalá Zamora, was replaced by Manuel Azaña in October 1931, *"he was declared a foe of militarism and the Church. By concentrating on these two issues and making only timid efforts to come to grips with the most urgent problem - land reform - the ill-assorted coalition succeeded over the next two years mainly in exasperating almost every faction. Perhaps only the Catalan nationalists, given autonomy in September 1932, were satisfied with its performance"* (p.16). While what Mitchell says about land reform is true, and is the reason why the masses eventually became disillusioned - and rightly so - with his government, it is also true that he did take a number of progressive measures that scared the daylights out of the reactionary ruling classes: he took away from the Catholic Church its status as a state religion, and a Con-

stitution was drawn up which among other things proclaimed total freedom of religion. Rights were given to women - in particular the right to vote, but also the right to divorce. Ironically, giving the vote to women was partly responsible for Azaña's eventual downfall, as very many women had in Spain (as one would expect in a feudal society) been kept very politically backward and were, in due course, to cast their newly-won votes in favour of candidates approved by their Father Confessors and respectable Ladies of the Manor.

Thinking to save Spain from 'the anti-clerical dictatorship' of Azaña, General Sanjurjo led a plot to overthrow the government. The attempted rising, in August 1932, was easily suppressed, however, for at this stage the ruling classes knew it would be suicide to support it. They wanted to give the petty-bourgeois republicans more rope to hang themselves with, so that in future elections the masses would revert to voting as their masters directed them, having realised the folly of exerting their independence. So the leaders of Sanjurjo's uprising, including Sanjurjo himself, were arrested and thrown into rather comfortable jails.

To some extent the ruling class strategy succeeded. The main problem with Azaña was that he had no economic programme to speak of other than some very mild agrarian reforms that satisfied nobody. Unemployment was rising as the capitalist world spiralled into the economic crisis of the 1930's, and so naturally did the anger of the masses:

*"After a series of peasant risings and industrial strikes a frightened government was forced to call in the Army, the Civil Guard, and a newly-created Republican paramilitary force, the Assault Guards, to maintain a semblance of order. Ironically, Spain became more of a police-ridden state than it had been under Primo de Rivera," (ibid p.16).*

Hence the army's control over the government was consolidated, while the government itself inevitably split, as minorities refused to toe the line under pressure from their supporters. *"When peasant rebels were unceremoniously shot down while military rebels like Sanjurjo were merely exiled or comfortably imprisoned, the worst suspicions of the FAI [Anarchists] were confirmed; and under pressure from his supporters, Largo Caballero began to swing the socialist party and the UGT from a moderate reformism to a more revolutionary stance" (ibid p.16-17).*

In the meantime the fascist Falange (started up by Jose Antonio Primo de

Rivera, a son of the former military dictator) and the extreme right-wing CEDA organised for the purpose of reaping the workers' discontent with traditional workers' organisations. This discontent led to considerable abstention by workers from participation in elections held in 1933. The result was that the party which returned the largest number of seats was the CEDA. The ruling classes still knew it would be asking for trouble to let the CEDA take power, so that organisation was not straight away admitted into government. Instead the government was formed by the opportunist Radical Party led by arch-opportunist Alejandro Lerroux. It was, however, CEDA, holding the balance of power, which called the shots. Mitchell continues:

*"Though the largest party in the Cortes, the CEDA, did not have an absolute majority. But under pressure from its deputies the government, headed by Alejandro Lerroux, either repealed or ignored the 'subversive' legislation of its predecessor. Grandees' estates were restored, peasants evicted, wages cut. All those involved in Sanjurjo's rising were amnes-tied..."*

*"By February 1934 Largo Caballero was saying that 'the only hope of the masses now is in social revolution. It alone can save Spain from fascism'" (p.21).*

Other features of the Lerroux regime which infuriated the workers and peasants were:

1. A marked improvement of relations between the state and the church hierarchy. The Lerroux regime did not dare go so far as to allowing the Jesuits to return to resume their old ideological and financial tyranny, but many of the Constitution's disestablishing reforms were slowed down, and efforts to replace church education with secular education were abandoned.
2. The appointment to high military command of a large number of Monarchists;
3. The repeal of Catalonia's autonomy in October 1934, and the halting of plans to give Galicia and the Basque country autonomy;
4. The amnesty given in April 1934 to the Monarchist ex-member of the Primo de Rivera government, Calvo Sotelo, allowing him to return to Spain, and generally the friendly relations that existed between the government and anti-Republican military and political leaders.

All this time CEDA was demanding to be admitted into government, but insisting on doing so without undertaking support for the Republic. To bring the matter to a head, CEDA called a Conference of Right-wing parties in the thoroughly proletarian town of Covadonga in the mining heartlands of Asturias to discuss its claims. This was equivalent in terms of provocation to the National Front holding a meeting in Southall. It was outrageous and it gave rise to demonstrations throughout September 1934. On the 1st of October, when Parliament returned, CEDA voted against the government, with the result that the government was defeated and had to resign. The President of the Republic asked Lerroux on the 4th of October to form a new government which would include 3 CEDA people in key ministries. This he did and so CEDA acquired the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Agriculture.

### Asturias

Foreseeing the kind of treatment they could expect if these fascists continued in government, and remembering the experiences of the Austrian working class under Dollfuss, the immediate response of the Spanish workers was to go on strike. The socialist/communist-dominated union, the UGT, called a general strike on 5th of October and Lerroux declared a state of war!

For various reasons the strike movement only really came to a head in Asturias. In other places the workers were exhausted by strikes or uncertain what to do because of lack of enthusiasm for the struggle displayed by such 'leaders' as the socialist Largo Caballero and certain Anarchists. But in Asturias the Anarchist-dominated union, the CNT, and the UGT united under the name of Union of Proletarian Brothers. The workers of the solidly working-class Asturian cities were united and determined. Not satisfied with going on strike, workers seized control of the area for several days, hoping to force the government to concede their demands. Instead the government mobilised General Franco and his Moorish troops to put down the rebellion. With the collapse in the rest of Spain of the general strike movement, the defeat of the Asturian rebellion was inevitable.

The worst fears of the workers about the brutality of a CEDA-dominated government were about to be realised. Actually even in Spain where bloody savagery in repression of workers and peasants was a norm, the treatment of the Asturian workers by the Lerroux-CEDA government was unexpected in the degree of its horror. David Mitchell writes:

*"Of about 2,000 killed or wounded before surrender on 19 October, all but ten per cent were rebels: almost as many rebels were killed in the merciless repression that followed. Manuel Montequín remembers that 'in some places Moors, legionaries and civil guards didn't spare even dogs, cats, pigs or calves. They slaughtered everything in sight. I saw it with my own eyes when I was fighting in the village of Villafría. They even cut off the heads of children's dolls.'" (p.24)*

30,000 Asturian workers were taken prisoner and had to be confined in concentration camps because there was no more room in the prisons.

Horrific though these events were, it has to be understood that they laid the basis for the growth of the strength of the working-class movement. They steeled the working class:

*"The use of Moroccan troops and the horrors of the repression forced the bickering Left towards solidarity as nothing else could have done ... The Communists, who had advocated continuing the hopeless struggle (among them Dolores Ibarruri, an Asturian miner's wife later known as La Pasionaria [the passionflower]), reaped the reward in a surge of popularity and membership ..." (p.24).*

Jose Díaz, the General Secretary of the Spanish Communist Party, in a speech made on 2 June 1935 on the importance of the Asturias uprising, spoke for the working-class movement when he said:

*"You all know what happened in October. You know that we rose up all over the country; that Spanish workers, Catalan workers, Basques, Galicians, in short workers from all over Spain took to the streets to halt the advance of fascism by means of a general strike and an insurrectionary struggle. And you also know that the masses fought with admirable courage to overthrow the big bourgeoisie and the landlords and their reactionary and fascist government, and also in order to take power. This last objective was only achieved in Asturias. In Asturias it was achieved through the heroic stance of the proletariat. In Asturias it was achieved because they knew how to march in unity and how to conquer arms. The flag of workers' and peasants' power flew triumphantly over Asturias for fifteen days. The Alliances of Workers and Peasants took power through armed struggle. This glorious action by our Asturian comrades will live forever in the memory of all exploited people. Moreover we must not for-*

*get that over there our brothers and sisters, our heroes, fought in unity and that this is why they triumphed: communists, socialists and anarchists fought as one, shoulder to shoulder. For this very same reason, if we want to triumph in the country as a whole, it is essential that the United Front should be a reality, that unity in action should be imposed, that Workers' and Peasants' Alliances should be created and developed in every part of the country, so that they can direct the struggle of the vast masses to smash reaction and fascism. If we do this, I tell you that it won't be long before we see this government, Gil Robles and all those who defend them, run away, fleeing just as ignominiously as did the bourgeois and the civil guards of Asturias when faced with the serried ranks and the armed might of the miners and workers of Asturias" (p.11-12).*

### **From Asturias to victory in the elections of February 1936**

Asturias forced many of the major petty-bourgeois parties to participate in the Popular Front being promoted by the Communists. It became clear to all that there could be no democracy without a popular front. This was finally agreed between the Republicans, Communists and Socialists on 15 January 1936. The demands it proposed to the electorate were:

1. Amnesty for all those convicted of political crimes after November 1933;
2. Reinstatement of government employees who had lost their jobs for political reasons;
3. Compensation for the families of both revolutionary and government forces who had been killed;
4. Restoration of the sovereignty of the constitution;
5. Implementation of the constitution;
6. Improved public security;
7. Reorganisation of criminal justice;
8. Redistribution of responsibilities within the army and the police and re-writing of disciplinary rules;
9. Less tax and more credit for peasants;
10. Adoption of policies to counter economic depression in industry;
11. Adoption of a programme of public works;
12. The Bank and the Treasury to be placed at the service of national reconstruction;

13. Amendments to social legislation, including the fixing of a minimum wage;
14. Greater investment in secular schooling provision.

The popular front differed from the united fronts of the 1920s in that the former included social-democratic parties, whereas the latter did not. Hence the programmes had to be broad enough for social-democratic parties to accept, leading to accusations from Trotskyites and others that the programmes were bourgeois. But the reasons for including social-democratic parties in the popular fronts have been well explained by Campbell:

*"The lessons of the 1917 revolution, and of the subsequent revolutionary period in Europe, belong to the basic capital of the working class, and to neglect them is to commit political suicide. But those lessons cannot be applied to the present day unless one takes into account the difference in the situation to-day as compared with that of 1917-20 ..." (p.316).*

*"In 1917-20 capitalism was defending parliamentary democracy against the drive of the Socialist revolution, seeking to establish Soviet democracy. To-day, capitalism, in order to maintain itself, is seeking to undermine and destroy parliamentary democracy and dissolve the organs of the working class. To defend democracy in 1917-20 was to defend capitalism against the revolution."*

J.R. Campbell's analysis of this period is not original, but coincides with the line of the international communist movement, expressed by Comrade Stalin in 1930 in *The Right Deviation in the CPSU(B)* where he stressed "the task of intensifying the fight against Social-Democracy, and, above all, the 'left' wing, as being the social buttress of capitalism." And again in his *Report of the Central Committee to the XVI Congress of the CPSU(B)*, Stalin said:

*"By developing an uncompromising struggle against Social- Democracy, which is capital's agency in the working class, and by reducing to dust all and sundry deviations from Leninism, which bring grist to the mill of Social-Democracy, the Communist Parties have shown that they are on the right road. They must definitely fortify themselves on this road; for only if they do that can they count on winning over the majority of the working class and successfully prepare the proletariat for the coming class battles. Only if they do that can we count on a further increase in the prestige of*

*the Communist International".*

But by 1934, it was in many cases not a question of preparing the proletariat for the coming battles. It was a case of organising the proletariat to win the battles that the bourgeoisie was now forcing on it. This is why Campbell continued by saying that: *"To defend democracy in 1938 is to frustrate the capitalist attack on the working class, and is the starting point of any working-class advance to power"* (ibid p.318).

Again his analysis is in line with that of Comrade Stalin and with the international communist movement, as is shown by Comrade Stalin's report to the 17th Party Congress in 1934 where he pointed out:

*"The masses of the people have not yet reached the stage when they are ready to storm capital, but the idea of storming it is maturing in the minds of the masses - of that there can be hardly any doubt. This is eloquently testified to by facts as, say, the Spanish revolution which overthrew the fascist regime ...*

*"This, indeed, explains why the ruling classes in the capitalist countries are so zealously destroying or nullifying the last vestiges of parliamentarism and bourgeois democracy which might be used by the working class in its struggle against the oppressors ...*

*"In this connection the victory of fascism in Germany must be regarded not only as a symptom of the weakness of the working class and a result of the betrayal of the working class by Social-Democracy, which paved the way for fascism; it must also be regarded as a sign of the weakness of the bourgeoisie, a sign that the bourgeoisie is no longer able to rule by the old methods of parliament and bourgeois democracy, and, as a consequence, is compelled ... to resort to terrorist methods of rule" (p.299-300).*

This is why in August 1935 the 7th Congress of the Communist International resolved:

*"Under the conditions of a political crisis, when the governing classes can no longer dominate the powerful development of the movement of the masses, the Communists must emphasise cardinal revolutionary slogans (such as control of production and the banks, dissolution of the police, its substitution by an armed militia, etc.), calculated to shake the economic and political power of the bourgeoisie even more, strengthen the forces of*

*the working class, isolate the conciliatory parties, and lead the masses towards the revolutionary seizure of power. If, in face of such a rise in the movement of the masses, it should be possible and necessary in the interests of the proletariat, to form a government of the united proletarian front or of the popular antifascist front, which will not yet be a government of proletarian dictatorship but will undertake to carry out decisive measures against Fascism and the reaction, the Communist Party must procure the formation of such a government.*

*"The essential premise for the formation of a united front government constitutes a situation with the following factors: (a) when the bourgeois state apparatus is so far paralysed that the bourgeoisie is not in a position to prevent the formation of such a government; (b) when the broadest working-class masses are launching themselves massively against Fascism and reaction without yet being ready to fight for Soviet Power; (c) when a considerable part of the organisations of social-democracy and other parties which form part of the united front is demanding the application of relentless measures against the Fascists and other reactionary elements and is ready to fight in conjunction with the Communists in order to carry out these measures.*

*"In the measure in which the united front government really takes decided measures against the counter-revolutionary financial magnates and their fascist agents and in no way restricts the activities of the Communist Party nor the struggles of the working-class, the Communist Party will support this government in every way. As regards the problem of the participation of the Communists in a united front government, this will be solved according to the concrete situation in each case." (Resolutions, Chap.II. 8.).*

And as Jellinek rightly points out (p.208), *"The concrete situation in Spain at the beginning of 1936 contained all three factors which were 'the essential premise for the formation of a united front government'"*



## The formation of the People's Front and the course of the War

### People's Front

People's Front tactics were adopted by the international working-class movement in the new conditions of the early Thirties brought about by the victory of fascism in Germany and Italy - in the conditions when monopoly capitalism was driving to fascism as the only means of preserving capitalism by doing away with bourgeois democracy. In these circumstances the tactics of the People's Front were two-fold. First it sought to build an alliance of the working class and the intermediate strata of the population in order to defend democracy, preserve peace and to achieve labour-democratic government as a means to this end. Secondly it sought to enable the revolutionary proletariat to win whole sections of the working class and a considerable section of the middle strata over to the programme of complete socialism. But sensible though this tactic would seem, it was the subject of virulent denunciation by certain sections of the 'left', and in particular by Trotsky and his followers. Such a difficult and complicated line of struggle was not to the liking of Trotskyism, which seeks easy solutions to difficult problems in the comfort of ready-made formulas and dead dogma. For Trotskyism it is class collaboration to prevent the middle strata of the population from falling under the influence of monopoly capitalism; it is class collaboration to seek to isolate monopoly capitalists when the latter attempt to drive to fascism at full speed; and the Spanish Civil War, according to counter-revolutionary Trotskyism, is nothing but a wicked example of class collaboration.

In the course of this article it will be demonstrated beyond doubt that the Trotskyists sabotaged the struggle of the Spanish Republic against fascism, but each time this sabotage was accompanied by the utterance of ultra-left slogans such as the following: *"The bourgeoisie cannot be an ally against fascism"*, *"only the proletarian revolution can be a sufficient mobilising force to rouse the population in Franco's rear"*, *"the proletariat is irreconcilably opposed to bourgeois democracy"*, and so on and so forth. Not the slightest attention is paid by this nefarious gentry to solving the real

problems of a particular revolutionary struggle on the basis of the concrete circumstances and relation of class forces attendant upon such a struggle. Instead every concrete problem of the struggle is buried beneath a cataract of empty phrases, in pursuit of what can only be called 'revolutionary' self-isolation and a political stance in which right-wing cretinism interweaves with left-adventurist nonsense and they become inextricably intertwined. Though it must be said that if Trotskyism failed to appreciate the revolutionary nature of the Popular Front, the Jesuits (who were the big bourgeoisie and landowners of the Spanish Catholic Church) did not. Their organ *El Debate* declared on the 4th of August 1935, following the Seventh Congress of the ECCI which had adopted popular front tactics):

*"Communism now seems to us infinitely more dangerous when it disguises itself with the mask of governmental collaboration and offers this collaboration for something more than mere revolt"* (quoted in Jellinek at p 189).

### Circumstances of Formation of the People's Front

Following the defeat of the General Strike and the Asturias rising at the end of 1934, the Spanish working-class movement was driven underground, and 30,000 workers were groaning in Spanish prisons. In these circumstances, on the initiative of the Communist Party of Spain, the workers' front was broadened into a People's Front by an agreement between the Communist Party, the Socialist Party and the Left Republicans. The Anarchists would not join the popular front, but in the end urged their supporters to vote for it because of the promise to release political prisoners. The result was that when the growing crisis in the ranks of reaction led to a general election in February 1936, it resulted in a Popular Front victory, leading to a transformation in the opportunities for the working-class movement. At the time, the Spanish Trotskyists were organised in a sectarian counter-revolutionary outfit which had the audacity to call itself 'the Workers' Party of Marxist Unity' (POUM for short), which was led by Joaquin Maurin (who had earlier left the Communist Party on right-wing nationalist grounds) and Andreas Nin, one of Trotsky's closest colleagues in the USSR between 1926-27.

Although the Trotskyites have always denied the Trotskyist nature of the POUM since it was affiliated to Fenner Brockway's International Bureau for Revolutionary Socialism rather than Trotsky's so-called Fourth International, in all essentials it was Trotskyist - for example in its attitude

to the USSR, to the Popular Front, and to the problems of the Spanish Revolution. Within the POUM was a group calling itself the 'Bolshevik-Leninists' who stood for every dot and comma in the Revelation of Trotsky. The POUM at first denounced the Popular Front, thus strengthening the anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists. But as the idea of the Popular Front "swept all before it," to borrow the apt expression of the then Mr (later Lord) Brockway, who could by no means be described as an advocate of the Popular Front, the POUM entered the alliance for electoral purposes and, having benefited, returned afterwards to its 'freedom of action' by denouncing the Popular Front.

### Tasks after the February elections

After the February elections, the Spanish working class was confronted with the tasks of building their organisations within and without the Popular Front and to strive for a government more to the left than the Republican government which emerged from the February elections. And in this regard, on the initiative of the Communist Party, some real advances were made. Red unions under communist influence went into the UGT, the socialist Trade Union Federation; Socialist and Communist youth formed a single organisation; relations between anarchist and socialist trade union federations improved; negotiations were opened up for the unity of the socialist and communist parties. Hence, it became possible to frustrate the strategy of the ruling classes who had hoped that the masses would turn to the right once they experienced the bungling attempts of petty-bourgeois democracy to govern the country. What was actually happening was making the ruling classes more and more frantic, because they began to see that disillusionment with petty-bourgeois democracy was driving the masses to the left rather than to the right, and beginning to create the conditions for working-class hegemony over the republican movement. This is why the feudal remnants and big comprador bourgeoisie used every trick in the book to strangle this development. And, as ever, they were helped in their efforts by the Trotskyites who carried their reactionary outlook into the heart of the working-class and peasant movement under the guise of the most r-r-revolutionary slogans. Trotskyists of the POUM, for instance, did their best in every way to hamper the process of unification of progressive forces. They encouraged every excess on the part of angry workers and peasants. Attempts to organise and discipline this spontaneous movement were dubbed counter-revolutionary.

Here is how Felix Morrow, the American Trotskyist, expressed approval of

such activities as church burning:

*"The hated clergy, rulers of the 'black two years', were also dealt with in the time-honoured manner of oppressed peasants. Especially after it was clear the Government would not touch the clergy, the masses took matters into their own hands. This consisted not only of burning churches, but of ordering the priests to leave the villages under sentence of death if they returned. Out of abject loyalty to the Government, the Stalinists vilified the struggle against the clergy: 'Remember that the setting fire to churches and monasteries brings support to the counter-revolution' (International Press Correspondence, August 1st, 1936). They were listened to no more than was Azaña. In the province of Valencia, where the workers have now smashed the counter-revolution so decisively, there was scarcely a functioning church in June" (Felix Morrow, Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain, p.40).*

The efforts of the Communist Party to explain that such activity had nothing in common with revolutionary tactics were spat upon. Yet one of the most urgent problems facing the Spanish workers was to win the religious-minded peasants for the Popular Front. Church burning hindered this task. In fact, so harmful was this activity to the cause of the Spanish revolution that before the rebellion, fascist groups were caught red-handed burning churches with a view to blaming the communists.

Another method of fascist and bourgeois provocation was to exhaust the workers by prolonging strikes after all realisable gains had been made. The Trotskyists participated gleefully in such actions aimed at bleeding the strikers white, and in the course of it attacking the government, attempting to cause divisions between the two union federations, as well as between the socialists and communists.

The employing class sought to reply to the wave of strikes and peasant unrest by encouraging fascist organisations to launch a murder campaign against working-class leaders, similar to that launched by the Italian fascists in 1921-22. But the fascist gangs got the worst of it in their confrontations with the workers. The government suppressed the fascist organisations and proceeded with the cleansing of the police. In the meantime the fascists, having lost their chance of seizing control of the state via an electoral victory, vigorously planned to take power via a military coup, a military coup that this time would have the full backing of Spanish ruling circles and of foreign imperialism. Plans were hatched as soon as the Popular Front victory was announced. Generals Franco, Varela and Mola met in Madrid

to agree a strategy. In each provincial capital the military commander was to declare a state of siege and this takeover would be backed, in case of necessity, by the African army. Though Franco and Varela were posted outside Spain (precisely because the government distrusted them), Mola remained on the mainland at Pamplona, from where he was able to gather up and organise the military conspirators.

The government was soon informed of what was going on, but simply did not believe it. A delegation from the Communist Party leadership went to Casares Quiroga, the Prime Minister, with incontrovertible evidence of the plot. Casares Quiroga, however, dismissed it out of hand, claiming that the Communists saw fascists everywhere.

As the generals had adopted a policy of craven hypocrisy towards the government, the government fell for their flattery hook, line and sinker:

*"When Manuel Azaña was elected President of the Republic in May 1936, the first to pay their respects to him and pledge their support were Generals Franco, Goded, Cabanells and Quiapo de Llano, Colonel Aranda and others, all of whom were involved in the plot against the Republic.*

*"The letter which Franco sent to the Minister of War in the Republican government a few days before the uprising is a model of duplicity and dissimulation: 'Those who say the army is opposed to the Republic are lying', wrote the traitor General. 'You are being deceived by people who invent plots out of their own murky passions ...'*

*"At the very time when he wrote this, Franco was receiving and transmitting instructions to other generals involved in the plot; he was up to his neck in intrigue and conspiracy." (Sandóval and Azcárate p.24).*

Similar subterfuges were adopted by Generals Mola, Capaz, Cabanellas and Colonel Aranda: "On July 16, Mola gave General Batet his word of honour that he would not rebel. Two days later he rebelled ... , and arrested Batet" (*ibid*). He also had Batet executed in due course.

## The War

The start of the uprising itself was planned to be executed simultaneously all over Spain at 5 a.m. on July 18th, 1936. As it happened, the first action

was triggered prematurely when the fascists' plans were leaked to a military commander at Melilla (the easternmost city of Spanish Morocco), namely General Romerales. He dispatched troops and police to military headquarters where the rebel officers had already distributed arms. After some to-ing and fro-ing, it was General Romerales who was arrested by the rebels and not the other way round. The rebels declared a state of war, occupied all the public buildings in Melilla in the name of General Franco as commander-in-chief in Morocco ... and arrested the leaders of republican or left-wing groups. As Melilla had jumped the gun, the other two leading cities of Spanish Morocco, Tetuan and Ceuta had to do so also. The mainland uprising began at 5 a.m. on 18 July as planned.

There was only one possible response to the military uprising - as Asturias had shown - namely, armed force. The only force available to the Republicans apart from the one third of the Army and Civil Guard that had remained loyal, was the people. The Popular Front government, however, was a petty-bourgeois government which hesitated in a truly criminal manner before taking this necessary step. According to Sandóval and Azcárate (p. 27), "It is said that a leading city official in Corunna was heard lamenting in this strain when the rebels were about to attack the local government offices: 'if we arm the people now, who will hold them in check later? And if we don't, what will become of the Republic?' ... " As might have been expected, both the Prime Minister, Casares Quiroga, and the President, Azaña, objected to the distribution of arms to the people and it was three days before mass demonstrations led by Communists and Socialists were able to force the government to give in on this point. But by then military garrisons had risen up all over Spain and found themselves with no effective opposition as provincial governments would not distribute arms without permission from the Centre to do so. In those three days no fewer than 25 major towns were seized by the fascists, including Seville, Cádiz, Algeciras and Jerez on the 18th of July; Oviedo, Burgos, Zaragoza, Huesca, Jaca, Pamplona, Teruel, Valladolid, Segovia, Salamanca, Avila, Zamora, Palencia, Cáceres, Albacete, Majorca and Ibiza on the 19th of July; Coruña, Vigo, Pontevedra, Leon and Cordoba on the 20th of July. How many of these towns could have been saved if the people had been armed! In fact, where towns were saved (Barcelona, Valencia, Madrid, etc.) it was where arms were made available to the people because sympathetic soldiers had distributed them or because armed local militias had been organised beforehand. Significantly, these towns included all Spain's big and densely-populated industrial centres where the working-class movement was strong.

## The defence of Madrid

This is how Sandóval and Azcárate describe the situation in Madrid (p.28-9):

*"The greatest fascist danger spot in Madrid was the Montaña Barracks.*

*"On Sunday July 19, the troops there noticed with anxiety that the barracks was filling up with strangers, young civilian fascists who immediately received uniforms and weapons. At midday the fascist General Fanjul arrived, also in civilian clothing.*

*"After making a feeble speech, Fanjul issued a proclamation declaring a state of war in Madrid. Nevertheless, he did not dare to send his troops out into the streets, where the Madrid workers were carefully watching every move the military men made.*

*"Groups of workers ... were posted at corners, in trees and behind low walls. The barracks was besieged. The presence of angry crowds led Fanjul to adopt the prudent tactics of confining his rebellion to the inside of the barracks...*

*"Meanwhile the people went over to the offensive. Detachments of armed civilians, Assault Guards, Civil Guards and loyal troops, with magnificent audacity and heroism, were capturing the barracks at Getafe, Campamento and Vicalvaro.*

*"At dawn the next day the attack on the Montaña Barracks began.*

*" ... By noon the gates of the fascist stronghold were broken down. Madrid had stormed her Bastille."*

Then came the need to prevent fascists marching on Madrid from outside. Here is how Jellinek describes how this was done (p. 313-4).

*"With 10,000 men, the heavy artillery from Segovia and Median and the air squadrons from León and Logroño, General Mola marched into the Sierra Guadarrama towards Madrid. The battalions moved up steadily to the Alto de León, the pass which commands the road from Segovia to Madrid. The rest of the column spread out over the range towards the cement trenches built when Gil Robles was Minister of War.*

*"Then happened one of the most important events in the whole Civil War. Without officers, with almost no ammunition, with no communication and*

*without orders, the workers streamed out in taxis, commandeered cars, buses, anything, into the Sierra to meet a modern army. The Anarchists advanced into the hills armed only with sticks of dynamite wrapped in bundles of newspaper. Later they received a share of the rifles found in the Montaña Barracks.*

*"The Young Socialists rushed towards the Alto de Leon. Almost all their leaders had actually left for their holidays. The organisation of the first column was carried through entirely by the only member of the Executive Committee in Madrid, a 22- year old girl, Aurora Arnaiz.*

*"With wild enthusiasm - and almost nothing else - the first columns stormed into the Passes and held them all except the Alto de León. Even here, the enemy was blocked..."*

## The Fifth Regiment

It was, of course, now necessary to organise on a more permanent basis to resist fascist advances and to retake the areas that the fascists had seized. This was an awesome task when the government had only a third of its army at its disposal. It was the Communists who took the initiative in setting up a Regiment - the "Fifth" Regiment, which was to become the model on which the People's Republican Army was based. The Fifth Regiment was formed in July 1936 in the courtyard of a Madrid Monastery, the Salesian convent of Francos Rodriguez. The people of Madrid observed for themselves in the course of the spontaneous fighting that took place in defence of Madrid how much more effective and efficient their efforts would have been if properly organised and disciplined. As a result they flooded to the barracks to join the Fifth Regiment. They saw that it was the Communists who were prepared and ready to organise militarily in a professional way, and to train and arm its soldiers properly. Every Fifth Regiment unit had, like the Soviet army, a political commissar. Their function was to forge a new kind of discipline - conscious and voluntary rather than imposed, and therefore all the more effective.

Gradually the organisational methods applied to the Fifth Regiment proved so obviously successful that they were extended to new units (Mixed Brigades) and then to the whole People's Army. The success of Communist methods of organising the army is testified to by the praise of the bourgeois historian E.H. Carr, who was never a great friend of the Communists:

*"The first and most important field of Soviet activity was the*

reorganization of the army. Ever since the outbreak of the war the PCE had campaigned for the fusion of the surviving units of the old regular army with the workers' militia, to form a unified 'people's army'. But little was achieved before the arrival of the Soviet advisers and the formation of the international brigades at the end of 1936. The formula of unification was found in the creation, on the analogy of the international brigades, of 'mixed brigades' comprising battalions of both the old army and of the militias. The institution of political commissars, introduced into the international brigade, was extended to the mixed brigades, and then to the whole of the new people's army. Since the institution was based on a Soviet model, it was natural that communists should predominate in it. The corps of commissars became a powerful group, whose influence in military affairs was directed to the management of the army and to the establishment of overall Soviet control. The undivided aim of military efficiency was pursued; this, too, coincided with Soviet and Comintern policy at this time. If any ideology was invoked, it was that of patriotism and not of revolution.

*"The salutary effect of these measures on the fighting power of the republic is beyond question."*

Such was the strength and morale of the Republican People's Army that, without the lifeblood poured by German and Italian fascist governments into supporting Franco, the Republicans would have had an easy victory. Tamames writes (p. 263-4): *"... the battles of the Sierra demonstrated that the republican popular forces, organised in militias, were sufficient to contain the regular army and its auxiliary supporters such as the Falangists and the Carlist militias. But when those same forces were supported by heavier artillery and by Moroccans, Germans and Italians too, that was a different story."*

As we shall see, Franco's troops and equipment were constantly being replenished by international fascism, while the Republican effort was just as constantly being undermined by British, French and US imperialism in pursuance, inter alia, of their policy of appeasing Hitler.

### **Fascist advances**

The Fascists' first major objective was to bring the African troops up to attack Madrid. Their whole strategy was to capture Madrid as soon as possible, because they thought that once Madrid fell, the war would be over. Getting the African troops to the area of Madrid was a problem, however.

They could not be brought over by sea as the Spanish Navy guarding the Straits had remained loyal.

Hugh Thomas describes the means by which navy loyalty was secured (p. 242-3):

*"On the eventful dawn of 19 July, the cruisers Libertad and Miguel de Cervantes were sailing south from El Ferrol. They had been dispatched by the government to seek to prevent the Army of Africa from crossing the Straits of Gibraltar. Later, the only seaworthy Spanish battleship, the Jaime I (the España was under repair at El Ferrol), also left Vigo for the south. Upon all these ships, upon the destroyer Churrucá which had already landed a cargo of Moors at Cádiz, and upon all the warships at Cartagena, the same revolutionary events occurred as on the three destroyers which had been sent the day before from Melilla: that is, the men, stimulated by radio messages from the admiralty in Madrid addressed to them and not to their commanders, overwhelmed, imprisoned and in many cases shot those officers who seemed disloyal. The most violent battles occurred on the Miguel de Cervantes where the officers, in mid-ocean, resisted the ship's company to the last man. (To the laconic question as to what should be done with the corpses - asked by the committee of the ship's company which took over command - the admiralty replied: 'Lower bodies overboard with respectful solemnity')."*

On the 22nd of July 1936 the Spanish fascists begged Hitler and Mussolini for help. Both were more than willing to provide Franco with everything he needed. On the 27th of July 11 Savoia-81 transport planes arrived in Morocco from Italy and on the 28th 20 Junker transport planes arrived from Germany, in the guise of civilian aircraft ordered by a hastily-concocted Spanish-Moroccan transport company. These aeroplanes were used to get 14,000 men, with all their equipment, across the Straits and into mainland Spain.

In a deliberate act of sabotage of the Republican war effort, the US oil companies withheld supplies from the Republican ships which were not allowed to re-fuel. By undermining the Spanish fleet in this way, the Straits were very quickly opened up to the fascists, enabling them to transport the rest of the African troops by sea during the first days of August 1936, in convoys guarded by the German cruiser, Deutschland. The disembarkation of these troops at Algeciras was facilitated, in turn, by the British whose warships from Gibraltar obstructed Spanish Air Force bombing of the

troops' disembarkation.

Once landed the African troops were rushed north. In order to have unobstructed passage for the rest of the war, they had to capture Republican-held territory between the coast and Madrid. They advanced very rapidly, taking Almendralejo on the 7th of August, Mérida on the 8th and Badajoz on the 15th. At Badajoz they met with fierce resistance and suffered heavy casualties before they were able to capture it and take their revenge by rounding up over 2,000 people in the bullring and slaughtering them - one of the bloodiest atrocities of the whole war.

The fascist army continued its drive north on the 20th of August. Thomas notes (p.375) that: *"All the revolutionary collectives formed after the occupations of farms in March collapsed without much fighting, though the collapse was followed by much killing."* This is worth noting, in view of the belief encouraged by the Trotskyites that if one took care of the revolution, the war would take care of itself. What, however, is the point of making revolutionary gains if you have no means at your disposal of defending them?

Assisted by Italian fighter planes which gave the fascists local air control, the African army took Talavera de la Reina on the 3rd of September, well positioned to mount an attack on Toledo and thence on to Madrid. Toledo had been under Republican siege, but the African forces caused the siege to be lifted on the 27th of September, when the fascists took control of Toledo.

In September 1936 the Republicans went on to the offensive in Aragon. The forces concerned were riding high after consolidation of the whole of Catalonia in the Republican side, in which they had won a number of impressive victories. They seemed irresistible. From Catalonia they advanced into Aragón and were able to recapture half its territory before they were brought to a stop. In the view of Tamames, the reason for the loss of impetus lay in the rearguard *"which did not live up to the efforts demanded of it. In Barcelona, while Madrid was short of food, people were living as though there were not a war on. Production was declining because of Anarchist collectivisation. The CNT-FAI, instead of facilitating the advance on the Aragonese territory, to which they had made an extremely important contribution, dedicated itself to making a revolution, and to undermining republican power by creating entities such as the Consejo de Aragón."*

*"The lesson to be learnt from the collapse of the advance in Aragon was clear: to win the war and to carry out a libertarian revolution at the same time was simply impossible."* But this the Anarchists, encouraged by the POUM Trotskyists, totally failed to understand.

This fact brought the Communist Party into collision with the Anarchists and Trotskyites since it was clear to the Communist Party that the War against fascism had to be won first as a pre- condition to any other advance. Hence the Communists called for:

- Full power to the People's Front government;
- The formation of a People's Regular Army under a unified and single command, composed of those officers who had proved themselves in the Civil War.

At the same time the Communist Party went ahead with the building up of the Fifth Regiment as the nucleus of a model army.

This programme was greeted by furious opposition on the part of the POUM, the anarchists and even some left socialists. Yet one of the saddest aspects of the anti-fascist struggle in Spain was the criminal waste of life due to the division of the armed forces of the government into Party militias, whose rivalries and jealousies resulted directly in many an unnecessary military debacle.

This is how a German observer described the situation outside Huesca in the early stages of the Civil War:

*"Outside Huesca there were the Catalan militia, some centuries drawn from the Civil Guard, and other from the POUM, battalions of the FAI and next to them to United Socialists."*

*"In all these groups there were brave fighters. But the various leaders had diametrically opposed notions of the correct tactics. Acting in concert the militia would have swamped Huesca. Each individual group operated separately and was separately defeated."*

*"The socialist group put forward a joint plan of operations, but the neighbouring battalions said that this was superfluous."*

*"One of the next few days you will wake up and find black and red flags flying over Huesca"* (Peter Martin, *Spain between Death and Birth* quoted

in Campbell p.352).

The left socialists, who at the time were in control of *Claridad*, greeted the demand for a People's Army with a unified command with the following declaration:

*"To think that another type of army can be substituted for those actually fighting, and who in certain ways control their own revolutionary action, is to think in counter-revolutionary terms" (ibid p.353).*

After a time the POUM came down in favour of a united army and a unified command. Such an army, however, should be in their view not a People's Army but only a Workers' Army! It should not be subject to either the government of the Republic, nor to that of Catalonia, but to a military council elected from the workers' organisations. Meanwhile the POUM carried on with the most vicious propaganda against the Madrid and Barcelona governments (in both of which, after September 1936, the workers' representatives were in a majority) being allowed to build up a People's Army, stating that the soldiers of such an Army would be like the *"headless automatons who so efficiently click their heels and do or die for Hitler and Mussolini"* and that the communist proposal for a unified command comprising *"the ablest soldiers and the best representatives of the parties and trade unions who enjoy the confidence of the masses"* was tantamount to *"the handing over of absolute control of the Workers' Army to professional militarists."*

While this debate was taking place, Franco was winning battle after battle; while all kinds of anarchist experiments were being conducted in Catalonian industry, the two vitally important essentials for a victory over fascism were being neglected, namely, the creation of a People's Army and the development of a powerful war industry.

On the economic front, the Communist Party advocated that main industries be under state control, but that no attempt should be made to take possession of small shops or workshops. Further, that such state control be used to transform the main industries for war production. The actual situation was that most factories were in the hands of committees of trade unions; there was no co-ordination between the factories; profits earned in these union-controlled enterprises went into union funds; factories in many cases continued to make items such as bath tubs and prams because it was more profitable to do so, when they might have been making munitions for

the war against fascism. While this scandalous state of affairs continued, the POUM was screaming that the government was deliberately withholding arms from the Aragón Front. As a matter of fact, the POUM was supporting those who were preventing the transformation of the Catalan industries to supplying the needs of the Aragón Front. Each attempt by the state to control large-scale industry was dubbed an attempt to liquidate workers' control, undo the gains of the revolution and restore the capitalist class.

The Communist Party's demand for a People's Government representing all the organisations of the working class, with full powers to function without having to refer each decision back to the various organisations for confirmation, was greeted by the POUM as:

*"Aiming to set up a government with dictatorial powers in which the ministers are not responsible to their respective organisations, in short a strong government which will direct all its efforts to crush the creative revolutionary instinct of the proletariat" (La Batalla 16 Dec 16 1936, quoted ibid p.356).*

In the matter of public order, the Communist Party demanded a reorganised police force under government control by dissolving the workers' patrols which, having performed their original task of dealing with the fascists during the July rebellion, had begun to behave in a most arbitrary fashion, as shown by the massacre at La Faterellas. The peasants of this village, during the course of resistance to forced collectivisation of agriculture, shot two Anarchists. A patrol principally composed of Anarchists arrived from Barcelona and killed half the men of the village in terrible revenge. The demand arose for the suppression of such outrages and the POUM declared:

*"This offensive of the Stalinists cannot succeed and will not succeed ..." (ibid p.357).*

Thus it can be seen that the POUM stood for:

- (1) An Army independent of the government, and
- (2) A police force independent of the government, as a first step to the overthrow of the government by civil war.

On the peasant front the POUM, contrary to the demands of the communists and the interests of the Republic's fight against fascism, advocated a policy of forced collectivisation - thus endangering food supplies.

## Exclusion of POUM from Government

In view of the foregoing, unless the POUM sabotage of the policy needed to unite the Spanish people was broken, the organisation of the struggle against Franco would have been completely disorganised. And the first prerequisite for putting an end to this POUM sabotage was to exclude it from government, for how could a party, which denounced day in and day out every decision of the government as counter-revolutionary, be allowed to participate in such a government? This situation, at once tragic and farcical, was ended by the United Socialist-Communist Party of Catalonia precipitating a crisis by demanding the expulsion of the POUM from the government; and after a sharp internal struggle this was agreed. This move of the Communists was denounced by the Trotskyites and their friends as destructive of the unity of the working class. On the contrary, it marked the beginning of the adoption of a united policy in Republican Spain, in place of the sham unity which only impeded resolute action by the government in defence of the Republic against fascism.

## The Second Fascist attack on Madrid

The second fascist attack on Madrid had started, then, in the first week of November, 1936. 25,000 troops were massed 15 miles from Madrid, and troops commanded by Mola captured Getafe Airport on the 4th. Everybody thought the fall of Madrid was just a formality. On the 8th of November, in fact, the Soviet ambassador, Ivan Maiski, met Winston Churchill in London. Churchill was a supporter of Franco, and he and Maiski were getting somewhat heated as Maiski, naturally, supported the Republic. *"Why argue?"* said Churchill, *"In a week's time this disagreeable Spanish problem will have disappeared from the scene ... Franco will be in Madrid in two or three days. Who will even remember the Spanish Republic afterwards?"*

The main fascist offensive against Madrid was led by General Varela, who had just taken over command of the African army from General Yagüe. The slight delay in attacking Madrid was occasioned by a fascist desire to take Madrid on November the 7th as a gesture of reactionary defiance to the Great October Revolution. As we shall see, though, it was the Great October Revolution which triumphed again.

The Republican government, petty-bourgeois as it was, decided it could conduct the war more effectively from the safety of Valencia to where it withdrew. Thus it was left to the militants - the Communists and the United

Socialist Youth in particular - to organise the defence of Madrid. Unhindered by the need to please social democrats, they made an excellent job of it. On the night of 6/7 of November they formed a Junta de Defensa under General Miaja. Hastily put together though this was, the people of Madrid under its leadership, *"standing shoulder to shoulder, formed one immense barrier and marched out and took their places in the trenches round the city."*

*"Madrid will be Spain's Verdun! 'They shall not pass!' proclaimed the Communist Party, and these slogans were taken up by men and women from every walk of life, who offered their lives to save the city."*

*"And the fascists did not pass"* (Sandóval and Azcárate p.72-3).

Shocked and dismayed at their inability to take Madrid in spite of intensive aerial bombing by German bombers, the fascists decided to leave that particular problem aside for the time being. To start with they decided they needed more men and material, so they turned again to their Italian and German quartermasters demanding supplies. The German ambassador informed his government at this time that *"The military situation is far from satisfactory. The military operations carried out up to now have been undertaken by Moroccan shock troops and legionaries. These troops are in danger of being worn out by Madrid, even if they manage to take the capital."* Both the German and the Italian governments concluded that they needed to step up their military support for Franco. Between December 1936 and March 1937, the Italians shipped 100,000 fresh troops into Spain (70,000 Italian and 30,000 Moorish); the Germans sent the specially-formed Condor Legion made up of 6,000 men and 279 combat aircraft, 180 tanks and masses of support artillery.

## Málaga

The new Italian troops were first deployed in the fascist attack on Málaga (chosen by the fascists because Anarchist adventurism had caused chaos within the city administration such that there was nobody to defend it). Málaga fell on the 9th of February 1937 to an army made up of 15,000 Italians, 10,000 Germans, 5,000 Moors and 5,000 Spanish Foreign Legionaries.

Nevertheless the fall of Málaga illustrated the point that the Communist Party had been making: that the Republican armies were inefficient; that what was needed was a single command and a unified army. A huge demonstration in support of these demands took place in Valencia on



February 14th, and the government was obliged to respond to the demands of the people and the needs of the war, despite the fears of the 'respectable' petty-bourgeois Republicans in government that the Communist Party was getting far too influential.

### Jarama

The fascists, meanwhile, decided to abandon any direct assault Madrid for the time being. Instead they decided to head towards Valencia with a view to cutting off the supply lines between the two cities.

40,000 troops, mainly Africans, supported by the tanks, machine guns and warplanes of the Condor Legion, were ordered on the 5th of February 1937 to cross the Jarama river to cut off the road between Madrid and Valencia. By the 15th of February, however, they were forced to retreat by the newly-reorganised Republican Army (Mixed Brigades of regular army and people's militias), the 14th and 15th International Brigades and the support of 40 Soviet warplanes - Moscas and Chatos - that had just arrived in Spain: not as many in number as the German warplanes, but technically superior.

In the battle of Jarama both sides suffered heavy losses (estimated at 10,000 on each side), but the Republicans' victory shows how even a newly-formed People's Army, as yet poorly trained and equipped, could nevertheless triumph in open battle against a long-standing professional army: all that is needed is proper organisation and proper discipline, which thanks to Communist influence was provided.

### Guadalajara

The victory of Jarama was soon to be followed by another splendid victory at Guadalajara against Mussolini's 'volunteers' - a force of 50,000 men, 222 cannons, 108 tanks, 32 armoured cars and 80 warplanes. The Italians thought that Jarama had been lost by the Franco-ites because of typical Spanish incompetence, and they decided *"to give Spain and the rest of the world an exhibition of their strength and strategic wisdom. In March 1937 the Italian Expeditionary Force ... initiated the fourth attack on Madrid, this time through Guadalajara. Relying upon their lavish resources in men and arms, the Italian fascists announced they would seize Madrid and bring down the Republic in a matter of day"* (Sandóval and Azcárate, p.78).

As it was, it was the Italians who were brought down. The battle lasted from the 8th of March to the 21st by which time the Italian divisions had

been routed. The Italians lost 8,000 men (3,000 dead, 1,000 captured, 4,000 wounded) as well as vast quantities of arms and stores.

### The North

Severely mauled in their attempts to encircle and defeat Madrid, the fascists turned next to the North and launched, on the 1st of April 1937, an offensive to capture it. The Basques had finally received their longed-for autonomy after the start of the Civil War, and they were for this reason staunchly Republican. But a number of factors weakened the Northern front:

1. Access to the French frontier (and thus to supplies through France) had been closed off by the fascists seizing Irún (on 5 September 1936) and San Sebastián (13 September 1936).
2. The Northern Zone operated as three distinct semi-autonomous states - the Basque country, Asturias and the Santander area. There was virtually no coordination between them, and they failed to take advantage of the natural defences surrounding the area.
3. There was no effective Republican army in the area. The Basques refused to fight except on Basque territory.
4. According to (Sandóval and Azcárate (p.107) *"Unfortunately the policy of the leadership of the Nationalist Party was not worthy of the efforts, the sacrifice and the heroism of the fighters. The Nationalist Party had complete control over the Basque government, and its overriding desire was to prevent the introduction in the Basque country of the democratic changes that had already taken place in the rest of Republican territory. It refused to form the People's Army. The workers obtained neither social nor political benefits. The Basque government did nothing to gear the country's industrial potential to meet the needs of the war, even when the continued existence of Basque freedom was at stake."*
5. The fascists were able to impose a sea blockade, preventing supplies from arriving by sea.

In spite of all the difficulties faced by the Republicans, the capture of the North was no pushover, and on the 20th of April 1937, it was decided to use saturation bombing in an endeavour to break the spirit of the civilian population. The well-known bombing of Guernica was effected by German planes. 1,654 people were killed and 889 injured as this town of 7,000

people was bombed on a busy market day. Two days later Guernica fell to fascist land forces, as did Durango. On the 30th of April, Italian troops entered Bermeo.

The rest of Republican Spain, itself under constant threat not only from the fascists but also (in Catalonia) from the POUM, could do little to help.

In spite of the overwhelming forces ranged by the fascists against them, the people of the North put up a spirited defence. They sank the Franco-ite cruiser *España*, and they laid siege to Bermeo. Nevertheless the fascists advanced inexorably through heavy fighting towards Bilbao. In Bilbao it proved impossible to organise a Junta de Defensa like the one that had defended Madrid, partly because of lack of enthusiasm on the part of the Basque government, and partly because of a mass exodus of Bilbainos towards Santander. Nothing was organised, not even the dynamiting of the bridges to hinder the fascist advance. Nor would the Basques sabotage the iron mines or the steelworks to prevent them falling into enemy hands. The mistakes of Málaga were being repeated. In mid-June Bilbao fell and the Germans rushed in to take over the iron works. On the 26th of August Santander fell. Finally, despite valiant efforts on the Republican side to create diversions in other parts of Spain, Gijón fell on the 21st of October, thereby bringing to an end the Republican Northern Zone. It has to be said, though, that many fighters fled to the hills from where they maintained an ongoing guerrilla offensive for many years against the Franco regime.

## POUM putsch

While the fascists were destroying republican strongholds in the North, the POUM was redoubling its efforts at sabotage in the republican rear. The reply of the POUM to its exclusion from the government of Catalonia (the *Generalitat*) was to start preparations for a putsch whose sole aim was, and could not have been otherwise, to disorganise the rear of the resistance of the anti-fascist people's forces. The enlarged Central Committee of the POUM, in a lengthy resolution published subsequently on the 16th of December 1936 in its organ *La Batalla*, called for the creation of organs of dual power side by side with the existing government, for the purpose of overthrowing the latter. In other words, the POUM advocated the creation of conditions of civil war in the camp of the popular forces just at a time when Franco was still advancing and winning battles! In its resolution the POUM made indulgent use of 'revolutionary' and ultra-left phrases as camouflage for a policy of opposing every attempt to create a People's

Army and Police force under the Republican government, and of resisting, in the name of socialism (of course), government control of the economy of Catalonia.

And as the government advanced in the direction of achieving these objectives, so necessary for a victorious fight against fascism, the POUM denounced, day after day and in ever shriller tones, these measures as being designed to take away the *"gains of the revolution"*, and to bring back the capitalists and landlords who had fled abroad in an attempt to come to an understanding with Franco. The POUM's calls for an uprising against the government became more frequent and insistent. On 22 March 1937 *La Batalla* said:

*"Because of this our Party unceasingly shows the way; a revolutionary workers' front which will enable us to reach the end of the present stage and install a Workers' and Peasants' Government through the conquest of power ... "*

In April, Andreas Nin wrote:

*"No time must be lost. If we further passively watch the rebuilding of the bourgeois apparatus of power, the Spanish working class will have lost the most extraordinary opportunity that has been given for its emancipation. ... Then it will be too late. We must strike the iron while it is hot."*

On May 1st, Nin declared in an article in *La Batalla*:

*"The working class must cut the threads that bind it to the bourgeois democracy and decisively take the path of the conquest of power. There is still time. Tomorrow it will be too late."*

Andrade, in the same issue of *La Batalla*, declared:

*"The revolutionary working-class organisations must regain their full economic and political independence; they must abandon all kinds of confused co-operation with the fractions of the petty bourgeoisie and of reformism on the political field."*

Another appeal in *La Batalla* on May 1st 1937 said:

*"For two days the working class has been mounting guard. The men in the factories and workshops are watching night and day over the welfare of the Revolution which has been endangered by the weak and crooked policy of the reformists. They are not uncontrollables and provocateurs."*

*They are the conscious sentinels who are watching the rearguard. They are waiting with their rifles ready, for the working class has exhausted its patience. They are tired of so much feebleness on the part of cardboard governments formed on the basis of impotent compromises ... we shall continue on guard henceforth, for we can no longer tolerate the lame policy of the Valencian and Catalan Governments. A policy of compromises. A policy against the working class. A policy of putting the brakes on the Revolution. A policy directed to a new upsurge of the bourgeoisie who were hurled down on July 19th."*

On May 1st we also find this last-minute announcement:

*"All members of our party belonging to the People's Military School who have been appointed to different places in Catalonia or to the fronts are earnestly requested to report to the Executive Military Committee, to Rambla Estadios, headquarters of the Executive Committee."*

On May 2nd La Batalla said:

*"It is no longer a question of achieving immediate demands. Today the task is different. It is the seizure of power by all the workers."*

Also on May 2nd La Batalla printed a statement of the Executive of the POUM which said:

*"We are in agreement with one of the anarchist groups, which is at present in conflict with the Governmental CNT leaders and has issued the following slogans: 'All power to the working class. All economic power to the trade unions'."*

The Anarchist group referred to in the quotation immediately preceding was the so-called 'Friends of Durruti', which was rotten with fascist agents and was later resolutely repudiated by the CNT itself. Having failed to win the anarchist unions for a putsch policy, the POUM moved in the direction of splitting them.

And on the following day, 3rd May 1937, the insurrection that the POUM had been calling for took place.

The situation between April 25th and May 1st was so tense that the government of Catalonia banned all May Day demonstrations. The POUM responded to this ban through its spokesman Nin as follows:

*"The working class must cut the threads which bind it to the bourgeois democracy and decisively take the path of the conquest of power. THERE IS STILL TIME. TOMORROW IT WILL BE TOO LATE."*

No wonder, then, that the government, reading the incitements to insurrection occurring all around it, decided to take action. The criticism of the government is not that it took action to crush the insurrection but that it did not act early enough to stop it altogether. The fascist provocateurs got the conflict they had been working for.

Though the failure of the POUM to secure the support of the anarchist trade union, the CNT, condemned the insurrection to an early defeat, the POUM continued with it - along with two extreme Anarchist organisations, the 'Friends of Durruti' and 'Anarchist Youth' - thus prolonging the purposeless bloodletting.

And so the fascist provocateurs inside and outside the POUM and the organisations of anarchist extremists staged their greatest and most spectacular act of sabotage. But they were crushed. Since, for the purpose of carrying out their putsch, the Trotskyite POUM and the extreme anarchists had withdrawn their troops from the Aragon Front, the latter was weakened at a time of fascist pressure.

### Cleansing the rear

The Spanish people now became convinced of the necessity of cleansing the rear at all costs. The central government of Largo Caballero, which had for so long tolerated the POUM and the anarchist uncontrollables, was brought down and replaced by a government able and willing to concentrate the popular forces for the winning of the war. The new government began its work decisively. It disarmed anarchist 'patrols' and replaced them by responsible police in control of trusted communists and socialists. Compulsory collectivisation and requisitions on the peasantry, interference with small shop keeping - currency smuggling, import of arms for political groups as distinct from the Front, were stopped. The senseless and insane excesses which had for so long disfigured the Revolution and undermined its unity and purpose were ended. But the situation was such that these excesses could not be ended without supplementing persuasion with force. Those who were either provocateurs or had a vested interest in the persistence of anarchy had to be dealt with harshly. It was this process of securing a rear under one authority instead of under groups of squabbling rival committees, of ensuring the organisation of all available resources under one control for the winning of the war against fascism - this noblest of the tasks then facing the Spanish Revolution - that has since been portrayed by the Trotskyist and other agents of the bourgeoisie as the 'terror in Spain'. This gentry 'forgets' to mention the terror of fascism unleashed by

Franco's victory, to which the POUM Trotskyists and the Anarchist Uncontrollables made very large and shameful contributions by their erroneous policy, disruption, sabotage and downright provocation.

### **Spies and Agents Provocateurs**

In the course of its cleansing operations, the Spanish police raided the Peruvian embassy in Madrid. There it discovered the details of a well-organised fascist espionage group in touch with agents at the headquarters of the General Staff, the military medical service, the information services of the War Ministry, the anti-aerial Defence Bureau of the Naval and Air Ministry and a number of government organisations. In one of the documents discovered in the course of the unmasking of this organisation we read the following:

*"On the other hand the grouping of our forces for a rearguard movement proceeds with a certain slowness. None the less we rely on four hundred men who are ready to act. These are well-armed and in favourable positions on the Madrid front; the infiltration of our men into the extremist Anarchist and POUM ranks is being carried out successfully. We need a good propaganda chief who would carry on this work independently of ourselves so as to be able to act in greater safety.*

*"... In fulfilment of your order I went myself to Barcelona to interview a leading member of the POUM. I communicated to him all you had indicated. The lack of communications between yourself and him is explained by the breakdown of the broadcasting station, which began to function again while I was still there. You will certainly have received an answer with regard to the fundamental problem. N particularly requests you and the foreign friends that the person indicated to communicate with him should be myself alone and exclusively. He has promised me to send new people to Madrid to activate the POUM's work. With these reinforcements the POUM will become, as in Barcelona, a firm and effective support for our movement."*

The 'N' referred to in the document cited above was none other than Andreas Nin, leader of the POUM. For this he was arrested, but was later rescued by fascists disguised in military uniforms, who resorted to this measure in the hope of preventing the authorities from securing new and fuller proofs of their crimes.

On October 23rd, the Chief of the Barcelona police, Lieutenant- Colonel

Burillo, gave representatives of the press a detailed account of the discovery of a similar POUM plot in Catalonia.

### **Trotskyites outside Spain**

The activity of the Trotskyites and near-Trotskyite organisations outside Spain was conducted in the same spirit and for the same objectives as of those operating inside Spain. It is therefore hardly coincidental that in the months between October and December 1937, when everyone expected a determined fascist offensive against the Republican government, the Trotskyites redoubled their attacks against the People's government. Trotsky himself came out with a bitter denunciation of the Soviet Union, which was given the widest coverage in the pro-Franco imperialist press and right-wing socialist papers. Said Trotsky:

*"It is necessary to pass to an international offensive against Stalinism."*

And one of the centres of Stalinism against which it was necessary to develop an international offensive was, of course, the People's Government in Spain!

*"The events of recent months in Spain have demonstrated what crimes the Moscow bureaucracy, now completely degenerate, linked with its international mercenaries, are capable of.*

*"In Spain where the so-called Republican Government serves as a screen for the criminal bands of Stalinism, the GPU has found the most favourable arena for carrying out the directives of the Plenum." (It is time to pass to an international offensive against Stalinism, November 1937).*

An international offensive of the dupes of Trotskyism against the Spanish republic, to coincide with the offensive of Franco - such was the contribution of Trotskyism in the most critical period of the struggle of the Spanish people against local and international fascism. The experience of Spain merely confirmed the experience of the Soviet Union as to the counter- revolutionary pro-fascist character of Trotskyism.

### **Brunete**

Republican forces between the 6th and 26th of July 1937 mounted an offensive against the fascists at Brunete, East of Madrid. The aim of the offensive was partly to take the pressure off the Northern front, and partly to encircle and besiege Varela's forces outside Madrid. In this attack the Republicans were at first able to capture Brunete, but on the 25th of July the

Franco-ites took it back after receiving heavy reinforcements from the Northern front, from where the Condor Legion was brought back for the purpose of retaking Brunete. The battle ended with 23,000 Republican losses and over 13,000 losses on the fascist side. The offensive had succeeded in breaking up the fascist front, but the gains were not built upon or followed up. The Basques were unable to build on the respite that they had gained.

A similar offensive was launched in September 1937 at Belchite on the Aragón front, with similar results. Belchite, however, fell to Republican forces on the 6th of September, and they held on to it for several months.

### **Teruel**

The Republicans waited until December to launch their next offensive - at Teruel. 100,000 troops were ranged to recapture Teruel, with a view to disrupting a gathering of fascist forces at Guadalajara that was preparing to attack Madrid. On the 15th of December 1937 the Republicans besieged Teruel. In freezing weather conditions, and beating off a counter-attack from the Franco-ites (which were successfully diverted from their proposed attack on Madrid) the Republicans were, with a great deal of difficulty, finally able to take Teruel on the 8th of January. But again Germany and Italy came to Franco's rescue:

*"... The German ambassador in Salamanca, von Stohrer, sent a telegram to Hitler to say that Franco would be unable to continue the war without a great increase in foreign aid. And so, while the Western powers tightened the noose of Non-Intervention with which the Spanish people were being strangled, Germany and Italy again increased their deliveries of war material and the despatch of entire military units to Franco. This enabled him to organise a big offensive ... On February 22 he recaptured Teruel. On March 9, thanks to his overwhelming superiority in aircraft, artillery and other equipment, he succeeded in making a breakthrough on the Eastern front and started to advance towards the Mediterranean."*

On April the 15th, the enemy reached Viñaroz on the Mediterranean coast, cutting Republican territory in two. But the River Ebro stood between the fascists and Catalonia; and the river Segre between them and Valencia, so the Republicans still had every hope of forcing the fascists to retreat.

Unfortunately, however, the defeat at Teruel broke the spirit of some sections of the petty-bourgeois supporters of the Republic. For instance, the

Socialist Minister of War, Indalecio Prieto, who had always been sceptical (or nervous?) of the abilities of a People's Army, became openly defeatist and had to be removed from office. The people of Spain, however, were in no mood for surrender. For one thing, the events of the war had shown them how Franco could be expected to treat them if they did surrender, and the feeling was that one might as well die fighting.

On April 20, 1938, the Republican government put forward an agreed peace offer to the other side - a 13-point programme for a way to end the war without reprisals. But to get the offer accepted the government needed to put more pressure on Franco to convince him of the futility of fighting on. Hence on 25 July 1938, the Republicans again went on the offensive, crossing the Ebro in the dead of night to recapture lost territory to the South of Catalonia. The fascists had far superior forces, outnumbering the Republicans in the order of 12-1 as regards heavy artillery, 15-1 in bomber planes and 10-1 in fighter aircraft. In spite of that, the Republicans won a magnificent victory and were able to hang on to their gains for 3 months.

Meanwhile Hitler and Chamberlain were talking at Munich (29-30 September, 1938), and, as is well-known, Chamberlain made it known to Hitler that he was in no immediate danger from his imperialist rivals. Hence Hitler was encouraged to step up his aggression. He knew that in Spain, for instance, he could put the boot in and France, Britain and the UK would not lift a finger to stop him. On the 30th of October the Spanish fascists, then, launched a counter-attack against the Republican army of the Ebro, who by the 18th of November were forced back across the Ebro. According to Hugh Thomas, the Republicans lost 70,000 men in the fighting - 30,000 dead, 20,000 prisoners - including three quarters of the remaining members of the International Brigades. Fascist losses were also high at 33,000.

### **The Fall of Catalonia**

Following defeat at the Ebro and the renewed vigour of the German fascists towards pressing home their advantage in Spain, it was only a matter of time before Catalonia was taken. The French had closed the border on the 12th of June 1938 so that Catalonia could be starved of supplies. Aeroplanes provided by the Soviet government, 500 pieces of artillery and 10,000 machine guns were held up in France. Franco had 340,000 men at his disposal and abundant arms continuously being supplied by his allies. *"Throughout November and December 1938 convoys of Italian and German*

*ships constantly arrived at the ports in Franco's zone, bringing thousands of troops and military technicians and thousands of tons of war material".* (Sandóval and Azcárate p.127).

The allies had only 120,000 ill-equipped men, of whom only 37,000 had rifles.

The fascist attack on Catalonia started on 23 December 1938. Thanks to heroic fighting by the Republican Army the advance was retarded, but could not be contained. Tarragona fell on the 14th of January 1939. The government moved from Barcelona to Gerona. Barcelona fell on the 26th of January. Catalonia having fallen, the British government decided to recognise the Franco regime as the legitimate government of Spain: the purpose of this was to keep in Franco's good books in order to have some influence over Spain when the war was over.

After the fall of Catalonia, the Republic's resistance fell apart. The non-Communists in the government tried to save themselves by agreeing to surrender while the Communists still saw merit in hanging on, with no fewer than 700,000 Republican troops available in the remaining Republican areas and a highly volatile international situation which might at any moment turn to their advantage. Socialists however, who had for quite some time been dragging their feet - partly through defeatism, but also because they were beginning to fear that victory in the war would mean Communism, such was the prestige that the Communists had gained through their conduct of the war, and Communism they did not feel was worth fighting for - turned against the Communists. Fighting started between the former allies of the Popular Front. Casado, the Socialist leader, who had been in contact with Franco for some time to discuss terms of surrender, removed all Communists from their military posts. 12,000 Communists were thrown into prison, many to be handed over in due course to Franco. At this point the war was lost.

On Tuesday 28 March 1939, the fascists entered Madrid and by 30 March, the whole of Spain had fallen.

*"The war was over. But for Spain there came the terrible peace of the scaffold, the firing squads at dawn, the inquisitorial tortures, the ruthless extermination of Communists - yes, and Socialists, Anarchists and Republicans as well.*

*"Torrents of blood extinguished the beacon of heroism that had burned so*

*brightly for two years and eight months, illuminating the world and forging the spirit of resistance among the peoples."* (Sandóval and Azcárate, p.147).

## Non-Intervention

Finally, a few words on non-intervention. The Spanish Civil War, it must be appreciated, was the dress rehearsal for the Second World War. Germany and Italy had an interest in Spain partly because of its strategic position from the point of view of control of the Mediterranean, and partly because of its mineral resources which made it an attractive asset to an imperialist power with military ambitions. Moreover, Spanish mineral wealth was overwhelmingly British-owned and since the British were the imperialist rivals that Germany needed to dispossess, it was desirable to deprive the British of their Spanish influence.

German and Italian intervention in the Spanish Civil War, therefore, was one of the first steps taken by the fascist regimes of those countries to attack the imperialist interests of the relatively enfeebled British and French imperialists. Being enfeebled the latter were not, however, keen to take on the frenzied might of their challengers. British and French policy, therefore, evolved to try to persuade Hitler to make a priority of attacking the Soviet Union, thereby weakening both their enemies at once and leaving them very much in control of the situation.

Stalin and the CPSU, fully appreciating where British and French imperialist interests lay, were concerned above all to frustrate these plans and, insofar as it was possible, to keep the Soviet Union out of the war. To fight any war at all, however, certainly against an enemy as powerful as the Soviet Union, or even British and French imperialism, Hitler and Mussolini had to gobble up as many sources of supplies of men and materials as it possibly could before the outbreak of the major hostilities. In this context Spain looked very appetising, having both a large population and valuable resources that could be mobilised for war.

This is why right from the start of the rebellion of the fascist officers, Hitler and Mussolini supported them to the hilt. But paralysed by hopes that Hitler might be persuaded by kindness and understanding to attack the Soviet Union first, the British and French failed to take the obvious step of supporting the fascists' opponents. They even went out of their way to sabotage the fascists' opponents, which must have been a source of great

amusement in Berlin and in Rome.

As far as the Soviet Union was concerned, it was quite aware that every one of the fascist hyenas was its enemy, and a strong enemy at that. Its allies were the peace-loving working classes and peasant masses of Europe who had not the slightest interest in the way the imperialist bandits shared the loot or in dying in a war to redivide that loot.

This is why the Soviet Union did wholeheartedly support the cause of the Spanish people, notwithstanding the danger that this might in fact draw it into a war with Germany that it was anxious to put off for as long as was possible. The people of Spain had a loyal friend in the Soviet Union, which could be relied upon to do everything in its power to promote their cause and to frustrate the designs of every imperialist power. As Stalin said in a telegram sent to Jose Diaz on the 15th of October, 1936:

*"The toilers of the Soviet Union only fulfil their duty when they give aid to the Spanish revolutionary masses. They are aware that the liberation of Spain from the persecution of Fascist reactionaries is not a private cause of Spaniards, but a universal cause of the whole of advanced and progressive mankind. Fraternal Greetings."*

As we have seen, if the fascists won in Spain, it was only because of the massive aid received from Italy and Germany, aided and abetted by the sabotage of the Republican effort by the British, French and Americans.

This sabotage was coordinated through the fraudulent front of a 'Non-Intervention Committee' (the London Committee), which by appealing to peace sought to mobilise ordinary people meekly to accept the aggression being meted out to their class brothers and sisters in Spain. As the American historian F.J. Taylor pointed out, the US, France and Britain were "collaborators with the Axis" and thus committed "one of the blackest crimes against freedom in modern times."

According to international law, when civil war breaks out all non-combatant countries have an obligation to supply the legal government of the country concerned. Through the guise of 'non-intervention', Britain and France secured an EMBARGO on the supply of materials to the legal government of Spain while the Germans and Italians blatantly supplied the rebels with as much as they wanted.

In theory the non-intervention was organised, on the initiative of the French social-democratic Popular Front government (headed by the arch-opportunist Leon Blum) taken on the 6th of August 1936 to propose a non-intervention agreement. This agreement was, in the event, signed by 27 European states, who agreed not to send arms directly or indirectly to either side in the Spanish conflict. Among the signatories were - Germany and Italy, who, as we have seen and as later became obvious, had no intention whatsoever of abiding by it. It was also signed by the Soviet Union, a fact that set off the predictable chorus of cries of Betrayal from the Trotskyites and other counter-revolutionaries. But the Soviet Union signed in the hope that it would be possible through this Agreement to put pressure on German and Italian fascism to stop their intervention in Spain or to mobilise the other countries to stand up to German and Italian breaches of the agreement. In the event none of these possibilities materialised, since within 3 months it became clear that the whole agreement was a fraud from start to finish, whereupon the Soviet Union, after several warnings to the London Committee, withdrew from it. These facts are evidenced by official letters sent by the Soviet Union to the London Committee on the 7th and 23rd of October 1936.

The first of these read: *"The Soviet government cannot, in any event, consent to the Non-Intervention agreement being transformed by certain of the parties into a screen intended to conceal the military aid being given to the rebels against the legal Spanish government."*

*"Consequently the Soviet government finds itself obliged to state that if these violations do not cease immediately the USSR will consider itself freed from any obligations ensuing from the 'Non-Intervention' agreement."*

The second read: *"The Soviet government cannot feel itself bound by the Non-Intervention agreement to any greater degree than any of the other parties to that agreement."*

And thenceforth the Soviet government did all it could to supply the Republicans with everything they needed, from men (through the International Brigades who sent some 35,000 men to Spain), to military advisers from its own army, to armaments and food.

And in the long run the Soviet people benefited from the unstinting aid they gave to the Spanish people. For surely the heroism of the Spanish people when organised by Communist methods to fight the fascist armies and to

win against enormous odds must have been instrumental in convincing Hitler that it would not be a good plan to take on a Communist state as the British and French were urging him to do. Hence the heroism of the Spanish people were an important factor in the ultimate defeat of fascism in Europe.

## **The Stalin Society**

The aim of the Stalin Society is to defend Stalin and his work on the basis of fact and to refute capitalist, revisionist, opportunist and Trotskyist propaganda directed against him.

The activity of the Society includes (a) the study of and research upon his writings and actions; (b) the translation of material on these subjects into and from other languages; (c) the publication of material relating to such study and research; (d) the celebration and commemoration of important occasions in Stalin's life; (e) the establishment of contact with other groups and individuals with a view to taking a common stand on issues and the joint organisation of future activities; (f) the establishment of contact with similar societies and groups abroad with a view to mutual benefit from experience and collaboration.

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# The British Empire

The aim of this book is to provide a comprehensive survey of the British Empire, from its origins in the 16th century to its decline in the 20th century. It covers the political, economic, and social aspects of the Empire, and the role of Britain as a world power.

The book is divided into three main parts. The first part, 'The Origins of the Empire', discusses the early years of British expansion, from the 16th to the 18th century. The second part, 'The Height of the Empire', covers the period from the 18th to the 19th century, when the Empire reached its greatest extent. The third part, 'The Decline of the Empire', discusses the period from the 19th to the 20th century, when the Empire began to shrink.

The book is written in a clear and concise style, and is suitable for both students and general readers. It includes a bibliography and an index.