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Another Spain

Anti-Fascist Action

AFA's magazine Fighting Talk had a special on the Spanish Revolution. This is the introduction to that special, which also included 'The People Armed', 'The Rattle of the Thompson Gun', and 'Forgotten Heroes'.

In this issue of *Fighting Talk* we feature a number of articles that look at events surrounding the Spanish Civil War/Revolution. The courage and commitment of the men and women who went to Spain to fight with the International Brigades is well known, and in an interview with a member of the Connolly Column we get an idea of what inspired the thousands of volunteers, who came from fifty two countries. Over 2,000 volunteers left Britain to fight fascism in Spain, over 500 were killed. Despite the important military role the International Brigades played in the actual war, they were not the driving force. There wouldn't have been a civil war if the armed workers' militias hadn't resisted the military coup in the first place. The militias, like AFA, were not fighting the fascists to maintain the status quo — they had their own radical agenda. The article "The People Armed" is all about this revolutionary movement and shows what the militants were fighting for, rather than just what they were fighting against.

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Conventional history tends to be very black and white — there was a civil war, it lasted from 1936–1939, the fascists won, and that was the end of it. This isn't true. After the compromisers had sent the International Brigades home, and the war was lost, the people who had started the resistance to the fascists in the first place, the militant working class movement, carried on the fight. Despite the mass arrests, mass executions (over 200,000), and mass exodus of refugees, the Resistance fought on. This story is largely unknown but the two articles — “The Rattle of the Thompson Gun” and “Forgotten Heroes” — throw some light on this period. The reason this section of the magazine has been called “Another Spain” is partly because it shows what the militants were fighting for and also because it investigates some aspects of the struggle that aren't widely known. The capitalist crisis that gripped Europe in the 1920s and 30s saw strong working class movements threaten the established order in many countries — and fascism was unleashed as the cutting edge of counter-revolution. In Italy fascism was firmly entrenched after Mussolini took power in 1922; by 1933 Hitler's Nazis controlled Germany; in Britain Mosley's Blackshirts were attacking Jewish immigrants and the Left; in Ireland the Blueshirts represented the ultimate reaction. In Spain the situation was no different, and 60 years ago the struggle between the forces of Left and Right erupted into open warfare.

In 1931 the Spanish king was forced to stand down and retreat into exile, and a republic was established. The next five years saw the balance of power swing between the conservative reactionaries of the Spanish establishment and the progressive working class movement. In 1934 a working class uprising in Asturias was only defeated after the bloody intervention of the Spanish army.

In February 1936 the Popular Front (made up of liberal and left wing elements) was elected to govern Spain, which led to an increase of activity by working class militants and poor

peasants. The rulers of Spain could see their power (and property) slipping away and on the 17th July a group of extreme right-wing Nationalist generals made their move, starting with a military rising in Morocco which spread immediately to the mainland. Working class militants armed themselves and the military coup was smashed in Barcelona and Madrid, although the generals' troops did seize large areas.

Initially the Nationalists put much emphasis on capturing the capital Madrid, but after failing to break through at the battles of Jarama (Feb.'37) and Guadalajara (March '37) Franco moved on to other priorities, launching his northern offensive against Asturias and the Basque country. This included the infamous destruction of Guernica in April '37 by German planes. The Republican army launched attacks on the Aragon Front in May 1937 to try and deflect Nationalist troops from their successful campaign in the north, but this failed and by August 1937 the Nationalists had conquered northern Spain and the Basque country. The Nationalists' air and artillery superiority, supplied by Hitler and Mussolini, was proving unstoppable, and by April 1938 Franco's forces reached the Mediterranean coast near Valencia, splitting the remaining Republican controlled area in half.

The last major military initiative by the Republican forces was at the battle of the Ebro (July – Nov.'38) but the Nationalist counter-attack was successful. In a failed attempt to get the German and Italian support withdrawn, the Republican government ordered the International Brigades to disband, and they left in November 1938. In January 1939 Barcelona fell, followed by Madrid in March. The Spanish Republican army unconditionally surrendered to Franco's fascist forces on 1st April 1939.

Throughout the war the role played by the international powers influenced the eventual outcome. If the war is seen as one between democracy and fascism, the western 'democracies' were noticeable by their absence. The Conservative

government in Britain, with Labour support, was committed to a policy of non-intervention, as were the French, so in other words while Franco received massive military aid from Germany and Italy the anti-fascist forces were starved of weapons. The reason is clear. The British and French governments feared a 'Red Spain' and wanted the strong Spanish working class movement smashed, and were determined to avoid confrontation with the fascist powers.

Italy and Germany exploited the situation fully, by the end of July 1936 Italian planes had already been supplied. In December '36 3,000 Italian Blackshirts arrived in Spain, and the number of Italian troops soon rose to 50,000. Hitler sent communications equipment, anti-aircraft guns, infantry, tanks, tank instructors and the most effective air group – the Condor Legion. Mexico and the Soviet Union were the only foreign source of arms to the Spanish Republic, but Stalin's international maneuverings meant that by 1938 Soviet supplies started to dry up in line with the moves towards a German – Soviet non-aggression pact. For political reasons a lot of Soviet aid was withheld from the anarchists and the POUM, and the lack of military equipment is well illustrated by the fact that in the final Catalan offensive the anti-fascist forces only had 37,000 assorted rifles between them.

Apart from the militant anti-fascists of the Spanish working class and their supporters virtually everyone else was satisfied with the outcome of the war. Britain and France had managed to avoid getting drawn into a conflict with the Fascist Axis, who had gained valuable experience in perfecting the techniques of modern warfare, and capitalism was safely restored on the Spanish peninsula. The way the Spanish revolution was first isolated and then smashed leaves us with important lessons to be learnt today.