

Reflexions on the Spanish Revolution of 1936

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In the vast body of literature surrounding the Spanish Civil War, it is often presented as a struggle between democracy and fascism. This view is almost hegemonic among sectors of the left, many of them historically influenced by Stalinism. But such an approach clashes with the sociopolitical reality of Spain in the 1930s.

The democratic failure

The social, economic and political polarisation in the Spanish State in the years prior to the Civil War and the consequent failure of bourgeois democracy determined the outbreak of both the armed conflict and the revolution.¹ The electoral victory of the Popular Front in February 1936, instead of opening a new stage of social reforms, highlighted the inability of republican democracy to defeat the dominant classes determined to avoid any challenge to their power. The victory of the Popular Front unleashed a new wave of mobilisations by the working masses, both urban and rural, which the Republican government, as in 1931, attempted to repress. For its part, the right wing abandoned any hope of destroying Republican democracy from within and opted for a military coup.

The future of the Republic itself depended not only on its right-wing enemies, but also on the workers' movement. In the case of the socialists, the revolutionary faction, led by Largo Caballero, refused to repeat the experience of 1931-1933 and insisted that the PSOE (social-democratic Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) not participate in the new government, leaving the republicans with the task of "finishing the bourgeois revolution." This schematic vision of Marxism meant that Largo Caballero and his followers lacked a strategy for seizing power and remained passively waiting for the Republicans to pave the way for a socialist government. In contrast, the more social democratic faction of Indalecio Prieto, supported by the Communist Party of Spain (PCE), defended the need to return to a coalition government to complete the Republican reformist programme. It was this latter position that was adopted by the socialist movement in the midst of the Civil War. The left wing of the PSOE, having lost part of its base to Stalinism—especially the Socialist Youth (FJS), which would unite with the Union of Communist Youth to found the Unified Socialist Youth (JSU)—was overtaken by events and ended up accepting the same position as its social-democratic rivals.

On the eve of the Civil War, the anarcho-syndicalist National Confederation of Labour (CNT) continued to wield considerable influence within the Catalan labour movement—the most important on the Iberian Peninsula—and maintained a significant presence in Andalusia, Aragon, and the Valencian Community. Furthermore, in Asturias and Madrid, where socialists had historically held a majority within the labour movement, the CNT possessed a considerable strength.²

Activists and union leaders were divided between anarcho-syndicalists and various more purely anarchist sectors, the most important being the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI). All these tendencies shared a common characteristic: apoliticism. However, weakened by repression and ideologically divided, during the first months of 1936, the CNT adopted a less intransigent position in its relations with the political left, which can be considered a prelude to its direct participation in the government during the war.

¹ On the "failure" of the Republic see: Maurin (2023) and Durgan (2021).

² Amongst the extensive bibliographies on anarchism before and during the Civil War, the following can be consulted: Peirats (1989), Casanova (2010) and Ealham (2026).

In the February 1936 elections, in order to secure the release of its thousands of imprisoned members, the CNT did not promote an abstention campaign, as it had done in 1933, and its "freedom of the vote" was a factor contributing to the Popular Front's victory. In May 1936, the CNT held its Fourth Congress in Zaragoza, a landmark in the CNT's history, both ideologically and for its apparent call for workers' unity. Shocked by the repression of the Asturian commune in October 1934, the delegates advocated for a revolutionary alliance with the social-democratic General Union of Workers (UGT) as a first step toward social revolution. But the Congress also revealed the limitations of the CNT's political openness. While there was a long and abstract debate about the nature of libertarian communism, there was no discussion of the current situation or the threat of a military coup.

The newly formed POUM (Workers' Party of Marxist Unification) also advocated workers' unity, but through the reorganisation of the Workers' Alliances that had played a key role in the revolutionary movement of 1934. The POUM contrasted the Workers' Alliance, as an essential element for overcoming capitalism, with the Popular Front, a political alliance subordinated to petty-bourgeois republicanism.

At the same time, it insisted on the need for a large revolutionary party, a missing element that doomed the 1934 movement to failure. The new party hoped to win over the most radical sectors of the socialists, especially the youth. The fall of the Federation of Socialist Youth under Stalinist influence in the spring of 1936 dealt a fatal blow to that hope.

Revolution

The revolution that erupted in response to the military uprising in July 1936 marked the end of the revolutionary cycle that had begun with the Bolshevik victory in 1917. In just a few days, as Andreu Nin would say, the working class, arms in hand, had resolved "the fundamental problems"—the agrarian problem, the Church problem, the Army problem, and the Catalan problem—that "the liberal bourgeoisie" had failed to resolve in five years. The working class was not fighting for a democratic republic, but for a socialist revolution.³

The cornerstone of this revolution was the collectivisation of industry and land: a unique experience of popular self-management in the history of the labor movement. In many cases, the takeover of companies or land was a spontaneous process, with the subsequent support of workers' organisations.⁴ Urban collectivisation went further in Catalonia, where, under the CNT's control, half of Spain's industry at the time was concentrated. In the Valencian Community, collectivisation was also widespread, especially in agriculture. Besides those in Valencia, the best-known agricultural collectives were those organised by anarchists in eastern Aragon. And although the presence of the CNT militias in the area was important for its development, the initiative was often local, especially in towns where the establishment of libertarian communism had been declared during the anarchist uprising of December 1933. Agricultural collectivisation also spread through Andalusia and Castile.

The revolution also meant the widespread occupation of urban space, with the seizure of buildings and their conversion into headquarters for anti-fascist organisations, schools, hospitals, and community restaurants. Furthermore, for many women, the revolution and the war meant "a

³ Durgan (2025) pp. 88-89.

⁴ The most complete history of the collectivisation process remains: Bernecker (1982).

break” from their “traditional confinement to the home and gave them, for the first time, collective public visibility.”⁵ They first entered political activity by joining anti-fascist women’s organisations en masse, working in factories and, in a minority of cases, participating in the armed struggle.

At the heart of all resistance to the uprising were the workers’ organisations, and not only where the social revolution was strongest. Trade unions and workers’ parties organised militias to fight the rebels throughout the Republican zone. In the summer of 1936, there were approximately 150,000 militiamen fighting on various fronts. Beyond the revolutionary centres of Catalonia and the Valencian Country, in other areas trade unions intervened in industry, establishing different forms of workers’ control.

The Popular Front in the face of war and revolution

Faced with the rebels’ military superiority, heavily supplied by the fascist powers, the main parties of the Popular Front—Republicans, Socialists, and Communists—argued that it was necessary to present the war as a defense of bourgeois democracy in order to maintain the support of the middle classes and to secure military aid from Western democracies, primarily Great Britain and France. This position meant suppressing, or at least concealing, the social revolution underway in a significant part of the Republican zone.

Both at the time and in historiography, it was considered that the middle classes, or at least a sector of them, were represented by the left-wing republican parties. The fact that these parties played a central role in the republican governments of 1931 and 1936 has reinforced the idea of their political importance. However, their social and electoral base was ephemeral. Outside of Catalonia, the only place where it had massive support (Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya, the Republican Left of Catalonia or ERC), the social base of left-wing Republicanism was quite limited, basically among the urban petty bourgeoisie and very specific sectors such as teachers.

The electoral results during the years of the Republic clearly illustrate the limitations of their support. In 1931, excluding Catalonia, 111 left-wing Republican deputies were elected in coalition with the PSOE and the Radical Party, and in 1936, 129 were elected as part of the Popular Front. In 1933, without being part of a state-level coalition, they only obtained 14 seats (compared to 21 in Catalonia), 9 of them thanks to local agreements with the Radicals and 5 due to the support, also local, of the PSOE.⁶

Internationally, the Republic’s seemingly natural allies—the liberal democracies, with the notable exception of Mexico—not only abandoned the legitimate government by refusing to send it the weapons necessary for its defense, but also promoted the farce of a policy of “non-intervention” that resulted in the near-total isolation of loyalist, republican Spain. The participation of Germany and Italy in the Non-Intervention Committee was the clearest example of the cynicism of this infamous policy.

In reality, neither France nor Great Britain had any interest in supporting a seemingly weak government in a context of significant political and social radicalisation. The French Popular Front government, cornered by the ruling classes, the military leadership, and British imperialism, quickly abandoned any intention of sending arms to the Republic. The British government

⁵ Nash (2006) p. 92.

⁶ Durgan (1992).

considered Manuel Azaña, Prime Minister of the Second Spanish Republic (1931–1933 and 1936), organiser of the Popular Front in 1935 and the last President of the Republic (1936–1939), to be the “Kerensky of Spain” and, when the Civil War began, believed that “Bolshevism” was about to seize power. Statements among its ministers abounded regarding how Franco was the best option to protect British imperial and capitalist interests.⁷

Stalinism

With the degeneration of the Russian Revolution and Stalin’s rise to power, the communist parties had become completely subordinate to Moscow’s political needs. The Comintern’s shift towards the Popular Front policy was primarily driven by the need to contain the threat posed by Nazi Germany to the very survival of the USSR. This threat made it urgent to create an international alliance with democracies, especially France, against the fascist powers. Thus, the Popular Front became the national expression of Soviet foreign policy. The uniform adoption of this new orientation by communist parties during this period was not based on any analysis of the sociopolitical situation in each country.

However, in contrast to the disastrous previous line that had identified socialist parties with social fascism and considered them the greatest danger to the working class, the Popular Front was in line with the need to confront the threat of the extreme right and led to a surge in the influence of communists in many countries, including the Spanish State. With the outbreak of war, the PCE became the most powerful political party in the Republican zone. By mid-1937, it had reached 300,000 members—ten times more than before July 1936—while the Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya (Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia or PSUC) —its Catalan branch—had more than 50,000 and the Juventudes Socialistas Unificadas (Unified Socialist Youth or JSU, the party’s youth group), around 250,000.

This surge in influence was due to several reasons. The staunch defense by the communists of the Popular Front attracted newly politicised people to the party who opposed the military uprising and fascism, including sectors of the petty bourgeoisie frightened by the excesses of the revolution and the attacks on private property. By advocating military centralisation and strict discipline, the communists also gained the support of many professional soldiers who had remained loyal to the Republic. But above all, military support for the Republic from the USSR contributed to the rise in the prestige of the PCE.

One factor, which is often overlooked in explaining the growth of communist influence, was the enduring image of “the party of the Russian Revolution” and their self-identification as revolutionaries. The fact that the PCE, despite its commitment to the defense of republican democracy, spoke of the need for a “democracy of a new type”, a “popular revolution” and a “national revolutionary war” was a reflection of the political and social realities in the republican zone. The widespread use of Soviet imagery and revolutionary methods to mobilise the population of Madrid in November 1936 is another example of the seemingly confused relationship between communists and bourgeois democracy. Hence, it was not difficult to conclude that the Popular Front was a necessary tactical interlude, a preliminary phase, to the establishment of socialism.

⁷ Moradiellos (1996).

Such ambiguities help explain the appeal of Stalinism to a significant sector of the Federació de Joventuts Socialistas (Socialist Youth Federation or SYF) which joined the PCE.⁸

Ultimately, only the PCE (and, in Catalonia, the PSUC), with its discipline and Leninist structure, and not the liberal and reformist sectors, was able both to end the social revolution underway in the republican zone and to politically direct the war effort of the Popular Front.

Anarchism in the face of power

After the defeat of the military uprising in almost two-thirds of Spanish territory, power was exercised by countless committees, many of them from the Popular Front, with the direct participation of the CNT. In Catalonia, the committees reflected the influence of the revolution. Largely referred to as “revolutionary” or “anti-fascist” committees, their composition depended on the local strength of the various organisations. Generally, their members were appointed by their organisations; few were elected by the local population.⁹

To overcome the lack of coordination and the fragmentation of power in the first weeks in the Republican zone, different types of committees were organised at the regional and provincial levels, almost all supported by Popular Front organisations at the local level, with the addition of the CNT. Their autonomy and radicalism varied depending on the location. The most important of these was the Central Committee of Anti-Fascist Militias (CCMA) in Catalonia. The Catalan government, unable to manage the situation, proposed to the workers’ and republican forces the creation of a unified committee to coordinate the fight against the rebel forces. Thus, on July 21, the CCMA was formed with a Popular Front majority, although the decisions of the new committee reflected the strength of the revolution.¹⁰ In addition to military organisation, the CCMA took the first steps to control the economy, blocking the bank accounts of people who had supported the uprising and taking measures to help worker-owned businesses continue to pay wages.

Throughout much of the Republican zone, committees were formed which, like the CCMA, effectively held power during the first weeks of the Civil War. The political orientation of most of these committees reflected the influence of the Popular Front organisations. However, the situation was so polarised that in several places they acted in a markedly radical way, as happened with the committees of Cartagena, Gijón, Málaga, Valencia and, above all, with the Council of Aragon, organised in October and dominated by the anarchists.

But because the power of the committees, which remained completely fragmented, failed to consolidate, the revolution could not fully succeed. Given this reality, the future of the revolution depended on the CNT, which doubled its membership during the war, reaching 1,500,000 members. For the anarchists, the revolution was a reality in the sense that, in much of what would become the Republican zone, the working class controlled the streets, the factories, and the land. However, the workers’ organisations did not control communications, foreign trade, or banking. Above all, with the organisation of the People’s Army in the autumn of 1936, they lost control of the key element of the war and the revolution: the armed forces.

⁸ For examples of the contradictions in the position of the communists in relation to the Popular Front see Fraser (1979) Volume II, p. 30 and Durgan (2022) pp. 30, 43-44.

⁹ Regarding the committees, see, for example: Pozo (2012) and Durgan (2017).

¹⁰ There were five Republican delegates, three from the CNT, three from the UGT, two from the FAI and one each from the POUM, the PSUC and the Unió de Rabassaires, a Catalan agricultural trade union.

Faced with the vacuum left by the near disintegration of the Republican State, the dilemma for the anarchists soon arose. As early as July 21st, at the regional plenary session of the Catalan CNT, the day after the defeat of the military rebels in Barcelona, Juan García Oliver, one of the most influential leaders of radical anarchism, stated that the CNT had two alternatives: “to go for broke,” which would mean establishing “an anarchist dictatorship,” or to collaborate with the other anti-fascist forces. Since “a dictatorship” was anathema to the anarchists, and given the significant presence of other forces (especially the socialists), particularly outside Catalonia, they opted for “collaboration.” Thus, almost from the beginning, the anarchist leaders were caught in the ambiguity of their advocacy for revolution and their practice of collaboration with the state. In reality, the dichotomy was not between “dictatorship” or “collaboration”, but between workers’ unity, beyond the anarchist ranks, for the seizure of power or subordination to the Popular Front which, sooner or later, would mean the end of the revolution.

Opposed to creating another state, they ended up collaborating with the existing state, or, to be more precise in the case of the Spanish state in 1936, with the reconstruction of the Republican state. In early November 1936, with the military situation becoming increasingly critical, four anarchists joined the Republican government.

The counter-revolutionary process within the republican zone reached its peak with the street fighting of early May 1937.¹¹ A week later, the formation of a government headed by the moderate socialist Juan Negrín, without the participation of the anarchists, represented the definitive strengthening of the bourgeois state and the suppression of the most revolutionary sectors, especially the POUM, victims of a fierce campaign of slander by Stalinism. The last bastion of the revolution was the Council of Aragon, controlled by anarchists, which was dissolved in August. In February 1938, the CNT, by then fully committed to collaborating with the Republican State, returned to the government.

Was a revolutionary alternative possible?

It is necessary to consider whether there was an alternative to the Popular Front’s approach of waging war in defense of democracy at the cost of social revolution. The Republican government’s military strategy rejected the use of unorthodox or revolutionary tactics, partly due to the Republican government’s need to maintain control of the political situation in its zone and to present itself to the world as a liberal government. However, given the enemy’s great material advantage, the Republican government’s adherence to an orthodox military strategy had little chance of success.

The idea that the Popular Front, and the annihilation of the revolution, was only a “practical” position due to the military needs of the Republic is a fallacy.

The Popular Front policy, especially its subordination to imperialist interests, had military consequences. For example, the withdrawal of the naval fleet from the Strait of Gibraltar from the outset, under pressure from the British government, left the way clear for the rebel forces to move thousands of troops from North Africa to the Iberian Peninsula. And the refusal, in order not to harm the interests of French imperialism, to declare the independence of Morocco and support a nationalist insurrection in the fascist rear, also favoured the rebel forces.

¹¹ Among the bibliographies on the Acts of May of particular interest is Guillamón (2018).

An alternative strategy would have included the mass mobilisation of the population (as would be the case during the Battle of Madrid in November 1936), a defensive, positional war, and the use of more limited, lightning raids, combined with guerrilla warfare, thus avoiding massive clashes between two armies with markedly unequal capabilities. At the same time, measures such as the declaration of Morocco's independence and military support for the Moroccan independence movement, or the declaration of land distribution to peasants, could have contributed to undermining the enemy's rear.¹²

Of course, it's impossible to know whether a strategy of revolutionary war could have succeeded, although the defense of Madrid is illustrative in this regard. Furthermore, the international situation, in which both communist and social democratic parties wielded considerable influence, was far from favourable. It is impossible to know what impact the existence of a revolutionary power in Spain would have had on the labour movement beyond its borders. The precedent of 1917 raises the possibility that it could have acted as a catalyst and, consequently, led to other political currents having a greater influence on the class struggle.

War and revolution

Often, the historiography of the Civil War presents the division among anti-fascist forces as a division between those who wanted to prioritise the war (communists, republicans, and socialists) and the CNT and the POUM, who put the interests of the revolution before those of the war: a division between war or revolution. It was never like that. Both the CNT and the POUM advocated the need to wage war and revolution simultaneously, to wage a revolutionary war. The two were intrinsically linked. The POUM, above all, had a clear military policy that proposed the creation of a revolutionary army, taking as a model the Soviet Red Army during the Russian Civil War. But such an Army could not be built without a revolutionary government based on democracy from below, in committees of workers, peasants and militia.¹³

The POUM maintained that, to consolidate the revolution, at least in Catalonia, the working class needed to seize power. However, without the CNT, such a goal was impossible. Convincing the CNT, or at least part of it, of this soon became the main political concern of the POUM, but, as has been seen, it had to overcome the conviction of the anarchists that any form of revolutionary power or state would inevitably lead to a dictatorship.

Ultimately, the great absence in the Spanish revolution was the existence of a revolutionary organisation with the necessary strength to lead the seizure of power. There were a number of obstacles preventing the POUM, the "only party of the revolution" according to Andreu Nin, from becoming such an organisation. Beyond its own mistakes, its lack of a base outside Catalonia and its short history—it had been formed just a year earlier—were difficult obstacles to overcome. And without political leadership, the revolution was doomed to defeat.

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¹² On the debate about the alternative of revolutionary war see: Claudin (1975) pp. 210-242; Guillén (1980); Fraser (1979) volume II, pp. 27-38; Beevor (2005) p. 464; Durgan (2013).

¹³ Durgan (2025) pp.113-118.

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