

Was there a Spanish revolution?

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January 1997

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Historical interpretation has often suffered from the aggressive assaults of historians' ideologies. It is not my intention to succumb to positivism by defending the idea that there is only one impartial interpretation of history, but would only like to recall that history is in the final accounting political history. This is the cause of the fact that historians frequently arrive at diverse and contradictory conclusions. Historical interpretation is undertaken through the lens of the ideological and class interests of historians. There can be no doubt that one of the major debates that animated political life in the antifascist zone during the civil war, the echoes of which have reverberated down to our time, was about the nature of the Spanish Revolution.

The Failure of the Republic

In order to address this issue we have to go back to April 14, 1931, the date the Second Spanish Republic was proclaimed, accompanied by a great wave of popular enthusiasm. It took only five years for the bourgeois democratic regime to founder, unmourned and ingloriously, without ever representing the interests of any social class.

None of the democratic goals promised by the republican politicians were achieved. The historical problem that burdened the country, that of agrarian reform, remained unresolved after a series of timid measures that frustrated the hopes of the peasantry and frightened the landowners but never threatened the existence of the latifundia. The Catalan and Basque national questions also remained unresolved, the first case being addressed by statutory autonomy which was severely attenuated by the Spanish parliament, while the issue of Basque autonomy would not be dealt with until the beginning of the war. The military reforms did not affect the army's traditionally ultra-reactionary and rebellious nature. The power of the Church was unaffected and it retained its vast landholdings.

But this was not the secret of the failure of the Second Republic. The republicans could not implement their democratic reforms without infringing on the interests of the bourgeoisie and other powerful sectors of society. The republicans were not revolutionaries; their intentions were concerned with the modernization of Spanish capitalism, taking advantage of the assistance offered by the main workers organizations. Therefore, in order to complete the bourgeois revolution, they neither wanted to confront nor were they capable of confronting a bourgeoisie that felt threatened by this project and was not prepared to take the next step forward to its realization.

The history of the Second Republic was lost in timid reforms and endless parliamentary debates, which satisfied no one. The working class and the impoverished peasantry saw their hopes for a peaceful satisfaction of their demands disappear. As their frustration mounted, the popular classes were radicalized, and placed their faith in their own methods. Simultaneously, the bourgeoisie that had supported the Republic as the lesser of two evils, now that their attempts to carry out an authoritarian reform of the Republic by the parliamentary road having come to naught, entrusted the defense of their interests to the army, the only obstacle that stood between the revolutionary threat and their property:

“Thoroughly disappointed by the parliamentary republic inaugurated on April 14 and its liberal politicians, it no longer trusted anything but its own forces, its class or-

ganizations; it no longer believed in 'minimum' programs, in half measures. It could be said without exaggeration that its minimum program was social revolution."¹

The Army Against the Republic?

Contemporary official history presents the uprising as the attempt by a sector of the army to crush the Republic, a democratic and parliamentary regime. The reality, however, was quite otherwise. On the night of July 18, 1936, the army did not rebel against the Republic but against the revolutionary movement which was tending to go beyond the Republic. The democratic illusions of the popular classes having been exhausted, the Second Republic was an empty shell. In the months between February, when the Popular Front won the national elections, and July, when the military uprising took place, the republican government, supported by the socialists and communists, was unable to stem the revolutionary tide. The Republic vainly tried to sustain itself between the two great social forces girding for a fight.

In the first hours of the uprising, the government tried to negotiate with the military to bring it to an end. Its first attempts having failed, in order to demonstrate its good faith it formed a new government under Martínez Barrios, a government that stood to the right of the Popular Front, in which posts were reserved for the rebels, in case they reached an agreement: "Mola himself, and Aranda in Oviedo, Patxot in Málaga, stalled to gain time, they seemed to hesitate over burning their bridges, in case concessions were required from the Republic."²

The rebels did not intend to precipitate a civil war. The course of the conspiracy shows that they were trying to carry out a classic *pronunciamento*, like the ones that took place in the 19th century. Their intention was to provoke the resignation of the Popular Front government and open negotiations for a new government. They attempted to accomplish by means of brute force what the right wing parties had vainly tried to achieve: an authoritarian reform that would finish off the revolutionary threat once and for all.

For their part, the republicans were ready to negotiate the return to normal. Anything to prevent the uprising from leading to what both sides feared: the entry of the revolutionary movement on the political stage. The republicans were aware of the fact that an agreement could be reached with the army that would preserve the legal institutions, just as they knew as well that the revolution could not be a negotiating partner. While the government and the rebels carried on negotiations, the workers parties of the Popular Front appealed to the population to remain calm: "The government commands, the Popular Front obeys." Nonetheless, despite all efforts to prevent it, the negotiations broke down when the working class population occupied the streets.

Was There a Social Revolution?

Some historians of the stature of a Manuel Tuñón de Lara still insist on maintaining that there was no socialist revolution in Spain.³ A week after the military uprising, the political, social and

¹ Fernando Claudín: *La crisis del movimiento comunista*, Ruedo Ibérico, Barcelona, 1978, p. 173.

² Pierre Broué and Emile Témime, *The Revolution and Civil War in Spain*, Faber and Faber, 1972.

³ Manuel Tuñón de Lara, *Historia de España. La crisis del Estado: dictadura, república, guerra (1923-1939)*, Labor, Barcelona, 1981, Vol. IX, p. 224.

economic geography of the territory not under rebel control underwent a complete transformation. The republican government and the Catalan *Generalitat*, stripped of power, were merely the shells of their former existences. Here is what the president of the autonomous Catalan government said, recalling those moments:

“On July 19, I rang the bell in my office for my secretary. The bell did not ring, because there was no electricity. I looked out the door of my office, and my secretary was not there; she was unable to reach the Government Building; but even if I found her, she would not have been able to communicate with the general director’s secretary, because she had not arrived at the Generalitat. And if the director’s secretary, after having overcome a thousand difficulties, made it to her desk, her boss had not yet arrived.”⁴

Most of the army joined the uprising; those units which did not were disbanded, victims of the revolutionary contagion. The bourgeoisie and the landowners fled, abandoning their property out of fear of reprisals by the revolutionaries, after having initially expected the uprising to succeed. The factories, workshops and latifundia were occupied and expropriated by the workers and peasants, who began to reorganize production spontaneously and collectively. The republican institutions disappeared to make way for workers committees, which maintained public order and organized and controlled everyday life in the towns and cities. The police and the civil guard disappeared and were replaced by workers patrols that ensured public safety and spearheaded the repression directed against the uprising’s sympathizers. The army was replaced by enthusiastic improvised militias that confronted the rebels wherever the latter were entrenched. Everything was done spontaneously by the workers, without the intercession of the workers parties and trade unions, not even the most radical ones:

“At that time we did not have the least intention of occupying, expropriating or collectivizing any factories. We thought that the uprising would be crushed quickly and that everything would be more or less the way it was before. What would be the use of getting excited about collectivizations if everything was going to end up once again in the hands of the old capitalist system?”⁵

The revolutionary achievements mentioned above did not appear in the political program of any organization. In response to the uprising the workers formed groups that more or less corresponded with their organizational membership, created their own organs of power, ignoring the Popular Front’s appeals for them to submit to the institutions of the Republic. Is this not irrefutable proof of the socialist character of the Spanish Revolution?

While the republicans practically disappeared from the stage, the workers parties of the Popular Front replaced them as defenders of the Republic. The Socialist and Communist parties both denied, from the very first moments, that a socialist revolution was underway. The collectivizations, the committees, the expropriations, and the refusal of the working class population to recognize the government’s legitimacy (discredited because it was responsible for the fact that, as a result of its passivity, the military coup was not definitively crushed immediately after it

⁴ Jaume Miravittles, *Episodis de la guerra civil espanyola*, Pòrtic, Barcelona, 1972, p. 69.

⁵ Ronald Fraser, *Blood of Spain: An Oral History of the Spanish Civil War*, Pimlico, 1994.

began) were, in the view of the leaders of the Popular Front parties, the work of a minority of over-enthusiastic individuals who had manipulated the masses. But if the socialist revolution was not possible, how did these “incontrolados” acquire the ability to “manipulate” the masses? If these activities have no place in the programs of the most radical organizations (CNT, FAI and POUM), how did this kind of spontaneous action arise? Is it not because it responded to the consciousness and will of the workers? Was this not more real than the stereotypical schemas that condemned Spain to a long stage of capitalist development before it could be capable of opting for socialism? When the workers took to the streets during the July days, they did not do so in the name of the Republic in the name of their own demands, using their own methods, as well as in the name of the new social order to which they aspired.

The Socialist and Communist leaders defined the civil war as a clash between democracy and fascism, a war of “national independence”, in which the Republic was attacked by the fascist powers in collaboration with a sector of the army which had betrayed the sovereignty of the nation. Despite the differences between the various currents that supported the Popular Front, they had one feature in common: the denial of the existence of a Spanish socialist revolution.

The explanation for this view must be sought in political interests. The Socialist leaders, from the different tendencies of the PSOE, were not ready to commit themselves to a revolution in which they did not believe. They preferred to continue to support the Republic, a parliamentary system that allowed them to continue to serve as the intermediaries between the bourgeoisie and the working class, a political position that was the main source of their privileges. The Left Socialist leaders, headed by Largo Caballero, rode the crest of the revolutionary wave, but they did not believe in the revolution either. Socialism, the dictatorship of the proletariat, which they had once advocated in their speeches, was in their view limited to a simple peaceful change of government of the Republic. The Left Socialists never based themselves on a definitive program, which would have allowed them to successfully lead the revolution. Trusting to their power, they oscillated during the war between the two poles into which the “anti-fascist” camp was divided. The Communist Party, under the iron grip of Stalin’s agents, was a mere pawn of the Kremlin’s foreign policy. Stalinist diplomacy was then forging alliances with France and Great Britain as a counterweight to the Hitlerian threat to the USSR. A victorious socialist revolution in Spain was doubly “inopportune”.⁶ On the one hand it would have frightened the “democratic” capitalist powers and would have pushed them into the arms of Hitler. To consolidate good relations it was necessary to show that the USSR had definitely abandoned the Bolshevik dream of “world revolution”. The first workers state in history was not only no longer a threat, but it was a valuable ally when the time came for crushing any revolutionary movement that might endanger British and French interests. On the other hand, a victorious revolution in Spain that was not under the control of its complete pawn, the Communist Party, but instead under the control of the two organizations of anarchosyndicalism and Left Socialism that had little sympathy for tyranny, was a serious threat to its leadership of the international communist movement, and could even lead to the questioning of its own rule over the USSR.

If the Socialist and Communist leaders had recognized the obvious fact that they were faced with a socialist revolution, all their arguments in favor of the continued defense of the Popular Front’s commitments would have become irrelevant, and they would have been obliged to

⁶ The phrase, “inopportune revolution”, with reference to the Spanish revolution, was coined by Claudín (*op. cit.*).

support a revolutionary movement in which they did not believe. The denial of the socialist revolution was an alibi to justify the defense of the Republic to their social base. To square the circle, fascism was transformed into the last remnants of feudalism, against which the young bourgeois republic must be defended, rather than the tool used by the Spanish bourgeoisie to prevent the socialist revolution. If fascism really had a feudal nature, why did it arise in two European countries like Italy and Germany, where feudalism had disappeared long before, in order to build a highly developed capitalist economy?

Although some may consider it to be a heretical concession to speculation, it is worthwhile to reflect upon the historical variability of a bourgeois parliamentary republic in an era when the world capitalist system was undergoing its most profound crisis, expressed in the rise of European fascism. The opinions of republican politicians like Azana, who, during the last period of the war, tried to establish new negotiations with Franco in the interests of “national reconciliation”, are of significance in this connection. If the Republic had been saved, whether by military victory or negotiated peace, its institutions would have been saved, but at the cost of gutting them of their democratic contents. Neither the rebel army, nor the bourgeoisie who supported Franco, nor even the international bourgeoisie (in either the “democratic” or the fascist countries) were prepared to run the risk of a possible resurgence of the revolutionary movement in Spain, which could have once again endangered their interests. The salvation of the Republic would have been possible at the cost of rendering any such resurgence impossible and this was only a viable proposition at the cost of sacrifices made by the popular organizations, that is, by fulfilling the principle demand of the rebels: the reactionary and authoritarian reform of the Republic.

The debate concerning the nature of the war and the revolution led to another no less spurious debate over the question of whether the war should be fought first and the revolution later, or the revolution first and the war later?

War or Revolution: A Spurious Debate

If the nature of the Spanish revolution was democratic and bourgeois, what was to be done with the revolutionary achievements that had arisen spontaneously? From the Popular Front’s point of view, the consolidation of the revolutionary conquests implied a weakening of the “anti-fascist” struggle. France and Great Britain would never support a revolution. An isolated revolution would be incapable of defeating the aggression of the fascist powers. It was necessary to rebuild the Republic and its institutions, and to reestablish international respectability so that the democratic powers will intervene in the conflict. The workers and peasants must therefore renounce their conquests, return the land to its former owners, rebuild the police and the army, and erase the slightest evidence that a revolution had ever taken place. It was first necessary to win the war against Franco and then the conditions for the revolution will mature.

The French and British bourgeoisie, however, were much closer to Franco than to a republic which had been incapable of restraining the revolutionary movement. Who could assure them that once Franco’s army was defeated, a second revolution would not break out? Even after the revolutionary movement was defeated, following the Barcelona “May Days” of 1937, the “democratic” powers continued to negotiate with Franco regarding their economic interests on the peninsula. For the democratic powers, for France and Great Britain, Franco was the lesser evil.

Despite Franco's obvious sympathies for European fascism, he assured the definitive liquidation of the Spanish revolution. They would take no risks, not even in the name of democracy.

The organizations to the left of the Popular Front, the CNT, the FAI and the POUM, believed in the revolution and were prepared to defend its conquests. For various reasons, however, they felt that the highest priority was the preservation of "anti-fascist" unity, against the primary danger, the rebel army, even at the cost of holding back and postponing the revolution.

Anarchosyndicalism, a prisoner of its anti-statism, was not prepared for the seizure of power that it had always rejected. The CNT was practically the master of Catalonia (the most dynamic and industrialized zone of the Spanish economy), a large part of the Levant, the reconquered part of Aragon and extensive tracts in Andalusia, besides its significant influence in the rest of the country. Despite the fact that the revolutionary achievements were not delineated in the anarchosyndicalist program, its militants were their principle supporters, dragging in their wake the rank and file Socialists and Communists and even Catholics. Shortly before the uprising, the CNT had held its Saragossa Congress. Despite the increasingly urgent rumors concerning the progress of the military conspiracy, the Congress's debates focused on such ingenuous and inconsequential topics as the form that libertarian communism will adopt in the future. The proposals made by the most perspicacious sector of the CNT, the so-called anarcho-bolsheviks, who were in favor of the formation of a militia, were rejected by a majority of the delegates at the Congress. They would pay a very high price for their idealization of the spontaneity of the masses.

In order to understand the confusion of the libertarian leaders one need only examine the debates that took place in the CNT's Catalan regional committee, which held an extraordinary session on July 21, where the majority of the cadres voted to refuse to accept the power offered to them by the workers, and to instead collaborate with the partially-dismantled Catalan autonomous government. The libertarian cadres thought that the popular response to the uprising and the revolution would not proceed any further. They soon discovered, however, much to their dismay, that the popular mobilization had led to a spontaneous revolution that had made great progress without any central leadership. The trade union did not take action until several days later, when the revolution was already underway.

The CNT was not prepared to confront the challenge of exercising a power they did not want. They could not take power, but neither could they offer it to their circumstantial allies in the Popular Front, when the masses had just taken it away from the latter. The CNT finally chose a compromise solution, collaboration with the supporters of the reconstruction of the republican order. In vague terms the libertarian leaders chose to place the revolution in "hibernation" until after the war. They forgot that a revolutionary situation cannot wait until more advantageous conditions exist. Without daring to take power, and in the name of "unity against fascism", they had to gradually yield to the pressure of their new allies. In the final accounting, anarchosyndicalism chose to emphasize the war over the revolution. The words of one of its most outstanding leaders, Diego Abad de Santillán, perfectly describe the trap into which they had fallen:

"We knew that it was not possible to win the revolution if we did not win the war first, and we sacrificed everything to the war. We sacrificed the revolution itself, without noticing that this sacrifice also implied the sacrifice of the goals of the war."⁷

⁷ Diego Abad de Santillán, *Por qué perdimos la guerra*, Plaza y Janés, Barcelona, 1977, pp. 180-181.

Finally, it is necessary to describe the position of the POUM. Some historians think that too much importance has been granted to this party, which was only well-established in Catalonia. If we acknowledge, however, that revolutions are extremely complex and dynamic phenomena, we will have to admit that the importance of POUM-ism does not reside in the number of its militants, but in the influence of its politics and its ability to respond to the growing movement.

From the first moments of the war and the revolution, the POUM was situated on a secondary political plane. For POUMism the leaders of the Spanish revolution were anarchosyndicalism and Left Socialism. The POUM assumed the role of counselor to the CNT leadership, hoping to convince it that it could and must take power. Not being successful in this endeavor, as anarchosyndicalism retreated, the POUM was dragged down with it, unable to formulate an alternative for the rising discontent among the rank and file.

Now that we have finished this brief summary of the different political choices in the Spanish war and revolution, we must agree that we actually find ourselves dealing with a false debate. From the various points of view, no political alternative, not even the most radical, supported driving the revolution to its ultimate consequences, at least not until the war with Franco's army ended in with the defeat of the latter.

The "war or revolution" antithesis was not real. Both terms, far from being opposed to each other, were complementary. The success of the anti-fascist side during the initial stages of the conflict was undoubtedly due to this convergence. The revolutionary enthusiasm unleashed in the battle against the uprising was one of the fundamental factors that decided the fall of the Republic and the defeat of the military throughout most of the country:

"Lacking military organization and experience, arms and commanders, the workers could only compensate for this deficit with their enthusiasm, and enthusiasm could not be generated by the idea of defending a republic that had persecuted a good part of the workers movement and had allowed the civil war to break out. This enthusiasm, which had to take the place of any army, arms and military experience, could only arise from the conviction that the property of the people, that is, the revolution, was being defended."⁸

This is the only way to explain the vertiginous transformation that took place in the republican zone. War and revolution were two terms that converged for a large part of the popular classes of Spain. Victory over the rebel army was equivalent to taking their destiny into their own hands, appropriating the land, expropriating the factories, finishing off the hated civil guards and police, and putting an end to the hunger, poverty and exploitation they had endured for centuries. There can be no doubt at all that the unfolding of the revolution then in progress would play an important role in the outcome of the war.

Why Did Franco Win?

The dual power that existed between July 1936 and May 1937 ended with the defeat of the revolutionaries. Because their leaders refused to take power, they ended up handing it over to their enemies in the Popular Front, who were more audacious and exercised greater foresight.

⁸ Victor Alba, *La revolución española en la práctica*, Jucar, Madrid, 1977, p. 23.

After the Barcelona May Days of 1937, the apparatus of the republican state was reconstructed. The revolutionary committees that had seized power at the local level during the first months of the war disappeared, and were replaced by republican councils and institutions. New police units replaced the workers patrols. The revolutionary militias of the early stages of the war disappeared to give way to a new army similar to the one that had led the uprising. Since the bourgeoisie remained on Franco's side, the collectivizations continued to function in order to fill the economic vacuum caused by the flight of the owners of the collectivized enterprises, but had lost their power and were controlled by republican officials. The revolution died and the resuscitated republic arose to take its place.

On the side of the rebels, the army, transformed into the backbone of reaction, succeeded in unifying the political formations of the right and the extreme right. Phalangists, Carlists and Alfonsin monarchists were compelled to reluctantly submit to the military project. Once the various factions were unified, the bourgeoisie and the ruling social sectors were in a better position than their enemies to win the war.

Once the revolutionary war was transformed into a simple civil war, in which the social form or the interests of distinct social classes were not at stake, military victory was assured for the side that had better arms and organization. The victory of Franco was only a matter of time.

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Translation of “Hubo o no una revolución española?—Debate”, published in *Razón y Revolución*,
No. 3, January 1997.

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