1936: Revolution in Spain

written by Andy Durgan | July 25, 2016

On 18 July 1936, part of the Spanish army, backed by the upper classes and the Catholic church, rose up with the intention of ending the country's experiment in democracy and social reform (the Second Republic 1931-6). The resulting civil war would be one of the pivotal events of the 20th century. For some it was the rehearsal for the Second World War, for others the "last great cause".

For millions, defeat meant almost 40 years of fascism in Spain. But 1936 also saw the beginnings of a profound revolution – the possible key not just to victory over fascism but also to a different future.

The revolution of 1936 continues to be one of the greatest examples of how ordinary people can take control of their lives and begin to transform the world around them. It did not appear out of thin air.

Workers take control

In previous decades anarchist and socialist ideas had rooted themselves in the Spanish working class. At the centre of this tradition was the idea of workers taking control of their workplaces. However, the revolution was not just the work of the more radical minorities but based on massive and largely spontaneous participation.

Without any order being given, most industry and much of the land was collectivised, especially in Catalonia, Eastern Aragon and Valencia. In the countryside, the great estates were seized and many small holdings were merged.

Workers' organisations set up militias to fight the fascist rebels. Anti-fascist committees organised security and supplies, and applied revolutionary justice.

Occupied buildings were converted into people's restaurants, hospitals or schools.

The lives of women were transformed as many entered the factories and political activity for the first time or went to the front to fight.

Popular resistance had converted what was supposed to be a simple coup into a full-blown civil war. A great divide now emerged in the Republican areas controlled by the anti-fascist resistance.

The question of power

This was not between war or revolution as is often claimed, but over what type of war—an orthodox war or a revolutionary war.

What happened in Spain in 1936 was the clearest example of how you cannot change the world without taking power. For the powerful anarchist trade union, the CNT, the revolution was a reality.

In the streets, the factories and on the land it seemed the masses dominated the situation. However, they did not control communications, trade, finance and, above all, the armed forces—the revolution was incomplete.

The anarchists were opposed to all states and so rejected the idea of building a new one, even though in practice they saw the need to centralise the anti-fascist struggle.

So they rejected the setting up of a revolutionary state, which they believed would mean an "anarchist dictatorship", yet ended up collaborating in the reconstruction of the Republican state. In November 1936, four anarchist leaders joined the very Popular Front government that would undermine the revolution.

Stalinism

The struggle against fascism in 1936 starkly posed the need for left unity. The Popular Front, established before the war with the aim of uniting the workers' and liberal middle class parties in defence of democracy, seemed the logical response to the terrible threat posed by fascism.

In reality, far from achieving unity, the Popular Front oversaw a counter-revolution that seriously undermined the anti-fascist struggle. It was to be expected that the liberal Republican parties and the moderate socialists, given their opposition to social revolution whatever the situation, would opt to support capitalist democracy before all else.

The reasons why the Communists, the most enthusiastic supporters of the Popular Front, opposed the revolution are more complex. The Communist Party grew rapidly in the first months of the war, especially among the lower middle classes.

It was seen as the defender of both military efficiency and public order. In fact Communist strategy was subordinated to Stalin's Russia which sought an alliance with the Western democracies against Nazi Germany.

Stalin was not interested in a revolution in Spain, especially one not controlled by him, which could endanger such an alliance. Thus the revolution and its supporters were attacked in the name of unity.

This counter-revolutionary offensive culminated in street fighting in May 1937, the bloody

persecution of the revolutionary left and the ending of the revolution.

Popular Front

One reason given by supporters of the Popular Front for presenting the war as a simple struggle between fascism and democracy was the need to win the support of democratic governments around the world. The fascist axis of Italy and Germany were providing massive aid to the fascists.

The problem was that the democratic governments' imperial and class interests meant that they were never going to support a Republic perceived as left wing. Instead Britain and France pursued the cynical policy of "non-intervention".

Of the great powers, only Russia sent aid to Republican Spain, something which greatly strengthened the Communist influence.

But Soviet aid came with strings attached. Prices charged for arms were manipulated and Russian leaders applied pressure to curtail the revolution. This was also the epoch of the great Stalinist purges in Russia and its methods and propaganda were now exported to Spain.

The only real international support that the Republic received was from workers. There emerged a massive solidarity movement with the Republic. About 35,000 foreign volunteers from around the world, most of them workers, went to Spain to fight in the International Brigades. Many of them died.

The politics of war

The Popular Front government's insistence on presenting the war to the world as one in defence of parliamentary democracy meant its military strategy was posed in orthodox terms with great First World War style offensives. Given the technological superiority of the fascist army this strategy meant an enormous drain on the Republic's limited resources, as well as a terrible loss of life, and ended in total defeat.

While the militias created in the early days of the revolution were democratically organised, the new People's Army, which the Popular Front government created to replace them had a traditional military structure. Everybody, including the anarchists, accepted that there was a need for a centralised command, but a revolutionary army would have maintained the democratic, voluntary and militant spirit of the militias.

With the resources available to the Republic, an alternative strategy would have been based on mobility and more limited attacks on what was a vast front and in-depth defence. Above all, such a strategy would have taken advantage of a potentially large social base in the fascist rearguard to organise guerrilla warfare.

However, a revolutionary war needed a revolutionary political power. Fear of the reaction of the imperial powers meant, for example, that the Republic refused to support a Moroccan nationalist uprising in fascist controlled areas of Spain's colonial possessions in North Africa.

Similarly, the Republic never took advantage of its control of most of Spain's navy as the activity of a red fleet in the Mediterranean would have upset Britain and France.

Alternative

Only the small revolutionary socialist party, the POUM, posed an alternative strategy. It argued for the setting up of a revolutionary government based on committees of workers, peasants and fighters.

Such a government would have deepened the revolutionary process, organised a red army and pursued a military strategy that was not subordinated to the winning over of the imperialist powers.

It would also have won over the lower middle classes by measures that both protected their interests and maintained the independence of the workers' organisations. For example, it would have opposed the forced collectivisation of small scale private property that sometimes occurred, while showing in practice the advantages of voluntary collectivisation.

The POUM also defended the need to create a revolutionary workers' front to both unite the anti-fascist forces and to defend the revolution. The brief formation of the Revolutionary Youth Front in early 1937 by the POUM and anarchist youth could have been an important step in this direction but it was soon opposed by the CNT leadership as "too political".

To impose a revolutionary alternative there was a need for not only a correct programme but also an organisation with sufficient influence and support to lead an assault on power and, most importantly, the building of "another power".

The POUM did not have sufficient strength on its own and thus, fearing being isolated, baulked at breaking with the leadership of the CNT, and in Catalonia, for example, followed the anarchists into government.

The experience of the Spanish Revolution shows not only people's potential to change the world but also that the building of a revolutionary political organisation cannot be ignored.

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Originally posted here.