

The Spanish Civil War and the War Today

Our Guernica



Guernica, painting by Pablo Picasso, 1937, after the German bombing of the town by that name during the Spanish Civil War.

By S.K.

The Spanish Civil War — Dreams + Nightmares

An exhibition at the Imperial War
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A recent exhibition at the Imperial War Museum in London covered one of the most inspiring internationalist events of the twentieth century - the Spanish civil war, when men and women from around the world came to Spain to fight side-by-side with its people against a fascist coup that was meant to crush their revolutionary upsurge and aspirations.

The power of this important exhibition was plain to see, not only in the huge and highly varied crowds it attracted, but in their faces as well. Maybe the most fitting praise one could give the organisers is that visitors' excitement, awe, animated conversation and tears were in proportion with the historic importance of the events themselves.

There could be no doubt that the battles of 1936-1939 in Spain are still part of many lives today, no longer as memory, except for a handful, but in the different summaries, conscious and otherwise, that play an important part in people's ideas about politics. It is worth pondering why that period, so apparently far from us now, has such persistent resonance.

The main figure associated with this show, historian Paul Preston, wrote a catalogue essay attempting to fit together all the elements that made up the exhibition, including photos, film footage, audio recordings, posters, letters, documents and the innumerable artefacts, the soldiers' kit bags, flags, buttons and other souvenirs that in the context provided by the displays turn out to be surprisingly moving. Because of Preston's close association with this exhibition, his essay makes explicit the thinking in the choice and layout of displays.

He begins by quoting Albert Camus: "It was in Spain that men learned that one can be right and still be beaten, that force can vanquish

spirit, that there are times when courage is not its own reward. It is this, without a doubt, which explains why so many men throughout the world regard the Spanish drama as a personal tragedy." It was in the end, Preston tells us, "the last great cause".

Of course it was nothing like the last great cause, but it was great, not because it was lost but because of what it was a part of and represented. This exhibition's greatest strength was that it brought out just how much that cause meant to the people of Spain and the millions of people around the world who in one way or another came to their defence.

A thorough political (including military) summation of the Spanish civil war is a task still pending for the international communist movement. Some comrades have made a significant initial investigation. Here we will sketch out only some broad outlines and concentrate on the issues best served by the show itself. Far from being only of historical concern, they involve vital lessons for the great struggles we need to be building right now.



Both photos by Robert Capa, a renowned photographer who took many memorable photos of this war. Above, two comrades relax in the sun. Left, the American writer Ernest Hemingway helping a Republican soldier to unjam his rifle during the battle of Teruel, December 1937.

After all, today's Guernica may be a village wedding party in Afghanistan or almost anywhere in Iraq. (Guernica, the iconic image of the Spanish Civil War thanks to Picasso's famous painting, was a Basque village devastated by Nazi bombers on 26 April 1937 in the first massive use of airpower against civilians in history.) It is always misleading to transpose the past onto the present. Neither the Taliban nor Saddam Hussein are the Spanish Republic; in fact, there is nothing good about them at all. But the bombings the US and its accomplices have carried out and are preparing for in the near future are not smaller crimes, and the need for impassioned, organised, fighting outrage today is no less either.

The Spanish armed forces rose up on 17 July 1936 because the elected government failed to repress a mass upsurge that threatened the Catholic Church, the Army, the big landown-

ers and the monopoly capitalists. The Popular Front government elected on 16 February was not at all revolutionary and never claimed to be. But the electoral defeat of the Church-backed fascist party and the victory of a coalition whose most popular promise was to free the prisoners from the 1934 miners' revolt in Asturias gave encouragement to land seizures, demonstrations and other radical activities that the government itself hated and feared. Preston writes that one of the main reasons why the generals were out to overthrow the Republic, less than five years old, and replace it with an open military dictatorship was that, "The new regime raised inordinate hopes among the most humble members of society."

The core of the fascist insurrection was the Army of Africa, based in the Spanish-controlled part of Morocco. Army garrisons on the peninsula itself had some initial successes in southwestern, north-western and central Spain, and controlled a third of the country. But that was not enough to effect what the US today calls a "regime change". The coup plotters, with Generalissimo Francisco Franco soon their undisputed leader, failed to take the main industrial cities and much

of the countryside. Revolutionary sailors in Spain's Mediterranean fleet mutinied, arrested and in some cases executed their officers and took over the ships. The bulk of the fascist forces, both Spaniards and Moroccans, were bottled up in North Africa. But the Republican government opposed offensive naval action. Why? Because that would not be tolerated by Britain, which considered itself master of the Mediterranean. As for the idea that the Republic should side with the nationalist movements and sentiments in Morocco against the Spanish army and declare that Spain would renounce all its colonies, that was considered out of the question because it would enrage France, the master of North Africa, including the rest of Morocco. Nazi Germany and Mussolini's fascist government in Italy provided aircraft to ferry Spanish troops across the straits and save what Preston calls "a coup gone wrong". The Spanish ruling classes could count above all on the support of Italy, which sought to extend its influence in North Africa and Europe against its French and British rivals. The Popular Front government counted on help from Britain and France to put down the fascist rebellion. Here we can see one of the

fascists' greatest strengths and one of the Republic's greatest weaknesses.

The British ruling class was pro-Franco almost down to the last man. That was true of both those then in office, like Prime Minister Baldwin, who were trying to negotiate a deal with Germany and Italy to turn them against the then socialist Soviet Union, and those, like Churchill, who believed that a showdown between Britain and its main rival Germany could not be avoided. France, with its own Popular Front newly installed in government, at first made the Spanish Republic some promises and then broke them. In the guise of ensuring Spain's "neutrality", Britain imposed an Atlantic naval blockade to stop arms supplies to the Republic. Franco could receive all the support he needed from Germany and especially Italy, which sent 50,000 troops. The Republic got help from only two countries, Mexico and the USSR. The US supported the blockade wholeheartedly and did everything it could to make things difficult for supplies or volunteers to reach the Republic. After the Second World War the US became Franco's main backer.

The Spanish generals expected the whole thing to be over in a few days. Wherever they were able to seize control they executed workers, poor and landless peasants and intellectuals by the thousands. People from these classes were considered potential terrorists unless proven otherwise. But Franco was unable to inflict a decisive blow on the Republic. Troops loyal to the government were joined overnight by militias organised by the unions and political parties. The Republican government, based on weak pro-British Spanish bourgeois forces and the bourgeoisies of oppressed nationalities within Spain in the Basque region and especially Catalonia, was ready to concede defeat again and again. When Madrid was surrounded the ministers fled, until an anarchist column intercepted them and dragged them back to the capital. Then, for a while, the tide seemed about to turn.

The battle for Madrid in Novem-

ber was only one of many breath-taking battles fought in the civil war, but it was certainly one of the most telling. The Republican forces stopped Franco's advancing troops in the city's western suburbs. There was hand-to-hand fighting from one building to another on the university campus and in a park popular for Sunday picnics. Factory workers, railwaymen, laundry workers, barbers, waiters, men and women took streetcars or walked to the front lines straight from work. Miners came from the region of Asturias with dynamite charges and formed anti-tank units. Taxi drivers climbed into tanks sent by the USSR. The Communist Party organised a regiment of its own troops and led in organising the entire population for defence and support work.

They were joined by something new in history – the International Brigades, organised by the Communist International (Comintern). They came illegally across the French border, only a trickle at first, mainly revolutionary refugees from Germany, Eastern Europe and Italy, and then very soon a torrent. There were 40,000 people from more than 50 different countries in all over the next few years, half of them workers, according to Preston's statistics. They were more than just willing arms. Many of them were veterans of revolutionary street battles and insurrections, and of First World War or peacetime military service. They taught the militia men and women how to use ammunition sparingly, how best to deploy machine guns, how to take advantage of cover and above all how to fight as organised units. They were invaluable in many ways, not least in the vision and spirit they brought with them. Although on the whole they fought in separate battalions according to nationality and language, in Madrid, Preston points out, they were sprinkled among the defenders at the rate of one to 30.

At that moment the government had little more than the people's determination to fight, and the people gave full proof of their courage and creativity. In the

following months, the International Brigades played a major role in beating back several offensives at the approaches to the capital. Their losses were terrible. More than half of the members of the British and American battalions were killed, many of them in the fighting at the battle of the Jarama River in February 1937, and almost all of the rest were wounded at least once. The Republican army grew stronger. But so did the fascist armed forces.

THE COMMUNISTS

Few people who have studied the Spanish civil war have disputed the fact that the Communist Party was the mainstay of the war against Franco. Preston does not do that, but he does say that his sympathy lies with "the antifascist struggle of the Spanish Republic" and not "the crimes of Stalinism". This is not a tenable position. He himself would probably admit that if it hadn't been for the Communist International under Stalin's leadership and for the Spanish Communist Party that was a part of the Comintern, the Spanish Republic would have collapsed almost immediately.

In the same eclectic spirit perhaps, Preston also points out that the civil war was an overlay of many different contradictions: "It was not one but many wars. It was a war of landless peasants against rich landowners, of anti-clericals against Catholics, of regional nationalists against military centralists, of industrial workers against factory owners." This is true. But the fact was that the war, as wars tend to do, tied all these contradictions up in one knot. This was an enormous advantage for the Spanish proletariat.

Those who saw the working class as only capable of fighting for its own immediate interests against "the bosses", such as the Trotskyists and anarchists in Spain, never grasped this point. If the proletariat united most closely with all the masses of people whose interests favoured thoroughgoing revolution and also with all those opposed to Franco, it could lead the war and the revolution

through whatever necessary steps or stages and transform both the people and itself.

In his succinct essay, Preston refers to “opposing beliefs over whether to give priority to the war or revolution”. (This idea is also prominent in *Land and Freedom*, British film director Ken Loach’s movie about the Spanish civil war.) If the question is posed this way, it cannot really be answered – you end up with the idea that “the good fight” is always lost. That is in fact the lesson many people draw from the Spanish civil war, a view that is often disguised as romanticism but is basically cynical and paralyzing.

In Spain, if there was to be a revolution, it had to take the form of a war against Franco, and everything had to be subordinated to winning that war. The Spanish Communist Party and the Communist International were the only forces determined to fight war through to the end. That is why the Communist Party grew so mightily in numbers and influence. The Trotskyists were not revolutionary at all, even though they tried to appear more “left” than the Communist Party by focusing on workers’ economic demands against the Catalan capitalists and farm owners who were actually allies against Franco. Nor were those anarchists (by no means all of them) who let their quest for personal freedom blind them to the need for military discipline and organisation, including not only militias but an army capable of taking the offensive and actually winning the war, not just defending some territory. Political power was up for grabs and war would decide the issue.

But if the main form of the revolution had to be war – and that is true for all revolutions at some point, since no revolutionary state can be established without smashing the state and the armed forces of reaction – then the politics of this war had to determine the way it was fought. At the same time as the Spanish civil war, and also as a part of the Communist International, Mao Tsetung was leading the Chinese revolution through another

revolutionary war. It was in summing up both Chinese and international experience that Mao drew the lesson that “people, not weapons, are decisive in waging war”. He pointed out that each class has its own specific forms of war, with its specific character, goals and means. He remarked that all military logic can be boiled down to the principle ‘you fight your way, I’ll fight my way’, and that the proletariat must forge military strategy and tactics which can bring into play its particular advantages, by unleashing and relying on the initiative and enthusiasm of the masses.

This is not the kind of people’s war that was fought in Spain.

CONFUSED STANCE

Following the line of the Communist International, the Spanish Party took a confused stance on the content of the civil war, tending to make an absolute of the difference between bourgeois democracy and fascism instead of recognising them as, ultimately, two forms of bourgeois dictatorship, and subordinated itself to vacillating big bourgeois allies. In Spain, the communists also increasingly subordinated their efforts to the attempt to protect socialism in the USSR, by drawing Britain and France into an alliance against the Axis powers. The conduct of the war as a whole, including where and when to fight, was waged on the basis of what might please England and France, whose duplicitous and often contradictory designs were often hard to guess. The communists built a new bourgeois army that waged conventional warfare. Soldiers fought with enormous heroism (or at least men soldiers – women were sent back from the front lines after the initial fighting), an enthusiasm in the face of death that could not be matched by fighters for a reactionary cause, but they were not utilised in a fully revolutionary manner that could draw on all their resources, including their initiative, creativity, military insights and ability to oversee the politics of their own officers. The civilian population found itself left out and

increasingly demoralised. Top officers often became paralysed and many eventually deserted.

It may have been correct for the Communist Party to carry the banner of the Republic and the alliance against Franco it represented, and this certainly would make adjustments in the class struggle necessary, but why did it mean that the proletariat had to subordinate its fundamental interests to those of the bourgeoisie? The fatal weakness of the Communist Party’s military line flowed from its wrong political understanding.

A particularly painful moment in the war came with a famous incident in Barcelona in 1937, where what Preston calls “a mini-civil war” within the civil war broke out. (Again, *Land and Freedom* takes this as a central moment.) Barcelona had been a hotbed of workplace seizures, revolutionary committees and militias, and it became a focus for discontent with the government’s attempts to return social life to its pre-war order. When workers led by the more or less Trotskyite POUM and some anarchists took over the telephone exchange that controlled communications between Barcelona and the rest of Spain, the local government run by the Communists and other Republicans simply sent in troops to clear them out. (Many other anarchists denounced the takeover as helpful to Franco.) Because the Communists relied on the Catalan and international bourgeoisie rather than enlightening the workers and relying on them to play their leading role in a united front, a dangerous situation was created, and the reactionaries took advantage of it. The result was a further dampening of the mass movement in Barcelona and throughout Republican Spain.

By March 1939, as Franco’s forces moved to finally crush Madrid, two and a half years after their initial attempt failed, Republican generals and ministers fled or tried to capitulate. According to Preston’s figures, in addition to the 400,000 people killed in the war, Franco had another 200,000 shot after the war was over and a million

were imprisoned or put in labour camps. Hundreds of thousands of refugees faced bombardment and strafing as they trudged into exile in France, where they were also interned in camps, although in less harsh circumstances. Many ended up in Mexico or the USSR, the only countries that welcomed them.

Speaking of the experiences of the international proletariat as a whole, Mao said that there were experiences that we should praise and experiences that make us weep. There were plenty of both in Spain. It was not a "lost cause" any more than it was "the last great cause". As events themselves so dramatically illustrated, Spain was not an isolated country but a weak link in the world imperialist system. The weaknesses of reactionary rule and opportunities for revolution were integrally linked with the tumultuous unfolding of global contradictions, both the contradictions between the imperialists and the struggle between revolution and counter-revolution. But it is not helpful to see the Spanish civil war as "a rehearsal for a bigger world war to come", as if everything that happened was inevitable or as if the war was not revolutionary in content. Whether it was won or even if it was lost, the advance of the greatest revolutionary upsurge in Europe since the Russian revolution would have had an inestimable impact on the international class struggle and its subsequent unfolding as world war approached against a background of crisis in all the imperialist countries.

Again, in opposition to the pseudo-romanticism of lost causes, the point is that things might have gone differently and that, at any rate, more could have been won. The revolutionaries might have lost no matter what, but unfortunately the way the war was fought and the line associated with it left a confused legacy for the people at that time and in the future.

Those of us who are the heirs of the Comintern and are working to unite the workers of the world once again in a communist international of a new type have a responsibility to draw all the necessary lessons and act accordingly.

While this exhibition would not be particularly helpful to someone seeking an understanding of some of the knottier issues involved, it did succeed in strongly spotlighting the glorious aspects of the Spanish civil war by the simple and effective method of letting the masses and others who gave their hearts to the masses speak. This was done using film footage, documents and most powerfully "oral history", audio recordings of first-hand accounts that visitors paused to listen to on telephone handsets installed amongst the displays. This was a history museum at its best. When you hear Spanish working men and women concretely describe their treatment as beasts of burden and how they began to raise their heads in the war, you begin to get a concrete sense that no matter what else was going on, this really was a clash between a murderous old world and a new one struggling for its life. The war photography on view was also remarkable, reflecting not only the development of lighter cameras and faster shutter speeds and film, which allowed the action to be captured "live", but also the stand and courage of a generation of photographers who set a moral as well as a technical standard for decades to come.

GLOBAL SOLIDARITY

Probably because of the exhibition organisers' own views, as well as for practical reasons, the exhibition was particularly strong on describing the solidarity movement in the UK. In fact, in many ways the question of world solidarity and what that really meant was a core theme here. The interviews with people who organised material support for Spain in factories, neighbourhoods and pubs create an amazing picture of the extent to which working people gave their food, money and lives for this cause. There were 150 groups in the UK dedicated to helping the Spanish Republic and almost none to aiding Franco's forces. They filled 29 chartered ships with food, clothing, medical supplies and ambulances and other vehicles.

They also sent ambulance drivers and medical personnel, as well as fighters, men and women who did not worry about how they would get home. An aged widower describes how in his youth he and his wife went to Spain to fight for their ideals, leaving their children behind with relatives. After hearing him describe their experiences and her death there and then conclude that it was all worth it, you begin to understand more clearly what a powerful force revolutionary internationalism can be.

This is also brought out in a stunning way by the artwork, written documents, recordings and other material produced in support of the Spanish Republic by artists and intellectuals of that day. The international proletariat was not only leading the Spanish civil war, it was also leading, to one degree or another, and not always directly, a vast contingent of painters, sculptors, poets, actors, musicians, composers and artists of every kind. They produced both works needed immediately to popularise the cause and works of enduring, timeless quality.

Never before in all of history had the world seen such a global movement. It could not have existed without the Comintern and its parties and the masses who gave so unstintingly in every country.

Of course it is true that many of those involved had confused ideas, spontaneously as well as due to mistakes on the part of leaders, but we need to see the essence of what was happening. There is a letter to his mother by a young English musician. He writes that he and his wife have seen "unemployed lads from the Clyde, and frightened clerks from Willesden stand up (without fortified positions) against an artillery barrage that professional soldiers could not stand up to. And they did this because to hold the line here and now means that we can prevent this battle being fought again later on Hampstead Heath or the hills of Derbyshire...." Many people felt that way, or at least thought it was necessary to argue like that to win

others over. It certainly was an illusion to think that victory against Franco could avoid a world war that Britain's rulers were determined to wage in the most favourable circumstances for themselves. In fact, Britain needed (and still needs) a revolutionary civil war on Hampstead Heath and the hills of Derbyshire, amongst other places. But that is only one side of the question.

This letter writer may have posed his participation in the civil war as if it were motivated by self-interest or at least simply the desire to protect family, friends and compatriots, but in fact he gave his life for something much broader. The civil war in Spain was rooted in a revolutionary upsurge and linked to the socialist USSR and the Comintern and other revolutionary struggles, including the revolutionary war in China. The Republic and its supporters were up against cynical manoeuvres on the part of both the Axis and Allied powers in preparation for a world war that would turn out to be one of the most towering crimes of capitalism. The masses in Britain, like the people of the world, shared common enemies with the Spanish people, including not only Hitler and Mussolini but the entire British ruling class. Some writers today like to claim that the Spanish Republic enjoyed so much support *despite* the role of the Communists. The point has already been made here that without the Communists, very quickly there wouldn't have been any Republic to support, but there is a deeper point too. Without their role, the civil war would not have had the same revolutionary and anti-imperialist component, and the sense that this was somehow a struggle between the forces of light and darkness would not have had as much basis in fact. There was confusion, but there was also a basic sense of right and wrong sides.

The show moves towards a conclusion with a poem by a civil war veteran: "Madrid in these days of our planet's anguish/wrought by the men whose mock morality/begins and ends with the tape of the Stock exchange," referring to the ticker tape that record-

ed transactions in those days. Couldn't this just as easily be written about our world now? Also at the end of the exhibition, a song by a young contemporary band contrasts those days to our times, when, "The future teaches you to be alone/The present to be afraid and cold/Gravity keeps your head down...." Now, no less than in the 1930s, the Spanish civil war continues to represent aspirations for a better world, and no less than then these aspirations can be organised and tempered in the people's struggle.

POETRY AND ROMANCE

Today the storm centres of the world revolution are in the Third World countries. There is certainly as much poetry and indeed the romance of revolutionary transformation where people's war has brought forth the embryos of people's power as there was in the days of the Spanish civil war. While for various reasons we face a more uphill battle in popularising those struggles, there are other factors at work as well. It is impossible to hear the slogan of Franco's Foreign Legion, "Down with intelligence, long live Death!" and not think of the religious fundamentalists and fascist freaks grouped around George W. Bush. When we think of the global cauldron of war that Spain prefigured, it seems not so very far away from us in time at all. Why can't we, today, as part of our leadership of the revolutionary struggle, build very broad and dynamic unity with all sorts of people around the world, including in the imperialist countries, to oppose the world the imperialists have imposed on us all and especially to fight the global rampage that imperialism, with the US at its head, is launching right now?

One of the lessons of the Spanish civil war that bears keeping in mind today is this: when the ruling classes find themselves rent with contradictions and crisis, they may resort to the most desperate and brutal measures to unify their own ranks and crush the people at home by force of arms, whilst they strive for a redivision of the colonies and the world. But such moves can be a

desperate gamble and bring into motion forces they cannot control. Franco's move to reimpose order created more disorder and drew the "ordinary" people, who in ordinary times often seem almost immune to politics, into unbridled political life and unbottled their enthusiasm for revolutionary change. It created more conditions for uniting the people and defeating their enemies. If we look at the current world situation in this light, we can better grasp both the dangers and the opportunities that it presents.

Another lesson from Spain is the tremendous possibilities for a real world movement of solidarity and resistance against our common enemies, and, no less importantly, the need to organise it so that it can become a material force. It was a complicated world in the 1930s and it still is, though the world has certainly changed in many ways, including the general class configuration in the imperialist countries. Today we have no socialist countries or Comintern yet, and we face other limitations, but what we have done so far is not nearly what world events require and make possible.

A poem in this show refers to weeping for the Spanish civil war's "dead young poets". This is a core image many people have of that war. Indeed, as this exhibition shows so well, poets from all over the world, including some of that century's finest, took part in this struggle, mostly on the side of the people, while the few that consciously chose the other side mainly stayed home. Two very great ones, Federico Garcia Lorca and Miguel Hernandez, were executed by Franco's unpoetic legions. (By the way, some of those poets, including Hernandez, were also Communists.) Today, we would unite the people's poets, to put it metaphorically, and all the people, but we would also reject the idea of beautiful losers "fighting the good fight". We want to fight good, in accordance with the proletariat's sweeping vision and ability to unite and rely on the broadest masses of people, and we want to win. ■