

What 'Land & Freedom' Leaves Out Spain: War & Revolution

Land and Freedom, a film by British director Ken Loach about the Spanish Civil War, is remarkable both for its vantage point and its subject matter. Winner of two prizes at the 1995 Cannes Film Festival, the movie brings to life one of the major class struggles of this century. After 60 years, the Spanish Civil War retains its romantic luster as a heroic struggle which pitted ordinary workers and peasants, aided by idealistic leftist youth from abroad, against the armies of General Francisco Franco, the Spanish ruling class and fascist military legions dispatched by Hitler and Mussolini. It is a conflict in which it is easy to choose sides.

During the Civil War Stalinists joined social democrats, pacifists and liberals in portraying it as a struggle to preserve Spanish "democracy." But there was much more at stake than this—the fundamental issue was whether society would be organized in accordance with the needs of Spain's capitalists and landowners or its workers and peasants.

There are many parallels between events in Spain in the mid-1930s and those in Russia after the overthrow of the Tsar in February 1917. The immediate origins of the Spanish conflict can be traced to the fall of the monarchy in 1931 and the proclamation of a republic headed by a coalition of bourgeois liberals and social democrats. The leader of the liberals was Manuel Azaña who Trotsky dubbed "the Spanish Kerensky," after the leader of Russia's short-lived Provisional Government. Like Kerensky, Azaña did not enjoy the confidence of the big capitalists and propertied interests, but instead depended on the support of workers' parties (first the Socialists, and later also the Communists) to maintain power. Like Kerensky, Azaña's social base expected him to deliver far more radical changes than he was prepared to countenance.

The result was an escalating series of clashes between the workers and the state throughout the 1930s. In 1933, a short-lived anarchist rising in Cádiz was crushed. As the struggle deepened, death squads assassinated prominent workers' leaders. Elements of the far right launched a fascist party, the Falange Española. When Azaña's government was displaced in 1934 by a rightist coalition headed by Alejandro Lerroux, the normally legalistic Socialist Party, spurred on by its left wing, began to talk of purchasing arms for distribution to its members.

In October 1934, in the midst of a general strike against the government, the miners in Asturias declared a socialist commune. The government dispatched Franco at the head of his Moroccan Army of Africa to crush the uprising. Franco's troops massacred 5,000 workers and jailed another 30,000. But this did not extinguish the resistance.

In January 1936, Lerroux was forced to resign amid a financial scandal, and new elections were called. For the first time, the anarchist leaders of the 1.5-million member Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT—the largest union in Spain) and the Federación Anarquista Ibérica (FAI—the illegal anarchist political organization) abandoned their principle of electoral abstention and endorsed the candidates of the Popular Front, a coalition of liberal bourgeois parties with the Socialists and Communists. The tide was so strong that the left-wing Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (POUM—an alliance of former Trotskyists headed by Andrés Nin and the Workers and Peasants' Bloc led by Joaquín Maurín) which had previously denounced such class collaboration, called for a vote for Azaña, and signed the Popular Front's election manifesto. In a January 1936 article entitled "The Treachery of the POUM," Trotsky denounced its support to the class-collaborationist alliance as a "betrayal of the proletariat."

For the first few months after his election, Azaña did everything possible to assure the Spanish ruling class that the Popular Front would pose no threat to its essential interests. He opposed the arming of the workers, ignored widespread reports that rightists in the military were preparing to revolt, and rebuffed suggestions that he purge the officer corps. This passivity emboldened the reactionaries. On 17 July 1936 the military launched an uprising in Morocco that quickly spread to garrisons across Spain. It was immediately supported by the Catholic Church and virtually the entire bourgeoisie. The Popular Front government responded by trying to conciliate the rebels. Azaña rejected proposals to arm the population:

"But the workers had drawn their own conclusions, and, without taking the slightest notice of the Popular Front sermons about governmental and parliamentary authority, helped themselves. They spontaneously hurled themselves upon the rebel armies, and by fraternising with the soldiers, disarmed them and emptied the Fascist armouries and arms depots in Barcelona, Madrid and Valencia. In a word, they answered the Fascist insurrection organised by the 'Republican' army with a proletarian counter-insurrection."

—Jean Rous, "Spain 1936-39: The Murdered Revolution," *Revolutionary History* Vol. 4, Nos. 1/2

Throughout loyalist Spain, workers seized the factories and landed estates that the bourgeoisie abandoned as they fled to join the Francoists. Soon the working class began to organize production without the bosses. Hastily organized militias of the workers' parties were dispatched to do battle at the front, while in the rear workers' patrols replaced the former police.

In *Homage to Catalonia*, George Orwell's classic 1937 account of his experiences in the POUM militia on the Aragon front, he described the possibilities for humanity

that he glimpsed in this revolutionary upsurge:

"I had dropped more or less by chance into the only community of any size in Western Europe where political consciousness and disbelief in capitalism were more normal than their opposites....In theory it was perfect equality, and even in practice it was not far from it. There is a sense in which it would be true to say that one was experiencing a foretaste of Socialism, by which I mean that the prevailing mental atmosphere was that of Socialism. Many of the normal motives of civilized life—snobbishness, money-grubbing, fear of the boss, etc.—had simply ceased to exist. The ordinary class-division of society had disappeared to an extent that is almost unthinkable in the money-tainted air of England....One had been in a community where hope was more normal than apathy or cynicism, where the word 'comrade' stood for comradeship and not, as in most countries, for humbug. One had breathed the air of equality....The thing that attracts ordinary men to Socialism and makes them willing to risk their skins for it, the 'mystique' of Socialism, is the idea of equality; to the vast majority of people Socialism means a classless society or it means nothing at all."

One of the great merits of Loach's film is that it captures this spirit. The story is told through the eyes of David, a young unemployed Communist Party member from Liverpool, who travels to Spain to join the International Brigades, and ends up by chance joining a POUM militia unit. David's experiences gradually transform his political views from uncritical acceptance of the Communist Party line to an understanding that, by keeping the struggle to limits acceptable to the capitalists, the Stalinists were betraying the revolution and paving the way for Franco's victory. David is apparently modeled on Stafford Cottman, the youngest member of Orwell's militia unit, "who had moved into the Young Communist League from the Labour Party's Guild of Youth, but who had none the less joined the P.O.U.M. (the lines were not so tightly drawn at first)" (*George Orwell A Life*, Bernard Crick). Crick reports that when Cottman eventually got back from Spain "his home was picketed on his return by local Communists denouncing him as a fascist."

The issues posed in Spain's civil war continue to reverberate today. According to *Freedom* (10 June 1995), a British anarchist publication, Santiago Carrillo, former leader of the Spanish Communist Party (PCE), denounced *Land and Freedom* in Madrid's *El Pais* the day before the movie opened. He complained that it reduced "one of the greatest epics of the fight for freedom this century" to the small change of a conflict between the POUM and the PCE. Loach replied by pointing out that, at the time, Carrillo had been among those who slandered the POUM as being in league with Franco. Carrillo's comments were echoed by Paul Preston, a British historian, in the cover story of the 16 February *New Statesman*. According to Preston, "Loach's *Land and Liberty* [sic] has to be seen as marginal, if not perverse" because it is more "an anti-Stalinist tract than a celebration of those Spanish and foreign men and women who gave their lives fighting Franco and his Axis allies."

To Loach's credit, he explains the international context of Moscow's popular-front policy. A high point of

the film is a discussion, which includes the militia unit and the peasants of a village they have liberated, about whether or not to collectivize the land. An American Stalinist intervenes, arguing that collectivization may scare off Republican Spain's potential democratic capitalist allies. And it was indeed in pursuit of a defense pact with Britain and France that Stalin insisted on sacrificing the Spanish Revolution on the altar of the Popular Front. The main political defect of Loach's presentation, however, is the absence of criticism of the policies of the POUM. From this film one could easily get the impression that the POUM, as opposed to the Stalinists, pursued a consistently revolutionary course. This was not so.

In an article written two weeks after the Civil War erupted, Leon Trotsky, leader of the victorious Red Army in the Russian Civil War, observed:

"A civil war is waged, as everybody knows, not only with military but also with political weapons. From a purely military point of view, the Spanish revolution is much weaker than its enemy. Its strength lies in its ability to rouse the great masses to action. It can even take the army away from its reactionary officers. To accomplish this, it is only necessary to seriously and courageously advance the program of socialist revolution.

"It is necessary to proclaim that, from now on, the land, factories, and shops will pass from the hands of the capitalists into the hands of the people. It is necessary to move at once toward the realization of this program in those provinces where the workers are in power. The fascist army could not resist the influence of such a program for twenty-four hours; the soldiers would tie their officers hand and foot and turn them over to the nearest headquarters of the workers' militia. But the bourgeois ministers cannot accept such a program. Curbing the social revolution, they compel the workers and peasants to spill ten times as much of their own blood in the civil war. And to crown everything, these gentlemen expect to disarm the workers again after the victory and to force them to respect the sacred laws of private property. Such is the true essence of the policy of the Popular Front."

—"The Lesson of Spain," 30 July 1936

The capitulation of the POUM and the Anarchist CNT/FAI to the Popular Front—i.e., to the conception that the interests of the workers and peasants had to be subordinated to those of the "progressive" capitalists—laid the basis for the defeat of the revolution and, ultimately, of the Republican side. As long as the workers' parties accepted the necessity to maintain the bloc with the "progressive" capitalists, it followed that the struggle had to respect private property and safeguard Spain's colonial holdings. This is why the Republican camp refused to proclaim the independence of Morocco, despite the fact that this would have had a powerful destabilizing effect on the Moroccan troops, which constituted an important element of Franco's army. The government also refused to legalize the expropriation of the landed estates, and strove to reassure the capitalists by "regularizing" the state apparatus, disarming the workers and liquidating the organs of popular power that had arisen in July 1936.

The POUM deplored these moves, but refused to

break with the Popular Front over them. The best that Nin could offer was some “revolutionary” doubletalk. Despite its left criticisms of the treachery of the Stalinists and the Popular Front, the POUM capitulated politically at every important juncture. It supported the Popular Front electorally and, in September 1936, entered the bourgeois government of Catalonia. One of the first tasks of the new government was to dissolve the organs of proletarian dual power that had sprung up alongside the official government bodies. The Central Committee of the Workers’ Militias was dissolved, and its functions assumed by the Defense Ministry, while the local anti-fascist councils (dominated by the workers’ organizations) were replaced by municipal administrations appointed by the government.

Furthermore, while the POUM held its ministerial portfolio, the working class was disarmed. A law was passed requiring all weapons to be delivered to the defense ministry within eight days: “At the end of the cited period those who retain such armament will be considered as fascists and judged with the rigour which their conduct deserves” (quoted in Felix Morrow’s *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain*). The decree was published in the 28 October 1936 issue of *La Batalla*, the POUM’s newspaper. Having lent its prestige to the disarmament of the workers and the eradication of their committees, on 12 December 1936 the POUM was unceremoniously booted out of the government. The CNT, which was both considerably larger and more pliable than the POUM, lasted until July 1937, when it too was discarded.

As the war progressed, the Stalinist grip on the Republican state apparatus tightened. Within the Popular Front government, the Communists defended the interests of the capitalists with single-minded determination. In a March 1937 address to a PCE Central Committee plenum, José Diaz, the party’s General Secretary spelled this out unambiguously:

“we should not lose our heads and skip over reality, trying to carry out experiments of ‘Libertarian Communism’ (Anarchist) or ‘socialization’ in the factories or in the countryside. The stage of the development of the democratic revolution through which we are passing requires the participation in the struggle of all anti-fascist forces, and these experiments can only result in driving away a very important section of those forces.

“If in the beginning the various premature attempts at ‘socialization’ and ‘collectivization,’ which were the result of an unclear understanding of the character of the present struggle, might have been justified by the fact that the big landlords and manufacturers had deserted their estates and factories and that it was necessary at all costs to continue production, now on the contrary they cannot be justified at all. At the present time, when there is a government of the Frente Popular, in which all the forces engaged in the fight against fascism are represented, such things are not only not desirable, but absolutely impermissible.”

—*The Communist International*, May 1937

In his speech Diaz ominously anticipated the forthcoming Stalinist repression. First, in a clear attempt to

isolate the POUM, he dismissed reports that the CNT/FAI would be targeted:

“Our enemies set rumours afoot that bloody clashes are inevitable between the Anarchists and the Communists, and that the question of who will crush the other will inevitably arise. It must be declared that those who spread such rumours are our enemies and enemies of the Anarchist comrades.”

He declared that it was necessary to launch a “ruthless struggle against Trotskyism,” and made it clear that the elimination of the POUM was a high priority:

“Our chief enemy is fascism, against which we concentrate all our fire and all the hatred of the people. But our hatred is directed with equal force against the agents of fascism, against those who, like the P.O.U.M., these Trotskyites in disguise, conceal themselves behind pseudo-revolutionary phraseology so as the better to fulfil their role as agents of our enemies in our own country. To destroy the ‘Fifth Column’ we must destroy all those who defend the political slogans of the enemy. But the slogans of our enemy are *against* the democratic republic, *against* the anti-fascist People’s Front, *against* the Frente Popular government....”

The showdown came two months later, in May 1937, when the Stalinists launched an assault on the CNT-controlled Barcelona telephone exchange. Thousands of armed workers, spearheaded by CNT and POUM militants, responded to this provocation by flooding into the streets and building barricades. The workers soon gained the upper hand in the initial fighting. Hundreds of government police were captured and disarmed, and most of the city was soon controlled by the workers. *Land and Freedom* portrays this battle. What is left out, however, is the fact that the leadership of both the POUM and CNT were caught by surprise—both by the Stalinist attack and the workers’ resistance. And then, instead of using their initial advantage to oust the government and restore direct workers’ rule, they temporized with Azaña. Only the small Trotskyist Bolshevik-Leninist Group and the left-wing anarchist Friends of Durruti called for a break with the Popular Front and the establishment of workers’ power. The Trotskyists issued a statement calling for disarming the Republican police and arming the workers. They warned that: “This is the decisive moment. Next time it will be too late.... Only proletarian power can assure military victory.” The left anarchists issued similar calls. But the POUM and anarchist leaders instead agreed to lay down their arms and send the workers home in exchange for a promise that there would be no reprisals. Within weeks the POUM was outlawed, its militias demobilized, its cadres arrested and its leaders murdered (see accompanying box).

Far from strengthening the Republican side, the Stalinists’ success in crushing the left only hastened Franco’s victory. The critical question upon which the final outcome of the Civil War hinged was that of *class* interest. The Spanish ruling class understood this from the beginning. They supported Franco because they knew that if he won the unions would be smashed, the left annihilated and a military dictatorship installed to

guarantee capitalist rule. But there was no equivalent appeal to class interest on the Republican side. The Stalinists exhorted the workers and rural proletarians to risk their lives so that, after the victory, they could resume life under the “democratic” rule of the same capitalists.

Fenner Brockway, leader of Britain’s parliamentarist Independent Labour Party (ILP), was certainly no revolutionary. Yet, after visiting Spain in June and July 1937, he concluded:

“it is evident that the retreat from a revolutionary position by the Governments is encouraging disillusionment and even indifference to the war. Spanish experience shows that an effective war against Fascism must also be a war for the Social Revolution. This is the dynamic of enthusiasm, and as the counter-revolution in Spain has proceeded the passion for the fight against Franco has decreased.”

—“Personal Report of Visit to Spain,” mimeographed circular [1937]

Land & Freedom vividly portrays how close Spain in the mid-1930s came to working-class revolution, and captures the confusion of militants caught up in the situation, as they slowly come to realize that they are being betrayed. The disarming of David’s POUM militia unit at the climax is the film’s most harrowing scene.

Yet the absence of any explanation for the POUM and CNT/FAI’s capitulation may lead viewers to draw unnecessarily pessimistic conclusions. For, aside from the decisive question of political leadership, the situation in Spain in 1936 was much more favorable than in Russia in 1917, where the workers triumphed. The Spanish proletariat of 1936 had much greater social weight, and was more politically advanced, than the Russian workers had been in 1917. Moreover, unlike the predominantly petty-bourgeois Russian peasantry, the rural population in Spain was composed mainly of landless proletarians and semi-proletarians who identified closely with their urban counterparts. The Spanish

masses fought magnificently but, without a coherent revolutionary leadership, were unable to overcome the coalition of POUMists, Stalinists, Anarchists, and social democrats supporting the Popular Front. In Trotsky’s words: “*There can be no greater crime than coalition with the bourgeoisie in a period of socialist revolution.*” Those who accept the framework of popular frontism must necessarily regard socialist revolution as a delusion.

The difference between victory in Russia and defeat in Spain lay entirely in the quality of the political leadership of the left wing of the workers’ movement. The Bolsheviks defended Kerensky, the leader of the cross-class Provisional Government, against the reactionary coup of General Kornilov, just as in Spain Trotsky called for the defense of Azaña against Franco. But, while Lenin adamantly refused to support Kerensky politically, and aggressively championed the independent interests of the working class against the popular front, the POUM and the rest of the Spanish left bowed before the coalition government in order to avoid isolation.

The contortions resulting from the POUM’s attempts to reconcile its formally Marxist analysis with its opportunist behavior would be hard for anyone to capture in a feature film. Loach at least deserves credit for telling the truth as he knows it. One of the political merits of the film is that it indicates that the key to the outcome of the Spanish Civil War lay in the struggles *within* the Republican camp.

Loach does not like the Popular Front, but he does not explain it sufficiently. In that sense, the full story of the defeat of the Spanish Revolution is still waiting to be told to a mass audience. Yet in a period of widespread despair and cynicism about politics, *Land and Freedom* is valuable in at least suggesting to a new generation that it is worth considering some of the unrealized historical possibilities of this betrayed revolution. ■