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To the extent that the Second World War was truly a fight for democracy against fascism, then it did not begin in 1939 in Poland, but in Spain three years earlier. This was when a people's war against General Franco's Nationalist rebellion was launched. He acknowledged as much in 1941, telling Hitler that in the Second World War 'the first battle was won here in Spain'.¹ From the opposite camp an American anti-fascist volunteer wrote: 'To me, World War Two started on July 18, 1936. That's when the first shot was fired in Madrid.'² This is not the conventionally accepted starting point merely because Allied governments were yet to take up arms. Thus Americans who returned from the Civil War were dubbed 'premature anti-fascists' and hauled in front of the forerunner to McCarthy's House Un-American Activities Committee.³ Their crime: opposing a coup which, according to the Nationalist daily, *El Correo Español*, 'was working ... to liberate Europe from the filth of democracy.'⁴

Although Franco was more a military figure than a classic fascist leader on Italian or German lines, his link with fascism and Nazism was visible from the outset. Without Hitler's Junkers 52 transport planes to fly soldiers from Morocco the rebellion might have fizzled out.⁵ Mussolini was also quick to provide planes, arms and ships.⁶ The Nationalists remained heavily dependent on the Axis throughout, receiving munitions supplemented by 16,000 German and 80,000 Italian military personnel.

If Franco declared his movement 'not exclusively fascist', he nonetheless admitted that fascism was a component part and the 'inspiration of the new State'.⁷ Nationalists echoed the Nazi slogan – *Ein Reich, ein Staat, ein Führer* – substituting the Spanish equivalent – 'One fatherland, one state, one *caudillo*'.⁸ Thus Francoist ideology has been dubbed 'an amalgam of fascist corporatism and religious obscurantism'.⁹

Moreover, Nationalist methods prefigured the murderous policies enacted by the Axis elsewhere. One Falangist admitted: 'The repression in the nationalist zone was carried out in cold blood, purposefully and methodically.'¹⁰ In Malaga, a city that surrendered

without resistance, 4,000 were shot in one week.¹¹ So extreme and violent was this process that:

Even the Italians and Germans criticised such blanket repression as 'short-sighted' and suggested the Nationalists should recruit workers to a fascist party instead of slaughtering them ... The decline in the number executed in the Nationalist zone during 1937 has also been attributed to the fact that there was simply no one relevant left to kill.¹²

When the fighting eventually stopped on 1 April 1939, 300,000 people lay dead.¹³

Though Spain did not join the Axis coalition and remained officially neutral, this was only because the country was utterly exhausted and Hitler was unwilling to pay Franco's price for entry. The latter did, however, send the 47,000-strong Blue Division to fight alongside the Wehrmacht in Russia.¹⁴

The Spanish Civil War did not conform to the standard model of army versus army, but to army versus revolution.¹⁵ An anarchist who spent 20 years in Franco's jails described how the people's war took shape in Barcelona, not only to defeat the Nationalists but in opposition to the elected Republican government Franco wished to overthrow:

For months, the coup of the generals had been expected. Everyone knew they wanted to turn out their paymasters in the Republic and establish their own dictatorship, modelled on the lines of the Fascist powers. 'The government can't get out of it,' everyone had said. 'Now it has got to arm the people'. Instead, the Popular Front Government had called on the army to be loyal. When it had finally revolted, we had hit back. Barcelona was ours in twenty-four hours!¹⁶

This was therefore a people's war combining resistance to Franco at the front *and* class war behind the lines. Militia columns marched off to fight the rebel army, but confronted their bosses on return. In Barcelona 80 per cent of enterprises were collectivised¹⁷ under a decree that said: 'The victory of the people will mean the death of capitalism'.¹⁸ In December 1936 George Orwell experienced the results:

the working class was in the saddle ... Every shop and café had an inscription saying that it had been collectivised; even the bootblacks had been collectivised and their boxes painted red and black. Waiters and shop-walkers looked you in the face and treated you as an equal. Servile and even ceremonial forms of speech had temporarily disappeared... Tipping was forbidden by law ...¹⁹

One aspect of civil war was a transformation in the status of women, one of whom reported: 'Women were no longer objects, they were human beings, persons on the same level as men ... [This] was one of the most remarkable social advances of the time ...'²⁰

The conflict that began in 1936 was, in one sense, already a world war. For alongside the Spanish working class who battled against Franco, Hitler and Mussolini, were the International Brigades, totalling some 32,000 from 53 different countries.²¹ The largest contingent of volunteers came from neighbouring France, but significant numbers of anti-fascist exiles from Italy and Germany were enrolled. Formed in response to a call from the Communist International.²² Sympathy for the Spanish cause inspired liberals, socialists and democrats, although 85 per cent of Brigaders were Party members.²³ In Britain, for example, the Labour Party initially pledged 'all practicable support ... to defend freedom and democracy in Spain,'²⁴ while opinion polls showed an 8:1 ratio in support of the Republican Popular Front government over Franco.²⁵

Yet the future Allies of the Second World War had no need of this anti-fascist people's war. Instead of siding with the democratically elected government, the French and British promoted a Non-Intervention Committee. Formally backed by all European countries²⁶ it was supposed to deny weapons and combatants to both sides in Spain. Neville Chamberlain, claimed 'we have no wish or intention to interfere with the internal affairs of any other nation.'²⁷ In fact, such pretended neutrality assisted Franco because the Republic had lost its main armaments to the rebels and was now denied the chance to purchase weapons on the international market, even though it was the legitimate government.

Furthermore, when Italy and Germany openly flouted the rules, nothing was done to stop them assisting France because even before 1936 the British establishment had concluded that in Spain 'the foundations of civilization are being undermined [because] the revolution is beginning ...'.²⁸ France had elected its own Popular Front government in 1936 under Blum and he originally wanted to

assist the Spanish Republic. However, not only did he fear provoking domestic right-wing forces,²⁹ he needed Britain as an ally against Hitler. Warned of 'strong pro-rebel feeling in the British Cabinet', it was Blum, who initiated the non-intervention process.³⁰

The USA could have sold arms to the Republic as its Neutrality Law did not apply to civil war. However, Washington declared that it would: 'of course, scrupulously refrain from any interference whatsoever in the unfortunate Spanish situation'.³¹ Roosevelt described events in Spain as 'a contagion [and] when an epidemic of physical disease starts to spread, the community joins in a quarantine ...'.³² Some sources suggest he regretted a policy which favoured Franco³³ and dabbled in an abortive plan to send covert military supplies.³⁴ Perhaps so. Yet in practical terms everything was done to discourage support to the Republic. For the first time in American history, restrictions were put on travel, with 'Not Valid for Travel in Spain' stamped on US passports.³⁵ While the US government obstructed assistance to the Republic, its big businesses backed Franco with 3 millions tons of fuel, and thousands of trucks essential for his war machine.³⁶

The Spanish civil war gave hints of the attitude Russia would adopt towards people's war in the future. Communist International Brigaders volunteered from a commitment to socialist internationalism, but Stalin was motivated by the needs of Russian state capitalism. He hoped to curb Hitler's ambitions through an alliance with Britain and France that threatened war on two fronts. A Spanish Republican victory that brought 'the death of capitalism' would alienate these western powers; a victory for Franco, with Nazi backing, would be equally damaging. Hugh Thomas concludes: 'With crablike caution, therefore, Stalin seems to have reached one conclusion, and one conclusion only, about Spain: he would not permit the Republic to lose, even though he would not help it to win.'³⁷

Apart from Mexico, the USSR was the Republic's only significant military backer, and to match fascist supplies to the Nationalists Stalin should have supplied six times more men and three times more tanks³⁸ than he did.³⁹ Even so help of any sort was manna from heaven, so Russia's influence grew to the point where it could engineer the downfall of the beleaguered Republic's leader, Largo Caballero, and his replacement by the more pro-Moscow Juan Negrin. Russia's line was for 'democracy' (of the parliamentary sort acceptable to Britain and France), but opposed to the revolution that inspired the mass fight against Franco.

The interaction of imperialist war and people's war was to be found in this clash between Stalin's foreign policy needs and popular revolution. Herbert Matthews, the *New York Times* reporter, was no doubt justified in denying the communists 'were mere robots obeying orders (except for the few Russian leaders involved). I still say they fought against Fascism and – at the time – for the democracy we know.'⁴⁰ Nevertheless their loyalty to what they considered the world's only socialist state trapped them in a contradictory stance: following Stalinism to extol conventional capitalist democracy, and yet fighting and dying for a people's war that went so far beyond it. This position was brilliantly summed up by a Scottish communist Brigader:

at that time I literally worshipped the Soviet Union. And when one finally had a rifle on which one could depend for killing Fascists, and not killing yourself, with a hammer and sickle emblazoned on it, then one felt a real thrill of pride. Here was the great Workers' Republic coming to the aid of the Spanish people in their effort to preserve democracy inside their own country. Because please bear in mind this fact: the struggle in Spain was not a struggle to establish communism.⁴¹

There was a technical, military, aspect to the interaction of the two wars in the Republican effort. Preston argues that: 'After the early defeats of the enthusiastic and heroic, but untrained and disorganized, workers' militias, many moderate Republicans, Socialists, Communists and even some anarchists advocated the creation of conventional military structures.'⁴²

However, the fundamental issue was political. Should the war be conducted in a way that did not alienate the western powers (who sympathised with Franco), or defeat the rotten system which had given rise to so many Francos over the years? These two conceptions came to blows in Barcelona during May 1937. Communists, in alliance with socialists and bourgeois Republicans, repressed the anarchist CNT and the POUM (a movement loosely linked to Trotskyism). Hundreds died, the NKVD Russian secret police pursued the survivors, and the revolutionary hopes of the early civil war were crushed.

It was always going to be difficult for the Republic to triumph given its continuing isolation, the calculations of Russia, the malevolent indifference of the Western Allies, and Axis aid to the enemy. But quashing the revolution sapped popular enthusiasm for

the fight, and proved no more effective in defeating the Nationalists. They won in 1939.

Although Britain and France were officially at war with fascism from that year on they did not change their attitude towards the fascist-backed Spanish government. As Glyn Stone writes: '[The Allied governments] had gone to war in September 1939 to challenge Nazi Germany's intention to dominate the European continent rather than to create a new democratic order in Europe and, accordingly, as long as Spain maintained its neutrality Franco's regime had nothing to fear...' ⁴³

In 1940 Churchill still waxed lyrical about the Nationalists: 'As in the days of the Peninsular War, British interests and policy are based on the independence and unity of Spain and we look forward to seeing her take her rightful place both as a great Mediterranean Power and as a leading and famous member of the family of Europe and of Christendom.'⁴⁴ Franco greeted these overtures by enthusiastically supporting Hitler's war against 'Russian Communism, that terrible nightmare of our generation'⁴⁵ and despatching the Blue Division to assist. He warned the USA that entry into the war would be 'criminal madness' and affirmed that the Allies 'have lost'.⁴⁶

The British and French governments were unperturbed. They concluded trade treaties and continued to support the weakest of the fascist regimes because, in the words of the British ambassador, any change 'would only lead to greater confusion and danger'.⁴⁷ The civil war had left the country heavily dependent on food imports, and while Indians starved the Western Allies rushed to supply Spain's shortfall with hundreds of thousands of tons of wheat,⁴⁸ as well as sending large quantities of industrial goods and oil. One American commentator concluded that Spanish civilians enjoyed the highest level of petrol consumption in Europe.⁴⁹

Allied policy may conceivably have been justified on purely strategic grounds. Formal Spanish neutrality left Gibraltar in British hands, safeguarding entry into the Mediterranean. However, that reasoning could not hold after 1945 when, as Britain's ambassador commented: 'With the elimination of other totalitarian governments in Europe the Spanish anomaly becomes more and more conspicuous.'⁵⁰ When Russia called for Franco's removal⁵¹ and US and British experts talked of using dependence on Allied oil as a lever to moderate his tyranny, Churchill weighed in with this tirade: 'What you are proposing to do is little less than stirring up a revolution in Spain. You begin with oil, you will quickly end in blood ... If we lay hands on Spain ... the Communists become

masters of Spain [and] we must expect the infection to spread very fast through both Italy and France.'⁵²

Leaving Franco untouched allowed the gruesome judicial murder of Republicans to continue unabated. In 1945 they were running at about 60 death sentences a week, with 23 carried out in Madrid on one day alone.⁵³

One possible objection to the concept of the Second World War involving a people's war might be that, in propaganda terms, *all* modern imperialist wars are presented as 'progressive' and 'democratic'. The Spanish experience shows that the current of people's war that manifested itself during the Second World War had independent origins, and indeed developed in the face of antipathy from Allied governments.

