

The Spanish Revolution is one of the most politically charged and controversial events to have occurred in the twentieth century. As such, the political orientation of historians studying the issue largely determines their interpretation. Leon Trotsky's *The Spanish Revolution (1931 – 1939)* is a collection of documents written during the period in question from a Marxist perspective. It is of especial significance as it was the first coherent Marxist critique of Stalinism in the Spanish context. It is important to note, however, that Trotsky's principal intention was to influence the course of history, not record it. His writings were primarily aimed at and circulated among the POUM (Workers Party of Marxist Unification) and the Spanish section of the International Left Opposition, but were also intended for members of the Communist Party and to a lesser extent the general population. Trotsky was attempting to instruct his followers on how to defeat fascism. His analysis was in some ways quite correct and insightful, but in others it was fundamentally flawed as a result of his theory of permanent revolution, which, it will be argued here, led him to a quite mistaken view of the course the socialist revolution he advocated should take.

Western historians tend to examine the Spanish Civil War from a military and technical perspective, generally attributing the success of Franco's forces to the material aid provided by Germany and Italy compared to the Republican's severe lack of resources. Trotsky saw this as an inadequate explanation. As he viewed the development of fascism as a result of a crisis in capitalism and a reaction against the revolutionary potential of the working class to overthrow it, Trotsky's focus was on the state of the class struggle.

Central to Trotsky's argument is the belief that a socialist revolution is the only method by which the conditions that give rise to fascism can be abolished forever. Trotsky identified a number of factors that were obstructing the socialist revolution in Spain, the most significant of which was the absence of a revolutionary Marxist party that could lead the working class to victory. Les Evans observes that Trotsky's "writings on Spain are permeated with his appreciation of the urgent need to construct a mass revolutionary party ... and his contemptuous rejection of all the ersatz substitutes that claimed to be such a party."<sup>1</sup> The Spanish Socialist Party certainly was not the party Trotsky considered necessary. It was a Social Democratic, and thus

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<sup>1</sup> Les Evans, 'Introduction' in Leon Trotsky, *The Spanish Revolution (1931 – 1939)*, New York, 1973, 22.

reformist, party that at times came close to being revolutionary only “in words”<sup>2</sup> but never in practice.

Trotsky recognised the Stalinist Communist Party as another one of these ‘ersatz substitutes,’ detailing the counterrevolutionary role it played throughout the Spanish Revolution. Stalinism, Trotsky maintained, was “not guided by Marxist theory, or for that matter by any theory at all, but by the empirical interests of the Soviet bureaucracy.”<sup>3</sup> Through the Third International, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union controlled all its members, including the Spanish Communist Party, and as such Trotsky considered it could never play a revolutionary role. The Soviet bureaucracy, by its very nature, could not do otherwise than to crush all working class movements in order to maintain its position of power and privilege. In Spain the Stalinists formed an alliance with the extreme right wing of the Socialist Party and the liberal bourgeoisie, and directed severe repressions against the left wing of the Popular Front.

The counterrevolutionary role played by the CNT (National Labour Confederation) and FAI (Iberian Anarchist Federation) was also identified by Trotsky as a factor that hindered the process of a socialist revolution in Spain. Trotsky saw in the actions of the anarchists “an irrevocable condemnation of anarchism as an utterly antirevolutionary doctrine.”<sup>4</sup> There can be seen several main aspects of anarchist philosophy that gives it its counterrevolutionary nature, but perhaps the most telling is its attitude towards the state. In its opposition to the state, anarchism does not distinguish between a bourgeois state and a workers’ state. This led the anarchists to purposely refrain from leading the working class to take power. Trotsky judged that “to renounce the conquest of power is voluntarily to leave the power with those who wield it, the exploiters.”<sup>5</sup>

The POUM was also unable to fulfil the role of mass Marxist revolutionary party that was needed to create the socialist revolution. The leaders of the POUM recognised the reformism of the other sections of the Popular Front, and exhausted their energies attempting to ideologically convince them of the necessity of overthrowing capitalism and building a socialist society. Trotsky ascertained that this was the

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<sup>2</sup> Trotsky, *The Spanish Revolution*, 35.

<sup>3</sup> Trotsky, ‘The Lessons of Spain,’ in Nick Soudakoff (ed.), *Marxism versus Anarchism*, Newtown, 2001, 172.

<sup>4</sup> Trotsky, ‘Lessons of Spain,’ 178.

<sup>5</sup> Trotsky, ‘Lessons of Spain,’ 178.

main mistake of the POUM, advocating instead that they expose the reformist nature of the Stalinists, anarchists and liberal bourgeoisie to the masses, and mobilise the working class against them. Trotsky observed that “contrary to its own intentions, the POUM proved to be, in the final analysis, the chief obstacle on the road to the creation of a revolutionary party.”<sup>6</sup>

The last of the decisive factors that Trotsky saw as impeding the socialist revolution was the inclusion of the liberal bourgeoisie in the Popular Front. Trotsky argued that if “the POUM, the anarchists [and] the ‘left’ Socialists – in other words the centrist groupings who reflected, even in a most remote degree, the pressure of the revolutionary masses”<sup>7</sup> had seen the necessity to exclude these bourgeois elements, the Popular Front would have had a better chance of success. Trotsky theorised that the inclusion of bourgeois elements in a united front against fascism “as a general rule is capable only of paralysing the revolutionary force of the proletariat.”<sup>8</sup> This is true because as stated previously, the best way to ultimately defeat fascism is by a socialist revolution, but the bourgeoisie will always work against this. The bourgeoisie fears the proletarian revolution that will bring about the abolition of private property much more than it does fascism, which only serves to restrict its accumulation of capital.

Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution dictated the course of action he believed the working class needed to take in order to affect a socialist revolution in Spain. His theory contends that the bourgeois-democratic revolution and the socialist revolution should both occur at the same time. This doctrine contradicts the theory of Lenin and the majority of the Bolsheviks in 1917 which dictates that the bourgeois-democratic and socialist revolutions need to occur separately, in order not to alienate those petty bourgeois elements who would take part in an alliance with the proletariat to win the bourgeois-democratic revolution, but would not be immediately convinced of the need for a socialist revolution and would not support it. Trotsky’s suggested course of action has practical implications on the possibility of the socialist revolution being successful.

The demand for land reform was one of great importance and urgency in the highly agrarian country of Spain. Trotsky believed that in the event of the working class taking power, it should immediately begin

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<sup>6</sup> Trotsky, ‘Lessons of Spain,’ 181.

<sup>7</sup> Trotsky, ‘Lessons of Spain,’ 175.

<sup>8</sup> Trotsky, ‘Lessons of Spain,’ 173.

the socialist expropriation of bourgeois property in city and village. He thus advocated the immediate nationalisation of land and thus the organisation of collective farms.<sup>9</sup> This line of action, however, would have resulted in the Spanish proletariat finding itself a besieged minority surrounded by a hostile peasant population. A working class without the support of the majority is in no position to complete the socialist revolution. Thus the theory of permanent revolution is incorrect.

Instead, an alliance between the working class and the peasantry should, after having taken power, support the confiscation of land by peasant committees, leaving open the question of how the confiscated land should be reorganised. The peasantry would then most likely divide the land among itself, in line with its long-standing demand of 'equal land tenure'. This process would bring about an inevitable divide between the semi-proletarian peasantry and the rich peasantry, as the former realises that their interests differ from those of the latter, and they have more in common with the working class. An alliance could then be formed between the semi-proletarian peasants and the proletariat that could begin to carry out the tasks of the socialist revolution.

Trotsky's *The Spanish Revolution (1931 – 1939)* is nevertheless a remarkable volume allowing the reader great insight into the relationship of political forces in Spain throughout the Revolution and why the attempts made to defeat fascism were unsuccessful. Trotsky's recognition of the counterrevolutionary role of the Communist Party, anarchists and liberal bourgeoisie was an invaluable addition to Marxist thought, as was his assessment of the weaknesses and failures of the POUM and the Popular Front. While his central thesis that a socialist revolution was the only method through which to ultimately destroy fascism and that a mass revolutionary party was urgently needed was correct, his theory on what actions this revolutionary party should take was not. This theoretical error, if identified and taken into account, does not however greatly decrease the value of his contribution to the Marxist understanding of the nature of fascism and how to defeat it.

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<sup>9</sup> Trotsky, *Spanish Revolution*, 208.

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