

A process of radicalisation: Ideologies of Revolution within the Anglophone International Brigades

Introduction

The International Brigades of the Spanish Civil War have attracted admiration and scorn in from both sides of the political spectrum, either being held up as paragons of anti-fascist internationalism or as dupes of the Comintern who were dogmatically loyal to the whims of Moscow. No matter which position one takes in this debate, it is undeniable that the International Brigades were heavily influenced by Communism, and, as such, generally remained loyal to Stalin and the Soviet Union throughout the war (many upheld Marxism-Leninism until the very end of their lives). However, the extent to which volunteers, and the broader Republican war effort, subordinated themselves to Soviet political imperatives is a more complex question that reveals several interesting conclusions regarding the structure of working class anti-fascism.

Traditional histories of the Spanish conflict have only relatively recently begun to pose a serious challenge to the narratives of communist treason contained in books by Burnett Bolloten and Stanley Payne, with the effort primarily being headed by Paul Preston and Helen Graham.¹ The International Brigades have always received more generous treatment than any of the Spanish Communists from historians, but very few people have considered this in the context of the Republican experiences of anti-fascist warfare. Domestic and international solidarity during this period was usually constructed on the basis of multi-tendency political coalitions, and as such, militant opposition to the Francoist counterrevolution produced radically transformative political relations. This essay will have a particular focus on the British Battalion of the XV International Brigade, a group of men who saw fierce action at Jarama, Brunete, Belchite, Teruel and the Ebro (references to other Anglophone units will be made when appropriate to the overall narrative). Far from kowtowing to the geopolitical priorities of Muscovite infiltrators, many Brigaders perceived themselves as fighting in defence of socialist revolution against fascist reaction and, at times, anarchist ultra-leftism.

However, it is the Spanish organisations, POUM and the CNT, that seem to have always retained their revolutionary credentials in past and present historiography. Non-Communist groups existed largely on the periphery of international anti-fascism, with anarchism gaining most of its sympathy from within Spain itself. Internationally speaking, the Independent Labour Party were certainly more welcoming to the revolutionary collectivist intentions of the Anarchists and POUM than anybody in the upper echelons of the Communist Party of

¹ Burnett Bolloten; *The Spanish Civil War: Revolution and Counterrevolution* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1991). Stanley Payne; *The Spanish Civil War, the Soviet Union, and Communism* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2004). Paul Preston; various works including *The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution and Revenge* (London, Harper Perennial, 2006). Helen Graham; *The Spanish Republic at War 1936-1939* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002)

Great Britain, and could be vocal about it on numerous occasions. It was one of the tragedies of the Spanish Civil War that the competing factions of communism, anarchism and Trotskyism could not find an accord, but it seems unlikely that either side would ever have fully backed down from their political convictions fully enough to allow any real grassroots cooperation. Trotskyists were widely despised by Communists for what some believed to be their opportunistic attacks on the leadership of the Soviet Union, and the ideal of the anarchists was simply incompatible with the Marxist-Leninist theory of the state. The main goal of this essay is to show how the view of dichotomous revolutionary and counterrevolutionary action within the Republican zone does not appreciate the complexities of political allegiance during the time of the Spanish Civil War. There was no shortage of radicals on either side of the political debate; it seems that the mutual dislike that existed between Communists and 'revolutionaries' was based more on the understanding of how the Republic should be defended, rather than if there should be any revolution at all.

A clarification on revolution and reform

It is a well-known fact that, at the time of the war, there were very few among the Communists who favoured violent revolutionary resistance to the Republic in the fashion of the anarchists. However, in this particular article we will use a more scientific definition of what revolution really means.

Simply put, within Marxist conceptions of class struggle (a conception that many of the volunteers were in basic agreement with) the character of a state is determined by the class who dominates the state apparatus. The men being studied here thought of themselves as defending the working class, and whether that sentiment was based on loyalty to the Spanish government as a worker's state, or simply beating back the bourgeois impulses of fascist reaction, they can be reasonably described as revolutionary in a broad sense.

Prelude to War: Rise of the Republic

The long-term genesis of the Spanish Revolution goes back to the Carlist Wars of the 19th Century, pitting monarchist supporters of Don Carlos and his descendants against the modernising forces of Spanish Liberalism. By the time of Miguel Primo de Rivera's overthrow in 1931, however, the political contours of factional antagonism in Spain had taken on a qualitatively different form. The Russian Revolution of 1917 produced immense revolutionary upheavals across the world, and Spain, although not experiencing the same anti-capitalist militancy of Germany or Hungary, was certainly not immune to such fissures. Victor Serge remembered the incandescence of revolutionary ferment during his 1916 journey through the country:

"The Spaniards, even the workers on the shop floor beside me, who were no militants, instinctively understood the Petrograd days, since their imagination transposed those events to Madrid and Barcelona. The monarchy of Alfonso XIII was no more popular or stable than

that of Nicholas II. The revolutionary tradition of Spain, like that of Russia, went back to the time of Bakunin. Similar social causes were operating in both countries: agrarian problems, retarded industrialization, a political regime at least a century and a half behind Western Europe. The wartime industrial and commercial boom strengthened the bourgeoisie... [and] also expanded the energies and appetites of a young proletariat which had had no time to form a working-class aristocracy, that is, to become bourgeoisified.”²

Similarly, during the three years (1917-20) that became known as the *trienio bolchevista*, an anonymous report to the Spanish Prime Minister Count of Romanones claimed that “*the Spanish proletariat is very similar to the Russian, for their mentality and their love for dazzling things and for grandiose phraseology.*”³ Rural insurrections in Southern Spain were brutally subdued by troops under Manuel de la Barrera in May of 1919, seeing the deportation of workers’ activists and the lockdown of several villages.⁴ However, this was militantly resisted by large-scale strike actions across the country, particularly around Catalonia. By 1920 the number of strikes per year had risen just 463 in 1918, to 1,060, a trend that was accompanied by virulent anti-communist rhetoric from the upper and middle classes of Spanish society, the latter of which were traditional supporters of anti-Carlist liberalism.⁵ The polarisation of domestic political constituencies during this period is best exemplified through the organisational geography of the *Sindicatos Libres* (Free Trade Unions), an ultra-right wing trade union-turned-paramilitary, and the *Somatén* civil militia; the highly developed civil society structures of regions such as Catalonia, Valencia and the Navarre provided fertile ground for the establishment of populist opposition to the newly militarised working class.⁶ Moderate ‘progressives’ were all too willing to participate in the repression of anarcho-syndicalism, as can be seen by the support given by the *Catalonian Lliga Regionalista* to the de Rivera coup in September of 1923.⁷ The escalating bourgeoisification of Spain had evidently redrawn the lines of engagement between conservative and progressive tendencies, with the influence of the Russian Revolution and simultaneous currents of anarcho-syndicalism motivating a direct rupture with monarchist liberalism.

As time went on, the experience of the de Rivera dictatorship began to take its toll. Right-wing groups naturally consolidated into a single bloc against what they perceived to be the threat of international Bolshevism, and were largely successful in exploiting the dominance

² Victor Serge; *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* (New York, New York Review Books, 1951) pp.62

³ Real Academia de la Historia, Fondo Romanones, box 96, file 34. Cited in Arturo Rodriguez; *Lenin in Barcelona: the Russian Revolution and the Spanish trienio bolchevista, 1917–1920*, *Slavic Review*, Volume 76 Special Issue 3. Can be found at <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/slavic-review/article/lenin-in-barcelona-the-russian-revolution-and-the-spanish-trienio-bolchevista-19171920/318DC4C401FC24F6AF E7AC5137408183/core-reader>

⁴ Francisco Romero; ‘*The Red Dawn of the Andalusian Countryside: Peasant Protest during the ‘Bolshevik Triennium’, 1918-20* in Francisco Romero and Angel Smith ed.; *The Agony of Spanish Liberalism: From Revolution to Dictatorship, 1913-23* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) pp.133

⁵ Rodriguez, *Lenin in Barcelona*.

⁶ Dylan Riley; *The Civic Foundations of Fascism in Europe: Italy, Spain, Romania, 1870-1945* (London, Verso, 2019) pp.61-62

⁷ Smith; *The Lliga Regionalista, the Catalan Right and the Making of the Primo de Rivera Dictatorship* in Romero and Smith; *The Agony of Spanish Liberalism* pp. 145-175 passim

of clerical hierarchy to turn the rural population against the 'Reds'. Jose Maria Peman, a famous Spanish poet that was known for supporting de Rivera's right wing government, loudly put forward his views on the developing Republicanism of Spanish society; '...the time has come for Spanish society to choose between Jesus and Barabbas.'⁸ If de Rivera had not acted in the repressive manner that he did, there is no reason to doubt that the moderate sections of the republican movement would not have been driven in to alliance with the anarchists and communists, as they eventually were. On the other hand, he evidently did not do enough to appease the support bases of the military regime, with his paternalist approaches alienating many of the landowning class and Catholic Church. In fact, his desire for the reform of military promotion procedures produced ultimately fatal apathy within the military establishment, leaving the road open for the victory of left-wing electoral parties in April of 1931.⁹ Divisions within the reactionary camp such as this formed a contrast to the newly discovered unity of progressive organisations in the Pact of San Sebastian, a coalition designed to overthrow the traditional social and legal structures of the Spanish establishment.¹⁰ Conservative fragmentation was symptomatic of long-term continuities that are identifiable throughout the Spanish history of the 20th Century, and it perhaps demonstrates the chaotic nature of political allegiances in the revolutionary epoch. Spanish anti-communism, whilst not yet manifested as fascism in a qualitative sense, was a common enemy around which disparate groups such as the communists and social-democrats of the International Brigades could (temporarily) mobilise. Ultimately, this would come to present a broad front against both fascism and the pre-war conservative CEDA led by Gil Robles, a party that vehemently challenged initial reforms under the Manuel Azana administration.¹¹ It was the eventual victory of this party in 1933 that prompted a revolutionary response from workers in the Asturias.

Revolution in the Asturias: Consolidation of working class republicanism

Mounted in opposition to the admission of three CEDA ministers in to the government of 1st October 1934, the 1934 Revolution was a key catalyst in the decision of communists both domestically and internationally to throw their weight behind the cause of social progress in Spain.¹² Although the divisions between the anarchists and communists had not yet developed in the way they later would, the construction of mutually independent support bases laid important groundwork in the demarcation of different revolutionary ideologies. The increasing prestige of the tiny Partido Comunista de Espana instilled an acute sense of loyalty to the Republican experiment in International volunteers, as many of these men, in referencing the Asturias rebellion, perceived themselves as defenders of the democratic revolution. In Britain, many were aware of this militant escalation of political hostilities. Glaswegian volunteer, Jimmy Maley, was said to have been highly invested in the pre-war events of Spanish politics, as reported by his son Willy:

⁸ Cited in Paul Preston; *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain* (Croydon, Harper Press, 2013) pp.5

⁹ Preston, *The Spanish Holocaust*, pp.6

¹⁰ Julian Casanova; *The Spanish Republic and Civil War* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010) pp.12-13

¹¹ *Ibid*, pp.94-95

¹² *Ibid*, pp.105-107

“See, my father was very aware of events leading up to the Spanish Civil War, so he was interested in events that were happening in Spain from 1931. Obviously he joined the Communist Party himself in ’32, but he talked about the miners in the Asturias and various things that had happened that he was interested in and had read about. And that’s hard to imagine, that people without any internet, and without any university education, or any schooling that might give you that, had that kind of anti-imperialist internationalist literature that, after the Russian Revolution, the Communist Party was providing...”¹³

Although at this stage international awareness of the Spanish conflict was comparatively limited, it nevertheless formed an important part of a historical process that many international volunteers would soon be radicalised by. The rollback of Republican land reform programs under the 1934 government created huge disaffection in the left, even amongst more radical sections of the movement. Francisco Largo Caballero took influence in the Partido Socialista Obrero Espanol (PSOE) from the moderate socialist Indalecio Prieto Tuero,¹⁴ leading to the formation of a Popular Front coalition with the communists and left-wing Republicans of Catalonia and Madrid. The association of this new government with the radicalism of the Asturias rebellion and the early reforms of the Manuel Azana administration projected radical messages on to the international stage that spoke to the working class struggles of many countries across the world. Francisco Franco’s military rebellion in 1936, triggering the Spanish Civil War, was the reaction of a populist and ruling class faction against this renewed sense of vigour in the working class. George Watters recounted in an interview with Ian MacDougall:

“We were afraid of the situation developing, of what was likely to happen to the Spanish Government, which at that particular time was carrying through some very good measures so far as the ordinary people were concerned; the eight-hour day, compulsory education for all children, a guaranteed wage and a number of other features that were considered a great advance.”¹⁵

Similarly, in the American Abraham Lincoln battalion, John Cookson felt a deep sense of commitment to the survival of the Spanish Government. In 1937, he explained his prior knowledge of Spanish politics:

“Yes, I was called crazy when I dared mention last year the second world war was dangerously near. I was called a “Red and radical” when defending the Loyalist government last August on. But all of that is different. Even the highest powers realize the nobility and dignity of the great Spanish government.”¹⁶

Nevertheless, many men were not as well read on the Spanish situation as Maley or Cookson, whether that be in the areas of revolutionary change or fascist advance. Such

¹³ Interview excerpt can be found at <https://549.scot/james-maley/#content>

¹⁴ Antony Beevor; *The Battle for Spain: The Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (London, Penguin Books, 2001) pp.28-32 passim

¹⁵ Cited in Daniel Gray; *Homage to Caledonia: Scotland and the Spanish Civil War* (Edinburgh, Luath Press Ltd., 2009) pp.33

¹⁶ Cited in Marco Buentello; *The Thing to Do: Motivational Factors for Enlistment in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade during the Spanish Civil War*, thesis, Texas A&M International University

volunteers formed a distinct minority within the International Brigade, with most relying purely on the journalism of communist party newspapers to stay up to date with conflicts in mainland Europe. For the most part, the process of radicalisation took place in Spain itself, whilst the volunteers fought and died in defence of the new Republic.

Politicisation through action: How Volunteers Understood the Spanish Republic

The formation of political and social solidarities within the Spanish People's Army was a transformative experience for many of the volunteers, with the efforts of brigade commissars bringing several men out of their apolitical stupor. Seeing the efforts of Spanish people to resist fascist aggression was an inspiration for those who had simply travelled there to escape the slums of London or Glasgow. Revolutionary shifts during this period went beyond the confines of class determinism, influencing the perceptions of race conflict and individual party loyalties within the International Brigades. Widespread tendencies like this can only be understood if we appreciate the domestic political contexts of Republican government.

Throughout this time under the government coalition of socialists, communists and republicans, there were unprecedented moves towards land reform and literary education amongst the rural population. The Agrarian Reform Law, announced in September 1932, was founded on basically reformist and moderate premises, but the landowning classes were loath to give up even a shred of their authority. In fact, the reform had only a limited effect; by December 1934, just 12,260 labourers had been resettled on 11,638 hectares of land, somewhat short of what may have been imagined in the minds of rural revolutionaries.¹⁷ Nevertheless, such initiatives were the catalyst of numerous power tremors at the heart of the Spanish state, as the anarchists and the Union General de Trebadores began to flex their muscles and pursue collectivisation of industrial and agrarian sectors of the economy. The Spanish Communists opposed this on the basis of the class collaborationist strategy prescribed by Georgi Dimitrov at the 7th Comintern Congress in 1935, advocating for a Popular Front of the working class, peasantry and landowners against Franco's forces. Certainly, during the 1920's the idea that the property of small businessmen and industrialists must be defended would have been unthinkable to many rank-and-file communists both at home and abroad. In advocating this strategy, the leadership of the PCE were following a very specific prescription set down by the Moscow Government, and as such, many of the grassroots activists of communist parties did not feel any especial loyalty to the upholding of the Comintern line. After all, in 2008, Willy Maley declared that his father's communism '*always owed more to the Calton than to the Kremlin*'.¹⁸ Jimmy himself remembered in a 2004 interview:

¹⁷ Mark Lawrence; *The Spanish Civil Wars: A Comparative History of the First Carlist War and the Conflict of the 1930's* (London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2017) pp.76

¹⁸ James Maley Obituary in the Glasgow Herald, 14th April 2007

*"...when the Spanish thing came up, I recognized right from wrong. This was the first time there had been an attempt made by working-class people to take power and they were being attacked..."*¹⁹

Despite the opposition many expressed towards the anarchist/POUM campaigns of collectivisation taking place in the countryside, the general explosion of working class mobilisation engendered by Francoist reaction in 1936 was something that enthused men throughout the International Brigades. The Junta de Defensa de Madrid (Defense Council of Madrid), was an ad-hoc institution established to coordinate militia actions against Nationalist offensives in the 1936-37 period, and was perhaps the high point of proletarian organisation within the Popular Front framework.²⁰ Ultimately, the organisational potentialities of this tendency were again disregarded in favour of appeasing Spanish landowners, but it was nevertheless broadly symptomatic of the unique phenomena that proved so encouraging to more radical members of the Brigades. Tom Murray, a dedicated communist that would later play a hand in the establishment of a Scottish breakaway from the CPGB, was not particularly interested in toeing the Moscow line during his service in Spain. Instead, he extolled the virtues of proletarian revolution:

*"We are comrades in a great campaign, co-workers in a magnificent enterprise and a determined team of builders in the work for the Socialist Commonwealth."*²¹

One example of a volunteer being changed by his experience in Spain was recounted by John Dunlop. Dunlop had travelled to Spain in early 1937, and became acquainted with a brigadier whom he suspected of running away from Scotland to escape the clutches of a woman that he had unintentionally '*bairned*'. However, he returned to his home country with a solid political commitment to the cause of anti-fascism.²² Aside from this interesting anecdote, there are other documented testaments to the radicalising potential of the International Brigades. For instance, one volunteer optimistically wrote that "*Spain is going to be a wonderful socialist country in a few short years*". Another was slightly more grandiose in his language; "*...the poor class of Spain are 500 years behind time... they been kept under like dogs but the people have risen now George*".²³ Volunteers of this ilk, who went beyond the standard party line of Popular Frontism, were most likely a minority, but to ignore their voices is to ignore a crucial component of the International Brigade story.

Perhaps a more generalisable trend would be the stiff resistance shown to racialised prejudice, particularly in the case of the Abraham Lincoln battalion. Given the fight that the International Brigades were engaged in, it may seem bizarre that racism persisted so strongly, but Lieutenant Conrad Kaye remembered all too well the extreme reluctance of

¹⁹ Interview can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EZvvN3Xe0Nw>

²⁰ Robert Colodny; *The Struggle for Madrid: The Central Epic of the Spanish Conflict, 1936-37* (New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers, 2010) pp.50-53 passim

²¹ Cited in Gray, *Homage to Caledonia*, pp.34

²² Ibid. 'Bairned' is Scots dialect for getting pregnant.

²³ Cited in Tom Buchanan; *Britain and the Spanish Civil War* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997) pp.128

some Southern white Americans and the British to integrate with Black volunteers. It seems that *“the really difficult ones [were] the British”*:

“They refuse to eat in dining rooms with the Negroes[sic], etc., and have to be drastically educated because neither the Spaniards nor the International Brigades will tolerate such heresy.”²⁴

Salaria Kee was also confronted with vicious prejudice from the Alabaman Dr. Pitts, a senior figure in the American medical staff. Reportedly, on board the SS *Paris* he refused to sit down next to Kee, whom he described as a “n— wench”. This blatant bigotry was challenged by Nancy Cunard, editor of the *Left Review* pamphlet in which George Padmore famously put forward his anti-colonial interpretation of the Civil War. Kee was invited to dine with Nancy, defying Pitts in a way that did nothing to mend relations between the two; his alleged disregard for Kee’s life during the war demonstrates how utterly ingrained these prejudices often were.²⁵

Yet, the integration of White and Black soldiers into single military units was an unusual innovation that established firm foundations for challenging racism at both domestic and international levels. In the British Battalion, there were a number of men who loudly spurned divisions of race, and instead espoused a strong sense of working class solidarity. Oscar Hunter remembered that *‘one night with some Englishmen going home, they were going home and I was going to Albacete, and one of them was named Topsol and all the way down, I’ll never forget, he sang all of these filthy English ballads... Topsol was something.’* The man referred to as ‘Topsol’ may have in fact been Walter Tapsell, a Communist activist that was unfortunately killed in an ambush at Calaceite late in 1937. Whoever ‘Topsol’ really was, his friendship with Hunter was a stirring testament to the international and interracial solidarities produced by the shared experience of war.²⁶ Welsh volunteer Alun Williams eloquently put these sentiments in to words:

“We were there in a foreign land, men of all nationalities, of colour, creed, race, religion and cultures. From all parts of the world; Iceland to Australia, the tortured lands of Central Europe to the affluent democracies of the West.”²⁷

Within the British Battalion, the institutional apparatuses through which politicisation was carried out took the form of regular battalion meetings, hosted by the political commissars. John Gollan recalled what he had witnessed at one of these meetings:

“The boys – there were 650 of them, 400 British and 250 Spanish – sat round in a large semi-circle with their rifles across their knees, listening while I explained the situation back home. Imagine it! We could hear the guns very plainly. Lorry-loads of materials for the front and armament convoys kept rumbling by. Overhead, every few minutes, a squadron of planes

²⁴ Cited in David Featherstone; *Solidarity: Hidden Histories and Geographies of Internationalism* (London, Zed Books, 2012) pp.121

²⁵ *Ibid*, pp.121-122

²⁶ *Ibid*, pp.121

²⁷ *Ibid*, pp.120-121

flew towards the fascist lines. Each time this happened we had to interrupt the meeting because the boys cheered the planes so much."²⁸

The study of the interactions volunteers went through in an environment of such immense military and social upheaval offers an interesting glimpse in to an underappreciated dimension of military experiences in the Civil War. International volunteers were not dogmatically loyal to party political lines; they were independent and capable of forming their own thoughts, putting paid to the idea of the British and American communists as Muscovite stooges. Contrary to official exhortations, many perceived the conflict as a revolutionary epoch, rather than a simple class collaborationist, anti-fascist war.

However, it is probably true to say that the vast majority of volunteers felt little sympathy for the anarchist or POUM revolutionaries. Support for this constituency came from alternative sources.

Going against the grain: International Opposition to 'Counter-Revolution'

Due to the huge popularity of George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*, it is often forgotten that those who attacked the Spanish and Soviet communist parties during the war formed a distinct minority of the international movement. Anarchist and POUM factions drew most of their support from the Spanish population. Even a radical brigader like George Drever, who was willing to stay in Spain after the war had finished in order to establish socialism, was contemptuous of their perceived antics.²⁹ John Angus, whilst not entirely wedded to the vitriol directed at POUM by Spanish communists, criticised the actions of POUM as being "*not at all helpful to winning the war*", and generally believed that they, along with the anarchists, were "*very remote from [the] reality*" of the fight against fascism.³⁰

However, international sympathies for the 'revolutionary' wing of the Spanish Republic were not entirely non-existent. The Independent Labour Party, a British organisation, contributed around 100 volunteers to the war effort, split between the regular International Brigades and an independent militia, the latter of which was the unit that George Orwell eventually joined.³¹ In military terms, the militia did not see any significant action. However, they occupied a unique position within the British socialist milieu of the 1930's, representing an international structure largely independent of communist influences. Early in the war the ILP and CPGB were able to work together, not exactly harmoniously, but effectively enough to lay the groundwork for a mass movement in support of the Republic. However, events in Spain would create unworkable divisions in the CPBGB-led Unity Campaign, as John McGovern aggressively attacked the *Daily Worker* as "*the subsidised press of Stalin*".³² The newspaper published similarly vitriolic attacks on the ILP leadership;

²⁸ Cited in Gray, *Homage to Catalonia*, pp.70

²⁹ *Ibid*, pp.34

³⁰ Cited in Richard Baxell; *Unlikely Warriors: The British in the Spanish Civil War and the Struggle against Fascism* (London, Aurum Press Ltd., 2012) pp.158

³¹ Gray, *Homage to Catalonia*, pp.142

³² *Ibid*, pp.143

“The Spanish ILP [POUM] and the British ILP have eternally disgraced themselves by supporting a rebellion of anarchist uncontrollables at the very moment that Spanish rebellion is knocking at the gates of Bilbao.”³³

At their most extreme, the attacks on POUM and the ILP accused them of actively collaborating with Francoist forces, a fantasist assertion that many International volunteers of the Communist Party would later acknowledge as hyperbolic. However, the comparative willingness of Communist Party members accept this narrative demonstrates just how antagonistic the competing revolutionary ideologies had become in their quest to head the anti-fascist movement. In fact, Communists were not the only ones guilty of hyperbole. Ethel MacDonald was an exception in the International movement, given her steadfast loyalty to the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT) and Federación Anarquista Ibérica (FAI).³⁴ Naturally, her anarchist allegiances brought her in to disrepute with the Spanish government authorities in the climate of mutual suspicion that predominated at that time. She did not take kindly to her arrest or the arrest of her anarchist comrades, and gradually moved towards full-blooded hostility to the Republican government and the Communists whom she imagined to be running the show.³⁵ The Communist Parties of the world may have been opposed to social revolution at that time, but the perception of them as forming the heart of government is demonstrably false. Admittedly the PCE did wield disproportionate influence in the Republican military, but not even the leaders of the party were anywhere close to being ‘counterrevolutionary’ enough that they would actively undermine the Spanish government in order to halt revolution. It seems that MacDonald’s attacks against the government were a product of her own persecution and the pre-war conflicts between her United Socialist Movement and the CPGB:

“My arrest was typical of the attitude of the Communist Party. In Scotland the group to which I am attached has always been in complete opposition to the Communist Party. In opposing their propaganda we have always had to deal with their fundamental ignorance and brutality.”³⁶

Painting the cadre of any opposition party as being counterrevolutionary was a practice that was common, and still is common, in leftist politics. George Orwell, a man also caught up in the violent cleavages of Republican politics, was perhaps slightly more understanding of the nuances governing different organisational tendencies. He qualified his criticism of ‘Stalinism’:

“Please notice that I am saying nothing against the rank-and-file Communists, least of all against the thousands of Communists who died heroically round Madrid. But those were not the men who were directing party policy.”³⁷

³³ Ibid, pp.144

³⁴ Ibid, pp.168-169

³⁵ Ibid, pp.171-172

³⁶ Ibid, pp.172

³⁷ George Orwell; *Homage to Catalonia* (digitally accessed via Gutenberg Project) pp.43

Yet even Orwell seemed to make an unjustifiable leap of logic when he claimed that the Communists were bent on permanently stopping worker's revolution. Let alone the rank-and-file cadre we have already observed, the notion that leaders with absolutely no connection to Moscow other than a shared political ideology would so completely subordinate themselves to Stalin's wishes is verging on conspiracy theory. Again, political divisions often saw sense thrown out the window, a commonplace in revolutionary situations.

Overall, those who believed the Communists to be active counterrevolutionaries, rather than simply putting the revolution on hold in order to secure Republican unity, were rare to find internationally, and almost impossible to find in the International Brigades bar a few select individuals. Ideological diversities were generally expressed through non-antagonistic means, not through the brutality that was seen in anarchist terrors and Republican counter-terrors. Orwell's writing has arguably created a skewed version of reality; collectivisation was not a widespread practice among the anarchists, who were by far the greatest social and political constituency of the anti-'Stalinist' left. It should be remembered that only 18.5 percent of land in the Republican zone was ever actually collectivised, and even a strident libertarian like Michael Seidman admitted the individualistic tendencies many of these collectives were plagued by.³⁸ Using the traditional fault lines of revolution versus counterrevolution is just too simplistic a picture to fully understand the dynamics of the Spanish Republic and the International Brigade experience.

Conclusions

It is clear from the literary and statistical evidence we have available that traditional narratives of treasonous Communist counterrevolution are not helpful in understanding the structure of Republican politics. It is true that most Internationals did not preoccupy themselves with questions of social revolution, but even they retained a strong sense of class consciousness in their fight for Spanish freedom.

Fundamentally, the question of revolutionary ideology within the International Brigades comes down to an analysis of how anti-fascism was socially constructed; it is fair to say that, regardless of the specifics, volunteers made it abundantly clear that they were fighting on behalf of their class. Most volunteers in the British and Abraham Lincoln battalions came from industrial working class backgrounds, and they were willing to violently defend their class interests, whether that be in ILP or Communist capacities. Some may not have had any political allegiance at all. As mixed-race British volunteer Charles Hutchison said:

*"The Brigaders came out of the working class; they came out of the battle of Cable Street, they came out of the struggles on the side turnings ... they weren't Communist, they weren't Socialists, but they were anti-fascist."*³⁹

³⁸ Lawrence; *The Spanish Civil Wars*, pp.80

³⁹ M.J. Hynes; *The British Battalion of the XVth International Brigade*, unpublished B.A. dissertation, University of Manchester, pp.25-26. Cited in Baxell, *Charlie Hutchison: the only Black Briton in the International Brigades*. Can be found at <http://www.richardbaxell.info/hutchinson/>

In spite of the particular cases shown here, not everyone was overcome by optimistic airs of revolutionary fervour, but the working class consciousness of the International Brigades lent a certain character that did not exist in many other armies before that time. In the STV documentary 'The Scots Who Fought Franco' Aberdonian volunteer John Londrigan summed up the sentiments of many that fought, died and survived in Spain:

"If I leave this earth tomorrow, I'll leave with the sense of knowing that I've done something on behalf of my class. On behalf of my kind".

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