

# Spanish civil war: Trotskyists and the POUM

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Andrés Nin, the leader of the POUM until his murder at the hands of Stalinist agents in Spain, was expelled from the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) in 1927. He formed a Spanish section of the International Left Opposition, led by Leon Trotsky.

Between 1930 and February 1933 Trotsky and Nin corresponded about the tasks of the Spanish revolution, which had opened with the fall of King Alphonso and the declaration of the Second Republic in 1930. Over the next eight years the revolution went through many ebbs and flows until the final victory of the counter-revolution at the hands of Franco in March 1939.

## Centrist

Nin and the POUM were to play an increasingly important role in Catalonia and Aragon, but not as Trotskyists.

Trotsky considered Nin a centrist; someone who veered between reform and revolution. Trotsky's first disagreement with Nin was his unprincipled orientation towards Joaquim Maurin's party in Catalonia—the Catalan Federation.

This was an essentially right-wing split from the PCE, sharply critical of the ultra-left excesses of Stalinism in the late 1920s and early 1930s but largely silent about the rightist policies of the mid-1920s. Despite holding a quite different appreciation of Stalinism than Maurin, Nin refused to build an opposition to him, helped write their documents and edit its paper.

All this at a time—1934/35—when the rank and file of the Socialist Party was undergoing massive left-wing radicalisation, something Nin barely related to. Nin and Maurin eventually fused in 1935 to form the POUM. This was the occasion for Nin's public break with Trotskyism, although Trotsky had publicly broken with Nin two years earlier.

Nevertheless, Trotsky was the first to recognise that the POUM, small as it was, organised some of the best working class fighters in Catalonia.

The POUM was a lone voice in Spain throughout 1935 in unmasking the crimes of the Stalinists in the USSR during the Moscow Trials. The POUM's paper—*La Batalla*—carried the harshest and most accurate criticisms of the policies of the Popular Front and the Second Republic. The leftism of the POUM earned it the hostility of both the anarchist and socialist leaders who tried to exclude Poumists from their trade unions.

The POUM was small. Before the civil war estimates of its size vary from 3,000 to 8,000. Like most of the left-wing groups, it grew during the early phase of the civil war and by September 1936 it was about 30,000 strong with 10,000 organised in its own militia.

## Fatal

The fatal flaw in the political make-up of Nin and the POUM's leaders was that they refused to criticise the errors of the anarcho-syndicalist (CNT) and Socialist leaders and thereby failed to educate the working class vanguard in the need to break with their leaders and build a revolutionary party. Worse, while Nin was critical of many of the measures proposed in the name of the Popular Front by the PCE, he made the POUM act as a 'loyal opposition' inside the Popular Front, agreeing to abide by policies that were fatal for the prospects of a successful revolution.

The best example of the POUM's centrism was to be found in its attitude to the Popular Front itself. Before the February 1936 elections POUM campaigned against any coalition with the republican bourgeoisie. Then, on the very eve of the elections, they actually entered the Popular Front only to renounce it again when the elections were over.

However, Nin's criticism of the Popular Front after February 1936 was not that it tied the workers' organisations to the programme of the bourgeoisie but that it was not genuinely a Popular Front. *La Batalla* of 17 July, on the eve of the Civil War, called for:

'an authentic government of the Popular Front, with the direct participation of the Socialist and Communist parties.'

Yet, when the Civil War erupted and the initiative was with the masses, the POUM shifted direction sharply and gave voice to the demands of the socialist revolution. In those early weeks the POUM led the Lerida revolutionary committee. It was the only committee in Catalonia to refuse to have a representative of the republican bourgeoisie on the committee.

## Challenge

But even here the POUM stopped halfway. It could and should have used its revolutionary influence in towns like Lerida and Gerona to agitate for the formation of district and provincial soviet-type bodies which would have developed into a decisive challenge to the political authority of the Generalidad (the republican bourgeois government in Catalonia).

Not only did they not take this road but Nin went out of his way to explain at great length that Soviet-type bodies were unnecessary and 'alien' to Spain. This unforgivable rationalisation for the prejudices and libertarian localism of the anarcho-syndicalist masses was typical of the POUM.

Instead of 'saying what is?', the POUM tried at every turn to minimise principled differences that divided it from other workers' parties and above all to conciliate with the leaders of the CNT. For one whole year, for example, *La Batalla* refused to criticise the CNT leadership.

Nin was to get his wish for a 'genuine' Popular Front government in September 1936. Up until 7 September *La Batalla* denounced 'bourgeois ministers', unlike the PCE who heaped praise upon them. But once the cabinet was formed in Madrid under Cabellero, the PSOE leader and the leftist face of the bourgeoisie, and the offer was made to the POUM of a seat in the provisional government in Catalonia, all this ceased.

## Control

In its place Nin assured the readers of *La Batalla* that a revolutionary orientation was 'assured' whenever there was a majority of 'socialists' in the government. Nin went so far as to define the dictatorship of the

proletariat as a united front of workers? parties and trade union leaders who assume governmental power! Nin forgot? the small matter of the democratic control and accountability by the mass of workers and poor peasants!

Once the POUM took its seat in the Catalan government it also took responsibility for the measures of the government. Of course, the POUM proposed radical measures to its Stalinist and bourgeois allies: an industrial and credit bank; no compensation to factory owners.

But these were rejected and the POUM remained respectfully silent. Worse, when the government proposed that there should be a government agent in each factory, or that there should be no further elections of Factory Councils for two years, the POUM agreed.

## **Stronghold**

But quite criminal was Nin's readiness to join President Companys on a tour of Lerida? a stronghold of the POUM? to convince workers that the powers of the revolutionary committees should be dissolved. Nin argued:

?These revolutionary committees, whether Popular Executive Committees, or Committees of Public Safety, represent only part of the workers? organisations, or else, represent them in incorrect proportions . . . Obviously, the suppression of their revolutionary initiative is to be regretted, but one must recognise the need to codify . . . the various municipal organisations, as much with the aim of replacing them uniformly as of setting them under the authority of the new General Council.?

After having performed these valuable services for the bourgeoisie, on 16 December 1936, Nin was kicked out of the government. The POUM's usefulness was at an end. As Trotsky commented:

?In the heat of the revolutionary war between classes Nin entered a bourgeois government whose goal it was to destroy the workers? committees, the foundation of proletarian government. When this goal was reached, Nin was driven out of the bourgeois government.?

## **Obstacle**

It was for this reason that Trotsky called the POUM ?the chief obstacle on the road to the creation of a revolutionary party?. This harsh judgement was absolutely correct.

Of course, the thousands of workers in the POUM were not reactionary; on the contrary, they were subjectively very revolutionary. But Nin's actions stopped them from taking the final step towards a consistently revolutionary programme.

Stalinism refused to adapt to the revolutionary impulse of the masses after the civil war erupted in July 1936, and instead derailed and destroyed all radical initiatives that brought workers into conflict with the republican bourgeoisie.

In contrast, the POUM wanted revolution, proclaimed its necessity and even on occasion proposed correct tactics. However, it did this alongside covering-up the weaknesses and betrayals of the anarchist, socialist and even Stalinist leaders.

That is why centrism never did and never will lead a successful proletarian revolution.

