
Communist Party of Spain (Marxist-Leninist) *Lessons From Our National Revolutionary War Against Fascism, 1936-196*

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The Spanish Civil War is the most important fact in the revolutionary march of the Spanish people. No longer classifiable as an old-style democratic-bourgeois revolution, it must be seen as belonging to the epoch of the proletarian revolution initiated by the October Revolution in Russia. It aroused the revolutionary conscience of the Spanish people to unimaginable levels and became an example for the whole world.

The victory of fascism in Spain has for the present time blocked the march to socialism. But this is only temporary. And so, in order to be able to once again take the revolutionary road outlined by Lenin, Stalin and Mao Tsetung, the accomplishments and failures of the Party must be thoroughly studied. The revisionists have never made a critical analysis of the causes of the defeat of the popular masses of Spain and the errors of the Party. Quite the contrary. They have attempted to hide them and to absolve the Party of all responsibility for this defeat. But there can be no doubt that, given the size and influence of the Party at that time, it must bear a large share of the responsibility.

In making this critique, however, we do not mean to demean its great accomplishments. For after all is said and done, the Communist Party of Spain was the "soul of the war, the most heroic and self-sacrificing of all the political parties involved." Without its leadership and support the people of Spain would have been crushed in a few weeks and would not have been able to inflict such heavy losses on the fascists.

Mao Tsetung has shown that the fact that objective conditions are right does not automatically insure victory. What is needed in addition is the conscious activity of man – that is, how the war is directed and carried out. Our national war against fascism was by nature a just war. The Popular Front enjoyed the overwhelming support of the popular masses. Although the international situation was "difficult," never has there been such a

display of solidarity with any cause. And yet the war was not won. Hence, the logical conclusion is that the conscious activity of the Party was misdirected; that it did not know the proper way to carry on the war.

The war, say the revisionists, is an historical fact which we should forget. This is an incorrect interpretation because it ignores the fact that the war is still going on. Why is it possible to state this? Because the causes which produced it have not disappeared. If anything, the contradictions have become more acute. How can one talk now, as the revisionists do, of "peace and national reconciliation" when foreign invaders still occupy our soil and the people are still saddled with fascism? In 1939 Franco sold the country to the Nazis; now it is US imperialism which holds the mortgage. In reality, the "liberalization" and "democratization" of which the revisionists speak is an illusion; the clothing may be new, but underneath the body is still the same. Moreover, the fact that the relationship of international forces has changed does not mean that Franco and fascism can be deposed by peaceful means. The task of the Communist Party of Spain today is to unite all popular classes of Spain against Franco and to lead an armed struggle against Franco and his imperialist backers.

II. The Political Situation in Spain from 1931 to 1936.

Unlike most of the other countries of Western Europe, the Spanish bourgeoisie never completed its revolution. Important sectors of the economic and social life of the country remained under the control of the feudal classes. As a result the progress and development of productive forces were, for the most part, blocked throughout the entire 19th century. This was approximately the situation up until 1931. But on April 13 of that year the insoluble contradictions between the financial and landowning oligarchy and the popular forces reached such a peak that the king was overthrown and the Second Republic proclaimed. But once again the weak and vacillating bourgeoisie failed to take the decisive measures necessary to insure social progress. The economic and political privileges of the dominant classes were left intact. Key posts in the army were left in the hands of the reaction. The agrarian reform instituted in 1932 was timid in the extreme. And, unfortunately, during this period the working class was profoundly divided between social democratic and anarchist tendencies. The Communist Party was not strong enough at that time to assert its leadership of the labor movement.

In 1933 the reaction again took over the reins of power, unleashing a fierce campaign of repression and terror known as the "Bienio Negro" (2 black years). In October 1934 there were widespread popular uprisings against the government, especially in Asturias, Madrid and Barcelona. It was during this period that the formation of the Popular Front was begun with strong Communist support and participation. In the elections of 1936, the forces of reaction suffered an overwhelming defeat. But because of the divisions in the working class, the new government was still basically bourgeois in content and form. And as was to be expected, it was weak and vacillating. Its fatal mistake, however, was to ignore the repeated warnings of the Communist Party that the reaction was not going to take its defeat at the polls with folded hands. And so when Franco struck on July 18, 1936, the country was completely unprepared for the attack.

III. The National Revolutionary War against Fascism; the Policy of the Party of Alliances.

With the attack on the republican government, the character of the Spanish Civil War changed from a bourgeois-democratic revolution to that of a proletarian revolution. And from this moment on the SPC became the most important party in Spain because it was the only one capable of leading the people to victory. During the initial period of the popular resistance the line of the Party was essentially correct: to reinforce the Popular Front. And because of this correct line, the Party quickly gained in prestige and strength. It must in all honesty be said that the Party did try to achieve the unity of the proletariat. But since it was not able to do so, the reasons for this failure must be carefully studied. The main errors of the Party were as follows:

1. Shackling itself to republican legalism and not taking advantage of new forms of power arising among the masses.

In the beginning of the war, there was a great atomization of republican power; each party had its organs of power, each region was more or less autonomous. On paper all were to come under the jurisdiction of the Popular Front. But the truth of the matter is that this government had little authority. And the Party was unable to resolve the contradiction between the need for a single front and government and the interests of the different groups and classes involved in resisting Franco. New forms of popular power arose spontaneously, such as popular revolutionary committees. The Party should have encouraged their development and sought to unify them under its leadership. Instead, out of fear of violating petty-bourgeois "legality," it shackled itself to outworn republican institutions. It tried to do everything through the Popular Front. But as Mao Tsetung has pointed out in his *Question of Independence and Initiative Within the United Front*, there are times when the Party must consult with the front before moving and times when it must move first and inform the front later.

An example of this neglect of popular forms of power is the case of the Junta de Defensa de Madrid (Defense Council of Madrid). The Junta was born of the immediate need to defend Madrid from the Fascists. Without consulting its allies about the correctness of its action, the Party quickly forged a powerful popular force capable of defeating the fascists. Without this move on the part of the Party, the resistance in Madrid would have been virtually nonexistent. Unfortunately, however, the Party was unable to draw the proper lessons from this magnificent display of popular power. In the words of the document, "They took it as an isolated incident without seeing in it the nucleus of the future political structure which would have permitted us to win the war and which was drawn from practical life and created by the popular revolutionary masses under the leadership of the Party. Instead of seizing upon this example, instead of extending this experience throughout all of Spain the Party, out of fear of petty-bourgeois forces, it let the Junta languish to the point of extinction thus depriving the people of the most genuine form of popular power that it had heretofore acquired."

2. Loss of independence within the Popular Front.

The Party thought of the united front as the organ of unity whose task it was to direct the revolution. This was correct. But in order for a front to be able to carry out this role, it must be directed by the working class and its Communist Party. Since the front was an amalgam of largely petty-bourgeois forces, the Party was not bound to do everything through it. The Party

did not clearly understand its role. This can only be interpreted as a failure on its part to comprehend the true nature of the revolution – proletarian rather than bourgeois democratic. Jose Diaz and authentic Marxist-Leninists elements did understand, but, unfortunately they were defeated in the intra-party struggle with the right-wing elements led by Ibaruri and Carrillo.

3. Failure to achieve unity of the working class and to create a unified proletarian Party.

From the above two points it can be inferred that one of the chief causes of the defeat of the revolutionary forces was the lack of unity of the working class. The temporary unity achieved in the initial stages of the war soon dissolved under the pressure of conflicting interests. The truth was that the working class was influenced by many non-proletarian ideas, social democratic and anarchist ones being the most important. Despite the enormous prestige and power of the SPC, it never successfully wrested the control of the labor movement out of the hands of these forces. Failure to do this was again a result of a wrong line on alliances. Unprincipled concessions were made to the two large labor union confederations, the UGT and the CNT, in order to maintain a unity of *form* rather than *content*. Unity should have been sought at the *base* by means of struggle and ideological debate rather than at the top leadership of the rival parties. But in Ibaruri's book, *El Unico Camino*, she insists on the principle that Communists should not engage in proselytizing; rather than having forbidden it, she should have made it a duty of every Communist.

4. Not having forcefully demanded popular consultation at opportune times.

The war should have been run on the principle of democratic centralism so that the masses could have developed their own initiative and be led to see in the government the true representative of their own interests. But throughout the whole war we find that "the organs of power were based on the relationship of forces existing in the Popular Front prior to the fascist uprising, relationships which had in the meantime undergone profound changes. The popular masses should have been consulted in order to correctly represent the people in the state and to incorporate and link them more closely to the organs of power."

But this was not done. And so throughout the war, the members of the Cortes (Parliament) were, for the most part, those elected in February 1936.

5. Tagging behind the petty-bourgeoisie.

If we examine the actions of the Party during the war, we see that it never really understood the necessity for the proletariat to be at the head of the struggle. It strove only to take its place beside the petty-bourgeoisie and the progressive elements of the middle bourgeoisie. And so it happened that all these other elements really led while the Party simply tagged along.

This policy can be illustrated by the following things:

The reluctance of the Party to take part in the government; the lack of importance of the two ministries it finally agreed to accept – Education and Agriculture; the reluctance to assume positions of leadership in the army; the acceptance of the depoliticizing of the Popular Army by Prieto; and finally, its reluctance to take complete power in the last days of the struggle.

In summarizing this point, the documents state: "History shows that we can neither trust nor follow the 'progressive' bourgeoisie because, generally speaking, with the exception of certain honorable and meritorious persons, they prefer to temporize when faced with the threat of fascism rather than to turn over the leadership to the proletariat. Only after the fascist invasion and bloodbath did a part of these classes fight fascism. And later on they betrayed the proletarian masses and surrendered to imperialism. This is an historical lesson of rich content which we cannot forget."

6. Abandoning the rearguard, but at the same time not controlling the Popular Army and not placing the armed forces under its control.

The role of the Communist Party in the army was great – almost half of the Popular Army was made up of communists and their sympathizers. But it failed to realize that it is necessary to maintain a rearguard, for without a rearguard maintained by the Party, the front cannot be sustained.

Despite the large number of communists in the army it was always securely in the hands of the vacillating bourgeoisie. And so the Party committed the double error of abandoning the rearguard and not taking control of the army. And what is worse, the Fifth Regiment, which was organized and largely made up of communists, was unconditionally placed under the leadership of the Republican Army.

7. Reliance on the so-called "Western Democracies."

The policy of the republican government toward international alliances was vacillating. While on the one hand it took a correct position by asking for international solidarity and close ties with the USSR, on the other it never stopped begging aid from countries which not only did not give it, but cynically and hypocritically granted it to Franco. And while the government and the Party denounced the policy of "non-intervention," they did not alert the popular masses to the futility of relying on the Western "democracies," especially France.

IV. Participation in the Government

The role of the party in the government was certainly positive. For example, Vicente Uribe, Minister of Agriculture, directed one of the most revolutionary actions of the republican government – land reform. In addition, the Ministry of Education under Hernandez carried out important education projects and reforms, such as the literacy campaign.

But it was only at the insistence of Largo Caballero that the Communist Party finally consented to enter the government. And throughout the entire war their role was one of inferiority. Today the revisionists try to make a virtue of this reluctance, calling it evidence of "impartiality" and "loftiness of vision." In reality, though, it was really "blindness as to what should be the role of the Party in this era of proletarian revolutions." The revisionists, in their assessment of their role in the war, are trying to say to the present Spanish bourgeoisie that they are willing to do the same thing again. But unfortunately for them, the new Communist Party of Spain (M-L) and the proletariat are now clearly aware of the fact that, from now on, the role of the Party cannot be anything but a leading one.

The anarchist-Trotskyite putsch of Barcelona in the spring of 1937 presented the Party with an excellent chance to reinforce its participation in the government without damaging its

alliances. But even with the fall of the Caballero Government, the Party did not attempt to relinquish its secondary role and emerge from the shadows. And this despite the undeniable fact that it was the only party strong enough to mobilize the masses and defeat the counter-revolution.

And after the fall of Catalonia, the Party could have taken over the whole state apparatus and resisted to the end, as Jose Diaz repeatedly insisted. But in the interest of the formal unity of the Popular Front, the Party agreed to the capitulation. By so doing, it lost sight of the fact that "the object of unity was to struggle against fascism and the foreign invaders and not to capitulate." The Party at that moment should have transformed its unworkable and outmoded alliances, got rid of all vacillating elements, and by relying on the most militant and trusted fighters, assumed the predominant role commensurate with its prestige among the popular masses. In this way it would not have been jeopardizing antifascist unity but strengthening it.

V. Strategy, Tactics, Participation in the Armed Forces.

Objectively speaking, conditions were right for a military victory. The cause for failure must therefore be sought in certain subjective errors analyzed as follows:

1. Character of the war and its strategy.

A correct strategy for fighting a war cannot be determined unless a profound analysis of objective conditions is made. The Party did not do this. And so it chose a type of war which was to the enemy's advantage – classical, positional warfare. People's war, on the contrary, must adopt a strategy in keeping with its usually inferior equipment – that is, a war of annihilation based on movement, combined with guerrilla operations in the enemy's rearguard. The Party did not avail itself of the rich experiences of the people's war against Napoleon in Spain in 1808. Guerrilla nuclei of peasants and day laborers should have been organized in enemy-occupied territory. But permission for this from the army was never forthcoming. After the capitulation, most of the armed forces slipped over into France. At this point, guerrilla resistance should have been organized. The army could even have attempted some sort of strategic retreat toward the South Central Zone. At any rate, the retreat to France was a move devoid of revolutionary perspective and showed a lack of faith in the people.

Moreover, if we analyze the actions of the People's Army during the war, we see that it almost never took the initiative except during the first two months of the war. Even its so-called offensives were, for the most part, responses to heavy enemy pressure. The Party was not aware of the fact that a People's Army must always keep the initiative, not only in attack, but in retreat as well.

At Guadalajara when defensive tactics and positional warfare were abandoned and a flexible tactic of movement was adopted, the People's Army surprised the enemy and defeated him. But sufficient reserves were not on hand to take full advantage of the victory. So even though the tactics used at the moment happened to be correct, no change in basic strategy was made.

Contrary to what the revisionists claim, the Battle of the Ebro was not a victory. It would be more appropriate to call it "the beginning of the end." This was so for the following reasons: first, the People's Army lost the initiative almost at the beginning of the battle and persisted in defending the territory. And secondly, all its principal forces were committed in this battle – once annihilated, the resistance collapsed. Valencia was momentarily saved, but the best

troops of the People's Army were destroyed. The objective should have been the destruction of the greatest possible number of enemy troops, after which, the army should have retreated.

2. Policy in relation to the armed forces.

The policy of creating a People's Army was correct. This should always be considered one of the great achievements of the Party. And the Fifth Regiment, which was created at the insistence of the Party and without prior government approval, became the nucleus of this army. But the Party's eagerness to create this army led it into making unprincipled concessions. The Fifth Regiment was unconditionally turned over to republican hands. Moreover, the Party did not resist the governmental policy of keeping communists out of key army Posts despite the fact that over half of the fighters in the People's Army were either Communists or members of the United Socialist Youth.

Indalecio Prieto as Minister of War did everything possible to dampen the revolutionary spirit of the People's Army and imposed many anti-communist measures which the Party should never have tolerated. He prohibited the participation of the military in popular actions and attempted to bureaucratize the political commissars. He even forbade the dissemination of political propaganda throughout the enemy lines.

To summarize, the principal errors of the Party with respect to the army were as follows:

- Mistaken concept of the type of war and the consequent adoption of erroneous strategy and tactics.
- Lack of understanding of the strategic importance of guerrilla warfare in a people's revolutionary war.
- Vacillation in the face of treasonous acts and elements in the army.
- Failure to control the key posts in the army and turning over its own forces to the bourgeoisie.
- Failure to organize popular armed struggle after the fall of Catalonia.
- Acceptance of the plan to let the bulk of the People's Army slip over the Pyrenees into France.

