

# THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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## I

On 20 December 1998 Irving Weissman, a veteran of the Spanish civil war, World War II, and a former Communist, died in Daly City, a suburb of San Francisco. He was 85 and suffered congestive heart failure.

A week after his demise an obituary appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. It described his origins: he was born in New York to Jewish immigrant parents. It pointed out that his first language was Yiddish, and that he did not learn English until he began elementary school. It then went on to tell that it was while Irving Weissman attended City College of New York that he was recruited into the Young Communist League, and subsequently became well known as a street corner speaker.

Because of the Depression he dropped out of college and, in 1933, he joined a New Deal programme for the unemployed: the Work Projects Administration (WPA). As described to a *Chronicle* reporter by his survivors, Irving Weissman had previously served as a Communist organiser among the jobless, and was assigned by the WPA to teach English to new immigrants. He used the official Communist organ, the *Daily Worker* -- when supervisors checked the classrooms the students would pull out more conventional reading matter to hide the paper.

In many ways Mr. Weissman was a typical representative of radical New York youth in the 1930s. But in July 1936 distant events changed his life forever: a military conspiracy broke out against the elected leftist government of the Spanish Republic. Police loyal to the regime were joined by armed defence bodies from the ranks of the large working class parties, mainly Socialists and anarchists, successfully defended Spain's four main cities: Barcelona, Madrid, Bilbao, and Valencia. Only Sevilla, which had a weak labour movement, fell to the rightist officers, whose forces were quickly, and inaccurately, labelled 'fascist'.

Almost immediately Nazi Germany and authentically-fascist Italy were revealed to be supporting the military rebels. German transport planes were used to ferry troops from Spanish-controlled northern Morocco, where the uprising began, to the mainland near Sevilla. Soon Italian 'volunteers' were on their way to strengthen the anti-government ranks, which had come under the overall command of General Francisco Franco, head of the Spanish Foreign Legion.

Ultra revolutionary leftist groups in France, Britain, Belgium, and Scandinavia, including numerous Italian and German antifascist refugees, viewed the salvation of the Spanish cities by labour-based forces as a workers' revolution. The anarcho-syndicalist Confederación Nacional del Trabajo or National Labour Confederation (CNT) played a prominent role in defending Barcelona. It was the largest of Spain's radical factions and the only mass revolutionary union grouping in Europe. It inspired anarchists, syndicalists, and their sympathizers to head for the Pyrenees and the Spanish frontier.

Trotskyists, other anti-Stalinists, and members of minuscule political sects joined the southward stream from the beginning. The French poet Benjamin Péret, the most extreme political insurrectionary of the surrealist movement, and a Trotskyist, arrived in Barcelona within two days of the proletarian triumph.

Such marginal types were accompanied by rank-and-file social-democratic labourers and intellectuals from around Europe. Only the Communists held back, kept on a short leash by Moscow, until September 1936 when Joseph Stalin issued an electrifying order to cadres around the world: 'The Spanish conflict is not the affair of the Spaniards alone, but of all progressive humanity.' The Soviet Union, the self-proclaimed vanguard of socialist revolution, a government which ruled a sixth of the world and controlled one of the most powerful armies in the globe, was to stand alongside the defenders of the Spanish Republic. Only the revolutionary government of Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico offered similar assistance to the loyalist regime in Madrid.

Military units were hastily assembled in Russia and from among the German and other Communist exiles in Paris. Some recruits had served in the Red Army, and many were veterans of World War I. They first appeared in the streets of Madrid on the morning of 8 November 1936 – a Sunday, and the day after the 19th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution.

Their arrival could not have been met with more drama. That day Madrid suffered the pounding of airborne attacks, and was besieged by 20,000 rebel troops – troops who were led by Moroccan mercenaries with a record of brutality and atrocity, including mass rapes. Wave after wave of the rightist forces advanced into the vulnerable southwestern side of the city. The working-class women of Madrid were warned to prepare. They were told to keep butcher's knives and other simple implements of defence handy, and to be ready to throw boiling oil on the invaders. Able-bodied men were ordered from their workplaces to the trenches. Meanwhile, the Republican government was evacuated to Valencia.

The night of 7 November was stormy: rain drenched Madrid, and lightning blasted the sky open. Civilians prepared for the imminent fall of the city and what would doubtless be a mad flight. Shelling forced residents to leave their apartment buildings. They attempted to sleep under trees and benches along the fashionable boulevards – hardly a safer alternative, but many had been maddened by the siege. Foreign newspapers were reporting that Madrid had already fallen. Near midnight, a company of socialist women volunteers was almost entirely wiped out in the chaos.

And then, in the misty dawn, some 1,700 'international' volunteers -- Germans, Poles, French, and Italians -- were seen on Madrid's main thoroughfare, the Gran Vía. They marched by with great discipline, uniformed in corduroy, wearing steel helmets, carrying rifles and red flags, and singing revolutionary anthems. Crowds on the sidewalks cheered and wept as the armed men passed by.

The newcomers joined the anarchist militia in the front lines. With the roar of artillery the enemy assault resumed, but the defence held. Days later the 'internationals' appeared again at the Bridge of the French, on the river Manzanares which is famous in Spanish history as the place where Napoleon's troops had been stopped. The Bridge

of the French, which had almost been taken by the Moroccan tabores, was also held. And, temporarily, Madrid was saved.

The ‘internationals’ in Madrid became world heroes overnight. And it also became known that these units were created at Stalin’s order. Their commander was the Soviet army general Emil Kleber, whose real name was Moshe Stern and who was a Bukovinian Jew. Incredibly, he was also the former head of Soviet military intelligence in North America. The Madrileños had known the truth from the start, crying out, ‘Vivan los rusos! Aquí están los rusos!’ at their first sight of the volunteers. They became the International Brigades (IB), an assemblage of de facto Soviet detachments within the Spanish Army who served as a counterpart to the Foreign Legion under Franco, which had led the rebellion.

Back in New York, a clandestine directive to recruit young American Communists for service in Spain had been received during the same week in November. Among those selected for enlistment was Irving Weissman. When he got to Spain, he was assigned to the Canadian IB unit, the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion. He was wounded, and returned to the United States when the IB were withdrawn from Spain by Stalin, late in 1938.

Mr. Weissman worked in shipyards in the United States until American entry into World War II, when he volunteered for the US Army. He took part in the invasion of Italy. After the war, he became a full-time employee of the Communist Party, first in upstate New York and, later, as executive secretary of the party in West Virginia.

In 1952 he was tried in Pennsylvania under the Smith Act, for conspiracy to advocate the overthrow of the US government. However, a mistrial was declared, and Mr. Weissman only served a six-month sentence for contempt.

By that time he had become disaffected with the party, which he considered rigid, doctrinaire and out of touch with American reality. He later worked in construction but remained active as an IB veteran.

He campaigned for the rights of Jewish veterans of the IB who had suffered from the anti-Semitic policies of Poland’s Communist secret police boss, Mieczyslaw Moczar, in the late 1960s. He also supported the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. In recent years, he was a member of the editorial board of *The Volunteer*, an official publication of American veterans of the Brigades.

All these details of his long and, from a certain perspective, virtuous life were included in the *Chronicle* obituary. But sadly Irving Weissman’s survivors were not left to grieve for him in peace. The day the obituary appeared both his daughter and news editors at the *Chronicle* were deluged with angry telephone calls from the hard-line Stalinists among the veterans, rebuking Irving Weissman’s family, and demanding a correction of a phrase in the obituary. His daughter was even assailed on the street by an angry former comrade.

The offending clause was: “The brigades were ordered out of Spain by Joseph Stalin.” As Dave Smith, ‘Bay Area post commander’ of the ‘Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade [sic] and Associates’ wrote to the *Chronicle* city editor. He said: ‘This statement is a lie and is a perfect example of a cold-war red-baiting distortion of the Spanish civil war...We expect a correction to be published.’ According to these

fanatics the withdrawal of the IB announced on 21 September 1938 was a decision taken by the Spanish Republican authorities alone. Stalin, they declared, had nothing to do with it.

No correction was printed in the San Francisco Chronicle. But the controversy over so trivial a difference in interpretation exemplifies the most remarkable aspect of the Spanish war's impact in the United States. The conflict itself ended on April 1, 1939. Yet the war about the war -- argument upon argument, frequently brutal and hurtful -- over what happened and why has yet to end.

## II

No correction of the Chronicle obituary for Irving Weissman was needed because, notwithstanding the political mythology perpetuated by sentimentalists, the IB were under the complete and absolute control of the Soviet government, from top to bottom, beginning to end. This was confirmed after the fall of Russian Communism by the opening of the IB archives in, unsurprisingly, Moscow, and the publication of selected documents about the Brigades. Some of the most disturbing items were printed in the US in 1996.<sup>1</sup>

At the time, the truth about the IB withdrawal from Spain was understood by numerous Spanish and foreign observers. Jesús Hernández, who had been a Communist minister in the Spanish Republican government, later wrote that Moscow 'wished to deprive the Republic of any possibility of further resistance' because Stalin, who had realized that 'all his diplomatic manoeuvres [to influence Britain and France] had been a resounding failure', had decided 'to negotiate with Berlin, offering as proof of his sincerity the corpse of the Spanish Republic'. Thus, while removing the IBs from Spain, Stalin maintained control through a puppet Spanish Republican premier, Juan Negrín.

Of course, as we know, less than a year after the announcement that the IB would leave Spain, the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact had been signed in Moscow, and the Nazis and Stalinists were preparing the 20th century partition of Poland.

Some IB volunteers, including Americans, resisted the withdrawal order. The modernist composer, Conlon Nancarrow, who died in Mexico City in the late 1990s, had joined the American Communist Party in 1934. He went to Europe as a jazz trumpeter aboard a pleasure ship in 1936. The next year he enlisted in the IB, serving in the Abraham Lincoln Battalion, made up of Americans, Cubans, and Spanish draftees.

Nancarrow's first published compositions, 'Toccata for Violin and Piano' and 'Prelude and Blues for Piano', were issued by Nicolas Slonimsky in 1938, while he was fighting in Spain. When the IB were evacuated Nancarrow joined a Spanish-only unit and remained in combat. After the defeat of the Republic in 1939 he escaped Spain, stowing away in a ship loaded with olive oil heading out of Valencia.

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<sup>1</sup> Klehr, H., Haynes, J.E., Firsov, F.I. (eds.). 1996. *The Secret World of American Communism*. USA: Yale University Press.

The debate over the Spanish war involves many more details than the withdrawal order, but all those that are subjects for acrimony today lead back to Stalin and Stalinism. In great part this is because in the aftermath of the conflict a deliberately falsified version of its history, concocted by Stalinist methods and under Soviet inspiration, was imposed as a template on the consciousness of American liberals and radicals.

In this 'official' legend the Communists were the best fighters in Spain, the most competent and courageous. Indeed, the war itself became less an episode in Spanish and European history than a chapter in the epic of American communism -- a bright and shining moment in which the allegations of Stalinist atrocities in the USSR were rendered moot. The Spanish people, it was said, made up songs about their Communist heroes. Peculiarly enough, these were rendered to American audiences by performers such as Pete Seeger, playing a distinctly non-Spanish instrument -- the banjo.

The mythologists claimed that the rest of the world had turned its back on Spain. It was Stalin, the American Communists, and their comrades who had put their lives on the line against the fascists, well ahead of those who made great and heroic sacrifices in World War II.

Other than banjo tunes, the official legend came to include bizarre strictures about Spanish reality. The two million strong Spanish anarchists, who fought the war to the end before a quarter million of them took refuge with their families in France, were portrayed as fools and cowards. A purported contrast with the Communists, which was anything but coincidental. The anarchists had lost the war, according to Communist supporters, by their incessant lack of discipline.

And, according to the orthodox Stalinists, the Partit Obrer d'Unificació Marxista or Workers' Party of Marxist Unification (POUM), a smaller revolutionary force which was largely based in Catalonia, had turned against the Republic, and joined the fascists. This thus proved the accusations presented in the Moscow Trials that Trotsky, the reputed inspirer of the POUM group, had hired himself out to Hitler.

Lastly, according to the myth, the war was only about resisting fascism and Hitler's drive for world conquest. Arguments put forward by isolated and irresponsible extremists, who said the war was really an expression of a social revolutionary crisis in Spain, were worse than irrelevant. Such diversionary propaganda 'objectively' helped Franco. And even more obscure and abstruse claims that the Spanish war involved the only instance of a near-successful working-class revolution in Western Europe, in keeping with Western democratic and populist traditions, did not merit being heard, much less answered.

Almost from the beginning this myth had its challengers. The most famous was, of course, George Orwell, whose *Homage to Catalonia* first appeared in 1938. Orwell had not waited for a Muscovite invitation to support the Spanish left. Furthermore, he had enlisted in the POUM militia, and had been seriously wounded in fighting on the Aragón front. And, he had witnessed a Communist attempt to outlaw the anarchists and POUM in Barcelona in May 1937.

Denying such unpleasant realities as Orwell described was a major task for the Communist loyalists, but one to which they applied themselves with great dedication.

Orwell was regularly trashed by Lincoln Battalion veterans, orally and in print. Ken Loach's 1996 feature film, *Land and Freedom*, followed the anti-Stalinist line of Orwell. It was met by horrified denunciations on the part of the 'Lincolns', as they had come to nickname themselves.

And of all the contested elements in this tapestry, none is more painful and provocative than the point made by Orwell and underlined in Loach's film: that the American and other foreign volunteers ended up as counter-revolutionary mercenaries who were used against the Spanish people. Not even the long-known execution of American volunteers as 'deserters' is so traumatic to the guardians of the official version.

A whole new mishegas broke out this year with publication of a memoir, *Jumping the Line: The Adventures and Misadventures of an American Radical*, by William Herrick (University of Wisconsin Press). Herrick was a Communist cadre member from New York who had been sent to Spain. He became an officer of a renowned machine gun company -- an elite assignment -- in the Lincoln Battalion. Herrick returned to the United States with a bullet in his neck, which was never removed.

But Herrick had already seen too much in Spain. On his return to New York he was buffeted by a new shock: the Hitler-Stalin pact. He turned against the Communist Party altogether. He spent the rest of his life fighting slander and harassment from his former comrades, as well as living with the disabilities caused by his war wound.

His memoir is riveting and grim. *Jumping the Line* is the best account of the Spanish war ever published by an American volunteer. It is a relentless autopsy on the murdered idealism of the young Communists who went to fight the fascists in Spain but who, as Herrick showed, served as secret police thugs for Stalin against the anarchists, POUM, and anti-Soviet socialists. It also shows -- with a depth of understanding which reveals how deep Herrick's radical convictions went-- that the native supporters of the Spanish left were out for more than just a repudiation of 'fascist' aggression. They were fighting for social revolution, based on the labour movement. The kind of revolution that Stalin hated and feared far more than he did the Nazis.

*Jumping the Line* finally stands as a uniquely truthful and beautiful account of the lives of American and international Communist cadres in the Stalin era. Bill Herrick speaks for every comrade who risked his or her life fighting for the world revolution in the 1930s, only to be betrayed by Moscow. It is extremely doubtful that a better book about the appeal of revolutionary Communism, or the experience of its youthful militants, will ever be written (at least in English). However, Herrick's relentless demolition of the legends of the Lincoln Battalion was not limited to a criticism of Stalin. Nor was it limited to the secret guilt which clearly oppressed Herrick for years: that the foreigners had been employed to kill Spanish radical dissidents.

In excruciating detail, Herrick describes the experiences of the American volunteers. These volunteers were, for the most part, college boys or feckless young Communists from places like Brooklyn. They were without the war experience of the German, French, Belgian, Italian, and Slavic volunteers. They went into battle armed with training that was criminally inadequate, and they were subsequently slaughtered en masse. But, they rebelled against the commissars and commanders who sacrificed and

purged them; they even slew one of their officers on the battlefield, an American black named Oliver Law.

Much of this was originally spelt out by Herrick in a powerful novel, *¡Hermanos!*, published in 1969. It was reiterated in the mid-1980s in interviews with Paul Berman, then of the *Village Voice*. Berman recalls the brouhaha that subsequently erupted, complete with a 'Lincoln' picket line at the *Village Voice* office, and demands for his dismissal. The reaction to *Jumping the Line* from the Stalinists was therefore predictable.

In the November 2, 1998 issue of *The Nation*, book reviewer John L. Hess served as designated hit-man for the Stalin-Beria lobby. Recycling an 11-year-old *Nation* column, Hess declared that Herrick had 'defamed' Oliver Law. Herrick, Hess charged, had borrowed the story of Law's death from the long-forgotten leftist, and Bohemian novelist and screenwriter, Bernard Wolfe. That Wolfe had heard it, like Herrick, from witnesses, was beyond Hess's imagining. Hess, determined to perform in the prescribed manner, wrote of Herrick and Law: 'The deconstruction of radical heroes was enjoying a small boom. Writers were confirming the guilt of Tom Mooney, Joe Hill, Sacco, and Vanzetti (whose crime is affirmed by a dead source in Herrick's memoir), the Rosenbergs and Alger Hiss.'

Hess created this amalgamated list of radical victims at least partially out of his own fevered mind. Nobody has seriously claimed Mooney was guilty for eight decades, nor have any recent such claims been made about Joe Hill or Bartolomeo Vanzetti. (Sacco is another matter.) It is increasingly apparent that Mooney, Hill, Sacco, and Vanzetti, whatever their faults or crimes, were authentic radicals. They are dishonoured by being lumped in with sleazy Stalinists like the Rosenbergs and Hiss.

Hess's polemic was monumentally mean-spirited. 'Herrick's second hand accounts of disaster, which he attributes to Stalinist malignancy, could be transposed to any war,' he declaimed. 'That's war.'

This despicable argument was answered, unexpectedly, in a letter to *The Nation* (30 November 1998) from impeccably-radical columnist Todd Gitlin. He demanded to know what other wars had seen such incidents, described by Herrick, as '[t]he Communist assassination of three Spanish non-Communist leftists, witnessed by Herrick? A Comintern agent's gun muzzle pointed at Herrick because he's been heard making inconvenient remarks? The unexplained disappearance of a troublesome militant?'

### III

For a serious historian of the Spanish war, two aspects of this controversy stand out.

First is the arrogance of the 'Lincolns' regarding their version of the past, which is exceptional even by the standards of the mammoth lie factory operated by the American intellectual left. Any other Americans who conducted themselves with such heedless self-righteousness regarding the culture and history of a foreign people would be considered clueless imperialists at best.

Pete Seeger's banjo versions of Spanish songs, with their lyrics altered to conform to the Party line, are a uniquely appropriate metonym for the overall character of American Communist memory about the war.

In the view of the 'Lincolns' and their acolytes, the Spanish war was and is about Americans, not about Spaniards. It is astonishing to realise that of the vast stream of memoirs and histories of the volunteers published by the 'official' faction, not one contains a useful review of the Spanish background of the war, to say nothing of a new contribution to Spanish historiography. It is as if Spain were an island somewhere in the Atlantic, to which the 'Lincolns' were transported in a hermetically-sealed capsule, and from which they were returned to the company of their comrades in Brooklyn.

The indifference to the previous experience of the Spanish whom the 'Lincolns' had allegedly come to assist is expressed, above all, in the failure of most of them to learn any Spanish at all, as I found out at the beginning of my research on the war some 35 years ago. But it also reflects a central fact about the Spanish experience.

The 'Lincoln' volunteers had come from an American radical milieu in which the Communist Party, however small and isolated, was by far the dominant element. Youthful American radicals of the 1930s were amazingly susceptible to the triumphalist attitude of the Stalinists, who claimed to be creating a 'new man' – one who embodied history as none ever had before. But Spain was wholly different. There the Communist Party was a small and unpopular sect (notwithstanding the propaganda campaigns to build up such figures, such as that by Dolores Ibarruri, known as La Pasionaria), without roots in the country's labour history.

For several generations Spanish revolutionary politics had been dominated by the long-established mass movements of the anarchists and socialists, alongside which the Stalinist Communists offered a pretty meagre profile. That the entire Communist effort was financed from abroad was distasteful to Spanish workers. And, most importantly, nearly all of the founders of the Spanish Communist Party, who were sincere and experienced revolutionaries, had broken with Moscow after Stalin's accession to power. By 1936 they were to be found in the ranks of the POUM.

Stalin's intervention - Soviet arms, political influence, and the arrival of secret police (NKVD) cadres on Spanish territory - induced some Republican military officers, state bureaucrats, ambitious intellectuals, and other opportunists into the ranks of the Communist Party. But the Party never gained the wide constituency, and intense loyalty and affection enjoyed by their anarchist and other rivals.

In the absence of a Spanish Communist tradition in which they could orient themselves, it was understandable that the 'Lincolns' would come to view the Spaniards from a distance, and with a disdain not far removed from the feeling of most American troops toward their Southeast Asian battle comrades 30 years later. Like the 'Lincolns,' few Americans in Vietnam learned the language or the history of the places in which they were risking their lives.

More difficult to understand is why no new historical understanding has penetrated the armoured memory of the surviving 'Lincolns' and their supporters, even with the passage of 60 years. It is as if the 'Lincolns' have been intellectually sealed in amber. But the most amazing aspect of the willful ignorance, and of the rivalries over history

that we still witness, is that the battle of historical memory has been won in Spain itself, unbeknown to the 'Lincolns'. Not by the Francoists, who won the shooting war and who even now have few advocates -- rather, the ideological war was won by the anti-Communist left.

A fascinating development has been taking place in Spain since the death of Franco in 1975 -- a phenomenon that mirrors the sought-for monopoly of the 'Lincolns' over writing and publishing about the Spanish war in the US. Of the hundreds of volumes of memoirs, biographies, analyses, and research that have appeared in Spanish, Catalan, and the Basque region over the past twenty five years, almost none defend the reputation of the Communists, the intervention of the Soviet Union, or the broader Stalinist interpretation of the war. The speeches of forgotten socialist leaders have been reprinted; every tiny commune of anarchist peasantry seems to have had its activities memorialised; a considerable library of POUM literature has been republished, with many recent additions to its bibliography. But there are few, if any, volumes glorifying La Pasionaria, or the International Brigades. Indeed, the Muscovite claim that there was nothing more at stake in Spain but the victory of democracy over international fascist aggression is almost completely absent from the Spanish historical discourse, in which the conflict of the 1930s is typically referred to as 'la revolución'.

This is a matter which Spanish historians of the right and the left tend to agree. To all of them, the war was the outcome of a profound upheaval that had gestated in Spain for more than a century, based on the land question; the issue of lay education; corruption of the monarchy and the military; the legacy of Castilian centralism; all complicated by the growth of an aggressive labour movement, and the emergence of a modern nationalism among the peripheral ethnic groups.

Disagreement -- because finally, most of today's Spanish historians, like those in the US, define themselves as left wing -- is over whether the Franco counter-revolution was justified. But nobody in Spain, apart from a handful of old Stalinists, defends the Communist line. And everybody knows that Stalin betrayed the republic; that, as the POUM founder Joaquín Maurín later put it, the Spanish Republic was defeated as soon as it became clear to the Spanish people that the war they were fighting had become a conflict between Franco and Stalin. They were ready to fight Franco to the death; but not for the benefit of Dzhugashvili.

The 'Lincolns' may claim that their version of history was legitimised by the recent decision of the Spanish government to award the surviving veterans a highly-conditional option of citizenship. But the long delay in granting this status, which was proposed many years ago, and the political intrigues that accompanied it, were so baroque as to somewhat deflate the honour.

That the battle of historical memory was won in Spain by the anti-Stalinists is visible in many ways and places. One is the existence of a plaça named for George Orwell near the Barcelona waterfront. It was made possible by the mayoral administration of Pasqual Maragall, of the Catalan Socialist Party. Another is the inauguration, in Can Rull, a Catalan town with a Communist mayor, of a street named for Andreu Nin.

Recollection of the terrible death of the POUM leader Nin, assassinated by Soviet secret police agents in the summer of 1937, at age 45, has a special place in this

process. In the late 1970s, with the Franco regime dismantled and radical spirits in revival, it became common to hear in Spain that the civil war had been fought between 'the (right wing) killers of Federico García Lorca and the murderers of Andreu Nin'. In recent years, to a handful of foreigners, especially admirers of Orwell, Nin's case involved no more than a fading echo of a tragic, internecine struggle within the Spanish drama. But in Catalonia it meant quite a bit more.

Nin, born in El Vendrell, the same Catalan locale as the cellist Pau (Pablo) Casals, was a great deal more than the leader of a minor 'Trotskyist' party. He had also been a leading figure in the anarcho-syndicalist labour movement in Barcelona in the 1920s. He had fled to the Soviet Union when he was implicated in a major terrorist conspiracy. In Moscow, he married a Russian woman and rose to a high position in the international Communist network, but then became a Trotskyist and was sent into internal exile. The saga of Nin's escape from Stalin and his return to Barcelona in 1930 was extensively covered by the Spanish daily press.

But more importantly, Nin had been a successful journalist and essayist. He contributed to literary periodicals with the greatest influence in the Catalan cultural revival before and during World War I. This fact might have guaranteed him no more than a footnote in anthologies and manuals issued in an obscure romance idiom, were it not for his skill as a translator from Russian into Catalan. After his fall from authority in Moscow, and with his return to Catalonia, Nin made his living translating and publishing Russian novels.

The effects of this professional decision were varied. On one hand, we now know that the martyrdom of the Russian novelist Boris Pilnyak (1894-1937), one of Russia's outstanding 20th century writers, was at least partially caused by the unfortunate fact that Pilnyak's 1930 volume, *The Volga Flows into the Caspian*, had been translated into Catalan by Nin. Fatally for Pilnyak, he had kept letters from Nin that were found by the NKVD.

But Nin's Russian translations also made possible a posthumous revenge on the Stalinists. In the 1960s, after the Franco regime lifted its ban on Catalan-language secondary education, thousands of young Catalans read Nin's translation of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, as part of their regular literature courses. Nin also translated *Anna Karenina* and works by Chekhov and Zoshchenko, as well as, of course, Trotsky. In addition, several Catalan writers published reminiscences of him -- among other things, it has been revealed that he had been the lover of the highly-popular Catalan woman novelist Mercè Rodoreda. And everyone who read his translations, or heard about him, learned that he had been tortured and executed by Stalin's agents. Today, my co-author Víctor Alba, one of Nin's three main biographers, lectures continually around the Catalan circuit on the Stalinist persecution of the POUM and the death of Nin.

The historiographic victory of the anti-Stalinists on Spanish territory is reflected in other facts. A Welsh-born Jew, Burnett Bolloten, who died in 1987, emerged as the authoritative historian of the war, in Spanish even more than English -- a position comparable with Robert Conquest's position on the history of Stalin's repression. As a United Press correspondent on the Republican side in the Spanish war, Bolloten had observed a great deal. And, as a former Communist with associations in the NKVD, he learned even more. In 1940 he found himself in Mexico, ordered by his Communist

superiors to join the plot against Trotsky. He refused and broke with the Soviets, beginning an odyssey that would lead him to write *The Spanish Civil War: Revolution and Counterrevolution*, a huge study published in 1991 by the University of North Carolina Press. Bollothen's judgement is the same as Herrick's, which is shared by millions of Spaniards: that Stalin deliberately manipulated, betrayed, and helped destroy the Spanish Republic.

#### IV

The opening of archives was naturally important for the recovery of the truth about Spain. Thanks to Nikita Khrushchev, it had been fully established that the vast majority of Soviet officers who had been sent to Spain had been massacred in the purges just before World War II, including once-famous individuals such as Moshe Stern. Indeed, it was obvious to Stalin that the fact of having served in Spain, so far from Soviet borders, made such personnel highly suspect. In addition, numerous high-ranking Communist veterans of the Spanish war had been purged in Eastern Europe after World War II. In the 1960s and 1970s most of the reputations of those who had been purged were restored, and the files on their cases opened, in countries such as Czechoslovakia and Hungary. It was then partly disclosed that rumours about purges and mass executions in the Slavic and Hungarian detachments of the IB were true.

Even before the revelations which emerged from the Russian archives after 1991, significant documentation on the war and Soviet intervention had come to light in Spain. With the fall of the Republican administration in 1939, vast files had been seized by the Franco forces, and came to be housed in the National Historical Archives in Salamanca and Madrid. They were preserved and catalogued until the late 1980s, when they were made available to scholars.

The Spanish documents comprise many sources that are of considerable use to historians like Bollothen, such as copies of reports, in Russian, from Soviet agents on the scene to headquarters in Moscow. But one very thick file was outstandingly important: the transcripts from the 1938 trial of the POUM, charged at Soviet insistence with 'high treason and espionage' against the Republic. Among the subsidiary entries was a series of notes prepared for NKVD interrogation of the POUM defendants and other suspects. And one sheet of comments had to do with none other than Eric Blair, a.k.a. George Orwell.

This document has been printed in English in volume XI of *The Complete Works of George Orwell*.<sup>2</sup> However, it is accompanied therein by inaccurate comments showing that the editor, and his collaborators on that project, did not comprehend what it was and what it means.

The NKVD notes on Orwell are found in a batch of reports on foreigners involved with the POUM, most of them arrested and at least two of them killed. These 'assessments' were produced by the State Special Information Department, a Communist-controlled Spanish police body. The notations on Orwell are slender but ominous. The original memorandum is dated 13 July 1937, three weeks after Orwell

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<sup>2</sup> Orwell, G (Ed) Peter Davison. 1998. *The Complete Works of George Orwell*. USA: Secker and Warburg.

escaped from Spain. It was kept active until 26 November 1937, the date of a cover letter attached to it.

Orwell and his wife Eileen were, first of all, described as ‘pronounced Trotskyists’ on the basis of their correspondence. They were also said to be members of the British Independent Labour Party (ILP), and in their ‘committee’ on the Aragón front where Orwell was alleged to have functioned.

In the notes a sinister cast was given to a credential signed by Georges Kopp, who was Orwell’s commander in the POUM militia and later his relative by marriage. He had also tried to rescue Kopp from Communist detention in Barcelona, as described in *Homage to Catalonia*. The credential was analysed as a safe-conduct for the use of Eileen Blair during the May 1937 street fighting in the city, which is the centre piece of *Homage*. The charge of possessing clandestine or subversive credentials was evidence of a clear intent by Stalin’s agents to liquidate Orwell.

In addition, the document also includes a cryptic but deadly notation, ‘Contact with Moscow,’ referring to the Blair couple. It is absurd to think that Orwell in Spain had contacts in Moscow; but it is not absurd to conceive of the Stalinist police fabricating such links in the interest of a Moscow-style trial. Indeed, the surviving comrades of Andreu Nin always believed that the Soviet assault on the POUM was motivated by the belief that a ‘Moscow trial’ could be organised outside Soviet borders, to dispel the doubts about the show proceedings that had been voiced by many foreign liberals and leftists. Nin, they said, obstructed such a project by giving up his life rather than to falsely confess -- his death, they said, saved the rest of them.

In chapter 13 of *Homage to Catalonia* Orwell light-heartedly mentioned that after he had gone into hiding during the Stalinist raids in Barcelona, his correspondence had been seized by Communist agents from his wife’s hotel room. The document I have cited clearly originated with the NKVD examination of that sequestered archive. But Orwell down-played the interest in him shown by Stalin’s minions, writing that: ‘I was not guilty of any definite act, but I was guilty of “Trotskyism”. The fact that I had served in the POUM militia was quite enough to get me into prison.’

In reality and in the context of the cited document, this comment seems both an exaggeration and an understatement. Firstly, the document contains much more about his presence in Barcelona than about his militia service at the Aragón front. By and large, POUM militia service alone was not enough to result in the arrest of any person, even a foreigner. The POUM and its militia included tens of thousands of people serving at the front, in Catalan local governments, and on the borders of the Republican state, until the war ended. Even the Stalinists were not yet reckless or confident enough, with the war continuing, to directly confront such a force. Despite the arrest of a group of German volunteers by Stalinist repressive forces, as described by Orwell, and the continued arrest and murder of individual POUM militia members throughout the war by the Stalinists, few anti-Stalinists in Spain were persecuted just for POUM militia affiliation.

However, the Soviets were definitely intent on decapitating the POUM and destroying its leadership. The involvement of any individual, Spanish or foreign, with the top political stratum of the POUM was an extremely serious matter. The document I have discussed identifies Orwell as the liaison between the POUM and the British ILP.

Thus, Orwell's correspondence, indicating to the NKVD that he was a prominent foreign supporter of the POUM rather than a rank-and-file militia member, would have made him eligible for disappearance and execution, not simply imprisonment. That, in fact, was exactly the fate of Orwell's counterpart, an Austrian dissident Marxist named Kurt Landau who functioned as the POUM's liaison to German-speaking anti-Stalinist tendencies. Landau was kidnapped by Soviet agents in Barcelona and disappeared. His arrest order surfaced in the Salamanca files.

In general those foreigners arrested in the early NKVD raids on the POUM were revolutionary hangers-on who stayed in Barcelona, frequenting political meetings and gossiping. Orwell's preference for life at the front, rather than as an ideological gadfly back in the city, probably saved him. So long as he was at the front Franco's troops might kill him, and he was out of Stalinist reach.

But after May 1937 Orwell was not completely safe anywhere behind the Spanish Republican lines. He modestly presented himself in *Homage to Catalonia* as a fairly unsophisticated and obscure individual when he went to Spain. In reality, he was publicly hailed on his arrival by the POUM. An unsigned notice on Orwell, headed 'British Author With the Militia' appeared in an English-language POUM bulletin, *Spanish Revolution*, in February 1937. And, photographs of Orwell with Nin and others, were printed elsewhere in the POUM press. Such publicity unquestionably made him a target of the NKVD. Yet, in his characteristically self-effacing way, he never disclosed just how great a danger he had faced in Barcelona.

The Salamanca revelations have been complemented, of course, by Soviet documentary releases. One of the first and most important such disclosures came when TV3, the Barcelona-based Catalan-language television network, sent a team of reporters to Moscow, where they were able to obtain the operational file on the killing of Nin. Their investigation resulted in a documentary, *Operation Nikolai* -- titled after the code name used by the NKVD for him -- that was broadcast in 1992 on prime time TV in Catalonia, then in the rest of Spain, and finally on national television in France.

*Operation Nikolai* traces the life and death of Nin step by step, and includes several unambiguous statements. Pelai Pagès, a left-wing biographer of Nin, pictured in the courtyard of the University of Barcelona where he teaches, declared without flourishes, 'The assassination of Andreu Nin signified the assassination of the Spanish revolution.' A veteran anarchist, Juan Liarte, was more vehement: 'Stalin was afraid of our revolution!' he declared. "Stalin had to destroy our revolution!"

Nowhere in the film is the Lincoln Battalion mentioned; nor was La Pasionaria, who appeared briefly, even identified. One can imagine the wave of apoplexy that would sweep the 'Lincolns' and their admirers if such a documentary were to be shown on prime-time TV in America.

Another rebuke to the official Communist version of the Spanish war came a year later, in 1993, with publication of *Deadly Illusions*, by John Costello and Oleg Tsarev. This volume, a biography of the mysterious NKVD 'defector' Lev Lazarevich Feldbin, alias Orlov, included a good deal of information about the Nin murder. Orlov, as NKVD boss in Spain, co-ordinated Nin's murder, before his own 'defection' to the US in 1938. The previously-mentioned selection of documents from the Comintern archives, *The Secret World of American Communism*, included definitive

evidence on the iron control over the IB exercised by the NKVD, with deadly results for alleged 'deserters', Americans included.

The US National Security Agency's publication of the Venona papers has also contributed to an accurate record about Spain. Of some 3,000 NKVD messages sent during and after World War II many, which were sent from New York, San Francisco, and Mexico City, showed the continued use of Spanish Republican political figures and IB veterans, with Americans naturally among them, as NKVD agents. One such individual was Victori Sala, a key Russian-controlled provocateur in the fraudulent treason case for which the POUM was tried. Sala, who showed up in Mexico City, and whose code name or klichka was 'Jota' or 'J', was described in an NKVD communication of June 29, 1944, in chilling terms: "Please look into the question of bringing J into our work here on the polecats [Trotskyists] and of setting up a group for tracing people and for external surveillance, for which there is a great need."

Clearly, the murderous campaign against anti-Stalinist leftists, carried out in Spain against Nin, Orwell, and others, and which William Herrick alone has described as an American insider, continued long afterward, and far away.

If the structure of Stalinist lies has collapsed in Spain itself, it may also be said that cracks have appeared in the edifice the 'Lincolns' erected in the American historical consciousness. The publication of Herrick's *Jumping the Line* represents a major fissure. That deep within the system of falsehoods, other weaknesses exist is proved by the posthumous report of Irving Weissman's fight for honesty among the American IB veterans. For, according to his survivors, Irving Weissman had tried for years to introduce a breath of historic fresh air into the cramped, stuffy parlour of the 'Lincolns.'

But the struggle for truth continues, as demonstrated by the angry response to the Weissman obituary in the San Francisco Chronicle. Obviously, some of the 'Lincolns' and their fans will never change. However, Ronald Radosh is now preparing a volume on Spain, to appear next year in the Yale Archives of Communism series, drawn from the records of the Soviet military and secret police. Radosh is also using the newly-released Mask documents, some tens of thousands of decrypted communications between Moscow and Comintern agents abroad, including Spain, which have been made public in Britain by MI6.

And, what will history's likely verdict be then? That men like Irving Weissman, Moshe Stern, and Conlon Nancarrow, like Orwell and William Herrick, were heroes for fighting for the Spanish Republic? Unquestionably. But that the Spanish people were right in refusing to fight for Stalin? Unarguably.

With publication of the Radosh volume, the battle won in Spain by the anti-Stalinists may be closer to victory in the land where Abraham Lincoln was born.

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