

Aleksandr V. Shubin

Institute of World History, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow

Spain's Decisive Moment*

The Great Spanish Revolution was caused by several deep social conflicts generated by the antagonism of "two Spains": conservative religious Spain and secular progressive Spain; contradictions of transition to industrialization in agrarian society; the choice between strategies of transition to a social state during the Great Depression. Such overlapping resulted in the formation of a wide ideological spectrum, from anarchists to fascists. Under these circumstances the liberal center degraded and enjoyed less support. The rapid development of the anarchist movement, especially anarcho-syndicalism, became an important feature of the Spanish Revolution even in comparison with the Russian Revolution where anarchism also played an important role. Social solidarity traditions of the Spanish workers also facilitated the development of socialist ideas, especially anarcho-syndicalism.

Each influential political force of the Spanish tragedy was not monolithic. The right-wing CEDA (Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas, Spanish Confederation of the Autonomous Right) oscillated between fascism and conservatism, and fascism tried to combine the Italian patterns, the Spanish conservative tradition and syndicalism. The liberal organizations moved either towards conservatism (radicals) or social democratic values. The PSOE (Partido Socialista Obrero Español, Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) was torn apart by the struggle of left socialists (followers of Francisco Largo Caballero) and social-liberals (followers of Indalecio Prieto and others). The libertarian camp included a wide spectrum of parties, from anarchist extremism to moderate syndicalism close to left social democracy. The contradictions within Marxist-Leninists were the sharpest. The Communist Party of Spain (Partido Comunista de España, PCE) and the Catalan PSUC (Partido Socialista Unificado de Cataluña) considered the anti-Stalinist Marxist-Leninist POUM (Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista, Workers' Party of Marxist Unification) which tried to collaborate with the CNT to be their main enemy alongside with fascism. An important role in political life was played by the trade unions which in fact controlled their members not only in social, but in political aspects as well.

The situation in Spain also depended on world developments such as the Great Depression and the struggle between fascism and communism. In Spanish circumstances, the Popular front policy initiated by the Comintern was of great importance. It provided the organizational form for consolidation of the left forces and facilitated the transition of the PCE to the moderate positions. However, the Popular front won the elections partly due to the support of anarcho-syndicalists.

The political heat developed after the Popular front had come to power didn't quite match up the mildness of the reforms implemented by the liberal government. The mass moods were "piled up" and radicalized by the ideological elite. The potential victory of political opponents was considered a catastrophe. The moderate policy of the liberals didn't correspond with the depth of the social crisis. The profascist army leaders exploited the situation to seize power

* This essay is a slightly edited translation of the epilogue of Aleksandr Shubin's forthcoming monograph *Velikaia Ispanskaia revoliutsiia* [The Great Spanish Revolution], Moskva, URSS, 2011, ISBN 978-5-397-02355-9.

and destroy the Republic. Although Franco and his generals identified themselves with the multiple-valued term "nationalists", their ideology had fascist character.

When the army leaders tried to put an end to the governance of the Left, they immediately received a counterstroke from the trade unions and socialist parties. They secured a full mobilization and achieved distribution of arms to the people. The republican army began to form as a militia army. It assured the initial success of republicans over the greater part of the country.

Both the rebellion and the fight against it were accompanied by terror. Antirepublican terror was more regular, whereas terror from the republican anarchists was more spontaneous. The assistance provided by the Axis powers helped rebels to recover from the first attack in July. It became clear that the republican militia, which surpassed the army in urban conditions, was unable to pursue an offensive war. The CNT militia failed to attack Saragossa. There the front consolidated. In the other regions where the militia system was not supported by the strong syndicalist structure in the rear, the militia could not maintain any sufficient resistance to the direct attack of the army.

European diplomacy was caught off guard by the internationalization of the conflict in Spain. At first, it seemed like the situation would be quickly resolved either by a victory or defeat of the revolution. Instead, a prolonged war began; moreover, in many respects it began due to external intervention. Intense diplomatic activity around the Spanish tragedy made some authors to believe that the destiny of Spain was not solved in Madrid. That corresponded to the opinion of the rulers of the destinies of the world in London, Paris, Berlin and Rome. But the Spaniards fighting spoilt a game to European diplomacy. If the republicans had not defended Madrid and not continued struggling up to 1939, "the Spanish item" would have been quickly removed from the agenda. The destiny of Spain was shaped not only in Madrid, but in Madrid as well. Contrary to the opinion of some politicians of the Republic (including President Manuel Azaña) and some modern historians, the war had not been initially lost by the republicans, all the more so as they had received the timely aid from the USSR which alongside with the Interbrigades counterbalanced the factor of fascist intervention up to 1938.

Showing resistance to fascism, Spain changed the situation in Europe. It built up strained relations between the conservative government of Great Britain and Popular front of France which was "ideologically aligned" with the Republic. However, the leaders of the French Popular front in fact betrayed the Spanish Republic being afraid of both revolution and fascism. The war in Spain enabled a rapprochement between Germany and Italy, and in order to redirect Italy to the Entente, Great Britain and France were ready to sacrifice the Spanish Republic. The policy of appeasement which culminated in the "Munich moment" had first been "approved" in Spain in the form of a hands-off approach. The USSR participated in it for tactical reasons. After having checked that Italy and Germany didn't stop in helping the rebellion, the Soviet management also began to assist the Republic. It was of essential importance for the USSR both for ideological and foreign policy reasons that the Republic didn't go under. The war in Spain was not only the first large-scale fight against fascism. It distracted attention of the West including Nazism from the borders of the USSR in an opposite direction.

Spain affected the course of events in the crucial second half of the 1930s by becoming the major political and military testing ground. Spain provided invaluable military and political experience in such matters as the role of aviation and artillery in modern war (tanks hadn't won their spurs yet), the relationship between the front line and the rear, etc. Not always that

experience was apprehended, and partly it became outdated with the beginning of the Second World War and its blitzkriegs. Military experts of the USSR and France could affirm that a "war of motors" might be a positional war - as the First World War was. It led to tragic mistakes in 1940-1941.

*

The beginning of the Civil War, the distribution of arms among civilians in the Republic led to the beginning of not just a socio-political, but deep social revolution, qualitative changes in property relations and the political system. As a result of industrial collectivization (*incautación, socialización*) in Spain, first of all in Catalonia and Aragon, a new sector of economy appeared that qualitatively differed both from the capitalist ones, and from the state ones - first of all by the advanced system of industrial democracy, participation of workers in taking industrial decisions. The negative attitude of the anarchist doctrine to "democracy" as multi-party parliamentary system didn't prevent anarcho-syndicalists from incorporating democracy in the sphere of production. Relying on the trade union structures, the anarcho-syndicalists and the left socialists made a practical step to unify the producer with the means of production. But it was just a step.

The dictatorship of the managers was replaced by the power of the collective represented by its core group (first of all the trade union leaders coming from the structures of the CNT), and an almost religious influence of anarchist slogans, disagreement with which could be considered counterrevolution. However, the influence of ideology shared by a significant mass of workers played the role of mobilizing the masses, also at the place of production. The anarcho-syndicalists and the left socialists managed to create a rather effective and democratic social system (to the extent possible in the conditions of Civil War) based on industrial democracy. Despite the heavy economic situation caused by war and the split of the country, the collectivized industry prevented a steep decline in production. The introduction of a system of industrial democracy proved that productive efficiency after all might be possible for Spanish enterprises in circumstances of war and partial economic blockade. The myth of "disorganization of production by anarcho-syndicalists" could be discarded as completely wrong. When the workers and engineers took possession of the factories, they did their best. The production volumes required to meet war demands exceeded the pre-war performance. However, the model of self-government and industrial democracy, coordinated by trade unions and semi-governmental public structures, dissatisfied the representatives of other political forces. In 1937 it resulted in a considerable aggravation of political struggle within the Republican camp. The struggle against industrial democracy which took place during the government Juan Negrín (1937-1939) contributed to a decline in the economic growth rate in comparison to the period of Largo Caballero's government.

The rural collectivization initiated by anarchists also received wide expansion within the Republic. Unlike in the USSR, it had not been caused by governmental pressure upon the peasantry. In some cases the majority of peasants forced the minority to partake in collectivization, in other cases individual farms were preserved. Sometimes the radical anarchist detachments compelled peasants to join collective farms, but the CNT and the anarcho-syndicalist leaders opposed it. The general support for collectivization and its voluntary character for the majority of peasants were also confirmed by the fact that after the defeat of anarcho-syndicalists in the conflict with communists in May-August 1937, when anarchists had already no opportunity to lay violent hands on their opponents, the mass movement of agrarian collectives continued and even extended. As a whole, the

collectivization produced a good effect on a nationwide scale as well. In spring 1937 the food situation noticeably improved, the cropland acres were extended which was admitted even by the anarchists' opponents. Successes and failures of particular collectivizations depended on their leaders, but as a whole, the movement which liquidated a tax burden without prior arrangements (as well as the latifundium system and small-scale crofting agriculture) demonstrated its sustainability.

From September 1936 till May 1937 the Largo Caballero government of the Republic promoted deep social transformations. The anarcho-syndicalists participated in it since November and therefore it was not just a government of the Popular front, but that of a wide anti-fascist coalition. The activity of anarchist ministers in the government did not have just a specifically anarchical, but rather an all-democratic character and fitted in the framework of the social state. While the CNT was in government, the opponents of the anarcho-syndicalist social and economical experiment could not develop a serious attack against the sector of industrial democracy. As soon as the CNT left the government, the opponents launched an attack which resulted in the essential curtailing of the social revolution. The presence of the CNT in the government was a condition for the preservation of those revolutionary achievements which had been reached in the autumn of 1936. After syndicalists had joined the Spanish government, they conducted a relatively pluralist economic policy which was supported by Largo Caballero and in fact became the basis of the social and economic line of the cabinet as a whole.

During the Largo Caballero period the military construction of the Republic was based on a combination of militia principles at a level of divisions and those of a regular army at a level of units. This combination didn't insure the Republic against a defeat in Malaga, but enabled it to defend Madrid and to defeat the Italian corps near Guadalajara. The Negrín-Prieto government began to destroy the militia system, but didn't gain a victory in the war. The decline in soldiers' enthusiasm and growth of caste sentiments as well as a lack of control over officers contributed to the decrease in combat proficiency of the republican army in the second half 1937 and resulted in defeats. The toppling of Largo Caballero frustrated the preparation of the operation in Extremadura which could force the war away from the positional phase which was fatal for the Republic.

The infighting that was more characteristic of the Republic than of the Franco regime was not by itself dangerous to the Republic. Only during short moments it could pose a threat to the front line, and Franco didn't take advantage of the opportunity. The internal political conflicts had a negative impact on the destiny of the Republic not so much through their course, as through their outcome in May 1937.

In the first half of 1937 underlying contradictions built up in the republican camp. The communists were opposing the revolution which had burst in Spain, since they believed that the revolution broke away from the Soviet pattern they tried to achieve, and also prevented a victory of the Republic. With regard to the latter assumption they saw eye to eye with Azaña, Prieto and Negrin. The political center of Republic veered to the right, the communists became the center of consolidation of the party of order which opposed social revolution. Largo Caballero was on the side of the revolution which took place in Spain because he considered it a tool of mass mobilization required for a victory over fascism and because the revolution assigned a clear meaning to the struggle – a victory of a new society over an old one and not just the preservation of Spain which had existed up to 1936. Largo Caballero and his supporters sought a model of a new society which would develop during the revolution and would match the principles of democratic socialism. After they got acquainted

with the ideas defended by the syndicalists in the government, the caballerists began to incline to an idea to create a society whose basic structure would comprise workers' trade unions.

On May 3, 1937, the PSUC and Catalan nationalists provoked an armed conflict with anarcho-syndicalists in Barcelona which were accused of "an anarcho-trotskyist rebellion". In spite of the fact that the parties managed to reach a cease-fire agreement, the conflicts of May 3-6 were used by the opponents of the CNT and the POUM to establish control over Barcelona and to begin reprisals against the opposition. But for as long as the Largo Caballero government had the power, the investigation of events in Barcelona could result in the discredit of PSUC and communists as a whole. Therefore, the prompt overthrow of Largo Caballero, who disagreed with the interpretation of conflicts as an anarcho-trotskyist rebellion, became a matter of principle for the communists. Thus, the overthrow of Largo planned by the communists as early as in March became an immediate task in May. On top of that, the PCE was ready to keep Largo as formal head of the government provided that real power and, first of all, control over armed forces would be concentrated in the hands of the bloc formed by communists and PSOE "centrists".

The communists struggled to change the governmental strategy and military policy, not limiting themselves, if necessary, to the overthrow of the head of the government in power. However, it did not mean that they planned the whole course of the May political crisis in advance starting from the armed conflicts in Barcelona. They were ready to operate resolutely, winning back position by position from their opponents, but when their actions in Barcelona caused discontent, they were even taken aback in the first moment. Moreover, the result of their actions in Barcelona did not guarantee the communists a crushing defeat of the opponents and even placed their own positions under a threat. In these circumstances the communists were actually saved by the leaders of the PSOE's right wing and President Azaña. This resulted in a new division of powers where the positions of communists were not yet certainly dominating though rather strengthened. The communists could take advantage of another, less risky occasion to advance in transforming the Spanish Republic into a "national democracy". They were not almighty manipulators; their strength rather lied in the consistency with which they headed in the direction of statisation pulling PSOE statistes along after themselves.

After the May events, Largo Caballero could continue to head the government upon one of two conditions: either he would yield to dictation and turn into a nominal figure or would take advantage of the negative role of the PSUC in the events in Barcelona, weaken the communists, recreate the government on a new trade-union basis (having balanced UGT and CNT in their rights), and appeal to the organized masses, ignoring the president's opinion. This, certainly, once again would have broken up the Constitution, but after July 18 it had been broken quite often. Such is Revolution. However, one of the crucial questions in the development of the Spanish Revolution, having a worldwide importance, was: Would there be a new syndicalist model which would exist alongside with American, Soviet and fascist variants of regulated industrial society? Would the countries taking the path of a social state face a dilemma: to create a new society on the basis of authoritarianism, capitalist pluralism or, as in Spain, on the basis of industrial democracy?

It is obvious that the government whose core group would consist of trade union leaders of the CNT and the UGT would continue the social transformations focused on the improvement of collectivization and syndicalisation. Such a government would investigate the events in Barcelona in a way unfavorable for communists, which could result in weakening

the communists in the executive power structures as well, and at the end in a defeat of the PCE in the race for power. However, the same course of events would mean the overthrow of not only communists, but also of the right socialists and republicans. But in May 1937 Largo Caballero didn't dare to operate in a revolutionary way. The "Spanish Lenin" did not enjoy the determination of the true Lenin. At the same time, Largo Caballero gave up the role of the figurehead of a ship which suddenly altered the course line.

As he didn't dare to break up with the party-presidential system, Largo Caballero failed, and on May 17 Manuel Azaña charged the socialist Juan Negrín, focused on the closest cooperation with PCE, with the formation of a new government. The political upheaval was prepared in spring 1937 not in favor of individual figures, but in favor of the bloc between communists and right-wing socialists. The social-liberal and communist politicians fixed upon Negrín as the most convenient figure of compromise. Emissaries of the Comintern directly participated in such manipulations and were a pressure group in a coalition of "May winners". It was obvious that the right socialists couldn't have triumphed over Largo Caballero and the social revolution, if they hadn't obtained communist support.

*

Anti-fascists counted on at least two factors of resistance (which had been already proved by the defense of Madrid) – the revolution and the assistance of the USSR. It was impossible to win at that conjuncture, having only one of them. The final defeat resulted not only from the weakening of Soviet assistance, but from that of the revolution as well. Having paralyzed the revolution, the new Spanish government killed incentives of dedicated struggle for a victory. Largo Caballero could combine both such power sources of the Republic. Negrín gave up on one of them following that only the outbreak of the Second World War could save the Republic from ruin.

Up to 1938, the Soviet assistance counterbalanced the material and technical intervention of Germany and Italy, and the Interbrigades did so in regard to the presence of the Italian military contingent. At the end of 1937 the Soviet assistance began to decline, while fascist assistance began to increase. The declining of Soviet assistance was connected with the disappointment of the Soviet government over the inability of the new Negrín-Prieto government to achieve the promised breakthrough in the war, as well as with the complication of the international situation when the Spanish problem became less important in comparison with the newly arisen crises in China and Czechoslovakia.

From the second half of 1937, Soviet assistance was provided to China as well, and the supplies to the East were "subtracted" from the supplies that the USSR could direct to Spain. China was more important yet for the USSR than Spain – in fact this time the struggle developed in immediate proximity of the Soviet borders. The peripheral containment of Japan was critical for the USSR during the whole period of the 1930s.

During the spring and summer of 1937, Republicans had an opportunity to recapture the initiative when Franco carried on a two-front war having concentrated forces in the North. Instead of focusing efforts on the victory and preparation of the offensive operation, communists and social-liberals passionately struggled for power, and the Republic wasted time. In summer they conducted an operation angled towards their style, and it became clear that their methods were not better, but worse than Largo Caballero's war strategy. In July-December 1937, the chance to recapture the initiative was missed.

Nevertheless, the USSR continued to support the Republic. Its preservation (even without a chance to win) drew Germany and especially Italy away from operations in Eastern Europe. Handling the assistance that depended on a complex foreign policy situation, Stalin did not discontinue the struggle in Spain, strengthening the control over the political system of the Republic. As the experience of the "people's democracies" showed, when establishing communist regimes Stalin acted step by step even in much more favorable conditions.

*

In May 1937, the revolutionary government was replaced by a coalition having an interest in the decrease and then in the complete reduction of the ongoing revolution. However, the communists, who, though seemingly reasonable, were the strongest faction of the May regime, did not give up on an idea to transform Spain into a socialist country (in their understanding of the word). Negrín's government started de-collectivization and simultaneously nationalization. This was not just a deviation from the former revolutionary gains, but a change of the vector of revolution from self-government to statism and governmentalization. The regime which was formed in Spain in May 1937 constituted an early form of "people's democracy" – the regimes widely spread in Eastern Europe after the Second World War. "People's democracy" meant a pro-Soviet regime combining a liberal facade with authoritarian statist core. The proportion of both depended on factors of foreign policy, and under the influence of the West the facade could overcome the core in certain conditions. "People's democracy" constituted not just a displacement of allies by a communist "cuckoo's egg", but also the synthesis of two statisms - communist and social-liberal - on a pro-Soviet platform.

The more decisive steps towards a "People's democracy" in Spain were to be made after the completion of the Civil war, provided that the international situation had changed. When the time was right, it would become possible to unite communists and supporters of a pro-Soviet policy in a united party, and "clean up" the opposition. Having missed the opportunity to gain a military victory over the Francoists, the Republic had only one chance to survive - to keep the course until the beginning of the Second World War. Such a chance appeared in September 1938 due to the Sudeten Crisis, it remained even in 1939 as the Republic continued with small, yet sufficient resources of resistance to keep the course for some months in the unpredictable situation of Europe on the eve of war.

However, the leading political forces of the Republic, including Prime Minister Negrín, came to the conclusion that the defeat was inevitable and began to search for ways to minimize the costs of such a catastrophe. The communists involved in the global struggle against fascism were ready to hold the last-ditch defense. But they also had to operate in the wake of the policy of Negrín whose maneuvers caused mistrust among those republicans who were afraid to be left in the evacuation basket. As a result, the Casado rebellion had the widest political support including that from the opponents of unconditional surrender.

The rebellion provoked a collapse of the Republic five months prior to the beginning of the Second World War. Its breakdown became one of the signals (even though far from being the major one) for Stalin to change his foreign policy strategy. The downfall of the Spanish Republic was the evident corroboration for the failure of the strategies of Popular front and collective security which Stalin had accepted in 1934-1936 with so much pain.

At the end of the Civil war Franco defined his position of neutrality to which he began to incline as early as in the troubled Munich days. At least in that way the Republic won – it didn't allow Francoism to involve Spain in the Second World War.

At the same time, the battle in Spain was the first battle against fascism, which ended up with the downfall of the fascist bloc in 1945.

*

The shift to industrial democracy in Spain was stopped not as a result of internal processes, but as a result of the violent suppression of the revolution. The military defeat in itself didn't yet give grounds for the conclusion of a crucial non-viability of models. History provides many examples of military destruction of social and political structures which, in the context of other military-political conditions, gave an example of high efficiency and viability. The issue of a syndicalist alternative viability has been reduced to the question as to whether such a society could exist by maintaining its originality with regard to the "capitalist" and "state-communist" models.

There is a strong probability that in those years the ideals of self-government and consequent democracy could fight their way to become a reality only under extreme circumstances. It is difficult to say whether the anarchist self-government could survive under conditions of a quiet life. The experience of many countries in the West and "socialist" Yugoslavia showed that self-government and federalism under conditions of an industrially-bureaucratic society had been implemented more in form than in substance, but nevertheless improved living conditions. Global historical tendencies proved to be stronger than the ideas which were generated ahead of time. But, only reaching out beyond the horizon, it will be possible to overcome a vicious circle of routine.

The very development of a non-capitalist system based on the principles of self-government instead of public administration made the Spanish revolution one of the key events in world history. It proved that the first word in the word combination of "social state" is the crucial one. Social transformations generated by a collapse of spontaneous capitalism might be implemented by strengthening the state – in an American, German, Italian or Soviet way. They might also be implemented by strengthening the self-regulatory structures of the society, such as trade unions, bodies of territorial self-government, democratic social movements – in short, in a Spanish way.

Regardless of the powerful laws of history, much in the direction of history's flow depends on the "decisive moments" of mankind, mentioned by Stefan Zweig. Social forces come to balance and then everything depends on the "subjective factor". The outcome of a "decisive moment" defines the future for millions of people for decades forward. The "decisive moment" of Spain history is the Great Spanish Revolution of the 1930s. This period of Spanish history is an inexhaustible wealth of lessons for those who seek to transform the world on the basis of freedom and solidarity searching for a real alternative to authoritarianism and capitalism. Spain was situated in an epicenter of world politics and the destinies of the world depended upon it. Such a role requires sacrifice. But at the same time it gives life instead of a wretched existence.

In the chain of events of world politics in the 1930s, when a small caste of politicians shaped the future of millions of people, the events in Spain were different from those of other countries in the sense that history was made "from below", and the common people dared to

settle their lives in their own way, not taking orders from the “bosses”. Therefore, despite all blood and dirt which the history of Spanish Republic was not lacking, its leaders actually respected the determination of common people. As this doesn't happen very often, it cannot be overestimated.