

Spanish Revolution, Comintern and Indian Left

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The Spanish revolution, which spanned the years between 1935 and 1939, will remain a historic event, glorious for the heroic sacrifice of the Communists and other left-wing parties, the struggle of the International Brigade against Fascism. There is, of course, another side to it. And that is the story of some contradictions that dogged the anti-fascist movement. A story that has, for most parts, been left untold. For a more truthful and unbiased assessment of the role of the Communist International (Comintern) and the international Communist movement all available information needs to be thrown open.

The Popular Front policy, scripted by the Comintern secretary-general George Dimitrov and endorsed by Josef Stalin, was preceded by the “third period”, or the ultra-left period of the Comintern. The Popular Front thesis was in sharp contrast to the new colonial, or shall one say decolonization, thesis at the Sixth Congress (1928) of the Comintern—“Revolutionary Movement in the Colonies and Semi-colonies”. Introduced by Otto Kuusinen, under Stalin’s diktat, the thesis said the colonial bourgeoisie in India had gone over to imperialism and had no progressive role left to play. This was a drift from Lenin’s Theses on the National and Colonial Questions at the Second Congress of Comintern (1920). But Lenin correctly insisted on the temporary alliance with sections of the national bourgeoisie in colonies, while at the same time emphasizing on the independence of the proletariat. The Popular Front (PF) policy in Spain crossed the border of this temporary alliance, when Spanish Communists under the directive of the Comintern, which had by then became an instrumentality for Soviet Foreign policy, advocated the formation of a government with a section of the bourgeoisie, and thus subordinated proletarian independence to “democracy”. Moreover, the thesis of staviest revolution, which states that in a backward country proletarian revolution cannot succeed, played a key role here.

One of the major blunders of the Comintern in its third period was Stalin’s theorization of Social Fascism. Social Democrats in Germany and elsewhere were identified as chief enemies. Comintern-affiliates among communist parties (called ‘sections’ of Comintern) in Germany and elsewhere initially participated in programmes jointly with the Nazis. It was left to Trotsky to advocate, in contrast to the Stalin-Dimitrov line, a United Front with the Social Democratic and other left parties instead. In 1931, he gave a call for the united front of Left Parties, including the Socialists, to defeat Fascism.

The theory of Social Fascism objectively helped Hitler in crushing the Left and democratic parties in Germany. A sharp rightward turn became inevitable when the Comintern advocated total unity against Fascism, and joined hands with major imperialist countries like Great Britain and the US. The only major imperialist power on the other side was Japan which did not embark on the Fascist path .The Popular Front was, in practice, an electoral coalition of the Communist Party, not only with the Socialist formations, but also with liberal-

bourgeois parties. Dimitrov laid only one condition –opposition to Hitler and Fascism– thereby made PF the broadest possible formation.

The PF experience in Spain deserves an examination. It consisted of the Socialist Party (PSOE), Communist Party (PCE), Esquerra Party and the Republican Union Party. Groups from the far Right formed the National Front that supported Hitler's Germany. Apart from the Socialist and the Communist party there were other left-wing groups– namely the Anarchists and Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (POUM). CNT, the trade union of the Anarchists, had the deepest penetration in some places, while the POUM was close to Trotsky and the Fourth International, and its leader Andre Nin was an ex-Trotskyist. These groups initially did not join the PF, as the radical mood within the Spanish Society was on an upswing, thanks to a mounting capitalist crisis and Fascist aggression, what with workers' and peasants' councils being formed in many places.

Trotsky's United Front (UF)– rather alliance of the Left–had many takers. The objective ground for such support grew when the dominant section of the Spanish bourgeoisie went over to the Franco's camp in 1935. The republicans constituted a very weak section of the bourgeoisie. Hence it was not simply a question of an alliance with the bourgeoisie. The point was to confine the entire struggle of the proletariat to the struggle of democracy, i.e. form a bourgeois republic. The Comintern's position was further based on its assertion that in a less developed country such as Spain, a working class revolution was not possible. This completely ignored the Russian experience of 1917, where in spite of the dominance of feudalism in the countryside, a socialist revolution had occurred in November.

One of the key tasks assigned to the revolutionaries the world over was to save the Soviet Union. But how? On one hand, it was envisaged as a matter of simply posing the question of bourgeois democracy in a country where the possibility of revolution was ripening. On the other, the emphasis was on adequate preparation for a workers' and peasants' revolt that would defeat Fascism and capitalism and thus help Soviet Union? And it was precisely this difference that formed the basis of the debate between Stalin and Trotsky. Trotsky, in spite of being expelled from the Comintern in 1927, still considered himself a part of it and advised his followers to do the same, at least till 1933. After that, he came to the conclusion that the Third International had drifted away from Lenin's thoughts. Intra-Comintern democracy was suppressed. However, Comintern archives reveal that there was resentment. (Dimitrov's doubts about Stalin's portrayal of Nikolai Bukharin directly hint at concoction and distortion of facts about a man whom Lenin had described as the best young Bolshevik. That suggests Dimitrov had noted his reservations against Stalin on the question of Bukharin.)

The Spanish people voted on Sunday, February 16, 1936. Out of a possible 13.5-million voters, over 9,870,000 participated in the 1936 general election. And 4,654,116 people (34.3%) voted for the Popular Front, whereas the National Front obtained only 4,503,505 (33.2%), leaving the remaining 526,615 (5.4%) of the votes for the centrist parties. The Popular Front, with 263 seats out of the 473 in the Cortes, formed the new government.

Anarchists and Poumists initially did not join the government, but rather concentrated on organizing independent worker and peasant militias. Although the Popular Front government was a Communist-Socialist alliance with weaker sections of the Spanish bourgeoisie, there was discontent inside both the Socialist and the Communist Parties. Like almost every front, the PF too had inner contradictions. However, pressured by the Left, the PF government introduced some reforms -- namely release of left-wing prisoners and limited agrarian transformation.

In September 1936, President Azaña appointed the left-wing socialist, Francisco Largo Caballero, as prime minister. Largo Caballero also took over the important role of war minister. He brought into his government two left-wing radicals, Angel Galarza (minister of the interior) and Alvarez del Vavo (minister of foreign affairs). He also included four Anarchists, Juan Garcia Oliver (justice), Juan Lopez Sanchez (commerce), Fredrica Montseny (health) and Juan Peiro (industry). That apart, two right-wing socialists, Juan Negrin (finance) and Indalecio Prieto (navy and air) were also inducted into the cabinet. Largo Caballero also gave two ministries to the Communist Party (PCE): Jesus Hernandez (education) and Vicente Uribe (agriculture).

After taking power Largo Caballero concentrated on winning the war, shelving social revolutionary imperatives. Playing to the gallery of foreign imperialist governments, he announced that his administration was "not fighting for socialism but for democracy and constitutional rule".

And Caballero introduced changes that upset the left in Spain. This included conscription, the reintroduction of ranks and insignia into the militia, and the abolition of workers' and soldiers' councils. He also constituted a new police force, the National Republican Guard. He also agreed to hand over the control of the Carabineros to the finance minister.

At that time, official Communists —Stalinists—were an insignificant force compared to the Socialists. Even the POUM and the Anarchists, especially the latter, were stronger in some places than them. And that was the real reason behind their policy for not going far beyond "democracy". Had the Comintern been alive to this task, the rank and file of the Socialists and other parties could have been encouraged to fight ahead. Anarchists fought heroically, but suffered from misconceptions about Marxism. At the decisive moment, they also joined the Popular Front. POUM, instead of appealing to the advanced workers, also joined the Popular Front. The contradiction between the rank and file, and the leaders remained alive. Moreover, as the name of Trotsky was once associated with the POUM, the Comintern and its Spanish section demanded suppression of the Trotskyites.

The Popular Front, thanks to such contradictions within, was no workers' government as it did not go against the class interests of the bourgeoisie. It was trapped between a Fascist Franco on one hand, and the workers and peasants on the other. Hence when Franco and his right-wing party initiated a counter-revolutionary military uprising in 1936 to overthrow the moderate Popular Front government, and crush the workers' and peasants' movement that evolved out of the crisis, the government initially refused to supply arms fearing that it might lead to a workers' revolution. But Spanish workers and peasants were advanced

in their consciousness and did not keep silent. In several regions, land was collectivized, factories were occupied. A huge portion of Spain was coming under workers' control. One of the finest examples was Barcelona, where CNT, the Anarchist union, and the POUM occupied the telephone exchange and many workplaces by putting armed workers in control. The Anarchists and the POUM fought heroically against the fascists but were slaughtered. The Comintern was unnerved by such uprisings because it was going beyond the limits of "democracy". The government arrested numerous Anarchist activists, tortured and murdered some, and finally disarmed the workers. This gave Franco more breathing space. Incidentally, the French Popular Front Government also refused to supply arms to the anti-Fascist militants during the Spanish Civil War, obviously to keep the Comintern's Stalinist leadership in good humour.

As the civil war was in progress, the Comintern under Stalin realized it was not possible to stop the Fascists simply through an electoral "Popular Front". The realization came too late. It is only then Stalin began supplying arms to the Spanish republican government, whereas the right-wing under Franco had been receiving arms from Italy and Germany for long. The Spanish Communists, who were still not a very significant force, began to wield increasing influence due to the Soviet arms supply.

In 1937 an incident similar to the one in Barcelona took place in Catalonia. Like Madrid, Catalonia workers and peasants rose in revolt and set up armed militias under the leadership of the Anarchists and the POUM. They fought bravely against the Fascists. Thus, side by side with the official governments of Madrid and Catalonia there had arisen organs predominantly worker-controlled, through which the masses organized the struggle against Fascism. In the main, the military, economic and political struggle was proceeding independently of the government and, indeed, in spite of it. It was a classic example of dual power, similar to what had been seen in Russia after February, 1917.

The pro-Stalin Spanish Communists spread all sorts of provocative rumors about the POUM organizing an insurrection under Trotsky's influence to essentially help Fascism. Throughout the world, Trotsky and the POUM were pictured as Fascist agents. The truth, however, was that the POUM had already joined the Popular Front government by rejecting Trotsky's ideas. But that had clearly not prevented the outfit from organizing militias to fight Fascism. However, finally the Popular Front government, where Spanish Communists were now playing a major role, crushed the Catalonia workers and peasants, and arrested and murdered lots of Anarchists and POUM activists. POUM leader Andre Nin was captured, tortured and later murdered by GPU -- Stalin's secret police. This was consistent with the pattern that had earlier been discerned in China, where in 1927 thousands of Communists were massacred as a result of Comintern's policy at the hands of Kuomintang, or in Germany where Fascists came to power because of the Comintern's blunder. If those had been devastating mistakes in the Comintern policy, in Spain it was an act of counterrevolution. Of course, Spanish Communists and Republicans later fought along with the International Brigade against Fascism and lots of Communists were murdered. But that cannot erase the fact that it was because of the Comintern's misplaced

policy that Franco eluded defeat. In 1939, Franco overthrew the PF government and grabbed power.

While Spanish Communists, along with the Anarchists and the POUM, fought a dogged battle against Fascists in the later stages, the treacherous policy of subordinating working class revolution to republican democracy hampered the anti-fascist movement a lot. The victory of revolution in Spain could have ushered a sea change in whole of Europe and could have helped in creating an international socialist confederation. But the Comintern, which already became a tool in the hands of the Soviet official bureaucracy, which was armed with the theory of "Socialism in one country", was only interested in keeping its own regime stable by indulging in all sorts of maneuvers. Ultimately, the Red brigade of Soviet Russia did succeed in defeating Fascism. But it was at a terrible cost.

While pointing out important contributions of Trotsky and the Trotskyists in the context of World War II and Fascism, it is equally necessary to point out their mistakes too. Trotsky, although he maintained that the Stalinist parties would under pressure from the masses go further than they wanted, outlined two sorts of possibilities. Either a political revolution in Soviet Russia would be victorious or a Fascist reaction would triumph. Ultimately, neither of the two happened.

The Spanish experience receives less attention among official Communists for whom Trotsky is an anathema. That is unpardonable.

Left in India

It will not be wise to compare the Indian situation with the one in Spain. In Spain 1936-1939, a revolutionary mood prevailed among the workers and peasants. Workers' and peasants' councils were formed in several places such as Madrid, Catalonia and Barcelona. At issue there was the subjective factor -- a powerful revolutionary party armed with revolutionary theory. The Anarchists and the POUM cadre, although they did fight heroically, unfortunately fell for the idea of Popular Front and yet could not escape its cynical repression. Such militant mood is evidently absent in India, where the Congress, the key party of the big bourgeoisie, has been returned to lead the central government in the recent parliamentary elections. The debacle of the so-called Left in the parliamentary arena, what with its seats in the Lok Sabha dropping from 61 to 24, is a much discussed topic. These parties, although Marxist in name, symbolize right-wing Social Democracy. The reason for the debacle must be attributed to their reformist-cum-reactionary politics. In states such as West Bengal, where they are in power, they have clearly sought to implement the neo-liberal policy to grab the fertile land of peasants and give it to industrialists like Tata, Salem and so on. The CPI(M) has been theorizing that the present stage is the stage of capitalist development, where multinationals and corporate bodies need to be invited to increase productivity. This stage, according to the largest Indian Communist party, will be followed by the stage of struggle for socialism. It has, therefore, formulated its own new theory of two stages, which is just a pretext for covering up for its bankrupt politics. Leaders of CPI and CPI (M) have clearly become direct agents of capitalism.

Some would want to ascribe the bankruptcy of such parties and their current electoral debacle to their Stalinist origin. But this simple and direct correlation is unscientific. The Spanish Communist Party, under instructions from Moscow,

had committed heinous crimes by murdering the activists of POUM and the Anarchists, thus weakening the anti-Fascist movement. Yet, at a later stage it carried out an armed struggle against the Fascists. At least, during the period the Spanish Civil War, the Communist parties, even when they were taking directives from Moscow, sincerely believed in revolution. It was their erroneous belief in the theory of two-stage revolution that put them on the side of counterrevolution at the decisive moment. Today, the leaders as well as the rank and file of the CPI and CPI (M) have become so paralyzed, thanks to their practice of the policy of direct collaboration with the bourgeoisie, that they have no power left in them to as much as think about revolution.

Along with the political degeneration, personal degeneration and corruption prevailed at every layer of the party hierarchy: from top to bottom.

But still the theory of Popular Front and Spanish experience has its significance in the theoretical discourse of the Left. The undivided Communist Party of India, following the Comintern line, opposed the Quit India movement in 1942.

The Spanish situation repeated itself in India in the sense that some CPI members even handed over the freedom fighters by terming them as Fascist agents, to the British colonial administration. The CPI, albeit it corrected this mistake, never really engaged in a thorough-going criticism of its stand. Throughout their history, both the CPI and the CPI (M) maintained that revolution in India will be a democratic revolution, where a section of the national bourgeoisie will play a progressive role. Their alliance with the bourgeoisie, their claim that the fall of Soviet Union was the collapse of a model 'Socialist' state and things like that ought to be attributed to the degeneration of these parties. The major responsibility for all that must, however, be placed on their leadership, which consciously abandoned its organically acquired role of leading the toiling masses of the country, and succumbed to the temptations of Parliamentary politics.

That, however, has done little by way of disabusing other non-CPI, non-CPI (M) radical communist and left parties in India – which are clearly not tainted by parliamentarism and which are into organizing workers, agricultural laborers and peasants against the barbaric onslaughts of the New Economic Policy – of the utterly mistaken idea of a two-stage revolution as also the belief that a proletarian revolution could not succeed in a backward country. Most of those parties originated from the Naxalbari peasant uprising and derive their ideological sustenance and vision from what is called the Mao Tse Tung thought. Inspired by Mao's thesis of New Democracy, they believe the Indian revolution will be new democratic in nature, whereby a section of the national bourgeoisie will be their ally. This erroneous idea has sometimes forced these otherwise honest revolutionaries to strike alliances with one or the other section of the kulaks or rich peasantry. Needless to say that such an erroneous programmatic line, notwithstanding their consistent opposition to the CPI and CPI (M) and the doggedness of their struggles, runs the risk of derailing the revolution at its decisive moment.

In Spain, the Popular Front, of which the Spanish Communist Party was an important constituent, directly crushed the uprisings of the workers and

peasants, and tortured and murdered Anarchist and POUM activists and leaders under the instruction of the GPU, thereby weakening the anti-Fascist movement and derailing the revolutionary process. In China, no such incident occurred. The Comintern, on the pretext of containing Fascist aggression, was able to directly control and manipulate the politics of the Spanish Communist Party. In China, the Comintern tried to establish its control and force its line on the CPC but that did not eventually happen. Even after the anti-Japan national liberation movement was victorious, thanks to the sacrifice of communist leaders and activists and the tactical alliance the CCP had struck with the Kuomintang (KMT), the Comintern advised the CPC to start a dialogue with the KMT for building a democratic republic. CPC did initially accept that line and started the dialogue, which broke down later when Chiang Kai Shek refused to engage. Thanks to the powerful peasant army, the CPC was able to defeat Chiang Kai Shek and capture power.

But Mao's conception of New Democracy could not rid itself of the staviest theory of revolution, wherein democratic revolution has to triumph first before a successful socialist revolution can follow. Although in China, under peculiar objective conditions the revolution marched forward, the theory of this staviest revolution played a detrimental role in the revolutionary movements of several countries, the most notable of which is Indonesia. Although today's objective conditions in India differ both from China's and Spain's, the idea of staviest revolution prevails in the theoretical discourse of the radical Left in India. This is related to the characterization of the Indian state as semi-colonial, which has consequently led to attempts at artificially relating the Indian situation to that of China in 1949.

Considering that significant sections of Indian capitalists such as the Tatas, Ambanis and so on have become founts of monopoly capitalism and given that India has consistently struck aggressively imperialistic stances vis-à-vis neighboring countries such as Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan, is it not time to wonder whether India is actually semi-imperialist, instead of the traditional characterization of it being semi-colonial? Is this not the time to go back and study the Russian experience to take guidelines from Lenin's The April Theses?

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