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Introduction

> Men [and women] make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.
>
> K. MARX
> *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

If one turns aside from the devastating human tragedy and wasted potential consequent upon the Republic's military defeat in 1939, to examine the political cost of that defeat to the component organisations of the Republican side, then none was worse affected than the Spanish socialist movement, comprising the party (PSOE) and union (UGT). After half a century's existence, the party which had sustained the Republic from its birth in 1931, was all but annihilated by the experience of the civil war. The PSOE would only be restored to its leadership position in Spain's political life in the 1970s. But the Socialist Party which emerged then, although claiming historical continuity, bore little resemblance to its predecessor. It was a new party for a new Spain.[1] The defeat of the Republic in April 1939 had precipitated the final crisis of the 'historic' PSOE. But while the PSOE's disintegration was a function of the Republic's own, the reverse was no less true, as this study seeks to show.

Born in the last quarter of the nineteenth century (PSOE 1879, UGT 1888), the Spanish Socialist Party was an archetypical social democratic party, defined by its commitment to gradualist political change. In this it was sustained by the belief that the PSOE was ultimately destined to inherit the state.[2] In control of the government, the party would then implement social and economic reform from within. At the same time, the Spanish Socialists' radical discourse, dating from their experience as an 'outsider' party under the Restoration Monarchy (1874–1923), for a long time prevented the PSOE's hegemonic position as *the* party of the Spanish working class from being successfully challenged on the left. In particular, the PSOE's combination of reformist praxis and revolutionary discourse was an important factor impeding the development of the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) as a serious rival. This state of affairs was to last until the civil war.

Inside the socialist movement, the union's relationship to the party observed, in theory at least, the classic social democratic

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schema. Although much larger than the PSOE, the UGT was autonomous only in the labour sphere. Where political action was concerned, it was held to be subordinate to the programme and directives of the party. This relationship worked as long as there existed a common political culture between the two wings of the movement. Historically this was based on the fundamental illegitimacy of the Spanish state which excluded the Socialists from power. But the coming of the Second Republic in 1931 would alter perceptions of the state in socialist ranks, fracturing the traditional relationship between the party and union organisation.

The birth of the Second Republic in 1931 was perceived as heralding the PSOE's 'historic' moment. The Republic brought for the first time in Spain a genuine if very imperfect pluralist parliamentary democracy – and thus resumed the minimum, if not necessarily sufficient, requirements for enacting a programme of social and economic reform, and above all fundamental land reform. Such a scenario seemed to guarantee a major political future for the PSOE. Progressive republicanism needed the PSOE as much, indeed more, than the PSOE needed the Republic. This was not only because the Socialists' commitment to parliamentary reform was clear, but most crucially because socialist support alone could ensure a reasonable chance of success for the reforming enterprise. The PSOE was the most powerful parliamentary force on the left in Spain. (The Spanish Communist Party was tiny and thus of marginal importance, while the powerful anarchist movement opposed all parliamentary activity.) Of all the groups operating in parliament only the Socialists had a coherent national organisation. This was the legacy of the UGT's collaboration with Primo de Rivera's dictatorship in the 1920s. But it must also be remembered that the PSOE's status as the only mass political party in 1931 depended on its being backed by the formidable strength of its labour movement.

The future looked promising. But, in fact, the reality of the socialist experience in the 1930s was to lead not to the fulfilment of the party's perceived political destiny but to organisational disintegration and eclipse. The Republic's social and economic reform foundered in the face of powerful and entrenched conservative opposition between 1931 and 1936. The bitter experience of this effectively split the socialist movement down the middle – the bone of contention being the advisability and efficacy of socialists bolstering the weak forces of progressive republicanism in government. By spring 1936 the lines inside the socialist movement had been drawn between the left socialists, who opposed collaboration in government, and the parliamentary socialists who saw it as the best and

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only viable means of achieving reform. To explain the ensuing internecine strife which was to cost both the Republic and the socialists themselves so dear, one must look to the organisational rivalry between the two wings of the movement: parliamentary socialists and trade unionists. This consistent line of fracture within Spanish socialism had already manifested itself in the 1920s in the conflicting reactions towards Primo de Rivera's military dictatorship.[3] But the significance of the Second Republic increased the gravity and impact of the division. As the first real parliamentary democracy, it reversed the traditional balance of authority, promoting the protagonism and strength of the parliamentary party over that of the traditional 'senior partner', the union. It also meant the end of the shared political culture based on the illegitimacy of the state, thus initiating an internal battle between the two wings for control of the PSOE's maximum leadership body: the national executive committee.

The left socialists' position can be explained by the fact that their leaders were mainly prominent trades unionists whose power depended on their recognising and responding to the mood of the UGT membership. The most salient feature of this membership in the 1930s was the process of acute radicalisation undergone by its most numerically important sector – the Socialist Landworkers' Federation (FNTT). From 1930 onwards it experienced a massive influx of landless labourers from Spain's impoverished rural south. The landless labourers were the incarnation of Spain's backwardness, their plight epitomising the need for the structural reform of her agriculture. The landless flooded in to the FNTT in the hope of government-led agrarian reform. But when this was stymied by conservative obstruction in parliament and the localities then the landless took direct action, for example by seizing estates in the south-west in March 1936. As the socialist left's real political 'muscle' derived from its role as the mediator of such demands, which it channelled into national politics, it responded to the FNTT's radicalisation by mouthing an increasingly revolutionary rhetoric.

The PSOE left's leaders blocked the parliamentary socialists' road to collaboration in government, arguing that either the republicans would enact reform or there would be a revolution which would bring the PSOE control of the state. But the socialist left were indulging in mere revolutionary posturing. Its leaders remained bound by the weight of their union responsibilities. Ultimately they were bureaucrats who were not prepared to risk the whole of the UGT – carefully constructed over the past four and a half decades –

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in one revolutionary throw of the dice. The socialist left said it wanted to 'bolshevise' the PSOE, turning it into a revolutionary cadre party. But, in reality, it did nothing. It did not reorganise the socialist sections nor train or arm a militia. The party left had no blueprint for seizing power – as was to become painfully obvious when the military backlash occurred in the shape of the 17–18 July coup in 1936.

The left socialists' strategic bankruptcy thus worsened an already tense situation. They were inciting the right – which had most of the fire power – but had not the least idea how to meet its draconian response. Yet still they refused to allow the parliamentary socialists to enter the government, while the moderates would not collaborate without the support of the left. This stalemate was to prove fatal to the Republic. For the Socialists were the only group capable of taking direct action against conspiratorial officers in order to defuse the coup already being planned in the provincial garrisons by spring 1936, in the wake of the centre-left victory at the polls the previous February. The military rising against Republican reforms in July 1936 erupted thus into the middle of the Socialists' own private war.

The experience of civil war (1936–9) was to prove consummately disastrous for the PSOE. In the course of the war the Spanish socialist movement suffered a total eclipse. The most spectacular symptoms of socialist decline were the loss of the Socialist Youth (FJS) to the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) at the beginning of the war and the extent of PCE conquests in the UGT – achieved in the course of a bitter power struggle in the union. Such a dramatic decline in itself poses major questions, but the response assumes added importance in view of the lasting impact of the experience on the PSOE. Indeed, so profound was it, and so great the resulting antipathy towards the PCE, that the socialist leadership in exile, by persistently rejecting any suggestion of socialist–communist collaboration, consigned itself for decades to the margins of the democratic opposition to the Franco regime (1939–75).

On initiating this investigation, the available answers regarding socialist eclipse all seemed acutely unsatisfactory. The bitter mythology of exiled socialism, inscribed in the intensely subjective memoirs and correspondence of civil war veterans laid the sole responsibility for the socialist débâcle at the door of the Comintern and the PCE. Nor did scholarly works escape this simplism. Most notably, for all its bibliographical wealth, a similar conspiracy theory confines Burnett Bolloten's pioneering work within an interpretative vacuum which seriously impairs its usefulness.[4]

For a long time, however, the consequences of the civil war – exile

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and dictatorship – ruled out a more wide-ranging investigation of PSOE decline. In Spain the archives and newspaper libraries were closed, while the PSOE's own party archive – lodged in Moscow – was equally inaccessible. Sharing the fate of so many militants, it too endured a lengthy exile, returning to Spain only with the end of the Franco regime. The Moscow Historical Archive contains a vast amount on the PSOE during the Republican period and the civil war. It is this material – executive minutes, reports, circulars and, above all, a voluminous correspondence – which has furnished the documentary foundation of the following study. While both personal memoirs and party press proved extremely useful, the Moscow archive provides the key to reconstructing the wartime history of the Spanish socialist movement, as well as offering crucial insights into the balance of power inside the Republican camp. Most importantly, by offering a perspective on the PSOE across the entire Republican experience of reform, reaction, revolution and war, the Moscow archive illuminates the complex interaction of factors which provoked the socialist crisis, thus allowing us to travel beyond the sterile simplism of earlier conspiracy theories.

That the growth of the PCE was inextricably bound up with socialist eclipse is certainly demonstrated by the study which follows. What is challenged, however, is the assumption that the PCE was the primary cause of socialist decline. This received wisdom has been sustained – in Bolloten particularly – by a careful choice of chronology. He examines the war period (1936–9) in isolation. Once a wider perspective is taken, however, it is evident that PCE growth was partly a symptom of a pre-existing crisis *inside* the Spanish socialist movement.

By locating the origins of wartime eclipse in this internally generated conflict under the Republic (1934–6), this study highlights the essential continuity in the PSOE's history across the military rising. This continuity has in the past been obscured by a tendency to view the eruption of civil war as an absolute cut-off point. Partly this periodisation derived from a methodological problem, namely the fragmentation and inaccessibility of civil war sources for the PSOE. Nevertheless, implicit in the idea of the military rising as a watershed was the assumption that it qualitatively transformed the internal life of the socialist movement – as if the fact of civil war and the extreme circumstances it produced somehow galvanised the Socialists, creating unity out of division and harmony out of bitter internecine antagonism. But neither military coup nor popular revolution nor full-scale civil war wiped the slate clean. The real effect of the war was rather to exacerbate the old pre-war conflicts inside the socialist

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movement. A major contributory factor in the intensification of this internal war was the emergence of the PCE as a serious rival to the PSOE, competing for members, political influence and ultimately for control of the Republican war effort.

PCE ascendancy was partly the consequence of international political circumstances beyond the Socialists' control. The civil war brought the Spanish Socialists state power. Ironically though, they 'inherited' too late. Once the military coup had escalated into full-scale war, the locus of control shifted beyond Spain. Victory and defeat came rapidly to depend on political choices made outside her frontiers. In concrete terms this well-known internationalisation of the conflict meant that the fate of both sides ultimately depended on foreign intervention (including Non-Intervention) and the political realities which underlay it. Fascist and Nazi intervention on Franco's side combined with the non-interventionist stance of the Western democracies meant the slow strangulation of the Republic. This in turn made Soviet aid to the latter essential to any attempt at survival. It was the Republic's dependence on Soviet arms, imposed by Non-Intervention, which established the preconditions for PCE expansion. But the political repercussions of Soviet intervention had devastating domestic consequences which would eventually wreck the Spanish socialist movement, destroying Republican political unity in the process.

But although the PSOE was in a very real sense handicapped by a series of external factors, this was far from the whole story. From the very beginning of the war the strength of the PCE's appeal lay in its superior discipline and organisation. Superior, that is, compared to the factional disarray of Spanish socialism. The emphasis which this study places on organisational rivalry inside the socialist movement is certainly confirmed by developments during the war. In the course of 1937 the internal socialist conflict emerged very clearly as a power struggle whose goal was control of the PSOE's national organisation. Moreover, the supposed ideological division inside the socialist leadership was itself brought into serious question by wartime developments. For the military coup, by precipitating a grass roots revolution in the Republican zone, provided a kind of litmus test of the socialist left's self-proclaimed revolutionary faith. In September 1936 it assumed control of the Republican government. But instead of furthering the social and economic radicalism released by the military rising, the socialist left chose to curtail it. Throughout its period in office (September 1936–May 1937), the socialist left allied itself with non-proletarian political forces and adopted policies which facilitated the restoration of the bourgeois Republic. For all its

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past radical posturing, the left socialists in government appropriated wholesale the collaborationary, or Popular Frontist strategy of their reformist opponents.

For the reformists, the PSOE left's volte-face was sufficient proof that a genuine ideological division had never existed in the socialist movement. Their conviction that the left's opposition had always been motivated by a mixture of opportunism and ambition strengthened the PSOE reformists' determination to eradicate the left and its destructive impact from the socialist organisation. It was the reformists' decision to purge the left from both the party and union movement which determined the course of the Socialists' internal conflict during the war.

The lines along which the socialist movement divided during the war also cast light on the nature of the socialist division under the pre-war Republic. In particular, they reinforce the view that the real strength of the socialist left between 1934 and 1936 lay in its role as a political mediator. It channelled the demands of the radicalised landless labourers of Spain's rural south into the national political arena. During the war, the reformists' attempt to destroy the socialist left's power base ultimately failed because it could always count on the support of the most powerful union in the UGT – namely the agrarian labourers federation (FNTT). Even after the reformists had ousted the left socialists from control of the UGT's national executive (October 1937), they were able to entrench themselves in the FNTT. In the PSOE too, the enduring support for the left came overwhelmingly from its southern federations and from socialist deputies who represented constituencies in the rural south.

But as this study demonstrates, the private civil war being waged inside the ranks of Spanish socialism was not the only power struggle to undermine the stability of the Republican war effort. Even more damaging in its effects was the explosive rivalry between the PSOE and the PCE which erupted during the war. This can be defined as, at root, a struggle between two ideologically similar parties for the predominant position on the left. It is argued here that while the circumstances of the civil war determined its particularly acute form, socialist–communist organisational rivalry was inherent in the nature of the Popular Front alliance itself.

In Spain, the Popular Front was the name given to the electoral coalition of middle-class and proletarian political parties which won the February 1936 elections on a reformist ticket. Before July 1936 its central axis had been the republican–socialist alliance. But, as Spanish republicanism disintegrated under the impact of military coup and popular revolution, the imperatives of Republican defence

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– and especially the Soviet arms factor – determined the reconstruction of the Popular Front around a socialist–communist axis. The viability of the Republican war effort thus came to depend on the creation of a successful working relationship between the Socialist and Communist Parties. Not only was this never realised, but a savagely destructive conflict developed between their respective cadres. The origins of this conflict can be traced back directly to the objectives of Popular Front as envisaged by the Comintern.

The Comintern's adoption of Popular Frontism in 1935 had been motivated by a desire to contain the threat which fascist advance in Europe posed to the Soviet Union. It was envisaged that this objective would be achieved in two ways. Firstly, by building bridges to the bourgeoisie, creating, wherever possible, defensive alliances between proletarian parties and those of the progressive liberal middle classes. But secondly – under a banner which proclaimed strength in unity – the Comintern also sought the fusion of Socialist and Communist Parties in a single class party. In Spain particularly, where before 1936 the Communist Party was a tiny party eking out an existence on the margins of political life, the Socialists viewed this as a crude attempt to gain access to its rank and file. However, the civil war radically altered the political equation. Not only did it create the basis for the expansion of the PCE, by allowing it to assume the mantle of Spanish republicanism, but the imperatives of Republican defence also made it impossible for the PSOE publicly to repudiate the idea of proletarian unity. As the war progressed, spurred by their conquest of the Socialist Youth, the Catalan socialists and Catalan UGT, as well as several of the union's constituent national industrial federations, communist cadres put increasing pressure on their socialist counterparts to unite at the local and provincial level in order to force recognition of the *de facto* existence of the 'partido único' (single party) from the PSOE leadership.

The realisation that the PCE was out to absorb the socialist base, combined with the evidence of the Communists' aggressive proselytising techniques, provoked growing outrage among socialist cadres. The PSOE's reformist leadership attempted to control this reaction, primarily because they realised that open war between socialists and communists would destroy the Republican war effort. However, the disaffected socialist left, ejected from its power base in the UGT by the combined efforts of their reformist socialist opponents and pro-communist trade union leaders, was by 1938 rapidly re-establishing a political platform by channelling the growing discontent of the socialist grass roots. By this point, internal socialist conflict was inextricably caught up in the hostilities between socialist and com-

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munist cadres. When these tensions eventually erupted, their explosive force utterly wrecked the Popular Front. Once it collapsed, the end of Republican resistance was inevitable.

Ultimately the collapse of the Popular Front at national level would have been determined by its failure internationally, that is, by the non-realisation of the Soviet Union's cherished objective of collective security. But here it is argued that the effect of the Munich agreement of September 1938 between the democracies and the dictators (and the beginnings of the withdrawal of Soviet aid from the Republic) had such a dramatic and immediate effect in Spain precisely because the constant political infighting between the PSOE and the PCE – the parties on which the Republican defence rested – had already eroded the Popular Front alliance from within. Yet the failure of socialist–communist relations was itself determined by the very contradictions of Popular Front as applied to 1930s Spain. Tactically and ideologically it undermined the PSOE–PCE alliance. Tactically, because the aggressive sectarianism which was the stuff of daily interchange had a cumulatively erosive effect. Ideologically, too, Popular Frontism was flawed. Or, more accurately, because Popular Front was a strategy applied efficiently and uniformly in Republican Spain, it was the maximum reflector of the acute political contradictions born of Spain's social and economic disparity. The policy thrust of the PCE's 'historic compromise' *circa* 1936 was geared more towards the liberal centre than towards social democracy. In the Spanish case, this was particularly inappropriate – and especially once the civil war was underway – because the degree of social and economic polarisation in evidence, combined with the historic weakness of the liberal middle class in Spain, made the PCE's defence of the political centre untenable.

The limited social stratification of 1930s Spain – the product of decades of economic retardation – had led to the formation of blocs which were confronting each other in the civil war. To be sure, in exceptional, economically developed and industrialised areas like Cataluña, the PCE (or PSUC), could defend the interests of the commercial and industrial bourgeoisie. But, by and large, Spain was not Cataluña. It was a rural economy where the monolithic structure of backwardness obtained – the landed faced the landless. And here, during the war, the PCE was often to be found defending landed interest against the rights of the socialist and anarchist collectives. By charting the history of this daily strife between socialists, anarchists and communists, we gain a clear picture of how the Popular Front was undermined. The PCE sought to placate the political centre – which the eruption of civil war itself had annihilated –

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instead of pursuing more radical policies which could have secured genuinely popular support for the Popular Front.

But, however serious the disunity in their ranks, the final responsibility for the defeat of the Republic in 1939 undoubtedly lies other than with the Spanish Loyalists. Ultimately the outcome of the civil war was decided not in Spain but in the cabinets and chancelleries of Europe. Whilst it is not the business of the historian to deal in counterfactual hypotheses, it seems unlikely that even perfect political unity on the Republican side could have reversed the outcome of the war. The crippling material impediments endured by the Republicans would have remained. Non-intervention was not a product of loyalist disunity – although to an extent the reverse was true. A united Republic would still have lacked what their Nationalist opponents possessed in abundance – political and material support from Europe. In the end Franco did not have to conquer the Republic militarily. Isolated in the world, without a land frontier to its name, lacerated by bombs, it collapsed inward under an intolerable weight of hunger and sheer hopelessness – burying for ever the reforming ideal it had enshrined. And when the defeat occurred, one of the main political casualties was Spanish socialism. The movement whose strength had once sustained the Republic's hopes of reform lay shattered amid the wreckage of battle.

The account which follows focuses mainly on the civil war period (1936–9). However, the first section (comprising chapters 1 and 2), deals with the socialist movement under the Republic (1931–6). Within this section the opening chapter provides both a thematic and a chronological introduction to the study as a whole. The theme of Spanish socialism in the civil war obviously has a potential for exploration so vast as to be unmanageable within a single study. The structure of this account has thus been determined by its central purpose: to explain the origins of socialist eclipse. Thus I have focused not on the grass roots revolution behind the Republican lines, but rather on the political consequences of its containment. The central narrative and interpretation is built around what I understand as the central tension within Republican ranks – once a socialist-led cabinet had overseen the reconstruction of the Republican state and redefined its war effort in non-revolutionary terms. This tension was the growing rivalry between the PSOE and the PCE for political influence, members and ultimately for control of the Republican state at war. The peripheral treatment of the anarcho-syndicalist organisation (CNT) here I would argue accurately reflects its political status within the Republic once the short-lived revolutionary phase of the war had ended. The CNT's vast mobilis-

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