

Andy Durgan

Marxism, War and Revolution

Trotsky and the POUM

First published in *Revolutionary History*, Volume 9, n°2, 2006.

THE Spanish Revolution marked the end of a cycle that began with the Russian revolution of 1917. The scope and complexity of the social experiments that took place in the first months of the Spanish Civil War were even more far reaching than in Russia 19 years before. The defeat of the Spanish Republic was a massive blow to the international working-class movement, a defeat that has to be seen in the context of the rise of fascism and Stalinism on a world scale and the burying of the hopes of human liberation that had been ignited by the events in Russia in 1917. The experience and lessons of the Russian revolution run through the writings of Leon Trotsky, who from exile, hounded and slandered by his capitalist and Stalinist enemies alike, was trying desperately to reorganise the scattered forces of revolutionary Marxism.

For Trotsky, the significance of events in Spain in 1936 was clear: for the first time since China in the mid-1920s there was the real possibility of a victorious socialist revolution. In many parts of Spain the workers and peasants responded to the military uprising by taking over the factories and the land and organising their own militias. But alongside a myriad of local revolutionary committees, the Republic's institutions continued to exist. This situation of virtual dual power could not last. For the Stalinists and their social democratic and liberal allies, the struggle in Spain was between democracy and fascism. For the revolutionary left, including Trotsky, the war against fascism was inseparable from the struggle for socialism. The implications of a victory for the revolution in Spain were enormous – and not just for Spanish workers and peasants. The isolation of the world's first workers' state, the USSR, would be broken and with it, Trotsky believed, the deadly grip of Stalinism over the international communist movement. With the defeat of the Spanish revolution, fascism was strengthened and the world plunged into war.

The intervention of the Soviet government in the Spanish Civil War was the first of its kind outside the borders of the USSR. Trotsky had previously defined Stalinism as 'bureaucratic centralism', but events in Spain 'acted to fix definitively', he argued in late 1937, 'the counter-revolutionary character of Stalinism on the international arena'.¹ Three years after having strangled the Spanish revolution, the Stalinists finally eliminated their most persistent opponent, Trotsky. His assassin, Ramón

¹. LD Trotsky, 'The Lessons of Spain: The Last Warning', 17 December 1937, *The Spanish Revolution*, New York, 1973, p311.

Mercader, was a member of the Stalinist Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia (*Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya* – PSUC) and had first learned his deadly trade in the struggle against his revolutionary compatriots.

Trotsky's writings on Spain cover many questions of crucial importance for Marxists. The nature of working-class power, the role of anarchism, of Stalinism and of the Popular Front, the relationship between war and revolution, the nature of fascism, and the national and agrarian questions were all graphically illustrated by the Spanish experience.² For Trotsky, however, the principal lesson of the Spanish revolution was the need for a revolutionary party. Not surprisingly therefore, much of what he wrote during and after the Civil War concerned the errors of those who considered themselves revolutionary Marxists. Hence the strategy, tactics and general politics of the anti-Stalinist Workers Party of Marxist Unification (*Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista* – POUM) were constantly scrutinised by Trotsky. He believed that through its mistakes the POUM held 'an enormous responsibility for the Spanish tragedy'.³

The Foundation of the POUM⁴

The fall of the military dictatorship of Primo de Rivera in January 1930, and the subsequent ousting of the King 15 months later, were to mark the beginning of a period of intense class struggle in Spain, culminating in 1936 in civil war. Although observing events from afar, Trotsky quickly grasped the importance of what was happening, and he was soon both analysing the Spanish situation and trying to give advice to his co-thinkers. However, by the end of 1931, events elsewhere, particularly in Germany, were increasingly attracting his attention, and he wrote less frequently on Spain. He would not write systematically again on the question until 1937, thus only commenting in passing, if at all, on such crucial events in the years leading up to the Civil War as the radicalisation of the Socialist Party, the implications of the Right's electoral victory of 1933, the creation and nature of the Workers Alliances, the anarcho-syndicalist insurrections of January and December 1933, the revolutionary movement of October 1934, the divisions within the anarcho-syndicalist National Confederation of Labour (*Confederación Nacional del Trabajo* – CNT) and the nature of the peasant movement.

^{2.} Between 1930 and 1940, Trotsky wrote at least 39 articles and 66 letters, most of which were published at the time, that refer to events in Spain. The most complete collection of these are to be found in LD Trotsky, *La Revolución Española*, two volumes, Barcelona, 1977, edited by Pierre Broué. For a summary of Trotsky's view on events in Spain, see P Broué, *Trotsky*, Paris, 1988, pp883-94, and T Cliff, *Trotsky: The Darker the Night the Brighter the Star*, London, 1993, pp235-90. The standard Trotskyist view of the Civil War and revolution in Spain can be found in F Morrow, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain*, New York, 1974, first published in 1938.

^{3.} LD Trotsky, 'The Culpability of Left Centrism', 10 March 1939, *The Spanish Revolution*, op cit, p344.

^{4.} For a more detailed account of the relationship between the Spanish Trotskyists and the International Left Opposition prior to the Civil War and the background to the formation of the POUM, see A Durgan, 'The Spanish Trotskyists and the Foundation of the POUM', *Revolutionary History*, Volume 4, no 1/2, London, 1992, pp11-53; also in *Cahiers Léon Trotsky*, no 50, Grenoble, May 1993, pp15-56. See also P Pagès, *El movimiento trotskista en España (1930-1935)*, Barcelona, 1978.

The Spanish Trotskyist group, the Communist Left (*Izquierda Comunista de España* – ICE), although smaller than its Stalinist rivals, let alone the massive Socialist and anarcho-syndicalist movements, was one of the more important sections of the International Left Opposition, and contained in its ranks many of the most able cadres of Spanish communism. Relations between Trotsky and the ICE were never very good, as was first reflected in his correspondence between 1930 and 1932 with the Spanish group's principal leader, Andreu Nin.⁵ Trotsky accused Nin of not answering his questions on developments in Spain and of wasting his time trying to influence the 'right' communist Workers and Peasants Bloc (*Bloc Obrer i Camperol* – BOC). The BOC was formed in March 1931 with the unification of the former Catalan Federation (*Federación Comunista Catalano-Balear* – FCCB) of the Spanish Communist Party and the independent Catalan Communist Party (*Partit Comunista Català*). The unified organisation kept the name FCCB until 1932 when it became the Iberian Communist Federation (FCI). The FCCB had broken with the Spanish Communist Party (*Partido Comunista de España* – PCE) because of its bureaucratic methods and its ultra-left analysis of events in Spain. The Catalan Communist Party had been founded in 1928 by young activists, some from a left nationalist background, impressed by the USSR's 'solving' of the national question but unimpressed with the PCE. The Bloc was meant to serve as a periphery organisation to the now enlarged Federation, but in practice both organisations soon became one of the same. Nin initially argued that the Trotskyists should work within all communist factions and not just the PCE, which meant in the dissident Madrid Federation, which had broken with the party in the summer of 1930, as well as the FCCB/BOC, which had 700 members at its foundation in March 1931, compared with a dozen PCE loyalists in Catalonia. Nin was confident that he could influence Maurín's organisation, and initially this appeared to be the case. Not only did he contribute regularly to the Bloc's press, but in early 1931 he wrote its first Political Thesis, which differed little from the Trotskyists' position on the unfolding revolution.⁶ However, Nin's optimism was misplaced, and by mid-1931 he had been excluded from the BOC because of his Trotskyism, as in fact Trotsky had warned would happen once he started to argue openly for the Left Opposition's politics. Meanwhile, the Madrid Federation had collapsed back into the PCE.

The Spanish Trotskyists now systematically attacked the BOC's 'confused' politics: its call for the CNT to 'take power' in September 1931, its apparent defence of separatism and the creation of 'national movements' in regions where there was little national consciousness, its muddled organisational basis and its initial refusal to take

^{5.} Andreu Nin, a teacher and journalist, entered organised politics at the age of 19 in 1911 as a left Catalan nationalist, but two years later, dissatisfied with nationalism, he became a member of the Spanish Socialist Party. In 1918, inspired by the Russian revolution, he joined the CNT. He was definitively won over to communism after going to Moscow in 1921, initially to attend the founding congress of the Red International of Labour Unions. He became Assistant General Secretary of the RILU, joined the Left Opposition in 1926, and was finally expelled from the USSR in 1930. Extracts from Nin's correspondence with Trotsky were originally published in the *International Bulletin* of the Left Opposition in March 1933, and can also be found in Trotsky, *The Spanish Revolution*, op cit, pp370-400.

^{6.} *La Batalla*, 12 February 1931, this can be compared with Trotsky's pamphlet *The Revolution in Spain*, 24 January 1931. See *The Spanish Revolution*, op cit, pp67-89.

any position in regard to the situation in the international communist movement. 'Maybe it would not be possible', one ICE leader wrote in April 1932, 'to find in today's working-class movement an organisation crippled by a more unhealthy opportunism than that which the Catalan Federation suffers.'⁷ The BOC, in turn, dismissed the Trotskyists as a divisive and irrelevant sect condemned to the sidelines of the working-class movement, from where they 'blindly follow the positions handed down by Trotsky'. They were the 'mirror image of Stalinism' whose same 'mechanical centralist methods' they had copied.⁸

The disagreements between Nin and Trotsky were soon further compounded by the incomplete information reaching the exiled and harassed former Bolshevik leader.⁹ This was particularly clear in regard to the ICE's supposed support for the dissident Landau and Rosmer groups and the unfortunate 'Lacroix case'. The ICE repeatedly denied any political support for Landau or Rosmer, but argued that both had the right to put their views within the international organisation.¹⁰ Trotsky and the Left Opposition's International Secretariat (IS) had appeared to back the ICE's former General Secretary, Henri Lacroix, in his obscure struggle against Nin. Lacroix led a small faction which backed the international Trotskyist leadership in its criticism of the ICE leadership over its change of name (from 'Communist Opposition' to 'Communist Left' in March 1932) and of 'its lack of a concrete programme for the Spanish revolution'. The ICE leaders, in turn, described Lacroix's motives as more personal than political. Such accusations appeared well founded when Lacroix was expelled from the ICE in June 1933 for the misappropriation of funds. He then unsuccessfully applied to rejoin the Communist Party, to whom he described Trotskyism as 'counter-revolutionary'. In September 1933, he joined the PSOE and publicly denounced his whole communist past.¹¹ The IS now condemned Lacroix for his 'violent and poisonous struggle... against the International Left Opposition and a number of leading comrades', and described him as always having been 'an alien

^{7.} L Fersen, 'Acerca del congreso de la FCCB', *Comunismo*, April 1932.

^{8.} Around the time of Nin's break with the FCCB and the expulsion of a small group of his collaborators for having formed a faction, there was a series of anti-Trotskyist articles in the BOC press, see *La Batalla*, 9, 16 and 23 July, 20 August, 17 and 24 September and 29 October 1931.

^{9.} Before arriving in Mexico at the beginning of 1937, Trotsky did not even have a secretary to translate for him from Spanish.

^{10.} The ICE repeatedly denied any political support for either group, but argued that they had a right to put their views within the international organisation. The French and German sections, in turn, criticised the ICE's positions (A Durgan, 'The Spanish Trotskyists and the Foundation of the POUM', *Revolutionary History*, Volume 4, no 1/2, London, 1992, pp21-22; Pagès, op cit, pp30-32. The problems in the international movement that arose from Trotsky's insistence on all sections intervening in each others' debates are discussed in Cliff, op cit, pp300-01).

^{11.} 'Henri Lacroix' (Francisco García Lavid) was a founder member of both the Communist Party in the early 1920s and the Spanish Opposition in February 1930. His correspondence with the PCE leadership of 14 and 15 July 1933 can be found in the party archive in Madrid; his denunciation of communism, in *El Socialista* 29 September 1933. The Belgian Trotskyist Georges Vereeken goes to some length to show that Lacroix was a GPU agent (G Vereeken, *The GPU in the Trotskyist Movement*, London, 1976, pp48-67). However, the fact that the PCE did not allow him to rejoin seems to refute this claim. According to Pierre Broué, Lacroix was lynched by Stalinist troops at the end of the Civil War when he was trying to cross the border (Trotsky, *La Revolución Española*, Volume 2, op cit, p536).

element among the Bolshevik-Leninists, alien to their ideas and their methods'.¹² Despite the belated acceptance by the international organisation of Lacroix's disruptive role, its previous support for him had seriously undermined its already tenuous relations with the ICE leadership. However, not all the blame could be placed on the IS and the beleaguered Trotsky. The ICE did very little to overcome the growing tensions between it and the international leadership.

The rejection by the ICE of the 'French turn', when Trotsky urged his supporters to enter the socialist parties to influence their growing left wings, was an important step towards the Spanish group's complete break with the International Left Opposition. The 'entry' tactic appeared particularly relevant in Spain, where the Socialist Party had turned sharply left after 1933. The leadership of the radical Socialist Youth (FJS) sympathised openly with Trotskyism and the BOC. In September 1934, the FJS leadership, including its General Secretary Santiago Carrillo, travelled to Barcelona to try to persuade the BOC youth to join them. Despite the offer by the Socialists that the BOC youth would form the leadership of any unified organisation in Catalonia, they rejected the proposal as it would mean the Bloc losing its youth section to the Socialist Party. The ICE, although recognising the importance of developments within the Socialist Party, refused to enter it because it feared losing its political and organisational independence. Instead, the Spanish Trotskyists argued it would be more useful for them to remain outside, thus not only providing a clear pole of attraction for revolutionaries within the Socialist Party, but also for the ranks of the powerful anarcho-syndicalist movement.

The fusion in September 1935 of the ICE and the BOC to form the POUM left the international Trotskyist organisation without a section in Spain, and could appear surprising after the two organisations' previously embittered relationship. However, by the end of 1934, both the general political climate and the orientation of the two organisations had changed sufficiently for them to be working quite closely together. The creation of Workers Alliances in early 1934, involving the BOC, ICE, Socialists, syndicalists (*Treintistas*)¹³ and other workers' organisations had opened the way for this collaboration. The events of October 1934, with the defeat of the revolutionary general strike called to oppose the entrance of the far right into the government, led to a further clamour for unity within the workers' movement. The ICE, which had been unable to break out of its general isolation, was particularly susceptible to such pressure. Its membership had grown to maybe 800, of which nearly half were peasants in the area around Llerena in Extremadura. Elsewhere it had a few groups with a minimal influence, especially in Madrid, Salamanca, Sevilla and some parts of the North.¹⁴ The BOC, in turn, had 4500 members, most of them in Catalonia,

¹². Vereeken, op cit, pp59-60.

¹³. The *Treintistas* were dissident members of the CNT who had rebelled against the FAI-dominated leadership of the unions, and had formed the 'CNT Opposition Unions', which were strong in Catalan industrial centres such as Sabadell, Manresa and Badalona, as well as in the Valencia region. Most would rejoin the CNT on the eve of the Civil War.

¹⁴. Pagès, op cit, pp70-94. The ICE was not predominantly a Catalan group as it has sometimes been portrayed, for example by Gerald Brenan, *The Spanish Labyrinth*, London, 1978, p223n; and P Heywood, *Marxism and the Failure of Organised Socialism in Spain 1879-1936*, Cambridge, 1990, p168.

compared with up to 10 000 in the PCE. The ICE's leadership thus proposed fusing with the BOC in Catalonia and, reversing its previous opposition to 'entrism', joining the Socialist Party in the rest of Spain. But the ICE rank and file rejected entering the Socialist Party, preferring instead to build the new united party throughout the whole of the country. The group's membership took this position on the basis of its experience of working within the Socialist unions, the *Unión General de Trabajadores* (UGT), where the bureaucracy, despite its 'leftism', had constantly stifled debate, the recent expulsion of the Trotskyists from the French Socialist Youth and the need to present an open and independent alternative to the CNT masses.

The ICE argued that though the BOC still lacked political clarity, it had dropped its worst political excesses such as its tendency towards nationalism and pseudo-syndicalism, and it had evolved towards an anti-Stalinist position in relation to the international communist movement. On the national question, by 1933 the BOC formally defended the same position as the ICE of calling for self-determination for the principal national minorities, and no longer spoke of calls for separatism or for the creation of national movements where they did not even exist. The ICE itself had also modified its view of the question, accepting in 1934 that the Basque Country was an oppressed nation, a position which Trotsky himself had already defended.¹⁵

The evolution in the Catalan Federation's politics towards a more coherent revolutionary Marxist analysis was most notable in relation to developments within the international communist movement. The FCCB/BOC has often been referred to as Bukharinist, both at the time and since, mainly due to its abstentionist position between 1930 and 1932, when it refused to take sides in the debates which divided communism internationally.¹⁶ At the beginning of its open break with the PCE, the Catalan Federation was quite eclectic in its attitude towards the international communist movement, and it published articles by different communist leaders, including both Stalin and Trotsky. Its politics also reflected certain traits of Comintern orthodoxy: for instance, despite its denunciations of the PCE's ultra-leftism, its press continued to refer to the Socialists as 'social fascists' until mid-1932.

¹⁵. Trotsky had already taken this position in early 1931 in his pamphlet *The Revolution in Spain*. See Trotsky, *The Spanish Revolution*, op cit, p78. The ICE's position, which amounted to a change of line, can be found in JM Arenillas, *The Basque Country: The National Question and the Socialist Revolution*, ILP, Leeds, 1974.

¹⁶. For references to the BOC's 'Bukharinism', see M Biccarrondo, *Octubre del 34*, Madrid, 1977, p60; JL Martín i Ramos, *Els orígens del PSUC*, Barcelona, 1977, p48; I Molas, in his introduction to A Monreal, *El pensamiento político de Joaquín Maurín*, Barcelona, 1984, p8; and P Broué, *La Revolución Española*, Barcelona, 1977, p247. The ICE also accused the BOC of being 'Bukharinist', see *El Soviet*, 15 October 1931, and especially H Lacroix, 'De Brandler a Maurín. La feneida Agrupación Comunista de Madrid', *El Soviet*, 12 May 1932. Felix Morrow wrote that the 'cadre' of the BOC 'collaborated with Stalin in the 1924-1928 period in sending the Communist Party of China into the bourgeois Kuomintang "bloc of four classes"; in creating farmer-labor and "two-class" parties "of workers and farmers"... in a word, in the whole opportunist course of those disastrous years' (Morrow, op cit, p103). This seems a particularly gratuitous criticism given that the only 'cadre' of note in the Bloc at this time was Maurín, and he was in prison between 1924 and 1927, and there is no evidence of any specific 'collaboration' by him or any other FCCB member with Stalin in relation to the Communist International's China policy. Moreover, apart from the Left Opposition, most, if not all, communists accepted the Comintern's policy at this time.

The idea of a ‘Workers and Peasants Bloc’ was associated with Bukharin’s period of influence in the Communist International, but whereas Bukharin had seen it as a form of electoral alliance, the FCCB’s conception was that of a periphery organisation of sympathisers. The BOC’s abstentionism in relation to the international movement did not last, and in February 1932 the BOC’s leader Joaquín Maurín¹⁷ spoke of the ‘degeneration of the CI since Lenin’s death’, that is before the period of Bukharin’s influence. Six months later, in a series of articles, Maurín denounced the bureaucratisation of the Comintern and the persecution of oppositionists in the Soviet Union. The roots of this degeneration, he wrote, lay in the triumph of ‘socialism in one country’, a theory associated as much with Bukharin as Stalin, which had led to the ‘subordination of the CI to the Soviet state’.¹⁸ Despite Trotsky’s hostility to the FCCB/BOC and its polemics with the ICE, even prior to 1935, the Bloc’s press constantly defended the former Bolshevik leader from Stalinist slander, describing him as ‘Lenin’s best comrade... the man of the October Revolution’ and ‘one of the most extraordinary brains of world socialism’, as well as publishing his articles in its press.¹⁹ Trotsky’s apparent unawareness of this evolution in the BOC’s politics (he made no mention of it in his writings) would not help his subsequent understanding of the nature of the POUM.

The Communist Left was convinced that much of the BOC’s membership was open to revolutionary Marxism, and that the only real difference between the POUM’s programme and that of the International Left Opposition was over the latter’s call to move immediately towards building a new International. Even on this question, the Spanish Trotskyists were confident that the unified party would eventually be won over. The ICE wrote to the International Secretariat in July 1935:

The fusion will take place on the basis of a *jointly* elaborated programme, which is the result of discussions that have continued for months, and which contains *all* our fundamental principles: the affirmation of the international character of the proletarian revolution; the condemnation of the theory of socialism in one country and of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry; defence of the Soviet Union, but with the absolute right to criticise all the errors of the Soviet leadership; affirmation of the failure of the Second and Third Internationals, and the necessity to re-establish the unity of the international workers’ movement on a new basis.²⁰

Initially, the IS approved of the ICE’s decision to enter into talks with the BOC in

¹⁷. Joaquín Maurín, a teacher by profession, joined the Catalan CNT in 1918 and was the leader of its small pro-communist faction which became the Catalan Federation of the PCE in 1924. His writings, along with those of Nin and other ICE leaders, represent by far the most serious theoretical contributions made by Spanish Marxists in the 1920s and 1930s.

¹⁸. *La Batalla*, 2 June, 29 December 1932, 12 January, 9 February 1933.

¹⁹. *La Batalla*, 22 and 29 December 1932, 27 April, 26 October 1933. For a list of articles by Trotsky in the BOC press, see A Durgan, ‘Andreu Nin i la formación del POUM’, in V Alba (et al), *Andrés Nin i el socialisme*, Barcelona, 1998, p68n.

²⁰. Letter from the ICE National Committee to the International Secretariat, 21 July 1935, *Boletín Interior de la ICE*, 1 August 1935, original emphasis. For the POUM’s founding programme, which was written jointly by Maurín and Nin, see POUM, *Qué es y qué quiere el Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista*, Barcelona, 1936.

Catalonia, providing it entered the PSOE in the rest of the country. However, once it became clear that the Spanish Trotskyists had changed their position in favour of forming a new unified party in the whole country, the IS condemned their decision, because of the danger of their becoming absorbed by the BOC, particularly as they had renounced the forming of their own faction within the new party. The ICE, in turn, protested about the IS's 'fundamental lack of understanding of Spanish affairs', and reiterated that the only difference with the BOC was over the proposed creation of a new 'Fourth' International.²¹ The BOC was affiliated to the International Bureau of Revolutionary Socialist Unity, usually known as the London Bureau, which grouped together various small left socialist and dissident communist parties, and which had 'the objective of preparing for the formation of a reconstructed International on a revolutionary socialist basis'.²² Trotsky had described the London Bureau as 'centrist', and the vacillating positions adopted by some of its affiliates during the Civil War would confirm this evaluation. The ICE saw its work within the Bureau as similar to that of other Trotskyist groups, which had entered their respective socialist parties, within the Second International. As regards its unification with the BOC, the ICE presented this as the same as the position taken by the Dutch and American Trotskyists which were in similar parties to the POUM, namely the RSAP and the Workers Party.

Despite its initial condemnation of the ICE's decision to fuse with the BOC, the International Secretariat acquiesced after a conciliatory report by the delegate it sent to Spain, Jean Rous, in the summer of 1935. The disappearance of the Communist Left, Rous claimed, was only 'a stage on the road towards the construction of the revolutionary party and the Spanish section of the Fourth International'. Trotsky, upon hearing of the foundation of the new party, stated:

The new party has been proclaimed. We take note. To the extent that this depends on international factors, we must do everything possible to make this party gain authority and influence. This is possible only through means of intransigent and consistent Marxism. I am prepared to follow this road, and I am sure of the collaboration of all the comrades of the International Secretariat in all that is asked of us.²³

Some six months later, once the POUM had signed the Popular Front pact and the leftist Socialist Youth had agreed to unite with their communist counterparts, Trotsky was now far less tolerant, stating that the former ICE leaders should be 'stigmatised forever as criminals against the revolution' for having permitted 'the splendid Young Socialists to pass over to Stalinism'. The task of the Spanish supporters of the Fourth International was, on the one hand, to enter the PSOE and the Socialist Youth and, on the other, to 'grasp in full the wretchedness of the

²¹. Letter from the ICE National Committee to the International Secretariat, 21 July 1935, *Boletín Interior de la ICE*, 1 August 1935.

²². *Revolutionary Socialist Bulletin*, January 1936.

²³. Cited in J Rous, *Rapport sur la fusion de la Gauche Communiste d'Espagne (Section de la LCI) et le BOC (Bloc ouvrier et paysan, Maurín)*, September 1935.

leadership of the POUM... especially of the former Left Communists'.²⁴

The POUM and the Popular Front

The POUM's apparent support for the Popular Front would lead to the definitive break of any remaining links between the IS and the former ICE at an 'official' level. It would also be at the centre of Trotsky's critique of the POUM's politics during the Civil War. The POUM's decision to sign the Left Electoral Pact (later known as the 'Popular Front') in January 1936 confirmed all Trotsky's worst fears about Nin and Maurín's political confusion.

The POUM's initial reaction to the Comintern's turn towards the Popular Front in 1935 was to denounce it for subordinating the workers' movement to the petit-bourgeoisie. In the coming months, the party's press was full of attacks, in terms similar to those used by Trotsky, on the idea of a Popular Front. In May 1936, Maurín described the Comintern's position as showing its 'total incomprehension' of the nature of fascism, and claimed that it would only result in holding back the working class by keeping its struggle within a bourgeois framework, thereby giving the counter-revolution time to prepare itself. 'In a word... the new line of the Comintern was the repetition of what the Mensheviks had wanted in Russia in 1917', and the same as the position of reformist socialism which had led to disasters in Italy, Germany and Austria. Instead of the class collaboration that this new turn by the Stalinists represented, Andreu Nin argued that it was necessary to create the conditions in the short term for the conquest of power, and this meant 'forging the necessary arms for such a victory — the workers' united front and the revolutionary party' — and the workers' movement maintaining its complete ideological and organisational independence.²⁵

For Trotsky, the POUM's formal position was irrelevant and what mattered was its actual decision to sign the pact. Such treachery, he argued, only served to confirm the opportunism of his would-be Spanish followers since the advent of the Republic in 1931. In his first article on Spain for nearly four years, Trotsky accused the former ICE leaders of having betrayed the proletariat for 'the sake of an alliance with the bourgeoisie' of whose left wing they had turned into the 'mere tail', and he concluded that it was hard to 'conceive of a more ignominious downfall'.²⁶

Initially the forerunners of the POUM had favoured the Workers Alliances presenting lists in any forthcoming election, but the hostility of the *Treintistas* to such an idea and the ambiguous attitude of the PSOE towards the Alliances meant that this proposal received little support. By the summer of 1935, the future POUM

²⁴. LD Trotsky, 'Tasks of the Fourth International in Spain', 12 April 1936, *The Spanish Revolution*, op cit, pp211-14.

²⁵. J Maurín, '¿Revolución democrático-burguesa o revolución democrático-socialista?', *La Nueva Era*, May 1936; A Nin, 'Después de las elecciones del 16 de febrero', *La Nueva Era*, February 1936. In July 1935, Maurín had denounced the Stalinists for negating the 'historical concept of the class struggle' and reducing the proletariat's actions to class collaboration (*La Batalla*, 19 July 1935). For more examples of the party's theoretical rejection of the Popular Front, apart from the aforementioned articles by Maurín and Nin, see Jordi Arquer's article in *La Nueva Era*, February 1936, and one by the ex-ICE member José Luis Arenillas in *La Nueva Era*, July 1936.

²⁶. LD Trotsky, 'The Treachery of the POUM', 23 January 1936, *The Spanish Revolution*, op cit, p209.

recognised that some form of provisional agreement with the petit-bourgeois republicans would be necessary, but without the workers' organisations making any concessions over their political independence.²⁷ The POUM proposed forming a 'Workers Front' with the other workers' parties which in turn would reach a tactical agreement with the Republicans. But such a front also failed to materialise. Both the Socialist right and the PCE accepted a direct alliance with the left Republicans, on the basis of a bourgeois-democratic programme. The powerful left Socialist faction was hamstrung by its complete ideological confusion, which led it seriously to misunderstand the implications of the Comintern's latest turn.

Faced with the impossibility of forming a Workers Front, the POUM at the end of 1935 offered to support a left electoral alliance on the basis that it was transitory and aimed at 'defeating the counter-revolution at the polls', securing an amnesty for all political prisoners and re-establishing the Catalan Statute of Autonomy. If these basic demands were not met, the party insisted it would stand alone.²⁸ The subsequent electoral agreement, however, appeared to fulfil these conditions, and the POUM thus ended up signing the Popular Front pact on 15 January, albeit without having had the slightest say in the elaboration of its programme. The POUM leadership explained its decision by declaring itself 'extraordinarily interested in obtaining parliamentary representation' which would allow the party to defend a 'class position' in the Cortes.²⁹ The former ICE leader Juan Andrade further justified signing the pact because the party had been forced to recognise the 'material existence of an electoral law' that obliged it to make 'provisional agreements' with the Republican left 'to avoid the victory of the bourgeoisie'.³⁰ The massive support among the working class for some form of electoral unity, if only to achieve an amnesty, would even lead the CNT to abandon its abstentionism and effectively to encourage its members to vote. Faced with this situation, the POUM was loath to isolate itself even further; a fear that would later lead it to participate in the Catalan government during the Civil War.

During the electoral campaign, the POUM organised its own independent propaganda, giving a singularly radical interpretation of the electoral battle. Maurín, speaking to 'a wildly enthusiastic' crowd of 5000 in Madrid, the hall bedecked with giant portraits of Lenin and Trotsky, declared:

On the one side is the socialist-democratic front, and on the other only thieves and murderers... We are going to the elections thinking not only of our dead and prisoners, but also of the victory of our revolution that will trace a diagonal line through Europe between Madrid and Moscow that will contribute to the sinking of fascism throughout the world.³¹

The former BOC leader Jordi Arquer, speaking to 12 000 in Barcelona, declared that

²⁷. For example, J Maurín, 'Como se plantea entre nosotros la cuestión de las relaciones del movimiento obrero con los partidos pequeño burgueses', *La Batalla*, 26 July 1935.

²⁸. *La Batalla*, 27 December 1935.

²⁹. *Acta del Comité Central del POUM*, Barcelona, 5-6 January 1936.

³⁰. *La Batalla*, 24 January 1936.

³¹. *La Batalla*, 14 February 1936.

the POUM did not ‘counterpose democracy to fascism, but communism... the dictatorship of the proletariat’.³²

The triumph of the left in the elections was greeted by the POUM as a great victory for the workers and peasants, and an important defeat for the counter-revolution. It was not a victory for bourgeois democracy, nor did it represent mass support for petit-bourgeois republicanism, but was a by-product of the revolutionary struggle of October 1934. The POUM pointed out that any new left Republican government, given the depth of the economic and social crisis by 1936, would be worse than the last in 1931. Any attempt to carry out even the mildest aspects of the left’s electoral programme would provoke the fiercest resistance from the ruling class. Two roads stood before the masses — that of Germany and Austria, or that of Asturias.³³ Over the coming months, the POUM constantly denounced the attempts of social democrats and Stalinists alike to subordinate the workers’ movement to petit-bourgeois republicanism. Faced with this crisis, Nin had written soon after the elections, that it was ‘a crime and a betrayal’ to demand that the working class should ‘renounce its maximum aspiration — the destruction of the bourgeois state and the conquest of state power — in the name of ‘consolidating the Republic’.³⁴

Apart from denouncing the POUM’s participation in the Popular Front pact, Trotsky now briefly turned to Maurín’s concept of the ‘socialist-democratic revolution’, the theoretical underpinning of the party’s analysis of the Spanish revolution. This was dismissed by Trotsky as an ‘eclectic hodgepodge’; the ‘democratic and socialist revolutions’ were, as the October revolution in 1917 had shown, ‘on opposite sides of the barricades’. Not only had the democratic revolution been carried out in Spain, but the Popular Front was ‘renewing it’. The socialist revolution could only be made by an uncompromising struggle against the ‘democratic’ revolution and its Popular Front. Maurín’s ‘synthetic democratic-socialist revolution’ meant nothing.³⁵

It seems that Trotsky had no more than a superficial idea of what Maurín’s theory consisted. He appears to have understood that the POUM leaders were defending a straightforward stagist theory of revolution, common to both Menshevism and Stalinism, whereby after passing through the bourgeois revolution, the workers would move on to the ‘socialist stage’. In fact, for Maurín, writing in May 1936, the coming revolution in Spain would ‘not be bourgeois-democratic but socialist-democratic, or to be precise, socialist’:

Whilst reformist socialism, Menshevism, saw the Russian revolution as a bourgeois-democratic revolution, revolutionary Marxism, represented by Lenin and Trotsky, believed that the proletariat must conquer political power in order to carry through the bourgeois revolution that the bourgeoisie is incapable of doing, and to initiate the socialist revolution... The seizure of power by the working class [in Spain] will entail the realisation of the democratic revolution that the bourgeoisie will not make

^{32.} *La Batalla*, 10 January 1936.

^{33.} *La Batalla*, 13 March 1936.

^{34.} *La Nueva Era*, February 1936.

^{35.} LD Trotsky, ‘Tasks of the Fourth International in Spain’, 12 April 1936, *The Spanish Revolution*, op cit, pp211-14.

— the liberation of the land and of the nationalities, the destruction of the church, the economic emancipation of women, the improvement of the material and moral situation of the workers — and at the same time it will initiate the socialist revolution, nationalising the land, transport, mines, heavy industry and the banks.³⁶

Thus the POUM's position in relation to the Popular Front was a lot closer to Trotsky's than he assumed. However, by actually signing the agreement, it made the party's ability to differentiate itself from the Socialists and communists that much harder. Subsequent developments in the Civil War, principally in relation to participation in the Catalan government, confirmed Trotsky's worst fears about the vacillating character of the POUM's politics.

Revolution: The POUM and the Question of Power

The outbreak of the Civil War in July 1936 meant that Spain once more became central to Trotsky's work, although his political activity was still hindered by factors beyond his control. From late August 1936, he was interned in Norway and unable to receive information or intervene in the work of his followers. Not until February 1937, once installed in Mexico, could Trotsky begin to write systematically about events in Spain. Unfortunately, many crucial months had passed, and his supporters and critics alike in the revolutionary movement had been deprived of his advice and analysis. The bulk of Trotsky's writings on the Spanish Civil War were produced when the tide had turned decisively against the revolution and therefore took the form of drawing out the lessons, particularly in relation to the POUM, for revolutionaries throughout the world.

On the eve of the Civil War, the POUM was still a fairly small organisation compared not only with the Socialist Party but also with the PCE.³⁷ The majority of its 6000 members were still concentrated in Catalonia. This at least meant that the POUM could play a relatively important role in what was both the most industrialised region of Spain and the centre of the revolution. The POUM grew rapidly in the first months of the war, and by the end of 1936 claimed to have 30 000 members.³⁸ It sent to the front some 8000 militiamen during the first 10 months of the war, produced five daily, as well as numerous weekly, newspapers, and controlled radio stations in Barcelona and Madrid.

The POUM seemed aware of the great responsibility that had befallen it. As one party leader declared:

The victory of the Spanish revolution is the beginning of a powerful world revolutionary movement. The meridian [of the world revolution] has now been displaced from Moscow to Barcelona. The Bolshevik party has

^{36.} *La Nueva Era*, May 1936.

^{37.} According to its own, undoubtedly exaggerated, figures, the PCE's membership grew from 20 000 in 1935 to over 80 000 by July 1936. At the height of the Civil War, due as much to its image as the party of 'order', military efficiency and 'anti-fascist unity' as to the prestige of the USSR, the party claimed to have over 300 000 members. It also controlled the 250 000-strong JSU.

^{38.} *Boletín Interior del POUM*, 15 January 1937.

degenerated and it is the POUM who will pick up its banner and unfurl it throughout the world.³⁹

The war and the revolution were inseparable. The POUM insisted that the immediate tasks of the workers and peasants were both the defeat of the fascist forces and the construction of socialism. Nevertheless, despite holding a formally revolutionary position, the POUM would prove unable to influence significantly the course of events. For the POUM itself, this was a result of its organisational weakness and isolation. For Trotsky, the problem was the whole centrist nature of the political practice of the POUM and its predecessors. He would thus conclude in March 1939:

Left centrism [of which the POUM was a particularly clear example – AD], especially under revolutionary conditions, is always ready to adopt in words the programme of the socialist revolution and is not niggardly with sonorous phrases. But the fatal malady of centrism is not being capable of drawing courageous tactical and organisational conclusions from its general conceptions.⁴⁰

Nowhere would this appear to be clearer than in relation to the question of power.

The immediate problem facing the counter-revolutionary forces in the Republican camp was the need to reorganise a state machine capable of smashing the revolution. An important step towards the restoration of bourgeois control was the creation in September 1936 of a new Catalan government based on all anti-fascist organisations, including the POUM. Prior to the formation of this new regional government, power in Catalonia resided in scores of committees made up of representatives of different organisations. These committees were rarely elected by the local population or workforce, and they tended to reflect the influence of each party or union in any given locality or workplace. Parallel to these committees were the militias, organised along trade union and party lines. The most important committee, and the possible embryo of a revolutionary government, was the Catalan Central Committee of Anti-Fascist Militias (*Comité Central de Milicias Antifascistas* – CCMA). This body's decisions reflected the predominance of the revolutionaries at this stage in Catalonia, although the majority of its components could not be considered as such.⁴¹

The existence of these committees and the militias led POUM leader Andreu Nin to claim that, effectively, the 'dictatorship of the proletariat already existed' in Catalonia.⁴² This declaration can be seen as an attempt to allay the anarcho-

³⁹. La Batalla, 24 December 1936.

⁴⁰. LD Trotsky, 'The Culpability of Left Centrism', 10 March 1939, *The Spanish Revolution*, op cit, p343.

⁴¹. The CCMA consisted of four members of the Catalan Republican Left (*Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* – ERC), five anarcho-syndicalists, four Stalinists (one from the PSUC and three representing the UGT), one POUM representative and one from the Peasants Union (*Unió de Rabassaires*).

⁴². 'What is the dictatorship of the proletariat? It is the exercise of authority solely and exclusively by the working class, the annulment of all the political rights and freedom of the representatives of the enemy classes. If the dictatorship of the proletariat is that comrades..., today in Catalonia such a dictatorship exists.' ('El proletariado español ante la revolución en marcha', 6 September 1936, in A Nin, *La Revolución Española*, Barcelona, 1978, p218)

syndicalists' fears of a proletarian dictatorship, given that Nin was calling on the CNT to form part of a 'workers' government'. Nin would later argue that no 'dual power' as such had emerged in the Spanish revolution, as Trotsky and his followers claimed, because the local committees were not elected by the masses and that they were often, effectively, Popular Front bodies, representing the whole left, including the petit-bourgeois parties.⁴³ Strictly speaking, Nin was correct in his assessment if the model for dual power was that of the soviets in revolutionary Russia in 1917. What existed was, in effect, a *de facto* dual power in that there were many, often disconnected, committees which were an alternative source of power to an initially inept Republican state. They included anti-fascist committees at a local level, as well as those that organised supplies or transport or coordinated the militias (particularly the CCMA) or ran collectivised factories or farms. As one of the leaders of the Trotskyist group in Barcelona during the war, G Munis (Manuel Fernández-Grandizo), would write some years later, there was an 'atomisation of power', each committee was like a 'small government'.⁴⁴

As an alternative to the bourgeois Republic and the Popular Front, the POUM called for the establishment of a Constituent Assembly based on workers', peasants' and soldiers' committees, not only in Catalonia but in the whole of Spain. At a more practical level, the POUM argued for the CCMA to 'take power', but the CNT, let alone the PSUC and the Catalan Republicans (*Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* – ERC), refused to countenance such a move. Instead, the anarcho-syndicalist trade union federation bowing, in part, to mass pressure, increasingly put 'anti-fascist unity' above all other considerations. Thus, the formation of the new Generalitat (Catalan government) 'Council', in which, like the CCMA, the reformists were in the majority (albeit a slightly larger one), seemed a logical outcome of this need for unity.⁴⁵ The new body appeared not only to the ERC and PSUC, but also the CNT, as a natural replacement for the CCMA, which was duly disbanded.

The POUM Central Committee, after having to recognise that no other organisation would take up the call for a workers' government, justified its participation in the Generalitat on the basis that the workers' organisations were in a majority, the new regional government had a 'socialist programme' and the Catalan petit-bourgeois parties had been radicalised. Hence, it contrasted the Generalitat, 'the government of the revolution', with the government presided over by the left Socialist leader Largo Caballero in Madrid, which the POUM described as 'against the interests of the revolution'. Meanwhile, the party would still argue for the 'formation of workers', peasants' and fighters' committees' from which would emerge 'proletarian power'.⁴⁶

In his first declaration after arriving in Mexico in February 1937 on the situation in

⁴³. A Nin, 'El problema de los órganos de poder en la revolución española', *Juillet. Revue Internationale du POUM*, no 1, Paris-Barcelona, June 1937.

⁴⁴. G Munis, 'Significado histórico del 19 de julio', *Contra la Corriente*, Mexico, August 1943, in *Balance*, no 5, October 1997.

⁴⁵. The Generalitat Council of September 1936 consisted of four ERC representatives, three anarcho-syndicalists, one from the PSUC, UGT, POUM and the *Unió de Rabassaires* and a military advisor; thus the balance in favour of the forces opposed to the revolution had changed from nine to six in the CCMA to eight to four.

⁴⁶. *La Batalla*, 5, 27 and 30 September 1936.

Spain, reproduced without comment in *La Batalla*, Trotsky was scathing about the POUM's participation in the Catalan Government:

... in order to fight hand in hand with the other parties at the front, there is no need to take upon oneself any responsibility for the false governmental policies of these parties. Without weakening the military front for a moment, it is necessary to know how to rally the masses politically under the revolutionary banner.⁴⁷

The reasons the party gave for taking such a course of action were indeed difficult to sustain. Although the workers' organisations maintained the majority, albeit reduced, that they had had in the CCMA over the Republicans, this 'majority' included the Catalan Stalinists (the PSUC), who were clearly, even at this early stage, opposed to the revolution. Even though the Stalinists and Republicans had also formed a small majority within the CCMA, the latter's direct links with the militias and local committees had placed the initiative in the hands of the revolutionaries. In contrast, the new government represented a shift back towards Republican, that is bourgeois, legality, despite its 'legalising' of many of the conquests of the revolution. Taking into account the exact balance of forces within the government is also important in assessing the relevance of its 'socialist' programme. Its economic programme was that of the Central Economic Council, which previously had been subordinated to the CCMA. It had been elaborated by Nin and aimed at a 'socialist transformation of the Catalan economy'. Yet without a revolutionary power to put this programme into practice, it was only partially applied. The ERC and PSUC, although rejecting the programme's aims 'completely to collectivise industry', saw no alternative but to accept it, at least formally. Where, however, they were immediately more successful in pushing back the revolution was in the dissolving of the local anti-fascist committees, rebuilding the security forces in the rearguard and imposing more control over the militias.

As regards the 'radicalisation' of the Catalan Republicans, whether this continued or not depended on the pressure exercised by the revolutionary forces outside the government. Since its foundation in 1931, as effectively a coalition of different leftist and radical nationalist groupings, the ERC had received massive support from the Catalan peasantry, the petit-bourgeoisie in general and from many workers, especially 'white-collar' sectors.⁴⁸ Moreover, much of the CNT rank and file voted for the ERC in elections. The *Esquerra*'s politics were typical of such a mass petit-bourgeois formation, vacillating between trying to uphold Republican legality and its half-hearted rebellion against the right-wing government in October 1934. Many of its leaders saw themselves as social reformers and had cultivated links with the more moderate sectors of the CNT, while at the same time from within the Catalan government the ERC had tried to break strikes led by the radical Iberian Anarchist Federation (*Federación Anarquista Ibérica* – FAI) and had favoured non-anarchist unions. During the Republic, the BOC had denounced the ERC as 'counter-

⁴⁷. *La Batalla*, 20 February 1937; LD Trotsky 'Interview with Havas', 19 February 1937, *The Spanish Revolution*, op cit, p243.

⁴⁸. The ERC had 60 000 members by 1936 and had received over 400 000 votes, 40 per cent of the total cast in Catalonia, in the 1933 elections.

revolutionary' and had mistakenly predicted its imminent demise as a petit-bourgeois party crushed between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. The forerunners of the POUM also recognised the contradictory nature of the ERC, given its mass support, and in some towns and villages the dissident communists and left nationalists often belonged to the same unions and had worked closely together against the Right. Elsewhere, the ERC had sided with reactionary groups against the Bloc.⁴⁹ In November 1936, Nin was to compare the left nationalist party with the Russian Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs).⁵⁰ Maybe Nin was over-generous in his evaluation of the ERC's radical credentials, but it is difficult to sustain the view that this party directly represented the bourgeoisie.⁵¹ The left Republicans were, as Trotsky wrote in December 1937, the 'shadow' of the bourgeoisie, and, along with the Stalinists and right Socialists, they would re-establish bourgeois democratic power in the Republican zone.⁵² The bourgeoisie as such was in the Francoist zone or in hiding. The crux of the problem was that the new Catalan government was subordinated to the Popular Front policies of the ERC and the PSUC, which meant the workers' movement was tied to a bourgeois-democratic programme, and as a consequence this government's formation would represent an important step, despite the CNT and POUM's intentions, in the dismantling of the revolution.

Apart from the reasons given publicly by the POUM to justify its participation in the Catalan government, it was also due to its fear of being 'misunderstood' by the masses, isolated and therefore being deprived of supplies for its militias and even opening the way to its being made illegal, as the Stalinists already advocated. In particular, the party believed that by entering the Catalan government it would prevent the CNT from being pulled towards the Stalinists and Republicans. Nin himself saw the government's situation as 'transitory' and thus unlikely to last long.⁵³ At best, the POUM postponed all these problems for a few more months by accepting the invitation to form part of the Generalitat Council in early October 1936.

The party's representative in the Catalan Government, Nin, was appointed Councillor (Minister) of Justice and he introduced a number of radical reforms,⁵⁴ but these were of little significance compared to the role of the new government in undermining the revolution. Having disbanded the CCMA, the Generalitat proceeded to dissolve the local anti-fascist committees and replace them with municipal councils based on the same distribution of representatives as the Generalitat Council. The implications of such a move were obvious for the

⁴⁹. This had been the case in the municipal elections in 1934, where in some villages the BOC and ERC presented joint lists, while in others the *Esquerra* had sided with the right, see A Durgan, *BOC 1930-1936. El Bloque Obrero y Campesino*, Barcelona, 1996, pp268-71.

⁵⁰. August Thalheimer, 'Notes on a Stay in Catalonia', *Revolutionary History*, Volume 4, no 1/2, pp279-80.

⁵¹. The American Trotskyist Felix Morrow described the ERC as a 'liberal-bourgeois party' and its leadership as 'hardened bourgeois politicians' (Morrow, op cit, pp76, 112).

⁵². The left Republicans were the 'political attorneys of the bourgeoisie but not the bourgeoisie itself' (LD Trotsky, 'The Lessons of Spain: The Last Warning', 17 December 1937, *The Spanish Revolution*, op cit, pp309-10).

⁵³. W Solano, *El POUM en la historia*, Madrid, 1999, p64.

⁵⁴. See Pelai Pagès, 'Andrés Nin, conseller de justicia de la Generalitat de Catalunya', in Alba, op cit, pp79-94.

revolutionary organisations. In scores of towns and villages throughout Catalonia, the CNT and POUM had been the dominant, and often the only, force in the local committees, but now power would shift into the hands of the Catalan Republicans and their Stalinist allies. In fact, upon entering the government, the POUM had claimed that the dominance of the revolutionary forces in Catalonia would ensure the government would not fall under the control of their opponents. Although Nin opposed within the Catalan government the dissolving of the committees, there was no public criticism made by the POUM of the move, and the party's Central Committee agreed unanimously to implement the new decree.⁵⁵ The Stalinists, meanwhile, were stepping up their campaign against the 'Trotskyist' POUM, and in December 1936, Nin was thrown out of the Generalitat government following direct pressure from the Soviet government on the Republican authorities.

The POUM's decision to enter the Generalitat marked the end of any hope – however vague – that Trotsky had that this party could develop into a truly revolutionary organisation. In his subsequent writings on the Spanish situation, he would return repeatedly to the POUM's participation in the Catalan government, which he saw as the logical outcome of its previous support for the Popular Front in the elections. Accusations that the POUM had only aided the counter-revolution by its stance, albeit without the damning conclusions that Trotsky made, would also come from within the party itself. Within its youth organisation, the JCI (*Juventud Comunista Ibérica*), there was 'profound dissatisfaction' with the decision to participate in the Generalitat Council, and there was also criticism in the Barcelona Local Committee and in the party's stronghold of Lérida.⁵⁶ The first public criticism would be from the former ex-ICE leader Juan Andrade, in April 1937, when he described the party's participation as having been 'entirely negative' and 'harmful' to the development of the revolution.⁵⁷ Even one of the POUM's most loyal leaders, Enric Adroher (Gironella), could write a few months after the war had finished that the Generalitat had had 'one historical mission... to liquidate the committees', and that the POUM had been 'entrusted to convince the revolutionary forces' of the necessity of doing this, then be expelled from the government once the 'invaluable service' had been carried out.⁵⁸

⁵⁵. J Gorkin, 'El error fundamental', *L'Expérience Espagnole*, POUM, Paris, 1939, p7. There was only veiled criticism in *La Batalla* a few days later, while the party's foreign language press justified the dissolution of the committees as 'reinforcing revolutionary power', see R Tosstorff, 'Nin com a líder del POUM', in Alba, op cit, p153. Nin took part in a Catalan government delegation to Lérida, to ensure that the local committee, in which the POUM was influential, accepted the decision to establish a new Municipal Council. Contrary to what has been claimed, the delegation was not received with hostility, and the revolutionary committee accepted the new decree, given the prestige of the POUM and CNT. See F Bonamusa, *Andreu Nin y el movimiento comunista en España (1930-1937)*, Barcelona, 1977, pp299-300.

⁵⁶. Solano, op cit, p64; Tosstorff, op cit, p152; J Andrade, *Notas sobre la guerra civil. Actuación del POUM*, Madrid, 1986, pp49-51.

⁵⁷. *La Batalla*, 13 April 1936. Juan Andrade was a founder member of both the PCE and the ICE.

⁵⁸. Gironella (Enric Adroher), 'Sobre los errores cometidos por el POUM', *L'Expérience Espagnole*, op cit, p10. One former ICE militant, Eduardo Mauricio, described the party's participation in the Catalan government as 'going against all revolutionary Marxist principles' (O Emem (Eduardo Mauricio), 'Situación Revolucionaria. El poder – El partido', *L'Expérience Espagnole*, op

At the time, the POUM assessed its expulsion from the Generalitat as marking an important step towards the party's removal from all legal political activity in the Republican zone. With few exceptions, the party leadership refused to see at this stage that its participation had not only done nothing to strengthen the revolution, but had helped the counter-revolutionary forces to undermine it. The POUM now called, and would continue to do so until the party was made illegal six months later, for its reinstatement in the Catalan government. At the same time, it stepped up its earlier calls for a Constituent Assembly of delegates from workers, peasants and soldiers committees, which in turn would elect a 'Workers' and Peasants' Government'.

While the POUM lamented that the workers 'had not built soviets', Trotsky pointed to the committees that workers had already set up in the process of taking over industry. In the Catalan capital, it had been 'only a question of unifying these committees, of developing them', he wrote in October 1937, and they would have become the 'soviet of Barcelona'.⁵⁹ The problem with Trotsky's position was that, with few exceptions, the committees were set up by existing workers' organisations rather than elected by the masses. Moreover, Trotsky's formula for the creation of a 'Barcelona soviet' failed to take into account either the influence of the anarcho-syndicalists or Stalinists in the unions which controlled all the major workplaces or the weakness of the POUM in the city. Given the general absence of directly-elected committees, Trotsky's position only made sense as something for which revolutionaries had to agitate within the workers' organisations.

Formally, the POUM's position was not so far removed from that of Trotsky. In April 1937, *La Batalla* quoted Lenin approvingly that 'there was no middle way between the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie and the dictatorship of the proletariat. All illusions (in such a middle way) were nothing more than the reactionary lamentations of the petit-bourgeoisie'.⁶⁰ By early that year, the POUM called for a 'Revolutionary Workers Front', whose main task was to call for a congress or assembly of delegates from the trade unions and from 'existing committees' – in the workplaces and countryside and at the front – rather than for the creation of new ones. Nin pointed to how, unlike in Russia before the revolution, the unions had 'great prestige and authority' among the masses, and had never limited themselves just to immediate demands but had also played a political role. The soviets, in turn, had emerged from the need of the Russian workers to find some form of representative organisation in the absence of strong traditional workers' organisations. In Spain, in contrast, the workers had not created new revolutionary organisations because they still looked towards the unions. In the same way as the Bolsheviks called on the soviets to take power, the POUM called on the existing expressions of workers' power – basically the unions and the committees controlled by them – to do the same. Calling on 'existing committees' to form the basis of a new proletarian state was similar, at least formally, to Trotsky's position, but nothing

cit).

⁵⁹. LD Trotsky, 'The POUM and the Call for Soviets', 1 October 1937, *The Spanish Revolution*, op cit, p299.

⁶⁰. *La Batalla*, 20 April 1937.

was seriously done by the POUM to raise the question in those areas where it was strong.⁶¹ According to Nin, in one of his last articles, and the only time he directly replied to Trotsky's criticisms of his party, the POUM's slogan for 'workers', peasants' and fighters' committees' had not 'permeated' the masses, and it would thus have been 'sterile' to have set up such bodies in isolation.⁶² Nin did not consider that it was the party's task to establish these committees if they did not exist, pointing out that the Bolsheviks had not created the soviets but rather had agitated that these bodies take power.

The POUM and the CNT

At the centre of the POUM's dilemma over how to build an alternative revolutionary power was its constant fear of clashing directly with the CNT leadership and, as a consequence, 'isolating' itself. Thus the real problem for the POUM during the Civil War, and one with which it never came to terms, was how to break the influence of the anarcho-syndicalists over the masses. The majority of the most militant workers were organised in the ranks of the CNT, and, so long as the POUM could not win over at least part of the anarcho-syndicalists' base, it could not become the true leadership of the working class. Yet instead of offering an independent alternative to anarcho-syndicalist workers, the POUM ended up tail-ending the CNT leadership. Trotsky did not take up this crucial flaw in the POUM's politics until the end of 1937.⁶³

To understand the POUM's attitude towards the CNT, it is necessary to trace the party's relationship with the anarcho-syndicalists in the years leading up to the war. In 1931, the BOC believed that the revitalised and increasingly radical CNT unions could play a role similar to that of the soviets in the Russian revolution. These illusions were soon undermined both by the CNT leadership's adventurist tactics and by the growing persecution of the BOC's members within the anarcho-syndicalist unions in Catalonia. Between 1932 and 1933, nearly all those unions controlled by the BOC were driven out of the CNT. Parallel to this, the anarcho-syndicalist unions in Catalonia, now led by the FAI, were losing members and influence. By the spring of 1936, the Catalan CNT claimed less than half of the over 300 000 members it had had in 1931. This, along with the growth of the POUM-led unions, led Andreu Nin to talk of the 'end of the CNT's hegemony over the Catalan proletariat'.⁶⁴

With the outbreak of the war, the Catalan CNT's fortunes changed dramatically and it grew spectacularly. In Catalonia, according to their own figures, the anarcho-

⁶¹. Various leading party members have pointed to this problem, for instance, J Gorkin, 'El error fundamental', *L'Expérience Espagnole*, op cit; O Emem (Eduardo Mauricio), 'Situación Revolucionaria. El poder – El partido', *L'Expérience Espagnole*, op cit; Célula 72, 'Por la creación de los Consejos de Obreros, Campesinos y Combatientes', in Comité Local de Barcelona del POUM, *Boletín Interior*, 23 April 1937; P Jane, 'Por una crítica Revolucionaria', *Boletín Interior del POUM* (edited in France), no 38, 20 January 1948.

⁶². A Nin, 'El problema de los órganos de poder en la revolución española', *Juillet. Revue Internationale du POUM*, no 1, Paris-Barcelona, June 1937.

⁶³. LD Trotsky, 'The Lessons of Spain: The Last Warning', 17 December 1937, *The Spanish Revolution*, op cit, pp317-18.

⁶⁴. A Nin, 'La Federación Obrera de Unidad Sindical', *La Batalla*, 15 May 1936.

syndicalist unions grew from some 140 000 members in July 1936 to 360 977 three months later, about a third of the workforce.⁶⁵ The pace of events rapidly forced the POUM to re-evaluate the importance of the anarcho-syndicalist movement. By September 1936, Nin could state that the ‘whole future of the Spanish revolution depends, in most part, on the attitude that the CNT and FAI adopt’.⁶⁶ Trotsky also recognised that ‘the élite of the Spanish proletariat’ was concentrated in the CNT’s ranks.⁶⁷ The difference was, however, that while Trotsky continually berated the anarcho-syndicalists for their disastrous politics, the POUM spent too much time trying to convince the CNT *leaders* of the error of their ways. As one disgruntled party member argued, the ‘fact that the POUM has not made fraternal, albeit severe, criticism of the CNT has prevented the CNT masses and the working class in general from being able to establish the difference between the two, and has led to a confusion between the positions of the two organisations’. Instead, the party should have gone further in criticising what it termed the anarcho-syndicalists’ ‘trade union capitalism’, whereby some CNT unions treated workplaces, services or industries under their control as effectively ‘their’ property, rather than as part of an economy under working-class control as a whole. Likewise, the POUM should have been more critical of the undoubtedly cases of forced collectivisation in some parts of the countryside which had driven many workers and, especially, peasants into the hands of the Stalinists.⁶⁸

In the early months of the war, the POUM leadership was optimistic about the possibility of closer collaboration with the CNT. A few days before his expulsion from the Catalan government, Nin wrote about the close ties between his party and the CNT leadership in Catalonia.⁶⁹ The CNT, in turn, naïvely expected the POUM to be allowed to join the Liaison Committee it was establishing with the UGT and PSUC. Given the anarcho-syndicalists’ indifference to the POUM’s expulsion from the Catalan government, Nin’s hopes seemed misplaced. In fact, the links continued to be vague, with the notable exception of the Revolutionary Young Workers Front (*Frente de la Juventud Trabajadora Revolucionaria* – FJTR), established in February 1937 by the JCI and its libertarian counterparts, the JJLL (*Juventudes Libertarias*). The Front organised a series of public meetings and demonstrations in defence of the revolution, including a rally of 50 000 in the centre of Barcelona, as well as organising joint militia columns for the front and a network of local committees. The FJTR was undoubtedly the nearest the POUM came to forming a united front with the anarcho-syndicalists, but it proved a short-lived experience. The more ‘apolitical’ sections of the CNT leadership were hostile, not only to taking power, but also to any

⁶⁵. *Solidaridad Obrera*, 6 May 1936, 10 October 1936.

⁶⁶. A Nin, ‘El proletariado español ante la revolución en marcha’, 6 September 1936, in A Nin, *La Revolución Española*, op cit.

⁶⁷. LD Trotsky, ‘For Aid for the Spanish Victims of Stalin–Negrín’, 6 October 1937, *The Spanish Revolution*, op cit, p299.

⁶⁸. These criticisms were expressed principally by Josep Rebull, administrator of *La Batalla*, see Célula 72, ‘Contratesis Política’, Comité Local de Barcelona del POUM, *Boletín Interior*, 23 April 1937, and Célula 72, ‘Resolución sometida al Comité Central del POUM en octubre de 1937’, in Trotsky, *La Revolución Española*, Volume 2, op cit, p515. These documents, and others by Rebull, are reproduced in *Balance*, no 19, May 2000, and no 20, October 2000.

⁶⁹. *Boletín Interior del POUM*, 15 January 1937; also see Tosstorff, op cit, p155.

collaboration with political parties. In late May, a Plenary Meeting of CNT delegates voted to put an end to the Libertarian Youth's involvement with the JCI. However, the anarcho-syndicalists' apoliticism did not extend to rival trade unions, and during the war the CNT signed several pacts with the Stalinist-dominated Catalan UGT and even, in August 1936, one including the PSUC.

Given the centrality of winning over the anarcho-syndicalist rank and file, perhaps the biggest mistake the POUM made during the war, and one barely touched on by Trotsky, was to have taken those unions under its control into the Socialist UGT rather than the CNT. The consequences of this decision were arguably even more serious than its participation in the Generalitat. By joining the CNT, the POUM would have been in a better position to have worked with the anarcho-syndicalists' rank and file. In May 1936, the POUM had formed its own trade union federation, the Workers Federation of Trade Union Unity (*Federación Obrera de Unidad Sindical – FOUS*), with the hope that this would be the first step towards a broader trade union unity.⁷⁰ The outbreak of the war soon undermined this hope, as the masses flocked into either the CNT or the UGT; a process speeded along by the Catalan government's decision to make trade union membership obligatory. Faced with this situation, the POUM had little choice but to enter one of the two major federations. The POUM leaders justified their decision to enter the UGT on the basis that they believed they could win the leadership in Catalonia of the relatively weak Socialist unions. Once this had been achieved, the POUM claimed that it would be possible to pose the question of trade union unity with the CNT. Prior to the war and the foundation of the PSUC,⁷¹ the POUM-led unions had generally had good relations with their Socialist counterparts. In contrast, the bitter internal struggles of 1932-33 within the CNT were still fresh in the minds of many POUM militants. In addition, it was true that had the POUM members worked politically within the CNT they might have put the party's strategy of trying to influence the anarcho-syndicalist leadership in danger.

It would not take long to see how badly the POUM had miscalculated. Following the Popular Front's electoral victory in February 1936, the Catalan UGT had already begun to grow quite quickly, doubling its membership to around 85 000 on the eve of the war. Once the war started, and especially after the Catalan government's obligatory syndicalisation decree, the Socialist unions soon claimed 436 299 members

⁷⁰. The FOUS was founded in Catalonia in May 1936 and had a membership of around 50 000. In Barcelona it had some 17 000 members, its principal base being among low-paid clerks and shop-workers; most of its support from industrial workers came from outside the Catalan capital, particularly in Terrassa, and in the provinces of Girona, Lleida and Tarragona; see A Durgan, 'Sindicalismo y Marxismo en Catalunya 1931-1936', *Historia Social*, no 8, Valencia, 1990, pp29-45; also Durgan, *BOC*, op cit, pp443-74. On Marxist unions in Barcelona, see A Durgan, 'The Search for Unity: Marxists and the Trade Union Movement in Barcelona 1931-1936', in A Smith (ed), *Red Barcelona: Social Protest and Labour Mobilisation in the Twentieth Century*, London, 2002, pp108-26.

⁷¹. The PSUC was founded a few days after the beginning of the war by the social democratic Catalan Socialist Union (*Unió Socialista de Catalunya*), the radical nationalist Catalan Proletarian Party (*Partit Català Proletari*) and the local PCE and PSOE. It had less than 3000 members at its foundation, half being from the USC, but it claimed 50 000 by March 1937; for the different sources relating to the PSUC's initial membership, see Durgan, *BOC*, op cit, p426, n84.

in the region by October 1936, more in fact than the CNT.⁷² Many of these new members tended to be from the least militant sections of the working class, especially white-collar sectors and technicians. In the countryside, the powerful *Unió de Rabassaires* ceased to be dominated politically by the ERC, and it fell under the influence of the PSUC. The UGT also set up an organisation for the self-employed and small businessmen, the GEPCI (*Gremi i Entitats de Petits Comerciants i Industrials*), which would be in the forefront of agitation against the 'excesses' of the revolution. With the help of their allies within the UGT leadership in Madrid, the Stalinists had little trouble dominating this new and inexperienced membership, and they found it relatively easy to crush the POUM's influence within the unions. To make matters worse, many of the POUM's leading trade union militants were at the front, while some rank-and-file members abandoned the UGT of their own accord and joined the CNT.⁷³ Within a few months, the party found itself deprived of its trade union base.

Another cause of the POUM's isolation from the CNT rank and file, according to Trotsky and his supporters, was its military policy. In fact, the POUM's position differed little from Trotsky's, and throughout the war it counterposed a 'Red Army', modelled on the Russian example, to both the existence of party and trade union militias and the bourgeois 'Popular Army' which soon replaced them. However, dissident party members and Trotskyists alike would continually complain about the lack of political life, with few exceptions, within the POUM units and the failure to create the very soldiers' committees that it advocated in its general propaganda. The Trotskyists also criticised the POUM's decision to form its own militias and thus once more avoid any direct confrontation with the CNT leadership. The practical result of this decision was that the majority of the POUM's militiamen ended up isolated on the Aragon front, generally inactive and deprived of arms and basic supplies. Around half of these militiamen were party members, including many of its most experienced militants, especially from among the youth.

While it should have been possible to have avoided so many leading militants being sent to the front, there seemed little alternative in the first weeks of the war to the party forming its own militias. All other workers' organisations had rapidly done so, and this was considered an indispensable demonstration of each organisation's anti-fascist credentials. The party leadership eventually became aware of the problems that military isolation was creating, and by early 1937 urged its members to enter other units.⁷⁴ Unfortunately, it was too late, for this belated decision had few practical results. The consequences of the party's isolation would soon become dramatically clear during the events of May 1937.

The May Days

By early 1937, the counter-revolution was gathering pace in the Republican zone. The Stalinist press was increasingly full of slanderous attacks on the 'Trotsky-fascists' of the POUM and demands for their suppression. The POUM's calls for socialist revolution and its constant denunciations of the Moscow Trials were particularly

⁷². *Butlletí de la Unió General de Treballadors. Secretariat de Catalunya*, 15 December 1936.

⁷³. POUM Central Committee meeting, 27 June 1937, *El proceso del POUM*, Barcelona, 1989, p561.

⁷⁴. *La Batalla*, 21 January 1937.

irksome for the Stalinists, both within and outside of Spain. In Madrid, repression against the POUM had already begun. In October, members of the united Communist-Socialist youth organisation, the JSU (*Juventud Socialista Unificada*), had assaulted the JCI's headquarters, and soon afterwards the party's press and radio station in the capital were closed down. It was only a matter of time before similar measures were taken in Catalonia, but the still considerable power of the revolution in the region made this a much more difficult task. There was also the CNT to contend with, once the far weaker POUM had been crushed.

During the first months of 1937, the POUM repeatedly warned against moves to undermine the revolution, in particular any attempt to disarm the workers in the rearguard. Nonetheless, even the POUM leaders, who were far more aware of the dangers the revolution faced than their anarcho-syndicalist counterparts, still overestimated their own strength. For instance, Nin could argue in March 1937 that it was still possible to take power peacefully, without recourse to an armed insurrection.⁷⁵ Trotsky, writing from thousands of miles away, dismissed such optimism. 'Even now power is in the hands of military leaders and the bureaucracy in alliance with the Stalinists and anarcho-reformists... supported by the foreign bourgeoisie and the Soviet bureaucracy. To speak of peacefully gaining power under these conditions is to deceive oneself and the working class.'⁷⁶ Unfortunately for the POUM, he would be proved right only too soon.

On 3 May, security forces under the control of the Stalinists attacked the central telephone exchange in Barcelona, which was dominated by the CNT. This latest provocation proved to be the last straw for many militant workers, and it led to a general strike and armed uprising, organised principally by the CNT's local Defence Committees. Barricades sprung up throughout Barcelona, and within hours most of the city was under the insurgents' control. Five days of intermittent street-fighting followed between the armed workers and forces controlled by the Stalinists and the Catalan Republicans, leaving over 200 dead. Although most observers admit it would have been relatively easy for the revolutionary organisations to have taken complete control of the city, the movement was eventually sabotaged by the CNT leadership, which was afraid of endangering 'anti-fascist unity'. Most of the armed workers, the majority of whom were CNT members, disoriented and frustrated, accepted the union leaders' pleas to lay down their arms. 'Republican order' had been restored and the balance of power had been decisively tipped in favour of the counter-revolution.

During the next few weeks, a new wave of repression was directed against the most militant sections of the workers' movement, accompanied by a massive propaganda campaign by the Stalinists against the 'Trotskyists', who were blamed for the insurrection. In Madrid, the left-Socialist leader Largo Caballero was ousted from government because he refused to repress the POUM. The new government, headed by a right-wing Socialist, Juan Negrín, quickly submitted to Stalinist pressure, and the POUM was declared illegal on 16 June. Many POUM members and radical

⁷⁵. La Batalla, 14 March 1937.

⁷⁶. LD Trotsky, 'Is Victory Possible in Spain?', 23 April 1937, *The Spanish Revolution*, op cit, pp260-61.

anarchists were arrested, and others disappeared. Dozens of anarchists and POUM militants, along with some foreign Trotskyists and other dissident Marxists, were murdered. The most notorious case was that of Nin, who was kidnapped and later executed by NKVD agents after they had failed to obtain a false confession from him.⁷⁷

Once the fighting started on 3 May, the POUM immediately placed itself on the side of the workers. Even though it did not believe the workers could 'win', the POUM proposed the creation of Defence Committees in every neighbourhood and workplace based on not only the anarcho-syndicalists but also the POUM, and it repeated its call for a Revolutionary Workers Front.⁷⁸ The party believed it was possible to take over Barcelona and then force the authorities to negotiate with the revolutionaries. The problem arose once more that the POUM's main orientation was to try to persuade the CNT leadership of the correctness of the party's position. From the first day of the uprising, the POUM made a great effort to coordinate the struggle with the anarcho-syndicalists, and there were several meetings between representatives of the party leadership and the CNT, FAI and JJLL. But the CNT was only interested in finishing the uprising as soon as possible. The JCI leader Wilbaldo Solano described how the POUM representatives were 'stunned' by the 'frivolity' and 'political blindness' of the CNT leaders.⁷⁹

The pathetic calls of the anarchist Minister García Oliver for the workers to lay down their arms and embrace their enemies were enough to give the CNT's Barcelona leadership the excuse to back down completely. Internally, the POUM recognised that the CNT had betrayed the struggle, but 'tactics mean that we should criticise' the anarcho-syndicalists 'with care, so as not to isolate ourselves...'. If 'the top of the CNT was attacked frontally, its base would rise up unanimously in its defence'.⁸⁰ Because it was not prepared to break publicly with the CNT leadership, the POUM had little choice but also to abandon the barricades to avoid 'bloody repression'. The party leadership had already intervened to stop a joint JCI-JJLL column from marching on the few government buildings in the centre of the city that were still in the Generalitat's hands because the CNT would not support such an action. Likewise, the leadership prevented the POUM's Barcelona Committee from organising the election of delegates from the barricades to the Defence Committees.⁸¹ Initially, the POUM leadership even tried to present the results of the May Day fighting as a victory, claiming that the counter-revolution's 'provocation...' had been smashed by the magnificent reaction of the working class'.⁸² It would not take long to

^{77.} By December 1937, there were claimed to be around 15 000 anti-fascist prisoners in the Republican zone, a thousand of whom were believed to have been POUM members, see *Juventud Obrera*, 30 November 1937. According to one former POUM member, about 50 party members were murdered by the Stalinists prior to the end of the war in 1939 (V Alba, *El Marxismo en España*, Volume 2, Mexico, 1973, p521).

^{78.} *La Batalla*, 4 May 1937.

^{79.} Solano, op cit, p94.

^{80.} 'Reunión del Subsecretariado Internacional del POUM, 14 de mayo 1937. Informe del camarada Gorkin sobre las jornadas de mayo', reproduced in *Balance*, June 1995.

^{81.} Célula 72, 'Las jornadas de Mayo', Comité Local de Barcelona del POUM, *Boletín Interior*, 29 May 1937.

^{82.} 'El significado y alcance de las jornadas de mayo frente a la contrarrevolución' (POUM Central

see the consequences of what, in reality, was a decisive defeat for the revolutionary left.

For Trotsky, the POUM's failure to lead the struggle to take power in May 1937 was perhaps its greatest betrayal of all. The POUM and the CNT, the former Bolshevik leader stated, had 'done just about everything to ensure the victory of the Stalinists, that is, of the counter-revolution'.⁸³ Trotsky believed that the seizure of power was on the agenda. The anarcho-syndicalists had confirmed this, Trotsky argued, by claiming in their press that they could have taken power 'if they had wanted to':

If the Catalan proletariat had seized power in May 1937, they would have found support throughout all of Spain. The bourgeois-Stalinist reaction would not even have found two regiments with which to crush the Catalan workers. In the territory occupied by Franco not only the workers but also the peasants would have turned toward the Catalan proletariat, would have isolated the fascist army and brought about its irresistible disintegration. It is doubtful whether under these conditions any foreign government would have risked throwing its regiments onto the burning soil of Spain. Intervention would have become materially impossible, or at least extremely dangerous.⁸⁴

Was it possible for the working class to have seized power in May 1937? It is certainly reasonable to believe, as Trotsky did, that if the workers had taken this step in Catalonia in May, or before, that it would have had dramatic repercussions not only in both the Republican and fascist zones of Spain but also internationally. In particular, the more radical sectors of the CNT and the Socialist left would have been greatly strengthened. However, by May 1937, objective circumstances were not as favourable as Trotsky claimed. It is very doubtful that the 'bourgeois-Stalinist reaction' would not have even 'found two regiments with which to crush the Catalan workers'. The reality was that the Republican government had by this time quite extensive military forces on which it could rely. Apart from units of former Civil Guards and the recently reorganised border police, the *Carabineros*, the Stalinists had built up a massive military force, in particular around Madrid, which was further strengthened by the presence of the International Brigades. The Stalinists' base could have been severely shaken by the workers taking power in Catalonia, but given subsequent events it is hard to believe that they would not have been able to count on enough troops to make a serious defence of the Republican state. Of course, this does not rule out the possibility of a revolutionary victory. As Trotsky himself pointed out, no revolution is 'guaranteed victory in advance', but the military and political situation by May 1937 was more unfavourable than he seems to have appreciated. In comparison with the first months of the war, the revolution had been seriously undermined by the time the Stalinists provoked the May uprising.

Once more, Trotsky drew attention to the fatal absence in May 1937 of a

Committee Manifesto), 12 May 1937, in A Nin, *La Revolución Espanola*, op cit, p286.

⁸³. LD Trotsky, 'On the Revolutionary Calendar', 22 October 1937, *The Spanish Revolution*, op cit, p303.

⁸⁴. LD Trotsky, 'A Test of Ideas and Individuals Through the Spanish Experience', 24 August 1937, *The Spanish Revolution*, op cit, p279.

revolutionary party. But even if the POUM had been the party Trotsky envisaged, its forces were confined almost exclusively to Catalonia. Any revolutionary movement in this region, given its strategic importance, could have exerted considerable influence over the rest of Spain. The problem was, however, that the POUM lacked a significant base among the industrial proletariat of Barcelona, the true vanguard of the region's working class. Although the party had 30 000 members by December 1936, only 2200 of these were in Barcelona.⁸⁵ Its mass base was among peasants and workers in small provincial towns. In Barcelona, the POUM, though having members in most sectors, was only really strong among the shop and clerical workers and, to a lesser extent, printers. There has also been a tendency in Trotskyist writings on the Spanish Revolution to overestimate the importance of the POUM's potential allies in May 1937, the radical anarchist group, the Friends of Durruti. The latter's programme, in particular its call for 'revolutionary juntas' and the taking of power, was undoubtedly encouraging for Marxists, but it had a rather ephemeral existence as an organisation, and its main aim was to change the leadership of the CNT. During the May events, although there were contacts between the two organisations, the POUM was unable to reach any agreement over joint action with the Friends of Durruti. Andrade reported to the party leadership that they had 'little weight', and 'were incapable of elaborating a responsible policy'.⁸⁶

None of this caution as regards Trotsky's view of events means that there was no alternative to the position that the POUM took. Two weeks after the uprising, party leader Julián Gorkin gave credibility to Trotsky's analysis when he reported:

If power had been taken, the central government would have had to make a deal with Catalonia, given Catalonia is the most anti-fascist region in the whole of Spain... [and] it would have feared the repercussions of violent repression, given that the CNT on the Madrid front has provided the best fighters. There is no doubt that a revolutionary government would have been able to have dealt with the rest of the parties in Spain and would have extended the revolutionary situation.⁸⁷

Another party leader, Gironella, would admit soon after the war that his party had failed to understand the course of events leading up to May, had therefore not prepared itself for this struggle and not known how to take advantage of the 'great betrayal of anarchism'. 'Instead of posing the situation as it was: a violent struggle for power', he wrote, the POUM 'posed it as a simple counter-revolutionary provocation.' It was not just a provocation, but 'the definitive solution' of the contradiction that had arisen in July 1936 'in favour of the counter-revolution'.⁸⁸

The POUM's position in May 1937 was the logical outcome of its political practice since the war had begun. Afraid of being isolated and of breaking publicly with the

^{85.} *Boletín Interior del POUM*, 15 January 1937.

^{86.} Solano, op cit, p97.

^{87.} 'Reunión del Subsecretariado Internacional del POUM, 14 de mayo 1937. Informe del camarada Gorkin sobre las jornadas de mayo', *Balance*, June 1995.

^{88.} Gironella (Enric Adroher), 'Sobre los errores cometidos por el POUM', *L'Expérience Espagnole*, op cit.

CNT leadership, it was impotent in the face of events. If the anarcho-syndicalists had accepted the POUM's proposal that the two organisations should take over Barcelona completely and thus gain a breathing space for the revolution, the outcome of the May events could have been very different. It can only be speculated as to whether or not the revolutionary forces could have made a bid for power throughout the Republican zone. Nevertheless, the line taken by the anarcho-syndicalist leadership amounted to an abysmal surrender, and led to the revolution's final defeat. By following the CNT leadership, the POUM merely made the destruction of its own organisation and of the remaining gains of July 1936 that much easier.

The Bolshevik-Leninists and the POUM⁸⁹

As we have seen, the question of how a revolutionary party could be built was at the centre of Trotsky's writings on Spain, especially after the events of May 1937. At the beginning of the Civil War, he did not rule out altogether winning over the POUM, despite all his recent criticisms of its politics. Also, many POUM members, particularly those from the ICE, still sympathised with Trotsky, and especially his fight against Stalinism. Most importantly, the POUM's press had continued to publish articles by him. The Trotskyist movement's guarded optimism about the POUM at the beginning of the war was reflected by the American Trotskyist Felix Morrow, who would later be one of its fiercest critics, when he wrote in September 1936 that the POUM 'counted in its cadres the most experienced revolutionary elements in the country', and that it had 'swerved considerably away from its centrist course'.⁹⁰

Despite the breakdown in relations between the IS and the ICE during 1935 and the harsh criticisms made by the Trotskyist movement of the POUM for having signed the Popular Front pact, in the months leading up to the war former ICE leaders such as Andrade and Nin were still in contact with the IS, as well as with various dissident Trotskyist groups.⁹¹ With the outbreak of the revolution, Nin and other POUM leaders now argued that the time had arrived to form a new revolutionary international, something which brought them into conflict with various parties in the London Bureau, and which placed them closer to Trotsky's position.⁹² Hence, when the International Secretariat's representative Jean Rous arrived in Spain in early August 1936, his first contacts with the POUM were fairly positive.⁹³ Various foreign Trotskyists, resident in Barcelona, were already working with the POUM, and as a

⁸⁹. For an account of Trotskyist activity in Spain during the Civil War, see P Pagès, 'Le mouvement trotskiste pendant la guerre civile d'Espagne', *Cahiers Leon Trotsky*, no 10, Grenoble, June 1982, pp47-65; A Guillamón (ed), *Documentación histórica del trotsquismo español (1936-1948)*, Madrid, 1996, and *Revolutionary History*, Volume 4, no 1/2.

⁹⁰. Morrow, op cit, p60.

⁹¹. See the letter from Andrade to Nin, 4 May 1936, which talks about 'our international organisation', in Guillamón, op cit, pp44-46.

⁹². Tosstorff, op cit, p169.

⁹³. Nicola di Bartolomeo testified to the generally good relations at first between Rous, himself and ex-ICE leaders such as Nin, Molins i Fábrega and, especially, Andrade. Di Bartolomeo himself interviewed Nin on the night of 18 July (N di Bartolomeo, 'The Activity of the Bolshevik-Leninists in Spain and its Lessons', *Revolutionary History*, Volume 4, no 1/2, pp230-34; Fosco, 'Espagne, Mai 36-Janvier 38', *La Vérité*, 1 June 1938, cited in Guillamón, op cit, p179).

consequence of Rous' conversations with the party leadership, these and other foreign Trotskyists were encouraged to enlist in its militias. Trotskyists made up the majority of the 50 fighters of the POUM's International Lenin Column, organised in mid-August 1936, which was to be the first exclusively foreign unit in the militias. At the POUM's first public rally after the beginning of the war, a message from the Fourth International was read from the platform, and, according to the Italian Trotskyist Nicola di Bartolomeo (Fosco), the meeting ended with the audience acclaiming Lenin and Trotsky.⁹⁴ Most importantly, the POUM agreed to continue to publish articles by Trotsky in its press and to raise with the Catalan government the question of his being granted asylum in Catalonia.⁹⁵ Thus di Bartolomeo could later claim that during the first weeks of the war, 'the Bolshevik-Leninists acquired considerable influence among the ranks of the POUM'.⁹⁶

Trotsky's response to these early contacts was very conciliatory indeed. He replied to Rous:

As for Nin, Andrade and the others, it would be criminal to let ourselves be guided now in this great struggle by memories of the preceding period. Even after the experiences we have had, if there are differences in programme and method, these divergences must in no way impede a sincere and lasting rapprochement.⁹⁷

Three days later he speculated about how the POUM could collaborate with the anarchists: 'we are only observers..., these questions can only be solved on the spot'.⁹⁸ Trotsky's letter to Rous was intercepted by Mussolini's secret police and never reached its destination. The old frictions soon resurfaced, and they reappeared at a time when Trotsky was forced into silence by his internment in Norway. As the French historian Pierre Broué points out, Trotsky's inability to intervene in the Spanish situation came when in his relationship with Nin and other ex-ICE members 'the smallest political initiative could have had incalculable consequences'.⁹⁹

In mid-August, the French Trotskyist paper *La Lutte ouvrière* published a letter from Trotsky, originally intended only for internal consumption, attacking Nin for his 'crime' of having supported the Popular Front in February 1936, and advising his followers to avoid 'any compromise with vainglorious centrists, any erasing of borders between them and us – in a word, any criminal reconciliation'. According to various testimonies, the publication of this letter did considerable damage to relations between Rous and certain POUM leaders.¹⁰⁰ The situation then deteriorated

^{94.} N di Bartolomeo, 'The Activity of the Bolshevik-Leninists in Spain and its Lessons', *Revolutionary History*, Volume 4, no 1/2, p234.

^{95.} It was agreed that articles by Trotsky would appear on a weekly basis in *La Batalla* on its front page, see Fosco, 'Espagne, Mai 36-Janvier 38', *La Vérité*, 1 June 1938, cited in Guillamón, op cit, p183.

^{96.} N di Bartolomeo, 'The Activity of the Bolshevik-Leninists in Spain and its Lessons', *Revolutionary History*, Volume 4, no 1/2, p234.

^{97.} LD Trotsky, 'Letter to Jean Rous', 16 August 1937, *The Spanish Revolution*, op cit, p240.

^{98.} LD Trotsky, 'Letter to Victor Serge', 19 August 1936, *The Spanish Revolution*, op cit, pp241-42.

^{99.} Trotsky, *La Revolución Española*, Volume 2, op cit, p22.

^{100.} LD Trotsky, 'Letter to the International Secretariat', 27 July 1936, *The Spanish Revolution*, op cit,

further when the POUM censored an article it published by Trotsky, excluding a critical reference to the French left Socialist leader Marcel Pivert, who the POUM were reluctant to criticise because he was secretly organising the sending of arms to the Republic.¹⁰¹ With Nin's entrance into the Generalitat at the end of September 1936, the Trotskyists' attitude towards the POUM hardened further, and when they asked to be allowed to form an open faction within the party, this was turned down. Although the few Spanish Trotskyists also remained members of the POUM, in November 1936 the Bolshevik-Leninist Section was formally constituted as an independent organisation.

The POUM showed little interest, however, in entering into a dispute with Trotsky, and still perhaps hoped to avoid openly clashing with him. Trotsky's arrival in Mexico in early 1937 coincided with the visit of a POUM delegation to buy arms headed by the veteran workers' leader, David Rey. They immediately entered into contact with the old Bolshevik leader, and Rey organised the protection of his house.¹⁰² In February, *La Batalla* carried, without the slightest comment, Trotsky's first declaration in Mexico on the situation in Spain, which was critical of the POUM. It was not until a month later that the first public rebuttal of these criticisms appeared in the party's press.¹⁰³

By the time Trotsky could turn his attention once more to the situation in Spain, he seems to have dismissed any idea of winning over the POUM to his positions. The party's 'centrism' and 'treachery', which now became recurring themes in his writings, were the logical outcome of the ICE's politics in the years prior to the war. As Trotsky had warned just before the Civil War began, 'small crimes and betrayals which remain almost unobserved in normal times, find a mighty repercussion in the time of revolution'.¹⁰⁴ According to the former Bolshevik leader, the real damage caused by the POUM leadership during the Spanish revolution was that 'by their general "left" formulas they created the illusion that a revolutionary party existed in Spain and prevented the appearance of the truly proletarian, intransigent tendencies'. Consequently, 'contrary to its own intentions', the POUM had 'proved to be... the chief obstacle on the road to the creation of a revolutionary party'.¹⁰⁵

If Trotsky had hoped to influence the more left-wing elements within the POUM, the harshness of his language when dealing with the party did not help him in this aim.

pp230-33. On responses to this letter, see P Broué's note in Trotsky, *La Revolución Espanola*, Volume 2, op cit, pp48-49n.

¹⁰¹. The original stated 'only people like Maurice Paz or Marceau Pivert can believe that Daladier is capable of purging the army of reactionaries and fascists... But no one takes such people seriously.' In *La Batalla* the part in italics was cut out and replaced with 'only naïve people' (LD Trotsky, 'The Lessons of Spain', 30 July 1936, *The Spanish Revolution*, op cit, pp234-39; *La Batalla*, 22 August 1936).

¹⁰². Solano, op cit, p109.

¹⁰³. LD Trotsky, 'Interview with Havas', *The Spanish Revolution*, op cit, p242-44; *La Batalla*, 21 February 1937. The first article to reply to Trotsky's criticisms was 'A propósito de unas declaraciones de Trotsky sobre el POUM', *La Batalla*, 25 March 1937.

¹⁰⁴. LD Trotsky, 'The POUM and the Popular Front', 16 July 1936, *The Spanish Revolution*, op cit, p219.

¹⁰⁵. LD Trotsky, 'The Lessons of Spain: The Last Warning', 17 December 1937, and 'The Culpability of Left Centrism', 10 March 1939, *The Spanish Revolution*, op cit, pp318, 345.

Jean Rous, writing in early 1939, believed that political differences had not always been dealt with in the most adequate way during the Spanish conflict.¹⁰⁶ Victor Serge, much berated by Trotsky for his support for Nin, blamed ‘the translators and publishers’ for having ‘exaggerated Trotsky’s style’. The leading Belgian Trotskyist, Georges Vereeken, would later accuse Stalinist agents in the Trotskyists’ ranks of having deliberately fostered differences and misunderstandings between Trotsky and the POUM.¹⁰⁷ The situation was made worse by the limited information reaching Trotsky. As Broué has commented, for example, the POUM’s foreign language publications, on which Trotsky often depended for information, were ‘extraordinarily free’ in their interpretation of the party’s politics.¹⁰⁸

Trotsky’s hopes instead rested on the very limited forces of the Spanish ‘Bolshevik-Leninists’, as the Trotskyists called themselves at this time. At the beginning of the war, there had been no organised Trotskyist group in Spain, and although a few ex-ICE militants were recruited, the Bolshevik-Leninist group consisted, at first at least, mainly of foreigners. Things were made worse by the existence of a small dissident group around the paper *Le Soviet*, connected to Raymond Molinier’s Parti Communiste Internationaliste, led by di Bartolomo. The ‘official’ group never had more than about 30 members, and it only produced two bulletins and three copies of its newspaper *La Voz Leninista* during the course of the war, as well as a number of leaflets. The *Le Soviet* group consisted of only eight people, all but one foreign, and published 15 issues of its paper, but in French.¹⁰⁹ An internal report written in December 1936 on the official Bolshevik-Leninist group leaves little doubt of the group’s initial weaknesses. The first problem was that the best militants when they arrived in Spain were anxious to prove themselves and most went to the front instead of ‘organising a solid nucleus’ in the rearguard. There remained in the rear ‘only a handful of incompetents, careerists and adventurers’, and soon the group found itself ‘without any organisation and completely disoriented’. As foreigners, they lacked ‘solid links with the working class’, had ‘an insufficient knowledge of the language or the habits of the masses’, and came up against ‘enormous difficulties in their political work’.¹¹⁰

^{106.} J Rous, ‘Spain 1936-39: The Murdered Revolution’, *Revolutionary History*, Volume 4, no 1/2, p397.

^{107.} Serge, cited in Vereeken, op cit, p161. While some of Vereeken’s claims are somewhat fanciful, the GPU obviously did play a disruptive role within the international Trotskyist organisation in the 1930s. The most notorious case was that of Marc Zborowski (*Etienne*), who was a leading figure within the International Secretariat during the Spanish Civil War and later confessed in the USA to having been a GPU agent at this time.

^{108.} Trotsky, *La Revolución Espanola*, Volume 2, op cit, p322, n85.

^{109.} According to the Belgian Trotskyists, the Spanish Bolshevik-Leninist group had 33 members in early 1937 (Trotsky, *La Revolución Espanola*, Volume 2, op cit, p93n). According to Guillamón (op cit, p24, n10) in May 1937 there were 30 in the BL group and eight in *Le Soviet*. An internal report by Erwin Wolf claimed that in June 1937 there were 26 members in the group (17 in Barcelona), of which only five were foreigners (BN, ‘Rapport Interieur’, Barcelona, 6 July 1937, in ibid, p139). Munis claimed the majority of the BL group were Spanish by April 1937 (G Munis, ‘Carta a Trotsky’, 22 April 1937, in ibid, p121). The Bolshevik-Leninists’ paper *La Voz Leninista* was published for the first time on 5 April 1937 and then again on 23 August 1937 and 5 February 1938. The intention was to publish it on a bimonthly basis. See G Munis, ‘Carta a Trotsky’, in ibid, p121.

^{110.} ‘Informe de actividad del grupo BL en Barcelona’, in Guillamón, op cit, p58; see also Vereeken,

The Bolshevik-Leninists were confident that, objectively at least, there existed the basis for a ‘regrouping’ of the revolutionary left involving part of the Socialist left, sections of the POUM and the more radical anarchist factions. The Trotskyists were particularly encouraged by their contacts with the Friends of Durruti during the May events, members of whom printed the Bolshevik-Leninists’ propaganda. Nonetheless, despite claims to the contrary, they were unable to exercise any influence over the Friends of Durruti as such.¹¹¹ But relations with the POUM were bad, and a further request in April 1937 to be allowed to form an open faction within the party came to nothing. This was hardly surprisingly as the Bolshevik-Leninists’ open letter to the POUM was written in such a way as to leave it clear that it was only a propaganda exercise, designed to ‘expose’ the centrist leadership to its rank and file.¹¹² Even those sectors identified by the Trotskyists as forming the ‘POUM left’ now showed little interest in collaborating with the Bolshevik-Leninists.¹¹³ The Bolshevik-Leninist leader Erwin Wolf blamed his group’s ‘sectarianism’ and the ‘abstract’ nature of its criticism for its failure to influence the POUM.¹¹⁴

Some revolutionary Marxists, however, saw no alternative to working solely within the POUM, even if this meant their not having an open faction. Various foreign dissident and ex-Trotskyist factions gave critical support to the POUM, and their members who went to Spain joined the party without any prior conditions, as was the case with the *Le Soviet* group. The principal aim of these groups was, by collaborating with the ex-ICE members, to help strengthen the POUM’s left wing and form the nucleus of a genuine revolutionary party. Within the ‘official’ Trotskyist movement, the relatively important Belgian and Dutch sections, much to Trotsky’s disgust, also argued for critical support for Nin’s party. They pointed out that the POUM was far from being a homogeneous organisation, and the only perspective open to the Trotskyists, given their weakness, was to attempt to ‘convert it into a true party of the Fourth International’. According to these groups, the sectarianism of the official Bolshevik-Leninists had only served to alienate those many POUM members who were revolutionaries and had helped the more centrist elements in the party leadership in their struggle against Trotskyism.¹¹⁵

The POUM was internally divided, as the criticisms over the party’s participation in the Catalan government had shown, and although formally organised factions did

^{111.} op cit, pp176-77.

^{112.} BN, ‘Rapport Interieur’, in Guillamón, op cit, p141; Morrow, op cit, p139, speaks of the BLs establishing ‘close contacts with the anarchist workers, especially the Friends of Durruti’; A Guillamón, *The Friends of Durruti Group 1937-1939*, Edinburgh, 1996, pp94-106, deals in detail with the Trotskyists’ supposed relations with the Friends of Durruti.

^{113.} *La Voz Leninista*, 5 April 1937.

^{114.} BN, ‘Rapport Interieur’, in Guillamón, *Documentación*, op cit, p141.

^{115.} He also criticised them for not doing trade union work (BN, ‘Rapport Interieur’, in Guillamón, *Documentación*, op cit, pp139-40).

^{116.} See the report of the Amsterdam Conference of the Bureau for the Fourth International, 11-12 January 1937, at which the Belgian-Dutch line won the support of the majority present, reproduced in Pierre Broué’s appendices to LD Trotsky, *La Revolución Española*, Volume 2, op cit, pp422-37. Apart from the French PCI through the *El Soviet* group, the US Revolutionary Workers League, through Russell Blackwell, tried to work within the POUM.

not exist, it is possible to identify left, centre and right tendencies.¹¹⁶ As one 'left' POUM leader later admitted, his party 'lived from the beginning of the revolution in a hidden permanent state of crisis'.¹¹⁷ In Valencia, the party leadership openly supported the Popular Front and was quite virulent in its anti-Trotskyism, as was the important Sabadell organisation in Catalonia. The growing crisis within the POUM would probably have emerged even more clearly at its forthcoming National Congress, but this could not be held once the party was made illegal. For example, the JCI Central Committee intended to propose to the congress the expulsion of those elements within the party who supported the Popular Front.¹¹⁸ Some years after the Civil War, the POUM did indeed split, but it was the right that broke away to form a Catalan social-democratic grouping, the *Moviment Socialista de Catalunya*. By the late 1940s, the party leadership in exile was in the hands of the party's left.¹¹⁹

Although Trotsky predicted in March 1937 that the POUM might split if it did not change its line, only after the war would he refer, in passing, to its left-wing opposition.¹²⁰ The ex-ICE members formed the mainstay of the party's left, but the military uprising had caught many of them behind enemy lines and few survived. Of the former ICE branches that remained, those in the north of Spain were cut off from the rest of the Republican zone, and in Madrid three-quarters of the organisation's prewar membership died fighting in the first few months of the war. Nonetheless, the Madrid POUM was quite openly 'Trotskyist' in its sympathies, and was to the left of the party leadership in Barcelona. In Catalonia, the ICE group had been heavily outnumbered by the BOC. The Bloc's principal leader, Joaquín Maurín, had been particularly interested in strengthening his party with the incorporation of the Communist Left's cadres, in particular his friend Nin. Maurín had thus acted as a bridge between Nin's group and the former BOC leaders, but in his absence there was a revival of the old suspicions of the intentions of the 'Trotskyists'.¹²¹ Nin, although publicly the leader of the POUM, was subjected to constant control by the former BOC members, who made up the majority of the party's leadership. There

^{116.} Russell Blackwell identified eight different tendencies within the POUM in December 1936, see *Political Tendencies Inside the POUM (Preliminary Report)*, Barcelona, 8 December 1936; also see 'Comentarios a la reunión del Comité Central ampliado del POUM', *Boletín editado por el grupo Bolchevique Leninista de España (IV Internacional)*, January 1937.

^{117.} J Andrade, 'Preface' to A Nin, *Los problemas de la Revolución española*, Paris, 1971, p8.

^{118.} *Juventud Comunista*, 10 June 1937.

^{119.} A few POUM militants joined the Trotskyists, for example a former ICE leader from Llerena, Eduardo Mauricio. In the early 1950s, the POUM adopted a State Capitalist analysis of the USSR and the Eastern Bloc, see the extract from Tony Cliff's *State Capitalism in Russia*, 'Sobre la estructura social de la URSS. La burocracia en la industria', *La Batalla* (Paris), 8 April 1951, and the articles by Ignacio Iglesias, *La Batalla* (Paris), 19 July 1950, 25 August 1951, 10 October 1951, 12 November 1951, 15 December 1951; these were reproduced in POUM (*Cuadernos de La Batalla*) 'La URSS: de la revolución socialista al capitalismo de Estado'; see also 'Resolución de la Conferencia del POUM. La naturaleza social del régimen ruso' (25 May 1953), *La Batalla*, 1 August 1953. The POUM did not 'disband after the Civil War' (Cliff, *Trotsky*, op cit, p284n); after a period of clandestine activity in the late 1940s, it was basically an exile organisation until the 1970s, when it took part in a failed attempt to unite various revolutionary Marxist groups. *La Batalla* last appeared in 1980.

^{120.} LD Trotsky, 'No Greater Crime', 15 July 1939, *The Spanish Revolution*, op cit, p351.

^{121.} Maurín was caught in the Francoist zone at the beginning of the war.

was even talk of excluding Juan Andrade, the most outspoken critic of the party's line in the leadership, from the POUM's Executive Committee.¹²² But neither Nin nor the other ex-ICE leaders felt strong enough to break with the party majority.¹²³ By May 1937, the POUM left had been strengthened as some militants, particularly among the youth and in Barcelona, began to protest at the leadership's constant vacillations. The most outspoken and coherent opposition came from the administrator of the party press, Josep Rebull, who, in a series of documents written as part of the pre-congress discussion, lambasted the POUM leadership's failure to provide the masses with a clear revolutionary alternative. Unlike the Trotskyists, Rebull, a former BOC member, saw this failure as a break with the political orientation of the Bloc and the POUM prior to the war.¹²⁴

The repression directed against the most radical sectors of the workers' movement after the May events undermined any perspective for the revolutionary 'regroupment' for which the Bolshevik-Leninists hoped. The left Socialists, demoralised both by the loss of many militants to Stalinism and by the ousting of their leader Largo Caballero from the government, made little attempt to fight the counter-revolutionary onslaught. The left anarchists were heavily hit by repression, and the Friends of Durruti were expelled from the CNT, although this sanction was never carried out. Moreover, as Pierre Broué stresses, the Bolshevik-Leninists, forced into clandestinity and with several of their leading members murdered, now found themselves even more isolated from the POUM and its left wing.¹²⁵

The Missing Party?

Faced with the rise of fascism, the threat of war and the bankruptcy of social democracy and Stalinism, Trotsky saw no alternative than to call for the founding in the short term of a 'fourth' International. Trotsky's decision to advocate the immediate creation of a new revolutionary party in Spain has to be placed in the context of his general political outlook by the late 1930s, with the apparently unstoppable rise of fascism, the imminence of war, and the stranglehold of Stalinism

^{122.} Tosstorff, op cit, p163.

^{123.} According to Fosco, in August 1936 Andrade had been talking of organising a faction 'to struggle against the centrism of Nin' (N di Bartolomeo, 'The Activity of the Bolshevik-Leninists in Spain and its Lessons', *Revolutionary History*, Volume 4, no 1/2, p234). This claim is dismissed by the former POUM militant Albert Masó in his letter of 5 May 1998, which criticises various aspects of the collection of Bolshevik-Leninist documents edited by A Guillamón, *Documentación*, op cit; see *Balance*, August 1998, which also includes Guillamón's reply.

^{124.} Rebull's documents were published signed by *Célula* 72 in the Barcelona Local Committee's *Boletín Interior*, 23 April 1937 and 29 May 1937; and are reproduced, along with subsequent writings by him in *Balance*, no 19, May 2000 and no 20, October 2000. Munis would claim, wrongly, that the majority of the party's Local Committee in Barcelona was in 'total agreement' with his group (G Munis, 'Carta a Trotsky', in Guillamón, *Documentación*, op cit).

^{125.} See Broué's comments in Trotsky, *La Revolución Española*, Volume 2, op cit, p119n. Munis, writing in December 1937, spoke of his group's 'near total isolation' ('Lettre à Klement', Barcelona, 29 December 1937, in Guillamón, *Documentación*, op cit, p168). Despite this isolation, a few days after the POUM being made illegal, the BLs issued an appeal to the POUM left and the Amigos de Durruti which spoke of how the 'old POUM' had died, and now it was time to build the 'POUM of the Fourth International', see Comité de la Sección Bolchevique-Leninista de España, 'El viejo POUM ha muerto', Barcelona, 26 June 1937, in ibid, pp132-35.

over large sections of the international workers' movement. Both his own circumstances and that of the movement he was trying to build were increasingly desperate, and this produced what has been described as an 'almost millenarian and messianic' element in his politics at this time.¹²⁶ For Trotsky, the gap between objective necessity and subjective reality had to be bridged as quickly as possible. There was an urgent need to build a new revolutionary leadership, not just in each country, but at an international level. The 'historical crisis of mankind', he wrote in 1938, 'is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership'.¹²⁷ Yet Trotsky was confident that 'during the next 10 years the programme of the Fourth International will become the guide of millions and these revolutionary millions will know how to storm earth and heaven'.¹²⁸ Writing at the end of 1937 on the defeat of the Spanish revolution, he had concluded that throughout the world: 'The revolutionary cadres are now gathering only under the banner of the Fourth International. Born amid the roar of defeats, the Fourth International will lead the toilers to victory'.¹²⁹

As Duncan Hallas has commented, 'the mood of expectation induced by such statements made sober and realistic assessments of actual shifts in working-class consciousness, alterations in the balance of class forces, and tactical changes to gain maximum advantage from them (the essence of Lenin's political practice) extremely difficult for Trotsky's followers', as did an emphasis placed on the centrality of programmatic demands as a way of overcoming the revolutionaries' weaknesses, whereby the demands in themselves appeared to have 'some value independent of revolutionary organisation'.¹³⁰ As the Bolshevik-Leninist leader Erwin Wolf commented shortly before his abduction by the Stalinists, reflecting on the failure of his group to influence the POUM, 'correct ideas on their own are not sufficient'.¹³¹

Although such a stance became characteristic of Trotskyist politics in the late 1930s, as early as December 1930, when the Spanish Left Opposition had barely 50 members, Trotsky had written that despite its weakness, if it took the initiative in 'posing the political... and organisational problems of the revolution, it can in a very short space of time occupy the leading position in the movement'.¹³² Five years later, he bemoaned that 'with a correct policy, the "Left Communists" as a section of the Fourth International might have been at the head of the Spanish proletariat today', instead 'for six years' Nin and his comrades 'have done everything possible to

^{126.} J Molyneux, *Leon Trotsky's Theory of Revolution*, Brighton, 1981, p185; Duncan Hallas speaks of a 'near messianism in Trotsky's conceptions' at this time (D Hallas, *Trotsky's Marxism*, London, 1979, p95); Tony Cliff also refers to the 'semi-messianic spirit' affecting the Fourth International (Cliff, op cit, p306).

^{127.} LD Trotsky, *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International*, London, 1972, p12.

^{128.} LD Trotsky, 'The Founding of the Fourth International', *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1938-39*, New York, 1974, p87.

^{129.} LD Trotsky, 'The Lessons of Spain: The Last Warning', 17 December 1937, *The Spanish Revolution*, op cit, p326.

^{130.} Hallas, op cit, pp103-04.

^{131.} He also criticised them for not doing trade union work (BN, 'Rapport Interieur', in Guillamón, *Documentación*, op cit, pp139-40).

^{132.} LD Trotsky, Letter to A Nin, 12 December 1930, *The Spanish Revolution*, op cit, p383.

subject this energetic and heroic proletariat of Spain to the most terrible defeats.¹³³ This damning assessment of the role of the former Spanish Trotskyists assigns to them an importance they never had. As we have seen, this lack of a revolutionary leadership led Trotsky increasingly to place all his hopes in the small band of Spanish Bolshevik-Leninists. So in the spring of 1937, he could declare that ‘outside the line of the Fourth International there is only the line of Stalin-Caballero’, and that revolutionaries had to understand that that there was ‘no intermediary between the Fourth International and betrayal’.¹³⁴

Trotsky thus seemed confident that the correct political line in a revolutionary situation could transform even the smallest of groups into the leadership of the working class. As the POUM was not a small group, but a party of thousands, this was even clearer. In February 1937, he had written:

The policy of the POUM leadership is a policy of adaptation, expectation, hesitation, that is to say, the most dangerous of all policies during civil war, which is uncompromising. Better to have in the POUM 10 000 comrades ready to mobilise the masses against treason than 40 000 members who suffer the policies of others instead of carrying out their own. The 40 000 members... cannot by themselves ensure the victory of the proletariat if their policy remains hesitant. But 20 000, or even 10 000, with a clear decisive, aggressive policy, can win the masses in a short time, just as the Bolsheviks won the masses in eight months.¹³⁵

With the Civil War more or less over and the full magnitude of the defeat of the Spanish working class terribly clear, he concluded that ‘if the POUM had not marched at the heels of the anarchists and had not fraternised with the Popular Front, if it had conducted an intransigent revolutionary policy, then... in May 1937... or most likely much sooner, it would naturally have found itself at the head of the masses’ and would have ensured victory.¹³⁶

Trotsky based his belief in the possibility of a small group transforming itself rapidly in a revolutionary situation into a mass party, and into the leadership of the working class, on the experience of the Bolsheviks. However, it hardly seems necessary to draw attention to the very important differences between the tiny Spanish Bolshevik-Leninist group, or even a rectified POUM, and the Bolsheviks. Prior to taking power, although a relatively small organisation, the Russian party not only had a clear programme, albeit after April 1917, and brilliant leadership in Lenin, but also nearly 20 years’ experience of hard and bitter struggle. Moreover, the Bolsheviks, although in a minority, had a base among key sections of the Russian proletariat.

In contrast to some of his writings at this time, Trotsky’s last article on Spain, on

^{133.} LD Trotsky, ‘Tasks of the Fourth International in Spain’, 12 April 1936; ‘To the Editorial Board of *Lutte Ouvrière*’, 23 March 1937, *The Spanish Revolution*, op cit, pp211, 250.

^{134.} LD Trotsky, ‘Is Victory Possible in Spain?’ 23 April 1937; ‘The Insurrection in Barcelona’, 12 May 1937, *The Spanish Revolution*, op cit, pp262, 266.

^{135.} LD Trotsky, ‘A Strategy for Victory’, 25 February 1937, *The Spanish Revolution*, op cit, p245.

^{136.} LD Trotsky, ‘The Culpability of Left Centrism’, 10 March 1939, *The Spanish Revolution*, op cit, p346.

which he was working at the time of his murder in August 1940, reflected the real problems faced in building a revolutionary party. Apart from having a correct programme, such a party needed tried and tested cadres — something which could not be simply created in a short period of time. He pointed out that:

... even in cases where the old leadership [of the working class] has revealed its internal corruption, the class cannot immediately improvise a new leadership, especially if it has not inherited from the previous period strong revolutionary cadres capable of utilising the collapse of the old leading party. ... He [Lenin] did not fall from the skies. He personified the revolutionary tradition of the working class. For Lenin's slogans to find their way to the masses, cadres had to exist... though numerically small at the beginning, the cadres had to have confidence in the leadership, a confidence based on the entire experience of the past...

... during a revolution, that is, when events move swiftly, a weak party can quickly grow into a mighty one provided it lucidly understands the course of the revolution and possesses staunch cadres that do not become intoxicated with phrases and are not terrified by persecution. But such a party must be available prior to the revolution inasmuch as the process of educating the cadres requires a considerable period of time and the revolution does not afford this time.¹³⁷

Thus, the process of converting a party into the leadership of working class does not depend on political clarity alone, but is the result of an organic process involving the accumulation of cadres and the building of a relationship with that class over a period of time. Formally at least, the POUM defended a revolutionary position throughout the war: the need for the working class to take power through the creation of workers, peasants and combatants' committees, and, when the revolution was on the defensive, for a Revolutionary Workers Front. The problem was to convert these formally correct slogans into reality. Trotsky, of course, was merciless in drawing attention to the contradictions between the POUM's revolutionary rhetoric and its day-to-day practice. One can speculate endlessly about what might have happened had the POUM adopted other positions, but what is quite clear, and was later recognised as such by some of its own leaders, is that its reluctance to break publicly with the leadership of the CNT and its participation in the Generalitat government hindered its ability to act independently.

Despite the mutual hostility which had developed between the International Secretariat and the ICE prior to the Civil War, it is clear that Trotsky could still have influenced the POUM. Many POUM members sympathised with Trotsky, both as the leader of the Russian revolution and for his general defence of revolutionary Marxism. There are repeated examples, prior to its unification with the ICE, of the BOC both praising Trotsky and publishing his articles, despite its criticism of his followers. This general identification with what Trotsky represented continued with

¹³⁷. LD Trotsky, 'The Class, the Party and the Leadership' (unfinished), 20 August 1940, *The Spanish Revolution*, op cit, pp358-59, 362-63.

the foundation of the new party in 1935. The politics of the POUM, reflected in its programme of March 1936 and in countless articles in its press, were close to the Trotskyists in many key points: internationalism, opposition to Stalinism, defence of internal party democracy, the need for a new International, its calls for a united front and its opposition to the class collaboration of the Popular Front.

The initial reaction of both the IS and Trotsky to the foundation of the POUM, it should be remembered, was of guarded optimism. This, combined with the personal contacts of Nin, Andrade and others with the Trotskyist movement, meant that the possibility of some form of real collaboration appeared to exist in the summer of 1936, something of which Trotsky himself, as we have seen, was aware. Nonetheless, this was undermined by the publication of Trotsky's private letter to the International Secretariat in *La Lutte ouvrière* and the behaviour of most of those Bolshevik-Leninists already in Spain. The failure of Trotsky's letter to Rous to arrive, one which advocated a conciliatory attitude in dealing with the POUM, proved equally unfortunate. Thus the anti-Trotskyist elements in the POUM leadership were provided with the opportunity they needed to break off even the tentative relations which their party had recently established with the Trotskyist movement

Even with the deterioration of relations, there were still plenty of reasons to believe that the Trotskyist movement, had it adopted a different approach, could have influenced the POUM. The fact that the POUM expressed interest in sending observers to the founding congress of the Fourth International in September 1938 showed that it was open to establish some form of relationship with the Trotskyist movement, despite their, at times, profound disagreements.¹³⁸ More importantly, the fact that even mainstream party leaders such as Gorkin and Gironella could recognise in 1939 that the POUM had not clearly understood in May 1937 or before the significance of events or how to pose the question of power, reflects that the distance between the POUM and Trotsky was not insuperable.

Trotsky's unfinished article from 1940 places the problems involved in establishing a new party more into perspective, and it stands in contrast with the position he defended during most of the war regarding this question. In the end, however, one can only surmise whether the outcome of events would have been any different if Trotsky had dealt with the POUM differently. As it was, by the time he began to write systematically on events in Spain, for the first time since 1931, the revolution was well on its way to defeat. Thus Trotsky's principal aim in his writings on the Spanish Revolution was that other revolutionaries should learn from what he saw as the POUM's mistakes.

¹³⁸. This participation was rejected for security reasons, see the minutes of the founding congress in *Cahiers Leon Trotsky*, no 1, January 1979 (thanks of Reiner Tosstorff for drawing my attention to this information). According to Wilebaldo Solano, the POUM representative to the congress, Narcis Molins i Fábrega, failed to turn up at the appointed rendezvous, having been deliberately misled by the GPU agent Marc Zborowski (Etienne) (Solano, op cit, p210).

