

# The International Brigades and the social revolution in Spain, 1936-1939

Fifth Estate Collective

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"You experienced the war; I experienced the revolution!" With these words our compañero, Federico Arcos, confronted three veterans of the communist-dominated International Brigades as part of a panel invited to comment on Ken Loach's film about the Spanish revolution, *Land and Liberty*, following an April 13 showing. The movie depicts revolutionary fervor in 1936-37 Spain, concentrating particularly on a front-line workers' militia. They attempt to fight together without the social stratification of rank privilege, and the communist-dominated government endeavors to "militarize" them, to return them to hierarchy and the discipline of the barrack.

Sixty years ago, on July 18th, 1936, an attempted coup by fascist army officers in Spain sparked a revolution in that country, which became a three-year protracted civil war. *Land and Liberty* is the first major international film about the Spanish Civil War in the half-Century since Gary Cooper starred in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Federico saw revolution and counter-revolution first-hand in Catalonia, including innumerable instances of communists—supposed allies in the, anti-fascist struggle—betraying the war effort and imprisoning or murdering anyone considered their rivals.

The Comintern, a council of world communist parties controlled by the Soviet Union, raised about 30,000 foreign volunteers to fight in Spain as part of the International Brigades. Over 3,000 of these were Americans, who served in the Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, and Canadian Mackenzie-Papineau battalions, and the John Brown artillery battery, or with assorted medical units. All the panelists at the film discussion besides Federico had been Brigades members.

One of the other panelists acknowledged that his duties in Spain, in the late 1930s consisted of driving a truck, and that he had not seen any revolutionary ferment as depicted in the movie. Another, a Hungarian combatant in the Brigades and now an American academic, spoke with the confident authority of a Communist turned Scholar. He was outraged that the film would question the necessity for military victory to precede revolution. For the three Brigades panelists, winning the war was the obvious and necessary priority. They took as an assumption that militarization of the "people in arms" was an absolute necessity to accomplish this goal.

Contradicting this, Federico pointed out that the principal goal of military training is to establish hierarchical social relations. Although acknowledging his respect for the idealism and sacrifice of those who had gone to Spain to fight fascism, Federico defended the film's anarchist

sympathies. Marching in ranks and learning to salute merely inculcate obedience, leading to a cult of discipline.

Long before the Brigades arrived, Spanish workers had armed themselves as best they could, despite efforts of Republican government politicians, and successfully fought trained regular soldiers of the fascists. In fact, armed workers saved many of Spain's major cities for the Republic, including Madrid and Barcelona, during the revolution's early weeks.

At one point during the discussion, Federico referred to executions carried out by the International Brigades of their own men, a point hotly disputed by the academic panelist. The other two Brigade veterans seemed confused by this information, and stated they were unaware of any executions in the American battalions.

Since 1937, histories of the Spanish revolution have chronicled the counter-revolutionary violence employed by Communists during the antifascist struggle. This work has been augmented by researchers sifting through the archival collections in the former Soviet Union for details from Spain. Documents seeping out of this long process have confirmed that American commissars in American Brigades units did carry out disciplinary executions. (See *The Secret World of American Communism*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995, for recently uncovered information.)

The climax of the panel discussion came when Federico, in a voice breaking with emotion, proclaimed how privileged he feels to have participated in an event where, "with one heart," the people of Barcelona rose to defend their city. The loudest outburst of applause that afternoon followed.

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