

“Spain! Why?”

Indian Anti-Imperialism, Anti-Fascism, and the Spanish Civil War

Ole Birk Laursen

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80 years on from the Spanish Civil War, and with popular fascism on the rise again across Europe, the United States, and India, we have to bear in mind the ways in which socialists and anarchists came together to fight European fascism. As the British, French and American governments stood aside to allow Franco, with the aid of Hitler and Mussolini, to defeat the republic, the history of such non-governmental resistances are even more pertinent and provide a deeper understanding of the power of extra-parliamentary political organisations.

In the face of British non-intervention, it became clear that fascism easily colluded with colonialism. Moreover, despite attempts to compare and combine anti-fascism and anti-imperialism by Indian nationalists such as Jawaharlal Nehru and V. Krishna Menon, those struggles were largely seen as separate issues by European socialists. Paradoxically, such intersectional struggles have often been overlooked, and the Spanish Civil War remains principally a Euro-American affair in existing historiography, denying the true international character of the International Brigades.

Two months after the Spanish Civil War broke out on 17 July 1936, the Communist International set up the International Brigades to assist the Spanish Republican cause against Franco's fascist regime. At the same time, the September 1936 Non-Interventionist Agreement signed by 27 countries, including Britain, France and Germany, effectively banned entry of British nationals into Spain. However, in January 1937 British socialists established the British Battalion of the International Brigades, officially named the Saklatvala Battalion, after the Indian Communist MP for Battersea, Shapurji Saklatvala, who died in January 1936.

While this moniker never caught on among the volunteers, Saklatvala's daughter, Sehri, continued to be involved in the fight against fascism and with the Spain-India Committee organised a 'For Spain, Indian Evening' on 12 March 1937. As an example of what Maria Framke calls 'political humanitarianism', the Spain-India Committee also donated an ambulance to the war effort and agitated widely among the British left.

Menon, Nehru and Spain

The India League, led by V. K. Krishna Menon, realised that Indian freedom was inextricably linked to other international conflicts such as the Spanish Civil War. At a meeting in late January 1938, Menon noted that "the freedom of the Indian people was synonymous with the freedom of the peoples of the world, and that imperialism and exploitation must come to an end". To celebrate Indian Independence Day on 26 January – declared by the Indian National Congress in January 1930 – the India League organised a National Independence Demonstration at Trafalgar Square on 30 January 1938 in "solidarity with the Indian, Chinese and Spanish people". As around 1,200 people marched from Mornington Crescent, "four bands accompanied the processionists. Flags of the Spanish Republic, Irish Republic, Indian National Congress and Sama Samaja Party, and banners with portraits of Subhas Chandra Bose, Jawaharlal Nehru, Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, the Emperor of Abyssinia, Chiang Kai-Shek, and 'La Passionaria' (the Spanish woman communist leader), were carried". At Trafalgar Square, the following resolution was read aloud:

"We recognise that the fight against imperialism in India, Burma, Ceylon, in Africa and the rest of the Colonial Empire, is part of our own common struggle for democracy and against fascism and war, and we, therefore, call upon all democratic and

peace-loving men and women in this country to consciously ally themselves with and to actively support these struggles against the common foe”.

Alongside the India League, Menon’s friend Jawaharlal Nehru was among the most vocal agitators in the Indian campaign against fascism in Spain. At first he failed to attract any substantial attention in India, but after his tour of Europe in 1938, which included a trip to Spain with Menon, he managed to rally more support. In his pamphlet ‘Spain! Why?’ (1938), he remarked that, “by giving our food-stuffs to the Spanish people, we compel the world’s attention to our view-point”.

Internationalising Indian Nationalism

Despite the relatively few Indians in the International Brigades, Nehru’s campaign against fascism was not lost on all. Gopal Mukund Huddar, one of the few Indians fighting in Spain, joined the International Brigades under the name ‘John Smith’ in October 1937. In early February 1938 he went to Tarazona but, in early April 1938, he was captured by Franco’s army in the battle of Gandesa. Relating his experiences upon return to India, Huddar wrote that, “for another few days we held the hills behind Gandesa. Here we had our artillery, Anti-Tank, Anti-air guns. We held that place in face of artillery shelling for seven hours every day. However in the end we were encircled”.

Signalling the international composition of the International Brigades, his fellow prisoner Carl Geiser later wrote about Huddar that he “reported on the struggle for independence from Britain of the people of India under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru”. Released from prison in late November 1938, a few receptions were held in London in honour of Huddar, before he returned to Bombay in mid-December 1938. A committed nationalist, the experiences in Spain made Huddar an internationalist. “Spain gave me an opportunity to know Germans, Austrians, Americans, French, English, Czechs, Canadians etc”, he wrote upon return to India. “It is possible now to think internationally and to create international centres for Indian propaganda”.

For an Indian volunteer in Spain to think internationally is to acknowledge the deep links between anti-imperialism and anti-fascism. As we mark 80 years since the Spanish Civil War, it is clear that to learn from history demands a greater understanding of international solidarities in the face of fascism. And, while it took another decade for India to gain independence from Britain, the Spanish Civil War nevertheless marked a significant entry onto world politics and important steps towards freedom for Menon and Nehru.

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