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# Popular Front, war and internationalism in Catalonia during the Spanish Civil War

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## Popular Front, war and internationalism in Catalonia during the Spanish Civil War\*

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Catalan Nationalist discourse was not exclusive to progressive liberalism from the early twentieth century, it was also present in Marxism. Catalan Marxism was populated by nationalist formations that united the liberation of the working class to their liberation of nation.<sup>1</sup> Some examples worth mentioning are socialist organizations such as the Socialist Union of Catalonia (Unió Socialista de Catalunya - USC), and communist organizations such as the Proletariat Catalan Party (Partit Català Proletari - PCP). The Socialist Union supported autonomy and the Proletariat Party supported independence. Catalan Marxism also included Catalan parties that distanced themselves from nationalism and whose main objective was the struggle for the liberation of the working class. They considered the structure and definition of the Spanish state to be an immutable state, dominated by the Castilian nation. Examples of this in the communist camp were the Workers' Party of Marxist Unification (Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista - POUM), the Communist Party of Spain (Partido Comunista de España - PCE), and the subsidiary of that party in Catalonia, the Communist Party of Catalonia (Partit Comunista de Catalunya - PCC). Another example along these

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<sup>1</sup> The close relationship between Catalan nationalism and the labor movement, including the specific case of Marxism, has been shown in Josep Termes, *(Nou) resum d'història del catalanisme* (Barcelona: Base, 2009); Josep Termes, *La Catalanitat obrera: la República Catalana, l'Estatut de 1932 i el moviment obrer* (Catarroja: Afers, 2007); and Josep Termes, *Historia del catalanisme fins el 1923* (Barcelona: Pòrtic, 2000).

same lines, but in the socialist camp was the Catalanian Federation of the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (Federación Catalana del Partido Socialista Obrero Español - FC del PSOE).

But the Catalan nationalist movement in Spain had to survive within the international European context of the 1930's, which was not at all favorable to their interests. National movements, culminating with the birth of new independent liberal states, had their biggest boom in the nineteenth century: the revolutions of 1848, the unification of Italy in 1861 and Germany in 1871, the creation of the new European states after the end of World War I in 1918, and the birth of the Irish state in 1921. The knowledge and acceptance in Europe of the plurinational reality of the Spanish state was very limited, if nonexistent. Spain was identified as synonymous with the Castilian nation, solid within its borders, similar to the situations of France or Britain.

### ***Popular Front***

However, this lack of knowledge and acceptance in Europe of the plurinational reality of the Spanish state, could in theory be questioned by an institution outside the European liberal states. An institution such as the Communist International (CI). The Russian revolution in October of 1917 had raised, among other flags, that of national liberation. The birth of the Communist International in 1919 included the national liberation of oppressed peoples as the eighth point of its founding statutes.

This principle continued to form part of the International during the Seventh Congress, held from July 25th to August 20th, 1935; the period it formulated its new Popular Front strategy.

The International had initiated its definitive framework within the Soviet party-state structure and had established as a priority the absolute obedience to Joseph Stalin and submission to the interests of the Soviet state. The organization centered its activity on international relations in order to achieve a politic of collective security and status quo of the Soviet state worldwide. In addition, other points that were emphasized were the need to respect the established hierarchy within the international communist movement, the necessary fulfillment of all objectives set by leading cadres, and the unfeasibility of independent operation of any of the member parties of the International.

Fascism had been identified as the main enemy of the communist movement and, by extension, as candidate for territorial aggression in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The Popular Front tactic designed

mechanisms to fight fascism with the creation of a broad political alliance between the liberal parties of the left, socialists and communists; the creation of a single party of the proletariat through the fusion of the communist and socialist left wing; and with the fusion in the union camp between the socialists and communists. The Communist International ensured that the Communist parties neither would be part of the Popular Front governments, and nor attempt to access them later. Therefore, the Communist International resigned to expand worldwide communist revolution. It was concentrated in compromising with liberal and socialist forces to maintain the liberal democracy against the rise of fascism and also considered liberal democracy as a step on the way to the triumph of socialism.<sup>2</sup>

The Communist Party of Spain, Spanish national section of the international organism, was part of this process and accepted its role within the machinery of the International. The Communist Party of Spain faced their legislative elections of February 1936 following the mandates of Moscow. The Spanish section of the International supported the creation of the electoral coalition of the Spanish Left, known as the Popular Front. The international organism took responsibility for providing them with financial assistance. The International also encouraged contacts between the leaders of the Communist Party of Spain and the left wing of the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, led by Francisco Largo Caballero, in view of the tenets of socialist-communist unity established at the Seventh Congress. The Secretariat of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (IKKI), the third body in the tiers of decision-making of the International after the Presidium and General Secretary, had made this explicit in the meeting celebrated in Moscow on January 25th, 1936.<sup>3</sup>

The leadership of the Communist Party of Spain supported the course set out from Moscow, but acknowledged that the fusion process to create one party of the proletariat was not yet fully developed because of two factors: 1) the immaturity of Spanish socialism, due to prevailing ideological confusion that dominated within the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party and weak acceptance of the principles of the Seventh Congress, and 2) the lack of ideological training

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<sup>2</sup> See Pierre Broué, *Histoire de l'Internationale Communiste, 1919-1943* (Paris: Fayard, 1997); José Gotovich and Mikhaïl Narinsky, (dir.), *Komintern: L'histoire et les hommes. Dictionnaire biographique de l'Internationale communiste* (Paris: Les Éditions de l'Atelier, 2001); Mikhaïl Narinsky and Jurgen Rojahn, (ed.), *Centre and Periphery. The History of the Comintern in the light of New Documents* (Amsterdam: International Institute of Social History, 1996); Tim Rees and Andrew Thorpe (ed.), *International communism and the Communist International 1919-1943* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998); Tauno Saarela and Kimmo Rentola, (ed.), *Communism national & international* (Tampere: Tammer-Paino Oy, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (RGASPI). Fund 495, circumscription 20, file 265. Secretariat of the Communist International, *Résolution du Secrétariat de l'Internationale Communiste sur la question espagnole* (25/01/1936), 3.

received by the cadres of the Spanish Communist Party to foment the process of the workers' fusion.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to this, Georgi Dimitrov (general secretary of the Communist International), Andrei Losovsky (IKKI) and Jesús Hernández (cadre of the Communist Party of Spain) had met in Moscow in May of 1936. The three of them had concluded that the Spanish communist movement had its weakest link in Catalonia. The reasons were: the scant presence of communist activists, the ineffective coordination among the cadres and members, the inability to respond to the liberal nationalist parties, and the lack of understanding of the social and national reality in Catalonia by the leadership of the Communist Party of Spain.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Popular Front and war***

However, the beginning of the Spanish Civil War establish an unexpected and new situation due to the particular evolution of the workers' unification process in Catalonia, which culminated in the birth of the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia (Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya - PSUC) just five days after the Civil War began on Catalan soil. The Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia was founded in Barcelona on July 24th, 1936, as a result of the merging of two parties from the socialist camp, the Socialist Union of Catalonia and the Catalanian Federation of the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, and two parties of the communist camp, the Proletariat Catalan Party and the Communist Party of Catalonia. The new organization was the result of the instructions adopted by the Seventh Congress in favor of creating one unified party of the proletariat in the struggle against fascism. It was also the result of the unity of workers that had generated in Spain after the events of October 1934. And, it must not be forgotten, the need to create a strong alternative to the anarchist hegemony and competition that the Workers' Party of Marxist Unification could suppose for the Catalanian workers' movement. The Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia was a Marxist formation, and as its name suggested, was essentially a unified anti-fascist party. Anti-fascism allowed for the convergence of former members of the Unified Socialist Party, the Catalanian Federation of the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, the Proletariat Catalan Party and the Communist Party of Catalonia into one party. This is of special relevance if we recall that the birth of the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia occurred during the combats in the streets of Barcelona against a military uprising that was considered fascist. There were other Marxist and

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<sup>4</sup> RGASPI. F. 495, c. 10a, f. 205. Executive Committee Communist Party of Spain, *Decisión sobre la cuestión española* (07/06/36).

<sup>5</sup> RGASPI. F. 495, c. 2, f. 225. Jesús Hernández, *La situación en España después de la victoria del Frente Popular* (22/05/36), 30-34.

nationalist components that were part of the makeup of unified Catalan party, but they occupied a secondary position. The Stalinist communist element was provided by former members of the Communist Party of Catalonia, but with a reduced quantitative and qualitative presence among the members and cadres of the newborn Unified party.<sup>6</sup>

The characterization of the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia as a nationalist party had a very clear logic: social liberation and national liberation in Catalonia were two sides of the same coin. Catalonia must liberate itself equally from the oppressive centralism of the Spanish state, from the reactionary bourgeoisie and from the landowners. This nationalist project did not propose independence from the Spanish state; the aim was to change the centralized state model and create a new type of co-federal state where the different nationalities of the Spanish state had equal footing. The culmination of the national project of the Unified party would be the creation of a Federation of Iberian Republics which would voluntarily integrate, with equality and mutual respect, the Catalan, Castilian, Basque and Galician nationalities.<sup>7</sup>

Since its first day of existence, the national discourse of the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia could not be separated from its ideological definition as a Marxist party linked to the Communist International. It defined itself unilaterally as a party adherent to the International, while at the same time declaring itself to be essentially anti-fascist, not communist. The explanation for this situation was very complex. First, the unified Catalan party saw the International as the greatest stronghold in the global fight against fascism, based on the proclamations of the Seventh Congress, and on the International's interpretation of the war in Spain as a world conflict between fascism and democracy. Thus, there was a point of total agreement between Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia and the Communist International on the question of the fight against fascism in Spain. Second, the Catalan party was considered to be a legitimate child of the Seventh Congress since it was the result of the ruling launched by the Popular Front for the creation of a single party of the proletariat – the fusion of communists and socialists into one party. Third, the Catalan party identified with the defense of national rights advocated by the International since 1919. The unified Catalan party hoped that the International would recognize and support a definitive resolution for the issue of nation in Catalonia within the Spanish state, and would thereby also support the desire of the Catalan party to remain independent of any Spanish state organization. And fourth, the Communist International was perceived as a prestigious

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<sup>6</sup> A different point of view is in Aleksandr Shubin, *Velikaya Ispanskaya Revoliutsiya* (URSS: Moskva, 2011), 142-143. Profesor Shubin believes that the Socialist Unified Party of Catalonia was a Stalinist communist party from his birth.

<sup>7</sup> See Josep Puigsech, *Nosaltres, els comunistes catalans. El PSUC i la Internacional Comunista durant la Guerra Civil* (Vic: Eumo, 2001), 58-59.

leader on an international level within the workers' movement, far superior to the Socialist International.

### ***Popular Front, war and internationalism***

The reaction of the International, and its Spanish section, the Communist Party of Spain was negative.<sup>8</sup> Moscow and Madrid were overwhelmed by the protests coming out of Catalonia, and this was understandable. Moscow and Madrid did not have the capacity for action in the region northeast of Republican territory at this time. Catalonia, like the rest of Republican Spain after the start of the military uprising, had been left without the effective presence of the instruments of the Republican central state. In addition, the official delegate of the International in Spain, Victorio Codovilla, was in Madrid during these times. The International, therefore, had no official representative in Barcelona. The Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia took advantage of this occasion to act independently from the control of Moscow and Madrid to determine the pace and dynamics of its relationship to the International; and did so without even being an official section of the international organization.

Codovilla was asked to de-authorize the identification of the Catalan party with the Communist International. Codovilla presented the principal causes of grievance detected in the Catalan party to the date of July 30th, 1936.<sup>9</sup> These could be summarized into different points: 1) The Catalan party inspired great ideological distrust because it was not solely communist, it was unified. As well, communists allied with Moscow were scarce within the leadership and membership of the party. Also, The Catalan party had not respected the internal

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<sup>8</sup> The last two books about the trajectory of the Communist Party of Spain during the Spanish Civil war are Fernando Hernández, *Guerra o Revolución. El Partido Comunista de España en la guerra civil* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2010); and Josep Puigsech, *Entre Franco y Stalin. El difícil itinerario de los comunistas en Cataluña, 1936-1949* (Mataró: Ediciones de Intervención Cultural/El Viejo Topo, 2009).

About the relationship between Soviet Union and Spain, see Antonio Elorza and Marta Bizcarrondo, *Queridos camaradas. La Internacional Comunista y España* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1999); Daniel Kowalsky, *La Unión Soviética y la Guerra Civil Española* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2004); Stanley G. Payne, *Unión Soviética, comunismo y revolución en España (1931-1939)* (Barcelona: Plaza & Janés, 2003); Roland Radosh, Mary R. Habeck and Grigory Sevostianov (ed.), *España traicionada. Stalin y la guerra civil* (Barcelona: Planeta, 2002); Frank Schauf, *La victoria frustrada. La Unión Soviética, la Internacional Comunista y la Guerra Civil Española* (Barcelona: Debate, 2008); Ángel Viñas, *La soledad de la República: El abandono de las democracias y el viraje hacia La Unión Soviética*, (Barcelona: Crítica, 2006); Ángel Viñas, *El escudo de la República: el oro de España, la apuesta soviética y los hechos de mayo de 1937* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2007); and Ángel Viñas, *El honor de la República. Entre el acoso fascista, la hostilidad británica y la política de Stalin* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> See Radosh, *op*, 52.



norms of the international organism. The party had not complied with the dogma that each state could only be represented by a single party which in the Spanish case corresponded to the Communist Party of Spain beginning in 1921; 2) The emergence and operation of the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia had fallen outside the control of the International, due to the situation of the Republican central state in Catalonia after the failed military insurrection, and the absence of a delegate of the International in Catalonian territory; and 3) Disrespect for authority. The unified Catalan party had blatantly disobeyed orders concerning the timing and model of fusion of the proletariat. Moscow believed that the fusion would be a good weapon within the Catalan workers' movement to fight against the anarcho-syndicalist hegemony of the National Confederation of Labor-Iberian Anarchist Federation (Confederación Nacional del Trabajo-Federación Anarquista Ibérica - CNT-FAI) and the alleged Trotskyist presence of the Workers' Party of Marxist Unification. But the fusion was intended to be a medium to long term execution and always a part of the general process of Spanish socialist and communist fusion.

In July of 1936, Moscow and its Spanish section now had a serious problem. The Communist International and the Communist Party of Spain could not ignore that the Catalan party had proclaimed itself to be the representative of the international organism in Catalonia, that it had acted on its behalf in the northeast of Spain, and positioned itself as unified and independent of any Spanish state party. The context of civil war aggravated the situation, especially if we bear in mind the scheme of global confrontation between fascism and anti-fascism crafted by the International. Thus, the Communist International and by alliance, the Communist Party of Spain, were forced to react to the consolidation of the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia within the political sphere of Catalan territory. The project of the International was clearly defined: place the Catalan party under its control converting it into a communist party and transform it into the Catalan branch of the Communist Party of Spain. This would mean the end of its national content as well. However, the main problem lie in the rhythm and dynamics of the relationship; it was not in the hands of the International or the Communist Party of Spain, but of the Catalan party. For now, the international organism and the Spanish communist party could only watch and evaluate the actions of the Catalan party and try to confection a way to place it under its sphere of influence and, to the extent that it was possible, build a more clarifying relationship.

The Presidium and the Secretariat of the Executive Committee of the Comintern, the IKKI, that is to say, the maximum leadership bodies of the international organization after the secretary general, also expressed their concern regarding the Catalan party during their meetings on the 16th and 19th of September. André Marty, a new delegate of the International in Spain, was in

charge of articulating the criticism from Moscow regarding the unified Catalan party. His most prominent recriminations were the persistence of internal divisions in the party based on the four parties of origin, the weak internal structure, the excessive presence of socialist militants and petty-bourgeois nationalists, the blurred policy lines established in relation to the social and political situation in Catalonia, the submission to the orders of the Iberian Anarchist Federation, the coexistence with Trotskyism, the breach of the provisions of the Seventh Congress (because the Catalan party was not formed from excision of the left wing of socialism), and finally, the boycott of Moscow's initiative for a delegate of the International to have influence and involvement in party leadership.<sup>10</sup>

The International decided to act. First, Moscow identified the former members of the Communist Party of Catalonia as their only followers and their route of entry into the unified Catalan party. Secondly, the French Communist Party (Parti Communiste Français - PCF) was used as a link between Barcelona and Moscow that included the arrival of French militants to the ranks of the Catalan party, a feat that the Communist Party of Spain was not able to achieve. Thirdly, Ernő Gerő was made a specific delegate of the International to the Catalan party. It was a coherent decision. The Hungarian delegate had sound knowledge of the Spanish reality, which included the Catalan reality. He had already spent time in Spain and Catalonia by order of the leadership of the International between 1933 and 1934, and then had a second stay between 1934 and 1935. Gerő had an excellent command of Spanish, but no command of the Catalan language. The problem for the leadership of the International would be that Gerő ended up establishing a close personal chemistry with the Catalan party's general secretary, Joan Comorera, and became aligned with the origin and essence of the Catalan party as a unified party.<sup>11</sup>

A channel of information was generated by Soviet personnel who arrived in Catalonia with the aid sent by the Soviet Government to the Republic following the passage of *Operation X*, like, for example, the journalist Ilya Ehrenburg or the general consul of the USSR in Barcelona, Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko. The Antonov-Ovseenko case was special. Maxim Litvinov, chief of the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs (NKID) and, especially, Nikolai Krestinsky, attached to the direction of NKID, decided to establish a consular representation in Barcelona in mid-September 1936. The Soviet Government and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union ratified the decision of NKID. The arrival of the Consulate in Barcelona on October 1, 1936 was explained by three reasons. First,

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<sup>10</sup> RGASPI. F. 495, c. 20, f. 270. André Marty, *Untitled* (10/10/36); and RGASPI. F. 495, c. 10 a, f. 209. André Marty, *Notes sur le PCE* (11/10/36).

<sup>11</sup> RGASPI. F. 495, c. 120, f. 165. Executive Committee PSUC, *Pour le Comité Central du parti* (20/04/37).

the will of the Soviet party-state to build an institutional structure that would allow him to influence and intervene directly in Catalonia. One of the reasons were behind this decision, although not the only, was the will to influence the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia. Second, the Consulate also had to facilitate contacts in the network of Soviet military intervention in Spain. And thirdly, the Consulate should establish trade relations between the Government of Catalonia and the USSR. In conclusion, PSUC had forced the interest of the Communist International, but also the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs.<sup>12</sup>

However, Soviet diplomacy was not willing to defend a model of federal or confederal state in Spain, as desired by the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia. Spain was perceived as a solid and indivisible by NKID leaders and also by the Soviet consul in Spain. Antonov-Ovseenko recorded it in October and November 1936. He addressed to the NKID to certify that he had succeeded in establishing close political and personal connection with president of *Generalitat*, Lluís Companys, which allowed him to access the Catalan president and much of his circle of collaborators. He wanted to ponder the vagaries Federalists authorities of the Government. Moreover, Antonov-Ovseenko had expressed concern about the serious danger posed to the stability of the Spanish Republic craving independence of Companys, which was ready to proclaim Spain as a Federal Republic, taking advantage of weakness in which was the Republican state power in Catalonia. And the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia could give their support if this proclamation carried out.<sup>13</sup>

The episode of the expulsion of the Workers' Party of Marxist Unification from the Catalan government in December of 1936 became the first positive sign for the International. The Communist International evaluated the role of the Catalan party in this political crisis: the Catalan party was actively involved in the struggle against Trotskyism in Spain and had been instrumental in the expulsion of the members of the Marxist Unification from the government. Thus, the Catalan party had enacted the guidelines of the international organism over a great internal enemy. The Presidium of the IKKI had defined the guidelines on Trotskyism that were to be followed by members of the International on February 6th, 1937. The national sections were to focus the fight against Trotskyism in two areas: international discrediting and eliminating the Workers' Party of Marxist Unification from the Republican political scenario. The first instruction had been executed in the case of the Catalan party: they had linked the

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<sup>12</sup> Foreign Policy Archive of Russian Federation (AVPRF). Fund 10, inventory 11, circumscription 71, file 53. Nikolai Krestinsky, *Pismo t. Rosembergomu* (19/09/1936); AVPRF. F. 10, i. 11, c. 71, f. 53; Nikolai Krestinsky, *Pismo t. Zaslavskomu* (22/09/1936); AVPRF: F. 10, i. 11, c. 71, f. 53. Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko, *Pismo t. Kaganovichomu* (23/09/1936); and AVPRF: F. 10, i. 11, c. 71, f. 53. Anonymous, *Untitled* (17-18/09/1936).

<sup>13</sup> AVPRF. F. 05, i. 16, c. 62, f. 119. Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko, *Untitled* (11/11/36).

Marxist Unification party with Trotskyism and had defined it as an element of fascism, an ally of the rebel troops and the enemy of the Republic, of the Popular Front, of united workers, trade unions, youth, the Army of the Republic and the USSR. The Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia, though not a formal or de facto member of the International carried out this instruction. The Catalan party had also fulfilled the second instruction if we count the public demand to isolate the Marxist Unification party from Catalan political life on January 16th of 1937. The Politburo, the Central Committee and the Secretariat of Agitation Propaganda of the Catalan party had undertaken a public campaign to separate the Trotskyites from public political life by holding regular meetings, internal reviews, identifying and expelling infiltrated elements and publicly disseminating information on the negative character of Trotskyism as required by the Presidium of the IKKI.<sup>14</sup>

However, this did not prevent the criticism from spreading and even growing. Marty, together with the Bulgarian Stepan Minev, another new delegate sent to Spain, became mouthpieces for the criticism issued from the international body to the Catalan party. The two delegates claimed that the leaders of the Catalan party did not indoctrinate militants in an orderly and systematic fashion, that the party had a scarce number of militants and weak social rooting, that its military action in the Aragon front had been deficient, and, finally, that a relationship had not been fostered between the governments of the *Generalitat* (the Catalan regional government) and the Republic (the state government of the Spanish Republic).<sup>15</sup> The Presidium of the Executive Committee of the Comintern was very critical about the Catalan nationalism on February 1937. It felt that was mainly responsible for bad relations between Catalonia and Spain, translated in the tense relations between the government of the Republic and the government of the *Generalitat*. The Presidium of the Executive Committee of the Comintern was not willing to correct their vision of the nation state model prevailing in Spain, let alone the right of Catalonia to be defined as an independent state in Europe in the thirties. Its support of the Catalan nation resulted, at most, a diffuse autonomy and always within the boundaries of the current national model of the Spanish state. Therefore, the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia nationalist thesis were doomed to failure from the point of view of Moscow.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> RGASPI. F. 495, c. 20, f. 270. Roland Guyot, *Mémorandum du camarade R. Guyot sur les questions espagnoles* (21/12/36); RGASPI. F. 495, c. 74, f. 211. Walter Ulbricht, *Untitled* (05/03/37); RGASPI. F. 495, c. 74, f. 206. Presidium of the Executive Committee Communist International, *Los resultados del proceso de los trotskistas* (06/02/37); and RGASPI. F. 495, c. 2, f. 246. Presidium of the Executive Committee Communist International, *Sobre la realización de la campaña contra el trotskismo* (06/02/37).

<sup>15</sup> See RADOSH, *op*, 187-192.

<sup>16</sup> RGASPI. F. 495, c. 2, f. 246. Presidium of the IKKI, *Untitled* (06/02/37).

The perspectives of the International about the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia changed after the confrontations in May of 1937.<sup>17</sup> The government of the Republic managed to recover most of the attributes that the Catalan namesake had acquired at the beginning of the war. The role of the Communist Party of Spain within the government and republican state structure, along with the growing influence of the Soviet state, opened the ground for the International and Spain's communist party to redirect its relationship with the Catalan party. The international organism would no longer be in the position to merely react to the activity of the Catalan party; Moscow and the Communist Party of Spain would now have the capacity for direct action in Catalan territory. The Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia would no longer determine the pace and direction of its activity with the International as it had historically done since July of 1936. The Catalan party would be forced into the erosion of its character as a unified party as well as to examine its nationalist discourse. The new strongman of the Communist International in Spain, Palmiro Togliatti, was an ardent supporter of situating the Catalan party under the control of the International and converting it into a submissive Catalan branch of the Communist Party of Spain. The International and the Spanish national section had reason to be satisfied. The effective redirection of the anomaly that the Catalan party had generated within the Spanish communist family, and especially within the internal structure of the International, appeared to be approaching its completion.

The mood of the international organism was well reflected in the assessments of the reported heroic role of the Catalan party during May of 1937.<sup>18</sup> The international organization was especially pleased with the integration of the Catalan party within a network of persecution and repression of the Marxist Unification party. The network centered around foreign militants and was connected with agents of the Soviet espionage service. The Catalan party, nevertheless, had not yet come to constitute itself as a communist party, neither ideologically nor organically, as was noted by Marty and Gerö.<sup>19</sup>

The Communist Party of Spain supported the assessments of the International's delegates sent to the capital city of the Soviets, as well as the

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<sup>17</sup> The May events were analyzed in Ferran Gallego, *Barcelona, mayo de 1937. La crisis del antifascismo en Cataluña* (Madrid: Debate, 2007); Carlos Garcia, Harald Piotrowsky and Sergi Rosés (eds.) *Barcelona, mayo 1937: testimonio desde las barricadas* (Barcelona: Alikornio, 2006); and José Luis Martín (ed.), *Els Fets de maig* (Mataró: Ediciones de Intervención Cultural/El Viejo Topo, 2010).

<sup>18</sup> See Josep Puigsech, "La realitat catalana i la Internacional Comunista. Lectures, interpretacions i valoracions dels Fets de Maig de 1937," *Afers. Fulls de recerca i pensament* 22, 56 (2007): 177-181.

<sup>19</sup> RGASPI. F. 495, c. 183, f. 10. François, Pablo Salvador and Rocca, *Untitled* (30/07/37-10/09/37); RGASPI. F. 495, c. 10 a, f. 222. Ernö Gerö: *Untitled* (30/08/37); and RGASPI. F. 495, c. 2, f. 257. André Marty, *Untitled* (20/09/37).

decisions of Togliatti, which was not surprising. The leadership of Spain's communist party had launched an offensive to establish the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia as its subsidiary by fomenting the presence of its members in the steering apparatus of the Catalan party and grassroots cadres. They managed to increase their pressure and penetration of the Catalan party during a meeting of both parties held in Barcelona in January 1938. The result was that Catalan party members were forced to act within the cells of the Spanish communist party if they were part of a state organism and/or were in army units composed by a majority of communist party members. The Spanish communist party also was authorized to take action in the case of disciplinary needs among the Catalan party members. In exchange, they had to respect the national and unified character of the party.<sup>20</sup>

Given this new situation, the Catalan party did not renounce their nationalist thesis but did evaluate it. The party minimized the purview of its nationalist discourse because of the gradual recovery of the Republican central state authority over Catalonia, and because of the intensified relations between the International and the Spanish communist party. Therefore, the Catalan party postponed the immediate implementation of its Federation of Iberian Republics and reinforced a discourse of close collaboration between all nations of Republican Spain to defeat fascism. This logic would be maintained until the end of the Civil War.<sup>21</sup>

Contact between the Communist Party of Spain and the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia would intensify from this moment on, as would the tensions between them. The Spanish section of the Communist International was ready to put an end to what it regarded as the separatist attitude of the Catalan party. And the Catalan party, for its part, considered that the Spanish communist party was trying to absorb and dilute its constitution. They were willing, however, to strengthen contacts with the Spanish section of the International and establish a common policy. But a fusion should be avoided and, to the extent that it was possible, the unified character should be respected.<sup>22</sup> The Presidium of the International was aware that the Catalan party was not yet under their control because they had not separated from their origin as a unified party nor were their

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<sup>20</sup> Historical Archive of the Communist Party of Spain (AHPCE). Fund PSUC. Portfolio 19. Central Committee Communist Party of Spain, *Informe del Partido sobre la situación de España después de la formación del Gobierno Negrín* (may 1937).

<sup>21</sup> See Puigsech, *op*, 72.

<sup>22</sup> AHPCE. F. PSUC. p. 19. Executive Committee Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia, *Relaciones orgánicas entre el Partido Comunista de España y el Partido Socialista Unificado de Cataluña* (January 1938); and AHPCE. F. PSUC. p. 19. Executive Committee Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia, *Proyecto de Resolución* (12/05/37).

relationships any smoother with the Spanish communist party. This was acknowledged during a meeting held in late September of 1937.<sup>23</sup>

Comorera traveled to Moscow by order of the Communist International in February 1938. The International took advantage of the climate of political tension that existed in the USSR at the beginning of 1938 to facilitate Comorera's surrender to their interests. The stay of the Catalan party's general secretary in the capital of the Soviets coincided with the beginning of a new purge in the Soviet party-state, in the Soviet society and with rising tension within the ranks of the Communist International itself. A debate centered around the appropriateness of removing the communist presence from the government of the Spanish Republic. Stalin and Dimitrov were determined to do so in order to end the international isolation of the USSR with liberal European powers, and because of criticism that the Communist Party of Spain received because of its military failures and management of the republican rearguard.

The desire of the International was to place the Catalan party under its control and, from there, to annihilate its unified character. Comorera was aware of this and did not offer resistance. But he did manage to keep his party temporarily independent of the Spanish communist party. To do this, he presented the party as the first step in the process of creating a single party of the Spanish proletariat, precisely what had been established in the provisions of the Seventh Congress. Comorera recognized that Catalan unification would be completed with the fusion of the Communist Party of Spain and the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party in the rest of the Spanish state, within which would include the subsequent integration of the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia. But while the fusion of the first two parties was not made effective, the Catalan party was entitled morally and materially to remain independent. Because the party was the child of the Popular Front, it was reasoned to be in a more advanced stage of evolution. In addition, Comorera also affirmed that his party was to be equally entitled to remain independent once it had begun its transformation into a communist organization. He argued that its genesis as a unified party shaped the distinct nature of the organization, different than that of the Spanish communist party, which had been a communist organization since its birth.

The International agreed to postpone the decision on the nature of the Catalan party as independent or subsidiary of the Spanish communist party. This had been the direct result of the political skills and adaptability of Comorera to the reality within the international organization, and of the support he received from former comrade, Gerö. The Hungarian delegation sent to Moscow one of

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<sup>23</sup> RGASPI. F. 495, c. 20, f. 262. Presidium of the IKKI: *Las tareas más importantes del PC de España* (20/09/37), 9 p.

Comorera's reports that was the closest to the spirit of communism. It began with a communist greeting to Dimitrov, continued with a plea for self-criticism and to eliminate leftist tendencies and the Trotskyist attempt to penetrate the Catalan party, and culminated in the proposal to increase worker militancy in the leadership and cells of the party.<sup>24</sup>

Comorera pointed out to Dimitrov and Manuilski the strategic interest that the Catalan party offered the International if they were interested in penetrating into Catalonia given the prominent position of the party within the Catalan regional government and autonomous apparatus. The Catalan leader also expressed his identification with Soviet communism and assured that his party was indeed a communist organization. Comorera also made good use of his skills as orator and politician which won him the personal and political trust of Dimitrov and Dimitri Manuilski. But his participation in the debate over the communist withdrawal from the government of the Republic was the greatest proof. Comorera presented opposing thesis to that of Stalin and Dimitrov, but that was in alliance with that of Spain's communist party. He argued that the withdrawal would only serve to weaken the communist presence (which included that of the Catalan party) within the political and military apparatus of the Spanish Republic, and would give way to criticism by the Unified Marxist party and the anarchists on the defeatism of the Catalan party and the Spanish communist party. He argued that a withdrawal would not avoid the accusations of Francisco Franco on the communist control of the Spanish Republic, would not serve to facilitate an agreement between the Soviet and British governments, and would not help advance a better understanding between the governments of the Republic and of Catalonia. Comorera, along with the Communist Party of Spain, eventually achieved their goals. But it was not because of their theses. It was due to the failure of the negotiations between the Soviet and British diplomacies, which invalidated the creation of an anti-fascist alliance between the USSR and Britain in Spain, that inspired Stalin's decision to maintain the communist presence in government.<sup>25</sup>

The leadership of the International ordered Comorera to return to Catalonia to execute the full conversion of the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia to a communist party beginning in March of 1938. The visible leaders of the process were five cadres, leaders of the Catalan party that were trusted by the International. They were: Comorera, converted to communist ideologue during his stay in Moscow; Miquel Valdés, secretary of organization and a former member of

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<sup>24</sup> RGASPI. F. 495, c. 120, f. 165. Joan Comorera, *Las tres condiciones de la victoria: unidad proletaria! ¡Frente Popular! ¡Unión de los pueblos de la República!* (January 1938).

<sup>25</sup> RGASPI. F. 495, c. 74, f. 215. Joan Comorera, *Otchet tov. COMORERA ob Ob'edinennoi Sots. partii Catalonii* (20/02/38); and RGASPI. F. 495, c. 74, f. 214. Joan Comorera: *Uchastie communistov v pravitelstve* (27/02/38).



the Communist Party of Catalonia; Rafael Vidiella, leader of the General Union of Workers and the first militant of the Catalan party who went to Moscow for a meeting of the Red Trade Union International in mid-1937; Pere Ardiaca, head of the press apparatus; and José del Barrio, a leading military cadre who had a history with the Communist Party of Catalonia as well.<sup>26</sup> These five men, along with the other members of Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia, were forced to identify with one of the paths of the conversion of their party. Comorera was the leader for one of the routes and had the support of Catalan nationalist sectors of the party and argued for maintaining the Catalan party as independent. The Spanish Communist Party was leading another path, with the support of most of the delegates to the International, the unitarian sectors of the Catalan party and the Unified Socialist Youth of Catalonia (Juventudes Socialistas Unificadas de Catalunya - JSUC). The sectors that opposed the conversion to a communist party failed to create a solid operating group, and as was to be expected, became one of the potential targets of the international organism, beginning with Miquel Serra Pàmies.

The Communist International was relatively satisfied with the ideological evolution of the Catalan party from this moment on. At this time, the internal structure of the Catalan party took its first steps toward ideological unification, exemplified by a process of expulsions for lack of discipline and acts of immorality and cowardice, between April and June of 1938. In addition, the organization of democratic centralism was enhanced, especially among grassroot organizations. The nationalist component was toned down and the number of militants from the ranks of workers increased. However, the International discovered a problem whose dimensions were greater than what had been anticipated. The two paths of conversion had become synonymous with permanent conflict since neither of the parties was willing to budge. The Spanish Communist Party, through Togliatti, was the first to demonstrate this fact. The international delegate complained to his superiors of the boycott from Catalan party when it was time to work together with the Spanish party.<sup>27</sup> The leadership of the Spanish party was commissioned to support the thesis of Togliatti and called to intensify the common work with the Catalan party. The Politburo of the Spanish communist party met with the Executive Committee of the Catalan party on July 18th, 1938 in Barcelona, to try to reach an agreement of collaboration. The leadership of the Communist Party of Spain pledged not to absorb the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia and to recognize it as the only party of the international organization in Catalonia. The Catalan party, for its part, pledged to intensify its relations with the Spanish party and not try to control its course. It

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<sup>26</sup> RGASPI. F. 495, c. 120, f. 238. Stepan Minev?, *Resumen de una conversación* (08/09/38).

<sup>27</sup> See TOGLIATTI, Palmiro, *Escritos sobre...*, op. cit., p. 186-202.

was decided to establish a single line of work between the two parties and to unite the organization of the members.<sup>28</sup>

But fighting continued in spite of these agreements. The reasons were: the evolution of the war and the rearguard, the coordination of the leadership bodies of the two parties, the intensification of relations between the parties, and the lack of predisposition of the leadership of the Spanish party to respect and understand the Catalan national reality. The best example of this was the disapproval of the *Thirteen points* of Negrín by Comorera. The Catalan party's general secretary developed his own thirteen points in response to the politic of Negrín that was considered to be anti-Catalan. Undoubtedly, the presence of each respective party in the government of the Republic and in the *Generalitat* transported the confrontation between the two paths of conversion to the Republican state structure.<sup>29</sup>

The Secretariat of the IKKI addressed the situation of the Spanish Republic on September 3rd, 1938 within a context of war where the Republican defeat was inevitable. Moscow expressed concern about the negative effects the fighting was producing between the Government of the Republic and the autonomous Catalan government. They demanded it to end. The Communist Party of Spain received orders to end the anti-Catalan sentiment that was present in its ranks and to accept the Catalan national reality. The Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia, for its part, should end their petty-bourgeois distrust and reluctance to intensify its relationship with the Spanish communist party. It must also accept the collaboration of the Politburo of the Spanish party to prepare for the future Catalan party congress and must work in a disciplined manner with the Spanish communist party militants in Catalonia.<sup>30</sup>

The tension and confrontation between the two lines of conversion continued despite these orders and led to numerous clashes between the delegates of the International in Spain. Togliatti, Minev and the leadership of the Spanish communist party accused the Catalan party of being a victim of its own desire for independence, of boycotting the government of the Republic and of carrying out fractional and discriminatory work with different Catalan party members depending on their political backgrounds. The leadership of the Communist Party

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<sup>28</sup> RGASPI. F. 495, c. 10 a, f. 227. Central Committee Communist Party of Spain: *Untitled* (23/03/38); and AHPCE. F. PSUC. p. 19. Executive Committee Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia- Politburo Communist Party of Spain, *Normas para el trabajo común del Partido Comunista de España y el Partido Socialista Unificado de Cataluña* (18/07/38).

<sup>29</sup> RGASPI. F. 495, c. 12, f. 163. Joan Comorera, *Untitled* (01/08/38).

<sup>30</sup> RGASPI. F. 495, c. 20, f. 262. Secretariat of IKKI: *Resolución* (03/09/38), 14 p.

of Spain dared to make a list of ideological and personal grievances on members of the Catalan party leadership that did not embrace their line of thinking.<sup>31</sup>

The final offensive of insurgent forces in Catalonia in December of 1938 and January of 1939 became a new source of conflict. The withdrawal of the Spanish and Catalan parties from the city of Barcelona was accompanied by mutual accusations of cowardice and lack of resistance. Minev, with support from senior levels of the Spanish communist party, and from leading cadres of the Catalan party who supported his position such as Vidiella or Ardiaca, tried to organize a congress of the Catalan party to place Pere Aznar as the general secretariat. Comorera managed to abort the initiative. But this episode increased the political and personal confrontation between Togliatti and Minev. The secretary general of the Catalan party indirectly supported the emergence of a new theoretical journal edited by Catalan party leadership, entitled *Catalunya*, which was censored by Togliatti.

The last episode before the exile began, would occur in a small town on the border between Catalonia and France. The leadership of the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia met in Agullana on February 5th, 1939 to establish a new directive team that would be able to affront the beginning of an exile. The Civil War continued in the rest of Spain, but republican Catalonia was about to be defeated and it was necessary to define the policy that would follow. The result of the Agullana was satisfying for the Communist Party of Spain. The new leadership of the Catalan party was relatively balanced with the members from both lines.

Catalonia ceased to form part of the territory under the control of the Spanish Republic in February of 1939. But the Civil War continued in the rest of republican Spain, particularly in a limited central-eastern zone of the Iberian Peninsula. The final defeat of the rest of the Republic was a matter of weeks. The Catalan party began the road to exile. Meanwhile, the leadership of the Spanish communist party returned to Spanish soil to live the last weeks of life of the Republic.

### ***Conclusion***

Looking at the position taken by the Communist Party of Spain and the Communist International, we must note that both, especially the latter, were victims of their lack of knowledge of what Catalonia truly was. Neither body had

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<sup>31</sup> RGASPI. F. 495, c. 10 a, f. 232. Central Committee Communist Party of Spain, *Sobre la situación en España* (19/11/38); RGASPI. F. 495, c. 120, f. 128. Central Committee Communist Party of Spain, *Características de algunos camaradas del C. C.* (November 1938?).

firsthand knowledge of Catalonia – the result of having lived there or having spent time there. Therefore, it is logical that they thought in terms of a centralist Spanish state, unified and without possibility of reform and/or fracture. Although members of the Spanish party had greater possibilities to clarify this problem than did the leaders of the International, both were prisoners of the vision established by the international context of events and definitions. The panic experienced in the face of the fascist enemy penetrated and shaped the theoretical position of the international communist movement, just as it had done with liberalism. In the case of Europe, liberalism had been paralyzed and this had facilitated the expansion and aggression of fascism. The communist movement proposed a tactical reaction to that expansion and aggression which was the Popular Front. It was a new tactic, superseding the tactic of ‘class against class’ because of the need to prevent the triumph of the new archenemy. The problem for the international communist movement, beginning with the party-state of the USSR and the leadership of the Communist International, and ending with the Communist Party of Spain, was that this tactic was an extreme. It was the creation of a *new* party that was a fusion of communists and socialists, and what made it worse was that it was executed at the regional level, not at the state level. This is what was demonstrated by the experiment that took place in Catalonia.

If we reflect on the history of Catalan Marxism during the Civil War we can affirm that the Catalan question produced one of the most exceptional and intractable cases to be lived not only in Spain, but internationally: 1) From an international perspective, the International had allowed certain margin for the theses of the Catalan nationalists because of their defense of the liberation of oppressed nations. Marxist-Leninist theory on the national question, filtered through the Stalinist lens and inspired by the practical application in the USSR with its model of state, allowed for the linking of nationalism and Marxism. The International supported national liberation processes in theoretical terms, but only that. The International had no desire to turn into practice their theoretical defense of the national question, at least in the Spanish case. Doing so would encourage the fragmentation of their dogma *one state, one party*. The International perceived the Spanish state as a state entity that was solid and indestructible. This was not incompatible with support for Catalan nationalism, as long as the Catalan nationalism opted to stay within the Spanish state. The International considered Catalonia to be a region, with a few singularities, within a Spanish nation that was perceived as synonymous to the Catalan nation. For this reason, the Catalan party was a real problem for the Communist International. It did not accept their national character that fractured the dogma *one state, one party*. It also did not accept the Catalan party’s core as an essentially anti-fascist formation, although this was a project that in theoretical terms the International had defended in its creation of the Popular Front; 2) from an internal perspective, it was a further

example of the enormous difficulties of understanding and, in particular, of acceptance of the Catalan national reality by Spanish central state representatives. The Communist Party of Spain displayed a fervent anti-Catalanism that in some cases was accompanied by anti-Catalan positions. Their perspective of the Spanish state did not go beyond that of a centralist model in practical terms, even though in theoretical terms a decentralized project could be defended, even as a part of a federal project. Their reticence toward the Catalan party as a national party and the actions of many of the Spanish party militants when they came to Catalonia fleeing the military occupation of the rebel troops were a good couple of examples.

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