

debate

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Two Reviews of the film *Land and Freedom*

Fable for our time?

by Andre Marais

The Spanish Civil War is generally accepted to be one of the turning points of the twentieth century, in many ways setting the scene for the events of the Second World War. More significantly, it marked the culmination of the revolutionary cycle begun by the Bolsheviks in 1917. Interest in this conflict has generated a wealth of literature as well as a number of memorable cinematic attempts to deal with the war, the most notable being Frederic Rodd's *To Die in Madrid* (1965). The most recent contribution is *Land and Freedom*, British director Ken Loach's highly acclaimed re-creation of the war, told through the eyes of a young Republican militia-man through a series of letters and newspaper cuttings discovered by his granddaughter decades later.

The release of this film comes almost exactly 60 years after the civil war began, when the army led by Franco rose in revolt against the democratically-elected Popular Front government. Workers and peasants in much of Spain resisted with force, so beginning three years of bloody fighting, culminating with the death of over one million people, the victory of Franco and the end in defeat of the most substantial class confrontation of the 1930s. Interpretations of the war's importance and its outcome have divided both participants and historians over the last five decades and Loach does not hesitate to put forth his own perspective on the events.

Could the course of events in Spain have been different? The strength of Loach's film lies in its attempt to show that the defeat of the Left was not inevitable, as the Communist Party at that time and since has tried to argue. The film points to the real possibilities of an alternative strategy based on a revolutionary war. In particular, it demonstrates how the hopes and aspirations of workers were strangled by the political strategy of the Communist Party under the influence of Moscow. *Land and Freedom* also shows how, above all, the Spanish Civil War was an international class confrontation drawing in ordinary men and women from across the world. They came to fight in Spain as part of the International Brigades, formed in defence of the Republican movement. The central character, an unemployed British worker and Communist Party member, leaves his native Liverpool to fight in Spain and

eventually ends up in the POUM (United Marxist Workers' Party) militia.

Loach's mixture of humour, anecdote and sentiment makes for powerful political cinema. Intertwining and blending English, Spanish and Catalanian creates a convincing depiction of the internationalism of the day. The verve, spunk and dynamism of the participants never collapse into caricature.

While reception to *Land and Freedom* has been generally favourable since its 1995 release (as Spain's entry in the Cannes film festival), it has received criticisms from Paul Preston in the *New Statesman* and Vicente Navarro in *Monthly Review*. Preston dismisses Loach's interpretation of events as a distorted explanation of the causes of the Republic's defeat. Navarro, while applauding Loach for his denunciation of Stalinist sectarianism which "used repression and manipulation rather than conviction to put forward their position," makes the point that the anarcho-syndicalists and Trotskyists of the POUM "have had their own share in such practices." More importantly, perhaps, Navarro critiques the film for barely showing the face of fascism in the film, despite the fact that Loach says he made the movie because of the current resurgence of fascism.

In spite of these criticisms, *Land and Freedom* should be welcomed as a whole generation of activists' introduction to this important chapter in working class history. Its arrival comes at a time when the world is once again experiencing mass unemployment, war and rampant nationalism, the very conditions in which fascism breeds. For the weakening and ever-fragmenting forces of the Left in South Africa, *Land and Freedom* offers the opportunity to review our own sectarian past and to re-examine such issues as the relationship between democracy and socialism and between democratic practice and political pluralism.

Anarchist-syndicalists sidelined

by Lucien van der Walt

Land and Freedom, the new film by Ken Loach, provides a moving account of events in the Spanish Civil War. Loosely based on George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*, it is the story of a young British working class communist militant who goes to Spain to fight fascism. Once there, he finds comradeship and romance in the militia of the POUM and discovers the revolution within the struggle against fascism.

The film is especially notable for its portrayal of the social revolution which swept Spain after the attempted fascist coup by General Franco in 1936. For example, when the POUM militia liberates a village in the film, the villagers organise a meeting to discuss what to do next. After a heated discussion, they decide to collectivise the land and work it in common, a process repeated countless times in those areas controlled by anti-fascist forces.

On the other hand, *Land and Freedom* does not clarify for its audience the distinction between nationalisation and collectivisation. At the beginning of the film, a Spaniard showing films from the revolution explains that industry had been "nationalised" when in fact it had been collectivised through workers' self-management.

Additionally, by choosing to focus on the activities of the POUM militia, Loach provides a misleading picture of the events and actors in the revolutionary struggle in Spain. In particular, the film gives no sense of the central role played by the anarchist-syndicalist worker, women and youth organisations in making the revolution, despite the fact that they comprised the vast bulk of the revolutionary Left. Although anarchist-syndicalist colours appear throughout the film in red and black flags and neckties, and whilst the POUM militia sings the anthem of the giant anarchist-syndicalist union, the CNT (National Confederation of Labour), no attempt is made to put across the Anarchists' point of view. For example, the events sparked by the Communist Party's attempts to commandeer the CNT-controlled telephone exchange in Barcelona are confusingly shown and leave the audience none the wiser.

However, notwithstanding these faults, *Land and Freedom* remains worth seeing. Fittingly, the film ends with a quote from libertarian socialist William Morris, reminiscent of the words of Nestor Makhno:

We will not conquer in order to repeat the errors of past years, the error of putting our fate into the hands of new masters; we will conquer in order to take our destinies into our own hands, to conduct our lives in accordance with our own will and our own conception of the truth.

Go see *Land and Freedom*, a vivid celebration of the Spanish Revolution and the ideas that inspired it. •••

WRITE FOR DEBATE

Debate is a non sectarian left wing journal that will appear three times a year. It is a forum for analysing, debating and recording events, processes and struggles of the broad working class. Our editorial board and contributors to this our first issue come from numerous political tendencies within and outside of the ANC. To this end the journal will not publish articles that are sectarian in nature. We will publish any reasonably well written article that is engaging and serious in nature.

PUBLICATION GUIDELINES

Our maximum word limit is 5,000 words for those who would like to make analytical contributions.

Responses to articles and reviews contained need to be limited to 3,000 words.

In order to live up to the title of this journal we need our readers to engage with what appears on our pages, so please contribute.

Letters are most welcome and should remain under a thousand words.

We encourage submissions on all manner of topics, including the environment, culture, music. As readers will see we have printed two poems in this issue, we request poets out there to send in their work for possible publication.

All material submitted will be treated in confidence

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