

# Adam Hochschild's *Spain in Our Hearts*: A deeply felt work on the Spanish Civil War marred by its perspective

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This year marks the 80th anniversary of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, a conflict that shaped decisively and tragically the political development of the second half of the 20th century. The war caused the deaths of half a million people, paved the way for the carnage of World War II by emboldening and strengthening the fascist regimes, and left in its trail decades of dictatorship and savage reprisals in Spain.

It is not surprising that in many circles the Spanish Civil War has been, and remains to this day, shrouded in confusion and outright falsification, containing as it does in concentrated form virtually every fundamental political lesson of the period following the Russian Revolution.

Much of the falsification has emerged from the international Stalinist camp and its academic apologists, as part of an effort to conceal the counterrevolutionary role played by the Stalin bureaucracy in Moscow and the Spanish Communist Party. In Spain, under the banner of the "Popular Front," Stalinism intervened to suppress a developing social revolution, to liquidate those forces and individuals who articulated or defended a revolutionary perspective and to terrorize wide layers of workers and peasants who spontaneously gravitated toward the most radical solution to the crisis of Spanish capitalism.

In this context, the publication of Adam Hochschild's *Spain in Our Hearts: Americans in the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939* is a significant event. Hochschild is the well-known author of several books on wide-ranging and important topics, including the brutality of Belgian colonialism in the Congo (*King Leopold's Ghost*). In his latest work, Hochschild portrays the experience of several Americans during the Spanish Civil War, most of whom fought as volunteers in the Stalinist-organized Abraham Lincoln Brigade, while others reported on a conflict that captured the attention of the entire world.

The main strength of Hochschild's book is his ability to portray these stories in a vivid and compelling manner. He was inspired in carrying out this project by his interactions with former members of the Lincoln Brigade, including two personal friends. Reportedly all of the 2,800 Americans who fought in the Lincoln Brigade are now deceased, and Hochschild approaches their tragic experiences with great sensitivity, as well as a genuinely curious and respectful attitude toward their motivations and limitations. Many of the stories narrated in the book are truly worth telling.

James Neugass, for instance, came from a wealthy Jewish family in New Orleans, dabbled in odd jobs as a seaman, fencing coach, cook, and poet before joining the Communist Party and volunteering for Spain. There he experienced the war as an ambulance driver under increasingly difficult conditions with the relentless advance of General Francisco Franco's fascist forces.

Hochschild traces the personal toll imposed by the conflict through Neugass' remarkable diary. In his earlier entries Neugass displayed a

certain political naiveté, but also insightful curiosity about his new surroundings and a sense of purpose. He remarked bitterly on the impossible conditions faced by the Spanish peasants, wondering why the Pope turned against them by supporting Franco. As the grandson of slave owners, he movingly reflected on his everyday experiences alongside those black volunteers who for the first time experienced life without racial segregation.

But the increasingly desperate conditions of the conflict began to alter the tone and content of Neugass' diary. Working without respite to do what he could to succor the mounting casualties, and with no access to morphine or other supplies, Neugass noted how "When they are in my arms, I can hear their shattered bones grinding inside of their flesh."

Toward the end of the diary, as if to distance himself from the horrific events he was experiencing, Neugass began to refer to himself in the third person as "the Chófer" [the driver]. Caught behind enemy lines in the midst of a military rout, Neugass, who before Spain, had never "heard a more lethal noise than the backfiring of a car," reported killing a number of what were presumably Franco's troops in a haunting entry:

"Killed three, five, eight of them. One with knife, others with bombs. At night. May have to kill more ... Separated from unit ... Looking for the lines. Are there lines? Everything all mixed up. Very, very bad. Wound hurts. Have to move on, somewhere."

Neugass' story as well as many of the others narrated by Hochschild are not only moving but also capture something of the spirit of the times: the immense class struggles of the 1930s that drew into their vortex even somewhat unlikely characters; the basic sense of revulsion against fascism and the awareness of an impending military and political catastrophe that had to be stopped; but also the great confusions and contradictions in the political consciousness of those who sensed what history had in store.

Through his narrative, Hochschild displays in an inspiring way the enormous reserves of idealism (in the best sense of the word) found in the American population at the time, a substantial section of which was not coincidentally attracted to socialist principles and organizations. These stories make a particularly striking impression today, when reporting about "foreign volunteers" is confined to those deeply disoriented and sometimes outright sadistic figures that make their way into the killing fields of Syria.

But the Spanish Civil War also raises a host of broader political issues, and on those Hochschild stumbles badly. With one significant exception, he generally reproduces the entrenched and politically tendentious account of the conflict that was originally propagated by Stalinism.

Even the book's principal strength, its moving portrayal of the personal tragedy of the courageous Americans who fought in Spain as volunteers, is diminished by Hochschild's inability to deal with the political lessons of the civil war. The real magnitude of those personal tragedies and the

futility of the immense sacrifices made in particular by those people who were in or around the Communist Party, can only come to light with a clear understanding of the monstrous betrayals carried out by the Stalinist bureaucracy in Spain and internationally.

The more fundamental weakness of the book is perhaps in part a function of Hochschild's limitations as an author and commentator. While showing a keen eye for detail and human drama involving individuals, his other books often fail to provide a fully satisfying general picture of the broader social and political forces at play in the events he describes. However, the fact that Hochschild has been immersed for decades in prominent "left" circles (*Ramparts* magazine, *Mother Jones*, and an academic position at UC Berkeley) must also have contributed to his difficulties in grappling with the political dimension of the Spanish Civil War.

### **War and revolution**

The general understanding of the Spanish Civil War presented by Hochschild begins with a crucial and correct insight that is completely at odds with the prevailing view of the conflict. Beneath the obvious surface of the armed conflict between the Spanish Republic and General Franco's forces there was ongoing social revolution.

In the thick of the war the workers and peasants of Spain were transforming the country's property relations by revolutionary means. In response to the military coup in July 1936 they had seized weapons from the paralyzed Republican government and prevented Franco from taking control of the whole country. They subsequently formed remarkably egalitarian popular militias to continue the fight against Franco, occupied factories and key government buildings, while seizing, and often collectivizing, the land in the countryside.

To his credit, Hochschild acknowledges that, far from a mere military conflict in defense of the bourgeois Republic, the Spanish Civil War contained at its heart a powerful social revolution. Hochschild moreover supplements this insight with another one that flows out of his particular concern with media reporting about the conflict: "Although the Spanish Revolution took place amid one of the largest concentration of foreign correspondents on earth, they virtually never wrote about it."

Hochschild's explanation for this astonishing fact is overly technical and unconvincing, blaming the herd mentality and professional habits of the press corps. They stayed at the same hotel in Madrid, picked up impressions and stories from each other and generally lacked the necessary inquisitiveness and courage, leading to the creation of a simplistic and incorrect "Authorized Version" of the events: "Spain had a democratically elected government fighting a right-wing military coup backed by Hitler and Mussolini."

There is of course a more compelling reason why the revolutionary character of the Spanish Civil War was systematically concealed: the bourgeois Republican government as well as its powerful Stalinist backers were absolutely committed to presenting the conflict as a mere defense of "democracy." And while the capitalist classes of England, France and the United States undoubtedly had a keen understanding of what was really happening in Spain, they also had no interest in letting working people in their own countries in on it.

The foreign journalists in Spain then, in systematically failing to report on the revolution, were likely taking the cue from their betters in Washington, London, and Moscow. And this journalistic blockade was not simply a matter of presenting a distorted account of the events. The revolution in Spain had to be concealed exactly as it was being actively betrayed by violent means, not by Franco's troops, but by the bourgeois Republic under the political direction of Stalinism. The media's conspiracy of silence, that is, was a necessary component in a broader political conspiracy to strangle the Spanish revolution.

The fact that Hochschild fails to connect these dots is not an arbitrary

lapse, but flows out of his general political understanding of the conflict. Having affirmed that a social revolution was taking place, he also presents it as doomed to fail and standing in the way of a successful prosecution of the war against Franco. This is the other plank of the "Authorized Version" about the Spanish Civil War propagated at the time, and passed on as common sense down to today.

Hochschild simply and superficially reproduces it in his book without having to strain himself too much. He defends Stalinist "centralization" and the suppression of the popular militias, remarks on the unworkable character of the socialistic economic measures spontaneously implemented by workers and peasants in Republican-controlled areas, and dismisses the notion that the working class is "the world's key revolutionary force" as "wildly wishful thinking."

Most significantly, Hochschild minimizes the persecution of the anarchists and POUM by the Republican government under Stalinist direction. For all the expected moral handwringing about the awful acts committed in suppressing the revolution—including, for example, the torture and murder of POUM leader Andrés Nin—the logic of the position endorsed by Hochschild essentially demanded such acts.

Hochschild is apparently oblivious to the glaring problem involved in taking the position that it was necessary to choose the war over the revolution in order to defeat Franco. The ostensibly more "realistic" anti-revolutionary policies "pragmatically" carried out by the Republican government at the direction of Stalinism and to the satisfaction of the Western "democracies," were in fact proven to be disastrous by the actual course of events. The strangling of the revolution led to the defeat of the war and its terrible aftermath.

This fundamental point was not simply registered after the fact, but was in fact advanced as a political prognosis by Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition internationally in the form of the theory of permanent revolution. In the case of Spain, this position was advanced long before the coup, on the heels of the initial overthrow of the monarchy in 1931. A full assessment of Hochschild's book requires a brief account of this question.

### **The Spanish Civil War and the permanent revolution**

The theory of permanent revolution found a powerful practical verification in the Russian Revolution of 1917. The February Revolution overthrew the Tsarist autocracy and replaced it with a bourgeois provisional government. But the bourgeoisie in Russia, due to the belated capitalist development of the country, was a reactionary class, deathly afraid of a revolutionary process it was in no position to control. The Russian bourgeoisie was, moreover, tied by a thousand threads to its international colleagues in the imperialist countries, who pushed it to continue the war effort and restore order in the country.

Left to the ministrations of the bourgeoisie, therefore, even the prospect for a "normal" democracy in Russia was, regardless of its political rhetoric and maneuvers, actually non-existent. It was in fact the working class, in collaboration with sections of the peasant army that was responsible for the February Revolution and its subsequent defense.

But the process of defending the gains of February propelled the popular masses in Russia, under the leadership of the Bolshevik party, to expand it beyond the boundaries of bourgeois democracy. This process culminated in the October Revolution with the overthrow of the provisional government and the formation of a new Soviet government.

This same essential outline and relation of class forces was in place in Spain. However, while the Spanish Civil War also verified the correctness of the permanent revolution, it did so tragically and in the negative. Due to the betrayals and crimes of Stalinism, the policy originally pursued by the Bolsheviks in Russia was rejected by the Communist Party in Spain. Rather than deepen the revolution and seek to expand its international reach, the Stalinists adopted the position of supporting the capitalist

Republican government within the framework of a “Popular Front” government originally pioneered in France.

Significantly this sort of cross-class alliance banking on the “progressive” bourgeoisie, had been the Menshevik position in Russia during the revolution. The basic implication of this position in Spain was revealed exactly as workers, peasants and soldiers were encroaching on bourgeois property and political institutions: they had to be stopped.

As had been the case in Russia, this policy also had an international dimension. Preventing, and then undoing the revolution in Spain was necessary not just to secure the support of the progressive bourgeoisie domestically, but also to placate the more powerful “democracies” and their ruling classes—particularly France, England, and the United States.

This calculation of course had nothing in common with revolutionary internationalism and the legacy of the Russian Revolution. Yet the Stalinist bureaucracy found it attractive in seeking various diplomatic concessions from the Western democracies and in jockeying for a more secure position in the coming World War. In pursuing this path, the Stalinists carried out a series of monstrous crimes, actually paving the way to Franco’s victory.

It is also important to note that at the same time that Stalinism was carrying out its betrayals of the workers in Spain and France (where a potentially revolutionary general strike erupted in May 1936), the Kremlin bureaucracy was exterminating the generation that had organized and led the October Revolution in the Moscow Trials and the horrifying purges. Stalin was both attempting to crush socialist opposition in the Soviet Union and demonstrating to the Western powers his counterrevolutionary credentials.

In Spain, as Trotsky explained, two irreconcilable political programs confronted each other: “[S]aving *at any cost* private property from the proletariat, and saving *as far as possible*, democracy from Franco; and on the other hand, the program of abolishing private property through the conquest of power by the proletariat. The first program expressed the interests of capitalism through the medium of the labor aristocracy, the top petty-bourgeois circles, and especially the Soviet bureaucracy. The second program translated into the language of Marxism the tendencies of the revolutionary mass movement, not fully conscious but powerful. Unfortunately for the revolution, between the handful of Bolsheviks and the proletariat stood the counterrevolutionary wall of the Popular Front.”

The only actually realistic policy in Spain was thus to deepen the revolution and extend it internationally. Not to curry favors with the bourgeoisie of England, France and the United States, but to inspire and mobilize the international working class. Doing so would have systematically undermined Franco’s position.

For example, to defend the redistribution of the land and infringement of bourgeois property in the cities would have undermined Franco’s rear, giving workers and peasants in his territories a powerful reason to rebel. Moreover, to emancipate the colonies would have made a powerful political impression on the many Moroccans serving in Franco’s armies as shock troops.

Hochschild’s book does contain certain elements that substantiate this view of the relationship between the civil war and the revolution in Spain. For example, he discusses *The Spanish Earth*, a film made by prominent sympathizers of the Republic to appeal for its defense internationally. One of the scenes in the film features peasants working on an irrigation project as an example of the economic success of the Republic.

As Hochschild notes in passing, the film neglected to inform the viewer that this irrigation project was only possible after the peasants “had formed a union and confiscated the land from a handful of big owners.” In other words, even basic economic progress in Spain was the product of revolutionary measures undertaken by the masses themselves without the approval of the Popular Front government.

More significantly, Hochschild’s book features an extensive analysis of

the pivotal role played by the American oil company Texaco in the conflict. The fact that Texaco illegally sold oil on credit to Franco was already known, although Hochschild’s exposure is spirited and devastating. To it Hochschild adds important new information: Texaco also effectively provided military intelligence to Franco’s government and its fascist allies leading to the sinking or capture of several ships carrying crucial provisions for the Republic.

Hochschild’s book thus provides fresh evidence that important sections of the international capitalist class, far from supporting “democracy,” actively worked to secure Franco’s victory. But these aspects of Hochschild’s book remain insulated from his general appraisal of the conflict. And it is exactly on the role of advanced capitalist countries in Spain that the author misleads his readers.

Hochschild presents the question of the non-intervention of France, England, and the United States in a disingenuous manner. The narrative leads the reader to believe that a series of unfortunate near-misses prevented the United States in particular, at a minimum, from reversing its weapons ban and to provide desperately needed military provisions to the Republic. The right appeal made at the right time by a series of journalists, celebrities and litterateurs, to the American president and in some instances to the first lady might have reversed this policy, and thus turned the tide of the war, saving the Republic.

This point of view is presented through a series of dramatic vignettes, but also affirmed explicitly as a reasonable policy on the part of the Popular Front government. The link between these appeals to the imperialist powers—which in reality proved to be futile—and the active strangling of the revolution in Spain are left to the imagination of the reader.

While pinning the hopes for democratic salvation on the imperialist countries, moreover, Hochschild at the same time repeatedly characterizes the Republic’s dealing with the Soviet Union as a “devil’s bargain.” This gesture is also significant in that it echoes the kind of anti-communism that historically defended the right-wing policies of Stalinism while at the same time demagogically presenting an unbridgeable moral gulf separating the Soviet Union from the Western “democracies.” The latter, ostensible defenders of civilized norms and institutions, at the time presided over bloody colonial empires abroad or a shameful system of racial segregation domestically.

To conclude, while Hochschild’s *Spain in Our Hearts* contains some valuable information and a moving account of important individual experiences, on the whole the book is part of a long tradition of miseducation concerning a political experience that casts a long shadow over the 20th century, down to today. And Hochschild misrepresents not just the past, but the present as well, glibly stating in the conclusion of his book that Spain’s “future as a parliamentary democracy seems assured.”

In fact, all of the unresolved political questions of the Spanish Civil War, beginning from the historical unviability of bourgeois democracy, are found in the political present, as Spain finds itself in the throes of a very serious political crisis and beset by explosive economic contradictions. Hochschild’s book does not contribute to a clarification of these vital questions and their deep historical roots.

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