

Spain: The POUM's Seven Decades

Friday 5 February 2010, by [SOLANO Wilebaldo](#) (Date first published: November 2009).

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Introduction to The POUM's Seven Decades

— The ATC editors

WE PRESENT THIS leading participant's account of the Party Of Marxist Unity (POUM) as an historical document. The POUM was the most important organization of the revolutionary left in the Spanish Revolution of 1936-39. Its historic role is twofold: as a critical political and military force in the struggle against fascism, and as a target of the murderous Stalinist campaign that ultimately destroyed the revolution from within. Wilebaldo Solano was General Secretary of the Iberian Communist Youth — Juventud Comunista Ibérica (JCI) in 1936, member of the Executive Committee of the POUM, imprisoned until 1944 and later elected as General Secretary of the POUM (while in exile). He is the author of *El POUM in la Historia. Andreu Nin y la revolución española*, and founder of the Fundacion Andreu Nin. At age 93 he currently divides his time between Paris and Spain. This essay, written in 2005, has been translated for *Against the Current* by Susan Weissman with the assistance of Michel Vale

The POUM's Seven Decades

— Wilebaldo Solano

THE PARTIDO OBRERO de Unificacion Marxista (The Workers Party of Marxist Unification, POUM) was founded in Barcelona on September 30, 1935 in a small house in the Horta district. That was 70 years ago. The event was not public, since we were still in a phase of relative clandestinity imposed on the movement after October 1934, so we felt it prudent to limit the number of delegates.

Nevertheless, the delegates were very representative and included Joaquín Maurín and Andreu Nin. Their mission was to elect an Executive Committee and prepare a Congress of the new organization. [Andreu or Andres Nin (in Catalan or Spanish respectively) was a leading Spanish Communist who had become a supporter of the Left Opposition. His torture and murder in June, 1937 — discussed below — signaled the Stalinist forces' turn to terror against the Spanish left — ed.]

The intention was to found a new party based on the unification of the Bloque Obrero y Campesino (Workers and Peasant bloc) and the Izquierda Comunista (Left Communists), two revolutionary Marxist organizations created in 1930 and 1931. The Bloque Obrero y Campesino — formed during the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera — was a reaction to the bureaucratic degeneration of the Communist International and the dogmatic sectarianism of its Spanish Section, while the Izquierda Comunista arose from among the militants who sympathized with the Left Opposition of Leon Trotsky.

The fusion of the Workers and Peasants Bloc with the Left Communists came about after a long period of working together within the Alianza Obrera (Workers Alliance — a bloc of almost all the political organizations and unions), which opened new perspectives. The POUM, with its strong base in Catalonia and solid foundations in Valencia and Aragon, extended its activities into various regions of Spain, creating important sections in Galicia, Asturias, Extremadura and entered a phase of peninsular expansion, its main objective. In addition, the merger with the Left Communists brought with it a team of considerable intellectual and political potential.

The POUM was recognized by all political organizations and trade unions and participated in the struggle against the rise of fascism in Europe and against the reactionary offensives in Spain. It also participated in the worker-republican coalition of February 1936 that gave electoral victory to the left, although it was only able to seat one deputy, Joaquín Maurín, who was one of the first to publicly denounce in Parliament the threat of the military coup of July 1936.

It is universally known that POUM was one of the forces that actively intervened in the fight against the fascist-military insurrection in Catalonia, Valencia, Madrid, Asturias and elsewhere; that the POUM was part of the Militias Committee of Catalonia, the People's Executive Committee of Valencia, the Council of the Generalitat Catalana (Catalan Government) and of hundreds of revolutionary committees in various organizations around the country.

Some may also know that the first Russian ambassador in Spain was also the first to oppose the POUM being represented in the Junta de Defensa de Madrid (Committee for the Defense of Madrid.) It was a terrible misfortune for us that the Civil War and the revolutionary process coincided with Stalin's brutal turn that led to the deaths of some of the most outstanding figures of the Russian Revolution.

Many kept quiet during the scandalous Moscow trials. A party like the POUM could not remain silent before a crime that clearly heralded so many more. The POUM issued a statement condemning the Moscow Trials.

From then on Stalin declared war on us and used any and all means to slander and destroy us. The matter was worse still since it was a time when people were hoping for Soviet aid.

On the other hand, Stalin wanted to direct Spanish policy and intensified pressure on the Republican government. General Orlov, head of the GPU [Soviet secret police] in Spain, assumed absolute powers to organize slander and persecutions, bypassing all the legal powers of the State. But his first political test was the dismissal of Largo Caballero [left-wing Socialist] as Head of Government, putting Negrín in his place. Stalin called for an obedient man and a political shift that would

liquidate the revolutionary process.

The Murder of Andreu Nin

Be that as it may, a few weeks later (June, 1937 — ed.) when they believed that they had gained better control over the Army and the State apparatus, and it looked like the big forces of the left (the Socialist Party, the anarchist-led union federation CNT, etc.) were not going to resist his plans, General Orlov went on the offensive and his police proceeded to kidnap Andreu Nin and to detain Andrade, Bonet, Gorkín, Escuder and many POUM militants.

The coup was accompanied by an attack on our premises, closure of our newspaper La Batalla (The Struggle) and all the party press, and burglarizing the homes of the detained. To complete the operation they imposed a censorship on the press and the radio for a week.

A few days later the newspapers began to talk of a “serious fascist plot.” They were frightened that the people would find out the truth about revolutionary Catalonia. But ultimately, since Barcelona was not Stalin’s Moscow, they were forced to attack the POUM in repugnant political terms.

The reaction of the militants of the POUM was immediate. In Barcelona posters appeared on the walls asking “Where is Nin?” POUM leaders who had not been arrested (Jordi Arquer, Gironella, Molins i Fàbrega, Solano) met and elected a new Executive Committee, and organized a national and international defense campaign for Nin and the other detained comrades. We visited Companys, who then called Azaña and Negrí and sent Miravittles to Valencia immediately. We met with the leaders of the CNT and the Partido Socialista, and contacted Victor Serge in Paris, who organized an international campaign with the backing of André Bretón, Andre Gide and the forces of the left in France, England and the United States.

Three international commissions came to Spain to investigate the attack on the POUM. Arquer went to Valencia with Olga Nin and María Teresa Andrade to launch a protest and question Negrín and his ministers. But the archives of the GPU in Moscow have revealed what we feared. Now we know who and how they tortured and assassinated Nin in Alcala de Henares in order to extract a “confession.” This was told to us by none other than Antonov Ovseenko’s son.

There is no name for the crime committed against Andreu Nin. And worse, it took place at the same time that Comandante Amadeo Cahué, militant of the POUM Youth, died leading the brigade under his command on the Huesca front, when the POUM militants in the battalion under the command of our Mika Etchebehere, in the Division of Cipriano Mera, fought and died in the trenches of Moncloa defending Madrid. [Cipriano Mera was a famous Anarchist militia leader, later Commander of the Fourteenth Division and the Fourth Army Corps — SW.]

Finally, at this time the Negrín government dissolved the 29th Division under the command of our compañero Josep Rovira, and militants of the POUM were being assassinated by Stalinists poisoned by the odious campaigns of the CP press. One of the most serious cases was the murder of Juan Hervás, Secretary General of the Escuela Nueva Unificada de Cataluña (Unified New School of Catalonia), which was officially denounced by the CNT and provoked the wrath of Luis Companys and numerous unions and political organizations.

Fighting Fascism, Resisting Stalinism

From July 1937 until the end of the war, the POUM maintained its organization throughout, even though some historians treated it as if it were missing in action. It even grew since many young people, male and female, joined the Juventud Comunista Ibérica (Iberian Communist Youth) to fill the gap left by those who were fighting at the front, and they were very effective at disseminating our clandestine press, La Batalla and Juventud Obrera (Young Workers), various pamphlets and the excellent book *The Case Against the POUM*.

Curiously, Carrillo and company protested because the police didn't arrest us, nor shut down our publications. Or they furiously attacked certain CNT newspapers like *Castilla Libre* of Madrid, treating them as agents of the POUM. The struggle against the POUM breached the front of the anti-Franco struggle, and created discontent and vast unrest in the most diverse camps as well as the international arena.

To make matters worse, Orlov went on the offensive against foreign intellectuals who were in Spain and his henchmen murdered people like Kurt Landau, ex-leader of the Communist Party of Austria; the Italian anarchist writer Camilo Berneri and his collaborator Francisco Barbieri; Alfredo Martinez, General Secretary of the Catalan Libertarian Youth (Juventudes Libertarias de Cataluña); the journalist Marc Rein (son of a leader of the Socialist International); the Trotskyist militant Erwin Wolf; and among the first, the writer José Robles, translator of Dos Passos.

The turmoil even reached the International Brigades and caused some combatants to abandon the fight. Bob Edwards, who led the English fighting in the Rovira Division, demanded their repatriation.

The POUM's position was clear. For its militants there would be no vacillating. They had to continue the military struggle against Franco and to defend the conquests of the revolutionary period, criticizing and denouncing Stalinist policy. The POUM's militants were absolutely faithful to these principles, thanks to the help they got from the Field Officers (chiefs) of the Anarchist and Socialist military Divisions, and some leaders of the Socialist Party and the CNT, like Largo Caballero and Luis Araquistain, Joan Peiró and Federica Montseny.

In the midst of the war, after a series of serious military setbacks due to Soviet strategy, Stalin called for "a Moscow Trial in Barcelona" and he applied strong pressure that finally overcame the resistance of his subordinates in Spain.

That trial, which pleased neither Negrín nor anyone else, was staged in Barcelona in October 1938, when the POUM was going through a difficult period. The Stalinist police had arrested the second POUM Executive Committee and Arquer, Rodes, Solano, Farré Gassó and other comrades were imprisoned in the State Prison in Barcelona (with Andrade, Gorkin, Gironella and others).

We were all ready for a political combat that would have had great resonance. And so it did. In the October trial, the accused defended themselves with intelligence and courage and countered all the Stalinist accusations. The court praised the lives of revolutionaries and beat a retreat, merely sanctioning its conduct in the Days of May 1937. Largo Caballero, Federica Montseny and Tarradellas refuted all the accusations and denounced the trial itself.

There was no "Moscow Trial" as Stalin had called for and the conviction was prohibited by the censor, which undid all the intrigues of the GPU, which were quite thoroughly exposed in the book *The Case Against the POUM*, a work that has been very useful to all historians of the Civil War.

The Struggle in Exile

I do not want to go into the role of the POUM during the Franco regime and its intense action in the battles that unfolded in Catalonia and in Spain, or to sum up the many activities of the POUM in exile in France and Mexico. In those days as well we had problems with Stalin and Stalinism — even in the prisons in France and especially in the presidio Eysses, where they tried to make life impossible for us, despite a French court in the service of the Gestapo that sentenced a broad group of POUM militants to long prison terms for “Communist” activities.

Further, we may well recall that in the period of resistance to fascism in the south of France, the Spanish Stalinists created a National Union and a Supreme Junta to which we all had to submit and tried to prevent through violence the rebirth of the Spanish labor movement and the creation of military groups that evaded its authority. But they couldn't prevent the emergence of the Socialist Party, the POUM and the CNT and the resurgence of guerrilla organizations such as the Freedom Battalion [Batalión Libertad] and the Basque Brigade, nor finally were they able to prevent many Spanish from joining the French guerilla groups.

But that said, it is worth remembering that in the intense political life of the POUM in its long and interminable exile in France we maintained significant relations with all the Spanish parties in the Alliance of Democratic Forces, participated in numerous activities with the French labor movement and internationally, and with La Batalla, Tribuna Socialista and various books and pamphlets, we created a press that spread throughout Spain and opened new horizons among the new generations emerging on our peninsula. Our only obstacle was Stalin, but gradually matters began to change: Echoes from the Gulag and the smatterings of information on the Russian totalitarian regime were having grave repercussions throughout Europe.

It was then that many intellectuals and students turned to us to discuss the experience of the Spanish Revolution and the role of the POUM, and when we realized we had to step up the long march in honor of the revolutionary POUM in the face of Stalinist slander. Not long after, the rebellion of Tito and the events of Hungary and Czechoslovakia opened new horizons. But the crowning moment was the XX Congress of the Russian Communist Party and Khrushchev's speech on February 25, 1956 on the “Crimes of Stalin,” which the Spanish Communist Party concealed but the POUM published in issues of La Batalla. From that moment on we felt a need to intensify the struggle for the truth in the USSR and raise the question of the murder of Andreu Nin.

The Opening

In the years that followed, everything had changed for us. Our ideas and our tasks shifted terrain. We had to discuss with both old and young. It was then that the calls from Communists and sympathizers began, and the proposals for conferences and debates, while evocations of the Civil War and the Spanish revolutionary process began to take on a different hue.

The Spanish Communist leaders came with many excuses to hand and many problems in their heads. It was possible to talk and discuss with Semprún, with Claudín, with Azcárate and with certain leaders of the PSUC [Catalan Communists].

Proposals were submitted to make films with the participation of comrades in the POUM; a Communist mayor of Paris requested photos of the POUM and Nin for an exhibition on the Spanish Civil War, the film “La experiencia por memoria” (The experience of memory) was shown in Montreuil, a bastion of the French PC, and a long discussion about the POUM began. All appeared

different and all appeared possible.

Unfortunately, the POUM had its internal problems and a faction of older activists advocated joining the Socialist Party of Catalonia at a time when the POUM had close links with various youth groups who demanded revolutionary socialism and wanted to merge with it. This difference created problems, but did not stop the POUM from putting in its appearance in Barcelona where it was legalized on September 17, 1977 with La Batalla as a weekly and a team of young and enthusiastic leaders. The party was now recognized throughout the world and had embarked upon intense activities.

The long march for truth for Nin continued, now under excellent conditions. La Fundació Andreu Nin (Andreu Nin Foundation) was created in 1989 in Madrid and Barcelona with the aim of rendering homage to our unforgettable comrade and to demand that the Russian government headed by Gorbachev clarify where and under what conditions Nin, leader of the POUM, died.

It was not too long before that the Parliament of Catalonia paid tribute to Nin in a special session. In a few days the leaders of the Foundation collected hundreds of signatures of known activists and intellectuals in support of a document asking the Russian government to clarify the Nin case. The odd thing was that the Russian Ambassador, Igor Ivanov (later head of the Putin government), proposed that a delegation bring the document to the Embassy.

On June 27, 1990 several of us in the POUM entered the Soviet Embassy and delivered the document. The Russian diplomats received us very cordially and asked us about Nin's daughters. We said that the document would have to be delivered to Gorbachev, and we were given a pamphlet in Spanish, "Names rehabilitated." The names were Bukharin, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Rykov, Sokolnikov and Riutin, all shot by Stalin.

We left convinced that we were entering a new era, although we could not then foresee that the USSR would collapse under such incredible conditions, the absolute punishment for Stalinist totalitarianism.

In recent years much has been produced concerning the POUM and its history, among the most important of which are the films by Dolors Genovés and Llibert Ferri "Operation Nikolai" done by Catalan TV — an excellent French version has been circulating in a number of countries — and Ken Loach's "Land and Freedom," which has traveled the world and has been successful in France and England and as far as Japan and Bolivia.

To this important work must be added the international dissemination of the work Homage to Catalonia by English writer George Orwell, and the film series on the Revolution and the Civil War ("Zona Roja" — "Red Zone") on TV3, directed by Felip Solé, and "Civil War in Catalonia" sponsored by the Barcelona delegation.

The Andreu Nin Foundation (La Fundació Andreu Nin) is the largest organization dealing with the POUM and its history that exists today. In its monthly newsletter and its archives are dozens of documents of great value on the vicissitudes of the party which the world came to know in the Revolution and the Spanish Civil War, and which Stalin tried to destroy because it was thwarting his totalitarian plans.

Stalin and Stalinism are the past. The future belongs to those who are struggling against capitalism for a free and democratic socialist society, with neither exploiter nor exploited.

P.S.

* From Against the Current, ATC 143, November-December 2009.