

# Andreu Nin's Marxism Tackled the Big Questions of Spanish and Catalan Politics

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**Andreu Nin, leader of the POUM, was murdered by agents of Stalin during the Spanish Civil War. Nin's legacy speaks to issues still relevant today, from Catalonia's right to self-determination to the danger of the far right.**

Andreu Nin was the leader of the Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (Workers' Party of Marxist Unity, or POUM) during the Spanish Civil War. Nin was assassinated by Stalinist agents in June 1937 as part of a wider campaign to repress the POUM that George Orwell documented in his book [Homage to Catalonia](#). There is a plaque in Nin's honor on Barcelona's main thoroughfare, the Rambla, near the spot where he was abducted at the age of forty-five.

Nin's contribution to Marxist thought is not as widely known as the circumstances of his death. We must assess that contribution against the generally poor panorama of Spanish Marxism in the 1930s. As Nin's biographer Pelai Pagès has argued, he distinguished himself by rethinking the political problems facing Spain and Catalonia "through the prism of a critical Marxism, basing his analysis on contemporary international experiences and debates."

Many of the questions that Nin addressed, from the danger of fascism to the self-determination of national minorities, are still very much on the political agenda today. In Spain itself, the last decade has seen the leaders of the Catalan independence movement prosecuted or driven into exile by the state, while the far-right Vox party has become a governing partner for mainstream conservatives. This article will look at the way Nin approached such issues in the context of his own time.

## Political Apprenticeship

Nin first entered into political activity at the age of nineteen in 1911 when he joined a Catalan republican organization, the [Unió Federal Nacionalista Republicana](#). Increasingly concerned with social questions, he became a member of the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) two years later. Having grown disillusioned with the Spanish centralism and political moderation of the PSOE, and influenced by the revolutionary events in Russia, he joined the anarcho-syndicalist Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT) union movement in 1919, briefly serving as its general secretary.

As one of the leaders of the pro-Bolshevik minority inside the CNT, Nin traveled to Moscow in July 1921 to take part in the Third Congress of the Communist International and the foundation of the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU). Unable to return to Spain, he remained in Moscow, becoming assistant general secretary of the RILU and a member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU).

In 1923, Nin aligned himself with Leon Trotsky in the struggle within the CPSU (although he never worked as Trotsky's secretary, as has frequently been claimed). In 1928, as a member of Trotsky's defeated Left Opposition, Nin found himself removed from all positions of political responsibility. He survived in Moscow for the next two years by working as a translator of Russian novelists such as

Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky into Catalan.

After returning to Barcelona, Nin was a leading member of the Spanish Trotskyist organization, the Izquierda Comunista de España. In 1935, his group fused with the Workers' and Peasants' Bloc to form the POUM. When the civil war began in July 1936, the POUM leader Joaquín Maurín was trapped in enemy territory. Nin became the party's principal spokesperson until his murder eleven months later.

### **Anarchism, Syndicalism, and Workers' Unity**

As a leader of the RILU, Nin wrote and spoke extensively about the problems facing the international trade union movement. Once the revolutionary wave of the early 1920s had passed, Nin was concerned about the dangers of communists forming small "red unions" and isolating themselves from the mass of workers in social democratic or even Christian unions. For Nin and the RILU, it had to be clear that the reformist leaders were the ones splitting the trade union movement, not the communists.

After Joseph Stalin's victory over his Bolshevik opponents, he directed the communist movement to take an ultraleft turn known as the Third Period that ended the orientation favored by Nin. The lessons Nin learned during the early years of the RILU informed his subsequent writings on the trade union question, synthesized in *Las organizaciones obreras internacionales* (1933).

In September 1930, Nin returned to Catalonia, which was by far the most important industrial center in Spain at the time. The trade union movement was dominated by the CNT. Nin was one of the few Marxists who tried to explain the influence of the anarcho-syndicalists.

An economic boom that resulted from Catalonia's privileged position during World War I had led to mass immigration from the countryside into Barcelona. These politically inexperienced but radicalized immigrants formed an important part of the CNT's massive increase in membership during the postwar years. Historians have often cited this influx as a key factor behind the support for anarchist ideas and methods.

Nin, however, gave more importance to the peculiar and relatively backward economic structure of Catalonia. Local manufacturing was dominated by textiles, in which small workshops and factories predominated. Following Marx, Nin noted how anarchism had more success in less industrialized countries. He insisted that it was a mistake to explain its success in terms of national or psychological characteristics.

For Nin, the dual absence of a socialist political alternative and of large workplaces had perpetuated the influence of petty-bourgeois, individualist ideas. He predicted that this individualism would disappear with the creation of large-scale industry and a working class that was educated in the spirit of cooperation and discipline by modern factory conditions. As Nin pointed out, anarchism had little support in places where heavy industry and large concentrations of workers prevailed, such as the Basque region of Vizcaya, or countries like Germany, Britain, or the United States.

Lenin had argued that the popularity of anarchism was often a punishment for the "opportunistic sins" of the workers' movement. In Catalonia, according to Nin, the Socialists had been guilty of such sins. They had abandoned the region in the late nineteenth century to establish their headquarters in Madrid, the bureaucratic center of Spain, far from the great proletarian centers of the northeast.

Nin's trade union writings during the period before the civil war continued to stress the need for unity and for revolutionaries not to isolate themselves. He had to grapple with the great divide of the Spanish workers' movement between the CNT and the Socialist Unión General de Trabajadores

(UGT) federation. The defense of unity inside the unions was particularly problematic in Catalonia given the near-hegemony of the anarcho-syndicalists, who had purged Marxists from their ranks.

The POUM responded to such exclusion by forming the Federación Obrera de Unidad Sindical, with Nin as its general secretary, as the first step toward a wider unity involving all tendencies. Union organization, according to Nin, “cannot be, must not be, an organization based on one tendency, a sectarian organization. That would frustrate its principal aim, which is to bring together all workers, regardless of their ideas, to defend the interests of the whole class.”

## Understanding Fascism

Nin was one of several leading figures in the international communist movement who sought to analyze what he termed the “completely new phenomenon” of fascism. After visiting Italy in January 1924, Nin wrote regularly on the fascist threat in the RILU and Comintern press.

He later set forth his analysis most clearly in [Las dictaduras de nuestro tiempo](#). The book was published in 1930 as a reply to Francesc Cambó, leader of the Catalan bourgeois nationalist party, the Lliga. Cambó’s own book *Les dictadures* had argued that the Italian and Soviet dictatorships were in essence the same.

Nin outlined five reasons for the triumph of fascism in Italy: demoralization caused by the war; the need for the capitalists to consolidate their rule through dictatorial methods; the threat of proletarian revolution and its defeat; the existence of a great mass of *déclasse* elements; and the petty bourgeoisie’s disillusionment with democracy. The latter point was of particular importance when comparing fascism with other reactionary movements.

In Italy, he argued, it had not been difficult for fascism to “gain mass support among the petty bourgeoisie, a class that had always vacillated between capitalism and the proletariat,” in a situation of political, economic, and social crisis. Members of this class were “more or less comfortable with the capitalist regime” before 1914 but then turned toward the Italian socialists as they lost confidence in the bourgeoisie. However, the failure of the socialists to take power had “pushed the petty-bourgeois masses toward fascism.” This was a new political force that presented itself as “representing the interests of the whole nation” while using those masses as “cannon fodder in the counter-revolution.”

During the pre-civil war years, basing himself on Trotsky’s writings, Nin was virtually alone in comparing the situation in Spain with that of Germany. In the spring of 1933, he argued that while fascism might not be an imminent danger in Spain, it would be “a crime” for the workers’ movement not to prepare for confrontation with what could soon be a real threat. As in Germany, liberal and right-wing governments had prepared the ground for the extreme right with their repressive policies and the continued presence of “leading reactionaries” in the state machine.

For Nin, the German case was “a scientific example of how not to proceed” in the face of a fascist threat. At the time he was writing, the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) was still following the same disastrous line as the German Communists in the last years of the Weimar Republic. It saw the Socialists and the anarcho-syndicalists — defined as “social fascists” and “anarcho-fascists” respectively — as the main obstacle to working-class revolution.

However, it was not just the Stalinists who misunderstood and underestimated the fascist danger. Nin also criticized the anarchists who perceived “all governments, without exception” as being “fascist,” from Mussolini’s Italy to the USSR and the Spanish Republic.

Nin agreed with Trotsky that the missing factor in Italy and Germany was a workers’ united front

based on “a program of struggle” that would be “acceptable to the workers of the organizations of all tendencies.” Resistance to fascism, he argued, “could easily become a revolutionary struggle for power, supported by the great peasant masses, disappointed by the agrarian reform.” The petty bourgeoisie, “impressed by the power of the workers’ front, would join it or would be neutralized, and fascism would be deprived of its essential base.”

He thus considered the founding of the Workers’ Alliance Against Fascism in December 1933 to be “one of most important events in the international workers’ movement” during the last decade. This united front included all of the working-class organizations with the exception of the CNT (apart from its members in Asturias) and the Stalinists. The Alliance opposed the entrance of the far right into the Spanish government with a revolutionary general strike in October 1934, which was one of the key events in the period leading up to the civil war. Unfortunately, the strike was undermined by disinterest from the main workers’ organizations.

In the general election of February 1936, the Republican, Socialist, and Communist parties came together to form the Popular Front alliance and won a majority in parliament. As Nin predicted, the election of a reformist government pushed the Spanish ruling classes and the most reactionary sections of the petty bourgeoisie away from any remaining pretense of supporting democracy. They now sought to establish an authoritarian regime modeled on those of Germany and Italy.

In Spain, however, it was the army that acted as the counterrevolutionary vanguard. Mainstream conservatism encouraged it to do so, having grown disillusioned with the failure of the republican government to smash the workers’ movement, as did the relatively small organizations of the fascist right. The memory of bloody repression after the October 1934 strike prompted the working-class organizations to resist the military uprising of July 1936. Nin insisted that only the working class could oppose fascism by launching the social revolution.

## **The National Question**

As a youthful Catalan republican, Nin rejected bourgeois nationalism and defended the principle of “internationalism between nations.” During his time as a member of the Socialist Party, he clashed with the party leadership in Catalonia over its Spanish centralism.

Nin argued that nationalism and socialism were not incompatible in the Catalan case, as both forces opposed Spain’s undemocratic government. One could not counterpose an abstract “internationalism” to the just aspirations of oppressed peoples — it was necessary to establish a “Confederation of Iberian Nationalities” instead.

While living in the USSR, Nin adopted a Marxist viewpoint on the “[national problem](#)” that was heavily influenced by Lenin. His writings on the question culminated in 1935 with the publication of [Los movimientos de emancipación nacional](#). Nin presented a historical overview of the Marxist position on the question before finishing with a detailed account of the organization of the USSR as a “union of free nations.”

Nin drew parallels between Spain and the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires. Each had been ruled by an absolutist, despotic government based on the domination of semifeudal elements, large landowners, and the established church, Catholic or Orthodox. In Spain, this coalition of reactionary interests launched a crusade against Catalan nationalism, thus converting the national question into one of the key factors in the pending “democratic revolution.”

Since the Catalan bourgeoisie soon abandoned attempts to obtain more regional autonomy, the struggle for self-determination passed into the hands of the petty bourgeoisie. Yet according to Nin,

the latter force was incapable of defeating the Spanish state. Only the working class could complete this task. As “the enemy of all oppression,” the working class would “fail in the most elementary of its duties if did not rise up against one of the sharpest forms of oppression: national.”

Nin insisted that the defense of national self-determination in Catalonia did not mean that the proletariat should side with the bourgeoisie. Communists had to combat national chauvinism at a local level and put class solidarity above national differences. The struggle for the right of oppressed peoples to independence did not mean dividing the working class into different national groupings: in fact, he argued, it would result in “closer union” between workers of different nationalities.

The uprising against the far-right government in Madrid in October 1934 had a “national” dimension in Catalonia, as the Catalan government supported the movement and briefly declared an independent Catalan Republic. On the eve of the uprising, Nin urged Catalan workers to “sustain the national liberation movement in Catalonia” and vigorously oppose “all attempts to attack it by reaction.”

He saw the proclamation of the Catalan Republic as an act of immense revolutionary significance. According to Nin, the workers’ movement should seek to remove the “indecisive and treacherous petty bourgeoisie” from the leadership of the Catalan movement and make the demand for a republic its own, setting out to “free Catalonia from the Spanish yoke, the first step toward the Union of Iberian Socialist Republics.”

However, the Catalan government of Lluís Companys rapidly capitulated to the Spanish army. This bore out Nin’s prognosis about the weakness of the petty bourgeoisie. The vicious repression of Catalan and Basque identity by Franco’s government after 1939 later confirmed the determination of Spain’s ruling class to uphold national unity at all costs.

## **The Spanish Revolution**

Nin’s analysis of the revolutionary process that was underway in Spain after 1931 drew on the experience of the Russian Revolution in 1917. However, he believed that it would be wrong to copy the Bolsheviks mechanically and insisted upon the differences between the two countries.

Spain was more developed than Russia in economic and even political terms, and the trajectory of its working-class organizations made a distinctive strategic orientation necessary for revolutionaries.

For liberal reformists and revolutionaries alike, the “democratic revolution” in Spain — which would mean resolving the agrarian and national problems, breaking the power of the church and army, granting women the vote, etc. — had yet to be completed. Influenced by Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution, Nin believed that a weak and conservative bourgeoisie was neither able nor willing to introduce such democratic reforms.

The petty-bourgeois republicans, who governed Spain from 1931 to 1933 and again after the Popular Front victory in February 1936, found the path to reform blocked by the ruling oligarchy. For Nin, only the proletariat, with the support of the peasantry, had the strength needed to complete the democratic revolution. The workers could then move directly to impose socialism, as had been the case in Russia in 1917.

In order to carry out this task, however, there would have to be a mass communist party and a united front of proletarian organizations. When the Spanish Republic was established in 1931, Nin rejected the idea of calling for the immediate seizure of power, as the Spanish Communists did. He believed that it was essential to first dispel the illusions of the masses in the republic and win over or neutralize the petty bourgeoisie.

To do so, it was necessary to put forward a program of democratic demands such as the right to free speech and assembly, the legalization of strikes, the right of separation for Catalonia, and “the end of repressive measures directed against the workers’ movement.” Other measures called for by Nin included the dissolution of the paramilitary Civil Guard and the confiscation of clerical wealth, as well as the transfer of land to the peasants without compensation and state support for unemployed workers.

The Republicans and their Socialist allies were unable to carry out their reform program in the face of ruling-class intransigence, and the outbreak of civil war confirmed the validity of Nin’s analysis. In September 1936, two months after the war began, Nin addressed a mass meeting in Barcelona. He described how the situation had changed as the resistance to Franco’s coup developed into a working-class revolution in Republican-held areas like Catalonia.

According to Nin, after five years in which the liberal bourgeoisie had been unable to solve any of the “fundamental problems” of the Spanish revolution, from the position of the Catholic Church to land reform or the Catalan right to self-determination, the working class had settled those questions “arms in hand, in a few days.” He insisted that the workers of Catalonia and Spain were not fighting for the republic. The struggle against Franco had already gone beyond that objective.

For Nin, the question of power was central to the victory of the revolution. This meant persuading the CNT that it was necessary to seize it. The problem for the anarchists, apart from their aversion to state power as such, was their fear of a Soviet-style dictatorship. Nin tried to counter this fear by insisting that the Catalan working class had already put Marx’s call for a “dictatorship of the proletariat” into effect:

What is the dictatorship of the proletariat? It is authority exercised solely and exclusively by the working class, the suppression of all political rights and all freedom for the representatives of the class enemy. If that is the dictatorship of the proletariat . . . then I declare that the proletarian dictatorship exists in Catalonia today.

Nin wanted the CNT and the POUM to encourage the creation of popular committees representing workers, peasants, and soldiers that could form the basis of a new society. The alternative was the reconstruction of the bourgeois republican state and the undermining of the revolution — a process that was well underway by early 1937. Nin warned in March 1937 that if the working class did not react to this process, it would “have lost the exceptional occasion which history offers it to emancipate itself and give a tremendous impulse of the world revolution.”

## **A Method for Action**

Trotsky was [extremely critical](#) of the POUM, accusing it of “centrism,” or wavering between reformist and revolutionary politics. In particular, he criticized Nin’s party for not calling for the creation of soviets and for participating in the Catalan government. In May 1937, Nin responded to his former mentor’s criticisms, emphasizing once again the differences between the Russian and Spanish revolutions, in particular the absence of dual power in Spain.

According to Nin, the existence of mass trade unions meant that the working class had not created soviets on the Russian model. The local and regional anti-fascist committees that had been organized at the beginning of the war were basically Popular Front committees, named from above by the different working-class organizations.

Nin accepted that there was a need for soviet-style bodies, but insisted that these bodies had to emerge from below, as they had in Russia, and could not be created by revolutionaries from above.

The POUM thus argued for the CNT defense committees, which had led the unsuccessful insurrection in Barcelona in May 1937, to be broadened to include all revolutionary organizations and extended into the workplaces.

Nin concluded that his arguments would not satisfy those who believed in “solving all problems with the help of a wisely elaborated recipe, good for all cases.” But he stressed that Marxism was “not a dogma but a method for action” that must be “based on an analysis of material reality” rather than “mechanically repeating a formula.”

The murder of Nin just weeks later snuffed out his contribution to the Spanish workers’ movement. The Republican forces were finally defeated in 1939, and Franco’s murderous dictatorship went on to rule the country for almost four decades. By the time the organizations of the Spanish left were able to reemerge in the open from the late 1970s, the POUM was no longer a real political force. Yet Nin’s legacy has remained an inspiration for those seeking an alternative to social democracy on the one hand and Stalinist communism on the other.

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