

“SAVE THE CHILDREN!”: THE COMINTERN NARRATIVE OF VICTIMIZATION IN SPAIN AS THE CORNERSTONE OF THE POPULAR FRONT PLATFORM

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ABSTRACT: In this paper we examine the carefully orchestrated effort of the Communist International (Comintern) to craft, divulge and rally left wing forces around a victimization narrative that reversed the roles of the October 1934 armed insurrection in Spain and became the cornerstone of its Popular Front campaign. To this end, the Comintern leveraged the abundant resources of its front organizations, especially International Red Aid and the World Committees, financed and led from Moscow and Paris and supported locally as needed by its Spanish section. Starting in early 1935, the Spanish socialist party, many of whose leaders became dependent on Red Aid funding, embraced the narrative and their strategy became indistinguishable from that of the communists. Contrary of the dominant interpretation of these events, this paper demonstrates the Popular Front in Spain cannot be understood without a history from above perspective that takes full account of the leading role of the Comintern in them.

KEY WORDS: Comintern – Popular Front – P.C.E. – P.S.O.E. – Victorio Codovilla – Manuel Azaña

“¡SALVAD A LOS NIÑOS!»: EL RELATO DE VICTIMIZACIÓN DE LA COMINTERN EN ESPAÑA COMO PIEDRA ANGULAR DE LA PLATAFORMA DEL FRENTE POPULAR

RESUMEN: El artículo examina el esfuerzo cuidadosamente orquestado de la Comintern para elaborar, divulgar y reunir a las fuerzas de izquierda en torno a un relato de victimización que invirtió los roles de la insurrección armada de octubre de 1934 en España y se convirtió en la piedra angular de su campaña del Frente Popular. La Comintern aprovechó los abundantes recursos de sus organizaciones de masa, especialmente Socorro Rojo y los Comités Mundiales, financiados

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y dirigidos desde Moscú y París y apoyados localmente según las necesidades por su sección española. En 1935, el partido socialista español, muchos de cuyos líderes dependían de la financiación del Socorro Rojo, se abrazó al relato y su estrategia se volvió indistinguible de la de los comunistas. Contrariamente a la interpretación dominante de estos hechos, este trabajo demuestra que el Frente Popular en España no puede entenderse sin una perspectiva de “historia desde arriba” que tenga plenamente en cuenta el papel protagonista de la Comintern en los mismos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Comintern – Frente Popular – P.C.E. – P.S.O.E. – Victorio Codovilla – Manuel Azaña

INTRODUCTION

Social scientists, psychologists and narratologists have long been aware of the frequent role victimization narratives play in the justification of political violence. Perpetrators of violence often construct “victimologies” focusing on an event as an injustice, “exaggerating the impact, minimizing the context and extending the time frame of the event backward and forward in time.”¹ George Mosse studied the cult of the fallen soldier after the Great War and how myths of redemptive suffering were used to construct extreme nationalist ideologies, especially by defeated nations.² Using some of Mosse’s insights, Brian D. Bunk explored the political propaganda in both revolutionary and anti-revolutionary texts produced after the socialist-led armed insurrection in Spain in October 1934. Bunk’s conclusion was, in essence, that in the pro-revolutionary accounts “commentators hope to shift the perceptions of the revolt as a violent uprising to highlight instead a cruel repression.”³ Bunk suggests that the pervasive deployment of such narratives united all left-wing parties in a common cause as “victims of the repression” and became a major contributor to the campaign of the Popular Front January and early February 1936.

In this paper, we will examine the direct and leading role of the Comintern in the shaping and deployment of the left-wing victimization narrative as the cornerstone of the Popular Front tactic in Spain. To this end, the Comintern utilized the Moscow-based leadership and resources of International

1 Anthony PEMBERTON and Pauline G. M. AARTEN, “Narrative in the Study of Victimological Processes in Terrorism and Political Violence: An Initial Exploration”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 41 (7/2018), p. 543.

2 George L. MOSSE, *Fallen Soldiers. Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

3 Brian D. BUNK, “Your Comrades will not Forget. Revolutionary Memory and the Breakdown of the Spanish second Republic”, *History and Memory*, 14 (1-2/2002), p. 65-92, quote on p. 67.

Red Aid⁴ under Elena Stasova, the world-class agit-prop capabilities of the “Münzenberg trust” in Paris, and local assets in Spain including Comintern agents and a myriad of committees and front organizations. All these assets masterfully combined and generously financed resulted in the identification of all left-wing republicans and socialists with the victimization narrative as the most potent unifying factor of their individual visions and aspirations after October 1934. Thus, contrary to Juliá, substantial unity of action was in fact achieved among all the left-wing parties on the basis of aiding and vindicating the *victims*, as early as the winter of 1934-35.⁵ Much of the archival material⁶ we will discuss has not been covered in the literature until now. This material is combined with period press reports and other sources to demonstrate the step-by-step leadership of the Comintern in building and deploying the victimization narrative to win over every major left-wing party in the country to the banner of the Popular Front. This paper thus challenges the traditional view of the Popular Front in Spain primarily as a grassroots movement driven by a real threat of fascism.⁷ We also challenge the common understanding of Manuel Azaña as the architect, not merely of the convergence of republican parties under his leadership, but of the entire Popular Front platform that was victorious in February 1936⁸. The data presented and discussed in this paper suggests the Popular Front is not properly understood without a primary “history from above” interpretation. This interpretation takes full account of the masterful agit-prop leadership of the Comintern in drafting and securing widespread support for the victimization narrative, the linchpin of the Popular Front platform.

4 MOPR is the Russian acronym of the International Organization for Aid to the Fighters of the Revolution, headed by Helena Stasova. Internationally the organization was known as International Red Aid, Rote Hilfe in the German-speaking world, and Socorro Rojo Internacional in Spain.

5 Juliá argued that there was no real popular front in Spain until the start of the Spanish Civil War, and that as late as November 1935 there was still no unity of action among communists, socialists and others, the distribution of substantial Soviet aid notwithstanding. See Santos JULIÁ “The Origins and Nature of the Spanish Popular Front” in Martin ALEXANDER and Helen GRAHAM (ed.), *The French and Spanish Popular Fronts*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 27.

6 In order based on volume consulted for this paper: The Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI); The National Archives of the UK (TNA), Labour History Archive and Study Centre (LHASC); and Archivo Histórico del P.C.E. (AHPCE).

7 See for example Martin ALEXANDER and Helen GRAHAM, “Introduction” in *The French and Spanish... op. cit.*, p. 2; Helen GRAHAM and Paul PRESTON, “The Popular Front and the Struggle against Fascism” in Helen GRAHAM and Paul PRESTON (ed.), *The Popular Front in Europe*, London: McMillan, 1989, p. 4; Helen GRAHAM, “The Spanish Popular Front and the Civil War” in *Popular Front in Europe... op. cit.*, p. 109. Graham identifies correctly the amnesty demand as the focus of popular fervor in the Popular Front campaign, but considers it grass roots-driven.

8 For example, Paul PRESTON, “The Creation of the Popular Front in Spain” in *Popular Front in Europe... op. cit.*, p. 85.

THE PRISONERS AND THEIR CHILDREN: *VOILÀ* A GREAT METHOD!

“North of the Pyrenees they assume fascism is installed in Spain...that I have become a reactionary, an ally of the monarchists”, protested Alejandro Lerroux to a special correspondent of the regional French daily *L’Ouest Éclair* on the 6th of December 1934. The reality on the ground was rather different, insisted the Spanish republican Prime Minister. A double attack had been launched against the democratic regime and the unity of Spain, an explosion of anarchy in Asturias and a separatist attempt in Cataluña. In the face of such a threat, which resulted in over one thousand casualties among the armed forces and police, continued Lerroux, “I have not abused my powers. I have merely deployed the constitutional measures the framers of our constitution, *des républicains authentiques*, designed for the defense of our institutions. Could I have acted more liberally than I did?” Of 27 death penalties, he concluded, only two have been carried out.⁹

Lerroux was right. According to Simeón-Vidarte’s account of his conversation with General López Ochoa, the number of armed forces personnel executed for abuses in Asturias more than doubled the number of insurrectionists whose death sentences were actually carried out.¹⁰ Immediately following the end of hostilities in Asturias, Cataluña and elsewhere, the conservatives in the Government coalition insisted on justice by the book (“justicia a secas”), while Lerroux admitted openly that when duty and feelings were in conflict, he would go with his feelings.¹¹ Simeón Vidarte admits openly that in the amnesty campaign he was a part of, Lerroux, was a key ally, thanks to whom “salvaríamos a todos los encartados por la insurrección.”¹² A careful perusal of the period press reveals the widespread interest in the military tribunals and the sentences throughout the late fall and winter of 1934. Additionally, such a perusal reveals the build-up of frustration among the conservatives over the *impunismo* they perceived in the Government intervention in the judicial process, a frustration which led eventually to the departure of the CEDA ministers from the government.¹³ The repression that followed the October insurrection was, in fact, rather restrained by contemporary European standards, and it pa-

9 “Avec M. Alexandre Lerroux, président du conseil”, *L’Oest Eclair* (6th December 1934), p. 2.

10 See the account Juan Simeón-Vidarte claimed to have heard directly from General Lopez Ochoa. Juan SIMEÓN-VIDARTE, *El Bienio Negro y la Insurrección de Asturias*, Barcelona: Grijalbo, 1978, p. 361. Simeón-Vidarte played a leading role in the preparation of the armed insurrection, as well as in the amnesty campaign that followed it.

11 Cited in Luis PERICOT GARCIA, *Historia de España*, vol. VI, Madrid: Instituto Gallach, 1967, p. 129.

12 Juan SIMEÓN-VIDARTE, *El Bienio Negro...*, *op. cit.*, p. 341.

13 On the long and tense debates among the members of the cabinet see Ricardo DE LA CIERVA, *Fracaso del Octubre Revolucionario: La Represión*, Madrid: Arc Editores, 1997, p. 85-94.

les by comparison, for example, with the systematic execution of red prisoners after the revolutionary / counterrevolutionary civil war in Finland.¹⁴

In January 1935, with the destruction caused by the October 1934 armed insurrection¹⁵ still evident in Asturias and elsewhere, socialist leader Graciano Antuña wrote a confidential letter to the Executive Committee of the Comintern. In this four-page document, Antuña, probably writing from soviet territory as one of many socialist exiles there,¹⁶ mentions the full ideological and strategic alignment of the socialist leadership of the insurrection with the Comintern and its Spanish section. The Asturian socialist, Secretary general of the SOMA, the Asturian miners' union, and of the regional socialist federation, had had a leading role in the technical preparation, financing and in the actual fighting that occurred from October 5th through 18th 1934. Antuña writes to the Comintern as an individual yet expresses what he considers to be the majority view shared by the PSOE's insurreccional leadership of Caballero in Madrid, González Peña in Asturias, and both UGT and the youth organization. The door to the unification of the proletarian parties, argues Antuña, has been opened wide by the “hecho insurreccional” of October 1934. As for the socialists, he continues:

“Una vez aceptado, como esta por el Partido Socialista Obrero Español la necesidad de la violencia para la revolución por medio de la insurrección armada a fin de establecer la Dictadura del Proletariado (sic), no sería fácil... desplazarle de la posición actual”.¹⁷

14 The number of red prisoners shot, often summarily, after the Finnish Civil War exceeded 10,000 and included many women. See Toumas TEPORA and Aapo ROSELIUS (ed.), *The Finnish Civil War 1918*, Leiden: Brill, 2014. For a brief discussion of the European context, including the Finnish repression, see Stanley G. PAYNE, *The Collapse of the Spanish Republic 1933-1936*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006, p. 101-3.

15 This is a correct technical term as per socialist and communist understanding of the events, see Caballero in *El Socialista* (21st April 1934): “Los momentos actuales no permiten otra salida que la insurrección armada de la clase trabajadora para adueñarse del poder político íntegramente, instaurando la dictadura del proletariado”, and Graciano Antuña's own language cited below. See also a detailed discussion on Comintern training on armed insurrection and its application in Spain in Gustavo MARTÍN ASENSIO, “Mobilizing all our Forces: Comintern Operations in Spain 1923-1936”, *Aportes, Revista de Historia Contemporánea* 109 (2/2022). An account of the victims caused by the revolutionaries hosted by the socialist Fundación Pablo Iglesias mentions a total of 1,377 killed, of which 326 were army and police forces, and nearly 3,000 wounded. <http://archivo.fpabloiglesias.es/files/Unidades/AH/70/AH-70-42.pdf>. The accounting carried out by Aurelio de Llano, which Ricardo de la Cierva considered the most accurate, added up to 1,196 killed and 2,068 wounded including both the loyal forces and loyal civilians. See DE LA CIERVA, *Fracaso*, 39.

16 Antuña appears several times in the lists of socialist, communist and anarchist émigrés kept in the Comintern archives. See A.V. ELPÁTIEVSKY, *La Emigración Española en la URSS*, Madrid: Gráficas de Diego, 2008, p. 56-72.

17 Handwritten and signed letter in Spanish and cover note in Russian requesting an urgent response in RGASPI 495. Op. 32.D. 225

Antuña then proceeds to propose a plan by which PCE and PSOE, together with unions and youth organizations will eventually achieve full unification into a single proletarian party and union, though, he adds, “sin ansias de absorción.” In light of this opportunity, Antuña asks the Comintern to halt their criticisms of the socialists and look to the future. In his final paragraph the Asturian socialist tells the Comintern that the socialists have 40,000 insurrectional fighters in prison, a significantly exaggerated figure.¹⁸ The prisoners are led by Caballero and Peña, Antuña continues, and the will of the proletariat is to free them. Any criticism of the jailed fighters will be considered, he concludes, a barrier to the proposal he puts forth in his letter. Thus, Antuña refers to the imprisoned socialists as the ultimate badge of insurrectional credibility which shields the party from any criticism as to tactical errors. Additionally, he presents the imprisoned socialists as the current focus of proletariat affections in Spain and the glue that holds together those who supported the violence as they await a new and finally successful insurrection. The February 1935 correspondence between Antuña and Caballero evidences the leading role of the Asturian among socialist exiles in the USSR.¹⁹ Further, the Asturian socialist’s view on the centrality of the prisoners in left wing strategy soon became dominant in his party. Thus, UGT leader and socialist deputy Bruno Alonso, writing a few months later in reference to communists, socialists and anarchists affirmed that “...the only condition that can unite us and heal our wounds...is the prisoners!”²⁰

With his emphasis on the prisoners and their families, Antuña was preaching to the choir. The Comintern had already grasped the agitational-propagandistic opportunity presented by the imprisoned rebels, their wives, and children, and all the left-wing *victims* of the insurrection. In an October 31st 1934 cable of the Political Commission of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) to the English and Irish sections²¹, the Co-

18 The full prisoner population in Spain as of October 13th, 1934, was of 25,000. The Government budget commission approved an increase of 4 million pesetas to cover the population increase in October, once the total reached 25,000. See for example “25000 presos en las cárceles de España” in *Heraldo Segoviano*, (13th October 1934). On the 26th of October, the Madrid daily *La Voz* covered the Minister of Justice’s trip to the prison in Oviedo and detailed that the prisoner increase attributable to the insurrection was of 743, that is, the number before the insurrection was 239 and 982 after. On the 2nd of November, *Ahora* reported the number of prisoners in Oviedo was up to 1,047. See also the *Anuario Estadístico Español* data for 1934 in Luis GARGALLO VAAMONDE, *El Sistema Penitenciario de la Segunda República*, Madrid: Ministerio del Interior, 2010, p. 201.

19 See on the correspondence between Antuña and the exiles with Caballero J. A. SÁNCHEZ Y JIMENEZ SAÚCO, *La Revolución de 1934 en Asturias*, Madrid: Editora Nacional, 1974, p. 152.

20 Bruno ALONSO, “Salvemos a la República”, article published in *La Libertad* and reprinted in the socialist *Democracia*, (27th July 1935). In this piece, Alonso issues a passionate call for the formation of the left-wing block on the sole basis of promoting the rights of the prisoners from the October armed insurrection.

21 This is the first of several Comintern messages to its UK sections on the topic, all intercepted by UK intelligence as part of the MASK program. Nigel WEST, *MASK. MI5’s Penetration of the Communist Party of Great Britain*, London: Routledge, 2005, p. 132.

minintern leadership complained about the “extremely inefficient” campaign carried out to that date by those sections in support of the Spanish proletariat, adding that the non-execution of the death sentences was merely a fascist ploy to distract international attention.²² To compensate for this inefficiency, the center instructed its English section to organize delegations to Spain and to “raise scientists, writers and radical bourgeois politicians.” Less than two weeks later, the Willi Münzenberg -run World Committee against War and Fascism had arranged a delegation to Spain led by Lord Listowel (William Hare, the 5th Earl of Listowel), and a veteran Comintern envoy to Spain, the labor MP Ellen Wilkinson. In addition to the British labor politicians, Charles Bourthomieux, a French attorney, and Münzenberg’s right hand man Otto Katz formed the core of the group. The foreign delegation was a proven formula for the Comintern and a favorite in Münzenberg’s agit-prop arsenal since its success in Madrid a year earlier. In a July 1933 telegram to Moscow, the Comintern’s Roman Lander Secretariat had inquired about “which tactics comrade Barbusse should use in the Anti-Fascist Committee in Spain.”²³ A year later, in his 1934 retrospective report on 1933 World Committee budget and activities, Münzenberg highlights the high impact the Barbusse, Wilkinson and Lord Marley visit to Madrid had in July 1933. Although the trip was a “great expense” for the Paris office, the agitation that ensued in Spain made this a great success.²⁴

The media, both in the UK and in Spain followed Listowel and Wilkinson’s trip to Asturias closely, with interpretations split along party lines. On the 15th of November 1934, the Cortes President, the Radical Republican Santiago Alba, informed the media that he could not accept any foreign collective investigation of internal Spanish affairs and that he had communicated this decision to the visitors during their meeting at the Cortes that day. He added that several other violent events had taken place in Europe that same month, and neither Britain nor France had considered themselves entitled to investigate.²⁵

22 On the long and tense debates between Alcalá Zamora and the centrist republicans and conservatives on the topic of the death sentences, a debate won by the President of the Republic without the support of the Supreme Court, see Stanley G. PAYNE, *The Collapse...*, *op. cit.*, p. 97-98. As Payne points out, the conservatives also failed to see the implementation of their motion for an investigation of the involvement of the unions in the insurrection.

23 Jul 1933 telegram from Roman Lander Sekretariat to ECCI. RGASPI Fond 495. Op. 4.D., 254. Heckert, Losowski, and Piatnitsky were commissioned to study and reply on this matter.

24 Jan 18th, 1934, World Committee report on cooperation with other organizations and committees. A handwritten note indicates this is for the information of Bela Kun. The report includes highlights from several individual countries. RGASPI 495. Op. 60. D. 248a

25 *Ahora*, (15 November 1934). The opinion expressed by José Calvo Sotelo that day made it to the pages of the monarchist daily *ABC*: “eso es realmente indigno”, the columnist adding that several members of the Cortes would investigate the suspicious entities behind this visit. On the 17th *The Scotsman* published, upon the return of the British politicians, Ellen Wilkinson’s assessment of the visit. She claimed that the hostile reception they had in Oviedo was “engineered” as an excuse to escort them to the border, and that

Meanwhile, the visit generated a substantial amount of correspondence within the Labour Party in the UK, evidencing growing doubts and concern regarding its legitimacy. The Labour Party enquiry led to the conclusion that neither Lord Listowel nor Ellen Wilkinson had any Labour credentials or support for such a trip, that Wilkinson did not understand Spanish, and that she was most likely working for a committee “to which members of the Labour Party are not allowed to belong.”²⁶ Perhaps due to the language barrier, as well as the suspicion aroused in both Madrid and Asturias by the foreign visitors, they did not manage a single interview with local citizens. Nevertheless, the visit was a significant propaganda coup, as admitted years later by del Vayo.²⁷

Meanwhile, Elena Stasova, the Moscow-based Head of International Red Aid and its global network of sections and affiliated organizations was already busy coordinating campaigns on behalf of Spanish “victims of fascism”, especially from a fund-raising and aid distribution angle. In a November 14th, 1934, letter to the political Commission of the ECCI,²⁸ Stasova noted that “a whole series of committees” had already been created, ranging from women and youth to liberation of prisoner committees and others. Stasova expressed her concern, however, that while Red Aid was pursuing a unified approach to aid, assisting the socialists and others, she perceived a great danger of fragmentation as other groups seemed to be acting independently from Red Aid. In addition to recommending unification of all aid efforts under Red Aid leadership, Stasova asked the Political Commission to decide on who should distribute the funds, though she recommends the Paris committee be the first recipient of all the money collected. As we shall see below, the Comintern’s effort to secure a socialist commitment to the unification of all aid committees under Comintern control would not reach a final breakthrough until October of 1935. The Comintern’s Political Commission stressed to the English section on the 19th of November the relationship of dependency that they saw between the united front and a joint effort in the campaigns on behalf of the “victims of fascism”

their visit had been simply “a private party organized to satisfy our curiosity.” Wilkinson’s explanation notwithstanding, the Labour Party discussed in internal communications Wilkinson’s lack of credentials for this activity and the fact that it was giving the Labour Party “a bad name.” Labour History Archive, LP/WG/SPA 56-63. See also the colorful description of the visit in *Time Magazine* of November 26th, 1934, in an article entitled “Spain. Priests into Pork.” On Münzenberg’s organization of the visit and his subsequent friendship with del Vayo and other “pro-Russia socialists” see also Babette GROSS, *Willi Münzenberg: Una Biografía Política*, Tr. Ruth Gonzalo; Vitoria: Ikusager, 2007, p. 368.

26 Correspondence between Ernest Robinson and the Assistant Secretary of the Labour Party, LP WG SPA 56.

27 See on this Laura BEERS, *Red Ellen. The Life of Ellen Wilkinson, Socialist, Feminist, Internationalist*, Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 2016, p. 299.

28 E. Stasova letter to the Political Commission of the ECCI, 14th November 1934 RGASPI F. 495. Op. 4. D. 441

in Spain. The Second International's failure to support the Comintern's campaigns were, therefore, a threat to the united front.²⁹

Among the “whole series of committees” Stasova refers to in her November 1934 letter, few proved a greater success than those involving children and women. Immediately after the end of hostilities, the President of the Council of Ministers, Mr. Lerro, had issued an order by which Clara Campoamor, the Government's Director of Public Beneficence and Social Assistance, was to travel to Asturias to organize and deliver assistance to the orphans of both rebels and police and military, “sin distinción de matices”.³⁰ Shortly thereafter, various alternative orphan committees were created by left-wing organizations following strictly the left-wing parties' narrative of fascist *aggressors* and proletarian *victims*. Thus, on the 20th of October, the “Comité de Mujeres contra la Guerra y el Fascismo”, together with Socorro Rojo Internacional, having gathered “the humanitarian feeling of all democratic women”,³¹ announced the launch of a subscription to aid women and children from Asturias. The Committee appointed the radical republican Dolores Merás as the coordinator of this program. Two days later, *La Libertad* reported the creation of “Asociación Pro Infancia Obrera” headed by Dolores Merás and with no reference to Red Aid or the Word Committee, with office on Arenal 26 in Madrid. The aim of this association was to assist proletarian *victims* by hosting abandoned children in homes, “the only means of obtaining love”. A month later *Heraldo de Madrid* reported on the activities of “Comisión Pro Infancia Obrera”, the creation of sub-commissions and offices headed by local delegates in a number of locations. The piece included photos of several of the children and invited the public to contribute financially with a very emotion-laden appeal. The Madrid daily *La Libertad* followed suit on the 7th of December by opening its own subscription in support of Asturian children not covered by other initiatives. *La Libertad* added a note of suspicion in relation to the other associations, demanding proof of the “integrity and purity of their feelings.” The Comintern's direct financing of the campaign included a 1.5 million peseta transfer to Red Aid in Spain in late 1934.³²

29 19th November 1934 telegram in Nigel WEST, *MASK. MI5's Penetration...*, *op. cit.*, p. 134-5.

30 See on this Neus SAMBLANCAT MIRANDA, “Clara Campoamor, Pionera de la Modernidad” in Clara CAMPOAMOR, *La Revolución Española Vista por una Republicana*, Barcelona: Universidad Autònoma de Barcelona, 2002, p. 37. See, for example, *Heraldo de Madrid* of 18th of November 1934 for coverage of the launch of this Government program. On the 19th, *La Voz* reported Campoamor was in Santander visiting the Gobernador Civil to announce the building of orphanages for the children of the victims.

31 See article on the cover of *Heraldo de Madrid*, (20 October 1934).

32 See RGASPI F. 558 Op. 2 D. 115, mentioning the amount in pesetas and its equivalent of 350,000 gold rubles.

Elena Stasova was following these activities in Spain closely. On the 9th of January of 1935 she wrote a letter³³ to the Comintern's Political Commission in which she addressed weaknesses in the ongoing "campaign against terror in Spain" as well as opportunities that remained unexploited. Ever since Ercoli (in reference to Comintern Secretary Palmiro Togliatti) left Paris, Stasova writes, the whole movement has lacked direction and concreteness and has suffered from internal rivalries between the World Committee and International Red Aid. The World Committee had expressed the erroneous idea, writes Stasova, that Red Aid is a "very communist organization" and has attempted to replace Red Aid in the fight against terror. It is indispensable, continues Stasova, to work within the Communist factions of all these organizations in order to dissipate any suspicion regarding the non-party character of Red Aid and to assure the correct functioning of the movement. To turn the situation around, Stasova proposed to the commission several measures. These included a renewed Paris-based leadership including Willi Münzenberg of the World Committee and Raoul of Red Aid in France, with instructions to concentrate all efforts on the slogans against the death penalties, and to organize rapidly conference tours by Rafael Alberti and Margarita Nelken, the socialist deputy. Finally, Stasova addressed the topic of the orphans. Immediately, she writes, take practical measures to transport the Asturias orphans to Paris and bring 10 of the children to Russia. Putting the Münzenberg team in charge of a campaign involving children made sense in several ways. In addition to his proven ability to deploy countless apparently independent organizations and to recruit and manage intellectuals and artists, Willi had already led a campaign involving orphans. Arthur Koestler recalled Willi's assignment to him to come to Paris and write a propaganda booklet based on "La Pouponniere", a Comintern-run orphanage near the French capital. While pretending to be open to children of German refugees of all parties and persuasions, in reality it served, with a few exceptions, those of German Communist Party and Comintern officials. The orphanage suffered from so many deficiencies that it had become, Koestler writes, a sort of "organized bedlam." Those deficiencies notwithstanding, Willi asked Koestler to come, take some pictures of the children and write 5,000 words, making them look "jolly but thin."³⁴ The utilization of orphans in the context of Comintern mass organizational campaigns against "fascist terror" was known to Comintern representative in Spain Victorio Codovilla from prior experience in 1932 and early 1934.³⁵

33 7th January 1935. A la Commission Politique de l' I.C. Sur la Campagne Internationale Contre la Terreur en Espagne. RGASPI F. 495 Op. 204 D. 441.

34 Arthur KOESTLER, *The Invisible Writing*, Boston: The Beacon Press, 224.

35 In the summer of 1932, International Red Aid was at Villa de Don Fadrique after the shootout between communists and Guardia Civil agents, attempting to bring some of the children of the

In late January 1935, the Comintern's Spanish section seems to have started implementing Stasova's recommendations. On the 22nd of January *La Voz* reported that the leaders of a local chapter of a "Comisión Pro Infancia" were arrested in Oviedo. The charges involved an alleged attempt to bring orphans to Madrid and to deliver some to Russia. The leaders, including Dolores Ibaruri, the Pasionaria, were later released but instructed to return to Madrid that same evening. *El Día de Palencia* reported, a week later, that the Pasionaria-led group had traveled through Palencia from Oviedo, transporting children who were already receiving material help from the Government's public assistance program. The report claimed the children were instructed to reject any government funds, since the funds "come from monarchists and fascists."³⁶ In his lengthy February 1935 report delivered in person to the Comintern's Roman Secretariat, Codovilla explained that Pasionaria was driving these efforts. The choice of Pasionaria made sense because of her great popularity, not only among proletarian masses but even among the *petit bourgeoisie* and republicans. The most crucial aspect of this work, wrote Codovilla, was the "moral effect" produced in the working masses who welcomed Pasionaria screaming "long live the revolution! long live the Communist Party! long live Pasionaria!". Once the children were taken to Madrid, Codovilla added, it was necessary to use the event to attract the attention of workers. Codovilla described the typical procedure followed in the many political events featuring children:

“The committee organizes many events in theaters and thus gathers large masses of workers to deliver the children in patronage. Each time a child is given in patronage we place a member of the committee on stage telling the story of the child, and with it the story of his father and of the revolution. The police, present at the event, do not know what to do, but they know that their brutal intervention in an event of this type will trigger the audiences' protest.

communist peasants killed and wounded to Madrid. Codovilla waited for the group at the train station in Madrid, but the Government had forbidden the removal of the minors. Codovilla felt the campaign had been a great success, nonetheless. Undated letter from Medina to Moscow, probably from August 1932, RGASPI. F. 495. Op. 32. D. 213. In late February 1934, the Comintern instructed Codovilla to organize campaigns in favor of the orphans of the Austrian insurrection, including sponsorships. Moscow to Spain, 28th February 1934, TNA HW 17/26.

³⁶ *El Día de Palencia* (31 de enero 1934). A similar report in *Diario de Almeria* of 10th of February 1935. Laura Branciforte, takes the Red Aid propaganda at face value and affirms that Socoro Rojo "se ocupó del socorro y de la evacuación de los niños." Her entire paper needs re-writing in light of the archival evidence. Laura BRANCIFORTE, "Legitimando la Solidaridad Femenina Internacional", *Arenal*, 16 (1/2009), p. 27-52.

So, they decide to do nothing. *Voilà* a great method for breaking free of our illegality!³⁷

The leadership of Infancia Obrera was later to include Clara Campoamor, the former Director of the Government aid program, and both Campoamor and Pasionaria would address a rally in Madrid in May. The rally, held at the popular theater Cine Europa, was advertised as a gathering in support of amnesty and against the death penalty, and all the speakers, including Red Aid representative Eduardo Ortega y Gasset, declared their support for the united front as the best means to achieve their stated aims.³⁸ In reference to the campaigns with children in late 1934, Codovilla was not too far off target when he wrote in his report that “all the left-wing press talks about this activity.” Indeed, the Comintern understood and exploited the popularity of the “infancia obrera” campaign to target Spanish women nation-wide. The legality of the children’s committees enabled the Comintern and its Spanish section in March 1935 to use their offices and personnel to launch a larger outreach to women under the banner of International Women’s Day. Moscow proposed a number of slogans for this campaign that connected women, children and the challenges posed by the high cost of living with anti-fascism. These slogans “should demonstrate the impact of government terror” on bottom line issues related to motherhood and family such as medical care, proletarian education, and the cost of milk. The campaign also involved bringing six women to the USSR and the slogan “Women in the USSR are happy mothers.”³⁹

As Stasova’s communications with the Political Commission of the ECCI make clear, International Red Aid in Moscow, Paris and Spain was the driving force behind the campaigns in support of prisoners, families, and children. The World Committee, as well as the various Spain-based committees and sub-committees was carefully implementing the recommendations of the Red Aid chief with the approval of the Comintern’s Political Commission. The full

37 *Secretariat Romaine, orateur Codovilla, 29th January 1935, Question Espagnole. RGASPI f. 495. Op. 32. D. 165.* The document includes questions and answers in dialogue with Ercoli and others during the presentation.

38 See the report in *Hoja Oficial del Lunes* (27th of May 1935).

39 See “Au C.C. du P.C. Espagnol”, 11th January 1935, RGASPI F. 495 Op. 32 D. 224; Lista de Consignas para la Jornada Internacional Femenina, *Ibidem*. The Comintern and its Spanish section struggled to reach Spanish women with their message, these efforts notwithstanding. In late May 1936, a draft resolution for work “among women” determined that the February 1936 elections had revealed that women were “perfectamente susceptibles” to be wrenched from the hands of fascism, provided the Communists could show they respected the “religious” feelings of women. It was decided, therefore, that Dolores (Pasionaria) should publicly announce that the PCE is not against the feelings of believers. Additionally, a brochure should be published “in very popular language” about several key problems women face, connecting these to the political situation. Protokoll (A) 47 29th May 1936 and accompanying draft document Work Among Women RGASPI F. 494 Op. 18 D. 1092.

alignment of the activities on the ground with the official aims of Red Aid is evident in a March 29th, 1935, Comintern letter⁴⁰ to the Central Committee of its Spanish section, the P.C.E., detailing instructions for the work of Red Aid in Spain. The three-page letter starts by reminding the P.C.E. leadership that the ongoing campaigns for the “persecuted peasant workers...prisoners and their families, and the fight for the liberation of all proletarian political prisoners has in Spain the highest political significance”. This requires, continues the letter, the full attention and support of the Communist Party to the Red Aid organization in Spain. The primary task of Red Aid in Spain, affirms the letter, is to utilize all the legal and semi-legal means necessary to carry out the aid to the prisoners and their families so as to contribute to create in the whole country...an environment of discontent and hatred towards the murderous regime...” The press coverage of these campaigns in early 1935 indicates they were having the desired effect.⁴¹ Further, the instructions from Moscow to Madrid stress the importance of leveraging these activities to create a true mass movement that does not have a public communist façade. Depending on local and regional conditions, continues the letter, the movement can have the most varied forms. Where police presence makes creating a Red Aid branch impossible “it is necessary to organize under a different form and name, including sowing clubs to repair clothes for the children, patronage groups for specific Asturian villages, etc.” Further, the P.C.E. was asked to ensure that more non – communists are recruited for Socorro Rojo, especially socialists, anarchists and individuals with no party membership. The aim of all of this, according to the letter, is to drive the united front project forward ensuring that socialists, anarchists and nationalist parties in Cataluña and Basque Country follow the communist lead in this movement. Rallies and other activities should be used to explain to the leaders of these parties the central role of International Red Aid in the movement, demonstrated practically by the distribution of funds exceeding three million pesetas to that date.

The abundant resources of Socorro Rojo had a powerful impact on the socialists in 1935 as the need of the hour forced them to abandon earlier refusals to accept Red Aid Spain’s regular outreaches to them.⁴² Socialist leader J. Mar-

40 Begleitbrief zum Brief der PC. Betreffe MOPR Arbeit. An Das ZK der KP Spaniens. RGASPI. F. 495. Op. 32.D. 224. Letter is written in South American Spanish using “ustedes” instead of “vosotros”, perhaps by Ercoli. This is a stylistic mistake corrected in other similar letters sent to the Spanish party from the center I have seen.

41 Thus *Diario de Palencia* (31 January 1935) report on the activities of Pasionaria and Asociación Pro Infancia entitled “Captando niños para envenenarlos de odio revolucionario.”

42 On August 18th, 1933, UGT advised its members that Red Aid was a communist organization set up “against” the socialist Fondo Matteotti, and that UGT members should only contribute funds to the socialist fund. “El Fondo Matteotti,” in *Justicia Social* of that date. In August 1933 UGT decided to reject an invitation to visit the USSR made to them by Red Aid and Friends of the Soviet Union in

tinez Amutio wrote openly about the socialist leaders' trips to Paris in 1935 to request additional funding from Comintern agent Stepanov after "Contreras" and Codovilla made the introduction.⁴³ Codovilla, informed the center in his 125 page January report that the Red Aid-funded campaigns and outreaches to the socialists were a resounding success, and the most solid basis for the achievement of the united front in Spain. As of January 1935, Codovilla continued, there were prisoner aid committees in every major town in Spain, with over 1,000 lawyers recruited for the cause by Red Aid. The merit of the Communist organization, concluded Codovilla, is that "neither socialists nor anarchists were able to do for their people what we have done for them." The Comintern, its Spanish section and its conglomerate of front organizations, he concluded, ought now to focus on promoting a concentration of all anti-fascists into a single left-wing block. As for the socialists, if progress is not made towards the merger of unions, youth and, eventually, party, added Codovilla, the plan is to split PSOE from inside.

FROM DEL VAYO TO AZAÑA: THE VICTIMIZATION NARRATIVE AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE POPULAR FRONT

The spring and summer of 1935 was a particularly busy period at Münzenberg's office on 83 Boulevard Montparnasse in Paris. Just as Stavova had requested, the socialists Margarita Nelken and Álvarez del Vayo were among the speakers secured for a "first European conference for the victims of fascism in Spain", held in Paris on the 13th and 14th of April 1935. The protocol and program reveal the content and aim of this event.⁴⁴ Beyond fundraising, the objective of the event was to unite "all anti-fascist forces without distinction of political party" in a single solidarity movement for the people of Spain. Interestingly, the Spanish delegation, made up of 33 delegates, is referred to as the Popular Front in Spain (Die Volksfront in Spanien). Nelken was introduced as the socialist member of parliament who would address the "reign of terror" of the "foreign legionnaires and the Arab troops", and the tortures suffered by the workers. Del Vayo was to address the unification of the solidarity movement as all anti-fascists were coming together, from the communists to the left-wing republicans. On the second day of the conference, Lord Listowel was to address the experience he gained

Spain, explaining that UGT only sends to foreign destinations the delegations selected by itself and for purposes aligned with its own objectives. See brief report "Unión General de Trabajadores. Reunión de la Ejecutiva", *Luz* (11th August 1933).

43 J. MARTÍNEZ AMUTIO, *Chantaje a un Pueblo*, Madrid: G. del Toro, 1974, p. 269-70.

44 Protokoll die Pariser Hilfskonferenz für die Opfer der Faschismus in Spanien, 4th point in the discussion. RGASPI. F. 495. Op. 4.D. 471

in his trip to Spain, especially the heroic fight of the Asturian miners and the “poisoning campaign” Gil Robles engaged in against the foreign delegation. Del Vayo’s close collaboration with the Comintern in 1935 developed significantly, when, in November 1935, on his way to the meeting of the Second International, del Vayo asked the Comintern for instructions via the Paris-based representative “Julius” (Gyula Alpári).⁴⁵ Ercoli replied explaining what del Vayo “should” do at the meeting. The Spanish socialist, instructed Ercoli, should stir up debate between left and right wings of the international socialist organization, ensure the Communist united front tactic is discussed, and ask any supporters of the united front concept to reach out to the Comintern directly. It appears, therefore, that del Vayo was in fact operating as an “agent of Moscow” long before his taking over the war-time army commissariat.⁴⁶

In the late spring of 1935 Henri Barbusse took over the leadership of the campaign in Spain. Using his own contacts from his 1933 Madrid visit and others provided by the Paris Comintern office, Barbusse proceeded to write every leading left-wing republican, socialist and anarchist group to invite their participation in a movement he called the “Concentración Popular.” Elorza and Bizcarrondo mention this recruitment effort by Barbusse⁴⁷ but leave out an interesting accompanying report in the same RGASPI file.⁴⁸ The authors of *Queridos Camaradas* are also somewhat dismissive of this Barbusse campaign, suggesting its results were “minuscule” as was the case, they argue, with his visit in 1933. To begin with, however, Münzenberg had a higher estimation of the return on investment to the Comintern of the expensive 1933 trip, considering the agitation and awareness of the anti-fascism concept among the republican and left-wing parties. Münzenberg’s continued successful leadership of the various Spanish campaigns brought him to Madrid in April 1936 for meetings with Caballero and del Vayo.⁴⁹ As for the Concentración Popular effort, the outcome of this effort was, in fact, significant. First, Barbusse obtained positive responses from the socialist party, with a response letter offering active involvement from Enrique de Francisco. Further, Barbusse’s efforts also achieved the support of Prudencio *Sayagüés*, the leader of the youth branch of Izquierda

45 Protokoll (A) Nbr. 14 Der Sitzung der Sekretariats der EKKI vom 16 November 1935. RGASPI. F. 495. Op. 18. D. 1030

46 The data on del Vayo’s activities in the Comintern archives requires a heavy revision of the apologetic of del Vayo put forth, for example, by Cristina RODRIGUEZ GUTIERREZ, “Julio Álvarez del Vayo y Olloqui. ¿Traidor o Víctima?”, *Espacio Tiempo y Forma*, 16 (2004) p. 291-308.

47 Antonio ELORZA and Marta BIZCARRONDO, *Queridos Camaradas. La Internacional comunista y España 1919-1939*, Barcelona: Planeta, 1999, p. 246-7.

48 Correspondence and report in RGASPI F. 543. Op. 1. D. 25.

49 See two separate references to at least two separate visits of Willi Münzenberg to Spain in TNA HW 17/26 22nd March 1936, Moscow to Medina, and 26th of March 1936, “Epoca” to Medina.

Republicana, Azaña's party,⁵⁰ as well as from Felix Gordón (Unión Republicana) and Botella Asensi (Izquierda Radical Socialista). The youth of Izquierda Republicana led by *Sayagüés*, were far more radicalized than the rest of Azaña's party, had many members in prison or closely monitored by the police, and were a natural entry point for the Comintern's outreach into Azaña's organization.⁵¹ In addition, Elorza and Bizcarrondo are failing to see the full context of the Comintern popular front outreach that begins with "Albert's" (probably Hugo Eberlein, as I have argued elsewhere⁵²) effort in January 1935. A detailed comparison of the "Albert" and Barbusse campaigns reveals they are two stages of the same Comintern-driven effort to win over all republican and left-wing parties to the banner of the Popular Front. The slogans agreed in both cases are almost identical, with the addition in the Barbusse campaign of a rejection of constitutional reform, a key requirement of left-wing republicans like Victoria Kent in those days. The core of the slogans in both cases centers on the campaign to secure amnesty for the October 1934 insurrectionists, a stand against military tribunals and the death penalty, and for the cancelation of the state of siege. Interestingly, both versions of the campaign include slogans in defense of democratic and parliamentary freedoms, while at the same time demanding immunity for those who took up arms against the center-right republican government. The slogans "for peace" and "against war" are equally surprising for the same reasons. The Comintern's victimization narrative embedded in these slogans was fully shared from left wing republicanism to PSOE and anarchist parties in 1935, though the Comintern leadership understood it was fundamentally at odds with the facts on the ground.⁵³

50 Sayagüés is listed as speaker in the Concentración Popular rally, see *La Libertad*, 9th August 1935. Sayagüés was also listed as a supporter of the Popular Front in the "Albert" report I have discussed in Gustavo MARTÍN ASENSIO, "Mobilizing all our Forces...", *op. cit.*, p. 64-65. See the document in RGASPI. F. 495. Op. 32 D. 225 L. 95-100.

51 See on this Juan AVILÉS FARRÉ, *La Izquierda Burguesa y la Tragedia de la II República*, Madrid. Comunidad de Madrid, 2006, p. 380.

52 Gustavo MARTÍN ASENSIO, "Mobilizing all our Forces...", *op. cit.*, p. 64-5.

53 Regarding the issue of the death penalties, as we saw above, the Comintern was forced to suggest to its UK sections that the commutation of the death sentences in 1935 was a mere "fascist ploy". As we shall see below, Azaña informed his soviet intelligence interlocutor in September 1935 that any further executions were extremely unlikely. Of the 23 death sentences initially given, only 2 were carried out, and this brought about the resignation of the three CEDA ministers in March 1935. See on this Félix GORDÓN ORDÁS, *Mi Política Fuera de España*, México: Victoria, 1961, p. 297. As to conditions faced by the leading insurrectionists in jails, P.C.E. leader José Diaz and Ercoli discussed with Manuilsky and others in January 1936 the fact that when the Comintern representatives wanted to meet Caballero and the youth leaders in prison, the director of the jail gave them a room to hold their meetings because he was sympathetic to their cause. Elsewhere in the report Codovilla writes that "le directeur de la prison laisse faire..." See Transcript of the Jan 17th, 1936, Meeting of the ECCI's Roman Lander Secretariat - Spanish Commission. RGASPI F. 494 Op. 20 D. 269. As to the freedom to hold rallies and meetings, as we shall see below, the Comintern representatives in Spain were surprised at the fact that a Red Aid rally

Other republicans who eventually joined the leadership of Azaña's party and are mentioned in these documents are Victoria Kent, mentioned as a definite commit by “Albert”, and Felix Gordón, whose response to Barbusse is included in the file of the Frenchman's campaign for the *Concentración Popular*. Sayagües and Kent participated together as speakers in multiple events in 1935, some promoting left-wing republican unity, and others various Comintern or P.C.E.- driven agendas.⁵⁴ Lastly, José Salmerón, whose commitment is listed by “Albert” in January, became Secretary General of Azaña's party and a close advisor to him. When Azaña met with Caballero in an early and unsuccessful attempt to win Caballero's support for the left-wing coalition, the meeting was held at Salmerón's house.⁵⁵ The Comintern's Popular Front outreach to the republican parties in the first half of 1935, therefore, appears to have been more successful than Elorza and Bizcarrondo were willing to accept. This outreach effort towards the republicans continued after the summer when it finally reached the very apex of Izquierda Republicana's leadership.

In late September 1935 Manuel Azaña went on a European trip for about two weeks. The press did its best to track him down and find out where he was and when he was coming back, given the pressing matters facing republican parties at that time. On the 20th of September, the leader of the left-wing minority in the Cortes was asked where Azaña was, to which he replied, “I think he is in Brussels”. On the 26th, a *Diario de Almeria* reporter affirmed Azaña was being “visitadísimo” in Paris. On the 27th *Diario Palentino* informed its readers that Sanchez Roman had traveled to Paris to meet Azaña. The press also revealed the former Prime Minister had met the socialist Prieto in Brussels and the Catalan Casanovas in Paris. Manuel Azaña, however, had another meeting on the 26th of September 1935 that went unnoticed by the press. A then unknown 31-year-old Eastern European man, speaking French with a heavy German, or perhaps Polish accent, had also managed to sit down for a “very interesting conversation” with Manuel Azaña during his Paris visit.⁵⁶ In the course of that conversation, the Spanish leader had told the enigmatic stranger he was in fact “ready to talk to the communists”, and gladly committed to joining and supporting one of the many versions of Willi Münzenberg's World Committee. The discrete and slow talking stranger, who breathed deeply and

was able to be held legally, and that the Government would ban a rally and then lift the ban the following day after limited street protests. Codovilla's amusement at Spanish police weakness in the face of the staged “aid the children” rallies has already been mentioned.

54 Kent and Sayagües together spoke at the Izquierda Republicana rally in Madrid on the 4th of May 1935. Sayagües spoke at the rally against war together with Claudín of the Communist Youth and others, on the 4th of August 1935, see *La Libertad* (2nd of August 1935).

55 See Juan Avilés FARRÉ, *La Izquierda...*, *op. cit.*, p. 348.

56 Report addressed to Ercoli, Gottwald on meeting with Manuel Azaña, signed “Gilbert”. 26th September 1935. RGASPI F. 495. Op. 12.D. 92

stuck out his chest when he walked, was a Galizianer from near Lemberg who used the aliases “Gilbert” and “Otto”. His real name was Leopold Trepper, and he was in Paris as a roving, high-powered soviet army intelligence agent who was also completing a Moscow based course of study. Trepper would achieve global fame in World War II as the leader of the Red Orchestra spy ring. His file at The National Archives⁵⁷ is extensive and enables us to make this identification based on the alias he uses in this report, “Gilbert”, and the alias used in a report produced less than a week later from Valencia signed “Otto”. Both documents are part of the same RGASPI opis (inventory) and delo (file) within the 495 Comintern fond (collection).⁵⁸ Additionally, the German language of the report and the French he used with Azaña match what we know of Trepper, as do the family details we know of “Gilbert” from other RGASPI files.⁵⁹ Finally, the TNA file does place Trepper in Paris at this time already as technical Director of R.U. Intelligence, with responsibilities that overlapped those of the Comintern’s secretive international liaison department (O.M.S.) and responsibility in Western Europe including Spain, Portugal, and France. “Gilbert” also signed a delicate report on Henri Barbusse sent to Moscow in July 1935,⁶⁰ advising Bela Kun that Barbusse was becoming unreliable and that the leadership should use the Frenchman’s upcoming visit to Moscow to have a detailed conversation with him. Barbusse died in Moscow during his visit in August 1935 and received an official Soviet government funeral.

The “Gilbert” report suggests its author is a masterful networker and negotiator, capable of engaging deeply with powerful men of cultures different from his. “Gilbert” explains in his report how he navigated the conversation with Azaña, probing him effectively about his vision for the collectivization of land, about which, “Gilbert” adds, “he developed these principles on his own, without any suggestion from my part.” Gilbert was very pleased and perhaps surprised to hear Azaña had a vision of land collectivization⁶¹ that was far bet-

57 Leopold Trepper, TNA KV2-2074-1 and KV2-2074-2. The literature on Trepper focuses almost exclusively on his leadership of the Red Orchestra spy ring during the Second World War, and not on his work in the early to mid-1930’s. In his autobiography, Trepper reads his later disillusionment with Soviet communism into the account of his life in Moscow in 1934-1935 and does not cover any of his work in Paris or Spain in 1935 which we know of from the archival material cited. Leopold TREPPER, *Le Grand Jeu*, Paris, 1975.

58 A helpful explanation of the Russian archival classification system is provided by the University of Reading here <https://research.reading.ac.uk/archives-guide/former-soviet-archives-structure/>

59 Letter from Gilbert to “dear friend”, a superior in Moscow, dated 17th of September 1933, in which Gilbert makes a request for the approval of travel for his wife and child. ECCI, Documents des comités antiguerres dans différents pays, RGASPI F. 543 Op. 1 D. 123.

60 With cover note from Bela Kun to Dimitrov, RGASPI. F. 495. Op. 60 D. 249

61 In the course of the interview, Azaña mentioned he lost the 1933 elections because his land policy amounted to little beyond talk. As Malefakis argued, Azaña and many of the left-wing republicans shared a “sentimental attachment to a distant and imperfectly understood objective.” In addition, Azaña had

ter aligned with Comintern tactics than that expressed by Caballero and other leading socialists.⁶² “Gilbert” also highlights that Azaña did not utter a single negative word about the Communists and answered with an unqualified “yes” when asked if he was ready to contact them. Azaña added, however, that he believed the PCE was a relatively weak force, and he was focusing on securing the support that would bring a left-wing coalition to power. When Azaña expressed his wish that the proletarian parties support the democratic course he wished to take, “Gilbert” requested Azaña’s active backing for a new committee for a world peace congress, and to create a committee in Spain in which all forces who work for peace should be included. “Gilbert” brought up last of all the question of prisoners and death penalties. Azaña replied that he believed any further executions were ruled out, but that amnesty was unthinkable while the conservative coalition was in power. In conclusion, “Gilbert” wrote to the center that he believed Azaña could be won over for the Comintern’s amnesty strategy, and that the Spanish section should increase their ongoing efforts to form a popular front in the direction of Azaña. “Gilbert” concluded: “We are constantly trying to orient the Concentración Popular toward this task.”⁶³

We cannot attribute a major shift in Azaña’s political orientation to this encounter with Soviet military intelligence. We can, however, establish that the Spanish republican was no longer asking “where can we possibly go with the communists?”⁶⁴ as he had done in his April correspondence with Prieto. Azaña’s agreement to join and promote the Comintern’s World Committee to unite “all the forces who work for peace”, that is, the antifascist united front under another name, was major achievement of this meeting for the Comintern, which Azaña would later attempt to deny.⁶⁵ In all probability, Azaña’s

a “naively optimistic assumption that he held a semi-permanent mandate to power”, which led him to think he would solve all the difficult land challenges eventually. Edward E. MALEFAKIS, *Agrarian Reform and Peasant Revolution in Spain*, New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 1970, p. 254-56.

62 In a January 1936 report on the situation in Spain presented in Moscow, Codovilla and Pepe Diaz explained that the socialists were campaigning for the nationalization of land, failing to understand, that, according to Comintern tactics, nationalization of land belonged only in the following phase of the revolution and not in the then current “democratic-bourgeois” phase, unless local conditions clearly allowed this move. Secrétariat Roman. Commission Espagnole, 17 January 1936, RGASPI F. 495 Op. 20 D. 269. In presenting collectivization as the correct measure for Spain in 1935-6, there was no discussion of the cost in human lives that collectivization had just had in the USSR. See on this Stephen KOTKIN, *Stalin Volume II, Waiting for Hitler*, New York: Penguin, 2018, p. 34, on the liquidation of the “kulaks” as a class.

63 Wir versuchen schon standig, die Concentracion Popular auf diese Aufgabe zu orientieren.

64 Azaña’s letter to Prieto cited in Octavio CABEZAS, *Indalecio Prieto, Socialista y Español*, Madrid: Alga, 2005, p. 281.

65 See *El Adelanto de Salamanca* (6th October 1935), “El señor Azaña rectifica una noticia”, with Azaña denying he had signed a manifest against war as was published in a conservative daily. The Catholic daily, *El Siglo Futuro*, had suggested the day before there was a degree of hypocrisy in the communist, socialist and republican stance against war in Abyssinia and elsewhere, while at the same refusing to condemn the

pragmatism led him, already in September of 1935, to relax his earlier commitment to exclude the far-left socialists and communists from his planned electoral alliance. For the Comintern, it was clear that Azaña had the charisma and the appeal to the masses that was absolutely required for the Popular Front to be successful. Once it became clear that he was also on board with the victimization theme as the basis for left-wing unity, the Communists gave him their full support as the visible head of the Popular Front. Three weeks after Trepper produced his report, the P.C.E. shouted their endorsement from the rooftops: ¡Todos al mitin de Azaña!, declared the leading headline on *Pueblo* on the 19th of October.⁶⁶ In his famous Comillas speech the following day, Azaña fulfilled at least the essential requirements of socialists and communists by identifying true republicanism with the *victims* of the October insurrection. Further, he declared that the “revolution” had been the just exasperation of the popular masses whose rights had been sacrificed and referred to the advent of the II Republic in April 1931 as the coming of the Spanish revolution. With the 1933 electoral victory of the republican and conservative coalition, he concluded, *that* republic had disappeared. Azaña’s final words, a sample of his most potent rhetoric, were a command for the audience to be silent and remember “the martyrs of the republic.” While the silence of the people, he added, declares their indignation, the people’s voice can sound as terrible as the trumpets of judgment. ¡People!, ¡all in one voice for Spain and the republic!.⁶⁷ Thus, the rhetorical spearhead of Azaña’s message was fully satisfactory to socialists and communists and was sufficiently aligned with the Popular Front slogans promoted by “Albert” in January and Barbusse in June. A comparison of Azaña’s words in Comillas and the wording of the Popular Front platform published in January 1936 with the April 1935 republican declaration reveals the radicalization of the republican amnesty message in this period of 5 months.⁶⁸ The victimization narrative, including the commitment to turn the tables on

slaughter carried out by the insurrectionists in Spain exactly a year earlier. “¿Habr  llegado ya el Turquesa a Etiop a?”. Azaña’s support for the “World Committee against War” was, on this occasion, equally hypocritical, argued *Siglo Futuro*.

66 Santos Juli  attributes the massive crowd exclusively to Azaña’s own charisma and the attractiveness of his vision to “redeem the republic”, making no mention of the P.C.E. and left-wing socialist support, and of the large far left contingent evident in the crowd, whose slogans and symbols were fundamentally at odds with much of his speech. Santos JULI , “The origins of the Spanish Popular Front” in Martin ALEXANDER and Helen GRAHAM, *The French and Spanish... , op. cit.*, p. 28-9; Likewise, Juan Avil s FARR , *La Izquierda... , op. cit.*, p. 368.

67 Quotes taken from the full speech as reported by *La Libertad* (21 October 1935).

68 The declaration of April 11th, 1935, a basis for unity among three leading republican parties including Azaña’s, was a reformist, legalist defense of law and order within the constitution. It responded to the conservative government’s plans of lifting the state of war by deeming them “insufficient”, while at the same time demanding, not blanket amnesty, but a regime of strict legality for prisoners, including the punishment of crimes that were “debidamente probados.” See the declaration in *Heraldo de Madrid* (12th April 1935).

the *aggressors*, resonated fully with a majority of the 400,000 people who had come to the banks of the Manzanares that Sunday morning. That core message enabled the many socialist and communist attendees to ignore the constitutionalist elements in the republican’s speech. Indeed, much of the press took note of the clear disconnect between many of Azaña’s political speeches and the slogans and banners displayed by his audiences.⁶⁹ As Francesc Cambó had said 5 days before the speech, Azaña’s democratic references are the lyrics of the song, but the music is provided by the far-left radicals and the anarchists. Everyone knows, Cambó added, that in Spain the music overpowers the lyrics.⁷⁰ In its front-page editorial the centrist republican daily *Ahora* wondered whether, when the time came, Azaña’s enthusiasm would be able to contain the overwhelming impetus of the revolutionaries in his audience. “Albert”, Barbusse, and the Comintern’s Spanish section were counting on a negative answer to that question.

Five days after the Paris interview with Azaña, Trepper (using this time his “Otto” alias) appears in Valencia, Spain, to report on the recently concluded national plenary meeting of the prisoner aid committees, an organization with socialist and other left-wing presence. The meeting had taken place on the 14th and 15th of September 1935 and, though endorsed by P.C.E., PSOE, Red Aid and a number of left-wing parties, the event had been open to all republican parties and cultural organizations.⁷¹ The report is signed “Otto”, and is forwarded to Ercoli via the Red Aid organization with a cover note from Stasova that reads: “Since Victor is coming soon and will give the summary report on Spain, we send you the business report that has already arrived for preliminary inspection.”⁷² Victor is a reference to “Contreras”, that is, Vittorio Vidali, Stasova’s man in Spain in 1935 and early 1936. “Otto” starts his account with a reference to Victor, who was present at this even and at a parallel Socorro Rojo conference in Sevilla and will report on both.⁷³ However, “Otto” wishes

69 Preston also acknowledges this disconnect and refers to Azaña’s surprise at the thousands of clenched fists and “proletarian passion”. see Paul PRESTON, “The Creation of the Popular Front in Spain” in Helen GRAHAM and Paul PRESTON (ed.), *The Popular Front...*, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

70 *La Libertad* (15th October 1935), 5 days before the rally in Comillas.

71 According to *La Región*, (September 13th)

72 Cover note with handwritten note by Ercoli and “Otto” report in RGASPI F. 495 Op. 12 D. 92.

73 There was a degree of confusion regarding these two events, given the communist and socialist present in both. The Sevilla event was the “legal” national conference of Socorro Rojo Internacional, Red Aid in Spain, and was to be held in Sevilla on the 7th and 8th of September. Its self-identification as a “legal” event notwithstanding, the Government banned the event, but lifted the ban after protests ensued and the conference finally took place on the 10th and 11th. See the account in *La Región* 15th September 1935, section fittingly entitled “Lucha de Clases”. The Valencia event was set up as a non-partisan “national plenum of aid committees”, though communists and socialists were in a majority and the executive committee was made up of communists as “Otto” reveals in his report. The dates for that event were originally the 14th and 15th of September and, according to “Otto” the event was delayed by one day. The

to add his own commentary over two and one half typed pages. His insights into the event and why it was successful for the Comintern, as well as the intelligence he gathered through his on-site networking with Pasionaria and others confirm, once more, the value of Trepper's involvement.

To begin with, "Otto" expresses his surprise at the fact that the Valencia event was legal. The Government had originally banned the conference, probably because of its obvious connection with Socorro Rojo and the Comintern. The large media campaign, explains Otto, together with the widespread protests, forced the Government to lift the ban, and this has a great impact on the continued legal status of "RH" (Rote Hilfe, Red Aid) in the province. But legality could be maintained only to the extent that the organizers did not reveal their true identity, and "Otto" laments the mistake made by the editor of the party newspaper who had published the names and addresses of the central committee members, all of which, he adds, are party members. Despite this, Otto celebrates that of the 62 participants, 18 were socialists and 2 anarchists, and that the program and discussions demonstrate that Socorro Rojo had "tremendously strengthened its authority as a non-partisan aid organization in the last few months and that it has real mass popularity in key parts of the country." The effective reach of Red Aid throughout Spain, continues Otto, is evidenced by the many regional meetings held to select delegates for the plenum, even in Asturias, though the meeting there was held illegally.

The unprecedented success of this event, concludes "Otto", is seen in the fact that PSOE and UGT have committed to the creation of a unified aid organization and this commitment is reflected in the adopted resolutions. These resolutions also affirm the commitment to extend the scope to "all forms of solidarity", including assistance to the prisoners, fight against death penalty and support for political emigrants. This achievement, continues "Otto", changes dramatically the standing of the Comintern with Schevenels and Adler, the leaders of the Second International. Otto met with Dolores (Dolores Ibarruri, "La Pasionaria") after the event, and he was happy to hear she felt as satisfied as he with the outcome. Immediate steps should be taken, the Spanish communist agreed, to initiate the implementation of a unified aid organization where the situation is ripe for this. Barely two months later, Elena Stasova was able to affirm that in some countries, including Spain, Red Aid had grown to such an extent that it had received within its ranks the socialists, not only isolated individuals, but the organization as a whole.⁷⁴ In her country-by-country status summary, Stasova refers to the Red Aid

fact that a government which was, according to Comintern doctrine and propaganda, a fascist tyranny, would lift bans on revolutionary events less than a year after an armed insurrection on account of limited popular protests does not provoke any commentary by "Otto", aside from expressing surprise and delight. 74 Rapport de la Camarade Stasova au Secretariat du C.E. de L'I.C. 25 January 1936. RGASPI F. 495. Op. 20. D. 905.

event in Sevilla, and sums up the joint achievement of that event and its partner plenum in Valencia by concluding that a new united organization was “created.” That new organization, Stasova concludes, brings into the Red Aid ranks the socialists, unions, and other organizations belonging to the Popular Front.

The consolidation of the many comités de ayuda in Spain under Communist control, agreed to in the Valencia plenary meeting, was a substantial return on the investment made by Red Aid in the country since October 34. Thanks to this investment, the International Red Aid, the World Committee, and multiple organizations created by them since October (orphans, women, students, anti-death penalty, for peace...) succeeded in driving the narrative of *victims* and *aggressors* from October 1934 to February 1936. The unification of aid committees was the fourth leg to the unification chair, the others being unions, youth, and single party, but its role from an agit-prop perspective in the creation and success of the Popular Front was fundamental. With its unification program on track, the Comintern focused heavily on the Popular Front campaign, pouring substantial sums into the country in January and early February 1936.⁷⁵ According to Socorro Rojo’s own assessment of the content of their campaign after victory was declared on the 18th of February, the heart of the message had been amnesty and justice.⁷⁶ That is, in full alignment with the “Albert” (January 1935) and Barbusse (June 1935) campaigns, the Popular Front program was fundamentally about the full vindication of the October *victims* and the punishment of the *fascists* who repressed them. With the Popular Front in power, a thoroughgoing settling of accounts could begin, and Red Aid made sure socialists, anarchists and republicans understood who had invested the most to bring this about. Meanwhile, Red Aid operative and P.C.E. member Lucía Barón spoke in Moscow to the MOPR commission about the spectacular success of her organization, which entitled her to interpret the victory as a victory for Dimitrov and for Moscow.⁷⁷ The deep wells of resentment, dug skillfully over 14 months were full to the brim. La ansiedad popular, declared *La Libertad*, demands immediate action.⁷⁸ In

⁷⁵ See Antonio ELORZA and Marta BIZCARRONDO, *Queridos...*, *op. cit.*, p. 249; Stasova file in TNA, KV2-3596 with a letter from Victor about receiving campaign cash etc. Comintern financing of the Popular Front campaign was widely discussed in the conservative press in Spain. Also, the organ of Socorro Rojo Internacional, *Ayuda* (27th February 1936), p. 1, “La Victoria del Frente Popular”, which highlights the fact that Red Aid had “mobilized millions of pesetas.”

⁷⁶ See *Ayuda* (27th February 1936), p. 2, “La propaganda electoral y la amnistía.” “Nuestra foto representa algunos de los numerosos carteles que, con el grito de ¡amnistía!, llamaban a votar por el frente popular.”

⁷⁷ See Commission du MOPR, Séance du 19 Février 1936, Orateur, Lucía. RGASPI F 495. Op. 20 D. 907. Barón noted that the Spanish right-wing press had been correct in their reading of what a vote for the left-wing parties truly meant.

⁷⁸ On the 21st of February *La Libertad*’s leading headline was “¡Todo el Poder Para el Pueblo!”. The sub heading read: “La ansiedad popular está pendiente de la acción rápida y justiciera del Gobierno.” On a side piece the theme is picked up again. Fast justice is the first demand of popular anxiety.

Caballero's own words, "nothing will happen" if the new government moves fast to deliver justice to the people⁷⁹. On the 18th of February, with votes still being counted, *La Libertad* placed a large cartoon of a republican citizen holding the tricolor flag on page three. He smiles as he stands on top of a large pile of bodies, the faces of opposition party leaders clearly discernible in it. Just below, a brief report on the hurried departure from Spain of well-known anti-revolutionaries, including the former interior minister Salazar Alonso,⁸⁰ "el que provocó la revolución de octubre." The article suggests that if their crimes were merely political it would be best to simply let them go. That was certainly not the case, the article concludes.

¡VIVA LA SENDA DE OCTUBRE! THE EMIGRANTS RETURN... WITH A VENGEANCE

As news of the Popular Front victory reached Moscow, Margarita Nelken, José Laín, Adalberto Salas and the rest of the 200 socialist, communist and anarchist⁸¹ immigrants in Moscow understood their time to return home had arrived. At an ECCI secretariat meeting held on the 21st of February 1936, the outcome of the elections in Spain was discussed, with Manuilsky as reporter and Florin, Dimitrov and Gere as the panel. Based on that discussion, the stenographic protocol (A) Number 29⁸² indicated that Manuilsky was to draft a set of directives for the Spanish party, and Dimitrov would approve the final text with a deadline of two days from the date of that meeting. In a follow-up meeting that same day, it was agreed, in relation to the Spain topic, to produce both a directives document and an accompanying "letter of the Spanish emigrants" in Moscow. The content of both documents is fundamentally the same,

79 Lengthy report on Caballero's words to the press in *Heraldo de Madrid* (17th February 1936).

80 Rafael Salazar Alonso, radical republican leader and Minister of Gobernación (interior) in 1934. In his January 1935 report cited above, Codovilla refers to him as "that bloody little dog" (un petit chien sanglant). In 1934 Salazar Alonso opposed the armed insurrection and defended constitutional legality. His 1935 book *Bajo el Signo de la Revolución* contains an abundance of documentation he gained access to from police files demonstrating the direct socialist and communist involvement. He was arrested by left wing militias in August 1936 and shot. The sentence against him mentions his book explicitly and argues that the book contained statements "contrary to the constitution." See the 2007 reprint which includes the text of the August 1936 sentence in Juan M. MARTÍNEZ VALDUEZA, "El Hombre y su Destino" in Rafael SALAZAR ALONSO, *Bajo el Signo de la Revolución*, Astorga: Akrón, 2007.

81 Elpátievsky cites Comín Colomer's estimate of 150, but believes, based on his own research in RGASPI, the total figure exceeds 200 slightly. See ELPÁTIEVSKY, *La Emigración...*, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

82 The protokoll, as well as the various drafts, final versions and translations, and part of the drafts of the letter in RGASPI F. 495 Op. 20 D. 262. Most of the drafts, final versions and translations of the letter in RGASPI. F. 495. Op. 18 D. 1075a. The directives document, addressing the Central Committee of the P.C.E., bears a reference number #452 in the original Russian draft, as do all versions and translations. The letter bears the reference number #453, also in all versions and translations.

but the “letter from the Spanish emigrants” is significantly expanded and includes an introduction and conclusion related to the status of the signatories as fighters having escaped “fascist terror”. The version of the letter in Spanish that contains the hand-written signatures of 27 socialist, communist and anarchist October fighters bears several minor corrections that required a final, clean version in Spanish.

The directives document begins by alerting the Spanish section to the fact that, although the Popular Front coalition is now in power, reactionaries and fascists in Spain are still strong. The Spanish party should, therefore, take immediate action to wrest the masses away from the opposition parties and prepare to undermine their economic and socio-political base until they are “completely destroyed.” The document covers the familiar tactics of extra-parliamentary militias and worker and peasant alliances through which to “paralyze” the hostile actions of the moderate elements within the People’s Front Government. Systematic agitation should be carried out for full unification with the socialists, on the basis of the five conditions for unification detailed by Dimitrov at the VII Comintern Congress⁸³. A final set of requirements are listed, and these include the “cleansing” of rightists and centrists from the ranks of the P.S.O.E., as those are the elements that disrupted the October insurrection. Lastly, the Comintern recommends its Spanish section to agree with Largo Caballero a joint manifesto based on these directives and initiate a campaign on *Mundo Obrero* and other media.

The “letter of the Spanish emigrants” covers the same material but expands it at various points. The letter is addressed to the “comrades of the socialist and communist parties and those of the CNT, and to all the workers of Spain”. In the first draft of the Russian original dated 21st February, the anarchists are not included in the typewritten text of the title, but this omission is corrected by hand by Manuilsky (adding “and National Confederation of Labor”) in the February 23rd Russian draft. The introduction presents the signatories as the Spanish socialists, communist and anarcho-sindicalists who, “in the fateful days (of October 1934) managed to escape the claws of fascist terror and were fortunate enough to find refuge in the USSR.” Having heard the news of the Popular Front victory, the emigrants rejoice at the immediate prospect of returning home to re-join the fight against the enemies of the people. Before launching into an expanded commentary of the directives, the letter establishes the authority and legitimacy of the emigrants. Having lived and studied Soviet Communism in situ, they advise their readers that any true revolutionary, re-

83 See the five conditions for unification in Dimitrov’s speech on August 2nd, 1935. Georgi DIMITROV, “The Working Class Against Fascism” in *VII World Congress of the Communist International*, London: Modern Books, 1935, p. 74-75.

ardless of affiliation, must take advantage of the “formidable experience of the Bolshevik party.” When addressing the pursuit of full unity with the socialist party based on Dimitrov’s 5 conditions, the Spanish version of the latter which bears the signatures, as well as the French translation, spells out the conditions in a footnote. These include “complete break of the social democrats with the bourgeoisie, and recognition of the need to remove the bourgeoisie from power revolutionarily and establish the dictatorship of the proletariat in the form of soviets.” The letter concludes with a brief reflection on the need to learn from the October 1934 insurrection and be better prepared both politically and technically. The signatures are preceded by a list of vivas: Long live the October path, the USSR, etc. Among the 27 signatures many are easily recognizable: The socialists Virgilio Llanos, José Laín, Margarita Nelken, Adalberto Salas (Margarita Nelken’s son in law who married her daughter in Moscow), and others. Among the communists Rubén Ruiz was Pasionaria’s son who would be killed in the battle of Stalingrad. Manuel Zapico, an anarchist, and other less known names are identifiable thanks to the lists in Elpátievsky’s book cited above.

The Spanish version of the letter is based on the first edited Russian draft, dated 23rd February 1936. However, as we have already mentioned, only the Spanish and French versions contain the fully spelled out five conditions for unification with their explicit statement on dictatorship of the proletariat and soviets. The corrected version of the Spanish language letter, bearing the footnote with the five conditions, is followed in the RGASPI file by a cover letter from Manuilsky to “Medina”, that is, Victorio Codovilla, the leading Comintern agent in Madrid. Manuilsky writes in his note:

“For Medina. My dear friend, I attach a letter-platform produced by certain political emigrants. The (political) line presented in it corresponds entirely with the position we ourselves defend. I beg you to examine it with Pepe (Díaz). It would be good for you to discuss it with (our) friend Caballero and then use it as the basis for a joint political platform.... such a platform will render great services for the political orientation of the masses. The letter should not be published as it is, and doing so would create great inconveniences for us, for you, and for the objectives we pursue. Its political value depends on the condition that it be presented in the name of the local militants in the country who have worked the whole time in country and not from outside, from the emigrants. Fraternal greeting, your, M.”

In summary, though we ignore the authorship of the Russian draft used as a basis and mentioned in the protocol, both the directives and the letter were edited and completed in Russian and with the direct editing responsibility of Dmitry Manuilsky. Evidently, the Spanish emigrants did get an opportunity to add their edits to the working Russian draft, and their most distinctive addition is the footnote with the detail of the 5 conditions for unification, as well as the introduction and final exhortations. Directives and letter together were the output the ECCI decided was needed to address the situation in Spain after the February elections. The “letter from the emigrants” was believed likely to have the greatest impact on Caballero, given the leading socialists who signed it, all having maximum insurreccional credibility. However, for the larger audience in Spain, the ECCI wisely instructed that its content be presented only as coming from local militants so as to hide any connection with the Comintern and Moscow.

Much of the letter’s contents were published by José “Pepe” Diaz on *Mundo Obrero* in June 1936.⁸⁴ However, the returning emigrants, socialists included, would work effectively as the primary promoters of the agenda it contained. The RGASPI file contains an interesting two-line note confirming that the Spanish language documents were sent to Spain via the Comintern’s O.M.S. ciphering infrastructure. Later that same month, the ECCI secretariat met again, declaring that, due to the amnesty declared in Spain, the Red Aid leadership had decided that “all Spanish political emigrants” should return to Spain immediately, even those attending the International Lenin School and other training programs.⁸⁵ The same RGASPI file contains a farewell letter to Stalin, in which the Spanish October fighters, “with absolute unanimity and devoted enthusiasm” thank the leader of the proletariat for the privilege of having witnessed the glorious soviet project.

The arrival in Madrid via Irun of the main group of emigrants was the focus of media attention and reveals the key role they played in acting out the final act of the victimization narrative. The extensive photographic reports in *Mundo Gráfico*, *Ahora*, and on *Transporte*, the U.G.T.’s transport organ, together with the description of the event in the press,⁸⁶ are a window into the socio-political meanings and impact of that event. Nelken, De Francisco and others had been in Spain since the 15th of March or earlier to start work in the Cortes under the new Government.⁸⁷ The journey of the main group of 121 immi-

84 José DÍAZ; “Nuestro Camino”, series of articles in *Mundo Obrero*, June 6th 1936.

85 ECCI Sekretariat, protokoll (A) 37, 22 March 1936, RGASPI. F. 495. Op. 18.D. 1083

86 See *Mundo Gráfico* (29th April 1936); *Ahora* (25th April 1936); *Transporte UGT* Año 1 No. 117, (May 1936); *ABC Sevilla* (25th April 1936); *El Cantábrico* (25th April 1936).

87 See *La Tarde de Zamora* (16th March 1936) on the “refugees” who had been exiled “hasta ayer mismo”, including Nelken and Acuña.

grants from Leningrad via London, and their arrival by train, however, was carefully staged, with media and the public becoming a part of the pageantry and procession through the heart of Madrid.⁸⁸ The leader of the Asturian socialist insurrectionists, Ramón González Peña stood on the platform at Estación del Norte together the press and the Red Aid leadership awaiting the train carrying the emigrants from Irun via El Escorial. Socorro Rojo had carried out a significant campaign inviting the public to attend the welcome ceremony and parade. Based on the photographs in *Transporte* and *Mundo Gráfico*, the campaign was a success. The train cars carrying the group had the windows down with red flags and U.H.P. banners sticking out, matching those held by the crowds at the station. The 121 October fighters proceeded to march toward Calle Segovia and then up the steep hill towards the Almudena Cathedral, Calle Bailén and Calle Mayor, for a carefully planned stop at City Hall. Ahead of the crowd were a group of cyclists warning cars to make way. After the cyclists a group of children, the communist “pioneers”, and then the Communist and Socialist youth parading in uniform. Finally, a car filled with women carrying the flag of the Soviet Union just ahead of the group of exiles and their entourage. At City Hall on Calle Mayor, González Peña went out on the balcony and saluted the crowds with a raised fist as the mayor of Madrid stood, immediately to his right, to welcome the group to the capital. When the parade reached the Ministry of Gobernación (Interior) on Puerta del Sol, the crowd stopped again, sang the International and chanted slogans in favor of the rule of workers and peasants. The former exiles had now become celebrities. Being a former “refugiado político” became so attractive and profitable that the left-wing media warned about false refugees coming out of the woodwork in those days.

The message conveyed by this carefully choreographed procession through the capital of Spain that spring evening was reasonably clear. The vindication of the *victims* of October was acted out for all, especially local and national Government to witness. For anyone who failed to grasp the meaning of that procession, Largo Caballero would spell out that message in one of several rallies held at Cine Europa in the following weeks: “Es por octubre por lo que ha triunfado el Frente Popular.”⁸⁹ In the same rally, also featuring P.C.E.’s José “Pepe” Díaz, Margarita Nelken declared to the enthusiastic crowd that Spanish workers had to follow the path of October, and added:

88 For the multiple communications between Madrid and Moscow on the status of the journey, and Moscow’s concern over visas and the legal status of 6 of the comrades accused of terrorism, see TNA HW 17/26, 28th February 1936, 8th of April and 11th of April.

89 *La Libertad* (11th April 1936) reporting on the rally on the evening of the 10th. Pepe Diaz spoke in identical terms. See “Sin el movimiento revolucionario de octubre no habría en febrero Frente Popular.” Speech given in Oviedo on July 5th, 1936, published as a pamphlet by P.C.E. AHPCE – Dirigentes-José Diaz.

“No se puede tolerar que hombres que ejercieron la violenta e injusta represión de octubre anden por la calle y se sienten en el Parlamento... Si ellos fusilaron a nuestros compañeros, nosotros no podemos hacer otra cosa con ellos. Esta es una medida urgente y necesaria para la salud pública”.⁹⁰

In another rally held in the same theater in March, Nelken had started by delivering a proletarian greeting Comintern boss Dimitrov had personally given to her for the workers of Spain. She went on to say that sentimentalism was the worst enemy of Spanish proletarians. Because of sentimentalism, she continued, the great cathedral in Oviedo was not completely destroyed. She went on to address the judiciary and put forth the Soviet justice system as a model for Spain. Following the Soviet example, she added, it is preferable to have a baker in the judiciary than a monarchist. The baker knows nothing about laws, but he does know the revolution.⁹¹ The tables had been turned.

CONCLUSION

In an April 1935 Pravda editorial entitled “Agitation, a great art”, the writer explained that, given its importance, agitation could not be entrusted to low level operatives. The Communist agitator, continued the Pravda piece, must know, and understand people, what worries them and interests them, in order to find paths to their consciousness.⁹² The *Münzenberg* - Barbusse led anti-fascist front campaign of 1933 had been reasonably successful for the Comintern, yet it did not galvanize all the left-wing masses to an extent sufficient to bring about unity of action. The October 1934 insurrection delivered what had been missing. Substantial bloodshed, destruction, and suffering, adequately interpreted within a victimization narrative of proletarian *victims* and fascist *aggressors* enabled the Comintern to bring all the left-wing forces together under a single banner. Although the post-October repression had been rather mild by contemporary European standards, revolutionary historical memory, crafted and deployed successfully by the Comintern and its allies, successfully contradicted that narrative and became embedded in left-wing identity throughout 1935. In this article we have discussed archival material, largely ignored thus far in the historiography of the II Republic and have detailed the step-by-step leadership of Red Aid and other Comintern organizations in deploying the

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁹¹ *La Libertad* (26th March 1936)

⁹² “Agitatsya, Bolshoe Iskusstvo”, *Pravda* (7th April 1935), available online <http://docs.historyrussia.org/ru/nodes/91034-agitatsiya-bolshoe-iskusstvo#mode/inspect/page/1/zoom/4>

victimization story as the cornerstone and “banderín de enganche”⁹³ of the Popular Front from late October 1934 to February 1936. The powerful “network effect” of all the Comintern organizations, working in unison while appearing to be independent of one another in the achievement of Moscow’s goals is a theme we develop fully elsewhere. The material we have discussed requires a significant revision of the widely held notion that the Popular Front in Spain was “born of pressure from the grassroots” and driven by an “overwhelming need to oppose the advance of fascism.”⁹⁴ In the larger context of Comintern operations in Spain from 1931 to 1936, the successful Moscow-financed and led campaign to own and exploit the post October 1934 narrative is further evidence that the beginning of significant Soviet influence over the affairs of the Spanish Second Republic must be dated much earlier than the outbreak of civil war.⁹⁵

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93 The Spanish phrase refers to the recruitment office of a military unit.

94 Martin ALEXANDER and Helen GRAHAM, “Introduction” in *The French and Spanish...*, *op. cit.*, p. 2. See my introduction above.

95 Contra Paul PRESTON, “The Creation of the Popular Front in Spain” in Helen GRAHAM and Paul PRESTON, *The Popular Front in Europe*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1987, p. 1.

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