

GRAHAM, HELEN. *Socialism and war. The Spanish socialist party in power and crisis 1936–1939*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge [etc.] 1991. xii, 327 pp. £35.00.

The work of Helen Graham on the factional fighting within the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) between 1936 and 1939 fills a gap, since contrary to what one might expect, this subject has not previously been covered in such a comprehensive way. Curiously, accounts of party infighting among Spanish socialists during the 1930s stop at 19 July 1936. In keeping with the general historiographic trend, the literature about the Civil War, which had for decades been dominated by political and ideological questions, has in recent years turned particularly to questions of a social and local historical nature.

The realization is only just emerging that with the opening of a series of archives of organizations such as the PSOE, the Communists (PCE) and finally the Anarchists in the 1980s it is now possible to work on the history of organizations from reliable sources, using internal material rather than published materials. Helen Graham's work, which is based on a British dissertation, is however an important contribution.

Her work aims to explain the reasons for the deep crisis in the PSOE during the Civil War, when the party dominated the government and seemed to all intents and purposes to be at the peak of its influence but was, in reality, marked by deep splits, which ultimately led to its disintegration and which contributed to its irrelevance up to the 1970s. It offers plausible criticism of the theory – initially put forward vehemently in the debates in exile – that this was more or less entirely attributable to the activities of the Communists in the Civil War. For this reason it begins with an abridged account of factional confrontation between 1934 and 1936.

As a reaction to its experiences in the early years of the Republic since 1931, a left wing was formed within the party under the veteran party and trade union leader Largo Caballero. This relied particularly on the Socialist trade union, the UGT, and spoke of a “Bolshevization” of the party and the need for revolution. The right wing led by Prieto tried to maintain its reformist coalition in parliament with the bourgeois republicans. The Socialist left had, however, already passed its peak thanks to its hesitancy in the October 1934 battles against a new right-wing government, and this allowed the reformist wing to win back ground and in particular to consolidate its control of the party apparatus. As internal conflicts escalated in the months following the People's Front elections in February 1936, the left suffered a potentially critical setback with the merger of the Socialist and Communist youth organizations. Until then an important bastion of the left wing of the party, the new youth organization was in fact under the control of the Communists. The reformists in the youth organization were much too weak to prevent this. Graham does not mention that local left-wing youth officials (from Madrid and Barcelona for example) in May/June attempted to organize a tendency, but that this was immediately crushed by the leadership of Santiago Carrillo as “Trotskyist”. She speaks of an “erosion of the left” which manifested itself in the trade union sphere as an upsurge of the anarcho-syndicalist CNT because of the comparative moderation of the UGT.

But the “popular revolution” of 19 July formed a new point of departure. Largo Caballero, the most radical party leader, took over the leadership of a broad

coalition government in September. The ensuing incorporation of the revolution into the reconstruction of the state apparatus led to a shift in political power relationships which had direct effects in the PSOE. The reformists began their internal party offensive, with one of the points of conflict being their relationship with the PCE. The traditionally anti-communist right now ironically found a close coalition partner in the PCE, whose support against the right the left had constantly tried to attract, and concluded a pact with it which was ultimately to lead to the unification of the two parties. The common link was the People's Front policy, the front against any "revolutionary experiments". In May 1937 Largo Caballero was deposed, and the right-wing Socialist Negrín succeeded him as prime minister.

The most interesting part of Graham's work, because it has hitherto been relatively little researched, is the following section, making up more than half of the text, in which she details the factional struggle in the two years or so leading up to the defeat of the Republic. The Socialist Party leadership under its secretary Lamóneda, who became Negrín's strongest supporter (whereas the actual leader of the right, Prieto, very quickly lost influence in the course of the Civil War), took the offensive to eliminate the left. They were to an extent deprived of their leading positions in the party and particularly in the UGT by the powers of the state. However, this turned out to be a Pyrrhic victory. It was hard won by concessions to the PCE, which was also allocated positions in the UGT. The right of the party also had to ally itself with the "unitary Socialist" who had split off from the left and who in reality had shifted on to a Communist course and occupied leading positions chiefly in the UGT. All this caused a crisis in the reformists, the process culminating in their "atomization". The banner of anti-communism now allowed the left to reorganize its forces against a background of the rapidly deteriorating situation of the Republic from the summer of 1938 onwards. It ultimately became the driving force of resistance against the Lamóneda-Negrín leadership, initially within the party and then in March 1939 by overthrowing the government. In view of the military power-relationship this could only hasten Franco's victory, however.

The trenchant characterizations of the two Socialist factions which run through the whole account are in a way the quintessence of Graham's work. As regards the left she takes up the theme of radical reformism which the UGT bureaucracy articulated as a reaction to the profound radicalization of its base. The way it acted inside and outside the party remained bureaucratic and conservative. Its "fundamental objective remained the aggrandisement of the socialist organization in Spain" (p. 46). That also explains why the Socialist left never seriously sought a coalition with the CNT even when its exclusion from the government was imminent in May 1937. Instead it undermined its own social base through government policies to which its revolutionary rhetoric was in fundamental contradiction. It was a matter of intellectuals whose actual importance was frequently overestimated but it also reflected the mentality of its radical base. Unfortunately there are few indications of its effects, for example in connection with the agrarian collectives which were set up by the UGT's agricultural trade union but which were given no particular support by the Largo Caballero government. In contrast to the research of Santos Juliá into Madrid socialism, Graham stresses the crucial importance to the party left of the Socialist organizations in the agrarian south of the country and shows that it was the power structures there which the reformists never succeeded in destroying.

On the other hand she tries in a sense to save the honour of the right around

Negrín and Lamonedá, who were traditionally attacked in exile debates as having “sold” the PSOE to the PCE. (Negrín in particular has been more and more positively evaluated publicly in Spain in recent years – perhaps because of the increasingly moderate policies of today’s PSOE?) She tries to establish as their motive that because of the international situation the Republic had no other choice but to seek a close coalition with the PCE and the Soviet Union. “[T]he historian some fifty years on [. . .] must seek to understand its rationality and necessity [. . .]” (p. 159). This argument is not new and was put forward by Negrín and Lamonedá themselves. It is also no doubt true that this policy was based on a certain logic. But in evaluating their actions it must also be asked how realistic it was and particularly how much the ensuing confrontation with the other forces of the left threatened the existence of the Republican camp. This was most manifest in the repression against the POUM, which Graham only mentions in passing. Negrín and Lamonedá believed that they could dominate the coalition with the PCE, and one important result of her research has been to establish how Lamonedá contrary to appearances strove for the independence of the Socialist Party organization. On the other hand we must also realize that in Eastern Europe after 1945, for example, all Social Democrats who agreed to unite with the Communists had the same hopes, only to be absorbed in the end (as happened to the Socialist Youth in Spain in 1936). In any case, it emerges from this book that the right of the party feared the left more than the PCE and was thus prepared to “sacrifice” it.

Graham’s book is an organizational history and, as the title indicates, is not intended as a general account of the Civil War, but it would have been good to learn more about the general development of the party in these three years. Graham’s account is strictly limited to the leadership struggle; the activities of the leadership beyond this are therefore not covered. Research on significant aspects of party organization and that of the party base, “the grassroots”, remains to be done to allow a genuine overall evaluation of the various factions. These comments are not intended to diminish the work of the author. By evaluating internal material relating to the party and the trade unions, and also by drawing on the PCE archive, she has succeeded in establishing in detail the various stages of the self-destructive dynamic of the factional struggle which was not just a reaction to the PCE’s actions but above all had internal roots. She has produced an important contribution to the historiography of the PSOE. Perhaps this will stimulate further work on the other organizations in the Civil War.

*Reiner Tosstorff*