Tom Buchanan

Anti-fascism and Democracy in the 1930s

In November 1936 Konni Zilliacus wrote to John Strachey, a leading British left-wing intellectual and a prime mover in the recently founded Left Book Club, inviting him to ponder 'the problem of class-war strategy and tactics in a democracy'. Zilliacus, a press officer with the League of Nations and subsequently a Labour Party MP, was particularly worried about the failure of the Communist Party and the Comintern to offer a clear justification for their decision to support the Popular Front and collective security. 'There is no doubt', Zilliacus wrote, 'that those who are on the side of unity are woefully short of a convincing come-back when the Right-Wing put up the story about Communist support of democracy etc. being merely tactical camouflage.'[1]

Zilliacus's comment raises very clearly the issue that lies at the heart of this article. For it is well known that the rise of fascism in the 1930s appeared to produce a striking affirmation of support for democracy, most notably in the 1936 election victories of the Spanish and French Popular Fronts. Here, and elsewhere, anti-fascism was able to unite broad political coalitions ranging from liberals and conservatives to socialists, communists and anarchists. But were these coalitions united more by a fear of fascism than by a love of democracy — were they, in effect, marriages of convenience? Historians have long disagreed on this issue. Some have emphasized the prior loyalty of Communist supporters of the Popular Front to the Stalinist regime in the USSR, and have explained their new-found faith in democracy as, indeed, a mere 'tactical camouflage' (a view given retrospective weight by the 1939 Nazi–Soviet Pact). Others have noted the gap between the democratic rhetoric of Communist leaders and the revolutionary temper of their working-class followers, while

European History Quarterly Copyright © 2002 SAGE Publications, London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, Vol. 32(1), 39–57.
[0265-6914(200201)32:1;39–57;020561]

liberals and social democrats who made common cause with Communists during this period are often portrayed as gullible 'fellow travellers'. Conversely, some historians have chosen to see in the militancy of rank-and-file supporters of the Popular Fronts, and in the volunteers who went to fight with the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War, the manifestation of a genuine passion for democracy that had its roots in a tradition of popular radicalism.[2] This article is intended to advance the debate by focusing on the neglected question of what kind of democracy anti-fascists were seeking to defend — and, indeed, what kind of new democracy they were hoping to create.

'Was Franco a fascist?' This has become a clichéd question, but, although opinions may differ, the essential framework of an answer is readily available. There is a daunting body of literature, as well as a lively debate, on 'the nature of fascism' from which criteria for judging whether Franco was a fascist can be derived. But where does one start if, instead, the question is 'Was Largo Caballero a democrat?' There are shelves of theoretical literature on democracy, but nothing which deals with the question of what it meant to be a 'democrat' in Europe in the 1930s. While it might be argued that in conditions as polarized and desperate as those in Spain during the mid-1930s this is an indulgent question, there are, nevertheless, significant issues at stake. After all, Largo Caballero, Prime Minister of the Spanish Republic for almost nine months during the civil war, dipped in and out of democratic behaviour in the 1930s. In the period 1931–3 he served as Minister of Labour in the government of the newly created Spanish Republic; in October 1934 he supported a rebellion against the elected centre-right government in order to 'protect' the Republic's constitution; in 1936 he joined the Popular Front alliance with Communists and liberal Republicans, while stating that he remained committed to the conquest of power and establishment of Marxist socialism: 'we are mortgaging absolutely nothing of our ideology and action'.[3] After the Popular Front's election victory he prevented moderate socialist colleagues from forming a more stable coalition government that might conceivably have averted military rebellion. While prime minister he took part in a remarkable exchange of letters with the Soviet leadership, in which Stalin gave guarded approval to the parlia-

mentary road to socialism in the Spanish context. Largo Caballero replied that 'whatever may be the future of the parliamentary form, it does not possess among us, or even among the republicans, enthusiastic defenders'.[4] Thus, the conventional explanation of his muddled political trajectory — that he was a 'rhetorical revolutionary' — is evasive on the question of his democratic credentials. In short, it is easier to define what he was not than to define what he was. While not wishing to become enmeshed in a discussion of Largo Caballero's politics, and while accepting that some anti-fascist political leaders (such as Léon Blum or Indalecio Prieto) can be identified far less problematically as 'democrats', this brief survey of Largo Caballero's career does illuminate the difficulties in creating a set of criteria similar to those that one might employ to judge a 'fascist'. There are at least three reasons for believing that this issue deserves more attention than it has previously received.

First, the concept of democracy was central to the contemporary legitimation of the Spanish Republic during the civil war (1936–9), and of the French Republic during the Popular Front era (c. 1934–8). Anti-fascist politicians articulated a powerful and seductive language of liberty, democracy and democratic rights which asserted that theirs was a cause worth fighting for precisely because it represented a defence of democracy (and not some ulterior motive). Examples litter the rhetoric of the period. For instance, the French Communist leader Maurice Thorez told his party's congress in June 1934 that 'We love France: the classic home of revolutions and class struggles, the cradle of humanism and liberty, where culture has always thrived. It is not a question of choosing between communism and fascism, but between fascism and democracy.'[5] Julio Alvarez del Vayo, the Spanish Republic's foreign minister, told the Council of the League of Nations that the civil war was not a struggle between communism and fascism, but rather a case of fascist aggression 'to prevent the democratisation of the political regime in Spain'.[6] For the British Communist leader Harry Pollitt, too, the war in Spain offered a clear choice for the British people: 'Either on the side of bestial fascism, or on the side of democracy.'[7] It might be argued that the rhetoric of the leaders bears little relationship to the motivations of anti-fascist militants who were facing a very real and immediate threat from fascism on the streets of London and Paris, or on the barricades of Madrid. Their actions might

well be seen as instinctive and derived from elemental ideas of justice and fair play, like the volunteers in Cecil Day Lewis's poem who went to Spain because their 'open eyes/ Could see no other way'.[8] Even so, the language employed by the leaders was vital for the transformation of the Popular Front from a simple political alliance into a democratic 'crusade',[9] and was duly internalized and expounded by the rank and file. Thus, the regularity with which democracy was invoked by anti-fascist politicians suggests that their commitment to it deserves to be taken, and also tested, at face value.

Secondly, veteran anti-fascists *continued to talk* a language of democracy. Scottish International Brigade volunteers, in a published collection of interviews, continually referred back to the democratic justification of their cause. One, a Communist blacksmith who died in 1985, recalled that

> We didn't go to Spain to usher in socialism or communism or anything like that. We went to Spain to continue the fight for the freedom of a people to put a cross on a ballot paper and elect its kind of government.

Another, who served in an ambulance unit, said that 'I was there on the simple task of saving, or hoping to save, the Spanish Republic — a democratic elected government.' A third knew that he had gone to defend democracy, but struggled to define it: 'it depends what you term democracy, capitalist democracy, socialist democracy, or what do you mean by democracy?'[10] At the same time, however, many International Brigade volunteers also idealized the Soviet Union, which was clearly not 'democratic' in the same way as Republican Spain, and tolerated the repression during the civil war of the Communists' political rivals such as the anti-Stalinist POUM. This ability to hold what now seem incompatible beliefs about democracy appears paradoxical: evidence at best of ignorance, at worst of cynicism. However, as will be argued in the following section, the paradox becomes more understandable when one considers the multiple meanings of democracy in 1930s Europe, and its appropriation by the Communists in the Popular Front era. Thus, while left-wing leaders were concerned that their belated discovery of democracy might appear to be a mere political tactic, many of the rank and file actually believed (or came to believe) that they were 'democrats', and this belief stayed with them throughout their lives.

Thirdly, historians' use of the concept of democracy has often tended to become entangled with anti-fascists' language of democracy. Hence Julian Jackson's book on the French Popular Front is subtitled *Defending Democracy*[11] when the actual content focuses far more on the social and cultural 'explosions' associated with the period. In fact, the Popular Front government's work in support of democracy was largely limited to defeating the right-wing leagues, although the introduction of sweeping social reforms may well be viewed as a means of strengthening the Republic's democratic basis. Certainly there was no *extension* of democracy, either to women (who did not win the vote until 1944) or to the colonies. Another example is the work of Helen Graham on the politics of the Spanish Republic during the civil war. Graham argues that responsible Republican leaders, above all the prime minister and moderate socialist Juan Negrín, sought to construct a Spanish state that could both win the civil war and lay the basis for a modern, liberal Spain in the postwar era. She asks 'why the decision was made to reconstruct and consolidate the *liberal democratic* state',[12] which surely raises the question of in what sense the wartime Republic can be deemed 'liberal democratic'. Parliament (the Cortes) played an insignificant role during the civil war, described by one eye-witness as 'an expression of a Democracy which was the soul of a people but which was vague and inert, incapable of constructive expression'.[13] Negrín is said to have seen the Cortes as a mere 'oratorical arena',[14] and none felt the marginalization of parliamentary life more keenly than the head of state, President Manuel Azaña, who spent the war as a depressed onlooker.[15] During the war power lay largely beyond constitutional scrutiny, initially in the revolutionary anti-fascist committees, and then in the ministerial and secret-police fiefdoms of the war's latter stages. Rights that one would expect to find in a liberal democracy, such as freedom of assembly, expression and religious observance, were in abeyance during the war, although there is reason to suppose that Negrín would have reintroduced them in the event of victory.[16] But would he have been allowed to? Graham's conclusion, that the Spanish Communist Party formed the only viable mobilizing force in Negrín's new Spain, is compelling. However, her evidence about the main characteristics of this mobilization — the organization of the population into groupings based on occupational, generational and gender divisions; the aggression

shown towards rival political forces; and the reliance on facile sloganeering — hardly suggests that the way was being prepared for a conventional liberal democracy. Instead, there would be many echoes of these Communist tactics in the formation of the 'People's Democracies' of East-Central Europe — above all, Czechoslovakia — after 1945. One is left wondering at Negrín's political judgement in believing that he could build a 'liberal' Spain on the basis of an inherently illiberal political party.[17]

In many parts of Europe, especially in the new states of east-central Europe, Woodrow Wilson's 'world safe for democracy' had collapsed within a decade of the Versailles peace treaty. Even so, until the German and Italian aggressions of the later 1930s, European democracy was still a varied and, at least in some countries, a dynamic phenomenon. Above all, democracy, in the sense of the fullest possible electoral and civil rights, was very new. Even in a country such as Britain, with a longstanding tradition of representative government, universal male suffrage did not arrive until 1918, and universal female suffrage not until 1928: in Stanley Baldwin's graphic phrase, democracy had arrived 'at a gallop'.[18]

Accordingly, in the 1930s the meaning of democracy differed widely from country to country. In Spain democracy still posed a radical threat to the old elites, especially in the countryside where clientelism and illiteracy had traditionally obstructed democratic politics. The electoral victory of the Popular Front in February 1936 does, therefore, deserve to be seen as a 'triumph for democracy',[19] although the result was far closer than the division of seats in the new Cortes would suggest. In Britain, on the other hand, democracy, which had so frightened the Conservatives in 1918, had been trained to support the *status quo* by 1931 when the Tory-dominated National Government won a landslide election victory. In France democracy had become fused since at least the 1870s with the Republican tradition, albeit at the cost of having become associated with the manoeuvring and political horse-trading of the Third Republic. In Czechoslovakia, the only country in central Europe to avoid authoritarian rule, democracy meant the primacy of the Czechs over other ethnic groupings in an increasingly centralized state. In some smaller countries of North West Europe and in Scandinavia co-operativist or social democracies had steered an innovative path through the

Depression (although in Finland democracy also rested on the outlawing of the Communist Party). Europeans were dimly aware that in the United States President Roosevelt had used democratic means to challenge the effects of the Depression, taking on powerful vested interests in the process. Meanwhile, in the Soviet Union there was a regime that might lack freedom 'in the classic sense of absolute liberalism',[20] but which claimed to have made 'democracy real for the vast majority of the people'[21] through the abolition of class relationships.

There were in addition pan-European conceptions of democracy which reflected the aspirations of specific social, political and religious groupings. Hence, Christian democracy, socialist (or social) democracy, and industrial democracy were all seen as ways of transforming the capitalist social order from within. Democracy might also have a looser but perhaps more inspirational meaning: an egalitarian, compassionate and spontaneous way of life, born out of revolutionary upheaval, that had nothing to do with parliamentary democracy. This was the 'democracy' of the French factory occupations of June 1936 and the anarchistic direct democracy that so appealed to foreign observers amongst the militias at the outset of the Spanish Civil War. For one Spaniard who was a student during the civil war,

> What impressed [him] most was the profound democracy of the masses which the revolution had initiated. When he thought today [i.e. 1973] of a society without exploiters and exploited . . . it was of that democracy he thought.[22]

Above all, the anti-fascist politicians in the 1930s had to measure themselves against what had been dismissively known on the Left as 'bourgeois democracy', the creation of nineteenth-century liberalism. This view of democracy combined democratic rights (mediated through parliamentary and local-government institutions) with the defence of the established social and economic order. For Communists this 'democracy' was nothing but the cracked mask for capitalist interests that was discarded in favour of more overt forms of class warfare during the Depression. This was precisely the 'sham' democracy which socialists before 1914 had dreamt of one day displacing, and which Communists after 1917 had striven to overthrow to a more rapid timetable. Until the 1930s the idea that parliamentary means could lead to the overthrow of capitalism would have

seemed ridiculous to such people, and even the pacific Léon Blum acknowledged that socialism would probably, when it eventually arrived, follow some violent social rupture. The rise of fascism forced the left to reassess its relationship to this 'bourgeois' democracy and to consider under what conditions it could work within it. To what extent, in other words, would Popular Frontists of the Left be willing to forego their longer-term goals in pursuit of short-term political accommodation? The Spanish Communist leader Dolores Ibarruri (La Pasionaria) made it very clear that the Communists' attitude to parliamentary democracy was an instrumental one. While striving to create the

> . . . parliamentary and democratic Republic of a new type . . . as communists we do not renounce our desire to bring about in time the victory of socialism, and not only in Spain, but all over the world. We are Marxists–Leninists–Stalinists, and therefore we adapt our theory to the revolutionary possibilities of the given moment, without renouncing our ultimate aims.[23]

On the other hand, Léon Blum, for all of his notorious agonizing over the difference between the 'conquest' and the 'exercise' of power, appears to have fundamentally believed that the Popular Front could actually reinvigorate democratic institutions by proving that 'Parliamentary Government is capable of action'.[24]

Liberal democracy was troubled as never before in the course of the 1930s, when the inadequate response of parliamentary regimes to the impact of economic depression gave rise to a damaging perception that they were less efficient than the dictatorships in harnessing national resources. In these circumstances legitimate party-political disagreements and the clash of interest groups appeared to be an excuse for the refusal to take painful decisions in 'stalemated' societies. Moreover, part of the secret of the fascists' success lay in their skill in exploiting the opportunities presented by democracy (hence the Nazis' use of the referendum and the electoral system to undermine the Weimar Republic). In this apparent twilight of liberal democracy, many of its former advocates began to question whether it could survive unless democrats were willing to match the ruthlessness of the fascists, even at the temporary expense of civil liberties. Hence, democracy should exist only for those willing to abide by its rules, while its enemies should be firmly dealt with. For Alvarez del Vayo, this weakness of democracy was encapsulated in his memory of Manuel Azaña arrogantly smoking a cigarette

as anti-Republican conspirators were rounded up in 1932. He later felt that this cigarette was 'to prove fatal' for the Republic in 1936 when far more serious conspiracy was allowed to develop unimpeded.[25] But there was far more at issue here than the need for a whiff of grapeshot or the rounding up of the usual suspects. Many anti-fascists believed that liberal democracy had to be fundamentally transformed to make it more efficient and better able to plan the economy, and this modernized and robust democracy might well have to reduce established democratic rights, especially in the economic sphere. Thus the 1930s saw the beginnings of a debate about how democracy should be policed and how its edges should be defined.

Democracy was so recent a phenomenon that there was as yet no code of democratic behaviour: in the words of Karl Newman, 'the democrats served too short an apprenticeship' after 1918.[26] In the years after 1945 democracy came to be seen in Western Europe as an effective means of sharing power and resources within pluralist societies. The essential democratic virtues were compromise, tolerance and respect for law and the electoral process, all cemented into place with redistributive taxation and welfare states. Political parties were willing to abandon their maximalist goals (such as the classless society or the Catholics' 'Christian city') in return for prosperity and constitutional guarantees for their core values and institutions. This may not have inspired the young, but at least elections were no longer fought on a 'winner-takes-all' basis (although this might be said to have applied in the Italian election of 1948). It was this essential trust and pragmatism that was so lacking in the interwar years. As Eric Hobsbawm points out, the same social democrats and Catholics who governed post-1945 Austria, sometimes in coalition, were involved in violent confrontation in 1934.[27] The French Communists seemed to be learning the art of compromise in June 1936, when Maurice Thorez told his Central Committee that

> Though it is important to press our claims thoroughly, it is equally important to know when to stop . . . We must even know how to agree to compromises if all our claims have not yet been accepted, as long as the most important and most essential ones have been agreed to.[28]

Even so, the Communists remained outside the French Popular Front government, and reserved the right to criticize its policies.

Neither of the major pre-civil war Spanish political parties, the right-wing CEDA or the socialist PSOE, gave its wholehearted endorsement to the Republic. As Stanley Payne observes, the corrupt Radical Party was the only political force in the Second Republic to embody the 'porkbarrel' politics of some successful democracies, yet in this polarized society it merely seemed to lack 'morality and purpose'.[29] It was not only the Spanish right (or Largo Caballero) that strained the bounds of democratic behaviour during the Second Republic. Manuel Azaña, the leading liberal politician in Spain, dealt with his enemies in a highly sectarian and illiberal way, especially the Catholic Church.[30] Azaña, who once described the Republic as an 'instrument of war' for refashioning the Spanish state and society,[31] palpably failed to draw groups that felt excluded into the Republican 'patrimony'. Similarly, the Comisión de Actas, the body whereby after each election the new Cortes could challenge suspicious results in individual constituencies, was used in a divisive manner after the close election of February 1936 in order to give more seats to the Popular Front.[32]

It was this complex and inchoate world of democratic politics that the Communists sought to enter in the mid-1930s, galvanized by the rise of fascism and, above all, the triumph of Nazism in 1933. Famously, the 7th Comintern Congress in August 1935 followed and gave approval to the lead taken by the French Communists in joining the movement for the defence of the Republic after the right-wing riots of 6 February 1934. However, the apparent shift in strategy should not mask underlying continuities in policy. The speeches by Georgi Dimitrov (the Comintern General Secretary) at the congress make clear that the key task remained unity of the working class, while far less attention was paid to the extension of the alliance to include peasants and the petty-bourgeoisie through the People's Front. In particular, Dimitrov warned that the defence of democratic rights within bourgeois democracy did not in any sense lessen the Communists' opposition to bourgeois power:

> Being upholders of Soviet democracy, *we shall defend every inch of the democratic gains which the working class has wrested in the course of years of stubborn struggle, and shall resolutely fight to extend these gains*.[33]

This distinction between bourgeois democracy and the democratic spaces that existed within it remained central to Communist

thinking in the Popular Front era. At the 15th Congress of the CPGB (Communist Party of Great Britain) in 1938, Harry Pollitt attacked George Bernard Shaw as an 'old Fabian' who saw democracy as 'merely' a device to help the rich to rob the poor. 'Let us repeat it, and never forget it, that democracy, even under capitalist economy, offers the best field for the development of the class struggle.' Had the International Brigaders gone to Spain for

> . . . some abstract democracy, or for some sham version of democracy as practised by our ruling families? . . . They gave their lives in the service of a democracy that meant concrete things, economic and political rights and liberties for the workers and the mass of the people.[34]

Maurice Thorez wrote that 'By defending the democratic Republic we were not only defending the conquests of the proletariat but were enabling it to make fresh advances.' But he also noted that: 'The struggle to defend democratic liberties cannot separate us from the democrats.'[35]

Thus, at least at the level of the party line, democracy was to be defended because it contained within it the possibility of working-class organization and advance that was completely denied under fascism: for this reason, at least where there was no immediate prospect of an advance to socialism, it was worth defending. Even this qualified message was not necessarily warmly received — Dimitrov and Pollitt both had to warn against hardliners who feared that 'democratic illusions' would flourish under the Popular Front. Indeed, many rank-and-file Spanish Communists wanted to seize the chance for revolution in 1936 rather than following the line of self-restraint being preached by Moscow.[36] In March 1938 the Spanish Communist leader José Díaz had to reproach the party newspaper *Mundo obrero* for stating that the war in Spain was between fascism and communism, not fascism and democracy, and that the Republic's real enemy was capitalism.[37]

The new Communist attitude to democracy was posed its most serious challenge in Spain during the civil war. Here, unlike in France where Thorez and the Communist leadership had set their face against working-class militancy but had also refused office, the Communists had the chance not only to work within the constraints of 'bourgeois' democracy, but also to go one step further and replace it. They were greatly assisted by the domestic

and international context. There was a widespread perception that the USSR, the only major state to supply arms, was the Spanish Republic's friend, and the war witnessed the rapid emergence of the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) as a large and broadly based party. Indeed, the PCE was almost a Popular Front in its own right, with a strong position in the military and state apparatus, representation in government, and numerous subsidiary organizations. In November 1937, at the plenum of the PCE Central Committee, José Díaz claimed that for the first time Spain had a regime with democratic characteristics, with the eclipse of the feudal remnants on the land, the church and the military. In this 'democratic and parliamentary Republic of a new type' the masses were now fully involved in the political life of the nation.[38]

But how democratic was this democracy 'of a new type'? One influential critic was the Italian Communist Palmiro Togliatti, who served in Spain as a Comintern adviser between mid-1937 and the end of the civil war. Before going to Spain he had written an article 'On the peculiarities of the Spanish Revolution' in which he argued that the novelty of the Republic lay in the fact that if the Spanish people were victorious fascism would have been eliminated, unlike in France, Britain and the USA. This new democracy would be unable to be other than an enemy of any form of conservatism.[39] While Togliatti was in Spain, however, the question of democracy was central to his critique of the Republic, and in his reports to Moscow he was consistently critical of the lack of democracy in wartime Spain. The other parties and trade unions, he noted, impeded mass participation and behaved like the prewar *caciques* (local bosses), appointments to local governments were imposed from above, and, worst of all, many in the Communist Party itself failed to understand the need for mass participation and consultation. José Díaz's suggestion at the November 1937 plenum that there should be new elections to the Cortes had been stymied as much from within Communist ranks as by their rivals who did not wish to see the Communist gains during the civil war reflected in their parliamentary representation. (However, in his report of 30 August 1937 Togliatti himself had ruled out new Cortes and municipal elections on the grounds that 'they would end up in shooting'.[40]) In a damning final report after the fall of Madrid, Togliatti concluded that

> . . . throughout the war there never existed in the Spanish democratic Republic and in the life of the people an authentic democratic regime . . . the Communist Party did not fully comprehend that one of the fundamental causes of the weakness of the Republic was the absence of democracy.[41]

The Togliatti reports are fascinating because they open a rare window onto the real politics of democracy in the anti-fascist struggle. There was much reference to democracy, and some attempt at democratic practice. However, democracy was attractive to Togliatti not because he was a liberal democrat but because it offered a way of breaking open the powerful positions still held by the Communists' allies and rivals in the Socialist party and in the trade unions, and because it offered a banner behind which the Republic could be united not only against fascism but also for material improvements.

The journalist Claud Cockburn, in one of his truer moments, wrote that Spain was a test for 'Democracy . . . it was the phrase people used at the time, and they believed in it.'[42] Certainly there was a great deal of talk of democracy in the anti-fascist era: but, again, the question that this poses is 'what was meant by democracy?'[43] More often than not this was not traditional liberal democracy: after all, a number of parliamentary democracies had survived the advance of fascism in the 1930s, foremost amongst them Britain, but one did not see them extolled as role models. Indeed, British anti-fascists saw the coalition National Government, massively endorsed at the polls in 1931 and 1935, as a perversion of democracy. A narrow political elite had, they felt, tricked a gullible and apathetic public into supporting a government that pursued a pro-fascist foreign policy and imposed 'Fabio-fascism' (in the words of E.M. Forster[44]) on Britain through public-order legislation. According to the writer Geoffery Garratt, who organized relief work in Spain, British politics was fast becoming 'the playground of the rich, or the preserve of the old', and there was little prospect of the true will of the people being expressed.[45] In 1937 G.D.H. Cole wrote that the National Government had been re-elected two years previously under 'false pretences', and that it should now be turned out of office by a 'mass movement of opinion'.[46] Democracy continued to operate far less contentiously in Scandinavia and a number of European states such as Switzerland. There was a late flowering of interest in the lessons that could be learnt from their success, and a

sudden vogue for studying the Danish Folk High Schools and Swiss village democracy.[47] However, in a review of the state of democracy in 1939 G.D.H. Cole argued that small states such as Switzerland might exist as successful 'waistcoat pocket democracies' because the populations were 'civilized' and they were economically secure, with a high degree of equality. But democracy could not flourish in larger states such as Britain and France because political democracy had not been matched by economic democracy (for instance, the problem of the so-called French 'two hundred families' that controlled the economy). Therefore, democracy in these countries must take the form of a radical assault on existing social and economic structures.[48] As Harold Laski put it in 1937, the true democrats would be those who sought to abolish private ownership of the means of production and the class system.[49]

Thus, many anti-fascists had a militant vision of democracy, as a means of forcing radical change. As the Labour Party left-winger Stafford Cripps put it in 1934, the revolutionary alternative was both hopeless and abhorrent: 'Our only alternative then is to rid ourselves of capitalism by the machinery of democracy.'[50] La Pasionaria, the Spanish Communist leader, told a rally in 1936 that her party wished to create a

> . . . democratic Spain . . . not the Spain which is clinging to her old traditions; we mean a Spain which will give the peasants land, which will socialize industry under the control of the workers, which will introduce social insurance so that the worker may not be condemned to a homeless old age.[51]

In the correspondence that opened this article, Konni Zilliacus argued that Marx believed that it might be possible for socialism to be introduced in Britain by democratic means, and thought that it was the duty of all Communists to 'test this belief to the utmost'. An almost Jacobin vision ensued: once a British Popular Front government was elected it should 'take any powers that circumstances may make necessary to carry out its mandate and overcome resistance to the will of the people'. Ideas discussed in the early 1930s by the Labour Party should be revived, including abolition of the House of Lords and the speeding up of procedure in the Commons. 'Why not refer to this specifically, and express the C.P.'s belief that all this must be given a fair and full trial? (If it works, tant mieux!).'

The Communists do not deserve to be dismissed out of hand

for their advocacy of democracy in these years. As we have seen, they did develop a theoretical justification that not only explained their position to non-Communists but, more significantly, to themselves. Yet they deserve (to invoke E.M. Forster again) at best 'one cheer for democracy'. Theirs was a belated recognition that even within 'bourgeois democracy' there were a great many rights to lose that, in Stalin's words, could be 'used by the working class in its struggle against its oppressors'. In the process they gained a renewed sense of how democratic rights had been won, allowing them to insert the anti-fascism of the 1930s into a pantheon that already contained the Tolpuddle Martyrs, the Communards and Garibaldi's Thousand. This helped them to identify more fully with national working-class and radical traditions and appear less as the creatures of Moscow. But while they had made a compromise, it was hardly to be a 'historic compromise', as the refusal to support Britain and France on the outbreak of war in September 1939 was to prove. In any case, Communists and their supporters continued to believe that a superior form of democracy existed in the Soviet Union. In the words of Thorez, Soviet democracy was 'democracy taken to its logical conclusion, to its final stage, that which immediately precedes the perfect communist society'.[52] So long as the Soviet Union represented true democracy, Western Communists would always see their own democracies as at best aggregations of 'democratic rights' which could be exploited to their own advantage.

While struggling to be democrats, therefore, the Communists had failed to learn that democracy is 'a theory of society, not a theory of government',[53] that democracy is about actions as well as words. Communist actions in the 1930s were often heroic, but often lacked the less heroic virtues on which functioning democracies rest. Moreover, old methods and habits die hard: hence the sectarianism of the Spanish Communists, especially against the Socialists, did much to smash the very unity that they claimed to support and precipitated the collapse of the Republic in 1939.[54] Many individuals also failed to match in their behaviour the noble ideals which they publicly espoused. Thus, two leading anti-fascist politicians, the French Radical Pierre Cot and the Spanish Socialist Alvarez del Vayo, were both crypto-communists, articulating Communist policies within their own parties. Another, less exalted, example is that of Thomas

Murray, a Scottish Labour Party councillor who was secretly a member of the Communist Party, and was ordered by the Communists to volunteer to join the International Brigades in order to inspire his local Labour movement. (He was later ordered home to contest his council seat.) It is notable that, while paying lip service to the defence of democracy, he wrote from Spain that he was fighting the 'great fight which will almost certainly lead to the ultimate overthrow of the forces of capitalism and establish the great Socialist Commonwealth'.[55]

The concept of 'democracy' represents a challenge to all who work on the 1930s. It is important to be aware of the multiplicity of conceptions of democracy during the decade, and the lack of agreement amongst those who called themselves 'democrats' over the values and behavioural norms that such an appellation might represent. Politicians who claimed to be democrats need to be judged in the light both of their words and of their political actions. This was not only a period, moreover, in which democracy seemed to be in need of defending, but also one in which there was a great deal of innovative thinking about how democracy could be improved and strengthened. This reassessment helped to lay the basis for the two very divergent forms of 'democracy' ('people's democracy' and 'social democracy' in its various forms) that would confront each other in Europe during the Cold War. Finally, historians should look again at the clichéd dualism of 'fascism and democracy' and start treating the democratic side with the complexity and seriousness which, quite rightly, they have brought to an understanding of the fascist side.

Notes

1. John Strachey papers, in private possession of Elizabeth Al Qadhi, letter dated 4 Nov. 1936. I am grateful to Mrs Al Qadhi for permission to consult these papers.

2. Helen Graham and Paul Preston provide a historical overview in 'The Popular Front and the Struggle against Fascism', in Helen Graham and Paul Preston, eds, *The Popular Front in Europe* (Basingstoke 1987); see also Jacques Droz, *Histoire de l'antifascisme en Europe, 1923–1939* (Paris 1985). For a view of the volunteers in Spain as radical democrats, see James K. Hopkins, *Into the Heart of the Fire: The British in the Spanish Civil War* (Stanford 1998), especially 103–9.

For a highly critical view of the role of intellectuals in the Popular Front era, see David Caute, *The Fellow Travellers: A Postscript to the Enlightenment* (London 1973), chapter 3, 132–84, and Stephen Koch, *Double Lives: Spies and Writers in the Secret Soviet War against the West* (New York 1994).

3. Cited in Burnett Bolloten, *The Spanish Civil War: Revolution and Counter-Revolution* (Chapel Hill 1991), 22.

4. Letters of 21 Dec. 1936 and 12 Jan. 1937, reproduced in full in E.H. Carr *The Comintern and the Spanish Civil War* (Basingstoke 1984), 86–8.

5. Maurice Thorez, *Son of the People* (London 1938), 88.

6. Speech of 11 Dec. 1936, cited in Alun Kenwood, ed., *The Spanish Civil War: A Cultural and Historical Reader* (Providence/Oxford 1993), 69. Alvarez Del Vayo's views on Spanish democracy are developed interestingly in his memoir *Freedom's Battle* (Kingswood, Surrey 1940), chapter 14.

7. Article of 3 Aug. 1936, in Harry Pollitt, *Selected Articles and Speeches* (London 1954), 16.

8. C. Day Lewis, 'The Volunteer', in Valentine Cunningham, ed., *The Penguin Book of Spanish Civil War Verse* (Harmondsworth 1980), 314. On this point, see also Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy, 1934–1938* (Cambridge 1988), 43.

9. G.D.H. Cole, *The People's Front* (London 1937), 17.

10. Ian MacDougall, ed., *Voices from the Spanish Civil War: Personal Recollections of Scottish Volunteers in Republican Spain, 1936–1939* (Edinburgh 1986), 260, 87 and 66. The blacksmith Garry McCartney felt vindicated by the fact that the Spanish people had elected a socialist government in 1982, 'tentative as it may be'.

11. Jackson, op. cit.

12. Helen Graham, 'Spain, 1936: Resistance and Revolution. The Flaws in the Front', in T. Kirk and A. McElligott, eds, *Opposing Fascism: Community, Authority and Resistance in Europe* (Cambridge 1999), 68.

13. Henry Buckley, *Life and Death of the Spanish Republic* (London 1940), 414. Buckley was a British journalist who lived in Spain throughout the 1930s. He was sympathetic to the Republic but saw its failure as a comment on the failure of Spanish democracy, and the imposition of an inappropriate 'nineteenth century' democratic model.

14. Helen Graham, 'War, Modernity and Reform: The Premiership of Juan Negrín, 1937–1939', in Paul Preston and Ann L. Mackenzie, eds, *The Republic Besieged: Civil War in Spain, 1936–1939* (Edinburgh 1996), 168.

15. See Azaña's diary entry for 20 May 1937, cited in James Whiston, '"Obligación de opinar": The limits of Pluralism in Manuel Azaña's *La Velada en Benicarló*', in Preston and Mackenzie, op. cit., 242.

16. The best evidence for this is Negrín's '13 points' of May 1938 which set out his vision of a postwar Spain.

17. Helen Graham, 'War, Modernity and Reform', in Preston and Mackenzie, eds, op. cit., offers a major reinterpretation of Negrín's premiership.

18. Cited in Philip Williamson, '"Safety first": Baldwin, the Conservative Party, and the 1929 General Election', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 25/2 (1982), 387.

19. Alvarez del Vayo, op. cit., 244.

20. Harold Laski, *Liberty in the Modern State*, introduction to the 1937 edition (Harmondsworth 1937), 43.

21. Pat Sloan, *Soviet Democracy* (London 1937), 279.

22. Interview with Miguel Nuñez, in Ronald Fraser, *Blood of Spain: The Experience of Civil War, 1936–1939* (Harmondsworth 1981) 293.

23. Report to Plenary Meeting of the Central Committee of the Spanish Communist Party, June 1937, in Dolores Ibarruri, *Speeches and Articles, 1936–1938* (Moscow 1938), 114.

24. *Léon Blum before his Judges: At the Supreme Court of Riom, March 11th and 12th, 1942* (London 1943), 53.

25. Alvarez del Vayo, op. cit., 245.

26. Karl J. Newman, *European Democracy between the Wars* (London 1970), 118. Newman deals primarily with the failure of democracy in Germany, Austria and a number of central European states, and thus has little directly to say on the subject of this article. For analyses of the failure of democracy after 1919, see also Mark Mazower's *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (London 1998), especially chapter 1; Richard Bessel, 'The Crisis of Modern Democracy, 1919–45', in D. Potter et al., *Democratization* (Cambridge 1997), 71–94, and Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, eds, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Europe* (Baltimore 1978).

27. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes* (London 1994), 137.

28. Thorez, op. cit., 130–1.

29. Stanley Payne, *Spain's First Democracy: The Second Republic, 1931–1936* (Madison, WI 1993), 382. For a fuller account of the role of the Radical Party, see Nigel Townson, *The Crisis of Democracy in Spain: Centrist Politics under the Second Republic, 1931–1936* (Brighton and Portland 2000).

30. Frances Lannon in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 11 June 1999, 5, commenting on Paul Preston's essay on Azaña in his *Comrades! Portraits from the Spanish Civil War* (London 1999).

31. Speech of 17 July 1931, cited in Tim Rees, 'Battleground of the Revolutionaries: The Republic and Civil War in Spain, 1931–39', in Moira Donald and Tim Rees, eds, *Reinterpreting Revolution in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Basingstoke 2001), 117.

32. Payne, op. cit., 296ff. For a different interpretation of this episode, see Paul Preston, *The Coming of the Spanish Civil War: Reform, Reaction and Revolution in the Second Republic* (London 1978), 182.

33. Georgi Dimitrov, *The Working Class against Fascism* (London 1935), 98 (emphasis in original).

34. Communist Party of Great Britain, *For Peace and Plenty* (London 1938), 59–64.

35. Thorez, op. cit., 83, 89.

36. Tim Rees, 'The Highpoint of Comintern Influence? The Communist Party and the Civil War in Spain', in Tim Rees and Andrew Thorpe, eds, *International Communism and the Communist International* (Manchester, 1998), 153.

37. Carr, op. cit., 67–8.

38. José Díaz, *Tres años de lucha* (Paris 1970), 484.

39. Palmiro Togliatti, *Escritos sobre la guerra de España* (Barcelona 1980), 97–8.

40. In fact, Dimitrov and the Comintern continued to press for the calling of elections; see Dimitrov's letter to Stalin, 16 Sept. 1937, enclosing document on 'The Most Important Tasks of the PCE', in Alexander Dallin and F.I. Firsov, eds,

Dimitrov and Stalin, 1934–1943: Letters from the Soviet Archives (Yale 2000), 62–71.

41. Report dated 21 May 1939, in Togliatti, op. cit., 300.

42. Claud Cockburn, *In Time of Trouble* (London 1957), 239.

43. When reading a heavily annotated copy of G.D.H. Cole's 1937 polemic *The People's Front*, I was interested to notice that a previous reader — clearly reading it immediately after publication — had scrawled in the margins 'all this without defining "democracy" & democrats'.

44. In other words, imposing fascism by gradualist (Fabian) means (cited in Geoffrey T. Garratt, *The Shadow of the Swastika* (London 1938), 33).

45. Garratt, op. cit., 67.

46. G.D.H. Cole, *The People's Front* (London 1937), 28–9. The 'false pretences' were the government's commitment to collective security, immediately betrayed by the Hoare–Laval Pact to allow the carve-up of Abyssinia.

47. See E.D. Simon's *The Smaller Democracies* (London (Left Book Club) 1939) which studied Switzerland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland.

48. G.D.H. Cole, 'The Lesson for Democracy', in *The Highway*, 31 (March 1939), 153–5.

49. Laski, op. cit., 39–40.

50. D. Blaazer, *The Popular Front and the Progressive Tradition: Socialists, Liberals and the Quest for Unity, 1884–1939* (Cambridge 1992), 162.

51. Speech of 23 Aug. 1936, in Ibarruri, *Speeches and Articles*, 16.

52. Thorez, op. cit., 210.

53. A.D. Lindsay, *I Believe in Democracy* (Painswick 1957 edn), text of broadcast made on 3 June 1940, 19.

54. Helen Graham, *Socialism and War: The Spanish Socialist Party in Power and Crisis, 1936–1939* (Cambridge 1992), chapter 11.

55. Hopkins, op. cit., 251–2; Thomas Murray papers, National Library of Scotland, Ms 9083, Box 1/1, 10 April 1938, Murray to 'friends'.

Tom Buchanan is University Lecturer in Modern History and Politics at the University of Oxford's Department for Continuing Education, and a Fellow of Kellogg College. His publications include *Britain and the Spanish Civil War* (1997) and, as co-editor with Martin Conway, *Political Catholicism in Europe, 1918–1965* (1996). He is currently researching a book on China and the British Left in the twentieth century.