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Bertram D. Wolfe and His Position on Human Rights after the Barcelona May Days

Chee Yuen Cheung

Secondary School, The ISF Academy, Hong Kong, China
apollo238238@gmail.com

Abstract. This work will discover US socialist Bertram D. Wolfe's position on human rights during the May Days by analyzing his two pamphlets from 1937. In Barcelona, in 1937, a series of clashes within the Republicans had caused a purge against the anti-Stalinist left. As a sympathizer with them and a leading member of the CPUSA (opposition), Wolfe wrote two pamphlets exposing the government's 'conspiracy' against its opponents and demonstrating the necessity of establishing a worker-peasant dictatorship government. The analysis in this article examined Bertram D. Wolfe's engagement with human rights principles in his writings about the May Days, revealed the complex interplay between his socialist ideology and the principle of human rights, and underscored the instrumental use of human rights principles in human rights writings and the role of the global socialist movement in local politics. The significance of this research is that it embodies the correlation between revolutionary pragmatism and rights-based idealism, demonstrating socialism's indirect promotion of human rights in the early 20th century.

Keywords: Human Rights, Socialism, Spanish Civil War, Bertram Wolfe, The May Days

1. Introduction

May Days was an impactful event during The Spanish Civil War. It was a series of clashes between the factions on the Republican side in Barcelona from May 3rd to May 6th in 1937, a city that was only further distant from the frontline against nationalists. The Mays Days had a profound impact, leading to decisive results. It led to Prime Minister Largo Caballero's resignation, the growing influence of Communists in the government, and the decline of its opposition parties, including the National Confederation of Labor-Iberian Anarchist Federation (CNT-FAI) and the Workers' Party of Marxist Unification (POUM). Due to the tide of internationalism in that era, repressive methods against the liberal socialists were vehemently opposed by their supporters, including a prominent member of CPUSA (Opposition) (Communist Party of the USA (Opposition)), Bertram D. Wolfe [1]. As an anti-Stalinist and a witness to The Spanish Civil War, his stance during the May Days was seldom discussed in academic research on related topics [2]. Considering the critical role support for legal defense and advocacy from foreign socialists played in striving for a fairer trial of POUM, it would be thought-provoking to discover how the socialists on the other side of the world could have impacted an incident in Spain by analyzing the connection between human rights principles and

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assistance from foreign socialists [1]. This work has examined to what extent Bertram D. Wolfe adopted human rights principles in his writings on the May Days.

2. Background

2.1. Background of the event

In late 1936, following the failure of the nationalist coup in Barcelona [3], various Popular Front parties found a new autonomous government under the coordination of President Lluis Companys. Representatives of the autonomous government included PSUC (Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia) (an ally of the PCE (Communist Party of Spain)), CNT-FAI (an anarcho-syndicalist trade union confederation), and the POUM (a communist opposition to Stalinism which was accused of being 'Trotskites' by communists and republicans due to their radical social revolution ideology and criticism of the People's Front). In December 1936, the PSUC suggested expelling POUM from the government to establish a more 'powerful' government. It escalated tension, leading to the declaration of a state of emergency in December. The December Crisis ended with the expulsion of POUM and the voluntary withdrawal of PSUC from the government, the latter being PSUC's response to CNT-FAI's backing of the POUM's expulsion. The political conflict did not end afterward. In January 1937, UGT (General Union of Workers), the mouthpiece of PSUC in the government, proposed reorganizing all security forces into a unified internal security force. This proposal encountered opposition from the POUM and CNT-FAI, causing their troops to withdraw from the frontline. Subsequently, government commissioners of CNT-FAI quit the government, which sparked a government crisis. The crisis continued and escalated after a few assassinations attempts on PSUC and PCE members. As a response to it, liberal socialist militias and government forces began to confront each other on the streets of Barcelona on April 29th. On May 3rd, fights broke out across Catalonia between the liberal socialists and forces of the autonomous government and ended on May 6th after an informal ceasefire.

2.2. Aftermath

After the brutal 4 days, the purge against the POUM and the CNT-FAI began. Kidnappings, assassinations, and unlawful arrests continued to happen. In June, a catastrophe befell POUM. Government forces occupied its Barcelona headquarters and imprisoned most of its leadership. This purge targeted both rank-and-file Party members and foreign supporters of POUM, with many subjected to unlawful imprisonment or summary executions. One of them was Andreu Nin, the leader of POUM, who was kidnapped and murdered by the Republican Authority in June.

The trail of POUM members began in October 1938. Due to the pressure from the calls for just public trial, it demonstrated relatively increased impartiality. To be exact, it was the legal support from foreign leftists that revealed the Republican regime's violation of human rights to the world [1]. As one emphasizer of the liberal socialists, Bertram D. Wolfe held congruent political views regarding the POUM's ideology. He joined the SPA (Socialist Party of America) due to his anti-war stance in his early years. After becoming a member, he drafted a manifesto with John Reed to support the leftists of the SPA to take over the party at the party convention in New York. Thereafter, Wolfe became a founder of the CPUSA (Communist Party of USA) but was soon expelled due to his objection to decisions from the Comintern. After that, Wolfe joined the Communist Opposition led by his political ally Jay Lovestone. In 1937, Wolfe was sent to Spain to investigate the current situation of the Civil War. During his journey, he was exposed to the chaotic situation within the

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Republican faction after the May Days. Consequently, he lent his support to the POUM and CNT-FAI by publishing pamphlets that criticized the Republicans and their PCE ally [2].

3. Secondary source analysis

This paper is on Bertram D. Wolfe's pamphlets' connection with human rights principles instead of his contribution to human rights. This topic has only been explored by a few scholars in the past. For instance, Burnett Bolloten's "The Spanish Civil War: Revolution and Counterrevolution" and Donald W. Treadgold's "Bertram D. Wolfe: A Life in Two Centuries"

3.1. The Spanish Civil War: Revolution and Counterrevolution

Published in 1991, "The Spanish Civil War: Revolution and Counterrevolution" gave a comprehensive account of Bolloten's research results on the Republican faction from 1939 to 1989 [1] Bolloten's research showed the results of human rights support from foreign socialists in Spain, referencing leftist newspapers such as "The Revolution Age" written by CPUSA (opposition), documents of trial records, and articles written by foreign socialists like John McGovern. The research's evidence included cases of foreign socialists offering legal support to defendants, proof of liberal socialists' innocence, and materials related to the publicity of the May Days. Based on the pieces of evidence above, Bolloten believed that the demand for a free public trial and the participation of foreign socialist lawyers prevented a Moscow-style trial and made the Republicans' conspiracy of falsifying evidence "a joke" [1].

3.2. Bertram D. Wolfe: a life in two centuries

Donald W. Treadgold's journal was published in 1979. It documented Wolfe's early experiences and reflected Treadgold's friendship with Wolfe. In his journal, he delved into Wolfe's life path, discussed how he became a socialist and shifted into an opponent within the CPUSE, and analyzed his connection with The Spanish Civil War. In his journal, he claimed, "Wolfe's adventures with Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, and others cannot be recounted here, or his encounter with misunderstanding and deliberate misrepresentation of what was happening?" [2] because Wolfe was misinformed that no church had been destroyed on the Nationalist side, when in fact 20000 had been. Finally, Treadgold pointed out that Wolfe's experiences during the Civil War were very different from his nineteenth-century life, which formed his mind and made him a different person [2].

4. Primary source analysis

Both Burnett Bolloten and Donald W. Treadgold had conducted a wide range of research and analysis on the republican regime's violation of human rights after the May Days, as well as how backing from foreign supporters of the liberal socialists played their role in striving for a fair trial. However, they did not answer the questions below: What points did Wolfe use in his writings to support the POUM and CNT-FAI? To what extent did he utilize human rights discourse to support his points? In this essay, two pamphlets written by Bertram D. Wolfe will be used to fill the gap in the secondary sources. "The Truth about the Barcelona events" was a pamphlet written by 'Comrade Lamba' with an introduction composed by Wolfe. It included a brief narration of the May Days and the positions of POUM, CNT-FAI, PCE, and the Republicans after the May Days. Besides, it included condemnation of the centralized government's long-standing conspiracy and its backing for

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the bourgeoisie and the Comintern. Although Wolfe did not write this pamphlet, it still effectively embodied his stance on the May Days since he held an affirmative attitude towards this work and regarded it as "A masterpiece of Marxist historical analysis" [1]. The second source is "Civil War in Spain," written by Wolfe and with an introduction written by Will Herberg. It gave a comprehensive account of the essence of the 'Spanish Revolution', the challenges and obstacles faced by the revolutionary forces, the republic's situation since 1931, the meaning of establishing a government serving the interests of the proletariat, and the critique against the centralized government's actions in the May Days. These two sources share significant similarities in content, as both were produced by Wolfe and directly linked to the May Days. Each included an analysis of the situation within the Republican faction and condemnation of the violation of human rights during and after the May Days, which can directly answer the research question.

4.1. "Civil War in Spain"

First, according to both sources, Wolfe condemned the suppression of liberal socialists after the May Days. In "Civil War in Spain", Wolfe demonstrated his opposition to the Republican Authority through his critique of the secret execution of Andres Nin. In Wolfe's appendix about Andres Nin, he wrote: "The arrest of all its (POUM) leaders and most capable and devoted members, the framing-up of Andres Nin as an agent of Franco and his subsequent murder in jail without trial." [4] This quote serves more as a denunciation of the violation of the right to a fair trial, as it highlights the phrases "framing up" and "without trial." Moreover, although Wolfe used a socialist pitch as can be seen in "This epic deed of the Barcelona workers saved Spain and changed the course (For Thwarting the coup in 1936) of the history of our times." [4] before this quote, it is clear that he prioritized the injustice of the execution over criticizing the "Bourgeois nature" of the centralized government since he placed this part after his socialist quote. Based on the above evidence, Wolfe attached greater importance to the violation of human rights than to his socialist stance.

Additionally, Wolfe incorporated human rights principles in his other writings. In chapter 5 of the pamphlet, he listed the necessary measures to win the war, including support for minority rights: "Autonomy and the right of self-determination and free cooperation for all the national regions of the Spanish peninsula — above all freedom for the Moors [4]." Although Bertram D. Wolfe then referred to these measures as the "extension of revolution", it was evident that this call for revolution aimed to strive for autonomy and racial equality. Furthermore, Wolfe's writing of how a workers' and peasants' government would evoke "A revolution against Franco and his foreign legionnaires in Northern Africa if they had freed the Moors and used radio to have proclamation in the Moorish tongue." [4] indicated that Wolfe believed in the principle of racial equality as much as he believed in the role the Moors could play in fighting against Nationalists in his socialist vision. Wolfe's conviction in minorities' role within the "Spanish Revolution" showed his affirmative attitude toward racial equality while maintaining his position as a socialist.

In chapter 9, "What's Ahead for Spain?" Wolfe condemned the republicans for their conspiracy against the revolutionary working class. The original text was, "It (The republican government) establishes a censorship, not military but political, on the workers organizations. It talks of the democratic republic but violates civil liberties, abolishes freedom of the press for the U.G.T. and C.N.T., that is for the majority of its people, and becomes a minority dictatorship ruling with the bayonet." This text inferred that Wolfe was dissatisfied with the dictatorship instead of just the Republicans' suppression of the liberal socialists because he soon wrote, "Each day the government of the democratic republic takes fresh steps towards naked bourgeois-military dictatorship and reaction [4]." The emphasis on 'Dictatorship' and 'Censorship' indicates that Wolfe intended to

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denounce the Republican regime's restrictions on speech and its dictatorial nature of the bourgeois, even though the purpose of his points was to condemn the political enemy of liberal socialists rather than his belief in the human rights principle.

In short, Bertram Wolfe only used human rights discourse in a few of his arguments, more as a tool to support his statements instead of the main idea of the pamphlet, indicating that he did not fully believe in human rights principles but only used them to justify his points. In the pamphlet, only the parts mentioned above revolved around human rights, and the rest of the contents were all on the theme of the proletarian revolution and 'the fascist and bourgeois nature' of the Republicans. The pamphlet began with a critique directed at the Republic regime for appeasing fascists, continued with the condemnation of Republicans and Communists' betrayal of the proletarian revolution, and ended with an argument of why the victory belonged to the Proletarians and why war (The Civil War) and Revolution (Proletarian revolution) are indispensable for the workers of Spain. In Chapter 5, Wolfe inscribed the P.O.U.M.'s program for the May Days and claimed it "slowly won its ground among various socialists". Article 13 of this program was "Convocation of a congress of delegates of workers' and peasants' unions and soldiers to lay the fundamental bases of the new regime and from which would arise a workers' and peasants' government — a government which would be the most democratic possible, which would express unequivocally the will of the great majority of the people, and which would have complete authority to ensure the new, revolutionary order [4]." The article proposed a government exclusively governed by workers and peasants with supreme revolutionary authority, explicitly rejecting conventional civil political rights. As this agenda was advocating a 'democratic government' which was in fact under the dictatorship of the proletariat instead of a freely elected government, it was not calling for human rights. Moreover, as Wolfe supports the suppression of landowners and the bourgeoisie in the pamphlet, it should be concluded that although Wolfe adopts human rights principles in a few of his points, he sought socialist principles over human rights due to his socialist political tendency. Wolfe agreed with certain aspects of the human rights principles, but his socialist stance made them contradictory [4].

4.2. "The Truth about the Barcelona Events"

In the second pamphlet, Bertram D. Wolfe kept the same attitudes on human rights, which he utilized to support his socialist statements. The pamphlet was called "The Truth about the Barcelona Events", written by a secret Spanish Socialist 'Comrade Lamba'. The pamphlet began with a narration of the May Days. After that, it focused on different political powers' attitudes towards the May Days and ended in a critique against the bourgeois Republican government for its betrayal of the revolution. "The Truth about the Barcelona Events" had a shorter length, and the contents about human rights principles account for a smaller proportion. The only two points that used human rights as arguments were about the centralized government's violation of political freedom and dictatorship. "It (Bourgeois reaction) closes the headquarters of the revolutionary party, the POUM, suppresses POUM, Anarchist and Syndicalist papers, but would reopen the Churches, centers of counter-revolutionary propaganda and even fortified machine gun nests of reaction!". Consistent with the preceding pamphlet, this par was also cited from the 'Program for the Crisis' outlined by the POUM. The entire pamphlet only uses human rights discourse to support its points occasionally, as in 'Civil War in Spain', utilizing it to support the struggle of the Spanish proletariat. It only emphasizes the human rights of the social group sharing common interests with liberal socialists instead of every victim of the regime [5]. Overall, this pamphlet and 'Civil War in Spain' both used human rights discourse to prove the 'Betrayal' of the Spanish Government. Although human rights

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principles occupied a certain amount of space in the pamphlet, it was only to support Wolfe's socialist arguments rather than the main argument.

5. Conclusion

Overall, this work examined Bertram D. Wolfe's engagement with human rights principles in his writings about the May Days and revealed the complex interplay between his socialist ideology and the principle of human rights. The analysis of his two pamphlets written in 1937 indicates that Wolfe supports his critique of the centralized government's 'bourgeois dictatorship' nature and betrayal of the liberal socialists through the selective use of human rights discourse. Nevertheless, his innovation of rights-based arguments remained secondary to his revolutionary socialist objectives. Wolfe's primary concern is to establish a worker-peasant dictatorship government that is able to defend the rights of the working class.

The two key findings of this work revolve around two aspects: the instrumental use of human rights principles in human rights writings and the role of the global socialist movement in local politics. This essay underscores how Wolfe's pamphlets depict the Republicans' violation of human rights as conspiracies against the socialist revolution and also explores how support from international socialists, both in terms of verbal and legal support, amplified pressure for fair trials.

Ultimately, this research fulfills the gap in scholarship in Bertram Wolfe's stance during The Spanish Civil War and his use of human rights principles in his writing. Its results embody the correlation between revolutionary pragmatism and rights-based idealism, demonstrating socialism's indirect promotion of human rights in the early 20th century. The future direction of this work can revolve around analysis of other uses of human rights narratives in The Spanish Civil War within different factions, comparative analysis of other writings of liberal socialists in the Civil War (E.g., George Orwell, Andrew Nin, Joaquin Ascaso, etc.), and the involvement of human right principles in socialist constitutions.

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