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The Civil War in Spain, 1936-1939 and the Image of Enemy in the British Fascist Press

Vera V. Malay¹, Svetlana U. Krupskaya²
Marina S. Orehova³, Andrey P. Urivskii⁴, Nickolay N. Fomichev⁵

Abstract

The article deals with the analysis of publications of British Fascists newspapers 'Action' and 'The Blackshirt' during the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939. The main directions of image of enemy formation are studied on the example of these papers. Forms of presentation and ways of international problems interpreting by far-right publications are studied. The fascist newspaper *Action*, *The Fascist Week* and *The Blackshirt* spoke from the position of nationalism, Imperial identity, anti-liberalism, anti-Soviet and anti-Semitism. The concept of "communism" in the pages of the fascist press has accumulated the most precisely the image of enemy. Articles and notes shaped confusion between "Soviet", "red" and "Communist". The USSR seemed to be "the warmonger" and the "architect of the Civil war in Spain". The destructive role of Soviet Russia in the conflict was proved in the British fascist press. Soviet Union was accused of seeking to plunge Spain and Europe into anarchy. In British fascist publications trend towards stereotyping and myth-making were noticeable, they were opposed to "Western" civilization (as individualistic) and "Eastern", "Communist" (oppressive, traditionalist).

Keywords: The Spanish Civil War, The Propaganda War, The image of enemy, The far-right press, The British Union of Fascists, The British fascist press Action, The Blackshirt.

¹ Belgorod State University Russia, 308015, Belgorod, Pobeda Street, 85. E-mail: Malay_v@bsu.edu.ru

² Belgorod State University Russia, 308015, Belgorod, Pobeda Street, 85.

³ Belgorod State University Russia, 308015, Belgorod, Pobeda Street, 85.

⁴ Belgorod State University Russia, 308015, Belgorod, Pobeda Street, 85.

⁵ Belgorod State University Russia, 308015, Belgorod, Pobeda Street, 85.

Introduction

The ideological component of the Spanish conflict quietly influenced all aspects of international relations. Breaking headlines in European newspapers during July 1936 concerning the Spanish Civil War sparked a serious information and propaganda war, exacerbating polarization in Europe on the eve of World War II [1]. In early August 1936, British leadership and diplomats expressed concern about the prospect of the creation of a hostile ideological bloc in Europe in connection with the events in Spain. Throughout the war in Spain similar fears were expressed by the French side [2].

The Spanish conflict of 1936-1939 provided a unique opportunity to the future participants of the World War II not only to perfect military doctrine, but also to study skills necessary to sway public opinion in their own countries [3].

The war in Spain caused a surge of interest in the English media. British society was fascinated by all aspects of the conflict. While all points of view were covered in the British press, the far-right press, represented by *The Fascist Week* (1933-1934), *Action* (1936-1939) and *The Blackshirt* (1936-1939) covered the views of the Fascist parties which owned them.

It is known that the British Union of Fascists (BUF), which was founded in 1924, was originally created as the British counterpart to the Italian extreme right. Fascist political influence in British society in the 1930s was weak. One may postulate that the unpopularity of the extreme right ideas in the British society of the 1930s, was largely due to the mentality of the inhabitants of the United Kingdom. A respect for the long-standing parliamentary tradition, as well as for their history, citizenship and family values inherent in British culture, and a respect for the stabilising role of the institution of monarchy all served to ensure this [4].

The Fascist press occupied a modest place in the newspaper market in the country. Most widely circulated was the BUF's official weekly publication *Action*. In April 1938 it had a circulation of 16 thousand per week (by comparison: the circulation of the Communist *Daily Worker* reached 100 thousand per day and the conservative *Daily Express* sold up to 2.329 million copies per day) [5]. A failure to win the 'circulation war' meant that the propagandists of the extreme right had to try to promote their ideas within society by adopting an analytical approach to the dissection of news [6].

Material and Methods

Source base of the article includes materials of the fascist British press (1936-1939). The conclusions are based on analysis of extreme right-wing national Newspapers - *Action*, *The Blackshirt*.

In the work various types of the analysis are implied: the principle scientific objectivity, historicism, involving the consideration of the problem in all its diversity and requiring systemic treatment with historical sources and literature. Such research methods, as a method of historical descriptions, problem-chronological and specific analysis are also used in the paper.

Historical and systematic method made it possible to consider a given problem in a complex of propagandist struggle in Great Britain before II WW. Comparative method helped to identify common and specific trends of British Fascist press in connection of Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939. The qualitative analysis of newspaper material allowed studying forms and methods of forming the image of the enemy by the main British Fascist newspapers on this base.

Essential-substantial analysis of print materials as a historical source involved the detection and explanation of the facts of reality (descriptive-narrative method). Moreover, the description was in the form of coherent presentation, with their own logic and meaning (the logical method).

Special attention is paid to the role of news and analytical articles in the British right newspaper, different degrees of subjectivity of ways of presenting information. Also attention is paid to the ratio of media space and reality, the specificity of the press as an exclusively subjective historical source.

Qualitative analysis of newspaper material has been attempted on base of the name and the content of articles. Complexes of the structural components of the development-right British printed propaganda 1936-1939 are compared. Usage the comparative-historical method involved identifying differences and similarities between similar press phenomena (the contents of the newspaper articles and notes) to achieve synthesis ideas about them.

Research and Discussion

Before the Civil war in Spain, 1936-1939 the problems there were given only occasional attention in the British fascist press. There was a tendency to demonise the left. After the Popular Front victory of February 1936, Spain was the main focus of major publications of the British fascist press. The problems in the Pyrenees were directly linked to the global issues.

An antipathy to the concept of 'Communism' was a constant feature in the images of the enemy on the pages of the British fascist Newspapers. The demonization of the left took two

main forms: through a negative view of Soviet participation in the Spanish War and a critical attitude towards the Republican government.

Opposition to the Popular Front was typical as the political events in Spain played out. *Action* reported on 'disturbing facts', such as the expropriation of land from private owners, the 'syndicalist tyranny' and oppression on religious grounds [7]. Anti-Soviet and anti-Republican motives were often quite difficult to separate. An editorial by *Action* editor John Beckett of May 1936, declaimed the Spanish regime as 'Moscow's barbarism'. The editor characterised the political problems of Spain as economic. In his opinion, there were two opposite trends: "National-socialism and fascism [are here in order] to regulate the economy, after bouts of anarchy and social decay. Spain and France seem willing to follow the madness of total economic control, as in Russia" [8]. Thus, the main features of the propaganda war against the Spanish Popular Front Government were outlined before the July uprising, rebellion and the beginning of the Civil War. Subsequently, these motifs became more prevalent in the British Fascist press.

The reason given by *The Blackshirt* for the rebellion's outbreak on 17th-18th July 1936, by anti-government forces in Spain, was the oppression of the rights of Monarchists, traditionalists, and the Phalangists by Anarchists and Communists. It was noted that the Fascist party in Spain was forced to act in a rapidly changing environment "with one hand" because its leader J. A. Primo de Rivera was in prison [9]. V. Joyce wrote of "Global problems and the blood lust of the financial oligarchy". He was one of the first to comment. He wrote that Communism had declared a 'Holy War' against Christianity in Spain. According to the author, these events were products of "global financial oligarchy", which was embodied by Communism in the Pyrenees [10].

The idea of some global power that had a decisive influence on global processes, not only linked the propaganda of the British Fascists to myth-making, but also created the image of a common enemy in the readers eyes. It should be noted that the fascist newspapers propagandists were trying to convey to the reader the idea that all Christian faiths should unify against the terror in 'Red Spain' [11].

Early reports about the Soviet presence in Spain were full of propaganda clichés and rhetoric typical of these publications. The Soviet Commissar for Foreign Affairs V. Litvinov was called 'The Red Bandit', the Soviet Ambassador in the Spanish Republic, M. I. Rosenberg (August 1936-February 1937) was called a 'Zionist' [12]. Anti-Semitism was closely intertwined with the anti-Communist rhetoric.

The British Fascist press actively criticized pro-Soviet propaganda. *Action* wrote that the English Communist newspapers *The Tribune*, *The Star* and *The Daily Worker* were published on 'Moscow money' [13]. The BBC was also accused of agitation in favour of Communists [14]. According to them there was no fundamental difference between the Communists, the Liberals and Labour. As for Spain, keeping the left socialist L. Caballero (September 1936-May 1937) in power was presented as an extreme degree of danger [15].

Those associated with the BUF newspaper *The Blackshirt* also wrote about the two errors that were allegedly inherent in the press in describing the Civil War in Spain. The first was the provision that government forces adhered to a democratic orientation. The second was that not all the rebels could be classed as fascists. It was also mentioned that the Russian Communist and French socialist governments used Baldwin's government (1935-1937) for their own purposes to support the related forces in Spain [16].

In the article 'We did not forget Russia, we remember Spain' the journalist from *The Blackshirt* G. Gibbs saw the cause of civil confrontation in the Pyrenees as the 'Red Virus' brought in from Russia. The author also believed that the main task of the 'Bolsheviks' was a world war and pan-European destabilization [17].

There were characteristic editorials with titles such as "Russian Weapons Were Sent to Spain", "Soviet Advisers in Madrid" (December 1936). The authors of the articles believed that in November 1936 Madrid was held only thanks to the Russian and International Brigades. If "Spain will be lost," concluded one of the *Action* journalists, "one should prepare for the aggression of Soviet Russia against its Eastern European neighbours" [18].

An integral feature of many *Action* and *The Blackshirt* numbers there were numerous caricatures aimed at discrediting 'Communist politics'. Most often these were symbols of violence and murder such as bones, skulls and blood [19].

In the propaganda of the British extreme right, the theory that there was ideological similarity between Liberalism and Communism was put forward repeatedly [20].

In one of the articles in *Action* (August 1936), the policy of European security was called the brainchild of a "crazy gang". It was pointed out that this policy was held by Litvinov exclusively in the Soviet interest [21]. Repeatedly in the British Fascist press, the idea was expressed that the actions of Germany and the USSR in Spain were reported by the British media in a biased manner.

After a year of war *Action* and *The Blackshirt* not only sympathized with the rebels, but also predicted their speedy victory based on the following promises. Firstly, the Spaniards would never mentally accept the communist Government. Secondly, there was no unified

Republican Government. Instead, there were three independent ones: in Valencia, in Barcelona and the North Government in Bilbao (Basques) [22]. It can be said that, despite the 'competition' between some Republican centers, and certain problems between the center and the periphery, the degree of separatist tendencies for that period has been exaggerated.

Intertwining the concept of 'Communism' with various aspects of the enemy's image, the author of *Action* G. Caning wrote that the aim of the Bolshevik regime in Russia was chaos throughout the world and a new World War. This general message was supplemented by the conclusion that the Soviet regime had destroyed not only Spain, but also China, by supporting 'anti-popular' governments in these countries. States with a fascist regime showed the world an example of thoughtful social reforms with a special role for the state in the economy and society. "The existence of Spain as an independent state is directly connected with a complete break with the USSR," one author of *Action* stated [23].

The British Fascist movement accepted General Franco as the head of Spain. British Fascist leader O. Mosley wrote in an article (February 1939) that he "wanted to become for the United Kingdom what Franco has become for Spain" [24].

In general, the legitimate Spanish government and Soviet participation in the Civil War, 1936-1939 were widely criticized by the British Fascist press. It is possible to single out several main themes that went into the formation of the caricature of the enemy: the repressive character of Republicans, their voluntarism in the course of reforms, actual repressions, guilt for the crisis of statehood and the partial loss of sovereignty.

In Fascist newspapers, the tendency to merge the images of the internal and external enemies was clearly manifested. A correspondent of *The Blackshirt* wrote that there were many "supporters of Franco" in the British Parliament. Data on the corruption of the leaders of the parliamentary opposition were cited [25].

The very fact of German intervention in Spain had been seen as a response, to the Soviet support for 'Red Spain'. Hitler was promoted as a peacemaker, and from the point of view of their destructive influence on the international situation an equal sign was put between Communism and Liberalism (*Action*) [26].

At the same time the author of the article suggested that the popularity of extreme Nationalist ideas in Spain was growing due to the economic and diplomatic successes of Germany. '[The] trouble of this country was associated only with Moscow', said the correspondent from *Action* [27].

In general, the Fascist press justified the Italo-German intervention in Spain and tried to understate the number of Italian troops on the side of the nationalists [28].

On the participation of subjects of the United Kingdom in the Spanish Civil War, the British Fascist movement showed solidarity with the British government. The Fascist movement had joined with the government on the issue of British volunteers in Spain. The title of one of the articles in *Action*, devoted to the humanitarian theme was typical, 'All Spain is not worth a drop of British blood' [29].

International volunteers were represented in Fascist newspapers as naive people who had succumbed to Soviet propaganda. A typical participant of the International brigade was drawn as mercenary, uneducated, unprincipled person prone to ambition. The authors of pieces in *Action* used the International Brigades to discredit the Spanish Popular Front government [30].

When covering the humanitarian aspects of the Spanish war of 1936-1939, there was also an appeal to social motives, an indication of the impossibility of helping Spain because of the inadequacy of the resources of Britain itself [31].

This clearly defined tendency to merge the images of external and internal enemies is very revealing. Fascist groups in the UK launched the campaign "No help to Spain". Evidence of mass events conducted to discredit the idea of humanitarian action in Spain were repeatedly reported in the press. For example, at a meeting on 5th February, 1938 in London, there were slogans such as "National Socialism for National Welfare", "Old Parties have betrayed workers", "Mosley always fought for the unemployed", "No food for Spain - food for the UK", etc.

This rhetoric testifies not only to the fact that the program of the British Fascist organizations had clearly manifested Nazi traits, but also to the social degradation of the movement. It was now orientated towards the unemployed and those below the poverty line. The slogans regarding the Spanish war focused participants in these mass events on the need to curtail aid to war in Spain for the sake of 'economic security and the well-being of Britain' [32].

Conclusion

The foreign perception of the British extreme right was formed in accordance with the ideas of Nationalism, Imperial identity, Corporatism, anti-Semitism, anti-Communism and anti-Liberalism.

The views of the British Fascists on the international situation was resolved on the firm rejection of Soviet foreign policy. The unity of the enemy's image in this case was manifested in terms of the global destructive role of the Soviet regime in the world. The legitimate Spanish government was accused of repression and oppression on religious and class grounds.

The leaders of the Republic were represented as incompetent, prone to dictatorship and traitors to the national interests of Spain. At the same time, the Soviet Union was accused of illegally sending weapons, aggressive international policy and the escalation of tensions in the world, in an effort to unleash a general war. There was also criticism of the governments of Baldwin and Chamberlain for an excessively compliant policy towards the Spanish Republic and the USSR.

The incompetence of the Republican leaders was shown in contrast with the economic success of the Spanish nationalists and Germany. The image of the general Franco was idealised. The Italo-German intervention was presented as a necessary step in response to 'Communist aggression'.

As for the fighting, the Fascist publications underestimated the number of Italian and German contingents fighting in Spain. In their speeches and from the pages of their newspapers, the leaders of the BUF called for the creation of a united anti-Soviet front in Europe. Despite their support of Italo-German intervention, the BUF maintained its solidarity with the Government's policy of non-intervention in Spain. International Brigades were shown as gullible people who succumbed to 'Communist propaganda'.

As a result, the Spanish Civil War provided a fertile soil for myth-making in this period. The Popular Front government and the Soviet Union were brought together within the framework of a general concept of 'Communism'. The British Fascist press sympathized with the Spanish rebels and predicted their inevitable victory in the Civil War.

The foreign policy of the British fascists turned out to be completely unviable in the face of the expansion of Axis aggression in Europe. The central thesis about the need for close cooperation with Germany in the international arena would not withstand criticism, including in the context of the coverage of the Spanish war of 1936-1939. The characterisation of the conflict by *Action* and *The Blackshirt* was unacceptable to the British public.

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18. Action. 1936. 5, 12 Dec.

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22. Action. 1936. 26 Jun.
23. Ibid. 1936. 19 Dec.
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28. The Manchester Guardian. 1937. 27 Oct.; The Blackshirt. 1937. 13 Nov.
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