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# Land and Freedom: An Accurate Glimpse of Spain's Civil War

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Land and Freedom: An Accurate Glimpse of Spain's Civil War

Reviewed by Matthew E. Kowalski

In most American history texts, the Spanish Civil War is often viewed as simply a 'dress-rehearsal' for the Second World War. As a consequence, the prevailing image of the conflict is that of a straightforward contest between the forces of fascism and democracy. This gross oversimplification of one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most important conflicts, fails to take into account the considerable diversity of political thought within both the Nationalist and Republican camps. British director Ken Loach's 1996 film *Land and Freedom*, attempts to overcome this common oversight. By focusing his attention on the internal conflict that developed between independent socialists and the Stalinist controlled Spanish Communist Party, Loach provides a more complete picture of events of 1936-39.

The film centers on the story of David Carr, a member of the British Communist Party who joins the International Brigades fighting for the Spanish Republic. Driven by his youthful idealism and a genuine belief in the internationalist cause, David fights with a militia group associated with the anti-Stalinist Marxist POUM {Partido Obrero de Unificacion} in Catalonia. As the film progresses, the young David become increasingly disenchanted, as the course of the Spanish revolution is hijacked by the Moscow controlled Spanish Communist Party. His relationship with his new comrades is also put to the test when the Stalinists begin to purge their political opponents in the anti-Franco resistance.

From a purely historical standpoint, *Land and Freedom* is a considerably honest portrayal of the Spanish Civil War. Its portrayal of the internal conflicts within the Republican camp and the attempts of the Soviet Union to manage the course of the Spanish revolution is extremely well handled. Indeed, the scene featuring a debate within an agrarian soviet brilliantly captures the considerable ideological diversity within the anti-Franco resistance. The film also presents an extremely accurate depiction of both the rampant anti-clericalism of the Spanish peasantry and the atrocities perpetrated by leftwing militias against the Roman Catholic establishment. Loach and screenwriter Jim Allen's personal ideology, however, contributes to the film's one major historical flaw. Because of their Trotskyite political leanings, they purposely inflate the importance of the POUM. In reality, the most powerful non-Stalinist faction in the Catalonian countryside was the anarchist CNT/FIA.

Besides its attention to historical authenticity, the film boasts strong cinematic qualities. The numerous battle scenes are well staged and extremely graphic. The intentionally gritty art design and cinematography does much to convey the brutal realities of modern warfare. Jim Allen's script captures both the revolutionary idealism of the period and the complexity of film's characters. In particular, the relationship between David and his Spanish lover/ comrade in arms Blanca is significantly well developed. The performances are also uniformly solid, especially Ian Hart's portrayal of David and Tom Gilroy's turn as an American Comintern agent.

Overall *Land and Freedom* provides a largely faithful portrayal of the socio-political complexities of the Spanish Civil War. Rather than viewing the events in Spain as a battle between tyranny and democracy, Loach and Allen accurately characterize the conflict as the 'class war' it really was. They also take into account the considerable ideological diversity within the Spanish Republic. Although their political bias is present in several facets of the film, it does not serve as a distraction. In conclusion, *Land and Freedom* is probably the most historically faithful account of the Spanish revolution to come out of the English-language cinema industry.

Director: Ken Loach  
Runtime: 109 min  
Spain/ Britain