

El Zorro Rojo

The Last Stalinist: The Life of Santiago Carrillo

By Paul Preston

(William Collins 432pp £30)

In 1977 an old ghost in new clothes began to stalk Europe: Eurocommunism. The term was invented by a journalist to denote a novel type of Western communism, somewhat liberal, almost social democratic and anyway nicer, cosier and more stylish than the traditional Soviet brand (not a difficult enterprise). The term was soon adopted by the leaders of the communist parties of Italy (Enrico Berlinguer), France (Georges Marchais) and Spain (Santiago Carrillo), who met in Madrid in March of that year to affirm and reaffirm their commitment to Western democracy. The ghost scared only those who were easily scared or whose job it was to pretend to be scared by leftists (the secret services, Kissinger and such like). Eurocommunism annoyed the Russians, since it suggested that to win elections in the West one had to distance oneself from the East. Less than a decade later the phenomenon evanesced. It would have been swept away anyway by the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The three leaders were not in the same position. In France Marchais was in alliance with the Parti socialiste, which was growing stronger by the day. In Italy, Berlinguer had scored a major electoral triumph in the elections of the previous year, bringing him almost level with the main governing party. Carrillo was far weaker than either. His Partido Comunista de

España (PCE) had been banned since the end of the Spanish Civil War. He himself had been forced to live in exile for almost forty years. As so often happens in clandestine parties, the PCE was rife with internecine warfare, out of touch with the wider country and still obsessively discussing a past history that was meaning-

less to most of the citizenry, especially those brought up under Franco. Yet, in the mid-1970s, the international situation seemed favourable to the Left. Franco was dead and democracy was returning to Spain; the military junta in Greece had been overthrown; in Portugal a left-wing military coup (supported by communists and other opposition forces) had finished off the Salazar regime. The USA, after a long and useless war, had withdrawn from Vietnam. In the wake of the Watergate scandal, President Nixon had been forced to resign.

However, this tide did not favour the communists. In France they were seen



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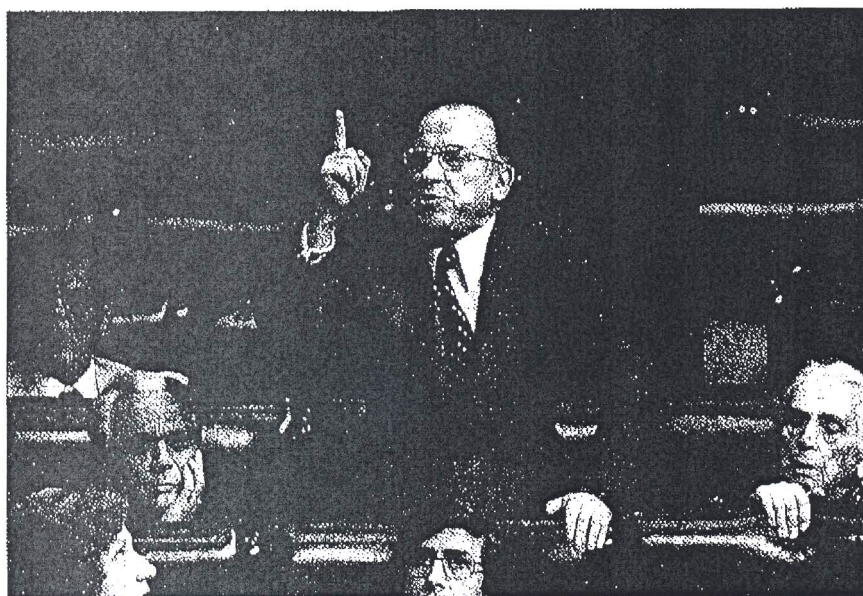
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Carrillo in the Cortes, 1977

off by their cleverer socialist rivals. In Italy they faltered and were later unable to profit from the collapse of the other parties involved in major corruption scandals. In Spain matters turned sour too. In opposition and even during the transition to democracy, the PCE had been taken seriously as a major force. Indeed, as Preston writes, the PCE had been 'the most determined opponent of the Franco regime' and Carrillo 'the dictator's most consistent left-wing enemy'. But the PCE found that years of obdurate and admirable opposition to Franco were not compensated by electoral success. The more acceptable socialists were able to reap what the much-feared 'reds' had sown. In the first post-Franco elections on 15 June 1977, the PCE obtained only 9.3 per cent of the vote. In 1979 it was almost as bad: 10.8 per cent. In 1982 support sunk to a catastrophic 4 per cent. The triumphant Partido socialista (PSOE) went on to hold power for the following fourteen years while in 1985 Carrillo, humiliated, failed even to be re-elected to the central committee of the PCE. He left the party he had led for decades, formed a small leftist outfit that earned 1 per cent of the vote, and spent his retirement from active politics writing self-serving memoirs, giving interviews and strutting around as a national treasure, a somewhat quaint and pathetic piece of Spanish history.

Carrillo was born in 1915 into left-wing politics. His father was a prominent socialist trade unionist and a close friend of Francisco Largo Caballero, the leader of the PSOE. Carrillo followed in his father's footsteps and joined the socialists. It must have been a tough if exciting childhood. Not many teenagers could claim, as Carrillo did, that their most profound memory of their father was 'seeing him regularly being taken away by Civil Guards from the family home'. Yet, as Paul Preston says, 'he grew up within a warm and affectionate extended family in an atmosphere soaked in a sense of the class struggle'. This 'would help account for the impregnable self-confidence that was always to underlie his career'.

By 1934 the nineteen-year-old Carrillo was general secretary of the socialist youth. As the situation in Spain lurched towards civil war, the young socialists moved further to the Left until Carrillo himself took the entire organisation into the PCE. From this point on the biography degenerates into a somewhat dull and unrelenting attack on everything Carrillo did, with too little examination of the historical context within which decisions were taken. Thus, absorbing the socialist youth movement into the PCE is said to have delivered a 'shattering blow' to the PSOE, 'undermining its political future' for the next generation. Perhaps, but why the entire organisation (around 50,000 members) followed Carrillo into the arms

of Moscow is not explained. 'In his anxiety for advancement', Preston writes, Carrillo 'was always ready to betray or denounce comrades'. But since he was already the leader of the young socialists, and the PSOE was bigger than the communists, it is not clear why he did not stay and advance in the former.

Preston, who was a rather generous biographer of Juan Carlos, the former king of Spain, is splenetic towards Carrillo, who is described as an opportunist and a liar, as someone who gets virtually every single prediction wrong, is cynical and 'dishonest', blames others, 'reacts badly to criticisms' and is at best a 'clever chameleon'. When he follows Moscow he is a Stalinist; when he doesn't he is an opportunist. The title of the book is *The Last Stalinist* (in the Spanish edition Carrillo is called, more kindly, *El zorro rojo* – 'the Red Fox'), but too often Preston uses the term 'Stalinist' to mean simply an authoritarian leader who packs meetings and wants to get his way – rather like calling anyone on the Right who is a bit nasty a 'fascist'. The fact is that during the 1930s and 1940s every communist leader in the world followed Stalin. Carrillo was no more (and no less) Stalinist than the others. When Stalin excommunicated Tito, Carrillo supported Stalin, but so did the entire communist movement, including Mao, Togliatti, Thorez *e tutti quanti*. As the leader of a defeated party, banned for decades and dependent on the USSR for everything, Carrillo did not have much choice. When circumstances changed so did Carrillo. In 1962 he agreed that a future democratic Spain should join the European Community (when most of the European Left and the USSR were still against it) and in 1968 he condemned the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. Biographers should always bear in mind the political constraints within which their subject operates. To drag them before a historical tribunal may be satisfying but does not make for good history. One might as well blame Churchill for his praise of Stalin during the war. 'If Hitler invaded hell', he said, 'I would make at least a favourable reference to the Devil'.

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