

Santiago Carrillo obituary

Communist leader committed to democracy in post-Franco Spain, but whose party found little electoral support

Paul Preston

The Guardian, Tuesday 18 September 2012 22.53 BST



Santiago Carrillo, centre, addressing the Congress of Deputies in Madrid in July 1977; to the right is Dolores Ibárruri, "La Pasionaria". Photograph: Str/EPA

A key player in the transition to democracy in [Spain](#), Santiago Carrillo Solares, who has died aged 97, was the longest-serving secretary-general of the Partido Comunista de España (PCE). However, the changes he was keen to promote in the country's political system ultimately marginalised the party. He was left a commentator outside it, respected by some, hated by others, notably for his controversial involvement in the darkest episode of the republican defence of Madrid during the civil war.

While the dictatorship of [Francisco Franco](#) had governed unchallenged since the end of that conflict in 1939, its response to the grave social problems caused by the 1973 energy crisis proved inadequate. Carrillo, formal leader of the PCE since 1959, had been in exile, mostly in France, and began to push for what he called "the pact for liberty", a broad opposition front. During Franco's illness of 1974, Carrillo launched the Junta Democrática in an attempt to ensure communist dominance of such moves.

He also published two works, *Demain l'Espagne* (Spain Tomorrow, interviews published in Paris in 1974, though banned in Spain until 1976) and *Eurocomunismo y Estado* (Eurocommunism and the State, 1977), aimed at proving his moderation. They established him as a leading theorist of Eurocommunism.

Franco died in November 1975, King Juan Carlos became head of state, and the following February a heavily disguised Carrillo returned secretly to Spain. By the time the police detained him for eight days in December 1976, he had already played a crucial role in pushing Adolfo Suárez's interim government in the direction of reform.

The PCE was legalised in 1977, and that June Carrillo was able to lead his party into Spain's first democratic elections since 1936. It gained 9% of the vote, coming third after Suárez's short-lived Unión de Centro Democrático (35%) and the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE, 29%): Carrillo himself became a member of the Congress of Deputies.

This was a considerable achievement, but Carrillo had already passed his zenith. In October 1976 he had called a general strike in the hope of provoking what he called the "ruptura democrática" (democratic break) – a scenario resembling the one that had

seen the collapse of the dictatorial regime in Portugal. The failure of the strike had opened the way to the more moderate scenario of the "ruptura pactada" (negotiated break), advocated by the socialist leader Felipe González.

In fact, the transition to democracy proceeded along the lines of negotiated consensus between the democratic opposition and the most progressive elements of the Franco regime. The PCE was wracked by demands for reform, the authoritarian habits of the aged, exiled leadership sitting ill with the young intellectuals of the internal resistance to Franco.

In response to proposals for the reincorporation of the reformists (known as "renovators") whom he had previously expelled, Carrillo resigned as secretary general in the summer of 1982. With elections imminent, he was persuaded to reconsider, but the collapse of the PCE vote from the 11% of 1979 to 4% as González's PSOE came to power in October 1982 ensured that he did indeed resign. When his successor, Gerardo Iglesias, sided with the renovators, Carrillo was dropped from the central committee in April 1985.

He formed a new workers-communist unity party, the Partido de los Trabajadores-Unidad Comunista, and stood unsuccessfully for parliament in the 1986 elections, in the 1989 European elections, and for parliament again in 1989. Two years later, Carrillo agreed to the mass incorporation of the Partido de los Trabajadores de España into the PSOE. He did not go with it, on the grounds that his long track record as a communist prevented him from playing an active role in the PSOE. However, his wife, Carmen Menéndez, did join.

Born in Gijón, on Spain's northern Atlantic coast, Carrillo had in fact started his political life in the PSOE, in which his father, Wenceslao, was a prominent figure. The teenage Santiago was drafted into the party's youth movement, the Federación de Juventudes Socialistas (FJS), and was a particularly vocal advocate of ultra-revolutionary responses to rightwing obstruction of reform in Spain's Second Republic. Accordingly, in 1934 he was elected secretary-general of the FJS, which became the most radical section of the socialist party.

The most dramatic fruit of socialist radicalisation was the uprising by miners in Asturias in October 1934. After it was defeated, Carrillo was jailed. From there he denounced the moderate and centrist sections of the PSOE, and called for the "bolshevisation" of the party. However, he accepted the entry of both the PSOE and the PCE into the electoral alliance known as the Popular Front. When he was released from prison after its victory in the February 1936 elections, Carrillo was invited to visit Moscow, where he was brought into the communist orbit.

On his return, he promoted the formation, in April, of the Juventudes Socialistas Unificadas (United Socialist Youth), through which the PSOE lost the FJS to the Communist party, of which he was probably already a member. By then, the civil war had broken out, and Carrillo's energy and organisational skills were at the service of the republican war effort.

The PCE played a crucial role therein. In early November 1936, with Franco's African Army at the gates of Madrid, the republican government was evacuated to Valencia. Carrillo, now 21, was made councillor for public order in the Defence Junta left behind in the capital, an indication of his special relationship with the Russians. On the same day he announced publicly that he had joined the PCE.

He immediately faced a terrible problem. The insurgent General Emilio Mola declared in a radio broadcast that the four rebel columns converging on Madrid would be joined by a "fifth column" of nationalist sympathisers, prompting official removals of rightwing and suspect army officers from Madrid's prisons on a large and horrific scale. Carrillo was technically responsible for these prisoners. Russian advisers insisted that they be evacuated. Thus about 2,000 were taken by bus and shot at the villages of Paracuellos del Jarama and Torrejón de Ardoz.

It was the greatest single atrocity in republican territory during the war, but exact

responsibility remains obscure. Communist claims that the buses had been waylaid at anarchist control posts on the outskirts of Madrid were unconvincing. Inevitably, Francoist propaganda built on it to create a picture of "red barbarism", and thereafter lost no opportunity to saddle Carrillo with the blame. In fact, the evacuation was a deliberate military decision, taken collectively by various authorities of which Carrillo was only one. However, he was a crucial element in the organisation of the process and his protestations of ignorance were untruthful.

In France at the end of the civil war, Carrillo ingratiated himself further with the communist hierarchy by writing an open letter denouncing his father for joining the junta set up by Colonel Segismundo Casado in a vain attempt to negotiate with Franco. From September 1939, Carrillo spent six months in Moscow as secretary to the Communist Youth International. After working for the Comintern and with PCE exiles in Cuba, Mexico and Argentina, he returned to Europe to work for the reorganisation of the party within Spain.

In the autumn of 1944, many of the Spanish maquisards who had been prominent in the French resistance began to drift to the Spanish border. That October, the PCE delegation in France under Jesús Monzón authorised an over-optimistic and inadequately prepared incursion through the Valley of Aran in the Pyrenees. Snowbound most of the year and sparsely populated by shepherds and woodcutters, it was no place to pick up support. With Franco's well-equipped army on the point of annihilating the invaders, Carrillo turned up with sufficient authority from Moscow to order the abandonment of the operation.

Thereafter, Carrillo was de facto leader of the PCE in France, the most important section of the exiled party after that in Moscow, where Dolores Ibárruri (La Pasionaria, the passion flower) was secretary-general. In 1948 he was part of a three-person delegation interviewed by Stalin about the situation in Spain. The Soviet leader recommended the abandonment of guerrilla action against Franco in favour of infiltrating the Falangist trade union organisation.

Carrillo had separated from his first wife, Chon, in Cuba in 1944. He met Carmen Menéndez, a party militant in 1947, and he married her (or openly acknowledged her as his partner) in Moscow in 1949. She was to be his faithful – and equal – partner until his death. Back in France, they lived as Monsieur and Madame Giscard, and had three sons, Santiago, José and Jorge. From the immensely powerful position of organisation secretary, Carrillo began to work towards taking over the PCE by presenting himself as an advocate of internal reform.

In 1954 he called for a renovation of party structures, as a result of which the central committee was expanded to include cadres from within Spain. A showdown came at the end of 1955. When the bulk of the PCE leadership denounced the United Nations' incorporation of Spain, Carrillo praised it as a triumph for the Soviet policy of coexistence. His gamble was justified when La Pasionaria eventually threw her weight behind Carrillo after Nikita Khrushchev denounced Stalin in his "secret speech" of February 1956.

Carrillo pressed his advantage, and that summer persuaded the PCE to accept a policy of national reconciliation to facilitate alliance with the new non-communist opposition to Franco. He was now virtually acting secretary-general of the PCE, and the post formally became his in December 1959, when La Pasionaria was elevated to the symbolic post of party president.

Convinced that his new policy would quickly promote a great national alliance against Franco, Carrillo came into conflict with two erstwhile allies in the struggle for internal reform. Fernando Claudín was the PCE's most acute thinker and Jorge Semprún the intrepid organiser of the secret networks within Spain. Both believed that economic growth in Spain would increase support for the regime.

After a bitter debate, Carrillo had them expelled in early 1965, only to spend the next few years incorporating their ideas into his many writings, particularly his book of that year, *Después de Franco ¿Qué?* (After Franco, What?).

Carrillo's move towards a more liberal position was accelerated dramatically by the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968. To maintain the PCE's credibility as a moderate democratic segment of the anti-Franco opposition, he was forced to condemn the Russians. In 1970 Carrillo simply expelled those hardline Stalinists who opposed him.

After the upheavals of the 1970s and 80s, Carrillo made a living as a writer. Although he was never a sophisticated theorist, Eurocommunism and the State had made him an international reputation. He wrote an account of his year on the run, *El Año de la Peluca* (The Year of the Wig, 1987) and of his role in the transition, *Memoria de la Transición* (1983). In 1993 he scored a huge commercial success with his lengthy but disappointingly anodyne memoirs. Other volumes followed, on the Second Republic and the civil war, but he never gave away the secrets that could have done so much to illuminate the history of the period. In late 2000 he published *¿Ha Muerto el Comunismo? (Is Communism Dead?)*.

Carrillo also became a regular interviewee on television and radio, recognisable by a gruff, knowing voice that reflected seven decades of chain-smoking. He attributed his iron constitution to the advice given him in Moscow in 1936 to take an aspirin every day.

As Spaniards began to investigate the crimes of Franco, the consequent backlash made Carrillo the target of ultra-rightwing attacks. A wall adjacent to his apartment block was scrawled with the words "Carrillo, murderer, we know where you live." In October 2005, when the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid granted him an honorary doctorate, proceedings were disrupted by militants chanting "Paracuellos Carrillo asesino!"

He shrugged it all off. In private, his affability and droll conversation belied his background as a party disciplinarian. Then, too, he would recount anecdotes that showed that from the age of 15 until his death he was a cunning old fox, a thoroughly political animal. His wife and sons survive him.

- Santiago Carrillo Solares, politician, born 18 January 1915; died 18 September 2012