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“Castro turned his back on anti-Francoists”

interview with Octavio Alberola

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Contents

Castro in those times	6
Che in Franco's Spain	7

Although now 85 years of age, Alberola continues to give talks and participate in anarchist ventures around the world, as well as writing articles and books: “I regret nothing. When there are people fighting for freedom, the worst thing we can do is stay at home. Even though we were part of the Spanish exile community in the Americas, our aim was to fight the Franco dictatorship, so there was nothing remarkable about our also helping with the struggles of the Mexican people and of every people to be able to freely determine their political options.”

Castro and Che Guevara in the early stages of the line-up that laid the groundwork in Mexico for the Cuban Revolution in the 1950s. The aborted attempt on the life of dictator Franco in San Sebastian in 1962. These days the anarchist Octavio Alberola Surinach (born in Alaior in the Balearic Islands in 1928) is critical of Castroism and a zealous champion of historical memory.

“In the 60s, a lot of young Cubans opposed to General Batista’s dictatorship started arriving in Mexico. By 1956, the Castro brothers’ movement, the 26 July Movement, was the largest Cuban revolutionary group in Mexico.” The dictator Batista had just pardoned them after they were arrested in connection with the failed attack on the Moncada barracks and among their number were the Castro brothers who then made contact with people eager and ready to assist them. One such person was the libertarian Octavio Alberola Surinach: “At the time I was a member of the Mexican student movement and had links with groups and trade union organisations that might help them to organise propaganda events in support of the fight against the Cuban dictatorship”, Alberola says. Remember that this was an anarchist who arrived in Mexico aboard the vessel ‘Ipanema’ from France with hundreds more refugees, along with his father who had been a teacher in the nationalist schools that operated in Spain up until 1939.

The young Octavio was reared in Mexico and educated there, which led to his becoming involved with the university student movement. Together with a group of young libertarians he helped launch the Mexican Libertarian Youth and in 1948 was arrested for putting up an anarchist manifesto in the streets of the capital. “We spent a month in one of the Mexican government’s secret prison along with Floreal Ocaña, Manuel González Salazar and Francisco Rosell. The Mexican police claimed that we were laying the groundwork for an act of terrorism. We were not brought in front of any judge and were held in a building under plain-clothed police guard”, the anarchist states. In the end they were all freed after signing an

undertaking that in future they would steer clear of meddling in Mexican politics.

After that, Alberola liaised with the Latin America exile movements campaigning from Mexico against the dictatorships in their homelands. In addition to the Cubans, there were the Venezuelans, the Dominicans and the Peruvians. Together, they launched a Latin American Youth Front against Dictatorship. “We came to an agreement: whoever managed to put paid to dictatorship in their homeland would lend a helping hand to the rest. The Venezuelans did just that, whereas Castro gave no help to anti-Francoists”, which brought criticism from the anarchists.

Castro in those times

Alberola talks about his support for the Cuban struggle: “At the Ateneo in Mexico and on trade union premises we laid on several public propaganda events targeting the Cuban dictatorship. Most of all at the Electricians’ Union. In Chapultepec I took part in a meeting with Fidel Castro as well as in some others with his younger sister.”

However, from the outset of this collaborative effort it was plain that the Cubans’ object was to establish a guerrilla” foco”. So what was Alberola’s main contribution?

“Organising propaganda events and putting them in touch with people able to help them out. I remember one young Spaniard, a pupil of my father’s, someone who had been an aviator in Aragon, volunteering to deliver gear to the mountains of Cuba.”

Alberola explains why they sought him out: “I was against the dictatorship in Spain. They were perfectly well aware of that and that I was in a position to help them in their struggle. My dealings with them were through Comandante De la Rosa. My only recollection of Che Guevara is of an Argentinean sitting in a corner at

the meeting, but back then he was not to the fore, any more than Raul Castro was”, Octavio recalls.

He also gave a helping hand to another anti-Batista Cuban group in exile in Mexico, the Directorio Revolucionario Estudiantil (Student Revolutionary Directorate): “Following the raid on the government building in Havana in 1957, members of that group fled to Mexico and they took part in our events, albeit that they hid their differences with Fidel’s group. They complained of his ‘leader-ist’ ambitions and the dangers of caudillismo.”

Che in Franco’s Spain

In 1959, after the Cuban dictatorship was brought down, Alberola reckoned that the Castroists would live up to their revolutionary propaganda and help out. The anarchists asked the Castroists to help anti-Francoists: “In France in 1961 I was at the Cuban Embassy, promised a visa so that I could travel to Cuba to get to grips with Cuban cooperation in our fight; but that visa never came ... Castro never broke off relations with Franco and Che Guevara was able to saunter around Spain under the protection of the Francoist police. Franco and Castro became friends.”

On the other hand, in 1961 the CNT, the FAI and the Iberian Libertarian Youth Federation (FIJL) held a congress in the city of Limoges, at which a team called Defensa Interior was formed for the purpose of assassinating Franco. “In 1962, I travelled to France and the French Basque Country to organise an attempt on Franco’s life. The group managed to plant the bomb, but, unfortunately, the dictator had rearranged the programme of his annual summer visit to San Sebastian. In the end we had to detonate the explosives because the battery only had an active life of one week.” According to our information, Alberola has never been prepared to name the two men and one woman – all of them French – who planted the bomb.