

# **The Spanish Revolution: Anarchy in Action**

Anarcho

April 10, 2020

# Contents

What is Anarchism? . . . . .	3
“Primitive Rebels”? . . . . .	5
Anti-Fascist <i>and</i> Anti-Capitalist . . . . .	6
Spanish Revolution Timeline . . . . .	6
The Revolution Begins . . . . .	7
An Incomplete Revolution . . . . .	10
The Counter-Revolution . . . . .	10
Lessons of the Revolution . . . . .	11
Conclusions . . . . .	13
Further Reading... . . . . .	13
Appendices... . . . .	14
A few (of many) Myths... . . . .	14
Trotskyists, then and now . . . . .	15

This is a write-up of a talk I gave in Nottingham in March 2019. It is an introduction to the 1936 Spanish Revolution as well as a general introduction to the anarchist theory which inspired it. After all, you cannot see how 1936 was anarchy in action if you do not know what anarchy is. The meeting was advertised as following:

“Iain McKay takes us back to Spain in the 1930s where anarchists occupied the factories and the land, to make a revolution at the same time as fighting Franco’s fascists. And within that revolution, the women of *Mujeres Libres* fought also for the liberation of women.”

This is what I would like to have said, rather than what was actually said at the meeting. Hopefully the difference is not too great. It is based on section I.8 of *An Anarchist FAQ*.

---

Why is the Spanish Revolution important? Why should it be remembered today? Noam Chomsky summarises why:

“over most of Republican Spain there was a quite inspiring anarchist revolution that involved both industry and agriculture over substantial areas [...] by both human measures and indeed anyone’s economic measures, quite successful [...] production continued effectively; workers in farms and factories proved quite capable of managing their affairs without coercion from above, contrary to what lots of socialists, communists, liberals and others wanted to believe.”

This wide-ranging and inspiring social revolution – even today often ignored in histories of the Spanish Civil War – did not come out of the blue. It was, as Chomsky reminds us, “based on three generations of experiment and thought and work which extended anarchist ideas to very large parts of the population.”

Here I will sketch the historical and theoretical context of the Spanish Revolution as well as indicating its achievements and limitations. Hopefully, this will inspire others to seek social revolution today – one which learns from the positives and negatives of the events in 1936 – as well as informing our activities and strategies today.

## **What is Anarchism?**

First, the theory. As noted, the social revolution of 1936 was the product of decades of anarchist organising and struggle – which raises the obvious question of what is anarchism?

Simply put, it is freedom within association and can be summarised in three words: Liberty, Equality, Solidarity. While many either through ignorance or mischief portray anarchism as being against organisation, in fact it supports self-organisation based on free Association and federalism with groups run directly by their members – what anarchists call self-management. This self-organisation is not something we relegate to the distant future but apply now in our struggles today.

Unlike most political movements, anarchists reject the notion that change can come from electing better politicians. Rather change must come from below, by means of solidarity and

direct action – strikes, boycotts, occupations, etc. In this way we build the new world while fighting the old. This means that the unions we create to fight the bosses become the means to run workplaces without bosses, the groups we create to fight for improvements in our communities become the means by which we manage our own affairs without politicians.

Anarchists often call ourselves libertarian socialists. As such, a future free society would see ownership undivided but use of resources divided – rather than in state socialism where ownership and control would rest in the hands of the bureaucrats, an anarchist society would see everyone own everything but control rest in the hands of people who actually use something. So rather than nationalisation, anarchists seek socialisation based on free access and use rights (or possession).

Such a society would be a vast federation of self-managed groups – it would be decentralisation and decentred with organisations based on elections, mandates and recall. This would ensure that any committees needed would be limited to administrative tasks carrying out the instructions of their members. It would be a functional Democracy based on workers’ control and run from below.

For more details, please read Rudolf Rocker’s classic work *Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice* (1937). However, to understand the events of 1936 which I will describe, I need to summarise the ideas which drove them:

**Building the new world in the shell of the old** – anarchists argue for, to use Michael Bakunin’s words, the “development and organisation of the non-political or anti-political social power of the working classes in city and country” for the “organisation of the trade sections, their federation in the International, and their representation by Chambers of Labour [...] bear in themselves the living germs of the social order, which is to replace the bourgeois world. They are creating not only the ideas but also the facts of the future itself”

**A new social organisation organised from below** – based on, to quote Peter Kropotkin, “independent Communes for the *territorial* groupings, and vast federations of trade unions for groupings *by social functions*—the two interwoven and providing support to each to meet the needs of [...] a liberated society”.

**Expropriation, socialisation and workers’ control (self-management)** – the means, using Kropotkin’s words again, to achieve anarchism would be to “expropriate the holders of social capital [...] by the workers themselves [...] They will organise themselves in the workshops to continue the work [...] they will take possession of it as if it had never been stolen from them by the middle-class”.

**Voluntary, Democratic Militias to defend freedom** – while Marxists may claim otherwise, anarchists recognised that the ruling class would not accept the ending of their power and privileges and so anarchists, to quote Errico Malatesta, argued for “voluntary militia [...] to deal with any armed attacks by the forces of reaction [...] or to resist outside intervention”.

**Transformation of *all* social relations** – the anarchist vision of revolution was never limited to just ending capitalism or the state. We seek to end all hierarchies as Emma Goldman suggested: “Only in freedom can man grow to his full stature. Only in freedom will he learn to think and move, and give the very best in him [...] individual liberty and economic equality, the twin forces for the birth of what is fine and true in man”.

Needless to say, regardless of the claims of Marx and Engels, anarchists recognise that transforming society would take time. We have always rejected, to use Kropotkin's expressed, the "fallacy of a 'One-day Revolution'" and recognised that "were we to wait for the Revolution to display an openly communist or indeed collectivist character right from its initial insurrections, that would be tantamount to throwing the idea of Revolution overboard once and for all". Social revolution, then, is a process rather than an event and so a free society, as Bakunin put it, "will develop and perfect itself through free experimentation [...] The development of each commune will take its point of departure the actual condition of its civilisation."

So, as Malatesta suggested, "could we overnight realise all desires and pass from a governmental and capitalist hell to a libertarian-communist heaven [...] ? These are illusions which can take root among authoritarians who look upon the masses as the raw material which those who have power can, by decrees, supported by bullets and handcuffs, mould to their will." Moreover, in the words of Italian anarchist Luigi Fabbri, "class difference do not vanish at the stroke of a pen whether that pen belongs to the theoreticians or to the pen-pushers who set out laws or decrees. Only action, that is to say direct action (not through government) expropriation by the proletarians, directed against the privileged class, can wipe out class difference."

## **"Primitive Rebels"?**

I have spent some time on explaining the theory of anarchism because, sadly, there are many myths spread about it and about Spanish anarchism in particular. A common one is associated with the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm who, in his book *Primitive Rebels* (1965), dismissed it as "utopian, millenarian, apocalyptic". However, to quote anthropologist Jerome R. Mintz, "the facts prove otherwise".

I would recommend Mintz's book *The Anarchists of Casas Viejas* (1983) as one of the best on the Spanish Anarchist movement by a non-anarchist. He did something extremely unusual – he actually interviewed the people involved in the movement Hobsbawm wrote about in his university office. He proved that Hobsbawm's account was "based primarily on a preconceived evolutionary model of political development rather than on data gathered in field research [...] he explains how anarcho-syndicalists were presumed to act rather than what actually took place [...] to prove an already established point of view". Indeed, "level-headed anarchists were astonished by such descriptions of supposed Spanish puritanism by over-enthusiastic historians." As Mintz suggests:

"at first glance the religious model seems to make anarchism easier to understand, particularly in the absence of detailed observation and intimate contact. The model was, however, also used to serve the political ends of anarchism's opponents. Here the use of the terms 'religious' and 'millenarium' stamp anarchist goals as unrealistic and unattainable. Anarchism is thus dismissed as a viable solution to social ills."

In short, the "oversimplifications posited became serious distortions of anarchist belief and practice". Hence the need to summarise anarchist theory before moving onto the Spanish Revolution – for you cannot appreciate it being anarchy is action if you do not have a grasp of what anarchism actually advocates.

## **Anti-Fascist and Anti-Capitalist**

The Spanish Civil War is usually considered as a forerunner of the Second World War – a struggle between the Spanish Republic and Franco’s fascist forces. This is not quite the case for the Spanish Labour movement, thanks to the influence of anarchists, was the most revolutionary one in the world. The CNT, a mass anarcho-syndicalist union, rightly saw the rise of fascism in the 1920s and 1930s as a product of capitalism’s fear of revolution.

To fight fascism effectively meant to fight the system that spawned it. Hence the CNT National Committee on 14 February 1936:

*“We are not the defenders of the Republic, but we fight against fascism relentlessly, we will contribute all of the forces that we have to rout the historical executioners of the Spanish proletariat [...] ensure that the defensive contribution of the masses lead in the direction of real social revolution, under the auspices of libertarian communism...”*

*“Either fascism or social revolution. Defeating the former is the duty of the whole proletariat and all those who love freedom, weapons in hand; that the revolution be social and libertarian must be the deepest concern of Confederates.”*

In short, the CNT was not fighting fascism to maintain an exploitative and oppressive system in which a nominally democratic government protects an economic system mired in years of depression. It was fighting fascism for a better society – and it was this fear which had driven ruling classes across Europe to embrace fascism to protect themselves.

## **Spanish Revolution Timeline**

These were the ideas which were commonplace in working class circles in many parts of Spain in 1936. Yet, as Chomsky noted, the social revolution of 1936 dates back decades and starts in 1868 with the formation of Spanish section of the *International Workers’ Association*. State repression soon saw this smashed but it was replaced by other union federations which suffered the same fate.

Then, in 1911 the *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo* (CNT) was founded – and was quickly banned. Legalised again, it surged in membership as workers in Spain (as elsewhere) were radicalised by the First World War and the Russian Revolution. 1919 saw the CNT declare at its national congress that its objective as libertarian communism. It was soon banned by the quasi-fascist Primo de Rivera regime. While the CNT was banned in the 1920s, in 1927 the *Federación Anarquista Ibérica* (FAI) – a specially anarchist federation – was founded.

In 1931 the Second Republic was created. The CNT re-organises and leads countless strikes and revolts – all faced repression by the liberal republic. Two years later, in 1933, a right-wing government was elected and, again, numerous libertarian revolts were crushed and the CNT repressed. In 1934 an insurrection in Asturias and Catalonia called by the UGT-run *Workers Alliance* is crushed. 1936 is the year of civil war and revolution as 19<sup>th</sup> February sees the Popular Front elected. The CNT starts to re-organise. On 17<sup>th</sup> July the Army revolts against the Republic,

starting in Morocco but soon spreads across Spain. The government is paralysed – the workers' organisations, with the CNT and FAI at their head, respond and draw upon their years of experience in the class struggle to resist the army.

I cannot cover all the popular resistance and so will concentrate on what happened on the 19<sup>th</sup> of July in Barcelona. The troops started to leave their barracks around 5am, with the officers claiming to be defending the republic against (yet another) an anarchist uprising. The CNT declares a general strike and factory sirens called the masses onto the streets. Libertarians seize weapons wherever they could and barricades are built – some assault and civil guards join the resistance. Fighting takes place all day and into the next. The Army revolt is finally ended with the storming of the final rebel barracks (the Andreu barracks).

All this, I must stress, was no spontaneous response. It was prepared and organised by libertarian “committees of defence” in Barcelona’s working-class neighbourhoods as well as by CNT unions – not to mention years of strikes, rent strikes, street fighting, etc. However, while the fighting was organised the subsequent Revolution *was* spontaneous – it was created by militants who had taken Kropotkin’s call to “act for yourselves” seriously.

## The Revolution Begins

Where the army had been defeated, the people took the opportunity to transform society into one worthy of human beings. Anarchist militant Enriqueta Rovira paints a vivid picture:

“The atmosphere then, the feelings were very special. It was beautiful. A feeling of – how shall I say it – of power, not in the sense of domination, but in the sense of things being under *our* control, if under anyone’s. Of *possibility*. We *had* everything. We had Barcelona: It was ours. You’d walk out in the streets, and they were ours – here, CNT; there, *comite* this or that. It was totally different. Full of possibility. A feeling that we could, together, really *do* something. That we could make things different.”

The workers did not go back to being wage-slaves but expropriated their workplaces. The days and weeks following the 19<sup>th</sup> of July saw the collectivisation of industry and the land. About eight million people directly or indirectly participated, with over 60% of the land collectively cultivated by the peasants without landlords while in Catalonia almost all the industries run by workers and their committees, without capitalists, well-paid managers or the state. Every branch of industry was taken over and run by their workers – factories, mills, workshops, transportation, public services, health care, utilities, even football teams. As visitor Emma Goldman recounted:

“I was especially impressed with the replies to my questions as to what actually had the workers gained by the collectivisation [...] the answer always was, first, greater freedom. And only secondly, more wages and less time of work. In two years in Russia I never heard any workers express this idea of greater freedom.”

The Spanish Revolution created a socialism which was based on workers’ control rather than, as in the Russian Revolution, controlled workers. The new collectives were structured like the CNT and its strikes and so based on, as historian Martha A. Ackelsberg put it, “general assemblies

of workers [which] decided policy, while elected committees managed affairs on a day-to-day basis". The collectives showed that capitalists were not needed for investment and innovation either, for "they maintained, if not increased, agricultural production, often introducing new patterns of cultivation and fertilisation [...] collectivists built chicken coups, barns, and other facilities for the care and feeding of the community's animals. Federations of collectives co-ordinated the construction of roads, schools, bridges, canals and dams."

While individual workplaces were taken over by their workers, federations were seen as a means to co-ordinate and socialise the economy. The CNT was well aware of the need "[t]o socialise an industry" as "partial collectivisation will in time degenerate into a kind of bourgeois co-operativism". As anarchist theorists had predicted, the process of federation and socialisation took time and developed unevenly. However, as CNT militant Saturnino Carod reminds us:

"For it can never be forgotten that it was the working class and peasantry which, by demonstrating their ability to run industry and agriculture collectively, allowed the republic to continue the struggle for thirty-two months. It was they who created a war industry, who kept agricultural production increasing, who formed militias [...] Without their creative endeavour, the republic could not have fought the war".

Getting the economy running again was not the pressing task facing the members of the CNT. Franco had only been defeated across three-thirds of Spain and so the defence of the revolution predicted by anarchist thinkers had an even greater urgency. This led to the organisation of militias by the CNT and other unions and parties. However, the CNT's armed forces were based on libertarian principles as militant Buenaventura Durruti summarised:

"I don't believe—and everything happening around us confirms this—that you can run a workers' militia according to classical military rules. I believe that discipline, coordination, and planning are indispensable, but we shouldn't define them in the terms of the world that we're destroying. We have to build on new foundations."

It should be noted that only the CNT militias were democratic, those organised by Marxist parties like the POUM and PSUC were modelled on Red Army.

As well as organising militias to free those under Army rule elsewhere in Spain, the workers of the CNT took the initiative in creating war industries by the conversion of existing industry to produce home-made armed vehicles, grenades, etc. However, it was not forgotten that a key measure to defend the revolution and defeat the forces of reaction was the interest and active participation of the many rather than power to a few. As Pilar Vivancos, a collective member, put it:

"it was marvellous to live in a collective, a free society where one could say what one thought, where if the village committee seemed unsatisfactory one could say. The committee took no big decisions without calling the whole village together in a general assembly. All this was wonderful."

As well as transforming the economy, the social revolution also looked to transform all aspects of social life. Women activists of the CNT and FAI created the *Mujeres*



*Libres (Free Women)* movement which was organised to fight against the “triple enslavement to ignorance, as women, and as producers” and recognised the interwoven nature of social oppressions and hierarchies:

“We could not separate the women’s problem from the social problem, nor could we deny [its] significance [...] by converting women into a simple instrument for any organisation, even our own libertarian organisation. The intention [...] was much much broader: [...] to empower women to make of them individuals capable of contributing to the structuring of the future society, individuals who have learned to be self-determining”

This was needed because, in spite of a theoretical awareness of the need for sexual equality, many male anarchists in Spain practiced manarchy in action. Thus patriarchy within the libertarian movement also had to be combated as Kyralina, a *Mujeres Libres* activist, argued:

“All those *compañeros*, however radical they may be in cafes, unions, and even affinity groups, seem to drop their costumes as lovers of female liberation at the doors of their homes. Inside, they behave with their *compañeras* just like common husbands.”

Another, Soledad, stressed that “[i]t was essential that we work and struggle together, because otherwise, there would be no social revolution. But we needed our own organisation to fight for ourselves.” This was based, to use the words of Lucia Sanchez Saornil, empowerment (*capacitación*):

“It is not [the man] who is called upon to set out the roles and responsibilities of the woman in society, no matter how elevated he might consider them to be. No, the anarchist way is to allow the woman to act freely herself, without tutors or external pressures; that she may develop in the direction that her nature and her faculties dictate.”

With this perspective *Mujeres Libres* were active across Republican Spain and created alternatives which undercut patriarchy wherever it raised its ugly head – including in the CNT and FAI.

Thus a new world was created across Spain, one which transformed every aspect of life – from the economic to the personal. A world which George Orwell vividly recounted when he arrived in Barcelona in December 1936:

“The Anarchists were still in virtual control of Catalonia and the revolution was still in full swing. [...] It was the first time that I had ever been in a town where the working class was in the saddle. Practically every building of any size had been seized by the workers and was draped with red flags or with the red and black flag of the Anarchists [...] Above all, there was a belief in the revolution and the future, a feeling of having suddenly emerged into an era of equality and freedom. Human beings were trying to behave as human beings and not as cogs in the capitalist machine.”

## An Incomplete Revolution

After 19<sup>th</sup> July, the members of the CNT started to build the beginnings of Anarchy. Workplaces and land expropriated and collectivised under workers control while union- and party-based militias were organised to defeat Franco's forces.

Yet, was the State smashed and replaced by a federation of workers' organisations as anarchism had long argued? No – the CNT in Barcelona decided to cooperate with other anti-fascist groups in a Central Committee of Anti-Fascist Militias. As they later recounted, the leadership of the CNT decided “not to speak about Libertarian Communism as long as part of Spain was in the hands of the fascists.” This eventually led to the CNT joining the Catalan and Spanish governments and were quickly marginalised

The question is: why? Was this anarchist theory or the situation facing anarchists? As anarchist theory was ignored, it must be the second.

For, lest we forget, immediately after the defeat of the Army in Barcelona the CNT was isolated – it had no idea what the situation was elsewhere, even elsewhere in Catalonia. Then there was the danger of fighting on two fronts if libertarian communism was declared as there was distinct possibility of having to fight Franco *and* the Republican State in that case. Then there was the fear of wider foreign intervention against the revolution beyond the help Franco received from Germany and Italy. Finally, there was optimism in the membership who had just defeated the Army in Barcelona and so were willing to tolerate the remnants of the State for a short period while Franco was defeated – particularly as there was so much else to do like organise militias and an economy.

All these factors help explain the decision to ignore Anarchist theory rather than push for libertarian communism even if it does not justify it nor make it correct.

## The Counter-Revolution

Ultimately, the decision of the CNT to avoid fighting on two fronts did not mean it did not happen. The remnants of the State and the capitalist class regrouped and pursued a counter-revolution. At its head was the Communist Party – and this party soon created a civil war within the civil war.

In Spain, it sided with the urban and rural petit-bourgeois and bourgeois to (finally) get a mass base and undermined the gains of the revolution while USSR shaped Government Policy by supplying weapons (and to get its claws on Spanish gold). The attack on the revolution reached its climax in the May Days of 1937 which began with a government attack on Barcelona's collectivised telephone exchange. This saw CNT members raise barricades across the city while the Communist and State forces assassinated anarchist activists (including Italian anarchist and refugee from Mussolini, Camilo Berneri). Elsewhere, saw the destruction of the rural collectives by use of troops and tanks while falsely claiming the peasants were forced to join – *at the same time praising Stalin's collectivisation!*

As well as using troops and tanks against peasants rather than Franco's troops, the State denied resources and weapons to libertarian troops and collectives. George Orwell stated the obvious:

“A government which sends boys of fifteen to the front with rifles forty years old and keeps its biggest men and newest weapons in the rear is manifestly more afraid of the revolution the fascists”

Finally, I should note the political repression and trials of radicals – starting with the dissent Marxists of the POUM as “Trotsky-Fascists” (although Trotsky had few, if any, kind words for the party). It was experiencing this at first hand which forced Orwell – a member of the POUM militia – to flee Spain.

## Lessons of the Revolution

Yes, ultimately the revolution was defeated but it must be stressed that *every* political grouping failed – anarchists, socialists, Stalinists, the POUM and the handful of Trotskyists.

In areas where the socialist UGT was bigger than the CNT the revolution was correspondingly less. As anarchist Abel Paz notes “in Madrid, thanks to the Socialist Party, bourgeois structures were left intact and even fortified: a semi-dead state received a new lease of life and no dual power was created to neutralise it.” In terms of the Stalinists, they defeated the revolution, replaced the militias with an army, placated the bourgeoisie but Franco still won. So the Communist solution completely failed – *the People Armed won the revolution, the People’s Army lost the war.*

The Spain labour movement clearly vindicated the anarchist critique of Marxism. While the anarchist influenced unions remained militant, the socialists soon became as reformist as Bakunin predicted:

“the workers [...] will send common workers [...] to [...] Legislative Assemblies. [...] The worker-deputies, transplanted into a bourgeois environment, into an atmosphere of purely bourgeois political ideas, will in fact cease to be workers and, becoming Statesmen, they will become bourgeois, and perhaps even more bourgeois than the Bourgeois themselves. For men do not make their situations; on the contrary, men are made by them”.

Indeed, it was the libertarian labour movement which was the innovative trend – so much so, many Marxists often point to the Spanish Revolution as an example of socialist revolution! As such, Engels was completely wrong when he proclaimed in the 1870s that “we may safely predict that the new departure will not come from these ‘anarchist’ spouters, but from the small body of intelligent and energetic workmen who, in 1872, remained true to the International.”

The reasons are clear enough – as anarchists had long argued, organising and fighting on the economic plain radicalised those involved rather than producing the apathy and reformism associated with electioneering. Likewise, the anarchist critique involved all social hierarchies and oppressions which meant – to use the words of historian J. Romero Maura – that “the demands of the CNT went much further than those of any social democrat: with its emphasis on true equality, *autogestion* [self-management] and working class dignity, anarcho-syndicalism made demands the capitalist system could not possibly grant to the workers.”

It should also be noted that Anarchism itself had predicted the failure of the revolution. Kropotkin, for example, had repeatedly stressed that “a new form of economic organisation will

necessarily require a new form of political structure” but the CNT refused to do this out of a desire to promote anti-fascist unity. However, in practice this cooperation within non-worker organisations did little to aid the revolution nor even the fight against fascism. As Kropotkin had suggested:

“what means can the State provide to abolish this monopoly that the working class could not find in its own strength and groups? [...] Could its governmental machine, developed for the creation and upholding of these [class] privileges, now be used to abolish them? Would not the new function require new organs? And these new organs would they not have to be created by the workers themselves, in *their* unions, *their* federations, completely outside the State?”

The experience of 1936 reinforces this argument for Anarchists did *not* fully apply Anarchist ideas and disaster resulted. In short, as British anarchist Vernon Richards put it, the CNT-FAI “failed to put their theories to the test, adopting the tactics of the enemy”. Rather than, to use Bakunin’s words, create “the federative Alliance of all working men’s associations “in order to “constitute the Commune” and so “the federation of insurgent associations” to “organise a revolutionary force capable of defeating reaction” the CNT in Barcelona Central Committee of Anti-Fascist Militias. Instead of this body it should have called a full plenum of CNT unions and neighbourhood defence committees with delegates invited from UGT and unorganised workplaces. Only this would have built the popular federations which could have successfully resisted Franco and defended the revolution.

The decision to work with other anti-fascist parties and unions was understandable but such co-operation had to be based on popular organisation *from below*. Anti-Fascism is not enough – the need remains to destroy the system which spawns it. As Scottish Anarchist Ethel McDonald put it:

“Fascism is not something new, some new force of evil opposed to society, but is only the old enemy, Capitalism, under a new and fearful sounding name [...] Anti-Fascism is the new slogan by which the working class is being betrayed.”

However, the most important lesson of the revolution is that libertarian socialism worked – but this is usually downplayed or ignored by “objective” historians. As Noam Chomsky argues, “there is more than enough evidence to show that a deep bias against social revolution and a commitment to the values and social order of liberal bourgeois democracy has led the author to misrepresent crucial events and to overlook major historical currents.” The revolution shows that products and services can be provided to workers, by workers without bosses and bureaucrats. It shows that there is a viable alternative to both privatisation and nationalisation in the form of socialisation and associationism.

This is why the Spanish Revolution should be remembered today. As Orwell put it, it was “a foretaste of Socialism [...] the prevailing mental atmosphere was that of Socialism. Many of the normal motives of civilised life – snobbishness, money-grubbing, fear of the boss, etc. – had simply ceased to exist [...] no one owned anyone else as his master [...] One had breathed the air of equality”. It shows that a genuine socialist alternative exists and works. As Durruti memorably put it at the Aragon Front:

“We have always lived in slums and holes in the wall. We will know how to accommodate ourselves for a time. For, you must not forget, we can also build. It is we the workers who built these palaces and cities here in Spain and in America and everywhere. We, the workers, can build others to take their place. And better ones! We are not in the least afraid of ruins. We are going to inherit the earth; there is not the slightest doubt about that. The bourgeoisie might blast and ruin its own world before it leaves the stage of history. We carry a new world here, in our hearts. That world is growing this minute.”

These words, like the revolution that inspired them, should inspire all seekers of liberty today.

## Conclusions

The experience of Spain in the 1930s shows that it is not enough to just oppose fascism for, after all, defending the *status quo* is hardly inspiring. This helps explain the often limited appeal of campaigns today against the far-right in which the critique of the social problems which the right blame on scapegoats is muted in the interest of widening the campaign. This portrays the left as being part of the problem rather than the solution by linking it with those who benefit from the system. As Chomsky noted long ago:

“Why should a liberal intellectual be so persuaded of the virtues of a political system of four-year dictatorship? The answer seems all too plain.”

It also shows that revolutions cannot be half-made. Even in the face of immanent threat of Franco’s troops, the so-called anti-fascist parties spent time and resources crushing the revolution and the CNT-FAI. It is hard to not draw the conclusion that the Republicans seemed to prefer fascism to anarchism. As such, attempts to limit the revolution was a fatal error by the CNT-FAI leadership.

However, we must not forget that Anarchists failed, *not* Anarchism. Unlike the Russian Revolution, which failed because Marxist theory was applied, in Spain the revolution failed because theory *not* applied. Yet for all the errors and limitations, the social revolution of 1936 was Anarchy in Action and remains an inspiration for today – although, of course, one to be learned from rather than idolised.

## Further Reading...

For this interested in finding out more about the Revolution and the CNT, I can suggest the following books:

- Abel Paz: *Durruti in the Spanish Revolution*
- Vernon Richards: *Lessons of the Spanish Revolution*
- José Peirats: *The CNT in the Spanish Revolution*
- Noam Chomsky: *Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship*

- Martha A. Ackelsberg: *Free Women of Spain*
- George Orwell: *Homage to Catalonia*
- Daniel Guérin: *No Gods, No Masters*

Finally, *An Anarchist FAQ* ([www.anarchistfaq.org](http://www.anarchistfaq.org)) has more information about both the social revolution and the libertarian ideas which inspired it.

## Appendices...

There were two additional sections which were originally included in the main presentation but excluded for time considerations. However, they were held in reserve in case there were any Trotskyists in the audience and used to refute the points they were sure to make. On the day, they were not needed as no one raised the points these addressed but in the interests of completeness I decided to include them now.

### A few (of many) Myths...

Like anarchism itself, the Spanish Anarchist movement is subject to a great many myths. I cannot cover them all here but I will address three of the most grating ones.

The first is the notion that the CNT opposed defending a Revolution before July 1936. This was expressed by historian Hugh Thomas who claimed that at the CNT's May 1936 National Congress there was "no agreement, in consequence, on the arming of militias". In reality, the CNT passed a resolution on libertarian communists which had a whole section on the defence of the revolution which stated, in part, that the "necessary measures for defending the new regime will be adopted" which include "organised, armed forces" for "[t]he People Armed will be the best guarantee against all intentions of restoring the destroyed regime by forces from within or without".

Likewise, many Marxists suggest that the collectivisation which occurred after the defeat of Franco's coup reflected anarchist ideology. Yet such collectivisation was *never* CNT policy for it had aimed explicitly for libertarian communism since 1919. Rather, it was a spontaneous product of the situation for "[f]inding the factories deserted, and no instructions from their unions, [the workers] resolved to operate the machines themselves" as eyewitness Abel Paz recounted. While such expropriation and workers' control were a key aspect of anarchist theory, both were always considered as just a first step towards *socialisation*. This process was hindered by the CNT's decision to cooperate with the State as, the CNT militant Gaston Level later noted, the government's Collectivisation Decree "had the baneful effect of preventing the workers' syndicates from extending their gains. It set back the revolution in industry".

Finally, there is the notion popular with Marxists that the CNT – like anarchism in general – fails to see the need for an alternative socio-economic organisation like their so-called "workers' State." This is false, as can be seen from the works of anarchist thinkers like Bakunin and Kropotkin as well as the CNT's resolution on libertarian communism which stressed that "it all begins in the individual, passes to the Commune, from the Commune it moves to the Federation, and finally, to the Confederation." The problem in 1936 was that the CNT decided not to build such a federation.

## Trotskyists, then and now

Given the failure of the revolution, Trotskyists argue that this shows the failure of anarchism itself, that the ideas of Anarchists are the issue for any revolution need a “workers’ State” to succeed.

This position is flawed for many reasons, not least because it ignores the “objective circumstances” facing the CNT-FAI (something they always stress when it comes to the Bolsheviks). It also ignores the Council of Aragon which was created by the same ideas (and even the same people) but which had a different outcome. Finally, it ignores the reality and fate of the Bolshevik regime which quickly became the dictatorship *over* the proletariat politically and an inefficient bureaucratic state-capitalism economically.

It should also be noted that all this talk of the need for a “democratic workers’ State” was not uttered in the 1930s. Rather, Trotsky argued *at the time* for party power rather than workers’ power for a “revolutionary party, even having seized power (of which the anarchist leaders were incapable in spite of the heroism of the anarchist workers), is still by no means the sovereign ruler of society”. Not learning anything from the failure of the Russian Revolution, he stressed that the “revolutionary dictatorship of a proletarian party [...] is an objective necessity [...] The dictatorship of a party [...] Because the leaders of the CNT renounced dictatorship for themselves they left the place open for the Stalinist dictatorship”.

Unsurprisingly, Trotsky’s ideas were unappealing for while the CNT, FAI and the non-Trotskyist POUM all increased massively in membership after July 1936, Trotskyist numbers in Spain stayed at around twenty – but they succeeded in producing a 100% increase in the number of Trotskyist groups, from one to two by splitting.

In short, the CNT rightly rejected the Trotskyist position and refused to recreate the errors of the Bolshevik revolution. Sadly, it also rejected the anarchist position.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)  
Anti-Copyright



Anarcho  
The Spanish Revolution: Anarchy in Action  
April 10, 2020

Retrieved on 24<sup>th</sup> April 2021 from [anarchism.pageabode.com](http://anarchism.pageabode.com)

[usa.anarchistlibraries.net](http://usa.anarchistlibraries.net)