

On militarisation of the militias

Interview in 'Spain and the World'

Camillo Berneri

February 1937

The first question we asked Camillo Berneri concerns the military situation as he saw it.

"I have no special skill in military technique", he replied, "but I can inform you of the impressions I received on the Huesca Front which I know well because I have fulfilled in turn the roles of ordinary Militia man, of political delegate of the 'Italian section' of the Ascaso Column and now of delegate to the Defence Council. I have the impression that the militia has made great advances. At the start, one was aware of a great lack of experience in the struggle against modern engines of war: for example time was wasted in shooting at aircraft flying at high altitudes, automatic weapons were neglected in favour of those which comrades were used to handling; the problem of roads was abandoned; ammunition was in short supply; liaison between different arms and units was defective and sometimes absolutely zero.

"At the present moment the militia-men have profited from the lessons of the last six months, transport has begun to be rationalised, roads are being repaired, equipment is more abundant and better distributed, and into the 'mind of the column' is slipping this idea; the necessity of co-ordinating command.

"We are forming divisions, and this will complete the economic plan of war, and the best known representatives of the CNT and the FAI have made themselves its supporters. In fact, it was these two organisations which were the first to propose a united command in order to be able to exert a decisive pressure on the weak points of the enemy lines, to relieve the pressure which the enemy is exerting on besieged towns and to prevent unfavourable manoeuvres and concentrations"

So, we observed, there is some good in militarisation"

"Certainly," Berneri replied with conviction, "but there is a distinction to be made: there is on the one side military formalism which is not only ridiculous, but also useless and dangerous, and on the other side there is self-discipline. The latter can be extremely strict, as is the case in the Durruti Column. Military formalism can be met, for example, in certain columns controlled by the Workers Party for Marxist

Unification (Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista, POUM). When one asserts, as is written in the code of duty of the Uribarri Column, that “the soldier who knows how to salute properly also knows how to fight”, one is guilty of stupidity reminiscent of Frederick II or Peter the Great.

“For my part I support a legitimate compromise: we must neither lapse into military formalism nor into superstitious anti-militarism. By accepting and achieving the reforms imposed on us by the nature of things, we shall by the self-same means, be in a position to resist the manoeuvres of Madrid and Moscow, which are trying to establish, under the pretext of militarisation, their military hegemony over the Spanish Revolution, in order to transform it into the instrument of their political hegemony.

“As for myself, I consider it a mistake to talk, as do certain representatives of the CNT-FAI of an overall or ‘supreme’ command instead of a unity of command. (That is to say co-ordination in matters of the control of the armed struggle). Their intentions are good, but the terms used leads to dangerous confusion’s!

“All things considered, therefore, the reforms needed in the militia, in my opinion, would be the following: a clear distinction between military command and political control, in the domain of the preparation and execution of the operations of war; strict fulfilment of orders received, but maintenance of certain fundamental rights: that of nominating and degrading officers.”

At this point the following question came to our lips: “What do you think of the internal political situations as regards the position taken by the CNT and FAI?”

“The necessity of Holy Alliance of all anti-fascist forces has led the Spanish anarchists to consider as ‘comrades’ many of their enemies of yesterday and to accept from their hands a part of the governmental responsibilities. It is not easy to draw up an exact balance sheet of the profit’s and losses deriving from this experience, but I think that today we have sufficient information for appraisal to be alarmed at the Russo-Bolshevik infiltration into military and technical spheres, adding itself to the dictatorial designs of the Marxist parties. On this last point, one can see a certain weakening of the CNT, and the situation is dangerous. But I hope that we shall overcome it victoriously, because among the Spanish anarchists, there is no lack of men who see clearly and understand the necessity of returning as soon as possible to the right path.”

And collectivisation is it progressing?

“It is progressing to a certain extent, as you could realise yourselves. One must be ignorant and of bad faith to talk, as certain dissident Communists are doing, of a ‘deadpoint’ in the social revolution in Spain or to represent the Spanish anarchists as ‘conservatives’ (exactly when collectivisation is spreading and strengthening itself in regions, like the Levant and Catalonia, where the anarchists have the greatest influence),

“If there is a conservative faction on the left, it is composed without doubt, of the right-wingers of Spanish Social-Democracy and of the orthodox organisations of Russian Bolshevism. For us the struggle is on between Fascism and Libertarian Communism. For the ‘moderates,’ it is simply a matter of the defence of democracy. But although the political horizons are distinct and opposed, the plan of battle reunites all the factions on the left. The main thing is to know whether the ‘comrades’ who are opposed to the social revolution will go so far in limiting it as to betray the promise they have given.”

Comrade Berneri was on the point of leaving us, and we hastened to put a last question: “What do you think of the behaviour of the Popular Front Government in France as regards Rome and Berlin’s policy of intervention”

“It is as cowardly as it is stupid. The Fascists have bombed Port-Bou, an international station and the French government has stopped sending trains in that direction! Another bombing of an Air France plane and no French machine will cross the border of the Pyrenees! Now France is busy preventing anti-fascists from coming to fight in Spain, while the governments of Hitler and Mussolini continue to send men, arms, planes and ammunition to the Fascist forces. A reasonable policy of support for the Spanish government would have allowed the anti-fascist militias to sort out the military mutiny in a few days. But the French government persists in believing neutrality is possible while it constitutes encouragement to the triple alliance of Hitler, Mussolini and Franco. Only broad-based and decisive popular action in France and Britain can force the respective governments of these countries to, adopt a less absurd behaviour.”

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Retrieved on 26th August 2021 from struggle.ws
(Translation from L'Espagne Nouvelle, February 1937). Translation published in 'The
Cienfuegos Press Anarchist Review' Number 4, 1978

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