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July 19th, 1936, Barcelona

Charlie Allison

19 July 2022

Everyone in Barcelona knew something was coming. Washer-women, trolley operators, bricklayers, revolutionaries, politicians, the cats down by the wharves, the guitar players on the Ramblas, the crows that squawked and picked at shiny things between the cobbles, the schoolteachers and painters and gossips.

But, in the waters by the docks, the fish and fishermen must have felt an invisible tightness in the air, in the water. The bulk of the prison-ship *Uruguay* sat on the water like a sore. The police were busy arresting anarchists for anything they could think of, so much so that they ran out of room on dry land to store them.

The cats that followed the fishermen from the docks might have affected indifference, licking their paws and pulling the eyes from the few fish tossed to them or left at the bottom of dinghies.

Unseen fish's breath make bubbles on the surface of the water.

The fascist puscht was the worst kept secret in all of Barcelona. Hell, all of Catalonia knew.

Except perhaps Emilienne Morin, Durruti's partner he'd met in a Paris bookstore.

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There was even a firing range behind Emilienne Morin's apartment. It was seldom quiet.

The cracks of rifle fire and the snap of pistols echoed off the old stone.

Anarchists practiced between shifts and meetings.

One of the more common weapons the anarchists did manage to get their hands on were old Winchester rifles.

Droescher, a German anarchist volunteer later in the coming civil war, later wrote of the Winchesters: "...when fired they sounded like mortars...the idea that our lives would depend on one of those old fashioned things in a really precarious situation was not very appealing."

In the days before the day, Buenaventura Durruti was forced to lean on stools during meetings of the anarchists—his hernia operation forced him into relative inactivity. He rested grudgingly, anxiously, wound tight as wire, as the meetings went on and on, checking and double checking contacts, timetables, logistics.

The Spanish National Police (Guardia Civil) almost universally backed the fascist coup attempt.

The Guardia Civil are beloved in few places, but are especially loathed in Basque Country and Catalonia, which often try to wrench free from the control of Madrid in order to rule themselves.

The anarchists of the CNT-FAI had to trust that the Guardia Civil and like organizations wouldn't aid the soldiers in Barcelona. It is hard to trust people whose entire job is based around imprisoning you or ending your life.

Even in the weeks leading up to the coup, police officers continued arresting (or attempting to arrest) and imprisoning anarchists, union members and other revolutionaries for having firearms on them.

Sources:

Droescher, Werner: Free Society: A German Exile in Revolutionary Spain

Enzensberger, Hans Magnus: Anarchy's Brief Summer: The Life and Death of Buenaventura Durruti

(Brief note: Enzensberger draws from a huge of amount of primary sources with direct quotes to form the majority body of his text, which saves me to trouble of listing Paz, Tellez, Romera, Montseny etc. in this citation—they are credited directly in the text when quoted. This essay is written in a variation of Enzensberger's own style and owes him a debt of gratitude. Other events described by these sources are summarized)

Hughes, Robert: Barcelona: A History

Kurlansky, Mark: The Basque History of the World

Tellez, Antonio: Sabate: Urban Guerrilla in Spain (1945–1960)

They did this even knowing that there existed a tentative truce in the face of the impending battle against the fascists. The habit of repression ran deep in the Guardia Civil.

The soldiers in their barracks grew tenser and tenser.

Some even deserted to the anarchists, when the time came, a few even having the foresight to take a machine gun and ammunition with them.

The anarchists knew what was coming. The soldiery, the fascists, were gathering their strength to seize the city of Barcelona—maybe all the cities in Spain. There were five thousand in Barcelona alone, enough to take the city if they wanted to.

There were five thousand members of the CNT-FAI in Barcelona as well, making this, on paper, an even fight. But the military had guns and the anarchists up until the last moment had far fewer guns than they needed.

The politicians, police-chiefs and military men all lied with a straight face and told Durruti they had no guns to spare for the anarchists.

Santillan wrote: "The government was afraid of the fascists, but it was even more afraid of the people armed."

The day before the day, every arms dealer and gun store in Barcelona was looted. Hunting rifles and knockoff pistols find their way into pockets or packages. It will have to be enough for the day.

We know Durruti, Oliver and Ascaso drank fiendish amounts of coffee to stay alert and awake. These men have robbed banks, countless banks, in Barcelona, in Uruguay, Chile, Argentina, killed powerful people that should have been out of their reach, and escaped death time and time again but I imagine them as uniquely nervous now.

All those other times, they've had to rely on themselves and their comrades. But this time, when the stakes are highest, they have to trust the liberals, the socialists, the gendarmes, the people in charge of persecuting and prosecuting them, to assist them instead of assassinate them.

The anarchists have cars on the day of days, heavy with impromptu armor and chalk on top of that spelling out CNT-FAI.

Durruti and Garcia Olivier took one such car to police headquarters.

They demand half of the riot police's weapons be distributed to the people. The General Commissioner for Public Safety, Escofet, tells them no.

The police don't give out so much as a single pistol to the unions.

A phone call breaks the standoff: the fascist coup is starting.

Paz writes that Olivier and Durruti draw their guns and go to leave the building at the news. On the way out, Durruti grabs the duty officer by the lapels and growls "Where are the pistols? Get on with it!"

Now, nearer dawn, Durruti speaks to the crowd outside the governmental palace. He speaks so well, the mass of the crowd shifts in an undefinable way, the police hand their weapons to the people of Barceloneta, begin to share guns and jokes.

Abel Paz wrote: "Before the very eyes of their officers, something astonishing happens: policemen are transformed into human beings."

A woman in a pink bathrobe who hasn't had time to put on her makeup shouts out to the Paralelo: "Long live the anarchists!"

The soldiers of the coup took the underground to the center of Barcelona. When they came up from the subway in the center

as he imagined them. Such was the antipathy towards all things Church.

No, it was not safe to be a priest or a churchman in Catalonia in July of 1936. For nights, the churches of Barcelona burned, like fireflies in the dark.

It was in this atmosphere that Durruti—tired, sore, having seen his cause win the day, lost his best friend and comrade Ascaso, watched the people of his city band together as one—made sure to smuggle the Bishop of Barcelona out of his house, hidden under a rain-coat. No one should ever forget a kindness done for them.

After the day has been won and the coup thwarted, the streets of Barcelona rang with parties, festivals, a prolonged orgasm that for a brief moment, erased all distinctions.

Assault guards—riot police— mingled with members of the FAI.

President Companys called Commissioner Escofet. People are taking over the homes of the wealthy and absent while the riot police just look on! Furniture being smashed! Something must be done! Can Escofet guarantee the loyalty of the police forces?

"I can't guarantee anything anymore" Escofet says."The men are walking out on me, they're going over to the FAI."

CNT members in their red and black hats danced with career politicians who only days ago would have happily thrown them in prison.

It was the beginning of, as German poet Hans Magnus Enzensberger called it, "anarchy's brief summer."

The events of July 19th, 1936 are worth remembering. They are worth reflecting upon. It is worth learning from, and holding in the front of our minds, like a soap-bubble on the tip of a finger.

Lists of the dead reduce names and the people that wore them, fade them to grayscale and blurry things that don't linger on the front of the mind.

There is no scrubbing out the pain that comes from the struggle necessary to achieve victory.

"If the priests knew what a beating we have in store for them They would run through the streets, shouting 'Liberty, liberty, liberty!"

So go the lyrics from a popular CNT-FAI song. The clergy was particularly hated by revolutionaries and peasants, as the majority of the priests in the Catholic Church were dedicated to a very feudal notion of power.

What the priests seemed to forget was that the nobility and priests were no less hated in feudal times as they were in 1936—anti-clericalism was particularly strong in Spanish anarchism, where the church had a strong hold over daily life. The priests of the Catholic Church were loathed for their naked abuse of powers, nearly incalculable wealth and absolute dedication to preventing all but the most piddling of reforms.

It wasn't for nothing that Francoism was often called "Fascism with Catholic characteristics". This was simply one more horrible face that the Church has worn since it stepped clear from the ruins—the legacy of—that famously patriarchal and authoritarian empire of the Romans.

To speak of the Church, particularly in Catalonia, was to speak of how best to dismantle it.

Even though the Sagrada Familia, beloved icon of Barcelona's tourist industry, was not dynamited, the anarchists had their revenge. The plans and workshop of Gaudi, a devout Catholic and chief architect of the structure (and safely dead for years), were torched by the anarchists. His designs would never live in stone

of Barcelona to take it in the early morning, they found everyone waiting for them.

When I say everyone was there, I mean *everyone* was in Barcelona. Young Quico Sabate and his brothers had gotten the jump on the fascists in their neighborhood of Hospitalet a few days before the coup was due to start and thus already had a healthy supply of weapons with them when they arrived in the city proper.

The Sabate brothers, particularly Quico, would go on to strike terror into the Spanish fascists and clergy even after the civil war that began that day ended, hiking across the Pyrenees to shoot fascist police officers, rob banks and spread anti-fascist literature through the streets of Barcelona.

Federica Montseny was there (who would become a minister in the post-Franco government in the 70s) and her grandfather Federico Urales, a family with a long anarchist tradition.

And of course Durruti, hernia operation be damned.

The Ukrainian anarchist Nestor Makhno would have been there if he could have, had he lived, had he not died in Paris broke and nearly-broken two years earlier.

He and Durruti had met in Paris briefly, when Durruti was newly freed from prison and between countries at the moment.

To say nothing of Ascaso, Valentina, the rest of the *Solidarios* that survived were there in the thick of things. The militant affinity groups of the FAI, the anarcho-syndicalist union of the CNT—all are there in force.

For once, 'the people', that abstraction given lip service by politicians when they have power and loathed when they become beings of flesh and blood and dignity as 'the mob', were awakened

They were ready for what came next.

Luis Romero writes:

“The active anarchists have spent the night on union premises, in the committees and back rooms. Now they’re streaming into the city center. The groups from Sanz, Hostafrancs and Collbanc, the ‘Muricans’ from La Torrassa, the CNT people from Casa Antunez are headed for the Plaza de Espana and the Paralelo; their goal is the engineers’ Lepanto barracks.

The textile workers of La Espana Industrial Company, the metal-workers of Escorsa and Siemens and from the Z lightbulb works who are on strike at the moment bricklayers and tanners, workers from the abattoirs and dustmen, day-labourers and, among them, a few singers from the Clave Choir, sub-proletarians from the slums of Montjuich and also a few gunslingers from Pueblo Seco; every-one is coming.

The market gardeners from Gracia who have always had revolutionary and anarchist leanings, are there as well, workers from the spinning mills and the tram depots, shop assistants too...

There aren’t just anarchists there but also socialists, Catalan nationalists, communists, people from the POUM and they’re all advancing, towards the Cinco de Oros, the Diagonale, towards the borders of their districts, throwing up barricades and guarding the approach routes and crossroads...”

I am not here to give you a boxing-style breakdown of the events of July 19th. I won’t bore you with the dull mechanics of violence, the data-entry of strategy and counter-strategy.

I won’t give a Homeric retelling of bullets flying, or bombs exploding, though of course there was plenty of that. I won’t be pulling down a map, no color-coded arrows or lines will show the movement of the fascists against the people of Barcelona, led by the CNT-FAI, and assisted, reluctantly, by the ‘legitimate government’ of Spain.

I won’t say how the air force bombed the fascist barracks after the soldiery tromped out of them in the morning, denying them a line of retreat.

The end results:

- The jails were opened—the Women’s Prison on Amalia Street was emptied before the fighting even stopped.
- The prison-ship Uruguay drained of prisoners.
- The police disarmed.
- The fascists were beaten, the coup thwarted.
- A total of around five hundred people died as a direct result of the action.

At the end, the people of Barcelona held the city in the palm of their hands. Political power lay with the anarchists now, not the republican government, and definitely not the fascists.

It was the first anarchist-held polity at that scale since the Korean anarchists, refugees and farmers in Manchuria formed the Shinmin from 1929 to 1931.

Before that there had been the Ukrainian Free Territory, sometimes (jokingly?) called Makhnovia from 1918 to 1921 in what is now Ukraine.

Looking at the heroics always involves looking away from the bodies of your friends, your partners, your family and neighbors.

It meant seeing Francisco Ascaso slumped face first on the cobles, his dark hair hiding most of but not all of, the blood from the bullet that pierced his forehead as he moved.

He was one of the two hundred casualties taken from the people of Barcelona that day, shot trying to get in close to a sniper’s nest in a hotel.

There are a hundred and ninety-nine, at the least, who shared his aims and died just like him—a word cut off as it left the tongue, a moment of bad luck or inattention or hateful geometry of shrapnel or ballistics.

Some may not have even had a weapon to raise.