

In and Against the State

The Making and Unmaking of the Barcelona May Days (1937)

Danny Evans

2022

Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Abstract | 3 |
| Introduction | 3 |
| Who Made the May Days? | 6 |
| In and Against the State? The Unmaking of the May Days | 11 |
| The Role of Conspiracy | 13 |
| Stalinist Violence | 16 |
| Conclusion: A New Genealogy? | 18 |
| Acknowledgements | 20 |

Abstract

This article discusses the mobilization and demobilization of anarchist workers during the Barcelona May days of 1937. Using recently published and primary research, it analyses how and why these events took place. The article argues that the programmatic and organizational coherence of the uprising has traditionally been underestimated, due to a lack of historiographical attention to the activities of mid-level anarchist activists in the CNT and the FAI. Understanding the significance and potential of the May days is crucial to an appreciation of the dynamics of the anarchist movement during the Spanish civil war, the process of Republican state reconstruction, counterrevolutionary violence, and the revolutionary approach to the war effort.

Since the Spanish war constituted a major blow for the European working class in an era of successive defeats, the inevitability of that defeat does not have to be taken for granted. Post-war writing has reflected the sort of thinking which permeated the Spanish left before the war and which went some way to dictating its policies during the war. Both the socialists and the communists were victims of a crude vulgar Marxist analysis of Spain's development, and their actions were conditioned by the consequent belief that Spain had to pass through a classic bourgeois revolution. [...] [S]uffice it to say that a rigid commitment to this view, strengthened by the exigencies of Soviet foreign policy, ensured short shrift for those groups which advocated more flexible revolutionary policies.¹

Introduction

In May 1937, a workers' uprising in Barcelona shook the wartime Spanish Republic. Co-ordinated by the defence committees of the Spanish anarchist organizations, the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (National Confederation of Labour - CNT) and Federación Anarquista Ibérica (Iberian Anarchist Federation - FAI), it was intended to defend and expand the revolution begun at the outset of the Spanish civil war (1936–1939). Anarchists had been central to the revolutionary process that quashed the attempted coup d'état of July 1936 and, in the following months, they were at the forefront of efforts to establish militia columns, take over workplaces and collectivize land in the Republican territory.² However, in the absence of any attempt to dissolve governmental bodies, many revolutionary phenomena were, from the first, formally subordinate to the national or regional organs of state, in spite of being self-managed or union-controlled in their day-to-day functioning.³ Consequently, the Republican state began

¹ Paul Preston, 'The Historiography of the Spanish Civil War' in Raphael Samuel, ed., *People's History and Socialist Theory* (Abingdon 2016), 190–204 (191).

² Agustín Guillamón, *Los Comités de Defensa de la CNT en Barcelona, 1933–1938* (Barcelona 2013). 'Anarchist' is used here in a broad sense. Although the tactics of the vast majority of the activists discussed in the present work can be described as 'anarcho-sindicalist', the frequent but misleading counterposition of anarchism to anarcho-sindicalism in the historiography makes the former, broader term, preferable in this context, and corresponds to the more common contemporary self-identification of the libertarian activist milieu.

³ Helen Graham, "'Against the State": A Genealogy of the Barcelona May Days (1937)', *European History Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (1999), 485–542 (495).

the gradual recovery of the authority it had lost. Anarchist organizations in Spain collaborated in this process, initially by joining ad-hoc anti-fascist committees alongside representatives of left-wing and liberal parties, then by agreeing to suppress those same committees and join organs of regional government, and finally by accepting ministerial roles in the central government in late October 1936.⁴

The general drift of mainstream historiography on the Spanish civil war has been to consider this as the moment when the revolution – the so-called ‘short summer of anarchy’ – came to an end.⁵ From this point on the anarchist leadership arrived at what appears to present-day historians to have been a mature acceptance of an auxiliary role in the direction of the war effort. The vast majority of the movement’s grassroots are assumed to have approved of this situation.⁶ Until recently, consideration of opposition to anarchist state collaboration has been limited to the Friends of Durruti group or to brief treatments of radical anarchist publications, with the resulting general impression that wartime anti-state anarchism was limited to bohemian journalists, eccentrics, or otherwise marginal figures on the fringes of the anarchist movement. There are regrettable and unexamined overlaps between contemporary Stalinist analyses of the anarchist movement and those of present-day mainstream historians, who identify a dividing line between a minority current of marginalized, criminalized extremists, often described in ableist or psychologizing terms, and the mature activists and wholesome proletarians who accepted the priorities of statist anti-fascism.⁷

This is no longer a tenable position. Recent research has established that anarchist opposition to state collaboration was much broader and more popular than was hitherto assumed.⁸ The May 1937 uprising in Barcelona is crucial to making this case but its significance has often been obscured, on the one hand by a reading of events that reduces the agency of anarchist activists and emphasizes the cloak-and-dagger manoeuvring of the Stalinists, and on the other by a desire to relegate the May events to a minor sideshow in the broader anti-fascist drama of the war.⁹ However, the May days witnessed a unanimously observed general strike and an estimated seven thousand armed revolutionaries on the city streets, with many more waiting on the periphery, meaning that larger numbers of people went into the streets in May than had initially mobilized

⁴ The four anarchist ministers were: Juan Lopez, Joan Peiró, Federica Montseny and Juan García Oliver.

⁵ The expression is taken from Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *El corto verano de la anarquía. Vida y muerte de Durruti*, Julio Forcat and Ulrike Hartmann, trans (Barcelona 2010). An example of the argument can be found in Julián Casanova, *Anarchism, the Republic and Civil War in Spain: 1931–1939*, Andrew Dowling and Graham Pollok, trans (London 2005), 150–1.

⁶ See for example Julián Vadillo Muñoz, *Historia de la CNT. Utopía, pragmatismo y revolución* (Madrid 2019), 239–42. From a very different perspective: Stanley G. Payne, *The Spanish Civil War* (Cambridge 2012), 217–18.

⁷ When referring to individuals, Stalinist is used here as an umbrella term to refer to leading members of Comintern-affiliated parties, Comintern officials, and agents and representatives of the Soviet Union. Further reflections on the utility of the term are included below.

⁸ See for example, Agustín Guillamón, *La Guerra del pan. Hambre y violencia en la Barcelona revolucionaria. De diciembre de 1936 a mayo de 1937* (Barcelona 2014); Los Gimenólogos, *En busca de los Hijos de la Noche. Notas sobre los Recuerdos de la guerra de España de Antoine Gimenez*, Francisco Madrid Santos, Carlos García Velasco and Los Gimenólogos, trans (Logroño 2009); Danny Evans, *Revolution and the State: Anarchism in the Spanish Civil War* (Chico, CA 2020); François Godicheau, ‘Periódicos clandestinos anarquistas en 1937–1938: ¿las voces de la base militante?’, *Ayer*, Vol. 55 (2004), 175–205.

⁹ The former position is discussed below. For the latter, see for example Paul Preston, ‘Lights and Shadows in George Orwell’s Homage to Catalonia’, *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* (2017), DOI: <https://www.tandfonline.com/action/showCitFormats?doi=10.1080/14753820.2018.1388550>.

against the military in July 1936.¹⁰ This was despite the fact that by 1937 the CNT's best-known activists were occupied in official tasks of government or at the front, along with thousands of others of the rank-and-file. Aside from its significance for the course of the war and anarchist participation, the insurrection presents one of the few recorded occasions when an uprising in a major city held within its own power the possibility of displacing the governmental and police authorities in the name of the organized working class.

The May days began on 3 May 1937, triggered by an armed police raid on the Telefónica, the Barcelona telephone exchange in the heart of the city, which had been run by a workers' committee dominated by CNT members from the earliest days of the revolution. The raid was met by armed resistance from workers inside the building and a standoff developed that spilled out into the Plaça de Catalunya. A general strike spread throughout the city. Clearly, in a situation of generalized street-fighting, an informal strike affecting city-centre bars, shops, public transport and so on, might be expected. However, the co-ordinated yet semi-spontaneous way in which the strike spread throughout the factories is indicative of broader sympathy with the insurrection, and of the continued vitality and co-ordinating capacity of the CNT's networks. Diego Camacho, a young anarchist in the neighbourhood of Clot, recalls being informed of events by telephone at his workplace on 3 May by Juan Turtós Vallès, a member of the neighbourhood defence committee. The shop steward at Camacho's workplace, having confirmed the information with the local trade union committee, assembled the workers who then voted to go on strike and report to their neighbourhood defence committees and union sections.¹¹

By dawn of 4 May, central Barcelona was a hive of barricade-building. George Orwell recorded that

long lines of men, women, and quite small children were tearing up the cobblestones, hauling them along in a hand-cart that had been found somewhere, and staggering to and fro under heavy sacks of sand [...] In a couple of hours the barricades were head-high.¹²

These five foot barricades represented a resurgence of working-class power that had reduced governmental authority to a handful of buildings in the city centre. Nevertheless, for reasons that have only recently been described with any clarity, the revolutionaries were persuaded to abandon their positions within a few days. In the following months, the anarchist organizations were ejected from national and regional government, their activists arrested in the thousands, and their local centres – including libraries and schools – wrested from them in violent and vindictive police operations.

It is over twenty years since Helen Graham published her landmark study of the Barcelona May days to which the present work owes its title. During this time, her article, which emphasizes the long and medium-term causes of the street-fighting, has become the standard English-language reference in the literature. Nevertheless, the question it seeks to address, of who was

¹⁰ The anarchist teacher Félix Carrasquer estimated that in Barcelona around 2000 activists mobilized to fight the mutinous army in July. See Ronald Fraser, *Blood of Spain: The Experience of Civil War, 1936–1939* (London 1979), 107. For May figures, see Manuel Aguilera Povedano, 'Los hechos de mayo de 1937: efectivos y bajas de cada bando', *Hispania*, Vol. 73, No. 245 (2013), 789–816.

¹¹ Abel Paz, *Viaje al pasado* (Madrid 2002), 141–3.

¹² George Orwell, *Orwell in Spain: The Full Text of Homage to Catalonia with Associated Articles, Reviews and Letters from The Complete Works of George Orwell* (London 2001), 108.

mobilizing and why, is only answered at the general and abstract level – it is ‘the poor’ who waged war against the state – while the question of how the mobilization and, no less importantly, the demobilization took place is left aside.¹³ Recent research allows us to answer these questions with a much greater degree of specificity. The purpose of this article is to present these new findings and to consider their consequences for historical interpretations of the May days and for the Spanish civil war as a whole. As such it should be seen as a necessary complement to Graham’s article, as well as an intervention in ongoing debates as to the significance of the Spanish revolution and the plausibility of its programme.

Who Made the May Days?

To complete Graham’s partial answer to this question requires attention to two key areas: the way in which mid-level anarchist activists were able to articulate and respond to discontent among their organizational base and broader constituency – the Barcelona working class – and how they revitalized and mandated a co-ordinating body capable of bringing about an insurrection. ‘Mid-level activists’ refers to those whose responsibilities as delegates within the CNT and the FAI did not extend to Regional Committee level, and who remained beholden to and in close contact with the grassroots in a way that those above them did not. An extended discussion of the wartime organizational functioning of the CNT and the FAI is beyond the scope of this article but it should be understood that, over the course of the war, the Regional and National Committees of both organizations increasingly took on executive functions that greatly exceeded their statutory roles as co-ordinating and liaison bodies. As will become clear below, the fluidity of the situation and the sharing of organizational premises made the boundaries of the ‘mid-level’ somewhat blurry, but no less fundamental as a category of analysis.

At the outset of 1937, anarchist activists were aggrieved by the retrocession of the revolution begun in July, perceptible on the streets of Barcelona in the growing confidence and violence of their political rivals. At this local level, the political programme of the latter could be summed up as the strengthening of governmental and police authority and the defence of property. In complete contrast, the anarchist programme could be summarized as: ‘socialization and the people armed’.¹⁴ Meanwhile, anarchist women perturbed by the sexism of men in the movement and apparent indifference as to the recruitment and education of women activists, were organizing autonomously in the rapidly growing *Mujeres Libres* (Free Women) grouping.¹⁵ Regardless of political allegiance, the most pressing grievance of the moment was hunger, with food scarcity leading to bread queues and demonstrations in the first quarter of 1937. Understanding how these issues were brought together is fundamental to understanding the scale of the May days uprising.

At this time, the Councillor in charge of food supply in Catalonia was Joan Comorera, secretary of the *Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya* (United Socialist Party of Catalonia – PSUC). Comorera was a veteran and visceral opponent of the CNT, determined to reintroduce a free market in food to demonstrate, as Graham put it, his party’s ‘superior ability to defend “mid-

¹³ Graham, “Against the State”, 485.

¹⁴ This was the front-page headline of the first issue of the radical anarchist publication *Ideas. Portavoz del movimiento libertario de la comarca de Bajo Llobregat*, 29 December 1936.

¹⁵ Martha A. Ackelsberg, *Free Women of Spain: Anarchism and the Struggle for the Emancipation of Women* (Edinburgh 2005).

dling” economic interests against libertarian depredation’.¹⁶ In the earliest stages of the revolution, responsibility for food supply had been taken on by the defence committees of the CNT. Their displacement by Comorera was therefore a striking symbol of the diminution of the power of revolutionary organizations since July. However, the authority of the defence committees in Barcelona persisted through their connection with the *patrullas* de control, a kind of revolutionary police force which had begun as a multi-party body, albeit dominated by CNT members, but which was abandoned by the PSUC and the Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (Republican Left of Catalonia – ERC) following the events at the Catalan town of La Fatarella in January.¹⁷ The *patrullas* were nominally answerable to the Catalan government’s Department of Internal Security, in which the CNT was hegemonic in the autumn of 1936, at the time of the reorganization of regional government. As such, the *patrullas* have come to be associated with the mythologized CNT ‘men of action’ attached to the Department, figures such as Dionisio Eroles, Manuel Escorza, Aurelio Fernández and José Asens. There is evidence, however, that in the early part of 1937, as control of the Department became contested by the CNT’s political rivals, any command structure that might have linked the *patrullas* to the Catalan government had begun to decompose.¹⁸ Following the January split, the *patrullas* appear to have increasingly operated as auxiliaries to neighbourhood defence committees.¹⁹

The split in the *patrullas* helped clarify the widening socio-political divisions in Catalonia. Immediately afterward, the *patrullas* set about demonstrating where their loyalties lay, rooting out food hoarders and demonstrating in practice a revolutionary alternative to the free market in food. A photograph in the Barcelona city archive shows members of the *patrullas* in the Sants neighbourhood of Barcelona distributing foodstuffs discovered in a hoard in January 1937.²⁰ Then, in March, the *patrullas* discovered a warehouse full of potatoes. The discovery resulted in an armed standoff with the Republican police. Refusing to back down, the *patrullas* provided armed protection for the distribution of the hoard to women queuing for groceries.²¹

Mujeres Libres blamed the growth of bread queues on the inefficiency and bankruptcy of statist bureaucracy. When food riots erupted in April, disrupting the anniversary celebrations of the Second Republic, in which the ERC and PSUC participated but which were boycotted by the CNT, Mujeres Libres supported the direct action of working-class women, issuing a statement

¹⁶ Graham, “Against the State”, 500. Graham’s linking of this policy to a middle-class social base has been challenged by subsequent research that concludes that the majority of the PSUC’s membership was of working-class origin. The significance of this finding should not be overstated, since such policies are equally explicable in terms of the cross-class strategy of Popular Front anti-fascism. See José Luis Martín Ramos, ‘La afiliación del PSUC durante la guerra civil (1936–1939): Volumen, distribución territorial y composición social’, *HMiC: història moderna i contemporània*, Vol. 6 (2008), 280–307.

¹⁷ Chris Ealham, ‘Una revolución a medias: los orígenes de los hechos de mayo y la crisis del anarquismo’, *Viento Sur* (2007), 93–101. On La Fatarella, see Pelai Pagès i Blanch, ‘La Fatarella: Una insurrecció pagesa a la reraguarda catalana durant la guerra civil’, *Estudis D’Historia Agrària*, Vol. 17 (2004), 659–74.

¹⁸ See the attempts of Eroles to rein in ‘uncontrollables’ nominally subordinate to his department in February and April: Carlos García and Harald Piotrowski, ‘El DAS contra la red Nazi’ in D. Nelles, H. Piotrowski, U. Linse and C. García, eds, *Antifascistas Alemanes en Barcelona (1933–1939)* (Barcelona 2019), 277–508 (292–4).

¹⁹ This would reach its moment of culmination during the May days, when units of the *patrullas* were absorbed entirely into the neighbourhood defence committees. See the transcript: ‘Entrevista amb Joan “Remi” per Joan Casanovas Codina, Barcelona, 13/3/1986’, *Arxiu Històric de la Ciutat de Barcelona, Fonts Orals*, 97 and 126.

²⁰ Perez de Rozas, *Arxiu Fotogràfic de Barcelona*.

²¹ See the minutes of the regional CNT meeting in which these events are discussed in Guillamón, *La Guerra del pan*, 378–9.

approving of those who had invaded markets to ‘take justice into their own hands’. In opposition to the free market policies of Comorera, the grouping’s Barcelona branch called for the socialization of production and consumption, thereby connecting the domestic sphere to the CNT’s campaign for the socialization of industry, which mid-level activists had already pushed beyond the boundaries of the factory gates and into the realm of housing.²²

Here, we can see how two of the key preoccupations of grassroots anarchism, maintaining an armed working-class presence in the rear-guard and the socialization of resources, had a direct relationship to the everyday experience of working-class people in Barcelona. The positioning of both *Mujeres Libres* and the *patrullas* alongside and in solidarity with the bread queues is suggestive of a greater strategic and programmatic coherence than wartime anarchism is normally afforded, and provides important context, not only for the broad community participation in the building of barricades and the participation of armed women in the street fighting in May 1937, but also for George Orwell’s observations following the events, of police on horses lording it over women queuing for groceries.²³

Anarchist grievances were elaborated upon in newspapers, reviews and flyers, and discussed at length in the network of expropriated buildings that, taken over in the summer of 1936, served as neighbourhood centres for the *Juventudes Libertarias* (Libertarian Youth), defence committees, *Mujeres Libres* and foreign anarchist groupings. Sharing experiences of encounters with the police or political opponents, this network adopted an increasingly combative stance on the street and in public pronouncements. The stated need to ‘return’ to the barricades and ‘begin again’ was omnipresent. The Libertarian Youth and the defence committees were also brought into closer contact with activists of the Marxist, anti-Stalinist *Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista* (Workers’ Party of Marxist Unification – POUM) through, respectively, the Revolutionary Youth Front and the *patrullas*. Although this rapprochement would ultimately have greater significance for their opponents than for the revolutionaries, it influenced a sharpening of anarchist propaganda in terms of naming the enemy, and there was some co-ordinated activity with rank-and-file members of the POUM during the May days.

Nevertheless, a further organizational point of reference was required for the coalescence of anti-state anarchism in the months prior to the May days to be converted into co-ordinated action. This was provided by the Local Federation of anarchist affinity groups; the city-wide co-ordinating body of the Barcelona FAI, whose secretary, Julián Merino, was pivotal. Merino was a veteran union organizer who had come to the attention of police in Navarra during labour disputes towards the end of the so-called ‘Bolshevik triennium’.²⁴ During the Second Republic he lived in Barcelona, and was the FAI’s delegate to the Catalan Regional Defence Committee.²⁵ As such, he was the sole organic link between this committee and the FAI. It was notorious that the *Nosotros* group, which dominated the Catalan Regional Defence Committee, was not initially affiliated to the FAI, in spite of its members’ tendency to speak in its name and bask in

²² *Solidaridad Obrera*, 16 April 1937. On the socialization of housing in Lleida: José Peirats, *Figuras del movimiento libertario español* (Barcelona 1977), 279–80.

²³ Orwell, *Orwell in Spain*, 141.

²⁴ José Miguel Gastón, *¡Vivan los comunes! Movimiento comunero y sucesos corraliceros en Navarra (1896–1930)* (Peralta 2010), 64–6.

²⁵ José Manuel Márquez Rodríguez and Juan José Gallardo Romero, *Ortiz, general sin Dios ni amo* (Barcelona 1999), 80.

its 'revolutionary mystique'.²⁶ Merino was cut from a different cloth. When told of his death in 1977, José Peirats, who served as regional secretary of the FAI for a period during the Second Republic, recalled that Merino 'was one of the few who remained in the FAI, stuck like a nail, during the reign of Dencàs-Badía. The big-mouths still around today never used to show their faces'.²⁷

Merino arrived back in Barcelona from the front in early 1937. He quickly took on the role of secretary of the Local Federation of the Barcelona FAI, unceremoniously unseating José Grunfeld, the previous incumbent who had been entrusted with the job on the night of his arrival from Argentina.²⁸ His return to Barcelona was a key factor in increasing the cohesion among the different fronts of resistance to state reconstruction in the city. It had been Merino who relayed the redistributive work of the *patrullas* to the anarchist movement's higher-ups in meetings early in the year. In April he convoked an assembly of anarchist affinity groups, which was opened up to the Libertarian Youth, as well as representatives of the defence committees and the German anarchist exile group, Deutsche Anarchosyndikalisten (German Anarcho-syndicalists - DAS). The assembly nominated a working group to write a position paper which turned out to be the most combative statement of wartime anarchism to date, and which also announced the formation of a committee to direct operations against the counterrevolution.²⁹

It is very probable that this committee, with Merino at the helm, then co-ordinated the May days uprising in response to the attempt by armed police to take over the Barcelona telephone exchange on 3 May. There is no question that Merino formed part of a committee co-ordinating the anarchist street fighters. What is unknown is whether this was a committee specifically created in response to the April plenum or a revived co-ordinating committee of the Barcelona defence committees – quite possibly it was a combination of the two. Merino's other organizational role, secretary of the Barcelona transport workers' union, is relevant here. Several accounts attest to the importance of this union in the street fighting. García Oliver considered Merino and his companions in the transport union to be among the few likely candidates capable of co-ordinating a mobilization on such a scale.³⁰ His account of seeing Merino at the Casa CNT-FAI, the headquarters of the Barcelona anarchist movement, making one telephone call after another, apparently giving orders, on 4 May, is discussed below. García Oliver's testimony can be supplemented by that of Matías Suñer Vidal, a member of the *patrullas* and of the FAI, who participated in the fighting. Suñer affirmed that he was 'at the orders of a secret revolutionary committee ... that directed military operations against the PSUC', naming as members of this committee Julián Merino, Lucio Ruano and José Manzana – the latter almost certainly a late addition, as discussed below.³¹ As secretary of the transport workers' union, Merino would have been in regular contact with the railway workers' delegate, Laureano Cerrada Santos, whose active role behind the barricades in

²⁶ Juan García Oliver, *El eco de los pasos. El anarcosindicalismo ... en la calle ... en el Comité de Milicias ... en el gobierno ... en el exilio* (Paris 1978), 128.

²⁷ José Peirats letter to Germinal Gracia, Montady 20 May 1977, B.A.S.E. (Biblioteca y archivo de sociología y economía), Montady. The 'reign of Dencàs-Badía' refers to the police campaign against the CNT and the FAI carried out by the Catalan regional government in the years prior to the abortive nationalist uprising of October 1934, in which Josep Dencàs and Miquel Badía were prominent.

²⁸ José Grunfeld, *Memorias de un anarquista* (Buenos Aires 2000), 176 and 194.

²⁹ Guillamón, *Los Comités de Defensa*, 196–221.

³⁰ García Oliver, *El eco de los pasos*, 423.

³¹ See 'Suñer Vidal, Matias' (2016), <http://militants-anarchistes.info/spip.php?article13135> (accessed 7 July 2020).

May has been attested to by Luis Andrés Edo.³² Esteban Navarro, a close acquaintance of Merino in their post-war exile, later affirmed that he (Navarro) had been a member of a 'revolutionary central committee' during the war alongside Cerrada and 'four other comrades'.³³

On 4 May, the success of the anarchist mobilization was conveyed to a meeting of CNT representatives by Merino in the Casa CNT-FAI, an enormous city centre building that had formerly housed the Catalan employers' association. That the meeting had been called by Merino and that his report presented the rising as a *fait accompli* demonstrates two things: that Merino felt mandated by the recent meeting of the Barcelona FAI to take the initiative against the counter-revolution, and that he anticipated a sufficiently sympathetic hearing to carry the day in the CNT's decision-making centre.³⁴ 'Our position is unimprovable', Merino declared. 'The fact that we have been able to take the Condal theatre and to take Civil Guards [police] prisoner should give an idea of the state of our morale.'³⁵ Co-ordinated by mid-level activists, rank-and-file anarchists had retaken the city they had been masters of back in July. At the meeting on 4 May, two anonymous mid-level delegates expressed their opinion that 'We have to go all out [to finish with] the Government', and that 'The order of the day is to liquidate these provocations, so that nobody dare contradict the organization'.³⁶

The May days prove that for a considerable portion of Barcelona's working class, rightly or wrongly, the anti-state anarchist programme continued to make sense. Nine months of war had evidently not led to the pragmatic abandonment of their aspirations. In fact, the propagandistic activist labour involved in the socialization campaign, and the immediate benefits of redistributive direct action in the first third of 1937 had increased the sympathetic constituency that the anarchist movement could mobilize. The agents of this new mobilization were not the movement's marginal figures but rather those mid-level activists whom Germinal Gracia would later describe as the CNT's 'true strength', its 'wellspring of anonymous activists, who wrote infrequently and expressed themselves crudely. Situated between the great mass of the membership and the famous higher-ups, these were the ones who carried the weight of the organization at its base, in direct contact with the factories'.³⁷ A description which, when extended to incorporate the relationship of *Mujeres Libres* and the *patrullas* to the bread queues, among other non-industrial anarchist networks, goes some way to explaining the continued vitality and popularity of a resolutely non-state anarchism for several months after the sun set on the short summer of 1936.

Nevertheless, the mobilization did not lead to a definitive victory, but a catastrophic defeat. The meeting on 4 May was divided in its attitudes and ended at loggerheads. The intervention of Manuel Escorza del Val the previous day, at a meeting called in response to the situation in the telephone exchange, is illustrative of the perspective of the organization's regional leadership: 'It is [...] a premature action that has not been thought out in the least [...] What remains to be

³² Luis Andrés Edo, *La CNT en la encrucijada. Aventuras de un heterodoxo* (Barcelona 2006), 59.

³³ Navarro letter to Germinal Gracia, La Victoria, 23 November 1976, B.A.S.E., Montady.

³⁴ There is some confusion as to whether the meeting Merino convoked took place on 4 or 5 May; Guillamón concludes convincingly that it was the earlier date. See Agustín Guillamón, *Insurrección. Las sangrientas jornadas del 3 al 7 de mayo de 1937* (Barcelona 2017), 494.

³⁵ 'Reunión extraordinaria celebrada el día cuatro de mayo de 1937, por el Comité Regional y los demás comités responsables de Cataluña', CNT (España) Archives 85 C, International Institute of Social History (IISG).

³⁶ *Ibid.* The delegates in question were respectively, that of Gerona and the health workers' union.

³⁷ Cited in Carlos Díaz, *Víctor García, 'el Marco Polo del anarquismo'* (Madrid: Madre Tierra, 1993), 19.

seen is whether we really control the mass of our membership'.³⁸ Merino, busy co-ordinating the response of the rank-and-file, was absent from this meeting. The following days would provide an answer to Escorza's question.

In and Against the State? The Unmaking of the May Days

The collaboration of the Spanish anarchist movement in the reconstruction of the Republican state occurred at different levels. The conversion of revolutionary activists to state agents took place in some cases by degrees, in some cases with brutal rapidity. By May 1937, the libertarian movement was operating on at least three distinct planes: as an anti-state project, focused on the defence and extension of revolutionary phenomena; as state functionaries, of necessity opposed to the former category; and as 'honest collaborators' nevertheless determined to preserve the autonomy and dignity of the anarchist organizations. The centre would not hold: the May days demonstrated the impossibility of honest collaboration and the partisans of the middle-ground had to choose which side they were on. To a great extent the fate of the Spanish anarchist movement depended on their choice.

The category into which individuals fell was not dependent on ideology and temperament so much as proximity to the centre of government. García Oliver had been the chief theoretician of the movement's insurrectionist wing in the years prior to the civil war. As Minister of Justice in the Republican government, he instructed new recruits to an officer training school that 'enlisted men "should cease to be your comrades and become the cogwheels of our military machine"'.³⁹ In this regard he led by example. Stewards of a machine, the leadership of the libertarian movement did not view the May events from an organizational, still less anarchist, perspective. As Joan Manent Pesas, veteran CNT member and ministerial secretary to Joan Peiró, put it: 'from a governmental point of view, for us it was catastrophic, so much so that it was as if we were going to lose the war the next day'.⁴⁰

It was with this 'governmental point of view' at the forefront of his mind that García Oliver hastened to Barcelona in a bid to bring the uprising to a halt. When he entered the first floor of the Casa CNT-FAI alongside the CNT's national secretary, Mariano Rodríguez Vázquez, he saw Merino on the telephone, giving orders. When he asked members of the CNT's Regional Committee whether Merino had been charged with some kind of mission, he was told that he had not. He was further informed that the Regional Committee had been unable to make contact with the barricades. García Oliver was no stranger to acting on the margins of organizational discipline and by his own account had begun to perceive what was going on: 'Are you aware of anyone who, acting in the name of a Committee directing this revolution, might be in contact with the barricades?' he asked the Regional Committee. 'No one is taking responsibility', came the reply. While García Oliver was speaking to the Regional Committee on the top floor of the Casa CNT-FAI, Merino made eight separate phone calls from the telephone downstairs.⁴¹ The ability to contact the base that had been lost at the Regional Committee level had thus been recovered by Merino at the mid-level.

³⁸ 'Reunión extraordinaria que celebró el Comité Regional, con los demás comités responsables el día 3 de Mayo de 1937, en la ciudad de Barcelona', CNT (España) Archives 85 C, IISG.

³⁹ Burnett Bolloten, *The Spanish Civil War: Revolution and Counterrevolution* (Chapel Hill, NC 2015), 328.

⁴⁰ Joan Manent Pesas file, Col·lecció Ronald Fraser, Arxiu Històric de la Ciutat de Barcelona, Fonts Orals, 57.

⁴¹ García Oliver, *El eco de los pasos*, 423-4.

As we have seen, despite what the CNT's Regional Committee may have reported to García Oliver, Merino *had* been charged with a mission to co-ordinate an armed response to the counterrevolution in Barcelona; the May days uprising responded to the mandate provided by the plenum of the local FAI the previous month. By this stage it was only the anti-state wing of Spanish anarchism that was operating according to the norms of pre-war libertarian democracy. Faced with this situation, García Oliver's plan was to pull rank, and to address himself to the grassroots of the movement directly over the radio. His plan backfired. Those behind the barricades listened in stupefaction to the Minister of Justice calling for both sides to set aside their weapons and embrace one another. Although their indignant reaction is widely recorded in the literature, many historians have concluded that, nonetheless, it was the intervention of the movement's leadership over the airwaves that swung the balance in the conflict. Such an unsatisfactory conclusion can be attributed in part to the relatively recent historiographical uncovering of the committee co-ordinating the uprising. Yet even Agustín Guillamón, whose work has been fundamental in this regard, and who has written the most detailed account of the May days to date, considers it an insurrection 'demobilized over the radio'.⁴²

Meanwhile, the committee co-ordinating the rising drew up its own plan. Several participants attest to the orders given to the neighbourhood committees on 4 May to ready columns for a march on the centre to take over the headquarters of the PSUC and police, while the CNT members stationed at the castle of Montjuïc trained their artillery on the seat of regional government, the Generalitat – now only waiting for the order to fire.⁴³ The testimony of one combatant in Sants is highly illustrative:

[this plan] did not come from the Regional Committee or the Local Federation [of CNT unions] but from the Regional Committee of defence groups [...] which had nothing to do with the Regional Committee of the [CNT] [...] The defence groups were something separate, and they'd reached the limit of their patience.⁴⁴

However, this plan was not put into practice either. In his passage through the Casa CNT-FAI, García Oliver had asked one of the building's guards to keep a watch on Merino, and it is very likely that, alerted by the Minister of Justice to his frenetic activity a few floors below them, the CNT's Regional Committee sent a delegation to impress upon Merino the importance of avoiding precipitous action while negotiations with the Catalan government continued. In any event, the expected order to advance was not forthcoming, and the revolutionary offensive, the anticipation of which in the headquarters of the POUM was memorably described by George Orwell, did not materialize.⁴⁵

The following morning at a hastily gathered meeting in the Casa CNT-FAI, those present were told that something had to be done, that the neighbourhoods could not be held back any longer. Informed that the Casa CNT-FAI was about to come under attack, it was agreed that the existing local defence committee be augmented by new delegates granted 'WIDE POWERS TO ACT AS REQUIRED'. The new delegates were José Xena, José Manzana, Gregorio Jover and

⁴² Guillamón, *Insurrección*, 343.

⁴³ Evans, *Revolution and the State*, 123–4.

⁴⁴ 'Entrevista amb Joan "Remi"', 103.

⁴⁵ Orwell, *Orwell in Spain*, 116–18.

Francisco Isgleas.⁴⁶ It seems likely that the existing local defence committee referred to here was the one co-ordinating the uprising, particularly in view of the fact that Manzana has been named alongside Merino as a member of the same.⁴⁷ If so, these new members would logically have been put in contact with Merino, whereupon their presence may well have been sufficient to tip the balance on the committee away from taking the offensive. The gambit of the radio appeal having failed, the only means at the disposal of the Regional Committee to re-establish contact with the rank-and-file was through the committee directly co-ordinating them. As ‘Remi’ testified: ‘on 5 May we stayed put, right? [...] Because for us, regardless of what García Oliver or whoever else might say, it was only for the defence committees to give the order that it was over’.⁴⁸

Merino was disadvantaged by the urban facelift the revolution had given Barcelona. The CNT-FAI’s occupation of the old employers’ association building gave it ownership of a strategically important site of enormous symbolic power. But the haste with which the different sections of the movement had laid a claim to its resources facilitated the solidification of a hierarchical reorganization of Catalan anarchism that corresponded to the layout of the building itself (the Regional Committee occupied the top floor, the Barcelona FAI were situated several floors lower down).⁴⁹ In order for the Regional Committee to call recalcitrant activists of the Barcelona FAI or Libertarian Youth to order, it only had to send a delegation downstairs. In spite of calls by the Friends of Durruti group and the Libertarian Youth of Gràcia for fighters to remain at the barricades on 5 May, the demobilization of the anarchists began its slow progress, delayed primarily by the aggression of their opponents, now scenting an opportunity of their own. This demobilization had not been effected over the radio, but via a bureaucratic manoeuvre of the Catalan CNT’s ‘honest’ collaborators, panicked into opting for the statist alternative by reports of an imminent frontal assault on their headquarters.

The Role of Conspiracy

The picture presented here is of a mobilization and demobilization enacted by the anarchist movement’s defence committees, answering to a city-wide co-ordinating committee, with Julián Merino at the helm, mandated to act by an amplified plenum of the Barcelona FAI in April. That is to say, an immediate explanation for the May events can be found entirely within the internal dynamics of the anarchist movement. Over eighty years of propagandistic and exculpatory literature, along with a tendency in the historiography to reduce the anarchist movement to the CNT leadership, has created a fog obscuring what must inevitably seem therefore, to be an overly simplistic explanation that ignores the significance of the conspiracies of the CNT’s enemies, chiefly the PSUC and Soviet agents but also Catalan nationalists.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ ‘Reunión extraordinaria celebrada por el Comité Regional de Cataluña con asistencia de casi todos los compañeros más responsables de la organización’, CNT (España) Archives 85 C, IISG. Capitalization of words as they appear in the minutes.

⁴⁷ Guillamón considers that this committee was set up with the sole purpose of defending the Casa CNT-FAI. See Guillamón, *Insurrección*, 226.

⁴⁸ ‘Entrevista amb Joan “Remi”’, 130

⁴⁹ Víctor García, ‘José Xena Torrent. Aporte para una biografía necesaria’, *Orto*, Vol. 54 (1989), 32–5 (32).

⁵⁰ See, for example, George Esenwein, ‘Review of Danny Evans, *Revolution and the State*’, *Anarchist Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (2020), 104–6.

Undoubtedly, there were counterrevolutionary machinations afoot, directed at unseating anarchist workers from those areas where they retained substantial influence. The CNT even received highly prescient reports in April 1937 that a crisis was to be provoked in Barcelona that would allow the central government to assume control of public order.⁵¹ However, the existence of a conspiratorial element to the counterrevolutionary project should not obscure the fact that this was secondary to the openly proclaimed central policy of opposing the socializing pretensions of a significant section of the organized working class. In practice, this meant re-establishing a monopoly of violence in Republican territory, restoring market mechanisms to internal trade, and ejecting anarchists from key strategic posts: notably border patrols and telephone exchanges. The apparently divergent ideologies of the parties involved (Catalan nationalists, centralizing liberal and socialist republicans in Valencia, federalist socialists, Stalinists whose tragi-comic array included ‘repentant’ oppositionists, arriviste opportunists and true believers) proved remarkably flexible in pursuit of this common project, which could be given a ‘revolutionary’ or cautiously moderate gloss as the occasion required.⁵²

That this was possible speaks to a considerable overlap in outlook among the component parts of the counterrevolutionary continuum in Spain (we might even say Europe). Catalan nationalists considered the anarchist movement to be alien and uncivilized and viewed it with racialized contempt.⁵³ When, in the period of revolutionary reflux, it became imperative to associate extralegal violence with anarchism, this tradition was drawn upon in the creation of the folk-devil of the anarchist ‘uncontrollable’.⁵⁴ This was then translated into ‘Soviet’ by the professional ideologues of the Comintern: ‘The second stratum [of anarchists] are the lumpen proletariat: all the thieves, bandits, prostitutes are declaring that they belong to the anarchists, because only thus can they get the weapons necessary for their dark deeds’.⁵⁵

The nationalist-Stalinist discursive repertoire provided a language and a veneer of legitimacy to the project of state reconstruction, which proceeded in a piecemeal fashion: a constant barrage of misinformation was conveyed to the authorities and published in press outlets intended to cast suspicion on elements within the anarchist movement; opportunities were taken on a case-by-case basis to have troublesome anarchists arrested or murdered; and police operations disarmed workers and broke up assemblies.⁵⁶ It was a high-risk strategy but the only one available to those

⁵¹ Sección Nacional de Coordinación, ‘Informe político confidencial’, Valencia 7 April 1937, CNT (España) Archives 40 F, IISG.

⁵² Illustrative in this regard was the part played by the doomed Soviet Consul in Barcelona, Antonov-Ovseenko whose careful tightrope-walking defence of ‘the liberal democratic model’ in the midst of a revolutionary situation is outlined in Josep Puigsech Farràs, ‘An Intimate Diplomatic View: The Spanish Civil War according to the personal diaries of the Soviet Consul Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko’, *International Journal of Iberian Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (2016), 21–36.

⁵³ See Chris Ealham, *Class, Culture and Conflict in Barcelona 1898–1937* (London 2005), 12–15.

⁵⁴ The point is made in Graham, “Against the State”, 538 (fn 114).

⁵⁵ Report by André Marty in Ronald Radosh, Mary R. Habeck and Grigory Sevostianov, eds, *Spain Betrayed: The Soviet Union in the Spanish Civil War* (New Haven, CT 2001), 48. Needless to say, the tropes of this counterrevolutionary imaginary: a criminal underserving poor, misogynist disdain for the fallen woman, an obsession with ‘unmasking’ unhealthy elements, were not only common to the republican counterrevolutionaries but also their fascist opponents. See also Chris Ealham, ‘The Myth of the Maddened Crowd: Culture and Space in the Revolutionary Urbanist Project in Barcelona, 1936–1937’, in Chris Ealham and Michael Richards, eds, *The Splintering of Spain: Cultural History and the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939* (Cambridge 2005) 111–32 (111–12).

⁵⁶ On the last point see Carme Vega, Anna Monjo and Mercedes Vilanova, ‘Socialización y hechos de mayo: una nueva aportación a partir del proceso a Mauricio Stevens (2 de junio de 1937)’, *Historia y Fuente Oral*, Vol. 3 (1990),

intent on the reconstruction of the Republican state. Its chances of success, as they well knew, depended on the continued commitment of the CNT leadership to collaboration and a calculation that this leadership would either disown or rein in its rank-and-file.⁵⁷

Understandably, leading CNT activists' heads were full of the plots against them as they struggled vainly to avoid their opponents' attempts to weaken and outflank them from within the corridors of power. This certainly inflected their attempts to explain the May events, both at the time and subsequently.⁵⁸ At the meeting in the Casa CNT-FAI on 4 May, Xena conveyed reports of a rapprochement in rural Catalonia between Communists and Catalan nationalists, and affirmed the role of the central government in the assault on the telephone exchange.⁵⁹ However, it must be recalled that in May the CNT leaders at a national and regional level were removed from the activists on the ground: they did not even know how to contact them, hence their pleas over the radio. The counterrevolutionary machinations of their opponents are important to understanding the dynamics of the united front that opposed them and are integral to deciphering the May events' sub-plots, particularly the most notorious cases of cold-blooded murder. But they are not immediate causal factors in how and why the events took place. The only way in which the May days can be explained as corresponding to a plot on the part of the anarchists' enemies would be if the authorities had known and desired that a raid on the telephone exchange would result in a generalized showdown. This is untenable.

Subsequently described as a calculated provocation, the police raid on the telephone exchange on 3 May was both entirely foreseen and of a piece with the step-by-step strategy of state reconstruction described above. At the meeting of the Catalan libertarian movement held on the day of the raid, it was reported that this was the fourth such attempt to dislodge the workers committee running the telephone exchange.⁶⁰ In anticipation of a further attempt, the windows had been reinforced in the days prior.⁶¹ What made the difference in May was the existence of a newly empowered committee in contact with the CNT's neighbourhood defence committees, mandated to act without consulting the movement's higher-ups.

While the Spanish Communists were the most obvious of the ultimate beneficiaries of the May days, this outcome was impossible to predict on 4 May.⁶² It is implausible to suggest that either the PSUC or Comintern agents deliberately engineered a situation that came within a hair's breadth of wiping them out in Catalonia. While the PSUC had formed its own 'defence commission' in the period preceding the events, this was in no way capable of waging, let alone

93–103; Antonio Gascón and Agustín Guillamón, *Nacionalistas contra anarquistas en la Cerdaña (1936–1937)*. Antonio Martín, *la experiencia libertaria de Puigcerdá y el sagrado mito de Bellver* (Barcelona 2018).

⁵⁷ Graham, "Against the State", 519; Vernon Richards, *Lessons of the Spanish Revolution 1936–1939* (Oakland, CA 2019), 143.

⁵⁸ See, for example, García Oliver, *El eco de los pasos*, 419–20, and the closing remarks of the CNT National Committee report cited in John Brademas, *Anarcosindicalismo y revolución en España (1930–1937)* (Barcelona 1974), 262–23.

⁵⁹ 'Reunión extraordinaria celebrada el día cuatro de mayo de 1937'.

⁶⁰ 'Reunión extraordinaria que celebró el Comité Regional, con los demás comités responsables el día 3 de Mayo de 1937'.

⁶¹ Eduardo Pons Prades file, Col·lecció Ronald Fraser, AHCB, Fons orals, 68.

⁶² The clearest advantage gained was at the level of central government, where the Spanish Communist Party took the opportunity provided by the May events to provoke a crisis in the cabinet. Josep Puigsech Farràs also affirms that 'one of the most notable aspects' of the post-May political situation was 'the increase in the influence of the Soviet state in Catalonia'. See Josep Puigsech Farràs, 'La intervenció de la Internacional Comunista a Catalunya durant la fase final de la Guerra Civil', *Recerques*, Vols 58–9 (2009), 75–98 (76).

winning, a showdown with the anarchists, lacking anything like the necessary popular base to draw on.⁶³ Burnett Bolloten, who cannot be accused of playing down counterrevolutionary machinations, nevertheless concludes that ‘It is dubious whether those responsible for the assault on the *telefónica* had anticipated such a widespread popular reaction’.⁶⁴ Likewise, the heavily documented volume *Spain Betrayed: The Soviet Union in the Spanish Civil War*, fails to uncover any smoking gun to that effect, in spite of its claims to the contrary.⁶⁵ In so far as specifically Stalinist machinations impacted on the May events, this had less to do with their detonation than with the murderous opportunism that flourished in the shadows and in the aftermath of the street-fighting.

Stalinist Violence

There is a great deal of debate in the historiography of twentieth-century communism as to the meaning and significance of Stalinism.⁶⁶ Despite the term’s origins in the Left Opposition, its usage is so widely and critically deployed in the historiography as to have exceeded such politicized beginnings, and there can be no doubt of its utility in analysing the discontinuities in post-1917 communism. In writing on the Spanish civil war, references to Stalinism and Stalinists are common, without a necessarily pejorative implication.⁶⁷ While Helen Graham has insisted that targeted violence against revolutionaries should be considered ‘communist’ rather than ‘Stalinist’ on the basis that this did not respond to a ‘Comintern game plan’, this cannot explain the way in which ‘Trotskyism’ was used to justify this violence, which coincided with the Great Purge underway in the USSR and the associated global effort to connect ‘Trotskyists’ with fascism.⁶⁸

Orwell described the distortion of meaning that accompanied this effort:

[Trotskyist] can mean one who, like Trotsky, wishes for world revolution; or a member of the actual organization of which Trotsky is head (the only legitimate use of the word); or [a] disguised Fascist [...] The three meanings can be telescoped one into the other at will.⁶⁹

In Spain the most infamous consequence of this phenomenon was the persecution of the POUM and, shortly after the May days, the grisly murder of its most prominent wartime leader,

⁶³ Manuel Aguilera, *Compañeros y Camaradas. Las luchas entre antifascistas en la Guerra Civil española* (Madrid 2012), 83.

⁶⁴ Bolloten, *The Spanish Civil War*, 432.

⁶⁵ Radosh, Habeck and Sevostianov, *Spain Betrayed*, 174. The key evidence referred to is a report by a Comintern agent that speculates on the need to provoke a crisis in the central government.

⁶⁶ For a useful introduction to the key issues, see Ronald Grigor Suny, *Red Flag Wounded: Stalinism and the Fate of the Soviet Experiment* (London 2020).

⁶⁷ For example, Angel Viñas refers to ‘Stalinist policies’ in ‘Playing with History and Hiding Treason: Colonel Casado’s Untrustworthy Memoirs and the End of the Spanish Civil War’, *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, Vol. 91, Nos 1–2 (2014), 295–323 (299), and the term is used with clearly explanatory rather than condemnatory intent in Josep Puigsech Farràs, ‘El PSUC, una nueva sección oficial de la Internacional Comunista’, *Ayer*, Vol. 72 (2008), 215–40.

⁶⁸ Graham, ‘Against the State’, 529–30.

⁶⁹ George Orwell, ‘Spilling the Spanish Beans’, *New English Weekly*, 29 July and 2 September 1937, available at: <https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/spilling-the-spanish-beans-2/> (accessed 13 April 2020).

Andreu Nin, by Soviet agents.⁷⁰ There were only a few dozen ‘legitimate’ Trotskyists in Spain during the civil war, but the POUM, as left opponents of Stalin, were constantly labelled as such by their enemies. In the historiography, somewhat less attention has been paid to the role that the manipulation of ‘Trotskyism’ played in the targeted murder of anarchists during and after the May days.

The PSUC’s defence commission described its purpose as ‘struggle against the anarcho-Trotskyists’.⁷¹ This fanciful amalgam had entered the Stalinist lexicon in the spring of 1937 as part of an ongoing attempt to isolate anarchist critics of Stalinism from their leadership in the CNT and the FAI. While ‘anarcho-Trotskyist’ in its broad polemical sense potentially referred to any anarchist whose commitment to the revolution threatened the CNT’s alliance with counterrevolutionary parties, its more specific meaning referred to a minority within the anarchist movement who were prepared to openly disavow the dishonesty with which the Stalinists conducted their campaign against the POUM. The most notable figure within this current was also one of the most vulnerable: Camillo Berneri.

A veteran anarchist in exile from fascist Italy, Berneri was highly respected among the anarchist rank-and-file. His long history of criticizing the USSR from a libertarian perspective had made him a target, and he wrote in a report to the CNT leadership in March that he was aware of a desire ‘in certain government circles’ to have him killed.⁷² When the May uprising took place, Berneri was in his flat on the Plaza Angel, in a narrow street dominated by a PSUC barricade.⁷³ A register of his building was carried out on 5 May, and a squad of PSUC members and police returned the following day to arrest him. He was shot along with his companion Francesco Barbieri shortly afterwards.⁷⁴ The official Communist Party history of the Spanish civil war described him as ‘chief theoretician of the “putschist” policy’ – the May events are described as an ‘anarcho-Trotskyist putsch’ in Stalinist literature – and Stalinists made little effort to conceal their satisfaction at his murder.⁷⁵ Just prior to his death he had completed an article entitled ‘In Defence of the POUM’.⁷⁶

The Catalan Libertarian Youth also found itself targeted. The Libertarian Youth had allied with the POUM’s youth wing in February to form the Revolutionary Youth Front, chiefly on the initiative of the anarchist Alfredo Martínez, who had spoken at a POUM rally in December.⁷⁷ This was a disastrous development for the Communist Party-led Juventudes Socialistas Unificadas (Unified Socialist Youth – JSU). Tasked with forming an anti-fascist alliance that would serve to isolate the POUM, it had succeeded only in leaving itself out in the cold, where a disaffected left-wing within its own ranks was targeted by anarchist propaganda.⁷⁸ In April, the Libertarian Youth

⁷⁰ Pelai Pagès i Blanch, ‘El asesinato de Andreu Nin, más datos para la polémica’, *Ebre*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (2010), 57–76.

⁷¹ Aguilera, *Compañeros y Camaradas*, 83.

⁷² Letter from Camillo Berneri, ‘Informes reservados 1937’, CNT (España) Archives 94 C, IISG.

⁷³ Guillamón, *Los Comités de Defensa*, 238–40.

⁷⁴ See Francisco Madrid Santos, *Camillo Berneri, un anarquista italiano (1897–1937)* (PhD thesis, Universidad de Barcelona, 1979), 501–13.

⁷⁵ Dolores Ibárruri, eds, *Guerra y Revolución en España 1936–1938, Vol. 3* (Moscow 1971), 20. See also the letter from Carlo de Maria to *la Repubblica*, 12 June 2007, available at <https://www.zerobeat.it/de-maria-risponde-novelli-sullomicidio-camilo-berneri/> (accessed 7 July 2020).

⁷⁶ Originally published in the New-York-based Italian anarchist publication *L’adunata dei refrattari*. Available in Spanish translation at <https://fundanin.net/2019/02/04/defensa-del-poum/> (accessed 7 July 2020).

⁷⁷ Martínez’s role in establishing the Revolutionary Youth Front was affirmed in *Solidaridad Obrera*, 15 May 1937.

⁷⁸ Evans, *Revolution and the State*, 85–9.

flysheet *Esfuerzo*, pasted on the walls of Barcelona, gave over an entire edition to the contributions of dissident members and sections of the JSU.⁷⁹ A report from a Soviet informant in Spain made exposing ‘the campaign and manoeuvres undertaken to split the Unified Socialist Youth’ a priority.⁸⁰ On 6 May, thinking the fighting had stopped, Alfredo Martínez left the Casa CNT-FAI, but never made it home.⁸¹ A fellow member of the Libertarian Youth Regional Committee, Pedro Trufó Rúa, was also arrested at a checkpoint and murdered around this time.

While the May days themselves were not the result of a Soviet-inspired conspiracy, it is accurate to describe the targeting and murder of the above individuals as Stalinist in both inspiration and execution. Whatever pre-civil war grudges and rivalries persisted into the spring of 1937, they could not explain the invention of ‘anarcho-Trotskyist’ as a category for elimination, which corresponded very precisely to the priorities established by the unleashing of the Great Purge. These priorities were set by Stalin himself, and while Comintern agents and affiliated parties may have pursued independent agendas in implementing them, they did so within the terms of these priorities.

Conclusion: A New Genealogy?

Academic usage of the term genealogy tends to subject to critique concepts that have been taken for granted in explaining historical phenomena such as ‘modernity’ and ‘nation’. As such, historical genealogies have eschewed teleological or ‘developmental’ models and emphasized contingency.⁸² Graham’s invocation of genealogy in the title of her article presents an inversion of this meaning as it is concerned with establishing precisely those long-term, structural roots of an historical event that overzealous ‘genealogists’ have been accused of neglecting.⁸³ This approach has several strengths but, in the case of ‘Against the State’, it not only leaves to one side the proximate causes of the May mobilization and demobilization discussed above, it also entails a developmental interpretive framework that requires interrogation.

For Graham, the May days ‘constituted the CNT’s own “crisis of modernity”’ by forcing the organization to come to terms with centralization.⁸⁴ Modernity, by which is meant an economically developed sovereign nation state, is taken to be an inevitable condition that would be imposed on Spain by Franco or by his opponents. To avoid the former fate, the latter had to quickly adapt to the requirements of modernity and wage a ‘modern war’.⁸⁵ Clearly, the CNT could only adapt to these requirements by negating itself as an anarchist organization, which is effectively what it did. But this was not, as Graham suggests, because its members were incapable of articulating an alternative. There was an alternative anarchist programme gaining in popularity and co-ordination throughout the first part of 1937. This was defeated, to a great extent because its champions, embarking upon an all-or-nothing showdown with its enemies, gambled on finding

⁷⁹ *Esfuerzo*. *Periódico mural de las Juventudes Libertarias de Cataluña*, third week of April 1937.

⁸⁰ Anonymous report by a Comintern agent in Radosh, Habeck and Sevostianov, *Spain Betrayed*, 194.

⁸¹ *Solidaridad Obrera*, 12 May 1937.

⁸² Michel Foucault, ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’ in Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York 1984), 76–100; Mark Bevir, ‘What is Genealogy?’, *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (2008), 263–75.

⁸³ For a useful discussion of the strengths and shortcomings of the post-structural and cultural turns in history, see Gary Wilder, ‘From Optic to Topic: The Foreclosure Effect of Historiographic Turns’, *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 117, No. 3 (2012), 723–45.

⁸⁴ Graham, “Against the State”, 523.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 531.

allies among those CNT higher-ups occupying a middle ground both in and against the state. The gamble failed.

With this failure died any possibility of exploring the ‘more flexible revolutionary policies’ referred to by Paul Preston in the epigraph to this article. In April 1937, in an open letter to the anarchist minister Federica Montseny, Camillo Berneri had advocated a declaration of autonomy and a campaign of agitation in Morocco, mobilization of the fleet, worker-led counterespionage in the rear, and democratization of the army.⁸⁶ On reading this letter for the first time forty years later, Germinal Gracia wrote to José Peirats that it retained ‘absolute validity today’ and that it ‘could be of great benefit to those of us who took to the barricades in May 1937’.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, such alternatives are given even shorter shrift today than they were in 1981, when Preston wrote his historiographical reflections. The overwhelming tendency in the literature is to accept the logic of the counterrevolution and to praise the Republican military strategy that proceeded from it.⁸⁸ Arguments to the contrary are peremptorily dismissed when mooted by non-specialists, while those of the military historian Antony Beevor are ignored.⁸⁹ The analysis of the May days presented in this article suggests that these arguments should be revisited, on the basis that there was both popular support for, and the organizational means to effect, a reintegration of the revolution and the war effort, and that the claimed necessity of side-lining the revolution to successfully prosecute the war was belied by the priorities of the revolution’s opponents.

In the end, the rival protagonists of the May fighting were not divided by attitudes to centralization but to working-class power. On one side of the barricades stood the socializing pretensions of the anarchists, on the other the programme of economic deregulation and ‘defence of social “normality”’ advocated by the PSUC and the Catalan nationalists.⁹⁰ Anarchist plans to socialize the production and distribution of food were in fact a plan for rationalization and sui generis centralization.⁹¹ By contrast, Comorera’s empowerment of shopkeepers, smallholders and hoarders represented a level of economic atomization that cannot be squared with the exigencies of the war. As Graham points out, the social base defended by the opponents of the revolution was not insignificant. It was, however, far less of a determinant to the outcome of the war than the industrial working class. In this sense, the Asturian anarchist Ramón Álvarez Palomo demonstrated a perceptive understanding of the ‘big picture’ when demanding the release of two dozen activists arrested for their opposition to similarly deregulatory economic policies in Gijón: ‘You want to return to the enemy, whether he is fascist or not [...] what you call his interests, but we do not want to give the working class the idea that they are fighting for the bourgeoisie’.⁹² The contemporary slogan of the PSUC, ‘Less experiments in collectivization, more produce’ may

⁸⁶ Camillo Berneri, ‘Open letter to comrade Federica Montseny’, available at <https://libcom.org/history/anarchists-government-spain-open-letter-comrade-federica-montseny> (accessed 15 July 2020).

⁸⁷ Germinal Gracia letter to José Peirats, Caracas 10 June 1977, B.A.S.E., Montady.

⁸⁸ Graham and Preston, whose 1981 essay is anomalous in this context, are the most prominent English-language advocates of this position.

⁸⁹ Antony Beevor, *The Battle for Spain: The Spanish Civil War 1936–1939* (London 2006), 349–50.

⁹⁰ Graham, “Against the State”, 499–500.

⁹¹ Socialization was not only a mechanism for the centralization of a given sphere of production and exchange but also for the rationalization of the CNT’s own structures. The campaign for socialization went hand in hand with plans to institute organizational federations of industry whose tardy implementation Graham identifies as a key deficiency in the CNT’s internal structure: *ibid.*, 492. On this point see Anno Monjo Omedes, *Militantes. Democracia y participación en la CNT en los años treinta* (Barcelona 2019), 435–48.

⁹² Ramón Álvarez Palomo file, Col·lecció Ronald Fraser, AHCB, Fons orals, 41.

appeal to present-day ‘common sense’, but the projection of this modern sensibility back onto revolutionary Spain serves to obscure both the limitations of such politics and the logic and popularity of the revolutionary position.⁹³

The May days remain a stumbling block to reading the Spanish civil war in the terms of early twenty-first century common sense because they demonstrate the continued appeal of the anarchist programme several months into the project of Republican state reconstruction. Its defeat was not inevitable, or at least not for the reasons normally offered. As demonstrated above, Graham’s assertion that ‘the Barcelona radicals had no organizational means of co-ordinating the fight-back from the CNT’s grass-roots committees’ can no longer be sustained.⁹⁴ The grassroots were successfully mobilized and co-ordinated by a mandated committee with the influential veteran activist Julián Merino at its helm. Nor did the radicals timidly accept the wisdom of their leadership transmitted over the airwaves, but instead remained at their posts, impatiently awaiting the signal to begin a co-ordinated offensive. The fact that this offensive was called off was highly contingent, owing to the sharing of a single premises by mid-level and leading anarchist activists, the spotting of Merino by García Oliver, and decisions being made under pressure by reduced numbers of delegates in a besieged building. In a curious comment made at a rally in Barcelona the following month, Comorera hinted at an appreciation of this contingency, stating that ‘if certain of the provocateurs had not lost their courage at the crucial moment, undoubtedly the movement would have had sweeping results’.⁹⁵

Perceiving what was ‘crucial’ about that moment requires an historical understanding of what was once a widely-held belief: that revolutionaries might shape an alternative destiny to that proscribed for them by developmentalist history, and that an understanding of agency should not be confined to the modern spheres of governmental offices and regimental headquarters. In the last analysis, understanding the Spanish revolution requires us to take seriously the fact that thousands of working-class people were once capable of elaborating a strategy and enacting a mobilization that held out the possibility of fighting for something other than ‘normalized’ modernity.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Elizabeth Stainforth, James Yeoman, Nathaniel Andrews, Joshua Newmark, Jessica Thorne and the two anonymous reviewers for reading and commenting on the first draft of this article.

⁹³ The slogan was raised at the Congress of Catalan Land Workers and denounced in *Solidaridad Obrera*, 26 January 1937. On Stalinist policy as ‘common sense’ see Preston, ‘Lights and Shadows’, 10–11.

⁹⁴ Graham, “Against the State”, 524.

⁹⁵ Joan Comorera, ‘Position in Catalonia’ in *Spain Organises for Victory. The Policy of the Communist Party of Spain Explained by Jesús Hernández and Joan Comorera with a foreword by J. R. Campbell* (London [1937?]), 60.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Danny Evans
In and Against the State
The Making and Unmaking of the Barcelona May Days (1937)
2022

European History Quarterly Volume 52, Issue 3, pp. 485–505, DOI: 10.1177/02656914221103464.
Open Access CC BY-NC 4.0

usa.anarchistlibraries.net