‘Ultra-left’ anarchists and anti-fascism in the Second Republic

Danny Evans

2016

Contents

ABSTRACT 3
INTRODUCTION 3
'SOCIAL FASCISM' IN GERMANY AND SPAIN 4
FASCISM OR REVOLUTION: RHETORIC AND PRACTICE IN GERMANY AND SPAIN 7
THE LESSON FROM GERMANY: REVOLUTIONARY PESSIMISM AGAINST 'MARXIST FATALISM' 9
FROM DECEMBER 1933 TO JULY 1936 12
CONCLUSION 14
REFERENCES 14

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the anarchist understanding of fascism during the Second Republic, and particularly during the abstention campaign of 1933, when the practice of radicals in the National Confederation of Labour (CNT) has been described as 'ultra-left' in view of its sectarianism and insistence on the need for an insurrectionary response to the threat of the right. The article explores the comparison made to the German Communist Party (KPD) during the so-called 'Third Period', and the lessons that anarchists in Spain attempted to draw from the rise of Hitler.

INTRODUCTION

The Spanish general election of November 1933 resulted in the formation of a centre-right government presided over by Alejandro Lerroux with the support of the Spanish Confederation of Autonomous Right Wing Groups (CEDA). Thus began the so-called 'bienio negro' of the Second Republic, characterized by the reversal of the reforms of the previous two years and the repression of left-wing and labour organizations. The elections had been preceded by a campaign orchestrated by the anarcho-syndicalist union, the National Confederation of Labour (CNT) which called on Spanish workers to abstain from voting. Following the elections, that same organization initiated a short-lived and disastrous uprising, which left over a hundred dead. This marked the beginning of a period of repression in which thousands of CNT activists were jailed and the day to day functioning of the organization was jeopardized.

Understandably, the historiography has not been kind to the CNT in this period. Its actions have been considered a consequence of 'impatience and revolutionary mysticism' (Gómez Casas 1973: 172), its propaganda dismissed as 'the radical discourse of a minority' of anarchists within the organization (Casanova 2005: 46). Thus the abstention campaign and the rising of late 1933 have generally been considered to be consequent upon the internal dynamics of the CNT, and the culmination of the process of radicalization within the organization during the first bienio of the Second Republic (1931–1933). This radicalization had already produced two uprisings, in January 1932 and January 1933, and the December revolt has been considered the closing act of a 'cycle of insurrections'. In contrast to the Asturian insurrection of October 1934, the anarchist revolt of late 1933 is not normally considered a response to the increasing perception of an international and domestic fascist threat. On the contrary, the CNT's insistence on pursuing a lonely insurrectionist tactic has been taken as evidence of ultra-left indifference among radicals as to the specific danger posed by fascism. According to Chris Ealham, anarchist radicals in this period 'downplayed the danger of the far Right', and acted in a sectarian manner that undermined attempts at anti-fascist unity:

> Playing an ultra-leftist, divisive role that had much in common with the German Communist Party (KPD) prior to Hitler's electoral triumph, the radical anarchists argued that there was no difference between the various electoral options, even suggesting that fascism was already in power […] like the KPD, the CNT and the FAI [the Iberian Anarchist Federation, a federation of anarchist affinity groups] blocked united anti-fascist action, directing their fury against what they regarded as the 'fascism' of their enemies, be they treintista [moderate syndicalist], socialist, republican

> or bloquista [dissident communist], all of whom were regarded as variants of authoritarianism. (2010: 134)

Using this suggestive comparison as a starting point, in this article I examine the roots of the commonalities between the approaches of the KPD and the CNT, specifically their sectarianism and revolutionary maximalism, while also fleshing out the differences that marked the anarchist approach to fascism in theory and in practice.

The 'anti-fascist epic' (Southworth 1996: 310) was finally won in 1945 by an alliance of imperial, Communist and democratic forces. This alliance contrasted with the 'divisions and ineffectiveness' of those who had opposed Hitler in Germany, identified as a contributing factor in his accession to power (Bullock 1973: 253). As such, the 'object lesson' of the rise of Nazism has been taken to be the need for unity among anti-fascists (Salter 1987: 21). History has not been forgiving, therefore, of the 'ultra-left' refusal of such alliances. However, the need for unity was not the only possible lesson to draw from Hitler's coming to power. For the anarchists in Spain, more attuned to developments in Europe than is sometimes suggested, the rise of Nazism confirmed their critique of the electoral tactic and the corruption inherent in a democratic system that had acquiesced in the establishment of tyranny through 'a shoddy political deal' (Bullock 1973: 253). By returning to the anarchist interpretationof fascism in the pre-civil war period, therefore, I not only intend to bring fresh light to bear on our understanding of anarchist activity in 1933, but also to suggest that this interpretation has some merit. In paying attention to the Spanish anarchists in this period, we might recover a lesson from history that has been glossed over, and which has continued relevance for how we think about democracy, fascism and the state today.

'SOCIAL FASCISM' IN GERMANY AND SPAIN

The phrase 'social fascist', used by Communists to describe their social democrat rivals, has been taken as a measure of the absurd sectarianism and misunderstanding of fascism that characterized the parties of the Communist International during the so-called 'Third Period' (1928–1934). The fifteenth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), which resolved that the 'most important task' of the Communist International was to 'intensify the struggle against international reformism' (Degras 1971b: 416–17), took place in December 1927, a little over two years after the previous 'left' policy had been abandoned in the face of international capitalism's apparent 'stabilization' (Leviné-Meyer 1977: 8). That the shift in policy was a result of political intrigue and manoeuvre was barely hidden even in the official pronouncements of the Communist International, which claimed that the Trotsky-Zinoviev opposition to Stalin had merged with 'the left wing of fascism and of international social democracy':

> [...] the undeniable beginning of a swing to the left, a revolutionizing of the West European working class, with its corollary of a more intense struggle between social democracy and communism, all this is bound to deal the opposition a decisive blow. (Degras 1971b: 420)

By the end of the 1920s, the theory of 'social fascism' was one aspect of the attempt by the increasingly Stalinized CPSU and Communist International to group all potential threats to Stalin's

influence into a single, global conspiracy against the Communist Party and the Soviet Union (Haro 2011: 580).

It must be acknowledged, however, that the notion of 'social fascism' in Germany had a resonance that obscured the cynical way in which it was presented to party activists. For many in the KPD, the connections between fascism and social democracy were not merely rhetorical. The German Social Democratic Party (SPD) was considered jointly culpable, with the proto-fascist Freikorps, for the murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, the founders of the KPD, in 1919 (Nettl 1969: 492). In 1923, the KPD held the SPD responsible for what it described as 'fascism's victory over democracy' in Germany, when a coalition government including Social Democrats declared a state of emergency during which the 'workers' government' of Saxony (an SPD-KPD coalition) was dismissed by the army (German Communist Party [1923] 1983: 151). So by the time 'social fascism' became official dogma at the end of the 1920s, it was considered by the oppositional critic August Thalheimer to be nothing more than a 'rekindling' of 'old ultra-left embers' which offered nothing new by way of analysis (1983: 195). Thalheimer would be proven correct in his prediction that the slogan would have a paralysing impact on left-wing German workers. Nevertheless, his theoretical dismissal of a counter-revolutionary continuum that might link the 'democratic' state of emergency to fascism, and his assertion that 'fascism only begins at the point when and where the bayonet becomes independent [of bourgeois democracy] and turns its point against bourgeois parliamentarians as well' was less prescient. Thalheimer rejected the possibility of a 'gradual "transition", whereby parliament transforms itself into its opposite' but this is in fact what occurred in Weimar Germany in 1933, when Nazi violence was accompanied by the formal establishment of a dictatorship by constitutional and parliamentary means. In contrast, anarchists in Spain recognized the potential transformation of democracy into dictatorship. Indeed, an article in the organ of the FAI made clear the role that the 'state of emergency' could play in facilitating the rise of fascism (Bonet 1933: 4) weeks before the Reichstag fire would confirm this possibility.

Superficially similar to that of the KPD, the anarchists' interpretation of fascism likewise facilitated sectarian, 'ultra-left' rhetoric. Defined broadly, fascism seems to have been understood to be synonymous with the employment of state power to destroy working class organizations. As intimated in the citation from Ealham above, Spanish anarchists believed that this destructive power could be wielded even by nominally leftist and democratic actors. This viewpoint had been in evidence as early as 1923, when the newspaper of the CNT in Catalonia, *Solidaridad Obrera*, identified Mussolini as only the latest in a line of counter-revolutionary agents of the state, stretching back to the Marquis de Gallifet, butcher of the Paris Commune, and which included the German social democrat Gustav Noske (Anon. 1923: 4). Thus, the fact that fascism represented a decisive danger was, or seemed to be, insufficient to distinguish it from the counter-revolutionary constellation of forces that always confronted revolutionary movements. Among Spanish anarchists, fascism became a byword for the extremity of the threat facing working class organization in Spain, a threat that could be identified in Stalinist Communism, social democracy, monopoly capitalism and corporatism as well as fascism proper.

Like the KPD in Germany, anarchists during the Second Republic could point to the track record of social democracy in Spain, which was similarly intertwined with the recent history of state repression, to bolster their thesis. This had been most starkly manifested in the collaboration of the General Union of Workers (UGT), a national trade union affiliated to the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), with the dictatorial regime of General Primo de Rivera (1923–1930).

Largo Caballero, General Secretary of the UGT, joined the dictator's State Council and the union participated in elections to the 'Parity Committees', joint bodies of workers, bosses and state delegates intended to regulate industrial relations, said to have been inspired by the Mussolini regime (Korsch 1977: 215).[1] In the first bienio of the Second Republic the UGT was again represented in government. The appearance of 'social fascist' in the pages of Solidaridad Obrera responded to an intensification of rhetoric during the 'hot summer' of 1931, when the strike wave that shook the young Republic was, in the eyes of the CNT, consistently undermined by the activity of the UGT. While the CNT's use of 'social fascist' to describe its rivals does not seem to have been employed in its press until 1 July 1931, the term merely replaced 'social traitor' and other such epithets intended to convey the same meaning. Ealham's suggestion, that the radical anarchist claim in 1933 that 'fascism was already in power' was exemplary of the rhetorical excesses of that period, must be balanced by the fact that the claim had been made by 'moderate anarchists' over two years previously (Anon. 1931: 1). The association of social democracy with fascism was not unique to the radical wing of Spanish anarchism, and was a feature of *Solidaridad Obrera* when the editorial board was still overseen by the famously moderate Joan Peiró. While it is probable that the term 'social fascist' was lifted from the Spanish Communist Party (PCE), this does not indicate any broader inspiration from that party, which the CNT viewed with no less scorn than the social democrats of the PSOE. In fact, at a celebrated public debate, the PCE was even accused by an anarchist activist of being the 'legitimate child of social fascism' (Orobón Fernández [1932] 2002: 231).

Events during the first bienio of the Second Republic only served to intensify anarchist disdain for social democracy. As in Weimar, a raft of legislation appeared with the express support of the Socialists, which was intended to criminalize elements of the revolutionary left's base, and grant the Republican government extraordinary powers to defend itself from insurrectionary threats (Ealham 2010: 77–80; on Germany see Rosenhaft 1983: 37–38). In addition to providing blacklegs to undermine CNT strikes, the UGT used its governmental role to win leverage over its libertarian rivals through the jurados mixtos, the arbitration committees brought in to replace Primo De Rivera's Parity Committees, but which were considered to be the same beast by the CNT (Prieto n.d. [a]: 54). Such tensions contributed to an already volatile situation, in which the desperation of workers whose welfare had not improved under the Republic overlapped with the strategic perspectives of anarchist 'men of action' keen to test the strength of the regime. Together these factors gave rise to an attempted insurrection in 1932, and another in January 1933. Both were put down easily by the authorities and resulted in the loss of activists through death, exile or imprisonment.

However, following the withdrawal of the Spanish Socialists from government in October 1933, an important difference between the political context of Weimar Germany and the Second Republic would become clear, most notably the relative limit to the embourgeoisement of the UGT in comparison to its German equivalent. Travelling through Germany in the summer of 1932, the libertarian Marxist Daniel Guérin described the Socialist trade union headquarters in Dresden as a 'showy palace' with the 'silent and coddled atmosphere of an expensive club' (1994: 56–57). The comfortable and assured position of social democratic trade unionism in Germany

[1] On the differences in the ideological inspiration behind the corporatism of the Mussolini and Primo de Rivera regimes, see (González Calleja 2005: 155–56). For our purposes, it is sufficient to recognize that anarcho-syndicalists in Spain considered the committees to be fascist in inspiration.

was a measure of the mature and developed democracy of Weimar that Stanley G. Payne has recently compared favourably to the 'less robust' democracy of the Second Republic (2013: 10), and yet it was precisely this privileged position that made it more, not less, vulnerable to fascist attack. The 'almost obsessive constitutionalism' of the German Socialists prevented them from organizing resistance to the ascension of the Nazi party (Salter 1987: 26), indeed their trade union buildings in Germany were surrendered to the Nazis in 1933 without a shot being fired. By contrast, out of government, many Spanish socialists in the PSOE and UGT became less enamoured of gradualist legalism and were sent on a leftward trajectory. This made an effective, if limited, rapprochement possible between the CNT and the UGT, as demonstrated most vividly by the Asturian revolutionary alliance and uprising of 1934, but also by joint strike action in certain cities in the years 1934–36. By 1936, in spite of the absence of any official agreement from their leaderships, in many cities and towns the members of the rival factions of the organized working class in Spain were able to effect a 'bottom up' alliance in order to confront fascism on the street.

FASCISM OR REVOLUTION: RHETORIC AND PRACTICE IN GERMANY AND SPAIN

During the early 1930s both the KPD in Germany and the CNT in Spain stressed that the choice facing the respective countries was one of social revolution or fascism. In fact, the 'ultra-leftism' of the Communist International's 'Third Period' led the group around former party leader Heinrich Brandler to denounce the 'anarchism' of the KPD (Gordon 1993: 15). Although this label was applied pejoratively, it is nevertheless no coincidence that elements of the more heterodox left were attracted to the KPD at this time, including former members of the anti-parliamentarian Left-Communist party, the German Communist Workers' Party (KAPD).[2] Nor was it particularly unusual, in the wake of the Wall Street crash and mass unemployment, to consider that capitalism was in a state of irreparable decomposition. In 1931, Walter Benjamin wrote to a friend that he considered a 'Bolshevik revolution in Germany' to be imminent, and Benjamin's apparent sympathy for the KPD during this period is likely due to the maximalism of its rhetoric (Löwy 1992: 106).

In Spain, maximalist rhetoric has been associated above all with the members of the Nosotros group (formerly known as Los Solidarios), which contained several of the country's most famous anarchists including Buenaventura Durruti, Francisco Ascaso and Juan García Oliver. The latter had elaborated the idea of 'revolutionary gymnastics' at the outset of the Republic. According to this theory, groups of revolutionaries should be mobilized for insurrectionary activity, the repression of which would lead to an escalating spiral of revolutionary action in which the masses would lose their fear of the state (García Oliver 1978: 115). This theory was put to the test when the Nosotros group assumed effective control of the CNT's defence committees in Catalonia. The rising headed by this group on 8 January 1933, when the Socialists were still a part of the governing coalition of the Republic, was a disaster. Nevertheless, the repression visited upon the anarchists in the aftermath, particularly the notorious massacre that took place in the Andalusian village of Casas Viejas, fuelled radical resentment against the Republican authorities and made a further showdown more likely.

[2] I am grateful to the Libcom forum member 'Entdinglichung' for this information.

While many anarchists condemned the uprising of January 1933, the belief in the imminence of a revolutionary crisis in Spain was not confined to a minority of radicals. Valeriano Orobón Fernández, who had written in 1932 of his isolation from both the moderate and radical wings of the CNT, declared in May of the following year that 'the great battle with the reaction is inevitable and close at hand. If we are able to defeat it, our triumph will open the way to the revolution' (Buenacasa 1933: 26 and 146). Likewise, the General Secretary of the International Working Men's Association (IWMA), to which the CNT belonged, Alexander Schapiro – a veteran Russian anarcho-syndicalist who produced a highly critical report on the functioning of the CNT and the FAI around the time of the January insurrection – wrote shortly afterward that 'we have entered into, not only the revolutionary period, but its decisive phase' (Schapiro 1933: 6).3 Another seasoned militant, Manuel Buenacasa, who had incurred the wrath of the radical wing for appearing to doubt the possibility of achieving the anarchist ideal in one isolated country, stated in 1933 that 'Spain sits atop a revolutionary volcano […] Even capitalism itself awaits its eruption as something fatal and inevitable' (1933: 137).

In both Germany and Spain, belief in the likelihood of revolution was fostered by, and served to foster in its turn, the political cultures of revolutionary workers. In both countries, an aggressive approach to street politics had been facilitated by cadres of the jobless or precariously employed, willing to bear the brunt of physical battles. The CNT and the KPD could also count on geographical strongholds in which community solidarity and hatred of the police made it possible for revolutionaries to become masters of self-contained worlds in which their organization and outlook were dominant, inuring their activists from the sometimes bleak panorama facing the organizations. In the streets and cafes of neighbourhoods such as Clot in Barcelona or Wedding in Berlin, and in the rural camps and retreats for young members of the KPD or CNT, workers read, or had read to them, the press of their organizations, which insisted on the imminence of a revolutionary reckoning with capitalism. It has been observed that, in Spain in the early 1930s, it became almost treasonous in anarchist circles to publicly doubt the immediate practicability of libertarian communism (Peirats 1964: 87–88).

While the insurrections of 1932 and 1933 in Spain were minor skirmishes compared to the upheaval that followed the outbreak of the Civil War in 1936, all were the result of the belief in the imminence of revolution within anarchist political culture. Diego Camacho, who lived in Clot, was barely in his teens in 1933, but would later recall:

> Who at that time, amongst the young and even the very young, kids like myself – immersed in that subterranean world created by the struggle carried out by the CNT and the FAI against governmental barbarism – did not feel attracted by the figure of García Oliver and want to imitate him? […] For us, those who lived through those years, the clarity of the struggle resided in everyday events: demonstrations, jails, rallies, union assemblies and shoot-outs in the street. We burned, even as children, with revolutionary passion. What a school is the school of life! (Paz 1994: 101)

For such workers, the CNT seemed to be the only organization capable of bringing the rapid change of society that they required. The hardship and tragedy that beset proletarian life was given meaning by the possibility of such a utopian rupture, brought about in an instant through the concerted will of the working people. However, as Buenacasa put it in 1933,

> affirmations [as to the immediate practicability of libertarian communism] were able to maintain the enthusiasm of the multitudes for a time, but as enthusiasm is not an eternal virtue of the masses, it has given way, finally, to an enervation that could be fatal. (1933: 56)

As such, the uprising of December 1933 in Spain would be informed by a pessimism that differentiated it from those that preceded it. The distinct character of the December revolt is also stressed in (Villa García 2011: 202) and is discussed in further detail below.

While the KPD had also pursued an 'ultra-left' policy that urged 'revolutionary violence' as the single method 'capable of ending the danger of fascism' (Rosenhaft 1983: 66), it did not attempt an insurrection in response to the rise of Hitler. The Comintern even prevented the Party from holding a counter-demonstration when Nazi storm troopers marched through Berlin in January 1933 (Rosenhaft 1983: 81). Hippolyte Etchebehere, a dissident communist from Argentina who bore witness to the collapse of the KPD in Germany recalled that:

> Day after day we were forced to accompany to the cemetery workers struck down by the Fascists, with no perspective for struggle before us, without ever experiencing a fight that would have allowed us to spit back so much accumulated rage, hatred and bitterness. At the side of the Sparticists who kept their weapons like holy relics we burned within, devoured by impatience, watching all our positions fall one by one, without a struggle; feeling the contempt of an enemy emboldened by the lack of resistance everywhere. (1993: 72)

THE LESSON FROM GERMANY: REVOLUTIONARY PESSIMISM AGAINST 'MARXIST FATALISM'

The anarchist press in Spain was not slow to associate the rise of Hitler with the shortcomings of the German left. Socialists and communists alike had 'not known how to anticipate or to prevent this evil' (Anon. 1933a: 1). Hitler in power represented 'one more failure of the "scientific" Marxists' (Anon. 1933b: 1). Their chief failing was identified, not in their disunity, but in their faith in democracy. The German democracy that had 'saved the tottering capitalist society when Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht fought Ebert and Noske' would now be cast aside by capital if it failed to submit to the 'Hitlerian machine-gun'. 'Mussolini, Stalin, Horthy and Hitler' had all demonstrated that '"democracy" only serves to dupe the gullible' (Pellicer 1933: 2). The rise of fascism in Germany was considered a further symptom of a 'dying world' in which 'all liberties are suppressed'. A bleak panorama was consistently depicted that left no room for a gradualist faith in progress, as the 'rights established by the revolutions of the 18th Century are not even paid lip-service to': 'Republic and monarchy are merely phases of the same brutal organization. Wherever we cast our eyes, the same system of violence and barbarism is found' (Anon. 1933c: 1).

This perspective was clearly far removed from that of the KPD, for whom the accession to power of Hitler was considered a hiccup on the route to its own eventual triumph (Degras 1971a: 120–21). It was closer to that of the German council communist Karl Korsch, a former member of the KPD who had been excoriated by luminaries of the Communist International following his

break from party orthodoxy in the early 1920s. He had subsequently taken an interest in the CNT and attended the organization's Madrid Congress in 1931. In response to Stalinism and fascism, Korsch developed a theory of a wide-ranging, transnational and potentially victorious counter-revolution that differed starkly from the relentless optimism of his former party. His belief in the early 1930s that fascism represented 'a moment of the counterrevolution' (Kellner 1977: 232) mirrored the response to the rise of fascism to be found in the Spanish anarchist press. Korsch's understanding of fascism would find a partial echo in the work of Walter Benjamin, and its affinities with the Spanish anarchist perspective provide a further point of entry for understanding the differences between the approach to fascism of the CNT and the Communist International.

The lesson that voting would be insufficient to prevent the triumph of fascism was communicated to the Spanish working class during the massive, nationwide abstention campaign that preceded the general election of November 1933. The campaign was conducted alongside propaganda that overstated the CNT's combat strength, in an atmosphere in which reasonable doubts as to the readiness of the masses to join in the insurrectionary essay were shouted down. Nevertheless, there is little to indicate complacency as to the threat of the right. Nor was it only radical anarchists who participated (Casanova 2005: 73–74). Addressing 100,000 workers at a CNT rally in Barcelona during the campaign was Benito Pabón, a noted moderate, and Valeriano Orobón Fernández, the individual who would become more associated than anyone else within the CNT with the attempt to prepare the ground for a united, socialist and revolutionary response to fascism. Having spent a couple of years in Germany as a delegate to the IWMA, he was more aware than most of the specific danger that fascism posed, yet he was contemptuous of the electoral tactics followed by the left:

> Look at the example of Germany […] In spite of the fact that [Marxists] saw the clear representative of international reaction in power, they didn't abandon the suicidal tactic of rendering accounts to fascism in the elections. Freedom was being killed, martyred, outraged; it wasn't time to vote but to take up the rifle […] But the herd was used to voting and staying at home […] Hamlet's dilemma was presented them: to be or not to be; no option remained open to them but the street, the popular insurrection; but the Marxists voted, and signed their own death sentence. (Anon. 1933d: 4)

While this was divisive language, insofar as it formed part of a polemic against the tactics of the CNT's rivals, it cannot be described as complacent. In contrast to the incoherent policy of the KPD, which combined violent rhetoric with an ongoing commitment to the ballot box, the CNT called upon its constituents to recognize in the counter-revolution an existential threat.

The Spanish anarchists were thus better placed to understand the threat of the political right in the early 1930s and their potential role in resisting it than the KPD had been in Germany. The CNT did not regard fascism as a blip on the road to socialism, but the consequence of socialism's defeat. Francisco Ascaso, who would die in the street-fighting in Barcelona in July 1936, expressed as much at another abstentionist rally:

> It is necessary […] to accept the responsibility of the revolutionary moment. We are a hope for the world proletariat that looks to us anxiously. We are the last redoubt of liberty. Everyone writes to us in the same tone: You can't let them destroy you […]

> this is our mission, and we have to abide by it at any price, even at the cost of our lives […] Life is not so beautiful. If we must fall, we will fall. (Anon. 1933e: 1)

This was not the bullish, offensive tactic of revolutionary gymnastics but a species of 'revolutionary pessimism'. As Murray Bookchin put it, 'failure was being built into the insurrection well in advance of its occurrence' (1998: 238). Revolutionary pessimism has been identified as a phenomenon within the European left from the mid to late 1920s (Lindemann 1984: 257), and also applied to Spanish anarchists (Meaker 1974: 311). However, in these instances its use has conveyed merely scepticism about the possibility of revolution. A different understanding of revolutionary pessimism, as identified in the work of Korsch (Kellner 1977: 234) and Benjamin (Löwy 2006: 9 and 50) resonates more clearly with the CNT's abstention campaign of 1933: 'a revolutionary pessimism that has nothing to do with fatalistic resignation' and which is 'equally as opposed to the melancholy fatalism of "indolence of the heart" as it is to the optimistic fatalism of the official – Social Democratic or Communist – Left' (Löwy 2006: 50). In more critical but no less relevant terms, Michel Crozier has suggested that revolutionary pessimism on the left led to the conclusion that 'a desperate gamble is the only hope' (2010: 176).

For the KPD there would be no such 'desperate gamble', and in May 1933 its central committee stated in a resolution that 'it was impossible for the KPD to take up a hopeless struggle against the fascist dictatorship, condemned in advance to defeat' (Degras 1971a: 255). In the build-up to the insurrection of December, the militants and press of the CNT attempted to impress upon the working class of Spain the importance of avoiding such a 'shameful', passively received humiliation (Anon. 1933d: 1), evoking a sense of 'duty' and acknowledging an 'obligation' to fulfil their promise to meet fascism with insurrection (Bonet 1933b: 2). Durruti suggested that a defeat would be preferable to paralysis and that an 'insurrectionary movement would serve as a warning to the incoming government that in Spain there was a working-class organization that would not kneel before a dictator' (Paz 1996: 364).

In contrast to the insurrections of 1932 and January 1933, that of December 1933 was preceded by an attempt to justify and to prepare the ground for a rising on the part of the CNT. While the insurrection of 1932 was an outgrowth of a localized struggle in the Catalan mining district of Alt Llobregat, and that of January 1933 a conscious attempt to use the defence committees as shock troops that would catalyse a wider revolutionary conflict, they were both manifestations of dissatisfaction with the Second Republic in its first, 'progressive' phase. They had both sought to take advantage of and push forward the revolutionary situation that had apparently emerged in Spain with the advent of the new regime. By the end of 1933, however, revolutionary violence had come to be conceived, not as a means of superseding the Republic, but as the only way of averting a fascist takeover of bourgeois democracy. In fact, this repurposing of revolutionary violence in an anti-fascist sense represented such a deviation from 'revolutionary gymnastics' as conceived by García Oliver that he refused to have anything to do with the December revolt (García Oliver 1978: 135). Notwithstanding the preparation undertaken, at least one regional section of the CNT warned in advance that the insurrection had no hope of success (Prieto n.d. [b]: 103). The rising began with a jailbreak in Barcelona and the adjacent town of Hospitalet, an anarchist stronghold, came under the control of the revolutionaries for four days. Libertarian communism was declared in several Aragonese villages, and workers' suburbs in Zaragoza were likewise held by the insurrectionaries for days, while there was heavy fighting in La Rioja (Peirats 2011: 57). The rising nevertheless posed little problem for the authorities, who crushed it within a week.

FROM DECEMBER 1933 TO JULY 1936

An attempt to explain how the CNT went from ignominious defeat in December 1933 to its achievements in July 1936 is beyond the scope of this article. In what follows, I will instead focus on whether the CNT's understanding of fascism and the means best employed to fight it underwent any substantial modification in this period that might contribute to such an explanation.

Although for many CNT activists the lesson from Germany was related to the inefficacy of electoral politics rather than the need for anti-fascist alliances, in the wider libertarian milieu calls for unity of action in opposition to fascism had been heard even before the uprising of December 1933. The syndicalist Marín Civera had founded the ideologically pluralist review *Orto* in 1932, which discussed fascism from a variety of perspectives: as a new and specific threat and as an authoritarian strain of capitalism that could be identified in, for example, Roosevelt's New Deal and US state racism as well as in the policies of the continental far right. The review called for a united front against fascism in September of 1933 (*Orto* [1933] 2002: 1017–19). Such calls for unity were becoming increasingly common in the ranks of the labour movement at this time, and led to heated discussions at national assemblies of the CNT, with disagreement owing to considerations of an ideological and geographically specific character (Gutiérrez Molina 1994: 31–41). In Catalonia, the Workers' Alliance was founded on the initiative of the dissident communist Workers' and Peasants' Bloc (BOC), although its efforts towards an anti-fascist and revolutionary united front were undermined from the first by the organization styling itself as an alternative to the CNT (Durgan 1996: 241).[3] The federal functioning of the CNT meant that its Asturian section was able to sign an accord of revolutionary unity with the UGT in the region in 1934, against the policy of the majority of the national organization, thereby laying the basis for the revolt of October. Even this evident break from contemporary anarchist orthodoxy should not be overstated, however, as it was made possible by the willingness of the Asturian Socialists to meet the CNT on the terrain of social revolution, thereby recognizing the necessity of an insurrectionary rather than electoral response to fascism.

Preceding the Asturian alliance, the most famous libertarian appeal to working class unity was that contained in two articles by Orobón Fernández published in January 1934. In his memoirs, Horacio M. Prieto makes the unconvincing claim that this made him 'the principle agent in the realization of that Alliance, and morally co-responsible for the incitation of the tragic, unexpected events in Asturias'. According to Prieto, these articles were 'very far from what had been his habitual anarchist principles until that point; they were a variety of vacillating Marxism' (Prieto n.d [b]: 50). In fact, while there were certainly novel aspects to Orobón's approach, there were more examples of continuity than rupture. As with all of the heterodox libertarian approaches to the problem of fascism and working class unity, Orobón did not demur from depicting the choice facing Spain as being one of fascism or social revolution. He did not advocate an electoral alliance or a defence of the Republic, but a shared commitment from proletarian organizations to a 'revolutionary working class democracy' inspired by the Bavarian Soviet Republic (Orobón Fernández [1934] 2002a: 274). While no-one could accuse him of 'down-playing the fascist threat', and while his deviations from anarchist orthodoxy were far from universally welcomed within

[3] The BOC, which would later merge with the Spanish Communist Left organization to form the Workers' Party of Marxist Unification (POUM), hoped that the 'left-wing' Catalan nationalists would join the united front, even conceiving of the paramilitary escamots of Estat Català, a virulently anti- anarchist organization considered by the CNT to be quasi-fascist, as potential allies (Durgan 1996: 295)

the CNT, his appeal to unity was predicated on UGT workers abandoning its 'possibilist wing' and 'evicting the mandarins from the executive' (Orobón Fernández [1934] 2002b: 273). In this, and in his qualified defence of the insurrection of December, which he described as 'one of the most formidable mass movements in the social history of Spain' (Orobón Fernández [1934] 2002b: 271), he was not far removed from even the radical current of Spanish anarchist opinion. In that sense, his appeal presaged the proposal for unified revolutionary action that the CNT would finally approve at a national, organizational level, at the Zaragoza Congress in 1936, which also made the abandonment of parliamentary tactics a condition of unity with the UGT (CNT 1978: 225). In both instances the UGT executive, and its General Secretary Largo Caballero, a former collaborator in the Primo de Rivera regime now feted as 'the Spanish Lenin', were unresponsive or evasive (Prieto n.d [a]: 54). If a revolutionary alliance was to be effected, it would have to be formed spontaneously, 'on the street'. Thus, the typically flippant response of radical anarchists to proposals of unity in this period – 'we'll see you on the street' (Gutiérrez Molina 1994: 36) – became a prophecy made flesh in the events of July 1936 when the members of the workers' organizations played a crucial role in thwarting the Spanish generals' coup d'état. Whereas the pretended goal of the Communist International during the 'Third Period' – a 'united front from below' – existed as little more than a slogan intended to facilitate Communist domination of anti-fascist initiatives, on the streets of many Spanish towns and cities a genunine 'united front from below' was temporarily successful in spite of the prevalence and endurance of organizational patriotism and sectarianism.

Although there is evidence of an increasing concern for practical, strategic questions among certain circles of CNT activists after 1933, the organization had not abandoned its commitment to social revolution, or undertaken any deeper revision of perspectives or ideology. The tactical shift of the defence committees away from revolutionary gymnastics was made on the basis of preparation and discipline, rather than a rejection of revolutionary violence itself (see the discussion in Guillamón 2014: 14–16). Likewise, when the National Committee of the CNT signalled, five months before the event, the imminent danger of a fascist mutiny centred on Morocco, it did so in order to urge that every attempt be made to 'ensure that the defensive contribution of the masses [against fascism] may lead to the real social revolution and libertarian communism […] pursued to its utmost consequences without tolerating attempts by the liberal bourgeoisie and its Marxist allies to hold back the course of events' (Peirats 2011: 90). On the eve of the revolt, *Solidaridad Obrera* again made its position plain in a front page headline: 'Only by making the social revolution will fascism be crushed. The lack of vision and counter-revolutionary conduct of Spanish Marxism in these decisive moments open the door to fascism' (Anon. 1936: 1; see also Villa García 2014). Within days, Spain would be converted into a battlefield. The CNT and the FAI deployed their activists, albeit, in the case of Barcelona at least, with a higher degree of strategic awareness than before. Now, however, in many major cities of Spain, they found that they could count on the important support of a proportion of local security forces, the intervention of the UGT, the dissident communists of the POUM, and a mobilized working class population – that previously 'timorous, passive element of the CNT' decried by Isaac Puente in the wake of December 1933 (Peirats 2011: 58) – which thronged the plazas clamouring for arms and that filled the streets in festive spirit as the coup was defeated.

CONCLUSION

Fascism did not come to power in Germany via an electoral triumph but through the acquiescence of state actors working within the remit of the Weimar constitution. Hitler, famously, was 'jobbed into office by a backstairs intrigue' (Bullock 1973: 253). For the anarchists of Spain this was a vindication of their anti-electoral and anti-state practice, and provided justification for the abstention campaign and failed insurrection of late 1933. In this sense, the anarchist opposition to social democracy was consistent with the view that formal politics would prove incapable of defeating fascism. While the KPD held to a similar position at the level of rhetoric, the German Communists did not elaborate a challenge to social democracy at the level of practice, remaining committed to electoral politics and proclaiming their faith in the progressive march of history. In contrast, the CNT retained its revolutionary perspective, refined its combat organization, and continued to proclaim its scepticism as to the state's protection of democracy, showing a willingness to translate words into deeds that was absent on the German left. The organization's acknowledgement of the global advance of reaction also stands in stark contrast to the enervating, immobilizing optimism of orthodox Communism. This revolutionary pessimism would be converted into premature triumphalism in July 1936 by the improbable victory over the mutinous army that was spearheaded by the workers' organizations in several of Spain's major cities, as the representatives of democracy vacillated and the state itself appeared to evaporate.

Revolutionaries were crucial to stalling the advance of fascism in Spain, but the 'anti-fascist epic' would be won, nine years later, by an alliance of decidedly anti-revolutionary world powers. While many revolutionaries participated in this victory, victory was theirs only insofar as they were prepared to suspend their revolutionary aspirations. Subsequent historiography has therefore tended to view this suspension as a necessary precondition for successful anti-fascism. In that context, the 'ultra-left' lesson from Germany and the insistence o revolutionary priorities shared, at least superficially, by the CNT and the KPD in the early 1930s, can be written off as doomed to failure, and their sectarian refusal to ally with parliamentary socialists condemned. This has implied the additional problem of viewing fascism as 'a relic destined to fade away and give free rein once more to progress' (Abensour in Löwy 1992: 111). Seventy years on from the denouement of the 'anti-fascist epic', as nationalist responses to economic slump gain in popularity and a growing refugee crisis is met by the battlements of 'Fortress Europe', we may be compelled to look again at the early years of the 1930s. In such circumstances we would do well to avoid the complacent certainty that a robust democracy will spare European nation states from barbarism. To that end, returning to the perspectives of those revolutionaries who were the first victims of Southworth's 'epic' may prove fruitful, both for the historiography, and also for the political exigencies of our own times.

REFERENCES

Anon. (1923), 'De Gallifet a Mussolini', *Solidaridad Obrera* (Barcelona), 5.8: 16, 24 March, p. 4.
—— (1931), 'Fascismo republicano', *Solidaridad Obrera* (Barcelona), 6.2: 182, 19 June, p. 1.
—— (1933a), 'Hitler, dictador', *Solidaridad Obrera* (Barcelona), 6.4: 617, 1 February, p. 1.

—— (1933b), 'Hitler al poder: Ante un fracaso más de los "científicos" marxistas', *Tierra y Libertad* (Barcelona), 4: 103, 17 February, p. 1.
—— (1933c), 'Un mundo que muere', *Tierra y Libertad* (Barcelona), 4: 106, 10 March, p. 1.
—— (1933d), 'La CNT, en la entraña del pueblo', *Solidaridad Obrera* (Barcelona), 6.4: 816, 7 November, pp. 1, 4–5.
—— (1933e), 'Rumbo hacia la Revolución', *Tierra y Libertad* (Barcelona), 4: 143, 24 November 1933, p. 1.
—— (1936), 'Solo haciendo la Revolución Social se aplastará el fascismo', *Solidaridad Obrera* (Barcelona), 6.7: 1328, 17 July, p. 1.
Berry, D. (2009), *A History of the French Anarchist Movement, 1917 to 1945*, Edinburgh: AK Press.
Bonet, J. (1933), 'Leyes de excepción: "Democracia" fascista', *Tierra y Libertad* (Barcelona), 4: 102, 10 February, p. 4.
—— (1933b), 'Después de las elecciones', *Tierra y Libertad* (Barcelona), 4: 144, 1 December, p. 2.
Bookchin, M. (1998), *The Spanish Anarchists: The Heroic Years, 1868–1936*, Edinburgh: AK Press.
Buenacasa, M. (1933), *La CNT, los 'Treinta' y la FAI*, Barcelona: Talleres Gráficos 'Alfa'.
Bullock, A. (1973), *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny*, London: Hamlyn.
Casanova, J. (2005), *Anarchism, the Republic and Civil War in Spain: 1931–1939*, London: Routledge.
CNT (1978), *El Congreso Confederal de Zaragoza: 1936*, Bilbao: Zero.
Crozier, M. (2010), *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon*, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers.
Degras, J. (1971a), *The Communist International 1919–1943: Documents, Vol. III (1929–1943)*, London: Frank Cass and Company.

—— (1971b), *The Communist International 1919–1943: Documents, Vol. II (1923–1928)*, London: Frank Cass and Company.
Durgan, A. C. (1996), *B.O.C. 1930–1936: El Bloque Obrero y Campesino*, Barcelona: Editorial Laertes.
Ealham, C. (2010), *Anarchism and the City: Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Barcelona, 1898–1937*, Edinburgh: AK Press.
Etchebehere, H. (1993), 'Letters to an Argentine Comrade', *Revolutionary History*, 5: 1, pp. 70–83.
García Oliver, J. (1978), *El eco de los pasos*, Paris: Ruedo Ibérico.
German Communist Party ([1923] 1983), 'The victory of fascism over the November Republic', in D. Beetham (ed.), *Marxists in face of Fascism: Writings by Marxists on Fascism from the Inter-War Period*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 149–51.
Gómez Casas, J. (1973), *Historia del anarcosindicalismo español*, Madrid: Zero.
González Calleja, E. (2005), *La España de Primo de Rivera: La modernización autoritaria 1923–1930*, Madrid: Alianza.
Gordon, S. (1993), 'Reports from Germany, 1929–30', *Revolutionary History*, 5: 1, pp. 14–28.
Guérin, D. (1994), *The Brown Plague: Travels in Late Weimar and Early Nazi Germany* (trans. R. Schwartzwald), Durham and London: Duke University Press.
Guillamón, A. (2014), *Ready for Revolution: The CNT Defense Committees in Barcelona, 1933–1938* (trans. P. Sharkey), Oakland, Edinburgh and Baltimore: Kate Sharpley Library and AK Press.
Gutiérrez Molina, J. L. (1994), *Crisis burguesa y unidad obrera: El sindicalismo en Cádiz durante la Segunda República*, Madrid: Fundación Anselmo Lorenzo – Madre Tierra.
Haro, L. (2011), 'Entering a theoretical void: The theory of social fascism and stalinism in the German Communist Party', *Critique*, 39: 4, pp. 563–82.

Kellner, D. (1977), 'Fascism and counterrevolution: Introduction', in D. Kellner (ed.), *Karl Korsch: Revolutionary Theory*, Austin and London: University of Texas Press, pp. 232–35.

Korsch, K. ([1931] 1977), 'The Spanish revolution', in D. Kellner (ed.), *Karl Korsch: Revolutionary Theory* (trans. K.-H. Otto, A. Giles-Peters and H. Schutte), Austin and London: University of Texas Press, pp. 212–23.

Leviné-Meyer, R. (1977), *Inside German Communism: Memoirs of Party Life in the Weimar Republic*, London: Pluto Press.

Lindemann, A. S. (1984), *A History of European Socialism*, New York: Yale University Press.

Löwy, M. (1992), *Redemption and Utopia, Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe,* London: The Athlone Press.

—— (2006), *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'* (trans. C. Turner), London: Verso.

Meaker, G. H. (1974), *The Revolutionary Left in Spain, 1914–1923*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Nettl, P. (1969), *Rosa Luxemburg*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Orobón Fernández, V. ([1932] 2002), 'La CNT y los comunistas españoles', in J. L. Gutiérrez Molina (ed.), *Valeriano Orobón Fernández: Anarcosindicalismo y revolución en Europa*, Valladolid: Libre Pensamiento, pp. 228–35.

—— ([1934] 2002a), 'Tribuna Libre. Frente Único. Consideraciones sobre la unidad. La plataforma de Alianza', in J. L. Gutiérrez Molina (ed.), *Valeriano Orobón Fernández: Anarcosindicalismo y revolución en Europa*, Valladolid: Libre Pensamiento, pp. 273–77.

—— ([1934] 2002b), 'Tribuna Libre. Frente Único. Consideraciones sobre la unidad. ¡Alianza revolucionaria, sí! ¡Oportunismos de bandería, no!', in J. L. Gutiérrez Molina (ed.), *Valeriano Orobón Fernández: Anarcosindicalismo y revolución en Europa*, Valladolid: Libre Pensamiento, pp. 268–73.

Orto ([1933] 2002), 'Por un "frente único" contra el fascismo internacional', in J. Paniagua (ed.), *Orto (1932–1934) revista de documentación social*, Valencia: Biblioteca Historia Social, pp. 1017–19.

Payne, S. G. (2013), 'A critical overview of the Second Spanish Republic', in M. Álvarez Tardío and F. Del Rey Reguillo (eds), *The Spanish Second Republic Revisited: From Democratic Hopes to Civil War (1931–1936)*, Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, pp. 9–19.

Paz, A. (1994), *Chumberas y alacranes (1921–1936)*, Barcelona: Medusa.

—— (1996), *Durruti en la revolución española*, Madrid: Fundación de Estudios Libertarios Anselmo Lorenzo.

Peirats, J. (1964), *Los anarquistas en la crisis política española*, Buenos Aires: Editorial Alfa.

—— (2011), *The CNT in the Spanish Revolution*, Vol. I (trans. P. Sharkey and C. Ealham), Oakland: PM Press.

Pellicer, F. (1933), 'Democracia y dictadura', *Tierra y Libertad* (Barcelona), 4: 106, 10 March, p. 2.

Prieto, H. M. (n.d. [a]), *Secretario General de la CNT de España en 1936: Ex-ministro de la República en el exilio. Recuerdos,* unpublished memoirs (Held at the Biblioteca Pública Arús, Barcelona).

—— (n.d. [b]), *Tomo II: Utopistas (semblanzas de militantes libertarios): El crac del anarquismo*, Second volume of unpublished memoirs (held at the Biblioteca Pública Arús, Barcelona).

Rosenhaft, E. (1983), *Beating the Fascists? The German Communists and Political Violence, 1929–1933*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Salter, S. (1987), 'The object lesson: The division of the German Left and the triumph of national socialism', in H. Graham and P. Preston (eds), *The Popular Front in Europe,* London: Macmillan, pp. 20–34.

Schapiro, A. (1933), 'En torno a la disidencia reformista: Una razonada opinión del compañero Schapiro', *Solidaridad Obrera* (Barcelona), 6.4: 637, 24 February 1933, p. 6.

Southworth, H. R. (1996), '"The Grand Camouflage": Julián Gorkin, Burnett Bolloten and the Spanish Civil War', in P. Preston and A. L. Mackenzie (eds), *The Republic Besieged: Civil War in Spain 1936–1939*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, pp. 261–310.

Thalheimer, A. (1983), 'So-called social fascism' [1929]', in D. Beetham (ed.), *Marxists in Face of Fascism: Writings by Marxists on Fascism from the Inter-War Period*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 195–97.

Villa García, R. (2011), 'La CNT contra la República: La insurrección revolucionaria de diciembre de 1933', *Historia y Política*, 25, pp. 177–205.

—— (2014), '"Obreros, no votéis". La CNT y el Frente Popular en las elecciones de 1936', *Revista de Historia Contemporánea*, 13, pp. 173–96.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright

Danny Evans
'Ultra-left' anarchists and anti-fascism in the Second Republic
2016

International Journal of Iberian Studies, 29: 3, pp. 241–56, doi: 10.1386/ijis.29.3.241_1

usa.anarchistlibraries.net