

Address to the International Working Men's Association Congress

Emma Goldman

Life imposes strange situations on all of us. For forty-eight years I was considered an extremist in our ranks. One who refused to compromise our ideas or tactics for any purpose whatsoever — one who always insisted that the Anarchist aim and methods must harmonize, or the aim would never be achieved. Yet here I am trying to explain the action of our Spanish comrades to the European opponents, and the criticism of the latter to the comrades of the CNT-FAI. In other words, after a lifetime of an extreme left position I find myself in the center, as it were.

I have seen from the moment of my first arrival in Spain in September 1936 that our comrades in Spain are plunging head foremost into the abyss of compromise that will lead them far away from their revolutionary aim. Subsequent events have proven that those of us who saw the danger ahead were right. The participation of the CNT-FAI in the government, and concessions to the insatiable monster in Moscow, have certainly *not* benefited the Spanish Revolution, or even the anti-Fascist struggle. Yet closer contact with reality in Spain, with the almost insurmountable odds against the aspirations of the CNT-FAI, made me understand their tactics better, and helped me to guard against any dogmatic judgment of our comrades.

I am inclined to believe that the critics in our ranks outside of Spain would be less rigid in their appraisal if they too had come closer to the life-and-death struggle of the CNT-FAI — not that I do not agree with their criticism. I think them 95 percent right. However, I insist that independent thinking and the right of criticism have ever been our proudest Anarchist boast, indeed, the very bulwark of Anarchism. The trouble with our Spanish comrades is their marked sensitivity to criticism, or even to advice from any comrade outside of Spain. But for that, they would understand that their critics are moved not by villainy, but by their deepest concern for the fate of the CNT-FAI.

The Spanish Anarcho-Syndicalist and Anarchist movements until very recently have held out the most glaring fulfillment of all our dreams and aspirations. I cannot therefore blame those of our comrades who see in the compromises of the Spanish Anarchists a reversal of all they had held high for well nigh seventy years. Naturally some comrades have grown apprehensive and have begun to cry out against the slippery road which the CNT-FAI entered on. I have known these comrades for years. They are among my dearest friends. I know it is their revolutionary

integrity which makes them so critical, and not any ulterior motive. If our Spanish comrades could only understand this, they would be less indignant, nor consider their critics their enemies.

Also, I fear that the critics too are very much at fault. They are no less dogmatic than the Spanish comrades. They condemn every step made in Spain unreservedly. In their sectarian attitude they have overlooked the motive element recognised in our time even in capitalist courts. Yet it is a fact that one can never judge human action unless one has discovered the motive back of the action.

When I have pointed this out to our critical comrades they have insisted that Lenin and his group were also moved by the best intentions, “and see what they have made of the Revolution.” I fail to see even the remotest similarity. Lenin aimed at a formidable State machine, a deadly dictatorship. From the very beginning, this spelled the death of the Russian Revolution — whereas the CNT-FAI not only aimed at, but actually gave life to, libertarian economic reconstructions. From the very moment they had driven the Fascists and militarists out of Catalonia, this herculean task was never lost sight of. The work achieved, considering the insurmountable obstacles, was extraordinary. Already on my first visit I was amazed to find so many collectives in the large cities and the villages.

I returned to Spain with apprehension because of all the rumours that had reached me after the May events of the destruction of the collectives. It is true that the Lister and Karl Marx Brigades went through Aragon and places in Catalonia like a cyclone, devastating everything in their way; but it is nevertheless the fact that most of the collectives were keeping up as if no harm had come to them. In fact I found the collectives in September and October 1937 in better-organised condition and in better working order — and that, after all, is the most important achievement that must be kept in mind in any appraisal of the mistakes made by our comrades in Spain. Unfortunately, our critical comrades do not seem to see this all-important side of the CNT-FAI. Yet it is this which differentiates them from Lenin and his crowd who, far from even attempting to articulate the Russian Revolution in terms of constructive effort, destroyed everything during the civil war and even many years after.

Strangely enough, the very comrades of the civil war in Russia who had explained every step of the dictatorship as “revolutionary necessity” are now the most unyielding opponents of the CNT-FAI. “We have learned our lesson from the Russian Revolution,” they say. But as no one learns anything from the experience of others, we must, whether we like it or not, give our Spanish comrades a chance to find their bearings through their own experience. Surely our own flesh and blood are entitled to the same patient help and solidarity some of us have given generously to our archenemies the Communists.

The CNT-FAI are not so wrong when they insist that the conditioning in Spain is quite different from that which actuated the struggle in Russia. In point of fact the two social upheavals are separate and distinct from each other.

The Russian Revolution came on top of a war-exhausted people, with all the social fabric in Russia disintegrated, the country far removed from outside influences. Whatever dangers it encountered during the civil war came entirely from within the country itself. Even the help given to the interventionists by England, Poland, and France were contributed sparingly. Not that these countries were not ready to crush the Revolution by means of well-equipped armies; but Europe was too sapped. There were neither men nor arms enough to enable the Russian counter-revolutionists to destroy the Revolution and its people.

The revolution in Spain was the result of a military and Fascist conspiracy. The first imperative need that presented itself to the CNT-FAI was to drive out the conspiratorial gang. The Fascist danger had to be met with almost bare hands. In this process the Spanish workers and peasants soon came to see that their enemies were not only Franco and his Moorish hordes. They soon found themselves besieged by formidable armies and an array of modern arms furnished to Franco by Hitler and Mussolini, with all the imperialist pack playing their sinister underhanded game. In other words, while the Russian Revolution and the civil war were being fought out on Russian soil and by Russians, the Spanish revolution and anti-Fascist war involves all the powers of Europe. It is no exaggeration to say that the Spanish Civil War has spread out far beyond its own confines.

As if that were not enough to force the CNT-FAI to hold themselves up by *any* means, rather than to see the revolution and the masses drowned in the bloodbath prepared for them by Franco and his allies — our comrades had also to contend with the inertia of the international proletariat. Herein lies another tragic difference between the Russian and Spanish revolutions.

The Russian Revolution had met with almost instantaneous response and unstinted support from the workers in every land. This was soon followed by the revolution in Germany, Austria, and Hungary; and the general strike of the British workers who refused to load arms intended for the counter-revolutionists and interventionists. It brought about the mutiny in the Black Sea, and raised the workers everywhere to the highest pitch of enthusiasm and sacrifice.

The Spanish revolution, on the other hand, just because its leaders are Anarchists, immediately became a sore in the eyes not only of the bourgeoisie and the democratic governments, but also of the entire school of Marxists and liberals. In point of truth the Spanish revolution was betrayed by the whole world.

It has been suggested that our comrades in every country have contributed handsomely in men and money to the Spanish struggle, and that they alone should have been appealed to.

Well, comrades, we are members of the same family and we are among ourselves. We therefore need not beat around the bush. The deplorable fact is that there is no Anarchist or Anarcho-Syndicalist movement of any great consequence outside of Spain, and in a smaller degree France, with the exception of Sweden. Whatever Anarchist movements there are in other countries consist of small groups. In all England, for instance, there is no organised movement — only a few groups.

With the most fervent desire to aid the revolution in Spain, our comrades outside of it were neither numerically nor materially strong enough to turn the tide. Thus finding themselves up against a stone wall, the CNT-FAI was forced to descend from its lofty traditional heights to compromise right and left: participation in the government, all sorts of humiliating overtures to Stalin, superhuman tolerance for his henchmen who were openly plotting and conniving against the Spanish revolution.

Of all the unfortunate concessions our people have made, their entry into ministries seemed to me the least offensive. No, I have not changed my attitude toward government as an evil. As all through my life, I still hold that the State is a cold monster, and that it devours everyone within its reach. Did I not know that the Spanish people see in government a mere makeshift, to be kicked overboard at will, that they had never been deluded and corrupted by the parliamentary myth, I should perhaps be more alarmed for the future of the CNT-FAI. But with Franco at the gate of Madrid, I could hardly blame the CNT-FAI for choosing a lesser evil — participation in the government rather than dictatorship, the most deadly evil.

Russia has more than proven the nature of this beast. After twenty years it still thrives on the blood of its makers. Nor is its crushing weight felt in Russia alone. Since Stalin began his invasion of Spain, the march of his henchmen has been leaving death and ruin behind them. Destruction of numerous collectives, the introduction of the Tcheka with its “gentle” methods of treating political opponents, the arrest of thousands of revolutionaries, and the murder in broad daylight of others. All this and more, has Stalin’s dictatorship given Spain, when he sold arms to the Spanish people in return for good gold. Innocent of the jesuitical trick of “our beloved comrade” Stalin, the CNT-FAI could not imagine in their wildest dreams the unscrupulous designs hidden behind the seeming solidarity in the offer of arms from Russia.

Their need to meet Franco’s military equipment was a matter of life and death. The Spanish people had not a moment to lose if they were not to be crushed. What wonder if they saw in Stalin the saviour of the anti-Fascist war? They have since learned that Stalin helped to make Spain safe against the Fascists so as to make it safer for his own ends.

The critical comrades are not at all wrong when they say that it does not seem worthwhile to sacrifice one ideal in the struggle against Fascism, if it only means to make room for Soviet Communism. I am entirely of their view — that there is no difference between them. My own consolation is that with all their concentrated criminal efforts, Soviet Communism has not taken root in Spain. I know whereof I speak. On my recent visit to Spain I had ample opportunity to convince myself that the Communists have failed utterly to win the sympathies of the masses; quite the contrary. They have never been so hated by the workers and peasants as now.

It is true that the Communists are in the government and have political power — that they use their power to the detriment of the revolution, the anti-Fascist struggle, and the prestige of the CNT-FAI. But strange as it may seem, it is nevertheless no exaggeration when I say that in a moral sense the CNT has gained immeasurably. I give a few proofs.

Since the May events the Madrid circulation of the CNT [paper] has almost doubled, while the two Communist papers in that city have only 26,000. The CNT alone has 100,000 throughout Castile. The same has happened with our paper, *Castilla Libre*. In addition, there is the *Frente Libertario*, with a circulation of 100,000 copies.

A more significant fact is that when the Communists call a meeting it is poorly attended. When the CNT-FAI hold meetings the halls are packed to overflowing. I had one occasion to convince myself of this truth. I went to Allecante with comrade Federica Montseny and although the meeting was held in the forenoon, and rain came down in a downpour. the hall was nevertheless packed to capacity. It is the more surprising that the Communists can lord it over everybody; but it is one of the many contradictions of the situation in Spain.

If our comrades have erred in permitting the Communist invasion it was only because the CNT-FAI are the implacable enemies of Fascism. They were the first, not only in Spain but in the whole world, to repulse Fascism, and they are determined to remain the last on the battlefield, until the beast is slain. This supreme determination sets the CNT-FAI apart in the history of indomitable champions and fighters for freedom the world has ever known. Compared with this, their compromises appear in a less glaring light.

True, the tacit consent to militarization on the part of our Spanish comrades was a violent break with their Anarchist past. But grave as this was, it must also be considered in the light of their utter military inexperience. Not only theirs but ours as well. All of us have talked rather glibly about antimilitarism. In our zeal and loathing of war we have lost sight of modern warfare, of the utter helplessness of untrained and unequipped men face to face with mechanized armies,

and armed to their teeth for the battle on land, sea, and air. I still feel the same abhorrence of militarism, its dehumanization, its brutality and its power to turn men into automatons. But my contact with our comrades at the various fronts during my first visit in 1936 convinced me that some training was certainly needed if our militias were not to be sacrificed like newborn children on the altar of war.

While it is true that after July 19 tens of thousands of old and young men volunteered to go to the front — they went with flying colours and the determination to conquer Franco in a short time — they had no previous military training or experience. I saw a great many of the militia when I visited the Durruti and Huesca fronts. They were all inspired by their ideal — by the hatred of Fascism and passionate love of freedom. No doubt that would have carried them a long way if they had had only the Spanish Fascists to face; but when Germany and Italy began pouring in hundreds of thousands of men and masses of war materiel, our militias proved very inadequate indeed. If it was inconsistent on the part of the CNT-FAI to consent to militarisation, it was also inconsistent for us to change our attitude toward war, which some of us had held all our lives. We had always condemned war as serving capitalism and no other purpose; but when we realised that our heroic comrades in Barcelona had to continue the anti-Fascist struggle, we immediately rallied to their support, which was undoubtedly a departure from our previous stand on war. Once we realised that it would be impossible to meet hordes of Fascists armed to the very teeth, we could not escape the next step, which was militarisation. Like so many actions of the CNT-FAI undoubtedly contrary to our philosophy, they were not of their making or choosing. They were imposed upon them by the development of the struggle, which if not brought to a successful end, would exterminate the CNT-FAI, destroy their constructive achievements, and set back Anarchist thought and ideas not only in Spain but in the rest of the world.

Dear comrades, it is not a question of justification of everything the CNT-FAI have been doing. It is merely trying to understand the forces that drove and drive them on. Whether to triumph or defeat will depend a great deal on how much we can awaken the international proletariat to come to the rescue of the struggle in Spain; and unless we can create unity among ourselves, I do not see how we can call upon the workers of the world to unite in their efforts to conquer Fascism and to rescue the Spanish revolution.

Our comrades have a sublime ideal to inspire them; they have great courage and the iron will to conquer Fascism. All that goes a long way to hold up their morale. Airplanes bombarding towns and villages and all the other monster mechanisms cannot be stopped by spiritual values. The greater the pity that our side was not prepared, nor had the physical means to match the inexhaustible supplies streaming into Franco's side.

It is a miracle of miracles that our people are still on deck, more than ever determined to win. I cannot but think that the training our comrades are getting in the military schools will make them fitter to strike, and with greater force. I have been strengthened in this belief by my talks with young comrades in the military schools — with some of them at the Madrid front and with CNT-FAI members occupying high military positions. They all assured me that they had gained much through the military training, and that they feel more competent and surer of themselves to meet the enemy forces. I am not forgetting the danger of militarisation in a prolonged war. If such a calamity should happen, there will not be many of our gallant militias left to return as military ultimatums. I fervently hope that Fascism will be conquered quickly, and that our comrades can return from the front in triumph to where they came from — the collectives, land

and industries. For the present there is no danger that they will become cogs in the military wheel.

All these factors directing the course of the CNT-FAI should be taken into consideration by the comrade critics, who after all are far removed from the struggle, hence really not in a position to see the whole tragic drama through the eyes of those who are in the actual struggle.

I do not mean to say that I may not also reach the painful point of disagreement with the CNT-FAI. But until Fascism is conquered, I would not raise my hand against them. For the present my place is at the side of the Spanish comrades and their great struggle against a whole world.

Comrades, the CNT-FAI are in a burning house; the flames are shooting up through every crevice, coming nearer and nearer to scorch our comrades. At this crucial moment, and with but few people trying to help save our people from the consuming flame, it seems to me a breach of solidarity to pour the acid of your criticism on their burned flesh. As for myself, I cannot join you in this. I know the CNT-FAI have gone far afield from their and our ideology. But that cannot make me forget their glorious revolutionary traditions of seventy years. Their gallant struggle — always haunted, always driven at bay, always in prison and exile. This makes me think that the CNT-FAI have remained fundamentally the same, and that the time is not far off when they will again prove themselves the symbol, the inspirational force, that the Spanish Anarcho-Syndicalists and Anarchists have always been to the rest of the Anarchists in the world.

Since I have been privileged to be in Spain twice — near the comrades, near their splendid constructive labour — since I was able to see their selflessness and determination to build a new life on their soil, my faith in our comrades has deepened into a firm conviction that, whatever their inconsistencies, they will return to first principles. Tested by the fires of the anti-Fascist war and the revolution, the CNT-FAI will emerge unscathed. Therefore I am with them, regardless of everything. A thousand times would I have rather remained in Spain to risk my life in their struggle than returned to the so-called safety in England. But since that could not be, I mean to strain every muscle and every nerve to make known, in as far as my pen and voice can reach, the great moral and organisational force of the CNT-FAI and the valour and heroism of our Spanish comrades.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Emma Goldman
Address to the International Working Men's Association Congress

Retrieved on March 16th, 2009 from dwardmac.pitzer.edu.
From Emma Goldman Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public
Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

usa.anarchistlibraries.net