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The Fall of Barcelona

Letters exchanged by Emma Goldman and Mariano R.
Vázquez after the Spanish Civil War

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February-March 1939

Transcribed from the Emma Goldman papers and Rudolf Rocker papers, archived by the International Institute of Social History.

These letters were exchanged by Emma Goldman, foreign representative of the CNT-FAI in London, and Mariano R. Vázquez, Secretary General of the CNT in February and March 1939. Following the fall of Catalonia, hundreds of thousands of Spanish republicans fled the fascist regime of Francisco Franco. The letters between Goldman and Vázquez discuss the plight of these refugees and how to aid them. They also debate the causes of the Republican defeat, with Goldman blaming the communist-backed government of Juan Negrín and Vázquez engaging in self-criticism about the fault of the CNT-FAI in prosecuting the revolution and discouraging foreign support.

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come of this meeting and at the same time deal with other matters. My departure date for Canada has been definitely fixed for the 8th of April. It will be very important for my work there that we have a conversation while I am in Paris.

Fraternally yours,

E.G.

hopes of the masses for a fundamental change in their situation, as the Spanish people have shown in their struggle against fascism. I feel, therefore, that it should never weigh on you to have arranged on 19th of July to bring about the Revolution and all that it implied. What I recognise, however, is that the debacle of the struggle in Spain has extinguished the torch of Freedom and revolutionary gains in Europe for many years. I am convinced, however, that the torch will be lit again and will be the only one to illuminate what is today a dark sky.

I will be guided by what you instruct me in the circulars you send me regarding correspondence. I will also try to collect funds when I arrive in Canada. It is impossible here. I would like to have in my possession funds available from the sum I received from the CNT-FAI lately, but not only is there nothing, but there is a deficit. However, it doesn't matter, as I will cover it somehow. I only mention it so that you know that if there had been anything in my hands I would have sent it the moment you arrived in France.

As far as countries where you can get asylum are concerned. It is with great regret that I have to say that I do not know of any. If there were a few refugees, it might be possible to bring them here. For that we need to have the full names of those who could come, as well as their professions. Arrangements are already being made here to bring some of the intellectuals. Souchy discovered a group of them in Boulon and I have given their names to the writers' organisations in England and also to an organisation called "Aid for Spanish Refugees". I am not sure if anything concrete can be achieved, but it will certainly not be possible to get asylum for more than a very small number of our refugees. When I get to Canada I will do what I can to start a campaign for asylum, but I don't want to raise hopes that will not be realised.

From the enclosed programme you will see that we will be holding another meeting to raise funds. I would like to have the optimism to mention the amount we should be able to raise. As I am going to Paris on the 26th of this month, I will let you know the out-

Goldman to Vázquez, 5 February 1939

Dear comrade Mariano R. Vázquez,

Knowing through Martin and Souchy that you and the other comrades have left Barcelona, our unhappy Barcelona, has not ended my anxiety. And since yesterday, the terrible crimes of Girona have increased my anxiety. If only I knew what to do to help you in this tragic hour. But as I don't know if you are safe and where, I feel completely helpless. I am afraid that this letter will not reach you, but I am sending it to comrade Roca in Paris; he is very trustworthy. I am sure if there is a chance, he will send it to you.

Do me the favour, dear comrade, of telling me if there is anything you want me to do and also tell me which of the comrades could be saved from Franco's brutality. Martin told me that your companion was with you but I didn't know if you also had your beautiful girl with you. I am so anxious for her, her as for all our comrades.

I hope with all my heart that you will write to me. I assure you of my sympathies and my comradely devotion at this hour, I am not only of sympathy but of desire to help you.

Fraternally,
Emma Goldman

Vázquez to Goldman, 13 February 1939

Dear Friend,

Comrade Roca handed me your letter of the 5th. I hasten to answer and am sorry I could not do so sooner to liberate you from your anxiety.

I left Barcelona a few hours before the enemy took her. On Wednesday, 25th of January at 9p.m. I called on the people of Barcelona over the radio. It was the last time. Some hours later the enemy dominated Barcelona, city of our struggles, our joy and...

We have saved all the comrades, because in the end we succeeded in making them open the frontier. But almost all of them are in concentration camps. I am not, because I fled.

The fundamental problem and our greatest preoccupation at present is to find out in which countries we can place our militancy, those hundreds of comrades who, in Spain, would be shot by Franco. On this basis I am working; we have already achieved something, but there is much work to be done yet.

I do not know concretely in which way you can be useful to us, after what I told you about our main preoccupation. It only occurs to me that you should go on your propaganda tour through Canada. I am convinced that it will be interesting from a moral as well as material point of view, because it may be a financial success and you will understand how much we are in need of money to meet all the many necessities which present themselves, especially when it comes to organize the journey of the comrades to America.

As I do believe that it will be impossible to place a single militant in England, and that one can collect but little money there, I advise you to go to Canada. You will no doubt, see yourself what else you can do within this idea of placing comrades in any possible country, and of collecting money to help the militants in exile and their wives and children, and to meet the journey expenses.

This is all I can tell you for the moment. Write to me c/o Roca, he will forward the letter to me. The life in the concentration camps is very hard and they put everybody in, as they don't want to arrange anybody's papers. I could not do it myself yet.

Embraces,

Mariano R. Vázquez.

Goldman to Vázquez, 13 March 1939.

Dear Mariano,

I have received your letter of 3rd of March with your circulars No. 1 dated 25th of February and 24th of the same month. I have also received your letter of 5th of March.

I will reply to your letter in a few days' time, although I have come to the conclusion that there is nothing to be gained by arguing with you, since you are so focused on your own views, which, however, I fully understand. Having been in the midst of the struggle, you could not formulate the same point of view as those who have not been in the midst of it. But there is one point in your letter which seems to me to be somewhat innocent. You say that if on 19th of July the Revolution and the Collectives had not been started, the Democracies would have helped you. Well, dear comrade, Czechoslovakia was never intended to be revolutionary or to bring about the fundamental changes in society that we intended. Have the democracies helped Czechoslovakia? Surely, international capitalism had nothing to gain from the Czechoslovak people. Yet Czechoslovakia was sold out by the Democracies. I cannot see the logic in your argument, therefore, that if you had not put so much emphasis on the Revolution and brought in the Collectives, Chamberlain and Deladier would have done anything to help you in your struggle against Fascism. You would have got as much from the Democracies as Czechoslovakia has got. On the other hand, you and the other comrades would not now be regarded by the whole world as the strongest revolutionary force and the most courageous fighters that Freedom has ever had. I recognise that the admiration and sympathy expressed everywhere should have been expressed in a more positive way. However, there has never been a group of men who symbolised the

of the world proletariat, incapable of helping us. With sympathy alone battles are not won. With theories one cannot triumph in a war. With words trenches are not stormed. And with literature one cannot defend Liberty against the attacks of tanks and aircraft. And since such is the case, by being revolutionaries at home and only preaching the Revolution abroad, a great deal of harm has been done to us, because the proletariat did nothing practical in our aid, and Capitalism, confronted by the Dilemma of Revolution or Fascism, opted for the latter. However, if given the choice between the Republic and Fascism, I am sure that it would have been on the side of the Republic.

You recognise that I am right in my assertion that the Revolution cannot triumph in any country if it is not backed by the solidarity of the proletariat. That is precisely the whole point and towards this end it is necessary to devise a way whereby no mere isolated revolutions are attempted to avoid sterile sacrifices. We must be capable of preparing conditions so that at least it will break out in two or three countries at once. And that when the proletariat gains power in those countries it will be not only in a position to defend their Revolution but also to propagate to other lands. This is the idea under which we must base our future activities. And we can do it and even triumph without losing time or even wasting energy. I think I can say that our won experience give us the right to feel that we are in a position which enables us to lend new light towards the revolutionary road.

I must now close as I think that I have given you enough material upon which to base your arguments against my thesis. Discussion is always good when carried with noble intentions, because it purifies arguments and makes it easy to extract good consequences.

Before closing I will remind you that I am still an optimist, aspiring to the triumph of the proletariat over its enemies.

Fraternally,

Mariano R. Vázquez.

Goldman to Vázquez, 16 February 1939

Dear comrade Mariano.

I cannot tell you how glad I was to hear from you at last. I knew that you had escaped the hell of the concentration camps, but I did not know where you are and what the plans of the CNT are as far as you are now in a position to make plan. You say nothing your letter about your companion and your lovely daughter I met in the school. Are they safe, and do you know how many of the members of the CNT-FAI committees have been able to get into France? I understand the old, deaf and crippled comrade Gonzalo Reparey had been completely forgotten and is already in the hands of Franco. I wonder whether this is true. My heart bleeds for those who could not get away, and for all of the refugees who are so abominably treated by the French authorities. I am preparing an article about this as well as the contemptible part played by England in helping Franco to Menorca and now like a vulture falling over the agonised bodies of the Spanish people in rushing to recognise Franco, this after thirty months of hypocritical pretenses that the *non-intervention pact* was for "humanitarian reasons". All capitalist countries are of course alike, but England is the most unscrupulous when it comes to serve her Imperialist interests. Unfortunately the British workers have drunk that unscrupulousness from their mother's breast.

Dear comrade you have said nothing in your letter of the real forces that compelled you and the other comrades of the CNT-FAI to give up the defense of Barcelona. I wish you would write me the exact reasons as everybody in England and the States are completely at a loss to account for the surrender. If you do not want the reason published you have but to let me know. But for my own peace of mind I really ought to know. I fear that it was the Negrín Communist allies of yours who have played you false. Already when I was in Barcelona last I had a feeling that in the crucial moment you of the CNT will be betrayed and left to your own de-

vices. You once told Martin that I was always suspicious or afraid of your allies. There was no need of either since it was too obvious that neither Negrín or his colleagues would stand by the CNT in time of grave danger. I fear it was your own sterling honesty and your child like belief in the need of working with the government which brought about the final debacle. Please do not take offense. It is my deep interest and abiding faith in you which makes me tell you frankly that you were duped by the miserable Negrín and Communist gang who hated the CNT-FAI as much as the Fascists. However, if you can give me the reasons that led up to the fall of Barcelona you will help me greatly and also the other comrades who have done whatever they could to help your struggle since it began.

I see in the papers that one López who belonged to the CNT is involved in the trials now going on in Barcelona. Can that possibly be our comrade? I ask because he is reported to have made all sorts of confessions as to his connection with the diplomatic parcel found with the American Consul. That would indeed be the worst kind of treachery. Please let me know if it is the same I have in mind. I can imagine the horrors going on in Franco's Barcelona, the growth of miserable informers who want to be on the good side of Franco, and the thousands upon thousands of victims who will be exterminated.

Dear comrade of course I am going to Canada. But I could not sail until I knew what had become of you all, whether you are safe, what plans if any you have and how I can help. I have actually made reservations to sail April 8th. Until then I hope to know exactly just what you and the other comrades plan to do. I wish I could believe that South America will let you in. But is not nearly all of South America Fascist, except perhaps Chile? And President Cárdenas who posed as Liberal when he came to Spain expressing fraternal sympathy with your struggle I understand he has already declared he will not permit the Anarchists into Mexico. It is frightful the miserable part all the so-called democracies are playing.

to demonstrate the truth of my assertion. Yes, my dear E., I repeat what I said in my last letter: perhaps if we had not been so revolutionary the war would not have been lost. Let me put it in another way: If on 19th of July, instead of the collectives and the Revolution, we had concentrated on a bourgeois Republic, international Capitalism would not have been frightened and, instead, would have decided in aiding the Republic, and then the war would not have been lost, because in any case I should prefer a bourgeois Republic to totalitarian Fascism. And this, dear E., cannot be disproved. Precisely what was needed was not to make the Revolution before winning the war. Do you understand? Once having won the war things would have been different.

You speak of the intuition and ideals of the people which to my way of thinking are not so called ideals, but purely and simply class egoism. The masses, the proletariat as a whole, have no lofty ideals. They are only possessed by the select minorities. The masses have for their ideals the improvement of their immediate necessities, and this is not a lofty ideal but egoism, very human and very just, if you like but nevertheless an egoism inspired by nothing else save the stomach. You state that the workers know that Democracy is nothing but Fascism under a mask and this cannot be sustained if we pretend to know anything about the different regimes and social orders. The truth is that *we* are, when we speak in the name of freedom, the most recalcitrant sectarians on earth. We carry opposition to exaggeration, either with us or against us, we say, and after saying it we sit back quite unconcerned, maintaining that those who do not think as we do are enemies of the working class or fascists. Yet how many systems and differences there exist among the interminable organisms of social life.

But going back to the theme, what do I care for the so called sympathy of the working class for the Revolution if all it does for it is to watch events from afar, awaiting that it will be served to them in a salver ready to be cooked? To be more precise, what do we care, we Spanish Revolutionaries, for the platonic sympathy

disagreements nothing can effect my faith in you and the other comrades, my admiration for the sacrifices you have made and the courage you have all demonstrated and my devotion to your struggle. To my last breath I will believe in the CNT-FAI and serve them to the uttermost.

Fraternally.

Emma Goldman.

Vázquez to Goldman, 5 March 1939

Dear E.,

I am in receipt of your letter of the 1st inst.

The report which I have sent you is not for publication. It is only meant for information among ourselves. The material for publication to the public will be forwarded in due course.

As regards your enquiry about the letters which I also sent you, I am sorry that nothing can be done at present owing to the difficulties in tracing our comrades scatted about the concentration camps.

Now I will deal with the other part of your letter. I must start by saying that never have I doubted for a moment in your enthusiastic readiness to defend us "in spite of our many errors". I know that you really like our movement and I am more than glad that you still think well of it notwithstanding what has happened.

There is no contradiction in my saying that "nobody betrayed anyone" because at the same time I explained that one thing will be what we shall know among ourselves and another what is convenient to tell to the public.

The most important part of your letter is that in which you show wrath at my words that "because we were too revolutionary we frightened capitalism". I am ready to argue this out with anybody

I suppose any funds one might be able to raise now will have to be done for the refugees. Is there such a thing as a Refugee organisation of our comrades outside of the SIA? Or is one to appeal in the name of the SIA? I must know that before I leave for Canada. Do you think I ought to come over to Paris and sail from a French port? It will mean an extra expense of about 250 francs in the price of the ticket as compared with sailing from an English port. If it is necessary that we talk over some matters before I sail I will come. So you must let me know soon.

Give my fraternal greetings to all the comrades to your companion and to your beautiful child.

Fraternally.

E.G.

Vázquez to Goldman, 21 February 1939

I have received your letter of the 16th inst which I hasten to reply.

You want me to explain to you the reason for the loss of Barcelona, and I enclose herewith a report which I have drawn on the matter. To it I only wish to add confidentially, that our Movement has had, though it is painful to confess it, its part of responsibility for what has happened by not having worked with the enthusiasm which the gravity of the moment demanded.

It is true that the sudden departure of the Government from Barcelona had a great demoralizing effect, but it is no less true that if something had been done towards awakening public enthusiasm Barcelona could have been defended, if only for a few days.

On the remarks made by you about our good faith and the treachery of others, once again I must repeat what I have told you

before: that here nobody has betrayed anybody. What has happened all along is that circumstances imposed what every time was contrary to our wishes. The circumstances my dear friend, were the lack of arms brought about by the attitude of the Democracies. The fact is that one country alone cannot fight against the whole world and that we have won from international fascism and the cowardly Democracies 20 battles, having lost the last one. This is all.

If we had to argue on the causes that led to the loss of the war we could not find the effects in those compromises to which you and some other comrades always refer. It was rather the opposite. We did not compromise enough but were too revolutionary, thereby frightening world capitalism. Experience tells us with clarity that our illusions in a revolutionary sense are one thing and reality is another. And those realities and possibilities will never exist in any country, and far less in countries like Spain, while there does not exist a world-wide proletarian solidarity and a revolutionary consciousness capable of averting that the enemy swallow us. It is in these incontrovertible truths that we have to find the causes, not in the betrayals and defects of others because we all had defects.

In public, when things are put in order, we shall be in a position to defend the Libertarian Movement in order to demonstrate that if there was any responsibility for the loss of our war, that responsibility cannot be attributed to to us, and moreover we will be able to prove that the responsibility rests absolutely with the other sectors which precipitated our defeat, but this, dear Emma, only for the public, for us, no. We must examine things with objectivity, the only way and means of extracting positive results from an experience the most important of all up to now realized by the proletariat.

I do not know to what comrade you refer when you mention López, who you say is in the hands of the tribunals in Barcelona.

I have nothing to say against your idea of coming to Paris, though if you leave it too late, I may not be in Paris by then. The funds which you collect you may send to the SIA if it is not

and then you will serve the masses, or you want to appease world Capitalism then you must compromise inch by inch and day by day until nothing is left of your revolutionary quality or inspiration and that in return will and must alienate the world proletariat. You cannot have it both ways. I cannot see therefore how you can say now that you “had not compromised enough.”

Believe me dear comrade I am not sitting in judgement nor do I want to strew salt over your open wounds. I know better than all foreign comrades who had been in Spain the frightful difficulties in your way, the criminal methods used by the democracies as well as the Fascists to prevent you winning the war, the lack of arms, the lack of food, the shattering bombardments. I saw all and heard all and I tried to put it in words feeble as they are to our comrades outside of Spain and to the workers wherever I could reach them. I am not “criticising”, I am pointing out certain factors that have contributed to the debacle. I only wish to add one more thing, lack of arms were certainly the greatest drawback to victory. Nevertheless there is another factor equally important if not more and that is the faith in victory of the workers and peasants which I fear grew less in proportion as the whole machinery of the struggle went into the hands of the Negrín Communist government and out of the management of the workers themselves. This was only too obvious to me on my last visit and my talks with many comrades both CNT and FAI. But even that did not diminish my faith in your ultimate triumph. Moreover, I do not even now think you defeated, spiritually so not, I believe so implicitly in the spirit of the Spanish and of our comrades that I feel certain it can never be truly conquered. And it is for this very reason that I cannot agree with you when you say that “illusions in a revolutionary sense, are one thing and reality is another.” I insist that reality without revolutionary illusion becomes a bloodless and lifeless thing, a frightful deception that accepts the shadow for the substance.

Please do not take offense at what I have written, for I mean no offense. On the contrary I want you to know that whatever our

follows its instincts which are usually correct. In the case of Spain the workers soon realised that promise of the 19th of July had been exchanged as in Russia by palliatives and reformism which again crushed their hopes. For you must bear in mind dear comrade that your allies, especially your Communist sector did everything in its power to deceive the workers outside of Spain about your motives in the war against fascism. They were never permitted to know that the CNT-FAI wanted to win the war in order to develop the grand constructive beginning of the 19th of July and not to reinstate world Capitalism in Spain. Not only did they do that but they spread by every insidious means the rumours that the CNT-FAI are sabotaging the war. When I tell you that the writer Wells when approached for a contribution to SAI said he would not give a penny because “the Anarcho-Syndicalists and Anarchists were interfering with the Republican government in the management of the war” you will realise how little the world outside and especially the labor world were permitted to learn about the motives of the CNT-FAI. Please do not get the impression that I excuse or justify the lack of the solidaric action on the part of the International proletariat for the Spanish struggle against Fascism. I can forgive them less than the treachery of the democracies. It was not in the interests of the latter to help the Republican government. It was in the interest of the workers to help their valiant brothers in Spain. I have only tried to explain the apathy of the masses because you do not seem to realise that it was brought about by the treachery of Stalin’s foreign policy, by his own Imperialist designs which shrank from no crime and no connivance to strangle every vestige of revolutionary feeling or action in Russia and latterly in Spain.

You are probably correct when you state that “a revolution in one country alone cannot hope to succeed unless it had the support of the solidarity of the International proletariat” but neither can it hope to win by the appeasement of the fears of world Capitalism. There is a saying in English to the effect that “one cannot serve god and the devil at the same time.” Now either you are revolutionists

possible to give them to the Libertarian Movement. If it is possible to pass them on directly to the Movement, all the better, since they will be badly needed for the future of our cause and also to attend to the needs of the refugees and their evacuation.

With cordial and fraternal greetings,
Mariano R. Vázquez.

Goldman to Vázquez, 27 February 1939

Dear comrade.

Thank you for your letter of the 21st inst and your declaration. The latter is being translated. If I get it before I mail this letter I will add a few lines to it.

Before I take up some points in your letter I want to ask you about something which you sent me before the Barcelona catastrophe. It was a letter together with a letter of the secretary of the Federación Nacional de las Industrias Sidero Metalúrgicas to the secretary of the Iron and Steel Trades Federation in this city together with a long list of names to whom parcels should be sent. Before the letters were translated the Catalan calamity broke over every body, so there was no sense in sending the material to the Secretary of the I.S.T.F. But it has since occurred to me that if I could get any information whether the people whose names you sent me have evacuated whether they are in some of the French camps and in which on I might get the Iron and Steel Trades Federation here to help them with food or money or in some way, perhaps even in making it possible for them to find asylum in England. I realise it is asking the impossible, still you might be able to furnish me with the information. Do it soon if you can.

Your reference to my “criticism” of the compromises made as being the same as that of the other comrades made me very sad,

because I was not aware that I had ever criticised you or the other comrades for their action. I admit that there were ever so many things the CNT, and up to last year the FAI did which I could not agree with. But I felt that the time had not come for me to point out what I considered grave errors on your part and sure to lead to dire consequences. The fact that I continued to do my utmost in this country for your struggle should have proved to you that I considered no disagreement so important so long as the struggle went on to "criticise". But even if I had done so it would not have been indicative of my lack of devotion to my Spanish comrades, and to the heroic battle they were waging. You will remember that at the extraordinary conference of the AIT, I said among other things that the trouble with our Spanish comrades is that they resent the least criticism from non-Spanish comrades no matter how sincere and well-meaning the criticism is made. I felt then and I do still that it was this characteristic of you and the other Spanish comrades which was responsible for many of the misunderstandings between them and some of our comrades outside of Spain. Yet it is an undisputed fact that our severest critics are often our most sincere friends. Besides expressing an opinion does not mean that we are criticising.

You say in your letter "nobody betrayed anybody". And in the next sentence you state that "publicly we will be able to prove that the responsibility of the loss of the war rests absolutely with the other sectors which precipitated our defeat". If this is true, as I have all along been convinced, that your other sectors are dragging down the precipices, then there was a betrayal otherwise why expose their perfidity? Frankly this seems a contradiction to me.

As to your statement that the CNT had not "compromised enough but that you were too revolutionary thereby frightening world Capitalism", I was not only shocked but I was amazed at the amount of short-sightedness on your part this implies. It seems to me dear comrade that if this is the main lesson you have gathered from your struggle and the awful amount of sacrifice you have

made then you should discard your belief in revolution altogether and never again call yourselves libertarians. For there never was a revolution and never can be that will not "frighten world Capitalism". Nor will you appease world Capitalism unless you completely emasculate the meaning and purpose of revolution. I should think Russia stands as a living example for this truism. The whole pack of world Capitalism whether Fascist or democratic now curry favor with Stalin's regime. I wonder, why when these very elements fought Russia be every means. You know the answer yourself, still I would like to remind you that it was the crushing of the Russian revolution by Lenin and his group, and since by Stalin which is bringing world Capitalism to the prostrate and bleeding body of the Russian revolution. Stalin's appeasement of world Capitalism did exactly what Chamberlain's appeasement of Hitler and Mussolini did. Both helped to increase the voracious appetite for world dominion, including the conquest of Spain and by emasculating the Russian and Spanish revolution they also paralysed the active will of the International proletariat...

To be sure the 19th of July 36 revived the spirit of the workers and raised their hopes to the highest expectation. I am certain if the Spanish revolution could have remained at its height there would have been a more direct and active response of solidarity than was shown Spain. Then came the evil hand of Stalin, the new slogan that was to save the world and incidentally help Stalin's foreign policy, Democracy not revolution. Democracy became the battle cry. Well, the workers in democratic countries knew from their own sad experience that democracy is after all nothing more than Fascism in disguise. Why should they have enthusiasm for a war to save democracy when they knew that the same slogan had killed ten million men and wounded twenty in the last war and that their chains had only been fastened tighter around their legs and hands?

Now I realise dear comrade that everything in life is relative. I myself prefer a few small political liberties under democracy than no liberties at all under fascism. But the mass does not reason, it