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The Anti-Worker Repression in Republican Spain

Ethel MacDonald



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17 September 1937

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that they need not suffer for their loyalty to the cause of the proletariat.

—Nîmes, 10.09.1937

Comrade Ethel MacDonald, for whose release *L’Espagne Nouvelle* made repeated appeals, is now back among us. She has asked us to thank our readers for the gestures of solidarity afforded her and requested that the same effort and the same assistance now be afforded, with 100% greater intensity, in supporting and defending the revolutionaries held in the Modelo Prison, Montjuich and Valencia (among them lots of German and Italian comrades utterly bereft of legal guarantees and outside support).

Below, comrades will find an account of the situation inside Catalonia, based on the personal experiences of our valiant contributor.

To work, everyone. Help *L’Espagne Nouvelle* to mount the campaign required to rescue our brothers.

IN THE WAKE OF THE RETREAT

The May Days debacle in Barcelona led to a formidable wave of repression by the Communist Party targeting the revolutionary personnel who had fought on the streets and barricades to bar the way to the counter-revolution. Since then, the schemes of Moscow’s men have been deployed in the light of day. Between 3 and 8 [May 1937], they showed their true faces to the entire world looking on. Along with the Assault Guards and the Civil Guard, they made their stand against the Barcelona workers in a coup de force designed to wrest control of firms and social life from the labouring masses organized within the CNT and partly also within the UGT. Their efforts proved less successful than might have been hoped because within hours the proletariat rose up as one to defend its rights. Workers from the CNT and members of the FAI and POUM stood side by side to bar their way.

But the workers’ backlash was aborted by the potential ministers from the trade union organizations, after which the Com-

munist Party's fury was unleashed on the members of revolutionary organizations. In the aim of disguising the part that it had played during the May events, the Communist Party, aided and abetted by the Valencia-controlled Public Order Delegation, strove to shift the blame for the uprising on to the anarchists and the members of the POUM. In authentically Moscow-style fashion, any who had resisted reactionary moves were denounced as "Trotskyists, provocateurs, fascist agents, etc." Unable to get the better of the CNT-FAI in the short term, the Bolsheviks started with the POUM.

THE 'ANTI-TROTSKYITE' OFFENSIVE

The POUM is made up of Marxists from a range of persuasions, in contact with lots of Marxist groups in a range of countries. Hanging the tag "Trotskyist" on these groups is as handy as it is wrong. Only a tiny faction within the POUM has a definite connection with Trotsky and a lot of its members are utterly opposed to him. But all of these strands share with the anarchists a patent lack of sympathy with the bourgeois-stalinist CP and this is why, in the hope of covering up its own treachery, the Comintern has lumped all its opponents together, labelling them "Trotskyists" in defiance of the actual facts.

And the Stalinists added the most cynical brutality to their usual slanders.

Over the space of two days, POUM locals were shut down, their presses seized and Spanish and foreign comrades were sent to prison. Comrades living in houses commandeered by the POUM since the July revolution had their effects searched and their papers and documents impounded.

STALIN AND THE WORLD COUNTER-REVOLUTION

Today, thanks to the Stalinists, there is a ready-made list of revolutionaries, a blacklist accessible to any government that may seek access to it. What other purpose could there be to the systematic arrests of the foreign comrades fighting in Spain? How come Russia police personnel are photographing them one by one and making multiple copies of their fingerprints? The files on them will no doubt make it possible to monitor the movements of revolutionaries and, with the connivance of the political police forces across the world, to seize them at any point.

Stalinism, which has betrayed the hopes of workers in so many countries, should see its careering provocation and felony ended in Spain. If the action does not come from that country itself, it has to come from outside. There we have a short-term goal around which all revolutionaries around the globe must be united: action on behalf of the release of the revolutionaries jailed in Spain. Russia's masters, frightened that the possibility of there being a free country of workers might pose a threat to their own future are using every means at their disposal to crush the Spanish workers. And unless we intervene, they will pull this off. Are we going to be faced with another shambles like the Russian revolution? If we are to avert this, we have to act. The stalinists' deeds and actions have to be dragged into the light. We must incessantly protest at every Spanish embassy to secure the release of all the revolutionaries. We must urgently set up Committees to come to the aid of released comrades and secure them livelihoods. Respect for the right of asylum must be imposed on a number of countries. Our German and Italian comrades have neither rights nor protections nor homeland. It falls to us to see to it

GAGGED

The persecution is growing by the day. It is affecting even correspondents from foreign newspapers. The special correspondent from one great liberal newspaper in Great Britain has been missing for five weeks now. No information regarding him has been forthcoming, in spite of the intervention by two consuls. The journalist in question was not English, but Italian and, according to what I have discovered, operated exclusively as a correspondent for his newspaper, steering clear of active involvement in Spanish politics.

I have instanced just three cases, but there are thousands of similar ones. Those of us who are free, because their friends still have the capacity to protest, are jammy so-and-so's. But what about those of our comrades who have no friends and no homeland? Are we going to let them rot in prison just because we are not ready to help them? Solid comrades who had already endured too much persecution and imprisonment, are languishing in the dungeons of Spain merely for having fought in revolutionary Spain on behalf of the Spanish people's cause. Is it not a scandal that a party made up of bourgeois and small businessmen, for these make up the Communist Party in Spain, have the authority to annihilate the accomplishments and all of the efforts of the Spanish people? The POUM has been held answerable for the uprising in May. Now, the Spanish people and we foreigners who were in Spain at that time know that the blame for the days of bloodshed in May belongs, not with the POUM, but with the Communist Party and the fascist personnel within its ranks. If the POUM is answerable, so too are the anarchists. But if the anarchists are to blame, then that blame will have to be shared with the masses of the populace, as the Barcelona anarchists are the very people. And, after all, who is the Communist Party to oppose the will of the people?

MASS ARRESTS

At that time I had occasion to call daily on a Dutch anarchist comrade who had been jailed without charge. The day after the arrests of the POUM leaders, I called to see him as usual, with another female anarchist in tow. At 'Police Headquarters' where visiting permits were issued, I came upon five comrades of my acquaintance, three of them from the POUM and two from the CNT-FAI. They informed me that the Assault Guards had searched their quarters that very morning, arresting them and seizing their personal effects without a word of explanation. Because my female friend and I had spoken to them, we were also locked up. When we took exception to this, we were told that we were not "detainees", but merely "remanded". The fact that we were acquainted with the arrested comrades was grounds enough for us to be taken captive.

All that day there was a constant procession of comrades, foreigners most of them, who had been arrested like the ones first mentioned. In fact, so comprehensive was the round-up that a cigarette-seller operating in the doorway of the POUM headquarters was rounded up with the rest and was only freed when he claimed membership of the UGT and produced a membership card from that organization. Some female comrades bringing food to their husbands or partners were arrested and, as a rule, it was dangerous to be anywhere near 'Police Headquarters'.

THE PRISON REGIMEN

In police stations around Barcelona, it was virtually impossible to get news of those arrested. Bereft of any protection whatever, they were entirely at the mercy of the authorities.

Under Spanish law, no one may be held in secret for any more than five days and no longer than thirty days on remand,

without being tried or released. In practice, the situation is quite different. Our comrades were placed in cells and denied visitors for however long the authorities chose to deny them. The same goes for the length of their detention without trial. Instances of comrades jailed for months without trial and denied contact with the outside world are too numerous to list. And the conditions in which they live in prison are very dire.

The overall health situation in Barcelona leaves a lot to be desired and the position of the prisoners, especially during the early weeks following the mass arrests was genuinely unimaginable. The prisons and police stations being filled to overflowing, garages and warehouses were used as holding centres. In one such garage, directly facing the 'Police Headquarters' on the Via Durruti, 140 comrades were packed together. The luckier among them had a blanket to sleep on, but most had to lie down on the concrete floor. And not for one night but for weeks on end and, in certain cases, months on end. At the same time there was only one wash basin-cum-toilet. Their only food, served twice a day, was a plateful of rice soup and potatoes. At the Hotel Falcon, I saw a lot of men from the International Brigade totally enfeebled from lack of food. Being foreigners and without friends in Barcelona, nothing could be done to alleviate their enforced diet.

SCREAMING FROM UNDERNEATH THE GRINDSTONE

One way or another, protests were mounted and appeals got out, the upshot being that the POUM's militians, initially held at their former headquarters in the Hotel Falcon, were removed to proper prisons.

Not that that brought an end to the arrests. In the hotel in question, a lot of CNT-FAI comrades and International Brigade volunteers were jailed. These men had enlisted under the aegis

LEAVING NO TRACE

Allow me to add one or two more examples of the dangers hovering over our foreign revolutionary comrades. When I was freed thanks to the intervention of Fenner Brockway, secretary of the ILP of Great Britain and on account of the publicity afforded my case by the British and French comrades, an assurance was also secured from the Valencia government that William Krehm, a Canadian comrade, would be released. Krehm was not released: I was informed by the British consul that he had been deported a fortnight earlier, since when none of Krehm's friends in Barcelona has had any further news of him. Krehm had been expelled, but his friends have not heard a word from him and must conclude that he is still in prison. No prisoner is allowed to take his personal effects with him when leaving the country: I myself realized that all of my personal effects had vanished. Plainly, once someone is arrested, the conclusion is that she will have no further need of civilian clothing. After I was released, I made ongoing efforts to recover my papers and articles. This was denied me, on the grounds that they contained propaganda against the Spanish government.

The following is but one instance among thousands. The wife of one German comrade used to visit him in prison twice a week. That comrade had been arrested on returning from the front lines in a special mission. Later, he was relocated to the holding centre on the Calle Angel where the Cheka operates. His wife was told that she would be allowed to bring him a blanket and provisions, but once she had stepped outside to fetch him these things, nothing more was heard of her. In all likelihood, it had been a ploy to get rid of the wife as well.

GORY RUINS

The lot of the German and Italian comrades in Spain is heartbreakingly pathetic. Driven from their homelands, they sought refuge in France and elsewhere. But, when the call of the Spanish Revolution sounded, they cast aside what little they had and rushed to play their part in the great fight. Many have been wounded, crippled and undermined by serious illnesses. Thanks to the party of the bolshevist counter-revolution, they have been reduced to gory ruins. Some are languishing in prison, unable to find a refuge in any other country. And in Spain itself, the threat of arrest is constantly hovering over them. As the reaction makes progress, there will be growing numbers of arrests and expulsions.

What befalls those jailed, we cannot say. Where are all our foreign comrades? No news filters through to the public, thanks to the censor's close surveillance on the press. Actually, anything might become of them. Queries about the detainees go unsatisfied. Maybe they are captives, or perhaps dead. We have no way of knowing. They might, like Nin, have been done to death. Despite all theories to the contrary and statements issuing from the supposedly responsible authorities, there is no doubt in Barcelona that Nin is dead, a victim, like our comrade Berneri, of stalinism's executioners. At a monster rally held in Barcelona, a public announcement was made by Federica Montseny that the corpses of Nin and two other individuals have been discovered under the highway in Valencia. The full text of Federica Montseny's statement appears in the (Spanish edition of the) *Information Bulletin* published by the CNT-FAI dated 24 and 25 July. A recent edition of the POUM newspaper *La Batalla*, currently being published in defiance of the law, has the most explicit details regarding the way in which the murder was carried out. (Unfortunately, I cannot quote the text, as there was no way that I could smuggle papers of any sort out of Spain).

of the Communist Party in their respective countries, in the honest belief that they were to help the Spanish people in its battle against fascism. But the behaviour of their officers and political commissars on the front was so dictatorial and anti-communist as to compel them to voice protests. Now, protesting was rewarded with imprisonment.

Gradually, it became obvious that the Communist Party was not content with exterminating the POUM. Having swept them aside, they now turned their sights on their real foes: the comrades from the CNT-FAI. Foreign comrades in particular, they regarded as a threat. Those comrades knew the truth about the May events: each and every one of them was keen to make it known abroad. Unfortunately, there was complete censorship of the newspapers and the mail. As for the workers' control over the border, that had been done away with and handed over to the carabineers and Civil Guard, and the latter would only allow Communist Party sympathizers to leave the country. Day in and day out, the Dutch comrade I was visiting in prison regaled me with the names and tribulations of the many comrades who had been arrested in Port-Bou whilst attempting to leave the country and been fetched back to Barcelona and imprisoned.

I spoke with lots of comrades during my time in prison and the only upside to my captivity was this: that it gave me the opportunity to hear expressions of utter disgust with the enormous man-trap known as the Communist Party from the lips of recently expelled ex-communists.

THE GPU AT WORK

My own arrest was a typical example of the way in which the Communist Party operates. In Scotland, the group of which I am a member has always been utterly opposed to the CP. In countering its propaganda with our own, we have always had

to reckon with their deep-seated ignorance and brutality; in Spain, despite the fact that the party recruits its supporters from among a rather different class than in Great Britain, its stance is exactly the same. The moment it gets hold of the tiniest morsel of power, it exploits it in order to break its opponents by force.

Late in the night, the Assault Guards and Security (Public Order) police raided the house in which I was living. Without a word of explanation, they set about ransacking all the rooms and every cupboard in the house. My room was ransacked and my personal effects, scattered all over the place, were strewn on the floor. After stumbling upon what they reckoned was proof enough to get me hanged (revolutionary literature, etc.) they asked to see my passport. Having scrutinized it, they announced that I was in Spain illegally, even though I had entered strictly according to regulations, before crossing of the border was ruled out for foreigners. They tried to get me to concede that I was not British, but French and that my plan was to leave the country along with a sum of money. All evidence to the contrary meant nothing. They believed what they wanted to believe. In the end, I was lumped with another five comrades and taken to the station. All of the papers and documents in my possession were unlawfully taken away and every objection was met with the same response: genuine antifascists, they argued, would raise no objection to being searched and questioned and to their homes being searched – having, by definition, nothing with which to reproach themselves or conceal from the police! After an interrogation that was equally nonsensical and tendentious and which got them nowhere we were subjected to comprehensive fingerprinting. Two of the prisoners were released at that point, but as for the rest of us, we were moved overnight to a different police station. My three male comrades were locked in an underground cell, but, I being a woman, was authorized to stay upstairs and to spend the remainder of the night in a chair.

MY DETENTION IN THE HOTEL FALCON

The following evening, our ‘pals’ from ‘Public Order’ showed up again and asked us to sign a statement about our having been arrested on account of our papers not being in order. Let me add that two of our three male comrades had returned from the front just five days before and their papers were wholly in order, except that being expelled Germans, they had no passports of course.

After that we were taken to ‘Police Headquarters’ on the Via Durruti and handed over to other police personnel who brought us to the notorious Hotel Falcon, formerly the headquarters of the POUM, which the Stalinists had turned into a sort of a private political prison. There I bumped into loads of familiar faces. Despite the nonsensicality of our predicament, we could still joke about it. We were taken to our rooms by means of a lift and even had running water there. But right now the Hotel Falcon is no longer in use as a prison. Its inhabitants have been relocated – some to the Modelo Prison, others to Montjuich and, worse still, some to Valencia.

Morale is high among the imprisoned comrades. The persecution and jailing of revolutionaries are nothing new in Spain and a lot of foreign comrades had endured the same treatment in their respective homelands. Even persecution at the hands of self-styled communists is not without precedent. The treatment meted out to revolutionaries in Russia is there as testimony to what is to be expected of the current regime over there in the socialist homeland. But for revolutionaries to be arrested in such large numbers in Spain even as their comrades and brethren are falling on every front facing the fascist foe represents a scandal that brings everyone who tolerates it without speaking out in protest into disrepute.

The Revolution should spell the end of prisons, rather than just a change of the prison guards.