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Revolutionary War?

A Contribution to the Debate about the Spanish Revolution

Winter 2000

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# Revolutionary War?

**A Contribution to the Debate about the Spanish  
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During the Spanish revolution groups of anarchists criticised the C.N.T. - F.A.I. for failing to fight a revolutionary war, since then this argument has been taken up in such publications as 'Lessons of the Spanish Revolution' and 'The Spanish Civil War: Anarchism in Action'. As Camilo Berneri put it "The dilemma, war or revolution, has no meaning. The only dilemma is this - either victory over Franco through revolutionary war or defeat."<sup>1</sup>

In this essay I'm going to examine the case for revolutionary war but crucially not from the perspective of revolution and counter-revolution in the 'republican zone' but rather from the perspective of military conflict raging throughout the country. In other words I'm not going to be questioning the need for revolution but rather the practicality of revolutionary war. I'll be doing this by giving a brief overview of the war - as the facts speak for themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in 'The Spanish Civil War 1936 - 1939' by Paul Preston page 126.

The first fact it is important not to overlook is the considerable and widespread support for fascism - in the elections of February 16th 4,000,000 votes went to the right wing parties and 4,700,000 for the left - important to remember lest we overestimate the possibility that Franco was going to be beset by mass troop desertions or popular uprisings behind his lines.

When the coup began the General's victory in Old Castille and Navarre was assured by the level of support for the reactionary movement in those areas, the fall of Vigo and La Coruna in Galica along with Seville , Cordoba, Granada and Cadiz in Anadulsia can be put down to the refusal of the Republican government to arm the working class or as is more useful and realistic the failures on the part of the libertarian left to prepare for an event which could be seen to have been coming. Elsewhere the putsch was suppressed, for instance, in Barcelona and Madrid where a combination of the continued loyalty of elements of the State forces , the strength of the labour movement and the emergence of armed militias saw off reaction. Arms were distributed be elements of the police and army opposed to the rising, in Madrid further arms were secured by the capture of Montana barracks on the 20th, while in Barcelona the C.N.T. - F.A.I. seized arms depots on the 19th. Of great importance was the failure of the rebelling generals to capture the Navy , whose crews mutinied, slew their insurgent officers and blockaded the Straits of Gibraltar. This prevented General Franco from moving his Army of Africa to Spain and that was the fascist's main force General Mola's Army of the North in northern Spain being far inferior to it . It was at this point that foreign aid became of paramount importance, Franco appealed for help from the Fascist governments of Portugal , Italy and Germany. Soon German transport aircraft were airlifting his troops into Spain and with the Italian bombers ending the blockade they were soon joined by troopships. Furthermore supplies were reaching the Army of the North, which had

enjoyed by the State, warfare inherently requires a authoritarian hierarchical organisation - because no one is going to vote for their certain death (e.g. should some unit need to be sacrificed in a diversion) because decisions can only be made in secret and because those decisions have to have trained specialists to make them . An exception to this would be limited guerrilla warfare and urban insurrections ( I wouldn't call it war ) which can be fought on a revolutionary basis but the Spanish Civil War was well beyond that. Not only is such a thing as a revolutionary war highly improbable I would go so far as to say that revolution and war are irreconcilable pole opposites. I may be wrong about that but I'm not wrong in saying that the dilemma of how to fight a revolutionary war was a very real one and until it is answered arguments to the effect that this should have been done or that should have been done or that this shows the failings of anarcho-syndicalism and so on are treating the revolution and counter-revolution behind the frontline as if it happened in a vacuum or in some sort of alternative dimension where there wasn't a war going on.

Despite this these criticisms are to be welcomed, no organisation, form of organisation, theory, period of revolutionary history or personality should be treated as some sort of 'holy grail' but rather all should be subject to a criticism and debate.

Of course against this claim can be held up the legendary "People's War" of various guerrilla armies which are indeed legend. However even the most cursory examination of the history of guerrilla armies will show that generally speaking guerrillas fall into two categories the ones which are the Imperialist proxies and the dead ones. To take for example the famous World War 2 partisans of Yugoslavia: "the main Russian aid arrived in the terminal stages of the war when the Partisan forces were moving over from guerrilla to frontal warfare. According to Soviet sources this totalled 20,528 rifles , 68,819 machine guns, light machine guns and automatic weapons , 3,797 anti-tank rifles , 3,364 mortars , 170 anti-tank guns , 898 varied types of guns, 491 aircraft, 65 tanks, 1,329 radio stations, 7 base hospitals, 4 surgical field hospitals and other items of various kinds." the extent of British support is harder to reckon but "During 1944 'something like' 9,000 tons of supplies were dropped to Partisans in Yugoslavia , including 100,000 rifles, 50,000 machine guns, 1,400 mortars and one million mortar bombs and handgrenades, and 100 million rounds of small arms ammunition. This did not include supplies that went by sea, among which were food and medical materials, trucks and quantities of fuel, as well as 107 tanks and 346 planes , a number of landing craft and small boats. In addition two squadrons of Partisan pilots were trained by the RAF. An aspect of Allied aid which was immensely helpful to Tito - and gratefully acknowledged by him - was the evacuation of sick and wounded to Italy, and their treatment in special hospitals which the British established for them."<sup>7</sup> Likewise with virtually every other successful "People's Army" - all are in reality attached to an Imperialist life support system.

The truth is there can hardly be any kind of revolutionary war, apart from the amply demonstrated (and I would have thought obvious) near total monopoly on organised violence

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<sup>7</sup> 'Tito: A Biography' by Phyllis Auty page 222.

failed to capture Madrid, via Portugal. This is the point at which the situation changes from one of street fighting with either isolated military units being defeated by the militias or unarmed workers unable to resist the uprising to one of full scale civil war. The next months saw two offensives, the Army of the North took the city of Irun thereby cutting the Basque areas off from France and the Army of Africa pushed northward towards Madrid. Events in Irun are outlined in 'Spanish Civil War: Anarchism in Action' : "This lack of arms did not only affect the Aragon front, Irun fell because of this shortage of weapons. One reporter described it. "They fought to the last cartridge (the workers of Irun). When they had no more ammunition they hurled packs of dynamite. When the dynamite was gone they rushed forward barehanded . . . while the sixty times stronger enemy butchered them with their bayonets."<sup>2</sup>

By the first week of November the Army of Africa had reached Madrid but crucially Russian arms in the form of 100 tanks and 50 fighter planes along with crews to operate them as well as trucks and medical supplies had arrived before them. The arrival of the Comintern's Army aka the International Brigades further stiffened the defence of Madrid and further internationalised the conflict as did that of Nazi Germany's Condor Legion . The civil war was rapidly taking on the characteristics of a proxy war between rival powers.

1937 was to see three Republican offensives as well as the conquest of the Basque areas and Asturias by the Fascists . To take the latter first, historian Gabriel Jackson describes the fall of Bilbao : " the 'Iron Ring' showed the same general weaknesses as did most of the Republican fortifications. Its trenches formed a thin perimeter in the hills outside the city, and in most areas there were only two lines, 200 to 300 yards apart . They

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<sup>2</sup> 'The Spanish Civil War: Anarchism in Action' by Eddie Conlon page 17.

stood on crests, with generally uncamouflaged concrete visible to the enemy, without positions in depth on the counterslope and without protection on the flanks.

Both political and military commentators at the time suspected treason in the entire planning of the defense of Bilbao, but the errors in these fortifications - as of those south of Madrid in October 1936 - could just as well have arisen from the military inexperience of those who designed them. In any case it is difficult to believe that Basque engineers purposely planned a trench system which would be untenable for their sons and brothers."<sup>3</sup>

The exact ins and outs of the Republic's defeats at Brunete, Belchite and Teruel need not concern us - what is important is that we are now talking about massive battles between two conventional armies with tens of thousands of men and hundreds of tanks, artillery guns and aircraft . By now the Popular Army had been formed, dominated by Communists, officered by remnants of the pre-1936 Spanish Army as well as Russians and armed by the Soviet Union. According to historian Paul Preston these defeats demonstrated that "the sheer material superiority of the rebel forces could always prevail over the courage of the loyalist troops."<sup>4</sup>

Franco followed up his victory at Teruel in Aragon by smashing through republican lines with 100,000 troops, 200 tanks and complete command of the air. In mid April 1938 they reached the sea and cut off Catalonia from the rest of republican Spain. In late July they were poised 25 miles from the Republic's capital Valencia and the Republic lanced it's final and fatal offensive establishing a bridgehead across the Ebro trying to unite it's divided territory, according to Paul Preston "Five hundred cannon fired an average of over 13,500 hundred rounds at them ev-

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<sup>3</sup> 'A Concise History of the Spanish Civil War' by Gabriel Jackson page 128.

<sup>4</sup> 'The Spanish Civil War 1936 - 1939' by Paul Preston page 149.

ery day for nearly four months ...Determined to smash the Republican army, Franco gathered over 30,000 fresh troops with new German equipment."<sup>5</sup>

The defining characteristic of the war was republican defeats partly due to inexperience but primarily due to the greater foreign military intervention on the "Nationalist" side - 100,000 Italians, 20,000 Portuguese , 5,000 Germans plus the latest in German military technology - more than a match for Soviet supplies even when they were not of Tsarist vintage. From 1937 onwards Franco with 200,000 more troops than the Republicans was always able to meet any Republican offensive with, fresh equipped reinforcements and was able to beat again and again the Popular Army. Even if the Soviet Union had backed the Popular Army to a far greater extent Franco would still have won as the Condor Legion gave the fascists control of the air<sup>6</sup> - the Soviet airforce being decidedly inferior and the rest of the Republic's planes dating back to the First World War. O.K. that was the "Nationalist" army versus the Popular army I'm not even going to argue against the notion that anarchist militias, whom of course Vickers and Krupps were just waiting to arm and who were going to be trained to operate tanks, aircraft and artillery by divine inspiration, were capable of doing any better or indeed fighting any kind of war without the Popular army let alone against the Popular army and Franco - which is what a "revolutionary war" would have meant.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. page 156.

<sup>6</sup> If you don't want to take my word for it take that of the fighter Francisco 'El Quico' Sabate who "wanted to become a pilot, as he realized that the Air Force would prove to be the most decisive military arm of the war. "

The training was in the Soviet Union and the Air Force was completely Communist dominated "and to become a pilot it was necessary to be a member of the JSU (United Young Socialists) , or at the very least have a special recommendation as a persona grata. El Quico thought at one time of joining the JSU, if there was no other way; after all , as he said , 'the habit does not make the monk.'" ('Sabate: Guerrilla Extraordinary' by Antonio Tellez page 30.)