

Angiolillo's Vengeance

Solidaridad Obrera

August 1998

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On 20 August 1897, the Italian anarchist Michele Angiolillo Lombardio was garrotted to death in Vergara, Spain. He was 36 years old and just a few days earlier he had killed the Spanish prime minister Antonio Canovas del Castillo in the spa town of Santa Agueda, capitalising upon an oversight on the part of the police escort.

We have few details about Angiolillo. We know that he was from Naples and entered Spain from France, coming from Marseilles in 1897. Previously he had been living in England and it was probably there that he met the Spanish anarchist refugees who would have filled him in on the situation of the anarchist movement in their homeland, especially as regards the most active elements at the time, the Catalans.

The Montjuich Trial

The engineer Tarrida del Marmol's book, *Inquisitors of Spain*, had just been published. The author, having fled to England, offered a first hand account of the so-called Montjuich trial which had followed the bombing of the Corpus Christi procession in Barcelona in 1896. A bomb had been thrown at the procession – not, oddly enough at the dignitaries leading it but at the body of the procession – and five workers and a policeman had been killed. This curious circumstance, plus the fact that the actual perpetrator was never identified led to suspicions of a set-up or connivance on the part of the police themselves, a much more likely story than most might be inclined to believe.

In any event, hundreds of arrests ensued and the matter was used as an excuse to put the anarchists on the rack. The aim was to indict some of the leading ideologues still at liberty, Tarrida del Marmol among them. Later, in his book, he would tell of the awful tortures to which the accused were subjected in the Montjuich fortress to extract phoney confessions. The upshot of the trial was that lengthy prison sentences were handed down and five anarchist militants were executed by firing squad. In only one case was there a hint of possible involvement in the preparations for the bombing. The other four were completely innocent.

The Restoration Regime

The First Republic having foundered due to military intervention, the Bourbon restoration established by Canovas del Castillo (endorsed by Isabella II, Maria Cristina and Alfonso XII, one after another) put paid to a pre-revolutionary situation and ushered in unprecedented stability, thanks to rotation in power of the conservatives (led by Canovas) and the liberals (led by Sagasta), both of them recognising the authority of the monarchy. That stability which favoured big business and shady deals served the interests of the landowning oligarchy and superior officers in the military. Their chief enemy (given, as well, the dithering and limp character of incipient marxist socialism) was anarchism: Not just on account of sporadic and controversial outrages, which many anarchists condemned, but because of the certain fact that the anarchist movement was growing in influence every day and that at all costs situations such as has occurred before where the anarchists fomented and led strikes, revolts and popular disturbances (as in Alcoy, Jerez, Cadiz, Barcelona, etc.) had to be averted. The position in Andalusia where hunger was an endemic problem might turn explosive again and any disturbances were put down at gunpoint and with mass arrests, not to mention recourse to the *ley de fugas* [shot 'trying to escape']. Dur-

ing this time, paradoxically, as Gerald Brenan puts it 'every Civil Guard turned into a recruiting-sergeant for anarchism.' In 1896 a new law was promulgated: it was designed specifically to crack down on anarchism.

As if that were not enough, the response to the pro-independence agitation in the Spanish colonies took the form of *carte blanche* being given to the most reactionary among the military. In the Philippines, a revolt had been ruthlessly quashed and among those mown down was the most popular leader, the Tagalog José Rizal. General Martinez Campos was dispatched to Cuba to defend the short-term interests of the Spanish landowners: he was soon replaced by General Weyler who displayed greater zeal in his efforts to de-populate the island. His greatest problem was ensuring regular supplies to his huge army which was doomed to hunger and decimating disease by the corruption of the army bureaucrats.

This policy of bloody terror was to furnish an ideal pretext for the US government to persuade the voters that war should be declared on foot of some obscure manoeuvre. The war with the Americans, under-rated by the 'brilliant' Spanish strategists, was to culminate in the disaster of 1898 and the traumatic loss of Spain's colonies and the complete disgracing of her army which, in spite of swallowing up the bulk of the national budget, stood exposed in its archaic and corrupt structures, especially the extremely pricy navy which was wiped out by armoured US ships. Canovas (someone the present rightwing government would have us look up to again) and his regime had one pronounced feature in the shape of a superciliousness that placed them beyond good and evil and inaccessible to any sort of influence by popular feeling. His lapidary pronouncements are famous: 'He is Spanish who cannot be anything else' and 'Poverty is the badge of stupidity...' This in a society prey to chronic starvation, with a 75% overall illiteracy rate and a State groaning under a massive debt run up by exorbitant military expenditure.

Angiolillo Face To Face With Canovas

By the time that Angiolillo arrived in Barcelona, anarchists had been driven completely underground: their public meetings, newspapers were strictly banned. He may well have been involved in an operation to raise funds and was arrested but the complete lack of evidence against him and good references resulted in his being released.

He then set about laying the preparations for the assassination bid that had brought him to Spain. He travelled to Madrid and assumed a false identity as one Emilio Rinaldini, reporter for the *Il Popolo* newspaper. He journeyed by train to Zumarraga and made his way to the spa town of Santa Agueda where he claimed to have come in search of a cure for his chronic pharyngitis. He had with him a small suitcase in which he had two revolvers and a few sticks of dynamite. He dumped the dynamite in order to avert injury to the innocent. Although he spoke with no one, his educated manner and great height did not go unnoticed; because of them several witnesses claimed to have seen him strolling around the environs of the Buena Esperanza hermitage just as the worshippers were leaving on the morning of 7 August. Once again, Angiolillo decided against accosting Canovas because of the large number of people in the vicinity.

His chance came the next day when the prime minister was fleetingly left alone with his wife on a bench in the spa. Rushing over, he fired at Canovas killing him virtually outright. He was detained and offered no resistance and taken to Vergara to appear before a summary court martial as the law required, even though he was, of course, no serviceman. Under questioning he

implicated no one, stating that he had acted alone at all times; he declared that he was a dedicated anarchist and that the assassination was by way of a reprisal for the torture and killing of his comrades in the Montjuich fortress and for the execution of the Filipino rebel leader José Rizal. He was sentenced to die by the garrotte, a sentence carried out forthwith on 20 August 1897. He appeared calm at all times and showed no signs of remorse.

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From *El Solidario*, August '98, organ of the Solidaridad Obrera group in Spain. Translated by
Paul Sharkey.

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