

# **Building Utopia**

**The Spanish Revolution 1936–1937**

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# Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Conclusion</b> . . . . .	9
<b>July 1936</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>The Workers' Victory</b> . . . . .	31
<b>The Social Revolution</b> . . . . .	32
<b>Collectivisation</b> . . . . .	34
<b>The Social Revolution</b> . . . . .	35
<b>August 1936</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>War or Revolution?</b> . . . . .	44
<b>September 1936</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>The CNT joins the Generalidad</b> . . . . .	49
<b>October 1936</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>November 1936</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>CNT entry into Madrid Government November 1936</b> . . . . .	58
<b>Militarisation – November 1936</b> . . . . .	67
<b>The Flight of the Government</b> . . . . .	69
<b>Madrid – The Death of Durruti</b> . . . . .	70
<b>December 1936</b>	<b>73</b>
<b>January 1937</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>February 1937</b>	<b>81</b>
<b>March 1937</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>Crisis of Generalidad Provoked</b> . . . . .	87
<b>April 1937</b>	<b>88</b>
<b>May 1937</b>	<b>91</b>
<b>Tuesday, 4 May</b> . . . . .	93
<b>Wednesday, 5 May</b> . . . . .	95
<b>Thursday 6 May</b> . . . . .	97
<b>Friday 7 May</b> . . . . .	98
<b>The May Days – Aftermath</b> . . . . .	103

June 1937	106
July 1937	107
August 1937	108
The Council of Aragón . . . . .	108
<b>Background Briefs</b>	<b>114</b>
Summer 1936: Why did we fail to take Zaragoza? . . . . .	114
Period of hesitancy . . . . .	114
From Barcelona to Zaragoza, a walk in the park, militarily? . . . . .	115
Dream Time . . . . .	116
Operation ‘Free Commune’: The Taking of Zaragoza . . . . .	117
Fifth Column Jiggery Pokery . . . . .	119
Planning Days . . . . .	119
Days of Hope . . . . .	120
DURRUTI’S ABSENCE, A DECISIVE FACTOR . . . . .	121
<b>Libertarian Communism</b>	<b>123</b>
<b>Collectivisations in Alcoy</b>	<b>127</b>
<b>Victor Blanco’s Story</b>	<b>131</b>
<b>The Question of Money</b>	<b>135</b>
<b>What Can We Do? (Camillo Berneri)</b>	<b>139</b>
<b>Sébastien Faure</b>	<b>141</b>
<b>The Problem of Militarisation</b>	<b>146</b>
The Problem of Militarisation. To the comrades, to the confederal columns . .	146
The staffing and specialities of Companies, Regiments and Divisions and the formation of a single collective command for the Aragón front . . . . .	147
On behalf of the Durruti Column: . . . . .	148
<b>Statement by Vivaldo Fagundes</b>	<b>149</b>
Protest before the libertarians, of present and future regarding the capitula- tions of 1937 by an ‘uncontrollable’ from the Iron Column . . . . .	149
<b>Address by Federica Montseny, 3 January 1937</b>	<b>153</b>
<b>Militarisation – March 1937: Dissolution of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils</b>	<b>158</b>
<b>February 1937: Memorandum from War Committee of the Iron Column, 16 Febru-     ary 1937</b>	<b>159</b>

<b>April 1937 –An Open Letter to Federica Montseny</b>	<b>161</b>
<b>April 1937: Confidential letter from an agent of Negrín, 15 April 1937</b>	<b>166</b>
<b>May: Unpublished Letter to Max Nettlau from Emma Goldman</b>	<b>168</b>
<b>September: The international debate on war and revolution</b>	<b>170</b>
<b>“Catastrophic Revolution” by Brandt</b>	<b>171</b>
<b>Pierre Besnard’s reply to ‘<i>Catastrophic Revolution</i>’</b>	<b>173</b>
<b>June: Anarchist Intelligence and Security Services</b>	<b>176</b>
<b>The POUM: Trotsky and the POUM</b>	<b>177</b>

# INTRODUCTION

Within the Spanish anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist movements there were three distinct points of view on the question of war and revolution. The first, probably the majority view, was that the war would be over in a matter of weeks, after all, a few days had been enough to rout the army in Barcelona and other industrial centres, and that the social revolution and Libertarian Communism as debated and adopted by the CNT's national congress at Zaragoza in February, five months previously, was an inseparable aspect of the struggle against economic and social oppression. Thus, the movement should proceed immediately to socialise the factories, the land and their communities.

The second position was that held by members of the regional, national and peninsular committees of the CNT-FAI, the so-called 'notables', office holders such as such as Horacio Prieto, Mariano Rodriguez, Federica Montseny, Diego Abad de Santillan, García Oliver, etc. They anticipated a lengthy war and opposed implementing Libertarian Communism until the war was won. They opted instead for compromising alliances with the bourgeois Republican, Catalanist and Stalinist parties.

Their argument was that such a strategy would prevent a situation developing wherein a victorious but exhausted CNT might be overwhelmed by another political force which had been more sparing with its forces ie, the Spanish Communist Party.

It was a fatal strategy that quickly absorbed them, undermined their principles and transformed what had hitherto been a great instrument of the working class into just another rigid bureaucratic institution.

The third body of opinion, a minority one held by militants such as Durruti, Camillo Berneri, Jaime Balius, and so on (and one which I incidentally agree with) also anticipated a lengthy war because of the involvement of Germany and Italy — but held that war and revolution were inseparable.

Only a libertarian revolution could finally destroy fascism because to do so meant destroying the state, since fascism only means a certain mode of the state: all states turn fascist when the threat to the privilege that the state protects — and to a degree also embodies — becomes strong enough, which happens when the participatory procedures of the state can no longer secure that privilege.

Fascism, in other words, is enforced class collaboration, as opposed to the voluntary class collaboration of parliamentary government.

My main contention is, briefly, that between July 21 and the end of August 1936, the so-called 'notables' of the CNT-FAI regional, national and peninsular committees abandoned all pretence of being revolutionary organs.

Instead, they constituted a vested interest structure that served, primarily, to apply the brakes to the spontaneous revolutionary activity of the union rank and file and to repress the revolutionary activists of the Libertarian Youth, the confederal defence cadres, the action groups and affinity groups such as the 'Friends of Durruti' .

They promoted 'Anti-fascist unity' and state power at the expense of anarchist principles and values, and imposed the hegemony of the Catalan CNT-FAI leadership over the local revolutionary committees and the general assemblies, not only of Catalonia, but of Aragón as well particularly the Regional Defence Council of Aragón. Their principal aim being to perpetuate their power base, even at the expense of the revolutionary anarchist principles and values that had inspired the largest mass labour union in Spanish history

For them the instrumental means had become the organisational end. Not only that; they were now part of a state that was increasingly dominated not just by reformist, welfarist, egalitarian social democrats, but by the agents of Soviet communism, anarchism's deadliest enemy

The 'notables' careers as anarchists were over — they were now counter-revolutionaries.

When the army's Barcelona garrison moved out of their barracks at 4.30 in the morning of 19 July the military lacked an essential ingredient for success, surprise!

The Regional Defence Committee of the CNT and the Anarchist Groups' Liaison Commission had had precise information as to the date of the military rising since the 13<sup>th</sup>. Within minutes, factory and ships' sirens were wailing their pre-arranged signal to the 300 or so CNT defence cadres waiting on the streets. They had also organised two mobile command centres, which were quickly on site at their pre-arranged strategic vantage points.

Despite having been presented with evidence that advanced preparations for a military rising were under way, neither President Luis Companys of the Catalan Government nor Prime Minister Casares Quiroga trusted the anarcho-syndicalist CNT, and refused to authorise — unsurprisingly perhaps — the distribution of arms to a mass labour union whose stated objective was libertarian communism.

The prospect of unleashing a social revolution by arming the people was, to the Republican bourgeoisie, more catastrophic than the alternative scenario of a military coup and fascism. The slogan of the reactionaries was — at least — the defence of tradition, family and property!

Barcelona police chief Federico Escofet for example was perfectly happy to arm the mainly reformist UGT union members, but as he explained:

'To arm the CNT represented an immediate or later danger for the Republican regime in Catalonia of EQUAL danger for its existence as the military rebellion. Companys and I agreed on the necessity of *NOT* distributing the arms, because the CNT-FAI was the dominant force. These armed elements, who undoubtedly would provide invaluable assistance in the struggle against the rebels, could also endanger the existence of the Republic and the government of the Generalitat.'

Escofet did everything in his power to prevent the militants getting their hands on the weapons in the San Andrés arsenal. He knew that once the people had those arms the monopoly of coercion, which gave the state its authority, would be broken and state power would collapse.

To this end he sent a company of loyal Civil Guard to defend the place, but they arrived too late. By that time the barracks had already been invaded and ransacked by workers.

This was probably the first pivotal event that transformed what the military hoped would be a straightforward military pronunciamiento into a rebellion, and then into a social revolution.

It was the moment when political power shifted, albeit briefly, from the Generalitat Palace to the union branches and to the local revolutionary committees.

Next morning, the 20<sup>th</sup> of July, police chief Escofet reported to President Companys that the rebellion had been put down, to which Companys replied, somewhat acidly, that that was all very well but the situation was still chaotic with armed and uncontrollable mobs rampaging through the streets.

Escofet threw the ball back into the politician's court:

'Mr President, I undertook to dominate the military revolt in Barcelona and I have done this. But an authority requires the means of coercion to make itself obeyed, and these means do not exist today. As a result, there is no authority. And I, my dear President, do not know how to perform miracles for the moment we are all overcome by the situation including the leaders of the CNT. The only solution, Mr President is to contain the situation politically, without minimising our respective authorities.'

As Escofet foresaw, the administrative leadership of the CNT, the 'notables, overtaken by events were as surprised as the politicians at the overnight shift in power. Having extolled the organisational virtues of the working class throughout their lives as militants, now that the workers were breaking their chains —and not just mentally but physically too — and that the dream was becoming a reality by a revolutionary process which threatened to make their role superfluous, they began having second thoughts, openly doubting the people's ability to administer their own lives in their own interests.

This is the thinking of all authoritarians who cannot even understand, let alone tolerate, the communal creativity that comes with the ending of division.

Once human beings see through the fragile egotistical characters that authoritarian society has bestowed upon them, to keep them divided, weak, and dependent on their supposed superiors, and realise that they have nothing to lose by sinking their differences, discovering their humanity and making common cause with each other — they have a world to win.

Despite their threats of social revolution earlier that summer in response to the much-talked-about rightist coup, the 'influential militants' who met on the 20<sup>th</sup> of July concluded that the 'objective conditions for social revolution' were not right. The military rebellion that had been unleashed, although it had triggered the revolutionary situation, would be the chief obstacle to the consolidation of the revolution, and would ultimately destroy it.

The higher committees of the CNT-FAI-FIJL in Catalonia were, therefore, caught on the horns of a dilemma — social revolution or bourgeois democracy.

They either committed themselves to the social revolution regardless of the difficulties involved in fighting both fascism and international capitalism or, whether through fear of fascism or fear of the people, they abandoned their anarchist principles and revolutionary objectives to bolster and become part of the bourgeois state in the hope that after the defeat of fascism it would undergo a transition and become a genuinely humane organ of power that operated in the interests of the people.

Faced with an imperfect state of affairs and preferring defeat to a possibly pyrrhic victory, the Catalan anarchist leadership renounced anarchism in the name of expediency and removed the social transformation of Spain from their agenda.

**BUT** what the CNT-FAI 'notables' failed to grasp was that the decision whether or not to implement Libertarian Communism *was not THEIRS to make*.

Anarchism was not something that could be transformed from theory into practice by organisational dictat. The anarchists had performed their task as the pathfinders and shock troops of

the revolution. They had implanted the ideas, and helped create the necessary environment in which those ideas and practices could be nourished and flourish.

But it was beyond their brief or their abilities to put anarchism into practice that was a task only the people themselves could perform.

Nor did the CNT-FAI leadership take on board the fact that the movement of 19 July had acquired a political direction of its own. On their own initiative, and without any intervention by the leadership of the unions or political parties, the CNT rank and file along with other union militants had, with the collapse of state power, superseded their individual partisan identities and had been welded – Catholics, Communists, Socialists, Republicans, Marxists and Anarchists – into genuinely popular non-partisan revolutionary committees controlling their respective neighbourhoods.

They were the natural organisms of the revolution – and the direct expression of popular power.

By failing to supplant the ‘legitimate’ political element within the state, the military had provoked the collapse of State power. It was the people in arms – led by the union defence committees – who had resisted the reactionaries wresting the initiative from the government and thereby depriving its rule of either legitimacy or effect. It was the people who now wielded power – in the working class districts the barrios and at the point of production and distribution, not the State or the union leaders /

In the immediate aftermath of the defeat of the fascist coup a dual power situation existed, an actual popular power against a collapsed centralised political and union power now in total eclipse, although tragically as events were to prove not for long.

From the very first moment, therefore, the higher committees of the CNT-FAI set aside traditional anarcho-sindicalist reliance on the creative spirit of the people and their capacity for self-organisation, blindly disregarding Isaac Puente’s warning in his pamphlet *Libertarian Communism*’

There should be no superstructure above the local organisation other than that with a specific function which cannot be carried out locally’ thereby becoming the unwitting agents in a tragically destructive process.

By imposing their leadership, these partisan committees suffocated the mushrooming popular autonomous revolutionary centres – the grass-roots assemblies in every factory and neighbourhood, the identifying feature of all great revolutions – preventing them from developing and proving themselves as an efficient and viable means of coordinating communications, defence and provisioning.

They also prevented the local revolutionary committees from integrating with each other to form a regional, provincial and national federal network that would facilitate the revolutionary task of social and economic reconstruction.

This process involved many complex factors – psychological as well as political.

Particularly powerful were the close ties of loyalty and the moral imperatives of solidarity that bound the individual CNT rank and file militants to the Organisation, and which made them hesitate to express public disagreement with the leadership in a time of crisis.

Equally, the sharp break with normal democratic union procedures – due to the ‘circumstances’ of war, governmental collaboration and the need for ‘antifascist unity’ – led to the higher committees ruling in the ‘interests’ of the base. What had been moral authority became coercive authority.



As I said earlier, they became de facto part of the state. There's also the fact that large numbers of particularly seasoned militants — i.e. wise and combat-hardened comrades — “marched in the direction of gunfire” and were too busy fighting the fascists to fight counter-revolution of any colour in the rear. This surely explains a lot.

For example, militants delegated by their district committees to go to the new CNT headquarters for news and advice on behalf of those local committees, were cherry-picked and arbitrarily co-opted into the centralised union apparatus.

The person principally responsible for this disastrous policy, was the clownish and, even to me, anyway, criminally incompetent Mariano Vázquez, the recently appointed CNT Regional Secretary and member of the FAI Peninsular committee:

‘Your place is here, not in the Locals’ was how he greeted suitable local militants who came in search of news.

Federica Montseny was another of those ‘influential militants’ catapulted to organisational prominence — without any democratic mandate either from her barrio committee or from the teachers’ union, to which she had only recently affiliated.

Sent by her local revolutionary committee of San Martín district to act as liaison, she suddenly found herself co-opted onto the Regional Committee by Mariano Vázquez. Later that same day she was also co-opted onto the FAI Peninsular Committee by a similar process.

I should explain that Mariano Vázquez’s appointment as Regional Secretary of the Catalan CNT was the result of the policy of the revolutionary anarchists refusing to accept administrative positions within the union. Anarchist members of the union tended not to get involved in the intermediary functions of the CNT in order to avoid the inevitable tension between their role as revolutionaries and union officials, whose job it is to defend the moral and economic interests of the workers.

At the union elections earlier that year for the post of Catalan Regional Secretary, most votes went to Marcos Alcón but he turned it down, as did Francesc Esgleas, the second choice, which left the door open for the third candidate, ‘Marianet’, Mariano Vázquez. His name according to García Oliver had originally been put forward as a ‘joke’ by comrades from the building workers’ union. The result of this ‘joke’ was that he was elected Regional Secretary on the basis of just four votes — an indication of the amount of confidence he inspired among his fellow workers.

If Marianet’s nomination was a ‘joke’ it was one that was to have tragic consequences for the Confederation. His career as Catalan Regional Secretary and, later, National Secretary of the CNT was catastrophic. Like Horacio Prieto whose place as CNT National Secretary he took later that year Marianet, the building worker turned administrator — like Federica Montseny — was a prime example of the lengths to which people in public life, including anarchists, will go when they abandon principles for expediency. Like Prieto, he, Montseny and others were putty in the hands of Negrín and the Stalinists, and were continually entering into pacts with the UGT and attending pro-government rallies and — by 1938, along with Prieto and Federica Montseny, he was arguing for the opening of negotiations with Franco.

## **Conclusion**

There’s much that can be said about the mistakes that were made, and how the revolutionary process in Spain was derailed between July 1936 and August 1937. Certainly, with regard to the

CNT-FAI, the most perceptive contemporary analysis, in my view, was that of the 'Friends of Durruti' group of rank and file activists originating from the Durruti Column.

Since the early Spring of 1937, when their paper, *El Amigo del Pueblo*, first appeared, this 'conscious minority' was the only organised section within the anarchist movement to publicly challenge the ever-deepening embroilment of the CNT-FAI 'notables' in governmental collaboration, and urge a return to the revolutionary spirit of the summer of 1936. The 'Friends of Durruti' saw that the real purpose behind the changes that would only benefit self-serving elitists, was to justify and perpetuate collaboration.

The CNT-FAI 'notables' had gone so far down the governmental road that the situational etiquette of the relationship they had established with state functionaries meant they were now embedded in the authority system that as anarchists they had previously repudiated. They had become part of the problem.

To withdraw from government now would have been a public admission that their repudiation of Libertarian Communism and all their actions to date had been destructive and negative. They had no choice but to see collaboration through to the bitter end. If social revolution were to be restored to the agenda it certainly would not come through the official apparatus of the CNT-FAI. According to *El Amigo del Pueblo*:

'...The real meaning of the decision of the FAI plenum is the fact that the band of comrades who recommend this metamorphosis, aim not only to see the FAI possessed of an organisation structure similar to that of other sectors but also, on the basis of this ill-considered step, the intention is to perpetuate the governmental collaboration begun after July. At the very moment when a complete re-assessment of mistakes is called for the error is compounded and the whole catalogue of catastrophes and counter-revolution blessed and absolved.

'The lesson has been in vain. During the course of the past year it has become clear that it is not possible to share revolutionary responsibility with the petite-bourgeoisie and with those parties which although they claim the label 'Marxist' are self-evidently appendages of the deskocracy. But common sense has yet to have its way in our ranks.

'It has been stated with the utmost clarity that Libertarian Communism is being foresworn for the sake of a rapprochement with antifascist groupings. Excellent! Are these other groupings by some chance forswearing their programmes so as to win over the CNT and the FAI...?

'It is truly deplorable that certain comrades with a long history in the anarchist movement have yet to grasp the reason why the anarchist groups have been able to work feats of such colossal importance which may be equalled but cannot possibly be out-done. And it defies understanding that entering once again a period of oppression there is this wish to tear up the formula which has opened up so many possibilities to the struggles waged by the proletariat of this peninsula.

By the end of August 1937, with the break up of the Council of Aragón the last stronghold of anarchist practice, the Spanish revolution perhaps the most profound and inspiring social experiment in recorded history was over; the Republican bourgeoisie and the Soviet advisers of

the Spanish Communist Party were now free from the immediate danger from the enemy within: the Catalan Nationalists had been neutralised, the Socialist Party split, and the influence of the 'conscious minority' of anarchists and non-Stalinist Marxists had collapsed – but the rank and file activists such as 'The Friends of Durruti' were too late.

Having surrendered their political, military and economic power to their own leaders they had seen these leaders acquiesce to the systematic dismantling of their achievements, the terrorising, imprisonment and murder of their militants, and the perversion of their aspirations for a free society out of all identifiable shape.

With nothing left to fight for it was only a matter of time before the will to resist collapsed, taking with it the Second Republic and that institutionalised monstrosity which had grown out of what had once been a great working class association – the CNT-FAI!

**Stuart Christie**

## July 1936

THE SPANISH ARMY in Morocco rose in rebellion against the Second Spanish Republic on 17 July 1936. By the following day the long-planned rising, under the leadership of General Sanjurjo and a military directorate consisting of generals Yagüe, Queipo de Llano, Mola and Franco, had spread to the Spanish mainland.

The Spanish anarcho-syndicalist labour organisation, the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT), had been preparing for the eventuality of a coup for some time. Earlier that year, on 14 February, just two days before the elections which were to bring to power the Popular Front government which precipitated the military uprising, the National Committee of the CNT in Zaragoza issued a prophetic warning to its members as to the likely consequences of a leftist victory in the forthcoming elections. It was a clear statement of intent to the Republican and social democratic bourgeoisie as well as to the military plotters and the landed oligarchy, whose interests they served, that the most powerful labour union in Spain would respond with the ultimate expression of working class power — social revolution:

**“On a war footing, proletariat, against the monarchist and fascist conspiracy!**

– Day by day the suspicion is growing that rightist elements are ready to provoke intervention by the military ... Insurrection has been deferred, pending the outcome of the elections. They are to implement their theoretical scheme of prevention should victory at the polls go to the left. Furthermore, we have no hesitation in recommending that, wheresoever the legionnaires of tyranny may launch armed insurrection, an understanding be unhesitatingly reached with antifascist groups, vigorous precautions being taken to ensure that the defensive contribution of the masses may lead to real social revolution under the auspices of Libertarian Communism. Should the conspirators open fire, the act of opposition must be pursued to its utmost consequences without the liberal bourgeoisie and its Marxist allies being countenanced in their desire to apply the brakes, in the event of the fascist rebellion's being defeated in its first stages ... in the course of the people's victory its democratic illusions would be dispelled; should it go otherwise, the nightmare of dictatorship will annihilate us. No matter who opens the hostilities seriously, democracy will perish between two fires because it is irrelevant and has no place on the field of battle. Either fascism or social revolution. Defeat of the former is a duty incumbent upon the whole proletariat and all freedom lovers, weapons in hand: that the revolution should be social and libertarian ought to be the most profound preoccupation of members of the Confederation ...”

Precise information as to the date of the rising had been obtained on July 13 by CNT-FAI agents in the barracks. The date was later confirmed following the arrest of a Guardia Civil officer carrying written orders. The two million strong CNT union and its sister organisation, the Iberian

Anarchist Federation (FAI), began to speed up their plans to resist the military and oligarchic conspiracy. In line with the February warning of the National Committee of the CNT, militants met frequently in their Locals throughout Spain to prepare for the inevitable confrontation with the rebels.

On 16 July the CNT held a regional assembly in Catalonia to coordinate resistance plans. Arms were requested of the Generalidad (the regional government of Catalonia), but these were refused and the CNT–FAI patrols on the streets were arrested. Censorship of *Solidaridad Obrera* prevented publication of a FAI manifesto instructing all anarchist groups to join the CNT’s Defence Committees to form a united front. The text was printed as a poster and distributed throughout the region.

In spite of the by now irrefutable evidence that advanced preparations for a military coup were under way, neither Prime Minister Casares Quiroga nor President Lluís Companys of the Catalan Generalidad were prepared to issue arms to the only organised and reliable opposition to the military conspirators – the labour unions. This hesitation is hardly surprising given the clearly revolutionary nature of the country’s largest labour union, the CNT. For the middle-class businessmen, civil servants and politicians of the Second Republic the prospect of unleashing a social revolution by arming the people was more frightening than the alternative scenario of a military coup and fascism. Hoping against hope that a last minute compromise could be reached with the military, the government steadfastly refused to countenance arming the people.

In Catalonia the Generalidad had no authority over the army. Federico Escofet, the Barcelona police commissioner explained the dilemma:

“To arm the CNT represented a danger for the Republican regime in Catalonia – as much of a danger to its existence as the military rebellion. Could the Generalidad voluntarily adopt such measures? I believed, for my part that I could not take the initiative with such potentially serious consequences, other than having blind faith in the triumph of the forces of public order. For this reason I did not want to arm the people.

“Companys and I agreed on the convenience of not distributing the arms demanded by the people because the CNT–FAI was the dominant force. These armed elements, who undoubtedly would provide invaluable assistance in the struggle against the rebels, would also endanger the existence of the Republic and the government of the Generalidad. The President warned me to be particularly careful in guarding the armouries to ensure there was no repetition of the raids such as those that took place on 6 October 1934. Effectively, the armouries were attacked the following day.”<sup>1</sup>

Escofet claims he did not place guards in order not to distract the attentions of the forces of order. He did, however, believe that the government should have armed the socialist trade union, the UGT, whose leaders, in spite of their revolutionary rhetoric, he considered ‘realistic’. Together with the forces of public order these were perceived as being sufficient to contain the rising.

Julian Zugazagoitia, a socialist leader, quotes the following eyewitness account of Casares Quiroga’s final days as premier:

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<sup>1</sup> Federico Escofet, *De una derrota a una victoria: 6 octubre de 1934 – 19 de julio 1936*, Barcelona 1984.

“His ministry is a madhouse and the wildest inmate is the minister himself. He neither eats nor sleeps. He shouts and screams as though possessed. His appearance frightens you, and it would not surprise me if he were to drop dead during one of his frenzied outbursts ... He will hear nothing of arming the people and says in the most emphatic terms that anyone who takes it upon himself to do so will be shot.”<sup>2</sup>

In a last ditch attempt to stave off the military rebellion, Premier Quiroga resigned on 18 July. His place was taken by Diego Martínez Barrio, a conservative republican, who also refused to arm the workers. Martínez Barrio did double somersaults in order to reach a compromise solution with the military plotters, offering them ministerial *carte blanche*. General Mola, who had taken over the leadership of the revolt following the accidental death of General Sanjurjo, was offered the Ministry of War in a proposed government of national reconciliation. Mola, however, made it quite clear to the bourgeois republican Premier that the class lines had been drawn up and that the political situation had reached the point of no return – confrontation was inevitable.

According to Cánovas Cervantes, Mola politely rebuffed Barrio’s desperate offer in a short telephone conversation:

“I am much indebted to you Señor Barrio, for the flattering and undeserved comments which my work and my past service have moved you to. I shall make my reply with the same courtesy and nobility you have used in speaking to me. The government with whose formation you are burdened will not get off the drawing board; should it ever take shape, it will be short lived, and, rather than remedying it, will have served to worsen the situation ... You have your masses and I have mine. If you and I were to agree to some deal we should both have betrayed our ideals as well as our men. We should both deserve to be lynched.”

As Mola predicted, the government of Martínez Barrio was short-lived, lasting only one day. In the space of three days, two governments fell rather than hand over arms to the workers. Barrio’s place was taken the following day, July 19, by José Giral who realised that all hopes of a deal were illusory. He had no option but to order weapons to be distributed to the union organisations. Giral’s decree legalised what was by then a *fait accompli*.

On the evening of July 18, the National Committee of the CNT broadcast an appeal on Radio Madrid to mobilise for war. In conjunction with the UGT, the CNT declared a revolutionary general strike. The previous day, 17 July, the transport workers’ section of the CNT in Barcelona had stormed two ships anchored in the port and expropriated around 200 guns. Groups of workers raided armouries and gun shops while antique and dilapidated rifles and revolvers appeared from hiding places under floorboards and attics. The central government in Madrid and the Generalidad who were, even at this late stage, still clinging to the hope that they could reach a settlement with the military, ordered the security forces to recover the weapons seized by the workers.

Police commissioner Escofet sent a company of Assault Guards to recover the stolen arms. Guarner, the officer in charge of the raid on the CNT transport workers’ Local where the arms were being stored, spoke to the anarcho-syndicalist militant Buenaventura Durruti who explained why the arms had been seized:

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<sup>2</sup> B. Bolloten, *The Spanish Revolution*, N.C., 1979.

‘There are times in life when it is impossible to carry out an order, no matter how highly placed the person who gave the order. It is through disobedience that man becomes civilised. In your case, then, civilise yourself by making common cause with the people. Uniforms no longer have any meaning. No other authority exists except revolutionary order, and the latter requires that these guns stay in the hands of the workers.’<sup>3</sup>

Durruti’s sincere speech convinced the Assault Guard captain who left with his men, taking with them a few unusable weapons, thus saving face and avoiding a confrontation. In fact, another anarcho-syndicalist activist, Garcia Oliver, turned up at Escofet’s office to demand the return of these weapons. He left with four or five pistols from Escofet’s drawer.

The CNT Defence Committee in Barcelona was based in the working class district of Pueblo Nuevo. Two trucks had been modified for use as mobile headquarters, one of which was manned by the anarchists of the *Nosotros* affinity group, including Durruti, Ascaso, García Oliver, Gregorio Jover and Aurelio Fernández. When the CNT Defence Committee received information that the infantry regiment stationed in the Pedralbes barracks and the Montesa cavalry barracks were being mobilised, the two CNT-FAI trucks set off for their pre-arranged locations. “Workers’ patrols posted along the way realised that the hour of the revolution had come.”<sup>4</sup> Shortly afterwards the sirens from the factories and ships in the harbour began to sound, the pre-arranged signal to the Barcelona Defence Committee to call its supporters to arms. The other mobile command post was stationed in the construction union, then based in the Casa Cambo which, within 24 hours was to become the “Casa CNT-FAI”.

Throughout the evening of 18 July and the early hours of 19 July, the workers busied themselves making their final preparations. When the military finally left the Pedralbes barracks at 4.15am on the morning of 19 July to occupy strategic points in Barcelona, they were met on the streets by the people in arms. Whether they were caught up in the euphoria of the moment or, perhaps, aware of the overwhelming odds against them, first the Assault Guards and then the Guardia Civil threw in their lot with the people; then it was the turn of the soldiers on the streets to surrender their weapons.

The CNT-FAI had a number of affiliates in the Ataranzas barracks, particularly sergeants Gordo and Manzana who, early on 19<sup>th</sup> July, attempted to rise against their officers. They were unable to gain control of the building, but they did manage to remove machine-guns, rifles and hand grenades which they handed over to the CNT Defence Committee. They also established a gun emplacement in the Plaza del Teatro which prevented the rebels in the Plaza de Cataluña from making contact with other isolated rebel forces.

The San Andrés barracks was the principle objective of the CNT Defence Committee, because of the arsenal that was to make the CNT the masters of Catalonia. The anarcho-syndicalist union had the support of the air force through Lieutenant Meana:

“I was terribly afraid of the consequences of what would happen if the arms in the San Andrés barracks fell into the hands of the militants – I ordered a company of the Guardia Nacional Republicana to occupy the Parque de Arillería to prevent the pillage of arms there,” said Escofet. Captain Francisco López Gatel was in charge –

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<sup>3</sup> Diego Abad de Santillán (quoted in *Durruti: The People Armed*, Abel Paz, Canada, 1976).

<sup>4</sup> Juan Gómez Casas, *Historia de la FAI*, p.217.

he returned shortly after with tears in his eyes and pleaded for Escofet's forgiveness for not having been able to fulfil the mission – the barracks had been invaded and the Captain had been unable to open fire on the people. "But what a responsibility for me – and how great were to be the consequences."

(Escofet, p. 331).

For Escofet, the situation in the city that night was truly alarming. The rebellion had been put down but the rebels had destroyed the forces of "public order":

"Thousands of people of both sexes, who had not fought, were running through the city streets, armed and wearing combat helmets and other military clothing taken from the barracks or from the defeated soldiers; thousands of excited people, who refused to be overcome by exhaustion, did not stop celebrating – waving flags and raising the clenched fist. Civilians mingled with security guards, Assault Guards, even the CNT, unbuttoned or in shirt-sleeves, raising the clenched fist, the newly minted salute of the people in arms. In those moments I asked myself with anguish how I could put down this popular inundation – how could I prevent it from becoming worse? The rebellion had been defeated throughout Catalonia. The tragic consequences provoked by the criminal elements of the military rebels became clear. The priority of the CNT-FAI was to implement the social revolution – Utopian and unrealisable – instead of reinforcing regimented authority.

(Escofet, p. 348).

"With the rebellion over I felt it necessary to visit President Companys in the Palacio de la Generalidad. His face showed no sign of relief at the victory we had achieved in Barcelona and throughout Catalonia against the military rebellion, a triumph which should have consolidated the authority and prestige of the government of the Generalidad. On the contrary, his face expressed a profound gravity, showing mixed emotions – sadness and worry. Possibly he saw similar emotions reflected in my face, certainly those were the ones which I felt. 'President', I told him, 'I come to communicate with you officially that the rebellion has been completely overcome. The last strongholds and redoubts have been taken. All the rebel chiefs and officers are prisoners. All that remains are one or two snipers.'

"Yes, Escofet, very well,' the President replied. 'But the situation is chaotic. The armed and uncontrollable mob are rampaging through the streets, committing every type of excess. And, on the other hand the CNT, powerfully armed, is master of the city and holder of power – what can we do?'

"'President', I added, 'I undertook to dominate the military revolt in Barcelona, and I have done this. But an authority requires the means of coercion to make itself obeyed and these do not exist today. As a result, there is no authority. And I, my dear President, do not know how to perform miracles.'

(Escofet, p. 352).

"I have spoken with General Aranguren, commander of the GNR and also head of its IV Organic Divisions and with General Arando, head of the Assault and Security Guards and both



are convinced, as am I, that in order to re-establish public order, we would have to embark on a battle as great as the one we have just completed, and this simply is not possible. How can we expect our Guardias, tired but euphoric due to victory, to confront the people with whom they have been fighting for those same ideals of liberty. If we were mad enough to try it we would never succeed. For the same reason, and for humanity, the forces of public order did not fire on those who invaded San Andres, in spite of the fact of the fact we knew we would lose all the arms. For the moment we are all overcome by the situation, including the leaders of the CNT. The only solution, President, is to contain the situation politically, without minimising our respective authorities – that is, if we were able to contain the situation politically.”

The CNT in Madrid had also, unsuccessfully, requested weapons, and had taken matters into its own hands. A Madrid Defence Committee was set up on 18 July that organised five-man patrols, each member armed with a pistol and a grenade. According to Juan Gómez Casas,<sup>5</sup> the first weapons were issued in Madrid on the night of 18–19 July on the initiative of “military figures exasperated with the stupidity of a government that believed itself still in control of the situation.” The first arms distributed among CNT and FAI workers in Madrid were those they took themselves after storming a truck.

As indicated earlier, the focal point of the rebellion in Catalonia was the Ataranzas barracks. The Metalworkers’ Union of the CNT insisted that its capture be their responsibility alone. They felt it a point of honour to avenge their comrades who had fallen in the Ramblas and in the streets adjacent to the barracks. Throughout the night of the 19/20<sup>th</sup> July the libertarians fought, advancing cautiously, establishing barricades and setting up advance positions that would permit an attack on the Ataranzas barracks. Tejedor, secretary of the Metalworkers’ Union, gave the following account of the attack:

“The glorious feat of the Ataranzas capture was the exclusive achievement of the men of the CNT. The Guardia Civil wanted to take part in the attack but we would not permit this. It was a matter of honour ... On 20 July comrade Durruti shouted to everyone – ‘Forward the men of the CNT!’ So began the epic attack which overshadowed the capture of the Bastille by the people of Paris.”

The capture of the Ataranzas fortress was not a major military target, the rebellion had been defeated but it was a psychological success for the anarcho-syndicalists. The weapons taken from the armoury and the ammunition stores provided the workers with much needed war materiel while the capture of General Manuel Goded, leader of the rising in Catalonia and the Balearics, was a major propaganda victory which seriously undermined nationalist and bourgeois morale. The Confederal Defence Committee of Catalonia, which had been responsible for the defeat of the nationalist rising in Barcelona, refused to accept Goded’s surrender. Instead they chose to press on with the fight until all the rebels had been wiped out or surrendered. The terms of Goded’s surrender, accepted by Companys, were broadcast from the Generalidad Palace. Goded’s surrender, in fact, referred only to himself; he did not order the surrender of the troops under his command: “I must declare to the Spanish people that luck has not been with me. From this moment on, any who seek to continue fighting should no longer count on me.” The Confederal Defence Committee’s decision to fight on after the defeat of Goded was to invest the resistance with a revolutionary depth and to break the myth that the working-class would always be beaten

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

by the army. Had the activists of the CNT–FAI laid down their weapons following Goded’s surrender and returned home, as the bourgeois politicians no doubt hoped, there would have been no social revolution and the unions would have been reduced to mere auxiliaries of the forces of public order. Instead, 36 hours after the military rising started on mainland Spain, bourgeois power had collapsed and the workers, the majority of whom belonged to the anarcho-syndicalist CNT, controlled the streets of the capital and had become the de facto power in Barcelona.

Overnight, power had shifted from the smoke-filled committee rooms of the Generalidad Palace to the union Locals of Barcelona. The CNT controlled arms, transport and communications. The President of the Generalidad, Lluís Companys, a remarkably astute Machiavellian politician, recognised this and immediately began manoeuvring to salvage what he could from the situation and suffocate the looming social revolution before it had time to draw breath and displace the order and power structure for ever. Confident of his ability to win the collaboration of the anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist “leadership”, Companys invited CNT–FAI representatives to his office where leaders of the other bourgeois and Marxist Catalan parties had already been assembled in an adjoining room.

García Oliver and Buenaventura Durruti responded to Companys’ call on behalf of the CNT on 20 July. They came directly from the barricades as victors of the day “armed to the teeth ... shabby and soiled by dust and smoke” to listen to the wily Companys’ honeyed speech. García Oliver has given the following account of what Companys had to say:

“Before I begin, I must say that the CNT and FAI have not received the treatment which they merit by virtue of their true importance – I have found myself obliged to confront and persecute you. You are now masters of the city and Catalonia, for you alone have defeated the fascist soldiery – the fact is that today, you, who were subject to harassment up until yesterday, have seen off the fascists and the military. Knowing, then, who and what you are, I can but address you in tones of utmost sincerity. You have won and everything lies at your feet; if you have any need of me, or no longer want me as president of Catalonia, just say the word now and I shall become just another foot soldier in the struggle against fascism. I, along with the men of my party, my name and my prestige, may be of use in the struggle which has ended so felicitously in this city today – you may rely upon me and my loyalty as a man and a politician convinced that today has seen the demise of a whole dishonourable past, as a man who honestly wishes to see Catalonia march in the van of the most socially progressive countries.”<sup>6</sup>

The president went on to suggest that under his chairmanship the CNT–FAI, together with all the antifascist parties, should set up “an organ capable of pursuing the revolutionary struggle until victory is assured”. This ad hoc ruling body was to be known as the Central Committee of Antifascist Militias (CCMA). After preliminary discussions with the assembled bourgeois and Marxist politicians, García Oliver informed them that their suggestion for the Antifascist Militias’ Committee was a matter for the Regional Committee of the CNT to decide and that they would be informed as soon as that body had decided on the matter. Companys’ artful flattery and skillful

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<sup>6</sup> García Oliver, *Solidaridad Obrera*, 19 July 1936.

manoeuvring had its desired effect.<sup>7</sup> The anarchist militants who had gone into the meeting as victors emerged as the vanquished.

García Oliver and Durruti gave their respective accounts of Companys's proposal to the Regional Committee of the CNT. Uncertain as to the ambiguous role of that organisation now that the military and the bourgeoisie had been routed and power had passed into the hands of the working classes, the members of the Regional Committee were anxiously pondering CNT strategy now that the revolutionary initiative had passed to the working class. The ambiguous role of the unions in the revolution had been debated at great length at the Zaragoza Congress earlier that year. Federico Urales, the father of the anarchist Federica Montseny, had argued, convincingly, that the great unions and the mammoth industrial federations would cease to exist "by reason of the sustained decentralisation of the federal compact of solidarity". Implicit in his argument was that revolution spelled death for the old system – including the CNT and FAI as organisations. Urales' argument was not made explicitly but it could be deduced from the producer-consumer relationship in which the producer had both a sphere of economic activity in the workplace and as an administrative-political consumer within the municipality. The assembly being sovereign in work as well as in the municipality, there could be no room for anything separate from and outside these two aspects of daily life.

The Regional Committee, whose General Secretary at the time was Mariano R. Vázquez, opted, however, to deal with the question of power on Companys' terms rather than accept the fact that the popular organs of the social revolution which were being thrown up by the people in arms had made it redundant. The erstwhile defence committees of the CNT and FAI, representing 60 per cent of Barcelona's working class, had, with the collapse of bourgeois power, superseded their organisational identity and become the popular revolutionary committees of each barrio or village, natural organisms of the revolution itself. On the other hand, by choosing political collaboration, the Regional Committee of the CNT began to transform itself from being an instrument of its membership into a self-serving institution concerned only with its own survival; its legitimate authority, derived from its long tradition of direct democracy and accountability, was to become coercive power.

Companys was contacted by telephone and informed of the Regional Committee's acceptance, in principle, of the setting up of an Antifascist Militias' Committee of Catalonia, pending the agreement of all the other parties – and, of course, the decision of a Plenum of local CNT unions which would be convened as soon as possible. In the meantime, Durruti, García Oliver and Aurelio Fernández were empowered by the Regional Committee to continue negotiations to ensure that should the Plenums agree to the setting up of the Antifascist Militias' Committee it would come into operation promptly and smoothly.

Apart from flying in the face of anarchist principles, it should be stressed that the decision of the Regional Committee to continue negotiations with the politicians and the remnants of the

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<sup>7</sup> It is unlikely that García Oliver would have required much convincing, even by the least artful of flatterers. Peirats mentions that García Oliver speaking of 'taking power' at a public meeting in the Barcelona Woodworkers Union in 'January or February 1936'. He had also pressed this case during a restricted meeting of 'notables' held just before the CNT regional conference to discuss the February 1936 elections. The 'restricted' meeting which took place 'behind the back of the Organisation' was to forestall an anti-election campaign such as that which had cost the Left the elections in November 1933. As Peirats notes: 'Out of it undoubtedly came the summoning of the conference which did indeed recommend a low key campaign against the elections. So low key that it was virtually non-existent.' José Peirats, *Presencia*, Paris, 1967, p.46.

State apparatus was directly contrary to normal CNT practice – which was to have no dealings whatsoever with political parties or representatives of the state until the Organisation itself had pronounced on the matter. It was a decision that reflected a long-standing weakness within the CNT.

Because there was no paid trade union apparatus it was believed that neither bureaucracy nor “leaderism” existed within the organisation. But this was not quite the case. The deference of the rank and file to the “natural” leaders who had won the workers’ trust by their personal sacrifice and commitment to the “idea” led inexorably to oligarchy. Bakunin was very conscious of these dangers and made the point clearly in *God and the State* – “There should be no fixed and constant authority, but mutual and voluntary authority. Society should not indulge men of genius, nor should it accord them special rights or privileges because: it would often mistake a charlatan for a man of genius; because through such systems of privileges it might even transform a genius into a charlatan; it would establish a master over itself.”

The representatives of the Regional Committee returned to the Generalidad Palace that same evening to begin provisional discussions with the Catalan politicians – José Terradellas, Artemio Aiguadé and Jaime Miravittles of the *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya*; Pey Poch of Catalan Action; Juan Comorera of the Socialist Union of Catalonia; Rafael Vidiella of the UGT and PSOE; and Julián Gorkín of the POUM. The *Estat Catalá* was disbarred from participating in the Militias’ Committee on the grounds that its leader, Dencás, was a fascist who had fled to Italy.

The following day, 21 July, the Regional Committee of the CNT hastily summoned an Extraordinary Assembly of Regional Plenums. According to José Peirats<sup>8</sup> this was not, in fact, a properly constituted Plenum of Unions with an agenda to be discussed in a regular way by the union representatives; it was, rather, a gathering of militants at Regional Committee level who – present in a personal capacity – had no mandate or authority to decide on the issues under discussion. More than a month was to pass before a regular Plenum of the Catalan CNT unions was to be held.

Mariano R. Vázquez, as Secretary of the National Committee of the CNT, gave the following account of the Extraordinary and pivotal assembly in his report to the International Working Men’s Association (AIT) in December 1937:

“On 21 July, 1936, Barcelona was the venue for a Regional Plenum of the Local Federations and Sub-Regionals called by the Regional Committee of Catalonia. The situation was analysed and it was unanimously decided not to mention Libertarian Communism until such time as we had captured that part of Spain that was in the hands of the rebels. Consequently, the Plenum resolved not to press on with totalitarian achievements, for we were facing a problem: imposing a dictatorship – wiping out all the guards and activists from the political parties who had played their part in the victory over the rebels on 19 and 20 July; a dictatorship which, in any event would be crushed from without even if it succeeded from within. The Plenum, with the exception of the Regional Federation of Bajo Llobregat, opted for collaboration with the other political parties and organisations in setting up the Antifascist Militias’ Committee (AMC). On the decision of this Plenum the CNT and the FAI sent their representatives to it.”

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<sup>8</sup> *Noire et Rouge*, No. 36, December 1967.

The Catalan middle classes were horrified by the social revolution which was gathering momentum before their eyes. Their world was being turned upside down and they shrilly denounced the anarcho-syndicalists as responsible for the excesses and outrages which occurred in the wake of the workers' resistance to the military uprising. The people in arms had begun to settle old scores, directing their fury against the more notorious torturers, gunmen and professional informers of the Republic and the Dictatorship. Ramón Sales in Barcelona and Inocencio Feced in Alicante were examples of men who had been involved in the murders of thousands of workers under the terrorist regime of Generals Anido and Arlegui and who had been summarily executed. There were also numerous cases of outrages and the settling of old scores by "revolutionists of the last moment" as a means of establishing their credibility as militants.

It was the sensitive question of "law and order" which provided the bourgeoisie with their first leverage point against the CNT. The CNT and FAI leaderships in Catalonia had shown themselves eager to establish their credentials as honourable and responsible members of the "revolutionary" government, the Central Committee of Antifascist Militias. Following a sustained disinformation campaign of exaggerated allegations, half truths and downright lies made by a near hysterical bourgeoisie, offended and threatened by the close attention paid to their class by the union organised patrols and search parties, the Regional Committee and the Local Federation of CNT Unions of Barcelona rose to the bait and broadcast a warning on Radio Barcelona on 25 July, day five of the social revolution, that the CNT and FAI, as "the authentic representatives of the antifascist proletariat" had "resolved upon very severe measures" which would be "enforced without a second thought" against any person or persons caught looting.

*Solidaridad Obrera*, the Catalan CNT daily newspaper, had, on the other hand, a more considered perspective on the alleged breakdown of "law and order":

"For a period of two days, Barcelona was reduced to two armies, each struggling to vanquish the other, and there is nothing like the stench of gunpowder to unleash all the instincts which man carries in his soul. Then again, the convulsions reached a point where control was lost over those folk whose sole concern is to satisfy their selfish whims and vengeful instincts. To these and to these alone do we owe it that this week (and not as many as reputed) have been perpetrated in Barcelona that which the CNT and, with it, all of the organisations which have participated in the revolution, would have preferred not to see perpetrated. Nonetheless, we cannot join in the chorus of those who, when all is said and done, carry the responsibility, not merely for the fascist revolt but also for having kept the people for years and years on end in a condition of permanent destitution and an even more lingering ignorance. Since these eternal grumblers fail to do so, we are under an obligation to point out that the looting has not been the whole story. Countless valuables discovered during searches and in burned buildings have not wound up in anyone's private possession. The organisation of the CNT and the Antifascist Militias' Committee have in safekeeping precious metals and objets d'art to the value of four million pesetas. The daily newspapers have carried reports on countless instances of the surrender of such items by workers who might not have had a crumb to eat within the week — who can tell?"

Honouring the libertarians, Escofet said:

“I should recognise their honesty and the romanticism of many of them who went out of their way to hand in true treasures in bank notes, valuable jewels which had fallen into their hands. Some tried to purify themselves by burning bank notes. I had to fill several safes with the goods handed in.

“In contrast, the crimes committed in Catalonia and throughout the Republican zone were generally inevitable excesses, ones one could expect after a great revolutionary convulsion. They were disorders of a passing and ephemeral type, not part of a system based in the force or the lack of humanity.’ (Escofet, p. 350).

The ploy of alleged excesses being perpetrated against their new-found partners in the struggle against fascism was successful. Not only were a number of so-called “uncontrollable” militants executed for “outrages” committed in the first weeks of the revolution, the authority of the “higher” committees grew increasingly more powerful. It was an authority which increasingly began to be directed against militants of their own organisation whenever they challenged that authority by overstepping certain prescribed limits which, it was felt, might upset the new found harmony in the common struggle against fascism.

The declarations and pronouncements which emanated from the various committees of the CNT and FAI at this time all ignored any reference to the social revolution which was by that time in full swing. Nor did they provide any guidelines. They simply limited themselves to calling off the general strike declared on 19 July ordering a return to work and at the same time exhorting their members to press on for a military victory against fascism.

The obvious unwillingness of the CNT and FAI leadership to press home their revolutionary advantage was not lost on Companys or the central government of José Giral. In the face of a massive squatting campaign in properties abandoned by the pro-Francoist bourgeoisie, the Catalan government announced a 25 per cent cut in rents while the Madrid government fixed the cut at 50 per cent. Instead of challenging this move by championing the socialisation of bourgeois property, by then a *fait accompli*, the CNT daily, *Solidaridad Obrera*, plumped for the 50 per cent rent.

García Oliver’s principled opposition to collaboration with the bourgeois parties did not lead him to refuse the nomination which endorsed his membership of the Militias’ committee along with Marcos Alcón, Durruti’s replacement, José Asens, Aurelio Fernández and Diego Abad de Santillan. In a commemorative article on the Militias’ Committee the following year García Oliver wrote of “the most extraordinary Plenum of Locals and Comarcals” which, summoned in haste with delegates ignorant as to the nature of the Plenum, had succeeded in overturning the fundamental principles of the CNT:

“The CNT and the FAI opted for collaboration and democracy, eschewing the revolutionary totalitarianism which simply had to have led to the revolution’s being strangled by the confederal and anarchist dictatorship. They trusted in the word and in the person of a Catalan democrat and retained and supported Companys in the office of President of the Generalidad; they accepted the Militias’ Committee and worked out a system of representation proportionate with numbers which, although not fair in that the UGT and the Socialist Party, minority groups in Catalonia, were assigned an equal number of positions with the triumphant CNT and anarchists —

implied sacrifice calculated to lure dictatorially inclined parties along the path of loyal collaboration which might not be jeopardised by suicidal competition.”<sup>9</sup>

In mitigation, it should be said that the overwhelming acceptance of the fateful Santillan proposition by the Extraordinary Plenum of 21 July was not due so much to uncertain commitment to Libertarian Communism as to a conviction that a declaration of Libertarian Communism would provoke immediate international retaliation. British warships were anchored in the vicinity and, it was widely thought, preparing to land troops and occupy the city to protect British interests there. By collaborating with the bourgeois Antifascist Militias’ Committee the CNT delegates thought they could deceive the foreign powers and the Madrid government into believing that the bourgeois democratic order still held in Catalonia while, in fact, the CNT-FAI wielded real economic, political and military power. The only people deceived were themselves.

García Oliver claims that in spite of the overwhelming vote against the social revolution taken by the delegates at the Plenum, he still refused to accept the decision and called a meeting of the *Nosotros* group that same evening to propose a coup. He suggested that under Durruti’s leadership anarchist columns should seize the main centres of government, the Generalidad and the City chambers, the Telephone Exchange and the Plaza de Cataluña, and the Ministry of the Interior and Security Directorate. Durruti, who, much to García Oliver’s chagrin, had been noticeably silent during the debate, did not rise to the bait:

“García Oliver’s argument, here and during the Plenum, strikes me as splendid. His plan to carry out a coup is perfect. But this does not seem to me to be the opportune moment. My feeling is that it should be put off until after the capture of Zaragoza, which cannot take more than 10 days. I insist that we shelve these plans until Zaragoza has been taken. At present, with only Catalonia as a base, we would be reduced to the most minimal geographical area.”<sup>10</sup>

The Central Committee of the Antifascist Militias Committee met for the first time that same night, 21 July, in the Maritime Museum where it established its permanent headquarters. Its representation consisted of the following: CNT – 3; UGT – 3; Esquerra Republicana (Companys’ party) – 3; FAI – 1; Catalan Action – 1; POUM – 1; PSOE (Socialist Party) – 1; Unió de Rabassaires (Catalan peasants’ party) – 1. The Generalidad was represented by a Commissioner with a military adviser. Durruti attended this first meeting as a CNT delegate, but it was to be his first and last. He felt only too keenly the contradictions and tensions that existed between the rule of the Central Committee of Militias and the popular organs of the social revolution.

In Madrid, the military rebellion led by General Fanjul was also quickly put down by the armed working class. The anarchists were numerically less strong in the capital, always a stronghold of the socialist UGT union, one of the reasons why arms had been distributed at the last moment, but they did play an important role in crushing the rebellion and halting the advance of General Mola’s Army of the North. David Antona, acting secretary of the National Committee of the CNT in Madrid, had issued an ultimatum to Premier Giral that either he release the CNT militants held in the Republic’s jails within three hours or “the CNT will see to their liberation itself.”

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<sup>9</sup> ‘El Comité Central de Milicias Antifascistas de Cataluña’, *Solidaridad Obrera*, July 18, 1937.

<sup>10</sup> *El eco de los pasos*, *ibid*, p.190.

The threat had the desired effect and the anarchist prisoners were released. Antona gave the following moving account of events in Castile:

“... Every one of the barracks in Madrid has risen up in arms. It is the same story in Toledo, Guadalajara and Alcalá de Henares. Around Madrid the fascists have succeeded in throwing up a cordon of gun-metal. No longer now only a question of the Montaña barracks which at the moment (11 a.m. on 20 July) was being bombed by loyalist aircraft ... the bombardment continues. Madrid resembles hell. The courage of her sons in those hours of drama deserves to be writ in letters of gold ... One might say that the whole of Madrid was mobilised. In proportion as the gravity of the situation becomes known, so the revolutionary ardour of the people grows ... No authority, one thinks, will be able to call this cyclone to heel. Those who have unleashed it will have to eat the dust of defeat. The telephone goes again. I pick up the receiver and a comrade shrieks at me that the Montaña barracks has fallen. Contemptuous of death some Assault Guards and Young Socialists, with men of the CNT at their head, burst into the barracks, razing the premises. This was the people's power making ready to mete out justice ... the only creative justice. At that solemn hour (12 noon, July 20) an entire regime perished at the hands of the people. The bullets which ended the lives of army officers and commanders from the Montana barracks killed, not men, but an entire society...

“In the wake of the fall of the Montaña barracks the remaining rebel strongholds in Madrid were falling one after another. With exemplary heroism the Madrid populace was committing itself with bared breast to the assault on the barracks, prompted by the boundless zeal which makes the great feats of history possible. Mola's advance on Madrid was halted in the Sierra. Peasants, unarmed except for a few hunting pieces and with a handful of CNT people and some from the UGT who had set out from Madrid with a few dozen hand grenades, contained an entire army. The next day, once the revolt in Madrid had been brought under control, reinforcements were dispatched to the Sierra del Guadarrama where, as mentioned earlier, the troops of the bloodthirsty ex-General Mola had been brought to a standstill.”<sup>11</sup>

The people in arms had broken the military encirclement of the capital.

One of the first actions of the newly established Central Committee of Antifascist Militias in Barcelona was to set about organising and co-ordinating columns out of the workers' militias and armed groups which had developed on the initiative of the Defence Committees of the CNT. It was decided that the first of these columns, led by Durruti, should be sent to relieve Zaragoza, which had fallen to the military under the command of General Cabanellas. Zaragoza was an important objective, both strategically and for reasons of solidarity. It guarded the Ebro valley, dominated the entire region, was an important communications centre, and was the main obstacle to the union of the Asturias and Catalonia with the Basque country, the most important industrial region of Spain. Zaragoza also had an important arsenal containing some 40,000 guns and, last but not least from the point of view of the CNT, it was an important anarchist stronghold where thousands of libertarians had fallen into the hands of the military.

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<sup>11</sup> *La CNT en la revolución española*, Ch. 8.



Why had such a strong anarchist centre fallen so easily into the hands of the military, almost without a shot being fired? Certainly, the rising had been well organised with virtually every repressive agency of the state throwing in its lot with the insurgents. This had not been the case in Barcelona and Madrid where substantial numbers of Assault Guards and Guardia Civil had remained loyal to the Republic. The task of the military had been made easier by the government decree of July 14, which ordered the closure of all CNT Locals. This had seriously limited the capacity of the anarcho-syndicalist to organise resistance, but the real reason lay elsewhere. For some time the reformist CNT leadership in Zaragoza had been cooperating closely with the local Popular Front administration in encouraging economic recovery and collaborating with local businessmen on plans to reduce unemployment. Pronouncing in favour of voting during the February elections they had been effectively co-opted into the system. At a meeting called by the Zaragoza CNT on the eve of the rebellion, militants had been swayed by the arguments of pacifist Miguel Abós that they should not respond hastily to the military threat but should instead pursue a pacific and restrained strategy of non-violence. They had, they believed, a good working relationship with the authorities in the city and, with a membership of 30,000, thought they had little to fear. CNT militants such as Miguel Chueca and metalworker Francisco Garaita tried to mobilise resistance, but so well organised and determined were the military and their allies that by 19 July it was too late to mobilise even a fraction of the membership. The general strike called by the CNT on 19 July was, in Zaragoza, essentially a defensive rather than an offensive weapon and in the face of massive and brutal repression the strike began to weaken after a heroic two weeks of passive resistance. The only hope the workers had now lay with the militia columns from Barcelona.<sup>12</sup>

Diego Abad de Santillán was the anarchist representative on the Central Committee of Antifascist Militias Committees with the task of organising the militia columns along libertarian lines. To prevent the creation of an army dependant on a centralised general staff, the militia columns were controlled by the unions and district defence committees who were responsible for recruiting and organising their own columns. The unions also took on responsibility for the families of the volunteers who went to the front. An artillery Colonel recently escaped from Pamplona commented drily: "From the military point of view there was frightening chaos, but the important thing was that the chaos was working." George Orwell's observations, although made the following year, capture the spirit of the militias:

"The essential point of the system was the social equality between officers and men. Everyone from general to private drew the same pay, ate the same food, wore the same clothes, and mingled on terms of complete equality. If you wanted to slap the general commanding the division on the back and ask him for a cigarette, you could do so, and no one thought it curious. In theory at any rate each militia was a democracy and not a hierarchy. It was understood that orders had to be obeyed, but it was also understood that when you gave an order you gave it as a comrade to a comrade and not as a superior to inferior. There were officers and NCOs, but there was no military heel-clicking and saluting. They had attempted to produce within the militias a sort of temporary working model of the classless society. Of course,

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<sup>12</sup> Information on Zaragoza from 'Anarchosyndicalism, Libertarian Communism and the State: the CNT in Zaragoza and Aragón 1930-1937', Graham Kelsey, Phd Thesis, University of Lancaster, 1984.

there was no perfect equality but there was a nearer approach to it than I had ever seen or than I would have thought conceivable in time of war.”<sup>13</sup>

The mobilisation for the attack on Zaragoza was rapid. Four days after the rebels had been defeated in Barcelona the first militia columns began to leave the Catalan capital to liberate their comrades in Zaragoza. These working class shock troops, numbering around 3,000, had been recruited mainly from the ranks of the CNT and the FAI and were led by Buenaventura Durruti and Pérez Farras, the column’s military adviser. Other anarcho-syndicalist columns and armed groups such as that raised by Saturnino Carod and the Ortíz column also were hastily organised to force the rebels back and relieve the Aragonese capital.

The organisational structure of the militia units was a principal point of discussion among the volunteers. There could be no question of restoring the authoritarian militarist principles of command and obey. Slowly, through discussion and the experiences of trial and error that, little by little, the structure of the libertarian militias evolved as they marched towards Aragón.

In the beginning, the organisational structure was reasonably simple, evolving to meet the requirements of each new situation as they presented themselves.

“Ten men formed a group with a delegate freely chosen to head it. Ten of these groups formed a century and the man in charge was chosen in the same way. Five centuries formed an assembly, which also had a delegate. The delegates of the centuries, and the delegate of the assembly formed the committee of the assembly. The delegates of the assembly with the general delegate of the column formed the war committee of the column.”<sup>14</sup>

Durruti’s military adviser, Pérez Farrás, Companys’ man on the Central Committee of Antifascist militias, a professional soldier, was concerned to restore the authority of the Generalidad over the popular force and remonstrated with Durruti over the application of libertarian principles to military organisation. Durruti replied:

“I have already said and I repeat; during all my life I have acted as an anarchist. The fact of having been given political responsibility for a human collective cannot change my convictions. It is under these conditions that I agreed to play the role given to me by the Central Committee of the Militias.

“I thought — and what has happened confirms my belief — that a working man’s militia cannot be led according to the same rules as an army. I think that discipline, co-ordination and the fulfilment of a plan are indispensable. But this idea can no longer be understood in the terms of the world we have just destroyed. We have new ideas. We think that solidarity among men must awaken personal responsibility which knows how to accept discipline as an autonomous act.

“Necessity imposes a war on us, a struggle which differs from many of those which we have carried on before. But the goal of our struggle is always the triumph of the revolution. This means not only victory over the enemy, but also a radical change

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<sup>13</sup> *Homage to Catalonia*, George Orwell, London, 1962.

<sup>14</sup> *Durruti, The People Armed*, Abel Paz, p.254.

in man. For this change to occur man must learn to live in freedom and develop in himself his potentialities as a responsible individual. The worker in the factory, using his tools and directing production, is bringing about a change in himself. The fighter, like the worker, uses his gun as a tool and his acts must lead to the same goals as those of the worker.

“In the struggle he cannot act like a soldier under orders but like a man who is conscious of what he is doing. I know it is not easy to get such a result, but what one cannot get by reason, one can never get through force. If our revolutionary army must be maintained through fear, we will have changed nothing but the colour of fear. It is only by freeing itself from fear that a free society can be built.”<sup>15</sup>

On 23 July, US Secretary of State, Cordell Hull notified President Roosevelt that “one of the most serious factors in this situation lies in the fact that the Spanish government has distributed large quantities of arms and ammunition into the hands of irresponsible members of left wing political organisations.”<sup>16</sup>

Before leaving Zaragoza on 24 July, one of these “irresponsible” left-wingers, Buenaventura Durruti gave a memorable interview to Canadian journalist Pierre Van Paasen of the *Toronto Daily Star*. The interview sums up concisely and with feeling the aspirations of the social revolution and the ponderous obstacles which stood in its way. Van Paasen asked Durruti why he had made what was to him the curious statement that they were determined “to finish with fascism once and for all, in spite of the government”? Durruti replied:

“No government in the world fights fascism to the death. When the bourgeoisie sees power slipping from its grasp, it has recourse to fascism to maintain itself. The Liberal government of Spain could have rendered fascist elements powerless long ago. Instead it temporised and compromised and dallied. Even now, there are men in this government who want to go easy with the rebels. You can never tell, you know, he laughed, the present government might yet need these rebellious forces to crush the workers’ movement.”

Van Paasen then interjected that both Largo Caballero and Indalecio Prieto had stated that the Popular Front’s only concern was to save the Republic and restore Republican order:

“That may be the views of those *señores*”, said Durruti, “We syndicalists, we are fighting for the revolution. We know what we want. To us it means nothing that there is a Soviet Union somewhere in this world, for the sake of whose peace and tranquillity the workers of Germany and China were sacrificed to fascist barbarism by Stalin. We want the revolution here in Spain, right now, not maybe after the next European war. We are giving Hitler and Mussolini far more to worry about today with out revolution than the whole Russian Red Army. We are setting an example to the German and Italian working class how to deal with fascism.

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<sup>15</sup> Durruti, *Ibid.*, p.225.

<sup>16</sup> Dante A. Ouzo, *Spain and the Great Powers*, NY, 1962, p. 160 (quoted by Noam Chomsky in *Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship* [*American Power and the New Mandarins*, N.Y. 1968] ).

“Do you expect any help from France or Britain now that Hitler and Mussolini have begun to help the rebels?”, continued Van Paasen. “I do not expect any help for a libertarian revolution from any government in the world.” Durruti replied grimly. “Maybe the conflicting interests of the different imperialisms might have some influence on our struggle. That is quite possible. Franco is doing his best to drag Europe into the quarrel. He will not hesitate to pitch Germany against us. But we expect no help, not even from our own government in the final analysis.”

Van Paasen then challenged him: “Can you win alone?” Durruti considered the question carefully. The journalist added: “You will be sitting on top of a pile of ruins even if you are victorious.” The anarchist replied quietly in a hoarse whisper: “We have always lived in slums and holes in the wall. We will know how to accommodate ourselves for a time. For you must not forget that we can also build. It is we who built these palaces and cities, here in Spain and in America and elsewhere. We are not in the least afraid of ruins. We are going to inherit the earth. There is not the slightest doubt about that. The bourgeoisie might blast and ruin its own world before it leaves the stage of history. We carry a new world, here, in our hearts.” He added: “That world is growing in this minute.”<sup>17</sup>

Having secured Lerida, the Durruti column advanced quickly, virtually unopposed, towards Zaragoza urging the peasants in the villages they passed through to seize and collectivise the land on which they worked. On the morning of 27 July, as the column was leaving the town of Bujaraloz, three rebel aeroplanes suddenly attacked, exposing the workers to their first major baptism of fire. The devastating blitzkrieg killed 20 men and injured many more. The men panicked. Many threw down their weapons and scattered to the four winds to escape the noise and horror of the death and destruction which rained down on them from the skies, killing and mutilating at random. When the planes had disappeared the column slowly straggled back to Bujaraloz where Durruti assembled his men in the main square to deliver what eye witnesses have described as, perhaps one of the most important speeches in his long career as an activist:

“Friends. No one was forced to come here. You chose your fate, and the fate of the first column of the CNT and the FAI is a harsh one. García Oliver said on the radio at Barcelona that we were going to Aragón to conquer Zaragoza or to lose our lives in the attempt. I repeat the same thing. Rather than retreating, we must die. Zaragoza is in the hands of the fascists. Why did we leave Barcelona if it wasn't to help them free themselves? They are waiting for us as we start to run. That is the way you show the world and our comrades the spirit of the anarchists, by succumbing to fear when faced by three planes.

“The bourgeoisie will not allow us to create Libertarian Communism because we want it. The bourgeoisie will resist because it defends its privileges and interests. The only way to create Libertarian Communism is to destroy the bourgeoisie. Only then will the road to our ideal world be assured. We have left behind us the peasants who have started to put into practice our ideal. They did this, feeling confident that our guns would guarantee their crops. So if we leave the road open to the enemy,

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<sup>17</sup> *Toronto Daily Star*, August 18, 1936.

it will mean that the initiatives of these peasants are useless, and what is worse, the conquerors will make them pay for their daring by assassinating them. This is the meaning of the struggle, a thankless one which resembles none that we have undertaken before. What happened today is a simple warning. Now the struggle is really going to start. They will shoot at us with cannons. They will strafe us with tons of grapeshot and sometimes we will have to fight with grenades, and even with knives. As the enemy feels it is cornered, it will respond like a beast and will bite fiercely. But it isn't yet at bay and it is fighting to avoid this. It is leaning on the aid of Italy and Germany. If we allow these powers to become deeply involved in our war, it will be difficult to beat the fascists because they will have armaments superior to ours.

'Our victory depends on the speed with which we act. The faster we attack, the greater chance we have of winning. Up to now victory is on our side. For that reason we must conquer Zaragoza at once. Tomorrow there will be no opportunities equal to those of today. In the ranks of the CNT there are no cowards and the men of the FAI die, but do not yield. We don't want people among us who are afraid of the first attack. I ask those who ran, hindering the advance of the column, to have the courage to drop their weapons so that firmer hands can pick them up. The rest of us will continue our march. We will arrive in the north. We will join hands with our Asturian comrades and we will conquer and give Spain a better world. I ask those who go back to keep silent about what happened today because it fills me with shame'<sup>18</sup>

It was a bitter but invaluable lesson that helped turn a raw body of inexperienced men into an army of fearless warriors.

But the march on Zaragoza was halted. The officer who had been in charge of the garrison at Barbastro, Colonel Villalba (who was in all likelihood a frustrated conspirator) and Companys' military adviser, Pérez Farrás, put pressure on Durruti not to advance further until his flanks had been secured. There was also a problem of a shortage of weapons and ammunition. The Central Committee of Antifascist Militias in Barcelona had decided, in its wisdom, that the saving of Majorca was of greater strategic importance than the capture of Zaragoza. It refused to provision the column with the necessary weapons and ammunition required to advance the 35 kilometres to the Aragón capital. Durruti had also, no doubt, been influenced in his decision to hold his advance by the effect the air attack had had on his men.

The fateful halt lasted nine days. During that crucial time the initiative passed to the insurgents. The unexpected breathing space enabled the military and their rightist supporters time to break the general strike by imprisoning and slaughtering the leading working class militants. The militarisation of the railways, during which it is estimated that 60 CNT railway workers were executed, enabled the rebels to rush reinforcements from Pamplona and successfully resist the attacks of the anarchist militia columns at Huesca and Almodévar. (See Background Briefs — 'Why did we fail to take Zaragoza?')

Durruti went immediately to Barcelona to press the case for the attack on Zaragoza and to stress his urgent need for war material with his erstwhile comrade of the *Nosotros* anarchist

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<sup>18</sup> Durruti's speech at Bujaraloz Town Hall, reconstructed from the recollections of two eye-witnesses, Liberto Roig and Pablo Ruiz. Quoted in Durruti, 'The People Armed', Ibid, p.231.

affinity group, García Oliver, now a CNT representative on the Central Committee of Antifascist Militias and head of the War Department. Oliver, however, had shifted his position from opposition to the Central Committee and was now viewing events as a committed partisan of that institution. He told Durruti that the revolution had to be subordinated to the contingencies of the war against fascism. The attack on Majorca had priority over everything else. It would force an Italian intervention that, in turn, would lead to a direct British intervention to restore “the balance of power” in the Mediterranean. Nothing Durruti could say to the contrary had any effect on his old comrade who insisted that the war had priority above everything and having made their decision to collaborate with the liberal democratic and socialist parties of government they must stick by it.

Taking advantage of the stalemate, the Durruti Column deployed over a wide front and reorganised itself. The column was organised into teams of 25 militiamen which, in turn, made up centuries (four squads). These centuries banded together into detachments consisting of five centuries; each detachment boasted a surgical team and another machine-gun team. The column was backed up by artillery commanded by Captains Carceller, Cole and Batet. Later, quartermaster, health and transport sections were formed. The column also had an Advisory Military Council chaired by Pérez Farrás and made up of professional military men; this took charge of liaison and cartography. The column appointed a delegate general and consultation with the rank and file took place through century committees made up of the group delegates, detachment committees (the century delegates), and a War Committee of the Column that consisted of the detachment delegates together with the delegate-general and was advised by the Advisory Military Council. There was also a propaganda service under the supervision of Francisco Carreño that published *El Frente* the bulletin of the column and ran its radio station. The column also organised various special service units that operated clandestinely behind enemy lines. These units, such as “Sons of the Night”, and “The Black Gang”, were organised by Francisco Ponzán, an anarchist who was later to play a key role in the anarchist military intelligence and covert operations service of the Army of the East, the SIEP (*Servicio de Investigación Especial Periférico*). Ponzán later organised and co-ordinated the escape and evasion lines used by the ‘Réseau Pat O’Leary’ and ‘Comet’ networks during WWII.

The men of the Durruti Column began to concentrate their activities on assisting the collectives which they had helped set up during their advance. Many of the militiamen volunteered to be fighter-producers and went off to help with the harvest. Durruti himself gave the following account of the column’s activities to the Madrid-based paper *CNT*:

“As for my column, I am satisfied with it. We are making war and revolution simultaneously. Revolutionary measures are being taken, not just in Barcelona but right up to the firing line. Each village we take embarks upon a revolutionary course. A defeat of my column would be quite awful for our retreat would not be comparable to the retreat of any army: we should have to take with us all of the inhabitants of the villages through which we have passed — from the firing line right back to Barcelona. Along the route we have followed there are only fighters. Everyone works for the war and for the revolution: this is our strength. As for discipline, as I see it this is nothing more than honouring one’s own responsibility and that of others. I am against the barrack style discipline, but equally I am against the mistaken concept of freedom to which cowards habitually appeal in order to dodge the issue. In war,

delegates should be obeyed: otherwise it is impossible to mount any operation. In my column, all of the dodges of the Great War have been tried — the mother on her death bed, the spouse going into labour, the ailing child, failing eyesight, etc. Anyone seeking to go home on the grounds that he is along as a volunteer and is volunteering to go home, I send home on foot — after he has had a piece of my mind. Things hardly ever get that far. To be frank, I am satisfied with the comrades who follow me.”<sup>19</sup>

## The Workers’ Victory

A telegram from the National Committee of the CNT in Madrid to the National Committee delegate in Barcelona on 30 July summed up the military situation throughout the Peninsula:

“Received your telegram. We celebrate victory all Catalonia owing to unstoppable impetus our comrades. Zaragoza situation delicate. Make heroic efforts to bolster the struggle in this sector. Andalucia relatively alright. Small sectors of Galicia, Asturias, centres in Gijón and Oviedo. Spare no effort after your victory. Redouble them dispatching necessary assistance. Madrid fine. Comrades’ heroism excelling themselves. Castile’s meseta in rebel hands, being fought even now. Report — National Committee.”<sup>20</sup>

The impetus of the rightist revolt, which had, on the whole, been confined mainly to the army and most of the police, had been halted. The Spanish seamen had remained loyal because CNT and UGT activists had established Sailors’ Councils, overpowered their officers and sailed for the Bay of Tangiers where they were able to prevent rebel reinforcements arriving from Morocco. They would have been more successful had it not been for the intervention of the Royal Navy who prevented the Spanish seamen bombarding Algeciras where the rebel troops were being landed. However, the failure of the rebels to win over the navy was an unforeseen development which threw the first major spanner in the works as far as the insurgents were concerned. The air force also remained generally loyal.

The failure of the revolt to achieve a speedy victory left the generals isolated in different parts of Spain. General Mola’s Army of the North holding Galicia and Leon in the northwest, Navarre and a large part of Aragón in the north; Queipo de Llano in the south holding eastern Andalucia, and General Franco’s Army of Africa holding Morocco, the conspirators’ base and the islands. The military had the unlimited support of Italy and Portugal and the sympathy and tentative support of Hitler’s Germany. The German ambassador to Spain informed Berlin on 25 July that “unless something unforeseen occurs” the revolt could not succeed. Even a month later Hitler’s acting Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Hans Dieckhoff, noted dismally: “It is not to be expected that the Franco government can hold out for long, even after outward successes, without large scale support from outside.”

Less than two weeks after the rising, on August 1, French socialist premier Léon Blum and his foreign Secretary, Yvon Delbos, were to suggest that the main European powers sign a non-intervention pact. Britain accepted the proposal eagerly and without delay. It was believed that

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<sup>19</sup> CNT, Madrid, 6 October 1936.

<sup>20</sup> *La CNT en la revolución española*, Peirats, Ch. 8

if there was no international intervention the Republican government could suppress the rebels on its own, thus avoiding an open clash developing between the Great Powers. After some delay caused by Portugal and Italy's refusal to sign (both these countries were providing assistance to the Spanish rebels), these two countries together with Russia and Germany signed the six power Non-intervention Pact. The Axis powers had no intention of observing this agreement or permitting any moves to enforce it if such steps threatened to hamper the insurgents in any way, and only agreed to it knowing that it would do greater damage to the Republican cause than the rebels.

## The Social Revolution

The military rising of 17 July ignited more than a heroic working class resistance; it fired joyous elemental hopes among Spanish workers and peasants, hope fuelled by over 60 years of anarchist agitation and propaganda and unleashed a social revolution which threatened to sweep all before it, transforming what had hitherto been a utopian dream into reality. Spain was to show the world the way of free communism — of anarchy. The ideas formulated by the experiences of earlier generations of anarchist thinkers and militants in the various insurrectionary rehearsals for the free society which took place in Spain between 1931 and 1936.

Having gained control of the streets, the rescue of a treacherous bourgeois Republic from the clutches of rightist generals was the farthest thing in the mind of the Spanish people. From the first moment of the rising the initiative passed from a hesitant bourgeoisie not to the intellectuals<sup>21</sup> or party or union leaders, but to the rank and file of the organised working class, a substantial number of whom either belonged to the CNT or FAI or shared a belief in what those initials stood for — a free and just society.

A radical transformation of the social order had begun to take place throughout most of free Spain. Eyewitness Burnett Bollotten, a UPI correspondent in Madrid at the outbreak of the rising, prefaces his study of the first 18 months of the Civil War, *The Grand Camouflage*, thus:

‘Although the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in July, 1936, was followed by a far-reaching social revolution in the anti-Franco camp — more profound in some respects than the Bolshevik Revolution in its early stages — millions of discerning people outside Spain were kept in ignorance, not only of its depth and range, but even of its existence, by virtue of a policy of duplicity and dissimulation of which there is no parallel in history ...’

Within the anarchist movement there were three distinct points of view on the question of war and revolution. The first was that held by most people. In the early stages, the majority of rank and file militants believed that the war would be over in a matter of weeks. After all, a few days had been sufficient to rout the army in Barcelona and other industrial centres. They believed that the revolution and Libertarian Communism, as debated and adopted by the Zaragoza Congress

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<sup>21</sup> Gaston Leval found only two lawyers among the organisers of the Aragón collectives, but even they, he says, were not strictly intellectuals. ‘It was not by the work of our intellectuals — more literary than sociological, more agitators than practical guides — that the future has been illuminated. And the peasants — libertarian or not — or Aragón, Levante, Castille, Extremadura, Andalusia, the workers of Catalonia, understood this and acted alone.



of February that year, was an inseparable aspect of the struggle against economic and social oppression and proceeded immediately to socialise the factories, land and their communities.

The second position was that held by members of the regional and national committees of the CNT and the Peninsular Committee of the FAI, such as Federica Montseny, Diego Abad de Santillan, García Oliver, etc. who anticipated a lengthy war and opposed implementing Libertarian Communism until that war had been won. They opted instead for compromise and alliances with the bourgeois and Marxist parties. They argued that this strategy would prevent a situation developing wherein a victorious but exhausted CNT might be overwhelmed by another political force which has been more sparing with its might. It was a fatal strategy which soon absorbed them, undermined their principles and transformed what had hitherto been a great instrument of the working class into just another bureaucratic institution. They had ignored the experiences of the previous 12 years or so, which showed clearly that the bourgeois republicans and reformist socialists would seize every opportunity to persecute the libertarian revolutionaries without mercy. The socialists had unhesitatingly persecuted the libertarians under the Dictatorship when Caballero was Minister of Labour and the UGT a quasi-fascist labour front. There had also been the vicious suppression of Casas Viejas by the socialists and left republicans generally, and the anti-libertarian legislation.

Clearly, the collaborationists did not appreciate that to make common cause with one's enemies can be fatal. They will continue to persecute you and may well even betray you to the enemy. Also, to insist that ordinary people are denied the transformation of their everyday lives that a revolution brings is the quickest way for them to lose interest in the struggle against fascism. Clearly, the collaborationists did not see this. To be realistic, this is not surprising. Their persecutors suddenly became their flatterers. The CNT had been an outlaw organisation all its life and had even been forced into formal dissolution under the Dictatorship. Even its so-called class brothers in the UGT-PSOE had persecuted it. In a sense, then, the collaborationists cannot be blamed: they had been coerced into opportunism almost by the enormous pressures placed on them by their new-found allies. García Oliver had spent almost the entire period of the Dictatorship in prison, then emerged to a hero's welcome, which he had no doubt earned. To be suddenly offered a ministry could turn anybody's head.

The third body of opinion, unfortunately a minority one held by militants such as Durruti, Camillo Berneri, Jaime Balius, and, later, Santillan, also anticipated a lengthy war, but held that war and revolution were inseparable. Only a libertarian revolution could finally destroy fascism because to do so meant destroying the state, since fascism only means a certain mode of the state: all states turn fascist when the threat to the privilege that the state protects and to a degree also embodies becomes strong enough, which happens when the participatory procedures of the state can no longer secure that privilege. Fascism, in other words, is enforced class collaboration, as opposed to the voluntary class collaboration of parliamentary government.

The collectivisations, requisitions and impoundments of land and capitalist property was, therefore a *fait accompli* foisted upon the higher committees by popular assemblies of a triumphant rank and file. These higher committees were now primarily concerned with winning the military war, assuring public order, restoring normality in the field of production, and reassuring their bourgeois allies that they had nothing to fear from the anarchist movement. Already, the bureaucratic conservatism fostered by an utterly unique political situation, and one brought about by a life and death struggle at that, prompted the fateful decision to give priority to the war over social revolution. It led to an unbridgeable gap between the higher committees

and the assemblies who were equally pressured into preoccupation with the very real practical tasks of reconstruction.

## Collectivisation

There were two types of expropriation of capitalist property, one partial, which could be described as nationalisation, the preferred socialist solution; the other, total expropriation was the anarchist option. *Incautación*, the anarchist solution, meant workers' self-management on the basis of the libertarian principles of mutual aid and solidarity. The socialists, through the UGT unions, opted for *intervención*, a system of partial control with workers' delegates and management representatives participating jointly in the running of the factory. Other collectives were, in fact, run as co-operatives with workers, having taken over the factory or workshop, simply utilising the existing money system and maintaining normal market relations among themselves, their suppliers and customers.

Often, however, the ultimate decision as to which type of administration — whether nationalised, co-operative, or socialised — had as much to do with economic and diplomatic factors as the political affiliation of the workforce. Factors militating against outright socialisation, particularly in the larger industries, included the loss of home and foreign markets, a shortage of raw materials and foreign currency, the latter often contrived deliberately by the bourgeois central government in Madrid, and the all-important dependence of the major industries on foreign capital. José Peirats quotes the example of the Belgian consul in Barcelona who informed the CNT metalworkers' union that 80 per cent of the Barrat foundry was controlled by Belgian shareholders. When the firm was expropriated orders evaporated. The Regional Committee of the CNT, anxious to avoid a diplomatic confrontation which might upset the prosecution of the war, leaned over backwards to accommodate the capitalist powers who, with the British and other foreign warships anchored offshore, were making thinly veiled threats of intervention if their interests were threatened.<sup>22</sup>

On 27 July, Mariano R. Vázquez, Regional Secretary of the CNT in Catalonia met the British consul in Barcelona, who presented Vázquez with a list of 87 companies in which Britain expressed an 'interest' and whose premises were to be protected against socialisation. The following day the Regional Committee issued a statement, which indicated how far its members had developed into a deferential bureaucratic elite under the pressures of war and the dynamic of power:

'From the outset, the Confederal Organisation has given a wide berth to anything which might cause friction with foreign powers; at the helm in this situation, our line has been that the battle against fascism is primary, but that at all costs a situation of tension which might furnish other nations with an excuse to intervene in the fighting on Spanish soil to favour an international defence of capitalism had to be avoided. Yesterday this committee received a visit from a delegation from the

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<sup>22</sup> According to information obtained by Gabriel Jackson 'the American colonel who headed the Telephone company had placed private lines at the disposal of the Madrid plotters for their conversations with General Mola and Franco.' Dante A. Puzo, *Spain and the Great Powers: 1936–1941*, New York, 1962, p.93.

British Consulate seeking some formula that might avert the perpetration by militants of acts that might prompt intervention from outside. A formula was agreed according to which we, for our part, would publish a list of British firms established in Barcelona and which are to be respected — Now all comrades are aware that these establishments have to be respected. This does not preclude the exercise of vigilance lest anyone seek to abuse the agreement and, under cover of that agreement to favour the conspiracy of enemy forces. Should such be the case, the responsibility will fall fully upon the British consulate. We have already expressed our willingness to respect foreign holdings.

— **The Regional Committee.**

## **The Social Revolution**

The achievements of anarchist communism in Spain between July 1936 and the end of 1937 undermine all the conventional perspectives of liberal and socialist thought. The facts, recorded by contemporary eye-witnesses, are documented in numerous works by Mintz, Dolgoff, Leval, Peirats, Bolloren, Souchy, Fraser and others. These accounts of the great experiment should not be studied as mere history, but, as Murray Bookchin points out, as ‘the raw material from which we can construct a realistic vision of a libertarian society.’ Among the best known of these descriptions and, according to eye witness Manuel Cruells, a Catalan journalist, the account which captured the mood and ‘political reality’ of Barcelona with ‘complete fidelity’ was that penned by George Orwell in *Homage to Catalonia*:

‘It was the first time I had ever been in a town where the working class was in the saddle. Practically every building of any size had been seized by the workers and was draped with red flags or with the red and black flag of the anarchists; every wall was scrawled with the hammer and sickle and with the initials of the revolutionary parties; almost every church had been gutted and its images burnt. Every shop and cafe had an inscription saying it had been collectivised; even the bootblacks had been collectivised and their boxes painted red and black. Waiters and shop-walkers looked you in the face and treated you as an equal. Servile and even ceremonial forms of address had temporarily disappeared. Nobody said ‘*Señor*’ or ‘*Don*’ or even ‘*Usted*’; everyone called everyone else ‘comrade’ and ‘thou’, and said ‘*Salud!*’ instead of ‘*Buenos dias*’. Tipping was forbidden by law; almost my first experience was receiving a lecture from a hotel manager for trying to tip a lift boy. There were no private motor cars, they had all been commandeered, and all the trams and taxis and much of the other transport were painted red and black.

‘The revolutionary posters were everywhere, flaming from the walls in clean reds and blues that made the few remaining advertisements look like daubs of mud. Down the Ramblas, the wide central artery of the town where crowds of people streamed constantly to and fro, the loudspeakers were bellowing revolutionary songs all day and far into the night. And it was the aspect of the crowds that was the queerest thing of all. In outward appearance it was a town in which the wealthy classes had practically ceased to exist. Except for a small number of women and foreigners there

were no 'well-dressed' people at all. Practically everyone wore rough working-class clothes, or blue overalls; or some variant of the militia uniform. All this was queer and moving; there was much in it that I did not understand, in some ways I did not even like it, but I recognised it immediately as a state of affairs worth fighting for. Also, I believed that things were as they appeared, that this was really a workers' state and that the bourgeoisie had either fled, been killed, or voluntarily come over to the workers' side; I did not realise that great numbers of well-to-do bourgeois were simply lying low and disguising themselves as proletarians for the time being.

'Together with all this there was something of the evil atmosphere of war. The town had a gaunt untidy look, roads and buildings were in poor repair, the streets at night were dimly lit for fear of air raids, the shops were mostly shabby and half empty. Meat was scarce and milk practically unobtainable, there was a shortage of coal, sugar, and petrol, and a really serious shortage of bread. Even at this period the bread queues were often hundreds of yards long. Yet so far as one could judge the people were contented and hopeful. There was no unemployment, and the price of living was still extremely low; you saw very few conspicuously destitute people, and no beggars except the gypsies. Above all, there was a belief in the revolution and the future, a feeling of having suddenly emerged into an era of equality and freedom. Human beings were trying to behave as human beings and not as cogs in the capitalist machine. In the barbers' shops were anarchist notices (the barbers were mostly anarchists) solemnly explaining that barbers were no longer slaves. In the streets were coloured posters appealing to prostitutes to stop being prostitutes. To anyone from the hard-boiled, sneering civilisation of the English-speaking races there was something pathetic in the literalness with which these idealistic Spaniards took the hackneyed phrases of revolution ...'<sup>23</sup>

Imaginative experiments in collectivisation were not confined to industry and agriculture; they took place in the public sector as well. In Barcelona an average of 3,000 sacks of flour were required each day for the 745 bakeries scattered throughout the city. The Bakers' Section of the CNT decided to socialise all bakeries in the city, thereby rationalising production and reducing unnecessary costs. The socialisation of the health services was another great achievement of the revolution. In Catalonia, most of the health workers, including porters and doctors, were united in one union. The service was totally reorganised with the region being divided into nine administrative zones with 36 health centres coordinating health services in every village in the region. The centres were autonomous, but if a problem arose in a particular region they would ask for specialist assistance and a doctor would be drafted from another area. People were no longer required to pay for medical services. Each collective, if it could afford it, would pay a contribution to its health centre. Building and facilities were improved and modern equipment introduced. In Barcelona alone, six new hospitals and eight new sanatoriums were opened during the course of the revolution.

As foreseen by writers such as Isaac Puente<sup>24</sup> collectivisation in the countryside was easier to implement and was more successful than similar ventures in industry. There were two main

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<sup>23</sup> *Homage to Catalonia*, George Orwell.

<sup>24</sup> See Background Briefs: Libertarian Communism.

reasons for this: firstly, villages and rural communities tend to have a strong sense of community and a collective tradition; secondly, anarchist traditions were particularly strong in the villages.

The military rising had triggered off spontaneous land seizures by the landless peasants and day labourers, particularly the enormous estates of the big landowners, the *latifundistas*. In other cases, such as in Aragón, land was expropriated by the militias as they advanced against the enemy, turning it over to local peasant syndicates who began to organise themselves along economic and geographic lines with a general assembly of working peasants electing a management committee responsible for economic administration. Small landowners had the choice between individual property and collective ownership. On the whole, no one was forced to join the collective and, likewise, if anyone wanted to leave no barriers were placed in their way. In the village of Peñalba, in Huesca, for example, a third of the collective decided to go 'individualist' and a proportion of land was allotted to them. Having chosen to remain outside the community they could not expect to benefit from its services, but they could opt to participate in communal work, if they wished, and they could bring their produce to sell in the communal shops.

A clearer idea of the revolutionary mood that had transformed the Spanish countryside can be seen in the principles expounded in the various charters drawn up by the agrarian collectives that united people on the basis of common work or locality. The charter of one collective, *Espluga de Francoli*, reads as follows:

**Article 1** — All those who may constitute the collective to have the same rights and duties.

**Article 2** — The collective is to be governed by decisions reached in assembly, the law of the majority prevailing ...

**Article 5** — The collective will reward its component families in accordance with the number of members each family may have ...

**Article 7** — All members of the co-operative are to have access to the produce in its possession, without money, but a tally is to be kept of all that is issued and on Saturdays an account will be compiled of what may have been acquired, and whatever the difference may be between that and the sum of the family's entitlement ...<sup>25</sup>

Collectivisation involved the takeover of privately owned land and working it under self-management. The agricultural collectives provide the clearest examples of anarchist ideas in action simply because life in the country was less complex in the city. Gaston Leval described the process of social reconstruction through the Collective:

'... the Collective was born with characteristics of its own. It is not a Syndicate for it encompasses all those who wish to join it whether they are producers in the classic economic sense or not. Then it brings them together at the complete human individual level ... Neither is the Collective the municipal Council or what is called the Commune ... for it parts company with the political party traditions on which the commune is normally based ... the whole population takes part in its management, whether it is a question of a policy for agriculture, for the creation of new industries, for social security, medical service or public education.'<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *La CNT en la revolución española*, José Peirats.

<sup>26</sup> *Ne Franco, ne Stalin*, Milan, 1952, Leval, pp. 343–344.

Although anarchist ideas played a crucial role in the revolution, it must be stressed that the collectives were not the creation of the anarchist movement, 'A great many collectives were created spontaneously by people remote from our movement ('libertarians' without being aware of it). Most of the Castile and Extremadura collectives were organised by Catholic and Socialist peasants: in some cases of course they may have been inspired by the propaganda of isolated anarchist militants.'<sup>27</sup>

General assemblies of the people discussed and voted on issues while the day-to-day administrative work of the collectives was carried out by elected teams of workers. Each team nominated a delegate who would meet with the delegates from other teams to co-ordinate the work of the collective. Delegates would be chosen either by their particular team or by the village as a whole. The general assembly of the collective would meet regularly, according to the wishes of the assembly itself. The amount of power the assemblies had varied from place to place; in some places assemblies made day-to-day decisions while in others only major decisions were made by the assembly with elected delegates dealing with the day-to-day affairs of the community.

The collectives were not isolated. One of the functions of the general assemblies was to delegate members to attend meetings of the cantonal federations, above which were the regional federations, the basis of economic coordination. Leval cites an example of this federal system at work:

'The 900 collectives were brought together in 54 cantonal (local or district) federations which grouped themselves and at the same time subdivided into five provincial federations which at the top level ended with the Regional Committee of the Levante Federation situated in Valencia and which coordinated the whole.'<sup>28</sup>

An example of the large scale of the operations of the Peasant Federation of the Levante is indicated by the fact that it produced more than half the total orange crop in Spain and transported and distributed through its own commercial organisation more than 70 per cent of the total harvest. Again, it is important to emphasise that although the federations carried out large-scale operations, the collectives were organised from the bottom up, from the point of production, and remained autonomous units.

As approximately 70 per cent of the rural population was illiterate prior to the revolution, education was an issue of great importance to the collectivists. As the anarchist educational primer, the *Cartilla filológica española*, urged:

'Mankind can be divided into the good and the bad. The good and the bad can be subdivided into the literate and the illiterate. Any other division is artificial, false, ridiculous or stupid. The subdivision between literate and illiterate, purely accidental, should not be the reason for vanity among those more fortunate or the cause of shame among those who have not had the good luck or the opportunity to learn. The bad are almost never so bad by nature, but, rather, almost always so as a result of social pressure, injustice, or the influence of bad examples, which circumstances they cannot alter.'

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<sup>27</sup> Leval, *ibid*, pp. 168–169.

<sup>28</sup> Leval, *ibid*, p.154

The collectives did not merely content themselves with raising the minimum school leaving age to 14; they built schools and technical and agricultural colleges as well. Due to their efforts, illiteracy was virtually eradicated in the collectives of Aragón, Levant, Castile, Andalucia and Extremadura which led to technical innovation, improved training and modernisation of agriculture which greatly boosted production in most areas.

The intellectuals, in their ineptitude in practical work, were inferior to the peasants who made no political speeches, but knew how to organise the new life. Not even the authors of the syndicalist health organisation in Catalonia were intellectuals. A Basque doctor with a will of iron, and a few comrades working in hospitals, did everything. In other regions, talented professional men aided the movement. But there too, the initiative came from below. Alcoy's industries, so well organised, were all managed by the workers, as were those of Elda and Castellón. In Carcagente, in Elda, in Granollers, in Binéfar, in Jativa, in land transport, in marine transport, in the collectives of Castille, or in the semi-socialisation of Ripolls and Puigcerdá – the militants at the bottom did everything. As for the government, they were as inept in organising the economy as in organising the war.' *Ne Franco ne Stalin'*, Milan, 1952.

## August 1936

IN VALENCIA the militants of the CNT, FAI and FIJL (Federación Ibérica de Juventudes Libertarias – the anarchist youth movement), who had led the attack on the Valencia Barracks on July 18, met in a monastery that they had converted into a temporary barracks and formed what was to become known as ‘The Iron Column’. In line with Spanish anarchist policy all prisoners were released when the prisons were opened during an insurrection. Many of these were common law prisoners who had been politicised during their imprisonment by anarchist or ‘social’ prisoners and chose to fight alongside their liberators. Accompanied by several hundred freed prisoners the new column set off for the Teruel Front where they later routed the fascists at Sarrión, in the *Maestrazgo*, on 13 August. The column then captured ‘la Puebla’ where they declared Libertarian Communism and set up their headquarters. They quickly established a defensive line, some 15 miles from Teruel, which stretched from Andeguela to Forniche. The rebel advance on Valencia was halted.

One of the prisoners liberated by the anarchists from the Valencian prison of San Miguel de Los Reyes has left us a personal account of the formation of what was quickly to become the most vilified and uncompromisingly revolutionary of all the militia columns:

‘I am one of the ones who were freed from San Miguel de Los Reyes, a sinister prison built by the monarchy as a burial place for men like us who, being no cowards, have never submitted to the infamous laws devised by the powerful against the oppressed. Like so many others, I was taken there for having committed an offence in that I had revolted against the degradation visited upon an entire country ... I had taken the life of a bully. Out along with me came many men who had also suffered and also been scarred by the ill-treatment they had experienced since birth. Some, as soon as they hit the streets, dispersed throughout the world; others of us rallied to our liberators who treated us as friends and loved us as brothers. Together with these we have gradually formed the Iron Column, together with them we have wasted no time in storming the barracks and disarming fearful guards; together we have, in hard fought attacks, driven the fascists back as far as the Sierra peaks where they remain today. Accustomed to taking what we need, we seized rifles and provisions in repulsing the fascists. And for a time we dined off what was offered to us by the peasantry. And without anyone making us a gift of a single weapon, we have armed ourselves with what we have wrested from the insurgent troops by the strength of our arms. The rifle which I clutch, the rifle which has been at my side ever since I turned my back on that fateful prison is mine, my very own, I took it from the man who bore it and nearly all the rifles which my comrades carry are, by the same token, our very own.’<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Protesta davanti al libertari del presente e del futuro, sulle capitolazioni del 1937, di un ‘incontrolado’ della Colonna di Ferro*, Turin, 1981.



In response to the libellous references to the Iron Column and the released prisoners who fought bravely in its ranks by historians such as Gabriel Jackson and Hugh Thomas we can quote the testimony of Mika Etchébéhere, a captain in the Republican Army and a member of the POUM who had some liberated prisoners under her command:

‘We, too, have had three or four such cases in our column, and they fought splendidly. At first we were stand offish; later, being together, they came to subscribe to our ideas and now it could not be said that they stole or anything of that sort,’<sup>2</sup>

The Iron Column, like other militias, set up a War Committee with the following structure: ‘The establishment of the War Committee is acceptable to all the confederal militias. Taking the individual as the starting point we form groups of 10, which manage minor operations for themselves. Ten groups make up one *centuria*, which nominates a delegate to represent it. Thirty *centurias* make up one column. which is led by the War Committee composed of the *centuria* delegates.’<sup>3</sup>

Its fighting strength in the early days was some 1,500 men, but in spite of the obstacles placed in its way by the government and the regional leadership of the CNT, this later rose to 3,000 men. It had bases scattered throughout five provinces: Castellón de la Plana, Valencia, Alicante, Murcia and Albacete. The Iron Column also enjoyed the support of two publications – *Linea de Fuego*, a four-page daily news bulletin for the men at the front, and *Nosotros* based in Valencia. The latter also acted as the organ of the FAI and the FIJL. *Linea del Fuego* also published general cultural articles – poems, short stories, literary criticism, and, of course, articles on politics, sociology, philosophy, economy and so on. Militants also contributed with articles about their everyday lives, on the running of the column, and on other national issues. It was a genuine forum for the discussion of issues peculiar to the column.

Because of its total commitment to anarchist principles and its refusal to compromise or form alliances with bourgeois or political parties, The Iron Column became the immediate target of a campaign of vilification and disinformation from the political parties, libels which have been picked up and repeated by subsequent generations of establishment historians.

On 1 October 1936, angry at the restoration of bourgeois order in the rearguard, intervention units from the column, set up specially to resist such developments, left the Teruel front and returned to Valencia to demonstrate to the bourgeoisie that the working class was not fighting to defend bourgeois property rights and justice but a new social order. It attacked and disarmed the guards, invaded the courts and destroyed court records, raided the nightclubs and cabarets frequented by the well-to-do and relieved them of their jewellery and wallets. Another unit went to Castellón de la Plana on 10 October on a similar mission and burned all the criminal and judicial records in the town. Later that same month, 30 October, the funeral of Ariza Gonzales, one of the Iron Column leaders whom it is believed was killed in a reprisal, turned into an armed uprising. ‘In the end, surrounded in the Plaza Tetuán by communist units armed with machine guns, the demonstrators suffered heavy casualties with about 50 or so being killed.’<sup>4</sup>

The Iron Column defended its actions against the campaign of vilification mounted by the Spanish Communist Party and the Republican government in the following manifesto aimed at

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<sup>2</sup> PANCR, Turin, 1967, interview with Mika Etchébéhere, pp. 16–17.

<sup>3</sup> *Linea del Fuego*, 17.11.1936

<sup>4</sup> *La Rivoluzione e la guerra di Spagna*, Broué and Témime, Milan, 1962, p. 247.

showing the bourgeoisie and Republican government that they were not given to rhetoric and meant business:

‘... As anarchists, we who, under the familiar denomination ‘Iron Column’ — struggle against the clerical and militarist reaction on the Teruel Front are concerned, of course, with the problems of the front, but also with those of the rearguard. Consequently when we realised that in Valencia things were not moving in the direction that we wished, when we noted that the rearguard, far from being a reassurance to us, was a focus of concern and misgivings, we resolved to intervene and, to that end, we dispatched the following requests to the relevant organisations:

- (1) that the Guardia Civil be disarmed and disbanded;
- (2) that all of the armed forces of the state in the rearguard (Assault Guards, Carabineros, Seguridad, etc.) be sent immediately to the front; and
- (3) that all records and archives held in capitalist and state institutions be destroyed forthwith.

These requests had their foundations in revolutionary and ideological considerations. As anarchists and as revolutionaries, we considered the existence of the Guardia Civil a reactionary corps, which as, throughout its existence and more especially during the present revolt, clearly displayed its mentality and its intentions, to be a threat. The Guardia Civil was odious in our eyes for many reasons and we had no confidence in it. So we asked that it may be disarmed and proceeded to disarm it.

We ask that all of the armed corps be moved up to the front lines because men and weapons are in short supply there while in the city, under the present state of affairs, their presence was more of a provocation than a necessity. We have been halfway successful on this count and we shall press on until our objective has been completely achieved.

Finally we asked for the destruction of all the documents which represented a whole past era of tyranny and oppression against which our free consciences had revolted. Let us destroy the records and give consideration to requisitioning those buildings, which, like the Court buildings, have been used in other times to entomb revolutionaries in prisons and have no *raison d’être* today, now that we find ourselves at the dawning of a libertarian society.

Such objectives brought us into Valencia and this explains all that we did in the manner deemed most appropriate.

Later, during our stay in Valencia, we observed that whereas efforts to acquire weapons foundered due to our lack of funds, there was a huge quantity of gold and other precious metals in many places — this prompted us to requisition the gold, silver and platinum of some jewellers in insignificant quantities which were surrendered to the Organisation. The above is what we have done. Now let us examine that which we did not do.

We are accused of looting buildings. This is a lie. We defy anyone to present us with an account of this and to show that our men were not acting out of necessity but

from mere caprice and a desire to create confusion. We stand accused of murdering people for amusement. This is a foul calumny. What have we done to deserve this reputation? What crimes have we committed? A deplorable episode, which we are first to lament and to condemn, appears to be the prosecution evidence. We had nothing to do with the death of our Socialist comrade José Pardo Aracil. It was shown, on the very night of his death that no member of our column had any hand in it. It has never occurred to us to attack the Socialists nor any other antifascist group, much less to do so in the treacherous fashion in which Pardo was attacked. This does not mean that we renege on our aims for these are the sole motivations for our fight: we realise, however, that at the present moment, internecine warfare would be a crime. We are facing a formidable enemy and all our exertions must be bent to his destruction.

In these crucial times for Spain's future, our position is clear and unmistakable. We shall fight with all our manpower, all our energies, all our enthusiasm in order to confound the vileness of fascism forever. We struggle to make a reality of the social revolution. Let us march towards Anarchy. Consequently, here and now, we shall stand by everything which makes it possible to live with greater freedom, to smash the yokes which oppress us and to destroy the vestiges of the past.

To every worker, every revolutionary, every anarchist, let us say: struggle, wherever you may be — at the front line or in the rearguard, against all the enemies of your liberty. Strangle the life out of fascism. But see to it also that as a result of your efforts no dictatorial regime is installed, no continuation (with all the vices and defects) of that state of affairs which we are striving to eradicate. With weapons now and with working tools later on, learn to live without tyrants, learn to emancipate yourselves, for this is the only path to freedom. Such, clearly expounded, is the thinking of the 'Iron Column'.

Comrades! Death to fascism! Long live the social revolution! Long live anarchy!<sup>5</sup>

French surrealist writer Benjamin Péret was among the first foreign volunteers to fight in Spain. His letters to André Breton provide us with a lucid and moving insight into the flowering and decline of the Spanish revolution. His first letter, simple and sincere, was sent from Barcelona on 11 August:

'My very dear André, if you were to see Barcelona today, filled with barricades, decorated with churches gutted except for their empty walls, you, like me, would exult. The anarchists are virtually the masters of Catalonia and the only force beside them is the POUM. The ratio between us is three to one, which isn't excessive and in the present circumstances can easily change. We have 15,000 armed men and they have 40,000—50,000. The Communists, who have fused with three or four small parties, are a negligible force. In their newspaper on Friday they declared that what is necessary isn't a proletarian revolution but a defence of the Republic, and whoever tries to make a revolution will find themselves opposed by the militias.'<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *La CNT en la revolución española*, Peirats, pp. 306–308.

<sup>6</sup> Courtot, *Introduction to the Reading of Benjamin Péret*.

Another foreign arrival in August was Abdelkjalak Torres, the Moroccan nationalist leader, who came to Barcelona clandestinely with an official delegation from the Moroccan independence movement. They proposed to the Militias' committee to unleash a revolutionary revolt in the Spanish protectorate, the home base of the military uprising, if weapons or money could be provided. All they asked for in return was a promise of recognition of Morocco's independence in the event of a Republican victory. The potential effect of such an uprising in Franco's rearguard would have been enormous, but the proposition was turned down by the Caballero government because of the international repercussions of such a move, particularly in regard to France and Britain. However the idea of promoting an insurrection in Morocco was one that the anarchists were to press throughout the course of the war.

The 'notables' of the CNT Regional Committee were blunt and to the point when they eventually explained their behaviour to the rank and file on 9 August. This was the first general assembly of the anarchist movement to take place since the rising:

'When the consuls approached us, we quickly guaranteed the foreign firms so that nobody might confiscate them. And when any attempt was made to do so, we even dispatched guards so that their interests would be respected.'<sup>7</sup> García Oliver added: 'I ask the whole of the proletariat to stay in the places of production and not to be sparing in their sacrifices ... This is not the time to seek a 40-hour-week and a 15 per cent wage increase'.<sup>8</sup> Federica Montseny, topped them all with classical utilitarian logic: 'We are obliged to go beyond what we had intended, on account of the abandonment of a huge number of industries necessary to the economic reconstruction of the revolution. We accept that abandoned responsibility in order to derive minimum profit by it.'<sup>9</sup>

## War or Revolution?

As the fighting receded early in August, and confusion began to lift the bourgeoisie began to catch their second breath and prepared to regain lost ground. On the military front the Madrid government made the first tentative moves to restore its authority by calling up the reserves from the intake of the previous three years with the view of creating a volunteer army under its control. In Catalonia, the young people called to the colours responded immediately to this decree by organising heated anti-militarist demonstrations in which they tore up their tunics to angry cries of 'Down with the Army!' and 'Long live the People's militia!'. At a mass rally in Barcelona's Olimpia Theatre 10,000 young Catalans announced their intention to join the militias and help liberate their comrades in Zaragoza but to refuse conscription on the grounds that they had no confidence in the officer corps and were morally opposed to parade ground and barrack room discipline.

A manifesto issued by the CNT the following day denounced the Madrid decree, supporting the refusal of the young to be called up and sought a compromise solution with the Generalidad's Defence Councillor, Diaz Sandino, within the Militias' Committee:

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<sup>7</sup> *L'Autogestion dans l'Espagne révolutionnaire*, Mintz, p.90.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p.91.

<sup>9</sup> Peirats, *op. cit.* Ch. 10.

‘The Madrid government’s lack of political vision confronts the workers’ organisations with a somewhat difficult problem. A large number of these youths are already enrolled in the militias; others have declared a readiness to enlist and to set off for Zaragoza immediately. But what they do not want, and their attitude is a logical one in the light of the treachery of military figures implicated in the recent revolt, is that they should be subjected to military discipline and placed under the orders of their old commanders. The formidable effort at liberation made by the people implicitly on 19 July was no idle exercise; it was not made that everything might continue as before. The umbilical cord which bound us in the past has broken forever. New conceptions of social obligations, human existence, of law and liberty are in force ... The CNT cannot be unheeding of, nor may it frustrate the lofty and worthy expression of a resolve thus enunciated with vim and enthusiasm. The soldiers gathered in the Olimpia Theatre yesterday even undertook to rejoin their respective corps, on condition that they enter the barracks as militians free to come and go as free men freely embracing the discipline that is a necessary part of concerted actions, and not as automata bereft of all human personality. And the CNT of Catalonia has to put the issue pure and simple to the Generalidad and Madrid governments alike. We cannot defend the existence nor can we comprehend the need for a regular, uniformed and compulsory army. That army ought to be supplanted by the people’s militias, by the people armed, the sole guarantee that freedom will be defended zealously and that fresh plots will not be hatched in the shadows.’

On 6 August, Santillán, FAI representative on the Militias’ Committee issued the following memorandum:

‘The Central Committee of Antifascist Militias of Catalonia has determined that soldiers from the years 1933, 1934, 1935 and 1936 should report immediately to barracks and there place themselves at the disposal of the Militias’ committees set up under the jurisdiction of the Central Committee.’

However, fearful of the rise of a new officer class within the militias, the unions set up workers’ and soldiers’ councils similar to those created in the early days of the Russian revolution. These councils, made up of soldiers and delegates from the various workers organisations and parties, acted as a working class security service which operated throughout all the armed services.

José Peirats provides an interesting account of the role of the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils in the testimony of Alfonso Miguel, a CNT militant and champion of the Councils:

‘The first workers’ and soldiers’ committees came into existence by agreement of the CNT–UGT. They were born in Barcelona. Then they were formed in the Levante, in Andalusia and in the capital itself, which was demoralised by defeatism and lurking treachery. They set about monitoring and carrying out purges. The committees assumed the unenviable task of raising morale, monitoring certain intrigues and keeping an eye on suspect officers and assisting all competent and sincere personnel. With the committees it was possible to sustain military activity and to keep at bay the fascism within. But for them, fascism would assuredly have devoured us. At that painful juncture, in the early months of the way, who was there capable of bringing

unity between the people and the army (an army on its last legs) and the armed institutions that have been demoralised by treachery and decimated in active service? They were not set up for considerations of rhetoric. The committees' creations were determined by the necessity of pressing on with the struggle and the need to have the utmost confidence in the overall decisions of the military command. The revolt had dashed all respect and killed every iota of confidence. So despite everything, it was possible to maintain a fairly coherent direction amid the general chaos by means of supervision (occasionally nominal and at other times effective) of the decisions of the command, without which no decisions would have been possible. The workers' militias needed an assured leadership. This they achieved by blending their own personnel with those (elected by the respective corps and military units) who shared their common aim: "to campaign together under a single and loyal accountable leadership". Force of circumstance determined their creation. Later, as they developed themselves, they determined that the militias should be replaced. And a new military organisation, the popular and revolutionary army, moulded by an anti-militarist population in the middle of a war against what had been its own army, came into existence in Spain.<sup>10</sup>

Having secured its military and security apparatus, the Generalidad slowly began to reassert its control over the economic sector. On 10 August, Mariano R. Vázquez announced to a public rally of the CNT and FAI in Barcelona's Olimpia Theatre, the first such assembly since the events of 19 July, that in agreement with the Generalidad government both organisations had agreed to become part of a proposed Economic Council of Catalonia. This statement by the Regional Secretary of the Catalan CNT was not a proposal to be discussed by the assemblies and either ratified or rejected, it was a *fait accompli*.

The Economic Council of Catalonia came into existence, formally, under a Generalidad decree on 13 August. The anarchists were in a minority of 5-to-10 on the council: the CNT had 3 members, Eusebio Carbó, Juan P. Fàbregas and Cosme Rofes, while the FAI was represented by Antonio García Birlán and Diego Abad de Santillán. The right-wing Esquerra Republicana, Acció Catalana Republicana, the Unió de Rabassaires, the PSO de Catalonia and the *POUM* were the other bourgeois, statist and Marxist parties with whom the anarchists and anarcho-syndicalist leadership had arbitrarily agreed to share responsibility for the 'normalisation' of the Catalan economy. It was at this same meeting that Federica Montseny, spokesperson for the FAI, made it clear to the bourgeoisie that the anarchist leadership intended to pursue a strategy of anti-fascist unity at almost any price

Although a member of the CNT for at least a year, Montseny, a romantic novelist, was a recent recruit to the FAI. Following the workers' victory, she was invited to join the *Nosotros* group on 21 July, the day the Central Committee of Antifascist Militias was formed. She appears to have been almost immediately co-opted on to the Peninsular Committee of the FAI.

August 10 also saw the formal institutionalisation of the Control Patrols, the popular organs set up for safeguarding revolutionary order. These were now formally made up of 700 men from all the antifascist organisations (325 from the CNT, the rest proportionally divided amongst the *Esquerra*, the UGT and the *POUM*) and divided into 11 geographic branches.

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<sup>10</sup> Peirats, op. cit. Ch. 10.

Another significant development in the erosion of the revolutionary initiative of the anarcho-syndicalist movement took place a few days later on August 15 with the news of the formation of a Committee to liaise between the FAI, CNT, PSUC and UGT, thereby strengthening and ‘galvanising’ anti-fascist unity by: seeking out ‘such points of agreement as may exist between those bodies, submitting them for discussion and approval by all, so that public guidelines and exhortations may be issued ...’, commending to its affiliated and organisations ‘the formation on every work site of factory committees with proportional representation for CNT and UGT members ...’ and ‘to eschew violent attacks and criticisms’.

The signatory of this statement of antifascist unity on behalf of the PSUC, the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia, formed in July 1936, was Juan Comorera, who, according to Franz Borkenau, represented ‘a political attitude which can best be compared with that of the extreme right wing of the German social democracy. He had always regarded the fight against anarchism as the chief aim of socialist policy in Spain – to his surprise he found unexpected allies for his dislike of anarchist policies in the Communists.’<sup>11</sup>

Revolution had brought in its wake a massive influx into the workers’ parties and organisations of the opportunistic detritus of capitalism. The bourgeoisie began to seek shelter in the organisation that had openly committed itself to defending bourgeois interests. In Catalonia that organisation was the UGT, virtually non-existent in the region until September 1936 when it became a fief of the Spanish Communist Party whose central committee had recently proclaimed its advocacy of ‘revolutionary order without infringement of respect for private property.’ The position of the international communist movement, had been expressed clearly by André Marty, a member of the Executive Committee of the Comintern, in a statement to the French Communist party paper *L’Humanité*:

‘In a country like Spain, where feudal institutions are still deeply rooted, the working class and the people as a whole have as their most pressing immediate task not the carrying on of the socialist revolution but the defence, consolidation and carrying through of the bourgeois democratic republic. Our Party’s only watchword as propaganda through our paper *Mundo Obrero*, on 19 July, was “Long Live the Democratic Republic”. This is common knowledge. Only people of ill-will can argue otherwise.’

Spanish Communist Party leader José Hernández and Santiago Carrillo, leader of the Communist-dominated United Socialist youth (JSU) had confirmed this line with the unequivocal affirmation that the party was ‘not fighting for the social revolution’.

By championing the privileges, status and property of the professional as well as the urban and rural bourgeoisie against the rapid advances of the anarchist-inspired social revolution, the Communist Party increased its membership dramatically within a matter of months. Peirats estimates that in Catalonia, in the first few months, the PCE had attracted 8,000 landowners and 16,000 members of the middle classes. By the end of 1936, the PCE had increased its membership tenfold to around a million.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Borkenau, *The Spanish Cockpit*, p.183.

<sup>12</sup> The exact strength of the PCE at the outbreak of the Civil War is uncertain. From a membership of 800 in April 1931 (Claudín) it had risen to between 30,000 (Peirats), 40,000 (Bolloten) and 113,000 (Miguel Maura, ex-Minister of the Interior). Most commentators agree however, that its membership was in excess of 100,000 (Gómez Casas). Compared with nearly two million members of the CNT and a million and a half in the UGT at the outbreak of the Civil War, the Spanish Communist Party was minuscule indeed and had little influence among the workers.

Although it had increased its membership in direct proportion to the discontent felt by the bourgeoisie and peasant smallholders at the progress of collectivisation of the land and factories under self-management, there was another more powerful reason for its rapid growth in influence of the PCE by the end of 1936. That reason was Stalin's decision to provide military support for the Republican government. It must be stressed from the outset that this had nothing to do with any altruistic motives of working class solidarity — a concept Stalin had renounced publicly since his entry into the League of Nations in 1934, committing himself instead to supporting liberal democracy. Stalin's decision to send arms to Republican Spain was based strictly on the diplomatic and strategic exigencies of Soviet foreign policy.

For Stalin, the Spanish Civil War was a pawn in a diplomatic chess game being played out by the three great European power blocs — the Axis, France and Britain, and Russia. Stalin hoped that the surrogate war being fought in Spain would provide him with sufficient breathing space to divert or minimise the effect on the Soviet Union of the inevitable wider European war. Hitler's expansionist policies would, Stalin believed, drag Germany into conflict with Britain and France leaving Russia as an onlooker. However, Soviet foreign policy at the time also required that the balance of forces in Europe should not be upset. Soviet support for social revolution in Europe would affect Russia's delicate military alliance with France and its relationship with Great Britain.

However, as dissident Communist historian Fernando Claudín points out, neither could it realistically dodge its duty 'to show active solidarity with the Spanish people in arms without risk of losing all prestige in the eyes of the world proletariat.'



## September 1936

### The CNT joins the Generalidad

EARLY IN September, the Giral government resigned to make way for a cabinet consisting of three right-wing, three left-wing Socialists, five Republicans and two Communists. The new government was led by Socialist leader Largo Caballero. The Socialist government lost no time in moving to restore the balance of power to the state, which, in spite of the welter of declarations and decrees, had not existed since the working class victory over the military on 19 July.

The response of the CNT leadership to the Caballero government, to which they had not been invited to join, came in mid-September when a 'working party' consisting of Juan López, Aurelio Alvarez and Federica Montseny, issued a statement calling for the setting up of what they described as a National Defence Council. It was, in effect, a government by another name and a further indication of the willingness of the CNT leadership to collaborate with the political parties. Among other functions the Defence Council, chaired by Caballero as President of the Republic with 5 CNT, 5 UGT and 4 Republican members, was to coordinate federally organised Regional Defence Councils, transform ministries into departments, create a single Popular Militia for police functions and a War Militia, with compulsory service, under a single unified military command.

Caballero, an experienced and wily politician, was fully aware of the kite-flying nature of the statement issued by the CNT's working party. A few days later, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of that same month the Madrid government responded to the CNT National Committee's overtures by setting up a temporary police force, the *Milicias de Vigilancia de la Retaguardia* (MVR — Rearguard Watch Militias), under the control of the Ministry of the Interior. The same decree also outlawed all other non-governmental bodies, which 'attempted to carry out functions peculiar to the same.' Thus began the process of rebuilding the state apparatus.

In spite of this outright affront to the anarcho-syndicalist movement by the Caballero government, the National Committee of the CNT bent even further backwards to renege on their principles. In a somewhat surprisingly naive choice of words for anarchists to describe the actions of politicians a further manifesto argued: 'The exclusion from the leadership of that struggle of a movement of the scale and significance of the CNT is tantamount to introduction of a bias into that same leadership and to depriving it of its national character, and, thereby, shattering its effectiveness ... But for this Confederation, which finds itself denied a place in the running of Spanish life at national levels, fascism would have scored an inexorable and tremendous victory ... Why is there no recognition of its mettle and why no acceptance of the proportional representation owing to it in the oversight of the struggle.' It went on to plead that because it had been chosen to forego 'the wholesale pursuit of its programme' (the implementation of Libertarian Communism) it had surely shown itself worthy of sharing in 'the oversight of the struggle' in its proposed National Defence Council.

In Catalonia, in the meantime, 24 September, the Regional Committee of the CNT convened a Plenum of the CNT unions to study the economic problems facing the collectives and to assist the work of the recently formed Economic Council. The report of the CNT delegate to the Economic Council, Juan P. Fábregas, provides a useful insight into the complexity of the problems of war and revolution as perceived by the small group of people who were now controlling the CNT and whose revolutionary ideas had been supplanted by the need for internal unity, harmony and the elimination of internal conflicts and tensions:

'Prior to 19 July there were 65,000 unemployed workers in Catalonia. There are huge stocks of manufactured goods which cannot be exported because of the war and on account of the strained relations existing between Madrid and Barcelona ... I must tell you of the difficulties raised by the Madrid government which has refused us all assistance in economic and financial matters, assured because it does not have much sympathy with the practical projects underway in Catalonia ... The Madrid government has refused point blank to help Catalonia. There has been a change of government but still we run up against the same difficulties ... We asked the government for a credit of 800 million pesetas, another of 30 millions for the purchase of war materials and a further 150 million francs for the purchase of raw materials. As a collateral we offered 1,000 million pesetas that the savings banks have on deposit in the form of securities with the Bank of Spain. All this was denied us.'<sup>1</sup>

The Plenum ended on 26 September, 1936. The following day the Catalan press informed the world that following discussions between Companys and the CNT, the anarcho-syndicalist labour union had officially renounced its antipolitical stance and was now a full member of the Generalidad government of Catalonia. The newspaper *Claridad* referred to a note to the Generalidad Council from the CNT Regional Committee accepting governmental responsibility which stated the CNT's acceptance 'indicates a realisation that reality is more instructive than any theoretical extremism and in no way implies abandonment of principle, but indeed the very opposite.'<sup>2</sup>

Later that same day the Regional Committee issued a press statement<sup>3</sup> denying it had held discussions with Companys or that it had abandoned its antipolitical principles by participating in government. What it did admit to, however, was an agreement to collaborate with a new body called 'The Council of the Generalidad'. The 'Council of the Generalidad' developed out of the Economic Council. It consisted of 4 Esquerra members, 3 CNT, 2 PSUC, 1 Rabassaires-Esquerra, 1 POUM, 1 Acció Catalana and one defence expert. The programme was: concentration on the war effort, the coordination of all fighting units under a single command, a conscript militia, a tightening of discipline, the economic reconstruction of the country, and to provide guidance to the working class so 'that its endeavours and its aspirations be coordinated and united.'

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<sup>1</sup> Peirats, Vol. 1, Ch. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Peirats, *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Yesterday, Saturday, the evening papers carried news that comrades Fábregas and Domenech had discussions with the President of the Generalidad, discussions which lasted 20 minutes. It has to be pointed out that the comrades in question talked, not with the President but had an audience with the Councillor for culture. To clarify another point to the press and, may it serve as a warning ... no government has been set up but rather a new body congruent with the circumstances in which we find ourselves and which goes by the name of the Council of the Generalidad'. Quoted by Peirats, *op. cit.*, Vol I, Ch. 11.

In an article in *Solidaridad Obrera* a few days later, commenting on the decision to participate in the 'Council of the Generalidad', Federico Urales, Montseny's father defended this decision:

"Some time ago we said: better proletarian dictatorship than bourgeois dictatorship. Now we proclaim: better any accommodation with those who, while not of us, are at least close to us, than that fascism should triumph; and in saying that we do not address ourselves to the anarchists but to all who struggle against fascism. We would do well to take on board the common peril and the mission that history has imposed on the Spanish people. All antifascists must be worthy of this moment. The salvation of the world's liberties lies in our hands. We have to rescue them with our hearts, our loyalty and our readiness to reach accommodations, bearing in mind that for us, the greater evil should be ... not the triumph of state communism over the bourgeois state variety, nor the triumph of state communism over the libertarian variety, nor yet the triumph of libertarian communism over the state variety, nor yet the triumph of a federal republic which may encourage common and collective possession of wealth ... no, it would be fascism victorious, and today and for as long as the fascist threat remains, our actions must be bent only to the prevention of that victory.'

With the establishment of the 'Council of the Generalidad' the Central Committee of Antifascist Militias had come to the end of its useful life as a caretaker Catalan government and was disbanded. Diego Abad de Santillán later explained:

'The Militias Committee guaranteed the supremacy of the people in arms, guaranteed Catalonia's autonomy, guaranteed the purity and legitimacy of the war, guaranteed the resurrection of the Spanish pulse and of the Spanish soul: but we were told and it was repeated to us endlessly that as long as we persisted in retaining it, that is, as long as we persisted in propping up the power of the people, weapons would not come to Catalonia, nor would we be granted the foreign currency to obtain them from abroad, nor would we be supplied with the raw materials for our industry. And since losing the war meant losing everything and returning to a state like the one that prevailed in the Spain of Ferdinand VII, and in the conviction that the drive given by us and by our people could not vanish completely from the militarised armed corps planned by the central government and from the new economic life, we quit the Militias Committee to join the Generalidad government in its Defence Councillorship and other vital departments of the autonomous government'.

## October 1936

The CNT leadership's obsession with antifascist unity steadily widened the gap between them and the aspirations of the mass of the working class membership. The class interests they now defended were those of the bourgeoisie and the property-owning classes. On 23 October a 'Pact of Unity' was signed between the CNT, FAI, the UGT and the PSUC in Catalonia. Article Two of this agreement relating to collectivisation, stated that although the Council supported collectivisation 'of everything which may be essential in the interests of the war', the council's understanding was that 'this collectivisation would fail to produce the desired results unless overseen and orchestrated by a body genuinely representative of the collectivity', in this instance the Generalidad Council.<sup>1</sup>

'With regard to small industry we do not advocate collectivisation here except in cases of sedition by owners or of urgent war needs. Wheresoever small industry may be collectivised on grounds of war needs, the expropriated owners are to be compensated in such a way as to ensure their livelihoods, by means of their making a personal or professional contribution in the collectivised sector. In the event of collectivisation of foreign undertakings, a compensation formula shall be agreed which is equal to the total capital ... We ... advocate a single command to orchestrate the actions of every combat unit, the introduction of a conscript militia and its conversion into a great people's army, and the strengthening of discipline ...'<sup>2</sup>

It was Article 15, however, the final chilling article that showed just how far down the road of bureaucratic conservatism this once great libertarian organisation had gone:

'We are agreed upon common action to stamp out the harmful activities of uncontrollable groups which, out of lack of understanding or malice, pose a threat to the implementation of this programme.'<sup>3</sup>

Also on that same day, 23 October, anarchist minister Juan Peiró gave the leadership's analysis of the situation together with a thinly veiled warning to the 'uncontrollables'<sup>4</sup> on Radio CNT-FAI:

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<sup>1</sup> President/Prime Councillor, José Tarradellas (*Esquerra*); Finance, Idem (*Esquerra*); Culture, Ventura Gassol (*Esquerra*); Internal Security, Artemio Aiguadé (*Esquerra*); Economy, Juan P. Fábregas (CNT); Supply, Juan J. Doménech (CNT); Health & Social Services, Antonio García Birlán (CNT); Public Services, Juan Comorera (PSUC); Labour & Public Works, Miguel Valdés (PSUC); Agriculture, José Calvet (*Rabassaires/Esq*); Justice & Law, Andrés Nín (POUM); Defence, Díaz Sandino (expert); Without Portfolio, Rafael Closas (*Acción Catalana*).

<sup>2</sup> *Solidaridad Obrera*, 29.9.1936.

<sup>3</sup> *Por qué perdimos la guerra*, Diego Abad de Santillán.

<sup>4</sup> The term 'uncontrollables' was applied to rank and file militants who refused to be seduced by the argument of 'circumstances' or to be bullied by the CNT-FAI leadership.

‘The war’s end will lead to a transitional arrangement, and will do so because there is no other more rational, more logical, more just course, because our sense of justice on this occasion cannot be diverted from the straight and narrow path of the law of rewards. If we all make our contribution to success in the war, then it is only fair that we should all share in the fruits of the revolution. What does compromise matter, if compromise now be the only way to triumph? In my own view, my brothers of all the peoples of Iberia, the transitional arrangement best suited to the circumstances being created by the war and revolution, is a Socialist Federal Republic ... What matters, and what presently takes priority over everything else, is that we and others are capable of compromise on a basis of mutual understanding ... The work of collectivisation which has been initiated will be able to proceed, though a portion of it will have to be reviewed and amended insofar as it is not consonant with any collectivist precept nor principle of socialisation ... Woe to those who may attempt to overcome it by violence for theirs will be the immeasurable responsibility for having aborted everything. and the triumph of the people in this criminal war, this war in which the people squanders its blood in torrents ... that nobody, no matter how sublime his intentions may be, may frustrate ... No matter how great may be the lack of perception of the potential of this unique hour in our history, and no matter how great may be the (to some extent, natural) lack of understanding in the proletarian multitudes, I do not accept that anything or anybody has the right to succumb to the lunacy of easing facsicm’s triumph, which is synonymous with humiliation, indignity, slavery and death.’

The following day Jaime Balius, one of the ‘uncontrollable’ anarchist militants who had been warning against applying the brakes to the revolution, warned:

‘Let us remember that should any centralising organ come into existence, the creative opportunities which have cost so much blood and for which so much blood has yet to be shed ... will largely be lost to us.’<sup>5</sup>

To protect the hard won land of the rural communities and the new society the people of Aragón were building the regional committee of the CNT, acting in concert with Durruti and his column, organised by an assembly of militia, village, and trade union representatives from Rioja and Navarre which was held in Bujaraloz on 6 October 1936. Francisco Muñoz, the regional secretary of the Aragónese CNT outlined proposals for the formation of a special regional committee which would ensure that the Aragónese region was ready and able ‘to organise itself in this revolutionary hour and re-establish its personality among the other Iberian peoples, in preparation for the great federation of the future.’<sup>6</sup>

In spite of opposition from the two Catalan militia leaders, Gregorio Jover and Antonio Ortíz, the Aragónese delegates at the Bujaraloz assembly, encouraged by Durruti, supported the proposals and the Regional Defence Council of Aragón was born with the specific objective of implementing Libertarian Communism. The meeting also decided to press for the setting up of

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<sup>5</sup> *Solidaridad Obrera*, 24.10.36.

<sup>6</sup> Consejo Regional de Defensa de Aragón, *Boletín*, No. 4, 5 November 1936 (quoted by G. Kelsey, *ibid*).

a National Defence Committee that would link together a series of such regional bodies, similar to the one now established in Aragón.<sup>7</sup>

Cesar Lorenzo, the CNT historian has underlined the revolutionary nature of this decision by the Aragónese in comparison with the collaborationist role of the Catalan regional committee:

‘That which the Catalan libertarians did not dare do, that is to say take all the power, was attempted by the Aragónese libertarians, despite the war which ravaged the countryside, despite the continual presence of important contingents of the POUM, the PSUC and Catalan forces, despite repercussions abroad, despite the Madrid government, and, finally, despite the CNT itself.’<sup>8</sup>

The formation of the Regional Defence Council was an affirmation of commitment to the principles of Libertarian Communism. This principled stand for revolutionary social and economic change brought the newly formed Council into direct conflict not just with the Catalan Regional Committee of the CNT, but also the National Committee of the CNT, which was by now working in close collaboration with the bourgeoisie and Marxist political parties and the state apparatus. Mariano R. Vázquez, later to be the secretary of the National Committee of the CNT, had first made his opposition to the Regional Defence Council clear during an inter-regional meeting in Caspe at the end of August 1936.

The oligarchisation and hostility of the national leadership of the CNT left the militants of Aragón isolated. Their Regional Defence Council was faced with the problem of attempting to retain its libertarian character, relate to the political and geographic circumstances in Aragón and, at the same time, work with the other elements of republican Spain. The Council decided to send a delegation to Barcelona and Madrid to discuss their relationship with the Generalitat and the central government in Madrid. Anarchists Joaquin Ascaso, the council president, and Miguel Chueca, the CNT regional committee representative, and two republicans led the delegation.

Meanwhile, Companys, the Catalan President, had had three months to rebuild his power base, contain and begin the process of rolling back the revolution. Gone was the deference and gratitude to the anarchist saviours of 20 July. He was undisguisedly hostile to the Aragónese and described the proposed autonomous Council of Aragón as an absurdity which would seriously damage the country’s international image.<sup>9</sup> The representatives then moved on to Madrid in early November where they received a more favourable reception from the new socialist premier, Largo Caballero, who agreed to recognise the Council provided the specifically CNT membership was dropped and other parties represented. Caballero’s positive response had, no doubt, much to do with bringing the autonomous body under its control and the military situation at the time. The fall of the capital appeared imminent and both Caballero and Manuel Azaña, the President of the Republic, were desperately trying to entice the CNT into the new government.

That same day, 24 October, Italian anarchist writer Camillo Berneri offered constructive suggestions in his paper *Guerra di Classe* as to how the anarcho-syndicalist movement could pursue a revolutionary strategy and fight the war at the same time. By breaking off diplomatic relations with Portugal, Italy and Germany, the Allies would be obliged to adopt a more resolute position. Fomenting revolution in the operational base of the insurgent army, Morocco, would

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<sup>7</sup> *Les Anarchistes Espagnols et le Pouvoir*, C. M. Lorenzo, p. 149.

<sup>8</sup> *CNT*, 17 September 1936 (quoted by Kelsey, *ibid*).

<sup>9</sup> C. M. Lorenzo, *op cit.*, 150.

seriously weaken the enemy. Other suggestions included taking stronger measures against the fascist rearguard, and the reconstruction of the Spanish diplomatic corps under the orders of a National Defence Committee.<sup>10</sup>

Bernerri's unrelenting commitment to the anarchist ideal soon brought him into open conflict with the CNT-FAI leadership. On 5 November, the day after the CNT joined the Caballero government, he warned his comrades through the columns of *Guerra di Classe*:

'Madrid is not content just to reign; it wants to govern as well. As a whole the Spanish government is just as hostile to the social revolution as to monarchist and clerical fascism. Madrid desired a "return to legality" and nothing else. Arming Catalonia, financing Catalonia, that signifies to Madrid arming the columns that carry the revolution on the points of their bayonets and supplying the new egalitarian economic order. We must, therefore, addressing ourselves to the government in Madrid, give it the choice between defeat in the war and the revolution and victory.'

He also urged the anarchist press to cure itself of its 'intoxification with the unfortunate spirit of "holy union" which has ended up by reducing political criticism to an imperceptible minimum. *Solidaridad Obrera*, by praising the Bolshevik government of the USSR, albeit in parenthesis, reached the heights of political naivety.' Bernerri ended his public criticism:

'To reconcile the "necessities of war", the "will" of the revolution and the "aspirations" of anarchism: there lies the problem. This problem must be resolved. On it depend the military victory against fascism, the creation of a new economy, the social deliverance of Spain and the evaluation of the anarchists' beliefs and actions. Three great things that merit every sacrifice and impose on each the duty to have the courage to state his own beliefs in their entirety.'<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See Background Briefs: 'What Can We Do?'

<sup>11</sup> *Guerra di Classe*, No. 4, 5.11.1936.

## November 1936

ON 30 OCTOBER, an optimistic editorial in *Solidaridad Obrera* noted: 'The Generalidad Council has embarked upon a series of measures that will, incontrovertibly, have an impact upon the course of events. Mobilisation has been decreed for all citizens who are of an age for military service. And, as expeditiously as the present situation requires, the classes of 1932, 1933, 1934 and 1935 have just been called up. In addition, the Council, whose jurisdiction covers Catalonia, has seen fit to invest these formations in the antifascist zone with military overtones. The militarisation of combatants may be distasteful to those idealists whose opinions are consonant with their ideas about the noxiousness of units that act in accordance with the dictates of orders, which are more or less arbitrary. But the course of events on the battlefields makes it commendable that militians should adhere to instructions drawn up for the implementation of war tactics. One of the quintessential aspects of war is the military code. The revolution has smashed to smithereens the lengthy code worked out by Alfonso's brass hats and entirely abolished the phenomenon of barrack-drilled masses consonant with a servility that the capitalist regime instituted for economic reasons... We are not familiar with the contents of the new military code worked out by those individuals whom the antifascist organisations have appointed to positions of responsibility. In our estimation, the Code which the revolution needs at the present juncture in the war must be of clearly revolutionary derivation.'

A more detailed perusal of the 'mobilisation' decree made clear the reactionary intent of the Caballero government. The following day's edition of *Solidaridad Obrera* carried a prescient reappraisal:

'... It is one thing for us to recognise, as we all do, the need to regulate the whimsicality and volubility of the militias and furnish a strict basis for the fighting men's sense of responsibility, even going so far as to enforce rigorous penalties on those who, once having committed themselves most solemnly, quit the field of battle, but this unfeasible corralling within the parameters destroyed by the army mutiny itself is quite another. Article No. 2 of the decree, which applies to enforcement of the existing Code of Military Justice until such time as a new Code for the militias may be devised, has made the most lamentable impression.

'Above all there is clearly a total lack of any grasp of reality or any clear appreciation of what has occurred. In the view of many antifascists of liberal outlook, the revolution is not yet a *fait accompli*... There is still a vulgar mentality that wishes to revert to the situation that existed prior to 19 July and which had been destroyed by the inexorability of the revolutionary process... Such conduct merely succeeds in demoralising the multitudes, diminishing their enthusiasm and elan and turning the vast multitudes who have volunteered to face death into, not the revolutionary people's army such as the militias can be, but, rather, a flock of scared and unenthusiastic folk who fight on even though they have lost the vigour and strength which



only great social upheavals produce in the collective soul. No. Militarisation of the militias, mobilisation of the proletariat and of all the antifascist population cannot, must not, mean that the old army is resurrected. Let us devise new solutions, a new concept of duty and honour, far removed from the rigid, aristocratic Code which, were it something solid might serve to manure the land. Instead, the people's heroism has endorsed new concepts of struggle and of life that we can raise to the heights of moral codes, to the stature of implacable and inexorable laws of war..'<sup>1</sup>

The militians were outraged by the proposal to militarise the popular columns. The War Committee of the Durruti Column on the Osera front immediately sent off a letter, dated 1 November, to the Generalidad Council informing them of its refusal to comply with the decree:

### **'ANTIFASCIST MILITIAS— DURRUTI COLUMN**

#### **Headquarters**

#### **TO THE GENERALIDAD COUNCIL OF CATALONIA**

IN LIGHT of the Decree on militarisation of the militias, the DURRUTI COLUMN'S War Committee, articulating the feelings of each and every one of the individuals enrolled in it, states the following:

The fascist military provocation of 19 July gave rise to an authentic and incontrovertibly popular movement by which, among other things, the hierarchical organisation of the military and the Code of Justice alluded to in Article 2 of the aforementioned decree stand utterly condemned.

This column, formed spontaneously in the heat of that protest in the streets of Barcelona and subsequently swelled by all who have felt an identification with our ideal, enjoys unity of lay out and of aims and its individual members discipline themselves in every regard bearing upon the attainment of their aim of routing fascism. If the aim of discipline is to improve upon the contribution of the individual, this Column can furnish ample proof of such effectiveness in the work carried out on the front by our militians, and the constant advance of our positions is our finest testimony in favour of self-discipline.

The militians of this column have confidence in themselves and in us who lead it through their express and unreserved delegation. This being so, they believe, and we share their belief, that the decree of militarisation cannot improve upon our fighting capabilities but will instead lead to suspicions, misgivings and repugnance such as they have noted and would redound in a real state of disarray.

The proffered argument according to which the enemy fights well provided with equipment in great abundance obviously cannot be solved with militarisation of the militias.

In view of all that has been set out above, this committee, in response to the clamour of protest raised in this column by the aforementioned decree, finds itself called upon to refuse its acceptance.

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<sup>1</sup> Peirats, op.cit. Vol. I. Ch. 14

In communicating this formal and specific decision, and taking the line that the struggle upon which we are embarked should not on this account slacken, we ask this Council, our freedom of organisation, and ask that it supply a detailed answer which may, as speedily as possible, bring to an end the state of anxiety which has been created.'

Osera front, 1 November 1936

On behalf of the WAR COMMITTEE

(Signed) **B. Durruti**

FOLLOWING the entry of the CNT into the Madrid government Domingo Navasal observed in *Solidaridad Obrera*:

'Spawned in the fever of revolution the committees of the armed Corps have not been designed to seize command of their units, but, rather, observing all the formalities, have only been concerned with what has been truly necessary; with monitoring the activities of those who do wield command and ensuring that those who carry out the orders do not impinge against revolutionary norms. In principle, this healthy activity on the part of the committees was considered indispensable and those who always thought along revolutionary lines would not have failed somehow to perform a duty which, had it not been performed, would find us in dire straits today...

'In proceeding directly towards the establishment of a unified command, the committees of the armed corps, working in close conjunction with the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, cannot be considered anything other than keen and dependable collaborators: for in one way or another their sole mission is to ensure that the organisms which they monitor do not deviate by as much as one single iota from the revolutionary trajectory upon which we have embarked. But it appears to be the case that people who style themselves revolutionaries and who, undeservedly no doubt, hold office and feel their prerogatives jeopardised, are resentful of this "interference", as they describe that which is only proper, and are straining with all their might to get an absolutely free hand in their decision making. And this state of affairs cannot go on. When we finish off the fascists we shall see whether we can leave those who occupy official posts a free hand in their intrigues. For the present, what we cannot tolerate is that anyone — no matter who he be — should permit himself the luxury of dispensing with a control that we, the lower orders, the ones who in the last analysis have made and are making this revolution are obliged to mount...'<sup>2</sup>

## **CNT entry into Madrid Government November 1936**

At 10.30 p.m. on 4 November 1936 the Spanish government issued a news bulletin that the CNT had joined the government: 'Being of the opinion that at the present moment none of the forces fighting against fascism ought to be left out of the government and that circumstances require that everyone have a share in its responsibilities and that each of the said forces may feel itself directly represented in positions of authority, the head of the government has advised the head

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<sup>2</sup> *Solidaridad Obrera*, 5.11.1936

of state to broaden the government by giving representation to the National Confederation of Labour. This suggestion, having met with acceptance from H.E. the President of the Republic, the head of the government proceeded immediately to reshuffle his council of ministers. As for the political outlook and programme of the government, once reformed, they shall remain as they have been hitherto.<sup>3</sup>

That same day the Barcelona CNT paper *Solidaridad Obrera* explained its decision with a self-assurance reminiscent of Lenin in the summer of 1917:

‘The entry of the CNT into the central government represents one of the most momentous events in this country’s political history. As a matter of principle and conviction, the CNT has at all times been anti-statist and hostile to government under any form. But circumstances, nearly always superior to men’s wishes though determined by that will, has wrought a transformation in the nature of the government and the Spanish state. At present the government qua the regulating instrument of the organs of the state, no longer represents a source of oppression for the working class, just as the state no longer represents the source of the division of society into classes. And with the CNT’s entry into them, both will the more completely cease to oppress the people. The functions of the State are to be curtailed in accordance with the labour organisations to orchestration of the country’s economic and social affairs. And the government will have no preoccupation other than the proper management of the war and the co-ordination of the work of the revolution on a larger scale.

‘Our comrades shall present the government with the collective or majority decision of the toiling masses previously assembled in huge general assemblies. They will espouse no personal or whimsical objectives but rather the decisions freely reached by the hundreds of thousands of workers organised by the CNT. There is a historical necessity hanging over everything. And the CNT accepts that historical necessity to serve the country, with the emphasis on winning the war promptly and lest the popular revolution be disfigured.

‘We have absolute confidence that the comrades chosen to represent the CNT in the government will be able to accomplish the duty and the mission entrusted to them. In them we should see, not the individual personalities, but the organisation they represent. They are not governors nor statesmen,, but warriors and revolutionaries in the service of victory over fascism. And that victory will be all the more speedy and complete the greater the support we may give them.’<sup>4</sup>

The news of the entry of the anarcho-syndicalist leadership into central government was bitterly denounced by militia papers such as *Linea del Fuego*, the paper of the Iron Column,<sup>5</sup> but the majority of the CNT membership accepted the news calmly. It should be stressed, however, that of the CNT’s approximately two million members, perhaps only 300,000 or so would have described themselves as anarcho-syndicalists or anarchists. It was for this reason that only

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<sup>3</sup> See Background Briefs.

<sup>4</sup> *Solidaridad Obrera*, Barcelona, 4.11.1936.

<sup>5</sup> *Los anarquistas en la crisis política española*.

articulate minorities and ‘uncontrollable’ elements, particularly in the militias, expressed their anger and discontent by subjecting the ‘influential’ militants to public criticism. But, according to Peirats,<sup>6</sup> ‘in many militants opposed to collaboration, there was an unavowed complicity, in that they railed about their sense of outrage whilst letting it all continue.’ The exigencies of the war and ‘force of circumstances’ left the majority resigned to the decision with an air of fatalism.

The international anarchist movement was, however, to prove less amenable to the ‘circumstances’ argument. At a meeting of the anarcho-syndicalists International (IWMA/AIT) in Paris in December that year, the CNT’s National Committee explained the problems, which it felt justified its entry into government. It argued that probably the CNT could have unleashed a successful revolution, but to have done so would have meant fighting on three fronts, against the military insurgents, against central government and against foreign capitalism:

‘Levante was undefended, hesitant with the army contingents still inside their barracks; our people were in the minority in Madrid; Andalusia was in chaos, with groups of workers armed with fowling pieces and sickles fighting in the hill country. What the situation in the north was, was anyone’s guess, and we could only suppose that the rest of Spain had fallen to the fascists... What is more, the nervousness of foreign consular representatives was shown in the presence off our ports of many foreign warships ... in the south our comrades, armed with shotguns, were resisting courageously but losing ground. They were reinforced with rifles, machine guns and artillery despatched from Catalonia and thereby weakening the thrust of revolution in Catalonia. Levante at last, determined to storm the barracks, had to be sent rifles and machine guns...The Aragón front with its 30,000 odd militiamen wound up almost devoid of ammunition. We would have needed about 6,000,000 shells a day and we had not a single one ... The bourgeois democratic governments would have prevented us buying or receiving war material...’

‘In the end, we were invited to present the revolution under a less aggressive guise by dissolving the Central Committee of the Antifascist Militias. It was put to us that it would be better if the Generalidad government were rebuilt in Catalonia, under the presidency of a liberal bourgeois, like Companys, who would lead foreigners to believe that the revolution was being directed along less radical channels... So formidably and powerfully organised were we and so absolutely did we control political power, military power and economic power in Catalonia that, had we so desired, we had only to lift a finger to install a totalitarian anarchist regime. But we knew that in our hands the revolution would have burned itself out and that we anarchists would have received no effective support from abroad, nor could we have hoped for any such support.’

Referring to the growing pressure from the central government on the revolutionaries’ positions, the report continued:

‘Our columns, the strongest numerically and the most combative, were the very ones least well provisioned by the government and already our comrades were subject to persecution and intrigues... those in positions of power constantly obstructed the CNT’s work of construction and expropriation... We lacked the real basis for a

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<sup>6</sup> 3 January 1937.

policy of social reconstruction in that we lacked gold. In Catalonia we were systematically denied money, provisions and weapons. Likewise, in Levante and elsewhere in the rearguard where the CNT was boycotted...Marxists and republicans were in collusion and, since they were in charge of money and arms, they favoured their own supporters, allocating them supplies, arms, positions of command, means of communication and transportation... Catalonia had to organise its foreign trade by competing abroad with the rest of the country, in both the feeding of her citizens and in the provisioning of the Aragón front. Those in government, exploiting our desire not to shatter the unity among antifascists or interrupt official relations with countries abroad, abused their privileged diplomatic circumstances to sabotage us viciously at every turn...'

The arguments advanced by the CNT National Committee were undoubtedly weighty. However, the CNT's entry into government, prompted, in part, as Federica Montseny, the anarchist Minister of Health, explained it: "in order to prevent the revolution deviating from its course and in order to pursue it beyond the war, and also in order to oppose all possibility of dictatorial endeavours, wherever they should come from", proved to be an utter failure. The CNT were playing the state's game according to the state's rules and the anarcho-syndicalist leadership were absolutely powerless to resist it.

Nor did the 'circumstances' argument of the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist movement satisfy the international anarchist movement. Writing in the French anarchist press the respected writer Sébastien Faure rebuked the CNT-FAI leadership with devastating lucidity:

"If reality contradicts principles, then these principles must be mistaken in which case we should lose no time abandoning them; we should be honest enough to admit their falseness in public and we should have virtue enough to devote as much ardour to combating them and being as active against them as formerly we did in their defence. Similarly, we should strive forthwith to seek out more solid, more just and less fallible principles. If, on the other hand, the principles upon which our ideology and tactics depend still hold, regardless of the circumstances, and are as valid today as ever they were, then we should keep faith with them. To depart, even for a short space of time in exceptional circumstances from the line our principles indicate we should adopt, is to commit a grave error, a dangerous error of judgement. To persist in this error is to commit a grievous mistake, the consequences of which lead on gradually to the temporary jettisoning of principles and, through concession after concession, to the absolute final abandonment of principle. Once again, this is the mechanism, the slippery slopes which can lead us far astray".<sup>7</sup>

The anarchist 'notables' quickly discovered that their powers to influence events in Cabinet were minimal.<sup>8</sup> The socialists controlled the six most important ministries: War, Sea and Air, State, Housing, Labour, Interior, and the Presidency. The CNT, on the other hand, had to settle for

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<sup>7</sup> See Background Briefs: Sébastien Faure for full text.

<sup>8</sup> García Oliver claims that the real reason the CNT was invited to join the Caballero government was to facilitate its flight to Valencia and to pre-empt any criticism or, presumably, revolutionary initiatives from the anarcho-syndicalist and anarchist rank-and-file. Although claiming to have opposed the move to Valencia, García Oliver, acting on the instructions of Horacio Prieto, National Secretary of the CNT to whom the anarchist ministers appear

four: Industry (Juan Peiró); Trade (Juan López Sánchez); Justice (García Oliver); Health (Federica Montseny). Largo Caballero retained supreme executive power through his control of the War Council. Having successfully wedded the CNT leadership to the government, Caballero quickly began to undermine union control of the militias and restore to the state its monopoly of violence. He made it quite clear that he was not prepared to provide weapons to any units not prepared to accept militarisation and convert to regular army formations. Equally serious, perhaps, was the fact that the decision by the CNT leadership to accept government office with a largely nominal of responsibility was a clear signal to both the Stalinists and the socialists of the confused thinking and weakness which characterised the CNT leadership. The anarchists had become, of their own volition, the agents of the state and servants of officialdom. Through their commitment to an illusory antifascist unity with bourgeois liberal and Marxist parties the CNT leadership had become totally compromised and were preparing the scenario for the coup de grace:

“The telegraph brings us the news – which we hereby make public – of the CNT’s entry into the government.

This is tantamount to accepting that which we have always denounced, thereby shattering the very foundations of our ideas.

Henceforth there is to be no more talk of freedom, but rather of submission to ‘our government’, the only organ with the competence to run the war and manage our economic life.

Four ministries have been allocated to the Confederal Organisation (...)

Four junior ministries occupied by four individuals who have never taken an interest in the issues their posts will be concerned with (...), incompetent, inept politicians.

The story continues. The state strengthens itself and all with the backing of an Organisation which styles itself libertarian.

For how long comrades?”

(Quoted by Nestor Romero, *Agora*, No. 3, Autumn 1980, Ed. Pensée et Action, Toulouse, p. 37).

THAT SAME EVENING, at 9.30 pm on 4 November 1936, Buenaventura Durruti broadcast a speech over Radio CNT-FAI from the organisation’s transmitters in Barcelona. Everyone was anxious to hear his response to that day’s news that four anarchists had joined the Madrid government: Federica Montseny, Juan García Oliver, Juan López and Joan Peiró.

The Durruti Column itself had failed to take Zaragoza. The main problem having been the difficulty in procuring weapons, ammunition and supplies. Durruti had tried everything in his power to acquire arms. He had even dispatched some of his *milicianos* on a punitive raid against Sabadell at the beginning of September to force the surrender of the weapons stored there for the use of a Sabadell Column that had not been formed. Also, the Decree militarising the Militias

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to have been answerable informed his colleagues that the National Committee’s wish was that they should not provoke a crisis and agree to move to Valencia if it came to a showdown. Prieto was later removed as National Secretary for this decision and his place was taken by Mariano R. Vázquez, (Marianet) ex-Regional Secretary of Catalonia and a man Oliver describes as a puppet of Federica Montseny. *El eco de los pasos*, Oliver, pp. 303–329.

had become effective on 20 October and friends and enemies alike were waiting to hear what Durruti had to say.

People began gathering around the loudspeakers hung from the trees in the Ramblas some time before the speech began. These normally churned out revolutionary anthems, music and news reports, but on this occasion the atmosphere was electric with expectation.

The militarisation decree had been hotly debated within the Durruti Column itself, which had decided not to accept it in that it did not hold out any prospects of improving the fighting capabilities of the *milicianos* who had volunteered on 19 July, nor did it offer a solution to the chronic shortage of arms. The Column also rejected the need for a barrack-style discipline and argued that revolutionary discipline was superior to it: “*Milicianos* yes, soldiers never”.

Durruti, as the Column delegate, used his speech to spell out the sense of indignation and betrayal felt by the *milicianos* on the Aragon front at the clearly counter-revolutionary turn of events and developments behind the lines.

Durruti’s broadcast began at 9.30 pm:

“Workers of Catalonia: I direct these words to the Catalan people, the selfless people who, four months ago, lowered the boom on the military goons who sought to ride roughshod over it. I bring you greetings from your brothers and comrades fighting on the Aragon front. They are within kilometres of Zaragoza and in sight of the towers of the Pilarica.

“Despite the threat looming over Madrid, we should bear in mind that we are a risen people and that nothing in this world is going to make us back down. We shall hold out on the Aragón front against the Aragonese fascist hordes and we turn to our comrades in Madrid to tell them to hold out, for the militians of Catalonia will do their duty — just as they took to the streets of Barcelona to crush fascism. The workers’ organisations ought not to forget the over-riding duty at the present time. On the front lines as well as in the trenches, there is but one thought, a single aim. Eyes are fixed, looking ever forward to the sole aim of crushing fascism.

“We ask the people of Catalonia to have done with the intrigues and internecine strife: to prove yourselves equal to the circumstances; set aside all rancour and focus on the war. The people of Catalonia have a duty to live up to the efforts of those fighting on the front. There is nothing for it but for everyone to mobilise. And it must not be thought that it is always the same people who should be mobilising. While Catalonia’s workers must shoulder the responsibility of serving on the front, the time has come to require sacrifice from the Catalan people living in the cities too. We need an effective mobilisation of all workers in the rearguard, because those of us already at the front want to know the calibre of the men we have at our backs.

“Let me address the organisations and ask them to cease their squabbling and intrigues. Those of us at the front require honesty of them, especially from the National Confederation of Labour and the FAI. We ask the leaders to act with honesty. It is not enough for them to send us letters at the front egging us on and for them to send us clothing, food and ammunition and rifles. They too must prove equal to the circumstances and look forward into the future. This war boasts all of the drawbacks of modern warfare and is costing Catalonia dearly. Leaders must take it on

board that if this war drags on, a start must be made to the organising of Catalonia's economy and a code of conduct in economic affairs. I am not prepared to scribble more letters just to secure an extra crust of bread or glass of milk for the comrades or children of a militiaman while there are councillors who can eat and drink their fill. We turn to the CNT-FAI to tell them that if they, as an organisation, control the economy, they should be organising it properly. And let no one think right now about wage rises and cuts in working hours. All workers, especially CNT workers have a duty to make sacrifices and work for as long as may take.

"If we truly are fighting for something better, the militians who blush when they read in the press of the donations raised for them and when they see the posters asking for aid for them will prove it to you. Fascist planes fly over us, dropping newspapers in which we can read of funds raised for their fighters, the very same as yourselves. So we have to tell you that we are not beggars and do not accept charity in any form. Fascism stands for and is, in effect, social inequality. Unless you want those of us who are fighting to confound those in the rearguard with our enemies, do your duty.

"If you would make provision against that danger, you should form a granite block. Politics is the art of chicanery, the art of living the high life [drone-like] and this must give way to the art of toil. The time has come to invite the trade union organisations and political parties to have done with this once and for all. There must be proper administration in the rearguard. Those of us at the front want to feel that there is responsibility and reassurance at our backs and we insist that our organisations look out for our wives and our children.

"If the militarisation decreed by the Generalidad is meant to scare us and foist an iron discipline upon us, you are sadly mistaken. You are mistaken, councillors, with the decree militarising the militias. Since you prattle about iron discipline, I say to you: come with me to the front lines. We who are there do not accept any discipline because we have enough conscience to do our duty. And you will see our order and our organisation. Then we shall go down to Barcelona and ask you about your discipline, your order and your control, which are non-existent.

"Rest easy. There is no chaos and no indiscipline on the front. We are all responsible, and we know the prize you have entrusted to us. Sleep easy. But we left Catalonia entrusting the economy to your care. Take responsibility and discipline yourselves. Let us not, through our incompetence, spark another civil war in our own ranks after this war.

"If there is anyone thinking that his party may be in a better position to impose its policy, he is mistaken, because fascist tyranny can only be resisted by means of a single force and there should be only one organisation with a single discipline. There is no way in this world that these fascist tyrants are going to get past us. That is the watchword here at the front. To them, we say: "You shall not pass!" And it is up to you to chorus: "They shall not pass!"

PEOPLE DISCUSSED Durruti's speech for hours after the broadcast ended— about what he had stated with his customary forcefulness and integrity. His words echoed loudly and passionately



through the Barcelona night, embodying the innermost thoughts of the working class. His were words of caution, reminding the workers that they were revolutionary militants. Durruti did not look upon anyone as a god, any more than the working class regarded him as one. He had stated that the militants confronting fascism on the battlefield were not prepared to let anybody belittle their liberating, revolutionary message. This was not a fight for any Republic or bourgeois democracy — but a fight to see the social revolution succeed and the proletariat emancipated.

There was not one word of demagoguery or rhetoric in the entire speech. They were hard, harsh, words for those at the top — and for those at the bottom, the workers and for the CNT hierarchs ensconced in hundreds of positions of responsibility; for the rank-and-file citizen and Generalidad councillors or brand new anarchist ministers. It was a diatribe against bureaucratisation of the revolution and an indictment of the government's policy, whether CNT personnel were in it or not. In the rearguard there was a deplorable tendency to mistake duty for charity, administration for command, function with bureaucracy, responsibility for discipline, agreement with decree and example with order and command. The threats to “go down to Barcelona” revived the fears of the bourgeoisie's political representatives, although even then it was too late to repair the fateful mistake made back in July when the revolution was postponed “until after Zaragoza has been taken” due to the theoretical shortcomings and lack of foresight in the anarchist movement. But a threat to the authorities did not go unanswered: Durruti's words, directed at his own class, was tantamount to a revolutionary testament. A testament rather than a proclamation because his death was a death foreseen which posthumous deification turned into an enigma. The CNT membership of the day was not persuaded that soviet agents were acting responsibly, a belief quickly rebutted for political reasons and without proper investigation by the CNT-FAI's regional and national committee members.

The rebirth of state power alarmed militants, but for the most part protest was muted. Disoriented by the CNT's entry into government the conscious rank and file anarcho-syndicalists limited themselves to re-affirming their commitment to anarchism in the hope that they could influence the consciences of the ‘comrade’ ministers.

However, it is also equally certain that all of the fronts, including Madrid, had, for many months, been controlled by the people in arms through the militias. The charge that the natural chaos of the early months of the war was due to the ineptitude on the part of the militias is totally unfounded. The mutinous army, well armed and disciplined, had been preparing their coup for at least two years previously. The people in arms, on the other hand, had rescued half of Spain from the army in the space of 48 hours. Had they received the arms and munitions they needed, it is also likely they could have taken Zaragoza and Huesca in the first weeks of the war, thereby increasing the likelihood of ultimate victory. The Spanish republican bourgeoisie, with good reason, was more frightened of its own working class than fascism. While the popular militias confronted the rebel army at the fronts, the republican government set about making war in the rearguard. Its overriding concern was not the prosecution of the war, but the restoration of the paraphernalia of law and order with which to defend the interests of the state and the institutions of capitalism.

In October Camillo Berneri had noted:

“From a trustworthy source, we know that since the start some 8,000 Germans have entered Spain, commanded by Russian officers. It is obvious that Madrid is organ-

ising its own *tercio* (foreign legion), which, well armed and well commanded, will be able to restore order. The increase in the police forces (*Guardias de asalto* and *Guardia Civiles*) and the mass arrival of Moscow's Moroccans must give us pause for thought."<sup>9</sup>

The anarchist counterattack against militarisation was again spearheaded by the Iron Column and the anarcho-syndicalists of the Levante. The matter was discussed at a Plenum of Syndicates held in Valencia on 13 November, 1936.<sup>10</sup> The position of the Iron Column was stated thus:

"Ideologically, we remain the enemies of all governments. What interests us is facts. There is a lot of talk about fascism and how fascism is a threat, and this is our belief: but we see and we note that everyone is saying that they agree to compromise for the purpose of aiding the men in the front lines, and that all that is agreed to is agreed in the expectation of rendering the struggle more effective: we have yet to see the fruits of so many compromises and such widespread acceptance of things which have always been repugnant to us. We wish to pose one specific and clear-cut question. Everyone is aware that there is a scarcity of materials on the Teruel front, and you all know the remedy lies in the hands of the government. That remedy was not forthcoming earlier, when we were not in the government and it is not forthcoming now when we are in it. Before they gave us nothing. The position now is precisely the same (...) We want the representatives of the regional Committee to tell the government this — and we want an answer".<sup>11</sup>

The following day, *Fragua Social* published this statement approved by the Iron Column:

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<sup>9</sup> Published in *Volontà*, 19 July, 1951.

<sup>10</sup> The structure, organisation and control of the CNT militias was recorded in the minutes of the same Plenum: "(1e) The mere fact of being the delegate of a group, *centuria* or war committee in no way implied special status or privilege: the moment a delegate fails to meet the requirements of his group, *centuria* or committee, he is to be discharged instantly and replaced by another delegate (...). (2) A propos of the question of discipline, our understanding is that moral self-discipline should be enforced by the militia member themselves by taking an interest in the struggle and then voicing their opinions concerning the conduct of the war, in the appropriate gatherings. (2f) In specific instances of drunkenness, desertion, suspicious or unjustifiable contacts, etc., etc., (the militia) is to be judged and punished by the *centuria* of which he is a member. (3) With regard to the control of the militias, the proposal is that once the column's internal organisational structure has been settled we must move on to liaising with columns of other political or ideological persuasions. This being so, our objectives are as follows: (a) The establishment of Operations Committees comprising two civilian delegates together with one expert military delegate in an advisory capacity for each and every column; these committees will be responsible for directing and orienting the fighting on their respective fronts. (b) At national level, we suggest the establishment of a National Council of Militias consisting of representatives from all columns fighting on the various battlefronts. No campaign instructions will be accepted other than those emanating from the fighting men. (c) To ensure greater harmony between all of the forces fighting on the front or in the rearguard, we want our delegate at the forthcoming Plenum of regional Committees to put the proposal for the necessity of disbanding all of those forces of the state which, not being controlled by the antifascist organisations, do not inspire confidence in our Organisation. (d) The aforementioned proposal, which refers to the *Guardia de asalto*, *Guardia Nacional Republicana*, *Carabineros*, *Volunteer Army*, etc., should be implemented in such a way that the individual members of these corps affiliate with the Militias of whatever political or ideological persuasion which most closely approximates to their particular viewpoints... (...) Moved by: Amalgamated Trades of Segorbe, the Metallurgical Union of Alcoy, the Sanitary Union of Valencia, General Trades of Gandia, General Trades of Moncada, General Trades of Orihuela, the workers of Biar, and the delegation from the Iron Column and the CNT Column 13.' F. Mintz, op. cit., pp. 287–288.

<sup>11</sup> Frank Mintz, op.cit., pp. 286–287.

“... We are fighting to destroy fascism and for our ideal, which is Anarchy. Every act on our part should tend not to bolster the state but to destroy it progressively: we must make the government completely redundant. We accept nothing which runs counter to our conception of anarchism, a conception which must become a reality: because one cannot preach one thing and practise another.”

A few days later, on 17 November, the Iron Column delegate addressed the CNT Regional Congress in Valencia:

“... There are comrades who think that militarisation will solve everything. We, on the other hand, say it will solve nothing. In place, of corporals, sergeants and officers graduating from the academies we offer our own organisation, and we do not accept militarisation. The Iron Column and all the columns of the CNT and FAI and other columns which are not confederal have not embraced military discipline (...).

“We have no need of bread and, consequently, we cannot consent. The only outcome would be a switch from a federalist structure to a barrack style discipline, which is precisely what we do not want...”

It was not merely on political grounds or fear that the CNT might disintegrate that moved the members of the Iron Column to reject militarisation, but a deep conviction concerning the essential basis for pursuing any social activity, in this case the war effort, based on anarchist principles. The delegate continued:

“There is constant talk of united militias. Our thinking is that, tomorrow as well as today, association on the basis of affinity should prevail. That individuals should associate on the basis of their ideas and their temperaments. That those who think along these or other lines should unite their efforts to achieve common aims. If columns are formed in a ragbag fashion no practical results will be forthcoming.”

## **Militarisation — November 1936**

The Regional Committee of the Levante backed the CNT-FAI national leadership and did little to support the refractory Iron Column's urgent request for men, provisions and munitions:

“This boycott was a serious matter for the Iron Column. In the early months of the war it had been able to rely upon its own recruiting campaigns and upon confiscations carried out with the aid of anarchist controlled committees in villages and towns behind the lines. But a decline in revolutionary fervour and the discredit into which the column had fallen in libertarian circles meant that its appeals for volunteers were incapable of furnishing it with an adequate supply of fresh recruits for the relief of men at the front. Furthermore, the committees were being supplanted by regular organs of administration, in which the more revolutionary elements were no longer the preponderant force.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *The Spanish Revolution*, B. Bolloten, N.C., 1979, p315.

Anger and dismay at the prospect of militarisation and the new Military Code spread throughout the militias. The German anarchists from the International Group of the Durruti Column somewhat hopefully suggested that direct democracy should be the guiding principle in drafting the proposed military code: the abolition of saluting, equal pay for all, press freedom (newspapers to be available at the front), freedom of discussion.<sup>13</sup>

Interviewed by the French anarchist paper *L'Espagne Antifasciste*, Durruti spoke of the proposed militarisation:

“...This decision by the government has had a deplorable effect. It is absolutely devoid of any sense of reality. There is an irreconcilable contrast between that mentality and that of the militias ... We know that one of these attitudes has to vanish in the face of the other one.”

November 1936 proved to be a milestone in the civil war. Having surrounded Madrid the mutinous army made a supreme effort to over-run the capital. The bourgeois government of Largo Caballero, together with the newly appointed anarchist ministers, fled the capital on the 6 November to Valencia while the people of Madrid rallied to the city's defence to cries of 'Long Live Madrid Without Government!'

Under strong pressure from Federica Montseny acting on behalf of the Council of Ministers, Durruti, increasingly dismayed about the steady erosion of the gains of the social revolution in the rearguard while the militants were sacrificing their lives daily, reluctantly agreed to broadcast an appeal for militia volunteers to save Madrid. The appeal was broadcast on CNT-FAI radio on 4 November. Durruti made it quite clear to the bourgeoisie that the social revolution would not be overcome in the name of antifascism:

“The time has come to demand sacrifices also from those living in the cities. There must be effective mobilisation of all workers in the rear, for we who are already on the front want to know what sort of men we can rely on in our rear ... if the object of the militarisation decreed by the Generalidad is to intimidate us and foist an iron discipline upon us, that is a mistake and we invite the authors of the decree to come out to the front and get a taste of our morale and discipline. Then we shall go and compare those with morale and discipline in the rearguard ... We who have left Catalonia entrust the management of the economy to you. You must also live up to your responsibilities and discipline.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The Germans also proposed: “(5) That there be set up a Battalion Council, with each company electing three delegates. (6) That no delegate shall exercise positions of command. (7) The Battalion Council shall summon a general assembly of soldiers should two thirds of the company delegates be so agreed. (8) The soldiers from each unit (regiment) are to elect a delegation of three trustworthy men from the unit. These trustees shall be empowered to convene a general assembly at any time. (9) One of them is to be seconded to the (brigade) staff as an observer. (10) This structure should be continued until the whole of the army has general representation in the Soldiers' Councils. (11) The general staff should also have a representative from the general Soldiers' Council. (12) Field courts martial shall comprise exclusively of soldiers. In the event of charges against ranks, the court martial shall have an officer seconded to it.” A. and D. Proudhommeaux, *La Catalogne Libre*, Ed. Le Combat Syndicaliste, Paris, 1970, p. 24.

<sup>14</sup> Text (censored) published in *Solidaridad Obrera*, 5.11.1936.

Durruti left Aragón with about 1,000<sup>15</sup> volunteers and made his way through Lerida, Barcelona, Valencia and then on to Madrid. At the Bakunin barracks in Barcelona he gave another memorable speech to his comrades in arms:

“Do you want to come with me to Madrid, yes or no? It is a question of life or death for us all. We will either conquer or die, because defeat will be so terrible that we could not survive it. But we will conquer. I have faith in our victory. I only regret that I speak to you today in a barrack. Some day barracks will be abolished and we will live in a free society. And Durruti gave such a description of a society without injustice and cruelty that most of the men who were listening cried. And when at the end he asked the question again: Are you coming with me, yes or no? it was such a unanimous ‘Yes’, so sincere and so deep that I can never forget it.”<sup>16</sup>

By the time Durruti and his volunteers arrived at the Vallecas barricades on the outskirts of the besieged capital on 14 November his column had risen to around 1,800 militians.

## The Flight of the Government

The first major decision foisted upon the new anarchist ministers in the Caballero government was that of abandoning or remaining in the besieged capital. At a hastily summoned Council of Ministers, Caballero proposed moving the government to Valencia. This was opposed by Justice Minister García Oliver. Having abandoned fundamental principles by becoming members of a government their credibility would have been further diminished by being seen to be abandoning Madrid to its fate. Oliver referred the matter to the National Committee of the CNT, National Secretary, Horacio Prieto, advised them: “Hold out, but if you risk a crisis, then give in.”<sup>17</sup>

The government left Madrid for the safety of Valencia on 6 November. Their departure did not go unnoticed by the Defence Committee of the CNT who determined to show them that the people in arms were still masters of the situation. Cipriano Mera, the anarchist military commander of Madrid, sent out a bulletin to all militia units on the Valencia road to inform them of the flight of the ministers and ordered their detention. The ministers were halted at the CNT checkpoint in Cuenca by a militia unit led by an anarchist militant called Villanueva. The ministers, including the anarchists, with the exception of García Oliver who had travelled by another route, protested but the militia unit, whose orders were to disarm and prevent people leaving Madrid, treated them as ordinary deserters. One complained bitterly: “This is too much. I am the Minister of Foreign Affairs and I am going to Valencia”. The militiaman replied: “Your duty as minister is to stay with the people at this dramatic hour. Fleeing, you demoralise the fighters.” The communist ministers Jesús Hernández and Vicente Uribe were also disarmed and when asked what he was going to do, Villanueva replied that as he returning to defend Madrid

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<sup>15</sup> Federica Montseny’s insistence that Durruti and 1,000 of his men should come to Madrid, which already had over 200,000 defenders, prompted García Oliver to ask if she “wanted to kill Durruti.” (*El eco de los pasos*, Juan García Oliver, Paris 1978, p. 329). It was García Oliver, however, who had originally suggested to Largo Caballero that Durruti could bring a force of 12,000 men from Aragón and that he should be appointed major and given the command of three ‘mixed brigades’ (militiamen and regular troops) on the Madrid front. (*ibid.* p. 324).

<sup>16</sup> Paz, *op.cit.* p. 296.

<sup>17</sup> Paz, *op.cit.* p. 298.

the following morning he would take the ministers with him and intended to “ put you in the front lines when we go into battle.” “But this is criminal”, they replied. Villanueva went on: “ It would be worse if I shot you as you deserve.”<sup>18</sup>

Villanueva, after contacting Eduardo Val, Secretary of the Defence Committee of the CNT in Madrid, released the ministers a short time later. Before they climbed into their cars to continue their journey to Valencia, Villanueva advised them:

“The Organisation has freed you against my will. You can go to Valencia, but never forget today’s flight – and even more the heroism with which the people of Madrid are fighting.”<sup>19</sup>

The ministers were not to forget the ignominy of their humiliating arrest at the hands of the people’s militia and the incident strengthened their resolve to break that popular organ of the revolution at the earliest opportunity.

## Madrid – The Death of Durruti

The defence of Madrid was bloody and vicious. It lasted from 7 November until 20 November. On his arrival on the evening of 14 November, Durruti was given responsibility for a sector of the University campus where another column, Libertad López Tienda, commanded by a certain ‘Negus’ of the PSUC, the Catalan Marxist party, was also located. At dawn the following day, 15 November, both the Durruti and Libertad López Tienda columns launched a head-on attack in an attempt to prevent the Moorish troops crossing the Manzanares river. The pressure was too great. Fresh nationalist reinforcements under General Asensio managed to force their way into the School of Architecture having wiped out most of the Libertad-López Tienda Column and around a third of Durruti’s men.

On 17 November, German Junker aircraft began their intensive *blitzkrieg* bombing raids wreaking death and destruction throughout the city. That day Durruti wrote what were to be his last words:

“I have come from the land of Aragón to win this fight which today is a question of life or death, not merely for the Spanish proletariat but for the world as a whole. Everything hinges upon Madrid and I will not attempt to disguise my delight at finding myself face to face with the enemy, if only because it lends nobility to the struggle. Before taking my leave of Catalonia, I asked that those involved in the struggle be conscientious. I am not referring to the poor in spirit or those who are lacking in vigour. I mean those of us committed to pressing onwards, ever onwards. Rifles are of no avail if there is no determination, no ingenuity in their use. There is no question that the fascists shall enter Madrid, but they must be repulsed soon, for

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<sup>18</sup> The episode was later blamed on a unit from the Iron Column who, since their spectacular re-entry into Valencia in October to break the re-birth of bourgeois power in the rearguard, had been the object of a massive campaign of slander and disinformation. Had the unit been from the Iron Column it is unlikely they would have had the slightest hesitation ‘unmaking’ the government; perhaps, thereby salvaging the social revolution.

<sup>19</sup> Peirats, op.cit., Vol. I. Chapter 1

Spain must be retaken. I am happy in Madrid, I make no bones about that; it delights me to see her now with the composure of the serious minded man who is alive to his responsibility and not the frivolity and bewilderment displayed by a man when the torment looms.”<sup>20</sup>

Just after midday on 19 November, Durruti, accompanied by his driver Julio Graves, Miguel Yolde, Bonilla and his Generalidad-appointed military adviser Sergeant Manzana, set out for the Clinical Hospital, the scene of serious fighting with Moorish troops. Noticing a group of militiamen he thought were deserters, Durruti stopped the car and got out to order them to return to their positions, which they did. As he opened the car door to re-enter, a burst of machine gun fire from inside hit Durruti in the chest at point blank range. According to Miguel Yolde and Sergeant Manzana the bullets came from Durruti’s own machine gun when it accidentally knocked against the car door. According to Bonilla, however, the third occupant, the fatal shots were fired ‘deliberately or accidentally’, by Sergeant Manzana. Interestingly enough, according to García Oliver, Durruti never carried a machine gun, only a pistol.

Buenaventura Durruti, the ‘troublesome priest’ of anarchism, died from his wounds in the early hours of November 20 aged 40 years.

Not convinced that Durruti’s death was the accident or the work of a sniper as presented by the National Committee of the CNT, and worried that Madrid was a trap designed to eliminate the anarcho-syndicalist militants, what remained of the Durruti Column wanted to leave the Capital immediately. The hasty arrival of Federica Montseny managed to persuade them to remain on in Madrid. García Oliver, in spite of the personal doubts he claims to have harboured about Durruti’s death had no faith in the capacity of the rank-and-file to accept the circumstances of the death at face value and judge for themselves. It was he who took it upon himself to release the manipulative lie that Buenaventura Durruti had died as a hero at the hands of an unknown sniper.

On 21 November the National Committee of the CNT and the Peninsular Committee of the FAI issued the following statement:

“Workers! The snipers of what has come to be known as the “fifth column” have floated the fallacious rumour that our comrade Durruti has been vilely murdered by an act of treachery. We caution all comrades against this foul slander. It is a base manoeuvre calculated to smash the proletariat’s redoubtable unity of action and thought [which is] the most efficacious weapon against fascism. Comrades! Durruti did not perish through any act of treachery. He fell in the fray as have so many others fighters for freedom. He died a hero’s death: while carrying out his duty. Let us be unanimous in rejecting this despicable innuendo calculated by the fascists for the purpose of smashing our indestructible unity. Reject it without euphemism and in its entirety. Pay no heed to irresponsible types who peddle fratricidal rumours. They are the revolution’s greatest enemy!”<sup>21</sup>

Durruti’s body was taken by car to Barcelona where the funeral took place on 23 November. It was one of the most important working class demonstrations in the history of the Spanish

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<sup>20</sup> Peirats, op.cit., Vol. I. Chapter 13.

<sup>21</sup> Peirats, Ibid.

labour movement with over half-a-million people lining the streets of the Catalan capital to pay their respects to an indomitable working class hero. Durruti was laid to rest beside his closest comrade, Francisco Ascaso, who had died in the assault on the Ataranzas barracks four months earlier, and an earlier anarchist victim of vicious state repression, Francisco Ferrer Guardia.

But they had to kill Durruti twice. On the anniversary of his death the ‘spin doctors’ of the Stalinist Negrín government went into over-drive to credit Durruti with the coining of a phrase – originally devised by Ilya Ehrenburg, in a doctored interview with Durruti and later backed by the CNT-FAI’s higher committees. It depicted him as saying the exact opposite of everything he had always said and thought, forswearing the revolution: “We renounce everything except victory.”

Unfortunately, no complete and reliable transcript exists of Durruti’s 4 November speech, because the anarchist press at the time both sweetened and censored the living Durruti.

Once dead, Durruti could be deified. He was even promoted, posthumously, to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in the Popular Army.

Command of the Durruti Column passed to Sergeant Manzana and Miguel Yolde, both of whom were soon to play an important role in imposing militarisation on the column.

## NOTES



## December 1936

By December the Spanish Civil War had begun to move into what Camillo Berneri described as its 'third phase': "Henceforth, the development of the internal situation is subject in the main to foreign factors. These are the Hitlerians and the antifascist émigrés of Germany and Austria, the Italian fascists and antifascists, the Bolshevik Russians and White Russians, the French Communists and the Irish Catholics — who are getting to grips with one another on the Madrid front. The relationships between the forces are in the process of changing — militarily and politically. The Civil War is in the process of taking on a faster rhythm, an even broader field of action, a more decided character, while the Russian intervention assures the hegemony of the socialist-communist forces which up to now were completely dominated by the anarchist forces. I have said and I repeat: the Civil War can be won in the military arena, but the triumph of the political and social revolution is threatened. The problems of the future in Spain are indissolubly linked to the international developments of the Civil War."<sup>1</sup>

December saw the Caballero government launch its assault on the militias. With Durruti dead (the one man around whom opposition might have focused), and the higher committees and other 'notable' militants in favour of militarisation there was likely to be little resistance. The first move came on 2 December when a ten-man Delegate Defence Junta was set up under the chairmanship of General Miaja to organise the defence of Madrid. The Defence Junta had a nominal anarchist presence with only two delegates, the rest were mainly communists and socialists.

On 4 December, anarchist ministers, García Oliver and Federica Montseny addressed a meeting in Valencia to generate support among the rank-and-file for the proposed militarisation. García Oliver had this to say:

'No matter what may be the [workers'] organisations to which they belong, they must employ the same methods the enemy uses in order to win. Above all, discipline and unity. With discipline and efficient military organisation we shall undoubtedly win.'

Federica Montseny added her pennyworth:

'Recently I spent several days in Catalonia and I realised something very important ... Those who do not feel the war at first hand are living in a revolutionary cloud cuckoo land. They hold the industries and workshops in their hands, they have eradicated the bourgeois, they live peacefully and in a factory, instead of one bourgeois, there are seven or eight. This is intolerable ...'

In fact, the workers were not quite the bourgeois shirkers Montseny made them out to be. Peirats quotes a report by the Investigation Section of Puebla de Híjar in Aragón who issued an appeal for 1000 volunteers to defend Madrid and 6000 workers came to offer themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> *Guerra di Classe*, No. 7, 1937.

At the same time, *Solidaridad Obrera* was having second thoughts about winning over the petty bourgeoisie by its policy of respecting small businesses, small industry and 'modest' property owners. That particular strategy had been won hands down by the Communist Party. An editorial of 3 December observed:

'This modest bourgeois social stratum, which at the start of the social revolution felt itself threatened, heaved a sigh of relief when it realised that we would respect its interests. Secure in the knowledge that we were no threat, it devoted itself peacefully to the pursuits of its small businesses. And how has the bourgeoisie repaid our generosity? Certainly in the case of those concerned with the sale and distribution of food, we have to say ... very poorly. Should things continue on their present course, it will be necessary to adopt more vigorous measures capable of putting an end to the abuses and wayward practices which have been indulged in...'<sup>2</sup>

The lack of military activity on the Aragón front provided the PCE with an excuse for escalating the attack on the anarchists through the columns of its paper, *Mundo Obrero*. That the militias had been consistently deprived of arms and ammunition and obstructed at every turn was conveniently ignored.

On 12 December the Militias delegation on the Defence Junta announced the 'indispensable necessity for the efficiency of the war to create a regular army, keeping in mind the government's decree on militarisation of the militias ...' ... and have resolved to:

'...organise all militia units and battalions from the different organisations into regular battalions and brigades. Consequently, all forces currently in Madrid, in the various barracks as incomplete battalions or remnants of other battalions are to be reorganised by the Militias Command into units of full strength, these being the only units which shall be acknowledged in the matters of payment and rationing. Those which refuse to comply with said conditions being denied the services of the paymaster's office and service corps — *Cosmos*.'<sup>3</sup>

The news of the militarisation decrees shocked the rank and file of the anarchist movement and the left wing socialists. Miguel García García, organiser of the Madrid and Pérez Carballo battalions, later recalled how he heard the news:

'We were stunned. García Oliver, Federica Montseny. Had they agreed to this? We could not believe it. We sent for information from our Regional Committee. None of our movement agrees with it. But it's for unity. They think it will impress the Russians. You know what a mania they have for authority. They will never trust a people without a disciplined army, you know how they worship the state — they are, after all, Marxists — But then we have to rely on them for arms.'

Militarisation was to prove the most salient move in the recuperative process of the state. For the PCE and their right wing socialist and republican allies their eagerness to bring the militia

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<sup>2</sup> *Solidaridad Obrera*, 3.12.1936.

<sup>3</sup> Peirats, op.cit., Vol. I. Chapter 13.

units under a unified command did not just stem from a desire to improve the military capability of the army, as the anarchists were only too aware. It was, rather, intended to strengthen the position of central government-at the expense of the popular organs controlled by trade union militants. The communists, who welcomed and actively sought militarisation, formed the first contingent of the Popular Army with the Fifth Regiment. Because of the preferential treatment it received in terms of access to new Russian military supplies and the esteem in which it was held by the high command this quickly became the Fifth Army Corps commanded by Russian military and political advisers. A similar sequence of events took place within the police, security and intelligence services where the special advisers from the Russian GPU/NKVD soon took over. With the influence of Soviet military aid behind them, by the end of the year the PCE had become an important contender for political power.

The PCE's strategy, pursued under the tight reins of their Comintern advisers was, first and foremost, to create the conditions favourable for the long term strategic goals of the USSR. The Popular Front concept itself had been Comintern policy from August 1935. By helping antifascist governments to power throughout Europe the Soviet Union hoped to contain German expansionist aims in the east. The Seventh Congress of the Comintern, which devised this policy asserted that one of the immediate tasks to be assumed by communists everywhere was to bind the peasantry and urban petite bourgeoisie with a broad popular antifascist front. When the Civil War unleashed a social revolution, the Soviet Union, to avoid alienating the western powers, declared itself the defender of the liberal bourgeoisie and 'property' rights. The Soviet Union, therefore, found itself in direct conflict with the far-reaching social transformation the people, inspired by the ideas initiated by the anarchists and left-socialists. Fernando Claudín describes PCE and Soviet policy as involving 'nothing less than pushing the proletarian revolution back within the bourgeois democratic grounds from which it "should" never have escaped.'<sup>4</sup> This demanded total control over central government in Madrid and the Catalan Generalidad and the neutralising of the revolutionary forces of the CNT and FAI, the left wing socialists of the UGT and the dissident Marxists of the POUM. To effect this policy Stalin appointed two key men to co-ordinate the restoration of bourgeois political, military and economic institutions: Marcel Rosenberg, Soviet ambassador to the central government, and Antonov-Ovseenko, consul general to the Generalidad.

*Pravda* of 17 December 1936 left no doubt as to what Comintern policy in Spain was to be:

'As for Catalonia, the purging of Trotskyist and anarcho-syndicalist elements has begun; this work will be carried out with the same energy with which it was done in the USSR.'

The purging 'having begun' referred, no doubt, to the accusation made by the Soviet consul, Antonov-Ovseenko, that the POUM newspaper, *La Batalla*, had 'sold out' to international fascism, presumably because of its sustained criticism of the Soviet Union<sup>5</sup> and the role of Soviet advisers whom it claimed were moulding Spanish foreign policy. The accusation of being pro-fascist or,

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<sup>4</sup> Fernando Claudín, *The Communist Movement, Part 1*, p.224.

<sup>5</sup> The POUM had denounced Soviet foreign policy in the 15 November issue of *La Batalla*: "To what was this change [in Stalin's attitude] due? Did Stalin perhaps realise the mistake he had made after two and a half months and seek to set it right? That there was an error is proved by the simple fact that it has been corrected, there has been a change. But the most important real factor that dictated the change is Stalin's realisation that Franco, with the undisguised support of Hitler and Mussolini, might snatch victory in the civil war. This would bolster the political

rather, anti-Soviet, did much to undermine the dissident Marxist organisation politically and provoked the first major split in the Generalidad since September. The POUM, which carried considerable influence within the UGT in Catalonia, was manoeuvred out of the Generalidad following a crisis provoked by the PSUC with the backing of the petite bourgeois parties of the *Acción Catalana*, *Estat Catalá* and the *Esquerra Republicana*. The new 'non-party government' swept to office on 15 December on the back of the artful slogan 'First and foremost, win the war, the guarantor of the revolution' was to be the grave digger of the revolution. The PSUC was to emerge triumphant from its first trial of strength with its weakest of enemies; the CNT was to be next in line.

Pressure was stepped up a few days later with the declaration of war on 'uncontrollable elements' by the communist Barcelona police commissioner, Eusebio Rodríguez Salas, newly appointed by the communist Councillor for Internal Security, Artemio Aiguadé.

The communist-inspired smear campaign that the POUM was working with and on behalf of international fascism was the first phase in a strategy of disinformation aimed at weakening the considerable influence of the POUM within the UGT. It was soon to extend its parameters to include the CNT. The fears and prejudices of the middle class were played on incessantly. The divisive and pro-governmental position of the higher committees of the CNT and FAI badly affected working class solidarity and the advances made by the revolution in the industrial, agricultural and service sectors began to falter as they became increasingly subjected to harassment and political and economic blackmail. The organisational structure of the CNT became more and more enmeshed in the recuperative manoeuvres of the more experienced power brokers among the liberal and Marxist politicians. The PSUC, which now controlled the Catalan Ministry of supply through Juan Comorera, artificially contrived a shortage of flour in Barcelona by refusing the CNT Councillor for Supplies the necessary foreign exchange he required. Blame was ascribed to the CNT Supply Committees, which had operating in every district of the city, and the 'ineptitude' of his CNT predecessor. For the first time bread became a scarce commodity. The arrival of Russian ships loaded with food supplies — 'a gift from the workers and peasants of Russia' (in fact paid for by Spanish gold) — gave a tremendous boost to communist influence and provided the opportunity for massive enthusiastically pro-soviet demonstrations on the streets of the capital. Inexorably, against this background of confusion, hunger and tension, the influence of the anarchist revolutionaries decreased while the PCE and its bourgeois allies were able to present themselves more forcefully as the defenders of middle class values and liberal democracy; the military stalemate and social disintegration was, they claimed, a direct result of 'the uncontrollables' who served the interests of international fascism. The bodies of CNT militants, 'uncontrollables', began to turn up on the streets of the capital.

The growing tensions together with the militarisation decrees created tremendous confusion and rancour among the volunteer militiamen at the front. Stormy confrontations took place between the fighting men and delegations from the higher committees sent to impose militarisation. On 22 December alone, 96 men of the Iron Column — which had made its position on militari-

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and strategic positions of Hitlerite fascism which Stalin considers his mortal enemy. The correction of the error has not sprung from the desire to be of service to the interests of the Spanish revolution — Lenin would not for a single moment have declared himself neutral towards it — but rather from a pre-occupation with foreign policy, and instinct of self-preservation in the international balance of power. In short: what really interests Stalin is not the fate of the Spanish or international proletariat, but the defence, of the Soviet government in accordance with the policy of alliances established by same states against others."

sation clear at the CNT Regional Congress in Valencia the previous month — left the front and were posted as deserters by the War Committee.

On 24 December the new Catalan Commissioner of Police, Eusebio Rodríguez Salas, was appointed by the communist councillor for Public Order, Artemio Aiguadé. With this appointment the counter-revolutionary preparations were complete. Later that day General Miaja issued orders that from 15.00 hours all checkpoints in the approaches to the capital were to be withdrawn until the reorganisation of the Rearguard Militia into brigades had been completed; that only regular forces under the control of the Ministry of War were permitted to bear arms; that any armed bodies who attempted mount checkpoints or guards on public buildings, barracks, etc., would be liable to the appropriate punishment under military law; that all matters concerning public order could only be dealt with by the properly constituted authorities. Any infringements which occurred were to be dealt with summarily by the judicial authorities.

Two days later, on the 26<sup>th</sup>, communist Defence Junta delegate, Pablo Yagüe, was shot when he refused to hand over his identity papers to a CNT militia unit in a Madrid suburb and drove through the checkpoint.

On 28 December the newspapers carried the following story:

“Valencia: the *Gaceta* has published an Interior Ministry decree establishing a National Security Council under the chairmanship of the Minister of the Interior... Two councillors will represent the UGT, two representing the CNT, plus another five councillors, one from each political party and organisation affiliated to the Antifascist Front; a commander from the Security Corps; a representative from the ranks of the Security Corps, etc.

‘The functions of the National Council ... include the choice of uniform, weaponry and future training, the staffing of units of the Corps, their arming and the distribution of personnel, etc. ...

‘In each provincial capital there is to be a Provincial Security Council comprising one representative from each union grouping and chaired by the civil governor and, in the case of inter-provincial councils, by a special government delegate. The Security Corps alone will be entrusted with functions relating to the maintenance of public order and vigilance ...

‘The corps of the National Republican Guard, security, Assault Guards, with Investigation and Rearguard Militias are hereby dissolved...

‘Should they so desire, all suspended personnel shall apply within 15 days for entry into the Security Corps, specifying the branch or section of which they seek membership. Such applications are to be forwarded to the Ministry of the Interior for a decision, having first submitted them to provincial and national councils for vetting.  
— *Cosmos*’.<sup>6</sup>

With this decree the popular organs of the revolution were to be legislated out of existence. Having met with concession after concession from the higher committees of the CNT and FAI and a deferential rank-and-file anxious to defend antifascist unity at all costs, the bourgeois politicians knew it was now time to ‘go for broke’.

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<sup>6</sup> Peirats, op.cit., Vol. I. Chapter 14.

## January 1937

From January 1937 onwards the CNT Information and Propaganda Bureau organised a regular series of lectures in the Coliseum cinema in Barcelona. The first lecture, delivered by Federica Montseny on 3 January 1937, on militant anarchy and Spanish reality, was a prime example of chauvinistic political demagoguery with nothing to commend it from an anarchist perspective. It does, however, provide a fascinating insight into the thinking of the CNT and FAI leaders in relation to the war, government and revolution from the vantage point of power. She explained to her audience that the anarchists had entered the government to prevent the anarchist movement from being 'ousted from the leadership of the revolution' in order to carry it further beyond the war, and also to oppose any dictatorial tendency, from wherever it might come.<sup>1</sup>

The agonising decision facing the popular militias in the meantime was whether or not to accept the militarisation being pressed upon them by their own comrades of the higher committees in the rearguard. Delegates from the different units of the Durruti Column in the Gelsa sector met in mid-January to protest against the decision to militarise the columns on the Aragón front. Their problem was not one of organisation or discipline, simply a lack of weapons and ammunition. They also drew up what would be an acceptable alternative to the anarchist volunteers. On 16 January, they issued a statement that appeared in the Lerida paper *Acracia* which they claimed spoke for every century in the Durruti Column:

"... Apparently the government is making the provision of equipment conditional upon our militarisation ... According to what the committees themselves say, they cannot give us any assurances that the Madrid government will supply us with the equipment even if we do militarise. That being the case, the trespass against our principles could be rewarded with nothing more than an empty promise."

The Iron Column also called a meeting of its militants to discuss the militarisation plans. The strength of feeling among the anarchist fighters on the question of militarisation was captured in a heartfelt and powerful protest to present and future generations of libertarians by an 'unknown uncontrollable' of the Iron Column:

"... And so, with our comrades at our sides, and imagining that there was some purpose to our struggle, we went willingly to war and even accepted death with pleasure. But when you are among the military where there are only orders and ranks; when you see in your hands the miserable pay with which you can scarcely sustain your family in the rear and you see your lieutenant, captain, colonel earning three times as much: four times as much, ten times as much as you, though possessed of neither enthusiasm, nor of greater acumen or greater courage than you, life turns sour because you see that this is no revolution, but profit for a few from a wretched situation

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<sup>1</sup> For full text of speech see Background Briefs: *Address by Federica Montseny*

which merely works to the detriment of the people... The militarists, all militarists — there are wrathful ones on our side — have surrounded us. Yesterday we were the masters of everything. Today they are. The Popular Army, popular only inasmuch as it consists of people, belongs to the government, and the government commands, the government ordains. The people have to obey and constant obedience is required of them...”<sup>2</sup>

On 18 January the Catalan Generalidad passed 58 decrees aimed at further containing the advances of the revolutionary working class. Juan Comorera, appointed Councillor for Food in December, set about abolishing the CNT run Supply Committees that had kept Barcelona provisioned with flour. Franz Borkenau, a visitor to the Catalan capital in January 1937, described the situation:

‘He restored private commerce in bread, simply and completely. There was, in January, not even a system of rationing in Barcelona. Workers were left simply to get their bread, with wages, which had hardly changed since May, at increased prices, as well as they could. In practice it meant that the women had to form queues from four o’clock in the morning onwards. The resentment in the working class districts was naturally acute, the more so as the scarcity of bread rapidly increased after Comorera had taken office.’<sup>3</sup>

The opinion of many anarchists in the rearguard was that militarisation was, on the whole, a good thing. Camillo Berneri, a delegate to the Defence Council, interviewed by *L’Espagne Nouvelle*, commented that the militias had made great advances and learned much from their experiences of the previous six months:

‘Transport has begun to be rationalised, roads are being repaired, equipment is more abundant and better distributed, and into the mind of the column (the Italian section of the Ascaso Column) is slipping the idea: the necessity of a co-ordinating command.

‘We are forming divisions, and this will complete the economic plan of war, and the best known representatives of the CNT and the FAI have made themselves its supporters. In fact, it was these two organisations that first proposed a united command in order to be able to exert decisive pressure on the weak points of the enemy lines

...

“So, there is some good in militarisation?”

“Certainly”, replied Berneri with conviction, “but there is a distinction to be made: there is on the one side military formalism which is not only ridiculous, but is also useless and dangerous — and on the other side there is self-discipline...

‘For my part, I support a legitimate compromise: we must neither lapse into military formalism nor into superstitious anti-militarism. By accepting and achieving the reforms imposed on us by the nature of things, we shall, by this self-same means, be

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<sup>2</sup> For fuller text see Background Briefs: *Protest before the libertarians of present and future*. Also known as ‘*A day mournful and overcast*’.

<sup>3</sup> Borkenau, *The Spanish Cockpit*, p.184.

in a position to resist the manoeuvres of Madrid and Moscow, which are attempting to impose, under the pretext of militarisation, their military hegemony over the Spanish revolution, in order to transform it into the instrument of their political hegemony. As for myself, I consider it a mistake to talk, as do certain CNT-FAI representatives of an overall or “supreme” command instead of unity of command. That is to say, general co-ordination in matters of the control of the armed struggle. Their intentions are good, but the term used leads to dangerous confusions!... All things considered, therefore, the reforms needed in the militia, in my opinion, would be the following: a clear distinction between military command and political control, in the field of the preparation and execution of the operations of war; strict fulfilment of orders received, but maintenance of certain fundamental rights: that of electing and recalling officers.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Translated from *L'Espagne Nouvelle*, February 1937.



## February 1937

On 5 February, the Iron Column convened a meeting in Valencia of all the confederal militia units in the Levante in an attempt to resolve the problem of militarisation. Taking part were representatives from the columns Tierra y Libertad, the Durruti Column, the Extremadura Andalusia Column, the Valdepeñas and Manzanares Sectors, the Ascaso, Iberia, Iron, Ortiz, Temple y Rebeldía columns and the CNT 13 Column. The CNT's National Committee was neither invited nor informed, but a representative turned up all the same. There were two items on the agenda: "(1) The attitude to be adopted by the columns in the face of the mobilisation decree and, (2) the effects this will have upon us."

Fernando Pellicer of the Iron Column opened the debate by accusing both the higher committees and themselves:

'... since we have been guilty of keeping our finest at the front while, by contrast, parvenus ensconced behind their desks have remained in the organisation's committees to engage in activities inimical to the proper functioning of the same...

'We are not hostile to (military) expertise but those who blather so much about it ought to know that in Spain the military who failed to mutiny did so simply through cowardice or simply because the occasion did not arise...

'Let us state this fact clearly: if we hope for a successful conclusion to the war from the presence of one armed comrade urging forward seven or eight militiamen at gunpoint from behind, then we might as well say we have lost the war...

'The government knows that the only ones capable of cleaning up Levante are the Iron Column and for that reason it denies us weapons. As far as Levante is concerned, the Organisation [CNT] has played a sordid game — played at setting up committees, committees which have given their consent to militarisation even though a resolution to the contrary was passed at the last Regional Plenum of Syndicates.'

Delegates from the Ascaso and Ortiz columns agreed with Pellicer's opening statement while the delegate from the Column CNT 13 informed the meeting that it had already re-organised itself and militarised because they felt that they had to be certain that 'if we have 1,000 men, we will be 1,000 men under an obligation to do our bits.'

The uninvited spokesman from the National Committee protested about not being informed and went on to say that militarisation had been imposed on no one. The decision had been taken with the approval of a Plenum of Regional Committees and if blame had to be apportioned it lay with those who abused their offices. The decision to militarise was approved because 'we have seen that columns with communists in control operate with war materials aplenty whereas we are increasingly being starved of the same.'

The delegate from the militias of the Central region pointed out that if the militias continued fighting as in the past there would be a disaster ‘because we no longer possess the self-discipline that we had at the outbreak of the war.’<sup>1</sup>

Cipriano Mera, speaking on behalf of the Defence Committee of the CNT intervened:

“Discipline should begin with the committees and its imposition solely upon the militiaman cannot be acceptable any more than the fact that the committees should do as they see fit without consultation with the comrades concerned. We need to embrace a strong sense of organisational discipline which will not, however, be of the barrack room sort. “

The Tierra y Libertad delegate spoke to say that although they had initially agreed to militarisation they now wished to renounce that decision:

‘We convened a meeting in our column; the consensus was that militarisation be rejected. The proof of this is that half our ranks, 143 men, contend that anyone may be overcome by panic, whether he be soldier or militiaman.’

When the Congress ended two days later, 8 February, although united in their criticism of the higher committees of the CNT and FAI, the militians remained divided over the question of militarisation.

According to Cipriano Mera ‘every delegation save two — the Iron Column and the Tierra y Libertad Column — accepted militarisation.’<sup>2</sup> The Italian anarchists of the International Battalion attached to the Ascaso Column were also bitterly opposed to militarisation.

In the face of growing pressure for a decision, the War Committee of the Iron Column published an urgent memorandum in *Nosotros* on 16 February warning its members that a decision had to be taken very soon — militarise or disband! It expressed the hope that the issue could be finally resolved at a general assembly of Column members to be held shortly. No formal decision was ever reached and the situation steadily built up to crisis point.

Meanwhile, Stalin increased the pressure on Largo Caballero, urging him to form a single proletarian party, merging the socialist and communists into one Unified Socialist Party of Spain. When Caballero finally rejected this proposal both the Stalinists and their right wing bourgeois allies, each for their own reasons, decided the time had come to move against the Spanish ‘Lenin’ as he had been misnamed. The emotional capital created by the fall of Malaga to the Nationalists on 8 February provided the opportunity for the opening shots in the campaign of vilification orchestrated against Caballero. For the next four months his position within the government and the party was to be steadily eroded until he was totally isolated.

The fall of Malaga, a major blow to the Republic, might have been averted, according to Borke-nau, by a popular ‘fight of despair’ which ‘the anarchists might have led’, as opposed to a military solution under the command of regular army officers

Revolutionary morale and hope had evaporated as the ever-encroaching power of the state and the sectarian interests of the parties suffocated the popular organs of the revolution and mass

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<sup>1</sup> For fuller text see Background Briefs: *Protest before the libertarians of present and future*. Also known as ‘*A day mournful and overcast*’.

<sup>2</sup> Cipriano Mera, *Guerra, Exilio y Carcel*, Paris 1976, p.112.

involvement. 'The nuisance of hundreds of independent village police bodies had disappeared, but with it the passionate interest of the villages in the civil war ... The short interlude of the Spanish Soviet system was at an end.'<sup>3</sup> 'The Spanish Republic', Borkenau observed, 'paid with the fall of Malaga for the decision of the right-wing of its camp to make an end of social revolution and of its left wing to allow that.'<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Borkenau, *op. Cit.*, p.212.

<sup>4</sup> Borkenau, *ibid.*, p.228.

## March 1937

By the beginning of March the state apparatus was ready, almost fully recovered from the double blow it had received the previous July from the reactionary military and the revolutionary industrial and agrarian working class. With a Cabinet, including the anarchist ministers, fully committed to implementing militarisation, Largo Caballero announced that from 1 April all forces on the Teruel front would come under the control of the Ministry of War. José Benedito, commander of the anarcho-syndicalist Torres Benedito Column was assigned to the Organisational Bureau of the General Staff with special responsibility for re-organising the militia columns. At the same time the Iron Column, the most refractory of the militia columns, was informed that the decree of 30 December which provided for servicemen's pay being made henceforth by battalion paymaster-officers, answerable to the Treasury would now be enforced.

At a general assembly of the Iron Column, the militians refused to submit to military re-organisation and to the new administrative regulations. Many decided to quit the front in protest. To avoid providing the War Ministry with the pretext to conscript the Column's members, the War Committee issued the following note:

“The Iron Column has not disbanded, nor is it contemplating disbandment. Nor has it militarised... it has requested that it be temporarily relieved so that it may snatch a little rest and reorganise.”

By mid-March the Column had largely been disbanded on account of the desertions by many of its militians. After an assembly held in Valencia on 22 March militarisation was accepted as a lesser evil and the remainder of the Iron Column, 4,000 men out of a total of 20,000, became known as the 83<sup>rd</sup> Mixed Brigade commanded by José Pellicer, with Segarra as political commissar. Before disbanding the Column's assets were shared out among rationalist schools, the CNT field hospital, the anarchist international prisoners' aid group and anarchist publishing ventures and libraries.

In Catalonia the statist politicians and functionaries were also making the final preparations for delivering the deathblow to the revolution. On 4 March, Artemio Aiguadé, the communist Councillor for Internal Security, announced the dissolution of the Control Patrols, the armed representatives of the workers' organisations, the Internal Security Council, composed of representatives of every shade of opinion, and the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils.<sup>1</sup> In addition, members of union or political organisations were prohibited from belonging to the forces of public order. Any infringement of this ban was to be punished by dismissal from the security corps. This provoked an immediate government crisis which was to last almost a month. That same day, *La Batalla*, paper of the POUM, reprinted extracts, with enthusiastic comments by Andrés Nin, from an article that had appeared in the CNT evening paper *La Noche*. The author was

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<sup>1</sup> See Background Briefs.

the paper's editor, CNT militant Jaime Balius, soon to be one of the founders of the Friends of Durruti group:

'We anarchists have arrived at the limits of our concessions...Not another step backward. It is the hour of action. Save the revolution... If we continue to give up our positions there is no doubt that in a short time we shall be overwhelmed and the revolution will simply be another souvenir. It is for this fundamental reason that it is necessary to develop a new orientation in our movement.'

Balius added, probably in reference to the POUM, that he was pleased to see that:

'Our anxiety is now shared by the evening paper of an organisation with which we are in fundamental agreement concerning the present revolutionary epoch and the role of the working class.'

Next day, 5 March, soldiers presenting what turned out to be forged documentation removed twelve of the most modern armoured cars in Catalonia from a military store. The man responsible for the theft proved to be the lieutenant colonel of the PSUC-controlled Voroschiloff barracks. When challenged the officer at first denied all knowledge of the tanks but they were quickly discovered. He then claimed that he had merely been carrying out orders received from the general staff of the Karl Marx Division.

Manuel Trueba, the War Commissar of the Karl Marx Division, quickly denied this allegation. *Solidaridad Obrera* of 7 March commented:

'... If these tanks were not taken for use on the front, then to what end was such a brilliant operation mounted? In this we discern the outlines of a dictatorial affront against which everybody knows that we would immediately protest. In this instance, as in every one, we cannot but issue a reminder of the constant peril. Should the unhealthy partisan zeal in someone outweigh the instinct of self-preservation, we have to state yet again our firm and unshakeable determination to defeat fascism above all else. And to defeat it as part of a spearhead of close unity with workers of every political and trade union denomination...'

March 5 also saw the formation of what was to be one of the most controversial anarchist groups of the social revolution — the Friends of Durruti (FOD). Dedicated to the defence of fundamental anarchist principles, the revolution, and to challenging the bureaucratic conservatism of the CNT-FAI leadership, the Friends of Durruti were not just another club:

'We aim to see the Spanish Revolution pervaded by the revolutionary acumen of our Durruti. The FOD remain faithful to the last words uttered by our comrade in the heart of Barcelona in denunciation of the work of the counter-revolution ...To enrol in our association, it is vital that one belong to the CNT and show evidence of a record of struggle, a love of ideas and the revolution...'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Solidaridad Obrera*, 5.3.1937,

The group made its official debut on 8 March when the same communiqué appeared in issue 77 of *El Frente*, the official paper of the Durruti Column.

The nucleus of the group, whose membership quickly grew to between four and five thousand,<sup>3</sup> were militants from the Durruti Column based in the Gelsa sector, anarchists who had consistently stood out against militarisation and the strategy of the higher committees. Their intransigence had led to them being warned on a number of occasions by the CNT and FAI Regional Committees to change their attitude and conform to the decisions of the Organisation.

These warnings were ignored. Sergeant Manzana, the man rumoured to be responsible for Durruti's death, accidental or otherwise, informed them that by holding out against militarisation they might provoke bloodshed among comrades:

‘After long deliberation it was decided that within 15 days of the meeting, they would leave the front, handing over their weapons to other comrades who would arrive to replace them.’<sup>4</sup>

Practically, as well as in theory, the group proposed a return to the ideals of self-management and revolutionary war that had existed among the rank-and-file immediately after the military uprising. In an interview in *La Noche* on 24 March, Pablo Ruiz, described as:

“ ... a delegate from the 4<sup>th</sup> Gelsa Group, composed of some 600 CNT-FAI militants’ outlined the factors which gave birth to the FOD group: ‘When we set out for the front we left comrades in the rear in possession of what was, from an anarchist point of view, a Revolution marching victoriously onwards. But in the shaping of that revolution, they have allowed a part to be played by political parties who had no feeling for the revolution having, as they did, to defend the interests of the petite bourgeoisie and the UGT which, by comparison with us, represented only a tiny percentage of workers in Catalonia and had damn little influence on the economic and administrative life of the Revolution. And it is now clear that in reaching an accommodation with them we lost our hegemony in the Revolution and have found it necessary to surrender a little more each day with the result that the revolution has been disfigured and the revolutionary gains made in those early days have evaporated.’

‘This led to the formation of the Friends of Durruti, insofar as this new organisation has as its fundamental task the preservation, intact, of the principles of the CNT-FAI, harking back to 19 July, with a view to ensuring that it is the union organisation which has responsibility for the management of the economy and society, with no place given to the political parties, the grounds for that being that they are not regarded as equipped for the work of renovation. And we say all this not with the intention of using force to enforce our plans, but rather as grounds for propaganda within the CNT itself, breathing new life into its creative, organising spirit which we cannot stand idly by and watch die.’

‘And I oppose participation by the parties because it is my belief that this implies the loss of the revolution which must be pursued by all the means at our disposal, but never by means of accommodations with groups which are, let alone in a minority, deaf to the call of revolution.’”

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<sup>3</sup> Jordi Arquer, typescript history of the ‘Amigos de Durruti’, quoted in *The Alarm*, San Francisco, 1983.

<sup>4</sup> FAI ‘Informe que este comite de relaciones de grupos anarquistas de Cataluna presenta a los compañeros de la region’, Barcelona, March 1937.

Benjamin Péret, the surrealist writer and volunteer fighter, wrote his last letter to André Breton from Spain on 7 March. He was with the First Company of the Nestor Makhno Battalion, Durruti Division at Pino de Ebro on the Aragón front:

‘Except for a postcard I haven’t written because of the lack of any interesting news. From the first day of my return it was obvious that any collaboration with the POUM was no longer possible. They were ready to accept people on their right, but not on their left.

‘Besides, nothing could be done anyway thanks to the ultra-rapid bureaucratisation of all the organisations and the scandalous activities that have developed. Otherwise, under the pressure of the Stalinists the revolution is following a descending curve, which if it is not rapidly halted will lead very quickly to a violent counter-revolution. In such conditions I decided to join an anarchist militia unit and I am here at the front – Pina de Ebro – where I will stay as long as something more interesting doesn’t take me somewhere else.

‘The sector – which I didn’t choose – is perfectly calm; we are separated from the fascists by the whole width of the Ebro, that is to say a good kilometre of water. Not a cannon shot, not a rifle bullet, nothing. It’s too calm to last. I would like to recount all the swinish acts by the Stalinists who openly sabotage the revolution with the evidently enthusiastic approval of petit bourgeois of all shades. There are many things, many signs disturbing to the greatest degree and which I cannot write about now...’<sup>5</sup>

## Crisis of Generalidad Provoked

On 30 March 1937, the CNT’s Regional Committee issued a circular to soldiers, federations and unions, recommending that they remain vigilant and keep constantly in touch. The POUM’s English language paper, *The Spanish Revolution*, edited by the American Charles Orr, observed that this circular also indicated an attempt on the part of the CNT leadership to centralise authority in its regional committees. The committees were empowered to decree mobilisations, issue orders and watchwords:

‘All who do not act accordingly to these rules and agreements will be publicly expelled from the organisation.’<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Claude Courtot, *Introduction à la lecture de Benjamin Péret*, Paris, 1965.

<sup>6</sup> *The Spanish Revolution*, No. 6, Vol. II, 31.3.1937.

## April 1937

With the pretext of the birthday celebrations of the Second Republic on 14 April, the State and the liberal bourgeois parties, along with the PCE and the PSUC, their Catalan counterparts, began to shift the focus of attention away from the popular revolutionary achievements of July 1936 to the elitist parliamentary machinations of April 1931. Militant opposition to the conciliatory role being played by the higher committees and ministers of the CNT and FAI became more outspoken. Camillo Berneri, published a bitter denunciation of the anarchist ministers in *Guerra di Clase* and urged them to re-think their position:

“The dilemma war or revolution no longer has any meaning. The only dilemma is the following: either victory over Franco, thanks to the revolutionary war, or defeat.”<sup>1</sup>

The Friends of Durruti were equally forceful in pointing out the dangers posed to the Revolution by the State, parliamentary socialism and the government controlled security forces. In a leaflet distributed during the 14 April ‘celebrations’ they noted:

‘... We possess the organs which must replace the state which is in ruins. The unions and the municipalities must take charge of the economic and social life of the Peninsula. The clear and obvious solution ... Free Unions and Free Municipalities ... We want no part of 14 April. Its memory is obnoxious. Only the parasites of politics can commemorate it... 14 April is not a day for demonstrations. We know the meaning of the April masquerade. And because we do not want July to end up like those hopeless early days of the Republic we resolutely oppose those who espouse the April anniversary and the figure of a lawyer raised to the heights of presidential office.’ (A reference to Companys).<sup>2</sup>

Writing in *La Noche* that same evening, Iron Column delegate Fernando Pellicer reflected:

‘We have been over-gracious and too, too hesitant in not having seized power in Catalonia so as to bring pressure to bear against the Valencia government’s boycott against the CNT and FAI in Catalonia and its disowning of the Aragón Front, since whenever one speaks about the Catalan region, it goes without saying that one means the Aragón Front. We dithered because we cowered in fear from the threat of foreign intervention. We could have, we should have seized power, and I am one hundred per cent sure that if we had, the Revolution would have taken an entirely different turn, and the war likewise. We know now that the threat of foreign intervention was no greater than the fear that seized us back in the month

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<sup>1</sup> See Background Briefs: *An Open Letter to Federica Montseny*.

<sup>2</sup> See Background Briefs.



of July. Back in July, nobody moved in Catalonia without the say so of the CNT. Everything, absolutely everything, was ours. Companys said that we would issue the orders, that we would be the ones to determine what was to be done and that he was prepared to act as the political champion, abroad and inside Spain, of our revolutionary creation. Well, Sr. Companys, what remains today of these fine intentions of yours? Not a thing. It was a play for time until the conservative, political forces, of bourgeois democracy and Moscow style socialist centralisation could compose themselves. And since time was to be the best ally of the middle class and the bureaucracy against the CNT and the FAI, the miscalculations we made during the months of antifascist collaboration did the rest and brought us to the pretty pass of this grave situation in which we presently find ourselves.

'In the realm of provisions, we have allowed the hoarders and speculators in this region to have their own selfish way, instead of us having, as a war measure, taken over the entire food industry in the chief districts and cities of Catalonia, thereby avoiding the present chaos obtaining in this sphere. Today, in Catalonia, it is not possible to feed oneself with an average income. Yet the hotels and the restaurants, the luxury ones, are brimming with fancy dishes. This is an affront to the hungry families and, above all, to the dependants of the militians away at the front. These luxury cafes are teeming with good for nothings who spend all their time seated around the tables, instead of taking up the gun or wielding the hoe in the fields ... The countryside despises us because the good life in the cities has been our sole concern, especially here in this rotten Barcelona, teeming with its bourgeoisified control committees who commandeer cars even for their private affairs. ...We must take provisions, with consent or by force; we should do away with the hotels and the cafes; and the dance halls and prostitution. We must introduce the family wage. Let the capital of each industry become the property of the syndicate concerned. Municipal control of housing. The family wage must apply to everyone. And, as a war measure, there must be intervention in all trade in food, great or small, so that order may be restored to the rearward ... we must increase the labourer's wage and cut the salaries of the blue-eyed boys so that everyone may eat. And anyone who cannot find useful work in the city, let him climb aboard a train, for the countryside has need of hands so that our peasant comrades need not work such a long day.'

The preparations for PSUC's final assault on the workers' organisations were well under way. Throughout April there were continuing provocations that raised the tension throughout Catalonia to breaking point. Roldán Cortada, secretary of the Generalidad Councillor for Defence, Vidiella, together with another companion from the PSUC, travelled to Paris in April on a mission to purchase arms for the Party's planned confrontation with the anarchists. In Paris they contacted an agent of Negrín's, known as 'C'. 'C' opposed the purchase of arms for the purpose indicated, but as Cortada was acting under party instructions and with the apparent involvement of party leader Juan Comorera, he complied, but confined his assistance to putting them in contact with people 'who may well have been able to assist them in their project.' 'C' reported to Negrín from Paris on 15 April advising against the venture as it would place 'victory in jeopardy'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Background Briefs: *Confidential letter from an agent of Negrín.*

Ten days later, 25 April, 'C' reported another visit to Paris related to the same arms purchasing mission, this time by men named Mora and Nicolau, The arms were supposedly to be paid for through the sale of jewels. 'C' voiced his suspicion that the sale of the jewels was for private gain and that the weapons story was a red herring.

The anarchists had their own information services such as the Servicio de Investigación de la FAI, organised by Manuel Escorza, and the SIEP, Servicio de Investigación Especial Periférico, a military intelligence organisation, organised by Francisco Ponzán, and it is possible they were fully aware of Cortada's activities.

On 25 April, Roldán Cortada, a former member of the CNT and a signatory of the reformist 'Manifiesto of the Thirty', was found murdered near Barcelona. A number of anarchists were arrested in connection with his death, but no evidence could be found against them. Cortada's funeral, attended by the armed forces and police, served as the pretext for an hysterical anti-anarchist campaign orchestrated by the PSUC, right wing elements in the UGT and the Estat Catalá, into an anti anarchist demonstration. Tension escalated. A few days later a number of CNT activists in the anarchist-controlled frontier town of Puigcerdá were killed by carabinieri troops acting on the orders of finance minister Dr. Juan Negrín. Militants at the front were restrained from taking effective preventive action by the intervention of the CNT leadership who arranged for control of the frontier town to be handed over to the Popular Army.

By the end of April the tension had reached breaking point. Feelings were running so high that both the CNT and UGT agreed to the Generalidad's request to cancel the traditional public May Day celebrations in case of violence.

George Orwell captured the atmosphere of the period in *Homage to Catalonia*:

'Under the surface aspect of the streets, with their flower stalls, their many coloured flags, their propaganda posters, and thronging crowds, there was an unmistakable and horrible feeling of political rivalry and hatred. People of all shades of opinion were saying forebodingly: 'There's going to be trouble before long!' The anger was quite simple and intelligible. It was the antagonism between those who wished the revolution to go forward and those who wished to check or prevent it — ultimately between anarchists and communists. '

## May 1937

The morning papers of 1 May 1937 carried reports of a joint statement on the “abnormal position” of public order by President Companys and the Communist councillor for Internal Security, Aiguadé. The statement stated that the Generalidad Council could not continue to operate under the “pressure, danger and disorder” implied by the continued existence in some areas of Catalonia of groups who “attempt to impose themselves by force and who compromise the revolution and the war”. The Generalidad was suspended until all the forces “not under the direct command of the Generalidad Council” were off the streets so that “the anxiety and alarm which is in Catalonia today may promptly evaporate. At the same time, the Generalidad Council has taken the necessary measures to ensure that its ordinances are strictly obeyed.”<sup>1</sup>

The ‘necessary measures’ taken by the Generalidad included the prohibition of all May Day celebrations throughout the revolutionary capital of Catalonia in order, they said, “to avoid incidents”. The police carried out raids and street searches in which numerous CNT activists were disarmed and taken into custody. Clara Thalmann, a Swiss Marxist recalls the atmosphere when some Friends of Durruti people she was with were arrested distributing leaflets in the industrial suburb of Sabadell. “Everyone could feel that the atmosphere was electric and was waiting for the spark to send up the powder keg. The short-circuit surprised us with its speed.”<sup>2</sup>

In a press conference the previous evening the counsellor for Internal Security, Aiguadé, made the following statement:

‘As required, implementation of the Generalidad Government’s ordinances went ahead in Barcelona, also. I must say that with the exception of minor incidents, which were overcome, the order was effective. In conformity with measures taken, this Councillorship will continue to act appropriately, and I have no doubt that with the assistance of the organisation and unions of the antifascist Front, and above all of the people of Catalonia, we shall make possible the kind of rearguard that will carry us on to the ultimate victory in the war. And I am prepared, quietly resolved but also prepared to act with all vigour to see that it is so.’ The counsellors for Internal Security and Defence both received a vote of confidence from the Generalidad Council ‘so that jointly, each within his particular jurisdiction, they may implement the necessary measures so as to find a solution to those problems which are still outstanding.’<sup>3</sup>

Next day, Sunday, 2 May, the Friends of Durruti group convened an urgent meeting in the Goya Theatre, Barcelona, to ‘hoist the banners of the CNT and FAI, in affirmation of their revolutionary principles’ and to warn of an imminent attack on the working class organisations.

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<sup>1</sup> Mintz and Peciña.

<sup>2</sup> *Combats pour la liberte: Moscou-Madrid-Paris*, Pavel and Clara Thalmann, Paris, 1983.

<sup>3</sup> *La Noche*, 30 April 1937.

By Monday 3 May the counter-revolution was ready for a major all-out offensive. Like harbingers of the gathering storm British and French warships ominously appeared in Barcelona harbour a few hours before the first trouble erupted.<sup>4</sup> Aiguadé, with the full backing of the Generalidad Council as we have seen, issued the orders for PSUC Police Commissioner Rodríguez Salas to occupy the Barcelona Telephone Exchange which had been legitimately run under the joint control of the CNT and UGT since July 19. Control of the exchange had been a bone of contention for some time. The justification given for ousting the workers was the government's claim that it was being improperly run and that official government communications with the outside world were being monitored by the anarchists, but this was clearly a convenient excuse for the long awaited final assault on the revolution.

That afternoon Pavel and Clara Thalmann were passing the Telephone Exchange situated at the corner of the Rambla de las Flores when they saw a crowd of confused and embarrassed looking Civil Guards standing outside the building surrounded by an angry crowd of passers-by. At 3 p.m. three truckloads of Civil Guards had attempted to enter the building but the anarchists workers in the Exchange had refused them entry:

‘At the top of the main staircase one could see militians calmly standing with automatic rifles. The crowd was growing quickly and armed workers were surrounding the guards and looking menacing. It was obvious that just one shot, if fired, would lead to pandemonium; this was the spark everyone had been expecting. The FAI headquarters was nearby in the Via Layetana so I sent Clara there to inform the committee and to fetch “un responsable”.’

Before Clara Thalmann returned the first shots had been fired. The crowds had scattered and the Civil Guards had taken cover in the porch. Within seconds the steel shutters had come down on the windows and doorways of nearby shops and restaurants. Sandbags suddenly appeared in the windows of the nearby Hotel Colon, the headquarters of the PSUC. According to eyewitness Pavel Thalmann, the exchange of gunfire was particularly violent between the Hotel Colon and the Exchange.

The attack on the Telephone Exchange was one of a concerted series of such raids on confederal strongholds throughout the city. The Spartacus barracks, with 5,000 men, was being bombarded with explosive shells. The barrage was suspected to be coming from the nearby Karl Marx barracks, but the communists there, when telephoned, denied all knowledge of the source of the shellfire. The Malatesta House, base of the Italian anarchists and the CNT Food Union premises was also under attack. But the Generalidad and the PSUC soon discovered the easy

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<sup>4</sup> In an interview with *Solidaridad Obrera* published on 13 May, Diego Abad de Santillán stated: ‘There is no doubt that the recent events were the result of a deliberate plot, such has never been seen before in the history of the social movement. This is plain from the fact that two weeks before they happened, people were talking about them in foreign diplomatic circles and were prepared for their occurrence. It was discussed there quite openly ‘that now the CNT-FAI had been forced out of the leading positions in Madrid and Valencia the anarchists in Catalonia were to be given a fight. The same statements were being made in Paris by persons very close to the Catalan government. And how else can one explain the sudden arrival of foreign warships in our harbour just a few hours before the outbreak of hostilities? Is not another proof that we are here dealing with a plan determined in advance? Long before the first shot was discharged in Barcelona, English and French cruisers were hurrying toward the port as if they had a prophetic presentiment of the things to come. If one takes all this into consideration, one asks oneself how much faith in the triumph of the anti-Fascist cause still exists, among those people who invoke foreign protection against the workers of their own country?’

victory they had hoped for was not to be. As the news of the Stalinist provocation spread a general strike broke out spontaneously. Trams ground to a halt in the middle of the street and barricades sprang up like mushrooms throughout the main thoroughfares and at all the important junctions of the capital. Only the war industries remained working. The spirit of 19 July had been reawakened and the people were in arms once again to defend the revolution.

Throughout Catalonia the Confederal Defence Committees, with the backing of the Control Patrols, quickly seized power again. Army officers were mobbed in the street and disarmed. Loudspeakers broadcast news and anarchist songs. By nightfall that same day the revolutionaries were again masters of most of Catalonia with the exception of the centre of Barcelona where the strategic positions occupied by the PSUC and Estat Catalá headquarters, the Civil Guard and Karl Marx barracks were all surrounded by the people in arms.

That night Camillo Berneri wrote to his daughter, Marie Louise, with a clear sense of foreboding:

“What evil the communists are doing here too! It is almost 2 o’clock and I am going to bed. The house is on its guard tonight. I offered to stay awake to let the others go to sleep, and everyone laughed saying that I would not even hear the cannon! But afterwards, one by one, they fell asleep, and I am watching over all of them, while working for those who are to come. It is the only completely beautiful thing...”

## **Tuesday, 4 May**

Sniping continued throughout the early hours of Tuesday 4 May. The barrage of explosive shells continued to rain down on the anarchist troops caught in the Spartacus barracks. Two Italian anarchists, Ferrari and De Perretti, managed to leave the building but were stopped and shot dead by PSUC members. The Regional Committee of the CNT reported that its headquarters in the Via Layetana (renamed Via Durruti) was in serious jeopardy and requested urgent help. With the support of a number of Italian comrades, Ricardo Sanz, now commander of the Durruti Column, led four armoured cars through the heavy fighting to relieve the besieged confederal building. Artillery units on Montjuich and on Tibidabo had their guns trained on the Generalidad building, the police headquarters, the Karl Marx Barracks and the Hotel Colón.

Before the CNT Defence Committee could give the order for the final assault on their attackers anarchist minister García Oliver and CNT National Secretary Mariano R. Vázquez, acting on behalf of the Caballero government, broadcast an appeal over Radio CNT-FAI for a cease-fire in the name of antifascist unity. This statement from the anarchist ‘notables’ had a restraining effect on most of the rank and file and the Defence Committee decided to hold back their planned counter-attack.

‘We spent that first night behind the huge barricade in the Rambla de las Flores’, recalled Pavel and Clara Thalmann, ‘trading shots with a group of civil guards assembled in the Moka Cafe. When the gunfire ceased, we discussed the meaning and the object of the fighting with the workers. They were proud of the spontaneous action and were convinced that the Stalinists had lost out in Catalonia. If we asked them “What are you going to do next? Who’s going to take power? What will relations with the Valencian government be like?” they would calmly answer, slapping

their rifle barrels “As long as we have the weapons and the factories neither the Stalinists nor the Francoists shall pass.”<sup>5</sup>

To explain what was taking place on the streets of Barcelona the Regional Committees of the CNT, FAI and FIJL, together with the Barcelona local CNT-FAI committees issued the following statement:

“For months past a poisonous atmosphere has hung over Catalonia making it impossible to maintain confidence between the different sections of the antifascist front. Apart from other problems relating to the matter of war and revolution, we wish to call the attention of everyone to the facts concerning the Catalan Ministry of the Interior. In the early phase of the Revolution, the central government issued a decree authorising the creation of committees within the police forces whose duty it was to supervise the police and to ensure the elimination of any fascist elements that remained within the police forces. When the present Minister of the Interior, Aiguadé, took office, he refused to recognise these committees, in spite of their legal standing. While everywhere else fascist elements were being excluded from police functions, known fascists were allowed to remain at their posts in the Catalan police because the Minister, in agreement with certain police chiefs is opposed to all modifications. Due to this high-powered protection, 62 Civil Guards from the Gerona barracks were able to flee, with ease, across the border, while 31 policemen in Barcelona fled with important documents, including plans of the coastal fortifications. And yet, it was known for months before their escape that these men were fascists.

“After the Central Council of the Civil Guard in Madrid was informed that another group of 40 men had attempted to escape from the Ausías March barracks, the Council demanded a list of the elements with reactionary sympathies still in the Catalan Civil Guard. It was only on 13 April that these elements were excluded by a central government decree. Moreover, the Catalan Interior Minister prevented this government decree, discharging the men, being put into effect, and he allowed the fascists to remain at their posts. At the same time he stiffened his opposition to the committees. He has also done everything in his power to disarm CNT and FAI members, with the assistance of other political factions, in order to break the revolutionary power of the CNT-FAI, power that is the best guarantee for the working people who are not wishful for the return of the regime of exploitation and for state oppression...”. The statement concluded, “For the restoration of confidence in the antifascist forces! For the victory over fascism! Against the systematic provocateurs Aiguadé and Rodríguez! For the purging of the high posts of the police force! Long live the social revolution!”

Companys, shocked at the possibility that he might be confronted with another 19 July, was desperate to put down the revolt and called upon the UGT columns at the front to come to his assistance. In so doing he was prepared to leave a 50-kilometre gap in the Aragón front. That same day 2,000 out of a total force of 7,500 men of the 27<sup>th</sup> (Karl Marx) Division under the command of

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<sup>5</sup> C. and P. Thalmann, *op. cit.*

Del Barrio left the front at Tardienta for the Voroschiloff barracks in Barcelona. Informed of this development, Máximo Franco, commander of the confederal Rojo y Negro column of the 28<sup>th</sup> (Ascaso) Division, and militiamen from the POUM's 29<sup>th</sup> (Lenin) Division — some 1,500–2,000 men in all — also left the Huesca front, to come to the aid of their comrades in Barcelona.

## Wednesday, 5 May

By the morning of third day fighting had eased slightly and an air of normality appeared to return to the city. Around 11 a.m., however, violent clashes broke out again in the city centre around PSUC premises and the Generalidad building. The POUM print shop was seized and Guardia Civil troops occupied the Francia railway station. The CNT headquarters came under renewed attack and they issued an appeal for a further three armoured cars to come to their assistance. The locals of the CNT Health Syndicate, the Libertarian Youth (FIJL), the telephone exchanges and CNT locals in Tarragona and Tortosa also came under attack. At 1 p.m. UGT General Secretary and Minister Antonio Sesé was shot dead outside the offices of the CNT Public Entertainments Syndicate. German anarchist Agustín Souchy's account of Sesé's death states that he was not killed by CNT men and that 'the shot came from the Paseo de Gracia, from a barricade held by his own party colleagues'.

Meanwhile, the Rojo y Negra column, led by Máximo Franco — which had left the front to come to the assistance of the Barcelona workers — was halted at Binéfar by Juan Molina, a member of the Generalidad's Defence Council. According to Peirats and Santillán, Molina was acting in his capacity as a representative of the CNT Regional Committee. Not all the men were stopped. Some pressed on to Lerida where they were halted by the threat of an air strike against them. Umberto Marzocchi, a volunteer with the Italian section of the Ascaso Column, claims that the number who reached Lerida was 4,000 and it was '... the intervention of CNT generals Jover and Vivancos and the threat that we would be lined up against the wall if we persisted in disregarding the plea for peace which the CNT's Justice Minister, García Oliver, had broadcast over the radio, which led the Spanish comrades to desist in their plans.'<sup>6</sup> The Carod Column of the 25<sup>th</sup> (Jubert) Division also got as far as Valderrobes before they too were stopped, this time by Joaquín Ascaso, of the Council of Aragón.

A French anarchist participant in the 'May events' has stated that the early morning of 5 May was also fairly calm in the barrio of Hostafranchs, near Sans. Trouble erupted when a unit of around 300 Guardia Civil attempted to enter the Calle de Léridan. Shooting broke out before they had reached halfway and they were quickly forced to surrender:

'The young Guardias who surrendered were stripped of their uniforms and were taken as prisoners to the Defence Committee barracks... The last group of Guardias who had occupied Poble Sec surrendered on 5 May at 11.00 a.m. At 2.00 p.m., the Guardias remaining in the barracks, 84 in all, surrendered. Their weapons were shared out among the specific organisations of the two *barrios*.'<sup>7</sup>

The CNT Defence Committee in the meantime was renewing its preparations for an assault on the Karl Marx barracks. The continued shelling had cost the lives of a number of men in the

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<sup>6</sup> *Umanità Nova*, 20 December 1964.

<sup>7</sup> *Interviú*, Barcelona, 6 June 1984.

Spartacus barracks. The attack was scheduled for 9 p.m. Artillery pieces, on the Tibidabo and Montjuich were ready to lay down a barrage of 500 shells if necessary. Everything was prepared, with the Italian anarchists of the International Battalion of the Ascaso Column in the van. The attack was to be led by Ceva, the commander of the Tierra y Libertad battalion with 4,000 men at his disposal. Meanwhile, Aiguadé, faced with an unexpected and potentially disastrous defeat at the hands of the workers, insisted that Companys call in reinforcements from the central government. Conscious that asking for outside help would mean abdicating power to the Valencia government, Companys resisted such a move.

Caballero, for his part, reacted by summoning the anarchist ministers to insist on a cease-fire. He informed them that unless representatives from the CNT and UGT National Committees flew to Barcelona to convince the workers to lay down their arms he would be obliged to send in troops. He also pointed out that it would mean placing those troops at the disposition of Aiguadé, the very person responsible for the provocation in the first place. In return he would arrange for the withdrawal of the PSUC counsellors on the Generalidad and leave the question of control of the Telephone Exchange open for future discussion.

That evening García Oliver and Federica Montseny, who had made their headquarters in the Generalidad building, broadcast an appeal in the name of antifascist unity urging CNT and FAI militants to lay down their arms. With great reluctance and frustration the CNT Defence Committee called off the attack on the Karl Marx barracks. Clara and Pavel Thalmann describe the dramatic effect that broadcast had on the militants on the barricades: “In whining, moving tones they besought the workers to end the fratricidal struggle, to resume work, for above all the war against Franco needed winning... Some of the anarchist workers at first refused to believe that this was their leaders speaking, but when obliged to believe that what they were hearing was true, their disappointment and rage knew no limits. Out of fury, shame and defiance many CNT and FAI members tore up their membership cards, tossing them into the fires behind the barricades where their soup was still simmering. They quit their positions by the hundreds, carrying their guns away to a place of safety. Feelings ran so high that Montseny and García Oliver could only venture out to the regional committees or assemblies of the syndicates with an armed escort.<sup>8</sup> This spontaneous, violent revolt, leaderless and without command, and based more upon a defensive instinct than upon any real combative aggressiveness, came to an abrupt end. The end was imminent.<sup>9</sup> The POUM leadership also ordered its members to lay down their arms and return to work.

The communist evening newspaper, *Frente Rojo*, leaped to capitalise on the gravity of the situation:

“For a long time we used to attribute anything that occurred to gangs euphemistically called ‘uncontrollables’. Now we see they are perfectly controlled...but by the enemy. This cannot be tolerated any longer ... All those who attempt, in one form or another, with some aim or another, to disturb [order] or break [discipline] should immediately feel the ruthless weight of popular authority, repression by the government, and positive action by the popular masses.”

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<sup>8</sup> André Prudhommeaux, ‘*L’Espagne Nouvelle*’, 18 February 1938.

<sup>9</sup> Paul and Clara Thalmann, op. cit.



‘Positive action’ was quick in coming. At about 5 o’clock that afternoon. Camillo Berneri’s flat at No. 2 Plaza del Angel, was raided by about a dozen men, half of whom were apparently police officers and the remainder PSUC members wearing red armbands. The officer in charge was a plain-clothes police officer from the Generalitat identifiable only by his badge number, 1109. Berneri and Francesco Barbieri, his close friend and comrade, were arrested and charged with ‘counter-revolutionary activities’ and taken away. Their bodies were recovered the following day, one in the Ramblas and the other in the Plaza de la Generalidad.<sup>10</sup> Domingo Ascaso and Francisco Martínez of the Libertarian Youth also died as did twelve militants from the San Andrés district who disappeared, only to turn up as mutilated corpses in the cemetery at Sardanola.

## Thursday 6 May

The sense of betrayal and disgust felt by the people on the barricades at the appeal by the ‘notables’ to lay down their arms and return to work led many to abandon their position and return home.

A force of 5,000 Assault Guards were rushed from Valencia to assist the Generalidad restore order. Anarchist centres in Reus and Tarragona were attacked and destroyed. That evening communists and Assault Guards launched an attack on the Spartacus barracks, but were repelled by the anarchists. Barricades were again thrown up to resist the renewed attacks on confederal centres throughout the city.

For its part, the Regional Committees of the CNT and FAI denounced the ‘uncontrollable’ Friends of Durruti in the columns of *Solidaridad Obrera*:

“We are taken aback by some leaflets circulating in the city and endorsed by an entity called ‘The Friends of Durruti’. Its contents are utterly intolerable and contrary to the decision made by the libertarian movement; this obliges us to disown it in full and in public... We of the regional committees of the CNT and FAI are not disposed to let anyone speculate with our organisations, nor may anyone flirt with dubious attitudes or maybe the intrigues of outright agents provocateurs...The General Council having been formed, everyone must accept its decisions for we are all represented in it. Get the guns off the streets...”

The Friends of Durruti responded immediately with another manifesto naming the provocateurs as the PSUC, Estat Catalá, the Esquerra and the Generalidad-controlled security forces:

‘... it is inconceivable that the CNT’s committees should have acted so cravenly as to order a cease fire and indeed have imposed a return to work just when we were on the very brink of total victory... Such conduct must be described as a betrayal of the revolution ... We cannot find words to describe the harm done by *Solidaridad Obrera* and the most outstanding militants of the CNT... The cessation of fighting doesn’t presuppose defeat. Though we may not have achieved our objectives we

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<sup>10</sup> Carlos Rama has suggested that Mussolini’s OVRA agents, were responsible for these murders. The CNT, for its part, accused Aiguadé. Personally, I am more inclined to accept Frank Mintz’s view that the order was given by Palmiro Togliatti, the Italian communist party leader, because of Berneri’s outstanding intellectual influence within the Italian left.

have increased our weaponry... Let us be on the alert for coming events... Let us not be deluded by the alleged threat of an attack from the ships of the English fleet... Let us not abandon the streets... ‘

## Friday 7 May

On 7 May the CNT's cease-fire order was repeated, this time with greater emphasis. The commander of the Spartacus barracks, Ricardo Sanz, somewhat reassured by the arrival of an expeditionary force from Valencia commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Emilio Porres, former commander of the confederal Tierra y Libertad Column, gave the order to withdraw. In spite of a few minor skirmishes the anarchists had abandoned all their positions by the following morning. Sapped of their fighting spirit by the continued exhortations of the National and Regional Committees disillusionment was widespread. The tragic and bloody 'May Days' were over. The national leadership of the CNT and FAI, subverted by power and ably manipulated by the Stalinists and their bourgeois allies, had delivered the coup de grace to the revolution. All that remained to them now was to mop up. The Thalmann's take up the story:

‘The fighting had ended, the barricades were coming down and, oh miracle!, the trams were running again. On the broad tree-lined Rambla, groups of people were excitedly arguing. Outside the Hotel Falcón, Kurt Landau, Max Diamant, and Willy Brandt were arguing about the meaning of events. Some claimed that the struggle had taken on new revolutionary features but others, more sceptical, believed the opposite, as indeed did we ourselves. We were convinced that a wave of repression would soon follow. Even as we spoke the noise of marching government troops could be heard from afar: in perfect order, with new uniforms and impeccably armed, they came down the main street and marched purposefully towards us. The groups hastily dispersed... ‘<sup>11</sup>

George Orwell was another eyewitness:

‘It must have been late that evening that the troops from Valencia first appeared in the streets. They were the Assault Guards. Quite suddenly they seemed to spring up out of the ground; you saw them everywhere patrolling the streets in groups of ten – tall men in grey or blue uniforms with long rifles slung over their shoulders, and a submachine gun to each group...

‘There was no doubt that the Government was simply making a display of force in order to overawe a population which it already knew would not resist; if there had been any real fear of further outbreaks the Assault Guards would have been kept in barracks and not scattered through the streets in small bands. They were splendid troops, much the best I had seen in Spain, and, though I suppose in a sense they were ‘the enemy’, I could not help liking the look of them. But it was with a sort of amazement that I watched them strolling to and fro. I was used to the ragged, scarcely armed militia on the Aragón front, and I had not known that the Republic

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<sup>11</sup> *Treball*, 13 May 1937.

possessed troops like these. It was not only that they were picked men physically, it was their weapons that most astonished me. All of them were armed with brand-new rifles of the type known as ‘the Russian rifle’ (these rifles were sent to Spain by the USSR, but were, I believe, manufactured in America).’

The bloody ‘May events’ marked the end of the great social experiment begin in July 1936. They also marked the turning point of the Civil War itself. The PSUC and their Soviet advisers had badly misjudged the situation in Catalonia in their attempt to tip the political balance in Catalonia in their favour. The fragile but fairly cordial thread of unity hitherto existing between the communists and the CNT at national level was broken. From now on unity was to be nothing more than a meaningless propaganda motif, a ploy in partisan proselytism. The common ground, which had held the Republican forces together, was fast disappearing.

Anxious to recuperate what he could from the situation, Stalin immediately selected the POUM as the scapegoats for the ‘May Days’. *Pravda* of 9 May announced:

‘ ... the provocateur’s role played by the Trotskyist-fascist POUM gang in the latest incidents, acting through shadowy contacts with groups of anarchist oafs, a goodly number of Franco’s armed agents among their number, stands clearly exposed.’

The PSUC paper, *Treball* was more circumspect:

‘ ... The principal role in the “putsch” was played by the uncontrollables, manipulated by the fascists and the Trotskyists. Nevertheless, their evil schemes fell on soil made fertile by a certain line of action which, by giving the interests of a so-called “revolution” (which has nothing in common with authentic revolution), priority over the interests of the war, allowed the evil to grow with each day that passed, growing greater and more contagious.’<sup>12</sup>

Emma Goldman, the anarchist publicist representing the CNT-FAI Committee in London, like many anarchists outside Spain, was shocked by the deeds and words of the CNT ‘notables’ during the ‘May Events’. She voiced her feelings in a fairly muted criticism of the leading members of the CNT-FAI in an article published in *Spain and the World* (5.2.37). Max Nettlau, anarchist historiographer, wrote angrily, rebuking her for daring to make public her criticism of the movement. In an unpublished letter to Nettlau dated 9 May she unburdened herself of long harboured doubts about what she saw happening in Spain.<sup>13</sup>

Issue No. 15 of *Guerra di Classe*, Berneri’s paper, also appeared on 9 May with its analysis of events:

“Having intuitively, instinctively, realised what it would have meant to have allowed the provocation and attempt at occupation by the Assault Guards of the Telephone Exchange to have gone by the way, the Barcelona proletariat has rebelled ... without bothering overmuch about whether those in leadership positions in its own organisations approved or disapproved its choice.

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<sup>12</sup> See Background papers.

<sup>13</sup> See Background papers.

‘Once more, and as ever, it has been proven that everything which is living, everything which is of effect in a social upheaval can only be the spontaneous, instinctive expression which proceeds from the grassroots.

‘[They] fought well and would have taken over Barcelona in the first 24 hours... had its magnificent, heroic, irresistible thrust not been brought to a halt by the repeated orders of the leadership groups...’

On 13 May the Minister of the Interior issued a decree disarming all individuals and groups not forming part of the forces of the state. Those who retained their weapons would be charged with treason and rebellion. The Control Patrols were dissolved. Communist ministers Jesús Hernández and Vicente Uribe demanded that the POUM, the chosen scapegoats for the ‘May Days’, be outlawed and its leaders arrested. Largo Caballero, who had been using the POUM as a counterweight to CP influence in the Cabinet, refused to accept that it was a fascist organisation and declared that only the courts had the power to authorise such extreme measures. On 15 May the communist ministers provoked a crisis by walking out of the Cabinet, followed by right wing socialists Prieto, Del Vayo, Giral and Dr. Juan Negrín. The anarchist ministers remained behind. Largo Caballero had been neutralised.

In a letter to Rudolf Rocker dated 14 May, Emma Goldman again expressed her despair at the course of events in Spain:

“...the pact with Russia, in return for a few pieces of arms, has brought its disastrous results. It has broken the backbone of Montseny and Oliver and has turned them into willing tools of Caballero ... they have called a retreat and have denounced the militant anarchists to whom the revolution still means something... it is a repetition of Russia with the identical methods used by Lenin against the anarchists and the SRs who refused to barter the revolution for the Brest Litovsk Peace ... I have tried and tried to explain and defend the CNT-FAI leaders for entering ministries... although ... I saw what the dire consequences will be. I had hoped against hope that the extermination of our comrades and the emasculation of the revolution would not come so soon. That they would hold be held back until Franco’s hordes were driven from the land ... the hope which has given me strength to carry on the work here ... But the death of Berneri and all the other comrades, and the cowardly stand of Montseny and Oliver and *Solidaridad Obrera* make it impossible for me to go on as the representative of the CNT-FAI... I am more than ever determined to return to Spain and confront the National Committee of the CNT-FAI for their explanation of the worst betrayal of the revolution since Russia. If I fail to get that I shall certainly give up my mandate and retire from, the field of action. Better silence than be a party to the slow bleeding to death of the Spanish revolution.

Of course I may find that the rank and file of the CNT-FAI have retained their revolutionary zeal and fervour. I will work for them, but in no official capacity. Meanwhile I am too grieved and too shaken over Berneri’s death ... on the day of the disgraceful demonstration with the Communists, the day of the Russian Revolution, I called a meeting in my room. Berneri was present\* He brought me a statement pointing out the blunders of the CNT-FAI, I still have it. But even he was against any public stand against the leaders in our ranks...

I cannot write any more

**Emma Goldman'**

The first issue of the Friends Of Durruti paper, *El Amigo del Pueblo* appeared on 20 May with a major public attack on the CNT-FAI leadership, the first of its kind to appear in the columns of an anarchist newspaper. In it they also explained their analysis of the May Events:

'On many occasions, our group has pointed out the innumerable errors committed by the responsible committees of the CNT. We have likewise stated publicly that their disastrous record over nine consecutive months has frittered away the essence of the July revolution... [Having been denied access to CNT press organs even though they were CNT militants]. We had no option but to bring out a paper which would put us in touch with the workers of the city and countryside... The title we have selected is a symbolic one. L'Ami du Peuple was the mouthpiece of Marat. We have exhumed the title carried by a news sheet which at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century crystallised the rebel spirit of that indomitable figure whose giant stature the passage of time has not erased...

'The Spanish Revolution has not yet gelled. We find ourselves in a period of indecision, which is specially critical for the development of our country's economy. To use an analogy, we would go as far as to say that the Spanish workers have not yet left the Kerensky stage behind them. And this is the simple reason why we are becalmed amid a sea of uncertainty and anxiety... In the July days we stopped halfway in deference to the international situation. And through lack of vision and revolutionary sense the reins of power were handed to the counter-revolution, which cannot but be found in the ranks of the petite bourgeoisie. The situation in July was priceless. Who could have resisted the CNT and the FAI, had they chosen to seize the initiative in Catalonia? But instead of making reality of the confederation's ideas as incarnated in the folds of its red and black flags and the cries of the multitudes, our committees spent their time to'ing and fro'ing between the centres of officialdom, but failing to secure a situation where we held a position befitting our strength in the streets. After a few weeks of hesitation, there came the invitation to share power. We recall that at a Plenum of Regional Committees, it was advocated that a revolutionary organ which, it was decided, would be known as the National Defence Junta at an overall level, with regional junta at local level. But the motions passed were not implemented. No mention was made of that error, not to say the infringement of the decisions made in the aforementioned Plenum. We went first into the Generalidad government, then, later, into the Madrid one. On what conditions was collaboration agreed? Our strength in the streets and in the workplace did not receive its just recompense. We joined the government without receiving the necessary assurances. No other organisation or party would have accepted a minority share of responsibility when it held an overwhelming majority on the streets. From that moment (which marked a setting aside of our principles) we have gone from error to error. The blunders have been such that we do not know how to describe the conduct of certain comrades who bear the responsibility for the uncertainty in which we find ourselves...

‘We have been labelled as agents provocateurs. Why do they say this of us? Because we have had the effrontery to speak the truth in forthright, plain language! And, much to our regret, we have seen how, even from the pages of our beloved daily *Solidaridad Obrera*, insults have been hurled at us with increasing venom. And this excess, committed by a man with a fascist background has been taken up by others with a background in the Lerrouxist camp...

‘We are undaunted by the attacks to which we have been subjected. We came into being with the revolutionary zephyr of July for our mantle and we have been fortified by the May incidents. Our aims are revolutionary and anarchist. We shall remain on a war footing until such time as the revolution has taken root. We shall be a dyke against which the counter-revolution will destroy itself...’

Two days later a specially summoned regional Plenum of CNT local and comarcal Federations decided that the charges of ‘betrayal’ made by the Friends of Durruti against the Regional Committees should be debated in the union assemblies. This was not done. Instead the FOD were given 48 hours grace to substantiate their charges. The FOD refused to give such an undertaking insisting that the case be debated as decided. So far as the FOD were concerned, only the general assemblies were empowered to judge on the matter.

The second issue of *El Amigo del Pueblo* appeared, uncensored, on 26 May. It had gone underground: “The absurd treatment meted out to us by the censors oblige us to give them the slip.”

The governmental crisis was resolved on 27 May when President Azaña called in Juan Negrín to form a new government. Indalecio Prieto was his new Minister of National Defence. Negrín was to become the last prime minister of the Second Spanish Republic. Trotskyist historians Broué and Témime describe Negrín as:

‘... an unconditional defender of capitalist property and resolute adversary of collectivisation, whom the CNT ministers find blocking all of their proposals. He is the one who solidly reorganised the carabineros and presided over the transfer of the gold reserves of the Republic to the USSR. He enjoyed the confidence of the moderates... [ and] was on excellent terms with the Communists.’ Needless to say the CNT was not invited to join the new Cabinet. Its somewhat petulant response to this rebuff was a press statement denouncing ‘any government in which the UGT and CNT were not represented and had been weakened by foreign influence.’

*Solidaridad Obrera* of 28 May carried a statement from the Regional Committees of the CNT and FAI notifying both organisations, ‘confederal and anarchist that all members of the Friends of Durruti association’ who do not publicly dissociate themselves from the stance adopted by said grouping were to be expelled.

The Italian Communist Party paper in France, *Il Grido del Popolo* carried an article on Camillo Berneri, referring to him as: ‘... one of the leaders of the Friends of Durruti group which... provoked the bloody uprising against the Popular Front government in Catalonia’ and who ‘... got his just deserts during that revolt from the Democratic Revolution whose right of self defence no antifascist can deny.’ That same day two members of the Friends of Durruti group, Joaquín Aubi and Rosa Muñoz, published a letter in *Solidaridad Obrera* which gives an indication as to

the overriding importance ascribed by the CNT rank-and-file to the organisation. They stated that although publicly obliged to renounce the group:

‘...being against the power struggle which it is waging against the specific and confederal bodies... we continue to look upon the comrades belonging to the Friends of Durruti as comrades but the CNT was our womb and it shall also be our tomb.’

During the course of a number of public meetings at the end of May, the CNT ministers gave an account of their achievements in government. It was an unconvincing attempt to present the state, because of the ‘anarchist’ involvement’, as having been transformed. Their experiences in government had perverted their thinking out of all ideological shape. At one such meeting Federica Montseny stated:

‘...Since the CNT chose to enter the government out of a sense of responsibility, and because of its useful conduct and the work it has unflinchingly seen through, a new future opens before the world because the French CGT has stated that trade union representation in the government, the practice of having UGT and CNT representatives in the government, was something of fundamental importance signifying to the world, as it did, the involvement of the labouring masses in the tasks of government...’

She went on, plumbing further depths, speaking of the new society:

‘... Who builds it? It is the handiwork of the workers, the producers, those who extract ore from the mine’s depths, those who operate the machines in the factories, who shape the iron in the workshops, those who drag the machines through the streets. The workers by hand and brain, those who labour with a constructive outlook, a sense of responsibility, having immersed themselves as a class in the work of government.’ Later, she posed the question: ‘Do you think it possible or feasible that one can govern today after the style of political parties, disregarding the responsibility in government and the collaboration in government today – and let it, in days to come – whilst taking no account of the organisations, and none of the unions? No, it is no longer possible to do so. Not a thing can they do against us or without us...’

## **The May Days — Aftermath**

Most statistics concerning casualties refer only to the days of actual fighting and do not take into account the murders and ‘disappearances’ in the repression that followed, nor the wounded who may have died. Most authors give figures of between 400 and 500 dead and 1,000 wounded, except for Souchy who talks about 1,500 wounded and the Soviet writer, Maidanik, who cites a figure of 950 dead and 2,600 wounded. There were, however, other casualties. Soviet diplomats Rosenberg, Antonov-Ovseenko, Alexander Orlov, and GPU chief Petrov were immediately recalled by Stalin and summarily shot on their return to Moscow.

Prisoners taken by the anarchists and held in the premises of the various Defence Committees in the different quarters were quickly released. This was not the case with many well-known libertarian militants taken by the other side. According to Augustin Souchy:

‘...some problems’ were encountered in the cases of Paules de Toro, José Dominguez, Antonio Iñáncil and Francisco Sarqueda who were still being held in the Karl Marx barracks on 13 May. At least nine anarchists also remained prisoners in the headquarters of the PSUC Central Committee. A further three CNT and FAI militants were held in the Estat Catalá building in the Rambla. There were also countless others held in the Generalidad Palace as well as in police headquarters where upwards of 200 anarchist militants were in custody. Many of these subsequently disappeared.’

The Soviet view of the ‘May events’ was substantially different from other accounts. Former Soviet ambassador to the Non-Intervention Committee in London, Ivan Maisky, recalled in his *Spanish Notebooks* (pp 122–123):

‘...on 3 May, large detachments of anarcho-sindicalists disarmed the Assault Guards and advanced towards the centre of the city ...The putschists seized the Telephone Exchange, mounted machine guns on the roofs of houses and posted snipers in scattered positions...’

Soviet general Pavel Batov’s account in *Beneath the Flag of the Spanish Republic* is equally unlikely, talking as it does of the disorder following the attempted ‘Trotskyist putsch’ being “suppressed by the workers from the factories and firms in Barcelona.”(Moscow 1967, p. 253).

In a later recollection of ‘the Barcelona putsch’ Spanish Stalinist Santiago Carrillo in *Demain L’Espagne* (1974), refers to ‘... internal contradictions of the Soviet revolutionary process... carried over into the international plane.’ In an attempt to absolve himself of guilt he digs himself in deeper:

‘... to the eyes of the army and the people as a whole this putsch, bringing together a small group of anarchists and Trotskyists, looked like a counter-revolutionary move aimed at breaching the front and easing the fascist offensive. Franco boasted of having agents among the putschists ... of course, I don’t believe now that Nin was in Burgos or Berlin. I believe there is a possibility that he may have been executed in our zone. But at the time, in the aftermath of a putsch like that I granted (because it never really came up as a topic for discussion between us) that Nin might have escaped and gone over to the other side, as the bulk of opinion believed. And the putsch in May 1937 only confirmed us in our belief that Trotskyists were counter-revolutionists.’

Briefly, on the question of fascist involvement in provoking the events of May, Von Faupel, Hitler’s ambassador in Burgos claimed responsibility, through his agents in Barcelona, in a report to Berlin on 13 May. This report is not substantiated by the man in charge of Franco’s intelligence operations in Catalonia, José Bertran y Musitú, who makes no reference to nationalist agents being involved in any way in his memoirs, *Experiencia de los Servicios de Informacion del Nordeste de Espana durante la guerra*, Madrid, Espasa Calpe, 1940.

Interestingly, Palmiro Togliatti, former editor of the Turin communist daily, *L’Ordine Nuovo*, and a member of the Comintern who had led the accusations of Trotskyist involvement with fascists was one of the sixty signatories of an ‘Appeal to Fascists’ which had been published in the August 1936 issue of the Italian Communist Party journal *Lo Stato Operaio*. The October issue



of this journal reported a PCI meeting in Paris where the platform banner read 'Reconciliation and Union of the Italian people.' Party policy was aimed at reconciling and uniting 'the Italian people — fascists and non-fascists.' On 17 April 1936, French communist leader Maurice Thorez offered the 'hand of friendship' to former servicemen who had joined the 'Croix de Feu' (Cross of Fire). Communist overtures to the fascists continued to appear in the *Lo Stato Operaio* until February 1937.

## June 1937

The first priority of the Negrín administration was the elimination of the POUM. All POUM leaders who could be found were arrested, many of them horribly tortured. Some, like Andrés Nin, arrested on 18 June along with many of his comrades, were never seen again. Although the arrests were carried out by the police, the general belief was that the arrests had been masterminded by Alexander Orlov, head of the Soviet GPU in Spain. Manuel Irujo, the new Minister of Justice, a Basque catholic, who had set up the special tribunals to try case of espionage and high treason in camera, confirmed that Nin had been taken to the penitentiary of Alcalá de Henares from which he had disappeared. Some POUM members managed to survive by going underground. On the walls appeared the mute protest: 'Where is Nin?' Below was often to be found scrawled the Stalinist retort: 'In Germany!'

Bilbao fell to the Nationalists the day after the police clamp-down on the POUM.

The lessons of the 'May days' were not entirely lost on the anarchist committees. Conscious of the growing threat to their autonomy in the face of the revived power of the state, the national committees of the CNT, FAI and FIJJL commissioned a study for the setting up of a co-ordinated anarchist intelligence and security service. In the early period of the war nearly every party and organisation had its own intelligence network. The FAI, for example, had its own Servicio de Investigación, as did the Defence Committee of the CNT. With the exception of the anarchists and the Basques, the majority of these were later incorporated into the communist dominated Servicio de Información Militar (SIM) in August 1937. Conscious of the problems of libertarian organisations in times of crisis, given their voluntary nature, the anonymous author or authors of the report argued that the anarchists had suffered from 'lack of guidance, of prior consideration of the resources of the enemy and of co-ordination in the affray.' The re-organised anarchist intelligence services was to be known as the Servicio de Información y Coordinación (SIC).

On 22 June, issue No. 4 of *El Amigo del Pueblo* carried the news of the arrest of Jaime Balius, one of the leading figures off the Friends of Durruti group, for his part in drafting issue No. 1 of the paper.

## July 1937

Until the middle of 1937 the war had been primarily defensive. The failure of the first major offensive at Brunete, in July 1937, was one of the first in a continuing series of military disasters. The Brunete campaign was the brainchild of the senior communist officers and their Soviet military advisers who, for international propaganda purposes, wanted a major offensive in the western sector of Madrid. The decision led to escalating dissatisfaction among the officers and men of the Popular Army and the International Brigades. The 'May Days' and other Soviet-inspired machinations had seriously eroded their morale and a number of units of the International Brigades openly mutinied in protest against their manipulation for propaganda purposes by the Comintern and the incompetence of the general staff. Although the Brunete offensive was claimed by the communists as a major victory, by 24 July the nationalists had recaptured most of their lost ground, including Brunete. The Republic gained some fifty square kilometres at a cost of 25,000 casualties.

On 21 July, seven German anarcho-syndicalists, probably from the DAS (Deutsche Anarcho Syndikalisten) centuria of the Durruti Column, imprisoned in the monastery of Santa Ursula smuggled out a letter to Pierre Besnard, secretary of the IWMA (AIT), the anarcho-syndicalist International, complaining of illegal imprisonment:

“...They treat us as spies and accuse us of having been in contact with the Gestapo during the events of May in Barcelona. This is an absurdity and we must not wonder that it has taken them months to concoct this abominable charge. There are 150 of us held prisoner in the Santa Ursula monastery, about 60 per cent of us foreigners, Germans for the most part... on 29 July we embark upon a hunger strike. Our interrogators are Spaniards but the commissars are always Russians and Germans. Dear comrades, do not forget us. Greetings to all.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Manuel Azaretto, *Las pendientes Resbalizadas*, Montevideo, 1939, pp. 151–152.

# August 1937

## The Council of Aragón

On 2 August, during a cabinet meeting, Communist minister Jesús Hernández declared:

‘... basically, the cabinet has been committed, on the public order front, to the prevention and curtailment, with maximum vigour, of any attempt to disturb or threaten [public order] that certain so called extremist groups, agents of fascism, may seek to provoke’.

Two weeks later Juan Comorera, PSUC leader spoke at a rally in Valencia on the question of eroding the dominant influence of anarchism in Catalonia:

‘With the unification of Catalonia’s four Marxist parties, this situation began to alter and there was opposition to the all but total dominion of anarchism and to the influence of the left wing parties. Today we have been victorious and we have put paid to the provocations and to the fascists’.

Comorera went on to speak of the ‘tribes’, referring to the anarchist militia columns, who allegedly commandeered trucks claiming they were on their way to capture Zaragoza:

‘Today we have a great army which takes its example from the glorious Karl Marx Division. We have surmounted the difficulties and eliminated those who are brave on the highways but cowards on the front.’

He conveniently forgot to mention that it was the CNT and FAI who kept their units at the front during the ‘May events’ while the Karl Marx Division was ‘brave on the highways’ in the rearguard. Repeated ministerial and press references to a ‘crisis of authority’ and a need to ‘concentrate the power of the state’ were to prepare the ground for the final assault on the last bastion of the social revolution – the Council of Aragón where, for the previous twelve months, a great social experiment had been taking place.

The Consejo Regional de Defensa de Aragón had been officially recognised by government decree on 23 December 1936 and delegated various governmental powers, including those appropriate to civil governors. It was made up of six councillors from the CNT and two each from the republican, socialist and communist organisations in the region. Four weeks later, on 19 January, Joaquín Ascaso had been recognised as the official representative of the quasi-independent libertarian defence council of Aragón. The highpoint of its expansion was reached in February 1937 when it convened the constituent congress of the Regional Federation of Collectives, consisting of 25 cantonal federations, covering 275 local branches and representing 141,430 families through 465 delegates. These delegates, including delegates from the UGT, resolved to abolish

money, set up a regional fund for external trade, socialise land under municipal ownerships, show tolerance to smallholders, set up work teams, co-ordinate production and statistical operations and agricultural training. The Council of Aragón and the revolutionary collectives it represented were, however, to be destroyed before these decisions could be implemented.

At a commemorative meeting held in Caspe on the first anniversary of 19 July, in the face of increasing criticism from its many enemies, including members of the National Committee of the CNT, Joaquín Ascaso defended the achievements of the Council of Aragón.<sup>1</sup> Mistakes had been made and there had been instances of arbitrary authority, but he stressed that Aragón had had to rely entirely upon its own resources and pointed out that the abolition of speculation in the region had helped its development, as could be seen in the achievements in the field of transport and public works:

‘Countless roads have been made. With the support of the militias, highways have been built, as has a series of transport connections. Communications are functioning as normal, Likewise the telephone network. And a start has been made on a railway line... plans for which have lain, covered in dust, in a ministry file for sixteen years. The townships, restored to their proper status, have achieved that which... prior to 19 July... had only been a distant dream.’<sup>2</sup>

The Council of Aragón, in spite of the mistakes that were made, stands as a historical highpoint of the Spanish revolution, one of the most outstanding examples of the possibility of putting the theories of anarchist communism into practice.

Late in the evening of 10 August 1937 the Negrín government, anxious to press home its advantage over the CNT in the wake of the ‘May Days’, announced the dissolution of the Council of Aragón. The unwillingness of the CNT leadership to defend its position or its rank and file members was a clear signal to the central government that the anarcho-syndicalist organisation would not defend an institution which had been set up in opposition to the CNT leadership. The reason given for the decision to abolish the Council by force of arms was the organisation of a new Loyalist offensive:

‘The material and moral demands of the war make it a matter of urgency that the authority of the state be concentrated in such a way that it may be exercised in a single minded fashion and with a single aim. The division and sub-division of power and its attributes have on more than one occasion rendered action ineffective which, albeit purely administrative in its origins, has ... how could it be otherwise?... profound repercussions upon the affairs of the war.

‘The region of Aragón, capable, thanks to the temper of its people, of the greatest human and economic contributions to the republic’s cause, is more sorely afflicted than any other by the shortcomings of the diffusion of authority and the consequent danger to the common and ideological interests.

‘Whatever its endeavours may have been, the Council of Aragón has not managed to remedy this affliction. Insofar as the rest of Spain is focussing upon a new discipline

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<sup>1</sup> *Cuadernos para una enciclopedia histórica del anarquismo español*, No. 22, May 1984, Vitoria.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in *Interviú*, 27 June, 1984.

composed of responsibility and efficiency, wherein sacrifice is demanded in many instances, Aragón remains on the perimeters of this centralising trend to which we are indebted for much of the victory that is promised us.

‘In seeking to find a remedy to the power crisis detectable in Aragón, the government believes that it will succeed in its aims by concentrating power in its hands. And to this end, by agreement with the Council of Ministers and on the instigation of the premier,<sup>3</sup> I hereby decree:

‘**Article first:** The Council of Aragón is dissolved and the post of government delegate held by the president of that council, abolished. As a result, Don Joaquín Ascaso y Budria and other councillors belonging to the aforementioned body are removed from the position of government delegate in Aragón.

‘**Article second:** The territories of the provinces of Aragón the jurisdiction of the Republic, remain under the purview of a governor-general for Aragón, appointed by the government, with whatever powers current legislation may invest the civil governors. ‘

According to a recent account of events by communist military leader, Enrique Lister, he claimed that he was ordered to appear before General Rojo in Valencia at 10.00 a.m. on the morning of 11 August.<sup>4</sup> Roja then escorted him to a meeting with Defence Minister Indalecio Prieto who explained that the government was determined to dissolve the Council of Aragón, but was afraid that the anarchists might not agree to comply with the decree. Not only did the Council of Aragón have its own police force it also had three Army Divisions. It would therefore be necessary to send a military force capable of controlling the situation. That force was to be led by Lister in command of the 11<sup>th</sup> Division of the Army of Manoeuvres supported by the 27<sup>th</sup> (Karl Marx) Division and the 30<sup>th</sup>, all commanded by communists.

Lister’s troops moved immediately. As they marched through Aragón they dismantled the collectives at bayonet point and returned the land to its former owners. Between 300 and 600 anarchists were arrested, including all the anarchist ministers and four members of the National Committee, of whom 120 remained in custody. According to anarchist historian Juan Gómez Casas ‘some were killed or wounded, and over a thousand had to flee to other regions or seek shelter in friendly trenches.’ CNT, FAI and FIJL centres were raided and destroyed, as were the local councils. The premises of the Regional Committee of the CNT were raided and sacked on the morning of 12 August on the ‘secret’ orders of Lister (according to the officer in charge when challenged by a spokesman for the new governor general José Ignacio Mantecón).

Joaquín Ascaso, President of the Council, was arrested and charged with possession of stolen jewels, a charge that was later withdrawn. As occurred during the ‘May Days’, the rank-and-file of the anarchist units on the Aragón front, the 25<sup>th</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> Divisions, together with the 153<sup>rd</sup> Brigade, were outraged and were only prevented from leaving their lines by threats from their military commanders and the intervention of the National Committee of the CNT, still obsessed with the spectre of antifascist unity and the priority of the war over the revolution.

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<sup>3</sup> Manuel Azaña, *Obras Completas*, Mexico City, 1966–68, Vol. IV, p. 614.

<sup>4</sup> This conflicts with what Lister states in his book, *Nuestra Guerra* (Paris, 1966), where he claims Prieto briefed him five days before his forces went into action. The Minister told him that “...I should act unhesitatingly, without bureaucratic or legal formalities, in whatever way seemed to me the best because I had the government behind me unanimously.” (p.152)

Miguel García García, an anarchist militiaman on the Aragón front explained why the rank and file tolerated these acts of provocation against their comrades and their ideals:

‘We had to put up with all this because their friends abroad were supposed to be sending us arms. Surely they could understand we would not win this war by defence? We saved Barcelona, we saved Madrid. But when the enemy conquered we could not drive him back. Not a dog could live among that withering mortar fire. All we could do was stand firm, hold our positions and wait, while men were dying around us, waiting for that happy day when Russia would sell us so many arms that the Republic could spare guns from police duties and give them to us who were defending its very existence.’

It was the collectives that suffered most, however. A meeting of agrarian workers’ delegates in Valencia later that year stated:

‘The government has nominated management commissions which have seized the food warehouses and have distributed supplies haphazardly. The land, draught animals and agricultural implements have been returned to the members of fascist families...The harvest has been similarly distributed, as well as the animals raised by the collectives. A large number of collective piggeries, stables, stockyards and barns have been destroyed. In such villages as Bordon and Calaceite even the peasants’ seed stock have been seized.’<sup>5</sup>

The repression of the Council of Aragón provoked an angry but muted response from the CNT. Lister claims he was ordered back to Valencia the following day, 12 August, by Rojo who informed him that the minister was waiting to see him and was furious:

‘As on that first occasion,’ Lister later recalled, ‘he accompanied me to Prieto’s office, but now there were no smiles, no arms across the shoulder and no chair to sit on. Prieto, standing in the middle of the room, availing himself of all his histrionic talents, began to rail at me for the benefit of the 30 or 40 persons outside in his anteroom. “What have you done in Aragón? You’ve killed the anarchists and now they’re demanding your head and I have to give it to them: otherwise a new civil war may break out”. I left him to get on with his charade and when he paused to draw breath I answered in a voice louder than his own, so that the public might hear. “Senor Minister: I must ask your forgiveness for not having carried out your order in relation to the shooting of the anarchists: things worked out in such a way that it proved unnecessary to take such a drastic step. There are 100-odd prisoners who will be handed over to the courts or released, whichever you may order.” At this point Prieto played what he believed to be his trump card. “In the office of Interior Minister Zugazagoitia”, he said, “there is at present a delegation from the CNT’s National Committee which claims that four members of its National Committee have been murdered, that their corpses have turned up on the Caspe-Alcaniz highway and that the CNT is about to order a general strike.”

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<sup>5</sup> Leval, *Collectives in the Spanish Revolution*, p. 336.

‘Unfortunately for them and for Prieto, the alleged victims of the shootings were alive and well and in the custody of the 11<sup>th</sup> Division. Had his Aragón plan worked out, Prieto would have killed two birds with one stone, opened up a new civil war between communists and the CNT, ensuring that the two organisations would destroy each other, and brought the war to an end that suited his agenda. In practice, Prieto was a precursor of Casado, Carrillo and company. Had his plans succeeded, the defeat of the republic would have been assured two years before the casadistas ensured it. And Prieto thought that the best tool for implementing his plans was the 11<sup>th</sup> Division, with me at its head, but his ploy backfired. The antifascist press approved and welcomed the government’s decision to restore republican order in Aragón.’<sup>6</sup>

The Communist newspaper *Frente Rojo* of 14 August launched a disinformation campaign in an attempt to justify the actions of the communist troops. It alleged that “Under the now defunct Council of Aragón, neither citizen nor property was guaranteed” and that Aragón was one enormous arms dump, that the government had discovered huge caches of arms and ammunition and dumps containing thousands of bombs, hundreds of machine guns, cannons and the latest model of tanks. This equipment was being “held back as the property of those who sought to turn Aragón into a battlefield against the government and the republic.” The Executive Committee of the PCE was unable to substantiate any of these charges when challenged to do so by the National Committee of the CNT.

A meeting took place on 16 August between the PCE’s Central Committee and the National Committee of the CNT to discuss the ‘current problems’. After a ‘broad exchange of views’ an agreement was reached whereby both sides would try to improve relations between them.

The consequences of Prieto’s decision to dissolve the Council of Aragón and the collectives were disastrous both for Aragón and the Republic. According to Graham Kelsey:

‘There were approximately 450 kilometres of front line in the region and the forces manning it had been largely ignored by the central government, as much in respect of military materials as of food supplies. From the opening days of the conflict when Durruti had issued his decree emphasising the vital importance of the harvest, those at the front had been dependent upon the agrarian produce of the Aragonese rear-guard. Many outside observers argued, no doubt correctly, that the organisation of supplies had been irregular. It must be considered very unlikely, however, that supplies were reliably organised on any front; the Aragonese fronts were probably a good deal better than most, thanks to the presence of the regional authority of the Defence Council and the economic co-ordination of the regional confederation of collectives.

‘After the invasion of Lister, as the Secretary General of the Institute of Agrarian Reform noted, agricultural production slumped. The majority of those lands confiscated in August and September 1936 from the larger landowners, which had been communally harvested and had then gone to form the basis of each village’s collective, were now returned to private ownership. In several cases this meant they were

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<sup>6</sup> *Interviú*, 27 June 1984.



not cultivated. At Cretas Encarnita Renato Simoni found that the food situation now began to become 'preoccupying'. More specifically, the mortality figures started to rise; the causes were primarily gastric, infections being brought on by the return to a diminished and impoverished diet...*caciquismo* raised its head again.

It is clear that the destruction of the collectives and the presence in the rearguard of considerable numbers of communist led troops brought a social readjustment. This was noted by the Secretary General of the Institute of Agrarian Reform [José Silva]: "Under cover of the order issued by the Governor general those persons who were discontented with the collectives ... took them by assault, carrying away and dividing up the harvest and the farm implements without respecting the collectives which had been formed without violence or pressure and that were a model of organisation."<sup>7</sup>

Ronald Fraser quotes another Aragonese communist even more damning in his denunciation of the situation created by Lister:

"...people who had been and always would be enemies of the working class, because their interests were fundamentally opposed, were given encouragement and support simply because of their hostility to the CNT"<sup>8</sup>

The assault on the Aragonese collectives was soon seen to have been a regrettable mistake. Vicente Uribe, the communist Minister for Agriculture, was forced to reverse his policy and encourage the re-establishing of collectives. They were, in fact, established in areas that had only set them up, originally, after outside pressure. Trotskyist G. Munis, no great admirer of the anarchists, later affirmed:

"This was one of the most exemplary episodes of the Spanish revolution. The peasants once more affirmed their libertarian convictions despite the governmental terror and economic boycotting of which they were the object."<sup>9</sup>

Concluding his study of Libertarian Aragón, Kelsey notes:

"Nevertheless, despite the successful re-establishment of collective farms in many parts of Aragón, the situation in the aftermath of August 1937 was totally alien to that which had first inspired the development of collectivisation and had brought the agricultural successes and social improvements associated with it. The destruction of libertarian Aragón proved to be the first stage in the final collapse of Loyalist Spain. The complete disintegration of the front lines in March 1938 emphasised the profound effect that the devastation of the rearguard had had on the Aragonese will to resist. It marked, furthermore, the final defeat of that liberal republican-socialist ethic which had, for the most part, controlled the fortunes and epitomised the character of the Spanish Second Republic."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> G. Kelsey, *Civil War and Civil Peace: Libertarian Aragón 1936-37*, unpublished ms.

<sup>8</sup> Ronald Fraser, *Blood of Spain*, p. 391.

<sup>9</sup> G. Munis, *Jalones de derrota. Promesa de victoria*, Barcelona, 1977, p. 430.

<sup>10</sup> G. Kelsey, *ibid.*

# Background Briefs

## Summer 1936: Why did we fail to take Zaragoza?

By Eduardo Pons Prades, *Nueva Historia* No 26, March 1979 (Translated by Paul Sharkey )

As we approach the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the international civil war in Spain (1936–1939), many of the essential aspects of the conflict are now clearly defined. Yet there is still a rather obscure period, essentially the time occupied by the initial phase of the war, between July and November 1936. It had two telling features: the republicans' inability to capture even one of the three major cities of Aragon and the resounding failure of Franco's push against Madrid. These setbacks were to have a substantial impact upon the prolonging of the war on Iberian soil. Today we shall try to unravel the reasons why Zaragoza was not captured either in August or in October 1936, when on both occasions the essential conditions for successful capture were in place.

The overall impression of the Spanish war, or its beginnings at any rate, is that amateurism prevailed. To some extent, it seems reasonable that this should have been so on the republican side. But there is nothing logical about its obtaining in rebel ranks, not just because of their professionalism — they were professional military men — but also because of where the initiative for the organising of the military revolt came from. It was a venture of incalculable socio-political implications that would split the country into two irreconcilable camps and its chief impact was to make the ordinary populace the principal casualties of the fighting, during the war as well as after it had ended.

### Period of hesitancy

Even though there was more than enough intelligence available to suggest that a revolt was imminent, the fact is that the republican leadership was caught napping by the eruption of it and by the ruthless repression that was its immediate aftermath. Only in Catalonia — with its home rule government, the presence of sizable numbers of armed anarcho-syndicalists and the determined intervention of a handful of servicemen committed to the Republic (Vicente Guarner, Federico Escofet and J M España, in particular) — was there a prompt response and from the outset the decks were cleared. And even though the Generalidad government was sidelined by the actions of revolutionary groups, state and para-state structures survived the crushing of that revolt pretty much intact. Feeding the prospect that, the revolt having been snuffed out, it would be the revolution's turn next. Despite the collectivisations, the socialisations and other supposedly revolutionary measures and the creation of a new brand of organism unmistakably hell bent on a fresh approach, we would do well to remember Saint-Just's dictum: "A revolution that stops half way is tantamount to revolutionaries' digging their own graves." So, as the columns of militians from Catalonia headed off to Aragon, they were leaving behind them a number of conditions

thwarting the handiwork of those whose view was that the war was a means rather than an end. The events of May 1937 were already in the making.

The anarcho-syndicalist Durruti Column, with Colonel Pérez Farrás as its military advisor, set off from Barcelona on 23 July 1936, with something over two thousand men. Bringing up the rear of the caravan of lorries and buses were three light artillery batteries under the command of Major Fernando Claudín. Bujaraloz was overrun on 2 August and Buenaventura Durruti set up his command post there. Later the column pushed on towards the river Ebro, occupying Pina and Osera and coming to within 20–25 kilometers of Zaragoza itself. Except for some minor skirmishing around Bujaraloz, other places were overrun without a fight.

Which leaves the question of the column's "stopping short" once it had passed Bujaraloz, and until very recently two major explanations have been offered for this: **1)** the column was stopped by the Ebro river and **2)** an order was issued by the Central Antifascist Militias Committee in Barcelona to the effect that it halt its advance and wait for the Ortíz Column (south of the river Ebro) to overrun Belchite and Quinto. Well, a simple glance at the map will suffice to show that the Ebro runs parallel to the Lérida-to-Zaragoza highway and that there was no obstacle to access into Zaragoza except for the very gates of the city. Although we should point out that in late October the three bridges spanning the river (the Santiago, de Piedra and El Pilar bridges), located in the north of the city, were still intact and un-mined. So an effort to at least sever the Zaragoza-Huesca highway was feasible and that would have been of great service to the columns which were pressing on towards Huesca, under Colonel Villalba's command, columns bogged down in tough fighting in Siétamo. As for the second theory, we have not been able to find any trace of any such order emanating from the Antifascist Militias Committee. But, even it did exist, it could only have been issued after further intelligence had come in from the operational zone to prompt that decision. On the other hand, the Ortíz Column was soon stalled outside Belchite and, to the north, republican forces were soon very close to the town and in sight of its asylum and cemetery. With their left flank protected by the river Ebro — which the enemy would have to cross if he wanted to harry the Durruti Column — how come republican forces did not then press on with their march on Zaragoza?

## **From Barcelona to Zaragoza, a walk in the park, militarily?**

Judging from the evidence from old militants and some professional soldiers (a high-ranking artillery commander among them) who witnessed things at first hand, the actual answer to that question is the "bombing" undergone by the Durruti Column at the hands of three planes whose crews dropped a number of 5 and 10-kilo timed bombs on it. The inexperience and indiscipline of the expeditionary force resulted in widespread panic. One eye-witness to this — C.B.V. — has assured us: "There was nobody left in Bujaraloz save Durruti and a hundred militant die-hards who took several days to round up the scattered forces." At around this time (early August 1936), Durruti reported that "Zaragoza is effectively in his grasp and victory is certain and imminent" and he explained that, while he had yet to actually enter the city, this was because "he is waiting for the columns operating on his flanks to move a little further up." The fact is that there were too many folk in the Durruti Column who had not had any hand, act or part in the crushing of the rebels in Barcelona and who regarded the conquest of Aragon as a military cakewalk. The

needs of the revolution probably held lots of tried and tested militants in Barcelona, when their presence on the front might have been priceless.

The Ortíz Column, with infantry Colonel Fernando Salavera as its military advisor, would set off from Barcelona on 24 July, also by road, with some 2,000 men, a fair number of whom were ex-soldiers and NCOs from the 34<sup>th</sup> Regiment. Its first target, Caspe, was controlled by a company of Civil Guard and about 200 Aragonese Falangists under Captain Negrete. After overcoming the enemy's dogged resistance, the militiamen, who lost some 250 of their comrades, overran the town and pressed on in the direction of Alcañiz, which was captured after some brief fighting. At which point the column split up: one part held the Híjar-to-Escatrón line and the rest headed for Belchite, digging in outside that town after occupying Sástago, La Zaida and Azaila. In early September, the Ortíz unit was joined by a small column, the Carod-Ferrer Column, which had just captured Goya's birthplace, Fuendetodos, and dug in outside of Villanueva de Huelva. Saturnino Carod Lerín, a native of Aragón, was a prominent anarcho-syndicalist trade union leader in Barcelona, while his "military advisor" was Civil Guard lieutenant José Ferrer Bonet.

## Dream Time

It must have been obvious to labour militants, unless they were wanting in terms of revolutionary realism, that from government circles — central or home rule government circles — aid would be forthcoming only to the extent that "the floodwaters retreated." It was the same story nationally and internationally. The so-called democratic powers — democrats governing but with capitalism calling the shots — would not help Spanish republicans, being of the view that they were damaging their interests in the peninsula and, on like grounds, the central and Catalan governments would abandon Aragon to its fate on the basis that revolutionary experiments there were going too far. All of this (and more) was predictable because it was (and is), as the old saying has it "in the nature of things." So it seems redundant to state that, in order to forge head in their twopronged war-plus-revolutionary endeavours, Iberia's revolutionaries — and anarcho-syndicalists in particular — should have been looking only to their own resources, which were considerable, especially in the knowledge that virtually the entirety of the people of Aragón were on their side. Major Vicente Guarner, in one of his books, bears this out:

"The intelligence acquired by the Durruti Column (he means the intelligence it supplied after gathering it from the mouths of CNT militants escaping from Zaragoza) was very useful. On virtually a nightly basis, workers were leaving Zaragoza and armed militians entering the city which they knew well and thus they reported back to us on the mobilisation of the classes of 1931 through to 1935, the arrival in the Aragonese capital from 25 July onwards of between 2,000 and 2,500 requetés from Navarra under the command of trained officers, some of whom had been trained in Italy."<sup>1</sup>

In view of the ease with which Zaragoza could be entered and left and of the organisational intelligence received (despite the harsh crackdown of the first few days, the CNT and the FAI were

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<sup>1</sup> *Cataluña en la guerra civil, Memorias de la guerra civil española 1936–1939*, Ediciones Gregorio del Toro, Madrid 1975.

reorganising), the notion of organising an operation to take the city of Zaragoza from within and from without started to germinate in the minds of the top responsables (commanders) of the libertarian columns. As well as the operation's being mounted without any non-CNT involvement. Thus, had that operation been a success, the hope was that they would be better heeded by government circles in Barcelona and Madrid. But within the CNT itself, the proliferation of committees led to great time-wasting, since, what with the more battle-hardened, shrewd and reliable militants being tied up with these, it seemed there was no way of dispensing with the input from the National Committee, the regional committees for Catalonia and for Aragon-Rioja-Navarra, the Peninsular Committee of the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI) and, from time to time, the Libertarian Youth. Nor, of course, from a number of comrades (whose contribution might prove crucial at a given point) holding down posts in a range of Catalan government bodies or on the Central Antifascist Militias Committee. At the time too, there was a lot of enthusiasm for launching a guerrilla war behind the enemy lines: "One day, García Oliver spelled out a scheme for taking to the Andalusian sierras with several thousands of comrades" — Diego Abad de Santillán recounts. "And we associated this initiative with our wish to drive into Navarra. Each of us would take charge of an expedition: exposing ourselves and gambling our very lives.

The matter was put to the War Ministry. Prieto was enthused by the idea and agreeable to its being implemented immediately. We set about training the men who would be going with us ... but the orders do not always come from the men in charge. Above Prieto, the minister of War, were Russian advisors and in their eyes we might pose a danger. And after we had already embarked upon lots of work targeting the Francoist zone, through skilful and daring emissaries, the thing was dropped."<sup>2</sup>

There is another question floating in the air: How come the CNT and FAI personnel did not, off their own bat and at their own risk and come hell or high water exploit their ability to mobilise people? Especially when regions as revolutionary as Galicia, Extremadura and western Andalusia were now behind the enemy's lines?

Particularly since the indications are that they refused to give up on their ambitious plan to capture Zaragoza.

## **Operation 'Free Commune': The Taking of Zaragoza**

There are still enough survivors around for us to be able to outline the preparatory phases of a military operation hatched in the minds and hearts of a handful of peace-lovers whom a freak of History had forced to turn into men of war. One of the most comprehensive testimonials, and the one that has inspired this article, comes from Saturnino Carod, the commander of, first, a column and then, after militarisation of the militias, political commissar with the Popular Army's 118<sup>th</sup> Mixed Brigade. The commander of the 118<sup>th</sup> was none other than Cristoriano Castán, a Zaragoza painter who would prove to be a real military genius, the brains behind "Operation Free Commune" — the primary object of which was the capture of Zaragoza: he was the "expert consultant" to the man at the top, Antonio Ortiz. The same Ortiz would go on to command the 25<sup>th</sup> Division and was, at the time in question, in charge of the South-Ebro Column. All three men were of the libertarian persuasion. "The fact is that our comrade Abad de Santillán" —

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<sup>2</sup> *¿Por qué perdimos la guerra? Memorias la guerra civil española 1936–1939*, Ediciones Gregorio del Toro, Madrid 1975.

Carod stated to us. “had led a delegation that travelled to Madrid to secure aid from the central government, coming away with nothing but promises.

Along with Díaz Sandino, we paid a visit to the president of the Republic, Manuel Azaña, in the former royal palace in Madrid. It was during the days of panic following the disasters in Talavera ... We set out our situation in Catalonia and our urgent requirements and we filled him in on our talks with Giral and the welcome we thought that our overtures had received. We asked Azaña to intervene personally lest the promises that had been made to us come to nothing. Azaña told us that he was virtually a prisoner, that the Constitution did not allow him the slightest intervention and that his role was to let the talking be done by those who were the lawful government, with the backing of the parties or the Parliament. We pressed him to cash in on the prestige that he enjoyed within and outside Spain. His silence and passivity, hiding behind the Constitution or not, was tantamount to criminality given the times we were going through and his attitude of folding his arms in the face of tragedy could never be countenanced. In the course of the conversation we got the impression that the man had no sympathy with fascism, but that he had even less with revolution and with the people’s taking a direct hand in public life, unless they respected the barriers put in place by the republican micro-parties that came into existence with the advent of the Republic. With men like Azaña around, fascist plotting was inevitable and loss of the war a foregone conclusion.”

“So, being fed up with promises” — Carod notes — “we made ready to shift for ourselves. One of the first moves we made was to select *responsables* (commanders) capable of showing initiative and of keeping mum about what was being planned.” One of the young libertarians mustered at the Cañar de Azaila camp — Enrique Casañas Piera — has told us: “There we learnt how to move silently and to operate at night: to keep talk to a minimum and not to smoke, to scatter in the event of danger and to re-group. We knew nothing as to where our posting would be, although we imagined that it might have something to do with Zaragoza and we hadn’t the slightest contact with folk outside the camp over the four or five weeks we were mustered there.”

Further evidence of the precautionary measures taken around “Operation Free Commune” comes in the shape of the conditions in which the propaganda side of the operation were fleshed out. We have it from one of the chief protagonists, Manuel Salas aka ‘*Salicas*’, who was in charge of the libertarian publication *Cultura y Acción*: “It was anticipated that thousands of leaflets of various sizes, colours and texts would be printed up — plus posters and pennants. We had all of this ready to go as and when we were told. Most of the leaflets were shipped to the “People’s Air Force” in Sarineña, where we were assured of the cooperation of one of the pilots of the plane that flew daily to Barcelona. The leaflets would be dropped from that plane over Zaragoza. And at around that time I was working in a print-shop in Alcañiz, where we carried out work for all the columns. The firm had been collectivised, but the owner had stayed on as a “technician”. So, to provide against any unwitting slip of the tongue, I decided to banish him from the print-shop for the duration of ‘Operation Free Commune’ and the best that I could come up was to have him arrested by the militias watch agency as a suspect and held in Alcaniz jail until such time as we might complete the ‘hush-hush’ work. It was a lousy thing to do, I’ll grant you, and later I had to make my apologies, but the truth is that every precaution we took was little enough. A single indiscretion might have cost us hundreds or even thousands of lives and thwarted the operation.”

## Fifth Column Jiggery Pokery

Carod can recall the names of the comrades to whom the five *centurias* (each made up of five 20-man teams) due to operate inside Zaragoza were entrusted: Batista Albesa (from Valderrobles/Teruel), Agustín Remiro (from

Épila/Zaragoza), plus Melendo, Ramón and Logroño, all from Zaragoza. The first two men in particular — Carod tells us admiringly — were exceptional:

“Dressed as a Falangist, Batista managed to get as far as Salamanca and on another occasion, in a Foreign Legion uniform, as far as Burgos. He and Remiro one day brought me several snapshots showing them in Falangist garb with some ‘*Margaritas*’ from the Zaragoza Falange. Through connections he had established in Zaragoza, as a supposed Falange member, Batista successfully connected with a fifth columnist group in Barcelona that used to meet in the Hotel Colón in the Plaza de Cataluña, the then headquarters of the Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya (PSUC)/Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia. I was the one who passed this information on to García Oliver who forwarded it to comrade Escorza — a collaborator of police chief Eroles — who orchestrated the raid that captured, among others, the Falangist Luys Santamaría and a cousin of his. Most of those arrested held PSUC party cards. Many years later, at a get-together at the ‘Trascacho’, a soiree for Ángel Pestaña, along with Casasús, Calvo and Salicas, I had occasion to mention the “incident” to Santamaría who was also present with one of the Vila San-Juan brothers. What I mean to say is, we had people of courage.”

## Planning Days

“Along with Durruti” — Carod went on — “and with Ortiz, we had a number of meetings in the wooden hut that served as his command post on the outskirts of Bujaraloz. He always refused to have his arm twisted. He was busy being Zaragoza’s ‘liberator’ and even though he gave the go-ahead at the eleventh hour, when it came to the preparations for the operation, Durruti reserved his final answer until he could see every detail of the operation, taking it for granted that the major role would be set aside for himself.” In the book already cited, Abad de Santillán had pointed out to Durruti “that the position he had held (and which made it incumbent upon him to mount a frontal attack if he wanted to close on Zaragoza) was not at all suited to the capture of Zaragoza and that, having been the first to set out from Barcelona, he was doomed to be the last man into the sought after city, where so many friends of ours had been massacred and whom he had intended to avenge.” “Not only that”, Carod adds, “but Durruti had dreams of crossing Navarra and linking up with the Basque Country and then going on to liberate his own home ground, Leon, after which he was considering splitting his column in two and pressing on in the direction of Asturias and Galicia.”

Durruti never missed an opportunity to air his plans: “I’ll be the first into Zaragoza and will proclaim a free commune there. We will not kowtow either to Madrid or to Barcelona, to Azaña or to Giral, to Companys or to Casanovas. If they wish, they can live in peace with us: if they don’t, we shall set up shop in Madrid ..”, the leader of the anarcho-syndicalist column was to tell the special envoy from Moscow’s Pravda. And, addressing another column commander who

happened to be present, the communist Manuel Trueba, he challenged him: “Help if you want; or, if you don’t want to, don’t help. The Zaragoza operation is mine in military, political and politico-military terms. I am answerable for it. Do you think that we are about to share Zaragoza with you in return for your providing us with a thousand men? Zaragoza will have either libertarian communism or fascism. Help yourselves to the whole of Spain, but leave me in peace with Zaragoza!”

## Days of Hope

Despite the systematic repression endured by the libertarian membership in Zaragoza — the second largest CNT stronghold in the country — at the outset of the war, the surviving members of Spain’s premier trade union organisation had managed to build up some highly effective clandestine groups. Thanks to these reliable and regular intelligence was available regarding the situation in the Aragonese capital. Besides, the libertarian columns’ ranks held plenty of Zaragoza-born fighters who knew the city like the back of their hands. Especially the working-class districts where they might find shelter and aid. On this basis, the operation’s organisers were prompted to provide for a synchronised attack from without, mounted by ten *centurias* (1,000 men) plus an uprising from within spearheaded by five *centurias* under the command of Batista, Remiro, Logroño, Ramón and Melendo, which were to strike from the El Arrabal, Las Delicias, Buenavista, Torrero and San José *barrios*. The specific targets were: the town hall, the telephone HQ, the telegraphs HQ, the Palafox barracks, the Falange barracks (at the Frontón Aragonés), the (Madrid and Utrillas) train stations, the military government, the Avenida de Palafox petroleum depot, the powder store (in the Gran Vía at the Iglesia Casas Baratas), the civil government, Radio Zaragoza (operating from El Coso) and the Hotel Universal where high ranking enemy servicemen were in residence. It should be pointed out that in each of these targets there were personnel ready to work in concert with the attackers. Each of the inner city *centurias* was to detach two teams

(i.e. 200 men in total) well equipped with hand grenades, to take up strategic positions and attack every sort of military vehicle, official cars and anything else they suspected might interfere with the smooth progress of the operation. The point was to sow as much confusion and uncertainty as possible along the Zaragoza’s main arteries.

Stage one was to infiltrate the aforementioned working class *barrios* under cover of night, where they would lie low for a day until Zero Hour which would be set for the following dusk. The primary objectives were: the Madrid, Teruel, Castellón and Barcelona highways were to be occupied by forward teams from the *centurias* attacking from the south and their march would be centred on the Fuendetodos-Jaulín-Zaragoza highway. Command of the *centurias* outside the city fell to Carod who spoke to us of the permeability of the sector picked:

“Days earlier, to feel out the ground, we made a few sallies out towards Jaulín and Valmadrid and looted the enemy while he slept. So much so that we captured two of his artillery pieces intact. Castán, who had earned his spurs at Ortiz’s side over many nights would overrun La Muela (on the Madrid highway) with his two *centurias* by way of a build-up to the operation so as to block any possible enemy reinforcements from the Guadalajara direction and would monitor the Zaragoza-to-Logroño



highway, lest anyone hinder enemy forces' withdrawal from the Aragonese capital, should they decide to fall back."

Pride of place in the revolutionaries' logistics (which kicked off with the mission entrusted to Manuel Salas aka *Salicas* was accorded to the immediate commandeering of buildings and the putting up of ready made posters destined for the CNT unions, the Local Trade Union Federation and the CNT's regional committee for Aragon, Rioja and Navarra, as well as the Libertarian Youth. A provisional town council had been formed, chaired by the veteran anarchist militant Antonio Ejarque Pina. The local military commander, with Castán as his advisor, would be Juan García Oliver. It had yet to be determined who would take up the post of civil governor, a post the CNT was considering offering to a member of Izquierda Republicana (Republican Left). With Batista and some of his best along, it was for Garcia Oliver to occupy Radio Zaragoza and proclaim the liberation of the city to all and sundry.

## **DURRUTI'S ABSENCE, A DECISIVE FACTOR**

Once all of the preparations were in place and just as they were about to fix the date and hour for "Operation Free Commune", Carod, at his Azuara command post, received a phone call from Ortiz announcing that the "grand outing" had been put back.

It took some hours for García Oliver to arrive at Sarineña airfield and Carod was one of the party there to greet him. Fresh fro the plane and after he had been told of the delay, García Oliver broke out cursing and swearing and threw a real tantrum, each curse more violent that the one before it, as he made no bones about his feelings of outrage and about his mind's being made up to head back to Barcelona immediately "to demand an explanation from these inept folk who govern over us and to sort more than one of them out." Carod admitted to us that at the sight of this fit of fury, he thought the news of the postponement must have come as news to the recently arrived Oliver. Now, a few days later, having reassessed what he could recall of that dizzying civil war period, Carod had his suspicions that maybe García Oliver had been in the know and had travelled up to Sarineña to defuse the unrest among the fighting men in time. Thereby ushering in a period of waiting that would never come to an end, in that the operation was not so much postponed as dropped "by the upper echelons of the Confederation." The suspicion that there had been a "leak" was widely held, as was the resultant suspicion that the pressures that had thwarted the operation had come from much higher up, from quarters outside of the CNT. Antonio Ortiz and Juan García Oliver are still alive in South America and may some day be able to produce the pieces seemingly missing from the jigsaw making up the "Operation Free Commune" puzzle.

When I tackled friend Carod about what the chances had actually been of capturing Zaragoza, the old labour bruiser answered: "Fifty-fifty, pretty good odds for any military commander, especially if command is vested in people who regard themselves as revolutionaries."

Days later, at the head of eight hundred men from his column, Buenaventura Durruti set off for the Madrid front where he was to perish in very unclear circumstances. And Juan García Oliver went on to take up one of the four ministries — Justice in this instance — offered by the socialist Largo Caballero and accepted by the CNT and the FAI.

So, until such time as we come by further information, we might very well close today with the words once uttered by the general; secretary of the regional committee of Aragon, Rioja and Navarra, when he declared that "Operation Free Commune had been postponed until such time

as Durruti might return from Madrid, because the most important battles in History are always won by the biggest generals and thus, the battle for Zaragoza needed to be won by the finest general the CNT possessed, Buenaventura Durruti.“

# Libertarian Communism

What exactly was ‘Libertarian Communism’, the watchword of the Spanish social revolution? The anarchist movement, particularly in Spain, has produced a number of studies as to how economic life might be co-ordinated in a free society. These studies were not utopian fantasies; they were firmly based in the economic situation of the country and gave consideration to the statistics of industrial and agricultural production, and appreciated the problems which raw material, power, international exchange, public services would pose. Nor were they blueprints for the future as can be seen in the May 1936 resolution at the Zaragoza congress on ‘The Confederal Conception of Libertarian Communism’: ‘We all feel that to predict the structure of the future society would be absurd, since there is often a great chasm between theory and practice. We do not, therefore, fall into the error of the politicians who present well-defined solutions to all problems, which fail drastically in practice.’ The resolution ended with the following words: ‘it should not be supposed that this report ought to be considered something definitive which may serve as an inflexible norm in the constructive tasks of the revolutionary proletariat. The working party’s intentions are much more modest. It would be content were Congress to look upon this as a broad outline of the initial plan that the producers will have to implement, as mankind’s point of departure in its march towards full liberation. May everyone moved by intelligence, daring and ability improve upon our work.’

The ideas formulated by the anarchist thinkers found expression and a proving ground in the ‘declarations’ of libertarian communism which highlight the five years of the Second Spanish Republic, and which finally took root with the outbreak of the Civil War when the old dream of building a free, just and egalitarian society became a reality – for a time.

One of the most influential of these statements of anarchist communism in Spain was *Comunismo Libertario* written by the Basque anarchist doctor Isaac Puente and published in 1932. Puente’s study outlined a set of principles to be applied by the working class and those prepared to work with them, for taking over and running the economic basis of society, in accordance with the concept of social justice as fairness. Puente’s ideas were to make an important contribution to the historic motion carried unanimously by delegates speaking for over a million workers at the CNT congress in Zaragoza in May 1936. It was on the basis of the ideas expressed briefly and elegantly by Isaac Puente that the libertarian workers and peasants of Spain were to push social liberation to unprecedented heights:

Libertarian communism ... is a system of human co-existence that attempts to find a way to solve the economic problem without using the state or politics, in accordance with the well-known formula: from each according to his/her abilities, to each according to their needs ...

Libertarian communism is a society organised without the state and without private ownership. And there is no need to invent anything or conjure up some new organ-

isation for the purpose. The centres about which life in the future will be organised are already with us in the society of today: the free union and the free municipality.

The union: in it combine spontaneously the workers from factories and all places of collective exploitation. And the free Municipality: an assembly with roots stretching back into the past where, again in spontaneity, inhabitants of village and hamlet combine together, and which points the way to the solution of problems in social life in the countryside. Both kinds of organisation, run on federal and democratic principles, will be sovereign in their decision making, without being beholden to any higher body, their only obligation being to federate with one another as dictated by the economic requirements for liaison and communication bodies organised in industrial federations. The union and the free municipality will assume the collective or common ownership of everything which is under private ownership at present and will regulate consumption (in a word, the economy) in each locality. The very bringing together of the two terms (communism and libertarian) is indicative in itself of the fusion of two ideas: one of them is collectivist, tending to bring about harmony in the whole through the contribution, and co-operation of individuals, without undermining their independence in any way; while the other is individualist, seeking to reassure the individual that his independence will be respected...

Libertarian communism is based on the economic organisation of society, economic interest being the only common bond sought between individuals in that it is the only bond on which all are agreed. The social organisation of libertarian communism has no other aim than to bring into common ownership everything that goes to make up the wealth of society, namely the means and tools of production and the products themselves and also to make it a common obligation that each contribute to that production according to their energies and talents and then to see to it that the products are distributed among everyone in accordance with individual needs.

Anything that does not qualify as an economic function or an economic activity falls outside the competence of the organisation and beyond its control. And, consequently, is open to private initiative and individual activity...

It is in the countryside that the implementation of libertarian communism presents fewest complications, for it merely requires the activation of the free municipality... the entire territory within its jurisdiction will be under common ownership and not just part of the municipal territory as is the case today; the hills, trees and meadows; arable land; working animals and animals reared for meat, buildings, machinery and farm implements; and the surplus materials and produce accumulated or placed in storage by the inhabitants.

Consequently, the only private property that will exist will be in those things which are necessary to each individual — such as accommodation, clothing, furniture, tools of the trades, the allotment set aside for each inhabitant and minor livestock or farm-yard poultry which they may wish to keep for their consumption or as a hobby.

Everything surplus to requirements can be collected at any time by the municipality, with the prior agreement of the assembly, since everything we accumulate without needing it does not belong to us, for otherwise we are depriving everyone else of it.

Nature gives us the right over property over what we need, but we cannot lay claim to anything beyond what we need without committing theft, without usurping the property rights of the collective.

All residents will be equal:

1. They will produce and contribute equally to the maintenance of the commune, with no differentiation other than on the basis of aptitude (such as age, training, trade, etc.)
2. They will take an equal part in administrative decision making in the assemblies, and
3. They will have equal rights of consumption in accordance with their needs, or, where it is unavoidable, rationing.

Whosoever refuses to work for the community (aside from the sick, the old, and children) will be stripped of their other rights: to deliberate and consume.

The free municipality will federate with its counterparts in other localities and with the national industrial federations. Each locality will put its surplus produce up for exchange, in return for those things it requires. It will make its own contribution towards works of general interest, such as railways, roads, reservoirs, reforestation, and so on...

In the city, the part of the free municipality is played by local federations. In large centres of population such great organisations may exist in each district. Ultimate sovereignty in the local federation of industrial unions lies with the general assembly of all local producers.

Their mission is to order the economic life of their locality, but especially production and distribution, in the light of the requirements of their own locality and, likewise, the demands of other localities...

The producers' unions will organise distribution, making use of co-operatives or shop and market premises.

A producer's pass book, issued by the appropriate union, will be indispensable if anyone wishes to enjoy all their rights; in addition to the detailed information concerning consumption such as, for instance, size of family, the number of days and hours worked will also be noted in these pass books. The only persons exempted from this requirement be children, the aged, and the infirm.

The producer's passbook confers a right to all these things:

1. To consume, in accordance either with rationing or with their needs, all products distributed in that locality.
2. To possess, for one's own use, a suitable home, necessary furniture, a chicken run on the outskirts, or an allotment, or a garden, should the collective so decide.
3. To use public services.

4. To take part in the voting on the decisions made in one's factory, workshop, section, union and local federation.

The local federation will attend to the needs of its locality and see to it that the particular industry is developed that it is best suited to, or which the nation has the most urgent need of.

In the General Assembly, work will be allocated to the various unions, who will further allocate to their sections, just as the sections will to workplaces with the constant aim of averting unemployment, of increasing the daily output of a shift of workers in an industry, or of cutting by the amount required the length of the working day.

All pursuits which are not purely economic should be left open to the private initiatives of individuals or groups...

Economic pressures compel the individual to co-operate in the economic life of the locality. These same economic pressures ought to be felt by the collectives, obliging them to co-operate in the economic life of the nation. But to accomplish this needs no central council or supreme committee, which carry the seeds of authoritarianism and are the focal points of dictatorship, as well as being the nests of bureaucracy. We said that we have no need of an architect or any ordaining authority beyond the mutual agreement between localities...

Above the local organisation, there should be no superstructure aside from those local organisations whose special function cannot be performed locally. The sole interpreters of the national will are the congresses and, where circumstances demand, they shall, temporarily, exercise such sovereignty as may be vested in them by the plebiscite decisions of the assemblies...

The mission of the national federations of communications and transport is to bring the localities into touch with one another, building up transport services between producing regions and consuming ones; giving priority to perishables which have to be consumed quickly, goods such as milk, fish, fruit and meat.

Upon the right organisation of transport hinge reliable supplies to areas of need and the non-congestion of areas where surpluses are produced.

No single brain or bureau of brains can see to this organisation. Individuals reach understanding through meeting one another and localities do the same by keeping in touch with one another. A guide or a handbook showing the produce in which each area specialises, will simplify the procurement of supplies, indicating just what may be requested of a given area and just what it has to offer.

Let necessity force individuals to combine their efforts in contributing to the economic life of their locality. And let necessity, likewise, force collectives to regulate their activities through nationwide interchange: and let the circulatory system (transport) and the nervous system (communications) play their part in the establishment of liaison between the localities.

Neither the running of the economy nor the freedom of the individual require further complications...

## Collectivisations in Alcoy

‘So far as collectivisations are concerned, Alcoy seems to me the most conclusive example and the one with the most lessons. The second largest town in the province of Alicante, it had a population of 45,000 in 1936. It was an industrial and commercial centre of some importance. The total number of industrial workers was 20,000, a very high proportion for a country where the active population nationally was from 33 per cent to 35 per cent. Textile production, which supplied not only fabrics but also hosiery, and ladies’ underwear, was the most advanced, and employed a fairly large complement of women. Paper-making came second ...

On July 18, 1936, rumours of the impending fascist attack which were rife throughout Spain also found an echo in Alcoy. They expected an attack by the military and the conservatives supported by the Civil Guard; our forces mobilised to meet the attack and took up combat positions in the streets. But the attack did not take place. So our forces who, by their initiative had outflanked the local authorities, turned to them and presented certain demands mainly motivated by the unemployment in the textile industry (our Syndicate at the time had 4,500 members, soon to become 6,500). These demands, without breaking the antifascist unity, were for assistance for the unemployed and control over industrial enterprises. All the demands were agreed to.

But new difficulties soon loomed. The employers were quite prepared for the workers’ control commissions to examine their books where transactions of purchases and sales, profits and losses were presumably correctly entered. But the workers, and more especially the syndicates wanted to go further. They wanted to control the whole capitalist mechanism which absurdly held back production when there were people insufficiently clad, and which created an unemployment which could not be accepted seeing that there was an insufficient demand. And very soon they came to the conclusion that they would have to seize control of the factories, and change everything in society.

Furthermore, the employers soon declared their inability to pay wages to the unemployed, which in that critical period was probably true. One part of the factories appeared to be insolvent because of the crisis and could not even pay the workers who were at work. So much so that the point was reached in this absurd situation where the employers asked the workers’ associations to advance them the cash to pay the unemployed.

So, the Syndicate of the workers in the textile industry, whose history we know best of all, nominated a commission which studied the situation and presented a report in which it concluded that the textile industry of Alcoy found itself in “a

situation of systematic paralysis, financial bankruptcy and of absolute deficiency administratively and technically.”

This determined the decisive step taken: on the proposal of the Syndicate, control commissions in the textile industry transformed themselves into management committees. And on September 14, 1936, the Syndicate officially took over 41 cloth factories, 10 thread, 8 knitting and hosiery factories, 4 dying, 5 finishing, 24 flock factories as well as the 11 rag depots. All these establishments constituted the whole textile industry in Alcoy.

Nothing remained outside the control and management of the Syndicate. But we must not imagine hiding behind this name were simply a few higher, bureaucratic committees making decisions in the name of the mass of unionists without consulting them. Here, too, libertarian democracy was practised... There were five general branches of work and workers. Firstly, weaving, employed 2,336 workers; then thread making with 1,158 skilled men and women; knitting and hosiery employed 1,360 and carding another 550.

At the base, the workers in these five specialities chose at their factory meetings the delegates to represent them in integrating the factory committees. One then finds these five branches of work, through the intermediary of the delegations, in the management committee of the Syndicate. The general organisation rests, therefore, on the one hand on the division of labour and on the other on the synthetic industrial structure.

Before expropriation took place, the enterprise committees consisted only of representatives of manual workers; later a delegate from the office staff was added and another from the stores and depots for raw materials. The role of these committees now consisted in directing production according to instructions received and emanating from the assemblies, to transmit to the committees and responsible sections of the Syndicate reports on the progress of work, to make known the needs for new technical material and of raw materials. They also had to pass on large invoices and pay the small ones.

But the representatives of these five branches of work constituted only a half of the management committee. The other half consisted of the Control Commission nominated by the Syndicate committee and by the representatives of the manufacturing sections.

The technical commission was also divided into five sections: administration, sales, purchases, manufacture, insurance. It was provided with a general secretary to ensure an indispensable co-ordination...

The personnel of the whole industry was divided into specialities; manual workers, designers and technicians. Orders were not distributed and the work involved in carrying them out not discussed without first consulting the factory technicians themselves. Decisions were not taken from above, without seeking information from below. If, for instance, a special cloth had to be manufactured containing more cotton than wool, or vice versa, five of the most able mechanics among them would be called in to consider if, and where, the technical means of production existed,



and in what way they could be used. As to the manual workers, they accomplished their tasks as scrupulously as possible; they participated in the responsibilities at the level of their activities; if necessary they informed the technical sections, through the works committee, of the difficulties which arose in carrying out their part of the work.

Every Monday, in each factory, the designers, technicians, and worker delegates met, examined their books and the accounts of the enterprise, the production figures, quality of work, orders in hand and all that made up the common effort. These meetings did not take decisions but their results were communicated to the corresponding union section.

The machines sub-section had as its objective to deal with the maintenance of the mechanical equipment and the buildings in which they were housed. It ordered the repairs asked for by the works committees, but had to consult the Technical Commission when the costs exceeded a fixed ceiling.

The control sub-commission for manufacture and statistics prepared reports on the individual balance sheets of each factory or workshop, on the return from raw materials, on experiments in new uses of materials, and the special problems created by them in the distribution of work and manpower, the consumption of power involved, and all other connected matters which could orientate production in general. It also recorded the transfer of plant from one factory or workshop to another.

The administrative sub-section was divided into three sections: counting house, accounts, urban and industrial administration. The counting house dealt with payments connected with the local textile industry in general, on the instructions given by the director of the corresponding sections. But on the other hand he had to have the agreement of the factories he dealt with.

The second section recorded administratively all purchases, sales, credit, etc., effected ... Finally, the subsection for urban and industrial administration dealt with the payment of contributions and rents and on all insurance matters involving accidents, and with maintaining permanent relations with the libertarian Friendly Society of the Levante...

In this huge co-ordinated and rationalised organisation the union was therefore the directing organism which encompassed everything. The general assemblies which every single worker was entitled to attend passed judgement on the activities of the Technical Commission and of the sections that sprang from the Factory Committees. It was the union which also assumed the juridical and social responsibility both for the expropriation undertaken and the general management. It established the rate of remuneration and co-ordinated all activities on a higher level in the collective interest.

As we have already pointed out, the other industries in Alcoy were organised and administered in the same way as the textile industry. The whole organisation was in the hands of the unions. And the union was in the hands of the workers who effectively participated in the organisation of the industry – and not only of the factory – and rose to the collective responsibilities in the individual sense.

They were hard at work in the engineering workshops I visited, and they too were organised on the principles of libertarian democracy and syndicalism. They had even successfully improvised an armaments industry to assist the armed struggle. The improvements favourably surprised some technically qualified visitors, and the government placed orders for the army.

On the other hand, paper making met with difficulties resulting from a decrease in reserve of raw materials. Once again one can see that if this experiment had taken place under more favourable circumstances the results would have been very much more successful than they were.

Nevertheless, the solidarity of the libertarian organisations allowed the printing, paper and cardboard unions to meet the difficulties. In fact, the sixteen other unions that composed the local federation in Alcoy gave financial assistance (since the money system was retained) to industries which were in the red. They had conquered the narrow corporate spirit, even of narrow corporate unionism.

The organisation of production was technically excellent in Alcoy at the time when I studied it, and as generally happened, it is probable it went on improving. The weak point was, as in other places, the organisation for distribution. Without the opposition of tradesmen and the political parties, all alarmed by the threat of complete socialisation, who combated this “too revolutionary programme”, it would have been possible to do better. This opposition obliged them to create their own antifascist control committee which had no combative role to play, but under this guise centralised the purchases of agricultural products, paying on the hand less to the peasants for their products, and on the other holding down prices and the cost of living. It was not an easy matter to assert themselves so as to avoid friction among the anti-Francoist sectors. For the socialists, republican, and communist politicians sought to prevent our success, even to restoring the old order or maintaining what was left of it.

Nevertheless, in Alcoy, 20,000 workers (3,000 of whom belonged to the UGT), administered production through their unions and proved that industry functions more economically without capitalists or shareholders and without employers fighting among themselves and thereby preventing the rational use of technical plant — just as the chaos in individual agriculture prevented the rational use of the land and the means of agricultural production ...<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Collectives in the Spanish Revolution*, Gaston Leval, London 1975.

## Victor Blanco's Story

Victor Blanco, teacher in the Huescan village of Alcampel (Aragón), another chronicler of the revolution, has left us his recollections of how the social revolution transformed the life in his village:

‘...On the night of the 27<sup>th</sup> (July), with the threat from Tamarite gone, the members of the CNT decided to start carrying out our aims, to try to create something new and humane, to organise an agricultural collective in accordance with anarchist principles. We held a meeting to determine how the idea should be presented to the people. We had the sympathy of the people but we knew we had to act carefully when we dealt with the personal interests of individuals. We agreed to call a public assembly of the area through the Alcampel Labour Union at 9.00 o'clock in the evening in the Plaza Major.

‘The call could not be made in the name of the Revolutionary Committees, which included two members of the Left, republicans who belonged to the Agricultural Union. They had agreed to join the Revolutionary Committee because they were threatened by the same danger as we: we were all antifascists. But they were not collectivists. They tried to boycott our efforts. However, they failed because of the influence of our organisation with the peasants...

‘I explained the goals we had in mind, an Agricultural Collective where all would have the same obligations and the same rights and benefits. The new organisation that we proposed to create would be completely free, libertarian. No one would be compelled — no one could be compelled — to join the new organisation.

‘Compulsion would be starting on a false foundation, a denial of our principles. Those who wish to join do so freely. The collectivists will bring what they possess to the organisation. The concept “yours and mine” will no longer exist when the collective is established. Everything will belong to everyone. An Administrative Council will be elected by a majority vote for one year at a General Assembly. If any questionable actions are observed during the year, the Assembly will be sovereign, will be able to withdraw its vote of confidence and require the administrators to resign.

‘Money will not be used internally by the Collective. All members of the Administrative Council — except for the General Secretary — will be required to work when they have free time from their administrative responsibilities. Work groups often comrades will be organised, with one elected as group delegate. He will be in touch with the Council to organise the work because the properties of the CNT comrades are scattered throughout the villages. There will be no more servants or housemaids throughout the area. The exploitation of man is abolished.

‘After I finished we made it clear that what we want to do is not the idea or programme of one man or group. Everyone is invited to offer their suggestions and opinions...

‘A number of people asked for the floor and the secretary took their names in order. The first speaker was Dr Antonio Pujol, the doctor from the Agricultural Union, a member of the POUM. He started by saying that we were not offering anything new by starting a Collective because there is one already in the Agricultural Union where the members go to the bakery in the union for their bread. He then went on to political questions... I replied stating that I knew all about the operations and goals of the Agricultural Union. It was started by large and medium sized property holders and includes a number of less fortunate peasants with small pieces of inferior land at the north end of the municipality. The first and second groups bring their wheat to the Union warehouse during September. This assures them enough bread for the entire year. As for the almost, disinherited, they have used up their reserves by December or January in the majority of cases. They must buy their bread on credit and pay for it when they can ... I suppose that Dr Pujol has observed the great difference in the standard of living of the two classes of citizens when he visits the homes of the sick who are rich and those who are practically disinherited.

‘We ask that exploitation be ended forever. Let everyone work according to his ability and consume according to his needs. Work for all, bread also for all. This is the foundation principle of the Collective that we as members of the CNT propose and which we want to encompass all of society. An end to capitalism and money.

‘A number of people took the floor to seek clarification of various questions. One member of the audience asked: “If you are thinking of abolishing money, how will you be able to make purchases?” In the CNT at the national level there are federations of industry. The land that we work will produce cereals, fruits, vegetables, fodder and cattle — more than we need for our consumption. We will have a surplus that we will deposit with a district or regional depository in a central area. The Industrial Federations will deposit their surplus manufactured goods. At this point there will be an interchange of goods. Each of the Collectives will have an open account with the District Repository which will record the value of our deposited merchandise and the value of the manufactured goods we receive. A general balance will be drawn up semi-annually so that each Collective will know its economic condition...

‘When the agenda was completed I stated: “All citizens who, with full responsibility for their actions, wish to join the new organisation can do so freely tomorrow... The Administrative Council will be elected by majority vote at the first General Assembly. All members will participate in drawing up the rules and regulations under which the Collective will function. Although we members of the CNT have an outline of what can be done, the collaboration of all members is essential...”

‘That night and for the next two or three nights a large number of neighbours signed up. Two-hundred-and-fifty-families joined the Collective, about half the population of the municipality. A number of large property owners signed up when they saw

that they would have no more servants and day labourers. They were afraid (although they were treated with full respect) that they had no recourse but to join...

'The Collective started to function on the 29<sup>th</sup> (July), but there were an infinity of problems to take care of, among them transportation. We did not have a truck. There were three citizens in the area who had trucks and earned their living with their trucks. But none of them joined the Collective because they were afraid to give up their only means of livelihood. How shall we get a truck?... We decided to contact the three largest of the four companies in the area. We took a truck and went to the Ford Motor Company in Barcelona (which had been socialised)...

'We explained the purpose of our visit to see if it would be possible to make an exchange. We brought three church bells to exchange for a 1929 truck that was still in running condition ...There was great joy in Alcampel when we returned with the problem solved so quickly...

'Work groups are organised with a delegate for each group. All the delegates meet each evening to organise the work. The first thing we did was to harvest the wheat which was being damaged by the drought...

'We requisitioned the Roque farm, irrigated the land belonging to the Marques of Alfarrás, where we cultivated enough vegetables to feed 250 families. We carried on a number of experiments in a corner of an irrigated field where we cultivated castor oil and seedbeds for the vegetable garden. Many comrades turned over their land to the Collective... We had two farms, one for poultry and the other for pigs. In addition to enough meat for our own consumption, we were able to issue 25 kilos of pork to each adult and a little less to each child. The surplus was brought to the District depository at Binefar...

'Two companies were requisitioned, a textile mill and an export house. Local business was not touched. We organised a dressmaking shop, a barbershop and a butcher shop.

'We had our own local money. However, we had a collective treasury when we had to use regular currency for replacements from the outside, operations for the sick and modifications for the pharmacy, all of which the Committee paid. A dining room was set up to feed patrols passing through, as well as the elderly. Pilar Ardenuy washed their clothing and delivered it. How happy the old people were who lived alone! No previous regime had ever had the slightest concern for their welfare. We prohibited the sale of alcohol in the cafes. Theatrical works were presented in the church.

There was a large, very fertile field in the northern part of the town, more than a hundred hectares, called La Cuadra. Each family fixed the boundaries of their property with landmarks. These landmarks were removed and the field became one parcel of land. The land was cultivated with a tractor and it was a marvel to behold. What joy to see the transformation! From slave labour to a chance to rest, from

misery to abundance. All wars bring destruction of people and property, but not ours....<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Statement of Victor Blanco, quoted by Souchy, *With the Peasants of Aragón*, Orkney, 1982.

## The Question of Money

One of the greatest challenges for anarchism must be to reject the production-based obsession of state communism and the market obsession of capitalism, and achieve a producer-consumer balance. Money and methods of replacing it were important and complex matters to be decided by the collectives. In the anarchist camp there were two distinct views on the matter. The first — that adopted by Kropotkin, called for the abolition of the wages system, advocating instead ‘dipping into stocks’, the socialisation of resources and repudiation of any hint of pay differentials.

‘A society having taken possession of all social wealth, having boldly proclaimed the right of all to this wealth — whatever share they may have in producing it — will be compelled to abandon any system of wages, whether in currency or labour notes.’<sup>1</sup>

The second view, developed by anarchist theoretician Pierre Besnard was that money should be retained along with consumer vouchers, in order to eliminate speculation on loans, savings, etc. He also proposed a national wage system based on international stocks and bonds and, possibly, tied to gold. This approach was very similar to that of the American anarchists such as Josiah Warren who argued that the price of goods and services should be related to the costs of production and delivery instead of the capitalist market principle that ‘the price of a thing is that what it will bring’.

The revolutionary experiences which rocked Spain between 1931 and 1933 in Spain had helped Isaac Puente develop and clarify the ideas expressed in his important pamphlet *Libertarian Communism*. In Aragón, for example, during the December 1933 insurrection, Libertarian Communism had been declared and money abolished.<sup>2</sup> In the 1934 Asturian uprising the anarcho-syndicalist, socialist and dissident Marxist dominated areas, popular workers’ committees had spontaneously introduced a voucher system acceptable to traders so that people could acquire provisions.

The 1934 experiments had considerable resonance in Spain at the time. Even the hard-line Marxists of the BOC and the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) enthused about the Asturian workers’ achievements in monetary matters in spite of Marx and Stalin’s position on wage differentials. Thus, on the anarchist side, there was Besnard’s view of pay and money divested of their speculative and exploitative features and the Puente view which called for the abolition of the money system. In considering this question at the May 1936 Zaragoza Congress the CNT had hedged in its motion adopting libertarian communism by coming up with the ambiguous formula based on

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<sup>1</sup> *The Conquest of Bread*, Peter Kropotkin, London, 1906, p.226.

<sup>2</sup> Money and wage differentials are justified by Marx: “Thus, this labour value which materialises during the same periods of time as comparatively higher values. A higher than normal value is, logically, represented by superior work.” (*Capital*, Vol. 1, p.158, Havana, 1965). The Marxist Leninists also retain money and wage differentials: “It is intolerable that a locomotive driver should receive the same pay as a copyist. Marx and Engels say that the difference between skilled and unskilled labour will still exist under the socialist system and even after classes have been abolished.” Stalin, 1931, published in *Questions of Leninism*, Moscow, 1947, p.420–421).

'the producer's pass book' issued by the appropriate union. The producers' pass book allowed one to:

“consume, in accordance either with rationing or with their needs, all products distributed in the locality; to possess, for one's own use, a suitable home, necessary furniture, a chicken run (on the outskirts), or an allotment, or a garden, should the collective so decide: to use public services: to take part in the voting on the decisions made in one's factory, workshop, section, union and local federation.“

The war brought different responses to the question of money. We have the experiences of the CNT collectives that abolished money with dramatic symbolism in bonfires, then found they had to reintroduce it in a euphemistic guise later. At the same time collectives in Aragón and Catalonia found that barter developed naturally in times of crisis and that city collectives or enterprises often preferred produce to worthless paper money. Nevertheless, it must not be forgotten that barter is simply a negotiation over value defined in product terms, and is not immune to 'market forces'. And just because money is not involved that does not take away the potential for exploitation or profiteering. Barter between nations for example would stop balance of payment problems, but only in the most vicious Thatcherite way. For example, a third world country needing energy is appallingly vulnerable when trying to exchange its major export commodity if it is either perishable or subject to fluctuations in demand. That is why stateless socialist societies must aim first and foremost for self-sufficiency, and trade must be limited to an exchange of surplus. Cash crop agriculture must be abandoned, providing of course that a sufficiently high level of food production is maintained for feeding the cities.

During the early and uncertain period that followed the military uprising the public services functioned normally as did the basic food provisioning of the city. There were no great demands on the system: each collective made an inventory of its resources and ideas as to what it might contribute to the revolution. The pay-scale was reorganised: the high salaries of directors and managers were abolished, the wages of skilled technicians such as engineers and foremen remained stable while labourers' wages increased quite sizeably. On 24 July, the Generalidad supported a move for less work and more pay by decreeing the 40-hour week and a fifteen per cent increase in wage levels. This was opposed by the CNT who called for greater productivity. Another trend was the introduction of the standard wage in the belief that prices were fixed. This presupposed that there would be no inflation and no black market, although one soon developed in Catalonia as it did throughout the rest of republican Spain.

Attitudes towards money also varied in the rural collectives. Some villages abolished money overnight, burning it symbolically in some instances, opting for immediate Libertarian Communism. Others chose to pool resources and issue local currency notes. But the circumstances of the revolution did not lend themselves to the sudden complete abolition of the money system, and it soon re-appeared in other guises. They did, however, go a long way towards abolishing the rule of money. Frank Mintz provides an interesting quote from the village of Bujalance in Córdoba, which underlines this ad hoc approach to money as a means of exchange:

'Everything that has been done has been done right away, by way of an experiment. During the early days bonds were issued, entitling one to whatever one needed.



Later this paper money was introduced and now we have adopted the producers' card system. To date this is the best arrangement we have put into practice.'<sup>3</sup>

However, an important weakness of the ration card system was its implicit institutionalisation of male superiority. In a ration-free system equality between the sexes and individuals is a de facto phenomenon. The introduction of the producers' card and the retention of wage differentials between male and female workers meant that women in collectives, on the whole, earned substantially less than men. In the Italian edition of his book Leval notes:

'in about half of the farm collectives, the wage paid to them (women) was less than that paid to men, in the other half it was about the same; these differences can be explained in terms of the fact that only rarely did a young woman live alone.'<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, the family wage system, where wages were determined by the number of members, with wages for individuals adjusted according, made the spouse of a worker, usually a woman, dependent.

Another element common to both sorts of collective was the problem of exchange and procurement of goods from outside the collective. In all cases examined by Frank Mintz the basic reckoning was worked out in pesetas and a deal was then struck either in money, between the collective and an individual, or through barter, between collective and collective, wherever possible. The collectives contributed a portion of their produce free of charge and, occasionally, looked after refugees and convalescents.<sup>5</sup>

The majority of the collectives confined themselves to issuing a local currency or introducing a voucher system. This effectively compelled the rich, albeit indirectly, to join the collective or go under. Frank Mintz believes that the rich in the agrarian collectives underwent a radical change of circumstances, but only when the UGT and the CNT were working together as one; otherwise the Spanish Communist Party would establish a CP dominated UGT branch and protect the rich and those opposed to self-management.<sup>6</sup> In the towns the rich were rarely interfered with. When a particular system did not work the members of the collective simply replaced it with another system. The Congress of the Aragón Federation of Peasant Collectives, for example, decided to replace the local currency system, introduced shortly after the revolution had begun, with a uniform ration book, but they left it up to each individual collective to stipulate the quantity of items available to each family. Where the monetary system remained in use a 'unitary wage' was introduced. Failing this, attempts were made to reduce differentials between the highest and lowest paid workers by introducing a national norm. According to Daniel Guérin, the units which adopted the collectivist principle of day wages were more stable than the few which opted for immediate, all out Libertarian Communism:

'In some villages where currency had been suppressed and the population helped itself from the common pool, producing and consuming within the narrow limits of the collectives, the disadvantages of this paralysing self-sufficiency made themselves felt, and individualism soon returned to the fore, causing the break-up of the

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<sup>3</sup> *Como implantamos el comunismo libertario en Mas de las Matas*, Macario Royo, Barcelona, 1934, p.19.

<sup>4</sup> *Comunismo Libertario*, F. Mintz, Isaac Puente.

<sup>5</sup> *La autogestión en la revolución española*, F. Mintz, p.184.

<sup>6</sup> Op. cit., p.315.

community by the withdrawal of many former small farmers who had joined but did not really have a communist way of thinking.<sup>7</sup>

These were just some of the complex questions and problems facing the collectivists which explain why the collectives did not go all the way and abolish the money system. Also, many of the members of the collectives were Catholics, social democrats, communists, or simply non-political, and did not share the anarchist vision of a free society. However, perhaps the most important reason of all was the continued existence of the official economic and administrative structure of capitalism, the Generalidad and the Republican State.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Anarchism*, Daniel Guérin, New York, 1970, p.135.

<sup>8</sup> *The Question of Money and Spanish Self-Management*, Frank Mintz, (unpublished article).

## What Can We Do? (Camillo Berneri)

**1:** To believe that, thanks to a policy of non-intervention, one can eliminate the possibility of an international armed conflict is to procrastinate while the problems worsen. It would permit Italy, Germany and Portugal to prepare themselves better for the war and allow the Spanish fascist forces to store up supplies of arms and ammunition.

If fascism were victorious, France would be threatened in the south and the balance of forces in the Mediterranean would be permanently upset in favour of Italy and Germany who would emerge from this adventure stronger and more aggressive. Italy is seriously committed in Ethiopia while Germany is in a bad financial situation; do they want war immediately? No. They could go to war but they do not deliberately want a war straight away. If they wanted it, they would have it set in motion already in Spain. We have to adopt, therefore, a forceful foreign policy, having as its basis Portugal, which has eluded the control of Great Britain. Geneva (ie, the League of Nations) is powerless. The only solution is, therefore, to break with Portugal by means of the following measures: the immediate expulsion of all Portuguese diplomatic representatives; the immediate and complete closure of the border with Portugal; confiscation of all goods belonging to Portuguese capitalists resident in Spain.

As for Germany and Italy, the immediate expulsion of all their diplomatic representatives, suspension of the right of German aircraft to overfly Spanish territory, the prohibition of all ships flying German or Italian colours from entering Spanish ports, the suspension of all immunity for bourgeois Germans and Italians living in Spain.

Such a foreign policy would have as its immediate effect the forcing of Britain and France to adopt a definite position. If it were to give rise to the armed intervention of Italy and Germany, that intervention would at least be provoked now and not at the time chosen by those powers.

**2.** The operational base of the fascist army is Morocco. We must intensify our propaganda in favour of Moroccan autonomy throughout the pan-Islamic sphere of influence. We must oblige Madrid to make unequivocal declarations announcing the abandonment of Morocco and a promise of protection for Moroccan autonomy. France views with concern the possibility of insurrectionary repercussions in North Africa and Syria; Great Britain would see autonomous nationalist movements in Egypt as well as among the Arabs in Palestine grow stronger. We must exploit such anxieties and fears by adopting a policy which threatens to unleash revolt throughout the Arab world.

For such a policy we need money and we urgently need to send agitators and organisers to all the centres of Arab migration, into all the frontier regions of French Morocco. On the Aragón Front, the Centre Front, the Asturias and Andalusia, a few Moors would be sufficient to act as propagandists.

**3.** Given our lack of arms and ammunition, we must expand production on the spot by making use of foreign technicians whose utilisation has been very badly organised. We must also create, as rapidly as possible, all the war industries possible and end wastage of munitions by issuing far-reaching instructions and decisive orders.

4. We must achieve 'unity' just as much in the general and specific plan of military operations, which must be carried out on all fronts, as in liaison among the comrades of the areas by means of a general Staff controlled by a 'National Defence Committee'.

5. We must completely and without pity eliminate the fascist remains which oblige us to maintain a front line within our own ranks and have recourse to systematic searches, mass arrests of people who are not in unions, who are of the right age and physical condition for military service, strict control of new recruits to the trade unions, etc...

6. We must force Madrid to reconstitute immediately all the Spanish diplomatic corps which will have to be reformed with members chosen by the 'National Defence Committee'.

## Sébastien Faure

“My thoughts are with our friends from Spain, and particularly with García Oliver and Federica Montseny. I have in mind the recent Paris conference and what they have stated, the explanation they have offered and the information disclosed by these two representatives of the CNT-FAI. Both have had recourse to their magnificent powers of eloquence to enlighten us in certain particulars and to explain to us the range of circumstances which, they claim, have, so to speak, obliged them perforce to take up the offer of ministerial participation made to them. With the liveliest of attention I read and re-read the verbatim text of everything they said in the latest issue of *Le Libertaire*. However faithful and accurate it may be, the translation of their words fails to convey to the reader the undertones of ardour and honesty emanating irrepressibly from their speeches. The text is available and that is the ‘essential’ point.

It would be an injustice not to acknowledge that tragic events, dramatic circumstances and the numerous and often contradictory needs of action have obliged our friends to make extreme decisions which by means of bias that is, up to a point, only natural, has gradually, but with ever more implacable logic compelled them to assume the position which we are familiar with, to occupy the government posts we know of and to shoulder the responsibility which is consequent upon these. I am not sitting in judgement. I find the practice of judgeship repugnant and I ask the friends of the CNT-FAI who have given their approval to our comrades García Oliver and Montseny and, at the same time, I ask these two comrades also, not to construe what I am about to say as a verdict of condemnation, for this would not be justified and this would not be the place for it. Nor do I intend anything of the sort. My nature, plus my experience of beings and things incline me towards indulgence and, borrowing the words of Madame de Stael, let me say: “To understand all is to forgive all.”

I understand perfectly that, standing at the heart of the drama in Spain for a year past, beset by incessant dangers, compelled to fight on two fronts — the front of war and the front of revolution — in short, faced, in this bitter struggle and this exceedingly rough and difficult battle, with the necessity of reaching an immediate decision amid thousands of adverse circumstances... as I say, I understand how our dear comrades may have committed some error. I do not imagine that anyone is sufficiently self-assured as never to make mistakes. So I shall take great care not to cast the first stone at anyone: especially since the commission of an error does not imply the gravity of culpability; it is only human ... Blame comes into it only when one persists in the error; this means that culpability begins when we cling to it, when we refuse to acknowledge the error of our ways.

Well, now, I hope that our brothers from across the Pyrenees will permit me to tell them, in an amicable, brotherly way that, as I see it, they have — thoughtlessly I am sure — committed a serious offence in not turning down the perfidious offer made them of a minister’s portfolio. This is the initial error which brought all the other errors in its wake. That painful surrender (I choose to believe that entry into the government was looked upon by them as a sacrifice forced upon them by the circumstances) was the source of all the errors which have followed. This is what I

was getting at earlier when I wrote that, by means of a natural bias, our friends had accepted the posts, functions and responsibilities and were gradually caught up and were irresistibly obliged to conduct themselves in the manner of those who, upon assuming a ministerial post, turn into yet another of the essential cogs of the State.

That a politician who may belong to a political faction should agree to join a cabinet of ministers, that this should be his ambition, that he should seek this honour and pursue these advantage, is only too natural: such a man plays his card, takes his 'chance' and rushes headlong down the path indicated, and will take great care not to let the opportunity slip. But that an anarcho-syndicalist, that an anarchist should accept a ministerial post is a very different matter. Upon his banners in huge letters, the anarcho-syndicalist has inscribed 'Death to the State!' The anarchist has written on his in fiery letters 'Death to authority!' Both are linked by a clear and specific programme founded upon clear and specific principles. Nothing and no one compels them to espouse those principles. With total independence and full knowledge of cause, and in a thoughtful way, they have subscribed to those principles; they have championed, propagated and espoused this programme.

That being the case, my contention is that the anarcho-syndicalists cannot line up with those whose mission it is to guide the chariot of state, since he is convinced that this chariot, "this famed chariot" absolutely has to be destroyed. And I say that the anarchist has a duty to repudiate every authoritarian position in that he is thoroughly persuaded of the necessity of destroying all authority.

There will be no shortage of people who may protest that, in reasoning thus, I am taking account only of principles and that, many a time, circumstances, the facts, which is to say that which is vulgarly described as 'reality' contradicts principles and makes it necessary for those who take love and respect for principles to lengths of religiosity to set aside temporarily, prepared to revert to their former standpoint just as soon as fresh 'realities' may make such a reversion possible. I understand the objection and this is my reply.

First. One or two things. If reality contradicts principles, then those principles must be mistaken in which case we should lose no time abandoning them; we should be honest to admit their falseness in public and we should have the integrity to devote as much ardour in combating than and being as active in refuting them as formerly we defended them. Similarly, we should strive forthwith to seek more solid, more just and less fallible principles.

If, on the other hand, the principles upon which our ideology and tactics rest still hold, regardless of the circumstances, and are as valid today as they were yesterday, then we should keep faith with them. To depart, even for a short time and in exceptional circumstances from the line our principles indicate we should adopt, is to commit a grave error, a dangerous error of judgement. To persist in this error is to commit a grievous mistake, the consequences of which lead on gradually to the temporary jettisoning of principles and, through concession after concession, to the absolute, final abandonment of principle. Once again, this is the mechanism, the slippery slope which can lead us far astray.

Second. It is my belief that the experiment attempted by our comrades of Catalonia, so far from compromising the firmness of our principles and weakening and destroying the correctness of them, may and ought to result (if we can but draw the precious lessons contained within this experiment and put them to good use), in a demonstration of the correctness of our principles and their robustness. The CNT and FAI are still powerful in Spain. They still enjoy considerable

prestige and an influence over the proletariat of city and countryside, the power of which no one would reasonably dispute.

Do our friends from Spain and abroad believe that the ministerial experience of which I speak has bolstered this power, this prestige, this influence? Or do they take the contrary view, that this prestige and strength have been undermined?

For the sake of impartiality, let us set aside everything which does not come under the heading of the facts: and let us stick, insofar as this may be possible, solely to the objective reality; let us open our eyes and, above every other consideration, let us look no further than reality. For my own part (and I know, having been told as much, that there are many who share my view) I have to say that the CNT and FAI have not profited by one iota from this experiment with ministerial portfolios; indeed, to my mind, they have lost much. Let us not indulge in exaggeration. Let us not speak of renegades and betrayals; it is not a question of these, but rather a tactic and a deed whose practical consequences we are examining. So let us proceed by way of looking at the evidence.

To begin with, it is beyond question that, whereas effective participation in central authority has had the approval of the majority within the unions and in the groups affiliated to the FAI, that decision has in many places encountered the opposition of a fairly substantial minority, since there has been no unanimity. The internal unity which obtained in each of these organisations has not broken down, nor has there been any split, but it is shaky. The close bond which has united the CNT-FAI for years past has not snapped, but it has been loosened. Two schools of thought have come into existence and the moral authority, not to say the material vigour of the great union confederation and the Anarchist Federation alike, has incontrovertibly borne the brunt of the clash between those two contending schools of thought.

Secondly, and conversely, those political parties called upon to act in a ministerial capacity alongside the delegates from the masses of workers and peasants have palpably increased their influence: they have strengthened the positions they previously held and captured new ones. And on the basis of official implementation of the reformist and collaborationist techniques which are second nature to them, they have countered and gradually threatened the spirit of revolutionary class struggle and the methods of direct action which logically derive from that spirit.

Thirdly, the mentality and usages to which the federalist organisation of the CNT and FAI had logically directed and automatically acclimatised the labouring masses have been noticeably impaired as a result of the introduction of their most prominent representatives into the essentially centralised councils of government.

The axis of the action to be carried into effect, the axis of the battle to be fought and the decisions to be taken and imposed, and even the responsibilities to be asserted, has ipso facto and logically and automatically been dislocated. The impulse no longer emanates from the base but from the upper echelons; guidelines do not emanate from the masses but from the leadership.

I think that these facts cannot be denied and that they are enough, more than enough, to show that, far from having been of advantage to the Spanish Libertarian Movement, participation at ministerial level has worked to its detriment in every respect. Again, let me say that I am not questioning the personal intentions of friends who, under the lash of dramatic circumstances (the exceptional nature of which is not unknown to me), have sought to be of service to the cause to which they have given body and soul. I cast no aspersions upon their integrity, but I shall demonstrate, by means of the very error into which they have fallen and of the consequences thereof, the intangible robustness of the principles upon which our ideology and our tactics

are founded. I want, further, to bring to the attention of anarcho-syndicalists and anarchists everywhere the viability of those principles, the necessity of keeping faith with them, and the many grave perils implicit in departure from them whatever the circumstances may be.

In short, and above all, believe that from the foregoing observations, we have to draw the precious lessons destined to spare us the false manoeuvres whose upshot would be to slow and to impair our progress towards our desired end and even to induce us to turn our backs upon our goal.

Anarchists have waged a resolute battle, without quarter, against everything and against everybody; they are resolved to press on with it, unstinting, until victory is achieved. The struggle implies, on the one hand, what needs doing, come what may; and on the other, that which ought never to have been done, under any circumstances. I am not unaware that it is not always feasible to do what it would be necessary should be done; but I know that there are things which it is absolutely essential ought never to be done.

The Spanish experiment can and ought to be a lesson to us. This experiment ought to put us on our guard against the danger of concessions and alliances even though these may be strictly conditional and of limited duration to boot. To say that all concessions weaken those who make them and strengthen those who are on the receiving end of them is to speak an incontrovertible truth. To claim that any compact, even a temporary one, agreed by anarchists with a political party which is, theoretically and in practice, anti-anarchist is a snare of which the anarchists are always the victims is a truth borne out by experience, by history and by simple logic. In the course of their dalliance with authoritarians, the loyalty and integrity of the anarchists are continually fouled by the perfidy and wiles of their temporary and circumstantial allies.

Does this mean that I am advocating the ivory tower? or complete isolation? Not at all! How come? Because anarchism long ago ceased to be a purely idealist movement of merely philosophical and sheerly sentimental speculation. Anarchism is a social and historical movement with deep roots in the soil of reality. Its growth and dynamism are closely bound up with the contingencies surrounding it ...and it ought to have its contribution to make to their development, so that it may forge us as far ahead as possible with its own progress and its own gains.

The objectives of anarchism are the right ones: its principles are rigid and inflexible; its sphere of action is immense and by virtue of its very plasticity it can and ought to take account of the various requirements imposed by the sinuous course of events.

None of this ivory tower nonsense, then. No isolation. Instead, vigilance, circumspection, extreme caution before setting foot, no matter who the company may be, upon a path which may not strictly be ours.

I do not want to conclude these observations without stressing the high regard and friendship which I still retain, in spite of everything, for our brothers of the CNT and FAI. As I see it, the best way of proving this profound esteem to them and this unalterable affection is not to keep a gag upon our misgivings and our reservations: much less should we prove our friendship by giving them our approval and our applause without faithfully and frankly giving expression to, what we think, eschewing both attenuation and exaggeration. And this is what I have done. It could not be otherwise. Shall I overlook the prodigious effort made by our friends and the wondrous achievements due to their bold initiative and their steadfast and energetic action? Shall I forget the heroic militants, known and unknown, fallen on the soil of Iberia in the name of the revolution and of liberty? Shall I forget the furious attacks, infamous accusations and



countless unspeakable persecutions of which they were the victims? Am I to forget the debt owed to them by the international libertarian movement?

Comrades. Let us not forget these splendid examples of daring initiatives, of dangers braved, of intrepid action and heroic struggle which the CNT and FAI have set before us. Let us not forget that for the past 12 months they have been fighting for our liberation. Let us cherish them, let us stand by them and let them, in this exceptional hour, feel the support, backing, defence and encouragement of our ardour and affection!"

# The Problem of Militarisation

January 1937: **The Problem of Militarisation. To the comrades, to the confederal columns; Statement by Vivaldo Fagundes; Protest before the libertarians of present and future regarding the capitulations of 1937 by an ‘uncontrollable’ from the Iron Column; Address by Federica Montseny, 3 January 1937; Militarisation – March 1937: Dissolution of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils; February 1937: Memorandum from War Committee of the Iron Column, 16 February 1937; April 1937: An Open Letter to Federica Montseny; April 1937: Confidential letter from an agent of Negrín, 15 April 1937; Unpublished letter to Max Nettlau from Emma Goldman; September 1937: The international debate on war and revolution; Pierre Besnard’s reply to ‘Catastrophic Revolution’; June: Anarchist Intelligence and Security Services; Trotsky and the POUM.**

## **The Problem of Militarisation. To the comrades, to the confederal columns**

The full text of this statement was re-published in July in *El Amigo del Pueblo*, the paper of the Friends of Durruti group:

‘ ... The efficiency of the centuries is not going to have any greater influence on the fighting ... the factors responsible for the stagnation of the Aragón front have nothing to do with good or bad organisation, nor with this or that system, it is, rather, a question of the quantity and quality of war materials, as we believe everyone is aware. If this had not been the case, we ourselves, rather than our comrades in the rearguard, would have long since expressly demanded all haste in its [militarisation] being imposed upon us, and we ourselves would have insisted upon it...

‘We have no desire to acknowledge the authoritativeness, in matters relating to the vanguard, of people who have no connection with them. This does not mean to say that some reforms may not be necessary, reform which we place before the Confederal and Specific Organisation for its consideration. We take the view that acceptance of them may offer a solution to problems having to do with the fastidiousness of anarchist awareness and with belligerent organisation ... well, the results have been shown.

‘...The arguments put to us by the committees are at odds with the experiences of the past six months. Apparently, the government is making the provision of abundant equipment conditional upon our militarisation... To date, so far as war materials are concerned, the comrades of the rearguard have trusted in the efforts of others...

France, Russia and now the Madrid government. Is this not so? Reality is enough to make us firmly convinced that only our efforts matter, that wherever the comrades have worked to boost the manufacture of war materials and put their heart and soul into this, there we can depend upon something and they rescue us from danger. The problem is one of war materials! War materials! We have to make them ourselves with our own sweat and initiative, overcoming difficulties and persevering. As the committees themselves admit, they can offer no guarantee that the Madrid government will issue us with those materials even if we do militarise. That being the case, the trespass we should commit against our beliefs would be repaid only with an empty promise. 'We have no wish to go any further along the road where the confederal organisation has compromised itself in the sphere of trade union and political trespasses, and now trespasses of a military nature, conflicting with our anarchist consciousness. Those of us who set off for the front towards the end of July made the comrades of the rearguard the repositories of the patrimony of the confederal organisation, the accumulation of the revolutionary anxieties, sacrifices and hopes of the many who have fallen in the fight against capitalism. And now, according to those comrades, militarisation is an inevitability which we have to accept unless we want everything to be lost and history to pass a harsh verdict upon us. We are sensitive to that verdict and to live up to our responsibility. We make these observations for the benefit of the generations yet to come and offer you this present organisational layout which, if accepted, will rescue much of the essence of our beliefs from foundering.'"

## **The staffing and specialities of Companies, Regiments and Divisions and the formation of a single collective command for the Aragón front**

'As militants, we offer for the consideration of the Organisation and of the confederal columns this present proposal, which we believe may be in tune with our anarchist beliefs:

Companies are to be made up as follows:

Four 12 man squads = 48 men, who shall comprise one section.

Four 48 man sections, = 192 men, who shall comprise one company

One battalion shall comprise 3 infantry companies and one specialist company.

A specialist company (machine gunners, mortars and Bren gunners) shall comprise 84 men; together with the three infantry companies they shall add up to 660 men, or one battalion.

One regiment shall comprise 3 battalions, giving a total of 1980 men.

A brigade shall consist of 2 regiments of Infantry, Cavalry, Artillery and specialised services.

A division shall comprise 2 brigades.

All of the above units are to be officered by technicians who have graduated from the special war academies. We shall, so far as possible, ensure that such positions on the Aragón front are filled by personnel from the special war academies sponsored by the Libertarian Youth (FIJL). In each of these units a political delegate is to be appointed by the members of said units and he shall have oversight of morale and administration, leaving the technician to his own area of competence.

No emblem, signifying different positions of each of them will be acceptable. It shall be possible to remove the technician on the request of the units, with complaints being presented before a tribunal at company, battalion, etc., level.

Battalion Committees are to be formed on the basis of company delegates, Divisional Committees by regimental delegates and a Committee of single command of the Aragón front by divisional delegates.

Given this guarantee of representation from the level of the joint command of the staff of the Aragón front right down to company level, orders for operations to be made will not be liable to debate. Courts may be set up to sit in judgement of breaches of discipline ... if minor, at company level, and in more serious instances, at divisional level. Such courts are to be made up of political delegates. The degree of sanction to be imposed for said breaches is to be prescribed in accordance with the rules of the loftiest justice, with stress being laid at all times upon the extreme gravity of the offence.

### **On behalf of the Durruti Column:**

The 4<sup>th</sup> Gelsa detachment

The Acción y Alegria group

The International Group

The artillery batteries

The machine-gunner sections and other centuries

(Reprinted in *El Amigo del Pueblo*, No. 5, 20 July, 1937)

## Statement by Vivaldo Fagundes

The militants' distrust of the motives for imposing militarisation was not unfounded. Vivaldo Fagundes, a Portuguese anarchist who participated in the Spanish Revolution has this to say:

“I have an extract from a letter of Indalecio Prieto, a minister, to Fernando de los Rios, then ambassador in Washington, in which Prieto gives an account of the work he was doing to finish anarchism off. He told him that already he had managed to win over its finest militants by interesting them in governmental politics and that the most stubborn ones, “the uncontrollables”, would be annihilated by militarisation – an anti-revolutionary ploy clearly anti-libertarian in its objectives – by means of their being dispatched to the fronts where they would be liquidated, by incorporation into shock brigades or battalions. He closed the letter by stating with cynical frankness that those of them who escape the bullets of his thugs and the communists would not escape the fascists' bullets.“

This document was published in Buenos Aires in the journal of the *La Batalla* group...’

Interview with Vivaldo Fagundes published in Edgar Rodrigues *A resistencia anarco sindicalista a ditadura. Portugal 1922 – 1939.*

## Protest before the libertarians, of present and future regarding the capitulations of 1937 by an ‘uncontrollable’ from the Iron Column

“ ... I have been in a barracks and there I learned to hate. I have been in a prison and there, amid the tears and the suffering, I have, curiously, learned to love and to love intensely.

In barracks I have been on the verge of losing my personality, such was the rigour to which I was subject, since they wanted to impose a stupid discipline on me. In jail, through a variety of struggles, I rediscovered my personality, which turned more and more insubordinate with every imposition. There I learned to despise all hierarchs, from the lowest to the highest: in prison, amid the most distressing pain, I learned to love the wretched, my brothers, preserving pure and untainted my hatred for the hierarchs, a hatred spawned in the barracks. Jails and barracks are one and the same: despotism and free play for the malice of some and suffering for all ...

Whenever I heard up there in the mountains that the order for militarisation was in the air, I felt my whole being collapse for a moment, because I saw clearly that

the warrior daring of the revolution in me would perish, only to leave me to survive as a being bereft of any personality in barrack or prison confines and to lapse anew into the chasm of obedience, into the animal somnambulism to which the discipline of barrack or prison — for they are one — lead ... They have not understood us, and being unable to understand have not loved us. We have fought — no need for false modesty now, for it is futile — we have fought, I say again, like few others have fought ...

Not for us has there ever been any leave, nor and this is worse still, a kind word. Everyone, fascist and antifascist and even our own people — what shame we have experienced! — have treated us with hostility.

They have not understood us. Or — and this is the greater tragedy amid the tragedy in which we live — maybe we have not made ourselves understood. Because we, having had heaped upon our backs all of the contempt and harsh words of those who, in life, were on the side of the hierarchs, have sought to live a libertarian lifestyle even in the midst of war, while others, to their and our shame, have continued to latch on to the chariot of state...

History, which embraces all of the good and all of the evil which men do, shall speak some day.

And history will say that the Iron Column was, perhaps, the only column in Spain to have a clear perception of what our revolution should have been. It will say, too, that it was the Column which put up the best fight against militarisation. And record, furthermore, that on account of this resistance, there were times when it was abandoned utterly to its fate on the battlefield, as if 6,000 battle hardened men, ready to triumph or perish, should have surrendered themselves to the enemy to be devoured by him...

Our resistance to militarisation was based on what we knew of the military. Our present resistance on what we presently know of the military.

Here and always, the professional military have constituted, as they do in Russia, a caste apart. It is they who command: the obligation to obey should alone be reserved for the rest of us. With all of his might the professional military man despises everything which the proletariat is, holding it to be inferior...

The proletarian army does not demand discipline that, in essence, might be summed up as adherence to campaign orders; it demands submission, blind obedience and the annihilation of the human personality...

The delegate of our group or *centuria*, was not foisted upon us, but elected by us and felt himself to be not a lieutenant, nor a captain, but our comrade. The delegates of the Column's Committees have not been colonels nor generals, but comrades. We ate together, campaigned together, laughed and swore together. For a time we had received no pay; nor had they. Then we received ten pesetas and they received, and still receive, ten pesetas.

The only thing which we accept is their proven competence; for that we elect them: and also, by virtue of their proven courage, we chose them as our delegates. They are

not hierarchs, there is no superiority of rank, and no harsh orders; there is sympathy, goodness, comradeship; a joyful existence in the midst of war's disasters. And so, with our comrades at our sides, and imagining that there was some purpose to our struggle, we went willingly to war and even accepted death with pleasure. But when you are among the military where there are only orders and ranks; you see in your hands the miserable pay with which you can scarcely sustain your family in the rear and you see your lieutenant, captain, colonel earning three times as much: four times as much, ten times as much as you, though possessed of neither enthusiasm, nor of greater acumen or greater courage than you, life turns sour because you see that this is no revolution, but profit for a few from a wretched situation which merely works to the detriment of the people...

We believed we were fighting to redeem and save ourselves and now we are lapsing into the very thing we are fighting against: into despotism, casteocracy, into more brutal, more alienating authority...

The militarists, all militarists — there are wrathful ones on our side — have surrounded us. Yesterday we were the masters of everything. Today, they are. The Popular Army, popular only inasmuch as it consists of people, belongs to the government and the government commands, the government ordains. The people have leave to obey and constant obedience is required of them.

Caught in the snares of the militarists, we have two options; the first leads to dissociation from those who hitherto have been our comrades in arms, by disbanding the Iron Column; the second leads to militarisation...

The column, this Iron Column which has set the bourgeoisie and the fascists between Valencia and Teruel shaking in their boots, should not disband but press right on to the end...

Having to accept orders from those whom we have not elected will be the lesser evil, but a great evil nonetheless. But...

Should we remain together, the same individuals as now, it should be all one to us whether we form a Column or a Battalion. In the fray we will not need anyone to encourage us, and during our time of repose, no one will prevent us from resting, because we will not permit him.

Corporal, sergeant, captain... either they will be our own people, in which case we will all be comrades, or they will be enemies in which case they will have to be treated as enemies...

Our future depends on ourselves, depends upon the cohesion between us. Nobody is going to force us to dance to his tune; we shall impose our tune upon those who may be around us, so that we may keep our personality alive.

Let us take one thing into consideration, comrades. The struggle demands that we do not deny the war either our participation or our enthusiasm. In a column of our own, or in a battalion of our own, or in a division or battalion not of our own, fight we must.

If we disband the Column, if we disintegrate, then, as conscript soldiers we shall have to go, not with whom we may choose but with whom we are ordered to go. And since we are not, nor do we wish to be domestic animals, the likelihood is that we shall find ourselves alongside people whom we should not wish to be alongside; with the ones who are, for good or ill, our allies.

The Revolution, our Revolution, the proletarian anarchist Revolution, to which, from the earliest days we gave pages of glory, calls upon us not to abandon our weapons, nor to abandon that compact group which we have thus far constituted, whether it go under the name of Column, Division or Battalion.'

Taken from *Protesta davanti ai libertari del presente e del futuro di un 'incontrolado' della Colonna di Ferro' sulle capitolazioni del 1937*, Turin, 1981.



## Address by Federica Montseny, 3 January 1937

*“Comrades and friends:*

I have accepted the honour of initiating this series of talks with the pleasure of one who must comply with a self imposed obligation, for anyone who has plotted the position of classical anarchism must today plot also the precise position to which it has been brought by the events through which we are living.

We as anarchists have amended nothing of that which was consubstantial with our very selves. That declaration needed to be made. We are anarchists, we remain such and we pursue the same ideals as ever. Events have nothing to do with what the Spanish anarchist movement is and shall continue to be. But a distinction has to be made between the immobile ideal and the eternal aspiration. An immobile ideal, a stagnant ideal which has no flexibility, no agility and no ability to react (it and its representatives) in accordance with the circumstances. Such an ideal is doomed to be overtaken, pushed aside and replaced by other ideals. This is what we Spanish anarchists have been able to take into account. Without the ideal's ceasing to be the same, without the anarchist ideas having been forced to beat a retreat in the face of the formidable experience of the historical situation and Spanish circumstances, we have managed to adapt ourselves, been able to find our niche, and to put into practice the physical precept with which Tarrida del Marmol defined the word authority. “Authority is something from which we keep subtracting and of which some remnant always remains and which we must aim always to diminish.”

Nobody could have foreseen the events which came in the wake of 19 July: we, however, did not lose our grasp of the situation and we went on acting just as we had up to then, for, since the advent of the republic, no organisation had given so much proof of revolutionary fervour as had ours. A reformist socialism, an almost universal preference for accommodation had been a brake upon the revolutionary process. Our steadfastness, the spur (what we might term our obsession) was necessary to whittle away at the forces which opposed the advances of the proletariat; it also successfully shifted reformist socialism as such on to a revolutionary footing. And so we come to the army revolt resisted by the proletariat, whose heroic resistance shaped events and led to a new dawn. A mass upheaval came to pass in Spain and our people hurled themselves into a revolution that has nothing in common with the Russian revolution nor with other upheavals. There would have been no revolution had we not prepared the people. This is our triumph and the most cherished prize that we anarchists possess.

Without distorting anarchist philosophy, we have managed to adapt ourselves to circumstances. There have been instances when anarchists elsewhere in the world could scarcely understand the Spanish anarchist. I intend no criticism of anarchists. One cannot censure a movement, nor a few individuals. We, like the statist communists or socialists, insist upon the total realisation of our ideals. Once this was agreed, our position boiled down to this: either we remain in opposition, in an opposition incomprehensible in that we all had to marshal our efforts around the bourgeois republic (bourgeois, but it stood for liberalism against fascism) or we make our own stand wherever circumstances obliged us to. Had all the comrades from Europe, America and elsewhere, who cannot comprehend what we are doing with Spanish anarchism, been in Spain we would have seen how they would have acted and their mental response to the events which had come to pass, with facts so very different from what we had imagined. The ideals are the same, but sometimes one has no option but to amend even one's opinion of the facts which occurred in such a way other than the manner anticipated. Nobody could have known that we would be making the revolution at the same time as waging a war. Not a civil war like the civil wars of the last century in which there was a parity of forces, but a modern war with every element required for the struggle.

Had we proceeded on 19 July to implement the totality of our libertarian ideals, the upshot would have been catastrophic, just as it would have been had the statist communists or socialists made the attempt. Such an attempt would have smashed the common front. For this reason we were the first to introduce a note of deliberation into our aspirations. The Spanish people's battle against fascism, itself a bold and grandiose effort by an unarmed people, a people that needed several days to stir the conscience of other peoples, found us alone in our will to be free beings, as against the authoritarian penchant of international fascism. We stand for a movement opposed to the ever-aggressive imperialisms of Italy and Germany. And already this contest is so great that victory over fascism was well worth the laying down of our lives.

We Spanish anarchists, cognisant of the overwhelming needs, imposed by the circumstances of the moment, have espoused a line of conduct designed to avoid a repetition of what happened in Russia where anarchism, for all its might, was ousted from the leadership of the revolution by a minority organisation.

On 19 July we were the most important labour movement in Spain, at least as far as Catalonia was concerned, and we could have embarked upon the adventure of wholesale conquest of our ideals. We did not, lest it wreck everything. By our attitude we have prevented anyone's being able to bridle the effervescence of the people by means of a dictatorship.

The CNT's entry into the central government and into the Generalidad Council of Catalonia ensured that the anarchist movement was not ousted from the leadership of the revolution. What was needed was a genuine united front of the entire proletariat and of all antifascist elements so as to erect an impregnable bulwark against international fascism which had turned the peninsula into its field of operations, and

how the people which are beating the fascists are making social advances by calling into existence a new concept of life, a new society.

Tell me if what we are doing is not great. When we reflect upon the times in which we live we astound ourselves. And we will think on how we have found it possible to overcome such huge obstacles.

Of all the problems posed by the present hour, the problem of the war is the most straightforward, in that we have been able to achieve and to maintain the unity of all workers, republican, socialist, communist and anarchist who know that fascism represents strangulation, something tougher than the late dictatorship because the fascist movement has been injected with German and Italian fascism.

Hatred of fascism and the urge to defeat it binds us together but now imagine the picture once the war is over, with different ideological forces which will wrestle for dominion over one another. Once the war is ended, the problem will crop up again in Spain with the same characteristics as featured in France and in Russia. We must make our stand here and now. We have to spell out our points of view so that the other parties may know what is what, and we may all, in a candid, loyal way arrive at the unity needed for the future. We have to seek out the platform, the common ground that enables us, with the greatest freedom and minimum scheme of economic achievements, to press on along the road upon which we have embarked until we reach our goal.

Already we have spoken of what we want once the war has ended. What we say today we had been saying before the war. And we said that there was something consubstantial with the history of Spain and with the aspirations of the people as manifested in each moment erupting consciousness, such as the revolt by the comuneros of Castile or of the Catalan segadores, which long ago asserted our people's stand against centralising, all-absorbing authority... this aspiration, a source of wonder to other lands, startled by the climate of liberty and democracy by which it was informed, and which was the assertion of our own individuality over anything that may have spelled tyranny or oppression.

We all have the same racial feeling for liberty against oppression, and against humiliation and for this reason the Primo de Rivera dictatorship, that farce, was unable to prevail in Spain, any more than Mola and Franco will be able to make theirs prevail, for our people prefers death over slavery.

Our concept of organisation is straightforwardly federalist. Of myself in particular it has been said that I am closer to Pi y Margall than to Bakunin. I can state that all we Spanish anarchists see eye to eye with Pi y Margall's philosophical, economic and political outlook because Pi y Margall was able to discover the very essence of our spirit. Federalism is the guarantee that the outcome of the contest will be prolific in terms of material benefits for the workers of the cities and countryside, making Spain what hitherto she has not been. We must all be federalists. Despite their centralistic outlook, an inheritance from the centralistic mentality of Marx and one that has to be remedied, the communists must be federalists. All republicans are federalists and we must be federalists too in accepting the establishment of the Iberian Federation

of Socialist Republics which will give each region the right to order its own affairs. To date, Spain has been a monstrous head upon a wizened body. All of the country's wealth flows to Madrid.

The economic reconstruction of the country is an impossibility if the bourgeoisie retain their power. Should any move be made to restore power to the bourgeoisie, that would be the greatest of catastrophes. The workers will brave sacrifice for the sake of revolution and will step up production for the sake of the revolution, but should this be asked of them for anything other than the victory of the revolution, it will be to no avail and indeed the workers will not countenance it. In fighting against fascism, the Spanish people is simultaneously fighting against social inequalities, against the *señoritismo* of the Spanish people, even though greater sacrifices be asked of it for after the war and for the success of the revolution, as it has a good fighting morale, and it will stick to its post and work for its own sake and for its children's, but it will never do it so that someone may make his fortune alone; it will work and it will struggle only for itself and for the future. Let no one lose sight of this fact. A civil war does not come into it. This is the people's war, the war of the workers against the lordling, the serviceman, the parasite.

The bourgeois parties have failed, having been unable to conjure up a moral consciousness or to stand up to the army revolt, leaving the military at liberty to lay the foundations of the current seditious revolt whose failure is due to its lack of a popular base.

Henceforth, if the new Spain is to take shape, it is necessary that every facet of the management of the country be handed over to the workers, and once federalism has been introduced, it is imperative that the workers achieve economic unity through the effective, continuous and trustworthy amalgamation of the two union groupings, the UGT and CNT.

So lofty a concept of individual and collective liberty do we have that we do not seek the success of a proletarian economic policy at the price of the imposition of a dictatorship of the working class.

In Spain, with the economy in the workers' hands there must be an accentuating of the morality of sacrifice and the sense of individual and collective responsibility. Morality must induce us to brave every hardship, rationing, and longer shifts for the sake of reconstruction, integrity and austerity and every one of us must feel that he is a soldier of a great cause; and all privilege has to be abolished. A sense of responsibility will help us to set aside our selfishness and personal ambition so as to make a contribution to the tasks which are to ensure that all our hopes become reality. This we want and we yield to none in encouraging it in ourselves and others.

Whereas it has not proved possible to eradicate authority absolutely in Spain, its prerogatives are being whittled away by, first of all, federalism and next by man's being instructed in how to live without anyone's ordering him to perform his duties, instilling within him a feeling of liberty within the anarchist principles which remain the quintessence of liberalism.

This Spanish proletariat, schooled in such principles and with its personality honed by the realities imposed by the struggle it conducts, will be the one to point the way along which all of the workers of the world must follow in order to win the right to liberty and well-being.'

Resumé published in *Boletín de Información*, quoted in Peirats, Vol. II, Ch. 20.

## Militarisation – March 1937: Dissolution of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils

The function of the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils was taken over by the War Commissariat, a body described by José Peirats as “...a body of Soviet provenance, an espionage and propaganda agency at the service of the parties which monopolised power.”

Alfonso Miguel, the anarchist militant whose account of the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils has been quoted earlier left a bitter description of the demise of the popular organs to which he had made such a contribution as well as his thoughts on the new line being taken by the CNT leadership:

“Circumstances are in the saddle. Eschewing Byzantine scruples and outmoded prejudices, the Spanish people fell in line with the dialectic of history. The intervention... whether direct or indirect of world capitalism, forced a heroic option upon us: the option of forging an army suited to defence and offence. Naturally enough, as soon as the chaotic activity of the earliest moments ceased and organisation of the war was able to proceed in an orderly manner, those organs which had acted as our saviours ought to have faded away so as to leave the new organisational forces room to operate. We entered a higher stage, determined by the greater problem of overcoming an enemy of great (thanks to the help received from abroad) material power. The militias came to an end, being converted into regular units. The Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils automatically ceased to exist. The former were replaced by a new body: the Army. The latter by a new agency basically charged with the same functions: the war commissariat. At every level, the commissars perform, in organisational and legal terms, the functions performed with admirable zeal by the simple, enthusiastic men who were elected by the Corps of Carabineers, Assault Guards, National Republican Guards and small military units... They did so all together in fraternal concert with the representatives drawn from the factory and the field. The people, without discrimination as to functions but united by common class interest, was able to keep morale high and make an immeasurable sacrifice on the fronts...

“...Without that fervently revolutionary unity, forged in the grandiose heat of 19 July could it... unarmed ... have withstood an armed, disciplined, well-led enemy? Could the unity and zeal for battle of everyone, militias and armed institutions alike, have been maintained without the moral and organisational bond of the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Committees? We simply have to concede at all time the revolutionary and realistic premise of effecting at each stage the necessary transformations required for victory. Eschewing all prejudice, with a cool head and with intelligent audacity”.

From: *De Julio a Julio*, Alfonso Miguel, Barcelona, 1937.

## February 1937: Memorandum from War Committee of the Iron Column, 16 February 1937

“In the beginning, the State was merely a spectre to which no one paid attention. The workers’ organisations of the CNT and UGT represented the sole guarantee for the people of Spain. Then politics intervened — and almost without realising what was happening, our beloved CNT has transformed itself into a spectre itself, without might or life. All its energies are channelled into strengthening the state whose appendage it has become, and into extinguishing the flames of revolution lit by the workers of the CNT and UGT... Had we the backing of the government and of our own Organisation — referring to the responsible Committees — we should have had access to more equipment and men for the relief of our frontline comrades and been able to grant leave; but, since this was not to be, and we had instead to allow our troops to remain month after month in the trenches, it is clear that such a spirit of sacrifice cannot be demanded, nor does it exist, and each day brings tremendous problems... We accept that the Column’s internal problem is not easy to solve, before something serious happens, before demoralisation and weariness squander and jeopardise all we have won and held at the cost of infinite sacrifice. Before all of this comes to be grasped, it is absolutely essential to devise some solution satisfactory to all.

...If we are to remain alone in not accepting militarisation, contrary to the decisions of the CNT and the FAI, we shall remain starved, not only of governmental support, but also of the backing of our very own Organisation. With the necessary aid, our Column would have retained, undiluted, the revolutionary principles which accord with our character, but in the absence of such aid, we are obliged to concede the failure of our approach to war. We know that the overwhelming majority of our comrades will not be able to do less than demonstrate their indignation at those responsible for such a situation, but we warn them right away that their protests will be smothered by violence by the organisms of the state. It is no longer possible to stand up to the state and its injustices, for it is already sufficiently strong to be able to smash any obstacle in its path. Furthermore, the extreme gravity of the moment requires of us that we swallow our bitterness. Yet again we must take our lead from Christ. We are aware of the objectionable features of militarisation. A system of the sort does not sit well with our temperament, nor with the temperament of any who have always had a clear concept of freedom. But we are also alive to the inconveniences we should encounter were we to remain outside the orbit of the Ministry

of War. It pains us to have to acknowledge it, but only two options remain to us: disbandment of the Column, or militarisation. Anything else would be pointless.'



## April 1937 —An Open Letter to Federica Montseny

*Dear Comrade,*

It was my intention to address myself to all your comrade ministers, but once the pen was in my hand, I addressed myself spontaneously to you alone, and I did not wish to go against this instinctive impulse. The fact that I am not always in agreement with you neither astonishes you nor irritates you, and you have shown yourself cordially oblivious to criticisms which it would almost always have been fair, because it is human, to consider as unjust and excessive...

I could not sit back and accept the identity that you claimed between Bakuninist anarchism and the federalist Republicanism of Pi y Margall. I cannot pardon you for having written that “in Russia it was not Lenin the true builder of Russia, but Stalin in fact, the effective spirit with his practical realism, etc.” And I applauded Voline’s reply in *Terre Libre* to your entirely false claims about the Russian anarchist movement.

But it is not about that I wish to talk with you. On these matters, and indeed on others, I hope one day or another to talk to you personally... If I address you in public it is about matters that are infinitely more serious, to remind you of the enormous responsibilities, of which perhaps you are not aware because of your modesty.

In your speech of 3 January, you said:

“The anarchists have come into the government in order to prevent the Revolution from deviating from its course and in order to pursue it beyond the war, and also in order to oppose all possibility of dictatorial endeavours, from whatever source it might come.”

Well then, comrade, in April, after three months experience of collaboration, we find ourselves confronted with a situation in which serious developments are taking place while even worse ones are beginning to materialise.

Where our movement has little grass roots support, such as in the Basque country, the Levant and in Castile, the counter-revolution is oppressing people and threatens to crush everything. The Government is at Valencia and it is from there that Assault Guards are setting out with the sole purpose of disarming the revolutionary cells formed for defensive purposes. The Vilanesa incident brings to mind Casas Viejas. It is the Civil Guards and the Assault Guards who keep their arms. It is they too, who, in the rear, must control the ‘uncontrollables’ — in other words disarm the revolutionary cells that are equipped with a few rifles and revolvers. This is taking place at a time during a civil war in which anything is possible, and in regions close

to the front, a front that is irregular in line and not even mathematically certain. All this is taking place while a political distribution of arms is called for — a political distribution which aims at sending arms only in accordance with strict necessity (strict necessity, we hope, will be enough) to the Aragón front, the armed guard of agrarian collectivisation in Aragón and the buttress of the Aragón Council, that Iberian Ukraine.

You are in a government that has offered France and Britain advantages in Morocco, while in fact we should have been obliged to proclaim, officially, the political autonomy of Morocco. I imagine that you, as an anarchist, must think this affair ignoble and stupid; but I believe the time has come to make it known that you and the other anarchist ministers do not agree with such proposals... [Berneri goes on to refer to his article of 24 October, 1936 in which he proposed independence for Morocco].

It goes without saying that one cannot guarantee, simultaneously, British and French interests in Morocco and at the same time agitate for insurrection. Valencia is continuing the policies of Madrid. This must change. And to change it, a clear and firm statement of one's intentions must be made — because at Valencia there are some influences at work pushing for a peace with Franco.

Writing in the *Populaire* of 3 March, Jean Zyromski said: "Moves aimed at concluding a peace are clearly visible, a peace which would, in reality, signal not only the end of the Spanish Revolution, but also the total loss of the social conquests already achieved.

"Neither Caballero nor Franco." Such is the formula that might sum up a certain point of view, and I am not sure if it does not have the support of certain political, diplomatic, and even governmental circles in Britain and in France.

These influences, these manoeuvres, explain different obscure points: for example, the inactivity of the loyalist fleet. The concentration of troops coming from Morocco, the acts of piracy against Canarias and Baleares, the fall of Malaga, are the consequences of this inactivity. And the war is not yet over! If Prieto is incapable and indolent, why tolerate him? If Prieto is bound by a policy which paralyses the fleet, why not denounce this policy?

You, anarchist ministers, you make eloquent speeches and you write brilliant articles, but it is not with these speeches and articles that the war will be won or the Revolution defended. The former will be won and the latter upheld by passing from the defensive to the offensive. The strategy of holding our position cannot last forever. The problem cannot be solved by issuing words of command: general mobilisations, arms to the Front, unified command, the people's Army, etc., etc. The problem can be solved by accomplishing those things which can be accomplished.

The *Dépêche de Toulouse* of 17 January published the following lines: "The main preoccupation of the Minister of the Interior is with re-establishing the authority of the State over that of the Groups and the 'uncontrollables', whatever their origin."

It is self-evident that when, for months, an attempt is made to annihilate the 'uncontrollables', the problem of liquidating the Fifth Column cannot possibly be resolved.

The suppression of the internal enemy can only be accomplished by experienced revolutionaries investigating and repressing its activities. An internal policy of class collaboration and of flattery towards the middle classes leads inevitably to tolerance towards politically ambiguous elements. The Fifth Column consists not only of fascist elements, but also of all those malcontents who hope for a moderate republic. At the moment it is the latter who are benefiting from the tolerance of those who persecute the 'uncontrollables'.

The elimination of the "internal front" was a condition of full and radical commitment by the Defence Committees set up by the CNT and UGT.

We are assisting in the infiltration into the control centres of the popular army of doubtful elements, doubtful elements which do not offer the guarantees of a political and union organisation. The political committees and delegates of the militias used to exercise a healthy control which, today, is weakened by the predominance of strictly military procedures of advancement and promotion. We must strengthen the authority of these committees and delegates.

We are witnessing a new development – which could have disastrous consequences – in which whole battalions are commanded by officers who no longer enjoy the esteem and affection of the soldiers. The situation is serious because the value of the Spanish militia is directly in proportion to the confidence they have in their own commander. It is, therefore, essential to re-establish the system of direct election and the right of dismissal from below.

A serious error has been committed by accepting authoritarian structures – not because they were errors as seen from a formal point of view, but because they concealed enormous errors and political objectives that have nothing to do with the needs of the war.

I have had the opportunity of discussing the matter with senior Italian, French and Belgian officers and I have come to the conclusion that they have a much clearer and rational understanding of the real needs of discipline than certain neo-generals who claim to be realists.

I believe the hour has come to establish the confederal army, in the same way as the Socialist Party has set up its own company, the Fifth Regiment of the Popular Militia. I believe the hour has come to resolve the problem of the "One Command" by effectively realising "unity of command", a move which would permit us to go on to the offensive on the Aragón Front. I believe the hour has come to do away with the thousands of civil guards and assault guards who are kept away from the Front because their function is to control the 'uncontrollables'. I believe the hour has come to finish with certain flagrant extravagances – such as respect for Sunday rest and of certain "workers' rights" which are in direct conflict with the safety of the Revolution.

We must, above all, maintain the morale of the combatants. Louis Bertoni, interpreting the feelings expressed by various Italian comrades fighting on the Huesca Front, wrote not so long ago:

“The Spanish War, thus stripped of all new faith, of all ideas of social change, of any revolutionary grandeur, is no more than a popular war of national independence that must be fought to avoid the extermination which world plutocracy has in mind. It remains a terrible question of life and death, but it is no longer a war affirming a new regime and a new humanity. We agree that all is not yet lost, but, in reality, all is threatened and attacked; our people have adopted the language of renunciation in the same way as Italian socialism when confronted with the advances of fascism. Beware of provocation! Calm and serenity! Order and discipline!

“All these things which, in effect, boil down to letting matters run their course. And, as fascism triumphed in Italy, anti-socialism in republican guise cannot fail to win, unless the unforeseen comes to pass. It is useless to add that we are simply making a statement of fact, without condemning our own people; we could not say how the conduct of these people could be different and effective as long as Italo-German pressure is increasing at the Front while that of the Bolshevik bourgeois is growing in the rear.”

I do not have Louis Bertoni’s modesty. I presume to assert that the Spanish anarchists could follow a political line different from the prevailing one. My experience of various great revolutions in recent years, and from what I read in the Spanish proletarian press itself, allow me to advise upon certain lines of conduct.

I believe that you must ask yourself the question if you are defending the Revolution better, if you are making a greater contribution to the struggle against fascism by participating in the government — or whether you would be infinitely more useful carrying the flame of your magnificent skill with words to the combatants themselves as well as behind the lines.

The time has also come to make clear the significance for unification that our participation in government could have. We must speak to the masses, appeal to them to judge whether Marcel Cachin is right when he states in *Humanité* of 23 March:

“The responsible anarchists are multiplying their efforts towards unification, and their appeals are more and more understood.”

Or is it *Pravda* and *Izvestia* who are right when they libel the Spanish anarchists, calling them saboteurs of unity?

It is necessary to call upon the masses to judge the moral and political complicity of the Spanish anarchist press as to the dictatorial offences of Stalin, the persecutions against the Russian anarchists, the monstrous trial against the Leninist and Trotskyist opposition — a silence more than compensated by the calumnies of *Izvestia* against *Solidaridad Obrera*.

It is necessary to appeal to the masses to judge whether certain moves to sabotage provisioning are contained within the plan announced on 17 December 1936, by *Pravda*:

“As for Catalonia, the purging of Trotskyist and anarcho-syndicalist elements has commenced; this work will be conducted with the same energy as that which was done in the USSR.”

The time has come to enquire whether the anarchists are in the government for the purpose of playing the role of vestal virgins tending a fire about to be extinguished, or whether they are there henceforth to serve as the Phrygian Cap for politicians, flirting with the enemy or with the forces anxious for the restoration of the 'Republic of all classes'.

The problem is set by the clear evidence of a crisis that is outstripping the men who embody it.

The dilemma: war or revolution no longer has any meaning. The only dilemma is the following: either victory over Franco, thanks to the revolutionary war, or defeat.

The problem for you and the other comrades is to choose between the Versailles of Thiers and the Paris of the Commune before Thiers and Bismarck form the Holy Alliance. It is for you to reply, for you are the "light under the bushel".

Camillo Berneri, *Guerra di Classe*, No. 12, 14 April 1937

## **April 1937: Confidential letter from an agent of Negrín, 15 April 1937**

“...I had no wish to see them succeed in their endeavour. I think I ought to explain why. The arguments put to me by Roldán Cortada by way of justifying his intended purchase of arms struck me as most unconvincing. His sole theme was that battle had to be joined with the FAI and that the membership of the FAI are armed. Supposing that it really were necessary to take on the FAI and that the FAI membership are armed, it behoves the government and not the militants of other parties to join that battle, as well as to disarm those FAI members who may bear arms. I put this argument to comrade Roldán Cortada, but to no avail. All I achieved was that he would not let me in on the negotiations into which he had entered. Thus I do not know whether comrade Roldán Cortada and his companion managed to purchase the weapons they spoke about. Nor have I made any effort to authenticate this. I have no particular interest in discovering this. But it is a fact that once the two comrades of whom I have been speaking had departed for Barcelona, a large number of militants of the United Socialist Party of Catalonia passed through Paris and all of them put to anyone who would give them a hearing the very same contention as comrade Roldán Cortada ... to wit, that battle had to be joined with the FAI. Latterly I have had reports of leading comrades from this party, comrade Comorera among them, having met with communist personnel from other countries and of agreement having been reached regarding a plan for a thoroughgoing attack upon the FAI. This business strikes me as extremely dangerous. If comrade Roldán Cortada did manage to buy the weapons he was charged with procuring and if the FAI membership are armed, as our comrade assures me they are, then at any moment Barcelona is going to be the scene of a most unedifying spectacle upon which the rebels will capitalise with all too ready a will. Already they concoct such things at the moment without any foundation in fact; so now they are about to be made a magnificent present. If the FAI truly constitutes a danger to the war we are waging, it falls to the government to eliminate the danger. It has more than enough resources to do so. To permit another party, even our am party, to shoulder that governmental task, an exclusively governmental task, may entail consequences most grave.

I apologise to you for expressing myself in the above fashion when my task is merely to inform. But I can see how detrimental that which is being hatched would be to the war, and I cannot refrain from expressing what I feel. What one must seek is victory in the war, and this does not strike me as the way to win it. The opposite indeed: it strikes me as the very means of placing victory in jeopardy. This is why I write thus in reporting to you the visit of comrade Roldán Cortada and that which I have observed since.

Accept, dear D.J., my most heartfelt greetings – ‘C’

Rudolf Rocker Archives – Spain. Spanje b.o. Documents Folio C. Document No. 119.

## May: Unpublished Letter to Max Nettlau from Emma Goldman

*“Dear Comrade:* Your letter of violent vituperation reached me soon enough...As regards your impatience with me, to put it mildly, I can only explain it by your complete reversal of mind and feeling. It is not so very long ago, not more than three or four years, when you showed no understanding of syndicalism – when you thought it more advisable for anarchists to ally themselves with liberal democratic elements rather than to busy themselves with bringing to life large economic organisations. Now you have no patience whatever with comrades who refuse to see in the leading anarchists in Spain demigods whose actions are not to be questioned. Don’t you consider this rather a plunge from your former attitude? Your former position regarding all Governments and their danger?

Now, while I am heart and soul with the struggle of the Spanish comrades, and while I have done my utmost to plead their cause, for which I would cheerfully give my life, I must insist that they are vulnerable: they have made terrible mistakes which are already bearing fruit. I hold Federica Montseny, García Oliver and several others of the leading comrades responsible for the gains made by the communists and for the danger now threatening the Spanish Revolution and the CNT-FAI. My very first interview with these two comrades had shown me that they were on the “borderline” of reformism. I had never met Oliver before, but I had met Federica in 1929. The change, since the Revolution swept her to the highest notch as leader, was only too apparent. This impression was strengthened every time I talked to her about the compromise she and the others had made. It was too obvious to me that these comrades are walking into the hands of the Soviet government. That in showing their gratitude to Stalin and his regime (though why they need gratitude in addition to the gold Stalin received for whatever he gave in arms, I do not know) dire results are sure to follow. Incidentally, it also meant the betrayal of our comrades in the concentration camps and prisons of Russia. I never saw a greater breach of faith with anarchist principles than the joint “love-feast” of the CNT-FAI with the Russian satraps in Barcelona. It was a sight for the gods, to see García Oliver and the Russian Consul competing with each other in glowing tribute to the Soviet government, or the eulogies that appeared daily in *Solidaridad Obrera*. Not a word did the paper, or Oliver, or Federica have to say about the Russian people, about the fact that the Russian Revolution had been castrated and that Stalin’s henchmen are responsible for tens of thousands of lives. It was a disgraceful affair – unnecessary and humiliating! I have not written about this to anyone, dear comrade, although I felt indignation and could have cried out my contempt of the so-called leaders of the CNT-FAI.



Granted that to save the antifascist situation, arms from Russia were needed, but why was it necessary to make it more than a business deal for which Spain paid heavily in gold, and the CNT paid in loss of much of its position and its strength?

Surely no one with any clear vision could be blinded to the motive of Russia's sudden interest, after three and a half months of antifascist struggle in Spain. Now the real motive is beginning to be recognised by the very people who sang hosanna to comrade Stalin; it was for no other reason than to get possession of Madrid and, if possible, to increase the armed communist forces in the rest of Spain, in anticipation of the "happy" moment when the anarchists can be exterminated as they have been in Russia. By right I should have given this to the public. I should have written all about this. My silence was, in a measure, consent to the betrayal of the comrades in Russia. I readily admit that. I did not do it because I did not have the heart to expose Federica and the others in our press outside of Spain. Yet you come along and throw brimstone and fire on my head because I dared, if you please, to explain some of the blunders of the leading members of the CNT-FAI in my statement...

Well, I am afraid we will probably not come to any understanding. You seem to feel about Federica and the Urales family as a mother does about her "chicks", nobody must touch them even remotely. I myself admired them for years: I admire her brilliant oratorical abilities, but I can say she has feet of clay, and I can see no reason why it should not be admitted. She has gone terribly to the right, and wearing a revolver in the belt does not make it any more to the left. However, I am certain that the comrades, when they come to see that politicians, whether in pants or skirts, whether anarchist or socialists, must be watched. They will go from the fundamental principles as they always have done in the past ...

Fraternally and affectionately — in spite of our disagreements

**Emma Goldman"**

## **September: The international debate on war and revolution**

Within the international anarchist movement the debate over the question of war or revolution continued to rage unabated. The September 1937 issue of *One Big Union Monthly*, the North American journal of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) published a debate between the two schools of thought. Brandt, editor of the journal *Cultura Proletaria*, defended the position of the CNT leadership in giving priority to the prosecution of the antifascist war over revolutionary peoples' war, while Pierre Besnard of the IWMA defended fundamental anarchist principles.

## “Catastrophic Revolution” by Brandt

“I want to refresh the memory of those who are preaching 100 percent revolution regardless of any consideration, by pointing out to them the Bilbao catastrophe, which opens the way to a complete fascist conquest of Spain. To be sure, comrade Besnard, very nice to place the revolution above the war; but it is the war that is imposing itself upon us in taking precedence over the revolution. The war got hold of us and we have to fight it out whether we like it or not. We can temporarily suspend the struggle against our Spanish capitalism, but we cannot, for a single instant, stop the fight against fascism. The revolution depends on our volition, but the war is imposed upon us. We cannot devote ourselves to the revolution if we have not first liquidated the war ...

Whether we like it or not, we are forced to remain tied to this coalition of anti-anarchist ‘friends’ in the common struggle against fascism, even at the risk of being stabbed in the very heart of the revolution. It is a danger one is always exposed to when, in order to fight a common enemy, it is necessary to associate with other parties. In order to save yourself from death at the front, you risk being knifed in the rear ...

The fact is that this line of compromise made possible the maintenance of an anti-fascist unity, and made possible the creation, out of nothing, of a military force that was capable of holding up the fascist armies, while a fight carried on in the rear would have paralysed this effort.

If the CNT-FAI followed the line of compromise, it did not do so by choice but because it was compelled. They would have much preferred to carry on the straight fight for the social revolution...

To those who are ceaselessly demanding that the anarchists fight in the rear as well as on the front, we are now posing, somewhat bluntly, the following question: What are you revolutionists of foreign countries doing towards stopping this fascist invasion that is strangling the revolution? You make collections, you are loudly protesting, you are writing fiery articles. Excuse us for our impertinence when we say that fascism will not be destroyed by collections and fiery articles. Moral decency and human sensibility demand that you do more than that... Your duty, the duty of the world revolutionary proletariat, is to prevent your democratic governments from blockading our sea coasts, our frontiers, while allowing the fascist invasion. And your duty at this moment is to prevent your governments from maintaining that control that is strangling us. But to do that it requires revolutionary action on your part, and fighting on the streets; but you also find yourselves unable to do that because, like us, you are surrounded by fascists and counter-revolutionaries ...

The anarchists of the CNT-FAI preferred to run the risk of Bolshevism rather than the certainty of extermination by fascism. Revolution had to choose between a probable death and a certain death.

Today, we find ourselves in the same tragic dilemma, fascism is about to defeat us. Who can even consider starting a conflict in the rear, now? Counter-revolution may fear a triumph of an anarchist revolution more than a triumph of fascism; while we, we are determined to entirely destroy fascism so that we may have the possibility of carrying on the social revolution.

With tears in their eyes — like many of those who were compelled, on 7 May, to give up their arms — with rage in their hearts, the anarchists found it necessary to be tolerant, to show a measure of tolerance to counter-revolution, until the day when, perhaps unable to bear up to the continual provocation, they will react, and that may bring about the catastrophe at the hands of the fascists. And who knows? Perhaps that is exactly what the counter-revolution desires.

The two jaws of the pincers are holding anarchism in Spain by the throat: fascism on one side, imperialist, democratic, Bolshevik-bourgeois counter-revolution on the other side. What will the revolutionists of the world do to save Spanish anarchism, and with it the revolution?’

**Brandt.**

## Pierre Besnard's reply to '*Catastrophic Revolution*'

“We have never been unaware of the difficult tasks that confronted our CNT comrades. But we do not agree with comrade Brandt concerning the character of the armed force charged with the defence of the revolution. Basing ourselves on the lessons offered by history, we stated long before the outbreak, of the Spanish revolution that a government force is essentially a counter-revolutionary force which will strangle the revolution the instant the masters of the State deem it favourable, even if the revolution is in its descending phase. We never ceased telling our Spanish comrades that a confederal militia, on the contrary, constitutes the essential instrument of defence of the revolution.

Brandt claims that in order to win it was necessary to accept the militarisation of the popular militia columns. We do not agree with him.

In spite of the assurances he gives — and which we have known before — we continue to believe that it would have been possible: a) to organise the united command; b) to realise the unity of armaments; c) to obtain the unity of provisioning, by establishing a technical organism functioning in accordance with syndicalist principles and under the permanent control of the labour unions.

Like all the others, this problem was essentially a problem of organisation, and the CNT — or the CNT and UGT — were perfectly qualified to resolve it.

As for discipline, ‘the principle force of the army’ as they say in the French barracks, it was just as easy to obtain it from the fighters of the front and of the rear. And we add that, having the consent of the men who would have to apply it, the discipline would have been infinitely superior to that imposed on the men by the constraining order of the State.

Meanwhile, we are aware that Brandt, who was not there at the initial phase of the revolution (the ascending phase), could not be convinced by our arguments unless we bring this discussion back to its original framework; therefore, let us try to do this so that the debate develops in all its clarity ...

They (the CNT and FAI) were absolute masters of the situation on the front as well as in the rear. The followers of the CNT-FAI represented 85 percent of the effectives in Catalonia; they were in the majority in other regions of free Spain, with the exception of Madrid.

Was it not possible, then, for the CNT-FAI, the inspirators and initiators of the movement against the fascist forces and enjoying, in this two-fold capacity, the full confidence of the masses, to definitely and for all time rid themselves of the politicians and

of the governments, to decree the mobilisation of all the wealth, as was demanded, even by Durruti himself?

And was it not possible, with the product of this mobilisation, to acquire the necessary arms with which to take Huesca and Zaragoza — these two keys to the war — from the fascists and to open up the road to Madrid where the frozen and immobilised gold was waiting to be put to use?

And, further, was it not possible to cut off supplying Madrid with foodstuff from Catalonia and the Levant if Caballero persisted in not understanding that his duty was to give aid to the rest of Spain in arming and reconstructing.

And was it not possible to have tried a Moroccan diversion that would have chased Franco out of there, with no hope of ever returning?

Finally, was it not possible to combine this action in Morocco with the starting of a revolution in Portugal, where the COT (General Confederation of Labour) was only waiting the word to begin this revolution, being assured in advance of 80 percent support from the army and the navy, and of 100 percent support from the population?

...

These are, it seems to us, something totally different from mere collections and fiery speeches. The National Committee of the CNT, possessing, as it does, all this data in its files, knows the truth of them better than anyone else ... ask of the outstanding militants of the CNT and FAI ... of the comrades of Catalonia, Aragón, Levant and of the Centre whether the authors of the plans had not come there themselves, in person, to aid and supervise the application in detail of these plans? ...

Let us now come to the question of fascism itself. Do you believe that the problem is as simple as you present it? No, it is altogether different. You will allow us to state that if there are antifascist counter-revolutionary forces today, it is because they were allowed to come to life, to organise themselves and to conquer for themselves a position not at all justified by conditions in July 19, 1936.

Had the CNT-FAI been aware of their strength, and had they acted in such a manner as to attract into their orbits all the elements that today are composing the counter-revolutionary anti-fascism, this thing would have been reduced to its simple expression.

Having failed to act in the right manner, the CNT-FAI allowed these forces to develop by their side in their own protecting shadow. At the beginning, these politicianist forces — who were working entirely under orders from Moscow — “represented nothing”, as the saying was then. In a word, they did not exist. Today, and for some time now, they are the absolute masters of the situation: masters of the governmental apparatus, of the army, of the general administration of the country. Why? After the foregoing, asking the question is answering it.

That is where the underestimation of the peril, that the foreign comrades have ceaselessly been pointing out, led to. These forces should not only not have been allowed to grow, but they should have been wiped out and the struggle, in accordance with our principles, in all its strictness, should have continued.

That they were able to impose their will, it was first of all necessary for them not to encounter that active resistance which such behaviour, on their part, should have provoked at the beginning of the events in Barcelona.

It is natural that there should now be difficulty in fighting against them and, on account of that difficulty, that the revolutionary efforts should be diminished by that much; it is also natural that the situation should now be deemed insurmountable because of the way the fight against the counter-revolutionary anti-fascist elements have been conducted, at the time when the CNT was the only force.

But it is an enormity that you should believe, comrade Brandt, that a revolutionary objective to the war be abandoned; that you should think we would agree to follow the path of least resistance, without any attempt to react; that you should subordinate everything to the winning of the war — the objective of which is the restoration of the democratic republic.

Our opinion is that efforts should be made to re-create, by actions conformable to our strength, the conditions that evoked the enthusiasm of the beginning, which brought about the veritable revolutionary realisations on the morrow of 19 July 1936, of the 19 July that re-appeared again on 6 May 1937, and was passed up in order to avoid responding to the provocations.

Today, it is from the interior of Spain that the revolution is receiving its greatest support. This support is not coming from the outside, except when there are successes in the interior which permits the broadening of the revolution. Never has a revolution followed a different course from 1789 to our own day. It is often only after long lapses of time that a victorious revolution finds an echo in other countries. Our international movement, numerically feeble, has done everything it was possible for it to do; there is no sense in saying or writing that it has not done its duty. Its weakness does not prevent it from having a clear vision, and we are convinced that after all is said and done, the revolutionary masses will act in the sense they always indicated: against fascists and against the counter-revolutionary antifascists; that is, against all the combined forces of capitalism, among which the workers, with good reason, will not differentiate ...

And, in conclusion, allow us to state that we are just as much realists, and less 'catastrophical' than you.

**Pierre Besnard.**

## June: Anarchist Intelligence and Security Services

The document outlining the proposed anarchist intelligence service, the *Servicio de Información y Coordinación* (SIC), is a masterpiece of Leninist demagoguery:

“Every revolutionary party or organisation has, unfailingly, to wage bitter struggles, sometimes against visible enemies, sometimes against others working in the shadows. Thus the triumph of its precepts and the full implementation of its hegemony (these being the aspirations which motivate it and give it meaning) should be the result of the solid and continuing task of annihilating the opposition.” The document explores the need for “disciplined organisation” and ‘consistent, steely political conduct’ and “jettisoning archaic norms” so as to face up to “modern methods of political contention”.

The draft was approved by the national committees of the three branches of the libertarian movement and a *Servicio Nacional de Coordinación* (National Co-ordination Agency) was set up to brief the leadership of the anarchist movement on “secret” matters relating to the military and political progress of the war.

In principle, the structure the Information and Co-ordination Service (SIC) was divided in four sub-sections: Military, Internal Security, Public Services and Information. These were answerable to “Subsection One” or the Secretariat, which, co-ordinated by an “accountable” comrade who would keep the national committees of the organisations represented well briefed.

Little has been written about the anarchist secret services because the majority of the reports in the CNT archives in the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam are either in code or signed by “nommes de guerre”. Many of the reports are of a highly dramatic nature, some relate to irregularities in the activities of Prieto’s Weapons Purchasing Commission in Paris, while others deal with ‘Confidential Intelligence’ on the current political and diplomatic situation.



## The POUM: Trotsky and the POUM

The POUM was formed in 1935 by an amalgamation of the Communist Left, a Trotskyist organisation led by Nin and Andrade, and the *Bloque Obrero y Campesino* (BOC – Workers’ and Peasants’ Bloc). In January 1936, the POUM’s decision to sign the Popular Front agreement promoted Trotsky to denounce the POUM in an article on 22 January entitled *The Treason of the Workers’ Party for Marxist Unification (POUM)*. Trotsky’s anathema led to a cooling of relations between the POUM and the supporters of the Fourth (Trotskyist) International and severely damaged the credibility of Spanish Trotskyists.

Unable to understand Spanish and with his relationship with Nin broken off, Trotsky had no reliable source of information on what was happening inside Spain. When the revolution came he was one of the few who failed to greet it with the joy felt by the masses of people everywhere. Maybe the knowledge that Trotskyism would play no part in the revolutionary process was the reason for his refusal to interest himself in what was happening in Spain. Had it not been for the existence of the POUM it is unlikely Trotsky would have written much on the Spanish Revolution and civil war. All of his contemporary articles were polemics written with the express purpose of combating the POUM.

According to Trotsky, the main problem facing the revolutionaries was not a shortage of arms but a revolutionary party with a correct programme to implement it. What the correct policy was has never been very clear. If it is to be judged by its practical effects then it is purely a matter of pragmatism and achieved aims, something in which Trotsky, the archetypal loser, was sadly lacking. Unable, or unwilling, to face up to the realities of the Soviet Union, Trotsky saw the crisis of mankind as a simple question of leadership; get rid of the bad guys and replace them with the good guys.

Jorge Semprun assesses Trotsky and Trotskyism’s contribution to political thought as a search for confirmations:

“To sum up: Marxism was not, for Trotsky, a tool with which to probe the concrete contents of reality but rather something with which to locate those features of it which bore out his ready-made interpretation. From which it follows that, not only the Church will be found to be orthodox but so will its sects and monks.”

Trotsky’s otherwise clear, critical faculties had a tendency to cloud when it came to assessing his own analyses. His arguments were, for him, irrefutable and mathematically calculable. He had an intolerance of mind that turned political disagreements into heresy. Failures and errors were always due to other people’s lack of understanding of the “fundamental line”. Trotsky himself was immune from all criticism: “Marx made mistakes, Lenin made mistakes, the Bolshevik Party as a whole made some, too. But these mistakes were corrected in time, thanks to the correctness of its fundamental line”.<sup>1</sup> This “fundamental line” was the exclusive property of

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<sup>1</sup> *La Crisis del Movimiento Comunista*, F. Claudin, Paris 1970, p. xi (preface by Jorge Semprun).

Bolshevik Leninism, the only ideology empowered to act in the name of the proletariat. All other parties and organisations were traitors to the working class.

Trotsky's dealings with the POUM and its leaders, particularly Nin, were arrogant. He refused to listen to any argument which differed from his own and chose to portray the facts to suit himself. He even went as far as accusing the POUM of supporting views it never held. Trotsky's main disagreements with the POUM were: that it signed the Popular Front pact of February 1936; that it failed to seize power in July 1936; that it joined the Generalidad; that it failed to be implacable in its denunciations of every other organisation; it had been conciliatory towards the anarchists. For Trotsky, the Russian revolution was the flawless paradigm, the only paradigm. When it was suggested to him that conditions in Spain were not those that existed in Russia in 1917, he replied, sneeringly, that this was "...The old, old argument of every opportunist" and that "...abstract concepts of that ilk cannot be taken seriously."<sup>2</sup> In a talk given in April 1937, Andrés Nin made a direct reply to Trotsky when he stated that "the formulae of the Russian revolution, applied in mechanistic fashion, will lead to disaster". He added "We must take the spirit from the Russian revolution, and not the letter."<sup>3</sup> To Trotsky the spirit and the letter were one and the same thing.

These are some of the reasons why Trotsky was so hostile towards the party that was, in every respect, closer to his ideas than any other, and towards men like Nin and Andrade who had been closely involved with the Fourth International. Certainly Nin's decision to form his own party instead of infiltrating the Socialist Party as Trotsky wished was another reason for the disagreement. Another may have been the fact that the Stalinist secret service had managed to plant one of its agents, a Russian-Pole by the name of Zborowski or "Etienne" in the international secretariat of the Fourth International, who had been ordered to sour relations between Trotsky and the POUM.<sup>4</sup>

The non existence of a Trotskyist movement in Spain at the outbreak of the war led to foreign Fourth International sympathisers to attempt to "enter" the POUM during the early months of the war. These sympathisers, mainly French, Italian and Belgian Trotskyists, who referred to themselves as "Bolshevik-Leninists", were few in number, perhaps around 50, and were to be found mainly in Madrid and Barcelona. They attempted to infiltrate the POUM in August 1936, but were refused admission by the POUM Executive Committee on the grounds that the spokesmen, Jean Rous and Benjamin Péret, wanted recognition as a Bolshevik-Leninist faction that was unacceptable to them. In spite of this failure to infiltrate the POUM en masse, around 20 Trotskyists managed to enlist in the Lenin battalion together with the POUM's international volunteers and fought bravely in Huesca.

Andrés Nin's role as councillor of Justice in the Generalidad created an unbridgeable gap between the Trotskyists and the POUM. It was a minuscule party and could ill afford to be deprived of the talents of one of its most capable militants. Two rival groups eventually emerged from among the foreign Trotskyists; the *Voz Leninista* group and the El Soviet group, these being the name of their respective papers. *Voz Leninista* whose main contributors were "Munis" (Manuel Fernández Grandizo), Benjamin Péret, the surrealist painter and the Polish/German exile "Moulin", was the officially recognised section of the Fourth International in Spain. The *El So-*

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<sup>2</sup> *Escritos sobre España*, Trotsky, p.159.

<sup>3</sup> *La Batalla*, Barcelona, 26 April 1937.

<sup>4</sup> *Le guépéou [GPU] dans le mouvement Trotskiste*, George Vereecken, Paris, 1975.

viet group, led by the Italian Nicola di Bartolemeo (Fosco) while calling itself Trotskyist, refused to recognise the Secretariat for a Fourth International. It was supported by the International Communist Party (PCI) whose paper *La Commune* was edited by Raymond Molinier and Pierre Frank.

By May 1937 the *El Soviet* group was down to seven or eight people (according to 'Fosco's' companion, 'Sonia' — Virginia Gervasini) and its involvement in the May Days was limited to putting in an appearance on the barricades. *El Soviet* published no leaflets between 3 and 9 May. The *Voz Leninista* group, with 15 members in Barcelona managed to issue one short text on the second day of the fighting, Tuesday 4 May, calling for a general strike, the arming of the working class and "unity of action of the CNT-FAI-POUM".

At no time, either during the "May Days" or afterwards did the Trotskyists and the Friends of Durruti publish or sign any joint text, nor was any reference made in *El Amigo del Pueblo* to the *Voz Leninista*. The only common ground between the Trotskyists and the Friends of Durruti was their opposition to the cease-fire.

Pavell and Clara Thalmann met Erwin Wolf, Trotsky's secretary, and Munis, "the real political head of the Spanish Trotskyists", in Barcelona immediately after the May Days who explained the Trotskyist "fundamental line". Spain was, apparently, in a phase of ascendant revolution. The evidence for this was the May Events had truly exposed to the world the unbreakable elan of the workers and their self-defence capability. It only remained to capture more ground: the Caballero government, sorely weakened was shortly about to be brought down."

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Stuart Christie  
Building Utopia  
The Spanish Revolution 1936–1937  
February 2003

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