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The Spanish Revolution of 1936

Archival documents vs. the myths of the historians

Vadim Damier

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Eighty years have passed since the beginning of the Spanish Revolution, and one would expect that after all this time passions would have cooled, giving way to a sober and more balanced analysis of those bygone events. And yet one can't help feeling at times that the war in Spain took place only yesterday, at least judging by the debates which are carried on around this topic in scientific and pseudo-scientific circles in Spain itself or, indeed, in Russia.

Of course this isn't accidental. In terms of social relations, the Spanish Revolution was one of the most profound events of the 20th century, even though it suffered a crushing defeat. However, too many social and political currents, along with the adherents of a wide variety of viewpoints, have interpreted the history of the Spanish Civil War as the confirmation of their own social concepts and opinions without regard to the actual facts.

Not surprisingly, this extreme politicization has contributed to the emergence of a multitude of myths about the Spanish

Civil War, which have been absorbed, reproduced and repeated by historians up to our own times. Especially unlucky in this regard are “history’s losers”—the Spanish anarcho-syndicalists. For them, there is almost no one to intercede, with the exception of activists from their own movement and a few professional historians who can almost be counted with the fingers of one hand.

Myths about the Spanish anarchists and their role in the Revolution and Civil War are widespread and tenacious. They range from accusations of radical adventurism, arbitrary violence, mass repression, compulsory collectivization, conspiracies and the undermining of the “anti-fascist front” to claims that the experience of anarchism in Spain proved the unsoundness of anarchist ideas which almost led to the betrayal of the revolution.

In a brief article there isn’t space for an examination of all such myths. Unfortunately, historians often prefer to follow established thinking or place their trust unconditionally in the memoir literature (some of which is of dubious value, while others, such as the memoirs of García Oliver, must be treated cautiously). And this is done instead of referring to archival documents, which allow us to easily refute incorrect assessments and prove that many circumstances should be regarded quite differently, and that many events proceeded quite differently from what is claimed in the literature.

I will focus on just two issues in the history of the Spanish Revolution and Civil War, and try to show how an appeal to archival sources can essentially change our conceptions.

First: what sort of decision was taken by the Spanish anarcho-syndicalists after the suppression of the military mutiny in Barcelona on July 19 through 20, 1936?

Almost without exception, historians claim that during a series of conferences and meetings of the Barcelonian and Catalan activists of the National Confederation of Labor (CNT) and the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI), there was

almost unanimous agreement to refrain from proclaiming libertarian communism, thereby declining to implement the decisions of the May 1936 CNT Congress in Zaragoza, in favor of collaboration with the other so-called “anti-fascist forces.” It’s true that historians differ as to the dates of these meetings, and are not completely clear on what exactly was discussed at each of them. However, researchers concur that the majority of anarcho-syndicalists and anarchists approved of the refusal to proclaim libertarian communism, i.e., the carrying out of an anarchist social revolution. And this despite the evidence of a number of witnesses and participants in the events (Abel Paz and Liberto Callejas, for example), that the “rank-and-file” of the movement took a different position.

The matter is complicated by the fact that the minutes of these meetings have not survived (although García Oliver affirms in his memoirs that such minutes were taken). But in the archives of the CNT preserved in the Institute for Social History in Amsterdam, there is a very interesting document that sheds an entirely different light on events. This is the record of an extended meeting of the National Committee of the CNT held on July 29. This was the first meeting after the start of the military uprising, at which the situation of the country on a national scale was discussed. In these minutes we find:

“The delegate of the Catalanian Regional Confederation described the fighting which our organization in Catalonia was engaged in. From the delegate’s description, one must conclude that victory was achieved solely thanks to the participation of members of the CNT and FAI. At the present time, and as a consequence of this victory, our comrades enjoy hegemony in all sectors of Catalonia. They are ensuring that life goes on in an orderly manner in all cities, towns, and villages...

“The delegate goes on to express the view that the majority of our members are apparently inclined, as a consequence of the predominance of our Organization, to proceed to the establishment of Libertarian Communism throughout the whole of

Catalonia. He declared that if the columns of comrades converging on Zaragoza are able to capture this city, the minority position will no longer have the possibility, as has been the case heretofore, to resist the bulk of the members of the Organization. The majority, he repeats, are going ahead with setting up our ideal, without worrying about what conditions prevail in the other regional confederations.”¹

This document represents the best evidence of how the anarcho-syndicalists really assessed the situation after the Barcelona victory, and how they intended to act. It implies not only that the majority of Catalonian anarcho-syndicalists advocated the immediate declaration of libertarian communism, but also that the July Plenum had not in fact taken a decision to refrain from proclaiming it. The Catalonian regional organization of the CNT decided only to postpone this step until the liberation of Zaragoza by the anarchist “militias”! In other words, it was decided not to decide anything yet. This choice was made in the hope that the situation would change for the better.

However, the CNT and FAI had maneuvered themselves into a trap. By putting everything on a single factor and linking the future of the social revolution to the possible liberation of one city (of no matter what importance), the anarcho-syndicalists found themselves heading down a slippery slope leading to a dead end.

They were soon to experience shock and dismay when it turned out that they couldn’t take Zaragoza. Suddenly they had to set a new course under unforeseen conditions. They had to decide whether to proclaim libertarian communism and proceed to the anarchist revolution, despite the failure of their previous plans, or transform their decision about an interim

¹ Acta de la reunion del Comité Nacional celebrada el dia 29 de julio de 1936, p. 1 // International Institute for Social History (IISG, Amsterdam). CNT (España) Archives. 79B. Actas y resoluciones, plenos y reuniones. 1936. No. 1. Acta de la reunion del Comité Nacional, 07/29/1936.

mined by “radicals.” In fact this anti-fascist alliance was perceived as unnatural both by the anarcho-syndicalist masses and by the leadership of the Communists and Republicans. In this sense, the events of May 1937 should be viewed not as some sort of “break-down,” but rather as the logical and inevitable result of the growing contradiction between the incompatible viewpoints and positions of forces and tendencies, which had already resulted in a “civil war within the civil war” with thousands of casualties.

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period of “antifascist cooperation” into a permanent strategy until the end of the war.

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According to yet another myth, the majority of members of the CNT and FAI subsequently supported the course of “antifascist unity,” which was opposed by only a small clique of radicals. But the minutes of the plenums, conferences and the regional Catalan congress of the CNT (February-March 1937) from the archives of the CNT and FAI in Amsterdam show a different picture. The influence of the “radical position” gradually increased in early 1937, as the anarcho-syndicalists more and more found themselves driven into a corner, with collectivization curtailed and the workers disarmed. At an extraordinary regional congress of the Catalan CNT, rank-and-file delegates complained that politically significant decisions were being taken without consulting their unions. In the voting, “radical” candidates, those in favor of ending concessions to the “antifascist” partners and withdrawing from the government, received more than 40 percent of the votes.²

Delegates from many unions criticized the actions of the government of the Spanish republic in the strongest possible terms, accusing it of refusing to allocate funds to Catalonia and sabotaging the provisioning of the Aragon front. The CNT ministers were blamed for failing to carry out the decisions of their organization. For example, a union representative of the liberal professions declared that if the National Committee found it necessary to collaborate, it should do so in an honorable and sincere manner.

A delegate of the metalworkers’ union of Barcelona noted that up to that point things were going in favor of the UGT at the expense of the CNT, and that this development was harm-

² 12a. Sesión del Congreso regional de sindicatos de Cataluña, pp. 4–5 / IISG (Amsterdam). CNT (España) Archives. Archivo de la Confederación Regional del Trabajo de Cataluña. 34A. Actas, dictámenes e informes. 1936–1938. No. 2. Actas de congresos y plenos regionales, 1936–1938.

ing the course of the revolution. He said the CNT ministers and the Catalan Regional Committee of the CNT were under the influence of “Marxists,” and expressed the view that the anarcho-syndicalists did not need representation in the central government, and that antifascist collaboration should be direct, not mediated. For the working class, the triumph of either fascism or Marxism would lead to the same disastrous consequences, he declared, citing the example of Russia.

Support for this position was voiced by the railway workers’ syndicate of Lerida, the shoemakers of Sitges, the workers of the distribution industry of Barcelona, and the workers of the social services of Barcelona (both of the latter groups also accused the National Committee of the CNT of violating confederal rules and withholding information from the syndicates). The building trades workers of Barcelona announced that if collaboration could not be effected in an honorable way, it should be discontinued. A representative of the social services workers of Barcelona called for the prompt convening of a national plenum of the CNT, at which the ministers would be held accountable for their actions and where a decision would be made about what to do next. A delegate of the union of workers of the liberal professions of Barcelona noted that the revolutionary organs formed after July 19 had relinquished their functions to governmental structures. He demanded the recall of the CNT ministers if the revolution continued to be held in abeyance, and posed the issue this way: “We must ask ourselves whether or not we are in a revolutionary situation. If we are, then we must proceed to the creation of the appropriate organs.”³

³ Acta de la octava sesion del Congreso regional de sindicatos de Cataluña, pp. 3–11 / IISG (Amsterdam). CNT (España) Archives. Archivo de la Confederación Regional del Trabajo de Cataluña. 34A. Actas, dictámenes e informes. 1936–1938. No. 2. Actas de congresos y plenos regionales. 1936–1938.

The radical wing of the movement urged that the revolution not be postponed until victory, but rather that the revolution be allowed to continue its course while simultaneously waging war. Evidence of the further radicalization of the anarcho-syndicalist masses comes from the plenum of the anarchist groups of Barcelona which met on April 11 through 12, 1937, the minutes of which were published by the historian Agustin Guillamon. Participation in this plenum included representatives of “Libertarian Youth” and the neighborhood-based “Committees of Defense.” The plenum demanded the withdrawal of anarchists from all government organs, and declared that “any form of government is reactionary in essence and therefore stands in contradiction to any social revolution.” It called for the convening on May 1 in Valencia of a peninsular plenum of the FAI to develop concrete proposals and the coordination of the forces required to implement these decisions.⁴

It’s worth mentioning that the opponents of the anarchists in the “republican camp” prepared for a decisive confrontation. The Russian historian Alexey Masterkov has discovered a report by the Soviet military specialist Colonel Terekhin in the Russian State Military Archive (RGVA). Terekhin reported to Moscow that at the beginning of May 1937 the Republican general staff posted armored troops in Valencia and on the highway to Barcelona, based on allegations “about the preparation of a large-scale mutiny in the Barcelona and Valencia regions and the cities in between.”⁵

All these documents force us to re-evaluate notions about the supposedly robust “anti-fascist front” which was under-

⁴ For materials of the plenum, see: Agustin Guillamon, *Los Comités de Defensa de la CNT en Barcelona (1933–1938). De los Cuadros de defensa a los Comités revolucionarios de barricada, las Partullas de control y las Milicias populares*, (Barcelona: Aldarull Edicions), 2011, pp. 181–207.

⁵ Russian State Military Archive (RGVA). E35082, op. 1, d. 73,1.162160 (numbering of the pages is reversed). The author thanks military historian Alexey Masterkov for providing a copy of this document.