

The Spanish Revolution 70 years later

Barry Pateman

2006

And, so we return to Spain. Nearly 70 years after the people's response to a right-wing military uprising, those events remain a source of wonder, optimism, confusion, strife and tragedy. It was a high mark of personal and social possibility that has yet to be matched. It was a real revolution of everyday life that shattered the patterns and relationships created by the agencies that constituted a growing capitalism.

Yet it was also a tragedy, comprised of millions of individual and interdependent tragedies; the curtailment of the revolutionary project by brave and well respected anarchists in the name of realism, what activist and historian Jose Peirats called, "a new theology of circumstantialism;" the slaughter of thousands who attempted to change and enrich their lives, by communists and their supporters; and a long, slow painful retreat relieved only by the individual courage of isolated groups of militants throughout the world.

Yes, we return to Spain and always will. Not just to "give flowers for the fallen," as Pietro Gori writes, but because what happened all those years ago still resonates with our practice as anarchists today. We must also remember that despite all of this tragedy, all of this mess, so many in Spain touched, if only for a moment, a "living Utopia."

By the mid-1930s, the anarchist movement in Spain, based around the CNT-FAI, was the largest in the world. Formed in Barcelona in 1910, the CNT was a national grouping of unions, decentralized and, at times, loosely structured, in order to avoid state repression, as well as to guard against any growth of permanent bureaucracy in its organization.

In the workplace, the CNT argued against arbitration and for mutual aid and direct action, a direct action that could take a variety of creative forms, from sabotage, armed resistance and strikes, to refusing to pay in restaurants. It was a grouping firmly located in working class life and culture, embracing all, and arguing for the right of the workers and poor to have the means to live with dignity and control their own lives. The movement was particularly strong in the provinces of Catalonia and Andalusia with large support in Galicia, Asturias, Levant, Saragossa and Madrid.

Its sharp, acerbic, and creative newspaper, *Solidaridad Obrera*, was widely read. Sometimes it possessed a celebratory air such as in its 31 March 1931 edition which declared that "the revolution will have the streets as its theatre and the people as protagonist."

The other important arm of Spanish anarchism, the FAI, was formed in 1927. Centered on the organizational structure of the affinity group, it had fought many fierce defensive and offensive campaigns against government and employer repression.

A good number of its militants, like those in the CNT, had suffered emotionally and physically for their beliefs at the hands of the government, and they had enormous standing in the movement. Uncompromisingly anarchist, the FAI's paper, *Tierra y Libertad*, said of Russia in its 3 July 1936 edition that, "in proportion, as the Soviet State became stronger, the revolution perished in the iron grip of decrees, bureaucrats, repressive machines and taxation."

Together with non-aligned anarchists and other rebels, the CNT-FAI formed a solid phalanx of revolutionary possibility seasoned by years of agitation and insurrections.

On 17 July 1936, sections of the army, led by right-wing generals such as Francisco Franco, occupied Spanish Morocco in an attempt to overthrow the liberal Republican Popular Front government elected in February of that year. Immediately, the CNT in Catalonia began to confiscate and collect weapons from wherever they could.

At dawn on Sunday, July 19, most of the military garrison in Barcelona joined the generals' revolt against the government and occupied key positions within the city. Many civil guard and assault members also joined the revolt. CNT-FAI militants activated sirens alerting everyone to take up arms and resist the impending military coup. With the remarkable bravery and organization of the working people of Barcelona, the revolt was crushed.

By July 20, the revolt was also defeated in Madrid. These successes were countered by serious defeats; Saragossa, a CNT stronghold was captured, and the Asturias were cut off. The fascist insurgents held a third of Spain. In these occupied areas, radicals of all stripes were quickly executed or imprisoned.

In the many cities, small towns and villages throughout Republican Spain, the state had simply splintered overnight. There was no functioning government. Yet this was no ideal revolution worked out in late night discussions in bars. Under threat from the forces of reaction, concerned for unity in the fight against fascism, splinters also occurred in the anarchist movement. What to do?

Across the greater Barcelona area, an organic "federation of barricades" was established and local groups sprang up spontaneously distributing food and supplies. Such activities empowered ordinary people, brought out skills and talents dormant in them and created the beginnings of a revolutionary practice. In essence Barcelona was, by July 20, in the hands of the CNT-FAI.

Indeed, Luis Companys, President of the Generalitat (the government of the autonomous province of Catalonia) asked a CNT-FAI delegation to meet him to discuss the situation. CNT militants Garcia Oliver, José Arens, Arelio Fernandez, Buenaventura Durruti and Abad de Santillán attended the meeting. They agreed to Companys' suggestion for the formation of what came to be known as the Central Committee of Antifascist Militias (CCMA) which took responsibility for keeping order in Catalonia.

They also accepted proportional representation on the CCMA, a strategy that gave equal weight to the UGT and PSOE—minority organizations in Catalonia compared to the CNT-FAI. Garcia Oliver argued that the choice was simple—either a confederate-anarchist dictatorship of the CNT-FAI or collaboration and democracy. To those anarchists at the meeting, invested with the respect and aura that years of experience gave them, a third way did not appear possible.

It was a moment in history when a sense of unlimited possibility filled the air. The CNT-FAI organized armed columns to fight the forces of the fascist rebels. By July 24, 1936, 10,000 volunteers had left for Saragossa—the first of many. Structured without military hierarchy, they were organized in groups of ten, with each group picking an elected delegate. Ten groups became a century and various centuries would form columns. Each column had an elected and accountable war committee responsible for its overall activities. Sometimes, ex-army officers would advise the committees. They moved fast, and with purpose. This organizational form, organic and empowering, reflected the wholesale changes occurring in the Republican zone in the early days of the Revolution.

In Barcelona, alone, over 3,000 businesses were collectivized. Assemblies of workers elected delegates who represented them on day-to-day issues. Wages were equalized, free medical care was provided, and parasitic "middle-men" were cut out of distribution. Rational education, based on the ideas of Francisco Ferrer, ones that concentrated on the needs of each individual child, was introduced into schools. Expensive restaurants were replaced by collective eating houses. All sorts of creative uses were found for the many churches that littered the landscape—if they were not burned.

In Barcelona and other areas, courts of law were instantly dissolved. Jails were invaded, their records destroyed and their inmates liberated. Railways, buses, taxis, textile mills, mines, cement works, food-processing plants, movie theatres, print shops, department stores, hotels—all collectivized, all under the control of the people who worked there. Everything taken for granted as a permanent fixture of life had changed. The walk to work, to the park, to the bar, to a friend's house—all became a different experience. The world was turning upside down.

Coming to Barcelona in December 1936, initially to write articles on the Civil War, George Orwell writes of red and black flags everywhere, revolutionary posters on every surface and revolutionary songs pouring out from speakers—an air of palpable excitement. People greeted one another with, "Salud," instead of, "Buenos dias," and

called each other “comrade” and used the informal “thou” with everyone. Adios, with its literal, “to God,” meaning disappeared from usage.

As Orwell says in *Homage to Catalonia*, “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 recognized it immediately as a state of affairs worth fighting for.” He joined the POUM militia.

This revolution, this reorganization of everyday existence, was equally strong in the countryside. For example, in the village of Alcorian in Teruel, an assembly of the whole village was called to discuss the agricultural situation. Twenty-three teams were set up, each with a delegate to an administrative body that would try and coordinate all aspects of local agriculture. Similar agrarian collectives spread like wildfire throughout Aragon and other areas. This was not simply political planning on the part of the CNT (although CNT members were involved). It was more of a natural response to the situation people found themselves in. It worked better than the old way. As simple as that, really.

As Gaston Leval wrote in his carefully detailed *Collectives in the Spanish Revolution*, libertarian communism “was born there very simply, as everywhere else, almost without an awareness of the extent and the significance of the task being undertaken.”

Soon after July 1936, nearly two thirds of the land in the Republican zone was involved in some collectivization of one kind or another. In some areas, if you didn’t join the collective, you were given land, but only as much as you could work yourself. No one could employ workers, and in some areas, money was abolished. Those who were not laborers, doctors, etc., were given what they needed in turn for the services they provided. Often, what we might call equalization funds, were set up to re-distribute the wealth from better off areas to poorer ones. Hospitals, homes, and schools were also built or improved. In Binefar, in eastern Huesca, the newly built hospital, funded by local workers, had an x-ray machine, and special wings for the treatment of VD, the study of preventative medicine and gynecology.

Some elements of the revolution attempted to change the position of women in Spanish society. In the spring of 1936, Mujeres Libres, an anarchist women’s group in Madrid, began to publish their paper, *Mujeres Libres*. It was a group of middle class and working class women which, by 1938, had grown to 30,000.

The Spanish revolution for the Mujeres Libres challenged exploitation at home and work and in society, suggesting that only a social revolution could bring about true equality and respect in relationships. Although the armed women milicianas were regularly seen at check points, and in the early columns fought side by side with men, it would be facile to deny that sexism remained a constant presence in all the columns, a challenge that Mujeres Libres took on when they could.

As the social revolution grew apace, Mujeres Libres created manufacturing and public service divisions supporting women in the workplace. In Barcelona and Madrid, the group started a trade union for women working in the food industry and public transport systems. Childcare centers were established in factories and in the agricultural collectives. They set up technical and professional schools for women.

Federica Montseny, anarchist Minister of Health and Social Service, helped provide the impetus to legalize abortion on therapeutic, eugenic, and ethical grounds. Prostitution became a particular focal point for the group and in *Tierra Y Libertad* of January 1937, Mercedes Canapisada, editor of *Mujeres Libres*, argued, “as long as any woman is kept as an object and is prevented from developing her personality, prostitution, in fact, continues to exist.”

While all this was happening, the civil war with the fascist forces raged, and the Communist Party (CP) steadily grew. Attracting the urban middle class and peasant proprietors displaced by collectivization, the party campaigned vigorously on their behalf, arguing, “[they are] as much opposed to the big capitalist and captains of powerful fascist enterprises as the workers. This being so it is everybody’s duty to respect the property of these small tradesmen and manufacturers,” (*Mundo Obrero*, CP paper in Madrid 27 July 1936).

Fiercely pushing for the strategy of the Popular Front to combat fascism, the CP consistently argued that the defeat of the fascist revolt was of paramount importance. Until that took place, everything else must wait, they argued. The Party received material aid and weapons from Soviet Russia which increased their prestige. Although Stalin agreed in August 1936 to the International Non-Intervention Agreement (proposed by France to prevent any extension of the Spanish conflict to the rest of Europe), Russia gradually intervened in Spanish affairs, and the first Moscow aid arrived in October of that year; none of it reaching the anarchist militias.

We should remember that Nazi planes aided the rebellion as did Italian aircraft with both Hitler and Mussolini responding quickly to calls for help from the Spanish generals. Numerous arguments have been made for the reasons for Russia's involvement in Spain. Whatever they really were, the European "democracies" sat back and watched three totalitarian countries help destroy the most profound social revolution of the twentieth century.

On September 26, 1936 the CNT joined the Catalanian Generalitat and on 3 November 1936, the organization joined the national government of the socialist Largo Caballero where they accepted four ministries—Justice, Commerce, Health and Public Assistance, and Industry. *Solidaridad Obrera* on 4 November 1936 argued that "circumstances beyond our control have...transformed the nature of the government and the Spanish state. At present, the government has ceased to be an oppressive, anti-working class force, just as the state no longer presents class divisions in society."

This alteration of the classic anti-state position had support among sections of the CNT, but caused consternation and criticism within the international anarchist movement. Many though, like veteran French anarchist Sebastien Faure, while offering criticism, tread cautiously out of loyalty to the CNT-FAI and "the heroic militants known and unknown fallen on the soil of Iberia in the name of revolution and of liberty."

For Emma Goldman also, working as an international representative for the CNT-FAI, whatever anguish she felt in private about the role of some in the CNT remained private. ("Already many compromises have been made by our people that have led them in all kinds of unfortunate ways. Fortunately, the Spanish people, especially the people in Catalonia, Aragon and the Levante, are with the Revolution. They are invincible. But my heart is heavy and I feel overcome by grief." [EG to Stella Ballantine 10/28/36])

Many felt that any public criticism of the CNT-FAI's participation in the government would simply be a betrayal. In a published article, Goldman's assessment of the situation was far more pragmatic: "(I) feel therefore that whatever our regrets may be of our Spanish comrades having entered ministries or having made other mistakes, we have no right in judging them, at least while Fascism has not been crushed." (January 5, 1937 letter to Freie Arbeiter Stimme and Spanish Revolution).

And, as the social revolution intensified, so did the calls for concentrating on the war effort above all else; the social revolution would have to wait. In fact, it was detrimental and destructive to the war effort. Inside the cabinet, the CNT ministers were confronted with the same arguments again and again by communists, socialists, and republicans—we must give the appearance of legality to the Spanish Republic, to calm the fears of the British, French and American governments. If they saw that all was well, maybe they would offer us support.

As a consequence of such thinking, the state began to restore its legitimacy at the expense of the popular forms of power. The local revolutionary committees began to be replaced by officially appointed municipal councils. The police corps was reconstituted, and a secret police established, the latter working hand-in-glove with the Soviet secret police that had arrived in Spain along with Russian aid. Oppositional voices against both the direction the Republic was moving and, as a by-product, against Russia, would soon be silenced.

The communists argued long and hard for nationalization as opposed to socialization, stating that, "to rush into these premature experiments in 'collectivization' and 'socialization' when the war is still undecided and at a time when the...enemy, aided by foreign fascism, is violently affecting our positions and endangering the future of our country is absurd and is tantamount to aiding the enemy," (CP Secretary José Diaz, "Report to the Central Committee of the Communist Party," March 1937).

Now remained the problem of the militia, the volunteer and primarily anarchist and POUM columns of the early days of the war. They had received their fair share of criticism with accusations of disorganization and sectarianism—there was no central general war staff, no military body that could review the battlefronts—and any alternative way of approaching war, any alternative form of organization appeared to be beyond the imaginations of more and more people.

Indeed, even *Solidaridad Obrera*, the CNT paper, urged the militias, stating that, "to accept discipline means that the decisions made by comrades assigned to any particular task, whether administrative or military, should be executed without any obstruction in the name of liberty, a liberty that in many cases degenerates into wantonness." (7 August 1936).

At the urging of CNT leaders, anarchist militias accepted military discipline but only after intense and passionate debate. A delegate from the anarchist Iron Column argued at a CNT Congress in November 1936 that, "We

must accept nothing that runs counter to our anarchist ideas, ideas that must become a reality, because you cannot preach one thing and practice another.”

For some, it was a necessary compromise in the war against fascism. For others, it was an abandonment of anarchism that would lead to a growing cynicism and wariness about what was happening around them. For the latter, it was, “A Day Mournful and Overcast,” as a Durutti Column pamphlet put it. Clashes between government assault guards and anarchist militia were not uncommon at this time; neither was the walking away from the militia by militants who felt that there could be no compromise with the new militarization and the consequent abandoning of anarchist practice.

The question of discipline in the militias was put more into the spotlight with the arrival of what would soon be called the International Brigades. Some early foreign volunteers had enlisted with the anarchist and POUM militia. The International Brigades, however, were organized on the initiative of the Stalinist-dominated Comintern, and began arriving in Spain during October 1936 and went into battle in early November.

Commanded primarily by CP commissars, they fought bravely and presented a sharp contrast to the various militias, with their acceptance of discipline and aura of authority. More importantly, their actions had a substantial effect in the international arena. Sometimes, it seemed when reading the world’s communist press that the brigades alone were doing the most important fighting. Revolutionaries and anarchists who came to Spain to support the social revolution as well as fight the fascists did not appear in the pages of the CP’s *The Daily Worker*. Instead, disgraceful allegations of treachery against anarchist and POUM militia began to appear in the communist papers.

Meanwhile, the forces of reaction (not a phrase to be used lightly) appeared to be growing at a disturbingly strong rate inside the Spanish government. POUM representatives were expelled from the national cabinet in December 1936 with no significant protest on the part of the CNT. In early 1937, though, rank and file members of the CNT began to respond to the attacks on the social revolution and those attempting to put libertarian communism into practice.

In Barcelona and other areas, there were various CNT revolutionary committees still in existence at a grass roots level including the *patrullas de control* (control patrols). These had served a rather complex role in the early days of the war, sometimes protecting capitalist property and punishing *incontrolats* (uncontrollables) in the anarchist ranks. They also reflected a fierce morality in their practice, executing elements considered anti-social such as drug pushers.

However, events would push them into the forefront of the defense of revolutionary activity. A link was made between members of the anarchist and POUM youth movements which, in February 1937, called for the formation of a Revolutionary Youth Front to defend the social revolution and to challenge the growing Communist Party hegemony. Drastically rising food prices, seen by some as the result of the gradual return of capitalism, also fueled resentment in some working class quarters.

Clashes between the *patrullas* and the Generalitat police on the streets of Barcelona began to take place regularly as the Communist party and others campaigned for a single authority (i.e., theirs!). At the end of April, the Generalitat passed a law disarming the *patrullas* leading to even more tensions. The Generalitat canceled May Day celebrations in Barcelona because of these tensions and on 3 May 1937, what became known as the “May Days,” broke out in the city. When Catalan police moved in to take over the telephone exchange that had been collectivized by the CNT, fighting broke out across Barcelona and Catalonia.

Four days of fighting was the response of the rank and file to the erosion of the social revolution, with anarchist radicals and members of the POUM taking over the streets and re-enforcing their presence in the working class neighborhoods which rushed to their support. Italian anarchist volunteers also took part in the fighting.

We can see now that all of the social changes that we had written about earlier and were so joyously introduced and embraced by communities were on the line. On one side were the *patrullas*, members of the POUM, those revolutionary committees that had survived from July 1936 and “The Friends of Durruti,” a group of anarchist militants formed to combat the “counterrevolutionary” policy of the CNT-FAI leadership.

On the other side were the police and the newly constituted state apparatus. The revolutionaries argued for the opening of “a second revolution,” but little came of it. The CNT-FAI leadership brokered a compromise and urged

the dismantling of the barricades established by the revolutionaries. After four days, an uneasy peace fell upon Barcelona and the rest of Catalonia.

Soon after, the CNT was expelled from the Generalitat and the POUM was banned and then repressed. Its leader, Andreu Nin, was tortured and murdered by Soviet security services and Spanish communists in a secret Madrid prison. The Communists claimed that Nin had been freed by a Nazi commando group to explain his final disappearance.

Members of the POUM and their supporters were rounded up throughout Spain. POUM organizers were put on trial in 1938 and were sentenced to various terms in prison for participating in the May Days of 1937. The situation spiraled into widespread reaction. CNT militants were shot or arrested or were just “disappeared.” They fought back as well as they could.

On the evening of 10 August 1937, the central government dissolved the Council of Aragon, the revolutionary committee representing the villages that were making libertarian communism a reality. Government troops swept into Aragon. Collectives were broken up and private ownership re-introduced. Under the command of the communist General Lister, government troops unleashed a wave of destruction in the region. Over 600 anarchists and radicals were arrested; some never returned. The CNT disappeared as a presence on village councils.

An interesting by-product of the invasion was the realization among the volunteer militia in Aragon of just how well equipped the invading military forces were. Volunteer militia had been on the frontlines for over a year with a bare minimum of armaments. After the communist-led invasion, agricultural production dropped significantly. Disillusionment set in on so many fronts and, in retrospect, we can see that the destruction of the revolutionary experience in Barcelona, Aragon and elsewhere proved to be powerful nails in the coffin of Republican Spain. A long darkness was about to set in.

The victory of fascism over the forces of revolution in 1939 led to the dispersal of Spanish anarchists worldwide. They went where they could. Some spent time in democratic French concentration camps after crossing the Pyrenees. Some would make it to South America or various safe havens in Europe. Many would go on to die in the struggle against fascism in World War Two.

Others would be laid low by the bitter experience of exile or would simply become accommodated to their host countries. Many of these haunting stories are still to be told. In Spain, there was an orgy of right-wing retribution. We are still unsure how many perished in the immediate aftermath of victory by Franco's forces. It probably is in the hundreds of thousands as old scores were settled and working class communities terrorized.

Still, small groups of anarchists kept a clandestine CNT alive in what the exiles called “the interior.” The CNT-FAI reconstituted itself in exile and the first congress of the Movimiento Libertaria Espanol (Spanish Libertarian Movement) was held in Paris in May 1945. Old tensions surfaced, however, in arguments about who they should collaborate with and how Francoism should be resisted. It was a difficult time. The organization was not prepared for the clandestinity necessary to keep the movement alive in the Spanish interior and this led to an initial period of tragic errors.

Linking the needs of those in the interior to those outside of Spain proved particularly difficult. Much of the time, despite the determined efforts of some, was spent in organizational and personal infighting. Some, though, never gave up. Some fought back; crossing into Spain, they set up bases for guerrilla actions against the Franco dictatorship. This is not the time to tell their story but their heroism must be recognized and their stories known.

And, so we return to Spain. What happened there, then, is not a dusky memory to be re-kindled in July of each passing decade.

The events that took place between 1936–1939 ask questions that anarchists must keep asking. What does it mean when we say we are anarchists? How do we act? Surely, we cannot believe one thing and practice another. How do we achieve consistency? How do we fight the pragmatic tendencies in ourselves? Who do we work with to bring about anarchy? What is our relationship to those who do not share our beliefs? Can any organization reflect anarchist practice? How can we break down the sinewy beast that capitalism has become?

Those voices coming to us through the possibilities and tragedies of seventy years ago contain much for us to think about.

We would do well to listen and reflect.

Glossary of Organizations

C.N.T. Confederación Nacional del Trabajo: National Confederation of Labor. Anarchist workers federation.

F.A.I. Federación Anarquista Iberica: Iberian Anarchist Federation. Allied with the CNT.

F.I.J.L. Federación Iberica de Juventudes Libertarias: Federation of Libertarian Youth.

M. L. E. Movimiento Libertario Español: Spanish Libertarian Movement; CNT, FAI and FIJL in exile

U.G.T. Union General de Trabajadores: General Workers Union. Socialist, but controlled by the Communists in some areas, including Catalonia.

P.S.O.E. Partida Socialista Obrero Español: Spanish Socialist Workers Party

P.S.U.C. Partido Socialista Unificado de Cataluna: Unified Socialist party of Catalonia. Communist controlled.

P.O.U.M. Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista: Marxist United Workers Party. Anti Stalinist Marxist Party which Orwell joined.

fifth Estate

Barry Pateman
The Spanish Revolution 70 years later
2006

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/372-spring-2006/the-spanish-revolution-70-years-later>
Fifth Estate #372, Spring 2006

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net