In Revolutionary Spain, Workers Made the Anarchist Vision Real

Book review

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a review of

Anarchism and Workers' Self-Management in Revolutionary Spain by Frank Mintz. AK Press, 2013, 326pp., $19, akpress.org

Following his brief synopsis about the Spanish anarchist movement before 1936, the central concern of French anarchist Frank Mintz is the very core of the 1930s Spanish revolution–the grassroots movement of urban and rural collectivization throughout republican Spain.

Though the broadest and most successful workers' self-management experience in the contemporary West, most historians have ignored or criticized this achievement, due to the anarchists' central role. By contrast, Mintz emphasizes the impressive positive record. But he wants also to show how important inconsistencies in the Spanish anarchist movement itself helped to limit and undermine this grassroots revolution.

Workers at the battle of the Ebro River (1938) fight well armed fascists. Photo: Chim (David Seymour)

Mintz insists that the core of social revolution is people managing collectively and without bosses their own efforts at sustenance, dignity, and community well-being. This was and remains a central anarchist ideal and it was no surprise that anarchists, committed to direct action, were thus at the center of the rapid wave of improvised local collectivizations once the fascist revolt in Spain broke out in July 1936.

Mintz acknowledges some joint efforts of anarchists with grassroots socialists, as well as the latter's separate collectivization efforts and even similar experiences involving no militants from either group. According to the author, nearly one-third of the population in republican Spain was involved in the more than two thousand collectives that made up half of the republic's economy in 1936 to 1939. "Self-management was the mainstay of the economy and emblematic of revolution," he writes.

Mintz, in the text originally published in 1970, provides broad overviews and specific case-studies of industrial, rural and service sector collective self-management, based on both archival material and oral histories.

Among important facts were the maintenance of pre-1936 agricultural output; the abolition of money itself in some farming collectives; the spontaneous formation of collectives, not directed from above; the crucial efforts of "women, the elderly, the young and the disabled" in making rural collectives succeed in the absence of young

men at the military front; and the determined efforts of many rural collectives to relaunch their experiments after repeated obstacles and sabotage by republic bureaucrats and politicians, and open destruction by communist-led military units.

From my own similar research on a large workers' self-management sector in post-independence Algeria (1962 65), I know how difficult it is to generalize fairly across the sector when details about so many units were never reported in the press or surviving archives. To further complicate research, in the case of Spain, large numbers of records were intentionally destroyed before the fascist takeover in 1939. Many collective militants were then shot or imprisoned and nothing could be openly written in Spain about the experience until after Franco's death in 1975.

Like Vernon Richards and Jose Peirats before him, beyond emphasizing workers' self-management successes, Mintz has no interest in uncritical glorifying myths for anarchist "sacred cows." Thus, he presents evidence from various sources about important contradictions and limitations among numerous collectives, as well as instances of direct hostility to such efforts by those he calls the "bigwigs" of the anarchist movement and the giant anarchist-led trade union, the CNT (Confederación Nacional del Trabajo).

He cites cases of authoritarian anarchist behavior in forming or managing certain rural collectives, though Mintz states that these were the exception. Also, some collectives developed individualist selfish attitudes and practices toward rival collectives instead of collaboration, but again he suggests that this was not the rule.

Additionally, large wage differentials sometimes occurred within individual units as well as between the industrial sector generally and those in agriculture. His point is that such issues are part of the reality of radical experimentation in motion and are important for current anarchists to discuss and struggle against in future collectivist efforts.

But along with these critiques and while also denouncing Stalinist, socialist and liberal sabotage of anarchist militia at the front and collectives in the rear, Mintz similarly exposes the anti-grassroots "bigwigs" of the anarchist/CNT movement.

Among them he cites Angel Pestaña, Horacio Prieto, Federica Montseny, Juan Garcia Oliver and Diego Abad de Santillán. The first two and others in the early 30s floated the idea of a reformist and hierarchical libertarian political party. The latter three and others in late 1936 rapidly abandoned the traditional anarchist principle of grassroots accountability in favor of top-level political collaboration with statist parties of the anti-fascist front in Catalonia and the rest of republican Spain.

While they did so in order to defeat fascism as a supposed prerequisite to social revolution, grassroots anarchist critics, such as Jose Peirats, the Libertarian Youth and the anarchist Iron Column militia, argued that prioritizing the war effort over revolution undermined the latter and assured an ultimate fascist victory.

Especially important in this regard, the book's Appendix VII describes a February 1937 plenum confrontation between members of the front line Iron Column militia and top-level representatives of the CNT. This invaluable brief account, apparently previously unpublished, starkly lays out the sharp conflict between the top and bottom of a supposedly horizontalist anarchist movement.

This split prefigured the tragic Barcelona May Days event three months later where CNT ministers in the national government demanded that grassroots anarchists lay down their guns during an armed struggle against communist attacks on their vital strategic positions.

In the February meeting, militia leader Cipriano Mera argued that "the [CNT National]Committee [has] conducted itself in an anti-confederal manner by not putting matters out for consultation in the unions and by forcing its decisions, without consultation, on the front line comrades in a dictatorial fashion…The National Committee and Regional Committees are thinking along lines that will strangle the life out of the revolution and thus should not be concealed from the fighting men".

Replied an individual from the National Committee, "The Organization takes precedence over all and we have to bow to this fact and ensure that nobody puts obstacles in its way."

The perspective and behavior of the "bigwigs," Mintz argues, were due not only to desperate exigencies of the civil war. Rather, he points to the hierarchical orientation, in the early 30s, of certain CNT leaders as well as the vanguardist elitism of several prewar prominent militants of the FAI (Federacion Anarquista Iberica) that constantly pushed the CNT toward revolutionary insurrection without discussion and approval from the base on upward.

While the personal courage of these FAI figures could not be denied, their orientation and actions, he says, unfortunately reflected essentially the same more centralist, disciplined and hierarchical anarchist movement model as "Platformism" in France, inspired by Russian anarchist exiles in the 1920s.

The book contains occasional surprisingly awkward word translations, some missing words, and abrupt transitions to other topics, as well as a now outdated claim that "there has been no analysis of the CNT's collaboration in government between 1935 and 1939." Jose Peirats' three-volume CNT analysis is the essential place to begin.

Nevertheless, Mintz' book is a valuable and passionate introduction to the strengths and weaknesses of workers' self-management in revolutionary Spain and the fatal hierarchical attitudes and behavior of anarchist leaders' collaboration with statism at the same time.

David Porter is a retired SUNY professor of history and political science and editor of *Vision on Fire: Emma Goldman on the Spanish Revolution*. He is the translator and author of *Eyes to the South: French Anarchists and Algeria*, a grassroots history of the past six decades of Algerian history from the perspectives of the French anarchist movement.

see also:

Los Quijotes: Anarchist Youth Group, Spain 1937 (Fifth Estate Vol. 24 Number 2 (Whole Number 332) Summer 1989)

and

News of the Spanish Revolution: Anti-authoritarian Perspectives on the Events

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