Anarchists in the Spanish Civil War

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For workers around the world, the Spanish Civil War was a beacon of hope against the tide of reaction then sweeping Europe. As the promise of workers' revolution was being dashed by the rise of fascism in Germany and the rise of Stalinism in the Soviet Union, the workers of Spain led a heroic fight against the 1936 uprising of General Francisco Franco. In the process, they led not only a struggle against fascism, but also a workers' rebellion that gave the world an inspiring glimpse of what workers' power could look like.

The Spanish Civil War was also the high point of anarchist influence in the international workers' movement. On the eve of the civil war, the anarchosyndicalist Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT) claimed more than a million members and had as its stated aim the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. Yet the Spanish anarchist movement failed the test that supposedly formed the heart of its program: the destruction of the state.

The ideas and theories of revolutionaries must ultimately be tested by events. During the war, anarchism's ideological abhorrence of state power–whether that state was a capitalist or a workers' state–led them, in practice, away from the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism and toward collaboration with the very government they opposed. As Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky wrote at the time, "In opposing the goal, the conquest of power, the Anarchists could not in the end fail to oppose the means, the revolution."[1]

Anarchism and the rise of the Spanish working class

Spain entered the 20th century as one of the most backward countries in Europe. An aged, decrepit monarchy ruled the

[1] Leon Trotsky, *The Spanish Revolution, 1931—1939* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973), p. 316.

country, propped up by the twin pillars of the Catholic church and an aristocratic officer corps. Throughout the 19th century, peasant rebellions and military coups had broken out regularly, but none had shaken the hold of the aristocracy. The Spanish bourgeoisie, from its inception, was incapable of leading a determined struggle against the monarchy. As Trotsky wrote:

Now even less than in the 19th century can the Spanish bourgeoisie lay claim to that historic role which the British and French bourgeoisie once played. Appearing too late, dependent on foreign capital, the big industrial bourgeoisie of Spain, which has dug like a leech into the body of the people, is incapable of coming forward as the leader of the people, is incapable of coming forward as the leader of the "nation" against the old estates, even for a brief period. The magnates of Spanish industry face the people hostilely, forming a most reactionary bloc of bankers, industrialists, large landowners, the monarchy, and its generals and officials, all devouring each other in internal antagonisms.[2]

Lacking reliable support from the propertied classes, the monarchy turned time and again to the military. The succession of juntas and palace coups that dotted Spanish history was but an expression of the inability of the Spanish bourgeoisie to lead the struggle for even the most basic democratic rights.

But a new class was emerging in Spain that began to change this equation. Spain experienced a period of rapid industrialization during the First World War that led to the growth of a powerful and highly concentrated urban working class. Although Spain remained a predominantly rural country, the working class doubled in size between 1910 and 1930. "The question of whether the present revolutionary convulsions can produce a genuine revolution, capable of reconstructing the very basis of

[2] Trotsky, p. 24.

national life," Trotsky continued, "is consequently reduced to whether the Spanish proletariat is capable of taking the leadership of national life into its own hands."[3]

Anarchism took hold in Spain beginning in the late 19th century among middle-class republican students and professionals who were distrustful of the powerful and corrupt central government; artisan workers who were being displaced by more modern production methods; and southern peasants who had a strong tradition of communalism and a distrust of both government and urban society.[4] By the turn of the last century, hundreds of anarchist affinity groups–small groups of 10 to 12 people with similar political ideas–dotted the countryside.

Politically these groups covered a wide spectrum. Some groups sought to escape from the existing capitalist system by forming alternative lifestyle communes in the countryside. Some adopted an emphasis on action as a form of propaganda meant to spark wider revolt–"propaganda of the deed," as it was called. This could mean anything from individual acts of terrorism to organizing small, local insurrections. The purpose of these actions was to offer "a sort of revolutionary 'education' of the masses through acts of revolt."[5] And still others helped to form militant trade unions, particularly among the peasants of Andalusia and later Aragón.

Spanish anarchism emerged as an awkward combination of peasant communalism, petty-bourgeois individualism, direct action against the state, and radical trade unionism. Yet they shared in common the basic principles of anarchism: opposition to elections and parliamentary activity, and opposition to all forms of hierarchy and centralism.

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[3] Trotsky, p. 24.

[4] Murray Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists: The Heroic Years, 1868—1936* (San Francisco: AK Press, 1998), pp. 61—63; Juan Gómez Casas, *Anarchist Organization: The History of the FAI* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1986), pp. 26—27.

[5] Max Nomad, quoted in Bookchin, p. 116.

Many workers, even at the time of the civil war, were at most one generation removed from the countryside. These young workers brought with them a peasant anarchist tradition, and the grueling work and living conditions of urban life proved a fertile ground for the growth of a radical labor movement.

Individualist and terrorist currents remained part of the Spanish anarchist movement. As late as 1936, the CNT devoted an entire discussion at its national congress to the place of vegetarians, nudists, naturists, and "opponents of industrial technology" in a libertarian communist society. But the growing ferment among Spanish workers greatly strengthened the position of the anarchosyndicalists, who, like other anarchists, rejected all forms of authority and political action, but who looked to the power of the working class, organized through trade unions, as the force capable of overthrowing capitalism.

In November 1910, representatives from anarchosyndicalist unions across Spain met in Barcelona to found the CNT, a national union. As Vernon Richards describes:

> By its constitution the CNT was independent of all the political parties in Spain, and abstained from taking part in parliamentary and other elections. Its objectives were to bring together the exploited masses in the struggle for day-to-day improvements of working and economic conditions and for the revolutionary destruction of capitalism and the state. Its ends were Libertarian Communism, a social system based on the free commune federated at local, regional and national levels. Complete autonomy was the basis of this federation, the only ties with the whole being the agreements of a general nature adopted by Ordinary or Extraordinary National Congresses.[6]

[6] Vernon Richards, *The Lessons of the Spanish Revolution* (London: Freedom Press, 1995), p. 17.

While the militant élan of the CNT led to successful strikes, this penchant for loose organization and lack of centralized coordination, in the words of Murray Bookchin, a sympathetic chronicler, often led to "sporadic, ill-time outbursts, easily crushed by the government."[7]

The anarchist revolutionaries in the CNT formed the Federación Anarquista Ibérica (FAI) in 1927, to guard against reformism within the CNT, as well as to maintain its opposition to any "infiltration" by other political forces. FAI militants, for example, were instrumental in winning the expulsion in 1931 of a group of 30 CNT leaders, the treintistas, who sought to make the CNT more syndicalist and less anarchist, criticizing the CNT for allowing small groups of militants to substitute their own armed actions for mass struggle. "The revolution," the treintistas wrote, "does not trust exclusively in the audacity of a more or less courageous minority, but instead it seeks to be a movement of the whole working class marching towards its final liberation."[8]

At the same time, the CNT often viewed workers who were not members as traitors to the revolution. At the 1919 national congress, the CNT leadership passed a resolution giving the workers of Spain a period of three months in which to enter the CNT, failing which they would be denounced as scabs.[9] This was not an insignificant statement–it reflected a tendency to see the key divide in society as one not between workers and bosses, but between authoritarians and nonauthoritarians.

Although the CNT gained a substantial following among many of the newly arrived workers in Catalonia and the agricultural laborers of Aragón by leading a number of militant strikes following the First World War, the Socialist-controlled

[7] Bookchin, p. 162.

[8] Quoted in Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* (London: Pelican, 1986), pp. 73—74.

[9] Burnett Bolloten, *The Spanish Civil War: Revolution and Counterrevolution* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), p. 197

Unión General del Trabajadores (UGT), with half a million members, was still the largest union in the country. Although the UGT was weighted down with a conservative leadership, any successful workers' movement–let alone a successful workers' revolution–would have to include the UGT's rank and file.

The birth of the Republic

Faced with growing opposition from Spanish workers after the First World War, the Spanish ruling class fell back on its traditional crutch, the military. In 1923, General Miguel Primo de Rivera took power under a military dictatorship. Even Primo de Rivera's dictatorship, however, could not ensure order against the growing tide of struggle. When the Great Depression broke out in 1929, Spain fell into a severe economic crisis, and the ruling class found that it could no longer contain the growing anger with brute force.

In 1930, Primo de Rivera was forced to resign. King Alfonso XIII called for democratic elections, ushering in the First Republic and five years of social unrest, during which the political right and left vied for control. Elections held in April 1931 went overwhelmingly to the republican parties, forcing King Alfonso to abdicate the throne and flee the country. The government of the Second Republic (the First Republic, formed in 1873, lasted only a year), led by Manuel Azaña, was composed of a coalition of the middle-class republican parties and the right wing of the Spanish Socialist Party, the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE). The PSOE provided a left-wing cover for a strictly bourgeois government that, from the outset, showed little interest in pursuing all but the most innocuous reforms.

Land reform was perhaps the most pressing issue in all of Spain. Agricultural products accounted for half of the coun-

try's income and two-thirds of its exports. Seventy percent of Spain's population worked the land, yet a small class of landowners controlled two-thirds of all the country's arable land, most of it held in large estates. Of the 5 million peasants in Spain, 1.5 million lived as sharecroppers and another 1.5 million were landless workers.[10] Starvation and hunger for the Spanish peasantry were as routine as the planting and harvesting of crops.

The immediate solution was the confiscation of the large estates and the redistribution of land to millions of poor peasants, but this reform went to the heart of Spanish capitalism. Land in Spain was mortgaged and heavily indebted to Spanish banks. Any expropriation of the large estates threatened not only the large landowners; it would wipe out loans owed to the banks, crippling Spanish capital. So the government stalled. It passed agricultural reforms that provided landowners compensation for any re-divided land. By the government's own figures, this redistribution would take more than 100 years.[11]

The republican-Socialist coalition also faced nationalist opposition from Catalan and Basque minorities within Spain and maintained a tenuous hold on a large portion of Morocco, which had been seized by the monarchy in a brutal imperial war that had lasted from 1912 to 1926. The national question was not simply a matter of justice for oppressed minorities; it was a matter of survival for the Republic. The colonial garrisons in Morocco were the most reactionary, brutal sections of the armed forces. The Spanish Foreign Legion and local mercenary groups that had carried out a war of attrition against the Moroccan people were a breeding ground for monarchist and fascist ideas. Any attack on the Republic would likely come from those sections of the armed forces.

[10] Felix Morrow, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain* (New York: Pathfinder, 1974), p. 8.

[11] Morrow, p. 10.

But the republican government would not give up its colonial possessions; it had its own imperial ambitions.

In less than two months, the republican-Socialist coalition traded its first blows with the workers' movement. In May 1931, members of the Civil Guard shot 10 workers after a clash with monarchist groups. In July, a general strike broke out in Seville in support of a walkout by local telephone workers. The government declared martial law. Forty workers died and more than 200 were wounded in the ensuing street battles.

The republican government was paralyzed between the aspirations of the workers and peasants who had elected it into power and its continued defense of the bourgeoisie. It was incapable of carrying through even the most basic democratic reforms. Reforms could only be defended and extended by strengthening the power of working-class organizations. Only by calling into question the very existence of the bourgeois government could the workers' movement be strengthened. As Trotsky wrote prophetically in 1931:

> The Madrid government…promises strong measures against unemployment and land-hunger, but it does not dare to touch a single one of the social ulcers… The discordance between the progress of the mass revolution and the policy of the new ruling classes–that is the source of the irreconcilable conflict that, in its future development, will either bury the first revolution or produce a second one.[12]

The struggle over democratic demands was not simply a fight for a less repressive state; it was at the core of the fight for workers' power and socialism. The working class, as Trotsky argued, was the only class capable of leading the fight for democratic demands for the peasantry and the oppressed

[12] Trotsky, pp. 126—27.

minorities; but, in that fight, it was bound also to fight for its own, socialist aspirations.

The anarchists had stood aloof from the democratic struggles for the republic. In Catalonia, a CNT stronghold, and in the Basque provinces, the anarchists did not advocate the right of self-determination, leaving the issue in the hands of the middle-class nationalists. And, while it organized demonstrations against the conscription of Spanish workers to fight in Morocco, it all but ignored that country's struggle for independence.[13] The anarchists' apoliticism led them to vacillate between complete indifference to the struggles for democratic reforms and wild ultra-leftism when antidemocratic laws were used to repress them. Having played little role in the formation of the Republic, the anarchists then faced its betrayals and repression by leaping into an adventurous cycle of insurrections that paved the way for the return of the right wing.

In January 1932, anarchists launched an insurrection in the Catalan mining town of Alto Llobregat. The military suppressed it almost immediately. In January 1933, they initiated a call for an insurrection in support of a strike of railway workers. Sporadic uprisings broke out in Catalonia, Valencia, and parts of Andalusia. They were uniformly crushed almost immediately. The centralized Spanish army had no trouble isolating and defeating each revolt in succession. The insurrections had little active support and were further hampered by the anarchists' insistence on federalism and autonomy. As César M. Lorenzo, son of the CNT's national

[13] At a mass meeting in Madrid, anarchist leader Federica Montseny criticized Franco's forces, saying: "If they were Spaniards, if they were patriots, they would not have let loose on Spain the Regulars and the Moors to impose the civilization of the Fascists, not as a Christian civilization, but as a Moorish civilization. People we went to colonize for them now come and colonize us, with religious principles and political ideas which they wish to impose on the minds of the Spanish people."

secretary, describes, the federal structure of the CNT-FAI made it impossible to coordinate actions, even for those who wanted to, among the various sections:

> Within the CNT everyone had his own opinion, everyone acted according to his own judgment, the leaders were ceaselessly criticized and challenged, the autonomy of the regional federations was inviolable, just as the autonomy of the local federations and unions was inviolable within the regional federations. To get a decision accepted…a militant had to exhaust himself making speeches, personal contacts, moving from place to place. Among the libertarians the ballot was repugnant; the unanimity they sought required interminable debates.[14]

As Frederick Engels noted of the role of the Bakuninist anarchists in the 1873 insurrection in Spain,

> Nothing remains of the so-called principles of anarchy, free federation of independent groups, etc., but the boundless, and senseless fragmentation of the revolutionary resources, which enabled the government to conquer one city after another with a handful of soldiers, practically unresisted.[15]

The insurrections were isolated also by the anarchists' insistence that anyone who opposed their adventure was on the other side. In a characteristic statement during one of its upris-

[14] Bolloten, p. 128.

[15] Frederick Engels, "The Bakuninists at work," in Marx, Engels, Lenin, *Anarchism and Anarchosyndicalism* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), p. 146.

ings in 1933, the FAI declared that "all those who do not cooperate in the armed insurrection are traitors!"[16]

Just a week after the January insurrections, anarchists in the small village of Casas Viejas rose up and seized nearby land, proclaiming a libertarian society. The government ordered the military to restore order. In the fighting, the military killed hundreds, burning some alive. Pictures of the massacre of peasants, armed with hatchets and scythes, by soldiers who were armed with rifles and artillery infuriated the public and helped to seal the fate of the Azaña government; but the cycle of insurrections took a heavy toll on the anarchists. Thousands of union militants were arrested. As Murray Bookchin notes in his history of anarchism before the civil war, "Perhaps the example set by the uprising succeeded in fostering the militancy of the growing left factions in the Socialist Party, but apart from strike actions and terrorism, it completely exhausted the movement."[17]

With the anarchists in retreat and the PSOE discredited for its role in the republican government, the right took the initiative. The right-wing parties began cynically exposing the atrocities of the Casas Viejas massacre in their press, and even formed their own tribunals to examine abuses by the military. All of this was a self-serving attempt to embarrass the Azaña government by groups that had nothing but contempt for the peasantry, but in the absence of an alternative from the left, it allowed the right to gain the upper hand.

The CNT played its part in the elections, arguing, "Workers! Don't Vote!... Destroy the ballot boxes...crack the heads of the ballot supervisors as well as the candidates."[18] When elections were called in November 1933, the right won an overwhelming

[16] Quoted in Andy Durgan, "Revolutionary anarchism in Spain," *International Socialism*, Winter 1981, p. 101.

[17] Bookchin, p. 239.

[18] Durgan, p. 101.

victory, ushering in what became known as El Bienio Negro, the two black years.

Reaction and revolt

The right-wing government that took power in November 1933, headed by Alejandro Lerroux, did so against the backdrop of the rise of fascism in Europe. Hitler had been appointed chancellor of Germany in January by the conservative president Hindenburg. In March, the Austrian fascist, Englebert Dolfuss, had convinced the Austrian president to cede him dictatorial powers. Austrian workers rose up heroically to defeat Dolfuss, but were crushed. Many Spanish workers feared that Spain would be next. After the November elections, the largest number of seats in the Cortes was held by members of the Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas (CEDA), a confederation of industrialists, monarchists, and admirers of Mussolini and Dolfuss, led by José María Gil Robles.

The membership of the PSOE and UGT, radicalized by the failure of the German Social-Democrats to put up any resistance to the rise of fascism and by the Austrian workers' fierce resistance, put pressure on their leadership to prevent any attempt by Gil Robles to take power. Moderate PSOE leaders Indalecio Prieto and Roman Gonzáles Peña publicly pledged in the Cortes that any attempt to install a fascist regime would be met with armed revolution. The large left wing, led by the Socialist Youth, declared that they were preparing for a proletarian revolution.[19] A call went out for the formation of a broad united front of workers' organizations, known as the Alianza Obrera, to resist the advance of the right.

On October 1, members of CEDA demanded seats in the government, leading to the collapse of the Lerroux government. Lerroux formed a new cabinet that included four members

[19] Morrow, p. 26.

of CEDA. The PSOE leadership, which only months before had promised armed resistance to Gil Robles, was now forced act. On October 4, the Alianza Obrera and the UGT called a nationwide general strike. In most places the strike was a tragic failure. The reformist PSOE leadership that had called for the strike had only partially committed to it. The start of the strike was postponed twice in hopes that an agreement could be reached with Lerroux to remove CEDA from the cabinet. When the UGT finally issued a strike call, it was on short notice and following a declaration of martial law that enabled the government to arrest hundred of Socialist organizers.

Only in the mining center of Asturias did the strike take on truly revolutionary proportions. There, the UGT, Communists, and the CNT had all entered into the Alianza Obrera, signing a pact that committed them to work together "until they obtain a social revolution in Spain." On the night of October 4, sirens announced the beginning of the strike. Joint militias attacked the barracks of the Civil Guards, disarming them. Miners marched on the capital, Oviedo, liberating towns along the route and gathering forces. When the miners took control of cities, they redistributed land to the peasants and seized the mines and factories. When they reached the capital, an armed column of 8,000 miners occupied the city. For 15 days the beleaguered miners of Asturias held out against the troops of the Foreign Legion. In the slaughter that followed, more than 3,000 were killed and thousands more were imprisoned.[20]

The various workers' organizations had joined spontaneously in Asturias. The October rebellion showed the potential of a united workers' movement and the desire of many rank-and-file workers from all parties for unity. When the CNT national leadership rebuked the local CNT committee for having signed such a pact without their consent,

[20] Morrow, p. 31; Bookchin, p. 252.

the rank-and-file miners responded, "In social struggles, as in other wars, victory always goes to those who previously got together and jointly organized their forces."[21] Nationally, though, the call for united action through the Alianza Obrera was rejected by the CNT, who opposed the participation of the PSOE.

In response to the call for the Alianza Obrera, the anarchist leader, Buenaventura Durruti, argued, "The alliance, to be revolutionary, must be genuinely working class. It must be the result of an agreement between the workers' organizations, and those alone. No party, however socialist it may be, can belong to a workers' alliance."[22] Essentially, the CNT's message was "We refuse to unite in struggle with workers who have yet to agree to march under our banner." An abstract opposition to "politics" led the anarchists away from united working-class action.[23]

The CNT's hostility to the Socialists was fueled by the opportunism of the PSOE. Though rhetorically to the left of other social-democratic parties in Europe, it had long since abandoned revolutionary politics. The leadership of the PSOE saw the Alianza Obrera as nothing more than a paper alliance. But by dismissing calls for unity and political struggle, the anarchists turned their backs on millions of workers ready to unite in struggle against the right, leaving them under the vacillating leadership of the reformists and centrists of the

[21] José Peirats, *Anarchists in the Spanish Revolution* (Detroit: Red & Black, 1974), p. 94.

[22] Quoted in Abel Paz, *Durruti: The People Armed,* Nancy MacDonald, trans. (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1974), p. 154.

[23] The Stalinists in this period also refused to support united front actions with the reformist workers' parties and organizations, arguing that they were "social fascists." Trotsky argued instead for revolutionaries to propose joint action to the leadership of the reformist organizations with the aim of uniting the working class in concrete action, exposing the reformists' weakness and vacillation in practice, and thereby winning the majority of workers to revolution.

PSOE. The anarchists' apolitical radicalism was merely the flip side of the PSOE's craven opportunism. As the Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin argued in 1917:

> The professional Cabinet Ministers and parliamentarians, the traitors to the proletariat and the "practical" socialists of our day, have left all criticism of parliament to the anarchists. It is not surprising that the proletariat of the "advanced" parliamentary countries, disgusted with such "socialists"...has been with increasing frequency giving its sympathies to anarchosyndicalism, in spite of the fact that the latter is merely the twin brother of opportunism.[24]

For Lerroux's right-wing coalition, however, the rebellion in Asturias was the beginning of the end. The right had been thoroughly discredited and a new militancy was growing among workers and the peasantry. When new elections were called, few people doubted the outcome.

From Popular Front to revolution

In February 1936, an electoral alliance between the main parties of the middle-class and the main workers' parties, known as the Popular Front, came to power in Spain. The CNT and the FAI had declined to join the Popular Front, affirming their opposition to all political action. But in practice, the CNT-FAI dropped its abstentionism and gave tacit approval to its members to vote for the Popular Front, thereby assuring its narrow victory.

The Popular Front came to power on the heels of a massive wave of strikes and peasant rebellions. Although its program

[24] V.I. Lenin, *State and Revolution* (New York: International Publishers, 1932), pp. 39—40.

consisted of reforms specifically designed not to alienate the bourgeoisie, most workers and peasants saw the victory of the Popular Front as the beginning of larger battles. As one Madrid socialist put it:

> [The workers] wanted to go forward, they weren't satisfied simply with the release of political prisoners and the return to their jobs of all those who had been sacked as a result of the revolutionary insurrection of October 1934. Instinctively, they were pressing forward, not necessarily to take power, not to create soviets, but to push forward the revolution which had begun with the republic's proclamation.[25]

The ruling class saw the Popular Front victory as a declaration of war. Lerroux's right-wing coalition had been unable to restrain the workers' movement; now large sections of the ruling class dropped their half-hearted support for the Republic and swung behind a dictatorial solution. Soon after the elections, a motley coalition of high-ranking army officers, monarchists, and fascists began plotting a military coup.

On the morning of July 17, the army garrison in Spanish-held Morocco rose in revolt under the direction of General Francisco Franco. Garrisons revolted in most major cities. From the beginning it was clear that this was an attack not only on the Popular Front government, but also on the working-class organizations that had brought it to power. After seizing control of the Seville garrison on July 17, General Gonzalo Queipo de Llano signed a proclamation declaring that the leaders of any labor union on strike would "immediately be shot" as well as "an equal number of members selected discretionally."[26]

[25] Ronald Fraser, *Blood of Spain* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), pp. 44—45.

[26] Bolloten, pp. 41—42.

The Popular Front government received word of the uprising within hours, but kept silent for an entire day. Even on the afternoon of July 18, the government offered only a note that read, "The Government speaks again in order to confirm the absolute tranquility of the whole Peninsula." Instead, on the night of July 18, the government dissolved itself and formed a new cabinet of right-wing politicians outside the Popular Front. Rather than fight the fascists, the government's first reaction was to appease them. The workers, however, responded immediately. It was a pattern that would be repeated throughout the war. The Popular Front government stalled and prevaricated, hoping until the last moment to avoid confrontation, and the working class led the struggle against the fascists.

The CNT and the UGT demanded that the Popular Front government arm the workers, but it refused. Ignoring the government's pleas, detachments of workers stormed army barracks, seized weapons and began distributing them to anyone with a trade union or party membership card. They quickly organized defenses, creating armed patrols, arresting fascist sympathizers, and building barricades. Within days, the revolt was defeated in many cities and Franco's forces were being rolled back out of the province of Aragón. But wherever the Popular Front government successfully prevented workers from mobilizing, the rebellion succeeded. Writes historian Hugh Thomas:

> Nearly everywhere on July 18, the civil governors followed the example of the government of Madrid, and refused to cooperate with the working-class organizations who were clamoring for arms. In many cases, this brought the success of the risings and signed the death warrants of the civil governors themselves, along with local working-class leaders.[27]

[27] Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* (London: Pelican, 1986), p. 220.

Historians Broué and Temíme write:

> In effect, each time that the workers' organizations allowed themselves to be paralyzed by their anxiety to respect Republican legality and each time that their leaders were satisfied with what was said by the officers, the latter prevailed. On the other hand, the Movimiento was repulsed whenever the workers had time to arm and whenever they set about the destruction of the army as such, independently of their leaders' positions or the attitude of "legitimate" public authorities.[28]

Although the Popular Front government remained in power, the state apparatus it depended on had collapsed. Most army officers were sympathetic to Franco, and the soldiers had either joined the uprising or the workers' resistance. Many industrialists and landowners fled to rebel-held territory.

As the old society began to fall apart, the workers' movement organized new structures in its place. The trade unions commandeered cars and trucks to transport members of the newly formed workers' militias; they formed ambulance services and worker-run hospitals. Communal kitchens and transportation centers were organized.[29] In the cities, workers took over factories and placed them under workers' control. They elected representatives to oversee production and coordinate work in the shops. George Orwell, who arrived in Barcelona six months after the uprising, wrote a moving description of the city under workers' control in his book Homage to Catalonia:

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[28] Pierre Broué and Emile Témime, *The Revolution and Civil War in Spain* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 104.

[29] The CNT-controlled radio station in Barcelona broadcast cooking tips for cooks in the communal kitchen who were unaccustomed to stretching a recipe for hundreds of people.

It was the first time that 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… Every shop and café had an inscription saying that it had been collectivized; even the bootblacks had been collectivized and their boxes painted red and black. Waiters and shop-walkers looked you in the face and treated you as an equal…

The revolutionary posters were everywhere, flaming from the walls in clean reds and blues that made the few remaining wall advertisements look like daubs of mud. Down the Ramblas, the wide central artery of the town, were crowds of people streaming constantly to and fro, the loud-speakers were bellowing revolutionary songs all day and far into the night… 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.[30]

In the countryside, peasants took control of the land, redistributing large estates and, in many places, collectivizing the land and setting up communes. An anarchist in the town of Membrilla, described their local commune:

On July 22, the big landowners were expropriated, small property was liquidated, and all the land passed into the hands of the commune…

[30] George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), pp. 4—5.

> The local treasury was empty. Among private individuals the sum of thirty thousand pesetas in all was found and seized. All the food, the clothing, the tools, etc., were distributed equitably along the population. Money was abolished, labor was collectivized, property was taken over by the community, and the distribution of consumer goods was socialized…
>
> Three liters of wine are distributed to every person per week. Rent, electricity, water, medical attention and medicines are free.[31]

War and revolution

From the beginning, the republican parties had nothing but contempt for the revolution: "The Revolution commenced under a republican government that neither wished to support it nor could support it."[32] But by 1936, the republican parties had little mass support. They held on to power largely through the support they received from the left. As it had during the first period of the republic, the leadership of the PSOE continued to defend the republican parties. Now the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) joined them.

Before the civil war, the PCE had been an insignificant party. It had failed to gain a large following after its founding in 1921, and since Stalin's rise to power in Russia, it had abandoned any commitment to revolutionary struggle and become little more than a tool of Soviet foreign policy. Now, after a brief period of ultra-leftism in the early 1930s, in which it refused to work jointly with reformist workers' organizations, the PCE flipped over to become the leading advocate of the Popular Front. The PCE hoped to win the support of the Allies to join a coalition

[31] Bolloten, p. 70.

[32] Bolloten, p. 56.

against fascism at a time when the Soviet Union was facing increasing hostility from the Nazi government in Germany.

From the first days of the war, the Popular Front government, with the support of the PSOE and the PCE, passed restrictions on the ability of peasants to seize large land holdings and on workers' ability to run factories under workers' control. It passed laws stating that under no condition would the private property of foreign firms be seized. Only by restraining the demands of the workers and peasants, the Popular Front government and its supporters argued, could it maintain unity between all antifascist forces, including the bourgeoisie. José Diaz, leader of the PCE wrote:

> If in the beginning the various premature attempts at "socialization" and "collectivization"…might have been justified…at the present time, when there is a government of the Popular Front, in which all the forces engaged in the fight against fascism are represented, such things are not only not desirable, but absolutely impermissible.[33]

Thus the left became the last defenders of the bourgeois order.

Both the PCE and the PSOE tried to underwrite their alliance with bourgeois forces by arguing that Spain needed first to have a bourgeois revolution, and only after this could it have a workers' revolution. But the bourgeoisie and much of the armed forces saw Franco's rebellion as the only force capable of restoring order and protecting capitalism against the advances of the workers and peasants.

Each attempt to appease the bourgeoisie by suppressing the class struggle and the peasants' fight for land weakened the fight against fascism. Only by strengthening the organizations of workers and peasants, and only by offering a political

[33] Morrow, p. 95.

program based upon land redistribution and workers' power, could the loyalist side hope to overcome the fascists. Not unity with the bourgeoisie, but a sharp break with the bourgeoisie (which had, after all, tried to prevent workers from taking up arms against the fascists) was necessary to defeat Franco. As Trotsky wrote at the time:

> A civil war is waged, as everyone knows, not only with military but also with political weapons. From a purely military point of view, the Spanish revolution is much weaker than its enemy. Its strength lies in its ability to rouse the great masses to action. It can even take away the army from its reactionary officers. To accomplish this, it is only necessary to seriously and courageously advance the program of the socialist revolution.[34]

An immediate redistribution of the large landed estates would have won the support of millions of peasants to the government, including many conservative peasants who had joined the clerical and monarchist forces in Franco's army. A declaration of independence for Morocco would have undercut Franco's support in North Africa, and even opened up a second front against his forces in Morocco. The immediate nationalization of industry and banking would have prevented the bourgeoisie from sabotaging war production by reopening closed plants and seizing money that could be used to purchase arms.

The Popular Front government could not pursue these basic tasks because they threatened the very existence of the bourgeoisie. Only a revolutionary government led by the working class could enact them. The workers controlled the streets and the factories, but that would not continue indefinitely. Either

[34] Trotsky, p. 235.

the workers would seize power in a new revolution or Franco and his supporters would crush the Republic.

The failure to seize power

The CNT was in control of much of Republican Spain and had power in its hands. In the Catalan capital of Barcelona, the leaders of the CNT-FAI were called into the offices of Luis Companys, head of the regional government. There Companys told them, "Today you are masters of the city and of Catalonia… You have conquered and everything is in your power; if you do not need or want me as president of Catalonia, tell me now."[35]

The delegates of the CNT were surprised by this frank admission: "He saw the situation more clearly than us because he hadn't been in the thick of the street fighting. One of us replied, 'We have come to no decision about this, consequently we cannot give an answer. We would have to return and report to the CNT.'"[36]

The choice was posed clearly: Either the CNT would overthrow the old government and establish a revolutionary government in Catalonia, or the Popular Front would remain in power and slowly strangle both the revolution and the fight against Franco. The CNT, however, was not prepared for the choice.

On July 23, the Catalan Regional Committee of the CNT-FAI called a meeting to discuss whether to overthrow the Catalan government. Initially, FAI leader Juan García Oliver, who later entered the national government as minister of justice, argued to "go for everything," overthrow the government and establish libertarian communism. If the government were overthrown, however, it would have to be replaced by a workers' government led by the CNT-FAI. The anarchists believed any such

[35] Broué and Témime, p. 130.

[36] Fraser, p. 111.

state would be a dictatorship, a mortal blow to their anti-statist principles. Federica Montseny argued that "her conscience as an anarchist would not permit her to accept…to go for everything as García Oliver proposed, because the installation of an anarchist dictatorship, because it was a dictatorship, could never be anarchist."[37] And Mariano Vázquez, the regional secretary of the Catalan CNT, opposed "compromising the Organization [CNT] in dictatorial practices."[38]

Looking back on the decision, FAI leader Diego Abad de Santillán wrote:

> We could have remained alone, imposed our absolute will, declared the Generalidad null and void, and imposed the true power of the people in its place, but we did not believe in dictatorship when it was being exercised against us, and we did not want it when we could exercise it ourselves only at the expense of others. The Generalidad would remain in force with President Companys at its head, and the popular forces would organize themselves into militias to carry on the struggle for the liberation of Spain.[39]

When the final vote was taken, García Oliver backed down, and only one delegate voted in favor of overthrowing the government. The CNT announced that it would support Companys remaining as head of the government.

Many anarchists at the time and since have tried to justify–or at least explain–the decision of the CNT to leave the government intact and even offer support. Some maintain that no such decision needed to be made. "The dilemma of

[37] Robert J. Alexander, *The Anarchists in the Spanish Civil War* (Janus Publishing: London, 1999), p. 743.

[38] Alexander, p. 743.

[39] Quoted in Broué and Témime, p. 131.

the 'Anarchist and Confederal dictatorship' or 'Collaboration and democracy,'" writes anarchist Vernon Richards, "existed only for those 'influential militants' of the CNT-FAI who, wrongly interpreting their functions as delegates, took upon themselves the task of directing the popular movement."[40] For Richards the problem exists only because García Oliver and others were "authoritarian" enough to acknowledge it. But Richards is only sidestepping the problem. A real dilemma did exist for the thousands of anarchists.

Most anarchists cite the war and the necessity of maintaining unity in the fight against fascism as the reason for not overthrowing the state. As Gaston Leval, a French anarchist who fought with the CNT militias, explains:

> The anarchists, too, faced with the fascist peril, the suppression of free speech and the right to organize, faced with the inevitable persecutions of all those who would not submit to dictatorship, realized that everyone must unite against fascism.[41]

Here the anarchists are only aping the arguments of the Stalinists, accepting the political and later physical disarming of the Spanish working class for the sake of "antifascist unity."

The Popular Front government had already shown itself unwilling to lead a determined struggle against Franco for fear of alienating the bourgeoisie at home and abroad. A determined struggle against fascism could only be led by the workers; but the state could not be sidestepped. It had to be overturned and replaced with a workers' government capable of waging the war along revolutionary lines. By renouncing their intention to overturn the bourgeois state, the anarchists merely showed the inability of their theories to provide a way forward.

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[40] Richards, p. 40.

[41] Quoted in Sam Dolgoff, ed., *The Anarchist Collectives: Workers' Self-Management in the Spanish Revolution, 1936–1939* (New York: Black Rose Books, 1990), p. 50.

The anarchist movement had always assumed that the social revolution would solve the question of the state. Now, in a revolutionary situation, the anarchists faced a situation of dual power in which either a workers' state or a bosses' state was posed sharply. As Leval again explains:

> At the end of 1936, all those among the anarchists who were preoccupied primarily with the revolutionary question oversimplified and underestimated the political problem. The social revolution would sweep away the entrenched powers and institutions. The political parties would disappear. The parasitic classes, no longer able to count on the support of the state, would disappear. And all that would remain to be done would be to organize the new anarchist society. But the necessity of fighting the war against fascism completely upset these expectations. The state continued to exist.[42]

The revolutionary Marxist tradition, contrary to the claims of the anarchists, had always maintained the necessity of destroying the bourgeois state. Its opposition to anarchism had always been that immediately following a revolution it is necessary to replace the bourgeois state with a workers' government capable of suppressing the forces of reaction. As Lenin writes in State and Revolution:

> We do not at all disagree with the Anarchists on the question of the abolition of the state as an aim. We maintain that, to achieve this aim, temporary use must be made of the instruments, means and methods of the state power against the exploiters, just as the dictatorship of the oppressed class

[42] Quoted in Dolgoff, p. 51.

> is temporarily necessary for the annihilation of classes.[43]

Again and again, the anarchists found themselves in the same dilemma. To overthrow the state meant replacing it with a revolutionary government led by the CNT-FAI. Anarchists rejected this as dictatorship. If the CNT-FAI refused power, the government would remain in the hands of class forces hostile to the revolution and unwilling to continue the revolutionary struggle that had arrested Franco's advance. Trotsky writes:

> In and of itself, this self-justification that "we did not seize power not because we were unable but because we did not wish to, because we were against every kind of dictatorship," and the like, contains an irrevocable condemnation of anarchism as an utterly anti-revolutionary doctrine. To renounce the conquest of power is voluntarily to leave the power with those who wield it, the exploiters. The essence of every revolution consisted and consists in putting a new class in power, thus enabling it to realize its own program in life. It is impossible to wage war and to reject victory. It is impossible to lead the masses towards insurrection without preparing for the conquest of power.[44]

Even the CNT's enemies saw its failure clearly. Major Frederic Escofet, a moderate Catalan republican, wrote:

> [The CNT found itself] virtually in control of the streets, the arms and transportation, in other words, with power in its hands; its leaders, who

[43] Lenin, p. 51.

[44] Trotsky, p. 316.

> were bold and energetic and experienced fighters, were disoriented. They had no plan, no clear doctrine, no idea what they should do or what they should allow others to do. The CNT concept of libertarian communism was devoid of realism and was silent as to the road it should follow in a revolutionary period.[45]

From contempt to collaboration

In Madrid, the Popular Front government was still in power, but had little support. The republican parties' base of support, already weak in July, had evaporated after Franco's initial victories. In an attempt to widen support for the government, President Manuel Azaña invited the left Socialist and head of the UGT, Francisco Largo Caballero, to form a new government with Cabellero as prime minister. Caballero was a reformist turned radical who combined fiery speeches in support of the revolution with continued collaboration with the party's right wing and the Popular Front government.

In September, Caballero formed a government composed of the Socialist, Communist, and left Republican parties. But, from the beginning he was insistent that the CNT be included in the government. Claridad, the publication of Caballero's faction of PSOE, wrote, "The entry of the representatives of the CNT into the present Council of Ministers would certainly endow the directive organ of the nation with fresh energy and authority, in view of the fact that a considerable segment of the working class, now absent from its deliberations, would feel bound by its measures and its authority."[46]

Initially, the CNT refused Caballero's offer of a single seat in the cabinet. They hoped that the strength of the militias and

[45] Trotsky, p. 392.

[46] Bolloten, pp. 192—93.

the factory committees would be sufficient to defend the revolution. "The militia committees guarantee the supremacy of the people in arms," wrote Abad de Santillán.[47] But as the Communists and right-wing Socialists began using their control over supply lines to starve the revolutionary organizations of food and arms, the anarchists realized that they could not remain indifferent to the composition of the government. Having renounced the intention of overthrowing the state, the CNT-FAI opted for collaboration with it! When Caballero agreed to give the CNT-FAI four seats in the government, the CNT-FAI accepted.

The CNT-FAI's decision to join a government, and a capitalist government no less, was a complete betrayal of the stated aims of anarchism and utterly compromised the anarchists. Looking back on the decision, Federica Montseny, then minister of health and social welfare, wrote:

> As a consequence, the state recovered the position it had lost, while we revolutionaries, who formed part of the state, helped it to do so. That was why we were brought into the government. Although we did not enter it with that intention, we were in it, and therefore had no alternative but remain imprisoned in the vicious circle.[48]

The CNT-FAI now joined Caballero and the Communists as the last defenders of the bourgeois order.

In the aftermath of the civil war, few anarchists support the CNT's decision to enter the government. Even at the time, the CNT-FAI received severe criticism from anarchists abroad. But what anarchist critics fail to do is provide any alternative, any way out of the dilemma in which the CNT-FAI found itself. José

[47] Quoted in Casas, p. 194.
[48] Alexander, p. 876.

Peirats, who during the civil war had been a leader in the libertarian youth movement and a strident critic of collaboration, describes the paralysis of the opponents of collaboration:

> At the distance of many years, I think that those of us who opposed consistently the governmentalist thesis could not have offered any other way of resolving the problems of the time than a stoic and heroic gesture. I think, also, that there was an unconfessed complicity in many militants opposed to collaboration, who shouted their holy ire at the same time they allowed it to happen… They couldn't offer any solution.[49]

Anarchist critics are unable to provide a solution because they accept the theoretical underpinnings that led the CNT-FAI leaders away from the seizure of power and toward collaboration. Helmut Ruediger, representative of the International Workingmen's Association in Barcelona, himself a critic of the CNT, acknowledged the opposition's dilemma in his response to the criticisms of foreign anarchists such as Emma Goldman:

> Those who say that the CNT should have established its own dictatorship in 1936 do not know what they are demanding… The CNT would have needed a government program, a program for exercising power; [it would have needed] training in the exercise of power, an economic plan centrally directed, and experience in the use of the state apparatus… The CNT had none of these. Nor do those who believe that the CNT should have implanted its own dictatorship have such a program, either for their own country or for Spain. Do not let us delude ourselves!

[49] Alexander, p. 766.

Furthermore, had it possessed such a program before July 19, the CNT would not have been the CNT; it would have been a Bolshevik party, and, had it applied such methods to the Revolution, it would have dealt Anarchism a mortal blow.[50]

The minority of anarchists who rejected collaboration and tried to find a way out of the impasse of anarchism were forced to break with key aspects of anarchist theory and move toward revolutionary Marxism. The Friends of Durruti, formed in March 1937, was a small group of anarchists based in Barcelona who broke with what they called "apolitical anarchism":

> To beat Franco we need to crush the bourgeoisie and its Stalinist and Socialist Allies. The capitalist state must be destroyed totally and there must be installed workers' power depending on rank-and-file workers' committees. Apolitical anarchism has failed.[51]

In response to this call for the overthrow of the Popular Front and its replacement with a revolutionary government, the CNT leadership demanded their expulsion from the union.

The defense of Madrid and the rise of the Communists

The very week the anarchists joined the government, Caballero showed just how shallow the Popular Front government's conviction to fight the fascists was. When Franco's forces moved to within a few miles of the capital, Madrid, rather than again arm the workers and call for a defense of the city, the new government's first act was to vote unanimously to flee the capital (the anarchist ministers abstained from the

[50] Bolloten, p. 393.

[51] Casas, p. 210.

vote, but did not publicly criticize the decision), leaving behind virtually no organized defense of the city.

Abandoned by the government, the inhabitants of Madrid began scrambling to build defenses. One young man recalled: "When the government left, we felt betrayed… Everyone expected the enemy to take the city. But they didn't. The climate began to change. There were calls everywhere to defend the city. 'Better to die than to live on your knees.'"[52]

Men, women, and even children hastily gathered arms and set out for the front. The union of streetcar workers began running free shuttles from the working-class quarters to the front. For weeks, workers fought the fascists street by street, house by house, showing incredible heroism. Men and women often went to the front unarmed, waiting to relieve someone or waiting for a comrade to fall in battle so they could take up arms. Revolutionary posters went up around the city that read, "MADRID WILL BE THE TOMB OF FASCISM! No pasarán! ["They shall not pass!"] Every house a fortress, every street a trench, every neighborhood a wall of iron and combatants."[53]

After a month of bitter fighting, Franco's forces began withdrawing from the Madrid suburbs that had been captured at the beginning of November. The Popular Front had won its first significant victory of the war. Victory had come through the tremendous initiatives and sacrifices of the workers of Madrid, but it was the Communist Party that would claim credit.

When the Popular Front government had fled Madrid, it had taken with them the leaderships of all the leading political parties and trade unions except the Communists. The organization of the defense of the city was left largely in their hands. After the defense of Madrid, the Communist press printed glowing accounts of how the Communists had saved Madrid, of the heroism of the Communist-controlled International Brigades,

[52] Fraser, p. 262.
[53] Fraser, p. 255.

and of the support received from the Soviet Union during the defense.

The PCE and its corollary in Catalonia, the Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya (PSUC), had grown from insignificant organizations at the outbreak of the civil war to mass organizations that included many heroic workers who gave their lives in Madrid, but these were not revolutionary workers' parties. The Communists' principle demands had been the defense of private property and the limiting of the revolution. In 1936, the majority of its members were small landowners, intellectuals, and members of the urban middle class.[54]

After the defense of Madrid, the Communists used their newfound popularity to begin to take control of the Popular Army and police forces, recruiting or winning support from leading members of the right wing of the PSOE and many of the remaining officer corps. They then took full advantage of their position over the distribution of weapons to withhold ammunition and supplies from the workers' militias of the CNT and the Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (POUM), a small anti-Stalinist party based mainly in Catalonia. The aim was clear: to starve the revolution. But the Communists could not gain undisputed control of the war without settling scores with the anarchists, the POUM, and the revolutionary workers of Barcelona.

Barcelona: The anarchist betrayal

Since July, Barcelona and most of the province of Catalonia had been in an uneasy truce. The workers' organizations, particularly the CNT, controlled most aspects of daily life; but the regional government was slowly disbanding the revolutionary committees and trying to restore "order." The changes bred resentment among most workers in Catalonia, but opposition had been compromised when the CNT and POUM had entered the regional government in September 1936. Instead, anger and

[54] Bolloten, p. 321.

frustration built over the winter. George Orwell, on leave from the front, described the changes in the city since his last visit:

> [Under] the surface-aspect of the town, under the luxury and growing poverty, under the seeming gaiety of the streets with 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 danger 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.[55]

The inevitable clash finally came on the morning of May 3, when three truckloads of Assault Guards, under the personal command of a PSUC minister, arrived at the anarchist-held Telephone Exchange with an eviction notice. This was a test of power. The Telephone Exchange had been seized by the CNT in the first days of fighting in July and had been run under workers' control ever since. It was widely regarded as the most visible symbol of workers' power in the city.

The CNT militants inside the building responded to the eviction order with bullets. Within hours, barricades were being erected all over the working-class districts of the city. "Hundreds of workers armed themselves," wrote Augustine Souchy, a well-known German anarchist, "constructing barricades and disarming the civil guard with their consent. No blood was spilled. The workers were masters of the situation."[56] From the

[55] Orwell, pp. 117—18

[56] Alexander, p. 905.

front, a joint column of CNT-POUM militia began a march on Barcelona to support the uprising.

Once the fighting started, two things were clear. First, the spontaneous uprising in Barcelona had the support of the majority of workers in Catalonia. Second, this provocation by the government was intended as an act of war against the revolution. This time there could be no collaboration; either the workers would move forward and overthrow the government, or their defeat would be the beginning of the end for the revolution. There were no guarantees that an uprising in Barcelona would have gained support outside of Catalonia, but a defeat in Barcelona guaranteed the defeat of the revolution.

Some workers' organizations understood the need to take power. The Friends of Durruti argued for the disarming of the military and the disbanding of the Communist Party for organizing against the revolution. They also argued for the overthrow of the government and the formation of a revolutionary junta. Likewise, the small group of Trotskyists in Barcelona published a leaflet calling on workers to form revolutionary councils and for the seizure of power. But both groups were too small to influence events decisively. Leadership of the workers' movement still lay with the leadership of the CNT-FAI.

The Popular Front government appealed to the CNT-FAI, and Montseny and Oliver were dispatched to Barcelona to end the fighting. Over the radio, Oliver and later Montseny appealed to CNT militants to dismantle the barricades and return home. CNT leaders stopped the CNT militia column from continuing its march to Barcelona.[57] In disgust, workers burned bundles of CNT newspapers at the barricades. "I heard

[57] The POUM, while not outrightly treacherous, was ineffective in its opposition. It remained focused on convincing the CNT leadership of the need to seize power rather than on pursuing an independent line. When it was clear that the CNT was not going to take power, the POUM argued for its own members to leave the barricades and halted the POUM militia column's march to the capital.

some comrades cry with rage over the telephone when they telephoned the [CNT-FAI] committees and the latter told them not to shoot, even though they were being attacked by machine-gun fire," wrote Abad de Santillán.[58] The barricades remained for another five days, but without the support of the CNT-FAI leadership, militants eventually retreated in frustration and disgust. The revolution had been defeated.

The months that followed were months of outright reaction. First the POUM and then the anarchists were purged from any position of power by the Communists. Thousands of revolutionaries disappeared into secret prisons to be tortured or killed. In June, POUM leader Andrés Nin was kidnapped and executed by the Soviet secret police. Any vestige of revolutionary power–the factory committees, the communes, the Council of Aragón, the militias–was forcibly disbanded.

The Popular Front government held out for nearly another two years, but from May 1937 on, its fate was sealed. Once the revolution was defeated, the civil war became a strictly military conflict. In a conventional war, the fascists held all the advantages–money, equipment, troops. The tremendous heroism and sacrifice on the part of Spanish workers that had marked the early months of the war had been based on a belief that they were fighting for a new society. With that gone, there was little reason to risk everything. As one peasant soldier fighting on Franco's side shouted across the trenches to workers' appealing to him to switch sides, "What has the republic done for us that we should fight for it?"[59] When Barcelona, the cradle of the revolution, fell to Franco on January 26, 1938, there were no barricades, there was no heroic defense. Manuel Tagüeña, the Communist Commander of the 15th Army Corp wrote, "Barcelona accepted defeat with

[58] Bolloten, p. 451.

[59] Quoted in Morrow, p. 1.

sorrow and saw no purpose at all in prolonging the fight. We were no longer in 1936."[60]

Conclusion

The apoliticism of the anarchist movement, its "denial" of political struggle, left it to drift between extreme militancy and collaboration. Responsibility for the defeat of the revolution must ultimately lie with Franco's army, the complicity of the PSOE leadership, and the treachery of the Communists–but it also lay in the betrayal of the revolution by the anarchist leaders.

The failure of the CNT-FAI to take power and its subsequent collaboration was not in spite of its anarchist principles; it was a product of them. By rejecting the formation of a workers' government as a form of dictatorship and refusing to seize power, the CNT-FAI left itself no course but that of collaboration, covered up with phrases borrowed from the Stalinists about the need for "antifascist unity." As Trotsky noted somewhat humorously at the time:

> We have already heard from some Anarchist theoreticians that at the time of such "exceptional" circumstances as war and revolution, it is necessary to renounce the principles of one's own program. Such revolutionists bear a close resemblance to raincoats that leak only when it rains, i.e., in "exceptional" circumstances, but during dry weather they remain waterproof with complete success.[61]

The anarchists thus vacillated between ultra-left adventurism (the period of the insurrections and a complete rejection

[60] Morrow, p. 669.
[61] Trotsky, p. 327.

of politics) and complete accommodation (joining a bourgeois government) at the decisive revolutionary moment.

An alternative is necessary not as a historical exercise, but because it shapes the struggles of today. In trying to explain the failures of the CNT in the Spanish Revolution, some anarchists have taken exactly the wrong lessons and retreated from the very idea of class struggle altogether. Murray Bookchin writes that as a result of the failure of the Spanish Revolution

> The limitations of the trade union movement, even in its anarchosyndicalist form, have become manifestly clear. To see in trade unions (whether syndicalist or not) an inherent potentiality for revolutionary struggle is to assume that the interests of workers and capitalists, merely as classes, are intrinsically incompatible. This is demonstrably untrue if one is willing to acknowledge the obvious capacity of the system to remake or to literally create the worker in the image of a repressive industrial culture and rationality.[62]

An inability to provide an alternative to the policies of the CNT-FAI has led Bookchin and others away from the idea that workers can struggle to remake the world in a more equal and democratic image. Today the anarchist movement is a far cry from the tradition of the CNT. It is dominated by middle-class, lifestyle politics, often explicitly rejecting workers' struggle as a means of liberating society.

Yet this is the greatest legacy of the Spanish Revolution. Whatever its failures, it stands as a heroic example of workers' struggle. Whatever its flaws, it gives a glimpse of what a socialist world could look like. But that alone is insufficient. While revolutionary socialists and anarchists share a common goal in a classless society, ultimately an alternative to capitalism

[62] Dolgoff, introduction, pp. xxxiii-iv.

must be found not within the tradition of Bakunin, Kropotkin, and Goldman, but with the revolutionary socialist tradition of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky.

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