

Political persecution in republican Spain



Short article by Emma Goldman giving an overview of Stalinist persecution of revolutionary antifascists during the Spanish civil war.

On my first visit to Spain in September 1936, nothing surprised me so much as the amount of political freedom I found everywhere. True it did not extend to fascists; but outside of these deliberate enemies of the revolution and the emancipation of the workers in Spain, everyone of the anti-fascist front enjoyed political freedom which hardly existed in any of the so called European democracies. The one party that made the utmost use of this was the PSUC, the Stalinist party in revolutionary Spain. Their radio and loudspeakers filled the air. Their daily marches in military formation with their flags waving were flaunted in everybody's face. They seemed to take a special pleasure in marching past the house of the Regional Committee as if they wanted to make the CNT-FAI aware of their determination to strike the blow when they will attain to complete power. This was obvious to anyone among the foreign delegates and comrades who had come to help in the anti-fascist struggle. Not so our Spanish comrades. They made light of the communist brazenness. They insisted that this circus clap trap could not decide the revolutionary struggle, and that they themselves had more important things to do than waste their time in idle display. It seemed to me that the Spanish comrades had little understanding of mass psychology which needs flagwagging, speeches, music and demonstrations — that while the CNT-FAI however, were concentrated on their constructive tasks, and fighting on the various fronts, their communist allies made hay while their sun shone. They have since proved that they knew what they were about.

During my stay of three months I visited many of the collectivised estates and factories, maternities and hospitals in Barcelona, and last but not least, also the 'Modelo' prison. Then the place that had harboured some of the most distinguished revolutionaries and anarchists of Catalonia. Our own

heroic comrades Durruti and Ascaso, Garcia Oliver and many others had been cell neighbours of Companys, the new President of the Generalitat. I visited this institution in the presence of a comrade, a physician who had made a special study of criminal psychology. The director gave me free access to every part of the prison and the right to speak to any of the fascists without the presence of guards. Among the few hundred admirers of Franco were officers and priests. They assured me in one voice of the decent and just treatment they were receiving from the management in charge of the place, most of whom were CNT-FAI men.

The possibility that fascists would soon be replaced by revolutionists and anarchists was far removed from my mind. If anything, the high water mark of the revolution in the autumn of 1936 held out hopes that the stain of prison would be wiped out once Franco and his hordes were defeated.

The report of the foul murder of the most gentle of anarchists, Camillo Berneri and his room mate, the anarchist Barbieri, was followed by wholesale arrests, mutilation and death. They seemed too fantastic, the change in the internal political situation too incredible to be true. I decided to go back to Spain to see for myself how far the new found freedom of the Spanish masses had been annihilated by Stalin's henchmen.

Once again I arrived on the 16th September this year. I went straight to Valencia and there discovered that 1,500 CNT members, comrades of the FAI and the Libertarian Youth hundreds of the POUM and even members of the International Brigade were filling the prisons of Valencia. During my short stay there I left no stone unturned to get permission to visit some of our comrades, among them Gustel Dorster whom I had known in Germany as most active in the anarcho-syndicalist movements before Hitler ascended to power. I was assured that I would be given permission; but at the last moment, before my return to Barcelona, I was informed that foreigners were not allowed to see the prison. I soon discovered the same situation repeated in every town and village I visited. Thousands of comrades and other genuine revolutionaries were filling the prisons under the Negrin-Prieto and Stalinist regime.

When I came back to Barcelona in the early part of October, I immediately sought to see our comrades in the Modelo prison. After many difficulties comrade Augustin Souchy succeeded in obtaining permission to have an interview with a few of the German comrades. Much to my surprise I found on my arrival there that the same Director was still in charge. He too recognised me and he again gave me full entry to the prison. I did not need to speak to the comrades through the hideous bars. I was in the hall where they foregather, surrounded by German, Italian, Bulgarian, Russian and Spanish comrades, all trying to speak at once and tell me of their conditions. I discovered no charge whatever that would stand in any Court, even under capitalism, had been preferred against them, except the idiotic charge of 'Trotskyism'.

These men from every part of the globe had flocked to Spain, often begging their way across, to help the Spanish revolution, to join the ranks of the anti-fascists and to lay down their lives in the struggle against Franco were held captive. Others again had been picked up on the street and had vanished without leaving any trace behind. Among the many was Reis, son of the internationally known Russian Menshevik Abramovich.

The most recent victim is Kurt Landau, a former member of the Executive Committee of the Austrian Communist Party, and before his arrest on the Executive Committee of the POUM. Every effort to find him has met with failure. In view of the disappearance of Andres Nin of the POUM and scores of others it is reasonable to conclude that Kurt Landau met with the same fate.

But to return to the Modelo prison. It is impossible to give all the names, because there are so many incarcerated there. The most outstanding is a comrade who, in a high responsible position before the May events, had turned over millions of pesetas to the Generalitat found in Churches and Palaces. He is held under the ludicrous charge of having embezzled 100,000 pesetas.

Another one is comrade Helmut Klose, a member of the CNT-FAI. He was arrested on the 2nd July. No charge has been made up to this date, neither was he brought before a Judge. Comrade Klose was a member of the FAUD in Germany (German anarcho-syndicalist organisation). After having been arrested several times, he emigrated to Yugoslavia in the summer of 1933. Expelled from there in February 1937, because of anti-fascist activity. He came to Spain in March. He joined the frontier service of the FAI, in the 'De la Costa' battalion. After the dissolution of this battalion, in June he took his discharge, entered the service of the agricultural collective in San Anores. In compliance with the request from his group he undertook the reorganisation of the Tailors' Collective of the Emigrants Committee. The charge made by the Cheka of his having disarmed officers while in the Frontier Service at Figueras is entirely without foundation.

Commander de Alkert Kille. He was arrested on September 7th. No reason was given. In Germany he had belonged since 1919 to the Productive Supply Union. Besides this he was a member of the Communist Party. In 1933 he emigrated to Austria. After the February events he fled to Prague: but later returned to Austria whence he was expelled and left for France. Here he joined the German anarcho-syndicalist group. In August 1936 he went to Spain, where he at once proceeded to the front. He was wounded once. He belonged to the Durruti column right up to the time of the militarisation. In June he took his discharge.

I also visited the POUM Sector. Many of these prisoners are Spaniards, but amongst them there are also a large number foreigners, Italian, French, Russian and German. Two members of the POUM approached me personally. They said little of their own suffering, but begged me to take a message to their own wives in Paris. They were Nicolas Sundelevich — the son of the famous Menshevik who had spent the longest part of his life in Siberia. Nicolas Sundelevich certainly did not give me the impression being guilty of the serious charges made against him of 'having given the fascists information' among the many other charges against him. It takes the perverted communist mind to hold a man in prison because in 1922 he had illegally left Russia.

Richard Tietz was arrested as he came out of the Argentine Consulate in Barcelona where he had gone on behalf of his wife, previously arrested. When he demanded to know the grounds his arrest the Commissar nonchalantly said "I consider it just". That was evidently enough to keep Richard Tietz in the Modelo since July.

As far as prison conditions can be humane the Modelo is certainly superior to the Cheka prisons introduced in Spain by the Stalinists according to the best party examples of Soviet Russia. The 'Modelo' still maintains its traditional political privileges such as the right of the inmates to freely mingle together, organise their committees to represent them with the director, receiving parcels, tobacco, etc., in addition to the scanty prison fare. They can also write and receive letters and reading material. Besides, the prisoners issue little prison papers and bulletins which they can paste in the corridors where they all foregather. Both in the section of our comrades and the POUM I found such prison papers, posters and photographs of the heroes of the two parties. The POUM had even a very fine drawing of Andres Nin and a picture of Rosa Luxemburg, while the anarchist's side had Ascaso and Durruti on their wall.

Most interesting was the Durruti cell which he had occupied in Barcelona until released by the 1936 elections. It was left intact as it had been while Durruti was its involuntary lodger. Several large

posters of our gallant comrade made the cell very much alive. The strangest part is however that the Durruti cell is in the fascist section. In answer to my question as to how Durruti's cell comes to be in there, I was told by the guard, "as an example of the living spirit of Durruti that will destroy fascism". I wanted very much to have the Durruti cell photographed but permission had to be obtained from the Minister of Justice. I gave up the idea. I had never in my life asked favours of Ministers of Justice, much less would I ask for anything from the counter-revolutionary government, the Spanish Cheka.

My next visit was to the womens' prison, which I found better kept and more cheerful than the Modelo. Only six women politicals were there at the time. Among them Katia Landau the wife of Kurt Landau, who had been arrested several months before him. She was like the old time Russian revolutionists utterly devoted to her ideas. I already knew of her husband's disappearance and possible end; but I did not have the heart to disclose this fact to her. This was in October. In November I was informed by some of her comrades in Paris that Mrs Landau had begun a hunger strike on the 11th November. I have just received word that as a result of two hunger strikes Katia Landau has been released.

A few days before my departure from Spain I was informed on good authority that the old dreadful Bastille — Montjuich was again being used to house political prisoners. The infamous Montjuich, whose every stone could tell of man's inhumanity to man, of the thousands put to death by the most savage methods of torture, or driven mad or to suicide. Montjuich where in 1897 the Spanish Inquisition had been reintroduced by Canova Del Castillo, then Premier of Spain. It was at his behest that 30 workers, among them distinguished Spanish anarchists, had been kept for months in underground damp and dirty cells — repeatedly tortured and denied counsel. It was in Montjuich that Francisco Ferrer was murdered by the Spanish Government and the Catholic Church. Last year I visited this terrifying fortress. Then it held no prisoners. The cells were empty. We descended into black depths with torches guiding our way. I almost seemed to hear the agonised cries of the thousands of victims who had breathed their last in the ghastly holes. It was a relief to get into the light again.

History does repeat itself after all. Montjuich again serves its old ghastly purpose. It is overcrowded with ardent revolutionaries who had been among the first to rush to the various fronts. Militants of the Durruti column freely giving their health and strength but unwilling to be turned into military automatons — members of the International Brigade who had come to Spain from every land to fight fascism, only to discover the harsh differentiation against them, their officers and the political commissars and the criminal waste of human lives due to the military ignorance and for party purpose and glory. All these and more are incarcerated in the fortress of Montjuich.

Since the world slaughter and the continued horror under dictatorship, red and black, human sensibilities have been atrophied; but there must be a few left who still have a sense of justice. True Anatole France, Georg Brandes and so many great souls whose protests saved twenty two victims of the Soviet State in 1922 are no longer with us. Still there are the Gides, the Silones, Aldous Huxley, Havelock Ellis, John Cowper Powys, Rebecca West, Ethel Mannin and others who would surely protest if made aware of the political persecutions rampant under the Negrin Prieto and Communist regime.

At any rate I cannot be silent in the face of such barbarous political persecutions. In justice to the thousands of our comrades in prison I have left behind. I will and must, speak out.