

Revolution and Counterrevolution in Catalonia – Carlos Semprún Maura

Introduction to the Spanish Edition

I wrote this book between 1969 and 1971, when the tremors of the May-June 1968 outbreak in France had not yet subsided, and when a wide range of topics, new for many people, nourished actions, discussions, projects, journals and books. Among these topics, of course, were the libertarian revolutions and the shopworn theme of self-management. To me it seemed that the logical as well as the obvious thing to do was to participate in my own way in these discussions and in the critique of totalitarianism (“red” fascism as well as the “white” variety), by writing a book about the experiences of “self-management” in Catalonia and Aragon in 1936-1939, concerning which almost no one (if not absolutely no one) knew anything in France at that time. I was myself only then discovering the importance of these phenomena as I engaged in research and gathered documents and data for the book.

During those same years, it had become fashionable for Parisian publishers to carry some “leftist” titles in their catalogues, in order to satisfy a new youthful customer base and to thus increase the profits of the various publishing houses.

This book, however, was offered to a whole series of publishers without being accepted by any of them, until it was to “miraculously” find a home with a respectable, and originally Catholic, publisher (Mame), that was at the time attempting to change its image to keep pace with the times. My book did not bring it any good luck since its publisher went out of business shortly thereafter, sinking into the most total bankruptcy....

I have changed nothing in the first French edition, except for omitting the short introduction that the French editor had requested in order to shed some light on the question of Catalonian nationalism for any possible readers on the French side of the Pyrenees. Such an introduction may very well be spared the Spanish readers of this book, who can obtain much more complete information on this topic—if they need to do so—from other books, or merely by reading their local newspapers, now that the Generalitat has been reinstated.... I will nonetheless take advantage of this opportunity to say, with regard to that brief review of Catalonian nationalism, that I utterly and completely reject all nationalism.

I have changed nothing, solely and exclusively due to my laziness, since there is much that could have been revised and improved, and also taking into account the fact that since this book was published, several other volumes have appeared that address the question of the collectives and other themes treated here. I have also refrained from changing the—few—more recent observations contained in the book. For example, the last paragraphs in which, in a quite perfunctory manner, I refer to the situation in Spain at the time when I was writing the book, that is, the situation of Spain under Franco.

Obviously, no one could have confidently asserted at that time that once Franco had died, Francoism would disappear so rapidly and so peacefully and that the recently unleashed democracy, with a full head of steam, would lead Spain towards Banality. A Banality that was preferable, in my view, to fascism, with or without its Francoist peculiarities. But this does not obviate the fact, and it is important to emphasize this, that revolutionary (you can put quotation marks around the word if you like) hopes and dreams have, with each passing day, fallen by the wayside.

And this, evidently, would tend to relegate this book to the dustiest shelf of the library, where the *history* books are stored, that is, books about what happened and will never happen again.

I say this because this book may cause certain readers to suffer from a delusion of “example” and the illusion of “repetition”. Something like the belief that what the libertarian workers set about doing in 1936, that undoubtedly profound social revolution, can be done again today and pursued to its ultimate consequences. Mere delusion, I repeat.

It is possible that this text will be “guilty” of fomenting illusions of this kind, it is possible that my own enthusiasm, upon discovering the importance of that social revolution, might be confused with something like a “clear and simple perspective for our time”: all we need to do is to pick up where they left off on that glorious road. Alas, no. I have never believed that history can be repeated; even less so with respect to this particular history.

Of course, no book, despite what the Marxist-Leninists believe, who are always in search of the right program, can provide revolutionary solutions, because everything that has ever been revolutionary in the world is always *unpredictable* and *spontaneous* and therefore surpasses and immediately renders obsolete any kind of program. Even if the “Marxist” historians will come later to explain to us that everything happened that way because Lenin was drinking coffee not far from the epicenter of the events.

If the repetition of what happened in Catalonia in 1936-1937 seems to me to be clearly impossible, this is simply because the Spanish society of today is very different from the Spanish society of 1936. Therefore, the anti-state, anti-authoritarian, libertarian, self-management, etc., struggle (I know full well that such a struggle *does not exist* today in Spain, we are only talking about a hypothesis), in order to exist, would have to be reinvented from top to bottom.

An adequate explanation of the changes that have taken place in Spanish society (and in the world) since the civil war, both with regard to attitudes and behaviors, as well as with regard to industry and agriculture, social classes, the role of the State, etc., not to speak of an evaluation of the significance of these changes, would require another book, and such an explanation cannot be encompassed in the framework of an introduction. It would be an easy matter for any reader, however, to compare what took place in 1936, which I

relate here in the footsteps of so many others, with what he experiences in his everyday life. They have nothing in common. Apart from the “eternal values” of Liberty and Justice which, precisely because they are “eternal”, are of no interest to me.

Nonetheless, attempts are being made to repeat history, and not just repeat it, but to make sure that it is repeated in exactly the same way. All the old cemeteries are being excavated. The old cadavers of anarchosyndicalism are disinterred, the old glories dislodged from their holes, the old mummies removed from their sarcophagi, the old flags unfurled and the age-old statutes dusted off, and an attempt is made to carry on with the glorious history of the CNT. And that is what is taking place right now.

Today’s CNT is nothing but a bad caricature of the CNT of the past. And this is not only logical, but was even predictable. I think that I have shown, in the pages that follow, everything that was contradictory throughout the 1930s in the theory and practice of anarchosyndicalism. Today, however, and precisely as a result of the changes that have since taken place in Spanish society, the very idea of anarchosyndicalism is stillborn, because in societies such as that of Spain, no trade union can be anything but a particular instrument for the integration of the workers into society, a vehicle for the control and management (and therefore one that inhibits action) of discontent and revolt. Exactly the contrary of anarchism, therefore, if this word still has any meaning at all. Which is certainly open to doubt.

It is true that the “reborn” CNT is today composed of people who, under the very same acronyms [CNT, etc.], understand not just different, but contradictory things. What is most striking, however, about the last few months of activity, at first tolerated and then legal, not taking into account the declarations of good intentions, but only the facts, is the fact that the CNT has been incapable of distinguishing itself in any significant way from the other trade union federations: the struggle for the legacy of the CNS [*Centrales Nacionales Sindicales*, the authoritarian “vertical” trade union of the Franco regime] calls for amnesty, demonstrations with shouted slogans and waving flags, debates about contracts, etc.—the same eyewash employed by all the bureaucratic organizations. And we shall not speak of that caricature of caricatures, of the sinister *happening* [in English in the original] of those who are attempting to reestablish the FAI, and in order to do so sleep once a week with a pistol under their pillow and dream that they are Durruti! (A personality who is totally sanctified and concerning whom we will have to start to speak with a minimum of critical spirit.)

All the expressions of outrage and all the excuses are of no avail against the fact that in conflicts in which something new, different, modern or libertarian has taken place (in Vitoria or Roca, for example), the CNT was absent. It “supported” or applauded the events symbolically, but from afar. In these and in other cases it was the workers themselves who, rejecting the self-interested support and even more the leadership of all parties and trade unions, conducted their struggles democratically by means of sovereign assemblies.

No, the only thing that is new is the festive spirit, the introduction of the notion of the festival in certain rallies and meetings of the CNT. But however attractive and novel it may be to break with the ritual that made meetings seem like the Catholic mass, two observations are in order: 1) the introduction of the festival in the meeting, of casual “informality” in the holy mass, has now led to scandal and it will not be long before it is expelled from “the ranks of a serious organization like the CNT”; and 2) those who think that these festive manifestations will have even the least effect on the stability of the royal throne or that of the Prime Minister—whether Suárez or González—are in for the biggest disappointment of their lives. It is, of course, true that most of the new “*juerguistas*” [fun-loving, pleasure-seekers] only want to have a good time and this “why not?” attitude has its place, but it does not go beyond this goal that is itself as important as it is limited.

To summarize: This book is not a manual in which I explain how to recreate, on the basis of past and present experiences, the libertarian collectives of Aragon, Catalonia—or Extremadura—or the barricades of Barcelona. If it has any interest at all, it is precisely because it can serve to show the enormous distance and the countless differences that separate the Spain of 1936 from the Spain of 1978 and the impossibility of repeating what took place in 1936. If that is what you are looking for, you will have to look elsewhere.

It might also have a critical interest, however. For me, of course, I would be pleased if it were a well-aimed stone that would shatter the totally false showcase of the Stalinist legend about the period of the civil war. After forty years of Francoist censorship—and of post-Francoist guilty consciences—the Spanish Stalinists have succeeded in imposing a heroic and democratic image of their activity, which was actually totally counterrevolutionary and repressive, during the civil war. Various books have already denounced this mystification (the best one being, probably, Burnett Bolloten’s *The Grand Camouflage*), but it is not useless to continue to throw stones at the showcase of this lie, if only to see if ours will be the one that breaks it.

My critique is not limited, however, to the analysis of the Stalinism of the 1930s. I also criticize the activity and conduct of the leading circles of the CNT. Generally, the anarchists who have criticized the actions of the leaders of the CNT (Peirats, Vernon Richards, etc.) have always done so from what we may call a political angle. For example: by joining Governments, the leaders of the CNT betrayed acratric principles; and by accepting the militarization of the militias, they did the same. All of this is true, but the reality is much more serious and profound, and I thought it was important to undertake a critical analysis of the bureaucratization of the CNT, with regard to not just the political, but also the economic terrain, “in the halls of power”, a bureaucratization that, as I think I have proven, was total and complete. And this is also of importance today. For, just what is it that those who are reconstructing the CNT are trying to accomplish? The impossible creation of a “revolutionary” trade union, or the organization of a trade union bureaucracy? The answer is obvious.

Modern societies are capable of producing a wide array of antibodies, of barriers and illusions around which those who seek to change or destroy those societies clump together, in an “organization” whose task is to plan discontent and then negotiate over it with the State and the employers in the eternal merry-go-round which is the basis of the conflict-ridden integration of the workers into the process of production.

If there have not been more actions and initiatives under the aegis of anarchy over the last few years in Spain, this is because too many groups and individuals have restricted their efforts to the task of rebuilding the Palace of the Thousand and One Nights of anarchosyndicalism, which has been dead since May 1937 (if you want to specify its date of death, which is not even necessary). By dedicating all their time and effort to this illusory task they have not conceived, and are indeed incapable of conceiving, even the least significant new idea. That Palace, which even has many resemblances to the Tower of Babel, has no other “coherence” than that which lies in its past.

His Majesty’s Government should not forget the CNT when the time comes for granting subsidies to the trade unions (maybe it will even get something from the distribution of the booty of the CNS), for who knows what might have happened if all those who are today devoted to building the Palace of mere nostalgia had instead chosen to think and to act, here and now?

C.S.M.

Paris, November 1977

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“Only when such prejudice is abandoned will it be possible for historians to undertake a serious study of the popular movement that transformed Republican Spain in one of the most remarkable social revolutions that history records.”

Noam Chomsky

Chapter 1

The Military Uprising and the Revolutionary Response

The military uprising

In Melilla, at 5:00 p.m. on July 17, 1936, the officers involved in the conspiracy went into action: they deposed the republican officer in command of the garrison, they seized the public buildings and proclaimed a state of emergency. The military uprising against the Spanish Republic had begun. The other garrisons, (Tetuán, Ceuta, Larache, etc.) joined the uprising that same night and, by the next morning, all of “Spanish” Morocco was in the hands of the rebel officers. The outbreaks of resistance on the part of “loyalist” military personnel and working class trade unions were rapidly crushed.

General Franco, who, from his garrison on the Canary Islands, was transported by airplane to Tetuán, where he was to assume command over the uprising, announced in a radio broadcast to those who “still cherish a sacred love for Spain”:

“It is all of Spain which is rising up and demanding peace, fraternity and justice; in the entire country, the Army, the Navy and the Forces of Public Order, all are rising up to defend the Fatherland.

“The energy that is displayed in the preservation of order will be commensurate with the resistance that is opposed to it.”¹

The republican Government, much less energetic, restricted itself to publishing, on the morning of the 18th, a press release that minimized the importance of the uprising and claimed that it was limited to Morocco and that “no one, absolutely no one, is associated with this absurd enterprise on the Peninsula”.² In the meantime, the garrisons of the Peninsula, following the example of those in “Spanish” Morocco, and the Canary Islands, also joined the uprising, with success, in various regions: Navarre (Pamplona), Aragon (Zaragoza), Old Castile (Burgos, Valladolid), Andalusia (Seville), etc.

When the republican Government was forced to acknowledge that Seville was in the hands of General Queipo de Llano, the socialist and communist parties jointly published the following proclamation:

“These are difficult but not desperate times. The Government is confident that it possesses the means to crush this criminal venture. Should those means prove insufficient, the Republic has the solemn promise of the Popular Front that it is ready to intervene in the struggle just as soon as its assistance is requested. The Government commands and the Popular Front obeys.”³

But the Government hesitated. It seems that it expected part of the armed forces would remain loyal, a large enough part to dissuade the “rebels” from persevering in their “absurd enterprise”. Likewise, it refused to “arm the people” out of fear of revolution, of course, but there is also no doubt that this refusal also originated to some extent in its fear of seeing the hypothetical loyal, or at least undecided, military units turn towards the enemy camp. With this refusal to take resolute action, the measures that the Government did take on July 18 seem perfectly ridiculous, since they were limited to officially

¹ *ABC*, Andalusian edition (July 23, 1936).

² *Claridad*, Madrid (July 18, 1936).

³ J. Peirats, *La CNT en la Revolución española*, Ruedo Ibérico, Paris, 1971, Vol. I, p. 139. In English: *The CNT in the Spanish Revolution*, Vol. I, ed. Chris Ealham, tr. Paul Sharkey and Chris Ealham, PM Press, Oakland, 2011; available online at: <https://libcom.org/files/The%20CNT%20in%20the%20Spanish%20Revoluti%20-%20Jose%20Peirats.pdf>.

dismissing the military commanders who had participated in the uprising and, at 3:45 p.m., it published another declaration:

“The Government once again addresses the people in order to confirm that everything is absolutely under control in the entire Peninsula. The Government, while grateful for the offers of support which it has received, declares that the best support that it could receive would be that of ensuring the normal course of everyday life, in order to set a noble example of tranquility and confidence in the means of Power.”⁴

What means of Power are these, however, except the Army and the Police, which were almost entirely in favor of the uprising? The republican Government, which feared revolution, still expected, in its fantasy world, that the Army, or a considerable part of the Army, “would come to its senses”. Since it expected this miracle, it refused to hand over arms to the workers organizations. Furthermore, the Prime Minister and the Minister of War, Casares Quiroga, proclaimed that anyone distributing arms without permission would be shot.

The President of the Republic, Manuel Azaña, trying by all means to avoid a confrontation, replaced the Casares Quiroga government with another, which was *ordered to negotiate* with the military rebels, with Martínez Barrio as President. The latter, in order to constitute a government of “national unity”, offered the Ministry of War to General Mola, who was the commander of the uprising in the northern zone. The President placed a telephone call to Mola. Naturally, Mola refused the offer. It was far too late, the die had been cast. The Martínez Barrio government had no other alternative but to resign, and that is what it did. It had existed for only a few hours, but while the uprising had spread throughout the entire territory of the Peninsula, the pressure of the working class masses to obtain arms and go into battle became increasingly more insistent. In some regions, the workers had begun to arm themselves by their own efforts. Thus, when a new Government was formed on July 19, led by José Giral, the latter had to allow the distribution of arms to the workers organizations. If it had not, it would have been swept away by the military uprising; by doing so, however, it not only handed over arms, but also real power, to the workers.

The preparations for battle in Barcelona

In Barcelona, the military junta, which had formed several months before, had arranged a theoretically perfect plan in coordination with the General Staff of the “rebels”. It called for the successful implementation of the mission that general Mola, in his master plan for the uprising, had defined in the following manner: “to neutralize the offensive capabilities of the Catalonian proletarian masses”.⁵ In order for this plan to succeed, the troops must converge from the barracks located in the suburbs towards the center of the city and seize the most important administrative buildings. The Mola Plan called for “informing the troops that an attempt was underway to overthrow the Republic and that

⁴ *Claridad*, Madrid (July 18, 1936).

⁵ *Solidaridad Obrera*, Barcelona (July 18, 1936).

the Army, as the guarantor of order, must defend the Republic in the streets.” This military ruse showed, in any case, that the military officers in charge of the conspiracy did not have too much faith in their troops. As for the officers who were known for their republican sympathies, they had to be neutralized right away. Since they were not very numerous, this part of the plan did not present too many difficulties.

The military plotters did not expect that they would have to face much resistance. One of them declared, a few days before the uprising: “When all that rabble hears the roar of the artillery, it will run away with its tail between its legs.”⁶ That is not exactly what happened.

Lluís Companys, President of the Generalitat, appeared to be much more aware of the impending threat of a “coup” than his colleagues in the central Government. In any case, on the morning of July 16, he wanted to have a meeting with the representatives of the CNT, the powerful anarchosindicalist trade union federation. The purpose of this interview would consist in studying the ways and means of joint resistance against the fascist threat.

“To study this request (for collaboration [C.S.M.]), the regional committees of the CNT and the FAI met with various leading militants of the two organizations. The decision that was made during this meeting was that: ‘faced with the fascist threat, the CNT and the FAI, setting aside all grudges and all settling of accounts, maintain the position that it is indispensable, or at least desirable, that close collaboration should be established between all the liberal, progressive and proletarian forces which are resolved to confront the enemy.’ It was at this time that the anarchist workers organizations of Barcelona formed a Liaison Committee with the Generalitat, composed of five militants from the two organizations: Santillán, García Oliver and Francisco Ascaso for the FAI, Durruti and Asens for the CNT.”⁷

The most effective measure that this Liaison Committee could have taken would have been the distribution of arms to all the workers and the concrete organization of the response to the uprising. But the Generalitat would not do this, because in Barcelona as in Madrid, “if the politicians fear fascism, they are even more afraid of the people in arms”, as the anarchist militant Diego Abad de Santillán wrote. Thus, not only did the Generalitat refuse to satisfy the Liaison Committee’s request—that is, one thousand rifles!—but the militants of the CNT who had been posted to stand guard over the barracks were arrested and disarmed by the police. In this context, the entire activity of the Liaison Committee consisted in negotiating to prevent the seizure of the few arms that the anarchists had managed to hide after the repression of October 1934.⁸

⁶ Abel Paz, *Paradigma de una revolución*, Paris, Ediciones de l’AIT, 1967, p. 26.

⁷ Diego Abad de Santillán, *La Revolución y la Guerra de España*, la Habana, Ed. “El Libro”, 1938, p. 131.

⁸ On the events of October 1934, see Appendix 1.

On July 17, when the news of the uprising in Morocco had already been broadcast, the FAI distributed a Manifesto to the workers leaving the factories:

“The fascist threat, at this moment, is no longer a threat, but a bloody reality.... This is not the time for indecision. We have to put our resolutions into practice. In each locality, the anarchist groups and the groups of the libertarian youth must maintain close contact with the responsible committees of the CNT. We are going to avoid entering into conflict with the anti-fascist forces, regardless of their past, because the categorical imperative of the moment is the crushing of the militarist, clerical and aristocratic uprising. Remain in constant contact with the regional and national specific organization (the FAI). Long live the Revolution! Death to fascism!”⁹

That night, the workers met in the various local trade union headquarters. Indeed, that is where they had spent all their free time since July 12, because they knew, like everyone in Spain—except the Central Government, which did not *want to know*—that the military officers and the fascists were preparing a coup d’état. On July 12, the militants of the CNT and the FAI decided to send armed groups to keep the barracks under surveillance so that they were not taken by surprise and so that they could plan where to concentrate their forces when the battle began. From then on, it was a waiting game. The news of the uprising in Morocco, however, caused everyone to clearly perceive the imminence of a confrontation. There was a great deal of anxiety; weapons had to be found at any price. A sailor, Juan Yagüe, proposed that they should seize the arms stored in the officers’ quarters of the cargo ships anchored in the port. A group was organized and went into action: in this way, 150 rifles and a dozen pistols were obtained. The Chief of Police, Escofet, however, having been informed of this action, sent a company of Assault Guards to the headquarters of the Transport Trade Union where the militants were distributing the guns. They surrounded the Trade Union headquarters, and the incident would have resulted in a pitched battle if Durruti and García Oliver had not arrived and negotiated an agreement: a dozen rifles would be surrendered to the Assault Guards as a token of the success of their mission.¹⁰ (It should be pointed out that the Assault Guard, unlike the Civil Guard, was a police force created by the Republic and that many of its members were republicans and even socialists.)

After another night of waiting and preparations, the mobilizations continued in the headquarters of the trade unions during the whole day of the 18th. The militants organized in Revolutionary Neighborhood Committees. These Committees were to play an essential role in the revolutionary process, and from that moment on they took charge of preparations for the coming battles. They were kept informed by messengers of the situation at the barracks, that is, of the mounting anxiety of the officers as Zero-hour approached. That night, the National Committee of the CNT broadcast by radio the instructions to commence the revolutionary general strike and recommended to all the Committees and all the militants that they should remain in contact with the superior

⁹ Diego Abad de Santillán, *Por qué perdimos la guerra*, G. del Toro, Madrid, 1975.

¹⁰ H. E. Kaminski, *Ceux de Barcelone*, Denoël, Paris, 1937, p. 21. Published in Spanish and Catalan editions, Ediciones del Cotal, Barcelona, 1977.

committees and that they should remain alert, with arms in hand, in the trade union headquarters. The Catalan Regional Committee of the CNT immediately passed on the word.

At 9:00 p.m. on July 18, a final interview between the CNT-FAI Liaison Committee and Companys took place; Companys still refused to distribute weapons to the workers. His attitude seemed inconsistent: on July 16 it was Companys himself who had taken the initiative to request the collaboration of the CNT and the FAI in the defense of the Republic, only to repeatedly refuse to give them, even when the “coup” had already begun, the means to undertake that defense: arms. Despite the fact that Companys—unlike the central Government that still imagined that it was the sole power and the only legal if not actual authority—had made a gesture towards the principal force that was capable of saving Catalonia from the fascists—the CNT—he nonetheless did not decide to arm the anarchist masses. How could he arm these people who were capable of “any madness”, even that of carrying out the social revolution? But if he did not arm them, would that not be tantamount to leaving the door open to fascism? Faced with this dilemma, Lluís Companys, leader of the Catalan autonomist movement, republican and liberal, could only temporize.

When they were informed of his refusal to distribute arms, the militants of the CNT, who had up until the last moment expected a change of heart on the part of the Generalitat, decided to obtain arms by all possible means: they ransacked the gun shops, they robbed sticks of dynamite from the quarries and, helped by some Assault Guards, they seized several deposits of rifles from Government depots. They requisitioned private automobiles in order to facilitate rapid communications between the different groups. Painted with the initials, CNT-FAI, these vehicles began to race through the streets of Barcelona. The groups of armed militants who were watching the barracks saw Falangists and *Requetés* enter the barracks to be given uniforms and weapons so they could fight alongside the regular soldiers. The night ended, one more night of waiting.

One might ask why the workers organizations, especially the CNT, which was far and away the largest workers organization in Catalonia, did not attack first in order to take advantage of the element of surprise. The only explanation that we find is the shortage of weapons together with the expectation of a change of heart on the part of the Generalitat. There can be no doubt, however, that the fear of breaking the anti-fascist front by engaging in an action that the Generalitat neither wanted to support nor was capable of assisting, was also an important factor. In any event, this “wait-and-see policy”, which was general among the working class organizations throughout the Peninsula, in many cases facilitated the initial victory of the military uprising.

The battles of July 19 and 20 in Barcelona

On July 19, at 4:30 a.m., the troops left their barracks shouting “Long live the Republic! Long live Spain!” This military ruse contrived by Mola failed, however. The armed groups which had occupied positions around the barracks were not fooled and immediately opened fire. The factory sirens were sounded, calling the workers to battle.

The troops, following the pre-established plan, that is, the rapid occupation of the strategic points of the city, occupied the España, University and Cataluña Squares, and seized the most important buildings, such as the Hotel Colón, the Hotel Ritz and the Telephone Company Building. The troops of the Atarazanas Barracks and the Maestranza occupied the port area between Correos and the Paralelo. General Goded, who arrived in a plane from Mallorca to command the uprising, took up a position in the *Capitanía General* and deposed and took prisoner the commander of the garrison who was loyal to the Republic: Llano de la Encomienda.

This was the situation in the early hours of the morning. Everywhere, however, the troops had encountered stiff resistance. At *La Brecha de San Pablo*, [a plaza or square] near the headquarters of the Woodworkers Trade Union, the trade union militants had constructed a major barricade whence they kept the soldiers at bay for four hours, who were only able to take over the barricade and seize the trade union headquarters after having forced the women and children of the neighborhood to march in front of them as human shields. By midday, however, a counterattack by CNT militants had recovered the Square and the trade union offices.

Meanwhile, battles were taking place in the center of the city which would prove decisive. The military was besieged in the buildings they occupied in the Plaza de Cataluña. At 1:00 p.m., the workers units were reinforced by the Assault Guards and some Civil Guards under the command of Colonel Escobar (one of the few officers of the Civil Guard—the specialized force used for the repression of the workers and peasant movements—who had joined the Republican side). The situation of the military was becoming critical. It could only be stabilized by the arrival of reinforcements coming from the barracks of San Andrés and the Docks. But the workers of Barcelona had prevented these reinforcements, composed of units of artillery and cavalry, from joining the besieged rebels. In the battle on Icaria Avenue, near the Docks Barracks, something took place which proved to be a decisive turning point in the battle. On this occasion, the soldiers justified their moniker of “workers and peasants in uniform”, as they are sometimes known in the jargon of the workers movement: some of them did not know what to do, others fired into the air, others put into practice the verses of the Internationale and turned their guns on their officers. The workers took advantage of the opportunity, surged forth from their barricades and staged a mass charge across open ground against the enemy. They took a large number of artillery pieces. The revolutionary counteroffensive had begun.

Night fell as the battles continued, but the military forces no longer had an advantage anywhere in the city. The buildings they had occupied in the center of the city had been recovered. During the early hours of the morning of Monday, July 20, the artillery was deployed in batteries in front of the *Capitanía General*. The rebel commanders were ordered to surrender. In order to encourage them to do so, one salvo from the artillery made the whole building shake, thus dispelling the last hopes of the besieged soldiers. Goded was taken prisoner and some militants of the CNT escorted him to the Palace of the Generalitat, whence he issued the following declaration that was broadcast over the radio:

“This is General Goded. I am addressing the people to declare that fate has been unkind to me and that I have been taken prisoner. I say this so that all those who do not want to continue fighting, should feel that they are dismissed from having any responsibilities towards me.”¹¹

In the barracks, the soldiers mutinied, shot their officers, and distributed arms to the workers. Only the fortress of Atarazanas remained in the hands of the rebels. The Republic’s Air Force—a few “Cuckoos”—commanded by Díaz Sandino, initiated the assault on the barracks with a bombing raid. Then the workers carried out the final assault, during which Francisco Ascaso, the well-known anarchist militant, died. And so, on the evening of July 20, the military uprising in Barcelona was defeated. The militants of the workers organizations had seized all the arms found in the barracks. In trucks, buses, and requisitioned private automobiles, armed groups departed for the cities and towns of the province of Catalonia and defeated the rebel military units in Tarragona, Gerona and Lérida.

What was the situation in the rest of Spain? The military had seized several footholds in Andalusia (Cadiz, Cordoba, Seville), where reinforcements from the army of Morocco, transported on Italian planes, initiated a reign of terror against the workers. The rebels had also conquered an extensive region between La Coruña and Huesca and Zaragoza which, from Cáceres, near the Portuguese border, extended all the way to Avila, Segovia, and Teruel, including Navarre, a large part of Aragon, Old Castille, León, almost all of Galicia and part of Extremadura. The Republican zone was therefore divided into two parts: to the north, the Basque Country, Santander, and the northern part of Asturias (except the capital, Oviedo) were squeezed between the sea and the “rebels”; to the south, the most important part that included almost all of Andalusia, Levante, Catalonia, part of Extremadura and New Castile. It must be pointed out that in the most industrialized regions (above all the Basque Country and Catalonia), in some of the richest agricultural regions (such as Levante) and in the major cities such as Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Bilbao, etc., the military uprising was defeated and that this defeat was everywhere due to the action of the masses, because the immense majority of the armed forces and police units were on the side of the “rebels”. This map also corresponds almost exactly to the respective influence of the forces of the left and the right in the country. In this way, the military uprising, which had been conceived as a simple *pronunciamiento*, which was only supposed to last a couple of days at the most and which was not supposed to encounter very much resistance, ran up against a series of difficulties that had not been foreseen in the plans of the General Staff. Whereas, for the big capitalists and the major landowners—and for the entire population of military officers, clergy, monarchists, falangists and other supporters of religion, order and fatherland—the coup d’état was intended as a preventive measure against the looming social revolution, it actually triggered the outbreak of the social revolution everywhere. During the first months of the civil war an unprecedented revolutionary crisis would unfold in Spain. Fascism had been contained, and the bourgeois Republic, caught up in the maw of the revolution, was

¹¹ Abel Paz, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

shattered into pieces. Once again, in contemporary history, the exploited masses seemed to have become the masters of their fate.

The power of the armed workers¹²

The edifice of the bourgeois State had collapsed throughout the country: “There was nothing left of the State but dust and ashes”, as a Republican jurist would later write.¹³ In the zone controlled by the military the moment for generalized counterrevolutionary violence had arrived. Not only were the militants of the workers organizations shot, but so were the workers themselves, just because they were workers. Not only were those who had voted for the Popular Front shot, but so, too, were their wives, their parents, and their children.

In the “republican zone”, the government no longer exercised any real authority. As the communist leader, Dolores Ibarruri would say: “The entire State apparatus was destroyed and the power of the State had passed into the streets.”¹⁴

“Shorn of the repressive organs of the state”, Bolloten writes, “the government of José Giral possessed the nominal power, but not the power itself, for this was split into countless fragments, and scattered in a thousand towns and villages among the revolutionary committees that had instituted control over post and telegraph offices, radio stations, and telephone exchanges, organized police squads and tribunals, highway and frontier patrols, transport and supply services, and created militia units for the battle fronts. In short, nowhere in Spain did the Cabinet of José Giral exercise any real authority.”¹⁵

Although this was generally the case in the entire republican zone, it was in Catalonia where this phenomenon acquired the broadest scope. It was true not only with respect to political and military affairs and the forces of public order, but also with respect to the social and economic relations of the population. Everything was changed, overhauled, transformed by the vast revolutionary tidal wave that was, quite contrary to its intentions, unleashed by the military uprising.

In Barcelona the armed workers were the masters of the city and devoted themselves to immediately transforming its physiognomy: they burned the churches (except for the Cathedral, which was considered to be a “work of art”), or else converted them into schools, meeting halls, indoor markets, etc. New revolutionary tribunals were created and

¹² On the workers, the proletariat and the “workers movement”, see the explanations set forth in Appendix 2.

¹³ Ossorio y Gallardo, *Vida y sacrificio de Companys*, p. 190.

¹⁴ Dolores Ibarruri, *Speeches and Articles (1936-1938)* (a propaganda pamphlet of the PCE).

¹⁵ Burnett Bolloten, *El gran engaño*, Caralt, Barcelona, 1975, pp. 43-44. In English: *The Grand Camouflage: The Communist Conspiracy in the Spanish Civil War*, Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, New York 1961, p. 42.

the old judicial system was dissolved; in general, the most reactionary judges were executed; the judicial records, burned; the doors of the prisons, opened, not only for political prisoners, but also for common criminals. The workers organizations formed Provisions Committees responsible for the supply of food and other basic needs, replacing private commerce almost everywhere.¹⁶ Other committees, especially the Committee of the Unified New School, formed by militants of the workers organizations and the university associations, assumed responsibility for education, opening 102 new schools within a matter of a few days. The Control Patrols enforced order on the streets and highways. The border posts on the French frontier, to the north of Catalonia, were also controlled by the workers: "... members of the anti-fascist militia stand guard. They wear blue overalls over which an ammunition belt is thrown. They are armed to the teeth with pistols and rifles. Behind a long table sit three workers with pistols at their sides. They are examining passports and credentials."¹⁷ Above all, workers militias were responsible for the war against the military: four days after the end of the fighting in Barcelona, a column of armed workers departed, led by Durruti, to liberate Zaragoza. He would march through Aragon with an Army of Social Liberation, applying the method proposed by the Italian anarchist Malatesta: "Seize a town or a village, render the representatives of the State harmless, and invite the population to organize itself freely."¹⁸ It is by no means my intention to paint an idyllic portrait; this was not always accomplished without conflicts or mistakes, or even without crimes, but it *was accomplished*.

The Catalanian workers quickly grasped that the struggle had to be fought on two fronts. For the State, which had been shattered into pieces (both the Central Government as well as the relatively autonomous Catalanian Generalitat), fought, at first discreetly, to transform its merely ostensible power into real power. It would appear that they also soon understood that the forces that were opposed to the radical transformation of society, which they had themselves initiated, were not all in the other military camp. Furthermore, from the very first days, conflicts broke out between the power of the Committees—"opaque, shady, impalpable, without either precise functions or express authority", according to the communist Jesús Hernández¹⁹—and the Generalitat. The incident of Figueres, for example, where a few anarchist workers, after having participated in the defeat of the military uprising, were disarmed by the Civil Guard. The July 20 issue of *Solidaridad Obrera*, which contains an account of the incident, concluded with this warning: "Comrades, do not allow yourselves to be disarmed by anyone, on any pretext."²⁰ But the revolutionary wave was now too strong and those who sought to

¹⁶ Concerning these issues—the provision of basic needs and education—see Appendix 3.

¹⁷ M. Sterling, in *Modern Monthly* (October 1936), quoted by B. Bolloten, *op. cit.*, p. 39. [*The Grand Camouflage*, p. 38.]

¹⁸ Quoted by Broué and Témime, *La révolution et la guerre d'Espagne*, Editions de Minuit, p. 43. (There is a Spanish translation published by Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico, 1962.) [In English: Pierre Broué and Emile Témime, *The Revolution and the Civil War in Spain*, tr. Tony White, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1970, p. 56.].

¹⁹ Jesús Hernández, *Negro y rojo*, p. 97 (propaganda pamphlet of the PCE).

²⁰ *Solidaridad Obrera* (July 20, 1936).

contain it, channel it or even to break it, were obliged to make concessions. The old police forces were dissolved: the members of their units that had fought alongside the people were incorporated into the workers militias and donned the “*mono*” [worker’s overalls], which took the place of a uniform.

The Catalonian workers, who had been on strike since July 18, commenced to undertake from the moment that they went on strike what Marx called “the expropriation of the expropriators”. They began to appropriate and administer the immense majority of industrial and commercial enterprises, as well as the public service sector of Catalonia. It should be pointed out that this was carried out spontaneously by the masses without any orders or instructions from any organization, not even from the CNT. The latter, during the first few days following the outbreak of the uprising, focused almost all its attention on the battle against the military and, in this respect, it was overwhelmingly left behind by its militants and the masses in general. The FAI’s first Manifesto, disseminated over the radio on July 26, spoke of the “fascist hydra”, but said not a word about the social revolution that was then underway. On the 28th, the local Federation of trade unions of the CNT issued the order to return to work in order to provide for the needs of the war, but without giving the least hint of any revolutionary directives. The workers, however, did not strictly obey the “return to work” order, that is, they did not just go back to work under the orders of their bosses and employers. As of July 21, that is, the day after the victory over the military uprising, the press was full of very revealing accounts of the new “state of mind” of the workers; everywhere, groups of armed workers proceeded to engage in confiscations of enterprises. Dressed in their overalls, wearing red, or red and black, bandanas around their necks, and with berets or military caps on their heads, with a wide assortment of weapons, among which the Mauser pistol predominated, and displaying a certain taste for showing off and spectacles, they were truly the armed people in action. One group of workers “arrived at the Barcelona Tram company offices located in Via Sant Antoni and took control of the building; they removed personnel files kept by the Company on its workers to the street, where they were burnt”.²¹ All the public services and means of communication and transport were confiscated by the Catalonian workers by such means. As of the 21st of July the railroad workers took control of the railroads. They formed revolutionary Committees and organized the defense of the stations by the railroad workers themselves, armed with rifles and machine guns. The movement of confiscations affected all the sectors of Catalonian industry: in Catalonia 70% of the enterprises were seized.²²

It was of course natural that this earthquake should affect every aspect of life. It was the “great revolutionary festival” in which all the bonds of servitude, regardless of their type, were temporarily broken. It is very significant that the politicians and ideologues had nothing to say about the joy that swept over the men and women of revolutionary Catalonia during those days. Notwithstanding all the happiness, however, this mad joy (mad because the fascist threat was terrifyingly close and the corpses had hardly even

²¹ Peirats, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 164.

²² See, *infra*: “The Collectivizations in Catalonia”, Chapter 4, p. 91.

been buried) caught the attention of some eyewitnesses. Franz Borkenau, upon his arrival in Barcelona, recounts that:

“And then, as we turned round the corner of the Ramblas (the chief artery of Barcelona) came a tremendous surprise: before our eyes, in a flash, unfolded itself the revolution. It was overwhelming. It was as if we had landed on a continent different from anything I had seen before.”²³

On every building, on every wall (Borkenau tells us), on everyone’s clothing, on all the automobiles, on all the train cars, everywhere, there are inscriptions and letters that symbolize the fight against fascism and support for the Revolution. Some are real works of art: the railroad cars, above all, it would seem; a very marked inclination for painting.²⁴

There can be no doubt that the fact that the railroad workers gave free rein to their inclination for painting was also a sign of the transformations that were underway. Borkenau, whose political views are “moderate”, but who recounts what he sees with honesty, points out: “In this atmosphere of general enthusiasm there is no difficulty in talking to anybody.... and everybody is friends with everybody in a minute.”²⁵ Yes, it is just as I said, the walls had been torn down, the State was shattered into pieces, the police dissolved, the employers fled, the factories belonged to the workers, everything was possible! (this would not last). Even the situation of women, who for centuries had been chained to the family, to their husbands, to the kitchen, to childbearing, shackled by religious and social taboos, in one of the most severe and sinister Mediterranean traditions, appears to have changed all at once: “... the streets were full of excited groups of young men in arms”, Borkenau continues, “and not a few armed women as well; the latter behaving with a self-assurance unusual for Spanish women when they appear in public (and it would have been unthinkable before for a Spanish girl to appear in trousers, as militia-girls invariably do)”²⁶ The same thing could be said of the youth. The latter, as everyone knows, is the protagonist of revolutions. But in Spain, the subjugation of the family—despite the libertarian propaganda—was particularly harsh and oppressive. The children had to obey their parents practically until they died. The family hierarchy—it must not be forgotten that Spain was at that time an overwhelmingly agricultural country—was almost as rigid among the “leftist” workers as it was among Catholic and reactionary families. In the streets, in the factories, and on the fronts, however, the boys (some had not yet celebrated their sixteenth birthday) and girls, wielding their rifles, cheerfully cast off age-old traditions and of the “dead weight of the past that weighs upon the minds of the living”. Is anyone surprised that the masses, in one great spontaneous movement, should confront all at once and with the same passion (even when they are not all fully conscious of what they are doing) every oppression, and every hierarchical

²³ Franz Borkenau, *The Spanish Cockpit: An Eye-Witness Account of the Political and Social Conflicts of the Spanish Civil War*, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1963, p. 69.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pages 72 and 73.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

structure of society, arbitrarily divided and separated into those private and illusory terrains that we call the “political”, the “economic”, the “social”, the “family”, and, why not, the “cultural”?

George Orwell arrived in Barcelona in December 1936. In his excellent book, *Homage to Catalonia*, he recounts the strange impression that the city produced. He knew, however (because he never ceased to point this out), that things had gotten much worse since July:

“The Anarchists were still in virtual control of Catalonia and the revolution was still in full swing.... 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; almost every church had been gutted and its images burnt. Churches here and there were being systematically demolished by gangs of workmen. 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.... Servile and even ceremonial forms of speech had temporarily disappeared. Nobody said ‘Señor’ or ‘Don’ or even ‘Usted’; everyone called everyone else ‘Comrade’ and ‘Thou’.... There were no private motor-cars, they had all been commandeered, and all the trams and taxis and much of the other transport were painted red and black.... Down the Ramblas, the wide central artery of the town where crowds of people streamed constantly to and fro, the loudspeakers were bellowing revolutionary songs all day and far into the night. And it was the aspect of the crowds that was the queerest thing of all. In outward appearance it was a town in which the wealthy classes had practically ceased to exist. Except for a small number of women and foreigners there were no ‘well-dressed’ people at all. Practically everyone wore rough working-class clothes, or blue overalls, or some variant of the militia uniform. All this was queer and moving.... Above all, there was a belief in the revolution and the future, a feeling of having suddenly emerged into an era of equality and freedom. Human beings were trying to behave as human beings and not as cogs in the capitalist machine.”²⁷

(It did not take long for Orwell to become disillusioned, either.)

He also recounted that the workers organizations had requisitioned many buildings, but we should point out that for several months (depending on the city involved) no one paid rent for their houses or apartments, thus realizing in practice the concept of free housing.... In addition, all the objects of prime necessity that were hocked at the Pawn Shops were returned to their owners *without payment* and it is not hard to imagine what this meant to a population that was almost always living in poverty. A campaign was waged against begging and homelessness, which had been so prevalent in Barcelona before the Revolution:

²⁷ George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1980, pp. 4-6.

“The Hotel Workers Trade Union fed all the poor people at noon and again in the evening. In order to be eligible for this free food, one needed, at first, an authorization from a committee or an organization, but—we are not bureaucrats!—we even fed those who did not present any documentation. These meals were distributed in many hotels, and even at the Ritz.”²⁸

As Noam Chomsky so correctly observes: “During the months following the Franco insurrection in July 1936, a social revolution of unprecedented scope took place throughout much of Spain. It had no ‘revolutionary vanguard’ and appears to have been largely spontaneous, involving masses of urban and rural laborers in a radical transformation of social and economic conditions that persisted, with remarkable success, until it was crushed by force.”²⁹

Chapter 2

The State Shattered into Pieces

“This was, therefore, a revolution not against this or that, legitimate, constitutional, republican or imperialist form of State power. It was a revolution against the State itself, of this supernaturalist abortion of society, a resumption by the people for the people of its own social life.”

Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France*

The Generalitat and the power of the armed workers

Catalonia was the first region where the military was defeated and it was also where “workers power” was most profoundly established. Jaime Miravittles, one of the leaders of the *Esquerra*, the party of Catalanist republican left, wrote:

“On Tuesday evening, July 21, in Barcelona, the situation was truly tragic. The army had ceased to exist. The institutions of the Generalitat had become totally mixed with the fighting population.”³⁰

In fact, the police and the soldiers who remained “loyal” were totally incorporated into the workers militias. Although the Madrid Government proclaimed that the uprising had been defeated in Barcelona thanks to the “loyalty” of the Civil Guards and the Assault

²⁸ *Ibid.* [Translator’s note: this passage was translated from the Spanish, as I was unable to locate a corresponding passage in the English edition of Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia*. This citation appears to be erroneous.]

²⁹ Noam Chomsky, *American Power and the New Mandarins*, The New Press, New York, 2002, p. 76.

³⁰ *Vu* (August 29, 1936), quoted by A. and D. Prudhommeaux, *La Catalogne Libertaire 1936-1937*, Ed. Cahiers Spartacus.

Guards, Companys, for his part, knew that he had to face the facts. He offered his congratulations to “the forces that, with courage, with heroism, fought for republican legality and civil authority”, but he knew very well that what these forces had accomplished, the forces of the Catalan proletariat, was to deprive that legality and that authority of all effectiveness. That is why, on July 20, with the battle of Barcelona only just concluded, he invited the anarchist leaders to meet with him at the Generalitat; Juan García Oliver has provided an account of the interview:

“The introductions were brief. We sat down, each of us with his rifle between his knees. In substance what Companys told us was this:

“First of all, I have to say to you that the CNT and the FAI have never been accorded the treatment to which their real importance entitled them. You have always been harshly persecuted and I, with much sorrow, but forced by political realities, I who before was with you,³¹ afterwards found myself obliged to oppose you and persecute you.’

“Today you are the masters of the city and of Catalonia because you have defeated the fascist militarists, and I hope that you will not take offence if at this moment I remind you that you did not lack the help of the few or many loyal men of my party and of the Guards and the *mozos*.... But the truth is that, persecuted until the day before yesterday, today you have defeated the military and the fascists. I cannot then, knowing what, and who, you are, speak to you other than with sincerity. You have won and everything is in your hands; if you do not need me nor wish me to remain as president of Catalonia, tell me now, and I will become one soldier more in the struggle against fascism. If, on the other hand, you believe that in this position, which only as a dead man would I have abandoned if the fascists had triumphed, I, with the men of my party, my name and my prestige, can be of use in this struggle, which has ended so well today in the city but which will end we know not how in the rest of Spain, you can count on me and on my loyalty as a man and as a politician who is convinced that today a whole past of shame is dead and who desires sincerely that Catalonia should place herself at the head of the most progressive countries in social matters’.”³²

To these words, perhaps sincere but nonetheless clever, the anarchist delegates were able to respond that it was not his fault personally and they were totally prepared to forget the complaints that they may have had against him, but that, in order to bring an end to “a

³¹ Lluís Companys, in his capacity as a lawyer, had often defended anarchist militants who had been arrested during the tumultuous period of 1917-1923 in Barcelona, which was punctuated by strikes, shootings and assassination attempts. Later, when he had become the leader of the *Esquerra* after the death of Macià—and then as the President of the Generalitat—he was politically opposed to, and often ordered the arrests of, the same anarchist militants whom he had previously defended.

³² *Dans la tourmente. Un an de guerre en Espagne*, Paris, 1938 (propaganda pamphlet of the AIT). [English translation of this passage was taken from Vernon Richards, *Lessons of the Spanish Revolution (1936-1939)*, Third Edition, Freedom Press, London, 1983, pp. 33-34—Translator’s Note.]

whole past of shame”, they had to radically transform society, destroy all its hierarchical structures, and that the Generalitat was no longer anything but an empty shell, which belonged to the dead past and that now the masses themselves were the ones who had to decide the forms and modalities of their own government, the self-management of the Catalan economy by the workers and the forms and modalities of their new life. Not forgetting for even a second the need to crush fascism in the entire Peninsula. What had to be done, therefore, was to let the people have their say, so that they may decide, instead of having other people once again make decisions for them, by cabals in more or less confidential meetings “at the summit”. This had to be the first step towards this transformation that seemed to be necessary to everyone.

But it was not words like these (very anarchist words, nonetheless) that the leaders of the CNT and the FAI spoke on that day to Companys. García Oliver observes that at that moment, “Companys spoke with obvious sincerity”. This is quite possible, but what is certain is that this was the only language that he could use if he wanted the anarchists to make concessions. If on this occasion Companys had sought to impose his will and demand from the anarchists strict obedience to the Catalan State—that is, if he had spoken to them as an effective ruler—they would have undoubtedly opposed him and the anarchists were strong enough to “take all power” into their hands. He was therefore obliged to appeal to their feelings and to anti-fascist unity, to acknowledge their importance, to praise them and to gain time, to go around in circles, to avoid confrontation. Impressed, so it would seem, by this “sublime gesture of dignity and understanding” (García Oliver), the anarchists accepted the task of leading the Generalitat and its President along “a new road”.

Once his offer was accepted, Companys rapidly proceeded to broach the essential purpose of the interview: political alliances. He announced to the delegates of the CNT-FAI that “in the next room, the representatives of all the anti-fascist sectors of Catalonia are waiting, and if you will allow me, as President of the Generalitat, to conduct you to them, I will make a proposal to give Catalonia a new institution to carry on the revolutionary struggle until victory is achieved”.³³

The representatives of the CNT-FAI met in the next room with the representatives of the *Esquerra*, the *Rabassaires*, the *Unión Republicana*, the POUM, and the PSUC (Communists). This was a very tense meeting of anti-fascist unity, taking into account the fact that it would not take much to cause latent conflicts to break out again in the culminating event of the bloody confrontation of May 1937.

“Companys explained to us (García Oliver recounts) that a Committee of Militias should be formed whose purpose would be to orient the whole life of Catalonia, which had been profoundly disrupted by the fascist uprising, and that they should try to organize the armed forces to fight against the fascists wherever they may be found, because at this time of national confusion the situation of the existing forces was still unknown.”³⁴

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

But the delegates of the CNT-FAI wanted to first consult with their organization (we may very well ask why they decided to lead the Generalitat “along a new road” without consulting anyone at all). A “Plenum of the Regional Committee” was held that very same night in the “*Casa de Cambó*”, which had been occupied by the militants of the Construction Workers Trade Union. It was García Oliver who set forth the proposal of Companies concerning the Central Committee of Militias. For him, the situation they faced could be summarized by the following dilemma: they had to choose “between libertarian communism, which means anarchist dictatorship, and democracy, which means collaboration”. A strange but significant way of framing the problem: contrary to all the ideas expressed in thousands of articles and speeches, libertarian communism, at the moment of truth, was converted into an “anarchist” dictatorship, and the CNT-FAI into *political* organizations that, according to this hypothesis, would have exercised *power* completely alone! As the perfect obverse of this portrayal, collaboration with the other political tendencies, the bourgeois republican authorities of Catalonia, etc., was ... democracy. It does not appear that anyone stood up to object that there were other forms of democracy that were possible at that moment, councils of elected and revocable delegates, a new Commune, in short. The dilemma posed by García Oliver was a false dilemma, but it was significant insofar as it reflected the state of mind of the anarchist leaders, as future events would prove. The Regional Committee of the CNT-FAI assented to the sophisticated arguments of García Oliver and proclaimed: “No libertarian communism. First we have to defeat the enemy wherever he may be found.”³⁵ No one bothered to demonstrate that this constituted any kind of contradiction.

That is how the decision was made to form the Central Committee of Anti-fascist Militias of Catalonia. The PSUC and the POUM each had one representative; the FAI, two (Santillán and Aurelio Fernández); the CNT, three (García Oliver, Asens and Marcos Alcón, Durruti having departed for the Aragon front); and the UGT also had three representatives, far in excess of its real influence. It seems, however, as if the CNT-FAI, which supported the representation of the UGT, sought to favor the trade unions to the “detriment” of the parties, which was absurd, because it was the Stalinists (“party men” if there ever was such a thing) who monopolized the UGT’s representatives from the very beginning. There was also one representative from the *Unión de Rabassaires* and four from the republican parties (the *Esquerra* and *Acción Catalana Republicana*). The Generalitat was represented on the Committee of Militias by a delegate of the police, who was, furthermore, the person who appointed the military commander.

Anti-fascist organizations represented on the Committee of Militias

The Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia (PSUC):

In July 1936 the communist movement in Spain was very weak taken as a whole. It had barely 30,000 members, which is derisory compared with the socialist and anarchist currents.

³⁵ *Solidaridad Obrera* (July 21, 1936).

In Catalonia, since the early part of 1936, negotiations were underway to bring about the merger of two small socialist organizations that felt attracted to Stalinism, and the Catalanian Federation of the Socialist Party, led by Rafael Vidiella, which had split from the Socialist Workers Party of Spain (PSOE). The two smaller organizations were the Catalanian Proletarian Party (which had split from the *Esquerra*) and the *Unión Socialista de Cataluña* (with a strong admixture of nationalism) whose secretary was Juan Comorera. The negotiations led to the formation, on July 24, 1936, of the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia (PSUC), led by Comorera, concerning whom Borkenau said that he represented “a political attitude which can best be compared with that of the extreme right wing of the German social-democracy. He had always regarded the fight against anarchism as the chief aim of socialist policy in Spain”.³⁶ The PSUC joined the Communist International and the latter dispatched a delegate to the PSUC who, under the name of “Pedro” (the pseudonym of Gëroe, the well-known Hungarian Stalinist), was the real architect of the activity of the Party. The communist leader Dolores Ibarruri defined the policy of the PSUC during the first days of the revolution as follows:

“From the beginning it engaged in extremely intense activity, both against the rebels as well as against the POUMists and the anarchists who had by means of terrorism taken over the Government of the Generalitat; they had seized almost all the arms from the Catalonia garrison, as well as the factories; they were the masters of the streets and went to the countryside unleashing a wave of terror and violence that paralyzed the peasants.”³⁷

Despite the social democratic origins of the leaders of the new party and despite its name, it actually exercised no autonomy with respect to the “national offices”. The PSUC, although it flattered the nationalist sentiments of the Catalanian petty bourgeoisie (who comprised its main clientele), was just another section of the Communist Party like all the others, and like the others was subject to the Political Bureau and, of course, to the Communist International.

The Workers Party of Marxist Unification (POUM)

The Stalinists hated the POUM because the latter had been founded essentially by communist dissidents, by “renegades”, among whom were some of the most well-known militants of Spanish communism, such as Andrés Nin, Juan Andrade, Joaquín Maurín, etc.

The Stalinists defined the POUM as Trotskyist (or rather, as “Trotsko-fascist”), a definition that has often been used by “liberal” journalists and historians, including Hugh Thomas. In reality, although Andrés Nin, the former secretary of the Red Trade Union International, Juan Andrade and other future leaders of the POUM resigned from the Communist Party in order to found the “Communist Left” on the basis of the theses of the

³⁶ Franz Borkenau, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

³⁷ Dolores Ibarruri, *El único camino*, Ed. Lenguas Extranjeras, Moscow, p. 532.

Trotskyist Opposition, they nonetheless broke with Trotsky when the latter ordered them to engage in “Entrism” in the Socialist Party in order to form a revolutionary fraction within its ranks. Instead of obeying Trotsky’s orders, they decided to merge with the Workers and Peasants Bloc, led by Joaquín Maurín (the former Catalan Federation of the Communist Party, which had broken with the latter during the period of the Communist International’s “ultraleft” line, above all because it did not agree with the Communist International regarding the question of “red trade unions” and the issue of Catalan nationalism). The Catalan Communist Party, led by Jordi Arquer (which had always remained independent of the Spanish Communist Party, basically due to its Catalan nationalism) merged with the other two groups to form the POUM in early 1936. Nonetheless, the POUM’s views concerning certain issues (especially with regard to the critique of Stalinism) were very close to those of Trotsky, but they were also similar to those of Marceau-Pivert, for example.

The POUM’s base was almost totally restricted to Catalonia. In July 1936, it had about 3,000 members, but its membership increased during the next few months, until it obtained considerable influence in certain Catalan cities, such as Gerona, Tarragona, and especially Lérida. When the revolution began, the leadership of the POUM undoubtedly advocated the most radical position with regard to the mass movement:

“The workers, peasants, and sailors aren’t fighting to defend the old bourgeois republic which brought them nothing, but rather to establish the future regime: the workers republic. They know this despite the propaganda of the parties of the Popular Front which claim that the workers militias defend the current constitution. If in Madrid the working class, under the leadership of the Socialist Party, the UGT, and the official Communists still follows the directives of the Popular Front, in Barcelona the government of the Generalitat is nothing but an official façade without any power.... In Catalonia there is thus not what is called ‘dual power’: the working class effectively controls all of society. Through the channel of the unions the proletariat assures the management of all public services and many private enterprises. The clergy and the reactionaries are expropriated; the homes of the rich and convents transformed into centers of education or sanatoriums. Committees are being formed in enterprises and villages, among sailors and republican troops. Our POUM, which is doing everything possible to create others like these and to connect them, sees in these committees the basis of the workers and peasants republic that is in gestation.”³⁸

Unfortunately, despite these noble words, the POUM would not fight for that workers autonomy, for those “rank and file committees” they advocated in the above proclamation, but, to the contrary, they would always attempt—insofar as it was possible—to sacrifice them in favor of certain illusory “high-level agreements” between bureaucrats. If Trotsky and his supporters (Felix Morrow and later Pierre Broué)

³⁸ *La Révolution espagnole*, No. 1 (September 1936). [in English: “The General Policy of the Workers Party of Marxist Unification (POUM)”, available online at: <https://www.marxists.org/history/spain/poum/1936/general-policy.htm> (Translator’s Note).]

condemned the POUM for not being Leninist enough, they condemned the whole history of the old revolutionary movement with its false victories, or more accurately, its fiascos, from the Russian Revolution to the Catalonian Revolution, for being too Leninist.

* * *

The Socialist Party, which was so strong in other regions in Spain, effectively did not exist in Catalonia. The Catalonian Federation of the PSOE participated in the founding of the PSUC, as we have just seen. One of the reasons for the PSOE's lack of influence in industrial Catalonia may have been its Jacobin centralism which conflicted with the nationalist sentiments of the Catalonian socialists. In any event, a curious phenomenon emerged in Catalonia in which all the socialist tendencies ended up merging with other groups, whether with the PSUC or with the POUM, and becoming, at least officially, Stalinists within the former or anti-Stalinists within the latter.

At first, the members of the POUM and the PSUC fought to gain control over the weak Catalonian UGT (The CNT's hegemony in Catalonia was overwhelming). Very quickly, however, the PSUC won control over the UGT and transformed this trade union into the refuge of the petty bourgeoisie who were appalled by the revolution and to whom the POUM, logically, seemed too extremist.

The National Confederation of Labor (CNT) and the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI):

The CNT, the heir of the Bakuninist movements of the First International, was founded in Barcelona between October 30 and November 1, 1910, by libertarian groups, mainly Catalonian, and held its first regular Congress, also in Barcelona, in September 1911: "With more than thirty thousand members, it organized a national general strike to protest against the war in Morocco; the government reacted by outlawing it, after the strike was cruelly repressed. In retaliation, Manuel Pardiñas killed the Prime Minister, José Canalejas (November 1912), and another anarchist tried to assassinate Alfonso XIII (April 1913)."³⁹ Not a bad start....

It may be said that the CNT is an organization that has no equivalent in the international workers movement, because it is the only anarchist mass organization of the 20th century. Openly anarchist and anarchosyndicalist, it soon had—depending on the year in question—between 500,000 and 1,000,000 members (in July 1936), but in 1938 it had more than 2,500,000. The CNT was simultaneously a trade union in the traditional sense (which organized strikes for higher wages and better working conditions, for example), and a revolutionary organization (which organized insurrectionary strikes, assassination attempts, expropriation of banks, etc.); it had a plethora of journals and newspapers, which were, furthermore, widely read, popular publishing ventures, cultural circles, continuing education for workers, etc. Any militant of the CNT could engage in all kinds of social, cultural, trade union, or "political" activities within one organization. The only

³⁹ César M. Lorenzo, *Les anarchistes espagnoles et le pouvoir, 1868-1969*, Ed. du Seuil, p. 45.

thing that he was obliged to do outside of the CNT was to earn a wage, because *there were no paid positions* in the CNT, except for that of general secretary (and in this respect as well the CNT has no counterpart).

In 1927, under the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, on a beach in Levante (during a clandestine meeting disguised as a picnic), a group of Spanish and Portuguese anarchists founded the FAI. Its purpose was to disseminate and defend anarchist theoretical purity in the trade unions of the CNT, while the latter were supposed to organize the workers to assume responsibility for the administration of society. There has been a lot of talk about the “dictatorship” exercised by the FAI over the CNT, yet, although even today there are still differing opinions on this subject, it does not seem correct to me to speak of dictatorship. It is certainly true that the ambiguity of relations between the “hard and pure” organization (not to speak of a “vanguard”) and the mass organization posed problems and led to conflicts (and this will always be the case as long as this type of relation exists), but this ambiguity can never be the same as the “normal” relations of dependence of a trade union and a party (in contemporary Spain, for example, the relations between the CC.OO and the PCE). The FAI, although it did have Peninsular and Regional Committees, actually constituted a federation of autonomous groups, each of which was formed more or less spontaneously by virtue of decisions made by a handful of anarchists who organized themselves as a group of the FAI. The most famous such group was undoubtedly the one that included Durruti, the Ascaso brothers, García Oliver, Jover, etc., who called themselves “*Los Solidarios*”. The fact that quite a few influential leaders of the CNT were members of the FAI has contributed to the birth of the legend of the dictatorship of the FAI. But if there was any influence, it was reciprocal and, during the revolution of 1936, the FAI and the CNT, strictly united since the beginning of the revolution (their initials always appeared together), ended up by practically merging into a single movement, which did not, of course, rule out the existence of rivalries or tendencies.

The violence of the social struggles under the Monarchy, under the Dictatorship of Primo de Rivera and even under the Republic, the long periods of clandestinity, the constant armed confrontations with the police and the army, with the thugs of the “free trade union” created by the Catalan employers during the 1920s, and then with the falangists, profoundly affected the mentality of these organizations. This is why, alongside each Regional Committee of the CNT, there was also a clandestine Defense Committee. This Defense Committee was responsible for direct action and was supposed to be prepared to replace the Regional Committee should the latter be arrested—which often happened. In many cases, the Defense Committee was formed by members of the FAI (but not exclusively, or always). The FAI thus underwent a transition from being the “guardian of doctrine” to being the “armed wing” of the CNT, without thereby abandoning its doctrinal mission, and continued to publish its own theoretical journals—such as *Tierra y Libertad*—pamphlets and books, to organize conferences, etc.

The CNT was also, of course, a decentralized organization: the regional federations enjoyed a great deal of autonomy with respect to the National Committee. Just as in its other organizations, the highest offices were as a matter of principle elected at the CNT’s

Congresses. The national secretary could be re-elected several times to the same position, but this was not very common, as the usual practice was to rotate the directive positions as often as possible. Another unwritten rule, but one that was very important in the CNT, was the prestige enjoyed by certain leaders who were known as “naturals”, whether or not they held any official positions in the organization. García Oliver, for example, who was never the National Secretary of the CNT, was much more popular and his advice more valued than many National Secretaries. The same thing was true of Durruti, who was to be the “beneficiary” after his death of a veritable personality cult. Some of these “natural” leaders were members of the FAI, but not all of them were.

It was precisely these decentralized and anti-bureaucratic organizations which, in contact with the revolutionary reality and with important public responsibilities (especially in Catalonia) that reproduced, with such incredible rapidity, the bureaucratic phenomenon: the leadership caste, in every respect, by “uprooting itself”, not only turned its back on libertarian principles but—and this is much more serious—turned its back on the revolutionary *action* of the masses, by always and in every circumstance seeking compromise when they were represented in governments (in the Catalanian and the Central Governments), and by always relying on those same masses when they were not represented in them.⁴⁰

The Catalanian nationalist republican organizations:

“Moreover ... the Esquerra, was a mass party; it was started in April 1931 by an alliance of between different Republican parties and groups in Catalonia, and it leaned on the powerful peasant trade union, the Rabassaires. Its prime mover and inspiration, Lluís Companys, once linked with Salvador Seguí,⁴¹ was for a long time the legal representative of the CNT....”⁴² We agree with Broué and Témime, the authors of the above passage, if we further qualify what is meant by the “mass” nature of the *Esquerra*. It is in fact the case that the *Rabassaires* (sharecroppers, small-scale farmers), a republican peasant and Catalanian nationalist movement, comprised the main base of popular support for the *Esquerra*. But during the revolutionary events in Catalonia, the activity of the *Esquerra* was expressed almost exclusively through the Generalitat and the other Catalanian governmental and municipal institutions. It is true that during the years that preceded the military uprising the *Esquerra* enjoyed some popular support due to its advocacy of Catalanian autonomy and to its achievements in this regard. Lluís Companys, the elected President of the Generalitat and the *Esquerra*, appeared as the apostle of Catalanian autonomy. This party that, as we shall see, fought effectively to

⁴⁰ On the history of the CNT, see Appendix 4.

⁴¹ Salvador Seguí was a very well-known anarchosindicalist militant in Catalonia during the early 1900s. A painter by profession, he was born in Lérida (Catalonia) in 1890 and was assassinated in March 1923 by the *pistoleros* of the Free Trade Union, a “yellow” organization created by the Catalanian employers. His death was avenged in the most pure *western* style by Francisco Ascaso.

⁴² Broué and Témime, *op. cit.*, English edition, p. 47.

restore the rule of law and the power of the State, had reformist tendencies with regard to the social question.

As for the role played by *Acción Catalana Republicana*, which was a small party, it appears that it was purely decorative: it only appeared in political alliances of the Popular Front type, and was also trotted out on the occasion of the creation of the Committee of Militias. Otherwise nowhere is any trace of it to be found during the revolutionary events in Catalonia, either on the front or in the rearguard.

The ambiguity of the Central Committee of Militias.

During its brief existence—from July 23 to October 3, 1936—the Central Committee of Militias was simultaneously an important arm of the Generalitat and a kind of coordinating committee for relations between the General Staffs of the anti-fascist organizations. Its creation was rendered necessary—as Companys implicitly revealed—by the nature and the power of the CNT-FAI.

The anarchists were almost entirely responsible for defeating the military uprising and they also held almost all “power”. It would have been dangerous to leave them to their own devices. One way or another, they had to be implicated in the responsibilities of political power and anti-fascist unity had to be imposed upon them. They accepted anti-fascist unity, but because their anti-state nature prevented them—for a few weeks—from forming part of any government, the ambiguous and provisional solution of the Committee of Militias was at first the only way that, while allowing them to act in accordance with their principles, would really involve them in the responsibilities of government power. During revolutionary periods, Power is always forced to disguise itself in “working class” trappings.

During the first few weeks, the Committee exercised broad powers and the Generalitat was limited to approving its decisions (*the tail here was much bigger than the head*). Later, both institutions of government, each of which sought on its own account to represent all the anti-fascist institutions, and whose functions largely overlapped in practice, got in each other’s way. One of them would prevail. Thus, when the CNT-FAI set aside its famous anti-state principles to join the Government, the Committee of Militias, transferring all its prerogatives to the Generalitat, was dissolved on October 3. On September 26, 1936, the anarchists joined the Council of the Generalitat and on November 4 they sent representatives to participate in the Central Government.

Although not everyone agrees with García Oliver’s account of the origin of the Central Committee of Militias (for some people declare that it was the anarchists’ idea and that Companys accepted it and supported it), it is, of course, with regard to the role and the nature of this Committee that the differences are most profound. The Spanish Communist Party, in its history of the civil war, a sensationalist hagiographical enterprise, perceives behind the creation of this Committee the sinister and dictatorial influence of the anarchists over Catalonia:

“Soon, there entered the meeting room (the famous room where the representatives of the other organizations were awaiting the conclusion of the discussion between the CNT-FAI and Companys [C.S.M.]), an important group of anarchist leaders: García Oliver, Durruti, Vázquez, Santillán, Eroles, Portelas, with bandoliers and pistols and some with rifles. They came to present a veritable ultimatum. . . . Through their mouthpiece García Oliver, the anarchists demanded the creation of a Central Committee of Militias of Catalonia, which would amount to a seizure of power. Its role was to be that of ‘directing the revolution’, ‘purging’ the rearguard and ‘organizing the dispatch of militias to Aragon’. All of the bourgeois parties were ‘discouraged’ and the representatives of the UGT and the PSUC (which was not officially founded until July 24, but which in fact had already existed for several weeks [C.S.M.]), practically isolated, could not do much.”⁴³

The composition of the Committee—outlined above—belies this “abuse of authority” and this “seizure of power” by the anarchists. The minuscule PSUC had four representatives, three under the label of the UGT, while the CNT-FAI, with an overwhelming majority in Catalonia, had five. It must be pointed out that, from that moment and repeatedly in the future, the leaders of the CNT-FAI, who considered the POUM and the PSUC to be “authoritarian Marxists” whose family squabbles were of little interest to them, gave preference to the Stalinists out of opportunism. For everyone knew that the representatives of the UGT were merely future PSUC leaders, but in this particular case, as in others that would follow, the CNT-FAI insisted that the Stalinists should have four delegates while the POUM should have only one. This does not seem to make any sense, even from the point of view of political alliances, because despite all their differences, the POUM had much more in common with the CNT-FAI than the Stalinists.

For Companys and his friends in the *Esquerra*, the Committee of Militias was a lesser evil, a transitional institution that could ensure an appearance of order, organize the dispatch of militias to the front and also guarantee a political compromise for the unity of the anti-fascist forces. The republican bourgeoisie, whose goal consisted in restoring the old legally constituted powers, the Generalitat and the municipal councils, to the detriment of the revolutionary workers Committees, were always confident that it would be a temporary measure.

In their complete delirium of identification with the Russian Revolution, the Trotskyists depicted the Committee of Militias as “the workers government of the workers revolution”⁴⁴, around which, according to Felix Morrow, “rallied the multitudinous committees of the factories, villages, supplies, food, police, etc.”⁴⁵ In reality, the Committee of Militias was created outside of and above the countless committees, which

⁴³ *Guerra y Revolución en España, 1936-1939* (a collectively-edited text of the Spanish Communist Party, under the chairmanship of Dolores Ibarruri, Ed. Progreso, Moscow), Vol. II, pp. 8-9.

⁴⁴ Translator’s Note: this phrase does not appear in Felix Morrow’s book cited in footnote no. 45 below and has therefore been translated from the Spanish.

⁴⁵ Felix Morrow, *Revolution and Counter Revolution in Spain*, Pioneer Publishers, New York, 1938, p. 63.

had almost always been formed spontaneously by the revolutionary masses. The General Staffs of the political and trade union organizations were the ones who, on their own and without any control or participation of the workers committees, chose the members of the Committee of Militias. With regard to this point we must point out—and we shall address this question again below—that no one ever elected the members of the Committee of Militias, just as no one would elect the future Cabinet Ministers (or the *consellers*, as they were called) of the Generalitat; all of them were *appointed* by the General Staffs of the political organizations, in proportion . . . to their relations of force and alliances. It was not a workers democracy, but rather the dictatorship of the General Staffs of the workers organizations....

For the leaders of the CNT-FAI, the Committee of Militias constituted the real power, the Generalitat, for them was only a puppet pseudo-government whose purpose was merely to serve as a façade in order not to shock the sensibilities of the western democracies. This was the only reason for its continued existence. It was, of course, supposed to be a *unitary* power, according to the line adopted by the superior committees of the Catalanian anarchists. This is what Abad de Santillán says about the role of the Committee of Militias:

“The Committee of Militias was recognized as the sole effective power in Catalonia. The Government of the Generalitat still existed and merited our respect, but the people only obeyed the power that was constituted by virtue of its victory and the revolution, because the victory of the people was the economic and social revolution....”

The prerogatives of the Committee were very broadly-defined:

“Establishment of revolutionary order in the rearguard, organization of forces that are at least to some extent trained for the war, training of an officer corps, a school for communications and signaling, provision of food and clothing, economic organization, legislative and judicial initiatives; the Committee of Militias was everything, it attended to everything, the conversion of peacetime industries into war industries, propaganda, relations with the Madrid Government, support for all battle fronts, diplomatic contact with Morocco, cultivation of available land, health and sanitation, guarding the coasts and the borders, a thousand things of the most disparate nature. We paid the militiamen, their families, the widows of the combatants, in a word, a few dozen individuals attended to the tasks that, in a government, would require a costly bureaucracy. The Committee of Militias was a Ministry of War during times of war, a Ministry of the Interior and a Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the same time, inspiring the creation of similar institutions in the domains of economics and culture.”⁴⁶

Under the aegis of the Committee of Militias a series of commissions or subcommittees were created which were assigned specific tasks, such as, for example, the Provisioning Committee which, at first, was responsible for controlling weights and measures, prices,

⁴⁶ Diego Abad de Santillán, *Por qué perdimos la guerra*, G. del Toro, Madrid, 1975, pp. 79 and 91.

stores, and, in general, all commerce in food, but also the provisioning of the militias at the front, the “control patrols” and the general population (restaurants, hospitals, etc.). “It was composed of delegates from the different parties and trade unions (three from the CNT: Valerio Mas, Facundo Roca and Juan José Domènach; two from the FAI: Juanel and Manuel Villar; three from the UGT; one from the POUM; three from the *Esquerra*; one from the *Unión de Rabassaires*; and one technical advisor). In reality, it was the CNT that ran the Committee and did most of the work; for even though the purely honorific presidency was bestowed on the Catalan nationalist, Pujol, it was Juan José Domènach who exercised the functions of the all-powerful general secretary. In the suburbs of Barcelona and in all the Catalan towns, commissions were formed that were responsible to the Central Committee for Provisioning.”⁴⁷

The Council of the Unified New School, mentioned above, was also created, which, composed of representatives of the trade unions and the University, was responsible for issues generally relating to education, including curriculum reform.

As for “public order” and “justice”, the picture was, of course, much more sinister. The initial idea was to prevent abuses and acts of extortion committed by certain “uncontrollable” groups or persons on their own initiative. In order to do this, as always in history and not just in the history of revolutions, what would be done involved the attempt to “legalize” these abuses and acts of extortion. The result was predictable, and not only were abuses not prevented, they were not even limited; all that happened was that “legal” executions were added to the acts of individual settling of accounts, not to mention the settling of accounts between organizations, concerning which we shall have the opportunity to speak below. In short, the repression was only “diversified”, a repression that was not aimed only at the fascists—far from it—and not even only against those suspected of being fascists.

As I have pointed out, the police forces (the Civil Guards and the Assault Guards) were at first dissolved, only to be reconstituted later. The “control patrols” were responsible for “public order”, at least during this period. According to César M. Lorenzo, there were 700 men enlisted in the Control Patrols in Barcelona (325 from the CNT, 145 from the UGT, 45 from the POUM, and 185 from the *Esquerra*):

“... led by a Central Patrol Committee, composed of eleven section delegates (four from the CNT, three from the UGT, four from the *Esquerra*); the anarchosindicalist José Asens was the secretary general.”

As you can see, Catalonia was just swarming with anarchist (!) general secretaries.

“... They acted in connection with the Commission of Investigation which was a component of the Security Bureau of the Central Committee of Militias. This Commission, directed by the anarchist Aurelio Fernández, was a kind of independent Ministry of the Interior, or a kind of revolutionary Security Service....”

⁴⁷ César M. Lorenzo, *op. cit.*, pp. 114-115.

“Separate from the Commission of Investigation, however, there were several police forces organized by every party and trade union which were only answerable to their respective central committees: these were the famous ‘chekas’ that spread such fear, with their secret agents, their private prisons, their commandos. The CNT’s police force, under the orders of Manuel Escorza, was the largest and most well-organized.”(!?)⁴⁸

It is comical enough to see an anarchist sympathizer like César M. Lorenzo praising the police, and furthermore the police of ... the “chekas”. And even if our author demurs, the police of the CNT was not the police force that did “the best work”, that is, let us not mince words, it was not the one that tortured and assassinated the most people (among whom only a tiny minority were fascists), but rather, as the name would also indicate, the “chekas” of the Soviet agents and their collaborators from the Communist International and the Spanish Communist Party. The Stalinist terror in Spain is, by far, the one that was best organized and most effective (in the “republican zone”, it will be understood, because the terror of the “other side” was even worse).

Those who had been arrested for imaginary or real crimes and who survived the various “chekas” and the summary executions, and were not *taken for a ride*, and finally faced a tribunal, found themselves facing a profoundly reformed justice system.

“... Revolutionary tribunals (established in the party headquarters in the provinces: Tarragona, Gerona and Lérida) where the delegates of the trade unions and the parties deliberated. The Committee of Justice of Catalonia and the Legal Affairs Department had their headquarters in Barcelona, where the lawyers Barriobero and Angel Samblancat presided (?), both members of the CNT. These institutions conducted marriage and divorce ceremonies, adjudicated civil or commercial litigation, prosecuted speculators and smugglers, inspected prisons, tried rebels, suspects and shirkers, etc. Previously, the administration of the prison system, the magistracy, and the Tribunals, had been carefully purged, everything was renewed from top to bottom and the procedures had been simplified, the expedients instituted before July 19 had been annulled or abolished; and finally, judicial fees had been abolished.”⁴⁹

Broué and Témime provide us with the social and political composition of the revolutionary tribunal of Lérida which was “wholly made up of workers, a third nominated by the POUM, a third by the UGT-PSUC, and a third by the CNT-FAI. The president, Larroca, from the CNT, and the Prosecutor, Pelegrín, from the POUM, were both railway workers”.⁵⁰ It appears that during the first few weeks of the revolution important reforms of the judicial system were implemented, but they were repealed, like everything else, with the counterrevolutionary restoration of the State.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 115-116.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

⁵⁰ Broué and Témime, *op. cit.*, English edition, p. 149.

Unlike what took place in other revolutions, it was not the “Revolutionary Tribunals” that indulged in the worst excesses of a repression that was certainly just as reactionary as all repression, but rather the parallel police of the parties and their sinister “chekas”, which much preferred that their prisoners should “disappear” rather than send them to courts that were either not always sympathetic with their party’s point of view or else were vaguely subject to control by public opinion (foreign observers, etc.).

In connection with this factor it is very revealing to note that generally the “control patrols” or the alleged “uncontrollables” have been accused of being the only ones responsible for the excesses that were committed in Catalonia. Nothing is said of the increasing severity of the Tribunals, which were increasingly subject to the political control of the Central Government beginning in 1937, and some people even went so far, as we have just seen, as to sing the praises of the “chekas”, of their “secret agents”, of their private prisons, and of their commandos!

Moreover, when all is said and done, the substitution of armed control patrols for the old police forces constitutes one of the most elementary measures of public health and safety, and it is grotesque to compare the violence, possibly exercised blindly, of “uncontrolled” isolated groups, with the systematic and organized repression indulged in by the political organizations, above all the Communist Party.

In Catalonia, as is the case in all real revolutions, one of the first things the revolutionaries did was to release all the prisoners, both common criminals as well as political prisoners, from the prisons. When, later, the prisons were filled up again, this was one of the signs—and not the least important one—of the progress of the counterrevolution. The repressive apparatus—tribunals, police, prisons, camps, torture, executions, etc.—is nothing but the most brutal and direct expression of the hierarchy of authoritarian societies that are divided into leaders and led; hierarchy and the repressive apparatus are indissolubly linked and sanctified, for centuries, by equally hierarchical systems of values.

Today, however, just as much as in the past, in Catalonia or anywhere else, we are confronted by the problem of knowing whether the revolution means the establishment of a *good* hierarchy (workers State), with its *good* concentration camps, its *good* firing squads, its *good* torture, etc., or whether the revolution is instead all that tends precisely to break the rules of the social order, to open the doors of the prisons, to destroy all hierarchy—and therefore all repression. For, regardless of the historical nuances, social hierarchy (“left” or “right”, “working class” or “bourgeois”) is always the source of oppression, exploitation and alienation, and it is impossible to seek to fight against the one without fighting against the other as well.

It can therefore be said—and so much the better if this shocks some people—that it is practically of no importance to know *who* is in prison—since, when it comes right down to it, there are only prisoners and those who guard them—it is prison itself that is intolerable. I am only speaking here of police repression in its most direct form, but it is obvious that hierarchy, and its repressive corollary, are found both in society as whole as

well as in each one of the social bodies of which it is composed, from the nuclear family to the industrial enterprise, including “vanguard” parties, which would be inconceivable, since they are hierarchical, without their repressive apparatus, without their control commissions and their discipline, without their cops and their informers, their ritual of expulsions and trials, sometimes real trials (for parties in power) and sometimes symbolic trials: the excluded person *disappears*, his name and his photograph disappear from the hagiographies, etc.

The continued existence of the repressive apparatuses in Catalonia effectively demonstrates, among other things, the persistence of the repressive hierarchical structures against which, however, the masses had commenced a battle to the death, at first not without success. Logically, this repression had practically no real effect with respect to “the defense of the revolution” or the fight against the “camouflaged fascists”. The capitalist system was disintegrated by the spontaneous action of the masses; the bourgeoisie who were politically hostile towards the masses had either fled or taken refuge with the anti-fascist organizations that welcomed them—above all the UGT in Catalonia.

Aside from a few hundred falangists and Francoists, who had been arrested or shot, the repression was directed above all against certain low-grade types of “right-wing” elements, or against people who “went to mass”, who, of course, did not pose any threat, only to expand and really only get into its full reactionary stride with the repression against the revolutionary militants or the militants of rival organizations (a reflection of the struggle among the political bureaucracies for the conquest of power). First prize in this field, we repeat, goes to the Spanish Stalinists, directed by Soviet advisors who relentlessly persecuted the POUM and a sector of the anarchists. As we shall see, it would only get worse. Repression is always the expression of reaction, regardless of the political faction or the social interests behind that *reaction*.⁵¹

Both in the domain of “public order” as well as that of “justice”, the political power of the Central Committee of Militias clashed with a whole series of separate powers of an infinite variety. In every Catalonian city and town, the old municipal councils had been bypassed or simply dismissed and replaced by revolutionary Committees. These Committees, for their part, were generally formed on the basis of anti-fascist unity. Each

⁵¹ That is why it is especially gratifying, in a grotesque sort of way, to see how, even in our time, practically all the sects that claim to be anti-authoritarian delightedly indulge in the *simulacrum* (since they are not capable of doing anything else) of repression. The ritual of exclusions, which is the simulacrum of the “revolutionary tribunals”, the “denunciations”, the simulacrum of executions, not to speak of the peoples prisons or tribunals or the organization of the increasingly more militarized “forces of order”, which hit or do not hit depending on their orders, like any other police force, with which they share the task of “preserving order”; the whole repressive arsenal, which always obeys a moral order (even, above all, when this moral order claims to be revolutionary) demonstrates beyond the shadow of a doubt the persistence of repressive hierarchy in the organizational structures and the minds of militants, those modern day soldier-monks.

revolutionary Committee in each city or town constituted its own special case. Thus, whereas in principle they were composed of delegates from the population—elected and revocable—real elections were in fact hardly ever held. Sometimes these elections were held only within particular organizations in order to pick someone to represent the organization on the revolutionary Committee. For, as in almost all the committees, whether or not they were elected, whether or not they were composed of “rank and file” militants, the delegates did not really represent the entire population—or the majority of the population—of a city or of a town (or an enterprise, in the case of the management Committees), but represented one or another organization on one or another revolutionary Committee. I will return to this topic of the monopoly of the organizations over the political and social life (and even over the everyday life) of Catalonia. Outside of an organization, an individual did not exist.

The revolutionary Committees of the Catalonian cities and towns actually enjoyed a great deal of autonomy with respect to the Central Committee of Militias. They wanted to be their own masters, and almost always were. In addition to this local or regional autonomy, there was the autonomy of each organization with respect to the Central Committee. The anarchists obeyed the orders of the Committee of Militias when the CNT-FAI asked them to do so, that is, they obeyed their organization—but not always.

The same was true of the other parties. With respect to the formidable spontaneous movement of the collectivizations, the Committee of Militias, like all the institutions of power and General Staffs of all the organizations, restricted itself to a stupefied assessment of its scope, before trying to channel and control it.

As far as I am concerned, the Committee of Militias was not the “workers government of the workers revolution”, nor was it an amorphous and original form of “revolutionary power”. Above all, it played a transitional role that gave it a somewhat improvised and fleeting quality, until the restoration of the “legal” power of the Generalitat which, for its part, was a delegate’s committee of the central republican power.

The bourgeois-Stalinist alliance

The PSUC occupies a place apart in the anti-fascist alliance. For if the members of the CNT-FAI and the POUM thought that they were defending the revolution by collaborating with the Generalitat, the leaders of the PSUC, for their part, were firmly committed to upholding the Generalitat *against* the revolution.

As a counterweight to the workers militias, Comorera proposed to Companys that some “Militias of the Generalitat” should be formed, but the bourgeois politicians thought that it was more important to *first* restore all governmental authority to the Generalitat. On August 2 Casanovas, from the *Esquerra*, made a similar proposal, supported by the Stalinists. A “popular front” government was formed that included the three representatives of the PSUC: Comorera, Minister of the Economy; Ruiz, Minister of Provisioning; and Vidiella, Minister of Communications. That is, the three sectors in which the autonomy that they wanted to liquidate was most firmly entrenched.

The CNT-FAI reacted vigorously, however, since it perceived that this operation was a maneuver against the Committee of Militias and against the CNT-FAI:

“While the first meeting of the Catalanian Popular Front government was underway, a delegation from the Committee of Militias of the FAI arrived and presented the following ultimatum: ‘Either the government dissolves immediately, or the Committee of Militias seizes power’.”⁵²

The government was obliged to dissolve on August 8, but, as the communist leader Dolores Ibarruri would later write, “The first step had been taken to loosen the anarcho-Trotskyist grip”.⁵³

While it was waiting for the chance to directly attack the anarchists and the POUMists and, once they were taken care of, to demolish the revolutionary conquests, the PSUC attempted to extend its influence by transforming itself into the champion of the interests of the small and medium bourgeoisie. It rapidly took over the regional (Catalonian) section of the UGT which had previously been of little account. Against the CNT, the Catalanian UGT, which acted independently of the UGT National Executive Committee controlled by Largo Caballero, proclaimed the slogan, “Defend the property of the small manufacturer”. The Catalanian section of the UGT had very little influence among the proletariat; its membership was basically composed of a few bank employees and a very high percentage of the municipal and State white collar employees. A few days after the defeat of the military uprising, the CADZI, the central trade union of the white collar and office employees of the private sector, joined the UGT. The percentage of “white collar employees” increased even more when the obligatory “unionization” of all employees was decreed, since the majority joined the UGT, which was more conducive to their interests—so they thought—than the CNT.

On the other hand, the Stalinists rapidly organized another trade union, the GEPCI (Catalonian Federation of Small-scale Merchants and Manufacturers Associations and Groups), which was also affiliated with the UGT, whose purpose was to defend the interests of the 18,000 merchants, artisans and small manufacturers who were hostile towards the collectivizations. The Catalanian Stalinists thus associated with the *Esquerra* and relied on the support of the middle classes, which were shocked by the revolution, attempting to convert the revolutionary struggle against the fascist military into a defense of republican legality and bourgeois order, basing its domestic power on everything that was conservative in the country, in order to put an end to the social transformations that were underway.

Until the bourgeois-Stalinist alliance restored the power of the Generalitat, the Committee of Militias did not blatantly oppose the initiative of the masses, but it did not do anything to support the progress of the revolution, either. To the contrary, the

⁵² Dolores Ibarruri, *op. cit.*, pp. 532-533.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

revolutionary organizations (the CNT-FAI and the POUM) sank ever deeper into the rut of collaboration with the bourgeoisie under the cover of anti-fascist unity. Thus, the Council of the Economy, which was formed by all the anti-fascist organizations (once again) and was created on August 11 and vested with authority two days later, was explicitly created for the purpose of regulating the “problems posed by the fact that the workers have taken control of an important sector of the Catalonian economy”.⁵⁴ What this means, frankly speaking, is yet another attempt on the part of the General Staffs to deprive the workers of the initiative they had shown with regard to administering the economy. It is true that the “program” of this Council of the Economy was quite radical (see Chapter 4 on the collectivizations), but in the month of August 1936 no other program would have been possible, without an open conflict with the protagonists of the collectivizations: the masses of the workers.

For the moment the offensive against the autonomy of the workers, with its speeches, its secret conclaves and its backroom deals, failed to deliver any results.

On September 9 a “decree” was published that ordered that all mining, industrial and manufacturing production, as well as the import of “lead”, was to be transferred to the control of the Generalitat. In order for this decree to be implemented, however—and so that the Catalonian government would once again really govern—Companys would have to successfully carry out the operation (prepared with the PSUC) that had already failed at the beginning of August: the formation of a “Popular Front government”, that is, the restoration of the power of the Generalitat supported by all the anti-fascist organizations. The CNT-FAI and the POUM, which had prevented the first such attempt, the Casanovas Government of August 2 (undoubtedly because they were not represented in that government’s Cabinet), were ready on this occasion to accept such a coalition government (on the condition, of course, that they should be represented in it).

Thus, on September 26, a new government was formed in which all the anti-fascist organizations were represented: three members of the Catalonian *Esquerra*: Tarradellas (Finance), Ayguadé (Security) and Gassol (Culture); three anarchists: Fábregas (Economy), Domènach (Supplies and Provisions) and Birlán (Health); two Communists: Comorera (Public Services) and Valdés (Labor); one *Rabassaire*: Calvet (Agriculture); one member of the POUM: Nin (Justice); one member of *Acció Catalana*: Closas (Minister without Portfolio); and Lieutenant Colonel Sandino as Minister of War. The program of this government was “the maximum concentration of efforts to win the war, without hesitating to use any means that would contribute to a rapid victory”.⁵⁵ Now, the false choice between revolution and war, which would later play such an important role, was first clearly expressed.

As the republican jurist Ossorio y Gallardo, the biographer of Companys, wrote:

⁵⁴ *La Révolution espagnole*, No. 1 (September 1936).

⁵⁵ Quoted by H. Rabassaire, *Espagne, creuset politique*, Paris, Ed. Fustier, 1938.

“The Generalitat was still a purely formal institution, but Companys, who had recognized the right of the workers to rule and who had even offered them his resignation, manipulated matters with such skill that, little by little, he reconstituted the legitimate institutions of Power, transferred the Ministerial responsibilities to *consellers* and relegated the workers institutions to the status of auxiliaries, helpers and executors. In four or five months the normal situation was reestablished.”⁵⁶

It is perfectly clear that the “normal situation” is the one in which a Government governs and in which the workers institutions are executors and auxiliaries of the Government.

Because all the anti-fascist organizations were now represented in the Generalitat, the temporary usefulness of the Committee of Militias had come to an end. On October 3 a decree was issued “dissolving the Central Committee of Anti-fascist Militias”. This decree was followed by other, equally significant decrees:

“October 11: a decree ordering the suspension of all Local Committees throughout Catalonia which obstruct and render impossible the effective action of the Government. This decree was accompanied by another decree issued by the Department of Internal Security which established deadlines for the appointment of new Municipal Councils throughout Catalonia. The local anti-fascist organizations must appoint the new councilors in the same proportions as their organizations are represented in the Council of the Generalitat.

“October 27: a decree ordering the surrender of all heavy weapons (rifles and machine guns).

“October 28: a decree militarizing the militias. In this decree it says that the Council of the Generalitat has submitted a new code of military justice for review, but that, while awaiting its approval, the militias will be subject to the existing military code of justice.”⁵⁷

As you can see, the Generalitat wasted no time in its attempt to “restore order”. The CNT-FAI and the POUM, represented in the Catalonian Government, accepted and approved these measures. Thus, one may read in *La Batalla* of October 28, 1936, without any commentary, the text of the decree ordering the disarmament of the peasants and workers:

“ARTICLE 1: All heavy weaponry (i.e., rifles, machine guns, etc.) in the possession of citizens, must be surrendered to the Municipalities or arrangements must be made for the latter to pick them up, within eight days following the publication of this decree. These weapons must be deposited in the General Barracks of the Artillery Corps and in the Defense Ministry of Barcelona in order to meet the needs of the front.

⁵⁶ Ossorio y Gallardo, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

⁵⁷ J.-G. Martin, *La transformation politique et sociale de la Catalogne*.

“ARTICLE 2: Once this deadline has expired, those who possess weapons of this type will be considered to be fascists and will be judged with the severity their conduct deserves.”

* * *

If I have devoted so much attention to the role and the nature of the Central Committee of Militias, I have done so deliberately due to the exegeses that have been produced concerning this Committee by the ideologues of various political persuasions of the “workers movement”. In this as in other cases, our theoreticians wear themselves out in the fruitless quest for the identification of a *good power*. For some—bourgeoisie and Stalinists, once again in alliance—the “good power” resided in the Generalitat which represented republican legitimacy and whose policy corresponded to the character of the war that was emerging: a war in defense of the democratic institutions of the Republic, threatened by fascist aggression.

For others, that is, to be precise, for the nostalgia-hunters and miners of the archives of the “good revolutionary tradition”, it was in the Committee of Militias where, for an all-too-brief span of time, the “good revolutionary power” resided (if it did not last, maybe this was due to the eternal problem of “revolutionary leadership”?). For them, not to have supported (how far?) the Committee of Militias was a betrayal, and the acceptance of its dissolution and its de facto integration into the Generalitat, was abdication. It is in the abandonment of that “good power” that the failure of the revolution resides.

For all the “Marxist-Leninist” ideologues, the question of power is everything. What is the “class content” of the power? What class is in power? That is all there is to it. The response, however, is quite simple: *Every class in power is an exploiting class, regardless of whether it is dressed up like a “bourgeois” or like a “proletarian”*. The social origin of the comrade ministers and of the political-state bureaucracy changes nothing about the matter, since the workers, for their part, will still be chained to their alienating labor and condemned to the mere role of executors.⁵⁸

Obviously, I shall not blame the Committee of Militias for not having arisen from some kind of “democratic process”. In the situation of Catalonia in July 1933, it was after all to be expected that a handful of workers leaders should have opted to engage in initiatives of this kind. The Committee of Militias adopted some measures that were useful and necessary in the first few days following the victory over the military. *But the initiative of the masses, and the useful and necessary measures that they had improvised, were much more advanced and went much further, in every respect, than those of the General Staffs of the workers and anti-fascist organizations that were briefly united in the Committee of Militias.*

This is definitely what seems to be the most important issue to me. It is in the spontaneous movement of the masses that the revolution resides, not in the Committee of

⁵⁸ On these concepts of Power, see Appendix 5.

the Militias, and not, later, in the Generalitat. The Committee of Militias straggled far behind the real movement, which it attempted to control, channel and, in a word, retard. Between its activity, from July to October 3, and that of the Generalitat, in the following months, there is no discontinuity. Both, as institutions of power, assumed the same position vis-à-vis the masses: from outside and from above, at the same time.

In the Catalonia of July-August 1936, the State was shattered into pieces, atomized into a thousand powers. All the political and trade union bureaucracies sensed the danger, they were “sidelined”, in a daze because of their uselessness. They all agreed that a centralized Power had to be restored (while they fought among themselves to control it) and that the hierarchical pyramid must be reconstructed in the political, military, economic, police, etc., domains, while they maneuvered to modify the components of this pyramid to their own advantage (the political and trade union bureaucracy often replaced the old administrative and state bureaucracy, for example). Some consciously, others unconsciously, tried once and then succeeded the second time, in resurrecting, so to speak, the State.

The Committee of Militias was itself already an attempt of this kind. Two months later it had been rendered useless because it was the same organizations, and in some cases the very same men, who were in the Generalitat, with the same titles and the same roles and, moreover, now with republican legitimacy.

What we have just said, however, only affords us a schematic glimpse of the real situation. The force of the revolutionary mass movement was such that the social transformations spontaneously initiated by the masses were so important that the Committee of Militias, and subsequently the Generalitat, proved to be useless and insignificant for some time, creating institution after institution and publishing decree after decree which no one—or almost no one—paid any attention to: there were much more important things to do.

Their authority “legally” existed, but the relation with authority was not a relation of submission, but quite the opposite. And their authority—unacknowledged—oscillated between vertigo and rage.

Indeed, one can really speak of a “wildcat democracy” (just as we speak of a “wildcat strike”) to designate the new social life that was inaugurated in Catalonia by the armed workers.

I do not want to succumb in turn to a “leftist” fetishism, but it seems to me that the development of this wildcat democracy could have given rise to a form of social organization of the type of a federation of councils (this is merely a vague indication, as, since I am not writing a cookbook, I do not have to provide any recipes). There were some concrete and essential factors already in place for such an ulterior development: 70% of the enterprises collectivized, numerous agricultural communes, workers militias, liquidation of the old police forces, revolutionary committees in the enterprises, the

neighborhoods, the cities and the towns, a “new anti-authoritarian state of mind”, changes in everyday life and in the status of women, etc.

If this federation of councils did not arise and if for months and months we witness a struggle between Power (Committee of Militias, first, then the Generalitat) and this wildcat democracy, this is due to a plethora of causes that are rooted in the social and historical context: the war, of course, but also the role played by the workers organizations—by all the organizations—and by the faithfulness, one could even call it the submissiveness, of the militants towards their organizations and their leaders. It was precisely by way of these organizations—including the libertarian CNT-FAI—that Power was “reintroduced”, authority once again sanctified, discipline imposed, the militias militarized, the social hierarchy reestablished and the revolution defeated.

“As in all previous uprisings of workers and pauperized peasants”, (we read in an accurate assessment in *Living Marxism*), “the outstanding fact was that the masses of Spain were more radical, more ‘left’, more extreme, than their leaders and the organizations controlled by them. Not that they acted against their organizations, not that they saw a barrier between themselves and their organizations, but the change of policy which came about as soon as the uprising turned into the order of the new regime, shows sufficiently that there was a wider gap between the acting masses and their organization than the workers were as yet able to realize. The mass actions in the summer and fall of 1936, in which unorganized and organized workers participated,⁵⁹ were neither instigated nor directed, nor extended, by the official leadership of the various organizations, the anarchist trade unions included, but by the workers themselves and by the force of circumstance to which the workers bidden or unbidden reacted.... what was truly revolutionary in the Spanish Civil War resulted from the direct actions of the workers and pauperized peasants, and not because of a specific form of labor organization nor an especially gifted leadership. It must be said, however, that the greater freedom within the less centralized anarcho-syndicalist unions was reflected in a greater self-initiative of anarcho-syndicalist workers. The revolutionary results of the spontaneous actions of the Spanish workers in the July events disappeared with the change from self-initiative and self-action of the workers to organization decrees, party decisions, and governmental rule, and the whole machinery set up anew to control the masses.”⁶⁰

That sums it up quite well.

Chapter 3

The USSR and the Spanish Revolution

⁵⁹ Although a sector of the unorganized workers participated in the struggles of July 1936, unionization was soon compulsory—and furthermore necessary, for example, in order to obtain necessary consumer goods.

⁶⁰ *Living Marxism*, No. IV (April 6, 1939), Chicago, p. 171.

The role of the Western democracies, particularly France and Great Britain, in the Spanish civil war, is relatively well known. Everyone is familiar with Blum's vacillations, the non-intervention policy and its consequences, the false neutrality of the British Conservatives, then in power, who became increasingly more inclined towards the Francoists, etc. Everyone knows about the material support for Franco provided by Nazi Germany and fascist Italy—although its importance is often exaggerated, insofar as the military aid from those countries is frequently attributed with the sole, or almost the sole, responsibility for the defeat of the “republicans”, thus sparing those who make these claims the need to examine the mistakes made by the republican camp. The role of the USSR, on the other hand, is a topic that has been subject to a great deal of controversy, which, after all, is to be expected because the same thing is true of everything that falls under the heading of the “great Stalinist lie”.

The Spanish war still plays a part in the legend of communist nobility. The Stalinist “Picture Postcard” speaks endlessly about the “disinterested help of the great fraternal people”, of the international brigades, of the prestigious military leaders, all of them communists, obviously, Spanish or foreign.

These latter day pilgrims in search of a “socialism with a human face”, such as Arthur London⁶¹ or Charles Tillon, have loudly proclaimed that not only their personal participation in the conflict, but also the participation of the communists (including the Communist International, the PCE, and the USSR), was a glorious page in their history, which is supposed to justify (among many other things, of course, but this is especially important) their thirty years—or more—of unconditional Stalinism. This argument, which is both polemical and Jesuitical at the same time, allows them to contrast the golden, heroic legend of communism, of which the war in Spain is, according to them, one of the most beautiful adornments, with the “darkness” of the extermination camps, the prisons, the torture, the frame-ups, in a word, Stalinist terror. The advantage of this type of attitude is clear: one opposes what is “good” to what is “bad” in the communist tradition in order to conclude that the “good” outweighs the “bad” and thereby to justify Stalinism as a necessary historical period; and at the same time it serves to justify their own activities and histories. In politics, it is every man for himself.

The success of this kind of operation, however, implies an absolute ignorance of the events, because nowhere else was the activity of the international communist apparatus as openly counterrevolutionary as it was in Spain; nowhere else, outside the so-called “socialist” countries, did Stalinist police repression play such an important role, or enjoy such uninhibited freedom of action. The “crimes of Stalinism” during the Spanish civil war would fill many volumes. This is not what I propose to do here, but I must address

⁶¹ Arthur London, *after* being released from jail in Prague (see *The Confession*), wrote a book about the war in Spain entitled, *Španělsko, Španělsko* [Spain, Spain], in which he tranquilly retails *all the lies of Stalinist propaganda*: POUM = fascist spies; anarchists = madmen or saboteurs, etc. And that is all. (We recommend the simultaneous reading of *Spain, Spain* and *The Confession*, for those interested in studying Stalinist psychopathology.)

this issue because the role of the USSR (and the Spanish communists) was crucial in the crushing of the revolutionary experience in Catalonia.

For me, by the way, there is no contradiction at all between the counterrevolutionary policy of the USSR towards Spain and its “social nature”. Nor is there anything scandalous about it despite what the “left” communists—Trotskyist or otherwise—have said and will say, in their obstinate efforts to clarify the “lessons of October”: insofar as the “Soviet” social system is one of the most reactionary social systems in the world (oppressive, police state, rigidly hierarchical), it would have been surprising, to say the least, if the Soviet Union were to have helped the Spanish Revolution instead of acting on behalf of its own interests as a “great power”.

In January 1933, Hitler took power in Germany; on October 21, 1933, Germany announced its withdrawal from the League of Nations. Faced with the rise of belligerent powers, the position of the USSR was at first to wait and see what would happen. If Hitler would abide by the terms of the Treaty of Rapallo, Stalin would be prepared to reach an understanding with him; just as he had come to an understanding with Mussolini, the only foreign chief of state who was never personally attacked by the Soviet press of that era and with whom Litvinov, at that time the Peoples Commissar for Foreign Affairs, declared that he had maintained the “most cordial relations”.

In its March 4, 1933 issue, the newspaper *Izvestia* declared “that the USSR was the only country that did not have hostile feelings towards Germany, regardless of the form and composition of its government”. In late 1933, *Pravda* also stated that the working class did not have to distinguish between fascist States and pseudo-democratic States. The fascist States, however, took it upon themselves to make this distinction and, on December 28, 1933, Molotov, in a Session of the Central Executive Committee on Foreign Affairs, complained that, during the course of the year “some groups in the ruling echelons of Germany have been trying to change that country’s relations with the USSR”. He nonetheless reaffirmed that “the USSR, for its part, has no reason at all to change its policy towards Germany”.⁶²

When it seemed that, for the time being, there was no likelihood that relations with Nazi Germany would improve (such an opportunity would arise later and the USSR would rush to sign the Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1939), Stalin decided to reinforce his relations with the other Western powers. In late 1933, the USSR had obtained the *de jure* recognition of the United States. Soviet negotiations with France, initiated in the Spring of 1933, resulted in the Soviet Union’s entry into the League of Nations, and a permanent seat on its Executive Council, on September 18, 1934. After Germany had withdrawn from this organization—the predecessor of the United Nations—along with Italy and Japan, the USSR sought to transform the League, which it had previously referred to as “a league of imperialist brigands in defense of the banditry of the Treaty of Versailles”, into an effective element of its diplomacy. The negotiations with France also resulted in the

⁶² Jane Degras, in *Soviet Documents and Foreign Policy*, ed. Royal Institute of International Affairs.

signing of a Franco-Soviet treaty of “mutual assistance in the case of unprovoked aggression by a European State”. The treaty was signed in Paris on May 2, 1935. According to the *Petit Parisien* of June 20, 1935, “the president of the Council, M. Laval, emphasized that he had included the paragraph concerning the policy of national defense of the French Government at the urging of Stalin”.

Stalin had ordered the turn to the “autarchic” period of the policy of the USSR and the Communist International: absolute priority for the strengthening of the economic and industrial power of Russia and, in foreign affairs, a policy of alliances with *any country at all*, in order to guarantee peace, and this for the same purpose of strengthening Russia’s economy and industry. In short, then as now, whether we are talking about the treaty with Laval or the Nazi-Soviet Pact, whether in Spain or Czechoslovakia, etc., Soviet foreign policy has always attempted to defend the interests of the USSR as a great power to the detriment of any and all other countries if necessary, in conformance with one of the most retrograde diplomatic traditions of the great imperialist States.

If some contemporary communist parties seem to disapprove of certain too-brazen imperialist interventions carried out by the USSR—for the benefit of their colleagues in the political class—in the past, on the other hand, “the worldwide phalanx of the proletariat” obeyed with discipline and zealously followed all the vagaries of Soviet foreign policy and now that the USSR was playing the card of forming alliances with the Western democracies “against fascism”, the Communist Parties fell into line, as they would again fall into line with the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939.

The theory of “socialism in one country”, the ideological alibi for the neo-nationalism of the Russian bureaucracy, had emerged victorious from the 6th Congress of the Communist International, which proclaimed in its Resolutions: “In view of the fact that the U.S.S.R. is the only fatherland of the international proletariat, the principal bulwark of its achievements and the most important factor for its international emancipation, the international proletariat must on its part facilitate the success of the work of socialist construction in the U.S.S.R., and defend it against the attacks of the capitalist Powers by all the means in its power.”⁶³

This language of the Lord giving orders to his Vassals, was further consolidated at the 7th Congress of the Communist International, which opened in Moscow on July 25, 1935. The USSR is, more than ever: “the most important factor in the history of the world.”⁶⁴

During this Congress the policy of international and national alliances of the “popular front” and “anti-fascism” would be theoretically formulated, setting aside all the “leftist” glitter, slogans such as “class against class” and the critique of “social fascism”. This

⁶³ “Documents of the VIth Congress of the CI”, quoted by Fernando Claudín, *La Crisis del Movimiento Comunista*, Ed. Ruedo Ibérico, Paris, 1970. [In English, see: <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/6th-congress/ch05.htm>.
Translator’s Note.]

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

theoretical turn required that a revolutionary label should be attached to the policy of the Popular Front and the defense of bourgeois democracy. Dimitrov declared: "Fifteen years ago, Lenin recommended that we 'seek forms of *transition* or of *a way to approach* the proletarian revolution'. It seems that in many countries the *popular front government* has demonstrated that it is one of the most important such forms of transition."⁶⁵

In its final resolutions, the 7th Congress called upon the communist parties to fight for the formation of a "united front or popular front government, on an anti-fascist platform, when the masses were in revolt against fascism though not yet ready for a revolution under communist leadership".

In Spain, the Popular Front won the elections of February 1936, and it was right in the middle of the full bloom of the "*frentepopulista*" policy that the revolutionary crisis of July 1936 erupted. This revolution went far beyond the anti-fascist and parliamentary framework of the Popular Front type; in reality, it went beyond all frameworks, all programs and all predictions, as is the case with all real revolutions. However, because the Spanish Revolution was contrary to the interests of the USSR—which was logical—the communist apparatus did everything within its power to contain and thus destroy it. With regard to this mission, the vagaries of the Spanish Communist Party are quite comical: in April 1931, when, according to the official Communist Party history, the party had barely 800 militants, the communist leaders welcomed the inauguration of the Republic with the cry, "All power to the Soviets! Down with the bourgeois Republic!" At the Congress of 1932, the Bullejos leadership was excluded for having issued the "opportunist" directive to defend the Republic against the *pronunciamiento* of General Sanjurjo (Sanjurjo's attempt failed, but Sanjurjo was to join Franco and Mola at the head of the putsch of July 1936). But when the mass movement *effectively* became radical and when the insurrection of Asturias in October 1934 had demonstrated the power of the revolutionary current in Spain, then the communist leaders, obeying the directives of the Communist International, decided that the Spanish Revolution was not socialist but simply bourgeois-democratic.

When, after the victory of the Popular Front in the February elections and faced with the revolutionary pressure of the masses, Largo Caballero, the leader of the left wing of the Socialist Party and the UGT, proposed the formation of a "workers government" from which the republicans would be excluded, the Communist Party rejected his proposal. José Díaz, the general secretary, wrote in the journal of the Comintern: "We must fight against every kind of manifestation of exaggerated impatience and against any attempt to prematurely break with the Popular Front. The Popular Front must continue. We still have a long way to go together with the republican left." What he actually intended to do was to put the brakes on the mass movement that was increasingly more inclined "towards the left", to keep it within the limits of anti-fascism, that is, within the alliance with the liberal bourgeoisie; he was also trying to reinforce the influence of the Communist Party, which up until that moment was only a small party, within the workers organizations. With the consent of Largo Caballero, the Communist Party dissolved the

⁶⁵ Georgi Dimitrov, *Oeuvres choisies*, Ed. Sociales, Paris, p. 102.

CGTU, its trade union that was affiliated with the Red Trade Union International, and “invited” its members to join the UGT. This was not a merger properly speaking, considering the weakness of the communist trade union. In some regions, however, especially in Catalonia, the Stalinists would soon obtain control over the Catalonian section of the UGT. Another operation proved to be more immediately advantageous for the Communist Party: the merger of the communist and socialist youth groups, which had 3,000 and 50,000 members, respectively, in the Unified Socialist Youth. Despite their minority status, the Stalinists rapidly succeeded in gaining almost total control over the organization of the Unified Youth, which they transformed into an effective instrument of their policies during the civil war. It had even greater ambitions, however, as it sought to carry out the same operation with the communist and socialist parties. Its negotiations with respect to this scheme with the left wing of the Socialist Party (Largo Caballero’s tendency) had made a great deal of progress, but the project failed (except in Catalonia), not so much because of the Communist Party’s subordination to the USSR—a country that enjoyed great prestige among broad sectors of left wing socialists at the time—as because of its ideas concerning the Popular Front and the “democratic” stage in which they wanted to bury the powerful struggle of the masses “for change”. Its domestic policies were much closer to, indeed, they were almost identical with, those of the right wing socialists—the Indalecio Prieto tendency—who, for their part, would not even consider merger with the Stalinists. This contradiction would not be resolved, and during the civil war the Stalinists associated with the right wing socialists and the republicans in order to fight against all the revolutionary currents, whether socialist, anarchist or POUMist.

From the “All power to the Soviets!” of 1931 to the “struggle in defense of the democratic Republic” of 1936—and all the rest—the vagaries of the PCE were not just due to its subordination to Stalin via the Communist International; there were also other reasons for its inconsistencies. In connection with this question, it would be absurd not to take into account the internal logic of all organizations of this type; in 1931 the Communist Party was nothing but a sectarian “groupuscule”, which “lived vicariously”, so to speak, in a revolutionary country (the USSR then, China now), which identified so completely with this “other country” that it even mechanically repeated its “directives”, which scorned real struggles because it could not influence them, etc. In a few years, thanks to its well-honed skills in manipulating the context of the Popular Front, it penetrated the terrain of the classical political game, saw how the number of votes it obtained increased, entered Parliament and emerged from the dark dungeons of the sects to take its place at the round tables of political wheeling and dealing, where, although a small minority at first, it soon managed (in the case of the PCE) to make a big splash. This is a classical process within the workers movement, and it is always taking place. Starting with ten deputies of the Communist League in France, for example; and now look at the results!

The foreign policy of the USSR was conditioned in this period by Stalin’s desire to prevent Great Britain and France from reaching an understanding with Hitler behind his back. In an attempt to prevent this from happening, the Western communist parties would attempt to transform themselves into the best defenders of the bourgeois republican order.

In France, they did so by breaking the powerful occupations movement of the factories in May-June 1936 (an occasion when Maurice Thorez distinguished himself with his famous “boss’s” slogan: “It is necessary to know how to end a strike!” In Spain, even though they could not prevent the strike wave from culminating in the revolutionary civil war, the Stalinists waged a bitter struggle to “put an end once and for all to the attempts of the trade unions and the committees to put socialism into practice”, as Jesús Hernández, who was at the time the leader of the PCE, declared in May 1937, with a marvelous although inadvertent sense of humor.⁶⁶

The support of the USSR for the Spanish Republic

Broué and Témime distinguish three stages in the Soviet attitude towards the war in Spain:

“—first, a *de facto* position of neutrality, accompanied by clear-cut evidence of sympathy and solidarity;

“—after October 1936, a substantial contribution in military aid, with a corresponding vigorous attitude in favor of the Republic on the Nonintervention Committee;

“—finally, after summer 1938, a gradual slowing down of military aid, ending in the total abandonment of the Republic.”⁶⁷

These three stages fit logically into the context of Soviet diplomacy: first, a wait and see attitude towards an unforeseen and inopportune revolution that seemed to be, if not dominated, at least significantly influenced by the anarchists; this wait and see stance was also directed towards the reactions of France and Great Britain. Next, aid, but aid devoted not to facilitating the victory of the revolution but to crushing it; aid that would allow it to exercise major political influence that was skillfully utilized for counterrevolutionary purposes. Finally, abandonment not just of a “lost cause”, but also due to a reversal of the pattern of alliances, a new turn in Soviet diplomacy that culminated in the Nazi-Soviet Pact.

Fernando Claudín, a former leader of the PCE, criticizes the Soviet policy towards Spain in his book—his criticism is similar to that of Broué and Témime, although somewhat more restrained:

“The USSR could not shirk its duty of active solidarity with the Spanish people in arms, or else it would have discredited itself in the eyes of the world proletariat. This duty coincided, on the one hand, with the anti-Hitler orientation of Soviet foreign policy during that period. On the other hand, however, such aid conflicted with the modalities, let us call them tactics, of that orientation. At this level, the objective number one of

⁶⁶ Quoted by B. Bolloten, *op. cit.* [This quotation was not found in Bolloten’s book. Translated from the Spanish. Translator’s Note.]

⁶⁷ Broué and Témime, *op. cit.*, English edition, p. 367.

Soviet policy was to consolidate the military alliance with France and to reach an understanding with England. But neither the bourgeois France of Blum, nor the conservative England of Chamberlain, could allow the victory of the proletarian revolution in Spain. To contribute to its victory would mean, for the Soviet Government, to sever its relations with both powers. Apparently, the only possible way to reconcile ‘aid to Spain’ with the above-mentioned goals of Soviet foreign policy was to see to it that the Spanish proletariat should not go beyond the point that, once it reached a certain threshold, would be permissible for the Anglo-French bourgeoisie. And the most that the latter would tolerate was for Spain to have a parliamentary, democratic, anti-fascist, and even Popular Front Republic, as leftist as you like, even, but ... bourgeois! Above all, bourgeois!’⁶⁸

For my part, I do not think that the fear of discrediting itself in the eyes of the “world proletariat” had much to do with the deliberations of the Stalinist leadership. For didn’t Moscow abandon its entire anti-Hitler strategy and sign the Nazi-Soviet Pact (with the “assassins of the Spanish Republic”), almost as soon as the war in Spain came to an end, thus performing a total reversal of its alliances, without any fear, it would seem, that its new alliance with the “worst enemies of the world proletariat and of all progressive humanity” would discredit it in anyone’s eyes?

The aid sent by the USSR to Spain conformed to more subtle reasons than the fear of discrediting itself in the eyes of the “world proletariat”—we should rather say, in the eyes of the communist movement—which had already become accustomed to swallowing everything without complaints, even though the Stalinists used this “aid” (let us speak clearly: the sale of arms to the Republic at a high price) for its propaganda.

As I see it, the essential goal involved the opportunity offered by the war for controlling the policy of the republican Government, first to crush the revolution, but also to use it as one more pawn in the chess game of European diplomacy, as an eventual trade-off—without, obviously, having to break off relations with the French and English governments as a result. The Soviet Union could at the same time present itself as the best defender of the legal and moderate Spanish Republic, as being against fascism, etc. This tactic offered numerous possibilities for Soviet diplomacy, which is not to say that it was entirely successful.

It also presented opportunities in the domestic and political arenas (even if only to cast an opaque veil over problems of every kind and over the cresting wave of trials of the Bolshevik old guard and mass deportations).

The first decision of the Soviet Government was to announce, on August 3, 1936, that it was deducting 1% from the monthly wages of workers and office employees who worked in the factories and offices of the State, for the purpose of financing aid to the Spanish Republic. Of course, not one penny ever reached Spain. Throughout the Soviet Union, solidarity campaigns were organized, calling upon the workers to tighten their belts one

⁶⁸ Fernando Claudín, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

more notch and to increase production “for Spain”, which was a good theme of agit-prop for increasing the pace of industrialization. Some volunteers presented themselves to the Party organizations, expressing their wish to fight in Spain, no doubt convinced by the noisy public relations campaign. They were arrested and deported to Siberia, as Victor Serge points out in his *Memoirs*. And when the Non-Intervention Committee was founded, the USSR immediately joined it, as always, for the purpose of pacifying the French and the English.

Jesús Hernández, former leader of the Spanish Communist Party and a Minister of the Republic during the civil war, recounts, in his book, *La Gran Traición [The Great Betrayal]*:

“... When those words spoken by Stalin which had once seemed so beautiful to us were still echoing in our ears—‘The cause of the Spanish people is not a private affair of the Spaniards, it is the cause of all advanced and progressive humanity’—the Kremlin responded to the French Government, which had asked what the Soviet Union would do if France were threatened for having helped the Madrid Government: ‘The Franco-Soviet treaty of 1935 obliges us to support each other in case one of our countries should be attacked by another power, but not in the case of a war caused by the intervention of either country in the affairs of another nation’.”⁶⁹

It is quite likely that the prudent attitude of the USSR (as well as that evinced by Great Britain) contributed to a large extent to the deceptions of the Blum government.

In early September 1936 an extraordinary session of the Politburo was convened in Moscow, during which Stalin announced his decision to support Republican Spain in its struggle against Franco. W. G. Krivitsky, who during that period was the Soviet chief of military intelligence in Western Europe, recounted that, two days later, he received the following message: “Extend your operations to cover Spanish civil war. Mobilize all available agents and all facilities for prompt creation of a system to purchase and transport arms to Spain.”⁷⁰ Since, however, he had to ensure the “proper use” of these arms, Stalin ordered Yagoda, at that time the head of the NKVD, to establish a network of agents in Spain. On September 14, Yagoda held an emergency conference in Lubyanka, headquarters of the political secret police in Moscow—and today still a famous prison. During this conference he appointed a veteran officer of the NKVD to direct the networks in Spain; this was Nikolsky, who operated under the name, Orlov. At this time a significant solidarity movement was taking shape that organized the dispatch of volunteers to Spain. Some of these volunteers were not Stalinist communists (some were not even communists) and their contact with the revolutionary reality of Spain (as well as the experience that some of them would acquire with regard to Stalinist dictatorship) represented a political danger for Stalinism. The agents of the NKVD were

⁶⁹ Jesús Hernández, *La grande trahison*, Ed. Fasquelle, Paris, 1953, p. 34. Originally published in Mexico under the title, *Yo fui un ministro de Stalin*.

⁷⁰ W. G. Krivitsky, *In Stalin's Secret Service*, Harper Brothers, New York, 1939, pp. 81-82.

responsible for ensuring that order reigned among these volunteers. Therefore, they had to infiltrate and control the “International Brigades” for a dual purpose: to capitalize on their valor in combat (which was often real) solely for the benefit of Stalinism; and to liquidate all real or “potential” opponents of Stalinism. Some of these men, such as André Marty, performed the latter task so effectively for the NKVD that they earned sobriquets like the “butcher of Albacete”.

The military aid of the USSR was not free, however. As everyone knows, the Republic paid in advance, with gold, for the weapons it received. The gold of the Bank of Spain was shipped, on October 25, 1936, from Cartagena to Odessa. This operation was supervised by Negrín, then the Minister of Finance, with the agreement of his colleagues in the Republican Government. The exact value of this gold has been a matter of much dispute, but there are reasons to believe that it was worth approximately 510 million pesetas. Nor do we know the exact quantity of arms that were sent by the Soviets. According to a document of the U.S. State Department quoted by Cattell and cited by Broué and Témime: “According to an American State Department document (March 25, 1937), out of 460 Republican planes, there were 200 Russian fighters, 150 Russian bombers and 70 Russian reconnaissance planes. They were mainly Katyusha bombers and I-15 and I-16 fighters, superior to the early German planes, but far inferior to the Messerschmitts. Almost all the tanks were also of Russian origin: the 12- and 18-ton tanks were fast and well armed.”⁷¹

A large proportion of the materiel purchased with Spanish gold was—according to the testimonies of the Basque President Aguirre and Krivitsky himself—antiquated and often unserviceable, some of which “dated from the Crimean War”, as Aguirre said. Since the USSR was a member of the Non-Intervention Committee, the Communist International and the NKVD created a whole series of shell companies to buy and transport arms to the republican zone and thus provide a cover for the Soviet Government (which never allowed even one gram of the gold it received to see the light of day).

“... In almost every country in Europe, in Paris, London, Amsterdam, and Zurich, businesses controlled by Moscow were created whose mission was to provide us with arms as if these shipments were normal commercial transactions across national borders. Naturally, these deals were paid for with the money of the Spanish State. Even though we no longer rely exclusively on Russian food supplies, we are still beholden to Moscow because all these commercial offices are controlled by the Kremlin agents who can always increase or decrease the shipments, regardless of where they originate, at their whim.”

We have seen that Krivitsky was personally in charge of these commercial offices whose main beneficiaries were a handful of communist parties:

“The French Communist Party, among others, acquired a fleet of 12 merchant ships which sailed the seas on behalf of the maritime company ‘France-Navigation’, it bought

⁷¹ Broué and Témime, *op. cit.*, English edition, pp. 369-370.

the Party Headquarters and automobiles for its leaders, it created newspapers like *Ce Soir*, all with the funds earmarked for the ‘purchase of arms’ which Negrín had deposited in the hands of the French Communist leaders, funds which, according to Prieto, amounted to the sum of two and a half million francs.”⁷²

For the purposes of its subtle diplomatic game, the interests of the USSR would not be served by a rapid victory of the Francoist military and its Nazi and fascist allies. This would have strengthened the fascist camp in Europe too much, it would have shocked the Western democracies and it could cause the USSR to be isolated. But its interests would not be served by a too-rapid victory of the republican side, either, given the power of the Spanish revolutionary forces at the beginning of the civil war, a power that, should those forces be victorious, would be multiplied a hundred-fold with the resulting uncontrolled (by anybody) social revolution that would have disturbed—or might disturb—the diplomatic game of the USSR and the other powers. The possible consequences of such a revolution would naturally shock all the governments. It was necessary to simultaneously crush all the revolutionary forces, enable the Republic to defend itself and, should it be victorious, its victory should be achieved under the aegis of the most moderate of republics, recognized as such by the Western democracies and full of gratitude to the USSR. And the possibility of a compromise between the two sides should not be ruled out, either.

The first Russian arms arrived in Spain on October 28, 1936. They were immediately entrusted to the PCE and used in the defense of Madrid, which was practically surrounded by Franco’s troops. The tone of the communists and the Soviet advisors was insistent: Nothing is more important than obtaining weapons. They gave the orders, they spoke and they were heard. The blackmail almost always worked: “Obey, or you will get no more arms.” In Madrid, for example, the Stalinists instituted an absolute veto on the presence of delegates from the POUM in the Defense Junta, which was theoretically composed of all the anti-fascist organization. And although all the organizations, with the exception of the PCE [the Communist Party], had in principle accepted the presence of the delegates of the POUM, these delegates, Gorkín and Andrade, had to return to Barcelona, their missions unfulfilled. When they arrived in Barcelona, they published an article in *La Batalla*, the journal of the POUM, that contained an account of what took place in Madrid. Antonov-Ovseenko, the consul-general of the USSR in Barcelona, responded to them on the following day with a press release in which he denounced “the fascist maneuvers of the POUM”. “A few days later (according to Gorkín) I had the opportunity to speak in Valencia with some Ministers of the Republic.” The Minister of Propaganda gave him some friendly advice: “Don’t engage in polemics with the Russians now: they are sending us arms’.” “‘OK,’ I responded, ‘but in exchange for these arms, which I think have been paid for in full with gold, are we going to allow Stalin to tell us what to do from Moscow? It seems to me that you are not aware of the danger represented by Stalinism and the policy that its followers intend to implement in Spain. Stalin doesn’t give a damn about the Spanish people, for him everything revolves around the needs of his foreign policy.’ I told the assistant secretary of the Minister that I was

⁷² Jesús Hernández, *La grande trahison*, Ed. Fasquelle, 1953, pp. 47-48.

convinced that Stalinism was planning our physical elimination. And I added: ‘And take care, after they get rid of us they will knock off everyone who does not accept their dictatorship.’ Then he confessed to me: ‘They are entrenched everywhere, they have a hand in everything. The President of the Republic is himself very worried about what they will say and what they will do. But what can we do? They are the ones who are providing us with arms’.”⁷³ And we shall merely add that this is precisely why they provided them.

The communists thus began to make the most of the advantageous position that Soviet aid created for them and made all of Gorkin’s worst fears come true, including the “physical elimination” of the revolutionary opposition. Krivitsky writes: “If Stalin was to make Spain a pawn in his power game, he must subdue all opposition in the Spanish republic. The spearhead of that opposition was in Catalonia. Stalin was determined to support with arms and manpower only those groups in which were ready to accept without reservation his leadership. He was resolved not to let the Catalonians lay hands on our planes, with which they might win a military victory that would increase their prestige and thus their political weight in the republican ranks.”⁷⁴

Before sending any weapons, the Soviets had resolutely insisted on the complete restoration of the power of the Central Government in the republican zone. Moscow’s ambassador in Madrid, Rosenberg, was working behind the scenes to bring about the liquidation of the revolutionary actions and the autonomy of the workers committees and to establish a strong government. At that time, a government of that kind would have to be oriented “towards the left”, otherwise the masses would have conceded it as little respect as they did the Giral Government. Therefore, on September 4 a Popular Front government was formed in Madrid. It was headed by Largo Caballero, as Prime Minister; Caballero was also the Minister of War and declared that he considered himself “the direct representative of all the forces that are fighting on the various fronts for the preservation of the democratic Republic”. The new government was composed of representatives of all the anti-fascist organizations and parties, except for the CNT-FAI, which did not join the Central Government until November 4, but which nonetheless gave the Government its undivided support from then on.

Despite his relative inconsistency, Largo Caballero defended a political line that was much more leftist than would have been acceptable to Stalinists of any nationality. Naturally, he was aware of the need for weapons and was ready to make concessions to obtain them, but sometimes he proved reticent and even openly hostile towards the “advice” of the Soviets. This is why Stalin, personally, in his most belligerent style, wrote Largo Caballero a letter, undoubtedly convinced that the workers’ tribune would see the light when he read it:

“You have to attract to the Government—Stalin wrote—the small and medium urban bourgeoisie or, in any event, make it possible for them to assume a neutral position

⁷³ Julián Gorkin, *Caníbales políticos*, Ed. Quetzal, Mexico City, 1941, p. 91.

⁷⁴ Krivitsky, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

favorable to the Government, protecting them from any confiscations and guaranteeing them the freedom to do business.... You must not alienate the leaders of the republican parties, but to the contrary, you must attract them, bring them closer to you and associate them with the common efforts of the Government. In particular, it is necessary to guarantee the Government the support of Azaña (the President of the Republic [C.S.M.]) and of his group and do everything possible to prevent his vacillations. It is also necessary for the enemies of Spain not to perceive it as a communist republic and thus to plan their open intervention, which constitutes the most serious danger for republican Spain. You can find an occasion to declare in the press that the Government of Spain will not tolerate anyone, no matter who they might be, from seizing the property of or endangering legitimate foreign interests in Spain or those of the citizens of the countries that do not support the fascists.”⁷⁵

This, with its village-priest style, is the program that Stalin imposed on the anti-fascist forces in exchange for military aid. For once, Trotsky was not mistaken when he observed:

“When the situation on the property front became even more threatening than on the military front, the democrats of all colors, including the Anarchists, bowed before Stalin.... Stalin with his munitions and with his counterrevolutionary ultimatum was a savior for all these groups. He guaranteed them, so they hoped, military victory over Franco, and at the same time, he freed them from all responsibility for the course of the revolution. They hastened to put their Socialist and Anarchist masks into the closet in the hope of making use of them again after Moscow reestablished bourgeois democracy for them. As the finishing touch to their comfort, these gentlemen could henceforth, justify their betrayal to the workers by the necessity of a military agreement with Stalin. Stalin on his part justifies his counterrevolutionary politics by the necessity of maintaining an alliance with the republican bourgeoisie.”⁷⁶

All the Stalinists, whether or not they were Spanish, “politicians”, “military officers” or “police agents”, would implement the counterrevolutionary line set forth by the Kremlin with brutal efficiency. We shall point out in passing that the immense majority of technicians of every type, secret agents, military advisors and the rest (we shall speak of some of them in this book, but there were thousands) would be executed upon their return to the USSR. This was the usual method of Stalinist justice: to periodically carry out executions of its executioners.

It was, of course, the PCE that would do most of “the dirty work”. Assisted by the military, political and police advisors of the Communist International and the NKVD, they endeavored, not without success, to modify government policy—and the policies of the parties of the Popular Front—in the desired direction, militarizing the militias,

⁷⁵ In *Guerra y revolución en España*, Vol. II, pp. 101-102.

⁷⁶ Leon Trotsky, *Ecrits*, Vol. II, Ed. IV International, pp. 538-539. [In English, see Leon Trotsky, “The Lessons of Spain: The Last Warning” (1937), available online at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1937/xx/spain01.htm>.]

defending private property, reestablishing centralized State power, in a word, putting a stop to the ongoing revolution. They were also responsible for providing the theoretical justification to the masses for these counterrevolutionary policies, telling them that this was the only possible revolutionary policy at this “stage of the struggle”. They were assisted in carrying out this task by the delegates of the Communist International, especially by Ercoli-Togliatti and Codovila.

Thus, one communist leader said, in March 1937, when speaking of the “mania for socialization and confiscation”: “Why have the workers fallen prey to this error? First of all, because of their unawareness of the political moment in which we are living, which has led them to believe that we are in the midst of a full-blown social revolution.”⁷⁷ The absurdity of the bureaucratic lie here rises to its most beautiful heights: the workers believe that they are living in a social revolution—going so far as to actually carry it out—but fortunately the “party of the workers” is there to set them straight, even with arms in hand if necessary. The Party is the proprietor of the revolution and decides, against the masses, against the facts, against the revolution itself, that the order of the day is ... the bourgeois revolution! This is what Dolores Ibarruri explains in the communist newspaper, *Mundo Obrero*, on July 30:

“The revolution that is taking place in our country is the bourgeois democratic revolution which was achieved over a century ago in other countries, such as France, and we Communists are the front-line fighters in this struggle against the obscurantist forces of the past.... In this historic hour the Communist Party, faithful to its revolutionary principles and respecting the will of the people, places itself at the side of the government which expresses this will, at the side of the Republic, at the side of democracy....”⁷⁸

Chapter 4

The Collectivizations in Catalonia

The collectives in the “republican zone”, especially in Catalonia and Aragon, are in my view the most important phenomena among the many revolutionary experiences of that period.⁷⁹ The collectives, which were violently slandered by their enemies, among whom

⁷⁷ *Frente Rojo* (March 30, 1937).

⁷⁸ Speech delivered on May 25, 1937; quoted by B. Bolloten, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

⁷⁹ Several books have recently been published that deal with the collectives in the republican zone in general and Catalonia in particular. Among them are the following: Gaston Leval, *L’Espagne libertaire 1936-1939*, Ed. du Cercle y la Tête des Feuilles, Paris, 1972; this is the revised and corrected version of the book published in Italian under the title, *Ne Franco ne Stalin* (in Spanish: *Collectividades libertarias en España*, 2 Vols., Ed. Proyección, Buenos Aires, 1972). Also, see Frank Mintz, *L’autogestion dans l’Espagne révolutionnaire*, Ed. Béliaste, Paris, 1970.

In Catalonia itself the following books have been published (in Catalan):

the communists stood out, and which were practically ignored for a very long time by historians or were idealized by most anarchist commentators, constitute a contradictory reality that reflects, more clearly than the “military” or “political” aspects of the period, what the struggle of that time was really all about. The whole social order was attacked, with transformations in the relations of production all economic life was turned upside down, the whole hierarchical pyramid of society was overthrown. Not only was a clean slate made of the sacred principles of private property but also of those other principles—which were also “sacred” for the so-called “vanguard” parties—which justified the division between order givers and order takers.

As we shall see, however, throughout the entire history of the collectives, the workers had to fight—and they failed to effectively do so—not only against the difficulties that inevitably accompanied the war, for example, or the declared enemies of the collectives, but also against the new obstacles that arose from the experience itself.

The first thing we will do is confirm the spontaneous character of the experiences of collectivization. It is this massive and spontaneous movement of collectivizations that serves most effectively to justify my claim concerning the importance of the *autonomous movement* of the working class masses in Catalonia, a claim which would otherwise only be so much “leftist” hot air.

In fact, on July 18 the superior committees of the CNT-FAI issued the call for a revolutionary general strike in response to the military uprising in North Africa. “It was exactly on the 28th of the same month that these same committees purely and simply issued the order to return to work.”⁸⁰ Since the 21st of July, however, the first expropriations had already begun. The movement began in the public services. On that same day the Catalanian railroad workers collectivized the railroads. On the 25th the urban transport system was collectivized, on the 26th the electric utilities, and so on in succession.

“Up until the first days of August, the CNT did not officially assume responsibility in an official and organized way for channeling the collectivizations.”⁸¹ Its first official

Albert Pérez-Baró, *30 mesos de collectivisme a Catalunya*, Ed. Ariel, Barcelona, 1970.

Josep Maria Bricall, *Política econòmica de la Generalitat, 1936-1939*, Ed. 62, Barcelona, 1970.

“Los de siempre”, *Colectividades campesinas, 1936-1939*, Col. Acracia (Libertarios) No. 15, Tusquets Editores, 1977.

Agustín Souchy Bayer, *Entre los campesinos de Aragón (El comunismo libertario en las comarcas liberadas)*, Col. Acracia (Libertarios) No. 21, Tusquets Editores, 1977.

⁸⁰ José Peirats, in *Presència*, No. 5 (September-October 1966).

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

reaction was constraining: the leaders of the CNT intervened to prevent the collectivization of the foreign enterprises, as the consulates had been loudly demanding.

In a great wave of enthusiasm, the workers, doing without any kind of “tutelage”, set about collectivizing industry, public transport, public services, commerce and even bars and the entertainment industry, cafes, hotels, barber shops, etc. From the very start each collectivization constituted a particular case, but they may nonetheless be classified into three main categories (I will address agriculture later):

1) Enterprises in which the owner theoretically still occupied his former position, but in which the workers elected a Workers Control Committee whose powers, at least at the beginning, were as real as they were comprehensive (this type was found above all in foreign-owned enterprises);

2) Enterprises in which the owner was purely and simply replaced by an elected committee;

3) *Socialized* enterprises.

The fundamental difference between collectivized enterprises and socialized enterprises consists in the fact that the latter included all the enterprises in a productive sector. The best example is undoubtedly the wood products industry which, under the aegis of the Woodworkers Trade Union (CNT), unified all the activities related to wood and wood products, from cutting down the trees to the sale of furniture, and reorganized workshops and warehouses from top to bottom. Socialized enterprises, however, were a minority. The collectivized enterprises had a tendency to mutually ignore one another, even those of the same industrial sector, whether in textiles or metallurgy.

These collectivizations were widespread throughout all of Catalonia, where more than 70% of the industrial and commercial enterprises were confiscated by their workers within a few days after the military uprising of July 19. In some small cities—or towns—in the Catalonian zone, and above all in Aragon, original formulas were implemented which unified the agricultural and industrial collectives within a *libertarian commune*.

The leading protagonists of this anti-capitalist wave were undoubtedly the anarchist and anarchosyndicalist workers of the CNT. They obviously did not obey any directives “from above”, since at first their leaders remained silent concerning these events, as they were very busy dealing with “politics” (and also organizing the war). But this did not pose any serious problems for the workers implementing the collectivizations, since all they were doing was applying libertarian ideas, above all the ones expressed at the recent Zaragoza Congress. They moved away from their leaders in the sense that they decided that the time had come for putting those ideas into practice, while their leaders, for their part, decided that they had to sacrifice the “program of libertarian communism” on the altar of anti-fascist unity.

We must point out that the collectivizations enjoyed favorable objective conditions due to the flight from Spain—or to the Francoist camp—of many owners, managers and directors of enterprises. In his book, *Por qué perdimos la guerra* [Why We Lost the War], Diego Abad de Santillán relates the fact that, in the fifteen days preceding the Francoist uprising, 90 million pesetas were withdrawn from Catalanian banks. Of course, the capitalists were not going to run away empty-handed. The owners who remained, who were not eliminated from the “social sphere” and who accepted the new regime, obtained jobs in their former workshops that were suited to their professional skills (it is estimated that this applied to about 10% of former owners). They worked as engineers, or accountants or commercial agents, or even as simple workers. They were paid the same wage as the other workers in their categories. Daniel Guerin was not mistaken when he pointed out that the Catalanian workers, compared to other historical experiences of the same kind, had the good fortune to be able to rely on the collaboration of a relatively large number of engineers and technicians. “For more than four months, the factories of Barcelona, over which waved the red and black flag of the CNT, were managed by revolutionary workers' committees....”⁸²

Serious difficulties soon emerged in some industrial sectors, however, difficulties that were the result, among other things, of shortages of raw materials and the contraction of markets as a consequence of the war. “The textile industry is not doing so well. The shortage of raw materials has caused many factories to operate only three days a week; but they pay their workers wages for four days. The longer this state of affairs lasts the worse it is for the enterprises. Four days wages are not enough. This is not a consequence of the collectivizations, but of the war. The Catalanian textile industry has lost its principal markets. Part of Andalusia, Extremadura, and Old Castile, and all of the northern part of Spain, with its densely populated industrial districts, and Asturias, all are cut off or in the hands of the fascists.”⁸³

What the author does not say is that the Catalanian Government ordered fabric for the uniforms of the new army from foreign suppliers, so great was its lack of confidence (to say the least) in the collectivizations. The situation improved in early 1937: the Catalanian textile industry was then working for the republican army.

The workers did, however, commit some very serious errors. One of them was their failure to seize the banks, thus making the same mistake as their illustrious predecessors of the Paris Commune. It was the Generalitat that controlled all the Catalanian banks. This led to problems with the Bank of Spain and therefore with the Central Government,

⁸² Daniel Guerin, *l'Anarchisme*, Ed. Gallimard, p. 157.

⁸³ A. Souchy, *Collectivisations: L'Oeuvre constructive de la Révolution Espagnole (1936-1939) (a compilation of documents)*, Ediciones de la CNT, Toulouse, reprinted in 1965, p. 21. This pamphlet was for many years the only half-way systematic work on the question, published in French. [In English, see Augustin Souchy and Paul Folgare, *Collectivizations: The Constructive Achievements of the Spanish Revolution. Essays, Documents and Reports*, online at: [https://libcom.org/history/collectivizations-constructive-achievements-spanish-revolution-essays-documents-reports.](https://libcom.org/history/collectivizations-constructive-achievements-spanish-revolution-essays-documents-reports)]

as we shall see below, but at the same time it allowed the Generalitat to exercise very effective pressure on collective enterprises that were experiencing financial difficulties or even merely shortages of liquidity.

The expropriations

On July 27, the employees of the maritime agencies, members of the UGT, went to their offices and proceeded to expropriate the *Compañía Transatlántica*. The same thing happened to the *Compañías Mediterráneas*, *Ibarra*, *Ramos*, etc. These expropriations constituted practically the only instances when the UGT took the initiative before the CNT. We should recall that the UGT, which had only a weak presence in Catalonia, nonetheless did possess a few sections among the office employees, petty functionaries and other “white collar” proletarians. The CNT, however, participated from the start in the Central Control Committee of the *Compañía Transatlántica*, which was composed as follows: three members of the CNT, 3 from the UGT and two government delegates, one from the Generalitat and the other from the Central Government.

This company’s fleet registered at one hundred thousand tons. The first measure of the Committee, which was the central office that directed the activity of the ship committees, warehouses, offices, etc., was to dismiss the managing director, his assistant and almost all the administrative officers of the former management. Payments of dividends to shareholders was also *suspended*.

In Barcelona the public services of transport, trolleys, the subway and buses had been consolidated into a single private company. On July 19, the Transport Workers Trade Union (*Sindicato Único*) decided to expropriate the transit company. The enterprise was divided into three departments: Trolleys, Subways and Buses. The workers in each department elected a Committee. The Generalitat also appointed one delegate, but his role, at least at first, was only symbolic. The organizational structure created by the Department of Trolleys was used as a model by the other Departments. An Enterprise Committee was elected that was composed of one delegate from each Department or Section. Each Section had its own Committee that organized its work in coordination with the Enterprise Committee. One of the most important measures was the *equalization* of wages. The engineers and the technicians who remained at their posts, for example, saw their wages reduced while the lower wage rates were increased. Operations were reorganized, eliminating bureaucratic positions that were considered to be useless. From July 1936 until the end of the war, the Barcelona urban transport system worked better than before—according to numerous testimonials—in the hands of the workers.

On July 21 the railroad workers took over the Catalonian rail network: the M.Z.A. and *Norte* lines. They immediately formed Revolutionary Committees that also assumed responsibility for the defense of the train stations and of the communications network. Here, too, as in the case of urban transport, and as was the case in 99% of the expropriations, it was the militants of the CNT who took the initiative, but afterwards, the members of the UGT—office employees, technicians—were represented on the Revolutionary Committees with the same number of delegates as the CNT, regardless of

the relative proportions of members in the industries involved. All of the Catalanian rail lines were collectivized by the railroad workers, who organized Revolutionary Committees at their stations, warehouses, etc. They informed the former managerial personnel that they were dismissed. Some, however, returned to work, but no longer as managers—a role that was assumed by the Committees—but as technicians.

In Catalonia, the telephone system was privately owned by an American trust. Heeding the orders of the Generalitat and those of their own leaders, the trade unions of the telephone workers did not collectivize this enterprise, but imposed a very strict system of workers control upon it, directed by joint CNT-UGT committees in every office throughout Catalonia. The American “owners”—or their Spanish representatives—were left with nothing to do but to control the “income” and “expenditures” of their pesetas. Among other measures, the committees compelled them to discharge executives and managerial staff who were considered to be superfluous and overpaid.

It would take us far too long and use up far too much space to list all the collectivizations. Before studying a few specific cases in more detail, we must point out that the “collectivist” tide engulfed almost all the productive activities of Catalonia, even the barber shops: the unionized barbers dismissed their employers and administered their barber shops themselves, abolishing tipping and imposing standard prices. In some cafes and hotels the same thing was done. The communists, seeking to demonstrate the “collectivist madness” of the anarchists, said that the famous bordellos of the no less famous “*barrio chino*” of Barcelona were also collectivized. We have not, however, encountered the least trace of such an interesting initiative in the documents and books that address this topic....

On the other hand, there is an abundance of documentation about the collectives created by the CNT Entertainers Trade Union [*Sindicato del Espectáculo*]. All theatrical, cinema, ballet, and “music hall” undertakings were collectivized. Producers, employers and owners were dismissed and the trade union itself directly managed all entertainment displays and performances, assuming responsibility for not only the programs but also the payment of the artists, the prices of admission, etc.

The Woodworkers Trade Union

As I mentioned above, the Woodworkers Trade Union implemented the “socialization” of its industry. It is the example of what the CNT meant then by *socialization*: the unification of all enterprises and activities of an industrial sector within a single socialized entity, administered directly by the corresponding trade union. The trade union—and not just the Woodworkers Trade Union, of course—changed its “nature”. From the institution of the “revolutionary and economic struggle of the proletariat” that it claimed to be—and which was to a large extent true of the CNT before 1936—it became the organizer and manager of an array of essential sectors of the economy, as soon as “the expropriators have been expropriated”. In revolutionary Catalonia, the Trade Union (CNT) would play a role that is practically unequalled in the history of the international workers movement: in a few days it became the leading political force in the country—

playing a determinant role from the Central Committee of Militias to the most obscure Revolutionary Neighborhood Committee—and the most important military force, even if only because of the number of its militiamen, and at the same time the crucial element of the Catalan economy, three-quarters of which had been collectivized by the *workers themselves*. This unprecedented situation gave rise to a whole series of problems and contradictions. The first and most obvious of all was the birth—rapidly liquidated by military defeat at the hands of Franco’s forces—of a *workers bureaucracy*.

* * *

On October 6, 1936 the Unified Trade Union of the Wood Products Industry (*CNT*) [*Sindicato Único del Ramo de la Madera* (*CNT*)] published a report on its activity, which began as follows:

“WE ARE GOING FOR EVERYTHING. We already said in another article that we have to go for everything, that we have to overthrow everything that exists; we have to cleanse the focal points of the infection. We have to give a sense of stability, recognizing that the bourgeois regime has come to its final hour.

“We have to bring about a rebirth of confidence among the workers. We have to tell them and we do tell them: Woodworkers: the employers do not exist, and so that you may see this clearly we present this summary. The employers, fellow carpenters, have taken shelter in the dens of the *trabucaires* of the *Fomento*,⁸⁴ **SO THEY NO LONGER EXIST, AND IN THEIR PLACE THE TRADE UNION OF THE WOOD PRODUCTS INDUSTRY HAS INSTALLED ONE OF ITS OFFICES.**

“The scum of the wood industry which has its headquarters in the *Escuela de Artifices* [School of Arts and Crafts], is today completely disorganized, destroyed, it no longer exists, and its offices and records are in our custody, The “Employers Association of the Upholstery and Furniture Industry” [*Patronal Embaladora y Tapicera*]” has also disappeared. Its offices and records are in our power. We are going for everything, and we have the duty to prevail, and we shall prevail as a revolutionary sector. We shall reorganize the small employers into large workshops. And once this is accomplished, we will control all production. By creating our confederal workshops, we have to instill rhythm on our activities. We want to do this, and when we say this it is because we are sure of our being able, in the short term, of being the only ones who have in our control all of production. All work must be performed by way of the Trade Unions, because, while it is true that they were once institutions of struggle against capital, today they must be institutions that regulate production.”⁸⁵

⁸⁴ “*Trabucaires* of the *Fomento*”: the thugs of the employer’s association (the “*Fomento*”).

⁸⁵ Personal archives of the author.

We encounter the same trenchant tone in the following text, published on December 25, 1936 in the *Boletín CNT-FAI* [CNT-FAI Bulletin], but this time it is not directed only at the employers:

“... Instead of implementing real expropriation, instead of giving ample satisfaction to the people, the employers are obliged to pay the full weekly wage and the hourly pay is increased and the working hours are decreased. And this in the middle of a war! Now that the Generalitat has expropriated all the money in the banks, it allows credit to be advanced on the basis of collateral composed of imaginary inventories, and such fabulous quantities of money are disbursed that today it has to admit its mistake when, examining the results, it confirms that millions have been disbursed without producing anything and that this has left the economy bankrupt.

“A quantity of parasitic bureaucrats has been created, which the Trade Union of the Wood Products Industry has sought to attenuate in the workshops and projects under its control. There are too many control committees that do not produce anything, and they have no right to produce nothing....”

* * *

“The Trade Union of the Wood Products Industry, with its broad sense of responsibility, taking account of the situation of the moment, wants not only to continue to pursue the advancement of the revolution, but also to orient it in such a way as to benefit our economy, the economy of the people. For this purpose we are consolidating all the small proprietors, the small-scale indebted employers, lacking the means of making a living, we assumed responsibility for the microscopic workshops, composed of an insignificant number of workers, without asking them about their trade union membership, as we only view them as workers who are inactive, harming the economy.

“So: from these workshops, using our own means and the dues of the workers, we are forming confederal workshops of two hundred or more workers, such as have never before existed in Barcelona and are few and far between in the rest of Spain.”

After noting the incomprehension and sabotage to which the reorganization of the wood products industry gave rise, the authors complain about the attitude of the government Control Committees towards their efforts. The Control Committees sell them the raw materials they need at exorbitant prices. They can only manage to be taken seriously—the text continues—when they pay off their debts within the specified term, regardless of the prices, something that no one has ever done in Catalonia. In any event, it is not enough to issue a few declarations of principle in order to eliminate the *mercantile spirit* of current social relations. The text concludes as follows:

“It is not correct to say that we do not accept the Collectivization Decree. Quite the contrary, we accept it, it is just that with respect to the domain of practice we interpret it differently. The way some people saw it, the easy and logical thing to do was to turn these collectives into nothing but big cooperatives, in which only those industries that

could finance their own operations would be assured of survival. What this means, however, is that we have abandoned the poor to their own devices, which entails nothing less than creating two classes: the new rich and the eternal poor. An inequality that cannot be tolerated! We accept the collectivization of all industries, but with just one treasury, shared equally. What we do not accept is that there should be poor collectives and rich collectives. This is the real problem of collectivization: to either collectivize all the sectors of production in general, or allow them to be free to carry out practical experiments....”⁸⁶

The real problem of the collectivizations was the problem posed by inequality, due to all kinds of factors (lack of money, lack of markets, lack of raw materials, etc.) that affected the collectivized enterprises which were for the most part independent, each constituting an isolated entity and each acting on its own behalf for its own benefit.

The problem of coordination among the collectivized enterprises was quickly perceived by numerous sectors of the CNT and not just by the Unified Trade Union of the Wood Products Industry. In October 1936 a trade union congress was held in Barcelona, with delegates representing 600,000 workers, whose purpose was to examine the socialization (in the sense indicated above) of industry. The congress approved a resolution to adopt a series of practical measures oriented towards uniting all the activities of the different sectors, all of this under the aegis and control of the trade unions. But these measures that were intended to respond to real difficulties were never effectively implemented. Shortly thereafter, the Collectivization Decree of October 24 entailed a different form of organization in which, naturally, the State would be in control of the entire apparatus of the trade unions and the various committees.

In order to address the problem of the “rich” collectives that were unconcerned with the fate of their “poor brothers”, everyone, the Generalitat as well as the trade unions, multiplied administrative and bureaucratic structures, control institutions, etc.—the *parasitic bureaucrats* denounced by the Woodworkers Trade Union—which did not succeed in their goal of achieving real “democratic planning”, but instead brought about the proliferation of the conflicts and abuses inherent to *working class officialdom* [*funcionarismo obrero*].

The Woodworkers Trade Union appears to have done a good job, with respect to its own industry, in resolving the problem of coordination. As we have seen, they rapidly rid themselves of the employers, consolidated the small-scale artisanal woodworkers and other craftsmen into larger workshops with shop carpenters, etc., workshops that are also responsible for the sale of the products they manufacture. The transition from widely-scattered *microscopic* enterprises to confederal workshops where the various productive activities of the wood products industry are concentrated, allows for planning production, a reduction in the number of unproductive bureaucrats and an *equalization of the wages of the workers*, a measure that is encountered in the vast majority of collectivizations. Theoretically, it seems that the necessary conditions for a real workers management of

⁸⁶ Personal archives of the author.

production existed. But the “manager” was explicitly designated; it was the *trade union*. When the texts of the Woodworkers Trade Union affirmed that it was the trade unions that had to “manage production”, they did so squarely within the pure orthodox tradition of the CNT. Since I feel a strong mistrust towards any orthodoxy, I would very much like to penetrate beyond mere words and to get to know more precisely just what *trade union management* meant in the wood products industry. We lack the documents—or I have not been able to find them. To me it is obvious that you cannot by any means confuse the woodworkers trade union with the workers in that industry. Let us take a banal example: the term, trade union, might mean the general secretary and his assistants, or it might mean the whole membership of the CNT (that is, the majority of the workers) democratically exercising its rights and really and collectively carrying out the management of production.

In the first case, “in the name of the trade union”, the leaders of the latter can *impose* certain measures on the workers, manipulate assemblies and voting and, when all is said and done, reconstruct the monopoly of knowledge and of power for the benefit of the “leadership”. It is a well-known mechanism—I have only summarized a few of its aspects—that leads to bureaucratic hierarchy. In the second case, it would be interesting to study how democracy and workers management would have been exercised through the Trade Union and what kinds of relations prevailed between the CNT and the minority UGT and the non-unionized workers—at least during the first few weeks—for trade union membership soon became practically obligatory. In this respect the ideology of the CNT constitutes an obstacle for analysis: since the trade union is the highest form of social organization and of workers democracy, the management of an industry by its corresponding trade union must necessarily be effective and democratic! The magic words, trade union, obscured any conflicts that might have existed.

The textile industry

The textile industry was traditionally one of the most important industries in Catalonia. Its structure, however, was archaic, even for the standards of that era, and was largely composed of small workshops, for example.

What follows are excerpts from the official review of collectivization in the textile industry, according to the report of the *Sindicato Único* of Barcelona (CNT) published in an undated pamphlet of the CNT: *La obra constructiva de la revolución española* [The Constructive Achievements of the Spanish Revolution]:

“One of the most important industries in Catalonia, most heavily concentrated in Sabadell and Tarrasa, is the textile industry. The trade union mentioned above has 40,000 CNT workers in Barcelona alone.

“The two major trade union federations together have 230,000 workers in the industry, 170,000 of whom are members of our Confederation. The current proportions among the unionized workers are approximately 70% in the CNT, and 30% in the UGT.

Wages

“The workers in the Dry Cleaning section, before July, earned a weekly wage of 68 pesetas. Today they receive 78.20 pesetas, or 15% more than they did before the revolution. They receive the same wage as the workers in the Washing section.

Hosiery

“This subdivision used to be paid by the piece, obtaining, prior to July 19, weekly wages of up to 175 pesetas, working on “Cotton” (men) and working an average of 10 hours per day. Today they receive 135 pesetas a week, and work forty hours a week for an hourly wage.

“The workers who work on “Standard”, who received between 60 and 70 pesetas a week prior to July, and were also formerly paid by the piece, now receive a fixed wage of 65 pesetas a week.

“Industrial technicians, before July, made anywhere from 250 to 350 pesetas; today, they make between 200 and 250 pesetas a week.

“Foremen, before July, made 125 pesetas; today, they make between 125 and 150 pesetas a week.

“It might very well appear, from the figures provided above, that wages have declined, but in reality this is an advantage for the worker, since he receives a fixed and steady wage, piecework having been eliminated. Another factor that must be taken into account is the number of hours the worker currently works and those he worked before the revolution; before July 19, the workers who worked on “Cotton” and “Standard”, in order to make the wages we just enumerated above, would have had to work 80 hours a week; today, in the factories where the short week has not been introduced (as a result of the shortage of raw materials), they work only 40 hours. If we divide the weekly wage by the number of hours worked, we find that the worker is making more money per hour than he did under the bourgeois regime. (These arguments hardly seem convincing to me [C.S.M.]

Militiamen to the front

“A very large number of CNT members from the manufacturing and textile industries have left their jobs in the factories and workshops operated by our Confederation in order to go to the front, and we may say that at the present time this sector of industry has undergone a major reduction in the number of workers it employs. From the City of Barcelona, between 20,000 and 25,000 workers who are members of the CNT have left for the front as volunteers. Of those who have volunteered from Barcelona, only about 3,000 are members of the UGT.

The elimination of rebel elements and fugitives. The bourgeois element.

“The following numbers will give us an idea of the approximate position of this element in the present situation. Of the total numbers of bourgeoisie, who in Catalonia number about 20,000 persons, whose most concentrated focus is in Barcelona (5,000), about 10% have remained in their factories, working and participating like simple workers: this was achieved by the collectivization process; about 40% have been eliminated from the social arena, and approximately 50% have fled to foreign countries, gone into hiding, etc.

“Up to 30 factory or workshop foremen have been eliminated due to their anti-revolutionary ideas and actions (SUFT-CNT). Between 12 and 14 workers have suffered the same fate for identical reasons.

Donations for the victims of fascism

“The SUFT has to date delivered to the Committee to Aid the Victims of Fascism 2,500,000 pesetas. Due to the reductions in the working week due to a shortage of raw materials, the weekly collections, which once averaged about 110,000 pesetas, have been reduced to about 55,000 pesetas.”⁸⁷

After pointing out that the textile workers gave between 5% and 15% of their wages, according to the above report, to the Committee of Militias for the needs of the war, the report continues with a description of the organizational structure of the collectivized enterprises. We may regret the imprecision of the formula, “almost the entire textile industry of Catalonia is collectivized”, which does not inform us concerning the percentage of the industry that was still in private hands, nor does it specify the nature of the relations between the collectivized industries and the Control Committees in the privately-owned enterprises. The second part of this report, however, which begins by stating that, “Once the enterprises are fully collectivized, the Control Committees will become Technical-Administrative Committees”, seems to indicate that, at the time this report was written (September or October 1936, judging by the references to the Committee of Militias), collectivization was still far from being complete.

The organizational structure was classically in accordance with the CNT model. It was composed of a pyramid of committees: Enterprise Committee; the Local Committee, which included the delegates of the local Factory Committees; County Committee; Regional Committee (for the CNT, Catalonia was always a “region”); and the National Committee of the Textile Industry. The texts insist on the democratic aspects of these organizational structures, not only because all their committees were elected, but also because, in the event of any disagreements, provisions were made for convening a plenary Assembly of the workers of an enterprise or even of a locality to resolve disputes, and this Assembly’s decision was final. When the conflict was situated at a “higher” level

⁸⁷ A. Souchy, *Collectivisations...*, pp. 48-50. It must be pointed out that wage discrimination against women (undoubtedly a reflection of a more generalized gender discrimination) persisted in both the industrial as well as the agrarian collectives, as a “reactionary vestige of the past”.

(County, Regional or National), the Assemblies of delegates or the Congresses would naturally resolve the disputes.

On paper, there seems to have been coordination, by way of the elected committees, among all the Catalonian textile enterprises, which made it possible to combat the inequalities I mentioned above. The report, however, only states that, due to reduced working hours and wages, the workers in some enterprises were only capable of donating a small contribution for the needs of the war. It does not mention that anything was done to remedy this situation. Did this coordination every really amount to anything more than good intentions? Furthermore, we do not know what kind of coordination subsisted once the Collectivization Decree mandated the creation of a different state-trade union structure.

We would also like to have more information about the fact that each committee, which was in turn subdivided into four or five departments, was authorized to appoint “the technical and bureaucratic (*sic*) personnel necessary for the performance of its functions”.

The metal industry

The problems faced by the metallurgical sector were not very easy to solve, either. It must be pointed out, above all, that some of the more important metallurgical enterprises were foreign-owned and that they were thus not subject to collectivization. Some, such as Barret, S.A., had been collectivized; but when the Belgian Consulate intervened, pointing out that 80% of the capital of this enterprise was Belgian, the workers had to refrain from full collectivization and instead subjected the enterprise to a modified form of collectivization entailing workers control.

Evidently, the metal industry of Catalonia was completely converted—or almost completely—into a war industry, and attempts were made to subordinate it, first to the direct control of the Committee of Militias, and then to the control of the Generalitat and finally to that of the Central Government, as we shall see below. Nonetheless, in this sector as well, working class initiative was in evidence to at least some degree in every enterprise. We shall cite the example of the Hispano-Suiza factory:

HISPANO-SUIZA

“The workshops of this important enterprise are working most intensely and with the greatest variety for the supply of the working class militias. The trade union organizations proceeded from the very beginning to confiscate the factory, and the workers have been entirely reorganized under the direction of the institutions created by the proletariat for that purpose, adapting the factory to the needs imposed by the civil war. Never before has a factory’s production been so completely transformed from peacetime to war production. All war production in the factories of the metal industry is subject to the control of the Committee of Militias, which acts through a direct delegate specially appointed for this task. The comrade who performs such a complicated and sensitive function is one of the most outstanding members of the Metal Workers Trade Union (CNT), whose offices are

located in Hispano-Suiza. In this factory the direction of the war-related metal production is concentrated.

“1,400 workers are employed in what has become a collectivized enterprise. The weekly payroll amounts to approximately 110,000 pesetas.

“The internal direction of the factory is under the control of an Enterprise Committee, composed of a representative of each section, and one each for the technical staff, the clerks, engineers, etc.

“The following special projects have been undertaken:

Armored trucks.

The manufacture of hand grenades.

Ambulances.

Machine gun tripods.

Belts and rucksacks.

“Planning is underway for the manufacture of tanks and artillery.

“Among the things that were previously made at Hispano-Suiza, the manufacture of automobiles and airplane engines continues, some of which have been delivered to the airport at Prat and to the Madrid Government.

“The spirit of the workers is admirable. All do their best to complete these projects, which are veritable front line outposts in the war against fascism. In the first seven days 15 trucks were armored with double layers of steel plate and cork padding, which is a true “record”. All these trucks have already been sent to the front in Aragon.

“The production of hand grenades amounts to 500 per day, which, completely finished, are delivered for shipment. We need only add that they are well made and powerful.

“At the present time it is not possible to compare current production figures with those of the past, due to the fact that the production process has been transformed and the complex situation created by the civil war renders all such calculations idle. We present below, however, an account of the progress of this factory, which will make its financial situation all the more interesting, since it is one of the most genuine expressions of the capabilities of the proletariat and of the new form of organization, which is born already concealing the seed of promise for the future.”⁸⁸

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

The Collectivization Decree and its consequences

The few examples of collectivization that we have just reviewed can only give us a very basic and possibly abstract idea of the real nature of this movement. We have to try to imagine what it represented: hundreds of thousands of workers, overnight, were to find themselves in a situation that they had undoubtedly dreamed of, but which they had never before experienced. The employers had been annihilated, private property abolished, and now they were in charge. For almost four months (from July to October 24, 1936), no employer or state authority dared to invade the terrain they had conquered. Everything had to be improvised from scratch. And this improvisation naturally had to be based on libertarian approaches to the question, but while such ideas defined a general line of conduct they did not contribute any solutions to concrete problems. And these problems (empty bank accounts, shortages of raw materials, shrinking markets, etc.) were daily problems and the civil war rendered their solution all the more difficult.

We must once again point out that each collective constituted its own particular case. During the excitement of the first stage (until the Collectivizations Decree), ad hoc solutions were devised for problems as they arose. It appears that it was during this period that direct democracy was most complete: it was the workers assemblies that elected the Enterprise (or Control) Committees and they also made the decisions concerning all important matters. In the public services (railroads, urban transport, electricity, etc.), the very nature of their work united all the workers of a city and even, up to a certain point, all the workers of Catalonia. Something similar took place in the metal industry, which was almost totally transformed into a war industry (in this case, however, special problems arose which we shall address below). Several attempts to coordinate the enterprises in the same industrial sector were made, not without success—by the Unified Trade Union of the Wood Products Industry, for example—or to coordinate all the industries within particular Catalonian cities. Generally, however, each self-managed enterprise constituted an autonomous entity, a fortress, which was simultaneously isolated from (with respect to financial problems and other issues) and associated by way of a thousand links with the rest of the movement. This is quite understandable: the workers of each enterprise were concerned first of all with reorganizing their lives and their labor within their own enterprise. This situation soon posed economic problems, however (even when their *purely* economic problems were nothing but the results of so many setups and traps). The war, the manifold needs of the population, etc., required production to be diverted in certain directions, and some enterprises still produced the same things as they did before the war without being able to sell their products. Concerning the latter we may provide a picturesque example: swept away by the enthusiasm generated by being involved in the creation of a “new life” and a “proletarian” society, a major publicity campaign, which was, moreover, spontaneous, was waged against bourgeois fashions in clothing (even the bourgeoisie dressed like workers in order to avoid attracting attention). The hat, which was the prime symbol of bourgeois fashion, fell into complete disuse. The workers in the hat industry, however, through their trade union, protested against this “discrimination”. They had been making hats all their lives, so they just kept making them, but since no one wore them anymore, how can they sell them? They found themselves in a dead end with no way out.... This

“Chaplinesque” example, chosen from among many others, demonstrates in any event that a reconversion of certain industrial sectors was necessary. It was not enough to just continue producing; it was also necessary, above all, to produce in a different way.... “To produce in a different way” requires, once again, to know who *decides* what and how to produce. “Production for the sake of production” cannot under any circumstances be the goal of a self-managed economy. The goal towards which that economy is directed has to be that of production for the increasing satisfaction of the *freely expressed* needs of the masses. Obviously, the immense majority of the Catalonians were in agreement about some priorities imposed by the war: the creation of a military industry, supplying the militias, etc. But the problems did not end there.

The coordination and reconversion of certain industries, the new orientation that had to be imposed on production, the *equality* of the standard of living and of wages—and this, no longer within a single enterprise, but also for all the Catalonian workers, etc.—required the construction of bridges between the islands of this immense archipelago constituted by the collectivized enterprises. During the four months of their first stage, it was the trade unions (above all the CNT trade unions) which constituted the sole connection between the workers of the different enterprises, different cities and different industrial sectors (the CNT even formed a Council of the Economy that only had a consultative role). This nexus, as we have seen and as we shall examine further, was becoming increasingly more bureaucratic with each passing day, but this seemed perfectly normal to the workers, who were for the most part members of the CNT and largely accepted the *cenetista* ideology according to which the trade unions—after the revolution—would become the organs of the management of production.

But we know that the superior committees of the CNT had not only not been involved in organizing the collectivizations, but the latter had been implemented *despite their opposition*. Having become apprised of the scale of this phenomenon, the CNT—as well as the UGT and even the Generalitat—was truly impressed. The Catalonian economy was practically in the hands of the workers, they could not just ignore this reality. The Catalonian State, of course, took advantage of the omissions and defects, sometimes real, sometimes fictitious, of the collectives, in order to assume control over them.

The “requirements of economic rationalization” were also used as a smokescreen for the most far-reaching plans of the political bureaucracies. Who was managing the Catalonian economy after the employers were dispossessed? No one. This was the scandalous fact that they could not tolerate. After four months of creativity, of workers democracy, of experiments and—why not?—of mistakes, various solutions could be proposed, whether to proceed along the same course, or to “restore order”. The most authoritarian solution possible was chosen, within the context of revolutionary Catalonia.

* * *

On October 24, 1936, the Catalonian Government institutionalized the collectivizations by Decree. This Decree has often been depicted, even by a large number of exegeses of a libertarian tendency, as the simple acknowledgement of what had been done by the

workers themselves. In actuality, it was precisely the opposite: the State assumed control over the collectivizations, first of all for the purpose of placing restrictions on them, but also, and most importantly, to extend its own influence and its control to the detriment of workers autonomy. With each passing day, and as a result of the accumulation of problems inevitably entailed by a radical transformation of economic life in the middle of a civil war, different solutions might have been found. The fact that they opted for the solutions implied by the Decree is not at all surprising. The question of the collectivizations cannot be considered in isolation from the other problems that were posed daily by the revolutionary situation. In this case as well, as we shall see, the anarchist leaders opted for the authoritarian solution just as they had opted—or would opt—for “anti-fascist unity” as opposed to the revolution, a regular Army as opposed to the militias, etc.

The Decree was drafted by the Councilor of the Economy of the Catalanian Government, Juan P. Fàbregas, who did not join the CNT until July 1936. He had previously been the director of the Barcelona Institute of Economic Sciences and was politically associated with the bourgeois nationalist proposals of the *Lliga*. It seems that the Decree was subjected to heated debate by the different political tendencies represented in the Generalitat prior to being approved. It was considered to be too revolutionary by some people....

The Decree and the organization of the economy

“*Article 1.* In accordance with the standards that have been established by this Decree, the industrial and commercial enterprises of Catalonia are classified as follows:

- a) *Collectivized enterprises*, in which the responsibility for management falls upon the workers in these enterprises, who are represented by an Enterprise Council, and
- b) *Private enterprises*, in which management is the responsibility of the owner or manager, with the collaboration and budgetary oversight of the Workers Control Committee.

Collectivized Enterprises

Article 2. Collectivization will be compulsory for all industrial and commercial enterprises which, as of June 30, 1936, employed more than one hundred wage workers, as well as those enterprises that, employing fewer workers, were owned by individuals who were declared to be rebels or who abandoned their enterprises. However, enterprises employing fewer than one hundred workers may be collectivized if the majority of their workers and their owner or owners agree to do so. Enterprises with more than fifty but fewer than one hundred workers may also be collectivized at any time if three-fourths of the workers support collectivization.

“The Council of the Economy (of the Catalanian Government [C.S.M.]) may also agree to authorize the collectivization of those other industries that, due to their importance in

the national economy or for other reasons, the Council considers to be advisable to withdraw from the influence of private enterprise.”

We must remind any readers who are inclined to find the above Articles to be very favorable to the idea of collectivization that all their stipulations had already been implemented by the workers for almost four months and that furthermore, by the time the Decree was promulgated, it was politically impossible to dismantle the collectives. In addition, the Decree contains an initial attempt to restrict the scope of the collectivizations, by seeking to exempt enterprises with less than 100 workers. Yet such enterprises constituted the *immense majority* of enterprises in Catalonia in 1936—and we shall point out, by the way, that almost all of them had already been collectivized. According to the Decree, the Unified Trade Union of the Wood Products Industry, for example, would have had to return to the private sector the enormous percentage of workshops that had fewer than 100 workers in June 1936. Naturally, it did not do so.

Even from the point of view of productivity, it was completely absurd to allow a mass of microscopic commercial and industrial enterprises vegetate, as was the case in Spain, which was very backward compared to the industrialized European countries. Their reorganization and consolidation were necessary preconditions for expansion—as they say today. This measure was therefore contrary to the “philosophy” of the Decree which, supported by all the political leaderships, sought to organize the economy in conformance with the imperatives of production.

But it was not the “imperatives of production” that were served but rather political imperatives, for the purpose of not alienating the middle classes by attacking the sacred principles of private property to which, as everyone knows, they are so closely attached.

The alliance with the “middle classes”—peasants, merchants, manufacturers—was an element of the program of the Stalinists, and was even the main axis of their alleged strategy for a “bourgeois-democratic” revolution. The POUM also thought such an alliance was necessary for the imaginary stage in which they bracketed the struggle: the “socialist-democratic” stage. Many CNT leaders were also susceptible to the attraction of such arguments, not because they shared the perspective of the absurd theory of “stages” of the Marxist-Leninist vulgate, but because of their support for anti-fascist unity, which they assumed was indispensable to win the war. As for the “bourgeois” and nationalist parties of the Popular Front, because they were the political representatives of the middle classes, they were naturally predisposed to defend their property rights.

In addition to the stricture concerning enterprises with fewer than 100 wage workers, another private sector was to be the beneficiary of special protection, the one that actually still existed alongside the collectivized sector. This other private sector was actually composed for the most part of foreign-owned enterprises—or enterprises that were partly-owned by foreign capital—which all the General Staffs of the political and trade union organizations, which were for once unanimous in their agreement about something, respected in order not to upset the Western democracies. For Great Britain, France and Belgium were among the countries with the largest investments in Catalonia.

Therefore, “workers control” was inaugurated in the private sector. According to the Decree, the powers of the Control Committee were as follows:

“*Article 22.* The mission of the Control Committee shall be as follows:

- a) Exercise control over working conditions, that is, to ensure strict compliance with the legal standards affecting pay, working hours, social benefits, hygiene and safety, etc., as well as to enforce strict discipline on the job. All warnings and notices that must be issued by the manager of the enterprise to its personnel will be passed on to the Control Committee.
- b) Administrative control in the sense of inspection and control over income and expenditures, both with regard to cash on hand and cash advanced by banks, with the object of responding to business requirements, and also intervening in all the other operations of a commercial nature.
- c) Control of production, consisting in close collaboration with the employer in order to improve the process of production. The Workers Control Committees will seek to maintain the best possible relations with the technical personnel in order to assure the smooth operation of the work process.

“*Article 23.* The employers will be obliged to present to the Workers Control Committees the account books and annual reports of their enterprises, and the Committees will send summary reports of the same to their respective General Councils of Industry.”

As you can see, this text not only allows the clever and enterprising employer to impose upon the Workers Control Committee all the hard work involved in enforcing “strict discipline” and assuring “the smooth operation of the work process”, but also allows a handful of workers to exercise the real control. It is undoubtedly the fate of such legal texts to be ambiguous and constitute attempts to dissimulate real conflicts. This also represents a development related to the general political evolution of Catalonia: at first, the employers were paralyzed with fear in the face of the revolutionary deployment and submitted to the demands of the workers, only to subsequently, supported by the government authorities, gradually attempt to reassert their power everywhere.

(In any case, the very idea of *Workers Control* is at least ambiguous, because it almost always amounts to saying that the workers must themselves control their own exploitation!)

The Decree also stipulated that the Control Committees had to be composed of delegates from every department of the enterprise: blue-collar workers, technicians, office employees and executives. These delegates were elected, but the representation of each trade union had to be proportional to the number of its members in the enterprise, which automatically guaranteed the predominance of the CNT, given its numerical dominance among the Catalan working class.

Let us return to the collectivized enterprises and the measures that placed restrictions on the self-management of the first few months:

“Article 15. Each collectivized enterprise will be subject to mandatory oversight by an Inspector from the Generalitat who will be a member of the Enterprise Council, and who will be nominated by the Minister of the Economy with the approval of the workers.”

As long as the Minister of the Economy was a representative of the CNT, one might logically suppose, given the atmosphere at the time, that the Inspector would almost always also be a member of the CNT, which did not automatically exempt him from being susceptible to the bureaucratic spirit—or from incompetence—but, at least, he did not have to be, in principle, hostile to the collectivizations. This would change later, and after the May Events of 1937, which led to the restoration of the power of the State in almost every domain, the “Inspectors” became, in many enterprises, the real directors, especially in the enterprises that were considered to be essential for the war effort. In any event, from their very first days, since these “Inspectors” were the representatives of the supreme authority in Catalonia, the autonomous Government, they were vested with great political authority, which was further reinforced, given the financial difficulties experienced by many enterprises and the Generalitat’s control of the banks, by an obvious weapon of pressure and blackmail, the granting or denial of credit.

“Article 14. In order to assure continuous monitoring of the overall progress of the enterprises, the Enterprise Councils will elect a Director, to whom shall be delegated, in whole or in part, the functions that are incumbent on the Council.

“In enterprises employing more than fifty workers, or in those whose capital exceeds one million pesetas, or which manufacture or assemble products related to national defense, the election of this Director must be approved by the Council of the Economy.”

This Article is very important because it nullifies the right to exercise direct democracy based on Councils of elected and revocable delegates (although we lack details concerning how this nullification was implemented, and even though it seems that the procedures of direct democracy were only admitted in extreme cases where the General Assembly of the factory had to make the decision). The production hierarchy was reintroduced in its most traditional and retrograde form: to direct a business—just like a party, an army, or—why not?—a country—you need *one* leader. The same pattern was endlessly repeated. Despite all the speeches about democracy, even about anarchy, when the time for action arrived, the only thing that was done was to oppose an allegedly good bureaucracy to another one that was considered to be bad. And it was precisely the anarchists, inveterate enemies of every type of hierarchy, who were the principal architects of this project.

But State control did not stop there. For the Decree likewise contained provisions for the creation of General Councils of Industry:

“*Article 24.* The General Councils of Industry will be constituted in the following manner:

“Four representatives of the Enterprise Councils, *chosen in a manner that is most convenient for the Councils* (my italics [C.S.M.]).

“Eight representatives of the various trade union federations, each federation to be represented in proportion to the number of members it has in the industry....

“Four technicians nominated by the Council of the Economy.

“These Councils will be presided over by their *respective delegates* on the Council of the Economy of Catalonia (my italics [C.S.M.]).

“*Article 25.* The General Councils of Industry will formulate the general outlines of the operational plans of their respective industries, helping the Enterprise Councils to carry out their functions and, in addition, they will oversee: the regulation of the total production of their respective industries....

“*Article 26.* The accords that will be adopted by the General Councils of Industry will be compulsory, they will have the force of law and no Enterprise Council or private enterprise may refuse to comply with them under any pretext that cannot be fully justified. Their only recourse will be an appeal to the Minister of the Economy, *whose ruling, after consultation of the report of the Council of the Economy, will be unappealable....*”

These Councils of Industry shared with the Plenary Assembly of the enterprise the privilege of being able to dissolve the Enterprise Councils or to revoke the mandates of any of their delegates. When, however, the Council of Industry ruled that an Enterprise Council was to be dissolved, the latter could only appeal—if it was supported by the Plenary Assembly of the enterprise—to the Council of the Economy, that is, to the Minister of the Economy, but if this appeal is rejected by the latter, “with the prior notification of the Council of the Economy, [it] is unappealable” (Article 20).

The Councils of Industry established, independently of the Enterprise Councils, the “general plan” of production. “With regard to the establishment of profit margins, fixing the general conditions of sales, acquisition of raw materials, and in connection with the rate of amortization of the fixed capital and formation of circulating capital, a reserve fund and the distribution of profits, they will also act in accordance with the rulings of the General Councils of Industry” (Article 12).⁸⁹

⁸⁹ The text of the Decree is reproduced in its entirety in Baldomero Cerdí y Richart, *Empresas colectivizadas e intervenidas*, Ed. Bosch, Barcelona, 1937. See also: Peirats, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 341-345. An English translation of the Decree may also be found at: <https://libcom.org/history/collectivizations-constructive-achievements-spanish-revolution-essays-documents-reports>.

We shall observe in passing that according to the model for the statutes of the collectivized enterprises stipulated by the Catalanian Government, 50% of the profits must be deposited in the Bank of Industrial Credit of Catalonia (that is, with the Generalitat); 15% is to be devoted to social projects of a collective nature; another 15% must be given to the workers, who may use it as they see fit. The remaining 20% was deposited in a Reserve Fund, for the amortization of machinery, etc.

Power had been reestablished as of old, from top to bottom, and workers autonomy had been reduced to practically nothing. The bureaucratic pyramid in the enterprises was once again in operation; the Government “Inspector” and the director at the head of the enterprises, the Councils of Industry above them and above the whole structure and above everyone, as it must be in the bureaucratic universe, the Minister and his Council of the Economy.

An inattentive reading of the Decree, however, might give the impression that, because these Councils of Industry are in theory controlled by the representatives of the workers, workers democracy is therefore automatically ensured. However, this would once again amount to confusing the bureaucracy with the working class, a confusion that is for that matter very common, especially during that era. If we take a closer look at the only delegates of the workers, the four representatives on the Enterprise Councils, not only did they constitute a minority on the Councils but *the way they were elected was not specified*. And why is that? Why else, than for the reason that they could not be elected directly in the workers assemblies? The eight representatives of the CNT and the UGT were in fact “unproductive” trade union officials who were answerable to and obeyed the leaders of their trade unions and therefore also the Catalanian Government, because it was the leaders of the two trade unions who represented their trade unions in both the Catalanian Government and the Central Government.

Lastly, there were four “technicians” appointed directly by the Catalanian Government. The least that can be said is that the Catalanian Government had a preponderant role in these Councils, a role that was reinforced and ensured by the fact that, in the case of a deadlock, it was always the Minister of the Economy who made the final decision.

This conclusion is fully confirmed by the text of the agreement signed in Barcelona on October 22, 1936 (two days before the publication of the Decree) by the CNT-FAI and the UGT-PSUC:

“1) We formally pledge to carry out the resolutions and decisions of the Council of the Generalitat, mobilizing all our influence and organizational capacities for the purpose of facilitating their implementation.

“2) We are advocates of the collectivization of production, that is, the expropriation without indemnification of the capitalists and of the transfer of this property to the collective. We are advocates of the collectivization of everything that is necessary for the needs of the war.

*“We are in agreement in considering that this collectivization will not yield the desired results unless it is directed and coordinated by a single institution, the natural representative of the collective, which, in this case, can only be the Council of the Generalitat (my italics [C.S.M.]). With respect to small-scale manufacture, we do not advocate collectivization, unless it is necessary to suppress rebel elements or for the unavoidable needs of the war.”*⁹⁰

The entire philosophy of the Decree is summarized in these paragraphs.

The question of the war industry constitutes a special case among the problems of the collectivizations. Despite the fact that Catalonia was one of the most heavily-industrialized regions of Spain, very few arms factories were located there. The first task was to create a real war industry. This was done and, of course, it was the CNT Metal Workers Trade Union which was mostly responsible.

“On 21 July, the Metalworkers' Union, by arrangement with Garcia Oliver, selected Vallejo to organise the war material factories. Since 19 July several Barcelona firms had spontaneously distinguished themselves through the manufacture of tanks, with more good intentions than know-how. Vallejo set about touring the *barriadas* and there signing up all suitably qualified comrades. Within six days some tanks had already been handed over to the CCMA.”⁹¹

These “tanks” were almost always just armored trucks. In any event, an entire war industry was created, based, of course, for the most part, on skilled craftsmanship.

The CNT Metal Workers Trade Union and Vallejo, as delegate, adopted the first measures. At first, in the Committee of Militias (with Iglesias as Delegate for Defense and Diego Abad de Santillán as Delegate for the Economy, both of whom, we should recall, were members of the CNT) and subsequently in the Generalitat, the government officials responsible for the war industry were anarchist leaders. This was to change after the May Events, when the Central Government assumed direct control over Defense and the Police in Catalonia, as we shall see below.

The Stalinists were not at all pleased about this anarchist control over the totality of the new Catalonian war industry. On various occasions they waged press campaigns against the CNT’s “sabotage” and “mismanagement” of the war effort. The CNT staged a vigorous counterattack in their press on April 15, 1937, in which José Tarradellas in person, at that time the Prime Minister of the Generalitat, refuted the insinuations and attacks published in the PSUC press, defending the efforts that had been carried out in Catalonia on behalf of war production. After May 1937, the Stalinists, in the person of Comorera, appealed directly to the right-wing socialist Indalecio Prieto, the Minister of

⁹⁰ Quoted by J. Andrade, “Les syndicats dans la révolution espagnole”, *Confrontation Internationales*, No. 3 (1949).

⁹¹ *Solidaridad Obrera*, quoted by Peirats, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 97.

Defense in the Central Government, with yet more accusations. Prieto wrote to Companys, the President of the Generalitat, who responded to Prieto's letter with a long letter of his own defending the work that had been done, a letter from which we shall quote the following passage: "In Catalonia, given its industrial and economic situation, our working class masses felt, as a historical mission, the need to confiscate every kind of industry. But this confiscation, above all with respect to the metal industry, not only conformed to their desires to have it in their hands, for it must be acknowledged that they immediately thought about transforming it so that it could produce war materiel ...".⁹² The letter continues, admitting that conflicts had arisen between the Catalonian Government and the workers Committees over the direction and organization of this industry, conflicts that "were resolved" in favor of the Generalitat. Companys summarized the figures for war production and listed all the factories and war materiel supplied to the Central Government, as Prieto himself had decreed after the May Events.

It was also on this occasion that we note the repetition of the classic scenario. The CNT trade unions took the initiative to create a war industry from scratch. Companys gave his blessing to this bold plan, but thought, of course, that it was too dangerous to leave this industry in the hands of the workers Committees. He succeeded in placing war industry under the control of the Generalitat. After May, Catalonian autonomy would be restricted, both because it was too revolutionary and because the Jacobin current that dominated the Central Government and the organizations that supported it demanded a return to statist centralism. The Central Government would gradually take the essential installations of the Catalonian war industry into its hands. The Stalinist defamation campaign had no other purpose than to hasten the dispossession of the workers Committees.

* * *

How did the workers react to the measures of the Collectivizations Decree? It seems that in most cases they simply refused to implement them. Juan Andrade provides the following account of the situation:

"On May 17, 1937 (that is, a few days after Barcelona's "bloody week" [C.S.M.]), a commission appointed by the CNT's Barcelona Local Federation of Trade Unions published a report, 'On the Economic Reorganization of Catalonia', in which it declared, with regard to the factors conducive to disorder, the following: 'It must first of all be pointed out that one factor of disturbance is the *failure to strictly comply with the current Collectivizations Decree*, insofar as broad sectors of the workers have totally ignored the letter and the spirit of the Decree and have carried out collectivizations totally lacking any scientific and economic basis.... The excessive eagerness to collectivize everything, especially those enterprises that possess monetary reserves, has awakened among the masses a vaguely materialistic or petty-bourgeois spirit. By considering every collective as the private property of the collectivized enterprise, instead of considering it to be held in usufruct, they have ignored the interests of the rest of the collectivity, they have

⁹² Ossorio y Gallardo, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

behaved in a cruel and egoistic manner, and they have put into practice procedures that are the legacy of the capitalist regime. Instead of rapidly advancing towards the creation of General Councils of Industry, the trade union organizations themselves have regressed, disturbing the process of development and of improvement prescribed by the Decree.... The collectivized enterprises have only been looking out for their own individual bottom lines, producing an imbalance in the finances of the enterprises, which implies yet more factors of disturbance.... There is also a factor of social indiscipline at work: *what is lacking is a moral impetus for obliging each collective to hand over its profits, indispensable for its enterprise* (my italics [C.S.M.]), as well as to set aside a sufficient reserve for meeting the other expenses of the front and of the rearguard'."

Among the measures recommended for remedying this situation, the Commission of the Local Federation of Trade Unions of Barcelona advised the following:

"The rigorous and thorough implementation of the current Collectivizations Decree, not allowing for even the least divergence from its rules. Concentration of industries and reduction of the personnel of each industry, depending on the strictly defined needs of production at any particular time. Obligation for every collective to liquidate its reserves. Establishment of a war tax on all wages in order to equalize wages and to prevent the emergence of three classes of manual workers, as well as of officials who receive wages that are three, four or five times the highest wage level of a blue collar worker. Creation of a war bond fund taken from the profits of all enterprises, collectivized or not, for the purpose of reducing profit levels to the minimum during wartime. Establishment of a financial policy that will allow the public powers to obtain their tax revenues and for the Government of the Generalitat to carry out its governmental functions from the economic point of view."

The report ends as follows:

"The Commission considers that these measures must be implemented as soon as possible if we want to prevent the economy of the region from collapsing within a few weeks. This recommendation must obtain a favorable reaction to assure social order and to impose morality and austerity in the rearguard. It is advisable to get the political economy working again in order to safeguard the experiment we are carrying out. The Commission once again insists on emphasizing the fact that whether or not the current Decree is complied with, the outcome will not fail to be attributed to the CNT, which has supported it, imposed it and assumed the main responsibility for its implementation.

"The Commission considers that it is our own comrades who have created the greatest difficulties that stand in the way of the implementation of the Decree, constantly disregarding its advice, and thus jeopardizing the Decree, both in Catalonia and elsewhere."⁹³

⁹³ Juan Andrade, "L'intervention des Syndicats dans la révolution espagnole", *Confrontation Internationale* (September-October 1949), p. 43.

We can only be shocked by the *authoritarian* and *bourgeois* spirit of this text: it is a vehement appeal for Government authority and a continuous insistence on the principles of discipline, profitability and productivity, which are considered to be the highest priorities. Of libertarian ideas, all that remains is the mere mention of the necessary equalization of wages. All of this, after the Stalinist counterrevolution had just attempted, and in part succeeded, to drown the Catalanian revolution in blood.

I have not concealed the defects and the shortcomings of the collectivist experiments in Catalanian industry (along with other problems), yet it is strange that this Commission should perceive in the resistance to the implementation of the Decree merely a “resurgence of the capitalist spirit”, when what actually was taking place was that the workers were opposing the implementation of measures that, in reality, would have put an end to their autonomy and to the self-management of the first few months of the revolution. Along with these factors, of course, there were also the egoistic particular interests of a few “rich” collectives that wanted to preserve their autonomy and the “status quo” that allowed them to divide among their own personnel relatively large profits. Given the difficult situation of Catalanian industry as a whole, however, these individual cases were not common and the real conflict was between two radically different concepts of collectivization: the *democratic* concept that was based on autonomy and self-management; and the *statist* concept that would reintroduce bureaucratic hierarchy into the economy. Once again, the CNT was in both camps at once.

The agricultural collectives

In all the regions where the Francoist insurrection was defeated, experiments in agricultural collectivization took place. Here I will only discuss those that were carried out in Catalonia and Aragon, which was so closely connected, both militarily and socially, to Catalonia, at least during the period of the civil war, that it would be hard to address the latter in isolation. I will not speak of the collectives in Levante (Valencia, Alicante, etc.), which is undoubtedly Spain’s richest agricultural region, where extensive collectivizations also took place.

The agricultural sectors of the CNT and UGT trade union federations were not the only important peasant organizations in Catalonia, unlike other parts of Spain (including Aragon, whose agricultural sector was dominated by the CNT). There was also a powerful, specifically Catalanian peasant organization that comprised the principal social and political base of the *Esquerra*: the “*Unión de Rabassaires*”. This organization was composed for the most part of sharecroppers and small-scale, landowning peasants. The *Rabassaires* were against the collectivizations and advocated the redistribution of the land, the abolition of the institution of sharecropping and measures favoring the creation of “family” farms; demands which, by the way, would be satisfied. Beginning in July 1936, the Catalanian peasants burned the title deeds of the big landowners and the sharecroppers became the owners of the parcels—of various sizes—that they cultivated. The CNT nonetheless attempted, at the Regional Congress of Catalanian Peasants in January 1937, to convince the other agricultural syndicates to join it in support of a

“common agrarian policy”. The *Rabassaires* and the CNT’s agricultural trade unions reached an agreement to abide by a “pact” whose main points were the following:

“1. Each family is to have the land which may be its due. Surplus land and other lands taken in charge may be liable to collectivisation provided that there are individuals supervised by responsible organisations who seek to collectivise them of their own free will.

“2. The size of the family plot shall be established in each village in accordance with its characteristics and the quality of its land.

“3. The fruits of the earth are to belong to those who work it and they shall not be dispossessed of their land as long as they work it as it should be worked.

“4. With reference to the organisation of collectives, they are to be organised on the basis of lands contributed to the collective by the collectivisers and of the surplus lands of those who have too much land. It is an indispensable prerequisite that those who wishing to join the collective donate the entirety of their holdings in land and working tools.”

Other Points refer to the concentration of land, cooperation between the collectives and the individual peasant landowners within a locally-organized Unified Agricultural Trade Union (*Sindicato Único Agrícola*); the right of landless agricultural workers to join collectives with only their “personal labor” as their contribution to the common fund, with the same rights and obligations as the other members, etc.

In short, the text of the proposed Agricultural Pact outlines a situation of coexistence and even cooperation between the individualist and collectivized sectors. The UGT, however, under various pretexts, did not attend this Congress, and therefore did not sign the Pact. Since the *Rabassaires* considered the commitment of the UGT to be essential for the implementation of the Pact, another meeting was held, but at this meeting the UGT declared that it would not sign the Pact because it was against collectivizations, not “as a matter of principle”, but “due to the circumstances”. The UGT’s refusal to sign the Pact was a fatal blow to relations among the three organizations with respect to any attempt to engage in the coordination of a common agricultural policy.⁹⁴

Nonetheless, of course, ever since July-August 1936 agricultural collectives were constantly being formed, just as in industry. They were almost always spontaneously created and sometimes under the pressure or the suggestion of the CNT. When the Durruti Column entered Aragon a few days after the defeat of the military uprising in Barcelona, it became the leavening agent for collectives and for “libertarian communism” in the region.

⁹⁴ Peirats, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, pp. 29-32.

Despite the diversity of experiences and conflicts, in many cases armed, between collectivists and individualist peasants—or rather, between organizations that favored one solution or the other—the general principles that inspired the constitution and activity of the collectives can be summarized as follows:

The collectives had to be free and voluntary. In any particular town all the peasants and agricultural workers who wanted to do so, organized to form a self-managed agricultural collective. They contributed to the collective everything they possessed: land, tools, draught animals and anything else they owned. Naturally, the agricultural laborers, as we have already mentioned, had nothing but their muscle power to contribute. The goods that each peasant contributed to the collective were described and listed in a register, so that when he wanted to leave the collective, which in principle he had the right to do at any time, they could be restored to him. No member of the collective could be expelled without the consent of a General Assembly of all the members of the collective, nor could he be expelled without at least one warning—or more—from the General Assembly. All the lands of the municipality or village district were collectivized; those of its members, obviously, and also those of the big landowners as well as municipal and village lands. The only parcels of land that were not collectivized were those of the independent peasants who cultivated them with the help of their family members, but they were not allowed to exploit outside labor, that is, they could not hire agricultural laborers. Obviously, these general rules led to a multitude of difficulties and gave rise to conflicts. Furthermore, the scale of collectivization varied from region to region. Where the *Rabassaires* were dominant, the usual agricultural policy entailed parcels of land being distributed to independent peasants. In Aragon, on the other hand, thanks to the influence of libertarian ideas, the collectives were extremely numerous. The anarchists have been accused (above all by the Stalinists, naturally) of using terror to force the peasants to join collectives. These calumnies, which conform to a political prejudice, have been refuted by numerous testimonials (which I shall quote below). It is completely ridiculous to talk about terror when the libertarian communes of Aragon (which is precisely where these alleged anarchist excesses were said to be most numerous) were self-managed and the workers assemblies not only elected, and had the right to recall the members of their committees, but also directly resolved all important questions during their periodic meetings. Who wielded terror and against whom was this terror directed, if the immense majority of the population of a commune (a village, a town, or even a city) participated directly in its management? It is true that there were some skirmishes, sometimes armed, between the supporters and the opponents of the collectives in Catalonia, fights between the members of the CNT and the *Rabassaires*, or between the CNT and the Agricultural Trade Union formed by the UGT, dominated by the Stalinists. These were isolated incidents, however, and even though some abuses were committed against certain minority fractions hostile to the collectives, what is most striking about the agricultural collectives (just like the industrial collectives) is their mass character, their creativity, their spontaneity, in short. Furthermore—as we shall see in the last part of this book—when the communist troops under the command of the unspeakable Lister entered Aragon during the summer of 1937 to *use terrorism to liquidate* the libertarian communes, they would not succeed, so great was the resistance of the agricultural workers—and of the other workers. The communists had to withdraw and suspend the

“reorganization of agriculture” (the liquidation of the communes) under the pretext of not “obstructing the harvest”. Obviously, the armed intervention of the troops under Lister dampened, limited and often diminished the movement of agricultural collectives in Aragon. In order to put an end to the fictitious anarchist “reign of terror”, this region was battered by real armed repression, which did not, however, achieve its goal: thus constituting an inadvertent and bloody demonstration of the support of the peasant masses for the collectives.

* * *

The following are some examples from agricultural collectives, first of all in Catalonia:

“*Pla de Cabra*: 2,000 inhabitants, some of whom were employed in the Martí Llopart textile plant. The collective was set up in June 1937 by some 270 individuals. They farmed some 5,000 hectares of land. The productivity of the land rose by 75 per cent. There was no fixed working day and the family wage arrangement applied. Each collectivist received 5 pesetas a day, plus 2 pesetas for each member of his family, regardless of age. They produced cereals, vegetables, grapes, almonds and hazelnuts. Produce surplus to requirements was sold off to or exchanged with outsiders. There was a henhouse with 500 hens for egg production. There were 15 cows and a bull. The church was turned into a makeshift warehouse. Collective stalls selling foodstuffs, vegetables, salted fish and beef were set up. They lacked agricultural machinery. The textile plant which the workers had collectivised experienced a period of crisis for lack of raw materials and chemical ingredients. The workers belonged to the CNT and to the UGT.

“*Hospitalet de Llobregat*: The land farmed by the collective extended to 15 square kilometres. There were upwards of 1,000 collectivists, male and female. Some 90,000 pesetas were paid out weekly as wages. The 1937 kidney bean harvest brought in 555,000 kilos. The farmland was divided up into 38 zones, of which 35 were irrigated and the remainder rain-fed scrub. From the outset 7,000 pesetas were paid out each week as expenditure upon general improvements in the construction of new ventures. In 10 months, machinery to the value of 180,000 pesetas was purchased, including a truck to ship produce. Here is a very illuminating breakdown of the accounts:

<i>September 1936 to August 1937</i>	<i>Income (pesetas)</i>	<i>Expenditure (pesetas)</i>
First Quarter	432,710.34	416,973.09
Second Quarter	910,756.81	794,628.51
Third Quarter	1,653,045.20	1,312,305.10
Fourth Quarter	2,007,992.80	1,643,773.05
Total	5,004,505.15	4,167,679.75

“The collective dispatched some eight wagonloads of artichokes (valued at 30,000 pesetas) to the fronts, as well as several truckloads of garden produce. It also showed solidarity with other, more needy collectives. Each quarter a general assembly would

convene to study what had been achieved and to set new targets. In advance of these assemblies the administrative council used to submit a detailed statement of accounts to the collectivists.

“The administrative council was made up of 5 comrades assisted by 2 delegates from each zone: 1 trade union delegate and 1 technician. The technical delegates met every fortnight to examine what work was required. On the basis of information from the technical delegates, the administrative council prescribed what was to be shipped daily to the markets in l’Hospitalet and Barcelona.

“The collectivists hatched a scheme for cutting channels into the banks of the Llobregat River so as to place the township out of reach of the frequent floods. With the exception of about 60 collectivists, they all belonged to the CNT. There was complete collectivisation of the land. Solidarity and exchange with other collectives were practised.”

Both examples, taken from the book by Peirats,⁹⁵ allow one to get an idea of how the agricultural collectives in Catalonia worked. The principles according to which these experiments were conducted were inspired by anarchist theory. We need only point to the democratic and self-managed aspect of the collectives; the General Assembly constituted the “supreme organ of power”, the Administrative Council was elected and revocable; the equality of all members, both with regard to rights as well as to duties, was total. In general, rigid working hours were not imposed, but tasks were shared by groups of five or ten persons. We should also mention the rationalization and increase of production, the aid sent to the front through donations in kind—and in men!—etc. An equally important aspect was the major social achievements of the agricultural collectives with regard to education and sanitation. All accounts point to the establishment of new schools, literacy or general educational programs for adults, new clinics and hospitals, libraries and cultural centers.

In the towns where the Collective embraced almost all the inhabitants, the Collective and the Municipality were merged in fact, if not legally. In the others, a Municipal Council was formed including representatives all the anti-Franco organizations and, depending on the relations that obtained among the political forces, there were tensions and friction. As a general rule, it can be said that, at least from July 1936 to the summer of 1937, in almost all cases, the Revolutionary Committees and the Collective Committees constituted the local organs of power, since the Municipal Councils had either been integrated into the Revolutionary Committees or existed parallel to them as simple decorations or vestiges of a temporarily abolished past. Beginning in the summer of 1937, the government authorities *attempted*—and sometimes succeeded—to restore their legally constituted powers to the Municipal Councils. These Municipal Councils, supported by the Government, *were not subject to new elections*, but were instead appointed from among the members of the organizations of the Popular Front.

⁹⁵ Peirats, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 278-279.

With regard to the agricultural collectives in Catalonia—and elsewhere—one thing that really stands out is the incredible discrimination practiced against women in the matter of wage rates—which was also the case in industry. Although the wage system was not uniform—because it was decided upon in common in each collective: family wage or individual wage or a combination of both—women were paid less than men. Regardless of the pretext that might be invoked, this exhibits some trace of the survival of reactionary attitudes from the past, which does not accord very well with the profoundly liberating experience of the collectives.

Aragon: From February 14-17, 1937, the founding Congress of the Federation of Collectives of Aragon was held in Caspe—the capital of revolutionary Aragon and the location of the headquarters of the Council of Aragon. Delegates representing twenty-five district federations, or 275 towns and 141,430 families, attended. A few months later, the number of collectives in Aragon reached 450, with 433,000 workers.

Obviously, the goal of the Federation of Collectives was to coordinate and plan the activity of each collective, while simultaneously respecting its autonomy:

“The fourth point in the Agenda was the formulation of a general Rule which stipulated the general directives of the Aragon collectives, the text of which is as follows:

“(1) Under the title Federation of Agrarian Collectives an Association is constituted in Aragon the object of which is to defend the interests of workers comprising these Collectives.

“(2) The task of this Federation will consist in the following:

“(a) To spread far and wide the benefits deriving from collectivism based on the application of mutual aid.

“(b) To supervise the experimental farms and trial stations which will be organised in the most suitable localities.

“(c) To encourage the preparation of the most gifted young people by the organisation of specialised technical schools.

“(d) To organise a corps of technicians who will study the way, to achieve a more efficient use of labour in the different branches, of agriculture.

“(e) To seek means for establishing and improving methods of exchange outside the region.

“(f) To organise exchanges on an international scale, thanks to the establishment of statistics relating to the production surpluses of the region; a Resistance Fund will be set up to provide for the needs of federated Collectives, always through close collaboration with the regional Council of Aragon.

“On the subject of public education, the Federation will undertake to:

“(a) Supply the Collectives with all the rudiments for encouraging leisure and the development of the cultural interests of everybody.

“(b) Organise lectures which will make a contribution to the general education of the peasantry, as well as cinema and theatre evenings, outings, excursions and all possible kinds of propaganda and cultural activities.

“(3) It is also necessary to set up in each Collective stock, rearing centres directed to the selection of more suitable breeds in order to achieve better returns than hitherto . . . Such activities must be supervised by qualified technicians . . . On the other hand all farming must include agriculture and stock-rearing . . .

“Various plans for experimental farms are available to the Collectives.”⁹⁶

The Federation also assumed responsibility for an advisory service for planning cultivation in accordance with the nature of the land, the relations of coexistence with the peasants who were still private farmers, etc. The “political” organ of the Federation was the Council of Aragon, presided over by the *cenetista* Joaquín Ascaso, who replaced the former Governor of Aragon.

Lastly, at the same Congress in Caspe the Federation defined its position vis-à-vis a Government Decree ordering the restoration of the power of the Municipal Councils throughout loyalist Spain. The Congress decided to accept the Decree, in consideration of the fact that “the Municipal Councils perform a different role than the Collectives”, and that “they exercise a function that is different from that exercised by the Administrative Committees of the Collectives”. In any event, the Congress called upon the CNT—which, of course, was everywhere—to be alert and to ensure that the two institutions enjoyed amicable relations, and to exert political control over the Municipal Councils. However, even assuming that the latter represented the whole population—since not everyone was a member of a Collective—it does not appear that the Decree was actually put into effect in these cities and towns, due to the military attack of the Stalinists against the agricultural collectives of Aragon. Here, too, libertarian democracy—which was very widespread—would coexist with “republican legality” before being brutally attacked by the latter. Which once again confirms that the best defense is a good offense and that for the Decree to really be implemented there would have had to have been a thorough reform of the members, the methods and the functions of the Municipal Councils, whether or not that is what they would be called—and this would have had to have been achieved by a democratic process, by way of free elections—rather than through backroom deals between parties. In any event, this was not the main thing, I think; the main thing is the importance and the success of the Aragonese agricultural collectives.

⁹⁶ Gaston Leval, *Colectividades libertarias en España*, pp. 89-93.

The socialist journalist, Alardo Prats, who visited the Collective of Graus in May 1937, recalls his impressions:

“... Everything has been collectivized: the Collective Hardware Store, the Collective Grocery Store, the Collective Restaurant, the Collective Blacksmith’s Shop, the Collective Mill.

“All the material, moral and economic expressions of the town are concentrated in the Collective as a whole. The work is shared. Each trade association, in its assembly, assigns it to every collectivist. It might be thought that these trade assemblies are a hotbed of discussions. There is actually very little talk. Because each person knows his obligation and does not reject it.

“The men over sixty years old are exempt from the obligation to work. At first, these travelers at the end of life’s road tried to keep pace with the enthusiasm of the young, who for the most part set the standards of the collectivist norms. They were afraid that they would be exhausted by labor that was too excessive for their years. They soon discovered their error. The old people did not have to work.... Then the old people, in an assembly, agreed to go back to work. It was necessary to work in order not to be a burden for the other collectivists and to help raise up the town from its prostration, to make it the leading producer among the neighboring towns. In order to help win the war, age and physical infirmities were not considered to be impediments by the old people of Graus. Then, the old people of Graus formed a veritable shock troop. The town gave it the name of ‘the International Brigade’.... The surprising progress made by the Collective is easy to understand. Every Saturday, the collectivists go to the Central Bank of the Collective, sign their names and collect their money. In the cooperatives of the Collective they obtain the necessary means for their survival.

“When a collectivist decides to get married, he is given a week’s vacation with full pay, the collective looks for a place for him to live—housing is also collectivized—and he is given furniture through the corresponding cooperative that he can pay for in reasonable installments.... Children are the object of the special care and constant attention of the Collective. They do not work until they are fourteen years old, for any purpose or under any circumstances. The exploitation of the child by his own family has come to an end, exploitation that obliged them in the past, most often, by the poverty of their homes, to abandon their education prematurely. Mothers, and especially women in the process of becoming mothers, are also the object of special treatment, above all during the period when they are nursing their babies. They are excused from all work. All the young people work in the workshops where they sew and finish clothing for the combatants, in the fields, or in the offices. All of Graus is a beehive of hard-working and self-abnegating people, ruled by the soundings of the siren that marks the hours of work and rest for all the neighbors....”⁹⁷ “When the General Secretary of the Collective, comrade Portella, brought me to the department of statistics and tossed me a file that contained precise

⁹⁷ Unlike other Collectives, Graus seems to have imposed rather strictly defined working hours.

information concerning the status of the work being done by the Collective and the production figures for the whole town, I nearly fainted. You could say with confidence that the State institution that works best, is the one that has the most competent and well-trained officials and keeps the most precise data, and would in these respects be somewhat like the organization of the Collective of Graus. As for those who receive this claim with skepticism, I would advise them to make absolutely sure by going there and seeing for themselves.

“Everything is systematically organized. Each sector of production has its file with the exact figures of its current production and forecasts for its growth that are updated daily.... This organization has facilitated all the improvements carried out by the Collective: in association with the town it has established a model farm for raising pigs, which is home to approximately two thousand animals of all ages and different varieties.... When winter comes every family in Graus will be given a pig, which constitutes one of the main sources of their subsistence. The farm is operated in accordance with the requirements of the most modern installations. The animals have showers and all the benefits of modern scientific stock raising. I asked the comrades who were in charge of the farm, and also those who had designed it, where they obtained the model for their farm. They told me, without making a big deal about it, that when they first set about the task of setting up the farm, they carefully studied and discussed various models and that they finally chose the American model, the same one used in the pig farms that supply the pork industry in Chicago. Elsewhere in the vicinity of the town another farm has been established, this one a poultry farm, a very satisfactory model of organization and experimentation.... The most varied species of domestic fowl are kept in the departments of the farm. They expect to have nearly ten thousand birds by next fall. The farm’s buildings now harbor six thousand. Everything is new and magnificent. Everything has been set up in accordance with the latest technology and based on experience with the latter. The director of the farm has invented a new incubator with a greater capacity than the earlier types. Thousands of tiny chicks swarm in these heated chambers. Hundreds of ducks and geese. Hundreds of roosters and hens, carefully classified. In one amazing farm, just like the pig farm. This Collective is a model for all the counties of Aragon. Graus is a place of pilgrimage for the workers of Aragon and a school for the economic reconstruction of our fatherland.

“The creative powers of their neighbors have been awakened. Their magnificent schools are open—they bear the name of Joaquín Costa—and a library with a catalogue that includes the most modern works on the most diverse themes of the intellectual disciplines. The Collective has a printing press and a bookstore. A School of the Arts and Trades has been established, where more than sixty local youths attend classes, and practice the different techniques of the arts and all trades. In the same building of the School of the Arts and Trades, a museum with paintings and sculpture has been installed. Graus has also largely assumed responsibility for a colony of refugee children, with their teachers, established in a large villa with a spacious garden close to the town.... It supports more than fifty adult refugees.

“Graus leads the way, with regard to all requirements of the needs of war, among all the towns of Aragon. It has built roads. It is studying the possibilities of exploiting certain areas in its vicinity that are rich in coal and sulfur mines. Its industries are working full time at maximum yield on the basis of perfectly normal operating conditions. It has built a new mill with the most modern equipment. It has acquired modern agricultural machinery, including the latest model harvester. It has industrialized the stock raising system; in short, it has transformed the life of the town and is leading a campaign to transform the lives of all the towns in the county that bears its name. It has carried out the Revolution.”⁹⁸

The author of this report, however, points out that Graus constitutes a kind of pilot project and that other collectives that he had visited had not obtained such satisfactory results.

Graus is, moreover, a relatively small town: 700 residents, all but 170 of them members of the Collective. We should also point out that money was not abolished in Graus. The Central Fund of the Collective paid the wages of the collectivists every Saturday. The author does not specify whether the wage was an individual wage or a family wage. There was a bank in Graus that was abandoned after its files were burned. Its employees worked as accountants for the Collective whose Central Fund was responsible for all internal and external transactions.

In the libertarian communes where money was abolished, wages were paid in the form of coupons, in accordance with the principle of the family wage. “The CNT collectives are characterized, for the most part, by the adoption of the family wage. Wages are paid according to the needs of their members rather than on the basis of the work done by each worker.”⁹⁹ When a Collective had an abundant supply of wine, bread or olive oil, for example, these products were distributed gratuitously; other goods could be purchased with coupons, which actually performed the function of a kind of “internal money” because when it was necessary to buy or sell something outside of the Collective, money recovered its old rights. Unless, of course, the exchange was carried out between two anarchist Collectives. Kaminski has described the Collective of Alcora:

“Everybody receives what he needs. From whom? From the Committee, of course. It is however impossible to provide for five thousand people through a single centre of distribution. Shops still exist in Alcora where it is possible to get what is necessary as before.” But these shops, Kaminski points out, are only distribution centers: “Everything belongs to the people and the former owners cannot get any profit from any of their former property. Nothing is paid for with money anymore; everything is bought with coupons. Even the barber will give you a shave in exchange for a coupon. These peasants want to possess ‘everything in common’, just like the primitive Christians in the Bible. They think that the best way to achieve general equality consists in abolishing money.” In Alcora, as in many other libertarian communes in Aragon, money was replaced by

⁹⁸ Alardo Prats, *Vanguardia y retaguardia en Aragón* (pamphlet), pp. 85-93.

⁹⁹ A. Souchy, in *Tierra y Libertad* (August 6, 1938).

coupons issued by the Committee: “The principle according to which the needs of all the inhabitants will be satisfied is not perfectly put in practice as the coupons are distributed according to the idea that every body has the same needs. There is no individual discrimination; the family alone is recognised as a unit. Only unmarried people are considered as individuals.” A strange position for anarchists! Kaminski continues: “Each family and person living alone has received a card. It is punched each day at the place of work, which nobody can therefore leave. The coupons are distributed according to the card. And here lies the great weakness of the system: for the lack hitherto of any other standard they have had to resort to money to measure the work done. Everybody, workers, shopkeepers, doctors, receive for each day’s work coupons to the value of five pesetas.” We shall take this opportunity to point out that in almost all the Collectives, doctors, teachers, agronomists, nurses, etc., became wage workers of the Collective and their services were provided at no cost to the members of the Collective. “On one side of the coupon the word, ‘bread’, is written; each coupon is worth one kilogram. But the other side of the coupon represents explicitly a counter-value in money. Nevertheless these coupons cannot be considered as bank-notes. They can only be exchanged against goods for consumption and in only a limited quantity. Even if the amount of coupons was greater it would be impossible to buy means of production and so become a capitalist, even on a small scale, for only consumer goods are on sale. The means of production are owned by the community.”

In this respect, too, Kaminski says, the Committee is the elected representative of the entire community. The committee is custodian of all the money of Alcora, approximately 100,000 pesetas. “The Committee exchanges the village products against products which it does not possess, and when it cannot obtain them by exchange it buys them. But money is considered as an unavoidable evil, only to be used as long as the rest of the world will not follow the example of Alcora.”

The Committee is responsible for everything, it runs everything, it possesses everything, it is a kind of *pater familias*. “Each special desire should be submitted to it. It is, in the last resort, the only judge. One may object that the members of the Committee run the risk of becoming bureaucrats or even dictators. The peasants have thought about that too. They have decided that the Committee should be changed at frequent intervals so that every member of the village should be a member for a certain period.”

This feature is also common to most of the Collectives in Aragon and Catalonia.

“There is something moving about the ingenuousness of all this organisation. It would be a mistake to see in it anything more than a peasant attempt to establish libertarian communism and unfair to criticise it too seriously. One must not forget that the agricultural workers and even the shopkeepers of the village have lived very poorly up till now. Their needs are hardly differentiated. Before the revolution a piece of meat was a luxury for them; only a few intellectuals living among them wish for things beyond immediate necessities. The anarchist-communism of Alcora has taken its nature from the actual state of things. As a proof, one must observe that the family card puts the most

oppressed human beings in Spain, the women, under the complete dependence of men.”¹⁰⁰

Indeed, the family wage—and the family coupon—advocated by the CNT as a great social advance, actually proved to be profoundly regressive, for not only was the woman—who was effectively the most oppressed category in Spain—subject to the man, but the children were also subject to the father of the family. Even boys, and yet more so the girls, between eighteen and twenty years of age, and even older, were subject to paternal authority. And Alcora, of course, was not the place to exercise sexual freedom. Paradoxically, what was claimed to be a progressive value was precisely the very essence of the family in its most conservative and traditional aspect and what was most backward about it. All of this explains quite well, as Kaminski so correctly points out, “the actual state of things”, that is, the backwardness characteristic of Spain at that time, especially in the countryside, during a full-blown revolutionary transformation, as it is reflected in the consciousness of the protagonists of that transformation.

As for the “abolition of money”, and the “moving ... ingenuousness” that Kaminski mentions, we must call attention to the enormous complications that resulted from the coupon system. The author relates, with a great deal of humor, that if a young worker from Alcora wanted to visit his girlfriend in the next town, he had to go to the Committee to exchange his coupons for money to buy a bus ticket. The same was true if he wanted to see a movie, or visit a relative. The Committee could refuse, it could decide how many times the collectivists could visit their girlfriends or how many times they could go to the movies, etc.! It is not hard to imagine the abuses that an overly-fastidious and strict member of the Committee might be capable of committing. Other witnesses, such as Borkenau and Bollothen, whose opinions on the collectives are very different, relate accounts of abuses of this type.

It is obvious that the abolition of money in Alcora and in other libertarian communes was a quasi-magical, *fetishistic* operation. Because they considered money to be absolute evil, to abolish it was to abolish *Evil* and to restore the reign of *Goodness*. This tendency went so far that in some communes, they took the money from the vaults of the banks and burned it in the street, amidst general rejoicing. There can be no doubt that these were authentic festive bonfires, but unfortunately they did not manage to so easily do away with the “empire of money”. It was impossible to abolish money within the collectives, while it continued to dominate social relations in the society that surrounded them, as long as it was necessary to buy and sell, go to the movies, take a bus, etc., and also as long as the neighboring Collectives, often less libertarian than the others, pay their wages in money and do not accept coupons.

If money may be considered to be the expression of relative poverty (abundance = free distribution) and social inequality, then the abolition of money can only result from the abolition of inequality and poverty, not the other way around.

¹⁰⁰ H. E. Kaminski, *op. cit.*, pp. 118-121.

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The autonomous Catalan Government also promulgated a Decree applying to the agricultural collectivizations, the text of which was published in *Solidaridad Obrera* on November 4th and 6th of 1937. This Decree, signed by Lluís Companys, President, and José Calvet y Mora, the Minister of Agriculture and leader of the *Unión de Rabassaires*, was not as interesting as the Decree on the Collectives in industry, because in this case the Decree involved something that was already a *fait accompli*. Of course, in order to justify its existence, the Decree sought to establish general compulsory rules for the operation of the agricultural Collectives. We have observed above that its stipulations reflect a desire to impose the right of the Government authorities to regulate and if necessary dissolve the Collectives as well as to introduce a “private sector” into their midst. The Decree acknowledged that the members of the Collectives despised the private possession of a garden, a chicken coop, or livestock (goats, pigs, cows) that was typical of the Soviet Kolkhoz. It nonetheless strikes us as indicative of the scale and real importance of the agricultural Collectives, that the Catalan Government, after the May Events of 1937, would publish this Decree recognizing them and establishing rules which were by and large the same ones that had regulated their operations for more than a year.

A provisional summary

“That anarchist revolution was simply destroyed by force, but during the brief period in which it was alive I think it was ... highly successful,” Noam Chomsky writes. For it was indeed *noteworthy* to see the masses of industrial and agricultural workers transform the existing social order in such a profound way. They did not obey any directive “from above”, but had to resist the orders and pressures of all kinds that emanated from the General Staffs of all the political and trade union organizations, and they had to do so right in the middle of a revolutionary war against “the army of the big capitalists and landowners”.

Indeed, everyone, in one way or another, was against the collectivizations, except for the workers themselves. It is of course true that the CNT-FAI claimed the Collectives to be “its own” creations and it was almost always the case that it was its militants who took the initiative to create them. But the Decree that limited and undermined them was also largely the work of the CNT. And all the administrative and bureaucratic measures spelled out in that Decree, whose purpose was to put an end to workers autonomy, were devised with the active participation of the CNT-FAI. And when, during the May Events, as we shall see below, an attempt was made to liquidate the collectives and workers democracy in general, the CNT defended them on the barricades, yet the CNT—the Ministers, leaders, bureaucrats, large and small—also preached compromise, civil peace, in a word—surrender. The CNT’s attitude *would be two-faced* during the events that we are analyzing. To say that the leaders betrayed the revolutionary impulse of the “rank and file”, while not totally false, does not really explain anything, either. Why did the rank and file obey their leaders this time, in an organization that as a matter of principle did not accept “iron discipline” or the “leadership cult”?

Among the “rank and file”, the libertarian workers and peasants collectivized *everything*, from the very first days of the revolution: transport, public services, commerce, and agriculture. Self-management prevailed everywhere, or almost everywhere. Along with some very notable successes, I have noted defects with regard to coordination and solidarity between the “rich Collectives” and the “poor Collectives”. This was not their only shortcoming: we may also refer to the failure to reconvert certain *obsolete* industries, as well as an insufficient degree of transformation of production more generally. All these things are, one might say, normal during the first stage of such an upheaval, whose general meaning—this is very important—can be summarized in the following way: the workers took over *their* enterprises. Just as it is to be expected that the most advanced experiences of direct democracy should have taken place in the towns and villages of Aragon and Catalonia, where the workers assemblies could meet regularly and make decisions “on the spot” concerning all necessary measures. In the industrial sector the problem was more complex—even if only due to the numbers of workers affected; the question of the “delegation of powers” arose, the trade unions intervened (the trade union bureaucracy emerged with its own particular goals), etc. All these phenomena are of great importance with regard to the relative “*success*” of each enterprise. Within the constraints of these phenomena, of course, direct democracy is possible and even easy—just as easy as it was for a libertarian commune in Aragon. This undoubtedly goes a long way towards explaining many things.

The superior committees of the CNT, ostensibly in order to ameliorate the defects of the collectives and to protect them—actually, in order to control them—proposed a form of organization which was set forth in the Decree of October 1936. The Decree placed restrictions on the scope of collectivization by excluding foreign-owned enterprises (in order to pacify the Western democracies) and enterprises with fewer than 100 workers. An important industrial sector was therefore restored to the private sector (given the low degree of concentration in Catalonian industry at that time). Actually, these restrictions remained a dead letter, except for the provisions concerning the foreign-owned enterprises. The Decree furthermore reestablished the hierarchical pyramid of production, at the top of which was the State, whose role in the economy became determinant for the first time in Spain’s history (although, to various degrees, this phenomenon also affected industry outside of Catalonia). In parallel with the attempt to establish a “new kind” of state authority, anarchist elements attempted to impose a degree of *trade union authority* on the Collectives. The Decree, as we have seen, attributed to the trade unions a very important role in the new organization of the economy, but a role that was *subordinate* to that of the Catalonian Government, the supreme authority (at least on paper; the Central Government never accepted Catalonian autonomy, and for all intents and purposes destroyed it in June 1937). There was always a strong tendency in the CNT, however, that advocated direct trade union control over the economy without any interference from the State. We need not add that this tendency was reinforced during those periods when the CNT was not represented in the Catalonian and Central Governments, only to recede when it was represented in the Governments, as it was—in the Catalonian Government—when the Decree was published. This tendency, which we shall refer to as the “trade unionist” tendency, never completely dominated the CNT, nor did it fight, contrary to

what one might conclude at first sight, against the bureaucratic phenomenon, but actually nourished it in its own way.

* * *

The position of the Communist Party towards the collectives is more consistent. It was against them, on the pretext that they did not correspond with the “bourgeois-democratic phase” in which they sought to imprison the revolution. More profoundly, however, it was against self-management and workers autonomy, as it always had been—and always will be. Its position is summarized by José Díaz, the General Secretary of the Communist Party, in a speech delivered on February 2, 1937 at the Olimpia Theater in Valencia, during a meeting in honor of ... Maurice Thorez:

“We have to address what we may call the rash of confiscations of the possessions of the small-scale manufacturers, and of the ‘socialization’ of small industrial enterprises, and all abuses of this kind. And as we do so, we must pose the question in all honesty and do whatever is possible to bring about the nationalization of big industry, so that the basic industries should pass, as they must, into the hands of the State, which has decreed the nationalization of all industries necessary for the war....

“In the factories there must be control exercised by the workers and the trade unions; I agree, but these trade unions must for their part not forget that their duty at the present moment consists in organizing and intensifying production at any price, under the direction of the Government, and making all the sacrifices that are necessary to win the war.”¹⁰¹

That is, there has to be respect for small-scale and medium industry, the “natural allies” of the proletariat in the bourgeois-democratic revolution. There has to be “workers control” of production in order to reinforce discipline and productivity, under Government authority, and there has to be nationalization, thus reinforcing the role of the State in the economy; which constitutes the fertile soil necessary for the development of the bureaucracy as the ruling class. Today, everyone knows that nationalization—the usual *tarte à la crème* [crowning demand] of communist programs—is anything but “a step towards socialism”, that it by no means helps to abolish the exploitation of the workers, but that it merely reinforces State Capitalism. And this is the case both in the so-called capitalist countries (as if there were any countries that are not capitalist!), where the state sector coexists alongside the private sector (which is constantly shrinking), and in the so-called socialist countries, where everything is nationalized, and where the total concentration of capital has been realized, that is, in the countries of bureaucratic State Capitalism.

In the countryside, the Communist Party asserted itself even more boldly, allying with the small and medium landowners (the big landowners, as was the case with the big

¹⁰¹ Pamphlet published by the National Committee for *Agit-Prop* of the Spanish Communist Party, Valencia, 1937.

industrialists and bankers, were all with Franco or had fled from Spain). Vicente Uribe, the leader of the Communist Party and Minister of Agriculture, offered to use the Party militia to defend peasant property from the collectivists:

“Right from the start, the main task for some people was not to create the foundations for a new agrarian economy, but to carry out crazy experiments, concocted by people who had completely lost their sense of reality. They want to solve the agrarian problem by means of collectivizations!”¹⁰²

The indignation of the Honorable Minister caused him great sorrow. His colleague in the Catalanian Government, Calvet y Mora, leader of the moderate *Unión de Rabassaires*, which recognized the agrarian Collectives in Catalonia—as well as his political ally, the President of the Generalitat, Companys—were flaming revolutionaries compared to the communist, Uribe. In fact, the Central Government never recognized the Collectives, either in industry or in agriculture. The Minister of Agriculture, Uribe, limited himself to legalizing some redistributions of the lands of *latifundistas* who had fled Spain, redistributions which had already been carried out by the peasants, and also to fighting ruthlessly against the collectives.

Although the UGT was rather favorably disposed towards workers control in the other parts of Spain, in Catalonia it was at first only dragged along in the wake of the powerful collectivist movement. The Stalinist influence over the Catalanian UGT, however, transformed it into an ally of the PSUC in the latter’s fight against workers autonomy and self-management.

* * *

The POUM did not maintain a very clear policy with regard to the collectives, either. The Council of the Economy, when it was still answerable to the Central Committee of Militias, and whose members included Santillán (CNT) and Andrés Nin (POUM), published an eleven-point economic plan on August 11, 1936:

“1) Regulation of production in accordance with the needs of consumption.

“2) Monopoly of foreign trade.

“3) Collectivization of the big agrarian properties that will be cultivated by the peasant trade unions, and compulsory trade union membership for all individualist peasants.

“4) Partial reduction in the value of urban property by the imposition of taxes and the reduction of rents.

“5) Collectivization of large-scale industry, utilities and mass transit.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

- “6) Expropriation and collectivization of enterprises abandoned by their owners.
- “7) Extension of the scope of the cooperatives in the distribution of products.
- “8) Workers control of banking operations until the banks can be nationalized.
- “9) Workers trade union control over all enterprises that are still operating in the private sphere.
- “10) Rapid reincorporation of the unemployed into the workforce.
- “11) Rapid suppression of the many separate taxes, which are to be replaced by a unitary tax.”

According to W. Solano,¹⁰³ it was Andrés Nin himself who drafted these points, which may in a way be considered to express the official point of view of the POUM. As is evident, his position is much more radical than that of the Communist Party and corresponds to his conception of the socialist-democratic nature of the revolution: the revolution was supposed to complete the tasks of the unfinished bourgeois-democratic revolution and, at the same time, it was supposed to lay the foundations for socialist transformation. Just like the communists, the POUM wanted to “respect” the property of the small-scale and medium bourgeoisie. Unfortunately for their respective plans, “the autonomous movement of the masses” had forged ahead in the radical transformation of society. And it is in relation to this fact that the position of the POUM is radically different from that of the Communist Party. With that indestructible good conscience that the bureaucratic lie bestows on its acolytes, the Stalinists became the most bitter enemies of the collectives and of workers democracy. The POUM, for its part, overtaken by the initiative of the workers and underestimating their achievements, nonetheless stood on the side of the workers at the most crucial moments; during the May Events, for example. This did not prevent it from condemning, especially via the pen of Juan Andrade, actions that were “spontaneous and lacking an overall plan” that were carried out by the working class in general and by the anarchists in particular. In this case, as well, its centralist-Leninist perspective compelled it to underestimate a rich, living experience, in the name of dogmas that claimed that such an experience was *impossible*, unless it is implemented under the command of a Workers and Peasants Government and the under the rod of a vanguard party.

* * *

As shocking as it might seem to simple souls who still believe that the communists are on the extreme left of the political spectrum, the Catalan nationalist forces—the *Esquerra*

¹⁰³ Wilebaldo Solano: General Secretary of the POUM in exile. During the war he was Secretary of the POUM youth group (the *Juventud Comunista Ibérica* [Iberian Communist Youth]).

and the *Rabassaires*—had a much more ambivalent position on the question of the collectives than the communists did.

The first observation that Lluís Companys made concerning the first expropriations, on the day after July 19, was that Catalanian industry had been set in motion. In the hands of the workers, of course, but this is better than total unemployment that would culminate in economic chaos. Later, they would, step by step, without too much violence, get down to the business of “restoring order”. That is, restoring the authority of the State.

The only power that the Generalitat had during the first few months of the revolution was financial. As I pointed out above, the confiscations and expropriations did not affect the banks—perhaps due to the anarchists’ scorn for money? The Generalitat, for its part, exerted pressure to enforce its strict control over banking operations.

“The Regulatory Office for Wage Payments granted to the enterprises that were under workers control loans in the amount of 44 million pesetas, while the Official Bank of Credits and Loans [*Caja Oficial de Descuentos y Préstamos*] disbursed 35 million pesetas between the months of July and November 1936. . . . The Catalanian Government, obliged to bring the war in Aragon to a favorable conclusion, in order to provide military assistance to the Central Government, to procure arms and munitions, to subsidize the needs of a town, a country, whose exports had declined to zero, I think that it was reasonable to request from the Central Government the authorization to transfer 180 million pesetas in the account of the Bank of Spain. Instead of responding to this request, the Minister of the Treasury ordered the Delegation of Finances of Barcelona to deliver 373 million pesetas. The old regionalist hostilities would come to life again in August (1936).

“Because the power of the workers was still in its embryonic state, the only authority capable of resolving the conflict was the Generalitat and its Government. On August 27 and 28, the Catalanian Minister of Finance declared the expropriation of the Catalanian Branch of the Bank of Spain. . . . Then, after confiscating, in retaliation, 36,000 pounds sterling that Catalonia had on deposit in Paris, the Central Government yielded and declared the operations undertaken by the Generalitat to be legal. But the agreement between the two Powers indicated that it was only valid with respect to the Government of the Generalitat.”¹⁰⁴ This latter stipulation was not without significance, because it is indicative of the mistrust, which almost amounted to sabotage, which the Central Government felt towards the Central Committee of Militias, which was then in power, and more generally towards the workers committees and collectives. The Generalitat, the sole financial power of Catalonia, used this leverage to exercise an increasing degree of control over the whole economic life of the country.

“The question of credit, the real bottleneck of collectivization, was not settled in accordance with the views of the revolutionaries, either. It was this crisis, we saw, that threatened the functioning even of the collectivized firms. The Generalidad Cabinet in

¹⁰⁴ H. Rabassaire, *op. cit.*, pp. 228-229.

Catalonia rejected the creation of the bank for industry and credit demanded by the CNT and the POUM.... the banks were able reserve their credits for private firms only and even to charge exorbitant commissions on transfers of funds ordered by the government. Juan Peiró suggested the creation of an industrial bank to finance the activities of collectivized factories. But the minister of finance, Negrín, was against it.... Thus the collectivization movement was checked and then halted, the Government remaining in control of the firms through the banks. It gradually asserted its authority, both in the *incautadas* [confiscated] and in the *intervenidas* [under workers control] firms, through its choice of controllers and directors. Its concern for efficiency and its political preoccupations often led it to restore former owners or administrators under different titles.”¹⁰⁵

These lines, taken from the book by Broué and Témime, might give the impression that the collectives were totally liquidated before the defeat of the Republic. This was not the case, however. Especially in Catalonia, some important sectors of industry that were still functioning, and the public services, remained, against all odds, in the power of the workers until the end of the war. It is true that the Catalanian Government and the Central Government intensified their influence, in the sense indicated above, in a series of industrial sectors. Moreover, besides financial sabotage, the government authorities issued a whole series of legal decrees to “dissolve” the collectives. Thus, in May, after the week of the barricades, the Central Government repealed the Collectivizations Decree of October 24, 1936, on the pretext that the Generalitat had no jurisdiction over such matters: Article 44 of the Constitution specified that only the State can engage in expropriation and socialization and the Generalitat could not act as a surrogate for the Spanish State. Another Decree, proclaimed on August 28, 1937, granted the Central Government the right to appoint inspectors and secure absolute control over the mines and the metal industry. In October of that same year, *Solidaridad Obrera* denounced a ruling issued by the Purchasing Department of the Ministry of Defense: the latter would only sign procurement contracts with enterprises that operate “‘on the basis of their old owners’ or ‘under the corresponding intervention controlled by the Ministry of Finance and Economy’.”¹⁰⁶

However, we repeat, neither financial sabotage, nor all the legal rulings and decrees and political pressure, were capable of putting an end to the collectives. When the communists attempted to liquidate their *bête noir*, the libertarian communes of Aragon, they were forced, as we have seen, to retreat. The government authorities and the anti-collectivist political parties also had to retreat in the sphere of industry, under pressure from the workers who would not accept such a return to capitalism, even if it was State Capitalism. The government could, for example, appoint directors with full powers who, if the workers decided to refuse to obey them and continued to elect their own representatives, would be nothing but government decorations. Some Collectives, both agricultural and industrial, reduced and besieged everywhere, therefore maintained their positions, at least until the entry of Franco’s troops into Aragon and Catalonia, who

¹⁰⁵ Broué and Témime, *op. cit.*, English edition, p. 225 and footnote 19 on p. 238.

¹⁰⁶ Morrow, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

drowned in blood the state of order that was being imposed—also sometimes with bloodshed—by the republican authorities.

The most important thing about this battle that was waged on so many fronts—some of which, and not the least important, were located in the minds of the protagonists—has never been set down in writing. There has been talk, good or bad, of the collectives, citing figures, events, etc. There has been talk of the Decree, of its implementation, of trade union organization, of the legal rulings—for or against. In short, there has been a lot of effort devoted to the study of institutions, and whether to praise them and to present them to the world as an example (has it not been said with pride that Yugoslavia was inspired by them?) and sometimes even citing Algeria (which has to be the acme of black humor!), or to criticize them and to try to prove that self-management is a trap, when what they are all talking about is precisely everything that was done to oppose self-management. No one has ever really spoken of the state of mind of the workers, however, of their relation to Authority. I am not going to fill this gap here with a handful of sentences, but this question must in any event be discussed, because it seems to me that it is much more important than the nostalgic quest for “good institutions” that would allow for “improved functioning of the economy”. And, anyway, there are no good institutions!

By way of the texts and eyewitness accounts—which are unfortunately too imprecise and indistinct—so that we can get to know the details, we will dare to undertake a massive campaign of “civil disobedience”. This wildcat democracy concerning which I have spoken—like the strikes known as “wildcat strikes”, it is simultaneously directed against the State, the employers and the “workers” bureaucracies, and is not institutionalized—is not expressed in any legal code, or in any Program of any Organization, or in any analysis of any theoretician. And this for the simple reason that to acknowledge it would amount to denying their own natures as “laws”, or as “theoreticians”. It was this revolutionary and libertarian state of mind of the workers, however, which made that wildcat democracy possible; that state of mind that caused them to fight the army and the fascists, that led them to collectivize everything—or almost everything—and which nourished their supreme rejection of Authority. And, of course, the old world had hardly been overthrown before every mechanism was set to work rebuilding a “new” world which, by chance, drew its essential values from the old one; within it, the good old principles of contemporary servitude, barely dissimulated, were sacred: Authority and Discipline, Army and Fatherland (yes, even the Fatherland!), Productivity and Order, etc.

None of this is new. What is, if not new, at least not very well known, however, was the relation of the masses with Authority in Catalonia during that period. Authority attempted to reassert its prerogatives everywhere, not only by means of the patient and underhanded restoration of a totalitarian State, but also by way of the subtle production of illusions; the spectacle of heroes and leaders: those young generals dressed in wool coats draped in cartridge belts come directly from Year II, with the inevitable aftertaste of Bolshevik mythology. Kleber and Budienny then went by the names of Líster and Durruti (once the latter was dead, which in his case was more prudent). The images of the venerated leaders (in the first rank, of course, Stalin stands out, who was worshipped not just by the Stalinists), these “icons”, appear on every wall in the devastated cities, in the offices of

all the political organizations. Each organization had its own saints as fodder for the masses, so that the latter, full of devotion, would be more obedient. An avenging hand was held up to threaten the illiterate peasant and the lazy worker, who, in the midst of this wonderful “heroic epic”, had imprudently plunged into an unparalleled adventure: they simply tried to change their lives. This was neither the time nor the place for that. Then they were accused of boycotting the war. They also were accused—because the heroic epic is just fine, it is even indispensable, but it is not everything—of sabotaging production and, naturally, Order. The Order which demanded that each person be at his post and perform the tasks that have been assigned to him by Authority. It is inconceivable—so says Authority, in its multiple faces, communist, republican or anarchist—it is inconceivable that the factories should be “in the power of the workers”. That does not mean anything. To direct a factory you need a director, this goes without saying. To organize and plan the economy you need organizers, specialists, technicians with knowledge and ability. Every organization had “their” specialists. Often, as we have seen, these specialists were the former owners, which was logical, in a way: had they not already proven their ability to be to be owners, since that is what they were? The “lazy” worker, however, who was even accused of having “capitalist interests”—as was the case not so long ago in China during that bloody settling of scores between factions of the bureaucracy that was so shamefully called the “cultural revolution”—and the illiterate peasant put up an admirable resistance against all these attempts on the part of Authority. They simply did not recognize its authority. They worked, they fought—in spite of what the bureaucratic lies would have us believe—what else could they do? They did not reject the requirements of technology and culture, to the contrary, they rather had a tendency to demonstrate too much respect for them, but they wanted to make the decisions, they wanted to remain the masters of their own lives and of their labor, however hard and miserable they may have been. If this is not a revolutionary stance, what is revolution?

Why, despite this rebellious state of mind and this wildcat democracy that had been imposed by the workers, was the authoritarian State restored—even though it was hardly obeyed? How was it possible to limit—since it could not be liquidated—the movement of the collectives? Precisely by virtue of a particular way of experiencing class solidarity, loyalty to the organization, a particular concept of militant values; these were the ways by which Authority was reintroduced “into the heads” of the militants, even of the most rebellious ones. This “filial” loyalty to the Organization (in this case, the CNT-FAI) is what definitively, up to a certain point, limited the extraordinary magnitude of the great refusal. This leads us, naturally, to the question of the phenomenon of bureaucratization in the movement of the collectives.

* * *

The study of this phenomenon is always absent from the texts that address the collectives, whether they are for or against them. I am going to speak here of the bureaucratic transformation of the CNT-FAI once it came into “contact” with power. To insist on once again talking about all those things that we now are all too familiar with, such as the Stalinist bureaucracy or that of the trade unions dominated by the Stalinists like the UGT in Catalonia, would only be a waste of time.

In his text entitled, *Ne Franco ne Stalin: L'attività sindacale nella trasformazione sociale*,¹⁰⁷ Gaston Leval recites the denunciations made by an important sector of the CNT leadership against “workers neo-capitalism” (*sic*), with reference to the industrial and commercial enterprises that were independent and self-financing; the ones that, after July 19, found full bank accounts and markets for their production and thus became what were called “rich Collectives”, which were not concerned, according to Leval, with the general interest. But even the “poor Collectives” were accused of neo-capitalism, because, not having raw materials or markets, they requested credits from the Catalonian Government to pay their workers “for doing nothing”. The supreme scandal! (Comrade Gastón does not seem to have taken account of the fact that it is not customary for the capitalists to pay their workers “for doing nothing”....)

For Leval as well as for a sector of the CNT, the solution to this problem was to be found in what they called “socialization” (the ambiguity of words!), that is, in the management by the corresponding trade unions of whole industrial sectors. It was, however, precisely in trade union management where the bureaucratic phenomenon assumed, in Catalonia, a certain original prominence. If we take a look at that period we see that, contrary to the practice of the CNT before the Revolution—whose sole paid position, in an organization that embraced one million members, was that of General Secretary, a position that no one held for very long, in an organization, in a word, which had a phobia of bureaucracy and which fought against that phenomenon that is inherent to every organization—after July 19, 1936 the CNT began to undergo a bureaucratic metastasis that took the form of a new layer of trade union officials in all the state institutions or in specifically trade union positions, who were engaged in or wanted to be involved with managerial functions, coordination, planning, or marketing of the production of the collectivized enterprises. This new layer of trade union officials, separated from production, had real power, a power that was simultaneously economic, political, military and even a police power. In the Municipal Councils, in the State administration—and even within the Government Ministries—in the institutions of anti-fascist alliances or in specifically anarchist institutions (CNT-FAI-FIJL), within the associations of agrarian and industrial collectives, in the new army created on the ruins of the militias (we shall examine this issue below), in the police (the regular police or the organizations’ own police forces), wherever the new Power was situated, at the top of the new hierarchy one finds the same group of leaders, the layer of trade union officials with extensive and varied powers, whose positions, to which they were supposed to be periodically reelected, had gradually become theirs by default—under the pretext, once again, that the war forced this upon them! No, we will not be deceived: in spite of their red and black flag, and all their verbiage about liberty, they comprised a true bureaucracy, that is, a separate layer of leaders, crystallized around a core of specific interests derived from the exercise of power, of a power that was, of course, economic as well as political, a power that speaks “in the name” of the proletariat, that is, in its place, while the proletariat is speaking less frequently on its own behalf, before being totally muzzled!

¹⁰⁷ G. Leval, *op. cit.*, Milan, 1948, pp. 36-38 and 40-41.

“In our eyes”, Claude Lefort writes, “the bureaucracy is a group which makes a certain mode of organization prevail, develops under certain conditions, expands along with certain states of the economy and technology only by virtue of a social activity. To attempt to grasp bureaucracy without focusing on a type of specific behavior is condemned to failure from the very beginning. Bureaucracy exists only through bureaucrats and their common aim to form a milieu apart from those whom they dominate, to participate in socialized power, and to interdefine each other in a hierarchy which guarantees them either material status or prestige.”

However, Claude Lefort continues, the bureaucracy cannot be reduced to a set of similar behaviors. The behavior of the isolated individual is “unintelligible”: “... it becomes meaningful only when placed in the context of a group. In fact, the bureaucracy comes about in an immediate socialization of activities and behavior. Here the group is not a category of activity or of socio-economic status; it is a concrete milieu where each draws his own identity. It is here that we can locate the link between bureaucracy and mass institutions. It is in ministries, unions, parties and industrial enterprises that the bureaucracy finds its adequate form because of the structural unity, the interconnection of the tasks, the number of jobs, the proximity of men within each sector, the perspective offered by a growing institutional development, the volume of capital engaged, etc. All of this defines a field of social power. It follows that the bureaucrats' identification with their enterprises is a natural mediation in consciousness whereby a group acquires its own identity. But this identification must not conceal the fact that in reality the bureaucracy does not have its destiny strictly defined by the technical structure of the mass institution. It also makes its own destiny. As the agent of a particular stratification, it multiplies positions and services, partitions various activities, generates artificial controls and coordinations, and reduces an ever growing mass of workers into merely mechanical functions in order to exercise its authority at every level.”¹⁰⁸

Certainly, in the middle of a civil war and amidst the violence of social conflicts, the bureaucracy in Catalonia could not possess such well-defined features, it was more of a vague outline of such a classic bureaucratic form. But Lefort's definition fits it perfectly. This “trade union” bureaucratization was not monolithic, either. Sometimes linked to the State apparatus, it merges with the State and is opposed to it at the same time. Conflicts break out between trade union officials placed by the political situation in the economic apparatus of the State, and other trade union officials whose only responsibility is towards their trade unions, but who nonetheless exercise managerial powers. We need only cite the example of the “Councils of Industry” where we find members of the CNT who are delegates of the Catalanian Government, and other CNT members who are delegates of the corresponding Industrial Trade Unions. The former were responsible for defending the authority of the State, while the latter were responsible for defending the autonomy of the trade unions and their influence over the economy (both had to deal with

¹⁰⁸ Claude Lefort, *Elements d'une critique de la bureaucratie*, Droz, Geneva-Paris, pp. 306-307. In English: “What Is Bureaucracy?”, tr. Jean L. Cohen, *Telos*, no. 22; available online at: <http://www.generation-online.org/h/fplefort.htm>.

all kinds of opposition from the “base”). Not to mention the much more acute rivalries that pitted the CNT against the UGT, both in the economic as well as other fields.

The *cenetista* officials appointed to positions in the different bureaucratic sectors had to appeal to “the discipline of the organization”: those in the Government bureaucracy called for respect for the authority of the comrade Minister (the portfolios that the anarchist Ministers held longest in Catalonia were those of the Economy and Defense); while those in the Trade Union bureaucracy called for respect for the authority of the comrade General Secretary of the corresponding trade union. This divergence signified more than just a simple clash between personalities and official positions, it was more than just a reflection of the disorder and red tape generated by the proliferation of committees and commissions that exercised all kinds of controls—this has been confirmed by all eyewitness accounts—sometimes with regard to matters of state and at other times involving trade union affairs (or party affairs), and were constantly involved in jurisdictional disputes. What was at stake was the outcome of the struggle for hegemony between the two bureaucratic tendencies. The first, the one that I have called the “trade union tendency”, and which, in Catalonia, was almost exclusively represented by the CNT-FAI, and the second, the state bureaucracy in which all the anti-fascist political and trade union organizations were represented—including the CNT—but in which the influence of the Stalinists was growing with each passing day.

One can find an interesting theoretical appraisal of the first tendency in the article published in *Solidaridad Obrera* by Juan Peiró, one of the most influential anarchosindicalist leaders (he was not a member of the FAI) and who was also, at the time the article was published, a Minister in the Central Government—a fact that is quite illustrative of the complexity of the phenomenon. While criticizing, and not without lucidity, the absence of a comprehensive economic plan that would encompass all the industries in the republican zone, Peiró declared, concerning trade union management:

“What I have always been saying, which I repeat today, is that before we address the problem of the collectives and socialized sectors, which today have all the drawbacks of corporate selfishness, we have to give priority to the creation of institutions capable of directing and administering the new economy without the need for either the tutelage or the institutions of the state. But to create the institutions that we will subsequently use to structure the collectivization and socialization of the social wealth, it is also necessary to carry out a revolution; because our conquest and consolidation of positions, so that, once the war ends, we will be capable of organizing the new economy, is also a profoundly revolutionary labor—much more revolutionary than destroying an economy—a labor that entails expropriating, collectivizing or socializing industries, a task for which no one was prepared, among other reasons due to the lack of the appropriate unified institutions required for such a noble and majestic political-social undertaking.”¹⁰⁹

A beautiful example of bureaucratic language: collectives that have not been planned from above “destroy” the economy. According to our theoretician, we have to give

¹⁰⁹ *Solidaridad Obrera* (January 26, 1937).

priority to the creation of directive and administrative institutions. Of course, he does not mention the word bureaucracy even once, but he effectively implies that is what he is talking about when he speaks of efficiency. He would like to prohibit socialization, expropriation and collectivization until the new hierarchy has been erected. As a representative of the “trade unionist” tendency, the comrade Minister would deny the State any role that would interfere with the “new economy”.

The victory of this tendency would have presupposed the victory of the CNT (the “anarchist dictatorship” that the leaders had sacrificed in favor of anti-fascist unity). We know that none of Peiró’s recommendations were implemented, even though the leaders of the CNT did contemplate carrying out a coup d’état on one occasion.¹¹⁰ The bureaucratic transformation of the CNT-FAI allows us to think that, even if the Spanish anarchists were to have really wanted to seize power and were to have actually done so, they would not have done anything different. That is, they would have shared Power with the rival factions of the political bureaucracy (communists, socialists, republicans), without thereby destroying their “power”. There can be no doubt that, disguised under the name of a “Central Workers Council”, what would have ultimately issued from such a “victory” would have been a bureaucratic State.

The bureaucratic tendency that would fight from the beginning to the end of the civil war for the hegemony of the State (of a State that would claim to be based on the rule of law, a republican and democratic State, but a State that bore the seed of the configuration that would later be assumed by the States of the “People’s Democracies”), if it were to have been victorious, would have put the trade unions in their place: they would have been converted into mere bureaucratic machinery in the service of the State. Despite the State’s constantly increasing power, it was never able to totally subjugate the trade unions of the CNT—nor was it able to crush workers autonomy. Comorera, the leader of the PSUC, confessed this failure, which he assumed was temporary, at a meeting of his party in Lérida, in January 1938:

“The trade unions cannot be kept apart from the economic administration of the country. First of all, because the Government does not yet have a sufficiently well-organized economic apparatus to assume sole control over the administration of the economy. Furthermore, Catalonia is a country that has an old and very deeply rooted trade union tradition. We cannot just plunge blindly ahead.... Today it is absolutely necessary for the trade union federations to play a role in the economic management of the country.”¹¹¹

We must not forget that all the organizations, including the CNT-FAI, were represented in the “statist” tendency, and that in order to suppress the sharing of responsibilities in the administration of the economy with the trade unions in such a manner as to work to their own exclusive advantage, they would have first needed an organization—or a coalition of organizations—that would be capable of imposing its will on the others by seizing all

¹¹⁰ Concerning this incident, see Appendix 6.

¹¹¹ Quoted by G. Munis, *Jalones de derrota, promesa de victoria*, Ed. Lucha Obrera, Mexico City, 1948, p. 348.

power, first in the State apparatus, and then in the entire country. The Stalinists and their allies obtained excellent results in this respect, without, however, succeeding in imposing their authority on the entire country.

It was Franco's victory that would resolve the conflict to the detriment of all these organizations, but it would not be too implausible to think that, were the republican side to have won the war, the struggle between the different bureaucratic tendencies would have been settled by force of arms. I am not saying this in order to indulge in the game of retrospective historical hypotheses, but simply to point out that bureaucratic State Capitalism can be reached by various roads.

* * *

The workers who did all the work, which was in the final analysis exemplary, to create the collectives, and who faced a thousand difficulties and attacks from every bureaucracy, were unable to organize a counterattack for the defense and consolidation of their conquests. Their resistance was passive: they did not abide by the stipulations of the Decree, they did not obey the orders and exhortations of the leaders of the CNT. When, forced by a lack of money, they accepted a director appointed by the Generalitat, this director, once he assumed his official post, was not obeyed, either. And so on, in succession. This "defensive" resistance favored, and even justified, the isolation of each enterprise. Within each enterprise (it was undoubtedly true that egoistic motives sometimes played a certain role), the workers were masters. With the drafting of each local or regional plan, the trade union and state bureaucrats rallied in its support, in the name of rationalization and planning, or the needs of the war, or reasons of State. Feeling cut out of the decision making process, the workers took refuge once again in their enterprises, as if they were fortresses under siege. Direct democracy was only possible in the small cities and the towns of Catalonia and Aragon, as I have already pointed out, and therefore, in those places, comprehensive local plans could have been proposed and subjected to public debate, unifying industrial and agricultural enterprises, cultural activities and other aspects of life.

The workers, however, never questioned the trade union structure and do not appear to have displayed a very clear awareness of the bureaucratic phenomenon. For the militants of the CNT, their organization was sacred, even if some of their leaders were not. This undoubtedly explains why there were no serious attempts to reverse the hierarchization of the CNT and force it to pay heed to the working class masses. Nor was anything done to establish a kind of coordination that would have been authentically democratic. Nonetheless, it would have been possible at any given moment (this is merely a way of saying, of course, that as long as the workers did not even pose this problem, this possibility remained an abstract one) for the workers to challenge the trade union officials by electing their own delegates, revocable at any time. These delegates, who would have continued to work in their enterprises, would have been different at every inter-enterprise meeting. Such delegates, always subject to being replaced or reelected in the assemblies of each enterprise, would obviously have been capable of creating effective coordination and solidarity among the different enterprises and industrial sectors of Catalonia. If such

an initiative had been attempted it would have constituted a first step in the workers counter-offensive against the bureaucracy. Given the bond of dependence, however, that tied the revolutionary workers to their organization (the CNT, in this case), this initiative would have seemed like sacrilege, both to the “base”—which, although it resisted and disobeyed, never took the step of engaging in an open and generalized counteroffensive against the bureaucracy—as well as to the bureaucracy itself, which, by the way, would not have hesitated to arrest anyone who publicly questioned the trade union structure, and the “divine right” of the organization, as a fascist saboteur.

* * *

The problem of the bureaucracy is not a secondary problem in contemporary societies in general, nor was it a secondary problem in Catalonia, in particular. It is by no means a marginal phenomenon that can be neutralized by who knows what kind of proper functioning of “democratic institutions” or by the “right to form tendencies”. The problem of the bureaucracy is a central problem of our time. It is true that, since the Spanish Revolution, the totality of bureaucratic experience has been considerably enriched by the victory of the totalitarian bureaucracies in numerous, and some very large, countries and also by the bureaucratization of modern capitalism. Today, it should be perfectly clear to everyone that any differences that may exist between the two systems—the “socialist” and “capitalist” systems—cannot conceal the foundation they have in common, which is exploitation and the lie.

For bureaucratic management also constitutes just as much—and sometimes more—the basis of capitalist management, as the exploitation and alienation of the workers. In any event, we have to put an end once and for all to those stale old myths that claim that bureaucratic management (the alleged “socialist ownership of the means of production”) constitutes a great step forward towards the “good” society, insofar as it has abolished the “private ownership of the means of production”. Today, it has been proven—and conclusively, by the experience of all the labor camps which, in a vast paranoid impulse, have been called “socialist paradises”—that the private ownership of the means of production is not a “constraint on the development of the productive forces”, according to the Marxist thesis, nor is it the only modern form of exploitation.

In 1936-1937, however, the sole reference point, the only existing model of the bureaucratic society, was of course the USSR. It was in the direction of this model of “socialism” that the Stalinists sought to proceed, by the indirect road of republican legality. But it was also towards Soviet society—although with some light touching up—that the members of the POUM directed their gaze, as did many left-wing socialists. No one at that time saw the danger, no one had a clear grasp of the deeper meaning of what was taking place in Catalonia, or of the real nature of Soviet society. Even the anarchist currents that remained faithful to their ideals and instinctively mistrusted, so to speak, the dictatorial aspect of the Soviet regime and the Communist Parties, had not analyzed the importance of the bureaucratic phenomenon and only had a vague and superficial idea—although not a false one—of the nature of the USSR.

“Russian society is divided into classes”, as Pierre Chaliou correctly observes, “among which the two fundamental ones are the bureaucracy and the proletariat. The bureaucracy there plays the role of the dominant, exploiting class in the full sense of the term. It is not merely that it is a privileged class and that its unproductive consumption absorbs a part of the social product comparable to (and probably greater than) that absorbed by the unproductive consumption of the bourgeoisie in private capitalist countries. It also has sovereign control over how the total social product will be used. It does this first of all by determining how the total social product will be distributed among wages and surplus value (at the same time that it tries to dictate to the workers the lowest wages possible and to extract from them the greatest amount of labor possible): next by determining how this surplus value will be distributed between its own unproductive consumption and new investments, and finally by determining how these investments will be distributed among the various sectors of production.”

“But the bureaucracy can control how the social product will be utilized only because it controls production. Because it manages production at the factory level, it always can make the workers produce more for the same wage; because it manages production on the societal level, it can decide to manufacture cannons and silk rather than housing and cotton. We discover, therefore, that the essence, the foundation, of its bureaucratic domination over Russian society comes from the fact that it has dominance within the relations of production; at the same time, we discover that this same function always has been the basis for the domination of one class over society, in other words, at every instant the actual essence of class relations in production is the antagonistic division of those who participate in the production process into two fixed and stable categories, directors and executants. Everything else is concerned with the sociological and juridical mechanisms that guarantee the stability of the managerial stratum; that is how it is with feudal ownership of the land, capitalist private property, or this strange form of private, non-personal property ownership that characterizes present-day capitalism; that is how it is in Russia with the 'communist Party' the totalitarian dictatorship by the organ that expresses the bureaucracy's general interests and that ensures that the members of the ruling class are recruited through co-optation the scale of society as a whole.”¹¹² (Of course, this can be applied today to China as well as Russia, to Romania and Cuba, etc., and this is what was at stake in the class struggle of revolutionary Catalonia.)

It is not a very original insight to claim that the Gordian Knot of exploitation is the relations of production. These relations of production are ruled by the order giver-order taker [*dirigente-ejecutante*] antagonism. This means that the worker, situated in the process of production with the role of simple executor, is dispossessed of all decision-making power over his labor, of any participation, and is converted into a simple cog in an activity conceived and organized by others—the order givers—who will take possession of the “products” and who will make the decisions, completely independently, about how they will be used. It is obvious that, at this level, the relations of production are identical, they pertain to both the factory of a capitalist trust—with its shares traded

¹¹² Pierre Chaliou, “Sur le contenu du socialisme”, in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, No. 17, pp. 6-7.

on the Stock Exchange—as well as the factory of a State Trust. The differences that may exist between the two systems—which were much more distinct in the era that we are studying, but which have since become somewhat blurred with the accelerated bureaucratization of capitalism—changes nothing essential with regard to the exploitation and the alienation of the wage workers in modern societies.

I place so much emphasis on the exploitation and alienation of the workers because it is one of the favorite themes of the bureaucratic lie (which holds that they, the workers, prefer bureaucratic management! What a joke!). It is obvious, however, that, to various degrees, it is society in general, the totality of human activities and everyday life in its entirety, that must suffer and has to fight against exploitation, alienation and the hierarchical division between order givers and order takers. Because it will obviously not be in his capacity as a citizen that the dispossessed worker (or anyone else) will be effectively involved, and will really participate in the decision-making processes of the State with regard to the use of the products of his labor or even about his own life. In this sense, the comparison is even less favorable for the totalitarian regimes (“socialist” or otherwise). As disgusting as it is when all these “revolutionary” altar boys profess how much they love democratic liberties—which they call bourgeois—when they are abolished it is even worse.

I think that the considerations I have set forth above clarify the content of the class struggle in Catalonia. Behind the propaganda of the left-wing parties and their more or less moderate programs (we will preserve important sectors of private capitalism for political reasons) or their more or less “revolutionary” programs (we will accelerate the nationalization of the economy), we see the struggle between workers self-management and bureaucratic management—and the latter’s somewhat original version generated by the superior committees of the CNT. State control over the economy—and over social life in general—seems to me to be what is inscribed in the political and social evolution of the Spanish Republic during the civil war. (Franco’s victory, however, also represented, in its own way, a nationalization of society and the economy, with its bureaucratic corollary, which is today making major progress, not without a struggle, towards the status of what some sociologists call “industrial society”.)

The workers who had *created*, and defended for so many months, the self-management of numerous industrial and agricultural (and also cultural, educational, etc.) sectors, had as their *enemies* not only the military and the fascists who represented the ruling classes of the bourgeoisie and the *latifundistas*, but also, “objectively”, the new bureaucratic layers which, under the same flags as the workers, were prepared—and had already commenced—to reestablish, sometimes under new forms, the same old exploitation of the wage worker and the totalitarian hierarchization of social life.

The reader should once again note the subtle insertion into society of certain mechanisms that always act—albeit not always in the same way—to reestablish on the plane of production—and of society as a whole—the order giver-order taker dichotomy. The role that the political and trade union organizations “of the working class” played in this process (and in others) is so obvious that one may ask how many more proofs are needed

to demonstrate that the parties and trade unions constitute an aspect—and have long done so—of the specific instruments of generalized coercion of modern societies.

Chapter 5

Militiamen, yes! Soldiers, never!

After the July events of 1936, there was no longer either an army or a police force, and the workers militias assumed responsibility for defending the Revolution, in the rearguard as well as at the front. In this matter, as well, the Generalitat was compelled to recognize the revolutionary initiatives, awaiting “better days”: on July 21, 1936, Companys issue a Decree creating the workers militias ... which had already crushed the military uprising in Catalonia several days earlier. The Decree attributed to the militias a temporary and defensive role. Enrique Pérez Farras was appointed “military commander of the militias”, and Luis Prunes y Sato was appointed the Commissar of Defense of the Generalitat, “with all necessary powers for the organization of the militias”.

In reality, it was the workers organizations that organized, armed and commanded the columns of militiamen; each organization had its own column. The Interim Committee created by the Generalitat was limited to legalizing the initiatives and requisitions for the armament, supply and transport of the militias.

“Here is the initial composition of the anti-fascist militias of Catalonia: CNT-FAI, 13,000 men; UGT, 2,000; Police and Generalitat, 2,000.”¹¹³

The militiamen were mostly members of the CNT-FAI. It was this organization that devised the initiative of marching on Zaragoza, a city with an important anarchosindicalist sector which, as we have seen, was in the hands of rebel military units. This first column entered Aragon four days after the end of the fighting in Barcelona. The railroad workers had hastily constructed an armored train that they placed at the disposal of the militiamen; the latter also requisitioned private automobiles and trucks. They advanced amidst the enthusiasm produced by their first victories, liberating numerous cities and towns in Aragon. Soon, however, the column, once it came within a few kilometers of Zaragoza, was unable to proceed any further. Entrenched in the city and in the mountains around it, with the Ebro as an impenetrable barrier, the military, with superior armament, interrupted the progress of the militiamen. They never took the city.

It is noteworthy that it never occurred to anyone to surround the city, penetrate through the rearguard of the enemy lines and take them by surprise. Antecedents for this kind of guerrilla tactic were right at hand, provided by the war against Napoleon, in Spain itself. As we shall see below, however, the stalemate before Zaragoza is merely one example

¹¹³ A. & D. Prudhommeaux, *La Catalogne Libertaire, 1936-1937*, Ed. Cahiers Spartacus, 1940, p. 6.

among many others of the incapacity of the militias, and above all of the incapacity of the so-called Popular Army, created several months later, to engage in real guerrilla warfare.

The commander of this column was Buenaventura Durruti, one of the most popular militants of the anarchist movement, one of those “natural leaders” who often had more influence than the *secretaries* (the immense majority of these “natural leaders”, during the civil war, served in the highest ranks of the State apparatus, the trade unions, the army, etc., thus losing their “natural” quality and becoming “official”). Pérez Farras, a career military officer, was its military advisor. In anarchist accounts, Durruti became the symbol of the social transformations that were carried out during the advance of his column through Catalonia and Aragon. In other accounts, he was an “executioner” who used terrorist means to impose libertarian communism on Aragon.¹¹⁴ Historical events are always associated with the figure of a “hero”. Durruti was neither an “executioner” nor was he the archangel of the social revolution. His column undoubtedly committed excesses, but it also acted as the leaven for the creation of the “libertarian communes”. The anarchist peasants, however, did not wait for his “orders” to carry out collectivizations: Franco’s uprising and the revolutionary response, the entry of the column of militiamen in Aragon, were for them the *signal* sounding the hour of the social revolution. As was also true of the industrial collectives, what characterized the peasant movement was its *spontaneity*. The presence of the anarchist militiamen undoubtedly favored the creation of the libertarian communes, but it was not the militiamen that *created* them.

This is how Durruti described the activity of “his” column:

“As for my column, I am satisfied with it. We are making war and revolution simultaneously. Revolutionary measures are being taken not just in Barcelona, but right up to the front. Each village we conquer embarks upon a revolutionary course. A defeat of my column would be quite awful, for our retreat would not be comparable to the retreat of any army: we should have to take with us all the inhabitants of the villages through which we have passed. From the front right back to Barcelona, there are only fighters along the route we have followed. Everyone works for the war and for the revolution: this is our strength.”¹¹⁵

This describes a strategy for revolutionary war that was quite well-adapted to the situation, but which unfortunately was not sufficiently developed. Durruti was not the only prestigious commander of an anarchist column—in this respect he was joined by Domingo Ascaso, Cipriano Mera, Ricardo Sanz, etc.—who, once the war began, attempted to convert his column into shock troops of the social revolution. It is just that, as I said, he encountered the enthusiastic support of the poor peasants and the workers who plunged into the prodigious adventure of the “libertarian communes”. All these “natural leaders”, however, once they became column commanders, accepted militarization (including Durruti), and their example and their prestige carried a great

¹¹⁴ On these executions, see Appendix 7.

¹¹⁵ Peirats, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

deal of weight. The role of these leaders is very ambiguous: precisely because they had a “history of struggle” behind them, because they courageously fought in the front lines of the battles of Barcelona (I am referring to the anarchist leaders), they were capable of “drawing the masses along with them”; they had ideas and they took risks, they were *listened to* and *obeyed*. And precisely because they were listened to and obeyed, they were capable, as the foundations of the new social stratification were being laid, *of separating themselves* from the masses and of playing the specific role of bureaucrat-leader. And this tendency, which was true of the revolution more generally, was also true of the question of the militarization of the militias. Thus, the “army of social liberation” that the first militia columns comprised, would become, as we shall see, a bad army of the “Prussian” type.

Durruti died—under mysterious circumstances that have given rise to all kinds of speculation¹¹⁶—on November 20, 1936, in Madrid, where his column had been transferred to reinforce the city’s defense against the fascist offensive. And although we know that he accepted militarization, what we do not know is whether he would have accepted all the reactionary consequences that it entailed. But what purpose can be served by such speculations?

* * *

During the first few months of the war, the militias of the CNT were characterized by their *anti-authoritarian* spirit.

“... there were also no military titles, badges, or distinctions in the way of food, clothing and quarters, and the few professional military men whose services were accepted acted only in an advisory capacity. The basic unit was the group, composed generally of ten men; each group elected a delegate, whose functions were somewhat akin to those of a non-commissioned officer of the lowest rank, but without the equivalent authority. Ten groups formed a century which also elected its own delegate, and any number of centuries made up a *columna*, or “column”, at whose head stood a committee of war. This committee was likewise elective and was divided into various sections in accordance with the needs of the column. The gradation into group and century delegates and a committee of war did not imply the existence of any permanent staff with special privileges since all delegates could be removed as soon as they failed to reflect the wishes of the men who had elected them.”¹¹⁷

This anti-authoritarianism, characteristic of the anarchists, did not exist in all the militia columns, but “support for an ideal” and enthusiasm almost always complemented military discipline. The first battles in which the militias engaged the regular military, the police or fascist volunteers, sometimes ended in victory and sometimes in defeat, but all the leaders thought that the essential cause, and almost always the only cause, of their defeats, was the absence of specifically military discipline. They said that the key to

¹¹⁶ On the death of Durruti, see Appendix 8.

¹¹⁷ Bolloten, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

victory was the establishment of iron discipline and therefore the militarization of the militias.

* * *

The Central Government, under its President José Giral, conscripted two age-groups of military drafts at the end of July 1936, in order to serve as a counterweight to the workers militias, a measure that had no practical effect, first of all because the immense majority of the “conscripts” were already at the front with the militias, but also because the Government at that time possessed no means of coercion that could be brought to bear against the few “shirkers”. On August 3 another Decree was promulgated, announcing the creation of “Volunteer Battalions”,¹¹⁸ but the volunteers continued to join the workers militias.

Nonetheless, the Government was determined to have “its own” army and, since it could not allow the workers militias to exercise a monopoly over the conduct of the war, it insisted, and two weeks later, on August 18, 1936, Giral, with the support of the Stalinists (as Giral himself told Bollothen), “issued a series of decrees aimed at the formation of a ‘volunteer army’, which was to be raised from among men of the first-line reserve, with cadres composed of retired officers and of non-commissioned officers not then on active service, whose loyalty had been attested by a Popular Front organization”.¹¹⁹ All these Decrees, however, had no effect at all, not only because the volunteers were already at the front, but also because of the enormous mistrust that the CNT-FAI and the socialist left—which accounted for a large number of people—felt towards José Giral and his Government, which they considered too *bourgeois*. These organizations, which controlled the majority of the militia forces, did not want to surrender their military authority to a Government that they did not really accept. Only later, when the more “working class” Government of Largo Caballero was formed (and later that of the Generalitat), and basically as a result of the machinations of the Stalinists and the blackmail of Russian arms, was it possible to create, to oppose Franco’s army, a republican army of the *same type*. Which in and of itself constituted an obvious disaster.

In Catalonia, the attempt to reconstitute the old hierarchical army of the classical type met with particularly strong resistance. “As a result of the conscription decree issued by the Madrid Government and the Generalitat, the streets of Barcelona were flooded with the recruits of the categories of 1933/34 and 1935 who, since they had no faith in the officers and considered themselves to be liberated from the old military conceptions of regimentation, refused to report for service. Many of these young people enlisted in the militias; some even wanted to depart immediately for Zaragoza.” At a big rally attended by 10,000 young people, the following resolution was approved:

¹¹⁸ See Fernando Díaz-Plaja, *El Siglo XX. La Guerra. 1936-1939* [*The 20th Century: The War, 1936-1939*], Ed. Faro, Madrid, 1963, pp. 194-195.

¹¹⁹ Bollothen, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

“We do not refuse to do our civic and revolutionary duty. We want to go to liberate our brothers in Zaragoza. We want to be militiamen of freedom, not soldiers in uniform. The army has demonstrated that it is a danger to the people; only the popular militias can protect public liberties: Militiamen, yes! Soldiers, never!”¹²⁰

The Catalanian Federation of the CNT-FAI concurred with this spirit and declared: “We cannot defend the existence nor can we comprehend the need for a regular, uniformed and compulsory army. That army ought to be supplanted by the militias, by the people armed, the sole guarantee that freedom will be defended zealously and that fresh plots will not be hatched in the shadows.”¹²¹ Finally, the Central Committee of Militias adopted a compromise solution, and on August 6 proclaimed “that the soldiers from the reserves of 1934-1935 and 1936 should immediately report to their barracks and place themselves at the disposal of the Militia Committees formed under the jurisdiction of the Central Committee of Anti-fascist Militias”.¹²²

The campaign waged against the militias in order to create a regular army was intensified and gained ground after September 1936. On September 4 the Largo Caballero Government was formed,¹²³ which was a very important milestone in the reconstruction of the State. The new Government, reinforced by the support of a broad sector of communist and socialist working class organizations, yet nonetheless enjoying a fairly good reputation, both among the anarchists as well as among the republicans, successfully accomplished what the Giral Government could not do, despite the help of the Stalinists, especially with regard to the army.

On October 10 the Popular Army was created by Decree and the militias were militarized. On October 15 the General Commissariat of War was formed, to which the political commissars of the army were responsible (a Ministry of War personally led by Largo Caballero, who combined this function with that of Prime Minister, still existed, of course). On October 22 the creation of the International Brigades was approved, etc.

On November 4, 1936, four anarchist leaders joined the Cabinet of the Central Government (see Appendix 9).

* * *

The Generalitat, in which the anarchists—on September 27—had just accepted Ministerial portfolios, faithfully followed the Central Government with respect to measures relating to the formation of an Army. October 1: mobilization decree affecting officers, non-commissioned officers and staff officers. October 4: conscription of all able-bodied men between the ages of 18 and 40. At the same time, the Central Committee of Militias was dissolved, as we have seen, on October 3 and all its powers relating to

¹²⁰ Prudhommeaux, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-10.

¹²¹ Peirats, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 187.

¹²² *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 188.

¹²³ For the composition of this Government, see Appendix 9.

military affairs were vested in the Department of Defense of the Generalitat. This Department was headed by Díaz Sandino, a career military officer.

The anarchist leaders, as we shall see, were about to perform an extremely abrupt “theoretical” about-face, not only with respect to their own participation in Government, but also with respect to the latter’s social role. On the same day that the Largo Caballero Government was formed, September 4, 1936, *Solidaridad Obrera* published an article entitled, “The Uselessness of the Government”, in which one may read the following:

“... the existence of a Popular Front government is tantamount to a clumsy imitation of [the antifascist] struggle.

“The war being waged in Spain is a social war. The weight of any moderating power, based upon the balance and conservation of classes, is incapable of playing a precise role in a conflict that shakes and enfeebles the very foundations of the state. So it is correct to say that in Spain the Popular Front government is merely a reflection of a compromise between the petty bourgeoisie and international capital.”¹²⁴

These harsh (but accurate) words did not prevent the CNT-FAI from shortly afterwards entering the Catalanian Government—disguised, it is true, under the name of the Council of the Generalitat—and then, after that, the Central Government. Already, before they joined these Governments, a whole series of agreements had been signed and negotiations undertaken concerning which the militants of the CNT-FAI knew practically nothing. In mid-September, on the occasion of a Plenum of the CNT, the formation of a “National Defense Council” was suggested, which would be presided over by Largo Caballero, which was merely a simple operation of camouflage to allow them to collaborate with the Government under another name. But the other parties were very eager for the CNT to participate in the Central Government and thus to make it an accomplice in the liquidation of workers autonomy in general and of the militias in particular. Their wish would come true.

As soon as they entered the Government, the tone of the anarchists changed and they adopted the “responsible” language of Government Ministers. Thus, the extremist García Oliver, now Minister of Justice, on December 4, 1936, during a rally in Valencia, exclaimed:

“Are we interested in winning the war? Then whatever may be the ideologies or the *credos* of the workers or the organisations to which they belong, they must use the methods used by the enemy, and especially discipline and union. With discipline and efficient military organisation, we shall win without a doubt. Discipline for those who struggle at the front and at the work bench, discipline in everything is the basis for triumph....”¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Peirats, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

¹²⁵ Vernon Richards, *Lessons of the Spanish Revolution (1936-1939)*, Freedom Press, London, 1983, p. 85.

How far removed are these speeches from the creativity of the masses, which was so often extolled by these same anarchist leaders! The language used by García Oliver had become indistinguishable from that used by the Stalinists.

“This growth of the bureaucratic and legalistic mind [within the CNT/FAI]”, Richards writes, “was accompanied by a slackening of the organisational methods by which decisions were normally taken by the CNT. In other words, a leadership was created—not only by the politicians and influential members of the CNT but also by the many members who held important administrative posts and military commands—which functioned through Committees and government departments, rarely consulting or giving an account of its actions to the rank and file of the organization....”¹²⁶

On the day after the CNT-FAI joined the Central Government, the Italian anarchist theoretician, Camillo Berneri, in an article in the newspaper, *Guerra di classe*, which he published in Barcelona, entitled, “Beware, Dangerous Turn”, wrote:

“It is necessary to deplore, moreover, the advance of bolshevisation within the ranks of the CNT characterised by the ever diminishing possibility for elements at the power base to exercise a vigilant, active and direct control over the works accomplished by the organisation’s representatives within government committees and Councils. We should create a series of commissions elected by the CNT and the FAI which have the aim of facilitating, but at the same time of rectifying whenever necessary the works of our representatives within the Councils of War and Economy.”¹²⁷

This controversy was not an abstract polemic between supporters of a traditional army—and therefore of a strong State—and the supporters of the workers militias—and therefore of revolutionary democracy. Some very concrete and very serious problems were at issue, since the military situation was by no means rosy. After the first victories of the workers in arms, victories that were attributable to improvisation and audacity, which crushed the military uprising in the main cities and industrial regions, Franco’s armies seemed to have risen up from the grave: they gained ground in Andalusia, and they conquered Extremadura, thus converging with the army in the North. On September 27, Toledo fell into their hands; Madrid, besieged, seemed as if it could not hold out much longer—in fact, it would hold out until the very end of the war—Irún fell on September 4, San Sebastián on September 13, etc.

All these defeats were blamed on the indiscipline, the disorder and the “anarchy” of the militias. The anarchist leaders, who had at first been supporters of preserving the militias,

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ Camillo Berneri. Some of his articles were published in a pamphlet entitled, *Guerre de classe en Espagne*, Ed. AIT (in French). See also *Guerra de clases en España, 1936-1939*, Ed. Tusquets, edited by Carlos M. Rama. [A selection of Berneri’s writings on the Spanish Civil War may be found online at: <http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/camillo-berneri-war-and-revolution#toc8>].

were gradually becoming defenders of their militarization. This conversion was precipitated, as we have seen, by their entry into the Governments.

For their part, the communists were from the beginning fervent supporters of a hierarchical, disciplined army under a unitary command structure. On August 18 they demanded, in a manifesto, the creation of a “new, heroic people’s army”, which would have to provide “the necessary cohesion and discipline”¹²⁸. On August 21, their newspaper, *Mundo Obrero*, declared that it was necessary to create “in the shortest possible time an army with all the technical efficiency required by a modern war. There can be no doubt that the cornerstone of our army is our heroic popular militia. But it is not enough to romance about its self-sacrifice and heroism. We must give thought to the measures that should be put into effect immediately with a view to increasing the efficiency of the people in arms....”¹²⁹

One must not think that the supporters of the militias refused to acknowledge military problems in general and the defects of the militias in particular. Kaminski, for example, who was wholeheartedly in favor of the social revolution, wrote:

“‘It is hardly necessary to say’, wrote a left-wing observer, ‘that these troops made every mistake that can be made. Night attacks were launched with *vivas* for the revolution; artillery was often placed on the same line as the infantry. Sometimes there were really grotesque incidents. One day a militiamen told me that after lunch a whole detachment went into a neighboring field to eat grapes; when it returned its position had been occupied by the enemy’.”¹³⁰

There are many testimonials concerning “grotesque incidents” of this type. For example, when the front was near the home towns of the militiamen, it was not rare for them to “sleep at home”. On other occasions, the militiamen refused to carry out one or another operation for reasons that were at times extremely eccentric. It need not be thought that fear was the main reason, since the witnesses themselves insist on the valor and courage of the militiamen, who sometimes even refused to dig trenches because “a revolutionary does not hide from enemy fire”. Apart from the examples of “misconduct” on the part of the militiamen, whom the pseudo-theoreticians of the modern army ordinarily considered to be soldiers-in-training, other, definitely more serious defects have been noted. These

¹²⁸ *Guerra y Revolución*, p. 309.

¹²⁹ Bolloten, *op. cit.*, p. 222. The Spanish translation of this passage from Bolloten’s book corresponds only in part to the text of the 1961 edition of *The Grand Camouflage: The Communist Conspiracy in the Spanish Civil War* (Frederick A. Praeger, New York, p. 207) quoted above. The text as translated from the Spanish is as follows: “in the shortest possible time an army with all the technical efficiency required by a modern war.... Against Franco’s army, supported by Italian and German troops, we must oppose another army that is not only of the same type (undoubtedly just as heroic and as popular as Franco’s army? [C.S.M.]), but even more modern if necessary. In this resides the guarantee of victory”.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 209, quoting Kaminski, *op. cit.*, p. 244.

defects basically involved the relation between the militia columns and their mother organizations—political parties and trade unions—under whose command they almost always operated. Thus, when columns of militiamen from different political—or trade union—factions were posted on the same front, as was the case in Aragon, if the “General Staff”—which was, by the way, more or less improvised, since the professional military advisors were held in suspicion—resolved to carry out an operation, all the columns of militiamen consulted first with their organizations, before approving or rejecting the plan. Furthermore, there was open rivalry between columns belonging to different ideological factions which sometimes caused them to steal weapons from each other—and which necessarily led them to refuse to deliver them to a poorly equipped rival column—and even, during periods of serious political conflict, to settle their differences at gunpoint....

There were also those who reproached the militia system for the absence of an all-embracing General Staff, a unified command of the traditional type, for some; and for others the absence of a coordinating institution on a national scale empowered to obtain intelligence concerning the situation on all the fronts, draft a common plan and make decisions concerning the supply of arms, munitions, means of transport, etc.

As the war dragged on, and the enemy dug in and dominated the conflict in certain regions, after the improvisation of the first few weeks a new general strategy became necessary. I shall immediately point out that as far as I am concerned, this necessary strategy had nothing to do with the improvised construction of an army identical to Franco’s army, with all the trappings of uniforms, salutes and braided epaulets, with officers who had the right to shoot the soldiers, with a hierarchy of pay rates, clothing, food and housing, with the goosestep and blind discipline. All this “Prussian” discipline that they sought to impose, did nothing but impede the essential thing: the implementation of a strategy that would be the counterpart of the social revolution that was underway, that is, a strategy of revolutionary guerrilla war. We shall have occasion to stress the importance of this matter later in this text.

The communists and the new army

The communists were the first to propose the dissolution of their militias into the regular army. And this is what they did immediately, as soon as the decree ordering the militarization of the militias was promulgated. B. Bolloten has this to say about the policy of the communists:

“In order to set an example to others, the Communist Party progressively broke up its own Fifth Regiment, whose battalions, together with other forces, were welded into the ‘mixed brigades’ of the embryonic regular army, Enrique Lister, head of the Fifth Regiment at that time, being made commander (with a Soviet officer at his side) of the first of these units. Because they took the lead in disbanding their own militia, the Communists secured for themselves the control of five of the first six brigades of the new army.” While they were taking control of these first units of the new army, the communists did not overlook the highest ranks of the command structure. For Bolloten

recalls that, during the first few weeks, with Largo Caballero as Minister of War, they had assured themselves of an enviable position: “This they were able to do partly because their relations with the War Minister, notwithstanding his many grievances, were still of a tolerable nature, as a result of which two of their adherents, Antonio Cordón and Alejandro García Val, were appointed to the operations section of the General Staff, but mainly because in key positions in the War Ministry there were men of supposedly unquestioned loyalty to Caballero, such as Lieutenant-Colonel Manuel Arredondo, his aide-de-camp, Captain Eleuterio Díaz Tendero, the head of the vital Information and Control Department, and Major Manuel Estrada, the Chief of the General Staff, who had already been drawn or were being drawn into the Communist orbit.”¹³¹

The communists thus assured themselves of the control of numerous key sectors of the military apparatus. Through the commissars, they exercised total control over the General Commissariat of War, an institution created on October 15, 1936 to ensure the political reliability of the armed forces. As it turned out, Alvarez del Vayo, General Commissar (and later the Minister of Foreign Affairs), as well as Felipe Pretel, general secretary of the Commissariat, who were initially supporters of Largo Caballero and who enjoyed his implicit confidence, were actually acting on behalf of the Communist Party. In addition, other communist leaders, such as Antonio Mije, a member of the Politburo, and José Laín, one of the leaders of the JSU, occupied the posts of Assistant Commissar of the Commissariat and Director of the School of Political Commissars, respectively.

On the other hand, when the militia columns were merged into the new popular army, care was taken to make sure that in the new brigades (and regiments) thus formed, militiamen from different political and trade union organizations should be “mixed”. These “mixed” formations (mixed battalions and brigades), however, curiously favored the communist military leaders and the professional officers allied with the Communist Party, who were appointed to commanding positions in these units. From the point of view of unitary command this mixing was logical, because it was conducive to unitary command and a central General Staff and because it was necessary to put an end to the relative autonomy of the columns and the various “General Staffs” of the parties and trade unions. They likewise wanted to impose the principle of the State above the parties—every party was simultaneously engaged in a merciless fight to control the State. It seemed that in this respect, as well, the communists profited to a great extent from their “infiltration” tactics. This “infiltration” was denounced somewhat later by some of their former allies, particularly by Largo Caballero, Luis Araquistain and Indalecio Prieto. The importance acquired by the party was due not only to its skillful maneuvering and its manipulation of Soviet aid, but also to the fact that its methods and ideology were quite well adapted to the turn taken by the struggle: the revolution had given way to a “war of national independence”.

In fact, no other social institution—since the officers who remained faithful to the Republic were too few in number to constitute an effective factor—was so prepared to transform itself into an “army corps” as the Communist Party. The rigid hierarchy, blind

¹³¹ Bolloten, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

discipline and unquestioning obedience that prevailed in its ranks, constituted the most favorable objective basis for the transformation of the party apparatus into the machinery of the new army. This disciplined and efficient structure, as well as its conservative and centralist policy, caused the Communist Party's ranks to swell and its importance to increase. This is why it attracted into its ranks, or into its orbit, many conservative professional military officers. As one of them told José Martín Blásquez: "I joined the Communists because they are disciplined and do their job better than anybody else."¹³² The growing influence of the Communist Party as the party of order is even more clearly displayed in the following statement made by a young republican journalist, who would later become a political commissar, to Franz Borkenau:

"The communists have been best in organizing work: and moreover they are by far the most conservative section of the movement. I do not see any reason why I should not be a communist, and probably I will join the party one day'."¹³³

It would also be interesting to analyze the extraordinary attraction exercised by the Communist Party over many "petty bourgeois" intellectuals (to use the Party's jargon). It seems to us that the explanation for this phenomenon has to be sought in the duality of the Communist Party: on the one hand it was the "heir" of the "great Bolshevik revolution", the Spanish section of the party of world revolution, whose glorious leaders, Lenin yesterday, Stalin today, appeared to timorous souls as the *nec plus ultra* of revolutionary extremism. To be a member of this Party (or one of its fellow travelers), which was ultra-revolutionary in the fantasy world of that time (just as Maoism or Guevarism would be for the world of 1973) and to participate in its conservative, "democratic" and even reactionary policy, was evidently the ideal solution, which these "petty bourgeois" elements found profoundly satisfying for their pretensions to "progress and culture" and for their panic-stricken fear of the revolution.

It is certainly true that the fantasy of revolution, especially of the October Revolution, which was so skillfully exploited by the Spanish Stalinists, found a widespread echo among certain simple souls, who joined the Party more for Chapaev's leather jacket (as featured in the Soviet film, *Chapaev*, that was profusely utilized as a tool of the Party's propaganda) than for the counterrevolutionary politics of the Communist Party.

Franz Borkenau, in his Introduction to the book by José Martín Blásquez, *I Helped to Build an Army*, wrote:

"With the siege of Madrid, military leadership, from November 1936 onwards, fell into the hands of the Communists, who launched a totalitarian scheme instead of a revolutionary one. The basic ideas of Communist military policy were: No revolution during the war; strict discipline, including terrorism within the ranks; strict political

¹³² J. Martín Blásquez, *I Helped to Build an Army*, London, Secker and Warburg, 1939, p. 205. Quoted by Bolloten, *op. cit.*, footnote 11, p. 224.

¹³³ F. Borkenau, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

control of the army, by a system of political ‘commissars’, with the aim of creating an ideology adapted to this policy, an ideology, that is, mainly based on nationalism.”¹³⁴

It must be pointed out, however, that for the Stalinist leaders and cadres of the Spanish Communist Party, this “concentration of power”, this establishment of a strong, military-bureaucratic State, to the degree that they were successful in controlling the latter (and we have seen how successful they were), was also a preparation for the “revolution”. According to their bureaucratic conceptions, the fact that the party should occupy key positions in the State apparatus, especially in the army and the police, would constitute the antechamber to the total seizure of power by the Party. This represents, as everyone knows, the supreme revolutionary goal of the communists. If they did not carry out this bureaucratic revolution—or this coup d’état—it was because their own interests with regard to this point were contrary to those of the Soviet bureaucracy, which wanted Spain to preserve its character as a bourgeois Republic. With this sole difference, the type of society that was in gestation in Spain and the role played by the Soviets in its formation, constituted, as G. Munis points out,¹³⁵ *a trial run* for what was later implemented in Eastern Europe in the “people’s democracies”.

The anarchist militias resist militarization

I have already pointed out that the anarchist leaders, as soon as they joined the Central Government, became resolute supporters of militarization and therefore contributed their own criticisms to the campaign to discredit the militias. We thus behold Federica Montseny exclaiming at a rally:

“Those in charge would order an operation and the militiamen would meet to discuss it. Five, six, and seven hours were lost in deliberation, and when the operation was finally launched the enemy had already attained his objective. Such things make one laugh, and they also make one weep.”¹³⁶

Within the ranks of the CNT-FAI, however, there were also fanatical defenders of the militias. Besides reaffirming libertarian principles, which were fundamentally incompatible with the army, the military discipline, the military ranks, and the blind obedience to commanders that were demanded by the advocates of the so-called Popular Army, these defenders of the militias called attention to the courage, the audacity, and the spirit of sacrifice of the *volunteers*, which no mercenary army would ever be able to match.

¹³⁴ Franz Borkenau, in J. Martín Blásquez, *I Helped to Build an Army*, pp. x-xi.

¹³⁵ G. Munis, *op. cit.*, p. 348.

¹³⁶ *Solidaridad Obrera* (December 1, 1936). [English language quotation taken from: Burnett Bolloten, *The Spanish Revolution: The Left and the Struggle for Power during the Civil War*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1979, p. 307—Translator’s Note.]

For example, a delegate of the Iron Column declared, at a CNT congress in November 1936:

“There are comrades who think that militarization will solve everything and we say that it will solve nothing. Against the corporals, sergeants and the officers who have graduated from the academies, who are totally unprepared for the problems of the war, we oppose our own organization, we do not accept the military structure.”¹³⁷

This column of 3,000 members which operated on the Teruel Front defended a consistent anarchist position that led it to condemn, along with militarization, the new governmental policy of the CNT-FAI. Thus, its delegate declared, in the speech quoted above:

“... all our actions must tend not to reinforce the State, but, to the contrary, we must destroy it little by little; we must render the Government completely useless. We accept nothing that is contrary to our ideas about anarchism, ideas that must become reality, because you do not preach one thing and do the opposite.”¹³⁸

With the support of the anarchist Ministers, however, the Central Government, under the Presidency of Largo Caballero, increased its pressure against the militias. Starting in December 1936, the militia columns that refused militarization no longer received arms shipments, and a Decree promulgated on December 31 stipulated that pay would only be disbursed to battalions of the regular army.

Despite the fact that, on the Madrid front—along with other fronts—the columns of the CNT-FAI had by that time consented to become army divisions and submit to the strict and authoritarian regulations of a regular army (while at the same time they resisted integration into the “mixed brigades”), in Catalonia and “its” front in Aragon, on the other hand, the situation was somewhat different. There, as we have said, the CNT-FAI constituted the majority at that time, both on the front as well as in the rearguard. This majority status was translated, “among the rank and file”, into greater resistance to militarization than was evinced elsewhere, while at the “summit”, the anarchist leaders—especially those who were Ministers of the Generalitat and the Central Government—although they accepted militarization like their counterparts in the other parts of Spain, wanted to at least retain command over their columns, which were gradually being transformed into divisions, and over the organization of the front and its logistics. This “autonomy” of the Aragon front was accepted by Largo Caballero who, offended by the underhanded scheming of the Spanish and Russian Stalinists, attempted to engage in a rapprochement with the CNT-FAI. In late October 1936, the militias staged an offensive on the Aragon front and seized positions at Monte Aragón and Estrecho Quinto, thus occupying positions overlooking Huesca. If Huesca could be taken then Zaragoza could be outflanked and attacked from the rear. But the militias tragically lacked the arms to continue their offensive. The bourgeois-Stalinist coalition that dominated the Central Government did not send them arms for the simple reason that it did not want the

¹³⁷ *Fragua Social* (November 14, 1936).

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

revolutionary forces to have any victories in the field. I have already quoted Krivitsky, who explained that his mission was, by all possible means, to prevent Soviet arms from falling into the power of the Catalan revolutionaries. This shortage of arms, painstakingly described by George Orwell in his *Homage to Catalonia*, prevented any serious offensive from being waged. And the vast propaganda machine of the Communist Party then began to ask, “Why don’t they attack on the Aragon front?”, and more or less openly accused the anarchist militiamen of sabotage and even of treason. Even today, the strictly official history of the war written by a commission of the Communist Party, under the chairmanship of Dolores Ibarruri, claims:

“The Aragon front had become a kind of ‘private preserve’ of the anarchists and the latter were principally responsible for the inactivity on that front.

“This passivity was most advantageous for the fascist rebels.”¹³⁹

One of the reasons that was most frequently invoked by the anarchist leaders to justify their entry into the Governments, was precisely that they would thereby be more capable of ensuring the equitable distribution of arms. So, in a way, they sacrificed their “anarchist honor” so that the Aragon front would be better supplied. Their “sacrifice”, however, was fruitless, and their participation in the government only benefited the interests of the counterrevolution.

Obviously, the blackmail involving Soviet arms also helped to impose Stalinist ideas on the military terrain—as it had in other fields. The American historian David T. Cattell wrote, with respect to this question:

“Soviet aid was used to discriminate against the revolutionaries in Catalonia in several ways. There is good circumstantial evidence that the Soviet Union set these conditions for aiding Catalonia: that the dissident Communist POUM should not be allowed to participate any longer in the Catalonia Generalitat, and that the Catalan government must submit to the over-all program set down by the central government. Aid to Catalonia began in December, and immediately the POUM representatives were dropped from the Council, the Catalan militias submitted to the long process of being organized into a regular army, and the central government began gradually to assume authority over industry in Catalonia.”¹⁴⁰

The Catalan regular army was created by a Decree published on December 6, and on December 18 a new Government of the Generalitat was formed, from which the POUM was excluded.

As was the case in the economic and political domains, however, the resistance of the “base” to the militarization of the militias in Catalonia and Aragon was particularly acute.

¹³⁹ *Guerra y Revolución en España*, Vol. II, p. 24.

¹⁴⁰ David T. Cattell, *Communism and the Spanish Civil War*, Russell & Russell, New York, 1965, p. 109.

The CNT-FAI was obliged to mobilize its “heavy artillery”, the prestige of its “natural” leaders, and pressures of every kind, so that its troops would accept precisely the contrary of what it had preached just a few months previously.

Mario Vázquez, the national secretary of the CNT, responded to an inquiry from the daily newspaper, *Nosotros*, the press organ of the Iron Column, in the following manner:

“*Nosotros*: Will our columns disappear?

“*M. Vázquez*: Yes, they have to disappear. It is necessary for them to disappear. When we arrived at the National Committee they were already taking measures to see to it that our columns, just like all the others, will be transformed into brigades—the name is not important—by providing them with everything necessary to ensure their effective operations. But if you take a closer look, this transformation does not imply any fundamental changes, since in the brigades the command will be exercised by the same men who are the commanders of the columns. It can therefore be said that the comrades who feel affection for their field commanders may rest assured that there will be no capricious appointment of men whose ideology and personal qualities are not compatible with their own. In addition, the political commissars, who are the real commanders—we must not be afraid of words—of the brigades, will be appointed by the CNT, to which they will be answerable at all times, although they will be required to attend a preparatory course at the Military School created for the purpose of training political commissars.”¹⁴¹

Faced with the resistance of the anarchist militiamen, a kind of “two-stage” militarization was implemented: to get them to accept the proposal an attempt was made to ensure a certain degree of continuity; the columns became brigades, but they would be manned by the same people and would be commanded by the same people as well. This had the advantage, they said, of assuring that the militiamen would be paid and that they would receive arms, but it also conferred greater discipline, which was necessary, and greater efficiency. Once they had accepted this stage, the autonomy of the columns, now transformed into brigades, was progressively attenuated, as they were increasingly subjected to the orders of the General Staff of the new army and as a result of their being merged into the famous “mixed brigades”. Anarchist “domination” on the Aragon front, for example, was liquidated in August 1937.

At this point, however, the plan to militarize the militias, which had been adopted at the insistence, it would appear, of the Soviet “advisors”, and which required that the libertarian columns be diluted in the mixed brigades, under the command of *reliable* officers, that is, counterrevolutionaries, appointed by the Ministry of War, could not be implemented all at once. A kind of interlude, or transitional period, was made possible thanks to Largo Caballero, who, apprehensive about the control exercised by the Spanish and Russian Stalinists over the new military apparatus—and seeing even the most faithful supporters of the Socialist Party becoming supporters of the Communist Party—now sought to find a political counterweight against their growing power by making overtures

¹⁴¹ *Nosotros* (February 11, 1937).

to the CNT-FAI. He therefore negotiated a compromise agreement with the leaders of the CNT-FAI, according to the terms of which the anarchist brigades would continue to be homogeneous, at the same time that he delegated to them the command over military operations in Aragon. According to Bolloten:

“The novel relationship thus established between Caballero and his former opponents of the CNT and FAI¹⁴² was a potent factor in disposing him to a policy of conciliation towards them. In particular, it deterred him from carrying out, at the pressing instance of the Communists, a thorough-going militarization of the Anarchosyndicalist militia on the basis of mixed brigades, as a step in the creation of the regular army, an army which he well knew was anathema to the Libertarian movement.”¹⁴³

We should mention, by the way, that it was only anathema to the militiamen themselves, since their old leaders had completely reversed their opinions with respect to this question. Thanks to Largo Caballero’s new orientation, the Superior Council of War appointed García Oliver to organize and direct one of the Military Schools (while, at the same time, he remained in his position as Minister of Justice, since the accumulation of government positions did not frighten our “natural” leaders, who did not display undue scorn for official positions and honors); García Oliver then declared, in a speech to the officer candidates at this School:

“Officers of the Popular Army, you must observe an iron discipline and impose it on your men who, once they are under your command, must cease to be your comrades and be simply cogs in the military machine of our army.”¹⁴⁴

It was therefore perfectly clear that, although the anarchist leaders wanted to preserve “their” columns, they also wanted to proceed to their total militarization. Even the “commanders” who had arisen from the struggle against the fascists were now compelled to respect strict military orthodoxy. Thus, Cipriano Mera, an anarchist bricklayer who had just become a general and was appointed to the command of an army corps in 1937, made the following statements to a journalist from *Solidaridad Obrera*:

“I am convinced that the invasion of the Italians and Germans imparted a whole new dimension on our struggle. It is no longer possible to defend ourselves as if we were

¹⁴² Largo Caballero was the President of the UGT, the socialist-oriented trade union, the rival of the CNT. There was a great deal of friction between these trade unions and their respective leaders. The anarchists were also infuriated by Largo Caballero’s participation in the government under the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, when he used his government position to favor the UGT to the detriment of the CNT, which was practically driven underground at that time. He was subsequently Minister of Labor under the republican Government of Azaña. Caballero, a reformist and advocate of governmental collaboration of the socialists with bourgeois parties, suddenly became a “revolutionary” in 1934 and became the leader of the left wing of the Socialist Party.

¹⁴³ Bolloten, *op. cit.*, p. 259.

¹⁴⁴ *L’Espagne Nouvelle*, No. 14-15 (July 31, 1937).

fighting a civil war against military rebels. We have to wage war against a regular army that possesses all the means of modern combat. And the way to do this is not to erase all differences among the combatants. I do not want anyone but combatants at my side. In my Division I do not know who is a member of the UGT, or who is with the CNT, or a republican party or a Marxist party. The army imposes, and I must from now on demand, iron discipline, a discipline that will have the merit of being voluntarily submitted to. From now on I will only debate with captains and sergeants.”¹⁴⁵

Despite all these “hammer blows” and every kind of pressure (pay, arms, etc.), the anarchist militiamen continued to mount energetic resistance against this obtuse militarism.

“When the superior committees of the CNT-FAI opted for across-the-board militarisation of the militias (something for which the CNT ministers had been pressing from their cabinet positions) there was grave confusion on every one of the fronts where the confederal fighters were serving. There were stormy meetings between the fighting men and committee delegations dispatched to the front with the unenviable task, which one can imagine. Many diehard *milicianos* who had presented themselves for front-line service in a volunteer capacity withdrew their commitment and returned to rearguard service.”¹⁴⁶

From the records of these “stormy meetings” I have chosen a fragment of a summary report from March 9, 1937, in which a group of militiamen, including quite a few foreign volunteers (not all the foreign combatants were communists!), debated the question of militarization with several leaders of the CNT-FAI:

“Georges BOUGARD (*militiaman*) declares that he is not speaking as a delegate but in his own name. He states that it is necessary to have some discipline since the army that we must fight against is formidably organized. Militarization is nothing but well organized self-discipline.... We face the dilemma: militarization or the total disappearance of the militias....

“LOVI (*militiaman*) declares that we must not limit ourselves to the question of the war, we also have to concern ourselves somewhat with the question of the Revolution.... There are two capitalisms that are trying to eliminate the whole revolutionary movement: the internal capitalism represented by the Generalitat, and the external capitalism represented by Blum, France, England, America, etc. For us, the CNT is not our only guide, nor are our ‘leaders’, we believe in the views the CNT stands for. The profession of military officer has always been a dishonorable one for us. And if we need military technicians, they must be controlled by the political delegates of the trade unions. But it seems that they now want to push the trade unions aside, like in Russia. They want to crush the Revolution, and since they cannot do so, they are doing everything possible to suffocate it....

¹⁴⁵ *Solidaridad Obrera* (March 23, 1937).

¹⁴⁶ Peirats, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 25.

“Raoul TAROU (*militiaman*) states that he will not speak as an anti-fascist but only as an anarchist. He is emphatically opposed to any kind of military authority. ‘In Gelsa,’ he says, ‘two months ago they gave us an ultimatum. But we only want technical delegates, without salutes, without drills, without goose-stepping, etc. If our proposal that we should form a partisan unit [*cuervo franco*] is not accepted and if there is no way to reach an understanding, I am ready to go back to France’.

“Moneck KRSECH (*militiaman*): Right now it is not the Revolution at the barricades that we have to deal with. The Spanish people cannot and must not continue to play at being heroes. It is a real war and it must be won like a real war. They want to play with theories and the spirit of the anarchists in order to disarm them. Our militarization does not consist in marching in military parades, nor does it consist in the military salute. What we need is effective commanders at the front. So we do not see such incredible things as our artillery shelling our infantry! We also have officers who are real comrades in the Durruti and Ascaso Columns. We do not have to pussyfoot around with the word, militarization, either....

“Domingo ASCASO (*Ascaso Division*): We Spanish anarchists are no less sensible than our French comrades. We are facing a completely militarized enemy. Comrade Ascaso declares that the militias were not organized for the Art of War (if one may call it an ‘art’). For an anarchist it is very hard to accept all this, yet we have nonetheless created military schools in order to hold on to our command over the militias. The Spanish anarchists have recognized that we will need discipline, responsibility.

“As for the technicians (military advisors [C.S.M.]), we select 75% and the Valencia Government selects 25%, and they will be authentic military technicians. We have reached a particularly critical situation. On some occasions, the enemy has advanced unopposed.... We have accepted official positions and Ministries, but we will only accept militarization on the condition that we can ourselves continue to choose that 75%. We have to accept this in order to carry on the fight; we will also have our own army. Do not forget that you can ‘promote’ your lieutenants whenever you want. The moment is very critical. The Spanish comrades *have accepted this* and they cannot back out now. You must understand that we are anarchists like you.

“Sacha PIETRA: ‘I am not a militiaman, but I have been in Russia where I experienced the Revolution and where I was able to observe the way they got rid of the anarchists.’ After summarizing the Makhnovist movement, this comrade recalls that it has been eight months and emphasized that as long as we have arms the ‘Revolution will still be here’. Here, everything is about the Revolution, which is real life. What matters is the spirit that inspires action. We are not lost. Here, the cause of the world Revolution is at stake. I think that some comrades are too quick to criticize. What is most important above all is to ensure the anarchist spirit. And also to try to find the means and the forces.

“A. SOUCHY: Some comrades have wholeheartedly accepted militarization and discipline. Our militarism has nothing in common with that of the fascist countries. We

have undergone an attempted fascist coup d'état and the resulting revolution has been transformed into a war. But if we wanted the revolution, if we accepted it, we must accept it along with all its consequences. A revolutionary force has risen against fascism. A military force has been mobilized against us and against that military force we have to mobilize another force that is also military. We need some more discipline, some more order....

“BLUMENTHAL (*militiaman*): ... They tried to distract us with the slogan of ‘first win the war’. In Barcelona I have seen truly disgusting things. Even braided epaulets and stars! That is not how we are going to win. As an anarchist, not only do I refuse to become a soldier but I do not want to become a lackey of capitalism, either.

“MÁXIMO (*militiaman*): ‘I am also anti-militarist, but I ask the comrades to reflect upon the matter a little, as I have done: our struggle is not only a struggle between Spaniards, it is an international struggle. If we remain in this state of agitation, nothing will happen. The day that we cease to have confidence in our captains, in our lieutenants, we will ask them to resign. Our militarism has nothing in common with that of the bourgeoisie....

“FORTIN then addressed the meeting. I think that we have lost the thread of the discussion somewhat. It is not a matter of debating—this would lead us too far afield—the question of whether militarization is good or bad: *militarization exists, it is a fact*. This meeting has been organized to discover what will happen among the comrades who have just returned from the front and who are naturally very disoriented. According to him, these comrades must be classified into three categories: 1) Those who reject all militarization and who have no other recourse than to return to their respective countries. 2) Those who are deserters, or fugitives, or people who have been sentenced to serve prison terms in their countries of origin. Obviously, they will not be handed over to the authorities. The CNT-FAI will find jobs for them in the rearguard. 3) Finally, those who still want to fight: they will either accept militarization and its consequences, or they will try to form a ‘partisan unit’ [*cuervo franco*], if possible.

“With regard to the last point, Domingo ASCASO, who supports the position of the leadership of the CNT-FAI (and who is accompanied by Joaquín Cortés, from the Regional Committee of the CNT), responded as follows, bringing the discussion to a close: ‘You are asking us to do the impossible. On July 19, the Spanish anarchists did not carry out a revolution, properly speaking; for as soon as there was a counterrevolution, what we were doing was resisting (*sic!* [C.S.M.]) the fascist rebels. The CNT and the FAI have been accepting positions of responsibility and we have even accepted militarization. This does not prevent us from considering ourselves to be just as anarchist as any of you.... Those who do not want to keep fighting can go home, but the others must accept militarization. Therefore, we cannot allow the creation of any kind of partisan unit’ [*cuervo franco*].”¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ Supplement (in French) of the *Boletín de Información CNT-FAI* (June 19, 1937).

Despite the awkwardness of the transcribed notes, this discussion faithfully depicts not only the bewilderment and the anger of the militiamen who were being subjected to militarization (a bewilderment and anger that caused some of them to desert rather than become regular soldiers), but also the Jesuitical authoritarianism of the leaders of the CNT-FAI.

Among the anarchist nuclei that resisted militarization for the longest time, we once again encounter the famous Iron Column. This “intransigent” column had long been opposed to the new centralist and authoritarian policy of the leading circles of the CNT-FAI. It was therefore the target of an intense campaign of defamation. One of the most common insinuations employed during that campaign was the claim that the anarchist militants who created the column in Valencia released all the prisoners from the city’s prisons and jails, liberating not just political prisoners but also common criminals. Some of the latter enlisted as volunteers in the Iron Column, which was fighting during this whole period on the Teruel front. The presence in the column of former prisoners who had been found guilty of criminal offenses would necessarily scandalize all the supporters of the bourgeois order. However, is it not the case that by allowing some pickpockets, some neighborhood pimps, and so on, to become revolutionary combatants, the column was just engaging in one way among others of ‘transforming life’?

On October 1, 1936, the Iron Column returned from the front to Valencia to obtain arms and munitions—which were very scarce, especially for all the militias—by disarming the police units of the city and thus complying, although in a revolutionary sense, with the demagogic slogan of the Stalinists: “All arms to the front!”. Santillán recounts that the Iron Column, in response to the boycott enforced against it by the Central Government, elaborated a plan to rob the Bank of Spain, but the leaders of the CNT-FAI were opposed. Had this action been carried out, it would have naturally led to an immense scandal as well as arousing the indignation of self-righteous elements, but it would undoubtedly have interrupted the sabotage exercised by the Central Government over the militias and the collectives with regard to financial matters and materiel. In any event, they would have been able to negotiate the return of the gold and money in exchange for a more equitable distribution of government aid (as it turned out, most of the gold was shipped to the USSR a few weeks later, on October 25).

Finally, the bourgeois State and the parties upon which it was based—including the superior committees of the CNT-FAI—delivered the *coup de grâce* not only to the revolutionaries of the Iron Column but also to those of all the other militia columns. In March 1937, the War Committee of the Iron Column declared:

“We are aware of the drawbacks of militarization. This system is not suited to our temperament, nor is it suited to the temperament of all those who have always had a good understanding of the meaning of freedom. But we are also aware of the difficulties we will face if we remain outside the orbit of the Ministry of War. We regret to admit that we have only two choices: dissolution of the column or militarization.”¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ *Nosotros* (March 16, 1937).

On March 21, 1937, during a general assembly of its members, the Iron Column accepted militarization and became the 83rd Brigade of the regular army. It was the last column of militiamen to fall into the trap of militarism.

War or revolution?

In this tangled mess, in all this confusion, a few features stand out, concerning which we must speak, due to the implications that the war and the theories about what should have been done, and about the role of the war, have for the topic that we are specifically addressing here, that is, for the social revolution in Catalonia.

The first thing that stands out is the expanding role of the Spanish and Russian Stalinists, *concerning which I have provided only a few examples*: of course, the communists advocated, from the very start, a disciplined army of the classical type, in conformance with their ideology and their authoritarian, centralist and hierarchical practice. Was the Soviet Army, whose example was always brought up as a constant point of reference, not all of those things? And was it not victorious due to its adoption of that model? But aside from this general principle, valid for any era, situation and region, a traditional army was advocated and created because it corresponded perfectly to the political situation of Spain, as it was conceived by the Stalinists. A legal and democratic republican State was defending itself with its army, its police, etc., against a fascist uprising. It was therefore necessary that the image—and the reality—of a lot of gangs of workers carrying out the revolution—anarchy!—should give way to that of a disciplined army, goose-stepping behind its heavily decorated officers, and even fighting against those same “armed gangs” on behalf of republican legality. All of this is perfectly logical and the persistent devotion of the communists to the pursuit of this goal attracted, as we have seen, countless sympathizers among “petty bourgeoisie” of all stripes.

Their militarist attitude—and this is undoubtedly not the least important aspect—was also instrumental in a formidable series of political maneuvers that allowed them to retain key positions in the State apparatus—especially in military and police affairs—positions that they might not have been able to obtain without their whole militarist policy. This attitude was profoundly facilitated by the blackmail of Russian arms, by their *controlled distribution*, as well as by the role of Russian military advisors, diplomats and others, who reigned like Proconsuls, giving orders to Governments, to the General Staffs, etc. Before delivering any arms to the legal Government of Catalonia they demanded that the POUM Minister must be expelled from the Council of the Generalitat—he was expelled—and they were even directly and actively involved in the fall of the Largo Caballero Government and its replacement by Negrín (who was, beyond the shadow of a doubt, their right-hand man, even more than he was the ally of the Spanish Communist Party). Page after page could be filled with examples of this type; I will return to this topic when I have to examine the implementation of the counterrevolutionary repression after the May Events of 1937.

The Soviet military advisors—bathed in the aura of their dual prestige as “technicians” and as “revolutionaries”—naturally comprised one of the fundamental axes of the constitution of the new army.

But the Spanish communists—advised by the Soviets—were not the only advocates of a traditional type of army. Everyone wanted it, except for broad sectors of the anarchist “rank and file”. Faced with the increasingly more serious threat posed by Franco’s armies and the German and Italian expeditionary forces, it never occurred to anyone to suggest the idea of a general strategy that was not *identical* with that of the enemy, that is, one that did not involve the formation of an even more highly disciplined, more efficient, more “Prussian” army than the one they had to fight. Obviously, such an army could only be, and indeed turned out to be, a fiasco.

Apart from this unanimous agreement on the question of military strategy, based on the inability to innovate, disagreements and nuances proliferated with respect to the problems of the war and the revolution, and regarding the relations between the war and the revolution. Besides the republicans and the right-wing socialists, who did not talk about revolution, but only about democracy, the “revolutionaries” were divided into two currents: those whose position may be summarized by the phrase, “First win the war”; and those who maintained that the war and the revolution were inextricably linked. “First win the war”, was the great slogan of the Stalinists which accorded perfectly with their entire “democratic” and “anti-fascist” strategy, a strategy which furthermore was intended to fit into the framework of the “great worldwide struggle against fascism”. This tactic, however, which they pursued to its extreme—as was their wont—and which, just as in other times and places, made them the *leading party of order*, did not prevent them—quite the contrary—from establishing a considerable degree of control over the apparatus of the State, which meant for them being on the threshold of power. From the propagandistic point of view, the Communist Party presented its general line, “First win the war”, with different nuances depending on the audience at which it was directed. For foreign consumption and for the moderate republican elements, the regime that arose from a republican victory would have to be “democratically elected by the Spanish people”. For the more radical elements, who either wanted to be or claimed to be more revolutionary, they presented the victory over fascism as a first step, the indispensable stage, towards the socialist *revolution*. With a few minor adjustments this line was shared by broad sectors of the political scene beyond the confines of the Spanish Communist Party. Not only did the left-wing socialists advocate a position of this kind, but so, too, did the supporters of the majority faction in the superior committees of the CNT-FAI, who thought that the social revolution could be postponed until “after the victory over fascism”.

The POUM supported a traditional army, but at the same time maintained that the war and the revolution were inextricably linked. In “Political Theses” written for the POUM Congress scheduled for June 19, 1937, but which was not held as a result of the Decree outlawing the party, Andrés Nin declared:

“The formula, ‘first win the war, then make the revolution’, is fundamentally flawed. In the conflict that is currently taking place in Spain, war and revolution are not only two inseparable terms; they are synonymous. The civil war, a more or less prolonged state of direct conflict between two or more classes of society, is one of the manifestations, the most acute such manifestation, of the struggle between the proletariat, on the one side, and the big bourgeoisie and the landowners, on the other, who, terrified by the revolutionary advance of the proletariat, are attempting to install a bloody dictatorial regime that would reinforce its class privileges. The struggle on the battlefronts is merely an extension of the struggle in the rearguard. War is a form of politics.... It is just a matter of knowing whether the workers and peasants on the fronts are fighting for a bourgeois order or for a socialist society. War and revolution are just as inseparable now in Spain as they were in France in the 18th century and in Russia in 1917-1920. How can we separate the war from the revolution when the war is nothing but the violent culmination of the revolutionary process that has been underway in our country since 1930...? And the guarantee of a speedy and lasting victory on the fronts is founded on a firm revolutionary policy in the rearguard, one that is capable of inspiring the combatants with the spirit and the confidence that are indispensable for the struggle, and is also capable of inspiring the revolutionary solidarity of the international proletariat, the only kind of solidarity upon which we can rely, and of building a strong war industry, of rebuilding on a socialist basis the economy that has been shattered by the civil war, of forging an efficient army at the service of the proletarian cause, which is that of civilized humanity. The instrument of this revolutionary policy can be nothing other than a Workers and Peasants Government.”¹⁴⁹

Although the POUM was right in insisting (paraphrasing, without citation, Clausewitz) on the inseparable nature of the war and the revolution, at least for the allegedly revolutionary forces, it was nonetheless incapable—as it was with regard to so many other questions—of disencumbering itself of its Leninist fetishism. Thus, just as its eager desire for a Workers and Peasants Government (which means exactly nothing, except in the context of nostalgic allusions) prevented it from fighting consistently against the restoration of the bourgeois-bureaucratic State that would outlaw it in order to satisfy the Russians, its support for a disciplined and efficient army, of the Red Army variety, would lead it to understand, but much too late, that it was by way of the militarization program that the Communist Party consolidated its hold over the republican armed forces.

Camillo Berneri was right when he criticized the POUM’s narrowly militarist conceptions (which it accompanied with an attempt to rehabilitate the Bolshevik mythos, to rival that of the Stalinists):

“Military formalism can be met, for example, in certain columns controlled by the Workers Party for Marxist Unification (Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista, POUM). When one asserts, as is written in the code of duty of the Uribarri Column (one of the

¹⁴⁹ Andrés Nin, “La Situación política y las tareas del proletariado” [The Political Situation and the Tasks of the Proletariat], in *Los problemas de la Revolución española*, Ed. Ruedo Ibérico, Paris, 1971, pp. 220-221.

four POUM columns on the Aragon front [C.S.M.]), that ‘the soldier who knows how to salute properly also knows how to fight’, one is guilty of stupidity reminiscent of Frederick II or Peter the Great.’¹⁵⁰

As far as I know, this Italian anarchist was one of the few people who attempted to reconcile, in his writings and activities, the “needs of the war” with the spirit of the militias. Without restricting himself to a simple recitation of the “eternal” principles of anarchism, and without falling into the trap of the widely respected militarism, Berneri proposed a kind of synthesis, as the following passage from the interview quoted above demonstrates:

“‘I have no special skill in military technique’, he replied, ‘but I can inform you of the impressions I received on the Huesca Front which I know well because I have fulfilled in turn the roles of ordinary Militiaman, of political delegate of the ‘Italian section’ of the Ascaso Column and now of delegate to the Defence Council. I have the impression that the militia has made great advances. At the start, one was aware of a great lack of experience in the struggle against modern engines of war: for example time was wasted in shooting at aircraft flying at high altitudes, automatic weapons were neglected in favour of those which comrades were used to handling; the problem of roads was abandoned; ammunition was in short supply; liaison between different arms and units was defective and sometimes absolutely zero’.

“‘At the present moment the militiamen have profited from the lessons of the last six months, transport has begun to be rationalised, roads are being repaired, equipment is more abundant and better distributed, and into the ‘mind of the column’ is slipping this idea; the necessity of coordinating command’.

“‘We are forming divisions, and this will complete the economic plan of war, and the best known representatives of the CNT and the FAI have made themselves its supporters. In fact, it was these two organisations which were the first to propose a united command in order to be able to exert a decisive pressure on the weak points of the enemy lines, to relieve the pressure which the enemy is exerting on besieged towns and to prevent unfavourable manoeuvres and concentrations’.

“‘So’, we (*Spain and the World*) observed, ‘there is some good in militarisation?’”

“‘Certainly’, Berneri replied with conviction, ‘but there is a distinction to be made: there is on the one side military formalism which is not only ridiculous, but also useless and dangerous, and on the other side there is self-discipline. The latter can be extremely strict, as is the case in the Durruti Column.... For my part I support a legitimate compromise: we must neither lapse into military formalism nor into superstitious anti-militarism. By accepting and achieving the reforms imposed on us by the nature of things, we shall by

¹⁵⁰ Camillo Berneri, interview with *Spain and the World*, translated into French in *L’Espagne Nouvelle* (February 1937), now available in Spanish translation in the book, *Guerra de clases en España 1936-1939*, Tusquets Ed., Barcelona, 1977.

the self-same means, be in a position to resist the manoeuvres of Madrid and Moscow, which are trying to establish, under the pretext of militarisation, their military hegemony over the Spanish Revolution, in order to transform it into the instrument of their political hegemony’.

“As for myself, I consider it a mistake to talk, as do certain representatives of the CNT-FAI of an overall or ‘supreme’ command instead of a unity of command’ (that is, general coordination with regard to the direction of the armed struggle [C.S.M.]).

“All things considered, therefore, the reforms needed in the militia, in my opinion, would be the following: a clear distinction between military command and political control, in the domain of the preparation and execution of the operations of war; strict fulfillment of orders received, but maintenance of certain fundamental rights: that of nominating and degrading officers.”¹⁵¹

Of course, if the combatants can elect and recall their commanders, the whole military hierarchical spirit would collapse, which is why this recommendation was never implemented. For, as Berneri himself points out in his proposals for achieving what we could call a synthesis between efficiency and freedom (a somewhat insufficient synthesis), what was at stake in the military controversy was not just defeating the fascist armies, but also crushing the revolution.

From this point of view, too, war and revolution are inextricably linked. The vast operation of militarization itself entailed a political operation that was equally comprehensive and which consisted in eliminating the “revolutionary armed gangs”, the militias that help the peasants to organize libertarian communes, militias that sometimes disarmed the police in order to arm themselves and which, in a word, constituted the armed wing of a libertarian social revolution that was by no means desired. This is why an ultra-reactionary army was imposed almost everywhere, which was given free rein to engage in political-police terrorism, in which the most blind discipline predominated, and in which the degrading rituals of the army were held sacred. Only a few anarchist columns, which had been transformed into divisions, still preserved a certain degree of the “spirit of the militias”. But this depended exclusively on the will of the commanders, some of whom, like Ricardo Sanz,¹⁵² protected their men from the excesses of the military formalism concerning which Berneri spoke. It may therefore be said that the political part of the militarization operation constituted a great success (which by no means ruled out conflicts between the CNT-FAI and the communists, for example, in the army, as in other arenas, but this is not really pertinent in the context of this discussion). All of this was, obviously, an essential part of the plan to restore the power of the bourgeois-bureaucratic State and therefore to ensure the victory of the counterrevolution.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² At least according to the testimony of José Peirats, who “served under him” on the Aragon front (testimony recorded during an interview conducted for this book).

In the military domain, however, this army that had been created according to the “Prussian” model was a very bad army, which to me also seems logical. Contrary to the story told by the heroic folklore, the republicans lost the civil war not only as a result of the intervention of the German Nazis and the Italian fascists (as well as the resistance of the anarchists to militarization). Despite the superiority of the armaments of the fascists, the defeat was not inevitable and, furthermore, the war lasted almost three years. The essential factors in the defeat were, in my view, stupidity and counterrevolutionary policies.

Stupidity and counterrevolutionary policies combined to build a young, virile and disciplined regular army—one that was definitely modern—in accordance with the propaganda, but worthless in the field. Without needing to immerse ourselves in an exhaustive analysis of military problems, we can simply point out that:

1) This army was bad because its leaders generally displayed an absolute lack of imagination and resourcefulness. The new so-called Popular Army pursued its slavish imitation of the enemy to the extreme of copying the enemy’s “art of war” and accepting battles on terrain favorable to the enemy, rehearsing, as if in grade school, the principles of a war of position and offensives based on “pincer movements” that they studied in military academies all over the world; for this kind of war, Franco’s army (that is, 90% of the Spanish army) and its Nazi and fascist allies were infinitely more prepared and their superiority is furthermore historically demonstrated.

The “brilliant” military commanders, lauded in the epic anthologies of the “left”, Líster, Modesto, *El Campesino*, etc., and their “mysterious” Russian military advisors, actually displayed a congenital cretinism on the purely military terrain, by warehousing their troops in a handful of mini-Verduns where the superiority of the enemy’s armament (which was not for that matter all that overwhelming¹⁵³) was destined to prevail in the long run. No military operation on any significant scale was undertaken in which surprise, mobility, and inventiveness were elements of success can be attributed to them.

2) The counterrevolutionary aspect of militarization had a profound affect on the “morale of the troops”, reducing, whatever anyone says, their offensive capabilities. For, to become good, disciplined soldiers, they had to be transformed into robots who allow themselves to kill without asking any questions, even in totally aberrant military operations—for which the history of war in general and of the war in Spain in particular provide abundant examples—and this requires training, just as good circus horses have to be trained. In “normal times”, of course, all of society participates in this training, from the family circle to the factory, or the farm, via the catechism, the school and military service—which, in popular parlance is excellent for young people precisely because it teaches them discipline. But here we have some workers who have voluntarily taken up arms to suppress the military uprising, workers who are aware of the fact that they are participating in a social revolution and who, especially the anarchists, of course, were profoundly anti-militarist, just as they were profoundly anti-capitalist. The volunteers in

¹⁵³ There are no reliable statistics, however, concerning the armament of the two sides.

the militias were precisely the opposite of the robot-soldier, and therefore it was particularly difficult and even impossible to transform them overnight into their opposites. These men had rebelled precisely against the regimentation and the exploitation of a repressive society that they hated and against which they were waging a battle to the death. To tell them that they had to reconstruct the military hierarchy of the army in order to defeat the military hierarchy of the enemy army would seem just as monstrous to them as if someone had proposed to them that they should intensify their own exploitation as wage workers in order to liquidate ... exploitation. Of course, that is just what was taking place, so we should not be surprised that they refused to reconstruct, in the name of who knows what kind of efficiency, the hierarchical society that they were in the process of destroying. For them, there was no "good army", just as there was no "good" exploitation of the wage worker. They did not refuse to fight, but they did refuse to relinquish that parcel of liberty that they had conquered. And they were right. Their struggle would otherwise have had no meaning, as subsequent events—and the example of all the revolutions that have ever taken place—have proven.

It has become fashionable to speak, in a silly and thoughtless way, about "psychological warfare", generally in an attempt to integrate "psychology" as an element of "modern" military tactics. It is nonetheless true that the world of the mind does not stop at the doors of the barracks. Taking an example from a totally different domain, I will simply point out that the training of special units in classical armies (paratroopers, "marines", legionnaires, etc.) involves not only intensive training, ultra-modern, specially designed weapons, etc., but also, and perhaps most importantly, an "esprit du corps", the idea that the subject belongs to a group apart, an elite that is superior not just to ordinary civilians, but also to the other branches of the military. The illusion of belonging to this kind of superior race is one of the essential motor forces of the combat effectiveness of these special units (and, of course, it is also indicative of the boundless stupidity of humanity, but let us not tarry...). Dispel this illusion, break this group fanaticism, and their combat effectiveness is diminished. At the opposite pole from this situation, if you militarize the anarchist militiamen, their combat effectiveness will also be reduced. With this one minor difference, however: that the only thing that the former, the paratroopers and so on, have to do is kill; whereas the militia columns actively participated in one of the most important revolutionary experiences of the first half of the twentieth century.

All of this is very nice, the communists said, and will say, but there was a war going on and it had to be won. We lost it, so their story goes, but we fought more efficiently than the anarchists, precisely due to the fact that we organized militarily more quickly and more effectively. And they always dredge up the same two examples to support their thesis: Madrid and the Aragon front. Madrid, which is where militarization first took effect, Madrid, in whose defense the communists were fully committed, lasted right up until the end, while the anarchists, who dominated the Aragon front, were incapable of taking Zaragoza.

This can be answered right away in the following manner: as for the Aragon front, disregarding the problem of arming the militias, anarchist "domination" lasted until the summer of 1937. After the May Events and thanks to the conspiracy of Prieto and the

communists (as we shall see below), communist troops entered Aragon, liquidated the Council of Aragon and seized control of the military command on the Aragon front. Although the anarchist militias were still quite numerous on this front, the responsibility for the conduct of the war virtually passed into the hands of the communists and their allies. However—and despite this fact!—Zaragoza still was not taken! If the offensive against “libertarian communism” in Aragon achieved such impressive results (although fewer than expected), the “offensive” against Franco’s troops, on the other hand, achieved none at all.

Let us now consider Madrid. It is true that it was on the Madrid front where militarization began in earnest. It is also true that the communists—and their Russian advisors—played a very active role in the defense of the city. What this means is that they controlled the commanding centers, but they were far from being the only ones who were fighting (this is demonstrated by the fact that during the “Casado conspiracy”, at the end of the war, when the communists staged a military occupation of the city and seized power, allegedly to oppose attempts to negotiate with Franco, Cipriano Mera, leading his soldiers, took only two days to militarily liquidate the communists¹⁵⁴).

I think, however, that this is not where we should look to discover the reason why the defense of Madrid continued right up until it came to an end in the pitched battles between the communists, on one side, and the anarchists and socialists on the other, just a few days before Franco’s troops entered Madrid, ending the war. The essential feature of the defense of Madrid was by no means its militarization, but its popular character. In Madrid, besieged and almost entirely surrounded, a phenomenon arose which had already been noted in other wars, that of an entire city refusing to surrender, that of an entire city, men, women and children, participating in one way or another in the resistance against the enemy. This popular character of the resistance constitutes the essential feature of the battle of Madrid. Furthermore, it was the workers militias, the whole population—or almost the whole population—that first crushed the military revolt and then repulsed the first attacks of Franco’s army, which from the beginning of the war sought at all costs to conquer the capital. Militarization was only implemented after the first victories of the “people in arms”.

* * *

Once the war was underway, however, and being conducted just as the enemy wanted it to be conducted, the militias were also unable to conceive of a revolutionary military strategy that would have allowed them to not only defend, but also to extend, their revolutionary conquests, at the same time that they fought Franco’s troops. *L’Espagne antifasciste* was correct when it characterized the point of view of the “anti-militarist” libertarians:

“It is becoming increasingly more urgent to ask whether the militarism of the rebel generals will be successful in imposing its own methods of fighting on the Spanish

¹⁵⁴ Concerning this incident, see Appendix 10.

revolutionaries or whether, to the contrary, our comrades will be able to destroy militarism by opposing it with methods of action that will culminate in the liquidation of the military front and the spread of the social revolution to all of Spain.

“The elements of success in the fascist camp are the following: a great abundance of materiel, draconian discipline, complete military organization and a reign of terror exercised against the population with the help of the military formations of fascism. These elements of success are being reinforced by the tactic of a war of position, of the continuous front, with a massive transport of forces towards the points that are intended to be taken.

“In the camp of the people, the elements of success are of a totally different kind: an abundance of men, the initiative and impassioned combativity of individuals and groups, the active sympathy of the working class masses of the whole country, the economic weapon of the strike and sabotage in regions occupied by the fascists. The total utilization of these moral and material forces, which are very much superior to the corresponding forces of the enemy, can only be achieved by way of a generalized struggle of dispersed attacks, ambushes and a guerrilla war extended throughout the entire country.”¹⁵⁵

The anonymous author of these lines seems to me to have perfectly summarized the situation.

“The spread of the social revolution to all of Spain” was in fact the best strategy that could have been opposed to Franco’s army and his traditional and standardized strategy. On the one hand, in the great cities and industrial and agricultural regions of the “republican zone”, if a popular defense would have been organized in which everyone, in one way or another, were to participate in the struggle, instead of allowing the war to stagnate on the fronts, on the other hand, the social revolution would have to be brought to the rearguard of the enemy, sabotage and guerrilla warfare would have to be organized, revolts would have to be encouraged and, if possible, insurrectionary strikes. For this to be possible, of course, the social revolution would first have to become more profound and would also have to spread throughout the whole “republican” territory, and then to the territory occupied by Franco’s forces. It was necessary for the workers subject to the fascist dictatorship to find out that there were zones in Spain that had been liberated from exploitation where the workers were the masters of their enterprises, of their labor and of their lives. It was necessary for the echoes of the revolution in the countryside to reach the Andalusian regions—for example—occupied by the fascists, etc. In order to conduct a struggle of this type, which, for simplicity’s sake we shall call a revolutionary guerrilla war (without having to look for any historical equivalents, which would be more than suspect), an army of the traditional type was not only unsuitable but counterproductive. The social revolution must begin with the liquidation of the army and of all its retrograde features. Obviously, the defects of the militias have to be overcome, but not only should they be preserved, but they should even accentuate and deepen, their spirit of initiative, their audacity and their voluntary commitment to fight. They also have to be provided with an

¹⁵⁵ *L’Espagne antifasciste*, No. 4.

offensive military strategy, in which movement, the element of surprise, sabotage, ambushes, etc., would have allowed them to avoid the pitfalls of the war of positions, which favored the enemy.

All of this obviously requires the participation of all the combatants in the decisions concerning the conduct of the war. An armed force composed of guerrillas—even if it is equipped with armaments as “modern” as those of the republican Army—cannot by any means copy the classical armies. Despite the obvious limits imposed by the war, democracy in the functioning of such an armed force of guerrillas is not only possible, but indispensable, in order to give free rein to the creativity of the masses. Democracy, that is, first of all, institutions whose delegates are directly elected and subject to recall (not in the middle of combat, we need not add!). The revolutionary spirit, the conviction that one is participating with arms in hand in the struggle for social transformations throughout society, creates the “shock troops” of the militias, and it is precisely the opposite of the hierarchy which, along with the ban on thinking, lies at the basis of the classical army.

It is futile, however, to speak of what might have been, since it did not happen that way, not even in Aragon where—after the first few weeks—the militiamen were bogged down in a war of positions before Huesca, Zaragoza and Teruel.

Such a revolutionary war can only be based on a social revolution that is as radical and as widespread as possible. The communists, however, and many of the socialists, the republicans, most of the anarchist leaders, the Russians, and the “democratic” Western governments (not to speak of the fascists!) did not want a social revolution, and all of them, each in their own way, participated in its suppression.

So they created an army. This regular army, given the existing historical, political, material and “moral” conditions, could only be a lousy army. They accepted the type of war imposed by the enemy and they were defeated. They lost the war because they did not want to carry out the Revolution. But since things are never quite so simple, the war was prolonged for two more years (1937-1939), because this bad army, which against all odds preserved some traces of the enthusiasm of the militias, fought very courageously.

Chapter 6

The “May Events” of 1937

The situation in Catalonia before the “May Events”

After the inauguration of the Largo Caballero Government and its Catalonian counterpart, the Council of the Generalitat, with the representation of all the anti-fascist organizations and the restoration of the [Catalonian] State, considerable progress was made in every domain at an ever faster pace. The “sinister power” of the Committees gave way to that of the “legally constituted institutions”, municipal councils, governors, the Council of the

Generalitat, and the Central Government. In December 1936, all the police forces which had been dissolved were completely reconstituted, sometimes under their former name (the Assault Guards), or else under a new name (the Civil Guards were renamed the Republican National Guard). Juan Negrín, the Minister of Finance under the Central Government, reorganized an impressive formation of *carabineros*, which we shall see in action below. All of these police units, of course, were under the direct orders of the Ministries to which they were responsible. And the Stalinists proceeded in the same way that we have seen them deal with the army, but this time in order to assert their control over the police units. In Barcelona, Rodríguez Sala, a member of the PSUC, was appointed Chief of Police and Ayguadé was named Councilor of Security (Minister of the Interior). The latter, despite the fact that he was a member of the *Esquerra*, collaborated closely with the Stalinists and some commentators have expressed the view that he was a “sleeper” working for the PSUC.

Beginning in late 1936, the supporters of “republican order” found that the situation was ripe for going on the offensive. Undoubtedly as an expression of gratitude for shipments of Russian arms, the first measures of political discrimination were directed against the POUM, those Spanish “Hitler-Trotskyists”. We have seen how the Stalinists vetoed the POUM’s participation in the Madrid Defense Junta. *La Batalla* published a protest against this veto, accusing Stalin of being uninterested in the fate of the Spanish and international proletariat and of only thinking of the interests of the Russian State. This kind of talk was not only intolerable for the Stalinists, but also for a large number of socialists, republicans, and even for some anarchist leaders. Was it not true that the USSR was sending arms? Always the same blackmail, which deliberately ignored the fact that these arms had been paid for with gold. On November 28, the Consul General of the USSR in Barcelona, Antonov-Ovseenko, publicly interfered, as he so often did, in Spanish “domestic affairs”, denouncing *La Batalla* in a press release, saying that it was part of the “press that is in the pay of international fascism”. It must also be pointed out that, at that time, *La Batalla* had also published articles and editorials protesting against the arrests of dissidents and the political trials in the USSR. And this was another intolerable scandal. Under pressure from Soviet agents, the PSUC provoked a crisis in the autonomous Catalanian Government in mid-December, demanding the expulsion of the POUMist Minister, Andrés Nin, the Councilor of Justice. Of course, the PSUC called for the expulsion of Nin as the first step of their battle against those agents of international fascism known as the militants of the POUM. The other organizations, however—including the CNT—consented to the expulsion of Andrés Nin in order to pacify the Russians. The crisis was resolved in a perfectly Jesuitical manner: it was decided to form a “non-party government”, a government in which only the trade unions would be represented: the CNT, UGT, and the *Unión de Rabassaires*. But the representatives of the UGT were practically the same persons who had represented the PSUC in the previous government. In addition, there was a representative of the party of the *Esquerra*, to make sure that the “Catalonian petty bourgeoisie is represented”. All these sophistries fooled no one, but they served their purpose: the expulsion of the POUM. An article in *Pravda*, published on December 17, 1936, could state: “In Catalonia, the elimination of the Trotskyists and anarchosyndicalists has begun; it will be carried out with the same vigor as it was in the USSR.”

For its part, the POUM protested against its expulsion in a Manifesto utilizing very restrained language:

“If, despite our efforts and our sacrifices there should be a breakdown in the unity of action, it will not be through any fault of ours. The blame would lie with those who make it take a back seat to their party-political ambitions and we are sure that before too long the facts will prove us right. Unfortunately, we must face the consequences of this manoeuvre which, being performed at this juncture, cannot but give succour to the common enemy. This being so, we find ourselves compelled to denounce it to Catalonia's working class.”¹⁵⁶

We must emphasize the rapidity with which the PSUC, which was created immediately after the military uprising and which was at that time a tiny sect, succeeded, within a few months, in controlling both the “base” (in some respects) and the “summit”. The base and the summit to which we are referring, however, are the base and the summit of the bureaucracy, both in the State and the trade unions, and in the struggle to control bureaucratic positions the Stalinists have always been “past masters”. And although the Catalanian Stalinists were neophytes with respect to this kind of work, they nonetheless benefited from the advice of veteran specialists like Antonov-Ovseenko and Geröe.

After the POUM was excluded from the Generalitat, Comorera was appointed (in his capacity as a representative of the UGT) Minister of Provisions. His first act as Minister was, of course, to declare war on the Committees on behalf of private commerce. On January 7, 1937, he issued a Decree granting control over provisioning and supply to the trade unions, in order to pave the way for the eventual dissolution of the workers Provisioning Committees.

“... Comorera, starting from those principles of abstract liberalism which no administration has followed during the war, but of which right-wing socialists are the last and most religious admirers, did not substitute for the chaotic bread committees a centralized administration. He restored private commerce in bread, simply and completely. There was, in January, not even a system of rationing in Barcelona. Workers were simply left to get their bread, with wages that had hardly changed since May, at increased prices, as well as they could. In practice it meant that the women had to form queues from four o'clock in the morning onwards. The resentment in the working class districts was naturally acute, the more so as the scarcity of bread rapidly increased after Comorera had taken office.”¹⁵⁷

In fact, it was not just bread, but all other food products, which, due to the restoration of private commerce, immediately underwent a rise in price and became scarce, flowing instead to the black market. The GEPCI, founded by the Stalinists as a branch of the UGT

¹⁵⁶ Peirats, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 121.

¹⁵⁷ F. Borkenau, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

(a glorious initiative that united in one trade union the wage workers and the employers, both small- and medium-scale), saw its economic and political role expand accordingly.

Comorera, faced with the popular discontent caused by rising prices and shortages, blamed his predecessor (the *cenetista* Domènach) and denounced the sabotage carried out by the trade union Provisioning Committees. He also staged another spectacular operation with the arrival of the first Soviet ship, the *Ziryandin*, on January 20, 1937, with a cargo of 901 tons of flour, 882 tons of sugar and 568 tons of butter. The docking of the Soviet ship was accompanied by a gigantic publicity campaign, so that the simple folk of Catalonia would understand that while the anarchists, with their disorder and their confusion, brought hunger to families and destroyed the economy, they, the Russians, were the best friends of the Spanish workers, and generously provided them with guns and butter. Publicity campaigns of this type were “a big hit” and the Russians enjoyed real prestige in the opinion of the public, from whom the very high price that Spain had paid for this disinterested aid was very carefully concealed. Eight days after the arrival of the Russian ship, on January 21, 1937, *Solidaridad Obrera* published a deranged article, from which we shall quote an excerpt:

“The eyes of hundreds of thousands of citizens who attended the superb farewell ceremony were focused on only one thing: the *Ziryandin*. It was a people who were swept away by the human meaning of this first visit from another people. This feeling was a tribute to solidarity. Tons of food products were brought from Russia to Spain by this messenger of the Russian proletariat, an offer from its women to our women, the kindly caress of the children of the East for the children of Iberia...”¹⁵⁸ (and so on in the same vein).

The general offensive of the State apparatus also affected freedom of expression. When one examines the newspapers of the period, one is often surprised to see “blank spaces” that get bigger and bigger and become more and more frequent in the pages of the newspapers, beginning in January 1937. At first, censorship was only applied to reports about military matters, but with the passage of time it was more frequently applied to articles and discussions of a strictly political and even theoretical nature. On March 14, 1937, for example, the publication of *La Batalla* was suspended for four days because of the content of a political editorial which did not have the good luck of pleasing the censors of the Generalitat.

The restrictions placed on freedom of expression affected not only the press; some political meetings and rallies were also prohibited. For example, the CNT-POUM rally that was scheduled to be held in Tarragona on February 26, 1937 was simply prohibited by the Catalan Government. The Government was afraid that points of view that would be too “extremist” would be advocated at this meeting, and there is no doubt that this measure was part of the general campaign against the POUM that was orchestrated by the Stalinists.

¹⁵⁸ *Solidaridad Obrera* (January 21, 1937).

Even within the CNT, and in its superior committees, a deeply entrenched spirit of “democratic centralism” was clearly manifested. On March 28, 1937, the National Committee held a conference of delegates of all the press organs of the CNT and the FAI at the joint headquarters of the two organizations in Barcelona. According to Peirats, the main objective of this meeting was to obtain the submission of all the newspapers and magazines to the directives of the National Committee. All discord had to be eliminated, especially the freedom of criticism that some newspapers and journals had directed against the betrayal of libertarian principles by the superior committees in general and the “comrade Ministers” in particular.

The proposal to convert the *cenetista* press into the simple mouthpiece of the superior committees was approved with only a one-vote majority. Furthermore, the defeated minority clearly expressed its intention not to abide by either this resolution or the vote approving it. This was indicative of the obstacles that were encountered by the centralizing tendency in the libertarian organizations, which, by virtue of their essence and their traditions, opposed all centralism. It was only in late 1937 and early 1938 that the “left opposition” in the CNT would be totally defeated.

This new centralism was objectively necessary for the leaders of the CNT, and not just with respect to the freedom of expression. They could not impose the Army on the militias, or State power—as well as their own participation in State power—on the workers Committees, or political and economic hierarchy on workers autonomy and democracy, without encountering serious resistance within their own organizations. Just as all leaders have always done when faced with similar conflicts, they attempted to suppress the opposition and silence all criticism. They imposed centralism in their own organization, thus putting the icing on the cake, and once again throwing overboard its traditions, its beautiful and florid discourses and libertarian principles, for the bureaucratic practice of the leaders had its own laws and its own requirements, with regard to which there have never been any exceptions in the history of revolutions.

The specialized layer of leaders that the CNT produced so rapidly was never subject “to the control of the base” at practically any moment during the war. This is an important feature—and a classical one—of the bureaucratic phenomenon. From 1936 to 1939 there were no real democratic elections to fill the responsible positions of the CNT and the FAI. It is true that there were many meetings, conferences, and assemblies, one of the most important of which was the extraordinary National Economic Plenum of the CNT held in January 1938 in Valencia. For the most part, however, these gatherings were assemblies of cadres in which the rank and file membership was either not represented at all or was only sparsely represented. Thus, for example, Mariano G. Vázquez, the regional secretary of the CNT in Catalonia in July 1936, was elected to the position of national secretary during a meeting of the Regional Committees, that is, during a meeting of officers of the regional federations. The same phenomenon may be observed in the operations of the FAI, which is to be expected, since both organizations, which had always been intimately associated, had almost totally merged in July 1936. Thus, in July 1937, shortly after the May Events, a Plenum of Regional Committees of the FAI was held in Valencia. I think that Vernon Richards was right when he emphasized the

intention that was clearly expressed at this meeting to transform the FAI from a federation of autonomous anarchist groups into some kind of political party.

“... the affinity group¹⁵⁹ has been, for more than fifty years, the most effective organism for propaganda, for contacts and anarchist activity. With the new organisation that is required of the FAI, the organic role of the affinity group has been eliminated. It is the intention of the Plenum that the affinity groups must be respected, but that by reason of the decisions taken by the FAI, they will not be able to participate organically in the FAI as affinity groups.”¹⁶⁰

The new organization of the classical “Bolshevik” type was based on rank and file neighborhood cells—or groups—and then on local and regional Committees, and above those Committees there was a National Committee, whose role would become ever more important.

As a corollary, also classic, of the authoritarian hierarchy imposed on the anarchist organizations, an incredible cult of personality developed around their leaders. While it is true that this cult of “outstanding militants” existed previously, when the CNT functioned as democratically as possible, it would now attain grotesque proportions. Here is an example: in the *Boletín de Información CNT-FAI*, we may read the following lines devoted to García Oliver:

“Men like our comrade must occupy posts of the highest level and the greatest responsibility, from which they can inculcate in their brothers their own valor and their own energy and, we should also add, their own strategy. Their dynamism, combined with their daring, represents an invincible barrier against fascism. Thanks to their dynamism, we see how our combatants will recover that spirit of sacrifice that will make them face danger in an unequal struggle, with their breasts bared. Men guided by a symbol die smiling; this is how our militiamen have died and this is how the men will die who are today soldiers in the Popular Army, forged in the spirit and in the example of comrade García Oliver.”

This sinister literary passage dedicated to the cult of leadership ends with an evocation of the “creative genius” of García Oliver, whom the author compares with “that other figure, our immortal Durruti, who rises from his grave and shouts: ‘Forward!’.”¹⁶¹ Although not quite reaching the dizzying summits attained by Louis Aragon when he sang the praises of Thorez and Stalin, it is nonetheless worth calling attention to these examples of “acritic” literature.

¹⁵⁹ The “affinity groups”, the original basis of the FAI, were formed by voluntarily associated groups of anarchists, who joined the groups precisely because of their shared theoretical or even personal “affinities”.

¹⁶⁰ Declaration at the Plenum of Regional Committees held in Valencia in July 1937.

Quoted by Vernon Richards, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

¹⁶¹ *Boletín de Información CNT-FAI*, No. 34 (August 27, 1937).

The spring of 1937 therefore marked a turning point when “the war began to devour the revolution”. The power of the State had been restored and with the entry of the anarchists in the Government, the sovereignty of the State was recognized by all the anti-fascist organizations. With the “submission” of the Iron Column, all the columns of militiamen had been transformed into units of a traditional regular army; the police had also been reconstituted; a severe censorship was imposed on the press; in Catalonia, where the social transformations had made the most progress, the collectives were impeded and boycotted, private commerce once again replaced the system of direct producer-to-consumer sale of products established by the Provisions Committees of the trade unions, etc. After the revolutionary tidal wave which had swept away the old repressive apparatus of the State and a large number of other oppressive institutions, in order to inaugurate a new form of society based on the self-determination of the workers and on the self-management of the enterprises, the old social pyramid—with some new layers—once again arose and it was precisely the political parties and the workers organizations that were the main agents of this reconstruction and which “transferred” their internal hierarchy to all of society.

As in all modern revolutionary movements, the men who fought against the oppressive hierarchy and against the class-based injustices and privileges that were inherent to that hierarchy, since they thought (correctly) that their task was immense, were obliged to associate in order to become stronger and more effective, but did so within certain organizations that reproduced within their ranks the hierarchy of the existing society which they sought to change and therefore, in the form of a mirror image, they also reproduced the whole value system of that society: discipline, the spirit of sacrifice, profitability, efficiency, organization, production, repression, exclusion, faith and fanaticism, the leadership cult, not to speak of all the values and habits of the bourgeois world, the latter not at all completely overturned, in which they were still immersed. In this case, as always happens whenever it is a matter of real revolutionary movements and when the latter are at first victorious, it was the spontaneous action of the masses that unleashed the movement and which drove it to its ultimate consequences. Later, their organizations would curb or divert—and sometimes just destroy—the results of these spontaneous actions. We cannot just say that the parties took “control of the situation”, because it was a control that was almost always desired by the masses themselves. The hierarchical parties reconstructed the social pyramid of oppression and institutionalized and glorified the new privileges and injustices—which were in many respects similar to the old privileges and injustices—and ideologically justified them as the results of the victorious revolution (just look at the USSR and all the other “socialist” countries). The originality of the Catalanian revolution, apart from the fact that it unfolded within a civil war against fascism and that it was crushed by the “republican forces” before the latter were militarily defeated, consists in the fact that the CNT-FAI, the largest organization in Catalonia, enjoying the support of the majority of the population—and which was also very strong in the rest of Spain—which was undoubtedly the least bureaucratic and least centralized organization within the European workers movement, itself *became* all these things within an extraordinarily brief span of time. And this was not because the leaders were “evil”—even if it is true that power corrupts—it was also due to the complexity of the situation itself, the demands of the war and the revolution, which they did not know

how to transform into a revolutionary war, as well as to the traditional “defects” of the CNT—the cult of leaders and of the sacredness of the Organization, among others. In any event, it may be legitimately claimed that any workers organization is *condemned* to bureaucratization, in one form or another. And this poses some theoretical questions that are still far from having been answered, in view of the fact that the myth of the revolutionary organization or vanguard (of a new type!?) is still wreaking the havoc with which we are all so familiar.

* * *

In the context of this situation it is hard to understand the claim made by Broué and Témime, according to whom, “Thus, in spring 1937 the conditions for a revolutionary upsurge were joined once again. Theories of revolutionary opposition met, at least in Catalonia, with a growing response from the workers who followed the CNT and saw their gains threatened. In the UGT, the Army, and the administration, Largo Caballero’s supporters reacted against the communists. Economic difficulties and the *checas* scandals were fertile soil for unrest.”¹⁶² Contrary to this rather contrived optimism, we saw above how Largo Caballero and his supporters were swept from the political stage just after the May Events. With respect to the “workers who followed the CNT”, their opposition—which was certainly quite real—was also directed against the leaders of the CNT, whose compromises and “governmentalist” line they refused to *accept*.

Let us take a look at some examples of this opposition in the ranks of the CNT. On April 14, 1937, Camillo Berneri, an Italian anarchist militant who enjoyed a great deal of prestige in Catalonia, published an “Open Letter to Comrade Federica Montseny” (*Guerra de classe*”, April 14, 1937), from which we have selected the following excerpts:

“It is the civil guards and the assault guards who are retaining their arms; it is they too who in the rear must control the ‘uncontrollable,’ in other words disarm the revolutionary cells equipped with a few rifles and a few revolvers. This happens while the internal front has not been liquidated. This happens during the course of a civil war in which every surprise is possible and in regions where the front is very close and extremely jagged is not mathematically certain. This, while a political distribution of arms appears clearly, tending to arm only in strict necessity (strict necessity, which we hope will appear adequate) the Aragon Front, the armed guard of agrarian collectivisation in Aragon and buttress of Catalonia, that Iberian Ukraine. You are in a government that has offered France and Britain advantages in Morocco,¹⁶³ whereas, since July 1936, it would have been necessary to proclaim officially the political autonomy of Morocco.... I believe that the time has come to make it known that you and the other anarchist ministers are not in agreement as regards the nature and the purport of such propositions....

“The dilemma: war or revolution no longer has any meaning. The only dilemma is this one: either victory over Franco thanks to the revolutionary war, or defeat. The problem

¹⁶² Broué and Témime, *op. cit.*, English edition, pp. 279-280.

¹⁶³ On the “Morocco Affair”, see Appendix 11.

for you and the other comrades is to chose between the Versailles of Thiers and the Paris of the Commune, before Thiers and Bismarck form the holy alliance.”¹⁶⁴

In Catalonia, the opposition groups expressed their discontent in the pages of the Lérida daily newspaper, *Acracia*, edited by José Peirats, the magazine, *Ideas*, and the official journal of the Libertarian Youth, *Ruta*. These were—among others—the publications that the *cenetista* leaders wanted to silence.

Among the opposition groups, we must also mention “The Friends of Durruti”. This group was composed for the most part of militiamen of the CNT-FAI who were so adamantly opposed to militarization that rather than wear the uniform of the new so-called Popular Army they preferred to depart from the front. They were most active during the “May Events” and over the next few months, during which period they published a clandestine newspaper (clandestine, because it had been prohibited by the censorship!): *El Amigo del Pueblo* [The Friend of the People]. In the spring of 1937, the leaders of the group, all of whom were members of the FAI (Careño, Pablo Ruiz, Eleuterio Roig and especially Jaime Balius), were contributors to the opposition journals, especially *Ideas*.

The Catalanian Libertarian Youth constituted one of the main centers of the political opposition to the leaders of the CNT-FAI. It is true, of course, that some of the leaders of the Libertarian Youth, such as Fidel Miró, its secretary, and Aurelio Fernández, the secretary of the Alliance of Revolutionary Youth, were quite amenable to the arguments of the “governmentalist” leaders. And its members undoubtedly did not want to break too openly with the organizations of the “older” comrades. In August 1936, as part of the “unitary” wave, the Libertarian Youth had signed a pact of alliance with the Catalanian JSU (Stalinists)—just as the CNT-FAI had signed such a pact with the PSUC—but it was not long before the pact was repudiated and the Libertarian Youth formed the Alliance of Revolutionary Youth with the *Juventudes Comunistas Ibéricas* [Iberian Communist Youth] (POUM) and the Syndicalist Youth. In the spring of 1937 the Regional Committee of Catalonia and the Local Federation of Barcelona of the Libertarian Youth published a manifesto that clearly outlined the opposition of the young libertarians to the course taken by the political situation. Here are some excerpts from their manifesto:

“The time has come to speak clearly and firmly. In the face of the openly counterrevolutionary activity of certain anti-fascist sectors that are attempting—as they themselves admit every day—to restore the bourgeois-democratic Republic, and whose activities, both on the national and international levels, comprise one of the factors that have caused this brutal struggle that we are waging against fascism to be prolonged, thus gradually yet ever more urgently confronting us with the alternative of having to abandon the revolution or lose the war, we, the Libertarian Youth, have decided to speak out clearly to the people—to the people of July 19—so that they can judge for themselves and make the decisions about matters that they consider pertinent....

¹⁶⁴ Berneri, *op. cit.*

“The counterrevolution has cast aside its mask and acts in the full light of day. The JSU has tried to rehabilitate Azaña—whose fortunes had fallen so low during the first few days of the Revolution that he tried to flee the country—and are calling for an alliance with the Catholic Youth, and even an alliance with those who ‘sympathize with fascism’, while they refuse to constitute the unity of the revolutionary youth with the young libertarians, communists (of the POUM [C.S.M.]), syndicalists, federalists, etc.”

After having denounced the provocations carried out by the police forces and the support granted by the Government and by the political parties to the proposals of the French and English governments to “suffocate the Spanish revolution”, the manifesto declared:

“In the Basque Country they have imprisoned our Committees and are persecuting the anarchist militants.... They refuse to send the arms that are needed by the Aragon front.... They send the children of the people to the front, while they leave in the rearguard—for notoriously counterrevolutionary purposes—the professional armed units and the police....

“There is no point in continuing to recite the litany of counterrevolutionary acts—of which we have only provided a few examples here”, the manifesto continues, the situation is quite clear, they want to crush the revolution, they are preparing the repression of the revolutionary elements. However, “... we are ready, if necessary, to go underground, to fight mercilessly against all the falsifiers, against all the tyrants over the people and against the miserable hucksters of politics. And today we shall once again repeat: Rather than renouncing the struggle against fascism, we will die in the trenches! Rather than renouncing the Revolution, we will know how to die on the barricades!”¹⁶⁵

These important sectors of opposition within the CNT-FAI itself, which were a perpetual source of annoyance and “bad conscience” for the anarchist leaders, constituted an obstacle standing in the way of the total restoration of the State and the effort to rein in the “uncontrollables”. But they comprised an obstacle that had to be crushed at any price and this was precisely what was resolved upon in the first few months of 1937.

The first skirmishes

On January 23, 1937, the UGT, dominated by the Stalinists, organized the First Congress of Land Workers, at which 400 delegates represented, according to the official figures, 30,000 members of the peasant organizations of the UGT, who energetically pronounced *against* the collectivizations. According to Peirats, above the stage there was an enormous placard upon which the following words were inscribed: “Fewer collectivist experiments and more products.” Víctor Colomé (who had become a communist leader after his expulsion from the POUM in January 1936) expressed the views of this organization in the following terms:

“There must be a speedy end of the confused—and in some areas chaotic—situation

¹⁶⁵ Personal archives of the author.

which exists today in the Catalan countryside, and this is vital if victory over fascism is to be ensured. While you are the ones who must decide whether there should be collectivisation or not, we have to tell you that we do not recommend it in that we do not believe it to be opportune at this time.”¹⁶⁶

The entire anti-collectivization campaign waged by the PSUC, the majority fraction of the Catalanian UGT that it controlled, and the nationalist petty bourgeois organizations, met with a positive reception among a large number of Catalanian peasants, whose economic situation, tradition and mentality led them to defend their family farms—and to try to enlarge their parcels—rather than turn them over to the more revolutionary and more modern experiments of collectivization. The heated disputes between the supporters and the opponents of collectivization sometimes took the form of armed confrontations, as in Fatarella, a village of 600 inhabitants in the province of Tarragona.

The incident at Fatarella, however, was only one of many such episodes of the struggle that was underway in Catalonia between supporters and opponents of the social revolution which culminated in the “bloody week” in May 1937. Another significant incident, over which a lot of ink was spilled at the time, was the affair of the “theft of the twelve tanks”.

The facts were as follows: some communist militiamen from the Voroshilov Barracks in Barcelona presented a forged requisition order at a CNT-controlled military depot and made off with twelve tanks. Although their paperwork was signed by Eugenio Vallejo, a CNT metal worker who had become the “boss” of the war industry in Barcelona, something about the demeanor of the communist militiamen seemed suspicious to the guards at the depot. They followed them and saw them enter the Voroshilov Barracks. After reporting back to Vallejo, they found out that he had not signed any such order. Theft! The CNT appealed to the Generalitat. The Prime Minister, Tarradellas, and Vallejo arrived at the Voroshilov Barracks, which had in the meantime been surrounded by the Control Patrols. After having first denied everything, the Lieutenant Colonel in command at the Barracks finally confessed but declared that he was just following the orders of the High Command of the Carlos Marx Division, under which he served. The latter, of course, denied having given him any such orders. On March 9, 1937, *Solidaridad Obrera* published the contents of the following telegram:

“Commissar of War ‘Carlos Marx’ Division to the editor of ‘Solidaridad Obrera’.
Learned from press affair tanks taken, please notify public that the General Staff of this Division is completely uninvolved with this affair, and is even unaware of the existence of tanks in Catalonia. We therefore disavow the actions of the alleged suspect in this affair, Manuel Trueba.”¹⁶⁷

In the internal logic of the hierarchy, the lower cadres have to cover for the higher ones and the latter, if necessary, must, for the “good of the Party”, disavow the lower cadres.

¹⁶⁶ Peirats, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 127.

¹⁶⁷ *Solidaridad Obrera* (March 7, 1937).

The Lieutenant Colonel who held the command over the Barracks could under no circumstances blame this affair on his superiors and thus compromise the PSUC as well.

This affair of the “theft of the tanks” was greatly magnified and for quite some time afterwards many commentators, especially the anarchists, would perceive it as an example of the preparations made by the communists as part of the conspiracy that culminated in the May Events of 1937. In any event, the “guerrilla warfare” of minor attacks and provocations between organizations, of violent polemics followed by strident declarations about “proletarian unity” against fascism, grew steadily worse until a new crisis shook the autonomous Catalanian Government. The crisis lasted exactly one month: from March 26 to April 26, 1937.

The “last straw” that triggered this crisis was, according to Peirats:

“The crisis was triggered by a decree from the minister for public order, dated 4 March, declaring the control patrols disbanded in favour of a further reshuffle of the various armed corps teeming in the Catalan rearguard. Guards were denied the right to be affiliated to parties and organisations and the control committees of these armed corps were abolished on the argument that the purging was now completed. In addition a plan to ‘disarm the rearguard’ was put into practice. Any civilian bearing arms without the proper authorisation or permit was to be disarmed and charged. The implications of this decree were as follows: to reduce the people to powerlessness and, consequently, to disarm the revolution. Weapons were to be exclusive to the public authorities and these were to be absolutely subordinate to the Ministry of Public Order which was awarded all of the classic prerogatives proper to government, just as soon as the people's patrols and the control committees in the armed corps had been abolished.”¹⁶⁸

Evidently, things did not turn out according to plan. The Control Patrols not only failed to surrender their weapons but to the contrary surged into the streets and disarmed the “regular” police units when the opportunity arose, and the police units did likewise when they had the upper hand. There were exchanges of gunfire and although I have found no exact information concerning the number of fatalities caused by these operations of mutual disarmament, it is more than likely that there were some fatalities. The Local Federation of the Libertarian Youth of Barcelona published an incendiary pamphlet with the title, “One More Provocation”, in which one could read the following:

“Today we solemnly declare that *we were armed, we are armed, and we will be armed*, and therefore so much the worse for Rodríguez Sala. For us this measure has no validity at all.

“We repeat it so that there will not be any room for doubt, we will continue to be armed, although with all our papers in order, and anyone who nevertheless wants to disarm us will have to kill us first.

¹⁶⁸ Peirats, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, pp. 130-131.

“But we will see who defeats whom.”¹⁶⁹

However, since the measure was a government measure that had been approved with the agreement in principle of the anarchist Ministers of the Generalitat, the latter were harshly criticized by the “rank and file” of the libertarian organizations and had to withdraw their support for the Decree to dissolve the Control Patrols, thus provoking the Government crisis.

During the month that the crisis lasted, the organizations gave free rein to polemics and accusations of every kind, but everything was “resolved” with the formation of a new Government that appeared to be a twin brother of the previous one. Tarradellas was still Prime Minister and Ayguadé (the two members of the *Esquerra*) was still Minister of “Internal Security”. And, despite the violent communist press campaign against him, the *cenetista* Isgleas retained his position as Minister of Defense.

During the government crisis, armed confrontations and conflicts of every type continued to take place. One of the most serious was the one provoked by the decision of Juan Negrín, who was at that time the Minister of Finance of the Central Government, to replace the armed groups of the CNT-FAI at the border posts on the frontier with France with *carabineros* (who were under the command of his Ministry). On April 17, the *carabineros* and other police units arrived at the border post of Puigcerdá, and then Figueras, and occupied the entire region along the border. Once again, the anarchist groups did not surrender and a battle took place between the police forces and the armed groups of the CNT-FAI.

The police units surrounded the city of Puigcerdá, which had been in the hands of the libertarians since July 1936. Armed groups of anarchists who had come to the aid of their comrades then surrounded the police forces, preventing the latter from contacting the government authorities in Lérida or Barcelona. The leaders of the CNT in Catalonia, however, rushed to the site of the conflict to negotiate a compromise solution. This “compromise” was nothing less than the withdrawal of the armed anarchist groups and the occupation of Puigcerdá by the police forces.

In the meantime, on April 25, Roldán Cortada, a leader of the UGT and the PSUC, was mysteriously assassinated in Molina de Llobregat. “The PSUC reacted violently and denounced the unruly elements and hidden fascist agents. The CNT formally condemned the murder and called for an inquiry which would, in its own view, have vindicated its militants”.¹⁷⁰ Two days later, in the vicinity of Puigcerdá, three anarchist militants were assassinated in retaliation. Among them was Antonio Martín, a local anarchist leader, who was the mayor of Puigcerdá. In a footnote on page 293 of [the English edition of] their book, Broué and Témime write: “Antonio Martín, a former smuggler, was, after July 1936, an effective chief customs officer.” According to Santillán, it was his

¹⁶⁹ Personal archives of the author.

¹⁷⁰ Broué and Témime, *op. cit.*, English edition, p. 282.

effectiveness in the performance of his job as customs inspector that earned him such deep-seated enmity. Nonetheless, republicans, socialists and communists transformed him into the executioner of Puigcerdá and the man who was responsible for a prolonged reign of terror. Manuel D. Benavides, in his book, *Guerra y Revolución en Cataluña* [War and Revolution in Catalonia], compiled an extensive rap sheet against the man he called “the bum from Malaga”.¹⁷¹

With their usual skill in capitalizing on the deaths of their comrades, the communists so insistently spotlighted the assassination of Roldán Cortada that the murder of Antonio Martín went almost unnoticed. Among other arrests, the communists managed to have Luis Cano, the anarchist municipal councilor of Hospitalet de Llobregat, arrested and charged with responsibility for the murder of the communist leader, but the Barcelona Tribunal dismissed the charges against him due to a lack of evidence on May 2, 1937.

The funeral of the UGT leader constituted a show of force on the part of the PSUC. For three and a half hours the police and the soldiers of the forces controlled by the Party marched down the streets with their weapons. According to Broué and Témime, the representatives of the POUM and the CNT who attended the funeral realized that the situation was more serious than they had previously thought: in fact, it was a show of force directed against them. *La Batalla* published the following reflections on the funeral and its purposes:

“A counterrevolutionary demonstration, whose purpose is to create a pogromist atmosphere among the petty bourgeois masses against the vanguard of the Catalanian proletariat—the CNT, the FAI and the POUM.”

And that is indeed what it was: “The following saying has been attributed to the PSUC: ‘Before taking Zaragoza, we have to take Barcelona.’ This accurately summarized the situation and faithfully expressed the aspiration of the country that demanded that the power usurped by the anarchists must be returned to the Generalitat”, Manuel D. Benavides, who was the spokesman for Comorera and the PSUC, later wrote in his book, *Guerra y Revolución en Cataluña*.¹⁷² The fact that the anarchists were represented in the Generalitat¹⁷³ appears to have had absolutely no effect on our author. We understand why. “Returning power to the Generalitat” means liquidating “the workers power” and workers democracy and restoring the bourgeois State. As long as there were anarchists who were willing to play the game with them—which they did, but not without difficulties—their presence in the Generalitat could be tolerated, at least temporarily. For

¹⁷¹ M. D. Benavides, *Guerra y Revolución en Cataluña*, p. 426.

¹⁷² M. D. Benavides, *op. cit.*

¹⁷³ According to them, they were *under-represented*. It is impossible to leaf through the anarchist press or the official press releases, etc., of this period without encountering the following argument: the CNT, the majority organization in Catalonia, had the same number of representatives in the institutions of power that the UGT had, which was a minority organization. They nonetheless accepted this situation, this *sacrifice* in the name of anti-fascist unity, as a testimonial of their good faith.

the communists, what was essential—and this applied not just to Catalonia, but to the entire “republican zone”—was to achieve, as soon as possible, the centralization of the State, a strong power, which they expected, and not without reason, to control with the help of the USSR and its “disinterested aid”. Like two superimposed, but intricately interpenetrating geological layers, the bourgeois Jacobin tradition and its variant, the “Bolshevik” tradition, constituted the ideological foundations of the Catalan nationalist parties and the Stalinists, respectively, in their common struggle to restore the State.

In this tense situation caused by all the armed conflicts, the assassinations and the arrests (only a few have been referred to here, but there were many more), the autonomous Catalan Government resolved that May Day, the traditional holiday of the working class, would not be celebrated as a holiday. In justification, the Government appealed to the needs for war production and to supply the front. But the Government also prohibited all demonstrations, rallies or meetings on May Day (which could very well have been celebrated after working hours).

May Day fell on a Saturday. Therefore, everyone was working. The leading committees of the anti-fascist organizations disseminated their ritual, and therefore sinister, press releases about the struggle of the international working class which this date symbolized.

May 2nd was a Sunday. The people of Barcelona were strolling up and down *las Ramblas*. But some of the militants were restless. A few days earlier, Camillo Berneri wrote in his newspaper, *Guerra di classe*:

“The shadow of Noske looms up. Monarchist-Catholic-traditionalist Fascism is only one sector of the counter-revolution. We must remember that. It must be said, We must not be a party to the manoeuvres of this great ‘Fifth Column’ whose tenacious vitality and redoubtable mimicry have been showed by six years of Spanish Republic. The Spanish Civil War is developing on two politico-social fronts. The Revolution must triumph on two fronts. And it will overcome [*Vencerá*].”

On Monday, May 3, the fighting that marked the onset of the “bloody week” began in Barcelona, during which Berneri himself was assassinated by the Stalinists.

The provocation

On May 3, at 2:45 p.m., several trucks full of Assault Guards, under the command of Rodríguez Sala, the Commissar of Public Order [Chief of Police] of Barcelona and a member of the PSUC, pulled up in front of the Telephone Company Building, on the *Plaza de Cataluña*.

The timing had been carefully arranged in advance, because at this moment many employees and militiamen on guard duty had just left the building to have lunch.

From the very first days of the Revolution, the Telephone Company Building of Barcelona, like all the major enterprises in Barcelona, was under the control of the two trade unions, the CNT and the UGT, with a representative of the Council of the Generalitat, but, just as in so many other workplaces, almost all the employees were members of the CNT.

The police stormed into the building shouting, "Hands up!" at the militiamen on guard at the entrance, who, taken by surprise, were disarmed. The police ran up the stairs to raid the other floors, but, alerted by the unusual shouting and noise, the employees and militiamen in the upper floors seized their weapons and put up a violent resistance to the police raid. The police had to beat a hasty retreat to the first floor.

The Stalinists' plan had failed. They had hoped to seize the Telephone Company Building by way of a "lightning" raid and confront the CNT with a *fait accompli*. Yet despite the timing and the element of surprise, the attackers had not achieved their objective. The Telephone Company Building remained in the power of the trade union forces, except for the first floor, where a few Assault Guards remained, while the others took up positions on the roofs of adjacent buildings.

"The news of the attack spread rapidly. Informed of what had taken place, the Regional Committee of the CNT called the Ministry of Internal Security on the telephone and demanded an explanation. Who gave the order to occupy the building? It did not come from the Council of the Generalitat, which had never deliberated such an action. After further inquiries, the Councilor of Internal Security, the republican Ayguadé, said he did not know anything about it. In fact, the order to occupy the building that Rodríguez Sala had presented bore his signature....

"The provocation was so obvious, that a wave of indignation immediately arose. Nor was the reaction to be delayed for very long. Not even an hour later, the militiamen of the FAI and the members of the Control Patrols appeared on the streets. Immediately thereafter one began to hear the first gunshots. The effect was instantaneous. Within a few minutes there was no one on the streets, the shopkeepers had drawn the shutters down over their shop-fronts and you only saw a few stragglers who were rushing off to their homes, keeping close to the walls to avoid the bullets that now began to fly everywhere. 'What is happening?' No one knows anything. But I had to get to safety.

"In the meantime the factories had been alerted. By mutual agreement, the workers of the CNT and the workers of the UGT decided to interrupt their work. Arms were taken from their hiding places and, as if in obedience to an order, barricades began to appear everywhere.

"The reaction was so vast that almost everything came to a stop. This is not what the authors of the provocation had expected. Night had not yet fallen and the whole city was already full of barricades and there were even barricades in the vicinity of the Generalitat, where the Government in fact found itself besieged by the popular forces. The Assault Guards who had been posted in advance at all the strategic points were submerged by this

immense human wave that surrounded them and left them as little islands lost in the midst of a storm-tossed sea. The shops were closed, the trains and the buses had returned to their depots, the taxis had disappeared from the streets, the city sank into an eerie silence, punctuated from time to time by the sound of gunshots heard during the night, or by the sudden rattle of machine guns.

“The night passed in this way, entirely devoted from beginning to end to the preparations for the battle whose imminent onset was sensed by everyone. The Government, clearly caught off-guard by this unexpected resistance, remained silent.”¹⁷⁴

According to Julián Gorkin, on that same night of May 3-4:

“The Executive Committee of the POUM met with the Regional Committees of the CNT and the FAI and the Libertarian Youth. We expressed the nature of the problem in its real terms: ‘None of us has set the masses of Barcelona in motion, it is a spontaneous response to a Stalinist provocation. This is a decisive moment for the revolution. Either we place ourselves at the head of this movement to destroy the internal enemy, or the movement will fail and the enemy will destroy us. We have to choose: revolution or counterrevolution.’”¹⁷⁵

They did not resolve to do anything. Their maximum demand was ... that the provocateur Commissar must be dismissed!!

“The opposing forces on the streets”, Peirats writes, “divided into two camps. On one side, the security forces (Assault Guards, Republican National Guard, Security Guards and *Mossos de Esquadra*) plus the PSUC and *Estat Català* parties (that is, the Stalinists and the Catalan separatists): on the other side were the popular forces made up of the anarchists (the CNT, the FAI and the Libertarian Youth), the POUM and the Control Patrols. The Confederal Defence Committees, traditionally organised on a ward-by-ward basis, were the great strategists of the popular counter-offensive. The no less traditional barricades mushroomed everywhere and battle was joined for the control of the streets, with a viciousness equal to that of 19 July.”¹⁷⁶

Tuesday, May 4

“That morning, the whole city, except for a few neighborhoods in the center of the city, were in the power of the workers”, Marcel Ollivier writes.

¹⁷⁴ Marcel Ollivier, *Les journées sanglantes de Barcelone*, Spartacus, pp. 13-14. I have relied largely on the account of Marcel Ollivier, which seems to me to be the most complete account of all the ones that I have read. George Orwell’s eyewitness account is also excellent, but since his book (*Homage to Catalonia*) is available in all good bookstores, I prefer to take this opportunity to avidly recommend reading Orwell’s book.

¹⁷⁵ Julián Gorkin, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

¹⁷⁶ Peirats, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 144.

“It was quiet at dawn. Not one gunshot. The housewives left their homes and creeping along the walls went out to buy food. Because ‘life goes on’, you have to eat, the children have to eat, even the husband has to eat, who will not go to work today but instead to the barricades....

“Later, the gunfire started again and the housewives and spectators ran for safety.

“They fought street by street, house by house, with rifles, with machine guns, and with hand grenades.”¹⁷⁷

Throughout the entire day the battle was waged with extreme violence. Besieged and besiegers, both sides, fought bitterly in almost the entire city. The “forces of order”, the police, the Stalinists, and the ultranationalists of the *Estat Catalá*, besieged the Telephone Company Building and the headquarters of a few organizations like the POUM, and they were in turn besieged by the militiamen of the CNT and the POUM in the big hotels in the center of Barcelona which they had occupied, in their barracks and in their headquarters. Among other events that took place on that day, several hundred Civil Guards, barricaded in their barracks, were surrounded and practically wiped out by anarchist militiamen. These same militiamen disarmed 400 Assault Guards and took them prisoner in the working class neighborhoods of Barcelona. The situation was still confused, however, and neither side had achieved any distinct advantage after a full day’s fighting.

“Under the spring sun, they fought, they killed without a truce. On the streets, which were totally deserted, the only things moving were the armored cars of the FAI, the cars of the various organizations that drove by at high speeds, greeted with bursts of gunfire, and the ambulances that came to the same barricades to recover the dead and the wounded and transport them to the hospital, where an impressive number of casualties was soon being treated. The doctors were overwhelmed with work. They had to call for outside help.”¹⁷⁸

The rapidity and decisiveness with which the militiamen of the CNT and the FAI and the militiamen of the POUM—united, or almost united, for once—launched their attacks on the police units, and the bitterness that characterized the latter in their attempt to subjugate the revolutionaries, might seem surprising. If we view it from the perspective of the “anti-fascist war” or even of “republican legality”, it might seem absurd or criminal. But it was precisely this rapidity and this decisiveness that encapsulate everything that I have just discussed: within the war and within the republican camp, a sharp conflict had been simmering for months, a “class war” that had already led to countless skirmishes and which, in those May Days of 1937, exploded in earnest. The fate of the social revolution was at stake and that is why the workers rushed to the barricades with such determination and without wasting any time in “negotiations” or doubletalk. Because they had no time to waste.

¹⁷⁷ Marcel Ollivier, *op. cit.*

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

The General Staffs, the bureaucratic leaders, were the ones who assumed the responsibility for conducting these negotiations. Night fell, and it seemed that the Generalitat had awakened from its stupor. Once its members were gathered together, they decided that the Government no longer existed, that it had gone down in the storm. They had to form a new governmental team.

“In the meantime, in an urgent attempt to stop the massacre, Vidiella, in the name of the UGT, and Vázquez, in the name of the National Committee of the CNT, issued pathetic appeals over the radio begging the combatants to stop shooting while a truce was being arranged. The anarchist Ministers in the Central Government, García Oliver and Federica Montseny, who rushed to Barcelona from Valencia, supported this appeal with all the means at their disposal.”¹⁷⁹

For, while the militants from both sides were engaged in a veritable pitched battle, their leaders continued to talk, both in order to reach an agreement as well as to take advantage of the situation. Companys demanded, before reaching any kind of agreement, the withdrawal of the armed workers. Tarradellas (Prime Minister), supported by Companys, refused to dismiss Rodríguez Sala and Aiguadé, as the anarchists had demanded.

From the microphones installed in the Palace of the Catalanian Government, the negotiators from the parties and organizations issued on that same Tuesday, May 4, a desperate appeal to the fighters to cease fire. Rafael Vidiella, the leader of the PSUC and a member of the Catalanian Government, declared:

“It is vital that all workers take a step back. It is essential that they set down their arms and that there be a ceasefire. Let each of them retain his positions but let not a single shot be fired. We are certain that we can find a definitive resolution this very night. Workers: we have more than enough resources to defeat national and international fascism, but we cannot achieve final victory with a fratricidal attitude such as the one that has arisen. There must be a ceasefire. We will search for that resolution this very day. Catalans, workers, anti-fascists all: Long live proletarian unity! Long live the antifascist unity if this war is to be won! Long live the unity of all workers so that national and international fascism may be routed once and for all! Long live Catalonia! Long live the Republic!”¹⁸⁰

García Oliver, the anarchist leader, a Minister in the Central Government and the first person sent by the latter to resolve the conflict, declared:

“Comrades: For the sake of anti-fascist unity, for the sake of proletarian unity, for the sake of those who have perished in the fray, pay no heed to provocations. Do not practise, at this juncture, the cult of the dead. Let it not be the dead, your feeling for the dead, for your fallen brethren that now prevents you from holding your fire. Do not

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ Peirats, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 146.

make a cult of the dead. In any civil war like the one we are living through, there are always the dead. All of the dead from the anti-fascist family will have the same glory and will have the same honour. What I am saying to you is what I think. You understand me, and you know me well enough to tell that just now I am prompted solely by my own utterly free will, because you know me well enough to know that never, never before nor now nor in the future, will anyone succeed in wresting from my lips a statement that is not heartfelt. And after all that I have said, I must add this: All of today's fallen are my brothers: I bow before them and I kiss them. They are victims of the anti-fascist struggle and I cherish each of them equally. Hail, comrades, workers of Catalonia!”¹⁸¹

Why not! Far from withholding his kisses, García Oliver bestows them upon all the dead, cops and workers in arms! Why? They all died defending or believing that they were defending something? But what? This does not seem to interest him at all. As for his insistence on talking about his sincerity, this can be explained by the rumor that was circulating among the militants of the CNT-FAI to the effect that he was practically held hostage by the forces of the Generalitat and therefore could not speak freely.

But that was not true. García Oliver, the Minister of the Central Government, used the same demagogic language as Rafael Vidiella, calling for a cease-fire, and only for a cease-fire, as if the bloody battle had no purpose, as if it were some kind of outburst of insanity that endangered the alleged anti-fascist unity and would undermine the front against the rebels. Which was certainly true. There can be no doubt that this “fratricidal” battle did not exactly reinforce the “republican camp”. But what we really want to know is how and why the situation had come to such an extremity and what was really at stake in this “civil war within the civil war”.

During the entire night of May 4-5, while the combatants maintained their positions, in the Palace of the Generalitat the negotiations were underway, punctuated by appeals for calm issued by the leaders over the radio. Like sorcerer’s apprentices, the Stalinists and their allies, who had sought to utilize a simple police raid to deprive the workers committees of a little more of their power, found themselves facing the workers in arms. Now, the jig was up, and they had to go for broke: they had to definitively crush the revolution. The anarchist leaders, for their part, appeared to have been totally left behind by the events. One after another, after Vidiella and García Oliver, they spent that night broadcasting over the airwaves: Federica Montseny, Toryho, the editor in chief of *Solidaridad Obrera*, the Commissar of Propaganda for the *Esquerra*, Miravittles, and President Companys himself. Companys, in his speech that was broadcast on the radio, disavowed the raid on the Telephone Company Building led by his chief of police, the Stalinist Rodríguez Sala. But in the negotiations carried out that night, which took place in the headquarters of the Generalitat, Companys demanded as a precondition for any agreement that the armed people must withdraw from the streets. The anarchists, for their part, only requested that they be guaranteed that Rodríguez Sala and Ayguadé would be dismissed. No agreement could be reached on any point.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

Wednesday, May 5

“Obeying the directives they had received, the workers remained at their posts awaiting the results of the governmental deliberations.”¹⁸² Since no results were forthcoming on any issue, the fighting continued.

Just as on the previous day, the housewives left their homes with great prudence to make their purchases and the shopkeepers, who had opened their shops briefly in the morning hurried to pull down the shutters as soon as they heard the first shots.

The fighting, it would seem, was even more violent than the day before. Exasperated by their casualties, the adversaries waged fierce battles in the neighborhoods of Barcelona. Everywhere, patrols of young men (and young women) were on their way to their barricades or to participate in attacks against buildings occupied by the Stalinists and the police.

Today, however, the revolutionary forces suffered two defeats: the Civil Guards took the *Estación de Francia* [a train station], occupied by anarchists, and the employees of the Telephone Company, who had already withstood two days of siege, surrendered to the Assault Guards.

“... The divisions at the front, when they discovered what was happening, proposed to return to Barcelona. The Regional Committee of the CNT declared that for the moment they were not needed, but that if their intervention was required they would be notified.”¹⁸³

In fact—all the testimonies confirm this—the anarchist and POUM leaders had already decided upon retreat. That same night the political and trade union organizations issued several more appeals asking the workers to abandon the barricades and return to their homes.

It is understandable that these reiterated appeals sowed confusion among the ranks of the revolutionary combatants. Their groups, which had from the very first day practically surrounded the police in the center of the city, balked at launching the final assault. How could they, for example, attack and take control of the Palace of the Generalitat, when their own leaders were inside the building, holding negotiations with the leaders of their enemies?

The attitude of the anarchist militants during these dramatic moments was exactly the same as the attitude of the workers involved in the collectivizations that I spoke of above. They plunged into battle ardently and spontaneously. They took over three-quarters of the city. But they waited for directives, they waited for orders from their venerated leaders!

¹⁸² Marcel Ollivier, *op. cit.*

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

When the latter ordered them to abandon the barricades, they refused! They would never leave the barricades, not today, not tomorrow, in spite of all the appeals of their leaders. The disappointing wait for revolutionary directives, however, gave rise to some hesitation, some uncertainty, that their enemies took of advantage of to seize the train station and the Telephone Company Building. This hesitation, of course, was accompanied by an undeniable ardor in the fighting, but, in this case as well, this ardor was employed for defensive purposes. They were waiting for their leaders to give them a comprehensive battle plan, a general offensive strategy (we have seen that, when the “general plan” was pure and simple withdrawal, they refused to comply with it) and since they received nothing like such a plan, they agreed to maintain their barricades and their neighborhood command centers, without engaging in a generalized and coordinated offensive. For the numerous attacks and partial victories of the previous day were no longer sufficient at this stage of the battle.

On this same day, Wednesday, May 5, the autonomous Catalanian Government resigned. What else could it have done? That evening, the Regional Committee of the CNT issued some new proposals:

“A cessation of hostilities. Each side to retain its positions. The police and the civilians fighting alongside them are invited to begin a truce. In the event of non-compliance with these accords, the responsible committees are to be advised immediately. No attention will be paid to isolated gunfire. The defenders of the union premises are to remain calm pending further information.”¹⁸⁴

These proposals were accepted in principle, but in practice, the government forces did not observe the cease-fire. The members of the Regional Committee of the CNT-FAI, meeting at the headquarters of the two organizations, had to suspend their meeting in order to participate in the defense of the building, which had been attacked by government forces. The situation was extremely confused. Among the ranks of the CNT-FAI, there was growing discontent expressed against the responsible committees that endlessly issued appeals for calm and for a cessation of hostilities without giving even the least consistent revolutionary directive. The revolt against this short-term conciliatory attitude—cease fire and hold your positions—was supported by the left opposition in the CNT, by all those who had already spent the last few weeks criticizing the governmental “collaborationism” of the CNT leaders. This opposition consisted of an important sector of the Libertarian Youth, numerous committees and rank and file groups in the enterprises and neighborhoods, as well as The Friends of Durruti. (Subsequent events demonstrated, however, that the majority of the militants of the CNT-FAI were unwilling to openly oppose the “conciliatory” directives of their leaders.) During the fighting, The Friends of Durruti broached the idea of forming a Revolutionary Junta that seemed to exist only on paper. For them, this Junta would replace the Generalitat, since they were advocates of a fight to the finish, until the seizure of power by the revolutionary organizations. They demanded that “all of the elements responsible for the attempted

¹⁸⁴ Peirats, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 147.

subversion under the aegis of the government must face the firing squad. The POUM must be admitted into the Junta because it stood with the workers”¹⁸⁵.

Even while they were fighting on the barricades they were also engaged in an intensive propaganda campaign in favor of continuing the struggle. Here are some of their most widely disseminated appeals:

“CNT-GROUP OF THE FRIENDS OF DURRUTI-FAI.

“Workers! A Revolutionary Junta. Shoot the culprits. Disarm the armed corps. Socialize the economy. Disband the political parties which have turned on the working class. We must not surrender the streets. The revolution before all else. We salute our comrades from the POUM who fraternized with us on the streets. Long live the Social Revolution! Down with the counterrevolution!”¹⁸⁶

These appeals and all the activities of the group of The Friends of Durruti were denounced by the Regional Committee of the CNT as provocations. The Group was subsequently expelled from the CNT. According to Peirats, the Group was never as important as some foreign observers thought. “The relative unimportance of its members,” Peirats writes, “POUM participation, and the Marxist flavour of some of its communiqués all served to dilute the real influence of the ‘Friends of Durruti’.”¹⁸⁷ It is undoubtedly true that, for the anarchists, this “Marxist flavour” would have consisted in the insistence with which the Group called for unity of action with the POUM, and its watchword of “a revolutionary junta”, the obsessive theme of Trotskyists past and present. Furthermore, the Trotskyists spoke very enthusiastically about this Group, which may indicate that they were either practicing “entrism” in the Group, or else that they had good relations with it. Jaime Balius, however, the leader of The Friends of Durruti, defended the Group against these “accusations” of Marxism. On May 4-5, the minuscule Trotskyist group in Barcelona (the Bolshevik-Leninist Section in Spain of the Fourth International) distributed a pamphlet that was not very different from the one distributed by The Friends of Durruti:

“Long live the revolutionary offensive! No compromises. Disarm the GNR [Republican National Guard] and the reactionary Assault Guards. This is a crucial juncture. It will be too late next time. General Strike in every industry not working for the war effort until such time as the reactionary government steps down. Proletarian power alone can guarantee military victory. Complete arming of the working class. Long live the CNT-FAI-POUM unity of action! Long live the Revolutionary Front of the Proletariat. Revolutionary Defense Committees in the workshops, factories, barricades...”¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁵ *L’Espagne Nouvelle*, No. 5 (May 22, 1937). [Quoted in Peirats, *op. cit.*, Vol. II—Translator’s Note.]

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ Peirats, *Los anarquistas en la crisis política española*, Buenos Aires, Ed. Alfa, p. 249.

¹⁸⁸ Quoted in Morrow, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

Of course, the general strike had already begun spontaneously on May 3 in Barcelona and in many other Catalan cities, as soon as news arrived concerning the assault on the Telephone Company Building.

The position of the POUM was, once again, ambiguous. At the same time that it threw all its forces into the fight—forces that were considerably weaker than those of the anarchists—it would appear that its leaders found the situation and its possible consequences to be inauspicious. Catalonia, they reflected, is not Spain. They knew very well that if the revolutionary forces were to take power in Catalonia, the rest of republican Spain would not follow them: this would result in a “triangular” situation that would pose serious difficulties for the anti-fascist camp in general and would only benefit the fascists. In any case, these were the arguments that Andrés Nin used to dampen the ardor of the combatants of the POUM who, with the anarchists, thought, and not without reason, that they could completely destroy the police units and the Stalinists and become the absolute masters of Barcelona, first, and then Catalonia, later. And thus, according to the testimony of Wilebaldo Solano, who was at that time the secretary of the Iberian Communist Youth (the youth group of the POUM), the forces of the POUM, instead of attacking the center of Barcelona, as they had been planning to do, instead agreed to defend their positions, which amounted to voluntarily entrenching themselves in a losing situation. The following appeal of the POUM, if one reads it carefully, clearly reflects this ambiguity:

“THE POUM TO THE WORKING CLASS.

“Comrades:

“With the struggle of the last few days, the proletariat of Barcelona has demonstrated its unshakeable will to no longer tolerate the least counterrevolutionary provocation. When we have repulsed the enemy, thanks to the magnificent response of the working class, we will have to ‘withdraw’. But the withdrawal can only be carried out under the following conditions:

“Withdrawal of the government forces from the streets.

“The working class is to retain its arms.

“The fulfillment of these conditions, which are perfectly acceptable, can put an end to the fighting and prevent useless bloodshed and give the comrades fighting at the front the morale and the confidence that are so necessary for fighting our mortal enemy: fascism.

“The Executive Committee.”

A very odd strategy, this, which consists in arguing that “when we have repulsed the enemy”, we shall commence our “withdrawal”! All the vacillations of the POUM are reflected here.

* * *

The events of May 5 undoubtedly represent the culminating point of the battle. While, as we have seen, the Catalonian Government had resigned that morning, that same evening the newspaper, *La Noche*, published the list of the names of the Ministers of the new Government: it included Valerio Mas, secretary of the Regional Committee of the CNT, Antonio Sesé, general secretary of the UGT of Catalonia, Joaquín Pons, from the *Unión de Rabassaires*, Martí Feced, of the Catalonian *Esquerra* (as Councilor of Public Order). The last page of the newspaper, however, contained a brief note concerning the death of Antonio Sesé.

The news was disseminated over the radio and the commentators unequivocally concluded that the secretary of the UGT had been assassinated. The PSUC immediately accused the anarchists of being responsible for the assassination, of course. The anarchists denied any responsibility and *Solidaridad Obrera* (on Sunday, May 9) published a chart depicting the itinerary of the automobiles in which Sesé and his comrades were travelling, which indicated that the bullets that had killed Sesé could not have been fired from the anarchists' barricades. This was not, of course, definitive proof. In any event, the "settling of accounts", which had been frequently carried out ever since the beginning of the fighting, spread, and many anarchist leaders, including Domingo Ascaso and Camillo Berneri, thus met their deaths.

The death of Antonio Sesé, however, seems to have been the death that caused the most political upheavals. The first consequence of his death was the dissolution of the new Government before it had even existed. The communists went on the offensive, not only in Barcelona, but also in various cities and towns in Catalonia.

That same day, the radio broadcast a joint manifesto signed by the local federations of the CNT and UGT trade unions which said: "The tragic events which have occurred in our city over the past 48 hours have prevented all of Barcelona's workers from attending their place of work. The conflict which triggered this situation of abnormality, which is injurious to the proletariat's cause, has been satisfactorily resolved by representatives of the anti-fascist parties and organisations, meeting in the Generalitat Palace. Consequently, the Local Federations of the CNT and of the UGT have agreed to address all of their members to instruct them to return forthwith to their customary employments. There must be a return to normality. Continued industrial idleness in these times of anti-fascist war is tantamount to collaboration with the common enemy and to weakening ourselves. Thus, the workers of the CNT and of the UGT, without exception, are hereby instructed to return to work...."

This strange, widely disseminated communiqué had the effect of instilling doubts into the minds of the combatants of the CNT. It said the conflict had been "resolved", it was signed by the representatives of organizations whose members were for the most part on opposite sides of the barricades. And if it was true? What exactly was resolved? In fact, there was no resolution other than the one that called for the formation of the Government that had just been dissolved.

“Yet again the police forces capitalised upon the impact made by this broadcast to gain new ground. The Navy minister, who had been fiercely criticised over the fleet's inactivity, made haste to dispatch a number of warships to Barcelona; these included the destroyers Sánchez Barcáiztegui and Lepanto. Moreover, it was reported that public order had been taken into the control of the central government and that sizeable contingents of Assault Guards were being dispatched from the Jarama front.

“Given the failure of the peace-making overtures made by Garcia Oliver and Mariano Vázquez (the minister of justice and secretary of the CNT National Committee respectively), Federica Montseny suggested to the central government that she make a personal intervention ahead of the dispatching of the expeditionary forces. These troops were not to be sent in until such time as the minister of health (Montseny) might deem appropriate. She also declined an escort on her journey to Barcelona by road. On reaching the CNT headquarters in Catalonia, she established immediate telephone contact with the Generalitat and indicated that, as the representative of the central government, she should have guaranteed access to the presidential palace. But en route (it was a route strewn with hostile barricades) and in spite of the many assurances she had been offered, the Minister's progress and that of her two companions was interrupted and it was only by a miracle that she was spared from being shot outright.

“Once in Companys's presence, Montseny's first step was to divest the latter of his office—for the duration of her stewardship—in the name of the Valencia government. Companys had espoused a stance of questionable neutrality.”¹⁸⁹

* * *

On that same day, the Italian anarchists, Camillo Berneri and Barbieri, were assassinated. On May 11, *Solidaridad Obrera* reported their assassinations—just two more among so many others!

“This secret and uncontrolled activity which has for some time now been weighing upon our anti-fascist zone, has been the cause of yet another tragedy: the death of our comrade, the professor Camillo Berneri. . . . Yesterday it was Mark Rein, the journalist and editor of the *Social Democratic Kraten*, who disappeared from the Hotel Continental in this city after having received two telephone calls. Today it was comrade Berneri whose body was found on Thursday, riddled with bullets, in Barcelona's *Hospital Clínico*.”¹⁹⁰

After a brief biography of Berneri, the newspaper then provided some details about his assassination.

According to this article, “two men with red armbands” appeared at 2 Plaza del Angel, where Berneri, his wife, Barbieri and other Italian anarchists were living. After a

¹⁸⁹ Peirats, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 151.

¹⁹⁰ *Solidaridad Obrera* (May 11, 1937).

mysterious interrogation (which was made even more mysterious due to the censored lines in the article which prevented anyone from being able to identify the political affiliation of the “men with red armbands”), the two men left, only to return later in the afternoon with a search warrant. The Italian anarchists allowed them to search the house. They seized some papers and ordered the Italians who were present not to leave “because otherwise you will be shot at in the street”. On the following day (!!!), May 5, a group of brawny armed men appeared at the house and told Berneri and Barbieri that they were under arrest. Both men protested. “It appears that you are counterrevolutionaries”, they were told, and they were taken away. On the morning of May 6 the police returned to the house and notified the residents that the two anarchists had been released and that they would be returning shortly. They did not return, however. “That same day, the families of the two disappeared men knew, from the files of the *Hospital Clínico*, that their bodies, riddled with bullets, had been found by the Red Cross in the vicinity of the Generalitat, on the night of May 5-6.” They had been shot from behind, with one bullet to the base of the neck. *Révolution Prolétarienne*, in its June 10, 1937, issue, pointed out with respect to these killings:

“He had received his first warning after the publication of his open letter to Federica Montseny. Antonov-Ovseenko was responsible for this warning, sent via the Generalitat. Berneri told his friends in Paris about it.”¹⁹¹

This was only one of a large number of crimes committed in Catalonia by the Russian secret services, which virtually dominated that “secret and uncontrolled activity” concerning which *Solidaridad Obrera* had so timorously spoken. Since Berneri was one of the most outstanding figures of the anarchist revolutionary opposition, it was, in a way, normal for him to be one of the targets of the Stalinist political repression directed by Antonov-Ovseenko (the former military leader of the Petrograd Soviet, now a cop), but above all by Geröe. Their thugs, sometimes members of the PSUC, constituted authentic parallel police forces, with their own private prisons, the “chekas”, and sometimes members of the official police of the Generalitat, who were very tightly controlled by the Stalinist party and who were furthermore under the command of one of its members: Rodríguez Sala. Berneri knew all of this, he had to know it, and that is why it seems so surprising to us that he stayed with his friends, in that house on the Plaza de Angel, after the first visit of the men with red armbands, when about half the city was full of barricades and in the hands of the anarchist militias. Were they surrounded? Was there no way for him to escape? These questions remain unanswered.

Thursday, May 6 and Friday, May 7

“During the morning of the third day, there was some hesitation. Some of the combatants, tired and discouraged, had gone home. Some trolley operators, thinking that the fighting had ended because of the quiet conditions that morning, ventured to take their trolleys out of their depots. They drove without incident down Salmerón Street towards the *Paseo de*

¹⁹¹ *La Révolution Prolétarienne* (June 10, 1937).

Gracia, but when they arrived at the *Paseo de Gracia* they were met by a hailstorm of bullets that forced them to return to their depots.

“What happened? This is what happened: The Friends of Durruti, contrary to the orders of the Regional Committee of the CNT, had decided to continue the struggle. Their slogans undoubtedly corresponded with the desires of the masses. The barricades, momentarily abandoned, were once again occupied, and the snipers took up their positions on the roofs. The Government was so weak that it was unable to take advantage of the momentary lapse in the fighting, and was thus unable to seize new positions. Notified of the situation, the POUM, which, following the directives of the CNT, had been urging the workers to stop fighting and return to work, sent out orders by telephone reversing its previous orders. The Government, still under siege in the Palace of the Generalitat, had demonstrated its absolute impotence.

“The gunfire started again. But no one knew what they were fighting for anymore. To recover the Telephone Company Building, which was in the power of the Assault Guards, they would have to use heavy artillery and it was all at the front. As for seizing power, which is what The Friends of Durruti were calling for in order to impose the formation of a Revolutionary Junta, and to disarm the Assault Guards, this could not be done without the help of the CNT. And the latter, far from desiring an intensification of the struggle, was issuing repeated appeals for peace. After a few hours, the silence that reigned in the *Plaza de Catalunya* rapidly spread outward towards the suburbs. The *Hospital Clínico* had already registered more than 500 fatalities and thousands of wounded, not counting those who, after receiving medical attention in the field, had returned to their homes.¹⁹²

“Meanwhile, it was announced over the radio that the Valencia Government, in consideration of the gravity of the situation, had decided to assume responsibility for reestablishing public order in Catalonia....

“The fighting had come to an end. Against all expectations, however, no one returned to work. The combatants remained at their positions. What were they waiting for? They were waiting for the deadline, established by The Friends of Durruti in that group’s ultimatum to the Government, to expire. If the Government did not surrender, The Friends of Durruti threatened to attack the Generalitat. This is how they spent the whole day, waiting for a resumption of the battle. But nothing happened.”¹⁹³

On that same day, in response to the outraged accusations of the Stalinists and their numerous fellow-travelers concerning the “counterrevolutionary putsch manipulated by the Francoist Fifth Column”, the CNT-FAI published a long communiqué addressed to “to the world’s conscience”. Here is an excerpt from this communiqué:

¹⁹² Concerning the political assassinations, see Appendix 12.

¹⁹³ Marcel Ollivier, *op. cit.*

“Everybody seems to think that the anarchists and trade unionists are to blame for the tragic happenings in Barcelona. That view could not be more mistaken. The CNT and the FAI were always ready, even as they are now, to maintain not just public order but also the requisite unity between the friends of freedom, between the Spanish people's anti-fascist democratic forces....”

“We were and are convinced that our objective—libertarian communism, in a Free Iberian Federation and with capitalism annihilated—cannot be realised immediately....”

After accusing the Communist Party, without mentioning it by name, of wanting to impose a party dictatorship, this communiqué, which was directed more at foreign countries than at Spain, related the facts, beginning with the assault on the Telephone Company Building. They did not want this to happen, these honest anti-fascists and devoted servants of the republican cause, they only acted in self-defense:

“The Regional Committees of the CNT and of the FAI have always publicly stated, and reiterated in their watchwords, that the workers are not attacking the security forces nor are they attacking the Generalitat government, because they themselves are part and parcel of it and represent one of its largest majority stakeholders.

“Instances could be cited by the dozen that demonstrate only a passive desire to defend. But none of this proved of any use.”¹⁹⁴

During of the night of May 6, the CNT and the FAI made some new proposals, which were quite similar to their previous proposals: the combatants of both sides were to withdraw from the barricades. All prisoners and hostages must be released. No repressive measures are to be adopted against anyone. The Catalanian Government and its allies would be given three hours to respond. The latter, however, did not respond for several hours after the deadline, undoubtedly because they were waiting for the reinforcements sent by the Central Government. The column of reinforcements was approaching Barcelona, but had been delayed because it was kept busy “restoring order” in cities and towns along the way, especially in the region of Tortosa, where the troops sent by Valencia carried out a bloody repression of the local anarchists, in spite of the promises that had been made to Federica Montseny. The leaders of the CNT-FAI in Barcelona threatened to intercept the column if the agreement was not respected and if the column from Valencia persisted in its acts of repression. Finally, at 4:45 a.m., on Friday, May 7, the Catalanian Government accepted the proposals and ordered a cease-fire.

The CNT immediately reported to its members via the radio that an agreement had been reached and that they must “not to react to any provocations”. There were more skirmishes around sunrise, however, since none of the units that were fighting wanted to be the first ones to abandon their barricades. Finally, at nine in the morning on Friday, May 7, the anarchists, according to Peirats, “set an example” and abandoned their barricades. Furthermore, the residents of Barcelona, upon hearing news of the agreement

¹⁹⁴ Peirats, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 153.

on the radio, surged into the streets, thus precipitating the demobilization and the abandonment of the barricades. Even so, there were a few more incidents of gunfire during the day on Friday.

At 8:30 p.m. on May 7, the column of Assault Guards and police units sent by the Central Government entered Barcelona, shouting, "UHP" (United Proletarian Brothers). "They made up a procession of 120 trucks filled with a motley assortment of some 5,000 paramilitary policemen. Evidence of this was the fact that as they paraded past the Regional Committee premises en route to Police Headquarters, shots were fired at the building even as cries of 'Long live the FAI!' were heard."¹⁹⁵

The anarchists harbored many illusions about the objectivity of these reinforcements because their commander, Lieutenant Colonel Emilio Torres Iglesias, was previously the military advisor for the CNT column, "*Tierra y Libertad*". Iglesias arrived in Barcelona later that day and assumed control over the Headquarters of Public Order, replacing Rodríguez Sala, but under the authority of the Central Government.

This insult to Catalanian autonomy with respect to Public Order was accompanied by a similar measure affecting military operations. For the Valencia Government appointed General Pozas as commander in chief of all Catalanian armed forces and of the Aragon front. Pozas, the former commander of the Civil Guards, was an ally of the Communist Party, like so many other military officers.

"And so ended", Marcel Ollivier writes, "the bloody events of May. They had demonstrated the power of the anarchists and the heroism of their troops. But they also revealed the indecisiveness of their leaders, their irresponsibility, and their total lack of understanding of political problems. Although the conspiracy to crush the CNT-FAI headed by Antonov-Ovseenko, with the complicity of President Companys and the republican parties, had failed, it at least had the effect of reinforcing the authority of the Valencia Government against revolutionary Catalonia. The conspirators had to make haste to take advantage of the situation. As the troops sent by Valencia were entering Barcelona, the Stalinists, who had bravely hidden behind the Assault Guards in one of their buildings during the fighting, loudly demanded that the POUM should be outlawed, those bums, those lowlifes, who were the source of every misfortune...."¹⁹⁶

The May Events in other parts of Catalonia

Although the most important events of the "civil war within the civil war" took place in Barcelona, major incidents also took place in various Catalanian cities. We have already mentioned some bloody confrontations in March and April, especially in Puigcerdá and in La Fatarella. The policy of neutrality observed by the former members of the militia columns, now members of Divisions of the New Army, most of whom were anarchists, which controlled the Aragon front or were stationed behind the lines at various points in

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

¹⁹⁶ Marcel Ollivier, *op. cit.*

Aragon and Catalonia, might seem surprising. In fact, this neutrality is explained by the position of the leaders of the CNT and the POUM.

For, as of May 5, “CNT elements from the Twenty-third Division and POUM elements from the Twenty-ninth, who had concentrated at Barbastro to march on Barcelona at the news of the events, did not proceed beyond Binefar: delegates from the CNT Regional Committee also managed to persuade the commander of the Twenty-sixth Division, Gregorio Jover, that any aggressive move should be avoided. After some hesitation, another CNT leader, Juan Manuel Molina, undersecretary for defense in the Generalidad, managed to persuade the anarchist officer Máximo Franco to halt his men at Binefar”.¹⁹⁷

The POUM, for its part, did the same with respect to its men in the 29th Division. While the radio station of the Generalitat was broadcasting hourly accusations against the “reactionary putsch fomented by the Francoist Fifth Column” in order to explain the street battles, the anarchist leaders, bogged down in negotiations, did not want to appear to be responsible for “evacuating” the front and sabotaging the conduct of the war. As for the POUM, it was too weak and vulnerable to assume such responsibility alone. Therefore, when the anarchist soldiers agreed to halt their march on Barcelona, the POUM troops followed their example. The result of the street fighting would have been different if neither of these military formations had obeyed the orders of their organizations....

The bloody battles of Tarragona and Tortosa began in much the same way as those of Barcelona. On May 5, at eight in the morning, the police raided the Telephone Company Buildings in both cities which, just as in Barcelona, were under the control of CNT-UGT Control Committees. The occupations of these buildings by the police were the opening salvos of the battles.

In Tarragona, the police, “once they were masters of the building proceeded to interfere with domestic and foreign communications, and cut off the telephone service of the confederal and anarchist organizations”.

“Four hours later, there was a meeting in the Military Headquarters between comrade Casanovas, representing the comrades of the Telephone Company and the Lieutenant Colonel who was commander in chief of the coastal defense forces.”¹⁹⁸

This meeting led to a unique compromise by the terms of which the police were to withdraw from the floors where the operators were located, while maintaining control of the lobby. The delegate of the Department of Public Order of Tarragona, however, rejected this agreement, because of the strict orders he had received from Barcelona. As soon as the negotiations were resumed, the CNT’s military operatives observed—always according to *Solidaridad Obrera*—that many people entered the local headquarters of the Party of the Republican Left (the *Esquerra*) and then departed with weapons. The same

¹⁹⁷ Broué and Témime, *op. cit.*, English edition, p. 284.

¹⁹⁸ *Solidaridad Obrera* (May 14, 1937).

thing happened, although more discreetly, at the headquarters of the PSUC and at the *Casa del Pueblo*.

On the next day, the offices of the Libertarian Youth were attacked. Its defenders, however, put up a fierce resistance and repelled the attackers. The local leaders of the CNT requested a meeting of all the anti-fascist organizations and the representatives of the police and the army. The PSUC and the UGT refused to talk to the anarchists.

On the night of May 6, the offices of the Libertarian Youth were attacked again, this time by much more numerous forces. The attack was successful. Two delegates from the CNT, who had just arrived in Tarragona, Castelló and Rueda, once again requested a meeting of the anti-fascist organizations. This time, naturally, the other organizations agreed, because the libertarian forces were now militarily in a weak position.

The delegate of the Central Government, Captain Barbetá, who was the commander of the republican air force base at Reus, declared that he had received orders from Valencia to use his entire arsenal, including air power, to subjugate and disarm the militants of the CNT-FAI. The latter, again according to the report published by *Solidaridad Obrera*, agreed to surrender their arms as long as the other organizations did the same. Captain Barbetá, however, refused to enforce this condition, since the other organizations were defending the Government, while the anarchists had rebelled against it. After long discussions, the *cenetistas* yielded on every point: they surrendered all their arms in exchange for nothing but a promise that their supporters who had been taken prisoner should be released and that they should be free to use their offices.

“The rest of the day, while these meetings were being held, passed quietly, but very early on the next day, at about three in the morning, the Assault Guards and police unexpectedly staged a violent assault on the local Council of Interior Defense and seized its offices, saying that they had orders to do so. And as if this was not bad enough, the attack was a pre-arranged signal for the commencement of the most terrible reprisals against the militants of the CNT and the FAI, thus nullifying the promises of the authorities. Soon the streets of the town were strewn with the corpses of outstanding militants of our organization. The following is a list of some of the victims....”¹⁹⁹

A list of fifteen names of local CNT committee members, for the most part, follows. Of course, the article ends with 22 lines obliterated by the censorship....

* * *

In Tortosa the script was essentially the same. The police occupied the building housing the offices of the Telephone Company, thus giving the signal for the commencement of hostilities. Street fighting ensued, punctuated by negotiations. In Tortosa, however, the CNT emerged victorious from the street battles, arrested the police and assumed control over the city administration. The column of Assault Guards sent from Valencia to ensure

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

the reign of order in Barcelona, however, had to pass through the city, and stopped there just long enough to restore order. The militants of the CNT and the FAI were arrested and their headquarters were wrecked.

The anarchist leaders of the city were taken away, handcuffed and shackled, to an “unknown destination”. Their corpses were found in the vicinity of Tarragona, along the sides of various roads....

“There were similar incidents in a number of villages in the Vic area. This area is one of the most reactionary in the whole of Catalonia, on account of the traditional hold of clericalism. The CNT was the only liberal organisation with any presence in that Carlist stronghold. Its enemies found that the best way of fighting against the people was to throw in their lot with the Assault Guards and Carabineers arriving in Vic, Manlleu, Bisura de Ter, Montesquiu, La Farga de les Lloses and other villages with the usual instructions to offer provocation. The upshot was a united front of police and Carlist requetés against the CNT and its militants. The organisation’s centres were attacked and their furnishings smashed. Caught in the crossfire, the CNT personnel had to desert the area en masse following a hopeless fight in which all of the odds were stacked against them....”²⁰⁰

Krivitsky’s perspective on the “May Events”

Here is what Walter Krivitsky has to say about the role played by the Soviet secret services in the May Events in Barcelona in his book, *In Stalin’s Secret Service*.²⁰¹

“In April, Stashevsky arrived in Moscow to report to Stalin personally on the Spanish situation. Though a rockribbed Stalinist, a rigidly orthodox party man, Stashevsky also felt that the conduct of the OGPU in the Loyalist areas was an error. Like General Berzin, he opposed the high-handed colonial methods used by Russians on Spanish soil.

“Stashevsky had no use for dissenters or ‘Trotskyists’ in Russia, and approved of the Ogpu method of dealing with them, but he thought that the Ogpu should respect the regular Spanish political parties. Cautiously he intimated that Stalin might perhaps change the Spanish policy of the Ogpu. The ‘Big Boss’ pretended to agree with him, and Stashevsky left the Kremlin quite elated.

“Later he had a conference with Marshal Tukhachevsky, in the course of which he called attention to the disgraceful behavior of the Soviet officials in Spain. This conference caused quite a lot of talk in the inner circle, partly because of Tukhachevsky’s already

²⁰⁰ Peirats, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 161.

²⁰¹ It is of interest in this connection to point out that Elisabeth K. Poretzky, the widow of Ignace Reiss, another one of “Stalin’s secret agents”, assassinated by the Russians in Switzerland in 1937, in her book, *Les Nôtres* (Denoël-Lettres Nouvelles), although diverging with respect to some minor details from the account in Krivitsky’s book nonetheless strikingly confirms everything that Krivitsky wrote about Spain.

shaken position. The Marshal was fully alive to the need of curbing those who behaved in Spain as though it were a conquered country, but he was already without the authority to discipline them.

“Stashevsky and I had several talks. He was awaiting the early fall of Caballero and the rise of Negrín, the man whom had groomed for the premiership.

“‘Big fights are ahead of us in Spain’, he remarked more than once.

“This was plain to those of us who understood Stalin’s policy. Stalin had consolidated his successes in the plan to make Spain a dependency of the Kremlin, and was already for another push forward. The Comintern was fading out of the picture altogether. Berzin now held the reins of the Spanish army in his hands.²⁰² Stashevsky had transferred most of the gold reserve from the Bank of Spain to Moscow. The Ogpu machine was going full steam ahead. The whole enterprise had proceeded in accordance with Stalin’s instructions: ‘Stay out of the range of the artillery fire!’ We had avoided the risks of an international war, and yet Stalin’s goal seemed within grasp.

“The one big obstacle in the way was Catalonia. The Catalonians were anti-Stalinist, and they were one of the main props of the Caballero government. To seize full control, Stalin had still to bring Catalonia under his rule and oust Caballero.

“This was emphasized to me in a report by one of the leaders of the Russian anarchist group in Paris, who was an secret agent of the Ogpu. He had been dispatched to Barcelona, where as a prominent anarchist he enjoyed the confidence of the anarcho-syndicalists in the local government. His mission was to act as an agent provocateur, to incite the Catalonians to rash acts that would justify calling in the army as if to suppress a revolt behind the front....

“Another report I read came from José Díaz, the leader of the Spanish Communist Party, and was addressed to Dimitrov, the president of the Comintern. Dimitrov sent it immediately to the headquarters of the Ogpu, since he had since learned who his master was. Díaz berated Caballero as a dreamer and a phrase monger who would never become a trusted ally of the Stalinists. He praised Negrín. He described the work the communists were doing among Socialists and anarcho-syndicalists to sap their strength from within.

“These reports made it clear that the Ogpu was plotting to crush the ‘uncontrollable’ elements in Barcelona and seize control for Stalin....

“The news from Barcelona burst sensationally upon the world. The headlines screamed: Anarchist Revolt in Barcelona! The correspondents reported an anti-Stalinist conspiracy in the capital of Catalonia, a fight for the Telephone Exchange, street riots, barricades,

²⁰² “As Luis de Araquistain, former Loyalist Ambassador to France, convincingly conclusively shows, 90 per cent of all important posts in Spanish War Department were at a later stage firmly occupied by Stalin’s henchmen” (*In Stalin’s Secret Service*, p. 94).

executions. To this day, the Barcelona May Days appear in the history of our times as a fratricidal war among the anti-Fascists while Franco was attacking them. According to the official statements, the Catalan revolutionists treacherously attempted to seize power at a moment when every energy was needed to resist Fascism. Another version of the Barcelona tragedy, given to the press and echoed throughout the world, is that it was a rebellion ‘by some uncontrollable elements who managed to get into the extreme wing of the anarchist movement, in order to provoke disturbances in favor of the enemies of the republic’.

“The fact is that in Catalonia the great majority of the workers were fiercely anti-Stalinist. Stalin knew that a showdown was inevitable, but he also knew that the opposition forces were badly divided and could be crushed by a swift bold action. The OGPU fanned the flames and provoked syndicalists, anarchists and Socialists against one another. After five days of bloodshed, in which five hundred persons were killed and more than a thousand wounded, Catalonia was made the issue on which the Caballero Government must stand or fall. The Spanish communists, led by Díaz, demanded the suppression of all anti-Stalinist parties and trade unions in Catalonia; the placing of newspapers, radio stations and meeting halls under OGPU control, and the immediate and complete extinction of all anti-Stalinist movements throughout Loyalist territory. Largo Caballero would not yield to these demands, and was forced to resign on May fifteenth. Dr. Juan Negrin became the premier of the new government, as Stashevsky had long ago decided.”²⁰³

Krivitsky, because of his professional background, tends to exaggerate the importance of the role of the Soviet secret agents. Everything he says is true, but, like M. Ollivier when the latter discusses the conspiracy of Antonov-Ovseenko, Krivitsky gives the impression that he thinks that history is made in the offices of the General Staffs of the secret services and the political police; the class struggle appears merely as a chessboard where one has to move the pawn-agent in just the right way to win the match. The class struggle, however, is obviously more than just that. In Catalonia, where a social revolution of great importance was being carried out, a revolution that was simultaneously directed—and in the middle of a civil war—at all the aspects of social life in order to transform them in a libertarian sense, the parties of order, the bureaucratic leaderships, in a word, the counterrevolutionaries, sought at all cost to crush this social revolution and to bring revolutionary Catalonia back into the fold of “republican order”. After many skirmishes, the May Events represented the hardest fight, the bloodiest counterrevolutionary attack, which, if it did not succeed in completely liquidating the revolution, at least did succeed in constraining its scope.

What is most noteworthy about these eyewitness accounts of those chaotic events, is the boundless cynicism of the politicians. The masses, feeling that the provocation at the Telephone Company Building was the signal for the liquidation of revolutionary democracy, and the beginning of the definitive restoration of the power of the totalitarian State, mobilized for combat, and the battle between the forces of order and the workers

²⁰³ Krivitsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-111.

was a bloody one. During this whole time, however, the politicians continued with their negotiations, appointing and deposing Ministers, relying on their power in the streets to obtain one more Ministry, one more piece of power for their own bureaucratic clan. Too bad we do not have audio recordings of these negotiations, with the background noise of the machine guns and people being shot in the back of the head!

Society, everything is back to normal....

A note on the press

“The Catalanian Government has suppressed the revolt with its own means.... The Press Secretary of the President, Joaquín Vila, made the following statement to the press, during a meeting of the Council of the Generalitat:

“On Wednesday, May 12, at 6:30 p.m., the Government of the Generalitat held a meeting.²⁰⁴ The meeting ended at 9:00 p.m. During this meeting various Decrees of the President, and the Ministries of Justice, of Provisions, of Education and of Finance were approved.

“The members of the Government have exchanged impressions of the recent events. The Government, which HAS SUPPRESSED THE REVOLT WITH ITS OWN MEANS, and has proceeded, with the support of the good sense of our people, to restore normal life, which is now completely restored, categorically and unanimously condemns the events which have taken place and thinks that, with the new means at the disposal of the Department of Public Order, the previous Decrees will be implemented, Decrees that are even now being published by the Government of the Republic, with regard to the establishment of unitary military command, the methods and the discipline of the war, the suppression of the checkpoints on the highways and the border posts, and the disarmament of the rearguard, because otherwise normal life will be impossible and because the lesson of past events will never be learned unless their causes are addressed.

“The Catalanian Government hopes that these measures will merit not only the support but also the loyal cooperation of all the parties and organizations that collaborate with it, because for the members of the Council [of the Generalitat] the implementation of the resolutions which the latter has adopted is the indispensable precondition for the preservation of the prestige of the government, which has been repeatedly compromised by violence, conflicts and upheavals, all of which, after all that we have gone through, can be neither encouraged nor tolerated.

“The Council of the Generalitat was confident that all the Catalanian anti-fascist elements would unite under its aegis, to maintain the coherence of the authority and the prestige of the Catalanian Government and the Government of the Republic.”

²⁰⁴ For the composition of this new Government, see Appendix 13.

“(Generalitat of Catalonia. President. Commissariat of Propaganda. Press Release. Barcelona, May 12, 1937.)”

Don't worry, society, everything is back to normal.... For the (ever less autonomous) Catalanian Government, everything was clear: the end of the fighting would once and for all allow for the reestablishment of order in Catalonia.

All the members of the this restricted Council displayed their unanimity in their revulsion towards the “revolt”. Communists, anarchists, republicans, all of them members of the political bureaucracy and therefore simultaneously allies and enemies, cast the “blame” for the “violence” on who knows what extraterrestrial invaders, on who knows what lunatics who escaped from the madhouse, who were shooting in the streets. They had crushed the revolt “with their own means” and proposed to continue—because, of course, nothing had really happened—their coalition government, in their great anti-fascist brotherhood.

It was totally intolerable for Power that its authority should be challenged. Therefore, its Power was parceled out in Catalonia. The various “workers” organizations had their own pieces of Power, which they attempted to extend by all means and which, contrary to all their sanctimonious declarations, they only partially surrendered to the autonomous Government, which was in theory their common representative. The Government, which was also the representative of the Catalanian nationalist bourgeoisie—whose leader was President Companys, who, for his part, at least had the advantage of being what he claimed to be, i.e., a bourgeois liberal—possessed, technically speaking, powers which were more extensive than those of the social forces which it represented.

All the political and state bureaucracies fought against this “disorder” so that power should be One, in order to achieve the unity of command and orientation. At the same time, however, each of these bureaucracies fought to try to see to it that this unifying and centralizing process would proceed in such a way as to redound to its own exclusive benefit. Consequently, all the bureaucracies had one project in common: the restoration of the unified power of the State, the restructuring of a social hierarchy even more bureaucratic than the “bourgeois” type; and at the same time they devoted themselves to a frantic struggle to have their members installed in the commanding positions at the summit of the social pyramid. Thus, the struggle among the bureaucracies to expand their share of power was added to the struggle of the masses, who spontaneously took to the streets to defend their wildcat democracy, the collectives, and in short to defend the revolution against the forces of repression of the counterrevolution. Yet, although these two struggles were intertwined, they must not be *confused*.

During this whole complicated revolutionary brawl, the CNT was simultaneously on the streets manning the anti-governmental barricades, and in the Government negotiating the ceasefire agreement, and, furthermore, it was accepted as negotiator and member of the Government by the same people that were in the streets fighting “against it [the CNT]”, assassinating its militants and accusing them of rebellion against the legal Government. The CNT was the leaven of “disorder” and of “order”, it was for and against workers

autonomy, for and against the disarmament of its armed groups, for and against “anti-fascist unity”, that political pretext for putting an end to the social revolution. As a bureaucracy, it could not totally separate itself from its “base” nor could it allow its men to be disarmed, nor could it by any means tolerate the prospect of the restoration of the State at their expense. Its entire attitude during the “May Events” can be summarized in one sentence: we will give our troops the order to cease fire, to withdraw from the barricades, on the condition that we preserve, and if possible, reinforce, our place in Power.

Obviously, we must distinguish between the bureaucratic leadership of the CNT and the mass of militants. The leaders found themselves faced with the fait accompli of the generalized and spontaneous response of the masses—for the most part, anarchists—and had to come up with a way to stop the fighting without losing anything. The militants, for their part, once again proved their valor, their spirit of initiative and, finally, their submission. They spontaneously surged into the streets, they fought with ferocity because they felt that their revolution was in mortal danger, they did not obey the first appeals of their leaders for a cease fire, but, while they were waiting for orders, for a comprehensive battle plan that never came, they lost heart, they hesitated and finally submitted to the cease fire directives. Some, the most intransigent, such as the The Friends of Durruti Group or the Libertarian Youth, wanted to continue the struggle, to overthrow the Generalitat, “to seize power”, but they were too few in number.

On May 8, in a communiqué, the Regional Committee of the CNT declared the “incident has come to an end”.

“THE CNT TO THE CATALONIAN PEOPLE:

“The tragic incident has come to an end, which had filled Barcelona with mourning, and so that everyone knows what to expect next, the Regional Committee of the CNT and the Local Federation of Unified Trade Unions, express their unanimous intention to collaborate with the greatest efficiency and loyalty in the establishment of public order in Catalonia, putting an end to the phase of partisan activity that led precisely to the unsustainable situation that unleashed the tragedy. We are therefore pleased to reiterate our agreement with the Government of the Generalitat and with the new delegate of Public Order dispatched by the Central Government, Lieutenant Colonel Torres, with regard to whom we have been able to confirm the excellent attitude with which he has come to address such a delicate situation in Catalonia....

“The Regional Committee of the CNT.

“The Local Federation of Unified Trade Unions.”

It must be noted that the situation of the POUM during the month of May was by no means comfortable. Excluded from the cabals and negotiations with state power, it tried to get a piece of the action in the sphere of power, and entered into private negotiations with the CNT. Although the leaders of the POUM were rhetorically “closer to the street”

than the leaders of the CNT, they appeared to have been just as dismayed by the events, fearing that they would have to pay a higher price for the battle than any of the other groups, which proved to be correct. Their doubts were reflected in the following declaration of its Central Committee, published in *La Batalla* on May 13, 1937:

“The enlarged central committee of the POUM meeting in Barcelona on 11 and 12 May, after examining the revolutionary events which occurred in Barcelona, studying the present situation, and the perspectives and experiences derived from them, unanimously adopted the following resolution:

1. The constant provocations of the counter-revolution embodied in reformist parties of the PSUC and of the petty bourgeoisie, provocations that in the fields of the war, the economy and of public order tend to liquidate the revolutionary conquests gained by the working class on the 19 July, arms in hand, which culminated on the 3 May with the attempt to seize the telephone buildings, produced the working class’s armed protest.
2. The POUM’s political position cannot be other than active solidarity with the workers who spontaneously declared a general strike, raised the barricades in Barcelona’s streets and with exemplary heroism knew how to defend the endangered revolutionary conquests.
3. As the workers who fought in the streets lack concrete objectives and a responsible leadership, the POUM is unable to do more than order and organise a strategic retreat, persuading the revolutionary working class of the need for this and preventing a desperate action which could degenerate into a putsch and which would result in the total crushing of the most advanced part of the working class.
4. The experience of the May Days demonstrates unequivocally that the only progressive way out of the present situation is for the working class to take power, and for this it is essential to coordinate the revolutionary action of the masses by the creation of a Workers’ Revolutionary Front that unites all the organisations which intend to fight for the total crushing of fascism which can be achieved only by a military victory on the fronts and by the victory of the revolution in the rear. The enlarged Central Committee considers that the political line followed by the party during the events has been entirely correct and it solidarises with the executive committee, convinced that it knew how to defend the interests of the revolution and of the mass of workers.”²⁰⁵

Thus, when the masses were in the streets, when it seemed as if Barcelona and all of Catalonia were tipping towards the side of the revolutionary forces, the POUM temporized, delayed, and “organized a strategic retreat”! Once this retreat was carried out, a retreat whose consequences would be dramatic, the POUM, finally sure of itself, suggested the magic solution that replaced the real class with the political formula: the

²⁰⁵ Author’s personal archives. [An English translation of this text is available online at: [https://bataillesocialiste.wordpress.com/english-pages/manifesto-of-the-poum-during-the-barcelona-may-days-1937/.](https://bataillesocialiste.wordpress.com/english-pages/manifesto-of-the-poum-during-the-barcelona-may-days-1937/)]

formation of a Revolutionary Workers Front to seize power on behalf of the working class (that is, by the POUM and its eventual allies). Was it not the case that “the rank and file” of this Front already existed in the street fighting? But the Leninist-bureaucratic spirit of the POUM led it to overestimate the power of alliances and pacts at the level of the General Staffs, while it underestimated (and even feared) the real struggle that was being waged outside the framework of agreements between leaders.

The relative weakness of the POUM was not the only factor that lay behind these vacillations. Its weakness certainly led it to “take shelter” behind the CNT, but what it sought above all was to seek this shelter by way of a “summit agreement” (which the leaders of the CNT did not want). The leaders of the POUM employed a more revolutionary language and sought an alliance with the anarchist masses, who were the only people who could protect them from the Stalinist wave that was becoming ever more menacing. But they insisted that this alliance had to be sealed at the summit and made no concrete proposals to the most “extremist” anarchist elements that were also—which was logical—the most anti-Stalinist. It would seem that they did not trust them, because in their view they were not sufficiently “politically responsible”. But by reiterating the need for a “strategic retreat” due to the “lack [of] concrete objectives and a responsible leadership” among the fighting workers, not only, by the way, did they themselves refuse to play the role of “revolutionary leadership”, which, within the Leninist tradition is what they claimed to be, but above all they attempted to provide a theoretical justification for and to project upon others their own lack of concrete objectives.

During the May Events, there were not thirty-six possible outcomes: either the revolutionary forces remain the masters of the region, giving the process of social transformation another push forward—above all by liquidating the repressive and bureaucratic apparatus of the Generalitat—which would have had a significant impact on the workers in the rest of Spain (for it was not so different in Catalonia from this point of view as one might think), and negotiate, from a position of strength, with the Central Government, agreements concerning the further prosecution of the war that would not only entail a more effective distribution of arms but also a new kind of war; or else the revolutionary forces retreat and repression is unleashed against them. It was impossible, however, to retreat while holding on to the ground that had been conquered ... which is what the POUM sought to do.

A question arises—a very important question!: What is the reason for the attitude of the masses towards their leaders? In view of the fact that the role of bureaucracies was that of preserving their own specific interests in the conflict, the “treason” or the indecisiveness of their leaders does not appear at all strange to us, but why were the masses unable to do without them? Why, for example, did the revolutionary militants of the CNT-FAI not repudiate the “comrade Ministers” and the other “bosses” after their tear-filled appeals to abandon the struggle? Will the masses ever be able to do without the mythology of heroes and leaders and the ambiguous relation that, in the very midst of the revolt, they always maintained with that other, “good” authority, to which they delegated their own power and to which they voluntarily submitted? They were unable to do so in Catalonia, anyway.

For the counterrevolutionary forces, on the other hand, the objective was very clear, and the result was profitable. This objective entailed that the State should recover not only its traditional powers but also—for the Stalinists, at least—the extension of State power in every domain. The State was supposed to direct the economy, destroying workers self-management, reintroducing the social and wage hierarchy and strict standards of profitability and productivity. The State was supposed to take in its hands the direction of the war, in the sense that we examined above. The State was supposed to assume responsibility for order in the rearguard, liquidating the control patrols. And so on. For the Spanish communists, as we have pointed out, this objective also involved preparation for the revolution. Their “revolution” consisted in the seizure of power and the establishment of a bureaucratic dictatorship, and control over the institutions of power would constitute an excellent “springboard” from which to pursue this goal. And to achieve this what was required was a centralized and totalitarian State.

In their Jacobin and centralist impulse, the communists and their “objective” allies, through the intermediary of the Central Government, took advantage of the “May Events” to limit the autonomy of Catalonia, not only because it was the most revolutionary region but also because it was autonomous. A strong State can only be One, embracing the entire “national” territory. The Central Government assumed direct control over the maintenance of public order in Catalonia and over the “industrial sectors” that pertained to National Defense, and also over military operations, simultaneously liquidating, as we have seen, the relative autonomy of the Aragon front.

They also achieved another goal: the liquidation of the POUM. In accordance with the imperatives of Stalinist terror which did not allow for the existence of dissident communists, this small party suffered all the ordeals of an implacable repression.

To conclude this chapter, I will reproduce the following text, which summarizes the point of view of the Catalan Stalinists concerning the May Events:

“The Regional Committee of the UGT, meeting on May 17 in Barcelona, has drafted the following note:

“1) Characterize the movement that began on May 4 (?) as a counterrevolutionary movement, set in motion to plunge the rearguard into indiscipline and disorganization and to breach the Aragon front. Consider that a rapid and energetic policy of public order in all of Catalonia, reestablishing the normality that is today merely apparent, putting an end to the actions of uncontrolled elements and of those Trotskyist provocateurs who are still at large and who maintain intact their cadres and their arms.

“2) Display readiness to abide by the Decree of the Government Ministry concerning the disarmament of the rearguard, but making sure that the duly stipulated guarantees of disarmament of all the organizations are implemented, and especially of those groups of uncontrollables that everyone knows about, and of the elements of the POUM, while affirming that all the arms that the trade unions of the UGT might have in their

possession will have to be surrendered to the representatives of the Government of the Republic and of liberty; but making sure that the forces of public order should confiscate, regardless of the cost, those arsenals of weapons that, removed from the fronts, were used in the streets against the Popular Front, for otherwise the UGT would be left defenseless and therefore at the mercy of its enemies.

“3) Affirm that one cannot deal on equal terms with men or organizations that rebel against the Government and against those who stand by the Government in the defense of the cause of anti-fascism, and therefore in consonance with the ratification of the resolution to expel the members of the POUM from the UGT, demand the dissolution of that party and its legal prohibition, the suspension of the daily newspaper, *La Batalla*, and of all its press organs and the confiscation of its presses, radio transmitters, etc., and taking the same measures against organizations like The Friends of Durruti, which has been repudiated by the Regional Committee of the CNT.

“4) Elaborate a new program of unity of joint action between the UGT and the CNT and propose the establishment of a permanent Committee for UGT-CNT united action, with an executive character, which completes the work carried out by the current Liaison Committee.

“5) Arrange for the urgent organization of the Commission of War Industries with the participation of all the anti-fascist organizations that are part of the Government of the Generalitat, and which, under the direct control of the Government of the Republic, will prioritize production, distribute raw materials and investigate the sabotage and espionage of the enemy, placing the war industries under the custody of the Armed Forces.

“6) Mobilization of the public services.

“7) Militarization of transport and communications.

“8) Immediate restoration of the Municipal Councils.”²⁰⁶

Chapter 7

Triumph of the Counterrevolution

The fall of Largo Caballero

One of the first consequences of the Barcelona “May Events” was the cabinet crisis of the Central Government and the downfall of Largo Caballero.

The Stalinists had been working for some time on a campaign against the old leader of the left wing of the Socialist Party, whom they accused of being too indulgent towards

²⁰⁶ Díaz-Plaja, *op. cit.*, pp. 429-431.

the anarchists and the POUM, and too independent with respect to the Russians. The Russian and Spanish Stalinists openly accused Largo Caballero (who, let us recall, was simultaneously the Prime Minister and the Minister of War) of being responsible for the military defeats suffered by the republican troops. Largo Caballero and his Undersecretary of State in the Ministry of War, General Asensio, would appear to have offered a certain amount of resistance (it would be more correct to say, rather, that they were not “obedient” enough) to the control exercised by the Stalinists over the military apparatus. Marcel Rosenberg, the Soviet Ambassador, during one of his periodic discussions with Largo Caballero, in which he often dictated the desires of Moscow, insisted to the Prime Minister that he must dismiss Asensio, who was the *bête noire* of the communists. The cantankerous Largo Caballero, however, threw the Soviet Ambassador out of his office. Obviously, this led to an intolerable scandal and Rosenberg threatened to cut off Soviet aid if Asensio was not dismissed from his position.

Jesús Hernández tells us in his book²⁰⁷ about a meeting of the Politburo of the Spanish Communist Party—in March 1937—attended by Togliatti, Marty, Codovilla, Stepanov, the attaché for Russian affairs, Gaykis and Orlov himself. At this meeting, which, according to the author, was a tumultuous one, the foreign delegates imposed upon the Spanish leaders the need to replace Largo Caballero with another, more manageable, socialist leader.

“As for the replacement for Caballero”, Togliatti continued, “this is a practical problem that we invite our comrades to consider. We shall proceed by a process of elimination. Prieto?... Vayo? Negrín? Of these three, Negrín seems to me to be the one most suited for this role. He is not anti-communist, like Prieto, nor is he a fool like Vayo.”²⁰⁸

The conflict between communists and left-wing socialists involved more than just military questions, since they also disagreed about political and economic issues. A detailed analysis of this conflict would go beyond the bounds of this study of Catalonia, since the Socialist Party hardly existed in Catalonia and the Catalanian UGT was directly controlled by the Stalinists.

It can be said in brief, however, that the left-wing socialists reproached the communists for their right-wing policies in almost every domain, both social and economic, and especially for their policies vis-à-vis agriculture, whose Minister, Vicente Uribe, was outstanding for his defense of private property. Although it was true that in the agricultural field, as in all the others, the actions of the militants of the UGT were much more moderate than those of the anarchists, they were nonetheless too bold for the communists.

But the squabbles “at the summit” between left-wing socialists and communists involved the classical aspect of the struggle for power between two political bureaucracies.

²⁰⁷ Jesús Hernández, *op. cit.*, pp. 54-58.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

During the months preceding the military uprising, however, and for a few months after it began, the “flirtation” between communists and left-wing socialists had proceeded so far that they had already commenced negotiations for the merger of the two parties and the formation of a “unified party of the proletariat”. Both parties considered the merger of their respective Youth organizations as a first step in this direction. Largo Caballero had actively participated in the latter venture despite the disapproval of the right wing of the Socialist Party. But Largo Caballero and his supporters—at least those who remained faithful to him—were very disturbed by the increasingly greater control exercised by the communists over the State apparatus, as well as by the colonialist methods of the Russians. The “*Caballeristas*” abandoned the idea of merger and set about defending their *territory* and trying to halt the gradual absorption of the State apparatus by the communists. At this stage of the conflict, one of the two sides would have to give way.

Indalecio Prieto, who, as a good right-wing socialist was theoretically very anti-Soviet and very anti-communist, but whose counterrevolutionary policy broadly coincided with that of the Communist Party, skillfully exploited this situation. Prieto and the communists agreed on the need to liquidate the revolutionary achievements of Catalonia, Aragon and other places, regardless of the price. They agreed on the need to create a regular army and indeed, on almost all important political questions, especially on that of the political destruction of Largo Caballero. Of course, the right-wing socialists looked towards London and Paris, just as the communists obeyed Moscow—but this did not prevent Prieto from flirting with the Soviets—and embracing the idea—now that he had abandoned the “*Caballeristas*”—of a merger of the two parties. Prieto and the communists made a whole series of secret agreements and backroom deals for the purpose of expelling Largo Caballero and his supporters, whom they considered to be too tolerant towards the anarchist experiments. These deals eventually led to the creation of a Liaison Committee associating the two parties, presided over by the general secretaries, Ramón Lamonedá, of the “*Prietista*” tendency, and José Díaz. Despite their loathing for one another, Prieto supported the candidacy of Negrín, who was being groomed at the suggestion of the communists to replace Largo Caballero to head the republican Government. Of course, according to the traditional rules of the political game, the communists and right-wing socialists only wanted to use Prieto to get rid of Largo Caballero, who was quite popular in the country, or who, at least, was considered by much of the country to be a lesser evil, especially by the anarchists. Once they were successful, the latent conflict between Prieto and the communists would not take long to become apparent.

On May 15, the Central Government met in Valencia to study the situation in the wake of the “May Events” in Barcelona. Jesús Hernández (Minister of Education) and Vicente Uribe (Minister of Agriculture), both of whom were communists, demanded that drastic measures be taken against those “responsible”. Those who were responsible, in their view, were, first of all the POUM, but also the “extremist” anarchist groups. Largo Caballero refused to outlaw the POUM which, in his view, was a working class organization and he, an old working class militant, would never outlaw a working class organization. He agreed that those who were responsible should be punished but, according to him, an investigation had to be carried out and it was the courts that must be

responsible for identifying and punishing the culprits. Faced with Largo Caballero's refusal to liquidate the POUM, Hernández and Uribe, playing their pre-arranged parts in this performance, stood up and left the meeting. Caballero limited himself to saying, "The Council of Ministers will continue":

"It was at this point that the unheard-of occurred. Gradually most of the ministers, including Prieto, Negrín, Alvarez del Vayo, Giral and Irujo, got up and left. The premier, Anastasio de Gracia, Angel Galarza and the four CNT ministers kept their seats."²⁰⁹

"We are in the throes of a crisis", Caballero said. He presented his resignation to President of the Republic, Manuel Azaña, on the following day. There was a series of secret meetings and negotiations to constitute a new Government. It would appear that at first there was thought of forming a Government without the communists, and Caballero had proposed to the anarchist leaders that they form a "syndicalist" government, that is, one dominated by the representatives of the CNT and the UGT. The anarchist leaders, who had supported Largo Caballero during the crisis and who praised him in their press, accepted this suggestion in principle. But Negrín, Prieto and Alvarez del Vayo emphatically declared to Manuel Azaña (who appeared to be in favor of a Government minus the communists) and to Largo Caballero that they could not govern without the communists because this would greatly anger the Russians, whose aid was indispensable. Always the same blackmail. In this case, as in all the others, the communists, Prieto, and Negrín had already reached an agreement in advance. As for Alvarez del Vayo, although he was ostensibly a left-wing socialist and a "*Caballerista*", he had for some time now already allowed himself to be manipulated by the communists, possibly without even being aware of the fact, since he was never burdened with too great an intelligence.

Finally, Largo Caballero gave up and the new Government, presided over by Negrín, was constituted in accordance with the plan devised by the Russians and the Spanish communists. Here is the list of the members of this Government which was immediately called the "government of victory" by the communists: President and Minister of Finance and the Economy—Juan Negrín (Socialist); Minister of National Defense—Indalecio Prieto (Socialist); Minister of Foreign Affairs—José Giral (Republican Left); Minister of Justice—Manuel Irujo (Basque Nationalist); Minister of the Interior—J. Zugazagoitia (Socialist); Minister of Education and Health—Jesús Hernández (Communist); Minister of Agriculture—Vicente Uribe (Communist); Minister of Public Works and Transportation—Giner de los Ríos (*Unión Republicana*); Minister of Labor and Social Welfare—Jaime Ayguadé (*Esquerra Republicana*) (he was the brother of the person who was formerly the Commissioner of Public Order in the Generalitat until the May Events).

The anarchists, who still supported Largo Caballero, refused to participate in the Government.²¹⁰

²⁰⁹ Peirats, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 182. Broué, Bolloten, Hernández, Thomas, etc., relate similar accounts of this crisis of the Central Government that led to the fall of Largo Caballero and the formation of the Negrín Government.

The repression of the POUM

Once this last “barrier” had been overcome, the counterrevolution set to work in earnest. In fact, the left-wing socialists and even Largo Caballero, in his capacity as Prime Minister, did not really constitute, any more than the Stalinists and their allies of the moment, a real support for the revolutionary movement, because it was largely thanks to the *Caballeristas* and the prestige enjoyed by the “Spanish Lenin” among the workers that it was possible for the bourgeois State to begin to recover its former power. The importance of the revolutionary movement in the republican zone was so great that, after the working class response to the military uprising, only a leftist Government, and even one that had a reputation for being of the “extreme left”, could undertake to restore the power of the State. A transitional stage was necessary for the passage from the period when the State was shattered into pieces, the period of the “sinister power of the Committees”, of the industrial and agricultural collectives, of the Militias and the Control Patrols; from the period of revolutionary enthusiasm and freedom, to the period of the restoration of the power of the State, the reconstitution of a traditional army and police force, of the attempts to impose State control over the economy, of the liquidation of the experiments of the revolutionary Committees in favor of a strong, centralized power, in short, the period of the counterrevolution.

The Largo Caballero Government was this necessary transitional Government that called upon the workers to sacrifice their revolutionary conquests IN THE NAME OF THE REVOLUTION and military victory against fascism.

In order for this plan to come to fruition, the General Staffs of the working class organizations had to participate in the Government and support it, as well as order their military units to make the necessary sacrifices. Once the State was reinforced and a large part of its prerogatives had been restored, the State had to proceed to a stage of open repression, the liquidation of the “mad experiments” of the collectives and other such changes, and violently suppress all those—who were still quite numerous—who questioned or even rejected the authority of the State. Largo Caballero, for example, was not an enthusiastic supporter of the libertarian columns of Aragon and, while he maintained a conciliatory attitude towards the CNT-FAI, allowing them to preserve their “private domain” in Aragon, this was merely due to his political opportunism, as part of his attempt to obtain possible allies and to achieve a political counterbalance against the communist maneuvers which posed a threat to his own bureaucratic interests and which were undertaken to undermine his “parcel of power”. And the anarchist leaders played the game with Largo Caballero like everyone else; as long as their own bureaucratic interests were safeguarded, they had no problem “sacrificing the libertarian revolution” in favor of anti-fascist unity and military victory. For the Stalinists, however, all of this fell far short of their desires, because what had to be liquidated was the revolution itself,

²¹⁰ They would later send a representative to participate in the Government, due to a reorganization carried out by Negrín’s Government: Segundo Blanco became the Minister of Education and Health, replacing J. Hernández.

which was to some degree “protected” by the contradictions of Power. Since they thought—correctly or incorrectly—that Largo Caballero represented an obstacle that stood in the way of their attainment of their goals, they got rid of him and, along with their accomplices, the right-wing socialists and the republicans, initiated a long and bloody period of “witch-hunts”.

Within the context of this general project of a “return to order”, the Spanish Stalinists, urgently pressured by the Russians, sought to take advantage of the opportunity to eliminate the POUM. The frenzied hatred of the Stalinists for the POUM in Spain was part and parcel of their hatred for Trotskyism (a hatred that was “satiated” by a long series of assassinations). Even though the POUM, as I have pointed out above, was not really Trotskyist, the Stalinists always identified it with “Trotskyist-Fascism”. Accusing the militants of the POUM of being *fascist spies* represented for Stalin and his supporters a political operation with the most wide-ranging international repercussions: it was one more proof to be added to the “dossier” of repression to prove the existence of the worldwide conspiracy of Trotskyism against the workers movement, democracy and peace, a conspiracy that was led from Berlin, Rome and Tokyo. And at the same time, the Moscow trials found a new justification in Spain, a new “proof” of that international conspiracy that obliged the Soviet judges to sentence to death or to the concentration camps not so many members of the Bolshevik “old guard” (as the Trotskyists claimed) but so many Nazi spies and saboteurs. In view of the immoderate indulgence of the Stalinists (like all totalitarian regimes) in *ritual*, the trial of the POUM had to be similar to the Moscow trials in every particular detail and, if possible, the same accusations of espionage had to be leveled against this dissident fraction of the communist movement, and the same penalties had to be sought. Since, however, the situation in Spain was not, after all, identical to the situation that prevailed in Russia, this project could only be partially implemented (which was already a major success for the Russians and shows how far the Russians were allowed to get away with *almost* everything in the republican zone).

In a speech delivered on May 9 in Valencia, José Díaz declared:

“Our main enemy is fascism. . . . But fascism has its agents working for them. Naturally, if the agents working for them were to say, ‘we are fascists and we want to work with you to cause problems’, then they would immediately be eliminated by us. That is why they have to go by other names . . . some call themselves Trotskyists . . . and I say: If everyone knows this and the Government knows this, what is the Government doing, if it does not treat them as fascists and exterminate them without mercy. . . .

“All the workers must know about the trial that is taking place in the USSR against the Trotskyists. It is Trotsky in person who has directed this gang of criminals who derail trains in the USSR, carry out sabotage in the big factories and do everything possible to discover military secrets to hand them over to Hitler and the imperialists of Japan. And when this was discovered in the trial and the Trotskyists declared that they were working on behalf of Hitler, and on behalf of the imperialists of Japan, under the direction of Trotsky, I ask: is it not totally clear that this is not a political or social organization of a

particular tendency, like the anarchists, the socialists or the republicans, but a gang of spies and provocateurs in the service of international fascism? The Trotskyist provocateurs must be wiped out!”²¹¹

The rest of the speech is of the same quality. In any event, it emphatically proclaims the international character of “Trotskyist provocation”.

As soon as the Negrín Government was formed, the Soviet agents, with the complicity of Colonel Ortega, a communist and the Director-General of Security for the Central Government, sent several teams of police commandos to Barcelona to arrest the leaders of the POUM, without notifying the republican Government.

One morning in June 1937, Hernández was summoned by Orlov, the commander of the NKVD in Spain, who told him:

“We have been fighting against a falangist network of spies for some time now. The elements of the POUM are part of it. Among the hundreds of individuals we have imprisoned, an engineer, named Golfín, has confessed everything. Nin has been deeply implicated as have all the members of the Trotskyist gang: Gorkin, Andrade, Gironella, Arquer. Someone by the name of Roca was acting as the liaison between the POUM and the falangists in Perpiñán. In Gerona, we found a briefcase full of documents in the possession of a certain Riera. The owner of a hotel, Dalma, has also confessed. Everything was in place to deliver a hard blow that we have managed to forestall without informing either the Government or the Minister.”²¹²

In response to Hernández’s suggestion that maybe it would have been better to have notified the Government, Orlov replied: “Our enemies are everywhere.” Hernández, however, dared to say, “Even the Minister of the Interior?” Orlov responded, “Zugazagoitia is a personal friend of some of those who had to be arrested”.²¹³ Hernández, who wrote the book containing this account after he had broken with Stalinism, provides a detailed account of his “crisis of conscience” on this occasion (and even his attempts to protest, although not about the whole operation—the arrest of the members of the POUM—but only about the procedures employed in carrying it out), but his testimony, like all the others, clearly displays, leaving no margin for doubt, the complicity in this affair of the Spanish Stalinists with the Soviet agents.

“Here are the facts, in all their veracity”, Victor Serge writes, in *La Révolution Prolétarienne*:

“At the end of May (it was May 28 [C.S.M.]), the excellent daily newspaper of the POUM, *La Batalla*, was indefinitely suspended. The government refused to allow the party to publish another newspaper, turning its back on the freedom of the press. For an

²¹¹ José Díaz, *Tres años de lucha*, Ed. Nuestro Pueblo, Toulouse, 1947, pp. 357-358.

²¹² Jesús Hernández, *op. cit.*, p. 75. See also: Julián Gorkin, *Canibales políticos*.

²¹³ *Ibid.*

article published on May 1, in which the workers were called upon to remain vigilant, with arms in readiness, and to form a revolutionary front, Julián Gorkin was accused of inciting to sedition, but he was released on bail. On about June 15, we were notified of the suspicious drama surrounding the death of Bob Smillie, the correspondent of the Independent Labour Party, a sympathizer of the POUM, who was arrested by the Spanish authorities as he was preparing to cross the French border, with all his papers in order, to return to England; he was brought, not to Barcelona, but to Valencia, where he died in prison, stricken by an inexplicable case of appendicitis. Unfortunate and brave comrade! Who knows what Russian had a hand in your death.

“On June 16, an order was issued from Valencia to arrest forty of the leading military commanders of the POUM (members of its Central Committee and its Executive Committee) in Barcelona. Andrés Nin and many other militants who participated in all the revolutionary events in Spain have been arrested. Since they did not find either Gorkin or Juan Andrade, their wives were seized as hostages, a fascist-style atrocity and at the same time the kind of thing that is characteristic of specifically Stalinist operations.

“The POUM’s radio transmitter has been seized. The Party has been practically outlawed. What remains of Spanish democracy for the workers?”²¹⁴

The conspiracy of the NKVD was in full swing. The “proof” that was used to justify the arrests was “Plan N”, a map of Madrid drawn on graph paper, discovered in the possession of the falangist Golfín, on which the police deciphered a message written in invisible ink, which mentioned “N” as a trustworthy agent. “N”, of course, was Nin, and, equally unsurprising, the whole thing was such a crude frame-up that they had to abandon it before the trial. On July 29, a note from Irujo, the Minister of Justice, announced that he was prosecuting Gorkin, Andrade, Bonet, Arquer and other leaders of the POUM in the Tribunals for Espionage and High Treason, along with the falangist Golfín (who declared during the trial that he had nothing to do with the POUM).

Between June 16 and July 29 much had taken place. First, the assassination of Andrés Nin, then the ridiculous display of eager compliance on the part of the Government Ministers when they were presented with this *fait accompli*. Everyone, from the socialists Negrín, Prieto and Zugazagoitia (the Minister of the Interior!) to the very Catholic Irujo (the Minister of Justice!) cravenly submitted to the will of the Russians and their accomplices in the Spanish Communist Party. All of them can be considered to be accomplices in this political crime. It must be pointed out, however, that there was an intense protest campaign that swept Spain and even affected other countries, initiated by non-Stalinist left-wing and extreme left-wing groups, coalitions and individuals, against the wave of Stalinist repression that seemed to have the effect of placing some limits on its depredations. The Stalinists in Spain and everywhere else responded with an even more intense campaign against the “Trotskyist-fascist plot”. One of the most savory offerings of this campaign was undoubtedly the *White Book* on this “plot” published by

²¹⁴ *La Révolution Proletarienne*, No. 249 (June 25, 1937).

the Spanish Communist Party, with an introduction written by the Catholic republican author, José Bergamín.

The assassination of Nin

Nin was arrested on June 16 along with his comrades. He was almost immediately separated from them, however. No one knew where he was, not the Government, not his comrades, no one, except for the leaders of the Spanish Communist Party, who knew that he was “in the hands of the Russian comrades”. Everywhere, in newspapers, and on the walls of the big cities, a question was tirelessly repeated: Where is Nin? To which the commandos of Communist Party agit-prop responded: in Salamanca or Berlin.

On August 4, the republican Government, pressed for explanations, especially by the anarchists, issued a press release that stated: “From information received, it appears that Nin was arrested by the general security police at the same time as the other POUM leaders, that he was transferred to Madrid to a detention center converted for that purpose, and that he has disappeared from there.”²¹⁵ At that time, several versions of the story of Nin’s disappearance were circulating. The Stalinists spread the rumor that a commando squad from the Gestapo had rescued him from the “detention center” that had been specially “converted” for his arrest and spirited him away to a safe location: undoubtedly in Salamanca or Berlin. According to another rumor (echoed by *The New York Times*), his corpse had been found on the outskirts of Madrid. There is no point, however, in wasting any more time with such speculations. What we do know is clear enough. According to the testimony of Jesús Hernández, at that time a member of the Politburo of the Spanish Communist Party, and according to the veiled references of some old Stalinists and the eyewitness accounts of Nin’s political friends, he was arrested and tortured in one of the numerous “chekas” of the Russian secret services, probably in Alcalá de Henares, near Madrid. He was tortured for very simple and obvious reasons: in the ritual of the Moscow trials, which were *repeated* in Spain, although there were many points in which both were identical—the political imputation of guilt by association: Golfin, the falangist, and the POUM; accusation of espionage, etc.—one indispensable piece was still missing in Spain: confessions. Nin was tortured to force him to sign a confession in which all the Stalinist charges were confirmed, according to the usual procedure which proved so successful—so to speak—in Moscow (and which is still being used in the so-called socialist world, as we have recently seen in Cuba). But Nin would not sign, and died under torture. Why Nin? This was also logical, because, besides the fact that he was at that time (J. Maurin was imprisoned in the Francoist zone) the leader of the POUM, “... the GPU was very interested in Andrés Nin. A close friend of the great men of the October Revolution in Russia, he had worked with them since the founding of the Red Trade Union International, for which he served as Secretary. Upon the death of Lenin, he did not conceal his friendship with Trotsky. He was not a supporter of Stalinist policies and publicly expressed his disagreement. Shortly after the definitive destruction of the opposition within the Bolshevik Party, Nin, considered to be a renegade, was expelled from the Soviet Union. He returned to Spain when the Republic was proclaimed

²¹⁵ Quoted by Broué and Témime, *op. cit.*, English edition, pp. 302-303.

and, with the ex-communists who had organized the Workers and Peasants Bloc, founded the POUM”.²¹⁶ With the death of Nin, not only was a blow inflicted on the POUM, but also on international Trotskyism and on Trotsky himself.

According to Hernández, it was the “most demoniacal” of Orlov’s collaborators, “*comandante Carlos*” (Vittorio Vidali, an Italian Stalinist who would later become the secretary of the Communist Party in Trieste), who conducted the whole operation and who conceived of the idea of simulating an attack by Gestapo commandos so that the tortured corpse of Andrés Nin would disappear forever.²¹⁷

The trial of the POUM

In Barcelona, on October 29, 1938, the Central Tribunal for Espionage and High Treason convened for the examination of charges against the Executive Committee of the POUM. Of course, the accused had been imprisoned for the whole time since their arrests, and so, too, were hundreds of members of the POUM, as well as anarchists, held in prisons all over republican Spain. The trial opened without *confessions*. And the accused, in addition to an extremely intense solidarity campaign, received testimonials in their favor from the former Prime Minister, Largo Caballero²¹⁸ and the leaders of the CNT-FAI, among others. (The National Committee of the CNT had issued a vigorous protest against the repression directed against the POUM since December 1936 in a public document signed by the national secretary, Mariano R. Vázquez and distributed on June 28, 1937.)

The evidence of espionage fabricated by the Soviet secret services was of such “appalling quality” that the judges had to dismiss this charge in order to fall back on that of “rebellion” (!). The defendants were not condemned to death, as the Stalinists wanted, but were all nonetheless sentenced to long prison sentences. Here are some excerpts from the Court decision:

²¹⁶ Jesús Hernández, *op. cit.*, p. 91. On the torture inflicted on Andrés Nin, see the same book by Hernández, pp. 103-107.

²¹⁷ See Andrés Nin, *Los Problemas de la Revolución Española*, Ruedo Iberico, Paris, 1971 (a collection of texts selected and introduced by Juan Andrade), which includes one of the declarations made by Nin to the Stalinist police in Madrid or in Alcalá de Henares on June 21, 1937. This declaration is of a biographical nature. Because it was part of the official record of the trial of the Executive Committee of the POUM, the attorney for the Party knew of its existence and made it possible for Nin’s widow to obtain a copy.

²¹⁸ Shortly after having been forced to resign from the Government, Largo Caballero was expelled from the UGT and even from the branch of the UGT in his home town of Valencia. All his supporters were discharged from positions of responsibility in the UGT, and from editorial positions on the newspapers, *Claridad*, *Adelante*, *La Correspondencia de Valencia*, etc. This “plot” was implemented thanks to the temporary alliance of the right-wing socialists and the communists. But it was almost always the Negrín Government that assumed responsibility for implementing authoritarian police measures and taking other actions to destroy the left-wing opposition in the socialist ranks. (See, for example, Broué and Témime, *op. cit.*, English edition, pp. 298-300.)

“... They always sought to maintain their leadership over these militarized units (the militias of the POUM [C.S.M.]) and to extend the influence of their Party to all the units that they could for the purpose of consolidating a firm foundation for the conquest of political power, should the necessary objective conditions arise which they will themselves strive to create to in order to replace the legitimate Government with another government of a distinctly working class and peasant character, one that is prepared to take revolutionary measures to implement their doctrines and that is why they are theoretically opposed, in the newspaper of their party, *La Batalla*, to the formation of a regular army, as the Government wants, and to the elimination of the militias.

“b) Violent opposition to the Government and bitter criticism of the decrees of the latter, as well as of the institutions of the Republic and of the parties and organizations upon which it is based, in order to weaken the existing regime and create the necessary external conditions for their seizure of power, which they intend to do first in Catalonia and then in the rest of loyalist Spain and thus establish a communist regime, organized in accordance with the doctrine of their party.... The accused named below helped to foment a condition of unrest and rebellion in the working class, undermined collective discipline, which is so necessary in the dangerous ordeal the Republic is experiencing, endangering the prestige of the latter in the face of international opinion, whose favorable reactions to the cause of the people strengthen the Government, and by the means of their activities create a situation that is favorable, in this sense, indirectly, and even if this was not their intention, for the plans of the rebels....

“The accused whose names we recite below were discovered to be carrying out these activities when, on May 3 of 1937, there was an encounter between a group of workers and the forces of public order.... (the accused) thought that the time had come to give a concrete content and outcome to the violent and *spontaneous* (author’s emphasis [C.S.-M]) actions of the working class masses and they attempted to take advantage of the latter in order to implement their designs for the conquest of power....

“It cannot be deduced from the above evidence that the accused provided any information of any kind concerning the status of the battlefronts or concerning the organization of the rearguard to fascist elements; that they maintained direct or indirect relations with such elements, or with any police or military units of the invading countries; that they are in contact with or support falangist groups or institutions in the country; that they are seeking to help the rebel combatants or that they receive economic aid from the enemies of the State for their political propaganda. (To the contrary, what can be deduced from the above evidence is the fact that all of them can boast of a long anti-fascist career; that they have contributed with their efforts to the struggle against the military insurrection and that the position that they defend responds solely to the goal of abolishing the democratic Republic in order to establish a regime in accordance with their own social conceptions)....

“Third consideration: *Whereas* the Decree of February 13, 1937 cannot be applied in this case because it defines and sanctions exclusively those acts of espionage and actions that

have been proven, it is not deduced that they can be included in numbers 2, 3, 4, of article 1st of the above recited charges, concerning which the prosecutor of the Republic bases his accusation, since they do not involve actions carried out secretly or not publicly, that there is no support for any kind of organization or social group subject to the influence of foreign States that favor the war against the legitimate Government, since the acts that are the object of the sanctions have not been committed for the purpose of supporting the designs of the nationalists or the foreigners who are at war with the Republic.”

The following sentences were pronounced:

“We declare: that we must condemn and do condemn the accused, Julián Gómez García (Gorkin), Juan Andrade Rodríguez, Enrique Androher Pascual (Gironella) and Pedro Bont Quito, to 15 years of isolation from the social community for each of them, as persons guilty of committing a crime of rebellion as defined above, and Jorge Arquer Saltó to eleven years of isolation from the social community (Arquer was not in Barcelona during the “May Events”, which was considered by the Court to be an extenuating circumstance [C.S.M.]) as an accomplice in the commission of the same crime and that they will have to serve their sentences in labor camps and, furthermore, any offices or rights of suffrage to which they may be entitled will be suspended while they serve their sentences....”

Two of the accused were declared to be not guilty.²¹⁹

The Tribunal also decreed the dissolution of the Associations of the Workers Party of Marxist Unification and the Iberian Communist Youth. Found not guilty of being spies, they were found guilty of being revolutionaries! Obviously, according to these same standards and with much greater reason, the CNT-FAI could very well have been charged with the same “crimes”; but the CNT-FAI had at that time more than two million members, and the POUM about 50,000. This explains the whole affair.

The POUM and the Iberian Communist Youth were officially dissolved by the Tribunal, a situation under which their members had been living for several months, which did not prevent them from engaging in clandestine activity (on a reduced scale, of course), especially by way of the continued publication, also clandestine, of their press.

We must repeat that in addition to this trial of the POUM leadership, hundreds of POUM militants were arrested—with or without trials. When Catalonia fell, many of them were able, often with the complicity of their guards, to escape from their prisons and cross the border into France.

Although its purpose was to smash the POUM, for the political motives explained above, and although its enforcers did not dare to do the same thing to the CNT-FAI, it goes without saying that the ensuing repression had an impact on more elements than just the

²¹⁹ A copy of the transcript of this court ruling was kindly provided to the author by W. Solano.

ranks of the POUM. Here are some examples: in Tortosa, 128 workers were arrested and brought to trial, accused of having borne arms during the “May Events”. The Court was seeking four death penalties and prison sentences of between six and twenty years.²²⁰ R. Louzon, a member of an international delegation for the investigation of repression against revolutionaries, heard from Mariano Vázquez and Federica Montseny that “the CNT has at the present time 800 members imprisoned and 60 ‘disappeared’.”²²¹ Indeed, although the prisons—“private” or otherwise—were full of revolutionary militants condemned by the Tribunals of Public Order, which had been reorganized by a Decree of June 23, 1937 (three civilian judges and two military judges, appointed by the Government, since the Popular Tribunals had been dissolved), the method that was most often used to liquidate the anarchist or “Trotskyist” “vermin” was “disappearance”, that is, torture or a shot in the back of the head. Besides Nin, Berneri, A. Martínez, Mark Rein, Bob Smillie, and all the other people already mentioned in this book, other well-known militants disappeared without a trace in Spain: “Kurt Landau, Austrian militant, the former secretary of the international Left opposition, in alliance with the POUM against Trotsky.... the Polish Trotskyist Freund, known as Moulin, the Czech Trotskyist Erwin Wolff, Trotsky’s former secretary, and José Robles, former professor at Johns Hopkins University ...”,²²² and the countless anonymous individuals shot during or after the “May Events” or for “insubordination” at the front.

“In November 1937 the Commission of Investigation under Félicien Challaye and the Englishman McGovern was astonished to find itself welcomed at the Model Prison in Barcelona by the Internationale, sung by five hundred prisoners.”²²³

The SIM (Military Investigation Service)

Formed on August 15, 1937 by a Decree issued by the Minister of Defense, Indalecio Prieto, the SIM was ostensibly a classical counterespionage service, such as every “modern” army must possess, or so it would seem. Under the specific conditions of the civil war in Spain, however, its triangular nature—the struggle between the revolution and the counterrevolution and the war against fascism waged by these two tendencies, the SIM was almost immediately transformed into the tool for a massive purge, in the service of the “witch-hunt” in the republican camp (and not just in the army). “After the Republican Sayagües it [the SIM] was run by the socialist Uribarri, a former officer in the Civil Guard, who worked directly with the Russians in the ‘special services’ and then, after his escape to France [“with a small fortune in jewels and gold stolen during the course of police activities”—see Broué and Témime, *op. cit.*, English edition, footnote 16 on p. 317], by Santiago Garcés who was regarded as one of the authors of Nin’s murder. Prieto, creator of the SIM, has described at great length how the service came to fall from his clutches. Major Duran, a Communist and head of the Madrid SIM, appointed militant Communists to all the important posts, and the Russian ‘technicians’ protested when

²²⁰ See *La Révolution Prolétarienne*, No. 250 (July 10, 1937).

²²¹ *Ibid.*

²²² Broué and Témime, *op. cit.*, English edition, p. 305.

²²³ *Ibid.*

Prieto wanted to send them to the Army. A few months after its formation, the SIM, which was completely immune from the authority of the minister of war, had more than 6,000 agents and was in control of prisons and concentration camps.²²⁴

Thus, in its origins, the SIM was a service for military counterespionage, but after it fell under the control of the communists, who were under the constant tutelage of the specialists of the NKVD, it became a political super-police, organized on the model of that Russian agency which for its part had previously served as a major source of inspiration for the Gestapo. It was divided into a series of sections which covered all military, economic and political activities (the “surveillance” of the parties and organizations), and relied on the inescapable Special Brigade entrusted with the job of torture and execution. The network of “private” prisons and concentration camps, as well as most of the police activities of the SIM more generally, were entirely outside the control of the republican authorities and were kept secret, except when it was a matter of arresting fascists, whom they proudly displayed, in order to quietly continue to pursue their counterrevolutionary terrorist activities.

José Peirats has provided a large sample of data obtained from the confidential reports of the CNT and the FAI on the activities and methods of this political super-police.²²⁵

According to these reports, the SIM was commanded by a Russian whose name is not provided. Among the Spanish Stalinists who occupied high positions in the Department of Security that worked closely with the SIM, they cite the names of Ortega, Burilo, Rodríguez Sala, José Cazorla, and Santiago Carrillo.²²⁶ Its methods were those of all the political super-police, whether Stalinist or fascist. Reading the testimonies published by Peirats, we cannot help but think of the techniques of interrogation used by the Nazis under the Occupation (or in Germany itself), or of the cheery proletarian festivals celebrated in the cellars of Lubyanka!

The key factor was, of course, torture. Every suspect, every dissident, had to confess that he was a fascist spy. The instruments of torture were as varied as they are anywhere else: besides beatings, hanging by the feet or by the hands, needles under the fingernails, etc., there were electric chairs “similar to the ones used in the United States”, except that they were not used to bring about the quick death of the victim, but, to the contrary, to prolong his suffering. There was also a kind of press that was used to crush the bodies of the detainees, whose upper part, curiously enough, was in the form of a swastika.... There

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 312-313.

²²⁵ Peirats, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, pp. 277-291.

²²⁶ Santiago Carrillo, the general secretary of the Spanish Communist Party, was, during the civil war, the general secretary of the JSU—and of the architects of its “Stalinization”—and “the chief of the Department of Security” in the Madrid Defense Committee until February 1937, when he was replaced by Cazorla. Therefore, he did not work with the SIM, which was formed much later, but with the NKVD, and he did so very directly and ... effectively, during the months when he was chief of Security in Madrid. That experience confers upon him, naturally, full authority to talk today about “socialism and freedom”.

were also tiny cells; in some, the prisoner could only stand up and the floor was laid with sharp, broken tiles that cut the bottoms of his feet; others, which they called “lockers”, came in two varieties: the big ones, in which the prisoner could stand up but without being able to move and the small ones in which he could only squat; there were also boxes in which the body of the prisoner was tightly confined and from which only his head protruded. In all these “political isolators”, as they were called in the USSR, the prisoners might be kept for weeks, or as long as their executioners liked, until they confessed that they were fascist spies. In the testimonies collected by Peirats, most of the accounts pertain to one of these chekas of the SIM located in Valencia, in the former convent of Santa Ursula. However, just like any other highly centralized public service, all the chekas were run according to the same model.²²⁷

The dissolution of the Council of Aragon

In light of the fact that the struggle between revolution and counterrevolution in Catalonia had a direct impact on Aragon, I think it would be useful to briefly summarize how this region was affected by the counterrevolutionary wave that swept across Catalonia.

When, immediately after the military uprising in Catalonia had been crushed, the columns of militiamen entered Aragon, and when the workers of Aragon formed “libertarian communes”, this region became, in a way, the vanguard of revolutionary Catalonia, with respect to not only military affairs, but also the political, economic and social domains. In Aragon, the “power” held by the anarchists was obvious, but this was not due to the use of terror, as the Stalinists said and still say,²²⁸ but was simply the result of the fact that the anarchists comprised the majority at the front and behind the lines. In October 1936, the anarchists organized the Regional Defense Council of Aragon, with Joaquín Ascaso (the brother of Francisco Ascaso, who was killed in the fighting in Barcelona on July 20, and of Domingo Ascaso, who was the commander of the Ascaso Division) as President, composed solely of members of the CNT-FAI. This Council attempted to play the role of a center of coordination between the rearguard and the front, between the columns and the “libertarian communes”—or other types of collectives—between the social revolution and the needs of the war, etc. In its first Proclamation, for example, one may read the following:

²²⁷ It therefore makes one shudder to read that, after having become aware of the torture chambers and horrors of the SIM (concerning which I have only provided a few examples), the leaders of the CNT-FAI debated whether or not they should accept a position offered to them on this political super-police by the communists, and finally declined on the grounds that the position in question did not have ... any real power! (See Peirats, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, p. 289. We should point out that Peirats harshly criticized the actions of the SIM, regardless of whether or not the CNT-FAI participated in it.)

²²⁸ See the books cited above by Dolores Ibarruri, Arthur London, Líster, and the “official” history of the war published by the Communist Party.

“1. That all applications for items of basic necessity, livestock and equipment and other items be forwarded directly to this council which will comply in so far as the capabilities of the region allow. Meanwhile sporadic acts of requisitioning, whoever might be the authors, will be strenuously disowned, except in circumstances of extreme urgency which preclude adherence to the normal channels established by this council.

“2. That antifascist columns must not interfere in the sociopolitical life of a village which is, per se, and by virtue of its own authority, free.”²²⁹

The two main concerns of the Council may be summarized in the points mentioned above: the obvious need not only for economic coordination, but also for military coordination (arms, provisions for the columns, for example, to which other “sections” of the proclamation refer) and the no less obvious need for the autonomy and the freedom of each libertarian commune—and for each town more generally—that is self-organized in the general—and complex—framework of the revolution and of the war. And since I have taken the liberty of engaging in such severe criticism of the anarchist leaders, I shall take this opportunity to acknowledge the fact that the Council of Aragon respected the autonomy of the communes and the diversity of their revolutionary experiments. At no time did Joaquín Ascaso act like the regional viceroy, despot and thief depicted by communist propaganda. With regard to the question of the problems of coordination and the requirements of the war, the various conflicting views which have been articulated are so colored by partisan interests that it is hard to form an objective opinion on the results. The libertarian communes proliferated in Aragon and profoundly transformed the lives of the poor workers and peasants, the shopkeepers and the artisans (even though certain retrograde structures were sometimes preserved: we have already commented on the ambiguity, to say the least, of the family wage and of wage discrimination against women, for example), but it is hard to say to what extent the Council of Aragon played a part in these changes, or if it was an essential factor in the social revolution in Aragon or whether, to the contrary, by providing services for the coordination between communes, it was a kind of symbolic aegis under which the experiments which it supported, without actually playing an important role in them, developed.

In any event, once the Council was formed, Ascaso went to Madrid to obtain the recognition of the Central Government. Despite the urging of the communists that Aragon should be returned to “legal” political administration—the civil Governor and municipal councils which had been replaced by the Council and the local revolutionary Committees—Largo Caballero, at that time the Prime Minister, agreed to recognize the Council on the condition that all the parties in the Popular Front should be represented in it. Ascaso agreed and the Council, reorganized in December, was composed of seven members of the CNT-FAI and seven members of the other organizations (Communist Party, UGT, republicans and one member of the Syndicalist Party). The anarchists, however, who were the majority organization in the region, still “dominated” the Council.

²²⁹ Peirats, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 213.

After the “May Events”, amidst the wave of the great offensive for the return to bourgeois order, the communists and right-wing socialists decided to liquidate the Council of Aragon, the libertarian communes (which comprised their main target) and the region’s relative autonomy.

“The moral and material demands of the war make it an overwhelming necessity that the authority of the state be concentrated in such a way that it may be exercised with uniformity of approach and intent.... The Aragonese region, capable . . . by virtue of the mettle of its people . . . of the loftiest human and economic contributions to the cause of the Republic, suffers to a higher degree than any other from the blemishes of dispersion of authority, from which it follows that harm is done to general ideological interests.”²³⁰ These revealing lines have been taken from the Decree mandating the dissolution of the Council of Aragon, which was replaced by a civil Governor, the republican Mancetón, a fellow-traveler of the Communist Party—the revolutionary Committees were replaced, as in Catalonia, with Municipal Councils which, of course, were not elected.

The Government, however, would never be able to eliminate the Council with the stroke of a pen. To do so, another counterrevolutionary conspiracy was necessary, which consisted in the military invasion of Aragon, under the most specious pretexts (troop replacements, military maneuvers, etc.) so that, when the Decree was published in the Official Bulletin (on August 10, 1937—or on August 11; the historians do not agree on the precise date)—these “reliable” troops were already in Aragon implementing it.

Enrique Líster, one of the military officers in command of this operation, with that smug cynicism that is so typically associated with a lack of intelligence, revealed some details of this conspiracy in his memoirs.²³¹

Indalecio Prieto, the Minister of Defense, summoned Líster to his office on the morning of August 5.

“He explained to me that the Government had decided to dissolve the Council of Aragon, but he was afraid that the anarchists would refuse to obey this order and, since, in addition to its own police forces, the Council of Aragon also had at its disposal three Army Divisions, he had proposed to the Council of Ministers, and the latter approved his proposal, to send a military force to Aragon that would be capable of enforcing the implementation of this government decision.... He told me that there would be no written order for my mission, or any communications concerning its implementation, and that it was a secret between the Government and me, that I was to liquidate without hesitation and without any bureaucratic or judicial procedures all those whom I think need to be liquidated, and that I had the whole Government behind me.”²³²

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 277.

²³¹ E. Líster, *Nuestra Guerra*, Ed. Ebro, Paris, p. 152.

²³² A few pages later, Líster seems to be angry at Prieto, who publicly accused him of brutality in this cleansing operation. Why was he so indignant? Maybe Prieto’s explanation of the terms of their secret agreement—“Do whatever you want, we will back

Líster and the other “loyal” commanders cheerfully indulged in a campaign of repression.

“Immediately, the Communist Major Lister’s Eleventh Division ... went into action against the Committees, whose dissolution was unanimously called for by the Popular Front press. The Council’s newspaper, *Nuevo Aragón*, was suppressed and replaced by the communist *El Día*. The local Committees were replaced by municipal councils set up by Líster’s troops. The offices of the CNT and the libertarian organizations were occupied by troops and then closed. Many leaders were arrested on 12 August, among them Joaquín Ascaso, accused of ‘smuggling’ and ‘jewel thefts’. On 18 September, thanks to the dismissal of the charge, he was released. By that date, the objective was attained, the remaining revolutionary power having been disposed of once and for all.”²³³

César M. Lorenzo observes:

“Would the confederal divisions posted on the Aragon front (the 25th, 26th and 28th divisions, not to mention the remnants of the former POUM-controlled 29th division, which had been placed under the command of the libertarian Miguel García Vivancos) descend upon the communist troops? The soldiers were passionately in favor of doing so, but the National Committee of the CNT and the Peninsular Committee of the FAI intervened to prevent the outbreak of another civil war; they asked them to be patient and not to do anything without the consent of the Organization, because an act of desperation could rapidly hand over the republican zone to Franco. So the confederal troops remained at their positions.”²³⁴

“As for the National Committee of the CNT and the Peninsular Committee of the FAI, their passive attitude is explained by their relative lack of interest in an institution that had been formed without their authorization and in spite of internal discipline; it is also explained by their desire to collaborate with Negrín and therefore they did not want to provoke any kind of serious conflict that might compromise their relations.”²³⁵

Without realizing it, Lorenzo (whose book tends to show that the Spanish anarchists were just as capable as anyone else of becoming a “responsible” political bureaucracy) is criticizing the leadership of the CNT-FAI.

you up, but officially we know nothing....”—was not clear enough? (We shall also note, by the way, that E. Líster is one of the leaders of a split in the Communist Party by some members of the Party who accused the D. Ibarri-Carrillo leadership of engaging in “anti-Soviet” criticism of the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia. Líster and his supporters have formed another communist party: the P.C.O.E.)

²³³ Broué and Témime, *op. cit.*, English edition, p. 306.

²³⁴ Lorenzo, *op. cit.*, p. 306.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

Obviously, both in Aragon and in Catalonia, and everywhere else, all the revolutionary measures implemented by the anarchist masses were carried out “without their authorization and in spite of internal discipline”.

Taken by surprise and “betrayed” by their national leaders (since their regional leaders had been arrested), the masses did not offer any real resistance to the military “putsch” that robbed them of their autonomy. A bloody wave of repression swept over occupied Aragon and the only thing that can be said in favor of the leaders of the CNT-FAI is that, thanks to their intercession with the Government, they prevented many local anarchist leaders from being shot. There were, however, hundreds of arrests and a new crop of “disappeared” persons.

“But the action of the communist military forces did not take long to demonstrate its catastrophic consequences. Aragon was economically ruined by the army’s depredations; the peasants no longer knew whom they could depend on; the dispossessed collectivists refused to work for the landowners as they did in the past; the confederal troops were demoralized; thousands of men had taken refuge in Catalonia. The communist Minister of Agriculture, Vicente Uribe, had to back off and once again tolerate the collectives, because he had to save the harvest. And, as startling testimony to the force of the agrarian collectivism of Aragon, the peasants reconstructed almost all the Collectives, and the anarchists were released and began to make a comeback. After having been on the verge of a civil war, after having ruined Aragon, undermined the morale of the confederal divisions, and killed hundreds of men, the Government, subject to communist control, totally reversed course.”²³⁶

* * *

And that was that. Order was reestablished. The new republican order became increasingly more authoritarian. The “democratic” façade had collapsed, taking with it the illusions of all those who had dreamed of a regime of “justice and liberty” in Spain, a tolerant, yet efficient, parliamentary republic. The new State had an obvious totalitarian, ultra-centralist and repressive vocation. The only crack in this beautiful edifice was the struggle among the diverse bureaucratic factions, for none of them was capable of completely imposing its will on the others.

In Catalonia, after an immense number of Decrees which had previously been nothing but so many “worthless scraps of paper”, the police finally proceeded to “disarm the rearguard”, that is, to disarm the workers. In Catalonia—as I have already pointed out—Public Order was now the “responsibility” of the Central Government. Democratic freedoms of speech, press and assembly were brutally liquidated; now it was not just the POUM and the “extremist groups” of the CNT-FAI that had to go underground, but all political activity was subjected to rigorous controls: trade union meetings had to be authorized by the delegate of Public Order, after permission to hold them had been

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 309-310. See also, Daniel Guérin, *L’Anarchisme*, and G. Munis, *Jalones de Derrota*.

requested at least three days in advance. A new law went into effect (created by the same Decree of June 23, 1937 that “reorganized” the Tribunals) that established a huge list of political crimes that would render practically everyone subject to prosecution:

“The definition ‘offense of spying and high treason’ was sufficiently elastic to permit the use of this fearsome weapon against any opponent, even a nonfascist one....” (Especially, I would say, against the revolutionaries [C.S.M.]). For it was considered a crime to “‘commit acts hostile to the Republic, inside or outside national territory’, ‘defending or propagating news or making judgments prejudicial to the conduct of war operations or to the credit and authority of the Republic’”, or to engage in “‘acts or demonstrations tending to weaken public morale, demoralize the Army, or diminish collective discipline’”. The statutory punishments varied from six years in prison to the death penalty. And this additional exacerbating factor must also be taken into account: the same penalties applied to “‘an attempt and an abortive attempt, conspiracy and proposal, as well as complicity and protection’” as applied to the actual commission of a crime. The Decree allowed for every kind of provocation and gave the police discretionary powers, since it was stipulated that “those who, after having agreed to commit one of these offenses, denounced it to the authorities before it was carried out, would be exempt from any penalty”.”²³⁷

Thanks to this legislation, which is just as democratic as that of the Greek Colonels, the prisons were filled with anarchists and members of the POUM.

This brutal attack on democratic liberties was also manifested in the intensification of the censorship of newspapers and other publications. We have seen how censorship, although theoretically restricted to information of a military nature, had actually become much more comprehensive over the previous few months, until it reached, under the Negrín Government, the hallucinatory characteristics of the totalitarian regimes. One example should suffice: “On 14 August a circular banned all criticism of the Russian government: ‘With an insistence suggesting a plan specifically designed to offend an exceptionally friendly nation, thus creating difficulties for the government, various newspapers have treated the USSR in a way that cannot be allowed.... This utterly reprehensible license ought not to be permitted by the Council of Censors.... Any newspaper that does not conform will be suspended indefinitely, even if it has been censored, in which case the censor will be summoned before the special tribunal dealing with crimes of sabotage.’ (!)”²³⁸

On June 18, 1937, the Central Government granted itself the monopoly control of all the radio stations and seized the transmitters that had previously been used by the trade union federations and the political parties.

In parallel with this operation that sought to control opinion, reducing to nothing any possibility of criticism (but which did not prevent the various bureaucratic factions from

²³⁷ Broué and Témime, *op. cit.*, English edition, p. 311.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

plunging into a struggle that often led to bloodshed, right up until the moment of military defeat), the organizations disciplined their ranks. Largo Caballero and the left-wing socialists who had not rallied around the banner of the Negrín Government's "*entente cordial*" were dismissed from positions of responsibility. The few attempts at rebellion on the part of some sectors of the JSU (under the influence of the "*Caballeristas*") were crushed.²³⁹ The CNT-FAI not only expelled groups such as The Friends of Durruti; even some of its former leaders, such as Abad de Santillán, who were calling for a "left turn" on the part of the organization, were dismissed from all responsible positions. Most of the dissident "rank and file" Committees were brought to heel, especially among the Libertarian Youth.

In accordance with the logic of a strong State and "unified command", the Central Government abolished Catalanian autonomy. In the arena of finances and industry, as well as that of military affairs and Public Order, the Generalitat was gradually deprived of all effective power. The Catalanian and Basque Ministers of the Central Government (Ayguadé and Irujo) resigned in August 1938 in protest against the effective liquidation of Iberian national pluralism, which had once been presented as one of the democratic conquests of the Republic and of the Popular Front. Viewed in the context of all these centralizing and authoritarian measures one might very well conclude that "identification with the enemy" actually extended beyond the strictly military sphere, as if the mystique of the strong State had been gradually instilled into the "defenders of democracy".

As for the collectives, the offensive staged by the new State proceeded in parallel with all the authoritarian measures discussed above. The collectives (see Chapter 4 above), despite the fact that they had been declared illegal immediately after the "May Events" by the Negrín Government, did not disappear. Faced with their resistance, which was sometimes passive but always stubborn, the Government multiplied its threats, Decrees and measures of intimidation, in order to put an end to the scandal of scandals for any kind of Power: workers autonomy and self-management. All the Decrees (the Decree of August 11, 1938 was the most draconian of all) were intended to militarize industry. The pretext for this was the same one as always: the needs of the war. For this purpose, the Central Government assumed direct control over the management of the metal industry, mines, transport, etc., in Catalonia. This administrative work was carried out by an army of bureaucrats, who were almost always totally ignorant of the technical and other problems involved in production, but who had been appointed to these administrative positions because of their political loyalty to the Negrín Government. I will not repeat what I have already said in the chapter on the collectives; I will merely recall the obstinate resistance of the workers to all of these bureaucratic measures. However, this resistance was not manifested by the workers' refusal to manufacture the arms, tanks, and airplanes ordered by the Government, but, to the contrary, the workers criticized the incompetence of the authorities and the delays for which the latter were responsible with regard to the supply of raw materials that were indispensable for increasing war production. This incompetence was so great that some factories had to cease operations for weeks at a time due to a lack of raw materials, lost in reams of bureaucratic red tape.

²³⁹ On the JSU, see Appendix 14.

Their resistance was manifested above all by their refusal to become mere executors of a productive process bureaucratically administered by the state authorities. The CNT, which was still very strong in Catalonia, having been deprived of its directive role, would on many occasions take the side of the workers, but at other times it acted as the interpreter of the governmental decisions for the workers.

The agricultural collectives of Catalonia, like those of Aragon, also had to endure a full scale offensive. The former landowners, encouraged by the new government policy, filed lawsuits in the Courts to recover their land which had been “illegally” confiscated by the peasants. Sometimes they were successful. In agriculture as well as in industry, it was the relation of forces that always determined whether or not the government’s anti-collectivist measures would be completely enforced. If, in one village, the collective had the support of the majority of the population, and was surrounded by other agricultural collectives that were just as solidly entrenched and defended by the CNT, the government authorities hesitated to engage in a show of force and in that case the lawsuits of the former owners were dismissed. Just the opposite was sometimes the case, however. In industry the same factors prevailed; the resistance of the workers forced the new director and the administrative institutions for which he worked to make important concessions. This silent struggle persisted until the military defeat. If the republicans had won the war, these conflicts would have ineluctably risen to the surface: if the war was the reason for all the centralization, the discipline, and a strong State, once the war was over, the workers would have demanded not just a return to self-management, but also would have striven to make it more profound and extensive. Since, however, the war was naturally not the sole reason why the bureaucracy rejected self-management, it would have had to attempt to destroy by force one of the most extraordinary adventures of our time.

* * *

The element of farce that inheres in all things appears in very high relief in the recent history of Spain, since it was Franco’s regime that realized the communist program: that is, the “bourgeois revolution”. Of course, as the sickly daughter of elderly syphilitic parents, this bourgeois revolution, born late, does not have, like its foreign sisters, the brilliance of a cultural and social renaissance, the expansion of democratic liberties (compared to the past), the retreat of ancestral prejudices (especially religious ones), etc. It is a “right-wing” bourgeois revolution, which has brought the industrialization of the country, the increase of production and a rise in the standard of living, the reduction of the agricultural share of the economy, not to forget the relatively massive consumption of televisions, cars, etc., under the rod of a strong State and dragging the ball and chain of the taboos and myths of the nationalist moral order. To use the jargon of the Marxist epigones, the economic base of the bourgeois revolution has been created even though the political superstructures do not seem to “fit” with its simplistic viewpoint. This is precisely why the Spanish “Marxists” still deny the importance of the economic development attained in Spain under Franco’s regime. When you cannot solve a problem you can always just deny it.

Today's Spain is unlike the Spain of 1936. The economic and social landscapes are different and so is the mentality of a large part of the ruling class. Industry and agriculture, the University and its problems, the Family and its problems (even the Church, so it would seem, has its problems), etc., are all different as well.

The opposition parties and organizations have not prospered from the idleness imposed by exile; all of them are convulsed with crises, but they are not crises of renewal but rather of stagnation. The "new internal opposition" has practically disappeared or has been incorporated with the old opposition, without providing it with an impulse of renewal.

The proletariat, which was the real—rather than the ideological—protagonist of the revolutionary experiences we have analyzed, has also changed. The agricultural proletariat, which was so important during that era, is now "in the process of disappearing", something that is not taking place without turmoil, as everyone knows. And the working class is in the process of being integrated, as in all of Europe, which does not mean that there are no strikes—again, as in all of Europe—or that they are not fighting for "free trade unions" (the kind of trade unions that are the instruments of integration that are best adapted to this new stage of "democratization" that many people are dreaming of for the post-Franco era). In this sense the Spanish revolution was, without any doubt, the last example of specifically proletarian, autonomous and revolutionary activity (see Appendix 2).

This "pessimistic" view is by no means intended to imply that Spanish society will be a society without conflicts. There is no society without conflicts and Spain is no exception. It simply means that these conflicts will be situated and will be manifested very differently in many respects. Spanish society is becoming, not without travail—just as has been, and still is the case everywhere else—what is called an "industrial society" and the conflicts that it will have to confront will be the modern conflicts of industrial societies. Which does not rule out—quite the contrary—the possibility that archaic conflicts will reappear, sometimes violently.

And as for "revolutionary perspectives"? For the analysis of a revolution as profound as the Spanish revolution, which was crushed by forces that were "objectively" allied with the old world, brings us face to face once again with the very concept of revolution, such as it is understood today. I shall not nourish any illusions: for some people, the account of this "defeat" will reinforce their critique of "spontaneism", while for others it will immobilize them in the symbol-ridden quagmire of imitation.

All the "victorious" revolutions, however, which are claimed to have taken place—before, during or after Marxism-Leninism—have produced monsters, dictatorships of stupidity and the police, suffocating machines of exploitation and alienation of individuals, in which even economic problems—which not so long ago were said to be the key to the success of the so-called socialist countries—have been ineffectively addressed or not even addressed at all, in which production, from the qualitative point of view, is just as absurd as in the other countries, while, from the quantitative point of

view, it falls far short of the other countries. Nevertheless, all those who want to do something, in Spain, for example, to liberate society from the enormous weight of the nationalist and clerical order, run up against the ruins of Marxism-Leninism—which is still clogging organizations and minds. It must also be pointed out that all the revolutions of a libertarian persuasion, like the one we have discussed here, have been crushed. This poses a few small problems, in any event, for the great idea of the 19th century, according to which the revolution would be a vast enthusiastic movement that would only take a few days—or a few months—to put an end to capitalist injustice and exploitation in order to inaugurate the “good society” without classes.

Nonetheless—long before Catalonia in 1936 and long after; May 1968, for example—the red thread of the libertarian, anti-hierarchical, self-managerial revolution breaks the surface here or there, it is crushed, now as before, it arises once more from its ashes, and this profound, unrecuperable, invincible, irreducible movement, although it sometimes changes its outward features—or tics—of its face, the essential aspect—the right of individuals to govern their own lives—is the same over the whole course of modern history. This movement is, for me, the only really revolutionary movement, the one that no power or supreme leader—whether of the “left” or of the “right”—will ever be able to effectively dominate. If it is true that the revolution must be reinvented—as I think—this can only be done by this movement, or, rather, it will be this movement—without leaders, without parties and without flags—that will, perhaps, reinvent it.

Appendices

1. On the insurrections of October 1934

In October 1934, a series of insurrections against the reactionary Government of the Radical Lerroux and the CEDA—whose strongman was Gil Robles, although he was only the Minister of War—broke out or were aborted in Spain. The most important insurrection took place in Asturias where the armed workers resisted the army for fifteen days, and were eventually crushed: under pressure from Dencàs, the leader of *Estat Català* (a nationalist organization that was deeply influenced by Mussolini’s fascism and which we shall see in action against the libertarians in 1937), Companys tried to take advantage of the insurrection, which was the initiative of the left wing of the Socialist Party, which failed to take place everywhere except in Asturias. On October 5, from the balcony of the Palace of the Generalitat and seemingly without any enthusiasm at all, he proclaimed the independence of the Catalan State within the framework of a Spanish federal republic (?). Madrid sent troops to put an end to this attempted secession. Companys had wanted to ask for help from the CNT (which was otherwise hostile towards this nationalist putsch whose leaders were just as opposed to the CNT as was the Central Government in Madrid), but the leading figures in the plot, Dencàs and Badía, the chief of police, emphatically rejected any such attempt. The police even took advantage of the putsch to arrest some anarchist militants. The whole thing ended rather suddenly, the army surrounded the Generalitat and then took it by assault, arresting Companys, without facing any real resistance. The *escamots*, the fascist-style military organization led by Dencàs, did not even participate in the fighting. Dencàs himself fled to fascist

Italy. According to Brenan (*The Spanish Labyrinth*, Ed. Ruedo Ibérico, Paris, 1962, pp. 214-215), the putsch was a coup planned by the CEDA and the monarchists to put an end to Catalanian autonomy, and Dencàs and Badía, the chief of police, were acting as agents provocateurs. Furthermore, Gil Robles even proudly admitted this in the Chamber of Deputies.

The CNT-FAI has been blamed for its passivity during these events in Barcelona. Its detractors have said that the organization should have done something, not to help the fascist Dencàs, or even to help the republican Companys—who had been manipulated by Dencàs—but to come to the aid of the Asturian miners organized in the CNT-UGT Workers Alliance who were besieged in Oviedo. The anarchists said in their defense (although some admitted the basic correctness of the criticism) that it would have been absurd to attempt to choose between the Catalanian reactionaries and the Madrid reactionaries, but they also alleged that the CNT had been decimated after the insurrections of January 1932, January 1933 and December 1933; it had undergone a cruel repression and thousands of its militants were in prison (César M. Lorenzo, *Los Anarquistas españoles y el Poder*, Ed. du Seuil, p. 85). They claimed that this argument was valid for Barcelona, Madrid, Zaragoza, etc.

2. Concerning the workers, the proletariat and the “workers movement”

To avoid confusion, I think it would be useful to clarify the following point: when I speak of the workers and the proletariat, I am not conferring any ideological connotation on these words. The proletariat is the metal workers, the textile workers, the railroad workers, the agricultural workers, etc. I have absolutely no belief in the charismatic role attributed by Marxism to the proletariat: the class that is the *bearer* of the socialist revolution that, by freeing itself, does away with all classes and establishes the good society without classes. I am even less in agreement with the various contradictory nuances and modifications of the epigones: which hold that the working class, although it is, by virtue of its very essence, the class that will liberate humanity, yet it cannot *by its own efforts* go beyond the theory and practice of the Trade Unions (Lenin). It is the Party that reveals to it its own nature and makes it aware of its historical mission, the party becomes the indispensable instrument for the conquest of political power (which they confuse with the revolution). Thus, the party gradually replaced the working class in Marxist orthodoxy, and the “worker” and the “proletarian” is the person who supports the Marxist-Leninist party (or State) line, and only that line.

Thus, we see, for example, that in Catalonia there are metal workers who cannot be “workers” and police chiefs who are “workers”. For the former, by engaging in self-management, are involved in a “petty bourgeois activity”, while the latter are in *class positions* because they are in the party. This shameful sophistry is still a golden rule among the parties—or groups or sects—of various Marxist-Leninist hues. All of this is false, just as it is false to think of classes as *univocal*.

Having said this, I still have to make one thing more clear: without confusing the proletariat and the “workers movement” (parties, trade unions, Herrs Professors,

ideological currents, publications, circles, *Casas del Pueblo*, etc.), it must nonetheless be pointed out that, *in the past*, together they constituted a general force of protest in society that was quite considerable and that today this is no longer true. The parties and trade unions, with each passing day, in the succession of struggles and of the development of modern societies, have been transformed into instruments of integration of the workers into society. Of course, from the very beginning they have entailed that feature, even if only because they reflect within their own structures the hierarchy of values and positions in bourgeois society, sometimes adapted to the latter, sometimes not. But what was at first only a tendency, has now become their predominant trait.

As for the proletariat, which is sometimes “represented” and sometimes “betrayed” by the workers movement, it has on more than one occasion acted as a protagonist in the history of social struggles, in an autonomous way, directly taking into its hands its specific interests without—or against—the mediation of the organizations that claim to be its representatives. *Every time that the proletariat has acted in this manner, it has done so in a libertarian or, as they say today, an anti-authoritarian sense.*

It was the Russian workers who created the Soviets in 1905. The social-democratic party of Lenin and Trotsky did nothing but *order them* to adopt its program or dissolve. All of this is history. Thus, it was the proletarians (in the sense defined here) who carried out the nearly universal self-management in Catalonia, and all the other revolutionary experiences that constitute the subject of this book. It must also be pointed out, however, that, aside from some recent experiences that have taken place in the “people’s democracies”, the proletariat is less and less prone to act in an autonomous or revolutionary way and it is fitting to ask whether the Catalonian revolution was not in a certain sense the last great manifestation of this revolutionary specificity of the proletariat that made it the real protagonist of numerous social struggles in the past.

This revolutionary specificity does not have much to do with the charismatic role, with the historic destiny, that Marx attributed to the proletariat; this is true for a whole series of reasons that would take too long to explain here—but *one* of them is precisely its own evolution, which has led broad sectors of the working class to be integrated into the so-called consumer society, which has transformed it into one of the most solid and conservative pillars of the “silent majority”, while other sectors engage in “wildcat strikes” and other actions which in their own way are inscribed in the modern anti-authoritarian movement. If, in another time, one could have spoken without any qualms of the proletariat, I think that today it would be more accurate to speak of *the proletarians*.

3. On the provisioning services and the New School movement

“The Central Provisioning Committee (which originated as a department of the Committee of Militias) was responsible for regulating and planning everything connected with the production and consumption of food (weights and measures, prices, control of department stores, warehouses, wholesale and retail trade, cooperatives, bakeries, food processing plants, the wheat harvest in Aragon and Lérida, the distribution of goods,

household supplies, clothing, all overseas purchases) and for supplying the militias which did not yet have their own quartermaster corps, the control patrols and the population in general (restaurants, hotels, hospitals, etc.). It was composed of delegates from the different parties and trade unions (three from the CNT—Valerio Mas, Facundo Roca and José Juan Domènach; two from the FAI—Juanel and Manuel Villar; three from the UGT; one from the POUM; three from the *Esquerra*; one from the *Unión de Rabassaires*; one technical advisor)” (César M. Lorenzo, *op. cit.*, p. 114). I will simply add that in view of the discrepancies that arose between this planning scheme and reality, it was often necessary to resort to improvisation, to resourcefulness and to personal skill, as was so often the case in other domains. There were numerous direct exchanges between Collectives (between agricultural and industrial collectives, or between agricultural collectives, etc.), which did not always pass through this Committee.

With regard to the Unified New School, the *Livre d’Or de la Révolution espagnole* [The Golden Book of the Spanish Revolution] points out that in July 1936 there were only 34,431 children attending school in Barcelona, and that in July 1937 there were 116,846 children attending 151 new schools (the figure of 102 schools that I provided in the text above refers to the first few weeks after the military uprising).

4. On the conflicts within the CNT

The history of the CNT is also the history of its conflicts and splits. When they did not agree with the orientation of a particular Congress, entire trade union federations of the CNT declared themselves *autonomous* and remained autonomous for longer or shorter periods of time. One of the most long-lasting splits was the one led by Angel Pestaña, who founded the Syndicalist Party in April 1933. Pestaña was a well-known leader of the CNT—he served several terms as its national secretary—and a member of the “moderate” current that wanted to rein in the “adventurism” and “terrorism” of some anarchist sectors and construct a “solid”, “responsible”, etc., workers movement ... one that was divided in the classic manner: a trade union and a political party, with a corresponding division of labor. Pestaña declared that he had broken with anarchism without for that reason having become a Marxist. He sought some kind of “synthesis” or “supersession” of the two currents of the workers movement. The CNT remained very hostile towards the Syndicalist Party, considering it to be an “element of division” (when the documents cited in this text use the word “syndicalist”, they are referring to members of this party and of their youth organization, the Syndicalist Youth). The Syndicalist Party, which never attracted more than a tiny fraction of the support enjoyed by the CNT-FAI, disappeared during the civil war and some of its members, including Angel Pestaña, rejoined the CNT.

5. On power

We only need to look around us to verify the situation of a badly paid robot to which the worker in the “workers” States has been reduced (like almost all the citizens, moreover). He cannot protest, however, without appearing to be a defector to capitalism or without succumbing to a kind of schizophrenia, since he is himself his own exploiter by way of

the State that belongs to him! Marvels of casuistry! For our fanatics of the dictatorship of the proletariat, what is at stake is not the abolition of the State, “that supernaturalist abortion of society”, but, to the contrary, its continuous reinforcement on every terrain, provided, of course, that this State declares that “it defends the historical interests of the working class”. It is easy to see where all this had led and how much suffering this *historical* defense has caused the workers, the peasants and the other citizens in the so-called “socialist” countries to undergo. Upon reading, listening to and witnessing the behavior of the greater part of those who call themselves “revolutionaries”, it will be said that men will always *entrust* all their desires and the realization of their dreams to a small handful of specialists, sages and leaders, and that not only is it impossible but, worse yet, it is “objectively reactionary” to fight against a Power whose injustice, alienation, privilege, exploitation—and often its terrorism—are denounced, without fighting to install another Power which, declaring itself to be *good*, just and in conformance with the meaning of history (as if history would have *that meaning!*). On the basis of this ideological postulate, the most total submission and the most intransigent faith in this new Power will be demanded, despite its injustice, its alienation, its exploitation, its crimes and its terrorism.

It is not that the nature of power is of no concern to us—and, by the way, the less totalitarian it is, the better—but in Catalonia, as elsewhere, there were men who correctly refused to allow themselves to be imprisoned in the false dilemma that sought to reduce, “in the final instance”, all social struggles to the installation of a “good power”. For there is no good power. Every hierarchical society bears within itself—with greater or lesser intensity—exploitation, alienation, and repulsiveness. Otherwise, why would it be hierarchical? We have to once and for all desacralize the idea of “proletarian power”—since the proletarians are precisely the people who are not in power and who are always intended to be reduced to the role of those who simply carry out orders. The question that was posed—and in the final accounting, without being resolved (will it ever be resolved?)—in Catalonia was the following: Does the revolution consist in destroying the “capitalist” hierarchy in order to replace it with another hierarchy which is then considered to be, despite multiple experiences, more just, and this due essentially to the fact that it is thought to be better adapted to the modern requirements of production—and do we therefore find ourselves facing capitalist goals which have merely been inverted? Or will men finally be able to dispense with the taboos and myths and refuse to continue to delegate to Power—the fate of a monstrous Father—the realization of their lives, in order to instead self-organize in a *democracy* that is neither authoritarian nor hierarchical? This, at least, is what was attempted in Catalonia, and this *attempt*, in the final accounting, seems essential to me because it was engaged in by thousands of men who lived for many months in a situation of almost total insubordination and creativity. Although non-hierarchical democracy was not institutionalized—can it ever be?—it was, however, very real and it was in open struggle against the new bureaucratic power.

6. On Prieto's resignation (March 1938)

César M. Lorenzo speaks quite explicitly of “the plot” that was never officially admitted by the CNT-FAI, even though many people were aware of it. The following is a summary

of its contours. In March 1938, rumors were afoot concerning the possible resignation of Indalecio Prieto, the Minister of Defense. The CNT sent a delegation to meet the Minister, composed of Galo Díez, Segundo Blanco and Horacio Prieto to ask him to remain in office. But Prieto confirmed his decision to resign, providing two main reasons: first, because the control exercised by the communists over his own Ministry was so great that he was their “prisoner”; Negrín, the President of the Cabinet, was helping the communists work against him. And also, because he thought that the war was lost and that they had to reach some kind of compromise peace agreement. The CNT’s delegation seems to have agreed with the Minister’s analysis, but expressed the view that, if he were to resign, communist control would be even greater. The *cenetistas* proposed that he should carry out a “coup de main” to liquidate communist influence over the State. It seems that the anarchist troops received the order (Lorenzo does not mention this) to prepare for this coup de main to expel the communists. Prieto declared that he was “very moved”, but did not accept the offer. Shortly afterwards, however, this coup de main was debated at a National Plenum of the CNT held in Barcelona. The delegates categorically rejected any “compromise peace” but were unable to resolve upon measures to adopt to rectify the situation. Finally, they decided ... to reenter the Government. (Lorenzo quickly glosses over this very bold conclusion to the debate!) Prieto resigned, Negrín assumed the portfolios of the Presidency and the Ministry of Defense and Segundo Blanco became the (CNT) Minister of Education and Health.

7. On the executions in Aragon

This is what Gabriel Jackson says in his book (*The Spanish Republic and the Civil War, 1931-1939*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1965, p. 292) concerning the executions in Aragon (we shall note in passing that this author, brilliantly criticized by Noam Chomsky in his essay on the Spanish civil war quoted above, is not at all sympathetic towards the anarchist experiments): “Some villages shot the priest, the Civil Guards, the main landlords, and professional persons such as notaries and pharmacists, known or assumed to favor the old order. In villages with populations of several thousand, the death toll might run between 4 or 5 and 35 to 40, with the casualties tending to be higher in Andalusia and the southeast than in the Levant and Catalonia.... (It is undoubtedly no coincidence that the social revolution, on the other hand, was much more advanced in Catalonia and in the Levante [C.S.M.]) On the other hand, there are also many testimonials to the intervention of Durruti personally to prevent the killing of landlords who had not aided the rising, but who were condemned simply as known Catholics, monarchists or partisans of Lerroux.” From among these testimonies, Jackson quotes the following: “... in separate conversations with two monarchist landlords, one of them a University professor and the other a lawyer, I heard a strong defense of Durruti’s active opposition to assassinations.” (This pertains to the events in Aragon.)

The following is the sinister balance sheet of casualties in the Spanish civil war provided by Jackson in his book (*ibid.*, p. 539):

100,000	Killed in battle
10,000	Killed by aerial bombing

50,000	Died due to malnutrition and illness (during the war)
20,000	Killed during the course of reprisals carried out in the republican zone during the war
200,000	Killed during the course of reprisals carried out in the fascist zone during the war
200,000	“Red” prisoners executed or died in prison as a result of illness or maltreatment between 1939 and 1943

Although other researchers have given higher figures (1,000,000 dead), it is nonetheless true that all concur in the view that the repression carried out by Franco’s forces during and after the war was responsible for the greatest number of deaths by far.

8. On the death of Durruti (November 20, 1936)

Buenaventura Durruti died on the “front line” near Madrid, but no one knows exactly who killed him. Some say that he was felled by an enemy bullet, others claim that he was killed by his own troops when Durruti attempted to stop them from retreating. Some thought that it may have been a political assassination; the communists have offered the hypothesis that it was a crime carried out by anarchist extremists, because Durruti was moving closer to the political positions of the Party. There is nothing, absolutely no proof at all, that would support this latter theory. On the other hand, some anarchists accuse the communists of committing the crime: they claimed that the communists wanted to get rid of a rival who was too popular. In any event, his corpse was not yet cold when almost everyone was squabbling over his body with real viciousness. The communists emphasized only one little phrase (“We renounce everything except victory”) to justify their theory that Durruti was in the process of moving towards the positions of the Party. The “government” anarchists also used Durruti, who had accepted the militarization of his column, which, they claimed, meant that he implicitly accepted their policy of compromise. As for the intransigent anarchists, they used him with even more passion due to his extraordinary revolutionary past, his activities in Barcelona and in Aragon, etc. Some even created a group within the CNT (discussed above) which they called The Friends of Durruti. The good thing about a corpse is that you can make it say whatever you want it to say.

9. The composition of the Caballero Government (September 5, 1936)

Here is the roster of the first Largo Caballero cabinet (September 5, 1936): *President of the Council and Minister of War*: F. Largo Caballero (socialist); *Minister of Foreign Affairs*: Julio Alvarez del Vayo (socialist); *Minister of Justice*: Mariano Ruiz-Funés (republican left); *Minister of Education and the Fine Arts*: Jesús Hernández (communist); *Minister of Labor, Health and Social Welfare*: José Tomás Piera (*Esquerra*); *Minister of Agriculture*: Vicente Uribe (communist); *Minister of Industry and Commerce*: Anastasio de Gracia (socialist); *Minister of Transportation and the Merchant Marine*: Bernardo

Giner de los Ríos (*Unión Republicana*); *Minister without Portfolio*: José Giral (republican left).

On November 4, 1936, with the entry of the anarchists, the Government was reorganized as follows: *President and Minister of War*: Largo Caballero; *Foreign Affairs*: Alvarez del Vayo; *Navy and Air Force*: Prieto; *Finance*: Negrín; *Education*: Hernández; *Justice*: García Oliver (CNT); *Interior*: Galarza; *Labor*: De Gracia; *Agriculture*: Uribe; *Public Works*: Julio Just; *Transportation*: Giner de los Ríos; *Industry*: Juan Peiró (CNT); *Commerce*: Juan López (CNT); *Health*: Federica Montseny (CNT); *Propaganda*: Carlos Esplà; *Ministers without Portfolio*: José Giral, Manuel de Irujo and Jaime Ayguadé.

10. On the Casado-Communist Party confrontation (Madrid, March 1939)

When it was clear that the war was militarily lost, the month of March 1939 witnessed an incredible bloodbath caused by fighting among the factions of the republican camp. On March 5, Negrín appointed communists to all the important military commands. This was done allegedly in order to organize a last-ditch resistance. But this “resistance” lasted only a few days. As far as the Communist Party was concerned, the whole operation was for the purpose of *organizing their evacuation*, and that is just what they did. In Madrid, however, Colonel Casado formed a Junta that represented all the anti-fascist organizations (except the Communist Party) and revolted against the Negrín Government. The Casado Junta (which, through the mediation of the English, opened up lines of communication with the enemy) declared that it wanted to negotiate an “honorable peace”. There would be no “honorable peace” nor would there be resistance to the bitter end. Everywhere, however, there were confrontations between supporters and enemies of the Negrín-Communist Party Government. Two thousand were killed in the fighting in Madrid. Afterwards, the Communist Party, whose troops had been defeated by troops under the command of Cipriano Mera, negotiated a compromise agreement with the Casado Junta which the latter accepted. Franco’s forces caused “everyone to reach an agreement” by taking Madrid. Then came the evacuation, the fight to obtain a berth on a ship, and the political repression that wracked Spain for years.

11. On the Morocco Affair

“The Morocco Affair” is a very revealing example of the incoherence of the short-term opportunism of the republican authorities. Despite attempts made by Berneri, Santillán and other revolutionary elements to persuade the Republican Government to declare its support for Moroccan independence (according to Santillán, the Committee of Militias had already contacted Moroccan nationalists to discuss the matter), the Republican Government, even under the Presidency of Largo Caballero, had always refused to consider this option because (of course!) it did not want to displease Great Britain and France, which were colonial powers. Instead, they offered to transfer control over all or part of the Spanish colonies in Africa to Britain and France in exchange for aid for the Spanish Republic. According to Jesús Hernández, the Republican Government, whose President at the time was Largo Caballero, in deliberations conducted with the Governments of Great Britain and France, had also considered the possibility of

transferring control over the Spanish colonies in Africa to Italy and Germany in exchange for their neutrality in Spain. None of these backroom conclaves produced any concrete results, as we all know.

The granting of independence to “Spanish” Morocco would not only have been “in conformance with the principles” of the Spanish workers movement (which had long fought against the colonialist war in Morocco), but would also have created a very difficult situation for Franco’s forces in Morocco, where they were dominant and where the military uprising had begun. For once, “principles” and “tactics” were complementary and favored an energetic anti-colonialist policy. But the republican General Staffs once again opted for the tactic of seeking an alliance with France and Great Britain, an alliance that the latter did not desire. In order to definitively rule out the option of declaring the independence of Spanish Morocco, a totally racist propaganda campaign was initiated against the Moroccan troops who were called barbarians, savages and so on. With regard to this question, see the books cited above by Broué and Témime (English edition, pp. 266-267), B. Bolloten (pp. 135-143) and Jesús Hernández (pp. 61-64).

12. The political assassinations in Barcelona

Among the 500 fatalities, of course (some commentators speak of twice as many), not all of them were the result of the street fighting. The ferocity of the battles would be accompanied by an impressive, although little-known, list of political assassinations. For it was a very simple matter to camouflage an assassination by leaving the corpse in the street, in places where there had been exchanges of gunfire. Besides the case of Berneri and Barbieri, there are others that were clearly assassinations: Alfredo Martínez, leader of the Regional Committee of the Libertarian Youth and secretary of the Revolutionary Youth Front (composed of the Libertarian Youth and the youth organizations of the POUM and the “syndicalists”) who went to the local headquarters of the (Stalinist) JSU to negotiate, and then disappeared.... His body was found several days later.

Or Juan Rúa, an Uruguayan intellectual, who was also a member of the Regional Committee of the Libertarian Youth, responsible for relations with the Aragon front, who was arrested in Tortosa, brought to an “unknown location”, and shot along with other anarchists. On May 11, *Solidaridad Obrera* denounced the assassination of twelve militants of the CNT from the neighborhood of San Andrés—who were arrested by the police and whose bodies were dumped in the Sardañola Cemetery by a “mysterious ambulance”—and of five other anarchists who were shot in Eroles, and then enumerated a whole series of summary executions in the provinces, especially in Tarragona and Tortosa.

Not all the victims of these executions, of course, were members of the CNT.

13. The composition of the Catalanian Government after the “May Events”

Here is a list of the members of the new Catalanian Government:

President: Lluís Companys. For the CNT: Valerio Mas. For the UGT: Rafael Vidiella. For the *Esquerra Republicana*: Martí Faced. For the *Unión de Rabassaires*: J. Pons. This was the same Government that was formed during the fighting, except that Rafael Vidiella replaced Antonio Sesé, who had been assassinated.

What was new about this Government was the role played by the Central Government in the operations of the Generalitat: the Central Government assumed direct control over the Department of Public Order, thus curtailing Catalanian autonomy. José Echevarría Novoa was the delegate of the Central Government for Public Order in Catalonia. Emilio Torres Iglesias (also sent by Valencia) was the Supreme Commander of the Police and J. M. Díaz Ceballos was the General Commissar for Security in Barcelona.

14. On the evolution of the JSU

The United Socialist Youth (JSU) was formed shortly before the civil war, after the merger of the Communist and Socialist youth organizations. It was rapidly “Stalinized”, however, and its internal democracy was destroyed. It became a docile satellite of the Communist Party, following the latter’s right-wing and opportunist policies. On January 15, 1937, in Valencia, Santiago Carrillo declared: “We are not fighting for a social revolution. Our organization is neither Socialist nor Communist. The JSU is not a Marxist youth group.” (See Broué and Témime, *op. cit.*, English edition, footnote 30 on p. 293). There was, however, a strong left-wing opposition within the JSU. It criticized the bureaucratic dictatorship of the leadership and called for a revolutionary orientation. This opposition—which had originated among the socialist members of the organization—was predominant in the Asturias and Levante Federations. One might say that it constituted the extreme left of the left-wing socialist current (certain Federations of the UGT and the “*Caballeristas*” of the PSOE). Rafael Fernández and José Gregori—the secretaries of the Asturias and Levante Federations, respectively—resigned from the National Committee of the JSU in protest against Carrillo’s policies. Carrillo labeled them as Trotskyists and supporters of Hitler and Franco. But the left-wing opposition of the JSU suffered the same fate as the “*Caballeristas*” after the formation of the Negrín Government.

Because the conquest of Asturias by Franco’s forces deprived them of their main base of support, they were systematically reduced to impotence by the combined efforts of the government alliance of communists, right-wing socialists and republicans, and the bureaucratic maneuvers of the Stalinist leadership of the JSU: Santiago Carrillo, Ignacio Gallego, Fernando Claudín, Federico Melchor, and others.

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