

ANARCHY IN THE NAVY

On occasions in the past, at public meetings, I have heard critics of socialism, and of anarchy, instance the running of a ship as an argument against the principle of libertarian organisation and of non-authority. It has been asserted and claimed that it would be impossible to run a large ocean-going vessel without some kind of hierarchical command structure. No ship could traverse the seas without a captain, it has been said. And on a theoretical level, more than one supposed advocate of socialism and communism has held the same viewpoint.

In his essay On Authority, Friedrich Engels states quite categorically:

"But the necessity of authority, and of impervious authority at that, will nowhere be found more evident than on board a ship on the high seas. There, in time of danger, the lives of all depend on the instantaneous and absolute obedience of all to the will of one."

And even William Morris, in his essay, Communism, remarks:

"An anti-socialist will say 'How will you sail a ship in a socialist condition?' How? Why, with a captain and mates and a sailing master and engineer (if it be a steamer) and A.B.s and stokers and so on and so on. Only there will be no 1st, 2nd and 3rd class among the passengers: the sailors and stokers will be as well fed and lodged as the captain or passengers; and the captain and the stoker will have the same pay."

Ignoring the remark that, within a classless society, the wages (pay) system would continue, it must be stressed that, with the tremendous advances in technology since Morris and Engels were alive, modern ships, as well as certain types of aircraft, can now be remotely controlled and guided automatically.

This was not, however, possible until quite recent times. Moreover, it was not possible with such large vessels as battleships or destroyers in 1936. Yet, despite some mistakes and lack of organisational preparation and, of course, extremely adverse circumstances, a comparatively large number of ships of the Spanish Republican Navy did manage to traverse the seas around the Spanish coast, and the Western Mediterranean, for a number of weeks following the military up-

rising, without any form of hierarchical command structure. There was anarchy in the Spanish Navy!

In 1936 the Spanish Navy was, in fact, quite large. It comprised two battleships, six cruisers, seventeen destroyers, nine submarines, six torpedo boats and five to ten gunboats. In 1931, a majority of the officers of the Navy, like those in the Army and Air Force, took an oath of allegiance to the Republic; but most of them had no intention of working for the Republic.

Most of the officers supported, or were involved in, the insurrectionary Movimiento against the Republic. During meetings between the Admirals and General Franco at the time of the Navy manoeuvres off the Canary Islands, meticulous arrangements had been prepared and thoroughly worked out for the mass embarkation of Moroccan troops to take place immediately after the uprising. But most of the Navy did not rally to the conspirators. The Minister of the Marine, Giral, had already restricted naval manoeuvres around the Canaries and the Moroccan coast. Loyal telegraph operators were, moreover, posted to the larger ships and to the Madrid Headquarters at Ciudad Lineal. But it was really the crews who thwarted the plan.

Most of the sailors were of working-class origin. They were better educated and better trained than most of their comrades ashore. They also knew how to organise themselves against the preparations of their officers. There was no Communist influence in the Navy, but on nearly all the ships, small clandestine cells, comprising mainly anarchists, but also some socialists, had been formed, made up of eight to ten sailors and NCOs. These maintained links with such organisations as the C.N.T. and F.A.I. in the ports. By the beginning of July, there was an elected Central Council of sailors on the cruiser Libertad. On July 13, delegates from Councils on the Cervantes, the Almirante Cervera, the Espana and the Velasco were able to meet the Council of the Libertad in El Ferrol, and discuss the moves they would make following a Generals' and Admirals' uprising. On July 14, they managed to establish contact with the Sailors' Council on the battleship Jaime I. Two days later in Madrid, Balbao, an NCO attached to the Naval Broadcasting Centre, physically removed the head of the Centre who was one of the leaders of the



officers' conspiracy. Through Balbao, during the uprising, the NCOs at the Centre were able to transmit messages to each ship, giving it up-to-the-minute information about the insurrection.

The Republican Government attempted through-out July 17 and 18 to crush the Generals' revolt by constitutional means. Casares Quiroga, the Prime Minister, repeatedly telephoned General Alvarez Buylla to resist the rebels in Morocco; and then ordered the warships at their bases at El Ferrol and Cartagena to proceed to Moroccan waters. But in most of the ships of the Spanish Navy, the officers refused to obey the orders of the Minister of Marine, Giral. He, therefore, dismissed them by telegraph, and gave power to the chief machinists. He also gave instructions for the distribution of arms to the crews. The crews, however, had in the main already acted.

The three destroyers, the Sanchez Barcaiztegui, Lepanto, and the Almirante Valdes, arrived at Melilla from Cartagena on the morning of July 18. During the voyage, the officers had heard General Franco's broadcast from Las Palmas. They prepared to join the rebellion. On arrival at Melilla, which was in the rebel generals' hands, they were ordered by the Ministry of Marine to bombard the town. They refused. The captain of the Sanchez Barcaiztegui summoned the crew on deck, explained the aims of the Movimiento, and demanded that the crew support the revolt. He was, at first, greeted with silence. Then, he was eventually interrupted with the cry: "To Cartagena!" The cry was taken up by almost the whole company. The officers were overpowered and locked up. The Sanchez Barcaiztegui raised anchor and, under the command of its Sailors' Council, left the rebel port and made for the open sea. The crews of the Lepanto and the Almirante Valdes also overpowered their officers, locked them up, and sailed out of the port. They elected Sailors' Councils which organised the running of the ships, and kept in touch with the Naval Broadcasting Centre in Madrid.

On the eventful dawn of July 19, the cruisers Libertad and the Cervantes were sailing south from El Ferrol. The destroyer Churruca had just landed a tabor of Moorish troops at Cadiz,

and the battleship Jaime I left the port of Vigo just before the uprising.

The following day, the crew of the Churruca shot all their officers. The same day, the crews of the Libertad and the Cervantes imprisoned or shot their officers, and their Sailors' Councils took over the running of the ships. But the most violent struggles occurred on the Jaime I. The crew informed the Centre in Madrid that they were taking control of the ship, and were making for Ceuta. There was, however, a bloody battle in mid-ocean. The officers resisted to the last man. The Ship's Council then radioed Madrid and asked what they should do with the corpses! They were told to lower the bodies overboard "with respectful solemnity". By midday, July 20, all the ships were completely under the control of their respective crews. All the ships then sailed for the Bay of Tangier, where they were able to stop the arrival of reinforcements, from Morocco, for the rebel generals. "The action of the sailors, by giving a serious jolt to the generals' plan, thus emerged as one of the most important events in the early days of the uprising." (The Revolution and the Civil War in Spain; Broue and Temine, p.110). In the words of the German charge d'affaires, Voelckers: "The defection of the Navy was the first thing that upset Franco's plans." (Ibid, p.119).

The crews of the ships remaining in Galicia in the north-west of the country, naturally had less influence on the hoped-for disembarkation of Franco's troops from Morocco. Nevertheless, the pattern was much the same as elsewhere in the Navy.

in Galicia, the main opposition to the Generals' revolt came from the crews of the warships in the harbours of Corunna, El Ferrol, and Vigo. The crews overpowered their officers on July 20. At El Ferrol, the military rebels managed to get control of the port, but the crew of the battleship Espana wrested control of the ship. They then began bombarding the rebel troops on shore. Unfortunately, owing to hesitations and divisions among the crew of the Almirante Cervera, which was also in the port of El Ferrol, the ship surrendered to the rebel troops. The Espana likewise raised a white flag, only to be followed by a couple of torpedo boats, all of which had overthrown their officers. This

was a setback for the anti-military forces. Many of the sailors, after they had given themselves up, were executed on the spot. El Ferrol became the main, and for a time only, rebel naval base. By September 1936, the Nationalists, as the rebels were now being called, had control of one battleship, two cruisers, one destroyer, and two gun- or torpedo-boats. The rest of the fleet was nominally under the control of the Republican government.

On August 9, a joint Catalan and Valencian expeditionary force of four transport ships, escorted by the battleship Jaime I, two destroyers and a submarine, all under the control of the Sailors' Councils, arrived at Ibiza. The workers rose up against the rebel garrison, and the island was taken over by the workers and the Sailors' Councils. But even at that early stage of the Civil War, the tide was turning against the workers and peasants of Spain, and their seamen allies. Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy were already intervening on the side of Generals Mola and Franco.

Between July 29 and August 5, the Germans provided transport aircraft to ferry 1,500 men of the Army of Africa to rebel-held Seville. And the Italians supplied fighter planes to protect the Nationalist merchant ships which also ferried 2,500 men and much equipment from Morocco to the Spanish mainland. With such support, Franco was able to control the Straits between Africa and Spain, as well as much of the Mediterranean coastline of Spain. The Republican fleet, at that time still run by the Sailors' Councils and Committees, was forced to take shelter in the harbours of Cartagena and Barcelona, "where indeed it spent most of the rest of the war" (The Spanish Civil War; Hugh Thomas, p.316.). Stanley G. Payne (The Spanish Revolution; p.339) also notes that from about September 1936, "...the Navy remained relatively inactive ..." He puts this down to, of all things, "Communist weakness"; but comments thus:

"The Soviet Union sent comparatively little maritime equipment, and the number of Russian advisers was proportionately lower than in the Army or Air Force, though apparently two Republican submarines were commanded by Russian Officers." (Ibid, p.339).

But, despite the short period that the ordinary seamen of the Republican Navy were able to control their ships, they did at least prove that, not only very large vessels, but a fleet of ships, can be navigated on the high seas without any hierarchical command structure. Under peaceful circumstances, any ships could be navigated under sailors' control, through Sailors' Councils. Libertarian organisation on the high seas is quite a practical proposition. Engels and Morris were wrong: there need be no captain, nor "impervious authority" and "absolute obedience of all to the will of one".