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Anarchist international action against Francoism from Genoa 1949 to The First Of May Group

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1949 to The First Of May Group
2010

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he had tried everything to discover where they were. Had it been some farmhouse, barn or outhouse – Monsignor Ussia reasoned – he would doubtless have been able to make out the sounds characteristic of that sort of building: hens clucking, the braying of a donkey, farmers’ voices... but there was only silence. Except that from time to time he could hear a car engine. So was it some remote bourgeois country villa? Monsignor Ussia stated that he had only a few seconds to concentrate because, all day long, his captors played a transistor radio very loudly, tuning into stations playing light music. The only window not shuttered – the ones in his room were shut at all times – was a little one in the lavatory but a fig tree planted up against the wall blocked the view. He also stated that he had not heard the cannon fired at noon each day on the Giancolo hill, nor the siren that did likewise in Rome, even though both could be plainly heard right around the city, so it was obvious that his hiding-place had been well outside Rome.

All these clues, vague though they assuredly were, were of no use in further inquiries.

Then again Monsignor Ussia did state that he had been treated well, that the food had been, if not good, acceptable, basically soup and tinned fare. They had also given him some fruit and mozzarella cheese. He said that at no time had he seen guns in his kidnappers’ hands although they had told him that they had pistols.

The chief feature of this kidnapping was that although it was mounted in Italy not a single Italian was involved. Both the preparation and effecting of it were down to the First of May Group.

The attack on Spain’s embassy in Genoa in 1949

In the Libertarian Movement’s battle against the Franco regime, 1949 stands out as one of the bloodiest of years, with large numbers of its tried and tested fighters being ruthlessly eliminated. The systematic slaughter had begun back in 1947 and 1948, with the killing of, among others, Antonio López and Diego Franco Cazorla (“Amador Franco”) who were shot in San Sebastian, and of Raúl Carballeira Lacunza and Ramón González Sanmarti who were gunned down in Barcelona.

Although our list may not be exhaustive, the fatalities of 1949 had a tremendous impact upon the urban guerrilla groups as well as on the groups operating in the sierras in Aragon and Andalusia, not to mention other regions which would take too long to list.

As we said, the year opened with the January court martial that passed sentence of death upon two Aragonese guerrillas: Justiniانو Garcia (“El Macho”) and Pedro Acosta Cánovas (“El Chaval”), both of them natives of Utrillas (Teruel). They were executed in Zaragoza on 22 March.

On 9 March, following a gun-battle with the security forces, the Galician José López Penedo was wounded and arrested in Torrasa: he faced a firing squad in Barcelona on 4 February 1950, alongside 31 year old Carlos Vidal Pasanau, Saturnino Culebras Saiz and Manuel Sabaté Llopart, all of whom had been captured in 1949.

Miguel Barba Moncayo (“Reyes”), had scarcely been released from prison after arrest in 1947 before he was murdered in cold blood by the police on 11 March 1949 in his own home.

In mid-May 1949, a team of ten guerrillas entered Spain via the province of Huesca. Eight of them lost their lives: Fabián Nuez Quiles (36), Rogelio Burillo Esteban (35) and Jorge Camón Biel (35) were gunned down while trying to cross the Ebro river near Al-borge (Huesca). Within days of that, the other members of the party

were captured and five were shot in Zaragoza on 8 May 1950 – Manuel Llovet Isidro (43), José Capdevila Ferrer (29), Manuel Ródenas Valero (31), Alfredo Carvera Cañizares (37) and Roger Ramos Rodríguez (30). The other two who survived served 20 years in prison.

In July, another 11-man guerrilla team, again from France, lost Aurelio Marti (24) and Antonio Ribera (30) in Huesca province.

In September the Italian libertarian Helios Ziglioli (21) died in an ambush laid by the Civil Guard in Barcelona province.

In October, the long list of libertarian militants who perished in the manhunt unleashed by Francoism included, in Barcelona alone: Luciano Alpuente, José Sabaté Llopart, Julio Rodríguez Fernández, Juan Serrano, Arquimedes Serrano Ovejas, Victor Espallargas, José Luis Barrao and Francisco Martínez Márquez. Many more were arrested and quite a number shot, as in the cases of José Pérez Pedrero, Pedro Adrover Font, Jorge Pons Argiles, Santiago Amir Gruañas, Cinés Urrea Piña, not to mention the aforementioned persons executed alongside José López Penedo.

11 November saw the arrest in Barcelona province of 47 year old Juan Vilella (“Moreno”), José Bartobillo (25), José Puertas (47) and the brothers Miguel and Jaime Guitó: within days every one of them had been murdered in the open countryside.

As if that was not enough, on 22 December another action group crossed the border en route to Barcelona: this was the “Los Maños” group: Wenceslao Jiménez Orive was gunned down in the street on 9 January 1950, and another two members of the group, Simón Gracia Flerigan and Plácido Ortiz Gratal were arrested the same day: both were shot on 24 December 1950.

To cap this slaughter in 1949, the legendary guerrillas Barnabé López Calle and Juan Ruiz Hercano perished in the mountains around Cadiz on 30 December.

Naturally the slaughter persisted into 1950. Here we will cite only the guerrillas Pedro Vargas Valverde (“Castellanot”) aged 32,

on him again: they walked him to a car and after a journey of half an hour they had pulled up, handed him a parcel containing his soutane and ID documents and told him to budge not turn his head until they were out of sight.

When the priest looked around him he recognised the place: he recalled that he had been there once before to attend the inauguration of the new Vatican Radio transmitter at Santa Maria. He saw from a road sign that he was in fact 4 kilometres outside of Bracciano, or 8 kilometres from the transmitter. In Bracciano he caught the bus into Rome and dismounted outside Vatican Radio. He told the policeman on guard duty: “I am Monsignor Ussia. They freed me an hour ago. Kindly call the Embassy while I rest for a moment.” This was at 7.00 am. Within minutes the news of his release had reached the embassy, the operations centre of the forces which had been searching tirelessly for him for the past 13 days, the Vatican Secretary of the State and the news agencies.

Half an hour later the ambassador Antonio Garrigues ventured out to meet him, along with all the Carabinieri officers who had been involved in the investigations. Monsignor Ussia quit Vatican Radio at around 8.30 and it took only a couple of hours rest before he was ready to face the press who were keen to hear his own version of his adventures.

Flash bulbs popped at the press conference and the reporters fought with one another to put their questions: How did the abduction take place? – Where was he driven? – Who in fact were his kidnappers? – Was his letter and one from the mysterious First of May Group sent to the Spanish ambassador, to *Osservatore Romano*, to the news agencies and dailies genuine? – How had they treated him?

Calmly and with a shadow of a smile, the freshly shaven priest replied to all of their queries.

We have already outlined the circumstances surrounding the abduction. The cleric confirmed these in every particular. As to where he had been taken, he explained that during his days in captivity

the overwhelming machinery of a police state, vent their spleen on defenceless victims.

“And to prove that from the outset we have been speaking the truth just as we declared it publicly and to Monsignor Ussia, let it be known that he will be released on Wednesday.

“Freedom for political prisoners!

“Freedom for the Spanish people!

“Down with the dictatorship!

“The First of May Group (Sacco-Vanzetti).”

That communiqué was accompanied by another which stated:

“The First of May Group (Sacco-Vanzetti) is part of the action groups of the Iberian Federation of Libertarian Youth (FIJL)

“Signed in Madrid and stamped by the FIJL “Peninsular Committee”

The kidnapers even announced that the release would come at 7.30 pm on 11 May in one of the great public parks in Rome.

Neither the police nor the press believed that the prelate’s release would take place as announced: it was obvious that the reference to a public park in Rome was a ruse designed to mislead the police while they released him elsewhere, without needless risk, as was indeed the case.

Monsignor Marcis Ussia was freed as promised at 6.30 am on 11 May 1966. Five hours later he gave a press conference in the function room of the Spanish Embassy and explained the circumstances attending his release.

His kidnapers had woken him at 4.00 am, giving him an ordinary grey suit and a straw hat and had put the welding goggles

and Juan Subinya Heras (39) who were gunned down in Gerona in March.

Many of the names given here were never made public in the exile community, perhaps to avoid discouraging other volunteers destined to meet the same fate.

Events in Catalonia, which, being a border region and consistently the stomping ground of comrades committed to the anti-Franco struggle, could scarcely be hushed up completely had enormous repercussions abroad.

One of the signs of protest, the most sensational one perhaps, took place in Genoa (Italy) where a trio of young Italian libertarians attacked the Francoist consular representative.

On Tuesday 8 November 1949, around noon, three Italian anarchists – Eugenio De Lucchi (21), Gaspare Mancuso (26) and Gaetano Busico (25) – showed up at the Spanish Consulate at No 3, Via Brigata Liguria.

Busico was carrying a Beretta pistol and, in a leather attaché case, a Sipel German bomb, complete with wooden throwing handle. Mancuso had a 7.65 calibre pistol and a bottle of petroleum: De Lucchi had a snub-nosed 9mm Beretta.

The trio ascended to the first floor after offering the doorman a plausible excuse for their presence. Busico led the way into the offices, followed by De Lucchi with Mancuso bringing up the rear. In the waiting room they found a total of fifteen people, with the staff and members of the public. Brandishing their guns they told people not to be afraid, that their interest was in the Spanish consul only. Whilst Busico and De Lucchi kept everyone at bay, Mancuso, having cut the telephone lines, made for the consul’s office. There was no one there of course: so he stacked some papers and items of furniture on the ground and doused them with petrol.

The consul, Juan Teixidor Sanchez, was out: apparently he had gone to a reception held by the Italia shipping line aboard the steamer *Conte Biancamano*.

While Mancuso was busy with his mission, Busico arrived to check that the consul was missing: he was able to vent his feelings only on a portrait of General Franco which he smashed to smithereens. Then he opened the window where the Falangist symbol and the red and yellow flag hung: he ripped them both down and ran up the red and black flag with the motto “Neither God nor Master” – the flag of the old militants of the Genoese Anarchist Federation.

Mancuso and Busico returned to the waiting room and having warned people what they were about to do, lest they take fright, Busico threw his grenade into the consul’s office which lay at the end of a long corridor. The grenade exploded and Busico went to inspect the damage and set fire to the papers previously doused with petrol.

Within minutes everyone was out of the Consulate: De Lucchi was mingling with the others, then out came Mancuso and Busico who had wanted, before leaving, to check that no one had been left behind in the place. As he was coming down the stairs, he met the doorman who attempted to lock the door to the street. Busico had to threaten him at gunpoint to get out.

From that point on things took a turn for the worse. De Lucchi, still overcome with excitement, stepped into the street still brandishing his gun and was quickly arrested. On reaching the street, Mancuso took a sharp left and blended in with the passers-by, whereas Busico had set off in the opposite direction.

Before getting away, Mancuso had looked up to see the black part of the flag bearing the subversive motto fluttering in the breeze and plainly visible. He boarded a tram at the corner of the Via Brigata Liguria and made his way to his sister’s place, where he had a bite to eat, shaved and then headed for the hills to wait until darkness fell. At around 5.00 pm, he bought a copy of *Il Mercantile* in the street the consulate was in. There he could read the first reports of the attack before going off to talk to some comrades, only to learn from them that De Lucchi had been picked up and

political prisoners. To that end we decided to kidnap Monsignor Ussia rather than Señor Garrigues.

“When the news broke in the press and on radio, our comrades in Madrid decided that the primary goal was no longer attainable in that the Pope would not succumb to public bullying. From that moment on there was no option left but to expose the dramatic situation of the Spanish antifascists held in the jails of the Francoist dictatorship, confronting the Pope and the Church with a matter of conscience at the very time when the Francoist repression is brutally targeting Catholic workers and students and even priests.

“By way of a demonstration of our profound regard for freedom – our own and that of others – we are going to honour our first commitment by returning Monsignor Ussia to his normal life, trusting that the present Spanish government – so emphatic in its pretensions to being a Christian government – will very shortly demonstrate on its own part its own conscience and desire for peace by affording freedom to the Spanish democrats currently denied it.

“We state that we have done our duty of solidarity and that, if we resorted to a method which has hitherto been repugnant to us, it was because we were forced to do so by the arrogance and cowardice of Spanish fascism which has never offered any response to the proposals we have put to have political prisoners released.

“We state too that we are sure that we are fighting in a just cause and that our conduct with regard to Monsignor Ussia will have shown that we anarchists are more respectful of man than those who, hiding behind

“We are a group of Spanish anarchists who have found ourselves obliged to resort to this sort of action to get the Spanish ambassador to the Holy See to sue the Pope to publicly press General Franco’s government to release all the Spanish democrats (workers, intellectuals and young students) sentenced to lengthy terms in the prisons of the Francoist dictatorship which, almost 30 years ago, was embodied in Hitler and Mussolini.

“Our goal is to secure just such a declaration so that the dictatorship may be obliged to heed the Church’s petitions and that jailed Spanish democrats may recover their freedom as all European democrats wish.”

The statement added that Monsignor Ussia’s physical well-being and personal safety would be scrupulously maintained and that he would be released just as soon as their aims had been achieved.

The world press expended a lot of paper and ink on Monsignor Ussia’s case and the Spanish press did not lag behind in this, although the latter misrepresented the story, in that it declined to reprint either Luis Andres Edo’s statement in full or the letter to *Avanti*.

By contrast, the AFP correspondent who jotted down Edo’s statement was arrested and interrogated by the police for several hours.

The Italian police deployed an enormous range of resources to uncover Monsignor Ussia’s whereabouts, but all to no avail.

After 12 days of fruitless inquiries, the Italian press was informed that the hostage was due to be freed, as indicated in a communiqué they had from the First of May Group:

“Effectively our action was designed to grab the attention to the Pope, as the supreme authority in the Church, and to get him to issue a public statement calling upon the Spanish government to free Spanish

was being held for questioning in the Carabinieri barracks near the consulate. There was no word of Busico. To set his mind at rest, Mancuso caught the first train for Carrara, where his friend had his home, and he arrived in the city of marble quarriers late that night. He was told at the Anarchist Federation premises that the Carabinieri had already called there as part of their inquiries into the attack in Genoa.

But Busico had not left Genoa at all and whilst Mancuso was making for Liorna in the car of a friend from Carrara, Busico spontaneously gave himself up to the police to shoulder his part of the blame with De Lucchi.

Mancuso stayed in Liorna a month before crossing the border into France at Ventimiglia with a friend. In Menton, they both took a taxi to Nice and travelled on to Marseilles by train. After a few days, Mancuso moved on to Paris to wait for a date to be set for the trial.

Whilst the police were trying to trace Mancuso, the Genoa press (*Il Corriere Ligure*, *Il Lavoro Nuovo*, *Il Corriere del Popolo* and *Il Nuovo Cittadino*) carried a statement from the Ligurian Anarchist Federation, signed by Vincenzo Toccafondo:

“In response to the repression mounted against the Spanish anarchists who express in the martyred Spain their burning desire that the whole of the people should enjoy freedom, three young anarchists have mounted a token operation against the Spanish consulate. Anarchist ideology holds that every individual should act on his own initiative. This should be well understood by any who might be straining to uncover some supposed conspiracy.

“Statements from the arrested young anarchists bear out what we have just pointed out. However, the Ligurian Anarchist Federation expresses its own utter solidarity with these youngsters who, by sacrificing their

liberty, sought to make a stand against the Francoist dictatorship.”

In consequence of this statement, Vincenzo Toccafondo, one of the oldest and most active propagandists of the Federation, was charged, along with the material authors of the attack, and tried alongside them on charges of making an apology for the offence.

The headquarters of the Genoa Anarchist Groups at No 2, Via Saluzzo, was subjected to a search by police and anti-militarist manifestoes, some copies of the Ligurian young anarchists' magazine *Inquietudine*, a copier and sundry propaganda materials were seized.

Once a date had been set for the trial, Gaspare Mancuso gave himself up on 5 April 1950 to the Italian authorities at the border post at Ventimiglia in order to share his friends' fate. He rejoined them in the Marassi prison in Genoa. The popularity the prisoners had won through their anti-Franco demonstration meant that all three were placed in the same cell.

De Lucchi, Mancuso, Busico and Toccafondo appeared before a Genoese magistrate on 1 June 1950, but the court found that it did not have jurisdiction and the case was moved up to the Criminal Court.

In the end, when the case was heard on 13 and 15 November, it turned into a monster demonstration against Franco. The following were called to offer evidence in mitigation: Federica Montseny Mane; Franco Venturi, a PhD and historian of modern art who had been a prisoner in Spain in 1940–1941; Giaeale Franchini, the widow of Mario Angeloni, the first commander of the Italian Section of the Francisco Ascaso Column (CNT-FAI) up until his death at Monte Pelado (Huesca) in the unit's first action on 28 August 1936; Marcello Bianconi, of the Ligurian Anarchist Federation, who had also served in the Ascaso Column; Pier Carlo Masini, publicist and outstanding propagandist of anarchist ideas in Italy, an eminent historian whose articles and lectures assisted the campaign begun on

Franco's physical disability, which of itself inevitably poses the problem of succession, along with the deterioration of the situation in every one of the spheres of activity in the country (...)

“The Libertarian Movement DECLARES:

“That the holding of the Spanish Embassy to the Holy See's ecclesiastical counsellor, Monsignor Marcos Ussia, is a plain and definitive expression of the stance of libertarian militants vis a vis the dictatorship (...)

“And DEMANDS: the immediate release of all political and social prisoners by way of a ransom for the release of Monsignor Ussia, the physical integrity and personal safety of whom are scrupulously guaranteed.

“PROCLAIMS: Its solidarity with the conscious elements of the nation, the workers, students and intellectuals who, on the street, in the university and in the factory, are, under the impact of dynamic direct action, hastening the downfall of the dictatorship (...)

“The Libertarian Movement, cognisant of the historic times in which the country finds itself, reaffirms its confidence in the popular action that is daily, with the commitment of upcoming generations, less and less disposed to go on tolerating the ignominy and arbitrariness of the moribund Francoist regime.

“Madrid 1 May 1966”

On Monday 2 May and Tuesday 3 May, Monsignor Ussia's case remained hot news, with the statement by Luis Andres Edo in Madrid and a letter that the kidnappers sent to the Italian Socialist Party newspaper *Avanti*. The letter sent to the paper stated:

that they had drafted as the “First of May Group” and which had been released to the newspapers and press agencies. They allowed him to write to his sister to reassure her and they advised him to write also to ambassador Antonio Garrigues to brief him on the reasons why he had been kidnapped and the conditions upon which he might be freed.

At 10.00 pm on 29 April, the Carabinieri were informed that a Peugeot with the licence number CD2811 was parked in the Via del Farnesi with engine running, headlights on and door open, blocking the street. The priest’s car was immediately identified and inquiries into his disappearance were promptly launched.

From his place of captivity Monsignor Ussia wrote two letters to family and another two to the ambassador were dictated to him. According to what he admitted after his release, the soothing words of his captors had not convinced him and he was sure that he would never again see the light of day, in that the conditions being asked by the anti-Francoists were unacceptable. The objective of getting the Pope to lobby Franco to release prisoners was puerile and the intention of forcing Franco to bow to their demands by means of this kidnapping was even more ridiculous.

On Saturday 30 April the Italian evening newspapers reported the mysterious disappearance of the ecclesiastical counsellor at the Spanish Embassy in Rome and the next day this was front page news in every newspaper once it was confirmed that he had been abducted by a Spanish anarchist commando which was demanding to trade him for the release of all political prisoners in Spain.

Luis Andres Edo, a militant of the FIJL, made the following statement relative to the kidnapping of Monsignor Ussia to the Agence France-Presse in Madrid on Sunday 1 May:

“The desperate efforts to which the regime has been reduced to find an alternative to the undeniable and runaway decomposition evident within its ranks, to which must be added the aggravating circumstance of

behalf of the anarchists and the Spanish people after 1945; Aldo Garosci, writer and prestigious journalist: his participation in the defence of the accused made a substantial contribution to turning the proceedings into an arraignment against Franco and his regime. A moving letter was also read out from the writer Carlo Levi, who was unable to attend in person. One of the witnesses who caused a huge sensation was the engineer Gino Bibbi, an anarchist from Carrara, for his name had frequently hit the headlines under Mussolini and he was regarded as the brains behind an attempt on the Duce’s life by the young Gino Lucetti in Rome on 11 September 1926.

The defence counsel – Tommaso Pedio, Massimo Punzo, Giuseppe Macchiavelli, Gian Barrista Brubetti, Giuliano Vasalli and Ernesto Monteverde – placed the Franco regime in the dock as a disgrace to humanity with their brilliant reports.

In short, all three perpetrators plus Toccafondo were discharged.

It is worth pointing out that the trial had a lot more impact than the actual attack.

The trial also brought to light a new and unexpected stance on the part of the judiciary: faced with the dilemma of obeying the dictates of the human conscience or acting as apologists for the totalitarian regime bleeding Spain white, they opted to defer to the first categorical imperative and, in their judgement, they acknowledged *the high moral and social significance of the act perpetrated as a fully extenuating circumstance*. Nothing like that had ever been heard before in Italy!

That the verdict on the perpetrators was a one-off is beyond question, but whereas the actual authors of the attack were set free, there was the absurd circumstance that the Italians Ivan Aiati, Alfonso Failla and Gigi Damiani were tried in Court No 11 of the Palace of Justice in Rome, on charges of making the case for the crime through their spirited defence of the three accused in the columns of *Umanita Nova*. Damiani and Aiati were sentenced to 8 months in prison and Failla was found not guilty. The previous

month, another Italian comrade, Umberto Marzocchi, another veteran of the Ascaso Column in the civil war, had been absolved when he was tried on the same charges.

The Libertarian movement in the fight against Franco (1962–1974) : The Internal Defence agency (DI) and the Iberian Libertarian Youth Federation’s (FIJL) First of May Group

The Spanish Libertarian Movement in exile (MLE), split into two camps since November 1945, managed to bury its differences for a time and was reunited in 1960.

The Spanish Libertarian Movement’s Second Inter-Continental Congress was held in Limoges (France), starting on 26 August 1961 and continued into early September. This was the first congress of the unified National Confederation of Labour (CNT).

In secret session on 2 September, the congress gave its unanimous backing to a so-called (secret) “Proposition” whereby it decided to proceed with the creation of an agency called “Internal Defence” (DI), the chief object of which was to lay the groundwork for an attempt upon the life of General Francisco Franco Bahamonde, the dictator of Spain. The Iberian Libertarian Youth Federation (FIJL) gave its enthusiastic backing to the decision.

In February 1962, the Defence Commission, which was the MLE’s conspiratorial agency, comprised of the co-ordinating secretaries of its three branches (CNT-FAI-FIJL), appointed the seven comrades who were to be responsible for Internal Defence.

The decision deserves a few comments.

The decision to establish a specific combat agency intended to overthrow the Franco regime was made without any amending of the errors made in the recent past – not even the most negative of

the Spanish College, he was obliged to stop his car: another vehicle was blocking the roadway and he could see someone stretched out on the ground. It was doubtless a traffic accident.

A man emerged from the car causing the obstruction to help the casualty, and the prelate did likewise without even switching off his engine. As he approached the supposed victim, the latter stood up, whilst the other gentleman who had come over, assisted by a third, pinioned him and escorted him to the car which had barred his path. They placed some goggles on him, blinding him completely and roared away from the scene.

The three men wore caps pulled well down over their eyes and their faces were hidden by kerchiefs tied at the back of the neck. They drove for nearly three quarters of an hour before stopping. Helped by two of the abductors, they got him out of the car and up some steps into a house. Then they removed the goggles and he saw that he was in a modest room containing a bed, a wardrobe, a table and two chairs. They gave him a pair of pyjamas by way of a change of clothing and took away his priestly garments.

During the day the three men took turns to keep watch on him, never leaving him on his own, and by night, two of them stayed with him. At no time was he able to see the faces of his kidnapers, for they never removed their masks. According to what Monsignor Ussia said after his release, two of them were very talkative, speaking Spanish in an accent similar to his own, which is to say, with a Basque accent. Whereas the third never uttered a word, which led him to think that he must have been dumb.

From the outset the kidnapers made it their business to set their captive at ease, telling him that they would not harm a hair on his head: that they had been forced to kidnap him despite their repugnance at being forced to take such action, because the position in Spain for anti-Francoists was worsening by the minute: the jails were full of political prisoners and they, who were at large, had a duty to do something to defend those of their brethren suffering under the dictatorship. They even read to him the communiqués

One Episode in the Libertarian Movement's Struggle against Francoism : The "First of May Group" and the kidnapping in Rome of Monsignor Marcos Ussia, the ecclesiastical attaché at Spain's embassy to the Vatican (Friday 29 April 1966 – Wednesday 11 May 1966)

At the 3rd Congress of the Local Federations of the Spanish CNT in Exile, held in the latter part of October 1963 in Toulouse (France) the agency called *Defensa Interior* (DI) which had been launched at the 2nd Intercontinental Congress of the CNT held in Limoges in August-September 1971 to breath new life into the struggle against the Franco regime was finally wound up. With the DI now gone, on to the scene came the First of May Group, which came to be the armed wing of the Iberian Libertarian Youth Federation (FIJL), which had been proscribed by the French authorities in a decree published in the *Journal Officiel de la République Française* on 20 October 1963. The story we tell below covers one of the operations carried out by that Group, whose activities continued into 1974. It ought to be remarked that the "terrorist" activity of the First of May Group was at all times characterised by a scrupulous respect for human life.

For several days, the movements of Monsignor Marcos Ussia, the ecclesiastical counsellor with the Spanish Embassy to the Vatican, had been under surveillance: he always left the Spanish Embassy in the Piazza di Spagna at around the same time, to travel by car to the Spanish College at No 151, Via Giulia, where the prelate had his lodgings.

On Friday 29 April 1966, as usual, but a little behind schedule, Monsignor Ussia set off on the same rout. As he crossed the Via Farnesi, a narrow, poorly-lit street in old Rome about 200 metres from

these errors, the direct linking of the underground struggle with the bureaucracy of an organisation that operated within the law and was subjected to close surveillance by the French authorities, and which might be subjected to all manner of pressures and blackmail.

It was a mistake to think that the MLE could hold "secret sessions" without the Ministry of the Interior's getting wind of the fact.

Without question, the launching of Internal Defence came at the lowest ebb of a lengthy period of exile.

Indeed, there was the unhappy conspiracy of circumstances that whilst in France an organisation of Spanish refugees was plotting against the life of the Spanish head of state, another organisation of French refugees inside Spain was planning to kill the French head of state, General Charles de Gaulle. As a result, both countries held all the trumps when it came to bringing pressures to bear on each other and in the reaching of agreements to co-operate in neutralising in their respective countries the opposition groups which represented a genuine common threat.

Even so, it is not correct to say that if the DI was set up at the aforementioned time, it was because it could not have been set up earlier on account of the schism within the CNT which had been split into two factions with very different, not to say, mutually antagonistic goals.

1 November 1954 had seen the initiation in Algeria of the uprising that signalled the beginning of the bloody Franco-Algerian war.

When the French authorities came around to the notion that the most sensible course had to be the conclusion of an agreement that might lead to peace and to recognition of Algerians' right of self-determination, this triggered a violent backlash by the European element in Algeria, leading, in January 1960, to the so-called "Bar-

ricades Week” which was quickly snuffed out, obliging the chief instigators of it to flee to the safety of Spain.

On 22 April 1961, after General de Gaulle had come out in public in favour of Algerian independence, a group of French generals rebelled in Algeria, setting up a sort of Directory, announcing a state of siege and operating as a counter-government in opposition to the policy emanating from metropolitan France. Their coup collapsed after a few days.

In May 1961, the Secret Army Organisation (OAS) emerged in Spain: it embraced the supporters of Algérie Francaise: by June it had ramifications in place in Paris and in July its organisation inside the Iberian Peninsula was formally complete.

It was from this point on that the OAS spread its tentacles wider and engaged in extensive terrorist activity which lasted until the Evian Agreements of 18 March 1962 which put an end to the war in Algeria and led to the formation of an independent Algerian state, as resoundingly endorsed in a referendum held in Algeria on 1 July 1962. A National Assembly elected on 20 September appointed Ahmed Ben Bella to head the first government of the Algerian Republic. Algérie Francaise was laid to rest, but the OAS was still around.

The result of the aforesaid referendum caused dismay in Spain where some 60,000 *pieds noirs* (French of European extraction who had settled in North Africa) who supported a “French Algeria” had taken refuge.

50% of these refugees were in camps on the outskirts of the city of Alicante. Large numbers of ex-OAS personnel wandered around not knowing what to do and with a very uncertain future ahead of them. Every ex-OAS leader had his supporters there and they had to be supported, kept busy and assigned missions.

“Training Centres” were improvised in various locations around Spain to provide training in the elements of underground existence and close-quarter combat, but neither the mutinous ex-legionnaires nor the *pieds noirs* were in any hurry to play at

Amedeo Bertolo declared after the trial:

“I was in jail only for the duration of the trial. It was worth the sentences we got because we saved the life of a comrade – although he subsequently stated that he was saved by the Pope – and we showed that, for all our shortcomings, a little enthusiasm can achieve significant results, without any need for the great resources now deployed.”

As for the resources available to them in the kidnapping, Amedeo Bertolo recalled that they spent 80,000 lire on the entire operation, most of it on the hire of the car. “We were so hard-up”, he observed, “that for the duration of the abduction we had to take up food collections from our friends so that the hostage and his guard might eat.”

Jorge Conill was quite ungrateful towards the comrades who had gone to such lengths to secure his survival. In prison he defected to the Communists and upon his release he was appointed political secretary of the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia (PSUC). When Pope Paul VI (the former Cardinal Montini) died Conill made statements that bore no relationship to the facts, claiming actions in which he had no hand and of which he had even no knowledge, and he argued that it had been the Pope who had saved his life. As we have said before, the Pope’s message calling for clemency was issued on 8 October – he had previously refused to intercede – and the Supreme Court Martial had rejected the prosecution’s call for a death sentence and confirmed the sentence of life imprisonment on 5 October, which is to say, three days before the Pope’s intervention.

On Tuesday 13 November 1962, the trial of those implicated in the kidnapping of the Spanish vice-consul in Milan, Isu Elias, opened in Varese (Lombardy).

Amedeo Bertolo had stated in Paris that he would show up voluntarily at the trial to shoulder his part of the blame with his colleagues. Although the Courthouse was closely guarded by Carabinieri, the fugitive did manage to make it through to the courtroom, posing as a barrister's assistant. There was a major sensation when he disclosed his identity in court.

As expected, the trial was turned into a monumental protest meeting and anti-Franco propaganda opportunity, as had been the case with the earlier Genoa trial on 13 November 1950 when the Italians Gaspare Mancuso, Gaetano Busico and Eugenio de Lucchi had faced charges in connection with the attack on the Spanish Consulate in Genoa on 8 November 1949.

21 November saw the last hearing against the direct perpetrators of the kidnapping and seven other accomplices who had acted as go-betweens and given assistance.

The jury was out for two hours and ten minutes. The sentences handed down were as follows: for De Tassis, Bertolo, Pedron, Gerli and Tomiolo, 7 months in prison; for Fornaciari, 4 months and one in custody. De Tassis had a month added for possession of arms, and Bertolo, Pedron and Tomiolo got another 20 days: Bertano and Novelli-Paglianti were sentenced to 5 months, with a further month for Bertoni carrying arms. The other sentences were these: Sartori, 5 months; the reporters Nobile and Dell'Aqua, 4 months, and Vincenzo Vaccari was found not guilty.

On the other hand, the Court did order that the sentences be suspended in every case, that the convicted men not be recorded as having criminal records and that all of those picked up be released forthwith.

For the second time, a "political" trial in Italy recognised the extenuating circumstance of the offenders' having acted on noble moral and social considerations.

being heroes of the counter-revolution. So, for want of a dazzling political education, they were indoctrinated with one obsessive idea: preparing for the "great day" when a hand-picked commando would breach the Franco-Spanish border to kill De Gaulle.

On 8 September 1961 the first attempt was made on the life of the French head of state. Only the skill of his driver aborted the attempt.

From June 1962 onwards Internal Defence sprang into action and its bombs exploded in Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia... In Valencia, on 15 July, an explosive device went off on the balcony of the City Hall from where Franco had made a speech only days before.

On 19 August 1962, a bomb exploded near the Ayete Palace, General Franco's summer retreat in San Sebastian: there were further bombs in Madrid, at the offices of the newspapers *Ya* and *Pueblo*.

Franco's arrival in San Sebastian had been announced in advance and Internal Defence had scheduled its bomb for the appropriate date. However, something still went wrong, because Franco delayed his departure and the device had to be detonated because the batteries used did not have sufficient life left to wait for the dictator to show up.

Three days later, on 22 August, at Petit-Clamart near Paris, bullets fired by an OAS commando passed within centimetres of General de Gaulle's skull.

On 10 February 1963, even as a further attempt on De Gaulle's life was being prepared, a number of OAS leaders was arrested by the Spanish authorities and deported to South America: others were interned in the South of Spain.

In August 1963, acting on intelligence from Renseignements Généraux,¹ and at the request of the Spanish authorities, France's

¹ The Renseignements Généraux comes under the Interior Ministry. Its specific remit covers "the investigation and collation of public order, social and economic intelligence of which the government must be kept informed". In the performance of this intelligence-gathering it has *antennae* (posts) wheresoever it deems necessary.

General National Security Directorate, issued warrants for the arrest and capture of a long list of FIJL militants living in several cities in France, as well as instructions that searches be made of MLE premises and documents seized. Just one from a long list of back-scratching favours exchanged between the French and Spanish authorities.

This phase of the fight against Francoism had its share of victims too: dozens of youths were arrested and sentenced to lengthy prison terms and two were executed: Francisco Granados Gata, 29, and Joaquin Delgado Martinez, 30, were executed by garrote vil on the morning of 17 August 1963, in the yard of the Carabanchel Provincial Prison (Madrid): both had been picked up along with a significant quantity of explosives destined for a fresh attempt on Franco's life.

Internal Defence's life was a short one. The Third Congress of CNT Local Federations was held in Toulouse in October 1963. It appointed to positions of leadership militants who were susceptible to the threats emanating from the French authorities and who were keen to preserve the Organisation's lawful status. Whereupon the campaign against Internal Defence was escalated. Needless to say, DI's performance can only be hinted at here for a detailed account of it would fill page after page.

When the DI was wound up, the youth organisation (FIJL) made up its mind to carry on with its activities, come what might. It ought to be pointed out that the French authorities had already anticipated just such a decision and banned the FIJL from operating within France. The relevant order was carried in the *Journal Officiel de la République Française* of October 1963, all but coinciding with the holding of the congress.

It was at this point that the "First of May Group" emerged: this was nothing but the armed wing of the FIJL carrying on the fight launched right after Franco's victory in 1939, "a fight against the Dictatorship on the terrain of revolutionary action, that being the only positive means of answering with force the repressive vio-

At dawn on 4 October a raging blaze destroyed the farmhouse where the vice-consul had been held: nothing was left except the outer walls. An investigation found that the fire had been accidental, probably due to some cigarette butt dropped by one of the many people to have tramped through the place and fed by the straw stored there and by the wooden frame of the building.

Jorge Conill, Marcelino Jimenez and Antonio Mur were tried in Madrid a second time on 5 October 1962, before the Supreme Court Martial. The prosecuting counsel, Colonel Rafael Diaz Llanos, asked for the death penalty for Conill, with life imprisonment for the others, but the Court confirmed the sentences pronounced on 22 September. However, the American Associated Press agency mistakenly reported that Jorge Conill had been sentenced to death.

This mistaken news was picked up by all the media and it was amid a general belief that Jorge Conill was facing death that a noisy anti-Franco demonstration proceeded in Milan the next day: it massed outside the Spanish Consulate-General in the Via Ariberti, a few hundred metres from the Piazza del Duomo: the demonstrators carried placards displaying angry anti-Franco slogans.

On 8 October Cardinal Giovanni Battista Montini, the archbishop of Milan (who took over from John XXIII at the Vatican as Paul VI on 21 June 1963) sent General Franco a message urging clemency for Jorge Conill, Marcelino Jimenez and Antonio Mur. It read:

"On behalf of the Catholic students of Milan and on my own behalf, I beseech your excellency to show clemency to the condemned students and workers, so that human life may be spared and that it may be plain that public order in a Catholic country can be defended differently from in countries without Christian faith and customs."

And so Isu Elias, Spain's honorary vice-consul in Milan, had been held captive for just four days in all.

The day before (1 October) the young libertarians had issued a statement to the ANSA agency: it stated:

“FIJL (International Libertarian Youth Federation)
COMMUNIQUÉ

The young people of the free world cannot ignore the crimes committed by the Franco government against the liberty and lives of wretched Spaniards. The kidnapping was organised in order to focus the attention of world opinion upon the sorry plight of the three young libertarians sentenced in Barcelona. We want to inspire on the part of the world's decent democrats a feeling of moral and material fellowship with the Spanish people. We have returned the vice-consul as promised to show that ours are not the methods employed by Franco and his Falangist police.

Milan, 1 October.”

Within a day of the release of Isu Elias, Gianfranco Pedron had been picked up in Cerro Maggiore near Milan. The son of a craftsman, he was studying agriculture at Milan University: he was a member of the Internationalist Libertarian Youth. Some remarks made by the landlady of the rented farmhouse put the police on the trail. It was not long before all the others were arrested too: Alberto Tomiolo, Luigi Gerli, Vittorio De Tassis, the son of the chairman of the Chamber of Commerce in Trento, and the reporters Aldo Nobile and Giampiero Dell'Aqua, as well as Nino Vaccari (all three from the newspaper *Stasera*). The only one to give police the slip was Amedeo Bertolo who had fled first to Genoa, then to near Novara and finally to Paris.

The car used in the kidnapping was found in a garage in Verona.

lence of the Franco regime and of recovering the Spanish people's liberty”.

The “First of May Group”, right from its inception, was plainly internationalist in composition, with branches in many countries in Europe, particularly in Italy, Great Britain, Germany, Belgium and Switzerland.

However, the “First of May Group”'s “terrorist” activity was always and everywhere marked by a scrupulous respect for human life. Its policy was always “solidarity between all peoples subjected to oppression and capitalist aggression”, as was stated in one of its manifestoes:

“In our estimation, the true revolutionary goal is to secure the liberty of all peoples, and, within each people, of all individuals without exception, and neither private capitalism nor State capitalism can lead to Man's emancipation and to the establishment of a genuine free society”.

In late April 1966 the Spanish Embassy's church attaché to the Vatican, Monsignor Marcos Ussia, mysteriously disappeared in Rome. Within days the “First of May Group” had claimed the abduction with simultaneous statements issued in Rome and Madrid. The abduction served to trigger an international campaign on behalf of political prisoners in Spain: the cleric was released safe and sound after a fortnight's fruitless inquiries by the Italian police.²

In the early months of 1968, there was a flurry of attacks on premises owned by US companies and against US military bases in Europe, as well as against the embassies of dictatorial governments

² A complete account of the abduction of Monsignor Marcos Ussia can be found in No 57 of the magazine *Polemica* (April-June 1995, pp 28–30). [Reprinted in this collection.] The magazine can be contacted at *Polemica*, Apartado de Correos 21.005 – 08080 Barcelona Spain.

like Spain, Portugal, Greece, Bolivia, Uruguay... attacks mounted simultaneously in Great Britain, France, Germany, Holland, Switzerland and Italy.

Between 1969 and 1971, the keynote of “First of May Group” activities was attacks upon aircraft belonging to the Iberia airline company in a number of international airports – all part of a campaign against tourism in Spain.

The last action in which members of the “First of May Group” were involved alongside other French activists was the kidnapping of the Paris director of the Bank of Bilbao, Angel Baltasar Suarez, on 3 May 1974. The kidnapping was claimed by the “International Revolutionary Action Groups” (GARI). Suarez’s release was made conditional upon the release of political prisoners held in Spain. On 28 May the banker was freed, and that day and over the succeeding days militants of the “First of May Group”, among others, were arrested.

Between 19 and 31 January 1981 (Franco having gone to meet his maker in November 1975) ten anti-Francoists, indicted in connection with the Suarez kidnapping, appeared before the Criminal Court in Paris. Every one of them was acquitted of the charges.

The 1962 abduction of Spain’s honorary vice-consul in Milan

On the night of 29–30 June 1962, three bombs went off in Barcelona: one near some Spanish Falange premises in the Plaza Fernando Lesseps: another at the Opus Dei-owned Colegio Mayor Monterols: and a third at the National Planning Institute. There were no casualties and the material damage was slight.

On 19 September 1962, three young libertarians were arrested and charged with the bombings: Jorge Conill Valls, a chemistry student at Barcelona University: and two workers, Marcelino Jimenez Cubas and Antonio Mur Peiron.

Reporters thought that they were about to hear some interesting official statement about the abduction, but went along readily enough. Alonso Gama made it plain straight off that “in order to avert any misunderstanding”, he was handling the press releases, but “only in respect of matters relative to the consulate”. When a reporter asked: “And regarding the thing that has held the public’s interest for the past three days and forced the police into frantic activity and demanding emergency action?”, Alonso Gama replied: “I’ve just come up from Rome and know absolutely nothing about all that. In any event, this kidnapping cannot have any effect: even if every diplomat were kidnapped it would not have the slightest effect on the conduct of the Spanish government.”

The dialogue continued for a few minutes before the diplomat “who had a lot of things to do” took his hurried leave to the reporters.

In the company of Nozzoli, a reporter from *Il Giorno* and after warning Vittorio, Amedeo Bertolo headed for Cugliate Fabiasco in the early hours of 2 October to hand the vice-consul over to him. But when the two men reached the farmhouse, it was to find that the bird had flown a short time before: the cage was empty. Nino Puleiro, a reporter with the weekly *ABC*, had had wind of it in an anonymous telephone call and had arrived at around 1.30 am.

Vittorio De Tassis had thought him the reporter from *Il Giorno*, surrendered his prisoner and vanished. Nino Puleiro escorted the vice-consul to the *ABC* editorial offices. At 2.30 am the magazine’s editor in chief, Gaetano Baldacci, handed the freed captive over to the head of the Flying Squad, who had come in answer to his call.

Bertolo immediately returned to Milan to warn his friends that they were all in imminent danger and to look to their safety.

So imminent was the danger that the police arrived at the farmhouse three hours after the vice-consul had been released and if they were not the first to show up, that was only because they had got lost in the nearby woods.

Dearest Diddy, I am well and I beg you not to upset yourself. Love to Mum and Muccia and all the others. All my love to you, your Isu.

Those lines were accompanied by a letter from the kidnappers, written in block capitals:

We have kidnapped the Spanish vice-consul in Milan in an effort to halt the execution of three young antifascists tried in Barcelona. Doctor Elias is in no danger. We guarantee that he will be freed when, thanks to the news of his abduction, we have brought the dismal fate of our three comrades in Barcelona to the world's attention. Long live Free Spain!

An identical letter was sent to the Milan evening paper *Stasera*.

The idea of releasing the vice-consul in Geneva had to be dropped quickly because inconceivable dangers arose. Alfredo Tomiolo, who had acted as driver in the abduction and whose task was to stay quietly at home and nothing more, panicked and told a lawyer about his nervousness. The latter advised him to contact leftwing reporters (Communists, more or less) since it was extremely dangerous to leave the denouement of the episode in the hands of anarchists exclusively. Tomiolo contacted some reporters from *Stasera* but the word soon spread through their colleagues and even the police got wind of details that placed the whole operation in jeopardy.

Once the young libertarians learned what was going behind their backs they decided to release the vice-consul forthwith.

On the evening of 1 October, Alonso Gama, first secretary with Spain's Rome Embassy, who had been designated to take over temporarily from Isu Elias, called a press conference at the consulate in the Via Ariberti.

On 22 September all three stood trial before a court martial (Summary Case 71-iv-62) and received the following sentences: Jorge Conill Valls, 30 years' imprisonment; Marcelino Jimenez, 25 years and Antonio Mur 18 years. The Captain-General of Catalonia refused to endorse these sentences: in his view, the accused deserved the death penalty, and he repudiated the Court Martial's findings, meaning that a retrial would ensue. The likelihood was that, in the light of precedent, all three militants of the FIJL (Iberian Federation of Libertarian Youth) would face the death penalty and that execution would follow quickly.

In an attempt to save the lives of Jorge Conill Valls and his two confederates, the Gruppo Giovanile Libertario (Libertarian Youth Group) in Milan planned to kidnap Spain's honorary consul-general in Milan, the Conde de Altea.

The group comprised Amedeo Bertolo, a 21 year old student who had met and struck up a friendship with the three accused in the course of a trip to Spain in 1962 to bring in anti-Franco propaganda materials; Luigi Gerli, 22; Gianfranco Pedron, 21; and Aimone Fornaciari, 22. This anarchist group had the assistance of four socialists of "the revolutionary left", as they described themselves at the time. (This was pretty much what was later described as the "extra-parliamentary opposition".) They were Antonio Tomiolo, Vittorio De Tassis, Giorgio Bertani and GianBattista Novello-Paglianti.

Amedeo Bertolo later explained that this ideologically motley collection came about because four people were not enough to pull the operation off successfully and they could not secure help from other young libertarians: then again, and this was the most important factor, they needed a driver and none of the original four could drive.

By the time they were ready to act they discovered that the consul, the Conde de Altea, was away on holiday in Spain: as it was a matter of urgency that some move be made soon on behalf of their Spanish comrades, they refused to alter the original plan and just made do with using the honorary vice-consul, Isu Elias, a 55

year-old of Polish extraction, as their hostage. In the absence of the consul proper, the latter was his temporary deputy.

Alberto Tomiolo paid out 31,000 lire in Verona on the hiring of a white Giulietta: all they did was replace its original licence plate, VR 71538, with a different set. The original plate was to be refitted before the hire car was returned.

They decided to carry out the kidnapping on Thursday 27 September 1962 but, due to unforeseen circumstances, the car arrived at the scene a half hour late and by the time it reached No 6, Via Ariberti, the consulate was closed. At which point they had a brainwave: that evening they a call to Isu Elias, supposedly on behalf of the deputy mayor of Milan, the Christian Democrat Luigi Meda, to tell him that Meda wished to speak with him and to that end was inviting him to a working lunch the next morning at the La Giarrettiera restaurant: to make it easier for him to keep the appointment he would sending a car to pick him up.

On Friday 28 September 1962, at 12.15 pm Luigi Meda's supposed "secretary" (Vittorio De Tassis) showed up and together they walked to the car parked in the Via Ariberti, where Antonio Tomiolo (in chauffeur's uniform) was waiting for them with the engine running; Isu Elias sat in the back whilst De Tassis sat in the front beside the driver. At which point Gianfranco Pedron and Amedeo Bertolo joined them, sitting either side of the vice-consul and warning him at gunpoint not to offer any resistance.

Isu Elias, who was called as a witness at the trial of his abductors, stated that the car took off at some speed, that it was being driven crazily and that they came within a whisker of a collision with a tram, that the driver took the wrong turn several times over and drove through traffic lights..

Once on the road out of Milan, they made Isu Elias wear sunglasses, covered in bandages, with gauze and cotton on the inside so that he could not see a thing.

Gianfranco Pedron had, some time previously, rented a ramshackle and deserted farmhouse, more like a stable, near

Cugliate Fabiasco, a village of 178 souls some 50 kms north of Milan and just 5 kms from the Swiss border. Pedron and his friends used to spend weekends there. They made for the farmhouse by a roundabout route to confuse their captive. The vice-consul was terror-stricken and his companions did all they could on the trip to set him mind at ease: they explained that their intention was to hold him hostage in an attempt to save three comrades from execution who had been arrested in Spain and were in danger of being executed: that they would not be harming him in any way.

They left the vice-consul at the farmhouse in Cugliate Fabiasco under guard by Vittorio De Tassis.

On the Saturday morning they tipped off the (pro-Communist) Milan evening paper *Stasera* that they had kidnapped Spain's honorary vice-consul in Milan and explained their motives. Amedeo Bertolo immediately travelled to Paris in order to issue from there a series of communiqués to the press, stipulating that the kidnapped vice-consul would be used as a hostage in securing the release in Spain of Jorge Conill Valls and his comrades who had been arrested for political offences.

The kidnapping caused something of a sensation in the Spanish as well as the European and American press.

It had been anticipated that the vice-consul would be handed over to a team of Spanish young libertarians for release in Geneva at the premises of the Human Rights League there, and that the opportunity would be seized to issue a statement of condemnation of Franco's regime, generating ever more publicity and thus investing the operation with even more impact.

On the evening of Monday 1 October the vice-consul's wife received through the mail a few lines in the kidnap victim's own handwriting. The express letter was franked at Orly airport in Paris and bore the time of 2.30 pm 29 September. The letter stated: