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Spain: model for anarchist organizing

a review of *The CNT in the Spanish Revolution*,
Volume I by Jose Peirats

David Porter

Spring, 2012

A review of

The CNT in the Spanish Revolution, Volume I

by Jose Peirats, Edited and Introduced by Chris
Ealham; Translated by Paul Sharkey

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The Spanish anarchist movement and revolution of the late 1930s are undoubtedly the historical force and context most praised by Western anarchists. In absolute numbers, in proportion of the overall population they were part of, and in the radical transformation they accomplished in much of Spanish society, the reputation is well deserved.

Highlighting their accomplishments, Jose Peirats, the author of the best history (in three volumes) of the immense Spanish anarcho-syndicalist Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo (CNT), states as well that, "We write for history's sake and also for the

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purpose of enlightening future generations of fighters.” For this reason also, he says, “none of the mistakes made by workers should be glossed over in silence.”

It is critical that contemporary anarchists accept his advice. This recently published first volume of the English translation of his definitive work is an excellent place to begin.

This volume, translated by Paul Sharkey and Chris Ealham and extensively edited by the latter, provides exceptionally well documented insight into the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist movement’s first tumultuous decades as well as its internal ideological struggles and organizational variety. It continues with the CNT’s initial experience in fighting Spanish fascist/Nationalist forces while simultaneously constructing the beginnings of libertarian communism in the Civil War and Revolution of the 1930s.

Several months after a Left coalition electoral victory in February 1936, Spanish military and Rightist political forces launched a violent revolt to overthrow the new government. Anarchists (and others) immediately resisted his effort in direct street clashes throughout Spain.

In Catalonia, where the CNT was the largest force on the Left, and elsewhere in the center and east of Spain, Leftist forces prevailed. Soon thereafter, front lines were established that divided Spain down the middle and more traditional warfare began.

Ealham’s detailed historical and documentary knowledge, as well as his political understanding of the continued relevance of Peirats’ account, significantly help in comprehending and appreciating the common political issues between the historical subjects discussed and contemporary readers. Ealham’s detailed notes and commentary bring up-to-date, and greatly add, to both the book’s scholarly and political activist dimensions.

Additionally, Ealham’s rich introductory account of the genesis of the original work published in 1951 and Peirats’ immense travails to complete it in conditions of post-Civil War exile, poverty

In my view, it also provides a broad introduction to essential traits, dynamics, issues, and dilemmas of the anarchist movement generally.

This new North American edition gives access to a new generation and a new community of readers and well serves Peirats’ original intent.

The consequences of repression and sabotage of anarchists' military efforts and the rural revolutionary collectives in the Aragon area by their supposedly anti-fascist allies (especially the Communists) were enormously bitter and costly, as well described in this volume.

As Peirats states, "The CNT had glided into an uninterrupted avalanche of concessions. It was hard to get off this slippery slope. It had to do battle on terrain utterly different from its own...The CNT, heroic and invincible in the union, the factory and the streets, was easy prey in the salons and corridors of the ministries."

Nevertheless, at the grassroots, Spanish anarchists had succeeded in launching remarkable and unprecedented widespread egalitarian and communitarian efforts in industrial, agricultural, educational and other realms, especially in areas of their greatest strength — Catalonia, Aragon, and Valencia. A deeper issue of collaboration in this volume is concerned with to what extent and at what price could the anarchist movement reciprocate against repression and social oppression with violent retaliation, resistance and revolution of its own. In the face of assassinations and imprisonment of anarchists and state repression of various forms of anarchist expression, the growing polarization between non-violent (such as education, publishing, strikes and demonstrations) and violent alternatives was a continuing reality of the movement in the 1920s and 1930s.

It culminated in anarchists' determined reaction with arms to the fascist insurrection in July 1936. As influential militant Diego Abad de Santillan later stated, "We knew that victory in the revolution was not possible without victory in the war and for the war's sake we sacrificed everything. We even sacrificed the revolution itself, not realizing that this sacrifice also implied the sacrifice of our war aims."

As Ealham emphasizes, Peirats' history has been an essential starting place for understanding the Spanish Civil War and Revolution, from the time of its first publication to the present.

and repression, provide a sobering contrast to the relative comfort of most present-day anarchist historians.

Long-time Fifth Estate staff member, Federico Arcos, who fought against the fascists in his native Spain, provided crucial assistance for the Meltzer Press original 2001 British publication of this translation as well as extensive valuable photographic resources whose images bring the text even more to life.

In our present context of spreading popular uprisings against the tightening screws of sick and increasingly desperate and repressive capitalism, this account is most timely.

How Spanish anarchists created a massive working-class revolutionary organization in the midst of a capitalist society, the nature of the social transformation they envisaged, and the struggle to maintain the integrity of organizational principles and objectives in the midst of civil war and betrayal by political "allies" are all critical issues for the contemporary movement of anarchists and anti-authoritarians.

Peirats, as the documentary historian, provides rich and detailed accounts of the debates. At the same time, as the experienced revolutionary activist, he conveys the passions, ideals and perilous myths lived at the grassroots level.

Peirats' discussion and the events in Spain raise basic questions about what is and what makes a revolution. Is it realistic to hope for a single emancipating occurrence or is it instead a long-range and never-ending process of significant anti-hierarchical ruptures that break through the established forms of dominance faced in their specificities by each generation and social context? Alternatively, as the Spanish example suggests, the very potential for a deep revolutionary transformation at any historical juncture depends on both a long series of social ruptures over previous decades as well as a propitious immediate context of external factors.

While the Left electoral victory and subsequent civil war in 1936 opened up social space in areas of anarchist preponderance for revolutionary economic and social forms, the Left government and the

war itself also imposed intense hierarchical demands of their own through repressive threats, dependence on foreign support, and the nature of violence itself.

The CNT, the anarcho-syndicalist mass revolutionary labor union founded in 1910, is the focus of Peirats' history. But Spanish anarchism was both part of and partly separate from the CNT. This ambiguity between more purist anarchists (most prominently the FAI, the Iberian Anarchist Federation, founded in 1927) and the mass anarcho-syndicalist union movement provided much of the ongoing tension within Spanish anarchism before and during the 1930s.

Creating and maintaining a mass organization, however, inspired and led by veteran anarchists, brought forth issues of practical coordination of large numbers of workers, differing revolutionary commitment levels among those with and without anarchist backgrounds, and the difficulty of wielding decisive political power in the midst of various competing political parties and a rival socialist mass union movement, the UGT, without corrupting the anti-statist nature of the anarchist ideal and practice.

In Spain at that time, the CNT represented by far the largest political force of anarchist inspiration. However, its claim to privileged influence over the strategy and goals of Spanish anarchism was constantly in dispute by those critical of its decisions or those anarchists not committed to a syndicalist orientation. Because of its very size and dynamism, whatever direction the CNT took usually had important repercussions on all anarchists, whether CNT members or not.

This was an important authority issue in itself. Authority disputes also emerged between historic leaders as well as between those who did and those who did not partake in violent direct action initiatives before 1936. Aside from this was the potential for CNT institutional bureaucratization and defensive leadership styles, especially after the fateful decision in 1936 to join newly cre-

ated anti-fascist unity governments at national, provincial, and local levels, despite the CNT's diligent traditional commitment to decentralist and anti-elitist organizational principles and grassroots accountability.

As French anarchist Sebastian Faure observed, the result of the CNT's governmental collaboration was that, "the impulse no longer emanates from the base but from the upper echelon; guidelines do not emanate from the masses but from the leadership."

From the late 1920s through the entire Spanish Civil War and Revolution, and the defeat of both in 1939 (and later postwar exile), the issue of whether and how much this anti-statist movement should collaborate (including electoral voting in 1931, 1933 and 1936) with non-anarchist political forces (left and liberal parties and unions) was constantly debated and caused fundamental splits within the movement.

The high-stakes volatility connected to this debate was all the greater in desperate contexts of potential and real massive repression from rightist forces, especially during the Civil War itself.

The dilemma was inevitable for a movement which, however strong, was only a large minority within the overall population, which was committed against imposing its own dictatorship on others and which, nevertheless, was under violent attack by state, capitalist and aristocratic forces.

When collaboration logic was accepted, even to the point of allowing four anarchist leaders to become ministers of the wartime central government, anarchists faced additional continued problems of how much to compromise the ideal of libertarian revolutionary self-direction in the face of alliance partners (liberal Republicans, Socialists, and Communists) whose leaders were committed to power aggrandizement (and, with the Stalinists, frequently to persecution of anarchists) at every turn, even in the midst of the deadly civil war.