

meseta in rebel hands, being fought even now. Report
— National Committee.”³⁰

The impetus of the rightist revolt, which had, overall, been confined mainly to the army and most of the police, had been halted. The Spanish sailors had remained loyal, because CNT and UGT activists had established sailors’ councils, overpowered their officers and sailed for the Bay of Tangiers, where they were able to prevent rebel reinforcements arriving from Morocco. They would have been more successful had it not been for the intervention of the Royal Navy, who prevented the Spanish sailors bombarding Algeciras, where the rebel troops were being landed. However, the failure of the rebels to win over the navy was an unforeseen development, which threw the first major spanner in the works as far as the insurgents were concerned. The air force also remained generally loyal.

The failure of the revolt to achieve a speedy victory left the generals isolated in different parts of Spain: General Mola’s Army of the North holding Galicia and Leon in the north-west, and Navarre and a large part of Aragón in the north; General Quiépo de Llano in the south holding eastern Andalucía; and General Franco’s Army of Africa holding Morocco, the conspirators’ base, and the islands. The military had the unlimited support of Italy and Portugal, and the sympathy and tentative support of Hitler’s Germany. The German ambassador to Spain informed Berlin on 25 July that “unless something unforeseen occurs” the revolt could not succeed. Even a month later, Hitler’s acting Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Hans Dieckhoff, noted dismally: “It is not to be expected that the Franco government can hold out for long, even after outward successes, without large-scale support from outside.”

Less than two weeks after the rising, on 1 August, the socialist premier of France, Léon Blum, and his foreign secretary, Yvon

A Study of the Revolution in Spain, 1936–1937

Stuart Christie

1998

³⁰ Peirats, *La CNT en la revoluciÓn espaÓola*, vol. 1, pp. 144–5.

followed, there are only fighters. Everyone works for the war and for the revolution: this is our strength. As for discipline, as I see it this is nothing more than honouring one's own responsibility and that of others. I am against the barrack style discipline, but equally I am against the mistaken concept of freedom to which cowards habitually appeal in order to dodge the issue. In war, delegates should be obeyed: otherwise, it is impossible to mount any operation. In my column, all of the dodges of the Great War have been tried — the mother on her death bed, the spouse going into labour, the ailing child, failing eyesight, etc. Anyone seeking to go home on the grounds that he is along as a volunteer and is volunteering to go home, I send home on foot — after he has had a piece of my mind. Things hardly ever get that far. To be frank, I am satisfied with the comrades who follow me.”²⁹

The workers' victory

A telegram from the National Committee of the CNT in Madrid to the National Committee delegate in Barcelona on 30 July summed up the military situation throughout the Peninsula:

“Received your telegram. We celebrate victory all Catalonia owing to unstoppable impetus our comrades. Zaragoza situation delicate. Make heroic efforts to bolster the struggle in this sector. Andalucía relatively OK. Small sectors of Galicia, Asturias, centres in Gijón and Oviedo. Spare no effort after your victory. Redouble them dispatching necessary assistance. Madrid fine. Comrades' heroism excelling itself. Castile's

²⁹ CNT (Madrid), 6 October 1936.

delegates, detachment committees (the century delegates), and a War Committee of the Column, which consisted of the detachment delegates together with the delegate-general and was advised by the Advisory Military Council. There was also a propaganda service under the supervision of Francisco Carreno, which published *El Frente*, the bulletin of the column, and ran a radio station. In addition, the column put together various special-service units that operated clandestinely behind enemy lines. These units, such as ‘Sons of the Night’, and ‘The Black Gang’, were organised by Francisco Ponzán, an anarchist who was later to play a key role in the anarchist military intelligence and covert operations service, the SIEP (Servicio de Investigación Especial Periférico). (Later still, Ponzán became the founder and organiser of the ‘Reseau Pat O’Leary’, the Second World War Allied escape network.)

Collective support

The men of the Durruti Column began to concentrate their activities on assisting the collectives they had helped set up during their advance. Many of the militiamen volunteered to be fighter-producers and went off to help with the harvest. Durruti himself gave the following account of the column’s activities to the Madrid-based paper CNT:

“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 firing line. Each village we take 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 of the inhabitants of the villages through which we have passed — from the firing line right back to Barcelona. Along the route we have

Contents

Introduction	7
Chapter 1 July 1936	11
On a war footing, proletariat, against the monarchist and fascist conspiracy!	11
Co-ordinating the resistance	12
Class lines drawn	15
The revolutionary general strike	16
The call to arms	18
Companys’s worst nightmares	20
Psychological and strategic objectives	22
The pivotal mistake	24
The question of power	26
The Central Committee of Antifascist Militias	27
Dangers of indulging ‘men of genius’	27
The world turned upside down	29
Law and order	30
‘For they are all honourable men’	30
Power corrupts	32
The price of political naivety	33
The coup that never was — but should have been!	34
Madrid — July 1936	36
Boundless zeal	37
Zaragoza — a strategic and tragic failure	38
The workers’ militias	39
Military ends and means	41
‘A New World in our hearts’	43

Zaragoza sacrificed by the Central Committee of the Anti-fascist Militias	45
The fateful halt	48
The Durruti Column	49
Collective support	50
The workers' victory	51
The Social Revolution	53
War and revolution	55
Collectivisation	57
Equality and freedom	60
Imaginative experiments	62
Land seizures	63
Chapter 2 August 1936	68
‘Our very own’	68
A target for vilification	70
‘Strangle the life out of fascism’	72
A surrealist writes home	75
War or Revolution?	76
Workers' and soldiers' councils	79
The bourgeoisie strikes back	80
More steps towards collaboration	82
Rise and rise of the Spanish Communist Party	84
Breathing space for Stalin	85
Chapter 3 September 1936	87
The state rebuilds	88
Problems of war and revolution	89
The Council of the Generalidad	90
The collaborationists win the day	91
Chapter 4 October 1936	93
Warning to the ‘uncontrollables’	94
The Council of Aragón	95

head of the Catalan War Department.²⁸ García Oliver, however, had shifted his position from opposition to the Central Committee, and was now viewing events as a committed partisan of that institution. He told Durruti that the revolution had to be subordinated to the contingencies of the war against fascism. The attack on Majorca had priority over everything else. It would force an Italian intervention, which, in turn, would lead to a direct British intervention to restore ‘the balance of power’ in the Mediterranean. Nothing Durruti could say to the contrary had any effect on his old comrade, who insisted that the war had priority above everything, and now the anarchists, having made their decision to collaborate with the liberal democratic and socialist parties of government, must stick by it.

The Durruti Column

Taking advantage of the stalemate, the Durruti Column deployed over a wide front and reorganised itself. The column was now organised into teams or squads of 25 militiamen, four of which, in turn, made up centuries. Fives of these centuries banded together into detachments; each detachment boasted a surgical team and a machine-gunner team. The column was backed up by artillery commanded by Captains Carceller, Cole and Batet. Later, quartermaster, health and transport sections were formed. The column also had an Advisory Military Council chaired by Pérez Farras and made up of professional military men; this took charge of liaison and cartography. The column appointed a delegate-general, and consultation with the rank and file took place through century committees made up of the group

²⁸ The July Revolution of 1936 allowed for the revolutionary independence of Catalonia; before it, Catalonia had autonomy within the Spanish state, but no responsibility for matters of war and peace. Between July 1936 and May 1937, however, it is possible to talk of Catalan control over the anti-fascist war effort.

its wisdom, that the saving of Majorca was of greater strategic importance than the capture of Zaragoza and refused to provision the column with the necessary weapons, and ammunition required to advance the 35 kilometres to the Aragón capital. The fronts where anarchist troops dominated, particularly the Aragón front, were deliberately starved of arms and ammunition, and the Central front where Stalinists dominated was heavily supplied, even though it was less vulnerable and the fighting had moved elsewhere. This prevented the possibility of action in the north, which might have united the isolated republican region in the north-west (with its mining and industrial base) with the main area. But this would also have united revolutionary Asturias with revolutionary Aragón and Catalonia. However, there was much to be gained for the republican state in avoiding a dynamic approach. A victory over Franco while the state was still not consolidated and the revolutionary movement was still armed and in full flow could only strike fear into the hearts of the politicians.

The fateful halt

The fateful halt lasted nine days. During that crucial time, in Zaragoza the initiative passed to the insurgents. The unexpected breathing space gave the military and their rightist supporters time to break the general strike by imprisoning and slaughtering the leading working-class militants. The militarisation of the railways, during which it is estimated that 60 CNT railway workers were executed, enabled the rebels to rush reinforcements from Pamplona and successfully resist the attacks of the anarchist militia columns at Huesca and Almudébar.

Durruti went immediately to Barcelona to press the case for the attack on Zaragoza and to stress his urgent need for war materiel with his erstwhile close comrade, García Oliver, now a CNT representative on the Central Committee of Antifascist Militias and

Aragón isolated	97
Rolling back the revolution	97
Berneri's strategy	98

avoid this. It is leaning on the aid of Italy and Germany. If we allow these powers to become deeply involved in our war, it will be difficult to beat the fascists, because they will have armaments superior to ours.

“Our victory depends on the speed with which we act. The faster we attack the greater chance we have of winning. Up to now, victory is on our side. For that reason, we must conquer Zaragoza at once. Tomorrow there will be no opportunities equal to those of today. In the ranks of the CNT, there are no cowards, and the men of the FAI die but do not yield. We don’t want people among us who are afraid of the first attack. I ask those who ran, hindering the advance of the column, to have the courage to drop their weapons so that firmer hands can pick them up. The rest of us will continue our march. We will arrive in the north. We will join hands with our Asturian comrades and we will conquer and give Spain a better world. I ask those who go back to keep silent about what happened today because it fills me with shame.”²⁷

It was a bitter but invaluable lesson, which helped turn a raw body of inexperienced men into an army of fearless warriors.

The march on Zaragoza was halted, however. Durruti was no doubt partially influenced in his decision to hold his advance by the effect the air attack had had on his men. However, the officer who had been in charge of the garrison at Barbastro, Colonel Vilalba, and Companys’s military adviser, Pérez Farras, put pressure on Durruti not to advance further until his flanks had been secured. There was also a shortage of weapons and ammunition. The Central Committee of Antifascist Militias in Barcelona had decided, in

²⁷ Durruti’s speech at Bujaraloz Town Hall was reconstructed from the recollections of two eyewitnesses, Liberto Roig and Pablo Ruíz. Quoted in Paz, Durruti: The People Armed, p.231.

“Friends. No one was forced to come here. You chose your fate, and the fate of the first column of the CNT and the FAI is a harsh one. García Oliver said on the radio in Barcelona that we were going to Aragón to conquer Zaragoza or to lose our lives in the attempt. I repeat the same thing. Rather than retreating, we must die. Zaragoza is in the hands of the fascists. Why did we leave Barcelona if it wasn’t to help them free themselves? They are waiting for us as we start to run. That is the way you show the world and our comrades the spirit of the anarchists, by succumbing to fear when faced by three planes.

“The bourgeoisie will not allow us to create Libertarian Communism because we want it. The bourgeoisie will resist because it defends its privileges and interests. The only way to create Libertarian Communism is to destroy the bourgeoisie. Only then will the road to our ideal world be assured. We have left behind us the peasants who have started to put into practice our ideal. They did this, feeling confident that our guns would guarantee their crops. So if we leave the road open to the enemy, it will mean that the initiatives of these peasants are useless, and what is worse, the conquerors will make them pay for their daring by assassinating them. This is the meaning of the struggle, a thankless one which resembles none that we have undertaken before. What happened today is a simple warning. Now the struggle is really going to start. They will shoot at us with cannons. They will strafe us with tons of grapeshot and sometimes we will have to fight with grenades, and even with knives. As the enemy feels it is cornered, it will respond like a beast and will bite fiercely. But it isn’t yet at bay and it is fighting to

Introduction

In July 1936, the popular movement that contained the military and right-wing uprising in Spain triggered one of the most profound social revolutions of the twentieth century. The period that began on 19 July 1936 and ended in August 1937 with the destruction of the revolutionary Aragón collectives by communist-led republican military forces was one of profound and extended freedom and democracy in the management of social life, work and the economy. The history of the Spain of 1936–7 demonstrates the fate of a revolution that attempted to create a genuinely autonomous society, but did not make a complete break with those bodies that are inherently given to control and manipulation — the state, the political parties and the unions. In other words, the Spanish anarchist movement of the time failed to clarify its radicalism and to pursue the logic of its principles. Why did this happen? How did the republican parties re-establish the authority both of the Catalan regional government and of the central government in Madrid? What brought about the ultimate ascendancy of the Communist Party under the premiership of Juan Negrín?

A key factor in understanding this is the slogan, ‘First the war, then the revolution.’ This phrase was cynical when it was used by not only by the republicans, socialists and communists, who never wanted a popular revolution anyway, but also by those anarchists who were so far removed from the people that they no longer identified with them.

More dangerously, though, the slogan was ingenuous when it was mouthed by many other, entirely committed anarchists, because it obscured the reality that a war is a very political phenomenon, and that how it is fought is determined by political alignments.

It is ingenuous to believe that the only possible anti-fascist front is one made among leaders at governmental level. Such a point of view sees efficiency in obedience, and fails to take account of the

importance of the will to fight, which derives from what is being fought for. In fact, there were only three major victories by the republican side in the war: the original defeat of Franco's revolt, the defence of Madrid and the battle of Guadalajara. The first two were won by the spontaneous action of the people, by the committees and militias and through revolutionary enthusiasm, while even in the third, which came after revolutionary hopes began to die, political subversion of enemy troops played a decisive role.

The political decision to organise a hierarchical, traditional army placed political limitations on the way the war was fought. A war of movement was excluded. It would have required highly independent units. But in the war of positions that took place instead, the technical advantages of the Francoists were maximised and the main advantage of the anti-fascists — the fact that most of the population were anti-Franco — was lost. Political factors also entered into play very directly in another way: the fronts held predominantly by anarchist troops, such as in Aragón, were starved of arms and ammunition, and the central front, where Stalinists ruled, was heavily supplied, even though it was less vulnerable and the fighting had moved elsewhere. This prevented the possibility of action in the north, which might have united the isolated republican region in the north-west (with its mining and industrial base) with the main area. But this would also have united revolutionary Asturias with revolutionary Aragón and Catalonia.

There was much else also to be gained for the republican state in avoiding a dynamic approach. The prospect of a victory over fascism while the state was shaky and the revolutionary movement organised, active and armed could only strike fear into the hearts of the politicians. Thus not only were anarchist troops deliberately used in such a way as to decimate them, but there was an immense concentration of weaponry retained for repressive purposes in the rear while the fronts went without. This is a genuine irony given all the allegations by the Stalinists that weaponry was being hoarded in the rearguard by the revolutionaries. Competitive political in-

"We have always lived in slums and holes in the wall. We will know how to accommodate ourselves for a time. For you must not forget that we can also build. It is we who built these palaces and cities, here in Spain and in America and elsewhere. We are not in the least afraid of ruins. We are going to inherit the earth. There is not the slightest doubt about that. The bourgeoisie might blast and ruin its own world before it leaves the stage of history. We carry a New World, here, in our hearts.

That world is growing in this minute. "²⁶

Zaragoza sacrificed by the Central Committee of the Anti-fascist Militias

Having secured Lérida, the Durruti Column advanced quickly, virtually unopposed, towards Zaragoza, urging the peasants in the villages they passed through to seize and collectivise the land on which they worked. On the morning of 27 July, as the column was leaving the town of Bujaraloz, three rebel aeroplanes suddenly attacked, exposing the workers to their first major baptism of fire. The devastating blitzkrieg killed 20 men and injured many more. The men panicked. Many threw down their weapons and scattered to the four winds to escape the noise and horror of the death and destruction that rained down on them from the skies, killing and mutilating at random. When the planes had disappeared, the column slowly straggled back to Bujaraloz, where Durruti assembled his men in the main square to deliver what eyewitnesses have described as perhaps one of the most important speeches in his long career as an activist.

²⁶ Toronto Daily Star, 18 August 1936.

was to save the Republic and restore Republican order. Durruti replied:

“That may be the views of those señores. We syndicalists, we are fighting for the revolution. We know what we want. To us it means nothing that there is a Soviet Union somewhere in this world, for the sake of whose peace and tranquillity Stalin sacrificed the workers of Germany and China to fascist barbarism. We want the revolution here in Spain, right now, not maybe after the next European war. We are giving Hitler and Mussolini far more to worry about today with our revolution than the whole Russian Red Army. We are setting an example to the German and Italian working classes how to deal with fascism.”

“Do you expect any help from France or Britain now that Hitler and Mussolini have begun to help the rebels?” continued Van Paasen. Durruti replied grimly:

“I do not expect any help for a libertarian revolution from any government in the world. Maybe the conflicting interests of the different imperialisms might have some influence on our struggle. That is quite possible. Franco is doing his best to drag Europe into the quarrel. He will not hesitate to pitch Germany against us. But we expect no help, not even from our own government in the final analysis.”

Van Paasen then challenged him: “Can you win alone?” Durruti considered the question carefully. The journalist added: “You will be sitting on top of a pile of ruins even if you are victorious.” The anarchist replied quietly in a hoarse whisper:

regimes. The CNT despised him (he did little or nothing for the jobless) and its members joked at the amazing resemblance he bore to Benito Mussolini.

terests at great cost dominated military planning. At the end of the war, lives continued to be wasted because hostilities were pointlessly prolonged for the sake of illusory diplomatic ends. The point here is not that victory would have been possible if these obstructions had been removed. The limitations of the revolution, already mentioned, would themselves have placed curbs on the military possibilities. The point is that the slogan ‘First the war, then the revolution’ was no innocent plea made from practical necessity. Instead, it was the most vital ideological weapon that the republican state and its restorers, including the ‘leadership’ of the CNT/FAI, possessed. Probably the most important element in the argument it represented was that of foreign policy.

Britain and France, it held, would not supply arms or assist Spain diplomatically if there was any talk of revolution. However, the ‘non-intervention’ of the West soon showed itself to be a means of doing nothing to aid Spain, while allowing Germany and Italy relatively undisrupted intervention. Moreover, wisdom on this score was soon beside the point, for it was Stalin who the Spanish were reassuring by placating the international bourgeoisie, once Russian aid began to flow in September 1936. Stalin was out to suppress any true, autonomous revolution, and wanted to use Spain to achieve a western anti-fascist commitment. A counter-revolutionary policy served both these desires, and it was imposed both through the lever of aid and by Communist Party and secret police terrorism. Though the revolutionaries at least should have understood that the West was more anti-Russian than anti-fascist, the ‘foreign policy’ argument against revolution continued to be used even after Stalin started laying the basis for the Nazi-Soviet Pact and let aid to Spain drop.

For the sake of this deluded hope (which became an excuse for counter-revolution), real opportunities were lost, and the revolutionary gains for which the people fought so hard and sacrificed so much were reviled, eroded and subject to repression. The Italian anarchist Camillo Berneri wrote the following to Federica Montseny

shortly before his murder during the Stalinist police terror of the May Days of 1937: 'The war in Spain, thus stripped of all new faith, of all ideas of social change, of all revolutionary greatness, of all universal meaning, is no more than a common war of national independence, which must be carried out to avoid the extermination which the world plutocracy has in mind. There remains the terrible question of life or death, but it is no longer a war to assure a new regime and a new humanity...' He added: 'The dilemma: war or revolution no longer has any meeting. The only dilemma is this one: either victory over Franco thanks to the revolutionary war, or defeat'.

The author wishes to thank Mark Hendy, Chris Ealham and Greg George for their invaluable input and comments during the drafting of this work.

fear. It is only by freeing itself from fear that a free society can be built."²⁴

'A New World in our hearts'

Before leaving for Zaragoza on 24 July, Durruti gave a memorable interview to Canadian journalist Pierre Van Paasen of the Toronto Daily Star. The interview sums up concisely and with feeling the aspirations of the social revolution and the ponderous obstacles that stood in its way. Van Paasen asked Durruti why he had made what was to him the curious statement that they were determined "to finish with fascism once and for all, in spite of the government." Durruti replied:

"No government in the world fights fascism to the death. When the bourgeoisie sees power slipping from its grasp, it has recourse to fascism to maintain itself. The Liberal government of Spain could have rendered fascist elements powerless long ago. Instead it temporised and compromised and dallied. Even now, there are men in this government who want to go easy with the rebels. You can never tell, you know [he laughed], the present government might yet need these rebellious forces to crush the workers' movement."

Van Paasen then interjected that both Largo Caballero and Indalecio Prieto²⁵ had stated that the Popular Front's only concern

²⁴ Paz, Durruti: The People Armed, p. 225.

²⁵ Not to be confused with Horacio M. Prieto, later National Secretary of the CNT. Indalecio Prieto was a Basque socialist, although really a liberal-democrat and most bourgeoisified. This explains why he got the job of finance minister in the first Republican-Socialist government (1931-3). As a minister he was most unorthodox and pledged the Republic to make good all the debts accrued by past

given political responsibility for a human collective cannot change my convictions. It is under these conditions that I agreed to play the role given to me by the Central Committee of the Militias.

I thought — and what has happened confirms my belief — that a workingmen's militia cannot be led according to the same rules as an army. I think that discipline, co-ordination and the fulfilment of a plan are indispensable. But this idea can no longer be understood in the terms of the world we have just destroyed. We have new ideas. We think that solidarity among men must awaken personal responsibility, which knows how to accept discipline as an autonomous act.

Necessity imposes a war on us, a struggle that differs from many of those that we have carried on before. But the goal of our struggle is always the triumph of the revolution. This means not only victory over the enemy, but also a radical change in man. For this change to occur, man must learn to live in freedom and develop in himself his potentialities as a responsible individual. The worker in the factory, using his tools and directing production, is bringing about a change in himself. The fighter, like the worker, uses his gun as a tool and his acts must lead to the same goals as those of the worker.

In the struggle he cannot act like a soldier under orders but like a man who is conscious of what he is doing. I know it is not easy to get such a result, but what one cannot get by reason, one can never get through force. If our revolutionary army must be maintained through fear, we will have changed nothing but the colour of

Chapter 1 July 1936

The Spanish army in Morocco rose in rebellion against the Second Spanish Republic on 17 July 1936. By the following day, the long-planned coup d'état, under the leadership of General Sanjurjo and a military directorate consisting of generals Yagüe, Quiapo de Llano, Mola and Franco, had spread to the Spanish mainland.

The Spanish anarcho-syndicalist labour organisation, the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT), had been preparing for the eventuality of such a coup for some time. Earlier that year, on 14 February, just two days before the elections that were to bring to power the Popular Front government that precipitated the military uprising, the National Committee of the CNT in Zaragoza issued a prophetic warning to its members as to the likely consequences of a leftist victory in the forthcoming elections. This was a clear statement of intent to the Republican and social-democratic bourgeoisie, as well as to the military plotters and the landed oligarchs, whose interests they served, that the most powerful labour union in Spain would respond to a military coup with the ultimate expression of working class power — social revolution:

On a war footing, proletariat, against the monarchist and fascist conspiracy!

“Day by day, the suspicion is growing that rightist elements are ready to provoke intervention by the military. The Insurrection has been deferred, pending the outcome of the elections. They have a blueprint for

thwarting a victory by the Left at the polls. Furthermore, wherever the legionnaires of tyranny may rise in arms, we have no hesitation in calling for an immediate understanding with antifascist groups, vigorous precautions being taken to ensure that the defensive contribution of the masses may lead to real social revolution under the auspices of Libertarian Communism. If the conspirators open fire then the act of opposition must be taken to its utmost consequences, without allowing the liberal bourgeoisie and its Marxist allies to apply the brakes, in the case where the fascist rebellion is defeated in its first stages — in the course of the people's victory, its democratic illusions would be dispelled; should it go otherwise, then the nightmare of dictatorship will annihilate us. No matter who opens the hostilities seriously, democracy will perish between two fires, because it is irrelevant and has no place on the field of battle. Either fascism or social revolution! Defeat of the former is a duty incumbent upon the whole proletariat and all freedom-lovers, weapons in hand: that the revolution should be social and libertarian ought to be the most profound preoccupation of members of the Confederation.¹

Co-ordinating the resistance

The precise date on which the rising was to take place had been discovered on 13 July by CNT-FAI agents in the barracks. It was later confirmed following the arrest of a Guardia Civil officer carrying written orders. The 500-thousand strong CNT union (rising to around two million by the end of 1936) and its sister organisation, the Federación Anarquista Iberica (FAI), began to speed up

¹ CNT National Committee declaration of 14 February 1936

George Orwell's observations, although made the following year, capture the spirit of the militias:

“The essential point of the system was the social equality between officers and men. Everyone from general to private drew the same pay, ate the same food, wore the same clothes, and mingled on terms of complete equality. If you wanted to slap the general commanding the division on the back and ask him for a cigarette, you could do so, and no one thought it curious. In theory at any rate each militia was a democracy and not a hierarchy. It was understood that orders had to be obeyed, but it was also understood that when you gave an order you gave it as a comrade to a comrade and not as a superior to inferior. There were officers and NCOs, but there was no military heel-clicking and saluting. They had attempted to produce within the militias a sort of temporary working model of the classless society. Of course, there was no perfect equality but there was a nearer approach to it than I had ever seen or than I would have thought conceivable in time of war.”²³

Military ends and means

Durruti's military adviser, Pérez Farras, Companys's man on the Central Committee of Antifascist Militias, a professional soldier, was concerned to restore the authority of the Generalidad over the popular force, and remonstrated with Durruti over the application of libertarian principles to military organisation. Durruti replied:

“I have already said and I repeat; during all my life, I have acted as an anarchist. The fact of having been

²³ George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*, London, 1962.

ate their comrades in Zaragoza. These working-class shock troops, numbering around 3,000, had been recruited mainly from the ranks of the CNT and the FAI, and were led by Durruti and the column's military adviser, Pérez Farras. Other anarcho-syndicalist columns and armed groups such as that raised by Saturnino Carod and the Ortiz column also were hastily organised to force the rebels back and relieve the Aragonese capital. The organisational structure of the militia units was a principal point of discussion among the volunteers. There could be no question of restoring the authoritarian militarist principles of command-and-obey. Slowly, through discussion and the experiences of trial and error, little by little, the structure of the libertarian militias evolved as they marched towards Aragón.

In the beginning, the organisational principles were reasonably simple, evolving to meet the requirements of each new situation as they presented themselves.

“Ten men formed a group with a delegate freely chosen to head it. Ten of these groups formed a century and the man in charge was chosen in the same way. Five centuries formed an assembly, which also had a delegate. The delegates of the centuries and the delegate of the assembly formed the committee of the assembly. The delegates of the assembly with the general delegate of the column formed the war committee of the column.”²²

An artillery colonel recently escaped from Pamplona commented dryly:

“From the military point of view there was frightening chaos, but the important thing was that the chaos was working.”

²² Paz, Durruti: *The People Armed*, p. 254.

their plans to resist the military and oligarchic conspiracy. In line with the February warning of the National Committee of the CNT, militants met frequently in their locals throughout Spain to prepare for the inevitable confrontation with the rebels.

On 16 July, the CNT held a regional assembly in Catalonia to co-ordinate resistance plans. Arms were requested of the regional government of Catalonia, the Generalidad, but these were refused, and the CNT-FAI patrols on the streets were arrested. Censorship of the CNT daily newspaper *Solidaridad Obrera* prevented publication of a FAI manifesto calling upon all anarchist groups to join the CNT's Defence Committees to form a united front. The text was printed as a poster and distributed throughout the region.

In spite of the by now irrefutable evidence that advanced preparations for a military coup were under way, neither the national prime minister in Madrid, Casares Quiroga, nor the Catalan president, Lluís Companys, was prepared to issue arms to the only organised and reliable opposition to the military conspirators — the labour unions. This hesitation is hardly surprising, given the clearly revolutionary nature of the largest of these, the CNT. For the middle-class businessmen, civil servants and politicians of the Second Republic, the prospect of unleashing a social revolution by arming the people was more frightening than the alternative scenario of a military coup and fascism. Hoping against hope that a last-minute compromise could be reached with the military, the government steadfastly refused to countenance arming the people.

In Catalonia, the Generalidad had no authority over the army. Many years later, Federico Escofet, the Barcelona police commissioner in 1936, explained the dilemma as follows:

“To arm the CNT represented a danger for the Republican regime in Catalonia — of equal danger to its existence as the military rebellion. Could the Generalidad voluntarily adopt such measures? I believed, for my part, that I could not take the initiative with such

potentially serious consequences, other than having blind faith in the triumph of the forces of public order. For this reason, I did not want to arm the people.”²

“Company and I agreed on the convenience of not distributing the arms demanded by the people because the CNT-FAI was the dominant force. These armed elements, which undoubtedly would provide invaluable assistance in the struggle against the rebels, would also endanger the existence of the Republic and the government of the Generalidad. The President warned me to be particularly careful in guarding the armouries, to ensure there was no repetition of the raids such as those that took place on 6 October 1934. Effectively, the armouries were attacked the following day.”³

Escofet claims he did not place guards in order not to distract the attentions of the forces of order. He did, however, believe that the government should have armed the socialist-led trade union, the UGT, whose leaders, in spite of their revolutionary rhetoric, he considered ‘realistic’. Together with the forces of public order, these were perceived as being sufficient to contain the rising.

Julian Zugazagoitia, a socialist leader and later minister of the interior, quotes the following eyewitness account of Casares Quiroga’s final days as premier:

“His ministry is a madhouse and the wildest inmate is the minister himself. He neither eats nor sleeps. He shouts and screams as though possessed. His appearance frightens you, and it would not surprise me if he were to drop dead during one of his frenzied outbursts. He will hear nothing of arming the people and says

² Federico Escofet, *De una derrota a una victoria*, Barcelona, 1984, p. 233.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 231

they had been effectively co-opted into the system. At a meeting called by the Zaragoza CNT on the eve of the rebellion, militants had been swayed by the arguments of the pacifist Miguel Abos, that they should not respond hastily to the military threat, but should instead pursue a pacific and restrained strategy of non-violence. They had, they believed, a good working relationship with the authorities in the city and, with a membership of 30,000, thought they had little to fear. CNT militants such as Miguel Checa and metalworker Francisco Garaita tried to mobilise resistance, but so well organised and determined were the military and their allies that by 19 July it was too late to rally even a fraction of the membership. The general strike called by the CNT on 19 July was, in Zaragoza, essentially a defensive rather than an offensive weapon, and in the face of massive and brutal repression it began to weaken after a heroic two weeks of passive resistance. The only hope the workers had now lay with the militia columns from Barcelona.²¹

The workers’ militias

The mobilisation of these was rapid. Diego Abad de Santillán was the anarchist representative on the Central Committee of Antifascist Militias with the task of organising the militia columns along libertarian lines. To prevent the creation of an army dependent on a centralised general staff, the militia columns were controlled by the unions and district defence committees, which were responsible for recruiting and organising their own columns. The unions also took responsibility for the families of the volunteers who went to the front.

Four days after the rebels had been defeated in Barcelona, the first militia columns began to leave the Catalan capital to liber-

²¹ Information on Zaragoza from Graham Kelsey, ‘Anarchosyndicalism, Libertarian Communism and the State: The CNT in Zaragoza and Aragón 1930–1937’, PhD thesis, University of Lancaster, 1984.

Zaragoza — a strategic and tragic failure

In Barcelona, one of the first actions of the newly established Central Committee of Antifascist Militias was to set about organising and co-ordinating columns out of the workers' militias and armed groups that had developed on the initiative of the defence committees of the CNT. It was decided that the first of these columns, led by Durruti, should be sent to relieve Zaragoza, which had fallen to the military under the command of General Cabanellas. Zaragoza was an important objective, both strategically and for reasons of solidarity. It guarded the Ebro Valley, dominated the entire region, was an important communications centre, and was the main obstacle to the union of Catalonia with the Asturias and the Basque Country, the most important industrial region of Spain. Zaragoza also had an important arsenal containing some 40,000 guns, and, last but not least from the point of view of the CNT, it was an important anarchist stronghold where thousands of libertarians had fallen into the hands of the military.

Why had such an anarchist stronghold fallen so easily to the insurgents, almost without a shot being fired?

Certainly, the rising had been well organised, with virtually every repressive agency of the state throwing in its lot with the fascists. This had been far from the case in Barcelona and Madrid, where substantial numbers of Assault Guards and Guardia Civil had remained loyal to the Republic. Also, the task of the military had been made easier by the government decree of 14 July, which ordered the closure of all CNT locals. This had seriously limited the capacity of the anarcho-syndicalists to organise resistance, but the real reason lay elsewhere. For some time, the reformist CNT leadership in Zaragoza had been cooperating closely with the local Popular Front administration in encouraging economic recovery, and collaborating with local businessmen on plans to reduce unemployment — and, presumably to facilitate the freeing of political prisoners. Pronouncing in favour of voting during the February elections,

in the most emphatic terms that anyone who takes it upon himself to do so will be shot.”⁴

Class lines drawn

In a last-ditch attempt to stave off the military rebellion, Quiroga resigned on 18 July. His place as premier was taken by Diego Martínez Barrio, a conservative republican, who also refused to arm the workers. Martínez Barrio did political double-somersaults in order to reach a compromise solution with the military plotters, offering them ministerial carte blanche. General Mola, who at that time had not taken over the leadership of the revolt (he took over the leadership following the accidental death of General Sanjurjo on 20 July), was offered the Madrid government's Ministry of War in a proposed regime of national reconciliation. Mola, however, made it quite clear to the bourgeois Republican premier that the class lines had been drawn up, and that the political situation had reached the point of no return — confrontation was inevitable.

According to the CNT journalist Cánovas Cervantes, Mola politely rebuffed Barrio's desperate offer in a short telephone conversation:

“I am much indebted to you Señor Barrio, for the flattering and undeserved comments which my work and my past service have moved you to. I shall make my reply with the same courtesy and nobility you have used in speaking to me. The government with whose formation you are burdened will not get off the drawing board; should it ever take shape, it will be short-lived, and, rather than remedying the situation, will have served to worsen it. You have your masses and

⁴ B. Bolloten, *The Spanish Revolution: The Left and the Struggle for Power during the Civil War*, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1979.

I have mine. If you and I were to agree to some deal we should both have betrayed our ideals as well as our men. We should both deserve to be lynched.”

As Mola predicted, the government of Martínez Barrio was short-lived, lasting only one day. In the space of three days, two governments fell rather than hand over arms to the workers. Barrio’s place was taken the following day, 19 July, by José Giral, who realised that all hopes of a deal were illusory. He had no option but to order weapons to be distributed to the union organisations nationally. Giral’s decree, however, only legalised what was by then a fait accompli.

The revolutionary general strike

On the evening of 18 July, the National Committee of the CNT broadcast an appeal on Radio Madrid to mobilise for war. In conjunction with the UGT, the CNT declared a revolutionary general strike. Even before this, on the previous day, 17 July, the very first day of the military rising, the transport workers’ section of the CNT in Barcelona had stormed two ships anchored in the port and expropriated around two hundred guns. Groups of workers raided armouries and gun shops, while antique and dilapidated rifles and revolvers appeared from hiding places under floorboards and in attics. Meanwhile, the CNT in Madrid had also, unsuccessfully, requested weapons, and had taken matters into its own hands. A Madrid Defence Committee was set up on 18 July, which organised five-man patrols, each member armed with a pistol and a grenade. According to Juan Gómez Casas,⁵ the first weapons were issued in Madrid on the night of 18 -19 July on the initiative of “military figures exasperated with the stupidity of a government that believed itself still in control of the situation.” The first arms dis-

⁵ Juan Gómez Casas, *Historia de la FAI*, Montreal, p. 27.

Young Socialists, with men of the CNT at their head, burst into the barracks, razing the premises. This was the people’s power making ready to mete out justice. It was the only creative justice. At that solemn hour (12 noon, July 20), an entire regime perished at the hands of the people. The bullets that ended the lives of army officers and commanders from the Montaña Barracks killed, not men, but an entire society.

Boundless zeal

“In the wake of the fall of the Montaña Barracks, the remaining rebel strongholds in Madrid were falling one after another. With exemplary heroism, the Madrid populace was committing itself with bared breast to the assault on the barracks, prompted by the boundless zeal that makes the great feats of history possible. Mola’s advance on Madrid was halted in the Sierra. Peasants, unarmed except for a few hunting pieces and with a handful of CNT people and some from the UGT, who had set out from Madrid with a few dozen hand-grenades, contained an entire army. The next day, once the revolt in Madrid had been brought under control, reinforcements were dispatched to the Sierra del Guadarrama, where ... the troops of the bloodthirsty ex-general Mola had [already] been brought to a standstill.”²⁰

The people in arms had broken the military encirclement of the capital.

²⁰ José Peirats, *La CNT en la revolución española*, Paris, 1971, Ch. 8.

Madrid — July 1936

In Madrid, the armed working class also quickly put down the military rebellion under the leadership of General Fanjul. The anarchists were numerically less strong in the capital, always a stronghold of the socialist UGT union, one of the reasons why arms had been distributed only at the last moment, but they did play an important role in crushing the rebellion and halting the advance of General Mola's Army of the North. David Antona, acting secretary of the National Committee of the CNT in Madrid, had issued an ultimatum to Premier Giral that he should release the CNT militants held in the Republic's jails within three hours, or else "the CNT will see to their liberation itself." The threat had the desired effect, and the anarchist prisoners were released. Antona gave the following moving account of events in Castile:

"Every one of the barracks in Madrid has risen up in arms. The same story in Toledo, Guadalajara and Alcalá de Henares. Around Madrid, the fascists have succeeded in throwing up a cordon of gunmetal. No longer now only a question of the Montaña Barracks which at the moment (11 a.m. on 20 July) was being bombed by loyalist aircraft, the bombardment continues. Madrid resembles hell. The courage of her sons in those hours of drama deserves to be written in letters of gold. One might say that the whole of Madrid was mobilised. In proportion as the gravity of the situation becomes known, so the revolutionary ardour of the people grows. No authority, one thinks, will be able to call this cyclone to heel. Those who have unleashed it will have to eat the dust of defeat. The telephone goes again. I pick up the receiver and a comrade shrieks at me that the Montaña Barracks has fallen. Contemptuous of death, some Assault Guards and

tributed among CNT and FAI workers in Madrid were those they took themselves after storming a truck.

The central government in Madrid and the Generalidad in Catalonia, who were, even at this late stage, still clinging to the hope that they could reach a settlement with the military, ordered the security forces to recover the weapons seized by the workers.

It seems that also at this stage, news of the rising in Morocco had already reached Barcelona. According to Federico Arcos:

"That day was Saturday, my sixteenth birthday, everywhere people were talking about it (the rising)... There were fiestas de barrio that day. Streets were decorated with the participation of all the neighbours. That evening on the the organising committee referred to the Moroccan rising and the CNT's expectation that the army would revolt in the rest of Spain. For this reason it was decided to cancel the celebrations and prepare for the expected battle."

Certainly, as yet, there had been no fighting in Barcelona, and Police Commissioner Escofet sent a company of Assault Guards to recover the stolen arms. Guarner, the officer in charge of the raid on the CNT transport workers' local, where the arms were being stored, spoke to the prominent anarcho-syndicalist militant Buenaventura Durruti, who explained to him why the arms had been seized:

"There are times in life when it is impossible to carry out an order, no matter how highly placed the person who gave the order. It is through disobedience that man becomes civilised. In your case, then, civilise yourself by making common cause with the people. Uniforms no longer have any meaning. No other authority exists except revolutionary order, and the latter re-

quires that these guns stay in the hands of the workers.”⁶

Durruti’s sincere speech convinced the Assault Guard captain, who left with his men, taking with them a few unusable weapons, thus saving face and avoiding a confrontation. In fact, another anarcho-syndicalist activist, Juan García Oliver, turned up shortly afterwards at Escofet’s office to demand the return of these weapons. He left with four or five pistols from Escofet’s drawer.

The call to arms

The CNT Defence Committee in Barcelona had its base in the working-class district of Pueblo Nuevo. Two trucks had been modified for use as mobile headquarters, one of which was manned by the anarchists of the Nosotros affinity group, including Durruti, Francisco Ascaso, García Oliver, Gregorio Jover and Aurelio Fernández. When the CNT Defence Committee received information that the infantry regiment stationed in the Pedralbes barracks and the Montesa cavalry were being mobilised, the two CNT-FAI trucks set off for their prearranged locations.

‘Workers’ patrols posted along the way realised that the hour of the revolution had come.’⁷ Shortly afterwards, the sirens from the factories and ships in the harbour began to sound, the prearranged signal by the Barcelona CNT Defence Committee calling its supporters to arms. The other mobile command post was in the offices of the construction union, then based in the Casa Cambó, which, within 24 hours, was to become the ‘Casa CNT-FAI’. Throughout the evening of 18 July and the early hours of 19 July, the workers busied themselves making their final preparations. When the military finally left the Pedralbes barracks at 4.15 a.m. on the morning

⁶ Reported by Diego Abad de Santillán; quoted in Abel Paz, Durruti: The People Armed, Montreal, 1976.

⁷ Gómez Casas, Historia de la FAI, p. 217.

a meeting of the Nosotros group that same evening to propose a coup. He suggested that under Durruti’s leadership anarchist columns should seize the main centres of government, the Generalidad and the City chambers, the telephone exchange and the Plaza de Cataluña, and the Ministry of the Interior and Security Directorate. Durruti, who, much to García Oliver’s chagrin, had been noticeably silent during the debate, did not rise to the bait:

“García Oliver’s argument, here and during the Plenum, strikes me as splendid. His plan to carry out a coup is perfect. However, this does not seem to me to be the opportune moment. My feeling is that it should be put off until after the capture of Zaragoza, which cannot take more than ten days. I insist that we shelve these plans until Zaragoza has been taken. At present, with only Catalonia as a base, we would be reduced to the most minimal geographical area.”¹⁹

The Central Committee of the Antifascist Militias met for the first time that same night, 21 July, in the Maritime Museum, where it established its permanent headquarters. Its representation consisted of the following: CNT — 3; UGT — 3; Esquerra Republicana (Companys’s party) — 3; FAI — 1; Catalan Action — 1; POUM — 1; PSOE — 1; Union de Rabassaires (Catalan peasants’ party) — 1. A Commissioner represented the Generalidad with a military adviser. Durruti attended the committee meeting as a CNT delegate, but for the first and last time. He felt only too keenly the contradictions and tensions, which existed between the rule of the Central Committee of Antifascist Militias and the popular organs of the social revolution.

¹⁹ Juan García Oliver, El eco de los pasos, Barcelona, 1979, p.190.

in Catalonia, were assigned an equal number of positions with the triumphant CNT and anarchists.”¹⁷

In mitigation, it should be said that the overwhelming acceptance of the fateful de Santillán proposition by the Extraordinary Plenum of 21 July was due not so much to uncertain commitment to libertarian communism as to a conviction that a declaration of libertarian communism would provoke immediate international retaliation. British warships were anchored in the vicinity and, it was widely thought, preparing to land troops and occupy the city to protect British interests there. By collaborating with the bourgeois Central Committee of Antifascist Militias, the CNT delegates thought they could deceive the foreign powers and the Madrid government into believing that the bourgeois-democratic order still held in Catalonia while, in fact, the CNT-FAI wielded real economic, political and military power. Unfortunately, however, the only people deceived were themselves; on 23 July, the US Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, notified President Roosevelt that “one of the most serious factors in this situation lies in the fact that the Spanish government has distributed large quantities of arms and ammunition into the hands of irresponsible members of left wing political organisations.”¹⁸

The coup that never was — but should have been!

García Oliver claims that in spite of the overwhelming vote against the social revolution taken by the delegates at the 21 July Plenum, he still refused to accept the decision and called

¹⁷ ‘El Comitè Central de Milícies Antifascistes de Catalunya’, *Solidaridad Obrera*, 18 July 1937.

¹⁸ Dante A. Puzzo, *Spain and the Great Powers*, New York, 1962, p.160 (quoted by Noam Chomsky in ‘Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship’, in *American Power and the New Mandarins*, New York, 1968).

of 19 July to occupy strategic points in Barcelona, they were met on the streets by the people in arms. Whether they were caught up in the euphoria of the moment or, perhaps, aware of the overwhelming odds against them, first the Assault Guards and then the Guardia Civil threw in their lot with the people; then it was the turn of the soldiers on the streets to surrender their weapons.

Inside the Atarazanas Barracks, the main army stronghold in downtown Barcelona at this time, the CNT-FAI had a number of affiliates, particularly Sergeants Gordo and Manzana, who, early on 19 July, attempted to rise against their officers. They were unable to gain control of the building, but they did manage to remove machine-guns, rifles and hand-grenades, which they handed over to the CNT Defence Committee. They also established a gun emplacement in the Plaza del Teatro, which prevented the rebels in the Plaza de Catalunya from making contact with other isolated rebel forces.

The principal objective of the CNT Defence Committee was the San Andrés Barracks, because it contained the arsenal that was to make the CNT the masters of Catalonia. The anarcho-syndicalist union had the support of the air force through Lieutenant Meana. Said Escofet:

“I was terribly afraid of the consequences of what would happen if the arms in the San Andrés barracks fell into the hands of the militants — I ordered a company of the Guardia Nacional Republicana to occupy the Parque de Artillería to prevent the pillage of arms there.”

Captain Francisco Lopez Gatel was in charge — he returned shortly after with tears in his eyes, and pleaded for Escofet’s forgiveness for not having been able to fulfil the mission; the barracks had been invaded and the Captain had been unable to open

fire on the people. ‘But what a responsibility for me — and how great were to be the consequences,’ he later wrote.⁸

Company's worst nightmares

For Escofet, the situation in the city that night was truly alarming.

“The rebellion had been put down, but the rebels had destroyed the forces of ‘public order’. Thousands of people of both sexes, who had not fought, were running through the city streets, armed and wearing combat helmets and other military clothing taken from the barracks or from the soldiers; thousands of excited people, who refused to be overcome by exhaustion, did not stop celebrating — waving flags and raising the clenched fist. Civilians mingled with security guards, Assault Guards, even the CNT, unbuttoned or in shirt-sleeves, raising the clenched fist, the newly invented salute of the people in arms. In those moments, I asked myself with anguish how I could put down this popular inundation — how could I prevent it from becoming worse? The rebellion had been defeated throughout Catalonia. The tragic consequences provoked by the criminal elements of the military rebels became clear. The priority of the CNT-FAI was to implement the social revolution — utopian and unrealisable — instead of reinforcing regimented authority.”⁹

“With the rebellion over, I felt it necessary to visit President Companys in the Palacio de la Generalidad. His face showed no sign of relief at the victory we

⁸ Escofet, *De una derrota a una victoria*, p. 231.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 348.

The price of political naivety

The obvious unwillingness of the CNT and FAI leadership to press home their revolutionary advantage was not lost, either on Companys or on the central government of José Giral. In the face of a massive squatting campaign in properties abandoned by the pro-Francoist bourgeoisie, the Catalan government announced a 25 per cent cut in rents, while the Madrid government fixed the cut at 50 per cent. Instead of challenging this move by championing the socialisation of bourgeois property, by then a *fait accompli*, Solidaridad Obrera plumped for the 50 per cent rent.

García Oliver's principled opposition to collaboration with the bourgeois parties did not prevent him refusing the nomination that endorsed his membership of the Militias Committee, along with Marcos Alcón, Durruti's replacement, José Asens, Aurelio Fernández and Diego Abad de Santillán. In a commemorative article on the Militias Committee the following year, García Oliver wrote of

“the most extraordinary Plenum of Locals and Comarcals, which, summoned in haste with delegates ignorant as to the nature of the Plenum, had succeeded in overturning the fundamental principles of the CNT:

The CNT and the FAI opted for collaboration and democracy, eschewing the revolutionary single-mindedness, which simply had to have led to the revolution's being strangled by the confederal and anarchist dictatorship. They trusted in the word and in the person of a Catalan democrat and retained and supported Companys in the office of President of the Generalidad; they accepted the Militias Committee, and worked out a system of representation proportionate with numbers under which the UGT and the socialist party, though they were minority groups

in true treasures in bank notes, valuable jewels which had fallen into their hands. Some tried to purify themselves by burning bank notes. I had to fill several safes with the goods handed in ... In contrast, the crimes committed in Catalonia and throughout the Republican zone were generally inevitable excesses, ones one could expect after a great revolutionary convulsion. They were disorders of a passing and ephemeral type, not part of a system based in the force or the lack of humanity.”¹⁶

Power corrupts

The bourgeois media accounts of alleged excesses being perpetrated against their new-found partners in the struggle against fascism achieved their authors’ aim. Not only were a number of so-called ‘uncontrollable’ militants executed for ‘outrages’ committed in the first weeks of the revolution, but also the authority of the ‘higher’ committees grew increasingly more powerful. It was an authority that increasingly began to be directed against militants of their own organisation whenever they challenged that authority by overstepping certain prescribed limits that, it was felt, might upset the new-found harmony in the common struggle against fascism.

Indeed, the declarations and pronouncements that emanated from the various committees of the CNT and FAI at this time all ignored any reference to the social revolution, which was by then in full swing. Nor did they provide any guidelines. They simply limited themselves to calling off the general strike declared on 19 July, ordering a return to work and at the same time exhorting their members to press on for a military victory against fascism.

¹⁶ Escofet, *De una derrota a una victoria*, p. 350.

had achieved in Barcelona and throughout Catalonia against the military rebellion, a triumph that should have consolidated the authority and prestige of the government of the Generalidad. On the contrary, his face expressed a profound gravity, showing mixed emotions — sadness and worry. Possibly, he saw similar emotions reflected in my face, certainly those were the ones that I felt. ‘President’, I told him, ‘I come to communicate with you officially that the rebellion has been completely overcome. The last strongholds and redoubts have been taken. All the rebel chiefs and officers are prisoners. All that remains are one or two snipers.’

“Yes, Escofet, very well,’ the President replied. ‘But the situation is chaotic. The armed and uncontrollable mob is rampaging through the streets, committing every type of excess. And, on the other hand the CNT, powerfully armed, is master of the city and holder of power — what can we do?’

‘President’, I added, ‘I undertook to dominate the military revolt in Barcelona, and I have done this. But an authority requires the means of coercion to make itself obeyed, and these do not exist today. As a result, there is no authority. And I, my dear President, do not know how to perform miracles. I have spoken with General Aranguren, commander of the GNR and also head of its IV Organic Divisions, and with General Arando, head of the Assault and Security Guards, and both are convinced, as am I, that in order to re-establish public order, we would have to embark on a battle as great as the one we have just completed, and this simply is not possible. How can we expect our Guardias, tired but euphoric with victory, to confront the people with

whom they have been fighting for those same ideals of liberty? If we were mad enough to try it, we would never succeed. For the same reason, and for humanity, the forces of public order did not fire on those who invaded San Andrés, in spite of the fact we knew we would lose all the arms. For the moment, we are all overcome by the situation, including the leaders of the CNT. The only solution, President, is to contain the situation politically, without minimising our respective authorities.”¹⁰

Psychological and strategic objectives

As indicated earlier, the focal point of the rebellion in Catalonia was the Atarazanas Barracks. The metalworkers’ union of the CNT insisted that its capture be their responsibility alone. They felt it a point of honour to avenge their comrades who had fallen in the Ramblas and in the streets adjacent to the barracks. Throughout the night of the 19–20 July, the libertarians fought, going forward cautiously, establishing barricades and setting up advance positions that would permit an attack on the barracks. Tejedor, secretary of the metalworkers’ union, gave the following account of the attack:

“The glorious feat of the Atarazanas capture was the exclusive achievement of the men of the CNT. The Guardia Civil wanted to take part in the attack, but we would not permit this. It was a matter of honour. On 20 July comrade Durruti shouted to everyone — ‘Forward the men of the CNT!’ So began the epic attack which overshadowed the capture of the Bastille by the people of Paris.”¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 352.

¹¹ Miguel Garçla, *The Miguel Garçla Story*, Sanday, Orkney, 1982.

“For a period of two days, Barcelona was reduced to two armies, each struggling to vanquish the other, and there is nothing like the stench of gunpowder to unleash all the instincts that man carries in his soul. Then again, the convulsions reached a point where control was lost over those folk whose sole concern is to satisfy their selfish whims and vengeful instincts. To these and to these alone do we owe it that this week (and not so many as reputed) have been perpetrated in Barcelona events that the CNT and, with it, all of the organisations that have participated in the revolution, would have preferred not to see perpetrated. Nonetheless, we cannot join in the chorus of those who, when all is said and done, carry the responsibility, not merely for the fascist revolt but also for having kept the people for years and years on end in a condition of permanent destitution and an even more lingering ignorance. Since these eternal grumblers fail to do so, we are under an obligation to point out that the looting has not been the whole story. Countless valuables discovered during searches and in burned buildings have not wound up in anyone’s private possession. The organisation of the CNT and the Antifascist Militias’ Committee have in their safekeeping precious metals and objets d’art to the value of four million pesetas. The daily newspapers have carried reports on countless instances of the surrender of such items by workers who might not have had a crumb to eat within the week — who can tell?”

Honouring the libertarians, Escofet said:

“I should recognise their honesty and the romanticism of many of them who went out of their way to hand

Ramón Sales in Barcelona and Inocencio Feced in Alicante were examples of men who had been involved in the murders of thousands of workers under the terrorist regime of Generals Anido and Arlegui and who had been summarily executed. There were also numerous cases of outrages and the settling of old scores by ‘revolutionists of the last moment’ as a means of establishing their credibility as militants.

Law and order

It was the sensitive question of ‘law and order’ that provided the bourgeoisie with their first point of leverage against the CNT. The CNT and FAI leaderships in Catalonia had shown themselves eager to establish their credentials as honourable and responsible members of the ‘revolutionary’ government, the Central Committee of Antifascist Militias. Following a sustained misinformation campaign of exaggerated allegations, half-truths and downright lies made by a near-hysterical bourgeoisie, offended and threatened by the close attention paid to their class by the union-organised patrols and search parties, the Regional Committee and the Local Federation of CNT unions of Barcelona rose to the bait, and broadcast a warning on Radio Barcelona on 25 July, day five of the social revolution, that the CNT and FAI, as “the authentic representatives of the antifascist proletariat” had “resolved upon very severe measures” which would be “enforced without a second thought” against any person or persons caught looting.

‘For they are all honourable men’

Solidaridad Obrera, on the other hand, had a more considered perspective on the alleged breakdown of ‘law and order’.

The capture of the Atarazanas fortress was not a major military objective — the rebellion had already been defeated; but it was a psychological success for the anarcho-syndicalists. The weapons taken from the armoury and the ammunition stores provided the workers with much-needed war materiel, while the capture of General Manuel Goded, leader of the rising in Catalonia and the Balearics, was a major propaganda victory that seriously undermined fascist and bourgeois morale. The CNT Defence Committee of Catalonia, which had been responsible for the defeat of the nationalist rising in Barcelona, refused to accept Goded’s surrender. Instead, they chose to press on with the fight until all the rebels had either been wiped out or surrendered. The terms of Goded’s surrender, accepted by Companys, were broadcast from the Generalidad Palace. However, they referred only to himself; he did not order the surrender of the troops under his command: ‘I must declare to the Spanish people that luck has not been with me. From this moment on, any who seek to continue fighting should no longer count on me.’ The CNT Defence Committee’s decision to fight on after the capture of Goded was to invest the resistance with a revolutionary depth, and to break the myth that the working class would always be beaten by the army. Had the activists of the CNT-FAI laid down their weapons following Goded’s surrender and returned home, as the bourgeois politicians no doubt hoped, there would have been no social revolution, and the unions would have been reduced to mere auxiliaries of the forces of public order. Instead, thirty-six hours after the military rising started on mainland Spain, bourgeois power had collapsed, and the workers, the majority of whom aligned themselves with the anarcho-syndicalist CNT, controlled the streets of the capital and had become the de facto power in Barcelona.

Overnight, power had shifted from the smoke-filled committee rooms of the Generalidad Palace to the union locals of Barcelona. The CNT controlled arms, transport and communications. As head of the Generalidad, Companys, a remarkably astute, Machiavellian

politician, recognised this and immediately began manoeuvring to salvage what he could from the situation and suffocate the looming social revolution before it had time to draw breath and displace the order and power structure for ever. Confident of his ability to win the collaboration of the most influential anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist militants, Companys invited CNT-FAI representatives to his office, where leaders of the other Catalan parties — bourgeois and Marxist — had already been assembled in an adjoining room.

The pivotal mistake

It was Juan García Oliver and Buenaventura Durruti who came on behalf of the CNT in response to Companys's call on 20 July. They arrived straight from the barricades as victors of the day, 'armed to the teeth É shabby and soiled by dust and smoke',¹² to listen to the wily Companys's honeyed speech. García Oliver has given the following account of what Companys had to say:

"Before I begin, I must say that the CNT and FAI have not received the treatment, which they merit by virtue of their true importance — I have found myself obliged to confront and persecute you. You are now masters of the city and Catalonia, for you alone have defeated the fascist soldiery — the fact is that today, you, who were subject to harassment up until yesterday, have seen off the fascists and the military. Knowing, then, who and what you are, I can but address you in tones of utmost sincerity. You have won and everything lies at your feet; if you have any need of me, or no longer want me as president of Catalonia, just say the word now and I shall become just another foot soldier in the struggle against fascism. I, along with the men of

¹² Juan García Oliver, *Solidaridad Obrera* (Barcelona), 19 July 1937.

the militias committee approved." This was passed, for the reasons set forth at the end of the following year by Mariano R. Vázquez, by then the secretary of the National Committee of the CNT, in his report to the International Working Men's Association (AIT):

"The situation was analysed, and it was unanimously decided not to mention Libertarian Communism until such time as we had captured that part of Spain that was in the hands of the rebels. Consequently, the Plenum resolved not to press on towards the complete achievement of our revolutionary aims, for we were facing a problem: imposing a dictatorship — wiping out all the guards and activists from the political parties who had played their part in the victory over the rebels on 19 and 20 July; a dictatorship which, in any event, would be crushed from without even if it succeeded from within. The Plenum, with the exception of the Regional Federation of Bajo Llobregat, opted for collaboration with the other political parties and organisations in setting up the Central Committee of Antifascist Militias (CCMA). On the decision of this Plenum, the CNT and the FAI sent their representatives to it."

The world turned upside down

By now, the Catalan middle classes were horrified by the social revolution that was gathering momentum before their eyes. Their world was being turned upside down and they shrilly denounced the anarcho-syndicalists as responsible for the excesses and outrages that occurred in the wake of the workers' resistance to the military uprising. The people in arms had begun to settle old scores, directing their fury against the more notorious torturers, gunmen and professional informers of the Republic and the Dictatorship.

inexorably to oligarchy. Bakunin had been very conscious of these dangers sixty years before, and made the point clearly in God and the State —

“There should be no fixed and constant authority, but mutual and voluntary authority. Society should not indulge men of genius, nor should it accord them special rights or privileges because: it would often mistake a charlatan for a man of genius; because through such systems of privileges it might even transform a genius into a charlatan; it would establish a master over itself.”

The representatives of the Regional Committee returned to the Generalidad Palace that same evening to begin provisional discussions with the Catalan politicians — José Taradellas, Artemio Aiguader and Jaime Miravillas of the Republican Left of Catalonia; Pey Poch of Catalan Action; Juan Comorera of the Socialist Union of Catalonia; Rafael Vidiella of the UGT and PSOE (Partido Socialista Obrero Española; and Julian Gorkin of the POUM (Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista). The Estat Catalá was disbarred from participating in the Militias Committee on the grounds that its leader, Dencás, was a fascist, who had fled to Italy.

The following day, 21 July, the CNT Regional Committee hastily summoned an Extraordinary Assembly of Regional Plenums. According to José Peirats,¹⁵ this was not, in fact, a properly constituted Plenum of Unions with an agenda to be discussed in a regular way by the union delegates; it was, rather, a gathering of militants at Regional Committee level who — present in a personal capacity — had no mandate or authority to decide on the issues under discussion. More than a month was to pass before a regular Plenum of the Catalan CNT unions was held. At the 21 July meeting, de Santillán, for the FAI, moved that “libertarian communism be waived [i.e., abandoned — SC] as an immediate objective, and participation in

¹⁵ *Noir et Rouge* (Paris), No. 36, December 1967.

my party, my name and my prestige, may be of use in the struggle which has ended so felicitously in this city today — you may rely upon me and my loyalty as a man and a politician convinced that today has seen the demise of a whole dishonourable past, as a man who honestly wishes to see Catalonia march in the van of the most socially progressive countries.”¹³

The President went on to suggest that under his chairmanship the CNT-FAI, together with all the antifascist parties, should set up “an organ capable of pursuing the revolutionary struggle until victory is assured.” This ad hoc ruling body was to be known as the Central Committee of Antifascist Militias (CCMA). After preliminary discussions with the assembled bourgeois and Marxist politicians, García Oliver told them that their suggestion for the Central Committee of Antifascist Militias was a matter for the Regional Committee of the CNT to decide, and that they would be informed as soon as this was done. Company’s artful flattery and skilful manoeuvring had its desired effect.¹⁴ The anarchist militants who had gone into the meeting as victors emerged as the vanquished. García Oliver and Durruti gave their respective accounts of Company’s proposal to the Regional Committee of the CNT. Uncertain as to the role of that organisation, now that the military and the bourgeoisie had been routed, and that power had passed into the

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ It seems unlikely that García Oliver would have required much convincing even by the least artful of flatterers. Peirats mentions García Oliver speaking of ‘taking power’ at a public meeting in the Barcelona Woodworkers Union in ‘January or February 1936’. He had also pressed this case during a restricted meeting of ‘notables’ held just before the CNT regional conference to discuss the February 1936 elections. The ‘restricted’ meeting, which took place ‘behind the back of the Organisation’, was to forestall an anti-election campaign such as that which had cost the Left the elections in November 1933. As Peirats notes, ‘Out of it undoubtedly came the summoning of the conference, which did indeed recommend a low-key campaign against the elections. So low key that it was virtually non-existent.’ José Peirats, *Presencia*, Paris, 1967, p. 46.

hands of the working classes, the members of the Regional Committee were anxiously pondering CNT strategy. The ambiguous role of the unions in the revolution had been debated at great length at the CNT's national congress at Zaragoza in May that year. Federico Urales, the father of the anarchist Federica Montseny, had argued, convincingly, that the great unions and the mammoth industrial federations would cease to exist "by reason of the sustained decentralisation of the federal compact of solidarity." Implicit in his argument was that revolution spelled death for the old system — including the CNT and FAI as organisations. Urales's argument was not made explicitly, but it could be deduced from his words on the producer-consumer relationship, in which he indicated that the producer both had a sphere of economic influence in the workplace and was an administrative-political consumer within the municipality. Because the assembly was sovereign in work as well as in the municipality, there could be no room for anything separate from and outside these two aspects of daily life.

The question of power

The committee of the Catalan Regional Confederation of the CNT, whose secretary at the time was Mariano R. Vázquez, opted, however, to deal with the question of power on Companys's terms rather than to accept the fact that the popular organs of the social revolution which were being thrown up by the people in arms had made it redundant. The erstwhile defence committees of the CNT and FAI, representing 60 per cent of Barcelona's working class, had, with the collapse of bourgeois power, superseded their organisational identity and become the popular revolutionary committees of each barrio or village, natural organisms of the revolution itself. On the other hand, by choosing political collaboration, the Regional Committee of the CNT began to transform itself from being an instrument of its membership into a self-serving

institution concerned only with its own survival; its legitimate authority, derived from its long tradition of direct democracy and accountability, was to become coercive power.

The Central Committee of Antifascist Militias

Companys was contacted by telephone, and informed of the Regional Committee's acceptance, in principle, of the setting up of a Central Committee of Antifascist Militias for Catalonia, pending the agreement of all the other parties — and, of course, the decision of a Plenum of local CNT unions, which would be convened as soon as possible. In the meantime, Durruti, García Oliver and Aurelio Fernández were empowered by the Regional Committee to continue negotiations to ensure that should the Plenum agree to the setting up of the Central Committee of Antifascist Militias then it would come into operation promptly and smoothly.

Apart from flying in the face of anarchist principles, it should be stressed that the decision of the Regional Committee to continue negotiations with the politicians and the remnants of the state apparatus was directly contrary to normal CNT practice — which was to have no dealings whatsoever with political parties or representatives of the state until the organisation itself had pronounced on the matter. It was a decision that reflected a long-standing weakness within the CNT.

Dangers of indulging 'men of genius'

Because there was no paid trade union apparatus, it was believed that neither bureaucracy nor 'leaderism' existed within the organisation. However, this was not quite the case. The deference of the rank and file to the 'natural' leaders who had won the workers' trust by their personal sacrifice and commitment to the 'idea' led

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Stuart Christie
A Study of the Revolution in Spain, 1936–1937
1998

Retrieved on 2012-01-24 from
[https://web.archive.org/web/20120124213836/http://
flag.blackened.net/revolt/spain/scRevSpain/intro.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20120124213836/http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/spain/scRevSpain/intro.html)
First published in Great Britain 1998 by The Meltzer Press.

theanarchistlibrary.org

Delbos, were to suggest that the main European powers sign a non-intervention pact. Britain accepted the proposal eagerly, and without delay. It was believed that if there was no international intervention then the Republican government could suppress the rebels on its own, thus avoiding an open clash developing between the great powers. After some delay caused by Portugal and Italy's refusal to sign (both these countries were providing assistance to the Spanish rebels), these four countries together with Russia and Germany signed the six-power non-intervention Pact. The Axis powers had no intention of observing this agreement, or of permitting any moves to enforce it if such steps threatened to hamper the insurgents in any way, and only agreed to it knowing that it would do greater damage to the Republican cause than to that of the rebels.

The Social Revolution

The military rising of 17 July ignited more than a heroic working-class resistance; it fired joyous elemental hopes among Spanish workers and peasants, hope fuelled by over sixty years of anarchist agitation and propaganda, and unleashed a social revolution that threatened to sweep all before it, transforming what had hitherto been a utopian dream into reality. Spain was to show the world the way of free communism — of anarchy, putting into practice ideas that had been formulated by the experiences of earlier generations of anarchist thinkers and militants and in the various insurrectionary rehearsals for the free society that took place in Spain between 1931 and 1936. Having gained control of the streets, the rescue of a treacherous bourgeois republic from the clutches of rightist generals was the thing furthest from the minds of the Spanish people. From the first moment of the rising, the initiative passed from a hesitant bourgeoisie, not to the intellectuals³¹ or party or

³¹ Gaston Leval found only two lawyers among the organisers of the libertarian communist collectives in Aragón, but even they, he says, were not strictly

union leaders, but to the rank and file of the organised working class, a substantial number of whom either belonged to the CNT or FAI or shared a belief in what those initials stood for — a free and just society.

A radical transformation of the social order had begun to take place throughout most of free Spain. Eyewitness Burnett Bolloten, a UPI correspondent in Madrid at the outbreak of the rising, prefaces his study of the first eighteen months of the Civil War, *The Grand Camouflage*, thus:

“Although the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in July, 1936, was followed by a far-reaching social revolution in the anti-Franco camp — more profound in some respects than the Bolshevik Revolution in its early stages — millions of discerning people outside Spain were kept in ignorance, not only of its depth and range, but even of its existence, by virtue of a policy of duplicity and dissimulation of which there is no parallel in history³²

intellectuals. ‘It was not by the work of our intellectuals — more literary than sociological, more agitators than practical guides — that the future has been illuminated. And the peasants — libertarian or not — of Aragón, Levante, Castile, Extremadura, Andalucía, the workers of Catalonia, understood this and acted alone. ‘The intellectuals, due to their ineptitude in practical work, were inferior to the peasants, who made no political speeches, but knew how to organise the new life. Not even the authors of the syndicalist health organisation in Catalonia were intellectuals. A Basque doctor with a will of iron, and a few comrades working in hospitals, did everything. In other regions, talented professional men aided the movement. But there, too, the initiative came from below. Alcoy’s industries, so well organised, were all managed by the workers, as were those of Elda and Castillon. In Carcagente, in Elda, in Granollers, in Binefar, in Jativa, in land transport, in marine transport, in the collectives of Castile, or in the semi-socialisation of Ripolls and Puigcerdà — the militants at the bottom did everything. As for the government, they were as inept in organising the economy as in organising the war.’ (Gaston Leval, *Ne Franco ne Stalin*, Milan, 1952.)

³² Burnett Bolloten, *The Grand Camouflage*.

War and revolution

After the initial successes of the anarchist movement, there were three distinct points of view on the question of war and revolution.

The first position was that held by most people. In the early stages, the majority of rank-and-file militants believed that the war would be over in a matter of weeks. After all, a few days had been sufficient to rout the army in Barcelona and other industrial centres. They believed that the revolution and libertarian communism, as debated and adopted by the CNT's Zaragoza Congress of May that year, was an inseparable aspect of the struggle against economic and social oppression and proceeded immediately to socialise the factories, land and their communities, whatever the formal declarations and alliances made by many of the 'leaders'.

The second position was that held by those 'leaders' — members of the Regional and National Committees of the CNT and the Peninsular Committee of the FAI, such as Montseny, Santillán (in the earlier stages), García Oliver, and others — who anticipated a lengthy war and opposed implementing libertarian communism until that war had been won. They opted instead for compromise and alliances with the bourgeois and Marxist parties. They argued that this path would prevent a situation developing wherein a victorious but exhausted CNT might be overwhelmed by another political force that had been more sparing with its might. It was a fatal strategy, which soon absorbed them, undermined their principles and transformed what had hitherto been a great instrument of the working class into just another bureaucratic institution. They had ignored the experiences of the previous twelve years or so, which showed clearly that the bourgeois republicans and reformist socialists would seize every opportunity to persecute the libertarian revolutionaries without mercy. The socialists had unhesitatingly persecuted the libertarians under the Primo de Rivera Dictatorship from

1923 to 1930.³³ Then, the CNT was outlawed and forced to operate clandestinely, while the still-legal reformist UGT was especially favoured by the elevation of its general secretary Largo Caballero to the position of Minister of Labour – a situation that both in this and in some other respects almost made the UGT itself a fascist labour front.³⁴ There had also been the vicious suppression, by the socialists and left republicans generally, both of the revolutionary rising at Casas Viejas in Andalucía in 1932, one of many throughout Spain during the period, in which libertarian communism was declared, and of the CNT generally by means of legislation echoing that of the Dictatorship.

Clearly, the collaborationists did not appreciate that to make common cause with your enemies can be fatal. They will continue to persecute you and may well even betray you to your common new enemy. Also, to insist that ordinary people were denied the transformation of their everyday lives that a revolution brings was the quickest way for them to lose interest in the struggle against fascism. Obviously, the collaborationists did not see this. To be realistic, this is not surprising. Their persecutors suddenly became their allies and their flatterers, almost coercing them into opportunism by the enormous pressures they placed upon them. García Oliver had spent almost the entire period of the Dictatorship in prison, then emerged to a hero's welcome, which he had no doubt earned.

³³ The Primo de Rivera Dictatorship ran from his pronunciamiento (coup d'État) in September 1923 to January 1930. There then followed a brief 'Soft Dictatorship', with limited civil liberties including the partial legalisation of the CNT in April 1930, lasting till the birth of the Second Republic in April 1931.

³⁴ The PSOE-UGT collaborated shamelessly with the Dictatorship, attempting to exploit the difficulties of the banned CNT. Besides Largo Caballero's presence in the government, members of the UGT sat in pseudo-fascist, state-run labour courts that tried and sentenced strikers of the CNT, the UGT and other affiliations (or none) for defending their own living standards and working conditions. However, under Primo de Rivera there was no single state 'union', nor was the UGT the only legal one, so his industrial policy was not a fascist one like those of Mussolini or Hitler, or indeed Franco.

After this, to be suddenly offered a ministry could turn anybody's head.

The third body of opinion, unfortunately a minority one held by militants such as Durruti, Camillo Berneri, Jaime Balius, and, later, Santillán, also anticipated a lengthy war, but held that war and revolution were inseparable. Only a libertarian revolution could finally destroy fascism, because to do so meant destroying the state, since fascism only means a certain mode of the state: all states turn fascist when the threat to the privilege that the state protects, and to a degree also embodies, becomes strong enough, which happens when the participatory procedures of the state can no longer secure that privilege. Fascism, in other words, is enforced class collaboration, as opposed to the voluntary class collaboration of parliamentary government. The collectivisations, requisitions and impoundments of land and capitalist property were, therefore, a fait accompli foisted upon the higher committees by popular assemblies of a triumphant rank and file. These higher committees were now primarily concerned with winning the military war, assuring public order, restoring normality in the field of production, and reassuring their bourgeois allies that they had nothing to fear from the anarchist movement. Already, the bureaucratic conservatism fostered by a unique political situation, and one brought about by a life and death struggle at that prompted the fateful decision to give priority to the war over social revolution. It led to an unbridgeable gap between the higher committees and the assemblies, which were equally pressured into preoccupation with the very real practical tasks of reconstruction.

Collectivisation

There were two types of expropriation of capitalist property. One, partial expropriation, which could be described as nationalisation, was the preferred socialist solution; the other, total

expropriation, was the anarchist option. Incautación (forfeiture), the anarchist solution, meant workers' self-management based on the libertarian principles of mutual aid and solidarity. The socialists, through the UGT unions, opted for *intervención*, a system of partial control with workers' delegates and management representatives participating jointly in the running of the factory. Other collectives were, in fact, run as cooperatives, with workers, having taken over the factory or workshop, simply utilising the existing money system and maintaining normal market relations among themselves, their suppliers and customers.

Often, however, the ultimate decision as to which type of administration — whether socialised, nationalised or co-operative — had as much to do with economic and diplomatic factors as the political affiliation of the workforce. Factors militating against outright socialisation, particularly in the larger industries, included the loss of home and foreign markets, and shortages of raw materials and foreign currency, the latter often contrived deliberately by the bourgeois central government in Madrid; while further difficulties arose from the dependence of the major industries on foreign capital. José Peirats quotes the example of the Belgian consul in Barcelona, who informed the CNT metalworkers' union that 80 per cent of the Barrat foundry was controlled by Belgian shareholders. When the firm was expropriated, orders evaporated.³⁵ The Regional Committee of the CNT, anxious to avoid a diplomatic confrontation that might upset the prosecution of the war, leaned over backwards to accommodate the capitalist powers, who, with the British and other foreign warships anchored offshore, were making thinly veiled threats of intervention if their interests were threatened.

On 27 July, Mariano R. Vázquez, secretary of the Regional Confederation of the CNT in Catalonia, met the British consul in Barcelona, who presented him with a list of 87 companies in

carry the revolution on the points of their bayonets and supplying the new egalitarian economic order. We must, therefore, addressing ourselves to the government in Madrid, give it the choice between defeat in the war and the revolution and victory.”

He also urged the anarchist press to cure itself of its intoxication by the unfortunate spirit of ‘holy union’, which “has ended up by reducing political criticism to an imperceptible minimum. *Solidaridad Obrera*, by praising the Bolshevik government of the USSR, albeit in parenthesis, reached the heights of political naïvety.”

Bernerí ended his public criticism:

“To reconcile the ‘necessities of war’, the ‘will’ of the revolution and the ‘aspirations’ of anarchism: there lies the problem. This problem must be resolved. On it depend the military victory against fascism, the creation of a new economy, the social deliverance of Spain and the evaluation of the anarchists’ beliefs and actions. Three great things which merit every sacrifice and impose on each the duty to have the courage to state his own beliefs in their entirety”.: [72]

³⁵ Peirats, *La CNT en la revolución española*. Vol. 1 pp167-8.

more favourable reception from the new socialist premier, Largo Caballero, who agreed to recognise the Council provided the specifically CNT membership was dropped and other parties represented. Caballero's positive response had, no doubt, much to do with bringing the autonomous body under Madrid's control, and also the military situation at the time. The fall of the capital appeared imminent, and both Caballero and Manuel Azana, the president of the republic, were desperately trying to entice the CNT into the new government.

Berneri's strategy

That same day, 24 October, Italian anarchist writer Camillo Berneri offered constructive suggestions in his paper *Guerra di Clase* as to how the anarcho-syndicalist movement could pursue a revolutionary strategy and fight the war at the same time. By breaking off diplomatic relations with Portugal, Italy and Germany, the Spanish Republic would force the Allies to adopt a more resolute position. Fomenting revolution in the operational base of the insurgent army, Morocco, would seriously weaken the enemy. Other suggestions included taking stronger measures against the fascist rearguard, and the reconstruction of the Spanish diplomatic corps under the orders of a National Defence Committee.[71]

Berneri's unrelenting commitment to the anarchist ideal soon brought him into open conflict with the CNT-FAI leadership. On 5 November, the day after the CNT joined the Caballero government, he warned his comrades through the columns of *Guerra di Clase*:

"Madrid is not content just to reign; it wants to govern as well. As a whole, the Spanish government is just as hostile to the social revolution as to monarchist and clerical fascism. Madrid desired a 'return to legality' and nothing else. Arming Catalonia, financing Catalonia, that signifies to Madrid arming the columns that

which Britain expressed an 'interest' and whose premises were to be protected against socialisation. The following day, the Regional Committee issued a statement that indicated how far its members had developed into a deferential bureaucratic elite under the pressures of war and the dynamic of power:

"From the outset, the Confederal Organisation has given a wide berth to anything that might cause friction with foreign powers; as those in control of the current situation, our line has been that the battle was against fascism, but that at all costs a situation of tension that might furnish other nations with an excuse to intervene in the fighting on Spanish soil to favour an international defence of capitalism had to be avoided. Yesterday this committee received a visit from a delegation from the British Consulate seeking some formula that might avert the perpetration by militians of acts that might prompt intervention from outside. A formula was agreed according to which we, for our part, would publish a list of British firms established in Barcelona and which are to be respected — now all comrades are aware that these establishments have to be respected. This does not preclude the exercise of vigilance lest anyone seek to abuse the agreement and, under cover of that agreement, to favour the conspiracy of enemy forces. Should such be the case, the responsibility will fall fully upon the British Consulate. We have already expressed our willingness to respect foreign holdings.

— The Regional Committee."

Equality and freedom

The achievements of anarchist communism in Spain between July 1936 and the end of 1937 undermine all the conventional perspectives of liberal and socialist thought. The agricultural collectives provide the clearest examples of anarchist ideas in action, simply because life in the country was less complex in the city. Collectivisation involved the take-over of privately owned land and working it under self-management. The facts, recorded by contemporary eyewitnesses, are documented in numerous works by Bolloren, Sam Dolgoff, Ronald Fraser, Leval, Frank Mintz, Peirats, Agustín Souchy and others. These accounts of the great experiment should not be studied as mere history, but as Murray Bookchin points out, as “the raw material from which we can construct a realistic vision of a libertarian society.”³⁶ Among the best known of these descriptions and, according to eye witness Manuel Cruells, a Catalan journalist, the account that captured the mood and ‘political reality’ of Barcelona with ‘complete fidelity’ was that penned by George Orwell in *Homage to Catalonia*:

“It was the first time 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. Every shop and café had an inscription saying it had been collectivised; even the bootblacks had been collectivised and their boxes painted red and black. Waiters and shop-walkers looked you in the face and treated you as an equal.

³⁶ Murray Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists: the Heroic Years 1886–1936*, NY: Free Life Editions, 1977.

the Catalan Regional Committee of the CNT, but also with the National Committee of the CNT, which was by now working in close collaboration with the bourgeois and Marxist political parties and the state apparatus. Mariano R. Vazquez, secretary first of the Catalan Regional Committee and then later of the National Committee, had first made his opposition to the Regional Defence Council clear during an inter-regional meeting in Caspe at the end of August 1936.

Aragón isolated

The oligarchisation and hostility of the national leadership of the CNT left the militants of Aragón isolated. Their Regional Defence Council was faced with the problem of attempting to retain its libertarian character, relate to the political and geographic circumstances in Aragón and at the same time work with the other elements of republican Spain. The Council decided to send a delegation to Barcelona and Madrid to discuss their relationship with the Generalidad and the central government in Madrid. The delegation was led by two anarchists, namely Joaquín Ascaso, the Council president, and Miguel Chueca, the CNT regional committee representative, and two republicans.

Rolling back the revolution

Meanwhile Companys, the Catalan president, had had three months to rebuild his power base, and to contain and begin the process of rolling back the revolution. Gone was the deference and gratitude to the anarchist saviours of 20 July. He was undisguisedly hostile to the Aragonese, and described the proposed autonomous Council of Aragón as an absurdity which would seriously damage the country’s international image.[70] The representatives then moved on to Madrid in early November, where they received a

organised an assembly of militia, village, and trade union representatives from Rioja and Navarre, which was held in Bujaraloz on 6 October 1936. Francisco Muñoz, the regional secretary of the Aragonese CNT, outlined proposals for the formation of a special regional committee which would ensure that the Aragonese region was ready and able “to organise itself in this revolutionary hour and re-establish its personality among the other Iberian peoples, in preparation for the great federation of the future.”[67]

In spite of opposition from the two Catalan militia leaders, Gregorio Jover and Antonio Ortiz, the Aragonese delegates at the Bujaraloz assembly, encouraged by Durruti, supported the proposals and the Regional Defence Council of Aragón was born with the specific objective of implementing libertarian communism. The meeting also decided to press for the setting up of a National Defence Committee which would link together a series of regional bodies that were organised on principles similar to the one now established in Aragón.[68]

Cesar Lorenzo, the CNT historian, has underlined the revolutionary nature of this decision by the Aragonese in comparison with the collaborationist role of the CNT’s Catalan Regional Committee:

“That which the Catalan libertarians did not dare do, that is to say take all the power, was attempted by the Aragonese libertarians, despite the war that ravaged the countryside, despite the continual presence of important contingencies of the POUM, the PSUC and Catalan forces, despite repercussions abroad, despite the Madrid government, and, finally, despite the CNT itself.” [69]

The formation of the Regional Defence Council was an affirmation of commitment to the principles of libertarian communism. This principled stand for revolutionary social and economic change brought the newly formed Council into direct conflict not just with

Servile and even ceremonial forms of address had temporarily disappeared. Nobody said ‘señor’ or ‘Don’ or even ‘Usted’; everyone called everyone else ‘comrade’ and ‘thou’, and said ‘salud!’ instead of ‘buenos días’. Tipping was forbidden by law; almost my first experience was receiving a lecture from a hotel manager for trying to tip a liftboy. 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. The revolutionary posters were everywhere, flaming from the walls in clean reds and blues that made the few remaining advertisements look like daubs of mud. 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; there was much in it that I did not understand, in some ways I did not even like it, but I recognised it immediately as a state of affairs worth fighting for. Also, I believed that things were as they appeared, that this was really a workers’ state and that the bourgeoisie had either fled, been killed, or voluntarily come over to the workers’ side; I did not realise that great numbers of well-to-do bourgeois were simply lying low and disguising themselves as proletarians for the time being.

Together with all this there was something of the evil atmosphere of war. The town had a gaunt untidy look, roads and buildings were in poor repair, the streets at night were dimly lit for fear of air raids, and the shops were mostly shabby and half-empty. Meat was scarce and milk practically unobtainable, there was a shortage of coal, sugar, and petrol, and a really serious shortage of bread. Even at this period the bread queues were often hundreds of yards long. Yet so far as one could judge the people were contented and hopeful. There was no unemployment, and the price of living was still extremely low; you saw very few conspicuously destitute people, and no beggars except the gypsies. 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. In the barbers' shops were anarchist notices (the barbers were mostly anarchists) solemnly explaining that barbers were no longer slaves. In the streets were coloured posters appealing to prostitutes to stop being prostitutes. To anyone from the hard-boiled, sneering civilisation of the English-speaking races there was something pathetic in the literalness with which these idealistic Spaniards took the hackneyed phrases of revolution³⁷

Imaginative experiments

Imaginative experiments in collectivisation were not confined to industry and agriculture; they took place in the public sector as

³⁷ See Appendix: 'Libertarian Communism' (to be published in a later instalment).

understanding. The work of collectivisation which has been initiated will be able to proceed, though a portion of it will have to be reviewed and amended insofar as it is not consonant with any collectivist precept nor principle of socialisation. Woe to those who may attempt to overcome it by violence, for theirs will be the immeasurable responsibility for having aborted everything. And the triumph of the people in this criminal war, this war in which the people squanders its blood in torrents that nobody, no matter how sublime his intentions may be, may frustrate. No matter how great may be the lack of perception of the potential of this unique hour in our history, and no matter how great may be the (to some extent, natural) lack of understanding in the proletarian multitudes, I do not accept that anything or anybody has the right to succumb to the lunacy of easing fascism's triumph, which is synonymous with humiliation, indignity, slavery and death." [65]

The following day, Jaime Balius, one of the 'uncontrollable' anarchist militants who had been warning against applying the brakes to the revolution, warned:

"Let us remember that should any centralising organ come into existence, the creative opportunities that have cost so much blood and for which so much blood has yet to be shed, will largely be lost to us." [66]

The Council of Aragón

To protect the hard-won land of the rural communities and the new society the people of Aragón were building, the regional committee of the CNT, acting in concert with Durruti and his column,

and its conversion into a great people's army, and the strengthening of discipline." [63]

It was Article 15, however, the final, chilling one, which showed just how far down the road of bureaucratic conservatism this once great libertarian organisation had gone:

"We are agreed upon common action to stamp out the harmful activities of uncontrollable groups which, out of lack of understanding or malice, pose a threat to the implementation of this programme." [64]

Warning to the 'uncontrollables'

Also on that same day, 23 October, the anarchist minister in the Generalidad Juan Peiró gave the leadership's analysis of the situation, together with a thinly veiled warning to the 'uncontrollables' on Radio CNT-FAI:

"The war's end will lead to a transitional arrangement, and will do so because there is no other more rational, more logical, more just course, because our sense of justice on this occasion cannot be dis severed from the straight and narrow path of the law of rewards. If we all make our contribution to success in the war, then it is only fair that we should all share in the fruits of the revolution. What does compromise matter, if compromise now be the only way to triumph? In my own view, my brothers of all the peoples of Iberia, the transitional arrangement best suited to the circumstances being created by the war and revolution, is a Socialist Federal Republic. What matters, and what presently takes priority over everything else, is that we and others are capable of compromise on a basis of mutual

well. In Barcelona an average of 3,000 sacks of flour were required each day for the 745 bakeries scattered throughout the city. The Bakers' Section of the CNT decided to socialise all bakeries in the city, thereby rationalising production and reducing unnecessary costs.

The socialisation of the health services was another great achievement of the revolution. In Catalonia, most of the health workers, including porters and doctors, were united in one union. The service was completely reorganised, with the region being divided into nine administrative zones with 36 health centres co-ordinating health services in every village in the region. The centres were autonomous, but if a problem arose in a particular region they would ask for specialist assistance and a doctor would be drafted from another area. People were no longer required to pay for medical services. Each collective, if it could afford it, would pay a contribution to its health centre. Building and facilities were improved and modern equipment introduced. In Barcelona alone, six new hospitals and eight new sanatoriums were opened during the course of the revolution.

As foreseen by writers such as Isaac Puente,³⁸ collectivisation in the countryside was easier to implement and was more successful than similar ventures in industry. There were two main reasons for this: firstly, villages and rural communities tend to have a strong sense of community and a collective tradition; secondly, anarchist traditions were particularly strong in the country areas.

Land seizures

The military rising had triggered off spontaneous land seizures by the landless peasants and day labourers, particularly of the enormous estates of the big landowners, the latifundistas. In other cases, such as in Aragón, land was expropriated by the militias as they

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 343–4.

advanced against the enemy, turning it over to local peasant syndicates who began to organise themselves along economic and geographic lines with a general assembly of working peasants electing a management committee responsible for economic administration. Small landowners had the choice between individual property and collective ownership. In most areas, no one was forced to join the collective and, likewise, if anyone wanted to leave no barriers were placed in their way. In the village of Penalba, in Huesca, for example, a third of the collective decided to go 'individualist' and a proportion of land was allotted to them. Having chosen to remain outside the community, they could not expect to benefit from its services, but they could opt to participate in communal work, if they wished, and they could bring their produce to sell in the communal shops.

A clearer idea of the revolutionary mood that had transformed the Spanish countryside can be seen in the principles expounded in the various charters drawn up by the agrarian collectives, which united people on the basis of common work or locality. The charter of one collective, Espluga de Francoli, reads as follows:

Article 1 — All those who may constitute the collective are to have the same rights and duties.

Article 2 — The collective is to be governed by decisions reached in assembly, the law of the majority prevailing ...

Article 5 — The collective will reward its component families in accordance with the number of members each family may have ...

Article 7 — All members of the co-operative are to have access to the produce in its possession, without money, but a tally is to be kept of all that is issued and on Saturdays an account will be compiled of what may have

Chapter 4 October 1936

The obsession of the CNT leadership with antifascist unity steadily widened the gap between them and the aspirations of the mass of the radical working-class membership. The interests they now defended were those of the bourgeoisie and the property-owning classes. On 23 October a 'Pact of Unity' was signed between the CNT, FAI, the UGT and the PSUC in Catalonia. Article Two of this agreement, relating to collectivisation, stated that although the Council supported collectivisation 'of everything which may be essential in the interests of the war', the council's understanding was that "this collectivisation would fail to produce the desired results unless overseen and orchestrated by a body genuinely representative of the collectivity," in this instance the Generalidad Council.[62]

"With regard to small industry we do not advocate collectivisation here except in cases of sedition by owners or of urgent war needs. Wheresoever small industry may be collectivised on grounds of war needs, the expropriated owners are to be compensated in such a way as to ensure their livelihoods, by means of their making a personal or professional contribution in the collectivised sector. In the event of collectivisation of foreign undertakings, a compensation formula shall be agreed which is equal to the total capital. We advocate a single command to orchestrate the actions of every combat unit, the introduction of a conscript militia

caretaker Catalan government and was disbanded. Diego Abad de Santillán later explained the collaborationist position: The Militias Committee guaranteed the supremacy of the people in arms, guaranteed Catalonia's autonomy, guaranteed the purity and legitimacy of the war, guaranteed the resurrection of the Spanish pulse and of the Spanish soul: but we were told and it was repeated to us endlessly that as long as we persisted in retaining it, that is, as long as we persisted in propping up the power of the people, weapons would not come to Catalonia, nor would we be granted the foreign currency to obtain them from abroad, nor would we be supplied with the raw materials for our industry. And since losing the war meant losing everything and returning to a state like the one that prevailed in the Spain of Ferdinand VII, and in the conviction that the drive given by us and by our people could not vanish completely from the militarised armed corps planned by the central government and from the new economic life, we quit the Militias Committee to join the Generalidad government in its Defence Councillorship and other vital departments of the autonomous government."

been acquired, and whatever the difference may be between that and the sum of the family's entitlement³⁹

Gaston Leval describes the process of social reconstruction through the Collective:

"É the Collective was born with characteristics of its own. It is not a Syndicate, for it encompasses all those who wish to join it whether they are producers in the classic economic sense or not. Then it brings them together at the complete human individual level É Neither is the Collective the municipal Council or what is called the Commune É for it parts company with the political party traditions on which the commune is normally based É the whole population takes part in its management, whether it is a question of a policy for agriculture, for the creation of new industries, for social security, medical service or public education."⁴⁰

Although anarchist ideas played a crucial role in the revolution, it must be stressed that the collectives were not the creation of the anarchist movement. A great many collectives were created spontaneously by people remote from our movement ('libertarians' without being aware of it). Most of the Castile and Extremadura collectives were organised by Catholic and Socialist peasants: in some cases of course they may have been inspired by the propaganda of isolated anarchist militants.

General assemblies of the people discussed and voted on issues, while the day-to-day administrative work of the collectives was carried out by elected teams of workers. Each team nominated a delegate, who would meet with the delegates from other teams to co-ordinate the work of the collective. Delegates would be chosen

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 168–9.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 154.

either by their particular team or by the village as a whole. The general assembly of the collective would meet regularly, according to the wishes of the assembly itself. The amount of power the assemblies had varied from place to place; in some places assemblies made day-to-day decisions, while in others only major decisions were made by the assembly, with elected delegates dealing with the day-to-day affairs of the community.

The collectives were not isolated. One of the functions of the general assemblies was to delegate members to attend meetings of the cantonal federations, above which were the regional federations, the basis of economic co-ordination. Leval cites an example of this federal system at work:

“The 900 collectives were brought together in 54 cantonal (local or district) federations which grouped themselves and at the same time subdivided into five provincial federations which at the top level ended with the Regional Committee of the Levante Federation situated in Valencia and which co-ordinated the whole.”

An example of the large scale of the operations of the Peasant Federation of the Levante is indicated by the fact that it produced more than half the total orange crop in Spain and transported and distributed through its own commercial organisation more than 70 per cent of the total harvest. Again, it is important to emphasise that although the federations carried out large-scale operations, the collectives were organised from the bottom up, from the point of production, and remained autonomous units.

As approximately 70 per cent of the rural population were illiterate before the revolution, education was an issue of great importance to the collectivists. The anarchist educational primer, the *Cartilla filologica española*, urged:

tightening of discipline, the economic reconstruction of the country, and to provide guidance to the working class in order “that its endeavours and its aspirations be coordinated and united.”

The collaborationists win the day

In an article in *Solidaridad Obrera* a few days later, commenting on the decision to participate in the Council of the Generalidad, Federico Urales, Montseny's father, defended this decision:

“Some time ago we said: better proletarian dictatorship than bourgeois dictatorship. Now we proclaim: better any accommodation with those who, while not of us, are at least close to us, than that fascism should triumph; and in saying that we do not address ourselves to the anarchists but to all who struggle against fascism. We would do well to take on board the common peril and the mission that history has imposed on the Spanish people. All antifascists must be worthy of this moment. The salvation of the world's liberties lies in our hands. We have to rescue them with our hearts, our loyalty and our readiness to reach accommodations, bearing in mind that for us, the lesser evil should be not the triumph of state communism over the libertarian variety, nor the triumph libertarian communism over the state variety, nor yet the triumph of a federal republic which may encourage common and collective possession of wealth. No, it would be fascism victorious, and today and for as long as the fascist threat remains, our actions must be bent only to the prevention of that victory. With the establishment of the Council of the Generalidad, the Central Committee of Antifascist Militias had come to the end of its useful life as a

The Plenum ended on 26 September 1936. The next day the Catalan press informed the world that following discussions between Companys and the CNT, the anarcho-syndicalist labour union had officially renounced its anti-political stance and was now a full member of the Generalidad government of Catalonia. The newspaper *Claridad* referred to a note to the Generalidad Council from the CNT Regional Committee accepting governmental responsibility, which stated the CNT's acceptance "indicates a realisation that reality is more instructive than any theoretical extremism and in no way implies abandonment of principle, but indeed the very opposite."³

The Council of the Generalidad

Later that same day, the Regional Committee issued a press statement⁴ denying it had held discussions with Companys or that it had abandoned its anti-political principles by participating in government. What it did admit to, however, was an agreement to collaborate with a new body called 'The Council of the Generalidad'. This body developed out of the Economic Council, which had been constituted by decree in the previous month. It consisted of Esquerra members — 4, CNT — 3, PSUC — 2, Rabassaires-Esquerra — 1, POUM — 1, Acció Catalana — 1 and one defence expert.. The programme was: concentration on the war effort, the coordination of all fighting units under a single command, a conscript militia, a

³ Ibid.

⁴ 'Yesterday, Saturday, the evening papers carried news that comrades Fabregas and Domenech had discussions with the President of the Generalidad, discussions that lasted 20 minutes. It has to be pointed out that the comrades in question talked, not with the President but had an audience with the Councillor for Culture. To clarify another point to the press and, may it serve as a warning É no government has been set up but rather a new body congruent with the circumstances in which we find ourselves and which goes by the name of the Council of the Generalidad.' Quoted by Peirats, *ibid*.

"Mankind can be divided into the good and the bad. The good and the bad can be subdivided into the literate and the illiterate. Any other division is artificial, false, ridiculous or stupid. The subdivision between literate and illiterate, purely accidental, should not be the reason for vanity among those more fortunate or the cause of shame among those who have not had the good luck or the opportunity to learn. The bad are almost never so bad by nature, but, rather, almost always so as a result of social pressure, injustice, or the influence of bad examples, which circumstances they cannot alter."

The collectives did not merely content themselves with raising the minimum school-leaving age to 14; they built schools and technical and agricultural colleges as well. Thanks to their efforts, illiteracy was virtually eradicated in the collectives of Aragón, Levant, Castile, Andalucía and Extremadura. This led directly to improved training, technical innovation and the modernisation of agriculture, which greatly boosted production in most areas.

Chapter 2 August 1936

In Valencia, the militants of the CNT, FAI and FIJL (Federacion Iberica de Juventudes Libertarias — the anarchist youth movement) who had led the attack on the city's army barracks on 18 July met in a monastery that they had converted into a temporary militia quarters, and formed what was to become known as the Iron Column. In line with anarchist policy, all prisoners were released when the jails were opened during an insurrection. Many of these were common-law prisoners, who had been politicised during their imprisonment by anarchist or 'social' prisoners, and chose to fight alongside their liberators. With several hundred freed prisoners among its numbers, the new column set off for the Teruel Front, where they later routed the fascists at Sarion, in the Mastrazgo, on 13 August. The column then captured the village of La Puebla, where they declared libertarian communism and set up their headquarters. They quickly established a defensive line, some 15 miles from Teruel, which stretched from Andeguela to Forniche. The rebel advance on Valencia was halted.

'Our very own'

One of the prisoners liberated by the anarchists from the Valencian prison of San Miguel de Los Reyes has left us a personal account of the formation of what was quickly to become the most uncompromisingly revolutionary but also the most vilified of all the militia columns:

Problems of war and revolution

In Catalonia, in the meantime, on 24 September, the Regional Committee of the CNT convened a Plenum of the CNT unions to study the economic problems facing the collectives and to assist the work of the recently formed Economic Council (see August). The report of the CNT delegate to the Economic Council, Juan P. Fabregas, provides a useful insight into the complexity of the problems of war and revolution as perceived by the small group of people who were now controlling the CNT and whose revolutionary ideas had been supplanted by the need for internal unity, harmony and the elimination of internal conflicts and tensions:

"Prior to 19 July there were 65,000 unemployed workers in Catalonia. There are huge stocks of manufactured goods that cannot be exported because of the war and on account of the strained relations existing between Madrid and Barcelona ... I must tell you of the difficulties raised by the Madrid government, which has refused us all assistance in economic and financial matters, assuredly because it does not have much sympathy with the practical projects underway in Catalonia ... The Madrid government has refused point blank to help Catalonia. There has been a change of government but still we run up against the same difficulties ... We asked the government for a credit of 800 million pesetas, another of 30 millions for the purchase of war materials and a further 150 million francs for the purchase of raw materials. As a collateral we offered 1,000 million pesetas that the savings banks have on deposit in the form of securities with the Bank of Spain. All this was denied us."²

² José Peirats, *La CNT en la revolución española*, op. cit., vol. 1, ch. 11.

The state rebuilds

Caballero, an experienced and wily politician, was fully aware of the kite-flying nature of the statement issued by the CNT's working party. A few days later, on the 20th of the month, the Madrid government responded by setting up a temporary police force, the *Milicias de Vigilancia de la Retaguardia* (MVR – Rearguard Watch Militias), under the control of the Ministry of the Interior. The same decree also outlawed all other non-governmental bodies that "attempted to carry out functions peculiar to the same." Thus began the process of rebuilding the state apparatus.

In spite of this outright affront to the anarcho-syndicalist movement, the National Committee of the CNT bent even further backwards to renege on their principles. In a somewhat surprisingly naïve choice of words for anarchists to describe the actions of politicians, a further manifesto argued:

"The exclusion from the leadership of that struggle of a movement of the scale and significance of the CNT is tantamount to the introduction of a bias into that same leadership and to depriving it of its national character, and, thereby, shattering its effectiveness ... But for this Confederation, which finds itself denied a place in the running of Spanish life at national levels, fascism would have scored an inexorable and tremendous victory ... Why is there no recognition of its mettle and why no acceptance of the proportional representation owing to it in the oversight of the struggle?"

It went on to plead that because it had chosen to forego "the wholesale pursuit of its programme" (the implementation of libertarian communism), it had surely shown itself worthy of sharing in 'the oversight of the struggle' in its proposed National Defence Council.

"I am one of the ones who were freed from San Miguel de Los Reyes, a sinister prison built by the monarchy as a burial place for men like us who, being no cowards, have never submitted to the infamous laws devised by the powerful against the oppressed. Like so many others, I was taken there for having committed an offence in that I had revolted against the degradation visited upon an entire country ... I had taken the life of a bully. Out along with me came many men who had also suffered and also been scarred by the ill-treatment they had experienced since birth. Some, as soon as they hit the streets, dispersed throughout the world; others of us rallied to our liberators who treated us as friends and loved us as brothers. Together with these we have gradually formed the Iron Column, together with them we have wasted no time in storming the barracks and disarming fearful guards; together we have, in hard-fought attacks, driven the fascists back as far as the Sierra peaks where they remain today. Accustomed to taking what we need, we seized rifles and provisions in repulsing the fascists. And for a time we dined off what was offered to us by the peasantry. And without anyone making us a gift of a single weapon, we have armed ourselves with what we have wrested from the insurgent troops by the strength of our arms. The rifle that I clutch, the rifle that has been at my side ever since I turned my back on that fateful prison is mine, my very own, I took it from the man who bore it and nearly all the rifles that my comrades carry are, by the same token, our very own."¹

¹ Protesta davanti al libertari del presente e del futuro, sulle capitolazioni del 1937, di un 'incontrolado' della Colonna di Ferro, Turin, 1981.

The Iron Column, like other militias, set up a war committee with the following structure:

“The establishment of the War Committee is acceptable to all the confederal militias. Taking the individual as the starting point, we form groups of ten, which manage minor operations for themselves. Ten groups make up one centuria, which nominates a delegate to represent it. Thirty centurias make up one column, which is led by the War Committee composed of the centuria delegates.”²

A target for vilification

The Iron Column’s fighting strength in the early days was some 1,500 men, but in spite of the obstacles placed in its way by the government and the regional leadership of the CNT in Catalonia, this later rose to 3000. It had bases scattered throughout five provinces: Castellón de la Plana, Valencia, Alicante, Murcia and Albacete. The Iron Column also enjoyed the support of two publications — *Linea de Fuego*, a four-page daily news bulletin for the men at the front, and *Nosotros*, based in Valencia. The latter also acted as the organ of the FAI and the FIJL. *Linea del Fuego* published general cultural articles — poems, short stories, literary criticism — and, of course, articles on politics, sociology, philosophy, economy and so on. Militants also contributed with articles about their everyday lives, on the running of the column, and on other national issues. It was a genuine forum for the discussion of issues peculiar to the column.

Because of its total commitment to anarchist principles, and its refusal to compromise or form alliances with bourgeois or political parties, however, the Iron Column became the immediate target of a campaign of vilification and disinformation from the political

² *Linea del Fuego*, 17 November 1936.

Chapter 3 September 1936

The CNT joins the Generalidad

Early in September, the Giral government resigned to make way for a cabinet consisting of 3 left-wing and 3 right-wing socialists,¹ 5 republicans and 2 communists. The new government was led by the head of the socialist party, Largo Caballero. The new regime lost no time in moving to restore the balance of power to the state, which, in spite of the welter of declarations and decrees, had not existed since the working class victory over the military on 19 July.

The response of the CNT leadership to the new government, which they had not been invited to join, came in mid-September when a ‘working party’ consisting of Juan Lopez, Aurelio Alvarez and Federica Montseny issued a statement calling for the setting up of what they described as a National Defence Council. This was a government by another name, and a further indication of the willingness of the CNT leadership to collaborate with the political parties. The statement urged that the council should be chaired by Caballero as President of the Republic, with 5 CNT, 5 UGT and 4 republican members; among its functions should be to coordinate federally organised regional defence councils, to transform ministries into departments, to create a single popular militia for police functions and a war militia, with compulsory service, under a single unified military command.

¹ The principal difference between the wings was on the party’s relations with the CNT, the communists, etc. The left had a corresponding pseudo-revolutionary rhetoric, while the right was made up of bourgeois liberals like Indalecio Prieto.

For Stalin, the Spanish Civil War was a small part of a diplomatic chess game being played out by the three great European power blocs – the Germany-Italy Axis, France and Britain, and Russia. Stalin hoped that the surrogate war being fought in Spain would provide him with sufficient breathing space to divert or minimise the effect on the Soviet Union of the inevitable wider European war. Hitler's expansionist policies would, Stalin believed, drag Germany into conflict with Britain and France, leaving Russia as an onlooker. However, Soviet foreign policy at the time also required that the balance of forces in Europe should not be upset. Soviet support for social revolution in Europe would affect Russia's delicate military alliance with France and its relationship with Great Britain.

However, as the dissident communist historian Fernando Claudin points out, neither could the Soviet Union realistically dodge its duty "to show active solidarity with the Spanish people in arms without risk of losing all prestige in the eyes of the world proletariat."¹⁷

¹⁷ Claudin.

parties, libels that have been picked up and repeated by subsequent generations of commentators on the Spanish Civil War. In response to these, we can quote the testimony of Mika Etchebere, a captain in the Republican army and a member of the POUM, who had some liberated prisoners under his command:

"We, too, have had three or four such cases in our column, and they fought splendidly. At first we were stand-offish; later, being together, they came to subscribe to our ideas and now it could not be said that they stole or anything of that sort."³

On 1 October 1936, angry at the restoration of bourgeois order in the rearguard, intervention units from the column, set up specially to resist such developments, left the Teruel front and returned to Valencia to demonstrate to the bourgeoisie that the working class was not fighting to defend bourgeois property rights and justice, but to establish a new social order. They attacked and disarmed the guards, invaded the courts and destroyed court records. They also raided the nightclubs and cabarets frequented by the well-to-do and relieved them of their jewellery and wallets. Another unit went to Castellón de la Plana on 10 October on a similar mission and burned all the criminal and judicial records in the town. Later that same month, 30 October, the funeral of Ariza Gonzales, one of the Iron Column leaders whom it is believed was killed in a reprisal, turned into an armed uprising. "In the end, surrounded in the Plaza Tetual by communist units armed with machine guns, the demonstrators suffered heavy casualties with about 50 or so being killed."⁴

³ Interview with Mika Etchebere, ANCR, Turin, 1967, pp. 16–17.

⁴ P. Broué and E. Témime, *La Rivoluzione e la guerra di Spagna*, Milan, 1962, p. 247.

‘Strangle the life out of fascism’

The Iron Column defended its actions against the campaign of vilification mounted by the Spanish Communist Party and the Republican government in the following manifesto aimed at showing that its militants were not given to rhetoric and meant business:

“... As anarchists, we who — under the familiar denomination ‘Iron Column’ — struggle against the clerical and militarist reaction on the Teruel Front are concerned, of course, with the problems of the front, but also with those of the rearguard. Consequently when we realised that in Valencia things were not moving in the direction that we wished, when we noted that the rearguard, far from being a reassurance to us, was a focus of concern and misgivings, we resolved to intervene and, to that end, we dispatched the following requests to the relevant organisations:

- (1) that the Civil Guard be disarmed and disbanded;
- (2) that all of the armed forces of the state in the rearguard (Assault Guards, Carabineros, Seguridad, etc.) be sent immediately to the front; and
- (3) that all records and archives held in capitalist and state institutions be destroyed forthwith.”

These requests had their foundations in revolutionary and ideological considerations. As anarchists and as revolutionaries, we considered the existence of the Civil Guard to be a threat; it is a reactionary corps that has, throughout its life and more especially during the present revolt, clearly displayed its mentality and its intentions. The Civil Guard was odious in our eyes for many reasons and we had no confidence in it. So we asked that it might be disarmed and proceeded to disarm it.

Republic’. This is common knowledge. Only people of ill-will can argue otherwise.”

The leader of the Communist Party of Spain (PCE), José Hernández, and Santiago Carrillo, the leader of the communist-dominated United Socialist Youth (JSU), themselves echoed this line, affirming unequivocally that the party was ‘not fighting for the social revolution’.

By championing the privileges, status and property of the professional as well as the urban and rural bourgeoisie against the rapid advances of the anarchist-inspired social revolution, the PCE increased its membership dramatically within a matter of months. Peirats¹⁶ estimates that in Catalonia, in the first few months after July, the party had attracted 8,000 landowners and 16,000 members of the middle classes. By the end of 1936, the PCE had increased its membership ten-fold to around a million.

Breathing space for Stalin

Although the PCE had increased its membership in direct proportion to the discontent felt by the bourgeoisie and peasant small-holders at the progress of collectivisation of the land and factories under self-management, there was another, more powerful reason for its rapid growth in influence by the end of 1936. That reason was Stalin’s decision to provide military support for the Republican government. It must be stressed from the outset that this had nothing to do with any altruistic motives of working class solidarity – a concept Stalin had renounced publicly since his entry into the League of Nations in 1934, committing himself instead to supporting liberal democracy. Stalin’s decision to send arms to Republican Spain was based strictly on the diplomatic and strategic exigencies of Soviet foreign policy.

¹⁶ Peirats, *La CNT en la revolución española*.

&endash; to his surprise he found unexpected allies for his dislike of anarchist policies in the communists.”¹⁴

Rise and rise of the Spanish Communist Party

Revolution had brought in its wake a massive influx into the workers’ parties and organisations of the opportunist detritus of capitalism. The bourgeoisie began to seek shelter in particular in the organisation that had openly committed itself to defending bourgeois interests. In Catalonia that organisation was the UGT, virtually non-existent in the region until September 1936, when it became a fief of the communists,¹⁵ whose central committee had recently proclaimed the party’s advocacy of ‘revolutionary order without infringement of respect for private property’. The position of the international communist movement had been expressed clearly by André Marty, a member of the executive committee of the communist international, in a statement to the French CP paper *L’Humanité*:

“In a country like Spain, where feudal institutions are still deeply rooted, the working class and the people as a whole have as their most pressing immediate task not the carrying on of the socialist revolution but the defence, consolidation and carrying through of the bourgeois democratic republic. Our Party’s only watchword as propaganda through our paper *Mundo Obrero*, on 19 July, was ‘Long Live the Democratic

¹⁴ Franz Borkenau, *The Spanish Cockpit*, London, 1987, p.183.

¹⁵ The exact strength of the PCE at the outbreak of the Civil War is uncertain. Most commentators agree, however, that its membership was in excess of 100,000 (Gómez Casas). Compared with the CNT and the UGT, however, at this time the PCE was minuscule indeed, and had little influence among the workers. The PSUC eclipsed the POUM only after it won over the anti-revolutionary middle classes.

We asked that all of the armed corps be moved up to the front lines because men and weapons are in short supply there, while in the city, under the present state of affairs, their presence was more of a provocation than a necessity. We have been halfway successful on this count and we shall press on until our objective has been completely achieved.

Finally we asked for the destruction of all the documents that represented a whole past era of tyranny and oppression against which our free consciences had revolted. Let us destroy the records and give consideration to requisitioning those buildings that, like the court buildings, have been used in other times to entomb revolutionaries in prisons and have no *raison d’être* today, now that we find ourselves at the dawning of a libertarian society.

Such objectives brought us into Valencia and this explains all that we did in the manner deemed most appropriate.

Later, during our stay in Valencia, we observed that whereas efforts to acquire weapons foundered due to our lack of funds, there was a huge quantity of gold and other precious metals in many places — this prompted us to requisition the gold, silver and platinum of some jewellers in insignificant quantities which were surrendered to the Organisation. The above is what we have done. Now let us examine what we did not do.

We are accused of looting buildings. This is a lie. We defy anyone to present us with an account of this and to show that our men were not acting out of necessity but from mere caprice and a desire to create confusion.

We stand accused of murdering people for amusement. This is a foul calumny. What have we done to deserve this reputation? What crimes have we committed? A deplorable episode, which we are first to lament and to condemn, appears to be the prosecution evidence. We had nothing to do with the death of our socialist comrade José Pardo Aracil. It was shown, on the very night of his death, that no member of our column had any hand in it. It has never occurred to us to attack the socialists nor any other antifascist group, much less to do so in the treacherous fashion in which Pardo was attacked. This does not mean that we renege on our aims, for these are the sole motivations for our fight: we realise, however, that at the present moment, internecine warfare would be a crime. We are facing a formidable enemy and all our exertions must be bent to his destruction. In these crucial times for Spain's future, our position is clear and unmistakable. We shall fight with all our manpower, all our energies, all our enthusiasm in order to confound the vileness of fascism forever. We struggle to make a reality of the social revolution. Let us march towards Anarchy. Consequently, here and now, we shall stand by everything that makes it possible to live with greater freedom, to smash the yokes that oppress us and to destroy the vestiges of the past.

To every worker, every revolutionary, every anarchist, let us say: struggle, wherever you may be — at the front line or in the rearguard, against all the enemies of your liberty. Strangle the life out of fascism. But see to it also that as a result of your efforts no dictatorial regime is installed, no continuation (with all the vices and defects) of that state of affairs that we are striv-

While the formalisation of the Patrols certainly served to maintain the post-July status quo, the CNT-FAI and the POUM resisted the subsequent attempts of the PSUC and bourgeois politicians to reorganise the state police in Barcelona at their expense, and their members played a leading part in the street fighting in the Barcelona May Days of 1937. After the May Days, during which popular sovereignty was first re-established by militant anarchists in response to an attempted communist coup, and then once more (and finally) discarded at the behest of the anarchist leadership, the Patrols were disbanded, and their functions taken over by the state police.

A development of more immediate significance in the erosion of the revolutionary initiative of the anarcho-syndicalist movement took place a few days later on 15 August, with the news of the formation by the FAI, CNT, PSUC and UGT of a 'Liaison Committee' to strengthen and 'galvanise' anti-fascist unity by seeking out 'such points of agreement as may exist between those bodies, submitting them for discussion and approval by all, so that public guidelines and exhortations may be issued ...,' commending to its affiliated and organisations 'the formation on every work site of factory committees with proportional representation for CNT and UGT members ...' and also "eschew[ing] violent attacks and criticisms."

The signatory of this statement of antifascist unity on behalf of the PSUC was Juan Comorera, who, according to the German sociologist and historian Franz Borkenau, a dissident communist and supporter of the revolutionary experiment, 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

At the same meeting, Mariano R. Vazquez, Regional Secretary of the CNT for Catalonia, announced that in harmony with the Generalidad government both organisations had agreed to become part of a proposed Economic Council of Catalonia. This statement was not, however, a proposal to be discussed by the assemblies and either ratified or rejected; it was a *fait accompli*.

The Economic Council of Catalonia came into existence, formally, under a Generalidad decree on 13 August. On it, anarchists were in a minority of 5 to 10: the CNT had three members, Eusebio Carbo, Juan P. Fabregas and Cosme Rofes, while the FAI was represented by Antonio García Birlán and de Santillán. The statist and Marxist parties with whom the anarchists and anarcho-syndicalist leadership had arbitrarily agreed to share responsibility for the ‘normalisation’ of the Catalan economy were the right-wing Esquerra Republicana, Acció Catalana Republicana, the Unió de Rabassaires, the PSUC, the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia, which had been formed on 24 July 1936 by a merger of the socialists and communists, and the POUM.¹³

More steps towards collaboration

The same day, 10 August, also saw the formal institutionalising of the Control Patrols, the popular organs of public safety. Basically a Barcelona phenomenon, the Patrols were made up of 700 men from all the antifascist organisations, of whom 350 were from the CNT, the rest proportionally divided among the Esquerra, the UGT and the POUM and divided into 11 geographic branches.

¹³ The PSUC was formed from socialist and Stalinist groups in July; before this, in the spring and early summer of 1936, the POUM, having existed as a vehemently anti-Stalinist party for some years before, already had 5,000 members, while even after its formation, the nascent, ‘united’ PSUC had in July no more than 2,000 or 3,000. See Peret’s letter to Breton quoted in the text above: ‘The Communists, who have fused with three or four small parties, are a negligible force.’

ing to eradicate. With weapons now and with working tools later on, learn to live without tyrants, learn to emancipate yourselves, for this is the only path to freedom. Such, clearly expounded, is the thinking of the ‘Iron Column’.

Comrades! Death to fascism! Long live the social revolution! Long live anarchy!”⁵

A surrealist writes home

The surrealist writer Benjamin Peret was among the first volunteers to fight in Spain. His letters to André Breton provide us with a lucid and moving insight into the flowering and decline of the Spanish revolution. His first letter, simple and sincere, was sent from Barcelona on 11 August:

“My very dear André, if you were to see Barcelona today, filled with barricades, decorated with churches gutted except for their empty walls, you, like me, would exult. The anarchists are virtually the masters of Catalunya [sic] and the only force beside them is the POUM. The ratio between us is three to one which isn’t excessive and in the present circumstances can easily change. We have 15,000 armed men and they have 40,000–50,000. The Communists, who have fused with three or four small parties, are a negligible force. In their newspaper on Friday they declared that what is necessary isn’t a proletarian revolution but a defence of the Republic, and whoever tries to make a revolution will find themselves opposed by the militias.”⁶

⁵ Peirats, *La CNT en la revolución española*, pp. 306–08.

⁶ Courtot (ed.), *Introduction to the Reading of Benjamin Peret*.

Another foreign arrival in August was Abdelkjalak Torres, the Moroccan nationalist leader, who came to Barcelona clandestinely with an official delegation from the Moroccan independence movement. They proposed to the Central Committee of Antifascist Militias to unleash a revolutionary revolt in the Spanish protectorate, the home base of the military uprising, if weapons or money could be provided. All they asked for in return was a promise of recognition of Morocco's independence in the event of a Republican victory. The potential effect of such an uprising in Franco's rear-guard would have been enormous, but the proposition was turned down by the Caballero government⁷ because of the international repercussions of such a move, particularly in regard to France and Britain. However the idea of promoting an insurrection in Morocco was one that the anarchists were to press throughout the course of the war.

War or Revolution?

As the fighting receded early in August, and confusion began to lift, the bourgeoisie started to find their second wind and prepared to regain lost ground. On the military front, the Madrid government made the first tentative moves to restore its authority by issuing a decree calling up the reserves from the intake of the previous three years, with the clear intention of creating a conscript fighting force to rival and no doubt eventually replace the popular volunteer militias.

In Barcelona, the young people called to the colours responded to this by organising heated anti-militarist demonstrations in which they tore up their army tunics to angry cries of 'Down with the Army!' and 'Long live the People's militia!'. The Militias Committee (skilfully instigated by President Companys and exploiting the opportunism — however confused and naïve — of

⁷ Largo Caballero became prime minister in September.

who composed the CNT's Catalan Regional Committee were blunt and to the point when on 9 August, at the first general assembly of the anarchist movement to take place since the rising they eventually explained to the rank and file their behaviour in the previous weeks:

"When the consuls approached us, we quickly guaranteed the foreign firms [see 'July' — SC] so that nobody might confiscate them. And when any attempt was made to do so, we even dispatched guards so that their interests would be respected."¹⁰

Garcia Oliver added:

"I ask the whole of the proletariat to stay in the places of production and not to be sparing in their sacrifices ... This is not the time to seek a 40 hour week and a 15 per cent wage increase."¹¹

Federica Montseny topped them all with classical utilitarian logic:

"We are obliged to go beyond what we had intended, on account of the abandonment of a huge number of industries necessary to the economic reconstruction of the revolution. We accept that abandoned responsibility in order to derive minimum profit by it."¹²

¹⁰ Frank Mintz, *L'Autogestion dans l'Espagne revolutionnaire*, Paris, 1970, p.90.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.91.

¹² Although she had been a member of the CNT for at least a year, Montseny, a romantic story writer, was a recent recruit to the FAI. Following the workers' victory, she was invited to join the Nosotros group on 21 July, the day the Central Committee of Antifascist Militias was formed. She appears to have been co-opted onto the Peninsular Committee of the FAI almost immediately.

tary command. The revolt had dashed all respect and killed every iota of confidence. So, despite everything, it was possible to maintain a fairly coherent direction amid the general chaos by means of supervision (occasionally nominal and at other times effective) of the decisions of the command, without which no decisions would have been possible. The workers' militias needed an assured leadership. This they achieved by blending their own personnel with those (elected by the respective corps and military units) who shared their common aim: 'To campaign together under a single and loyal accountable leadership.' Force of circumstance determined their creation."

Then, in Miguel's own words:

"Later, as they developed themselves, they determined that the militias should be replaced. And a new military organisation, the popular and revolutionary army, moulded by an anti-militarist population in the middle of a war against what had been its own army, came into existence in Spain."⁹

That is, as the revolutionary impetus was first harnessed, then lost, the committees became instruments of the new bourgeois-cum-Stalinist political order.

The bourgeoisie strikes back

Meanwhile, the Generalidad gradually began also to reassert its domain over the economic sector, again in no small part thanks to the assistance of its allies within the CNT. The prominent militants

⁹ Peirats, *La CNT en la revolución española*, chapter 10.

the anarchist militants who sat on it, with the aim of harnessing popular power to his own bourgeois purposes — see July), sought immediately to mould this unrest into a form amenable to its central command; thus the following announcement was made on 6 August by de Santillán, the representative of the FAI:

"The Central Committee of Antifascist Militias of Catalonia has determined that soldiers from the years 1933, 1934, 1935 and 1936 should report immediately to barracks and there place themselves at the disposal of the Militias' committees set up under the jurisdiction of the Central Committee."

A few days later, at mass rally on 10 August, in Barcelona's Olimpia Theatre, 10,000 young Catalans announced their intention to join the militias and help liberate their comrades in Zaragoza, but to refuse conscription on the grounds that they had no confidence in the officer corps and were morally opposed to parade-ground and barrack-room discipline.

The next day, 11 August, a manifesto issued by the CNT denounced the Madrid decree, supporting the refusal of the young to be called up:

The Madrid government's lack of political vision confronts the workers' organisations with a somewhat difficult problem — a large number of these youths are already enrolled in the militias; others have declared a readiness to enlist and to set off for Zaragoza immediately. But what they do not want, and their attitude is a logical one in the light of the treachery of military figures implicated in the recent revolt, is that they should be subjected to military discipline and placed under the orders of their old commanders. The formidable effort at liberation made by the people implicitly on 19

July was no idle exercise; it was not made that everything might continue as before. The umbilical cord that bound us in the past has broken forever. New conceptions of social obligations, human existence, of law and liberty are in force ... The CNT cannot be unheedful of, nor may it frustrate, the lofty and worthy expression of a resolve thus enunciated with vim and enthusiasm.”

The manifesto continued by championing the need of the populace to organise their own revolutionary forces:

“The soldiers gathered in the Olimpia Theatre yesterday even undertook to rejoin their respective corps, on condition that they enter the barracks as militians able to come and go as free men, voluntarily embracing the discipline that is a necessary part of concerted actions, and not as automata bereft of all human personality. And the CNT of Catalonia has to put the issue pure and simple to the Generalidad and Madrid governments alike. 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 people’s 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.”⁸

At the same time, by not challenging as a usurpation the assumption of authority over ‘the people armed’ by the semi-bourgeois Militias Committee, the CNT’s statement placed a further seal upon the harnessing of the workers’ force to the purposes of their traditional enemies. Of course, this was hardly surprising: the CNT was itself the most powerful organisation represented on the Committee.

⁸ Solidaridad Obrera, 5 August 1936.

Workers’ and soldiers’ councils

Parallel developments took place within the militias. Fearful of the rise of a new officer class, the various workers’ organisations and parties set up workers’ and soldiers’ committees similar to the councils created in the early days of the Russian Revolution. These committees, made up of delegates from the various organisations, acted as a working-class security service that operated throughout all the armed services. An interesting account is provided by the testimony of Alfonso Miguel, a CNT militant and champion of the committees:

“The first workers’ and soldiers’ committees came into existence by agreement of the CNT&endash;UGT. They were born in Barcelona. Then they were formed in the Levante, in Andalucia and in the capital itself, which was demoralised by defeatism and lurking treachery. They set about monitoring and carrying out purges. The committees assumed the unenviable task of raising morale, monitoring certain intrigues and keeping an eye on suspect officers and assisting all competent and sincere personnel. With the committees it was possible to sustain military activity and to keep at bay the fascism within. But for them, fascism would assuredly have devoured us. At that painful juncture, in the early months of the war, who was there capable of bringing unity between the people and the army (an army on its last legs) and the armed institutions which had been demoralised by treachery and decimated in active service? They were not set up for considerations of rhetoric. The creation of the committees was determined by the necessity of pressing on with the struggle and the need to have the utmost confidence in the overall decisions of the mili-