

# Manuel Escorza del Val (1912–1968)

## A biographical note

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Manuel Escorza del Val was born in Barcelona in 1912. The son of Bernardo Escorza Tello,<sup>1</sup> a veteran CNT militant of the Woodworkers Trade Union, who died on September 29, 1938, in mysterious circumstances. When he was a child he suffered from polio which left him permanently paralyzed. Of very short stature due to the atrophy of his legs, he used enormous lifts in his shoes, which, combined with his crutches, gave him a very pathetic appearance and made walking extremely difficult for him.

Of a very headstrong, acerbic and harsh character, he was highly educated and exhibited great force of will. He did not allow anyone to help him walk and he strove to remain as independent as possible. He was active in the Libertarian Youth and became a member of the Peninsular Committee of the FAI. He played a very active role in the Ateneo Faros, located on Mistral Avenue.<sup>2</sup>

At the outbreak of the civil war he participated in the Plenum of Local and Regional Committees, which met on July 21, 1936, where he advocated a third way in opposition to Juan García Oliver's half-hearted support for "going for broke", and also in opposition to the majority position supported by Diego Abad de Santillan and Federica Montseny that called for loyal collaboration with the government of the Generalitat. Escorza advocated the temporary and opportunist use of the bourgeois government as an instrument for socialization and collectivization, as well as to generate a respectable image for foreign governments; the goal of his proposal, however, was to finally get rid of the Generalitat and kick it into the street when it had ceased to be useful to the CNT.

He was the highest official of the CNT-FAI Intelligence and Investigation Services, which had been formed, and underwent further development, as a necessary complement of the clandest-

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<sup>1</sup> Bernardo worked as a custodian at several CNT branch offices, and died, along with Juan Rascón, a cashier, in a gunfight during a robbery. According to the trade union Bulletin that recorded the deaths of Escorza and Rascón, Bernardo Escorza was a native of Alcañiz and lived on Carretes Street in the Rabal, and worked as a barber.

<sup>2</sup> Here is the testimony of Conxa Pérez: "Manuel Escorza, who in 1936 was the head of the special groups of the FAI dedicated to counterintelligence and the persecution of fascists, taught us about sexuality and spoke at educational meetings. He was a natural-born teacher, he lived in Les Corts. Mauricio, my main companion, carried him on his back, since he was crippled, to the Ateneo Faros where he was scheduled to speak. He was very intelligent. His house was full of books, and always surrounded by young people. In 1936 he asked me to join the FAI intelligence service, which he led. I was a very close friend of his, but I did not want to." Interview with Txema Bofill in *Catalunya*, February 2011.

tine structure of the CNT defense committees. Beginning in July 1936, these Services planned and carried out all kinds of repressive tasks, as well as engaging in intelligence gathering and espionage and counter-espionage. The Investigation Committee was composed of two sections. Liberato Minué, Escorza's brother-in-law, was in charge of foreign espionage, and Escorza was himself responsible for domestic intelligence.

Repression was aimed not only at rebel organizations and individuals, but also at CNT militants. Escorza was responsible for the execution of José Gardeñas, an outstanding militant of the Construction Workers Trade Union, and of Manuel Fernández, the president of the Food Service Workers Trade Union, by order of the Organization, with the knowledge and consent of Federica Montseny and Abad de Santillan.

His work in intelligence and espionage was characterized by Juan García Oliver as excellent. The activities of the police, the intelligence services and the repressive actions against the Fifth Column, both fascist elements as well as priests, and its activities, as well as against those who were slandered as "incontrolados" within the anti-fascist camp itself, including the CNT, gave him a sinister reputation that, in conjunction with his paralysis and his dramatic physical appearance, with crutches and lifts in his shoes, which conferred upon him a repulsive and hunchbacked appearance, made him feared for his power over life and death, which was furthermore colored by a mythical aura that, halfway between spitefulness and the black anti-libertarian legend, defined him (in the words of García Oliver) as "crippled in body and soul".

Escorza always performed his outstanding and effective intelligence and repressive work in accordance with strict orders from the Organization, and never used his position for personal enrichment. He was proverbial for his honesty, his austerity and his culture. He neither drank alcohol nor smoked.

In the summer of 1936 he participated in the talks between the CCMA and the Moroccan pro-independence forces, for the purpose of demobilizing the Moroccan volunteers in Franco's units, expressing the willingness to grant them independence.

The victory of the workers insurrection in July 1936, which defeated the military revolt, led to a revolutionary situation in Catalonia in the summer of 1936, in which the armed proletariat imposed class repression against persons and symbols of the bourgeoisie (employers, priests, fascists and the *pistoleros* of the yellow trade unions), expropriated their property, crushed their repressive forces (the Army and the police), and suppressed the Church. It was a spontaneous, violent, and festive working class repression exercised against the bourgeoisie and the Church, taking the form of an immediate retaliation against their attempts to impose a military and fascist dictatorship by force of arms. After a long process that began with the insurrection of July 19–20 of 1936, the Control Patrols were officially founded (on August 11) as police institutions of the Central Committee of Anti-fascist Militias (the CCMA).

The Control Patrols lasted longer than the CCMA, since they were not dissolved until early June in 1937, a month after the events known as "The May Events" of 1937. They were composed of eleven sections, covering all the neighborhoods of Barcelona. They were staffed, at first, by a total of seven hundred men, with eleven district leaders, one for each section. Some of them came from the requisition patrols, and others from the defense committees, although many of the latter proved to be reluctant to serve as "policemen" for ideological reasons, which opened the door to new, opportunist elements. Furthermore, only about half of the members of the patrols were members of the CNT or the FAI; the other half were members of the other organizations that formed the CCMA: the POUM, the Esquerra Republicana of Catalonia (the ERC) and the

Stalinists of the PSUC, for the most part. Only four section delegates, out of the eleven sections, were members of the CNT: those responsible for the neighborhoods of Pueblo Nuevo, Sants, San Andrés (Armonia) and Clot; another four were with the ERC, three from the PSUC and none from the POUM.

The Control Patrols were under the authority of the Investigation Committee of the CCMA, led by Aurelio Fernández (FAI) and Salvador González (PSUC), who replaced Vidiella. Their section headquarters was located at 617 Gran Vía, led by two delegates of the Patrols, i.e., José Asens (FAI) and Tomás Fábregas (Acció Catalana). The wages of the members of the Patrols, ten pesetas per day, was paid by the government of the Generalitat. Although arrests were made in all the sections, and some of the prisoners were interrogated in the old Casa Cambó, the central prison was located in the former San Elías convent of the Order of St. Clair.

A tribunal had been constituted at San Elías,<sup>3</sup> whose mission was to judge the prisoners as quickly as possible. Ordinarily, this tribunal was composed of the Arias brothers, Aubí and Bonet, from the FAI; África de las Heras and Salvador González, of the PSUC; Coll from the ERC and Barceló from the POUM. The operations of this tribunal were independent and occasionally Aurelio Fernández, Manuel Escorza, Vicente Gil (“Portela”), Dionisio Eroles, Riera and José Asens attended its proceedings, due to their positions. The prisoners were summarily interrogated, without any judicial guarantees of any kind, in an exceptional situation characterized by the collapse of the administrative, judicial and police apparatus of the republican State.

Salvador González established a PSUC prison and a network of repression in the Hotel Colón and the Círculo Ecuéstre, with the help of Joaquín Olaso, África de las Heras and Victorino Sala. Josep Soler Arumí, from the ERC, set up his own prison in the Centro Federal on the Paseo de Gracia, and he incurred the despicable distinction of being the first to **systematically** torture prisoners. All of them were frequent visitors to the convent of San Elías, which was the central prison of the Control Patrols of the CCMA.

Manuel Escorza del Val was in charge of the Investigation and Intelligence Services of the CNT-FAI, an espionage and counter-espionage institution that was not answerable to the CCMA, but to the Regional Committees of the CNT and the FAI, that is, it was a libertarian institution that, in accordance with the proposal made by Escorza at the Plenum of July 21, sought to create an autonomous and independent institution of the CNT that would eventually be capable of “kicking into the streets” the government of the Generalitat. Later, Escorza was the head of the Special Investigation Brigade, a department of the Security Committee of the Generalitat.

This CNT-FAI Investigation Service performed tasks related to intelligence, repression and espionage. It was led by Manuel Escorza who, installed in the attic of the old Casa Cambó, had confiscated the archives of the Employers’ Association (the *Fomento del Trabajo*) and of the League (the right-wing Catalanist party), which provided him with many names, a large amount of information, and a large number of contacts and addresses, on the basis of which he accomplished an efficient labor of “purging” of right wing elements, priests and individuals who were discontented with the “new revolutionary order”, compiling for the Control Patrols, or the various anarchist investigation committees, not only in Barcelona but for all of Catalonia, fateful **lists of people who were to be arrested and interrogated**. These general lists were completed for each lo-

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<sup>3</sup> This Revolutionary or Emergency Tribunal was “officially authorized” at the meeting of the Secretariat of the Patrols on January 3, 1937; it was composed of Torrents (POUM), Bonet (CNT), Coll (ERC) and Chueca (UGT). See Agustín Guillamón, *La guerra del pan*, Aldarull/Descontrol, 2014, pp. 113–115.

cality or county with the names contributed by the local and county revolutionary committees, or by the investigation committees of the various militia columns. **The battle against fascism was fought not only at the front, but also behind the lines.** And it was not a task carried out exclusively by the CNT, but by all the anti-fascist organizations.

Manuel Escorza was also in charge of screening and approving the nomination of the most qualified men for the various responsible positions in the CNT, both within the CNT itself and in the various administrative bodies; this function made him very influential within the superior committees of the CNT.

In October 1936, Escorza signed the CNT-UGT-PSUC-FAI unity pact, along with **Eroles** and **Herrera**. In April 1937, Pedro Herrera, the “conseller” (Minister) of Health in the second Tarradellas government, and Manuel Escorza, were the leading members of the CNT who negotiated a settlement with Lluís Companys (the president of the Generalitat) to bring an end to the government crisis that had broken out in March 1937, due to the resignation of the “conseller” of Defense, Isgleas of the CNT.<sup>4</sup>

Companys decided to abandon the tactic of Tarradellas, who could not imagine a government of the Generalitat that was not a government of anti-fascist unity, in which the CNT did not participate, in order to adopt the tactic proposed by Comorera, the secretary of the PSUC, which consisted in imposing a “strong” government by force, one that would no longer tolerate *a CNT that was incapable of keeping its own militants in line, described as “incontrolados”*.

Companys was determined to break with a policy, which was becoming increasingly more difficult, of making pacts with the CNT and he thought that the time had come, thanks to the support of the PSUC and the Soviets, to impose by force the authority and the decisions of a government of the Generalitat that, as the facts were to demonstrate, was still not strong enough to dispense with negotiations with the CNT. The negotiations between Companys and Escorza and Herrera,<sup>5</sup> after not resulting in any kind of political solution after two months, could be considered to have been a failure, although they did find *in extremis* a life preserver with the acceptance of Aurelio Fernández as “conseller” in the ephemeral new government of April 16.<sup>6</sup> The open opposition of Companys to the appointment of Aurelio gave way before the danger posed by a total break with the CNT.

Finally, on April 15 a personal agreement was arrived at between Companys, the president of the Generalitat, and Manuel Escorza, **who at that time seemed to be the most powerful figure in the CNT**, since he not only controlled the Investigation Service, but also exercised decisive influence over the Control Patrols, the defense committees of the Barcelona neighborhoods and the Regional Committees of the CNT and the FAI.

On April 27, 1937, the assassination in an ambush at the Bellver bridge of Antonio Martin, the anarchist leader from the libertarian district of Cerdaña and a long-time member of the group,

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<sup>4</sup> Isgleas resigned when he was informed of the intention of the Carlos Marx Division, controlled by the PSUC, to abandon the Aragon Front and go to Madrid. Isgleas was opposed to any weakening of the Aragon Front, as well as to the proposal made by Companys to disarm and control the forces behind the lines. The CNT opposed the decrees of March 4, 1937, which ordered the dissolution of the Control Patrols and the formation of a Unified Security Corps, to be formed by the Assault Guards and the former Civil Guards. See Agustín Guillamón, *La guerra del pan*, Aldarull/Descontrol, 2014, pp. 332 *et seq.*

<sup>5</sup> “Minutes of the meetings of Companys with Herrera and Escorza on April 11 and 13, 1937”.

<sup>6</sup> In this government (which lasted from April 16 to May 4), the Ministers from the CNT were Isgleas (Defense), Capdevila (Public Services) and Aurelio Fernández (Health and Public Welfare).

“Los Solidarios”, shattered the fragile agreement reached on April 15 between Escorza and Companys.

Manuel Escorza, by disclosing his reports on the ongoing preparations for a joint coup de main on the part of the Stalinists and the government of the Generalitat, put the defense committees on a state of alert. It can be said that Escorza **lit the fuse** that led directly to the armed confrontations of May 1937 in Barcelona.

Companys, without notifying Tarradellas (or, of course, Escorza and Herrera), issued the order to Artemi Aguadé, the “conseller” of the Interior, to occupy the Telephone Exchange building, which was carried out by Rodríguez Salas, the Commissar of Public Order, at around 2:45 p.m. on the afternoon of May 3, 1937.

Josep Asens and Dionisio Eroles tried to stop the insurrection, but were **ignored** by the defense committees of the Barcelona neighborhoods. Escorza thought that the May insurrection was premature, poorly prepared and lacking clear objectives and an effective leadership.<sup>7</sup> He was afraid that the predictable subsequent repression of the insurrection would weaken the Organization.

It was Julián Merino, the secretary of the Local Federation of the FAI, who unleashed the insurrection, by creating a secret revolutionary committee of the CNT and two commissions to spread the struggle in the streets.<sup>8</sup>

After the bloody events of May 3 to 7, Escorza placed his hopes for the strength, the survival and the opportunities for influence on the part of the CNT in the role of the anarchosindicalists in the domain of the economy.

Entrenched in the attic of the Casa CNT-FAI, Escorza proved to be beyond the reach of the republican judicial repression and the Chekas of the Stalinists unleashed in Barcelona in the summer of 1937, which even reached such outstanding leaders as Aurelio Fernández. The brutal repression made the CNT disappear as an organization in many localities and counties: Cerdaña, Tierras del Ebro, Igualada....

At the end of the war Escorza went into exile in Chile, thanks to the Masonic solidarity and the complicity of the Chilean consul in Toulouse, together with his brother-in-law Minué. He led a very austere life (which belied the slanderous Stalinist fairy tales about the “treasure” he accumulated during the Spanish civil war) in Valparaíso. Closely monitored by Franco’s agents, his police dossier was inflated with fallacious reports that nourished the black, anti-libertarian legend, of Stalinist origin.

He was a rigorous, pedagogical, and fearsome critic of the theater, cinema, literature and art in the daily newspapers, *La Unión* and *La Estrella*, in which his articles were published under the pseudonym of *M. del Val*. He died in Valparaíso, his city of refuge, in 1968.

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<sup>7</sup> See Agustín Guillamón, *Insurrección. Las sangrientas jornadas del 3 al 7 de mayo de 1937*, Ediciones Descontrol, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

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