

# **The CNT defense committees in Barcelona 1933–1938**

*An interview with Agustín Guillamón*

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On the occasion of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Spanish Revolution, our friend and collaborator Agustín Guillamón was interviewed by the editors of the website *alabarricadas.org* about his latest book, *Los Comités de Defensa de la CNT en Barcelona (1933–1938)*.

## ***Alabarricadas—An obligatory question: What were the Defense Committees?***

The defense committees were the clandestine military organizations of the CNT, financed by the trade unions, and their activities were subordinated to the latter.

In October 1934, the old tactic of action groups was abandoned in favor of serious and methodical revolutionary preparation. The CNCD said, “There can be no revolution without preparation. We have to put an end to the prejudice in favor of improvisation. This error, involving confidence in the creative instinct of the masses, has caused us to pay a heavy price. We cannot obtain by means of a process of spontaneous generation the indispensable means necessary for waging war on a State that has experience, heavy weaponry, and a greater capacity for offensive and defensive combat”.

The basic defense group should not have too many members, in order to facilitate its clandestine operations and its flexibility, and must have a profound understanding of the character, knowledge and abilities of each militant. It should be composed of six militants, each of whom is responsible for a specific function:

1. Secretary: Contact with the other cadres, formation of new groups, drafting reports;
2. Personal Investigator: Ascertain the danger posed by enemies;
3. Building Investigator: Draft blueprints and provide statistical reports;
4. Researcher for determining strategic points and tactics for street fighting;
5. Researcher for Public Services;
6. Investigator to determine where to obtain arms, money and supplies.

It was thought that this number of six militants was the ideal figure for a defense group or team, with the proviso that, in certain cases, one more member could be added for “relief” purposes. Absolute secrecy was mandatory. These groups were the basic core groups of a revolutionary army, capable of mobilizing more numerous secondary groups, and these, in turn, were to mobilize the entire population.

The defense group was the basic cell of this clandestine military structure of the CNT, composed of six militants. Its responsibilities were very precisely demarcated within each neighborhood. In each neighborhood a district Defense Committee was formed, which coordinated all these defense cadres, and which received a monthly report from the Secretary of each Defense Committee. The Secretary-Delegate of the district drafted a summary report that he delivered to the District Committee; and the latter, in turn, passed it on to the Local Defense Committee “and the latter passed it on to the Regional and National Defense Committees, respectively”.

The report of the CNCD also included a detailed plan for the organization of the Defense Committees on a regional and national scale, which also embraced all those sectors of the working

class, such as railroad workers, trolley conductors, telephone and telegraph operators, postal employees and, in short, all those sectors that, due to the special character of their trades or organizations, were national in scope, with special emphasis on the importance of communications in a revolutionary insurrection. A special section was devoted to the task of infiltration of, propaganda among and the enrollment of sympathizers in the military barracks.

The Defense Committees had two essential functions:

1. Acquisition, maintenance, storage and training in the use of weapons;
2. Logistics in the broadest meaning of the term, from assuring the basic needs of the population and running soup kitchens to the establishment and maintenance of hospitals, schools, cultural centers ... and even, during the early stages of the revolution, the recruitment of militias and the provisioning of the columns leaving for the front.

The first Defense cadres were formed shortly after the proclamation of the Republic, and could be considered to be the continuation, reorganization and extension of the armed action and self-defense groups of the years of *pistolerismo* (1917–1923).

### ***ALB—How were the action groups transformed into defense cadres?***

In January 1935, the anarchist groups, *Indomables*, *Nervio*, *Nosotros*, *Tierra Libre* and *Germen*, at a Plenum of the Federation of Anarchist Groups of Barcelona, formed the Local Committee for Revolutionary Preparedness.

The Plenum, confronted by some truly discouraging historical developments—the rise of fascism in Italy, Nazism in Germany, Stalinism in the Soviet Union, and the economic depression accompanied by mass long-term unemployment in the United States and Europe—drafted a Report that opposed these developments with the hope of the revolutionary proletariat. It said: “Amidst the generalized collapse of ideals, parties, and systems, only the revolutionary proletariat remains standing with its program of the reorganization of the foundations of labor and economic and social reality, and solidarity”.

The Report contained a profound critique of the puerile tactics of revolutionary gymnastics and improvisation that had been abandoned in October 1934. It said: “The social revolution cannot be interpreted as a single bold attack, in the style of the coup d’états of Jacobinism, but will instead be the consequence and result of the process of an inevitable civil war whose duration cannot be foreseen”.

Revolutionary preparation for a long civil war required that the comrades confront new challenges that were unthinkable in the framework of the old tactics of the armed groups. The Report said: “In view of the fact that it is not possible to possess in advance the stockpiles of weapons necessary for sustained combat, the Preparedness Committee must undertake a study of how to convert industries in certain strategic zones [...] into industries that are capable of providing war materiel for the revolution”. This was the origin of the Commission of War Industries, formed on August 7, 1936, which created a powerful military industry from scratch thanks to the efforts of the workers, coordinated by the CNT’s Eugenio Vallejo Isla, a metal worker, Manuel Martí Pal-larés, of the Chemical Workers Union, and Mariano Martín Izquierdo; the responsibility for this achievement was subsequently claimed by bourgeois politicians (Josep Tarradellas), and while it

is true that they did contribute to its success, it was “primarily due to the workers in the factories, and to the technicians, whose responsible delegates were granted managerial authority by the CNT from the beginning of the war”.

From the action groups and gunmen who practiced a revolutionary gymnastics prior to 1934, the CNT had passed to the creation of information and combat cadres that were viewed as the basic cells of a revolutionary army.

***ALB—One question that many people will ask, is if the anarchists could have seized power.***

During the first six months of 1936 the group *Nosotros* engaged in bitter disputes with the other groups of the FAI in Catalonia regarding two fundamental concepts, at a time when it was known for certain that the military was making preparations for a bloody coup d'état. These two concepts were the “seizure of power” and the “revolutionary army”. The pragmatism of the *Nosotros* group, which was more concerned with insurrectional techniques than with taboos, clashed head-on with the ideological prejudices of the other groups in the FAI, that is, with the rejection of what the latter referred to as “anarchist dictatorship”, and with their deeply ingrained anti-militarism, which left everything to the creative spontaneity of the workers.

This harsh attack against the “anarcho-Bolshevik practices” of the *Nosotros* group was comprehensively set forth in the journal *Más Lejos*, edited by Eusebio C. Carbó, whose contributors included Jaime Balius and Mariano Viñuales. *Más Lejos* published the responses to a survey that it had featured in its first issue of April 1936, which consisted of two questions about electoral abstention, and a third question about the seizure of power, which was framed in the following manner: “Can anarchists, under any circumstances, and OVERCOMING ALL SCRUPLES, accept the seizure of power, in any form, as a means of accelerating the pace of their progress towards the realization of Anarchy?”

Almost all those who participated in the survey responded to this question in the negative. But none of the responses offered a practical alternative to accompany this general rejection of the seizure of power. Anarchist theory and practice seemed to be divorced from one another, on the very eve of the military coup d'état.

At the Plenum of the Barcelona Anarchist Groups, which met in June 1936, García Oliver proposed that the organization of defense cadres, coordinated in neighborhood defense committees in the city of Barcelona, was the model that should be followed, and that they should be extended to cover all of Spain, and that this structure should be coordinated on a national and regional level, in order to form a revolutionary army of the proletariat. This army should be complemented with the creation of guerrilla units of one hundred men each. Many militants opposed García Oliver's proposals, and put their trust instead in the spontaneity of the workers rather than in a disciplined revolutionary organization. The anti-militarist convictions of many affinity groups led to an almost unanimous rejection of the theses of the *Nosotros* group, and especially the theses defended by García Oliver.

## ***ALB—How were these Defense Committees transformed into Popular Militias and revolutionary neighborhood committees?***

On July 16, the army revolt began in Melilla. By the 18<sup>th</sup>, the military revolt had spread to all of Morocco, the Canary Islands and Seville.

The military garrison of Barcelona had about six thousand men, as opposed to almost two thousand in the Assault Guards and the two hundred members of the Catalan Autonomous Police. The Civil Guards, concerning whom no one was sure just which side they would join, had about three thousand men. The CNT-FAI had about twenty thousand militants, organized in District Defense Committees, who were ready to take up arms. It agreed, in the liaison committee formed by the CNT with the Generalitat and the loyal military officers, to confront the coup with only one thousand armed militants.

On July 19 and 20 of 1936, in the midst of the fighting in the streets of Barcelona, when the rebel military officers were defeated, the members of the defense committees began to refer to themselves, and were referred to by others, as “the militiamen”. Without any transitional period whatsoever, the defense cadres became Popular Militias. The original structure of the defense cadres had foreseen their extension and growth, by way of the incorporation of secondary cadres. All that had to be done was to find a place within them for the thousands of worker-volunteers, who were joining the fight against fascism, and to send them to Aragon. The confederal militias were transformed into the vanguard of all the armed units that were sent to fight the fascist enemy. They comprised the armed organization of the revolutionary proletariat. They were imitated by the other columns, including those of bourgeois origin. Due to the absence of a single proletarian army, the various parties and organizations created their own party and trade union militias, without any central command and with only the most tenuous coordination.

These defense cadres underwent a dual TRANSFORMATION. On the one hand, they were transformed into the Popular Militias, which from the very first days of the war defined the Aragon front, and inaugurated the collectivization of the land in the liberated Aragonese villages; on the other hand, they were transformed into the revolutionary committees that, in every neighborhood in Barcelona, and in every town in Catalonia, imposed a “new revolutionary order”. Their common origin in the defense cadres caused the confederal militias and the revolutionary committees to maintain very close relations with one another.

The revolutionary committees performed, in every neighborhood or locality, especially in the nine weeks after July 19, the following functions:

1. They confiscated buildings for committee offices, storage of supplies, cultural centers and rationalist schools. They seized and administered hospitals and newspapers;
2. They conducted searches of private homes to requisition weapons, food, money and objects of value;
3. Inspection of suspicious buildings by armed squads, in order to arrest “cops”, snipers, priests, reactionaries and fifth columnists. (Recall that the mopping-up operations conducted against snipers lasted an entire week in the city of Barcelona);
4. They set up recruiting centers in every neighborhood for the Militias, which they armed, financed, supplied and paid (until mid-September) with their own means, and even after

May 1937, each neighborhood maintained an intimate and continuous relation with its militiamen on the front, and welcomed them when they came home on leave;

5. They stored arms in the headquarters of the defense committee, which also played the role of a local store or warehouse, in which the provisions committee of the district was also housed, which supplied the neighborhood with food that was requisitioned in the rural areas by means of armed coercion, exchange, or purchase with vouchers;
6. Imposition and collection of the revolutionary tax in every neighborhood or locality.

The revolutionary committees performed an important and quite multifarious administrative role, which extended from the issuance of vouchers, food coupons, and travel passes, marriage ceremonies, supply and administration of hospitals, to the confiscation of food, furniture and buildings, financing rationalist schools and cultural centers managed by the Libertarian Youth, paying the militiamen or their families, etc.

The District Revolutionary Committees were coordinated from the headquarters of the Regional Committee, to which the secretaries of every neighborhood defense committee reported. There was also a permanent Confederal Defense Committee, located in the CNT-FAI headquarters.

For matters related to the confiscation of large quantities of money and very valuable objects, and all those other tasks involving arrests, information or investigation that, due to their importance, surpassed the jurisdiction or abilities of the neighborhood revolutionary committees, the latter submitted the matters in question to the Investigation Service of the CNT-FAI, under the direction of Escorza at the CNT-FAI headquarters.

### ***ALB—Was there a power vacuum? Were the neighborhood committees formed from the Defense Committees? And what about the provisions committees?***

The real power of decision and execution was in the streets; it was the power of the armed proletariat, and the local committees of defense and of workers control exercised this power, spontaneously expropriating factories, workshops, buildings and property; organizing, arming and transporting to the front the groups of volunteer militiamen that they had previously recruited; burning churches or converting them into schools or warehouses; forming patrols to extend the social war; manning the barricades, which were now class frontiers, that controlled traffic and manifested the power of the committees; running the factories, without owners or managers, or converting them for military production; requisitioning cars and trucks, or food for the provisions committee; taking bourgeoisie, fascists and priests “for a ride”; replacing the superannuated republican municipal authorities, imposing in every locality their absolute authority in all domains, without waiting for orders from the Generalitat, or from the Central Committee of Antifascist Militias (the CCMA). The revolutionary situation was characterized by an atomization of power.

On the night of the 19<sup>th</sup> the only real power was “the federation of the barricades”, and the only immediate objective was the defeat of the rebels. The army and the police, which had either been dissolved or confined to their barracks, disappeared from the streets after July 20. They had

been replaced by Popular Militias composed of armed workers, who fraternized with discharged soldiers and Civil Guards who had disposed of their uniforms, in one victorious mass of people, which transformed them into the vanguard of the revolutionary insurrection.

In Barcelona, the defense committees, now transformed into revolutionary neighborhood committees, in the absence of any directives from any organization and without any other coordination than the revolutionary initiatives required by everyday needs, organized the hospitals, overflowing with an avalanche of wounded, set up soup kitchens, requisitioned cars, trucks, weapons, factories and buildings, searched private homes, arrested suspicious persons and created a network of provisioning committees in every neighborhood, which were coordinated in a Central Provisioning Committee in the city, in which the Food Workers Trade Union played an important role. The revolutionary contagion affected all social sectors and all organizations, which sincerely chose to lend their support to the new revolutionary situation. This was the only real power of the CCMA, which appeared to the people in arms as the antifascist institution that must fight the war and impose the new revolutionary order.

On July 21, a Local and Regional Plenum renounced the seizure of power, understood as the dictatorship of the anarchist leaders, rather than as the imposition, coordination and extension of the power that the revolutionary committees were already exercising in the streets. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> a full Plenum, held in secret, of the superior committees of the CNT and the FIA closed ranks with regard to their decision to collaborate in the CCMA, and to prepare for the Plenum on the 26<sup>th</sup> to overcome the resistance of the militants.

On the 24<sup>th</sup> the first two anarchist columns had departed for the front, under the command of Durruti and Ortiz. Durruti delivered a speech over the radio in which he warned of the need to remain vigilant in the face of a possible counterrevolutionary putsch. The revolutionary situation in Barcelona must be consolidated, in order “to go for everything” after taking Zaragoza.

On July 25 Companys went to the Naval Academy and accused the members of the CCMA of having been inefficient with regard to maintaining public order, and was greeted with indifference by García Oliver who menacingly dismissed him.

On the morning of July 26, the Regional Plenum ratified the definitive collaboration of the CNT-FAI in the CCMA, as consented to by the superior committees of the CNT-FAI in their debate on the 23<sup>rd</sup> and at the previous Regional Plenum held on the 21<sup>st</sup>.

The Plenum of the 26<sup>th</sup> unanimously confirmed that the CNT would observe the decision, approved on the 21<sup>st</sup>, to participate in this new institution of class collaboration called the CCMA. At the same Plenum, on the 26<sup>th</sup>, a Provisions Committee was created, dependent on the CCMA, to which all the various provisions committees that had arisen at different locations would be subject, and at the same time ordered a partial cessation of the general strike. The summary statement of the principle agreements reached at this Plenum was drafted in the form of a Public Proclamation, so that it should be disseminated and accepted by the population.

The CC for Provisions was a fundamental institution, which ensured an indispensable requirement for those worker-volunteers who had abandoned their ordinary jobs in order to go to fight against fascism in Aragon: so as to assure, in their absence, the feeding of their families who would no longer be able to rely on a weekly paycheck.

## ***ALB—What were the Control Patrols?***

On August 11, 1936, the control patrols were created as a revolutionary police force dependent on the Central Committee of the Antifascist Militias (CCMA).

Only about half of the members of the patrols were members of the CNT or the FAI; the others were members of the other organizations that were part of the CCMA: the POUM, the ERC (Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya), and the PSUC, for the most part. Only four of the eleven district delegates were CNT members: those representing Pueblo Nuevo, Sants, San Andrés (Armonía) and Clot; four were from the ERC, three from the PSUC and none from the POUM.

The Control Patrols were under the control of the Investigation Committee of the CCMA, presided over by Aurelio Fernández (FAI) and Salvador González (PSUC), who replaced Vidiella. Its central headquarters was established at 617 Gran Vía, under the direction of two delegates of the Patrols, *i.e.*, José Asens (FAI) and Tomás Fábregas (Acció Catalana). Their pay, ten pesetas per day, was provided by the government of the Generalitat. Although all the district patrols carried out arrests, and some of the detained were interrogated at the old Casa Cambó, the central prison was located at the former convent of the order of St. Clare in San Elías.

## ***ALB—What were the overall achievements of the Central Committee of Antifascist Militias?***

On September 26 a government of the Generalitat was formed with the participation of anarchist ministers. On October 1 the dissolution of the CCMA was officially proclaimed.

The decree of October 9, supplemented by the one published on October 12, declared the dissolution of all the local committees that were formed on July 19, and that they would be replaced by the new local government institutions. Despite the resistance offered by many local committees to this order, and despite the delay of several months that preceded the complete establishment of the new local government institutions, this was a deathblow from which they never recovered. The resistance of the CNT militants, who disregarded the directives of their superior committees and the order of the Generalitat, posed a threat to the antifascist pact. The anarchosindicalist leaders were caught between their militants, who were reluctant to obey them, and the accusation directed at them by the other antifascist forces, who said it was necessary to obey and to enforce compliance with the decrees of the government, and to make the “incontrolados” see the light.

This was the real final balance sheet of the achievements of the CCMA after its nine weeks of existence: the transition from revolutionary local committees, which exercised total power in the streets and the factories, to their dissolution to the exclusive benefit of the full reestablishment of the power of the Generalitat. Furthermore, the decrees signed on October 24 on the militarization of the Militias as of November 1 and the promulgation of the Collectivization decree completed the disastrous balance sheet of the CCMA, that is, the transition from volunteer revolutionary workers Militias to a bourgeois army of the classical type, subject to the monarchist code of military justice, under the command of the Generalitat; the transition from the expropriations and workers control of the factories to a centralized economy, controlled and administered by the Generalitat.

The delay in implementing the decrees, as a result of the low-profile yet still intransigent resistance of the confederal militants, who were still armed, caused the government of the Generalitat to emphasize as its primary objective the disarming of the rearguard, and it unleashed a propaganda campaign against the so-called “incontrolados”, which dovetailed with the second objective contained in the constantly-repeated slogan: “arms to the front”.

The powerful resistance of the anarchosyndicalist rank and file to the militarization of the militias, the Generalitat’s control over the economy and the collectivized enterprises, the disarmament of the rearguard and the dissolution of the local committees, resulted in a delay of several months in the complete fulfillment of the decrees of the government of the Generalitat with regard to these issues. This resistance would culminate, in the spring of 1937, in major unrest, which was exacerbated by discontent with the progress of the war, inflation, and the shortage of primary necessities, which then crystallized in a general critique on the part of the CNT rank and file militants of the participation of the superior committees of the CNT-FAI in the government, and the antifascist and collaborationist policies of their leaders, whom they accused of forfeiting “the revolutionary conquests of July 19”.

In October of 1936 the decree concerning the militarization of the Popular Militias produced a great deal of unrest among the anarchist militiamen of the Durruti Column, on the Aragon Front. After long and acrimonious debates, in March 1937, several hundred volunteer militiamen, posted in the Gelsa sector, decided to abandon the front and return to the rearguard. An agreement was reached which stipulated that the replacements for the militiamen who were opposed to militarization would arrive over a period of fifteen days. They abandoned the front, bringing their guns with them.

Having arrived in Barcelona, together with other anarchists (defenders of the continuation and intensification of the July revolution, and opponents of the CNT’s collaboration with the government), the militiamen from Gelsa decided to form an anarchist organization that was distinct from the FAI, the CNT and the Libertarian Youth, whose mission would be to bring the libertarian movement back to the revolutionary path. Thus, a new group was formally constituted in March 1937, after a long period of preparation that lasted several months, beginning in October 1936. Its executive committee decided to assume the name, “Friends of Durruti”, which was largely due to the fact that many of its members were former militiamen of the Durruti Column, and as Balius correctly pointed out, it was by no means a reference to Durruti’s political positions, but rather to the popular myth that had grown up around him.

This revolutionary opposition to the militarization of the Popular Militias was also manifested, to one degree or another, in all the confederal columns, but was most pronounced in the Iron Column, which decided on various occasions to “descend on Valencia” in order to drive the revolution forward and confront the counterrevolutionary elements in the rearguard.

In February 1937 an assembly of confederal columns was held that addressed the question of militarization. The threats to withhold arms, food, and reinforcements from the columns that did not comply with the militarization decree, together with the certainty that the militiamen would be integrated into other units that were already militarized, were very effective. For many of the delegates, it seemed that it would be better to accept militarization, and to flexibly adapt to it in each column. Finally, the ideology of antifascist unity and CNT-FAI collaboration in government administration, in defense of the republican State, won out over the resistance to militarization, which was finally accepted even by the recalcitrant Iron Column.

## ***ALB—Did the defense committees clash with the superior committees?***

During late November and early December 1936, the CNT debated the role that should be played by the defense committees in Barcelona.

The debates were framed within a strictly trade union-based perspective, which was not at all sympathetic with regard to the important role performed by the defense committees and the provisioning committees at the neighborhood level. It was held that their functions, once the stage of the revolutionary insurrection had come to an end and the next stage had begun, were of an exceptional and provisional character and that in any event they must be assumed now by the trade unions.

In November/December 1936, the defense committees were a thorn in the side of the governmental policies of the CNT superior committees; therefore, the latter proclaimed that the defense committees must accept a subordinate role and submit to the authority of the trade unions, as mere armed, but somewhat annoying and superfluous, appendages of the latter.

The debates were focused on the degree of autonomy to be enjoyed by the neighborhood defense committees with respect to the trade unions. Proposals spanned the spectrum from allowing the Local Defense Committees to be totally independent and to be completely separate entities, recognizing them as THE MILITIA OF THE CNT, to their full and absolute subordination to the dictates of the Local Federation of Trade Unions, which were not only to debate relevant issues and decide what action should be taken, but would also have custodianship over arms, and jurisdiction over the members and finances of the Defense Committees.

The fundamental issue, according to the Regional Committee, was the generalized refusal to obey the disarmament orders: “the neighborhoods are our own worst enemies”. In October 1936, the entry of the CNT into the government of the Generalitat led to the creation of a Committee for Internal Security, which resulted in a situation of dual power of command over the forces of public order, between the CNT and the government of the Generalitat. The Control Patrols were losing their autonomy and their decision making capabilities, while the Commissariat of Public Order, controlled by the PSUC and the ERC, was increasing its coercive powers, recommissioning the units of the Assault Guards and the Republican National Guards (the former Civil Guards). At the end of January 1937 the militiamen of the PSUC-UGT abandoned the Control Patrols, and were replaced by elements from the CNT, the ERC and the POUM. The final elimination of the Control Patrols, which would be absorbed into a new, unified Security Corps by the decree of March 4, 1937, implied the CNT’s loss of hegemony in the police functions and repressive tasks of the rearguard.

In the fragile political and armed equilibrium that prevailed in the spring of 1937 in the Barcelona rearguard, the growth of and increasing threat posed by the repressive forces of the bourgeoisie, which were tending to monopolize the means of violence, gave a new impetus to the reorganization and preparedness of the neighborhood defense committees for a confrontation that now appeared to be inevitable.

## ***ALB—Why did the committees lose control over provisioning? What was the “war for bread”?***

On December 20, 1936, Joan Comorera (PSUC), the Minister of Provisions, delivered an important speech, in Catalan, at the Gran Price ballroom in Barcelona.

Comorera argued in favor of a strong government, with full powers, capable of enforcing decrees that would no longer be just so many scraps of paper, as was the case under the first government of Tarradellas, in which Nin represented the POUM. He called for a strong government, capable of carrying out an efficient military policy that would centralize all forces at the front.

Comorera blamed the defense committees for the shortages and high prices of food, rather than the hoarding and speculation of the shopkeepers. His speech justified and served as an explanation for the slogan that had appeared on placards and posters in women’s demonstrations that took place in late 1936 and early 1937—“more bread and fewer committees”—demonstrations that were promoted and manipulated by the PSUC. It was clear that there would be a confrontation between the two opposed provisions policies, that of the PSUC and that of the Food Workers Trade Union of the CNT. The Food Workers Trade Union, through the thirteen provisions warehouses in the various districts of the city that were under the control of the revolutionary neighborhood committees (or, more accurately, of the district defense committees), delivered free food to the people’s kitchens, which fed the unemployed and their families, and also served the needs of the refugees who, in April 1937, already numbered 220,000 in Barcelona. It was a network of provisioning that rivaled the retail shops, which only responded to the law of supply and demand; the revolutionary institutions attempted, above all, to prevent the prices of necessities from rising too high, which rendered many products inaccessible for the workers and, of course, for the unemployed and the refugees. The black market was the biggest business arena for the shopkeepers, who made excellent profits thanks to the hunger of the majority of the population. Comorera’s war for bread waged against the district provisioning committees had no other objective than that of stripping the defense committees of every shred of power, even at the cost of depriving Barcelona of food and other basic necessities.

Comorera ended his speech with an appeal to all the organizations to assume responsibility for the sake of iron unity in the antifascist struggle. In order to understand Comorera’s speech we must note the strategy, formulated by Gerö, of implementing a SELECTIVE policy against the anarchist movement, which consisted in integrating its leaders into the State apparatus, while at the same time carrying out an implacable repression against the revolutionary sectors, that were shamefully referred to as “incontrolados”, gangsters, murderers, agents provocateurs and irresponsible elements; and whom Comorera very clearly identified with the defense committees.

The provisions warehouses of the neighborhood committees determined what, how, what quantities and what price would be charged by the shopkeepers, once the “revolutionary” needs of the neighborhood were satisfied, that is, the needs of the invalids, children, unemployed, people’s kitchens, etc. Comorera advocated the elimination of these revolutionary neighborhood committees, which were to be replaced by the free market. He knew, furthermore, that the former implied the latter, and that, unless the defense committees were suppressed, the free market would be a chimera.

The rational, adequate and planned provisioning of Barcelona and Catalonia, would have required the adoption of the proposals made by Joan P. Fàbregas, the Minister of the Economy

and member of the CNT, between October and December of 1936, in his fruitless battles in the Council of the Generalitat, to secure the monopoly of foreign trade, which were opposed by the other political factions represented on the Council. Meanwhile, on the Paris grain market, ten or twelve private Catalan wholesalers competed with each other, driving the prices of grains every higher. But the monopoly of foreign trade, which was not even a revolutionary measure, but only one that was appropriate for a situation of wartime emergency, violated the philosophy of the free market advocated by Comorera.

There was a connection between the bread lines in Barcelona and the irrational competition of the wholesalers in the Paris grain market. This Barcelona-Paris nexus would have been severed by a monopoly in foreign trade. With Comorera's free market policy this nexus was consolidated. In addition, the PSUC encouraged the speculation of the shopkeepers, who got rich on the hunger of the workers.

### ***ALB—How and for what purposes did the Defense Committees reorganize?***

On Sunday, April 11, at a rally in La Monumental arena, there were many placards demanding the release of Maroto and numerous other antifascist prisoners, most of whom were members of the CNT. Federica Montseny was greeted with boos and catcalls. The shouts in favor of freedom for the prisoners got louder and louder, and were constantly repeated. The superior committees held the Friends of Durruti responsible for this disruption of the rally. Federica, who was very upset, threatened not to hold any more meetings in Barcelona.

Gracia's Grupo 12 presented a written proposal:

“On Monday, April 12, 1937, a session of the local plenum of the Anarchist Groups of Barcelona was held at the CNT-FAI headquarters, attended also by the confederal Defense groups and the Libertarian Youth.

“The Plenum, in consideration, after ample discussion, of the results of nine months of ministerial policies, and in recognition of the impossibility of winning the armed struggle on the fronts against fascism without subordinating all particular, economic, political and social interests to the supreme goal of the winning the war; and in consideration of the fact that only with the total socialization of industry, trade and agriculture, is the crushing of fascism possible; and whereas every form of government is by its very essence reactionary and therefore contrary to every social revolution; it is resolved:

1. That all the persons who currently occupy positions in the antifascist governmental apparatus must resign;
2. That an antifascist revolutionary Committee should be formed for the coordination of the armed struggle against fascism;
3. Industry, trade and agriculture must be immediately socialized;
4. A producer's card must be introduced. The general mobilization of all men capable of bearing arms and of working must be implemented for the front and for the rearguard;

5. And finally, to impress upon one and all an unyielding revolutionary discipline, as a guarantee that the interests of the social revolution cannot be flouted with impunity.”

This meeting had escaped the control of the bureaucrats. The Defense Committees of Barcelona, or, which amounts to the same thing, the delegations of the revolutionary neighborhood committees, as well as the Libertarian Youth, participated in this Plenum, and undoubtedly contributed to the radical tone of the resolutions.

The FAI of Barcelona, together with the sections of the revolutionary neighborhood defense committees and the Libertarian Youth, despite the indignation and the hysterical opposition of certain bureaucrats, resolved to put an end to collaborationism, and demanded that the anarchist ministers of the government of the Generalitat must resign and that a revolutionary Committee must be formed to conduct the war against fascism. This was a decisive step towards the revolutionary insurrection that would break out on May 3.

This Plenum also testified to the existence of an ideological divide, not so much between the CNT and the FAI, as between revolutionaries and collaborationists, which indicated the existence of an organizational split within the libertarian movement in Barcelona, which was manifested in the growing opposition and the unbridgeable gap with regard to goals that had opened up between the defense sections of the neighborhood committees and the Libertarian Youth, on the one side, and the superior committees, on the other.

This radicalization was the product of an increasingly unsustainable situation in the streets. On April 14, a women’s demonstration, which on this occasion was not manipulated by the PSUC, departed from La Torrassa for the various markets in Collblanc, Sants and Hostafrancs, to protest against the high price of bread and other food products. The demonstration appealed to the Revolutionary Committee at the Plaza de España to intervene on their behalf, but the Committee told them that the issue was not within its jurisdiction. The demonstrations and protests spread to almost all the markets of the city. On the following days there were disturbances and demonstrations at various markets, although not as intense as the demonstrations of April 14. Some shops and bakeries were plundered. The hungry people of the working class neighborhoods of Barcelona had filled the streets to express their anger and to demand solutions.

### ***ALB—What role did the Defense Committees play in May 1937?***

On Monday, May 3, 1937, at about 2:45 p.m., three trucks full of heavily armed Assault Guards stopped in front of the Telephone Company’s main building located on the Plaza de Catalunya. They were under the command of Eusebio Rodríguez Salas, a UGT militant and hardcore Stalinist, who was also an officer in the Commissariat of Public Order. The Telephone Company building had been under the control of the CNT since July 19. The monitoring of telephone communications, surveillance over the borders and the control patrols were the main bones of contention, which had since January provoked various incidents between the republican government of the Generalitat and the confederal masses. It was an inevitable struggle between the republican State apparatus, which claimed absolute authority over all domains in “its jurisdiction”, and the defense of the “conquests” of July 19 by the CNT. Rodríguez Salas attempted to seize control of the Telephone building. The CNT militants on the lower floors, taken by surprise, allowed themselves to be disarmed; but on the upper floors, the militants fought back with determination, thanks to a strategically placed machine gun. The news of the attack spread rapidly. Barricades appeared

immediately throughout the city. This must not be understood as a spontaneous reaction of the working class of Barcelona, because the general strike, the armed confrontations with the police and the barricades were the result of the initiative taken by the defense committees, whose directives were rapidly followed thanks to the existence of an enormous degree of generalized discontent, the increasing economic hardships of everyday life caused by the high cost of living, the bread lines and rationing, as well as the tension that divided the revolutionary rank and file of the CNT between collaborationists and revolutionaries. The street battles were directed and executed by the neighborhood defense committees (and only to a lesser extent by certain units of the control patrols). The fact that there were no orders from the superior committees of the CNT, whose members were government ministers in Valencia and Barcelona, or from any other organization, to mobilize and construct barricades throughout the city, does not mean that the barricades were purely spontaneous, but rather that they were the result of the directives issued by the defense committees.

Regardless of the importance of the roles played by certain leaders prior to May, all of them were rapidly left behind and surpassed. The neighborhood committees unleashed and played the leading role in the insurrection of May 3–7 of 1937 in Barcelona. And it is not possible to confuse the neighborhood defense committees with an ambiguous and imprecise “spontaneity of the masses”, as is maintained by mainstream historiography.

This is how Nin, the political secretary of the POUM, described the May Days on May 19, 1937:

“The May Days in Barcelona brought about a revival of certain institutions which, during the last few months, have played a certain role in the Catalan capital and in other important municipalities: the Defense Committees. These are institutions of a primarily technical-military type, formed by the trade unions of the CNT. It was these institutions that really led the struggle, and which constituted, in each neighborhood, the center of attraction and organization of the revolutionary workers.”

The Friends of Durruti did not start the insurrection, but its members were the most active combatants on the barricades, and distributed a leaflet demanding the replacement of the Government of the Generalitat by a Revolutionary Committee.

The confederal workers, disoriented by the appeals of their leaders—the same ones they had on July 19!—chose, in the end, to give up the struggle, although at first they had laughed at the calls of the CNT leadership for peace and for the end of the fighting, in the interests of antifascist unity.

### ***ALB—How were the Defense Committees dissolved?***

The military power of the defense committees in the city of Barcelona was still intact, despite the fact that the May Events were a terrible political defeat for the revolutionaries, which would become evident on June 16, 1937 with the arrest of the Executive Committee of the POUM and the banning of that party.

From that time on, a selective repression was also directed against the CNT, and a judicial offensive was opened up on several fronts:

1. Against the local revolutionary committees created on July 19 and 20;

2. Against all those who had participated in the rebellion of May 1937;
3. Against thought crimes, reading the clandestine press, defeatism or bearing arms without authorization;
4. Against certain well known officials of the CNT, such as Aurelio Fernández, Barriobero, Eroles, Devesa, etc.

At the end of May 1937, however, the defense committees were still strong enough to organize some armed units under the direction of the district defense committees.

The revolutionary neighborhood committees in Barcelona that had arisen on July 19–20 survived until at least June 7, when the recently-restored forces of public order of the Generalitat dissolved and occupied the various headquarters of the Control Patrols, and also some of the headquarters of the defense committees, such as that of the neighborhood of Les Corts. Despite the decree ordering the disbanding of all armed groups, most resisted until September 1937, when they were systematically dissolved and the buildings they occupied were attacked, one by one. The last building occupied by a defense committee, and the strongest and most important, was the headquarters of the Central defense committee, located at the former monastery of St. Anthony, which was attacked on September 21, 1937 by the forces of public order, which utilized an entire arsenal of machine guns, tanks and hand grenades. The monastery's defenders did not yield, however, to force of arms, but to the evacuation order delivered by the Regional Committee.

From then on, the defense committees disguised themselves under the name of CNT coordination and information Sections, devoted exclusively to clandestine investigative and informational tasks, of the kind that was carried out prior to July 19; but now (1938) they had to operate in a distinctly counterrevolutionary situation.

They were still combative enough and strong enough, however, to publish a clandestine bulletin, *Alerta!*, seven issues of which were distributed between October and December 1937. The first issue was published on October 23, 1937. The constant preoccupations of this bulletin were: solidarity with "revolutionary prisoners", demanding their release and denouncing the administration of and abuses that took place at the Modelo prison; the critique of the collaborationism and politicization of the FAI; and the denunciation of the disastrous military policies of the Negrín-Prieto government and the Stalinist domination of the army and the State. It expressed its support for the Libertarian Youth and the Friends of Durruti. An unforgettable characteristic of the publication were its constant calls to "revolution" and the demand that all the members of the superior committees must resign their government positions: "The Revolution cannot be carried out FROM WITHIN THE STATE, but only AGAINST THE STATE". Its last issue, dated December 4, 1937, denounced the Stalinist Chekas and the brutal persecution of the CNT members in Cerdaña.

In 1938, the revolutionaries were either dead, in jail or living in conditions of absolute secrecy. It was not Franco's dictatorship, but Negrín's republic that put an end to the Revolution.

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Agustin Guillamón  
The CNT defense committees in Barcelona 1933–1938  
An interview with Agustín Guillamón  
July 20, 2011

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*Translated from the Spanish original in January 2013. Interview was conducted in July 2011.*

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