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Review of *The CNT in the Spanish Revolution* by José Peirats

Anarcho

August 18, 2008

The CNT in the Spanish Revolution: Volume 1, Jose Peirats, The Meltzer Press

The Meltzer Press should be congratulated on producing Peirats classic history of the CNT. It is a wonderful book and a vital resource on the history and politics of the CNT. While its cost may put people off buying it, all I can say is that it is worth the money. It is a goldmine of useful information and facts, presenting an honest and comprehensive account of the CNT from its founding in 1911 to approximately the end of 1937.

In this classic work you will find in full the CNT's concept of libertarian communism as agreed at its congress in May, 1936. It is a truly beautiful document and, regardless of the claims of Liberal and Marxist historians, hardly utopian. Indeed, it is useful to finally have the resolution available in English — it means we are no longer dependent on historians selectively quoting from it. For example, Hugh Thomas (in his work **The Spanish Civil War**) states

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Review of an essential book for understanding the CNT and the Spanish Revolution.

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“there was no sign that anyone [at the congress] realised that there was a danger of fascism; and no agreement, in consequence, on the arming of militias, much less the organisation of a revolutionary army as suggested by Juan Garcia Oliver.” He fails to tell the reader that Oliver’s motion was defeated by one favouring the idea of guerrilla warfare. Nor do the selections he quotes from the resolution itself include its argument that *“permanent army constitutes the greatest danger for the revolution ... The people armed will be the best assurance against any attempt to restore the system destroyed by exertions from within or without ... Each Commune should have its arms and means of defence.”* To co-ordinate defence of the revolution, *“Confederal defence cadres”* would exist (based on the CNT’s existing “defence committees”).

Hugh’s omission is extremely serious — it gives a radically false impression of anarchist politics. His comments could lead a reader to think that anarchists, as Marxists claim, do not believe in defending a revolution. As can be seen from the actual resolutions of the Saragossa conference, this is not the case. Given that Thomas quotes from the resolution on libertarian communism we can only surmise that he forgot to read the section entitled “Defence of the Revolution.” Such is the level of reporting on anarchism and Spanish anarchism in particular. Having Peirats work in English means we have another resource with which to refute the spurious nonsense as regards our Spanish comrades that passes for history.

Also of interest is the discussion of the CNT’s role in the October revolt of 1934. Peirats account effectively and easily destroys Trotskyist claims that anarchists abstained from the revolt in Catalonia (in fact, the first shots of the revolt were directed by the Catalan rebels towards CNT members trying to take part in the revolt in an organised fashion by opening their union locals). As he states, the *“absurd contention according to which the confederal proletariat of Catalonia allegedly betrayed their brethren in Asturias melts away in the face of a truthful narration of the facts”*. He also presents extensive information on the collectivisations, the Coun-

cil of Aragon, the July 1936 decision to postpone creating libertarian communism and to collaborate with the state and bourgeoisie in the name of “anti-fascist unity.” He also discusses the crisis of the CNT’s functional self-management and the assumption of more and more power by the higher committees. Being a leading opponent of the policy of anti-collaboration during the revolution his work is therefore critical, but fair. He does not fail to point out the errors and mistakes made, the violations in libertarian principles and their disastrous effects along with the positive experiences of the revolution and those areas, like Aragon, in which the CNT did apply its politics rather than postpone doing so.

Peirats quotes extensively from original sources and leaves the narrative sections to a minimum. This is a great strength of his history as it gives the reader a vivid picture of what people thought and did at the time, rather than being “interpreted” by historians (as Thomas proves, with little reliability). History may be written by those who win but it is also written with those with excess time on their hands (i.e. academics rather than working class people). Its nice to read a work of history which bases itself on what the people involved wrote and said.

In summary, this is a wonderful work and an essential resource for anyone interested in the history of the CNT and the Spanish revolution. Indeed, reading Peirats work you see how much other historians (and other anarchists) have lifted from it in their books. It is great to finally have the work available in English.