

The People Armed

Women in the Spanish Revolution

Anti-Fascist Action

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The events of 1936 - 1939 brought massive upheavals to the daily lives of Spanish people. Working class women, in particular, participated in and witnessed great changes as the old order of Church and domestic culture were swept away by social revolution and war. Thousands of ordinary women were propelled by necessity into revolutionary events, from front line fighting and organising community defence to collectivising and running farmland and factories. When the revolution was crushed in 1939, the memories and bonds formed in the revolutionary period sustained them through long years of the Fascist dictatorship, in prison, exile, or continuing the struggle in the resistance movements.

Much has been written about the war and the political organisations during this period. References to ordinary women and their activities are scarce. We have used first hand and eye witness accounts as much as possible because these stories are best told by those who lived them.

The July Uprising

Workers, unions, and working class communities were swift to react to the Fascist's attempted coup on 17/18 July 1936. Men and women in Barcelona slept in union halls during the week before the uprising, expecting a call to arms. In Catalonia, Madrid, and Asturias, men and women both young and old stormed the armouries to grab the weapons that the government had refused to provide them with. Cristina Piera entered the armoury at San Andreas at dawn on the 19th with her son and his friends in the FIJL (libertarian youth organisation) and was caught up in the excitement : "I woke up in the morning and heard that people were in the armoury...so I went there...everybody went...I took a pistol and two ramrods (for rifles) what I could carry. They had gunpowder there too...Even me, with the little I knew, and could do, I was there. People took arms and ammunition, and I took what I could."

Enriqueta Rovira, a young woman of 20 , jumped the first train back to Barcelona when she heard the news : "Most of the action was in the centre of Barcelona. I had a pistol...and I was prepared to use it. But they soon said no...I didn't know how to use it and there were companeros without arms. So they sent me - and all the women, all families - to build barricades. We also took care of provisions. Women in each barrio (district) organised that, to make sure that there would be food for the men...Everyone did something." Women were at a disadvantage in having no experience of weapons handling. In the heat of the battle and with limited arms it was only logical that guns went to those who already knew how to use them. But in building the barricades women continued to play a vital role. A group of five or six militant women set about fortifying one of the city's most elegant buildings, "...when the (CNT) companeros returned - victorious, of course - (from storming the military barracks at Atarazanas, at the foot of the Ramblas) and saw how beautiful it was, they took it over as the casa CNT-FAI." (Soledad Estorach). Other women took to the rooftops with loudspeakers, calling on the soldiers to take off their uniforms (!) and join the people.

The Fascist uprising was crushed in Barcelona, but the workers knew that this was only the beginning. While the government urged people to stay at home rather than actively defend the city and rely upon the notorious Guardia Civil (who later used their rifle butts to disperse demonstrations of Barcelona women against rising food prices), Miguel Garcia and others were involved in efforts to organise a people's army:

”...But by this time every man and woman in Barcelona knew that we had stormed the heavens. The generals would never forgive us for what we had done. We had humiliated and defeated the Army, we - an ‘unorganised, indisciplined rabble.’ We had altered the course of history. If Fascism won, we knew that we would not be spared. Mothers trembled for their small children. When the news came from the South that the invading rebels were using Moorish troops to put whole towns to the sword, many of these women, even elderly ones, struggled and fought to obtain a rifle so that they could take part in the defence of their homes. Indomitable, inscrutable, they sat together in pairs, chatting among cronies, with a rifle across their lap, ready for Franco and his Moors ‘and if Hitler comes, him too’.”

Garcia goes on to describe how old scores were settled as women discovered new freedoms : “In Barcelona, down in the slum quarters of the Barrio Chino, the whores were carried away by the general enthusiasm. They made short work of the ponces and pistoleros who had preyed upon them for so long. ‘Away with this life, we will fight on the side of the people!’ they cried. It was a great joke to the foreign journalists, who regarded the unfortunate women as less than human and anything they did ridiculous of itself...In fact, they volunteered to fight in the front lines. Later, this proved an embarrassment. Gradually their units were disbanded...!” Some say that they inflicted more damage than enemy bullets at the front line, as companeros succumbed to a variety of interesting diseases !

While some women headed for the front with the newly formed militia columns, others were widely involved in the social revolution back home, requisitioning buildings for communal eating halls, schools, or hospitals, or collecting and distributing food and other supplies. Women took manufactured goods to barter with farmers in rural areas in exchange for food. Taxis and trams were repainted with revolutionary insignia as communities brought local services back under their control. “The feelings we had then were very special. It was very beautiful. There was a feeling of - how shall I say it ? - of power, not in the sense of domination, but in the sense of things being under our control, if under anyone’s. Of possibility. A feeling that we could together really do something.” (Enriqueta Rovira).

”We took the first steps...towards emancipation...we couldn’t take the ‘giant steps’ because of the war and the exile, which cut our struggle short... Our children have to be the pacesetters for the future...But our memories, such beautiful memories, of that struggle so hard and so pure... (Azucena Barba).

Other commentators noted the self-assurance of Barcelona women in August 1936, previously unusual for Spanish women in public. There were also conspicuous changes in Madrid. Young working class women took to the streets in their hundreds, collecting money for the war effort, enjoying their new found liberty to walk up and down the streets, talking without inhibitions to passers by, foreigners, and militia men. This contrasts strongly with accounts of nationalist areas. For example, in Vigo, under nationalist occupation, it was unusual to even see a woman out on the streets.

In the Front Line

Despite traditional disadvantages women continued to take part in actual combat against the Fascists. Mujeres Libres supported them in Madrid by setting up a shooting range and target practice for women "disposed to defend the capital" while the Catalonia group's "War Sports" section offered: "preliminary preparation for women so that, if it should be necessary, they could intervene effectively, even on the battlefield." It was.

Armed women were always most noticeable in urban defense, when the Fascists threatened cities like Madrid. But during the first year of the war women also served as front line combatants with the militia columns, in addition to nursing and, in the usual militia system, working alongside the rural population to ensure a common food supply. Their bravery at the front cannot be over-stated because, if captured alive, they inevitably faced rape, mutilation and death. It was only after the battle of Guadalajara, in May 1937, that women were asked to leave the front, as the government demanded incorporation of the militia into regular army units.

Donald Renton, an English volunteer with the International Brigades in Figueras in November 1936 recalls the impact of seeing militia women: "While we had often talked about the role to be played by women in the general struggle, there for the first time we saw the militia women, comrades who like ourselves were either going to have or already had had, first line experience in the battle against the fascist enemy. These were wonderful comrades, people who had - so far as I was concerned at least - a very, very powerful inspirational effect on arriving inside Spain itself."

Foreign women also served in the international sections of the columns. Abel Paz refers to four women "nurses" in the "International Group" of the Durruti Column. They were captured by Moors in a fierce encounter at Perdiguera. As prisoners of the fascists they were as good as dead: "Georgette, militant of the Revue Anarchiste, Gertrude, a young German woman of the POUM who liked to fight with the anarchists, and two young girls whose names haven't been recorded in the war chronicles. Durruti was very close to all of them...and he was deeply moved by these deaths. The death of Georgette, who was a sort of mascot of the Column, filled the militiamen with rage, particularly the "Sons of Night". She had carried out many surprise attacks on the enemy rearguard with the latter. They vowed to avenge her and during a number of nights made fierce attacks against the Francoists." The "Sons of the Night" were a specialised group operating behind enemy lines - women were not just at the front as nurses.

In the defence of Madrid in early November 1936, women were also prominent in the fighting. The Women's Battalion fought before Segovia Bridge. At Gestafe, in the centre of the Northern Front, women were under fire all morning and were among the last to leave. Fighting with the Italians of the International Column in Madrid was a 16 year old girl from Ciudad Real, who had joined up after her father and brother were killed. She had the same duties as the men, shared their way of life, and was said to be a crack shot.

Back in Madrid itself, women were organising in defence of the city, building barricades, providing communication services, and organising, through local committees, the distribution of food and ammunition to the barricades and throughout the city. Collective meals, cr ches, and laundry facilities were set up. Women also played a major role in anti-aircraft observation and surveillance of suspected fascist sympathisers.

An International Brigade volunteer, Walter Gregory, who fought in Madrid in July 1937 recalls that: "A frequent sight in the area of Las Cibeles was of the Women's Militia coming on and off

duty. In twos and threes they would make their way down the Gran Via which ultimately led to the University City and the Madrid front line. The Gran Via was too often shelled to be used by vehicles, nor would the women have risked marching down its length in formation. In small groups and chattering away to each other, they looked very like women the world over, and only their dishevelled khaki uniforms after several nights in the trenches marked them out as being something special. These brave girls were such a common sight that they did not attract comment, nor did they appear to want to. Yet Madrid remained the only place in Spain where I saw women in the front line, although it must be remembered that the first British subject killed in the war was Felicia Brown, who died on the Aragon Front as early as 25/8/1936." Felicia was caught by machine gun fire while attempting to blow up a Fascist munitions train.

During the bitter battle at Jarama in 1937, another International Brigader Tom Clarke, described the courage of a small group of Spanish women: "I remember there was a bit of a retreat. There was a rumour went round... and they started retreating. We'd gone back a bit, and some of them were actually running. And here we came across three women who were sitting behind a machine gun just past where we were, Spanish women. I saw them looking at us. I don't know whether it shamed us or what. But these women - they sat there... We sort of stabilised the line."

They were certainly an eye-opener for foreign men! Borkenau describes a lone militia woman serving with a POUM column:"She was not from Barcelona, but a native of Galicia (who had)...followed her lover to the Front. She was very good looking but no special attention was given to her by the militia men, for all of them knew that she was bound to her lover by a link which is regarded among the revolutionaries as equal to marriage. Every single militia man, however, was visibly proud of her for the courage she seems to have displayed in staying in an advanced position under fire with only two companions. 'Was it an unpleasant experience?' I asked. 'No, solo me da el entusiasmo' (to me it is only inspiring) replied the girl with shining eyes, and from her whole bearing I believed her. There was nothing awkward about her position among the men. One of them, who was playing an accordion, started la Cucaracha, and she immediately began the movements of the dance, the others joining in the song. When this interlude was over, she was again just a comrade amongst them."

By late December 1937 there were still women serving in the militias, but their numbers were diminishing fast. Orwell noticed that, by this time, (male) attitudes towards women had changed, citing an example of militia men having to be kept out of the way while women were doing weapons drill, because they tended to laugh at the women and put them off. However, if women were becoming less active on the front line, this was not the case elsewhere.

Mujeres Libres

There were a number of womens' journals and groups in revolutionary Spain, including Anarchist, Socialist, and Communist organisations, which also had their own women's and youth sections. Because of the information available concerning its role, this article concentrates on the activities of the anarchist Mujeres Libres.

In the years prior to the revolution, women active in the anarcho-syndicalist movement had begun organising and meeting, preparing the groundwork for Mujeres Libres (Free Women) - a local, regional, and national network of women which grew to over 20,000 strong. It played a vital

role, not only in the war against Fascism, but in building the foundations of the new libertarian society which its members hoped to create.

Anarchist women had been actively organising and promoting a women's network since 1934. Despite their involvement with and commitment to the existing networks of unions, ateneos (storefront schools / cultural centres), and youth groups, women were finding themselves always in a minority and without the full equality and respect which they demanded from their (male) comrades.

In late 1934 a group of Barcelona women met to overcome these problems and encourage greater activism among existing CNT women: "What would happen is that women would come once, maybe even join. But they would never be seen again. So many companeras came to the conclusion that it might be a good idea to start a separate group for these women...we got concerned about all the women we were losing...In 1935, we sent out a call to all women in the libertarian movement." (Soledad Estorach). They organised guarderías volantes (flying day-care centres), offering childcare to women wanting to serve as union delegates and attend evening meetings.

Meanwhile, Madrid women, calling themselves Mujeres Libres, were trying to develop women's social consciences, skills, and creative abilities. Towards the end of 1936, the two groups merged as Agrupación Mujeres Libres. The initiative was met with enthusiasm but there was also scepticism. Was this a "separatist" group? Would they encourage women to see liberation in terms of access to education and professional jobs, like middle-class Spanish "feminists"? Far from it. "The intention that underlay our activities was much broader: to serve a doctrine, not a party, to empower women to make of themselves individuals capable of contributing to the structuring of the future society, individuals who have learned to be self-determining, not to follow blindly the dictates of any organisation". (Federación Nacional (M.L.) Barcelona 1938)

Responding to some middle class American feminists' attempts to claim Mujeres Libres as their political ancestors, or to criticise them for failing to achieve "sexual equality", Susceso Portales, (a CNT and FIJL activist who joined Mujeres Libres in central Spain in 1936), states their position: "We are not - and we were not then - feminists. We were not fighting against men. We did not want to substitute a feminist hierarchy for a masculine one. It's necessary to work, struggle together because if we don't, we'll never have a social revolution. But we needed our own organisation to struggle for ourselves."

These were women who had as their goal a complete social and political revolution. Their means of achieving this was to ensure that women were included and preparing to be included at every step. By July 1936, a network of anarchist women activists had been established for some time, ready and able to participate in the July events, and encourage other women to take part in creating the new society.

Secciones de Trabajo

Mujeres Libres ran training programmes for new workers in co-operation with the local unions. Their Secciones de Trabajo developed apprenticeship programmes, bringing women into traditionally male factories and workplaces, improving skills and participation, and equalising pay levels to increase women's independence. "The secciones de trabajo (labour sections) were probably the most important activities. We started in that area immediately, because it was essential

to get women out of the home. Eventually there were Mujeres Libres groups in almost all the factories.” (Soledad Estorach)

Labour sections were organised specific to trades or industries at local, regional, and national levels, with the co-operation of the relevant CNT unions. From July 1936 onwards, women rushed to fill new factory jobs in the chemical and metallurgical industries. By September 1936 Mujeres Libres had 7 labour Sections. In Madrid and Barcelona women ran much of the public transport system. Pura Prez Arcos described her elation at being one of the first group of women licensed to drive trams in Barcelona : ”They (the Transport Workers Union) took people on as apprentices, mechanics, and drivers, and really taught us what to do. If you could only have seen the faces of the passengers (when women began serving as drivers), I think the companeros on transport, who were so kind and co-operative towards us, really got a kick out of that”. In the Aragon collectives the first delegates to the village committees were women. Here women were running the villages on a day to day basis anyway, since the village men were often away tending the flocks (no change there then!).

The secciones also set up childcare facilities at workplaces, arguing that the responsibility for children belonged to the community as a whole. They encouraged this as a widespread practice and produced booklets explaining how to set these up in other areas.

In Catalonia union organisations collectivised virtually all production, drawing on a long history of workers’ organisation and struggle. Industries and workplaces were reorganised to reflect the needs of the people who worked in them. Recreation centres for workers and their families were built by timber and construction workers ; churches were requisitioned to provide day-care centres and schools for children. The mostly female textile industries were collectivised, abolishing piecework, while the CNT was active in organising homeworkers, bringing them back into the factories to receive a daily wage.

Education

However, years of tradition and inexperience of workplace or political activism would not disappear overnight. Mujeres Libres saw one of its major tasks as developing women’s confidence and skills to speak at meetings, take full part in discussions and debates in village committees, factories, etc., and put themselves forward as delegates.

Programmes developed and implemented included basic literacy and numeracy, mechanics, business, sewing, agriculture, childcare , health, typing, languages, history, union organisation, general culture, and economics. Mujeres Libres set up farm schools for women who had left rural areas to enter domestic service in the cities, to enable them, if they wanted to, to return to their villages and participate in collectivised farming. They operated on both a city-wide basis, and in individual districts, running day and night classes for all age groups, also encouraging women who studied to take their new skills with them to hospitals, battlefronts, and other areas and pass these on to others. Members also set up libertarian schools and universities in buildings requisitioned from or abandoned by the Church and bourgeoisie.

Family & Healthcare

Responsibility for nursing, healthcare, and child education had traditionally been held by the Church. Mujeres Libres were committed to bringing these back into community control, developing libertarian practices, and distributing information about contraception, pregnancy, child development, and parenting through their journals and a range of pamphlets. Their attempts to meet health care needs and educate women for motherhood went beyond the written word. Within the first days of the revolution, Terrassa activists set up a nurses' school and an emergency medical clinic to treat those injured in the fighting, later creating Terrassa's first maternity clinic. Barcelona MLs ran a lying-in hospital with birth and postnatal care for women and babies, and its own health education programmes.

Sexual Equality

Spanish anarchists - both men and women - had promoted sexual liberation for many years prior to the revolution. Now they were active in distributing information on sex and sexuality, contraception, sexual freedom, and the replacement of legal and religious marriages with "free love" - voluntary relationships which could be terminated at will by either partner. Legal marriage ceremonies continued on many collectives, because people enjoyed it as a festive occasion. Comrades went through the procedures, later destroying the documentary proof as part of the celebration! The revolution enabled thousands to experience some degree of liberation in their personal relationships. Women felt able to refuse offers of marriage without causing offence to male friends or their families. It was a time of openness and experimentation. The double standard, of course, did not disappear, let alone vanish overnight. Many men used "free love" as a license to extend their sexual conquests, while more puritanical elements labelled women who openly enjoyed their sex lives with several partners as "mujeres liebres" (rabbits)!

Modern feminist criticism of Spanish women's "lack" of achievement in these areas ignores both the traditional stranglehold of the Church and the fact that people were effectively running their communities and fighting a war on several fronts. The women involved felt justly proud that they were in charge of supplying food and clothing to barricades and battlefields, and caring for the sick and wounded. "Traditional" as these roles were, they were vital to the continuation of the war and revolution.

Propaganda

Consciousness raising and support for these activities was spread by means of literature, including booklets, the "Mujeres Libres" journal, exhibitions, posters, and cross-country tours, especially to rural areas. There are many accounts of urban compañeras visiting rural collectives and exchanging ideas, information, etc. (and vice versa). Produced entirely by and for women, the paper Mujeres Libres grew to national circulation and, by all accounts, was popular with both rural and urban working class women. Each issue encouraged its readers to develop a libertarian vision, and to participate fully in the events around them; the paper consistently spelled out the "revolution and war" position of the movement.

Nationalist Repression

The nationalists were well aware of the opposition they faced from women. General Quiapo de Llano, in his radio broadcasts from Seville, raved against and threatened the "wives of anarchists and communists". As they consolidated their power, the Fascists wasted no time in reversing the liberalisation of divorce and introducing strict dress codes for women - including the banning of bare legs! The Repression, of course, was much more terrible, with up to a third of Spain's population ending up behind bars, and countless men, women, and children massacred in fascist reprisals. In 1945, there were still eight jails for women political prisoners in Madrid alone. A Falange newspaper reports a baptism ceremony in Madrid in 1940 for 280 children born in prison. Many Spanish women fled to the French refugee camps, where they pooled food and established communal kitchens. Others joined the Resistance.

In their struggle against fascism and for a radical political and social alternative the "Free Women" of Spain provide an example that is still relevant today: "To be an anti-fascist is too little; one is an anti-fascist because one is already something else. We have an affirmation to set up against this negation...the rational organisation of life on the basis of work, equality, and social justice. If it weren't for this, anti-fascism would be, for us, a meaningless word."

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