

The first guerrillas In Cantabria

Antonio Téllez Solà

March 2002

The Spanish army revolt that began in July 1936 failed in Minorca (Balearic Islands), Catalonia, part of Aragon, Valencia, Murcia, much of Andalusia, Asturias (with the exception of Oviedo), Santander, Vizcaya and Guipúzcoa..

In the North, the rebels captured Irun on 5 September 1936 and San Sebastian followed on 15 September. By late March 1937 the invasion of Vizcaya was underway, with Bilbao captured on 19 June and by 2 July 1937 operations in the last Basque province left to the Republic were all but over.

Operations against Santander started on 14 July 1937. Santander was lost on 26 August and by 1 September the remainder of the province had been occupied.

Such was the defeat inflicted on the forces defending the province that the victors thought that the resistance in Asturias would easily be overcome, but the Asturians and Cantabrians put up a brave fight in the Picos de Europa. Occupying Asturias was no stroll for the army. far from it. Her defenders suffered 100,000 wounded and nearly 30,000 dead. Franco's final war dispatches were issued on 21 October 1937: "The Northern front is no more." This was only a half-truth for some two thousand men from the defeated republican army organised themselves into guerrilla bands that it took six months and 23 infantry battalions to break.

After the failure of the army's revolt in Santander, the CNT set up the Libertad (Freedom) Battalion with which the younger CNT personnel from the city enlisted: these included brothers José and Belisario Lavín Cobo and another pair of brothers, Ramiro and Terio Agudo. After regularisation, the Libertad became the 126th Battalion, commanded by the anarchist Cecilio Galdós García, a CAMPSA employee and it was one of the first battalions dispatched to Asturias to beat back the Galician column attacking from the west. [Cecilio Galdós was born in Santander in 1920. He commanded the 126th Battalion during the civil war. He died in early October 1949 while trying to cross the border between France and Spain on organisation business. At the time he was killed, Galdós was serving on the clandestine Peninsular Committee of the FAI] Another anarchist mountain battalion was the 122nd. Both battalions had 600 men, divided into 1 machine-gunner and 4 infantry companies.

After defeat, many of the fighters made their way through the hills and valleys to their villages around Cantabria. The two sets of brothers we named were among them.

José Lavín Cobo, known as Pin or as Pin el Cariñoso "a nickname he had inherited from his grandfather Andrés", made no attempt to hide when he got home from Asturias. He started work

in a bakery belonging to his uncle in San Roque de Río Miera, about 17 kilometers outside of Liérganes. But for the brutality of the victors, the likelihood is that it would never have occurred to Pin and many others to become guerrillas. They became guerrillas rather than allow themselves to be murdered.

In the winter of 1937 the Civil Guard arrived to arrest José Lavín Cobo and took him to the Falange headquarters in Liérganes “to make a statement”, as they put it. But conversation among the Falangists, who showed no circumspection at all, told Pin that they were going to “take him for a ride”. If he was to save his skin he had no choice but to escape. An aunt of his who had a business nearby had brought him something to eat and had yet to return to pick up her cutlery. Using the handle of a spoon, Pin made himself a skeleton key, opened the door of the lock-up, caught his guard unawares and knocked him out with a punch, disarmed him and took to the hills.

José Lavín fled to the Sierra de Hornijo and had very soon set up a guerrilla band, most of the members of which were veterans of the fighting on the Asturian front, legendary names in Cantabria, in that some of them later set up the Malumbres Brigade. To name but a few, they included: Raimundo Casar Acebo, Tampa (the US-born son of Spanish parents and himself a US citizen); Domingo Samperio Rada (Rada), a communist born in Los Cerrillos near Miera; Pin’s older brother Belisario, surnamed Cobo but known as Sario; his brother and sister Marcos Lavín Cobo (Ceniza) and Dolores (La Lola), his cousin Pedro Lavín (Melenas); the brothers Rafael (nicknamed Ferroviario) and Nemesio Hazas Arce; Orestes Gutierrez (Manonegra), a communist from Mirones; and Ramiro Agudo (Ramiro). Their theatre of operations covered the comarcas around Miera, Liérganes and Vega de Pas.

An informant reported that Pin el Cariñoso and his men were hiding out on the Mortesante crag. In March 1938 the guerrillas were taken unawares and the security forces killed a certain Plácido, wounding Pin and his sister Maria who had been caught in the crossfire while returning from a food run. She was thrashed with clubs and then locked up in Liérganes. Her brother Belisario was more seriously wounded and decided to turn himself in. He was taken under arrest to Santander, treated and, once he had recovered from his injuries, he was shot in the Provincial Prison on 27 October 1938.

Pin determined to avenge his brother’s death. First he killed the informer and then, along with Orestes Gutiérrez (Manonegra) who was also keen to avenge an aunt of his who had been shot after thoroughly brutal treatment, he made his way into Miera under cover of the night and showed up at a bar where they knew some of the Falangists they were after might be. They were not all there but the guerrillas killed one who, before he died, fired his pistol, killing a customer who was playing cards and was completely unconnected with this score-settling.

Shortly after that somebody gave away Orestes’s hide-out. The hut where he was hiding out was surrounded by the Policía Armada and the guerrilla was mown down when he stepped outside.

When the brothers Ramiro and Terio Agudo returned from Asturias they hid out in their mother’s house on the outskirts of Liérganes but someone got wind of their presence and reported them.

One morning armed police showed up and carried out a search of the premises. The brothers were found hiding in the roof-space. That very night they were taken to Jesús del Monte, a godforsaken spot on the Bilbao road. The brothers were tied together. On reaching the place they were positioned on the edge of an embankment well lighted by car headlights. They were just

about to shoot when it occurred to one of the members of the picket that it would be a shame to rip and get blood on the splendid jersey that Ramiro was wearing but if he was get it off him, he would have to be untied from his brother.

The moment he found himself free and faced with the prospect of imminent death, the 24 year old Ramiro threw himself backwards and vanished into the undergrowth. His would-be executioners fired after him, only to hear a voice calling out to them: "I know every one you! And I know where you live! You'll answer to me for whatever you do to my brother Terio!" Terio was spared.

Something like a month later two full companies of soldiers tried to capture Ramiro Agudo, Santiago el Melero and Enrique Barrigas together after they had been reported. The story of the engagement would be long in the telling but thanks to Ramiro's great courage they all came out of it safe and sound.

But in the end they did manage to run him to ground. In August 1940. Ramiro had gone up to Santander meaning to catch a ship to America. A few friends from his days at the front had undertaken to get him on to a coal boat as a stowaway. A few hours before he was due to sail he went to a restaurant for a bite to eat but the Guards were tailing him. They seized him there as he was eating, although that was no easy thing, for Ramiro broke bottles and chairs on his assailants and put more than one of them out of commission, but they managed to immobilise him.

They tried to come to an arrangement with Ramiro: 'We'll let you go if you tell us where the rest of the band is. Pin el Cariñoso is the one we really want.'

To buy time, Ramiro played along and said that he would take them to the guerrillas' hide-out if they would spare his life. The Guards did not trust him and kept him well surrounded by armed men and tied by the wrists to another guard. As they came to a spot known as El Jazu on the cliff at Mortesante, Ramiro took everyone by surprise by jumping off, dragging the Guard with him. But the unexpected occurred. the pair were left dangling from a laurel, one on each side of it, over a sheer drop. The Guard was bleating for help whilst Ramiro Agudo was biting him. Once they had been rescued, Ramiro was thrown on to the ground and his face was beaten to a pulp with rifle butts and he was poked with bayonets, his chest and legs were flayed and they castrated him, dragging him into Liérganes on his last legs, there to finish him off outside his own home.

In 1941 the forces of repression managed to smash José Lavín Cobo's network of contacts and carried out lots of arrests among Pin el Cariñoso's family, friends and acquaintances in an attempt to discover his whereabouts. His cousin Pedro Lavín Melenas, Marcos (Cenizo), Dolores Lavín (La Lola) and Laureano Lavín Cobo (Paisa) joined the band in order to escape the brutal crackdown.

The arrest of some runners led to the location and liquidation on 24 October 1941 of Nemesio Haza Arce (Nemesio) and Constantino (El Madrileño) in La Cavada. Rafael Haza Arce (El Ferrioviario) was wounded too, but managed to escape.

Pin el Cariñoso's hide-out at 44 Calle Santa Lucia in Santander was also uncovered. The house was surrounded and the guerrilla was killed on 27 October 1941. The following day Marcos and Dolores, the children of Benito Lavín from Socastillo "who had been beaten to death without saying where his children were", and their cousin Pedro (Melenas) were surrounded in a house in the Ojaiz district in their hide-out in Peñacastillo and killed. That same day, Santiago Martín Fernández was also captured in Orejo and in December they got Laureano Lavín. The Civil Guard lost some men in the process.

Other early guerrilla bands, somewhat later than Jose Lavin Cobo's band, included the renowned group of Ceferino Campo Roiz (Machado) the La Hermida-born teacher from Bejes who was a member of the UGT. He had spend some time in america. His band was one of the most famous ones as was the band of Mauro Roiz Sánchez (Mauro) who operated in the Potes district. Another band led by Juan Gil del Amo (Hijo del practicante de Carabeos) operated in the campoo area, ranging northwards into the provinces of Burgos and Palencia.

We have seen how Rafael Haza Arce (El Ferrioviario) from José Lavín Cobo's (Pin el Cariñoso) band had managed to evade capture, as had Raimundo Casar Acebo (Tampa). In 1943 they reorganised the band between them. At the beginning of 1944 they were joined by a relative, Esteban Arce, a communist. For a while the new guerrilla band was known as the Northern Guerrillas or the Malumbres Brigade led by Tampa, but in 1945 it became the Santander Guerrilla Grouping. As its name suggests, it was communist in outlook..

They carried our robberies in and around Entrambasaguas, Haza, San Miguel de Aras and Badames: and a few kidnappings plus the raid on the stores of the Dolomitas S.A. company, carrying off all its dynamite: they carried out sabotage at the Morrón engine depot on the Santander-Bilbao rail line: they felled electricity pylons, high tension wires, etc. but that takes us into another phase of the Cantabrian guerrillas' activity, one more familiar than the initial stages.

Ceferino Campo Roiz (Machado), who was, as we have said, a socialist sympathiser, even if the Civil Guard Lieutenant Francisco Aguado Sanchez describes him as an anarchist, went to ground in the Picos de Europa on the border between the Asturias and Cantabrian provinces after the capture of Asturias.

The Picos de Europa are the mountain range that separates the provinces of Santander(now Cantabria) Asturias and León from the rest of the North, and are situated close to the Cantabrian Range of which they are an offshoot and which they exceed in height. Between them lie the Valdeón and la Liebana valleys. The wilder parts of the La Liébana valley is ideal guerrilla country. Potes, thje capital of La Liébana had been put to the torch on 31 August 1937 by retreating Asturian miners passing through after the collapse of the Basque front and it became the capital of the resistance in Cantabria along with villages like Treviso, La Hermida or Bejes.

In 1940 Machado joined with 12 escapees from the Potes (Santander) concentration camp to form a guerrilla band that was known over the years as the Machado Brigade, the Picos de Europa Guerrilla Brigade and finally, the Llaneda Valleys Guerrilla Brigade.

In 1941 Ceferino Campo Roiz's (Machado) group was joined by Juan Fernández Ayala (Juanín), another escapee from the Potes camp where he had been serving a 30 year sentence.

The Machada Brigade grew to number about forty guerrillas and runners. In June 1945 Machado was ambushed by the Civil Guard in Pandébano near Sostres (Asturias) and perished in the encounter. Juanín then took over as the group's commander. This legendary guerrilla managed to survive until 24 April 1957 when he was killed in an ambush set near Liébana (Santander). Juanín's comrade Francisco Bedoya Gutierrez (Bedoya) died on 2 December 1957.

Raimundo Casar Acebo (Tampa), it is vaguely reported, was executed by his own men on 9 september 1947 for refusing to abide by the orders of the Communist Party, but the true circumstances surrounding his death remain a mystery.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Antonio Téllez Solà
The first guerrillas In Cantabria
March 2002

Retrieved on 17th May 2021 from www.katesharpleylibrary.net
Published in *Polémica* (Barcelona) No 76, March 2002. Translated by: Paul Sharkey.

theanarchistlibrary.org