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The Cult of Personality in the Spanish Revolution

Danny Evans

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In an article of January 1937¹, Ada Martí, one of the moving spirits behind the anarchist student organisation the FECL, criticised what she called ‘revolutionary fetishism’: the tendency to create icons out of revolutionary martyrs. Regardless of the ideology of the idol in question, such hero worship had no place in a revolution – at least one directed at freedom and equality rather than dictatorship. In the article, she noted in passing that Buenaventura Durruti would have been appalled at the sanctification to which he had been subjected since his death. Worse was to come.

Following his death, Durruti was used by the leadership of the Spanish anarchist movement to symbolise self-sacrifice and the subordination of the revolution to the war effort. An invented quote was attributed to him, ‘We renounce everything except victory’, and repeated endlessly by his former comrades and enemies alike.

The sanctification of Durruti served the leadership in two respects. First, it lodged the country’s most famous anarchist at

¹ ‘Revolutionary Fetishism’

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the forefront of the Republic's martyrs, thereby demonstrating the commitment of the movement to the war and to anti-fascist collaboration. Second, it worked as a disciplinary mechanism over the anarchist rank-and-file, suspicious of leadership but full of admiration for their fallen *compañero*.

One event in particular illustrates both of these purposes. At the beginning of July 1937, a major assembly of the Catalan FAI was held in the Casa CNT-FAI, the headquarters of the libertarian movement in Barcelona, to debate the organisation's collaboration with the Republican state. The opening sessions were dominated by radicals who advocated breaking with the policy of collaboration. During its second session, proceedings were called to a halt so that the delegates could attend the unveiling of a plaque dedicated to Durruti. In order to attend, it was only necessary to head to the balcony and windows of the meeting hall, as the plaque was unveiled in front of the Casa CNT-FAI, as can be seen in the photos of Pérez de Rozas in the Arxiu Fotogràfic de Barcelona.

There, the delegates were confronted by an enormous multitude who had heeded the call in that morning's *Solidaridad Obrera* to appear 'as one man' in memory of Durruti. They were addressed from a raised platform to the side of the building on which stood, alongside notable anarchists such as Juan García Oliver and Ricardo Sanz, the chief of police Ricardo Burillo, then overseeing operations against revolutionary centres, union premises and libraries. After the ceremony, the big names of Spanish anarchism who had shown up to the event entered the meeting hall, where they proceeded to browbeat the FAI delegates into backtracking on their radical agenda.

The crowd that had gathered represented the greatest show of anarchist strength between the May days of 1937 and the end of the war, but also symbolised the shift from 'mass participation to mass mobilisation' described in reference to the Russian revolution by

Simon Pirani²: ‘Mass mobilization, in which the party defines the parameters and aims of a campaign, calls on the mass of people to support it, and judges mass consciousness by levels of participation, stands clearly in the “socialism-from-above” tradition. It fences off the mass from decision-making, and assigns it a limited role, undertaking activity guided by decision-makers in the party.’ When the proceedings came to an end, the crowd were urged to leave in an orderly fashion without making any kind of demonstration, which the following day’s *Solidaridad Obrera* congratulated them on doing.

In such a context, we can see that it was a mistake for an important radical anarchist grouping to call itself the Friends of Durruti (FOD). On the one hand, the choice of name was intended to expose the CNT-FAI leadership’s falsification of Durruti’s politics and to affirm a revolutionary continuity with the militia column he had led and which many of the FOD had fought in. On the other, it was off-putting to those anarchists repelled by the cult of personality being constructed around the anarchist martyr. Furthermore, to do battle over the legacy of Durruti was tactically dubious when so many resources were being invested in constructing a pliable, national myth out of the obdurate internationalist anarchist. In an article at the end of May 1937 denouncing the FOD, the Madrid-based anarchist newspaper *Castilla Libre* affirmed that the grouping had been infiltrated by Communist Party provocateurs who falsely claimed to be disciples of the ‘people’s *caudillo*’. This frightening expression, mirroring the fascist propaganda describing Franco – who had not yet taken on this title formally – as a ‘caudillo’, would become increasingly visible in anarchist media, in a process described by Miquel Amorós in *Durruti en el labarinto*.

Although a contributor to the FOD’s newspaper, Ada Martí was right in perceiving the inherently anti-revolutionary, anti-

² *The Russian Revolution in Retreat, 1920-24: Soviet workers and the new communist elite* (Routledge, 2008)

libertarian nature of the cult of personality. Her warning is no less true today than it was in 1937: 'Beware new idols!'