May Days 1937

Book Review

David Porter

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Contents

a review of

The May Days, Barcelona 1937 by A. Souchy, B. Bolloten, Emma Goldman and Jose Peirats, Freedom Press, London, 1987, 128 pages, $5.00

FE note: The tragic events of May 1937 highlighted what had always been the dichotomy of the Spanish War. The struggle has been widely and popularly known as the Spanish Civil War, and characterized solely as the defense of the liberal Republican government against the fascist forces of General Francisco Franco. The conflict was the prelude to World War II and the reigning mythology describes it as the "good fight" to defend democracy from the forces of barbarism, a battle which was aided heroically by the world communist movement which sent "international brigades" from numerous countries to assist the struggling Spanish government.

However, occurring simultaneously, and of more significance, was the Spanish Revolution, led by the million-member anarcho-syndicalist CNT-FAI which, although hidden from official histories, established an anti-statist, anti-capitalist communismo anarchismo throughout many of the country's fields and factories (see FE #323, Summer 1986, "Spain '36" by David Porter).

Beginning in 1937, the Spanish central government aided by their communist allies, attempted to wrest control of the revolutionary gains from the anarchists through a campaign of murderous assaults on CNT positions of which the Barcelona May Days was perhaps the most pivotal.

The communist record of anti-anarchist terror and counter-revolutionary activity probably had more to do with the eventual defeat of the Revolution and the Civil War than did Franco with all of his aid from Hitler and Mussolini. However, this has been obscured by liberal and stalinist historians who, in tandem, disguise the treacherous record of the communists, while ignoring the far-reaching achievements of the anarchist movement. Details of the Spanish events are far too complex to be explained in detail at this writing, but we highly recommend the Volume under review and, additionally, suggest *Anarchists in the Spanish Revolution* by José Peirats, and *Vision on Fire: Emma Goldman on the Spanish Revolution*, edited by David Porter as excellent sources for information. In the review below, Porter examines the implications of the attack on the anarchist position in Barcelona, both for the movement of half a century ago and for ours today. We welcome your comments.

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Young anarchists assassinated by the Communists in Barcelona, May 1937.

—from *Anarchists in the Spanish Revolution* by José Peirats (available from our book service)

Along with Kronstadt in 1921 and the Spanish street insurgency against the right-wing coup of July 1936, the Barcelona May Days of 1937 in the midst of the Spanish Revolution stand out as perhaps the most poignant event, the greatest "moment of truth" in modern anarchist history. Within those several days and that small area was the greatest concentration ever of armed anarchist defense against the viciousness of authoritarian power. Yet the particularly disillusioning resolution of the May Days foretold better than any other single event the immense tragedy swiftly overtaking the largest anarchist movement in the world. In short, the May Days were the final great hope as well as defeat of the traditional anarchist movement.

Small wonder that passions run hot on the subject. For some, the May Days of Barcelona represent a scandalous betrayal by Spanish anarchist "leaders," such as Federica Montseny, Juan Garcia Oliver and Mariano R. Vasquez. All three greatly admired figures had the audacity to urge Barcelona anarchists to lay down their arms in the face of intentionally confrontational, bloody provocations by the anarchists' ostensibly antifascist "allies"—instigated particularly by the Communists. To "save antifascist unity," militant anarchist street fighters and anarchist troops in

Aragon ready to support the rear were told to accept a humiliating truce—one which conceded a shift in power from the likely-victorious anarchists in Barcelona to an increasingly Stalinist and repressive regime. Such a disgrace was the culmination of the long string of "realist" assessments of options and responsibilities by a majority of anarchist "influentials" since the July 1936 outbreak of civil war and before. To their credit, many such "leaders"as Montseny, Diego-Abad de Santillan and others—learned their bitter lesson from May and later publicly admitted the bankruptcy of their collaboration with the Spanish Republican government.

The anarchists were the most influential political force in Catalonia, and they had been raised to a fever pitch by the likely victory over the violent provocations of the power-hungry Communists and their allies in Barcelona. On the face of it, it seems incredible that this grassroots movement so intensely imbued with anarchist principles, so fiery in its commitment to social revolution and the fall of the state could have been impelled to back down and defuse a revolutionary center on the verge of explosion.

Opposed Collaboration

To explore any or all of these factors would take much greater space than available here. Yet it should be noted that there were also significant numbers of Spanish anarchists who opposed collaborationism from the beginning, who foretold the trap it eventually led to in May 1937 and after. Such individuals energetically expressed strong anarchist critiques in meetings and the press, while also contributing to a vast array of successful collective experiments in agriculture, industry, the service sector, education and other realms. Many such anarchists were assassinated or imprisoned, their collectives destroyed, their opinions ignored or ridiculed by statist political forces, again particularly by the Communists. Yet they persisted as long as they could, until killed or forced into harrowing exile.

In retrospect it seems more obvious to us now how dim were the overall chances for a successful anarchist social revolution in Spain. It is possible, as some have argued (even at the time), that a different approach to the civil war, (using guerrilla instead of fixed battle-line strategies) would have enhanced the possibilities of defeating the fascists while preserving a non-collaborationist, uncorrupted anarchist movement. A prolonged struggle of this sort perhaps could have mobilized the areas of anarchist strength throughout Spain, could have avoided the worst centralizing and costly strategies, organization and logistics of traditional warfare, and could have outlasted the increasingly preoccupied Nazi and Italian fascist support which was so crucial to Franco's Nationalist success.

Possibility for Revolutionary Society

As elsewhere in parts of Europe in 1944 through 1946, it is also possible that a significant open space for revolutionary society could have followed a successful defeat of the fascists while the Soviet Union, Britain, France and the United States were preoccupied on other fronts and in post-war reconstruction. Yet the long-range survival of such an experiment in the face of state powers everywhere else seems hard to imagine. Even worse, several immediate factors would have been more decisive than foreign invasion. The majority of Spanish people were not anarchists; even with Franco's defeat, no doubt large numbers would have resisted social revolution. Also, most

of the anarchist movement itself (the FAI and CNT) seemed willing—however begrudgingly—to accept "emergency" hierarchical and centralist practices within the movement. Thus, winning even a guerrilla war would still have required postwar armed defense against internal and external enemies, and in turn, the persisting crisis would have discouraged consistent commitment to non-hierarchical principles.

It is a virtue of the new small book *The May Days: Barcelona 1937*, edited by Vernon Richards and published by Freedom Press, to bring together four complementary accounts which set forth clearly the context and essential dynamics of the May 1937 events. Additionally, Richards' own remarks, in a preface, brief chapter, some footnotes and an epilogue, encourage an intelligent synthesis of the material without precluding potential conclusions somewhat different from his own. Of the four outside contributions, three are already available to those familiar with anarchist history.

The entry by José Peirats (from his *Anarchists in the Spanish Revolution*, 1977) describes the political context in which the May events would unfold. Augustin Souchy's detailed account of the events themselves was reprinted apparently only in anarchist periodicals of the time. Another careful account, but with richer independent documentation, comes from Burnett Bolloten's *The Spanish Revolution: The Left and the Struggle for Power during the Civil War* (1979). Emma Goldman's description of the persecution of Spanish revolutionaries was derived from her trip to Spain in late 1937 (it was reprinted recently in my compilation of her Spanish writings, *Vision on Fire*, 1983). Vernon Richards' useful remarks, in turn, are comparable to those found in his own valuable *Lessons of the Spanish Revolution* (rev. ed., 1983).

Direct Experience in Spain

An important advantage of the four major contributions is that all are written on the basis of direct experience in Spain at the time—Peirats, Souchy and Goldman as anarchist militants and Bolloten as an unusually careful, astute and sympathetic journalist for United Press International. In compact, readable form, the book thus gives voice to authentic observers with perspectives then and now largely ignored by the dominant conservative, liberal and state-socialist press.

If the course of the huge, 1930's Spanish movement was doomed from the start, in the face of all the factors discussed above, how can today's comrades find a sense of direction in such a tradition? What can we learn from this book and from the Spanish experience in general?

If the old contexts and practices of street barricades no longer seem serious or viable possibilities in much of the world, the lessons of the slippery road of collaborationism seem eternal. How many of us are tempted, for all the pragmatic reasons of crisis or simple expedience, "temporarily" to ally ourselves with cultural or political forces or principles whose suppositions and end-goals obviously contradict our own? However more subtle and unspectacular the dynamics, can we truly see a different pattern at work than that which revealed itself so dramatically in Spain?

Temptations of Hierarchical Power

The events of May 1937 were the culmination of a process in which numerous anarchist "influentials" became unconsciously addicted (some temporarily, some permanently) to the tempta-

tions of hierarchical power. Once accepting such a condition, the only way an anarchist can then preserve a sense of personal ideals is to work toward some piece of "lesser-of-evils" reform. But the eventual reform never occurs without yet greater compromise. The downward spiral most often continues until the anarchist becomes identical to hierarchical social reformers.

Demoralization, cynicism and apathy naturally follow. In all of this, the power addict may "mean well," but be totally fooled as to the real outcome—especially when actively flattered by others far more skilled in the realities of such a world. When others threaten to withdraw the power fix (thus threatening "the coalition," "respectability," "acceptance" by authorities, or simply one's sense of escape), deeper and deeper complicity are the only response. Eventually, even the anarchist pretense is lost.

At least the beginnings of this dynamic played a significant role in the events of May 1937. Eventually, it led some "influentials "not awakened by the May outcome to tolerate even the imprisonment of anarchist militants and conscription for the front by the CNT late in the war. To comprehend this pattern is reason enough to read and re-read the tragic accounts in this book.

Despite the crisis atmosphere which encouraged compromise and collaboration, there persisted the revolutionary energy, the commitment to an ideal, and the fierce determination to struggle for freedom amidst hellish alternatives. Such passionate energies typified the thousands of anarchists who fought the fascists, who defiantly stood up against the Communists and other statists in the first days of May 1937 (as well as before and after), and who struggled on in their daily collective experiments. There was a level of energy, commitment and generous solidarity in the Spanish context which defies our own experience and serves as a model for whatever we are part of in the future. Balancing the tragedy and the greatness together, from an anarchist perspective, at least one important lesson from Spain is that there is never "victory" as such. The best we may hope for is a commendable and fully human attempt to make every present context as qualitatively free as we can.

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