

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



# Anarchist military organization during the civil war in Spain

Dmitry Mrachnik, Yigal Levin

11 February 2018

According to a widespread prejudice, «ideological anarchism» excludes a classical military organization based on a one-man command and obedience to orders. This comes not only from the anti-anarchist propaganda of the Bolsheviks, who represented the anarchists as an uncontrollable rabble. Even the anarchists themselves, competing in a level of ideological purity, sometimes claim that true anarchism is so much anti-authoritarian that it excludes a one-man command from military tasks. This can usually be heard from insurgent anarchists, who reduce all forceful actions to the coordination of the set of affinity groups.

But if this can be effective for direct action, then to protect the revolution, and even more to counter foreign invasion, this method is not suitable. How can you fight the thousands-strong army formation with the autonomous groups of 10–20 people who at any moment can split up? A war with anyone requires supplies, strict discipline and guarantees that units will not give up their weapons.

Dmitry Mrachnik, Yigal Levin  
Anarchist military organization during the civil war in Spain  
11 February 2018

Retrieved on 5<sup>th</sup> February 2022 from [www.nihilist.li](http://www.nihilist.li)

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)**

But even those who glorify the role of the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI) and the National Confederation of Labor (CNT) in the Spanish revolution, can't ignore or deny the fact that they have typical army principles. Dissolve these prejudices by the example of the Confederal Militia — the armed forces of Spanish revolutionaries during the civil war of 1936–1939.

This formation comprised of up to 100 000 fighters who served on a voluntary basis. The basic unit of militia was a group of 30 people. Several groups formed the centurium, a few centurions — the battalion. Several battalions formed the column, which was the largest formation of Spanish revolutionaries in the military organization and numbered from 2 000 to 10 000 people. Judging by the standards of the regular armies of that time, the column of the Confederal Militia was something like a stripped pack division. Each column had its headquarters — the War Committee, as well as the technical and quartermaster's logistics council. All the columns were united and coordinated in the Central Committee of the Antifascist Militia of the Republic.

There were 50 000 people in the Militia of anarchist columns from the CNT, that is exactly a half. Another 30 000 were fighters of the General Union of Workers (UGT), 10 000 from the Communist Party of Spain and 5 000 from the Workers' Party of Marxist Unity (POUM). They were also joined by 12 000 Storm Guard police officers who opposed the Francoist rebels.

The anarchists were very badly armed and had only what could be obtained on the black market, from the warehouses of the republic or taken from the francoists. By the way, this was one of the reasons why the Spanish anarchists entered a dialogue with the republic and sent their delegates to the government. It was an attempt to receive arms from the Republic. Of course, the anarchists did not get anything. Moreover, they were killed with a brand new weapon, received from the USSR. To do this task, even the tank brigade of the Stalinist general Enrique Lister was removed from the front.

It is interesting that not only several thousand republican soldiers who served in the army joined the anarchist militia, but also about 200 officers sympathizing with the Spanish revolution and anarchists. They helped to structure the detachments and columns in the summer of 1936, set up the distribution of weapons from warehouses and organized military training camps. Each column had, in addition to headquarters and services, autonomous groups and partisan units.

Autonomous groups were companies of internationalists. For example, in the column of Durruti, which was one of the most famous, there were a Sebastien Faure company, consisting of French and Italians, American Sacco and Vanzetti company and a German Erich Mühsam company. Partisans were groups of the most experienced and brave fighters — something like the anarchist «special forces». They were specialized in field reconnaissance, sabotage, raids on enemy lines and so on.

The volunteer militia turned out to be one of the most combat-ready formations of the republic. For example, for many years, despite the terrible shortage of everything, it held the Aragonese front, vividly showed itself in the Guadalajara operation, where it played an important role in the victory of the Republicans, and also came to the aid of Madrid in the most difficult hours of this city. A professional military man, Colonel de la Beresa, in his work on the Spanish epic, described the fighting formations of anarchists as follows: «From the military point of view, it's chaos, but it's chaos that works.»

Of course, the military discipline in the confederate militia, which is natural for any military organization, was based on the orders of the commanders, who could only be discussed in times of non-combat (the famous Spanish anarchist of Buenaventura Durutti was one of the most respected military commanders). That is, in this sense, the armed forces of the anarchists differed little from any others, if we do not take into account the equality of

relations between the troopers and the commanders, the absence of ranks, trumps and drill, although this is not unique.

The combat formations of different ideological orientations in all countries could contain a share of democracy in the relations between the troopers and commanders, which in no way affected the status of these structures. This could be found not only in the ranks of the Spanish anarchists of the 1930s-revolutionary armies at all times who were famous for such relations, but also they could be observed in the Insurrectionary Army of Ukraine, led by Nestor Makhno, and even in the early Workers' and Peasants' Red Army.

Indeed, war, as the famous anarchist thinker Max Nettlau wrote, is the most anti-anarchist action of all that one can imagine. However, we have to resort to it if we want to survive and implement our political project. And even the anarchist army has commanders and discipline, no matter how paradoxical it may sound for people who see anarchism as an exclusively individual freedom on the verge of irresponsibility. The FAI-CNT Armed Forces in this sense should be the most sobering example.