

When Insurrections Die

1917–1937

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1999

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“If the Russian Revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that both complement each other, the present Russian common ownership of land may serve as the starting point for a communist development.”¹

This perspective was not realised. The European proletariat missed its rendezvous with a revitalised Russian peasant commune.²

Brest-Litovsk: 1917 and 1939

Brest-Litovsk, Poland, December 1917: the Bolsheviks proposed peace without annexations to a Germany intent on taking over a large swath of the old Tsarist empire, stretching from Finland to the Caucasus. But in February 1918, the German soldiers, “proletarians in uniform” though they were, obeyed their officers and resumed the offensive against a soviet Russia as if they were still facing the Tsarist army. No fraternisation occurred, and the revolutionary war advocated by the Bolshevik Left proved impossible. In March, Trotsky had to sign a peace treaty dictated by the Kaiser’s generals. “We’re trading space for time”, as Lenin put it, and in fact, in November, the German defeat turned the treaty into a scrap of paper. Nevertheless, practical proof of the international link-up of the exploited had failed to materialise. A few months later, returning to civilian life with the war’s end, these same proletarians confronted the alliance of the official workers’ movement and the *Freikorps*. Defeat followed defeat: in Berlin, Bavaria and Hungary in 1919; then the Red Army of the Ruhr in 1920; the March Action in 1921...

September 1939. Hitler and Stalin have just carved up Poland. At the border bridge of Brest-Litovsk, several hundred members of the KPD, refugees in the USSR subsequently arrested as “counter-revolutionaries”, are taken from Stalinist prisons and handed over to the Gestapo. Years later, one of them would explain the scars on her back — “GPU did it” — and her torn fingernails — “and that’s the Gestapo”. A fair account of the first half of this century.

1917–37: twenty years that shook the world. The succession of horrors represented by fascism, then World War II and the subsequent upheavals, are the effect of a gigantic social crisis opening with the mutinies of 1917 and closed by the Spanish Civil War.

Not “Fascism Or Democracy” — Fascism And Democracy

According to current left-wing wisdom, fascism is raw state power and brutal capital unmasked, so the only way to do away with fascism is to get rid of capitalism altogether.

So far, so good. Unfortunately, the analysis usually turns round on itself: since fascism is capitalism at its worst, we ought to prevent it from actually producing its worst, i.e. we ought to fight for a “normal”, non-fascist capitalism, and even rally non-fascist capitalists.

Moreover, as fascism is capital in its most reactionary forms, such a vision means trying to promote capital in its most modern, non-feudal, non-militarist, non-racist, non-repressive, non-reactionary forms, i.e. a more liberal capitalism, in other words a more capitalist capitalism.

¹ Marx & Engels, Preface to Russian Edition 1882, *Communist Manifesto* (MECW 24), p. 426.

² Originally published as *Quand Meurent les Insurrections*, ADEL, Paris, 1998. This version was translated by Loren Goldner, revised by the author, and first published by Antagonism Press, 1999. An earlier version was published in 1979 as a preface to the selection of articles from *Bilan on Spain 1936–39*. Chapters of this preface have been translated in English as *Fascism and Anti-Fascism* by several publishers, for instance Unpopular Books.

While it goes on at length to explain how fascism serves the interests of “big business”³, anti-fascism maintains that fascism could have been averted in 1922 or 1933 anyway, that is without destroying big business, if the workers’ movement and/or the democrats had mounted enough pressure to bar Mussolini and Hitler from power. Anti-fascism is an endless comedy of sorrows: if only, in 1921, the Italian Socialist Party and the newly-founded Italian Communist Party had allied with Republican forces to stop Mussolini... if only, at the beginning of the 1930’s, the KPD had not launched a fratricidal struggle against the SPD, Europe would have been spared one of the most ferocious dictatorships in history, a second world war, a Nazi empire of almost continental dimensions, the concentration camps, and the extermination of the Jews. Above and beyond its very true observations about classes, the state, and the ties between fascism and big industry, this vision fails to see that fascism arose out of a two-fold failure: the failure of revolutionaries after World War I, crushed as they were by social-democracy and parliamentary democracy, and then, in the course of the 1920’s, the failure of the democrats and social-democrats in managing capital. Without a grasp of the preceding period as well as of the earlier phase of class struggle and its limits, the coming to power, and still more the nature of fascism, remain incomprehensible.

What is the real thrust of fascism, if not the economic and political unification of capital, a tendency which has become general since 1914? Fascism was a particular way of bringing about that unity in countries — Italy and Germany — where, even though the revolution had been snuffed out, the state was unable to impose order, including order in the ranks of the bourgeoisie. Mussolini was no Thiers, with a solid base in power, ordering regular forces to massacre the Communards. An essential aspect of fascism is its birth in the streets, its use of disorder to impose order, its mobilisation of the old middle classes crazed by their own decline, and its regeneration, from without, of a state unable to deal with the crisis of capitalism. Fascism was an effort of the bourgeoisie to forcibly tame its own contradictions, to turn working class methods of mobilisation to its own advantage, and to deploy all the resources of the modern state, first against an internal enemy, then against an external one.

This was indeed a crisis of the state, during the transition to the total domination of capital over society. First, workers’ organisations had been necessary to deal with the proletarian upsurge; then, fascism was required to put an end to the ensuing disorder. This disorder was, of course, not revolutionary, but it was paralysing, and stood in the way of solutions which, as a result, could only be violent. This crisis was only erratically overcome at the time: the fascist state was efficient only in appearance, because it forcibly integrated the wage-labour work force, and artificially buried conflicts by projecting them into militarist adventure. But the crisis was overcome, relatively, by the multi-tentacled democratic state established in 1945, which potentially appropriated all of fascism’s methods, and added some of its own, since it neutralises wage-worker organisations without destroying them. Parliaments have lost control over the executive. With welfare or with workfare, by modern techniques of surveillance or by state assistance extended to millions of individuals, in short by a system which makes everyone more and more dependent, social unification goes beyond anything achieved by fascist terror, but fascism as a specific movement has disappeared. It corresponded to the forced-march discipline of the bourgeoisie, under the pressure of the state, in the particular context of newly created states hard-pressed to constitute themselves as nations.

³ For example, Daniel Guérin, *Fascism and Big Business* (New International vol. 4 no. 10, 1938)

The bourgeoisie even took the word “fascism” from working class organisations in Italy, which were often called *fasci*. It is significant that fascism first defined itself as a form of organisation and not as a programme. The word referred both to a symbol of state power (*fascies*, or bundles, borne before high officials in Ancient Rome), and to a will to get people together in bundles (groups). Fascism’s only programme is to organise, to forcibly make the components of society converge.

Dictatorship is not a weapon of capital (as if capital could replace it with other, less brutal weapons): dictatorship is one of its tendencies, a tendency realised whenever it is deemed necessary. A “return” to parliamentary democracy, as it occurred in Germany after 1945, indicates that dictatorship is useless for integrating the masses into the state (at least until the next time). The problem is therefore not that democracy ensures a more pliant domination than dictatorship: anyone would prefer being exploited in the Swedish mode to being abducted by the henchmen of Pinochet. But does one have the choice? Even the gentle democracy of Scandinavia would be turned into a dictatorship if circumstances demanded it. The state can only have one function, which it fulfils democratically or dictatorially. The fact that the former is less harsh does not mean that it is possible to reorient the state to dispense with the latter. Capitalism’s forms depend no more on the preferences of wage workers than they do on the intentions of the bourgeoisie. Weimar capitulated to Hitler with open arms. Léon Blum’s Popular Front did not “avoid fascism”, because in 1936 France required neither an authoritarian unification of capital nor a shrinking of its middle classes.

There is no political “choice” to which proletarians could be enticed or which could be forcibly imposed. Democracy is not dictatorship, but democracy does prepare dictatorship, and prepares itself for dictatorship.

The essence of anti-fascism consists in resisting fascism by defending democracy: one no longer struggles against capitalism but seeks to pressure capitalism into renouncing the totalitarian option. Since socialism is identified with total democracy, and capitalism with an accelerating tendency to fascism, the antagonisms between proletariat and capital, communism and wage-labour, proletariat and state, are rejected for a counter-position of democracy and fascism presented as the quintessential revolutionary perspective. The official left and far left tell us that a real change would be the realisation, at last, of the ideals of 1789, endlessly betrayed by the bourgeoisie. The new world? Why, it is already here, to some extent, in embryos to be preserved, in little buds to be tended: already existing democratic rights must be pushed further and further within an infinitely perfectible society, with ever-greater daily doses of democracy, until the achievement of complete democracy, or socialism.

Thus reduced to anti-fascist resistance, social critique is enlisted in dithyrambs to everything it once denounced, and gives up nothing less than that shop-worn affair, revolution, for gradualism, a variant on the “peaceful transition to socialism” once advocated by the CPs, and derided, thirty years ago, by anyone serious about changing the world. The retrogression is palpable.

We won’t invite ridicule by accusing the left and far left of having discarded a communist perspective which they knew in reality only when opposing it. It is all too obvious that anti-fascism renounces revolution. But anti-fascism fails exactly where its realism claims to be effective: in preventing a possible dictatorial mutation of society.

Bourgeois democracy is a phase in capital’s seizure of power, and its extension in the 20th century completes capital’s domination by intensifying the isolation of individuals. Proposed as a remedy for the separation between man and community, between human activity and society,

and between classes, democracy will never be able to solve the problem of the most separated society in history. As a form forever incapable of modifying its content, democracy is only a part of the problem to which it claims to be the solution. Each time it claims to strengthen the “social bond”, democracy contributes to its dissolution. Each time it papers over the contradictions of the commodity, it does so by tightening the hold of the net which the state has placed over social relations.

Even in their own desperately resigned terms, the anti-fascists, to be credible, have to explain to us how local democracy is compatible with the colonisation of the commodity which empties out public space, and fills up the shopping malls. They have to explain how an omnipresent state to which people turn for protection and help, this veritable machine for producing social “good”, will not commit “evil” when explosive contradictions require it to restore order. Fascism is the adulation of the statist monster, while anti-fascism is its more subtle apology. The fight for a democratic state is inevitably a fight to consolidate the state, and far from crippling totalitarianism, such a fight increases totalitarianism’s stranglehold on society.

Rome: 1919–1922

Fascism triumphed in countries in which the revolutionary assault after World War I matured into a series of armed insurrections. In Italy, an important part of the proletariat, using its own methods and goals, directly confronted fascism. There was nothing specifically anti-fascist about its struggle: fighting capital compelled workers and the young CP (created at Livorno, January 1921, and led by the “Bordigist” faction) to fight both the Black Shirts and the cops of parliamentary democracy.⁴

Fascism is unique in giving counter-revolution a mass base and in mimicking revolution. Fascism turns the call to “transform the imperialist war into civil war” against the workers’ movement, and it appears as a reaction of demobilised veterans returning to civilian life, where they are nothing, only held together by collective violence, and bent on destroying everything they imagine to be a cause of their dispossession: subversives, enemies of the nation, etc. In July 1918, Mussolini’s paper, *Il Popolo d’Italia*, added to its title “Veterans’ and Producers’ Daily”.

Thus from the outset fascism became an auxiliary of the police in rural areas, putting down the agricultural proletariat with bullets, but at the same time developing a frenzied anti-capitalist demagoguery. In 1919, it represented nothing: in Milan, in the November general election, it got less than 5000 votes, while the socialists got 170,000. Yet it demanded the abolition of the monarchy, of the senate and all titles of nobility, the vote for women, the confiscation of the property of the clergy, and the expropriation of the big landowners and industrialists. Fighting against the worker in the name of the “producer”, Mussolini exalted the memory of the Red Week of 1914 (which had seen a wave of riots, particularly in Ancona and Naples), and hailed the positive role of unions in linking the worker to the nation. Fascism’s goal was the authoritarian restoration of the state, in order to create a new state structure capable (in contrast to democracy, Mussolini said) of limiting big capital and of controlling the commodity logic which was eroding values, social ties and work.

⁴ Angelo Tasca, *The Rise of Italian Fascism 1918–1922* (Gordon 1976). Phillip Bourrinet, *The Italian Communist Left 1927–45* (ICC 1992).

For decades, the bourgeoisie had denied the reality of social contradictions. Fascism, on the contrary, proclaimed them with violence, denying their existence between classes and transposing them to the struggle between nations, denouncing Italy's fate as a "proletarian nation". Mussolini was archaic in so far as he upheld traditional values ruined by capital, and modern in so far as he claimed to defend the social rights of the people.

Fascist repression was unleashed after a proletarian failure engineered mainly by democracy and its main fallback options: the parties and unions, which alone can defeat the workers by employing direct and indirect methods in tandem. Fascism's arrival in power was not the culmination of street battles. Italian and German proles had been crushed before, by both ballots and bullets.

In 1919, federating pre-existing elements with others close to him, Mussolini founded his *fasci*. To counter clubs and revolvers, while Italy was exploding along with the rest of Europe, democracy called for... a vote, from which a moderate and socialist majority emerged. Forty years after these events Bordiga commented:

"Enthusiastic involvement in the 1919 electoral celebration was tantamount to removing all obstacles on the path of fascism, which was shooting ahead while the masses were put to sleep as they waited for the big parliamentary showdown... Victory, the election of 150 socialist MPs, was won at the cost of the ebb of the insurrectionary movement and of the general political strike, and the rollback of the gains that had already been won."

At the time of the factory occupations of 1920, the state, holding back from a head-on-assault, allowed the proletariat to exhaust itself, with the support of the CGL (a majority-socialist union), which wore down the strikes when it did not break them openly. The institutionalisation of "workers' control" over the factories, under state supervision, was approved by bosses and unions alike.

As soon as the *fasci* appeared, sacking the *Casa di Popolo*, the police either turned a blind eye or confiscated the workers' guns. The courts showed the *fasci* the greatest indulgence, and the army tolerated their exactions when it did not actually assist them. This open but unofficial support became quasi-official with the "Bonomi circular". After being expelled from the socialist party in 1912, with Mussolini's agreement, for supporting Italy's war against Libya, Ivanoe Bonomi held several ministerial posts, and was head of government in 1921-22. His October 20, 1921 circular provided 60,000 demobilised officers to take command of Mussolini's assault groups.

Meanwhile, what were the parties doing? Those liberals allied with the right did not hesitate to form a "national bloc", including the fascists, for the elections of May 1921. In June-July of the same year, confronting an adversary without the slightest scruple, the PSI concluded a meaningless "pacification pact" whose only concrete effect was to further disorient the workers.

Faced with an obvious political reaction, the CGL declared itself a-political. Sensing that Mussolini had power within his grasp, the union leaders dreamed of a tacit agreement of mutual tolerance with the fascists, and called on the proletariat to stay out of the face-off between the CP and the National Fascist Party.

Until August 1922, fascism rarely existed outside the agrarian regions, mainly in the north, where it eradicated all traces of autonomous agrarian worker unionism. In 1919, fascists did burn the headquarters of the socialist daily paper, but they held back from any role as strike-breakers in 1920, and even gave verbal support to worker demands: Mussolini took great pains to stand

behind the strikers and dissociate himself from troublemakers, i.e. communists. In the urban areas, the *fasci* were rarely dominant. Their “March on Ravenna” (September 1921) was easily routed. In Rome in November 1921 a general strike prevented a fascist congress from taking place. In May 1922 the fascists tried again, and were stopped again.

The scenario varied little. A localised fascist onslaught would be met by a working-class counter-attack, which would then relent (following calls for moderation from the reformist workers’ movement) as soon as reactionary pressure tapered off: the proletarians trusted the democrats to dismantle the armed bands. The fascist threat would pull back, regroup and go elsewhere, over time making itself credible to the same state from which the masses were expecting a solution. The proletarians were quicker to recognise the enemy in the black shirt of the street thug than in the “normal” uniform of a cop or soldier, draped in a legality sanctioned by habit, law and universal suffrage. The workers were militant, used guns, and turned many a Labour Exchange or *Casa di Popolo* into a fortress, but stayed nearly always on the defensive, waging a trench war against an ever mobile opponent.

At the beginning of July 1922, the CGL, by a two-thirds majority (against the communist minority’s one-third), declared its support for “any government guaranteeing the restoration of basic freedoms”. In the same month, the fascists seriously stepped up their attempts to penetrate the northern cities...

On August 1st, the Alliance of Labour, which included the railway workers’ union, the CGL and the anarchist USI, called a general strike. Despite broad success, the Alliance officially called off the strike on the 3rd. In numerous cities, however, it continued in insurrectionary form, which was finally contained only by a combined effort of the police and the military, supported by naval cannon, and, of course, reinforced by the fascists.

Who defeated this proletarian energy? The general strike was broken by the state and the *fasci*, but it was also smothered by democracy, and its failure opened the way to a fascist solution to the crisis.

What followed was less a coup d’état than a transfer of power with the support of a whole array of forces. The “March on Rome” of the Duce (who actually took the train) was less a show-down than a bit of theatre: the fascists went through the motions of assaulting the state, the state went through the motions of defending itself, and Mussolini took power. His ultimatum of October 24 (“We Want To Become the State!”) was not a threat of civil war, but a signal to the ruling class that the National Fascist Party represented the only force capable of restoring state authority, and of assuring the political unity of the country. The army could still have contained the fascist groups gathered in Rome, which were badly equipped and notoriously inferior on the military level, and the state could have withstood the seditious pressure. But the game was not being played on the military level. Under the influence of Badoglio in particular (the commander-in-chief in 1919–21) legitimate authority caved in. The king refused to proclaim a state of emergency, and on the 30th he asked the Duce to form a new government.

The liberals — the same people anti-fascism counts on to stop fascism — joined the government. With the exception of the socialists and the communists, all parties sought a rapprochement with the PNF and voted for Mussolini: the parliament, with only 35 fascist MPs, supported Mussolini’s investiture 306–116. Giolitti himself, the great liberal icon of the time, an authoritarian reformer who had been head of state many times before the war, and then again in 1920–21, whom fashionable thought still fancies in retrospect as the sole politician capable of opposing

Mussolini, supported him up to 1924. Democracy not only surrendered its powers to the dictator, but ratified them.

We might add that in the following months, several unions, including those of the railway workers and the sailors, declared themselves “national”, patriotic, and therefore not hostile to the regime: repression did not spare them.

Turin: 1943

If Italian democracy yielded to fascism without a fight, the latter spawned democracy anew when it found itself no longer corresponding to the balance of social and political forces.

The central question after 1943, as in 1919, was how to control the working-class. In Italy more than in other countries, the end of World War II shows the class dimension of international conflict, which can never be explained by military logic alone. A general strike erupted at FIAT in October 1942. In March 1943, a strike wave rocked Turin and Milan, including attempts at forming workers’ councils. In 1943–45, worker groups emerged, sometimes independent of the CP, sometimes calling themselves “Bordigists”, often simultaneously antifascist, *rossi*, and armed. The regime could no longer maintain social equilibrium, just as the German alliance was becoming untenable against the rise of the Anglo-Americans, who were seen in every quarter as the future masters of Western Europe. Changing sides meant allying with the winners-to-be, but also meant rerouting worker revolts and partisan groups into a patriotic objective with a social content. On July 10, 1943, the Allies landed in Sicily. On the 24th, finding himself in a 19–17 minority on the Grand Fascist Council, Mussolini resigned. Rarely has a dictator had to step aside for a majority vote.

Marshal Badoglio, who had been a dignitary of the regime ever since his support for the March on Rome, and who wanted to prevent, in his own words, “the collapse of the regime from swinging too far to the left”, formed a government which was still fascist but which no longer included the Duce, and turned to the democratic opposition. The democrats refused to participate, making the departure of the king a condition. After a second transitional government, Badoglio formed a third in April 1944, which included the leader of the CP, Togliatti. Under the pressure of the Allies and of the CP, the democrats agreed to accept the king (the Republic would be proclaimed by referendum in 1946). But Badoglio stirred up too many bad memories. In June, Bonomi, who 23 years earlier had ordered the officers to join the fasci, formed the first ministry to actually exclude the fascists. This is how Bonomi, ex-socialist, ex-warmlonger, ex-minister, ex-“national bloc” (fascists included) MP, ex-government leader from July 1921 to February 1922, ex-everything, took office for six months as an anti-fascist. Later the situation was reoriented around the tripartite formula (Stalinists + Socialists + Christian Democrats) which would dominate both Italy and France in the first years after the war.

This game of musical chairs, often played by the self-same political class, was the theatre prop behind which democracy metamorphosed into dictatorship, and vice-versa. The phases of equilibrium and disequilibrium in class conflicts brought about a succession of political forms aimed at maintaining the same state, underwriting the same content. No one was more qualified to say it than the Spanish CP, when it declared, out of cynicism or naivety, during the transition from Francoism to democratic monarchy in the mid-70’s:

“Spanish society wants everything to be transformed so that the normal functioning of the state can be assured, without detours or social convulsions. The continuity of the state requires the non-continuity of the regime.”

Volksgemeinschaft Vs. Gemeinwesen

Counter-revolution inevitably triumphs on the terrain of revolution. Through its “people’s community” National Socialism would claim to have eliminated the parliamentarism and bourgeois democracy against which the proletariat revolted after 1917. But the conservative revolution also took over old anti-capitalist tendencies (the return to nature, the flight from cities...) that the workers’ parties, even the extremist ones, had misestimated by their refusal to integrate the a-classist and communitarian dimension of the proletariat, and their inability to think of the future as anything but an extension of heavy industry. In the first half of the 19th century, these themes were at the centre of the socialist movement’s preoccupations, before Marxism abandoned them in the name of progress and science, and they survived only in anarchism and in sects.

Volksgemeinschaft vs. *Gemeinwesen*, people’s community or the human community... 1933 was not the defeat, only the consummation of the defeat. Nazism arose and triumphed to defuse, resolve and to close a social crisis so deep that we still don’t appreciate its magnitude. Germany, cradle of the largest Social Democracy in the world, also gave rise to the strongest radical, anti-parliamentary, anti-union movement, one aspiring to a “workers’” world but also capable of attracting to itself many other anti-bourgeois and anti-capitalist revolts. The presence of avant-garde artists in the ranks of the “German Left” is no accident. It was symptomatic of an attack on capital as “civilisation” in the way Fourier criticised it. The loss of community, individualism and gregariousness, sexual poverty, the family both undermined but affirmed as a refuge, the estrangement from nature, industrialised food, increasing artificiality, the prostheticisation of man, regimentation of time, social relations increasingly mediated by money and technique: all these alienations passed through the fire of a diffuse and multi-formed critique. Only a superficial backward glance sees this ferment purely through the prism of its inevitable recuperation.

The counter-revolution triumphed in the 1920’s only by laying the foundations, in Germany and in the US, of a consumer society and of Fordism, and by pulling millions of Germans, including workers, into industrial, commodified modernity. Ten years of fragile rule, as the mad hyperinflation of 1923 shows. This was followed in 1929 by an earthquake in which not the proletariat but capitalist practice itself repudiated the ideology of progress and an ever-increasing consumption of objects and signs.

Capitalist modernity was questioned twice in ten years, first by proletarians, then by capital. Nazi extremism and its violence were adequate to the depth of the revolutionary movement National-Socialism took over and negated. Like the radicals of 1919–21, Nazism proposed a community of wage-workers, but one which was authoritarian, closed, national, and racial, and for twelve years it succeeded in transforming proletarians into wage-workers and into soldiers.

Fascism grew out of capital, but out of a capital which destroyed old relationships without producing new stable ones brought about by consumerism. Commodities failed to give birth to modern capitalist community.

Berlin: 1919–33

Dictatorship always comes after the defeat of social movements, once they have been chloroformed and massacred by democracy, the leftist parties and the unions. In Italy, several months separated the final proletarian failures from the appointment of Mussolini as head of state. In Germany, a gap of a dozen years broke the continuity and made January 30, 1933 appear as an essentially political or ideological phenomenon, not as the effect of an earlier social earthquake. The popular basis of National Socialism and the murderous energy it unleashed remain mysteries if one ignores the question of the submission, revolt, and control of labour.

The German defeat of 1918 and the fall of the empire set in motion a proletarian assault strong enough to shake the foundations of society, but impotent when it came to revolutionising it, thus bringing Social Democracy and the unions to centre stage as the key to political equilibrium. Their leaders emerged as men of order, and had no scruples about calling in the *Freikorps*, fully fascist groupings with many future Nazis in their ranks, to repress a radical worker minority in the name of the interests of the reformist majority. First defeated by the rules of bourgeois democracy, the communists were also defeated by working-class democracy: the “works councils” placed their trust in the traditional organisations, not in the revolutionaries easily denounced as anti-democrats.

In this juncture, democracy and Social Democracy were indispensable to German capitalism for killing off the spirit of revolt in the polling booth, winning a series of reforms from the bosses, and dispersing the revolutionaries.⁵

After 1929, on the other hand, capitalism needed to eliminate part of the middle classes, and to discipline the proletarians, and even the bourgeoisie. The workers’ movement, defending as it did political pluralism and immediate worker interests, had become an obstacle. As mediators between capital and labour, working-class organisations derive their function from both, but also try to remain autonomous from both, and from the state. Social Democracy has meaning only as a force contending with the employers and the state, not as an organ absorbed by them. Its vocation is the management of an enormous political, municipal, social, mutualist and cultural network. The KPD, moreover, had quickly constituted its own empire, smaller but vast nonetheless. But as capital becomes more and more organised, it tends to pull together all its different strands, bringing a statist element to the enterprise, a bourgeois element to the trade-union bureaucracy, and a social element to public administration. The weight of working-class reformism, which ultimately pervaded the state, and its existence as a “counter-society” made it a factor of social conservation which capital in crisis had to eliminate. By their defence of wage-labour as a component of capital, the SPD and the unions played an indispensable anti-communist part in 1918–21, but this same function later led them to put the interest of wage-labour ahead of everything else, to the detriment of the reorganisation of capital as a whole.

A stable bourgeois state would have tried to solve this problem by anti-union legislation, by recapturing the “worker fortress”, and by pitting the middle classes, in the name of modernity, against the archaism of the proles, as Thatcher’s England did much later. Such an offensive assumes that capital is relatively united under the control of a few dominant factions. But the

⁵ See Serge Bricianer, *Anton Pannekoek and the Workers’ Councils* (Telos 1978) and Phillip Bourrinet, *The German/Dutch Left* (NZW 2003).

German bourgeoisie of 1930 was profoundly divided, the middle classes had collapsed, and the nation-state was in shambles.

By negotiation or by force, modern democracy represents and reconciles antagonistic interests, to the extent that this is possible. Endless parliamentary crises and real or imagined plots (for which Germany was the stage after the fall of the last socialist chancellor in 1930) in a democracy are the invariable sign of long-term disarray in ruling circles. At the beginning of the 1930's, the crisis whipsawed the bourgeoisie between irreconcilable social and geopolitical strategies: either the increased integration or the elimination of the workers' movement; international trade and pacifism, or autarchy laying the foundations of a military expansion. The solution did not necessarily imply a Hitler, but it did presuppose a concentration of force and violence in the hands of central government. Once the centrist-reformist compromise had exhausted itself, the only option left was statist, protectionist and repressive.

A programme of this kind required the violent dismantling of Social Democracy, which in its domestication of the workers had come to exercise excessive influence, while still being incapable of unifying all of Germany behind it. This unification was the task of Nazism, which was able to appeal to all classes, from the unemployed to the industrial tycoons, with a demagogy that even surpassed that of the bourgeois politicians, and an anti-semitism intended to build cohesion through exclusion.

How could the working-class parties have made themselves into an obstacle to such xenophobic and racist madness, after having so often been the fellow travellers of nationalism? For the SPD, this had been clear since the turn of the century, obvious in 1914, and signed in blood in the 1919 pact with the *Freikorps*, who were cast very much in the same warrior mould as their contemporaries, the *fasci*.

Besides, socialists had not been immune to anti-semitism. Abraham Berlau's *The German Social-Democratic Party 1914–1921* (Columbia 1949) describes how many SPD or union leaders, and even the prestigious *Neue Zeit*, openly raved against "foreign" (i.e. Polish and Russian) Jews. In March 1920 the Berlin police (under socialist supervision) raided the Jewish district and sent about 1000 people to a concentration camp. All were freed later, but the labour movement did contribute to the spread of anti-semitism.

The KPD, for its part, had not hesitated to ally with the nationalists against the French occupation of the Ruhr in 1923. No Comintern theoretician opposed Radek when he stated that "only the working-class can save the nation". The KPD leader Thalheimer made it clear that the party should fight alongside the German bourgeoisie, which played "an objectively revolutionary role through its foreign policy". Later, around 1930, the KPD demanded a "national and social liberation" and denounced fascism as a "traitor to the nation". Talk of "national revolution" was so common among German Stalinists that it inspired Trotsky's 1931 pamphlet *Against National-Communism*.

In January 1933, the die was cast. No one can deny that the Weimar Republic willingly gave itself to Hitler. Both the right and the centre had come round to seeing him as a viable solution to get the country out of its impasse, or as a temporary lesser evil. "Big capital", reticent about any uncontrollable upheaval, had not, up to that time, been any more generous with the NSDAP than with the other nationalist and right-wing formations. Only in November 1932 did Schacht, an intimate adviser of the bourgeoisie, convince business circles to support Hitler (who had, moreover, just seen his electoral support slightly decline) because he saw in Hitler a force capable of unifying the state and society. The fact that industrial magnates did not foresee what then

ensued, leading to war and defeat, is another question, and in any event they were not notable by their presence in the clandestine resistance to the regime.

On January 30, 1933 Hitler was appointed chancellor in complete legality by Hindenburg, who himself had been constitutionally elected president a year earlier with the support of the socialists, who saw in him a rampart against... Hitler. The Nazis were a minority in the first government formed by the leader of the NSDAP.

In the following weeks, the masks were taken off: working-class militants were hunted down, their offices were sacked, and a reign of terror was launched. In the elections of March 1933, held against the backdrop of violence by both the storm-troopers and the police, 288 NSDAP MPs were sent to the Reichstag (while the KPD still retained 80 and the SPD 120).

Naive people might express surprise at the docility with which the repressive apparatus goes over to dictators, but the state machine obeys the authority commanding it. Did the new leaders not enjoy full legitimacy? Did eminent jurists not write their decrees in conformity with the higher laws of the land? In the democratic state — and Weimar was one — if there is conflict between the two components of the binomial, it is not democracy which will win out. In a “state founded on law” — and Weimar was also one — if there is a contradiction, it is law which must bend to serve the state, and never the opposite.

During these few months, what did the democrats do? Those on the right accepted the new dispensation. The Zentrum, the Catholic party of the centre, which had even seen its support increase in the March 1933 elections, voted to give four years of full emergency powers to Hitler, powers which became the legal basis of Nazi dictatorship.

The socialists, for their part, attempted to avoid the fate of the KPD, which had been outlawed on February 28 in the wake of the Reichstag fire. On March 30, 1933, they left the Second International to prove their national German character. On May 17 their parliamentary group voted in support of Hitler’s foreign policy.

On June 22, the SPD was dissolved as “an enemy of the people and the state”. A few weeks later, the Zentrum was forced to dissolve itself.

The unions followed in the footsteps of the Italian CGL, and hoped to salvage what they could by insisting that they were a-political. In 1932, the union leaders had proclaimed their independence from all parties and their indifference to the form of the state. This did not stop them from seeking an accord with Schleicher, who was chancellor from November 1932 to January 1933, and who was looking for a base and some credible pro-worker demagoguery. Once the Nazis had formed a government, the union leaders convinced themselves that if they recognised National Socialism, the regime would leave them some small space. This strategy culminated in the farce of union members marching under the swastika on May Day 1933, which had been renamed “Festival of German Labour”. It was wasted effort. In the following days, the Nazis liquidated the unions and arrested the militants.

Having been schooled to contain the masses and to negotiate in their name or, that failing, to repress them, the working-class bureaucracy was still fighting the previous war. The labour bureaucrats were not being attacked for their lack of patriotism. What bothered the bourgeoisie was not the bureaucrats’ lingering lip service to the old pre-1914 internationalism, but rather the existence of trade-unions, however servile, retaining a certain independence in an era in which even an institution of class collaboration became superfluous if the state did not completely control it.

Barcelona: 1936

In Italy and in Germany, fascism took over the state by legal means. Democracy capitulated to dictatorship, or, worse still, greeted dictatorship with open arms. But what about Spain? Far from being the exceptional case of a resolute action that was nonetheless, and sadly, defeated, Spain was the extreme case of armed confrontation between democracy and fascism in which the nature of the struggle still remained the same clash of two forms of capitalist development, two political forms of the capitalist state, two state structures fighting for legitimacy in the same country.

Objection!! — “So, in your opinion, Franco and a working-class militia are the same thing? The big landowners and impoverished peasants collectivising land are in the same camp?!”

First of all, the confrontation happened only because the workers rose up against fascism. All the contradictions of the movement were manifest in its first weeks: an undeniable class war was transformed into a capitalist civil war (though of course there was no assignment of roles in which the two bourgeois factions orchestrated every act: history is not a play).⁶

The dynamic of a class-divided society is ultimately shaped by the need to unify those classes. When, as happened in Spain, a popular explosion combines with the disarray of the ruling groups, a social crisis becomes a crisis of the state. Mussolini and Hitler triumphed in countries with weak, recently unified nation-states and powerful regionalist currents. In Spain, from the Renaissance until modern times, the state was the colonial armed might of a commercial society it ultimately ruined, choking off one of the pre-conditions of industrial expansion: an agrarian reform. In fact, Spanish industrialisation had to make its way through monopolies, the misappropriation of public funds, and parasitism.

Space is lacking here for a summary of the 19th century crazy quilt of countless reforms and liberal impasses, dynastic squabbles, the Carlist wars, the tragicomic succession of regimes and parties after World War I, and the cycle of insurrections and repressions that followed the establishment of the Republic in 1931. Beneath all these rumblings was the weakness of the rising bourgeoisie, caught as it was between its rivalry with the landed oligarchy and the absolute necessity of containing peasant and worker revolts. In 1936, the land question had not been resolved: unlike France after 1789, the mid-19th century sell-off of the Spanish clergy's lands wound up strengthening a *latifundist* bourgeoisie. Even in the years after 1931, the Institute for Agrarian Reform only used one-third of the funds at its disposal to buy up large holdings. The conflagration of 1936–39 would never have reached such political extremes, including the explosion of the state into two factions fighting a three-year civil war, without the tremors which had been rising from the social depths for a century.

Spain had no large centre-left bourgeois party like the “Parti Radical” which was the centre of gravity of French politics for over sixty years. Before July 1936, Spanish Social Democracy kept a much more militant outlook in a country where land was often occupied by wage-labourers, where strikes were rampant, where Madrid tram workers tried to manage the workplace, and where crowds stormed jails to free some of the 30,000 political prisoners. As a socialist leader put it: “The possibilities of stabilising a democratic republic in our country are decreasing every day. Elections are but a variant of civil war.” (One might add: a variant of how to keep it at bay.)

⁶ Vernon Richards, *Lessons of the Spanish Revolution 1936–1939* (Freedom Press 1953). Michael Seidman, *Workers Against Work during the Popular Front* (UCLA 1993).

In the summer of 1936, it was an open secret that a military coup was coming. After giving the rebels every chance to prepare themselves, the Popular Front elected in February was willing to negotiate and perhaps even to surrender. The politicians would have made their peace with the rebels, as they had done during the dictatorship of Primo de Riveira (1932–31), which was supported by eminent socialists (Caballero had served it as a technical counsellor, before becoming Minister of Labour in 1931, and then head of the Republican government from September 1936 to May 1937). Furthermore, the general who had obeyed Republican orders two years earlier and crushed the Asturias insurrection — Franco — couldn't be all that bad.

But the proletariat rose up, blocked the putsch in half of the country, and hung on to its weapons. In so doing, the workers were obviously fighting fascism, but they were not acting as anti-fascists, because their actions were directed against Franco and against a democratic state more unsettled by the masses' initiative than by the military revolt. Three prime ministers came and went in 24 hours before the *fait accompli* of the arming of the people was accepted.

Once again, the unfolding of the insurrection showed that the problem of violence is not primarily a technical one. Victory does not go to the side with the advantage in weaponry (the military) or in numbers (the people), but rather to who dares to take the initiative. Where workers trusted the state, the state remained passive or promised the moon, as happened in Zaragoza. When their struggle was focused and sharp (as in Malaga) the workers won; if it was lacking in vigour, it was drowned in blood (20,000 killed in Seville).

Thus the Spanish Civil War began with an authentic insurrection, but such a characterisation is incomplete. It holds true only for the opening moment: an effectively proletarian uprising. After defeating the forces of reaction in a large number of cities, the workers had the power. But what were they going to do with it? Should they give it back to the republican state, or should they use it to go further in a communist direction?

Created immediately after the insurrection, the Central Committee of Antifascist Militias included delegates from the CNT, the FAI, the UGT (socialist union), the POUM, the PSUC (product of the recent fusion of the CP and the socialists in Catalonia), and four representatives of the *Generalitat*, the Catalan regional government. As a veritable bridge between the workers' movement and the state, and, moreover, tied if not integrated into the Generalitat's Department of Defence by the presence in its midst of the latter's council of defence, the commissar of public order, etc., the Central Committee of the Militias quickly began to unravel.

Of course in giving up their autonomy most proletarians believed that they were, in spite of everything, hanging onto real power and giving the politicians only the facade of authority, which they mistrusted, and which they could control and orient in a favourable direction. Were they not armed?

This was a fatal error. The question is not: who has the guns? But rather: what do the people with the guns do? 10,000 or 100,000 proletarians armed to the teeth are nothing if they place their trust in anything beside their own power to change the world. Otherwise, the next day, the next month or the next year, the power whose authority they recognise will take away the guns which they failed to use against it.

"In fact, the fight in Spain between "legal" government and "rebel forces" is in no way a fight for ideals, but a struggle between determined capitalist groups entrenched in the bourgeois Republic and other capitalist groups ... The Spanish cabinet is no different in its principles from the bloody Leroux regime which massacred thousands

of Spanish proletarians in 1934 ... Spanish workers are now being oppressed with guns in their hands!”⁷

The insurgents did not take on the legal government, in other words the state as it then existed, and all their subsequent actions took place under its auspices. “A revolution had begun but never consolidated”, as Orwell wrote. This is the main point which determined the course of an increasingly losing armed struggle against Franco, as well as the exhaustion and destruction by both camps of the collectivisations and socialisations. After the summer of 1936, real power in Spain was exercised by the state and not by organisations, unions, collectivities, committees, etc. Even though Nin, the head of the POUM, was an adviser to the Ministry of Justice, “The POUM nowhere succeeded in having any influence over the police”, as one defender of that party admitted.⁸ While the workers’ militias were indeed the flower of the Republican army and paid a heavy price in combat, they carried no weight in the decisions of the high command, which steadily integrated them into regular units (a process completed by the beginning of 1937), preferring to wear them down rather than tolerating their autonomy. As for the powerful CNT, it ceded ground to a CP which had been very weak before July 1936 (having 14 MPs in the Popular Front chamber in February, as opposed to 85 socialists), but which was able to insinuate itself into part of the state apparatus and turn the state increasingly to its own advantage against the radicals, and particularly against the militants of the CNT. The question was: who mastered the situation? And the answer was: the state makes subtle and brutal use of its power when it has to.

If the Republican bourgeoisie and the Stalinists lost precious time dismantling the peasant communes, disarming the POUM militias, and hunting down Trotskyist “saboteurs” and other “Hitler agents” at the very moment when anti-fascism was supposed to be throwing everything in the struggle against Franco, they did not do so from a suicidal impulse. For the state and the CP (which was becoming the backbone of the state through the military and police) these operations were not a waste of time. The head of the PSUC supposedly said: “Before taking Zaragoza, we have to take Barcelona.” Their main objective was never crushing Franco, but retaining control of the masses, for this is what states are for, and this is how Stalinism got its power. Barcelona was taken away from the proletarians. Zaragoza remained in fascist hands.

Barcelona: May 1937

On May 3, the police attempted to occupy the Telephone Exchange, which was under the control of anarchist (and socialist) workers. In the Catalan metropolis, heart and symbol of the revolution, legal authority stopped at nothing in disarming whatever remained alive, spontaneous and anti-bourgeois. The local police, moreover, was in the hands of the PSUC. Confronted by an openly hostile power, the workers finally understood that this power was not their own, that they had given it the gift of their insurrection ten months earlier, and that their insurrection had been turned against them. In reaction to the power grab by the state, a general strike paralysed Barcelona. It was too late. The workers still had the capacity to rise up against the state (this time in its democratic form), but they could no longer push their struggle to the point of an open break.

⁷ *Proletariër*, published by the councilist group in The Hague, July 27, 1936.

⁸ Victor Alba, *Spanish Marxism versus Soviet Communism: a History of the POUM* (Transaction Press, 1988).

As always, the “social” question predominated over the military one. Legal authority could not impose itself by street battles. Within a few hours, instead of urban guerrilla warfare, a war of position, a face-off of apartment building against apartment building set in. It was a defensive stalemate in which no one could win because no one was attacking. With its own offensive bogged down, the police would not risk its forces in attacks on buildings held by the anarchists. Broadly speaking, the CP and the state held the centre of the city, while the CNT and the POUM held the working-class districts.

The status quo ultimately won out by political means. The masses placed their trust in the two organisations under attack, while the latter, afraid of alienating the state, got people to go back to work (though not without difficulty) and thereby undermined the only force capable of saving them politically and... “physically”. As soon as the strike was over, knowing that it henceforth controlled the situation, the government brought in 6,000 Assault Guards – the elite of the police. Because they accepted the mediation of “representative organisations” and counsels of moderation from the POUM and the CNT, the very same masses who had defeated the fascist military in July 1936 surrendered without a fight to the Republican police in May 1937.

At that point repression could begin. Only a few weeks were necessary to outlaw the POUM, to arrest its leaders, to kill them legally or otherwise, and to dispose of Nin. A parallel police was established, organised by the NKVD and the secret apparatus of the Comintern, and answering only to Moscow. Anyone showing the slightest opposition to the Republican state and its main ally, the USSR, could be denounced and hunted down as a “fascist”, and all around the world an army of well-meaning, gentle souls would repeat the slander, some from ignorance, others from self-interest, but every one of them convinced that no denunciation was too excessive when fascism was on the march.

The fury unleashed against the POUM was no aberration. By opposing the Moscow Trials, the POUM condemned itself to be destroyed by a Stalinism locked in a merciless world struggle against its rivals for the control of the masses. At the time, not just CP fellow-travellers, but many political parties, lawyers, reporters and even the French League for the Rights of Man came out in endorsement of the guilt of the accused. Sixty years later, mainstream ideology sees these trials as a sign of the Kremlin’s mad will to power. As if Stalinist crimes had nothing to do with anti-fascism! Anti-fascist logic will always align itself with the most moderate forces and always turn against the most radical ones.

On the purely political level, May 1937 gave rise to what, a few months before, would have been unthinkable: a Socialist even farther to the right than Caballero: Negrin, heading a government which came down hard on the side of law and order, including open repression against the workers. Orwell – who almost lost his life in the events – realised that the war “for democracy” was obviously over: “that meant that the general movement would be in the direction of some kind of fascism.” What remained was a competition between two fascisms, Orwell wrote, with the difference that one was less inhuman than its rival: he therefore clung to the necessity of avoiding the “more naked and developed fascism of Hitler and Franco”.⁹ From then on, the only issue was fighting for a fascism less bad than the opposing one...

⁹ *Homage to Catalonia*, April 1938. In 1951, it had sold less than 1,500 copies. It was first published in the US in 1952.

War Devours The Revolution

Power does not come any more from the barrel of a gun than it comes from a ballot box. No revolution is peaceful, but its “military” dimension is never central. The question is not whether the proles finally decide to break into the armouries, but whether they unleash what they are: commodified beings who no longer can and no longer want to exist as commodities, and whose revolt explodes capitalist logic. Barricades and machine guns flow from this “weapon”. The greater the change in social life, the less guns will be needed, and the less casualties there will be. A communist revolution will never resemble a slaughter: not from any nonviolent principle, but because revolution subverts more (soldiers included) than it actually destroys.

To imagine a proletarian front facing off a bourgeois front is to conceive the proletariat in bourgeois terms, on the model of a political revolution or a war (seizing someone’s power, occupying their territory). In so doing, one reintroduces everything that the insurrectionary movement had overwhelmed: hierarchy, a respect for specialists, for knowledge that Knows, and for techniques to solve problems — in short for everything that plays down the role of the common man. In Spain, from the fall of 1936 onward, the revolution dissolved into the war effort and into a kind of combat typical of states: a war of fronts. Soon the working-class “militia man” evolved into a “soldier”.

Formed into “columns”, workers left Barcelona to defeat the fascists in other cities, starting from Zaragoza. Taking the revolution beyond areas under Republican control, however, would have meant completing the revolution in the Republican areas as well. But even Durruti did not seem to realise that the state was everywhere still intact. As his column (70% of whose members were anarchists) advanced, it extended the collectivisations: the militias helped the peasants and spread revolutionary ideas. Yet however much Durruti declared that “these militias will never defend the bourgeoisie” they did not attack it either. Two weeks before his death he delivered a speech broadcast on November 4, 1936:

“At the front and in the trenches there is only one idea and one aim — the destruction of fascism.

“We call on the Catalan people to stop all internal conflicts and intrigues, to forget all jealousy and politics and to think of the war only. The politicians are only playing tricks to secure for themselves an agreeable life. This dubious art must be replaced by the art to work. The people of Catalonia must be worthy of their brothers fighting at the front. If the workers of Catalonia have taken the supreme task to fight at the different fronts, those living in towns and cities will also have to be mobilised to do their share. Our heroic militia, ready to lie down their lives on the battlefield want to be assured whom they have behind them. They feel that no one should be deterred from their duty because of lack of wage increase or shorter hours of work. Today all toilers and especially those of the CNT must be ready for the utmost sacrifices. For in that way alone can we hope to triumph over fascism.

“I address myself to all organisations, asking them to bury their conflicts and grudges...

“The militarisation of the militias has been decreed. If this has been done to frighten us, to impose on us an iron discipline, this is a mistaken policy. We challenge those

who have issued this decree to come to the front and see for themselves our moral and our discipline and compare it with the moral and discipline in the rear. We will not accept dictated discipline. We are doing our duty. Come to the front to see our organisation! Later we shall come to Barcelona to examine your discipline, your organisation and your control!

“There is no chaos at the front, no lack of discipline. We all have a strong sense of responsibility. We know what you have entrusted us with. You can sleep quietly. But remember we have left Barcelona in your hands. We demand responsibility and discipline from you too. Let us prove our capacity to prevent the creation of new differences after our war against fascism. Those who want their movement to be the strongest are working in the wrong direction. Against tyranny there is only one front possible, one organisation and only one sort of discipline.”¹⁰

Listeners would think that a revolution had actually taken place, politically and socially, and just needed its military completion: smashing the fascists. Durruti and his comrades embodied an energy which had not waited for 1936 to storm the existing world. But all the combative will in the world is not enough when workers aim all their blows against one particular form of the state, and not against the state as such. In mid-1936, accepting a war of fronts meant leaving social and political weapons in the hands of the bourgeoisie behind the lines, and moreover meant depriving military action itself of the initial vigour it drew from another terrain, the only one where the proletariat has the upper hand. As the “Dutch Left” wrote:

“If the workers really want to build up a defence front against the Whites, they can only do so by taking over political power themselves, instead of leaving it in the hands of a Popular Front government. In other words, defending the revolution is only possible through the dictatorship of the proletariat, and not through the collaboration of all anti-fascist parties ... Proletarian revolution revolves around the destruction of the old state machine, and the exercise of the central functions of power by the workers themselves.”¹¹

In the summer of 1936, far from having decisive military superiority, the nationalists held no major city. Their main strength lay in the Foreign Legion and in the Moroccan “Moors”. In 1912, Morocco had been split by France and Spain into two protectorates, but had long since rebelled against the colonial dreams of both countries. The Spanish royal army had been badly defeated there in 1921, largely due to the defection of Moroccan troops. Despite Franco-Spanish collaboration, the Rif war (in which a general named Franco had distinguished himself) ended only when Abd el-Krim surrendered in 1926. Ten years later, the announcement of immediate and unconditional independence for Spanish Morocco would, at minimum, have stirred up trouble among the shock troops of reaction. The Republic obviously gave short shrift to this solution, under a combined pressure from conservative milieus and from the democracies of England and France, which had little enthusiasm for the possible break-up of their own empires. At the very time, moreover, the French Popular Front not only refused to grant any reform worthy of any

¹⁰ *Boletín de Información*, CNT-ait-FAI, Via Layetana, 32 y 34, Barcelona, November 11, 1936.

¹¹ *P.I.C.*, published by the GIC, Amsterdam, October 1936

name to its colonial subjects, but dissolved the Etoile Nord-Africaine, a proletarian movement in Algeria.

Everyone knows that the policy of “non-intervention” in Spain was a farce. One week after the putsch London announced its opposition to any arms shipment to what was then the legal Spanish government, and its neutrality in the event that France would become drawn into a conflict. Democratic England thus put the Republic and fascism on the same level. As a result, the France of Blum and Thorez sent a few planes, while Italy and Germany sent whole divisions with their supplies. As for the International Brigades, controlled by the Soviet Union and the CPs, their military value came at a heavy price, namely the elimination of any opposition to Stalinism in working-class ranks. It was at the beginning of 1937, after the first arms shipments, that Catalonia removed Nin from his post as adviser to the Ministry of Justice.

Rarely has the narrow conception of history as a list of battles, cannons and strategies been more inept in explaining the course of a directly “social” war, shaped as it was by the internal dynamic of anti-fascism. Revolutionary élan initially broke the élan of the nationalists. Then the workers accepted legality: the conflict was stalemated and then institutionalised. From late 1936 onward, the militia columns were bogged down in the siege of Zaragoza. The state armed only the military units it trusted, i.e. the ones which would not confiscate property. By early 1937, in the poorly equipped POUM militias fighting the Francoists with old guns, a revolver was a luxury. In the cities, militia men rubbed shoulders with perfectly outfitted regular soldiers. The fronts got stuck, like the Barcelona proletarians against the cops. The last burst of energy was the Republican victory at Madrid. Soon hereafter, the government ordered private individuals to hand in their weapons. The decree had little immediate effect, but it showed an unabashed will to disarm the people. Disappointment and suspicions undermined morale. The war was increasingly in the hands of specialists. Finally, the Republic increasingly lost ground as all social content and revolutionary appearances faded away in the anti-fascist camp.

Reducing the revolution to war simplifies and falsifies the social question into the alternative of winning or losing, and in being “the strongest”. The issue becomes one of having disciplined soldiers, superior logistics, competent officers and the support of allies whose own political nature gets as little scrutiny as possible. Curiously, all this means taking the conflict further from daily life. It is a peculiar quality of warfare that, even for its enthusiasts, no one wants to lose but everyone wants it to end. In contrast to revolution, except in the case of defeat, war does not cross my doorstep. Transformed into a military conflict, the struggle against Franco ceased to be a personal commitment, lost its immediate reality, and became a mobilisation from above, like in any other war situation. After January 1937, voluntary enlistments tapered off, and the civil war, in both camps, came to depend mainly on compulsory military service. As a result a militia man of July 1936 leaving his column a year later, disgusted with Republican politics, could be arrested and shot as a “deserter”!

In different historical conditions, the military evolution from insurrection to militias and then to a regular army is reminiscent of the anti-Napoleonic “guerrilla” warfare (the term was borrowed from Spanish at the time) described by Marx:

“By comparing the three periods of guerrilla warfare with the political history of Spain, it is found that they represent the respective degrees into which the counter-revolutionary spirit of the Government had succeeded in cooling the spirit of the people. Beginning with the rise of whole populations, the partisan war was next car-

ried on by guerrilla bands, of which whole districts formed the reserve, and terminated in corps francs continually on the point of dwindling into banditti, or sinking down to the level of standing regiments.”¹²

For 1936, as for 1808, the evolution of the military situation cannot be explained exclusively or even mainly by the art of war, but flows from the balance of political and social forces and its modification in an anti-revolutionary direction. The compromise evoked by Durruti, the necessity of unity at any cost, could only hand victory first to the Republican state (over the proletariat) and then to the Francoist state (over the Republic).

There was the beginning of a revolution in Spain, but it turned into its opposite as the proletarians, convinced that they had effective power, placed their trust in the state to fight against Franco. On that basis, the multiplicity of subversive initiatives and measures taken in production and in daily life were doomed by the simple and terrible fact that they took place in the shadow of an intact state structure, which had initially been put on hold, and then reinvigorated by the necessities of the war against Franco, a paradox which remained opaque to most revolutionary groups at the time. In order to be consolidated and extended, the transformations without which revolution becomes an empty word had to pose themselves as antagonistic to a state clearly designed as the adversary.

The trouble was, after July 1936, dual power existed in appearance only. Not only did the instruments of proletarian power which emerged from the insurrection, and those which subsequently oversaw the socialisations, tolerate the state, but they accorded the state a primacy in the anti-Franco struggle, as if it were tactically necessary to pass through the state in order to defeat Franco. In terms of “realism”, the recourse to traditional military methods accepted by the far left (including the POUM and the CNT) in the name of effectiveness almost invariably proved ineffective. Sixty years later, people still deplore the fact. But the democratic state is as little suited for armed struggle against fascism as it is for stopping its peaceful accession to power. States are normally loath to deal with social war, and normally fear rather than encourage fraternisation. When, in Guadalajara, the anti-fascists addressed themselves as workers to the Italian soldiers sent by Mussolini, a group of Italians defected. Such an episode remained the exception.

From the battle for Madrid (March ’37) to the final fall of Catalonia (February ’39), the cadaver of the aborted revolution decomposed on the battlefield. One can speak of war in Spain, not of revolution. This war wound up having as its first function the resolution of a capitalist problem: the constitution in Spain of a legitimate state which succeeded in developing its national capital while keeping the popular masses in check. In February 1939, the Surrealist and (then) Trotskyist Benjamin Péret analysed the consummation of the defeat as follows:

“The working class... having lost sight of its own goals, no longer sees any urgent reason to be killed defending the bourgeois democratic clan against the fascist clan, i.e. in the last analysis, for the defence of Anglo-French capital against Italo-German imperialism. The civil war increasingly became an imperialist war.”¹³

That same year, Bruno Rizzi made a similar comment in his essay on “collective bureaucratism” in the USSR:

¹² Marx, *Revolutionary Spain*, 1854 (MECW 13), p. 422.

¹³ *Clé*, 2nd issue.

“The old democracies play the game of anti-fascist politics in order to let the sleeping dog lie. One must keep the proletarians quiet... at any time, the old democracies feed the working class with anti-fascism... Spain had turned into a slaughter of proletarians of all nationalities, in order to calm down unruly revolutionary workers, and to sell off the products of heavy industry.”

The two camps undeniably had quite different sociological compositions. If the bourgeoisie was present on both sides, the immense majority of workers and poor peasants supported the Republic, whereas the archaic and reactionary strata (landed property, small holders, clergy) lined up behind Franco. This class polarisation gave a progressive aura to the Republican state, but it did not disclose the historical meaning of the conflict, any more than the large working-class membership of socialist or Stalinist parties told us all about their nature. Such facts were real, but secondary to the social function of these parties: in fact, because they were grass-roots bodies, they were able to control or oppose any proletarian upsurge. Likewise the Republican army had a large number of workers, but for what, with whom and under whose orders were they fighting? To ask the question is to answer it, unless one considers possible to fight the bourgeoisie in an alliance with the bourgeoisie.

“Civil war is the supreme expression of the class struggle”, Trotsky wrote in *Their Morals and Ours* (1938). Quite... as long as one adds that, from the “Wars of Religion” to the Irish or Lebanese convulsions of our own time, civil war is also, and indeed most often, the form of an impossible or failed social struggle: when class contradictions cannot assert themselves as such, they erupt as ideological or ethnic blocs, still further delaying any human emancipation.

Anarchists In The Government

Social Democracy did not “capitulate” in August 1914, like a fighter throwing in the towel: it followed the normal trajectory of a powerful movement which was internationalist in rhetoric and which, in reality, had become profoundly national long before. The SPD may well have been the leading electoral force in Germany in 1912, but it was powerful only for the purpose of reform, within the framework of capitalism and according to its laws, which included for example accepting colonialism, and also war when the latter became the sole solution to social and political contradictions.

In the same way, the integration of Spanish anarchism in the state in 1936 is only surprising if one forgets its nature: the CNT was a union, an original union undoubtedly but a union all the same, and there is no such thing as an anti-union union. Function transforms the organ. Whatever its original ideals, every permanent organism for defending wage labourers as such becomes a mediator, and then a conciliator. Even when it is in the hands of radicals, even when it is repressed, the institution is bound to escape control of the base and to turn into a moderating instrument. Anarchist union though it may have been, the CNT was a union before it was anarchist. A world separated the rank-and-file from the leader seated at the bosses’ table, but the CNT as a whole was little different from the UGT. Both of them worked to modernise and rationally manage the economy: in a word, to socialise capitalism. A single thread connects the socialist vote for war credits in August 1914 to the participation in the government of the anarchist leaders, first in Catalonia (September ’36) and then in the Spanish Republic (November ’36). As early as 1914,

Malatesta had called those of his comrades (including Kropotkin) who had accepted national defence “government anarchists”.

The CNT had long been both institutionalised and subversive. The contradiction ended in the 1931 general election, when the CNT gave up its anti-parliamentary stand, asking the masses to vote for Republican candidates. The anarchist organisation was turning into “a union aspiring to the conquest of power”, that would “inevitably lead to a dictatorship over the proletariat”.¹⁴

From one compromise to the next, the CNT wound up renouncing the anti-statism which was its *raison d'être*, even after the Republic and its Russian ally or master had shown their real faces in May '37, not to mention everything that followed, in the jails and secrets cellars. Like the POUM, the CNT was effective in disarming proletarians, calling on them to give up their struggle against the official and Stalinist police bent on finishing them off. As the GIC put it,

“...the CNT was among those chiefly responsible for the crushing of the insurrection. It demoralised the proletariat at a time when the latter was moving against democratic reactionaries.”¹⁵

Some radicals even had the bitter surprise of being locked up in a prison administered by an old anarchist comrade, stripped of any real power over what went on in his jail. Adding insult to injury, a CNT delegation which had gone to the Soviet Union requesting material aid did not even raise the issue of the Moscow Trials.

Everything for the anti-fascist struggle!

Everything for cannons and guns!

But even so, some people might object, anarchists by their very nature are vaccinated against the statist virus. Isn't anarchism the arch-enemy of the state? Yes, but...

Some Marxists can recite whole pages of *The Civil War in France* on the destruction of the state machine, and quote the passage from *State and Revolution* where Lenin says that one day cooks will administer society instead of politicians. But these same Marxists can practice the most servile state idolatry, once they come to see the state as the agent of progress or historical necessity. Because they imagine the future as a capitalist socialisation without capitalists, as a world still based on wage labour but egalitarian, democratised and planned, everything prepares them to accept a state (transitional, to be sure) and to go off to war for a capitalist state they see as bad, against another they see as worse.

Anarchism overestimates state power by regarding authority as the main enemy, and at the same time underestimates the state's force of inertia.

The state is the guarantor, but not the creator, of social relationships. It represents and unifies capital, it is neither capital's motor nor its centrepiece. From the undeniable fact that the Spanish masses were armed after July 1936, anarchism deduced that the state was losing its substance. But the substance of the state resides not in institutional forms, but in its unifying function. The state ensures the tie which human beings cannot and dare not create among themselves, and creates a web of services which are both parasitic and real.

In the summer of 1936, the state apparatus may have seemed derelict in Republican Spain, because it only subsisted as a potential framework capable of picking up the pieces of capitalist society and re-arranging them one day. In the meantime, it continued to live, in social hibernation.

¹⁴ *P.I.C.*, German edition, December 1931.

¹⁵ *Räte-Korrespondenz*, June 1937.

Then it gained new strength when the relations opened up by subversion were loosened or torn apart. It revived its organs, and, the occasion permitting, assumed control over those bodies which subversion had caused to emerge. What had been seen as an empty shell showed itself capable not only of revival, but of actually emptying out the parallel forms of power in which the revolution thought it had best embodied itself.

The CNT's ultimate justification of its role comes down to the idea that the government no longer really had power, because the workers' movement had taken power *de facto*.

“...the government has ceased to be a force oppressing the working-class, in the same way that the state is no longer the organism dividing society into classes. And if CNT members work within the state and government, the people will be less and less oppressed.”¹⁶

No less than Marxism, anarchism fetishizes the state and imagines it as being incarnated in a place. Blanqui had already thrown his little armed flock into attacks on city halls or on barracks, but he at least never claimed to base his actions on the proletarian movement, only on a minority that would awaken the people. A century later, the CNT declared the Spanish state to be a phantom relative to the tangible reality of the “social organisations” (i.e. militias, unions). But the existence of the state, its *raison d'être*, is to paper over the shortcomings of “civil” society by a system of relations, of links, of a concentration of forces, an administrative, police, judicial, and military network which goes “on hold” as a backup in times of crisis, awaiting the moment when a police investigator can go sniffing into the files of the social worker. The revolution has no Bastille, police station or governor's mansion to “take”: its task is to render harmless or destroy everything from which such places draw their substance.

The Rise And Decline Of The Collectivisations

The depth and breadth of the industrial and agrarian socialisations after July 1936 was no historical fluke. Marx noted the Spanish tradition of popular autonomy, and the gap between the people and the state which made itself manifest in the anti-Napoleonic war, and then in the revolutions of the 19th century, which renewed age-old communal resistance to the power of the dynasty. The absolute monarchy, he observed, did not shake up various strata to forge a modern state, but rather left the living forces of the country intact. Napoleon could see Spain as a “cadaver,

... but if the Spanish state was indeed dead, Spanish society was full of life” and “what we call the state in the modern sense of the word is materialised, in reality, only in the army, in keeping with the exclusive “provincial” life of the people.”¹⁷

In the Spain of 1936, the bourgeois revolution had been made, and it was vain to dream of scenarios such as 1917, not to mention 1848 or 1789. But if the bourgeoisie dominated politically, and capital dominated economically, they were nowhere near the creation of a unified internal market and a modern state apparatus, the subjugation of society as a whole, and the domination of local life and its particularism. For Marx in 1854 a “despotic” government coexisted with a

¹⁶ *Solidaridad Obrera*, November 1936.

¹⁷ Marx, cited by Marie Laffranque, ‘Marx et l’Espagne’ (*Cahiers de l’ISEA*, série S. n°15).

lack of unity that extended to the point of different currencies and different systems of taxation: his observation still had some validity eighty years later. The state was neither able to stimulate industry nor carry out agrarian reform; it could neither extract from agriculture the profits necessary for capital accumulation, nor unify the provinces, nor less keep down the proletarians of the cities and the countryside.

It was thus almost naturally that the shock of July '36 gave rise, on the margins of political power, to a social movement whose real expressions, while containing communist potential, were later reabsorbed by the state they allowed to remain intact. The first months of a revolution already ebbing, but whose extent still concealed its failure, looked like a splintering process: each region, commune, enterprise, collective and municipality escaped the central authority without actually attacking it, and set out to live differently. Anarchism, and even the regionalism of the POUM, express this Spanish originality, which is wrongly grasped if one sees only the negative side of this "late" capitalist development. Even the ebb of 1937 did not eradicate the élan of hundreds of thousands of workers and peasants who took over land, factories, neighbourhoods, villages, seizing property and socialising production with an autonomy and a solidarity in daily life that struck both observers and participants.¹⁸ Communism is also the re-appropriation of the conditions of existence.

Sad to say, if these countless acts and deeds, sometimes extending over several years, bear witness (as do, in their own way, the Russian and German experience) to a communist movement remaking all of society, and to its formidable subversive capacities when it emerges on a large scale, it is equally true that its fate was sealed from the summer of 1936 onward. The Spanish Civil War proved both the revolutionary vigour of communitarian bonds and forms which have been penetrated by capital but which are not yet daily reproduced by capital, and also their impotence, taken by themselves, in bringing off a revolution. The absence of an assault against the state condemned the establishment of different relationships to a fragmentary self-management preserving the content and often the forms of capitalism, notably money and the division of activities by individual enterprises. Any persistence of wage-labour perpetuates the hierarchy of functions and incomes.

Communist measures could have undermined the social bases of the two states (Republican and Nationalist), if only by solving the agrarian question: in the 1930's, more than half of the population went hungry. A subversive force erupted, bringing to the fore the most oppressed strata, those farthest from "political life" (e.g. women), but it could not go all the way and eradicate the system root and branch.

At the time, the workers' movement in the major industrial countries corresponded to those regions of the world which had been socialised by a total domination of capital over society, where communism was both closer at hand as a result of this socialisation, and at the same time farther away because of the dissolution of all relations into commodity form. The new world, in these countries, was most commonly conceived as a worker's world, even as an industrial one.

The Spanish proletariat, on the contrary, continued to be shaped by a capitalist penetration of society that was more quantitative than qualitative. From this reality it drew both its strength and its weakness, as attested by the tradition and demands for autonomy represented by anarchism.

"In the last hundred years, there has not been a single uprising in Andalusia which has not resulted in the creation of communes, the sharing out of land, the abolition of

¹⁸ Among others: Orwell, and Low & Brea, *Red Spanish Notebook*, (City Lights, 1979).

money and a declaration of independence ... the anarchism of the workers is not very different. They too demand, first of all, the possibility of managing their industrial community or their union themselves, and then the reduction of working hours and of the effort required from everyone ...”¹⁹

One of the main weaknesses was the attitude towards money. The “disappearance of money” is meaningful only if it entails more than the replacement of one instrument for measuring value with another one (such as labour coupons). Like most radical groups, whether they called themselves Marxist or anarchist, Spanish proletarians did not see money as the expression and abstraction of real relationships, but as a tool of measurement, an accounting device, and they reduced socialism to a different management of the same categories and fundamental components of capitalism.

The failure of the measures taken against commodity relations was not due to the power of the UGT (which was opposed to the collectivisations) over the banks. The closing of private banks and of the central bank puts an end to mercantile relations only if production and life are organised in a way no longer mediated by the commodity, and if such a communal production and life gradually come to dominate the totality of social relationships. Money is not the “evil” to be removed from an otherwise “good” production, but the manifestation (today becoming increasingly immaterial) of the commodity character of all aspects of life. It cannot be destroyed by eliminating signs, but only when exchange withers away as a social relationship.

In fact, only agrarian collectives managed to do without money, and they often did so with the help of local currencies, with coupons often being used as “internal money”. Sometimes money was handed over to the collective. Sometimes workers were given vouchers according to the size of their families, not to the amount of work done (“to each according to their need”). Sometimes money played no part: goods were shared. An egalitarian spirit prevailed, as well as a rejection of “luxury”.²⁰ However, unable to extend non-commodity production beyond different autonomous zones with no scope for global action, the soviets, collectives and liberated villages were transformed into precarious communities, and sooner or later were either destroyed from within or violently suppressed by the fascists... or the Republicans. In Aragon, the column of the Stalinist Lister made this a speciality. Entering the village of Calanda, his first act was to write on a wall: “Collectivisations are theft.”

Collectivise Or Communise?

Ever since the First International, anarchism has counterposed the collective appropriation of the means of production to Social Democratic statism. Both visions, nonetheless, have the same starting point: the need for collective management. The problem is: management of what? Of course, what Social Democracy carried out from above, bureaucratically, the Spanish proletarians practised at the base, armed, with each individual responsible to everyone, thereby taking the land and the factories away from a minority specialised in the organising and exploitation of others. The opposite, in short, of the co-management of the Coal Board by socialist or Stalinist union officials. Nevertheless, the fact that a collectivity, rather than the state or a bureaucracy,

¹⁹ Gerald Brenan, *The Spanish Labyrinth* (Cambridge, 1990).

²⁰ Franz Borkenau, *The Spanish Cockpit* (Faber & Faber, 1937).

takes the production of its material life into its own hands does not, by itself, do away with the capitalist character of that life.

Wage labour means the passage of an activity, whatever it might be, ploughing a field or printing a newspaper, through the form of money. This money, while it makes the activity possible, is expanded by it. Equalising wages, deciding everything collectively, and replacing currency by coupons has never been enough to do away with wage labour. What money brings together cannot be free, and sooner or later money becomes its master.

Substituting association for competition on a local basis was a guaranteed recipe for disaster. Because if the collective did abolish private property within itself, it also set itself up as a distinct entity and as a particular element among others in the global economy, and therefore as a private collective, compelled to buy and sell, to trade with the outside world, thereby becoming in its turn an enterprise which like it or not, had to play its part in regional, national and world competition or else disappear.

One can only rejoice in the fact that half of Spain imploded: what mainstream opinion calls “anarchy” is a necessary condition for revolution, as Marx wrote in his own time. But these movements made their subversive impact on the basis of a centrifugal force. Rejuvenated communitarian ties also locked everyone into their village and their barrio, as if the point were to discover a lost world and a degraded humanity, to counterpose the working-class neighbourhood to the metropolis, the self-managed commune to the vast capitalist domain, the countryside of the common folk to the commercialized city, in a word the poor to the rich, the small to the large and the local to the international, all the while forgetting that a co-operative is often the longest road to capitalism.

There is no revolution without the destruction of the state. But how? Beating off armed bands, getting rid of state structures and habits, setting up new modes of debate and decision — all these tasks are impossible if they do not go hand in hand with communisation. We don’t want “power”, we want the power to change all of life. As an historical process extending over generations, can one imagine over such a time frame continuing to pay wages for food and lodging? If the revolution is supposed to be political first and social later, it would create an apparatus whose sole function would be the struggle against the supporters of the old world, i.e. a negative function of repression, a system of control resting on no other content than its “programme” and its will to realise communism the day that conditions finally allow for it. This is how a revolution ideologises itself and legitimises the birth of a specialised stratum assigned to oversee the maturation and the expectation of the ever-radiant day after tomorrow. The very stuff of politics is not being able, and not wanting, to change anything: it brings together what is separated without going any further. Power is there, it manages, it administers, it oversees, it calms, it represses: it is.

Political domination (in which a whole school of thought sees problem *number one*) flows from the incapacity of human beings to take charge of themselves, and to organise their lives and their activity. This domination persists only through the radical dispossession which characterises the proletariat. When everyone participates in the production of their existence, the capacity for pressure and oppression now in the hands of the state will cease to be operative. It is because wage-labour society deprives us of our means of living, producing and communicating, not stopping short of the invasion of once-private space and of our emotional lives, that the state is all-powerful. The best guarantee against the reappearance of a new structure of power over us is the deepest possible appropriation of the conditions of existence, at every level. For example, even if we don’t want everyone generating their own electricity in their basements, the domina-

tion of the Leviathan also comes from the fact that energy (a significant term, another word for which is power) makes us dependent on industrial complexes which, nuclear or not, inevitably remain external to us and escape any control.

To conceive the destruction of the state as an armed struggle against the police and the armed forces is to mistake the part for the whole. Communism is first of all activity. A mode of life in which men and women produce their social existence paralyses or reabsorbs the emergence of separate powers.

The alternative upheld by Bordiga: "Shall we take over the factory, or take over power?" (*Il Soviet*, February 20, 1920) can and must be superseded. We don't say: it does not matter who manages production, whether an executive or a council, because what counts is to have production without value. We say: as long as production for value continues, as long as it is separated from the rest of life, as long as humankind does not collectively produce its ways and means of existence, as long as there is an "economy", any council is bound to lose its power to an executive. This is where we differ both from "councilists" and "Bordigists", and why we are likely to be called Bordigists by the former, and councilists by the latter.

Leaving The 20th Century?

The Spanish failure of 1936–37 is symmetrical to the Russian failure of 1917–21. The Russian workers were able to seize power, not to use it for a communist transformation. Backwardness, economic ruin and international isolation by themselves do not explain the involution. The perspective set out by Marx, and perhaps applicable in a different way after 1917, of a renaissance in a new form of communal agrarian structures, was at the time not even thinkable. Leaving aside Lenin's eulogy for Taylorism, and Trotsky's justification of military labour, for almost all the Bolsheviks and the overwhelming majority of the Third International, including the Communist Left, socialism meant a capitalist socialisation *plus* soviets, and the agriculture of the future was conceived as democratically managed large landholdings. (The difference — and it is a major one! — between the German-Dutch left and the Comintern was that the Left took soviets and worker democracy seriously, whereas the Russian communists, as their practice proved, saw in them nothing but tactical formulas.)

The Bolsheviks are the best illustration of what happens to a power which is only a power, and which has to hold on without changing real conditions very much.

What distinguishes reform from revolution is not that revolution is violent, but that it links insurrection and communisation. The Russian civil war was won in 1919, but sealed the fate of the revolution, as the victory over the Whites was achieved without communising society, and ended in a new state power. In his 1939 *Brown Fascism, Red Fascism*, Otto Rühle pointed out how the French Revolution had given birth to a military structure and strategy adequate to its social content. It unified the bourgeoisie with the people, while the Russian revolution failed to create an army based on proletarian principles. The Red Army that Poland defeated in 1920 hardly kept any revolutionary significance. As early as mid-1918, Trotsky summed it up in three words: "work, discipline, order".

Very logically and, at least in the beginning, in perfectly good faith, the soviet state perpetuated itself at any cost, first in the perspective of world revolution, then for itself, with the absolute priority being to preserve the unity of a society coming apart at the seams. This explains, on one

hand, the concessions to small peasant property, followed by requisitions, both of which resulted in a further unravelling of any communal life or production. On the other hand, it also explains the repression against workers and against any opposition within the party.

In January 1921, the wheel had come full circle. The 1917 revolutionary wave set in motion by mutinies and basic democratic demands ended in the same way — except this time proles were being repressed by a “proletarian” state. A power which gets to the point of massacring the Kronstadt mutineers in the name of a socialism it could not realise, and which goes on to justify its action with lies and calumny, is only demonstrating that it no longer has any communist character. Lenin died his physical death in 1924, but the revolutionary Lenin had died as head of state in 1921, if not earlier. Bolshevism was left with no option but to become the manager of capitalism.

As the hypertrophy of a political perspective hell bent on eliminating the obstacles which it could not subvert, the October Revolution dissolved in a self-cannibalising civil war. Its pathos was that of a power which, unable to transform society, degenerated into a counter-revolutionary force.

In the Spanish tragedy, the proletarians, because they had left their own terrain, wound up prisoners of a conflict in which the bourgeoisie and its state were present behind the front lines on both sides. In 1936–37, the proletarians of Spain were not fighting against Franco alone, but also against the fascist countries, against the democracies and the farce of “non-intervention”, against their own state, against the Soviet Union, against...

The “Italian” and “German-Dutch” communist Left (including Mattick in the US) were among the very few who defined the post-1933 period as utterly anti-revolutionary, whereas many groups (Trotskyists, for example) were prompt to foresee subversive potentials in France, in Spain, in America, etc.

1937 closed the historical moment opened by 1917. From then on, capital would not accept any other community but its own, which meant there could no longer be permanent radical proletarian groups of any significant size. The demise of the POUM was tantamount to the end of the former workers’ movement.

In a future revolutionary period, the most subtle and most dangerous defenders of capitalism will not be the people shouting pro-capitalist and pro-statist slogans, but those who have understood the possible point of a total rupture. Far from eulogising TV commercials and social submission, they will propose to change life... but, to that end, call for building a true democratic power first. If they succeed in dominating the situation, the creation of this new political form will use up people’s energy, fritter away radical aspirations and, with the means becoming the end, will once again turn revolution into an ideology. Against them, and of course against overtly capitalist reaction, the proletarians’ only path to success will be the multiplication of concrete communist initiatives, which will naturally often be denounced as anti-democratic or even as... “fascist”. The struggle to establish places and moments for deliberation and decision, making possible the autonomy of the movement, will prove inseparable from practical measures aimed at changing life.

“...in all past revolutions, the mode of activity has always remained intact and the only issue has been a different distribution of this activity and a redistribution of work among different persons; whereas the communist revolution is directed against the mode of activity as it has existed up till now and abolishes work and the dom-

ination of all classes by abolishing classes themselves, because it is carried out by the class which no longer counts as a class in society, which is not recognised as a class, and is in itself the expression of the dissolution of all classes, nationalities, etc. within present society...”²¹

²¹ Marx & Engels, *The German Ideology* (MECW 5), p. 52.

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Gilles Dauvé
When Insurrections Die
1917–1937
1999

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This is a shorter, entirely reconceived version of the preface to the selection of articles on Spain 1936–39 from the Italian Left magazine *Bilan*, published in French in 1979 under the pen-name Jean Barrot, and now out of print. The first English edition was published in October 1999. This edition from Endnotes #1 (2008) corrects some typographical errors and improves layout, but has no substantive alterations.

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