“¡Vivan las tribus!”

Persecution, resistance and anarchist agency in the Popular Army during the Spanish Civil War (1936-9)

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ABSTRACT

The anarchist participation in the Popular Army during the Spanish Civil War has largely been subsumed into wider narratives regarding the modernising impulses of the Republican state on the one hand, and the resistance to statist collaboration mounted within the libertarian movement on the other. In this dichotomy, the anarchists who participated in militarisation are either seen as latecomers to the far-sighted, pan-antifascist project spearheaded by the Republican leadership, or else as passive spectators to the brutal dismantling of the revolutionary project. The weakness of this narrative is that it largely neglects not only the varied motives for accepting militarisation, but also the considerable agency exerted by anarchists at the front in resisting anti-libertarian persecution, while constructing a new identity as the vanguard of antifascism. Drawing on a combination of syndicalist reports, oral testimonies and anarchist press materials, this paper rejects the accepted vision of the front as a space of lethargic defeat. Rather, it reinterprets it as a space in which the anarchists instrumentalised their traditions and practices, alongside their inviolable moral authority achieved through their antifascist war experience, to establish a libertarian subculture within the Popular Army.

Introduction

> *I am deeply proud to be a tribu because by being so I am part of the eternal traditions of the CNT. What greater pride could a Spanish worker aspire to than to be a part, however small, of that immense colossus, always victorious and never defeated?*
>
> "¡No Nos Importa … !," *Acracia*, 20 January 1938, No. 464, 1.

In the waning months of 1936 a militiaman of the Iron Column, a formation largely composed of Valencian anarchists stationed near Teruel penned a series of passionately worded articles protesting the planned incorporation (militarisation) of their unit into the ranks of the newly formed Popular Army:

> One day – a day that was mournful and overcast – the news that we must be militarised descended on the crests of the *Sierra* like an icy wind that penetrates the flesh. It pierced my body like a dagger, and I suffered, in advance, the anguish of the present moment. At night, behind the parapet, the news was repeated: "Militarisation is coming!."
>
> (*A Day Mournful and Overcast* 2003, 8).

This writer, signing themselves only as an *"incontrolado"*, then described the agonies of "submission" to military hierarchy and the dehumanising impact this would have upon the legendary Column (*A Day Mournful and Overcast* 2003, 15–18). Decades later, the articles would be compiled and republished as a pamphlet in both Spanish and English, helping to set the tone for retrospective anarchist appraisals of militarisation and libertarian participation in the Popular Army as little more than a heavy defeat for the revolution (Paz 2011; Peirats 2001). This concession was to sap the militia's revolutionary zeal and condemn its militants to the persecutions orchestrated by the communist-influenced high command and the officer corps (Aroca 1972; Santillán 1940).

Such an understanding of militarised anarchism, as a moral lesson against statist collaboration, represents only a partial account of anarchists within the military effort of the Spanish Civil War, one which neglects their extensive protagonist role as political-military agents within the Popular Army. Over the course of this conflict, these uniformed anarchists found themselves at the centre of military events serving on every major front in a full variety of combat roles within the newly formed Popular Army, some attaining distinction and even the esteem of professional Republican soldiers. At the same time, as will be argued here, these militants sought to reconstruct themselves as the vanguard of antifascism, creating a distinctive military subculture within the Popular Army based upon their egalitarian norms, their affective bonds with one another, and networks of solidarity between themselves and the wider movement.

The military involvement of the anarchists in the Civil War has generally been linked closely to the overarching discussion of the counter-revolution thesis extended by Burnett Bolloten and a host of anarchist memoirists and historians, foremost among them José Peirats and Abel Paz (Bolloten 1991; Paz 2007, 2011; Peirats 2001, 2011, 2012). In these accounts, the militarisation of the militias into the Popular Army was a manifestation of the dismantling of the revolutionary order by the alliance of the Republican state, the *Partido Comunista de España* (PCE), and the *Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya* (PSUC), with the support and direction of the Soviet Union. Anarchist participation in the Popular Army, in this account, was little more than a "militaristic trap" produced by the "wretched antifascist pact" with the sole purpose of breaking the anarchist monopoly on violence at the front (Paz 2011, 119–27). Subsequent historians have modified this picture, noting the clear support for militarisation among many sections of the anarchist movement, which Helen Graham associates with the modernising impulses of total war (Graham 2002, 178–80; Graham 1999, 522–24; Casanova 2005, 124–25). In turn, the modernisation narrative has been disrupted significantly by a new wave of anarchist historians, emphasising the longevity and resurgent potential of the movement's antistatist radicalism, peaking in the mobilisations of the May Days before being tragically undercut by an authoritarian, pro-collaborationist leadership (Amorós 2009, 2011; Agustín; Guillamón 1998, 2015, 2017). In the estimation of Danny Evans (Evans 2020, 49), the *mando único* (that is, the centralisation of command structures within the Republican armed forces) was "being used euphemistically … to hasten the return of those aspects of soldiery that this 'left of anti-fascism' did oppose: martial discipline, military rank and the loss of political and revolutionary characteristics." Those unpersuaded by these arguments were either coerced into accepting militarisation through the delivery of arms or abandoned the front to defend the "revolutionary interregnum" behind the lines (Evans 2020, 63).

There is merit in the re-examination of anarchist radicalism in this context, not least because it underscores that, contrary to earlier expectations, many anarchists were, in fact, able to articulate a coherent response to the demands of the moment, exemplified in the campaigns of economic socialisation and communal mobilisation (Vega, Monjo, and Vilanova 1990; Danny; Evans 2022, 487–94). Nonetheless, the place of anarchist soldiers in this reframing is somewhat muted, with preference given to those, such as the members of the dissident *Agrupación de los Amigos de Durruti* (AAD), who were willing to abandon the frontline rather than accept the dictates of militarisation (Guillamón 1998). The responses of those on the frontline, both before and after the May Days, were markedly more complex than this dichotomy would suggest. Military experience, as articulated most notably by Eric J. Leed (1979, 12–32), is a liminal process within which combatants – in this case the Spanish anarchists – transition to a new and separate identity to those not at the front. This veteran identity (what Yuval Noah Harari terms being a

"flesh-witness" (Harari 2010, 67)) granted them the moral authority within the anarchist movement to sanction new courses of action and demand support. Although in most instances, this resulted in an embracing of the hybrid identity offered by militarised antifascism, this did not preclude the preservation of a separate libertarian sensibility, capable of rising to the surface when threatened.

Utilising a combination of oral testimonies, memoirs, and internal reports produced by the *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo* (CNT) and the *Federación Anarquista Ibérica* (FAI), this article will begin by examining libertarian responses to the process of militarisation, noting both the heavily gendered discussions of discipline but also the manner in which military experience was marshalled in defence of the different paths available to the militiamen. Following this, we will detail how the anarchists attempted to preserve a distinct subculture within the Popular Army, rooted in their affective models of leadership, at the highest and lowest levels, and the strong sense of masculine *compañerismo* (camaraderie) that resulted. As shall then be demonstrated, more hybrid forms of identification were also made possible by the circumstances of war with those at the front instrumentalising the common language of antifascism in their efforts to establish themselves as the first among equals in the antifascist struggle. Despite these commonalities, our final section will detail, with specific reference to the experiences of the 153rd Mixed Brigade, how the anarchists simultaneously conceived of the Popular Army as a contested space in which they were obliged to defend their own, at the highest and lowest levels. As much as anarchist radicalism in the rearguard waxed and waned across the span of the war, so too did that of the anarchists in uniform.

Militarising anarchism

The outbreak of war found the Spanish anarchist movement at a crossroads in its attitudes towards the use of force in support of the Revolution. Without question, it possessed a profoundly antimilitarist bent stemming from a hostility to the military as a coercive arm of the state which had regularly served as an invasive presence within working class communities. At the same time, the anticipated revolution was often related as a martial spectacle; a wave of creative destruction sweeping away the old order.[1] This vision was given further credibility by the Spanish anarchists' engagement with the Mexican and Russian Revolutions, victories attributed to the "warrior workers" meting out, as Joshua Newmark terms it with respect to the former, "vengeful violence during a dire period in the Spanish workers' struggle" (Newmark 2022, 69; Rodriguez 2018, 11–14). The Russian example also made clear the need to defend revolutionary gains through coordinated force, a necessity which stimulated the creation of the Defence Committees by the anarchist syndical organisation, the *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo* (CNT) (Guillamón 2014). Nonetheless, the question of just how coordinated and organised this revolutionary defence should be was left unsolved by the summer of 1936, with ridicule heaped upon those in the FAI – the movement's ideological organisation – who called for a "revolutionary army" (Skirda 2002, 155). Local initiatives, cross-party connections and contingent decision-making were therefore crucial to anarchist success and failure in the early months of the Spanish Civil War, with scenes of armed

[1] For the emergence of a more militarised conception of anarchism, see (Ealham 2004, 130–41; Noland 1970, 289–304; Dolgoff 1972, 205)

workers outmanoeuvring the military in Barcelona differing sharply from the fatal capitulation witnessed in Zaragoza (Blanch 2013, 45).

By contrast to the division and scepticism of the pre-war period, the movement almost universally embraced the martial displays of the militia columns, "the proletarian phalanxes" (Solidaridad Obrera 1936, 1), massing in the streets and departing for the front (Casanova 2005, 110–11). Though the democratic and egalitarian norms and practices of these formations have been consistently emphasised (Paz 2011, 129–38; Orwell 2000, 26–28), especially in the popular imagination,[2] it should be noted that such practices depended upon the circumstances of the moment. Voting on orders certainly took place within particular units, but decision-making seems to have mostly fallen to the more experienced and able militants to whom personal faith and respect ensured obedience, as implied by the personalised unit names: Durruti, Maroto, and Ortíz (Amorós 2011; Gallardo, José, and Rodríguez 1999; Paz 2007). Uniforms, salutes, and military justice were publicly abandoned but with the justification that they were incompatible with a true masculine identity. *Acracia*, an anarchist weekly publication, with strong libertarian associations, declared that displays of martial discipline were akin to "hanging [the militiamen's] testicles in the barracks" (Acracia 1936, 4), while the aforementioned *incontrolado* of the Iron Column declared: "I do not know whether, after having felt ourselves to be men in the fullest sense of the word, we shall get used to being domestic animals, for that is what discipline leads to and what militarisation implies" (*A Day Mournful and Overcast* 2003, 9). In spite of this, exemplary punishments were indeed applied where necessary with Durruti reportedly humiliating a pair of militiamen for attempted desertion by threatening to send them back to Barcelona half-naked (Enzensberger 2019, 108). The point is not that anarchist principles were absent or incompatible with the reality of the situation, but rather that they were understood in terms that augmented a combative, masculine identity which increasingly separated those who had departed for the front from those who remained in the rear-guard.

This divide was rarely better exemplified than in the Plenum of the Columns in February 1937, a gathering organised by the Maroto and Iron Columns in response to the CNT's approval of the militarisation decree, issued in October of 1936 following a series of military defeats which were only narrowly halted in and around Madrid (Graham 2002, 164–66; Peirats 2001, 1:293–97). Underlying this "historic" meeting was a broader discontent felt by the militiamen at being shut out of the decision-making within the movement, particularly with respect to the formation of a regular army ("Acta Del Pleno de Columnas Confederales y Anarquistas" 1937, 6–8). The minutes of the debate were later published by the AAD and constitute a remarkably frank discussion of the anarchists' military record, the direction of the revolution and the question of militarisation. Many delegates joined the Iron Column in arguing that courage, rather than discipline, was essential to victory: "We do not believe," declared a representative of the *Tierra y Libertad* column, "that a man is braver because he is called a soldier" ("Acta Del Pleno de Columnas Confederales y Anarquistas" 1937, 26). Leading the pro-militarisation camp was Cipriano Mera, a veteran militant and militiaman from Madrid. When Mera spoke with regard to the leadership of the anarchist movement, he was scathing:

> There were no more than two or three hundred militants of the CNT that fought fascism in Madrid, and our Nacional Committee provided no solution other than to

[2] The 1995 Ken Loach film "Land and Freedom," heavily influenced by *Homage to Catalonia*, provides a portrayal of these practices, including a lengthy discussion of the risks of militarisation into the Popular Army.

> flee in fear of the bombs that fell about them … as if their lives were more precious than any other militant.
>
> ("Acta Del Pleno de Columnas Confederales y Anarquistas" 1937, 23).

In spite of this, he was clear on what was militarily necessary, having witnessed first-hand the attritional fighting in the Sierra de Guadarrama during which he had lost many close comrades ("Acta Del Pleno de Columnas Confederales y Anarquistas" 1937, 24; Mera 1976, 33). Another delegate noted that, in contrast to the Central Zone, neither Aragon nor the Levante, the strongholds of anti-militarisation, had been subjected to a sustained offensive ("Acta Del Pleno de Columnas Confederales y Anarquistas" 1937, 17). Many that openly rejected militarisation were inclined to accept its substance, namely martial discipline and a unified command:

> We will accept an iron discipline, we will shoot those who abandon the front, we will accept a unified command, but we will not accept that those who sit behind desks may lead us without exposing themselves to danger.
>
> ("Acta Del Pleno de Columnas Confederales y Anarquistas" 1937, 19–20).

To an extent, an implicit threat lay over these discussions. Major shortages of arms and munitions were prevailing across the Republican Zone, with the few sources of modern weapons available being channelled into the intense fighting around Madrid and to the newly formed Mixed Brigades (Mulattieri 2022, 100–102). Anarchist columns, even those deployed to the Central Zone, found themselves isolated from fresh supplies and modern weapons. Within certain elements of the *Tierra y Libertad* Column, a formation scattered across a 300 km area from the Central Zone to the province of Teruel, fewer than half of the personnel were equipped with rifles ("Informe Que Eleva al Presidente Delegado de La Junta de Defensa de Madrid, General Miaja, El Comisario General de La Brigada (En Formación) 'Tierra y Libertad'" 1937, 38). When the question of arms arose during the Plenum, a representative of the National Committee stated plainly the line of Prime Minister Largo Caballero: "The arms of the state belong to the armed forces of the state" ("Acta Del Pleno de Columnas Confederales y Anarquistas" 1937, 22). Hence, if the anarchists did not agree to militarise, they could not expect to receive munitions from the Republic. Conversely, as Mera argued, if they were to militarise, they could hope to carve out control over sections of the armed forces through the appointment of officers and commissars: "We must militarise within a purely confederal framework. Militarising our homogenous confederal militias through our own organisation. A battalion of ours, among the Marxists and under a Marxist command, would be the death of the CNT" ("Acta Del Pleno de Columnas Confederales y Anarquistas" 1937, 50). Such a model of the anarchists as an army within the Popular Army had its advocates within the highest echelons of the movement, including García Oliver who lamented their failure to establish heterogenous anarchist units in sufficient numbers during the Siege of Madrid to counteract the growing strength of the communist-dominated Fifth Regiment (Oliver 1978, 258–59). The Secretary of the National Committee of the CNT, Mariano Rodriguez Vazquez, went still further in calling for organisational discipline in order to counteract "the Marxists" who he claimed to be seeking the piecemeal destruction of the decentralised anarchist movement ("CNT-AIT Comité Regional Circular No. 2" 1938, 1). In short, the aim of the central leadership in advocating militarisation was to defeat the communists at their own game as part of a process of "mimetic rivalry" whose object was national hegemony (Girard 1977, 169).

Despite this, the heavy-handed behaviour of the central leadership towards the confederal militiamen reinforced the breach between them over the lack of consultation in the organisation of the war effort, and their efforts to delegitimise the assembly as "irregular and abnormal" ("Acta Del Pleno de Columnas Confederales y Anarquistas" 1937, 34). Although Plenum itself ended without reaching agreement, further gatherings would be held by defiant anarchist militiamen, with the Iron and Maroto Columns only agreeing after a lengthy internal debate coupled with continual pressure from the CNT (Amorós 2011, 114–15; Amorós 2009, 149–53). Resistance was fierce even in the Central Zone where Mera was obliged to intervene (Carabaño 1974). It should be noted that there was a performative element to rejecting militarisation; when representatives of the CNT read out the list of appointments for military ranks to members of the Rosal Column their response was a cascade of gendered insults from the militiamen: "[T]he first name to be read out was that of a man who had been a waiter; he was appointed a major. 'Major of the mother who bore you,' he shouted, 'I'm a good anarchist'" (Fraser 1979, 338). Despite this, Carabaño noted that many of these vocal protestations came from militiamen who would go on not simply to perform but excel in military roles, attaining promotion "by merit" (Carabaño 1974). These would include José Pellicer Gandía, perhaps the most ardent opponent of militarisation present at the February Plenum, who would work to persuade the majority of the Iron Column to endure incorporation into the Popular Army on the strict understanding that they would collectively select their commanders and commissars (Amorós 2009, 149–56).

This is not to deny that there were large numbers of those who continued to utterly reject militarisation. As is known, some hundreds did leave the front with many joining the burgeoning anti-statist resistance in Barcelona (Evans 2020, 83–85; Brodie 2020, 85–87). Yet it should be noted that many of these dissenters retained a profound respect for their comrades who had chosen to remain fighting. The AAD's publication *El Amigo del Pueblo* was rhapsodic about the combatants' "vigour" and "stoicism" (El Amigo Del Pueblo 1937, 2), while *Ruta* – the publication of the *Juventudes Libertarias de Cataluña* (JJLL) – described them as "the vanguard of the new world being forged … the elite of the Spanish youth and the pride of those who work without rest in the fields, factories and workshops" (Ruta: Órgano de Las Juventudes Libertarias de Cataluña y Baleares 1937b, 2). From this perspective, the front was not regarded as a lost cause; their best and most proven militants remained there, whether or not they now wore uniforms, and consequently could be seen as an untapped resource for the reawakening of the revolution. Among the anarchists in uniform, there also lingered a belief that militarisation was a sacrifice made in defence of the revolution in the rear. "If it were not so," warned a soldier of the 42nd Division (formerly the Rosal Column) in its publication, *Libertad*, "the betrayal would be terrible … . [The dead] form a body of martyrs who cannot be forgotten at the hour of national compensation. The war has as its corollary the transformation of our fatherland" (Libertad 1937, 18).

The outcome of such struggles was a reluctant but conscious adoption of militarisation by a large proportion of anarchist militiamen who, consequently, would be able to carve out a distinct military subculture. Many of their units would retain their integrity: conscripts would supplement their numbers, but militia officers and political delegates retained their posts with five divisions in Aragon, and later IV Corps in the Central Zone, alongside a scattering of brigades and divisions on the Levante and Granada fronts being under a qualified form of anarchist command (Alexander 1999, 1:269–72; Alpert 2013, 214). Although these units did not provide the level of direct control aspired to by the increasingly authoritarian leadership of the CNT-FAI, they nonetheless allowed for the preservation of anarchist identity within the Republican ranks.

Beyond this, the many thousands more anarchist affiliates and militants who were recruited into other units of the Popular Army would also fall back on their movement's organic organisational practices to build a libertarian-military sensibility.

Anarchist military identity

As should be clear from Mera's conduct, the construction of this new military identity relied to a great extent on the respect afforded to proven militants – both living and dead – who embodied anarchist military aptitude and leadership. At the highest level, these included the members of the *Agrupación Nosotros* who were appointed to divisional commands, namely Antonio Ortíz, Gregorio Jover, Ricardo Sanz, and – from September 1937 – Miguel García Vivancos, who each became widely feted in the anarchist press (Alpert 2013, 142–43; Brown 2022, 9–10). Yet it was Mera who was reproduced most widely, precisely because he was not only a veteran militant but one who had been a vocal critic of the militaristic language employed by *Nosotros* (Cultura y Acción 1937, 1; Montseny 1937, 10; Mujeres Libres 1937, 7; Santa-María 1937, 9). The martyred visage of Durruti also hung over the movement, exhorting soldiers of every political persuasion to set aside ideological principle in support of the war effort (Bannister 2009). The antistatists, by contrast, took quite different lessons from Durruti's life and example; the AAD – composed of former members of the Gelsa Section of the Durruti Column (Guillamón 1998, 36) – articulated their *caudillo* as foremost a symbol of the unbroken connection between the war and revolution:

> Buenaventura Durruti was a *caudillo*. But it was not merely a vanity. It was earned through his life, in the street, and on the field of battle while these aspiring *caudillos* [eg. The communist commanders] spent their time in luxurious hotel lobbies among elegant tourists
>
> (El Amigo Del Pueblo 1937, 1).

All the same, they also afforded high praise to Mera after his successful command of the 14th Division at the Battle of Brihuega in March 1937:

> The confederal forces led by Mera have worked a miracle. On more than one occasion they have demonstrated their valour and heroism. They are forces entirely of the people, just the same as their commander.
>
> (El Amigo Del Pueblo 1937, 2).

Militarisation could be criticised in the abstract, therefore, but not necessarily those who remained at the front. Their revolutionary credentials made them unimpeachable, whether or not they wore a uniform, shielded as they were by the emotive bonds forged in the intimate world of the *grupistas*, bound by their common experience of insurrection, incarceration, and militancy (La 70: Órgano Semanal de La Brigada 1937, 1; Tierra y Libertad 1937, 5).

This affective model of leadership held true among the mid-ranking and junior leadership, who now became officers and commissars within the new confederal formations. When asked his reasons for remaining in the front after militarisation, an anarchist militiaman answered that it was because of the personal trust they had felt between themselves and their officers (Bernuz 1974). Consequently, many newly militarised units retained the informal, egalitarian modes of interaction between officers and men as described by Carabaño:

> … the truth is, we came to accept militarisation with great enthusiasm, though we never accepted the formal practices of discipline […] In our units we did not generally salute, not even with a clenched fist; we just said *adios* and *hola* […] And besides, our officers and soldiers had always been friends and we remained so, calling each other *tú* – there existed a love between us.
>
> (Carabaño 1974).

Some officers and NCOs in their turn eschewed badges of rank, with a corporal on the Aragon front tattooing his on his chest, to the evident disgust of General Vicente Rojo while inspecting the trenches (Rojo 1942, 116). Though uniforms are often thrown in amongst the outdated traditions rejected by the anarchists, it should be noted that early militia formations did attempt to impose some measure of uniformity, particularly through the combination of the so-called Durruti cap, leather jackets, and the red and black neckerchief of the CNT-FAI (Enzensberger 2019, 172–73). Informality and affective bonds between officers and ranking soldiers is not a phenomenon distinct to the anarchist war experience but rather a commonplace effort to humanise the "vast, impersonal, arbitrary, coercive machine" represented by the modern conscript army (Sheffield 2000, 178; Smith 2016, 87–89). Nonetheless, the above responses by Spanish anarchists indicate the extent to which the movement's prefigurative traditions of solidarity and fraternity provided additional resonance to such expressions of group identity.

The informal and distinctly proletarian aesthetic of the anarchists had long been scorned by their opponents among the socialists, communists and republicans who designated them *bandidos* (bandits) and *tribus* (primitives) (Frente Libertario 1937, 2; La Voz 1936, 1; Solidaridad Obrera 1937, 3). Those at the front responded by appropriating these insults as affirmations of their distinct military identity. This contrasted favourably with the supposedly "display-doll" appearance of their rivals in the Republican and Socialist youth organisations who, it was maintained, dedicated themselves to parades instead of military training (Esfuerzo : Periódico Mural de Las Juventudes Libertarias de Cataluña 1937, 1). In another notable example, when the troops of the 119th Mixed Brigade (formerly of the Durruti Column) paraded before General Sebastián Pozas in June 1937, the disciplined silence was suddenly broken by the "thunderous" shout of "¡Vivan las Tribus!" which prompted all four battalions to take up the chant (Gracia 2005, 61–62). Two months later, two soldiers of the same formation wrote to the dissident publication *Acracia*, one to memorialise his fallen comrades "who have shown how to be heroes and worthy of our savage *tribu* whose blood has stained every field of battle," and the other to defend the record of the anarchists who had "stoically fought in that great epic in the streets defending the cause of the revolution: they were *tribus*; they were workers when they stood, and heroes when they fell" (Areste 1937, 1; García 1937, 1).

Pressure continued to be exerted to remove these visual signifiers of anarchist culture. Prior to the Belchite Offensive in the summer of 1937, the soldiers of the 117th Mixed Brigade (a constituent unit of the anarchist 26th Division) were twice confronted by Republican officers, who unsuccessfully demanded the removal of their red-and-black banner – a gift from the Libertarian Youth they had carried since departing Barcelona in the summer of 1936 – as well as their distinctive confederal neckerchiefs ('Informes Sobre Detenciones Etc de La 25 División (117 y 118 Brigadas).' 1937, 1–3). These homogenising impulses had been given greater weight by the so-called Proselytization Decree, issued by the Republican Ministry of Defence on 28 June 1937, which effectively criminalised outward expressions of political partisanship within the armed

forces, largely with a view to arresting the PCE's recruitment efforts within the military (Alpert 2013, 209). In practice, however, both the communists and the anarchists had engaged and continued to engage in political agitation among soldiers. During the national plenum of regional representatives of the *Federación Ibérica de Juventudes Libertarias* (FIJL) in January 1937, the Catalan delegation described their efforts to utilise Barcelona's officer-training academy, the first established in the Republican Zone, to "establish a [libertarian] preponderance among military officers" ('Pleno Nacional de Regionales de La FIJL Celebrado En Valencia.' 1937, 5). Indeed, just one month after Prieto's decree, the CNT's National Committee called for the resus of *grupos de afinidad* within the Popular Army, based around press discussions, recruitment, and the sharing of intelligence, all with the hope of creating "a potent organisation" that would be "decisive for [our] triumph" ('Carta Del Comité Nacional al Comité Regional de Catalunya 1937, 22).

Much as the communists worked through the *Juventudes Socialistas Unificadas* (JSU) on the pretext of offering non-partisan education, the FIJL worked proactively to distribute propaganda at the front and mobilise *agrupaciones culturales* ('Pleno Nacional de Regionales de La FIJL Celebrado En Valencia 1937, 6). Such efforts are attested to by the urgent petitions for books, pamphlets and newspapers sent to the press organs of the CNT throughout 1937 and 1938 ("Cartas Recibidas Sobre La Revista El Parapeto, Semanario Confederal Del Frente" 1937–8). The content of these deliveries varied considerably and included both CNT regional bulletins alongside the more holistic, culturally oriented journals like *Umbral*, *Estudios*, and *La Revista Blanca* ('Carta Del Delegado de Prensa de 82 Brigada Mixta a La Subsección de Propaganda de "Parapeto" 1938, 16; 'Carta Del Comité Regional, Sección Propaganda al Comité Nacional, Sección Defensa, Subsección Propaganda 1937, 19–20), underscoring the desire among anarchists at the front to rekindle the culture of free discussion and *capacitación* that had permeated their *ateneos libertarios* prior to the war (Navarro 2005). Material shortage and struggles with distribution would disappoint many such *agrupaciones*, who bitterly complained of the ubiquity of communist periodicals, such as *Mundo Obrero*, in stark contrast to the scarcity of libertarian publications ('Carta Del 19 Brigada Mixta al Comité de Propaganda, Valencia 1937; 'Carta Del Delegado de Prensa de 82 Brigada Mixta a La Subsección de Propaganda de "Parapeto" 1938, 16). Perhaps more concerning for the CNT leadership was the fact that anarchist soldiers were also active consumers and participants in the clandestine anarchist press with the Defence Section of the CNT calling for the confiscation of copies of *El Amigo del Pueblo* circulating among soldiers on the Aragon Front, "sowing confusion wholly prejudicial to the combatants' morale" ('Informe Semanal de La Sección Defensa 1937, 101). Anarchist soldiers utilised these networks to express dissent with the "circumstantialist" narrative being broadcast through official anarchist channels (Godicheau 2004, 194). A "militiaman" of the Catalan Libertarian Youth praised *Ruta* for its break with the "monotonous" language of official CNT-FAI publications: "The anarchism of *RUTA* is authentic anarchism, free from mystification and sophism. The prose of *RUTA* does not speak of circumstances" (Ruta: Órgano de Las Juventudes Libertarias de Cataluña y Baleares 1937a, 1).

That such scepticism and discontent was largely overcome speaks again to the importance of those anarchist militants serving as officers and commissars, mediating the concerns of soldiers both to the syndical organisation and the military command. In one instance, when elements of the 83rd Mixed Brigade (formerly the Iron Column) refused to move towards the front-line without first being issued arms, it was left to the Brigade commissar – the veteran militant José Espí Reig – to soothe their fears and prevent the incident from escalating (Reig 2018, 125). In a noteworthy case, following a mutiny among the 4th Battalion of the 119th Mixed Brigade (26th

Division) in which the ranking soldiers refused to undertake an assault against a prepared Nationalist position, it was again the commissars who both alerted their commanders to "frayed" morale of the exhausted troops and who ultimately moved to resolve the dispute ('Informe de Lo Ocurrido Con El Cuarto Batallón 119 Brigada Mixta 1937, 32). During the subsequent court-martial, conducted by officers of another battalion of the 26th, it was agreed that punishment would be administered but with the following striking caveat:

> It must not be forgotten that both units are composed of volunteers who have fought from the very beginning of the war, having written many glorious pages in the history of the Spanish revolution, something that this Tribunal must not ignore.
>
> ("Sentencia Pronunciada Por El Tribunal Militar Designado Por La Superioridad Para Fallar El Sumario Incoado Por El Delito de Sedición Militar En Que Incurrió El 4 Batallón de La 119 Brigada Mixta" 1937, 28).

Commissar Joan Sans Sicart of the 121st Mixed Brigade is another case in point; a militant of the FIJL who had served on the barricades during the May Days and a vocal anti-Stalinist, Sicart nonetheless remained clear on the needs of the war-effort and collaborated across party lines while in the front. In his speeches to new recruits, he repeatedly invoked not simply the libertarian communist future but also the cultural achievements of the Republic (Sicart 2003, 92–96). Sicart's memoirs make few references to political agitation or even of his correspondence with the CNT-FAI and he claimed to have made every effort to disrupt partisan activities. On two occasions he discovered and broke-up clandestine meetings of alleged communist militants (Sicart 2003, 126–29), but also received threats from recalcitrant anarchists who later accused him of "acting like a communist." Sicart even alleged that a lieutenant was murdered by this "group of malcontents," describing the affair as "another episode in the battle […] against militarisation" (Sicart 2003, 130–31).

Had Sicart and his ilk ceased to be militants of the CNT-FAI? The common war experience of many young militants encouraged them to identify with roles and even identities that overlapped political lines (for a comparable process at work in wartime Gijón, see Radcliff 1996, 310–12). The general mobilisation of manpower ensured that few units could remain homogenously political in one direction or another and still fewer were drawn from the urban environment which had produced the militias.[3] Ricardo Sanz alluded to this directly in a sternly worded letter to the Executive Committee of the Libertarian Movement in which he complained that newly arrived anarchist volunteers possess "the belief that they can meet and discuss matters as if [the Army] were part of their local syndicate," maintaining that "we do not think of distinguishing between old and new militants here […] *They are all soldiers* [emphasis original]" (Sanz 1938). The Military Recruitment and Instruction Centres (CRIM), the *Escuelas Populares* for officers and commissars, and the *Hogares del Soldado* (recreation and learning spaces embedded in the frontline) enforced this principle still further, creating hybrid identifications as militants and affiliates retained con-

[3] Taking the example of the 41st Mixed Brigade, 56.1% of its soldiers were described as agricultural workers, with 26.6% being identified as urban workers and 17.3% as belonging to "other professions." Of those whose political affiliation was recorded, 44.2% were UGT affiliates, 18.5% members of the PCE, 15.1% members of the JSU, 8.7% CNT affiliates with 2.7% identifying as Republicans ("Composición Político-Social y Militar de Las Fuerzas de La 36a y 41a Brigada Mixta, de Esta [Cuarta] División 1937).

tact with their syndicates and parties while being socialised into their new military roles.[4] Since officers and commissars were rarely addressing a homogenous constituency many, consciously or unconsciously, adopted the all-embracing narrative of the conflict as an antifascist war of national liberation, as testified to within the aptitude surveys submitted to the CNT Regional Committee of Cataluña in July 1938, one of which closed with the emphatic declaration that "Spain is, and will remain, for the Spanish!" ('Cuestionarios Contestados Por Los Militantes Sobre Sus Experiencias y Opiniones 1938, 13)

All the same, for anarchist affiliates and militants at the front, the CNT-FAI was a source of both moral and material support which they were unafraid to call upon. Besides the requests for press, there were numerous instances of soldiers writing to the Defence Section or the Liaison Committees to request leave or protest the abuses of commanders or miscarriages of justice. In response, the Defence Section successfully demanded that the wider organisation, and particularly the press organs, render just homage to "the bravery of confederal units" as well as to specific anarchist battlefield heroes (Del Pardo 1938, 5; Solidaridad Obrera 1939, 2; Yoldi 1938, 28). Soldiers also increasingly benefitted from the military welfare network established by *Solidaridad Internacional Antifascista* (SIA). Though SIA's work as a libertarian response to the communist-inflected humanitarian organisation *Socorro Rojo* is well established, less commented upon is that, from its creation in June 1937, the group worked to channel aid to the front, supplying confederal soldiers with anarchist publications and acting as a postal service between soldiers and their families (Sánchez Saornil 1938, 37; '; Organización de Servicios de Paquetería al Frente 1938, 135). SIA's Combatants Section worked especially hard to counter the sense of abandonment felt by anarchists and, from February 1938, began establishing groups within the army to further disseminate propaganda materials and organise cultural events ('Multipliquemos Las Agrupaciones de Solidaridad Internacional Antifascista 1938, 32–46; Ackelsberg 2005, 174–75). In doing so, the organisation provided a limited, but legal, opportunity for libertarian mobilisation and identification within the Popular Army, resulting in a firm rebuke on the part of Mera who accused SIA of undertaking "*proselitismo*" among soldiers in precisely the same mould as *Soccorro Rojo* (Mera 1938, 19). Underpinning the work of SIA was both the established anarchist impulse for solidarity but also an unquestioned reverence for the combatant within wartime anarchist culture, regarded as the embodiment of libertarian virtue and a source of spiritual and physical renewal (Hombres Libres 1937, 3; Mujeres Libres 1938, 9; Tierra y Libertad 1937, 2). In this regard, the front was to become a liminal space within which anarchists neither rejected the statist hierarchies of the military nor abandoned their group identity as libertarians.

Persecution and resistance at the front

It would be a mistake to allow these examples of hybridity to obscure the central fact that the reestablishment of the *Código Militar* rearticulated outward expressions of libertarian discontent

[4] As Matthews (2012, 44–47) highlights, the CRIM were the first stage in the training and socialisation of Republican soldiers but it should be emphasised that, given the urgency of Republican mobilisation, much of these processes took place at the front itself. Here the *Hogares* and *Rincones del Soldado* offered spaces for "rational recreation" in a heterogenous antifascist ambience, combining slogans and symbols of the Republic with those of social and cultural revolution (Gómez and Antonio 2020). Similarly, the *Escuelas* for officers and commissars were, at the outset, intended to be syncretic and non-partisan (Oliver 1978, 357–62), though expressions of partisanship were by no means uncommon (see Sicart 2003, 28–44).

as punishable displays of *proselitismo* that their opponents would be quick to exploit. The imprisonment of Francisco Maroto, commander of the 147th Mixed Brigade in Granada Province, provided a foretaste of such manoeuvring in action. In February 1937, a tumultuous meeting of the CNT Regional Committee of Andalucía, including three companies of militiamen from the Maroto Column, condemned the "abuses" and "disrespect" shown by the forces of the Civil Governor towards anarchist militants. According to some accounts, Maroto then led his men on horseback through the streets "with bayonets fixed," before entering the Governor's residence with a smaller delegation to demand restitution at gunpoint ('Maroto' 1937, 54–55). In response, Maroto was subsequently seized and imprisoned by local Assault Guards before being sentenced to death by Almeria's Tribunal Popular (Amorós 2011, 126–44). Though the sentence was suspended in January 1938, the case caused outcry among many dissident sections of the movement, particularly among the FIJL, for whom Maroto was a warrior-hero "of the same ilk and status as Durruti" (Amorós 2011, 259–63). Maroto's well-known martial prowess in the *Sierra Nevada* added to the outrage among many militants who viewed the front as the true moral focal point of the movement, in contrast to the corruption and backsliding of their leadership in the urban rear-guard (Hombres Libres 1937, 6).

The anarchists' culture of associationism also helped to reinforce their sense of persecution within the Republican Zone while stimulating displays of solidarity and unrest. On the front line, the *Sindicatos de las Fuerzas Armadas* provided major focal points for discontent. Although scant material has survived on their scale and functioning at the front, they appear to have emerged in Madrid, shortly after the Nationalist assault of November 1936, as an effort to open the ranks of the CNT to soldiers, assault guards, and carabineros while also retaining influence over their affiliates within the armed forces who "understand that from [within the military] they can render the greatest service to the revolution in arms" (Frente Libertario 1936, 1). The National Committee of this syndicate was established in June 1937, but its activities generally focused on defending the CNT's footholds within the Republic's internal security forces ('Actas e Informes Del Sindicato de Las Fuerzas Armadas y Asociación Nacional de Cultura de Las Fuerzas Armadas 1937, 4–5). Nonetheless, those established at, or near, the front appeared to have become focal points for anarchists to express their frustrations and grievances in the face of resurgent statism and abuses from the high command. In August 1937, responding to the calls for solidarity issued by the *Sindicato*, a commissar of the 4th Battalion (141st Mixed Brigade) encouraged his soldiers to violently demonstrate for the release of the veteran militant, Justino Villaverde, of the 153rd Mixed Brigade (formerly the *Tierra y Libertad* Column), a protest which resulted in death sentences being handed down for the two ringleaders while seven soldiers were despatched to disciplinary battalions for the remainder of the war ('Procedimiento Sumario Contra Miembros Del 4° Batallón de La 141a Brigada Mixta Como Autores de Un Delito de Sedición 1937, 122). Many anarchists saw rank hypocrisy in the fact that such harsh sentences were seldom handed down to senior officers, even after the increasing number of military reverses in the north and the Central Zone from mid-1937 onwards, as articulated in a report by the Defence Section of the *Movimiento Libertario de Cataluña*:

> The military courts are teeming with fascists and "moles", most of them card carrying members of the PCE who devote their time to shooting soldiers and NCOs, but who delay sentencing superior officers, the ones chiefly responsible for all the planning failures and defeats.

(Peirats 2012, 3:64).

Such drastic actions were only the most visible displays of discontent available to the anarchists. Even though state-censorship had attempted to eradicate critical discussions in public, the regional and clandestine press continued to serve as forums for complaint and appeal after May 1937, rebutting accusations of cowardice and deriding hostile Republican leaders (Godicheau 2004, 196–201). Anarchist units also sent representatives to regional meetings of the FAI and FIJL, bringing their own concerns to bear (‘Actas Del Pleno Regional de La FIJL de Andalucía 1937, 18–29; Evans 2020, 203).

Spanish anarchists, both during and since the Civil War, have alleged that the series of military operations organised on the Aragon Front in the summer of 1937 were essentially political in nature, being aimed to distract anarchist soldiers from the counterrevolutionary campaigns being organised in the rear-guard, disrupt the confederal composition of the Aragon divisions, and mount a sustained campaign of persecution against prominent anarchist commanders and commissars (Peirats 2012, 3:60; Santillán 1940, 251). Historians of the wartime Republic have generally dismissed such a portrait, relaying the destruction of the libertarian movement in Catalonia and Aragon as a necessary evil while others have readily accepted accounts of anarchist military ineptitude in these operations (Graham 1999, 530–31; Esdaile 2018, 233–37; Masoliver 2005, 156). Clearly it is necessary to temper both accounts; for all that the confederal divisions had lacked materiel and organisation prior to militarisation, they served with distinction during the assault on Belchite and the 25th Division was subsequently redeployed as part of the Army of Manoeuvre for the winter offensive against Teruel (Beevor 2006, 297–99; Lorenz 2018, 92–97), later receiving praise for its “magnificent and disciplined” conduct by none other than the communist commander Enrique Líster (Alpert 2013, 114). Relations between communists and anarchists during the summer of 1937 were not entirely hostile: Saturnino Carod, an early militia commander and later commissar of the 25th Division, recalled two “fraternization” events held between the men of the 25th and the communist 11th Division including political speeches, dinners and dances (Carod 1973).

In spite of this, the image reported to the CNT by the commissars of anarchist dominated brigades was all too often one of abuse, neglect, and persecution, a process which continued beyond Belchite into the collapse of the Aragon Front, and the reorganisation of the Army of the East into the Army of the Ebro. Desperate pleas were made to the National Committee of the CNT to defend its armed militants from the “deliberate offensive against units of a confederal nature,” manifested in the arrest of Maximo Franco, the commander of the 127th Mixed Brigade who had previously sheltered anarchists deserting from communist-dominated units (“Informe Sobre La Situación Del Compañero Maximo Franco, Jefe de La 127 Brigada (28 División)” 1938, 61). Though anarchist formations would participate in offensive and defensive operations to the very end of the war, the Republican high command was sufficiently distrustful of their “rebellious attitude” to order the deployment of “loyal” formations from the Central Zone to disarm any anarchists leaving the front during the 11th Division’s suppression of the Council of Aragon (‘Índice de Medidas Que Se Proponen Ante Posibles Acontecimientos Que Puedan Derivarse Como Consecuencia de La Disolución Del Consejo de Aragón 1937, 1–3). Such anti-libertarian dispositions, while not corresponding to a conspiracy, certainly created an environment in which hostile officers and commissars, of whatever political denomination, felt able to discriminate with impunity. The commander of the 61st Mixed Brigade, notably a member of the PCE, alleged that

during the Aragon Offensive, in the Spring of 1938, the commander of the 22nd Corps shot and killed one of his junior officers out of hand, with the sole justification that he was thought to be an anarchist (García Lavid 1938, 15).

The 153rd Mixed Brigade provides perhaps the most apt example of the contours of this hostile environment, while at the same time underscoring the continual efforts of anarchists, both at the front and within the organisation, to virulently defend the record and integrity of their forces. The column was described in one report as "forged in the heat of those euphoric first days [of the Revolution]," consisting almost entirely of anarchist volunteers from Barcelona and Central Catalunya who joined the Defence of Madrid in October 1936. Its opposition to militarisation prompted the National Committee to dispatch Antonio Seba Amorós to take command and supervise its reorganisation as a Mixed Brigade (Informe Que Eleva al Presidente Delegado de La Junta de Defensa de Madrid, General Miaja, El Comisario General de La Brigada (En Formación) "Tierra y Libertad" 1937, 38–40; Gómez 2018, 11–15). At the commencement of the Belchite Offensive in August 1937, the Brigade numbered just 800 men and was described as "extremely poorly armed" in one report (Grunfeldt 1937c, 61). Nonetheless, it was attached to the 35th Division of General Karol Wacław Świerczewski (alias Walter), together with the 117th and 118th Mixed Brigades of the 25th Division and the socialist-dominated 32nd Mixed Brigade. The 153rd's official report described that the brigade approached the town of Belchite from the south-west, engaging in bitter house-to-house fighting during which the majority of its officers became casualties "setting an example of tenacity and bravery" ('Informe Relacionado Con La Toma de Belchite 1937, 60–63). Much was also made of the lavish equipment exclusively dispensed to "the Marxists," with one report speculating this to be "a manoeuvre to annihilate our heroic brigade" (Grunfeldt 1937c, 61). To avoid unnecessary losses during the final assault on the Plaza de Ayuntamiento, the four attacking brigades opted to each dispatch one assault company, keeping the remainder of their forces in reserve. This decision prompted the open derision of General Walter who openly claimed that the anarchists were waiting for the hard fighting to end in order to take credit from the International Brigades, a rumour which "greatly demoralised" the men of the 153rd ("Informe Relacionado Con La Toma de Belchite Realizada En Los Primeros Días de Septiembre de 1937 1937" 1937, 63). Still worse came when Walter summoned Seba to his headquarters and, upon hearing the latter's protestations that his men were "on the front line" and not waiting in reserve, proceeded to verbally abuse and beat the anarchist; according to one report, throwing him down an embankment, striking him in the testicles, before finally throwing his binoculars at him, creating a 5 cm cut across Seba's forehead (Grunfeldt 1937c, 61). News of this incident spread widely through the movement, with the Defence Section of the National Committee writing to Seba directly express their "outrage" at the "savage and unjust abuses," committed "by that cowardly scoundrel named Walter" (Grunfeldt 1937a, 22).

Superficially, these actions appear to vindicate Bolloten's narrative of the anarchist movement being extinguished by the communist-led counterrevolution, aimed at seizing the reins of power in the Republic (Bolloten 1991). It should be noted, however, that there remains no direct evidence of a preordained conspiracy on the part of the PCE in this case. Walter himself was under severe pressure for results after Modesto demanded the attack redirect against Belchite rather than the overall objective of Zaragoza and sought to explain away the overall failure of the operation to sabotage by "a large-scale Trotskyist spy and terrorist organisation." Arms were certainly allocated in greater numbers to Líster's men yet it was his 11th Division, and not the confederal formations, which was intended to lead the spearhead through the Ebro Valley (Beevor 2006,

296–99). Walter's behaviour reveals less about the intentions of communist commanders than the anarchists' understanding of military norms and practices. The level of detail attached to the altercation highlights precisely what anarchist officials found most shocking; Walter had both failed to treat Seba with the respect owed to a dutiful militant and conduct himself in the moral, dignified manner essential to *hombría* (manliness) – "a sense of upright morality, integrity, honourableness, truth, dignity and dedication" that Richard Cleminson identifies as central to the anarchist understanding of correct male behaviour (Cleminson 2008, 211). The very ferocity of the attack, contrasted with Seba's respectful passivity and fulfilment of his obligations underscored that it was the anarchists, rather than the communists, who represented discipline and dutiful behaviour. In addition, Walter had belittled the martial achievements of the confederal formations which the movement's commissars took great pains to highlight to the *comités superiores* after the failed offensive, proudly relating the message received by the 153rd from General Pozas during the fighting for Belchite which exhorted them to conclude the assault "for the honour of the Popular Army" ('Informe Relacionado Con La Toma de Belchite 1937, 62). That the 153rd suffered some 300 casualties during the operation was also widely circulated within the organisation, with José Grunfeldt (Secretary of the Defence Section of the National Committee of the CNT) writing to the Regional Committee of Catalonia to demand why neither *La Noche* nor *Solidaridad Obrera* had written "a single word" about the tribulations of the 153rd:

> If, after having conducted themselves exceptionally and taken the majority of the enemy positions, our comrades at the front see that they are not done justice in our newspapers … and do not lose heart, this will not be the result of our efforts in the rear.
>
> (Grunfeldt 1937b, 65–66)

Grunfeldt also protested that Prime Minister Juan Negrín's letters of congratulation on the capture of Belchite were addressed solely to Miguel Vivancos, the commander of the 25th Division, leaving "despondent" the men of other divisions who had also "conducted themselves heroically" (Grunfeldt 1937c, 63). Strikingly, in demanding homage to their comrades as exceptionally "brave soldiers," anarchist officers and commissars were arguably replicating and legitimating the wider norms of Republican military culture. The complaints and demands above were not related to the legitimacy of the antifascist war or the advent of the counterrevolution, but rather the proper recognition of the combatant as an exalted category deserving of all necessary support from their comrades in the rear in the face of "unjust" behaviour on the part of their adversaries.

The 153rd remained a focus of anarchist persecution long after the conclusion of the Belchite Offensive. In March 1938, the Brigade was incorporated into the 30th Division and, shortly after, many of its officers – including all of its Staff Officers – and the entirety of its commissars were replaced by equivalents from the Central Zone while command of the brigade passed to the communist Félix Arano Malaxechevarria. In the succeeding months, as detailed by the socialist commissar Enrique Rigabert Martín, a culture of corruption overtook the command of the brigade, spearheaded by Arano who enabled the embezzlement of funds intended to improve living conditions for the rank-and-file (Rigabert Martín 1938, 69–71). In response, an official pertaining to the Defence Section of the CNT was despatched, meeting with a group of (former) officers, NCOs and commissars at the headquarters of the 4th Battalion where they proceeded to

protest vehemently the dismissal of their commanders. The official noted "the despair prevailing among the soldiers, for they do not see either their liberty or their lives guaranteed." Of particular note was the dismissal of Major Feliciano Llach Bou (alias Leal), who had remained with the brigade since Barcelona and who had lost a testicle while leading his men during the Battle of the Segre ("indisputable proof of his conduct and that of his men" (Merino 1938, 8–10)., At the same time a campaign of solidarity was initiated among anarchist affiliates on the frontline, notably the *Agrupación Cultural "Durruti"* of the 26th Division which wrote threateningly to the leadership of the CNT that:

> The cause of the comrades from the 153rd Brigade is our cause: the cause of libertarians of the 26th Division. We must warn you that the blood brotherhood of anarchists cannot bear the crimes which Lenin's bastard offspring try to perpetrate, and so we serve notice of the possibility that our patience will be exhausted should that which must be prevented in the interests of everyone […] befall our comrades from the 153rd.
>
> (Peirats 2012, 3:174)

Throughout the autumn of 1938, the representative of the Defence Section liaised futilely with the Divisional and Corps commanders, who failed to intervene in the affair. At the same time, according to a report issued by Republican military intelligence, a group of anarchist dissidents were now organising within the brigade with one declaring "If the FAI does not begin to act, we will have no other option but to take matters into our own hands, which can only end with bullets" (Informe Del Jefe Del SIM - Demarcación Del Ejército Del Este 1938, 77). In the early hours of October 28th, 1938, Rigabert together with his aide, were found by a roadside "riddled with bullets", an act widely seen as a libertarian retaliation to their officers displacement. A flurry of desertions and arrests followed, including of Leal who was accused of being centre of the conspiracy by the Republican military authorities (Ignacio Mantecon 1938, 59–60). A final CNT report on the affair at the close of 1938 put the matter starkly: "The 153rd Brigade is lost to the organisation" ('Asunto de La 153 Brigada Mixta 1938, 5–7). Notably, the subsequent investigation into the murder was seriously hindered by the close bonds between anarchist militants, described as "that of a class, or a family", as well as the Brigade's "impenetrable politics" (Ignacio Mantecon 1938, 62). A piece even appeared in *Solidaridad Obrera* praising Leal, by this time identified as a key suspect in the affair, as "an example of determination and heroism," while *Ruta* even insinuated that the murder was a legitimate exercise in "direct action" ('Informe Del Jefe Del SIM - Demarcación Del Ejército Del Este 1938, 78).

That the anarchists were ultimately unsuccessful in averting the displacement of their officers and commissars in this case should not obscure the fact that the men of the brigade actively sought to reconstitute their unit and reaffirm their intimate bonds with their leadership. This entailed working officially through "the Organisation," unofficially through appeals to their fellow combatants and, *in extremis*, violent acts of vengeance aimed at communicating their identity to a military institution that was indifferent or even hostile to their concerns. It is interesting to note that the demands placed to the organisation and to the *Agrupación "Durruti"* did not include discharge but rather the restoration of their unit as it had been previously, thus tacitly accepting the legitimacy of their military service and reflecting a continued attachment to an anarchist military identity even within the strictures of the Popular Army.

Conclusion

The image of anarchists entrapped by the promise of militarisation, passively accepting of the persecutions orchestrated by the Spanish Communist Party and regimented into an army little different to that of the Republic and the Restoration, is manifestly an oversimplification. Though scarcely recognised, anarchist leading role within the Popular Army was as extensive and multifaceted as their socialist contemporaries. The militarisation of antifascism that prevailed within the Republican military allowed many libertarians to embrace a hybrid identity, exalting the revolutionary, insurrectionary traditions of their movement and the resulting emotive bonds this had created between them, while adopting the roles and tasks required for the military defeat of fascism. Within the liminal landscape of the front, anarchists were able and willing to forge new connections, bestowing respect upon those who had likewise proved themselves on the field of battle and receiving it in some quarters in return. Their self-perception as the true vanguard of antifascism granted the armed anarchists an unimpeachable moral authority which was wielded to defend their interests both within the libertarian movement itself and against the encroachments of the Republican military-political leadership. The apparent hostility of Republican military authority, along with the belief in the pervasive conspiracy being mounted against them by the communists, gave impetus to resurgent displays of libertarian mobilisation in defence of their persecuted comrades at the front. That the anarchist leadership failed to act as forcefully in their defence, as many argued they ought, speaks to a desire to play the communists at their own game as dutiful servants of the Republic and thereby lay the groundwork for the eventual uprooting of their opponents when the opportunity arose. Revisiting the anarchist military experience does not simply serve to diversify our understanding of the Spanish Civil War. As this and previous special issues (Evans and Yeoman 2016) have demonstrated, anarchism cannot be seen as a distinctly Iberian aberration, but as a movement engaged and connected with the debates and crises of the twentieth century. The advent of total war was an immense intellectual and political challenge for the international left, even more so given fascism's embrace of its socially and racially regenerative potential. In Spain, the anarchists were in the forefront of articulating an antifascist response to the demands of modern war based around the martial potency of the masses, led by a proven revolutionary cadre. That this vision failed should not obscure the palpable impact that this war experience had upon the European movement during the subsequent global conflagration. Those who had served at the front, including those who remained and donned uniforms, retained revered status among anarchists in exile or incarcerated by the victorious Francoists. However heretical the stance of the pro-militarisation anarchists may appear with the benefit of more than eight decades of hindsight, the front remains a crucial space of transformation, radicalism and mobilisation which can, and must, be rediscovered by historians of anarchism.

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