

The Spanish Revolution, Its Mistakes and Potential Corrections

Nestor Makhno

1934

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Nestor Makhno, exiled in Paris, was in touch with Spanish anarchists and 'hoped that they would learn from the Makhnovist experience [...] "Makhno has never shirked a fight; if I am still alive when you begin yours, I will be with you."'¹ Two pieces about Spain appear in *The Struggle Against the State and Other Essays*. This article, written just before his death, has not previously been translated.

Part one

Our friend Nestor Makhno, whose insurgent activities in Ukraine, all too well-known in these parts to need repeating, jotted down a few notes some months back regarding the Spanish revolution from his impoverished exile in France and forwarded them to us so that Spanish anarchists mind bear them in mind. There will be a follow-up piece in the next edition.

In recent months, the character and shape of the Spanish revolution have been determined partly by pressures from the revolutionary masses of the proletariat and partly the wishes of the liberal bourgeoisie per se, which made up its mind once and for all to break with the constitutional monarchy and ensure (support) a Republic, that suiting them better.

Bear in mind that the Spanish revolution started out with a novel compromise (concealed from the masses of course) struck between the king and the liberal bourgeoisie. We all know that that bourgeoisie, after defeating the monarchists in the municipal elections, sensed that it had political mastery over the country's political forces, brought what was, as far as it was concerned, ready-made pressures to bear on the troops and king Alfonso XIII took fright. It is also common knowledge that the monarchists, following some sort of negotiations with the liberal bourgeoisie, saw to it that the executioner king Alfonso XIII was allowed to leave the country unhindered and without facing punishment. Moreover, he left with his entire retinue, taking with him the wherewithal for a life of luxury. The king reserved the right to return to the throne, and to appoint a successor to take his place. All of which shows us that the liberal bourgeoisie, in rescuing the king from the people's justice and relocating him to another State's soil, was alive to the fact that the king might be of use to it in scaring the people, just as the latter was getting ready to wrest more freedom than the bourgeoisie was inclined to grant it.

The bourgeoisie got its sums right. It is obvious that the leading lights of Spanish liberalism took careful note of the mistakes made by their counterparts in the Russian revolution vis a vis the working people, which is waking up and the liberals behave like faithful guardians of the slavery principle built up in Spain down through the centuries. That slavery served the purposes of the king, his retinue and his admirers, but the people hardly featured at all in the story, the great people at whose expense the king and his courtiers were living. And, disgracefully, today's liberals are looking to that people once again, now that they have struck their deal with the monarchists regarding the criminal king's unhindered departure. One question arises, out of necessity: where were the real friends of the people, at the time, those revolutionaries of every stripe? Where were they, these people who had so often orchestrated attempts against the life of the criminal king? Had the ideas that prompted Spain's best sons into acts of heroism cooled

¹ Alexandre Skirda *Nestor Makhno : Anarchy's Cossack* p.277

down? For it cannot be argued that there were no such personnel in Spain at the time. Nor can it be claimed that they came to some arrangement with the liberals to let the king leave. The only acceptable explanation is that the Spanish revolutionaries, after securing freedom of speech and the right to organize, were preoccupied with marshalling all of their forces and devising schemes for practical action, so that the labouring people might understand them better and be in a position to help them in the fight for liberation. And if this latter point is correct, what results have their gatherings produced? For there is no trace of any in the revolutionary camp: the socialists are in the service of the liberals, and as for the syndicalists and anarchists, well, it looks as if the time has not yet come for implementing and embedding their ideals in the life of the people: In all probability, they are waiting for better times to come. The Bolsheviks (state communists), are, as ever, making do with street demonstrations, without taking any responsibility in the eyes of the working people. Meanwhile, the liberals' leaders are feeling brave and boldly dictating to their party and the Government the means whereby they should make strides towards 'strong rule' and 'restored order'. Which is what the liberals want of the Spanish revolution. With such appetites at work and without further ado, they are slipping into the life of the country everything that does not conflict with their class interests.

Which is how the liberal bourgeoisie has reached the heights of Power and is hurriedly fitting the country out with fresh chains. Also, they are doing all this safe in the knowledge that the socialists are going to support them in this battle and that they will crush the extremists the moment they try to raise the people against them.

All of this makes it understandable that the neither liberal bourgeoisie nor the government fears the Bolsheviks' street demonstrations, nor the workers' general strikes that are so frequently called throughout Spain under the supervision of the revolutionary syndicalists and anarchists and which, despite their making themselves so sorely felt, nearly always end up in bloody failure. The liberal bourgeoisie can rest easy, in that its leaders are watching out for its well-being: Thanks to the political agility and the astute tactics of its leaders, the bourgeoisie can gauge its strength precisely, measure it against that of its enemies and take its bearings vis a vis its most dangerous left-wing enemies and, thanks to that, the bourgeoisie knows when and in what measure its armed forces must be deployed against its enemies. Meanwhile, the leaders of the left fail to note, or refuse to note, what the bourgeoisie is establishing in the country. Anyway, the leaders' behaviour tells us with certainty that in the entire left-wing front, there is something of a muddle that seems to grow out of the fact that the leaders hold working class offices, for which they are equipped neither by their character nor by their determination, or else based upon their belief that the masses are incapable of implementing their ideas without State oversight. From a distance, it is hard to hang a label on this. But one thing is plain and, as I see it, is not in dispute, and that is that in the ranks of the left there is a deep-seated confusion. Otherwise the Manifesto of '*The Thirty*'² would not have surfaced as it is very damaging to the Spanish revolution and to the anarchist movement. That manifesto, even though it comes from

² Manifesto of the Thirty, so named after its 30 original signatories, was drawn up in August 1931, by leading committee members of the CNT and *Solidaridad Obrera* editorial board members. It was designed to stem the process whereby the CNT was having to suffer the fall-out from FAI-inspired revolts and rebellions. In post-incident crackdowns, the CNT was facing the shut-down of its premises and unions, mass arrests and the expense of funding the legal defences and maintenance of the families of those arrested, killed or deported. The government encouraged the 30 (the *treintistas*, so called) as a more moderate opposition. It should be pointed out that in earlier years some of these alleged 'reformists' had been on the more radical wing of the anarcho-syndicalist movement.

senior, veteran and well-meaning militants, may prove deadly for the revolutionary project. The consequences of it may turn out to be even greater, if we consider that the Spanish revolution is afflicted by lots of shortcomings, given that, even today, it has no set course of practical action, any more than it is possessed of sufficient resources for social action, in the absences of which revolutions are always left powerless. The Spanish revolution will be powerless unless it proves equal to the need to press on down its path, without the bourgeoisie or the Bolsheviks in cahoots with it being about to stop it in its tracks.

Part two

I would go so far as to contend yet again that, thanks to the absence of set courses for direct action, as well as the absence of appropriate resources for social action, a manifesto has now been published by thirty comrades, something similar might happen tomorrow and, on account to of this, the revolutionary front is being narrowed down and the revolution suffering more. In light of this, the chances of the bourgeoisie's ultimately seizing control of the revolution and outright reaction getting worse cannot be ruled out. But it will be too late by then to work towards an authentically revolutionary front and steer the revolution towards victorious expansion. As long as the labouring masses in Spain have not grown weary and still have hopes of achieving something in terms of conquering freedom and well-being, and as long as the liberal bourgeoisie wants to be a left-wing bourgeoisie: one day proclaiming a bourgeois Republic and the next day a workers' Republic, a lot can be done to bolster the revolution and get it on course for fruitful growth. But such things come at a cost. They call for the utmost effort, not so much from isolated individuals or groups as from workers at large, in close concert ideologically and tactically, free of smugness, workers that know what they want and who invest their entire intellectual initiative in bringing it about. The truth is that our anarchist community is still not used to collective actions. Historically, its practice has been random, and hardly ever and in no revolution has it brought about the impact to which anarchists have aspired, nor managed to win the masses over. But the overriding message of time is that we should forget about that approach and ought to organize our forces, organizing the labouring masses arming them with such resources for social action that they can defend themselves against bourgeois capitalist society. Furthermore: that they can emerge victorious from their battles with it.

The fact of the matter is that, to date, such notions have been out of place in anarchist thinking, but their absence was notable in the Russian revolution and did enormous damage to the anarchists. And there is a damaging absence discernible in the Spanish revolution too.

When you look at the Spanish revolution and see that within the left-wing camp the predominant force belongs to the anarchists, one cannot help but be moved. You cannot blithely watch the mistakes of which the most likely cause is the confusion that has taken possession of the most outstanding persons: instead of cashing in on historical developments that only come along once in a blue moon, the movement watched as cracks emerged within its ranks. And this all happened at a point when the revolutionary time-table was demanding maximum effort from the movement and initiative from its groups so as to help the country to organize its labour resources in order to set up its organs of production. There was also the need to set about establishing committees for the defence of the revolution, whereby the country might be swiftly spared, politically, from the oppression of bureaucracy, economically of the exploiter boss and

mentally, from all past enslavement. Then it might devote its efforts to building the new order of the free society and a brand-new life. All of which would be achieved without any oversight from the State, the Church, or finance capital.

Not that I think that all is lost quite yet: the Spanish people still has hopes of not succumbing to the bourgeoisie and reckons that it is quite capable of setting the course for the revolution by means of which it will be in a position to realize its centuries-old ambitions: to be free and independent of the bourgeoisie and any order it imposes. Consequently, revolutionary anarchists must make their own independent evaluation of the vanguard forces of revolution and not let themselves be distracted by ‘united fronts’ and other abstractions about the future, but rather, live in the here and now and work with an eye to the present. There must be an outline program of practical action, one that is short but clear to all its supporters who may be scattered around the country, and one that can be readily understood by the broad masses of the workers.

In that program, anarchists must state that all of the means of production belong to the nascent labour-based society and must be under the management of the workers’ trade unions. There must be a declaration that all the land belongs to the new society and should be under the management of the peasants’ societies, communes and their unions. That finance, education and other realms of social life must belong to labour associations that are free of sanctions from State authorities.

Anarchists, in propagandizing about such matters must operate with regard for the new, republican system of exploitation. The bourgeoisie must be stripped, forcibly, of the land, factories, mines and means of transport. Once the bourgeoisie makes a stand against these gains, it should be placed in a position where it does not get time to defend the assets accumulated through others’ labours, but enough to save their lives.

Organized, uncompromising struggle will draw the majority of revolutionary workers into the anarchists’ orbit. In which case, there will be no one left to sit on the fence, nor signatories to the ‘Manifesto of the Thirty’, let alone their followers. All of the vital forces of the revolution, attracted by the anarchists’ ideology, and guided by the latter’s organizations and strategy will set about attacking the strongholds of the bourgeoisie, the Government and their hirelings. The toiling people will win and its age-old dream of Freedom and Equity based on free labour will be an accomplished fact.

Makhno’s death and the Spanish comrades

Where did the Makhno article above come from and through whom? Going by *Tierra y Libertad* alone:

- a. On 30 June 1934 there was an appeal for ‘Solidarity for Nestor Makhno, gravely ill’ stating that he had been seriously ill for the previous five months. ‘His recovery will take a long time’. Donations were directed to Madame A. Faucier in Paris.
- b. On 9 August 1934, there was a front page article about Makhno, recording his death on 27 July. A shorter piece noted that after his death the United Press agency in Paris had issued

a wire report published by a newspaper in Barcelona on 29 July that *Tierra y Libertad* reckoned was defamatory and libellous of Makhno.

- c. On 16 August 1934 *Tierra y Libertad* carried a page 4 article by Angel Calvo entitled 'Comrade Makhno Has Died'. It read: 'At six o'clock on the morning of 25 July, the valiant Russian revolutionary and main driving force of the Ukrainian revolution, Nestor Makhno, passed away. ANGEL CALVO.'

Calvo has an entry in the *Dictionnaire international des militants anarchistes*:

Angel CALVO

Born 16 October 1899 in Remolins (Tortosa) – tiler – FAI-CNT-Drancy (Seine-Saint Denis)

Having fled to France, Angel Calvo, a tiler working in Drancy served as secretary of the Voluntad group in 1934; it was active in the Paris area and affiliated to the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI). He was very actively involved in 1935 in the campaign for the right of asylum alongside other members of the Drancy group, including Heriberto Ramos aka Juan Robles y Robles, Fabriciano Carrasco, Manuel Estrada and Pelayo Lopez. The FAI had lots of groups in France at the time [...] Calvo was living at the time in No 17, Rue Jules Verne in Drancy with Fabriciano Carrasco and his name was on a list of anarchist addresses to be checked out in the Paris area.

Rolf Dupuy. From militants-anarchistes.info

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