

The Heroic Tragedy: Civil War and Social Revolution in Spain

DJP | Spanish civil war | Spain | CNT | Anarcho-Syndicalism | Anarchism



'Back the revolutionary general strike the very instant anyone [i.e. the military] revolts. We, the people of Catalonia, let us be on a war footing and ready to act. Be valiant. Arm yourselves and do battle. Long Live the CNT! Long Live Libertarian Communism! Launch the revolutionary general strike against fascism.' - CNT statement of 19 July 1936

Eighty years ago this summer, Spain saw an attempted military coup being temporarily defeated by ordinary people in many parts of the country. This was the beginning of what was to be a three year long civil war, resulting in half a million deaths, and followed by the four decade dictatorship of General Franco. This article will aim to describe some of the key features of the conflict, paying close attention to the 'social revolution' in Catalonia and Aragon which is of most relevance to socialists.

To understand the outbreak of the civil war it is first necessary to understand some of the background to the conflict. Spain in the early twentieth century was a predominately agrarian society; large scale industrialisation had only taken place in the north of the

country and in Catalonia, around Barcelona. In the countryside an entrenched land owning class, of which the church was a significant section, had been resistant to agrarian economic reform, rural workers were locked into a state of poverty, often forced to work for long hours for little more than subsistence wages. Decades of agitation and self education had given birth to a strong and militant anarchist and syndicalist movement. Spain had become the only country where the anarchist ideas of Bakunin, Kropotkin, Malatesta and others had given rise to a social movement of significant numbers. By the time of the 1930's the major workers unions were the CNT (National Confederation of Labour) and the UGT (General Workers' Union). Despite ideological differences and occasional conflict there was often cooperation between the two organisations. The CNT was an anarcho-syndicalist organisation that shunned parliamentary elections and advocated industrial direct action as a means of overcoming capitalism. From the late twenties onwards, the FAI (Anarchist Federation of Iberia) had gained influence within the CNT. The FAI pushed for a programme of insurrectional 'revolutionary gymnastics' with the intent of immediately bringing about anarchism through violent confrontation with the state. These policies clashed with those of the more orthodox syndicalists within the CNT who saw the social revolution as only being possible after a longer period of working class self-education and self-organisation. The UGT was affiliated to the labourist social-democratic PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers Party) and pursued a line that was more in favour of winning legal concessions from the government.

The military declaration of 1936, which bought the beginning of the civil war, was not the first time that Spain had faced dictatorship. The dictatorship of General Miguel Primo de Rivera came about in 1923 when the government resigned in the face of a similar pronunciamiento from the Army. Following a bloodless coup, Primo de Rivera stayed in power until 1931, when the support of the military and the wealthy classes was lost. Subsequent elections gave victory to anti-monarchist parties, causing the King to abdicate and flee the country, thus bringing into being the Second Republic of Spain.

The coming of the Second Republic saw a sudden rise in working class activity as workers looked to it as a means to finally solve their economic and social problems. Rural and urban workers, even in areas not previously known for their radicalism, began to demand improvements to working conditions, public meetings became commonplace and the church, seen by many to be defending the privileged and the wealthy, often became a target for grievances. The increase in working class militancy, and particularly attacks on the Roman Catholic Church, enraged certain sections of the ruling class. In the election of 1933 a confederation of Catholic parties, the CEDA, operating on a quasi-fascist platform, won the largest amount of seats but not enough of a majority to form a government. Despite this, power was offered to the second largest party, the Radical Republican Party. The Radicals co-operated with the CEDA and in 1934 they ceded, giving three ministerial positions to the CEDA.

In protest against the CEDA entering the government the PSOE declared a general strike on 5th October 1934. In most parts of the country the strike was rapidly defeated as the government declared a state of martial law and the army took over the running of essential

services. In Barcelona the regional government declared an independent state of Catalonia. A blood bath was avoided, when a request to arm the workers was refused, and when the military general in charge of re-establishing the authority of the Madrid central government ordered his troops to be 'deaf, dumb and blind' towards any provocations. The only place the strike held on for any amount of time was in the northern mining area of Asturias where, unlike in other areas, the strike had the backing of all the workers organisations. There the situation rapidly became insurreccional. An estimated 15,000 to 30,000 armed miners took part in an uprising. Civil Guard posts and public buildings were attacked and several towns being successfully occupied. Comunismo libertario was declared with revolutionary committees taking on the social responsibilities of government, the use of money was restricted and ration vouchers were distributed to families. In response the government sent General Franco and the Moroccan Army of Africa, as well as the navy and airforce, to quell the disturbance. Retribution was brutal, around 2000 miners were killed and a further 20,000 to 30,000 imprisoned. Moorish troops unleashed a wave of looting, rape and summary executions on the surrounding mining villages. The Asturian uprising showed a pattern of events that would be repeated on a larger scale two years later, as the civil war took its course.

The military rebellion

In 1936 a leftist popular front, supported for the first time by the votes of the anarcho-syndicalists, won the election. The victory was partly due to the promise to release the thousands of prisoners who were still being held following the uprisings of '34 and to also reverse and improve on wage reductions imposed by the previous government. Determined to put a stop to the growth of working class militancy, anti-religiosity and regional separatism that had accompanied the coming of the republic, a conspiracy of officers in the military sought to reimpose what they saw as being the true will of the nation. A coup was organised to take place in July 1936. The generals hoped that they would achieve a rapid victory. However, this was not to be. In the event, beginning on the 18 July, significant elements in the military and security forces remained loyal to the Republic. The whole of the Navy remained loyal, just over half of the Guardia Civil (Civil Guard –a rural paramilitary police force) as did over 70 percent of the Guardias de Asalto (Assault Guards –an urban paramilitary police force set up during the time of the republic).

On hearing of the military rising the government, in the beginning in denial about the seriousness of the situation, was at first unwilling to arm the workers organisations. So initially through their own initiatives, by raiding gun-shops, digging up weapons stored since the Asturias uprising or by being provided weapons by loyal Assault Guards, ordinary workers began to come out against the rising. In Madrid a crowd stormed the Montaña barracks. In Barcelona factory sirens sounded to warn of the rising and an immediate general strike came into effect. Thousands of people took to the streets, setting up barricades to hinder the incursions of the military. Where the workers movement was strong, and opposition was organised quickly, the rising was defeated. In areas which failed to offer resistance, the rising was successful and the military rebels (henceforth referred to

as the 'Nationalists') began serving out a brutal repression of the workers organisations and anyone who was seen as being loyal to the republic. Spain was split into two zones, as noted by Raymond Carr 'those who happened to be in a zone that was hostile to their beliefs had to conform, escape, or risk imprisonment or shooting. Loyalty was often a matter of locality.' Though, where given the choice, the working classes generally supported the Republic and the upper classes, the Nationalists.

The working class in the saddle

The effect of arming the unions meant that the workers organisations were in control. In Barcelona, the CNT was offered full control of the Generalitat (Catalonian regional government) but refused to take it, partly because they did not want to set up a 'workers' dictatorship', and partly because they were not sure how to deal with the situation. Instead they took a place on the Anti-Fascist Militia Committee, which was in effect a sub-committee of the regional government. This committee was later dissolved and the CNT took a minority position within the Generalitat. While the CNT held power in the factories and workplaces, a vast swathe of governmental state power, including the administration of military affairs and the overseeing of justice, was left with the Generalitat. This would later be used as a level to prise power away from the syndicalists.

In Barcelona, Catalonia, Aragon and the surrounding areas the CNT enacted their anarcho-syndicalist ideology and set about collectivising large sections of industry, though it was in the countryside that the most far-reaching attempts at realising 'libertarian communism' were attempted. Following the upheavals, most large landowners in republican controlled areas had fled. With the landowning class absent, rural workers began spontaneously commandeering and collectivising land. Collectivisation meant that access to equipment, resources and labour could be pooled, leading to an increase in output and productivity and an improvement in living conditions. Within the collectives attempts at achieving an equitable distribution of goods and services were conducted in a various different ways. Some, a minority, practised a system of free access where people could simply take what they needed from the communal store. Others printed their own forms of currency or ration cards. As time went on the normal state of affairs gravitated towards that of being paid a fixed 'family wage' where collective members were entitled to certain quantities of various household items. To say that money was abolished is to push too far, 'money' does not necessarily mean only state minted currency but whatever can serve as a general measure of value and means of exchange. Whilst some agricultural collectives did not pay their workers in state currency, it was still used as a means of accounting between units. Despite the collectivisations the basic economic unit was still that of separate and competing enterprises.

"Anarchists abandoned the idea of a substitute for national money. The agrarian collectives decided to abolish money, only to adopt other systems of exchange.... The difficulties created by local money and the lack of a unified currency soon became evident. Very soon the collectivists of Aragon saw the advantages of a kind of national bank"—Frank Mintz

In Catalonia and Aragon nearly 70 percent of the workforce was involved in the collectives. Across the whole of the Republican territory there were almost 800,000 involved on the land and just over one million in industry.

Industrial collectivisation was not as deep or far-reaching as the efforts in the countryside. In the first days of the revolution workers simply seized abandoned factories and restarted production. Workers in a collectivised enterprise would organise themselves into committees, and the committees would be federated regionally. The basic unit of organisation was the factory committee. The requisitions were retrospectively made legal in late October 1936. This was partly in an effort for the central government to regain control of industry. Part of the legislation meant that each factory council had a designated 'controller' that was responsible to the government. The vast majority of industry in Catalonia was organised in this way. While the workers certainly had more control over their working conditions than in a privately or state owned enterprise, the industrial situation could best be described as kind of trade-union controlled capitalism; production was still being conducted for the purpose of exchange, both within the Republic and with the outside world.

The Spanish civil war is often simplistically described as a war of democracy versus fascism, or by Francoist historians as Catholicism versus Soviet Communism but this hides the real multiplicity of the underlying forces that fed into the conflict. Religion, regionalism, the agrarian question, rival claims to the monarchy, and class conflict all played a role in shaping the course of events.

There was tension and conflict of interests between the various groups that made up the Republican Popular Front. The Generalitat (Catalonian regional government) sought to regain power that had been taken from them during the putting down of the military rising of July 1936. Events came to a head and culminated in the 'May Days' of 1937, as famously described by George Orwell in *Homage to Catalonia*. On 2 May three trucks of assault guards, led by Rodriguez Salas the communist (PSUC – Catalanian Communist Party, pro-Stalinist) Commissioner for Public Order, arrived at the CNT/UGT controlled telephone exchange building with the intention of seizing it. Taking the occupants by surprise they were able to enter the building but were eventually forced back by machine-gun fire. The sound of the fighting alerted those nearby and news of the raid quickly spread throughout Barcelona. A standoff ensued. On one side were the various forces of government and the PSUC, and on the other the CNT-FAI, backed up by the POUM (a small non-Stalinist communist party, similar in outlook to opposition Communists of Russia) and a smaller group The Friends of Durruti (a group within the CNT that objected to collaboration with the government).

CNT leaders made their way to the Generalitat to demand that Aiguader (Commander of the Assault Guards and Republican National Guard who was assumed to have given the order) and Rodriguez Salas resign, to pacify the situation. But no compromise could be met.

The CNT declared a general strike. A network of barricades were constructed to resist the government forces, and movement of non-CNT vehicles was prevented. Sporadic shooting could be heard throughout the streets of Barcelona. A call for calm was put out over the radio, to no avail.

Anarchist and POUM divisions left the battlefield and attempted to head to Barcelona, only to be turned back by republican aircraft. Government reinforcements arrived in Barcelona via sea and road. The possibility of a full civil war within the civil war was becoming increasingly real. Seeing the futility of such a turn of events CNT and FAI leaders proposed that the barricades be taken down on the condition that no reprisals be carried out by the Assault Guards. The government agreed and on 7 May the barricades began to disappear. Five days of street fighting had resulted in more deaths and casualties than in the initial putting down of the military coup. The era of anarcho-syndicalist power in Barcelona was over. The PSUC and the PCE (Spanish Communist Party of which PSUC was the Catalanian branch) used the events to bolster their position within the government.

World war by proxy

In many ways the Spanish Civil War was a dress rehearsal for the Second World War, with foreign intervention playing a decisive role from the beginning of the conflict. The fascist states of Germany and Italy provided troops and hardware to aid the Nationalists, using the conflict as a testing ground for new equipment and techniques. In the first days and months of the conflict it was impossible for large Nationalist troop movements to be conducted via the sea, as the Republic had control of the navy. So German aircraft provided transport for the otherwise stranded forces of the Army of Africa commanded by General Franco, this being the first operation of its kind in history with a force of some 13,500 men being moved from Morocco to the mainland by the end of the operation. Another historical first befell the Basque town of Guernica which, later in the conflict, was to be the first civilian town destroyed by air raid. The other western European countries in effect supported the Nationalists by preventing arms being passed to the Republicans under the guise of non-intervention. Only Russia and Mexico supported the Republic and Mexico only diplomatically.

The aim of Russian foreign policy was to seek anti-Nazi allies in the region, a policy dependent on French capitalism. As the spread of workers' control would be a threat to the interests of the ruling classes in the area, the goal of the Russians was to secure the victory of the Republic but at the same time stem the successes of the syndicalists. As the Republic's only source of arms came from Russia, administered by the Spanish Communist parties, they were able to apply much leverage to the situation; though not to the extent that the Republic was a mere puppet of Moscow, as is sometimes claimed.

The Spanish Holocaust

'It is necessary to spread terror. We have to create the impression of mastery, eliminating without scruples or hesitation all those who do not think as we do. There can be no

cowardice. If we vacillate one moment and fail to proceed with the greatest determination, we will not win. Anyone who helps or hides a Communist or a supporter of the Popular Front will be shot' – General Mola.

Away from the front-lines a wave of violent killings took place, claiming nearly 200,000 victims. Though atrocities occurred on both sides, the nature of the killings in the two different zones reflected two different attitudes towards violence and human life. In the Nationalist zone the repression was of a premeditated and coldly calculated nature designed to suppress the enemy through the imposition of terror. It has been estimated that, out of all the victims of rearguard repression, 150,000 were at the hands of the Nationalists. Once an area had been conquered they would round up known Republicans and trade unionists and mass executions would follow. Republican women would have their heads shaved and be forced to drink castor oil, so as to soil themselves in public. Thousands were subjected to rape and other forms of torture. The Nationalists were to continue with their policy of bloody repression well after the civil war had been won – in the years following the war a further 20,000 Republicans were to be executed.

The disappearance of conventional structures of law and order led to atrocities on the Republican side, but these were mostly brought to an end within the first few months of the war. Violence was spontaneous and came from the bottom up, rather than being the result of a deliberate policy. In the countryside armed gangs roamed from village to village, executing anyone that was suspected of being sympathetic to the Nationalists. Victims included captured rebel army officers and troops, the clergy, landowners and businessmen. Nearly seven thousand members of the church were murdered or executed. Some efforts were made to protect and assist the evacuation of Nationalist prisoners and others at risk, an equivalent move not seen on the Nationalist side. Workers organisations and political parties set up autonomous police forces and secret prisons, known as checas. As the conflict went on these would increasingly be brought into central control; though the Communists, assisted by imported NKVD Soviet secret police, would hold on to their checas, using them not only against suspected Nationalists but also against the CNT-FAI, POUM and other advocates of the social revolution.

Conclusion

It is all too easy to pass judgment from the distance of history. Any praise or criticism must be made in the light of the fact that without the military rising none of the subsequent events would have happened, and everything that did happen was unavoidably shaped and influenced by the conditions of war and the wider international situation. The social revolution in Catalonia only occurred because the normal functioning of state power had been disrupted by the military rising, with control of the economy temporarily passing into the hands of the syndicalists.

Could the social revolution (better understood as 'trade-union controlled capitalism') have spread further? The actual situation of the time meant that the odds were vastly stacked against this. The syndicalists were isolated both within the Republic and internationally. The

central government deliberately held back credit and resources from the syndicalists, and international trade deals meant that foreign trade could only be conducted via the Madrid government, so economically the syndicalists found themselves behind a blockade.

But suppose, for the sake of argument, the CNT had somehow managed to become the dominant force throughout the whole of the Republic. How then would their programme have fared? Worker-controlled capitalism is subject to the same pressures as those of capitalism proper. Even with the whole industry of the nation forged into one great co-operative, the logic of market competition would remain. The national co-operative would have to be able to acquire goods and raw materials from the outside world and to do this it would have to profitably dispose of its own. In order for this to be possible enough surplus-value would have to be squeezed out of the working class so that at least an average rate of profit could be realised. As with any capitalist enterprise, the pressure would be to continually increase productivity of labour, ultimately to the detriment of the labour. The logic of capitalism is not imposed because of the greed of individual capitalists but because market competition compels enterprises to accumulate or die. Communism is not capitalism without capitalists but a system where productive activity is directly controlled by the whole of society, rather than being mediated through exchange on the market.

On the dawn of the military rising, the working class of Spain faced a bleak choice; face repression and extermination at the hands of the fascists, potentially die fighting, or suffer the isolation of exile. Though the outcome was not and could not have been socialism, the efforts of a strong and well-organised workers movement did for a short time and in many respects successfully improve their living conditions. However, at the same time we should not over-romanticise, since the positive achievements of the syndicalists were happening against a background of violence and slaughter. The cooperative worldwide society we call socialism cannot be brought about through coercive means, as what is gained by force has to be held onto by force. Repression and summary killing can only contribute to an atmosphere of authoritarianism. Nonetheless one cannot help but admire the bravery of the ordinary men and women who courageously set about building what they saw as the new society, whilst at the same time resisting the forces of a military rebellion. War and civil war is always a tragedy, but in this case it was a tragedy of heroic proportions.

Following the death of Franco and the return to parliamentary democracy in Spain, anarcho-syndicalism returned to play a small but significant, though greatly reduced, role in the Spanish labour movement. Spain's third largest union currently is the CGT (General Confederation of Labour), formed from a split with the CNT in 1979, with a reported membership of 80,000.

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