

A Bottom-Up History, Not a Comfortable Reinforcement

Agustín Guillamón is a dedicated anarcho-syndicalist activist whose partisanship has not affected his critical sensitivities nor prevented him from graphically outlining what he regards as the errors and inconsistencies of the Spanish libertarian left. His narrative relies extensively on the records of meetings, documents, and manifestos of the various factions and committees of the National Confederation of Labor (Confederación Nacional del Trabajo or CNT) and the Iberian Anarchist Federation (Federación Anarquista Ibérica or FAI), most especially those of the rank-and-file militants. This is a history from the “bottom up” not usually found in studies of the Spanish Revolution and Civil War.

Guillamón’s book, as the editors of the Kate Sharpley Library note by way of introduction, “makes us reassess and debate what we thought we knew” (12). And it is “not an easy read for those of us looking for a comfortable reinforcement of the purity of our anarchist ideal” (10). The libertarian left in Spain, the CNT and FAI, were neither naïve nor unsophisticated, nor for that matter “filled with saintly militants driven by the purity, righteousness, and moral correctness of their mission.” They were organizations shaped by their members’ “experience of strikes, insurrections, imprisonment, exile, cultural activities, and lives led in the working class barrios and villages of Spain” (6-7). The anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists and their organizations formed an organic part of the working-class community, involved in each and every aspect of working-class life, social and cultural. And for all that it was a remarkably complex movement, containing various currents and tendencies that were frequently in conflict—both between and within the two organizations. They could almost be considered as separate

entities. For although membership in the two groups often overlapped, the FAI never could claim more than several thousand militants, while by 1936 the CNT numbered its members in the hundreds of thousands. The CNT sought to organize the entire working class of Catalonia and of Spain on the basis of need and physical survival. The FAI was a voluntary association of ideologues.

From its founding in 1910, and throughout the early years of the twentieth century, the CNT was characterized by internal factionalism that only intensified with the outbreak of the revolution and civil war in 1936. From the outset there were those who sought some means of collaboration or coexistence with the state and with other political and social movements, a policy often followed by labor organizations elsewhere in Western Europe. On the other side were the revolutionary elements for whom armed class struggle was both unavoidable and desirable—a position Guillamón unequivocally defends—but who were soon to be labeled “incontrolados” (the uncontrolled) by the government collaborators and Stalinists.

The CNT defense committees were formed in reaction to the ferocious repression visited upon the union in the 1920s as it attempted to organize in the workshops and factories of Barcelona and the province of Catalonia in the most difficult and dangerous of conditions. It was the era of pistolero (literally, the use of pistols): Under both the monarchy and the dictatorship of General Primo de Rivera, attacks on the CNT went far beyond the routine blacklisting of militants, lockouts, and the use of scab labor. The Civil Guard, the employers, and Catalonian vigilante groups did not hesitate to employ officially sanctioned terrorism against strikers, union members, and the working class in general and followed an unrestrained policy of physical assault, imprisonment without trial, and assassination. This general policy of repression did not essentially change with the proclamation of a Spanish Republic in 1931, much to the disillusionment of many in the

CNT who had actually taken the Republican promise of popular power and rule of law at face value.

From the outset, CNT union militants were forced to arm themselves, form self-defense teams, and retaliate shot for shot against the agents of the state and the employers. Under conditions of mass unemployment and widespread impoverishment, some groups began to engage in expropriations, bank holdups, and raids on payroll offices to sustain themselves, their neighbors, and the union itself. In the author's words, "the distinction between legality and illegality was meaningless in a wretched and forlorn world of rampant exploitation, where it was a struggle simply to eke out a bare existence" (33).

Funded by and subject to the CNT, the defense groups provided the union with its own militia force. Generally, each defense group consisted of some six dedicated militants, each charged with specific tasks. These included liaison with other cadres, gathering intelligence on government forces and the employers' pistoleros, drawing up plans of urban structures, reconnaissance of strategic areas for purposes of street fighting, surveillance of public services, and the provision of weapons and resources.

By the early thirties, under the pressure of constant attack, the defense committees took the offensive and engaged in a series of mini-insurrections—preparations for what they considered to be the inevitable social revolution. But Guillamón considers these latter actions to have been merely examples of "a childish policy of revolutionary gymnastics," that left the organization severely weakened, and a course of action that was finally superseded by more realistic plans that emphasized intensified training, organizational coherence, and the stockpiling of resources (24). By the outbreak of the revolution and civil war in 1936, the CNT defense committees could mobilize some 20,000 armed militants. And it was the defense committees that met head on and defeated the military uprising in Barcelona. Guillamón

describes this battle between the pro-Franco forces and the anarcho-syndicalists in some detail.

In the wake of the fascist defeat in July of 1936, the CNT armed cadres held effective power in Catalonia. Now the CNT was forced to make an immediate choice: cooperation with the Republican government in Madrid and the provincial authorities in Barcelona—the better to concentrate on the military defeat of General Franco's army that had succeeded in taking over half the country—or the immediate launch of the social revolution and the implementation of libertarian communism? Or was the one somehow dependent upon the other?

On the one hand, some demanded the assumption of power by a Committee of Militias, but that would have constituted a dictatorship under another name and a complete betrayal of libertarian ideals. Besides, the anarchists were not strong enough to initiate libertarian communism in the rest of Spain. Even in Catalonia the collectivizations that the CNT was able to immediately effect in industry and agriculture were opposed by some peasant farmers, small business owners, and more conservative Republicans. And would the central government in Madrid, not to mention the governments of Britain and France, tolerate such a radical social upheaval in the midst of a civil war?

On the other hand, although the provincial government of Catalonia could rechristen itself a council and be granted a certain measure of autonomy by the federal republic, it still remained, and retained the powers of, a traditional state, representing a coalition of different classes, political parties, and groups with opposing interests, ranging from the radical to the reformist to the socially reactionary. This was true whether the CNT entered into collaboration with it or not. Such had been the bane of revolutionaries since the days of the Paris Commune—an existing governmental structure always ready at the first opportunity to ally with conservative or reactionary forces against popular control and popular power.

This choice broke the ranks of the "pure" anarchists of the FAI as much as the CNT. Collaboration meant that the CNT was absorbed into the machinery of the state, merely one of several parties and unions represented in the Popular Front political alliance, despite the CNT's membership of over half a million. And the CNT could not enter the government and still maintain its own independent defense committees, its own armed militia.

Guillamón makes frequent reference to the "higher committees" of the CNT, whom he charges sought collaboration with the Catalanian and the Republican state from the beginning. "In July 1936, the defense committees ... were potential organs of the power of the working class. They could have become everything had the revolutionary situation of July 19 spread and deepened" (133-134). Instead, the confederation engaged in a "succession of retreats and an undermining of their revolutionary gains" that included the reduction and eventual disarmament of the defense committees (132).

The ebbing of the revolutionary tide paralleled the simultaneous growth in power and influence of the reactionary Communist Party, the conduit through which a dependent Spanish Republic received arms and resources from the Soviet Union. Stalin's foreign policy aim was to forge an alliance between Russia and the Western powers against Hitler and Mussolini. A social revolution in Spain would undermine this effort, panic the ruling circles in Britain and France, and turn them in the opposite direction.

The anarcho-syndicalist *incontrolados*, now calling themselves the Friends of Durrutti, aligned with the radical socialists of the Workers Party of Marxist Unification (Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista) in attempting to resist the Stalinist-led counter-revolution. But it was too late. The events of May 1937 in Barcelona saw the final suppression of the revolutionary militants and the opening of a campaign of imprisonment, torture, and murder directed against them. It

was, Guillamón insists, “the Republic rather than Franco’s dictatorship that defeated the Revolution” (190).

“Throughout history,” Guillamón instructs the reader, “revolutionary movements have never been unblemished and flawless; they have been motley and contradictory, naïve and forward-thinking, irksome and blinkered, surprising and far-sighted, all at the same time” (246). The mass movement of anarcho-syndicalism in Spain proved to be no exception.