

# **These days in history:**

**19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> July 1936.**

**“The people armed, power lies in the streets.”**



*“Look what we did to the army!”*

**An examination of the events leading to the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War and the two days of street fighting that, having defeated the fascist coup in Barcelona and Madrid, launched a year of social revolution.**

**Radical workers' bloc at Tolpuddle 2014 festival special edition.**

**Taken from ‘The Authority of the Boot-maker’ by Mal Content.**

## **Author's note:**

The attempted military coup in Spain and resulting Civil War are significant for two reasons: the selfless solidarity it engendered in the international working class, and the spontaneous social revolution that took place in those regions where the coup failed. It's also instructive with regard to the pitfalls of trying to oppose fascism within the parameters of the bourgeois state. The other great thing about it, is whatever your perspective: anarchist, Trotskyist, liberal, Stalinist or fascist, you can find an account of it that will support your own conclusions!

The extent to which fascism intersects with bourgeois society is complex and ambivalent, but the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century reveals that fascism would never have got off the ground without the collusion of the political establishment and it would not have survived any period of its history without the protection of the state; remember, everything the state does is to discourage us from acting as a class.

“No government in the world fights fascism to destruction. When the bourgeoisie sees power slipping through its hands, the bourgeois raise up fascism to maintain their privilege.”

- Buenaventura Durruti to Pierre Van Paassen, 24<sup>th</sup> July 1936.

This pamphlet consists of excerpts from the chapter 'Fascism and antifascism' from the forthcoming book: 'The Authority of the Boot-maker, or, Why I am an Anarchist' by Mal Content, a highly personal take-it-or-leave-it view of history and social theory. Multiple sources were used for the events described, which is why the place names etc. are a dreadful mixture of English, Spanish and Catalan.

## **Further study:**

**Libcom's Spanish civil war 1936-39 - reading guide can be found here:**

**<https://libcom.org/library/spanish-civil-war-1936-39-reading-guide>**

**Hopefully the final volume will have a comprehensive bibliography.**

## **About the author:**

Mal Content has got a job and doesn't need a wash or a haircut, thanks, but the world does owe him a living.

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## **Introduction:**

**In February 1936 the broad-left Popular Front had narrowly defeated a right-wing National Bloc comprising monarchists, the Catholic Church, and the fascist Falange party. The election was an irrelevance as Spain had for decades been sliding inexorably into all-out class war. The right never had any intention of accepting the result and many of the people who voted for it didn't believe in government at all.**

**“Between the election in February and the fascist revolt in July there were 113 general strikes, 228 partial general strikes, 145 bomb explosions, 269 deaths, 1287 wounded, 215 assaults and 160 churches burned. ... On June 13th, 30,000 Asturian miners struck; on June 19th 90,000 miners throughout the country were on strike. Every city of importance had at least one general strike. Over one million were out in the first days of July.”**

**- Eddie Conlon: ‘The Spanish Civil War: Anarchism in Action.’**

**The anarchosyndicalist National Confederation of Labour (C.N.T.) and its sister organisation the Iberian Anarchist Federation (F.A.I.) having been in open revolt against the republic, and the monarchy before it, called on rank and file socialists and union members to join them in a revolutionary alliance against the imminent fascist coup. The country was bitterly divided between the workers and peasants on the one hand, and the church, army, landlords and industrialists on the other. Their interests' lay in diametrically opposite directions, as Durruti put it:**

**"There are only two roads, victory for the working class, freedom, or victory for the fascists which means tyranny. Both combatants know what's in store for the loser. We are ready to end fascism once and for all, even in spite of the Republican government."**

**- Buenaventura Durruti, quoted in the Toronto Star: ‘Two Million Anarchists Fight for the Revolution.’ 24<sup>th</sup> July 1936.**

**On the 20<sup>th</sup> July, three days into the rebellion, the socialists/republicans realised they had nothing left to lose and the third Popular Front government in as many days recognised the workers' militias as a fait accompli; a little background is in order.**

**The Spanish workers' organisations** had followed a very different path to those in Britain and Germany. From the 1840s onwards they were influenced by the libertarian ideas of Proudhon, and later Bakunin. The Spanish Regional Federation (F.R.E.) advocated social revolution, federalism and extra-parliamentary (direct action) methods, affiliating to the International Working Men's Association until the split, in which it naturally took the anarchist side. With 300,000 members the F.R.E. participated in the short-lived First Republic and set up an anarchist commune at Cartagena. After the restoration the movement went underground but conducted a vigorous resistance, a small statist party, the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (P.S.O.E.) also emerged and founded the General Workers Union (U.G.T.).

**The colonial war in Morocco** was a serious bone of contention, ill-equipped and poorly trained conscripts suffered heavy losses against the superior Berber troops, leading to an uprising in Catalonia in 1909. Following the execution of prominent anarchists, including the education pioneer Francisco Ferrer, the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo was established with almost half its members being Catalan. At its 1919 congress it formally declared its commitment to anarchist/libertarian communism. The socialists and anarchists often worked together but the C.N.T. was wary of Moscow and retained its libertarian character. After a delegation visited the U.S.S.R. and met with Russian anarchists, it revoked its provisional membership of the Comintern and instead affiliated to the anarchosyndicalist International Workers Association, building its membership to over a million.

Throughout its history the Confederation was repeatedly banned or suppressed; there were waves of strikes, sabotage, lockouts and arrests, alongside tit-for-tat assassinations of militants, bosses and government officials. In response to the insurrectionary general strike of 1917 the government installed army officers in the regional administrations, and enacted the 'ley de fuga' or 'law of flight' which allowed police to shoot suspects while escaping custody. Being easy enough to fake this opened the way for extra-judicial executions. The church and the employers' associations funded 'Sindicatos Libres' - scab unions which hired gangsters, 'pistoleros' to shoot confederals, necessitating the formation of armed defence committees. This urban guerrilla wing, self-funded by armed robbery, existed uneasily alongside the pure syndicalists, who preferred to operate within the system towards economic issues, believing that the time was not right for revolution.

**The class collaborationists** lost the argument with the murder in broad daylight of one of their own, the moderate and legally-minded Salvador Seguí. The Libres were targeting syndicalists as the most immediate threat; meanwhile the more combative elements in the union were resolved to punish the pistoleros and their sponsors. The prominent gangsters Juan Languia and Joan Serra were assassinated along with former Police chief (and German agent) Bravo Portillo, the Prime Minister Eduardo Dato, the president of the Owners' Federation Félix Graupera, the former governors of Barcelona and Bilbao and the Cardinal Archbishops of Toledo and Zaragoza.

“Several other anarchist groups decided to launch an attack on the Hunters' Circle, a pistolero refuge and meeting place of the most vicious employers. The raid had a devastating psychological effect. They never imagined that more than fifteen people would audaciously burst into their lounge and fire at them at

point-blank range, but that is exactly what happened. The bourgeoisie asked for police protection and many pistoleros fled Barcelona.

There was tremendous confusion in the city. The poor supported the radical workers and greeted police invasions of their neighbourhoods with gunfire. It was a bitter war, and Durruti and his friends were destined to live out one of the most dangerous and dramatic chapters of their lives. Years later a witness observed that "it had no precedent other than the period experienced by Russian revolutionaries between 1906 and 1913. These youths disregarded the adults' prudent recommendations and became judges and avengers in Spain's four corners. They were frequently persecuted by the state and had no support other than their own convictions and revolutionary faith."

- Abel Paz: 'Durruti in the Spanish Revolution'.

The central government pulled the plug on Catalan state terrorism, for a little while, but the violence had taken its toll on the C.N.T.'s membership and resources. However, it was these insurrectionist affinity groups and defence committees who would go on to rally the people into one of the most significant conflicts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The disastrous conduct of the Moroccan war de-stabilised the constitutional monarchy, which had to be rescued in 1923 by the bloodless coup of General Primo de Rivera, ending one general strike and provoking another. Although the dictator took office with no discernible ideology beyond preservation of the status quo – monarchy, property and church, both he and King Alfonso visited Rome within two months of the coup.

“It has not been necessary to imitate the fascists or the great figure of Mussolini, though their deeds have been a useful example for everyone.”

- Miguel Primo de Rivera, quoted in 'The Franco Regime 1936-1975' By Stanley G. Payne.

His sentiments were in step with most of Europe's ruling classes at the time, his son José would go on to found the explicitly fascist Falange party during the second republic. In 1926 the labour minister, having made a study of Italian corporatism, began dividing Spain's economy into twenty-seven economic corporations on the fascist model, with compulsory state-supervised arbitration between capital and labour - a sham as the most popular union had been driven underground. The bourgeoisie had exploited Spain's neutrality to generate large profits from WW1, and the relative prosperity of the 1920's allowed for economic growth and modernisation of the infrastructure, but overall wages declined and the conditions of the rural poor became ever more wretched.

The military dictatorship ended co-operation between the C.N.T. and U.G.T., the former maintaining an armed struggle with many of its members imprisoned or exiled. The need arose to co-ordinate the activities of anarchist affinity groups across the Iberian Peninsula, in order to balance day-to-day battle for material improvements with the maintenance and promotion of anarchist principles. Discussions initiated by Portuguese anarchists with Spaniards in exile led in 1927 to the inaugural congress of the Federación Anarquista Ibérica

(F.A.I.); its task, as well as co-ordinating resistance to the dictatorship and the bosses, was to keep the union revolutionary in both theory and practice, within a decade, the former would displace the latter.

**Towards the end of the decade** the rebellion broke into the open again and Rivera was replaced, a year later the government resigned and elections were called, the monarchy being tainted by its support for the dictatorship was heavily defeated by a very broad Socialist–Republican Coalition. As the king fled the country, the Second Republic was declared on the 14<sup>th</sup> April 1931, it was doomed from the start. The Depression badly hit both agriculture and industry, the value of exports fell, wages were cut still further, prices and unemployment rose and land fell into disuse while the people starved; the money economy was not working for most Spaniards and libertarian communism offered the only practical solution. As in the rest of Europe, the ruling class looked to fascism. Some commentators have pointed to the uniquely clerical character of the Spanish far right as somehow setting it apart from mainstream fascism, but fascism never needed a coherent ideology, insofar as it is reactionary ultra-nationalism, it will necessarily exploit regional obsessions, from the weird folk paganism of the Nazis to Hirohito’s ‘Era of enlightened peace’, they make it up as they go along.

**The socialists** hoped to increase their influence amongst the working class by improving their lot, but all the power in the land was held by forces opposed to any reform. The Carlists just wanted a different king. The Catholic Church was state-subsidised, controlled a third of Spain’s wealth, and had an effective monopoly on education; it also presided over the subjugation of women, a terrific subsidy to the bourgeoisie. Agricultural land was in huge estates, held by the monarchist aristocracy, the same class that dominated the army\*. Landlords were able to fix wages, prices and rents within their domains and could hire and fire at will. Between these poles were the extremists of the centre who hoped liberal democracy would lead to a modern capitalist market economy. The industrial Basque and Catalan bourgeoisie wanted independence to free themselves from the old feudal relations. The survival of the republic depended on the collaboration of all these conflicting interests none of whom could budge an inch without upsetting the applecart. Neither could it survive without the acquiescence of the working class, in whom it had raised expectations the state would never be able to deliver

\* Ten per cent of the army were officers, like the church it provided employment for the useless offspring of the rich.

The U.G.T. having accepted the invitation of the dictatorship to participate in the government arbitration scheme, there were those within the Confederation who wanted legal recognition to compete with it. The C.N.T. was first and foremost a labour union whose membership on occasions reached two million. Its militancy and direct action methods got results, and since the situation of the workers was desperate, it was bound to attract people who just wanted to eat; so from time to time reformist tendencies crept in which could be satisfied by some semblance of democracy. The Marxists, republicans, separatists and all those who feared the power of the working class courted these people, deluding them that they had any influence, but ultimately gave them no respect since they had voluntarily tied their own hands.

The honeymoon didn't last long; the instability in the new republic was highlighted when a group of right-wing civil guards opened fire on the May Day rally in Barcelona, in the gunfight that ensued, some infantrymen sided with the workers. A split likewise opened within the confederation, as the 'legalisers' resorted to airing the union's internal disputes in the bourgeois press, who delighted in publishing their attack on the F.A.I. The 'thirty' had to be expelled and set up opposition unions and a political party.\* The Socialist Workers' Party dominated the government although its union had fewer members and having collaborated with the dictatorship had become simply a bureaucratic, reformist, scab union. It received preferential treatment as a tool of the government. Anti-union laws were enacted and a new paramilitary police force the Guardia de Asalto, 'assault guards' created to be used against strikers.

\*The Syndicalist Party participated in the popular front of 1936 and the opposition unions were re-admitted just prior to the coup.

**For the CNT-FAI** it was business as usual as it went into action against another round of state repression, the workers were growing in confidence and strikes led to land occupations and armed insurrections, there were several declarations of libertarian communism, and mines were occupied in Catalonia. The usual suspects were deported to the Spanish colonies without trial, although these actions were rarely initiated by union officials or even the F.A.I. but by the rank and file, as the bureaucracy struggled to keep pace with the militancy of its membership. The revolution gathered momentum throughout 1932; an attempted coup by fascist General Sanjurjo was defeated by the prompt action of the C.N.T. defence committees, effectively saving the Republic, which showed its gratitude by driving the union underground again. In January 1933 insurrections in Catalonia, Andalusia and Levante ended with the massacre by Assault Guards of unarmed peasants at Casas Viejas, who were burned to death in their hovels, further hardening attitudes to the Republic. The F.A.I. claimed responsibility for the uprising as a political gesture although it had in fact been planned by the confederal defence committees. It invariably got the blame anyway for any militant activity from the socialists and gradualist elements in the union.

**The little Spanish Communist Party** (P.C.E.) of a thousand members stuck steadfastly to the Comintern's 'class against class' line - social democracy equals social fascism. The republican government was "not to be defended or supported under any circumstances". The position changed over the course of 1933 after Hitler's accession brought about the annihilation of the German labour movement. Henceforth Stalin courted the liberal democracies of the west, diplomatic recognition by the U.S.A. followed assurances that communist subversion in that country would cease. Germany's pact with Russia's old enemy Poland, made an alliance with France imperative, so the French Communist Party began to make overtures to the very reformist Socialist Party, leading to the first popular front.

**In September** an election boycotted by over a million C.N.T. members returned a right-wing coalition and the anarchists responded with a new offensive, briefly capturing several cities. The confederation sought an alliance with the General Workers union, but without the influence of the Socialist Workers' Party, since it had no interest in installing another authoritarian government. This only happened in Asturias, where the rank and file made a pact in defiance of their respective leaders. The socialists now found themselves persecuted

using the very legislation they had devised to thwart the anarchists. The following year they attempted a coup together with bourgeois Basque and Catalan separatist elements. Cynically however, they knew the confederals would not scab on their general strike. The Catalan administration, the Generalitat, which had been given a degree of autonomy in 1932, continued to repress CNT-FAI, so its declaration of independence was a flash in the pan. To the socialists' astonishment, in Asturias they lost control of the revolt to the workers, who declared libertarian communism, running the munitions factories day and night to arm their militias. After two weeks of fierce fighting the province was re-captured by General Franco's African legion, which massacred 3000 people. The mining districts were the last to fall, at the end there were 30,000 political prisoners.

The national committee of defence committees, in a presentation to the October 1934 congress noted that the tactic of spontaneous, improvised insurrection, often called 'revolutionary gymnastics' had run into a law of diminishing returns and recognised the need to prepare for a protracted civil war against the modern military-industrial state. The requirement for 'propaganda by the deed' to precipitate a revolutionary situation had passed, since the conflict was now inevitable and the anarchists were going to bear the brunt of it. The left politicians, even from their prison cells, still harboured dreams of defeating the right through constitutional means with a broad electoral coalition, as if the lessons of Italy and Germany were still to be learned.

The decision was taken to formalise the structure of the defence committees to fulfil their role as the clandestine military apparatus of the union. The C.N.T. was organised as a confederation of trade rather than industrial unions so the defence committees would be embedded in, and funded by these unions, but answer to the national committee. A district committee would be made up of little cells, each with half a dozen members of the same trade union, well known to one another, who would each take on a specific area of intelligence-gathering, planning and co-ordination. They would collectively amass the detailed local knowledge necessary to conduct a guerrilla campaign in their neighbourhood, identifying potential threats, targets, vantage points, supply routes, arms caches, storage depots and so on. Those unions responsible for infrastructure, especially transport, communications and power, would co-ordinate on a national level to enable them to quickly take control of their respective functions. Plans would be laid for rapidly transforming manufacturing industry into war production. A special department was dedicated to infiltrating the military.

**On the 4<sup>th</sup> of October 1935** Mussolini sent his armed forces into Ethiopia and fired the opening shots in the conflict that would shortly tear up three continents. He also had his eye on the strategic Balearic Islands while Hitler coveted the ores and mineral deposits in the Iberian Peninsula and Western Sahara. Spain and Portugal had long ago lost their political and economic independence and were no longer counted amongst the great European powers; a circle of vultures looked down, waiting to deploy their natural resources in the next imperialist turf war. Events in Spain were about to have a transformative effect on the antifascist movement and European history.

**A month before the 1936 elections** the P.S.O.E. joined with the Communist Party in the Popular Front, promising an amnesty and land reform. Throwing in their lot with them were

some liberal bourgeois republican parties and the Workers Party of Marxist Unification (P.O.U.M.) a newly-formed group of independent anti-Stalinist communists. This time, pragmatically the confederation didn't bother organising a boycott, they knew they would be fighting fascists before the year was over and it would be harder to get support if the enemy could claim any democratic legitimacy, plus they needed those prisoners out.

The incoming Popular Front government restricted its amnesty to purely political prisoners, excluding those anarchists who had committed common law offences during the insurrection. It banned the Falange and demoted Generals Franco and Mola who then met in March to plan the coup; they chose as their figurehead General Sanjurjo, whose 1932 takeover had been foiled by the working class. The bourgeoisie were out of control, ignoring the new land reform legislation and refusing to re-employ sacked militants. The people took matters into their own hands by opening the provincial prisons and occupying unused land.

**July opened with a wave of terrorism** from the Falange, notably the occupation of Radio Valencia on the 11<sup>th</sup> and the assassination of Assault Guard Lieutenant José Castillo the following day. The socialists retaliated immediately by killing the Leader of the Opposition Calvo Sotelo. The government had patently lost its grip; rebellious army units took orders only from General Mola whilst those loyal to the Republic looked to the workers' organisations for a lead. On the 13<sup>th</sup> July CNT-FAI obtained the army's final plans from its agents in the military, and on the 14<sup>th</sup> the government closed the union locals by decree. On the 15<sup>th</sup> the funerals of both Castillo and Sotelo took place in Madrid in an atmosphere of great tension.

**In Barcelona** there were some twenty thousand militants organised in over two hundred C.N.T. district committees, plus anarchist affinity groups of the F.A.I., Mujeres Libres (Free Women) and Libertarian Youth. There was a desperate shortage of weapons, some had been captured during the previous uprising but there were not enough to go round. A liaison committee had been mandated to negotiate with the Generalitat. On the 16<sup>th</sup> of July their regional assembly resolved to call for a united revolutionary front with the other unions and proletarian parties; they would request arms from the state, but make plans to seize what they needed as soon as the army rose. The chemical workers' union began to manufacture explosives. Over the next three days the Popular Front government in Madrid frantically tried to placate the military, offering General Mola a ministerial post, arresting armed anarchist patrols and censoring the C.N.T.'s call to action, which had to be distributed by hand. Two Prime Ministers resigned in rapid succession rather than arm the workers, who by now were sleeping in the union halls, ready to go.

Each committee would be responsible for the defence of its own area, and collectively the unions would seize the infrastructure. The subway and drainage workers would manage the movement of personnel and equipment beneath the city. The army was mainly stationed at the outskirts, so they would have to meet up in the centre to take the government buildings, the telephone exchange, the radio transmitter and carve out a route to the port. The plan was to halt each regiment's advance just far enough away from its base to isolate and overwhelm it. The regional defence committee comprising the Los Nosotros affinity group, whose names were already well known throughout Spain and elsewhere: Ascaso, Durruti, Fernández, Ibáñez, Jover, Oliver, Ortiz, Ruiz, Sanz; was housed in the construction union offices. They

fitted out two lorries as mobile headquarters. They were in close contact with Sergeants Gordo and Manzana at the Atarazanas barracks, plus some comrades at the El Prat airfield, who arranged reconnaissance flights by Nosotros members. The aviators' first task would be to bomb the Sant Andreu Central Artillery Barracks so the confederals could get their hands on its arsenal.

**On the 17<sup>th</sup>**, the army mutinied in North Africa and quickly gained the upper hand; the Madrid government insisted it had the matter under control. The same day in Barcelona the C.N.T. maritime transport workers' union boarded two vessels anchored in the port, and liberated a few hundred rifles and pistols. Some three hundred lever-action Winchester '73s were in the hands of the municipal workers having been dropped into drains by fleeing separatists two years earlier. An old Hotchkiss machine gun, stolen piecemeal from the Atarazanas barracks, was mounted on one of the lorries.

Delegates approached the Catalan interior minister; if he would equip at least a thousand of the most experienced guerrillas the confederation could guarantee the defeat of the coup. He knew only too well whom he was being asked to arm; Barcelona's anarchists, feared, reviled and persecuted, thrown into jail on the slightest pretext, condemned to the most menial jobs and the worst housing, offered their lives to hold hell at bay. But once they had slain the monster before which their masters cowered, who would hold back the social revolution? The choice had been spelt out often enough: fascism or libertarian communism. The minister insisted he had nothing to spare; the defence of Barcelona was to be left to the socialists' Assault Guards, the more conservative Civil Guards, and the Generalitat's security police.

**On the 18<sup>th</sup>**, when the military rebellion had spread to the Canaries and Seville, the C.N.T. and U.G.T jointly announced their revolutionary general strike. Firearms were retrieved from under floorboards, home-made grenades were assembled; gunsmiths were raided, and some youths relieved the night watchmen of their pistols. In Madrid the Defence Committee organised five-man patrols with pistols and grenades, and hijacked an army truck. The unions began to requisition vehicles and paint them with their initials.

The liaison committee went to Barcelona's central police station to demand arms, as did Julián Gorkin of the P.O.U.M. Around midnight they returned to the Interior Ministry; at their instigation an angry crowd of dock workers from nearby Barceloneta was pouring into the square, facing three companies of assault guards. At the last moment an official acting on his own initiative diverted a hundred pistols from the building to the F.A.I. delegate Abad De Santillan, who brought them to the construction union. Confined in their barracks, the soldiers were told that anarchists had risen against the Republic; this would lead to confused fraternisation with the assault guards, who initially took them for loyalists. It would also cause many to turn their fire on their officers when the lie was discovered. A thousand Falangists entered the barracks and put on uniforms, armed priests took up positions in the church towers, ready to fire on the working class.

**Before dawn on the 19<sup>th</sup>**, Barcelona's factory sirens alerted the workers that troops were leaving the Pedralbes barracks and the barricades went up. The crowd surrounding the government offices fell quiet; an assault guard carrying a rifle took his pistol from his belt and handed it to a stranger, others followed suit. At street level, the political rivalries

between anarchists, socialists and Catalanists were being set aside. Betrayed by their institutions and abandoned by their government, the people at once realised they had nowhere to place their faith but in themselves and each other. The Air Force would fight for the republic although some officers deserted at dawn with their aircraft. The Navy having been alerted to the mutiny by the N.C.O. Benjamin Balboa, the sailors convened workers' councils aboard ship, and overnight around three quarters of the aristocratic officer class, being fascist sympathisers, were shot.

Flying the red and black flag, the defence committee's two mobile command posts set off from the Jupiter football field in Poble Nou with Antonio Ortiz and Ricardo Sanz on the machine gun behind the cab of the first vehicle. The confederals fell in behind as it passed, singing their revolutionary anthems, all their lives had prepared them for this moment. Watched by the chief of police from his balcony they made their way to Las Ramblas, home of the transport and metalworkers unions, a vital conduit between the outlying barracks and Atarazanas, the military offices and the docks. The soldiers were allowed to approach as far as the city centre where they were met by sniper fire from the rooftops and the proverbial bomb-throwing anarchists.

Valeriano Gordo and José Manzana\* tried unsuccessfully to take over the Atarazanas barracks; instead they opened a side door, passing out machine-guns, rifles and hand-grenades, exchanging fire with the defenders as they made their escape, then set up a gun emplacement at the nearby Plaza Del Teatro, where one of the command trucks was parked.

\*Most sources agree on this, however Agustín Guillamón has it that José Manzana was already under arrest on the 19<sup>th</sup> and that Sgt. Martín Terrer accompanied Gordo in this action.

At the Plaza de Cataluña the infantry were driven into the hotel Colón and the lower floors of the telephone exchange, which they sand-bagged and defended with machine guns. The largely female telephonists' union barricaded themselves upstairs to prevent the equipment from falling into the hands of the enemy, and listen in on their calls. The committee that had occupied the main post office on Saturday night intercepted fascist telegrams routed through a French contact, and altered the content to create extra confusion. The infantry company that attempted to reach the radio station on Casp Street was massacred apart from a few who took refuge in the Ritz.

**The army had its only success** on the Via Parallel, which linked the Plaza de España with Atarazanas and the docks. A squadron of the Montesa Cavalry entered the Plaza shouting "long live the republic", which as elsewhere, had the intended effect. The assault guards initially joined them and in the confusion that followed they were able to take prisoners including women and children. The Sappers' Regiment entered the Plaza from a different direction and attempted to pass the barricade blocking the road. Two cannon were deployed against workers armed with pistols and shotguns, leaving body parts hanging in the trees and trolley cables. The sappers made it through to the docks and routed a company of assault guards; thus they were able to reinforce the barracks and set up machine guns at the Columbus monument. The woodworkers union, housed on a side street hastily assembled a huge barricade where it joined the Parallel at Brecha de San Pablo. Here the Cavalry,

shielding themselves with their hostages, swept the street with machine gun fire and drove the workers back, to occupy both the local and the barricade. Their position was purely defensive however, as the surrounding streets were controlled by the working class, they were going nowhere; the battle here lasted six hours. A further squadron of cavalry accompanied by a group of Falangists occupied the university building where it eventually succumbed to the P.O.U.M.

The first four trucks which set out from Sant Andreu Artillery Park were ambushed and ransacked. Now the Seventh Light Artillery taking the same route ran into a company of assault guards on Diputació Street; they set up their battery protected by a row of machine guns and held out for a couple of hours, resisting the best efforts of a gathering crowd to dislodge them, the machine guns creating heavy casualties. This tragic impasse was broken when a C.N.T. squad loaded up with grenades and clambered aboard the flatbeds of three trucks, which were then driven flat out into the machine guns. The longshoreman Manuel 'El Artillero' Lecha hauled his captured cannon to the Plaza de Catalunya, then around Barcelona's hot spots throughout the day and night of the 19<sup>th</sup>.

The Mountain Artillery Regiment, whose barracks were at the docks, advancing on Icaria Avenue towards Barceloneta found itself impeded by five hundred tons of spooled paper that had been unloaded in half an hour with electric forklifts from one of the ships. Nearby some assault guards were handing out rifles to anyone who could produce a union card. The battery was bombarded with mortar fire from the roof of the government building then forced back up the road as the dockers rolled the spools forward whilst their comrades fired from behind and lobbed grenades over the top. Relieved of their officers and artillery they retired to barracks and a barricade was erected to keep them there until they were ready to quit. Simultaneously at the woodworkers' barricade reinforcements had arrived and a counter-attack was underway; the army was caught in a pincer movement organised by Francisco Ascaso and Garcia Oliver. After Ascaso shot their commanding officer another stepped up only to be brought down by a cavalry corporal.

'While Francisco Ascaso was jumping for joy and waving his rifle over his head, García Oliver was shouting over and over, "Look what we did to the army!"'

- Agustín Guillamón: 'Barricades in Barcelona: The CNT from the victory of July 1936 to the necessary defeat of May 1937'.

**In the afternoon**, the fascist general Manuel Godea flew in by seaplane from Majorca to find his forces divided and surrounded. Ignoring his assistant's advice to turn back he landed at the naval base which was still in fascist hands, and was driven by armoured car to the army headquarters. Through all this the Civil Guard had remained in their barracks, they were technically under the Catalan Interior Ministry and their commander, General Aranguren had declared for the republic, but their loyalties were uncertain. Now they were sent to Plaza de Catalunya, teeming with armed workers who regarded them with the utmost suspicion. They joined the assault on the Hotel Colón with a group of P.O.U.M militia led by José Rovira and artillery support from Manuel Lecha; after thirty minutes and heavy casualties, white flags appeared and the P.O.U.M occupied the space. At the same time a

large crowd headed by Buenaventura Durruti and the Mexican anarchist Enrique Obregón (who died in the attack), invaded the telephone exchange. Lecha turned his cannon on the Ritz and its occupants surrendered to the assault guards.

Goded sent reinforcements to the Icaria barracks, where they were hammered by the Dockers' captured artillery; his last hope was General Aranguren, who was having none of it. Goded was given half an hour to surrender then his headquarters were shelled from all sides, Lecha was there. Taken into custody for his own safety he was persuaded to broadcast a statement over the radio freeing his command from their commitments, to avoid further bloodshed. Leaflets dropped from the air explained that the uprising had been started by the generals, and the presence of the conservative Civil Guards amongst the workers confirmed this, so those troops still besieged by the masses began to turn on their officers and open the doors. The mechanics at the naval base did likewise. Rebels hiding in the Carmelite monastery agreed to hand themselves over to the Civil Guard in the morning. Groups of F.A.I. activists occupied the Bruc barracks at Pedralbes and renamed it the Bakunin, the first war committee was formed here.

**As each barracks fell, more workers were armed;** Sant Andreu surrendered around midnight yielding 30,000 rifles. The civil guard, who were still walking the line between republic and revolution, had been sent to guard them for the Generalitat, but balked at firing on the crowd. Power now lay in the street; the district committees came into their own, organising communications, food and supplies to the fighters. Assault guards and loyalist troops removed their uniforms to blend in with the workers, and were incorporated into new revolutionary committees. General Mola's brother shot himself overnight; by morning only Atarazanas remained in the hands of the army. With the burning churches illuminating the new world in their hearts, the metalworkers' union refused any assistance from the forces of the former state. The Nosotros militants joined them to storm the fascists' last bastion in Barcelona, the action in which Francisco Ascaso lost his life.

“The attack was redoubled. Now Ascaso had found shelter on Mediodia Street behind a truck which was riddled with bullets. Wanting to eliminate a “sniper” who kept him from advancing, he leaned against the hood of the car. A bullet hit him full in the face and he was killed instantly. Durruti was overcome by the death of his comrade. Already when Obregon was killed during the attack on the Central Telephone Exchange, Durruti's anger had burst out and had pushed him forward to the very doors of the exchange. Now his fury was unleashed. Without looking at anyone, he left for the barracks. The other fighters fascinated followed him. The soldiers terrified by this tidal wave surging towards them hastened to raise the white flag.”

- Abel Paz: 'Durruti, the people armed'.

**It was one p.m.** In 33 hours the coup had been defeated in the city and the workers were in control. As this news spread throughout Catalonia, demoralised mutineers abandoned their posts to the people. Ricardo Sanz carried Ascaso's body to the Transport Workers Union, just one of three thousand revolutionaries who had perished in the battle. Covered in dust and

armed to the teeth, the CNT-FAI liaison committee entered the palace of the Generalitat, to confront the regional governor, Luis Companys.

My grandad used to say: “Every dog has his day; it’s knowing when you’re having it that counts”. The liaison committee was not of the class collaborationist tendency; its members were experienced labour organisers and veterans of numerous street battles with the cops and the bosses’ pistoleros, but were about to be outmanoeuvred by the devious Companys, a union lawyer turned career politician who had just been informed by his exasperated Chief of Police that his authority extended no further than the walls of his office.

Having hitherto been prepared to abandon Catalonia to fascism rather than risk social revolution, the governor embarked on an exercise in damage limitation. He had already assembled representatives of the political parties in an adjoining room. He apologised profusely for his lack of faith in, and persecution of the CNT-FAI, congratulated them on their victory, and offered his services, either as a common foot soldier, or as governor administering the province on behalf of a coalition of antifascist militias, reminding them that his own party, the civil and assault guards had also played their part in liberating the city. With hindsight they ought to have shot him, or conceded his obsequious request to serve at the front: “Yes mush, right at the front, missing you already”. The revolt of the military, supported by the church and the aristocracy, had shattered the fragile illusion of legitimate authority, and it was not going to return by itself. Whilst the anarchists went to seek a mandate from their unions, the politicians plotted their counter-revolution.

**Companys’ offer** faced CNT-FAI with a perennial anarchist dilemma: what to do with power until such time as it can be dissolved forever. Logically, it can only be exercised, shared with others who have a different agenda or given away by default. The meeting was split between those who wanted to push for full social revolution in the hope that it would spread through the rest of Spain, and those who believed it was necessary to collaborate with the statist parties that held sway elsewhere in the country, to be sure of beating the fascists. There was a well-founded fear of foreign intervention if the state were to be abandoned altogether, there were British warships moored at Gibraltar, and much of Spain’s industry was owned by British capitalists.

Even in Catalonia, where the C.N.T. accounted for sixty percent of the working class, imposing libertarian communism by decree would create a fantastic paradox, dismissed by Federica Montseny as an ‘anarchist dictatorship’. That in fact was Companys’ ‘zero option’; leaving Catalonia in the hands of the CNT-FAI and P.O.U.M. militias without formal oversight, in the hope that they would fuck it all up, be judged harshly by the Spanish people and that European capital would eventually intervene. One alternative would have been to throw open the union membership to all, so that its directly democratic, federalist structure could be used for decision making, but it would have the input of Marxists, Stalinists, separatists and other bourgeois. The incorporation of groups with partisan axes to grind would inevitably force it into a representative role.

**Of course, the decision was no longer theirs to take**, the people were already collectivising the factories and the fields, blissfully unaware that their revolution was about to be betrayed by the very pioneers whose example had inspired them to achieve the impossible. As

anarchists they should have anticipated, that freed from the impositions of government, religion and property, the workers and peasants would spontaneously organise to take their lives into their own hands. Even the historic 20<sup>th</sup> July issue of the C.N.T.s daily paper, Solidaridad Obrera, distributed on the barricades, was published by a group of workers who just happened to pass by its empty premises and took it upon themselves to write, lay out and print the journal.

“What the CNT-FAI leadership had failed to take on board was the fact that spontaneous defensive movement of 19 July had developed a political direction of its own. On their own initiative, without any intervention by the leadership of the unions or political parties the rank and file militants of the CNT, representing the dominant force within the Barcelona working class, together with other union militants had, with the collapse of State power, superseded their individual partisan identities and had been welded - Catholics, Communists, Socialists, Republicans and Anarchists - into genuinely popular non-partisan revolutionary committees wielding physical and moral power in their respective neighbourhoods. They were the natural organisms of the revolution itself and the direct expression of popular power.

The assumption that political power in Catalonia had passed to the higher committees of the CNT-FAI was, probably, the principal blunder which was to undermine the revolutionary process. By failing to displace the 'legitimate' political element within the state the military provoked the collapse of State power. It was the people, led by the militants of the defence committees, who had stood firm against the reactionaries while the government had dithered. In doing so it lost its right to rule. The people now wielded power - in the working class quarters and at the point of product and distribution- not the State or the union leaders who had now outlived their usefulness to the revolutionary process. A dual power situation existed - diffused popular power against centralised political and union power.”

- Stuart Christie: We, the Anarchists! A Study of the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI), 1927-1937

Shamefully, the question was never put to the rank and file, but decided in haste by the delegates to the Plenum of the Catalan Regional Confederation, exceeding their mandates in defiance of federalism. After fierce argument, the meeting voted to participate in a 'committee of antifascist militias', but crucially allowing the Generalitat, which presently existed in name only, to survive with its support, on condition that executive power was vested in the committee.

**The strategy, outlined by De Santillan,** was of 'democratic collaboration', to deceive the rest of Spain and Europe that libertarian communism had been set aside, that the bourgeoisie still had a voice, at least until the situation had stabilised enough for the fascist gains to be assessed, and the reaction of the international proletariat made known. However the political composition of Catalonia did not allow for any kind of proportional representation. In their magnanimity, the anarchist majority would give equal say to the tiny socialist parties and U.G.T., and to the liberal-bourgeois Catalanists. So libertarian communism would be

postponed for the duration of the war, which would be prosecuted under the nominal legal authority of the republic. Durruti it's said was uncharacteristically quiet. It's worth bearing in mind that he'd just lost his best friend, and nowhere can I find any account of him having slept since he discharged himself from hospital on the 14<sup>th</sup>, he was supposed to be convalescing from a hernia operation.

In hindsight it's like watching a car crash in slow motion, but in the heady days of 20<sup>th</sup> July, with the people armed and throwing boxes of banknotes into bonfires, probably the anarchists genuinely didn't consider the composition of any political body to be important, it was all for show, wasn't it? Certainly Durruti considered the committee an irrelevance, and only attended one meeting. Thus the anarchists, having led by example, beaten the army, and drawn the working class of all stripes into their revolution, not only ended up as a minority faction in a government maintained entirely by their own efforts, (liberal democracy, in other words) but through their participation in this sham, ceased to be anarchists!

For what it's worth, the Central Committee of Anti-Fascist Militias of Catalonia was constituted as follows: Three Delegates from each of the C.N.T., the U.G.T. and Esquerra Republicana (Companys's party); one each from the F.A.I., the P.O.U.M., the P.S.O.E., Catalan Action, Union de Rabassaires (Catalan smallholders' party). The Generalitat was represented by a commissioner and a technical military adviser, Jesus Pérez Farràs. So roughly half the committee represented the people of Catalonia, the remainder spoke for the former central and regional governments, both of which had spectacularly failed in their allotted task, foreign capital and the bourgeoisie. However the day to day running of the city, and therefore of production, was a matter for the district committees, who practiced de-facto libertarian communism and were now open to the participation of all citizens.

**The Spanish Communist Party** was insignificant at the start of 1936, with fewer than 100,000 members, mostly among the professional classes. By offering some insurance for private property, status and wage differentials in the face of the growing social revolution, it was able to boost its membership to over a million by the end of the year. Within days of the coup, its tiny Catalan counterpart, the P.C.C. ate the region's Socialist Workers' Party and sucked in a couple of other left groups to form the P.S.U.C., it immediately affiliated to the Comintern and Stalin got a seat at the table.

**A moment of black comedy** was provided by the pompous General Sanjurjo, when the light plane sent to collect him from exile in Portugal, weighed down with all his dress uniforms, accoutrements and medals, failed to clear the trees at the end of the runway, so the fascist and his finery went up in flames.

**Madrid was dominated by the Montaña Barracks;** the officers there prevaricated over joining the coup owing to poor communications and an understandable desire to be on the winning side. The garrison's commander refused to open his armoury to the militias, neither would he declare for the rebels. On the morning of 19 July the C.N.T. demanded the release of all their prisoners within three hours, or they would see to it themselves. Prime Minister Giral caved in to the inevitable, emptied the prisons and issued 65,000 rifles to the unions but all but 5000 of the bolts were held in the barracks. The fascist General Fanjul, who had also participated in the 1932 coup, arrived at the Montaña and attempted to persuade its officers

and men to join the nationalists and impose martial law on the city, reassuring them that General Mola's Army of the North were only 50km away over the Guadarrama mountains and would shortly be in the capital. In the event, Mola's advance on Madrid was halted in the Sierra by lightly armed peasants. By the time the inhabitants of the Montaña had made up their minds, anarchist and socialist militias were in position alongside the assault guards; fighting broke out with Falangists in the city and shots were exchanged with the troops. The following morning the barracks came under fire from loyalist aircraft and a couple of field guns supervised by a retired artillery officer. A white flag appeared, but as the militia surged forward they were shot at. An enraged mob of CNT-FAI and Young Socialists swarmed through the gate under heavy machine gun fire with Assault Guards bringing up the rear. In the melee that followed some defenders managed to surrender, others were summarily executed, thrown from windows or committed suicide, there was great loss of life on both sides.

**The coup was soundly defeated** in those areas where working class militancy had reached a tipping point, sufficient to give the socialists confidence to commit themselves, and the paramilitaries to take the people's side; much of the military and police were simply hedging their bets, and changed sides in both directions. Zaragoza had been a C.N.T. stronghold, but the leadership was on the reformist side and too cosy with the government; arms were promised but never delivered. It was also the military headquarters of the region, whose commander General Cabanellas played a double game until the 19<sup>th</sup> July when he declared war on the people. The Assault and civil guards went over to the nationalists and the city was lost. Striking workers were shot; a mass grave uncovered in 1979 revealed seven thousand bodies. In Seville, where the Communist Party controlled the U.G.T., fighting broke out between the unions, allowing the nationalists to take the city by default.

**When the dust had settled** from the uprising the nationalists held about a third of the country, the remainder was either loyal to the republic, controlled by the workers, or in a fluid state. Scores were settled in both territories, an estimated between one- and two-hundred thousand executions of union members took place in the nationalist zone, on the other side, the clergy, landlords and aristocracy were purged.

The loss of Zaragoza was keenly felt. Durruti and Oliver were unhappy with the decision of the Plenum and the way it had been taken. Oliver proposed they overthrow the Generalitat at their earliest convenience, Durruti insisted the priority was the liberation of Zaragoza and the thirty thousand political prisoners presumed to be held there (who were as good as dead if they delayed), so the column that was to bear his name set off for Aragon on the 24<sup>th</sup>, after his famous interview with the Toronto Star.

“There were a dozen youth at the head on a truck. The Herculean José Hellín stood out among them, waving a black and red flag. He will die defending Madrid on November 17 while blowing up Italian armoured personnel carriers. The centuria led by the metalworker Arís followed behind. Five centurias came next: there were the miners of Figols and Sallent, who would soon distinguish themselves as an elite force of dynamiters, and also sailors from the Maritime Transport Workers' Union led by Setonas, who will prove to be outstanding guerrillas. “El Padre,” an old militant who fought with Pancho Villa's during

the Mexican Revolution, led the Third Centuria. Textile worker Juan Costa was responsible for the Fourth Centuria and the nineteen year old libertarian Muñoz represented the Fifth Centuria, formed exclusively by metalworkers.”

- Abel Paz: ‘Durruti in the Spanish Revolution’.

**The Durruti Column** was organised prefiguratively, reflecting the classless free society it was fighting for. Durruti’s entirely logical analysis was that the volunteers could not fight fearlessly against the enemy if they were motivated by fear of their officers, and history shows that conflicts involving conscripts under coercion become exercises in mass skiving and shirking responsibility. Villages liberated along the way were encouraged to collectivise, which they embraced with enthusiasm and ingenuity.

Two days later the column was within twenty miles of Zaragoza, waiting for two further columns to catch up; these were to protect its flanks and defend the newly-established agricultural collectives; here it remained for a couple of weeks by which time it had run out of ammunition. Straightaway the anarchists found themselves fighting on two fronts as the Stalinists had already begun to misbehave; eight machine guns hidden in the offices of the P.S.U.C. were hastily returned when the column threatened to come and collect them.

Approximately a quarter of the militia did not have weapons at any one time so they occupied themselves with agricultural work, giving industrial and rural workers a better understanding of each other’s needs. A reciprocal arrangement developed with peasants receiving military training, some eager volunteers had to be recalled from the front as their experience was needed in the fields. The fearless libertarian experimentation of the Aragonese peasantry and the revolutionary zeal of the column potentiated each other, enabling both to fully appreciate the essence of the war as defence of the social revolution. These contacts resulted in the formation of the Defence Council of Aragon, to integrate provisioning the columns into their libertarian socialist economy and to resist the encroachments of government.

**Meanwhile time was running out for Zaragoza**, the people were not armed and the General Strike was being weakened by nationalist violence. The U.G.T. was trying to negotiate its way out and went back to work leaving the anarchosyndicalists isolated. With the political parties on board, the C.C.M.A.C. had no enthusiasm for liberating thousands of anarchist militants and nor did the government in Madrid. The committee only lasted until September anyway, at which time the Catalan regional administration was re-constituted with the support of CNT-FAI delegates who were now behaving more like representatives, not of the anarchists, but of an abstract ideal of anarchy, to be pursued at some indeterminate time that receded ever further into the future. Their role was to justify the decisions of government to the people rather than present the people’s demands to government, and they would only be needed for so long as the workers exerted actual power over production and the conduct of the war. They had been persuaded that the social revolution could follow a swift victory over fascism, however the Popular Front government was in no hurry; its priority was to re-establish its governance while there was still fuck all to govern. Using the promise of arms and a united front against the fascists, the politicians would dupe the

confederals into propping up what remained of the state while the militias weakened for lack of supplies.

The popular front underwent yet another change of leadership on 4<sup>th</sup> September, when Largo Caballero, the president of the U.G.T. took over as prime minister. He had moved closer to the communist party since his incarceration in the mistaken belief that they wanted to bring about a socialist revolution, his mistake would lead to the defeat of the republic, his exile and imprisonment in Sachsenhausen concentration camp; he barely survived the Second World War. The majority of his comrades were of course executed by Franco.

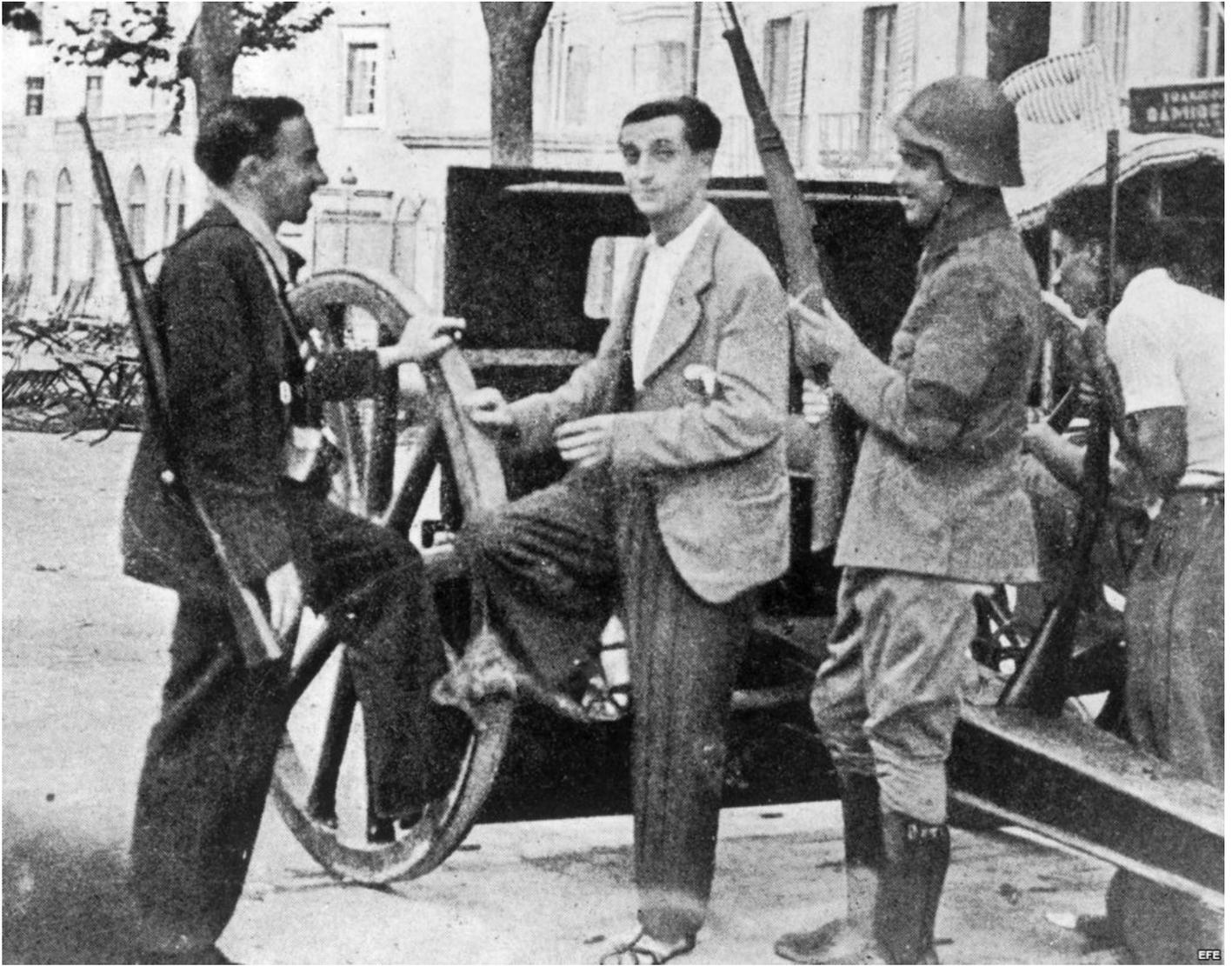
**The first foreign volunteers** were those who had travelled to Barcelona for the People's Olympiad that had been scheduled to start on the 19<sup>th</sup> July, in protest against the official games being hosted by the Nazis in Berlin. Some were swept up in the revolutionary fervour and enlisted in the militia. One such was the swimmer Clara Thalmann who with her husband Pavel joined the Durruti Column on the Aragon front then fought with the Friends of Durruti in the May events of 1937. They were imprisoned by the Stalinists and later operated in occupied Paris as members of the Proletarian Revolutionary Group, assisting people on the run from the Gestapo. Miraculously the Thalmanns both survived to old age and set up an agricultural commune in the south of France, popular with student radicals in the 1960s.

Nat Cohen, a clothing worker from Stepney, with a dozen or so others founded the Tom Mann Centuria; he remained in touch with the British Communist Party through its representative in Spain, Tom Wintringham, who proposed the formation of the International Brigades. The French Communist Party also wished to recruit volunteers, in September Stalin approved the project and the Comintern began co-ordinating the recruitment and transport of volunteers by each of the national parties. Britain's Independent Labour Party recruited for the P.O.U.M., its co-affiliate in the 'London Bureau' or International Revolutionary Marxist Centre, its most famous volunteer being George Orwell.

**The politicians' most pressing task** was to recover their monopoly on violence, by turning the workers' militias into a conventional 'Popular Army' with a hierarchical command structure, proposed by the communists and established by government decree in October. This met with fierce opposition within the columns; it's fair to say that the workers had not taken up arms to defend the Republic, even against fascism, or for the right to choose who was going to order them about, as they had endured one or other form of brutal economic and political regime all their lives. They wanted nothing more or less than what was due to them, land and freedom\*, the war and social revolution were inseparable.

\* The title of the F.A.I.'s periodical.

Of course the decade ended with the defeat of the Spanish republic and the outbreak of the Second World War. The people's war against fascism had turned into an imperialist turf war; six years and sixty million deaths later, the great powers would carve up Europe between themselves.



Francisco Ascaso, speaking to Joaquín Ascaso in Barcelona, shortly before his death on 20<sup>th</sup> July 1936.



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