

**Agustín Guillamón**

**Barricades in**

**Barcelona: The CNT**

**from the victory of July**

**1936 to the necessary**

**defeat of May 1937**

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*First published in 2006, this book, focusing on Barcelona in 1936-1937, provides an account of the street battles and victory of July 1936, examines the defense and neighborhood committees that defeated the uprising in the city, and addresses the issue of the decision of the CNT-FAI superior committees to collaborate with counterrevolutionary parties and social groups to preserve anti-fascist unity at any price and how this decision culminated in May 1937 in the defeat of the revolution, with special emphasis on the emerging discontent among the anarchosyndicalist rank and file and the role of The Friends of Durruti Group in crystallizing opposition to official CNT policies.*

# Part 1 - The Victorious Insurrection of July 1936

## Dedications

*To Pascual Guillamón, wounded and disabled in the confrontations of July 19 in Barcelona; shot by the fascists when they occupied Tarrasa.*

To my grandfather Eliseo, and his numerous brothers: emigrants, cenetistas, anonymous fighters and exiles; always proletarians conscious of being proletarians.

To my father, who at the age of twelve lost a war.

In memoriam.

## INTRODUCTION

This is a book about the barricades erected by the workers of Barcelona in July 1936 and May 1937, only ten months apart. It is a study of the reasons why they were built, as well as their similarities and differences. It attempts to explain the “offensive” character of the workers insurrection of July, and the “defensive” character of the May insurrection. How did the practically unarmed workers manage to defeat the rebellious army and the fascists in July? And how was it

possible that, in May, a proletariat armed to the teeth could be politically defeated after having demonstrated its military superiority in the streets? Why were the barricades of July still standing in October 1936, while the barricades built in May were immediately dismantled?

The myth of the barricades, which appeared in Barcelona on numerous occasions during the 19th century, in the general strike of 1902, during the Tragic Week of 1909 and the general strike of 1917, was not propagated in vain. As history teaches us, barricades are structures for defensive purposes, and almost always presage the defeat of the workers at the hands of the army or the police. In July 1936 the first victory of the proletariat over the army took place at the Brecha de San Pablo, against some soldiers entrenched behind the barricades. This book considers the barricades as one instrument, among others, of the irrevocable decision of the proletariat to confront the class enemy; not as a myth that chains it to the past. It contemplates the barricades *as a class frontier*, with the proletariat on one side, and the enemy on the other. Today's class frontiers would include on the enemy side those who deny the existence of the proletariat, confuse the Stalinist dictatorships with

communism, propose the conquest of the state instead of its destruction, or proclaim that capitalism is eternal.

In the epilogue, the committees that arose during the Spanish revolutionary events of 1936 are considered in the context of the international experience of the Russian soviets and the German councils, in order to recognize them *as a form of revolutionary organization of the working class*.

July 1936 was a victorious insurrection; but was the insurrection of May 1937 a victory or a defeat? This book aspires to understand why, and above all *how*, some of the revolutionary leaders of July 1936 became the most disastrous and influential counterrevolutionaries of May 1937. To put it another way, it attempts to explain the history of the workers movement and to discard the ridiculous comic strips of supermen and traitors, as well as the bourgeois or Stalinist biased arbitrary interpretations that are characteristic of university academic studies.

The book also tries to respond to the questions posed by the French surrealist poet Benjamin Péret, who was in Barcelona between August 1936 and April 1937: *“What is the nature of the revolution of July 19, 1936: bourgeois, anti-fascist, proletarian? Was there a situation of dual*

*power on July 20, 1936? If so, to whose benefit did it evolve? What forces presided over its liquidation? Have the workers seized control of the apparatus of production? Has the nationalization of production led to or created the material basis for a form of state capitalism? Did the working class organizations (parties, trade unions, etc.) attempt to organize a workers power? Where and under what conditions? Why was bourgeois power not liquidated? Why did the Spanish revolution end up in disaster?"*

The task of the poet is to ask the questions, the job of the historian is to try to answer them, and the privilege of the reader is to judge whether the responses given are correct and convincing.

Agustín Guillamón  
Barcelona, December 2006

# Part 1- The Victorious Insurrection of July 1936

*Vivere militare est.* (To live is to fight.)

Seneca, *Epistulae Morales*

## **TO ARMS, TO ARMS!**

At sixteen hundred hours on the sixteenth, the army rose up in revolt in Melilla. The President of the Government, Casares Quiroga, when asked by some journalists about what he was going to do about the uprising, responded with a little joke: “They have arisen? Good. I am going to bed.” On July 18, 1936 the military rebellion had spread to all of Morocco, the Canary Islands and Seville.

The military garrison of Barcelona had approximately six thousand men, against almost two thousand assault guards and two hundred “*mossos d’esquadra*” [a special defense corps of the Generalitat]. The civil guards, whose loyalties were uncertain, had about three thousand men. The CNT-FAI had about twenty thousand militants organized in neighborhood defense committees, ready to take up arms. The CNT agreed, in the liaison commission that included representatives of the CNT, the Generalitat and loyal military officers, to confront the rebels with only one thousand armed militants. However, the CNT’s



negotiations with Escofet, the police commissioner, and with España, the regional minister for the Government, were unproductive. On the night of July 17 the *cenetista* [member of the CNT] Juan Yagüe, Secretary of the Maritime Transport Trade Union, organized the assault on the weapons lockers of the ships docked at the port, obtaining about 150 rifles; these were to be added to the guns taken on the 18th from the gun shops, security guards and night watchmen of the city. This small arsenal, stored at the Transport Workers Trade Union headquarters on the Ramblas, led to a confrontation with the police commissioner, who demanded that the weapons be handed over to him. There was some risk of an armed confrontation with the assault guards, and the CNT militants themselves hurled abuse at those who were, in their opinion, much too conciliatory: Durruti and García Oliver. The incident was defused with the surrender to Guarner, Escofet's second in command, of some old inoperative rifles, which prevented a break between the republicans and the anarchists on the eve of the military coup.

Starting at three in the morning on July 19th, a growing crowd demanded arms from the Government Chancellery, at the Plaza Palacio. *There were no arms for the people, because the Government of the Generalitat*

*was more afraid of a workers revolution than it was of the military revolt against the Republic.* Juan García Oliver, from the balcony of the Chancellory, ordered the CNT militants to keep in touch with the defense committees of their respective neighborhoods, or to advance on the barracks of San Andrés to await an opportunity to seize the arms stored there. A little later, when the uprising was announced in Barcelona, the militants began fraternizing with the assault guards at San Andrés when the latter, equipped with every variety of small arms, surrendered their guns to the civilian volunteers who asked for them. At the same time, the Deputy Director of the Aviation Services, Servando Meana,[1](#) a CNT sympathizer, who was acting as a liaison between the Prat Airfield and José María España, delivered the arms stored in the Government Buildings to the anarchosyndicalists[2](#) on his own responsibility and at his own risk, without the knowledge of his superiors. The *cenetistas* of the Chemical Workers Trade Union began to manufacture hand grenades.

## **THE SIRENS OF THE FACTORIES OF PUEBLO NUEVO SOUND THE CALL TO BATTLE**

*At four-fifteen on the morning of July 19, 1936, the troops of the Bruc barracks, in Pedralbes, marched into the streets, heading for April 14 Avenue (now known as*

Diagonal) towards the center of the city. The workers, posted in the vicinity of the barracks, had orders to sound the alarm but not to engage the soldiers until they came very close to the city center. The previously-determined tactic of the Confederal Defense Committee foresaw that it would be easier to fight the troops in the streets than if they remained entrenched in their barracks.

*The Jupiter football field* on Lope de Vega Street was used as a staging area from which to initiate the workers insurrection against the military uprising, due to the fact that the homes of the majority of the anarchist members of the “Nosotros” group were located in the vicinity, as well as the large numbers of CNT militants who also lived in that neighborhood. The Defense Committee of *Pueblo Nuevo* had requisitioned two trucks from a nearby textile factory, which were then parked near the Jupiter football field, and which were probably used as clandestine arsenals by the anarchists. Gregorio Jover lived at number 276 Pujades Street. Throughout the night of the 18th to the 19th of July, the whole second floor of that building was converted into the meeting place of the members of the “Nosotros” group, awaiting the news of the rebels taking to the streets. Jover was joined by: Juan García Oliver, who lived nearby, at number 72 of

Espronceda Street, almost at the corner of Llull; Buenaventura Durruti, who lived less than a kilometer away, in the Clot neighborhood; Antonio Ortiz, born in the La Plata neighborhood of Pueblo Nuevo, at the intersection of Independencia and Wad Ras Streets (now Badajoz/Doctor Trueta); Francisco Ascaso, who also lived nearby on San Juan de Malta Street; Ricardo Sanz, also a resident of Pueblo Nuevo; Aurelio Fernández and “the Valencian” José Pérez Ibáñez. From Jover’s window one could see the fence of the Jupiter football field, next to which the two trucks were parked. At five in the morning a message arrived informing Jover and his comrades that the troops had begun to leave the barracks. Lope de Vega, Espronceda, Llull and Pujades Streets, which bordered on the Jupiter football field, were full of armed CNT militants. About twenty or so of the most experienced militants, tempered in a thousand street battles, boarded the trucks. Antonio Ortiz and Ricardo Sanz manned a machine gun behind the cab of the leading truck. The sirens of the textile factories of Pueblo Nuevo began to sound, proclaiming the general strike and the revolutionary insurrection, and could be heard in nearby neighborhoods and at the port. This was the agreed-upon signal for the call to battle. And this time the alarm of the sirens literally meant that arms must be taken up for defense against the enemy: “to arms”. The

two trucks, flying the black and red flag, followed by a column of armed men singing “Sons of the People” and “To the Barricades”, encouraged by the neighbors crowding the balconies, marched down Pujades Street to the Rambla of Pueblo Nuevo, to walk up to Pedro IV Street, and from there to the *Construction Trade Union* offices on Mercaders Street, and then to the *Metal Workers and Transport Trade Union* headquarters on the Ramblas. Never before had the verses of these songs conveyed such meaning: “although we expect pain and death against the enemy, duty calls us, the most precious good is liberty, it must be defended with faith and with valor”; “with our bodies we shall subdue the fascist hyena, and the entire people with the anarchists will make liberty triumph”.

The “Nosotros” group, now transformed into a Revolutionary Defense Committee, directed the workers insurrection in Barcelona against the military uprising from one of these trucks parked on the *Plaza del Teatro*. By commanding the Ramblas the revolutionaries prevented the link-up of the rebels who were proceeding from the Plaza de Cataluña and Atarazanas-Capitanía, at the same time that it allowed for the rapid dispatch, by way of the side streets and alleys of the Chino and Ribera neighborhoods, of reinforcements to help the

combatants at the Brecha de San Pablo and Icaria Avenue. It was necessary to prevent the troops who had left their barracks in the outer parts of the city from reaching the center of the city and linking up with Capitanía-Atarazanas, or seizing the nerve centers of the telephone, telegraph, postal and radio transmitter installations.

The invaluable collaboration of the artillery sergeants Valeriano Gordo and Martín Terrer from the Atarazanas barracks,<sup>3</sup> who opened the door that faced on Santa Madrona Street, allowed the entry of the armed anarchist groups and the arrest of almost the entire officer corps who were conducted under arrest through that same door to Santa Madrona Street. But a burst of machine gun fire from the nearby building housing the Officers' Quarters permitted the escape of Lieutenant Colubí, who then took command of the resistance. The heavy barred doors of the wide plazas that connected the old medieval Atarazanas with the building of the Maestranza (now demolished), which faced directly on the Ramblas, where the offices of the Artillery Brigade and the quarters of some officers, made it possible for the soldiers who were entrenched there to resist the attack. The rebels regained control of the barracks, but the anarchists had seized four machine guns, several

hundred rifles and several crates of ammunition. The crossfire that was set up between the office buildings and that part of the Atarazanas barracks that faced the Rambla de Santa Mónica, to which was added the fire from the machine guns installed at the base of the Columbus monument, made their position impregnable. Since the militants from the Metal Workers and Transport Trade Unions had left for Barceloneta, the anarchosyndicalist forces that remained in the Plaza del Teatro decided to postpone the assault in order to transfer their forces to the Brecha de San Pablo, with the arms taken from Atarazanas, leaving the sector under the Ramblas, with the buildings of the Military Offices and the Maestranza of Atarazanas surrounded by a group under the command of Durruti, with an artillery piece managed by Sergeant Gordo.

## **THE REBEL MILITARY FORCES OCCUPY THE PLAZA DE ESPAÑA AND THE PLAZA DE LA UNIVERSIDAD**

At about four-fifteen in the morning three squadrons belonging to the Cavalry Regiment of Montesa began to make their way on foot from the barracks on Tarragona Street. *The first squadron*, after an initial exchange of fire with assault guards that lasted about twenty minutes, occupied *the Plaza de España*, with a machine gun unit, and then began fraternizing with the assault guards from

the barracks located at the intersection of the Gran Vía-Paralelo, next to the Hotel Olímpico (today the Catalonia Plaza Hotel). The assault guards and the cavalry squadron reached a curious non-aggression pact, and over the course of the morning reinforcements, which were not molested, left the barracks of the assault guards for Cinco de Oros and Barceloneta, at the same time that these assault guards were allowing the rebels to hold the vantage point of the Plaza de España, and later allowed the passage of a company of sappers from the engineers barracks of Lepanto, which proceeded along the Paralelo until it arrived at Atarazanas and the Military Office Building.

On Cruz Cubierta Street, *in front of the Hostafrancs Municipal Building*, the defense committee erected a *barricade that blocked the road*. The rebel troops had two artillery pieces, located next to the fountain in the center of the Plaza de España, which had been brought in trucks from the barracks at the Docks. The military fired an artillery salvo at the barricade at Hostafrancs, but aimed too high, and the shells exploded in a small barricade on the side street of *Riego*, killing eight people and wounding eleven. It was a Dantesque scene, with arms, legs and chunks of human flesh hanging from the trees, lampposts and trolley cables. The decapitated



head of a woman was found seventy meters from her torso. The rebels controlled the Plaza de España until three in the afternoon.

*The second squadron*, with a machine gun unit, which was joined by a group of rightists, was engaged in battle on Valencia Street, but gained their objective, which was to dominate the Plaza de *la Universidad* and to occupy the university building, in whose towers they placed machine guns. They checked the identification papers of all the pedestrians, detaining those who were members of the CNT or the parties of the left, among whom was Angel Pestaña. In the courtyard of the University they exchanged fire with an armed group from the POUM. Over the course of the morning the rebels were forced to withdraw to the University Building, pursued by a group of assault guards at whom they had been shooting, and the members of the POUM who had occupied the *Seminary*, from which they swept the University gardens with gunfire. Completely surrounded, and after losing a large number of their men to desertion, the rebels surrendered at two-thirty in the afternoon to a detachment of the civil guard, and came out into the street behind the shield of the civilian prisoners they had captured.

## THE REBELS WIN A BATTLE: THE ENGINEERS BESIEGE THE ASSAULT GUARDS

*From the Lepanto engineers' barracks, located on the Gran Vía, on the outskirts of Barcelona, in Hospitalet de Llobregat (at what is now the Plaza Cerdá, on the site where they are building the "Judicial Center"), a company of sappers had emerged at about four-thirty and headed towards the Plaza de España, where they fraternized with the cavalry squadron, which dominated the vicinity with machine guns and light artillery, and with the assault guards posted there, even though the latter had displayed on the door of their barracks the proclamation of the declaration of a state of war. Given the calm situation that prevailed there, they were ordered to proceed to the Military Offices (the current Military Building, across from the Columbus monument). They marched down the Paralelo, and *Vilá y Vilá* Street, until they reached the *Baleares dock*, where they were confronted by a company of assault guards that had arrived from Barceloneta, which was defeated<sup>4</sup> because it was caught in the crossfire from Atarazanas and the sappers. After leaving a small group in Atarazanas the majority took up positions in the Military Office Building in order to defend it. The rebels had achieved their first victory and *Escofet* lost control of the *Paralelo*. The rebels*

consolidated their hold on the medieval shipyards, the *Aduana* and the electric power plant of *the three smokestacks*, and therefore controlled the plaza around the Columbus monument and the lower part of the Paralelo. In order to break their hold and to isolate the rebels at the Plaza de España from those at Atarazanas, the workers of the Woodworkers Trade Union and the Defense Committee of Pueblo Seco rapidly constructed an enormous barricade at the Brecha de San Pablo, between *El Molino* and the *Chicago Bar*.

## **THE PEOPLE DEFEAT THE ARMY ON THE PARALELO**

*The third squadron* which had left the cavalry barracks on Tarragona Street was ordered to consolidate rebel control of the Paralelo, with the objective of linking up their barracks with the Capitanía. Now, however, when they reached the vicinity of the *Brecha de San Pablo*, they were incapable of getting past a monumental barricade built of cobblestones and sandbags, which formed a double rectangle across half the avenue, because an intense hail of gunfire prevented them from proceeding. The soldiers were only able to occupy the *headquarters of the Woodworkers Trade Union* of the CNT on Rosal Street and the barricade in front of the building, abandoned by the CNT militants when, in accordance with the Mola Plan,[5](#) the rebel soldiers

advanced *behind a human shield of women and children from the neighborhood*. Then the soldiers installed three machine guns, one in front of *La Tranquilidad Bar* (69 Paralelo, next to the Victoria theater), another on the roof of the building next to El Molino, and the third on the barricade of the Brecha de San Pablo, which were employed to full effect. It was now eight in the morning. It took the third squadron two hours to take the barricade, which was defended by the defense committee of *Pueblo Seco* and militants of the woodworkers trade union. But the workers continued to harass the troops from the other side of the Brecha, from the terraces of nearby buildings and from all the adjoining side streets and alleys. At eleven in the morning the third squadron had successfully achieved full control of the entirety of the Brecha, after five hours of combat. However, the attempt made by the troops located at the Plaza de España to reinforce their comrades at the Brecha was thwarted when they reached the *Avenida Theater* (at 182 Paralelo) and were subjected to gunfire from the walls of the fairground enclosure that faced the Paralelo, and from Tamarit. The cenetistas decided to mount a counterattack against the Brecha, indirectly from Conde del Asalto (now Nou de la Rambla) and other points, without success. The local residents built barricades on the side streets of the

Paralelo next to *Poeta Cabanyes* and *Tapioles*. About a dozen assault guards, who had been ordered to go there by the officer of the Assault Guards who was fighting on the side of the rebel military forces, decided to join the popular forces. Shortly thereafter, the CNT reinforcements that came from the Plaza del Teatro, after storming the Hotel Falcón, from which they had been subjected to sniper fire, then proceeded from the Ramblas by way of San Pablo Street, and after securing the neutrality of the barracks of the customs police and after freeing the prisoners at *the women's prison of Santa Amalia*, they arrived at the Ronda de San Pablo by way of *Flores Street*, under a hail of gunfire from the rebel troops. Ortiz, along with a small group of men who had brought the machine guns seized at Atarazanas, managed to cross to the other side of the Ronda, and rapidly constructed a small barricade that gave them some shelter from the bullets of the three enemy machine guns installed in the Brecha. The anarchists climbed onto the rooftops, and placed their machine guns on the roof of the *Chicago Bar* (the same building that is today the office of the Caixa de Catalunya) which provided covering fire for the mass frontal assault on the Brecha, directed simultaneously from Flores Street, from both ends of *Aldana Street*, from *Tapias Street* and from the *café Pay-Pay* on San Pablo Street, located across

from *the Romanesque church of Sant Pau del Camp*, which they had entered by way of the back door.<sup>6</sup> The captain who commanded the troops next to the machine gun in the middle of the Brecha was felled by shots fired by Francisco Ascaso, who had gone on ahead of the other attackers and taken up an advantageous position, while the others advanced without any cover, in the open. A lieutenant tried to take command of the unit from his fallen captain, in order to continue to resist, but he was shot by a corporal from among his own troops. This was the beginning of the end of the battle. Between eleven and noon the third squadron was defeated, and the Brecha de San Pablo was recovered by the workers. 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!” In this crucial district of the city the anarchists, among whom were Francisco Ascaso, Juan García Oliver, Antonio Ortiz, Gregorio Jover and Ricardo Sanz,<sup>7</sup> had defeated the army after more than six hours of battle. A small number of soldiers continued to put up some resistance, after having taken refuge within El Molino, where, after running out of ammunition, they finally surrendered at about two in the afternoon.

## THE INFANTRY ARRIVES AT THE PLAZA DE LA UNIVERSIDAD AND THE ESCOLAPIOS DE SAN ANTONIO

The infantry regiment of Badajoz (from the Pedralbes barracks) had been ordered to go to the Capitanía by General Llano from the general staff, and that is where it went, but with the intention of placing itself under the orders of General Goded, who had flown from Palma de Mallorca to Barcelona to assume command over the military uprising. Once it reached the Gran Vía, the company under the command of Captain López Belda continued to march down Urgell Street towards the Paralelo, where they came under fire, and from there they went to Atarazanas, and the Columbus and Capitanía monument, where they reinforced the remaining troops at this location. *López Belda and the sappers were the only rebel troops that reached their proposed objectives, which in their case was to reinforce Atarazanas and the Capitanía.*

The rest of the column, under the command of Major López Amor, proceeded down the Gran Vía towards the Plaza de Cataluña, and exchanged fire with the squadron of the Montesa regiment, which had already occupied the Plaza de la Universidad. Once this error was discovered, a company went down by the Ronda de San

Antonio, in the direction of Capitanía, but once it reached the vicinity of the Market of San Antonio, it was attacked by the defense committees, which would not allow it to reinforce the troops fighting in the Brecha, so the company had to take refuge in *Los Escolapios*, where they surrendered one hour later, after putting up stiff resistance.

## **THE BATTLE AT THE PLAZA CATALUÑA**

After leaving a small garrison behind in the University, the rest of the troops, under the orders of López Amor, entered the *Plaza de Cataluña* by way of Pelayo and the Ronda Universidad, where they were surrounded by a curious and apprehensive crowd, shouting “Viva la Republica”, whose members did not know if these were loyal or rebel troops. After an exchange of fire between the rebel troops and the assault guards, white handkerchiefs appeared, the shooting stopped, and assault guards and soldiers embraced and fraternized. The crowd of armed civilians arrived and broke up the troop formation by mixing with the soldiers. The confusion, the cunning tactics of some, the indecision of the assault guards, the mistrust of the workers, and the excessive physical proximity created an incredible and dangerous disorder. The Plaza was occupied by units of the Assault Guards and by numerous militant armed



workers on the side of the Ramblas, the Telefónica and the Puerta del Ángel. Major López Amor gave the order to check the identification papers of the civilians, most of whom were cenetistas, but faced with the impossibility of arresting all of them he decided to evict them from the Plaza, and installed machine guns at the four corners of the Plaza: on the roof of the Maison Dorée (at the corner of Rivadeneira, on part of the site that is now occupied by Sfera), on the roof of the Cataluña Theater (approximately the site of the current Habitat), at the Hotel Colón (now Banesto) and at the Casino Militar (today absorbed by El Corte Inglés), and he placed two light 7.5 cm artillery pieces in the center of the Plaza Cataluña. López Amor then went to *the Telefónica* with the intention of occupying it and controlling communications. The initial collaboration of the Assault Guards, obtained by the treason of their commanding officer, Lieutenant Llop, was transformed, after a very uncomfortable period of about ten minutes, into open opposition. López Amor ordered the two artillery pieces situated in the center of the Plaza to open fire on the Telefónica. After three volleys communications were almost totally cut off. Gunfire erupted both within and outside of the building. During the confusion a group of Assault Guards captured López Amor in front of the Casino Militar. The companies of the Assault Guards,

together with the armed workers, barricaded themselves in Fontanella, the upper floors of the Telefónica, the Puerta del Ángel and the Ramblas. Pelayo, Vergara and Ronda Universidad Streets had already been secured by militant workers, thus isolating the army troops, who finally had no other recourse than to take refuge in the *Hotel Colón*, the *Maison Dorée*, the *Casino Militar* and the lower floors of the Telefónica, from which points they resisted the attacks of the workers and the Assault Guards. The center of the Plaza was a no-man's land. The troops had been prevented from making their way along the Ramblas towards Atarazanas and Capitanía, or by way of Fontanella and Puerta del Ángel to the Police Station at Vía Layetana or the Palace of the Generalitat. The equipment of the Telefónica and the nearby radio transmitters had also been prevented from falling into the hands of the rebels. The Telephone workers cut off communications of the Capitanía with the rebel barracks. The popular forces quickly stormed the *Casino Militar* and the *Maison Dorée*, thanks to the combined efforts of the Assault Guards and the workers, who had secured their positions by using the tunnels of the subway. The resistance of the rebels, who now only controlled the shelled *Hotel Colón* and the lower floors of the Telefónica, came to an end at four in the afternoon, when they surrendered to the late but decisive attack of

the civil guards, supported by the Assault Guards and the enthusiasm of the people, who did not trust the civil guards. An enormous crowd filled the openings of the nearby streets, the subway entrances and the adjacent alleys. White flags appeared in the Hotel Colón and then the popular fury swept away all in its path. The cannon that Lecha had brought from Claris thundered once again. Durruti and Obregón (who died in the attack), in a massive assault from the Ramblas by the anarchist militants, charging right in the open without cover, retook the lower floors of the Telefónica. At the same time, civil guards and workers, Josep Rovira of the POUM in the forefront, entered the Hotel Colón and took the officers prisoner. The Plaza was littered with corpses. Here, too, the army had been defeated.

## **THE REBELS TAKE REFUGE IN THE CARMELITE MONASTERY**

From the *Gerona Barracks*, or from the Santiago Cavalry barracks, at the corner of Lepanto and Travesera de Gracia Streets, near the Hospital of San Pablo, around five in the morning three squadrons of about fifty men each proceeded on foot, with machine guns installed on cars. Their objective was to take control of the *Cinco de Oros* (today the Plaza Juan Carlos I), at the corner of the Paseo de Gracia and Diagonal Street, in order to proceed

from there to Plaza Urquinaona and the Arco del Triunfo. They were subjected to minor harassment during their entire passage through Lepanto, Industria, and Córcega Streets, as well as the Paseo de San Juan (then known as García Hernández). At the Cinco de Oros, however, they found several companies of assault guards awaiting them, with a squadron of cavalry and a machine gun unit, accompanied by a crowd of militant workers, positioned on rooftops and balconies, in trees and doorways, armed with automatic weapons and hand grenades.

Unexpectedly for the rebels, who had advanced without taking the precaution of sending out any scouts, a steady barrage of fire swept the leading ranks of the troops, causing a large number of casualties among both soldiers and officers. Colonel Lacasa, who commanded the regiment from Santiago, took refuge with the surviving officers and some soldiers in *the Carmelite Monastery*, situated on the Diagonal at the corner of Lauria Street, where, with the active assistance of the monks, they barricaded themselves in impregnable positions thanks to the machine guns installed on the lower floors and on the roof.<sup>8</sup> The detachment of civil guards that had been sent to fight them joined them instead. The Colonel stationed advance outposts in the vicinity of the monastery at the corners of Córcega/Santa Tecla Streets, Claris/Diagonal Streets and Menéndez Pelayo (now

Torrent de l'Olla)/Lauria Streets, which, after suffering many casualties, were forced to withdraw before nightfall. That night, the rebels entrenched in the monastery agreed to surrender to the civil guards at dawn on the following day.

A short distance away, at the corner of *Balmes and Diagonal Streets*, a half hour after the beginning of the battle at Cinco de Oros, four trucks coming from the San Andrés Artillery Depot, transporting about fifty artillery gunners to the Plaza de Cataluña, were ambushed, stopped and destroyed by the fusillades of fire from workers and Assault Guards. Rifles and artillery pieces were seized by the workers.

## **AT BARCELONETA: MOBILE BARRICADES AGAINST ARTILLERY**

The Mountain Artillery Regiment, at the *barracks of the Docks on Icaria Avenue*, was the principal focal point of the plot of the military uprising. Two trucks had managed to leave the barracks, each with artillery pieces, and both successfully arrived at their destiny at the Plaza de España. One of these guns, installed at the center of the square, announced with its roar that the artillery had come to the streets. At six a column was organized, under the command of Major Fernández Unzué, whose

objective was first to take the Palace of the Government and then the Palace of the Generalitat. In October 1934, this same Major, at the command of just one battery of artillery, only needed to fire once on the Palace of the Generalitat and immediately saw the white flag that put an end to the Catalanist rebellion of Companys. An airplane had bombed the barracks before the trucks left, causing some casualties and a certain degree of demoralization. Nonetheless, the three batteries drove into the streets, without waiting for the arrival of the two companies of the nearby Alcántara Infantry Regiment, which were supposed to provide cover for them. That artillery batteries must be protected by infantry was a fundamental in the military manuals, since the artillery pieces had to advance slowly through the middle of the street, in the open, dragged by animals; but the officers were convinced that the “mob” would run away once they heard the first salvo of cannon fire. Meanwhile, in *Barceloneta*, the celebration of the local residents and the longshoremen was transformed into a unanimous outcry demanding arms. Enrique Gómez García, the commanding officer of the Barceloneta barracks of the Assault Guards, faced with an imminent confrontation, decided to distribute weapons to those who handed over to him, as a guarantee that they would return the weapons, their trade union or political party membership

cards. The first battery, commanded by Captain López Varela, managed to proceed without incident until he came to the bridge of San Carlos (which no longer exists), which crossed Icaria Avenue and the railroad tracks, when he unexpectedly encountered gunfire from a group of Assault Guards, along with workers who had been armed by the Assault Guard barracks, posted in the environs of the Plaza de Toros of Barceloneta (which no longer exists), the bridge itself, on the boxcars and walls of the rail yards, and on the nearest balconies and rooftops. They were rapidly joined by a crowd of militant workers from Pueblo Nuevo, Barceloneta and from the Transport and Metal Workers Trade Unions of the Ramblas. The three batteries found themselves squeezed between two sides, and each prevented the others from advancing. López Varela managed to set up the machine guns and the four cannons of his battery, and opened fire, without pausing in his advance towards Barceloneta. After two hours of fighting on the defensive, the two batteries of the rearguard, immobilized and constantly harassed by well-entrenched attackers, managed to withdraw to their barracks with numerous casualties, in a chaotic retreat, marked by the terrified stampede of the animals that were transporting some munitions that had exploded when they were hit by gunfire. At the entrance to the barracks they suffered fourteen casualties, caused

by the machine guns of two airplanes, which shortly afterwards bombed the barracks themselves with little effect. The battery of López Varela, which was now incapable of retreating, could not pass the intersection of Icaria Avenue and the Paseo Nacional, which was blocked by an enormous barricade that was six feet high, which the longshoremen had built with the usual cobblestones and the not so common sandbags full of carob beans, along with pieces of wood and *five hundred tons of spooled paper* unloaded in a half hour by electric forklifts from the ship, “Ciudad de Barcelona”, moored at the nearby “moll de les garrofes”, the usual location for the unloading of carob beans from the sailboats that transported them from the coastal towns of Castellón and Tarragona. The battery was then subjected to attack by mortar fire from the roof of the Government building, as well as by a steady barrage of fire from rifles and machine guns coming from the Escuela Náutica and the Depósito Franco. The soldiers fired their cannons at the barricades and the crowds, producing terrible damage to both; but the barricades were rebuilt and the crowds returned to intensify their determined attack. The position of the rebels became untenable. At ten they received the order to retreat, but this retreat turned into a hellish ordeal, because as the soldiers attempted to withdraw, the spools of paper, now transformed into



*mobile barricades*, were pushed forward by unarmed workers, while other workers well protected behind the spools threw hand grenades and maintained a steady rate of rifle fire. The final assault was made against about thirty men, barricaded behind their artillery pieces and dead animals, fighting elbow to elbow. López Varela, wounded, was taken to the Gobernación, and the rest of the officers were taken prisoner, while the soldiers fraternized with the people. Several cannons and various small arms were taken: and it was only ten-thirty in the morning.

The Docks barracks was besieged, with a barricade built a hundred meters from the main gate. The infantry from the Alcántara regiment was easily repulsed twice, although some soldiers managed to sneak into the barracks, without at all altering the desperate situation of the besieged, who, around eight in the evening, surrendered to several officers of the Assault Guards, who took charge of the prisoners. That night the barracks was taken over by the defense committees of Barceloneta and Pueblo Nuevo, without meeting any resistance.

## **AT THE PLAZA URQUINAONA: THE REBELS FAIL TO OCCUPY THE RADIO STATION**

Next to the *Parque de la Ciudadela* there were two barracks: that of the Intendencia, loyal to the republic, so loyal in fact that it was entrusted with the mission of separating and keeping watch over two thirds of the civil guard units, which at the orders of Colonel Escobar had left Layetana to seize control of the Plaza de Cataluña, and the barracks of the Alcántara infantry regiment, whose officers were divided between those who sympathized with and those who were opposed to the military uprising, which maintained a curious neutrality and a typical “soldier’s caution” that caused the troops to set off quite late, after nine in the morning, at the order of General Fernández Burriel. One company was ordered to come to the relief of the besieged artillery barracks at the Docks; their mission was thwarted by the opposition of an armed crowd that made them return promptly to their barracks. The second company was ordered to occupy the broadcast studios of Radio Barcelona at Number 12 Caspe Street. Coming under fire in the Urquinaona Plaza, the soldiers made a desperate attempt to make their way down Lauria Street towards Caspe, but after an hour of heavy fighting the company was practically destroyed, and only a small group

managed to take shelter in the Hotel Ritz, where they surrendered after being subjected to artillery fire.

## **AT DIPUTACIÓN STREET: TRUCKS ARE DRIVEN AGAINST THE ARTILLERY**

*The barracks of the Seventh Light Artillery regiment and the Parque de Artillería were two buildings located at the end of San Andrés del Palomar Street. The rebels organized a joint defense of the two buildings, relying on the collaboration of civilian elements, most of whom were monarchists who had reacted unfavorably to the speech made to them by Captain Reinlen, who concluded his speech with final cries of “Viva España” and “Viva la Republica”. Approximately thirty thousand rifles were stored at the Parque de Artillería. After the first departure of the four trucks, which as we have seen were destroyed at the intersection of Diagonal/Balmes, a second convoy was organized, whose orders were to support the infantry of the Badajoz regiment (which had taken refuge in various buildings on the Plaza de Cataluña, without being able to proceed any farther). This second convoy consisted of one battery (four cannons). It arrived at Bruc Street, near Diputación Street, at seven in the morning, after a long trip of six kilometers almost without incident. At the intersection of Bruc and Diputación they were ambushed by a group of*

Assault Guards and armed workers. The outbreak of gunfire raised the alarm among the nearby Assault Guard units that were guarding the Police Station at Vía Layetana, and was also heard by those who had been dispatched from Cinco de Oros to the Plaza de Cataluña, as well as by the popular forces that were besieging the Hotel Colón and the Telefónica. The battery advanced down *Diputación Street* towards Claris Street, but when it attempted to turn down this street and cross the Gran Vía, it was subjected to steady rifle and machine gun fire, which caused numerous casualties among the troops and the draft animals. Once they set up their cannons and machine guns in *the square formed by Diputación, Claris, and Lauria Streets and the Gran Vía*, they opened fire on the crowds that never ceased to regroup and counterattack. The seventy soldiers who manned the battery were confronted by much more numerous attackers, well concealed on rooftops, in windows and on balconies, whose resolve never flagged despite the artillery fire. The reinforcements that came to the aid of the popular forces were composed of two companies of Assault Guards, since a third company had refused to fight and returned to the comfort of its barracks on the Plaza de España, and by hundreds of workers who were constantly joining the battle. The situation of the rebel battery became increasingly more difficult. After two

hours of fighting, however, a shocking number of fatalities had been caused by the rebel artillery. The cannons were defended by a screen of machine guns, which made them inaccessible to every charge. The Assault Guards became discouraged, and thought that they lacked the means necessary to confront the artillery. The original and very risky tactic utilized by a group of CNT militants to successfully carry out the final attack consisted in boarding the flatbeds of three trucks, and after *driving them at full speed towards the screen of machine guns*, leaping from the vehicles throwing hand grenades. This unexpected tactic led to the disruption of the defensive screen of the machine guns and their seizure by the workers, who fired them at the artillery battery. At eleven in the morning the battle was over. While the rebel officers surrendered to the Assault Guards, the anarchosyndicalists immediately seized the machine guns and one cannon, which they dragged by hand towards the Plaza de Cataluña.

## **THE CAPITANÍA IS SUBJECTED TO ARTILLERY FIRE AND STORMED BY THE PEOPLE: GODED IS TAKEN PRISONER**

At the *Capitanía building*, on the Paseo de Colón, where the commanding officers of the Cataluña Division were located, the generals and staff officers gave the

appearance of acting in an *Opera Buffa*. No one obeyed the orders of General Llano de la Encomienda, the supreme commander of the Division, who remained loyal to the Republic, but no one dared either to depose him and take command. The rebel General Fernández Burriel allowed Llano to continue to issue orders and take telephone calls in his office. The whole atmosphere was redolent of accusations of weakness, barracks boastfulness and invocations of honor. When *General Goded*, after declaring a state of war in Mallorca and easily dominating the island, came to Barcelona at about twelve-thirty in one of several seaplanes to take control of the uprising in Cataluña, he could not understand why Llano de Encomienda remained at large and why the General Staff had not yet centralized the command over the operations of the rebels. Goded's journey from the *Naval Air Station* to Capitanía was surrounded by the sounds of intense exchanges of gunfire and the distant roar of artillery. After a series of curses and mutual threats of death exchanged with General Llano, Goded confronted the military situation of the moment. He made a futile phone call to *General Aranguren of the Civil Guard*, in an attempt to give him orders. Aranguren, who was at the Palacio de Gobernación, accompanied and discreetly kept under observation by España, Pérez Farrás and Guarner, refused to join the rebels. Goded

ordered the infantry of the Alcántara regiment to make another attempt to relieve the artillery troops at the Docks. He could not understand why the latter had been left without infantry protection. Faced with the demoralization produced among the rebels by the constant bombardment and strafing by the republican airplanes, Goded ordered, through a go-between, the seaplanes which had escorted him to Barcelona to bomb the airport at El Prat. But when his messenger came to the Navy Air Station with his written orders, the seaplanes had already left for their base at Mahón, after confronting the manifest hostility of the naval personnel and the Air Station staff. It was two-thirty and the defeat of the rebels already appeared to be a forgone conclusion. Goded then tried to summon reinforcements from Mallorca, Zaragoza, Mataró and Girona. He could not get a telephone connection with Mataró or Girona, nor could he send a messenger, because the armored car's tires had been punctured by bullets. Zaragoza and Palma were too far away to offer any effective support. Nor could the infantry of the Alcántara regiment secure its objectives, since it was easily repulsed in its second attempt to approach the barracks of the Docks, and the soldiers who managed to sneak into the barracks were not numerous enough to raise the siege.

A heterogeneous crowd, formed of militant workers brandishing rifles and wearing helmets and cartridge belts taken from the enemy, and Assault Guards with their dress coats unbuttoned, or in their shirts, dragged the cannons taken at Diputación-Clarís, proceeding via Layetana Street with the intention of assaulting the Division. The *longshoreman Manuel Lecha*, a former artilleryman,<sup>9</sup> installed the guns in the Plaza Antonio López in order to get a direct line of sight to fire on the Capitanía building, while the batteries taken on Icaria Avenue were firing on an indirect line from Barceloneta. It was five in the afternoon. Goded, seeing these arrangements, telephoned España, the Chancellor of the Gobernación, in order to boastfully demand his surrender, receiving in response the offer of a half hour to surrender, with the guarantee that his life would be spared, and once this half hour had expired the artillery would open fire. At five-thirty the artillery salvos began. Forty salvos and a barrage of rifle fire that was getting closer and closer allowed no doubts to be entertained about the imminence of the final assault. A white flag appeared and both sides observed a ceasefire, but when a loyal officer approached the building to accept its surrender, the machine guns of Capitanía opened fire. The battle resumed and when the doors of the building were about to be forced a white flag once again



appeared, but now the attackers did not cease firing, and finally broke down the doors and entered in force into the Capitanía. It was now six in the evening. *Major Pérez Farrás*,[10](#) risking his own life, managed to protect General Goded from certain lynching, which was the fate of various officers in civilian clothing, and brought him to the Palacio de la Generalitat, where he was convinced by Companys to broadcast over the radio transmitter that was installed there an order to cease fire: "Fate has been unkind to me and I have been taken prisoner. Therefore, if you want to avoid a bloodbath, the soldiers who will join me may do so free of any responsibility." It was seven in the evening. The message was recorded and broadcast by the *radio transmitters* every half hour, with a significant propaganda impact all over Spain.

## **THE FRUIT IS RIPE FOR THE PICKING**

The popular victory was so overwhelming that some buildings fell by themselves, without any violence at all, as ripe fruit falls from the tree. The warden of the *Modelo Prison* opened the doors of the prisoners' cells, anticipating the inevitable riot and assault on the prison. At Number 26 Mercaders Street the Construction Workers Trade Union as well as the Regional Committee of the CNT and the Local Trade Union Federation had their headquarters. Right behind these buildings was the

Barcelona Employers Federation headquarters, a building that is now Number 34 Vía Layetana. In the adjacent building, currently Number 32, was the Casa Cambó. Both buildings were occupied by the cenetistas, without any resistance, since they had been completely abandoned, with the furniture and the archives left behind. Both buildings together were known as the “*Casa CNT-FAI*” and served right up until the end of the war as the headquarters of the CNT and FAI Regional Committees, the Mujeres Libres, and, among many other groups, the Committee of Investigation and Information of the CNT-FAI, directed by Manuel Escorza, who, from the attic of the Casa Cambó, made extensive use, over the following months, of the information contained in the archives captured from the Employers Association and the Lliga.

## **SAN ANDRÉS: THE BARCELONA PROLETARIAT SEIZES THIRTY THOUSAND RIFLES**

The small force that guarded the barracks and artillery depot of *San Andrés*, most of which was composed of right wing and monarchist peasants, saw how the crowds that were attacking the barracks kept growing larger. During the afternoon the republican air force strafed and bombed the barracks and the Maestranza, taking care not to blow up the arsenal, causing some casualties, both

among the soldiers as well as among their attackers. The planes repeated their attacks three or four more times, killing and wounding several more soldiers, causing an enormous demoralization to spread among the defenders, which was further magnified by news of the disaster that had overtaken the military rebellion in Barcelona. By nightfall the defenders, both military as well as civilian, were gradually abandoning the barracks, and attempting to escape. Without any resistance the confederal defense committees of San Andrés, Horta, Santa Coloma, San Adrián and Pueblo Nuevo stormed the barracks and the Maestranza, before dawn, seizing the entire arsenal stored there. There were thirty thousand rifles. *The Barcelona proletariat was now armed.* The Assault Guards, sent by Escofet to prevent this from happening, refused to engage in an armed conflict with the workers.

The barricades built in front of the barracks to prevent the escape of the besieged rebels, now prevented the entrance of the Assault Guards. It was now too late to impose bourgeois order: the situation was distinctly revolutionary. If these Assault Guards had opened fire on the people they would have been immediately transformed into suicidal rebels.

In reality, *as of six in the evening, with the final capture of the Plaza de Cataluña and the surrender of Goded at the Capitanía, the uprising could be considered to have been defeated.* All that remained was a cleanup operation to finish off the last holdouts. The various barracks, now with hardly any troops, were totally demoralized, and further discouraged by constant desertions, they surrendered or were stormed over the course of the evening and night. Such was the case, for example, at the barracks of Bruc, in Pedralbes, held by a small squad of rebels. In the evening a plane dropped leaflets, explaining that the soldiers were discharged and the rebel officers deposed, which provoked the desertion of almost all the soldiers. The few remaining officers decided to surrender the barracks to the Civil Guard, although it was only shortly thereafter stormed by the cenetista workers without meeting any resistance. They renamed it the “Bakunin” barracks.

## **JULY 20: THE FINAL ASSAULT ON THE CARMELITES AND THE ATARAZANAS BARRACKS**

On the 20th only two rebel strongholds remained: the monastery of the Carmelites and the core positions of Atarazanas and the Military Offices.

Since dawn an enormous crowd had joined the siege of the monastery of the Carmelites, impatiently breaking through the cordon of Assault Guards. The besieged had already announced their surrender on the previous night, without, however, ceasing to shoot at any of the besiegers who tried to approach the monastery. The active complicity of the monks with the rebels, to whom they had given refuge, medical aid and food, was interpreted by the masses surrounding the monastery in such a way that they imagined that the monks had also manned the machine guns, which had caused so many casualties. Towards noon Colonel Escobar arrived on the scene, in the command of a company of the Civil Guard, who negotiated with the rebels for their immediate surrender. The gates were opened and from the outside one could see the officers, mixing fraternally with the hated monks. An enraged mob, breaking through the cordon of Assault Guards and Civil Guards, invaded the monastery, killing the monks and officers with clubs and knives or shooting them point-blank, and did not even spare the corpses of their enemies. The body of Colonel Lacasa was *decapitated*, that of Captain Domingo was *decapitated, mutilated and impaled* on a pole and the body of Major Rebolledo was *castrated*.<sup>[11](#)</sup> Anonymous militiamen dispersed an impromptu march that celebrated the victory by displaying the impaled head of

the Colonel. The cut-up remains of Captain Domingo were brought in a taxi to the zoo to be fed to the beasts.[12](#)

At the end of the Ramblas, in front of the Columbus monument, on the left was the building containing the *Military Offices*, and on the right, just in front, the *Atarazanas barracks*, divided into two zones, separated by broad plazas divided by walls and barred doors: the Maestranza (a building that once faced on the Rambla de Santa Mónica, which no longer exists), whose defenders were still holding out, and the old medieval shipyards, which had already been conquered. The Palacio de Dependencias (the current Gobierno Militar, where Salvador Puig Antich was tried in 1973), housed all the auxiliary services of the Division: Judge Advocates, auditors, accountants, prosecutors, mobilization center, etc. *The crossfire between the buildings of the Dependencias, the Columbus monument and Atarazanas, made them impregnable.* Guns commanded a wide expanse from the balcony of Atarazanas, which opened up on the Rambla, and caused many fatalities among the attackers. The siege had begun on the 19th. At dawn on the 20th, when the uprising had been defeated in the entire city, all available forces were deployed on the Rambla de Santa Mónica in expectation of the final

assault. A 7.5 cm gun, under the command of Sergeant Gordo, maintained a steady barrage on the old masonry of Atarazanas, at the same time that the truck that had left from Pueblo Nuevo, with a machine gun installed on the back of the vehicle, protected with mattresses, approached from the other side of Atarazanas, maintaining a steady fire from the machine gun. The situation became untenable for the besieged: some one hundred fifty men, one hundred ten in the Dependencias and about forty in Atarazanas. Two more cannons and two mortars installed on the pier joined the siege. Airplanes continuously bombed and strafed the rebel positions. From nearby terraces men threw hand grenades. After they ran out of ammunition the soldiers in the Dependencias Militares decided to surrender, and, after negotiating with the Gobernación concerning guarantees of safety for the departure of the officers' relatives who were in the building, flew the white flag shortly after noon, allowing the entrance of the Assault Guards. The anarchists who besieged the last redoubt of the rebels, in Atarazanas, rejected the intervention of the Civil Guard and the militants of the POUM in the final assault. The CNT Defense Committee, including all the members of the "Nosotros" group, was present at Atarazanas, and decided to storm it. The anarchist attackers approached the barracks, some taking cover by

running from tree to tree, others taking cover “behind the rolling newspaper spools”.<sup>13</sup> In an imprudent advance Francisco Ascaso was killed by a shot in the head. Shortly afterwards the soldiers in Atarazanas surrendered, flying the white flag, at the sight of which the libertarians climbed over the walls and entered amidst a storm of gunfire directed at the officers, while they fraternized with the common soldiers. It was a little before one in the afternoon.

## **THE MILITARY BALANCE SHEET: FROM THE FASCIST UPRISING TO THE WORKERS INSURRECTION**

The main barracks were on the outskirts of the city and their predictable strategy,<sup>14</sup> confirmed by the documents of the conspirators in the uprising, which had fallen into the hands of Major Felip Díaz Sandino, consisted in converging in the center of the city to occupy the government buildings, especially the Palacio de la Generalitat and that of the Gobernación, the communications centers such as the Telephone, Post Office and Telegraph facilities, and the radio transmitters and to make contact with the Division headquarters (the Capitanía building).

The forces loyal to the Government of the Generalitat had a bicephalous leadership, divided between the *Police*



*Station on Vía Layetana*,[15](#) under the direction of Captain Escofet and Major Alberto Arrando, who exercised provisional command over the Assault Guards, and where Companys had taken refuge; while in the *Palacio de Gobernación* the chancellor José María España directed operations, who had ordered the mobilization of two-thirds of the Civil Guard forces behind the Palace since eleven in the morning of the 19th.

The plan of the *confederal Defense Committee*, drafted by García Oliver, consisted in keeping activities in the vicinity of the barracks under observation, and allowing the rebel troops to leave the barracks without engaging them in battle, because it would be easier to defeat them in the streets. The close personal relations between the leaders of the CNT and various republican officials, especially from Atarazanas and the El Prat airfield, proved to be of decisive importance on July 19th,[16](#) with the seizure of the important arsenal at the Atarazanas barracks and the weapons stored at the Gobernación, together with the continuous air bombardments of the barracks held by the rebels. The collaboration of the CNT with the air force had already materialized several days before the rebel uprising, in the form of intrepid reconnaissance flights over Barcelona carried out by various members of the “Nosotros” group in planes

piloted by the officers Ponce de León and Meana, with the knowledge of Díaz Sandino, commander of the air force at Prat.[17](#)

The arrogance and ineptitude of the rebel officers, who were convinced that “the mob” would run away in fear once they heard the first salvo of cannon fire, or once they saw the soldiers marching down the street in martial order, led to the ambushes that they suffered at Cinco de Oros, Balmes-Diagonal and at Icaria Avenue, where they were taken by surprise and massacred while advancing slowly down the middle of the street, with mules dragging their artillery pieces, without any scouts sent out ahead, or any protection from infantry. *The rebels were sure that the uprising would be a military cakewalk, as was the case on October 6, 1934.* But on July 19 the rebels did not have to confront four overweening Catalanists, led by an incompetent governor like the fascist Dencás, or an anti-CNT police chief like Badía, who was also hostile to Companys because of a dispute over women,[18](#) but the industrial proletariat of Barcelona, organized in defense committees in each working class neighborhood and in the groups of militants of the various trade unions of the CNT. That is, by those non-professional proletarian combatants who, over the course of the struggle itself,

would be called and would call themselves, after the evening of July 19, and as they took up arms: *the workers militias, the militiamen*.

With the exception of Cinco de Oros, the initiative in the confrontations with the rebels was always seized by the proletariat: on the Paralelo, in Pueblo Nuevo, in Barceloneta, in San Andrés. The Assault Guards (1,960 men in all)<sup>19</sup> were incited to fight and resist by the courage and fearlessness of the workers, whom they overwhelmingly supported. On numerous occasions the Assault Guards hesitated, as they did at Diputación Street in their confrontation with the artillery unit, or even collaborated with the rebels, as they did at the Plaza de España, or were decimated and annihilated by the rebels, as happened to a company at the port of Baleares. The commanders of the Civil Guard, General Aranguren and Colonel Brotons, were “semi-prisoners” in the Palacio de Gobernación, closely guarded by José María España, Vicente Guarner (Escofet’s second-in-command) and Enrique Pérez Farrás. The Civil Guards were a non-factor during the events, up until the moment when Colonel Escobar received the order from General Aranguren to seize the University and the Hotel Colón. Escofet, the police commissioner, had ordered Aranguren by telephone, in the name of President Companys, to bring

the Civil Guards into the conflict, in an attempt to dampen the proletarian combativeness and to break the dubious neutrality and wait-and-see attitude of the Civil Guard. But the mistrust, both on the part of the workers as well as the Government of the Generalitat, towards the Civil Guards was never dispelled. The troops of the Civil Guards had already received orders to concentrate in just two barracks on the night of July 18, those of Ausias March and Consejo de Ciento, in order to keep them under observation and to prevent any of them from going over to the side of the rebels, as took place with the detachment sent to the monastery of the Carmelites under the command of Major Recas. Both barracks were constantly under surveillance by groups of CNT militants and squads of the Assault Guards. And during their slow advance up Layetana, when they tried to get from the Palacio de Gobernación to the Plaza de Cataluña, the remaining two-thirds were separated by loyal soldiers from the Intendencia, and watched very closely by groups of armed workers. The intervention of the Civil Guard was therefore not decisive in Barcelona, and in any case its initial neutrality was more important, as was the prevention of any attempts on the part of its members to join the ranks of the rebel troops. The polemic concerning whether the military uprising was defeated by the units of the Assault Guards and the Civil

Guards, “controlled” by the Government of the Generalitat, or by the CNT, is clearly an *a posteriori* political distortion, and is historically false, because both Guard forces were undermined by the enemy. *The contagious and unstoppable popular and revolutionary climate, which prevailed in Barcelona on July 19, compelled the forces of public order to do their duty, and they ended up later fraternally participating in the common struggle against fascism.*

It was the Barcelona proletariat, understood as the population of recent immigrants in the marginal and marginalized neighborhoods of “cheap housing” and the shantytowns of La Torrassa, Collblanc, Can Tunis, Santa Coloma, Somorrostro, and San Andrés, and the industrial workers (especially the textile workers, but also those employed in the metal industry, the port, the gas and electric utilities, construction, transport, chemicals and wood, etc.), paid badly and treated worse, subject to humiliating factory rules, draconian working conditions, generalized piecework and wages that did not cover the most basic necessities; with extremely harsh living conditions, insecure and miserable, in the neighborhoods of Sants, Pueblo Nuevo, Pueblo Seco, Clot, San Andrés and Barceloneta, or the numerous unemployed workers<sup>20</sup> of the various working class neighborhoods of

Barcelona, Hospitalet and Badalona, who took the initiative, organized in each neighborhood into CNT defense committees.<sup>[21](#)</sup> The decisive impact that the victory of the insurrection in Barcelona would have had on all of Cataluña had also attracted to the city, already on the night of July 18, a group of miners from Alto Llobregat and numerous militants from Tarrasa.

The CNT in Barcelona during the 1930s created a world of deeply rooted and necessary social, family, neighborhood and immigrant relations, which took the form of a strong sense of neighborhood association, of an all-embracing kind, from trade union and culture to mutual aid, self-defense and solidarity against the abuses of the employers and the police. In a city with an extraordinarily high percentage of recent immigrants<sup>[22](#)</sup> since 1914, a word-of-mouth effect prevailed, in which the most experienced emigrant conveyed information about jobs and housing to his family or friends from the “village”, which led to a largely-unstudied phenomenon whereby people from the same rural towns came to live in the same urban neighborhoods, or even on certain streets.<sup>[23](#)</sup> The enormous strength of the CNT in the working class neighborhoods had been able to take root and flourish precisely by means of that patient and modest work of organizing, trade unionism, educating,

“proletarianizing” and defending that massive population of migrant labor power that came from the rural world. Barcelona was an industrial city with huge social inequalities and profound class distinctions, with marked differences that were manifested both with regard to clothing and food, as well as in the well defined geographical class boundaries between the elegant bourgeois neighborhoods (around the Paseo de Gracia and the Derecha del Ensanche), with luxurious buildings where modernism flourished; and the working class neighborhoods, without infrastructure or public services, unhealthy, lacking urban amenities, subjected to the service of industry, in which the workers housing was nothing more than warehouses, next to the factories, for cheap and abundant labor power, which the rising unemployment of the 1930s plunged into misery and marginalization, concentrating the population of the old town at Bengali levels of density, and everywhere erasing the differences between proletarians and lumpen, who shared an identical situation of struggle for mere survival. Furthermore, the city’s recent social history, with confrontations like the general strike at La Canadiense (1919), and the outright class war of the years of pistolismo (1917-1923) which concluded with the victory of the employers during the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, showed that Barcelona society was not

based on an authoritarian model of submission of the proletariat to the dictatorship of the local bourgeoisie, which did not hesitate to resort to state terrorism, or brutal repression by means of the army, to preserve its authority.

From the very first moment that the rebel troops began to leave their barracks, at around four-fifteen in the morning, until the afternoon of July 19, it was these defense committees (in which the anarchist affinity groups and the libertarian cultural centers had been integrated) and the cenetista militants, concentrated in the offices of the various trade unions of the CNT, especially the woodworkers, on Rosal Street, the Transport and Metal Workers, on the Rambla de Santa Mónica, and the Construction Workers, at Number 26 Mercaders Street, near the Casa Cambó, which led the armed struggle. At about nine in the morning an unstoppable revolutionary contagion began to spread, massive and mimetic, curious and bold, which by the afternoon had become a mass phenomenon, which filled the streets with an immense crowd that wanted to participate at any price in the battle of Barcelona against fascism, anxious not to miss the opportunity of intervening so that the people's victory would be assured. The radio never ceased to encourage the



struggle with its stirring reports. Requisitioned cars, on which the initials CNT-FAI or UHP had been emblazoned, full of armed militiamen, assured effective communication between barricades, the sites where battles were taking place and the trade union locals, driving at high speed down the side streets, which were totally controlled by the workers. The workers at the Telephone Company, who had already cut off the communications of the Capitanía with the rebel barracks, installed telephones at some of the strategic barricades.

At the Brecha de San Pablo, at the intersection of the Paralelo with San Pablo Street, the Ronda de San Pablo and Rosal Street, next to El Molino, the armed proletariat, without help from anyone, defeated the army. But this victory would not have been possible without that immense crowd of people who harassed the rebels at every corner, from every balcony, from every doorway, from the terraces and rooftops, who watched the movements of the troops, built barricades, offered food and drink, or medical aid, information and shelter to the combatant workers, and who anxiously waited for someone to fall wounded in order to pick up their much-sought after rifle or pistol, in order to carry on with the battle.

Around nine in the morning a squadron coming from the Plaza de la Universidad proceeded down the Ronda de San Antonio<sup>24</sup> towards the Brecha de San Pablo. But already at the Ronda de San Pablo, in front of the Mercado de San Antonio, the rebels were attacked from all sides by a bold crowd, and they had to take refuge in the monastery of Los Escolapios de San Antonio, where, after an hour-long siege, their ammunition exhausted, they had no other choice but to surrender.

At eleven in the morning, the troops who had occupied the Plaza de España attempted to go to the aid of the rebels who were fighting in the Brecha de San Pablo, because after five hours of combat they needed ammunition and provisions, but not only could they not advance beyond Avenida Cine, but they were attacked by the crowds and had to retreat. After several hours of resistance they were forced to abandon a square that they could no longer control, fleeing in haste to the barracks they had left, and leaving behind their two artillery pieces that they had set up in the middle of the square, because the increasing and fearless attacks of the defense committees of Sants, Hostafrancs, La Torrassa, La Bordeta and Collblanc had taken the fairgrounds area and all the streets that led to the Plaza de España, transforming it into a massive trap without any possible

defense, once the masses of the workers had secured Tarragona Street, the only street that remained open by which the soldiers could return to their barracks. At three in the afternoon the Plaza de España was in the hands of the people; it was an eerie plaza, strewn with corpses and dismembered animals.

Thanks to the fact that the rebel troops who were fighting in the Brecha remained totally isolated, without being able to obtain any help at all, between eleven and noon the final assault on the machine guns installed in the center of the Paralelo Avenue took place, which we described above. Between noon and two in the afternoon a small group waited for the last soldiers, who had taken refuge inside El Molino, to finally use up what remained of their ammunition. Meanwhile, the immense crowds that had seized the entire Paralelo, from the Plaza de España to Atarazanas, and from the Brecha to Los Escolapios, set off, victorious, enthusiastic, and with better weapons, towards those places where fighting was still taking place, anxious not to miss out on the glory of participating in the final victory over fascism, or towards the barracks of San Andrés, where it would soon be possible to obtain a much-desired rifle.

These same masses, armed or not, but filled with the revolutionary fever, we find in the Plaza de Cataluña,

harassing the rebel troops until they caused them to break formation, and finally forcing them to take refuge in the Hotel Colón, without being able to successfully fulfill their mission to seize the nearby broadcasting station of Radio Barcelona, at Number 12 Caspe, or Radio Asociación, at Number 8 Rambla de los Estudios. This was the same crowd, curious, exalted and bold to the point of recklessness, that, at the intersection of Diputación and Lauria, stopped and paralyzed the artillery forces that had been dispatched to aid the rebels who were isolated and besieged in the Plaza de Cataluña, despite the fact that they were close enough to hear the rattle of the machine gun at the Hotel Colón. This was the same crowd that broke and dispersed the rebels in the Plaza de Urquinaona. This crowd, which did not observe any ideological tendencies, or parties, fraternized in the street fighting with Assault Guards and Civil Guards, causing them to relax their discipline. They were the same crowds that assaulted the barracks of San Andrés, seizing thirty thousand rifles, and which by their mere presence, exultant and festive, paralyzed the Assault Guards who were sent to prevent them from doing so. And it was this enraged and impatient crowd that on the 20th mercilessly executed monks and officers who had continued to resist, provoking a useless spilling of the

people's blood, and who displayed some of the corpses as lessons.

## **ARMED VICTORY AND POLITICAL CAPITULATION**

Counting the casualties on both sides the total was about four hundred fifty dead (mostly cenetistas) and thousands of wounded. *In thirty-two hours the people of Barcelona had defeated the army.* Almost all the churches and monasteries, some already on the morning of the 19th, were burned under controlled conditions or had coffins burned at their doors, with the notable exceptions of the Cathedral and the Church of the Holy Family, seized by the "mossos d'esquadra" and the libertarians, respectively. The Barcelona proletariat was armed with the thirty thousand rifles of San Andrés. Escofet resigned from his position as Police Chief at the end of July, because he could no longer guarantee public order. The Assault Guards and Civil Guards were, from a military point of view, undoubtedly more efficient and disciplined than the defense committees and the various groups of armed workers; but without the participation of the crowds in the street battles, these companies of Civil Guards or Assault Guards, politically conservative or fascist, would have passed with their weapons and supplies over to the side of the rebel troops: they were neither the winners nor the losers in this battle. The

military and fascist uprising, which had counted on the complicity of the Church, failed almost everywhere in Spain, creating, as a reaction, *a revolutionary situation*. The defeat of the army by the proletariat in the “red zone” had completely destroyed the state monopoly on violence, leading to the blossoming of a myriad of local powers, directly associated with the local exercise of violence. *Violence and power were intimately related*. On the other hand, in Barcelona, the so-called “forces of public order”, those Assault Guards and the Civil Guards, which had been so undecided about which side to take, and which ended up fraternizing with the armed people, had been assigned to their barracks by the Government of the Generalitat, awaiting the opportune moment to deploy them in support of the counterrevolution. This generalized revolutionary situation was what caused the emergence, without the directives of any organization, or any directive centers of any kind, in every place in Spain where the fascist uprising had been defeated: committees; the arming of the proletariat; barricades and control patrols; popular militias; confiscated cars and trucks with the confederal initials painted on their sides, filled with men waving rifles over their heads, racing loudly up and down the streets; the disappearance of hats and ties; the burning of the churches; passes issued by the defense committees; looting of the houses of the

bourgeoisie; revolutionary committees on a regional or local scale in Málaga, Barcelona, Aragón, Valencia, Gijón, Madrid, Santander, Sama de Langreo, Lérida, Castellón, Cartagena, Alicante, Almería, among the most well-known; persecution, imprisonment or murder “in situ” of fascists, rebel officers, employers and priests; confiscation of factories, barracks and buildings of all kinds; workers control committees and a long *etcetera* in which the exercise of violence WAS ITSELF the manifestation of the new workers power. In the weeks following July 19 in Barcelona a revolutionary situation arose, new and unprecedented, festive and savage, in which the execution of the fascist, of the boss or the priest, WAS the revolution. Violence and power were identical. Rather than dual power, there was an *atomization* of power. The revolutionary torrent dragged everything along with its furious, redemptive and inexorable ecstasy. Although the state institutions remained, the CNT-FAI decided it was necessary to *FIRST* crush fascism where it had triumphed, and accepted the creation alongside the Generalitat, whose existence was not questioned, of a Central Committee of Antifascist Militias of Cataluña (CCMA),[25](#) which was to be an extended version of the collaboration of the military liaison committee in which the Generalitat, the loyal military officers, the confederal Defense Committee and

the other republican and working class parties and organizations participated during the street fighting.

Also on the 20th, Companys, as president of the Generalitat, which still existed, summoned the leaders of the various organizations to the Palace, including the anarchists. A debate was held at a plenum of militants, meeting at the *Casa CNT-FAI*, to determine whether they should respond to the invitation of the president of the Generalitat, and after a brief analysis of the situation in the streets, it was decided to send the Liaison Committee to the Generalitat to meet with Companys. The members of the delegation attended the meeting<sup>26</sup> armed, tired and filthy from battle: Buenaventura Durruti, Juan García Oliver,<sup>27</sup> “Abad de Santillán”, José Asens and Aurelio Fernández.<sup>28</sup> Meeting with the delegates of the various political and trade union organizations on *the patio of the oranges*, including Andreu Nin, Joan Comorera, Josep Coll, and Josep Rovira, they discussed their experiences in the events, excitedly passing from one group to another, until Companys appeared, accompanied by Pérez Farrás. The various groups combined into one, all next to one another and in a line, in respectful silence. Companys looked at all of them, one by one, satisfied, serene and smiling. Fixing his gaze on the CNT delegation he greeted them with these words: “You have won.



Today you are the masters of the city and of Catalunya, because only you have defeated the fascist officers, and I hope that you will not be angry with me for reminding you that you did not lack the help of the Assault Guards and the 'mossos d'esquadra'." He continued, in a meditative tone: "But the truth is that although you were harshly persecuted right up until yesterday, today you have defeated the military and the fascists." After greeting all of those present, standing, formed in a circle around him, as the masters of the street, he asked, "And now what shall we do?" Looking at the cenetistas, he told them: "Something must be done to deal with this new situation!" He continued, warning them that, although we had conquered in Barcelona, the struggle was not over, "we do not know when and how it will turn out in the rest of Spain", then he called attention to his position and the role that he could play in his office: "for my part, I represent the Generalitat, a real but diffuse state of opinion and international recognition. They are mistaken who consider all of this as something useless", and concluded by claiming that if it was necessary to form a new government of the Generalitat, "I am at your disposal if you want to speak to me". García Oliver responded: "You can remain as President. We are not at all interested in the presidency or the government", as if he had understood that Companys was resigning his

position. After this first meeting,[29](#) informal and stressful, of the various delegates, standing all around Companys, the latter invited them to enter one of the Palace's parlors, where they were comfortably seated, to coordinate the unity and the collaboration of all the antifascist forces, by way of the formation of a committee of militias, *that would control disorder in the streets and organize the militia columns* that had to be sent to Zaragoza.

The Enlarged Regional Committee of the CNT, informed by the CNT delegation of the interview at the Palace, agreed after brief deliberation to tell Companys by telephone that the CNT accepted on principle the constitution of a Central Committee of Antifascist Militias (CCMA), pending the *definitive* resolution that would be adopted at the Plenum of Local and District Committees, which was to convene on the 21st. That same night Companys ordered that the official bulletin of the Generalitat should print a decree mandating the creation of these civilian militias.

On Tuesday, July 21,[30](#) at the Casa CNT-FAI, the proposal of Companys that the CNT should participate in a CCMA was submitted for the formal approval of a Regional Plenum of Local and District Trade Unions, convoked by the Committee of the Regional Confederation of Labor of

Cataluña. After the introductory report by Marianet, José Xena, representing the District of Baix Llobregat, proposed the withdrawal of the CNT delegates from the CCMA and that the organization should proceed with the revolution to establish libertarian communism. Juan García Oliver then spoke and characterized the debate and the decision that had to be made as a choice between an “absurd” anarchist dictatorship or collaboration<sup>31</sup> with the other antifascist forces in the Central Committee of Militias to continue the struggle against fascism. In this manner García Oliver, deliberately or not,<sup>32</sup> rendered the confused and ambiguous option of “going for broke” unviable to the Plenum. As opposed to the prospect of an intransigent “anarchist dictatorship”, the defense offered by Federica Montseny<sup>33</sup> of the acratik principles against all dictatorship seemed more logical, balanced and reasonable, supported by the arguments of Abad de Santillán concerning the danger of isolation and foreign intervention. Yet another position arose, defended by *Manuel Escorza*, who proposed the use of the government of the Generalitat as an instrument for socialization and collectivization, while waiting to dispose of it when it ceased to be useful to the CNT.<sup>34</sup> The plenum proved to be favorable to the idea of the CNT collaborating with the other antifascist forces in the

Central Committee of Militias, with the one negative vote of the District Committee of Baix Llobregat. Most of those who attended the Plenum, including Durruti and Ortiz, remained silent, because they thought, as did so many others, that the revolution must be postponed until the capture of Zaragoza and the defeat of fascism. So, without further debate or philosophical considerations, it was decided to consolidate and institutionalize the Liaison Committee between the CNT and the Generalitat that existed prior to July 19, which was now transformed, expanded and further elaborated in the CCMA that, by embodying the antifascist unity of all the parties and trade unions, was to be responsible for imposing order on the rearguard and organizing and supplying the militias that had to go Aragón to fight the fascists.

At the first meeting of the Central Committee of Militias, held on the night of the 21st, the CNT representatives<sup>35</sup> clearly displayed for the republicans and Catalanists their power and independent character, having published a public proclamation that gave the Central Committee many more responsibilities and duties, both with regard to military matters and public safety, than were initially conceded by the Decree of the Generalitat. It was not an idle boast that caused Aurelio Fernández, in response to

a question that had arisen at this first session of the CCMA about who defeated the army, to answer that it was *“the same people as always: the dregs of society”*, that is, the unemployed, the recent immigrants and the marginal and impoverished population living in the “cheap housing” of La Torrassa, Can Tunis, Somorrostro, Santa Coloma and San Andrés, and the abused industrial proletariat that, in extremely harsh living conditions, devastated by massive unemployment, worked long hours, went to work hungry, or worked temporary jobs for piecework rates, piled up in the working class neighborhoods of Pueblo Nuevo, Sants, Barceloneta, Chino, Hostafrancs or Pueblo Seco, who rented or subleased small shacks, houses or apartments that they had to share with others because of the unaffordable rents.

Meanwhile, Companys had authorized *Martín Barrera, the Minister of Labor*, to make a radio announcement of the regulations concerning the reduction of the working day, wage increases, rent reductions and new labor laws which had to first be agreed to by the representatives of the employers associations, such as the Employers Federation, the Chambers of Industry and of Real Estate, etc., to whom he explained the necessity of channeling the revolutionary impulse of the masses, as the director

of the potash mines of Suria had in fact already done, who preferred to suffer financial losses instead of going back to the mine and being taken hostage by the miners. During the course of the meeting various representatives of the employers received phone calls warning them not to return to their homes, because patrols of armed men were looking for them. The meeting ended when it became clear that the businessmen who were present no longer represented anyone. The radio announcement was broadcast anyway, several days later, in an attempt to provide a safe framework for popular enthusiasm and demands.

On Thursday, July 23, at the Casa CNT-FAI, the question of the entry of the anarchosyndicalists into the CCMA and the significant opposition to this policy on the part of the militants, was submitted to debate at a Joint Plenum of the CNT and FAI,[36](#) that is, a Plenum of leading militants.[37](#) During the evening of that same day, the members of the “Nosotros” group met at the house of Gregorio Jover to analyze the situation,[38](#) and to bid farewell[39](#) to Buenaventura Durruti prior to his departure on the following day with a Column of militiamen, who left the next morning from Cinco de Oros, and to Antonio Ortiz, who embarked with another Column on a train on the evening of the 24th.[40](#)

At nine-thirty on the morning of the 24th, Durruti, in the name of the CCMA, delivered a radio address in which he warned the cenetistas of the imperious necessity of remaining vigilant against any counterrevolutionary attempts and not to abandon what they had conquered in Barcelona.<sup>41</sup> Durruti seemed to be aware of the danger of leaving the rearguard unsecured, with a class enemy that had not yet been eliminated. Everything had to be postponed until after the capture of Zaragoza.

On Sunday, July 26, at the Casa CNT-FAI, the question of the CNT's collaboration in the Central Committee of Antifascist Militias, in which the representatives of the CNT were already participating,<sup>42</sup> was once again submitted for the formal approval of a Regional Plenum of Local and District Federations of Trade Unions, convoked by the Committee of the Regional Confederation of Labor of Cataluña. The result was that the decisions made by the Expanded Regional Committee to collaborate with the Government of the Generalitat and the other parties, which already constituted an irreversible reality, were *ratified again* by another Regional Plenum of Trade Unions. It was a policy of *fait accompli*, in which the Plenum of the 26th performed the role of a simple rubber stamp for decisions that had already been made. Although we have no record of the

debates that took place, the final accord left no room for doubts concerning the serious opposition that arose against the acceptance of the collaborationist position of the superior committees of the CNT-FAI—all we know is that there was fierce opposition. The resolution on the analysis of the current revolutionary situation concluded with a statement that support for the position was “*absolutely unanimous*”. Curiously, the position that was approved at this Plenum was defined as the “same position”, that is, the one that the CNT delegation had already provisionally accepted when it met with Companys, the same one that was approved by the Regional Plenum of the 21st, and the same one that was approved at the Joint CNT-FAI Plenum on the 23rd. What position?: “*the fascist rebels are the only enemies of the people*”, and therefore neither the bourgeois government of the Generalitat nor the republicans were enemies that had to be attacked, but allies. The renunciation of revolution was *already* absolute: “*No one should go any further. No one must break ranks.*” An appeal was made regarding the moral obligation to accept the decisions of the majority<sup>43</sup> and a profession of faith in the antifascist cause was pronounced: “*Every day, against fascism, only against the fascism that rules half of Spain.*” The final communiqué of the Regional Plenum concluded with an unequivocal and indisputable



order to accept and obey the CCMA: “there is a COMMITTEE OF ANTIFASCIST MILITIAS AND A SUBORDINATE BODY CALLED THE SUPPLY COMMISSION. It is everyone’s duty to comply with their directives, and regularly follow the procedures of all their orders.”

On July 28 the Local Federation of Trade Unions of Barcelona proclaimed *the end of the general strike*.

## **COMMITTEES EVERYWHERE; COORDINATION NOWHERE**

Violence and power go hand in hand. Once the state’s monopoly on violence was destroyed, because the army was defeated in the streets and the proletariat had taken up arms, a revolutionary situation opened up that imposed its violence, its power and its order. The power of an armed working class.

The *revolutionary committees*—defense, factory, neighborhood or town, workers control committees, supply committees, etc.—formed *the embryo* of the organs of power of the working class. They initiated a methodical expropriation of the property of the bourgeoisie, implemented industrial and agricultural collectivization, organized the popular militias that stabilized the military fronts during the first few days, organized control patrols and rearguard militias that

imposed the “new revolutionary order” by means of the violent repression of the Church, the employers, fascists and former pistoleros and yellow trade unionists, since counterrevolutionary snipers operated continuously for a whole week in the city. *But these committees were incapable of coordinating their efforts and creating a centralized working class power.* The initiatives and activities of the revolutionary committees frequently overlapped with and were duplicated by those carried out by the leaders of the various traditional organizations of the workers movement, including the CNT and the FAI, or a POUM that was still making demands for higher wages and minor reforms which had already been surpassed by the events.

A revolutionary situation existed on the streets and in the factories, and there were some potential organs of power of the proletariat: *the committees*, which no organization was capable or desirous of coordinating, strengthening and transforming into authentic organs of power. The spontaneity of the masses had its limitations; their political and trade union organizations were even more limited. Neither possessed a prepared, precise and realistic program that could be applied in that revolutionary situation. Indeed, *the anarchist leaders not only did not know what to do with power, they did not*

*even know what it was. Against the fascist threat, which had triumphed in half of Spain, they imposed the slogan of antifascist unity, of the sacred union with the democratic and republican bourgeoisie. Rather than a situation of dual power shared between the Generalitat and the Central Committee, there was a duplication of powers. Furthermore, the superior committees of the CNT, in mid-August, had already decided to disband the CCMA as soon as the conditions permitted and the spontaneity in the streets subsided sufficiently. In the meantime, however, ever since July 19, the committees that had spontaneously emerged everywhere pragmatically imposed the new political, social and economic reality that had arisen from the victory of the workers' insurrection over the army, and in Catalonia these committees, in factories and residential areas, exercised all power.*

## **SEVENTY YEARS LATER: CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS**

*The state is the organization of the monopoly of violence at the service of the ruling social class. The capitalist state is one of the most important instruments of the rule of the bourgeois class over the proletariat, that is, the apparatus of repression that assures the capitalist social relations of production. The first task of a proletarian*

revolution is the total destruction of this capitalist state, and the consolidation of a workers power. *Without the intention and practical action (on the part of a revolutionary organization) to destroy the capitalist state one cannot speak of a proletarian revolution.* Perhaps one could speak of a revolutionary movement, a revolutionary situation, or a “popular revolution”, or of *antifascist unity*, a war against fascism, or a fantasy “dictatorship of the proletariat without the destruction of the capitalist state”, the discovery of the “brilliant” analyses of the POUM, etc., but not of a proletarian revolution. Ideological ambiguity was congenital to the libertarian movement. And this ambiguity was made into a virtue by the antifascist CNT bureaucrats and by the clever bourgeois politicians, who knew how to channel the muddy waters of anarchist incoherence into their mills. No attempt was ever made at any time to destroy the bourgeois state apparatus.

*In Barcelona, the CCMA was the product of the working class and anarchist victory of July 19, but it was also the product of the refusal of the anarchosyndicalists to destroy the state.* The CCMA, the outcome of a deal between Companys and the libertarians, but also accepted by the “Marxists” (the POUM and the Stalinists), was *an organization of class collaboration*, by

means of which the Government of the Generalitat regained control over those functions it had lost because the anarchists had conquered them in the streets: basically the police, public order and the military. The CCMA was never, and never claimed to be, an organ of workers power, and therefore there was never a situation of dual power that pitted the CCMA against the Government of the Generalitat. It is true that, among the anarchists, there were diverse conceptions concerning the revolutionary situation that had arisen in Cataluña after the events of July 19-20, 1936: the first conception, and the one that was by far the dominant one, was the one propounded by Abad de Santillán and Federica Montseny, which called for absolute and sincere *collaboration* with the other political forces (including the bourgeois ones) in an antifascist unity that they believed was indispensable in order to win the war, and implied “loyal” collaboration with the Government of the Generalitat as the lesser evil so as to prosecute the “revolution” and the war at the same time. The second conception, advocated by García Oliver, theoretically consisted in “*going for broke*”, that is, it entailed the establishment of an “anarchist dictatorship”, in which a vanguard of enlightened leaders replaces the proletariat, taking power in its name, but in practice meant governmental collaboration, in the naïve belief that the

“black and red” color of the Ministers could change the nature of the government in which they participated. The third conception, pragmatically proposed by Manuel Escorza, consisted in using the Government of the Generalitat to legalize the “revolutionary conquests”, controlling the Ministries of Defense and Public Order, and relying on the indisputable dominance of the CNT in the streets in order to attempt to *“crystallize the revolutionary situation”*, in the expectation that these measures would lead to more favorable conditions for the definitive revolutionary victory, while at the same time consolidating the real power of a libertarian organization parallel to the CNT-FAI, autonomous and independent, based on the Committee of Investigation and the CNT Defense Committees, an organization that would be capable of coordinating and centralizing all the anarchosyndicalist positions in the Government of the Generalitat, and which later made possible the workers insurrection of May 1937 against the provocations of Companys and the Stalinists. All of these positions rapidly evolved towards *the same tactic of integration of the workers movement in the program of antifascist unity* with the POUM, the Stalinists and the bourgeoisie, *with the exclusive goal of winning the war against the fascists*. This in turn caused a distinction to emerge among the anarchosyndicalist between the “redskins” and the

“woodpeckers” or collaborationists, which was entirely different from the previous divisions between FAIstas and Trentistas. The critique directed by the “redskins” at the collaborationists, which was at first purely verbal and moralistic, evolved towards a pessimism that led the majority to passivity or a flight forward, which caused them to see no other solution besides abandoning all militancy or enlisting in the military forces to win the war against fascism, even if this army was, after the summer of 1937, the Popular Army, that is, the bourgeois army of the Republic, once the militarization of the Militias had been implemented. The most coherent opposition to collaborationism that emerged among the libertarians was the opposition that took shape in The Friends of Durruti Group, which after January 1938 was practically defunct, because it had succumbed to the combined attacks of Stalinist repression and the opposition of the “government” cenetistas.

There was no party, trade union or vanguard group that called for the destruction of the bourgeois state and the revolutionary path of strengthening, *coordinating and centralizing the organs of power that had arisen in July 1936: the workers committees*. After July 20 the Barcelona proletariat exercised a kind of dictatorship “from below” in the streets and the factories, unrelated

and indifferent to “its” political and trade union organizations which not only respected the state apparatus of the bourgeoisie instead of destroying it but actually reinforced it. In the absence of a revolutionary party capable of formulating the battle for the program of the proletarian revolution,[44](#) the war against the fascist enemy imposed the ideology of antifascist unity and war on behalf of the program of the democratic bourgeoisie. *The war was not conceived as a class war, but as an antifascist war between the state of the fascist bourgeoisie and the state of the democratic bourgeoisie.* And this choice between two bourgeois options (democratic and fascist) *ALREADY presupposes the defeat of the revolutionary alternative.* For the revolutionary workers movement antifascism was the worst consequence of fascism. The ideology of antifascist unity was the worst enemy of the revolution, and the best ally of the bourgeoisie. The necessities of this war, between two bourgeois options, stifled any revolutionary alternative and suppressed the methods of the class struggle that made possible the victory of the working class insurrection of July 19. It was necessary to renounce the revolutionary conquests in favor of winning the war against the fascists: “we renounce everything except victory.”[45](#)



The alternatives that were thus posed were false: it was not about winning the war first and then carrying out the revolution (the Stalinist proposal), or even of fighting the war and carrying out the revolution at the same time (the POUM and libertarian thesis), but of abandoning the methods and the goals of the proletariat. The Popular Militias of July 21-25 were authentic proletarian Militias; the Militias of October 1936, militarized or not, were *already* an army of workers in a war directed by the bourgeoisie (whether fascist or republican) in the service of the bourgeoisie (whether democratic or fascist).

The “social revolution” and the expropriation of the factories initiated by the anarchosyndicalist rank and file were in conflict with the Popular Frontism of the anarchist and POUMist leaders. There are even people who speak of a social “*revolution*” without the seizure of state power, and even of a divorce between the socioeconomic and political aspects of the revolution.[46](#) In any event, the Popular Frontism of the anarchist leaders, and the ideology of antifascist unity, prevailed over any revolutionary consideration of destroying the state, which was always rejected as utopian and unrealistic, and which never went further than fantasy declarations of good intentions on the part of the most verbally radical elements, like García Oliver.

The CCMA was never an organ of workers power. A situation of DUAL POWER never existed. In any case there was a DUPLICATION OF POWERS between the CCMA and certain Ministries of the Generalitat, and above all a *complementary* labor on the part of both against the revolutionary committees.

The vacuum of state or centralized power led to *an initial fragmentation and atomization of power* that was resolved in September 1936 with the entry of the working class organizations into the Government of the Generalitat (and later in that of the Republic). Neither the anarchists, nor the CCMA, in which they were dominant, nor the POUM, ever attempted to remove the republican bourgeoisie from power, or destroy the state apparatus, which always remained in the hands of Companys. The definitive armed defeat of the proletariat, which took place in May 1937, was the only possible outcome of the decision made by the working class organizations in July 1937 to renounce the *absolute and total* seizure of a power that the proletariat already exercised in the streets and the factories. *May 1937 had already begun in July 1936.*

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- [1.](#) Information drawn from the “Declaración manuscrita de Servando Meana Miranda, capitán arma de Aviación”.

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- [2.](#) Abad de Santillán brought a hundred pistols to the Construction Trade Union. See: Diego Abad de Santillán, *Por qué perdimos la Guerra* [1939], Plaza Janés, Esplugues de Llobregat, 1977, p. 76.
  - [3.](#) Sergeant Manzana, despite the fact that his name is erroneously cited in many books as a leading figure in the revolutionary events of July 19, could not participate in the struggle because he was being held prisoner in the barracks brig, and was not liberated until the evening of the 20th. See: Marquez and Gallardo, *Ortiz, General sin dios ni amo*, Hacer, Barcelona, 1999, p. 101.
  - [4.](#) At six in the morning a company of assault guards from Barceloneta received orders to proceed to the Paralelo, but after unexpectedly running into a company of sappers in front of the Atarazanas they suffered numerous casualties, among others Captain Francisco Arrando, their commanding officer (the brother of Alberto Arrando, Chief of Staff of Security and Assault Guards). The company was pinned down for thirty hours in the warehouses along the Balears Dock, until the Atarazanas barracks surrendered.
  - [5.](#) The Plan of General Mola, the organizer of the military revolt against the republican government, ordered the use of terror by the rebels as the only

effective means to confront massive popular resistance. It expressly contemplated employing threats against the children and wives of the resistance, as well as mass shootings. From the very start the minority of rebel military personnel and fascists needed to impose their rule with terror over a much more numerous enemy, by way of a war of extermination that had already been practiced in the colonial war in Morocco.

- [6.](#) Because the entire breadth of San Pablo Street was swept by machine gun fire from the machine guns situated in the center of the Paralelo and on the roof of the building next to El Molino.
- [7.](#) And also many anonymous CNT militants, among others, Quico Sabaté, a militant from the Woodworkers Trade Union, who also participated in the assault on the Atarazanas barracks on the 20th, and who was a famous guerrilla fighter during the Franco regime.
- [8.](#) It appears that Colonel Lacasa had already, during the previous night, prepared to use the monastery as a hospital-fortress, and had also installed machine guns on the roof of the Casa de Les Punxes, across the street from the monastery.
- [9.](#) The incredible exploits of “El Artillero” were summarized in a brief account published in

*Solidaridad Obrera* (July 27, 1936), in which we are told how he had conquered two cannons in the battle fought against the light artillery at Diputación-Lauria, how he then forced the surrender of the rebels who had taken refuge in the nearby Ritz, after firing three salvos; from there he went to the Plaza de Santa Ana (today an unnamed square, at the end of the Puerta del Ángel, at the intersection with Cucurella-Arcs) where he fired several volleys of indirect shellfire at the Hotel Colón until the rebels inside it surrendered. Then he took his cannons down Layetana Street in order to fire thirty-eight volleys at the Capitanía. From there he went to Diagonal, in order to end the evening in the Sants neighborhood, firing on Galileo Street at a church, until its defenders surrendered.

- [10.](#) He was chief of the “mossos d’esquadra” in October 1934. His death sentence was commuted and he was amnestied and then joined the military reserve. On July 19, without assuming any official responsibility, he effectively participated as an organizer of the street battles. Appointed by Companys to be secretary of the proposed Committee of Civilian Militias, he became the military advisor of the Durruti Column.
- [11.](#) Lacruz, p. 50; Romero, p. 525.

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- [12.](#) José María Fontana, *Los catalanes en la Guerra de España*, Acervo, Barcelona, 1977.
  - [13.](#) Juan García Oliver, *El eco de los pasos*, Ruedo Ibérico, Barcelona-Paris, 1978, p. 189.
  - [14.](#) Felipe Díaz Sandino went to the airport at Logroño to investigate the preparations being made for a military coup promoted by Captain del Val, coming from Madrid. Once he confirmed the existence of a conspiracy he informed Generals Núñez de Prado and Casares Quiroga. Faced with the passivity of his superiors he decided to purge the right wing elements under his command and accumulated a stock of bombs and machine gun ammunition at the airport of El Prat, at the same time remaining in close contact with the Generalitat and the CNT.
  - [15.](#) Two fast cars, with full gas tanks, were parked in the courtyard of the police station, prepared for the flight of Companys, Escofet and their families, who were to be taken to the port at Maresme, where a ship was waiting to take them to France.
  - [16.](#) Juan García Oliver, “Ce que fut le 19 de juillet”, *Le Libéraire*, (August 18, 1938).
  - [17.](#) Ricardo Sanz, “Francisco Ascaso Morio”, mimeographed text.

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- [18.](#) Enric Ucelay-Da Cal, “El ‘complot’ nacionalista contra Companys. Noviembre-Deseembre del 36’, in *La Guerra civil a Catalunya (1936-1939), Vol. 3*, Edicions 62, Barcelona, 2004, pp. 205-214.
  - [19.](#) This was a police unit, with little real military training, most of whose members were older men with wives and children.
  - [20.](#) The defense committees of the CNT during the 1930s had recruited into their ranks numerous unemployed workers with a dual objective: one of solidarity, because they paid them a wage, and the other, tactical, to prevent them from becoming strikebreakers. This recruitment was always palliative and assigned on a rotating basis, both for reasons of solidarity and in order to prevent any professionalization and to ensure that the largest possible number of militants should pass through the defense committees, which in case of emergency could rely on an ample number of trained, combat-ready members. See Chris Ealham, *Class, Culture and Conflict in Barcelona, 1898-1937*, Routledge, London, 2005.
  - [21.](#) In Barcelona the defense committees constituted an authentic clandestine military structure, already formed in 1931 and powerfully reinforced in 1935. See “Ponencia presentada a la Federación Local de

Grupos Anarquistas de Barcelona. Comité Local de Preparación Revolucionaria”, Barcelona, January 1935. The groups that signed this document were The Indomables, Nervio, Nosotros, Tierra Libre and Germen.

- [22.](#) Between 1900 and 1930 Barcelona’s population doubled, increasing from half a million to one million inhabitants. The opening of Layetana, the construction of the Ensanche, and the public works on the subway and the International Exposition of 1929 required a vast supply of cheap labor, which during the 1930s went to swell the bloated ranks of the unemployed.
- [23.](#) Such as, for example, the torrential emigration from “the ravine of hunger” (a mountainous district in the provinces of Castellón and Teruel) to Pueblo Nuevo between 1910 and 1930, and from Murcia to La Torrassa, during the 1930s.
- [24.](#) There is a well-known photograph of the barricade built on Tigre Street, at the corner of the Ronda de San Antonio, taken by Agusti Centelles.
- [25.](#) José del Barrio, in his mimeographed memoirs, claims that he was responsible, as secretary of the UGT, for suggesting to García Oliver the idea of forming the CCMA on the afternoon of the 20th, before his interview with Companys, and that



therefore García Oliver appropriated the idea and conveyed it to Companys. Regardless of who originated this idea, the idea of forming a CCMA that would resolve the burning issues of creating militias to confront the fascist army in Aragón, and Control Patrols that would replace the sequestered forces of public order, was something that was imposed by the existing revolutionary situation. It is not necessary to seek the copyright: only with hindsight can we debate the circumstances that led to the creation of the CCMA, in the form it assumed; on the 20th, however, it seemed to everyone involved to be obvious, necessary and inevitable, just as it was everywhere else in Spain where the military uprising was defeated by the workers insurrection.

- [26.](#) For a reliable version of this famous interview, which is very different from the all-too-imaginative version offered by García Oliver, see: Josep Coll and Josep Pané, *Josep Rovira. Una vida al servei de Catalunya i del socialisme*, Ariel, Barcelona, 1978, pp. 85-87.
- [27.](#) Juan García Oliver himself, in 1950, also provided a different, “more complete and believable” version, of his famous account (published in July 1937) of his interview with Companys: “The military-fascist uprising had taken place exactly as we had

predicted. Companys [...] took refuge in the Barcelona Police Station, where he arrived at seven in the morning on the 19th of July, as he was terrified by the consequences of what he expected to happen, because he assumed that, with all the soldiers of the Barcelona regiments joining the uprising, they would easily sweep away all resistance. However, the forces of the CNT-FAI, almost alone, faced the rebels for those two memorable days and, after a bitter and bloody struggle [...] we defeated all the regiments [...]. For all these reasons, Companys, facing the representatives of the CNT-FAI, was overwhelmed and confused. Confused, because, in his consciousness he only thought about the weight of the great responsibility that they bore towards us and the Spanish people for not having heeded all our predictions [...]. Overwhelmed, because despite the fact that they did not fulfill the commitments they made with us, the CNT-FAI in Barcelona and in Cataluña had defeated the rebels [...]. This is why, when he addressed us, Companys told us: 'Now I know that you have many reasons to complain and to express your dissatisfaction with me. I have fought against you for a long time and I was incapable of really appreciating your true worth. It is

never too late, however, to sincerely make amends, and the way I shall do so, which you will now see, has the value of a confession: if I had appreciated you at your true worth, it is possible that we would not be facing the situation we are now facing; but there is no other remedy, now, you alone have defeated the rebel officers, and logically you should govern. If that is what you think, then I am quite pleased to surrender to you the Presidency of the Generalitat and, if you think I can be of any use in another position, you need only tell me what post I should occupy. BUT DUE TO THE FACT THAT WE STILL DO NOT KNOW EXACTLY WHO HAS EMERGED VICTORIOUS IN THE OTHER PARTS OF SPAIN, AND IF YOU BELIEVE THAT FROM THE PRESIDENCY OF THE GENERALITAT I CAN STILL BE OF SERVICE BY ACTING AS THE LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE OF CATALUÑA, LET ME KNOW, SO THAT FROM THIS OFFICE, AND ALWAYS WITH YOUR CONSENT, WE SHALL CONTINUE THE STRUGGLE UNTIL IT IS CLEAR WHO HAS WON.’ For our part, and this is what the CNT-FAI thought, we understand that Companys should still remain at the head of the Generalitat, precisely because we have not filled the streets and fought specifically for the social revolution, but to defend

ourselves from the fascist military coup.” [From García Oliver’s responses to Bollothen’s inquiries.]

- [28.](#) Aurelio Fernández replaced Francisco Ascaso on the liaison committee, whose other members were Durruti, Oliver, Santillán and Asens.
- [29.](#) Information derived from the version provided by Coll and Pané, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-87.
- [30.](#) “On July 21, 1936, a Regional Plenum of Local Federations and District Committees, convoked by the Regional Committee of Cataluña, was held in Barcelona. At this meeting, the situation was analyzed and it was unanimously determined not to speak about libertarian communism as long as we had not yet conquered that part of Spain that was in the hands of the rebels. The Plenum therefore decided not to proceed to enact totalitarian measures [...] it decided in favor of collaboration, and agreed to form, with only one vote in opposition, that of Bajo Llobregat, together with all the Parties and Organizations, the Committee of Antifascist Militias. The CNT and the FAI so order their representatives by resolution of this Plenum.” Quoted from *Informe de la delegación de la CNT al Congreso Extraordinario de la AIT y resoluciones del mismo*, p. 96.

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- [31.](#) See Juan García Oliver, “El Comité central de Milicias Antifascistas de Cataluña”, in *De julio a julio. Un año de lucha*, Tierra y Libertad, Barcelona, 1937. García Oliver wrote this article one year after the events in question, and it is very much influenced by the political context following May 1937.
  - [32.](#) “Finally, my informant claims that at the assembly or plenum of the 21st, García Oliver proposed the question of anarchist dictatorship or libertarian communism and that it was not supported by the assembly. I say that if he did so, he did so without conviction, as he was convinced that an anarchist dictatorship could only lead to disaster. He posed this dramatic dilemma in order to create more support for his collaborationist choice [....] García Oliver confirms this air of comedy by arrogantly writing the following: ‘the CNT and the FAI decided upon collaboration and democracy, renouncing revolutionary totalitarianism, which would have led to the strangling of the revolution by the confederal or anarchist dictatorship’.” See José Peirats, “Mise au point sur de notes”, *Noir et Rouge*, No. 38, June 1967.
  - [33.](#) The previously cited testimonies of José del Barrio, Juan García Oliver himself, in 1950, and José Peirats, are corroborated by that of Federica

Montseny: “Nobody even ever imagined, not even García Oliver, who was the most Bolshevik of all, the idea of seizing revolutionary power. It was only later, when we saw the extent of the movement and of the popular initiatives that we began to discuss whether we could or should go for broke.” (Abel Paz, *Durruti: El proletariado en armas*, Bruguera, Barcelona, 1978, pp. 381-382.) [English language edition: Abel Paz, *Durruti: The People Armed*, Black Rose Books, Montreal, 1996.]

- [34.](#) Letter from García Oliver to Abel Paz. See Abel Paz, *Durruti en la Revolución española*, FAL, Madrid, 1996, pp. 504-505. [English language edition: Abel Paz, *Durruti in the Spanish Revolution*, tr. Chuck Morse, AK Press, San Francisco, 2006. Available online at: [http://libcom.org/library/durruti-spanish-revolution.](http://libcom.org/library/durruti-spanish-revolution)]
- [35.](#) The anarchosyndicalist representatives were Josep Asens, Buenaventura Durruti and Juan García Oliver for the CNT, and Aurelio Fernández and Diego Abad de Santillán for the FAI. Durruti was later replaced by Marcos Alcón.
- [36.](#) “Just how far can we proceed with an experiment in libertarian communism in Cataluña, without having ended the war and with the dangers posed by foreign intervention? This dilemma was

posed to the anarchists militants and the representatives of the trade unions on July 23, at a Plenum of the two organizations [...] it was decided to preserve the antifascist bloc, and to issue the directive to the entire region: we must not proclaim libertarian communism. Seek to maintain hegemony in the committees of the antifascist militias and postpone any totalitarian attempt to realize our ideas.” Quoted from *El anarquismo en España. Informe del Comité Peninsular de la Federación Anarquista Ibérica al Movimiento Libertario Internacional*, n.d. [1938?], p. 2.

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Another document confirms the testimony of the one just quoted above: “At a Plenum attended by both the anarchist and the confederal organizations it was agreed, due to the urgent circumstances that prevailed at that time, to accept collaboration and to participate directly in the state institutions of political and economic administration.” Quoted from the FAI pamphlet, *Informe que este Comité de Relaciones de Grupos Anarquistas de Cataluña presenta a los camaradas de la Región*, n.d. [March 1937?].

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- [37](#). Because of the urgency of making decisions on these matters, after July 19 the horizontal and

federative machinery of the CNT collapsed and with it any practice of direct democracy also fell by the wayside. The usual practice was to adopt the important decisions that had to be made at meetings of leaders, members of the Regional Committee, the Local Federation of Barcelona, the Peninsular Committee of the FAI, and all those who had positions of responsibility in the CCMA, the Council of the Economy or the Investigation Committee, the Control Patrols, etc. These decisions made by the leading militants and office holders would then be submitted at a later time to Plenums for ratification, thus “formally” preserving the appearances of the traditional modus operandi of the CNT.

- [38.](#) García Oliver reiterated his proposal to take power by taking advantage of the concentration of militiamen who were supposed to depart for the front.
- [39.](#) García Oliver, *El eco...*, pp. 190-191. Gallardo and Márquez, *Ortiz*, pp. 109-110.
- [40.](#) Antonio Ortiz, “La segunda Columna sale de Barcelona”.
- [41.](#) “You have a duty now. Come to a rally at the Paseo de Gracia at ten in the morning. A warning, workers of Barcelona, all of you and especially those



of the CNT. The positions that have been conquered in Barcelona must not be abandoned. The capital must not be abandoned. You must remain on permanent guard, eyes open, in case you have to respond to any possible events. Workers of the CNT, all as one man we must go the aid of the comrades of Aragón.”

- [42.](#) See the PROCLAMATION signed by the Committee of the CRTC, which we reprint in its entirety in the Appendix. An article appeared in *Solidaridad Obrera* (July 27, 1936) which stressed that “the confederal position, in relation to the revolutionary situation, will continue to be the same one maintained up until now”, as if it was necessary to overcome significant resistance to what was already approved at the Plenum of the 21st.
- [43.](#) The horizontal and federative organizational machinery of the CNT, which rapidly broke down and became a mere formal ratification of the debates and resolutions already adopted by the superior committees, was not conducive to the emergence of “tendencies” capable of defending their minority positions within the organization.
- [44.](#) That is: destruction of the capitalist state (whether fascist or republican); extension and centralization of the committees as organs of

workers power; socialization of the economy; proletarian control over the war effort; and dictatorship of the proletariat.

- [45.](#) Propaganda slogan coined by Ilya Ehrenburg, which *Solidaridad Obrera* under the editorship of Toryho falsely attributed to Durruti. See Ilya Ehrenburg, *Corresponsal en la Guerra civil española*, Júcar, Gijón, 1979, p. 24.
- [46.](#) Santos Juliá, “De la división orgánica al gobierno de unidad nacional”, in *Socialismo y guerra civil. Anales de historia de la Fundación Pablo Iglesias*, Vol. 2 (1987), pp. 227-245.

## **Part 2 - The CNT-FAI in the Central Committee of Antifascist Militias of Catalunya**

*“All history was a palimpsest, scraped clean and reinscribed exactly as often as was necessary. In no case would it have been possible, once the deed was done, to prove that any falsification had taken place.”*

George Orwell, 1984

*“Obsequium amicos, veritas odium parit.” (Compliance raises friends, and truth breeds hate.)*

Terence, *Andria*

### **POWER IS IN THE STREETS**

*The real power of decision and execution was in the streets, it was the power of the proletariat in arms, and it was exercised by the local committees, the defense committees and the workers control committees, spontaneously expropriating factories, workshops, buildings and land; organizing, arming and transporting to the front the groups of volunteer militiamen that had previously been recruited; burning churches or converting them into schools or warehouses; forming*

patrols to *spread the social war*; manning the *barricades*, which were now class frontiers, and which controlled all traffic and manifested the power of the committees; resuming production at the factories, without employers or managers, or converting them to military production; requisitioning cars and trucks, or food for the supply committee; taking bourgeoisie, fascists and priests “for a ride”; replacing the obsolete republican municipal governments, and imposing in each locality their absolute authority in all domains, paying no attention to any orders from the Generalitat, or the Central Committee of Antifascist Militias (CCMA).

On the night of the 19th there was no other real power besides that of “the federation of the barricades”, and this power had no other immediate goal besides the defeat of the rebels. The army and the police, either dissolved or confined to their barracks, disappeared from the streets after July 20. They were replaced by Popular Militias composed of armed workers, who fraternized with the discharged soldiers and civil and assault guards, many of them in civilian clothing, in one victorious mass, which transformed them into the vanguard of the revolutionary insurrection.

In Barcelona, during the following week, while the CCMA was still only a provisional power, *neighborhood*

*committees*<sup>2</sup>, as the expression of the power acquired by the defense committees, coordinated their activities in an authentic urban federation that, in the streets and the factories, exercised all power, in every domain, in the absence of any effective exercise of power by the municipal governments, the national government, or the Generalitat. The dozens of barricades erected in Barcelona were still manned in October, controlling vehicular traffic and checking for identification papers and the requisite passes, issued by the various committees, as a means of consolidating, defending and controlling the new revolutionary situation, and above all as a symbol of the new power of the committees.

## **THE CONTRADICTIONS OF GARCÍA OLIVER AND STATE ANARCHISM**

In order to understand the obvious and numerous contradictions of García Oliver, and the dense smokescreen that his memoirs cast over the events of this period, it is necessary to explain his conception of the adaptability of abstract ideological principles to the pressing needs of more immediate political tactics, as well as his conception of the nature of leadership in the confederal organization.

How do we interpret the fact that García Oliver, in *El eco de los pasos*, in his account of the regional plenums of the 21st and the 26th of July, claims he said that the CCMA was a lid<sup>3</sup> on the revolution, while on August 3, only a week later, he considered the CCMA to be the best guarantee of the progress of the revolution?<sup>4</sup> How can we resolve the permanent contradiction of García Oliver, between what he did and what he says he did? Did he really propose, at the Regional Plenum of July 21, that the CNT should seize power?

In order to understand the García Oliver of July 1936 we must compare his attitude and his activities of that period with his attitude and activities during the electoral campaign of February 1936. During this electoral campaign, the anarchosyndicalist leaders never explicitly told the workers to vote. They claimed that, regardless of the outcome of the elections, a few months later an armed confrontation was inevitable; if, however, the workers were to vote for the Popular Front, besides obtaining the release of thousands of prisoners, the circumstances of the armed confrontation would also be more favorable for them, since they would benefit from republican legality and republican control of the state apparatus. Therefore, what the CNT-FAI did was much more than to renounce their traditional appeal for

abstention from voting in the elections, as García Oliver himself unequivocally explained: “WE ADVISED THE WORKING CLASS TO DO WHATEVER THEY THOUGHT BEST WITH RESPECT TO VOTING, BUT WE DID TELL THEM THAT, IF THEY DID NOT VOTE FOR THE LEFT, ON THE DAY AFTER THE ELECTIONS THEY WOULD HAVE TO CONFRONT THE FASCIST RIGHTISTS WITH ARMS IN HAND. WHILE IF THEY VOTED FOR THE LEFT, BEFORE SIX MONTHS HAD PASSED AFTER THE VICTORY OF THE LEFT WE WOULD HAVE TO CONTRONT THE FASCIST RIGHTISTS WITH ARMS IN HAND. Naturally, the working class of Spain, which had for many years been advised by the CNT not to vote, interpreted our propaganda in exactly the way we wanted them to, that is, that they should vote, since it would always be better to confront the fascist rightists if they were to revolt after being defeated in the elections and ousted from the Government.”[5](#)

We note the curious and contorted argument of García Oliver, *who, without himself renouncing the abstentionist principle, INDIRECTLY advised the militants and sympathizers to abide by the tactic that was most beneficial for the CNT’s organization by voting.* This is the same parallelism that we have to apply in order to grasp García Oliver’s speech at the Plenum of July 21: *without himself renouncing “going for broke”, he encouraged the*

*militants to draw the conclusion of how absurd and ridiculous it would be, at that time, to impose an “anarchist dictatorship”.*[6](#)

In short, García Oliver was capable of making a speech that was *formally* consistent with the sacrosanct anarcho-syndicalist principles, but simultaneously induced the militant rank and file to choose the tactic that he considered most appropriate at the time, however inconsistent it was with respect to those ideological principles.[7](#)

This pernicious and baroque way of exercising leadership and “leading the masses” allowed him to indulge months later in a kind of “victimism”, by which he attributed the catastrophic choice of collaborationism *exclusively* to the CNT rank and file. Forty years later, with the historians unable to consult the minutes of the Plenums of the 21st and the 26th of July, which have conveniently disappeared, who would deny the claim of the author of *El eco de los pasos* that he proposed “going for broke”, or even that later he unwillingly assumed leadership of the CCMA, or that he would later resist being appointed as anarchist Minister of Justice under Largo Caballero, or that, very much against his will, but for the benefit of the confederal organization, he performed the necessary role of “fire chief” during the Events of May 1937, and then later was the frustrated candidate for Chancellor of



the Government of the Generalitat, and then a long *etcetera* of contradictory sellouts, each one more surrealistic than the last.

In any event, no one is what he says he is, but *what he really does*, and what the others say he is. And this also applies to García Oliver. Juan García Oliver was an anarchosyndicalist leader who, from his position as the effective president of the CCMA, *suffocated the revolution of the committees*, when the revolutionary initiatives of these committees superseded the directives of the confederal organization. The collaborationism of the CNT, however, did not just consist of the entry of a few of its leaders into the government; *it was the entire organization that was implicated in the various levels of the state apparatus*. And this fact was more important than the more than dubious position of the individual García Oliver in favor of an ambiguous “going for broke”. The CNT lacked a program and a tactic that would have prepared it for the seizure of power; and that is why its leaders did nothing but improvise, and sought to collaborate with the other antifascist forces and the government of the Generalitat, despite the “provisional setback” this implied for their anti-state prejudices, which led to the hybrid CCMA. In fact, if the CNT had such a program and such a tactic it would not have been

an anarchist trade union, but a Marxist party. The anarchosyndicalist organization and ideology foundered on the rocks of the openly revolutionary situation that arose following the insurrectional victory of July 1936.

And here we return to our analysis of García Oliver's idea of leadership in the CNT. Not all the militants were equal, nor did their opinions, or proposals, carry the same weight; one only needed to pay heed and give consideration to the speeches of those who, before they mounted the podium, had risked their lives and their liberty for the organization, rather than those who had limited their intervention to talk. Those who had become leaders did so by means of their dedication and courage. This leadership of "the man of action" and, on a secondary level, of the "intellectuals",<sup>8</sup> was an integral aspect of the CNT, although this was not enunciated in its regulations and statutes.

The theoretical horizontal and egalitarian structure of the CNT rapidly disappeared, if it had actually ever prevailed at the highest decision-making levels. The superior committees provided a screen for the upper echelons of the leadership, which debated and decided everything *secretly*, in its own environment of friends and acquaintances. The great trade union Plenums on a national and regional scale, only served to *ratify* the

resolutions already made by the superior committees, and to make them *public*.

The CNT functioned in a pyramidal and quasi-Leninist manner, in which a small vanguard debated and decided everything, and this was only made worse by the fact that it was impossible for *tendencias* to form within the organization that were capable of organizing with their own programs and leaderships against the majority, since the CNT was formally a *unitary and horizontal* trade union organization.

## **THE FIRST DAYS OF THE CCMA**

The first informal meeting of the CCMA took place during the evening of the 20th, for informational and preparatory purposes, once the CNT delegation had obtained the provisional consent of the Joint Regional Committee. Representing the government of the Generalitat and the ERC were Josep Tarradellas, Artemi Aguadé and Jaume Miravittles; for the Unió Socialista, Comorera; for the UGT, Vidiella: Peypoch for Acció Catalana; Gorkin for the POUM; and Buenaventura Durruti, Juan García Oliver and Aurelio Fernández represented the CNT-FAI.

Tarradellas proposed the exclusion of Estat Català, as he considered it to be a right wing organization, since its

leader Dencás was a fascist who had taken refuge in Italy. García Oliver proposed a representational scheme for participation in the CCMA: three posts for the CNT, three for the UGT, and three for the ERC; two for the FAI, and one for each of the following organizations: Acció Catalana, POUM, the socialists, and the Rabassaires. On that same night the decree concerning the formation of Citizen Militias was sent to be printed in the Official Bulletin of the Generalitat, which was published on the following day. In this decree, Lluís Prunés was named Minister of Defense by Companys, and Pérez Farrás was appointed chief of the militias. The militias were an institution that assumed the responsibility for Defense, without any participation from the national government, which lacked any presence in the government of the Generalitat.[9](#)

On July 21 at eleven in the morning, at the Naval School, the first official meeting of the CCMA took place, where García Oliver, ignoring the published decree and the delegates named by the Generalitat, submitted for debate and approval his project for the constitution of a Central Committee of Antifascist Militias that would impose *a new "revolutionary order"*. The CNT had renounced any intention of seizing power, but it was not ready to become a simple bit player in the Generalitat

and thus renounce its armed victory in the streets, which the rank and file militants would never have tolerated. After a debate in which Artemi Aguadé argued against Juan García Oliver's idea of the concept of "revolutionary order", the CCMA was officially founded. The leadership of the CCMA was exercised *de facto* by García Oliver. The delegates at the meeting<sup>10</sup> approved the following text, which was published as a *Decree*:

"The Committee of Antifascist Militias of Cataluña having been constituted, this institution, in accordance with the Decree published by the government of the Generalitat of Cataluña in today's Official Bulletin, has approved the following resolutions, with which all citizens must comply:

"1. Revolutionary order is established, which all the organizations represented on the Committee are pledged to uphold.

"2. For control and security, the Committee has appointed the necessary squads for the purpose of ensuring rigorous compliance with its orders. Towards this end, the squads will bear the corresponding credentials that will identify their personnel.

"3. These squads will be the only ones accredited by the Committee. Any other persons or groups that act outside

the purview of these squads will be considered to be rebels and will suffer the punishments that the Committee considers appropriate.

“4. The night squads will be especially strict with regard to those who disrupt the revolutionary order.

“5. Between one and five in the morning traffic will be restricted to the following elements: a) all those with credentials proving that they are members of any of the organizations that constitute the Committee of Militias; b) those persons who are accompanied by any of the above elements who will vouch for their moral character; c) Those who can prove that they had to leave their homes for reasons of *force majeure*.

“6. For the purpose of recruiting elements for the Antifascist Militias, the organizations that constitute the Committee are authorized to open corresponding recruitment and training facilities. The conditions regarding this recruitment will be set forth in detail in internal regulations.

“7. The Committee hopes that, given the need to construct a revolutionary order to confront the fascist groups, it will not have to resort to disciplinary measures in order to enforce obedience.

“The Committee.”[11](#)

The decree forming the CCMA was therefore nothing extraordinary, and was primarily oriented towards measures to ensure public order. The term, “revolutionary order” does not allow us to seriously speak of anything like dual power, as some historians have. Nor did the contemporary press emphasize the constitution of the CCMA as anything extraordinary, nor did it at any time view the CCMA as a revolutionary government that was a *rival* of the Generalitat. The Generalitat, for its part, continued to lead a phantom existence, assuming responsibility for the secondary tasks that the CCMA delegated to it, and its authority was practically limited to publishing the Official Bulletin.

In Barcelona, *the defense committees, having been transformed into revolutionary neighborhood committees*, in the absence of any directives from any organization and without any other coordination than was required by the revolutionary initiatives of each moment, organized the hospitals, overwhelmed by an avalanche of wounded, organized popular kitchens, requisitioned cars, trucks, weapons, factories and buildings, searched private homes and arrested suspects, and created a network of supply committees in each neighborhood, which were coordinated in a Supply

Committee for the entire city, in which the Food Supply Trade Union played a significant role. The revolutionary contagion affected all social sectors and all organizations that were sincerely sympathetic to the new revolutionary situation. This constituted the only real power of the CCMA, which appeared to the people in arms as the antifascist institution that must *conduct the war and impose the new revolutionary order*.

We have already seen how a Plenum of Local and District Committees had on July 21 renounced the seizure of power, understood as a dictatorship of the anarchist leaders rather than as the imposition, coordination and extension of the power that the revolutionary committees were already exercising in the streets. On the 23rd a secret joint plenum of the superior committees of the CNT and the FAI closed ranks around the decision made to collaborate in the CCMA, and to prepare to overcome the resistance of the militants at the upcoming Plenum on the 26th. On that same day García Oliver broadcast a speech directed at the workers of Zaragoza, calling upon them to go into the streets and let themselves be killed by the fascists.<sup>[12](#)</sup> At a bar across from the Pino church, the Unified Socialist Party (PSUC) was formed, as a merger of four small socialist and Stalinist groups.



We have also seen how, on the 24th, the first two anarchist columns departed for the front under the command of Durruti and Ortiz. Durruti broadcast a speech over the radio in which he warned his listeners of the need to be vigilant against a possible counterrevolutionary coup. *The revolutionary situation in Barcelona had to be consolidated, in order to “go for broke” after the capture of Zaragoza.*

On July 25 Companys appeared at the Naval School to accuse the members of the CCMA of being ineffective in assuring public order, in the face of the indifference of García Oliver who dismissed him in a threatening manner.

*On the 26th of July, the definitive collaboration of the CNT-FAI in the CCMA was ratified* that morning at the Regional Plenum, a decision that had already been approved by the superior committees of the CNT-FAI in their debate on the 23rd and at the previous Regional Plenum held on the 21st.

The Plenum of the 26th *unanimously* confirmed that the CNT would maintain the *same position* approved already on the 21st of July to participate in this new institution of class collaboration known as the CCMA. This same plenum of the 26th created a Supply Commission,

dependent on the CCMA, to which the various supply committees that had emerged all over the city were ordered to submit,<sup>[13](#)</sup> and at the same time ordered a partial termination of the general strike. The summary of the main resolutions approved at this Plenum was published in the form of a *Decree*,<sup>[14](#)</sup> in order to ensure that they were understood and observed. The CCMA met on the evening of the 26th to create a flow chart and schematic of various departments: War, Militias of Barcelona, Regional Militias, Supply Commission, Propaganda, Authorizations and Permits, Control Patrols, Military Hospitals, Transport and Subsidies.

García Oliver was in charge of the Department of War. Abad de Santillán was responsible for supplying the militias, assisted by Miret and Pons. Aurelio Fernández was named chief of the Department of Investigation, or, which amounts to the same thing, the real chief of the revolutionary police, with the assistance of José Asens and Tomás Fábregas (Acció Catalana), who led the Control Patrols. Marcos Alcón (who replaced Durruti) was responsible for the Transport section, with the assistance of Durán Rosell (who replaced Antonio López Raimundo, who was killed on the front at Huesca), from the UGT. Josep Miret (Unió Socialista, later to merge with the PSUC) and Joan Pons (ERC) were in charge of the

Department of Regional Militias. Miravittles (ERC) was made leader of the Department of Propaganda and Torrents (Unió de Rabassaires) was appointed head of the Supply Commission. Rafael Vidiella (replacing José del Barrio, the delegate of the Carlos Marx Column) was also appointed to the Department of Investigation, which was led by Aurelio Fernández. Joan Pons Garlandí (ERC) was named to head the Department of Authorizations and Permits (passports). Artemi Aguadé (ERC) led the War Hospitals department. Josep Tarradellas was appointed to head the decisive department of the Economy and War Industries. The brothers Guarner, Díaz Sandino and Pérez Farrás were named as military advisors. Lluís Prunés, Minister of Defense of the Generalitat, soon resigned from his ostensible but scarcely effective position (which was not recognized) as president of the CCMA.

The dominance of García Oliver and his clashes with the government of the Generalitat were constant features of the CCMA until its dissolution, although they diminished in intensity, importance and interest with each passing week, both because of the fact that García Oliver lost the support of the Regional Committee, and because of the ineffectiveness of the CCMA and the very early secret decision of the CNT to dissolve it. The most serious

confrontation was undoubtedly García Oliver's veto of the Casanovas government, proposed by Companys on July 31, 1936, in which two PSUC Ministers were admitted: Joan Comorera and Rafael Vidiella, and one from the Unió de Rabassaires: Josep Calvet. García Oliver's ultimatum, which included a threat to overthrow the Generalitat, because he saw the new government as an attack against the existence of the CCMA, ended with Companys relenting and modifying the composition of the government (now with only republicans) just a few days after having published the decree of its constitution.

The position of the superior committees<sup>15</sup> of the CNT-FAI was incoherent, unsustainable and contradictory. Their ideological principles prevented them from entering the Government of the Generalitat, but they did not want that government to pose a threat to the CCMA, either, and thus sought to keep the government subject to an institution that was not, and did not want to be, a revolutionary government that was an alternative to the Generalitat. The CCMA did not hold all power in its hands, nor did it want to leave all power in the hands of anyone else. The anarchosyndicalist leaders wanted to *consolidate the existing revolutionary situation*. If this has been called dual power it is only because there was no understanding of the fact that dual power entails a

ferocious and merciless struggle, carried out between *two opposed poles*, to destroy the rival power.<sup>16</sup> In the case of Cataluña it was more appropriate to speak of a *duplication* and *complementarity* of powers divided among various ministries of the government and the CCMA, which occasionally proved to be problematic, ineffective and irritating for everyone involved. García Oliver's threat against the formation of the Casanovas government had no other purpose than to preserve this duplication of powers. The anarchosyndicalist participation in the tasks of the government by way of the CCMA was unsatisfactory. But no one dared to propose to the armed masses of libertarian militants that the anarchosyndicalists should directly enter the government. When reality clashes with principles, it is the latter that usually have to give way.

In the meantime, the CCMA created the Council of the Unified New School (July 27, 1936), the Commission of War Industries (August 7, 1936), the Control Patrols (August 11, 1936) and the Council of the Economy (August 11, 1936). There was a tendency underway towards an *exclusively military specialization of the CCMA*. In reality what was taking place was *a process of integration of all the revolutionary initiatives into the government machinery*. All these mixed commissions had

a high degree of autonomy and independent power of decision, besides counting on a notable working class presence, even at the presidency and the leadership levels, but they were always organically embedded in the various departments of the government of the Generalitat, which was beginning to acquire prestige, presence and portions of power, to the permanent detriment of the CCMA and the revolutionary committees. The most notable case was that of the Commission of War Industries, in which Tarradellas was able to form a team of professional technicians, such as Colonel Jiménez de la Beraza, the Head of the Air Force Miguel Ramírez and the Artillery Captain Luís Arizón, who, together with highly skilled workers, such as the metal worker Eugenio Vallejo,<sup>17</sup> a pioneer in creating an incipient war industry after July 20, who brought the collaboration and enthusiasm of the various trade unions and committees, and successfully created a war industry from absolutely nothing, which attained significant production levels in only a few months.

## **THE COUNCIL OF THE ECONOMY**

The purpose of the Council of the Economy was to “provide a suitable structure for and normalize the functioning of the Catalan economy”, as the Decree of the Generalitat that ratified its creation stated on August

11, 1936. It was an institution of class collaboration between the different antifascist forces that composed the CCMA, in a revolutionary situation dominated by the political and military hegemony of the CNT, and its goal was to channel, control, regulate and neutralize, or minimize as much as possible, the methodical expropriation of the bourgeoisie that the proletariat was carrying out. It was the point of departure for the counterrevolution to recover the functions lost by the state apparatus, first transforming the expropriations into collectivizations, which were nothing more than appropriations of the enterprises by their workers, reflecting a kind of “trade union capitalism”,<sup>18</sup> and finally established rigid control over the Catalan economy, which was planned, centralized and directed by the Generalitat. In this manner a parallel evolution was underway, of a legislative character, but also one that imposed effective control over the enterprises by the Generalitat which, starting with the Plan of Socialist Transformation (August 17, 1936), concluded with the Decree on Collectivizations and Workers Control (October 24, 1936), which imposed an inspector appointed by the Generalitat on the collectivized enterprises. The explanation of the Collectivization Decree, and its public introduction and imposition on the working class that took place during the Conference on

the New Economy on December 5-6 of 1936, although presented as a kind of working class assembly with decision-making powers, nothing could have been further from the truth.

The much-mythologized self-management of the collectives never went beyond a *capitalism of trade union management and state planning*, against which the industrial workers of Barcelona fought in the spring of 1937, in favor of the alternative of *socialization*.

## **THE CONTROL PATROLS**

Already during the weeks prior to the military uprising the Nosotros group had organized some requisition patrols, which had been reconnoitering the churches to prepare for their plundering, in order to obtain money, precious metals and artworks with which weapons could be bought from foreign countries.[19](#)

These requisition patrols went into action on July 19 and engaged in frenetic activity during the first few weeks. The atomization of power, the confinement of the forces of public order to their barracks, and the absence of control and coordination on the part of the CCMA, caused Barcelona to experience a wave of looting and terror, as a natural continuation of the street battles against the military uprising. It was a kind of *extension of*



*the social war* in which priests, bourgeoisie and rightists were enemies to be hunted down and killed by patrols of armed men, subject to no authority, who defended themselves from attacks from snipers for a whole week. On July 28 the CNT-FAI published a serious warning that all disturbers of the public order who took justice into their own hands would be shot. And some outstanding militants were in fact shot,[20](#) along with various criminals and opportunists. In order to quell this social disorder the CCMA created the Control Patrols, conceived as a revolutionary police force, on August 11.

The Control Patrols lasted much longer than the CCMA, as they were not dissolved until early June 1937, shortly after the events known as “the May Days” of 1937.

They were formed into eleven sections, distributed throughout all the neighborhoods of Barcelona. At first they had a total of seven hundred men, plus eleven commanding officers, one for each section. They wore uniforms composed of a leather jacket with zipper, corduroy pants, militia cap and a black and red bandana, they carried identification cards, and they were armed. Some of them came from the requisition patrols and others from the defense committees, although many of the latter proved to be reluctant to act as “police” for ideological reasons, which allowed new, unreliable

elements to enter the Control Patrols. Furthermore, only half the members of the Patrols were members of the CNT, or the FAI; the other half were members of the other organizations that formed the CCMA: POUM, ERC and PSUC, for the most part.

The Control Patrols were under the authority of the Committee of Investigation of the CCMA, led by Aurelio Fernández (FAI) and Salvador González (PSUC), who replaced Vidiella. The central office of the Committee of Investigation was at Number 617 Gran Vía, where the two delegates of the Patrols, José Asens (FAI) and Tomás Fábregas (Acció Catalana) were based. The Patrolmen's wages, ten pesetas a day, were paid by the government of the Generalitat. Although all the sections made arrests, and some of those arrested were interrogated at the old Casa Cambó, the central prison was located in the former convent of the Nuns of San Elías. The warden of the prison was Silvio Torrents "Arias" (FAI), the delegate of the central office of the Control Patrols. A tribunal was constituted at San Elías, created by the Control Patrols themselves, without the formal consent of any organization, whose mission was to judge the detainees as quickly as possible. This tribunal was composed of the Patrol members Riera, the brothers Arias, Aubí and Bonet, of the FAI; África de las Heras and Salvador

González of the PSUC; Coll from the ERC and Barceló from the POUM. The operations of this tribunal were totally independent of the CCMA, any other organization and the Generalitat. It was *led* by Aurelio Fernández, Manuel Escorza, Vicente Gil (“Portela”), Dionisio Eroles and José Asens. The detainees were interrogated summarily, without any judicial safeguards of any kind.

The Control Patrols included, at the time of their founding, the following sections: the First, or Casco Viejo, at Number 31 Ancha Street, under delegate Miguel Lastre; the Second, at the intersection of Aragón and Muntaner Streets (Number 182 Aragón Street). The Third, covering Barceloneta and the Estación del Norte. The Fourth included the working class neighborhoods of Poble Sec and Can Tunis. The Fifth, the working class neighborhoods of Sants and Hostafrancs, its headquarters located at the Orfeó de Sants on Galileo Street—its delegate was “Mario” (FAI); the Sixth, the upper class districts of Bonanova and Pedralbes, with its headquarters on Muntaner Street; The Seventh, the Gracia and San Gervasio neighborhoods, with its headquarters on Balmes Street; the Eighth, the working class neighborhood of El Clot—its delegate was Oliver (FAI); the Ninth, the working class neighborhood of San Andrés and its delegate went by the name of Pérez (FAI);

the Tenth, Horta; the Eleventh, with its headquarters at the Ateneo Colón, at Number 166 Pedro VI Street, in the working class neighborhood of Pueblo Nuevo—its delegate was Antonio López (FAI), and it shared its headquarters with the Patrols of San Adrián. The patrolmen had no other restrictions on their jurisdiction that were clearly expressed other than to respect the rights of the freemasons and the consulates.[21](#)

Aurelio Fernández had effective control of the borders. He competed with Pons (ERC) with regard to the issuing and control of passports and travel permits. Aurelio assigned Vicente Gil (“Portela”) to supervise control over the airfields and ports.

Aurelio Fernández worked very closely with Manuel Escorza, the real decision-maker who directed, coordinated and informed the other CNT “police” officials: José Asens, the delegate of the Control Patrols, and Dionisio Eroles, the Secretary of the Council of Workers and Soldiers, an institution created to purge the military and police of elements whose loyalty was in doubt.

Manuel Escorza del Val was the director of the Services of Investigation and Information of the CNT-FAI, that is, an institution that was not under the authority of the

CCMA, but of the regional committees of the CNT and the FAI, in other words, it was a libertarian institution that, in accordance with the proposal made by Escorza at the Plenum of July 21, constituted an attempt to create an autonomous and independent armed force that would be capable of “giving the boot” someday to the government of the Generalitat. The central investigation patrol, which was under its authority, made San Elías, which was already the central prison for all the Control Patrols, into a fortress, a power center, a general barracks and the headquarters of the tribunal of the Patrols.

This Investigation Service of the CNT-FAI carried out missions involving information gathering and espionage, even in France, where Minué, Escorza’s brother-in-law, established an efficient information gathering network.

Manuel Escorza del Val, with his office on the top floor of the former Casa Cambó, had confiscated the archives of the employers association (Fomento del Trabajo) and the chamber of commerce (the Lliga), which provided him with many names, dates, relations and addresses, with which he carried out an efficient labor of repression against rightists, priests and individuals dissatisfied with the “new revolutionary order”. It was Escorza, for example, who revealed the scandal and the conspiracy of

the plot of Casanovas against Companys, in November 1936.

Salvador González established at the Hotel Colón and the Círculo Ecuestre a prison and a network of repression under the control of the PSUC, similar to that of Escorza, with the help of Olaso, Rodríguez Sala, África de las Heras and Sala. Soler Arumí, of the ERC, set up his own repressive apparatus at the Centro Federal at the Paseo de Gracia.

These repressive institutions had no connection or fealty to the Generalitat or the CCMA, or even to their own organizations. This autonomy of the repressive forces, which allowed them to act with total independence, without having to justify their activities to anyone, degenerated, among the cenetistas as well as the PSUC, POUM and the ERC, into abuses and unnecessary and unjustifiable arbitrary actions. The practice of taking priests, bourgeois, and rightists “for a ride” became a regular occurrence, especially along the roads in Arrabassada, el Morrot, Can Tunis, Somorrostro, Vallvidriera and Tibidabo; and later at the cemetery of Moncada. The shakedowns and payoffs in the form of money, gold or jewels in exchange for allowing arrested persons to avoid imprisonment and trial,[22](#) whether they were priests or rightists, was absolutely odious, corrupt

and reprehensible. We must differentiate between the police and repressive duties carried out against those who opposed the “new revolutionary order”, typical of any regime, from the corruption that was practiced on behalf of the patrol members and their leaders, which only grew worse as the impression that the republican side might lose the war began to make headway.

During the first two months of their existence the Patrols generated a climate of social anxiety and insecurity due to their arbitrary actions and their multiplicity of allegiances, since there were the patrols of the CCMA, those of each organization and each neighborhood (or town), factory or barricade. Looking back on this period, those who have focused on the intestine struggle among the antifascists, that is, the struggle of the PSUC and the ERC against the CNT, attributed the repression of the first months *solely* to the anarchists, overlooking the repression carried out by the ERC and the PSUC, which, after May, established in Barcelona the ubiquitous terror of the Military Investigation Service (SIM).[23](#)

The Control Patrols constituted the failed attempt on the part of the CCMA to corral the prevailing public disorder. Not only did they constitute an undesirable political police of the CCMA, but they also acted *in parallel* with the patrols of the political police of each organization;

and *in competition* with the armed patrols of the militiamen of the defense committees, who were answerable to no other authority other than their own neighborhood, factory or village committees, and who continued to man the barricades months after July, and who at their own initiative and risk carried out requisitions, confiscations and “took people for rides”, which allowed them to finance their own activities and even to buy arms from foreign countries.<sup>24</sup> These were the autonomous militiamen or patrolmen, from every organization or from no organization, who were not subject to the orders of the CCMA’s Control Patrols, and who might or might not bring their detainees or plundered booty to San Elías, and who often executed their own justice directly in accordance with their own understanding. In these conditions, no one could clearly differentiate, much less control, or direct, the limits between the necessary *class terror*, the ambiguous “*new revolutionary order*” of the CCMA, and mere *crime*, with the consequent discredit that fell upon anyone who wanted to push forward the “revolutionary conquests” and extend the social war. Once again we find ourselves faced with the *atomization of power* that prevailed in the summer of 1936: patrols of the CCMA; patrols of the CNT-FAI, of the POUM, the PSUC, and the ERC; patrols of every defense committee, every town, every factory,



every neighborhood, and even every barricade; all autonomous and self-financing, acting in parallel, without being answerable to any central authority or outside the control of the authorities to which they were supposed to be subject.

## **THE MILITARY FAILURE OF THE CCMA AND ITS STRUGGLE AGAINST THE COMMITTEES**

With the formation of all these Commissions and Councils (of the Economy, of Supplies) the CCMA was gradually transformed into an institution that *specialized exclusively in matters of Defense and Public Safety*, and therefore became more and more estranged from any pretense to constitute a revolutionary government that would be capable of replacing the government of the Generalitat. This refusal to become a revolutionary government, however, led irremediably to the CCMA's failure in its attempts to constitute an institution for the direction and centralization of the war against fascism, due to the political incapacity of this institution to become the sole organizing and leading force of the new army. The improvised militias were formed without a single directive institution. *Instead of mobilizing a unitary proletarian army, the militia columns were formed under the aegis of the various parties and trade unions, with the concomitant problems of coordination, homogenization*

*and centralization.* The Stalinists and the government of the Generalitat easily used this structure to consolidate the counterrevolutionary advance a few months later. But if the leaders of the CNT had renounced an anarchist dictatorship, how were they going to impose an anarchist army? Furthermore, the absence of a revolutionary theory, program and perspectives led the anarchist leaders, left behind by the revolutionary initiatives of the rank and file committees, to engage in constant improvisation which, combined with their optimistic view that the war would only last for a few weeks, prevented the superior committees of the CNT from understanding the future significance of their erroneous decisions. The CCMA therefore also renounced the main reason for its creation: to create volunteer workers militias, supply them and direct the war. The chronic shortage of weapons and ammunition, which were not distributed to the fronts and the columns that needed them, but wherever the leaders of the parties decided, depending on their ideological affinities, was used by each militia to discredit its rivals. The slogan, “go for broke after capturing Zaragoza”, was turned against its proponents, for if Zaragoza was not taken there would be no anarchist coup attempt; that is, the anarchist militias must not be given arms. The inability to impose a unitary command structure on the militias led to serious

deficiencies with regard to their organization and operations, since there was not the least coordination and planning of military operations even among the various militias on the same front.

*The CCMA therefore failed with regard to the military question as well.* The only function that it performed adequately, and which was the function that all of its components, with the exception of the POUM and the anarchists, explicitly wanted it to perform, was that of defending and *strengthening the government of the Generalitat*; this was in any case its principal objective after the first week of September, when the CCMA voted to dissolve itself. The Generalitat, as well as the Stalinists and ERC, would deftly capitalize on the opportunity offered by the constant errors of the CCMA. On October 24 the Decree militarizing the militias established the foundations for the bourgeois army of the Republic. The only thing the militiamen could do was to *resist* the inevitable militarization, which was already implemented by March of 1937.

Meanwhile, the revolutionary situation in the streets was indifferent to the collaborationist directives imposed by the anarchosyndicalist leaders. The *atomized power* of the various Local Committees extended throughout all of Catalunya, with various degrees of power and autonomy,

and which in some locations reached the level of making an absolute break with republican legality and the kind of equilibrium that prevailed at the time in Barcelona between the Generalitat and the CCMA. Thus, in Lérida, the CNT, POUM and UGT did away with the city government and constituted a Popular Committee that excluded the republican forces in order to constitute *a power based only on the working class organizations*. Not only Josep Rodés (POUM), who assumed the position of police commissioner, but also Joaquín Vila (UGT), who was appointed as the delegate to the Generalitat, usurped these positions to enhance the power of the Popular Committee of Lérida; and to these were added the position assumed by Francisco Tomás (FAI) as the head of the newly-created Committee of Popular Information. These local revolutionary committees constituted authentic city-states, or committee-governments,<sup>25</sup> imposing fines and collecting taxes, recruiting militiamen for the front, forming control patrols to impose their authority, carrying out public works financed by revolutionary tax measures to solve the problem of massive unemployment, imposing a new rationalist educational model, confiscating food, etc. These local committees replaced the municipal governments, depriving the Generalitat of the least influence in their towns. Throughout Cataluña, without

any directives from the CNT, a methodical expropriation of the factories and properties of the bourgeoisie, the churches and monasteries was carried out, at the same time that, in Barcelona, the CCMA was sharing out among the various organizations the barracks, printing presses, newspapers and some buildings and hotels. *The committees complied with the directives of the CCMA if they did not conflict with the interests of the revolution, but mounted enormous resistance when they were thought to be the product of a compromise with the bourgeoisie and the government of the Generalitat.* At the same time, however, the CCMA had to rely on these local committees if it wanted its directives to be observed. The internal conflict within the leadership of the CNT-FAI, between those who supported and those who were opposed to collaboration, was also manifested in the problematic relations between the Central Committee of Antifascist Militias and the local revolutionary institutions. The government of the Generalitat restricted itself to providing a legal sanction for the social and economic reality of the collectivizations and “revolutionary conquests”, as the only way it could hope to acquire the prestige and the acceptance that it lacked. The CCMA could barely govern, or give any orders at all, outside of the city of Barcelona, without the acquiescence and collaboration of the local committees

or trade unions. *The weakness of the latter was rooted in the impossibility of their consolidation as an authentic alternative power on the scale of all of Catalunya, without the coordinating and centralizing support of a working class organization, much less against the opposition of all the existing organizations.*

*The CCMA and the Generalitat coincided in their policy of supporting the restoration of the powers of the old municipal governments against the usurpation of their powers by the local revolutionary committees, and this mission was performed with great effectiveness by the Department of Regional Militias, led by Josep Miret and Joan Pons. This Department stripped the local committees of the responsibility for the recruitment and organization of the militiamen, which the committees had spontaneously exercised during the first few weeks, and transferred this responsibility to the regional commissions, based on the new territorial division of Catalunya. This regional structure facilitated the subjugation of the various local committees, which had to send delegations to the regional offices, far from the pressure of their local revolutionary conditions.*

Thus, not only was the CCMA not a revolutionary government that coordinated the activities of the local committees; it saw the latter as signifying a diminution of

its authority. And the anarchist leaders not only helped to consolidate the power of the Generalitat, but were also quite pleased with the weakening of the local committees. That is why they allowed Miret of the PSUC and Pons of the ERC to undermine the power of the local committees in Cataluña. This was another serious error on the part of the leaders of the CNT, because the weakening of the local committees undermined the real basis of the CNT's power outside the city of Barcelona.

In Barcelona, the defense committees, upon which the real power of the CCMA was based, existed in almost all the neighborhoods and in some confiscated buildings, among which were the Hotel Número 1 at the Plaza de España, the Escolapios at the Ronda de San Pablo, the Estación de Francia, the Estación del Norte, and the defense committees of Barceloneta, Pueblo Nuevo, San Andrés and Gaudí Avenue, among others.

## **THE MINUTES OF THE MEETINGS OF THE CCMA AND THE DEBATE CONCERNING ITS DISSOLUTION**

According to the account of Joan Pons Garlandí, as related in his memoirs, two stages of the CCMA's history can be distinguished, which coincided with the period when its offices were located at the Naval School, next to the Gobernación, at the Plaza Palacio, and the

period after their transfer<sup>26</sup> at the end of July to the Capitanía at the Paseo Colón. During the first stage no minutes were recorded, or at least none have been located to date. In the second stage, Miravittles was responsible for drafting them, until he appointed a secretary for the purpose. They exist, but in an incomplete form.<sup>27</sup>

The nocturnal meetings of the CCMA were usually held on every other day, very late at night, so that the majority of the members could attend, who were busy during the rest of the day with the responsibilities of their various positions. They tended to be somewhat chaotic and disorganized. Problems were resolved as they came up, in an improvised manner. Some members, such as García Oliver, Rovira and Vidiella, exhibited from the beginning their oratorical gifts, with very long, vacuous and boring speeches that interested no one, which is why they were not even recorded in the minutes of the meetings. All the members of the CCMA attended its meetings heavily armed and ostentatiously displayed their enormous pistols. The threats made by Durruti against Miravittles, reminding him of his authorship of an article in which he proclaimed the equivalence of *FAIstas* and *Fascistas*, and García Oliver's insulting treatment of Companys, caused the first meetings to generate a



certain climate of tension, which was definitively dispelled when the offices of the CCMA were moved to the Capitanía.

The meetings of the CCMA were often attended by people who were not members of the CCMA, such as technicians, reporters or advisors. Resolutions were usually unanimously approved. Dissenting views were recorded in the minutes, until, at the meeting of September 6, it was decided to record only the final resolution.

Ever since the end of July 1936, David Antona, the Interim Secretary of the National Committee of the CNT in Madrid, had been receiving offers from the Giral government to collaborate with the republican government and the other antifascist forces, offers that were debated at the National Plenum of Regional Committees held in Madrid on July 28.<sup>28</sup> At this meeting the representatives of the Catalan Regional Committee became enmeshed in a debate regarding whether the CNT should or should not seize power. Once the option of establishing libertarian communism was rejected, on the basis of the argument that the CNT was a minority grouping outside of Cataluña, the debate focused on the ways and means of the CNT's collaboration with government bodies.

During the entire month of August the anarchist “notables” were split over the dilemma of whether they should put an end to the CCMA, without entering the government of the Generalitat, or maintain it. There were two basic approaches: the first consisted in creating technical commissions in the various Councils (Ministries of the Generalitat) as a formula for *controlling without participating in the government*: this approach was exemplified in the commission of war industries or the Council of the Economy;<sup>29</sup> the second was to do the same thing but within the revolutionary institutions, formally based on legal powers, but upholding *a revolutionary power that would provide them with a real position of power*: this was exemplified in the Control Patrols, the defense committees and the Committee of Investigation of the CCMA, coordinated and directed by Manuel Escorza from the Committee of Information and Investigation of the CNT-FAI, which was answerable only to the Regional Committee of the CNT and the Peninsular Committee of the FAI.

On August 3<sup>30</sup>, in a resolution signed by Jaime Miravittles as secretary of the CCMA, various agreements of a minor nature were approved, such as the confiscation of the Elizalde and Anet factories; the creation of an ammunition dump at Lérida, with

subsidiary storage depots at Caspe and Monzón; a salute to the Durruti column “for its discipline and organizational acumen”; the approval of a motion to inform in writing the Local Federation of Trade Unions of all decisions of a general nature made by the CCMA; the dispatch of a delegate to oversee the manufacture of bombs at Reus; the selection of loyal officers from a list presented by UMRE; the appointment of Jiménez de la Beraza and the brothers Guarner as technical specialists on the General Staff of the Militias; etc.

Already, *on August 17*, while a Plenum of Local and Regional Committees of the CNT was being held, *the decision to dissolve the CCMA was made*, although this was not yet made public to the confederal militants.<sup>[31](#)</sup> The explanation that was given for the resolutions adopted at this Plenum, in the Report of the delegation of the CNT to the Extraordinary Congress of the AIT, leaves no room for doubt: “It was considered that, in order to avoid the duplication of powers represented by the CCMA and the Government of the Generalitat, the former had to disappear and the Council of the Generalitat of Cataluña had to be formed, carrying out some more positive activities without the hindrance of a clash of powers and to put an end to the pretext that the democracies will not help us ‘because the anarchists are

in charge’.”[32](#) The goal of this maneuver was, in short, to replace the CCMA with a system of technical commissions, attached to the Ministries, and to limit the authority of the CCMA to military questions. This resolution was ratified on August 21 at a Regional Plenum of anarchist groups.[33](#)

Finally, *at the end of August*, a *secret* Plenum of the Libertarian Movement of Cataluña was held. García Oliver, tired of the endless debates, shouted to the delegates, “Either we collaborate, or else we impose a dictatorship: You decide!”[34](#) The Plenum had to decide whether or not to accept the invitation, which arose from numerous conversations between Companys and Marianet, to the CNT to participate in the “Council” of the Generalitat. The Plenum finally *decided in favor of the entry of the CNT-FAI into the government of the Generalitat*.[35](#)

On *August 31*,[36](#) at 11:30 p.m., a plenary session of the CCMA was held, attended by the majority of the members and delegates. García Matas reported on the situation of the republican forces in Mallorca. He warned the delegates that the enemy possessed six fighter squadrons that posed a threat not only to the Balears but also to Barcelona and Valencia. He thought that the enemy was preparing for a major offensive in Mallorca.

Jiménez de la Beraza, whose argument was then supported by Marcos Alcón, insisted on the necessity of finishing off the assault on Huesca in order to shift the scarce war materiel that was available to operations at Mallorca. Vidiella emphasized the international importance of the Mallorca campaign.

At the next Plenary of the CCMA, held on *September 2*,[37](#) Agudé reported on the fate of the hospital ship, “Marqués de Comillas”, filling in the gaps in the information provided at the previous meeting, concerning the damage inflicted on the ship by a bombing attack. Miret proposed, and his proposal was approved, to order Captain Bayo to evacuate the military personnel and remove all war materiel from the ship, which was henceforth to be just a hospital.

Miret reported on *the events at Lérida*, concerning the theft of provisions, weapons and munitions. A long and bitter debate ensued in which Aurelio Fernández, Gironella (POUM), Abad de Santillán, Artemi Agudé, Marcos Alcón, Torrents, Fábregas, Vidiella, Asens, and others participated. It was decided that the theft was the result of shortages everywhere, both in Lérida as well as in Barcelona, and that the irregularities that were being denounced had already been abolished due to the new measures implemented by the War, Supply and Health

Commissions. It was announced that some of the weapons that had been stolen had already been recovered. And it was resolved that the Commission of War, reinforced with representatives from all the organizations that were members of the CCMA, accompanied by a strong contingent of armed militiamen, should scour all the towns of Cataluña in order to collect all the arms and munitions they could find. With regard to the composition of the Committee of Militias of the city of Lérida,[38](#) it was resolved that it would be required to allow the entry of representatives of the ERC. At the suggestion of the comrades from Lérida, the CCMA resolved that the Commission of War should relocate to that city, which was a strategic point on the Aragón front, for the purpose of resolving the serious problems that continued to accumulate, with regard to troop movements and the provision of arms and other war materiel.

José Asens proposed, and his proposal was approved, to abolish all the special seals of the Militias, and sections of the Central Committee, in order to prevent abuses, and that there should only be one official seal of the CCMA.

Marcos Alcón reported on the problems posed for the Transport Commission by the need to constantly requisition cars and trucks, exposing the abuses of the

various organizations and public bodies, which possessed an excessive number of vehicles. It was resolved to grant full powers to the Transport Commission to requisition all the individually owned vehicles in Barcelona and all the trucks that it should need, as well as to deprive the organizations, groups and public bodies of all their excess vehicles.

Asens reported that there was an insufficient number of patrolmen to attend to the volume of services that had to be performed. He thought that all the units of the Militias, including those of the Capitanía, should send contingents for the Control Patrols, which were also supposed to act in coordination with the Investigation Patrols. Aguadé thought that the Patrols had to be motorized, and that it was necessary to carry out a purge of the elements that formed the Sections. It was resolved to increase the number of Patrolmen, the precise number to be established by the Commission, and *that the Investigation Patrols should be integrated with the Patrol Sections*, and also that the personnel of the Sections should be purged.

Asens also proposed the need to carry out an investigation in Caspe concerning the activity of Antonio Ortiz,[39](#) which was opposed by Aurelio Fernández because he thought that it was improper to attend to

matters that were not the result of the conduct of the CCMA.

A proposal of Miret and Fernández was approved, which mandated that, at the next meeting, a project should be undertaken to regulate investigatory proceedings, and that the latter may not be authorized with any other seal than that of the CCMA.

A proposal made by Lluís Prunés was approved to require that all the special taxes, subscriptions, donations and receipts from festivals to raise money for the militias should be controlled by the CCMA.

All the resolutions were unanimously approved, and the session ended at three in the morning on September 3.

On *September 3* a National Plenum of Regional Federations was held in Madrid to debate Largo Caballero's offer to name Antonio Moreno as confederal Minister, an appointment that had been "provisionally" accepted by Moreno and by Interim National Secretary David Antona. The National Committee, basing its deliberations on the resolutions of the recent Plenum held in Cataluña, where the participation of the CNT in the "Council" of the Generalitat was approved, declared its support for participation in the government of Largo Caballero. The delegates, however, rejected this



proposal. After lengthy debate a compromise was reached, consisting in the CNT's support for the new government and the formation in each Ministry of an auxiliary commission composed of representatives of the CNT. At a press conference held on September 4, the formation of the first<sup>40</sup> government of the socialist Largo Caballero was announced, without any CNT representation. On September 8, Largo Caballero rejected the CNT's proposal concerning auxiliary commissions, but remained open to the offer of a Ministry to the CNT.<sup>41</sup>

At 11:45 p.m. on *September 4*,<sup>42</sup> the CCMA met again, with the attendance of most of the delegates. Giménez de la Beraza reported on the war materiel available for the various fronts. He emphasized the lack of small arms ammunition and the advisability of proceeding to requisition all the supplies of such ammunition throughout Cataluña, and also recommended that gunpowder be manufactured, which would take two months, with all the problems that such a timetable entailed. He mentioned the negotiations being carried out in foreign countries and the positions of the various governments "with respect to our struggle against fascism".

Aurelio Fernández explained that the Section of Investigation was “proceeding to requisition arms and ammunition, which some organizations had already handed over”, adding that “we have to find and collect all we need”.

Guarner reported that the conquest of Huesca “will require one million bullets”.

García Oliver reported that the retreat from Mallorca had been carried out “without the knowledge of the Committee”, and that it was the result of a powerful bombardment by the enemy and the interference of the Madrid government, “which had ordered the withdrawal without informing Cataluña”.

Prunés informed the delegates that Captain Bayo “had been ordered by the Committee of the ship ‘Jaime I’, in the name of the Squadron Committee and the Government of the Republic, to abandon Mallorca with all the men and materiel, in order to proceed to Málaga, and that he was given two hours to decide and forty eight hours to leave”.

González revealed that some of the militiamen who had returned from Mallorca said that there was a heavy bombardment and that Bayo ordered them to throw equipment into the sea. An order was issued for Bayo to

present himself immediately and that various militiamen who were willing to provide testimony should also present themselves before the CCMA.

Aurelio Fernández called attention to the receipt of several messages by the CNT from outstanding comrades in Zaida, requesting that an investigation be carried out concerning the events at Belchite “after the withdrawal of the Ortiz Column”. Santillán said that these reports and the documentation provided did not support “any specific accusation”, but that he was in favor of pursuing the investigation. García Oliver stated that the withdrawal from Belchite was due “to the lack of artillery”. He appointed a commission to carry out the investigation.

A proposal to transfer the gasoline stored at Can Tunis to another location to prevent its destruction by bombing was approved.

Miret (PSUC) and Agudé (ERC) referred to various border patrols that were organized on the initiative of various individuals and groups, without any effective control on the part of the CCMA. Aurelio Fernández expressed his view “that the border patrols are the responsibility of the Investigation Section and that everything that is currently taking place is a result of

organizational deficiencies”; in order to remedy the situation, it was resolved that the Investigation Section should improve its organization of the border patrols, and that the CCMA should exercise strict control and unified direction over these patrols. Likewise, it was resolved to withdraw authorization for the establishment of a hospital that some self-styled Alpine Militias had organized on their own account in Barcelona, without the authorization of the Health Committee.[43](#)

The session took a Copernican turn with the appearance of Captain Bayo in the royal chambers of the Capitanía, where the CCMA was meeting. García Oliver asked him why he had ignored the CCMA, with regard to both his decision to embark for Mallorca and then to return. Bayo responded that he sailed for Mallorca after having been requested to do so by a large group of militiamen who had presented themselves to him at the Airfield, and with the consent of the Government Minister, España; and that he returned in obedience to an appeal by the government of the Generalitat, which is why he had not been able to come before the Committee. García Oliver insisted that he had an obligation to obtain the consent of the CCMA, “which holds the power of decision over all matters pertaining to the war”, because if he had done so it would at least have prevented the bad effect that

the retreat from Mallorca had produced with respect to public opinion.

Bayo continued to proffer explanations, relating to the situation of the troops and the way the landing was conducted. He praised the morale and bravery of the troops under his command, “who were ready to fight wherever I sent them”. He pointed out that he had loaded all the materiel he could and that supplies and equipment were only destroyed or thrown into the sea to prevent the enemy from seizing them. He read the order, signed by the committee of the “Jaime I” and by the Squadron Committee, requiring him to withdraw in the name of the Government of the Republic. He accepted the order to withdraw, to save the lives of the militiamen, since the enemy air forces were bombing them with one hundred kilogram bombs. He denied having received any motorcycles, trucks or artillery, and said that if they had been sent they were probably at Mahón.

Marcos Alcón explained the manner in which these expeditions were conducted, without authorization of the CCMA, and that the latter was faced with so many *faits accompli*, and that the defeat at Mallorca was due to a lack of organization. Vidiella asked for the opinion of the military advisors. Giménez de la Beraza claimed that

Bayo's action was "militarily a defeat, politically a disaster, all because he acted on his own account without consulting the CCMA, and that the political aspect is much more serious than the military aspect". As for the equipment, he said that throwing the heavy equipment into the sea was justifiable, but not the light arms.

Then a group of militiamen appeared in the royal chamber, arriving from the failed expedition to Mallorca, militants of the ERC, the CNT and the UGT, who provided their reports, confirming the information submitted by Bayo.

After Bayo's report on the fascist air forces in Mallorca, García Oliver notified the delegates of the agreement between Santillán and Sandino and the Madrid government to send five thousand men to the Central front.

It was resolved that the four thousand militiamen who had returned from Mallorca should depart on Monday: two thousand for the Madrid front and two thousand for the Aragón front, and that one thousand national guards (the new name for the civil guards) should also leave for Madrid, and that the garrison at Mahón should return to their base with the "City of Barcelona". All these

resolutions were unanimously approved. The session ended at 1:45 p.m. on the 5th of September, after a marathon meeting of fourteen hours, in which it had become apparent that *the CCMA was incapable of controlling and directing the military operations based in Cataluña.*

The Mallorca expedition had been carried out behind the back of the CCMA, organized by Captain Bayo, with the assistance of Companys, and with the support of the UGT (Comorera) and the Maritime Transport Trade Union of the CNT. It failed as a result of a lack of organization of the operations and the sudden order to withdraw issued by the central government. The lack of war materiel for the Aragón front was exacerbated by the loss of equipment and supplies at Mallorca, and the disaster was magnified by the *discrediting of the CCMA*, which was not only incapable of directing *all* military operations, but was even incapable of being aware of their existence.

The next meeting was called to order on *September 6*<sup>44</sup> at midnight, and was attended by the majority of the delegates to the CCMA. Over the course of the meeting various questions were asked, among which were: the request of the Syndicalist Party, led by Ángel Pestaña, to be admitted to the CCMA; a proposal concerning the

advisability of an immediate attack on Jaca; the appointment of Llorenç Perramon as Recording Secretary, without the right to vote, and that the minutes of the meetings should only consist of the resolutions approved, without an account of the debates.

The minutes of *September 8*<sup>45</sup> record the replacement of Josep Rovira (the delegate of the Lenin Column of the POUM) by Julián Gorkin. Various resolutions regarding subsidies, the prohibition of collecting money on the street, closer surveillance over the correct use of the food subsidies granted by the CCMA, the clearing of lines of people in front of the Capitanía, and increasing the number of members of the Control Patrols to one thousand six hundred were approved, along with other minor issues.

On *September 10* the minutes record the ratification of the *resolution to dissolve*<sup>46</sup> *the CCMA* and the recommendation that at the next meeting the respective criteria with regard to the form and proportional representation for the posts each organization will occupy in the Council of Defense of the Generalitat should be determined. *The resolution to dissolve the CCMA was kept secret.*



It was also resolved that the dead should be buried at the front and that the bodies should not be shipped home. It was once again insisted that only the Control Patrols and the Investigation Patrols were empowered to authorize and carry out searches, and that anyone who did so on his own account should be punished. Three delegates, from the CNT, the UGT and the POUM, were appointed to carry out weekly inspections of subsidies, donations, and festivals for raising money for the militias.

All of the above resolutions were unanimously approved.

On *September 12*<sup>47</sup> a resolution was approved, with the abstention of the representatives of the UGT and the POUM, that mandated that the current government of the Generalitat should be replaced by a Council of Defense of the Generalitat of Catalunya, with representatives of all the organizations that composed the CCMA, “which would at the same time be dissolved”.

On *September 14*<sup>48</sup> García Oliver publicized the CNT’s resolution concerning the constitution of the Council of Defense of the Generalitat, replacing the current government of the Generalitat, within the framework of a new political conception of the Spanish state, conceived as a “Confederation of Free Nations, starting with Catalunya”.

Gorkin, in the name of the POUM, stated that the new Council of the Generalitat must be composed of representatives of all the organizations that composed the current CCMA and that “the program of this Council must be of a socialist kind, or one involving socialization”.

Vidiella, for the UGT, agreed with the first point expressed by Gorkin with regard to the representatives on the Council, as well as with the name of “the Council of the Generalitat”, and also thought that its jurisdiction must be extended over all of Catalunya, and that it must embrace all the factions, and that this Council must be the only authority empowered to carry out confiscations, or to proceed with the collectivization or socialization of the country. Vidiella therefore advanced the idea of a *strong government*, vested with full authority.

Miravittles, for the ERC and the Generalitat, said that this new government (he dared to violate the acritic taboo concerning calling something that was really a government by the name of “council”) must include all social classes and that as for a program, it must be whatever is necessary to defeat fascism.

Santillán, for the FAI, expressed his view that it was necessary to establish points of convergence that would unite all the factions, as had been the case up until this

time, and that the principal goal must be to destroy fascism in all of Spain.

Torrents informed the delegates that it was the view of the Unió de Rabassaires that it was necessary to form a *strong government*, with the same representatives as the current CCMA: “a single power that would prosecute the war against fascism and establish order in the new economy”.

García Oliver said that everyone was in agreement on the need to transform the country in every respect, establishing a new juridical, political and economic order; and as for a program, “there is already a Council of the Economy responsible for carrying out the economic transformation”.

Gorkin (very meticulously) said that “antifascism is not a program”, which is why it was necessary to specify in what manner the dominant privileges had to be destroyed. Gorkin thought that it was necessary to specify just what economic policies had to be enforced in the rearguard, and to define the purpose of the struggle of the combatants at the front, which was to create a better society. He proposed that alongside each Minister of the new government, as was already the case in the

Council of the Economy, there should be a Council composed of representatives of all the organizations.

Miravittles explained that the time to establish a concrete program, whether communist or anarchosyndicalist, would arrive if the war was won, but in the meantime it was necessary to create a government capable of winning the war against fascism.

Alcón (CNT) maintained “that the government must conduct the war against fascism and the economic transformation must be carried out by the working class organizations in the streets; and that it is useless to oppose this because the organizations will go on with their work regardless of our resolutions”. It was the mission of the government to direct the war, but it must not legislate with regard to economic matters, because this is the job of the workers, operating through the Council of the Economy. He finished his speech by claiming: “the war must be fought by the Government, Collectivization must be carried out by the Council of the Economy.”

Miret, of the PSUC, said that it was indispensable to formulate a concrete program that would assure the unity of all the factions.

Gorkin declared that the formulation of a program did not require that each faction renounce its ideals, but that all the points of convergence and the necessary directives for the defeat of fascism should be established. He did not agree with the proposal that spoke of social classes, but of organizations that represent the classes and that the latter must not reorganize but transform the social and economic foundations of the country, which “is to say, carry out the social revolution”.

Vidiella said that only a strong government would be respected by foreign countries and that socialization in the countryside would entail a confrontation with the peasantry.

García Oliver expressed his view that the revolutionary transformation must affect all the juridical, economic and political aspects of the country, and that each region must proceed in accordance with its own characteristics, since the policies that are appropriate for Cataluña would not be appropriate for Andalucía. He thought that a mere Council must not do anything but prepare the policies that would have to be implemented once the war was over.

And he emphasized that to create this Council all that was necessary was for the CCMA to tell the President of

the Generalitat that it wanted it to be formed, so that the Generalitat would proceed to its immediate creation.

Vidiella agreed that it would be the President who would form the Council.

Gorkin and Miret both made proposals. Miret's was approved, which was as follows:

“The representatives of all the organizations that compose the CCMA should petition the President of the Generalitat of Catalunya, proposing the convocation of a meeting of delegates of all the organizations represented in the CCMA to discuss the organic constitution of a Council of Defense of the Generalitat and of the program that the latter must implement”.

Pons (ERC) referred to the name of the Regional Defense Council, suggested by the CNT, and expressed his view that the word, “Regional”, must be deleted. Alcón expressed his opinion that the word must be maintained, and that a National Council of Defense must be formed in Madrid. Miravittles seconded the proposal to eliminate the word, “Regional”. García Oliver prudently resolved the dispute, proposing that the first act of the Council would be to give itself a name. Vidiella, for his part, proposed to delete the word, “Defense” and designate it as simply the “Council of the Generalitat of Catalunya”.

After the semantic debate the session ended at two-thirty on the morning of September 15.

No one opposed the dissolution of the CCMA. No one, except the anarchists, allowed themselves to be deceived regarding the fact that this entailed the formation of a new government of the Generalitat, whether it was called a “council” or not. The debate on the program of the new government that would supersede the CCMA, revolved around the concepts of “socialization”, proposed by the POUM, or “antifascist”, advocated by the ERC and the PSUC. The CNT-FAI maintained its characteristic ambiguity: the economy was the task of the Council of the Economy, while the war was the job of what they called the Council of Defense of the Generalitat. García Oliver, Marcos Alcón, Aurelio Fernández and José Asens actually thought that the program of the “Council” was of no importance. It was the price that had to be paid to avoid isolation. What was of importance for them was the fact that the CNT would continue to control the various Ministries, by way of technical commissions, like those attached to the Council of the Economy or the commission of war industries, while a good part of the military and police apparatus would be in the hands of the CNT-FAI. This indefiniteness, ambiguity and incoherence led them

irremediably to *support the program of antifascist unity*, that is, of that antifascism that proposed the constitution of a strong government capable of “imposing order” on the economy and winning the war.

On the *15th of September* a National Plenum of Regional Committees was held in *Madrid*, at which it was resolved to approve the intervention of the CNT in the military, economic and political leadership of republican Spain, with the proposal of the formation of a National Council of Defense. This was, in short, a proposal that the CNT should collaborate with the government of the Republic, by means of this Council that was to be composed of five delegates of the CNT, five from the UGT and four republicans. This National Council was conceived as the unified summit of the various regional Councils. It was a federalist conception, so dear to the CNT, in which the economy was to be socialized and the army unified under a unitary command structure and a commissariat of war. Although it persisted in the old trick of not calling things by their names, the CNT’s proposal pointed towards the reconstruction of a strong and centralized state.[49](#)

On *September 16*[50](#) a report concerning the case of Captain Bayo was presented, an order was issued to remove the bales of cotton from the barricades,[51](#) the



Control Patrols were authorized to issue a special Section identity card, in addition to the one already possessed by each patrol, and it was agreed to await the return of Tarradellas in order to dispatch a commission from the CCMA to Madrid.

On *September 18*<sup>52</sup> it was agreed to organize coastal defense with militiamen from the local committees, that a commission of information and censorship should be appointed that would be composed of representatives of every organization that was part of the CCMA, to create a new ID card for the members of the Patrols, and that “a commission composed of the comrades García Oliver, Miravittles, Vidiella and Gorkin should meet with the President of the Government of the Generalitat tomorrow and that the latter should make an appointment to receive them”.

On *September 19* a commission of the CCMA, composed of García Oliver, Miravittles, Vidiella and Gorkin met with Companys in order to deliver the proposal drafted by Miret concerning the formation of the Council of the Generalitat, that is, of the new Government of the Generalitat that would include anarchosyndicalist Ministers, once the great semantic dilemma about calling the Council of the Generalitat what it always really was, the Government of the Generalitat, was finally resolved.

On that same day<sup>53</sup> Vidiella, Aurelio Fernández and Miravittles were named as members of the commission that was to travel to Madrid to “negotiate with the government of the Republic as a consequence of the result of the journey of the comrade Minister Tarradellas”.<sup>54</sup>

On *September 20*<sup>55</sup>, in the royal reception hall of the Capitanía, at 6:00 p.m., a special session of the CCMA convened that was attended by García Oliver, Fábregas, Alcón, Vidiella, Miravittles, Fernández, Torrents and Gorkin, along with invitees such as Sesé for the UGT, Escorza for the FAI and Calvet for the Unió de Rabassaires, to initiate discussions with the Moroccan delegates Mohammed El Ohazzari and Omar Abd-el-Jalil, the representatives of the Moroccan Action Committee, who had arrived in Barcelona in early September for the purpose of obtaining support for Moroccan independence. At this meeting the support of the CCMA for the Moroccan delegation was solemnly formalized, and it was promised that the CCMA would try to get the Government of the Republic to declare the independence of the Spanish Protectorate in Morocco.<sup>56</sup> The session, which was conducted in a formal manner, ended at 6:15 p.m.

A photograph exists (“Història Gràfica del Moviment Obrer a Catalunya”, Diputació de Barcelona, 1989), taken after the signing of the agreement by the Moroccan Action Committee and the CCMA, in which one can recognize, among others (from left to right), Marcello Argila Pazzaglia, the two Moroccan delegates, Juan García Oliver, Julián Gómez García (“Gorkin”), Manuel Estrada Manchón, Rafael Vidiella, Mariano Rodríguez Vázquez (“Marianet”), Manuel Escorza del Val (with crutches) and Aurelio Fernández Sánchez.

On *September 21*[57](#) it was resolved to add Gorkin to the commission that was to be dispatched to Madrid and that Guarner and Miret should appoint an officer to command the coastal defenses.

At the meeting of *September 22*[58](#), the CCMA decided to “prohibit the entry into Cataluña of the families from Madrid and the provinces who are constantly arriving in Barcelona, and that they should be returned to their places of origin”. This resolution was transmitted to the Ministry of the Government and to the railroad workers Committees of Barcelona, Lérida, Tortosa, Mora de Ebro, Valencia and Madrid for its effective implementation.[59](#)

On *September 25*[60](#) the CCMA voted to broadcast a message to the cruiser “Libertad” which, according to the

press, was transporting the mortal remains of the heroic militiawoman Lidia Odena, informing the ship's captain of the resolution of the CCMA according to which the comrades killed at the front were to be buried at the front, and that they could not be shipped back to the rearguard without the express permission of the CCMA, and that if the ship had already left port, that upon its arrival in Barcelona the burial should be carried out without any public demonstration.

This was the last act of the CCMA that we can identify. As soon as September 18, its resolutions were very brief and drafted in a telegraphic style, although according to García Oliver the CCMA held two more meetings, on the 27th and the 28th,[61](#) before its last session when it officially disbanded, which took place on October 1, 1936.

## **THE BALANCE SHEET OF THE CCMA AND THE NEW GOVERNMENT OF THE GENERALITAT**

On *September 26* the new government of the Generalitat was constituted, with Tarradellas as Prime Minister, in which *three CNT-FAI Ministers* participated: Joan Porqueras Fàbregas as Minister of the Economy, Antonio García Birlán as Minister of Health and Social Welfare and Josep Joan Doménach as Minister of Provisions.[62](#)

The resolution to dissolve the CCMA was not made public until the end of the Regional Plenum of Trade Unions, which was held from September 25 to 27, and which had to formally approve this dissolution, which was presented as the consequence of the entry of the cenetistas into the government, since, in the words of García Oliver himself: *“today the Generalitat represents all of us”*.

*Solidaridad Obrera*, in its September 27th issue, insisted on claiming that a new institution called the “Council of the Generalitat” had been created, rather than a new government; after September 29, however, it accepted the new reality and explained the reasons why the CNT entered the new government of the Generalitat at the same time that it announced the dissolution of the CCMA. Curiously, the dissolution of the CCMA was presented as an inevitable consequence of the formation of the Government of the Generalitat, when in reality it was only when, between the end of August and the first days of September, that it was decided to dissolve the CCMA, when anyone began to discuss the entry of the CNT into the government.

On *September 28* another National Plenum of Regional Federations was held in Madrid, where the national secretary *Horacio Prieto* attacked the proposed National

Defense Council for its lack of realism. He set forth his arguments in favor of pure and simple participation in the government of Largo Caballero. He insisted that things should be called by their real names and that the CNT should dispense with its ideological prejudices. He did not, however, obtain the support of the delegates to the Plenum, who merely voted in favor of a manifesto that acknowledged the need for antifascist unity.[63](#)

On the evening of *October 1st*, the last, purely ceremonial, session of the CCMA was convened. García Oliver delivered a concluding speech in which he called for the unity of all the parties and organizations. After proclaiming that he had been a staunch defender of the CCMA, but that now he would be a passionate defender of the new Council of the Generalitat, he responded to a query of Miravittles by asserting that as a Catalanist he could only celebrate the decision of the CNT to enter the government of the Generalitat.

The Official Bulletin of the Generalitat published on October 3 contained the decree, signed on *October 1*, in which *Juan García Oliver was appointed general secretary of the Department of Defense*, a new position expressly created for him. In this same issue of the Bulletin the *Decree Proclaiming the Dissolution of the CCMA* was also published:

“The CCMA, created by the decree of July 21, has understood that, having fulfilled the mission that it certainly performed so appropriately during the first days of the military uprising, it must now dissolve. Therefore, in accordance with the Executive Council, it is hereby Decreed: Article 1. The CCMA, created by the Decree of July 21, is dissolved. Article 2. By decree and in accordance with the orders pertaining thereto, as required, the present Decree will be fulfilled. Barcelona, October 1, 1936. The Prime Minister, Josep Tarradellas.”

In the Official Bulletin published on October 4, by decree signed *on October 3, Aurelio Fernández was appointed general secretary of the Committee for Internal Security.* For the CNT, this signified the preservation of its grasp on the key positions of Public Order and the Militias.

The new government of the Generalitat proposed to strengthen the economy on the basis of a program initiated by the Council of the Economy and to reinforce the war effort by way of *compulsory mobilization* and the establishment of *discipline and a unitary command structure.*

The presence of all the antifascist organizations in the government of the Generalitat implied a major step forward towards the reestablishment of republican

legality and the rehabilitation of all state functions. This implied the termination of all those revolutionary committees that, in every locality, exercised sovereign and *total power*, from the collection of taxes and maintenance of control patrols to the financing of public works to address the problem of unemployment.

The Decree of *October 9*, complemented by the one issued on October 12, declared *the dissolution of all the local committees* that were formed on July 19, which were to be replaced by the new municipal authorities. Despite the resistance of many local committees, and despite the delay of several months before the new municipal government bodies could be created, this was a death-blow from which the committees would not recover. *The resistance* of the CNT militants, who ignored the directives of the superior committees and the orders of the government of the Generalitat, *endangered the antifascist pact*. The anarchosindicalist leaders were caught between the Scylla of the CNT militants, reluctant to obey its directives, and the Charybdis of the charge leveled by the other antifascist forces that it was necessary to comply, and enforce compliance with the decrees of the government, and bring “the uncontrollables” into line.



This was the *real balance sheet* bequeathed by the CCMA in its nine weeks of existence: *the transition from a situation where local revolutionary committees exercised all power in the streets and the factories, to their dissolution for the exclusive benefit of the complete reestablishment of the power of the Generalitat.*

Likewise, *the decrees signed on October 24<sup>64</sup>* concerning the militarization of the militias effective as of November 1 and the promulgation of the Collectivization decree, completed the disastrous balance sheet of the CCMA, that is, *the transition from working class Militias composed of revolutionary volunteers to a bourgeois army of the classical type, subject to the monarchical code of military justice, commanded by the Generalitat; and the transition from expropriations and workers control of the factories to a centralized economy controlled and directed by the Generalitat.*

The delay in the application of the decrees, provoked by the mute but determined resistance of the confederal militants, who were still armed, caused the government of the Generalitat to make the disarmament of the rearguard its number one priority, initiating a propaganda campaign against the so-called “uncontrollables”, which was conflated with the

secondary objective expressed in the constantly repeated slogan: “arms to the front”.

The powerful *resistance* of the anarchosyndicalist rank and file *to the militarization of the militias, to the control of the economy and the collectivized enterprises by the Generalitat, to the disarming of the rearguard and to the dissolution of the local committees*, resulted in a delay of several months before the decrees of the Generalitat on these matters could really be enforced. This resistance crystallized *in the spring of 1937* in a major outburst of disenchantment, which was intensified by discontent with the progress of the war, inflation and the shortages of food and clothing, and led to the consolidation of *a generalized critique on the part of the CNT rank and file militants of the participation of the superior committees of the CNT-FAI in the government, and the antifascist and collaborationist policy of their leaders, who were accused of forfeiting “the revolutionary conquests of July 19”*.

## **STATE ANARCHISM JUSTIFIED BY THE IDEOLOGY OF ANTIFASCIST UNITY**

This was the incubator that gave birth to the Events of May 1937, which once again saw Barcelona littered with barricades. This discontent explains the emergence and the power of the Friends of Durruti Group, which in May

proposed the necessity of imposing a Revolutionary Junta to replace the Generalitat. After May, the Group was able to express this confederal discontent in an analysis in which it claimed that in July 1936 *there was no revolution* and that the CCMA was an institution of *class collaboration*, and elaborated a program that concluded that *revolutions are totalitarian or they are defeated*. What distinguished the Friends of Durruti from so many other enraged groups of cenetistas and anarchists<sup>65</sup> was precisely the fact that the former proposed *a program*, whereas the others issued appeals to certain abstract and ineffective principles, which were shared by the superior committees they were criticizing.

*Only then*, after the May Days of 1937, did the anarchosyndicalist leaders elaborate their justifications and distortions concerning what had taken place. Some began to understand, too late, the impact of their errors and improvisations.

It was therefore necessary to find justifications for so many mistakes, and to elaborate a response that would allow the anarchosyndicalist leaders to refuse to assume responsibility for those mistakes. The delegation of the CNT to the Congress of the AIT,<sup>66</sup> in December 1937, had to provide the first answer, under the impact of the constant insults and accusations of ineptitude and

abandonment of the ideological principles of anarchosyndicalism that they were subjected to by the majority of the delegates to the international congress.

“Political power fell into our hands without our wanting it [...] The CCMA, the institution for the coordination of the combat forces at the front, was created. Our Libertarian Movement accepted this Committee, but first we had to resolve the main problem in our Revolution: antifascist collaboration or anarchist dictatorship. We accepted collaboration. Why? [...] the circumstances made us think it advisable to collaborate with the other antifascist sectors.”[67](#)

In fact, the Spanish delegation needed the help of a prestigious intellectual to defend themselves from the attacks of the international, with a report that exuded a certain intellectual stature. This *secret report* so pleased the Spanish anarchosyndicalist leaders that they decided to publish it in a propaganda pamphlet, translated into Spanish, despite the inconsistency entailed in publishing a text that had been declared “secret”.[68](#)

In this pamphlet,[69](#) Helmut Rüdiger fully justified the pragmatic actions of the CNT as being due to the *particularities* of Spain, averring that it was a working class movement without intellectuals, or any theoretical

preparation or political experience, due to its permanent state of clandestinity; and that it was characteristic of extremism, based on a simplification of social relations and an unlimited optimism, to think that all that was necessary was to proclaim libertarian communism in order to transform man into an angelic being.

Rüdiger's entire argument can be summarized as *an assimilation and application to the anarchist movement of the ideology of antifascist unity*. According to Rüdiger, July 19 was a victory for the CNT because, for the first time ever, it was able to unite the entire population behind it. The CNT would be victorious when it would once again be able to rally the entire people behind it. That is, antifascist unity justified everything, explained everything and permitted everything. All the pragmatic actions of the leaders of the CNT, the abandonment of the anti-state theories, the abandonment of principles, the collaborationism with bourgeois parties and the government, the militarization of the Militias, the anarchist Ministers, the war economy, everything, absolutely everything, was justified by this ideology of **ANTIFASCIST UNITY**. Helmut helped the anarchist leaders to justify their errors, their incapacity and their constant improvisations: **one could, and must, renounce**

## **libertarian communism, and the revolution, in favor of antifascist unity.**

Now the anarchosyndicalist leaders were enabled to rewrite their contemporary history. Now García Oliver was enabled to appear as a sacrificial victim of the rejection on the part of the confederal organization of his proposal to “go for broke”.

This made it possible to claim that, “what began on July 19 was not yet the definitive social revolution, but only the first step of that revolution, the beginning of the antifascist struggle”. Helmut crafted a veritable anthology of catchphrases for the supporters of collaborationism: “This was the first time in the history of revolutions that a victorious revolutionary organization renounced its own dictatorship.”

What Helmut did not say was that this ideology of antifascist unity presupposed the acceptance of the methods and goals of the program of the democratic bourgeoisie.

The advocates of State anarchism and those who supported the proletarian revolution were, and are, incompatible. The absence of an ideological and organizational break within the libertarian movement could only lead, first to the suppression, and later to the

assimilation of the critical sectors with the worst aberrations of State anarchism. Without such a break a process of clarification and delimitation between the positions of the various factions could not take place. Ambiguity and confusionism comprised the *other* defeat of the libertarian movement, which was pregnant with consequences for its future.

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- [1.](#) Three very interesting theses, unfortunately unpublished, have been written about the CCMA:

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Josep Eduard Adsuar Torra, *Catalunya: Juliol-Octubre 1936. Una dualitat de poder?*, (2 Vols.), Doctoral Dissertation, Department of Contemporary History, University of Barcelona, 1979.

Enric Mompó, *El Comité Central de Milicias Antifascistas de Catalunya y la situación de doble poder en los primeros meses de la guerra civil española*, Doctoral Thesis read on June 8, 1994, Department of Contemporary History, University of Barcelona.

Josep Antoni Pozo Gonzalez, *El poder revolucionari a Catalunya Durant els mesos de juliol a octubre de 1936. Crisi i recomposició de l'Estat*, Doctoral Thesis defended on June 21, 2002, Department of Modern

and Contemporary History, Autonomous University of Barcelona.

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- [2.](#) The *Constancia* group, at a meeting of anarchist groups and defense committees, proposed “that our representatives in the government should withdraw and that the neighborhood committees should elect a Central Committee.” See “Segunda sesión del pleno local de Grupos Anarquistas de Barcelona [...] con asistencia de los grupos de Defensa confederal y Juventudes libertarias”, Barcelona, April 24, 1937. The proposal, although far too late, shows that these neighborhood committees were still active in April 1937.
- [3.](#) Juan García Oliver, *El eco de los pasos*, Ruedo Ibérico, Barcelona-Paris, 1978, p. 185.
- [4.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 188.
- [5.](#) Responses of García Oliver to a questionnaire from Bolloten (1950).
- [6.](#) In reality, this term, “anarchist dictatorship”, was probably not used by García Oliver, but by Federica Montseny, as a suitable summary of his long speech at the Plenum of July 21.
- [7.](#) According to Peirats, “during the first days of the movement, García Oliver and a few other militants half-heartedly proposed the idea of establishing



libertarian communism in Cataluña. I think that this idea was proposed without real conviction. García Oliver was convinced that libertarian communism was impossible in Cataluña". See the interview with José Peirats in *Colección de Historia Oral: El movimiento libertario en España (1)*. José Peirats.

- [8.](#) Durruti, García Oliver and Aurelio Fernández were the prototypical men of action. Federica Montseny, Abad de Santillán and Pedro Herrera were the prototypical anarchist intellectuals.
- [9.](#) It was therefore by no means a revolutionary government, but an institution of class collaboration, created to fight against fascism under extraordinary circumstances, which required the government of the Generalitat to assume responsibilities for Defense that were not ordinarily within its jurisdiction.
- [10.](#) Juan García Oliver, Buenaventura Durruti and José Asens for the Regional Committee of the CNT; Aurelio Fernández and Diego Abad de Santillán for the FAI; Artemi Agudé, Jaume Miravittles and Joan Pons for the Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya; Tomás Fábregas for Acció Catalana; Josep Torrens for the Unió de Rabassaires; Josep Rovira for the POUM; Josep Miret for the Unió Socialista; José del Barrio, Salvador González and Antonio López

Raimundo for the UGT; and the envoys of the government of the Generalitat, Lluís Prunés, Pérez Farrás and Vicens Guarner.

- [11.](#) All those who attended the meeting signed the above decree, except for the three delegates sent by the Generalitat.
- [12.](#) García Oliver said exactly this in his speech: “Militants of the CNT and the FAI, you have to make them kill you.” See *El eco...*, p. 196.
- [13.](#) Instead of coordinating these supply committees, created by the revolutionary committees *from below*, the control of their operations was transferred to the CCMA, to be exercised *from above*.
- [14.](#) The text of this DECREE is reproduced in the Appendix.
- [15.](#) The Regional Committee of the CNT, the Peninsular and Regional Committees of the FAI, the Regional Committee of the Libertarian Youth, the Local Federation of the CNT, the Local Federation of Anarchist Groups, the CNT-FAI Committee of Investigation, and all the representatives of the regional and local federations, and those who had responsible positions in the CCMA (and later in the government).

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- [16.](#) We need only recall the intervening stage between the February Revolution and the October Revolution in Russia in 1917. Only a profound lack of knowledge of what really happened in Catalunya enabled some historians to make an unfortunate historical comparison between the Russian case and the Catalan case, and made it possible for them to speak erroneously of dual power shared by the CCMA and the Generalitat.
  - [17.](#) On July 20 he was authorized by Durruti to create a war industry. Vallejo initiated a coordination network among the metallurgical and chemical industry trade unions, together with the miners of Sallent, and supervised the transformation of civilian industrial production to an industry for production of military goods. The collaboration of the cenetista Vallejo with Tarradellas proved to be effective in the medium term, but implied the submission of the initial revolutionary direction to the government of the Generalitat.
  - [18.](#) These enterprises also paid taxes to the CNT-FAI; Comorera abolished these taxes in February 1937.
  - [19.](#) Miquel Mir, *Entre el roig i el negre*, Edicions 62, Barcelona, 2006.
  - [20.](#) See Peirats, p. 175.

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- [21.](#) Interview with Miquel Mir in *Quadern*, supplement to the Catalan edition of *El País* (July 27, 2006).
  - [22.](#) Bishop Irurita was liberated by high-level officials at San Elías in exchange for jewels. When the patrol staff discovered the identity of the liberated prisoner several days later they were very upset. See *Quadern*, Catalan supplement of *El País* (July 27, 2006).
  - [23.](#) See Agustín Guillamón, “La NKVD y el SIM en Barcelona. Algunos informes de Gerö sobre la Guerra de España”, *Balance*, No. 22 (November 2001).
  - [24.](#) “It would be advantageous for us to acquire weapons, small arms but of high quality, which are most necessary for the defense of the revolution. The Defense Committee complains about the late delivery of war materiel to Barcelona and explains the situation as follows: There are many neighborhood groups that, independently, supply themselves with all they need from foreign countries, more cheaply and more quickly.” Quoted from “Reunión de comités, celebrada el día 6 de octubre de 1936”.
  - [25.](#) This expression is used by Munis in *Jalones de derrota, promesa de victoria*.

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- [26.](#) See Jaime Balius, “En el Nuevo local del CCMA”, *Solidaridad Obrera* (August 23, 1936).
  - [27.](#) I have been able to consult the following records for minutes of the CCMA: August 3 and 31; and September 2-4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18-21, 23 and 25 of 1936.
  - [28.](#) “Informe de la delegación de la CNT al Congreso Extraordinario de la AIT y resolución del mismo”, December 1937, p. 96.
  - [29.](#) Concerning the Council of the Economy one may consult the book by Ignasi Cendra, *El Consell d’Economia de Catalunya (1936-1939)*, Publicacions Abadia Montserrat, 2006.
  - [30.](#) Govern de la Generalitat de Catalunya. Comité de Milícies Antifeixistes: “Acords presos en la reunió del CC de les MA en el dia 3 d’agost del 1936.”
  - [31.](#) Pozo, *op. cit.*, p. 236.
  - [32.](#) “Informe de la delegación de la CNT...”, p. 97.
  - [33.](#) Pozo, *op. cit.*, p. 237.
  - [34.](#) César M. Lorenzo [César Martínez was the son of Horacio Martínez Prieto]: *Los anarquistas españoles y el poder*, Ruedo Ibérico, Paris, 1969, p. 98.
  - [35.](#) César M. Lorenzo, *op. cit.*, pp. 99-100.
  - [36.](#) Comité Central de les Milícies Antifeixistes de Catalunya: “Resum de la reunió del dia 31 d’agost del 1936.”

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- [37.](#) Comité Central de les Milícies Antifeixistes de Catalunya: “Resum de la reunió del dia 3 de setembre del 1936.”
  - [38.](#) This Committee had originally been composed solely of working class representatives of the POUM, the UGT and the CNT-FAI.
  - [39.](#) Antonio Ortiz was the delegate of the Columna Ortiz (also known as the Sur-Ebro Column).
  - [40.](#) It replaced the government headed by the republican Giral.
  - [41.](#) César M. Lorenzo, *op. cit.*, pp. 180-181.
  - [42.](#) Comité Central de les Milícies Antifeixistes de Catalunya: “Resum de la reunió del dia 4 de setembre del 1936.”
  - [43.](#) This issue was one aspect of a struggle between the interests of the Generalitat, defended here by the PSUC and the ERC, and those of the CNT-FAI, concerning the control of the borders, and more specifically the frontier pass at Puigcerdà, which was completely dominated by Antonio Martín, the anarchist leader of La Cerdanya. The attack of the PSUC-ERC concerning the border question was answered by the CNT with an attack on the financing of the hospital of the Alpine Militias, which comprised the embryo of a Catalanist army.

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- [44.](#) Comité Central de les Milícies Antifeixistes de Catalunya: “Acords presos en la reunió del dia 6 de setembre del 1936.”
  - [45.](#) Comité Central de les Milícies Antifeixistes de Catalunya: “Acords presos en la reunió del dia 8 de setembre del 1936.”
  - [46.](#) Comité Central de les Milícies Antifeixistes de Catalunya: “Acords presos en la reunió del dia 10 de setembre del 1936.” The word, “ratification” suggests that a proposal to dissolve the CCMA was made at a previous meeting, a proposal we cannot locate among the previous minutes, although it may refer to certain conversations that took place outside of the CCMA, as Joan Pons Garlandí suggests in his memoires.
  - [47.](#) Comité Central de les Milícies Antifeixistes de Catalunya: “Acords presos en la reunió del dia 12 de setembre del 1936.”
  - [48.](#) Comité Central de les Milícies Antifeixistes de Catalunya: “Resum de la reunió del dia 14 de setembre del 1936.”
  - [49.](#) Lorenzo, *op. cit.*, pp. 182-184.
  - [50.](#) Comité Central de les Milícies Antifeixistes de Catalunya: “Resum de la reunió del dia 16 de setembre del 1936.”

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- [51.](#) There were still barricades on the streets almost two months after July 19. The order to remove the cotton bales was issued due to the shortage of raw materials in the textile industry.
  - [52.](#) Comité Central de les Milícies Antifeixistes de Catalunya: “Resum de la reunió del dia 18 de setembre del 1936.”
  - [53.](#) Comité Central de les Milícies Antifeixistes de Catalunya: “Resum de la reunió del dia 19 de setembre del 1936.”
  - [54.](#) Tarradellas had gone to Madrid to obtain financial and technical assistance to create a military industry in Cataluña. As Tarradellas said: “one of the reasons for my trip—as you must already know—was, besides accompanying the forces of the Civil Guards to place them at the disposal of the military commander in Madrid, to request that the Central Government transfer as soon as possible to Cataluña the Toledo arms and ammunition factory.  
Accompanied by Colonel Giménez de Abaza, the director of the Oviedo arms factory, and Air Force Colonel Ramírez Cartagena, one of the commanders of the Barcelona air force when the uprising began, accompanied then by these two republican officers, faithful to their oath to defend the Republic, I had several interviews with Sr. Largo Caballero and his



advisors. You have no idea of how I felt, I had to return to Barcelona without having obtained the transfer of the Toledo arms and ammunition factory to Cataluña.” Quoted from “Letter from Tarradellas to Bollo ten dated March 24, 1971”, published in its entirety in *Balance*, Issue No. 6 of the archival series (1998).

- [55.](#) Comité Central de les Milícies Antifeixistes de Catalunya: “Resum de la reunió del dia 20 de setembre del 1936.”
- [56.](#) See Abel Paz, *La cuestión de Marruecos y la República española*, Fundación Anselmo Lorenzo, Madrid, 2000.
- [57.](#) Comité Central de les Milícies Antifeixistes de Catalunya: “Resum de la reunió del dia 21 de setembre del 1936.”
- [58.](#) Comité Central de les Milícies Antifeixistes de Catalunya: “Resum de la reunió del dia 23 de setembre del 1936.”
- [59.](#) This lack of solidarity expressed by the CCMA for the refugees from Madrid could not have been more despicable and shameful.
- [60.](#) Comité Central de les Milícies Antifeixistes de Catalunya: “Resum de la reunió del dia 25 de setembre del 1936.”
- [61.](#) García Oliver, *El eco...*, pp. 281-284.

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- [62.](#) The first two had been members of the former Council of the Economy of the Generalitat.
  - [63.](#) Lorenzo, *op. cit.*, p. 185.
  - [64.](#) Published in the Official Bulletin of the Generalitat on October 28, 1936.
  - [65.](#) See “Segunda sesión del pleno local de Grupos Anarquistas de Barcelona [...] con asistencia de los grupos de Defensa confederal y Juventudes libertarias”, Barcelona, April 24, 1937.
  - [66.](#) The delegation was composed of José Xena, David Antona, Horacio Martínez Prieto and Mariano Rodríguez Vázquez.
  - [67.](#) “Informe de la delegación de la CNT al Congreso Extraordinario de la AIT y resolución del mismo”, December 1937, pp. 75-76.
  - [68.](#) Rüdiger’s argument in favor of the necessity of subordinating all the activity, all theory and all the principles of the CNT to antifascist unity, as the only way to guarantee victory in the war, OBVIOUSLY implied the necessity of keeping this report SECRET. If the Russian and Spanish Stalinists were to find out about the blind determination of the CNT to submit to antifascist unity, *at any price*, then the CNT would run the risk of becoming a puppet in the hands of its political rivals. The National Committee of the CNT, however, did not hesitate to PUBLISH this SECRET

report: there was nothing new about the incompetence, naiveté and political immaturity of the CNT leaders. Furthermore, by publishing this pamphlet in 1938, Rüdiger's secret report could only have scandalized those few simple souls who, in 1938, still believed in the revolutionary nature of the CNT.

- [69](#). Helmut Rüdiger, *El anarcosindicalismo en la Revolución Española*, CNT, Barcelona, 1938.

## Part 3 - The Death and Funeral of Durruti

*“Cui prodest scelus is fecit.” (Whoever benefits from the crime is the one who committed it.)*

Seneca, *Medea*

*“We anarchists can go to jail, or die the way Obregón, Ascaso, Sabater, Buenaventura Durruti and Peiró died, whose lives are worthy of a Plutarch. We can die in exile, in the concentration camps, in the maquis, or in a hospice, but to accept the position of government minister, this is inconceivable.”*

Jaime Balius, “For the Record”, *Solidaridad Obrera*, September 2, 1971.

### **FROM NOVEMBER 4 TO NOVEMBER 22, 1936**

On November 4, many people were eagerly waiting to listen to a surprise speech by Durruti that was to be broadcast by Radio CNT-FAI from Barcelona to all of Spain. On that same day the press reported on the accession of four anarchist Ministers to the Madrid government: Federica Montseny, Juan García Oliver, Juan López and Joan Peiró. The Durruti Column had not captured Zaragoza. The difficulties with regard to the supply of arms comprised the main problem at the front.

Durruti had tried everything in his power to obtain weapons. He even sent a detachment of militiamen in early September on a punitive expedition to Sabadell, in order to force them to deliver the arms that had been stored there in anticipation of forming a Sabadell Column that had not yet been organized. Furthermore, on October 24 the Generalitat had approved the Decree militarizing the Militias, which re-imposed the old Code of Military Justice, effective as of November 1. Both the friends as well as the enemies of Durruti eagerly awaited his speech.

Even before the speech started, people gathered in the vicinity of the speakers that had been installed in the trees of Las Ramblas, which usually broadcast revolutionary songs, news and music. Wherever there was a radio in Barcelona, people were impatiently waiting for the announcement: “Durruti Speaks”.

The Militarization Decree had been passionately discussed in the Durruti Column, which had voted not to comply with it, because it could not improve the combat conditions of the volunteer militiamen of July 19, nor could it resolve the chronic shortage of weapons and ammunition. Durruti signed, in the name of the Committee of War, a text<sup>1</sup> rejecting the militarization demanded by the “Council”<sup>2</sup> of the Generalitat,

significantly datelined from the Osera Front on the same day (November 1) that the hated Military Code was supposed to become effective. The Column denied the need for barracks discipline, to which it opposed the superiority of revolutionary discipline: *“Militiamen, yes; soldiers, never.”*

Durruti, as the delegate of the Column, sought to evoke the indignation and protests of the militiamen of the Aragón front against the clearly counterrevolutionary course that was emerging behind the lines. The broadcast of Durruti’s speech<sup>3</sup> began at 9:30 p.m.:

*“Workers of Cataluña! I am speaking to the Catalan people, to the generous people that four months ago defeated the soldiers who tried to crush them beneath their boots. I send you salutations from your brothers and comrades fighting on the front in Aragón, who are only kilometers from Zaragoza, within sight of the towers of Pilarica.*

*“Despite the threat that is closing in on Madrid, we must always remember that the people have risen, and nothing in the world can make them retreat. We shall resist on the front of Aragón, against the Aragonese fascist hordes, and we call upon our brothers in Madrid to resist, because the militiamen of Cataluña will know how*

*to do their duty, just as they did when they went into the streets of Barcelona to crush fascism. The workers organizations must not forget their imperative duty at the present time. At the front, as in the trenches, there is only one thought, one goal. Our gaze is fixed, we look forward, with the sole purpose of crushing fascism.*

*“We ask the Catalan people to stop the intrigues and bickering. You must rise to the occasion: stop quarreling and think of the war. The people of Catalonia have the duty to support those fighting on the front. We have to mobilize everyone, but don’t think that it will always be the same people. If Catalan workers have assumed the responsibility of going to the front, it’s now time to demand sacrifices from those who remain in the cities. We have to effectively mobilize all the workers in the rearguard because those of us who are at the front need to know that we can count on the men behind us.*

*“To the organizations: stop your rows and stop tripping things up! Those of us who are fighting on the front ask for sincerity, above all from the CNT and FAI. We ask the leaders to be genuine. It is not enough for them to send encouraging letters to us at the front, and to send clothing, food, rifles and ammunition. It is also necessary for them to face the facts, and plan for the future. This war has all the aggravating factors of modern warfare*

*and is proving to be very costly for Catalonia. The leadership has to realize that we'll need to start organizing the Catalan economy, and imposing rules on the economic order, if this lasts much longer. I do not feel like writing any more letters so that the comrades or the son of a militiaman can have one more crust of bread or pint of milk, while there are Ministers who do not have to pay to eat and have no limits on their expenditures. We call upon the CNT-FAI to tell them that if they as an organization control the economy of Catalonia, then they must organize it as it should be organized. No one should think of wage increases or reduced working hours now. It's the duty of all workers, especially the workers of the CNT, to make sacrifices, to work as much as necessary.*

*“Of course we're fighting for something greater and the militiamen will prove it. They blush when they read about fund drives to raise money for them in the press, when they see those posters asking you to make a donation. The fascist planes drop newspapers on us that publish lists of donations for their soldiers, and they are neither more nor less than what you give. That is why we have to tell you that we are not beggars and therefore we do not accept charity in any form. Fascism represents and is in effect social inequality, and if you do not want those of us who are fighting to confuse those of you in the rearguard*



*with our enemies, then do your duty. We are waging war now to crush the enemy at the front, but is this the only enemy? No. Anyone among us who is opposed to the revolutionary conquests is also an enemy, and we must crush them as well.*

*“If you want to neutralize the threat, you must form a granite front. Politics is the art of obstructionism, the art of living [like parasites], and this must be replaced with the art of labor. The time has come to invite the trade union organizations and the political parties to put an end to this business once and for all. In the rearguard we need capable administrators. The men at the front want responsibility and guarantees behind us. And we demand that the organizations look after our women and children.*

*“They’re mistaken if they think that the militarization decree will scare us and impose an iron discipline on us. You are mistaken, Ministers, with your militarization decree. Since you have so much to say about iron discipline, then I say to you, come to the front with me. At the front we do not accept any discipline, because we are conscious of doing our duty. And you will see our order and our organization. Then we shall return to Barcelona and we shall ask you about your discipline, your order, and your control, which does not exist.*

*“Remain calm. There’s no chaos or indiscipline at the front. We’re all responsible and cherish your trust. Sleep peacefully. But remember that we’ve left Catalonia and its economy in your hands. Take responsibility for yourselves, discipline yourselves. Let’s not provoke, with our incompetence, after this war, another civil war among ourselves.*

*“Anyone who thinks that his party is strong enough to impose its policy is wrong. Against the fascists we must marshal one force, one organization, with a unified discipline.*

*“The fascist tyrants will never cross our lines. That is our slogan at the front. To them we say: ‘You will not pass!’ To you: ‘They will not pass!’”*

Hours after having listened to Durruti’s radio address, people were still discussing what he had said with his usual energy and integrity. His words resonated with force and emotion in the Barcelona night, embodying the genuine thought of the working class. It was a cry of alarm that reminded the workers of their condition as revolutionary militants. Durruti did not recognize any gods, nor did he see the working class as gods. He took it for granted that the militiamen who were fighting fascism at the front were not going to allow anyone to

rob them of the revolutionary and emancipatory content of their struggle: they were not fighting for the Republic or bourgeois democracy, but for the triumph of the social revolution and the emancipation of the proletariat.

His entire address did not contain even one demagogic or rhetorical phrase. His words were a spur to the great and the small of the earth. For the workers and the CNT leaders comfortably settled into responsible positions, for the ordinary citizens and for the Ministers of the Generalitat or the glamorous anarchist Ministers. A diatribe against the bureaucratic deviations of the revolutionary situation that arose on July 19, and a condemnation of government policy, with or without CNT leaders to provide a façade. In the rearguard there was an unfortunate confusion between duty and charity, administration and command, function and bureaucracy, responsibility and discipline, agreement and decree, and example and orders and commands. The threat to *“return to Barcelona”* caused the resurgence of terror among the political representatives of the bourgeoisie, although it was already too late to remedy the inexcusable and naïve error of July, when the revolution was postponed *“until after Zaragoza is captured”*, as a result of theoretical shortcomings and a lack of perspective on the part of the libertarian movement. But

these threats against the ruling powers were not in vain: his words, directed at his class brothers, possessed all the value of a revolutionary testament. A testament, rather than a proclamation, because his fate was already sealed, a fate that his posthumous deification transformed into an enigma.

The immediate consequence of the radio address, was the convocation by Companys on the following day, November 5, at 11:00 p.m., of an extraordinary meeting<sup>4</sup> in the Palace of the Generalitat of all the Ministers and representatives of all the political and trade union organizations, in order to discuss the growing resistance to compliance with the Decree militarizing the militias, as well as to the Decree proclaiming the dissolution of the revolutionary committees and their replacement by Popular Front municipal government bodies. Durruti was the cause and the target of the debate, although everyone avoided mentioning his name. Companys proclaimed the necessity of putting an end to “*the uncontrollables*”, who, outside of all political and trade union organizations, “*were ruining everything and compromising all of us*”. Comorera (PSUC) stated that the UGT had expelled from its ranks those who did not comply with the decrees, and invited the other organizations to do the same. Marianet, secretary of the

CNT, after boasting of the sacrifices made by the anarchists with their renunciation of their own ideological principles, complained of the lack of tact demonstrated by the attempt to immediately enforce the Code of Military Justice, and assured those present that after the decree ordering the dissolution of the committees, and thanks to the efforts of the CNT, there were fewer and fewer uncontrollables, and that this was not so much a matter of groups that had to be expelled as resistance that had to be overcome, without provoking revolts, and of individuals who must be convinced. Nin (POUM), Herrera (FAI) and Fábregas (CNT) praised the efforts carried out by all the organizations to stabilize the situation after July 19, and to reinforce the power of the current Council of the Generalitat. Nin mediated the dispute between Sandino, Minister of Defense, and Marianet, concerning the causes of the resistance to the Militarization Decree, saying that *“everyone basically agreed”* and that there was a certain amount of fear among the masses *“about losing what they had gained”*, but that *“the working class agrees that a real army must be created”*. Nin saw the solution of the current disagreements in the creation of a Commissariat of War in which all the political and trade union organizations would be represented. Comorera, much more intransigent than Companys and Tarradellas,

claimed that the fundamental problem resided in the Generalitat's lack of authority: "*groups of uncontrollables are still doing whatever they want*", not only with regard to the question of militarization and the conduct of the war or the issue of a unitary command structure, but also with regard to the dissolution of the committees and the formation of municipal governing bodies, as well with respect to the collection of arms in the rearguard and recruitment, which augured disaster. Comorera even said that this lack of authority extended to the collectivizations, "*which are still being carried out capriciously, without observing the Decree that regulates them*". Companies accepted the possibility of modifying the Military Code and creating a Commissariat of War. Comorera and Andreu (ERC) insisted that it was necessary to comply with and to enforce compliance with the decrees. The meeting concluded with a joint appeal to the Catalanian people to exercise discipline in complying with all the decrees of the Generalitat, and to all the organizations to make a commitment to declare their support for all the government's decisions in their press.<sup>5</sup> No one at this meeting opposed militarization: the problem for the politicians and bureaucrats was merely how to make the people obey the government's decrees.

On November 6 the Council of Ministers of the Republic, including the four anarchist Ministers, voted unanimously to evacuate the Government from Madrid, which was besieged by fascist troops. The scorn for this decision on the part of the Local Federation of the CNT of Madrid was reflected in the publication of a belligerent manifesto that declared: *“Madrid, free of Government Ministers, will be the tomb of fascism. Onward, militiamen! Long live Madrid without a government! Long live the Social Revolution!”* On the 15th of November elements of the Durruti Column were already fighting in Madrid under the command of Durruti, who had resisted leaving Aragón, and who was finally convinced by Marianet and Federica. On November 19, a stray bullet, *or perhaps not so stray*,[6](#) struck him while he was at the Madrid front, where he died the next day. On Sunday, November 22, in Barcelona, an endless, chaotic and disorganized funeral procession[7](#) advanced slowly through the streets, while the two bands that were unable to harmonize their music only contributed to the augmentation of the confusion. The cavalry and motorized troops who were supposed to lead the procession were prevented from doing so by the enormous crowds. The cars that bore the funeral wreaths had to be driven in reverse. The members of the cavalry escort attempted to make their way forward

separately. The musicians who had been dispersed in the crowd tried to regroup amidst a confused mass of people bearing antifascist placards and waving red flags, red and black banners, and the striped flags of the republic. The procession was led by numerous politicians and bureaucrats, although the limelight was monopolized by Companys, the president of the Generalitat, Antonov-Ovseenko, the Soviet consul, and Juan García Oliver, the anarchist Minister of Justice of the Republic, who addressed the crowd from in front of the Columbus Monument in order to display his oratorical gifts before the multitude. García Oliver rehearsed the same arguments of sincere friendship and fraternity among antifascists that he would later use in May 1937 to help to smash the barricades of the workers insurrection against Stalinism. The Soviet consul initiated the tradition of ideological manipulation of Durruti by depicting him as a champion of military discipline and unitary command. Companys delivered the most dastardly insult when he said that Durruti *“had been shot in the back as all cowards die ... or as those die who are murdered by cowards”*. All three of them coincided in their praise for antifascist unity above all else. Durruti’s funeral bier was already a tribune for the counterrevolution. Three orators, excellent representatives of the bourgeois government, of Stalinism and the CNT bureaucracy,



disputed among themselves for the popularity of the man who was yesterday's dangerous uncontrollable but today's embalmed hero. When the coffin, eight hours after the beginning of the spectacle, now without its official cortege, but still accompanied by a curious crowd, arrived at the cemetery of Montjuic, it could not be buried until the next day because hundreds of wreaths blocked the way to the site of the grave, which was too small, and a heavy downpour prevented it from being enlarged.

We may never find out how Durruti really died, since there are seven or eight different and contradictory versions; but it is most interesting to ask why he died fifteen days after having delivered his radio address. Durruti's radio broadcast was perceived as a dangerous threat, which encountered an immediate response in the convening of the extraordinary meeting of the Council of the Generalitat, especially in the brutality of Comorera's speech, which could hardly be moderated by cenetistas and POUMistas, who ultimately swore to devote themselves to the common task of complying with and enforcing compliance with all the decrees. The sacred antifascist union between working class bureaucrats, Stalinists and bourgeois politicians could not tolerate uncontrollables of the stature of Durruti: this is why his

death was such an urgent and necessary matter. By opposing the militarization of the militias, Durruti personified the revolutionary opposition and resistance to the dissolution of the committees, the direction of the war by the bourgeoisie and state control of the enterprises expropriated in July. Durruti died because he had become a dangerous obstacle for the ongoing counterrevolution.

And for this very same reason Durruti had to die twice. One year later, at the commemoration of the one-year anniversary of his death, the all-powerful propaganda machine of Negrín's Stalinist government worked at full capacity to attribute the authorship of a slogan to Durruti, invented originally by Ilya Ehrenburg,<sup>8</sup> and later given the support of the bureaucracy of the superior committees of the CNT-FAI, in which he was made to say the opposite of what he always said and thought: "*We renounce everything, except victory.*" That is, Durruti renounced the revolution. We do not even possess a complete and reliable version of his speech broadcast over the radio on November 4, 1936, because the anarchist press of the period revised and censored Durruti's live speech for publication.

Once he was dead, Durruti could become a God. And even a Lieutenant Colonel<sup>9</sup> in the Popular Army.

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- [1.](#) Buenaventura Durruti, “Al Consejo de la Generalidad de Cataluña”, Frente de Osera, November 1, 1936. See Appendix.
  - [2.](#) “Council” was the word used to avoid using the word “Government”, which was taboo for the anarchists.
  - [3.](#) The speech is reconstructed from various fragments published in *Solidaridad Obrera* and *Acracia*.
  - [4.](#) “Acta de la reunió celebrada sota la presidencia de S.E. el president de la Generalitat pels conseller i representants dels partits i sindicats que tenen representació en el Consell, els dies 5 i 6 de novembre de 1936.”
  - [5.](#) Marianet replaced the old and experienced anarchist Liberto Callejas with the young bureaucrat Jacinto Toryho as editor in chief of *Solidaridad Obrera*, which then published a censored version of Durruti’s speech.
  - [6.](#) A stray bullet was also blamed for the death, in April 1937, of Antonio Martín, the anarchist leader from Puigcerdà. The memoirs of Pons Garlandí disclose that his death was actually the result of a premeditated assassination, orchestrated by high level officials of the ERC in the Generalitat’s police force, who had contracted the services of two

snipers, one of whom was known as “penja robes”, well known in La Cerdaña for his marksmanship. Posted in the bell tower, with the bridge that leads to Bellver in their sights, they had no other objective than to assassinate Antonio Martín.

- [7.](#) Concerning Durruti’s funeral, see *Solidaridad Obrera* (November 24, 1936) and the books by H. E. Kaminski, *Los de Barcelona* [1937], Ed. Cotal, Barcelona, 1977 [a partial English translation can be found online—in October 2013—at: <http://misterscruffles.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/kaminski.pdf>] and by Mary Low and Juan Breá, *Red Spanish Notebook: The First Six Months of the Revolution and Civil War* [1937], City Lights Books, San Francisco, 1979.
- [8.](#) Ilya Ehrenburg, *Corresponsal en la Guerra civil española*, Júcar, Madrid, 1970, p. 24.
- [9.](#) In April 1938 Negrín posthumously awarded this military rank to Durruti.

## **Part 4- THE FRIENDS OF DURRUTI GROUP IN THE INSURRECTION OF MAY 1937 AND ITS PROGRAM**

*“The function of history would therefore be showing that the laws deceive, that the kings play a part, that power deludes and that historians lie.”*

Michel Foucault, *The Genealogy of Racism*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Friends of Durruti Group was an anarchist organization, founded in March 1937. Its members were militiamen from the Durruti Column who were opposed to militarization, and anarchists who were critical of the entry of the CNT into the republican government and the Generalitat.

The historical and political importance of the Friends of Durruti resided in its intention, which arose in 1937 within the ranks of the libertarian movement itself, to create a revolutionary Junta that would put and end to the abandonment of revolutionary principles and collaborationism with the capitalist state; so that the CNT would defend and intensify the “conquests” of July 1936, instead of gradually surrendering them to the

bourgeoisie. The Group never actually proposed, however, to become, during the May Days of 1937, an authentic revolutionary alternative to the collaborationist leadership of the CNT-FAI, which had various Ministers in the government of the Republic and in that of the Generalitat.

## **THE FRIENDS OF DURRUTI GROUP FROM ITS FOUNDING TO THE MAY EVENTS**

In October 1936 the decree militarizing the Popular Militias provoked major discontent among the anarchist militants of the Durruti Column on the Aragón Front.<sup>[1](#)</sup> After long and passionate discussions, in March 1937 several hundred volunteer militiamen, stationed in the Gelsa sector, decided to abandon the front and return to the rearguard.<sup>[2](#)</sup> An agreement was reached to the effect that the relief of the militiamen opposed to militarization would be sent within fifteen days. They abandoned the front, *taking their weapons with them*.

Once they arrived in Barcelona, together with other anarchists (defenders of the continuity and intensification of the July revolution, and opposed to confederal collaboration in the government), the militiamen from Gelsa decided to form an anarchist organization that was separate from the FAI, the CNT and

the Libertarian Youth, an organization whose mission would be to channel the anarcho-sindicalist movement into the revolutionary path. The Group was formally constituted in March 1937, after a long period of incubation that lasted several months, beginning in October 1936. The directive Committee chose the name of “Group of the Friends of Durruti”, a name that was in part testimony to the fact that most of its members were former militiamen of the Durruti Column, but, as Badius astutely pointed out, it was not chosen as a reference of any kind to Durruti’s views, but rather as a result of the popular cult that had grown up around his memory.<sup>3</sup>

The central headquarters of the Group was located on Las Ramblas, at the corner of Hospital Street. The group experienced a rapid and notable increase in its membership. Just before May 1937, the Group had distributed between four and five thousand membership cards. In order to qualify for membership, one had to be a CNT militant. The Group’s growth was the result of the discontent of a wide sector of the anarchist militants with the CNT’s betrayal of its principles. Another factor in its favor was the struggle that was underway against the implementation of the Collectivization Decree, which was being effected by means of budgetary decrees prepared by Tarradellas at S’Agaró, and by means of which the

government of the Generalitat sought to control and direct the operations of all the Catalan enterprises, subjecting them to a rigid state economic plan.<sup>4</sup> The Catalan economy was in fact being transformed into a kind of collectivist (or trade union) capitalism of state planning, in which the government of the Generalitat exercised financial control over each and every one of the enterprises, and possessed the additional power of appointing an Inspector from the Generalitat, who acted on behalf of the government and directed the enterprise. From January to July 1937, in Barcelona, the industrial workers had attended numerous assemblies in the factories, which were often menaced by large contingents of police just outside the meeting halls, where the question of the conflict between *socialization and collectivization*<sup>5</sup> was posed with greater or lesser clarity and effectiveness, together with the extremely serious problem presented by the decline in purchasing power of wages and the difficulties in obtaining food and meeting other basic needs. Collectivization implied that the ownership of the small and medium-sized enterprises and workshops had passed from their former owners to the workers in each enterprise, disconnected from and unsupportive of the wage workers in other, less productive enterprises, or enterprises that faced greater difficulties. This is therefore a form of collective



ownership, on the part of the workers in each enterprise, although subject to the iron grip of state control, since the general direction of the economy was planned by the government of the Generalitat, which not only exercised financial control and therefore the power to starve out insubordinate enterprises, but also held effective managerial powers due to the Inspector, who in fact became the director and new boss, appointed by the government. In reality, *collectivization had therefore become a kind of collective capitalism, under trade union management, with state planning and direction.*

Socialization, however, means the organization of the workers in Industrial Federations or Trade Unions, which are supposed to reorganize and rationalize production in an entire industrial sector, directed and planned by the trade unions, in which gains are supposed to accrue to the benefit of all of society, and not just the workers of each enterprise.<sup>6</sup> The totality of all these Federations of Industry, rather than the bourgeois government of the Generalitat, should therefore be responsible for the direction and planning of the economy in all of Catalunya. Besides an ideological struggle, which it certainly was, it was above all a struggle for the mere survival of the worker-managed industries, for if Companys and Comorera had the power to tax the enterprises and establish the standards for their working conditions, as

well as prevent access to credit or raw materials, they had in their hands the real control of any enterprise, by way of the Inspector they imposed, and with the generalization of this situation a kind of state capitalism was established, directed by the Generalitat.

This struggle was ideologically concretized in the slogan disseminated by the Group of the Friends of Durruti, in April and May of 1937, “All power to the trade unions”. Recall that the May Days were provoked precisely by the refusal of the workers to accept an Inspector appointed by the Generalitat at the Telephone Company.

The Group engaged in frenzied activity. From its formal constitution on March 17, up until May 3, the Group organized various public meetings (at the Teatro Poliorama on April 18 and at the Teatro Goya on May 2), distributed various manifestoes and pamphlets, disrupted Federica Montseny’s speech at the rally at the Monumental on April 11, and plastered the walls of Barcelona with posters explaining their program. Two of this program’s points are particularly noteworthy:

1. *All power to the working class.*
2. Democratic institutions of workers, peasants and combatants, as an expression of this working class power, which they called the *Revolutionary Junta*.

They also called for *the trade unions to assume full economic and political direction of the country*. When they spoke of trade unions they were referring to the confederal trade unions, excluding the Stalinized UGT. In fact, some of the members of the Group had abandoned their positions as UGT militants in order to join the CNT, and therefore to become eligible for membership in the Friends of Durruti Group.

In reality, although the working class origins of the members of the Group made all of them eligible to be members of the CNT, most of them were militants of the FAI, which is why it could very well be said that the Group of the Friends of Durruti was a group of anarchists who, from acratid doctrinal purism, but above all because they reflected the ongoing struggle for the socialization of the enterprises and against the militarization of the confederal militias, opposed the collaborationist and statist policy of the leadership of the CNT, and the FAI itself.

They were a dominant force in the food supply trade union, with branches throughout Catalonia, as well as in the mining districts of Sallent, Suria, Fígols and Cardona, in the vicinity of Alto Llobregat. They also had influence in other trade unions, in which they were a minority faction. Some of the Group's members were also

members of the Control Patrols. They never formed a fraction or a sub-group within the Patrol Controls, however, or ever attempted to infiltrate the Patrols.

We cannot characterize the Group as an affinity group, or even as a conscious and organized vanguard that was methodically carrying out a plan to present itself as an alternative to the FAI. It was, both from the numerical as well as organizational and ideological point of view, much more than a more or less informally constituted affinity group (which would usually have a maximum of between twelve and twenty members) formed on the basis of certain shared ideological views and common discontent. And although it would be even less correct to view it as just another branch of the Libertarian Movement (ML), such as the CNT, FAI and the Libertarian Youth, it could be compared to the Mujeres Libres of that time: an organization with its own goals, not completely demarcated by any of the three great organized branches of the ML. It was a large organization of militants (five thousand members before May) that instinctively felt the imperative need to confront the pusillanimous policies of the CNT and the constantly advancing counterrevolutionary process. Its most outstanding spokespersons were Jaime Balius and Pablo Ruiz. On Sunday, April 18, the Group held a public meeting in the

Teatro Poliorama, where they intended to publicize their existence and present their program. Jaime Balius, Pablo Ruiz (the delegate of the Gelsa Group of the Durruti Column), Francisco Pellicer (from the Food Supply Trade Union) and Francisco Carreño (a member of the War Committee of the Durruti Column) spoke at this meeting. The event was a major success and the ideas expressed by the speakers were loudly applauded by the crowd. On the first Sunday in May (the 2nd), the Group held another informational rally in the Teatro Goya, which filled the theater to overflowing and provoked great enthusiasm in the audience. A documentary film entitled, "July Nineteenth" was shown, in which the most emotional incidents of the revolutionary days of July 1936 were depicted. Pablo Ruiz, Jaime Balius, Liberto Callejas and Francisco Carreño spoke at this meeting. During the course of the meeting the audience was warned that an attack by the reactionaries against the workers was imminent. The superior Committees of the FAI and the CNT immediately attempted to discredit the Friends of Durruti Group, whom they slandered as Marxists.

The program set forth by The Friends of Durruti, prior to May 1937, was characterized by its emphasis on the management of the economy by the trade unions, the

critique of all the parties and their state collaborationism, as well as a strict return to aocratic doctrinal purity. The Friends of Durruti explained their program in the poster with which they covered the walls of Barcelona at the end of April 1937. These posters now advocated, before the insurrection took place, the need to *replace the bourgeois government of the Generalitat of Catalonia with a Revolutionary Junta*. The posters read as follows:

“From the Group of the Friends of Durruti. To the working class:

1. The immediate constitution of a Revolutionary Junta formed of workers from the city and the countryside and combatants.
2. The family wage. Rationing card. Direction of the economy and control over distribution by the trade unions.
3. Liquidation of the counterrevolution.
4. Creation of a revolutionary army.
5. Absolute control of public order by the working class.
6. Firm opposition to any armistice.

7. A proletarian justice system.

8. Abolition of prisoner exchanges.

Attention, workers: our group is opposed to the advancing counterrevolution. The decrees on public order, sponsored by Aiguadé, will not be implemented. We demand that Maroto and the other imprisoned comrades be released.

All power to the working class.

All economic power to the trade unions.

Against the Generalitat, the Revolutionary Junta.”

The poster of April 1937 foreshadowed and explained the leaflet distributed during the May Days, along with many of the other themes and concerns addressed by Balius in the articles published in *Solidaridad Obrera*, *La Noche* and *Ideas* (on revolutionary justice, prisoner exchanges, the need for the rearguard to live for the war, etc.). And this was the first time that the Group advocated the necessity of *a Revolutionary Junta to replace the bourgeois government of the Generalitat*. This Revolutionary Junta was defined as a revolutionary government formed by all the workers, peasants and militiamen *who had fought in the streets during the revolutionary days of July 1936* (and this excluded the PSUC, founded on July 23, and the ERC).

The most important point, however, was the combined expression of the three concluding slogans. The replacement of the bourgeois government of the Generalitat by a Revolutionary Junta appears alongside the slogan of *“All power to the working class”* and *“All economic power to the trade unions”*.

The political program expressed in this text, which was distributed immediately before the May Days, was undoubtedly the most advanced and lucid of all the programs of all the proletarian groups of the time, and made the Group the revolutionary vanguard of the Spanish proletariat at this critical and decisive moment. And that is just how the Group was viewed at the time by the POUM and the Bolshevik-Leninist Section of Spain.

## **THE MAY EVENTS**[7](#)

There was no demonstration in Barcelona on *May Day*, which fell on a Saturday. The Generalitat had declared the day a working day, for increasing war production, although the real reason was fear of a confrontation between the different workers organizations, due to the growing tension in various towns and districts in Catalonia. On that same Saturday, the Council of the Generalitat met to deliberate on the disturbing situation of public order in Catalonia. This Council expressed its



approval of the efficacy displayed during the last few weeks by the Ministries of Interior and Defense, to whom it agreed to grant a vote of confidence to resolve those questions concerning public order that still needed to be addressed.

The President of the Generalitat, on Monday, May 3, was conveniently absent due to a trip to Benicarló for a meeting with Largo Caballero, which allowed him to disavow responsibility for the first incidents. In any event, the political decision of Companys, with his absolute refusal to dismiss Artemi Aguadé and Rodríguez Salas, as the CNT demanded earlier that same day, was one of the most important trip-wires that led to the armed confrontations of the following days. On that same day, a large contingent of miners from the Alto Llobregat mining basin were present in Barcelona, who were interested in the agreements the government had to make concerning the export of potash,<sup>8</sup> and who subsequently took an active part in the defense of the barricades.

*On Monday, May 3, 1937, at around 2:45 p.m., three trucks carrying heavily armed assault guards pulled up in front of the headquarters of the Telephone company in the Plaza de Cataluña. They were commanded by Rodríguez Salas, a militant of the UGT and a dedicated*

Stalinist, who was the publicly appointed chief of the Commissariat of Public Order. The building containing the Telephone company had been confiscated and controlled by the CNT since July 19. The questions of the surveillance of telephone communications, control over the borders, and the control patrols were the bones of contention that had provoked various incidents since January pitting the republican government of the Generalitat against the confederal masses. It was an inevitable confrontation between the republican state apparatus, which claimed absolute dominion over all the responsibilities that “pertained” to it, and the defense of the “conquests” of July 19 on the part of the cenetistas. Rodríguez Salas attempted to take control of the Telephone building. The CNT militants on the lower floors, taken by surprise, allowed themselves to be disarmed; on the upper floors, however, serious resistance was organized, thanks to a strategically placed machine gun. The news spread quickly. Barricades were immediately erected throughout the city. It is not possible to speak of a spontaneous reaction on the part of the Barcelona working class, because the general strike, the armed confrontations with the police forces and the barricades *were the fruit of the initiative taken by the Committee of Investigation of the CNT-FAI and the defense committees*, which rapidly encountered support

thanks to the existence of an enormous amount of generalized discontent, the increasing economic hardships occasioned by the rising cost of living, long queues and rationing, as well as the tension among the rank and file base of the confederal militants between collaborationists and revolutionaries. *The street battles were initiated and carried out by the neighborhood defense committees* (and only partially and secondarily by some elements of the control patrols). The fact that there was no directive from the superior committees of the CNT, whose members were acting as Ministers in Valencia, or from any other organization, to mobilize and build barricades throughout the city, does not mean that these actions were purely spontaneous, but rather that they were the result of the directives issued by the defense committees.<sup>9</sup> Manuel Escorza had spoken at the assembly of the CNT-FAI on July 21, 1936, advocating a third way, as opposed to García Oliver's half-hearted advocacy of the "go for broke" strategy and the overwhelming majority position of Abad de Santillán and Federica Montseny in favor of loyal collaboration with the government of the Generalitat. Escorza advocated the use of the government of the Generalitat as a tool to socialize the economy, and that it then be disposed of when it ceases to be useful to the CNT. Escorza was the highest ranking official of the *Investigation Services of the*

*CNT-FAI*, which had since July 1936 been executing all kinds of repressive tasks, as well as espionage and intelligence. These Services had preserved *their own separate organizational structure*, autonomous and independent of both the government of the Generalitat as well as, during its brief existence, the CCMA. It was directly responsible to the superior committees of the CNT-FAI (the Regional Committees of the CNT and the FAI), while at the same time it *exercised a coordinating role* for the neighborhood defense committees and the CNT militants who were members of the public institutions of the Commissariat of Public Order and the Control Patrols: José Asens, Dionisio Eroles, Aurelio Fernández, “Portela”, etc. In April 1937, Pedro Herrera, the “conseller” (Minister) of Health under the second Tarradellas government,<sup>[10](#)</sup> and Manuel Escorza, were the CNT officials who negotiated with Lluís Companys (the President of the Generalitat) to resolve the serious government crisis of early March 1937, due to the resignation of the “conseller” of Defense, the cenetista Isgleas.<sup>[11](#)</sup> Companys decided to abandon the tactic employed by Tarradellas, who could not imagine a government of the Generalitat that was not a government of antifascist unity, and in which the CNT did not participate, in order to adopt the tactic advocated by Comorera, secretary of the PSUC, that consisted in using

force to impose a “strong” government, one that would no longer tolerate a CNT incapable of keeping its own militants, whom he referred to as “uncontrollables”, in line. Companys was determined to break with a an increasingly more problematic policy of compromises with the CNT and thought that the time had come, thanks to the support of the PSUC and the Soviets, to impose by force the authority and the decrees of a government of the Generalitat that, as the facts had demonstrated, was not even strong enough to refrain from making deals with the CNT. The fruitless discussions held by Companys with Escorza and Herrera,[12](#) which failed to arrive at any kind of political solution in two months of talks, and despite the ephemeral new government of April 16,[13](#) led directly to the armed confrontations of May 1937 in Barcelona, when Companys, without conferring with Tarradellas (not to mention Escorza and Herrera) issued the order to Artemi Aguadé, “conseller” of the Interior, to occupy the Telephone building, which was then executed by Rodríguez Salas,[14](#) Commissar of Public Order, at approximately 2:45 p.m. on May 3, 1937. The general strike order was not the product of a “spontaneous class instinct”. *The order to seize the Telephone building was the brutal response to the CNT demands*[15](#) *and an expression of contempt for the negotiations*[16](#) *carried out*

*during the month of April by Manuel Escorza and Pedro Herrera, representing the CNT, directly with Companys, who had expressly excluded Tarradellas. Escorza<sup>17</sup> had the motive and the ability to respond immediately to the provocation staged by Companys from his position in the Committee of Investigation of the CNT-FAI, an autonomous organization that coordinated the defense committees and the CNT members who held positions of authority in the various departments of public order. This was most likely the trigger of the armed confrontations of the May Events, and created a favorable terrain for the activities of the Friends of Durruti. They were able to immediately adapt to what was required by the circumstances. While the workers were fighting with arms in hand, the Group attempted to lead them and give them a revolutionary goal. Its limitations soon became apparent, however. It criticized the leaders of the CNT, whom it called traitors, in its Manifesto of May 8, but it was unable to counteract the CNT's directives to abandon the barricades. Nor did it propose to act outside of the framework of the confederal organization and its directives, which immediately sought to stop the insurrection that was started by the defense committees, when the great ones, such as García Oliver, Federica Montseny and Abad de Santillán, tried to put out the fire. The Friends of Durruti was incapable of realizing its*

proposal to form a Revolutionary Junta. Its members knew that its critiques of the anarchosyndicalist leadership were not enough to displace it from its ruling position in the CNT organization. Furthermore, the Group's members were mostly young and inexperienced and lacked prestige among the confederal masses. Its ideas had not deeply permeated the rank and file militants.

While the Group was floundering in this situation of impotence it received a note from the Executive Committee of the POUM, requesting that an authorized deputation of the Group meet with the Executive Committee. This meeting was attended by Jaime Balius, Pablo Ruiz, Eleuterio Roig and Martín. At 7:00 p.m. on May 4, they met with Gorkin, Nin and Andrade at the Principal Palace on the Ramblas. Together they assessed the situation, and reached the unanimous conclusion that, given the opposition of the leadership circles of the CNT and the FAI to the revolutionary movement, the movement was condemned to failure.<sup>18</sup> They agreed that it was necessary to carry out an orderly retreat of the combatants and that the latter should keep their weapons. That the withdrawal should be carried out before the positions have to be abandoned as a result of the actions of the enemy forces. That it was necessary to

obtain guarantees that the combatants at the barricades would not be targets of repression. On the evening of the next day, the highest-level anarchosyndicalist leaders and officials again spoke on the radio, calling for an end to the fighting. And now the rank and file militants at the barricades no longer mocked the “firemen” of the CNT-FAI, or the kisses that García Oliver gave the assault guards.

On *Wednesday, May 5*, the Friends of Durruti distributed the well-known leaflet at the barricades that made them famous, whose text reads as follows:

“CNT-FAI. ‘The Friends of Durruti’ Group.

WORKERS! A Revolutionary Junta. Shoot those responsible. Disarm all armed government forces. Socialization of the economy. Dissolution of all the political Parties that have attacked the working class. We shall not surrender the streets. The revolution above all else. We salute our comrades of the POUM who have fraternized with us in the streets. LONG LIVE THE SOCIAL REVOLUTION! DOWN WITH THE COUNTERREVOLUTION!”

This leaflet was printed during the night of May 5th by workers forced to do so at gunpoint, in a print shop in the Barrio Chino. The improvisation and lack of infrastructure of the Group were evident. The text was



drafted after the meeting with the Executive of the POUM, held at 7:00 p.m. on the previous day, when the Group and the POUM had already agreed on a position of defensive retreat, without abandoning any weapons, and with the demand that guarantees be secured against repression. The leaflet, approved by the POUM, and published in issue number 235 (May 6) of *La Batalla*, was not backed up by a plan of action, and was nothing but a declaration of intentions and an appeal to the spontaneity of the confederal masses to persevere in their actions against the advances of the counterrevolution. In reality, everything depended on the decision of the CNT leadership. It was absurd and illogical to think that the confederal masses, despite their initial reticence, and despite their criticisms, would not follow the leaders of July 19. Only if the leadership of the CNT was supplanted by another revolutionary leadership would it be possible, although even then it would be very difficult, for the masses to follow the directives and the action plan of a new leadership. Neither the Group, however, nor the POUM attempted to dislodge the confederal leadership, nor had either prepared any kind of plan of action. Both, in practice, encouraged a tailist policy with respect to the decisions of the CNT leadership. The Executive Committee of the POUM rejected the proposal of Josep Rebull<sup>19</sup> to seize the

Generalitat and any buildings that might still put up any resistance in the city center, *arguing that this was not a military question, but a political one*. The confrontations were restricted to the center of the city.

On May 5 there was a meeting between the Local Committee of Barcelona of the POUM and the Friends of Durruti, which the POUMistas characterized as a failure, because:

“They [the Friends of Durruti] did not want to directly intervene within the confederal structure to replace the leadership, they only wanted to have an influence on the movement without assuming any other kind of responsibility.”

In the leaflet distributed on May 5, The Friends of Durruti proposed a joint POUM-CNT-FAI action. As an immediate objective, to lead the revolution, they advocated the formation of a Revolutionary Junta. BUT THIS COULD NEVER BE CARRIED OUT IN PRACTICE. They were people of the barricades, rather than organizers. The proposal for joint CNT-FAI-POUM action did not go beyond a salute to the militants of other organizations, who were fighting shoulder to shoulder with them at the barricades. This proposal never proceeded from the text of the leaflet to a concrete pact. They did practically

nothing to unseat the CNT leadership and deprive it of control over the confederal masses, who had repeatedly ignored the CNT's orders to abandon the struggle in the streets.

The Friends of Durruti were the most active fighters on the barricades and completely dominated the Plaza Maciá (now the *Plaza Real*), with all the side streets blocked by barricades, and the entire length of *Hospital Street*. At the intersection of *Las Ramblas* and *Hospital Street*, under an enormous portrait of Durruti draped over the façade of the building where the Group had its headquarters, a barricade was built where they established their center of operations. Their absolute control over Hospital Street connected with the headquarters of the Confederal Defense Committee (the central barracks of the defense committees) at *Los Escolapios*[20](#) on the Ronda San Pablo, and from there with the *Brecha de San Pablo*, secured by forty militiamen from the Rojinegra Column, who, under the command of the Durrutista Máximo Franco had “dropped in on Barcelona” for purposes of “observation and intelligence”, after both the Rojinegra Column as well as the Lenin Column, commanded by Rovira, had returned to the front after yielding to pressure exerted by Abad de Santillán and Molina, that is, by the

cenetistas who were giving orders from the Department of Defense of the Generalitat, in the absence of Isgleas.

The POUM totally dominated the *Plaza del Teatro* with several barricades that defended an extensive perimeter around the headquarters of the Local Committee (in the Principal Palace) and the *Hotel Falcón*, which had been transformed into a fortress.

The bloodiest and most decisive battles took place on *May 4th and 5th*. The working class neighborhoods were under CNT-FAI control from the very first moment of the insurrection. In the heart of Pueblo Nuevo, for example, barricades were erected systematically to control the incoming and outgoing traffic on the Mataró highway, yet all was quiet in this area, and in those neighborhoods where fighting was necessary the battles were rapidly decided in favor of the defense committees, as was the case in *Sants*, where the defense committee, installed in the Hotel Olímpic on the Plaza de España, attacked the neighboring barracks of the Assault Guard (which housed 600 men) at the *Plaza de España*, and then, as a preventive measure, attacked the barracks of the National Guard (the former Civil Guard) at *Casarramona*<sup>21</sup> (now the headquarters of Caixa-Fórum), held by a squad of 80 men, since the rest of the garrison, which had a total of 400 National Guards, had departed

with orders to seize the radio station on Las Ramblas. As soon as they reached the vicinity of *Los Escolapios* they were defeated and took flight. In *Pueblo Seco*, the defense committee fired artillery salvos at the *Cine América* (No. 121 Paralelo), where about sixty of these National Guards had sought refuge during the course of their attempt to get back to their barracks.

The bloodiest battle was fought *in the center of the city, and often involved confrontations between adjacent barricades* erected by the POUM, CNT, PSUC, ERC and the Generalitat, to defend their respective headquarters and local offices.

The Plaza de Sant Jaume, where the Palacio de la Generalitat and the offices of the City Government were located, was defended by barricades manned by the *mossos d'esquadra*. The members of the POUM erected a barricade at the intersection of Las Ramblas and Fiveller Street (now Ferran/Fernando), from which they fired on the barricade of the Generalitat. The PSUC built a barricade at the intersection of *Llibreteria Street and the Plaza del Angel* (at that time, Dostoievski), right in front of the building containing the headquarters of the UGT federation of water, gas and electric power trade unions, located on the Vía Layetana (then known as Durruti). The resulting ability to open fire from two sides

at once allowed them to dominate this sector of the Vía Durruti, and also blockaded the gates of No. 2, Plaza del Angel, where Berneri and Barbieri resided, who were kidnapped and murdered by a UGT patrol. There were also battles on Vía Durruti between the Commissariat of Public Order and the Casa CNT-FAI, which was defended by tanks. The combat in the Post Office building was fought floor by floor.

On the Paseo de Gracia gunfire was exchanged between the *Casal Carlos Marx* of the PSUC and the nearby local headquarters of the CNT's *Woodworkers Trade Union*; there was also a battle at the *Cinco de Oros*, between the barricade erected in front of the POUM headquarters, on the Paseo de Gracia, and the barricade of the nearby Assault Guard barracks. Also on the Paseo de Gracia, the German anarchosyndicalists had built another barricade in front of the former German consulate, protected by a machine gun that raked the entire Paseo de Gracia.

On the Gran Vía, between Balmes and the Paseo de Gracia, there was a battle that pitted Assault Guards and special troops of the Estat Català, who had occupied the *café Oro del Rhin* and erected a barricade on the Rambla de Catalunya, against the cenetistas of the *Food Supply Trade Union* and the *headquarters of the Control Patrols*; meanwhile, from the *Hotel Colón*, which shared a

courtyard with the building housing the *CNT's Graphic Arts Workers Trade Union*, whose members were preparing to assault the hotel, shots were fired on the *Telephone Building*. On the upper part of Las Ramblas the headquarters of the Executive Committee of the POUM, endangered by gunfire from a platoon of Assault Guards who had constructed a fortified position in the adjacent *Café Moka*, was defended from the astronomical observatories of the *Poliorama*,<sup>22</sup> a building located on the other side of Las Ramblas, from which gunfire was directed at the entrance of the *Café Moka*. There was also a fierce battle at the *Parque de la Ciudadela*, around the *Parliament* building, Azaña's residence (the president of the Republic), the *Mercado del Born* and at the *Estación de Francia*, which was controlled by the cenetistas, but which was finally captured by the troops from the nearby *Palacio de Gobernación*. There were also battles between the *Carlos Marx Barracks* (PSUC) and the nearby *Espartaco Barracks* (CNT), formerly known as the *Docks Barracks*.

The patrols of the various factions searched and disarmed<sup>23</sup> individuals and groups from other factions on the streets of Ensanche. Numerous incidents, brawls and armed clashes were taking place everywhere, but especially in *the triangle formed by the Hotel Colón* (the

headquarters of the PSUC), *the Palacio de la Generalitat and the Commissariat of Public Order*, on the Vía Durruti. This counterrevolutionary bastion in the center of the city, composed of narrow and twisting alleys, easily blocked by small barricades, *and still disputed*, should have yielded to the resolute assault of the Barcelona workers, as Josep Rebull insistently demonstrated to the Executive Committee of the POUM with a map of Barcelona. But the radio broadcasts of the speeches of the anarchist Ministers and other dignitaries had a powerful demobilizing effect. Although at first *some people actually fired their guns at their radios when they heard García Oliver say that he had to kiss the dead police*,<sup>24</sup> because they were antifascist brothers, the demoralizing effect of such broadcasts on the barricades soon became apparent,<sup>25</sup> which witnessed a slow but steady desertion by the anarchist militants. Manuel Escorza and Aurelio Fernández immediately obeyed their superiors, with the excuse that it was “obvious” that the insurrection had been the “spontaneous” response to the provocation implied by the occupation of the Telephone Building at the order of the Generalitat.

At the Generalitat the top echelon leaders of the CNT, “protected” by the artillery of Montjuic that were aimed at the Palacio,<sup>26</sup> the Stalinists and the Catalanist



bourgeoisie *did the only thing they could do: they formed another government, the same government with different names.* The leaders of the POUM met with the Regional Committee of the CNT to appeal for caution! Among the barricades various Committees for the Defense of the Revolution arose, but they did not succeed in forming a Revolutionary Junta.[27](#)

Balius, the most outstanding theoretician of the Friends of Durruti Group, crippled due to progressive encephalitis, and spastic hemiplegia that affected the left side of his body, which made him unable to move his left leg and caused stiffness and trembling in his left arm, leaning on his crutches, *read a proclamation from the barricade of Las Ramblas/Hospital in which he called for the revolutionary solidarity of the European proletariat, and especially the French proletariat, with the struggle of the Spanish proletariat.* It was a powerful revolutionary image that captured the moment, as beautiful as it was unavailing.

Distributing leaflets at the barricades was not easy, and was often met with suspicion on the part of many militants, and even with physical force. On the evening of May 5, the Bolshevik-Leninists Carlini and Quesada[28](#) held an informal meeting with Balius, without any other purposes or perspectives than to continue the struggle

on the barricades. Jaume Balius also met with Josep Rebull,[29](#) the secretary of cell 72 of the POUM, which, due to the small numerical importance of both organizations, had no practical result. The Friends of Durruti rejected Josep Rebull's proposal to issue a joint Manifesto.

On *Thursday, May 6*, the militants of the CNT, as a demonstration of their sincere desire to bring peace to the city, evacuated the Telephone Building, where the conflict began, which was immediately occupied by the forces of the police, who guaranteed that the UGT militants would be able to keep their jobs, in order to resume telephone service. Faced with the protests of the anarchist leaders, the Generalitat responded that "it was a *fait accompli*", and the confederal leaders chose not to publicize this new bourgeois "betrayal", in order not to fuel the fires of discontent. The vernacular term for this was that they were acting as firemen, that is, putting out fires and/or conflicts. The abandonment of the barricades by the cenetistas was now generalized. Little gunfire was heard.

When the news was reported that a contingent of troops was on its way from Valencia to pacify Barcelona, Balius proposed the formation of a confederal column that should depart from Barcelona and intercept them. Once

this column was formed in Barcelona, it would be joined by other fighters along the road, and it would also have the support of not a few militiamen from the Aragón Front: it could go all the way to Valencia and then assault heaven...! Commissions were formed to consult with the militants in the trade unions and the streets, but the proposal found no echo whatsoever. It was absolutely unrealistic.

*On Friday, May 7, starting at 7:00 p.m.,* the troops from Valencia marched down the Diagonal and the Paseo de Gracia. A few days later only the barricades of the PSUC were still standing, which it wanted to preserve as monuments commemorating its victory.

*On Saturday, May 8, order once again reigned in Barcelona.* The corpses of Camilo Berneri, Alfredo Martínez, and many other persons who had been tortured and executed by the Stalinists, began to turn up. The superior committees of the CNT-FAI demanded the expulsion of the Friends of Durruti, although no trade union assembly would ratify this decision.

The confederal masses, disoriented by the appeals of their leaders—the same ones they had on July 19!—finally chose to abandon the struggle, despite the fact that at first they had laughed at the appeals from the

CNT leadership for calm and to abandon the struggle so as to preserve antifascist unity.

The Manifesto distributed on May 8 by the Friends of Durruti Group, in which the Group presented their evaluation of the results of the May Days, was printed at the printing press of *La Batalla*. The Group, denounced by the CNT as an organization of provocateurs, had no publishing facilities of its own. A militiaman of the POUM, Paradell, a leader of the retail workers trade union, when he found out that the Group needed access to a press, told Josep Rebull, the editor in chief of the POUM newspaper, and the latter, fulfilling the most elementary duty of revolutionary solidarity, without consulting any superior ranks of the party, offered to print the Manifesto for the Friends of Durruti.

In this Manifesto The Friends of Durruti Group related the seizure of the Telephone Building to previous provocations. They identified the provocateurs of the May Events as the Esquerra Republicana, the PSUC, and the armed forces of the Generalitat. The Friends of Durruti proclaimed the revolutionary nature of July 1936 (and not just its nature as opposition to the fascist uprising) and of May 1937 (they would not be content with just another change of government):

“Our Group, which has been in the streets, on the barricades, defending the conquests of the proletariat, advocates the complete victory of the social revolution. We cannot accept the fiction, and the counterrevolutionary reality, of the formation of a new government with the same parties, but with different representatives.”

In opposition to the back room deals that the Group qualified as deceits, The Friends of Durruti offered their revolutionary program, already set forth in the leaflet issued on May 5:

“Our Group demands the immediate formation of a revolutionary junta, the shooting of those who are responsible, the disarmament of the armed forces, the socialization of the economy and the dissolution of all the political parties that have attacked the working class.” The Friends of Durruti Group did not hesitate to claim that the workers won the battle on the military field, and therefore that they had to put an end once and for all to a Generalitat that meant nothing. The Group accused the leaders and superior committees of the CNT, who had paralyzed a victorious workers insurrection, of “betrayal”: “The Generalitat represents nothing. Its continued existence reinforces the counterrevolution. The workers won the battle. It is inconceivable that the

committees of the CNT have acted with such timidity that they would order a 'cease-fire' and that they would even order a return to work when we were on the verge of total victory. They did not take into account the real source of the aggression, they did not pay attention to the real meaning of the events of the past few days. Such conduct must be defined as a betrayal of the revolution, conduct that no one, for any reason, must ever commit or sponsor. And we cannot even find the words to describe the nefarious work done by *Solidaridad Obrera* and the most well-known militants of the CNT."

The term "betrayal" was used again when the Group commented on the expulsion order issued by the Regional Committees of the CNT against The Friends of Durruti Group, as well as in its discussion of the encroachment by the central government of Valencia on the security and defense powers of Catalonia (not those exercised by the Generalitat, but those controlled by the CNT): "This is betrayal on a vast scale. The two essential guarantees of the working class, security and defense, are offered on a platter to our enemies." The Manifesto concluded with a brief auto-critique with regard to certain ineffective tactics employed during the May Days, and with an optimistic perspective on the future, which the immediate wave of repression that began on May 28

demonstrated to be vain and illogical. May 1937 did not end in a draw; it was a severe defeat of the proletariat.

Despite the pervasive mythology of the Events of May 1937, the one thing that is clear is that it was *a very chaotic and confused situation, characterized by the eagerness to negotiate of all the parties implicated in the conflict*. May 1937 was at no time an offensive and resolute workers insurrection, but merely a defensive struggle without any precise objectives, although it formed part of the ongoing struggle of socialization against collectivization, and the struggle in defense of “the conquests” of July. The detonator of the conflict was the assault on the Telephone Building by the security forces of the Generalitat. And this action took place within the framework of the logic pursued by the government of Companys to slowly take over all the powers that the “anomalous” situation brought about by the workers insurrection of July 19 had momentarily deprived it of. The recent successes it enjoyed in Cerdaña cleared the way for a decisive showdown in Barcelona and all of Catalonia. It was obvious that Companys felt that he had the support of Comorera (PSUC) and Ovseenko (the Soviet Consul), with whom he had collaborated very closely and effectively since December, when the POUM was expelled from the government of

the Generalitat. The policy of the Stalinists coincided with the objectives of Companys: the weakening and annihilation of the revolutionary forces, that is, of the POUM and the CNT, were Soviet goals, which could only be achieved by way of the strengthening of the bourgeois government of the Generalitat. The long open crisis of the government of the Generalitat, after the refusal of the CNT to consent to the transfer of the Carlos Marx Division (of the PSUC) to the Madrid Front, and after the Decree of March 4 ordering the dissolution of the Control Patrols and the disarmament of the rearguard, led to its inevitable violent culmination, after various episodes involving armed confrontations in Vilanesa, La Fatarella, Cullera (Valencia), Bellver, the funeral of Cortada, etc., in the assault on the Telephone Building and the bloody events of May in Barcelona. The stupid blindness, the unbreakable loyalty to antifascist unity, the high degree of collaboration with the republican government on the part of the principal anarchosyndicalist leaders (from Peiró to Federica Montseny, from Abad de Santillán to García Oliver, from Marianet to Valerio Mas) were not irrelevant factors, nor did they pass unnoticed by the government of the Generalitat and the Soviet agents. Their idiotic sanctity could always be counted on, as was abundantly displayed during the May Days. But Companys did not expect the



rapid and decisive armed response of Escorza, from the defense committees, and then he was infuriated by the refusal of the Valencia government to order Díaz Sandino (who was the commander of the Republican air force) to bomb the barracks and buildings controlled by the CNT. Companys ended up forfeiting all the powers of the Generalitat with regard to Defense and Public Order, which had never been very extensive in the first place.

As for the activities of the Friends of Durruti during the May Events, there is certainly no justification to engage in a deceptive mythification of their participation in the barricades and of its leaflet, since the Friends of Durruti at no time called for the replacement of the confederal leadership, and limited its efforts to harsh critiques of its leaders and their policy of “betrayal” of the revolution. Perhaps they could not have done any more than that, given their small numbers and the slight influence they had on the cenetista masses. But we should emphasize their participation in the street battles, and their control of various barricades on Las Ramblas, especially the one in front of their social center, and their interventions in the struggles in Sants, La Torrassa and Sallent. We must, of course, acknowledge their attempts to provide leadership and minimal political demands, in the leaflet distributed on May 5. The distribution of this leaflet was

not easy, and cost the lives of several of the Group's members, but its distribution on the barricades could count on the sympathy and the support of many CNT militants. Among the noteworthy actions that took place during the May Days, we must not forget the appeal issued by Balius from the barricade on the corner of Las Ramblas and Hospital Street, for the active solidarity of all the workers of Europe with the Spanish revolution. The Friends of Durruti, once the group received news of the formation of a column of Assault Guards that was to be sent from Valencia to crush the rebellion, reacted with a call to form an anarchist column to intercept it. This idea never amounted to anything more than a vain proposal, which no longer found any echo whatsoever among the cenetista militants, who began to abandon the barricades. Meanwhile, Ricardo Sanz, the delegate of the militiamen of the Durruti Column, who had returned from the Madrid Front while awaiting transfer to the Aragón Front, remained inactive in the barracks of the Docks on Icaria Avenue, totally uninvolved with the street battles, as if he was unaware of them or they were taking place on the planet Mars.[30](#)

We must finally note, from a political point of view, the agreement made with the POUM to issue an appeal to the workers that, before they abandon the barricades,

they should request guarantees that there would be no subsequent reprisals; and above all that the best guarantee was to keep their weapons, which they must never surrender. A defeated workers insurrection might not abandon its arms, but it cannot expect that repression would not be directed against the insurrectionaries, which is just what took place after June 16.

It is certainly true, however, that, once the fighting was over, the May barricades proved to be a nuisance for everyone: the troops that had arrived from Valencia tore up the membership cards of the cenetistas and forced peaceful passersby to tear down the barricades, at the same time that the Regional Committee of the CNT was calling for the rapid dismantling of the barricades as a sign of a return to normal. Within a few days only the barricades of the PSUC remained, which the PSUC wanted to preserve as a monument to and sign of its victory. The total casualties amounted to five hundred dead and several thousand wounded.

From a theoretical point of view, the role of The Friends of Durruti Group was much more significant after the May Days, when they began publishing their bulletin, which was given the name of the newspaper published

by Marat during the French Revolution: *The Friend of the People*.

## **AFTER MAY**

The leadership of the CNT proposed the expulsion of the members of the Friends of Durruti Group, but could not convince any trade union assembly to ratify this proposal. A large part of the confederal militants sympathized with the revolutionary opposition embodied by the Group. This does not mean that they either took part in the actions of or held the same views as the Friends of Durruti, but they did understand and respect the Group's positions, and even supported its criticisms of the CNT leadership.

The confederal leadership deliberately used and abused the accusation of "Marxists", the most serious insult imaginable among anarchists, which it launched on repeated occasions against the Group, and specifically against Balius. Balius and the Group, of course, defended themselves from this quite underserved "insult", and not without reason. There was nothing in the theoretical propositions of the Group, much less in *The Friend of the People*, or in the Group's various manifestoes and leaflets, that would allow one to call the Group Marxist. The Group comprised merely an opposition to the

collaborationist policy of the confederal leadership, from within the organization and on the basis of the anarchosyndicalist ideology.

The first issue of *The Friend of the People* was legally published on May 19, with a large number of censored galley proofs. The front page, in black and red and in full sized format, was emblazoned with a sketch showing the smiling Durruti carrying a red and black flag. This first issue was not dated; the editorial offices of the paper were located at Number 1, Rambla de las Flores, on the first floor. The newspaper was published as the voice of The Friends of Durruti Group. It listed Balius as editor in chief, and Eleuterio Roig, Pablo Ruiz and Domingo Paniagua as editors. The most interesting article, signed by Balius, was entitled, "For the Record. We Are Not Agents Provocateurs" ["Por los fueros de la verdad. No somos agentes provocadores"], in which Balius complains about the insults and attacks originating from among the confederal ranks themselves. He referred to the leaflet and the manifesto issued in May, which he said he would not republish in order to avoid its certain and inevitable censorship. He directly attacked *Solidaridad Obrera* for its hostility towards The Friends of Durruti, and denied the slander spread by the CNT leadership: "we are not agents provocateurs." To avoid

ensorship, starting with the second issue, *The Friend of the People* was published clandestinely. The fifth issue is one of the most interesting editions of *The Friend of the People*. Its cover page features an article entitled: "A Revolutionary Theory." This editorial alone would be enough to assure the political and historical importance of The Friends of Durruti, not only in the history of the civil war, but in the history of acratid ideology as well. In this article, The Friends of Durruti attribute the advance of the counterrevolution and the failure of the CNT, after the latter's undeniable and absolute victory of July 1936, to one reason alone: the *absence of a REVOLUTIONARY PROGRAM*. And this was also the cause of the defeat of May 1937. The conclusion of this development is set forth with great clarity:

"The descending trajectory [of the revolution] must be attributed exclusively to the absence of a concrete program and immediate efforts to implement such a program, and this is why we have fallen into the nets of the counterrevolutionary sectors at the very moment when the circumstances had become genuinely favorable for the crowning act of the aspirations of the proletariat. And because the awakening of July was not allowed to develop freely, in a genuinely class sense, we have made possible a petty bourgeois rule that could have by no

means ever emerged if among the confederal and anarchist milieus a unanimous resolve had prevailed to install the proletariat in control of the country. [...] succumbing to the foolish notion that a revolution of a social type could share its economic and social nerve centers with enemy elements. [...] In May the same conflict was again posed. Once again, the wind was blowing in favor of the revolution. But the same individuals who in July were frightened by the danger of foreign intervention, during the May Days once again fell prey to that same lack of vision that would culminate in the fateful “cease fire” order that was later transformed, despite the declaration of a truce, into an insistent disarmament and a merciless repression of the working class. [...] So that, by depriving ourselves of a program, i.e., libertarian communism, we have entirely surrendered to our enemies who possessed and still possess a program and various directives [...] to the petty bourgeois parties that we should have crushed in July and in May. We think that any other sector, were it to have an absolute majority such as we possess, would have become the absolute arbiter of the situation. In the previous issue of our bulletin we published a program. We feel the need for a revolutionary Junta, the economic predominance of the Trade Unions and the free construction of Municipal bodies. Our Group has sought

to provide a guide, out of fear that, should circumstances similar to those of July and May re-emerge, the same things would happen. And victory depends on the existence of a program that must be supported, without hesitation, with guns. [...]"

"Revolutions that do not have theories do not get anywhere. The positions outlined by 'The Friends of Durruti' may be subjected to revision by major social disturbances, but they are rooted in two essential points that cannot be circumvented. A program and guns."

This text is fundamental; it marks a milestone in the development of anarchist thought. The theoretical concepts set forth in this text, which had previously been only vaguely outlined, are now expressed with a blinding clarity. And these theoretical achievements would later be repeated and argued in the pamphlet by Balius, "Towards a New Revolution". But this is where they appeared for the first time. And no one can deny their novelty and their significance for anarchist thought. The Friends of Durruti Group had accepted old theoretical concepts, formulated after a painful historical experience, which over the course of a civil war and a revolutionary process had starkly revealed the contradictions and the necessities of the class struggle. Is it possible to seriously believe and present



documentation to the effect that this development in the political thought of the Friends of Durruti was due to the influence of a group outside the anarchist movement, whether Trotskyists or POUMistas? It is undeniable that this development was due exclusively to the Friends of Durruti Group itself, which in its analysis of the political and historical situation had reached the conclusion of the necessity, which is unavoidable in a revolution, of establishing a program and a government that would impose the dictatorship of the proletariat against the bourgeois enemies of the revolution.

The sixth issue of *The Friend of the People* was datelined Barcelona, August 12, 1937. The lead editorial was entitled, “The Need for a Revolutionary Junta”, which, following up on the editorial in the previous issue concerning the need for a revolutionary theory, claimed that what was needed in July 1936 was a *Revolutionary Junta*:

“Concerning the July movement, we have come to the conclusion that the enemies of the revolution must be crushed without mercy. This has been one of the main errors we have made that we are now paying for many times over. This defensive mission will be the responsibility of the Revolutionary Junta, which will have to be unyielding with enemy sectors. [...]

“The importance of the constitution of the Revolutionary Junta is immense. This is not just another idea. It is the result of a series of failures and disasters. And it is the categorical rectification of the course that has been followed up until the present.

“In July an antifascist committee was formed that did not measure up to the importance of that sublime moment. How could the embryonic organ arisen from the barricades function with friends and enemies of the revolution side by side? Due to its composition, the antifascist committee was not the exponent of the July struggle. [...] we advocate that only the workers from the city and the countryside, and combatants who, at the decisive moments of the battle have proven to be the champions of the social revolution, should participate in the Revolutionary Junta. [...]

““The Friends of Durruti’ Group, which has formulated an exact critique of the May events, feels, from this very moment, the need to constitute a Revolutionary Junta, as we conceive it, and we believe it is indispensable for the defense of the revolution [...].”

The development of the political thought of The Friends of Durruti was already quite noteworthy. After the recognition of the necessity of the dictatorship of the

proletariat, the next question that was posed was, who exercises the dictatorship? The answer is a Revolutionary Junta, which is then defined as the vanguard of the revolutionaries who fought on July 19. As for the role of this Junta, we cannot believe that it would be any different than that attributed by the Marxists to the revolutionary party.

Munis, however, in the second issue of *La Voz Leninista*, criticized the sixth issue of *The Friend of the People* because he discerned in its claims a regression with respect to the same formulations made by The Friends of Durruti Group during, and immediately after, the May events.[31](#)

The eleventh issue of *The Friend of the People* was dated Saturday, November 20, 1937, which was the anniversary of the death of Durruti, and was almost entirely devoted to commemorating the popular anarchist hero. Among all the articles in this issue, mostly devoted to a more or less accurate commentary on the figure of Durruti, one article stands out, entitled, "Comments on Durruti", in which the author engages in a polemical denunciation of *Solidaridad Obrera* with regard to the question of Durruti's ideology and intentions. According to the anonymous author, *Soli* [*Solidaridad Obrera*] claimed that Durruti was prepared to renounce all revolutionary

principles to win the war. The author of the article in *The Friend of the People* viewed such a claim as an outrage and as the worst possible insult against the memory of Durruti. The Group's view of Durruti's ideology was entirely contrary to that offered by *Soli*:

“Durruti never renounced the revolution. If he did say that everything except victory must be renounced, he was referring to the fact that we must be prepared for the greatest sacrifices, even of life itself, rather than submit to fascism.

“In the mouth of Durruti, however, the concept of victory does not imply the least separation of the war and the revolution. [...] We do not believe, and of this we are convinced, that Durruti would have advocated that the class, which achieved total victory at the cost of such great sacrifices, would be the same class that is constantly making concessions and compromises for the benefit of the enemy class. [...]

“Durruti wanted to win the war, but he always kept an eye on the rearguard. [...]

“Buenaventura Durruti never renounced the revolution. The Friends of Durruti will never renounce it either.”

The twelfth issue of *The Friend of the People*, dated February 1, 1938, was the last issue of the bulletin of The Friends of Durruti Group.

## **THE BALIUS PAMPHLET: “TOWARDS A NEW REVOLUTION”**

The pamphlet, “Towards a New Revolution”[32](#) was published clandestinely in January 1938, although Balius began writing it around November 1937. It is the most elaborate of the texts of The Friends of Durruti Group, and therefore deserves a separate commentary.

The most important theoretical contributions of the pamphlet were already set forth in the editorials of *The Friend of the People* in issues 5, 6 and 7, that is, in the issues published between July 20 and August 31.

The pamphlet consists of 31 pages, and is divided into eight chapters. In the first chapter a brief historical introduction is presented, in which Balius offers a grotesque depiction of the period extending from the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera until October 1934. In the second chapter the events leading to the revolutionary insurrection of July 19 are analyzed.

Some of his claims are quite striking, and are no less true for being presented in such a blunt manner:

“The people looked for weapons. They got them. They obtained them by their own efforts. Nobody gave them to them. Neither the government of the Republic nor the Generalitat gave them a single rifle.”

We must call attention to the profound analysis of the revolution of July 19, 1936 carried out by The Friends of Durruti Group:

“The immense majority of the working class population was on the side of the CNT. The majority organization in Cataluña was the CNT. What happened that caused the CNT not to carry out its revolution, which was the revolution of the people, that of the majority of the proletariat?

“What happened was what had to happen. The CNT was without a revolutionary theory. We did not have a correct program. We did not know where we were going. A lot of poetry, but in the final accounting, we did not know what to do with those enormous masses of workers, we did not know how to give flexibility to that popular surge that poured forth in our organizations and because we did not know what to do we surrendered the revolution on a platter to the bourgeoisie and the Marxists, who played the same old masquerade, and what is much worse, we gave them the respite they

needed to rebuild their forces and implement a victorious plan. No one knew how to realize the full potential of the CNT. No one wanted to follow through with the revolution with all its consequences.”

Thus, the revolution of July failed, according to The Friends of Durruti Group, because *the CNT lacked a revolutionary theory and a revolutionary program*. Many reasons, and diverse and various explanations have been offered from within the anarchist movement concerning the nature of the July revolution; some hypotheses are more or less convincing, but neither Vernon Richards, nor Semprún-Maura, nor Abad de Santillán, nor García Oliver, nor Berneri, have been as clear and as definitive, nor have they analyzed the nature of the July revolution with the same profundity, as The Friends of Durruti Group did in the paragraph we just quoted.

This is only the tip of the iceberg, however, because The Friends of Durruti, who were not brilliant theoreticians, or good organizers, but essentially people of the barricades, who defended their theoretical positions on the basis of their reflections on their experiences, without any other compass than their class instinct, were capable, in the text that we shall consider next, of one of the best contemporary analyses of the Spanish revolution. An analysis that deserves close consideration,

and one that we must not label as anarchist or Marxist, because it is the analysis of men who did not play with words, but with lives, and first of all with their own:

“When an organization has spent its entire existence calling for revolution, it has the obligation to carry that revolution out precisely when the opportunity to do so is presented. And in July this opportunity arose. The CNT had to step up and assume the leadership of the country, delivering a solid kick to everything archaic, everything ancient, and in this way we would have won the war and we would have won the revolution.”

“But we proceeded in a manner contrary to this. The CNT collaborated with the bourgeoisie in the offices of the state at the very moment when the state was falling apart everywhere. It reinforced Companys and his entourage. A breath of fresh air was given to an anemic and cowed bourgeoisie.

“One of the causes that led most directly to the strangulation of the revolution and the displacement of the CNT is that fact that it acted like a minority faction despite the fact that we had the majority in the streets. [...]

“We furthermore assert that revolutions are totalitarian no matter what anyone says. What happens is that



various aspects of the revolution gradually continue to develop but with the guarantee that the class that represents the new order of things is the one that holds the greatest responsibility. And when things are done halfway, what happens is just what we are commenting on, the disaster of July.

“In July a committee of antifascist militias was constituted. It was not a class organization. It contained representatives of bourgeois and counterrevolutionary fractions. It seemed that this committee had arisen in opposition to the Generalitat. But it was a scene in a comedy.”

First of all, we must call attention to the Group’s definition of the Central Committee of Antifascist Militias as an *institution of class collaboration*, rather than the embryonic stage of a working class power. The critique of the confederal collaborationism in saving and rebuilding the state is combined with the tautology that the only duty of a revolutionary organization is to carry out the revolution.

So far, all the assertions of The Friends of Durruti are anarchist orthodoxy. As a direct consequence of these assertions, however, or perhaps it would be more correct to say, as a consequence of the contradictions of the

CNT, that had become bogged down in a project as foreign to anarchism as the salvation and reconstruction of a decomposing capitalist state, we come to a notable theoretical breakthrough on the part of The Friends of Durruti: *revolutions are totalitarian*.

Totalitarian means, above all, “total”, although in this context we cannot exclude the second accepted meaning of authoritarian. If this claim is in contradiction with the libertarian spirit, then we would have to assert that an anarchist revolution is an irresolvable contradiction. The anarchists in Spain in 1936 experienced something like this.

The pamphlet by Balius, in the next chapter, addressed the revolutionary insurrection of May. The reasoning of The Friends of Durruti Group was as clear and as radical as it was precise: the cause of the May Events can be found in the July insurrection, *because the revolution was not carried out in July*.

“The social revolution in Cataluña could have been a reality. [...] But events took a different turn. The revolution did not take place in Cataluña. The petty bourgeoisie, who during the July events had kept in the background, once they noticed that the proletariat was once again being victimized by a handful of sophistical

leaders, prepared for battle.” *“The revolution did not take place in July 1936.”* This assertion on the part of The Friends of Durruti Group (as well as their assertion concerning the necessarily totalitarian nature of all revolutions) could not be more clear and emphatic. All the historians, however, including those who glorify The Friends of Durruti as superheroes and replace the cult of personality of Lenin or Durruti with that of Balus, disregard this declaration that is fundamental and crucial in understanding the rise, the reason for existence and the struggle of the Group.

The Group’s analysis of Stalinism, and the decisive role played by Stalinism as a spearhead of the counterrevolution, was not only astute, but was deeply rooted as well in the description of the social layers that provided their base of support. We must point out, however, that the word “Stalinism” was never used, but rather the terms, “socialism” or “Marxism”, with the evident meaning that we today give, from a historical and ideological point of view, to the word, “Stalinism”.

“Socialism in Cataluña has been disastrous. Its ranks have been filled with people who are against the revolution. They have assumed leadership of the counterrevolution. They have given life to a UGT that has been taken over by the GEPCI. The Marxist leaders have sung the praises of

the counterrevolution. And they have made the united front a creature of their own, first eliminating the POUM, and then they tried to repeat this feat with the CNT.

“The maneuvers of the petty bourgeoisie allied with the socialist-communists, resulted in the events of May.”

According to The Friends of Durruti Group the May Events were a planned provocation, whose purpose was to create a climate of indecisiveness, which would make it possible to deliver a decisive blow against the working class, in order to definitively bring an end to a potentially revolutionary situation:

“... the counterrevolution sought to bring the working classes into the streets without a solid plan so they could be crushed. Their goals were in part achieved due to the stupidity of a handful of leaders who issued the order to cease fire and who accused The Friends of Durruti of being agents provocateurs when the street battles were being won and the enemy was being eliminated.”

The accusation directed against the anarchist leaders (although no names are mentioned, we cannot help but think of García Oliver, Abad de Santillán and Federica Montseny) was not meant to be an insult, but constituted an adequate description of their activity during the May Days.

The Friends of Durruti thought that the counterrevolution had attained its chief objective, which was the control of public order by the Valencia Government. The description and assessment of the workers response to the Stalinist provocation, that is, the May Events, carried out by The Friends of Durruti, is very interesting: a) It was a spontaneous reaction; b) There was no revolutionary leadership; c) The workers had achieved, in a few hours, an overwhelming military victory. Only a few buildings in the center of the city continued to resist, and they could have been easily taken; d) The defeat of the insurrection was not a military defeat, but a political defeat.

“Within a few hours the struggle was decided in favor of the proletariat of the CNT, which as in July defended its prerogatives with arms in hand. We conquered the streets. They were ours. There was no human power that could dislodge us. The working class neighborhoods immediately fell into our power. And our enemies who were gradually surrounded and bottled up in one part of the city—the downtown area—would soon have been conquered had the committees of the CNT not defected.” Next, Balius justified the actions undertaken by The Friends of Durruti during the bloody week of May 1937: The Friends of Durruti, in a situation of indecision

and generalized disorientation among the ranks of the working class, distributed a leaflet and a manifesto, for the purpose of giving a revolutionary direction and goals to the events. Subsequently, the main concern of the Group, faced with the incredible position of the confederal leadership that sought peace and brotherhood, was that the barricades not be abandoned without conditions and guarantees.

According to Balius, in May there was still time to save the revolution, and The Friends of Durruti were the only people who were capable of rising to the challenge of the circumstances. The blindness of the CNT-FAI to the repression that would be inflicted with impunity against the revolutionary workers, had already been foreseen by The Friends of Durruti. The chapter of the pamphlet devoted to collaborationism and the class struggle is of great interest. Collaboration in the tasks of the government of the bourgeois state was the main accusation leveled by the Group against the CNT. The critique of The Friends of Durruti Group was even more radical than that of Berneri, because the latter criticized the participation of the CNT in the Government, while the Group criticized the collaboration of the CNT with the capitalist state. Nor was this just a matter of two verbal expressions with only a slight difference in emphasis; this

involves an entire political conception distinct from the one that Berneri had in mind. As we read in the pamphlet:

“We do not have to collaborate with capitalism, not from outside the bourgeois state or from within its governmental departments. Our role as producers is to be found in the trade unions, strengthening the only bonds that must continue to exist after a revolution led by the workers. [...] And one cannot preserve a state alongside the trade unions—much less reinforce it with our own forces. The struggle against capital continues. A bourgeoisie exists in our own land that is complicit with the international bourgeoisie. The problem is the same as it was years ago.”

The Friends of Durruti claimed that the collaborationists were the allies of the bourgeoisie, which amounts to saying that the anarchist Ministers, as well as all those who advocated collaborationism, *were allies of the bourgeoisie*:

“The collaborationists are allies of the bourgeoisie. The individuals who advocate this kind of complicity do not care about the class struggle nor do they have the least respect for the trade unions.

“At no time must we accept the consolidation of the power of our enemy.

“The enemy must be attacked. [...] Between exploiters and exploited there cannot be the least contact. Only in the struggle will it be decided which side is victorious. Either the workers or the bourgeoisie. But by no means both at the same time.”

The Group, however, never took the next, decisive step, which could be none other than to break with an organization of a collaborationist nature, which had proven its inability to curtail and put an end to this policy of alliance with the bourgeoisie. The Group never proposed a break with the CNT, nor did it ever denounce this organization as an organization of capitalism. It did not draw all the conclusions of the ideological premises it set forth. It was easier to accuse a handful of individuals, a few leaders who advocated a policy of collaboration with the bourgeoisie, than it was to arrive at the brutal and painful conclusion that *the CNT, which during the twenties and thirties had been the best organizer of the revolutionary proletariat in Spain, had become, over the course of the war, by way of its unconditional support for the policy of ANTIFASCIST UNITY, an organization of collaboration with and submission to the bourgeoisie.* It was not the anarchist Ministers who were responsible for



the CNT's deviation from its principles; *it was the CNT that produced such Ministers.*

The trade unions of the CNT had by 1938 ceased to be working class organizations oriented towards the class struggle; they had been transformed into bureaucratic organizations in the service of the state, by means of the institutions that were responsible for the increase of and conversion to war production, at the same time that labor was being militarized. The trade unions now played an important and irreplaceable economic role.

The Group, however, thought that the trade unions were still organizations of the class struggle. Not even the Catalan UGT, Stalinist to the core, and the mere tool of the PSUC, the party of the counterrevolution, was viewed by the Group as an institution of the bourgeoisie.

After May 1937 the various Trade Unions and Federations of Industry *underwent a change of function and nature*, having become regulatory, coordinating and centralizing institutions for production, conveniently "inspected" by technical commissions. They had ceased to be class trade unions, defenders of the demands of the workers, in order to become "*a new type of boss*"<sup>[33](#)</sup> that organized the economy in obedience to the directives issued by the government of the Generalitat

(or, beginning in 1938, by the Republic). We have already seen<sup>34</sup> how the collectivizations had been transformed from the workers expropriations of July 1936 into a capitalism of trade union management and state planning, legalized by the Collectivization Decree, in October 1936, and further authorized by the decrees of S'Agaró in January 1937. In the spring of 1937 a revolutionary struggle by the workers for socialization as opposed to collectivization of the economy was underway.

Beginning in June 1937, the Industrial Trade Unions, having lost their functions as representatives of the demands of the workers and once every revolutionary attempt had been defeated,<sup>35</sup> became alienated from the workers, and their nature underwent a transformation, as they became *institutions of economic management, as well as control and monitoring of labor productivity*.

In this context, the revolutionary socialization promoted by the workers in the Trade Unions or Federations of Industry in the spring of 1937,<sup>36</sup> was in fact converted, after the defeat of May, into a determined drive for economic and managerial centralization, *coordinated from these same Industrial Unions*, and subject to state planning, which in addition led to advocacy of the need,

from an exclusively productivity-based perspective, of CNT-UGT unity. Managerial unity, presented demagogically as the culmination of “working class unity”.

The Industrial Unions, which prior to May 1937 were the revolutionary instruments of the workers for socializing the economy, had been transformed, after the defeat of the May insurrection, into the instruments of the counterrevolution to enforce the militarization of the economy and labor. *The Group was incapable of analyzing this transformation.*

It was therefore impossible for The Friends of Durruti to take the decisive step. *If they were incapable of recognizing the real nature (in 1938) of the trade unions as an apparatus of the capitalist state, they could not propose a break with a CNT that had exchanged its working class and trade union character for that of a bureaucratic institution of the state.* To the contrary, the trade unions played a key role in the Group’s theoretical arguments; its accusations were directed against individuals, not against organizations. The Group did not recognize the *illness* or its causes, but only a few of its symptoms. The pamphlet proceeds with an explanation of the positions and the program of The Friends of Durruti Group. The principles and characteristic political

positions, of a tactical character, were enumerated in a partial, confused and imprecise way, compared to previous formulations, which was perhaps the result of the fact that the pamphlet was written in haste and under pressure, or else due to the insignificant support they encountered at the time.

The program was succinctly outlined on the basis of the experience of July, which The Friends of Durruti depicted very expressively as a triumphant insurrection, which only lacked a theory and revolutionary goals: “No one knew what road to follow. We lacked a theory. We had spent years revolving around abstractions. The leaders at the time asked themselves, what do we do now? And they allowed the revolution to slip away. During culminating moments like those we must not hesitate. But we have to know where we are going. And this is the vacuum we want to fill, since we understand that what took place in July and in May cannot be repeated.”

“In our program we introduce a slight variation within the anarchist tradition. The constitution of a Revolutionary Junta.”

The Revolutionary Junta was defined by the Group as a vanguard formed to repress the enemies of the revolution:

“The revolution, as we understand it, needs institutions that watch over it and that will repress, in an integral sense, those enemy sectors that current circumstances have demonstrated are not resigned to their own disappearance.

“Perhaps there are anarchist comrades who feel certain ideological scruples, but the lesson we have so harshly learned is sufficient to convince us that we cannot beat around the bush. If we want to prevent the next revolution from being an exact replica of what has just occurred, we must proceed with the utmost energy in dealing with those who do not identify themselves with the working class.”

Next, The Friends of Durruti set forth their revolutionary program, which can be briefly summarized by three major points: 1. The constitution of a Revolutionary Junta, or Council of National Defense, whose mission would consist of the conduct of the war, control of public order, international affairs and revolutionary propaganda; 2. All economic power to the trade unions—this implied the creation of an authentic trade union capitalism; 3. The Free Municipality, as the basic cell of territorial organization, halfway between a decentralized state and the typical anarchist federal conception. The pamphlet concludes with a final section, which has the

same title as the pamphlet, in which a lapidary and realistic assessment is offered: “the revolution no longer exists.” After a long series of assumptions and questions about the immediate future, in which the force of the counterrevolution is verified, a voluntaristic, and perhaps rhetorical appeal is made on behalf of a future revolution capable of satisfying the hopes of humanity and the anarchist ideal. The victory of the counterrevolution in the republican zone, however, and the victory of the fascists in the war were already inevitable, as Balius acknowledged in his 1978 Introduction (entitled “Forty Years Ago”) to the English language edition of “Towards a New Revolution” (published under the title, “Towards a Fresh Revolution”).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The Friends of Durruti Group was, both with regard to its numerical strength as well as its goals, much more than just an affinity group, and was more like a sector of the libertarian movement, similar to the “Mujeres Libres”. It never attempted to propose a revolutionary alternative to the CNT-FAI. It only opposed the bureaucratic leadership of anarchosyndicalism, and was content to call for new leaders. It was not influenced, either in whole or in part, by the Trotskyists, or by the POUM. Its ideology and its slogans were typically confederal; at no

time could it be said to have displayed a Marxist ideology. In any event, it certainly displayed a great deal of interest in the example of Marat, and one might be able to speak of a powerful attraction for the assembly movement of the Paris Sections, for the *sans-culottes* and the *enrages*, as well as for the revolutionary government of Robespierre and Saint-Just, which were studied by Kropotkin in his History of the French Revolution. It never referred to, and was perhaps unaware of, the anarchist Platform, with which it nonetheless possessed certain features in common.

Its goal was simply to confront the contradictions of the CNT, to provide the CNT with ideological coherence, and to rescue it from the rule of individuals and superior committees staffed by officials in order to return it to its roots in the class struggle. Its *raison d'être* was to engage in criticism of and opposition to the CNT's policy of constant concessions, and of course to the COLLABORATION of the anarchosyndicalists in the central government and the government of the Generalitat. The Group was opposed to the abandonment of revolutionary objectives and of the fundamental and characteristic ideological principles of anarchism, which had been disregarded by the leaders of the CNT-FAI in the name of antifascist unity and the need to adapt to

circumstances. Without a revolutionary theory there is no revolution. If principles are only cast aside at the first obstacle imposed by reality, perhaps it would be better if we admitted that we have no principles. The highest leaders of Spanish anarchosyndicalism thought they were clever negotiators, but they were manipulated like puppets. They renounced everything, in exchange for nothing. They were just so many opportunists without any opportunities. The insurrection of July 19 did not encounter a revolutionary vanguard capable of imposing the power of the proletariat, destroying the capitalist state and undertaking an authentic working class revolution. The CNT had no plan for what to do once the military uprising was defeated. The victory of July plunged the anarchosyndicalist leaders into dismay and confusion. They had been *left behind* by the revolutionary impetus of the masses. And since they did not know what to do they accepted the proposal of Companys to constitute, together with the other parties, an Antifascist Front government. And they posed *the false THEORETICAL dilemma of anarchist dictatorship or antifascist unity and collaboration with the state* to win the war, because in PRACTICE they did not know what to do with power, at a time when their failure to seize it left it in the hands of the bourgeoisie. *The Spanish "revolution" was the tomb of anarchism as an*



*organization and as a revolutionary theory of the proletariat.* This is the origin and the reason for existence of The Friends of Durruti Group, which could not, however, nor did it know how to, save the anarchosyndicalist ideology from its death throes.

The limitations of the Group were very clear. And so, too, are its historical limitations. At no time did it ever propose a break with the CNT. Only an absolute lack of acquaintance with the confederal organizational mechanics<sup>37</sup> could lead one to believe that a project of criticism or an attempt to foment a schism would not inevitably lead to expulsion, which in the case of The Friends of Durruti was prevented by the sympathy for the Group expressed by the confederal rank and file militants, although at the price of an iron ostracism, and almost complete isolation.

The Group's maximum objective was the critique of the leaders of the CNT, and to put an end to the policy of confederal participation in the government. Not only did the Group want to preserve the "conquests" of July, but it also sought to continue and intensify a revolutionary process that it considered to be insufficient and neutralized. Its organization and the means at its disposal, however, were even more limited. Its members were people of the barricades, they were not good

organizers, and were even worse theoreticians, although they had some good journalists. In May they put all their faith in the spontaneity of the masses. They did not effectively counteract the official CNT propaganda. They were incapable of providing leadership and coordination for the defense committees that had unleashed the insurrection of May. They did not make use of, or attempt to organize, the militants who were members of the Control Patrols. They issued no orders to Máximo Franco, a member of The Friends of Durruti Group, and the delegate of the Rojinegra Division of the CNT, who on May 4, 1937, wanted “to drop in on Barcelona” with his division but, except for himself and about forty militiamen on an “observation mission”, returned to the front (as did the POUM column, led by Rovira) as a result of initiatives undertaken by Molina. The high points of the Group’s activity were: *the poster distributed at the end of April 1937*, in which it proposed the overthrow of the Generalitat and its replacement by a Revolutionary Junta; its domination of *several barricades on Las Ramblas*, during the May Events; the reading of the appeal for solidarity with the Spanish revolution, directed at all the workers of Europe; the distribution at the barricades of the famous leaflet of May 5; and the summary of the events set forth in the Manifesto of May 8. The Group was unable, however, to implement any of

its slogans: a Revolutionary Junta was never formed. The Group called for the formation of a column that would set out to confront the troops coming from Valencia; but it soon abandoned the idea in consideration of the scanty support it generated. After the May Events the Group began publishing *The Friend of the People*, despite its repudiation by the CNT and the FAI. In June 1937, although the Group had not been outlawed like the POUM, it suffered from the political persecution aimed at the CNT militants as a whole. Its bulletin was published clandestinely after the second issue (May 26), and its editor in chief Jaime Balius was arrested and imprisoned on several occasions. Other members of the Group were dismissed from their positions, such as Bruno Lladó, a councilman in the Sabadell municipal government; or Santana Calero, who underwent an inquisitorial persecution within the Libertarian Youth. Most of its members experienced attempts to expel them from the CNT, which was advocated by the FAI. Nonetheless, they carried on with their clandestine publication and distribution of the Group's press and leaflets until February 1938. The Group's most outstanding tactical proposals may be summarized in the following slogans: the economy run by the trade unions, federation of municipalities, army of militias, revolutionary program, replacement of the Generalitat by a revolutionary junta,

and unity of action between the CNT-FAI-POUM. The Friends of Durruti Group was therefore a *failed attempt*, one that had arisen from within the libertarian movement, to constitute a Revolutionary Junta that would deliver all power to the trade unions. It proved to be incapable, not only of realizing its slogans in practice, but even of effectively propagating its ideas and providing practical orientations for the way to fight for them. Maybe the terrified bourgeoisie and the disguised priests saw them as a group of wild brutes, but among its members it included such journalists as Balius and Calleja, military commanders such as Pablo Ruiz, Francisco Carreño and Máximo Franco, and municipal councilors like Bruno Lladó, and trade unionists like Francisco Pellicer, and the leading member of the Libertarian Youth, Juan Santana Calero. Its remote origins should be sought among the libertarians who shared the revolutionary experience of the insurrection of Alto Llobregat in January 1932, in the FAI affinity group “Renacer” between 1934 and 1936. Its more immediate origins are to be found in the opposition to the militarization of the militias (especially in the Gelsa sector), and in the defense of the revolutionary conquests and the critique of cenetista collaboration, expressed in articles published in *Solidaridad Obrera* (from July until early October), and in *Ideas* and *La Noche*

(from January to May 1937), especially by Balius. Its means of struggle were the leaflet, the poster, the bulletin and the barricade; but it never proposed schism or a break as a weapon of struggle, nor did it denounce the counterrevolutionary role of the CNT, nor did it even, during the May Days, make a serious effort to confront the confederal leaders to attempt to counteract the effect of the defeatist directives of the CNT-FAI. *The Friends of Durruti had elaborated an alternative program to that of the CNT-FAI, but did not provide an alternative leadership, which left them defenseless against the measures taken to expel them.*

The historical importance of The Friends of Durruti Group is undeniable, however. And its importance resides precisely in its character as an internal opposition to the collaborationist orientation of the libertarian movement. The political importance of its emergence was immediately recognized by Andreu Nin, who devoted a eulogistic and hopeful article to the Group, because it opened up the possibility of a revolutionary orientation of the cenetista masses who could oppose the treasonous and collaborationist policy of the CNT. This explains the interest in trying to influence The Friends of Durruti Group that was displayed by the Trotskyists as

well as the POUM; an influence that they never managed to assert.

The principal theoretical contributions of the Group to anarchist thought can be summarized in these points:

1. *A revolutionary program.*
2. Replace the capitalist state with a *Revolutionary Junta*, which would have to be prepared to defend the revolution from the inevitable attacks of the counterrevolutionaries. Guns will be used to defend the revolutionary program.

Both points were recapitulated by the Group itself in its slogan: “*A program and guns.*”

Its traditional anarchist apoliticism caused the CNT to lack a theory of revolution. *Without a revolutionary theory there is no revolution*, and not seizing power means leaving it in the hands of the capitalist state. For the Group, the CCMA was an institution of class collaboration, and had no other purpose than to consolidate and fortify the bourgeois state, which the CCMA did not want to destroy and was incapable of destroying. Hence the advocacy by The Friends of Durruti Group of the necessity of forming *a Revolutionary Junta, capable of coordinating, centralizing and fortifying the power of the multitude of workers, local, defense,*

*enterprise, militia committees, etc., that were the only holders of power between July 19 and September 26. A power that was fragmented into multiple committees, which locally held all power, but because they did not federate, centralize and consolidate their operations among themselves, they were detoured, weakened and transformed by the CCMA into Popular Front municipal administrations, managing committees of trade union-run enterprises and battalions in a republican army. Without the complete destruction of the capitalist state, the revolutionary days of July 1936 were incapable of taking the step to a new structure of working class power. The degeneration and final fiasco of the revolutionary process were inevitable. The confrontation between the reformist anarchism of the CNT-FAI, however, and the revolutionary anarchism of The Friends of Durruti Group was not clear, precise and starkly outlined enough to provoke a split that would clarify the opposed positions of both sides. The accusation of "betrayal" hurled by the Group at the CNT-FAI in May, which was later withdrawn, did not explain anything either, nor did it amount to anything besides a deserved insult, but did not allow for the slightest progress. Thus, despite the fact that the political thought expressed by The Friends of Durruti Group was an attempt to understand the reality of the Spanish war and revolution*

from the perspective of anarchosyndicalist ideology, one of the main reasons why it was rejected by the confederal militants was its authoritarian and “Marxist” character.

*These anarchosyndicalist militants, however, proved to be incapable of controlling their leaders, who made all the important decisions in secret discussions among “dignitaries”, which were then formally ratified and publicized at the official Plenums. The war rendered the horizontal and democratic organizational methods of the CNT, which were too slow and ineffective, obsolete, and the leaders issued orders to the militants by way of memoranda.* Furthermore, the urgency of the decision making process and the privileged information to which they had access, due to their positions and responsibilities, made them indispensable. This is why their resignations or accusations of betrayal of principles were always ineffective. The widespread opposition of the anarchosyndicalist masses to the collaborationism of their leaders, documented and displayed at a myriad of meetings and local plenums, found no outlet, because it was expressed in the name of the same principles that their leaders professed. The *strength* of The Friends of Durruti, and the Group’s positive achievements with respect to this massive but “silent” opposition, resided in



the fact that the Group had its own *program* to oppose to the confederal bureaucracy; its *weakness* derived from the fact that it was incapable of also opposing a leadership, a group of leaders that would be capable of opposing the aristocracy of “the men of action” or “the intellectuals”,[38](#) who proved to be the only leaders possible.

We can conclude that *The Friends of Durruti found themselves in a dead end*. They could not accept the collaborationism of the leading cadres of the CNT and the advancing counterrevolution; but if they theorized the experiences of the Spanish “revolution”, that is, the need for a Revolutionary Junta that would overthrow the bourgeois republican government of the Generalitat of Catalunya, and violently repress the agents of the counterrevolution, then they were labeled as Marxists and authoritarians and therefore forfeited any chance of proselytizing among the confederal rank and file. *We must ask ourselves whether the dead end of The Friends of Durruti was nothing but the reflection of the theoretical incapacity of Spanish anarchosyndicalism to confront the problems posed by the war and the “revolution”*.

In Barcelona it was, and still is possible to hear words of hatred and contempt directed against Durruti and “his

friends”, in the mouths of the class enemies; among working class milieus, however, people have always spoken respectfully of a mythologized Durruti, of the enormous demonstration of the proletariat at his funeral procession, of the indomitable revolt of the Durrutistas, of the anarchist and revolutionary achievements of July 19. During the long night of Francoism, anonymous hands wrote the names of Durruti and Ascaso on their nameless tombstones. It is not the historian’s job to respect myths; but it is his job to derive the important lessons of the class struggle. We need only retain two images. In the first, we see a submissive, persuasive and garrulous Companys, who on July 20 offered the anarchist leaders positions in an Antifascist Front government, because they had defeated the fascist military, and power was in the streets. In the second we see a Companys cornered, with the gloves off, who on May 4 was pleading with the government of the Republic to dispatch an air force squadron to bomb<sup>39</sup> the barracks and the strongholds of the CNT, and all the other targets indicated by the military chief of the PSUC, José del Barrio.<sup>40</sup> Between these two images roll the film of the “revolution” and the war. May 1937 was contained in embryo in July 1936. *The Group had understood that revolutions are totalitarian (that is, total and authoritarian) or else they are defeated: this was its*

*great merit.*[41](#) And it is on this basis that they must be rejected or accepted, if it is understood that some revolutionaries who are taking the factories and properties from their legal owners, cannot do so peacefully and politely, begging and saying, “please”. There is nothing more authoritarian and violent than stripping the bourgeoisie of its possessions, nothing is more authoritarian and violent than to defeat the army in the streets and seize weapons from the barracks, nothing is more authoritarian and violent than to burn churches and monasteries to put an end to the social and political power and influence of the Church of 1936. This should be obvious. The Friends of Durruti had understood that a revolution, besides being authoritarian and violent, must be TOTAL: one cannot make political agreements with the bourgeoisie and govern alongside it, it was necessary to destroy the capitalist state, abolish the Generalitat and exercise power from a Revolutionary Junta, constituted exclusively by the working class forces that had fought in the streets on July 19, 1936.

*Revolutions are totalitarian or they are defeated;* this was the essential theoretical achievement of the Group.

The Friends of Durruti Group has been ignored and mythologized for a long time, and maybe the time has come to understand it in its historical context. In order to

do so, however, we have to avoid transforming the history of The Friends of Durruti into a “situationist” comic strip of superheroes, because not only did its members not have the makings of heroes, but they also had their own theoretical and organizational limitations, since they could not, nor did they ever even attempt to become a “revolutionary alternative” to the CNT-FAI, from which they not only never split, but to which they always remained attached organizationally even in the face of attempts to expel them on the part of the superior committees.[42](#)

The Friends of Durruti Group became disturbing mirror for the CNT because they reflected a monstrous image, which many people did not want and still do not want to see: *it was and is better to just break the mirror.*

The fundamental question, the question that is taboo for the libertarian movement and the topic that so many books, militants and historians have been unable to elucidate, because they do not understand it, is why the revolutionaries of yesterday were transformed after a few months into Ministers, “firemen”, and counterrevolutionaries.... Why did the anarchist leaders and/or the libertarian movement renounce the revolution in July 1936 and in May 1937? The answer given by The Friends of Durruti themselves—“the

BETRAYAL of the leaders” —was nothing but an insult that explained nothing. From the very first moment the libertarian movement, lacking a program or revolutionary theory, supported antifascist unity. It sought to unite with socialists, Stalinists, POUMistas, republicans and Catalanists to defeat fascism. During the thirties antifascism was the worst poison and the greatest victory of fascism. The sacred union of all antifascists to defeat fascism and defend democracy implied for the libertarian movement the renunciation of its own principles, its own revolutionary program, the revolutionary conquests, everything ... that is, the famous slogan falsely attributed to Durruti: “we renounce everything except victory”, to submit to the program and interests of the democratic bourgeoisie. *It was this program of antifascist unity, of complete and loyal collaboration with all the antifascist forces, that led the CNT-FAI, rapidly and unconsciously, to government collaboration with the sole objective of winning the war against fascism.* It was this adherence to the antifascist program (that is, the defense of capitalist democracy) which explains why and how the same revolutionary leaders of yesterday became, a few months later, Ministers, “firemen”, bureaucrats and counterrevolutionaries. *It was the CNT that produced Ministers, and these Ministers betrayed nothing and no*

one; they restricted their efforts to faithfully exercising their functions to the best of their abilities.

The difference between the insurrections of July 1936 and May 1937 resides in the fact that the revolutionaries in July were without arms, but had a precise political objective: the defeat of the military uprising and of fascism; while in May, despite the fact that they possessed more arms than they did in July, they were politically disarmed. The working class masses began an insurrection against Stalinism and the bourgeois government of the Generalitat, *despite* their organizations and *without* their leaders, but they were incapable of waging war to the end *without* their organizations and *against* their leaders. In May 1937, as in July 1936, there was no revolutionary party, which the proletariat had failed to create during the thirties. Neither the POUM nor the CNT-FAI were, nor could they have been, that revolutionary vanguard; to the contrary, they were the major obstacles to its emergence. The incompetence of the anarchosyndicalist leaders and the absence of any revolutionary theory left no other horizon than that of antifascist unity and the democratic program of the republican bourgeoisie. *The methods and the goals of the proletariat had already disappeared from the stage.* The CCMA not only failed to reinforce the power

of the revolutionary committees, but it collaborated with the Generalitat to weaken and abolish them.

*The barricades erected in July 1936 were still standing months later; while the barricades erected in May 1937 disappeared immediately, except for the few that the PSUC wanted to leave standing as a testimonial to its power and its victory.*

May 1937, from this perspective, although it was undoubtedly the consequence of the increasing discontent in the face of rising prices, the shortages of food and other provisions, the struggle within the enterprises for socialization of the economy and workers control, the escalation of the attempts by the Generalitat to disarm the rearguard and seize control of public order, etc., etc., was above all *the necessary armed defeat of the proletariat*, which was required by the counterrevolution in order to put a definitive end to all revolutionary threats to bourgeois and republican institutions.

In 1938, the revolutionaries were dead, in jail or in hiding. The prisons contained fifteen thousand antifascist prisoners. Hunger, bombing and Stalinist repression were the masters and lords of Barcelona. The militias and labor had been militarized. Order now reigned throughout all

of Spain, both in the Francoist part as well as in the Republican part. The revolution was not crushed by Franco in January 1939; the Republic had already finished it off many months earlier.

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- [1.](#) See Agustín Guillamón, “Habla Durruti”, in *La Barcelona Rebelde*, Octaedro, 2003. See also the interview with Pablo Ruiz in *La Noche*, No. 3545 (March 24, 1937).
  - [2.](#) “Not only do they refuse militarization, but they will not abide by the requests of either Committee [the Regional Committees of the CNT and the FAI] and instead cast down their weapons and abandon the front. [...] seeing that it was not possible to harmonize the differences of opinion that existed in the Durruti Column [...] since there was so much tension that it was feared that the dispute would degenerate into a bloody clash [...] the majority of the comrades of the Gelsa group have abandoned the front against all regulations and in conflict with the agreements undertaken by both the specific and the confederal organizations.” FAI, *Informe que este Comité de Relaciones de Grupos Anarquistas de Cataluña presenta a los camaradas de la Región*, March 1937(?).



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- [3.](#) This chapter provides new information, and revises and corrects the account in a previous work, published in English: Agustín Guillamón, *The Friends of Durruti Group*, AK Press, San Francisco, 1996. The latter book is a translation of the contents of issue number 3 of *Balance*.
  - [4.](#) *L'Obra normativa de la Generalitat de Catalunya. El Pla Tarradellas*, Edició del Comissariat de Propaganda de la Generalitat de Catalunya, Barcelona, 1937.
  - [5.](#) Anna Monjó, “L’economia entre revolució i guerra”, in *Història, Política, societat i cultura del Països Catalans (Vol. 9), De la gran esperança a la gran ensulsiada 1930-1939*, Enciclopèdia Catalana, Barcelona, 1999.
  - [6.](#) Trade Union of the Iron and Steel Industry of Barcelona, CNT-FAI, *Colectivación? Nacionalización? No: Socialización*, Imp. Primero de Mayo, Barcelona, 1937.
  - [7.](#) We shall not present a complete account of the May Days, but only of those aspects that involve the Friends of Durruti Group; in any case, the reader may consult the Appendix for more information.
  - [8.](#) Crónica del Departament de Presidencia del 3 de maig de 1937.

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- [9.](#) As Gorkin states: “In reality the movement was totally spontaneous. Of course, this spontaneity was quite relative, and must be explained by the fact that *Defense Committees* have existed since July 19, scattered everywhere, in Barcelona and Cataluña, which were primarily organized by rank and file elements of the CNT and the FAI. For a while these Committees were mostly inactive, but it can be said that on May 3 they were the ones who mobilized the working class. They were the action groups of the movement. We know that no general strike order had been issued by any of the trade union federations.” See Julián Gorkin, “Réunion du sous-secrétariat international du POUM—14 mai 1937”.
  - [10.](#) The second Tarradellas government was in office from December 16, 1936 to April 3, 1937.
  - [11.](#) Isgleas resigned because of the proposal that the Carlos Marx Division, controlled by the PSUC, should be transferred from the Aragón Front to the Madrid Front, and not, as some historians claim, due to yet another in a series of disarmament decrees promulgated for the rearguard that nobody took seriously. Isgleas was opposed to the weakening of the Aragón Front, and demanded that, in any event, the men of the Marx Division should be replaced by two thousand men from the police forces in the

rearguard. This was intended as a countermeasure in response to the attempts on the part of Companys to disarm and control the rearguard.

- [12.](#) “Actas de las reuniones de Companys con Herrera y Escorza del 11 y 13 de abril de 1937”.
- [13.](#) In this government (in office from April 16 to May 4), the CNT Ministers were Isgleas (Defense), Capdevila (Public Services) and Aurelio Fernández (Health and Welfare).
- [14.](#) According to the memoirs of Joan Pons Garlandí, before May, in a meeting of the Committee of Internal Security, in the office of the Commissar of Public Order Rodríguez Salas, in the Palacio de Gobernación on Plaza Palacio, Artemi Aguadé persuaded Aurelio Fernández, who had put his pistol to the head of Rodríguez Salas, not to shoot. This anecdote reflects the great tension that existed between the CNT leaders and the appointees of the ERC who had positions of authority in the police forces.
- [15.](#) Herrera and Escorza advocated the formation of Inspection Commissions in all the Ministries of the Generalitat, which would allow them to control what was done and what was planned in all the departments of the government, especially in those directed by the PSUC, as a safeguard to avoid future

conflicts between the different antifascist organizations. It would be modeled on the Council of the Economy and the Commission of War Industries, which had proven so effective, according to Escorza and Herrera.

- [16.](#) Josep Tarradellas, “La crisi política prèvia als Fets de Maig. 26 dies de desgovern a la Generalitat”.
- [17.](#) Escorza was born in Barcelona in 1912, the son of a CNT militant in the Woodworkers Trade Union. He suffered from polio as a child, which left him permanently paralyzed. Of very short stature as a result of the atrophy of his legs, he used enormous lifts in his shoes that, in addition to his crutches, gave him a pathetic appearance and extremely limited his mobility. Of an extremely sour and severe disposition, he was very well educated and willful and would not allow anyone to help him move about. He was a militant in the Libertarian Youth and became a member of the Peninsular Committee of the FAI. At the beginning of the civil war he addressed an assembly of the CNT-FAI on July 20, 1936, advocating a third way, as opposed to García Oliver’s half-hearted advocacy of the “go for broke” strategy and the overwhelming majority position of Abad de Santillán and Federica Montseny in favor of loyal collaboration with the government of the

Generalitat. Escorza advocated the use of the government of the Generalitat as a tool to socialize the economy, and then dispose of it when it ceases to be useful to the CNT. Escorza was the highest ranking official of the *Investigation Services of the CNT-FAI*, which had since July 1936 been executing all kinds of repressive tasks, as well as espionage and intelligence. The Committee of Investigation was organized in two sections: Minué was in charge of foreign espionage and Escorza himself was in charge of internal intelligence. Repression was directed not just at rebel organizations and individuals, but also against CNT militants. Escorza was responsible for the execution of José Gardeñas, of the construction federation, and Fernández, president of the Food Supply Workers Trade Union, at the order of the confederal organization, with the knowledge and consent of Federica Montseny and Abad de Santillán. García Oliver stated that Escorza's intelligence and espionage work were excellent. His police work, intelligence activities and repressive measures relating to fifth columnists, as well as fascist elements and priests, and their activities, as well as those relating to the so-called "uncontrollables" within the antifascist camp itself, including those who were members of the CNT,

conferred upon Escorza a sinister reputation that, combined with his handicap and his arresting appearance, transformed him into a figure of revulsion and horror, feared for his power over life and death of others, radiating a mythical aura that was half contempt and half terror, led him to be known as (in the words of García Oliver) “a cripple in body and in soul”. It cannot be denied, however, that he was extraordinarily effective (and this was acknowledged by García Oliver himself) with respect to his responsibilities in the matter of espionage, intelligence and repression, which he always carried out strictly under orders from the confederal organization. During the summer of 1936 he made outstanding contributions to the conversations between the Central Committee of Antifascist Militias of Cataluña (CCMAC) and the Moroccan Action Committee (CAM), whose representatives proposed that the government of the Republic grant independence to Morocco as a means to undermine the effectiveness of the Moroccan troops that had been recruited by Franco’s army. On October 22, 1936, Manuel Escorza and Dionisio Eroles, in the name of the Regional Committee of the CNT, and Pedro Herrera, for the FAI, signed the unity pact between the CNT-FAI and the PSUC and the UGT,

which was explained to and submitted for the approval of a mass meeting held in the Monumental Plaza de Toros, at which Antonio Sesé, Federica Montseny, Joan Comorera y Vázquez, as well as the Soviet consul in Barcelona, Antonov Ovseenko, spoke.

- [18.](#) See W. Solano, “La Juventud Comunista Ibérica (POUM) en las jornadas de mayo de 1937 en Barcelona”, in *Los sucesos de mayo de 1937. Una revolución en la República*, Fundación Nin y Fundación Seguí, Pandora Libros, Barcelona, 1999, pp. 158-160.
- [19.](#) Agustín Guillamón, “Josep Rebull de 1937 a 1939. La crítica interna a la política del CE del POUM sobre la Guerra de España”, *Balance*, Issues 19 and 20 (May and October 2000).
- [20.](#) “Pedro” (Gerö), in his reports to Moscow, identified Los Escolapios as the controlling center of the insurrection of May 1937. See Agustín Guillamón, “La NKVD y el SIM en Barcelona. Algunos informes de Gerö sobre la Guerra de España”, *Balance*, no. 22 (November 2001).
- [21.](#) Juan Giménez Arenas, *De la Unión a Banat*, Fundación Anselmo Lorenzo, Madrid, 1996, p. 59.
- [22.](#) This is where the British author George Orwell was stationed.

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- [23.](#) The nephew of Francisco Ferrer Guardia was murdered by a PSUC patrol at one of these checkpoints, because he resisted being disarmed.
  - [24.](#) These are his exact words: “I declare that the guards who have died today, are like my own brothers: I bow down before them and kiss them.” (“declaro que los guardias que hoy han muerto, para mí son hermanos: me inclino ante ellos y los beso”). See *El eco...*, p. 427.
  - [25.](#) Testimony of Albert Masó March (a POUM militant), from correspondence with the author.
  - [26.](#) According to the account of Abad de Santillán, *Por qué perdimos la guerra*, Plaza y Janés, Barcelona, 1977, p. 211.
  - [27.](#) The Local Committee of Barcelona [of the POUM], “Informe de la actuación del Comité local durante los días de mayo que éste presenta a discusión de células de Barcelona”, mimeographed text.
  - [28.](#) Correspondence between the author and José Quesada Suárez.
  - [29.](#) Correspondence and interview of the author with Josep Rebull Cabré. See also Agustín Guillamón, “Josep Rebull de 1937 a 1939: la crítica interna a la política del Comité ejecutivo del POUM durante la



Revolución española”, *Balance. Cuadernos de historia*, nos. 19 and 20 (2000).

- [30.](#) Ricardo Sanz, *El sindicalismo y la política. Los “solidarios” y “nosotros”*, Edición del autor, Toulouse, 1966, p. 306. The barracks of the Docks (renamed “Espartaco”) was attacked by the Stalinists from the nearby Carlos Marx Barracks, but the troops under the command of Ricardo Sanz limited their activities to passive defense, without going into the streets. At this same barracks, militiamen from the Tierra y Libertad Column, who had participated in the street battles, obeyed the orders issued by the Regional Committee of the CNT on the evening of May 5 to halt all offensive operations. Only a group of Italians (who had brought four tanks to defend the Casa CNT-FAI on May 4 and on May 5 had delivered six armored cars to the Gran Vía to defend the headquarters of the Control Patrols and the Food Supply Workers Trade Union) continued to fight at the barricade erected on Icaria Avenue.
- [31.](#) Munis, in the second issue of *La Voz Leninista* (August 23, 1937) subjected the concept of the “revolutionary junta” that was elaborated in the sixth issue of *The Friend of the People* (August 12, 1937) to critique. For Munis, The Friends of Durruti were suffering from a progressive theoretical

deterioration, and a diminishing practical capacity to exercise influence in the CNT, which led them to abandon certain theoretical positions that the experience of May had allowed them to encompass. Munis claimed that in May 1937 The Friends of Durruti had simultaneously launched the slogans of “revolutionary junta” and “all power to the proletariat”; while in the sixth issue, dated August 12, of *The Friend of the People*, the slogan of “revolutionary junta” was proposed as an alternative to the “failure of all state forms”. According to Munis this implied a theoretical regression insofar as it reflected the assimilation by The Friends of Durruti of the experiences of May, which distanced them from the Marxist concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and once again dragged them into the ambiguity of the statist-anarchist theory.

- [32](#). Republished by Etcétera (Apartado 1363) and Ateneu Enciclopèdic Popular (Apartado 22212) [both 08080 Barcelona] in 1997, although accompanied by an inadequate preface containing erroneous information. [For an English language translation of this text, including the 1978 Introduction by Balius, see *The Friends of Durruti, Towards a Fresh Revolution*, Zabalaza Books, Johannesburg, n.d.; available online in October 2013 at:

[http://zabalazabooks.files.wordpress.com/2011/08/towards\\_a\\_fresh\\_revolution\\_fod.pdf.](http://zabalazabooks.files.wordpress.com/2011/08/towards_a_fresh_revolution_fod.pdf)]

- [33.](#) Anna Monjó, *Militants*, Laertes, Barcelona, 2003, pp. 465-471.
- [34.](#) At the beginning of this chapter.
- [35.](#) Most revolutionaries were in prison or in hiding. Those who had not yet suffered the impact of repression fled to the front to find refuge. The few who wanted to continue the fight for socialization in the factories encountered indifference or suspicion, or else were reduced to impotence by the new bureaucrats, who obtained the support of the flood of new members after July 19, 1936.
- [36.](#) In the city of Barcelona the 24 *Sindicatos Únicos* were organized into 12 Industrial Unions. The FAI underwent a development similar to the one that affected the CNT: after July 1937, it was organized territorially into Groups, which replaced the traditional affinity groups. This reorganization of both the CNT as well as the FAI, was a consequence of the defeat of the revolutionaries in May 1937, and implied the transformation of the class trade unions (*sindicatos únicos*) into institutions of economic management and for enforcing the militarization of labor (industrial unions); and this

was paralleled by the transformation of the FAI into an antifascist political party.

- [37.](#) The horizontal and federative functioning of the CNT did not permit its militants to organize dissident poles in organized tendencies, with their own leaders and programs distinct from those of the superior committees.
- [38.](#) García Oliver, Ascaso and Durruti were the prototypical “men of action”. Federica Montseny and Abad de Santillán were prototypical “intellectuals”.
- [39.](#) According to the testimony of Jaime Antón Aguadé i Cortès, written and dated before witnesses in Mexico City on August 9, 1946: “During the May Days the government of the Generalitat requested that the government of Spain send airplanes to bomb the CNT strongholds and this request was denied. Companys then asked what he was supposed to do to get the situation under control and he was told that there was no other solution besides surrendering jurisdiction over Public Order in Cataluña to the central government, and Companys surrendered it.” These statements are confirmed by the teletypes exchanged between Companys and the government of Valencia, in the fragment that confirms the request by Companys to

bomb Barcelona: “The President of the Generalitat, communicates to the subsecretary of the Council, that the rebels have brought artillery into the streets. It is requested that orders be conveyed to Sandino to place himself at the disposal of the Government of the Generalitat.”

- [40.](#) Teletype from José del Barrio: “To Comrade Vidiella. Order from Comrade del Barrio. Say the following: ‘Situation Barcelona very serious. Must work to prepare air force and bomb when we advise, the Escolapios, Plaza de Toros Monumental, the Campos Sagrado rail depot, the Barracks at San Andrés, Pueblo Nuevo and the Hotel del Reloy at number 1 Plaza de España. The mission of the air arm is absolutely necessary by tomorrow morning (it is now already seven)’.” See Appendix.
- [41.](#) “Revolutions are totalitarian no matter what anyone says. [...] In July a committee of antifascist militias was formed. It was not a class institution. Bourgeois and counterrevolutionary fractions were represented in it. It might seem that this committee arose to confront the Generalitat. But it was a scene in a comedy. [...] Neighborhood defense committees, municipal committees, supply committees were created. Sixteen months have passed. What remains? Of the spirit of July, a

memory. Of the institutions of July, a past. But the whole nest of politicians and petty bourgeois are still standing. In the Plaza de la República of the Catalonian capital there is still that crowd of elements that only intend to live on the backs of the working class.” From the pamphlet of The Friends of Durruti Group, “Towards a New Revolution”, written by Balius.

- [42](#). These superior committees at the highest levels of the organization were reduced to a handful of bureaucrats, who, after May 1937, were profoundly hostile to one another due to personal grudges, pitting the National Committee of the CNT, the Regional Committee of Cataluña, the Peninsular Committee of the FAI and the Executive Committee of the Libertarian Movement against each other. At the end of the war, after obscure vacillations and miserable reversals of position on the part of the various factions, the opposition between the bureaucrats, who were totally indifferent to the rank and file militants who were preoccupied with hunger and bombs, had been reduced to the confrontation between the Negrinistas of the National Committee, controlled by Marianet and Horacio Prieto, and the Anti-Negrinistas García Oliver, Isgleas, Esgleas, Peiró, Montseny and the Nervio Group: Abad de Santillán,

Pedro Herrera, Rafael Nevado, Fidel Miró and Germinal de Souza. Others, such as Joaquín Ascaso and Antonio Ortiz, condemned to hell by slander, fought to survive.

## Part 5- EPILOGUE

*“The working class is revolutionary or it is nothing.”*

Karl Marx, Letter to Schweitzer (February 13, 1865)

### THE COMMITTEES OF 1936

In July 1936, what was lacking was a revolutionary theory. Without theory there is no revolution. After seventy years of anti-state preaching, the Spanish anarchist movement, without understanding the real nature of power and the state, had come to a *historical crossroads* where it had to decide whether to advance by the revolutionary road, or collaborate with the bourgeois government of the Generalitat (and the Republic) in order to defeat fascism. The ambiguous option of “going for broke” proposed by Juan García Oliver was conceived as a *coup d'état*, in which the anarcho-syndicalist leaders would impose an “anarchist dictatorship” that was contrary to their ideological principles. The high level leaders of the CNT-FAI, left behind by the rank and file militants, felt dizzy before their incapacity to manage the victory of the workers insurrection. And they chose to collaborate. The revolutionary situation as it existed in July, characterized by *power that was fragmented* into hundreds of committees, was throttled by that *institution*



*of class collaboration* known as the Central Committee of Antifascist Militias (CCMA).

There was no revolutionary vanguard capable of inspiring the further development of the revolution of the committees. No working class organization, neither the CNT-FAI, nor the POUM, proposed in July *the revolutionary road of reinforcing, intensifying, extending, coordinating and centralizing the revolutionary committees* that, in the streets of Barcelona and in many municipalities of Catalonia, already exercised *all power*. And the committees by themselves were not able to do so, either, because they would have had to resolutely confront their own leaders and organizations.

In only two months this CCMA, with a predominant representation of the CNT-FAI, successfully weakened the multitude of revolutionary committees which had arisen everywhere, and reconstructed the state apparatus, which the CNT-FAI reinforced by accepting various official positions, first in the Catalanian government, and then a month later in the government of the Republic. The first decrees of the government of the Generalitat, reinforced with *anarchist Ministers*, ordered the militarization of the Militias and, naturally, the dissolution of the committees that nonetheless resisted their effective forced disappearance for several

more months. May 1937 was therefore the necessary armed defeat of the proletariat required by the counterrevolution in order to finish off the least trace of the revolutionary threat.

*The revolutionary committees* that had arisen in July 1936 were incomplete and imperfect institutions, *incapable of transforming themselves into authentic institutions of working class power*. They differed from workers councils (which had arisen as institutions of workers power in the proletarian revolutions of Germany and Russia) in the following respects: 1. They were not institutions that were democratically elected by mass assemblies of rank and file workers and therefore independent of the trade union bureaucracies and the parties; 2. They were not unitary institutions of the working class, and were furthermore incapable of coordinating among themselves, in such a way as to create superior institutions that would centralize the power of the workers.

After the victory of the revolutionary insurrection of July 19 two choices were possible: the revolutionary option consisted in reinforcing, intensifying, coordinating and centralizing the revolutionary committees as institutions of workers power, **TRANSFORMING THEM INTO WORKERS COUNCILS**; the popular front or reformist

option consisted in the integration of the workers movement into the state apparatus of the republican bourgeoisie and therefore in the weakening, isolation and final *dissolution* of the committees.

The government of Largo Caballero, despite its working class appearances, was based on the old state apparatus of the bourgeoisie and its purpose was to absorb all the revolutionary institutions and structures in order to gradually neutralize them until, once the bourgeois fraction of the government felt strong enough, they could be openly crushed.

The trade unions, by their very nature, were not institutions of workers power. The committees were not *yet* such institutions of workers power. The committees were not councils and therefore proved to be incapable of coordinating among themselves, and of creating superior institutions capable of centralizing, unifying and creating a working class power that would confront the capitalist state. The irreplaceable and necessary mission of a revolutionary vanguard or party would have been precisely to impel the transformation of the committees into workers councils.

The POUM and the CNT-FAI failed as revolutionary vanguards, and the committees were incapable of

becoming (by their own efforts) councils. *This was the principal limitation and determining cause of the rapid degeneration of the revolutionary situation that existed in July 1936, which made possible the sudden recovery of the bourgeois state apparatus.*

We must therefore make the distinction, as Josep Rebull did in the spring of 1937,<sup>1</sup> with precision, rigor and clarity, between committees,<sup>2</sup> workers councils and trade unions. They were *distinct* working class institutions with *different* functions.

The trade unions, during a revolutionary period, were supposed to be the economic institutions in control of production and distribution, that is, technical and administrative institutions. But they could not be, nor could they fulfill, functions of political representation or institutions of working class power. The Councils are precisely those institutions of workers power that, due to their democratic election in assemblies, are independent of the trade union bureaucracies and the parties. The strengthening of the councils means that they will assume leadership functions in every locality, accelerating the decomposition of the capitalist system. They are therefore *incompatible with the capitalist state*, and their defense is irreconcilable with the parties that participate in the governments of the bourgeoisie.

The seizure of power is based on *the armed struggle and the destruction of the capitalist state*, which is replaced with a government of Workers Councils.

The function of a revolutionary vanguard is not to be a substitute for the working class in those functions that only pertain to the class itself: seizing power, exercise of the dictatorship of the proletariat, control of the economy and the militias, conduct of the war, centralization of workers power and class unity, etc. The function of this organization, in a revolutionary situation, is necessarily that of impelling the creation of the institutions of working class power, so that they can exercise their functions of workers power, and thus establish a dictatorship of the proletariat, incompatible with the capitalist state, and therefore without any political collaboration of any kind with the bourgeoisie.

## **Insurrections, rebellions and revolutions**

If we define *revolution*, in the 20th century, as the violent confrontation with the state for the final goal (whether it is achieved or not) of the *seizure of state power*, carried out by political forces that are opposed, not only to the current regime, but to the existing social order, and the *proletarian revolution as the attempt to destroy the capitalist state apparatus*, we are differentiating the

proletarian revolution from the popular revolutions and the latter from other political forms of changing the government, such as coups d'état, fascist and Stalinist counterrevolutions (as in the twenties and thirties), social revolts, riots and protests, the fall of totalitarian regimes (the fascist regimes during the forties, or the Stalinist ones at the end of the eighties and beginning of the nineties), colonial wars of independence (especially those of the fifties and sixties) and civil wars.

Insurrections, revolts or revolutions are almost always violent, but this violence by itself lacks significance. All the insurrections of the past show us that, although they were violent, this violence has always been overcome by the subsequent counterrevolution, which has massacred, imprisoned or deported its enemies on a mass scale, especially after the fighting has ended, when it had already obtained military victory: the hatred and carnage born from the fear of the owning classes of the proletarian threat. If the revolution resides in the revolutionaries, then they must be exterminated in order to carry on with the peaceful exploitation of the "good citizens". If the spirit of vengeance has played a certain role in working class insurrections, it has always been paid back with interest by the reaction. We need only consider the Kuomintang in 1926 or Francoist Spain

(1939-1975). Working class insurrections have for their part been less bloody and ferocious than the anti-feudal peasant revolts, because the latter were the product of desperation. The destruction of property, or murders, which have taken place in some insurrections have generally been the spontaneous result of backwardness and desperation on the part of a lumpen sector that cannot escape from its poverty, or abolish oppression. Rebellions, revolts or insurrections, no matter how violent or socially radical they may be, cannot be defined as revolutionary if they are limited to attacking the local administrators of capitalism, and leave the capitalist economic and social system standing. Revolutions are always struggles for state power and lead to the attempt (whether or not it is successful) to seize state power by a group, a coalition or a class. The starting point of a proletarian revolution is the destruction of the bourgeois state. Therefore, in order to understand just what a revolution or an insurrection is, how it develops and what it seeks, we need to understand the nature of the state, and especially the nature of the capitalist state.

## **What is the state?**

It is not the state, or political power, that creates the classes; it is the existence of a society that is divided into classes that creates the state, in order to defend all the

privileges of the ruling class. We could find a thousand different definitions of the state. They can basically be reduced to just two, however. One, which is very broad, and that improperly speaks of the state as already existing in the first civilizations, with the development of major agricultural surpluses, of Mesopotamia and Egypt, and then Greece and Rome, we shall not use, as it is inadequate for the study of the capitalist society in which we live. This definition, in any event, requires that the state be defined according to the prevailing mode of production: the slave state, the feudal state, the capitalist state. The other definition, which is more specific, is the one that utilizes the current concept of the state, or the capitalist state, or the modern state, as an absolute sovereign power or as the sole power in each country, which is the one we shall use.

## **What is the capitalist state?**

The modern, or capitalist, state, is a recent historical form of the political organization of society, which arose about five hundred years ago in a handful of countries, with the end of feudalism and the first manifestations of the system of capitalist production. The emergence of the (capitalist) state presupposed the disappearance of the feudal forms of political organization. The concept of the (modern) state is therefore quite recent and arises



with the historical emergence of the system of capitalist production. It is the form of political organization that is proper for capitalism.

In feudal society sovereignty was understood as a hierarchical relation that mediated a plurality of powers. The power of the King was based on the loyalty of the other seigniorial powers and these royal powers were furthermore alienable, that is, they could be sold or granted to the nobility: the administration of justice, the recruitment of the army, the collection of taxes, the bishoprics, etc., could be sold to the highest bidder or were awarded in a complex network of favors and privileges. Sovereignty resided in a plurality of powers, which could be subordinated to one another or compete among themselves.

In capitalist society, the state transforms sovereignty into a monopoly: the state is the sole political power in a country. The (modern or capitalist) state possesses the monopoly of political power, and as a result also lays claim to the monopoly on violence. Any challenge to the monopoly on violence is considered to be a crime and an attack on capitalist law and order, and is therefore persecuted, punished and annihilated. In feudal society, social relations were based on personal dependence and privileges. In capitalist society, social relations can only

exist between juridically free and equal individuals. This juridical freedom and equality (not freedom and equality with regard to property) is indispensable for the formation and existence of a proletariat that provides the cheap labor for the new manufacturers. The worker must be free, and he also must be free of all property, in order to be available and prepared to rent himself for a wage to the owner of the factory, a business or to the state itself. He must be free and lacking any bond to the land that he farms, any reserves for survival, and any property, in order to be driven by hunger, pauperization and misery to the new industrial concentrations where he can sell the only commodity that he possesses: his strength and his intelligence, that is, his labor power and ability to work.

These new social relations, particular to capitalism, correspond with a new political organization, unlike the feudal organization: a state that monopolizes all political relations. In capitalism all individuals are theoretically (juridically) free and equal and no one is any longer subject to any kind of political dependence on the old form of feudal lords or the new owner of the factory. All political relations are monopolized by the state.

In pre-capitalist modes of production the relations of production were also relations of domination. The slave

was the property of his master, the serf was bound to the land that he worked or he was directly bound to a lord. This dependence has disappeared in capitalism. The (modern) state is therefore the product of the capitalist relations of production. The (current) state is the specific form of organization of political power in capitalist societies. There is a radical separation between the economic, the social and the political spheres.

The (modern) state monopolizes power, violence and the political relations between individuals in the societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails. In the capitalist system of production capital is not just money, or factories, or machines; capital is also, and *above all*, a social relation of production, and precisely that social relation of production that exists between proletarians, sellers of their labor power for a wage, and the capitalists, buyers of the commodity known as “labor power”.

The (capitalist) state has only recently emerged, about five hundred years ago, and it will disappear along with the capitalist relations of production. The (capitalist) state is thus not eternal; it has a very recent origin and will also come to an end. The political theory of the modern state was born in England in the 17th century, anticipating or justifying that historical process known as

the Industrial Revolution, with Hobbes (and Locke). Hobbes is not just the first theoretician, from the chronological point of view, but his works already express the present-day problematic of the (modern) state. From Plato to Machiavelli, pre-state political theory was characterized by its definition of political power and the community as something NATURAL, and by its identification of the civil community with the political community. After Hobbes, state political theory is characterized by its definition of the state as an ARTIFICIAL entity, its separation of the concepts of civil community (civil society) and political community (the state) and by its addressing the question of the reproduction of political power.

The (capitalist) state arises from a contradiction, which was its origin and its reason for existence, between the theoretical defense of the common or general good, and the practical defense of the interests of a minority. The manifest contradiction between the illusion of defending the general interest and the real defense of the interests of the bourgeois class. The reason for existence of the (current) state is nothing but to guarantee the reproduction of the social relations of capitalist production.

The (capitalist) state, however, reified in its institutions, is the mask of society, conveying the appearance of an external force that is motivated by a higher rationality that embodies a “just” order for which it performs the role of a neutral arbiter. This fetishization of the (modern) state ALLOWS the capitalist social relations of production to appear to be mere economic relations, rather than relations based on coercion, at the same time that it also VEILS the oppressive character of state institutions. In the market, worker and employer have the appearance of free individuals, who engage in a “purely” economic exchange: the worker sells his labor power in exchange for a wage. In this free, “exclusively” economic exchange, all coercion has been obscured, and the (capitalist) state has not intervened at all: it is not there, it has (apparently) disappeared.

The necessary split between the public and the private is a necessary precondition of the capitalist relations of production, because only thus can they APPEAR to be free agreements between juridically free and equal individuals, in which violence, monopolized by the (capitalist) state, has disappeared from the stage. All of this leads to a CONTRADICTION between the state AS FETISH, which must conceal its monopoly of violence, permanently exercised against the proletariat in order to

guarantee the capitalist relations of production, that is, of the exploitation of the proletariat by capital, and the state AS THE ORGANIZER OF SOCIAL CONSENSUS and legality, which conducts free elections, tolerates democratic rights of freedom of expression, assembly, press and association; allows trade unions and legislates labor reforms like health coverage, pensions, the eight hour day, unemployment insurance, etc.

## **Essence and functions of the capitalist state**

It is the existence of a society divided into classes that creates the state, in order to defend all the privileges of the ruling class. In crisis situations the capitalist state immediately reveals that it is first of all a *capitalist* state, rather than a state of the nation, the people, or its citizens, or a “welfare state”. The coercive component of the state, linked to class rule, is the *FUNDAMENTAL ESSENCE* of the state, which becomes transparent when social consensus and state legitimacy are sacrificed on the altar of subjecting the proletariat to the exploitation of capital. Proletarian revolts and insurrections always reveal the class nature of the state and its essential repressive function.

The capitalist state arises from this contradictory relation between its repressive essence and its apparent function

as an arbiter. It attempts to conceal its repressive role, fulfilled as a guarantee of the rule of the bourgeois class by way of the monopoly on violence, at the same time that it seeks to appear to be the organizer of the consensus of civil society, which in turn legitimizes the (modern) state as a neutral arbiter. By this means the state also reinforces its ideological monopoly and obtains a more complete and disguised domination over civil society.

*The fundamental institutions of the state are the standing army and the bureaucracy.* The tasks of the army are defense of the territorial frontiers against other states, imperialist conquests, to extend markets and obtain control over raw materials, and above all to serve as the ultimate safeguard of the established order against working class subversion. The task of the bureaucracy is to administer all those functions that the bourgeoisie delegates to the state: education, police, public health, prisons, mail, railroads, highways.... The civil servant of the (capitalist) state, from the schoolteacher to the college professor, from the policeman to the cabinet minister, from the truck driver to the doctor all performed, or still perform, necessary functions for the normal operations of the affairs of the bourgeoisie; where they are detrimental to the latter,

they are privatized, as has recently been taking place with regard to jails, police and the army in some countries.

The (modern) state is the ORGANIZATION of the political rule over, and the permanent coercion and economic exploitation of the proletariat by capital. The (capitalist) state is therefore not a machine or a tool that can be used for opposite purposes: yesterday to exploit the proletariat, tomorrow to emancipate the proletariat and suppress the bourgeoisie. It is not a machine that can be conquered, nor can it be manipulated according to the whims of the machine operator. *The proletariat cannot conquer the state*, because the state is the political organization of capital: *it must destroy the state*. If a victorious insurrection of the proletariat limits itself to conquering the state, and then reinforcing and rebuilding it, then we can speak of a coup d'état or a revolution, or even of a proletarian revolution (as in October 1917 in Russia), but in any event it is a revolution that has left standing the foundations of a rapid and powerful counterrevolution, which will soon lead to another form of managing capitalism, as was the case with Stalinism in Russia.

The proletariat must destroy the state because the state is the political organization of the economic exploitation



of wage labor. The destruction of the state is a condition *sine qua non* of the beginning of a communist society. The capitalist state cannot really be destroyed, however, unless the proletariat immediately destroys the economic, social and historical preconditions for the existence of wage labor and the law of value on a world scale.

## **What replaces the state?**

What replaces the state? The administration of things in communism. The proletarian revolution, however, is not a question of parties or organization. What determines the possibility for communism is a high degree of development of the productive forces and the extension of wage labor and the proletarian condition.

Organizational problems cannot be posed outside of those who are being organized and the problems that crop up at any particular moment. There are no rules, or magic formulas, or guarantees against bureaucratization and the counterrevolution.<sup>3</sup> Bureaucrats tend to be experts at organization, outside of society. *The historical experience of the international proletariat points to the Russian Soviets, the German “**räter**” and the Spanish Committees, that is, the organization of the proletariat in workers councils, as the revolutionary form of organization of the working class.*

We are therefore not speaking of one or another particular organizational form of committee or council, but of the councilist organization of society. The councils do not represent the workers, they are the organized proletariat. The council is a class institution and an institution for struggle. It is not a political body, it is the organization of society in new relations of production, and therefore it is not democratic, nor is it dictatorial, it is beyond politics, and avoids the separation between the public and the private that is characteristic of capitalism. Soviets, *rater* and committees failed in the past, but they existed, demonstrating the capacity of the proletariat for directing and managing factories, cities and countries; but also showing their limits and their limitations, which we must understand and correct. They have always appeared whenever the revolutionary proletariat rose up against capitalist barbarism. They were the working class response to the vacuum left by the bourgeoisie, rather than the result of a radicalization of the struggle. The councilist ideology contemplates the councils as a goal and not just as a moment of the struggle in the transition to communism. The councilists replace the “party” concept of the Leninists with the “council” concept. Both ideologies are sterile. *The councils will only be what the proletariat makes them in*

*the struggle to destroy the state and construct communism.*

## 6

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- [1.](#) See Agustín Guillamón, “Josep Rebull de 1937 a 1939”, *Balance*, issues number 19 and 20 (2000).
  - [2.](#) The committees were bureaucratic rather than democratic institutions, in which the delegates were not democratically elected by the working class rank and file in mass assemblies, but were appointed by the trade union or political bureaucracies. This implies, on the one hand, a separation between the

committees and the rank and file workers, and on the other hand, their dependence on the bureaucracy. This was the reason for their inability to coordinate among themselves and to create centralized and unitary class institutions; coordination was carried out by the various trade unions and parties, and the problematic of unity and centralization (with regard to military, economic, productive, supply issues, etc.) became a kind of jigsaw puzzle of multifarious discussion circles, on all scales and in every field, involving the various antifascist organizations, both working class and bourgeois and Stalinist.

- [3.](#) The Paris Commune of 1871 transformed all public offices into elected and revocable positions, paid the average wage of the workers.