

The Spanish Revolution 1936 –39



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1936 Revolution in Spain Workers rise against fascist coup

Manus Maguire writing in *Militant Irish Monthly*, May 1986, No. 141

[These two articles have been very slightly edited, Belfast SP, 2005]

This month workers in Barcelona begin celebrating the anniversary of the revolutionary events that gripped Spanish society 50 years ago. Leon Trotsky explained that the heroism and combativity of the Spanish workers was such that there could have been ten victorious revolutions in the period 1931-37.

The most revolutionary year was 1936. It began as a period of black reaction was drawing to a close. The workers had gone down to a defeat in 1934 culminating in the crushing of the Austrian Commune in October. 1934 and 1935 were the 'beino negro' – the two black years.

The general election of 16th February 1936, took place amid a rising radicalisation of workers and peasants. The Popular Front, made up of Socialist, Communist and Liberal parties, obtained a majority and its victory was the signal for the masses to move into action.

The workers did not wait until Parliament decreed reforms. In four days they carried out the programme of the Popular Front and went beyond it. 100,000 workers massed outside the Ministry of the Interior. Their slogan was 'Amnestia' (amnesty) for the 30,000 political prisoners. These workers victimised and sacked since 1934 were physically re-instated in the factories docks and shops. The employers were forced to compensate them for lost pay. Those fascists and scabs who were taken on were dismissed. The 44-hour week was introduced, along with wage rises and paid holidays. The armed militias of the workers' parties were revived.

The movement of workers sent shock waves throughout the ruling class. A section demanded that the President should declare a 'state of war' as a step towards a military coup. But the right wing parties and the fascists were in disarray and confusion.

The masses had moved independently. They had no faith in the liberals, who were allowed to dominate the Popular Front. The pre-election agreement gave them more seats to

contest than their real support with the population would warrant. They were elected despite their liberalism on the Popular Front ticket. The workers' parties (the Socialist and Communist Party) took 114 out of 268 Popular Front seats. Azana, the liberal leader of the Republican Left party became Prime Minister.

The workers and peasants had voted for change. But the Government made no effort to implement its programme. In the rural areas peasants and landless labourers seized over 3,000 estates. Influenced by socialist ideas many estates were not broken up but run collectively.

May Day 1936 was marked by mass demonstrations in all the main urban centres. The Socialist (UGT) and Anarchist (CNT) trade unions organised a general strike. In many cases these parades were led by the armed militias of the Young Socialists.

The enormous power of the working class was demonstrated time and again. In late June there were national strikes for higher wages and better conditions by building workers, lift workers, waiters and even bullfighters.

Within four months of the Popular Front election victory 113 general strikes and 228 partial strikes had taken place. All sections of the working class were drawn into strike activity. Hundreds of thousands of workers, particularly the youth, were joining the socialist and anarchist parties.

In the meantime, the counter-revolution was re-organising in the form of the Falange (fascist) Party. By May and June they were conducting regular gun attacks on the workers districts. The armed workers' militias replied in kind. Fascists stepped up attacks on picket lines and strikes. On 12th July, they assassinated a Socialist militia leader. The workers demanded action. But the Popular Front continued to turn a blind eye to the activities of the fascists.

On the 13th July civil guard policemen arrested Calvo Sotelo, one of the most prominent

leaders of the Right. On their way into custody Sotelo was shot dead by a socialist policeman. In turn the ruling class demanded action, they condemned the Popular Front and the right wing deputies withdrew from Parliament. Both funerals took place on 14th July in the same cemetery. They ended in a gun battle between the Socialists and the fascists.

The capitalists were terrified at the power of the working class. They had been organising covertly for a military takeover. The working class was to be crushed. The workers' organisations, the trade unions and the parties were to be smashed. All the apparatus of the State was still in the hands of the capitalist class. Fascists and military leaders that had persecuted the working class for a generation were still in authority. Two prominent reactionaries, Generals Franco and Mola, were demoted and sent to Morocco and the Canaries. But from there they plotted counter-revolution and a coup d'état.

The date for the coup was eventually set for 17th July. Under Franco, the Army of Africa, made up of Moors, mercenaries and Legionaries, seized power in Spanish Morocco and the Canaries. Mola, now based at Pamplona, was to raise the garrisons in northern Spain. General Franco would then cross into Southern Spain calling on the rest of the military to rally behind the counter-revolution.

On the 18th July fascist officers seized Seville, Granada and Cordoba in the south. Incredibly, the Popular Front government issued a statement calling for calm and said, 'No one, absolutely no one, on the Spanish mainland, has taken part in this absurd plot.'

In Seville, Granada and Cordoba the working class were lulled to sleep. Mass demonstrations demanded arms, but they were advised by their leaders to go home. That night fascist officers went to the workers districts with the names of trade union branch secretaries, Communist Party secretaries, Socialist Party secretaries and other prominent militants. Systematically they went through each one and summarily executed them.

The memory of the 'beino negro' was still fresh in the minds of the workers. The government attempted but failed to suppress news of the uprising. Sailors of the Spanish fleet off Morocco were quick to act. They arrested their fascist officers, threw many of them overboard and shot the rest. They

established sailors committees and made radio broadcasts to the workers about the coup.

The trade unions called for a general strike throughout Spain. But the workers recognised that a demonstration with folded arms was not sufficient to halt the counter-revolution. Workers began to gather arms. One hundred thousand marched in Madrid with banners demanding, 'Arms! Arms! Arms!' The liberal leaders of the Popular Front refused to hand out weapons. Taxi drivers had even met and put 3,000 taxis at the disposal of the government. On the 19th July a column of 4,000 Asturian miners kitted out with plenty of dynamite began marching to Madrid.

Later that day, the proletariat of revolutionary Barcelona showed their metal. Rebel troops began to move out of their barracks to seize key centres in the city. But the workers had prepared to challenge. The pavement stones were used to build barricades. Raids were made on sporting shops for rifles, construction sites for dynamite and known fascist homes for concealed weapons. But despite these measures the masses in Barcelona still had only 200 weapons with which to face 5,000 well armed troops.

Nevertheless, it was the extent of the workers' movement and the political appeal to the rank and file troops that won the day. As soon as the troops left the barracks the sirens from the factories, docks and elsewhere began to wail. Several hundred thousand workers swarmed onto the streets. At every corner a makeshift barricade went up. One Falangist officer from his hotel saw the workers everywhere in their black and red anarchist scarves. He turned to his fellow fascist, "this time the CNT are out in force. We're done for."

Felix Morrow in his brilliant book, 'Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain' explained how the workers with their bare hands smashed the forces of reaction in Barcelona;

"Heroic workers stepped forward from the lines to call upon the soldiers to learn why they were shooting down their fellow toilers. They fell under rifle and machine-gun fire, but others took their places. Here and there a soldier began shooting wide. Soon bolder ones turned on their officers. Some nameless military genius, perhaps he died, then seized the moment and the mass of the workers abandoned their prone positions and surged forward. The first barracks were taken."

By 2pm on the 20th July the workers were masters of Barcelona. They now had 30,000 rifles and 150 pieces of artillery. Within 36 hours they cleaned up the rest of Catalonia.

The workers in Madrid moved likewise. The pressure of the masses forced the Popular Front leaders to hand out 5,000 rifles, which were rushed to the offices of the UGT.

As the fascist officers and right wing leaders assembled in the main Montana Barracks, workers gathered outside. The size of the demonstration made it impossible for the rebels inside to get out.

That night the armed Socialist militias took effective control of the capital, outside the barracks. The following day workers with artillery pieces, drawn on a beer lorry, bombarded the barracks. At 10.30am the garrison commander was hit. Confusion reigned inside; the ranks wanted to surrender; a white flag was flown from one of the windows. Anticipating the surrender of the fortress the masses surged forward, but they were met with merciless machine-gun fire. This was repeated several times.

Enraged, the workers stepped up their attacks. Eventually the great door of the barracks collapsed. Thousands of workers flooded into the courtyard. The ranks threw their rifles to the workers. The officers fought room by room. Officers from one room at the top of the barracks were eventually disarmed. Then one well-built worker went in and proceeded to throw the yelling officers out the window one by one to the workers below. As in Barcelona the proletariat of Madrid were triumphant. In Valencia, Malaga, Bilbao and other cities the fascists met a similar fate. In towns and villages the workers and also the peasants rose. The working class was in power in two-thirds of Spain.

In the other one-third, the area which became known as Nationalist Spain, the workers became victims of a bloody campaign of vengeance organized by the army and the fascists. The workers' parties and the trade unions were banned. Even to have voted for the Popular Front was now deemed a crime. Strikers were executed. Members of the workers' parties were arrested and shot. A Swiss Red Cross official driving through one town was told by a Falangist, 'that is red Aramda. I am afraid we had to put the whole town in prison and execute very many people.' [Quoted from Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish*

Civil War, page 258] The reactionary Mayor of Pamplona explained: "it is necessary to spread an atmosphere of terror. We must create the impression of mastery. Anyone who is overtly or secretly a supporter of the Popular Front must be shot."

General Mola summed up his attitude of the Spanish workers, when asked by a Red Cross official for prisoner exchanges, "how can you expect us to exchange a Spanish gentleman for a Red dog?" The bloody massacre of workers had a reason. Although the army and the fascists were well armed they were few in number. In places such as Seville, Saragossa, Granada and Cordoba, the large working class population had to be terrified and cowed into submission. Stories abound of the atrocities. Records could never be kept, because of the extent of the bloodletting. Even to identify one of those butchered was guilt by association. As many as 50,000 may have perished before the end of July at the hands of these gangs.

In Madrid, Barcelona and elsewhere the working class held power. Workers' committees sprang up everywhere taking control of all facets of life. They controlled transport, industry and defence. Workers went abroad to obtain imports and exports. A union book or a red part card was better than a passport to get into the country. Peasants seized the huge estates. In city, town and village the masses organised militias, armed, drilled and sent them to the front lines. A new worker-police force was established to deal with law and order. The UGT in Madrid ran the food supplies sent in by the peasants. In Barcelona (population 1 million) the workers had their own radio station, 8 daily papers, dozens of weeklies and other magazines.

Over 400,000 were members of the workers' parties. Even a lipstick factory was taken over and changed to producing shells for the war.

Within three days of defeating reaction in Catalonia a column of 20,000 militia fighters set out for the nearby province of Aragon, captured by the fascists. They came as an army of social liberation and drove back the military. The peasants took the land and the workers the factories. Workers' committees and anti-fascist committees were set up. They became bastions of the revolution.

The workers without so much as a by your leave had seized power and began a war with the fascists. They [the workers] now held two-thirds of Spain, had it not been for the

vacillation and lack of leadership of the Socialist and Communist Party tops in the south, it would have been the whole of Spain. The workers moved spontaneously and instinctively if not consciously. The capitalists had fled to the side of Franco. All that remained were the liberals of the Popular Front, 'the shadows of the capitalist class,' as Trotsky described them. They had no power, no independent base within society and no armed forces upon which to rely. Yet they were the legal government – by virtue of the consent of the leadership of the workers' parties.

The situation that existed was described by Trotsky as one of dual power, similar to what existed in Russia between the revolutions of February and October 1917. But Trotsky explained that the situation in Spain in 1936 was immensely more favourable. Dual power means the workers hold power in their hands, but because they are not fully conscious of this they still tolerate the existence of the capitalist Government as the legal power. But such a balancing act cannot survive forever, and, ultimately, only one power can survive. In Russia in 1917 this problem was resolved by the Bolsheviks when the Soviet power and the working class eventually triumphed in the October Revolution. The issue was still to be resolved in Spain.

A civil war now developed between 'Nationalist' and 'Republican' Spain. Republican Spain was in a dominant position. They held the key industrial centres of Madrid, Catalonia and the Basque country. They had the rich mineral deposits in the Asturian mines. They held the chemical and explosive plants. The gold reserves in the Bank of Spain were in their hands. They had the two largest cities with over one million inhabitants and 65% of the population live in their area. They could also count on support from workers in the area held by the reactionaries. Republican Spain as it was at the end of July 1936 contributed 70% to the budget; Nationalist Spain had only 30%.

The struggle of the Spanish proletariat was a tremendous inspiration to the working class internationally. 40,000 international volunteers rushed to Spain. Money, support and material aid flooded to the workers' cause. Ten thousand workers went from France, socialists from Britain and Ireland made their way, many never returned. All the objective conditions existed for a victorious socialist revolution.

Why then was it possible for General Franco to march triumphantly into Madrid on 27th March 1939 – less than three years later? Why did the fascists and military come to power? Given the enormous revolutionary potential that existed, why did the revolution end in bloody defeat?

The answer lies in the role of the Popular Front and the leaders of the workers' parties. Rather than standing for a socialist Spain, the leaders of the Communist, Socialist and Anarchist parties sought a coalition with the 'progressive' capitalist politicians of the Popular Front for a 'democratic' Spain. But how could democracy be defended except on the basis of socialism?

Those who fail to understand the mistakes of the past are doomed to repeat them. As a new generation of workers and youth move into struggle, in Spain and internationally, it will be necessary for them to have a clear understanding of the processes and lessons of the Spanish Revolution.

About the poster on the cover

This poster consists of a proclamation made by the Central Committee of the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) with the symbols of communism—the hammer, the sickle and the red star—in the background. The poster was probably issued in the summer or fall of 1936, when the PCE launched a campaign to appear as a moderate party, committed to the Republic and to the respect of private property. The text on the poster reads:

To win the war is to spur the revolution, says the Communist Party. The struggle to win the war is indisputably tied to the development of the revolution. If we do not win the war, the development of the revolution will be set back. It is imperative that this idea penetrate into the masses. We struggle to create a better society, in which such criminal and monstrous acts as the rebel subversion will be impossible.

However, to all those dreamers or those who are irresponsible, who want to forcibly impose upon their own province or people experiments of 'socialism' or 'libertarian communism,' or of another kind, we must make them understand that all those experiments will crumble to the ground like imaginary castles if the war is not won, if we do not squash the military traitors, if we do not annihilate the fascists tormentors of our country, and if we do not eliminate the invading troops of German, Italian and Portuguese fascism from our land.

[SP emphasis]

Spain 1936 – the lessons of the Popular Front

Militant Irish Monthly, July-August 1986, No. 142.

This is the second of a two-part article on the Spanish Revolution written on its 50th Anniversary by Manus Maguire. This article deals with why the revolution ended in such a bloody defeat and the vital lessons to be learnt by workers today.

The power, profit and privileges of Spanish capitalism and landlordism was directly threatened by the mass movement, unleashed as a result of the election of the Popular Front in February 1936. Not even the workers' leaders, let alone the liberals, could keep it in check.

Capitalism never gives up its power without a fight. It was inevitable that the ruling class would use their state apparatus to resist. Frederick Engels explained that the state, in the last analysis, could be reduced to armed bodies of men – police, armies, prisons, etc. acting in the defence of private property.

Faced with a revolutionary movement of the working class, the dominant representatives of capitalism concluded that the workers and their organisations had to be crushed. The date for a military uprising was set.

The liberals of the Popular Front government actually prepared the way for this revolt. It made no attempt to curb the power of the state. In April, Colonel Margada published a full report of a military conspiracy against the Government. Incredibly, the Government denounced the report. Instead it called for full support for the armed forces and at the insistence of Franco, Colonel Margada was court-martialled and flung out of the army.

Under the noses of the Government the conspirators prepared. At the same time the liberals continued to suppress strikes and imprison workers. Meetings were declared illegal; the Left press was censored and party offices closed down. Troops were used against peasants seizing land.

In comparison fascists engaged in armed attacks on workers and being found in possession weapons were treated leniently. This, of course, emboldened the fascists and when Franco eventually launched his revolt on July 17th 1936, defence was the last thought in the Government's mind. The Prime Minister, Quiroga, when informed of the uprising reportedly said, "they're rising. Very well, I shall go to bed."

President Azana attempted to find some compromise with the generals. They suppressed all news of the rebellion and instead tried to lull the masses into sleep. Had the fate of Spain in July depended on these liberals, it would have fallen to fascism, without a shot being fired.

But could anything else be expected of the liberal-dominated Popular Front Government? It was, after all, a capitalist government and depended on its state forces to hold the working class in check. How could it be expected to disarm itself?

The real betrayal lay with the leaderships of the Socialist, Anarchist and Communist Parties and in the illusions they created in the Popular Front.

Had these workers' organisations rejected collaboration with the capitalists in the Popular Front and campaigned, in the February general election, in a united front of the workers' parties, on a socialist programme, they would have taken the mass of Spanish society with them.

They could then have begun dismantling the bourgeois state, dismissed fascist and reactionary officers; called for the democratic election of a new officer corps; introduced trade unions rights for the ranks of the armed forces, and allowed them to join the workers' parties. These measures would have sabotaged the plans of the fascist officers. Faced with any threat of counter-revolution the workers could have been armed. On this basis and with a class appeal to rank and file soldiers, sailors and airmen, the fascist threat would have been crushed.

Instead of adopting this programme the workers' leaders have power to the bourgeois Popular Front leaders, under this cover the fascists organised their revolt. In the event, the ranks of the working class moved and saved the situation.

Workers' power

The revolution of July 19th drove the fascists from two-thirds of Spain, where power now rested in the hands of the workers and their militias. As previously explained, the situation which now existed was one of dual power,

similar to the situation in Russia from February until October 1917.

In Spain the workers' power of the anti-fascist militias co-existed with the bourgeois Popular Front. In Russia the Soviets and the Provisional Government of Kerensky represented proletarian power and bourgeois power.

But in Russia the Bolsheviks had the conquest of state power- 'All power to the Soviets' – inscribed on its banners. In October 1917, through the Soviets, they led the workers and peasants to state power overthrowing the Provisional Government.

The Soviets were elected delegates of workers, peasants and soldiers formed at village, district and city level and nationally in the All-Russian Congress of Soviets. These bodies accurately reflected the changing moods and consciousness of the masses. Initially they were dominated by Menshevik and other reformist parties. But on the basis of the betrayal of reformism and the programme of Bolshevism, the latter won a majority on them.

In Spain Soviets did not exist in this fully rounded-out manner. Power was exercised through committees of workers' peasants and militias – but with them made up of appointed representatives of the workers' parties and the trade unions.

While initially reflecting the aspirations of the masses they were not directly accountable to them. These committees existed on the basis of mutual consent and unlike Soviets could not be democratic organs of workers power. Their weakness was shown in the ability of the workers' leaders to manipulate them at a latter stage.

The 'Communist' Party and the right wing Socialists argued that Spain was not ripe for socialism. It was the old Menshevik, now Stalinist, 'stages theory'. The CP in a statement stated that its aim was 'the defence of Republican order, while respecting private property.'

To achieve this, it was argued, that they needed to unite all those forces opposed to Franco, including the bourgeois liberals of the Popular Front. Yet these capitalist politicians had shown themselves many times to be the irreconcilable enemies of the working class. All had held office in government, between 1931-36, that had viciously suppressed the labour movement.

Nor in July, or at any other time, had they shown any commitment in the struggle against Franco. Now the workers, persecuted for generations, were asked to accept them as reliable allies.

In real terms, these elements feared the armed workers 1,000 times more than the fascists. What would a Franco victory mean to them? It might place restrictions on their political careers, but not prevent them from continuing to exploit and make profits from their factories and businesses. These would only be threatened if Franco's armies were defeated by the armed workers.

Slowly and at first cautiously the liberal capitalists in republican Spain began to reassert authority using the crutch provided by the Communist Party and the right wing of the Socialist Party led by Prieto. They argued that military aid was needed from the 'western democracies', but it would never be given to workers who seized factories or workers' militias. Along with the CP they argued for their disbanding, giving the government all the responsibility to execute the war.

By late August the Government felt confident to begin to claw back the gains of the July revolution. Giral, the bourgeois Minister of Defence, announced the enlistment of 10,000 men for a reserve force. This was the first step in the reconstruction of a standing army under bourgeois control. Conscription was then introduced for a much larger force. It was agreed in cabinet that the militias and the workers police patrols had to be replaced.

Opposition backing

The liberal bourgeois meet with no resistance to these plans from the workers' parties. Indeed the CP and the Prieto socialists fully agreed and co-operated with them. Finding no real opposition the liberals felt more confident to chip away further at the power of the working class.

Yet faced with this creeping counter-revolution, the left of the workers' movement; the Caballero socialists and the UGT; the anarchist CNT-FAI and the POUM all remained totally silent. The POUM was a smaller centrist party (i.e. revolutionary in theory, but reformist in practice) based mainly in Catalonia. All these parties failed to advance a proletarian alternative. Based on a Marxist programme to the campaign by the bourgeois.

Reformism

Leon Trotsky once explained that 'betrayal is inherent within reformism'. No tendency within

the working class stood for a revolutionary struggle against fascism or for a direct struggle for state power by the working class.

To a greater or lesser extent, these leaders accepted that socialism should wait until after Franco's defeat. But it was this position which proved fatal. What was required was a socialist programme based on a united front of the workers' parties. Based on Soviets, this united front would easily have taken power and tossed the bourgeoisie aside. With a revolutionary appeal the workers, peasants and colonial masses would have been won to their banner thus securing a quick victory over the fascist armies.

On the basis of a revolutionary Government land could have been decreed to the peasants. This decree in Russia won them to the Bolshevik revolution. Granting independence to Morocco could have been turned into a mighty beacon to ignite a movement of the oppressed masses throughout the colonial world. The nationalisation of the factories, banks, mines, etc. and the development of a socialist plan of production would have convinced the working class that they were fighting for their own future and a socialist Spain.

Whose future?

In war, and particularly civil war, politics is the dominant factor. The Spanish workers and peasants would have fought, to the last drop of blood in their veins, if it meant ending exploitation.

But could they really be expected to give everything for Azana, the oppressor of the peasants? For Bannio, leader of the Republican Union who was Prime Minister during the two black years or for any other exploiter in the Popular Front. Only a workers' government and a workers' state could have pursued the struggle to victory.

The example was the Russian Civil War of 1918-22. The Red Army led by Leon Trotsky defeated the counter-revolutionary White armies who invaded Soviet Russia to strangle the workers' state.

A workers' and peasants Red Army in Spain would have smashed fascism. They would have made an international appeal – not to the capitalist leaders of Europe, as was made by the Popular Front, but which fell on deaf ears. A socialist Spain could have appealed to the workers of Britain, France, Italy, Germany and in the Soviet Union.

It would have been a pole of attraction for the Russian masses and sounded the death knell for the Stalinist bureaucracy. The German and Italian workers would have risen to the occasion at being shown by their Spanish brothers and sisters how to destroy fascism.

This was the programme laid down by Trotsky and his followers during the course of the Spanish revolution. Unfortunately no genuine Marxist (i.e. Trotskyist) tendency existed in Spain which could have translated these ideas to the masses.

Instead, the leaders of the main workers' organisations pursued the policy of class collaboration and Popular Frontism. The leaders of the Socialists, the Communist Party, the CNT-FAI and the POUM all joined as Ministers in the bourgeois government.

Workers disarmed

The government then dissolved the revolutionary committees and began disarming workers. These plans were laid in Cabinet where anarchists and so-called Marxists were government ministers.

This counter-revolutionary struggle by the Popular Front was greatly strengthened by the defeat of the working class in Barcelona in May 1937. On 3rd May, the assault guards were ordered by the Catalan government to seize the telephone exchange. This was held by a joint CNT-UGT committee and defended by CNT militia fighters. It was a crucial communication centre for the entire region. The attack was repulsed. Facing the destruction of their power in Barcelona at the hands of the bourgeois, they replied as they had done the previous July. Barricades went up. Armed workers appeared and patrolled the streets. The bourgeois police and soldiers were disarmed. The Catalan government was suspended powerless in mid-air. Again the proletariat of Barcelona held power. A revolutionary government could have been established.

But rather than adopting this course the CNT leaders, who were actually Ministers of the Catalan government, called on their followers to lay down their weapons, dismantle the barricades and return to work.

These leaders had already exposed all the contradictions within anarchism and betrayed their followers in entering a bourgeois government. Now they asked the anarchist masses to sacrifice themselves on the altar of the capitalist class.

Capitulation

The POUM did not accept this treachery, at least initially. Neither did the anarchist masses who refused to withdraw and demanded guarantees about the intentions of the government. The influence of the POUM soared amongst the anarchist workers. The government felt that it had no choice but to concede some reforms with its left hand, but with the intention of clawing them back with the right hand, at the earliest opportunity. The masses were coaxed from the barricades. The POUM failed to outline any alternative. By the end of the week they tail-ended the anarcho-reformist leaders and called on their forces to leave the streets and return to work.

The CNT had agreed that each side withdraw its forces. Naively they withdrew from some areas including the telephone exchange. The government moved quickly and occupied it. The Catalan masses were left leaderless, desperate and confused, 5,000 heavily armed assault guards entered the city. Only a few days before these same troops had refused to go.

The CNT appealed 'in the interests of peace' for their followers to leave the barricades. Only the Friends of Durruti, a small revolutionary tendency grouping towards genuine Marxism, called on the workers to resist the counter-revolution. They had their origins in the CNT, from where they were expelled. But they had little tradition and insufficient influence. The confusion prevailed. The counter-revolution had scored a crucial victory. Assault guards began disarming the workers.

The creeping counter-revolution now developed into a gallop. The CNT and the POUM had been used to disarm the masses and could now be dispensed with. Unceremoniously they were kicked out of government.

The persecution of CNT and POUM militants at the hands of the capitalist and Stalinist police had been going on since the end of 1936. Now it was put into top gear. Their presses and radio stations were censored and shut down. The leaders, especially of the POUM, were thrown into jail and eventually the parties were driven underground. In the end many of their best leaders ended up by being butchered by their captors.

Prime architects in this campaign was the 'Communist Party'. As far back as December 1936 the Stalinists had announced in Pravda (17 Dec. 1936) that the anarchists and POUMists would be purged in Spain. They added 'it will be

conducted with the same energy with which it (the purges) was conducted in the USSR.' Many of the prisons in 'republican' Spain now took on all the features of Stalin's jails in Russia. Few fascists were held, but they were full with 1,000's of revolutionary fighters incarcerated.

Theoretically weak

But while the Communist Party set the tone for the betrayal of the revolution, they were by no means were the decisive elements. The left Socialists, anarchists and POUMists could have gathered the overwhelming majority of workers and peasants to their banners. But their leaders lacked clear theories, ideas, perspectives, strategy and tactics to win the revolution and defeat fascism. They limited the struggle to within the confines of capitalism. It was its reformist outlook which led the, however unconsciously, to betray the revolution.

By 1938 the fascist armies, with massive material support from Nazi Germany and Italy, were making increased headway. Demoralised Aragon and Catalonia fell. Isolated, the Asturian masses fought to the end.

The only major cities to remain were Madrid and Valencia. By this stage the bourgeois has routed out all vestiges of working class power. They had restored its state, its army and its police. The revolution of July 19th had been successfully derailed.

In July 1936 what had prevented a compromise between the liberal bourgeois and Franco was the powerful and armed working class. This was no longer the case. Generals Casada and Miaja, the Popular Front's military leaders could see no victory over Franco in sight.

In early 1939 they began secretly to look to end the war. But they saw the Communist Party as an obstacle to their aims. In the end, the generals decided that they too had to be removed.

On the night of March 11th troops of the Popular Front engaged units with communist commanders in the capital. 230 died and over 5000 wounded before they surrendered. The top communists military leaders Barceto and Coresa were hurriedly summoned before a court martial. The death sentence was ordered and they faced the firing squads there and then. The Catholic and Protestant militants were now persecuted and the party driven underground. Even Judas Iscariot received 330 pieces of silver for his treachery. For the communists there was no reward and they met the same fate as the other workers' parties. General Casado and Miaja now

established a military dictatorship and called for surrender to the fascists.

Even had 'republican' Spain won the civil war there still would have been a military police state in Spain. This in itself was the final condemnation of the policies of all the workers' parties.

Marxism

The conditions which gave rise to the Spanish Revolution of 1931-37 are returning today. The attempted military coup of Colonel Tejero in February 1981 shows the threat still posed to the working class.

The events in Chile in 1973 also underline the necessity to study the lessons of the Spanish revolution. But these lessons are being learnt. Today a Marxist tendency is needed in Spain preparing the Spanish workers to fight its forthcoming battles to a victorious conclusion.

Felix Morrow
**Revolution and
Counter-Revolution in Spain**
Chapter 3:
The Revolution of July 19

The Barcelona proletariat prevented the capitulation of the republic to the fascists. On July 19, almost barehanded, they stormed the first barracks successfully. By 2 p.m. the next day they were masters of Barcelona.

It was not accidental that the honour of initiating the armed struggle against fascism belongs to the Barcelona proletariat. Chief seaport and industrial centre of Spain, concentrating in it and the surrounding industrial towns of Catalonia nearly half the industrial proletariat of Spain, Barcelona has always been the revolutionary vanguard. The parliamentary reformism of the socialist-led UGT had never found a foothold there. The united socialist and Stalinist parties (the PSUC) had fewer members on July 19 than the POUM. The workers were almost wholly organized in the CNT, whose suffering and persecution under both the monarchy and republic had imbued its masses with a militant anti-capitalist tradition, although its anarchist philosophy gave it no systematic direction. But, before this philosophy was to reveal its tragic inadequacy, the CNT reached historic heights in its successful struggle against the forces of General Goded.

As in Madrid, the Catalan government refused to arm the workers. CNT and POUM emissaries, demanding arms, were smilingly informed they could pick up those dropped by wounded Assault Guards.

But CNT and POUM workers during the afternoon of the 18th were raiding sporting goods stores for rifles, construction jobs for sticks of dynamite, fascist homes for concealed weapons. With the aid of a few friendly Assault Guards, they had seized a few racks of government rifles. (The revolutionary workers had painstakingly gathered a few guns and pistols since 1934.) That — and as many motor vehicles as they could find — was all the workers had when, at five o'clock on the morning of the 19th, the fascist officers began to lead detachments from the barracks.

Isolated engagements before paving-stone barricades led to a general engagement in the afternoon. And here political weapons more than made up for the superior armament of the fascists. Heroic workers stepped forward from the lines to call upon the soldiers to learn why they were shooting down their fellow toilers. They fell under rifle and machine-gun fire, but others took their place. Here and there a soldier began shooting wide. Soon, bolder ones turned on their officers. Some nameless military genius

— perhaps he died then — seized the moment and the mass of workers abandoned their prone positions and surged forward. The first barracks were taken. General Goded was captured that afternoon. With arms from the arsenals the workers cleaned up Barcelona. Within a few days, all Catalonia was in their hands. Simultaneously the Madrid proletariat was mobilizing. The left socialists distributed their scant store of arms, saved from October 1934. Barricades went up on key streets and around the Montaña barracks. Workers' groups were looking for reactionary leaders. At dawn of the 19th the first militia patrols took their places. At midnight the first shots were exchanged with the barracks. But it was not until the next day, when the great news came from Barcelona, that the barracks were stormed.

Valencia, too, was soon saved from the fascists. Refused arms by the governor appointed by Azaña, the workers prepared to face the troops with barricades, cobblestones and kitchen knives — until their comrades within the garrison shot the officers and gave arms to the workers. The Asturian miners, fighters of the Commune of October 1934, outfitted a column of five thousand dynamiters for a march on Madrid. It arrived there on the 20th, just after the barracks had been taken, and took up guard duty in the streets.

In Malaga, strategic port opposite Morocco, the ingenious workers, unarmed at first, had surrounded the reactionary garrison with a wall of gasoline-fired houses and barricades. In a word, without so much as by-your-leave to the government, the proletariat had begun a war to the death against the fascists. The initiative had passed out of the hands of the republican bourgeoisie.

Most of the army was with the fascists. It must be confronted by a new army. Every workers' organization proceeded to organize militia regiments, equip them, and send them to the front. The government had no direct contact with the workers' militia. The organizations presented their requisition's and payrolls to the government, which handed over supplies and funds which the organizations distributed to the militias. Such officers as remained in the Loyalist camp were assigned as 'technicians' to the militias. Their military proposals were transmitted to the militiamen through the worker-officers. Those Civil and Assault Guards still adhering to the government soon disappeared from the streets. In the prevailing atmosphere the government was compelled to send them to the front. Their police duties were taken over by worker-police and militiamen. The sailors, traditionally more radical than soldiers, saved a good part of the fleet by shooting their officers. Elected sailors'

committees took over control of the Loyalist fleet, and established contact with the workers' committees on shore.

Armed workers' committees displaced the customs officers at the frontiers. A union book or red party card was better than a passport for entering the country. Few reactionaries managed to get out through the workers' cordon.

The revolutionary-military measures were accompanied by revolutionary-economic measures against fascism. Why this happened, if the world-historical scheme called merely for 'defence of the republic', the Stalinist-democrats have yet to explain.

Especially was this true in Catalonia where, within a week from July 19, transport and industry was almost entirely in the hands of CNT workers' committees, or where workers belonged to both, CNT-UGT joint committees. The union committees systematically took over, re-established order and speeded up production for wartime needs. Through national industries stemming from Barcelona, the same process spread to Madrid, Valencia, Alicante, Almeria and Malaga although never becoming as universal as in Catalonia. In the Basque provinces, however, where the big bourgeoisie had declared for the democratic republic, they remained masters in the factories. A UGT-CNT committee took charge of all transportation in Spain. Soon factory delegations were going abroad to arrange for exports and imports.

The peasants needed no urging to take the land. They had been trying to take it since 1931; but Casas Viejas, Castilblanco, Yeste, were honoured names of villages where the peasants had been massacred by Azaña's troops because they had taken land. Now Azaña could not stop them. As the news came from the cities, the peasants spread over the land. Their scythes and axes took care of any government official or republican landowner injudicious enough to bar their way. In many places, permeated by anarchist and left-socialist teachings, the peasants organized directly into collectives. Peasant committees took charge of feeding the militias and the cities, giving or selling directly to the provisioning committees, militia columns and the trade unions.

Everywhere the existing governmental forms and workers' organizations proved inadequate as methods of organizing the war and revolution. Every district, town and village created its militia committees, to arm the masses and drill them. The CNT-UGT factory committees, directing all the workers, including those never before organized, developed a broader scope than the existing trade union organizations. The old municipal administrations disappeared, to be replaced, generally, by agreed-upon committees giving representation to all the anti-fascist

parties and unions. But in these the Esquerra and Republican Left politicians seldom appeared. They were replaced by workers and peasants who, though still adhering to the republican parties, followed the lead of the more advanced workers who sat with them.

The most important of these new organs of power was the 'Central Committee of Anti-fascist Militias of Catalonia', organized July 21. Of its fifteen members, five were anarchists from the CNT and FAI, and these dominated the Central Committee. The UGT had three members, despite its numerical weakness in Catalonia, but the anarchists hoped thereby to encourage similar committees elsewhere. The POUM had one, the Peasant Union (Rabassaires) one, and the Stalinists (PSUC) one. The bourgeois parties had four.

Unlike a coalition government which in actuality rests on the old state machine, the Central Committee, dominated by the anarchists, rested on the workers' organizations and militias. The Esquerra and those closest to it — the Stalinists and the UGT — merely tagged along for the time being. The decrees of the Central Committee were the only law in Catalonia. Companies unquestioningly obeyed its requisitions and financial orders. Beginning presumably as the centre for organizing the militias, it inevitably had to take on more and more governmental functions. Soon it organized a department of worker-police; then a department of supplies, whose word was law in the factories and seaport.

In those months in which the Central Committee existed, its military campaigns were inextricably bound up with revolutionary acts. This is evident from its campaign in Aragon, on which the Catalan militias marched within five days. They conquered Aragon as an army of social liberation. Village anti-fascist committees were set up, to which were turned over all the large estates, crops, supplies, cattle, tools, etc., belonging to big land owners and reactionaries. Thereupon the village committee organized production on the new basis, usually collectives, and created a village militia to carry out socialization and fight reaction. Captured reactionaries were placed before the general assembly of the village for trial. All property titles, mortgages, debt documents in the official records, were consigned to the bonfire. Having thus transformed the world of the village, the Catalonian columns could go forward, secure in the knowledge that every village so dealt with was a fortress of the revolution!

Much malicious propaganda has been spread by the Stalinists concerning the alleged weakness of the military activity of the anarchists. The hasty creation of militias, the organization of war industry, were inevitably haphazard in all

unaccustomed hands. But in those first months, the anarchists, seconded by the POUM, made up for much of their military inexperience by their bold social policies. In civil war, politics is the determining weapon. By taking the initiative, by seizing the factories, by encouraging the peasantry to take the land, the CNT masses crushed the Catalan garrisons. By marching into Aragon as social liberators, they roused the peasantry to paralyse the mobility of the fascist forces. In the plans of the generals, Saragossa, seat of the War College and perhaps the biggest of the army garrisons, was to have been for Eastern Spain what Burgos became in the west. Instead, Saragossa was immobilized from the first days.

Around the Central Committee of the militias rallied the multitudinous committees of the factories, villages, supplies, food, police, etc., inform joint committees of the various anti-fascist organizations, in actuality wielding an authority greater than that of its constituents. After the first tidal wave of revolution, of course, the committees revealed their basic weakness: they were based on mutual agreement of the organizations from which they drew their members, and after the first weeks, the Esquerra, backed by the Stalinists, recovered their courage and voiced their own programme. The CNT leaders began to make concessions detrimental to the revolution. From that point on, the committees could have only functioned progressively by abandoning the method of mutual agreement and adopting the method of majority decisions by democratically elected delegates from the militias and factories.

The Valencia and Madrid regions also developed a network of anti-fascist joint militia committees, worker-patrols, factory committees, and district committees to wipe out the reactionaries in the cities and send the militia to the front.

Thus, side by side with the official governments of Madrid and Catalonia there had arisen organs predominantly worker-controlled, through which the masses organized the struggle against fascism. In the main, the military, economic and political struggle was proceeding independently of the government and, indeed, in spite of it.

How are we to characterize such a regime? In essence, it was identical with the regime which existed in Russia from February to November 1917 — a regime of dual power. One power, that of Azaña and Companys, without an army, police or other armed force of its own, was already too weak to challenge the existence of the other. The other, that of the armed proletariat, was not yet conscious enough of the necessity to dispense with the existence of the power of Azaña and Companys. This phenomenon of dual power has accompanied all proletarian revolutions. It signifies that the class

struggle is about to reach the point where either one or the other must become undisputed master. It is a critical balancing of alternatives on a razor edge. A long period of equilibrium is out of the question; either one or the other must soon prevail! The 'revolution of July 19' was incomplete, but that it was a revolution is attested to by its having created a regime of dual power.

The 'May Days' of 1937 in Barcelona

Pierre Broue, author of "La
revolución española : 1930-
1940"

From 'La Verite', No. 601, Jan.1986

Every workers revolution in the 20th century bears the characteristic mark that a situation of duality of power appears at its beginning. This is between the old organs of the state, whether rejuvenated or not, which have generally passed into the control of a government of 'conciliators' with the first stage, and the organs of the mass movement, organisations of struggle which have become the organs of a new power.

Our readers will know the analyses which Trotsky made on this matter in the 'History of the Russian Revolution', about the duality of power created by the first revolution in February 1917, between the old state, with the Provisional government at its head, and the new workers' state in the process of formation, that of the Soviets.

The apparatus of the duality of power marks only the beginning of the struggle between them, the struggle which ends in the victory of either the revolution or the counter-revolution, through the victory of one power or the other. Study of the revolutions in the period since October 1917 reveals the decisive role of the general staffs on the side of the revolution, of their party, of the party which fights for the victory of a the new power. That party has neither provoked nor engineered the revolution, any more than it can stop without joining the counter-revolution. The authority of the party may be widely recognised, even by a majority of the masses, but it enables it only to act as a brake on an offensive which may be premature or isolated - this was the case of the July days of 1917 in Petrograd - or, on the contrary, to clear the way for the final assault, by helping the masses to overcome the obstacles on their road to power. This was the case of the insurrection of October 1917 in Russia.

What has been called the 'May Days of 1937' in *Barcelona* are an event of this kind, independently of the fact that the event took place within one of the two opposing camps in the course of a civil war, the 'Spanish War'. In fact, the duality of powers began in July 1936, with the victorious counter-stroke of the workers

in a number of large cities, including *Barcelona*, to the military coup d'état of General Franco.

In May 1937 it was the Popular Front government of the Generalidad of Catalonia - under the pressure of the Stalinists in the PSUC - which took the counter-offensive. It tried to seize a telephone exchange, which was in the hands of the militia of the anarcho-syndicalist CNT. The latter resisted, arms in hand, and the workers in *Barcelona* replied to the attempt by a general strike. Several days of street fighting followed in the Catalan capital.

The supporters and agents of Stalin speak of a 'fascist putsch'. Other elements in the Popular Front speak of a 'tragic misunderstanding'. The Trotskyists agree on the general significance of what happened, but are divided in their appreciation of the incident itself.

Trotsky believed that victory was possible and that, therefore, we have here an 'October' which failed, because there was no revolutionary leadership which wanted to fight to win. His comrade, the Italian Blasco, regarded the event as 'July Days' ending badly for lack of a firm leadership, which could transform the retreat from turning into a rout.

In this month of May 1937 the atmosphere was tense. In the last days of April there had been violent incidents at Molins de Llobregat, where a PSUC leader was killed. Eight CNT militants were killed at Puigcerda in the course of an attack by armed police to recover control of the frontier for the government. On May 1, the government prohibited street demonstrations, which might provoke the outburst of workers' anger which it feared, or might give to that anger the means to bring together to hit back.

The explosion came on May 3. That afternoon the *Barcelona* police chief, an active member of the PSUC named Eusebio Rodriguez Salas, presented himself in front of the central telephone exchange, the 'Telephonicia', in the Place of Catalonia in *Barcelona*. The exchange belonged to the American Telegraph and Telephone Company; it had been seized during the revolutionary days, and was under the control of a committee and of members of the CNT militia. It is located in the heart of the Catalonian capital, and what happened to it came to be a symbol for the fate of the revolution and the workers' positions. The initiative by Rodriguez did not get a green light from the government, which had not been consulted, but it had the approval of the government's public order adviser, who, as everyone knew, was completely devoted to the PSCU.

The police chief's escort got into the building by surprise and disarmed the militiamen whom it caught unawares on the ground floor. The militiamen on the upper floors were warned and began to resist this unexpected attack and to fire on their attackers. Two senior police officers, members of the CNT named Asens and Eroles, were warned at once and rushed to the Telephonica to stop the shooting. They did their utmost to convince their comrades not to keep up their resistance which, they said, could only make things worse. In response to their persuasion, the militiamen agreed to vacate the Telephonica, which remained in the hands of the police.

But the peace making efforts of the two mediators were in vain. The sound of shots had alerted the people of Barcelona, who were in a state of extreme tension and were, in fact, expecting some move to be made, if not by the government, at any rate by the extremists of the PSUC. The news of the attack on the Telephonica spread like a trial of gunpowder. The workers went on strike in order to paralyse the advance of the counter-revolution. They erected barricades to prevent the government's forces of repression from moving freely around. The branches of the CNT at its base, particularly its 'defence committees' were also there, and their members were armed.

George Orwell, in his book 'Homage to Catalonia', bears witness to having experienced the early hours of those 'days' as acts of aggression against the working people of Barcelona, carried out by those whom he calls by their old name, the 'Civil Guard', former policemen who had been integrated into the new police forces which their chiefs were now throwing into attacks on the workers' barricades in Barcelona.

The Barcelona workers were led by the elements organised in the 'control patrols' – the last vestiges of the workers' militias for maintaining order in the rear – and by the defence committees. They counter-attacked and came out of the workers' districts. The battle raged in the centre of the city against the forces of order, which had their headquarters in the Karl Marx barracks of the PSUC. Their spearhead, directed towards the Ramblas, was located in the Hotel Colon, in the Place of Catalonia, at the top end of the Ramblas.

Several victorious attacks were directed against the police strong points in the Exhibition palace and the American cinema. The anarchists even

found some tanks, which enabled them to break the encirclement of the workers' fighting nuclei.

The leaders of the CNT maintained their policy of pacification, while at the same time they defended the militants who, they said, were the victims of an act of aggression and of provocation. The same evening (May 3), there was a meeting of the leaders of the CNT, the POUM and their youth organisations. One of the POUM leaders, Gorkin, declared:

"Either we place ourselves at the head of this movement to destroy the enemy within, or the movement will collapse, and this enemy will destroy us."

No one denies that the situation was favourable for liquidating the undertaking and the forces of the PSUC. However, despite the enthusiasm of its youth section ('Young Libertarians') the CNT maintained its waiting stance of 'protestation', and the POUM did not want to be isolated from it.

The fighting continued on May 4, with sudden silences following brutal outbursts. 'La Batilla', the newspaper of the POUM, spoke of 'the provocations with which the counter-revolution is testing the pulse of the ability of the working masses to resist' and 'the preparations for a thorough-going attack on the conquests of the revolution.' The article goes on:

"But the counter-attack by the proletariat could not be more powerful. Thousands of workers have taken to the streets, arms in hand. Factories, workshops and shops have ceased work. The barricades have gone up again in every part of its capital. The working class is strong and will know how to crush every effort by the counter-revolution. We must live on the alert, rifle in hand. We must maintain the magnificent spirit of resistance and of struggle, which guarantees our victory. We must prevent counter-revolution from raising its head again."

The POUM journal also demanded that Rodriguez Salas be dismissed, that the decrees be annulled, that 'public order be in the hands of the working class' and that a workers' revolutionary junta be formed, with the creation of 'committees to defend the revolution in every quarter, every place and every work-place.'

All the evidence goes to show that in this article we have a policy made up on the spot. Victor Alba, the historian of the POUM, assures us that this is not what the POUM wanted to do, but only what it could do, bearing in mind that it was determined not to cut away from the CNT!

Indeed, the leader of the CNT, Garcia Oliver, appealed on the radio for a ceasefire; he called on people not to speak any more about 'provocations' or to 'go on about the dead.'

Companys' the president of the Generalidad, called for calm. He denounced the initiative of Rodriguez Salas, but he demanded that the workers must leave the streets and return to their homes before peace could be restored. The regional committee of the CNT between two attacks by the forces of order on its premises, called for a truce and for calm. All the personalities of the 'Left' of the Popular Front rushed to its help on the radio.

On May 5 the forces of order mounted what was nothing less than a terrorist attack. Armed groups of men in uniform arrested the Italian anarchist, Berneri, who criticised the policy of class collaboration of his anarchist comrades with the Popular Front. His dead body was found the next day. But during this time the CNT was working with the UGT (the reformist trade union federation) to issue a joint appeal for work to be resumed, explaining that the cessation of industry in 'these moments of anti-fascist war is equivalent to collaborating with the common enemy by weakening ourselves.'

'The Friends of Durutti', an organisation of dissident anarchists, who had opposed the absorption of the militias into the army, issued an appeal for the formation of a 'revolutionary junta' to include the POUM. It criticised the leaders of the CNT who called for a ceasefire and demanded that the 'provocateurs' be executed. Every leading organ of the CNT repudiated this declaration and the organisation which issued it, in extremely violent terms. Barcelona was vibrating with rumours. The 29th Division, commanded by the anarchist Jover, and the 26th, under the POUMist Rovira, were forbidden to march on the capital. In fact these commanders had thought of doing so, but were dissuaded by their organisations. Leaders of the JCI (Jeunesses Communistes Internationalistes) and of the committee for defence in North Barcelona organised a column, based on officer cadets from the military academy, to seize the central headquarters of the PSUC and of the Generalidad. It was the POUM leader, Andres Nin, who put a stop to this operation. British warships were anchoring in the harbour.

Federica Montseny, the Minister for Health in the Popular Front government at Valencia, which was headed by Largo Caballero, protested against the fact that all the ceasefire negotiations took for granted that the Telefonica had been taken over by the forces of order. The UGT in

Catalonia decided to exclude from its ranks all those members of the POUM who did not expressly repudiate their comrades who were taking part in the insurrection!

The death of another minister, a member of the PSUC and of the UGT, named Antonio Sese, who was shot by unknown murderers as he was going to take up his appointment, perhaps gave the central government a pretext for taking public order out of the hands of the Catalanian Generalidad. From that time onward, public order was entrusted to General Pozas, a professional soldier, a former head of the Civil Guard, who appears to have been linked to the PSUC by connections of a hardly political nature. There was total confusion. Both the arrival of troops sent by the Valencia government and a possible foreign intervention were being expected. The new government included none of the PSUC people who had played a role in the provocation.

On May 6 the body of Berneri was found; he had been well and truly assassinated. The workers who followed the CNT were disorientated by the disorder and confusion, as well as by the appeals from their own leaders. They began to desert the barricades in large numbers. The POUM, in its own way, buried the movement with comments about 'these three magnificent days' and 'this tremendous experience'. It put on record that it had been with the masses in the streets at the beginning, and observed that 'under the repeated injunctions of their leaders, the masses have begun to withdraw from the struggle.' Yet it present the result as being largely positive:

"Beyond any doubt it (the proletariat) has won a great, partial victory. It has defeated the counter-revolutionary provocation. It has won the dismissal of all those who were directly responsible for the provocation. It has struck a serious blow at the bourgeoisie and reformism. It could have won more, much more, if those in the leadership of the organisations which stand at the head of the working class of Catalonia could have risen to the level of the masses."

On May 7 the police took over the abandoned barricades, which were to be demolished amid great publicity by girls belonging to the PSUC. The trams began to run again. Two hundred militants were freed from jail. Shots were fired at the car of Federica Montsent, the anarchist minister. The issue of 'La Batilla' for May 8 once again urged a return to work. At the same time, the local committee of the POUM in Barcelona sharply criticised the executive of its party, which it accused of having 'capitulated' in the course of those days, in the face of the

counter-revolution, under the pressure of the conciliatory leaders of the CNT.

Little by little we are now uncovering the long list of revolutionary militants with whom the specialised groups in the service of Stalin settled their accounts in the course of these 'days'. Berneri and his friend Barbieri, Alfredo Martinez, the leader of the Libertarian Youth, the German Trotskyist Freund, known as Moulin, who was the link between the small group of Trotskyists and the Friends of Durutti; he 'disappeared'. This was only the beginning of the repression.

There can be no doubt that 'La Batilla' was publishing complete nonsense on May 6, when it presented the May Days as having turned out positively. These days were the first stage in the unfolding of a counter-revolution, the first victims of which, a few weeks later, were to be the POUM itself and, in particular, its principal leader the old revolutionary, Andres Nin.

However, can these mistaken appreciations, if we consider the extraordinary strength which the huge movement of the working class in Barcelona had revealed a few days, indeed a few hours, earlier?

The fresh memory of that movement hovers over the discussion which opened within the POUM in the following days, in preparation for a congress which the Stalinist repression prevented from ever being held.

We have little information about the attitude of the right wing in the POUM, apart from an editorial of May 15 in its Valencia newspaper, 'El Comunista'. This condemned the workers in Barcelona on the ground that 'one cannot swim against the stream with impunity' and denounced, 'after the provocateurs' 'those who played their game and cleared the ground in front of them'. We also know that the POUM organisation in Sabadell issued a manifesto condemning the action of the workers in Barcelona, and that Luis Portela, a member of its executive, judged the attitude of the leadership during these May Days to have been 'adventuristic'.

The thesis of the executive was drafted by Nin. He drew a parallel with the 'July Days':

"In July 1917 the workers in the Russia capital took to the streets arms in hand, rising up against the policies of the democrat, Kerensky. The Bolshevik Party considered this movement to be ill timed and dangerous. None the less, the

Bolsheviks played an active part in it, placed themselves at its head, led it and guided it in such a way as to prevent it from becoming a disaster for the revolutionary proletariat."

Nin started from the provocation by the forces of the police. He declared that the workers had defended the interests of the proletariat in the streets. As to the policy of his party he wrote:

"If it had all depended on us to start things off, we would not have given the order for insurrection. The moment was not favourable for a decisive action. But the revolutionary workers, rightly indignant at the provocation of which they were the victims, flung themselves into battle, and we cannot leave them to their fate. To act otherwise would have been an unpardonable betrayal."

Nin declared that the activity of the POUM aimed at "canalising a movement which, because it was spontaneous, had many chaotic aspects, and to avoid its transforming itself into a fruitless putsch, which would have fatal consequences for the proletariat. It is necessary to provide limited slogans for the movement."

A third position, that of J Rebull and of Cell 72, reproaches the leadership of the POUM for having 'run after the events' and having 'once again waited on the opinion of the opportunist elements in the confederal leadership.' Their counter-theses declared:

"The first results of the workers' insurrections are a defeat for the working class and a new victory for the pseudo-democratic bourgeoisie."

Trotsky devoted a number of writings to the Spanish Revolution and several times discussed the May Days. He conceded to the defenders of the policies of the POUM that there was a superficial resemblance between the movement of the masses before the July Days in Petrograd and that of May 1937 in Barcelona. However, he was concerned in particular to emphasise the deep differences between the two - according to him, the essential difference lay in the fact that in 1937 the Spanish masses had a more serious experience of their revolution than those had in Russia in 1917. Trotsky wrote:

"In Spain the May events took place not after four months but after six years of revolution. The masses of the whole country have had a gigantic experience. A long time ago they lost the illusions of

1931, as well as the warmed-over illusions of the Popular Front. Again and again they have shown to every part of the country that they ready to go thorough to the end. If the Catalan proletariat had seized power in May 1937 – as it had already seized it in July 1936 – they would have found support throughout all of Spain. The bourgeois-Stalinist reaction would not even have found two regiments with which to crush the Catalan workers. In the territory occupied by Franco not only the workers but also the peasants would have turned towards the Catalan proletariat, would have isolated the fascist army and brought about its irresistible disintegration. It is doubtful whether under these conditions any foreign government would have risked throwing its regiments onto the burning soil of Spain. Intervention would have become materially impossible, or at least extremely dangerous.

“Naturally in every insurrection there is an element of uncertainty and risk. But the subsequent course of events has proven that even in the case of defeat the situation of the Spanish workers would have been incomparably more favourable than now, to say nothing of the fact that the revolutionary party would have assured its future.”

L Trotsky, A test of ideas and individuals through the Spanish experience.

In Trotsky’s opinion, it was a revolutionary party which was lacking in May 1937. This is the reason for his ferocious criticism, not merely of the anarchists but also of the policies of the POUM, and what he calls its ‘indecision, its equivocations, its hesitations and its lack of a clear programme’, which prevented it from providing for the masses ‘the revolutionary leadership without which victory was not possible’.

Perhaps a little more light can be shed on Trotsky’s position in the insurrection, which fell in May 1937 for lack of a revolutionary party, and on his divergences with his comrade Blasco which were never expressed in writing in a direct debate, if we look back to his preface to Volume 3 of the Russia edition of his works, which we know under the title ‘The Lessons of October’.

There we find that Trotsky directed precisely the same criticisms against what he called the ‘right wing’ of the Bolshevik Party, Zinoviev and Kamenev, who opposed the insurrection which

Lenin proposed, as those which he directed against the POUM in 1937 or the German Communist Party at the time of its failed insurrection in 1923:

“A party which has been carrying on revolutionary agitation for a long time, tearing the proletariat little by little from the influence of the conciliators, and which, one it is lifted to the height of events by the confidence of the proletariat, begins to hesitate, to look for midday at 2 o’clock, to turn its back and to tack about, paralyses the activity of the masses, provokes disappointment and disorganisation among them and leads the revolution to defeat...”

He analysed the position of the ‘Old Bolsheviks’, who advanced against Lenin in April 1917 the old formula of ‘the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry’, which they then counter-posed to that of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the struggle for Soviet power:

“Their method...consisted in exerting on the leading bourgeoisie a pressure which did not go outside the framework of the bourgeois democratic regime. If this policy had been victorious, the development of the revolution would have proceeded outside our Party, and we would have, in the end, had an insurrection of the masses of workers and peasants which was not led by the Party, in other words, July Days on a vast scale, that this, a catastrophe.”

It seems to us that this formula permits conclusions to be drawn about the May Days by settling at least the ambiguities which may have survived in the historic debate about the analogies with the Russian revolution. About these ambiguities, Trotsky himself took pleasure in emphasising that he himself had not introduced them, though he was often blamed for doing so, and he made clear that, for his part, he had been deeply convinced that ‘Spain was not Russia’, a conclusion which did not in the slightest justify the policy which led to catastrophe.