Betrayers of the Spanish Revolution: 85th Anniversary of the Trotskyist Coup in Barcelona.

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One of the most intensely propagandized, most powerfully misunderstood events in modern history, outside the USSR, took place within the Left-wing camp of the democratic forces of the Spanish Civil War, who opposed the fascist coup of General Franco. That May 1937 uprising, in which the Trotskyist party P.O.U.M. and its libertarian and anarchist allies instigated violence and seized Barcelona from the anti-fascist Catalan government, is now called their May Days. A title that renounces the working-class spirit of May Day.

A political perspective on this historically quintessential moment of “leftist infighting” has been dominated by those few Anarchists and Trotskyists who most closely identify with, and support, these actions. They so happen to correspond to the position of their ruling states – with a line drawn out in George Orwell’s classic propaganda travelogue Homage to Catalonia. These voices and their bourgeois publicists have firmly established a false historical image in the mind of the average person, reflecting and exacerbating a basic ignorance of events. The effect of this misinformation campaign has been to celebrate a program of unprincipled action, to resurrect an old indemnity between Left factions, and to serve the greater end of anti-Communism with a narrative that has been simplified by its basis in false pretences.

The deadliest poison pill which the opportunist partisans cannot swallow is the fact that the majority of anarchists, and of course the vast majority of those who fought in the Spanish Civil War, opposed the hollow violence of the May Days which had been instigated by politically marginal armed groups during a critical moment of the war against Franco. In fact, the CNT and FAI, which organized the greatest majority bloc of syndicalists and anarchists respectively, had joined the Catalan government on September 28th of 1936 and were themselves centrally involved in the suppression of the fighting. While some anarchists delight in being “more anarchist than anarchism”, facts like these still cannot seem to be processed into the historical narrative upon which many Left polemicists rely, and so are rarely reflected in bourgeois media depictions of these important days and the broader understanding of the role anarchists played. And the bourgeoisie aren’t the only figures who can't digest the historical situation.

Trotskyists have carved out their niche from the Communist movement by denouncing Stalin as Arch-Traitor to the Revolution, and so are very nervous about the public’s view of their actions in Barcelona. Their ideal position as the moral high ground would give way to a clear image of the material reality of sabotage against the Spanish Republic, and thus the anti-fascist struggle in the most important era of history.

The Trotskyists of Spain, namely the P.O.U.M., stood with the Trotskyist line against the Popular Front which was established in the Republic. They had been formed from a merger of Trotskyists and the rightists, allies of Bukharin, from which the rightist faction of Maurin dominated. While they were rejected by Trotsky and expelled their Trotskyists in turn, their positions reflected an authentic program of Trotskyist derivation from Marxism-Leninism; where-in Trotsky laid out in Permanent Revolution that his position on this issue of the democratic struggle “was really different from Lenin’s.” So too was the 1937 ‘revolution’ for the overthrow of the Republican bloc a Trotskyist program, as the man himself had stated the “social revolution cannot be carried out within the framework of democracy”. and would not stand with the democratic forces against the world fascists who sought to abolish

democracy, parliamentarism, and the strength of the worker’s unions.

Again, the POUM reflected Trotsky’s opportunism all too well when they turned against their own principles in order to take a seat at the table of the Spanish coalition they had previously denounced as conciliation. But they had done so to suit first their own interests, not to join in anti-fascist struggle in good faith, and so were soon ejected from the Popular Front in December of 1936 following their political wrecking activities and general subterfuge.

Leading this minority oppositional front against the broadening Republican coalition formed from developments in 1936, were the Friends of the Durutti, who were established when of a few hundred FAI anarchists from the Durutti Column abandoned the front in Aragon in March, two months before the rebellion, and brought their rifles to use in Barcelona. They were joined by the Libertarian Youth, the FIJL, and the openly Trotskyist Bolshevik-Leninists, and their marginal position placed them at odds with the broader anarchist participation, of the CNT and the FAI, in the government of the antifascist Republic. These political fringe actors were less concerned with the serious state of the war and the tenuous alliance against fascism, and more with their own political fortunes.

A few anarchists and Trotskyists sought to create a renewed place for themselves in Spanish politics by tapping into the divisions which always lie at the foundations of a Popular Front. Cynically, revisionists and provocateurs of the time claim that this backwards rebellion was the 'true revolution'. The only Spanish Republic to be won would be, in Orwell’s thesis, “some kind of Fascism.”

The direction of Spain after the war was definitely a kind of fascism, but the democratic forces were not at all responsible for instituting it. Orwell's thesis reveals the ugly truth behind 'principled leftists' of his type - real fascism under Franco's violent and criminal regime is exactly the same as a coalition government of Communists, Anarchists and Liberals. The opportunist forces who promoted and instigated the revolt were in fact the most despicable traitors, who would not positively contribute to building up the strength of revolutionary forces inside the anti-fascist bloc, but instead may as well have crossed over the lines and joined Franco themselves for the work they did to sabotage the progressive movement from the inside in the pursuit of their own self-interests. And in some cases, they did.

Background

In the weeks before the Barcelona chaos of May 2nd – May 8th, contradictions within the Republican camp were building to the point of consistent violent confrontation, due to the situational impossibility of negotiation. The situation was extremely dire, not only for the democratic forces militarily on the Front against Franco – the effective encirclement of the northern republicans and the failed offensives of their own, but at that point even to the basic acquisition and distribution of food.

This enflamed the contradiction that lay between local armed forces, each securing their own stockpiles of food and arms. This was made especially severe by the political makeup of the Spanish Republic was a loosely confederated organization of regional governments, like the Generalitat de Catalunya, and the municipal governing committees, each with their own material interests and local strong-men to be negotiated.

In November of 1936, the Catalan government, with the full support of the Anarchist CNT, suppressed a smaller, nationalist revolt in the area of Bellver. After doing so, they were able to were made better aware of the full activities that were going on in

the Cerdanya region which shared its border with France. To control the flow of materials to and from capitalist France, a police patrol of caribineirs was stationed in the town.

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Their presence threatened to uncover the lucrative smuggling activities of the forces based in neighboring Puigcerdá – which brought arms to the local elements of the FAI from France - not for the arming of the military forces on the front against Franco, but for the partisan strengthening of their own forces. Their armed strength increased their capacity to enact their program, which involved the systemic extortion of deserters and robbery to enriched themselves. Indeed, criminal activity such as passport falsification was covertly centered in Puigcerdá.

The leader of this ring was the mayor of Puigcerdá, Antonio Martín Escudero, a middle-man between the FAI-affiliated unions and the bosses, who supported collectivization of livestock only to control the cattle for his private use, and who excised a hated tax on the smaller towns of La Cerdaña. The anarchist system of rule in that region, which was such a focus for the private forces of organized crime, French bourgeois interests, and the Francoist infiltration forces based across the border in the French city of Perignan, had enabled the rise of new private, exploitative relations to emerge.

Suddenly, this strong-man, in coordination with P.O.U.M. militamen garrisoned nearby, assaulted the make-shift barracks of the Republican patrol, and took the men hostage on the 1st of March 1937. No legitimate reason is given for the attack, only the “concerns” of the ruling Puigcerdá Committee – who threatened to execute these Republican soldiers unless the CNT and the government met to arrange their terms. Instead, the mayor and some of his men were killed by armed forces of the anarchist CNT in the fighting for control of the border post.

Thus, it was anarchists in government who carried the necessary duty of shedding the blood of counter-revolutionaries who hide under a political banner in a peripheral skirmish which would later be tied to the explosions of tensions characterized by the coming May Days. These events are given passing mention by Orwell, who sought to create the mythology which today persists, including pinning every turn of the conflict on the Communists, painting the strong-man of Puigcerdá as “a well-known Anarchist” murdered in a conspiracy against the workers. These narratives are clung to by contemporary anarchist opportunists.

As well as presaging them, these battles in the Cerdaña typify the general nature of the more serious May Days. The organizational relationship between smaller forces, who could claim whatever politics would gain them the most good-will, and the mass forces leading the war against fascism, was tearing at the seams of the Spanish Republic.

A few anarchists could thus see necessary developments, such as the seizure of the border post of Puigcerdá from criminal privateers, as an assault on their revolution. They were free, free from any ties of solidarity or shared activity, to fixate on the dangers of the Republican state while turning their back to the genuine threat of the fascist dictatorship.

This itself typifies the errors of Anarchist organization: due to its fundamental structures, Anarchists cannot properly approach the situations they are in with foresight or strategy. For example, contemporary bourgeois historians typically agree that while the terror of fascist executions was organized insitutionally, killing around 200,000 people, the Republican executions were overwhelmingly the result of breakdowns of discipline and the independence of local commanders. And these breakdowns had serious consequences, with mass destruction and instances of killing which alienated the rural masses. A consolidation of the democratic state had

to be done to take control over the chaotic situation and rally a defense of the rear. The Popular Front, invigorated by its election in 1936 and the rapproachment with the bloc of anarchists, now had the authority and the mandate to institute it.

In early March 1937, the Catalan government dissolved the Defense Committee in order to establish command over the region's numerous local police and militia committees. A single Catalan police force was created from scratch after the police had abandoned their posts in the 1936 crises. This force was not permitted to include membership of any political party or trade union. Ten days later, the central Republican government ordered all worker organizations, committees, patrols and individual workers to hand over their weapons. Anarchist, Control Patrols, policing forces who refused to submit to democratic process, were thus left without collective leadership, but continued to operate unofficially, killing over 500 civilians in Barcelona alone.

The May

In a shared effort to maintain the peace, both Communist and Anarchist unions, the UGT and CNT, agreed not to hold parades for May Day. Both forces knew the terrible consequences which uncoordinated and chaotic conflict could have for their shared hopes of progressive development in Spain.

It was on the 2nd of May that operators in the Telegraph office of Barcelona cut off communication between the Republic Minister of Naval and Air forces to the government of Catalonia. When a second call was cut, between the President of the Spanish Republic, Manuel Azaña and Lluís Companys, the President of Catalanya, the political reality became clear.

These are serious crimes in themselves, if not direct acts of sabotage, even if they have the appearance of pranks – the effect is to impact the course of the war by an hour, by a day. But the threat was in the main, the idea that individuals working in the telegraph office should take on the decisions which should be made collectively. Instead, the governing bodies were left wondering the motivations of the telegraphists. There was a true danger of fascist infiltration, Franco's Fifth Column, and the infiltration of personal interest as seen in Antonio Martín. The Telegrafica office in Barcelona was a vital communication link, connecting Catalanya to the Republic leadership and military coordination centers in the capitol of Valencia, to the eastern extent of the front lines. Whatever interpretation could be made, this attempt to control the apparatus of communication on May 2nd was a clear message of their intent to unilaterally pull Barcelona out of the war effort.

On orders from the head of the regional government, police entered the central Telegraph Station in Barcelona and occupied it. Orwell's opportunistic claims about the "bourgeoisification" of the control of the working arms of industry are illuminated for what they were by the true situation which faced by the Republic. The social revolution of 1936 had seen the complete desertion of the Republican police forces, and so they had to be built up again ad-hoc, and with the assistance of militia of questionable reliability. The disarmament of these militias, and their replacement by police forces created by the government elected in February 1936, was a necessary move for security in the rear.

The violent social and military situation, which tore at the persistence of the coalition from within and without, is the direct historical context which modern apologists for the POUM and the May Days have written countless pages to bury. If people knew that such actions were being carried out by a few anarchists without any coordination or cooperation broadly across the country, few people would say

that they represented the forward development of the revolution.

Every day of fighting, the regional Committee of the CNT-FAI, the union of syndicalists (CNT) and anarchists (FAI), called for peace to return to the streets of Barcelona.

At a meeting of the Republican Cabinet in the capital of Valencia, the anarchists Federica Montseny and Juan Peiro agreed to go to the Barcelona headquarters of the CNT-FAI to bring an end to the conflict. It was agreed that both the anarchist CNT and the Communist-leaning UGT would call for ceasefire in official radio broadcasts to their fighters in the streets.

The CNT and FAI sent their representatives from Valencia as peace negotiators: as they arrived, they were shot at. While they negotiated with the Generalitat, calling for the dismissal of the police chief who had been ordered to seize La Telegrafica, they broadcast for their own members to cease their attacks. But an effective call for peace was constipated by contradictory messages, which asked why the police were violating their right to control the Telegrafica. Implicitly, this was a claim of persecution to the ears of the FAI and CNT men waiting urgently for news of their own political situation.

At first, anarchists were non-lethal in their seizure of the city, but this was not a situation that could continue. The night that police had entered the Telegraph office, a gunfight broke out between Catalan nationalists and some FAI men, killing one of the anarchists. This amplified the sense of hostilities in Barcelona, and the belief in the victimization of anarchists by groups in the government. This was exactly what the provacateurs intended to utilize. Hunger, more than ideology, drove the violent unrest in Barcelona in 1937, and that minority of forces who were truly motivated ideologically utilized the chaos of the workers to enact their own violent campaign.

For the next few days, shooting between different armed groups, between rival neighborhoods, shut down the streets. Trotskyists appealed to the anarchists to ignore the CNT-FAI statements, chanting slogans for the “Social Revolution” of 1936. The POUM newspaper, La Batalla, ran the statement by the Friends of Durruti on their front page.

On May 4th, fighting had died down, as cordones of safe travel were established between neighborhoods, but these attempts to resume peaceful like could be broken by any one party which chose to take the opportunity to take the upper hand in an ambush.

Where before, these had been only skirmishes, now the density of forces, and the myriad of competing armed groups, created a situation of war. But without any real support, the insurrection was over the moment that reinforcements from the armed forces arrived.

In the later days of the fighting, bridges, roads and railways were bombed to impede the column on its route from Madrid to Catalonia. A simple glance at a map of the Spain would reveal what impact this sabotage would have on the ability for the antifascists to deploy troops and materials to the front line.

The planned Summer offensive against the fascist lines in central Spain was a non-starter, completely failing to take advantage of Franco’s own campaign around the northern coastal pocket of Asturias and Cantabria. So, while the fascists effectively encircled and strangled this pocket to death, slowly making advances, the Republicans could make no major successes, with the failure to re-take Huesca in June directly tied to re-deployment or desertion of thousands of soldiers.

Foreign Intelligence Involvement

After government control was restored in the city, POUM faced particularly intense scrutiny as large numbers of their militia were arrested for their part in the violence. Extensive networks of espionage were uncovered by the Republican police, which has since been buried in the English speaking world. In 1933, POUM had accepted the invitation of the British Independent Labor Party (ILP), to join their international of anti-Soviet socialist parties in Europe, based in London.

This International Centre was led by the Independent Labor Party, which would go on to produce numerous politicians for the social-democratic Labour Party – which still hangs around the neck of the British Left. The ILP sent its troops to Spain as the conflict began, a strong force of about 25 individuals. But it's undersized numbers obscured an oversized financial contribution. The ILP donated over £10,000, around $200,000 today, an ambulance and a plane load of supplies to the POUM.

For propoganda purposes, the POUM was especially delighted to invite the widely-published English author Eric Blair, after he was rejected from the larger International Brigades by the Communist Party secretary Harry Pollitt. They were embedded with the POUM leadership, and this tight relationship brought Orwell to the rooftop of the Poliorama overlooking the Barcelona headquarters of the POUM on the nights of May.

It is alleged by contemporary witnesses that the P.O.U.M. received arms from the fascists, and in La Cerdanya we saw there the men with the inclination and ability to do it by smuggling rifles across the border from France, which housed a fascist espionage base in the nearest major coastal city. While Trotsky himself distanced his work from the International Center, there is a parallel, not only with the conspiracies of Trotsky himself and his 'Trotskyist Opposition' inside the USSR, now evidenced in his letters, but also the working cooperation with the fascist bloc of Europe.

This has been widely debated, but today stands confirmed in the facts that the Trotskyist Opposition in the USSR sought every friend it could have: even in the fascist camp. This involved numerous communications with German and Japanese fascists, seen in the letters of Trotksy's son Sedov, and in the effective use of the propaganda sent directly from the pen of Trotsky to the radio broadcasts of Goebbels. In 1939, Trotsky himself agreed to speak against the Communist Party at the McCarthyist House Un-American Activities Committee.

While they remain insistent that all evidence is a total Communist fabrication, there has been little to no serious interrogation of the documents and evidence as publicized in Trotskyism in the Service of Franco. One document, sent from a POUM agitator to the Francoist base in Perpignan, illustrates the plan to manipulate the situation of hunger in Catalonia

• Vigorous preparations are being made for an insurrection in which the majority of the active members of the P.O.U.M. will take part. We have taken good advantage of the food shortage to organise a demonstration amongst the women. This should take place within two days."

Preparations, it seems, were also made by the men of the ILP to take their leave from the Aragon front, then traveling to the fascist siege of Huesca closer to Catalonia. In effect, they had coolly drawn back their forces from the frontlines, straight to their barracks adjacent P.O.U.M. headquarters in Barcelona, just in time to arrange themselves before May. Clearly, they intended to be prepared at the site

of partisan political efficiency, rather than greater military need of the antifascist forces. Given the extensive ties to the fascists and international social democratic arms of the bourgeoisie, we should view this action with the greatest seriousness.

There are further ties which call on us to realize the full scope of the international importance, and international involvement, of instigating unrest among the antifascists through local agents like the POUM: achieving the exact wishes of the Western imperialists as well as the fascists. Orwell's commanding officer, Georges Kopp of the English-speaking centuria of the P.O.U.M. into which the ILP were integrated, was accused at this time of receiving orders from fascist-occupied Huesca. The idea that this "Communist" accusation was a total fiction is complicated by Kopp's later career.

In May, 1941, Kopp freely travelled to Nazi-occupied France, despite his leading role in the POUM which was widely publicized. He had been invited by the French Admiralty, who apparently intended to supply the fascist fleet which the Vichy operated in the Mediterranean on behalf of the fascist Axis, including activities like attempting to use two of its sea-tankers to transport Romanian oil to Germany around the blockade. While it is alleged, citing his diary, that Kopp consciously believed his work would not aid the fascist cause, it could not be more clear in those days that the Vichy were the allies and puppets of the Nazis, if not formal members of the Axis. His 2013 biograph, George Orwell's Commander in Spain: The Enigma of Georges Kopp says of his motivations:

> *Kopp's dream was to produce synthetic oil massively and profitably, in order to solve his financial problems once and for all.*

With 500,000 francs lent by "some friends", Kopp established a new laboratory in Marseille to produce synthetic oil from lignite, which was abundant in the southern part of France over which the Vichy ruled. After a year, the industrial lab was set up, and Kopp continued on for the Vichy as a consultant in the field, after which he was recruited by British intelligence, who made their own ties with Kopp's contacts. By 1943, new production techniques for lignite synthetic oil allowed it to be mass-produced in German factories. Over the course of the entire Second World War, over 90% of all of Germany's aviation gasoline and half of its petroleum needs came from their synthetic fuel plants.

In the aftermath of the repression, enormous piles of hay have been made over the prosecution of the POUM. As we have seen, the POUM were uniquely involved in the prosecution of the tragic week of uncomradely war in Barcelona. But while the Stalinist conspiracy is used to ignore the reports of the Barcelona police and Republican intelligence about espionage agents and sabotage from within the POUM, the history of the Spanish trail against them, praised by the likes of Emma Goldman for exonerating the POUM leadership, clearly shows that the Communists were not in real control of the Spanish government.

Even a well deserved reputation as had befallen the Spanish Trotskyists could not prevent them from being elevated by the bourgeoisie in the international view. Instead of being condemned as rash provocateurs and wrecking agents in international media, they were christened as martyrs of Stalin. This is the sort of cachée off which Western Left political parties are made.

Today, it is grim to know that we will have to ask those 'allies' on the Left if they would be proud to start such a rebellion in the midst of the forces at war with such a militaristic, reactionary and vile regime as Franco's. Imagine if, in a fictional future, President Trump were to rally the support of the US military generals to overthrow the US government, and a coalition led by liberals, anarchists and communists bravely resisted it. Would you be proud to rebel against this coalition and directly injure the frontlines holding back the fascist criminals?

What was once a minority position of freaks and counter-revolutionaries has, in the aftermath of the victory of fascism, become a rallying call for the leftist “Lost Cause” in Spain, a story sold by legions of Anarchist merchandisers which line the streets of Barcelona today. The role of Communist forces in the suppression of the revolt has been revised by propagandists, who attack the alliance of forces in the government of Catalonia and the Spanish Republic at every opportunity in order to protect whatever side they wish.

A simple history reveals that the May Days were not the only violent explosion of tensions within the Republic, nor was it the first. Emerging from Marxist-Leninist principles of solidarity and the strategy of a Popular Front alliance against fascism, Communists truly worked to support the struggle for liberation, while Trotskyists and other opportunists only utilize their position to join the struggle only when it suits their own purposes, taking advantage of any chaos that arose and even stooping to make it worse.

When the state acts as the repressive tool which it can only ever be, Communist participation in that state turns every action into a Stalinist plot. Like so many other distortions, the story of the “Communist repression” is meant to threaten against anyone who would dare ally with those who are most committed to the success of the struggle for liberation. The default source for informing many communists has been reduced to the websites run on the agenda of Trotskyists, where endless articles from irrelevant groups are recalled from the archives to prop up this old line.

In action, they all stand with the same old wrecking program of Orwell, smearing the face of the struggle in Spain with cheap and unprincipled libertarian filth. They have to indict the Popular Front, lying about this or that, in order to make themselves seem ideologically pure. This myth propagates all the worst impulses in Left opportunism; its anti-Communism, anti-solidarity, its lack of authentic planning and capacity to understand the situation around its activity. Only Marxism-Leninism, and the scientific application of materialist analysis, can create a successful, coordinated alliance of progressive forces and avoid the chaos of Spain.

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