Unit 17
Spain 1936-39:
Revolution and Civil War

This Unit aims to

- Give a short introduction to and provide a chronology and commentary on the political and military events of 1936-39 in Spain.
- Chart the reasons behind the entry into government by the CNT.
- Examine the workers' militias.
- Discuss the rise in influence of the Communists.

Terms and abbreviations

CNT: Confederacion Nacionaln del Trabajo (National Confederation of Labour). Anarcho-syndicalist union.
PSO: Partido Socialista Obrero (Workers' Socialist Party)
POUM: Partido Obrero de Unificacion Marxista (United Marxist Workers Party). Dissident revolutionary Communist Party
FAI: Federacion Anarquista Iberica (Iberian Anarchist Federation)
UGT: Union General de Trabajadores (General Workers' Union). Reformist trade union controlled by the socialists.
PSUC: Partido Socialista Unificat de Catalunya (Catalan Unified Socialist Party). The combined Socialist and Communist Parties of Catalonia.
FIJL: Federación Ibérica de Juventudes Libertarias (Iberian Federation of Libertarian Youth). Anarcho-syndicalist youth organisation.
SIM: Servicio Militar De la Investigación (Military Investigation Service). A secret police network set up by the Stalinists after May 1937.
Falange: Main fascist party in Spain.

Introduction

This Unit should ideally be read in conjunction with Units 15, 16 and 18, which deal with the events leading up to 1936, the cultural and social programme of the anarcho-syndicalists, and the collectives respectively. Although many books and articles have been written on the Spanish Revolution, few attempt to draw practical lessons from it that we can apply to the modern world. This is one of the intentions of these four Units. This one is particularly concerned with how the state and forces of capitalism went about attacking the revolution and protecting their wealth and privilege, and how the revolutionary working class acted in trying to achieve the best outcome possible, given the prevailing situation.

The 1936 Revolution

The Popular Front was elected to power in February 1936 (see Unit 15). A few weeks later, the generals and politicians who would eventually stage the fascist uprising of July 17th started meeting secretly in Madrid to formulate their plans. The rising was scheduled for between 10-20th July, at which point General Sanjurjo (leader of an aborted coup in 1932 and now in Portugal) would fly back to Spain and take overall command. In the event, he was accidentally killed in the flight, and it was the vindictive General Franco who was to emerge as the coup leader, through quick thinking, scheming and opportunism. Posted to Morocco against his wishes, Franco already had a well-deserved reputation as a devious butcher of working class people. Indeed, this single person, together with his followers, were to ensure that Spain embarked on the most vicious modern Civil War in western Europe.

The CNT knew what was coming (see Unit 15). Indeed, as early as February 14th ,it issued a prophetic warning that day by day;

"the suspicion grows that right-wing elements are ready to provoke a military coup. Morocco appears to be the focal point of the conspiracy. The insurrection is subject to the outcome of the elections. The plan will be put into effect if the left wins. We do not

support the Republic, but we will put all our efforts into an all-out fight against fascism in order to beat the traditional oppressors of the proletariat".

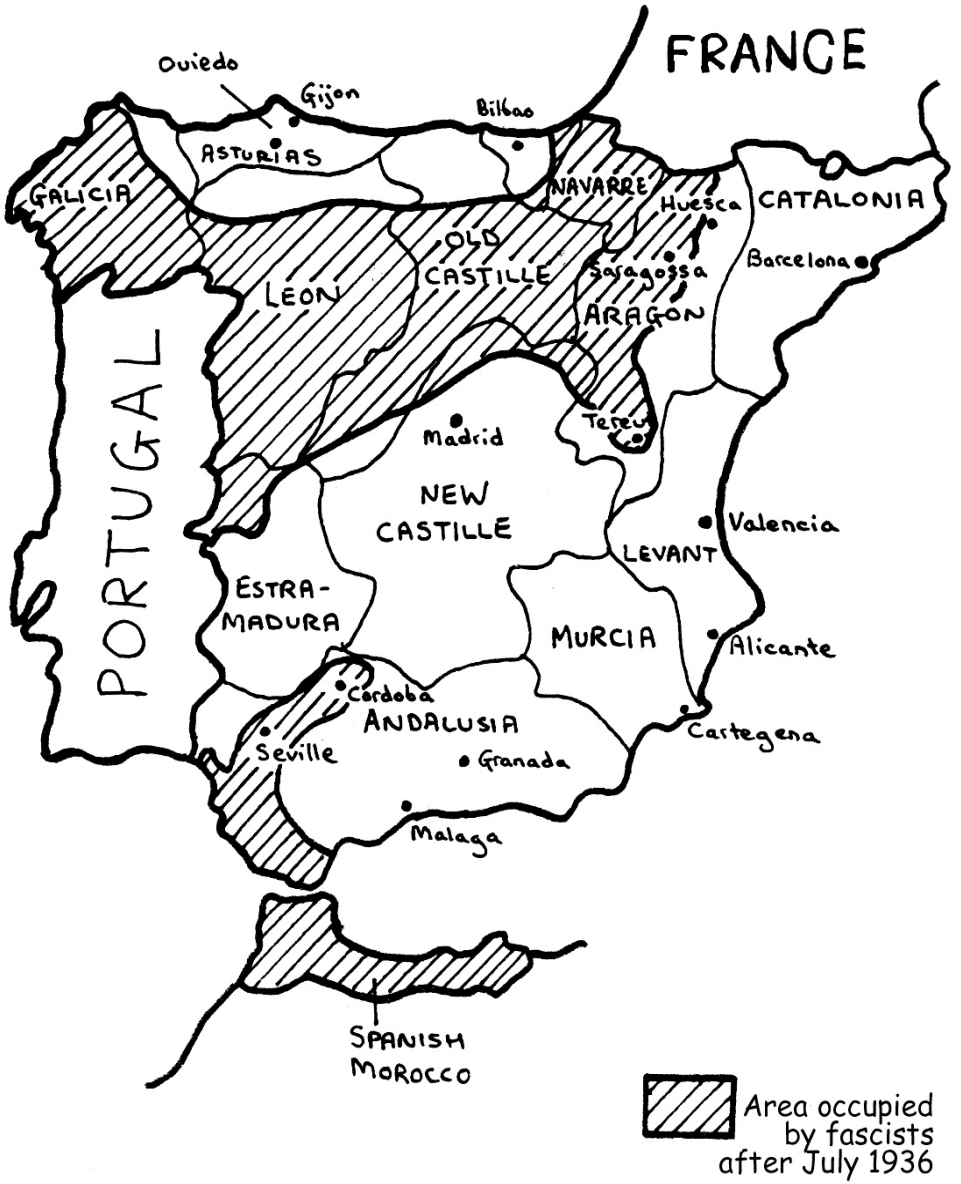
During June and July, 10-20 strikes per day were breaking out (there were an average of well over 100,000 workers on strike at any one time), and the success rate of these actions was high. The years of agitation, propaganda, ideas and action began to pay off for the CNT, as people began to put theory into practice. Factories and land were occupied everywhere, and bosses and landowners fled. Faced with the rising confidence and activity of the working class, the bosses increasingly bypassed the crumbling state and resorted to assassinations (see Unit 15).

By mid July, the bourgeoisie had put the finishing touches to its plans for an army coup, while the CNT had begun to prepare for the revolution. CNT informers in the barracks monitored the fascist plans, and the organisation began to develop a strategy for sustained guerrilla warfare. Arms were seized whenever possible (often from churches where the monks and priests hid them for the fascists).

It was in anarcho-syndicalist Barcelona, stronghold of the CNT, that preparations and effective defences had been made to repel the military coup. When local government and businesses stood by and refused to supply arms to the CNT, they went and helped themselves from ships in the docks, arms depots, and even shops. Sympathetic Assault Guards distributed arms directly from their barracks. On the 18th July, cars hastily splashed with the letters 'CNT' began to patrol the streets as a warning to the army, and the same day, the latter announced their coup.

In the early hours of the 19th July, the army of the Barcelona garrison, perhaps the largest in Spain, began to occupy strategic centres of the city. However, the CNT and the workers were already out on the streets waiting to meet them. Everywhere, they were massed behind makeshift barricades, or spilling over in massive crowds in front of the aggressors, unarmed, or poorly armed, but determined to stop the fascist coup. They pleaded with the soldiers not to shoot, and where they were disregarded, they surged forward, simply overwhelming the troops despite their far superior fire-power.

The infantry had been told they were defending the Republic and, on realising what was really happening, some soldiers shot their



officers and joined the workers. The Assault Guards eventually joined the revolutionaries and the Civil Guard remained largely neutral. The CNT set up an operations base at the building workers union premises, and within 33 hours, the working class was in control of the whole city.

Red and black flags flew everywhere and revolutionary euphoria broke out amongst the masses. A feeling of solidarity and comradeship existed throughout the city and soon the whole of Catalonia was in the hands of the working class.

District and defence committees sprang up everywhere to organise arms and food distribution. The army barracks, which were still occupied, were bombarded with leaflets announcing the defeat of the coup and the workers militias moved into them as the soldiers surrendered.

Elsewhere, in Madrid, resistance was paralysed as the UGT, the majority union there, waited for orders from the indecisive government. Eventually some soldiers began to supply arms to the communists and socialists, but the CNT/FAI received nothing, so they ambushed the trucks and set about surrounding the fascist forces of General Mola. Madrid was soon in the hands of the working class and, as in Barcelona, prisons were emptied and pressure was put on the government to concede to considerable workers' demands. However, Morocco, Seville, Granada and Cadiz in the south all fell to the fascists, despite fierce resistance from peasants in rural Andalusia, often armed only with scythes and pitchforks. When they were eventually overcome thousands were butchered in cold blood. Once consolidated in the south, Franco's army began its march northwards through Estramadura, and on towards Madrid. In the north, the fascist forces took Galicia and parts of Aragon, but the Basque region and most of Asturias remained in the hands of the Republic or the workers.

Compromise & consolidation

By the 21st of July, the police and army no longer existed in Catalonia, as the district committees set up by the new collectives were distributing food and other essentials, while the workers began running society, from factories to trams to shops (see Unit 18). People burned money in the streets in huge spontaneous celebrations.

The republican President of Catalonia, Lluis Companys, had taken refuge in the palace of the Generalitat (regional government) of Catalonia. The revolution had failed to deal with the now powerless capitalist politicians, and Companys set about regaining his position of power by trying to gain favour with the CNT. He called a meeting of all the political parties and unions in Catalonia, where he told the CNT members present that they had been wrongly persecuted in the past, and that now a new era of co-operation with the CNT must begin. In persuasive political rhetoric, he called on the CNT, the bourgeois republican parties, the socialists (PSOE) and the United Marxist Workers Party (POUM) to form a Militia Committee to be led by his party, to organise the fight against fascism in the rest of Spain.

As 80% of the workers in Catalonia were in the CNT, any decision without them was worthless, and a Regional Plenum of the CNT considered the 'offer' on the same day. Here, a clash of viewpoints ensued. Many delegates insisted there should be no collaboration with political parties and the state, and that the push to consolidate the revolution and extend it to the rest of Spain was the only way forward. However, others argued that Catalonia's isolation from the rest of Spain, large areas of which had been taken by the fascists (including anarcho-syndicalist strongholds in Zaragoza and Andalusia), meant the odds were against any revolution succeeding at this point.

They forcefully made the point that, if the decision was made to go for full-scale revolution across Spain, the anti-fascist forces would be split, as the republicans would turn on the CNT and the revolution. Additionally, they pointed out that help for the CNT and the revolution would be minimal outside the anarcho-syndicalist strongholds, as the international proletariat was either controlled by social democracy or enslaved to fascism. Poor military strength was also a crucial factor – there was little doubt that if the CNT fought the well-equipped (and internationally supported) fascist army on their own they would be massacred.

The result of the Plenum was that the CNT refused to agree to the politicians proposals. However, as a compromise, they proposed that a Central Committee of Anti-Fascist Militias be set up in Catalonia, involving the CNT, FAI (anarchists, almost all of whom were in CNT –see Unit 15), POUM, UGT, PSUC (Catalan Socialist Party and Communist Party united together), and the bourgeois Republican parties. The majority at the Plenum naïvely believed that the Madrid government would fully arm the workers in Catalonia, because of the appearance of state control that this new organisation would give. Companys accepted the CNT proposal, forced to compromise on his desire to control the Committee due to his lack of power base. However, the formation of the Committee was a backward step for the revolution.

The CNT had never before broken with its anarcho-syndicalist principles, and now, it had entered into a power sharing executive with the local politicians, some of whom had been directly responsible for brutally oppressing the CNT and the workers over the past 5 years. In retrospect, this was a tragic mistake, since it provided the political parties with a base to rebuild - without it, they would have been completely powerless, and the CNT and the workers would have remained in complete control (albeit for the time being, and under constant threat from the Republic and Franco's forces). Now, the workers still controlled industry and agriculture, but the workers and the political parties (through the Committee) jointly controlled the military response to fascism.

The CNT entered the deal primarily because it put the fight against anti-fascism higher than the revolution. It felt the revolution was at this stage unsustainable (which was probably true, given the war and the strength of the fascists' backing), whereas the Civil War was thought to be winnable, with the help of the government. However, it was wrong to trust the government at all and, on the crucial issue of relying on the government to supply the CNT militias with arms, it misjudged the deviousness of politicians the world over. The new Committee also gave an opportunity to the small (but vehemently opportunist) Communists to gain a power foothold and begin their counter-revolution. Finally, the CNT misjudged the price it would pay for compromising on its anarcho-syndicalist principles. Not only did it not gain anything from the exercise, it stood to lose a great deal.

In defence of the CNT's decision, it must be said that these were chaotic times, and the choices were hard. A wider revolution outside Catalonia was almost certainly unattainable, meaning that outside forces would eventually crush the revolution inside Catalonia anyway. Thus, with a bleak outlook, the idea that the revolution was lost, and that the 'next best thing' was to defeat fascism by any means necessary was clearly sensible.

However, the problem lies with the means. The CNT was to learn a hard lesson - that 'no compromise with politicians' is an anarcho-syndicalist principle, which if broken, leads to dire consequences. In retrospect, not only was the compromise wrong, but also the CNT probably underestimated its power, and thus signed up to a deal which immediately gave ground to the politicians. It is indefensible and unquestionably naïve that the CNT, which had been oppressed and denied power on its own terms for so long, when offered compromised power by the oppressors themselves, agreed to it, almost on the politicians own terms.

With the Committee in operation, the CNT did not embrace the power it offered, as he political parties did. Indeed, it urged the working class to organise themselves and take as much responsibility as possible, since it realised the danger of the body it had just helped to set up. They found themselves in a difficult position and tried to steer a dual course - but, in the end, only one of them could be successful.

Anarcho-syndicalist action

Meanwhile, on the ground, anarcho-syndicalism was still very firmly in action. The general strike that had been declared on the 19th began to wind down, as workers started to collectivise the hospitals, railways, docks, trams, buses, factories, shops, bakeries, etc., and the metallurgical and chemical plants were modified to make rifles, bullets, armoured cars and other arms for the war. The farms in Catalonia were collectivised and communal stores created to feed the towns and cities (the urban and rural collectives and anarcho-syndicalist economy are discussed in detail in Unit 18).

In the first few weeks after the uprising, there was a general belief that a new world had been born and that capitalism was gone forever. Old rivalries were forgotten and replaced by a feeling of solidarity and mutual aid. Capitalist ways of life and thinking began to disappear and a feeling of respect for others as well as for oneself began to appear. Greed and enmity were becoming things of the past as the material conditions of life changed and people began to work collectively and take control of their own lives. With the end of the class system and the beginning of communal ownership, 'petty crime' started to end (particularly theft) and this, combined with the greater individual liberty created, caused a massive decline in 'violent crime'.

Abortion was made available for the first time during the revolution as well as contraception and advice on birth control. Previously, women were rarely seen with men in public but during the revolution they openly mixed in cafes and on the streets. Women began to wear trousers for the first time and traditional sexual roles began to be broken down (the massive impact on education, women's rights, and sexual, cultural and social liberation in the revolution are discussed in Unit 16).

Aragon and Zaragoza

The fall of Zaragoza to the fascists had been a bitter blow to the anarcho-syndicalists, as it was their second largest stronghold after Barcelona, and was in a key position. The Zaragoza CNT had been promised arms by the Governor on the eve of the coup but had received none. Immediately, the fascists had searched working class districts, rounded up the anarcho-syndicalists, and shot them on the spot.

Soon after the creation of the Central Committee of Anti-Fascist Militias in Catalonia, the CNT made plans to liberate Aragon and Zaragoza. This would clear a path to the northern enclave of Asturias, controlled by the CNT and UGT and isolated from the rest of 'Republican Spain', where most of the arms factories were. Workers would then control the vast majority of Spain, including most large cities and nearly all the industry. Thus, as the hard line CNT members who had opposed the Committee saw it, the revolution could be regained and the Committee disbanded.

Three armoured columns were organised by the CNT-FAI and a fourth by the Committee. Within 5 days, 12,000 anarcho-syndicalists were on their way, along with another 3,000 fighters in the fourth column. By the 24th (2 days later) the fighters of the CNT's central column (the Durruti column) were 20 miles from Zaragoza, having liberated towns and villages on the way. However, they then had to wait precious days for the remaining columns to cover their flanks, and Durruti began to grow impatient. Makhno, the Russian anarchist who had fought the Bolsheviks and capitalists, had described to him the effect of war on revolutionaries, and he recognised that it turned even the best people into 'irresponsible killers'. After two weeks of fighting, they completely ran out of ammunition, and 20-30,000 militia men and women were left idle. Despite desperate appeals, the Committee in Catalonia failed to send significantly more arms, as it was mounting other campaigns, and the Madrid government flatly refused to arm the CNT. They resorted to raids into enemy territory.

CNT enters the government

On the 4th September, Caballero replaced Giral as head of the Republican government and on the 26th, the Central Committee of Anti-Fascist Militias was dissolved and the Catalan government established. The UGT and CNT representatives formed a minority on it, and the political parties began to strengthen their position by rearming the state. This act was carried out without consulting the membership; for the first time in its history, the CNT was developing a bureaucracy which was rapidly becoming divorced from the rank-and-file and, as a result, the federalist structure of the organisation was becoming weakened. The FAI, once advocated as the organisation to keep the CNT on a 'pure' revolutionary path, was now at the forefront of leading it 'astray' into collaboration. If involvement in the Central Committee of Anti-Fascist Militias wasn't enough, the involvement of the CNT in the government did irreparable damage to the revolution.

Due to poor wartime communications and deep involvement with the militias and collectives, many of the rank-and-file members of the CNT were initially unaware of the collaboration. Some CNT members saw entry into government as a temporary move to defeat fascism, after which they could continue the fight for the revolution (an idea actively encouraged by the communists). Alas these individuals did not realise that the fight against fascism was inextricably linked with the fight for a revolutionary society; for once the revolution had broken out, there could only be one of two things - anarchism or fascism.

The CNT joined the Catalan government to get arms, raw materials and money from the central government, since they considered that this was the only way of defeating fascism under the unfavourable conditions they found themselves in. The Madrid government then refused to arm the workers or supply them with raw materials. Though it had the 2nd largest gold reserve in the world, it clearly preferred fascism to anarchism. The railway workers union even planned to seize the gold from the Bank of Spain in Madrid, using 3,000 CNT militia, transporting it back to Barcelona by rail. However, this was eventually abandoned on the grounds that it could create Civil War between Barcelona and Madrid.

On the 4th November, the CNT entered the central government. Horacio Martinez Prieto -the General Secretary of the CNT - chose four ministers without consulting the organisation. These were Juan Peiró and Juan López, along with two members of the FAI - Federica Montseny and Juan García Oliver. The latter refused to join at first, but arms were promised to the CNT if they did, so he capitulated. In the event, few were delivered, and the exercise was a disaster for both the war and the revolution.

Neither the Catalan nor the Central government delivered their promises of arms to the CNT militias and, meanwhile, the rank-and-file CNT and the working class pushed the revolution forward, organising collectives, and generally creating a libertarian society. As news of the collaboration spread amongst the CNT rank-and-file, many began to actively oppose it. By the end of November, the majority of the FIJL (Catalan anarcho-syndicalist youth organisation) were actively opposed to the moves, calling for a return to non-collaboration. Those that entered the government thought that they could use the state for the benefit of the workers and the revolution, but anarcho-syndicalists generally make poor politicians and they were continually ou'anoeuvred and outwitted by those that had spent a lifetime learning the 'art' of politics.

The Republican government wanted to wait a while before winning the war, since a quick victory over the fascists would ensure victory for the revolution and leave the workers in control of the country. Instead of this, the Popular Front parties wanted to re-establish their position of power and then launch an attack on the fascists, so they could once more rule Spain. The Republicans, Socialists and Communists spent all their efforts destroying the revolution by squabbling and clamouring for power, before turning to the problem of the war, which the CNT and the workers had been trying to fight right from the start. The incorporation of the CNT into the two governments was essential for the politicians because of the huge following for anarcho-syndicalism and the CNT amongst the working class.

Workers' Militias

The CNT workers generally believed that the forces fighting the war had to be in keeping with the new society being created, and so their militias were decentralised, self-governing and democratic. There were no uniforms, no officers, no marching or saluting, no barrack-style discipline and no enforced conscription. They formed themselves into military units called centuries, which met regularly in general assemblies, and also elected a delegate. The centuries came together to make up a column, and the delegates of the assemblies made up the war committee of the column. The delegates were chosen to lead the various forces but had to fight alongside the rest of the militia. They were instantly recallable and received no special privileges, as in all anarcho-syndicalist organisations.

There was great enthusiasm for the militias and over 150,000 CNT members immediately enlisted for them. They relied on self-discipline, revolutionary enthusiasm and an understanding of what they were fighting for to keep them going. Training was brief - often by Republican Army officers who were kept under close scrutiny by workers committees. Everyone discussed all manoeuvres and battles beforehand and the militias only followed orders from the delegates when they could see the sense of them. However the militias suffered from a chronic lack of arms and ammunition and were only able to fight sporadically.

The Madrid government starved the militias of arms, whilst weapons were secretly hidden by the Republicans and arms garrisons kept under heavy guard by troops loyal to the government in areas with a weak anarcho-syndicalist influence. As the Republican government regained its strength by recreating the police and the army, they began to physically oppose the militias. In late September, Largo Caballero did a deal with the Communist Party and agreed to buy a large supply of arms from Russia, including tanks and planes, using the gold in Madrid. They used these to strengthen the People's Army (the Republican army, increasingly controlled by the Communists) and, in early October, they issued a decree that made the militias illegal and incorporated them into the People's Army. The CNT militias resisted, but the government starved them of pay, food, and supplies and many were forced to submit.

Some left the front, preferring to work in the collectives rather than submit to the degrading discipline and Communist tyranny in the Army, while others knew that the revolution couldn't be won without revolutionary fighting units but weren't prepared to die to save a capitalist regime. The militarisation decree greatly demoralised the fighters and, in turn, enthusiasm began to decline among the masses. Whilst the militias existed and were armed, they had made some early gains but, by the end of 1936, the war was going badly for the Republicans.

In Asturias, where nearly all the arms factories were, the courageous defenders fell victim to a powerful pincer movement by the fascists and were slowly being worn down. In much of Andalusia, the peasants and workers had been massacred as Franco's army moved northwards towards Madrid. In Malaga, the anarcho-syndicalists gained the upper hand but the government starved it of supplies, money and arms and it fell to the fascists. In the Basque region, the 'autonomous government' had fled, more afraid of the CNT than the fascists, and Irun fell before the year was out. Only in Catalonia, Aragon and Levant - the CNT strongholds - were the fronts holding their own. In Madrid, the CNT and UGT worked together, but were surrounded on three sides by the fascists, who were moving closer all the time.

Rise of the Communist Party

In July 1936, with 3,000 members, the Communist Party (CP) had very little influence amongst the working class except in Seville and parts of Asturias. It was pro-Moscow and strongly Stalinist, and now became a major tool of Stalin's foreign policy. He ordered it to form an anti-fascist alliance with 'progressive sections of the middle and upper-classes'. Stalin knew that a European war was imminent and wanted to keep it away from Russia so that Russia could remain a spectator and pick up the pieces afterwards. When revolution broke out in Spain he saw a chance of keeping the war limited to Western Europe. Stalin also had long term economic interests in Spain, as did Germany and Italy, who helped Franco's troops on the opposing side. They were able to test their new planes, tanks and arms and train their troops in preparation for the big European conflict they were gearing up for, while holding out the possibility of encircling France on three sides.

After July 1936, the CP united with the PSOE (Spanish Socialists in Catalonia) to form the PSUC (Catalan Unified Socialist Party). The aggressive Stalinists found the PSOE easy to infiltrate and take over, as did the Communist Youth with the Socialist Youth Movement (which merged to form the 200,000 strong Unified Socialist Youth). Before 1936, they had tried to infiltrate the CNT, but found it impossible because of its anarcho-syndicalist structure. Instead, they set about taking over the UGT, which they found a lot easier.

The Stalinists exploited every political, military and economic opportunity that arose. A large group of specialists in political intrigue were sent by the Comintern under the guise of advisors and technicians - among them were many agents of the GPU (later the KGB). Then, as the Madrid government received tanks, planes, arms and ammunition from Russia, the Stalinists were given important positions in the government and Army in return. From here, they gradually began to take over the government and army. As they grew in power and confidence, they began to launch verbal, then increasingly physical attacks on the POUM and the CNT. The POUM was a small Marxist-Leninist Party of fewer than 10,000 members, with Trotskyist connections. However, it found itself in a situation that didn't fit in with its dearly held Marxist theory - the Catalan masses had bypassed the 'Revolutionary Party', missed the 'transitional period of state socialism' and formed an anarcho-syndicalist society instead. It now opposed the collectives and advocated 'workers

control through the state' on Bolshevik lines. Despite this, the Stalinists organised its expulsion from the Catalan government, who then proceeded to wipe out the entire POUM, 'Trotskyism' and any criticism of the Soviet Union by Marxists.

The CNT were too strong to take on at first but, by the end of 1936, the PSUC claimed a membership of one million. Some 90% of these were middle or upper class, including many fascists and nationalists stranded in the revolutionary areas, for whom it provided relative safety from the 'anarchist hordes'. Landowners, entrepreneurs and Army officers joined in large numbers, as they saw it as the force most likely to defeat the anarcho-syndicalists. In December 1936, the PSUC began to organise the International Brigades, which provided the Comintern with a big propaganda boost abroad and helped it control even more fighting units. The CNT requested foreign anarcho-syndicalists and anarchists to stay in their 'own countries' and spread the struggle internationally, but the Comintern encouraged Communists to go to Spain so they could control the fighting there.

As the Stalinists gained strength and confidence, they started to attack the CNT and the revolution. Armed Communist squads attacked the collectives, workers were shot, and the press was taken over. The Stalinists, who had very few principles or scruples to stick to, pronounced that the CNT were fascist agents deliberately sabotaging the war effort and forcing peasants to form collectives at gunpoint. While everyone knew this was preposterous, it sowed seeds of doubt and signalled that the Stalinists were getting the upper hand.

By the end of April 1937, the revolution in Catalonia was in decline in the face of the attacks of the Communists and the state. The police and army had been recreated and the courts were once again filling the prisons with anarcho-syndicalists. Torture was increasing, and militant workers began to 'disappear'. The collectives were being harassed, starved of materials and their organisations destroyed. The workers saw their gains destroyed and they began to get more and more angry. By the beginning of May, they had had enough.

May Days

The usually massive May Day parade in Barcelona was cancelled in 1937 because of the tension between the CNT and the Stalinists. Instead of celebrating, CNT members were harassed, searched and disarmed by the police. The next day, the Assault Guards tried to take the Telephone Exchange in Barcelona from the CNT, on the orders of a Communist Minister. The workers who had collectivised it repelled them, but were surrounded. Within two hours, the workers had taken to the streets and erected barricades throughout Barcelona. The incident sparked off a general uprising against the government throughout Catalonia.

The CNT, FAI, FIJL and POUM now faced up to the PSUC, UGT (now taken over by the Communists) and the bourgeois Republican Parties. The government resigned, but the fighting continued. Renewed CNT district committees were organised, and the workers took control of large parts of the city. The CNT Ministers García Oliver and Federica Montseny arrived from Valencia to placate the CNT members, but they were no longer trusted by the workers and were ignored. The street fighting continued for 5 days, in a desperate bid to recreate the revolution which everyone knew in their heart of hearts had now been lost. Eventually, the Madrid government took advantage of the uprising and sent 5,000 troops to Catalonia to crush the rebellion and take firm control of the whole region, which had been autonomous since July 1936.

The CNT left the barricades on May 7th , 1937, totally demoralised. The new troops launched a bitter wave of repression against the remnants of the revolution, invading collectives and jailing and shooting anarcho-syndicalists, workers and bystanders indiscriminately. With 500 dead and over 1,000 wounded, the death toll was not enough for the Stalinists, who now unleashed a wave of terror across Catalonia. This period had all the hallmarks of the Bolsheviks' crushing of the Kronstadt Commune in Russia in March 1921 (see Units 11-12). The numbers of anarcho-syndicalists and POUMists tortured in the secret police's prisons, shot, imprisoned or 'disappeared' will never be known.

The Stalinists also took the opportunity to disarm everyone but the government forces and launch full-scale assaults against CNT buildings. The May Days signified the abrupt end of the revolution in Catalonia -the Stalinists had finally taken on the CNT and destroyed the revolutionary gains of the working class. The CNT still managed to keep control of a lot of the industry in Catalonia, but with few arms and severely demoralised, the revolution was definitely over.

After May 1937, the CNT finally parted with the government. In August, the Stalinists set up the Military Investigation Service (SIM), which was supposedly a counter-espionage network set up to catch fascists. In fact it was a spy network, controlled by the GPU (secret police), to follow militants in the Republican zone. Even the police were scared of SIM agents, and all SIM agents were watched by other SIM agents. The secret of the Communists 'success' was terror and torture. Even concentration camps, modelled on those in Russia, were set up and packed with anarcho-syndicalists and POUMists.

Invasion of Aragon

Aragon had been a *de facto* anarcho-syndicalist society since the beginning of the revolution, being run extremely successfully by the workers themselves through the collective movement (see Unit 18). By August 1937, the front line was roughly in the same place it had been 12 months before (55% of Aragon being controlled by the workers and peasants). The decentralised and non-hierarchical collectives had operated so well for over a year, that they had effectively put the UGT and all political parties out of business. People saw no need for them. Stalin's Communists therefore found it impossible to infiltrate or otherwise gain power from within, even when they had now gained a monopoly of state power elsewhere.

The only alternative was open military attack. So, instead of fighting the fascists, on 10th August, four Communist-controlled Army divisions marched into Aragon. The defence committees set up by the collectives were powerless against such a force, and the orgy of destruction was so severe that even some Communists dared to criticise it. Militants were shot and arrested and the collectives smashed. The land, produce and hardware were returned to their former owners, many of whom were nationalist, fascist sympathisers!

Immediately, strikes broke out against the new rulers, and since they were supplying the Aragon front with food and supplies, the Communists had to let them reorganise the collectives so that the harvest could be gathered. They were also forced to release many prisoners. Nevertheless, the presence of an invading force demoralised the workers, to such an extent that much of the subsequent harvest was not even collected from the fields.

Decline, fascism & genocide

The rank-and-file of the CNT and FAI, remaining true to the ideas of anarcho-syndicalism, increasingly opposed any continued attempts to collaborate with the Communists and government throughout 1938. In January 1939, following a series of strikes against the re-introduction of management into workplaces, the Republican government ordered a general mobilisation of all workers.

However, by this time, the war was as good as over. Since early 1937, Hitler's Nazis had been investing vast amounts of military hardware in Franco's fascist war, and the balance of military might was now tipped firmly in favour of the fascist forces. In April 1937, in a now infamous and bloody experiment, the Nazis tried out their new attack technique of 'blitzkrieg' on the defenceless town of Guernica in the Basque Country (Franco hated the Basques with almost as much venom as he hated the CNT). Untold hundreds of civilians died in a single massacre, which became a foretaste of what was to come elsewhere in Europe two years later.

By April 4th 1939, the fascists had conquered the whole of Spain. Many working class people now decided it was too dangerous to stay and try their luck with fascism, and probably the largest exodus in Spanish history occurred, as hundreds of thousands of workers fled the country. Large numbers of these ended up in concentration camps in France, but small groups of Spanish anarcho-syndicalists appeared in many countries throughout the world. Some continued the fight against fascism by fighting with the various resistance groups against the Nazis, a number ending up in their concentration camps.

For those that stayed in Spain the repression was terrible – Franco had more people killed after the Civil War than died during it (over half a million according to some sources). One in ten of the workers in each factory were taken out and shot and thousands ended up in concentration camps and prisons for their political views. Franco used the ideas of the Falange - Spain's largest fascist party - as the only way to crush the rebellious Spanish proletariat. Along with genocide, he instituted fully-fledged fascism - dictatorship, strict state economic control, an end to free speech and elections, and greatly increased police powers. All strikes and independent workers organisations were banned, women were virtually confined to the home, and the reactionary views of the Catholic Church and the Monarchy once more dominated society.

The orgy of murder and terror lasted until the end of the Second World War. With the fall of the two fascist powers that helped him to power - Germany and Italy - Franco briefly eased the repression, thinking the Allies might turn on him for aiding their enemies. However, the Second World War had been an imperialist war, not one against fascism, and these governments felt no threat from Franco. So, the terror resumed, and the prisons filled up further. For simply being a member of the CNT, the punishment was a 30-year prison sentence, and any workers who dared to strike were brutally attacked. Despite this, the CNT maintained a clandestine organisation throughout the 1945-75 period, which only ended when Franco died and the subsequent social democratic government legalised the organisation. Immediately, the CNT sprang back to life, having learned the hard lessons of collaboration with any politicians, on any level, at any time. The modern development of the CNT (along with other anarcho-syndicalist movements across the world) is continued in Block 4.

Conclusion

The difficulty of reconciling theory and principles with complex practical reality is an inevitable feature of any large revolutionary movement looking to take on the status quo. That the CNT made mistakes as a result of complex external problems brought on by the war is not in doubt. Collaborating with bourgeois parties, and then participating in government, whatever the circumstances, was a mistake. What is critical, is that we (a) learn from the mistakes of the past and (b) do not allow these to overshadow the amazing demonstrations of anarcho-syndicalist society in action, which the workers and the CNT created and maintained for over a year (see Units 16 and 18).

The decline of the CNT and FAI once they began to participate in the State is ironically a testament to the ideas of anarcho-syndicalism. Those who participated in it soon lost touch with people and the ‘corruption of power’ quickly took hold of them, as it does anyone put in that position. The Spanish Revolution showed decisively that no government (not even one with ‘anarchists’ in it) can be of any use to the working class. Far from joining the state, it would have been better to have taken it on and been smashed in the process (which it was subsequently anyway), for only in this way can the revolution have any chance of long-term success.

It would be wrong to react to the CNT’s experience by attempting to construct a set of ‘never to be changed’ tactics and strategies. In such cases, the state can change tactics at the drop of a hat, and the revolutionary movement is exposed as a result. While the state’s actions are largely predictable, and we have a toolbox of methods of direct action to counter them, new ones will always appear, and we must be flexible enough to recognise these and alter our action accordingly. However, what we must have ‘set in stone’ is a set of uncompromising principles, which define how we can proceed without losing our aim of transformation of society (for example, through well-intended but naïve negotiation with the state).

The CNT has a long and remarkable history, and this remains both a long-standing testament to anarcho-syndicalism, and an outstanding practical example of a successful ‘trial-run’ of a society based on these ideas and principles.

Postscript: Academics and Spain

As pointed out in Unit 15, academics and historians have often dismissed the achievements of the Spanish anarcho-syndicalists both before and during the revolution and civil war. This can be attributed to an elitism that sees liberal and Marxist academics unable to come to terms with mass movements that lie outside the control of privileged elites.

In developing an alternative culture of resistance, anarcho-syndicalists reject intervention by outside experts and parliamentary intermediaries within the social struggle. Instead, there is a reliance on the mass experiences of the workers and peasants. This characteristic is called "ouverierism" and can be identified in anarcho-syndicalist movements the world over.

Academics tend to rely on what they see as "experts" to construct their own theories. They use "official" sources, often ignoring or dismissing oral and non-academic sources of information. This produces a bias that becomes more prominent within academic circles as their arguments become further removed from the original sources of evidence. Noam Chomsky has called this a "failure of objectivity", and he questions the objectivity of such historical accounts;

"it is characteristic of the attitude taken by liberal (and Communist) intellectuals towards revolutionary movements that are spontaneous and only loosely organised, while rooted in the deeply felt needs and ideals of the dispossessed masses. It is a convention of scholarship that the use of such terms as those of the preceding phrase demonstrates naïveté and muddle-headed sentimentality."

Because the Spanish Revolution did not fit into the accepted pattern and by-passed the accepted means of change favoured by academics and experts it is seen as a kind of aberration and a nuisance that stood in the way of a successful prosecution of the war to save the bourgeois regime from the Franco rebellion. Since anarcho-syndicalism rejects theorising as an abstract exercise, preferring to concentrate on practical solutions to problems, without the need for one great theorist, it is often dismissed by academics as "primitive" and "naïve". This can account for much of the dismissal and distortion of both contemporary and modern accounts of the events that took place in Spain during the revolution and civil war.

Key points

- From the election of the Popular Front government in February 1936 it became increasingly obvious that there would be right-wing coup staged by the army.
- It was the workers who resisted the coup, while the government hesitated.
- A crucial compromise was made with anarcho-syndicalist principles by the CNT when it entered into a power-sharing executive with the political parties.
- Factories and industries collectivised themselves and were successfully controlled and operated directly by the workers themselves.
- The CNT-FAI workers' militias were run on anarcho-syndicalist principles, decentralised, self-governing and democratic.
- The Communist Party was able to gain influence by exploiting the political situation.
- In May 1937, the Stalinists launched an attack against the CNT and the POUM that marked the end of the revolution.

Checklist

1. How did the government react to the coup in contrast to the CNT?

2. What were the reasons for the CNT entering into power-sharing in Catalonia?

3. Why did the CNT join the Catalan government?

4. How were the workers' militias organised?

5. In what way did the Communist Party gain influence?

6. What were the "May Days"?

Answer suggestions

1. *How did the government react to the coup?*
   The Popular Front government hesitated and was unsure what to do. The CNT declared and general strike and arms were seized to overcome the fascists.

2. *What were the reasons for the CNT entering into power-sharing in Catalonia?*
   It was argued that the anti-fascist forces would be split if a full scale revolution was implemented and, with large areas of Spain controlled by the fascists, the revolution had little chance of succeeding at this point. Poor military strength was also a factor.

3. *Why did the CNT join the Catalan government?*
   The CNT joined the government to get arms, raw materials and money. These were not forthcoming. Many of the rank and file membership were unaware of this move and vigorously opposed it when they found out.

4. *How were the workers' militias organised?*
   The workers' militias were made up solely from volunteers and were decentralised, self-governing and democratic. There were no uniforms, no officers, no marching and saluting or barrack-style discipline. General assemblies chose delegates to lead them who were instantly recallable.

5. *In what way did the Communist Party gain influence?*
   The CP merged with the Socialist Party and began to gain political influence. In return for arms from the Soviet Union communists were given important positions within the government and army.

7. *What were the "May Days"?*
   Once the communists felt powerful enough, they began to attack the anarcho-syndicalists and other dissent revolutionaries. In May 1937, the Assault Guards, under orders from the communists, attempted to take the telephone exchange in Barcelona from the CNT. A general uprising ensued against the government throughout Catalonia. Some 5,000 troops were sent to crush it, and Catalonia came under the direct control of the central government in Madrid.

Suggested discussion points

- Should the CNT have collaborated with the government and what was the alternative?
- Can the fight against fascism be separated from the fight for a social revolution?

Further Reading

The Tragedy of Spain. Rudolf Rocker. ASP, pamphlet. £1.20. -BS- -SE-

Now sadly out of print, a well-proportioned account of the events of 1936-39, with particularly telling sections on the collectives and social movements and the antics of the Communist Party.

Anarchists in the Spanish Revolution. José Peirats. Freedom Press, ISBN 0900 384530. £6. -AK- -BS-

At nearly 400 pages, this classic is a highly detailed and value for money history of the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist movement from 1868 to 1939, written by a participant CNT member.

The Anarchist Collectives: Workers' Self-management in the Spanish Revolution, 1936-39. Sam Dolgoff (ed.). Black Rose Books. ISBN 0919 618200. £9.99 -AK-

Probably the best single text on the Spanish revolution (provided you ignore the Bookchin introduction). Contains an excellent section by Gaston Leval, a contemporary, on how the revolution was hampered by the beaurocratisation of the CNT.

Spain 1936-39:Social Revolution - Counter Revolution. Freedom Press, ISBN 0900 384549. £5. -AK- -BS-

Selection of original documents from the period, covering the collectives, reports on meetings and demonstrations, and the events surrounding the CNT.

The May Days, Barcelona 1937. Freedom Press, ISBN 0900 384395. £2.50. -AK- -BS-

Another Freedom Press selection, this time on the May Days uprising. Contributions from Souchy, Peirats and other CNT veterans.

Blood of Spain: The Experience of Civil War 1936-1939. Ronald Fraser. Allen Lane, 1979 (reprinted Pelican Books, 1988). ISBN 0140 228292. £7.99. -BS- -LI-

Oral histories by participants (including anarchists, Marxists, fascists, nationalists, Catholics etc.). Popular and illuminating.

Anarchist Organisation: The History of the FAI. Juan Gomez Casas. Black Rose, ISBN 0920 057381. £10.99. -AK- -LI-

The first English language history of the FAI, including its role (both detrimental and positive) in the Spanish Revolution and the

CNT.

No Gods No Masters, Vol. II. Daniel Guerin. AK Press. ISBN 1873 176694. £11.95 -AK-

Anarchist reader of original/contemporary works, contains 1936 articles and communiques of the Spanish CNT.

American Power and the New Mandarins. Noam Chomsky. Penguin, ISBN 1 4021126 8. -AK- -LI- -BS-

A collection of essays, the first of which, “Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship” deals with how academics and historians have interpreted the Spanish Revolution and the anarchist part in it.

1936, The Spanish Revolution. The Ex. AK Press. ISBN 1873 176015. £16.95. -AK-

More of a piece of art than a historical source, this double CD single boxed set of revolutionary songs contains a photo-book of the Revolution. Well-produced, vivid pictorial record.

Notes:

Unusually for periods of revolutionary working class history, there are a number of relatively accessible books on Spain in the 1930s. This is a sample of some of the better ones. Please note, you may find useful sources on the topic of this Unit in the Further Reading sections of any or all of Units 13-18. The Further Reading outlined is not designed to be an exhaustive bibliography or a prescriptive list. It is designed to provide some pointers for the reader who is interested in taking the topics raised in this Unit further. In addition to the above, it is always worth consulting your local library for general history texts which do cover the period, although they invariably understate the level of working class organisation and activity. To assist Course Members, an indication is given alongside each reference as to how best to obtain it. The codes are as follows: -LI- try libraries (from local to university), -AK-available from AK Distribution (Course Member discount scheme applies if you order through SelfEd, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW), -BS- try good bookshops, -SE- ask SelfEd about loans or offprints).