

## **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

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# **A War of Rebellion: Radical Politics in the Spanish Civil War**

HUNTER WHITE

The Spanish Civil War was one of the seminal events of the twentieth century. It occurred in the interim of the two most destructive conflicts in human history and contained adherents to every radical ideology at the turn of the century. This has made it a useful lens into the study of the revolutionary movements of the period, but to focus on the war solely as a sort of laboratory for radical politics or a prophetic text for WWII is to lose sight of its distinctly Spanish roots and the effect of the Spanish character both on the war itself and the ideologies torrenting within it. The anarchist movement in Spain, the only European nation where it managed to gain actionable political power and territory, provides a window into the uniquely Spanish nature of the war. In fact, Spanish Anarchy was less about the adoption and implementation of a foreign politi-

cal ideology, such as Vladimir Lenin's revolutionary Marxism or Mikhail Bakunin's social anarchy, and more an inherently Spanish event. Its consistent inability to achieve coherent political goals once it had taken power instead suggests that it was a specific Spanish outlet for some essential human passion. In *The Rebel*, Albert Camus argues that the individual desire to rebel is fundamental to the human character. This philosophy of personal rebellion better explains Spanish anarchism than Bakunin's thought. The anarchist movement, and other radical polemics, of the Spanish Civil War are closer in resemblance to Camus's rebellious philosophy than the revolutionary ones of Bakunin or Marx.

## **The Rebel**

In *The Rebel*, Camus sought to unpack the centuries of revolution that had marked the period since the Enlightenment and its rejection of the divine right of kings. He found value in the natural inclination of the slave to rebel, to affirm that there is something in him which will not bow to every injustice, some inherent value worth protecting, something more precious than the mere continuance of his life.<sup>1</sup> It takes no great leap to see the way in which this reasoning would conform with revolutionary proletarian philosophies such as Communism and Anarchism. When the rebel accepts his own life as collateral in the struggle for this greater goal, he is elevated from an individual struggle into a broader human one. A single rebellion must be a rebellion on behalf of all mankind or it loses its source: its inherent humanity.<sup>2</sup> But Camus broke from these philosophies when

1 Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, Penguin Books, 2013, 1, 21-23.

2 *Ibid.*, 12, 19.

he differentiated between the natural human inclination for rebellion and the dialectical Marxist revolutions, wherein man becomes subject to a greater history, and any sin committed against the individual is absolved in this prophetic future. Using his logic of rebellion Camus denied the right to tyranny in service of history. When the revolution puts history before the individual, he relinquishes his status as rebel and becomes master.<sup>3</sup>

This particular view of revolutionary politics defined the anarchism of the Second Spanish Republic. It was a rebellious spirit stemming less from ideology or grand plans for a historical dialectic and more from a boiling rage at a history of injustices which had stewed for centuries. This natural human response to exploitation led not to a singular political revolution but to countless warring ideologies vying for power. In many ways, the Spanish Civil War was not a two-sided civil war but a series of various competing rebellions. As would be expected of a peasant and worker rebellion, its roots and causes can be found in Spain's centuries-old problems.

## **Spain before the War**

Most Spanish political movements have had a distinctly grass roots character. They have been, for the most part, the work of the peasantry and the common man who have risen up and rebelled. During the Reconquista, small barbarian kingdoms began the work of driving out the Moors and uniting under a new Christian identity. After Napoleon drove out the king and placed his brother on the throne, autonomous guerrilla bands of common men and women

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3 Ibid., 284-291.

made the country too odious to rule.<sup>4</sup> It was always the lower classes of Spain who acted as keepers of a fiery Iberian independence. Even conservative politicians such as Antonio Canovas, restorer of the monarchy, commented upon the indispensable nature of the Spanish peasant in the preservation of Spain.<sup>5</sup> This culture of grass root revolution and a history of political power needing to be rescued by the people provided the Spanish peasant with a unique and potent relationship between himself and those who governed him.

In the pre-industrial period, the church was the constant supporter and refuge for these revolutionary movements. Spain's strong Catholic faith provided an ideological basis as well as shelter and organization. Spain's lower classes could always rely on the Church as a way to influence politics and vice-versa. As Enlightenment ideas spread throughout Europe, the strength of the Church began to weaken, and its fear of liberal movements grew; it turned increasingly towards conservative politics and grew increasingly indebted and entwined with the landowning classes.<sup>6</sup> This betrayal shattered working class faith and turned the clergy from a source of hope to a constant reminder of their oppression on heaven and earth. Once the Church had abandoned its traditional role as both a defender of the lowly and a bridge across classes, the peasantry was left with its historical potency and its growing anger without any means to assuage it. By now they were an army awaiting an ideology.

In this moment of need just such radical godless philosophies

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4 Gerald Brenan, *The Spanish Labyrinth an Account of the Social and Political Background of the Civil War*, Univ. Press, 1967, 19-20, 312-313.

5 *Ibid.*, 318.

6 *Ibid.*, xxv.

were spreading throughout Europe. Spain would have representatives from each, including devout Stalinists, more-moderate socialist unions (UGT), who focused on worker's rights as opposed to outright class struggle before the war, and anarchist unions (CNT), who believed in the complete eradication of the state and the abolition of private property. These competing factions would all play crucial roles in the Second Republic along with the bourgeois liberal republicans, but it is the unique success of the anarchist movement in Spain that provides the greatest insight into the radical movement and its fundamental roots.

Anarchism, as defined by Mikhail Bakunin, is a political philosophy based foremost upon what must be destroyed as opposed to what should be built. Bakunin spent much of his writing arguing against the legitimacy of any State which requires coercion. He argued instead for willful agreements between localized autonomous collectives.<sup>7</sup> Both ideas spoke profoundly to a Spanish populace which had been enduring an incompetent centralizing government that, more often than not, enforced its will at the end of a rifle.<sup>8</sup> It also spoke to the inherent independence of the various Spanish provinces, all of which believed they had the right to govern themselves better than the central government. It was for this reason that Anarchism took most readily in Catalan, with its centuries of separatism, and Andalucía, where for centuries peasants had been revolting, abolishing currency, and collectivizing land in a medieval tradition.<sup>9</sup>

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7 Mikhail Bakunin, *God and the State*, Mother Earth Pub, 6-13.

8 Gerald Brenan, *The Spanish Labyrinth an Account of the Social and Political Background of the Civil War*, Univ. Pr, 1967, 115.

9 *Ibid.*, 314-316.

But what most thoroughly guides the Anarchist philosophy is rage. It is rebellion against society and is more concerned with declaring it unjust and worthy of destruction than getting lost in the weeds of governance. It is Camus's slave grabbing the hand of his master and declaring enough is enough whether or not God or history would be there to redeem him afterwards.

### **International Aide**

The Spanish Civil War is perhaps the most international civil war in history. It boasted three different foreign powers providing direct intervention and assistance as well as countless volunteers from various nations. This foreign involvement proved crucial in the outcome of the war. Nearly every major battle was decided by the extent to which each side could acquire foreign aid, a competition which the Nationalist rebels won handily.<sup>10</sup> It is thus important to examine foreign involvement and its ideological underpinnings.

Combatants from every major western Allied and Axis power would find their way into the conflict, but only the revolutionary states provided any official aid. The western democracies adhered to the Non-Intervention Agreement, wherein the European powers of the time and the United States agreed to avoid involvement in the war, including the selling of arms. Tired of the past and fearful for the future, they hoped to contain the conflict to Spain. Mussolini's Italy and Nazi Germany completely and immediately broke the agreement, with Stalin soon following in response.<sup>11</sup> Though hated

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10 Gabriel Jackson, *A Concise History of the Spanish Civil War*, Thames and Hudson, 1974, 12-17

11 Anthony Beevor, *The Spanish Civil War*, Peter Bedrick Books, 1983,

enemies, the German and Italian fascists and the Russian Bolsheviks both viewed themselves as freeing their peoples from an oppressive liberal world order. The liberal democracies, on the other-hand, allowed a democratically elected European government to face a military coup and slip into fascism due to fear of their radical elements. When the nations of the world looked to Spain, they did not see competing factions or a regional civil war; they saw a nest of revolutionary fire. Those nations, still attached to their conservative liberal-institutions, wanted no part of such rebellion.

But it was just that rebellion which enticed multitudes of independent citizens to volunteer and fight for a nation which was not their own. Of the 4,000 Americans who served in the volunteer Lincoln Brigade, 100 were black men serving in the first integrated unit in American history, one which would be led by a black officer, Oliver Law, the first African-American to lead a mixed-race battalion, much less a predominately white one. These men were mostly communists and black nationalists disillusioned with the false freedom of American society. They saw the fight in Spain as one for the emancipation of man. It was not a fight contingent solely on political ideals either, as they wished to intervene in the Second Italo-Ethiopian war, defending a heretical monarchy, the year before. It was one based upon self-determination and the inherent dignity of man.<sup>12</sup> It was an act of rebellion against a world which so often refused to acknowledge their humanity. Similar views on the conflict were shared by the white veterans of the Lincoln Brigade who would go on to be

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12 Robin D. G. Kelley, "This Ain't Ethiopia But It'll Do," *African Americans In the Spanish Civil War*, ed. Danny Duncan Collum, 5-43.

blacklisted as “premature anti-fascists” during the period of McCarthyism.<sup>13</sup> All these volunteers saw in Spain a great hope which they could not find in their own countries. They, like Camus’s slave, no longer identified with nation or creed but with a broader humanity worth the sacrifice of their own small life.

### **Crisis and Collapse**

Spain at the turn of the century was in crisis. It possessed a bloated and incompetent bureaucracy, a similarly expensive and incompetent army, and a monarchy with a habit of escaping to France at the first sign of trouble. The Spanish political system had no separation of powers: courts were controlled by the government, the *cortes* were elected through buying ballots or often just ignoring them, and political positions were bestowed through nepotism. In the last free election before the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, 113 deputies were close relatives of political leaders.<sup>14</sup> This Cosa Nostra system led to corruption so severe that in 1902, 50% to 80% of property taxes went unpaid. This gross corruption of the tax system benefited the large landowner over the small one who often paid 30 to 40 pesetas per acre while the large estates paid next to nothing.<sup>15</sup>

The same top down corruption could be found in the military with its own bloated officer corps. During the Moroccan War in 1923, there were 25,000 officers to 200,000 enlisted men.

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13 John Gerassi, *The Premature Antifascists: North American Volunteer in the Spanish Civil War 1936-39: an Oral History*, Praeger, 1986, 45.

14 Gerald Brenan, *The Spanish Labyrinth an Account of the Social and Political Background of the Civil War*, Univ. Press, 1967, 33.

15 *Ibid.*, 12-15.

The military comprised over half of the Spanish budget in 1922 and despite this was grossly anachronistic, possessing obsolete artillery and entirely lacking airplanes or tanks; most of its budget went to officer pay instead of modern armaments. This old bloated force was greatly unpopular with the common people whose sons were sent to die by the droves in pointless and failed colonial wars. It had also gained a taste for declaring the government in need of saving in the form of its *pronunciamentos*, a coup by any other name.<sup>16</sup> These factors made the military an unpopular institution even before the Civil War.

Between the central government, the military, and the church, it is difficult to find a single Spanish institution that was not an object of ire for the common Spaniard. In the face of such unpopular rule, the government and landowners responded with harsh reprisals. Strikes were violently disbanded. Anarchist leaders would be arrested without evidence and then shot in the back for supposedly attempting escape.<sup>17</sup> Liberal reforms did not rid the government of such atrocities. In 1934, a sergeant was found innocent by a military tribunal in Burgos for the shooting of unarmed protesters which resulted in the death of eleven and the wounding of thirty more. Moments such as this drove many anarchists, including the CNT to proclaim that social democracies were even fouler than monarchical rule.<sup>18</sup> The populace's rage would boil over countless times both in the streets and directly against the government, which had three

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16 Ibid., 91-94.

17 Ibid., 114.

18 Julian Casanova, *Anarchism, the Republic and Civil War in Spain: 1931-1939*, Taylor & Francis, 2014, 26-31.

Prime Ministers assassinated over a twenty-year span.<sup>19</sup> It was for these reasons that Manuel Azana, President of the Second Republic, had made order his primary objective and continued many repressive policies that, unintentionally or not, supported the land-owning classes to the continued fury of union organizers.<sup>20</sup>

The anger and mobilization of the under classes was not then strictly political, as the achievement of their political agendas rarely brought about an end to their actions. Even with a legitimate and representative government, in the process of labor and agrarian reforms, violence continued. It was not a revolution based upon pure political aims; it was a violent rebellion against an entire society which had become unjust and abusive, and it would not be peacefully resolved without the individual Spaniard's dignity restored. It was a moral movement before a political one.

This can be seen especially during the Civil War itself by the ways in which the radical movements attempted and failed to govern. At the outbreak of the war, the CNT would see a huge leap in its functional political power. In the summer of 1936 Catalonia would become, perhaps, the first anarchist community since man left the wilderness. They gained power the same way the anarchists had gained any of their progress: in the streets. Though fantasies of common men, women, and children manning makeshift barricades are more apocryphal than factual, it was the anarchist militias that provided the major defense of Barcelona and as such found them-

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19 Gerald Brenan, *The Spanish Labyrinth an Account of the Social and Political Background of the Civil War*, Univ. Press, 1967, 115.

20 Julian Casanova, *Anarchism, the Republic and Civil War in Spain: 1931-1939*, Taylor & Francis, 2014, 7-9.

selves at the levers of local power. The looming threat of fascism had tempered their puritanism, and a radical restructuring of society was not yet in the cards.<sup>21</sup>

Unlike the nationalist rebels, the anarchists could not rely on foreign aid from any western powers.<sup>22</sup> Production could not cease, and the conditions were now worse than under the previous regime. Many of the reforms that had been earned by their collective action now had to be suspended in order to keep the war economy competitive with the combined efforts of the Fascist machine. This, combined with rising inflation, made life for the proletariat in the proletarian paradise all the worse, and now the entire workforce had learned the effectiveness of sabotaging production through late arrival, slow labor, theft, and other forms of worker's protest.<sup>23</sup> It was now the anarchists who had to handle their own militant workers and their strikes. Even in Catalan, where the urban anarchist dream came as close to being realized as anywhere outside the Gates of Eden, its own proponents rebelled against it when they felt it to have degraded them.

Faced with difficulty in governing, the anarchists focused more on the destruction of the symbols of the old order than political organization. Churches were ransacked and turned to barracks, cafes, and dancehalls; icons were burned in mass bonfires, and priests

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21 Julian Casanova, *Anarchism, the Republic and Civil War in Spain: 1931-1939*, Taylor & Francis, 2014, 101-107.

22 Allen Guttman, *The Wound in the Heart: America and the Spanish Civil War*, The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962, 21.

23 Julian Casanova, *Anarchism, the Republic and Civil War in Spain: 1931-1939*, Taylor & Francis, 2014, 140.

were forbidden from wearing the marks of their office.<sup>24</sup> It was once again this base level anger, not politics, that spurred action. It was that same indomitable will to independence and dignity which most ingratiated Spain to anarchism which proved to be its greatest weakness once power was attained. The urge to destroy and liberate can only take one so far before the need to construct and organize arises. When this must be done with enemies on all sides, from an international Fascist conspiracy to Stalinists fearing a non-Soviet model of revolution to western nations abandoning a democracy in favor of a fascist dictatorship, it becomes nearly impossible.

This inability to sustain their boldest achievements can be seen again and again. At the start of the war, revolutionary posters were emblazoned with jack-booted women marching to freedom, rifles on shoulders, but in less than a year the rhetoric had returned to the standard patriarchal call of valiant motherhood, and women had all but vanished from the militias.<sup>25</sup> Old Spanish feelings outlasted revolutionary fervor. Even without women, these anarchist militias proved difficult to maintain. One by one they found themselves absorbed into the regular army. The egalitarian Durruti Column became just another division in the Republican Army after the death of anarchist folk hero Buenaventura Durruti. They assimilated politically as well, joining the central government with five members on Caballero's Council of Defense.<sup>26</sup> They had hoped to gain some

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24 Gerald Brenan, *The Spanish Labyrinth an Account of the Social and Political Background of the Civil War*, Univ. Press, 1967, 246.

25 Julian Casanova, *Anarchism, the Republic and Civil War in Spain: 1931-1939*, Taylor & Francis, 2014, 140. 109-111.

26 *Ibid.*, 114-118.

modicum of influence upon the central government as they had managed in their activist striking days, but this too proved detrimental. The CNT's willingness to deal with the government splintered their support and led to several prominent leaders breaking off and starting splinter groups, the very plot of the conservative members of the Republican government.<sup>27</sup> Without its radical polemic, in the eyes of the Spanish peasant, it was just another political party vying for power in a corrupted government.

This inability to rule proved disastrous in Andalucía when the anarchists attempted to solve Spain's great agrarian question which had plagued Spanish rulers since the Conde-Duque. Here they enacted Bakunin's ideas for the collectivization of rural land and social-and-gender equality. But in doing so they butted heads with centuries of cultural norms. The autonomy and independent nature of the Spanish people turned against them yet again. Andalusian peasants rebelled against both over-collectivization of land and the liberation of women. The communists seized this opportunity to drive a further wedge into their faction.<sup>28</sup> In one final overture for assistance, the Spanish anarchists sought aide from the International Association of Workers, by this time made up mostly of anarchists and Trotskyists. There, the only active anarchist movement on the planet was dressed down by foreign intellectuals for collaboration with the other anti-fascist movements and impure ideology. By the end of the conference the Spanish delegation returned to its trenches aidless and the other delegates returned to their downy beds, heads held

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27      *Ibid.*, 121-122.

28      *Ibid.*, 133-36.

high for their purity of thought.<sup>29</sup> They were too radical in the field and not radical enough in the lecture hall. Spanish anarchism was never a purely ideological movement. No matter the source of the ideas or the slogans, the movement was distinctly Spanish, rooted in Spanish traditions, Spanish culture, and Spanish history. Its proponents in the field were interested in destroying the chains which had enslaved them, and anarchism promised the largest fire.

### **Conclusion**

For the illiterate peasants and workers who made up the vast majority of the radical militias, it was never a question of fulfilling any ideology; it was instead the release of centuries of pent up anger. Anarchism was not a prescription for their problems but a tool for the destruction of the state which had so unjustly ruled them. It was not Marx's end of history, nor was it Bakunin's prelapsarian collective, it was instead Camus's slave, declaring his humanity in the face of an unjust master and dying for the audacity.

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29 Ibid., 149.

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