

*“The question is not: who has the guns? but rather: what do the people with the guns do? 10,000 or 100,000 proletarians armed to the teeth are nothing if they place their trust in anything beside their own power to change the world. Otherwise, the next day, the next month or the next year, the power whose authority they recognize will take away the guns which they failed to use against it.”*

In this pamphlet:

“When Insurrections Die”  
by Gilles Dauvé (1979)

## **WHEN INSURRECTIONS DIE**



# When Insurrections Die

by Gilles Dauvé (a.k.a. Jean Barrot) (1979)

## Brest-Litovsk, 1917 and 1939

*“If the Russian Revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that both complement each other, the present Russian common ownership of land may serve as the starting point for a communist development.”*

Marx/Engels - Preface to the Russian edition of the manifesto, 1882.

This perspective was not realized. The European industrial proletariat missed its rendez-vous with a revitalized Russian peasant commune.

Brest-Litovsk, Poland, December 1917: the Bolsheviks propose peace without annexations to a Germany intent on taking over a large swath of the old Tsarist empire, stretching from Finland to the Caucasus. But in February 1918, the German soldiers, “proletarians in uniform” though they were, obey their officers and resume the offensive against a Russia still ruled by soviets. No fraternization occurs, and the revolutionary war advocated by the Bolshevik left proves impossible. In March, Trotsky has to sign a peace treaty dictated by the Kaiser’s generals. “We’re trading space for time”, as Lenin put it, and in fact, in November, the German defeat turns the treaty into a scrap of paper. Nevertheless, practical proof of the international link-up of the exploited had failed to materialize. A few months later, returning to civilian life with the war’s end, these same proletarians confront the alliance of the official workers’ movement and the Freikorps. Defeat follows defeat: in Berlin, Bavaria and then in Hungary in 1919; the Red Army of the Ruhr in 1920; the March Action in 1921...

September 1939. Hitler and Stalin have just carved up Poland. At the border bridge of Brest-Litovsk, several hundred members of the KPD, refugees in the USSR subsequently arrested as “counter-revolutionaries” or “fascists”, are taken from Stalinist prisons and handed over to the Gestapo.

1917-1937, twenty years that shook the world. The succession of horrors represented by fascism, then by World War II and the subsequent upheavals, are the effect of a gigantic social crisis opening with the mutinies of 1917 and closed by the Spanish Civil War\*.

\*This is a shorter, entirely reconceived version of the preface to the collection *Bilan/Contre-révolution en Espagne 1936-1939*, Paris, 1979 (now out of print). A text in progress will deal further with the question of the development of fascism, and thus of anti-fascism, in our own epoch.

the Kronstadt mutineers (who were, for their part, only raising democratic demands) in the name of a socialism it could not realize, and which goes on to justify its actions with lies and calumny, is only demonstrating that it no longer has any communist character. Lenin died his physical death in 1924, but the revolutionary Lenin had died as head of state in 1921, if not earlier. The Bolshevik leaders were left with no option but to become the managers of capitalism.

As the hypertrophy of a political perspective bent on eliminating the obstacles which it could not subvert, the October Revolution also dissolved into a self-cannibalizing civil war. Its pathos was that of a power which, unable to transform society, degenerated into a counter-revolutionary force. In the Spanish tragedy, the proletarians, because they had left their own terrain, wound up prisoners of a conflict in which the bourgeoisie and its state were present behind the front lines on both sides. In 1936-37, the proletarians of Spain were not fighting against Franco alone, but also against the fascist countries, against the democracies and the farce of “non-intervention”, against their own state, against the Soviet Union, against....

1936-37 closed the historical moment opened by 1917.

In a future revolutionary period, the most subtle and most dangerous defenders of capitalism will not be the people shouting pro-capitalist and pro-statist slogans, but those who have understood the possible point of a total rupture.

Far from eulogizing advertising and obedience, they will propose to change life... but to that end will call for building a true democratic power first. If they succeed in dominating the situation, the creation of this new political form will use up people’s energies, fritter away radical aspirations and, with the means becoming the end, will once again turn revolution into an ideology. Against them, and of course against overtly capitalist reaction, the proletarians’ only path to success will be the multiplication and coordinated extension of concrete communist initiatives, which will naturally be denounced as anti-democratic or even as... “fascist”. The struggle to establish places and moments for deliberation and decision, making possible the autonomy of the movement, is inseparable from practical measures aimed at changing life.

*“(...) in all past revolutions, the mode of activity has always remained intact and the only issue has been a different distribution of this activity and a redistribution of work among different persons; whereas the communist revolution is directed against the mode of activity as it has existed up till now and abolishes work and the domination of all classes by abolishing classes themselves, because it is carried out by the class which is no longer, in society, considered as a class and which is already the expression of the dissolution of all classes and all nationalities, etc. within society itself (...)”*

(Marx, The German Ideology, 1845-46) 29

## “Fascism and Big Capital”

If it is precisely the case, to use the formulation made famous by Daniel Guerin, that fascism serves the interests of big capital, 99% of the people articulating this perfectly accurate thesis hasten to add that, in spite of everything, fascism could have been averted in 1922 or 1933 if the workers’ movement and/or the democrats had mounted enough pressure to bar it from power. If only, in 1921, the Italian Socialist Party and the newly-founded Italian Communist Party had allied with republican forces to stop Mussolini; if only, at the beginning of the thirties, the KPD had not launched a fratricidal struggle against the SPD, Europe would have been spared one of the most ferocious dictatorships in history, a second world war, a Nazi empire of almost continental dimensions, the concentration camps, and the extermination of the Jews. Above and beyond its very true observations about classes, the state, and the ties between fascism and big industry, this vision fails to see that fascism arose out of a two-fold failure: the failure of the revolutionaries after World War I, crushed as they were by Social Democracy and parliamentary democracy, and then, in the course of the 1920’s, the failure of the democrats and Social Democrats in managing capital. Without a grasp of the preceding period as well as of the earlier phase of class struggle and its limits, the coming to power and, still more, the nature of fascism remain incomprehensible. For the rest, it is no accident that Guerin misjudges both the Popular Front, in which he sees a “failed revolution”, and the real significance of fascism .

What is the real thrust of fascism, if not the economic and political unification of capital, a tendency which has become general since 1914? Fascism was a particular way of bringing about that unity in countries-- Italy and Germany-- where, even though the revolution had been snuffed out, the state was unable to impose order, including order in the ranks of the bourgeoisie. Mussolini was no Thiers, with a solid base of power, ordering regular armed forces to massacre the Communards. An essential aspect of fascism is its birth in the streets, its use of disorder to impose order, its mobilization of the old middle classes half-crazed by their own decline, and its regeneration, from without, of a state unable to deal with the crisis of capitalism . Fascism was an effort of the bourgeoisie to forcibly tame its own contradictions, to turn working-class methods of mass mobilization to its own advantage, and to deploy all the resources of the modern state, first against an internal enemy, then against an external one.

This was indeed a crisis of the state, during the transition to the total domination of capital over society. First, worker organizations had been necessary to deal with the proletarian upsurge; then fascism was required to put an end to the ensuing disorder. This disorder was, of course, not revolutionary, but it was paralyzing, and stood in the way of solutions which, as a result, could only be violent. The crisis was only erratically overcome at the time; the fascist state was efficient only in appearance,

because it forcibly integrated the wage-labor work force, and artificially buried conflicts by projecting them into militarist adventure. But the crisis was overcome, relatively, by the multi-tentacled democratic state established in 1945, which potentially appropriated all of fascism's methods, and added some of its own, since it neutralizes wage-worker organizations without destroying them. Parliaments have lost control over the executive. With welfare or with workfare, by modern techniques of surveillance or by state assistance extended to millions of individuals, in short by a system which makes everyone more and more dependent, social unification goes beyond anything achieved by fascist terror, but fascism as a specific movement has disappeared. It corresponded to the forced-march discipline of the bourgeoisie, under the pressure of the state, in the particular context of newly-created states hard-pressed to also constitute themselves as nations.

The bourgeoisie even took the word "fascism" from working-class organizations in Italy, which were often called *fasci*. It is significant that fascism first defined itself as a form of organization and not as a program. Its only program is to organize everyone, to forcibly make the component parts of society converge. Dictatorship is not a weapon of capital (as if capital could replace it with other, less brutal weapons); dictatorship is one of its tendencies, a tendency realized whenever it is deemed necessary. A "return" to parliamentary democracy, as it occurred (for example) in Germany after 1945, indicates that dictatorship is useless for integrating the masses into the state (at least until the next time). The problem is therefore not the fact that democracy ensures a more pliant domination than dictatorship; anyone would prefer being exploited in the Swedish mode to being abducted by the henchmen of Pinochet. But does one have the CHOICE? Even the gentle democracy of Scandinavia would be transformed into dictatorship if circumstances demanded it. The state can only have one function, which it fulfills democratically or dictatorially. The fact that the former is less harsh does not mean that it is possible to reorient the state to dispense with the latter. Capitalism's forms depend no more on the preferences of wage workers than they do on the intentions of the bourgeoisie. Weimar capitulated to Hitler with open arms. Leon Blum's Popular Front did not "avoid fascism", because in 1936 France required neither an authoritarian unification of capital nor a shrinking of its middle classes.

There is no political "choice" to which proletarians could be enticed or which they could forcibly impose. Democracy is not dictatorship, but democracy does prepare dictatorship, and prepares itself for dictatorship.

The essence of anti-fascism consists in resisting fascism by defending democracy; it no longer struggles against capitalism but seeks to pressure capitalism into renouncing the totalitarian option. Since socialism is identified with total democracy, and capitalism with an accelerating tendency to fascism, the antagonisms between proletariat and capital, communism and wage labor, proletariat and state, are rejected for a counterposition of democracy and fascism presented as the quintessential revolutionary

and oppression now in the hands of the state will cease to be operative. It is because wage-labor society deprives us of our means of living, producing and communicating, not stopping short of the invasion of once-private space and of our emotional lives, that its state is all-powerful. The best guarantee against the reappearance of a new structure of power over us is the deepest possible appropriation of the conditions of existence, at every level. For example, even if we don't want everyone generating their own electricity in their basements, the domination of the Leviathan also comes from the fact that energy (a significant term, another English word for which is power) makes us dependent on industrial complexes which, nuclear or not, necessarily remain external to us and escape any control.

To conceive the destruction of the state as an armed struggle against the police and the armed forces is to mistake the part for the whole. Communism is first of all activity. A mode of life in which men and women produce their social existence paralyzes or reabsorbs the emergence of separate powers.

## Balance Sheet

The Spanish failure of 1936-37 is symmetrical to the Russian failure of 1917-21. The Russian workers were able to seize power, but not to use it for a communist transformation. Backwardness, economic ruin and international isolation by themselves do not explain the involution. The perspective set out by Marx, and perhaps applicable in a different way after 1917, of a renaissance in a new form of the communal agrarian structures, was at the time not even thinkable. Leaving aside Lenin's eulogy for Taylorism, and Trotsky's justification of military labor, for almost all the Bolsheviks and the overwhelming majority of the Third International, including the communist left, socialism meant a capitalist socialization PLUS soviets, and the agriculture of the future was conceived as the large landholdings managed democratically. (The difference-- and it is a major one!-- between the German-Dutch left and the Comintern on this question was that the left took soviets and democracy seriously, whereas the Russian communists--as their practice proved--saw in them nothing but tactical formulas.

In any case, the Bolsheviks are the best illustration of what happens to a power which is only a power, and which has to hold on without changing real conditions very much. Very logically and, at first, in perfectly good faith, the state of the soviets perpetuated itself at any cost, first in the perspective of world revolution, then for itself, with the absolute priority being to preserve the unity of a society coming apart at the seams. This explains, on one hand, the concessions to small peasant property, followed by requisitions, both of which resulted in a further unraveling of any communal life or production. This explains, on the other hand, the repression against workers and against any opposition within the party. A power which gets to the point of massacring

by coupons has never being enough to eradicate the wage-labor relationship. What money brings together cannot be free, and sooner or later money becomes its master.

Substituting association for competition on a local basis was a guaranteed recipe for disaster. Because if the collective did abolish private property within itself, it also set itself up as a distinct entity and as a particular element among others in the global economy, and therefore as a private collective, compelled to buy and to sell, to engage in commerce with the outside world, thereby becoming in its turn an enterprise which, like it or not, had to play its part in regional, national and world competition, or else disappear.

One can only rejoice in the fact that one part of Spain imploded: what mainstream opinion calls “anarchy” is the necessary condition for revolution, as Marx wrote in his own time. But these movements made their subversive impact on the basis of a centrifugal force which also fed into localism. Rejuvenated communitarian ties also locked everyone into their village and their barrio, as if the point were to rediscover a lost world and a degraded humanity, to counterpose the working-class neighborhood to the metropolis, the self-managed commune to the vast capitalist domain, the countryside of the common folk to the commercialized city, in a word the poor to the rich, the small to the large and the local to the international, all the while forgetting that a cooperative is often the synonym for the longest road to capitalism.

There is no revolution without the destruction of the state: that is the Spanish “lesson”. But be that as it may, a revolution is not a political upheaval, but a social movement in which the destruction of the state and the elaboration of new modes of debate and decision go hand in hand with communization. We don’t want “power”; we want the power to change all of life. As an historical process extending over generations, can one imagine, over such a time frame, continuing to pay wages for food and lodging? If the revolution is supposed to be political first and social later, it would create an apparatus whose sole function would be the struggle against the supporters of the old world, i.e. a negative function of repression, a system of control resting on no other content than its “program” and its will to realize communism the day that conditions finally allow for it. This is how a revolution ideologizes itself and legitimizes the birth of a specialized stratum assigned to oversee the maturation and the expectation of the ever-radiant day after tomorrow. The very stuff of politics is not being able, and not wanting, to change anything: it brings together what is separated without going any further. Power is there, it manages, it administers, it oversees, it calms, it represses: it is. Political domination (in which a whole school of thought sees problem #1) flows from the incapacity of human beings to take charge of themselves, and to organize their lives and their activity. This domination persists only through the radical dispossession which characterizes the proletarian. When everyone participates in the production of their existence, the capacity for pressure

perspective. The official left and far-left tell us that a real change would be the realization, at last, of the ideals of 1789, endlessly betrayed by the bourgeoisie. The new world? Why, it is already here, to some extent, in embryos to be preserved, in little buds to be tended: already-existing democratic rights must be pushed further and further within an infinitely perfectible society, with ever-greater daily doses of democracy, until the achievement of complete democracy, or socialism.

Thus reduced to anti-fascist resistance, social critique is enlisted in dithyrambs to everything it once denounced, and gives up nothing less than that shop-worn affair, revolution, for gradualism, a variant on the “peaceful transition to socialism” once advocated by the Communist Parties, and derided, before 1968, by anyone serious about changing the world. The retrogression is palpable.

We won’t invite ridicule by accusing the left and the far left of having discarded a communist perspective which they knew in reality only when opposing it. It is all too obvious that anti-fascism renounces revolution. But anti-fascism fails exactly where its “realism” claims to be effective: in preventing a possible dictatorial mutation of society.

Bourgeois democracy is a phase in capital’s seizure of power, and its extension in the twentieth century completes capital’s domination by intensifying the isolation of individuals. Proposed as a remedy for the separation between men and community, between human activity and society, and between classes, democracy will never be able to solve the problem of the most separated society in history. As a form forever incapable of modifying its content, democracy is only a part of the problem to which it claims to be the solution. Each time it claims to strengthen the “social bond”, democracy contributes to its dissolution. Each time it papers over the contradictions of the commodity, it does so by tightening the hold of the “safety net” which the state has placed under social relations. Even in their own desperately resigned terms, the antifascists, to be credible, have to explain to us how local democracy is compatible with the colonization of the commodity which empties out public space and fills up the shopping malls. They have to explain how an omnipresent state to which people constantly turn for protection and help, this veritable machine for producing social “good”, will not commit “evil” when explosive contradictions require it to restore order. Fascism is the adulation of the statist monster, while anti-fascism is its more subtle apology. The fight for a democratic state is inevitably a fight to consolidate the state, and far from crippling totalitarianism, such a fight increases totalitarianism’s stranglehold on society.

## Rome, 1919-1922

The countries where fascism triumphed are also the countries in which the revolutionary assault after World War I matured into a series of armed

insurrections. In Italy, an important part of the proletariat, using its own methods and goals, directly confronted fascism. There was nothing specifically anti-fascist about its struggle: fighting capital compelled workers to fight both the Blackshirts and the cops of parliamentary democracy .

Fascism is unique in giving counter-revolution a mass base and in mimicking revolution. Fascism turns the call to “transform the imperialist war into civil war” against the workers’ movement, and it appears as a reaction of demobilized veterans returning to civilian life, where they are nothing, held together by nothing but collective violence, and bent on destroying everything they imagine to be a cause of their dispossession: trouble-makers, subversives, enemies of the nation, etc.

Thus from the outset fascism became an auxiliary of the police in rural areas, putting down the agricultural proletariat with bullets, but at the same time developing a frenzied anti-capitalist demagoguery. In 1919, when it represented nothing, fascism demanded the abolition of the monarchy, the Senate and all titles of nobility, the vote for women, the confiscation of the property of the clergy, and the expropriation of the big landowners and industrialists. Fighting against the worker in the name of the “producer”, Mussolini exalted the memory of the Red Week of 1914 (which had seen a wave of riots, particularly in Ancona and Naples), and hailed the positive role of unions in linking the worker to the nation. Fascism’s goal was the authoritarian restoration of the state, in order to create a new state structure capable (in contrast to democracy, said Mussolini), of limiting big capital and of controlling the commodity logic which was eroding values, social ties and work.

Traditionally, the bourgeoisie had tried to deny the reality of social contradictions; fascism, on the contrary, proclaimed them with violence, denying their existence between classes and transposing them to the struggle between nations, denouncing Italy’s fate as a “proletarian nation”.

Fascist repression was unleashed after a proletarian failure engineered mainly by democracy and its main fallback options: the parties and unions, which alone can defeat the workers by employing direct and indirect methods in tandem. It is false to present fascism’s arrival in power as the culmination of street battles in which it defeated the workers. In Germany, the proletarians had been crushed eleven or twelve years earlier. In Italy they were defeated by both ballots and bullets.

In 1919, federating pre-existing elements with other elements close to him politically, Mussolini founded his fasci. To counter clubs and revolvers, while Italy was exploding along with the rest of Europe, democracy called... for a vote, from which a moderate and socialist majority emerged.

“Victory, the election of 150 socialist deputies, was won at the cost of the ebb of the insurrectionary movement and the political general strike, and the rollback of the gains that had already been won”, Bordiga commented 40 years later.

At the time of the factory occupations of 1920, the state, holding

money as the expression and abstraction of real relationships, but as a tool of measurement, an accounting device, and they thereby reduced socialism to a different management of the same categories and fundamental components of capitalism.

The failure of the measures taken against commodity relations was not due to the power of the UGT union (which was opposed to the collectivizations) over the banks: as if the abolition of money was first of all something to be undertaken by the centers of power! The closing of private banks and of the central bank puts an end to mercantile relations only if production and life are organized in a way no longer mediated by the commodity, and if they, on this basis, gradually come to dominate the totality of social relationships. Money is not the “evil” to be removed from an otherwise “good” production, but the manifestation (today becoming increasingly immaterial) of the commodity character of all aspects of life. It cannot be destroyed by eliminating signs, but only when exchange itself disappears as a social relationship.

In fact, only agrarian collectives managed to do without money, and they often did so with the help of local currencies, with coupons often being used as “internal money”. Unable to extend non-commodity production beyond different autonomous zones with no scope for global action, the soviets, collectives and liberated villages were transformed into precarious communities and sooner or later were either destroyed from within or violently suppressed by either the fascists or the republicans. In Aragon, the column of the Stalinist Lister made this a specialty. Entering the village of Calanda, his first act was to write on a wall: “Collectivizations are theft”.

## Collectivize or Communize?

Ever since the First International, anarchism has counterposed the collective appropriation of the means of production to Social Democratic statification. Both visions, nonetheless, begin from the same exigency of collective management. But the problem is: management of what? Of course, what Social Democracy carried out from above, and bureaucratically, the Spanish proletarians practiced at the base, armed, with each individual responsible to everyone, thereby taking the land and the factories away from a minority specialized in the organizing and exploitation of others. The opposite, in short, of the co-management the Coal Board by socialist or Stalinist unions. Nevertheless, the fact that a collectivity, rather than the state or a bureaucracy, takes the production of its material life into its own hands does not, by itself, do away with the capitalist character of that life.

Wage labor means the passage of an activity, whatever it might be, plowing a field or printing a newspaper, through the form of money. This money, even as it makes the activity possible, is also expanded by it.

26 Equalizing wages, deciding everything collectively, and replacing currency

witness (as do, in their own way, the Russian and German experiences) to a communist movement remaking all of society, and to its formidable subversive capacities when it emerges on a large scale, it is equally true that its fate was sealed from the summer of 1936 onward. The Spanish Civil War proved both the revolutionary vigor of communitarian bonds and forms which have been penetrated by capital but which are not yet directly reproduced by capital, and also their impotence, taken by themselves, in bringing off a revolution. In the absence of an assault against the state, and of the establishment of different relationships throughout the country, they condemned themselves to a fragmentary self-management preserving the content and even the forms of capitalism, notably money and the division of activities by individual enterprise. Any persistence of wage labor perpetuates the hierarchy of functions and incomes.

Communist measures could have undermined the social bases of the two states (republican and nationalist), if only by beginning to resolve the agrarian question: in the thirties, more than half the population was under-nourished. A subversive force erupted, bringing to the fore the most oppressed strata, those farthest from “political life” (e.g. women), but it could not go all the way and eradicate the system root and branch.

At the time, the workers’ movement in the major industrial countries corresponded to those regions of the world which had been socialized by a total domination of capital over society, where communism was both closer at hand as a result of this socialization, and at the same time farther away because of the dissolution of all relations into commodity form. The new world, in these countries, was most commonly conceived as a worker’s world, if not necessarily as an industrial one.

The Spanish proletariat, on the contrary, continued to be shaped by a capitalist penetration of society that was more quantitative than qualitative. From this reality it drew both its strength and its weakness, as attested by the tradition and demands for autonomy represented by anarchism.

“In the last hundred years, there has not been a single uprising in Andalusia which has not resulted in the creation of communes, the sharing out of land, the abolition of money and a declaration of independence (...) the anarchism of the workers is not very different. They too demand, first of all, the possibility of managing their industrial community or their union themselves, and then the reduction of working hours and of the effort required from everyone (...).

Vast numbers of proposals were made, some of them were realized, and others were initiated. Communism is also the re-appropriation of the conditions of existence.

One of the main weaknesses was the attitude towards money. The “disappearance of money” is meaningful only if it entails more than the replacement of one instrument for measuring value with another one (such as labor coupons). But, like the majority of radical groups, whether they call themselves Marxist or anarchist, Spanish proletarians did not see

back from a head-on assault, allowed the proletariat to exhaust itself, with the support of the CGL (a majority-socialist union), which wore down the strikes when it did not break them openly.

As soon as the fasci appeared, sacking the Case di Popolo, the police either turned a blind eye or confiscated the workers’ guns. The courts showed the fasci the greatest indulgence, and the army tolerated their exactions when it did not actually assist them. This open but unofficial support became quasi-official with the Bonomi circular of Oct.. 20, 1921, providing 60,000 demobilized officers to take command of Mussolini’s assault groups. What did the parties do? Those liberals allied with the right did not hesitate to form a “national bloc”, including the fascists, for the elections of May 1921. In June-July of the same year, confronting an adversary without the slightest scruple, the PSI concluded a meaningless “pacification pact” whose only concrete effect was to further disorient the workers.

Faced with an obviously political reaction, the C.G.L. declared itself apolitical. Sensing that Mussolini had power within his grasp, the union leaders dreamed of a tacit agreement of mutual tolerance with the fascists, and called on the proletariat to stay out of the face-off between the CP and the National Fascist Party.

Until August 1922, fascism scarcely existed outside the agrarian regimes, mainly in the north, where it eradicated all traces of autonomous agrarian worker unionism. In 1919, fascists did burn down the headquarters of the socialist daily newspaper, but they held back from any role as strikebreakers in 1920, and even gave verbal support to worker demands. In the urban areas, the fasci rarely were dominant. Their “March on Ravenna” (September 1921) was easily routed. In November 1921, in Rome, a general strike prevented a fascist congress from taking place. In May 1922, the fascists tried again, and were stopped again.

The scenario varied little. A localized fascist attack would be met by a working- class counter-attack, which would then relent (following calls for moderation from the reformist workers’ movement) as soon as reactionary pressure tapered off; the proletarians trusted the democrats to dismantle the armed bands. The fascist threat would pull back, regroup and go elsewhere, over time making itself credible to the same state from which the masses were expecting a solution. The proletarians were quicker to recognize the enemy in the black shirt of the street thug than in the “normal” form of a cop or soldier, draped in a legality sanctioned by habit, law and universal suffrage.

At the beginning of July 1922, the C.G.L., by a two-thirds majority (against the Communist minority’s one-third), declared its support for “any government guaranteeing the restoration of basic freedoms”. In the same month, the fascists seriously stepped up their attempts to penetrate the northern cities...

On August 1, the Alliance of Labor, which included the railway workers’ union, the C.G.L. and the anarchist U.S.I., called a general strike. Despite broad success, the Alliance officially called off the strike on the 3rd.

In numerous cities, however, it continued in insurrectionary form, which was finally contained only by a combined effort of the police and the military, supported by naval cannon, and, of course, reinforced by the fascists.

Who defeated this proletarian energy? The general strike was broken by the state and the fasci but it was also smothered by democracy, and its failure opened the way to a fascist solution to the crisis.

What followed was far less a coup d'état than a transfer of power with the support of a whole array of forces. The "March on Rome" of the Duce (who actually took the train) was less a showdown than a bit of theatre: the fascists went through the motions of assaulting the state, the state went through the motions of defending itself, and Mussolini took power. His ultimatum of October 24 ("We Want To Become the State!") was not a threat of civil war, but a signal to the ruling class that the National Fascist Party represented the only force capable of restoring state authority, and of assuring the political unity of the country. The army could still have contained the fascist groups gathered in Rome, which were badly equipped and notoriously inferior on the military level, and the state could have withstood the seditious pressure. But the game was not being played on the military level. Under the influence of Badoglio, in particular (the commander-in-chief in 1919-1921) legitimate authority caved in. The king refused to proclaim a state of emergency, and on the 30th he asked the Duce to form a new government. The liberals -- the same people anti-fascism counts on to stop fascism--joined the government. With the exception of the Socialists and the Communists, all parties sought a rapprochement with the PNF and voted for Mussolini: the parliament, with only 35 fascist deputies, supported Mussolini's investiture 306-116. Giolitti himself, the great liberal icon of the time, an authoritarian reformer who had often been president of the state council before the war and who had again been head of state in 1920-1921, whom fashionable thought still fancies in retrospect as the sole politician capable of opposing Mussolini, supported him up to 1924. The dictator not only received his power from democracy; democracy ratified him.

We might add that in the following months, several unions, including (among others) those of the railway workers and the sailors, declared themselves "national", pro-patriotic and therefore not hostile to the regime; repression did not spare them.

## Turin 1943

If Italian democracy surrendered to fascism almost without a fight, the latter spawned democracy anew when it no longer corresponded to the balance of social and political forces.

The central question after 1943, as in 1919, was how to control the working class. In Italy even more than in other countries, the end of World War II shows the class dimension of international conflict, which can never be

to "take"; its task is to render harmless or destroy everything from which such places draw their sustenance.

## The Failure of the Collectivizations

The depth and breadth of the industrial and agrarian socializations after July 1936 was no historical fluke. Marx noted the Spanish tradition of popular autonomy, and the gap between the people and the state which made itself manifest in the anti-Napoleonic war, and then in the revolutions of the nineteenth century, which renewed age-old communal resistance to the power of the dynasty. The absolute monarchy, he observed, did not shake up various social strata to forge a modern state, but rather had left the living forces of the country intact. Napoleon could see Spain as a "cadaver", "but if the Spanish state was indeed dead, Spanish society was full of life" and "what we call the state in the modern sense of the word is materialized, in reality, only in the army, in keeping with the exclusively "provincial" life of the people".

In the Spain of 1936, the bourgeois revolution had been made, and it was vain to dream of scenarios such as 1917, not to mention 1848 or 1789. But if the bourgeoisie dominated politically, and capital dominated economically, they were nowhere near the creation of a unified internal market and a modern state apparatus, the subjugation of society as a whole, and the domination of local life and its particularisms. For Marx, in 1854, a "despotic" government coexisted with a lack of unity that extended to the point of different currencies and different systems of taxation: his observation still had some validity 80 years later. The state was neither able to stimulate industry nor carry out agrarian reform; it could neither extract from agriculture the profits necessary for capital accumulation, nor unify the regions, nor still less keep down the proletarians of the cities and the countryside.

It was thus almost naturally that the shock of July 1936 gave rise, on the margins of political power, to a social movement whose realizations with communist potential were reabsorbed by the state they allowed to remain intact. The first months of a revolution, already ebbing, but whose extent still concealed its failure, looked like nothing so much as a splintering process in which each region, commune, enterprise, collective and municipality escaped the central authority without attacking it, and set out to live differently. Anarchism, and even the regionalism of the POUM, express this Spanish originality within the workers' movement, which is wrongly grasped if one sees only the negative side of this "late development" of capitalism. Even the ebb of 1937 did not eradicate the élan of hundreds of thousands of workers and peasants who took over land, factories, neighborhoods, villages, seizing property and socializing production with an autonomy and a solidarity in daily life which struck both observers and participants. Sad to say, if these countless acts and deeds, sometimes extending over several years, bear

one day cooks will administer society instead of politicians. But these same “Marxists” can still practice the most servile state idolatry, once they come to see the state as the slightest agent of progress and of historical necessity. Because they see the future as a capitalist socialization without capitalists, as a world still based on wage labor but egalitarian, democratized and planned, every thing prepares them to accept a state (transitional, to be sure) and to go off to war for a capitalist state they see as bad, but against another one they see as worse.

For its part, anarchism overestimates state power by seeing authority as the main enemy, and thus underestimates it with the belief that state power can be destroyed by itself. Anarchism does not see the effective role of the state as the guarantor but not the creator of the wage labor relation. The state represents and unifies capital, it is neither capital’s motor nor its centerpiece. Anarchism deduced, from the undeniable fact that the masses were armed, that the state was losing its substance. But the substance of the state resides not in its institutional forms, but in its unifying function. The state ensures the tie which human beings cannot or dare not create among themselves, and creates a web of services which are both parasitic and real. When, in the summer of 1936, it seemed weak in republican Spain, it subsisted as a framework capable of picking up the pieces of capitalist society, and it continued to live in hibernation. Then it awoke and gained new strength when the social relations opened up by subversion were loosened or were torn apart; it revived the hibernating organs, and, the occasion permitting, assumed control over those which subversion had caused to emerge. What had been seen as a mere nuisance showed itself capable not merely of revival, but of emptying out the parallel forms of power in which the revolution thought it had best embodied itself.

The CNT’s ultimate justification of its role comes down to the idea that the legal government no longer really had power, because the workers’ movement had taken power de facto. “(...) the government has ceased to be a force oppressing the working class, in the same way that the state is no longer the organism dividing society into classes” (Solidaridad Obrera, September 1936)

No less than “Marxism”, anarchism fetishizes the state and imagines it as being incarnated in a place. Blanqui had already thrown his little flock into attacks on city halls or on barracks, but he at least never claimed to base his actions on the proletarian movement, only on a minority which would awaken the people. A century later, the CNT declared the Spanish state to be a phantom relative to the tangible reality of the “social organizations” (i.e. militias, unions). But the existence of the state, its *raison d’être*, is to paper over the shortcomings of “civil” society by a system of relations, of links, of concentrations of force, an administrative, police, judicial, military network which goes “on hold”, as a backup, in times of crisis, awaiting the moment when police investigators can go sniffing into the files of the social services. The revolution has no Bastille, police station or governor’s mansion

explained by military logic alone. A general strike erupted at FIAT in October 1942. In March 1943, a strike wave rocked Turin and Milan, including attempts at forming workers’ councils. In 1943-1945, worker groups emerged, sometimes independent of the CP, sometimes calling themselves “Bordigists”, often simultaneously antifascist, rossi, and armed. The regime could no longer maintain social equilibrium, just as the German alliance was becoming untenable against the rise of the Anglo-Americans, who were seen in every quarter as the future masters of western Europe. Changing sides meant allying with the winners-to-be, but also meant rerouting worker revolts and partisan groups into a patriotic objective with a social content. On July 10, 1943, the Allies landed in Sicily. On the 24th, finding himself in a 19-17 minority on the Grand Fascist Council, Mussolini resigned. Rarely has a dictator had to step aside for a majority vote.

Marshal Badoglio, who had been a dignitary of the regime ever since his support for the March on Rome, and who wanted to prevent, in his own words, “the collapse of the regime from swinging too far to the left”, formed a government which was still fascist but which no longer included the Duce, and turned to the democratic opposition. The democrats refused to participate, making the departure of the king a condition. After a second transitional government, Badoglio formed a third in April 1944, which included the leader of the Communist Party, Togliatti. Under the pressure of the Allies and of the CP, the democrats agreed to accept the king (the Republic would be proclaimed by referendum in 1946). But Badoglio stirred up too many bad memories. In June, Bonomi, who 23 years earlier had ordered the officers to take over the fasci, formed the first ministry to actually exclude the fascists, and the situation was reoriented around the tripartite formula (PC+PS+Christian Democracy) which would dominate in both Italy and France in the first years after the war.

This game of musical chairs, often played by the self-same political class, was the theatre prop behind which democracy metamorphosed into dictatorship, and vice-versa, while the phases of equilibrium and disequilibrium in the conflicts of classes and nations unleashed a succession and recombination of political forms aimed at maintaining the same state, underwriting the same content. No one was more qualified to say it than the Spanish CP, when it declared, either out of cynicism or naïveté, during the transition from Francoism to democratic monarchy in the mid-1970’s:

“Spanish society wants everything to be transformed so that the normal functioning of the state can be assured, without detours or social convulsions. The continuity of the state requires the non-continuity of the regime.”

## ***Volksgemeinschaft vs. Gemeinwesen***

Counter-revolution inevitably triumphs on the terrain of revolution. Through its “people’s community”, National Socialism would claim to have eliminated the parliamentarism and bourgeois democracy against which the proletariat revolted after 1917. But the conservative revolution also took over old anti-capitalist tendencies (the return to nature, the flight from cities...) that the workers’ parties, even the extremist ones, had negated or misestimated by their inability to integrate the a-classist and communitarian dimension of the proletariat, by their inability to critique the economy, and their inability to think of the future world as anything but an extension of heavy industry. In the first half of the nineteenth century, these themes were at the center of the socialist movement’s preoccupations, before they were abandoned by “Marxism” in the name of progress and Science, and they survived only in anarchism and in sects.

Volksgemeinschaft vs. Gemeinwesen, people’s community or the human community... 1933 was not the defeat, but only the consummation of the defeat. Nazism arose and triumphed to defuse, resolve and to close a social crisis so deep that we still don’t fully appreciate its magnitude. Germany, cradle of the largest Social Democracy in the world, also gave rise to the strongest radical, anti-parliamentary, anti-union movement, one aspiring to a “worker’s” world but also capable of attracting to itself many other anti-bourgeois and anti-capitalist revolts. The presence of avant-garde artists in the ranks of the “German radical left” is no accident. It was symptomatic of the attack on capital as “civilization” in the way that Fourier criticized it. The loss of community, individualism and gregariousness, sexual poverty, the family both undermined but also affirmed as a refuge, the estrangement from nature, industrialized food, increasing artificiality, the prostheticization of man, regimentation by time, social relations increasingly mediated by money and technique: all these alienations passed through the fire of a diffuse and multiformed critique. Only a superficial backward glance sees this ferment purely through the prism of its inevitable recuperation.

The counter-revolution triumphed in the 1920’s only by laying the foundations, in Germany and in the U.S., of a consumer society and of Fordism, and by pulling millions of Germans, including workers, into industrial, commodified modernity. Ten years of fragile rule, as the mad hyperinflation of 1923 shows. This was followed in 1929 by an enormous earthquake, in which not the proletariat but capitalist practice itself repudiated the ideology of progress and an ever-increasing consumption of objects and signs.

Nazi extremism, and the violence it unleashed, were adequate to the depth of the revolutionary movement it took over and negated, and to these two rebellions, separated by 10 years, against capitalist modernity, first by proletarians, then by capital. Like the radicals of 1919-1921, Nazism proposed a community of wage-workers, but one which was authoritarian,

## **Anarchists in the Government**

Social Democracy did not “capitulate” in August 1914, like a fighter throwing in the towel; it followed the normal trajectory of a powerful movement which was internationalist in rhetoric and which, in reality, had become profoundly national long before. The SPD may well have been the leading electoral force in Germany in 1912, but it was powerful only for the purpose of reform, within the framework of capitalism and according to its laws, which included, for example, accepting colonialism, and also war when the latter became the sole solution to social and political contradictions.

In the same way, the integration of Spanish anarchism into the state in 1936 is only surprising if one forgets its nature: the CNT was a union, an original union undoubtedly but a union nonetheless, and there is no such thing as an anti-union union. Function transforms the organ. Whatever its original ideals, every permanent organism for defending wage laborers as such becomes a mediator, and then a conciliator. Even when it is in the hands of radicals, even when it is repressed, the institution is doomed to escape control of the base and to become a moderating instrument. Anarchist union though it may have been, the CNT was a union before it was anarchist. A world separated the rank-and-file from the leader seated at the bosses’ table, but the CNT as an apparatus was little different from the UGT. Both of them worked to modernize and rationally manage the economy: in a word, to socialize capitalism. A single thread connects the socialist vote for war credits in August 1914 to the participation in the government of the anarchist leaders, first in Catalonia (September 1936) and then in the Republic as a whole (November 1936). As early as 1914, Malatesta had called those of his comrades (including Kropotkin) who had accepted national defense “government anarchists”.

From one compromise to the next, the CNT wound up renouncing the anti-statism which was its *raison d’être*, even after the Republic and its Russian ally had shown their real faces and unleashed their fury on the radicals in May 1937, not to mention in everything that followed, in the jails and secret cellars. Then, like the POUM, the CNT was all the more effective in disarming proletarians, calling on them to give up their struggle against both the official and Stalinist police bent on finishing them off. Some of them even had the bitter surprise of being in a prison administered by an old anarchist comrade, stripped of any real power over what when on in his jail. In 1938, a CNT delegation which had gone to the Soviet Union requesting material aid did not even criticize the Moscow trials.

Everything for the anti-fascist struggle...

Everything for cannons and guns...

But even so, some people might object, the anarchists by their very nature are vaccinated against the statist virus. In appearance...

Some “Marxists” can recite whole pages of Marx on the destruction of the state machine, and pages of Lenin saying in *State and Revolution* that

POUM and the CNT) in the name of effectiveness almost invariably proved ineffective. Fifty years later, people still deplore the fact. But the democratic state is as little suited for armed struggle against fascism as it is for stopping its peaceful accession to power. States are normally loathe to deal with the social war, and normally fear rather than encourage any fraternization. When, in March 1937 in Guadalajara, the antifascists addressed themselves as workers to the Italian soldiers sent by Mussolini, a group of Italians defected. But such an episode remained the exception.

From the battle for Madrid (March 1937) to the final fall of Catalonia (February 1939), the cadaver of the aborted revolution decomposed on the battlefield. One can speak of war in Spain, not of revolution. This war wound up having as its first function the resolution of a capitalist problem: the constitution in Spain of a legitimate state which succeeded in developing its national capital while keeping the popular masses in check. In February 1939, Benjamin Peret analyzed the consummation of the defeat as follows:

“The working class (...), having lost sight of its own goals, no longer sees any urgent reason to be killed defending the bourgeois democratic clan against the fascist clan, i.e. in the last analysis, for the defense of Anglo-French capital against Italo-German imperialism. The civil war increasingly became an imperialist war.” (CI., No. 2)

The two camps undeniably had quite different sociological compositions and social meanings. If the bourgeoisie was present on both sides, the immense majority of workers and poor peasants supported the Republic, whereas the archaic and reactionary strata (landed property, small holders, clergy) lined up behind Franco. This class polarization gave a progressive aura to the republican state, but it does not disclose the historical meaning of the conflict, any more than the percentage of working-class members of the SPD, SFIO or PCF exhausts the question of the nature of these parties. Such facts are real, but secondary to the social function in question. The party with a working-class base which controls or opposes any proletarian upsurge softens class contradictions. The republican army had a large number of workers, but for what, with whom and under whose orders were they fighting? To ask the question is to answer it, unless one considers it possible to fight the bourgeoisie in an alliance with the bourgeoisie.

“Civil war is the supreme expression of the class struggle” (Their Morals and Ours, 1938). Trotsky’s assertion is right, as long as one adds that, from the so-called Wars of Religion to the Irish or Lebanese convulsions of our own time, civil war is also, and most often, the form of an impossible or failed social struggle, where class contradictions which cannot assert themselves as such erupt as ideological or ethnic blocs, still further delaying any human emancipation.

closed, national, and racial, and for 12 years it succeeded in transforming proletarians into wage-workers and into soldiers.

## Berlin 1919-1933

Dictatorship always comes after the defeat of social movements, once they have been chloroformed and massacred by democracy, the leftist parties and the unions. In Italy, several months separated the final proletarian failures from the appointment of the fascist leader as head of state. In Germany, a gap of a dozen years broke the continuity and made Jan. 30, 1933 appear as an essentially political or ideological phenomenon, not as the effect of an earlier social earthquake. The popular basis of National Socialism and the murderous energy it unleashed remain mysteries if one ignores the question of the submission, revolt, and control of labor, and of its position in society.

The German defeat of 1918 and the fall of the empire set in motion a proletarian assault strong enough to shake the foundations of society, but impotent to revolutionize it, thus bringing Social Democracy and the unions to center stage as the key to political equilibrium. The Social Democratic and union leaders emerged as men of order, and had no scruples about calling in the Freikorps, fully fascist groupings with many future Nazis in their ranks, to repress a radical worker minority in the name of the interests of the reformist majority. First defeated by the rules of bourgeois democracy, the communists were also defeated by working-class democracy: the “works councils” placed their trust in the traditional organizations, not in the revolutionaries easily denounced as anti-democrats.

In this juncture, democracy and Social Democracy were indispensable to German capitalism for regimenting the workers, killing off the spirit of revolt in the polling booth, for winning a series of reforms from the bosses, and dispersing the revolutionaries.

After 1929, on the other hand, capitalism needed to eliminate part of the middle classes, and to discipline the proletarians, and even the bourgeoisie. The workers’ movement, defending as it did political pluralism and immediate worker interests, had become an obstacle. As mediators between capital and labor, working-class organizations derive their function from both, but also try to remain autonomous from both, and from the state. Social Democracy has meaning only as a force contending with the employers and the state, not as a force absorbed into them. Its vocation is the management of an enormous political, municipal, social, mutualist and cultural network, along with everything which today would be called “associative”. The KPD, moreover, had quickly constituted its own network, smaller but vast nonetheless. But as capital becomes more and more organized, it tends to pull together all its different strands, bringing a statist element to the enterprise, a bourgeois element to the trade-union bureaucracy, and a social element to administration. The weight of working-

class reformism, which ultimately pervades the state, and its existence as a “counter-society” make it a factor of social conservation and Malthusianism which capital in crisis has to eliminate. By their defense of wage labor as a component of capital, the SPD and the unions fulfilled an indispensable anti-communist function in 1918-1921, but this very same function later led them to put the interest of the wage-labor work force ahead of everything else, to the detriment of the reorganization of capital as a whole.

A stable bourgeois state would have tried to solve this problem by anti-union legislation, by recapturing the “worker fortresses”, and by pitting the middle classes, in the name of modernity, against the archaism of the proles, as Thatcher’s England did much later. But such an offensive assumes that capital is relatively united under the control of a few dominant factions. But the German bourgeoisie of 1930 was profoundly divided, the middle classes had collapsed, and the nation-state was in shambles.

By negotiation or by force, modern democracy represents and reconciles antagonistic interests, to the extent that it is possible. Endless parliamentary crises and real or imagined plots (for which Germany was the stage after the fall of the last socialist chancellor in 1930) in a democracy are the invariable sign of long-term disarray in ruling circles. At the beginning of the 1930’s, the crisis whipsawed the bourgeoisie between irreconcilable social and geopolitical strategies : either the increased integration or the elimination of the workers’ movement; international trade and pacifism, or autarchy laying the foundations of a military expansion. The solution did not necessarily imply a Hitler, but it did presuppose a concentration of force and violence in the hands of the central government. Once the centrist-reformist compromise had exhausted itself, the only option left was statist, protectionist and repressive.

A program of this kind required the violent dismantling of Social Democracy, which in its domestication of the workers had come to exercise excessive influence, while still being incapable of unifying all of Germany behind it. This unification was the task of Nazism, which was able to appeal to all classes, from the unemployed to the captains of industry, with a demagogy that even surpassed that of the bourgeois politicians, and an anti-Semitism intended to build cohesion through exclusion.

How could the working-class parties have made themselves into an obstacle to such xenophobic and racist madness, after having so often been the fellow travelers of nationalism? For the SPD, this had been clear since the beginning of the century, obvious in 1914, and signed in blood in the 1919 pact with the Freikorps, who were cast very much in the same warrior mould as their contemporaries, the fasci. The KPD, for its part, had not hesitated to ally with the nationalists against the French occupation of the Ruhr in 1923, and openly talked of a “national revolution” to the point of inspiring Trotsky’s 1931 pamphlet Against National-Communism.

In January 1933, the die was cast. No one can deny that the Weimar Republic willingly gave itself to Hitler. Both the right and the center had

conflict further from daily life. It is a peculiar quality of warfare that, even for its enthusiasts, no one wants to lose but everyone wants it to end. In contrast to revolution, except in the case of defeat, war does not cross my doorstep. Transformed into a military conflict, the struggle against Franco ceased to be a personal commitment, lost its immediate reality, and became a mobilization at once economic (working for the front), ideological (wall posters in the street, meetings) and human: after January 1937, voluntary enlistments tapered off, and the civil war, in both camps, came to depend mainly on compulsory military service. As a result, a militia man of July 1936, leaving his column a year later, disgusted with republican politics, could be arrested and shot as a “deserter”!

In different historical conditions, the military evolution from antifascism-insurrection to militias and then to a regular army is reminiscent of the anti-Napoleonic guerrilla warfare (the term passed into French during the First Empire) described by Marx:

“If one compares the three periods of guerrilla warfare with the political history of Spain, one notes they represented the three corresponding degrees to which the counter-revolutionary government had reduced the spirit of the people. In the beginning, the entire population rose up, then guerrilla bands carried on a war of attrition backed up by entire provinces; and finally, there were bands without cohesion, always on the verge of turning into bandits or dissolving into regular regiments.”

For 1936 as for 1808, the evolution of the military situation cannot be explained exclusively or even mainly by the art of war, but flows from the balance of political and social forces and its modification in an anti-revolutionary direction. The compromise evoked by Durruti, the necessity of unity at any cost, could only hand victory first to the republican state (over the proletariat) and then to the Francoist state (over the Republic).

There was the beginning of a revolution in Spain, but it turned into its opposite as soon as the proletarians, convinced that they had effective power, placed their trust in the state to fight against Franco. On that basis, the multiplicity of subversive initiatives and measures taken in production and in daily life were condemned to fail by the simple and terrible fact that they took place in the shadow of a perfectly intact state structure, which had initially been put on hold, and then reinvigorated by the necessities of the war against Franco, a paradox which remained opaque to most revolutionary groups at the time. In order to be consolidated and extended, the social transformations without which revolution remains an empty word had to pose themselves as antagonistic to a state clearly designated as the adversary. But, after July 1936, dual power existed in appearance only. Not only did the instruments of proletarian power which emerged from the insurrection, and those which subsequently oversaw the socializations, tolerate the state, but they accorded the state a primacy in the anti-Franco struggle, as if it were tactically necessary to pass through the state in order to defeat Franco. In terms of “realism”, the recourse to traditional military methods accepted by the far left (including the

troops. Despite Franco-Spanish collaboration, the Rif war (in which a general named Franco had distinguished himself) ended only when Abd el-Krim surrendered in 1926. Ten years later, the announcement of immediate and unconditional independence for Spanish Morocco would, at minimum, have stirred up trouble among the shock troops of reaction. The Republic obviously gave short shrift to this solution, under a combined pressure from conservative milieus and from the democracies of England and France, which had little enthusiasm for the possible breakup of their own empires. At the very same time, moreover, the French Popular Front not only refused to grant any reform worthy of the name to its colonial subjects, but dissolved the Etoile Nord-Africaine, a proletarian movement in Algeria.

Everyone knows that the policy of “non-intervention” in Spain was a farce. One week after the putsch, London announced its opposition to any arms shipment to the legal Spanish government, and its neutrality in the event that France was drawn into a conflict. Democratic England thus put the Republic and fascism on the same level. As a result, the France of Blum and Thorez send a few planes, while Germany and Italy sent whole armies and their supplies. As for the International Brigades, controlled by the Soviet Union and the Communist Parties, their military value came at a heavy price, namely the elimination of any opposition to Stalinism in working-class ranks. It was at the beginning of 1937, after the first Russian arms shipments, that Catalonia removed Nin from his post as adviser to the Ministry of Justice.

Rarely has the narrow conception of history as a list of battles, cannons and strategies been more inept in explaining the course of a directly “social” war, shaped as it was by the internal dynamic of anti-fascism. Revolutionary elan initially broke the elan of the nationalists. Then the workers accepted legality; the conflict was stalemated, and then institutionalized. From late 1936 onward, the militia columns were bogged down in the siege of Zaragoza. The state armed only the military units it trusted, i.e. the ones which would not confiscate property. By early 1937, in the poorly-equipped POUM militias fighting the Francoists with old guns, a revolver was a luxury. In the cities, they rubbed shoulders with perfectly outfitted regular soldiers. The fronts bogged down, like the Barcelona proletarians against the cops. The last burst of energy was the republican victory at Madrid. Soon thereafter, the government ordered private individuals to hand in their weapons. The decree had little immediate effect, but it showed an unabashed will to disarm the people. Disappointment and suspicions undermined morale. The war was increasingly in the hands of the specialists. Finally, the Republic increasingly lost ground as all social content and revolutionary appearances faded away in the anti-fascist camp.

Reducing the revolution to war simplifies and falsifies the social question into the alternative of winning or losing, and in being “the strongest”. The issue becomes one of having disciplined soldiers, superior logistics, competent officers and the support of allies whose own political nature gets as little scrutiny as possible. Curiously, all this means taking the

come around to seeing him as a viable solution to get the country out of its impasse, or as a temporary lesser evil. “Big capital”, reticent about any uncontrollable upheaval, had not, up to that time, been any more generous with the NSDAP than with the other nationalist and right-wing formations. Only in 1932 did Schacht, an intimate adviser of the bourgeoisie, convince business circles to support Hitler (who had, moreover, just seen his electoral support slightly decline) because he saw in Hitler a force capable of unifying the state and society. The fact that the big bourgeoisie neither foresaw nor still less appreciated what then ensued, leading to war and then defeat, is another question, and in any event they were not notable by their presence in the clandestine resistance to the regime.

On January 30, 1933, Hitler was appointed chancellor, in complete legality, by Hindenberg, who himself had been constitutionally elected president a year earlier, with the support of the socialists, who saw in him a rampart against. ...Hitler. The Nazis were a minority in the first government formed by the leader of the NSDAP.

In the following weeks, the masks were taken off: working-class militants were hunted down, their offices were sacked, and a reign of terror was launched. In the elections of March 1933, held against the backdrop of violence by both the Stormtroopers and the police, 288 NSDAP deputies were sent to the Reichstag (while the KPD still retained 80 and the SPD 120). Naive people might express surprise at the docility with which the repressive apparatus goes over to dictators, but the state machine obeys the authority commanding it. Did the new leaders not enjoy full legitimacy? Did eminent jurists not write their decrees in conformity with the higher laws of the land? In the “democratic state”--and Weimar was one--if there is conflict between the two components of the binomial, it is not democracy which will win out. In a “state founded on laws”--and Weimar was also one--if there is a contradiction, it is law which must be made to serve the state, and never the opposite.

During these few months, what did the democrats do? Those on the right accepted the new dispensation. The Zentrum, the Catholic party of the center, which had even seen its support increase in the March 1933 elections, voted to give four years of full emergency powers to Hitler, powers which became the legal basis of the future dictatorship. The Zentrum was forced to dissolve itself in July.

The socialists, for their part, attempted to avoid the fate of the KPD, which had been outlawed on February 28 in the wake of the Reichstag fire. On March 30, 1933, they left the Second International to prove their national German character. On May 17, their parliamentary group voted support for Hitler’s foreign policy. Nevertheless, on June 22, the SPD was dissolved as “an enemy of the people and the state”.

The unions followed in the footsteps of the Italian CGL, and hoped to salvage what they could by insisting that they were apolitical. In 1932, the union leaders had proclaimed their independence from all parties and their

indifference to the form of the state. This did not stop them from seeking an accord with Schleicher, who was chancellor from November 1932 to January 1933, and who therefore was looking for a base and some credible pro-worker demagogy. Once the Nazis had formed a government, the union leaders convinced themselves that if they recognized National Socialism, the regime would leave them some small space. This strategy culminated in the farce of union members marching under the swastika on May 1, 1933, which had been renamed “Festival of German Labor”. It was wasted effort. In the following days, the Nazis liquidated the union and arrested the militants.

Having been schooled to contain the masses and to negotiate in their name, or, that failing, to repress them, the working-class bureaucracy was still fighting the last war. Its furtive acts of propitiation got it exactly nowhere. The labor bureaucrats were not being attacked for their lack of patriotism, but rather as a useless expense for the capitalist class. What bothered the bourgeoisie was not the bureaucrats’ lingering lip service to the old pre-1914 internationalism, but rather the existence of trade unions, however servile, retaining a certain independence in an era in which capital no longer tolerated any other community than its own, and in which even an institution of class collaboration became superfluous if the state did not completely control it.

## Barcelona, 1936

In Italy and in Germany, fascism took over the state by legal means. Democracy capitulated to dictatorship, or, worse still, greeted dictatorship with open arms. But what about Spain? Far from being the exceptional case of a resolute action that was nonetheless, and sadly, defeated, Spain was the extreme case of armed confrontation between democracy and fascism in which the nature of the struggle still remained the same clash of two forms of capitalist development, two political forms of the capitalist state, two state structures fighting for legitimacy in the same country.

Objection!

“So, in your opinion, Franco and a working-class militia are the same thing? The big landowners and impoverished peasants collectivizing land are in the same camp?”

First of all, the confrontation happened only because the workers rose up against fascism. All the power and all the contradictions of the movement were manifest in its first weeks: an undeniable class war was transformed into a capitalist civil war (though there was, of course, no worked-out agreement and no assignment of roles in which the two bourgeois factions orchestrated every action of the masses).

The history of a class-divided society is ultimately shaped by the need to unify those classes. When, as happened in Spain, a popular explosion combined with the disarray of the ruling groups, a social crisis becomes a crisis of the state. Mussolini and Hitler triumphed in countries with weak,

never resemble a slaughter: not from any non-violent principle, but because it will be a revolution only by subverting more than by actually destroying the professional military. To imagine a proletarian front facing off against a bourgeois front is to conceive the proletariat in bourgeois terms, on the model of a political revolution or a war (seizing someone’s power, occupying their territory). In so doing, one reintroduces everything that the insurrectionary moment had overwhelmed: hierarchy, a respect for specialists, for knowledge that Knows, and for techniques to solve problems, in short for everything that diminishes the common man. In the service of the state, the working-class “militia man” invariably evolves into a “soldier”. In Spain, from the fall of 1936 onward, the revolution dissolved into the war effort, and into a kind of combat typical of states: a war of fronts.

Formed into “columns”, workers left Barcelona to defeat the fascists in other cities, starting with Zaragoza. Taking the revolution beyond areas under republican control, however, meant completing the revolution in the republican areas as well. But even Durruti did not seem to realize that the state was everywhere still intact. As Durruti’s column (70% of whose members were anarchists) advanced, it extended the collectivizations: the militias helped the peasants and spread revolutionary ideas. But, Durruti declared, “we have only one aim: to crush the fascists”. However much he reiterated that “these militias will never defend the bourgeoisie”, they did not attack the bourgeoisie either. Two weeks before his death (Nov. 21, 1936), he stated: “We have only one thought and one goal (...): to crush fascism (...) For now, no one should be thinking of wage increases or a shorter work week... we must sacrifice and work as much as necessary (...) we must have the solidity of granite. The moment has come to call on trade-union and political organizations to end their bickering once and for all. On the home front, what we need is administration (...) After this war, we must not, by our own incompetence, provoke another civil war among ourselves (...) Against fascist tyranny, we should stand as one; only one organization, with only one discipline, should exist.”

Durruti and his comrades embodied an energy which had not waited for 1936 to storm the existing world. But all the combative will in the world is not enough when workers aim all their blows against one particular form of the state, and not against the state as such. In mid-1936, accepting a war of fronts meant leaving social and political weapons in the hands of the bourgeoisie behind the lines, and moreover meant depriving military action itself of the initial vigor it drew from another terrain, the only one where the proletariat has the upper hand.

In the summer of 1936, far from having decisive military superiority, the nationalists held no major city. Their main strength lay in the Foreign Legion and in the “Moors” recruited in Morocco, which had been under a Spanish protectorate since 1912 but which had long since rebelled against the colonial dreams of both Spain and France. The Spanish royal army had been badly defeated there in 1921, largely due to the defection of Moroccan

mediation of “representative organizations” and councils of moderation from the POUM and the CNT, the very same people who had defeated the fascist military in July 1936 surrendered without a fight to the Republican police in May 1937.

At that point, repression could begin. Only a few weeks were necessary to outlaw the POUM, to arrest its leaders, to kill them legally or otherwise, and to disappear Nin. A parallel police was established in secret locales, organized by the NKVD and the secret apparatus of the Comintern, and answering only to Moscow. From that point onward, anyone showing the slightest opposition to the Republican state and its main ally, the USSR, would be denounced and hunted down as a “fascist”, and all around the world an army of well-meaning, gentle souls would repeat the slander, some from ignorance, others from self-interest, but every one of them convinced that no denunciation was too excessive when fascism was on the march. The fury unleashed against the POUM was no aberration. By opposing the Moscow trials, the POUM condemned itself to be destroyed by a Stalinism locked in a merciless world struggle against its rivals for control of the masses. At the time, most parties, commentators and even the League for the Rights of Man came out in endorsement of the guilt of the accused. Sixty years later, mainstream ideology denounces these trials and sees them as a sign of the Kremlin’s mad will to power. As if Stalinist crimes had nothing to do with anti-fascism! Anti-fascist logic will always align itself with the most moderate forces and will always fight against the most radical ones.

On the purely political level, May 1937 gave rise to what, a few months before, would have been unthinkable: a Socialist even farther to the right than Caballero, Negrin, heading a government which came down hard on the side of law and order, including repression against the workers. Orwell—who almost lost his life in these events—realized that the war “for democracy” was obviously over. What remained was a faceoff between two fascisms, with the difference that one was less inhuman than its rival. Nevertheless, Orwell clung to the necessity of avoiding the “more naked and developed fascism of Franco and Hitler”. From that point onward, the only issue was fighting for a fascism less bad than the opposing one...

## War Devours the Revolution

Power does not come from the barrel of a gun any more than it comes from a ballot box. No revolution is peaceful, but the military dimension is not the central one. The question is not whether the proles finally decide to break into the armories, but whether they unleash what they are: commodified beings who no longer can and no longer want to exist as commodities, and whose revolt explodes the logic of capitalism. Barricades and machine guns flow from this “weapon”. The more vital the social realm, the more the use of guns and the number of casualties will diminish. A communist revolution will

recently-unified nation-states and powerful regionalist currents. In Spain, from the Renaissance until modern times, the state was the colonial armed might of a commercial society it ultimately ruined, choking off one of the pre-conditions of industrial expansion, agrarian reform. In fact, industrialization had to make its way through monopolies, the misappropriation of public funds, and parasitism.

Space is lacking here for a summary of the nineteenth-century crazy quilt of countless reforms and liberal impasses, dynastic factions, the Carlist wars, the tragicomic succession of regimes and parties after World War I, and the cycle of insurrections and repression that followed the establishment of the Republic in 1931. Beneath all these rumblings was the weakness of the rising bourgeoisie, caught as it was between its rivalry with the landed oligarchy and the absolute necessity of containing peasant and worker revolts. In 1936, the land question had not been resolved; unlike France after 1789, the mid-19th century selloff of the Spanish clergy’s lands wound up strengthening a latifundist bourgeoisie. Even in the years after 1931, the Institute for Agrarian Reform only used one-third of the funds at its disposal to buy up large holdings. The conflagration of 1936-1939 would never have reached such political extremes, up to and including the explosion of the state into two factions fighting a three-year civil war, without the tremors which had been rising from the social depths for a century.

In the summer of 1936, after giving the military rebels every chance to prepare themselves, the Popular Front elected in February was prepared to negotiate and perhaps even to surrender. The politicians would have made their peace with the rebels, as they had done during the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera (1923-1931), which was supported by eminent socialists (Cabellero had served it as a technical counselor, before becoming Minister of Labor in 1931, and then head of the Republican government from September 1936 to May 1937). Furthermore, the general who had obeyed republican orders two years earlier and crushed the Asturias insurrection -- Franco-- couldn’t be all that bad.

But the proletariat rose up, blocked the putsch in half of the country, and hung onto its weapons. In so doing, the workers were obviously fighting fascism, but they were not acting as anti-fascists because their actions were directed against both Franco and against a democratic state more unsettled by the workers’ initiative than by the military revolt. Three prime ministers came and went in 24 hours before the fait accompli of the arming of the people was accepted.

Once again, the unfolding of the insurrection showed that the problem of violence is not primarily a technical one. Victory does not go to the side with the advantage in weaponry (the military) or in numbers (the people), but rather to the side which dares to take the initiative. Where workers trust the state, the state remains passive or promises the moon, as happened in Zaragoza. When their struggle is focused and sharp (as in Malaga), the workers win; if it is lacking in vigor, it is drowned in blood

(20,000 killed in Seville).

Thus the Spanish Civil War began with an authentic insurrection, but such a characterization is incomplete. It holds true only for the opening moment of the struggle: an effectively proletarian uprising. After defeating the forces of reaction in a large number of cities, the workers had the power. But what were they going to do with it? Should they give it back to the republican state, or should they use it to go further in a communist direction?

Created immediately after the insurrection, the Central Committee of Antifascist Militias included delegates from the CNT, the FAI, the UGT, the POUM, the PSUC (product of the recent fusion of the CP and the SP in Catalonia), and four representatives of the Generalitat, the Catalan regional government. As a veritable bridge between the workers' movement and the state, and, moreover, tied if not integrated into the Generalitat's Department of Defense by the presence in its midst of the latter's councilor of defense, the commissar of public order, etc. the Central Committee of the Militias quickly began to unravel.

Of course, in giving up their autonomy, most proletarians believed that they were, in spite of everything, hanging onto real power, and giving the politicians only the facade of authority, which they mistrusted, and which they could control and orient in a favorable direction. Were they not armed?

This was a fatal error. The question is not: who has the guns? but rather: what do the people with the guns do? 10,000 or 100,000 proletarians armed to the teeth are nothing if they place their trust in anything beside their own power to change the world. Otherwise, the next day, the next month or the next year, the power whose authority they recognize will take away the guns which they failed to use against it.

The insurgents did not take on the legal government, i.e. the existing state, and all their subsequent actions took place under its auspices. It was "a revolution that had begun but had never consolidated", as Orwell wrote. This is the main point which determined both the course of an increasingly losing armed struggle against Franco as well as the exhaustion and violent destruction by both camps of the collectivizations and socializations. After the summer of 1936, real power in Spain was exercised by the state and not by organizations, unions, collectivities, committees, etc. Even though Nin, the head of the POUM, was an advisor to the Ministry of Justice, "the POUM nowhere succeeded in having any influence over the police", as one defender of that party admitted. While the worker militias were indeed the flower of the Republican army, and paid a heavy price in combat, they carried no weight in the decisions of the military high command, which steadily integrated them into regular units (a process completed by the beginning of 1937), preferring to wear them down rather than tolerating their autonomy. As for the powerful CNT, it ceded ground to a CP which had been very weak before July 1936 (having elected 14 deputies to the Popular Front chamber in February 1936, as opposed to 85 Socialists), but which was able to insinuate itself into part of the state apparatus and turn the state increasingly to its own

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advantage against the radicals, and particularly against the militants of the CNT. The question was: who was master of the situation? And the answer was: the state can make brutal use of its power when it is necessary.

If the Republican bourgeoisie and the Stalinists lost precious time dismantling the peasant communes, disarming the POUM militias, and hunting down Trotskyist "saboteurs" and other "agents of Hitler" at the very moment when anti-fascism was supposed to be throwing everything into the struggle against Franco, they did not do so from a suicidal impulse. For the state and for the CP, (which was becoming the backbone of the state through the military and police) these operations were not a waste of time. The head of the PSUC supposedly said: "Before taking Zaragoza, we have to take Barcelona". Their main objective was never crushing Franco, but retaining control of the masses, because this is what states are for. Barcelona was taken away from the proletarians. Zaragoza remained in the hands of the fascists.

## Barcelona, May 1937

The police attempted to occupy the Telephone Exchange, which was under the control of the anarchist (and socialist) workers. In the Catalan metropolis, heart and symbol of the revolution, legal authority stopped at nothing in disarming whatever remained alive, spontaneous and anti-bourgeois. The local police, moreover, was in the hands of the PSUC. Confronted by an openly hostile power, the proletarians finally understood that this power was not their own, that they had given it the gift of their insurrection ten months earlier, and their insurrection had been turned against them. In reaction to the power grab by the state, a general strike paralyzed Barcelona. It was too late. The workers still had the capacity to rise up against the state (this time in its democratic form) but they could no longer push their struggle to the point of an open break.

As always, the "social" question predominated over the military one. Legal authority cannot impose itself by street battles. Within a few hours, instead of urban guerrilla warfare, a war of position, a faceoff of apartment building against apartment building set in. It was a defensive stalemate in which no one could win because no one was attacking. With its own offensive bogged down, the police would not risk its forces in attacks on buildings held by the anarchists. Broadly speaking, the CP and the state held the center of the city, while the CNT and the POUM held the working-class districts. The status quo ultimately won out by political means. The masses placed their trust in the two organizations under attack, while the latter, afraid of alienating the state, got people to go back to work (though not without some difficulty) and thereby undermined the one force capable of saving them politically and... "physically". As soon as the strike was over, knowing that it henceforth controlled the situation, the government brought in 6,000 Assault Guards, the elite of the police. Because they accepted the

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