

## **‘Against the State’: A Genealogy of the Barcelona May Days (1937)**

The state is not something which can be destroyed by a revolution, but is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of human behaviour; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently.<sup>1</sup>

For a European audience, one of the most famous images fixing the memory of the Spanish Civil War is of the street fighting-across-the-barricades which occurred in Barcelona between 3 and 7 May 1937. Those days of social protest and rebellion have been represented in many accounts, of which the single best known is still George Orwell’s contemporary diary account, *Homage to Catalonia*, recently given cinematic form in Ken Loach’s *Land and Freedom*. It is paradoxical, then, that the May events remain among the least understood in the history of the civil war. The analysis which follows is an attempt to unravel their complexity.

On the afternoon of Monday 3 May 1937 a detachment of police attempted to seize control of Barcelona’s central telephone exchange (Telefónica) in order to remove the anarchist militia forces present therein. News of the attempted seizure spread rapidly through the popular neighbourhoods of the old town centre and port. By evening the city was on a war footing, although no organization — inside or outside government — had issued any such command. The next day barricades went up in central Barcelona; there was a generalized work stoppage and armed resistance to the Catalan government’s attempt to occupy the telephone exchange. Who, then, was mobilizing and why? To answer these questions we need to explore three separate but interwoven conflicts: first, the battle between political advocates

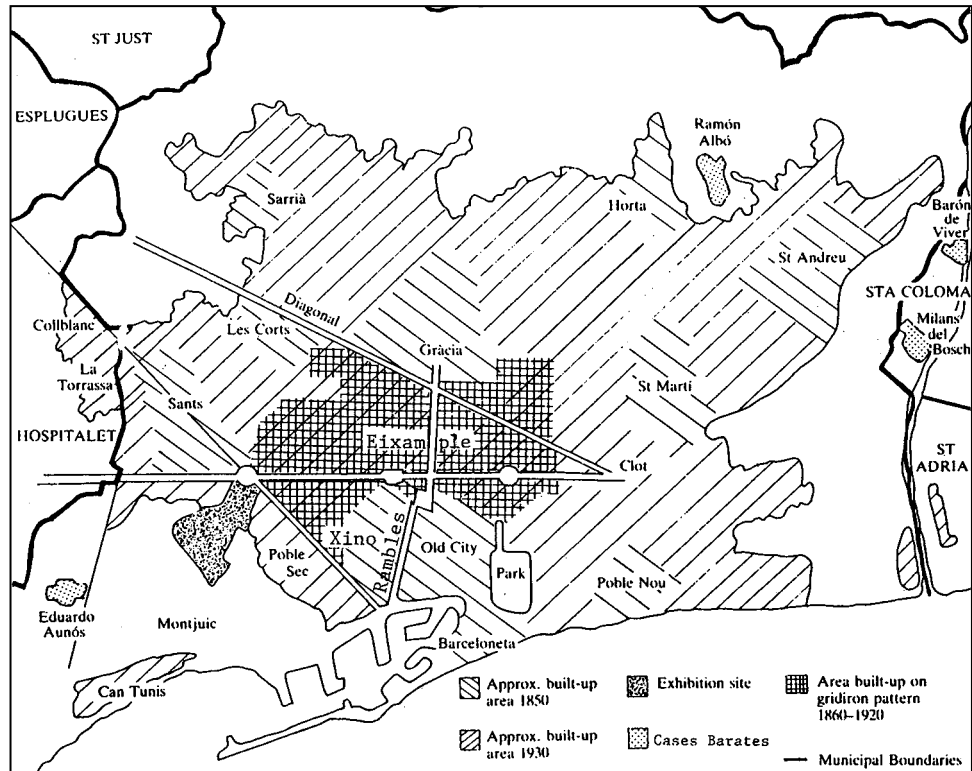
Figure 1 Division of Spain into Republican and rebel (Nationalist) zones, 22 July 1936  
 Source: Paul Preston, *The Spanish Civil War* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1986).  
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and opponents of a liberal capitalist order in Spain; second, a more diffuse but nonetheless pivotal clash (overlapping with the first) which we could term the social war between the poor and the state; and, third, the competition for power between Catalanist and centralist liberals in Republican Spain. All three conflicts long predated the civil war of 1936–9 between the liberal democratic Second Republic and its authoritarian opponents: they were, in effect, the internal wars of Spanish liberal development. The liberal model would ultimately be subject to drastic economic and cultural reformulation as a result of the Republic's defeat in the civil war.<sup>2</sup> But while that war was being fought out, its imperatives dramatically intensified all three internal wars.

The presence of anarchist militia forces in the Barcelona telephone exchange in May 1937 dated back some ten months to the attempt by rebel military to overthrow the Republic on 17–18 July 1936. Under the impact of the coup, the state imploded. In the absence of conventional defence forces, in much of urban industrial Spain popular militia forces raised by trade unions and parties of the left played a crucial role in defeating the military rebellion. In Barcelona, the historic stronghold of Spain's libertarian movement, the cadres of the anarcho-syndicalist trade union, the CNT, were at the forefront of this battle, in the process of which they conquered the Telefónica, along with other key buildings in central Barcelona, from the occupying military. The Telefónica in particular was a potent symbol of the intertwined power of capital and the state, especially since 1924, when the military dictator, General Miguel Primo de Rivera, had ceded it and monopoly rights on Spain's telephone services to the American International Telephone and Telegraph Corporation.<sup>3</sup> In Barcelona, as elsewhere, the July 1936 coup provoked the collapse of liberal constitutional order — in the form of government and state institutions (in particular police and security forces) — and of market-based economic activity. This, combined with the protagonism of organized labour in resisting the military rebels, saw the emergence of workers' committees to rearticulate crucial supply, transport, defence and public order functions. But unlike anywhere else in Republican Spain, the Catalan libertarians channelled the power which their pivotal defence role — and the armed strength underpinning it — gave them to spearhead in Barcelona and in other urban centres of Catalonia<sup>4</sup> a wide-ranging programme of industrial and commercial collectivization

**Figure 2 Barcelona City**  
*Source:* Nick Rider,  
 'Anarchism, Urbanization  
 and Social Conflict,  
 1900-1932',  
 PhD thesis, University of  
 Lancaster, 1987



in a bid to reinvent on anti-capitalist lines not only the economy but also social and cultural life.

The unparalleled range of what was attempted in Barcelona in the months after the July Days cannot be explained purely in terms of Barcelona's greater distance from the active front of the war compared with Spain's other capital, Madrid.<sup>5</sup> Certainly an emergency war footing would have required a different prioritizing of radical energies in Barcelona. But no amount of distance from the war would have turned 1936 Madrid into a revolutionary city.

The failure of first-wave industrialization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries meant that most of Spain in the 1930s was neither urban nor industrial<sup>6</sup> and none of its other urban centres — Bilbao<sup>7</sup> and Madrid included — was even a pale reflection of the cultural, political and sociological complexity of Barcelona. In short, Barcelona constituted Spain's only real industrial metropolis. Moreover, this was crossed with the radical heterogeneity of a cosmopolitan port city. What occurred in July 1936 was rooted in the unique scale and richness of Barcelona's popular and proletarian cultures.<sup>8</sup>

Proletarian Barcelona was synonymous with the direct action practices of the anti-parliamentary CNT which constituted the dominant form of labour organization in the city. The CNT's praxis in Barcelona had been forged in the brutal labour wars waged by Catalan industrialists and the monarchist state police on an unskilled and overwhelmingly immigrant<sup>9</sup> workforce in the years after the First World War. In order to discipline and 'contain' impoverished labour in the sweated conditions of undercapitalized and ramshackle Catalan factories and workshops, the police operated as the blatant instrument of management, administering blacklists, protecting scab labour, intimidating and abusing those in 'preventive detention' (*habeas corpus* did not, of course, exist) and even shooting workers on the street — the notorious *ley de fugas*.<sup>10</sup>

The paradox, that so crude and counterproductive a labour relations policy should have been conducted by the Catalan bourgeoisie — the most politically and culturally self-confident in Spain — needs to be understood in the context of industrial Catalonia's isolation within a national economy and polity still dominated by southern landowning elites. The latter's political representatives in Madrid fought tooth and nail against the

demands for economic protection for industry and the self government which, in the period up to 1923, was the goal of the entire Catalan bourgeoisie. In the course of this intra-liberal warfare, 'Madrid' even colluded with elements in the CNT, paying their hitmen to assault and bomb industrialists known for their Catalanist sympathies.

Some in the Catalan CNT required little persuasion to retaliate against those who victimized workers or who tortured and killed libertarians. They met state violence with their own. This spiral of attack and counterattack in the years between 1917 and 1923 galvanized the CNT's *grupos de afinidad*, the direct action groups whose attacks on bourgeois life and property were signed as collective acts of proletarian revenge. But, ironically too, the very strength of the libertarian fabric in Barcelona owed more than a little to the federal political traditions and civic dynamism of the advanced bourgeois metropolitan culture against which it defined itself.

For all that Barcelona was unique in its levels of industrialization and urbanization in Spain, it was still a place where 'modern' and 'pre-modern' worlds of popular and labour cultures merged, or indeed were actively linked through the praxis of the CNT. Its direct action tactics and the flexibility of its organizational structures meant its mobilizing capacity extended beyond strictly libertarian-identified workers through street sellers, the itinerant, the unemployed, via a grey area of semi-illegality to the 'underworld' of petty crime: from the politically conscious and organized to the 'lumpen', the CNT's influence reached out across the myriad overlapping worlds of the urban poor of 'out-cast Barcelona'.<sup>11</sup>

Heterogeneous and amorphous though some of these CNT constituencies were, in their political and economic dispossession all shared a common resistance — whether intuitive or consciously ideologized — to the liberal capitalist order and the machinery of the liberal state. Devoid of any positively integrative functions, such as the provision of universal primary education or a welfare role — however minimal — what the Spanish state meant to the poor and marginalized was basically the police and the army. It was thus associated with punitive functions: at best with conscription and indirect taxation, when not with direct repression. The general brutality of daily life — for example, a highly exploitative private housing market<sup>12</sup> to which there was

often no real alternative (even after the birth of the Republic in 1931) or the ever-present problem of food procurement — generated neighbourhood support networks (often centred around women's activities) into which the CNT could plug and which it, reciprocally, politicized:<sup>13</sup> the libertarians and the inhabitants of 'outcast Barcelona' were, at least for a time, one in their social war against the liberal state.

The CNT was not, however, a purely Catalan organization but a Spain-wide confederation. Each regional federation formulated a political ethic and practice in the light of the material circumstances of its particular membership. In a country as unevenly developed as Spain these ranged all the way from the slave revolts of impoverished landless day labourers in the southern federations of Andalusia and Extremadura to the republican-friendly, pro-parliamentary reform strategies of the CNT's northern federation which encadred a mix of artisanal, skilled and unskilled sectors — especially connected with the port of Gijón.<sup>14</sup> The virtual independence of each regional CNT federation meant these disparities provoked no intra-organizational tensions. However, by the end of the First World War political discrepancies around the issue of how to deal with the state were beginning to break the surface. In 1917 a group of self-proclaimed parliamentary syndicalists from Gijón even called for the formation of a political party to represent the CNT's interests.<sup>15</sup> While this fell on deaf ears even in Gijón, many syndicalist leaders — Catalans included — were seriously alarmed at the attritional effect that violent direct action was having on the organization.<sup>16</sup>

Between 1919 and 1922 Salvador Seguí sought to steer the Catalan CNT away from direct action in order to consolidate its organizational structures with a view to adopting a more nuanced syndicalist strategy. Although a majority of syndicalists still resisted the idea of parliamentary politics, these reforms were at root a response to the increasing complexity of industrial organization and of industry's interaction with the state. Both of these things required that libertarianism evolve, in particular as regards its strategic interactions with the state and with other political groups representing organized labour. But Seguí and other supporters of reform met the determined opposition of the majority of the Catalan federation,<sup>17</sup> the undisputed stronghold of the CNT.<sup>18</sup> Although the CNT's 1919 Congress approved the con-

version of its craft unions into modern, vertical industrial ones (the *Sindicatos Unicos*), it rejected their consolidation into national federations of industry.<sup>19</sup> But even progress towards the *Sindicatos Unicos* was slow and uneven.<sup>20</sup> The intervening years of military dictatorship between 1923 and 1930 froze the debates to some extent, delaying the possibility of any organizational revision, while the dictator's criminalization of the CNT gave radical, pro-direct action anarchists the upper hand in the argument over what the CNT was for and how it should be organized. Nevertheless, the very fact that in 1927 the radicals felt it necessary to form a separate group, the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI), in order to defend anarchist orthodoxy within the CNT indicates that the internal political differences remained unresolved.

The coming of the Second Republic in 1931 saw the reactivation and acceleration of these internal divisions over the CNT's future structure and strategy. Some inside the organization saw the parliamentary Republic as offering an enhanced opportunity for the CNT's partial political incorporation — at least sufficiently to defend its members and social constituencies through the now available channels of municipal politics and state labour agencies.

The bitter defeat of the workforce in the bloody, CNT-led Telefónica strike in July 1931 saw membership losses<sup>21</sup> as some telephone workers switched to the socialist-led trade union (UGT)<sup>22</sup> in the hope that its influence within the Republic's labour arbitration committees might offer a solution to their problems. But across 1931–3, radicals in the FAI and the affinity groups continued to perform and lead 'revolutionary gymnastics' (actions and popular risings against the Republican state) even though that state was already, demonstrably, too strong for such tactics to succeed. Those CNT leaders opposed to violent direct action may have been so on moral grounds, but they were also exercised by the evident and growing inequality of firepower between radical anarchists and the state, as the operational and technological sophistication of the police increased.<sup>23</sup> In other words, technological modernization as well as political change required the CNT to rethink its political praxis. For the radicals of the FAI, this sort of observation amounted to a heretical misunderstanding of the purpose and value of direct action and worker-state confrontations. But the disagreements over tactics



and strategy continued to grow, forcing a split in the CNT in 1933.

The famous *treintista* schism<sup>24</sup> saw the secession of some of the CNT's strongest union sections. The fact that some of the most influential of these *treintista* unions were to be found in Catalonia itself makes the point very clearly that this profound division did not separate the CNT in the rest of Spain from the 'radical heartland' in Catalonia, but rather that it ran straight through that libertarian heartland. In spite of the formal 'reconciliation' orchestrated at the CNT's May 1936 Zaragoza congress, the real issues remained unresolved when the military rose in July 1936.<sup>25</sup> Not the least indication of this ongoing conflict was the decision of some of the Catalan *treintistas* (unions and individuals) to join the Catalan branch of the socialist trade union (UGT) instead of returning to the CNT.<sup>26</sup>

The abiding failure of the Republic to deliver the promised 'new deal' nevertheless limited, for the time being, the wider impact of these internal divisions in the libertarian movement. Ordinary members of the CNT had voted left republican *en masse* in 1931 in the hope that the new government would deliver a social reform package to mitigate the growing fall-out from the depression. But whatever Republican 'law' promised of 'liberty' and 'social justice', in reality the republicans' commitment to orthodox liberal economics ('balancing the budget') ensured that the material conditions of life for the urban poor remained as harsh as before — from the bitter experience of the 1931 rent strike,<sup>27</sup> through the infamous bloody clashes which punctuated the prewar Republican years and also in the constant attrition of daily confrontations between the poor and the agencies of the liberal state. Republican legislation effectively criminalized the unemployed. Both the Law for the Defence of the Republic (October 1931) and the 'anti-vagrancy' legislation which replaced it in 1933 revealed the obsession of centre-left Republican governments with control of the streets and public spaces, as a result of which 'itinerant' persons of all kinds — union organizers, street sellers, the unemployed and the poor of many conditions — were imprisoned as 'vagrants', brought before the courts and in some cases confined to work camps.<sup>28</sup> In the poorer quarters of Barcelona, there were also running street battles with the police — whose personnel was largely unchanged from monarchist times — as the security forces, drafted in by the

Catalan authorities at the behest of the Catalan Chamber of Commerce, attempted to dismantle the informal street markets and stalls selling cheap food to the unemployed and socially marginal.<sup>29</sup> For many, then, the battle for daily survival bore out the arguments of radical libertarians in the FAI and direct action groups,<sup>30</sup> that the Republic was but a new façade for the old order.<sup>31</sup>

Notwithstanding the FAI's vision, however, the picture mapped out above makes it clear that the libertarian movement which faced down the rebel military on the streets of Barcelona in July 1936 was far from a revolutionary monolith. Moreover, as the political geography of the Republican zone was defined in the bloody weeks following the military coup, it also became apparent that the radical libertarians' vision of social and economic reorganization in Barcelona would be seriously contested by their political opponents both inside Catalonia and across the rest of the Republican zone.

In a sense, however, the 'Republic' did not yet exist. The impact of the military coup had blasted apart the reforming liberal project in Spain. The territory in which the rebels had been repulsed contained a number of different fragments of social constituencies which had opposed the military's centralizing agenda — but not for the same, or even compatible, reasons. The 'Republic' had the urban and rural middle classes of the north-eastern sea-board (historically the area of federalist political strength in Spain), including, most significantly, the lower middle classes of Catalonia. But the Republic also had in its camp, if only just, the nationalist lower middle classes of the Basque Country's industrial heartland, Vizcaya province.<sup>32</sup> Their brand of Catholicism and their intense social conservatism made them very reluctant supporters of the liberal Republic and this only in the expectation that its victory would allow them to 'secede' culturally and politically from the secularist centre. Alongside these already disparate constituencies of the middling classes, the Republic had the urban working class of Spain's two capital cities and the rural proletariats of eastern Aragon (in north east Spain) and eastern Andalusia. But it had lost a number of Spain's other big urban centres as well as the western half of Aragon and, most crucially, a substantial part of the rural 'deep south' (Andalusia and Extremadura), with its radical landless proletariat. This numerical decimation of the Republic's prole-

tarian constituency saw the amputation of much of the social base which might have driven a more radical wartime political agenda. Western Aragon and Andalusia/Extremadura were also strongholds of the CNT. Their loss was another important factor undermining the libertarians' position in the overall balance of power in the wartime Republic.

This uncertain configuration of power inside the zone allowed the leaders of the Republic in Madrid (republicans, socialists and the, as yet marginal, Spanish Communist Party [PCE]) to argue for their preferred option of *mando único* (single command), whereby all political, economic and military decision-making power would be invested in the central Republican government — constituted, *mutatis mutandis*, as a rerun of the Republic's 1931 liberal-left coalition government. This, they insisted, was the only viable basis on which to mobilize highly disparate social and political constituencies as 'the Republic' in a single war effort to hold off a powerful enemy. The Madrid government's arguments were strongly reinforced in the summer and early autumn of 1936 by an international situation which had rapidly become desperately unfavourable to the Republic.

By the end of July 1936 Franco's Army of Africa (mercenaries commanded by professional army officers) was being transported to the Spanish mainland in aircraft supplied by Hitler and Mussolini. As they drove up towards the capital city of Madrid during August and September, the rebels' coup was transformed into a full scale civil war, courtesy of foreign Fascist backing. As this happened, the overall balance of strength within Spain turned against the Republic. Its disadvantages were monumentally compounded by the virtually simultaneous imposition of a British and French-inspired arms embargo (Non Intervention) which, in practice, obstructed solely the Republic.<sup>33</sup>

But for all that liberal Madrid's pleas for *mando único* were backed by such compelling material circumstances, 'libertarian Barcelona' was bound to resist. Centralization could never be a neutral concept and those arguing for it were political, social and cultural enemies. Madrid republicans had always believed that reform began and ended with central state action.<sup>34</sup> The same underlying principle governed the praxis of the highly centralist-minded Spanish Socialist Party and union leadership (PSOE/UGT). The emergent Spanish Communist Party had also made the cause of central state power its own. Accepting

*mando único*, therefore, would have meant Catalan libertarians capitulating to the reconstruction of a central state whose only known historical function had been repression.

But the CNT radicals in Barcelona were up against more than just a hostile political centre. For Catalonia too was fiercely contested political space — whatever George Orwell's impressions may have been of 'the working class' being 'in the saddle'. When Barcelona's workers faced down the military rebellion on the streets, they had the support of Catalonia's rural and urban middle classes who were far more uniformly hostile than any other sector of Spain's bourgeoisie to the ultra-centralism of the military insurgents. But this did not lessen the incompatibility between libertarian and liberal visions of Catalonia's politico-social order once the rebel military had been defeated. This is why Lluís Companys, president of the Generalitat (the Catalan regional government), and leader of the (until then) hegemonic liberal left Catalanist party, the Esquerra,<sup>35</sup> could not bring himself formally to sanction the arming of Barcelona's militia forces.

The military rebellion seriously traumatized the political parties which represented the Catalan middling classes. But it neither neutralized these classes as a social force nor liquidated their economic interests — namely the defence of their farms, urban property and savings. Indeed the sudden, unexpected freedom from Madrid's control in the wake of the rebellion made the reconquest of political control an even more seductive prospect for middle-class Catalans. As a result, between the end of July 1936 and May 1937 Catalonia would be the arena of a complex three-way power struggle played out between anti-capitalist libertarians, middle-class Catalanists and centralist liberals.

Once the libertarian movement-in-arms had subdued the military rebellion in Barcelona, the ascendancy of an expropriatory new order implied immediate jeopardy for liberal constitutional order and those whose economic interests it enshrined. In particular, the rebellion-induced collapse of institutions related to law and order meant there were no physical means of repression available to protect private property. This is the context which explains the purposeful humility of Companys' comments to the CNT-FAI leaders who met with the Generalitat on 20 July:

Today you are the masters of the city and of Catalonia . . . You have conquered and everything is in your power. If you do not need me or want me as President of Catalonia . . . I shall become just another soldier in the struggle against fascism. If, on the other hand, you believe in this post . . . I and the men of my party . . . can be useful in this struggle.<sup>36</sup>

Comanys was performing a strategic retreat in order to achieve by lateral means two key objectives on behalf of the political class and social groups he represented: first to keep the concept of government legality formally in play and second to persuade the libertarians that their revolution needed a central governing body. In both Comanys was successful. The CNT agreed to the formation of a Central Antifascist Militia Committee<sup>37</sup> (21 July 1936) whose legitimacy was thus implicitly determined by Generalitat approval. In the circumstances, this was a staggering concession on the CNT's part. Through it the Catalan government was able repeatedly to assert its legal existence. Nor should we consider this a question of mere form or rhetoric: it constituted the first material stage in the battle to re-establish the Generalitat as the instrument through which liberal constitutional and economic order could be reimposed. The CNT's ascendancy was reflected in its control of the Central Committee's key departments of defence, transport and public order. But the last of these would rapidly become the supreme focus of tension in the battle for political control waged over the next twelve months between the libertarians and their liberal Catalan opponents. For the latter understood, quite correctly, that if they could reconstruct their coercive force, then all other forms of liberal reconstruction would be possible — as indeed they proved to be. All of which leads to the fundamental question of why the CNT-FAI agreed in the first place to share power on the Central Antifascist Militia Committee?

The answer to that question lies in the ideological and organizational specificities of the CNT-FAI. Its historical trajectory had scarcely equipped it with either a political blueprint for the seizure and exercise of power or the organizational structures through which to realize this. At the time and since, libertarians have represented their behaviour as a conscious rejection of 'bolshhevik methods'. But, in reality, it was the limitations in the CNT's 'invertebrate' organizational forms which clinched matters here. The CNT's national industrial federations were still in their infancy in 1936 and the CNT's own structure was a

highly decentralized one. Neither the national committee nor the regional confederal committee in Catalonia had executive power over its constituent union sections, nor did they have particularly good communication channels. The lack of industrial unions and of centralized CNT executive power also made lateral communication between unions difficult. None of these things had ever been absolutely crucial before. The libertarians' strength — particularly in Barcelona — lay, as we have seen, in its 'bottom-up' mobilizing ability. But after 18 July 1936, libertarian order needed top-down political articulation and a political 'head' in order to defend itself. Ironically, the lack of such facilities was itself an indication of how successful radical anarchists had been in blocking the initiatives of reformist syndicalist currents in the CNT right up to 1936.

In July 1936 Catalan anarchist leaders, for want of any alternative political blueprint, and believing themselves to be more powerful than they were, opted to utilize the political experience, personnel and central apparatus of the Catalan government.<sup>38</sup> In all of this, the CNT were ceaselessly encouraged by Companys, an immensely shrewd politician who rapidly assimilated the rhetoric of 'the revolution',<sup>39</sup> using it with consummate skill throughout the long summer, autumn and winter of 1936, even as he denounced libertarian 'excess' and campaigned for state control and the municipalization of industry and services.

Companys could take heart from the rich base of social constituencies supportive of liberal order to be found in Catalonia: ranging from tenant farmers and sharecroppers — the majority of the rural Catalan population — through urban white-collar workers, state functionaries, liberal professionals, the owners of small businesses and industrial workshops, to the security forces (police and Republican army officers). Although the existing political institutions of Catalonia had been battered by the coup, they still had this strong social base beneath them. These constituencies had not often been in the frontline fight against the rebels, to be sure, but nor had they evacuated the Republican zone or passed to tacit support of the rebels. The situation in Barcelona thus resembled that of 'dual power' in Petrograd in 1917. But Catalan liberalism (represented by the Generalitat inside the Central Militia Committee) was stronger than its Russian counterpart since it rested on a sounder social

base. Moreover, it was further reinforced by the clearly subordinate position of libertarian forces in the rest of the Republican zone.

But Companys also had to recognize that his own party, the Esquerra, was an insufficient instrument to deliver the goal of liberal political and economic reconstruction in Catalonia. The coup attempt had dealt an immense shock to both its organizational dynamic and the confidence of the leadership.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, Catalan liberals, although relatively more modern than the rest of progressive republicanism in Spain, still lacked adequate experience and understanding of what the arduous task of grass roots political organization required. What was needed, then, on the wild new frontier of political life in post-revolutionary Catalonia, was a new kind of party, able to mobilize its base 'bottom-up' (taking a leaf out of the CNT's book) and also unafraid to enter the fray because it had no pre-existing organizational stakes or power base to protect — only everything to gain.

The political force which emerged to fill this political space was the PSUC (United Socialist Party of Catalonia), formed on 23 July 1936 from the merger of four smaller parties. Although the tiny Catalan section of the official (i.e. Communist International-aligned) Communist Party was one of the four, the tendency in both the Anglo-American historiography and other literature (including Orwell) to present the PSUC as the Communist Party of Catalonia *tout court* is highly problematic. By far the most important numerical and ideological component in the PSUC was the *Unió Socialista de Catalunya*, a Catalan social democratic party headed by the ambitious Joan Comorera.<sup>41</sup> Prior to the war the party merger had stalled on Comorera's refusal to accept PSUC affiliation to the Communist International (Comintern). But his reluctance evaporated in the wake of the July Days. Now, for Comorera, as for the entire liberal left in Catalonia, the overwhelming need was to mount a common defence of social 'normality'. The organizational expertise and resources of the Comintern could only facilitate this process. Moreover, now the Comintern was every-where espousing politically middle-of-the-road alliances between liberals, socialists and communists as part of its Popular Front strategy, then affiliation must have seemed a small price to pay.

Comorera was hungry to build up the PSUC. In the prewar period he had sought in vain to find his social democratic party a

political space between the mainstream Esquerra and the radical kudos of the unaligned Catalanist communist party, BOC<sup>42</sup> (from September 1935 called the POUM)<sup>43</sup> which also recruited quite well among progressive urban sectors of the lower middle classes<sup>44</sup> (and whose militia George Orwell would later join). Now that the July Days had substantially raised the stakes for middling social sectors, Comorera's aim was to overtake the POUM and permanently to eclipse the Esquerra by demonstrating the PSUC's superior ability to defend 'middling' economic interests against libertarian depredation.

The PSUC's organizational dynamism — manifest not least in its robust press attacks on CNT 'disorder' — saw recruits flock to the party (and concomitantly to the Catalan branch of the socialist trade union, UGT).<sup>45</sup> The PSUC recruited well in urban and in rural areas — in the latter among small and medium owner-farmers, tenant farmers and sharecroppers, many of whom had previously held Esquerra membership.<sup>46</sup> All these sectors — who together constituted the majority rural population of Catalonia — had in common a sense of unease provoked by libertarian initiatives in the region. Requisitioning by the CNT's supply committees was the main focus of peasant hostility, as we shall discuss later. However collectivization also provoked anxiety. This was the case even though many had no direct experience of it. For in Catalonia, where large estates were the exception, the CNT-FAI had tacitly accepted the strength of the rural middling classes and had largely respected their property and individualist forms of farming. In neighbouring eastern Aragon, in stark contrast, some three quarters of the land was collectivized.<sup>47</sup>

The situation of hung power in Catalonia was precisely what made the adjacent territory of Aragon so important to the libertarian project. Not only was it libertarian Catalonia's war front, it was also the agrarian hinterland of its urban revolution. But 'revolutionary Aragon' was not quite the bulwark it first appeared. The CNT's prewar strongholds had mainly been in the urban centres of western Aragon which had fallen to the rebels in July.<sup>48</sup> Eastern Aragon was precisely where the CNT was less strong. Wartime collectivization there occurred largely through the initiative of Catalan anarchist militia who carried the new order to its villages.<sup>49</sup> This did not necessarily mean that collectivization was imposed on a uniformly unwilling rural population,<sup>50</sup> but it did mean that Republican Aragon was, like



Catalonia, contested political territory, rather than a monolithic support for Barcelona's radical libertarians.

This was, moreover, a structural weakness the Catalan libertarians could ill afford, in view of their isolation in the region. Not only were they up against liberal Catalonia, much bolstered by Comorera's PSUC, they were also increasingly estranged from the unaligned Catalan Communist Party (POUM).<sup>51</sup> Political disagreements and serious organizational rivalries between the CNT and the POUM went back years.<sup>52</sup> The POUM (and its forerunner the BOC) were highly critical of the libertarians' dogged antipoliticism which, they argued, left Barcelona's industrial proletariat defenceless. The same criticism was levelled at the CNT by the Catalan section of the official and highly centralist Spanish Communist Party. But while it was marginal enough for the CNT to ignore, the BOC/POUM had real political roots in Catalonia. BOC/POUM's combination of Catalanism and radical politics, although not devoid of contradiction as we shall see later, meant it appealed both to skilled, Catalan (or Catalan-speaking) workers and to some sectors of the region's urban and rural lower middle classes.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, the Catalan CNT's plummeting membership after 1931, and the internal dissension around *treintismo* and the FAI's violent direct action, were read by the BOC, rather over-optimistically, as a golden opportunity to break through the CNT's hegemonic relationship with the immigrant, unskilled industrial workforce of Barcelona capital. In 1932 the BOC had called on CNT dissenters to unite with them in a new *political* union leadership in Catalonia, whereupon the Catalan CNT responded by expelling the BOC-led trade unions in Lleida, Tarragona and Girona.<sup>54</sup> Although in the July Days of 1936 the CNT and POUM militia fought in unison, the prewar political tensions and organizational rivalries between CNT and POUM remained unresolved. There was clearly a connection between these tensions and the fact that the CNT, by agreeing to such a high level of representation on the Central Antifascist Militia Committee for the Catalan liberal republican parties, the socialist trade union (UGT) and the (then still marginal) PSUC,<sup>55</sup> allowed the POUM to be politically marginalized in spite of its strength and role in the July fighting in the other urban centres of Catalonia.

In acting thus, the CNT may have believed it was ridding itself of a troublesome political competitor. But the CNT was also

blocking out the POUM's valuable critique of the shortcomings in its own revolutionary structures and strategy. It is important to keep in mind this troubled relationship between the CNT and POUM because it was to have material effects on the development of the Catalan political scene between July and December 1936. Yet it is something which is often forgotten in light of the 1937 May Days, when libertarians and *poumistas* would find themselves on the same side of the barricades — although not, even then, in a state of political agreement.

Within ten days of the Antifascist Militia Committee's creation, the CNT-FAI had consented (on 31 July) to Companys' formal reconstitution of an all-liberal Republican Generalitat,<sup>56</sup> *of which the Committee would henceforward be a sub-entity*. It was as if the old Catalan anarchist mentality of the 'division of labour' between bourgeois 'politics' and the syndicalist ambit of the workers was still operating to blind the libertarians to the dangers of permitting the further consolidation of their antagonists in a situation of dual power.

At the end of September 1936 this conflict entered a new phase when the libertarians agreed to the dissolution of the Central Antifascist Militia Committee and entered the Generalitat. Two months of war — even if the fighting was not yet on Catalonia's doorstep — had taken their toll on the CNT's leaders. After successive militia defeats in the south, Talavera fell on 3 September. It was the last town between the rebel Army of Africa and Madrid. The Republic's international isolation also weighed heavily on libertarian hopes everywhere.<sup>57</sup> Significant political pressure was being applied by Madrid. The new prime minister, the veteran socialist union leader Francisco Largo Caballero, was determined to co-opt the CNT nationally to ensure their support for the war effort, but also to prevent their making damaging criticisms from the freedom of opposition. A national CNT plenum in late September sanctioned the principle of a libertarian governmental presence by reference to the overwhelming necessity of the situation.<sup>58</sup> But the simultaneous attempt to justify the decision on the grounds that the emergency situation had transformed the very nature of government and the state is indicative of how the intense crisis of Republican defence had mercilessly exposed the libertarians' underlying lack of political options:

... the government has ceased to be a force of oppression against the working class, just as the state is no longer the entity that divides society into classes. Both will stop oppressing the people all the more with the inclusion of the CNT.<sup>59</sup>

The fact that these were the words of Diego Abad de Santillán, one of the leaders of the Catalan FAI, also nullifies the argument that the controversy over entry to government neatly split radical anarchists from pragmatic syndicalists along the lines of the prewar conflict. In fact, all sections of the Catalan libertarians were understandably overwhelmed by the Republic's increasingly desperate situation.<sup>60</sup>

In the composition of the 28 September Catalan cabinet we can see embedded the strategy of the CNT's opponents, who constituted a far more complex group than 'the Communists' repeatedly referred to by many historians and commentators, including Orwell — as if this were a self-explanatory category. The libertarians' economic control was now formally 'contained' by the Esquerra. (Josep Tarradellas, appointed prime minister by Companys, also held the Finance portfolio, while Agriculture was in the hands of the Rabassaires, the Esquerra's rural tenants' and smallholders' union.)<sup>61</sup> Moreover, in the press and public fora liberal commentators and politicians from the Esquerra, the PSUC and other, smaller liberal Catalanist parties had started to attribute all economic dislocation and inefficiency to the *forms* of libertarian control *per se*, even though many of the problems they identified were intractable ones, deriving from the macro-economic and territorial dislocations of the war — industrial regions cut off from their suppliers of raw materials, productive regions from their markets, and so on.<sup>62</sup> It was the overarching crisis of the war which allowed the liberal political agenda underpinning this campaign to be submerged beneath high-minded denunciations of committee and collectivist inefficiency and abuses (which certainly existed) and impassioned exhortations to a — very necessary — unification of economic production. But what had opened the door to this liberal counterattack was precisely the libertarians' inability to articulate the committees politically. The fact that the only centralized forms of organization available belonged to their political enemies was now forcing libertarians into one of two positions, neither of which was feasible: a political 'compromise' with liberal order or an

all-out defence of the collectives. But the latter implied a defence of economic decentralization that was difficult to sustain in the conditions in which the civil war was being fought. Moreover, it laid pro-decentralization currents of libertarianism wide open to the attacks of their political enemies.

Agrarian collectivization was slowly but surely being eroded. The famous Republican decree of 7 October 1936 had only legalized collectives when they occupied land belonging to those who had supported the military rising. The Republican authorities never intended to legalize the collectives *in toto* (and never would). By early 1937 the Republic was legislating to reduce their room for economic manoeuvre (at the same time as it effectively turned all Catalan tenant farmers into owner occupiers). Again, the fact that political control belonged not to the libertarians but to their opponents would prove fatal. Without access to state funds (banks, gold, etc.), credit or external trade, the collectives' viability reduced over time. Lack of financial control meant there was no means of capitalizing the collectives — so new machinery, fertilizer, and specialist agronomist advice were largely absent. Lacking access to resources and in the face of the inevitable increasing dislocation of wartime, even the ideologically committed minority would become weary and disillusioned by what all too often ended as the collectivization of shortage and poverty.

The dissolution of the Central Antifascist Militia Committee also loosened the ties between libertarian Barcelona and Aragon, which had been overseen politically and militarily by the Committee. The result weakened both. Although the CNT remained the dominant political force in the new Council of Aragon, created at the beginning of October, this was soon an arena of struggle between the libertarians and their political opponents. Moreover, the other impulse guiding the Council's creation — the need for a governing body to co-ordinate Aragon's highly fragmented collectivized economy, not least in order to address the supply needs of its military front — serves to remind us of the fatal weakness affecting the CNT's entire political project: its fragmentation.

The CNT's political control went on unravelling inside Barcelona capital. On 9 October 1936 the Generalitat decreed the reconstitution of all local committees as municipal bodies with the same composition as itself in a bid to liquidate

libertarian power on the ground. The Esquerra were amazed to find the CNT's ministerial representatives acquiescing. But by this stage it was too late for them to oppose what were, in effect, the consequences of power-sharing in July.

From late September to December Comorera and the PSUC spearheaded an increasingly bitter propaganda campaign against the embattled CNT supply committees. Keen to re-establish the free market in staple goods sought by their supporters (small-holders, traders and shopkeepers), the PSUC publicly blamed the supply committees (and, implicitly, all forms of collectivization) for the increasingly acute food shortages facing the population.

The Catalan liberals' primary objective, however, remained full control of public order in Catalonia, since a monopoly of coercive force was the *sine qua non* of all other change. From the Generalitat's Home Office, Artemi Aiguader, the Esquerra's most determined political risk-taker, set his sights on the CNT's *de facto* control of the Defence/Security portfolio. But progress was inevitably slow, since neither the end of the Central Antifascist Militia Committee, nor CNT representation in the new Generalitat, nor the reconstitution of the municipal authorities had, of themselves, liquidated dual power. There still existed a network of defence committees as well as factory and neighbourhood committees throughout Barcelona and the region which, although now decapitated, still had the potential to function as the organizational sinews of collective anti-state resistance.<sup>63</sup>

But though liberal reconquest was thus to be a slow process, Aiguader could rely on the police. After having been formally dissolved in the aftermath of the coup, both the Assault Guards and National Republican (i.e. ex-Civil) Guards were by the end of 1936 subject to central government control. A new police force was also built up on the foundations of the Carabineros (Customs police) by Largo Caballero's Finance minister, Juan Negrín. By the end of 1936 the Carabineros were involved in skirmishes — which inside three months would escalate into bloody confrontations — with the CNT's control committees on the Franco-Spanish/Catalan border. Negrín was using the Customs police to re-establish central Republican government control of economic resource (including foreign exchange). Although this was far from welcome to the Catalan bourgeois federalists, the need to restore liberal social and economic order

was paramount, ensuring their interim support for Negrín's initiative. However, it was to be the looming political crisis over the POUM's ministerial presence in the Generalitat in November 1936 which provided the first golden opportunity to consolidate the liberal agenda in Catalonia in terms both of public order and of economic policy.

This opportunity was provided by the eruption inside Republican Spain of another dispute — the increasingly bitter one raging in the international communist movement. In late August, the POUM publicly denounced the executions in the Soviet Union of Zinoviev, Kamenev and other old-guard Bolsheviks. It did so in spite of a strong current of opinion in the party which urged caution so as to avoid any further deterioration of POUM relations with the Comintern-aligned PCE and PSUC.<sup>64</sup> In November, the POUM press openly accused the Comintern of pursuing the containment of the Spanish revolution because it was out of step with the Soviet government's defence needs, especially as the revolution offered no sectarian advantage since the Comintern did not control it politically.<sup>65</sup> These public criticisms are sufficient to explain the hostility to the POUM exhibited by Moscow and the Comintern. Moreover, although the POUM was not Trotskyist, the fact that Trotsky's former (albeit now politically-estranged) secretary, Andreu Nin, and his tiny Communist Left party formed a minor component of the POUM clinched the Comintern's determination to remove it from the political scene in Spain.

This might have been a rather more difficult task had the POUM's political position not already been weakened by its ambiguities. The party's discourse, directed at its urban worker cadres in Catalonia, promoted a radical anti-capitalist strategy for furthering both the July revolution and the war effort. Yet since the February 1936 elections, the POUM had supported Spain's liberal-left Popular Front alliance and its own party base in Catalonia also contained progressive sectors of the urban and rural lower middle classes who, while they were Catalanist and politically to the left of the Esquerra, were far from revolutionary or socialist in their outlook.<sup>66</sup> It was the concerns of these middling sectors that lay behind the POUM's post-July Day professions that it would 'uphold [the middle classes'] economic claims . . . within the framework of the revolution'. At the same time the POUM sought to distinguish itself from the PSUC which it

denounced as guilty of capitulating to its middle-class constituency, becoming its mere instrument.<sup>67</sup> But it is difficult to see how the POUM could have squared this particular circle. The party's dilemma arose from its hybridity. But the wartime situation made this highly problematic. The hostility of Catalan liberals and the PSUC pushed the POUM towards the CNT. But in spite of the POUM's conciliatory attitude<sup>68</sup> the CNT remained ideologically hostile and wary of the POUM as a potential rival. Moreover, the POUM's numerous criticisms of CNT excess in the implementation of wartime collectivization introduced further tensions to their relationship.<sup>69</sup> The POUM remained isolated as a result, neither accepted by its liberal Popular Front allies in Catalonia nor possessed, alone, of a sufficient worker base to invest its radical goals with a matching practice.<sup>70</sup>

After the POUM's public criticism of the Soviet Union, the PSUC demanded its exclusion from the Generalitat on 24 November. A great deal of emphasis has been laid here on the intervention of the Soviet Consul General in Barcelona, Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko, in persuading Companys and the Esquerra to accept this.<sup>71</sup> That such intervention occurred is clear. But given Antonov-Ovseenko was suggesting a political direction which all Catalan liberals were in any case keen to take, it makes no sense to argue that their decision was purely the product of Soviet 'duress'. What the Soviet diplomat offered Companys was a largely superfluous reminder of the liberal Republic's precarious international position. Nor did Companys need to be reminded that the POUM's presence in the Generalitat was an additional obstacle to liberal normalization.

The PSUC's demands for POUM exclusion opened the way for the Esquerra vehemently to denounce 'committee chaos'. Companys made no specific reference to the POUM, but demanded 'a strong government with plenary powers, capable of imposing its authority on everyone'.<sup>72</sup> The CNT instantly rejected this, well understanding that it rather than the POUM was Companys' real target. Indeed the PSUC made this absolutely explicit. After echoing Companys' declarations on the need to concentrate all power in the government, Comorera went on to demand that dual power in Catalan defence and public order now be ended *de facto* as well as *de jure* by the dissolution of both the CNT's defence and security committees.<sup>73</sup>

Faced by this Esquerra-PSUC front, the libertarians cannot

have failed to perceive the political dangers for themselves. But this did little to reduce their ambivalence towards the POUM. So, when the PSUC offered a deal, the CNT accepted: it would drop its opposition to POUM exclusion from the cabinet and the PSUC would drop its call for the dissolution of the defence and security committees.

On 16 December, after four days of crisis, the new cabinet line-up was announced. Out of a total of eleven portfolios, the Esquerra had four (including the Rabassaire-held post of Agriculture), the PSUC three and the CNT four. There was still a stand-off in public order: the Esquerra's Aiguader retained the Home Office portfolio, but the CNT committees continued to function. A crucial shift had nevertheless occurred in the economic posts. Why the CNT allowed this constitutes far more of a conundrum than does their position on the POUM.<sup>74</sup> Not only was the CNT's Economy brief overseen, as before, by Tarradellas' control of Finance, but now PSUC leader Comorera also had control of the crucial Supply portfolio. The battle to 'free the market' was about to begin.

This was a battle in which the Esquerra wanted the same outcome as the PSUC — the restitution of liberal economic order. But it was less prepared than the PSUC to take the strain in the bruising confrontation that loomed.<sup>75</sup> In part this was because the Esquerra was still recovering from the erosive impact of the July coup. But it seems highly likely that it was also a conscious tactic of Companys to allow the PSUC to do its 'dirty work' in the expectation that this would, in turn, erode the PSUC — which had grown very dramatically since July<sup>76</sup> — thus allowing the Esquerra to reclaim its hegemonic position in the Catalan arena. Increasing tensions in the heterogeneous PSUC between liberal centralist and Catalanist currents would give Companys and the Esquerra both the will and the opportunity seriously to recontest the political arena.

The fall of the southern city of Málaga early in February 1937 and the intense fighting continuing around Madrid, however, redoubled Republican government demands that *mando único* (a single military and political command) be established. Companys had already been at the receiving end himself in December 1936 when Antonov-Ovseenko reportedly reinforced the Republican government's agenda by linking Soviet military aid to Catalonia not only to the POUM's political exclusion, but



also to the Generalitat's acceptance of *mando único* — something far more politically unpalatable.

The Republic's worsening military situation was pressing down on all its political constituents. The CNT's ministers and national committee were increasingly acting as a conduit for central government policy which sought to keep the Catalan libertarians compromising inside the Generalitat. But what both central government and Catalan liberals failed to recognize was that while it was feasible to 'contain' the CNT's regional leadership, its social constituencies were quite another matter. It was in the daily lived experiences of these groups and the meanings they ascribed to such experiences that we find the crucial motive force in the build up of social and political tension in urban Catalonia across the winter and spring of 1937.

By early 1937 living conditions in Barcelona and the other urban centres of Catalonia were coming under strain from the economic dislocations occasioned by the war.<sup>77</sup> The region's high prewar population density (already double the rest of Spain's) was exacerbated by the major and relatively continuous refugee influx from the North (Guipúzcoa), from Madrid and (by February 1937) from Málaga in the South. By the end of 1936 there were already 300–350,000 refugees in Catalonia.<sup>78</sup> In addition, there were many evacuees who had moved to live with relatives, but who were not dependent on any refugee agencies — domestic or foreign — and thus did not figure in the formal statistics. But even excluding this group, the refugee population represented some 10 per cent of the region's total population by the beginning of 1937. This precipitated an urban resource crisis which was initially manifest in the form of infrastructural overload. (Catalonia had the most developed municipal government in Spain, but this could not prepare it for the scale of social welfare demand the war would produce.) By December 1936 there were shortages of basic foodstuffs and other staples which fuelled inflation, in spite of official price controls.<sup>79</sup>

The onset of war had also disrupted industrial production in urban centres. This led to sectoral unemployment<sup>80</sup> and to the disruption of normal rural–urban commercial exchange. Both left the poorer sectors of urban Catalan society exposed and the immigrant working class most of all.<sup>81</sup> Without family contacts in rural Catalonia and with the least monetary resources, they lacked the wherewithal to engage in the barter economy which

was already appearing.<sup>82</sup> This situation was mitigated in the early months after the coup by the emergency provision of food kitchens and, more crucially, by collective means of food procurement — neighbourhood and workplace food co-operatives — organized in the period of CNT ascendancy. Such grass roots initiatives often connected up with the CNT supply committees which, through their requisitioning activities in rural areas, played a major role in feeding working-class neighbourhoods. In the absence of rationing,<sup>83</sup> these mechanisms were the key to the survival of the urban poor as shortages increased in the autumn and winter of 1936.

By December 1936, however, the bread shortage was acute.<sup>84</sup> The material hardships indicated by food queues and accelerating inflation fuelled popular support for CNT and POUM-led campaigns for the implementation of rationing. But the initial response of PSUC leader Comorera, now in control of the supply portfolio after the December cabinet reshuffle, was to abolish the supply committees.<sup>85</sup> These had become the focus of smallholders' hostility because they regarded the prices at which they were required to sell as unfair and perceived the transaction to be based on implicit (when not explicit) coercion.

For both the PSUC and the Esquerra getting rid of the supply committees had more to do with eroding the political power of the CNT than it did with economic deregulation *per se*. Nevertheless, Comorera and his colleagues do seem to have believed that the urban food shortage in Catalonia was mainly the result of peasant hoarding rather than dearth. Allowing prices to increase was thus seen as a way of resolving the problem by giving Catalan smallholders the necessary incentive to sell.<sup>86</sup> The PSUC referred to its economic deregulation as 'Catalan NEP'.<sup>87</sup> But the party's optimism was profoundly misplaced. Catalonia's macro-economic situation was quite unlike that of post-civil war Russia.

Catalonia was a net importer of staple foodstuffs. At least half of the region's wheat consumption was normally dependent on imports from other parts of Spain or abroad. But the wartime division of Spain had separated food producing areas from their natural markets.<sup>88</sup> Nor was the problem susceptible to solution under wartime conditions. Although grain was imported from abroad on occasion, both the Generalitat and the central Republican government were increasingly limited in their ability

to purchase foreign wheat as the value of the Republican peseta fell and the Non-Intervention arms embargo obliged them to concentrate virtually all foreign exchange on the covert purchase of war material ('cash up front') on the international arms market.<sup>89</sup> The lack of wheat and other basic foodstuffs in Catalonia was, then, the result of an absolute shortfall, massively exacerbated by the continually increasing refugee population. Moreover, given the circumstances just described, the shortages could only get worse as time went on.

For this very reason the Republican authorities needed strict central control over domestic economic resources in order to be able to prioritize their use. In Russia, the Bolsheviks had relaxed their centralized control to implement the New Economic Policy (NEP) only *after* the defeat of the White armies. For the Spanish Republic, its version of that battle still lay ahead. Moreover, it was up against an enemy far more efficiently aided and supplied by its European backers than Russia's White armies had ever been. The mass, modern war — driven by German technological aid — made the urban population of Catalonia and, especially the industrial workforce at the heart of armaments production, vital to the Republican war effort. Guaranteeing an equitable rationed minimum of essential food-stuffs for this sector would probably have been beyond the organizational capacities of the Republican state in 1936–7. But even the political will to achieve this was absent because it ran counter to the liberal economic orthodoxies which still underpinned the Republican political alliance.

After the abolition of the supply committees, staple food prices were, in theory, under Generalitat control. In the stores and stalls of urban Catalonia, however, bread shortages increased and food prices rose sharply. The CNT and the PSUC engaged in mutual recriminations over the cause. The libertarians denounced it as retail speculation by the middle men of the Small Traders and Manufacturers Federation (GEPCI), founded by the PSUC at the start of the war, while the PSUC blamed the legacy of CNT inefficiency and poor harvests, made worse by the collectives. In fact both CNT and PSUC faced a complex array of economic problems in the Supply portfolio with only limited organizational resources and controls at their disposal.<sup>90</sup> Food shortages, inflation, speculation and the emerging black market were symptoms of a war-induced economic crisis. Tackling that crisis,

however, involved a political choice. The shift from CNT supply committees (for all their very real shortcomings) to government price controls signified that the industrial workforce and the urban poor were to be required to bear the brunt of Catalonia's wartime subsistence crisis on behalf of the rest.

With both prices and the scale of refugee need continuing to increase, the Generalitat was obliged to implement rationing in Barcelona in February. But the system was extremely inadequate. In practice, staple commodities were frequently unavailable through the rationing system.<sup>91</sup> Moreover, rationed goods were supplied to neighbourhoods in an extremely approximate way which took little account of differing population densities. Inevitably it was the urban poor in the cramped housing conditions of inner-city Barcelona and the densely populated working-class neighbourhoods beyond the Eixample<sup>92</sup> who bore the brunt of the rationing system's shortcomings. There were additional pressures too in these areas which had the highest influx of war-displaced persons staying with family members or friends. The long queues at the food depots frequently ran out before everyone had been served.<sup>93</sup>

While the urban working classes suffered the greatest levels of material deprivation, others too were adversely affected by the shortages. There were large numbers of middle-class families of modest means — the natural supporters of Esquerra and PSUC — who could not afford high market prices either and who were equally outraged by the evidence of speculation and the emerging black market. The manifest lack of a guaranteed minimum in the life of so many urban dwellers provoked street demonstrations against the food shortages from early 1937 onwards, and, most notably on 14 April, the sixth anniversary of the Republic's birth, following a sudden and intense price hike.<sup>94</sup> Many of the street protests against bread shortages and high prices, running through from February to May, were protagonized by women, apparently replicating the role they had taken in subsistence crises in many Spanish towns across many decades.<sup>95</sup> But these wartime protests were also different in that many were directly politically mediated. The CNT, FAI and POUM all instrumentalized such demonstrations as a plebiscite against Generalitat economic policy and they also boycotted the Republican commemoration on 14 April. But a greater number of protests were mobilized by women's associations affiliated to the Popular Front. In

Catalonia this allowed the food protests to be channelled by the PSUC in order to bolster the case for 'strong government'.<sup>96</sup>

At the same time as Popular Frontist mobilization was accelerating in Barcelona, however, the CNT remained plugged in, in a rather less 'modern' or organized way, to other social strata where the daily impact of *laissez faire* — more silent, but no less profound — would prime a time-bomb which exploded in the May Days.

Extreme material hardship was scarcely a stranger to the urban working class, nor to other poor and marginal sectors of 'outcast' Barcelona. There had also been shortages when the CNT committees were in place. Moreover, in so far as these were the result of speculation, it would have been very hard for the CNT — especially in a Popular Front mode which precluded or restricted coercion — to have controlled that process even if it had retained charge of the Generalitat Supply portfolio after December 1936. Nevertheless, the continuing deterioration in the city's supply situation and increasing inflationary pressure after January 1937 was interpreted by at least some of the social constituencies who looked to the CNT as other than merely war-induced incremental hardship. In the daily battle for survival, shortages, inflation, middle men and the black market<sup>97</sup> were read by sectors of the poor as the outcome of the economic normalization occurring in parallel with the process of reconstructing state political authority inside the wartime Generalitat. To understand how and why this link was made, we need to remember the context of repressive continuities experienced by poor and marginal social constituencies in their ongoing war with the liberal state since 1931.

In the flux following the defeat of the military coup in July 1936, the possibility of social and economic change had been glimpsed. But with the reconstitution of the Generalitat the full weight of institutional disapproval fell on collective grass-roots food procurement initiatives. The abolition of the supply committees was the culmination of a larger process of eroding such initiatives daily.<sup>98</sup> This also witnessed familiar scenes of the police clearing street sellers<sup>99</sup> and breaking up food protests, as well as now protecting commercial quarters from 'popular requisition'. Clearing itinerant vendors could of course be publicly justified as a move against the abuses of the black market, but it was a government measure which also erupted in unforeseen ways into the fragile economies of the urban poor.

Popular protest grew across the early months of 1937. The poor of Barcelona had no rights to assistance from the refugee agencies in their daily struggle for survival. Even in those industries which were converted to war production, workers' salaries failed to keep up with inflation. But many families had lost their male breadwinner, while some had never had one. This produced intolerable strains on working women since wartime food procurement was itself a full-time job, especially for the poorest.<sup>100</sup>

While the poor fought local battles for material survival much as they had done before the war, at macro level the Generalitat was preparing its own final push on public order. The early months of 1937 saw the imposition of tighter police discipline as Assault Guards and National Republican Guards were merged into a single Catalan police corps and prohibited from membership of any political party or trade union. While such a measure was still difficult to enforce, it did achieve the major goal of putting the workers' patrols beyond the law while also debarring their members from the unified police (and, therefore, from any legitimate policing functions). In reality, however, the patrols went on existing — *now in open conflict with the state*. The tension mounted further on 12 March when the central Republican government ordered all worker committees, patrols and individual workers to hand over their arms — long and small — within forty-eight hours. This confrontation over public order led to the dissolution of the Catalan cabinet on the 27 March when the CNT's representatives withdrew. But the ensuing three-week crisis concluded in a very similar cabinet configuration on 16 April. Still entrenched in the Generalitat's Home Office, the Esquerra's Artemi Aiguader stepped up his war against the patrols. Along the French/Catalan border, there were fatalities in the escalating clashes now occurring between Carabineros and CNT patrol committees over control of customs posts which the committees had held since July 1936.

One of these incidents in particular suggests how these confrontations were many-stranded, linked to ancient border disputes pitting local smugglers against those upholding the fiscal prerogatives of the political centre,<sup>101</sup> as well as to more recent conflicts over state control, or stemming from acute social conflicts between the Catalan labour unions. On a day in late April at Puigcerdà, Catalan police engaged in fire, shooting dead a number of anarchists, including the influential Antonio Martín,

old-guard radical and ex-smuggler turned CNT customs chief. When this incident occurred, the police detachment had been returning from Molins de Llobregat, having arrested its CNT leadership for supposed involvement in the earlier assassination of union leader and PSUC member, Roldan Cortada, on the 25 April. As Cortada was an *ex-treintista*, suspicion fell on the CNT even though it had publicly condemned the murder and called for a full enquiry. From the time of these incidents political tension was mounting in the whole of the Baix Llobregat area of Barcelona province.<sup>102</sup>

There were long-standing tensions between the CNT and the socialist UGT which escalated after 18 July 1936, leading to the assassinations of both anarchist and socialist leaders and militants in various areas of Republican Spain, but notably in Barcelona.<sup>103</sup> In prewar Catalonia where the casualized structure of industry made labour relations extremely bitter, the UGT's arbitration-based unionism had remained a minority affair. Although there was some modest growth among service industry workers, in general the UGT tended to organize skilled workers or white collar employees who, because they had more bargaining power, or for other more subjective reasons, often felt little sense of solidarity with more precariously placed sectors of labour. Moreover, it was also the Catalan UGT which in the 1930s became the new home for some sectors (for example, private security guards) previously belonging to the *Sindicatos Libres*, the yellow unions of the 1920s which had collapsed with the fall of the Primo dictatorship. Members of the UGT were sometimes used by employers to replace a striking CNT workforce, earning themselves a reputation for scabbing and lumpen behaviour and thus the enduring opprobrium of anarcho-sindicalist constituencies.

After the military coup of 18 July 1936 the Catalan UGT began to expand significantly, for much the same reasons as the PSUC, as lower middle-class, commercial and white-collar sectors — often previously unorganized — joined party and union in search of protection in a hostile and apparently libertarian-dominated political environment. Indeed it was the joint Esquerra/PSUC rearguard action against the CNT which underlay the compulsory sindicalization decree issued in Catalonia in December 1936. After this, the Catalan UGT expanded rapidly, membership extending to the self-employed and small

businesses, in the shape of the GEPCI. The identification in popular perception of GEPCI with increased economic speculation was a further source of social friction between the Catalan UGT and the CNT.

But everywhere, not just in the GEPCI, the newly politically mobilized urban lower middle classes perceived party and union membership as a form of professional advancement or career opportunity, since the PSUC in Catalonia (as the Spanish Communist Party elsewhere) were major articulators of the Popular Front war effort and providers of government service cadres.<sup>104</sup> And as white-collar staff joined the Catalan UGT, so it also became the organizational bulwark of internal resistance to socialized industry. It was consistently the office and professional staff who saw CNT industrial controls as the 'problem'<sup>105</sup> and supported increased governmental intervention at the factory assemblies which the Generalitat required in each workplace to ratify its socialized status.<sup>106</sup>

Although the CNT's radical middle-level cadres were dug in on the factory committees, this was more a case of siege conditions after the libertarians had lost political control in the Generalitat. Once this had happened, the CNT was helpless to prevent either the police action against the CNT frontier controls or the Catalan government's accompanying action annulling workers' control over customs, when, in the course of the April ministerial crisis, it refused to certify factory councils' ownership of exported goods tied up in foreign ports pending the resolution of legal suits lodged by former owners.

But the Generalitat, in its impatience to rein in socialized industry and restore its own control over industrial production, shifted in April from indirect political manoeuvring within individual factories to sending in the police, which, on at least one occasion, saw them surround a factory at the time of the vote.<sup>107</sup>

For politically conscious sectors of the labour rank and file, such a blatant use of the police clearly reinforced what they already knew: at the heart of the battle to control Barcelona's factories there was a political agenda. Power was being restored to the very police forces which, prior to the coup, had been the overt and violent instrument of capital and state — whether monarchist or Republican.

But the perception of police ubiquity also influenced broader social sectors of 'outcast Barcelona'. For them too the revanche



of the 'state' (or, at any rate, a hostile form of order) was embodied in the repressive power of its security forces. The police were remembered for their eviction of rent strikers in the prewar period, and for their front-line role in the implementation of Republican policies of social control which rigorously invigilated public spaces and criminalized the unemployed. That many of the Catalan policemen enforcing the 'new' liberal order in the streets and factories of wartime Barcelona had gravitated to the PSUC after 18 July 1936 meant no more than that they had swapped the moribund conservatism of right wing republicanism for a more dynamic brand — just as in 1931 they had turned to republican conservatism upon the eclipse of the dynastic variety.

By April 1937 worker patrols had already been excluded from all police functions in the other major Republican cities of Madrid and Valencia. State enforcement in Catalonia, and Barcelona especially, was bound to be more complex given the strength of popular resistance. But after the cabinet crisis, Aiguader gave orders that the arms decrees were to be rigorously enforced. During the second half of April, workers in Barcelona were disarmed on sight by the police — except, that is, where the police could be outnumbered and themselves disarmed.

The political temperature rose further as Roldan Cortada's funeral turned into a demonstration of state power in the form of a long march past of armed police and troops. While this also reflected middle-class fears that the recent violence might herald a return of the feared *paseos* (executions at the margins of the judicial process), the blatant rehearsing of the state's repressive capacity — together with moral panic-inducing editorials in Barcelona's liberal Republican press<sup>108</sup> (including *Treball*, the PSUC newspaper) were fatal components in the accumulation of social and political tensions. According to one source, three-hundred workers were disarmed in the last seven days of April.<sup>109</sup> It was this escalating confrontation over arms which catalysed the dense web of conflicts,<sup>110</sup> bringing the city to the brink of street fighting.

In an attempt at containment, the traditional First of May (May Day) labour demonstrations were suspended throughout Catalonia. But two days later Barcelona erupted when the police stormed the Telefónica in an attempt to eject the CNT delegates from the union control committee.<sup>111</sup> The building itself was

charged with extra painful memories since the libertarians' bitter strike defeat of 1931. In its origins, the Telefónica conflict set the Catalan government, state agencies and their political defenders against all those who, for whatever reasons, opposed the expansion of state jurisdiction. It is important to make the distinction here between the underlying causes of the May Days, on the one hand, and the political opportunities and consequences which *then* emerged from the evolution of the conflict in both street and cabinet office.

The key to anti-state popular mobilization lay in the close relationship between the mid-level cadres (shop stewards and branch activists) of the CNT's *comités de base* (both neighbourhood and factory committees) and militant, mobilized sectors of the industrial working class, many of whom had been the shock troops of earlier labour wars in the city.<sup>112</sup> Although the CNT's committee structure had been decapitated by the process of state political reconstruction spearheaded from the Generalitat, the grass roots committees still existed and could thus provide, together with the worker patrols, the organizational sinews of collective resistance in May.<sup>113</sup>

The assault on the Telefónica focused the resisters' energies on the city centre where all the political and economic machinery of government was concentrated — in close proximity to the most volatile of popular neighbourhoods, the Barri xino (literally, 'Chinese Quarter') which had long constituted the frontline between 'respectable' and 'outcast' Barcelona.<sup>114</sup> Indeed the force of the initial May explosion is only explicable if one bears in mind the longstanding connection between the 'outcast' city and the CNT. While the appearance of the barricades constituted an act of conscious 'political' contestation, the CNT's direct action was also mediating more amorphous, 'pre-political' forms of popular resistance. The CNT was, once again, functioning as a lightning conductor in inner city Barcelona, transforming both a shared history of persecution and the perception among the city's marginalized of the connection between state action (public order, food supply and so on) and the brutality of daily life, into generalized support for street action as active protest 'against the state'. This was what confronted liberal Catalonia and its police force in central Barcelona on 4 May.

As late as the evening of 3 May, with an equilibrium of forces inside the Telefónica and an armed stand-off around it, the

Generalitat could have averted the explosion in the streets. But it would have required a climbdown over the police seizure, the removal of police chief Rodríguez Salas who had led the assault and probably also of the Esquerra's abrasive Artemi Aiguader who, as Generalitat Home Office minister, had formally authorized it.<sup>115</sup> But far from backing down, Companys issued a quite uncompromising press communiqué to the effect that it would be necessary to 'clear up the streets',<sup>116</sup> a sentiment which echoed the Esquerra's stock-in-trade denunciations of the dangerous classes threatening the good order and livelihoods of bourgeois Barcelona. Clearly both the Esquerra and PSUC, as the driving forces in the cabinet which had been in session throughout the evening, wanted to force the issue over the telephone control committee as part of their onward consolidation of government power. However, it also seems likely that they did not yet realize what this would involve. Lulled into a false sense of security by the CNT leadership's quiescence, no one in the Catalan cabinet had reckoned with the force of the ensuing popular explosion on 4 May. This saw the Generalitat and other government buildings armoured and barricaded against attack, while whole neighbourhoods of the city rapidly became no-go areas for the police.

The capital's industrial satellites were solidly libertarian,<sup>117</sup> as were the worker districts of the industrial periphery, and neighbourhoods such as Sants, San Martí and Gràcia, situated just around the perimeter of the Esquerra's fief, the predominantly middle-class Eixample. Although violent incidents occurred in some of the peripheral areas, there was no serious challenge to the worker patrols.<sup>118</sup> Police action was focused on the city centre as the hub of political power. But the peripheral neighbourhoods were also perhaps left alone for fear of the resulting violence spilling over into the Eixample which was surrounded by hostile territory.<sup>119</sup> It is certainly the case that throughout the May street protests areas of uncontested CNT strength virtually encircled the city.<sup>120</sup>

May 4th was a day of violent confrontations across the city and lengthy cabinet deliberations with the CNT's national and regional leaderships. Also present was Juan García Oliver, CNT justice minister in the central government. By the evening, Companys was amenable to discussing the political compromise he had refused twenty-four hours earlier. In changing his stance, Companys was effectively recognizing the unforeseen magnitude

of the situation on the streets. For this was now posing a direct threat to Catalan autonomy.

In his dealings with the central Republican government, Companys had since July 1936 assiduously cultivated the picture of Esquerra populism as a vital device for controlling the CNT. This was intended to keep at bay any attempt by 'Madrid' to recoup the *de facto* expansion of Catalan statute powers — especially in regard of the army and finance — which had occurred in the wake of the military rising. But now, faced with rebellion on the streets of Barcelona, the central government repeatedly refused Companys' requests for police reinforcements, unless he also surrendered the Generalitat's control over public order and military affairs in the region. The central government was clearly set on using the turmoil to crack down on the Catalan particularism which equally offended all its constituent parts — republicans, socialists and communists, if for different reasons. Companys was informed that 'Madrid' would take over imminently, unless there was an immediate and substantial improvement in the public order situation.<sup>121</sup>

But by now it was too late for Companys to avert the acceleration of violent confrontation. The CNT leadership — national and regional — desperately sought to broker a ceasefire on the basis of the cabinet compromise. But they were, for a time at least, swept aside by the sheer force of what was happening down on the streets. When García Oliver, once the strongman of Barcelona's July Days, broadcast his appeal for a ceasefire from the Generalitat on the night of 4 May, many in the CNT, hearing him from the other side of the barricades, were convinced he had been taken hostage. Soon incredulity gave way to a dominant mood of embitteredness at what was interpreted as the leadership's betrayal of core anarchist values. In particular, García Oliver's attempt to claim as his brothers all those who had died, on whichever side of the barricades, was instantly scorned with a savage and sardonic amazement that has reverberated in the memoirs of the revolutionary left ever since.<sup>122</sup> In the black humour of the barricades, García Oliver's speech was christened 'The Legend of the Kiss' after a famous light opera.

But, in spite of mounting anger and incomprehension among their Catalan cadres, the CNT-FAI national and regional leaderships repeatedly refused to sanction armed action of any kind. The fact that this included the FAI as much as the CNT, with its

*treintista* heritage, indicates the enormous impact of the war on the political consciousness of libertarian leaders. Nor can this be satisfactorily explained as the corrupting effect of political power, as the consolatory but also highly reductionist postwar anarchist history tells it. More than anything, people like García Oliver held back in May because they saw the bigger picture: not only — or even necessarily primarily — in terms of the overriding imperatives of the war against Franco, but also in terms of the overall balance of firepower *within Republican Spain*.

The CNT could certainly have ‘taken out’ the state in urban Catalonia. But holding Catalonia as a whole would have required calling upon their troops from the Aragon front. Moreover, either course of action would have brought them up against the central Republican government. Its more powerful propaganda machine could easily have portrayed the CNT as the betrayers of the Spanish proletariat who had turned their backs on the war. There was inevitably a lack of knowledge and understanding elsewhere of what was occurring in Barcelona — even the POUM’s small sections in Madrid and Valencia were uneasy<sup>123</sup> — and the fact that Barcelona was the Republican city farthest from the battle front offered a gift for hostile propaganda. Moreover, the Republican government was already poised to intervene: had it been faced with an all-out CNT challenge it would surely have drafted in far greater numbers of troops and police to take on ‘revolutionary Barcelona’. Otherwise it could not have guaranteed the Aragon front or retained control over Catalonia’s war industries — even more essential now as Basque industry came under rebel attack in the North. The Republic itself might well not have survived such a massive escalation of armed internecine conflict, but, either way, the CNT would certainly have gone down in the blood-bath.

Thus the CNT-controlled anti-aircraft guns on Montjuich hill, trained on the government buildings below, remained silent. The armoured car attacks on government buildings occurred only as sporadic and unco-ordinated attempts by individual groups of CNT resisters and were easily repelled. The CNT’s most seasoned and best equipped fighters, the 500 or so men left from the Durruti column, which had fought on the Madrid front, were instructed by García Oliver to obey the orders dispatching them to Aragon. Those CNT militia on the Aragon front who had shown a willingness to come to the defence of their comrades in

Barcelona were ordered to remain at the front.<sup>124</sup> The POUM leadership in Barcelona also sent the same instructions to its Aragon divisions.

What transpired on the Aragon front itself is, however, less clear. The available evidence is fragmentary and sometimes contradictory. Bitterly disappointed and confused though many in the CNT and the POUM were, overall, military discipline remained intact — in spite of the inactive state of the front likely adding to the temptation. A several hundred-strong CNT/POUM party did reach Lleida, but returned to the front once they had obliged government forces to desist from besieging the CNT and POUM headquarters there.<sup>125</sup>

In Barcelona, however, all libertarian action remained defensive. This situation was the despair of the POUM's leadership — and specifically of Andreu Nin who across 3–4 May argued to no avail with the CNT's regional leaders that they must own the cause of their workers on the barricades. When it was clear that they would not, however, Nin too pulled POUM militants back from the brink, refusing to sanction joint armed action with CNT cadres, even though in some places joint defence and neighbourhood committees already existed.<sup>126</sup> Neither the POUM nor, still less, the handful of radical anarchist activists who made up the Friends of Durruti<sup>127</sup> had the organizational purchase to intervene in a politically decisive way in the May events. Indeed, it could be argued that the POUM's published proclamations of ideological support for those at the barricades and its public articulation of what the May Days meant functioned in some ways as a compensation for their political marginality.

The POUM's intention in calling upon the CNT to back their workers at the barricades was to strengthen the resisters' hand in subsequent negotiations with the Generalitat.<sup>128</sup> Nin and his executive colleagues were as aware as García Oliver that the overall balance of forces within Republican Spain was against those at the barricades. For this reason, the POUM leadership, like the CNT's, rejected outright the Friends of Durruti's published manifesto of 5 May which attempted to rally resistance behind a Revolutionary Junta.<sup>129</sup> But Nin still sought to convince the CNT of the need for unified resistance in Barcelona as a bargaining counter in order to prevent the unleashing of a blanket repression afterwards.<sup>130</sup>

The CNT leadership was, however, reluctant to sanction even

this form of tactical resistance. The fact that it did not can certainly be counted a serious strategic error, for it exposed not only the POUM but also the CNT's cadres to the full blast of state political repression from 7 May onwards. But it is vital to remember the intensity of the pressures deriving from the war situation. Since 18 July 1936 these had reinforced the politicizing currents inside the libertarian movement led by the *de facto* general secretary Horacio Prieto. The early months of 1937 saw a series of internal organizational changes in the CNT designed to erode the old confederal autonomy — for many synonymous with the CNT — and to centralize power in the hands of the national executive.<sup>131</sup> The latter cracked down on the FAI's direct action groups, excluding them as such from the organization, and it also implemented a much tighter editorial control of the confederal press — over and above the norms of wartime censorship. None of this occurred simply because the CNT was collaborating with the Popular Front alliance, but that collaboration accelerated the process of centralization which was also, in some ways, a form of political modernization.

In none of its armed uprisings across the Republican years since 1931 had the FAI ever won out against the forces of the state. In some ways it seemed as if the Barcelona events were finally illuminating that pattern of defeat. Certainly the plea of old-guard FAI supremo García Oliver to his comrades on the barricades, 'not to cultivate the mystique of the dead hero' seems haunted by such an awareness.<sup>132</sup> The escalation of the rebel military coup into full-scale war had widened the fault line in the CNT until by May 1937 the organization was itself divided by the barricades. The Barcelona May Days in effect constituted the CNT's own 'crisis of modernity'.

A transformation certainly occurred in the representation of the CNT's dead across the first ten months of the war. Gone by May 1937 was the cult glorifying the fallen warrior and martyr, such as that which grew up around the figure of the veteran libertarian leader, Francisco Ascaso, killed in the assault on Barcelona's Atarazanas barracks in the July Days. Or, supremely, the mythologizing, quasi-religious aura<sup>133</sup> and the exhortation to emulatory mourning<sup>134</sup> evident at the funeral of Buenaventura Durruti who died on the Madrid front in November 1936. Durruti had been the comrade-in-arms of both García Oliver and Ascaso in the brutal Barcelona labour wars of the 1920s. The

'three musketeers' of popular legend, Durruti, Ascaso and García Oliver, had created the most famous of all the anarchist direct action groups, Los Solidarios, to confront the hired gunmen of the monarchist state.

By contrast, the CNT's reportage on leaders, such as Domingo Ascaso (the brother of Francisco), who died in the Barcelona May Days was determinedly low-key.<sup>135</sup> No longer were there martyrs to the cause. The CNT's supporters were now being exhorted to respect other types of leader: the politician and office-holder rather than the street-fighter or radical egalitarian. García Oliver as minister underwent a notable reconstruction. He, unlike Francisco Ascaso and Durruti, had outlived the time when 'heroes' could credibly take on the state single-handed. Anarchist iconography serves thus as a cultural 'barometer' registering the expansion of state political authority.

Yet we cannot simply point to the CNT's leaders as the conscious 'authors' of these changes. Certainly for some the war had reinforced pre-existing views in favour of modifying libertarian praxis in order to incorporate the CNT to parliamentary politics. But for many more — although they did not consciously moot it, still less articulate it in public — the war's overwhelming practical imperatives had greatly problematized ideological resistance to centralized forms of organization. Yet most of these resources remained in liberal hands. This, plus the limited capacity of CNT organizational forms to integrate and centralize, saw the force of attraction exerted by the liberal state over libertarian leaders increase as the war itself escalated. The very real needs of the war effort saw both CNT and FAI leaders increasingly incorporated into the governing machinery of the liberal state, leaving isolated and uncomprehending sectors of their own cadres and social base whose daily experience led them to continue to resist its encroachment.

In all, this was the internal division in the CNT which opened into an abyss in May 1937. The Barcelona radicals had no organizational means of co-ordinating the fight-back from the CNT's grass-roots committees. Above all, the historic radical anarchist hostility to the formation of industrial unions in the CNT would now come back to haunt them. If such structures had existed, the battle for industrial production in the city which had raged across the months since the military coup might have been harder for the government to win.



By 5 May the tide had begun to turn against the resisters. The Telefónica workers surrendered to the besieging police and those behind the barricades, bereft of orders from their leaders — other than that urging them to ‘return to work’<sup>136</sup> — remained confined to the defensive as their positions crumbled. Beyond Barcelona too, police and pro-government forces, emboldened by the libertarians’ stalemate in the capital, made concerted assaults on CNT and POUM premises and CNT-held telephone exchange buildings in a number of towns across Catalonia, including, most notably, Tarragona and Tortosa.<sup>137</sup> The striking similarity of this police action — both in timing and pattern of attack — suggests a common set of orders emanating from the government in Barcelona.<sup>138</sup>

Midday on 5 May saw the formation of an emergency four-man cabinet of Esquerra/Rabassaire, CNT and UGT representatives which excluded all those who had previously occupied ministerial posts. The absence of any representative with a named PSUC affiliation might be interpreted as an attempt at cosmetic conciliation. But the new cabinet’s line on public order was as uncompromising as that expressed by Companys on the eve of the conflict on 3 May. The central Republican government, based in Valencia, confirmed its assumption of Catalan public order shortly after the proclamation of the new cabinet. Valencia was also moved by the fact that the Republican president, Manuel Azaña, who had been imprisoned in the presidential palace in Barcelona by the street fighting, was threatening to resign.<sup>139</sup> This had to be avoided at all costs since it would have seriously damaged the Republic’s democratic credibility at the very moment that it was intensifying diplomatic efforts in an attempt to procure the lifting of Non Intervention. The central government announced the dispatch of militarized police units to Barcelona. Even as late as 5 May Companys was hoping a rapid, determined push on the part of what were, for a short while at least, still Generalitat-controlled police forces inside Barcelona might bring the situation sufficiently under control for Valencia to reconsider its decision. Unfortunately, the violence on the streets exploded again, shattering Companys’ coping strategy.

On the afternoon of 5 May, Antoni Sesé, front-rank leader of the Catalan UGT and new Generalitat minister, was shot dead outside a CNT union building as he was being driven to assume

his governmental responsibilities. Although it is not possible to say for certain who killed Sesé or why, the circumstances of his death were sufficiently ambiguous and the atmosphere of mistrust generated by days of inter-organizational bloodletting so absolute for the accusation that he was shot by an anarchist sniper to be believed.<sup>140</sup>

Probably more than any other single incident, it was Sesé's death which precipitated the political intervention of the central Republican government. In a context where the continuation of violent street confrontation signalled the continuing jeopardy of state authority, the symbolic significance of a minister's demise was not lost on either the Catalan cabinet or the Valencia government. The Generalitat was now wide open to the charge that it had failed to contain a rising tide of disorder which was threatening the Republic's very capacity to resist militarily. Valencia's appointee to the Public Order portfolio, Colonel Antonio Escobar, was seriously wounded when shot at on his arrival in Barcelona. And production in Barcelona's war industries had been disrupted by the generalized work stoppage since 4 May. Valencia's take-over of public order and defence in Catalonia meant the Generalitat lost precisely those functions which were most highly charged in terms of nationalist identity. Companys personally authorized the hand-over, but in the circumstances he had little real choice. Behind Valencia's political intervention lay the tacit threat of direct military intervention which Companys wanted to avoid at all costs since it would have meant the complete suspension of the 1932 Catalan Autonomy Statute at a stroke.

In the event, the bitter battles over political and economic control which would develop between the Generalitat and the central government, intensified by the mounting material crisis of late 1937 and 1938, would, cumulatively, have as destructive an impact on the political cohesion of the Republic as any putative military occupation by 'Madrid'.<sup>141</sup> But this later jurisdictional conflict between 'Madrid' and 'Barcelona' should not obscure the fact that when over 5,000 central government troops and police arrived in Barcelona late on Friday 7 May — soon to be reinforced by several thousand more<sup>142</sup> — they came to enact a repression which would guarantee the same liberal order that the Esquerra, PSUC and Catalan middle classes had sought to reconstruct and defend since July 1936. The fact that the new

arrivals' conquering cry was the leitmotiv of the left — ¡U.H.P.! (Workers unite!) — was only one more example of the classic liberal assimilation of the legitimizing discourse of 'the revolution' all the better to consolidate a conservative order of property beneath.

With the arrival of police detachments from Valencia the May Days were effectively over. State repression was, however, only just beginning. All of the CNT leaders' painstaking efforts across 6 and 7 May to secure a peace 'with guarantees' came to naught. Indeed, even as they negotiated in Barcelona, government troops *en route* to the city were participating in acts of violent reprisal designed to dismember the libertarian movement as a political force. Symbolic acts — such the burning of the confederal flag — were rapidly followed by the burning of CNT premises and soon a veritable wave of *paseos* was unleashed in which many members of the CNT would be killed.<sup>143</sup>

Companys' promise that there would be neither victors nor vanquished rang hollow as Republican prisons began to fill up with those held in 'preventive detention' (*prisioneros gubernativos*) and thus with slim prospect of a trial.<sup>144</sup> On the streets, Valencian troops and Catalan police behaved like occupiers, routinely demanding identity papers, tearing up any CNT union cards they found and humiliating their owners. But it was scant revenge, given the dominant tenor of regret among the police and pro-government forces in general that the barricades had come down before they had finished the job.<sup>145</sup> It is difficult not to hear echoing once again in these sentiments the old attitudes of official Barcelona to the 'rabble'.<sup>146</sup> But the Republican state had to tread a fine line between punishment and the needs of wartime mobilization.

Barcelona's proletariat may have been the beating heart of the barricades but it was also the crucial centre of the Republic's war industry. Factory production was gradually starting up again after 7 May, and ensuring it against further disruption was vital, not only in view of the external arms embargo but also with the mounting rebel threat to war production in the north. Thus, while punishment for the May Days was essential in order to guarantee future labour discipline,<sup>147</sup> this had to be an exemplary punishment which did not directly victimize the CNT since its cadres still had the potential to disrupt production.

The results of Republican *realpolitik* were two-fold. First,

conciliation with the CNT leadership whose political subordination increased as divisions in libertarian ranks grew more acute in the wake of the May debacle. Second, it led to the political scapegoating of the POUM (about which the CNT's leaders made only very muted criticism).<sup>148</sup> The POUM's public identification with those resisting on the barricades, combined with its relative political marginality, made the party the ideal target for the symbolic function required by the Republican state *pour encourager les autres*. On 16 June, in the wake of the fall of Bilbao, the industrial power-house of the Republican north, the POUM executive committee was arrested. They would be brought to trial in October 1938 and found guilty of rebellion against the state. Most members of the executive were sentenced to lengthy prison terms and the party and its youth movement were formally outlawed.

The fact that the POUM was also the target in internecine wars in the communist movement facilitated the Republican government's objectives by increasing the party's isolation. But it is important to stress that these two processes of targeting the POUM had separate agendas and, moreover, ones which rapidly came into conflict with each other. The Republican authorities wished to make an example of the POUM by bringing the full weight of liberal law and order to bear on its leaders. But the very basis of liberal legitimacy — the constitutionality of the state — was daily being violated in the latter weeks of June as the Spanish Communist Party, Comintern representatives and some Soviet police personnel set up their own private prisons and interrogation centres (*checas*) on Republican state territory — but beyond the control of its constitutional authorities — wherein they assaulted and assassinated anti-stalinist dissidents with virtual impunity.

The intention here is not to suggest that Republican order was somehow less implacable — although it was less lethal, at least in the short term.<sup>149</sup> Rather it is to indicate that Comintern activity was directly challenging the 'monopoly of legitimate violence' on which Republican state authority depended. This is very well illustrated in the story told by POUM executive member Juan Andrade of his transfer from a Madrid *checa* to the state gaol in Valencia. The justice minister, Manuel Irujo, sent a detachment of assault guards whose main purpose was the surveillance not of the POUM prisoners but of the accompanying communist

policemen in order to ensure Andrade and his colleagues reached their destination safely.<sup>150</sup>

Andrade's account raises a crucial further question, however. What were the respective roles of the Comintern and the Spanish Communist Party in the repression of the POUM? While the ideological attack on anti-stalinist dissent was prepared in Moscow, there were simply not enough Comintern functionaries in Republican Spain to have carried out — or even supervised — a systematic political repression of the POUM.<sup>151</sup> Moreover, the Comintern seems notably to have targeted *foreign* dissidents (often themselves exiles) for the most brutal treatment. The notorious case of the kidnapping and murder of POUM general secretary, Andreu Nin, is at first sight an exception. But on closer observation it forms part of the same pattern. Nin was separated off from the rest of the POUM executive not because of any specific responsibility derived from the May Days but because of his personal history.<sup>152</sup> This bound him inescapably into the inner circle of the Bolshevik old guard and sealed his fate.

The Spanish Communist Party, meanwhile, was engaged, post-May Days, in an anti-POUM offensive designed to procure the party's total exclusion from the political life of the Republic at war.<sup>153</sup> Moreover, the Spanish Communist Party had the personnel to engage in a systematic repression.<sup>154</sup> The PSUC too had its particular motives, in view of the longstanding political-organizational rivalries within the ranks of the Catalan communist movement.<sup>155</sup>

In the prewar Republic many acute intra-organizational conflicts on the left had been played out violently. The coming of the war did not wipe out these memories or the patterns of dispute which had originated the conflicts. Indeed, as these mainly arose over issues of political influence, clientele and membership rivalries, the circumstances produced by rebellion and war, if anything, intensified such clashes in the Republican zone — hence the emblematic importance of the *tránsfuga* (political renegade).<sup>156</sup> These clashes occurred, as we have seen, between members of the CNT and UGT, between socialists and communists, and between the rival branches of Catalan communism. Part political, part organizational, part personal, these disputes also led to physical violence against individual members of the POUM. But while this constituted in part 'communist' violence,

it cannot accurately be collapsed under the term 'stalinist', in the sense that it was not a response to a Comintern game plan.

Once the street fighting had erupted in Barcelona, it precipitated a quantity of bloodletting on all sides. The CNT, UGT, PSUC and POUM, as well as other lesser players, were all involved in the violence, as the ghosts of decades of labour wars and political infighting stalked the streets and meeting rooms of Barcelona. Indeed the ritualistic reciprocal tearing up of union and party cards could be seen as a point where 'top-down' state repression met clientelist intra-party violence.<sup>157</sup> (As we have seen, the acute instability of the war had massively inflated the reciprocal currency value of political membership in a society which had deep-rooted traditions of political nepotism and 'fixing' [*enchufismo*].)

The May Days cannot, then, be reduced to a Cold War parable of an alien stalinism which 'injected' conflict into Spanish Republican politics.<sup>158</sup> The Comintern's 'clean-up' of dissident communists in Barcelona in May and June 1937, morally unattractive though it was, constituted but one strand in a more complex picture.

We can also conclude that the May Days were an urban rebellion, directed against state power and reflecting the particular configuration of CNT strength — and weakness — in Catalonia. This is confirmed by the fact that the last act of the May Days took place, not in Catalonia, but in neighbouring Aragon — the agrarian counterpoint of 'red' Barcelona. The city's physical barricades had been dismantled, but Aragon's institutional barricades against central state power still remained, in the form of its libertarian-controlled governing Council of Aragon, backed by the armed strength of CNT and POUM cadres on the Eastern (Aragon) front. The central government's appointment of General Pozas on 5 May as commander of the Eastern Army, as well as military head of the Catalan region, set the stage for the subsequent military offensive in Aragon the following August. The central government's target here was not rural collectivization *per se*, but the dissolution of the Council's political authority and the destruction of the organizational sinews of libertarian power in the region: 'the moral and material needs of the war imperiously demand the concentration of authority in the hands of the state'.<sup>159</sup>

Once state troops had been sent into Aragon to reassert

government control, however, the destabilization of CNT authority reactivated all manner of pre-existing political tensions. These mainly took the form of intra-organizational battles to acquire the libertarians' 'clientele' or to mobilize other sectors in the struggle for political control of the region's post-Council government structures.<sup>160</sup> These often involved disputes for and against collectivization in which the Spanish Communist Party, itself competing with left republicans, would defend peasant smallholders, much as the PSUC had done in Catalonia.<sup>161</sup>

The May events saw the interweaving of many different, highly complex strands of conflict stretching back beyond the Second Republic. To republicans, socialists and communists in Madrid, 'libertarian Barcelona' had in principle to be broken since it challenged the model and very validity of the liberal polity and society they were seeking to reconstruct. This task had also increased in urgency as the Republic faced escalating, 'total' war against the German and Italian-backed rebels. Faced with external embargo, it needed to mobilize its domestic economic and human resources to the maximum in order to ensure survival let alone victory. And this made urban, industrial, populous Catalonia the *sine qua non* of a successful modern Republican war effort. In the end, then, May has to be seen as the culmination of a very particular form of social conflict — shaped by the unevenness of Spain's development — in which, driven by the centralizing needs of the war effort, the bourgeois state (in the shape of certain political parties as well as bureaucratic agencies) finally broke down the political resistance and social autonomy of the most powerful and recalcitrant sector of industrial labour in Spain. The meaning of the May Days was not, in the end, about 'breaking the CNT' *per se* — its leadership was already a willing part of the liberal Republican alliance. Rather it was about breaking the CNT's organizational solidarities in Barcelona in order to deprive its constituencies, aided and abetted by various parts of 'outcast Barcelona', of the mechanisms and political means of resisting the state. 'May' was about a process of forcible 'nationalization': in the immediate term about war production, but ultimately about state building through social disciplining and capitalist control of national economic production. The Barcelona May Days of 1937 were ultimately about brutal 'modernization'.

## Notes

I should like to thank Chris Ealham, Tim Kirk, John Maher, Rudolf Muhs, Francisco Romero and Frank Schauff for their helpful comments on draft versions of this article. I should also like to thank Paul Preston (and Weidenfeld and Nicolson) and Nick Rider for allowing me to use Figures 1 and 2, respectively.

1. Gustav Landauer, *Die Revolution* (1908), translated quote from David Goodway, ed., *For Anarchism: History, Theory, Practice* (London 1989), 16.
2. Michael Richards, *A Time of Silence. Civil War and the Culture of Repression in Franco's Spain, 1936–1945* (Cambridge 1998).
3. During the May Days an anarchist poster, published as a call to defend the barricades, depicted the Telefónica being crushed beneath the tentacles of the giant octopus of capital.
4. In some of these other industrial towns — for example in Lleida, Tarragona and Gerona — the dominant political force was the Catalanist communist party, POUM, rather than the CNT. Relations between the two organizations are discussed below.
5. In 1930–1, Barcelona and Madrid were the only Spanish cities to have a population exceeding one million.
6. For the debate, see Leandro Prados de La Escosura, *De imperio a nación: crecimiento y atraso económico en España 1780–1930* (Madrid 1988); A. Shubert, *A Social History of Modern Spain* (London 1990), 9–56.
7. The northern Basque region of Vizcaya (focused on the city of Bilbao and the river Nervión) was the other area which experienced rapid industrial development at this time. But there a ribbon of small industrial centres developed, with no comparable centre to Barcelona.
8. For Barcelona's industrial development, demographic growth, urbanization, and more complex sociological stratification compared to elsewhere in Spain, see C. Ealham, 'Policing the Recession: Unemployment, Social Protest and Law-and-Order in Barcelona 1930–1936', unpublished University of London PhD thesis (1995), 27–30; also E. Ucelay da Cal, 'Catalan Nationalism: Cultural Plurality and Political Ambiguity', in H. Graham and J. Labanyi, eds, *Spanish Cultural Studies* (Oxford 1995), 145–7.
9. From outside Catalonia (but inside Spain). Most of these workers came from the impoverished rural South.
10. Workers were released and then shot down on the street, ostensibly while 'trying to escape', F. J. Romero Salvadó, 'Spain and the First World War: the Structural Crisis of the Liberal Monarchy', *European History Quarterly*, Vol. 25, 1995, 529–54; A. Balcells, 'Violencia y terrorismo en la lucha de clases en Barcelona de 1913 a 1923', *Estudios de Historia Social* 42–3 (July–Dec.) 1987, 37–79 (partic. 44–7); L. Ignacio, *Los años del pistolero. Ensayo para una guerra civil* (Madrid 1981), *passim*.
11. C. Ealham, 'Policing the Recession', *passim*; 'Anarchism and Illegality in Barcelona 1931–7', *Contemporary European History*, 4, 2 (1995) 133–51.
12. Ealham, 'Policing the Recession', 28–34.
13. Cf. Pamela B. Radcliff on the CNT's appeal through the politics of consumption, *From Mobilization to Civil War. The Politics of Polarization in the Spanish City of Gijón, 1900–1937* (Cambridge 1996), 287–8.



14. Radcliff, *From Mobilization to Civil War*, *passim*.
15. Radcliff, *From Mobilization to Civil War*, 128.
16. A. Pestaña, *Lo que aprendí en la vida*, (Madrid 1972) Part 1, 88–9, 100–1; Part 2, 87.
17. C. M. Lorenzo, *Los anarquistas españoles y el poder* (n.p. 1972), 44–5.
18. In 1919 the CNT's Catalan regional federation, with a membership of over 400,000, represented half of the total CNT membership for Spain, J. Peirats, *La CNT en la revolución española* (Madrid 1978) Vol. 1, 27–8. Although the Catalan federation suffered a membership decline across 1931–6, the fact that it retained its formidable mobilizing power in the streets and continued to provide the movement's most prominent leaders meant it retained its political dominance over the CNT nationally.
19. Lorenzo, *Los anarquistas españoles y el poder*, 36–7.
20. The exception was in the already politically exceptional northern federation, Radcliff, *From Mobilization to Civil War*, 179–80.
21. The Catalan federation's membership stood at c. 300,000 in 1930 but would drop to c. 150,000 by 1936. Estimates for the latter figure vary slightly, but none dispute the massive fall, Susana Tavera and Eulàlia Vega 'La afiliació sindical a la CRT de Catalunya', in (various authors), *Revolució i Socialisme*, Vol. 2 (Barcelona 1990); B. Bolloren, *The Spanish Civil War. Revolution and Counterrevolution* (Hemel Hempstead 1991), 862 (n. 21); M. Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists. The Heroic Years 1868–1936* (New York 1977), 234. By 1936, the next largest regional federations, Andalusia–Extremadura and the Levante had 120,000 and 50,000 respectively, S. Payne, *The Spanish Revolution* (London 1970) 199.
22. The UGT already had a base among skilled sectors of telephone workers, Manuel Cruells, *Mayo Sangriento. Barcelona 1937* (Barcelona 1970) 50.
23. The high price of FAI putschism is explored in Ealham 'Policing the Recession', 249–73.
24. So-called because of its origins in the thirty signatories to a reformist CNT manifesto in August 1931, Peirats, *La CNT en la revolución española* (1) 59–63.
25. J. Casanova, *De la calle al frente. El anarcosindicalismo en España (1931–1939)* (Barcelona 1997) 148–9. CNT congresses tended, in any case, to adopt decisions 'unanimously through acclamation'.
26. Eulàlia Vega, *Anarquistas y sindicalistas 1931–1936. La CNT y los Sindicatos de Oposición en el País Valenciano* (Valencia 1987) 222–6; Payne, *The Spanish Revolution*, 284.
27. C. Ealham, 'Frustrated Hopes. The 1931 Rent Strike and the Republic' (unpublished article); N. Rider, 'The Practice of Direct Action: the Barcelona Rent Strike of 1931', in Goodway, ed., *For Anarchism*.
28. Ealham 'Policing the Recession', 285 and "'Pimps", Politics and Protest: anti-vagrancy legislation in Republican Spain' (unpublished article), partic. 18, 29–31.
29. Ealham, 'Policing the Recession', 192–3.
30. For the overlap between male youth gangs and the FAI's direct action groups, Ealham "'Pimps", Politics and Protest', 4–5 and 'Policing the Recession', 17, 327–8 and 346–70.
31. The mass libertarian vote for the Popular Front coalition in the February 1936 elections was motivated by a desire to secure the release from gaol of

thousands of political prisoners to whom the Front's electoral programme promised immediate amnesty.

32. The rebels had the support of the politically/culturally centralist (*españolista*) Basque big industrial bourgeoisie who retired to southern France or rebel-held territory in northern Spain to wait out the conflict.

33. E. Moradiellos, 'British Political Strategy in the Face of the Military Rising of 1936 in Spain', in *Contemporary European History* I, 2 (1992), 123–37; see also his two books, *Neutralidad Benévola* (Oviedo 1990) and *La perfidia de Albión. El gobierno británico y la guerra civil española* (Madrid 1996); M. Alpert, *A New International History of the Spanish Civil War* (Basingstoke 1994).

34. J. Marichal, *El Intelectual y la Política* (Madrid 1990), 78; Javier Paniagua, introduction to Azaña's *Discursos Parlamentarios* (Madrid 1992).

35. It contained both urban professionals and white collar sectors as well as the Rabassaires (rural tenant and sharecroppers' union).

36. Bolloten, *Spanish Civil War*, 389.

37. *Solidaridad Obrera* (Barcelona) 21 July 1936. It had fifteen members: CNT/FAI (5), UGT (3), POUM (1), PSUC (1), Rabassaires (1) ERC (3) Acció Catalana (small liberal Catalanist party) (1), P. Broué and E. Témime, *The Revolution and the Civil War in Spain* (London 1972) 131–2.

38. Cf. German anarchist and AIT spokesman, Helmut Ruediger, in Bolloten, *Spanish Civil War*, 392–3; Cruells, *Mayo Sangriento*, 12.

39. '[The CNT] talked of the "new social economy"', and Companys was only too willing to talk as they did, for it blinded them and not him.' F. Morrow, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain* (first pub. 1938, edn. used London 1976), 43.

40. D. Abad de Santillán, *Por qué perdimos la guerra* (Buenos Aires 1940), 53.

41. The other two parties were the small Catalan section of the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) and the Partit Català Proletaria. Estimates of the precise membership levels of the four groups vary, with PCE sources tending to give a slightly higher figure for the Communists over the PSOE's Catalan section. But all figures indicate the minuscule size of the Proletarian Party and the USC's numerical dominance. The unified PSUC still only had somewhere between 3,000 and 5,000 members at its creation (and almost certainly nearer 3,000), as compared to a POUM membership of some 8,000. For PSUC, see Joan Comorera, 'Catalonia, an Example for Unity', *Communist International*, April 1938, 376 and Bolloten, *Spanish Civil War*, 397 has selection of figures and sources.

42. The Workers and Peasants Bloque (Bloc Obrer i Camperol [BOC]) had emerged at the end of the 1920s when the Catalan section (FCCB) of the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) — representing the bulk of the party at that time — seceded from the PCE and the Comintern over the latter's intolerance of regional nationalist political-cultural claims. The process which produced the BOC also explains the subsequent marginality of the 'official' Catalan section of the Spanish Communist Party (PCE).

43. The POUM (Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista) was formed when the BOC merged with Andreu Nin's small Communist Left (Izquierda Comunista [IC]). Although the POUM had cadres in central Spain (Madrid) and the Levante (Valencia), its real strength lay in the urban provincial centres of Catalonia and thus derived from the BOC.

44. The newly unified POUM had between 6,000 and 8,000 members in sum-

mer 1936, compared to the PSUC's 3,000 to 5,000, Bolloten, *Spanish Civil War*, 405; Morrow, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution*, 45.

45. See discussion of this below.

46. Via the Unió de Rabassaires, the especial base of Companys himself. For PSUC social constituencies and membership figures, Bolloten, *Spanish Civil War*, 399.

47. Broué and Témime, *The Revolution and the Civil War*, 158–9; Fraser, *Blood of Spain*, 348–50; J. Casanova, *Anarquismo y revolución en la sociedad rural aragonesa 1936–1938* (Madrid 1985) 119–29.

48. Including all three provincial capitals, Teruel, Huesca and Zaragoza, the CNT's second 'capital', Casanova, *Anarquismo y revolución*, 99.

49. Casanova, *Anarquismo y revolución*, 128; Cruells, *Mayo Sangriento*, 12.

50. Pro- and anti-collectivist positions were part of a broader struggle for political power in Republican Aragon as Julián Casanova's study, *Anarquismo y revolución*, makes clear.

51. Contrary to the impression consistently given by Orwell in *Homage to Catalonia* (first pub. 1938, edn. used London 1977) see, for example, 61–2.

52. The antagonism between the CNT and the BOC/POUM was also inextricably linked to the fact that most of the key leaders of the marxist left in Cataluña had served their political apprenticeship in libertarian ranks before moving on or, as the anarchists understandably interpreted it, becoming renegades.

53. A. C. Durgan, *B.O.C. 1930–1936. El Bloque Obrero y Campesino* (Barcelona 1996) (see partic. appendices 4–8).

54. Durgan, *B.O.C. 1930–1936*, 163–6. Barcelona capital remained the CNT's fief, Durgan, 'Trotsky, the POUM and the Spanish Revolution', *Journal of Trotsky Studies*, 2, 1994, 59.

55. Some eight posts in all.

56. *Guerra y Revolución en España 1936–39*, Vol. 2 (Moscow 1966), 18–19.

57. Cf. Juan Peiró's radio talk of 23 October 1936, cited in Broué and Témime, *The Revolution and the Civil War*, 207. (Peiró was appointed industry minister in the central Republican cabinet of 4 November.)

58. Peirats, *La CNT en la revolución española* (1) 200, 202; Lorenzo, *Los anarquistas españoles y el poder*, 184–5.

59. *Solidaridad Obrera*, 4 November 1936.

60. Cf. the Catalan FAI's premier leader, Juan García Oliver, in Broué and Témime, *The Revolution and the Civil War*, 208.

61. Full cabinet list in Bolloten, *Spanish Civil War*, 402–3. The PSUC had two portfolios — Public Services and Labour/Public Works.

62. See discussion below.

63. H.D. Freund, 'Dual Power in the Spanish Revolution', in *The Spanish Civil War. The View from the Left*, special issue of *Revolutionary History*, Vol. 4, nos 1–2, winter 1991–2, 326–7.

64. V. Alba, *El marxismo en España 1919–1939: Historia del BOC y del POUM* (Mexico 1973) 2 vols (1), 316 quoting POUM press (*La Batalla* [Barcelona]) criticism of 27 August; for POUM's caution, V. Alba, *Historia de la segunda república española* (Mexico 1960) 255 and *El marxismo* (1), 317.

65. *La Batalla*, 14 and 18 November 1936 respectively, for two criticisms.

66. The POUM justified its support of the Spanish Popular Front electoral alliance for tactical reasons, but it caused a definitive break between Trotsky and

Nin. For tensions inside the POUM and between the POUM and (Spanish and non-Spanish) Trotskyists, Durgan, 'Trotsky, the POUM and the Spanish Revolution'.

67. 'It is one thing to attract the middle classes to the revolution and another to form a coalition giving them a decisive role as a governing force . . . but we uphold their economic claims . . . within the framework of the revolution', *La Batalla*, 23 February 1937.

68. For example, POUM leader Andreu Nin accepted that, in the Spanish situation, unions not soviets were the appropriate instrument of revolution.

69. POUM Spanish and foreign press between July and December 1936 clearly attested to this, see examples/summary in Bolloten, *Spanish Civil War*, n. 48, 863.

70. There is little to suggest the POUM's crucial political ambiguities in *Homage to Catalonia* — an omission which problematizes Orwell's explanation of later political developments.

71. Cf. Bolloten, *Spanish Civil War*, 411; Cruells, *Mayo sangriento*, 29.

72. *Solidaridad Obrera*, 9 December 1936.

73. *Treball* (Barcelona) 13 December 1936.

74. The ostensible reason was libertarian prioritizing of the war portfolio in the Generalitat — so in the December crisis the CNT relinquished Supply in exchange for this, R. Fraser, *Blood of Spain* (Harmondsworth 1981), 375.

75. Accordingly, during 1936 the Esquerra press was far less explicit in its anti-libertarian stance than was the PSUC's, Bolloten *Spanish Civil War*, 410, 862 (n. 39).

76. Although there are no figures for the first six months of the war alone, the PSUC grew from little over 3,000 to c. 50,000 members by March 1937. This compares with c. 30,000 claimed by the POUM in December 1936, Bolloten *Spanish Civil War*, 399 and 405, for PSUC and POUM figures respectively.

77. J.M. Bricall, *Política econòmica de la Generalitat (1936-1939)* (Barcelona 1978), 33-40.

78. Bricall, *Política econòmica*, 93 gives the lower figure (based on Generalitat estimates). The higher estimate is drawn from Quaker sources which cite National Refugee Council (i.e. central Republican government) sources. The Republican government defined a refugee as: 'anyone, with the exception of combatants or men in good health aged between 20 and 45 years, who has been obliged to change residence on account of the present war and is not hostile to the regime but lacks the means to support themselves and is not sheltered by family or friends'. Figures and definition in Friends Service Council/R/Sp/2, file 4.

79. Both the Generalitat and the central Republican authorities had decreed price controls after 18 July, but these had little effect, Bricall, *Política econòmica*, 106 (n. 14), 111; Rafael Abella, *La vida cotidiana durante la guerra civil: la España republicana* (Barcelona 1975), 192-3.

80. Bricall, *Política econòmica*, 85 and ff.

81. The analysis here should not be taken as implying that conditions for the poor and most economically vulnerable were, *in absolute terms*, worse in urban Catalonia than elsewhere in the Republican zone. This is a difficult matter to assess and the situation changed across the war period. The point of the analysis here is rather to explore how the acute deterioration of material conditions (*crisis de subsistencias*) was subjectively experienced, interpreted and reacted to by those

constituencies at the receiving end.

82. Widespread barter — properly-speaking — emerged during the second half of 1937, Bricall, *Política econòmica*, 141–2. But by the end of 1936 those with enough resources were using them to obtain agricultural produce direct — either with money or in exchange for other goods — often luxury/specialist or imported (such as coffee or tobacco). As Quaker reports indicate, city shops still had plenty of goods to sell in late 1936 and early 1937, but these were often tinned reserve stocks or luxury products which scarcely addressed the gathering staple food crisis, cf. E. Ucelay da Cal, *La Catalunya Populista* (Barcelona, 1982), 315–16.

83. Although rationing was formally introduced for Barcelona by Generalitat decree on 13 October 1936, the system had not yet been implemented, Bricall, *Política econòmica*, 150.

84. Quaker sources remark on the population's reluctance to change its eating habits — even though substitutes for bread were available at this stage — because of the cultural importance of bread at a meal. FSC/R/Sp/1, correspondence/reports from Barcelona 1936–7, letter to London office, December 1936.

85. By decree of 7 January 1937.

86. By autumn 1936 Generalitat publicity posters were issuing pleas against hoarding and speculation, for example, see Fontseré's November 1936 poster reproduced in Bricall, *Política econòmica*, 96 (no. 9).

87. Payne, *The Spanish Revolution*, 289.

88. Bricall, *Política econòmica*, 137–40; Ucelay da Cal, *La Catalunya Populista*, 309–10.

89. G. Howson, *Arms for Spain* (London 1998), *passim*.

90. CNT control of Supply (July–December) saw a 47 per cent price increase, while the second six month period under PSUC supervision saw a further 49 per cent increase, according to figures produced by the Servei Central d'Estadística de la Generalitat de Catalunya, Bricall, *Política econòmica*, 137–8.

91. Originally bread, potatoes, sugar and eggs were rationed (dairy produce was generally in short supply) and soon olive oil was added. The list increased across the war, Bricall, *Política econòmica*, 150.

92. This district, built during the nineteenth-century expansion of the city, was where the most affluent sectors of Barcelona's bourgeoisie traditionally resided.

93. Long bread queues and the subsequent problems of malnutrition are well documented in the reports and correspondence of Quaker relief workers in Barcelona (Sants and San Andrés were estimated to be the neediest neighbourhoods), Friends Service Council (Spain); also Morrow, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution*, 64–5.

94. Prices rose another 13 per cent on top of a nearly two-thirds rise since July 1936, Fraser, *Blood of Spain*, 375–6; Morrow, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution*, 64–5; Bricall, *Política econòmica*, 137.

95. M. Seidman, *Workers Against Work. Labor in Paris and Barcelona during the Popular Fronts* (Berkeley 1991), 138.

96. Ucelay da Cal, *La Catalunya populista*, 315, 316; Cruells, *Mayo sangriento*, 31.

97. Morrow, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution*, 78; C. Semprún-Maura, *Revolución y contrarrevolución en Cataluña (1936–1937)* (Barcelona 1978), 240 and ff.; Abella, *La vida cotidiana*, 196.

98. Ucelay da Cal, *La Catalunya Populista*, 313.

99. Ucelay da Cal, *La Catalunya populista*, 320; Abella, *La vida cotidiana*, 188; C. Ealham, 'La lluita per al carrer: els venedors ambulants durant la II República', (forthcoming article, *L'Avenç*).

100. The Quaker wartime reports (FSC (Spain), Friends House, London) contain much devastating evidence of this.

101. Cf. P. Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley 1989), ch. 3, 103–33.

102. Peirats, *La CNT en la revolución española*, (2) 137–8; Ucelay da Cal, *La Catalunya populista*, 303; Broué and Témime, *The Revolution and the Civil War*, 282.

103. H. Graham, *Socialism and War. The Spanish Socialist Party in Power and Crisis 1936–1939* (Cambridge 1991), 64.

104. Everywhere this brought the Communist Party into a bitter organizational competition with the Socialist party and union, PSOE/UGT, Graham, *Socialism and War*, especially 167–218.

105. A popular cultural reflection of this in Abella, *La vida cotidiana*, 229.

106. C. Vega, A. Monjo and M. Vilanova, 'Socialización y Hechos de Mayo', in *Historia y Fuente Oral*, no. 3 ('Esas Guerras.'), 1990, 95.

107. Government officers would exploit internal differences in the assemblies between blue collar and administrative staff, or they would manoeuvre with UGT officials or, very occasionally, with pro-Popular Front members of the CNT. A summary of tactics in Vega, Monjo and Vilanova, 'Socialización y Hechos de Mayo', 97–8.

108. Cf. 'Today we must begin the cleansing operation [neteja] to remove the dregs of the Revolution. Each organization will have a share in this task.', Manuel Cruells in *Diari de Barcelona*, 1 May 1937.

109. Morrow, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution*, 73.

110. Cruells, *Mayo sangriento*, 27–43.

111. The committee also comprised UGT members and a government delegate.

112. Obviously this sector had been reduced by its protagonism in the militias. But the infrastructural needs of the home front and especially of war production meant many CNT shop stewards and workers had been 'mobilized' in their jobs.

113. Freund, 'Dual Power in the Spanish Revolution', 326–7; M. Low and J. Breá, *Red Spanish Notebook*, (first pub. 1937, edn used, San Francisco 1979) 221–2; Peirats, *La CNT en la revolución española*, (2) 192; Broué and Témime, *The Revolution and the Civil War in Spain*, 287; Fraser, *Blood of Spain*, 381, 382; cf. also Ealham's comments on the low public profile of pivotal branch activists, 'Policing the Recession', 148.

114. It is also interesting to compare the subtext of wartime liberal newspaper editorials (including those of the PSUC) with the degenerationist and social darwinist discourses — languages of anxiety all — clearly emergent in liberal Catalanist discourse after the First World War. Of particular concern then too was the proximity of the Barri xino — hub of 'lawlessness' and moral iniquity — to the financial and political centres of bourgeois Barcelona, or even 'Imperial Barcelona' in the language of early Catalan nationalism, according to which planned urban development provided a vital key to social control. See Ealham, 'Policing the Recession', 17–19 and 34–40.

115. Cruells, *Mayo sangriento*, 48–9; Bolloten, *Spanish Civil War*, 431, 869–70.

Bolloten makes much of Rodríguez Salas' PSUC membership and Aiguader's contacts with the PSUC. Doubtless the PSUC's general political abrasiveness appealed more to Aiguader — for reasons of his own style and personality — than it did to his other Catalanist cabinet colleagues. But Bolloten's own research findings indicate how all of the Catalan cabinet, minus the CNT, was supportive of Aiguader's objectives. (The criticisms made by Companys' cautious political lieutenant, Josep Tarradellas, were purely about *tactical* matters, M. Azaña, *Memorias políticas y de guerra*, (Barcelona 1981 [4th edn]) Vol. 2, 24.)

116. 'Hay grupos armados por la calle . . . y no cabe más solución que escamparlos' Cruells, *Mayo sangriento*, 58.

117. Such as Granollers, Mataró, Terrassa and Sabadell. Also Badalona — a small city to the north of Barcelona — and Hospitalet de Llobregat, a major immigrant quarter to the south of the capital.

118. Fraser, *Blood of Spain*, 378; Cruells, *Mayo sangriento*, 77.

119. Although a proportion of the Eixample's mansions lay empty after 18 July 1936 — their occupants having never returned from their summer vacations in parts of the (now rebel-held) north, or in southern France — the neighbourhood was still home to a substantial number of lower middle-class households.

120. Fraser, *Blood of Spain*, 380; Bolloten, *Spanish Civil War*, 432.

121. Although the entire Republican cabinet wanted the restoration of public order in Barcelona, there were different political emphases among its members. Prime minister Largo Caballero was looking for a mediated solution which would not flatten the CNT, valuable allies in the PSOE/UGT's organizational battle with the PCE. As a veteran populist union leader with a radical reputation, he also wanted an outcome that avoided his dispatching police to fire on workers. In contrast, the liberal republicans and parliamentary socialists in his cabinet who, like the centralist PCE, were hostile to both the CNT and liberal Catalan nationalists, wanted a public order crack-down.

122. Fraser, *Blood of Spain*, 379. Most memorably of all in Adolfo Bueso's, *Recuerdos de un cenetista*, 2 vols (Barcelona 1978) (2), 243.

123. Fraser, *Blood of Spain*, 384.

124. Fraser, *Blood of Spain*, 380.

125. Broué and Témime, *The Revolution and the Civil War*, 284; Bueso, *Recuerdos de un cenetista*, (2), 246; Bolloten, *Spanish Civil War*, 452 provides a summary of the available sources.

126. The POUM youth wing, JCI was the most prominent sector in favour of joint action, Fraser, *Blood of Spain*, 380-1.

127. This was a splinter group formed by those from the Durruti militia column who refused to be incorporated to the Republican Army. For a summary, see Fraser, *Blood of Spain*, 381, (n. 1). Also Casanova, *Anarquismo y revolución*, 245-7; Semprún-Maura, *Revolución y contrarrevolución en Cataluña*, 249-50, 273; Durgan, 'Trotsky, the POUM and the Spanish Revolution', 59.

128. Defensive resistance was the intent behind all the POUM's May manifestos, see the material cited by Semprún-Maura, *Revolución y contrarrevolución en Cataluña*, 275-6.

129. Cruells, *Mayo sangriento*, 70; Broué and Témime, *The Revolution and the Civil War*, 284; Semprún Maura, *Revolución y contrarrevolución en Cataluña*, 281-2. According to Juan Andrade of the POUM executive, Spanish Trotskyists (i.e. the diminutive Bolshevik-Leninist group belonging to the Fourth

International) who were present in Barcelona in May 1937 also agreed with the POUM's assessment of the situation — in spite of the triumphalism of their public manifestos, Fraser, *Blood of Spain*, 388 and Morrow, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain*, 143–4.

130. See testimony of Juan Andrade and Wilebaldo Solano (secretary of POUM youth) in Fraser, *Blood of Spain*, 381–2; also Bolloten, *Spanish Civil War*, 435.

131. Semprún-Maura, *Revolución y contrarrevolución en Cataluña*, 242–52.

132. 'No cultivéis en este momento el culto a los muertos'. The speech, broadcast on the night of 4 May, is cited by many authors, including Cruells, *Mayo sangriento*, 63; Semprún-Maura, *Revolución y contrarrevolución en Cataluña*, 267.

133. See the acute observations in Mary Low and Juan Breá, *Red Spanish Notebook*, 215, 216.

134. 'Emulate the hero of the people', Abella, *La vida cotidiana*, 163–8; K. Horna, *Fotografías de la guerra civil española (1937–1938)*, (Ministerio de Cultura exhibition catalogue, Salamanca 1992) 82, 87.

135. Casanova, *Anarquismo y revolución*, 252.

136. Semprún-Maura, *Revolución y contrarrevolución en Cataluña*, 277.

137. Cruells, *Mayo sangriento*, 86–90; Bolloten summarizes a number of contemporary press and other sources, *Spanish Civil War*, 452, 875 (n. 19); Semprún-Maura, *Revolución y contrarrevolución en Cataluña*, 284, 287–9; Souchy, *The May Days. Barcelona 1937* (London 1987) 95–100.

138. Semprún-Maura, *Revolución y contrarrevolución en Cataluña*, 287; Cruells, *Mayo sangriento*, 90.

139. Bolloten, *Spanish Civil War*, 448–9; Cruells, *Mayo sangriento*, 71. Azaña's diary account of the May events in the 'Cuaderno de la Pobleta' (1937), *Memorias políticas y de guerra*, Vol. 2, 22–38.

140. Cruells, *Mayo sangriento*, 68; Semprún Maura, *Revolución y contrarrevolución en Cataluña*, 276 and Bolloten, *Spanish Civil War*, 453 who also refers to the alternative theories.

141. From October 1937 the central Republican government was also based in Barcelona.

142. *Solidaridad Obrera* 9 May 1937; Bolloten, citing this and other contemporary press reports, calculates 12,000 arrived in total over a few days, *Spanish Civil War*, 460.

143. Cruells, *Mayo sangriento*, 86–90; Peirats, *La CNT en la revolución española* (2) 157–61; Semprún-Maura, *Revolución y contrarrevolución en Cataluña*, 284, 287–9; Souchy, *The May Days*, 98; J.M. Solé i Sabaté and J. Villarroya i Font, *La represió a la reraguarda de Catalunya (1936–1939)* 2 vols (Barcelona 1989) (1) 212–16, partic. 213–14; Bolloten, *Spanish Civil War*, 452, 875 (n. 19).

144. By July 1937 the CNT estimated 800 of its members were in gaol in Barcelona alone, Morrow, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain*, 144; Emma Goldman, 'Political Persecution in Republican Spain', *Spain and the World*, 10 December 1937, also cited in Souchy, *The May Days. Barcelona 1937*, 104–107; Peirats, *La CNT en la revolución española* (2) 263–4; Solé i Sabaté and Villarroya i Font, *La represió a la reraguarda de Catalunya*, (1) 217–24; 260 and 279–86 on Republican work camps.

145. Cruells, *Mayo sangriento*, 79.



146. Cf. Comorera's pre-war comments (as USC leader) on anarchism as the ideology of 'sub-human' and 'degenerate' individuals and 'underworld parasites', Ealham, 'Policing the Recession', 354.

147. The Generalitat also discreetly annulled its previous decree measures recognizing socialized control in industry, Morrow, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain*, 62.

148. This was in the logic of their earlier repudiation of the initiatives of the Friends of Durruti during the May fighting, Morrow, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain*, 105. Cf. also Casanova, *Anarquismo y revolución*, 251. The CNT would only ever have an emblematic cabinet presence after May 1937 and in fact never took up their seats in the Generalitat — at root because they could not come to terms with their new political marginality therein.

149. Later, imprisoned members of the POUM were caught between stalinist revenge action and Francoist punishment as Francoist troops bore down on Barcelona in 1939, J. Gorkin, *Canibales políticos. Hitler y Stalin en España* (Mexico 1941); G. Regler, *The Owl of Minerva* (London 1959) 324–5; Fraser, *Blood of Spain* 389; Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* (Harmondsworth 1977), 876. On POUM and other left prisoners, E. Goldman, 'Political Persecution in Republican Spain', 105–7; Broué and Témime, *The Revolution and the Civil War*, 315.

150. Fraser, *Blood of Spain*, 389.

151. Although we do not have exact figures, current research (based on Comintern archive material) estimates only a few dozen, and absolute maximum of thirty, high-ranking functionaries for the entire war period (i.e. certainly far fewer at any one time). And while there was a relatively greater presence of Red Army personnel (c. 3,000), they were overwhelmingly absorbed by military functions (which includes those fulfilled by civil engineers and interpreters). I am grateful to Frank Schauff for this information.

152. Durgan, 'Trotsky, the POUM and the Spanish Revolution', n. 5, 69; H. Graham, 'War, Modernity and Reform: the Premiership of Juan Negrin', in P. Preston and A.L. Mackenzie, eds, *The Republic Besieged* (Edinburgh 1996), 191.

153. Cf. Casanova's comments, *Anarquismo y revolución*, 247. Andrade's comments distancing the Spanish Communists from responsibility for the repression should be seen in the context of the postwar tendency of POUM survivors to construct the Comintern as the monolithic author of their political downfall. Andrade in Fraser, *Blood of Spain*, 388.

154. Andrade's remarks that the Spanish Communist Party leadership, like the Republican government, feared a backlash does not of itself preclude the party's involvement — Fraser, *Blood of Spain*, 388.

155. By stressing Comintern protagonism in Nin's disappearance and that of the *Spanish* Communist Party leadership in POUM repression, PSUC leaders in the main avoided the more problematic question of the involvement of PSUC members in anti-POUM violence both during and after the May Days — see for example Pere Ardiaca in Fraser, *Blood of Spain*, 390.

156. In Catalonia people usually passed from the CNT to the sphere of left parliamentary politics (UGT and communist parties). The *tránsfuga* was a fairly common phenomenon on the interwar Spanish left: examples mentioned in this article include Roldan Cortada, Rodriguez Salas and Rafael Vidiella (Sesé's replacement).

157. *Spain and the World* press report, 22 September 1937, in Souchy, *The May Days*, 100; Cruells, *Mayo sangriento*, 82.

158. This is the central, unchanging thesis of Burnett Bolloten's *oeuvre* — from *The Grand Camouflage* (1961) through to *The Spanish Civil War. Revolution and Counterrevolution*, published posthumously in 1991. What Bolloten has done is to construct a teleological narrative.

159. Text of dissolution decree in Fraser, *Blood of Spain*, 390.

160. Casanova, *Anarquismo y revolución*, 258–60. The Aragonese Council already contained representatives from all the Popular Front parties. Its dissolution meant the normalization of Aragonese government on the basis of the municipality.

161. Casanova, *Anarquismo y revolución*, 264–97; Fraser, *Blood of Spain*, 390–4.

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