

WRONG STEPS

Errors in the Spanish Revolution

Juan Garcia Oliver

One of the leading militants of the CNT gives his account of what the errors of the Spanish anarchist movement were in the earliest days of their long anticipated revolution.

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Errors in the Spanish Revolution Juan Garcia Oliver

Kate Sharpley Library 2000

Juan GARCIA OLIVER

Wrong Steps: Errors in the Spanish Revolution

From *El Eco de los Pasos* ('Echoing Footsteps,'
Autobiography of Garcia Oliver, Barcelona 1978,
pages 176 to 185) translated by Mick Parkin.

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Juan Garcia Oliver - Introduction

The main body of this pamphlet is a section from Juan Garcia Oliver's autobiography ('El eco de los pasos,' or 'Echoing footsteps'). My reason for translating it is that it's the only detailed explanation I've come across of what happened in July 1936 - i.e. why the CNT turned down the best chance it would ever get of promoting a social revolution and instead joined a disastrous 'popular front' against fascism.

Garcia Oliver was an important militant in the CNT and member of the influential 'Nosotros' group who played a crucial part in the events which stopped the military coup in Barcelona.

He is therefore able to give us some useful insights into the history of the CNT, despite his personal arrogance which makes him a generally unreliable witness - e.g. just about every conversation that he relates in this book ends up with someone saying "Yes Garcia, now I understand what you are saying. Please explain to us what we should do next." Another problem is that this biography was not published until 1978 when Garcia Oliver was 71 years old and so the word by word conversations which it contains have to be taken with a pinch of salt.

Despite all this, the book does give a general picture of the CNT's strengths and weaknesses which seems basically plausible.

Garcia Oliver begins his autobiography by saying that "people think an anarchist is someone who has read books by Kropotkin and Bakunin, and maybe that is true of middle-class anarchists ... now let's see how a fighting anarchist of working class origins was formed ..." One of the first stories he tells is how one night, at the age of 7, he and a bunch of friends were chased away from a hot air vent outside a textile mill in Reus (near Barcelona). Later that night they returned and broke all the windows of the watchman's hut... and they were never chased away again.

He went on to work as a waiter (when he wasn't spending time in prison) and always lived from the money he earned for himself. As a result, there were many occasions when he couldn't attend important meetings because he was working a late shift, or when his first worry as a union activist was how to scratch together the tram fare to get him to a meeting.

This life-long experience of struggle gave Garcia Oliver a solid sense that the working class would need to impose its will on society if it was ever going to free itself... an attitude which earned him the label of 'anarcho-Bolshevik.' Although he

did indeed have some very authoritarian attitudes¹ his belief that the workers needed to take control of the revolution "rather than leaving it in the middle of the road for anyone to pick up" was a lot more realistic than the abstract delusions which (according to his version of events) allowed the various middle-class anarchists who dominated the CNT's bureaucracy to divert it completely from its proper mission.

After the defeat of the military Garcia Oliver argued for the CNT to 'go the whole way', but was opposed by intellectuals such as Federica Montseny and Abad de Santillan who wanted to wait until conditions improved. As always happens, once the dust settled the capitalists were able to reassert themselves and, only a year later (after the May days in 1937) the CNT had effectively been sidelined.

This unjustified complacency and lack of analytical rigour which has always dogged anarchist organisations was amply demonstrated by the general sense after the defeat of May 1937 that "the Stalinists have been shown a lesson now, and wouldn't dare take on the CNT again." This aspect of the CNT's activities could still give pause for thought to modern anarchists, even though so many other aspects of their situation (e.g. their ability to influence the conscripts who had been forced into the Spanish army) have changed beyond all recognition.

Mick Parkin - translator.

(*) represents my notes.

(#) represents notes from the original text.

Where dots appear like this ... they are from the original text.

Where they appear like this [...] they mean that I have missed out a bit, e.g. a list of street names.

¹ (*) For example, see the translation in this pamphlet of the first communique of the committee of anti-fascist militias, which Garcia Oliver claims to have drafted.

El Eco De Los Pasos - Echoing Footsteps

That was a long day, July 20th, a day that began on the 18th. It was the day of our great victory. It was the start of our great defeat. And this great defeat began when Companys² phoned the secretariat of the regional committee of the CNT in Catalunya to ask that they send a delegation to meet him.

It was only 3 hours since Ascaso had died; Alcodori had only been dead for one day; and in the last 30 hours - one by one - some 400 anarcho-sindicalist comrades had died in the streets of Barcelona. Soon all these would be forgotten. Only by forgetting the dead is it possible to dispose of their ideas - which is exactly what happened.

With that day, the 20th of July 1936, began the decline of a great syndicalist organisation, unique in the world, which struggled to create a society and a way of living which was completely different from the one which is given to us by the capitalist system, with its governments, its armies and its bureaucracies.

When the CNT delegation³ which answered Companys' call returned to our Regional Committee to give an account of what happened, the last focal points of the military's resistance had fallen, and the street fighting was over. All those who had not taken part in the feats which were carried out by the workers of the CNT now began to turn up at our offices in Calle de Mercederes. One of the first to arrive was Diego Abad de Santillán who had an enormous Mauser pistol in his belt. Federica Montseny also had a little pistol, in a cute leather pouch at her belt - which she'd carried for years, for reasons of personal defence, in that tower-home where she lived in the middle class district of Guinardó.

It's painful to have to tell the truth, but on that night of 19th-20th of July, in Plaza del Teatro de las Ramblas - where Ascaso, Durruti and I were sleeping on the floor or leaned up against the trunk of a tree - the people who slept beside us were Vila Cuenca (leader of the Socialists) with a Winchester between his knees and Julián Gorkin (leader, with Andres Nin, of the POUM)⁴ who carried an enormous pistol in his belt. We saw nothing of Santillán, Federica, Alaiz, Carbó, or any of those who in meetings and assemblies have always tried to take over control of the CNT-AIT. It had all been left to Ascaso, Garcia Oliver and Durruti - while they

² (*) President of Catalunya, the nation/region around Barcelona - see Appendix 1

³ (#) This was made up of José Asens of the Regional Committee, Aurelio Fernandez, Durruti and myself who - as we were all members of the Committee of Defence In Catalunya - made up its armed wing. Abad de Santillán came along too, though he's never explained his presence to me - perhaps he was there because he was part of the FAI's Peninsular Committee.

⁴ (*) POUM: A Marxist party which opposed Stalinism without being Trotskyist.

considered the intellectual over-plan. Apparently this exempted them from having to fight on the streets, though later they were to prove that, intellectually, they weren't much use either.

We explained the outcome of our meeting with Companys - I gave a report, and so did Durruti. Companys recognised that we, the anarcho-syndicalists of Barcelona, had beaten the army, and said that we'd never been given the respect we deserved, but instead that we were unjustly persecuted. Now we were in charge of the city, so we could opt to use his services, or just send him off home. However, he said, he felt he could still be useful in the struggle which, although it had finished in this city, was still to reach its uncertain conclusion in the rest of Spain. He said we could count on him, on his loyalty as a man and as a politician, as he was convinced that on that day a past full of disgrace had died, so it was now his sincere desire that Catalunya should put itself at the head of the world's most advanced countries. Given the uncertain conditions in the rest of the county, he willingly, as President of the Generalitat,⁵ took on the responsibility of forming a Committee of Anti-Fascist Militias (CAFM) which would unite all organisations which were ready to fight, and which would be responsible for directing the struggle in Catalunya.

We could sort this out immediately as he'd already met with the leaders of all the other anti-fascist organisations, who were at this moment in a nearby room, and had already agreed to the idea. To confirm this he got us to go into the next room where, waiting to greet us, we found Comorera of USC (Catalan Socialist Unity); Vidiella of PSOE (Spanish Workers' Socialist Party); Ventura Gassol of E.R. (Republican Left); Pey Poch of A.C. (Catalan Action); Andrés Nin of POUM (United Party of Marxist Workers) and Calvet of the Rabassaires.⁶

We left the meeting and, after a brief exchange of views, at my suggestion the delegation told Companys that - as we had had no idea in advance of what he was going to propose - we had only been mandated to listen to his ideas then report back. This we would do, then let him know as soon as possible.

After a rapid consultation, in which various compañeros took part, the Regional Committee decided to phone Companys and tell him that, in principle, we agreed to the setting up of a CAFM. We reserved the right to agree (or not) the participation of each specific organisation, and to submit the whole plan to the plenum of local and regional groups in the CNT for a definite decision. This plenum was to meet on the 23rd, but in the meantime we agreed that steps would be taken

⁵ (*) Generalitat: The regional government for Catalunya

⁶ (*) Rabassaires: A small party mainly supported by vine growers

to set up the CAFM (pending the plenum's agreement) with myself, Durruti and Aurelio Fernandez being asked to arrange this.

Later that day we celebrated the first, still informal, meeting with [... various people from the other organisations]. On my suggestion, the following break-down of seats was agreed: CNT:3, FAI:2, UGT:3,⁷ ER:3, AC:1, POUM:1, PSOE:1, Rabassaires:1.

Machiavelli in sandals

A lot of people didn't sleep on the night of 20th/21st. In that hot and agitated city sleep was out of the question, what with the endless shouts of "Hands up! Who goes there?" and the car horns going off incessantly: CNT!, CNT!, CNT!

I didn't go home to sleep. From the Club Nautico - where we were planning to establish the CAFM, and where we'd just had the first informal reunion - I went to a little hotel near the port, with Garcia Vivancos, Aranda and a few others.

I was wide awake, and very much aware that in just one day an unstable revolutionary era had begun, and that this would bring with it unexpected problems which would have to be quickly resolved in a way which was original and totally new. We had no use for anything connected to the past, a past which had in some ways sunk already, but which would still make inexhaustible attempts to reassert itself. All revolutions carry with them a counter revolution. Revolution is a forward march from a certain point, whereas counter revolution is a return to that point, or in some cases to a point that is further back. If I couldn't sleep that night, there must be others who couldn't either. What were they doing, and who were these counter revolutionaries - friends we knew, or enemies that we didn't?

In that moment Companys was the counter revolutionary, whereas we, the anarcho-syndicalists of the CNT, were trying to establish Libertarian Communism - but right then, in that very moment - as the many uprisings that had occurred in Catalunya and the rest of Spain could testify ... or was I fooling myself? The proclamation of Libertarian Communism in the mining basin of Sallent y Cardona - was that a mirage? And what about January 8th in 1933?⁸ When the Anarchist Youth proclaimed Libertarian Communism in Tarrasa - was that an illusion? Were we revolutionaries, or just stand-ins for the Assault Guards, at the service of Companys and the Generalitat? If, from the first moment, it seemed to me a denial of our integrity as revolutionaries to accept the CAFM, then Companys (with his nervous and hurried manner) would soon make us reconsider that consent. This was

⁷ (*) UGT The socialist trade union.

⁸ (*) 8.1.33. - FAI / CNT uprising which Included Casas Viejas, see appendix 2

not to say that the coming together of the various anti-fascist sectors was a bad idea in itself, but - coming as it did from Companys - the initiative was essentially about gaining time in an attempt to take us back to where we were before the military uprising.

Companys, as the leader of a small Mediterranean republic, was no different from any other señor in an Italian republic during the Renaissance: leaders of small nations, they were lost inside immense palaces, from which they couldn't escape to conquer the world, as did those leaders of ancient city-states. When he wrote 'The Prince' Machiavelli only had to bring together the lies and intrigues of those princes of the Mediterranean and Adriatic.

So much for Companys. Esquerra Republicana [Republican Left] and the Generalitat, being bourgeois to the core, would have to defend the bourgeois way of life. "And what could be more perfect!" To have two serving girls (though the ideal was five) and two cars - one to go to work in, the other (complete with chauffeur) to take the little lady shopping or on visits to friends...

No doubt as soon as we left the palace of the Generalitat, while we were weighing up the pros and cons of the CAFM taking charge of things, Companys (given the historic role that he was convinced he would play in all this) must have thought of the copy of 'The Prince' lying open in his alcove. As he began fingering its pages, this thought must have been going through his head "You fool! Why did you give so much away?"

His mind was made up. Dismissing, with a broad smile, the leaders of the various small parties which hung around him, he would have called for comandante Pérez Farrás (always ready to take his orders) and Luis Prunés who was also a member of his party. He saw them both late at night because he'd had to see other people first, and then consider just exactly what he was going to do. He was going to pull back from what he'd suggested to our delegation... but in a very subtle way. What he was planning to do, without consulting anyone except Farrás and Prunés, had the double advantage of nullifying the CAFM before it was even born, and doing so without anyone finding out in advance. After all, who read the Official Bulletin in those days, when no-one read them anyway... and what a shame that it would take two days for them to be published anyway. In effect, two days later, the following decree appeared in the Official Bulletin:

"The fascist rebellion has been beaten by popular heroism and the forces of law. It is vital, therefore, to finish off annihilating the last few centres of fascism that exist in Catalunya and to prepare ourselves against possible outside dangers.

For these reason, the following decrees have been proposed by the President, and agreed by the executive council:

1. Citizen's Militias are to be created for the defence of the Republic and to fight against the fascist reaction.
2. Enrique Perez Farrás is named as leader of the people's militia in Catalunya.
3. Luis Prunés y Sató is named Commissioner of Defence for the Generalitat with the powers necessary to organise the above mentioned militias.
4. A Central Committee to direct and liaise with the Citizen's Militias has been set up with one delegate nominated by the Governing Councillor, another by the General Commissioner of Public Order, and with representatives from the various working-class and political organisations which were involved in the fight against fascism.
5. Throughout Catalunya a series of local defence committees will be formed, under the control of the President and his representatives, which will act in accord with the decisions of the Central Committee.

With this audacious and Machiavellian coup Companys smothered the, as yet unformed, CAFM. He gave it two putative parents, and baptised it with the name "Committee to direct and liaise with the Citizens' Militias", The words 'anti-fascist' to which we in the CNT-FAI were so attached, had been lost. Everything would now depend on the Councillor and the Commissioner as far as Barcelona was concerned - in the rest of Catalunya the local committees would be directly subject to the Generalitat.

Companys didn't have any real idea of what had happened in Catalunya. He was forgetting that (despite the agreements made in his name) it was left to the CNT-FAI to smash the army rebellion. In fact, when confronted by just one company of this same army on the 6th of October 1934, Companys and his 5000 armed 'escamots'⁹ had been forced to surrender.

How naive of him then, that he tried to direct this struggle [in 1936] from his office in the Generalitat - the same tactic which had so obviously failed him in 1934 - and thus left the streets, which was what mattered, to the CNT. And how naive that he should accept General Goded's surrender,¹⁰ without realising that any message can contain a code. In Mataró, Gerona, Figueras, Valls, Reus, Tarragona and Lérida the army was still active, and Goded would certainly have tried to

⁹ (*) Escamots: A Catalan nationalist militia. (see appendix 1 - 1934).

¹⁰ (*) Goded: leader of the military uprising in Barcelona.

redeploy some of his forces to help the soldiers in these towns. That's why Goded's surrender referred strictly to his own person, and not to the troops which made up the IV region, whom it simply relieved of their obligation to obey him.

The way in which Goded surrendered had immediate consequences. For one thing he did not surrender to the CNT (which was the organisation whose forces were surrounding him), so the soldiers in Atarazanas barracks didn't know who to surrender to, and kept firing on us. Secondly, the anarcho-syndicalists only followed orders from the Defence Committee of the CNT (which was based in the Plaza del Teatro, underneath a lorry) and this had decided not to accept Goded's surrender, but instead to continue the struggle until the army was annihilated or had surrendered completely.

In the euphoria of a victory which fell into his hands without even the slightest sacrifice by him or his party, Companys must have thought (once he'd got over the fear that he might have to go on radio again to explain his capitulation, as in '34) ... he must have thought that, with Goded's surrender, the men of the CNT-FAI would just turn in their arms and go home, happy to have been able to help the Assault Guards dominate the army.¹¹

He was deluding himself! At that moment I was explaining to Durruti and Ascaso (as we gathered underneath our lorry) that the army would be starting to take armaments out of all the barracks in Catalunya. As a result, there was no way that we could accept Goded's surrender, or lower our guard, but instead we must continue the struggle until the insurrection was totally beaten. There must be no doubt that we, the CNT, were the ones who won this victory - destroying once and for all the myth that the working class will always be beaten by the army. It was to achieve this deeper revolutionary effect that we carried on the struggle for almost another day until we finally achieved the surrender of the last insurrectionist in the Atarazanas barracks. Were we going to throw all this away and let Companys use his decree to reduce us to the condition of clumsy auxiliaries for the Commissioner of Public Order? No.

On the next day the CAFM met and we saw that the various parties had sent along a bunch of non-entities and people who we'd never heard of as their delegates. This made it obvious that they'd got together in advance and decided to devalue the organisation. Our delegates were as agreed; for the CNT: Durruti, José Asens and myself; for the FAI: Aurelio Fernandez and Abad de Santillán. Farrás,

¹¹ (*) Assault Guards: A body of troops (formed in 1931) whose first loyalty was to the defence of the Republic.

Prunés and Vincente Guarner (for the Commissioner of Public Order) also turned up, but we basically ignored them.

When the meeting began Prunés informed us that, in accordance with the decree which had appeared in the Official Bulletin, they had agreed to organise the creation of citizen's militias ... I interrupted him dryly, and informed him that we had gathered here not to deal with some militias which we'd never heard of, but to organise the CAFM which, in principle, had been agreed between the CNT and the President of the Generalitat, and with the agreement of all the other anti-fascist sectors in Catalunya. This is what we would now proceed to do, to which end I had drawn up a provisional constitution. I read this out and everyone listened attentively. As no other proposal had been put forward we went on to discuss mine point by point. After a few amendments, the following was agreed:

"The CAFM - constituted in accordance with the decree published in the Official Bulletin [sic] - has taken the following decisions, which all citizens are obliged to carry out:

1. A new revolutionary order has been established and all the organisations which make up the committee have agreed to maintain this.¹²
2. The committee has established various groups which are necessary to make sure that its orders are rigorously enforced, so as to establish control and vigilance. These groups will be provided with the relevant credentials.
3. These groups will be the only ones accredited by the CAFM. Anyone acting outside these groups will be considered to be creating a faction and will suffer whatever sanctions the CAFM decides.
4. During the night these groups will be particularly rigorous against those who debase the revolutionary order.
5. From 1 am to 5 am movement will be limited to the following: a) those pertaining to any group organised by the CAFM; b) persons accompanied by elements [of these groups] who can confirm their moral solvency; c) Those who can show that they have been forced to leave their homes by circumstances beyond their control.
6. With the aim of recruiting people to these anti-fascist militias, the organisations which make up the Committee are authorised to open centres for recruitment and

¹² (*) This first point, and the last, were the most contentious, with Artemio Ayguader of Republican Left arguing that 'a new revolutionary order' could be taken to mean anything, whilst I insisted that it was necessary to affirm that, from this moment on, a new order of things had been established, with the CAFM being committed to sustain and guide it.

training. The conditions of this recruitment will be specified as an internal matter for them.

7. The Committee expressed its hope that - given the need to construct this new revolutionary order so as to confront the remnants of fascism - it will not be necessary to have recourse to disciplinary measures so as to have its orders obeyed.

Companys' intentions had thus been totally thwarted, but Prunés made a last attempt to put us back on his course after the constitution was signed, by asking how he and Farrás would be involved in the CAFM. We replied that they would not be involved in any way, as membership was restricted to those who had just signed the document.

We then moved to share out the various positions... Garcia Oliver: chief of the War Department; Aurelio Fernandez: chief of Internal Security; Durruti: chief of Transport ... [etc ...] and Abad de Santillán proposed himself as the person responsible for preparing the militias.

Turning to the threat of a fascist attack from Aragon, it was immediately agreed that we should organise a rapid advance on Saragossa, then press on to Huesca. Durruti offered to lead the first column, with a promise to capture the capital of Aragon within 8 days, and no-one said 'no' - in fact, everyone was enthusiastic. Only I had doubts about his ability to direct such an all encompassing task, but I kept them to myself as Durruti had conducted himself throughout with such aplomb, so much so that even I, who knew him well, had never seen him so out-going and confident. He then went on to suggest that Farrás act as his military advisor, and this was accepted. Marcos Alcón - an old militant from the glass industry, who now worked in public entertainments due to an injury - was chosen as his replacement at Transport by the CNT's regional committee.

I'm going to ignore Farrás' military history.¹³ Sergeant Manzana was calm and capable in front of a small detachment of men. As for Durruti, he had an enormous amount of will power, but nothing in terms of initiative. Even so, there's no denying the miracles which often happen in a revolution, with people being influenced dramatically, even when they were previously trapped in inertia. As Durruti had volunteered we could suppose that he was moved by a powerful impulse, but I had to ask myself how he would conduct himself in Ascaso's absence. It was decided that the Durruti Column would leave at 10 am on 24th July, 1936.

¹³ (*) Farrás & Manzana were Durruti's military assistants.

The plenum of the Catalan CNT was due to meet on the 23rd [and would be chaired by] regional secretary Mariano Rodriguez Vazquez - known as Marianet. He had very little idea how to carry out his duties, which included: thinking out then publishing manifestos, preparing reports and chairing meetings. He should have been an active militant for at least ten years, having taken part in factory and union committees, and attended several local or regional plenums. Marianet had done none of this. He'd got to be regional secretary through what is best described as a joke on behalf of those compañeros in the construction union who put his name forward. The person who got most votes in the election was Marcos Alcón [see above] but he, however, refused the post. The next highest number of votes went to Francisco Isgleas, but he wouldn't accept it either. The third choice, with barely four votes, was Marianet who did accept. This was the normal way that things happened: starting off with whoever got the most votes and ending up with whoever got the least - even if this was only one vote. [The reason for this was that] although it was a paid position, it was so badly paid and (as with all paid posts) it could only run for a maximum of one year, so nobody with a decent job would accept it.¹⁴

The Defeat

Like a butterfly fresh from its enormous chrysalis, the CNT awoke on the [first] day of the revolution to sun its multi-coloured wings. Just yesterday the regional committee was cramped into the old house used by the construction union in Mercaderes Street, which served as both office and meeting place. Now they had an enormous new building (Casa de Cambó, on Via Lleyetana...) which housed Mujeres Libres and all the CNT's committees. They had just taken this building as a revolutionary act - as had most of the anti-fascist organisations - so I wonder what Companys thought of that.

The plenum was held in this new building, and it certainly lent an impressive aspect to the meeting. Everyone had turned up who had the obligation or right to do so, as well as several people who had come along anyway so as not to miss what promised to be one of the most important debates ever heard in the CNT's locals.

There were three tables set out - one for those who would preside over the debates, one for the various secretaries, and one for our press. There were also two large rows of chairs lined up against the side walls, in one of which appeared a

¹⁴(#) A very reasonable idea, agreed by the CNT Congress of 1931, which in practice caused us numerous lamentable upsets, and was so impracticable that it had to be annulled. I have to confess that it was I, as a delegate of the Barcelona woodworkers' union, who put forward this proposal ... which could explain my willingness to treat Marianet with such indulgence.

delegate from the National Committee, who had just arrived to inform us [of the broader picture]. He, along with all the other delegates, was sat with a rifle between his knees.

When the 'table of discussion' [i.e. the Presiding Table - PT] had been nominated Marianet gave a report on the struggles which had taken place in Barcelona and Catalunya, emphasising that the victory was due to the militants of the CNT directed by the Defence Committee. He closed his speech by referring to Companys' suggestion for a CAFM which had been accepted in principle, and the need for the organisation (gathered together at that moment with the maximum degree of representivity possible) to study the problems thrown up by our revolutionary triumph and trace out the line to be followed by the organisation in Catalunya.

Various delegations asked to speak. The first was the delegation from the region of Bajo Llobregat who said they understood the CAFM to be restraining the forward march of the social revolution. As this had only been agreed to on a provisional basis, they proposed withdrawing from the CAFM and carrying forward the revolution so as to establish Libertarian Communism in line with the agreements of the organisation, its principles and ideological aims. They also felt it would be appropriate if, before continuing the debate, some of the delegates from the CAFM gave their opinion as to whether this committee could be used to carry forward a revolutionary process comparable with our social aspirations.

When they had finished speaking there was a moment of expectant silence in which the air seemed to grow thinner. Something strange was happening. I observed someone going from place to place, from one delegation to another, as if transmitting an instruction which had been agreed in advance and behind of the back of the plenum. The gossip [who carried this message] was Fidel Miró of the Libertarian Youth - a person closely linked to Abad de Santillán.

I noticed that the members of the CAFM were dispersed throughout the hall (Aurelio was near me, but Durruti and Abad were at some distance) so when the chair asked one of us if we wanted to speak there was some confusion. No-one offered to speak, but when the call was repeated I decided to make an intervention.

I said that the way that Bajo Llobregat had set out the problem had relieved me of a sense of guilt as I had already reached the conclusion that since we'd accepted Companys' call to join the CAFM - albeit provisionally - what we'd really done was to restrain the forward march of the social revolution which we had always struggled for. I explained that even before the CAFM had been formed Companys had regretted suggesting such a thing and that he - as well as all the

other parties involved - saw it as nothing more than a second class version of the Commisaria de Policia as was proved by the non-entities who they'd chosen as their delegates.

I pointed out that if we'd made errors we should and must annul them, bearing in mind that we were at the start of a revolutionary process which could be a long time in unravelling and during which we were bound to have to modify some of our attitudes, and not a few of our agreements. I also explained that the forward march of the revolution was acquiring such a depth that the CNT - being the biggest piece in this complex process - must bear in mind that we could not leave it without control or guidance, as this could create a vacuum which (as in Russia in 1917) would allow the various Marxist tendencies to take control and obliterate us.

I gave my opinion that the moment had arrived when, as a responsible organisation, we should finish what we'd started on the 18th, dissolve the CAFM, and force events in such a way that - for the first time in history - we went the whole way as anarcho-sindicalists. That is to say that we should organise life in the whole of Spain along Libertarian Communist lines.

As soon as I finished speaking four people immediately asked to address the meeting: Federica Montseny, Abad de Santillán, Marianet and [the delegate from] Bajo Llobregat. Everyone noticed that Durruti had not asked to speak, as they were used to hear him support my point of view, given that we were both members of the 'Nosotros' group.

Federica Montseny was the first to address us: she spoke of a lifetime spent learning anarchist principles from her mother and father: of the immense joy which filled her breast when the working class triumphed over the military. She said that the road to revolution still seemed open, so we should rely on the people in arms to do the rest without trying to force things. Her awareness of anarchist principles didn't allow her to accept that at this point, in the first instance, we should force things - as Garcia Oliver was suggesting - as she felt this would involve the establishing an anarchist dictatorship... which, being a dictatorship, could never be anarchist. She recognised that it was a major concession to take part in the CAFM, which is why we must leave it as soon as the military was defeated and return to working for an anarchist society.

Diego Abad de Santillán said he thought the organisation would lose nothing of its character (either syndical or ideological) by being involved with the CAFM, so we should continue collaborating with other anti-fascists. Realistically, Garcia Oliver's suggesting that we go all out for Libertarian Communism, even when carried out by the CNT, would be no more than a summer cloud, given that all the

powers which rule the world would oppose it. We could confirm this by simply looking at the horizon from any roof: just off the port of Barcelona the English ships were waiting for an opportunity to intervene. They would land an occupying force which we could not resist, given that we would then be fighting two forces at the same time. This was why he was proposing that we accept the CAFM and postpone Libertarian Communism for now.

Marianet said that the most practical course was to remain in the CAFM, without prejudicing our ability to govern from the streets, but avoiding dictatorial stratagems... which is what would be the long term effect of the CNT going all out.

Bajo de Llobregat intervened again to say that, in view of Garcia Oliver's clearly worded proposal, we should leave the CAFM as they had already suggested.

It was my turn to speak again, so I explained that I had never mentioned the word 'dictatorship', nor 'syndical', nor 'anarchist.' "Federica Montseny had drawn the conclusion that to go the whole way was the same as establishing an anarchist dictatorship... which would be as bad as any other dictatorship. In a moment as serious and decisive as this it was appropriate to raise the level of debate, as the revolution started on July 18th will be over if we betray it. And we will betray it if, in a congress called to map out the destiny of our organisation - the major one in Catalunya and most of Spain - we constrain the debate with so-called anarchist arguments. We can't leave this plenum and just go home for a rest. Whatever gets decided in this plenum, it's going to be a long time before we get a rest, since if we as the majority don't give some direction to this revolution, the others - who are now still in the minority, but who are skilled in the arts of corruption and manipulation... they will take advantage of the vacuum in which we've left the masses. Then very soon Federica's joy will be replaced by the sadness and pain which the Russian anarchists have had to live through since their naiveté allowed the Bolsheviks to eliminate them.

"Also, as we're talking about dictatorship, it's worth pointing out that no two dictatorships are ever identical. Tyrannies have existed which were imposed upon the people - true - but there have also been tyrannies chosen by the people. And of all the known forms of dictatorship there has never been one exercised by the joint action of the workers' syndicates. What's more, if these syndicates are of an anarchist orientation and their militants have been formed by an anarchist moral then, to presuppose that they'll act the same as if they were Marxist, for example, is as good as saying that anarchism and Marxism are fundamentally the same ideology, being as they produce the same fruit. I don't accept such simplifications. I believe that syndicalism, in Spain and in the rest of the whole world, is looking for

an act of affirmation of its constructive values before humanity and history. Without this demonstration that we can build Libertarian Socialism, the future will continue to belong to the sort of politics that came out of the French Revolution - with many political parties to begin with, and just one at the end."

Referring to Abad de Santillán's intervention, I pointed out that it didn't involve the least bit of ideological argument, but was limited to an attempt to cultivate fear. Fear of foreign intervention should not be brandished at this point in time, because we are all here, and even if we did fight in the streets for three days, we are only now speaking with the permission of the dead - something which, unfortunately, neither Ascaso nor Alcodori, nor any of our other fallen compañeros can do. In other words we must never forget that we are talking from an enormous tomb - which is what the CNT has been since its conception - an enormous tomb which contains all the largely anonymous dreamers who believed that they were struggling for social revolution. Someone must speak on their behalf, and I feel that person should be me

I continued by saying that I didn't wish to make any reference to Marianet's contribution, but my silence might be taken as a disparagement "I don't feel that he deserves this, as his idea of governing the revolution from the streets, despite its demagogic connotations, does carry within it a germ of truth which is more realistic than the opinions of Federica or Abad de Santillán since it admits that a revolution must be governed. Right now [though, with] a revolution which has been made, not by a handful of adventurers, but by a great organisation such as the CNT, this is being denied...

As I'm supported by the delegates of a region [Bajo de Llobregat] I am now definitively proposing the CNT goes the whole way and establishes Libertarian Communism."

Abad de Santillán formally proposed the alternative of supporting the CAFM, and following an expectant silence, the president of the meeting [i.e. Marianet?] put this to a formal vote.

Those in favour of Garcia Oliver's proposal - Bajo de Llobregat. Nobody else? Get that down in the minutes! Those in favour of Abad de Santillán: all the others.

The president asked for a vote on who our five delegates would be - given that the original choice was provisional. The plenum, conscious of the barbarity which it had just committed, ratified my position as delegate by acclamation. When the president formally asked me if I would accept, I did so without speaking, but by simply bowing my head. The other delegates were also ratified by acclamation. I felt as if I must be dreaming, and I knew that I'd just been involved in the most unusual

plenum in our history. These delegates, gathered together in haste and without prior knowledge of what was going to be discussed, had ended up adopting a series of agreements which threw out of the window all the fundamental agreements of the CNT, ignoring in passing the most elementary aspects of the history of its organisation, which has always been strongly influenced by radicalism and anarchism. And it was members of the FAI¹⁵ who were pushing these positions (which were so reformist that even the *Treintistas*¹⁶ wouldn't have dared to propose them) or who didn't intervene in the debate and adopt a position. Many of them [the people who had formed the CNT], given the previously inconceivable defeat of the army, would have supported the proposal to go the whole way - always on the understanding, as I had indeed defined it, that it would be the syndical organisations of the CNT which led this.

Between the social revolution and the CAFM, the organisation opted for the CAFM. Time would tell who was right - the majority (with Santillán, Marianet, Federica and their group of anti-syndicalist anarchists like Eusebio Carbó, Felipe Alaiz, García Birlán, Fidel Miró and José Peirats) or Bajo de Lobregat who, like me, saw the need to go forward with the social revolution in a situation which had never been so promising.

These self-styled anarchists were making the FAI bankrupt, as it had been created specifically to neutralise the reformist syndicalists within the CNT. How had this happened? How had they managed to get so many reformists together? Was it anything to do with the defamatory rumours, which had been circulating for a while, about the dictatorial aspirations of the 'Nosotros' group and García Oliver, who was described as an 'anarcho-Bolshevik'? And what about Durruti's attitude, so ostentatiously demonstrated by his silence during this debate? Did this attitude of his have anything to do with what we'd said between ourselves in the 'Nosotros' group about what could happen to us in the revolution which was developing?

The question was raised by Ascaso when we were discussing the possibility of the CNT confronting a military uprising - in which case we'd opted to resist with the ultimate level of revolutionary action.

"As we've committed ourselves to the revolution," he said, "which one of us will be the first to die?"

¹⁵ (*) FAI. An organisation of conscious anarchist, within the CNT who considered it their duty to steer the organisation away from reformism.

¹⁶ (*) *Treintistas*: A tendency within the CNT - initially launched by 30 people who signed its platform - with a more gradualist approach.

I answered - not because I claim to be a seer, but so as to calm the strange nervousness that I saw in him:

"You'll go first Paco." [i.e. Francisco Ascaso]

"Thanks a lot, Juan! [i.e. García Oliver] Why me?"

"Because your question just demonstrates how agitated you've been since you had to resign as secretary of the CNT's regional committee, and because of the interpretation which some compañeros gave to your conduct in October [1934]."¹⁷

"Don't you agree that their attitude is unjustified?"

"Yes, it is, but that's not enough to stop you acting as if you're waiting for an opportunity to die in such a way that it would shut their mouths."

"I know that you're saying this out of fondness and compañerismo, but I hope that I won't be the first ... and who will go second?"

"I'm only making these calculations in terms of willingness to take unnecessary risks..."

"Carry on."

"I reckon it'll be you Durruti - for reasons very different to Ascaso's. You are your own worst enemy and you'll die through your own demagoguery - in the best sense of the word. You always do and say what the multitude wants as if they were somehow superior to you. Whenever it's announced that you are going to speak, people's eyes light up because they feel sure you'll say what they know you have to say, and that they are speaking through you. In contrast, when it's announced that I'm going to speak, the reaction is "Now what is this one going to say", because they know I always talk about the revolution as a heavy duty to perform. So, just to satisfy your curiosity, I'll predict my own death: it will be grey, and possibly a bit late in arriving."

And that is just how things turned out.

On the morning of the 20th, when we set off to assault the Atarazanas barracks and the military quarters (which were facing each other almost at the entrance of the port, and on either side of the column dedicated to Columbus) ... on that morning some, such as myself, moved down the Ramblas taking cover behind the tree trunks. Others, such as Ascaso and Durruti, formed up in lines across the width of the Ramblas with strange cheers of encouragement, and in a style which they must have learned from the Workers' Olympiad,¹⁸ with their chests bared and

¹⁷ (*) Ascaso used the government radio to call off a general strike and was dismissed as secretary of CNT Catalunya as a result. See appendix 1: 1934.

¹⁸ (*) Being held in Barcelona in 1936.

exposed to the military's fire - as if they were trying to reproduce a scene straight out of 'Battleship Potemkin'.

When I saw this I called them over and told them they would be dead before they got 10 metres - that it wasn't combat, it was suicide.

We carried on advancing from tree to tree, or rolling bobbins of newspaper before us. When we reached open space we rushed across it until we got to a wall which was under construction and which separated us from the arsenal which was situated between the end of the Ramblas and Santa Madrona Street. When Ascaso and Correa separated from us to line up on the pavement opposite, kneeling on the ground and pointing their guns towards the other side of the Ramblas (perhaps in the direction of Lloyds Italian or the military quarters, from where the enemy was firing) I gestured to them to flatten themselves against the ground. I didn't get a chance to repeat this gesture. Ascaso - like someone who was in a rage - was hurled back upon the flagstones of the pavement, raising his gun in both hands.

"You'll be the first to die, Ascaso, because you act like someone who is looking for death."

Did Durruti remember that as well? Was that the reason for the eloquent silence which marked his retreat at the plenum?

The same night, after the plenum had finished, the 'Nosotros' group met up with some comrades who had gathered at the Club Nautico (which was the centre for the CAFM) i.e. Marcos Alcón, Garcia Vivancos, Domingo Ascaso (Paco's brother) and Joaquín Ascaso (his cousin).

We had got together to discuss the negative turn of events at the plenum.

"It's inexplicable" I said, "In reality it's not Bajo Llobregat and myself who were defeated, but the organisation. The consequences of this are not visible yet, but they can be seen in advance. We're facing a future so impossible to foretell that we've got no idea how to act now. As the majority organisation which has abandoned the revolutionary process, we're creating an enormous vacuum..."

We could have expected the plenum to go the way it did. Let's not forget that the mechanism of our organisation is not comparable to a political party such as the communists, which is monolithic, but has a heterogeneous composition which means that it always moves forward somewhere between doubts and vacillations. For this reason it's always been directed, in reality, by a specific group which is more or less numerous. The formation of the *Treintistas* was an attempt to achieve this control over the organisation. We were trying the same thing with the

'Nosotros' group, and it's possible that the working class in Barcelona wouldn't have triumphed without our direction...

I believe that once more the 'Nosotros' group must set the pace which the organisation should follow, and finish the work which was begun on July 18th. We must take advantage of the concentration of forces which will be placed under Durruti's control tomorrow, and use them to assault the principle centres of government - the Generalitat and the Town Hall - with a section of the column which Marcos Alcón and I could direct. The Telephone Exchange and Plaza Catalunya could be taken by another section commanded by Jover and Ortiz, with Durruti and Sanz taking over [the offices of] the Home Office and Security. The Ascascos and Vivancos could join whichever column they chose - assuming that you are all in agreement.

Durruti spoke, finally revealing his true attitude. "Garcia Oliver's arguments, both here and in the plenum, are magnificent, his plan to realise a coup is perfect, but I don't believe that this is the right moment. In my opinion they should be carried out after we have taken Saragossa - something which must be done within the next 10 days. I insist that we leave these plans until after the fall of Saragossa. At the moment, with Catalunya as the only base to sustain us, we'd be reduced to our minimum geographically."

Durruti finished here, and the rest remained silent, with their lips so tightly closed that they became almost invisible.

Ascaso - our Paco - had given his life for the social revolution just days before, and now Durruti was turning his back on him. Everyone there realised that Durruti was avoiding going forward, for although he didn't say 'no' openly, he was using subterfuge to avoid saying 'yes'. He was grasping at the plan to take Saragossa as if it was his last chance.

I spoke again, saying that Durruti's arguments dealt with appearances rather than realities. The reality which confronts a majority organisation such as ours means that we have to take the reins of the revolution from the very first moment, and not leave it in the middle of the street for some passer-by to pick up. The capture of Saragossa is not only unpredictable at the moment, but it might not even be taken in three months, six months, or never. To set such a project underway it's no use marching off at the head of some militia column that is fighting for an abstraction like 'anti-fascism'. You have to fight as revolutionaries who are defending a sacred cause, who know that they are fighting for something of their own, and not just to defend the government in Catalunya or Madrid.

I know there is no point in carrying on with this meeting because two things have happened to the 'Nosotros' group to reverse its physiognomy. One is the death of Paco, the other is the irreversible division of opinion which has occurred. All that remains for me is to observe the results... and to assist in whatever way my talents permit.

The Trial of Strength

My talents were going to be put to the test. I would carry on serving the organisation, but in my own way. For me, the organisation was not a monolith which had been castrated, but a varied conglomeration which was heterogeneous in its thoughts and actions.

The legacy of previous generations of militants had to be borne in mind. They had made their contribution in the years leading up to the 18th of July. What happened at the plenum on the 23rd occurred because the majority of delegates had only recently joined the organisation, having joined it during the short period of the Republic.

My obligations were to those old militants as much as to these new ones. I was one of the oldest active militants, having shouldered its heavy obligations since 1919. But these were other times, and other men in the Organisation - they were the majority. They had said 'no', but they had let me speak, and time would verify my arguments. Was I totally defeated? What would be the opinion of our trade union militants and of the workers? Wasn't the building where they said 'no' to the revolution expropriated by revolutionary means? Presumably, having ducked the possibility of Libertarian Communism, they were going to abandon this new building and go back to Mercaders Street. If they didn't do this then they hadn't won yet, and I hadn't been beaten.

I would have to be very attentive to the pulse of the future, and not waste a minute of the day or night. We had to push forward and break the threads which tied us to the past. This was no time to rest, rest was counter-revolutionary. The revolution was marching forward, constantly distancing itself from its point of departure, from the past.

The 24th of July dawned, which could have been an unforgettable day in the revolutionary epic. But the plenum didn't want that. Durruti didn't want that. I went to salute the departure of the Durruti Column. This was my obligation as chief of the War Department of the CAFM. I met Durruti seated in his car next to commander Pérez Farrás. I shook his hand, and that of Farrás - also that of sergeant Manzana. If I had to choose between Manzana and Farrás I would have chosen the

first, because these were the early days of the revolution, days of corporals and sergeants.

From *El Eco de los Pasos* ('Echoing Footsteps,' Autobiography of Juan Garcia Oliver, pages 176 to 185)

Appendix I: Luis Companys / 1934

Companys was the leader of the middle-class Republican party in Catalunya - Esquerra. His real agenda was reformist, but he also indulged in radical posturing or rhetorical support for the working-class when it suited his ends. In his early days as a lawyer he had worked for a nominal fee to defend members of the CNT, later in his career he was involved in suppressing them, so the relationship had aspects which were ambiguous. His nationalism seems to have been genuine, as witnessed at his execution by firing squad after the Civil War when he asked to be allowed to remove his socks and shoes so that he would die in contact with the soil of Catalunya.

The feeble and reactionary nature of Companys' politics was perfectly illustrated by the events of October 6th [1934] in Catalunya.

Many historians have criticised the CNT for "sitting on its hands" and not helping the uprising in Catalunya which was launched in the name of *Alianza Obrera* (Workers' Alliance) - this turns out to be complete rubbish if we look at what really happened.

Unlike Asturias (where *Alianza Obrera* was a genuinely working-class alliance including the UGT and the CNT), in Catalunya it was basically made up of Esquerra, with a few other political parties who had no mass involvement (such as the socialists), some *Treintistas* and the UGT (which was the minority union in Catalunya).

Although these groups occasionally used revolutionary rhetoric, they never took the idea of a revolutionary uprising seriously and would have been happy if the net result of their activities had been for a left-wing government to replace the existing right-wing one.

The CNT would have been fully justified in not joining this badly prepared and reformist adventure, but the criticisms of the CNT becomes even more ridiculous when we realise that Esquerra not only shunned the CNT's assistance but also systematically repressed them as well.

The Generalitat (i.e. the Catalan government, controlled by Esquerra) had closed down all the CNT's union buildings since the revolt in December 1933 and

severely censored their paper *Solidaridad Obrera* - it only appeared on 304 of the 516 days prior to the uprising.

The socialists refused to meet Miguel Yoldi (general secretary of the CNT) when he went to Madrid prior to the uprising to talk about possible co-operation, and when the Socialist leader Largo Caballero visited Barcelona (in the summer of 1934) he was told by Companys not to bother meeting with the CNT as Esquerra could defeat the government without their help. Even in Asturias, the *Alianza Obrera* called the general strike which began the uprising without consulting the CNT.

The uprising itself in Catalunya was a farce, beginning with a call for a general strike on October 5th. When the military began to shell the Generalitat on the 6th the revolt quickly collapsed and Companys was forced to surrender after a belated call for all groups to unite behind him irrespective of political differences.

In fact, despite the fact that Esquerra sent the police round to arrest many CNT militants (including Durruti) the CNT offered to join in if it was allowed to organise autonomously on the basis of its involvement in the city's working-class neighbourhoods. However, when they tried to open up the offices of their building workers' local the police turned up and began firing at them. There was even an attempt to arrest the regional committee of the CNT which only failed because the forces of law and order were sent to the wrong building.

According to Garcia Oliver, Francisco Ascaso's involvement in these events was to haunt him until his death two years later. At the time he was general secretary of the Catalan region of the CNT from which position he was forced to resign after October - ostensibly for using the government radio to tell members of the CNT that the general strike had been called off ... apparently this offended against the dignity and autonomy of the organisation. The essential conflict behind his resignation was his opposition to the reformist way in which certain elements within the CNT were willing to compromise with the UGT for the sake of a workers alliance. (For Garcia Oliver, at least, the words '*aliancista*' and '*treintista*' were virtually interchangeable). Garcia Oliver's explanation for why Ascaso fell from grace was that he had opposed joining in Companys' adventure without consulting the organisation first. Although events proved him right, this lack of respect for democratic procedure allowed those who opposed him in the CNT to label him as 'authoritarian.'

In contradiction of the above analysis, Juan Molina (General Secretary of the FAI peninsular committee described the CNT's passivity in Catalunya as 'one of

most serious errors in the history of the organisation'. (see: Historia de la FAI, p152. Juan Gomez Casas) ... Perhaps he was an '*aliancista*'?

Main sources: *Historia de la CNT* (Jose Peirats) & Garcia Oliver: p154-61.

Appendix 2: The FAI's Uprisings During the 1930's:

(#) 'Left-wing' Republican government replaces monarchy and dictatorship: 14/4/31.

(1) 19/1/32: The miners of the valley of Cardona (near Barcelona) declare Libertarian Communism and were put down by the army, although it took them 5 days to do so, with repercussions being felt in Valencia and Andalusia. Hundreds of militants, including Durruti and Ascaso, deported aboard the ship 'Buenos Aires'.

(2) 8/1/33: This was originally meant to coincide with a general strike of all railway workers, which would have seriously hampered the movement of troops to suppress the uprisings. In the event the strike was called off, so the CNT's national committee called off the uprising. However, as preparations were already well advanced the FAI decided to still sponsor it in Catalunya, and the CNT's regional committee did the same in Andalusia.

Garcia Oliver was caught by the police when travelling in a taxi through Barcelona just before the start of the uprising, taken to the police HQ, brutally tortured and left for dead. In Andalusia the repression was made notorious by the police murders at Casas Viejas. Garcia Oliver claimed that the uprising was a success in that it prevented the 'left-wing' government from identifying itself as defending the workers' interests.

(#) National plenum of the CNT held in Madrid, 28-31 October 1933.

(#) Right-wing government elected Nov. '33, partly because of abstention campaign by the CNT

(3) 8/12/33: Insurrection organised by a Revolutionary Committee which was elected by a plenum of the CNT-FAI and based in Saragossa. One of whose members was Durruti, despite opposition from 'Nosotros' group - according to Garcia Oliver. There were confrontations on a national level, but this was insufficient to overthrow the state and a severe repression followed.

(#) October '34 Insurrection - see appendix 1

(#) Durruti was quoted as saying, at a plenum in Barcelona in November '35, that the workers should hold back for the final test rather than rising to secondary ones - this is taken as signifying a more cautious approach after his experiences

of repression and prison in the years since '31 (Casas p.153). According to Garcia Oliver this cautiousness went too far during the events of July '36.

(#) The CNT's lack of an effective abstention campaign during the elections of '36 was justified by the offer of an amnesty for all political prisoners if the left won, and was supposed to involve preparations for an uprising whichever side did win, as they had already realised that victory for the left would lead to military coup.

Appendix 3: The Relationship Between the FAI & the CNT

According to Casas and Garcia Oliver, the FAI was during much of its history more of an inspirational myth than an effectively structured organisation, and many of its more famous 'members' were not even technically members of the organisation. Garcia Oliver, for example, was generally negative about the value of the FAI (seeing it mainly as a tool of middle-class intellectuals, such as Federica Montseny) and claims - as is his usual excuse - that he only joined it in the end because others, such as Durruti, asked him to do so. Durruti and Ascaso were not members for many years, for example during the famous demonstration which followed the 1st of May in 1931, when Ascaso disarmed the police commander and Durruti held aloft a red and black flag shouting "Make way for the FAI!"

Garcia Oliver's attitude was that any mass movement, needs its myths with which to inspire people, so the label 'FAI' was as good a one as any for members of the 'Nosotros' group to use. This fits in with his belief that the will to victory was more important than achieving a perfect level of organisational preparation - which may be true, although his belief that the CNT's revolution would be unique in history is simply naive (p.125 -7.)

None of the 'Nosotros' group - with the exception of Ascaso - held official positions in the CNT, feeling that it was more appropriate to work at grass-roots level and speak at mass meetings.

Appendix 4: The End of the Committee Of Anti-Fascist Militias

The CAFM never operated according to its theoretical constitution, as in reality decisions were taken by the workers' organisations then ratified by the CAFM (p.209.)

When the CAFM was dissolved Garcia Oliver deluded himself into believing that this was not important because he was given a post relating to defence in the new Generalitat from which he reckoned that he could control things as a power

behind the throne. He also says Durruti did not give his support to any direct resistance (p.280).

When finally sent off to the Ministry of Justice he resisted this for the obvious ideological reasons, but eventually agreed because the CNT insisted (p.292.)

Garcia Oliver had a very real hatred of Jacobinism (p.230) but seems to have believed that, his own authoritarian attitudes were different because they would have been realised through a genuinely democratic mass organisation - i.e. the CNT.

Appendix 5: Some Other Points

a) Garcia Oliver divides the various factions within the CNT in terms of their relationship to the prison system. (i) The 'Nosotros' group were constantly being sent to prison, but were still willing to confront the state. (ii) The *Treintistas* (syndicalists) had already spent years in prison and were looking for a less confrontational approach which would allow them to avoid going back there. (iii) The FAI's leaders - such as Federica Montseny - were middle-class intellectuals who had never been in prison and were too scared to risk that possibility.

b) Garcia Oliver believed that the CNT lacked maturity as an organisation - e.g. no-one was ever disciplined for not carrying out their responsibilities (p.291). He also says that the quality of militant was always better the lower down the organisation you went. However he makes no attempt to explain why this should be, or what could be done about it. (p.479)

Chronology:

1930, January: End of Primo de Rivera dictatorship.

1931, April 14th: Election of 'left-wing' Republican government.

1931, June 16th: CNT Congress at the Madrid Conservatory.

1931, August: *Treintistas* split from the CNT.

1932, January: 1st FAI inspired uprising in Catalunya.

1933, January: 2nd FAI uprising (Barcelona and 'Casas Viejas').

1933, November: Election of right-wing Republican government.

1933, December: 3rd FAI uprising, based on Saragossa,

1934, Oct 5th: UGT & CNT unified uprising in Asturias (N. Spain.) Brutal repression follows - organised by Franco.

1934, Oct 6th: Uprising in Catalunya. Dominated by middle-class nationalist who exclude the CNT from their half-hearted failure.

1936, Feb 16th: Popular Front (left-wing) wins elections. The CNT does not push abstentionist policy in return for amnesty for political prisoners.

1936, May 1st: Saragossa congress of the CNT (*Treintistas* readmitted)

1936, July 17th: Military uprising begins in Morocco.

1936, July 18-20th: Military defeated in Barcelona, Madrid, etc.

Appendix 6: Biography

García Oliver, Juan. Reus 1902-Mexico 1980.

One of the select band of the most legendary CNT members. A very popular man with loyal friends, but many detractors because of his seemingly vanguardist view of revolution and his revisionism during the civil war and in the post-war years; he was in any event a militant with great presence and readily faced up to his responsibilities. From a working class family, by the age of 11 he was working in a wine store and later was an apprentice cook and waiter (the latter being his most regular occupation). By 1917 he was in Barcelona and by the following year in Montserrat too; in 1919 he joined the *La Alianza* waiters' association and sided with the anarchists (he helped set up the waiters' union and federate it to the CNT); at that time he was active with the *Regeneración* group (along with Rico, Bover, Romá, Pons and Alberich) representing it at the local federation (Bandera Negra) of anarchist groups; after serving prison time over a strike, he left for Reus on a CNT commission to unionise the workers in the area and met with great success, thanks to the backing of the action groups (1920); the following year he took charge of the Tarragona provincial committee and by the end of the year was back in prison. Joining *Los Solidarios* he was to have a hand in numerous operations from 1922 on. In 1922 he attended the Zaragoza conference and experienced dire economic straits in Valencia and Barcelona comarco; in 1923 he represented Reus at the regional plenum of unions and together with Ascaso put paid to the Languía problem (a gunman in the hire of the bosses) in Manresa. He spent a year in prison and then moved to France (where he rejected overtures from Macià), living in Paris and earning a living as a French polisher, along with Miguel, Arroyo and Pérez Combina, and with *Los Solidarios* with whom he hatched a plan to assassinate Mussolini (abandoned when the Italians failed to come through) and one targeting Alfonso XIII. Later he lived in Belgium with Aurelio Fernández and returned to Spain in 1926, at which point he was arrested (in Navarre); he was to remain behind bars in Burgos until 1931. During the republic he was utterly opposed to *treintismo*, championed revolution at the *Conservatorio* congress and resisted the National Industrial Federation format, as well as assuming the secretaryship of the FAI; later,

he was on the editorial staff of *CNT* (until it shut down in 1934). He was on the defence committees of Barcelona and Catalonia and was a theoretician and practitioner of the insurrectionary revolutionary gymnasium. He attended the 1936 congress where he argued the case for trade union unity and libertarian communism. Having played a crucial role in the defeat of fascism in Barcelona (July 1936), within days he was at a regional plenum urging that they "go for broke" (i.e. anarchist dictatorship), which suggestion was not accepted. On the other hand he was confirmed in his post on the militias committee, had a hand in the setting up of the People's War School and the school for militants and organised the *Los Aguiluchos* column with which he fought in Aragon (July-August 1936); later he was the Generalitat's defence minister, and the Republic's minister of Justice (November 1936) and, for a time, was in charge of public services in Catalonia (June 1937), a member of the Catalan CAP, creator (and a leading member) of the controversial Executive Committee of the CNT-FAI-FIJI in April 1938. With the collapse of Catalonia he crossed into France (January 1939) where he would be a member of the MLE General Council, before moving to Sweden with the assistance of the SAC. He spent the 18 months that he lived in Sweden engaged in intense correspondence (especially with Jover, Vivancos and Dominech) and proposed the setting up of a political party (the POT), a scheme that was soon abandoned. Off he went to the Americas, via Russia and would live for years in Mexico (from January 1941 onwards). In Mexico he carried on with his CNT activities and (in the April 1942 motion) argued in favour of republican unity against Franco and this led to a split in the CNT in Mexico. He expressed interest in a place in the Giral government-in-exile, was reduced to dire economic straits and saw how the CNT was gradually dwindling away. With the reunification in the 1960s he returned to Europe and was a member of Interior Defence. After Franco died he stuck to his inflexible line and personality: he refused to collect his former minister's pension unless it was backdated. He never repented of his participation in government and argued the case for firm discipline and militarisation, putting the defeat in 1936-39 down to ideological scrupulosity.

Author of: *El fascismo internacional y la Guerra antifascista española* (Barcelona 1937), *Mi gestión al frente del Ministerio de Justicia* (Valencia 1937), *El eco de los pasos* (Barcelona 1978), and wrote articles for *CNT*, *Tierra y Libertad*, *El Luchador*, etc.

Entry from Miguel Iñiguez - *Cuadernos para una enciclopedia-histórica del anarquismo español* (Vitoria, Spain.) Translated by Paul Sharkey.

Appendix 7: Comments on García Oliver

Jose Peirats [Author of the definitive CNT history]: Juan García Oliver -Victim of his Own Actions

... I had few personal dealings with García Oliver, who, prior to the rebellion in July 1936 had already been clamouring for the CNT to "take power." I came within an ace of being expelled from the Zaragoza congress over criticisms I had made of him in *Más Lejos*. I am indebted to him for coming to my defence on that occasion. Earlier, while I was secretary of the Barcelona Local Federation of Anarchist Groups (1933-34), we had sent for him. He showed up with Ascaso and Aurelio Fernández, out of courtesy shall we say because we had no jurisdiction over them, even though they used to talk so effusively from public platforms on behalf of the FAI - when they were not even members. They were answerable to the *Nosotros* group, which is to say, to a FAI apart. When I stepped down as editor of *Solidaridad Obrera*, the Regional Committee sent for me. I was received by Doménech (the secretary), Marianet and García Oliver. The latter treated me to a lengthy sermon, asking me not to quit the paper. "One ought not to give up positions the freemasons are eyeing up", was what he said. But I was not convinced. I told them that they were working behind the scenes to get the CNT to vote in the forthcoming elections, as was correct and as he concedes in his book. I resigned from the paper. This too does not quite square with my having been a 'plant' in *Soli*. (p. 132). But the biggest confrontation I ever had with García Oliver was on the eve of my joining the Aragon front. Severino Campos, Santana Calero, Manuel Seva and I had been called to the secretary's office in the Casa CNT-FAI in Barcelona to be threatened unless we packed in our campaign against anarchism's "governmental circumstantialism". By then he had become quite the bureaucrat (he was on the Policy Advisory Commission - CAP), Having been dumped as a minister.

I was the first person ever to label García Oliver an anarcho-bolshevik because of his forceful temperament and authoritarian theories. As I see it, he was always a victim of his own actions as an inflammatory speaker. Hence the business about "going for broke" at that Plenum of Locals and Comarcals in July 1936. It is my belief that he had no real conviction in the case he was making.

Fidel Miró [One-time secretary of the FIJL]

"Still fresh in my mind is the picture all we young libertarians in Catalonia had of Juan García Oliver. As far as we were concerned, he was the leader par excellence.

We admired - indeed, idolised - him, virtually without exception. He was brave, charismatic, a great public speaker with a record of suffering, emphatic and very lucid in debate and controversy... Notions of his such as the 'revolutionary gymnasium' or 'going for broke' were ideas that we youngsters did not debate but rather embraced without reservation. They suited our revolutionary aspirations, our mythic idea of the social revolution.

(...)

I prefer to hold in mind that image of García Oliver from my younger days rather than the egocentric bolshevik and the misleading picture to be had from a reading of his memoirs.'

Felipe Diaz Sandino [Military figure and Counsellor for Defence in the Generalitat of Catalonia]

I quickly found him (García Oliver) to be a man of clear intelligence, and energetic, with whom I could do business, since the intransigence reputedly part of his make-up was merely a great vigour of expression, but there was a willingness to listen to reasoned argument and, once converted by the latter, he became their staunchest advocate. (...) In addition, he had other qualities of great benefit to the cause, such as his indefatigable activity and his oratorical gifts (...)

Even when He seemed at his most excitable, I never saw him lose his head, and on more than one occasion when we were arguing hot and heavy, we never parted without a friendly word.

Juan Manuel Molina "Juanel" [Secretary of the FAI Peninsula Committee, 1930-32]

Just published is a book of memoirs from Juan García Oliver. It is going to raise a storm because of its gusto and rather contradictory nature.

Undeniably talented and with the benefit of having been one of the chief protagonists of anarcho-syndicalism's heroic age, he portrays his own influence and that of his group as central to social developments in Spain from 1918 up until after the civil war, playing down the historical record of the CNT and the hundreds of FAI groups that were always the backbone of the great trade union and libertarian movement. (...)

García Oliver offers us an exciting, lyrical description of events in July 1936, but is less than generous towards those participating in the struggle. (...) García

Oliver credits the victory over the rebels solely to the Libertarian Movement and to his own group in particular.

We have to do the decent thing and acknowledge that whilst the intervention of the anarcho-syndicalists was crucial in terms of its speed and its telling nature, it was not on its own. (...)

Somebody like García Oliver who had followed a zigzag course from the most extremist anarchist radicalism to leadership of the fighting forces of Catalonia and the Ministry of Justice, only to end up calling for the launching of a Workers' Labour Party (POT) should display a little more tolerance and understanding towards the supposed shortcomings of other people and not lash out at them the way he does.

With his irrepressible enthusiasm he sings the praises of the 8 January 1933 uprising and misrepresents that of 8 December the same year. The former, the brainchild of his own group, failed due to bad timing and was greeted by general indifference, although it caused a lot of victims.

The revolutionary uprising of 8 December was inspired by national accords. Disagreeing with this rising, neither García Oliver nor his group took any hand in it, aside from Durruti who represented Catalonia on the National Revolutionary Committee in Zaragoza, for which move he was criticised by García Oliver, as would happen again at the time of the October uprising in 1934. (...)

There being no way of stating how good or how open to question García Oliver's book is, let me sum up by saying this: No sculptor, indeed, not all the world's sculptors together, could have erected a monument to the glory of García Oliver such as he has given himself here, albeit by leaving everybody else in the shade.

Comments from *Historia Libertaria*, Madrid, No 4, March-April 1979.

Translated by Paul Sharkey.

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