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### Anarchism and imperialist war (part 2): Anarchist participation in the Second World War

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In the build up to the Second World War, following the defeat of the revolutionary wave of the 1920s, the Russian revolution had been strangled by isolation and was then finished off by the world bourgeoisie and Stalinism. The counter-revolution, the crushing of the world proletariat, had triumphed. In this context, anarchism underwent a fateful step in its evolution.

In every country, pushed inexorably on to the road to militarism by the blind laws of capitalism, the bourgeoisie prepared for war, whether in the fascist or democratic states, or in the Stalinist USSR. The impasse of the economic crisis left them no other option than this forward lunge into a second world holocaust. It was this forward march to war, the real mode of life in decadent capitalism, which gave rise to fascism. It imposed itself in the countries where the working class had suffered a profound defeat in order to subdue it and batter it, where it was no longer necessary to maintain democratic institutions whose function was to mystify the proletariat. Fascism was the most apt form of capitalism to accomplish the preparations needed for the accelerated march towards war.

The ideological dragooning for imperialist war behind fascism or Nazism, or behind the Stalinist myth of the 'socialist fatherland', was obtained through the most open and dreadful terror. But in the 'democratic' countries, in order to mobilise workers who hadn't suffered from the crushing of revolutionary movements, it was necessary for the bourgeoisie to use a particular mystification: anti-fascism. Claiming to offer workers a way of protecting themselves from the horrors of fascism was the means used to enrol them as cannon fodder in the war, in the service of one imperialist camp against another. In order to achieve this aim, the bourgeoisie, notably in France and Spain, provided itself with 'popular fronts' led by the left parties.

#### Anarchism gripped by anti-fascism

Unlike the cry of proletarian internationalism that rallied the working class to put an end to the barbarity of the First World War through the proletarian revolution, anti-fascism has never been a means for the proletariat to defend its class interests. On the contrary, it's a vehicle for delivering it up to the democratic bourgeoisie bound hand and foot. The situation of counter-revolution, the defeat of the proletariat which meant that there was no possibility of a revolutionary upsurge at that time, did not mean calling into question the fundamental principles of proletarian internationalism faced with the Second World War. There was no camp to choose. It was a fight against the bourgeoisie, the bourgeoisie both of the fascist camp and the democratic camp.

A prisoner of its tendency to defend 'liberty' against 'authoritarianism', anarchism capitulated in the face of anti-fascism. Before the war, the different currents of anarchism were among the principal animators of anti-fascism. These led the great

majority of anarchists to firmly take the side of the Allies in the Second World War. Deprived of any class criteria based upon the real social relationship that reigns in capitalist society, anarchism was led to completely submit itself to the defence of democracy, a particularly pernicious form of the dictatorship of capital. Some who had been internationalists in 1914, such as Rudolf Rocker, defended participating in imperialist war in 1940, arguing that contrary to 1914, there now existed two radically different systems and that the struggle against fascism justified support for the democratic states. This approach induced a great number of anarchists to physically participate in the war, in the first place in the un-uniformed imperialist armies of the resistance.<sup>[1] (# fn1)</sup>

In France, *"from the beginning of the war (the CNT group of the Vidal network in the Pyrenees) put itself at the disposal of the Resistance and worked actively with the Intelligence Service and the Central Bureau of Information and Action (BCRA) of de Gaulle, but also with the Sabot network and the group Combat (...) Lacking a national resistance organisation, anarchists seemed few in number though they were very much present. All the same, let's quote the maquis of the Barrage de l'Aigle (...) in the high circles of the reconstruction of the CNT in exile and one of the most active maquis of the resistance. This maquis is practically 100% confederal, like the maquis of Bort-les-Orgues. Generally, the maquis of the Massifs Centrale has large numbers of Spanish anarchists (...) "*<sup>[2] (# fn2)</sup>*"Present in the maquis in the south of France, in the groups FFI, FTP, MUR or in the autonomous groups (the Libertad battalion in le Cantal, the maquis Bidon 5 in Ariège, in the Languedoc-Roussillon) (...) [the anarchists], continued in their hundreds the fight that they had undertaken against Spanish fascism."*<sup>[3] (# fn3)</sup>*The 'Libertad' battalion "liberated the Lot and Cahors (...) At Foix, it was the anarcho-syndicalist CNT-FAI maquis that liberated the town on August 19."*<sup>[4] (# fn4)</sup>

It was the same picture in Italy. When they surrendered to the Allies on September 8 1943, the centre and northern regions remained in the hands of the Germans and the fascist republic of Salò. *"The anarchists immediately threw themselves into the armed struggle, establishing autonomous formations when it was possible (Carrara, Genoa, Milan), or in the majority of cases joining up with other formations such the 'Matteotti' Socialist brigade, the Communist 'Garibaldi' Brigade or the 'Giustizia e Libertà units of the Party of Action."*<sup>[5] (# fn5)</sup> In numerous places, the libertarians joined with the National Liberation Committee that brought together a large spectrum of anti-fascist parties or organised Groups of Patriotic Action [sic]. There were numerous anarchists in the 28th Garibaldi Brigade which liberated Ravenna.

*"In Genoa, anarchist combat groups operated under the names of the 'Pisacane' Brigade, the 'Malatesta' formation, the SAP-FCL, the Sestri Ponente SAP-FCL and the Arenzano Anarchist Action Squads. The attempt to set up a 'United Front' with all anti-fascist forces failed due to the Communists' attempts to impose their own hegemony. Furthermore, anarchists had their own representation only in the outlying CLN 's and this obliged them to engage in the armed struggle while relying on their own devices. Activities were promoted by the Libertarian Communist Federation (FCL) and by the underground anarcho-syndicalist union the USI which had just resurfaced in the factories...."*

*Anarchists founded the 'Malatesta' and 'Bruzzi' brigades, amounting to 1300 partisans: these operated under the aegis of the 'Matteotti' formation and played a primary role in the liberation of Milan"*<sup>[6] (# fn6)</sup>

The example of Bulgaria, where after the invasion by the USSR in 1941, the Bulgarian CP organised *"some maquis in which numerous anarchists participated"*<sup>[7] (# fn7)</sup>, or again, the anarchist anti-Japanese guerrillas in Korea 1920-30, attest to the general character of the participation of the anarchists in imperialist war.

And many of them wouldn't be put off by wearing the uniforms of the imperialist democratic armies: *"The Spanish libertarians (...) participated in their thousands in the resistance to Nazism and some of them went into the Free French battalions, fighting into Germany"*<sup>[8] (# fn8)</sup>. *"Some comrades enrolled into the fighting regiments of the Foreign Legion and found themselves in the front lines of combat."*<sup>[9] (# fn9)</sup>. *"They were sometimes assigned to north Africa, sometimes to black Africa (Chad, Cameroon). Others rallied to the French Liberation Forces of 1940. They joined up with columns of General Leclerc." (...) More than 60% Spanish, the famous 2nd D.B. included a good number of anarcho-syndicalists, so much so that one of their companies "is entirely composed of Spanish anarchists." The armoured vehicles 'Ascaso', 'Durruti', 'Casas Viejas', "were the first to enter the capital on August 24 1944" at the time of the liberation of Paris*<sup>[10] (# fn10)</sup> and to raise the tricolour on the Hotel de Ville!

#### **A war-mongering position in continuity with that taken in Spain, 1936**

The attitude of the anarchists during the Second World War came directly from their position in the 'rehearsal' of the war in Spain. The latter crudely showed the real role played by anarchism in what was neither "a class war", nor a "revolution" but a war between two factions of the Spanish bourgeoisie which unfolded into a world imperialist conflict.

In July 1936, the CNT, by virtue of an anti-fascist pact sealed with the parties of the Popular Front, gave its support to the Republican government in order to turn the reaction of the Spanish proletariat to the coup d'état of Franco towards anti-fascism.<sup>[11] (# fn11)</sup> The CNT diverted a social, economic and political struggle of the proletariat against all of the forces of the bourgeoisie towards a military confrontation solely against Franco, sending the workers to be massacred in the anti-fascist militias for interests that were not their own.

The participation of the libertarians in the bourgeois Republican government in Catalonia and Madrid illustrates the evolution of the CNT towards support of the bourgeois state. *"After the first victory and seeing a long and enormously important war looming up, we understood that the time had not yet come to consider the functions of government, of the government apparatus, as terminated. Similarly, the war*

*necessitates an adequate apparatus to lead it to a good end - the army, it's also necessary to have an organ of coordination, of centralisation of all the resources and energies of the country, that's to say the mechanisms of a state (...) So much that during the war, we must act in the bloody struggle and we must intervene in government. In effect, the latter must be a government of war. (...) We think that the war is the priority, that it's necessary to win this war as a preliminary condition to any new condition..."[12] (# fn12)* When the workers of Barcelona rose up in May 1937, the CNT were complicit in the repression by the Popular Front and the government of Catalonia (in which they participated), while the Francoists momentarily suspended their hostilities in order to allow the parties of the left to wipe out the uprising.

Through its support for total war, through the militarisation of the proletariat with the help of the anarchist collectives and the anti-fascist militias, through the proclamation of the Union Sacrée with bourgeois republicanism and the banning of strikes, the CNT participated in dragging the proletariat into a war that took on a clear imperialist character with the engagement of the democracies and the USSR on the republican side and Germany and Italy on the side of the fascists. *"At present, this isn't a civil war that we are undertaking, but a war against the invaders: Moors, Germans, Italians. It is not a party, an organisation, a theory that's in danger. It's the existence of Spain itself, of a country that wants to be master of its own destiny and which is running the risk of disappearing..."[13] (# fn13)* The nationalism of the CNT led it to explicitly appeal for world war in order to save the 'Spanish nation': *"Free Spain will do its duty. Faced with this heroic attitude, what will the democracies do? There are grounds for hoping that the inevitable will not be long in happening. The provocative and crass attitude of Germany is already becoming insupportable. (...) Everyone knows that, in the end, the democracies will have to intervene with their squadrons and their armies to bar the way to these insane hordes..."[14] (# fn14)*

The abandonment of the interests of the proletariat and the attitude of the CNT towards imperialist war produced animated oppositions in the anarchist camp (Berneri, Durruti). But their inability to break with the position that war went hand in hand with revolution made them victims of the policy of the defeat and dragging of the proletariat. Thus, those who tried to struggle against the war and for the revolution were incapable of finding a point of departure for really revolutionary struggle, which would have meant calling for workers and peasants (dragged into the two camps, Republican and Francoist) to desert, to turn their guns on their officers, to return to the rear and fight through strikes, through demonstrations on a class terrain against capitalism as a whole.

#### Small internationalist glimmers

However, when world war broke out, against the outbreak of anti-fascist war-mongering, some voices from anarchism were raised that rejected the terrain of anti-fascism and affirmed the only really revolutionary position, that of internationalism. Thus in 1939, in Britain, the Glasgow Anarchist-Communist Federation declared that: *"The present struggle opposes rival imperialisms for the protection of secular interests. The workers of every country belong to the oppressed class and have nothing in common with the interests and aspirations of the dominant class. Their front line isn't the Maginot Line; there they would be demoralised and killed, while their masters amassed their fraudulent gains..."[15] (# fn15)* In the south of France, the miniscule group around Voline[16] (# fn16) developed an intervention against the war on a clear internationalist basis: *"The present conflict is the work of the powers of money of each nation, powers who live exclusively and internationally on the exploitation of man by man (...) The state leaders, the military chiefs of all colours and shades, go from one camp to the other, tear up treaties, sign others, serve the Republic here, the Dictatorship there, collaborate with those military adversaries of yesterday, and vice-versa and back again (...) the people, they pay the piper: they're mobilised for democracies, against democracies, for the fascists, against the fascists. But whether in Africa, Asia or Europe, it's the masses who pay the cost of these 'contradictory experiences' and who get their bodies smashed in (...) It's not a question of only fighting against Hitlerian fascism, but against all fascisms, against all tyrannies, whether of the right, left or centre, whether royal, democratic or social, because no tyranny will emancipate labour, neither liberate the world, nor organise humanity on a really new basis..."[17] (# fn17)* This position clearly makes these anarchists an expression of the working class. Here again, when such a clarity is reached, it's by taking up the class positions of the proletariat.

But the hard test of isolation from other remaining internationalist groups and from the class in the conditions of the triumph of the counter-revolution, including the enormous pressure of anti-fascism (*"we had daily confrontations with other anti-fascists. Should we associate with them or remain against the current? The question was often agonising on the ground..."[18] (# fn18)*) soon extinguished this spark. The death of Voline (September 1945), the incapacity of the anarchists to draw the lessons from their experiences, led the elements of his group to return to the fold of the CNT, to momentary adhesion to its anti-fascist committees and, finally, to participating in the reconstruction of the FAI on a completely bourgeois political basis.

#### What is the political result for militant anarchist workers?

From an examination of the history of anarchism faced with two world wars, we can underline a series of conclusions:

- Not only did anarchism demonstrate its inability to offer a viable alternative and revolutionary perspective to the working class but it constituted a direct means of mobilising the working class for imperialist war. In 1936-37, the capitulation of anarchism faced with the anti-fascist mystification and with bourgeois democracy, seen as a 'lesser evil' in relation to fascism, was a way for capitalism to enlarge the front of political forces agitating for war, including the anarchists. After the First World War, the war in Spain constituted the second decisive act for anarchism, sealing its evolution towards supporting a capitalist state. This submission to bourgeois democracy was shown in the integration of the official currents of anarchism into the political forces of the capitalist state. Thus, following this process, from 1914 to the war in Spain

1936-37, official anarchism became an ideology for the defence of order and state capitalism.

- In the second place, it's important to say that the anarchist movement can't be reduced to its official currents and remains a very heterogeneous milieu. Throughout its time, a part of this milieu has sincerely aspired to the revolution and socialism, expressing a real will to finish with capitalism and exploitation. These militants have effectively placed themselves on the terrain of the working class when they affirmed their internationalism and dedicated themselves to joining its revolutionary combat. But doing this fundamentally depends on a process of decantation whose sense and breadth depends on the rapport de forces between the fundamental classes, the bourgeoisie and proletariat.

This decantation could well come to nothing or even go towards the bourgeoisie as in the black years of the counter-revolution of the 1940s. There, deprived of the compass of the class struggle of the proletariat and of the oxygen of discussion and debate with the revolutionary minorities it produces, elements trying to defend class principles were often trapped in the intrinsic contradictions of anarchism.

Anarchism could be orientated towards the working class when the latter affirmed itself as a revolutionary force. Thus, it's really the revolutionary movement of the working class, the rise of the world revolution and the proletarian insurrection in Russia (with the destruction of the state apparatus of the bourgeoisie by the Soviets and the unilateral halt to the engagement in imperialist war by the Russian proletariat and the Bolsheviks), which allowed those remaining internationalist anarchists to adopt a consistently internationalist attitude in 1914-18. They then joined up with the historic movement of the working class by approaching the communist movement coming out of the left of Social Democracy and opposed to the war: the Bolsheviks and the Spartacists. It was these marxist currents who were the most capable of putting forward the sole viable, realistic alternative: the transformation of imperialist war into civil war and the world proletarian revolution.

Scott 27/5/9

see also

[Anarchism and imperialist war \(part 1\): Anarchists faced with the First World War \(2009/wr/325/anarchism-war1\)](#)

[Anarchism and imperialist war \(part 3\): From the end of the Second World War to the end of the counter-revolution \(wr/327/anarchism-war3\)](#)

[Anarchism and imperialist war \(part 4\): Internationalism, a crucial question in today's debates \(2009/wr/328/anarchism\)](#)

[1] (#fnref1). The allegiances of anarchism went towards different fractions of the dominant class: some militants, seduced by the Charter of Labour, or pacifists restored by the armistice, collaborated in the National Revolution programme of Pétain and his Vichy government, as in the case of Louis Loreal, or ended up in the official structures of the French state, such as P. Besnard.

[2] (#fnref2). The Spanish Anarchists and the Resistance, in L'Affranchi no.14, Spring/summer 1997, on CNT-AIT.info.

[3] (#fnref3). E. Sarboni, 1944: *The black dossiers of resistance*, Perpignan, Ed. Du CES, 1984.

[4] (#fnref4). The Spanish Anarchists and the Resistance, in L'Affranchi no. 14, Spring/summer 1997, on CNT-AIT.info.

[5] (#fnref5). 1943-45: Anarchist Partisans in the Italian Resistance, on libcom.org

[6] (#fnref6). 1943-45: Anarchist Partisans in the Italian Resistance, on libcom.org.

[7] (#fnref7). Postface to Max Nettlau, *History of Anarchism*, p. 281.

[8] (#fnref8). E. Sarbone, 1944: *The black dossiers of resistance*, Perpignan, Ed. Du CES, 1984

[9] (#fnref9). Pepito Rossell, *In the resistance, the support of the libertarian movement*.

[10] (#fnref10). *Le Monde diplomatique*, August 2004.

[11] (#fnref11). On the trajectory of the CNT, read our series in the *International Review*, notably the articles: 'The failure of anarchism to prevent the integration of the CNT into the bourgeois state (1931-34)'; 'Anti-fascism, the road to betrayal by the CNT (1934-36)'.

[12] (#fnref12). D.A. de Santillan, in *Solidaridad Obrera*, April 16 1937.

[13] (#fnref13). D.A. de Santillan, in *Solidaridad Obrera* April 21 1937.

[14] (#fnref14). *Solidaridad Obrera*, January 6 1937, quoted by La Révolution Proletarienne no. 238, January 1937.

[15] (#fnref15). Quoted b P. Hempel, *A bas la guerre*, p. 210.

[16] (#fnref16). Vsevolod Mikhaïlovitch Eichenbaum - Voline (1882-1945), was a member of the Revolutionary Socialist Party during the revolution of 1905 and participated in the foundation of the St. Petersburg Soviet. Imprisoned, he escaped and got to France in 1907 where he became an anarchist. In 1915, threatened with imprisonment by the French government for his opposition to the war, he fled to the United States. In 1917, he returned to Russia where he militated among the anarcho-syndicalists. Consequently, Voline made contact with the Makhnovist movement and became head of the culture and education section of the insurrectional army and then

became president of its military, insurreccional Council in 1919. Arrested several times, he left Russia after 1920 and sought refuge in Germany. Returning to France, he edited, on the Spanish CNT's request, its paper in the French language. In 1940, in Marseille, he finished *The Unknown Revolution*. Hardship and the terrible material conditions of clandestinity affected his health and he died of tuberculosis in Paris, 1945.

[\[17\] \(#\\_ftnref17\)](#) Extract from the leaflet: *To all workers...*, 1943.

[\[18\] \(#\\_ftnref18\)](#) *Anarchists and the resistance*, CIRA, p. 33.

See also :