

## Occupy Membrilla

During the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39, British arms were supplied to the fascist General Franco through the Strait of Gibraltar to help defend British interests in the region against the workers councils and anarchists. What ‘particularly pleased’ Churchill, wrote Noam Chomsky in his essay ‘Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship,’ ‘was the forceful repression of the anarchists and the militarization of the Republic.’ Illustrating further the integrity of the Great Powers, the late Chris Harman adds that ‘the rulers of Western “democracies” were content for Hitler and Mussolini to flout a “non-interventionist” pact, since Franco was no danger to their empires.’ Along with Franco, the Churchill also defended Stalin during Cabinet meetings.

On August 14th 1938, Churchill said in an interview that ‘Franco has all the right on his side because he loves his country. Also Franco is defending Europe against the Communist danger – if you wish to put it in those terms. But I, I am English, and I prefer the triumph of the wrong cause. I prefer that the other side wins, because Franco could be an upset or a threat of British interests, and the others no.’ The proud Englishman had also told his Cabinet friends in 1914 (reported years later in the press, with any offending phrases omitted):

We are not a young people with an innocent record and a scanty inheritance. We have engrossed to ourselves an altogether disproportionate share of the wealth and traffic of the world. We have got all we want in territory, and our claim to be left in the unmolested enjoyment of vast and splendid possessions, mainly acquired by violence, largely maintained by force, often seems less reasonable to others than to us.

The Spanish libertarian and anarchist movements during the civil war were based on the assumption of collective ownership of land, with work, enterprise and innovation encouraged through means of free association between individuals. This form of anarcho-syndicalism (which Lenin, not without irony, had earlier denounced in *The State and Revolution* as ‘merely the twin brother of opportunism’) was, to Marshall Shatz, ‘the most concerted effort the anarchists made to adapt their principles to the structure of modern industry. It sought to achieve the libertarian society by means of trade-union organizations, through which the producers themselves would take over the direction of the economy and replace the coercive machinery of capitalism and the state. The trade union was to be the nucleus of the new society and at the same time, with its weapon of the general strike, the revolutionary agency that would achieve it.’ Here is Daniel Guérin’s assessment of the anarchist structure of the Spanish collectives:

Everything was put into the common pool with the exception of clothing, furniture, personal savings, small domestic animals, garden plots, and poultry kept for family use. Artisans, hairdressers, shoemakers, etc., were grouped in collectives; the sheep belonging to the community were divided into flocks of several hundreds, put in the charge of shepherds, and methodically distributed in the mountain pastures. ...

It appears that the units which applied the collectivist principle of day wages were more solid than the comparatively few which tried to establish complete communism too quickly, taking no account of the egoism still deeply rooted in human nature, especially among the women. In some villages where currency had been suppressed and the population helped itself from the common pool, producing and consuming within the narrow limits of the collectives, the

disadvantages of this paralyzing self-sufficiency made themselves felt, and individualism soon returned to the fore, causing the breakup of the community by the withdrawal of many former small farmers who had joined but did not have a really communist way of thinking.

There were also successful movements towards self-management inside industry which were just as successful as the agricultural movements, with most factories being organised in a highly efficient manner – something one would expect from those who know their trade best. A study of the collectivisation efforts in Spain during the Civil War was published by the CNT (Confederación Nacional del Trabajo, the anarcho-syndicalist labour unions) in 1937. Amidst the brutal oppression of the Republicans, the study describes the village of Membrilla in the province of Ciudad Real: ‘In its miserable huts live the poor inhabitants of a poor province; eight thousand people, but the streets are not paved, the town has no newspaper, no cinema, neither a cafe nor a library. On the other hand, it has many churches that have been burned ... Food, clothing, and tools were distributed equitably to the whole population. Money was abolished, work collectivized, all goods passed to the community, consumption was socialized. It was, however, not a socialization of wealth but of poverty.’

Chomsky comments on Membrilla that ‘after the Franco insurrection, the land was expropriated and village life collectivized ... Work continued as before. An elected council appointed committees to organize the life of the commune and its relations to the outside world. The necessities of life were distributed freely, insofar as they were available. A large number of refugees were accommodated. A small library was established, and a small school of design.’

Though he never visited this particular town, Orwell’s sympathies in *Homage to Catalonia* – which seems to me his greatest work – extend to all the collectives: ‘I have no particular love for the idealized ‘worker’ as he appears in the bourgeois Communist’s mind, but when I see an actual flesh-and-blood worker in conflict with his natural enemy, the policeman, I do not have to ask myself which side I am on.’ The collectivist efforts of the Spanish anarchists seem to depict humanity as distinct from Marx’s conception ‘of Man in general, who belongs to no class, has no reality, who exists only in the misty realm of philosophical fantasy.’ Orwell continues: ‘I have the most evil memories of Spain, but I have very few bad memories of Spaniards. I only twice remember even being seriously angry with a Spaniard, and on each occasion, when I look back, I believe I was in the wrong myself.’

The German anarchist Augustin Souchy, in his autobiography, describes how during ‘the course of collectivization of the village of Membrilla, the sum of 30,000 Pesetas in the tills of the municipality was distributed in equal amounts among the inhabitants before the impecunious communal economy was started. Although the initiative came from the anarcho-syndicalists, there were many instances where members of the socialist union UGT (Union General de Trabajadores – General Workers’ Union) participated in communal work.’

The CNT report concludes: ‘The whole population lived as in a large family; functionaries, delegates, the secretary of the syndicates, the members of the municipal council, all elected, acted as heads of a family. But they were controlled, because special privilege or corruption would not be tolerated. Membrilla is perhaps the poorest village of Spain, but it is the most just.’

For Chomsky, ‘An account such as this, with its concern for human relations and the ideal of a just society, must appear very strange to the consciousness of the sophisticated intellectual, and it is therefore treated with scorn, or taken to be naive or primitive or otherwise irrational. Only when such prejudice is abandoned will it be possible for historians to undertake a serious study of the popular movement that transformed Republican Spain in one of the most remarkable social revolutions that history records.’