

BARCELONA: A STRANGE UNITY OF PURPOSE

Experiments in Anarchism: Post-War Problems

FROM L. T. FLEMING, OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT IN SPAIN.

BARCELONA.

A RETURN to Barcelona (so far as these articles are concerned) means a return to the very complex things which underlie the present war, and it is time that I made some attempt to deal with them. When the war began, it seems to me that it could be reduced to quite simple terms—the effort of a military junta to overthrow the lawful Government of Spain—but this statement must be qualified to a very large extent because of events which have taken place since the war broke out, and influences, hitherto submerged, which have begun to assert themselves. In trying to explain them, I realise that I am putting myself in the position of the English journalist who tries to explain the Irish problem after three weeks in Dublin, and my only safeguard against error will be to keep as close as possible to the facts as I know them.

The rebellion of the Army officers on July 19th did not find Barcelona unprepared. For some days before the rising the prospect had been perfectly clear, and the groups of armed civilians who watched all night along the Ramblas were uncertain only as to the actual hour. The moment the rebellion broke out thousands of men leaped to quell it.

The Army officers and a large number of the rank-and-file were among the insurgents, and the Provincial Government of Catalonia took the only possible step to deal with them. It armed as many civilians as were ready to bear arms, and with this "amateur" force it drove the rebels from the city.

IMPROVISED ARMY

The improvised army was composed of men from all walks of life. It was organised almost at once into the Anti-Fascist Militia, and as such was given all the privileges and responsibilities of other State armies in time of war. Like them, it enjoys control over all aspects of war—not only the actual conduct of the war, but the supervision of food supplies, the keeping of order in the large towns, and a number of other duties which a peacetime army never could claim. Thus, the statement that the Government armed the rabble, and now finds that the rabble has usurped its powers, is a half-truth which conveys a totally false impression.

But we still have to consider the men to whom the Government gave arms. Some of them were Catalan Nationalists, who always had urged the right of their Province to govern itself, and who saw in General Franco's plans for military dictatorship the final threat to their independence. By far the greater number, however, belonged to the trades unions, and Barcelona shares with some other seaports the power to breed political extremists of the most virulent type.

In Barcelona there flourished not only Socialists, but Communists, and not only Communists, but Anarchists, Trotskyites, and a great variety of other left-wing groups. Surprising as it may seem to foreigners, the two Anarchist trades unions (F.A.I. and C.N.T.) enjoyed the largest support, and wielded great power in the town years before the rebellion was ever thought of.

RULERS OF CATALONIA

The result has been curious, and very confusing to anybody who takes his stand on the niceties of constitutional law. From one point of view the democratic Government in Catalonia remains the democratic Government, and the only difference is that it has ensured almost complete autonomy for the Province—it has created five new Ministries, for example, which render it quite independent of Madrid. Many of its powers have been delegated to the Anti-Fascist Militia, but only as a war-time measure, and it cannot be said either to have lost control of the situation or to have been subverted.

On the other hand, the Anti-Fascist Militia is a military body by accident, and a collection of political bodies in essence. The half-truth about the issue of arms is nearly a whole truth concerning the delegation of power, and it is very much a matter for argument whether the extremists will be willing to submit themselves again to bourgeois democracy when the war is over. General Franco's rebellion placed them in the saddle, and they mean to show that they can ride. Owing to the war many departments of national life have been put under their control, and they have already used these as a means to experiment with their political theories. What they have they will undoubtedly hold.

But who is to do the holding? At the moment the question hardly arises, because all elements in the Anti-Fascist Militia—with a unity of purpose and a discipline which are absolutely astounding to a stranger—have sunk their many differences, and have combined against the common enemy. That, however, does not hide the fact that the elements are most diverse, and that their differences will remain sunk only until the rebellion is over.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

The scrawled initials on the Barcelona case (to which I have already referred) represent the many strange bedfellows of the *Fronte Popular*, "F.A.I." and "C.N.T." will be familiar already as the two Anarchist trades unions, and the most influential among the others are "U.U.C.C." and "I.S.D.C." whose members are Communists, and the rather unpopular "I.O.U.M." or Trotskyites. (Much of the latter's unpopularity, incidentally, is due to the fact that it makes so much noise. Its habit of rushing round the town in cars, shouting "Down, Down, Down! Rah, Rah, Rah!" is universally deplored.) As a matter of fact, there is a good deal of tension among these various parties even now, and many of the Barcelona pickets who are mourned as having been "shot by Fascist raiders" have really been the victims of political enemies. Every night two or three deaths occur in the streets, and usually they can be put down to this cause.

But the most powerful of all are the Anarchists—so powerful that they have not only begun to make plans for the future control of Catalonia, but have been able to put some of their theories into practice. Most people know that anarchy means a negation of government; but it may be worth while here to point out that anarchy does not necessarily mean blowing everything up with a bomb. Actually, it is a most idealistic theory, and it is only because it takes so flattering a view of human nature that I cannot conceive its being employed on a large scale.

The ideal, say the anarchists, is that all men should be trusted to look after their own affairs, without interference by a central authority—because, sooner or later, a central authority becomes a

tyranny. Communism, for example, is all very well in its way, but it places everything under the control of the State, and so tends to interfere far too much with personal liberty. The ideal, admittedly, may be a long way off, but in the meantime one can make steps towards it by placing as much as possible of human activity under the control of those people who are directly interested in its various parts.

TALKS WITH ANARCHISTS

This is the impression which I have gathered from conversations with more than one anarchist in Barcelona, and when I objected that such a theory was unworkable, they would reply triumphantly: "But it is being worked!" So, indeed, it is, in a limited way. The anarchist theory (as interpreted here) claims that everything should "belong to the workers," but not in the Russian sense; for in Russia this is another way of saying that it should belong to the State. In Barcelona, for example, the tramway system now "belongs to the workers"—but only to the tramway workers; and the same applies to the theatres, some of the larger factories, the electric light supply, and a few other things. Thus, the idea of private property has not been by any means abolished.

In passing, it may be interesting to note how this state of affairs came about, and the tramway company provides a fairly good example. When the rebellion broke out the tramway directors and most of the higher officials either joined up with the rebels or left the country hurriedly. Some means had to be found to carry on the service, and it was carried on by a committee of the tramway workers themselves, who used the opportunity in order to put their anarchist theory into practice.

In many cases there has been no forcible expropriation at all—the industries are being run in this manner because nobody remained to run them in the other manner. At the same time, the electric light company is an example of an industry which has been taken out of the hands of its management since the rebellion began, and this "conversion" of industries is on the increase. With it (and apparently in flat contradiction to the anarchist theory) there goes a tendency to collectivise small industries and place them under the general control of a trade union such as the F.A.I. or C.N.T.

MONEY LAUGHED AT

Another odd manifestation is "libertarian Communism," with which we came into contact during our visit to the front. In some villages we paid for our petrol and oil in the usual way, but in others the proprietor would laugh heartily at our offer of money, and would remark, "There's no such thing as money here!" By signing a docket, we could have our tank filled to the top, and I cannot even guess how the system works. It is said that in these villages nobody pays any rent, nobody receives any wages, and everybody can have his reasonable needs supplied by signing a docket. This may or may not be true; all I know is that we did not have to pay for our petrol.

I had a very interesting interview with Señor Sanchis, one of the leaders in the anarchist groups, during which I tried to find out their future plans. "You mustn't think that we are a set of wild idealists," he said. "We know very well that we must take the machine as we find it, and gradually convert it to our purpose. In the end, of course, we should like to do away with central government altogether, and substitute organisation—organisation of industry by the trades unions, for example, not by the State. But we realise that we can't hurry too much."

All this, of course, was rather vague. I realised, I said, that a limited version of the Anarchist idea might be applied to such things as industry, but surely there were some things for which a State Government was essential? What was going to happen about taxation, for instance? His reply was disarming. "We haven't considered all that yet," he said. "After all, we have our hands full with this rebellion, and we can't be expected to think of everything at once. Things like that can wait."

BUT—AFTER THE WAR?

So it is impossible to say what form Catalonia will take after the rebellion is subdued—if it is subdued—and it is even impossible to say whether the Anarchists mean to overthrow the democratic Government or not. For the moment, both they and the other parties have only one end in view, and they are allowing nothing to interfere with the need to beat the rebels. They take any chance which offers to exploit their theories, but they do not go out of their way to create chances. As for the man in the street he knows nothing about the theories, but he is a strong supporter of anarchy for the reason that already his rents and his working-hours have been lowered and his wages increased. The trades unions have stood by him admirably, and General Franco's plan for a dictatorship which would curtail trades union powers rouses him to furious opposition.

But the Anarchists are not the only power in Catalonia, and we must also re-

TO-DAY'S WEATHER

Occasional rain or drizzle. Bright intervals locally.

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