

The revolution that accompanied the outbreak of the Spanish civil war (1936–1939) was one of few occasions in world history when a conscious attempt to change the fundamental relations of a society has been undertaken by masses of people. During this period, relations of production in the town and country, gender relations, and the physical and cultural expressions of a class-bound and Catholic country were profoundly, if only temporarily, altered for many of the millions of people caught up in the revolutionary experience in the Republican zone. The way people dressed, spoke and carried themselves changed overnight, as working-class people seized the opportunity to live differently. At the forefront of this process were the organisations that, in several Spanish cities, had taken the lead in opposing the attempted coup launched on 17 July 1936 by officers in the Spanish army: the anarcho-sindicalist Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (National Confederation of Labour – CNT) and the anarchist Federación Anarquista Ibérica (Iberian Anarchist Federation – FAI).

Such was the role of the anarchist organisations in suppressing the Nationalist mutineers that, on 21 July in Barcelona, they appeared to be the masters of the city. With the smell of gunpowder still lingering in the air, several of the CNT and the FAI's most prominent members met in the newly expropriated offices of an employers' association in the 'Casa Cambó', an imposing building in the heart of Barcelona soon to be renamed the 'Casa CNT-FAI', to discuss the question of whether to proceed immediately to their shared objective of libertarian communism. There it was decided, on a provisional basis, that no such attempt would be made, and that the Spanish libertarian movement would collaborate with other political tendencies, such as communists, socialists, liberals and Catalan and Basque nationalists, in fighting the common fascist threat.

This commitment to collaboration did not prevent the acceleration and expansion of the revolutionary process in the weeks that followed. CNT members were at the forefront of organisational efforts that saw militia columns established, workplaces taken over and land collectivised in the summer of 1936. The government, thrown into chaos by the upheaval of July, was marginal to these developments. However, in the absence of any attempt to dissolve governmental and administrative bodies, and in a spirit of cooperation that was variously described by anarchists as pragmatic, magnanimous and indicative of a new era of social harmony, many revolutionary phenomena were, from the first, formally subordinate to the national or regional organs of state, in spite of being self-managed or union-controlled in their day-to-day functioning. The collaboration of the libertarian movement in Spain with the state can therefore be understood to have begun months before this process was accelerated and formally consummated in late October 1936 by the unprecedented acceptance of ministerial roles in the central government by four Spanish anarchists.

This book is about the interrelated and opposed processes of revolution and state reconstruction as they unfolded in the Republican zone during the Spanish civil war. Its focus is on what are here referred to as 'radical anarchists': those members of the movement committed to pushing the revolution forward and resisting the encroachments of the state. A revolution, as James C. Scott has pointed out, is an interregnum. Between the collapse of one regime and the consolidation of another there is a period in which the experience of the state – the experience of being governed – is no longer a feature of daily life. 1 In Spain, the interregnum of 1936 has been termed the 'short summer of anarchy'. 2 During this period, the Republican state was challenged, not only by the emergence of phenomena that bypassed the authority of its political and police bodies, but also by the rupture in the nationalist and patriarchal 'common sense' on which these structures rested.

By studying the ways in which a reimposition of governance was resisted over the following months, this book sheds light on the perennial question of how states are (re)constituted, in ideological and cultural as well as administrative terms.

Students of Spanish anarchism are indebted to the activists who, having survived the war and escaped Francoist repression, wrote about their experiences in memoirs or historical works. The extraordinary efforts of Abel Paz and, in particular, José Peirats, to document the movement have provided the building blocks for all subsequent endeavour. 3 Much research has added to this foundational labour. In a recent article, Barry Pateman has affirmed that, in the last twenty years, the state of anarchist historiography has ‘changed beyond recognition’ in qualitative and quantitative terms. 4 This is in no small measure due to work on the movement in Spain, which reached its apogee during the civil war. Pateman mentions Chris Ealham and Agustín Guillamón, whose work on the CNT is fundamental to understanding the social and cultural universe of Spanish anarchism and the internal mechanisms and divisions within the organisation. 5 The present book builds on their research, and expands on recent historical work on the Spanish revolution and its political opponents. 6 I am further indebted to the labour of committed historians who, often without institutional support, have recovered the stories of little-known activists, events and groups. 7 The hypotheses presented here also depend to a great extent on work that has foregrounded the role of women anarchists. 8

This brief and not exhaustive survey suggests that Stanley Payne’s observation that ‘there has been little effort to account for Spanish anarcho-syndicalism in analytic and theoretical terms’ in the last forty years is somewhat misplaced. 9 Nevertheless, this book seeks to counter certain tendencies that have persisted in the historiography in spite of such efforts. First, it considers the ‘counterrevolution’ in Republican Spain to be synonymous with the process of state reconstruction, rather than a political project carried out chiefly by the Partido Comunista de España (Communist Party of Spain – PCE). In this sense it builds on the work of Helen Graham, who contends that the reconstruction of the Republican state was a cross-class, multi-party process that was not driven primarily by the ideological priorities of the PCE. 10 The participation of Stalinist organisations undoubtedly gave state reconstruction peculiar and bloody characteristics, but has also served to obscure the broader and more complex aspects of the process. 11 Second and relatedly, this book considers the libertarian movement’s collaboration with the Republican state to have been a lengthy process involving periods of reversal and consolidation, the study of which cannot be limited to the moments of anarchist representation in government but must incorporate attention to ideological and cultural questions, as well as to the activity of the anarchist organisations when not formally participating in government. Third, the book builds on studies of the socialisation campaign undertaken by the CNT in the first third of 1937. 12 Its attention to the upturn in revolutionary activity and the important alliances generated in this period suggests that the widespread conception that the revolution was a relatively brief affair, confined to the ‘short summer of anarchy’, requires modification.

In addition to drawing from existing secondary works that serve to correct these persistent tendencies, the book offers several historiographical advances based on the close study of primary sources, chiefly the minutes of assemblies and meetings, the testimony of activists, and the anarchist press. Following François Godicheau and Ealham, and inspired by Anglophone research into the Russian revolution, the book considers the role of mid-level activists who, for the most part, remained on the margins of both official positions of state administration and also what were known in such circles as the comités superiores of the Spanish libertarian organisations, but who nevertheless retained influence among wider sectors of the movement as union and affinity group delegates and prolific contributors to the anarchist press. 13 This focus has led to the unearthing of important interventions by, among others, Lucía Sánchez Saornil, Amador Franco, Juan Santana Calero and Julián Merino, the latter of whom is here afforded the centrality that his highly significant activity and role in the revolutionary rearguard deserves.

Beyond its individual champions, this work provides a more general account of the libertarian movement's radical currents than has been offered hitherto, and explains the complex affinities that linked their different manifestations. By examining the radical currents of Spanish anarchism as they cut across these different formations, we can perceive how opposition to collaboration and state reconstruction coalesced around specific positions that for the most part remained consistent with pre-war anarchist traditions while generating new revolutionary solidarities. 14 These positions formed a programmatic alternative to state reconstruction and demarcated the boundaries of the revolutionary achievements that radical anarchists fought to defend. The book shows that the radical position was both more widespread and more serious in its potential ramifications than has generally been understood.

The chapters are arranged in broadly chronological order. The first covers the pre-war years of the Spanish Republic and the tendencies and tactics of the libertarian movement in this period. Chapter 1 outlines the extent of the revolution that accompanied the outbreak of the civil war in the summer of 1936. I examine the meaning and impact of state collaboration and the emergence of an oppositional strain within the Barcelona defence committees, the Juventudes Liberarias (Libertarian Youth – JJLL) and the anarchist press.

The purpose of Chapter 3 is to show the persistence of the revolutionary anarchist project and the renewal of its programmatic and practical characteristics in the first third of 1937. The chapter focuses on the CNT's socialisation campaign and the new revolutionary alliances this helped to engender in and around the libertarian movement. These first chapters show the revolutionary movement in a period of expansion, albeit not without contradictions. By the spring of 1937, a radical anarchist programme had emerged, which drew on pre-war anarchist practices and the ideal of libertarian communism, and also on the basis of the revolutionary experience and its concrete achievements. Chapter 4 examines the showdown between this revolutionary programme and the forces of the reconstituted state during the May events in Barcelona. It offers a significant new interpretation of why and how both the mobilisation and demobilisation took place. After this period of expansion and eventual explosion came a period of splintering and defeat. The fifth chapter analyses the renewed critique of state collaboration that followed the May days and the attempt of the Barcelona FAI to advocate a withdrawal from official positions. The evolving methods adopted by the leading cadres of the libertarian movement in combatting radical anarchism are also examined. Chapter 5 discusses the defeat of this current, and departs slightly from the chronological order by covering three manifestations of this defeat in the period after the May days to the end of the civil war. It analyses the fracturing of revolutionary solidarities provoked by defeat and the hollow victory that this represented for the vitiated statist wing of Spanish anarchism. The attempts of the increasingly isolated radicals to bear witness to and draw lessons from their defeat are also discussed. The Conclusion discusses the historical import and contemporary relevance of the radical anarchists, evaluates their strengths and weaknesses, and posits the reasons for their ultimate failure.

Prior to the civil war, the libertarian movement in Spain had witnessed a boom in publications dedicated to outlining the post-revolutionary society. By imagining the world remade in the absence of a state, the anarchists advocated an end to private property, gender inequality and formal politics, proposing the socialisation of land and industry and the arming of the people. During the war, this imaginary provided the parameters of a mass revolutionary experiment. However, in a parallel process, the state re-established itself through a physical, ideological and economic assault on the manifestations of this libertarian programme that had emerged in the Republican rearguard. By examining the flashpoints where state reconstitution met libertarian recalcitrance, we find a broad and theoretically developed current of anarchism that attempted to retain its fidelity to pre-war traditions while analysing and drawing lessons from the revolutionary experience as it took place.

This current requires a wide-ranging and synthetic history so that its historical and intellectual significance might be fully appreciated. This book is a contribution to that history.

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