

Unit 15
Spain, 1868-1936:
Build-up to Revolution

This Unit aims to

- Examine the build up and background to the period of revolution and civil war in 1936-39.
- Assess the nature, growth and success, as well as the failures, of the CNT.
- Look at the political and social atmosphere of late 19th Century Spain, starting with the arrival of anarchist ideas in 1868.
- Look at the changing fortunes of libertarian organisations up to the establishment of the CNT, and the crucial period of the late 1920s and 1930s.
- Consider the approach of liberal and Marxist academics to the growth of anarchism in Spain.

Terms and abbreviations

- CNT:** Confederacion Nacionaln del Trabajo (National Confederation of Labour) Anarcho-syndicalist union.
- FRE:** Federación Regional Española (Spanish Regional Federation). The Spanish region of the First International
- FTRE:** Federación del Trabajadores Regional Española (Federation of Workers of the Spanish Region)
- Mano Negra:** (Black Hand)
- Solidaridad Obrera:** Workers' Solidarity. Libertarian union organisation.
- Ateneos:** cultural-political centres set up by the anarcho-syndicalists.
- Obrero consciente:** conscious worker. A worker who "understood" and acted accordingly.
- UGT:** Union General de Trabajadores (General Workers' Union) Reformist trade union controlled by the socialists.
- PSO:** Partido Socialista Obrero (Workers' Socialist Party)
- FAI:** Federacion Anarquista Iberica (Iberian Anarchist Federation)
- CEDA:** Confederación Española de la Derecha Autónoma (Spanish Confederation of the Independent Right). Catholic quasi-fascist party
- POUM:** Partido Obrero de Unificacion Marxista (United Marxist Workers Party) Dissident revolutionary Communist Party

Introduction

The CNT (National Confederation of Labour) had a long gestation period. Long before it blossomed into a huge anarcho-syndicalist movement, it was experimenting and developing ideas of bringing anarchism and syndicalism together into an overarching people's social and economic organisation, fit to fight off capitalism and forge a new society.

It began in 1868, when the Russian anarchist Michael Bakunin decided to try to help spread the word of the 'anti-authoritarian' tendencies in the First International. He paid the fare of his close friend, the Italian anarchist Giuseppe Fanelli who, despite knowing barely a word of Spanish, managed to convince a considerable number of workers and peasants of the value of anarchist ideas. The anarchist Anselmo Lorenzo described the scene thus:

"(Fanelli's) black expressive eyes...flashed like lightning or took on the appearance of kindly compassion according to the sentiments that dominated him. His voice had a metallic tone and was susceptible to all the inflections appropriate to what he was saying, passing rapidly from accents of anger and menace against tyrants and exploiters to take on those of suffering, regret, and consolation, when he spoke of the pains of the exploited, either as one who without suffering them himself understands them, or as one who through his altruistic feelings delights in presenting an ultra-revolutionary ideal of peace and fraternity. He spoke in French and Italian, but we could understand his expressive mimicry and follow his speech".

The message spread quickly from Barcelona to Madrid, and within days groups of workers were declaring themselves members of the International. In many ways, the country was ripe. Spain was a country with a poorly developed bourgeois democratic tradition, which gave little opportunity to the ruling classes to co-opt or negotiate with the workers and peasants, as happened in north-west Europe. There was also marked exploitation by landowners and employers that combined with a tradition of collective revolt and scepticism towards political parties. Indeed, the political and social condition of Spanish society at the time was a key-determining factor in the kinds of organisations that formed and the tactics they used to fight back.

In the late 19th Century (and really up to the middle of the 20th Century), Spain was largely a rural society with two major industrial areas, the textile area around Barcelona in the north-east, and the

heavy industry and port areas of the north, particularly around Bilbao and Gijón. As a result, there were huge disparities in lifestyle and wealth from one region to another. Also, communications were generally poor, and all train lines that there were led to Madrid. Mountainous areas, like Asturias in the north, were difficult to get to and it was not until the 1930s that an integrated railway transport system was consolidated. With strong regional identities, particularly in Catalonia and the Basque Country, and different languages spoken across Spain, 70% of the late 19th Century population could neither read nor write. Poverty was widespread, especially in rural areas such as the Andalusian plains, where farm workers would be hired on a daily basis and expected to work from dawn to dusk, only able to afford a meal of bread, olive oil and garlic at night. The Catholic Church wielded great influence and, unsurprisingly, pitched its lot in with the landlords and bosses.

Politically, Spain was slow to modernise and no real parliamentary tradition had developed by 1870. Frequent *coup d'états* took place, as the army participated in frequent changes of successive incompetent governments. A gap in this ongoing sequence of instability occurred around the turn of the Century. This period was characterised by corrupt elections, with power swapping pendulum-like between the two main parties, but no substantial benefit for the vast majority of the population. A major blow was dealt to the ruling class and army in 1898, as the Philippines and Cuba were lost to the United States, and with them, the last remnants of a once powerful global empire. Spain was now an ex-power on the world scene. Temporary stability ended with another coup in 1923.

The 1923 coup of General Primo de Rivera brought military rule back to Spain. This continued haphazardly until 1930, and was then followed by the formation of a progressive Republic in 1931. The Republic, or at least its leftist elements, so antagonised conservatives and the Church that, in July 1936, army generals, led by Francisco Franco, started a revolt which led to 3 years of Civil War (see Unit 17). As illustrated by these events, any libertarian organisation had plenty to contend with. Nevertheless, the anarchist organisations made steady headway against the tide of political uncertainty and violence, by pursuing two major goals. Firstly, they defended themselves and their communities from attack, and secondly, they set about creating a new world out of the ashes of the old.

The first organisations

After Fanelli's visit to Spain, a number of groups appeared, claiming their adherence to the International. Throughout 1869 and 1870, they sought to consolidate a national organisation, and a congress took place in June 1870 in Barcelona, which established the Spanish region of the International, the Spanish Regional Federation (FRE, Federación Regional Española). Around 150 delegates were present from a wide variety of associations, and the very breadth of membership was to become a problem for the FRE from the outset - there were so many different opinions on what a workers' organisation should do and what structures it should establish.

In essence, there were three main categories of workers in the FRE: 1) reformist co-operativists, 2) radical co-operativists, and 3) apolitical and anti-political delegates. The debate in these early years centred on whether co-operatives alone would be enough to bring about a decent society. Eventually, most concluded that they wouldn't, and that in addition to co-operatives, direct action would be needed. Also, there was a strong recognition of the need to pursue an active policy of non-participation in political structures such as the state.

The basic unit of the FRE was the craft union. The unions of different trades in an area were grouped into a local federation, and the local federations were united regionally, and then nationally. This structure established the basic organisational units that other revolutionary unions were to adhere to. In addition to the federal structure, local direct democracy (mass-meetings) prevented burdensome bureaucracy and anti-democratic leadership cliques from being established. The idea was also to bring local craft unions directly together in nation-wide federated industrial unions, but this took much longer to materialise.

With the FRE growing rapidly, the early 1870s became a hot bed of political activity in Spain, following on the heels of the European revolutions of 1868. As the temperature of resistance rose 1873 saw the creation of a Republic, which was broadly progressive and federalist in character. The FRE participated in various skirmishes throughout 1873 and 1874 to try to push the Republic towards anarchist collectivism and decentralise the country's politics in the process. Matters came to a head in the so-called 'cantonalist' uprisings in 1874, during which a number of autonomous areas free of state control were established, some of which persisted for many

weeks. The ruling class looked on with increasing fear and alarm as they saw hundreds of years of privilege under threat. Eventually, able to stand it no longer, the military waded in on their behalf, and the uprising was brutally crushed. Thereafter, the ruling class decided that a progressive Republic was a bad idea, and Spain returned to military dictatorship.

Secured back in power, the military unleashed a wave of repression against the FRE (much of which was conducted in the name of the Catholic Church). In the face of sustained violence towards its members, the FRE gradually died out. It was not until the 1880s that a more stable political situation led to a relaxing of the repressive measures against workers' organisations. Immediately, in 1881, a new organisation, the Federation of Workers of the Spanish Region (FTRE) was formed. The FTRE differed from the FRE in its more focused anarchist ideological stance and commitment to syndicalist methods of organisation and action.

Growth of the FTRE was rapid and, by 1882, regeneration of the labour movement was well underway. By September, there were over 5,000 members, which bears comparison to the 7,000 members that the FRE had had shortly before its dissolution. In the period September to December 1882 alone, there were at least 8 public congresses convened by unions of similar crafts and 10 regional or district congresses held by the FTRE. This amazing rate of growth in activity is a recurrent theme in the Spanish libertarian movement. The ability to grow meteorically in a few years after collapse or severe state/military repression indicates outstanding tenacity. It was also a necessary attribute in the volatile political and social situation of 1930s Spain.

Despite this, the FTRE had its ups and downs. One of the 'downs' was the so-called Mano Negra (Black Hand) affair, which created shockwaves throughout Spain and further afield. It began in December 1882, when a tavern owner and his wife were killed by a group of farm labourers in Jerez, Andalusia. Over the next two months, several other killings occurred locally, and the police announced that a revolutionary group called the Mano Negra was behind them. A further killing in Madrid the following year was also apparently carried out by the Mano Negra. The government launched an urgent inquiry, and promptly wildly exaggerated the likely size of the group. Furthermore, it used the events as an excuse to

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label all anarchists and their organisations as mindless, violent thugs. Despite the FTREs declared opposition to the group, if it really existed, the propaganda offensive that the events handed to the state was damaging. The FTRE was temporarily undermined, along with the growth of anarchist ideas in Spain.

It is still unclear how extensive the Mano Negra was and whether it had any links to the anarchists. What is certain, however, is that once a state commission had investigated it, it was provided with the perfect excuse to repress the FTRE. Due to the affair and the 'right to repress' that successive governments assumed as a result, the remaining decades of the 19th Century saw fluctuating fortunes for anarchism and anarchist union-based organisations.

Now on the defensive, the libertarian movement saw disagreements resurface, particularly over tactics. The so-called anarchist method of 'propaganda by the deed' had spread intermittently across Europe, and had even played its part in the libertarian movement in the USA. While such tactics were an understandable, desperate response to often-severe state violence (or even direct retaliation), they were not successful in building a mass-movement. However, during this period, the organisational power of the union-oriented anarchists began to steadily increase. It was this which formed the basis of the massive syndicalist movements of the early 20th Century.

In Spain, since the inception of the anarchist movement, there had been differences in the tactics of the regional groups that made up the FRE and later, the FTRE. There was a tendency for the Andalusian anarchists to organise cyclically, according to the strength of the harvests each year, and to disband when times were quiet. The Catalans, in contrast, seemed to favour more permanent and union-based organisations. There were frequent clashes at congresses over these differences.

After limping for a few years, the FTRE eventually went into demise in 1888. After this, a number of different organisations came and went, but it was not until the early 20th Century that organisational and political difficulties within libertarian organisations were at least partly resolved, as the syndicalists gradually gained ground in the anarchist camp. The CNT was to grow directly out of these circumstances.

The first sizeable organisation of the 20th Century was the union federation "Solidaridad Obrera" (Workers' Solidarity), based in Barcelona. In many ways, this was a continuation (or resurrection) of the union-based organisations of the FRE and FTRE, and it was significant that it grew in Barcelona, Spain's industrial heartland.

In many respects, Solidaridad Obrera represented the triumph of the union-based organisations over the looser and less organised anarchist federations. In the face of employers' onslaughts and a precipitous economic situation, workers in Spain saw the need for an organisation that would both defend their interests and enable them to move towards a world based on the principles of solidarity and mutual aid.

In July 1909, libertarian ideas came to the fore in a major episode of political and social turmoil. With much of its overseas empire gone, Morocco was one of the few parts that remained. Spain had fought battles for decades against the indigenous population seeking independence from either the French or Spanish, and the toll of the ongoing war had by now affected the majority of Spanish families. Against a climate of growing opposition to the war, and in a mistimed bid to oppose Catalan nationalist aspirations, the central government in Madrid issued another call-up for recruits to the war. For many people, disillusioned with the never-ending conflict, this was the last straw. They were no longer interested in the top-heavy army ploughing more millions and lives into its historic mission to save Spain's honour against the 'primitive' natives.

A week of rioting and church-burning broke out in the streets of Barcelona, as young men refused to be called up and expressed their disgust of the clerics. The state and army seized on the unrest as an excuse to embark on a smashing and murdering spree, aimed at all radicals, Catalan nationalists and republicans, but especially the anarchists. This inexcusable and cowardly attack on unarmed civilians became known as "Semana Trágica" or the "Tragic Week" of July 1909. The numbers of those imprisoned and killed are not known, but in one internationally-renowned case, Francesc Ferrer i Guàrdia, an radical anarchist school teacher with no involvement in the events, was tried and shot, so becoming another victim of the indiscriminate bloodshed.

The Social Dimension

Ferrer was a good example of the educationalist strain of the Spanish libertarian organisations in which culture, knowledge, and different methods of schooling were recognised as important in the creation of independent-thinking individuals. The strong cultural dimension of the CNT was to grow out of such developments, and became vital to its significance to the Spanish working class (see Unit 17). In order to understand how and why the CNT's cultural and educational undertaking was so important, we must explain how its predecessors tackled these issues.

Right from the beginning in Spain, anarchists understood why and how it was important to integrate themselves in the daily existence of the working class. By the end of the 19th Century anarchists were no longer rooted in one organisation or federation and had spread their activities into many social and cultural areas through the creation of their own bars, cafés, clubs, workers' centres and "ateneos" (cultural-political centres). As one writer has pointed out:

"In both rural and urban settings, neighbourhood clubs, bars, and other social centres became the focal points of anarchist activity. In this way, anarchism played a pivotal role in the socialisation and politicisation of the worker... A thriving anarchist cultural life was manifested in a variety of ways, but most notably in the proliferation of libertarian newspapers, sociological journals, pamphlets and books... The important role these associations played in the socialisation and politicisation of the worker cannot be overemphasised."

By the outbreak of the First World War, anarchists had succeeded in demonstrating the effectiveness of a strategy that built on people's communal and neighbourhood connections. Already, they had established radical places of activity such as workers' centres and storefront schools. The linkages between work and community, workers and the poor, and women and men were clearly understood, and the modes of organisation reflected this. These links were to prove vital in the construction of workers' consciousness and confidence, as well as providing support for times of hardship and in strikes. The *ateneos* in many local neighbourhoods that helped create a sense of community and were a haven where any worker could go, whether of anarchist affiliation or not, was important in the development of an anarchist culture in Spain.

Moreover, these cultural-political links were not confined to the cities. Anarchist culture was highly developed in rural Andalusia, where women's sections, schools, libraries and cafés were all co-ordinated by the local anarchist councils. Cafés were important in both city and country. Already ingrained in Spanish social life, the anarchist versions provided an extra dimension, as daily chance or planned meetings in cafés and plazas helped engender a new sense of communal consciousness.

Another aspect of the growing movement that cannot be overstated is the role of written propaganda. This may seem surprising, given that the majority of the population were illiterate, but tracts and pamphlets of workers' groups were circulated and studied fervently, as the hunger for self-education took hold. As one historian who travelled around the province of Córdoba stated in 1928:

"We who lived through that time in 1918-19 will never forget that amazing sight. In the fields, in the shelters and courts, wherever peasants met to talk, for whatever purpose, there was only one topic of conversation, always discussed seriously and fervently: the social question. When men rested from work, during the smoking breaks in the day and after the evening meal at night, whoever was the most educated would read leaflets and journals out loud while the others listened with great attention... Admittedly 70 or 80% were illiterate, but this was not an insuperable obstacle. The enthusiastic illiterate brought his paper and gave it to a comrade to read. He then made him mark the article he liked best. Then he would ask another comrade to read him the marked article and after a few readings he had it by heart and would repeat it to those who had not yet read it. There is only one word to describe it: frenzy."

Books and other publications traditionally denied to the impoverished workers were extremely important in what was seen clearly as the process of preparation for the 'new society'. During the first years of the FTRE's existence, its ideological platform was largely defined by two publications, "Revista Social" (1881-1885) and "Crónica de los Trabajadores de la Región Española" (1882-4). The former (Madrid) paper obtained the widest distribution of any working class paper of the period as, within three years, its circulation grew to 20,000 subscribers. Alongside these, hundreds of different local, regional and national publications were assiduously produced.

Anarchist ideas were not only published in theoretical form; as well as short tracts, various stories, such as the fortnightly “Novela Ideal”, were produced. Of all the publications of the period, “Acracia”, the Barcelona paper, stands out as the best anarchist theoretical journal. It published articles by William Morris, Herbert Spencer and Kropotkin, indicating its broad emphasis. A crucial aspect of this propaganda was the way in which it spread, which led to the anarchists being seen as within rather than detached from everyone else. As one commentator put it; “...the anarchists eventually became permanently integrated into the fabric of working-class society”.

The unique formula, which was soon to become known as anarcho-syndicalism, now began to really take shape. A mix of union militancy, ‘bread and butter’ demands, cultural ascendancy, literacy campaigns and country outings converged to create what was a diverse, empowering and powerful revolutionary movement. Within this, culture was placed in the centre, as one historian put it;

“...it can be said without exaggeration that for anarchism, more than for any other political ideology, culture has had the greatest value, not as something which would create politico-social well-being, but which would be a politico-social achievement in itself.”

The growth in confidence of the unions, which drew from the inter-linkages between workplace and community, all combined to provide both tactical focus and a vision of a new society. Above all, it was the relevance of anarchism in responding to people’s needs and problems, and the integration of anarchists within the wider population, which together provided the key to building a powerful anarchist movement in Spain in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Education

Access to culture and knowledge made one an “obrero consciente” (conscious worker), and thus attracted paramount importance. There was no separation of what should happen in the new society from the preparation that was to take place in the old. Here, the ‘new society’ was already being created, through free experiment with culture and self-education.

Anarchist ideas on education featured early on in the development of the movement. At the 1872 FRE Congress, a plan of “enseñanza integral”, an integral form of education without religion or traditional learning by rote was proposed. Following this, anarchists established schools and integral cultural centres drawing on the concepts of Francesc Ferrer i Guàrdia (see above) and supported endeavours to raise the population’s awareness on issues such as literature, reading and writing and scientific theories.

Central to ideas on education was the idea of the ‘conscious worker’, who understood and acted accordingly. Knowledge and its application to the service of humanity would aid the latter’s liberation. As a result, Spanish anarchism, and especially its Catalan element, embraced the new sciences that were appearing in Europe as the harbingers of new times of wisdom and justice. Against what anarchists saw as the deliberate obscurity, and therein the attempt to hide and deceive, of the Catholic Church, it was necessary to impose the rational anarchist word. As Ferrer himself put it:

“In the first place it [education] should not be similar to religious teaching, since science has demonstrated that the creation is a legend and that gods are myths. As a result, the ignorance of parents and the credulity of children is taken advantage of, and the belief in a supernatural being, a creator of the world, to whom requests and wishes can be made in order to meet all kinds of favours, has been perpetuated.”

For many workers, their first available source of information on many cultural, scientific and philosophical matters came from the anarchists. Indeed, it was the anarchists, with inexpensive, simply written brochures, who brought the French enlightenment and modern scientific theory to the peasantry, not the liberals or the socialists.

By the early 20th Century, anarchism was clearly in the forefront of a cultural change which was sweeping over Spain. The crisis which had enveloped the whole country at the end of the 19th Century was still a major feature of people’s lives. Anarchism and the

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way it embraced new ideas proposed a solution to this crisis, not on the basis of nationalist or imperialist assumptions on the worthiness of the Spanish race and empire, but rather as a means of achieving access to new heights of culture, knowledge and well being. The anarchists project went far beyond that of the intellectuals of the Republic, who proposed restricted liberal land reform and state schooling, here was a proposal for a free society without church, state or capitalism.

The anarchist's solutions were not just applicable to Spain and to the current crisis, but the rest of humanity, and far into the future; a society organised on a rational and egalitarian basis would solve the problems of human kind. In the midst of this vision, the education platform of the anarchists was based on a mix of a search for the new, modern rationality and a deeper understanding of nature, culture and morality. Through this mixture, lay the route to individual freedom and collective liberation.

In December 1910, various workers' craft and agricultural organisations came together in Barcelona to explore the possibility of creating a national organisation. During the congress, the idea of the national union was first discussed. In 1911, at a further congress, the National Confederation of Labour (CNT) was born. At the outset, the CNT contained 30,000 members in 350 unions throughout Spain.

True to anarchist organisational principles, the CNT shunned bureaucratisation and centralisation and based itself solidly on local unions built into regional federations. Strikes led by the CNT were expected to be short and no strike funds were created. Revolutionary violence was accepted, but only as a consequence of the contradictions and violence of capitalism itself. The organisation was committed to 'direct' rather than parliamentary action and reaffirmed its libertarian principles.

The CNT went into the fray immediately and was quickly made illegal in 1912 for its participation in strikes and violent action. For the next few years it remained a clandestine organisation, and entered a particularly difficult period after 1917. The years 1919-23 brought extreme repression, particularly in Barcelona, where the CNT was strongest. After a number of high-profile strikes and actions by CNT unions, employers resorted to establishing roving gangs of hired assassins, who would search out and murder CNT organisers. A response to this appeared in the form of quasi-official CNT gunmen, and a tit for tat gun battle ensued, lasting several years. This episode brought up once more the issue of tactics, the more moderate CNT members being against the more revolutionary aims of the CNT, while the anarcho-syndicalists argued for an out-and-out revolutionary programme.

Amidst the wave of enthusiasm sweeping Europe after the Russian revolution, the CNT sent a delegation from its 1919 Congress to the Moscow meeting of the International Red Trade Unions (IRTU), in order to assess the viability of joining the Red (Marxist) International (see Units 11-13). Soon after, news began to trickle through of the Bolsheviks' persecution of the anarchists in Russia. Although it had been initially favourable to the idea of joining the IRTU, the CNT now changed its mind. However, it was also aware of the need to organise internationally. In the event, a meeting of syndicalist organisations in Berlin in 1922 're-established' the Bakuninist spirit of the First International and created the International

Working Men's Association (later renamed the International Workers' Association, IWA - see Unit 13). It was to this international (the AIT in Spanish) that the CNT affiliated. By this time, the CNT was broadly an anarcho-syndicalist organisation that pledged to pursue the anti-statist and anti-political party approach towards a classless society.

After joining the IWA, the CNT saw no immediate reprieve to its difficulties in organising in Spain. The years 1923-30 were again difficult, with gun battles in Barcelona and the dire economic situation prompting the 1923 military coup, and subsequent military 'Directorship' (read dictatorship) of General Primo de Rivera. The CNT was outlawed, and Primo de Rivera refused to recognise it, instead choosing to negotiate in a corporatist system with the socialist trade union, the UGT, in an attempt to undermine the CNT. Thus, the UGT, and indeed some top members of the Socialist Party (PSOE) did relatively well under Primo de Rivera, and Largo Caballero, later to be heralded the 'Spanish Lenin', was even a cabinet member from the mid-1920s onwards. As a result, the Spanish socialists emerged from the years of dictatorship in 1930 with much of their organisation intact, in contrast to the decimated CNT. The rift created between the CNT and the UGT, as a result of the latter's participation with the dictatorship was deep and would barely (if ever) be healed.

Another problem the CNT faced in the late 1920s was pressure from within to take a 'softer' less solidly anarcho-syndicalist line, and start participating in state structures. To some extent this was understandable, in the face of shrinking influence and membership, while the reformist UGT and socialists enjoyed direct power and influence. However, the vast majority in the CNT argued against this 'easy option' as a dangerous route away from principled politics. As a response to these ideas, in 1927, the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI) was formed, by legendary figures such as Buenaventura Durruti and García Oliver. The FAI grew up in and around the CNT and set itself the task of keeping the CNT on the 'straight and narrow' of non-collaboration with the state and political parties. The FAI was avowedly pro-CNT, but operated in small clandestine groups, and for some gave the impression that it acted as an elite group, keeping the CNT on strict anarcho-syndicalist course. This was viewed positively or negatively, depending on how hard-line you were and how you viewed the idea of organisations operating within organisations. Suffice to say that the relationship between a labour union, which is

anarcho-syndicalist in outlook and practice, and a specific anarchist organisation is problematic, particularly when the latter is allowed to give the semblance of creating a 'higher tier' of hard line anarchist 'elites' within the former.

The 2nd Republic, 1931-36

By 1929, Primo de Rivera had managed to irritate all his main bodies of support; the Church, monarchy, army, and select group of politicians he had alongside his military advisers. When he disbanded an elite army corps protesting over pay and promotion without consulting the Chief of the Armed Forces, King Alfonso XIII, his last drop of support dried up. In January 1930 he asked his fellow generals for support. Without their pledge, he would resign. No support was offered, and he duly resigned and fled to Paris, to die shortly afterwards.

Throughout 1930, another army general, Berenguer, led a so-called 'soft-dictatorship', as the republican plots grew. The conspirators finally led an uprising, backed by 'progressive' sectors of the army, in mid-December 1930. The CNT, faced with a dilemma, supported the Republican uprising, although it carefully worded its support in apolitical anti-statist terms. The dilemma was that it was opposed to all political parties and governments, but it pragmatically recognised that the republic would be better in the short term than the tyranny of military dictatorship. As the dictatorship collapsed, it became clear that the force for a new republic and against the monarchy was considerable, even among the bourgeoisie. Elections were called, and in April 1931, King Alfonso XIII fled to France. The new administration proclaimed itself the Republic of 'all the workers'. The CNT's relationship with this new political system was to be problematic right from the start.

The Republic was certainly the first period in the 20th Century in which Spain would get close to liberal democracy which, compared with the past political corruption and army-driven politics, was a step forward. Even in the CNT, despite the lack of faith in any real change

from the regime, there was an expectation that things would be better, or at least not quite so bad. Celebrations were held across Spain and particularly in Catalonia, where bourgeois politicians of the nationalist parties believed they were one step closer to the realisation of an independent Catalan state.

There were three main recognisable periods in the Republican years of 1931-36. The first, the so-called reform years, was April 1931 to November 1933. At this point, elections returned a right wing majority, and this second period, of right wing coalition, lasted until the February elections of 1936. Then came the Popular Front government, which was left wing.

In the reform years, the oppression of years of military dictatorship seemed to visibly lift, as the progressive government set about tackling the terrible agrarian situation, by bringing measures to ease rural poverty and restore land ownership to the rural working class. Landlords and the Catholic church reacted angrily to this undermining of their privilege, and there were pitched battles as they took on the peasants and the CNT.

The Republic soon realised what it was up against. It tried to deal with the army, a bastion of the former monarchist regime, by retiring reactionary officers and replacing them with more progressive ones. The policy failed totally, as officers saw their beloved institution being interfered with, and turned even more antagonistic towards the new regime. If anything, the Catholic Church was an even greater problem, being one of the richest, most powerful and most reactionary institutions in Spain. It was deeply hated by whole sections of the working class, as shown by their readiness to burn down churches and convents during uprisings. The Republican government tried to take it on, for example by stopping its monopoly on education by banning religious orders from running schools. However, the Catholic Church simply formed businesses that bought and ran the schools and, without the state resources to counter this, education stayed the same as ever - firmly in the hands of Catholic reaction.

For these and various other similar reasons, the government did not deliver the social legislation needed. Strikes became widespread, and the CNT's hatred of the socialist UGT reached new heights as UGT workers were sent in as scabs to break CNT strikes. The government was openly hostile to the CNT, and its CNT offices were closed down and in some areas even destroyed several times over

the 2-year period. The socialists were particularly aggressive towards the CNT. Many anarcho-syndicalists were jailed or shot, and strikes or other means of direct action-based self-defence was the common result of such attacks. The net result of the intense repression of the CNT was that it was able to demonstrate how resilient and steadfast it was in both its principles and tactics. The working class, increasingly despairing of the left wing government's empty promises, began to turn to the CNT in ever greater numbers, and the membership figures were soon being measured in several hundreds of thousands, and within two years, topped a million.

After the 1933 elections, the CEDA (the Catholic right wing, quasi-fascist party) gained power, in a right wing coalition. Immediately, the new government set about undoing the legislation and social initiatives of the reform years. In October 1934, the CEDA took over the key ministries of industry and agriculture and immediately, a miners' uprising broke out in Asturias. The CNT was again in the front line of the action, and for a short period, the region was on the brink of full-scale social revolution, with workers taking over workplaces and producing weapons for their defence. However, the uprising was eventually crushed violently by massed ranks of the Civil Guard and army - Franco was in charge of this military campaign.

1936: CNT comes of age

By February 1936, over a year of CEDA oppression was enough, and the government swung back to the left, as the Popular Front was elected to power. Though it immediately set about undoing the CEDA-influenced legislation, it was becoming abundantly clear by this stage that no amount of reform was going to stop the increasing momentum for real change.

Over 30,000 militants imprisoned by the CEDA regime were now released, either 'officially', or in some cases, by the workers themselves. The bosses refused to rehire the released prisoners, and strikes broke out all over the country in protest. The peasants began to seize the land from the big landowners and collectivise, and the Popular Front didn't dare move against them. Neither did they act against the army, church and right-wing parties who were openly preparing a coup. The government quickly became ineffective, as events moved much faster than it could react, and power slipped away in two directions - the fascists, clerics and bourgeoisie on one side, and the anti-fascists on the other, consisting of workers from the rapidly swelling CNT and UGT. Full-scale class war broke out and between February and June, hundreds of churches were burnt down, there were 113 general strikes, over 200 other strikes, plus numerous gun battles, street fights, assassinations and bombings. With the Republic now discredited, Spain plunged towards inevitable civil war.

In May, the CNT held its National Congress in Zaragoza. As street action began to reach boiling point, the whole country's attention was focused on the Congress. Held within a climate of imminent expectation of full-scale social revolution, the Congress turned out to be an important event. Differences in tactics were again discussed, particularly between the more 'pro-insurrectionist, pro-FAI' activists and those who were more moderate in approach. Importantly, many tactical differences were overcome, and some unions who had briefly split away from the CNT over these now rejoined.

The Congress was for once united on all-important issues; it supported the expropriation of the land by the peasants, continued to push towards the revolution and an alliance with the rank-and-file of the UGT, and maintained its commitment to libertarian communism. Many of the resolutions passed fully recognised that there was now a historic opportunity to put ideas into practice. One stressed that it was impossible *"to predict the structure of the future society...since there is*

often a great chasm between theory and practice." It also defined the true nature of revolution (rather than insurrection) as *"a psychological phenomenon in opposition to the state of things that oppress the aspirations and needs of the individual"*. Direct action was only the first step, which would abolish "private property, the state, the principle of authority, and consequently, the class division of people into exploiters and exploited, oppressors and oppressed". The basic principles of the future society were also detailed, as were various human aspects of it:

"the commune is most free, which has least need of others...(and this commune)...will have no bureaucratic or executive character. Apart from those who work as technicians or statisticians, the rest will simply carry out their job as producers, gathered together at the end of the working day to discuss questions of detail which do not call for reference to a general assembly... (The new society)...will be incompatible with any punitive regime...such as prisons...(for) man is not bad by nature, and delinquency is the logical result of the state of injustice in which we live...when needs are satisfied and (people have) rational and humane education (the causes of social injustice) will disappear. (Anarcho-syndicalism also) proclaims free love, with no more regulation than the free will of the men and women concerned, guaranteeing the children the security of the community."

This resolution was written, discussed and unanimously adopted by the CNT, not in the 'enlightened 1960s or 1970s, but in 'regressive', Catholic Spain in 1936. With ideas well ahead of their time, and in a general atmosphere of both tactical unity and confidence about the future, the Congress was another boost for the CNT. It was timely for, within a matter of weeks; the extreme right wing and the army attempted a coup, throwing the country into civil war, as the CNT and the Spanish people rose up in defence against the fascists. The following 3 years of revolution, war and turmoil is the subject of Unit 17.

Postscript: Why Spain?

Many Marxist and liberal academics have addressed the question of why anarcho-syndicalism came to the fore in Spain from a 'racial temperament' perspective. The general idea here is that the 'hot-blooded Latin' temperament was somehow ideally suited to anarchism. This is frankly not tenable, certainly as any major force. If it were true, for a start, we would have seen similar anarcho-syndicalist revolutions in other Latin and Mediterranean countries, and we would not have seen the mass-movements that occurred in non-Latin countries.

There have also been offered a number of more plausible explanations for why it was anarchism, rather than Marxist-inspired socialism that grew into a mass force. These start with the idea that workers in Spain were won over by the electrifying character of one of Bakunin's emissaries, Giuseppe Fanelli, who went to Spain in 1868 to spread the word of the International. Undoubtedly, the way in which Fanelli expressed himself, even though in Italian, was fundamental to convincing workers he met of the validity of the International's case and methods of organising. However, to attribute the following sixty years of development of the mass anarcho-syndicalist movement to one visit by one man is tenuous to say the least.

Secondly, not unrelated to the hot-blooded Latin thesis, is the idea that there was/is something peculiar and particular about Spain that accounts for anarchism's ready acceptance by some sectors of the Spanish working class. One commentator has stated of the Andalusians of southern Spain that:

"By temperament and psychology the Andalusian tends to the philosophical anarchy of Kropotkin; environment and experience tempt him to follow the violent path of Bakunin".

Linked to this idea is a view of the anarchism of the rural south, as a primitive, spontaneous, and largely unplanned movement, where it was expected that the revolution would come almost of its own accord, with transformation taking place virtually overnight. One academic captured the characteristics of a revolt in 1933 at Casas Viejas:

"The men cut the telephone lines, dug ditches across the roads, isolated the police barracks and then, secure from the outside world, put up the red-and-black flag of anarchy and set about dividing the

land".

The government troops inevitably counter-attacked and the rising was suppressed, and it has been suggested that this indicates a simplistic view of the revolutionary process. On the contrary, the movement in the south was certainly characterised by spontaneity, but this is far from indicating a lack of planning or some overblown optimism. It is the suggestion of this writer that no one could suffer the well-documented appalling conditions of rural Andalusia, and the oppression of successive military dictatorships, and remain simplistic and naïve about their politics.

A third set of theories are the economic ones of various historians who attribute the strength of anarchism in Catalan industry to the small unit structure of the Catalan firms and the resultant proximity of employer and employee. It is suggested that, as a result, the struggle retained a personal note. However, such explanations do not forward any analysis of the regional variations of anarchism within Andalusia, or of the possible reasons for the lack of anarchist implantation in the Basque region, for example, where industry was also small unit based.

Interestingly, there was contemporary debate on the issue. The Republican Catalanist paper "L'Opinió" contained various pieces from April to December 1928. For example, in an August issue, Andreu Nin, later a prominent member of the Marxist POUM, discussed the reasons advanced by his comrade Joaquín Maurín as to the importance of anarchism in Catalonia. Maurín had stated that this importance was due to two principal causes: 1) the invasion of non-qualified labour from the agrarian provinces; 2) the opportunistic nature of Spanish socialism. Nin accepts these but advances what was in his eyes a more important reason. For Nin, it was necessary to look at the politico-economic structure of Catalonia. Catalonia was not an industrialised country; it was mainly agrarian, and industry was concentrated in certain areas, and was technically backward. For Nin as a Marxist, therefore, Catalonia was primarily agrarian and therefore petit bourgeois. The lack of concentrated industry meant that the working class was not educated with the spirit of organisation and discipline. The floodgates were thus open to the predominance of petit bourgeois tendencies, and anarchism was viewed as an example of this. In reality, as we have seen, the Catalan workers

were rapidly and highly educated in politics, and they clearly made their choice when they shunned the Marxist political parties.

This leads us to the often-stated idea that anarchism succeeded primarily because Marxism and socialism within Spain were weak. Certainly, if the Spanish socialist movement had been stronger, had not been so poor in its leading lights, had not been so rigid in its interpretation of Marxism, it may have met with more success. But this assumes that Marxism has some divine right - it 'should' have been dominant, and this therefore gives much away about the standpoint of the historians who hold this view, but little about the actual reasons for the situations which occurred at the time. Even overlooking this, Marxism's lack of success in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries cannot be explained by lacklustre leaders alone.

A more likely explanation for the Marxists' poor showing in Catalonia was that they were wrong, and the people knew it. They made tactical errors, not least by their extreme emphasis on electoral politics, in a country used to totalitarianism, rigged 'democracy' and fallible, self-centred political leaders. Put bluntly, in a country where elections had been fraudulent for years, perhaps this was not the best tactic.

Turning to more positive ground, some historians have suggested that, rather than the failure of socialism being the prime cause for the massive influence of anarchism, in fact there were several reasons why the anarcho-syndicalists were able to build such a movement themselves.

Firstly, its direct action tactics and uncompromising revolutionism appealed to a proletariat that was already becoming radicalised by the insurgent activities of militant elements in the Federal movement, which briefly attempted to implement its ideas in the Republic of 1873-4. Both anarchism and federalism were anti-statist and profoundly moralistic, opposed to capitalism and aspiring to bring about the spiritual regeneration of the people.

Secondly, no one trusted leaders or political parties, and the anarchists shared this stance, as well as making direct contact with people through local workplace and community organisation. This meant they could be trusted.

Thirdly, anarchism also was able to offer a language of class identity, in a country where the working class was a wide group, in terms of interests, backgrounds and lifestyles. Anarcho-syndicalism

appealed to both industrialised factory workers and non-unionised rural labourers alike. Linked to this, was a crucial tenet of Spanish anarcho-syndicalism, now adopted in modern anarcho-syndicalism throughout the world today - the central importance of developing a 'culture of resistance'. Cultural aspects of Spanish anarcho-syndicalism undoubtedly played a major role in both cementing and broadening the movement, giving wider relevance to the revolutionary ideal, and ensuring that no-one was 'left out' of the process of building the new society within the shell of the old.

In summary, all political groups effectively disfranchised the workers of Spain for decades, until anarchism came on the scene. Parliamentarianism and the monarchy alike had persistently denied the workers access to the political process, then anarchism arrived, bypassed the electoral process altogether, and organised independently of it. No wonder they turned away from Marxism and socialism, which were still trying to attract the working class to the ballot box. Certainly, there were regional differences, for example, the lack of anarchist presence in the Basque Country (which may have been due to the more open nature of the Catholic Church there). However, one thing is certain; the appeal of anarcho-syndicalism was real, and it brought the most results where it was found to be immediately relevant to people's everyday lives and problems. On closer examination, anarcho-syndicalism, far from attracting the naïve, who if educated would have chosen Stalin's doctrine, was actually a highly complex formula, which could only have been developed by the combined efforts of thousands of like-minded people, all of who believed in the world they were striving to create.

Key points

- Anarchism came to dominate revolutionary ideas in Spain towards the end of the 19th Century.
- Culture and education were critical elements in building anarchist consciousness.
- The CNT suffered continued repression from its birth, in contrast to the socialist UGT.
- Many liberal and Marxist academics have tried to explain away the rise of anarcho-syndicalism in Spain as an aberration, but the facts indicate otherwise.

Checklist

1. What were the main components of the Spanish Regional Federation (FRE) and what was the main debate?
2. How did the anarchists spread their ideas to the workers and peasants?
3. What were the organisational principles that the CNT adhered to?
4. Why was the FAI formed in 1927?
5. What were the three phases of the Second Republic, 1931-36?

Answer suggestions

1. *What were the main components of the Spanish Regional Federation (FRE) and what was the main debate?*

There were three main categories of workers in the FRE. Firstly there were the reformist co-operatives, secondly the radical co-operatives and finally the apolitical and anti-political workers. The basic unit was the craft union and the main debate centred on whether or not the co-operatives would be enough to bring about a change in society.

2. *How did the anarchists spread their ideas to the workers and peasants?*

There was a strong social dimension to the work of the anarchists and later the CNT. They understood how important it was to build a libertarian working class culture. They did this through the creation of their own workers' centres, clubs, bars and cafes as well as the *ateneos*, the cultural-political centres. They also understood the importance of education in a country where a high proportion of the population were illiterate and the Catholic Church was dominant. The anarchists established schools and integral cultural centres.

3. *What were the organisational principles that the CNT adhered to?*

The CNT rejected centralisation and bureaucracy outright basing itself on local unions built into regional federations.

4. *Why was the FAI formed in 1927?*

During the late 1920s there was pressure from within the CNT to take a more moderate line to ease the pressure from the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera. The vast majority argued against this. As a response to this debate the FAI was formed with the task of keeping the CNT functioning on anarchist lines.

5. *What were the three phases of the Second Republic, 1931-36?*

From April 1931 to November 1933 were the "reform years". Then, after elections returned a right wing majority, there was a period of a right coalition that lasted until the Popular Front government that came to power in February 1936.

Suggested discussion points

- Why did anarchism take such deep inroads into the consciousness of the Spanish workers and peasants?
- Does an anarcho-syndicalist organisation need an specific anarchist group to keep it on a revolutionary path?

Further Reading

Murray Bookchin. The Spanish Anarchists. AK Press, 1998. ISBN 187317604X (Old edition, Harper and Row, New York, 1977, ISBN 0060 906073 may be available in libraries or s/h shops). -AK- -LI-

Has become a standard text on the build up to the Spanish revolution, Bookchin's later work largely descends into reformism and electoralism, but this remains a triumphant classic.

The Spanish Labyrinth. Gerald Brenan. Cambridge, 1943, repr. 1990. -BS- -LI-

A heavyweight academic text which constitutes a detailed and informative reference guide to Spanish libertarian history.

The Anarchists of Casas Viejas. Jerome R.Mintz. Indiana University Press, ISBN 0253 208548. -BS- -LI-

Based on personal narratives of survivors and family members of those involved in the Casas Viejas uprising in Andalusia, southern Spain. Decisively dispels the Marxist myth that the rural anarcho-syndicalists were backward or unpoliticised prior to 1936.

Libertarian Communism. Issac Puente. Monty Miller Press/Rebel Worker, pamphlet. £1.50. -AK-

Reproduction of the set of principles adopted by the historic CNT Congress in Zaragoza in May 1936.

Anarchists in the Spanish Revolution. José Peirats. Freedom Press, ISBN 0900 384530. £6. -AK- -BS-

At nearly 400 pages, this classic is a highly detailed and value for money history of the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist movement from 1868 to 1939. Written by a participant and CNT member, it deals frankly with the problems, challenges and mistakes in the Revolutionary period, as well as the collective movement and a chronology of key events.

Anarchist Ideology and the Working Class Movement in Spain. George Esenwein. Berkeley, 1989. -LI-

An academic narrative on the ideas and events in Spain.

Marxism and the Failure of Organised Socialism in Spain. Paul Heywood. Cambridge, 1990. -LI-

Academic analysis of why party politics failed and the CNT succeeded in Spain. Detailed and often esoteric.

Anarchists of Andalusia. Temma Kaplan. Princeton, 1977. -LI-

More academic narrative - this time specifically concentrates on the rural movement in the south.

Durruti 1896-1936. Active. ISBN 8486 864224. £9.95. -AK-

Photo album with commentary, 200 quality pictures of Durruti/Spain, captions in 5 languages.

Durruti: The People Armed. Abel Paz. Black Rose, ISBN 0919 61874X. £10.95. -AK-

An exhaustive biography of the crammed, uncompromising life of this icon of the Spanish Revolution, who was finally killed on the Madrid front in late 1936. Half a million people attended his funeral.

Notes:

Unusually for periods of revolutionary working class history, there are a number of relatively accessible books on Spain in the 1930s. This is a sample of some of the better ones. Please note, you may find useful sources on the topic of this Unit in the Further Reading sections of any or all of Units 13-18. The Further Reading outlined is not designed to be an exhaustive bibliography or a prescriptive list. It is designed to provide some pointers for the reader who is interested in taking the topics raised in this Unit further. In addition to the above, it is always worth consulting your local library for general history texts which do cover the period, although they invariably understate the level of working class organisation and activity. To assist Course Members, an indication is given alongside each reference as to how best to obtain it. The codes are as follows: --LI- try libraries (from local to university), -AK- available from AK Distribution (Course Member discount scheme applies if you order through SelfEd, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW), -BS- try good bookshops, -SE- ask SelfEd about loans or