

## BOOK REVIEW

ZOFFMANN RODRÍGUEZ, ARTURO. *The Spanish Anarchists and the Russian Revolution, 1917–24. Anguish and Enthusiasm.* [Routledge/Cañada Blanch Studies on Contemporary Spain, Vol. 30.] Routledge, London [etc.] 2024. vii, 247 pp. £135. (E-book: £35.99.)

This book is a penetrating analysis of the impact of the Russian Revolution on the anarcho-syndicalist and anarchist currents in Spain during 1917–1924. As the author demonstrates, it was the anarcho-syndicalists, far more numerous than Spain's anarchists in this period, who were the most enthusiastic supporters of the Russian revolutionary model. Indeed, as we are reminded in these pages, many anarchists were just as hostile to the Soviet régime as they were towards the syndicalist practices of the National Confederation of Labour (CNT), the 700,000-strong union that affiliated provisionally to the Comintern during 1919–1922, when it was the most numerous pro-Soviet force in Spain.

The book is neatly organized into four chapters. From the outset, the author sets the tone in several key respects: the incisive prose style, the rigorous use of primary and secondary sources and spanning archives in Russia, the US, Holland, the UK, Spain, France, and Italy. The extensive incorporation of press materials makes for a fully developed political analysis of these crucial years of Spanish history, which saw an attempted revolution in 1917 and the establishment of a military dictatorship in 1923, punctuated by the creation of two communist parties. Meanwhile, the judicious integration of autobiographical sources permits a strong sense of the lived experience of militants and revolutionaries.

Chapter One assesses the immediate impact of 1917 in Spain. The fallout of the unfolding crisis in the east, followed by October and the establishment of the Soviet order, is considered across of a range of social strata inside Spain. Of particular interest is analysis of the process of othering in elite discourse, the suggestion that traditional society was under siege and that new forms of containment were required to halt the threat of Bolshevik contagion. Passing comparisons are also made between Spain and Russia, which, at opposite ends of the continent, had much in common in 1917, with their politically repressive régimes, large numbers of revolutionary exiles, their predominantly agrarian economies with smaller pockets of industry, the evidence of national tensions, and so on. The chapter draws to a close with some perceptive observations about the period after 1917 being a “dress rehearsal” (pp. 27–28) for the 1936 Spanish revolution, which effectively closed the cycle of insurgency unleashed in Europe with the Russian Revolution.

Chapter Two, “Negotiating Bolshevism”, begins with an analysis of those press materials relating to Russia available to the Spanish populace after 1917. It becomes clear how different political parties, social groups, and organizations interpreted developments partially, according to their certainties and their immediate purposes.

Thus, with the CNT, the main revolutionary threat in the eyes of local elites, the bourgeois press often depicted October 1917 as an anarchist or anarcho-syndicalist uprising. Accordingly, at the high point of CNT strike mobilizations in early 1919, when Barcelona was effectively paralyzed by the unions, wild panics circulated in the conservative press about suspicious East European immigrants planning a Soviet-style revolution in the city. At one stage, it was even claimed Lenin was in Barcelona. Meanwhile, with the CNT soaring on a rising tide of revolutionary optimism, its main newspaper, *Solidaridad Obrera*, publicized the Soviet project widely, just as it provided an echo for new insurrectionary movements, such as the 1918 German Revolution. In contrast, the press of the socialist movement, whose reformist quietism was badly shaken by 1917, met Russian events with consternation and censorship. In this way, the two poles of the Spanish labour movement embodied the “anguish and enthusiasm” described by Victor Serge and which is the subtitle for this excellent study. These same terms also define the arc of the CNT in relation to the Soviet experiment during 1917–1924.

As mentioned, from early on, the radical anarcho-syndicalists – and a smaller number of anarchists – were overcome by a profound revolutionary enthusiasm. Some of their number publicly embraced proletarian dictatorship as a temporary vehicle for social transformation. In stark contrast to the traditional view that CNT militants did not really know what was happening inside Russia, Zoffmann argues with brio and forcefulness that they welcomed the revolution and, moreover, embraced certain aspects of Bolshevik political ideology, reflecting a clear softening of the divisions between libertarian and Marxist wings of the workers’ movement since the period of the First International. The CNT’s Russian fascination was, nevertheless, at least partially, mediated through their labour traditions – it was not uncommon for anarcho-syndicalists to maintain that their unions were sufficiently broad-based to render the Soviets superfluous in Spain.

One of these pro-Bolshevik militants, the Catalan Eusebi Carbó, proposed the first CNT delegation to Moscow in 1919, which is the focus of Chapter Three, “Three Missions”, an analysis of two outward trips by anarcho-syndicalist delegations to the Soviet Union (in 1920 and 1921, respectively) and the inward trip of Comintern emissaries (1919). The latter coincided with deep social ferment, widespread mobilization, and an insurgent spirit among urban and rural workers, all favouring the establishment of a communist organization. That this did not transpire was, in no small part, related to the manner in which the CNT had already encadred the most revolutionary sectors.

Important attention is devoted to the CNT’s historic 1919 Comedia Congress in Madrid, which saw a big debate on Russia. The author is to be congratulated for teasing out the logic of this important gathering. Whereas the more moderate, syndicalist factions were critical of the Soviet system, the radical anarcho-syndicalists favoured provisional affiliation to the recently created Third International. Meanwhile, another resolution affirmed support for Bakuninist libertarian communism. Unlike those historians who point to the apparent contradiction of these two positions, Zoffmann disentangles the complexities of the situation. For instance, he suggests that by drawing closer to the Comintern, the radical anarcho-syndicalists effectively stymied attempts by CNT moderates to develop closer links with the strongly

anti-Bolshevik socialist union, the UGT. This hostility to reformist social democracy trumped the ideological purity of the radicals. More generally, the affiliation to the Third International, like the Bakuninist stance of Congress, were both statements of the revolutionary fervour of the majority of delegates.

Another historical cliché exposed by the author is that “Marxists in syndicalist clothing” sought to hijack the CNT and tie the union to Bolshevism. Much of this simplified view, which is also tinged with Cold War hues, focuses on the second CNT delegation to Moscow, in 1921, which is mistakenly assumed to have been a priori pro-Soviet because it included two future communist leaders, Andreu Nin and Joaquín Maurín. The author demonstrates that the fascination with Russia came from below and reflected the revolutionary optimism of the most radical sectors within the CNT base. He also shows that these communist-inclined syndicalists protested to their Russian hosts about the treatment of local anarchists and adopted other, far from orthodox Bolshevik postures. Further evidence of this came a decade later, in 1931, when Maurín, who had long broken with the CNT and was widely regarded as a Marxist, greeted revolutionary turbulence in Spain by calling for the unions to take power, a posture that would suggest he had not entirely forgotten his syndicalist past.<sup>1</sup>

The fourth and final chapter maps the upsurge of anti-Bolshevism within the CNT base, culminating in the 1922 Zaragoza Conference, where it was decided to break with the Comintern, although it could also be argued that the existence of the small but influential anarcho-Bolshevik current within the CNT in the 1930s suggest this rupture was not total. To his credit, Zoffmann avoids simplistic assertions that now the “anarchist” CNT “saw the light”, preferring to approach the break with the Comintern with subtlety, factoring in the rising awareness of critical libertarian voices coming from Russia about Bolshevik repression, while demonstrating how this dovetailed with the ebbing of militancy inside Spain and the decline of hopes in an immediate revolution that had abounded during 1917–1919.

The brief concluding section – like the book as a whole – is firmly anchored in a careful analysis of Russian, Spanish, and broader European developments. In a welcome rejection of the view of Spanish exceptionalism, the local political crisis is integrated within a wider analysis of the European context. On a critical note, the author overplays the militarization of the CNT and the spread of armed “action groups” after 1921 (p. 168) – certainly, these groups became more prominent in certain cities, but, had armed struggle supplanted everyday union practices, as is suggested, it remains hard to see how the CNT could have retained its base, even if there was a degree of coercion. At the same time, as Enzo Traverso has shown, the rise of armed struggle conceptions of revolution was itself intimately linked to the Russian experience of 1917.<sup>2</sup> Yet, this does not demur from Zoffmann’s great accomplishment, which is to add to the outstanding journal articles and book chapters he has produced in recent years and to arrive at important and original conclusions about the relationship

<sup>1</sup>“¡Todo el poder al proletariado!”, *La Batalla*, 24, September 1931.

<sup>2</sup>Enzo Traverso, *Revolution: An Intellectual History* (New York 2021), pp. 402–403.

between the Spanish anarchist movement and the Russian Revolution, abjuring hoary myths and distortions along the way.

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