

Spain, 1936–1939 : Gravediggers of the Revolution

Diego Abad de Santillán

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Foreword

Diego Abad de Santillán was an anarchist who was prominent in the Federación Anarquista Ibérica (FAI) and the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT) before and during the Spanish Revolution.¹ He was a well-known writer and anarchist theorist, member of the regional committee of the CNT and of the editorial board of the anarchist journal *Tiempos Nuevos*. Santillán was also one of the organizers of the popular militias in Catalonia, and later one of the anarchists who participated as a minister in the Catalan government.

Abad de Santillán argued in favor of urging anarchists to break with their traditional stance against participating in state processes in order to vote for the left-wing parties in the February 1936 Spanish Republican elections. Along with the others who favored this tactic, he argued that the election of leftist politicians was important to fight for in order to achieve the liberation of thousands of anarchist political prisoners who had been arrested during the savage repression following the Asturias rising of October, 1934. Because of the concerted efforts of many anarchists, a large number of rank-and-file urban and rural workers indeed did vote for and elect a majority of leftist politicians in the February, 1936 elections. However, as Vernon Richards tells us in *Lessons of the Spanish Revolution* [Freedom Press, 1972], once the left-wing politicians were in office, they ignored the desires of the workers, who had to act in their own behalf. Most of the political prisoners were not released immediately, and many were only freed because the prisons were opened in response to massive popular demonstrations, before the central government authorized it.

Abad de Santillán later came to recognize that the February, 1936 change in government which he had worked for, had not substantially deprived the capitalist class, the church and the military of real power. And, even with the leftist politicians in office, the government continued to arrest anarchists. By the time of the July, 1936 revolution, the prisons were once again overflowing with anarchist prisoners.

After the successful resistance to the Francoist military rebellion, Abad de Santillán was among those anarchists who decided to participate in the local, provincial and national governments, alongside politicians from other leftist and liberal republican groups. Later he became critical of the anarchist decision to participate in the government after July 19 because he recognized that in doing so they had participated in the re-creation of the state institutions and the transfer of initiative from the armed populace who defeated the fascist rising to central bodies with executive powers. Santillán asserted that the anarchist office holders were no better than any others, and were not even able to protect the ordinary rural and urban working people against their economic and political exploiters. He strongly believed that this re-creation of hierarchy had had an adverse effect on the morale of the revolutionary fighters. He argued that the anarchists' participation in the government had served only to reinforce the ideology of the state.

The Spanish Revolution was also undermined by the policies of the western democratic, Soviet and Italian Fascist and German Nazi governments. Vernon Richards notes that between 1934 and 1938 the government of the Soviet Union was anxious to gain the support of the Western states, and was therefore concerned to prove to them that it had ceased to be "revolutionary" and would no longer support revolutionary movements in other countries. Because of this, the U.S.S.R. only supported the Spanish Republican government's fight against fascism reluctantly and moderately.

¹ Ms. Sylvie Kashdan has kindly communicated this document. R.C.

In order to reinforce the position of the Soviet Union the Spanish Communist Party allied itself with groups generally opposed to all forms of revolutionary change. It opposed expropriation of the landed estates and the factories by those who worked in them, and it was hostile to the popular militias.

Soon after July 19th, hundreds of anarchist and socialist anti-fascist exiles from Italy and Germany, and anti-Stalinist revolutionaries from all parts of the world, came to Spain to help fight the Francoists. They fought alongside of the Spanish resisters long before the International Brigades were organized and arrived in Spain at the end of 1936.

However, the Soviet Union clearly directed the assistance it gave to the Spanish Republic toward the International Brigades and the loyal regular Spanish army. It made sure that arms, equipment, and other assistance were withheld from the militias and regions dominated by anarchists. At the same time, it sent secret police agents to Spain to kidnap, imprison and murder known opponents of Stalinism, especially, as Richards notes, ex-Communists who “knew too much.” The Soviet government also aimed to destroy the anarchist revolutionary movement in Spain which had proved such a formidable barrier to the Spanish Communist Party’s attempts at political hegemony. These goals were far from secret, and were even published in various CP papers throughout the world. For example, on December 16, 1936, the Soviet party paper *Pravda* published an article which proclaimed, “As for Catalonia, the purging of the Trotskyists and the anarchosyndicalists has begun ; it will be conducted with the same energy with which it was conducted in the U.S.S.R.” At the same time, the Spanish Communist Party supported the re-constitution of a regular police force, political police, and a regular army to replace the militias.

Why We Lost the War

The formation of the International Brigades and their admission into Spain were claimed to be necessary to counterbalance the military forces and aid sent by the Italian Fascists and German Nazis. The main difference between the two kinds of military assistance was that the Italian and German aid was intended to gain military triumph for the Francoists, and was, through its quantity and quality, a decisive factor in this triumph. For the Republicans, on the other hand, the International Brigades were not effective except as an instrument of domination for the Communists. For the Republic, the famous Brigades were, unintentionally, a factor in the defeat, since they did the anti-popular work of the Russians and the Spanish government beholden to them — to the detriment of the popular insurgency.

There was one reality that we Spanish revolutionaries could not ignore : we were counting on the active support of many workers and rebels from all countries who wanted to come and fight alongside us, for our cause, which was the universal cause of freedom against tyranny. We could not deny their desire to fight and die with us. Many Italians, Germans, French and people from other countries fought alongside us on the Aragon front from the very beginning.

But this kind of support was one thing, and the political intentions of those who created the International Brigades, with recruits from various countries, was something else. Despite the good intentions of some of the recruits who came to Spain, there were others, unemployed workers, who were won over by the attractive promises of recruiting propaganda. They came to Spain, not to die in the war, but to make a living in it, like old-time mercenary soldiers. The initiators

and highest-level leaders of the International Brigades, on the other hand, clearly understood the purpose for which they were formed.

In truth, the Republican government did not enjoy popular support, either in the Center, in Catalonia, the Levante, or Extremadura. The Russians shrewdly understood that the government would be unable to govern unless it were seen to be serving the people, by responding to their demands and aspirations. But they deemed it necessary to slow down the Spanish masses, to discipline them, to subjugate them to a strong central power — to change the Spanish temperament and soul. The people were heroically struggling against the Francoist military rebellion, but they were not a docile instrument in the hands of the government or the War Ministry bureaucracy.

In order to have a primary means of domination at its disposal, the central government, aided by the diplomatic machinations of the Russian government, admitted the so-called International Brigades into the country. The odious pretext given was that the popular militias did not know how to fight and were not obedient. In reality, they didn't obey those they weren't obliged to obey !

The militias did know how to fight, and they followed orders as well as the International Brigades. The only difference between the two was that the International Brigades were receiving modern, effective arms and equipment, while the popular militias were usually barefoot, with primitive weapons, and in most cases without ammunition. They were plagued by the ongoing sabotage of the centralized Republican bureaucracy.

We [of the CNT/FAI] opposed the formation of the International Brigades and ordered the border delegates not to let their volunteers cross the border from France. Then, we were visited by individuals, such as André Marty, who entered Spain secretly under Russian protection, to convince us to grant passage through Catalonia for those men who wanted to fight with us. We maintained that we had plenty of men, that instead of bringing these brigades into Spain, they should be helping us with arms and ammunition. We considered it an injustice and a crime that our militias, with all their bravery and spirit, should be unarmed, while large foreign units were given every necessity and treated well. We took over a thousand of those volunteers prisoner and escorted them back over the Spanish-French border. They then proceeded to French ports, where they took ships to Spanish ports controlled by the Republican government.

On one occasion one of our coast guard ships, the Francisco, detained a cargo of arms intended for the International Brigades. When it was unloaded in Barcelona, we found that the cargo consisted of worn-out pre-World War One equipment, purchased by the Spanish central government without concern for price. It was of such poor quality that we had no objections to handing it over when we were asked to. The enterprising Frenchmen involved in organizing the International Brigades evidently did a fine business with the government of the Republic.

Due to clever manipulation of the situation by the Russian government, we had to give up leadership of the Catalanian militias. As a consequence, the so-called volunteers then passed without hindrance through Catalonia.

We still did not have any clear notion of the danger these brigades posed as instruments of the central government. We feel sure that those of the rank-and-file fighters who were not simply adventurers would not have volunteered for the game that was being played ; they didn't realize that the brigades were required, not for the war effort, but only for the treacherous party policy of aspirants to dictatorship. For this a docile military force was needed, since the Spanish people were persistently showing themselves to be independent adults.

Afterwards, and when their mission was completed, we expressed our opinion to many of the International Brigade fighters, and they readily agreed that we were correct. But it was too late to repair the disastrous work they had unwittingly accomplished.

We will not discuss here the secret prisons or the freely-perpetrated assassinations of volunteers who were not loyal Stalinists. It seems that the Machiavellian Russians calculated that, in the context of the warm sympathy generated by the Spanish revolution, they could use the International Brigades against Trotskyists, anarchists, independent socialists and other adversaries who were attracted to the Brigades. In part, they calculated correctly.

We don't know how many joined the Brigades. There were perhaps between twenty and twenty-five thousand. But the truth is that within a few months, and as early as Indalecio Prieto's tenure as Minister of War, the majority of International Brigade fighters were Spaniards who were required to serve in them under the command of Communists from Russia and elsewhere. The ranks of these brigades were more often thinned out by desertion than by enemy fire, and were replenished by Spanish draftees.

In our opinion, there was never more opposition on the part of the people, nor were they less able to influence the war policy, than in the formation of the International Brigades and, later, in the creation of the swaggering carabinieri.

Afterword

Approximately 40,000 men from all over the world fought in the International Brigades. About one-third were killed, and many were permanently injured. Unfortunately, political repression of those who expressed criticism of Stalinism was a reality of daily life in the brigades. Jason Gurney, in *Crusade in Spain* [Faber & Faber, Ltd., London, 1974], who discusses the International Brigades from the point of view of the British volunteers, notes that André Marty, chief political commissar of the International Brigades, and a member of the Central Committee of the French Communist Party, admitted to having ordered the execution of 500 men belonging to the brigades for little or no reason except their political views. Gurney discusses some of the many decisions which were made by the brigade leaders for political reasons, with little regard for the disasters these caused.

Cecil Eby, in *Between the Bullet and the Lie : American volunteers in the Spanish Civil War* [Holt Reinhart & Winston, New York, 1969], discusses the desertions from the International Brigades which occurred from their inception and throughout their entire existence. The brigades were far from well trained, and were often not well equipped. Nevertheless, they had an authoritarian military officer structure, including political commissars for each battalion, and, despite populist rhetoric, discipline was often enforced harshly. Many volunteers felt this to be both inappropriate and wrong treatment for people who had freely chosen to come to fight. The political commissars were also often resented by volunteers from the Western countries, such as the U.S., Britain and France, who didn't want indoctrination, but information and discussion. Desertions and poor morale were due primarily to volunteers' growing distrust of the brigades' political and military hierarchy and resentment of the arbitrary (and, some felt, incompetent) behavior of the officers.

By the end of February, 1937, Eby tells us, the French consul at Valencia had supervised the evacuation of 400 French deserters aboard French war ships. However, when the French government closed the border on March 3, 1937, the Spanish Republican authorities arrested 60

more French deserters in Valencia and returned them to Brigade headquarters for imprisonment and punishment. Although many volunteers felt that, since they had come of their own accord, they should be allowed to leave when they chose, they were generally treated no different than draftees once in the brigades. However, once the Spanish government put an end to the rescue of volunteers by their home countries, desertion rates in the brigades were somewhat decreased, although never eliminated.

For more information on the International Brigades from a variety of perspectives, readers might also want to check Philip Toynbee [editor], *The Distant Drum : Reflections on the Spanish Civil War* [David McKay Company, Inc., New York, 1976].

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