

SUMMER 1936: WHY DID WE FAIL TO TAKE ZARAGOZA?

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As we approach the 60th anniversary of the international civil war in Spain (1936-1939), many of the essential aspects of the conflict are now clearly defined. Yet there is still a rather obscure period, essentially the time occupied by the initial phase of the war, between July and November 1936. It had two telling features: the republicans' inability to capture even one of the three major cities of Aragon and the resounding failure of Franco's push against Madrid. These setbacks were to have a substantial impact upon the prolonging of the war on Iberian soil. Today we shall try to unravel the reasons why Zaragoza was not captured either in August or in October 1936, when on both occasions the essential conditions for successful capture were in place.

The overall impression of the Spanish war, or its beginnings at any rate, is that amateurism prevailed. To some extent, it seems reasonable that this should have been so on the republican side. But there is nothing logical about its obtaining in rebel ranks, not just because of their professionalism — they were professional military men — but also because of where the initiative for the organising of the military revolt came from. It was a venture of incalculable socio-political implications that would split the country into two irreconcilable camps and its chief impact was to make the ordinary populace the principal casualties of the fighting, during the war as well as after it had ended.

PERIOD OF HESITANCY

Even though there was more than enough intelligence available to suggest that a revolt was imminent, the fact is that the republican leadership was caught napping by the eruption of it and by the ruthless repression that was its immediate aftermath. Only in Catalonia — with its home rule government, the presence of sizable numbers of armed anarcho-syndicalists and the determined intervention of a handful of servicemen committed to the Republic (Vicente Guarner, Federico Escofet and J M España, in particular) — was there a prompt response and from the outset the decks were cleared. And even though the Generalidad government was sidelined by the actions of revolutionary groups, state and para-state structures survived the crushing of that revolt pretty much intact. Feeding the prospect that, the revolt having been snuffed out, it would be the revolution's turn next. Despite the collectivisations, the socialisations and other supposedly revolutionary measures and the creation of a new brand of organism unmistakably hell bent on a fresh approach, we would do well to remember Saint-Just's dictum: "A revolution that stops half way is tantamount to revolutionaries' digging their own graves." So, as the columns of militias from Catalonia headed off to Aragon, they were leaving behind them a number of conditions thwarting the handiwork of those whose view was that the war was a means rather than an end. The events of May 1937 were already in the making.



The anarcho-syndicalist Durruti Column, with Colonel Pérez Farrás as its military advisor, set off from Barcelona on 23 July 1936, with something over two thousand men. Bringing up the rear of the caravan of lorries and buses were three light artillery batteries under the command of Major Fernando Claudín. Bujaraloz was overrun on 2 August and Buenaventura Durruti set up his command post there. Later the column pushed on towards the river Ebro, occupying Pina and Osera and coming to within 20-25 kilometers of Zaragoza itself. Except for a some minor skirmishing around Bujaraloz, other places were overrun without a fight.

Which leaves the question of the column's "stopping short" once it had passed Bujaraloz, and until very recently two major explanations have been offered for this: 1) the column was stopped by the Ebro river and 2) an order was issued by the Central Antifascist Militias Committee in Barcelona to the effect that it halt its advance and wait for the Ortiz Column (south of the river Ebro) to overrun Belchite and Quinto. Well, a simple glance at the



map will suffice to show that the Ebro runs parallel to the Lérida-to-Zaragoza highway and that there was no obstacle to access into Zaragoza except for the very gates of the city. Although we should point out that in late October the three bridges spanning the river (the Santiago, de Piedra and El Pilar bridges), located in the north of the city, were still intact and un-mined. So an effort to at least sever the Zaragoza-Huesca highway was feasible and that would have been of great service to the columns which were pressing on towards Huesca, under Colonel Villalba's command, columns bogged down in tough fighting in Siétamo. As for the second

theory, we have not been able to find any trace of any such order emanating from the Antifascist Militias Committee. But, even it did exist, it could only have been issued after further intelligence had come in from the operational zone to prompt that decision. On the other hand, the Ortiz Column was soon stalled outside Belchite and, to the north, republican forces were soon very close to the town and in sight of its asylum and cemetery. With their left flank protected by the river Ebro — which the enemy would have to cross if he wanted to harry the Durruti Column — how come republican forces did not then press on with their march on Zaragoza?

FROM BARCELONA TO ZARAGOZA, A WALK IN THE PARK, MILITARILY?

Judging from the evidence from old militants and some professional soldiers (a high-ranking artillery commander among them) who witnessed things at first hand, the actual answer to that question is the “bombing” undergone by the Durruti Column at the hands of three planes whose crews dropped a number of 5- and 10-kilo timed bombs on it. The inexperience and indiscipline of the expeditionary force resulted in widespread panic. One eye-witness to this — C.B.V. — has assured us: “There was nobody left in Bujaroloz save Durruti and a hundred militant die-hards who took several days to round up the scattered forces.” At around this time (early August 1936), Durruti reported that “Zaragoza is effectively in his grasp and victory is certain and imminent” and he explained that, whilst he had yet to actually enter the city, this was because “he is waiting for the columns operating on his flanks to move a little further up.” The fact is that there were too many folk in the Durruti Column who had not had any hand, act or part in the crushing of the rebels in Barcelona and who regarded the conquest of Aragon as a military cakewalk. The needs of the revolution probably held lots of tried and tested militants in Barcelona, when their presence on the front might have been priceless.

The Ortiz Column, with infantry Colonel Fernando Salavera as its military advisor, would set off from Barcelona on 24 July, also by road, with some 2,000 men, a fair number of whom were ex-soldiers and NCOs from the 34th Regiment. Its first target, Caspe, was controlled by a company of Civil Guard and about 200 Aragonese Falangists under Captain Negrete. After overcoming the enemy's dogged resistance, the militiamen, who lost some 250 of their comrades, overran the town and pressed on in the direction of Alcañiz which was captured after some brief fighting. At which point the column split up: one part held the Híjar-to-Escatrón line and the rest headed for Belchite, digging in outside that town after occupying Sástago, La Zaïda and Azaila. In early September, the Ortiz unit was joined by a small column, the Carod-Ferrer Column which had just captured Goya's birthplace, Fuendetodos, and dug in outside of Villanueva de Huelva. Saturnino Carod Lerín, a native of Aragon, was a prominent anarcho-syndicalist trade union leader in Barcelona, whilst his “military advisor” was Civil Guard lieutenant José Ferrer Bonet.

DREAM TIME

It must have been obvious to labour militants, unless they were wanting in terms of revolutionary realism, that from government circles — central or home rule government circles — aid would be forthcoming only to the extent that “the floodwaters retreated.” It was the same story nationally and internationally. The so-called democratic powers — democrats governing but with capitalism calling the shots — would not help Spanish republicans, being of the view that they were damaging their interests in the peninsula and, on like grounds, the central and Catalan governments would abandon Aragon to its fate on the basis that revolutionary experiments there were going too far. All of this (and more) was predictable because it was (and is), as the old saying has it “in the nature of things.” So it seems redundant to state that, in order to forge head in their two-



pronged war-plus-revolutionary endeavours, Iberia's revolutionaries — and anarcho-syndicalists in particular — should have been looking only to their own resources, which were considerable, especially in the knowledge that virtually the entirety of the people of Aragon were on their side. Major Vicente Guarner, in one of his books, bears this out: "The intelligence acquired by the Durruti Column (he means the intelligence it supplied after gathering it from the mouths of CNT militants escaping from Zaragoza) was very useful. On virtually a nightly basis, workers were leaving Zaragoza and armed militians entering the city which they knew well and thus they reported back to us on the mobilisation of the classes of 1931 through to 1935, the arrival in the Aragonese capital from 25 July onwards of between 2,000 and 2,500 requetés from Navarra under the command of trained officers, some of whom had been trained in Italy."¹

In view of the ease with which Zaragoza could be entered and left and of the organisational intelligence received (despite the harsh crackdown of the first few days, the CNT and the FAI were reorganising), the notion of organising an operation to take the city of Zaragoza from within and from without started to germinate in the minds of the top responsables (commanders) of the libertarian columns. As well as the operation's being mounted without any non-CNT involvement. Thus, had that operation been a success, the hope was that they would be better heeded by government circles in Barcelona and Madrid. But within the CNT itself, the proliferation of committees led to great time-wasting, since, what with the more battle-hardened, shrewd and reliable militants being tied up with these, it seemed there was no way of dispensing with the input from the National Committee, the regional committees for Catalonia and for Aragon-Rioja-Navarra, the Peninsular Committee of the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI) and, from time to time, the Libertarian Youth. Nor, of course, from a number of comrades (whose contribution might prove crucial at a given point) holding down posts in a range of Catalan government bodies or on the Central Antifascist Militias Committee. At the time too, there was a lot of enthusiasm for launching a guerrilla war behind the enemy lines: "One day, García Oliver spelled out a scheme for taking to the Andalusian sierras with several thousands of comrades" — Diego Abad de Santillán recounts. "And we associated this initiative with our wish to drive into Navarra. Each of us would take charge of an expedition: exposing ourselves and gambling our very lives.

The matter was put to the War Ministry. Prieto was enthused by the idea and agreeable to its being implemented immediately. We set about training the men who would be going with us .. but the orders do not always come from the men in charge. Above Prieto, the minister of War, were Russian advisors and in their eyes we might pose a danger. And after we had already embarked upon lots of work targeting the Francoist zone, through skilful and daring emissaries, the thing was dropped."²

There is another question floating in the air: How come the CNT and FAI personnel did not, off their own bat and at their own risk and come hell or high water exploit their ability to mobilise people? Especially when regions as revolutionary as Galicia, Extremadura and western Andalusia were now behind the enemy's lines?

Particularly since the indications are that they refused to give up on their ambitious plan to capture Zaragoza.

OPERATION 'FREE COMMUNE': THE TAKING OF ZARAGOZA



Saturnino Carod

There are still enough survivors around for us to be able to outline the preparatory phases of a military operation hatched in the minds and hearts of a handful of peace-lovers whom a freak of History had forced to turn into men of war. One of the most comprehensive testimonials, and the one that has inspired this article, comes from Saturnino Carod, the commander of, first, a column and then, after militarisation of the militias, political commissar with the Popular Army's 118th Mixed Brigade. The commander of the 118th was none other than Cristoriano Castán, a Zaragoza painter who would prove to be a real military genius, the brains behind "Operation Free Commune" — the primary object of which was the capture of Zaragoza: he was the "expert consultant" to the man at the top, Antonio Ortiz. The same Ortiz would go on to command the 25th Division and was, at the time in question, in charge of the South-Ebro Column. All three men were of the libertarian persuasion. "The fact is that our comrade Abad de Santillán" — Carod stated to us. "had led a delegation that travelled up to Madrid to secure aid from the central government, coming away with nothing but promises.

Along with Díaz Sandino, we paid a visit to the president of the Republic, Manuel Azaña, in the former royal palace in Madrid. It was during the days of panic following the disasters in Talavera .. We set out our situation in Catalonia and our urgent requirements and we filled him in on our talks with Giral and the welcome

we thought that our overtures had received. We asked Azaña to intervene personally lest the promises that had been made to us come to nothing. Azaña told us that he was virtually a prisoner, that the Constitution did not allow him the slightest intervention and that his role was to let the talking be done by those who were the lawful government, with the backing of the parties or the Parliament. We pressed him to cash in on the prestige that he enjoyed within and outside Spain. His silence and passivity, hiding behind the Constitution or not, was tantamount to criminality given the times we were going through and his attitude of folding his arms in the face of tragedy could never be countenanced. In the course of the conversation we got the impression that the man had no sympathy with fascism, but that he had even less with revolution and with the people's taking a direct hand in public life, unless they respected the barriers put in place by the republican micro-parties that came into existence with the advent of the Republic. With men like Azaña around, fascist plotting was inevitable and loss of the war a foregone conclusion.”³

“So, being fed up with promises” — Carod notes — “we made ready to shift for ourselves. One of the first moves we made was to select responsables (commanders) capable of showing initiative and of keeping mum about what was being planned.” One of the young libertarians mustered at the Cañar de Azaila camp — Enrique Casañas Piera — has told us: “There we learnt how to move silently and to operate at night: to keep talk to a minimum and not to smoke, to scatter in the event of danger and to re-group. We knew nothing as to where our posting would be, although we imagined that it might have something to do with Zaragoza and we hadn't the slightest contact with folk outside the camp over the four or five weeks we were mustered there.”

Further evidence of the precautionary measures taken around “Operation Free Commune” comes in the shape of the conditions in which the propaganda side of the operation were fleshed out. We have it from one of the chief protagonists, Manuel Salas aka ‘*Salicas*’, who was in charge of the libertarian publication *Cultura y Acción*: “It was anticipated that thousands of leaflets of various sizes, colours and texts would be printed up. Plus posters and pennants. We had all of this ready to go as and when we were told. Most of the leaflets were shipped to the “People's Air Force” in Sarineña, where we were assured of the cooperation of one of the pilots of the plane that flew daily to Barcelona. The leaflets would be dropped from that plane over Zaragoza. And at around that time I was working in a print-shop in Alcañiz, where we carried out work for all the columns. The firm had been collectivised, but the owner had stayed on as a “technician”. So, to provide against any unwitting slip of the tongue, I decided to banish him from the print-shop for the duration of ‘Operation Free Commune’ and the best that I could come up with was to have him arrested by the militias watch agency as a suspect and held in Alcaniz jail until such time as we might complete the ‘hush-hush’ work. It was a lousy thing to do, I'll grant you, and later I had to make my apologies, but the truth is that every precaution we took was little enough. A single indiscretion might have cost us hundreds or even thousands of lives and thwarted the operation.”

JIGGERY-POKERY BY FIFTH COLUMN SPIES

Carod can recall the names of the comrades to whom the five centurias (each made up of five 20-man teams) due to operate inside Zaragoza were entrusted: Batista Albesa (from Valderrobles/Teruel), Agustín Remiro (from Épila/Zaragoza), plus Melendo, Ramón and Logroño, all from Zaragoza. The first two men in particular — Carod tells us admiringly — were exceptional. Dressed as a Falangist, Batista managed to get as far as Salamanca and on another occasion, in a Foreign Legion uniform, got as far as Burgos. He and Remiro one day brought me several snapshots showing them in Falangist garb with some ‘*Margaritas*’ from the Zaragoza Falange. Through connections he had established in Zaragoza, as a supposed Falange member, Batista successfully connected with a fifth columnist group in Barcelona that used to meet in the Hotel Colón in the Plaza de Cataluña, the then headquarters of the Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya (PSUC)/Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia. I was the one who passed this information on to García Oliver who forwarded it to comrade Escorza — a collaborator of police chief Eroles — who orchestrated the raid that captured, among others, the Falangist Luys Santamaría and a cousin of his. Most of those arrested held PSUC party cards. Many years later, at a get-together at the ‘Trascacho’, a soiree for Ángel Pestaña, along with Casasús, Calvo and Salicas, I had occasion to mention the “incident” to Santamaría who was also present with one of the Vila San-Juan brothers. What I mean to say is, we had people of courage.”

PLANNING DAYS

“Along with Durruti” — Carod went on — “and with Ortiz, we had a number of meetings in the wooden hut that served as his command post on the outskirts of Bujaraloz. He always refused to have his arm twisted. He

was busy being Zaragoza's 'liberator' and even though he gave the go-ahead at the eleventh hour, when it came to the preparations for the operation, Durruti reserved his final answer until he could see every detail of the operation, taking it for granted that the major role would be set aside for himself." In the book already cited, Abad de Santillán had pointed out to Durruti "that the position he had held (and which made it incumbent upon him to mount a frontal attack if he wanted to close on Zaragoza) was not at all suited to the capture of Zaragoza and that, having been the first to set out from Barcelona, he was doomed to be the last man into the sought after city, where so many friends of ours had been massacred and whom he had intended to avenge."⁴ "Not only that", Carod adds, "but Durruti had dreams of crossing Navarra and linking up with the Basque Country and then going on to liberate his own home ground, Leon, after which he was considering splitting his column in two and pressing on in the direction of Asturias and Galicia."



Antonio Ortiz

Durruti never missed an opportunity to air his plans: "I'll be the first into Zaragoza and will proclaim a free commune there. We will not kowtow either to Madrid or to Barcelona, to Azaña or to Giral, to Companys or to Casanovas. If they wish, they can live in peace with us: if they don't, we shall set up shop in Madrid ..", the leader of the anarcho-syndicalist column was to tell the special envoy from Moscow's Pravda. And, addressing another column commander who happened to be present, the communist Manuel Trueba, he challenged him: "Help if you want; or, if you don't want to, don't help. The Zaragoza operation is mine in military, political and politico-military terms. I am answerable for it. Do you think that we are about to share Zaragoza with you in return for your providing us with a thousand men? Zaragoza will have either libertarian communism or fascism. Help yourselves to the whole of Spain, but leave me in peace with Zaragoza!"⁵

DAYS OF HOPE



Buenaventura Durruti

Despite the systematic repression endured by the libertarian membership in Zaragoza — the second largest CNT stronghold in the country — at the outset of the war, the surviving members of Spain's premier trade union organisation had managed to build up some highly effective clandestine groups. Thanks to these reliable and regular intelligence was available regarding the situation in the Aragonese capital. Besides, the libertarian columns' ranks held plenty of Zaragoza-born fighters who knew the city like the back of their hands. Especially the working class districts where they might find shelter and aid. On this basis, the operation's organisers were prompted to provide for a synchronised attack from without, mounted by ten *centurias* (1,000 men) plus an uprising from within spearheaded by five *centurias* under the command of Batista, Remiro, Logroño, Ramón and Melendo, which were to strike from the El Arrabal, Las Delicias, Buenavista, Torrero

and San José *barrios*. The specific targets were: the town hall, the telephone HQ, the telegraphs HQ, the Palafox barracks, the Falange barracks (at the Frontón Aragonés), the (Madrid and Utrillas) train stations, the military government, the Avenida de Palafox petroleum depot, the powder store (in the Gran Vía at the Iglesia Casas Baratas), the civil government, Radio Zaragoza (operating from El Coso) and the Hotel Universal where high ranking enemy servicemen were in residence. It should be pointed out that in each of these targets there were personnel ready to work in concert with the attackers. Each of the inner city *centurias* was to detach two teams (i.e. 200 men in total) well equipped with hand grenades, to take up strategic positions and attack every sort of military vehicle, official cars and anything else they suspected might interfere with the smooth progress of the operation. The point was to sow as much confusion and uncertainty as possible along the Zaragoza's main arteries.



Stage one was to infiltrate the aforementioned working class *barrios* under cover of night, where they would lie low for a day until Zero Hour which would be set for the following dusk. The primary objectives were: The Madrid, Teruel, Castellón and Barcelona highways were to be occupied by forward teams from the *centurias* attacking from the south and their march would be centred on the Fuendetodos-Jaulín-Zaragoza highway. Command of the *centurias* outside the city fell to Carod who spoke to us of the permeability of the sector picked: "Days earlier, to feel out the ground, we made a few sallies out towards Jaulín and Valmadrid and looted the enemy while he slept. So

much so that we captured two of his artillery pieces intact. Castán, who had earned his spurs at Ortiz's side over many nights would overrun La Muela (on the Madrid highway) with his two centurias by way of a build-up to the operation so as to block any possible enemy reinforcements from the Guadalajara direction and would monitor the Zaragoza-to-Logroño highway, lest anyone hinder enemy forces' withdrawal from the Aragonese capital, should they decide to fall back."⁶

Pride of place in the revolutionaries' logistics (which kicked off with the mission entrusted to Manuel Salas aka *Salicas* was accorded to the immediate commandeering of buildings and the putting up of ready made posters destined for the CNT unions, the Local Trade Union Federation and the CNT's regional committee for Aragon, Rioja and Navarra, as well as the Libertarian Youth. A provisional town council had been formed, chaired by the veteran anarchist militant Antonio Ejarque Pina. The local military commander, with Castán as his advisor, would be Juan García Oliver. It had yet to be determined who would take up the post of civil governor, a post the CNT was considering offering to a member of Izquierda Republicana (Republican Left). With Batista and some of his best along, it was for Garcia Oliver to occupy Radio Zaragoza and proclaim the liberation of the city to all and sundry.

DURRUTI'S ABSENCE, A DECISIVE FACTOR



Juan García Oliver

Once all of the preparations were in place and just as they were about to fix the date and hour for "Operation Free Commune", Carod, at his Azuara command post, received a phone call from Ortiz announcing that the "grand outing" had been put back.

It took some hours for García Oliver to arrive at Sarineña airfield and Carod was one of the party there to greet him. Fresh fro the plane and after he had been told of the delay, García Oliver broke out cursing and swearing and threw a real tantrum, each curse more violent than the one before it, as he made no bones about his feelings of outrage and about his mind's being made up to head back to Barcelona immediately "to demand an explanation from these inept folk who govern over us and to sort more than one of them out." Carod admitted to us that at the sight of this fit of fury, he thought the news of the postponement must have come as news to the recently arrived Oliver. Now, a few days later, having reassessed what he could recall of that dizzying civil war period, Carod had his suspicions that maybe García Oliver had been in the know and had travelled up to Sarineña to defuse the unrest among the fighting men in time. Thereby ushering in a period of waiting that would never come to an end, in that the operation was not so much postponed as dropped "by the upper echelons of the Confederation." The suspicion that there had been a "leak" was widely held, as was the resultant suspicion that the pressures that had thwarted the operation had come from much higher up, from quarters outside of the CNT. Antonio Ortiz and Juan García Oliver are still alive in South America and may some day be able to produce the pieces seemingly missing from the jigsaw making up the "Operation Free Commune" puzzle.

When I tackled friend Carod about what the chances had actually been of capturing Zaragoza, the old labour bruiser answered: "Fifty-fifty, pretty good odds for any military commander, especially if command is vested in people who regard themselves as revolutionaries."

Days later, at the head of eight hundred men from his column, Buenaventura Durruti set off for the Madrid front where he was to perish in very unclear circumstances. And Juan García Oliver went on to take up one of the four ministries — Justice in this instance — offered by the socialist Largo Caballero and accepted by the CNT and the FAI.

So, until such time as we come by further information, we might very well close today with the words once uttered by the general; secretary of the regional committee of Aragon, Rioja and Navarra, when he declared that "Operation Free Commune had been postponed until such time as Durruti might return from Madrid, because the most important battles in History are always won by the biggest generals and thus, the battle for Zaragoza needed to be won by the finest general the CNT possessed, Buenaventura Durruti."

NOTES

¹ *Cataluña en la guerra civil, Memorias de la guerra civil española 1936-1939*, Ediciones Gregorio del Toro, Madrid 1975.

² *¿Por qué perdimos la guerra? Memorias la guerra civil española 1936-1939*, Ediciones Gregorio del Toro, Madrid 1975.

³ ¿Por que perdimos a guerra? (op.cit.)

⁴ ¿Por qué perdimos la guerra? (op.cit.)

⁵ *Diario de la guerra de España*, Mikhail Koltsov (España contemporánea), Ediciones Ruedo Ibérico, Paris 1963.

⁶ In putting together a book (*Republicanos españoles en la Segunda guerra mundial*, Editorial Planeta, Barcelona 1975) the author had occasion, among other things, to handle the plans drawn up by the Inter-Allied High Command in London during the 1939-1940 campaign for the invasion of Norway. Well, it can be stated that “Operation Free Commune”, covering the capture of Zaragoza, was better prepared than the plan for northern Norway where, among other shortcomings, mountain troops found, upon coming ashore, that they had neither snowshoes nor protective goggles.”