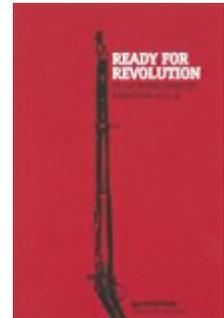




Agustin Guillamon. *Ready for Revolution: The CNT Defense Committees in Barcelona, 1933-1938.* Translated by Paul Sharkey. Oakland: AK Press, 2014. 260 pp. \$14.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-84935-142-3.



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A vast literature on the Spanish Revolution already exists, and one tends to think that everything about it has been written previously. This is just not true! Agustín Guillamón brings us new proof of how rich and complex this episode of history is and how full of contemporary relevance it remains. The author is an independent historian, who has already written several books on the period.[1] Based on extensive archival research, Guillamón views these events from the side of the radicals. His previous books are centered on the autonomous activity of workers; in other words, the actions taken by workers independently of the organizations which claimed to represent them. In particular, he analyzes the actions, tactics, and strategies of the large institutionalized organizations from the perspective of the rank and file.

In *Ready for Revolution: The CNT Defense Committees in Barcelona, 1933-1938*, Guillamón revisits the Spanish Revolution. The Defense Committees were rank-and-file organizations created by members of the anarcho-syndicalist union Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT), which

was by far the dominant union force in Barcelona in the 1930s. If the Defense Committees were tied to the union locals of the CNT, they were also independent of the CNT affiliate, the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI). Guillamón describes the revolutionary process through the life of these committees, their debates, hesitations, decisions, and actions. He begins with the formation of the Defense Committees.

After the failure of the 1933 insurrection, the CNT was both disorganized and greatly diminished in size and effectiveness. Massive state repression had sent its most active militants to prison. During the Asturias working-class insurrection of 1934, the CNT was unable to take part in its stronghold in Barcelona. In the beginning, the debate in the Defense Committees focused on the question of armed direct action in order to counteract underworld assassins who targeted union activists at the behest of individual employers and employer associations. These committees later became local rank-and-file organizations, based in the politically and socially vibrant work-

ing-class districts of Barcelona.[2] Guillamón recounts the internal debates within the Defense Committees as they quickly enlarged their fields of activity from self-defense to include other aspects of the social movement.

What is particularly pertinent in Guillamón's work is the insistence he places on the gap which existed between the political positions of these committees and the strategies of the majority of the anarchist leaders. Even before the participation of the anarchist leaders in the Republican government, a clear separation existed between the rank and file and the top echelons of the anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist movement, the so-called Higher Committees of the CNT-FAI. The CNT was far from being a monolithic organization, as is poignantly described by Guillamón. Its leadership was not unified, members did not necessarily follow or accept decisions made by its leadership council, and a variety of ideologies, strategies, and tactics were pursued simultaneously. It was precisely this great diversity of ideas and actions that made the CNT so vibrant and powerful. One can say that there was not one CNT, but several CNTs. That being said, specific ideologies and tactics came to the fore, especially during moments of crisis, often accompanied by fierce resistance and controversy. The pattern of leadership-imposed resolutions and the opposition to them was especially evident in the decision to participate in the post-July 1936 national government, and later on, in the conciliatory attitude adopted during the May 1937 events.

Guillamón also shows how, even before the July 1936 military revolt, military questions and the role of violent action were essential to the debates inside the Defense Committees. In response to the military coup, these questions immediately became topical. Guillamón provides a detailed and precise account of this development, especially the suddenness with which such decisions were made. What comes to the fore is the initiative and creativity of the rank-and-file CNT workers who

embraced an outright fight against the military. The Defense Committees had been preparing for such a situation, but ultimately things did not happen as hoped. In any case, it was their experience making autonomous decisions rather than following the dictates of the organized political parties and unions that allowed them initially to overwhelm and defeat the fascist soldiers and their allies.

After the victory over the military, the Defense Committees assumed the task of organizing the ongoing defense of the city. For a few short weeks, they also took over the functions normally handled by the city administration. This gave them real power. It was precisely this new rank-and-file power which the bourgeoisie was eager to destroy when the Higher Committees of the anarchist movement decided to participate in the coalition government, thereby neutralizing the thrust of the Defense Committees towards working-class self-governance. This was the first battle lost by Defense Committees. As Guillamón shows, a fierce debate, with considerable opposition, took place inside the anarcho-syndicalist movement between its leadership in the Higher Committees and the rank and file that identified with the Defense Committees. The government's concern was the militarization of the appointed local defense groups, the Control Patrols, and their subsequent integration or wholesale replacement within the government's security forces.

Guillamón's hypothesis is worth considering. According to him, the Defense Committees had the potential to evolve into revolutionary organizations in the working-class districts. Their evolution was blocked by the strategies and tactics used by the CNT's Higher Committees. For this, the Control Patrols were armed by the government in October 1936 as a means to neutralize and disband the locally constituted Defense Committees. It should also be noted that the Defense Committees in any case were not organs of direct democracy and did not represent the working class at large.

They were not elected, but instead included CNT members known locally as the most militant. Their composition was based on local networking relations, rather than a directly democratic process. This characteristic explains, in part, their inability to effectively oppose the Higher Committees and maintain their autonomy.

Finally, the struggle over supplies became the critical crisis for the Defense Committees. On that question, the Defense Committees confronted again the government's bureaucracy and security forces, since the departments in charge of economic distribution were under the control of the Stalinists of the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia (PSUC). The pages in which Guillamón describes the debates between the Defense Committees and the Agriculture and Economy Department in the Companys government are most helpful in understanding the Stalinist point of view. Joan Comorera, a hard-line communist in charge of the department, was one of the most violent opponents of the independent leftists clustered in the Workers' Party of Marxist Unification (POUM) and the CNT radicals in the Defense Committees, who, he suggested, acted as "agents provocateurs ... poisoning militants' minds" (p. 142). To defend the state bureaucracy, he accused the Defense Committees of creating their own separate bureaucracy and falsely accused them of having ties to the local mafias. To counteract their influence, he also established a marketplace and retail distribution network that bypassed them altogether. In this confrontation, the Defense Committees did not have the full support of the CNT-FAI Higher Committees, which were consumed by their participation in the Republican government's antifascist alliance.

This key question about the supply of goods marked a turning point in the revolutionary process. The strikes and riots against the lack of affordable food and other basic products, the high interest rates, and black market activities were the spark for the May 1937 events.[3] The commu-

nist attempt to regain control of Barcelona's streets and social spaces from the radical tendencies represented by the Defense Committees and other groupings should be understood in this light. The defeat of the radicals meant the crushing of the spirit of autonomy that was still so alive and active in parts of the CNT and POUM rank and file. The reinforcements provided to the Republican government by the Stalinists marked the end of the revolutionary struggle. It was a victory of collaborationism versus the militance of the rank and file. The revolutionary spirit was drowned first by the civil war directed against it and then by the regular war against the fascists that buried it altogether: the wars devoured the Revolution.

Guillamón's text is accompanied by an excellent glossary, which itself serves as a rich introduction to the groups and individuals of the Spanish Revolution. Paul Sharkey's first-rate translation preserves the spirit and rigor of the original text.

Notes

[1]. See the interview with Augustín Guillamón by Paul Sharkey, where the author talks about his political itinerary, interests, and research projects: <http://bataillesocialiste.wordpress.com/2014/08/21/interview-with-agustin-guillamon-2013/>.

[2]. On the intense social and political life of the working-class districts of Barcelona, see Chris Ealham, "An imaginary geography: ideology, urban space and protest in the creation of Barcelona's Chinatown, c. 1835-1936," *International Review of Social History* 50, no. 3 (2005): 373-397. Ealham demonstrates that what was perceived by the bourgeoisie as "zones of misery, disorder and dangerous classes" were in fact a particular field of social and political "worker's order." Also see Ealham's *Anarchism and the City: Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Barcelona, 1898-1937* (AK Press: 2010).

[3]. See Guillamón's recent book on this period: *La Guerra Del Pan: Hambre y violencia en la Barcelona revolucionaria, de diciembre de 1936 a mayo de 1937* [The Bread War: Hunger and Violence in Revolutionary Barcelona from December 1936 to May 1937] (Barcelona: Aldarull/Dskntrl, 2014).

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