

Did Commies kill Wobblies during the Spanish Civil War? - Raymond S. Solomon



In a mass demonstration in Barcelona, workers hold a banner reading, "Solidaridad Obrera, the daily newspaper of the Revolution." Photo: theanarchistlibrary.org

An article by Raymond S. Solomon about Stalinist repression during the Spanish Civil War.

In September 1938, Wobbly Ivan Silverman and “two unidentified Wobblies” were “forced by commies onto a bare field to face fascist machine guns [in] Spain.” This history was cited by Fellow Worker DJ Alperovitz in a Nov. 2013 article in the *Industrial Worker* that lists murdered Wobblies from 1907 until the present time. The article was titled “In November Who Do We Remember?” (page 6-7). In the right hand column, or sidebar, of this massive listing were small reproductions of parts of newspaper stories involving a large number of these Wobbly deaths. These terrible incidents include Wobblies being shot by thugs, killed by the Ku Klux Klan, dying in Soviet Russia’s Gulag Archipelago, and beaten to death by various company guards. In the bottom righthand corner is a clipping from the Sept. 10, 1938 edition of the *Industrial Worker* with the headline “IVAN SILVERMAN, TWO OTHERS KILLED IN SPAIN.”

This is typical of a lesser-known aspect of the Spanish Civil War (1936 to 1939)—that is the struggle within the Loyalist side between the communists on one side and the left-wing parties and the anarchists on the other. It was a civil war within a civil war. The communists wanted the Spanish Revolution of workers and peasants stopped or slowed down. It did not want the Spanish Loyalist cause to be seen as a radical cause.

Some of the most consistent reporting on this was in the periodical *Spanish Revolution*. It was put out by the Vanguard Group, an anarchist youth group, but it had guidance and support

from Wobblies, some of whom were integral to the Vanguard Group. These people included Herbert Mahler, Carlo Tresca, Sam Dolgoff (who often wrote under the pen name Sam Weiner) Roman Weinrebe, and Clara Freedman (my mother), who was both an anarchist and a member of the Industrial Workers of the World. My father Sidney Solomon (who wrote under the name S. Morrison) was very involved in both the publication of *Vanguard* and of *Spanish Revolution*. He was very sympathetic with the Wobblies. I am therefore going to summarize the reports in *Spanish Revolution* that cover this conflict within the Loyalist side of The Spanish Civil War. I appreciate the fact that the website libcom.org has made back issues of *Spanish Revolution* available on the internet. I am going to intersperse this with other sources including the *Industrial Worker*, George Orwell, Spartacus Educational, and Wikipedia. I have cited *Spanish Revolution* in “History of Workers’ Revolution In Catalonia” (May 2014 *Industrial Worker*, page 14). Please keep in mind that *Spanish Revolution* was monthly and twice monthly, and that communication technology at the time was not what it is now, so there will be some time-lags between the dates of events and their reporting in *Spanish Revolution*:

The Feb. 8, 1936 issue of *Spanish Revolution* reported that French communist Andre Marty (1886 - 1956) was a commander in the International Brigade. During the Russian Civil War he led a mutiny on a ship bringing men and arms to fight against the Russian revolution. This was part of an article about the International Brigades, noting their multinational make-up (*Spanish Revolution*, Vol. 1. No. 11). Wikipedia reported that Marty was quite autocratic and “saw fifth columnists everywhere.” In contrast to this, George Orwell, in “Homage to Catalonia,” reported that while serving in the Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (POUM) militia, dissent was greatly tolerated. At that time he expressed agreement with the communist view that the war came before the revolution, which was in contrast to the POUM and anarchist view that the war and the revolution were the same. He changed his views after the May Day conflict of 1937 (see below).

In two items on the front page of *Spanish Revolution* of March 12, 1937, (Vol. 1, No. 13), the New York Vanguard group joined in and reported on the anarchist defense of the Spanish POUM. The articles were titled “ANARCHISTS AGAINST P.O.U.M. PERSECUTIONS” and “STOP PARTY STRIFE ANARCHISTS DEMAND.” The Spanish POUM was a Leninist but anti-Stalinist organization. In part, the POUM was an offshoot from the Trotskyites, and was therefore hated by the communists. The above mentioned articles called for an end to the persecution of the POUM and for disseminating lies about it—such as the POUM being agents of Hitler and Mussolini. It also vehemently denied that the anarchists shared the communist view about the POUM, as was claimed by the Communist Party of Spain. The editors of *Spanish Revolution* pointed out that since the anarchists had sacrificed their ideological purity to form a coalition with other parties in the cause of fighting against fascism, there should not be internal party strife, as manifested by the communist campaign against the POUM.

The essence of the communist demands was that the revolution should be postponed, that collectivization of factories and agricultural land not proceed, and that the defense of Loyalist Spain be changed from the militia system and replaced by a centralized “disciplined” military. One revolutionary response to that appeared in the Feb. 16, 1937 issue of the anarchist publication, *Solidaridad Obreva*: “Unified command? Yes; but under the control of the proletarian organization.” The communists wanted, in contrast, a government-controlled military. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union directed that the arms it supplied should not go to the Aragon Front, which had many anarchists and POUM troops.

But the plot thickens, and the threat to the revolution increases, as shown in the April 9, 1937 dated edition of *Spanish Revolution* (Vol.1, No. 15). One headline was titled “TOWARDS A POLITICAL CRISIS IN CATALONIA” (Ibid p. 2). It seems that there was a Stalinist-bourgeois block against the advancement of revolution. In “Homage to Catalonia,” George Orwell summarized the new internal alignment on the Loyalist side as:

1.The anarchists: the POUM and Prime Minister Largo Caballero’s leftwing segment of the socialists within the Unión General de Trabajadores (UGT) were for the revolution; versus

2.The communists: President Manuel Azana’s Republican Party and conservative elements of the socialists (typified by Juan Negrin) against going full speed ahead with the economic and social revolution.

Two popular jokes of that period were, “If you’re too conservative to join the Republican Party, you can always join the Communist Party.” Also, “Save Spain from Marxism! Vote Communist!”

The publishers of *Spanish Revolution* wanted to explain, among other things, what was happening on the Loyalist side and why it was so important. There was a meeting held on April 4, 1937. The main speakers included Wobblies Carlo Tresca and Sam Weiner (a.k.a. Sam Dolgoff).

In late April, George Orwell was on temporary leave from the POUM militia, where he was fighting on the Aragon Front. As Orwell recorded in “Homage to Catalonia,” he wanted to transfer to the International Column (i.e. the International Brigade) where he felt there was more significant fighting. He needed a recommendation from a communist, and had sought out a communist friend. He sensed the tension. May Day 1937 was approaching. There was talk of the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT) and UGT marching together. In Catalonia, the past relationships between those two unions had not been good, in contrast to other areas in Spain. Orwell reported that due to this tension, the May Day parade was canceled in Barcelona. Orwell saw an irony in that Red Barcelona was the only major city in non-fascist Europe not to have a May Day parade.

Then, the Barcelona police and the communists demanded that the anarchists surrender the telephone exchange, which the anarchists had been running since the beginning of the Spanish Revolution. This led to a week of fighting with the police, with communists on one side and the anarchists and the POUM on the other side. Orwell was on the side of the anarchists. The fighting, which lasted from May 3-8 1937, was known as “The May Days.” One of the worst atrocities during the 1937 May Days was the murder of Italian anarchist Camillo Berneri by communists in Barcelona. Shortly after the May Days, Largo Caballero (“the Spanish Lenin”) was replaced by the more conservative Juan Negrin. As a result of the May Days, Orwell could not in good faith enlist in the International Brigade.

Orwell did go back to fight again in the POUM militia. During that time, Orwell was shot through his neck in battle. After recovery, he returned to Barcelona about five weeks after the May Days. The police and the communists were arresting POUM members, both Spaniards and foreign volunteers associated with the POUM. Orwell and his wife Eileen Blair escaped to France. Research by Michael Shelden, cited in his book “Orwell: The Authorized Biography,” shows that George Orwell (a.k.a. Eric Blair) and Eileen Blair were going to be arrested and publicly tried by the new communist-dominated government of Barcelona.

The Oct. 22, 1937, issue of *Spanish Revolution* (Vol. II, No.3, page 2) reported on the murder in Spain of Bob Smillie, a friend of George Orwell. Smillie had been arrested in the crackdown on the POUM and their Independent Labour Party allies. Although it was claimed that Smillie died of complications of an appendicitis operation, he had, in fact, had his appendix out in Britain. According to Spartacus Educational, Smillie had fought against Mosley's British Union of Fascists.

The same issue of *Spanish Revolution* reported that General Enrique Lister, a Spanish communist who had received military training in the Soviet Union, despite being popular outside of Spain, was breaking up Spanish peasant collectives in Aragon and Catalonia.

Despite the fact that George Orwell bore witness to the Communist Party's betrayal of the Spanish Revolution, including the murder and arrests of fellow POUM fighters, he asserted to the great merit of the communists who fought for Loyalist Spain. As Orwell wrote in "Homage to Catalonia," "Please note that I am saying nothing against the rank-and-file communists, least of all against the thousands of communists who died heroically around Madrid."

Ernest Hemingway said, "No men ever entered the earth more honorably than those who died in Spain." These included, as Alperovitz cited, in the November 2013 *Industrial Worker*, an "Unknown numbers of IWWs...[who] died while fighting fascists while serving with the Republican forces in Spain" and specifically Lou Walsh, who "Died while fighting with the Catalan Militia, Aragon front, Spain [on] June 16th, 1937." And, as reported by Matt White in "IWW Members Who Fought in the Spanish Civil War" (*Industrial Worker*, November, 2013), at least five other Wobblies died in the conflict:

Heinrich Bortz, German anti-Nazi, whose battlefield death was recorded on the Oct. 23, 1937 issue of the *Industrial Worker*; Ted Dickinson, Wobbly from Australia, who was executed as a prisoner of war after being captured by Franco's forces; Harry Owens, who fought in the forces of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion, and was killed in the middle of 1937; Louis Rosenberg, who, "According to his death notice from the CNT...was killed in action with the Durruti International Battalion." He was killed together with an unknown anarchist from Pennsylvania; Harry Schlesinger was killed in the latter part of 1938, when the war was almost lost, while serving in the Lincoln Battalion.

To learn more about the above five heroes, and other Wobblies killed in the Spanish Civil War read Matt White's most excellent article in the November 2013 *Industrial Worker*.

Many of the veterans of the Lincoln Battalion and the George Washington Battalion were treated very poorly when they returned to America. Many were accused of disloyalty. Some were called before Congressional Committees during the McCarthy era. A large number were blacklisted. Many could not get adequate medical care for serious wounds acquired during the Spanish Civil War. Leading Wobbly organizer Elizabeth Gurley Flynn said they were discriminated against for "being prematurely antifascist."

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