

## Chapter 16

# Anarcho-Syndicalism during the Second World War\*

Several months after the defeat in Spain, the Second World War broke out – completely paralyzing the activity of the IWA. The FORA, disturbed by the decisions of the 1938 congress, resolved to “temporarily cease to have relations with the IWA,” until the next congress re-examined these decisions. The Argentine and Uruguayan anarchists continued to insist the functions of syndicates must cease as soon as revolution took place and, as a consequence, they rejected the notion of syndicalist control over working class militias. They objected to cooperation with the State and political parties under the pretext of “tactical autonomy,” to the decisions of the 1938 congress about introducing proportional representation of sections at IWA congresses (instead of the previous equality), and to the creation of a special world federation of syndicalist youth.<sup>310</sup>

As far as World War II was concerned, both FORA and FORU confirmed their previous anti-war and anti-militarist position: the war was taking place between different groups of States and capitalists which were fighting for their own rule and privileges. In no way did the war correspond to the interests and hopes of people struggling for freedom and justice. Antifascism, according to the anarchists of Latin America, serves only as a screen for the interests of Capital of one of the groups of warring States. Therefore they called upon workers not to support the war under the banner and pretext of antifascism. Instead they advanced the slogan: “*Neither Fascism, nor Antifascism.*” Appealing for intensified antiwar and antimilitarist activity, they announced: “*The unique solution to the war, in fact to all wars – is the revolutionary union of peoples.*”<sup>311</sup>

In Europe itself during the Second World War the anarcho-syndicalists on the whole were too weak to exert themselves as an independent force. In France the CGT-SR, with 6,000 members at the end of the 1930’s<sup>312</sup>, was dissolved, while the syndicalist and anarchist organizations of Poland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Norway, and Denmark were outlawed following the occupation of these countries by the Nazis. The IWA Secretariat was located in Sweden and was deprived of almost all contact with libertarians in the belligerent nations.

The majority of the libertarian organizations at the very beginning of the war took a position which they termed “internationalist,” by analogy with the traditional slogans of revolutionary leftists about the transformation of imperialist war into social revolution. A declaration of the IWA Secretariat pointed out that “the war is the result of the capitalist system,” an “expression of the cruel competition between groups of

---

\* *Anarcho-syndicalism in the 20th century* by Vadim V. Damier; translated from Russian by Malcolm Archibald. Original published in Russian under title: *Anarkho-sindikalizm v XX veke*, in 2000. Includes bibliographical references and index. ISBN 978-0-9737827-6-9.

<sup>310</sup> Service de presse AIT., 1940, no. 16, p. 176; IISG: *IWMA Archive*, no. 32, “Rapport sur l’activité de l’AIT pendant l’année 1941,” pp. 2-4.

<sup>311</sup> A. López, *La FORA en el movimiento obrero (Anexo documental)*, Vol. 2, p.141, pp. 138-139; Service de presse. AIT., 1939, no.14.

<sup>312</sup> *Itinéraire*, 1995, no. 13, p. 59

capitalists for raw materials, colonies, and markets,” and the “struggle of imperialist States to ensure their influence and control over the world and its riches in the interests of their own group of States.” The IWA perceived fascism as “the cruelest form of capitalism” and “Enemy No. 1 of humanity,” but also called upon workers not to trust the democracies, since “they are soft on reaction, soft on bloody wars,” and “cannot guarantee peace.” “... If humanity wants to live a free life and liberate itself from constant wars, it must get rid of Capitalism...,” said the IWA in its declaration. “*The war between nations must be transformed into a war between classes. The international working class must act with all its energy to liquidate Capitalism.*” Declarations in the same spirit were issued by anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist organizations in France, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Belgium.<sup>313</sup> But in reality a significant number of anarchists soon abandoned this position and began to orient themselves towards the struggle with Fascism as “the greatest evil.”

Many German anarcho-syndicalists in emigration, using the Swedish syndicalists as a go-between, co-operated with the intelligence services of the Western powers. French anarchists participated in the Résistance. In Poland syndicalists and anarchists called for the “defense of the country” (although “not jointly with the bourgeoisie”), and created their own partisan detachments, which were then merged with the partisan detachments of the socialists in the “Polish People’s Army” and took an active part in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944.<sup>314</sup> In Italy and Bulgaria the anarchists formed their own partisan detachments which engaged in battles with the armed forces of the Fascist regimes. While participating in the creation of underground territorial and workplace organs, the Italian anarchists at the same time tried to preserve their organizational independence from political parties and groups. They took part in the Resistance and assisted in preparing and conducting strikes which were directed not only against the fascists and the German authorities, but also against Italian entrepreneurs. “Active operations were accompanied by ongoing efforts to work out the appropriate strategy for the current phase of events (the struggle against Nazism-Fascism) which could broaden the situation into a possible revolution,” noted one researcher. “The proposal for a ‘United Front of Working People’..., addressed to worker activists and rank-and-file members of left-wing parties, was... part of a project which regarded the original underground organs of the Resistance as elements of a counter-power in the spirit of anarchism and Workers’ Councils. The participation... of anarchists in Factory Committees must be viewed in this light, rather than as a concession to the democratic program of the liberation struggle as a second Risorgimento.”<sup>315</sup>

We have knowledge about at least one attempt at organizing armed struggle undertaken by anarchists in Ukraine. A former participant in the Makhnovist movement, Osip Tsebry, returned to the country illegally in 1942 and organized a partisan detachment in the Kiev region. In the tradition of its predecessors, it acted

<sup>313</sup> *Delo truda – Probyzhdeniye*, 1940, no.1, Yanvar – Fevral, pp. 7-12. Characteristically, a “group of Belgium, Spanish, Italian, French, and German anarchists”

expressed its disagreement with the fact that the IWA manifesto considered fascism to be “Enemy No. 1.” In their declaration they said: “The enemy today, like yesterday and even more so tomorrow, is our bosses. And our Enemy No. 1 is the State – the Government, its organs of suppression, the official and semi-official institutions which support it, the Army, the Bureaucracy, the Church – all the perpetual accomplices in the oppression of freedom and individuality.” (cited in: *Service de presse. AIT.*, 1939, no.14).

<sup>314</sup> *Service de presse. AIT.*, 1939, no.14; *ibid.*, 1940, no.18; T. J., “*Dzieci Sorela i Pilsudskiego. Dzieje syndykaizmu polskiego – od faszysmu do anarchizmu*,” *Podaj delej*, 1997, no. 7, p. 31.

<sup>315</sup> G. Berroero, “Anarchici e Resistenza a Genova: Una storia che manca,” *Umanita Nova*, 1998, no. 14 (26 April), p. 6.

against both Germany and the USSR, until it was defeated by German forces in 1943.<sup>316</sup> In Hungary small groups of anarchist student youth took part in partisan detachments and organized acts of sabotage in Budapest at the end of 1944. Anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists of the Netherlands and Belgium put forward a position for a “Third Front,” that is, against both warring sides; they agitated for civil disobedience and the organization of a workers’ movement independent of political parties. The Spanish anarchists after losing the war with the Francoists remained in a state of disunity, split between supporters of continued collaboration with antifascist forces and those who were favour of a return to traditional anarchist positions and against participation in any kind of coalition with antifascist or republican statist structures. The traditionalists considered the Second World War as a purely inter-Capitalist conflict and proposed that “in the case of open conflict between the French Resistance and the Germans, activists of the Confederation should seek shelter among the civilian population.” The who advised continuing the alliance with the republican forces called upon Spanish anarchist-emigrants to join the French Resistance.<sup>317</sup> The Spanish libertarians continued an underground struggle on the Iberian peninsula and tried to organize the assassinations of Franco and Hitler.

The French anarchists occupied an internationalist position. A particularly active role was played by a group in Marseille, gathered around Vsevolod Volin and André Arru. It distributed leaflets with an appeal to workers to act not only against German and Italian Fascism, but also against Soviet Stalinism and the democratic Capitalism of the West as well as against the slogan “national liberation,” seen as an attempt to unify the ruling and oppressed classes. The Marseilles group, agitating for social revolution and known under the name “International Revolutionary-syndicalist Federation,” became a centre of attraction for other anarchist groups throughout the whole country.<sup>318</sup> The British anarchists also spoke out against the imperialist war which was being sold as a struggle between fascism and democracy. They carried on active anti-war agitation, supported the strike movement, and tried to organize Soldiers’ Councils in the British Army.<sup>319</sup>

---

<sup>316</sup> *Delo truda – Probyzhdeniye*, no. 31 (December, 1949), p. 35.

<sup>317</sup> *Les anarchistes espagnols dans la tourmente (1939-1945)* (Marseilles, 1989), pp.166-171.

<sup>318</sup> Interview with André Arru in *Itinéraire*, 1995, no. 13 (Voline), pp. 76-81.

<sup>319</sup> See: *directe aktion*, 1996, no. 117, September - Oktober, pp. 8-9; no.118, November - Dezember, p. 9; P. Peterson, “John Olday – Künstler und Kämpfer“ in *Trafik. Internationales Journal zur Kultur der Anarchie*, 1985, no. 21, pp. 18-21.