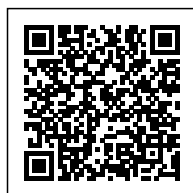


MELCHOR RODRIGUEZ: THE RED ANGEL OF THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

Posted on February 1, 2020 by Arnaud Imatz



Relations between Anarchists and Marxist Socialists have always been marked by mistrust, suspicion, even hostility and hatred. In Spain, during the nearly three years of Civil War (1936-1939), they took a particularly dramatic turn. The rivalry between the two revolutionary currents quickly led to an open struggle that culminated in a small civil war within the Civil War.

In a somewhat schematic way, the choice between them may be summed up in this way. Either start the revolution right away, proceed immediately to collectivization, while making war. This solution was the preference of anarchists, Marxist-Leninists of the [POUM](#) and some of the trade unionists of the socialist [UGT](#).

Or, on the contrary, temporarily favor the "sacred union" with the bourgeois left, so not to frighten the fellow-travelers, and especially the democracies, and first to win the war and postpone the social revolution. This a view was that of the Stalinist communists and their allies, the majority of the socialists.

This dispute, almost intractable, was temporarily settled by arms, to the advantage of the communists and their fellow-travelers. The bloody days of Barcelona (May 3-8, 1937) resulted in more than 500 deaths and 1,500 injuries.

But the anarchists never accepted communist rule. Nearly two years later, with the help of their social democratic, Trotskyist and anti-Stalinist allies, they took revenge in extremis. On the eve of the victory of the Francoist troops in March 1939, 150,000 soldiers, controlled by the CNT and led by [Cipriano Mera](#), revolted and prevailed against the Communist Army Corps I, II and III.

After violent fighting, which claimed several thousand lives, the anarchists ensured the success of the coup against the pro-Stalinist government of the socialist [Juan Negrín](#). Once the communists and their fellow-travelers were finally routed, and faced with increasing pressure from the National troops, the National Defense Council, composed of [General Miaja](#), [Colonel Casado](#), the Social Democrat [Besteiro](#) and seven other anarchist and anti-communist leaders, resolved to sign the surrender of the Republican camp.

One cannot understand the avatars of the Spanish People's Front during the Civil War, without taking into account this fierce libertarian opposition to social-Marxist domination. In fact, once the republican,

democratic and moderate left was completely whipped and marginalized, anarchists and anarcho-unionists were the only bulwark against despotism and Stalinist terror.

Examples of clashes and skirmishes between leaders, activists and sympathizers of the two major components of the revolutionary left abound. There is one, as emblematic as it is little known, which is particularly worth recalling. This is the conflict between the anarchist [Melchor Rodriguez Garcia](#) and the Secretary-General of the United Socialist Youth, responsible for public order in the Madrid Defence Committee (later secretary general of the [PCE](#) and co-founder of Eurocommunism), the Stalinist [Santiago Carrillo](#).

Melchor Rodriguez Against Communist Terror

In early November 1936, in the midst of the civil war, Melchor Rodriguez was appointed Inspector General of Prisons by the People's Front government. As such, he would work to prevent escapes but also prevent attacks and lynchings of detainees.

For some time now, communist militiamen and the Unified Socialist Youth (who were born on April 1, 1936, with the merger of the Communist Youth and the Socialist Youth) had made a habit of "visiting" Madrid's jails. The pretext was to evacuate prisoners from the besieged capital to safety.

In reality, once the distant suburbs were reached, in the name of "popular justice" and "revolution," the "fascist" enemies were ruthlessly liquidated. Faced with the indignant protests of foreign embassies, the authorities of the Popular Front finally got worried. This situation could no longer be tolerated.

Melchor Rodriguez was 43 years old when he took up his position as General Directorate of Prisons. A staunch anarcho-unionist, affiliated with the CNT and a member of the [FAI](#), he was known for his courage, idealism and anti-communism. For three months, he successfully opposed the policy of terror, defended by communist leaders, and stopped the wave of crimes.

The Mass Graves of Santiago Carrillo

Melchor was born in Seville in 1893 to a working-class family of three children. He had been raised by

his mother, an Andalusian woman who made a hard living as a cigar maker and seamstress. At the age of thirteen, he was already working as a boilermaker. Dreaming of becoming a bullfighter, he set out on an adventure on the roads of Spain as a teenager. Injured in the arena, in 1918, he had to give up his dream for good.

He was then found working as a metal worker in Madrid. Affiliated with the [CNT](#), of which he was one of the representatives in the capital, his political and trade union activities were multiplying. From 1932, he was responsible for organizing aid to anarchist prisoners jailed by the Republic.

Appointed head of the prison administration in early November 1936, four months after the outbreak of the civil war, Melchor Rodriguez immediately saw his authority challenged by the Communists. Believing that he did not have the means to act, he resigned. Political assassinations then increased in intensity.

In [Paracuellos](#), a village a few kilometers from Madrid, and in the surrounding area, in just over a month, nearly five thousand people were shot and buried in huge mass graves. All members and supporters of right-wing parties or "national forces" (radicals, Christian Democrats, Liberal-Conservatives, Agrarians, Nationalists, Monarchists and Falangists) were indiscriminately suspected of supporting the uprising.

Many victims had committed only one "crime" – attending a Catholic college, or belonging to a family of doctors or lawyers. The direct culprits of these appalling massacres are now known. They were the Socialist MP [Margarita Nelken](#), the Director General of Security, the radical socialist, [Manuel Muñoz](#), the Minister of the Interior, the socialist [Angel Galarza](#), and, above all, the Secretary General of the Socialist and Communist Youth, Santiago Carrillo.

For decades, Santiago Carrillo vehemently denied any involvement in the Paracuellos massacre, systematically calling his accusers slanderers, fascist agents or Neo-Francoists historians. But his direct responsibility can no longer be seriously questioned. It was established by several irrefutable documents and testimonies: the statements of Melchor Rodriguez, the letter of July 30, 1937 from [Dimitrov](#), head of the [Komintern](#), to [Voroshilov](#), informing him that Carrillo "gave the order to shoot," the report of Dr. Henny, representative of the Red Cross, and the damning testimony of the Consul of Norway, [Felix Schlayer](#), whose edifying memoir, which remained incomprehensibly in oblivion for sixty-ten years, was published under the title, [*Matanzas: en el Madrid republicano*](#).

Santiago Carrillo, during the Civil War, was not the defender of democratic values, celebrated and honored today by the socialist media and much of the radical left. Santiago Carrillo was appointed Doctor Honoris Causa of the [Autonomous University of Madrid](#) on March 16, 2005, for his role in the Civil War and the democratic transition. To this day, Melchor Rodriguez's life remains covered by the mantle of oblivion.

On the contrary, his [Chekist](#) methods and procedures make him one among those responsible for the most appalling populicide ever committed during the Spanish War. If there were a humanist and a true democrat at the time, it was certainly not the Stalinist in charge of the Public Order in Madrid – but, on the contrary, one of his fiercest opponents, strangely unknown and ignored, the anarchist, Melchor Rodriguez Garcia. A brief return to the facts makes this obvious.

On December 4, 1936, the government of the Popular Front confirmed the first appointment of Melchor Rodriguez. Full powers were granted to him by the Minister of Justice, [Garcia Oliver](#), an anarchist like him.

Once appointed special delegate to the Directorate General of Prisons, neither Stalin's envoys, [General Gorev](#) and diplomat [Mikhail Kolstov](#), nor their allies, namely, the delegate to the Public Order, Santiago Carrillo or his collaborator, [José Cazorla Maure](#), nor any other of their communist acolytes, could do anything against Melchor Rodriguez. In his eyes, there was no doubt that all these men "have disgraced the Republic."

On 24 December, Carrillo lost his duties as a delegate to the Public Order. For three weeks, Melchor Rodriguez's energetic action, often carried out at the risk of his own life, was decisive in stopping the massacres. Between December 4, 1936 and March 1, 1937, when the new government presided over by the pro-Stalinist socialist, Juan Negrín removed it, Madrid's prisons were secured.

The most remarkable episode of Melchor Rodriguez's life is undoubtedly the one that took place on December 8, 1936. After the bombing of Alcala airport, more than two hundred militiamen, furious, decided to take revenge on their hostages.

When the cells were forced, the "Red Angel," a nickname he acquired on this occasion, intervened: "Before killing one of these prisoners, you will have to get past me!" He saved nearly 1000 people that

day. The Member of Parliament for the [CEDA](#) (Confederation of Autonomous Rights), [Alberto Martin Artajo](#), the Falangist leader, [Raimundo Fernandez Cuesta](#) and the future Commander-in-Chief of the [Division Azul](#) and Secretary-General of the [Movimiento](#), [Agustín Muñoz Grandes](#), owed him their lives.

Many would never forgive him for his humanist and generous attitude, which was unusual among his co-members of the FAI. For the communists, he was the "traitor," "the agent of the fifth column," the "cryptofascist." In March 1939, in the capital besieged by Franco's army, communist troops and those of their socialist allies were crushed by forces controlled by the CNT. Anarchists and Social Democrats prevailed just on the eve of the ceasefire.

The new National Defence Committee appointed Melchor Rodriguez as head of Madrid's mayoralty. Faced with the advance of the national columns, there was a stampede. But the "Red Angel" refused to run away and remained at his post until the end. Judged and condemned by a Franco war council in November 1939, the numerous testimonies that were forthcoming, including that of General Muñoz Grandes, led to his release a year and a half later.

In the aftermath of the civil war, Melchor Rodriguez lived very modestly. An employee of an insurance company, he refused the economic aid offered to him. Intractable, he died true to his anarchist convictions. One day in 1973, he was found lying near his home, unconscious on the ground, with head injuries.

He was rushed to Francisco Franco Hospital. A friend, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Alberto Martin Artajo, who had esteemed and admired him for more than thirty years, immediately went to his bedside. The two men, whom so many things separated, spoke one last time.

The funeral took place in the presence of Francoist ministers, anarchist activists and survivors of the November and December 1936 massacres. On the coffin an anarchist flag and a crucifix were placed. Prayers rang out, followed by the anarchist anthem: "[Negras tormentas agitan los aires](#)." The "Red Angel," a symbol of national reconciliation, now rests in peace.

Is Reconciliation Still On The Agenda?

Many are surprised that the memory of Melchor Rodriguez, "the Spanish Schindler," as some say, has

not yet been officially honoured by democratic Spain and even (why not?) by the European Parliament. After all, the representatives of the majority of the political groups of the Standing Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, who for the most part have no idea what happened in Spain for more than a century, had not approved the March 17, 2006 resolution, at the instigation of the [PSOE](#) and against the advice of the PP, condemning the "undemocratic nature of Franco's coup," and yet proposed July 18 as an "international date of condemnation of Francoism?"

But is full reconciliation really on the agenda, as the official media, resolutely breaking with the desire for "forgiveness without forgetting" of previous decades, advocate with obsession and exclusivism a "recovery of historical memory," which is known to be a propagandistic and emotional evocation of the past, unrelated to rigorous and serious history?

Arnaud Imatz, a Basque-French political scientist and historian, holds a State Doctorate (DrE) in political science and is a correspondent-member of the Royal Academy of History (Spain), and a former international civil servant at OECD. He is a specialist in the Spanish Civil War, European populism, and the political struggles of the Right and the Left – [all subjects on which he has written several books](#). He has also published numerous articles on the political thought of the founder and theoretician of the Falange, [José Antonio Primo de Rivera](#), as well as the Liberal philosopher, [José Ortega y Gasset](#), and the Catholic traditionalist, [Juan Donoso Cortés](#).

The [image](#) shows a plaque at the house where Melchor Rodriguez was born.

This article was translated from the original French by N. Dass.

