

Women in the Spanish revolution

Liz Willis

October 15, 1975

Contents

Introduction	3
Background	3
Revolution	4
Defence of Madrid	7
Retrenching, Legalisation, Thermidor	8
International Dimension	10
Under Fascism	11
Conclusions	13
Acknowledgement	15

Introduction

In a way, it is clearly artificial to try to isolate the role of women in any series of historical events. There are reasons, however, — why the attempt should still be made from time to time; for one thing it can be assumed that when historians write about “people” or “workers” they mean women to anything like the same extent as men. It is only recently that the history of women has begun to be studied with the attention appropriate to women’s significance — constituting as we do approximately half of society at all levels.¹

In their magnum opus *The Revolution and the Civil War in Spain* (Faber & Faber, 1972), Pierre Brow and Emile Témime state that the participation of women in the Spanish Revolution of 1936 was massive and general, and take this as an index of how deep the revolution went. Unfortunately, details of this aspect are scarce in their book elsewhere, but the sources do allow some kind of picture to be pieced together. In the process of examining how women struggled, what they achieved, and how their consciousness developed in a period of intensified social change, we can expect to touch on most facets of what was going on. Any conclusions that emerge should have relevance for libertarians in general as well as for the present-day women’s movement.

Background

Conditions of life for Spanish women prior to 1936 were oppressive and repressive in the extreme. Work was hard, long and poorly paid², and when improvements did occur they were not always entirely beneficial to women. Figures from the Instituto de Reformas Sociales (quoted in S.G.Payne, *The Spanish Revolution*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1970), show that in the decade 1913–22, men’s wages increased by 107.1% and women’s by only 67.9%, while prices rose by 93%. When the 1931 Republic established the eight-hour day for agricultural labourers, this meant, according to a peasant in Seville Prison who talked to Arthur Koestler, that the men could go to meetings and gossip, while their wives could return home at 5 p.m., prepare the meal, and see to the children’s clothes.

Minimal reforms including maternity compensation had, however, been introduced, and featured in the aims of most progressive groups. Politically, the Republican Constitution of 1931 brought-votes for both sexes at 23, a radical departure for the time and place. At first, it has been said (by Alvarez del Vayo in *Freedom’s Battle*), a woman’s vote merely doubled the power of her husband or confessor, But the situation was being modified. The Republic brought measures of education and secularisation, including provision for divorce if “*just cause*” were shown. Despite the weight of internalised inferiority under which they must have laboured, many women were starting to involve themselves actively in politics.³

¹ Good examples of what can be done in this field are: Edith Thomas *The Women Incendiaries* (New York 1966, London. 1967 — about the Paris Commune) and Sheila Rowbotham’s work, e.g. *Women. Resistance and Revolution*.

² Arthur Koestler gives the average daily wage of an agricultural labourer as 3 pesetas, equal to about 1 pound at the time (*Spanish Testament*, Gollanz, 1937), and a women’s wage as half that, ie. 6d for working from sunrise to sunset. Burnett Bolloten (*The Grand Camouflage*, New York, 1961) cites the instance of a Seville village where women gathering chick-peas from 3 a.m. till 12 noon earned one peseta.

³ One of the many “incidents” of the early 30’s was the shooting of Juanita Rico, a Young Socialist, by Pila Primo de Rivera (daughter of the former Dictator and sister of the Falangist leader) 70,000 attended the funeral. In June 1936 Dolores Ibarruri was one of the 17 CP delegates in the Cortes; her autobiography (*They Shall Not Pass*, New York, 1966) gives details of political activity by Spanish women “Against War and Fascism,” ie. in CP orientated organizations.

On the libertarian side, the strong anarchist movement incorporated a certain awareness of the necessity to envisage changed relationships between people. For its adherents, the abolition of legal marriage at least was on the agenda. It is more difficult to assess to what extent their personal lives embodied a transformation in attitudes, but it seems that the particular problems of women were not a priority concern.⁴

In fact they were not much of a priority with anyone. Margarita Nelkin, a Socialist who was to become a deputy in the Cortes, wrote about *The Social Condition of Women in Spain* (Barcelona, 1922) and *Women in the Cortes* (Madrid, 1931); there was a movement for women's rights in the early twenties, but it had a reformist and careerist orientation, based on women in the professions. For anarchists, reformist, minimal or transitional programme was more or less out. The focus was on thoroughgoing social revolution. Unfortunately, any theoretical discussion of what such a revolution might involve was often out too, in favour of an assumption that things would work out spontaneously in the best possible way.

Revolution

In the response to the military insurrection of July 18, 1936 against the Republic there was indeed a powerful element of spontaneity. Events overtook the parties and leaders, including the "leading militants" of the CNT-FAI (syndicalist National Confederation of Labour, and the Spanish Anarchist Federation). One of the latter, Federica Montseny alluded later to "*the revolution we all desired but did not expect so soon*". Women played a full part. In the view of Alvarez del Vayo, they were dominant in the response to the uprising and formed the backbone of resistance. Broué and Témime tell us they were present everywhere — on committees, in the militias, in the front line. In the early battles of the civil war, women fought alongside men as a matter of course.⁵

Women were necessarily and naturally involved in the developing social revolution, in the collectives which established themselves in town and countryside, after the flight of many bosses and landlords. This fact implies certain changes, in their way of living, their degree of alienation in work and leisure (if they had any leisure), their state of mind, the attitudes of others to them. But the transformation in social relations, particularly in the status of women in the community, was a long way from being total, even in areas where libertarians had the greatest control over their own situation.

A simple index of the continued inferiority of a woman's position is provided by statistics on wages in the collectives. Women were often paid at a lower rate than men.⁶ To give some examples:

- a) In the retail trade in Puigcerda, men earned 50 pesetas a week, and women 35;
- b) In the Segorbe agricultural collective, men earned 5 pesetas a day compared with 4 for a single woman and 2 for a wife;

⁴ An impression of anarcho-syndicalists' attitudes to women is conveyed in the novel *Seven Red Sundays* by Ramon J. Sender, (Penguin, 1938).

⁵ George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (Gollanou, 1938); p 11 in Penguin edition.

⁶ Gaston Leval estimated that women were getting equal wages in about half the collectives — extract from *Espagne Libertaire* in Sam Dolgoff, ed., *The Anarchist Collectives: Self-Management in the Spanish Revolution, 1936–9*, Free Life Editions, New York, 1974) — a very useful collection of material on the subject.

c) In Muniesa, men received 1 peseta a day, women and girls 75 centimos and those under 10 years got 50 centimos.⁷

Many of the agricultural collectives agreed a “family wage,” varying with the numbers involved on the principle “*To each according to his needs*”. A household where man and wife both worked because they had no children might receive 5 pesetas per day, while one where only the man was seen as working for the collective, as his wife had to care for 2, 3 or 4 children, might receive 6, 7 or 8 pesetas.⁸ According to Hugh Thomas⁹ there was almost everywhere a separate scale of pay for working husbands and wives, with different bonuses for working sons, minors, and invalids, and separate rates for bachelors, widows and retired couples. Rates might vary from 4 to 12 pesetas a day. Sometimes certain categories of women did comparatively well. in Villaverde, widows were accorded the same as bachelors, plus child allowances — on the other hand, bachelors generally had free access to the communal restaurant, while others had to pay one peseta.

The idea of a scale of wages directly discriminating against women is not, then, accurate in every case. But there is clear evidence of a widespread assumption, based on the concept of the patriarchal family, that women did not require equal pay. Opinions of libertarian observers differed on the matter. Jose Peirats considered that the family wage was a way of meeting the desire for privacy and a more intimate way of life. H. E. Kaminski took a harder line, asserting that the family card put the most oppressed human beings in Spain — women — under the control of men.¹⁰ He took this as proof that the anarchist communism of the village of Alcora had “*taken its nature from the actual state of things*”.

As a measure of reform, the new wages system had its positive aspect. At least the right of women to the means of subsistence, whatever their role in society, was generally recognised; so was that of children. Peirats tells us that on the land, housewives were not obliged to work outside the home except when absolutely necessary (extras could be “called up” by the town crier to work in the fields in case of need), and pregnant women were treated with special consideration. Daughters of peasant families were no longer forced to go into service in the cities or abroad. Covered by the family wage, young women sometimes donated their labour to make uniforms — a reminder that the size of the wage packet was not now of such vital concern to workers. The situation had a degree of flexibility allowing for more choices than before, despite the continued division of labour which assigned all household tasks to women.

Perhaps the principal factor lessening the alienation of wage-labour (for the anarchist ideal of a wageless, indeed money-free society was not found practical given the limited and fragmented nature of the revolution) was the chance to participate in collective decision-making. The policy and practice of each collective would be decided by its General Assembly, which usually elected a Committee of Administration. The extent to which women were involved directly in determining their own status is uncertain. Hugh Thomas reckoned: “*It is not clear if every member of the collective was sometimes included, even women (sic) and at any rate working children, or whether; as is more likely, only workers were expected to attend.*” This would be a serious indictment of the

⁷ Figures in Broué and Témime, *The Revolution and Civil War in Spain*.

⁸ *Ibid.*, quoting Leval.

⁹ “Anarchist Agrarian Collectives in the Spanish Civil War,” in Raymond Carr, ed., *The Republic and the Civil War in Spain* (London; 1971).

¹⁰ Both writers are among those represented in Dolgoff’s *Anarchist Collectives*.

collectives if taken literally, but Thomas groping toward an inkling of what makes libertarians tick is not the most reliable interpreter.

Gaston Leval in *Collectives in the Spanish Revolution* (translated by Vernon Richards, Freedom Press, 1975; pp. 207–213), reports the meeting of a village assembly attended by “*about 600 people including some 100 women, girls and a few children*”. Business included a proposal to “*organise a workshop where the women could go and work instead of wasting their time gossiping in the street. The women laugh but the proposal is accepted.*” There also arises “*the nomination of a new hospital director (and we learn that the director is a woman, which is fairly unusual)*”. He records the obvious interest and involvement in the discussions, to the extent that “*no one left before the end... No women or child had gone to sleep*”. Women might generally be present, then but not necessarily on an exactly equal footing with men.

Even so, Thomas has noted the “*absence of the whole complicated apparatus of traditional Catholic living and of all the things that went with it (such as the subordination of women)*” as a factor that sustained persistent exhilaration for the vast majority of workers. Assumptions about female functions and femininity were not, of course rejected overnight. Leval has written about women shopping for provisions, dress shops making fashionable clothes for women and girls, young girls being taught how to sew clothes for their future children, among other unquestioning reflections of “*the actual state of things*”. But the impression of significant changes in attitudes and in the general social atmosphere is conveyed by many first-hand observers.

As early as August 1936, Franz Borkenau¹¹ noted the self-assurance of women in Barcelona, hitherto unusual for Spanish women in public. Militia girls invariably wore trousers, which had been unthinkable before; but even when armed, Spanish women were still chaperoned, unlike the female volunteers of other nationalities. In Madrid, too, he found the changed position of women conspicuous; young working-class girls were to be seen in hundreds, perhaps thousands, collecting for International Red Help. He describes their obvious enjoyment of what was for many a first appearance in public — collecting in couples, going up and down streets and into elegant cafes, talking uninhibitedly to foreigners and militia-men.

All the same, and in spite of other commentators’ occasional mutterings about “promiscuity,” he considered there was a general absence of any deep upheaval in sex life, less than in the Great War. But there was at least a tendency to dispense with or simplify the legal formalities. In place of marriage, anarchists favoured a Free Union based on mutual trust and shared responsibility; the bond between lovers was in many situations regarded as equivalent to the marriage tie. In collectives, according to Leval, the legal marriage ceremony persisted because people enjoyed it as a festive occasion — comrades would go through the procedures, then destroy the documentary proof.

The collectives embodied their own pressures to conformity, not only in the matter of work, which was expected to be taken seriously, but also in sexual matters. People who got married were often awarded gifts, extras and help with housing; on the other hand, the collective had the power to withhold privileges, such as the means to travel to town, if the purpose was considered unsuitable. Kamenski saw the village committee of Alcora in the role of pater families; he quotes a member of the collective as saying, “*There is no money for vice*”. Survivals of traditional attitudes included the curious assumption in some collectives that separate dining rooms were necessary for men and women, as required by human dignity. Segregation was also practiced in the home

¹¹ Borkenau, *The Spanish Cockpit* (Faber 193?),

for destitute children in Madrid, where boys were lodged, fed and taught, by a staff of women teachers, in the Palace Hotel, and girls in another building.

With all its limitations, the Spanish Revolution in its first phase brought new possibilities for women, in the zones not taken over by the Nationalists, and an element of personal liberation for some. One group which attempted to get a libertarian perspective on the situation was *Mujeres Libres* (Free Women). By the end of September 1936 it had seven Labour Sections — Transport, Public Services, Nursing, Clothing, Mobile Brigades for non-specialists, and brigades able to substitute for men needed in the war.¹² The federation grew, organising for women to make the maximum contribution to whatever practical work had to be done. Its members saw themselves as having an important educational function, working to emancipate women from the traditional passivity, ignorance and exploitation that enslaved them, and towards a teal understanding between men and women, who would work together without excluding each other. They saw a need to awaken women to vital consciousness of their movement, and convince them that isolated and purely feminine activity was now impossible. They saw themselves as based on comprehensive human aspirations for emancipation, realisable only in social revolution, which would liberate women from the stagnation of mediocrity.

Politically, the slogans of *Mujeres Libres* described the situation simply as a struggle between two classes and two ideologies: labour against privilege; liberty against dictatorship. It was to prove rather more complicated. The characteristic anarchist mixture of high-flown rhetoric, sketchy theory and intensive practical activity did not match up to the exigencies of grim political reality, despite the real achievements of the group under difficult conditions.

Defence of Madrid

Of course, the Nationalist threat was forcibly present, providing at first a stimulus as well as menace to revolutionary action, as people took the fight against it in their own hands. The stand made for Madrid against the Nationalist army in early November 1936 renewed the spirit of the immediate response to the military rising, and again women played as great a part as in the first days of the war. A women's battalion fought before Segovia Bridge. At Gestafe, in the centre of the northern front, women were under fire all morning and were among the last to leave. In the retreat to Madrid, occasional militia women were to be seen — some more soldierly in appearance than the men, others neat, groomed and made-up, a male observer noted.¹³ With the Italians of the International Column in Madrid was a sixteen-year-old girl from Ciudad Real, who had joined up after her father and brother were killed. She had the same duties as men, shared their way of life, and was said to be a crack shot,

Inside the city, women organised mass demonstrations, devised propaganda and slogans including the famous "*No Paseran*" ("*They Shall Not Pass*", accredited to La Pasionara), and built barricades, often with 'the help of children and sometimes under fire. Committees were set up based on districts, houses and blocks, for the provision of food, ammunition and communications. Women contributed actively to the defence, including anti-aircraft observation, and surveillance

¹² Report from the Madrid Group of *Mujeres Libres*, in *Spain and the Revolution*, 25.8.37, which includes the statements of their position. More information on the group is given in Temma F. Kaplan's article "Spanish Anarchism and Women's Liberation" (*Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 1971) — a contribution highly relevant to the subject of this pamphlet.

¹³ See Gilbert Cox, *The Defence of Madrid* (Gollanez., 1937)

of fifth-column suspects. Their committees organised collective meals and laundry; the creches and maternity homes set up between July and October carried on as best they could. Broué and Témime have described the spread of House and Neighbourhood Committees as amounting to a second Madrid Revolution, the basis of a genuine Commune.

Simultaneously, women often had to bear the brunt of hardship, risking violation of the curfew regulations which barred them from the streets before 6 a.m., in order to get a good place in queues for food (the first place the next day went to those not served). Wives were told that they must be ready to take the men's lunches not to the factories but to the trenches.¹⁴ Working-class women carried hot meals to the barricades. More middle-class women ran soup kitchens for refugees and first-aid stations for victims of fifth-column sniping.

Not everything done by women, however, can be seen in the same positive light. Accounts of recruiting processions of women, marching through the streets and calling idlers out of cafes, can be unpleasantly reminiscent of the erstwhile Suffragettes' white-feather chauvinism during the First World War. This impression is enhanced by a consideration of the attitudes evinced by Dolores Ibarruri, who became prominent as *La Pasionaria* about this time, her voice incessantly on loudspeakers in the streets and on Radio Madrid, urging women to fight with knives and boiling oil against the invader. The struggle against the Nationalists began to be posed in neo-nationalist terms, as the true patriotism — a recurring historical motif — instead of in class terms against reaction. By now the pressure to unite and fight against the fascists was beginning to threaten the gains of the revolution itself.

Retrenching, Legalisation, Thermidor

As the initial revolutionary impetus slowed, and the forces on the Republican side geared themselves to the task of winning the war, the contribution made by women did not diminish, but became more supportive in character. By November, according to Gilbert Cox, there were some militia-women still in the front rank, but their numbers were now few; they were more usually to be found as orderlies, cooking and washing behind the lines. George Orwell corroborates that by late December, there were still women serving in the militias, although not many. He adds that attitudes to them had changed. In the early days, many women had gone to the front as soon as they could get hold of a mechanic's overall¹⁵, the sight of armed women won applause and admiration where it was not taken as a matter of course. Whereas then, no-one would have seen anything comic in a woman handling a gun, militiamen now had to be kept out of the way when women were drilling because they tended to laugh at the women and put them off. One POUM (Partida Obrera de Unificacion Marxista — Workers' Party of Marxist Unification) position on Orwell's section of the front was an object of fascination because of three militia-women who did the cooking, and was put out of bounds to men of other companies.

The difference from the atmosphere of a few months earlier might be manifested in changes of dress — reappearance of garments that might be considered "bourgeois," girls in Barcelona in January '37 no longer hesitating to wear their prettiest clothes¹⁶ — or manners, with "comrade"

¹⁴ *Mundo Obrero*, 7.11.36, quoted in Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* (Penguin 1965), p.406.

¹⁵ *Alvarez del Vayo, Freedom's Battle* (London 1940).

¹⁶ *Borkenau*, p.175.

no longer the only acceptable form of address¹⁷, but it had a political context. “Dual Power,” when the collectives co-existed with a largely ineffectual government, had given way to the Popular Front government’s consolidation and extension of control. The informal leadership of the CNT-FAI had decided to enter the government.¹⁸ With more-or less heart-searching and rationalisation, they participated in the legalising, take-over and eventual suppression of the revolutionary gains, and paved the way for the Communist Party.

Federica Monseny, after some hesitation, accepted the appointment of Minister of Health. Coming from an anarchist family background, she had become prominent in the FAI and was regarded as one of the best orators of the movement. Later, she was to win the reputation of being the only government Minister prepared to discuss the participation frankly and critically¹⁹, even if not unequivocally. Her utterances include claims that the CNT were quite ingenuous in politics; that direct intervention in the Central Government was considered as the most far-reaching revolution made in the political and economic field; and that the state had been conceded a little credit and confidence in order to achieve a revolution from above,

At best, some reforms were achieved: legalisation of abortion, under controlled conditions, and the setting up of refuges open to all women, including prostitutes. Federica Montseny opposed the idea of dealing with prostitution by law, believing that it “*presents a problem of moral, economic and social character, which cannot be resolved juridically*”²⁰. A law of the Republic in June 1935 had banned prostitution, in such a way as to penalise the women concerned, during the revolution emphasis was more on educating out of prostitution, but it was not eliminated.²¹ The extent to which the Minister of Health was herself committed to farther-reaching sexual revolution is doubtful, in the light of an interview with Kaminski.²² Here she appeared as permissive towards birth control, but did not think that Spanish women would wish to use it (though there was probably an element of realism in this), did not believe in easy divorce, and considered that women would always enjoy “*compliments*” (i.e. sexist comments), incredulous at the suggestion that these might be thought insulting. Apparently she did, however, support the dissemination of birth-control information, as did *Mujeres Libres*.

The government also took steps to regulate marriage customs. Marriages had been celebrated at militia headquarters with the minimum of bother; those dating from July 18 or after were recognised as legal.²³ In April 1937 “*marriage by usage*” was instituted, whereby co-habitation for ten months, or less if pregnancy occurred, was considered as marriage. This decree was reversed due to the ensuing prevalence of bigamy.

As well as attending to details of social life, the government was preoccupied with the organisation of the war effort. A more “normal” wartime situation was setting in, with women coming to the fore to make up lacks in manpower. Another wartime feature was the inevitability of short-

¹⁷ See Orwell, pp.8–9, on earlier atmosphere.

¹⁸ The anarchists’ role vis-a-vis the government is critically discussed by Vernon Richards in *Lessons of the Spanish Revolution* (Freedom Press, 1972).

¹⁹ Burnett Bolloten, *The Grand Camouflage* (New York, 1961) — a thorough documentation of how the CP took over.

²⁰ Quoted by Temma Kaplan, J.C.H, VI,2,p. 108.

²¹ In besieged Madrid, according to Gilbert Cox, prostitutes were few but had little spare time.

²² Quoted in Gilbert Jackson, *The Spanish Republic and Civil War* (Princeton 1965). The tone of this conflicts somewhat with Temma Kaplan’s impression.

²³ Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, p.244. Actually, he writes “any marriage between militiamen,” but it is doubtful whether the Republic was that permissive.

ages. In the absence of rationing, women had to form queues for bread from 4 a.m. (although on Sundays the queue might be of women and men in equal numbers.) Food queues were controlled and harassed by Civil Guards on horseback²⁴, and in two serious bread riots in Barcelona early in 1937, crowds of mostly women were dispersed by rifle butts. Between July '36 and March '37 the cost of living doubled while wages rose by only 15%. In April '37 women in Barcelona held a demonstration on the issue of food prices.

To the external-causes of hardship were added the developing conflicts within the anti-fascist camp. The Communist Party, an insignificant group in Spanish politics at the start of the civil war, was extending its sphere of activity and tightening its hold on the Republican forces, backed by Russian military and political intervention. Women were a priority target, along with youth and cultural circles, when it came to making converts. Front organisations included the Union of Girls, Anti-Fascist Women, and the Union of Young Mothers. In July '37 JSU (Union of Socialist Youth) cells included 29,021 among women.²⁵

A physical clash came in the Barcelona May Days, 1937, when an attack on the Telephone Exchange by government forces intent on "*disarming the rearguard*" provoked fierce resistance. Once again the value of libertarian-participation in government — for the government — was demonstrated. At a time when, after three days fighting, it has been estimated that libertarian comrades and the POUM controlled four-fifths of Barcelona²⁶, the CNT-FAI leaders were called in to cool the situation. Appeals from Mariano Vasquez, Secretary of the National Committee of the CNT, and Garcia Oliver, an anarchist Minister of Justice, failed to pacify the workers. Federica Montseny was then sent on behalf of the Valencia Government (it had moved from Madrid with the Nationalist advance) after troops had been withdrawn from the front to send to Barcelona if necessary. She had obtained the government's agreement that "*these forces were not to be sent until such time as the Minister of Health should judge it necessary to do so*,"²⁷ thus envisaging the possibility that an anarchist Minister might give the O.K. for troops to be used against the working class. The net result was confusion, demoralisation, and concessions from the CNT side.

The "leading militants" seem to have taken the view that it was playing the enemy's game to give the Communist Party an excuse for attacking its opponents. Whether or not it needed an excuse, the fizzling out of the May Days' brief explosion enabled the CP to strengthen its position, forcing the anarchist Ministers into opposition and proscribing the POUM. Women were among its victims — those arrested included hospital nurses and wives of POUM members. Emma Goldman visited six female "politicals" in the women's prison, including Katia Landau, who urged anti-fascist prisoners to hunger strike and was herself released after two hunger strikes.²⁸

International Dimension

Internationally, the appeal of the Spanish Civil War was compounded of romantic exhortations and invocations of legality, which soon obscured the revolutionary aspects of the struggle in

²⁴ Orwell, pp188-89.

²⁵ S. G. Payne, *The Spanish Revolution* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1970). This compares with 70,080 peasant cells, 14,213 students', and 28,021 workers'.

²⁶ Leval, in Dolgoff's *Anarchist Collectives*, p. 60

²⁷ Peirats, quoted by Vernon Richards, p. 133.

²⁸ *Spain and the World*, 10.12.37.

“anti-fascist” rhetoric. This was the deliberate policy of the Popular Front/CP elements²⁹, and to recognise it is not to disparage the motives of those who answered the call. The first English volunteer to be killed was Felicia Browne, a CP painter shot in Aragon in August. Other women among the early volunteers were Renee Lafont, a French socialist journalist who died after being wounded in an ambush and captured, and Simone Weil, who was with the Durutti Column in Catalonia from August to October ’36.

In Britain, a hodge-podge of supportive organisations were set up under various auspices, with women heavily involved. The Defendants’ Aid Committee, for the welfare of British volunteers’ families, was founded by Mrs Charlotte Haldane of the CP and counted among its supporters the Duchess of Atholl, Ellen Wilkinson and Sybil Thorndike. Another CP woman, Isobel Brown, was behind the British Committee for the Relief of Victims of Fascism, which inspired the creation of the British Medical Aid Committee and Medical Aid Unit. Mrs Leah Manning, a British Socialist ex-MP, was in the last civil plane to reach Madrid when it was threatened, and offered her services as a propagandist in Britain for the saving of the city.

Libertarians were more aware of the social struggle. They were kept informed by the anarchist newspaper *Spain and the World*, which even included references to women from time to time; a report from *Mujeres Libres*; mention of the importance of mothers as educators, and the necessity of freeing them from religion; the caption to a picture — “*Spanish Women, too, enjoy Freedom: The Church will dictate no more*” (2-7-37). Emma Goldman, official delegate of the CNT-FAI in Britain, estimated in an interview (6-1-37) that women had not yet been given the chance to contribute much, and were insufficiently awakened and advanced; she judged that they had changed since 1929 however, becoming more alert and interested in social struggle. An article in the issue of 24-11-37 described the “*Transformation of Spanish women*” in terms of former backwardness due to Arabian influence and the domination of the Catholic Church, maintained by masculine authority and female resignation, now giving way to a “*magnificent and painful awakening*”.

But even Emma Goldman and other writers in *Spain and the World*, despite their awareness of what was going on (e.g. 19-7-37’ “Counterrevolution at Work”), tended to place increasing emphasis on “antifascism” first and foremost. The militarisation of the militias, attacks on elements, and suppression of the collectives left less and less that libertarians-could point to as positive. At the same time, a paradoxical determination was engendered to foster the idea of a vital struggle against fascism, so that everything that had been gone through would not appear useless. Of course it was possible to take the position that anything was better than fascism, but the “anything” one thereby helped to bring about was not the social revolution.

Under Fascism

In the event, the question of exactly what order of disaster would have resulted from a Republican victory and the impossibility of reviving a revolution that had been killed off, remained academic. Instead, Spain was overtaken by the alternative disaster of a fascist victory. While left politics might not have brought about women’s liberation, a right-wing regime meant its antithesis.

But there were women on the fascist side, not all of them duped or submissive auxiliaries. The Falange included women’s movements, both Carlists and Falange had women’s unions, and the Nazi Women’s Organisation was active in Spain. Pilar Primo de Rivera was prominent in one

²⁹ As documented by Bolloren and others.

of the factions opposed to Franco among the ideological assortment in the Nationalist camp, and ran the Auxilio Social founded by the widow of a Falangist leader in 1936. This organisation mobilised women for social work with means provided by Falangist women. Later, formal social service was instituted for women aged 17 to 35. In theory voluntary, a minimum of six months' continuous service or six successive periods of at least one month became a pre-requisite for taking exams and getting administrative jobs. Married women, widows with one child or more, and the disabled were exempt, in accordance with reactionary assumptions about the "sacred warmth of the family" and the position of women in the home.

Women provided the Nationalist army with the usual nursing, cooking and laundry services, and a few may have served in the army as such³⁰, but their participation was less noticeable on the right than on the left. The contrast was remarked. In Vigo, occupied by the Nationalists, scarcely a woman was to be seen out in the streets.³¹ The Nationalists too were aware of a difference: a memo found on one of their officers recommended that since large numbers of women were fighting on the enemy side, there was to be no distinction of sex in repression. Some did make a distinction, reserving special vituperation for the women who opposed them — most notorious was General Queipo de Llano, who raved against them and threatened the "*wives of anarchists and communists*" (significantly not assumed to be anarchists and communists in their own right) in his radio broadcasts from Seville, in terms that have been characterised as "*sexual psycho-pathology*".

Less hysterical forms of counter-liberatory action were practised and preached from the start, from suppression of the Republic's secular measures, including divorce, to a purity campaign on matters of dress, and the banning of bare legs. Spanish women were to be conditioned to accept a traditional submissive role. School was seen as an institution where young girls could learn their "*lofty duties*" in family and home.

This emphasis has continued, although economic pressures have led to more women working outside the home. To bring the story more up to date, a general book on Spain published in 1969³² gives some facts and figures:

- a) the percentage of Spanish labour made up by women rose from 7% to 17% between 1950 and 1965 — this compares with 25% in Italy, 31% in the UK;
- b) three-quarters of women employed were in the most menial, mechanical, low-paid work, although there was no legal disability as such;
- c) only between a quarter and a third of university students were women, although equal numbers of boys and girls went to first schools;
- d) there were three women professors, three women in the Cortes;
- e) A husband's formal permission was required before his wife could take a job, and might be withheld because the marriage allowance, payable after a second child, was forfeited if the wife worked.

³⁰ Temma Kaplan says, without giving a source for the statement, that they did (p.106), but the phenomenon cannot have been widespread. See Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, p.409, note 2, on the reaction of an Irish Lieutenant who fought for the Nationalists: "Women at the battle seemed to him the final degradation of the Republican side."

³¹ Koestler, *Spanish Testament*. *ibid*, for description of de Llano.

³² S. Clissold, *Spain* (Thames & Hudson, 1969).

Women have continued to resist. When the Republic was defeated, many joined the stream of refugees, opting for exile. At the French frontier, women and children were separated from men, to be housed in barns and empty buildings, women were given 8 francs a day, enough to buy food when pooled, and communal kitchens were set up. Later, women were interned at Argeles-sur-Mer, where there was a high rate of infant mortality. Such an existence was nevertheless preferred to life under fascism; incidents were recorded of women committing suicide with their children from a train returning refugees to Spain from occupied France.³³ Isabel de Palencia, who had been Minister Plenipotentiary for Republican Spain to Sweden and Finland from 1936 to 1939 and lived in exile in Mexico, wrote in 1945 that there were still eight jails for women political prisoners in Madrid. She cited a Falange newspaper report of a baptism ceremony in 1940 for 280 infants born in jail

More than twenty years later, Miguel Garcia described how wives of political prisoners had occupied churches in support of a hunger strike, and had to be dislodged by the forces of public order.³⁴ Lists of recent arrestees in recent years have included women, eg. *Front Liberaire des Luttes de Classes*, February '75, gives the names of three women among "*Twenty Revolutionary Militants who could face the death penalty.*" The odds against them may be judged from the following: "In Spain it is still part of the Civil Code that *"for reasons of matrimonial harmony, the husband is the decision maker as his natural, religious and historical right."*... a Spanish married woman needs her husband's written permission to transfer property, appear as a witness in court, apply for a passport, sign a contract, or start her own bank account.

No statement in Spain may be spoken or written in favour of divorce, abortion or the use of contraceptives. The penalties for taking part in feminist action are so severe as to be incredible. Simply participating in a discussion of women's problems can result in several years in jail.

"Recently, a Spanish woman was sentenced to two years and four months in prison after police discovered feminist literature in her flat. Her husband, who was apolitical, was given the same sentence. According to Spanish legal theory a woman cannot act on her own, her husband must therefore be responsible for her actions," — Freedom, 4.11.72, based on a report in Ramparts.

Conclusions

Until comparatively recently, it was almost necessary to justify the term "Revolution" in connection with the Spanish events of 1936 and after, so thoroughly had the social aspects of the struggle been obscured,³⁵ It might still have to be defended against purists who disparage the collectivisation as "*self-managed capitalism*". Even if this description were strictly accurate from a narrowly economic viewpoint, to deny any other significance to what happened would be to adopt blinkers. Neither can the failure to abolish "legitimate" government negate the value of the experience — "dual power" is a feature of revolutions. In spite of — and because of — its limitations, the Spanish Revolution requires and repays critical study.

In times of intensified social change, especially war and revolution, women are generally seen to be fulfilling new roles, acquiring a new view of themselves, and forcing changes in society's

³³ Isabel de Palencia, *Smouldering Freedom* (Gollancz, 1946).

³⁴ Miguel Garcia, *Spanish Political Prisoners* (Freedom Press, 1970).

³⁵ See Noam Chomsky, "Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship" in *American Power and the New Mandarins*, (New York, 1967).

view of them. This can be taken as an index of the extent to which they are suppressed and restricted in “normal” times, and the consequent waste of potential. Reversion to normality often brings women back to their former position, or near it. The demonstration of what women can achieve is effectively forgotten — which is one reason for documenting and analysing such periods. The history of women, however, has to be rescued not only from obscurity, but from two contrasting strands of attention it receives from time to time: the patronising line about women doing a grand job, being one hundred per cent behind the men (where else?); and the counter-tendency, which occasionally comes over in women’s liberation writings, to regard everything done by women as good and beautiful by definition.

In Spain, then, women were involved on all sides — no surprise, but perhaps worth making explicit in view of current slogans about “*supporting our sisters in struggle*” and the assumption that difference of sex is somehow fundamental. Did women in the Spanish Revolution have less — fundamentally — in common with men who shared their class situation and political commitment than they had with their notional “sisters” on the fascist side? All those women might have suffered in some degree from male domination, but there was no perspective for their uniting on that basis to achieve liberation.

On the other hand, liberation was not achieved by the spontaneous working out of social contradictions, even with the resistance of a strong libertarian movement. It may even be correct to judge, as Temma Kaplan did³⁶, that “*There is no reason to believe that the condition of Spanish women would have been fundamentally changed if the anarchists had won the war*”. But it is difficult to project the precise implications- of such a victory, and in my view she tends to exaggerate the reluctance of libertarians to envisage changes in sex roles and values. Nevertheless, her article raises important points, indicating the factors which prevented the transformation of the lives of Spanish working class women.

The inhibiting factors were rooted in the pre-revolutionary situation. Libertarians were aware of how capitalist society exploited women, but, to quote Temma Kaplan, “*They did not develop a programme to prevent similar exploitation in revolutionary society.*” The liberation of women had not been thought in theoretical and practical terms. It is not clear whether the moves towards more liberated sexuality were due to much more than a refusal of church and state forms (marriage). The willful lack of clarity which bedevils libertarian movements, and was to prove fatal in confrontation with the hard politics of the CP, had consequences here too. And if libertarians failed to confront their internalised repression, for the majority of the population the weight of inherited tradition must have been practically overwhelming.

In Temma Kaplan’s view, women revolutionaries subordinated their specific demands in the interests of winning the war; she implies a contrast between this policy and that of the anarchists as a whole. In fact, anarchists in general did go along with the Popular Front to a great extent. Eventually, they voiced their differences with the CP and made the conflict for a time explicit — but their libertarian programme was subordinated and submerged. Their revolution was lost a considerable time before the war was lost. Glossing over real differences for fear of dividing the movement means that the tougher, dominant ideology triumphs by default: authoritarianism wins over libertarian socialism, male domination over women’s liberation. This lesson is particularly relevant to movements orientated against what appears as an obvious “greater evil.”

³⁶ J. C. H., VI, 2, p. 102.

The fate of women in revolution is closely connected with the fate of the revolution as a whole. In Spain, there were initial gains, even if partial, limited and fragmented (it could be argued that the lives of Spanish men were not totally transformed either); stabilisation set in with the wartime situation, to be followed by reverses; defeat brought reaction. But the fate of women must not be left as a neglected, subordinate factor, or the social revolution, as well as the women's cause, will be diminished and damaged.

How relevant for us than the question of what might have happened if... , is the question of what happens now. There are some grounds for calculated optimism: society is that much more advanced, the crisis of authority that much more acute, Recent years have brought the development of the women's liberation movement, raising issues of inescapable significance for all revolutionaries, and furthering discussion of them. At least there are some things our male comrades could not now get away with, and, it is to be hoped, would not wish to impose. And — again hopefully — we have the beginnings of a libertarian movement which can expect to have credibility and to develop towards a new vision of society only if the liberation of women is an integral part of its perspectives

Acknowledgement

Thanks are due to all those who lent books and other material, also to comrades at Freedom Press for the chance to peruse their files of Spain and the World, and to a correspondent in Mujeres Libres in Exile.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Liz Willis
Women in the Spanish revolution
October 15, 1975

Retrieved on 2012-03-12 from <https://web.archive.org/web/20120312154349/http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/disband/solidarity/womenSpain.html>
Originally *published* October 15, 1975, by *Solidarity*, London

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

Background Conditions of life for Spanish women prior to 1936 were oppressive and restrictive in the extreme. Work was hard, long and poorly paid (2), and when improvements did occur they were not always entirely beneficial to women. "They did not develop a programme to prevent similar exploitation in revolutionary Gaston Leval in Collectives in the Spanish Revolution (translated by Vernon society." The liberation of women had not been thought in theoretical and practical Richards, Freedom Press, 1975; pp. 207-213), reports the meeting of a village terms. Start by marking "Women in the Spanish Revolution" as Want to Read: Want to Read saving! Want to Read. Currently Reading. Read. Women in the Spanish R by Liz Willis. Other editions. Defying Male Civilization examines women's role and experiences in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). It addresses the significant contributions made by anonymous women at the homefront as well as the heroic accomplishments of female political leaders and women who fought at the war fronts. When the war erupted, women's lives were dramatically transformed. It introduces readers to the complex reality of war and revolution from a gender perspective, focusing not only on women's heroic achievements but on the limitations of change. From the Back Cover. Some women also broke completely with conventional gender roles by undertaking an active part in warfare as milicianas. They took up arms and strove to be accepted on a par with soldiers at the front.