Malatesta

The Occupation of the Factories in Italy in 1920

General strikes of protest no longer upset anybody; neither those who take part in them nor those against whom they are directed. If only the police had the intelligence to avoid being provocative, they would pass off as any public holiday.

One must seek something else. We put forward an idea: the take-over of factories. For the first attempt probably only a few will take part and the effect will be slight; but the method certainly has a future, because it corresponds to the ultimate ends of the workers' movement and constitutes an exercise preparing one for the ultimate general act of expropriation.¹

The metal workers started the movement over wage rates. It was a strike of a new kind. Instead of abandoning the factories, the idea was to remain inside without working, and maintain a night and day guard to ensure that the bosses could not operate the night shift. But this was in 1920. Throughout Italy there was revolutionary fervour among the workers and soon the demands changed their character. Workers thought that the moment was ripe to take possession once for all of the means of production. They armed themselves for defence, they transformed many factories into veritable fortresses, and began to organise production on their own. Bosses were either thrown out or held in a state of arrest . . . It was the right of property abolished in fact, and the law violated in so far as it served to defend capitalist exploitation; it was a new regime, a new form of social life which was being ushered in. And the government stood by because it felt impotent to offer opposition: it admitted it later when apologising to Parliament for its failure to take repressive action.

The movement grew and showed signs of drawing in other categories of workers; here and there peasants occupied the land. It was the beginning of a revolution which was developing, I would say, almost in an ideal way.

The reformists naturally frowned on the movement, and sought to bring it down. The socialist daily Avanti! not knowing which way to turn, tried to make out that we were pacifists, because in Umantìa Nova we had said that if the movement spread to all sectors of industry, that
if workers and peasants had followed the example of the metallurgists, of getting rid of the bosses and taking over the means of production, the revolution would succeed without shedding a single drop of blood.

But this was of no avail. The masses were with us; we were called to the factories to speak, to encourage and to advise the workers, and would have needed to be in a thousand places at once to satisfy all their requests. Wherever we went it was the anarchists' speeches which were applauded while the reformists had to withdraw or make themselves scarce.

The masses were with us because we were the best interpreters of their instincts, their needs and interests.

Yet, the underhand work of the CGL and the agreements entered into with the Giolitti government to create the impression of a kind of victory through the sham of workers control was sufficient to induce the workers to abandon the factories, at the very moment when their chances of success were greatest.

The occupation of the factories and the land suited perfectly our programme of action.

We did all we could, through our paper (Umanità Nova daily, and the various anarchist and syndicalist weeklies) and by personal action in the factories, for the movement to grow and spread. We warned the workers of what would happen to them if they abandoned the factories; we helped in the preparation of armed resistance, and explored the possibilities of making the revolution with hardly a shot being fired if only the decision had been taken to use the arms that had been accumulated.

We did not succeed, and the movement collapsed because there were too few of us and the masses were insufficiently prepared.

When D’Aragona (the secretary of the CGL) and Giolitti (the Prime Minister) concocted the farce of workers control with the acquiescence of the socialist party, which was at the time under communist leadership, we put the workers on their guard against the wicked betrayal. But as soon as the order to leave the factories was issued by the CGL, the workers, who though they had always received us and called for us with enthusiasm and who had applauded our incitement to all-out resistance, docilely obeyed the order, though they disposed of powerful military means for resistance.

The fear in each factory of remaining alone in the struggle, as well as the difficulty of laying-in food supplies for the various strong points induced everybody to give in, in spite of the opposition of individual anarchists dispersed among the factories.

The movement could not last and triumph without growing and
spreading, and in the circumstances it could not grow without the support of the leaders of the CGL and the Socialist Party which disposed of the large majority of organised workers. Both Confederation and Socialist Party (including the communists) lined up against the movement and it all had to end in a victory for the bosses. 4

1. _Umanità Nova_, the Italian anarchist daily, March 17, 1920
2. Confederazione Generale del Lavoro (the reformist Trade Union organisation).
3. _Umanità Nova_, June 28, 1922
4. _Pensiero e Volontà_, April 1, 1924
Ernst Schneider
The Wilhelmshaven Revolt

Author's Note

The history of the toilers of the sea has yet to be written, but when it is, it will form part of the history of the forward storming vanguard of the proletariat.

I, who had a full and active share in those events, consider it my duty, in the interests of the working class, to record the following account, even at the risk of not avoiding inaccuracies, so that whosoever wishes, may understand.

Until the year 1935, I had in my possession the complete archive, but it had to be burned for reasons of safety for my comrades and myself. Those documents are, of course, lost, but it is better to lose documents than to lose one's life.

After all, I have kept my head, I am, therefore, able to make further use of it.

Introduction

With the rapid industrialisation of Germany, there grew up what was then, numerically the strongest workers’ movement in the world. Contrary to Britain, the socialist workers’ party came into being first, then, later on came the Trade Unions with their thousands of members.

The anti-socialist laws of Bismarck of the last century, did not hinder, but rather furthered the social revolutionary development, though the fact remains, that the ideological development of the oppressed masses has always been far behind the revolutionary technical development.

Nevertheless, during this process, the capitalist class was able, out of their immense profits, to throw a bone now and again to the oppressed. This, and ideological factors has opened the door to labour reformism.
The majority of the professional leaders who dreamt of ‘growing gradually into socialism’ became, forced by circumstances, associates of the capitalist system.

The rise of industrial Germany to the position of a great power came only after other countries had already developed independent manufacturing industries. There was hardly a territory left where traders and financiers could establish themselves, and to compensate for this the German State supported the banks and cartels in their fight against foreign competitors. Because their home market was too small for the highly developed economy which they controlled, the German monopolists needed territory and markets, which could be only obtained by national monopolies and State-capitalist expansion.

In Germany, contrary to Britain where international banking was the rule, national finance capital was predominant, which means banking capital, utilised for big industrial concerns and trusts which have a monopolist position inside the country.

As a matter of fact, Germany’s drive for expansion abroad, proved to be a most dangerous competitor and rival of the older Imperialisms, in particular, Great Britain.

Around the 90’s of the last century, Britain lost the greatest part of its trade on the Pacific coast to Germany, to say nothing of its losses to Germany in other parts of the world.

The mode of production and the current ideologies which determine the social-economic formations, the territorial division of the world by the great capitalist-military powers, the domination of the big monopolist combines make a series of imperialist World Wars inevitable, it could only be a question of time.

Even the Conference of the Social-Democrats in 1907, which was held in Stuttgart — even the wholly opportunistic — could not help but come to the conclusion that ‘Capitalism means War’.

But these were words, mere words. The International Socialist movement with its declared Leader-organisations proved itself to be in practice a capitalist institution. Instead of their Utopia of ‘growing into socialism’ they grew, in accord with natural laws, into inseparable cohesion with the capitalist system.

This is certainly nothing new, but it is necessary to bear it in mind.

In publications of the Left Radicals in Germany before the first World-War, it was pointed out that successful mass actions occur almost spontaneously. This is very true, and history proves it. In this manner, for instance, the sailors, through their spontaneous strike in Hamburg (1855) gained, besides the biggest wage increase ever known before, a general improvement in their working conditions and accommodation.
The same could be pointed out in the case of the spontaneous action of the crew of the giant S.S ‘Vaterland’ at Cuxhaven in the Spring of 1914. Here, the seamen, about 1,300, acted as a self-asserting fighting unit of the working class. There was then no time for needless collaboration between the seamen and the millionaires of the Hamburg-Amerika Line (Hapag), but there was solidarity and self-consciousness of the seamen. In short, the proud lords of the Hapag were forced to give in to the demands of the seamen unconditionally.

Moreover, the example given in this action of the proletarian vanguard spread over all the ocean-going ships of the German Merchant Fleet. Welcomed by the broad masses of the dock and riverside proletariat, again and again, they had emphasised their intention to fight their cause out. They knew that this could not be done by supporting the capitalist forces, but only against them.

The German social-democratic Press at the same time — it is characteristic — had, besides sneering at the seamen, little courage to report the matter impartially. The big Dailies in New York, however, made less secrecy out of it. Their front pages were full of the bold, but illegal strike action of the seamen on board the ‘Vaterland’.

It is essential to note that service in the Imperial Navy was compulsory for every German seaman. The crews of the merchant fleet were almost identical with the sailors on board the warships. The rest of the men of the war fleet were recruited from other sections of the industrial proletariat. Thus, they had not only the same interest, but also the same insubordinate spirit. Nevertheless, although their continuous struggle for freedom has been far less successful, the mutiny on board the warship ‘Oldenburg’ in the previous century opened an epoch of physical resistance and prolonged unrest of the war fleet.

Without a doubt, the die was cast for revolutionary mass action. This then, was the spiritual attitude amongst the maritime proletariat in Germany in 1914.

1. Masses and Leaders

The war clouds gathered over Germany. The rank and file of the German Labour Movement, at that time, in numbers, the mightiest movement in the Second International, urged for measures against the approaching war. Crowded mass meetings were held, and the slogan was given: ‘Mass action against the war’.

But words, mere words. The mass of the workers under the influence of their organisations, strongly organised and disciplined in Party and
Trade Unions were waiting for the call to action from their trusted leaders, but the call never came! Instead of action came complete political collapse. In contradiction of their previous teaching, the spokesman of the Social Democratic Party in the German Parliament on August 4, 1914, declared, ‘In the hour of danger we shall stand by our Fatherland’. The majority of the Social Democratic leaders had found their Fatherland. The workers were still without one!

The problem of masses and leaders remained practically unsolved, despite the prolonged struggle of revolutionary socialists such as Rosa Luxemburg, Anton Pannekoek, Heinrich Laufenberg, Johann Knief and others, whose devotion to the cause was unquestioned, against the then already flourishing policy of class betrayal. The overwhelming majority of the Social Democratic leaders rejected the idea of self-determination of the working-class, and worked secretly through their revisionist apparatus ‘Verein Arbeiterpresse’ for the subordination of the proletariat to the bureaucratic organisations. The catastrophe was unavoidable. Many workers felt that their sacrifices had been in vain. They had not understood the dynamics of their own organisation, so they felt betrayed, and they were. That brought disillusionment on the one hand, irritated nerves and indifference on the other. But still things went on.

2. The Grouping of the German Labour Movement After August 4th, 1914

The split of the Social Democratic Party developed the following various groups:

1. Majority Social Democrats — controllers of the old Party apparatus, supported the imperialist war in every way, and captured the bulk of the Party members.

2. Social Democratic Labour Partnership — (Soc. Arb. Gemeinschaft), later called Independent Social Democratic Party — in opposition to No. 1, but undetermined. Supported, for instance, financially, the Left Radicals in Hamburg, but declined to share further activity with them.

3. Revolutionary Confidential men (Revolutionäre Obleute), in factories and workshops in Berlin. Their policy was class-struggle, not imperialist war.

1. Since the old terms ‘Leader’, ‘Official’, ‘President’, etc. have become in the minds of class conscious workers synonymous with another class, the German term ‘Obmann’ (confidential man) is the concept for trustworthy fellow workers — respected class comrades.
5. Rhineland and Westphalia Group — around the propaganda periodical *Kampf* (‘Combat’), advocated mass action, and fought Nos. 1 and 2 on revolutionary socialist lines.
6. International Group, Berlin — published excellent revolutionary socialist pamphlets and the well-known *Spartakus* letters — distributed by groups 3, 4, 5 and 7. The first *Spartakus Brief* (Letter) addressed to the working class commenced with the words ‘You are asleep, Spartakus, instead of acting in a revolutionary manner’.
7. Left Radicals — later they changed their name to International Communists of Germany — had groups in Bremen, Hamburg, Wilhelmshaven, Braunschweig, Hanover, Saxony, East Prussia and Stettin. Published from 1916 to the end of 1918, the weekly paper *Arbeiter Politik* (Organ for scientific socialism). Advocated the programme of the revolutionary working-class on dynamic Marxian lines. Developed the Workers’ Councils movement. Their call to action in the war industries was promptly followed by the workers. The Left Radicals saw in the blind belief in the efficacy of Parties, one of the main reasons for the impotence of the working class.
8. There were also small groups of Anarchist Syndicalists — revolutionary pacifists, bold comrades-in-arms — who almost joined the Left Radicals.

It cannot be queried, history is made by all, and time forced to follow suit. In 1916, the spokesman of the Social Democrats, announced in the German Parliament, ‘The peace which seems possible to-day will leave Germany and her allies in the eyes of Europe, as a group of powers, whose spheres of economic control extend from the marshes of the Elbe, to the waters of the Persian Gulf. Thus, Germany will have won by her arms, the kernel of a great sphere of economic control, worthy to be set as a closed economic territory by the side of those of other world empires’.

This patriotic announcement was answered by the revolutionary socialist, Karl Liebknecht — at that time a conscripted soldier — at an illegal, but quite open demonstration in Berlin on the May Day of 1916 with the slogan, ‘Down with the War! The principal enemy is in your own country’. (‘Der Feind steht im eigenen land!’) Karl Liebknecht — though an M.P. — was sentenced to 6 years penal servitude. But his voice was heard in the workshops of the war industries, as well as on the battlefronts and in the naval units at sea.
3. The Secret Committee of the North Sea Fleet and the Naval Base of Wilhelmshaven

Liebknecht’s call was not in vain. It encouraged the opposition forces against the war. On board the cruisers, destroyers, torpedo-boats and other small fighting units, a whispering campaign went on among the sailors, and now and then acclamations; ‘Es lebe Liebknecht’ (‘Long live Liebknecht’).

Meanwhile, signals were given by a secret committee, later known as the Revolutionary Committee, or for short, RC.

The Committee issued definite instructions, warnings, information and slogans, and these signals were promptly transferred from mouth to mouth within a certain alliance. No member knew more than two comrades, one to the right, and one to the left like the links of a chain. The first link was known by only one comrade — the Committee.

Under cover of seamen’s yarns in the lower decks, in the lockers, the munition rooms, crow’s nests of the fighting masts, even in the lavatories, an underground organisation was built up which did its share towards stopping the imperialist war, and sweeping away the semi-feudal monarchy. The examples set by this underground organisation are of historical importance.

Besides the organisation of the RC, there appeared some instances of individual peace propagandists who were almost wiped out with the execution of two harmless conscientious objectors, the sailors Reichpietsch and Koebes. Whatever their motives, their struggle formed part of our own struggle, and therefore they died for us and our cause.

In this connection, it is a fact that a representative of one of these unfortunate sailors who consulted some prominent Social Democrat MPs, was shown the door. The Social Democrat MPs were not interested.

Meanwhile, the unrest grew amongst the seamen in the Fleet. A purge of the crews of certain ships was ordered by commanders of the Fleet, but the growth of the movement was far ahead of the measures taken by the Naval authorities, and the purging was, no doubt, more of a nuisance than a wholesome cure! Suspects — always the wrong ones, of course — were promptly ordered off to their Stammkompanie’s (Naval barracks). From there, thousands of seamen were ordered off to the Marine Division on the coast of Flanders.

In March 1917, leaflets written in block letters, signed by the Committee were distributed by the sailors of the 3rd Sailors Regiment. Later on, meetings of the seamen were held at the East End Park. These meetings were of course, illegal, but they were well protected.
Without doubt, the underground movement in the Navy did not stop on the gangways and accommodation ladders of the warships!

A Left Radical member of the movement whilst on leave in Hamburg in April 1917, was one of the 18 participants of a secret meeting arranged by a Hamburg woman comrade held in the woods near Gross Borstel, ‘Zum gruinen Jaeger’. The result of the meeting was a broadsheet addressed to the women workers in the war industries, and to the soldiers.

Two days later, after 5,000 of the leaflets had been spread among the people and placarded on walls and buildings, spontaneous strikes in the war industries followed. Dozens of strikers and leaflet distributors were arrested and imprisoned. It must be noted that our active friends in Hamburg were all women war workers, shorthand typists, etc., who placarded the broadsheets. Many of these heroines and comrades, as well as the printer, a business man who was not a member of the movement, were sentenced to penal servitude. Our sacrifices were heavy. To mention one’s own personal sacrifices would be invidious. A fighter is bound to fight and suffer. To do so for the cause is comparatively light. ‘True enough we must fight for the peace, if not, then it is the peace of the graveyard, the peace that will press down Europe and other parts of the world in a new era of darkest reaction.’ (Rosa Luxemburg).

Our task could only be to redouble our activities in the movement on board the warships, and on shore.

In July 1917, an example was given by the seamen of a (Commando) squadron headed by the battle cruiser ‘Prinzregent’ which lay anchored in the lower Elbe, at the order ‘weigh anchor, all hands to action stations’ some signs and gestures were made by the seamen, but no move was made to obey the order. Their own order ‘fires out’ proved mightier than the orders of the chiefs of the Fleet. Hundreds of sailors were sentenced to penal servitude from one to fifteen years. This event, and the attitude of the Admiralty showed the situation in general, clearly. Flurry and excitement amongst the authorities, but a staunch determination in the lower ranks.

Again the seamen had shown that they did not shrink from armed resistance. They knew that they could only succeed by concerted action by the seamen of the Fleet as a whole in close collaboration with their comrades in the Army and in the industries. Theoreticians who exaggerate the difference between theory and the living reality, may go astray, but seldom the practical fighters. The outlook of the latter was right. In January 1918, occurred the spontaneous strikes in the armament industries, followed by plunderings of bakeries in the Reich.
Then followed months of remarkable silence. It was the silence before the storm.

Towards summer, a meeting was held in the ‘Edelweiss’, the biggest dance hall in Wilhelmshaven. The meeting was protected by columns of the underground movement of the Fleet. It was late in the evening. The dance hall was filled with sailors, girls, and a few civilians. The orchestra had left the stage during the interval when suddenly, the great curtain of the stage fell, and shouts were heard: ‘Stay where you are, do not move!’ Then, from behind the curtain was heard a loud voice, impressive and convincing; ‘we are on the eve of decisive occurrences. There will be at last, no more war, no more oppression of the toiling and bleeding masses. . . but we must fight on, hard, long and bitterly. For the sake of the cause, no imprudence. Our day is coming.’

It came.

In September, a secret Conference of the various groups of the workers opposition took place in Berlin. Representatives of a number of industrial workshops, from North, East, Central and West Germany were assembled.

Summarising the reports of the assemblies that the independent worker-activities were constantly increasing all over the Reich, it was urged that the revolutionary class must violently explain its programme to the broad masses, regardless of expense and, that this was to be carried out without delay. . . Instead of the term ‘Socialism’, the term ‘Communism’, i.e., the association of free and equal producers into free Communes, was adopted.

A Manifesto — written by the late Comrade Frenken — in order to enlighten the social-democratic duped masses — to untie them from their careerist leadership, was issued in many thousands of copies, and some days later distributed within reach.

4. The Socialist Republic, Wilhelmshaven

At the end of October 1918, there was a spate of cases of insubordination and disobedience among the sailors at the base of the North Sea Fleet, and an outburst appeared inevitable.

Warships of all classes and types were alongside the docks and quays of Wilhelmshaven. Major ships including the battleship ‘Baden’ and the battle cruiser ‘Hindenburg’, were ready for action and awaiting orders from the chief of the Fleet. Ships anchored outside the docks and in the river Jade — the cruiser squadron, torpedo boat and destroyer flotillas — were also ready for action.
Rumours circulated to the effect that it had been decided to engage
the enemy in a final encounter, in which the German Fleet would
triumph or die for the glory of the ‘Kaiser and the Fatherland’.

The sailors of the Fleet had their own views on the ‘Glory of the
Fatherland’, when they met they saluted one another with a ‘Long live
Liebknecht’. The crews of the ships moored at the quayside were to be
found most of the time, not on board, but in the workshops and large
lavatories ashore. Officers, contrary to custom, carried revolvers, and
ordered the men to return to their ships. The men obeyed, but
meanwhile, others had left their ships and swelled the number ashore.
The situation was favourable, the Committee passed the message:
‘Guarded meeting after dark at the New Soldiers’ Cemetery. Send
delegate from every unit.’

According to the rules of the secret organisation, delegates had to
proceed to the meeting alone, or at most, in pairs, and at suitable
distances so as not to attract attention. The meeting took place, and
showed how general was the response to the call of the Committee. The
meeting place was guarded by sailors. Those present, stood, knelt, or
sat between the graves. There was no time for discussion or speeches.
The names of the ships moored in the harbour and river were called,
and out of the dark the almost invisible delegates just answered ‘Here’.
One comrade spoke, briefly but firmly. ‘The time has come. It is now
or never. Act carefully but resolutely. Seize officers and occupants.
Occupy the signalling stations first. When control has been gained,
hoist the red flag in the maintop or gaff. Up for the red dawn of a new
day!’

In accordance with the rules of the organisation, all had to stay in
their places for ten minutes after the speaker had left.

Fortunately, it was a dark night. On their return to their ships and
barracks some of the comrades heard the heavy tramp of marching
troops. Shots were fired, and the cry went up, ‘Down with the war’.
The sound of marching came from sailors — some 300 in number —
under arrest, who were being taken under escort to the train to the
prison Oslebshausen near Bremen. They were warmly cheered by the
passing sailors. When a dozen or so sailors were passing the building of
the Admiralty, they noticed that the guard house was occupied by
soldiers from a town, Marksen, in East Friesland. It was a machine-gun
detachment. The sailors without hesitation carried out an attack, and in
a moment had captured fifteen machine-guns. The commander of the
detachment, an old sergeant-major, after a short palaver, declared
himself in solidarity with the sailors. The sailors then marched to Door
A of the Imperial shipyard, and upon reaching the watch, found it
already in the hands of the revolutionaries. Continuing towards the
battleship ‘Baden’ they elected a new commander. He was a member of the Committee.

By this time the dawn had come. Shots were heard on board a small light cruiser lying in dry dock, and the white ensign was seen to be still flying in the maintop. After a struggle of about an hour, every ship except the ‘Hindenburg’ was in the hands of the revolutionaries. From the ‘Hindenburg’ the white ensign still flew. The commander of the ‘Baden’ signalled ‘Surrender or we shoot’. A struggle was observed on board the ‘Hindenburg’ and a detachment of stokers and firemen of the ‘Baden’ prepared to board the ‘Hindenburg’ and give a hand. But before they reached their destination, the white eagle ensign was hauled down and the red flag hoisted. At the same time, a signal was received from the cruiser squadron that there too, the revolutionaries had gained the upper hand.

At the orders of the Committee, a mass meeting was held outside the building of the Admiralty. A great crowd of 20,000 attended and later marched round the naval base, headed by the 15th Torpedo Half-Flotilla. A comrade announced that all the commanders and admirals of the North Sea Fleet had been deposed, and as long as they kept to their quarters, they would suffer no harm, but if they moved, they would be dealt with.

Three or four comrades entered the Admiralty building and informed the Admiral what had happened. His Excellency answered regretfully, that he could not do anything for the moment. He was informed that for the moment nothing would happen to him if he remained quiet and stayed at home.

By this time the crowds of war workers were streaming into the streets. It is regretted to have to state the fact that sections of the workers were still waiting for a call from their anti-revolutionary leaders, and had to be forced to be free. Their behaviour, as also was their leaders’ and the bulk of ‘the white collar proletarians’ was consciously — or unconsciously — reactionary during this period.

Events moved quickly. Big demonstrations took place, and processions converged at the training ground. After speeches and reports on the events, elections of workers’ and sailors’ councils were held. Every ship had its council and delegate. The same was done for each factory and town district.

That evening a meeting of the delegates took place, which constituted itself as the Revolutionary Government. A council of twenty-one sailors was elected, which was, so to speak, the Administrative Government. This, in its turn, elected a body of five members with executive powers. But when the first meeting of this council of five took place, it transpired that four of the members were
not revolutionary socialists. The fifth member told the others that the revolution could not be made by namby-pamby revolutionaries, and that he could not successfully work with them. Circumstances however, allowed them to carry on for some time. In fact, there was from the beginning, two governments in Wilhelmshaven, the Council of Five, with headquarters in the Officers Casino, and the Revolutionary Committee, backed by the revolutionary socialist seamen with headquarters on board the 'Baden' and in the 'Thousand Man Barracks'.

The following anecdotes about two of the members of the Council of Five will serve as an indication of the calibre of the majority of the Council.

A naval stoker, who spoke like a lay preacher, but was of questionable character, and was associated in some way or another with the Admiralty and other authorities of the Imperial régime, and also in close connection with Ebert, Noske, Scheidemann, etc., who, on November 4, 1918, when the revolutionary sailors stormed the shipyard barracks, begged his fellow stokers to barricade the main gates. They told him — with a kick — to behave himself. When the gates were then smashed in, he straightened himself, jumped to the entrance, and shouted with a theatrical gesture: 'Der Freiheit eine Gasse' ('A path for freedom'; a quotation from a poem on the death of Arnold Winkelried.) This man styled himself — under instruction from his imperial masters — President of Oldenburg, East Friesland and Wilhelmshaven, but in practice he kept very much in the background.

Another actor, an even more pitiable member of the Council of Five — whose surname was unfortunately the same as the author's — tried to make friends with the reactionary army of officers who were then approaching to attack Wilhelmshaven, and had for this purpose large posters printed, and put up during the street fighting, which read: 'I am not the Spartacist Ernst Schneider who is the leader of the Revolutionary Committee, and I have nothing to do with his communistic arrangements. My name is Joseph Schneider, and I am a Social Democrat.'

This Joseph was punished on the spot by working-class women, who drove him out of Wilhelmshaven with broomsticks. And like the Joseph of the Bible, he fled to another land — in this instance, Russia — and became a wealthy merchant.

5. The Critical Point

By this time, power was practically in the hands of the workers', soldiers', and sailors' councils; if not all over the Reich, at least in Wilhelm-
shaven, Bremen and Brunswick. The revolutionary proletariat pressed for a clear decision. Street and barricade fighting in towns and villages was the order of the day. Shock columns of revolutionary sailors were sent to all parts of Germany. For the purpose of ensuring permanent communications with Kronstadt, several hundred fully armed sailors were sent by the Revolutionary Committee to occupy the wireless station at Nauen, near Berlin, at that time still in the hands of the Ebert Government. They never returned. After fruitless attempts to capture the station, many of them went on to Berlin, and formed, under the leadership of an Imperial army officer, the revolutionary socialist, Lieutenant Dorenbach - a friend of Karl Liebknecht - the Peoples' Marine Division, (Volks-Marine Division). Our own attempts to get in touch with the revolutionaries in Kronstadt from the Wilhelmshaven wireless station were unsuccessful, our messages were jammed, first by a station somewhere in Finland, and later by Nauen.

In this situation — by now it was November 18 — the leaders of the trade unions joined the big industrialists in the Arbeitsgemeinschaft. In this connection Hugo Stinnes writes in his memoirs (I quote from memory): 'We were completely beaten. In this hopeless situation there came the great man Legien, Chairman of the General Committee of Trade Unions in Germany, as our saviour. He did, in fact, save us; and this shall not be forgotten.'

Stinnes did not forget. A millionaire industrialist, and one of the biggest shipowners in Germany, he named one of his biggest ships 'Karl Legien'. If ever a working class in any country in the world was treacherously betrayed, it was the German working-class. Were not the workers 'ripe' for social revolution? In Lunen, in the Ruhr district, the miners took possession of the coal mines and kept them running for more than five months; the administrative work being done by their wives and daughters. During that time, the output was greater than ever before. Similarly with the farm workers on an estate at Golnow in Pomerania, who took it over and worked it for more than a year as an armed community. Every member of the community kept arms in his house, but no case of violence, or even rudeness, occurred. They had their Workers' Council, and lived and worked their estate in peace until Noske's troops forced them back to wage slavery again. These are only two examples out of the many that could be quoted.

Let us lift the curtain! It was Karl Radek — the (1919) then Russian

2. Gustave Noske (1868-1946) member of the Reichstag who at the end of World War I was Governor of Kiel. He sided with the majority socialists against the Spartacists and was responsible for using the troops against them. — Editor
plenipotentiary in Germany — who declared openly ‘a victorious workers’ revolution in Germany now, means a lost revolution in Russia’.

Stalin, discussing the situation in Germany (1923), urged ‘In my estimation, the German workers must be restrained, not spurred on’. 3

Indeed, as time has shown, the Comintern has not only bloodily liquidated the genuine revolutionaries in Kronstadt and the Ukraine, but also has purposely prevented the Workers’ Revolution in Germany.

The seamen supporting the Revolutionary Committee felt that it was their duty to carry forward their activities and assist their class comrades at all costs. To do so, they were determined even to make use, in case of necessity, of the units of the battle fleet, which though bound by the clauses of the armistice, were still armed and fit for use.

But there were other difficulties to be faced. Hundreds of thousands of workers were still held in the bonds of obsolete systems of organisation, dominated by conservative leaders. This was glaringly illustrated on the occasion of the first All Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council Convention in Berlin, December 1918. It sounds unbelievable, but out of this ‘revolutionary’ Parliament it was found necessary to form a revolutionary group! And when Karl Liebknecht, as the chief speaker, very rightly pointed out: ‘The counter-revolution is in the midst of us’, some of the delegates raised their rifles against him.

The very same day, a counter-revolutionary attempt was made to capture the battleship ‘Baden’. Some blood was spilled, but the attempt was dealt with effectively, and the confidential man of the ‘Baden’ was enthusiastically cheered by his victorious comrades, on returning from the Convention in Berlin. A few days later, a motor-lorry packed with seamen from the Thousand Man Barracks, smashed a counter-revolutionary rising led by landlords of East Friesland, and helped their fellow-workers on the farms to set up an effective Farm Workers’ Council. When the detachment returned to the Barracks, it left behind a revolutionary community.

At about the same time, the ‘People’s Government’ in Berlin sent a delegate to Wilhelmshaven in an endeavour to induce the Sailors’ and Workers’ Councils to obey its orders. He was received by some of the members of the Council of Five, but was unsuccessful, and everything went on as before. In January 1919, when the Berlin Government sent one of its ministers to Wilhelmshaven on the same mission, he was arrested by a detachment of the 15th Torpedo Half-Flotilla.

3. In 1923, the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) pursued a united front policy with the German nationalists. The Nazi Graf von Reventlow wrote articles in the ‘communist’ central organ Rote Fahne.

At the same time Clara Zetkin, communist deputy, declared in the Reichstag, that a collaboration is quite possible between the Reichswar and the Red Army.
In the meantime, the Berlin Government had printed large posters which were plastered on the walls and buildings of towns throughout the Reich — though not in Wilhelmshaven, Brunswick and other places where the revolutionaries were in control — with the inscriptions in big reading: ‘Socialism all over Germany’, ‘Socialism is marching on’, etc. What in fact marched on, however, were the old reactionary forces led by the people ‘emancipating Social Democracy’. Their chief newspaper, Vorwaerts — twice captured and run by the revolutionary workers in Berlin — but later recaptured by the Social Democrats — published, at a time when hundreds of workers were being killed in street fighting in Berlin, the following incitement:

Karl und Rosa,
Viel Hundert Tote in einer Reih'
Rosa und Karl
Sind nicht darbei

(‘Many hundreds of dead in a row, but Rosa and Karl are not amongst them.’ Rosa and Karl were, of course, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht.)

To the Social Democratic propaganda in favour of a National Convention, the revolutionary communists replied with: ‘No National Convention! Arm the workers in the factories! Establish revolutionary tribunals to try the war criminals and counter-revolutionaries!’

At this time, the civil war was far from its climax. The decisive battles came later. New formations of the industrial workers were just marching up to the front line. They fought their battles, not as party men or trade unionists, but as independent revolutionary factory units.

In this very critical atmosphere, December 28, 1918, a party was born, which after long and vehement discussion was called the ‘Kommu-
nistische Partei Deutschland — Spartakus Bund’ (Communist Party of Germany — Spartacus League). It included only parts of the revolution-
ary groups mentioned in the previous chapters. Groups such as the International Communists in Bremen, Wilhelmshaven, Brunswick, etc., never joined it officially. It is important to note that the Communist Party of Germany (Spartacus League) was strongly anti-Parliamentarian when it started out. In so far as the trade unions were concerned, the slogan at first was ‘Destroy the Trade Unions’; this was later changed to ‘Capture the Trade Unions’.

Meanwhile, a new independent industrial union movement, known as the ‘Allgemeine Arbeiter Union, Revolutionäre Betriebsorganisation’ (General Workers’ Union, Revolutionary Shop Organisation), sprang up and spread all over Germany, its membership reaching in a compara-
tively short time several hundred thousand. This movement bitterly
fought the Reichswehr in Central Germany, at the Leuna Works for instance, and seized, as fighting units of the working class, shipyards and factories in Northern Germany.

In January 1919, I was commissioned by the Conference of the International Communists of North-West Germany to negotiate with Karl Radek — the then general bolshevik plenipotentiary in Berlin — and discuss with him ways and means for establishing wireless communications between Wilhelmshaven and Kronstadt.

I rushed by a special loco-engine to Berlin to conduct my mission immediately. Searching for Radek in vain throughout that day, I accidentally met Karl Liebknecht at midnight, who told me that Radek was hiding in the suburbs in a certain flat of the Workers’ Co-operative Society.

Mass strikes raged in the City and its surrounding districts. No buses or street-cars were running. When I, after a strenuous journey, arrived at Radek’s ‘secret’ flat, the latter was occupied with some exciting lady visitors.

At last, a political debate took place and it became clear to me, that the bolshevik party dictatorship did not concern itself with the task of developing the world revolution.

6. Prospects and Possibilities

Early in January 1919, the situation in general was fully understood by the class-conscious seamen in Wilhelmshaven, who were mostly quartered in the Thousand Man Barracks, on the submarine training ship ‘Deutschland’, and in smaller vessels such as destroyers and torpedo-boats. To make sure that nothing should go amiss, the seamen set about educating and training themselves. Lectures were given on Marxist socialism, communism and strategy, on board ships and ashore. Instead of the discredited — as a result of Social Democracy — term ‘socialism’, the term ‘communism’ was adopted. In close co-operation with the revolutionary socialist workers’ groups in north-western Germany and the industrial centres of Westphalia (Ruhr District), a strategic plan was drawn up to drive the reactionary forces from the waterside and south-western Germany towards Berlin. Such a plan it was thought, was better than to allow the reactionaries to fight on ground of their own choice. It was hoped also, to relieve the revolutionary forces locally, and conquer Berlin for the oppressed class.

The revolutionary seamen of the North Sea Station were determined to fight, to win or to die, for the cause. They swore that the old class-society should be ended, never to arise again, that there should be
no more slavery, no more capitalist war — they had had enough. To describe in words, the spirit of these seamen, is impossible. In their minds they saw a new world-wide society of workers, free and without fear of want, a society based on worker-democracy developing into a single unit of mankind.

In the meantime, it became evident that the reactionary forces were encircling north-western Germany. Little by little, their troops occupied certain strategical points, not as a marching army, but as ‘visitors’ and ‘sympathisers’ with the revolutionaries. In the meantime however, between January 10 and 15, the Weser Sailors’ Council sent a small torpedo-boat to Wilhelmshaven packed with sailors who wished to fight again, shoulder to shoulder with their old comrades. Together with these sailors, a certain Flight-Lieutenant A. was shown into the headquarters of the Committee. He offered his services to the cause, saying: ‘I am a proletarian by birth, and at times like these, I come back to the class to which I rightly belong’. A., who was an officer in the former Imperial naval air force, proved to be a brilliant instructor and advisor, as well as a brave fighter, and last but not least, a true comrade at heart. In a very short time he trained some fifteen young sailors, if not as pilots, at least as able observers. His skill as a military teacher saved many lives. Other comrades, able in command, arose from out of the crews of the fleet, as well as the rank and file of the workers, B., for instance, a former stoker of the ‘Baden’; C., a sailor of the destroyer flotilla; and D., a docker, elected by the revolutionary seamen, who proved to be a bold comrade and able harbour commander.4

The effect of the efforts made by orders of the Committee, and the readiness and willingness of its electors, was evident when it became known that an envoy — the third — of the Ebert Government had arrived by aeroplane in Wilhelmshaven to have a last talk with members of the Council of Five, asking them to surrender Wilhelmshaven to the Ebert Government. The confidential man of the Committee was at that time busy studying charts in the Thousand Man Barracks. From the comrade in command of the torpedo and destroyer flotillas he received by secret telephone — a cable leading from the far-off torpedo-boat harbour direct to the Thousand Man Barracks — the following message:

‘Comrade. The crews of Flotilla B are at action stations. Our 8.8 centimetre guns are well laid covering the Officers’ casino. At your order we will fire at once and destroy the house of traitors and its present occupiers. Please give the word.’

4. As many of the persons referred to still have relations in Germany, and for other reasons, they have been referred to by initial letters only.
There was a moment of hesitation; terrible thoughts whirled through the brain of the confidential man. But it only lasted a few seconds; then the order sounded back, clear and decided:

'Thank you comrade, the hour to do so is near, but it has not yet arrived.'

Meanwhile, a special messenger arrived from the same flotilla and he received the same order verbally.

It may be said, that no comrade was better informed than the confidential man of the Committee, and he loved his comrades as he loved the cause. He understood them too well, he knew they were right, but it could not be done, for in some situations it is not enough to be go-ahead.

On January 15 [1919], Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were murdered in Berlin by officers of Ebert's soldiery. In Wilhelmshaven a general strike was proclaimed by the International Communist group, which had at that time, apart from several hundreds of industrial workers, more than 500 members of the seamen of the fleet. Mass meetings and armed demonstrations were held. On the flagstaffs of the warships and the flagmast of the Thousand Man Barracks, the red flags fluttered in the wind at half-mast. The proletarians of the sea were mourning two beloved comrades, while the murder-provoking writer of Vorwaerts had his bloody prize.

Later, agents provocateurs sneaked into Wilhelmshaven. They passed themselves off as 'comrades' and one of them, in the service of a certain military camarilla was unmasked and two years later was executed by the revolutionaries in Central Germany.

Nothing could better illustrate the spirit of the seamen than the fact that when on the following day, January 16, an attempt was made by the reactionary 'Bund der Deckoffiziere' (Officers League) to free Wilhelmshaven from 'Spartacist domination', the revolutionaries taught them a lesson in fighting that few of the White Guards could have expected. After six hours of street fighting, during which several persons were killed, the Bund surrendered unconditionally. The street leading to the Jachmann Bridge was littered with abandoned rifles and machine-guns. Some of the officers gave a promise not to take up arms again against socialist revolutionaries, and it was later proved that they had kept their word. Whether or not this rising was inspired by the Ebert Government, the result was a defeat for the old militarist forces. The seamen supporting the Committee fought their opponents openly, and smashed them several times, but none of the officers were executed.

At about the same time, another reactionary coup de main was attempted at Jever in Oldenburg, which was also smashed by the
commandos of the Thousand Man Barracks. Once more, when the sailors returned to Wilhelmshaven, they left behind them in the Jever district a socialist Workers' community. But this time they did not return alone. They brought back with them, to put under arrest until things cooled down, a provincial Captain-General who did not believe in revolution. Unfortunately, this man was forgotten at the Heppens military prison in Wilhelmshaven, and when later his brother-officers of the Gerstenberg army opened his cell, and he told them he was the Captain-General of the Jever District, they would not believe him, and instead beat him soundly!

Towards the end of January, the tension grew among the seamen. Berlin fell, Kiel also. Bremen was attacked from the rear by a large army. Although a system of sailors' and workers' guard posts had been organised in Wilhelmshaven and the surrounding districts, and an Emergency Tribunal was sitting to deal with counter-revolutionaries, this was far from being enough. What Wilhelmshaven needed — and still needs, and not Wilhelmshaven alone! — was a full scale revolution from the ground up.

It was clear that this would not be achieved in collaboration with the old personnel of the Sailors' and Workers' Councils, but only by bringing in fresh blood from among the ranks of the socialist revolutionaries of the Committee and its active fighting units on land and sea.

In the economic sphere, the Committee envisaged an association of free and equal producers, based on a system of workers' democracy, utilising — since they would probably be isolated — the gold of the Reichsbank as a means of exchange with capitalist countries, and of course, that the gold could not be used against the revolutionary workers.

The great hope seemed to be Russia. In any case, there was no time for talking; the final moment had arrived for acting — if unsuccessfully, then, as an example.

They acted.

5. The Kiel Revolt flared up, but as many of the sailors went home it quickly died down. Thousands went to Hamburg where they formed a so-called Navy High Council of the Lower Elbe (Oberster Marine Rat der Niedereelbe).

The activities of this council were confined to requisitioning — by arms — of victuals in the surrounding districts. Unable to lay hands upon the gold of the banks, they seized — though temporarily — the funds of the Trade Unions in Hamburg.

Through the exodus of the rebels from Kiel, the Kiel Council was nearly emptied of revolutionary elements. And, it was mainly due to this that reactionaries such as the social democrat Gustav Noske, served more or less as a facade for the military force of the organised reaction. It was from here that the counter revolutionary Ehrhard Brigade started out.
The Revolutionary Wilhemshaven Commune

The struggle along the whole waterfront in north-western Germany increased in ferocity, and the revolutionary groups, fighting under extremely difficult conditions around Bremen, were wiped out after a stubborn resistance.

In this situation, the Revolutionary Committee in Wilhemshaven ordered ashore all available sailors of the fleet, supported by some of the torpedo boats that were at anchor, but ready for action in the Judebusen, to fight the approaching White army. The advanced squads of sailors marched 15 to 20 kilometres from Wilhemshaven to the front line, taking up their positions in trenches dug long before. These squads, each of from 10 to 30 sailors, with an elected Obmann, or confidential man, undertook to hold their ground against the advancing army of Ebert's troops. The seamen fully understood that their 3,000 men, with little experience of fighting ashore, would hardly be a match for an army of 40,000 experienced officers, but they understood that the fight had to go on at all costs, and that in the interests of themselves and the cause, there must be discipline—voluntary discipline based on affection and trust. They treated their own delegates, as well as the comrades in command, with brotherly love and respect.

Meanwhile, the Thousand Man Barracks was put into a state of defence. Machine guns, rifles, ammunition and hand grenades were distributed and stored on all floors, machine guns were mounted on the roof of this mighty and massive building.

On January 26, at 12 pm, the Revolutionary Committee proclaimed a state of siege throughout Wilhemshaven. The Old Soldiers' and Workers' Councils were removed from office. At the same time the Reichsbank with 21 millions in gold was seized, and the bank building guarded by a special troop of 50 sailors and 15 machine guns. Besides the Reichsbank, all other financial institutions were seized and occupied by armed sailors; as were all statistical bureaux, postal telegraph, and telephone offices, water and electricity works, all means of transport and traffic, railway stations, food and raw material depots, printing shops, and all government buildings.

Trains were stopped, they could come in but not go out. In five different broadsheets printed in huge letters, placarded all over the town, were given the essentials of the things to come.

Workers, old age pensioners, all toilers in distress, particularly those who lived in huts and wooden barracks, were told to seize the almost empty houses of the rich and occupy them immediately. This was done without delay. There were also many previous prisoners of war, who
were freed without any discussion of ‘different races’ and nationalities. Class-consciousness had solved these ‘problems’ on the spot, ‘... it is the social existence of man that determines his consciousness’.

On January 27, in the forenoon, one of the stockhouses which was crammed full with provisions of the Navy was opened by order of the Revolutionary Committee and many thousand kilogrammes of salt meat, salt pork, bacon, peas, beans, rice and tinned foods were distributed gratis amongst the Wilhemshaven inhabitants according to their needs.

Meanwhile, information was received from the observers, who were following the movements of the approaching army, that Wilhemshaven was cut off on all sides except the waterfront, and that some sailor units, supported by a small boat gun, had already opened the battle with the advancing Ebert troops. In fact, these comrades were in contact with the officer troops, who rushed at them and lost ground.

At the same time, it was obvious that the hope of assistance from the fortress Heppens, would have to be abandoned entirely because of large scale sabotage. In such a situation, to make use of torpedo boats in the Jadebusen, would have been disastrous. This then, and the situation in general, was earnestly discussed by the delegates at a meeting in the Thousand Man Barracks. As a result, word was given to the fighting sailor squads to concentrate rearwards to the starting point. This was carried out in an orderly manner. During the next few hours the revolutionaries intensified their activities; making some local advances, and destroying some hostile positions in the vicinity of Mariensiel.

Even in these circumstances, the Social Democrat leaders of Oldenburg, east Friesland, were allowed to hold a meeting in the Wilhemshaven canteen. They had asked to see the Revolutionary Committee, and two delegates of the Fleet, together with a comrade of the Revolutionary Committee, went to meet them. One of these Social Democrats, known as the ‘pontifex maximum of Oldenburg’, had just begun to speak, when his own party men told him roughly that he had better ‘shut up’ when he tried to persuade them not to mingle with the seamen, but just wait and see; though some applauded him, seeing in his waiting policy the lesser evil and believing that there would still be time to jump on the victor’s bandwagon if a victory should emerge. To them the situation appeared unstable. They were, without a doubt, capitalistically inclined, and therefore tried to weaken the socialist cause in every possible way. They feared their own shadows, and acted throughout in an underhand manner. This became evident when the rumour was spread that the Spartacists had robbed the Reichsbank of their own personal interests, and that some millions of gold had already been shipped away. Some months later, however, in July 1919, Ebert’s
'Extraordinary Peoples’ Court' in Wilhelmshaven, acknowledged that the Revolutionary Committee, although composed of ‘fanatical communists’, had always kept its hands clean.

On the afternoon of January 28, the first shells of a field howitzer, evidently aimed at the Thousand Man Barracks, crashed into the harbour district. At about this time, a small warship which, as it afterwards transpired, had been in Scandanavian waters for over three months, signalled to ask if it might put in for the Wilhelmshaven docks. Comrade D., the acting Harbour Commander, being suspicious of the latecomer, insisted on questioning the captain before he allowed the locks to be opened. The commander of the vessel, an Imperial corvette captain, was asked to meet Comrade D. on the pier, where he had to answer many questions, being finally told by D. that he would have to keep an eye on him, and that if he — the Herr Offizier — behaved himself, he, Comrade D., would see to it that he got another cigar band on his sleeve.

Elsewhere, more serious things were happening. At the main railway station in the town a battle was raging, many of the sailors were mortally wounded. A motorised column of officers had run past an outpost of seamen and workers, and made its way to the station, with the obvious intention of seizing the station, and the guards defending it were forced, in the face of heavy machine gun fire, to give way at one point. Suddenly, the car of the Revolutionary Committee made its way at full speed into the officers’ column, and threw among them a number of hand grenades. Eighteen officers were taken prisoner, and four machine guns, some automatic pistols and a number of naval daggers were captured. The loss of life was fortunately small.

The Obmann of the guard of the station, a tough young stoker of the ‘Baden’, ashamed at having nearly let the reactionaries get past him, stood with tears in his eyes as he faced his comrades. But they understood; a hearty handshake and everything was alright.

As to the seamen as a whole, unlike Ebert’s soldiery, they had no desire for revenge. It was war, but their captives were not molested more than was absolutely necessary.

On the afternoon of January 29, a message came addressed to the workers and sailors, informing them that some thousands of well-armed workers, commanded by a well-known young socialist, P., were on their way to give all possible help to the fighters for liberty at Wilhelmshaven.

Who could stand up to the revolutionary socialists now? Many of them thought they could already hear the gunfire of their brothers smashing the reactionary battalions from the east. But it was not the gunfire of the revolutionary army recruited in Hamburg, Marburg and
Bremen, as they joyfully suggested, but that of the reactionary Gerstenberg army. The army commanded by comrade P. never reached Wilhelmshaven. It advanced as far as Delmenhorst, engaged the reactionary forces, suffered heavy losses, and retreated.

By this time fighting was going on in the streets and at the barricades throughout Wilhelmshaven. Heavy losses were inflicted on the reactionaries, who fought in close column. A hail of hand grenades descended upon them from the roofs and windows of the houses, and their shouts of 'Ebert! Scheidemann!' were drowned by those of the revolutionaries 'Liebknecht! Luxemburg!' Again and again, the followers of Ebert were driven back, but ever again new officer columns appeared, mostly to suffer the same fate. Sometimes the firing died down, and only single explosions were heard; but then it would break out again, a roaring hurricane in a sea of splinters and wreckage.

In these circumstances 34 fatally wounded comrades, amongst them comrade A., were moved to a torpedo boat which shipped them to a small town on the lower Elbe.

Meanwhile, as the night drew on, the fourteen-hour battle for the Thousand Man Barracks began. Among the 588 defenders, mostly sailors from the battle fleet, were a dozen or so workers, some of them women, and, dressed in sailors' uniform, an eighteen-year-old girl, the daughter of a naval officer of high rank.

In a very short time, a shell of medium calibre crashed into the gymnasium, followed by others which fell around the barracks. A disagreeable odour, something like gas, filled the air. Then shells began to burst, at short intervals, in the western part of the building. But the sailors had their turn too. Volunteers were called for, Comrade C. took the lead, and within half an hour, he had smashed up a column of officers, taken three prisoners, and captured two heavy machine-guns and a 5.3 centimetre gun.

The battle went on throughout the night, reaching its climax in the early hours of the morning, when mine after mine was hurled into the Barracks. Fire-balls and star-shells were let off, and the darkness changed to fire and light. But there was no thought of surrender. Several attempts were made to storm the Barracks, but each time the white guard troops were repulsed by the machine-gun and rifle fire of the defenders. While the fighting was in progress, two meetings were held in the basement dining-room of the Barracks, and at both meetings it was resolved to fight on to the last, and in no circumstances to give in.

But while it is true that the Ebert soldiery had suffered terrible casualties, so too, had the revolutionary sailors and workers. There is no purpose in describing the harrowing scenes witnessed during the struggle, one only, shall be mentioned here. Comrade H., mortally
wounded, breathed ‘Communism or death!’ as he clasped the hand of the man next to him, and his fellow combatant knelt down and kissed the forehead of a brother-in-arms he had never known before.

It was day-break, two comrades were still firing the only machine-gun left undamaged . . . And from the mast-head of the Thousand Man Barracks was torn down the tattered red flag of the Wilhelmshaven Commune, riddled with gun-fire.

Here ends a chapter — but a chapter only — of the history of the revolutionary proletariat of the sea.

Conclusions and the Issues at Stake

To draw conclusions merely from visible surface facts and general experiences, has only limited value and does not permit us to see clearly the character of future developments. History does not move in a straight line, the zig-zags are not determined by one trend, but are a composite of many undercurrents which must be taken into serious consideration.

In each country the interests of the ruling class are closely bound up with the country’s previous history, existing relations, and its particular position within the frame of a given world situation. Any activities, alliances, losses, and opportunities are power and property relations. All external shifts, changes, and struggles are thus irrevocably connected with internal shifts and struggles between the classes, and within the ruling class or group.

No doubt, all previous existing ruling groups have hindered the development of a truly social production and distribution. The key to the understanding of history lies in the historical development of labour.

The class struggle alone will be the decisive and determining factor, with its highest point — the revolution. The latter is a matter of tactics.

All we have seen, in the practical field of revolutionary and social activities, the political parties are no better informed than the masses. This has been proved in all actual revolutionary struggles. As long as parties operate as separate groups within the mass, the mass is not revolutionary, but neither are the parties. They can only function as capitalist appendages.

The fact remains, the liberation of the working class can only be carried out by the working class itself.

Since the teachings of Marx, Bakunin, and others, many shifts and changes have taken place in the political, economic and social spheres. There are no such things as eternal values.

It is therefore, not enough to merely repeat the teachings and timely
truths of our pioneers and advisors, we must develop them and carry them out.

The period when capitalism was advancing is past, and with it the basis of the old forms of organisation. Every epoch has its own forms of organisation, which are significant for the onward movement of that same period, in the course of development, however, with the beginnings of a new period, the old organisational forms hamper more and more the new development. The older forms which were used as a means of progress in the beginning of a particular period, become at the end of that same period a hampering factor, and their effect is highly reactionary.

The time of the still — in some parts of the world — existing capitalistic labour organisations is obviously past. New conditions must be met with new forms of organisation and methods with the least possible delay. The workers themselves, organised as a revolutionary class, must act. The workers must be the masters, not the servants, of their own organisations.

The working class is in need of a movement which will closely trace the paths of the laws of motion. An entirely new movement based on working class solidarity, unification on the job, free and independent workers’ councils in cadres of self-asserting fighting units, based on ships, rail, aircraft, workshops, pits, factories and agricultural communities.

The workers do not require professional leaders, our confidential men shall be class conscious comrades and teachers only, dismissible at any time by a vote of their direct electors.

We have no ready made blueprints for the near future, but we will dare to predict that the present world war will inevitably end with a deeper economic and social crisis with revolutionary consequences. The self-acting workers of Europe, freed from the ties of outmoded organisational forms, will not wait for the call of professional party leaders. There will not be at any rate a true revolutionary working class movement on the European Continent.

Epilogue

I cannot end my story without regarding the present state of affairs in the ranks of the German workers, which is of the greatest interest to the anti-nationalist working class as a whole.

It is quite true, the German labouring masses tied to an outmoded system and under the pressure of a careerist leader dictatorship have
lost its long and bloody revolutionary battles. But so have until now the
great masses in all countries. In fact, the German working class in
general, though tortured with terrible suffering, is — contrary to the
nationalistic idiocy — free from any kind of race hatred, nationalism,
and so-called patriotism.

Nevertheless, they knew that they had — under conditions which
often were the logical outcome of their own activities — failed to defeat
‘fascism’ and that they therefore strive to value the arguments of their
class conscious fellow workers abroad. But they cannot be expected to
change their present nationalistic hangman for another nationalistic
hangman.

Equipped with an empirically organised underground network,
using continually changing methods, the German revolutionary
workers are trying their utmost to inform the masses as to just what is
going on, so that they will more readily understand the true situation.
These fellow workers cannot be fooled by any nationalistic propaganda.
They are aware that to destroy ‘fascism’ — which is more or less the
ruling form of the capitalist powers today — the workers of all lands
must destroy capitalism, and that this can be achieved only on the basis
of true working class solidarity. The time is not far away when it cannot
be ignored any longer, that considerable parts of the German working
class have resolutely fought for the great cause, and are even in the time
of the darkest reaction still fighting in the forefront of the revolutionary
proletariat.

Let the nationalists, who are surely the last to be entitled to throw
stones at anyone, shout, spreading their lies and mockery at the real
fighters for freedom, this will only strengthen and raise the spirits of the
anti-nationalist forces and, in the process of time, remove the scum of
human community.
Three years of struggle in Spain

The Spanish Revolutionary Unions speak

The greatest revolutionary event of recent times has come to an end, and it is right that the workers of the world should now be told the truth about it, both in order to put an end to misguided ideas about its real meaning and to stop the campaign of party falsification which merely serves to misinterpret the activities and fling mud at the names of those who were conspicuous for their spirit of self-sacrifice and renunciation.

In speaking of the Spanish war and the revolution, we are not impelled by a wish to argue or refute slanders, but simply to put the real meaning of what has happened before all those workers of goodwill and true revolutionaries; irrespective of their particular ideology.

On 18 July 1936, a revolt broke out in our country by virtue of which the power-state, composed of the agrarian and industrial bourgeoisie, the aristocracy and the Church, hoped to annul the electoral triumph

This is an important document which has not been reprinted since it was first published in 1939 as a penny pamphlet by FREEDOM PRESS in an edition of 10,000 copies, only a matter of a month or two after the final defeat in Central Spain. The group around the fortnightly journal Spain and the World were hosts to some 50 comrades from Madrid who had resisted until the last minute and only then made their way to the coast where they and the Casado Junta were picked up by a British warship, The Hunter, and brought to our shores. This is an important document because it was discussed in heated meetings by these comrades who were, with one or two exceptions people who had held down important 'encargos' (posts) in government. There was an ex-Minister (Juan Lopez) and a number of 'ministers' in the Casado Defence Junta (Marín, Val). Manuel Salgado was a prison director in the civil war; Falomir and González were important officials of the Railways section of the CNT; there were CNT military men; top secretaries of the Anarchist Youth which included a Hungarian ex-Communist by the name of Polgári (who produced with A Souchy a small volume on Colectivizaciones (Barcelona 1937). And there were a number of journalists notably García Pradas who edited the Madrid daily and a mysterious Russian who edited the Valencia CNT daily Fragua Social. One appreciates that they were smarting from the propaganda attacks by the Communists and were therefore concentrating theirs on the counter-revolutionary role played by the CP. But three years in government or official jobs had had its effect in their not seeing or admitting that they had contributed to power passing from the people in the street to the politicians. We have added a short piece from Jose Peirats' critical work as an antidote to this historically important, but from an anarchist point of view lamentable document.
achieved by popular vote in February of that year, and block the proletarian revolutionary advance. The revolt of the class-power state left the legal state unprotected and helpless, represented as it was by authorities without real power, and brainwashed by the poison of a false bourgeois democracy.

These authorities were unable to defend themselves or the people, who had to do duty for both. The state as such disappeared, leaving the fight against the rebels to be carried on by the spontaneous efforts of the people. The result was magnificent, thanks to the great organisational experience and keen revolutionary sense possessed by the two million workers of the CNT and UGT. Under the guidance of the FAI, Spanish anarchism immediately set to work to rout out obvious weaknesses maintaining throughout a steady anti-fascist drive. At the outset this organisation sent its most militant workers to the front, where their ability, heroism and abnegation were soon conspicuous and continued to be of outstanding value amongst other popular parties.

The part played by the young people in the Spanish struggle was splendidly upheld by the Libertarian Youth organisation. They attracted the finest and bravest young Spaniards who offered their lives and shed their blood as a matter of course, infusing into the struggle the elements of drive and calm responsibility which the circumstances required. In short, the libertarian forces constituted the pivot on which anti-fascist resistance depended, serving, moreover, in large measure, as a barrier to both weakness and treachery.

Now let us see what the two bands into which Spain was divided, represented. Fascism was lawlessness in arms: anti-fascism the popular defence of the constitution; fascism was the reactionary and feudal movements of the powerful: anti-fascism an advance towards some kind of dignity of life for the people; fascism was dictatorial in purpose: anti-fascism made for liberty. Fascism was a mortgage on national independence: anti-fascism a bold defence of it. The rebellion could not have taken place if the Spanish fascist had not already come to an arrangement with Hitler and Mussolini, who agreed to a mutual aid arrangement against Spain, in furtherance of their imperialist ambitions.

If the struggle had been purely a Spanish affair, the anti-fascist struggle would pretty quickly have settled it. But in a few days it was evident that the Germans and Italians were intervening, not only with

CNT — National Confederation of Labour (anarchosyndicalist).
FAI — Anarchist Federation of Iberia.
FIJL — Iberian Federation of Libertarian Youth.
UGT — General Workers Union (socialist-communist).
POUM — Workers’ Party of Marxist Unification.
the provision of war material to the fascists, but with the establishment of a political and military organisation around the figure of the traitor Franco, utilising the fascist Falange for the purpose.

The German-Italian intervention extended the scope of the war to the point of swamping the revolution. During the first months we fought against long-established privilege and corruption; and at the same time set up the proletarian elements of a new social life, political and economic; the war was then in fact, of a civil and revolutionary nature. Foreign intervention compelled us to turn the popular revolutionary militias into a regular army; to muster, hurriedly and as fast as we could, the state, which had not then been superseded by a better political and social organisation; to open our zone to the international brigades, whose control was not in our hands; and most of all, to ask the international proletariat for the help which they did not give us, which the bourgeois democratic states refused us and which finally Russia sold to us, not only at the price of gold; but also at the cost of our political independence. To get the arms of which we were in need we both gave away our national wealth, and had to tolerate the control of our political and military activities by the foreign and Spanish agents of the USSR.

This nobody wanted, but in view of the indifference of the world to our wretched situation, all anti-fascist parties acquiesced in it, in order that the people should not be crushed.

It was then that the real danger of the Communist Party became evident. Forestalling the bourgeoisie, it set up the cry that it was not the revolution for which we were fighting, but for a new kind of democratic republic: that our politics should circulate in the orbit of the western democratic tradition of England and France; that the small proprietor should be respected — that free commercial activities should be permitted — that is to say that the people should be at the mercy of speculators — that the churches should be opened — as if we had never been fired at from them, or we could allow centres of treason in the rearguard, etc., etc., etc. The slogans of the Communist Party during the first two years of the war can be summed up quite accurately in one: ‘Better to lose the war than allow the revolution’.

Neither in war nor revolution has anti-fascist Spain had a worse enemy than Stalinism. Persistently, following orders from above, it expressed itself in terms which alarmed even the bourgeoisie. Its ranks have been largely recruited from those who, thanks to its oft-repeated reactionary slogans, ended up by having no idea what they were fighting for, and in spite of its endless talk about ‘unity’, its behaviour was such that it was impossible for anti-fascists to get on with it.

What unity did the Communist party respect, or attempt to establish? None whatever — agents of the USSR murdered thousands
of non-Stalinist comrades who had come to Spain and joined the International brigades to fight for the proletarian revolution; in Barcelona they got rid of, among others, Ilse Wolff and Mark Rein, son of Abramowich, member of the Executive Commission of the IOS: the 'Checkas' of the Communist Party witnessed the crimes committed against numberless revolutionary workers: splits arose in the army. For instance that of El Campesino in which the soldiers who did not admit the red ticket were threatened with death, and in many others, despair and the loss of their best men were brought about by Stalinist intrigues. The press of the third International covered other anti-fascists with the grossest abuse, concentrating on those who most firmly upheld the Spanish people in their revolutionary aspirations.

The Spanish bourgeoisie, who were in subjugation, though still in existence, quite clearly grasped the importance of the Communist Party's role so far as they themselves were concerned, loudly praising the systematic attacks by the Stalinists on the revolution, as an 'eminently sensible' policy. They backed the Communists when they uttered their stupidest and most reactionary slogans; when they slandered the finest among the proletariat; when they engineered differences between the central syndicates; when they organised the political extermination of POUM and the murder of its leading militants; when they brought down the popular left government of Largo Caballero in order to get the CNT out of power; when they set the Lister Division against our Aragon collectives; when they provoked the events of May 1937 in Barcelona where, unable to break up the libertarian movement, they resorted to such criminal acts as the murder of Camillo Berneri.

The charges against the Communist Party during the war in Spain could easily fill volumes and backed by unchallengeable proofs from the communist dailies of Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia. But it would be a lengthy task which we cannot undertake now, though we must make it plain that we assert nothing that cannot be proved.

Our own movement, both during the war and before it, has been entirely faithful to its three distinguishing characteristics, working class, libertarian and Spanish. As working class, and organised on a syndical basis, it has always responded promptly to the general needs of the proletariat. Since May 1936, it has striven unceasingly to bring about an alliance between the CNT and the UGT with the end in view that the syndical organisation of the proletariat should repulse the state, no matter what political and economic parties stood in the way. None have more tenaciously opposed this purpose than the Communist Party, who backed a false popular front, in which the working class,
badly and half-heartedly represented, remained under the thumb of the bourgeoisie.

As proletarian, our movement has borne the brunt and been in the forefront of the Spanish revolution, and has in fact come to be the only political and social force upon which the revolution could reckon. In proof of which we can point to our propaganda and our action: through our propaganda we ensured that the workers were aware at all times of their class interests, and through our action we brought about socialisation both of land and industry, and provided millions of the proletariat, in the midst of an extraordinarily difficult war situation, with conditions of living which they had never had before, and which they will always remember.

As libertarian, our movement has always maintained, in accordance with existing circumstances, a firm opposition to all authoritarian tendencies. It has therefore been at once anti-bolshevik and anti-fascist, at the same time hostile to all political parties, every one of which is created in the image of the state, which they attempt to control and administer. In the syndical organisation, on the other hand, are to be found social production through labour, freedom of thought and assured means of livelihood.

Being Spanish, our movement has always had the independence of our country before it, and has struggled to defend it against fascism throughout the war. So also, it has energetically opposed the Stalinist influence which in the events of March 1939, when the communists made a sudden attempt to seize power, was once and for all silenced.

We have referred exclusively to the libertarian movements and the Communist Party. And this for two reasons — within anti-fascist Spain they have been the parties of outstanding dynamic energy and they have upheld such opposing positions as to make them the two points of attraction towards which lukewarm and indeterminate opinions gravitated. Those, that is to say, of the republican bourgeoisie and the social democrats. There was a certain timidity in the republican political manifestoes, which were always drawn up to suit the Stalinist slogans, and accompanied by sly and secretive action, with a flavour of intrigue in high places. The political schemes of the socialists — PSOE — depended upon the syndicalist body of the UGT whose position was being rivalled by the communists. The socialists can hardly be said to have had a policy of their own. They are an old established party, much given to governmental methods, and though there were many well-known leaders among them, they had no organic power. Their principal leaders during the war served the republican bourgeoisie and communist parties, and sometimes both at once. But they kept away from class politics, which was in the hands of the UGT. Largo
Caballero wanted to make a class appeal during the last months in which he was in power, but could achieve nothing, as inside the UGT itself, the communists had prepared the ground for his downfall. Indalecio Prieto is a socialist of the same brand as Caballero, and when he was Prime Minister did nothing but vie between indignation that the USSR tried to impose upon us and the humble proposals which he vainly made to England and France. Negrin and del Vayo are also both socialists but both of them have acted as Moscow lackeys. As a result of this indecisive behaviour on the part of its leaders, Spanish social democracy has been navigating without a compass and has allowed itself to be dominated by the Communist Party. Whenever it has felt impelled to act on its own, it has been irresistibly drawn into the political current of the libertarian movement, which was firm in its loyalty towards other anti-fascist parties and in that it never forgot for one moment its fundamental principles.

Of course, the libertarian movement has had to make compromises. No one knows it better or regrets it more keenly than we do. We compromised so far as to take part in the government; to help to form a regular army, to allow the USSR to control the decisions of our general staff... but what could we do? We could not do what we wanted, how much less have the groups and talking circles who blindly criticised us, done. We have been abandoned by everybody and finding ourselves, in our isolation, between the Scylla of surrender and the Charybdis of compromise, we gave way. This is the long and short of the whole business, and now that the war has come to an end, we find ourselves as rich in experience, in the enlightenment of reality, as we are faithful to the purity of our anarchist ideals and our syndical tactics.

How did the war end? Certainly not as we would have wanted, but as we could. The truth is, and it is as well that attention should be drawn to it, that the Spanish war came to an end in Catalonia.

Once the army corps commanded by the communist Etelvino Vega had collapsed and the forces of Lister and Modesto had fallen back on Tarragona from the Ebro; once the fascists were advancing over easily defendable country with a loss of no more than one per thousand; once Barcelona had been evacuated and the Negrin Government at the peak of its misunderstanding of the situation, gave every indication of assuming that the way to win a war was by stopping gunfire and letting off a lot of idiotic manifestoes;¹ once the Cortes met in Figueras, with each member of it with one foot in Spain and the other in France, thousands upon thousands of Spaniards crossed the frontier without any intention of returning to Spain — an intention which they shared with the government — who could really and truly say that the war, the real war in arms not the illusionary war of words, had come to an end.
England and France recognised Franco’s government. Other powers followed suit. Nobody, not even Russia, any longer sold us war material. What we already had bought remained in France, where was also a great part of our gold in various foreign banks. The funds which Negrin had personally deposited in them to ensure a bright future for himself were blocked; and in the republican zone of the Centre, Levant and the South, orders came from Negrin for the immediate evacuation of militant elements, etc.

When Negrin went to Madrid, where he remained but a few hours speaking with utter irresponsibility both of continuing the war and of establishing peace on the basis of his famous thirteen points, the last three in Figueras and the last manifesto of his government ‘to all Spaniards’ — one thing stood out with absolute clarity: that the war had been treasonably lost for us in Catalonia, while Negrin, and this is something more than mere supposition, had taken advantage of the situation to fill his purse again and get away abroad.

While the government was in the central-south zone, it had no fixed residence, hid its whereabouts, disguised its intentions, and, in spite of everything that it had no intention of doing, issued passports by the thousand knowing all the time that they would be valueless — and plundered what was left of our wealth. How could the people be expected to tolerate a situation which was not only inconsistent with its dignity, but also endangered the lives of thousands. It was obvious to all real anti-fascists that between the peace and the war about which Negrin was gaily chattering, without the slightest chance of either achieving the one or going on with the other, a disaster was arising in which even the honour of Spanish anti-fascism would perish. This produced such indignation that Negrin strengthened the bodyguard of gangsters with which he was always surrounded by the addition of a battalion of communist irregulars, and went even further by preparing a coup d’etat with no other end in view — the Catalan disaster proving clearly that he could not think of going on with the war — than that of crushing the will of the people, when about to betray them, robbing them for the last time and preventing them from obtaining definite proof of his tricky behaviour as a pawn of the communists.

In the early days of March [1939], the libertarian movement, which was alone in refusing to permit its supporters to ask for passports with which to escape abroad, after inviting all parties, including the communists, to form a new popular front government and make some military resistance which might obtain honourable conditions of peace from the enemy, suddenly found itself faced with two conflicting dangers, out of which the feared catastrophe might come. On the one hand a communist rising led by Negrin, on the other a revolt of the
regular military forces against him. Both of these dangers were on the point of coming to a head when the libertarian movement intervened, with the rest of the popular front apart from the communist party, and managed to set on foot an intermediate policy, both honourable and sincere, and stave off disaster and betrayal of the people.

The coup d'état of 5 March, prepared in haste but with boldness and loyalty, was warmly welcomed in the republican zone. The National Council of Defence was set up in Madrid, and Negrin himself wanted to hand over governmental power to it. This proposal was rejected by the Council, which was supported by the military leaders, and the former government fled abroad by air. The civil and military leaders of the Communist Party did likewise, deserting their followers at the moment when these were compelled, under military discipline to take up arms against the people. The result of the struggle was that the Communist Party was overthrown and those responsible for its treacherous uprising were imprisoned.

But this struggle, which lasted for eight days in Madrid, once again brought out the utter villainy of the Communist Party. Entire brigades headed by communist leaders, left their posts at the front at the mercy of the enemy to spill the blood about the streets and environs of Madrid. In Levant, Extremadura, etc. The communists made similar attempts, and it was only the self-control of the libertarian movement that avoided an unimaginable catastrophe. Events in Cartagena give one an idea of what might have happened. Demoralisation had taken over there, following the suspicious fall of Minorca under the Negrin government. The attempt to hand over the command of the naval base at Cartagena to a communist, whose criminal behaviour was only too well known to all anti-fascists, brought about disruption among the sailors whose anti-fascist action had been beyond reproach since 19 July 1936. The resulting confusion was taken advantage of by the fascists to organise a rising, which, though it was suppressed by setting up a National Defence Council, resulted in the total loss of the fleet, which was obliged to put out to sea under threat of being sunk and with enough fuel for only a few hours.

Barcelo, a non-communist rebel who betrayed Negrin and the Council, was shot. Conesa, who was responsible for the murder of four army chiefs, suffered the same fate. In consideration of their anti-fascist activities before the fall of Madrid, the rest were left at liberty.

What was the object of the National Defence Council, apart from the above episode which gravely endangered it? It was that of avoiding the disaster to which we were being driven by Negrin, and of securing an honourable peace. To this end it spoke to the people with absolute directness, and swore that not one member of the Council, nor any of
the anti-fascist leaders, would leave his post, adding that the *sauve-qui-peut* watchword of the former government would have to be changed into the better and nobler one of *sauve-qui-veut*. It spoke to the enemy face to face, without a foreign intermediary, with the object of exchanging a state of mutual murder for one of peace, which while recognising the military victory of the enemy, would leave our political dignity untouched.

Franco, vassal of Italy, did not accept the proposals of the National Defence Council, and as soon as the peace negotiations were concluded, he let loose an offensive on a number of fronts. Whereupon a strange thing happened: several military units of communist complexion — the 40th and 42nd Brigades (precisely those which were responsible for the heaviest fighting in Madrid in March 1939), sundry cavalry squadrons, and the division guarding the Ocana sector, went over to the enemy or laid down their arms with shouts for peace. In Extremadura, the communist forces also refused to fight, and in a single day the enemy advanced just as far as he chose. As this also occurred with other communist groups on all fronts, desertion spread, and, from one day to the next, Madrid, which for more than two years had held out with unconquerable heroism, found itself so utterly unprotected that the fascist forces could have entered it as easily as if they had been on parade.

It then became necessary to organise the evacuation of militant anti-fascists, calmly but with all possible speed. All those of our movement were still in the city, and the National Defence Council was the last to leave Madrid. The evacuated militants were transferred to Valencia, where events happened thick and fast, as all fronts were collapsing and the fascists were thirsting for blood. Leaders of all anti-fascist sections were warned that the port of Alicante alone offered means of escape, as it was farthest from the devastated fronts, and to it accordingly the flight proceeded. A day later the National Defence Council and this National Committee of the Libertarian Movement left Valencia for Alicante. It was impossible to get there as fascist risings had broken out in various towns on the way, and we were obliged to make for the port of Gandia, where we embarked on a British boat. For this we owe no thanks to any particular government, but to the Committee of International Co-ordination for helping Spain. This, and this alone, enabled us to get out of Spain — from Gandia, as other Spaniards got away from Alicante — to the extent of about two hundred anti-fascists of different political colours, among them sundry communist military leaders. The latter have fared in precisely the same way as the National Defence Council and this National Committee of the Libertarian Movement, which is proud to have remained at its post
while duty demanded it and so long as it was possible for it to see to the needs of the workers whom it represented.

Such, in broad outline, cleared of debatable issues and slanders, are the facts about the happenings in Spain during the war. If all anti-fascists, Spanish and foreign, had done their duty as we have, the Spanish people would have been victorious or, in the most unfavourable circumstances, would so have organised their defeat that the lives and dignity of all those militants who took part in the struggle would have come through it unharmed.

**London, April 1939**

The Libertarian Movement  
CNT, FAI, FIYL National Committee

1. A reference to Negrin's Thirteen-Point programme enunciated on May 1st 1938 — Editor

**José Peirats**  
**A Postscript**

Pity the revolution that devours itself in order to obtain victory. Pity the revolution that waits for a final triumph to put its ideals into practice. In spite of all the difficulties and deceptions, the Spanish revolution had the good fortune to come to full fruition. The revolutionary work of the collectives will be an indelible mark in time and space.

The rest will pass into history like a bad dream. So too will pass into oblivion those who, remembering with pleasure their positions as ministers and their military commands, are still thinking, twenty years later, about an impossible kind of libertarian political party. The real Spanish libertarian movement has historical, psychological, and popular roots that go deep. When uprooted, the movement dies.

From a distance of more than 20 years, I believe that those of us who consistently opposed collaboration with the government had as our only alternative principled, heroic defeat. I believe there was an unavowed complicity among many militants who were enemies of participation and who were self-righteously angry while they permitted the participation to take place. And yet they were sincere in their own way, sincere in their powerlessness. They could offer no solution that would simultaneously preserve so many precious things: victory in the war against fascism, progress in the revolution, complete loyalty to their ideas, and the preservation of their own lives. Lacking the power to perform miracles, these men consoled themselves by clinging to their principles.*

* This powerful defence of the Revolution is extracted from *The Anarchists in the Spanish Revolution* (1977) shortly to be reissued by Freedom Press. As we go to press we learn with deep sorrow of José Peirats death in his 81st year.
The Peasant Revolt in Italy

In the issue of Freedom for 26th November* we reported the seizures of land by the peasants of Sicily and Southern Italy which have since spread, even as far as the Po valley in the north. The Italian peasants have invaded the land after every war since the days of the Punic Wars of 264-146 BC, and the present occupations are the culmination of a continuous series of sporadic and isolated seizures which have taken place since the last war. In fact, as Prime Minister de Gasperi admitted last week, by the end of 1947 375,000 acres had already been occupied, and for the period 1946-1949 the total is 600,000 acres.

Basil Davidson writing in the New Statesman from Catanzaro in Calabria, says: “It began in Calabria on a small scale in 1945, and grew in the next two years, only to meet, in 1948, with strengthened resistance by the landowners who, with the Government firmly behind them after Demochristian victory last year, proceeded to evict the peasants again. These evictions began to be applied, a few weeks ago, to land which the Government had previously decreed should pass to the peasants (but which the peasants, in fact, had had to take). The evictions might have continued. Instead, they have given rise to a new and vaster wave of peasant agitation.”

Murder at Messina
Mr Davidson goes on to describe the events at Messina where

*Peasants seize land in Southern Italy: Direct Action forces Government to move
Large numbers of peasants in Sicily and Southern Italy are squatting on uncultivated big estates. It is, for instance, reported that on the fifteenth of this month, 1,000 peasants headed by a mayor, marched singing to take over 10,250 acres of uncultivated land in Palermo province. The police did nothing to stop them.

The Observer (20th November 1949) reports that this month’s direct action has “forced the Government into speedier rhythm than its political prudence hitherto allowed. Special land distributions to peasants in Calabria have been promised by the Government without waiting for passage of the national reform, while in Sicily landlords are reduced to attempting to buy off invaders.

“The Sicilian regional Government has voted the earliest transference of some tens of thousands of hectares of big landowners’ property to peasant families — without awaiting the passage of the land reform acts in the national and regional parliaments.”

26th November 1949
Freedom
thirteen peasants due to be evicted were shot down by the police, three of them fatally. “A group was working at Fragala on Sunday afternoon, 30th October, when they saw police approaching from above. They were about 150 men and women, some of the latter with their babies and smaller children. They told me that they clapped the police because they thought that anyone must be pleased to see this land, barren for more than ten years, fresh and clean again beneath the plough. The police, they said, came down towards them shouting for them to ‘put down their arms’. As they had no arms, they merely stood still. Late that night, long after dark, they were still gathering their dead and wounded.”

He made an exhaustive investigation and found that the official version which described the peasants as armed and declares that they threw grenades, entirely untrue, and visiting the casualties in hospital he saw that they were wounded by bullets fired from behind — fired, that is, while they were running away. Meanwhile, “six peasants arrested by this posse of police at Fragala are still in jail ‘pending inquiry’, while no sanctions of any kind appear to have been taken against the police.”

In the last week of November, Caltigirone in South East Sicily became the centre of further land seizures. This is the birthplace of the infamous Mario Scelba, the Italian Minister of the Interior, who had ordered the police to shoot if necessary to clear peasants from the land they have occupied. The first violent incident reported was between 250 police and as many peasants who had staked their claims and were settling in and building huts.

The peasants were finally evicted — a few of them to hospital — and motorised and armed police cleared another estate at San Pietro.

Near Catania, the peasants have been playing ‘hide and seek’ with the police, hiding when they arrive and taking possession when they go.

On to Rome
On 6th December, peasants around Rome seized land and began sowing at once. A peasant on Rome’s outskirts told a correspondent: “This is not politics as far as I am concerned. It is much simpler — a matter of bread for our bellies”. Another also expressed the mood of thousands. “I have planted my seed and intend to reap the harvest”, he said. “If the police want to move me they will have to carry me off — dead”. The princes, following
the example of the Calabrian and Sicilian barons, started cultivating all available land.

At Ceveteri, ruled by Prince Ruspoli, all available tractors came out to plough fields and prevent further occupation, and the News Chronicle reported that the big owners are trying to stem this land rush by cultivating more acres. It is their only protection.

They have spent vast sums (which they said they did not possess) to plough and sow land which would otherwise be seized. In Lucania and Calabria thousands more acres have been cultivated.

Two days later, peasants were occupying scrubland around Rome and several hundred farm labourers, men and women, seized more idle acres in Sicily. Police fired into the air in an effort to drive them off.

Though it was reported that on the 7th, the peasants “were still holding about 6,000 acres of the 80,000 originally seized, but they were expected to withdraw after establishing a symbolic claim to the land”, the seizures continued on the following days. Resentment against the Government and police was still running high, and armed police riot squads were patrolling country roads in case of clashes. And the Daily Telegraph reports with scandalised emphasis that “estates of some of the greatest Italian families have been invaded”.

At Laterza, near Taranto, 3,000 peasants occupied seven farms, but left after pegging out ‘claims’. They carried placards with the words ‘We have fought and the land should be ours’.

In some areas the columns were so numerous and strong that the local police were not in sufficient numbers either to turn them back or prevent them from occupying land.

Most of the zones affected by the agitation lie within a 15 to 20 mile area around the capital, and include Bracciano, Cerveteri and Monterotondo in the north and north west, Aprilia, Ariccia and Cisterna in the south, Maccarese in the west, and Rocca di Papa and other hill towns in the south east. Part of the land occupied belongs to big estates owned by the Roman aristocracy, the Torlonia and Ruspoli families among them.

On 14th December police fired on a crowd of several thousand farm workers near Bari and wounded eight of them.

The Government
When Signor de Gasperi, the Italian Christian Democrat Prime Minister, recently visited Calabria, the southernmost province of Italy, he was, the press reports, “genuinely moved by the sight of
the wretched misery he found" and in his speech at Camignatello, he said, "If we proceed with outmoded, obsolete ideas of private property, we shall never make progress", and his speech culminated in this warning to the big landowners: "Beware, if you have not realised that your hour has come — beware!"

Now, de Gasperi's remarks are very true, but the fact remains, the Tribune says, that "he happens to be the leader of a party which counts among its members and supporters many important representatives of the big land-owning interests who do everything in their power to prevent or sabotage any serious kind of land reform."

And it is curious to learn that members of the Italian cabinet discovered with surprise and horror of conditions in the south, when the ordinary book reader in this country has learnt vividly of these conditions from the novels of Ignazio Silone and from Carlo Levi's book Christ Stopped at Eboli.

We showed, in our issue of 26th November 1949, how the direct action of the peasants was forcing the authorities into making belated special land distributions to the peasants. The Government, as the News Chronicle points out: "is trying to stem the revolt by tokens", and the New Statesmen says that the authorities "are trying partly to forestall and partly to appease the peasants". And this is correct. De Gasperi in his press conference last week asked correspondents not to confuse the Land Improvement Bill with the new confiscation bills. They were quite separate. The Land Improvement Bill had, he said, "in some cases caused the sudden dismissal of peasants after improvements had been made. This", said de Gasperi, "was a point at which the local prefect could usefully intervene to effect a compromise."

The manner in which the local prefect "usefully intervenes" can be seen in the police murders at Messina. The Bill for expropriation (with generous compensation) of 112,000 acres in Calabria — the Government's appeasement measure, is merely a cynical tinkering with the question. Especially when we learn that the land "is to be handed gradually to peasants who can pay for it". The speech quoted above that de Gasperi made at Camignatello, was evidently meant for local consumption only, for in his press conference he warned that: "The peasants had stated their needs and these had gone before a commission. At present small co-operatives were marching, and when one marched another would march, and even some Christian Democrat co-operatives would march. The idea might get round that private property no
longer existed, and at that point the Ministry would have to intervene and a halt be called.”

As for the Christian Democratic programme of land reforms, the Tribune (9th December 1949) points out that it will not give land to landless peasants. “For the reform is based not on the size of properties, but on their profits and thus exempts most of the big Southern landowners whose latifondi are startlingly unproductive — to say nothing of the fact that this much advertised measure provides for the free sale within the next two years of land assigned for distribution.”

The Mafia
It is reported that the Mafia rallied to the support of the Sicilian landowners “in considerable force”, and a dispatch from Palermo says that “the agrarians refuse to disband the Mafia. The peasants want to negotiate directly with the landlords in accordance with the law on the assignment of uncultivated lands, but, as the bailiffs and rent collectors are usually members of the Mafia and would lose their jobs after the assignment, they are fiercely resisting and rallying round the landlords. The landlords themselves show no signs of wishing to break with these vampires of our Sicilian countryside.”

One of Basil Davidson’s informative articles in the New Statesman discusses the role played by the sinister secret society in Sicily. He says that banners and signboards carried in procession through Palermo carried an ancient war-cry: ‘The land to the peasants!’ They also carried a new one, a sign that the peasant unions have come to maturity and have learnt to look beyond the immediate need for land — ‘Down with the Mafia!’

Mr Davidson explains that “survival of the Mafia is the consequence of the customs of land tenure peculiar to this island. Latifondi in Sicily are leased, in the general way, not to the peasants who work the land, but gabellotti, intermediaries or sub-contractors (originally, perhaps, mere bailiffs) who lease in their turn to smaller intermediaries and so on down the scale until, at third or fourth remove from the actual owner, the land is leased eventually to the man who works it. This method of tenure explains not only the Mafia, but also the appalling abandonment of the lantifondi of Sicily — whole ranges of hills and plateaux where one may go for miles without seeing sign of life or human habitation. Few or none of the intermediaries invest in the land they rent; their object seems exclusively to extort from the peasant
more than they must pay the landlord. Having leased his land by agreements which are usually for many years, the landlord does not invest either; he merely takes his rent.

"The terror of the Mafia works both ways. The gabellotti mafiosi terrorise the peasant into giving them unduly much payment in produce for the land they sub-lease; and they terrorise the landowners into continued agreement with their terms. While they tend to murder the peasants, they usually let the landowners off with a fat ransom.

"But why should the landowners not rid themselves of this terror by calling in the State, by refusing once and for all to pay blackmail, by siding with the peasants? The answer lies in the last part of the question. However much a nuisance it may be from time to time, the Mafia can always be relied upon to act against the peasants."

The Communists
The Communists have played their usual role of attempting to cash in on popular discontents, and both the authorities and the press have been attributing the peasant rising to Communist agitation. Certainly, just as in the 'squatters' movement in Britain a few years ago, and in many other popular movements, the Communists have provided the authorities with the excuse and opportunity for taking counter-measures which would not have been possible otherwise. Mr Davidson points out in the New Statesman that the peasants are on the march "not as the authorities in Rome would have one believe, because they are 'incited by the agents of the Kremlin', but because hunger and despair drive hard, and because the alternative is lingering death", and as an Italian right-wing daily, quoted in our issue of 26th November 1949, emphasised, "it is false to call these people Communists. They feel they have reached the limits of endurance".

Footnote
At Potenza, the capital city of Lucania, perched 2,500 feet up, these words are scrawled in tar on the main building — 'Long Live Hope'.

Freedom 24th December 1949
1989 Protestors Storm Bastille

Leftwing opponents of the opulent bicentenary celebrations stormed the Place de la Bastille at the weekend for a pop concert that has upset President François Mitterand.

The concert, attended by about 250,000 people, was organised by the anarchist singer, Renaud.

Supported by the leftwing Communist Revolutionary League, the Communist Party, churchmen and intellectuals, Renaud condemned the decision to hold the G7 economic summit of the world’s richest countries here during the festivities.

His demands that the bicentenary should attack privilege and concentrate on helping the Third World — the new Third Estate — brought a counter protest from the Elysée.

When Renaud refused to abandon his idea, Mr Mitterand’s closest adviser, Mr Jacques Attali, invited him to lunch and pointed out that many Third World leaders were among the 30 heads of state of government invited to Paris.

The concert was preceded by a protest march in which the bicentenary logo of three blue, white and red birds had been transformed into vultures. Protestors shouted slogans in favour of concentrating the celebrations on attacking apartheid, colonialism and Third World debt.

Renaud wore the traditional sans culottes outfit to address a crowd which included trade unionists, anti-racists and representatives of leftwing movements.

The protest concert, which included several African groups, went on until late yesterday morning and will precede a week of campaigning against the economic summit.

from The Guardian 10th July 1989
Reginald Reynolds
No more illusions

Weighing heavily on my mind are those terrible realities of 1939 — those that stare at us from the headlines and those, even more appalling, which are more terrible because so few have realised them. Fascism over Europe, the imminence of war, the paralysis of democracy — these are the things that all have seen, the causes of fear and deep anxiety in millions of homes. Once more we hear the beat of the wings of the Angel of Death. The conquests of the past hundred years, wrested by working men and women in a continuous struggle from the ruling class, are doomed or already lost. The hopes of post-war Europe, begotten in an age that saw the fall of dynasties and the upheaval of nations, have withered and died.

Would that the story ended there. Its dark sequel brings it to an even more sinister conclusion. The Russian Revolution betrayed, and a totalitarian state masquerading as a socialist soviet republic. Social Democracy in full flight, indecent in its spiritual nakedness, its last disguises abandoned, preparing the way for national unity. The Stalinists, still successfully exploiting the memory of a revolution they long since betrayed, heading off militants, sabotaging the harassed forces of revolt. What fascism has done for Germany and Italy, fear, panic and treachery have done for England and France. Divided by the frontiers of nationalism, the masses prepare to defend their chains once more.

On one side they will fight for 'justice' and 'national socialism' and against 'encirclement'. On the other side, they will fight for 'democracy' and they too, like Hitler, will pollute the name of socialism. The ghost of Pilsudski will laugh among the marshes of the Vistula, where men will die for what they have never possessed. The African conscripts of France will perish for liberty, equality and fraternity, the supposed privileges of a white skin, but certainly not a black one. Desperate efforts will be made to obtain the 'loyalty' of the Arabs, today victims of systematic loot, plunder, torture and murder. And India? There, if resistance shows its head, the jackboots of democracy will give Goering a lesson in ruthlessness . . .

Here, in a street in Soho, a remnant of heroes is gathered together. They are symbolic of our scattered forces all over the world, the defeated ones, those who since 1918 have seen the failure of one hope
after another and have not lost faith or courage. Thermopylae was not more hopeless in its odds than the fight we are now facing — those few who still hold to that Good Old Cause which unites the toilers and the oppressed across the frontiers. Facing a situation incomparably brighter in its prospects (as history proved) of unqualified success, Tom Paine once wrote of the American Revolution: ‘There are times that try men’s souls, into such times have we been born.’ The words bite harder today. They come as the challenge of our own past, of generations who have wrought for freedom, to those who have seen the bastions of progress retaken one by one and stand today before their last stronghold.

Let us take courage from the undaunted spirit of those men and women who, having lost everything in Spain, are still ready to fight, and to fight on while life is in them. Let us not this May Day be overcome with despair or take refuge in illusions. If the houses of hope which we built were built upon the sand, there is no reason why we should, like ostriches, hide our heads in it. Realities must be faced, new plans made and carried out. It is not enough in this world to be right or even to be courageous. Virtuous circles are no less sterile than vicious ones. We can and must get our message to the masses.

Let us say to those who have not lost faith and turned back to the sophistries of reformism, the specious arguments of the Popular Front, let us say to all those who would join us but are waiting for someone else to do so first:

Comrades, real progress does not consist in accepting given alternatives but in creating some new ones. No movement ever began as a mass movement: the great movements that have made history, whether progressive or reactionary, became what they were because those who were tired of the choices that society offered them decided or were persuaded to reject them all.

Had such people considered only what was immediately ‘practicable’ no new movements could ever have come into being; for practicality depends on support, and if support is to depend in turn upon practicability, there can be no development.

The dynamic force in politics is the human will, which having determined its objective creates its own possibilities. In the game of politics we may often find that our opponents have cunningly devised the rules in such a way that, however we play our cards, we are bound to lose. In that case we must learn to devise new rules of play.

You have the aces and you have the trumps. Comrades what is wrong with the rules that you always lose? And what makes you keep to them when the game is yours if you will it?

Revolt! (incorporating Spain and the World) 1st May 1939

1 A reference to the Spanish CNT-FAI refugees who were being cared for by the Freedom Press Group — Editor.
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It was in the name of equality that the bourgeoisie overthrew and massacred the nobility. And it is in the name of equality that we now demand either the violent death or the voluntary suicide of the bourgeoisie, only with this difference — that during the revolutionary period, we do not want the death of men but the abolition of positions and things.

Michael Bakunin, The Lullers, 1868-69