ORANGES OF DISCORD: HOW THE STRUGGLE FOR CONTROL OF CITRUS HARVESTING AND EXPORT UNDERMINED ANTIFASCIST UNITY IN SPAIN IN 1936-1937

NARANJAS DE DISCORDIA: CÓMO LA LUCHA POR EL CONTROL DE LA COSECHA Y EXPORTACIÓN DE CÍTRICOS DISMINUYÓ LA UNIDAD ANTIFASCISTA EN ESPAÑA EN 1936-1937

A. Yu. Fedorov*

Resumen: Este artículo está dedicado a uno de los aspectos mal estudiados de la guerra civil y la revolución en España de 1936-1939. A pesar de los ochenta años transcurridos desde el final de esa guerra, siguen existiendo muchos temas mal estudiadas en su historia, y muchos temas continúan causando un acalorado debate, incluso entre personas que estudian profesionalmente la Guerra Civil española. Una de esas historias es la de la lucha por el control de la recolección y exportación de cítricos entre las distintas fuerzas políticas del campo republicano. En este caso, se trata de un examen integral del conflicto, que incluye tanto la confrontación a nivel de grandes políticas como los enfrentamientos armados, que dieron lugar a un gran número de víctimas y detenidos, y de muchas maneras anticipó la crisis política de mayo de 1937, que dio lugar a graves cambios en la vida sociopolítica de la República Española. Sin embargo, algunos detalles de este conflicto solo pueden aclararse gracias al trabajo con el material de los archivos rusos.

Palabras claves: Revolución social, Anarcosindicalistas, Socialistas, Comunistas, Naranjas, Exportación.

Abstract: This article is devoted to one of the poorly studied aspects of the civil war and revolution in Spain of 1936-1939. Despite the eighty years that have passed since the end of that war, many poorly studied subjects remain in its history, and many topics continue to be heatedly debated, including among people who are studying the Spanish Civil War professionally. One such episode is the story of the struggle for control over the collection and export of citrus fruits between the various political forces of the Republican camp. In this case, an attempt is made to conduct a comprehensive review of this conflict, which includes both confrontation at the level of high politics and armed clashes, resulting in a large number of victims and arrests. In many ways these events anticipated the May political crisis of 1937, which led to serious changes in the social and political life of the Spanish Republic. However, some details of this conflict can be clarified only thanks to work with materials held in Russian archives.

Keywords: Social Revolution, Anarcho-Syndicalists, Socialists, Communists, Oranges, Export

Social Revolution and the Export of Citrus Fruit

Immediately after the outbreak of the Civil war, revolutionary processes began to unfold in those territories that were controlled by the Republican government. These

* Fedorov Andrey Yuryevich – archaeologist specialist, “Metropolitan Archaeological Bureau” Ltd., Russian Federation, Moscow, fedorovan36@gmail.com.
processes embraced both urban and rural workers. Collectives began to emerge everywhere.

At the same time, although the main driving force of the accelerating social revolution were the anarcho-syndicalists of the National Confederation of Labor (CNT) and the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI), as noted by authors such as Aurora Bosch Sánchez and Robert Alexander, anarchists in the Levante had no real control over the processes taking place, and at the same time they proceeded differently everywhere, with varying degrees of success.35

As in other spheres of activity, collectivization was applied to the harvesting and export of citrus fruit.

Initially, the anarchists assumed that the export of citrus fruits from the Levante would be undertaken by the Regional Federation of Peasants of the Levante (FRCL). For this purpose the Federation created a structure known as FERECALE – an acronym formed from the initial two letters of the nouns in the Spanish name of the Federation. This acronym, it was anticipated, would facilitate easier promotion of the citrus products of the agrarian collectives in the international market.

Somewhat later, the Unified Levantine Council for Agricultural Exports (CLUEA), organized by the anarcho-syndicalist (CNT) and socialist (UGT) trade unions, was established to “Organize exports and prevent counter-revolution.”36 This Council was actively engaged in the export of the region’s most important products — oranges, as well as other citrus fruits, which were considered one of the most important foundations of the economy of the Republic, being the main export commodity. In general, CLUEA accounted for 51 to 70 percent of the export of oranges.37

Since its inception on October 7, 1936, the work of this Council had been constantly attacked by the Republican government, which essentially sabotaged its work.38 The communists accused the anarcho-syndicalists of robbing the peasants, forcibly taking their harvest of oranges for sale for their own benefit.39

As for the accusations of the ineffectiveness of the anarchists’ export policy, they were largely unfounded because the decline in export revenues was not due to the actions of the libertarians, but rather to the fact that before the war Germany, now hostile to the Republic, accounted for 40% of the exports of Spanish oranges.40 Moreover, with the outbreak of war, it became more difficult to deliver oranges to countries such as France and the United Kingdom, plus there was growing competition from orange-exporting countries in North and South America, as well as from Palestine.

This was superimposed on the economic problems caused by the Great Depression, and led to the fact that during 1931–1935, Spain's income from the export of oranges halved, accounting, nevertheless, for 11.07% of the total value of Spanish exports.41

40 *Spanish Revolution*, New York, 07.05.1937, №17, 2.
41 Alexander, *op. cit.*, 412.
All of this, of course, does not mean that there were no internal problems in the CLUEA. They were, however, not related to the actions of anarchists, but rather to a general decrease in the quality of organization of work at the local level.42

At the same time, according to the French researcher Frank Mintz, despite all the difficulties that CLUEA encountered, it carried out the export campaign of 1936–1937, as well as part 1937–1938, quite successfully.43

In their newspapers, the anarchists abroad urged their readers to buy oranges exported from Valencia to help the Republican economy, and also published information from the Valencian anarchists themselves regarding export plans.44

The essence of the conflict in the Republic around the CLUEA lay in several planes: economic, as well as internal and foreign policies. The foreign policy factor was particularly acute: the government of Valencia needed to take full control of the export of citrus fruits, not least in the interests of trade with the Soviet Union, which supplied arms.

So, for example, in a secret note from Rosengolz to Stalin and Molotov of November 22, 1936, it was said that the issue of exports of oranges, lemons and almonds from the southern regions of Spain “has great political significance.”45

Documents of the State Archive of the Russian Federation, relating to the end of 1937, provide a fuller story of the importance of citrus exports.

When, at the end of 1937, the issue of citrus purchases for the fourth quarter was discussed in the Soviet Union, the situation around imported citrus fruits, and first of all oranges, was considered from the angle of its “great trade and political importance.” However, it was emphasized that trade with the Soviet Union was of primary moral importance for the government of the Republic, helping to “to strengthen its positions in the markets of other countries” under conditions when these countries were trying to manipulate pricing policy, taking advantage of the difficult situation of the Republicans. For the Soviet side, it was also important that if the USSR didn’t buy “enough oranges,” then it was possible to lose Spanish lead, which “can find its way to countries that are most undesirable for us,” and the Republic at the same time “can transfer a large part of the purchase of goods (grain, cotton, fertilizers, etc.) to other countries.”46

Of course, in the spring of 1937, the political situation in Republican Spain was different. However, this information reflects the political and economic background of the conflict caused by the very fact of the formation of the CLUEA, and before that – FERECALE.

And the confrontation in Valencia was all the more important, since the balance of political forces in the Republican camp depended on the winner in the conflict around the collectives of the CLUEA and citrus exports. The victory of the government in this confrontation would mean strengthening not only itself, but also the Communists, while the victory of collectives would strengthen the position of supporters of the “social revolution,” the radical wing of the anarcho-syndicalist movement, and deliver a blow to the position of the “anarchist ministers.”

42 About the problems faced by the organization of the work of CLUEA at the local level, see: Alexander, op. cit., 411-412.
The Vinalesa Events and the “Gandia Front”

At the beginning of 1937, several conflicts occurred in the Levante between the supporters and opponents of collectivization. The clashes took place in the towns of Cullera and Carcagente.\(^{47}\)

On March 8, clashes broke out in the Vinalesa area, which had a population of about 2,200 inhabitants. It all started with an attack on the local labour centers of the Assault Guard units.\(^{48}\) According to one version, the reason was a small incident at a dance, used as an excuse by the authorities for a large-scale police operation.\(^{49}\)

According to another version, the clashes were provoked by the decree on government control over all foreign export, signed by the Minister of Trade, CNT member Juan Lopez.\(^{50}\)

In fact, the beginning of open conflict was provoked by a policy pursued by the Vicente Uribe, Minister of Agriculture in the government of the left socialist Largo Caballero and a member of the PCE, who deprived the collectives of the CLUEA of credit. The Minister’s actions led to a sharp increase in discontent among the peasants, in response to which police units were set upon them. Ultimately, according to Bosch Sánchez, “the impact of this conflict on the Republican economy, and in particular the Valencian one, was enormous.”\(^{51}\)

It should be noted that initially these events, although regarded as extremely unpleasant and dangerous, were not perceived as having great fundamental significance. This was stated during the Peasants Plenum of the CNT–Levante on March 15.\(^{52}\)

Meanwhile, in response to the actions of government forces, anarchist militiamen from the “Iron Column” and the column “CNT,” which were operating near Teruel, came to help the peasant collectives. For its part, the government sent assault guards and armored vehicles against the peasants.

As a result of the fighting, up to several hundred people were killed. According to the official data of the CNT, cited by Frank Mintz, four members of the National Confederation and 11 “guardians of order” were killed.\(^{53}\)

Moreover, in one of the Soviet reports it was said that at least 250 “rebels,” and 12 assault guards were killed, and another 10 – 15 of the latter were wounded as a result of fighting in the Levante. Also reported was the capture of 125 “prisoners” and the capture of substantial “trophies”: hundreds of rifles, dozens of boxes with hand grenades, machine guns, and dynamite.\(^{54}\) In another document smaller figures are cited: “The March uprising of the anarchists near Valencia was suppressed by armored cars. Seventy-five people were killed, 150 people were captured, and many weapons, machine guns, and grenades were captured.”\(^{55}\)


\(^{48}\) Andino C., “8 de marzo: En esta fecha”, CeNiT, Toulouse, 08.03.1994, №529, 12.


\(^{50}\) Peirats, op. cit., 49.

\(^{51}\) Bosch Sánchez, op. cit., 73-74.

\(^{52}\) Paeymirán N., “Actas del Pleno campesino de la CNT – Levante [Valencia a 15 de marzo de 1937]”, Supplement au numero 224 de CENIT, Toulouse, enero a junio de 1978, 6384.

\(^{53}\) Mintz, op. cit., 72.


According to Abel Paz, the majority of the “prisoners” (92 people) were fighters of the “Iron Column.” At the same time, he does not name the specific number of victims of the events described, although he writes that “there were many killed and wounded.” For his part, Miguel Amoros also speaks of 92 arrested members of the “Iron Column,” estimating the total number of people taken into custody as 200. He also mentions the same data about the numbers of dead as F. Mintz, assigning, however, the first four not to the CNT, but to the peasants.56

The issue of the Valencian anarchist newspaper Nosotros dated April 2, 1937, appeared with the headline on the front page: “The offensive begins against us. Unity, comrades! Unity, anarchists!”57

At the April 12 Plenum of local anarchist groups in Barcelona, the representative of the Confederation’s Defense Group Acracia [Anarchy] said that there was even an order to shoot the captured anarchists, estimated as 150 people, however, it was possible to save them from harm.58

The events embraced a number of settlements. Within a few weeks, they included the villages of Alfara, Gandia, Moncada, and a number of other places. Anarchists declared the formation of the “Gandia Front” (Jativa, Carcagente, Gandia and Sueca) and the “Vinalesa Front” (Catarroja, Liria, Moncada, Paterna, and Burriana).59

The newspapers of the Communists and even left-wing socialists saw in the event the “Intrigues of the Fifth Column.” In particular, this was written in the April 13 issue of the socialist Adelante.60

After the intervention of the CNT Minister of Justice Garcia Oliver and the socialist minister Angel Galarzsa (from the left faction of the PSOE), the conflict was more or less settled, and most of the arrested peasant leaders were released.61

Thus, the conflict over control of the harvesting and export of citrus fruits led in the spring of 1937 to serious clashes within the Republican camp on the territory of the Levante. However, at that moment the conflict was resolved before it could cause a serious crisis in the Republican camp. At the same time, these events demonstrated how strong the existing contradictions were, which soon led to bloody clashes in Catalonia and Aragon, the focal point of which was Barcelona.

According to the Spanish researcher Aurora Bosch Sánchez, in the spring of 1937 the attacks of the assault guards against agricultural collectives and unions of the CNT became systematic, spreading throughout Valencia.62 So, in particular, in April, 1937, a successfully developing peasant collective in Santa Magdalena de Pulpis was smashed by the national guard, which was dispatched by the authorities of the region.63

57 Nosotros, 02.04.1937, №41, 1.
60 Adelante, Valencia, 13.03.1937, №35, 2.
61 Alexander, op. cit., 231; Paz, op. cit., 161-162.
62 Bosch Sánchez, op. cit., 74.
In total, according to some reports, between the spring of 1937 and the end of 1938, there were at least 42 cases of attacks on collectives by Republican authorities and army units under the command of Communists in the Valencia region alone.\(^6\)

As for the control over the harvesting and export of citrus fruits, the struggle between the Communists and the Government against the CLUEA continued.

Meanwhile, the Council, well aware of its own shortcomings, sought to deal with their negative consequences. Thus, in preparing for the export season of 1937–1938, it was planned to put an end to competition between the local branches of the CLUEA, and to standardize the packing of oranges and transportation practices, as well as make improvements in the quality control of the exported goods.\(^6\)

The plans, however, could not be implemented. On September 6, 1937, by a decision of the Government of Juan Negrín, instead of the CLUEA being controlled by the trade unions of CNT and UGT, a new structure was created, Citrus Export Center, which was under the full control of the Ministry of Finance of the Republic and the Communist Party. At the same time, however, the FRCL and the UGT’s Federation of Agricultural Workers “continued working as one more exporting entity within the framework of the state structure.”\(^6\)

As the Spanish historian Julian Casanova notes in this connection: “This was the end of worker control of orange exports and the beginning of the end of union control of Valencian agriculture.”\(^7\)

**Bibliografía:**


\(^6\) Alexander, *op. cit.*, 424.
\(^6\) Ibid, 413-414.
\(^6\) Ibid, 414.
2003 Россия и Иberoамерика в глобализирующемся мире