

Barcelona 19th July 1936

A glimpse into the elsewhere

Life not History



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Kaleidoscope

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A glimpse into the elsewhere of an upturning so great that it is unimaginable, where certainties are swept away in an instant and life itself takes on a fragile intensity. These accounts contain a grain of everything it is possible to foresee of the ultimate fight for freedom and other aspects that could never have been dreamt in our worst nightmares. They inform, inspire but also warn: we need to recognise the enemies of freedom and self organisation in the paths we tread, blinded by our iconography of the enemy which is also standing right next to us and calls us comrade, albeit hissed through clenched teeth.

With love in our hearts.

Most workers had rushed to CNT union halls and from there, generally with no more than work and domestic tools—axes, hatchets, knives—surrounded the military government building. At 28, veteran of many struggles, Miguel gathered up his friends in the plaza Real and they rushed in the other direction, up the Ramblas into wealthy Barcelona, storming the gunshops. They collected a formidable round of weapons from a prepared list of sports shops and then went to Columbus Square. (A tense moment when they passed an armed Civil Guard squad: whether to go forward or backwards was inviting to be shot in the back. Defiantly they passed, shouting the slogans of the CNT. The Guard saluted. It was loyal to the Popular Front—not to the point of marching to the square to fight the Fascist rebels, but to the point of passively obeying whatever government was.) Albert Meltzer.

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..even the priests and friars were without pity as they machine-gunned the people from their convents and churches. A seriously injured man had to remain on the ground for many long hours without any assistance because the nurses from the nearby hospital were targeted from the windows of a convent and had to suspend their rescue efforts. The people eventually lost their patience and set fire to all the convents and churches. The cathedral was saved, but the bishop's palace was put to the flames. The purifying fire lasted several days as the people's joy continued. At least nine tenths of churches and convents of Barcelona are now nothing more than ruins. Tranquillo.

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..alarming symptoms are announcing themselves. Starting from the news that we have, with a certain frequency, of acts of vandalism, fraud or extortion even carried out in the name of the C.N.T. and the F.A.I., the latter organization, the Iberian Anarchist Federation, published in the newspaper Tierra y Libertad of 30 July and had thousands of copies posted up and circulated throughout the city, a poster you would think had been drawn up in the police station and a declaration of war against the small and large criminals in question, against whom is undoubtedly imposed the death penalty by firing squad. Vedetta

Miguel Garcia

BARCELONA IS OURS!

BARCELONA IS OURS! That is what they were shouting at the end of that now famous day, the 19th of July 1936. Everywhere the black-and-red flag of the CNT was flying. The bands were playing on the Ramblas. The people were delirious with excitement. They had hit back at world fascism and sent it reeling.

It was the day before that the news, so long expected, had come. The Army had decided to take over the Republic. It was staging a coup d'etat. The Falange was declaring that this was the hour when Spain would be transformed into a Fascist State. We had read with horror for three years of the unparalleled atrocities in Germany. The terror against political opponents, the pogrom that had been launched against the Jews, the transformation of the country into a War State. We knew that the generals of Spain would hesitate at none of this so far as we were concerned. They had been as surely taught that the people was 'scum' as the Nazis had taught that the Jews were 'inferior'. There was no mercy to be had from them. Led by the Falange, they would represent a greater force against us than we had ever known before.

I had arranged to meet some friends in the syndicalist movement that Saturday night. Most of them were in the transport union. Like many others in the town they had their own plans formulated hastily in the course of the day. I told them. I would contact others in the catering union. Its hall was close to the Captain General's Office, along the harbour, just off the Ramblas. From the balcony one could touch the Captaincy. One could look out over the harbour and see the Naval School, just off the via Layetana, and, to the right, overlooking the water, was the Military Government, in front of the Atarazanas barracks.

Farther to the west and towards the newer part of the city was the Plaza de Cataluna, a huge open-air walk; towering above the old city was the Columbus Monument, a great tower with a cupola on the top from which the old city could be viewed.

Rumours were flying when I reached the union headquarters early Sunday morning. Many people were walking about the streets as though they sensed they had seen their last night of peace for many years—for some of them, for ever. The Army must make a move soon, we felt. And this time it could not be like in 1934, when events passed us by. The Right Wing Press made no secret of the fact that they wanted a Fascist state. They praised Mussolini and Hitler daily. The clerical fascism of Austria sent them in raptures. But what chance have we, said some. The Barcelona garrison manned the barracks which ringed the city. They could surround the town in no time at all and take over everything. "This time, they have got to arm the people," we said. "The republic can't get out of it this time. They must give us arms or die themselves."

But nobody believed they would give us arms. Their record of the Republican leaders was against it. They called on the Army to be loyal; they relied on the assault police and carabinieri. The latter—(customs officers in uniform) always remained loyal to them, while the assault police was its own creation—built to fight the workers, now relying upon them for co-operation. But such State forces as remained loyal were no substitute for an armed people, and this they wanted to resist.

Some CNT workers, however, decided they would not go down without a struggle. The strongest section for resistance was in the transport union. A group of us in the catering section decided to go along to the old city to try to organise a break into an armoury. That way some of us would get guns. When we went down the Rambla, however, we found no transport available. A riot had begun.

"Death to fascism," people were crying, "Hang the generals!" Stones were thrown, shop windows broken. A crowd gathered, shouting increased, the people became bolder. They broke down shop doors, pillaged what they could, seized what they could carry, broke into tills, fought among themselves for the best goods. The five of us, who had decided to go on the arms raid, stood there watching. No police arrived. The crowd became more noisy, a wine shop was broken into.

I jumped on a barrow and began making a speech. "This isn't the way to fight fascism. There is only one way—with guns. Leave alone the toys of the bourgeoisie and come and raid the armouries!"

There was a shout of acclaim. My friends and I led them to a famous shop called Beristany, where the rich used to buy their Remingtons and Winchesters, hunting guns, revolvers. The crowd hammered at the barred door... They

kicked it in. Most of them made a grab at the money tills. My group forced its way in and began to arm ourselves. I took an expensive new Remington, and crammed my pockets with ammunition.

My friends took Winchesters. The crowd began to calm down. In the light of the street lamps they saw us purposefully arming. They stopped their pillaging for money and began to fight for guns. Every gun went, every round of ammunition. The men waved their new weapons and cheered. They were an indisciplined rabble before. Suddenly they felt themselves a new power. They came to pillage, they went back to fight. In the next 24 hours, many of them were to die.

I went home to hide my gun and ammunition. I did not want to parade the streets with it over my shoulder until the hour was ripe. When my mother saw me come in, gun in hand, she walked over to me. But she did not protest. I remembered how she had so often tried to persuade my father to give up his militancy. She smiled at me. "Take care, my son," she said. I kissed her, and told her not to be concerned. I went back to the catering union HQ.

I showed my card and went in. There were many people there all eagerly discussing the events. The Army had risen throughout Spain. The Republic was appealing for loyalty. The two main unions, the CNT and the UGT, had called a general strike for wherever the rebels were in control. They demanded armed resistance to fascism.

All over Barcelona there had been incidents like the one in which I had participated. The members of the FAI had decided to arm themselves. They knew that nobody would ever give them arms. In the crowd in the hall guns were bristling. But many of them were old revolvers and only a few had got hold of rifles from the armouries of the town. We heard gunfire, machine gun fusillades, rifle shots and shouts in the distance. It was seven in the morning of the 19th July, already hot. The city was stirring and shifting.

I had my pistol with me. I decided that I needed my rifle. I gathered together a few friends and we decided to go out and find what was going on. Nobody else was resisting but us. The UGT members remained in their halls impassive. The Socialists wrote manifestos. I would run home and get my gun. I opened the door of the union building and looked across the calle Merced to the huge back door, solid wood reinforced by iron, of the Captaincy General. There were about 200 men in the Captain General's quarters. Some were staff officers, the rest armed troops. At the bridge which connects the Captaincy General with the Church of Merced I saw soldiers—only a few feet away from our building. I turned round to talk to the man behind me who was carrying one of the few carbines in the room.

"Put it down your trouser leg. The soldiers will shoot you from there if they see it." But he was proud of his gun and would not listen.

"Follow me—run" I shouted, dashing out of the building, under the bridge and round the corner, safe from their line of fire.

I heard a shout, "Drop that gun." Then there came a shot.

I ran back. The man with carbine was lying doubled up on the street, his gun a few feet away. He was moaning with pain as his leg bled. He had been shot by soldiers on the bridge. I looked up at the officer who was there. "He's wounded—can I take him to the clinic?"

"Yes," said the officer, "But surrender his carbine. Put it by the door." We put his carbine by the door under the bridge. It opened, and the gun was snatched in, the door closed. We passed with him swiftly under the bridge to a first aid post used by the dockworkers. He was the first man of my union to be blooded.

Now there were many on the streets, guns appearing everywhere. Women, too. I could not wait any longer. I told my friend to wait at the first aid post, and ran home, got my Remington and all my ammunition, and joined him again.

By this time the battle was on. The transport union was crowded. There, the transport workers had rallied, from all parts of the town. Durruti and Ascaso were there, trying to organise them into shock groups, as other workers joined them. Catering workers came, some in their whites from the kitchens, some from the restaurants in the narrow streets or from the cafes in the Ramblas, from the bakeries and abattoirs, some with the meat cleavers and long kitchen knives. They intended to defend the building with their lives. It seemed a hopeless task. Each time one of our fighters tried to dash out and make a break, gun in hand, to take up a position where he could shoot up at the troops, he was shot down.

An armoured lorry, hastily improvised by the railway workers, charged down the Ramblas into the empty Plaza de Catalunya to challenge control of the streets. There were bodies all around, and the spent bullets hummed and kertoinged their way round the streets.

There was no way into the Captaincy. One had to make a long run round the Ramblas and through side streets to get to the back door. But there were armed men there too covering the street.

There was the sound of machine gun firing from nearby. It came from the cupola on the Columbus Monument. There was a Fascist up there with a weapon and ammunition and he was dominating the open spaces of the old part

of town. He was a hundred feet up and well protected. People were crouching in doorways sniping at him. But any attempt at getting closer was thwarted. The snipers were shot down.

As we joined the snipers, we heard the news that Francisco Ascaso had been shot down in the fighting and killed. He had died when he went to negotiate for the surrender of the Atarazana Barracks which had shown a white flag. He had been loved and respected throughout the city, and his death was taken as a personal blow. Tough fighters, who had been through the mill of battle in some form or other with this same enemy many times, wept when they heard the news. Every man was angry. As the news of his death spread, their rage began to mount. So many had gone the same way. This time, they said, the result would be different.

My friend, Angel, who was with me, tugged me by the arm. "The main fight seems to be in the Plaza de Cataluna. That's where we'll be most necessary. There are plenty now to defend the union building."

That is how it was, completely without direction. We had been taken unprepared. But we were all determined to act on our own responsibility. Angel and I headed down the Rambla, dodging from tree to tree when we were near the square of the Plaza, as bullets were flying in the great battle. Men were lying dead on the streets and under the trees, shot down by military snipers from the rooftops or from soldiers in the square. We luckily managed to reach the square without being hit. I lay behind a tree with my rifle trying to find out what was happening. Everything was confused, there were shouts and screams and machine gun fire.

I saw many men shot down. Fascists—civilian supporters of the Army—and a handful of soldiers were defending the telephone exchange, from which the operators had fled. There was heavy firing. On the other side of the square was the officers' club where a section of troops were stationed. They had a machine gun in the hallway of the club and were sweeping the square with fire. Men were trying to shelter behind dead mules in the square. There was nothing in the square, not one tree, to give protection. But I started to fire, partly to get used to my new rifle, and partly to keep the heads of the fascists down in the telephone exchange.

Angel and I ran down to the back of the telephone exchange. From the Columbus Hotel, on the other side of the square, came further firing. From our cover we gathered a few men around us to march on to the Hotel. As we marched on, we stopped dead in our tracks.

The street was packed with Civil Guards. There they were, our old enemy, 400 of them, armed with automatic weapons and rifles. We all felt we were dead men. We waited for them to fire. But they did not do so. They waved us on. I marched on slowly, my group following me. We thought we would be shot in the back. But we were mistaken. They were allies. They had stayed loyal to the Republican Government. It was hard to think that we now had such new friends. This was how it was during the early days of the civil war. There had been a shift in alliances. It was not always possible to recognise the enemy.

We went into the building behind the Columbus Hotel. It was an apartment house, with a bank on the ground floor. I ran up the first flight of stairs, rushed into the first door and saw three men with pistols. They were taken by surprise, and surrendered. They had a small post there with pistols and grenades. Some of the men with me wanted to shoot them down. I stopped them. We locked the door on them instead, after disarming them. When we left Angel threw the key away.

There were now nine of us, all armed. We went upstairs to the flat roof which overlooked the Columbus Hotel. Fascists in the hotel shouted to us not to fire, just as I was preparing to throw one of the grenades I had just taken from the flat below. We shouted over the gunfire.

"We will surrender but not to you," their spokesman shouted. "Only to the Civil Guards."

"Right," I said. "Stop shooting and we will fetch the Civil Guards." We went down to the street and to the colonel in charge of the two companies of Civil Guards. I told him that the rebel post in the Columbus Hotel would surrender to him and he ordered his men into the Plaza de Cataluna so that he could accept the surrender on the front steps.

But as the Guards marched into the square in view of the telephone exchange, there was a great outburst of firing. The Guards threw themselves on the ground—so did we. Then they opened fire with their modern Mauser rifles, the best weapons then available in Spain. I fired a few shots with my Reminton, but the range was too great.

The firing stopped suddenly. The Guards went into the hotel and disarmed the Rebels inside it. Then the telephone exchange stopped firing. A squad of uniformed police marched in and led the fascists away. The rebels in Barcelona were beginning to realise they had stirred up a hornet's nest. The whole of the people were against them. They were afraid to fall into the hands of the workers and preferred to surrender to the State forces which they knew, and which had always been on their side.

The machine gun stopped firing at the officers' club too. There was peace in the square, broken only by the moaning of an injured man who lay behind a small car which had been driven down into the level square and overturned, as a barricade.

I went with my group to the officers' club. I recognised the young officer in charge, who lived near me. He gave his pistol up to the uniformed police. The dead mules in the square had been hauling a small, four-wheeled wagon and the police now dragged this over to the officers' club and ordered the soldiers to throw their arms in it. I watched and saw one soldier with a brand new Mauser. I told him to give it to me.

He refused. "You aren't one of the Republican police. You're one of the rabble." I grabbed his gun and we fought for it. I hit him with the butt of my pistol and he let it go. I then ordered him to take off his bandolier which held 150 rounds of ammunition. This he did. I threw my Remington to one of my group, fastened the bandolier over my shoulder and looked around. This was how our movement was arming itself that fateful day. In no part of Spain would the Government let us have arms. Yet it faced mortal peril from the Army and the danger of foreign intervention. What we got we had to take for ourselves.

Down by the harbour there was shouting. I took a car nearby, a very small one, and four of us clambered in. We drove the mile or so down to the harbour past groups of running people waving pistols, and shouting about their various successes all over the town. On the vehicles they were chalking CNT-FAI. Part of the town was by now in the hands of the people. The uniformed police had decided to stay by the Republic. We did not trust the Civil Guard. There were ironic cheers of 'Long live the Republic' as they passed. They were a military force who went with the stronger side but they had always been against us. Although they had in the main taken no sides, we all believed they would come down on the side of the Generals' junta.

Once down at the harbour, we found another crowd behind the Civil Government building. In front of them was a big open space which led on to the harbour. To the left was the Naval School, and to the right the Captaincy-General. From the first floor balcony of this building there was a machine gun nest. It was impossible to approach. The attack on the important buildings around the Captaincy-General was held up because of this outpost.

Our group in the car sized up the situation. We saw that some light artillery was drawn up in a line approaching 1500 to 2000 yards away from the Captaincy-General. They had been brought there as fresh supplies for the soldiers, but the troops had been driven off. The guns were just lying there. They were '75s. If we could reach them we would be able to take out the machine gun nest with one round fired over open sights.

I told my friends of the plan. We would drive the car fast into the shelter of the Naval School. Then I would make a dash for the line of guns. We started out. The car went like hell, but 25 yards from the cover of the school, the machine gun caught us. The driver was hit badly in the leg. The engine was hit. I dived out of the back door and ran for the guns. I slithered behind the one nearest to me and sheltered behind the gun-shield as the gunner tracked me over the open space. I was terrified. As I dove for cover I felt a sudden stab. I was wounded in the leg. I pulled up my trouser leg and dabbed at the blood. But it was not a bullet wound. Just a piece of flying stone. Nothing of consequence.

I searched the guns. In vain. There were four guns but not a single shell. As I crouched, the machine gunner from the balcony of the Captaincy swept the line of guns, realising the danger if we had shells and could have fired back. I sat there, protected by the base of the gun, for fifteen-minutes, unable to move, the gun firing at me all the time with occasional bursts scattered round the open space to drive back the groups who, here and there, tried to make a front attack.

From where I lay I could see the wrecked car we had commandeered. One of our friends was lying on the street close by it. The others in the group were lying in the shelter of the school. Only one of us had a rifle with him. We could do nothing. Then suddenly, after fifteen minutes, the machine gunner must have decided I was dead. He switched target and began firing elsewhere. I sprinted across the open to the Naval School walls, and joined my friends and other people lying there. I said we must get our friend into cover. We crawled out again the open space, grabbed him back to the school. He was put into another car and driven off to hospital. I never saw him again. I do not know what happened to him.

We began to discuss our next move, "Let's go back to our union and see how things are going," I said. Maybe, too, we decided, we could find out there if the Captaincy-General could be taken from the rear. I ran off, in the cover of the Naval School, to an arcade from which one could see the machine gun but be protected by pillars from it. There I saw an astonishing sight. Trundling down the via Layetana close by the Post Office and some fifty yards from me, was another 75mm gun, hauled by one of the biggest men in the docks, Manuel Lecha.

It was hailed with delight, and Manuel earned a nickname that day "the Artillery-man" which he never lived down and by which he was affectionately known throughout Barcelona henceforth. We met again many years later. He was on trial with me in 1952.

I shouted to him to bring the gun over to the arcade so that we could silence the machine gun.

"I know, I know," he said. "Wait, wait. This isn't a toy pistol I'm coming!"

Manuel laid the gun in the shelter of the fashionable arcade. It roared out and a slice of a marble pillar close by was gouged out. That crater could be seen for many years.

The second round was a bullseye. It hit the machine gun square on. Immediately the Captain-General, a man named Goded, surrendered. This was a great success for us. We were disorganised, just individuals who had joined in the fighting without directives from above—he was the head of the military in Barcelona. Any combined attack on the people of Barcelona would be directed by him and his staff. But we had cut off the head of the tiger. After some weeks, when order was restored in Barcelona, this Goded and another general were executed after being found guilty in a military court of high treason. He had obeyed the orders of the Generals' junta, at whose head was General Mola. The Army conspiracy had, in fact, been headed by General Sanjurjo, with Mola next in superiority. Both died in plane crashes very early in the civil war. Goded was clearly in a state of treason to the government he had sworn to protect. He was shot. But at that moment, after his surrender, he had been given into the hands of the police.

It became much quieter in the harbour area after Goded had surrendered. There were huge crowds milling in front of the Captain-General's house and booing and cheering as the soldiers were brought out and disarmed.

Meanwhile the Military Government surrendered to the Assault Guards of the Republican police. We all marched on the Army HQ, and found that five army officers were being protected by the police. The crowd demanded them, and threatened the police that they would take them by force. They wanted revenge for the killings of the day. Realising they were outnumbered, the Assault Guards surrendered the officers. We took them along to the transport union for judgment.

We had a conference upstairs, together with members of the transport union. I went up to ask what should be done with the officers. I had not wanted to take them, but since it was the will of the crowd, I thought it best that the union deal with them. As we were talking, however, we heard shots. I ran downstairs to find that the officers had been killed by the growing crowd below, many of whose friends and relatives had died in the rebellion. I felt bad about this. These men had been shot in cold blood. That was not our way of doing things. But it was impossible to talk to the crowd. "Barcelona is ours!" they shouted. "They shall not kill us as they have always liked to do!"

Angel and I went outside, where we saw Buenaventura Durruti. He had not seen what was happening, but the crowd soon gathered around him, for he had an outstanding personality, and already he was being spoken of as a general of the people, who would wield this unorganised mass into a fighting force that would save Spain from its enemies.

Angel, who was a tramwayman, knew Durruti very well, as they belonged to the same transport union—(Durruti was a railwayman) and had both been on the National Committee of the CNT. He began to speak to Durruti, when we heard that the machinegun on top of the cupola had stopped firing.

"We will go along there if you will hold the crowd," said Angel. "The square is empty. Maybe the sniper has given up". He agreed, and we went along. All was silence in the square. In case the firing began again, we took shelter behind a shattered tram terminal point. Then we saw that a white flag was flying from Atarazanas Barracks, the same that had flown it in the morning and then—by accident or design—shot Ascaso when he went forward to talk. We were unsure of whether to approach or not. But the great square was exposed, We were in their line of fire anyway. Cautiously we approached.

A bespectacled young *alferez* (a cadet lieutenant, equivalent in the Army to a midshipman) asked for surrender.

"Right," we said. "Let us go back to the Columbus and when we're there you can come out."

As we returned to the Rambla, we saw the crowd waiting eagerly. A shot rang out from somewhere. I put a handkerchief on my rifle and called out to Durruti desperately, for the shot had been the signal for all the crowd at the door of the union to open fire. "Hold them back!" we cried. This was why Barcelona proliferated with initials. It was not just a burst of sectarian enthusiasm that induced us all to show our colours and affiliation. Otherwise we should have been shooting at each other rather than at the enemy.

They uttered a great roar when they saw the *alferez*.

"Take him to the union," said Durruti. "Francisco cannot be resurrected. . . ." But he had completely lost control of the crowd by now. The officer had up to then been arrogant, but now he began to tremble. He was crying. He was only a boy. "We joined to defend the people," he began. There was an outburst of laughter which drowned what Durruti was trying to say. "Where—in Morocco?" they were shouting. One man with a rifle in his hand pushed his way to the front. "I will show you how to defend the people," he shouted. He raised his rifle and hit the *alferez* in the face.

Half the face seemed to disappear. Blood squirted out. Other blows rained upon the *alferez*. He was dead before his body hit the street. There was an outburst of cheering. Angel Garcia, Durruti and I all shouted at them to stop, but they would not listen. Two soldiers came out. They rushed across the square. Durruti lost control of them. We shouted

to them to hold back but they were mad for revenge. They clustered round the alferoz, jeering, ugly with hatred. "You killed Ascaso," they shouted.

"Wait!" cried Durruti. "Francisco is dead..."

"Yes!" they interrupted. "Here is his murderer, this time they'll pay for it!"

"Don't degrade yourself to their level," began Durruti. "Fight them, don't assassinate as they do..."

They began to calm down. The other soldiers stood there terrified. Now they let them go.

Over by what had been the drink kiosk for the tramwaymen, I found a young soldier dying. He had been shot, and I gave him some rum.

"Maybe this is the chap with the machine gun," said Angel. But we did not know this. Perhaps he was the man who had silenced the machine gunner, a soldier who had come over to us. Who at this moment could tell friend from foe? The medical orderlies came running up as we shouted, and they carried him off.

Then there was general panic. The sound of a diving aircraft. A small single-engined aircraft was wheeling and climbing over the sea. It levelled off, headed inland and dived, got nearer and nearer. It opened fire again, the bullets thudded into the cupola of the monument.

The man in the cockpit was, I later learned, a popular local aerobatic pilot named Muntadas. He had decided on his own to attack the sniper in the monument. But he came too late.

Everyone thought it was a Fascist and rushed for shelter. Fortunately the pilot realised the change of situation in time, and veered off.

Now the firing had died away, apart from the odd burst of sniping. Everyone was talking excitedly of the victory that had been won.

"Now you will see, Italy and Germany will step in to protect their pals," they said. "It's war!"

The Socialist and Communist newspapers made great play of this. They had formed the Popular Front, which now had a parliamentary majority. It was certain, they felt, that if the Axis came in, their friends abroad would come in. The Popular Front was in power in France, under Socialist leadership and with Communist support. As for Russia, who of them could doubt that it would be first in the fight against Hitler?

By now the old city of Barcelona was entirely in the hands of the people. While we had been fighting in the area of the Ramblas and the harbour, there had been a great battle in the Paralelo, the main road from the old city out to Madrid. Garcia Oliver, Ricardo Sanz and others had organised the building of a large barricade of paving stones which had been thrown up to stop troops entering the city from the Lepanto barracks. About two thousand soldiers in this barracks had marched on the barricades. But the officers could not order them to advance, despite orders from the Captain General. Many of the troops were conscripts and had no taste for the job. There were a few skirmishes, and deaths. But after a while the troops fell back.

Everywhere it was the same story. "What is this damned fool Government doing? Why doesn't it release arms to the people? The Government armouries were locked and barred against the people. The Army was the only legal power that could withdraw them and the Army was in revolt. "Are they waiting until Hitler walks in, or what?"

In Madrid things were going well, we heard. The rebellion had been checked with ease. In most parts of the country the Army was beleaguered, held in its garrisons, unable to do more than withstand the people who encircled it, as in the famous siege of Alcazar. Saragossa was another story. The Army was in strength there, and was in desperate fighting with the CNT. If only the Government had released the arms to the CNT, the war would have been over in a week. The offensive military might of the generals within Spain had been smashed by workers who were now trying to overrun the garrisons. It was desperately urgent that arms be released before the Army in Morocco should move in. There it had arms in plenty. It was disciplined, ready. It had Moorish mercenaries too, though most people reckoned it unthinkable that in a civil war with Spaniards the super-patriotic right wing generals would use Moorish troops.

Inside Barcelona, the fortress of San Andreas had surrendered by the 21st. From there the cannon used by Flecha had come. But there were forts ringing the city which had a further supply of soldiers. In fact, though I did not know it at the time, there were columns of troops which had set out in a bid to rally round the Captaincy-General, but it had been prevented by crowds of thousands upon thousands, only a few of whom were armed. The soldiers could have got through, but only by a general massacre.

These were conscript troops and they would not do it. Their own kinsfolk might have been amongst the crowd. They threw up their arms and fraternised. The officers fled.

In some parts of the town the mob set fire to the churches. This happened all over Spain. For years one finds a priest ruling with absolute arrogance and in close cooperation with the local landowner. When he finds that some labourer does not come to church on Sunday and prefers to spend his time in the wineshop, he sends for the man's wife, catechises her, warns her. If her husband does not come, next day, standing around like cattle to be hired by

the landowner, he finds himself passed over for work. Soon the husband gets the message. Then, in times of civil disturbance, a mob ransacks the church. The priest flees. Silver-haired professors with goldrimmed spectacles then write, in their calm cloistered studies abroad, that this is due to the influence of the Spanish Anarchists, who—hot and dusty, tired out from the battle against the authorities, have come back to the village exhausted, to harangue the mob in voices hoarse with fatigue not to engage in such pointless activity.

Were there atrocities that day in Barcelona? There were a number. In many cases the crowd raided the barracks of the armed police and of the prefecture of police, the places where they had been beaten up and tortured. They naturally would not stand on niceties in dealing with the soldiers or the police where these were in rebellion.

But in many cases the police met them with bland assurances of their loyalty to the Republic. “We are keeping our oath, we are loyal to the Constitution,” they would say. “Yesterday we had you in custody—that is true. It was our duty. Today we are dealing with Fascists, rebels, traitors! We understand that you are anarchists, you do not want a police force. Very good, but you must understand you now have allies who do believe in the State—the republicans, the socialists, the communists. We are serving the constitution, long live the Popular Front!” These police would show themselves the more assiduous in torturing and shooting the Fascist prisoners whom they had. Many of them may not have been Fascists, just middle-class people who sympathised with the Army or the Right Wing generally. But the police had to show their enthusiasm to cover up their suspect past and even more suspect future. They more than anyone insisted that no arms be released to the syndicalist movement which was the only real force that was holding back the Army.

Before the day was over, we heard that yet another column of troops was intending to surrender. This was on the rue Diagonale, a main road on the outskirts of the town.

“Great,” I said when I heard it. “Come along and we’ll take their surrender.”

There was a young captain there, with two hundred men. He was a smooth talker. “We’ve no intention of fighting against Spaniards,” he said. “I have Goded’s orders, but I’m not obeying them.”

We told him Goded was captured. He professed surprise and delight.

“Let the men go back to their homes and families,” I said. “The war against Spaniards is over for you.”

Later I could have kicked myself for my mistake, the only one I had made that day. The officer probably knew already that Goded was captured. He only wanted to get out of a tight situation. We should have kept the soldiers with us. They were good troops, and their propaganda value would have induced other soldiers to have joined us. As it was they went off, still with their arms. Most of them left Barcelona, and probably many of them ultimately joined up with the Regular Army again—Franco’s Army. It was their career. We had let ourselves be tricked.

But that was the end of the Army’s bid to take over our city. As night fell there was sporadic fighting with Falangist sympathisers and other Right Wing elements, but the Army was out of it. When the civilian rebels learned of the collapse of the Army, the heart went out of their fighting. Barcelona was ours in less than twenty-four hours. The turning point had come when Manuel had lugged that old 75 up to the arcade, and blown out the machine gun nest. Once the Captain-General surrendered, there was no one to give orders. Nor was there any senior officer left with the desire and stomach to fight the entire city.

I went home. I had been blooded. I had fired, maybe killed. I had been involved in some ugly scenes I would not like to see again. But Barcelona was ours, it belonged to the people. I was too exhausted to sleep and my blood was racing. Halfway through the night I took my rifle and walked through the city. There were many people I had known from union struggles over the years doing the same. “Salud!” they cried out. Here and there fires were burning. The brigades were dashing through the streets, bells clanging. Here looters had fired shops and stores, even some private houses belonging to wellknown Falangists or Right Wing politicians. The firemen were trying to save the art treasures from one of the churches. Many youngsters were dancing around the squares, singing, stamping their feet, laughing. “Barcelona is ours!” they cried as I walked by.

Tranquillo (Giuseppe Ruozzi)

19 JULY IN BARCELONA

For a long time the senior officers of the army had engineered a vast conspiracy against the republic to establish a fascist and monarchical dictatorship. It is not clear why the government has allowed itself to be taken by surprise by this coup that almost pulverized it. The fact is that the government knew of these more or less secret practices, but did not want or did not know how to take the necessary measures. It did arrest a number of third or fourth category fascists, but left the executives alone.

The death of Sotelo, a monarchist and fascist deputy, was the spark that gave the conspirators the pretext to launch the coup that had been in preparation for a long time. The government had made some transfers in the senior cadres of the army, but on the one hand it did not put the "suspects" in a position of not being able to do any harm, on the other it replaced them with other characters of the same species. Thus both were able to continue their preparatory work undisturbed. When the revolt broke out, the government could not but hand over some weapons, many of which were antiquated, to the anti-fascist front that was set up at the last moment.

The military uprising began in Morocco, but also in Spain proper it had been felt in the air for many days, and for several nights the subversive parties were awake and armed in the headquarters of their respective organizations. Thus the awakening of the morning of July 19 with the roar of cannon shots, the clamour of machine guns and the crackling of rifles surprised no one, perhaps it even caused a little cheerfulness in the middle class who believed they could begin to glimpse the end of the worker agitation that was becoming more intransigent each day.

The sirens of the workshops were calling the proletarian forces to arms. Barcelona had taken on the appearance of a city at war. No trams, no vehicles in circulation. All the shops were closed. Only armed people in the streets. From the windows and balconies, the curious, very numerous, followed the phases of the struggle from the smoke of the canons and the evolution of the airplanes that dropped bombs on the barracks in revolt. In the doorways small groups formed, to disappear at the first shot from fascists in ambush behind the windows. The more daring gathered around the small groups of revolutionaries armed with old rifles and pistols. As soon as a truck loaded with weapons, men, women, boys arrived, they attacked it and they fought for the arms. The assault guards were mixed with the comrades of the confederation and the anarchist federation.

The first soldiers who went out on the road on the orders of the fascists were those of the Pedralba barracks, who arrived almost without obstacle to Plaza Catalonia, the most eccentric place of the city where all the riches of the bourgeoisie are gathered. The central telephone exchange is located there, and nearby the police headquarters, the great Via Layetana that leads to the sea, the barracks of the Capitaneria, the new military district, the great barracks and arsenal of Aterazarta, which in vain the anarchists and the syndicalists had attempted to storm the evening of January 8, 1933.

This troop had to rejoin the other one coming from artillery barracks in the Park. But the conjunction could not come about due to the prompt popular reaction. However, the ill-equipped disorderly soldiers arrived in Piazza Catalonia had installed machine guns and cannons, and they shot the first prisoners they took immediately, in a group, in the square, by way of example.

Revolutionary groups of every tendency were lined up against these soldiers, mixed with the civil guard, assault guards, finance guards, *mozzi di squadra* (Catalan police) and armed municipal police. The soldiers, who had been drunk for three days on wine and spirits and patriotic speeches with which they had been made to believe they had to fight against the rabble which had risen to overthrow the republic, when they saw themselves facing the regular forces of the republic fighting together with the people, understood that they had been deceived; the resistance began to weaken and the troops ended up no longer obeying the orders of the leaders, who had to escape inside the Colombo Hotel where, after an attempted barricade, they were taken prisoner.

At the same time various barracks were attacked, the Aterazana barracks, where comrade Francesco Ascaso met a glorious death, Barcellonetta, that of the Parco and of S. Agostino. In Barcellonetta five cannons were taken.

In these actions everyone fought bravely, from those of Esquerra to the socialists, from the communists to the anarchists, from assault guards to the *guardie civili*. Certainly it is almost astounding to see cops and anarchists fighting

together in the fire of battle, and riding cars together bearing red flags and inscriptions with the six initials: CNT and FAI which every automobile had to carry. And to hear the assault guards scream "Long live the CNT and the FAI" seems like something from another world. But revolutions are like that.

A people in arms finds all its children. The fraternization was complete. On the rifles was the red and black cockade. The password was: CNT. The passes had to bear its stamp. In the respite intervals, all the fighters fraternized in the communal restaurants of the Confederation and the popular front, since the strike was complete until the following Friday. Policemen and carabinieri bestowed pious praises on the anarchist fighters, for their great valour in fighting, and they toasted together.

The suffocation of the fascist movement in Barcelona cost a lot proletarian blood, but fascism is not over.

The most difficult battle was that of Sunday and Monday, there was fighting everywhere. The fascists hiding in the convents, on the bell towers of the churches, machine-gunned anyone who came within range, combatants or not, and even the Red Cross, so it was necessary for the revolutionaries to dislodge them with bombs. The victims were numerous.

A seriously injured man had to remain on the ground for many long hours without any assistance because the nurses from the nearby hospital were targeted from the windows of a convent and had to suspend their rescue efforts. The people eventually lost their patience and set fire to all the convents and churches. The cathedral was saved, but the bishop's palace was put to the flames. The purifying fire lasted several days as the people's joy continued. At least nine tenths of churches and convents of Barcelona are now nothing more than ruins.

It is estimated that our dead are about five hundred, the wounded a few thousand. They are many, but they would certainly have been more if the soldiers themselves had not rebelled against the orders of their officers in many of the neighbourhoods. In others, they fought reluctantly and did not try as hard as they could have done. With all this it took a huge concentration of anti-fascist forces to dislodge fascism from its hotbeds. And it's still not beaten everywhere. Zaragoza, Toledo, Seville and many other centres of Spain are still infested with them. Thousands of volunteers are departing from Barcelona against the fascists of Zaragoza, and from Madrid as well, against other centres.

Aerial bombardment contributed enormously to the victory of anti-fascism in Barcelona. The followers of the CNT and of the FAI contributed to the struggle in the streets eminently, both in number and in courage. These organizations always took the initiative.

Many senior officers and subordinates paid the penalty for their betrayal.

The anarchists did not want this bill to remain unpaid any longer. Too many dead had already been left on the ground, and in retaliation the enemy had been atrocious. And even the priests and friars were without pity as they machine-gunned the people from their convents and churches. Abroad they may say what they like, but it was precisely the monarchists, the fascists and the priests who were the first to attack, and it is right that the people strike them with their revenge. It is a pity that the barracks did not suffer the same fate as the churches, small churches and convents, of which there is not much left other than the crumbling outer walls.

Now the battle is concentrated around Zaragoza, where about ten-thousand fascists organized militarily, along with the population called to arms, are fiercely defending themselves. Equally dangerous are the other centres of fascist concentration, but the people are reacting everywhere. New defence groups are springing up all over, everyone is in agreement in the determination not to let themselves be disarmed anymore.

Will it be possible for this to be demanded? Certainly the government is beginning to show the discomfort in which it finds itself faced with a people in arms. In Madrid it has decreed the prohibition to circulate in cars armed, and that armed citizens are obliged to stay inside the barracks. Let's hope that these workers know how to impose themselves.

In Barcelona, something similar is about to happen. I myself have seen the authorities disarm two comrades who had no other title than the card of the CNT. Before this was enough to be armed, now it is no longer enough. The comrades must also report their own weapons to the union. The will to not let the weapons be taken off them exists and is a good sign. However, it is clear that those in power are insisting that the fraternization of the police forces with the revolutionaries, especially anarchists and syndicalists, must come to an end. Now the bodies that represent the constituted authorities are travelling separately. We still greet the communist with a clenched fist in the air, but it has become extremely rare for members of the police forces to shout: "Long live the FAI and the CNT".

The red and black colours have disappeared, and so have the initials of the two prevalent organizations. The CNT have reacted. Friday, in the places of control, I have seen groups of comrades paint again the now famous six initials so popular in the days of danger. It is also noticeable that even the police officers are beginning to be intolerant of checks and stamps of the Confederation. But the confederalists insist on it.

The people's ardour has not waned. We hope they are not satisfied with the new program of the popular front, which more or less, is that approved by the Zaragoza Congress. Fascism always remains to be defeated, but the defeat of fascism must only be the beginning of a luminous era of freedom and well-being.

Barcelona, July 26, 1936

Tranquillo (Giuseppe Ruozi)

Vol. XV, n. 33 del 22 agosto 1936

Vedetta

LETTERS FROM SPAIN

The events of recent days have alarmed the great European and American countries, which have sent dozens of battleships into the waters of the peninsula under the pretext of saving their countrymen. In reality, their fellow countrymen are not in any danger, although some of them are no strangers to the fascist plot.

But neither the battleships of the whole bourgeois world, nor the goats that the Fascist government of Italy sends to Franco's mercenaries, nor the aeroplanes and the aviators that the Hitler's government provides him with, intimidate the Iberian people, who trust in their victory.

The youth are parting for the Zaragoza front cheerful and contented, full of ardour and enthusiasm, although poorly armed. The final victory cannot fail.

The struggle is very hard. In Zaragoza alone, the fascist army counts eleven regiments with the most modern armaments. In the rest of Spain it rages over a vast territory, with peaks that reach up to a few dozen kilometres from Madrid.

Unfortunately it must be noted that, while the people are all a surge of boldness and self-denial, the government cares more about its own prestige than the freedom of the people of Spain.

While the enemy is a day's march from the capital, the government only thinks of disarming the people, and keeps anti-fascist citizens locked in its prisons, for political reasons.¹ In Madrid it is no longer permitted to go armed. In Barcelona, the authorities are plotting something quite similar. Armed cars have become rare, and must be authorized with special permits. A C.N.T. membership card is no longer enough to carry a rifle or a revolver, you have to be a member of the anti-fascist militia, which not only serves at the front, but also has function of public security in the "new revolutionary order". Esquerra, socialists and communists already disengage this service with a martial air that would be the envy of professional policemen. The members of the C.N.T. and the F.A.I., ad onta of the exhortations and the propaganda of certain leaders, have made common sense prevail and will limit themselves to searching and disarming the fascists and the enemies of the republican regime.

I couldn't quite understand what is meant by this "revolutionary order" decreed by the Antifascist Committee. For the time being, it is the bourgeois order and property that is being defended. The beggar that dares to take a pair of shoes or a shirt is shot, but the capitalist and the boss, who up until yesterday were called thieves and exploiters, are respected. Again, the present order exists in name alone.

Now it is said that the most urgent problem is to bring down fascism, and we will talk about the rest later. And that's all very well. But both to bring down fascism, and for what will happen afterwards, the people must be armed. Instead there is an attempt to disarm them. The formation of the regimented and militarily disciplined anti-fascist militia corps is not a form of people armed; instead it is one aspect of the disarming of the people that is being aimed at. The military hierarchy, discipline, the uniform, the barracks, etc. take away the character of revolutionary from the citizen, giving him that of the soldier. The proletariat is no longer people in arms, it is army at the orders of a command, which has its source in the State.

As in Russia, the social-communist dictators love to dress in military uniform just like the praetorians of any monarchy or bourgeois dictatorship, so we already see the leaders of the Antifascist Militia showing off barracks cap and soldier's jacket.

The people in arms means that all citizens are, individually and collectively, in possession of the weapons necessary to defend their own freedom and their own right, without thereby renouncing their quality as producers. The Spanish workers did not need a barracks internship to defeat the fascist conspiracy in Barcelona, in Madrid, in many other

¹ The newspaper *El Socialista* on Sunday 2 August - fifteen days after the victory of the people of Madrid over the clerical-fascist coup - gives the news of "a commendable act" which consists in this: « The anti-fascist political prisoners of the Prisons of Madrid, of all tendencies: communists, anarchists, republicans without exception, in a moving letter addressed to International Red Aid communicate their desire that the tobacco that this organization sends them be sent instead to the fighters fighting at the front in defence of democracy and the people's freedom ... since it is not possible for them to help the comrades in other way ... ». What to think of this government that holds its supporters in jail, while its enemies and those of the people occupy at least a third of the country and are almost within range of the capital?

cities. Now, instead, things are changing. Here, to be armed, not only is the C.N.T. membership card no longer enough, you must be enrolled in the Militia and establish your residence in the barracks. Those who return to work lose their right to arms. Not only is the proletariat being disarmed, but they want to separate the proletarian producers from the proletarian fighters.

A people in arms scares, first among those who gather the fruits of its enthusiasm. And barricades are a nightmare for those who govern. The committees are giving ground to the demands of the rulers of the popular front. But, fortunately, the militants of each party are refusing to give in, so far, and the barricades remain.

As soon as the struggle began, on July 19, a kind of anarchist communism was put into practice. On the first day, Sunday, there was not even any need to requisition the necessary to feed the fighters. Everyone spontaneously brought bread, meat, salume, fruit, eggs, oil and everything that was needed. That lasted two days. It was a splendid example of solidarity. Then the forced expropriations began and everyone ate at the communal kitchens. With a little good will you could have continued on that path. Instead, just as victory established itself – I'm speaking of Barcelona – it was decided to "restore public order": vouchers came into use, officialism claimed to regulate everything for everyone, discord began, and instead of expropriation there were government requisitions compensated by means of vouchers. The experience of past revolutions teaches that these "vouchers" are not worth much to those who receive them, but they create a mountain of trouble for the government that is responsible for them. In the meantime, they serve to maintain the legal system of private property.

It was decreed at first that the people could withdraw their possessions pawned in the pawn shops for free. Before the withdrawal began, with a new decree, gold objects, jewels and commercial bonds were excluded. Finally, after the newspapers had given this news, rejoicing, to the public, the government announced that no such thing had been decreed.

The population therefore remains assured of bread. The C.N.T. has been charged with the distribution of vouchers for restaurants, cheap kitchens, or food in kind, to the unemployed. The anti-fascist militia continues to apply requisition with vouchers.

Contrary to what happened in Madrid, both the political and common law prisoners were released in Barcelona from the afternoon of Sunday 19 July. They were freed by the guards themselves who opened wide the gates of the prisons; and many of those released, including those under common law bravely took up the gun and faced the first clashes.

Except that, once the danger has passed, alarming symptoms are announcing themselves. Starting from the news that we have, with a certain frequency, of acts of vandalism, fraud or extortion even carried out in the name of the C.N.T. and the F.A.I., the latter organization, the Iberian Anarchist Federation, published in the newspaper *Tierra y Libertad* of 30 July and had thousands of copies posted up and circulated throughout the city, a poster you would think had been drawn up in the police station and a declaration of war against the small and large criminals in question, against whom is undoubtedly imposed the death penalty by firing squad.² Now, no matter how deplorable the acts complained of are, it seems to me that the remedy proposed by the F.A.I. with its manifesto is even more deplorable.

² The F.A.I. manifesto reads verbatim: « Very serious rumours have reached us. We are told that armed groups claiming to belong to the C.N.T. and the F.A.I. and the Marxist Workers' Party of Unification, are carrying out house searches and committing acts repugnant to the anarchist spirit and to the law of the people. As this redounds to the detriment of our organization's prestige, whose responsible committees have not authorized any of these acts of vandalism, we have decided to oppose this monstrous irresponsibility, not only in words but with relentless revolutionary deeds. Attached to the Committee of Anti-Fascist Militias functions a Commission of Investigations which will take care to ascertain all the reports that are made about the activities of elements compromised in the past Fascist movement. This Commission is the only one, apart from the Superior Prefecture of Police, which from this moment has the right to order and carry out house searches. What is done on the margins of this will be arbitrary.

The FAI has resolved to put an end to these groups of incognizant beyond the control of our organization, who, for whatever purpose, dishonour the revolutionary movement of the people who have risen up in arms against fascism. We do not know what elements they are. But we affirm with all vigour that, whoever they are, their acts denounce them, at best, as troubled souls in which the people's vengeful instinct adulterates itself, awakening primitive voices nestled in the soul of their consciences.

The F.A.I., which has covered itself with glory in the recent historic days lived in Barcelona, the F.A.I. which, like the C.N.T., was the first in the struggle, in contempt of the ongoing danger to the great ideals of freedom, not only declares that it has nothing in common with these excesses, scum that flows from an uprising of the people, but is willing to put an end to it in a radical and energetic way.

We are enemies of all violence, of all imposition.

We are repelled by all the blood that is not shed for the people in their great tasks of justice. But we declare coldly, with terrible serenity and with the inexorable intention to do so, that if all these irresponsible acts sowing terror in Barcelona do not come to an end, we will proceed to shoot all the individuals found guilty of committing acts against the law of the people, and all those individuals who have conferred, for their own advantage, powers that the confederal organization has specifically assigned to a Commission composed of elements of the anti-fascist struggle front, electing from it the most unbiased and most honest men.

While some illustrious authors of the fascist conspiracy are detained aboard steamships anchored in the harbour, in first-class cabins, it seems to me exaggerated and inhuman to shoot little thieves who do immeasurably less harm.

Mind you, I do not defend the looting done for personal reasons alone, nor those unfortunates who, weapons in hand, get poor people to hand over fifty or one hundred pesetas: but I do not ask for the death penalty for them and I consider it anti-anarchist to compile decrees like this. Lead is reserved for the enemies, and instead of being inexorable against the wretched who do evil because they are victims of ignorance and poverty, we reserve our fury for the regime that generates them.

Relentless against the vicious institutions of the order based on privilege, we should inveigh against those who defend and enrage it rather than those who are victims of it. Heralds of a new, fairer and more just order, the office of executioner should repel us. We must give the word justice the meaning and elevated content which is the essence of our ideal. From what follows, the comrades will be able to get an idea, I hope, of the situation at this moment. Events happen and overlap with great rapidity, and when these lines see the light of day the situation may be different.

So far, the social revolution remains more in votes than in deeds. There is a war to the death against fascism. They reinforce and fight it alongside the government, men from all the left-wing parties, and the enormous obstacles that they meet show how entrenched the interests and castes of the reaction still were, also in this country. It is a holy war for whose victory it is necessary to appeal to all audacious forces. Success will be nearer and lasting the more widely the aspirations of the people will have been fulfilled in achieving it. On the contrary, we already see the symptoms of an inflexible governmental distrust of the people, with the first attempts at disarmament and regimentation.

These persistent symptoms warn of the difficulties that will be encountered as soon as the enemy has finally been defeated.

It is to be hoped that the workers will be able to resist the attempts of government oppression, securing the weapons with which they defended themselves from fascism and with which they will have to complete their emancipation.

Vedetta

Barcelona, 2 August 1936
Vol. XV, no. 34 of 29 August 1936

We are saying it as we will do it, and we will do it as we are saying it. Barcelona knows, and Spain and the whole world knows, that the men of the F.A.I. never leave their commitments unfulfilled. For the honour of the people of Barcelona, for the dignity of the C.N.T. and the F.A.I. we must put an end to these excesses. And we will put an end to them ».

The severity of the manifesto is not even its major flaw. The imprecision of the language is even more serious, since it can effortlessly extend terrible penalties to any form of individual initiative that does not find the approval of those who speak in the name of the F.A.I.

Elephant Archives

Barcelona 19th July 1936
A glimpse into the elsewhere

Miguel Garcia's Story. Edited by Albert Meltzer. Cienfuegos Press 1982.
L'Adunata dei Refrattari Vol. XV, no. 33 of 22 August 1936
L'Adunata dei Refrattari Vol. XV, no. 34 of 29 August 1936
from *Barricate e Decreti Spagna 36-37 La Rivoluzione Infranta*. GRATIS editions

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