The Last Echo of 1917? The Asturian October between Revolution and Antifascism

Matthew Kerry

On 18 July 1936, the socialist daily newspaper of the northern Spanish region of Asturias published a call penned by the Women`s Committee of the Socialist Youth from the small mining locality of Ciaño-Santa Ana. The note was addressed to 'every antifascist mother, youth and woman' and painted a dark panorama facing Spain if more women did not join their ranks:

> War and fascism! If fascism triumphs and war is declared, not only will we be force to watch our *compañeros* die in the horrifying massacre of warfare, but we proletarian women will also be forever condemned to suffer hunger and misery. We will have to watch our little ones die of hunger, […] obliged to sell our bodies if we do not wish to end up in the hospital, antechamber of the cemetery.

Their warning of the bleak future augured by the twin dangers of fascism – already a 'daily provocation' – and war – threatened again by 'capitalist and reactionary magnates and elites' – combined with an appeal to the heroism of Asturian women. They had proved their mettle 'on the barricades during the glorious Asturian Commune' and had courageously 'wrenched thousands of workers from the claws of reaction and the prisons where they had been buried' in its aftermath.[1] The Commune in question was the revolutionary insurrection of October 1934, which had its epicentre in the Asturian coal valleys. The socialist leadership had spent months planning a nationwide movement, but only in Asturias did it develop into an insurrectionary assault. For two weeks left-wing militias fought government forces whilst committees in the rear-guard pursued revolutionary measures. Approximately 1,500 died.[2] October 1934 and the ensuing harsh, widespread repression were central to the polarising and fragmentary pressures in Spanish politics through 1935 and 1936. Amnesty and justice for those imprisoned would be an important rallying cry behind the formation of the Spanish Popular Front, which was elected to power in February 1936.[3] A military rebellion in July

[1] *Avance*, July 18, 1936.

[2] Histories of the Asturian October include Paco Ignacio Taibo II, *Asturias, octubre 1934* (Barcelona: Planeta, 2013), David Ruiz, *Octubre de 1934: revolución en la República española* (Madrid: Síntesis, 2008) and Matthew Kerry, *Unite, Proletarian Brothers! Radicalism and Revolution in the Spanish Second Republic, 1931–1936* (London: University of London Press, 2020). Discussion of casualties in Eduardo González Calleja, *En nombre de la autoridad: la defensa del orden público durante la Segunda República Española (1931–1936)* (Granada: Comares, 2014), pp. 228–240.

[3] The political uses of October 1934 in Rafael Cruz, *En el nombre del pueblo: república, rebelión y guerra en la España de 1936* (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 2006) and Brian D. Bunk, *Ghosts of Passion: Martyrdom, Gender, and the Origins of the Spanish Civil War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

embroiled the young Republic in a three-year civil war. The conspiracy was put into action as the women of Ciaño-Santa Ana penned their mobilising appeal to Asturian women; the threat of war and fascism was more immediate than perhaps they imagined.

This chapter examines the place of the Asturian October as a local event within a wider national and international context.[4] It argues that the insurrection was a genuine attempt at a revolution which brought an end to what could be called a 'small age of revolution', which began in 1917 with the Bolshevik revolution. This small age of revolution was restricted to the immediate aftermath of the First World War, with the exception of Asturias in 1934. The interwar period saw no further successful social revolutions, but rather the rise of the fascist and authoritarian right, against which antifascism emerged as a movement to stop their advance. As ever is the case with periodisation, the temporal division in October 1934 between antifascism and revolution is necessarily imperfect.

The revolutionary label has stuck to the events of October 1934, even if they do not tend to form part of the revolutionary canon. In describing the Asturian October as revolutionary, this chapter views revolution as an unfolding process, rather than adopting a taxonomical approach or assessing it according to its outcomes.[5] The insurrection meets Goldstone`s definition of a revolution as 'an effort to transform the political institutions and the justifications for political authority in a society, accompanied by formal or informal mass mobilization and non-institutionalized actions that undermine existing authorities'.[6] The Asturian Commune was also a particular kind of revolution. Rather than a narrower political revolution, it was a social revolution which sought a transformation of the social order along class-lines and which was shaped by the ideologies and political culture of the first half of the twentieth century.

A new wave of studies reframe antifascism as a broad-based transnational movement or a 'culture' and eschew reducing it to Comintern strategy or some sort of Stalinist Trojan horse.[7] As a result, debate has often centred on how to delimit a sufficiently capacious

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[4] The insurrection is usually confined to Spanish politics, exceptions are Gabriel Jackson, 'Fascismo y antifascism, 1922-1939' and Pierre Broué, 'Octubre del 34 en el contexto europeo', in Gabriel Jackson, *Octubre 1934: cincuenta años para la reflexión* (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 1985), pp. 3–8, 9–18.

[5] I draw on George Lawson here, 'Within and Beyond the "Fourth Generation" of Revolutionary Theory', *Sociological Theory* 34/2 (2016), pp. 106–127. For an example of a similar emphasis on approaching the unfolding process of revolution, e.g. Eliza Ablovatski, *Revolution and Political Violence in Central Europe: The Deluge of 1919* (Cambridge: CUP, 2021).

[6] Jack A. Goldstone, 'Towards a Fourth Generation of Revolutionary Theory', *Annual Review of Political Science* 4 (2001), p. 39–187, here p.142.

[7] E.g. Hugo García, Xavier Tabet and Mercedes Yusta, *Rethinking Antifascism: History, Memory and Politics, 1922 to the Present* (New York: Berghahn, 2016) and also 'Transnational Anti-Fascism: Agents, Networks, Circulations', special edition of *Contemporary European History* 25/4 (2016), pp. 563–727.

definition of antifascism to allow for a range of groups – from Communists to conservatives – when the term risks becoming meaningless if it encompasses all non-fascists.[8] This chapter examines a different problem, namely how and when antifascism emerged as a social movement while also rooting notions of a Spanish antifascist culture in the Asturian coalfields.[9] Periodising antifascism has not been a central focus of scholarship, although Hitler`s ascension to the chancellorship of Germany is often described as a key moment of antifascist politicisation.[10] Other recent studies have convincingly argued that antifascism's origins in the early 1920s have been underplayed, even if they admit that antifascism did not develop into a mass movement until the 1930s.[11] Seidman`s study of European antifascism only begins with the Spanish Civil War.[12] This chapter argues that while fascism formed part of the framing for the insurrection, the Asturian October exceeded an antifascist gesture in its revolutionary pretences. A more clearly articulated antifascist movement was forged from the Asturian October and its posterior repression. Indeed the defeat of the insurrection allowed a clearer, mass-based articulation of antifascism as a social movement.[13]

Spain and Revolution, 1917-1934

Spain did not participate in the First World War, but was not immune to its effects which contributed to the country`s own crisis between 1917 and 1923. Across Europe, the effects of war led to two overlapping revolutionary waves: democratisation across Europe through the emergence of new republics and the enfranchisement of hitherto excluded sections of the population, and an upsurge in radicalism and social conflict, from strike waves to brief

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[8] E.g. debate over an 'antifascist minimum', see Nigel Copsey, 'Preface: Towards an Antifascist Minimum?', in Nigel Copsey and Andrzej Olechnowicz (eds), *Varieties of Anti-Fascism: Britain in the Inter-war Period* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. xiv–xxi and Tom Buchanan, '"Beyond Cable Street": New Approaches to the Historiography of Antifascism in Britain in the 1930s', in García, Tabet and Yusta (eds), *Rethinking Antifascism*, pp. 61–75.

[9] On Spanish antifascist culture, Hugo García, 'Was there an Antifascist Culture in Spain in the 1930s?', in García, Tabet and Yusta (eds), *Rethinking Antifascism*, pp. 92–113.

[10] Enzo Traverso, *Fire and blood: the European Civil War, 1914–1945* (London: Verso, 2017), pp. 254–255.

[11] Kasper Braskén, 'Making Anti-Fascism Transnational: The Origins of Communist and Socialist Articulations of Resistance in Europe, 1923–1924', *Contemporary European History* 25/4 (2016), pp. 573–596.

[12] Michael Seidman, *Transatlantic Antifascisms: From the Spanish Civil War to the End of World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[13] I follow Ruchter: 'a network of individuals, groups and organizations that, based on a sense of collective identity, seek to bring about social change (or resist social change) primarily by means of collective public protest.' Dieter Ruchter, 'Studying Social Movements: Some Conceptual Challenges', in Stefan Berger and Holger Nehring, (eds), *The History of Social Movements in Global Perspective* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 45.

Bolshevik-inspired 'Soviets'.[14] Like in other European countries, prices spiralled in Spain – although this was due to an economic boom as opposed to shortages – which paved the way for three interlocking rebellious movements in 1917, centring on the army, working class left and Catalan nationalists. The government caved to conspiring pressure groups in the army, while the socialist and anarchist revolutionary movement and Catalan demands for a constituent parliament failed. The crisis of 1917 nevertheless opened several turbulent years of labour radicalism. The rural south was rocked by the so-called 'Bolshevik triennium' – a surge in strikes and food riots which had little in common with Bolshevism – and in Barcelona anarchists flexed their muscles in labour conflicts, to which employers responded with hired gun-toting thugs and yellow unions.[15]

The crisis of the Restoration system led to two regime changes – in 1923 and 1931 – which attempted to remedy the country's ills. First, General Primo de Rivera seized power via an unopposed military coup and established an authoritarian dictatorship, which clamped down on anarchism and nationalist movements in Catalonia and the Basque Country, introduced corporatist bodies to manage labour disputes and promoted massive infrastructure projects. Funding dried up and opposition grew. He resigned in early 1930. A year later, municipal elections that constituted a de facto referendum on the monarchy delivered a strongly pro-Republican result. King Alfonso XIII fled into exile and the Second Republic was proclaimed.

For its supporters, the new Republic constituted a revolution. State-sponsored reform promised emancipation, social justice and modernity that would drag Spain out of obscurantism and backwardness. The socialists collaborated with Republican parties in the construction of the Republic in government, although this question divided the movement and they were careful to explain that the Republic was not 'their' regime.[16] For Largo Caballero, a veteran socialist trade unionist and Minister of Labour (1931-3), legislative reform would serve to grow the socialist trade union federation (UGT) and lay the foundations for socialism, which would emerge at some undetermined moment in the future. Government reform met opposition, however, notably from landowners, the Church and the right, and the slow pace of

[14] See Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: the History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 9 and Chris Wrigley, *Challenges of Labour: Central and Western Europe, 1917–1920* (London: Routledge, 1993).

[15] See Francisco Romero Salvadó, *Spain 1914-1918: Between War and Revolution* (London: Routledge, 1999) and Francisco Romero Salvadó and Angel Smith (eds), *The Agony of Spanish Liberalism: From Revolution to Dictatorship, 1913-23* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

[16] E.g. comments by Asturian socialist councillors and trade union officials reported in *La Aurora Social* 15, May 29, 1931. See also Paul Heywood, *Marxism and the Failure of Organised Socialism in Spain, 1879-1936* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 116.

change bred satisfaction amongst the socialist rank-and-file.[17] As the Republican-socialist coalition government broke down in 1933, Largo Caballero responded to rank-and-file discontent with the pace of reform and economic problems by demanding power to the socialists and a socialist Republic, to be achieved either through the ballot box or by force.[18]

The general elections of November 1933 sparked a sense of crisis within the socialist movement. They returned a victory for their opposition, the centre-conservative Radicals and the CEDA (Confederation of Autonomous Right-Wing Groups), a new mass-based right-wing party with dubious Republican and democratic credentials. Largo Caballero had talked himself into a corner regarding the use of force. Accordingly, and fearing a rollback of Republican reform or even the destruction of the Republic itself, Largo Caballero – from early 1934 leader of both the Socialist Party (PSOE) and the UGT – demanded the preparation of a revolutionary movement to forestall an attack on the Republic. Over the coming months, Largo Caballero, along with the backing of a Mixed Committee, formed by party, union and Socialist Youth members, issued secret instructions, raised funds, smuggled arms and initiated contact with the army in preparation for what would be the Asturian October.[19]

Machinations and preparations at the level of the socialist leadership only go so far in explaining the revolutionary insurrection whose origins also lie in the nature of politics and conflicts in the Asturian coalfields prior to October 1934.[20] The coal valleys were an area of widespread political activity where the left, in broad terms, was hegemonic. Most of the approximately 30,000-strong mining workforce belonged to the socialist trade union, the SOMA. A minority were SUM members – a union affiliated to the anarchist CNT but led by Communists and which fractured in late 1931 due to internal tensions. There were sharp differences between the socialists, anarchists and Communists, but also shared interests, spaces and practices which aided mutual understanding and the eventual forging of left-wing unity in 1934. Workers from different unions participated in workplace assemblies and debates in bars where ideological and tactical differences clashed, but which could also allow for mutual

[17] The classic study of reform and reaction is Paul Preston, *The Coming of the Spanish Civil War: Reform, Reaction and Revolution in the Second Republic* (London: Macmillan, 1978). For Largo Caballerosee Julio Aróstegui, *Largo Caballero: el tesón y la quimera* (Barcelona: Debate, 2013).

[18] On this 'double scenario', Santos Juliá, 'Los socialistas y el escenario de la futura revolución', in Jackson (ed.), *Octubre 1934*, pp. 103-130.

[19] Details in Francisco Largo Caballero, *Escritos sobre la República: notas históricas de la guerra en España 1917-1940* (Madrid: Pablo Iglesias, 1985), particularly pp. 93–110 and Amaro del Rosal, *1934: el movimiento revolucionario de octubre* (Madrid: Akal, 1984).

[20] For background, Adrian Shubert, *The Road to Revolution in Spain: The Coal Miners of Asturias, 1860–1934* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1987) and Kerry, *Unite, Proletarian Brothers!*, chs 1 and 2.

understanding.[21] They shared a culture of anticlericalism, a belief in the importance of working class solidarity and strike action as a tool for furthering the interests of the working class, a commitment to education and culture for working class enlightenment, and May Day as a day of both working-class struggle and celebration. The Paris Commune loomed large in left-wing culture and there was a shared interest in the USSR, which ranged from enthusiasm to sceptical, reserved interest.[22] The Bolshevik example was not limited to the Communists; Young Socialists attempted to claim Lenin for the socialists in late 1932.[23]

The coalfields were home to a rich associational life which exceeded the activities of trade unions. Socialist Casas del Pueblo were the centre of socialist activities and rivalled *ateneos*, which had emerged in the nineteenth century as liberal, bourgeois-led sites of progressive education through talks and libraries.[24] Membership of these institutions was large and predominantly male. Further activities and groups included lending libraries, cycling clubs, tourism groups, neighbourhood associations, and political societies, such as the Friends of the USSR or anti-war committees.[25] A Feminist Trip Society in Trubia organised a 400km trip around the province in 1931 for its 50 members.[26] Together with the trade unions, these associations and institutions in the coalfields facilitated networks and political education, and provided platforms for political action.

As the new Republican legislative programme began to impact everyday life in the coalfields in 1932, a radicalising dynamic emerged in the Asturian coalfields. Rent and religion proved to be significant arenas for collective action in the coalfields in 1932, as socialist activists demanded the full implementation of the secularising promise of the new constitution and Tenants Leagues mushroomed to campaign for rent reductions sanctioned by new legislation. As agitation for change met resistance from Catholics, the mining companies – who owned many schools and staffed them with religious personnel – and a reorganising right, resentment and frustration grew. Meanwhile, the SOMA struggled to respond to a downturn in the fortunes of the coal industry and only succeeded in alienating the rank-and-file further.[27]

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[21] E.g. an account of a debate in *El Noroeste*, May 14, 1932 and details of a pit assembly in *Avance*, August 17, 1933.
[22] E.g. *Avance*, June 7, 1932; *El Noroeste* 6, January 10, 1932.
[23] *Avance*, December 6, 1932.
[24] See Luis Arias González and Manuel Jesús Álvarez García, *Los palacios obreros: Casas del Pueblo socialistas en Asturias, 1902–1937* (Oviedo: Fundación José Barreiro, 2010) and Ángel Mato Díaz, *La Atenas del Norte: ateneos, sociedades culturales y bibliotecas populares en Asturias (1876–1937)* (Oviedo: KRK Ediciones, 2008).
[25] On working class sociability in Asturias, see work by Jorge Uría, e.g. *Una historia social del ocio: Asturias, 1898–1914* (Madrid: UGT, 1996).
[26] *Región*, July 16, 1931.
[27] More detailed analysis in Kerry, *Unite, Proletarian Brothers!*, chs 2 and 3.

This radicalising dynamic in the Asturian coalfields provided the foundation for a social movement of protest in 1934 which centred on the actions of state security forces and was a significant factor in creating the conditions for the mass backing for the Asturian October. Through March, April and May, as the security forces pursued a more vigorous policing strategy of frisking workers and searching Casas del Pueblo and workers' homes for arms, the coalfields saw an escalating spiral of strikes and public demonstrations beyond the control of the unions. This was a social movement of resistance, based on defending the local community. The actions of the security forces were a 'betrayal' of those who had agitated for the Republic and served to confirm fears of the perceived threat of an emerging authoritarian or fascist dictatorship in Spain.[28] By the end of the summer, the Asturian socialist newspaper, *Avance* combined demands for revolution with a depiction of the security forces as foreign army that had invaded the working class coalfields – and its was armies that started wars.[29]

Even as Spain stood on the threshold of revolution, what the revolutionary movement meant was far from clear. Prior to 1917, the Spanish socialist movement had been historically cautious and eschewed voluntarism in favour of reform, even if their rhetoric was radical, but had then organised a revolutionary strike in 1917 and conspired with Republicans to topple monarchy in 1930 via a military uprising supported by a socialist general strike.[30] In their search to explain the socialist shift to insurrectionary means, scholars have turned to the political culture of Spain and its socialist movement. For Avilés, the 1930 uprising planned by the socialists illustrated that insurrectionary means – whether through a coup or rebellion – to force regime change was part of socialist strategy, as well as wider Spanish political culture. The Asturian October would be simply a further iteration of this.[31] But in 1934 the lack of support from within the army was a marked contrast to 1930, where a socialist strike had been planned to support a military uprising. Furthermore, socialists had long considered a Republic as the way for the advance towards socialism, which could be achieved peacefully and legally through state reform and growing the socialist movement. The precedent of 1930 is more fruitful in showing how certain sectors of the socialist movement imagined revolution.[32] For all his radical rhetoric, it seems unlikely that Largo Caballero envisaged an insurrectionary

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[28] See Kerry, *Unite, Proletarian Brothers!*, ch. 4.

[29] *Avance*, September 22, 1934.

[30] See Heywood, *Marxism*.

[31] Juan Avilés, 'Los socialistas y la insurrección de octubre de 1934', *Espacio, tiempo y forma, serie v, historia contemporánea* 20 (2008), pp. 129–157. See also Enric Ucelay-Da Cal and Susanna Tavera García, 'Una revolución dentro de otra: la lógica insurreccional en la política española, 1924-1934', *Ayer* 13, 1994, pp. 115–146.

[32] See Santos Juliá, '"Preparados para cuando la ocasión se presente": los socialistas y la revolución', in Santos Juliá (ed.), *Violencia política en la España del siglo XX* (Madrid: Taurus, 2000), pp. 145-190.

assault on the state that would abolish capitalism and transform society, remoulding it along class-lines. Rather, the movement was a symbolic gesture, the force of which would provoke a government crisis such that elections would be called or power handed to the socialists. Strikers – and insurrectionaries in this case – were the auxiliary shock troops to an initiative centred squarely on the walls of parliament. Asturian leftists understood the revolutionary movement quite differently. In 1936 Asturian Young Socialists said they had believed in a movement with 'totalitarian' pretensions – a genuine attempt at social revolution.[33]

The Asturian October

The order to spark the revolutionary movement arrived in Oviedo, the provincial capital, late on 4 October 1934. In the early hours of the following morning, the sound of dynamite exploding in the coal valleys signalled the beginning of the revolutionary insurrection. Socialist militias, joined by Communists and anarchists, took up arms and besieged outposts of the security forces. After gaining control of their towns and villages, they marched on Oviedo. While Oviedo became a warzone, the coalfields saw comparatively little destruction. Control of the rear-guard lay in the hands of revolutionary committees, which were constituted by varying combinations of left-wing groups.

The revolutionary committees balanced the pursuit of revolutionary goals with the need to wage what was effectively a small-scale civil war. Committees symbolically abolished capitalism by banning money. An elaborate system was developed in La Felguera – at least on paper – to distribute food according to the size of families, which were accorded a greater or lesser monetary value.[34] Further revolutionary measures included burning official papers and archives and arresting enemies of the revolution. Approximately fifty died at the hands of revolutionaries, most of them priests, male religious and seminarians. To arrest a priest was 'to do something revolutionary'.[35] Less clear-cut in their revolutionary nature were the moves to requisition vehicles, distribute food centrally through the committee and unions, reorganise medical services and develop a rudimentary munitions and armour-plating industry. Such actions were assertion of revolutionary power, but also a desperate attempt to wage war on the Spanish state.

[33] *La Tarde* 24, April 27, 1936.
[34] Proclamation issued by the La Felguera Revolutionary Committee, 11 October 1934, reproduced in Aurelio de Llano Roza de Ampudia, *Pequeños anales de quince días: la revolución en Asturias, Octubre 1934* (Oviedo: Instituto de Estudios Asturianos, 1977), pp. 161–162.
[35] José Canel [José Díaz Fernández], *Octubre rojo en Asturias* (Barcelona: Silverio Cañada, 1984), pp. 145–146.

The committees communicated their decisions and desires through proclamations (*bandos*) which were pasted on walls or read out by militia patrols. Historians have neglected these sources, which are the main documentary evidence to have survived from the insurrection, for their unclear authorship, manifest lies and revolutionary fervour.[36] In addition to communicating directives and practical matters to the local community, the proclamations also served as a means of revolutionary expression. Through the proclamations they positioned themselves as protagonists in a revolutionary process and attempted to grasp and define the moment of revolution. In the heady initial moments of the insurrection, the proclamations declared that a social revolution 'had triumphed'.[37] The process was underway to create 'a new society' from the death of the old; in '[a] few hours – no longer […] there will be more bread on every table and joy in every heart'.[38] There had been a rupture in historical time and the present was fundamentally different from the past. The 'Republic of 14 April' had been 'defeated'.[39] The revolutionaries were heirs to a longer tradition of European revolutions and invoked the Russian and French Revolutions in order to elevate the Asturian insurrection into a wider, longer narrative of struggle. The 'world [was] watching' them and the revolutionaries had to fulfil the historical expectations of the workers of the world. Fortunately, the 'fatherland of the proletariat' would help them construct 'the solid Marxist edifice on the ashes of all that is rotten'.[40]

The USSR was not the sole international reference point for the revolutionaries, but the frequent references to Russia reveal how they were acting in the shadow of 1917. Some committees decreed the creation of a 'Red Army', although this desire was not fulfilled.[41] Whether an implementation of instructions from the Comintern handbook for revolution, *Armed Insurrection*, or a looser emulation of the Russian precedent, the proclamations positioned a Red Army as a necessary ingredient for the revolution to emerge victorious.[42] By self-consciously modelling their actions on previous revolutions, particularly the successful

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[36] E.g. Taibo, *Asturias*, pp. 454–455.

[37] Proclamation issued by the La Felguera Revolutionary Committee, 6 October 1934, reproduced in De Llano Roza de Ampudia, *Pequeños anales de quince días*, p. 161.

[38] Proclamation issued by the Grado Revolutionary Committee, undated, reproduced in Manuel Villar, *El anarquismo en la insurrección de Asturias: la CNT y la FAI en octubre de 1934* (Madrid: Fundación Anselmo Lorenzo, 1994), pp. 90-92.

[39] Proclamation issued by the Grado Revolutionary Committee, 11 October 1934, reproduced in De Llano Roza de Ampudia, *Pequeños anales de quince días*, pp. 149–150.

[40] Proclamation issued by the Third Provincial Revolutionary Committee, 16 October 1934, reproduced in Narcís Molins i Fábrega, *UHP: la insurrección proletaria en Asturias* (Madrid: Júcar, 1977), pp. 130–131.

[41] Proclamation issued by the Sama de Langreo Revolutionary Committee, 7 October 1934, in Molins i Fábrega (ed.), *UHP, La revolució proletària d'Astúries* (Barcelona: Atena, 1935), p. 125.

[42] A. Neuberg, *Armed Insurrection* (London: LLB, 1970), p. 186.

Bolshevik Revolution, militias and committees followed a revolutionary 'script', which they used as templates to guide their thoughts and actions.[43] Even so, there was not an attempt to dogmatically follow examples culled from the Russian experience. Anarchists, in particular, objected to a Red Army in which the armed proletariat would have to 'blindly obey' their superiors.[44] Nevertheless, the fragmentary evidence surviving from the insurrection, shows the events of 1917 to be the key reference point for revolutionaries in 1934.[45]

In its revolutionary pretences, the Asturian October formed part of a small age of revolutions inspired by the Bolshevik example in 1917. These revolutionary moments do not conform to the same model; there were significant differences between the strikes and land seizures of Italy's *biennio rosso* and the soviets of central and eastern Europe. The Asturian insurrection operated to a strict timetable rather than a rolling accumulation of layers of protest, as in the *biennio rosso*. The Asturian revolt was organised by the Spanish socialist party and led by a broad coalition of left-wing forces, rather than a radicalised socialist faction, like the Spartacist revolt, or the Communist party, as in Hungary. The revolutionary committees in Asturias derived from forms of local governance rather than soviets and drew on local union power rather than side-lining union influence.[46] The Asturian October did not emerge from a vacuum of power or a fragile legitimacy of political authority, as occurred in the wake of the First World War, but was a planned, full-frontal insurrection on a state which was not in crisis. There was little of the 'revolutionary openness' of the years following the First World War by the 1930s, as the right dictated the political rhythm across Europe.[47] The left was on the retreat, its resistance manifest in 1934 in episodes like the joint socialist-Communist mobilisation of 12 February in France and the socialist uprising in Austria. Even as the Asturian insurrection

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[43] Keith Michael Baker and Dan Edelstein (eds), *Scripting Revolution: a Historical Approach to the Comparative Study of Revolutions* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015). See also Eric Selbin's 'storying' approach in idem, *Revolution, Rebellion, Resistance: the Power of Story* (London: Zed, 2010).

[44] Proclamation issued by the Sama de Langreo Revolutionary Committee, 7 October 1934, in Narcís Molins i Fábrega, *UHP: la insurrección proletaria en Asturias* (Madrid: Júcar, 1977), p. 137. Anarchist criticism in Fernando Solano Palacio, *La revolución de octubre: quince días de comunismo libertario* (Madrid: Fundación Anselmo Lorenzo, 1994), p. 152; Villar, *El anarquismo*, p. 115, p. 118.

[45] References to Russia extended to 'vivas' to Russia or 'Let's save Russia!' daubed on walls. *La Veu de Catalunya,* October 28, 1934.

[46] For case studies, see chapters in Wrigley, *Challenges.* Councils undermining the unions in Germany and Italy in Eley, *Forging Democracy*, p. 163. The classic study remains Francis L. Carsten, *Revolution in Central Europe, 1918–1919* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

[47] Jakub S. Beneš, 'The Green Cadres and the Collapse of Austria-Hungary in 1918', *Past & Present* 236 (2017), pp. 207–241, here p. 210. See also Eley, *Forging Democracy*, pp. 152–153. For the 1930s, Pamela Radcliff, 'The Political "Left" in the Interwar Period, 1924–1939', in Nicholas Doumanis (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of European History, 1914-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 282–298 and Gerd-Rainer Horn, *European Socialists Respond to Fascism: Ideology, Activism and Contingency in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

was a similar surge in grassroots militancy, there was a revolutionary pretence in the events of October 1934 which surpassed a defensive reaction.

Antifascism

During the insurrection, militias would greet each other with the raised clenched fist. Together with the cry of 'unite, proletarian brothers!', it was both a password that allowed citizens to avoid arrest and a performance of revolutionary identity.[48] The fist had its origins as a Communist symbol in 1920s Germany and first appeared in Spain in 1934. Mourners raised their fists in salute at the funeral of Juanita Rico, a young socialist killed by Spanish fascists.[49] It would become the pre-eminent symbol of the Popular Front and particularly of the antifascist struggle during the Spanish Civil War. The fist`s emergence before the insurrection and prominence afterwards paralleled the development of an antifascist social movement in Spain.

Nazism`s installation in power in Germany in January 1933 opened a period of crisis and reconfiguration for the European left.[50] It stimulated the politicisation of intellectuals many of whom fled from dictatorial regimes in central and eastern Europe, often to Paris, which became the centre of the antifascist movement.[51] The French capital was the scene of the Anti-Fascist Workers` Congress in the summer of 1933, which combined with the previous year`s World Congress Against War in Amsterdam to create the World Committee Against War and Fascism. These organisations formed part of a wide network of transnational initiatives led by intellectuals and activists, often Communists or fellow travellers, which aided those in prison or fleeing persecution and aimed to resist the growth of the European extreme right. These committees and campaigns undergirded antifascist practice in the mid-1930s.

The Asturian coalfields were far removed from Paris salons, but Hitler`s ascent to power caused an impression. While not new, the term 'fascist' became increasingly common in the pages of the Asturian socialist press during 1933 to describe a hidden, growing threat from the right, even if it was not clear exactly how fascism would manifest in Spain and the threat was minimised prior to the November elections.[52] Electoral defeat for the left Republicans and socialists suddenly made the threat much more real, or so activists thought,

[48] Further detail in Matthew Kerry, 'Painted Tonsures and Potato-sellers: Priests, Passing and Survival in the Asturian Revolution', *Cultural & Social History* 14/2 (2017), pp. 237–255.
[49] Photographs in *Mundo Gráfico*, June 27, 1934.
[50] See Horn, *European Socialists*.
[51] Anson Rabinbach, 'Paris, the Capital of Antifascism', in Warren Breckman, Moses Dirk and Peter E. Gordon (eds), *The Modernist Imagination: Intellectual History and Critical Theory* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), pp. 183–209.
[52] E.g. *Avance*, October 26, 1933. See further Matthew Kerry, 'Radicalisation, Community and the Politics of Protest in the Spanish Second Republic', *English Historical Review*, 132/555 (2017), pp. 331–336.

and the vigorous policing of spring 1934 helped to stoke fears of the possible installation of an authoritarian or fascist regime from above, in a manner akin to Dollfuss in Austria.[53]

The international context was important for it provided one of the vital dynamics that helps to disentangle antifascism from a wider radical left-wing culture. The struggle against fascism was transnational and immediate and wrapped in a militant, activist-led politics. It required demanded international solidarity and had to be fought through working class unity. Antimilitarism – but not pacifism, as antifascists were not to shirk from violence if necessary – formed an important part of their worldview. In 1932 and 1933 there had been a number of anti-war meetings and the creation of anti-war committees in the coalfields, which drew support from across left-wing parties and cultural associations, but the language of fighting war became more prominent in 1934 and now closely linked to fascism.[54] In September the Women's Socialist Group in Sama de Langreo organised a demonstration against 'war and fascism'. Present in Sama was Matilde de la Torre, a socialist parliamentary deputy, who was part of the recently-created Women`s Committee Against War and Fascism.[55] Demonstrating in the streets against war was a new phenomenon.

Towards the summer of 1934 a self-conscious wave of antifascist activism had started to emerge and was evident in a series of well-attended rallies, which contrasted with the lack of support with Austrian socialists in February.[56] There was a slow genesis of an antifascist identity, which was necessarily 'under construction', in 1934 but it is difficult to speak of an actual antifascist social movement at this stage.[57] While the Asturian 'Workers' Alliance`, a pact signed by socialists and anarchists in March 1934, publicly declared its intention to oppose war and fascism, such phrasing to avoid 'raising the authorities' 'suspicions'. The actual objective was 'the triumph of social revolution in Spain, establishing a regime of political, economic and social equality, based on socialist and federalist principles'.[58] Antifascism was

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[53] On the socialists' watchful eye on Austria, Sandra Souto Kustrín, 'Las revoluciones no se hacen con hachas y hoces: estrategias del octubre madrileño', in Alejandro Aleassi and José Luis Martín Ramos (eds), *De un octubre a otro: revolución y fascism en el period de entreguerras, 1917–1934* (Barcelona: El Viejo Topo, 2010), p. 261ff.
[54] E.g. *El Noroeste*, August 25, 1932; *Avance*, October 18, 1933.
[55] See Mercedes Yusta, 'The Strained Courtship Between Antifascism and Feminism', in García, Tabet and Yusta (eds), *Rethinking Antifascism*, pp. 174–175.
[56] *Avance*, February 20, 1934; June 5, 1934; June 12, 1934; August 17, 1934.
[57] Ferrán Gallego, *Barcelona, mayo 1937: la crisis del antifascismo en Cataluña* (Barcelona: Debate, 2007), p. 143.
[58] *Avance*, April 1, 1934. The quotations in Report by the Asturian CNT Regional Committee on its actions and those of the Regional Revolutionary Workers' Alliance in the revolutionary events between March and October 1934, [undated], Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica, PS Gijón, J series, box 12, file 2, pp. 12–13 and Report by the Asturian CNT Regional Committee submitted to the Regional Plenary of unions on the events of October 1934, 10 April 1936, CDMH, PS Gijón, J series, box 12, file 3, p. 5. The pact in Víctor Alba, *La Alianza Obrera: historia y análisis de una táctica de unidad en España* (Madrid: Júcar, 1978), pp. 205–206.

a cover for revolution. Even as fascism structured ideas of a political threat, a self-aware, self-defining antifascist culture did not emerge prior to October 1934.

There is very little evidence that notions of fascism or antifascism structured political action during the insurrection. Rather it was the failure of the Asturian October and the vast repression that forged an antifascist movement. Armed struggle against the right and left-wing unity on the barricades – as recalled by the women from Ciaño-Santa Ana in 1936 – followed by defeat and repression provided a foundational moment for a new sense of collective political identity, however much this was mythologised.[59] Government forces imprisoned thousands in Asturias and from across Spain. The use of torture and beatings was widespread during the first weeks and months. All industrial workers lost their jobs in the coalfields and had to reapply for them. Left-wing political centres were closed and their newspapers and unions banned in Asturias. Despite censorship, reports of the suffering filtered out of Asturias thanks to the work of deputies protected by parliamentary immunity and solidarity and welfare initiatives, such as International Red Aid and the Committee in Aid of Working-Class Children.[60] Such initiatives, which were led by women, provided an extension of women's political activities from prior to the insurrection. Through 1935 the demand for amnesty became a powerful mobilising tool that engaged women in the coalfields and further afield, and facilitated a rapprochement between left Republicans and socialists, which widened into a Popular Front involving other left-wing parties, including Communists, ahead of the February 1936 elections.

The repression of the insurrection entailed an experience of state violence, which drew Spain into a wider international context by reflecting – or so it seemed – the experience of the left in other countries. Campaigns in support of the imprisoned German Communist Ernst Thaelmann had been conducted in the spring of 1934, but the focus on imprisonment domestically and internationally expanded much more between 1935 and 1936.[61] Asturian socialists publicly denounced the director of the prison for maltreatment of prisoners and during the spring of 1936 paid close attention to the actions and movements of the security

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[59] Yusta acknowledges that October 1934 was a 'touchstone' in female antifascist mobilisation. Mercedes Yusta, 'La construcción de una política femenina desde el antifascismo (1934-1950)', in Ana Aguado and Teresa María Ortega (eds), *Feminismos y antifeminismos: culturas políticas e identidades de género en la España del siglo xx* (ValenciaandGranada: Universitat de València/Universidad de Granada, 2011) p. 266.

[60] Translations of reports into torture in Leah Manning, *What I saw in Spain* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1935). For International Red Aid, Laura Branciforte, *El Socorro Rojo Internacional en España (1923-1939): relatos de la solidaridad antifascista* (Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 2009). Communist politician Ibárurri's account of evacuating children in Dolores Ibárruri, *Memorias de Dolores Ibárruri, Pasionaria: la lucha y la vida* (Barcelona: Planeta Verlag, 1985), pp. 187–190.

[61] Reports abounded on the use of torture in 1936, e.g. testimonies in the International Red Aid newspaper *Ayuda*.

forces, such as the transfer of civil guards from one town to another.[62] This indictment of a persecutory state dovetailed with the expression of solidarity towards leftists around the world fighting far right regimes. In late May, Oviedo was the scene of a rally in support of the Brazilian Communist Luís Carlos Prestes, where there were speeches by politicians from across the Popular Front, and also the CNT.[63] Moreover, the Italian invasion of Abyssinia had sharpened the anti-militaristic facet of left-wing political culture. For leftists, fascism, the highest form of crisis-ridden imperialist capitalism, now engaged in outright warfare and now 'entire peoples were drawn into the struggle against fascist aggression'.[64] The invasion caused an impression on the Asturian left. The front-page of the first edition of the socialist weekly *Asturias* carried an anti-war cartoon and an editorial warning left-wing disunion leads to war, while inside a column by Santiago Carrillo, secretary general of the Socialist Youth, diagnosed the war as an imperialist invasion that was the product of fascism's inability to solve capitalism`s contradictions.[65]

Spring 1936 saw the flourishing of an antifascist social movement in Asturias. The return of constitutional guarantees in January and the victory of the Popular Front – often labelled an 'antifascist bloc' during the election campaign – allowed the public return of left-wing political activity, which was accompanied by a renewed radicalism. Left-wing unions and parties reorganised, there was an influx of young activists into the ranks of the United Socialist Youth, which incorporated the formerly Socialist and Communist youth organisations, and International Red Aid sections expanded. While in many areas the Popular Front was simply an electoral agreement, in Asturias there was an added dynamism to Popular Frontism, though this 'vitality' was 'localized and sporadic'.[66] Unity and alertness to the fascist threat were the watchwords of the Asturian left in 1936, which now consciously, repeatedly self-defined itself as antifascist. A new International Red Aid committee in the tiny coastal hamlet of Bañugues passed a number of motions at its first meeting which reveal the weaving together of the domestic and international fronts of antifascist struggle. They agreed to send telegrams to the German and Brazilian embassies protesting over political prisoners, demand aid for the victims of the Asturian October, call for the disarming of fascists, appeal for the freedom of the

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[62] E.g. *La Tarde, January 15, 1936; February 5, 1936; February 10, 1936; April 8, 1936.*
[63] *La Tarde*, May 29, 1936.
[64] Buchanan notes that the British left debated how far Abyssinia constituted an antifascist struggle, Tom Buchanan, '"The Dark Millions in the Colonies are Unavenged": Anti-Fascism and Anti-Imperialism in the 1930s', *Contemporary European History* 25/4 (2016), pp. 645–665, here pp. 653–654, the quotation at p. 653.
[65] *Asturias*, September 28, 1935.
[66] Adrian Shubert, 'A Reinterpretation of the Spanish Popular Front: the Case of Asturias', in Martin Alexander and Helen Graham (eds), *The French and Spanish Popular Fronts: Comparative Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 223–224, the quotations at p. 244.

Hungarian Communist Rákosi and other 'antifascist fighters', and demand the expulsion of the local parish priests for their role in the repression of the revolutionary insurrection.[67] Such anticlericalism was part of a wider return to militancy by the left in 1936, which extended to left-wing militias patrolling public spaces and removing arms from their opponents. The Asturian revolution was a touchstone in speeches at rallies, but this was a feature of militant identities rather than a symptom of preparations for revolution. Even as the rhetoric was bullish and the actions potentially provocative, the aggression was defensive in nature; gone was the insurrectionism.

Between Revolution and Antifascism

During the Spanish Civil War, antifascism would provide a key cultural frame for understanding the conflict and upon which the Republican state was rebuilt.[68] Literacy campaigns, Cultural Militias and commissars cultivated the soldiers of the new Republican Popular Army as antifascist militants. Battalions produced their own newspapers which extolled the ideal of the proletarian antifascist fighter. The Communist Minister of Education declared that the school curriculum would be designed to shape future 'paladins of antifascism' who 'know how to position themselves in the world, independently evaluate developments and not be surprised by them' and schools materials, like calendars and textbooks, bore the imprint of antifascism.[69] An antifascist social movement based on left-wing unity was more difficult to sustain, however, thanks to deep divisions between parties and unions in the Republican zone.[70] One key point of contention was the question of 'war or revolution', which cut to the heart of how an antifascist struggle should be waged, and its relationship to revolution.

There is not the space here to engage in detailed discussion of the revolutionary process that followed the right-wing military coup in July 1936. The rebellion paralysed the Republican state and allowed purificatory violence, confiscation of goods, collectivisation of property, and formation of revolutionary or antifascist committees to administer the revolutionary process, which all reveal similar processes to October 1934. Yet the experience of 1936 was much less

[67] *La Tarde*, April 29, 1936.
[68] On the wider dynamics of Republican culture at war, see, recently, Carl-Henrik Bjerström, 'A Respectable Revolution: Republican Cultural Mobilisation during the Spanish Civil War', *Cultural and Social History* 18/1 (2021), pp. 97–121.
[69] *La escuela actual es esencialmente antifascista.* s.l, s.n, 1937, quoted in Magadena Garrido Caballero, 'Antifascistas españoles: discurso y movilización antifascista de los Amigos de la Unión Soviética en la Europa de entreguerras', in Carlos Navaja Zubeldía and Diego Iturriaga Barco (eds), *Novísima. Actas del II Congreso Internacional de Historia de Nuestro Tiempo* (Logroño: Universidad de La Rioja, 2010), p. 224.
[70] E.g. for the idea of a 'crisis of antifascism', see Ferran Gallego, *Barcelona, mayo 1937: la crisis del antifascism en Cataluña* (Barcelona: Editorial Debate, 2007).

cohesive and structured than 1934 and it was not an organised, full-frontal assault on political power. Left-wing groups rejected insurrectionism after 1934. The Asturian October marked the high tide of insurrectionism within the Spanish socialist movement, the Communists embraced Popular Frontism in 1935 and the anarchist CNT turned away from their insurrectionary politics of 1931-3 in their congress of spring 1936.

This chapter has argued that the Asturian October marked the end of a 'small age of revolution' in Europe which began in 1917. It was the last time in Europe that there was a mass attempt at capturing the state and remaking society through a popular uprising.[71] The insurrection was one moment of European left-wing rebelliousness in 1934, but it only fits uneasily with episodes like the Austrian 'Civil War' and the joint demonstration of French Communists and socialists in opposition to right-wing and fascist leagues for its revolutionary character. The defeat of the revolutionary insurrection marked the beginning of an antifascist social movement in Spain. Prior to the insurrection the perceived creeping threat of fascism had rendered it difficult know to when fascism had actually arrived or to calibrate the actual threat of fascism; only the insurrection and the repression brought it into sharp focus. The experience of state violence and the need for welfare and solidarity initiatives helped shape an antifascist movement which drew itself into a wider international context. Indeed, the reactive nature of antifascism required an event similar to the revolt and its repression which could be mythologised as a foundational moment for antifascism. Events in February 1934 served a similar function in France as a point of origin for the French Popular Front. On 6 February a march on parliament by veterans` leagues spearheaded by the right was followed six days later by a mass exhibition of rank-and-file co-operation between socialists and Communists. Although the road to the French Popular Front would be winding, the 12 February march would be mythologised as the starting point of the alliance of the French left and the Radical party.[72]

Scholars have noted the difficulties in distinguishing left-wing political culture from antifascism, such as in terms of the intertwined nature of feminism and antifascism, or antifascism and anti-imperialism.[73] Examining the nature of revolutionary politics and antifascism in Asturias similarly reveals how the latter drank from the currents running through Asturian left-wing – and European – politics during the 1930s. The antifascism of the Asturian coalfields emphasised antimilitarism, working class unity and international solidarity and

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[71] Ruiz has argued that the Asturian October was the last working class revolution in the west in Ruiz, *Octubre*.
[72] Recently, Brian Jenkins and Chris Millington, *France and Fascism: February 1934 and the Dynamics of Political Crisis* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).
[73] Yusta, 'The Strained Courtship'; Buchanan, 'Millions', p. 654. See also García, 'Antifascist Culture ', p. 96.

humanitarianism. Above all it was a conscious, active, mass-based oppositional culture, self-aware and self-defining against a fascist threat in a struggle that was international in character. Antifascism was an important vector for the political mobilisation of women in the coalfields, whose involvement was required for the defeat of fascism, as the socialist women of Ciaño-Santa Ana demanded in their appeal published on 18 July 1936, unaware that Spain stood on the threshold of a three-year civil war.