Buenaventura Durruti was killed on the Madrid front early in the Spanish Civil War. His comrades in the "flying column" of dedicated anarchists he led formed a group at his death dedicated to continuing his aims. These were to oppose collaboration with the Spanish Republican Government which the majority of the CNT had entered into, and to convert the war into a revolution by seizing the land and factories.

The CNT (National Labour Federation), which Durruti belonged to, was the biggest workers' organisation in Spain with a claimed membership of over a million. It had a core of political activists, the FAI (Iberian Anarchist Federation) numbering some fifty thousand, and was strongest in the Southeast i.e. Aragon, Barcelona, Valencia, Alicante—the most economically developed part of the country. The language spoken there is Catalan, not regular Spanish (i.e. Castilian). The other...
languages of the peninsula are Galician, a Portuguese dialect and Franco's mother tongue, and Basque, a language unrelated to any other in Europe.

This linguistic-cultural diversity has always created problems for central governments in Spain, as did the landscape which has rivers and high mountain ranges running from East to West, making communications difficult. It is ideal guerrilla country, whence the word arose during the attempted occupation by Napoleon's army. This was the setting for the Spanish Civil War, something of a misnomer, since after the first few months it became a European War by proxy, and a dress rehearsal for World War II.

In 1936 a conspiracy of generals backed by conservative groups, the aristocracy and the high clergy had mounted a coup d'etat against the five-year-old Republic which succeeded the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera. The uprising failed; the main centres of administration-Madrid, Barcelona, Bilbao, Valencia-were not captured and the rebels were left in the countryside with winter coming on. Most of Spain is a vast plateau and in the winter has more in common with Tibet than anywhere else.

At this point Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy sent forces in to help their right-wing proteges, and Soviet Russia intervened, helping the Communist Party (which was a relatively insignificant organisation) rather than the government. The war ended with a million dead and the Franco dictatorship in power from 1939 until 1975.

He is not detached. It is difficult to imagine anybody with experience of representative government and a free press, secular education and freedom of movement-however heavily qualified-being indifferent to these questions. Hugh Thomas in his *History of the Spanish Civil War* came close to it. No doubt in good time creatures will emerge from the woodwork and try to do a revisionist job on Franco. It was Stalin's slaughter of his comrades and fellow Russians that allowed this malignant, pot-bellied dwarf to pose as the saviour of European civilisation, and caused many British conservatives, including Churchill to support his claim.

The losers, as always, were the common people, pawns in a struggle between power brokers. Those who weren't killed were crammed into Franco's concentration camps, penal labour battalions, or settled down to a hungry future. The country swarmed with 57 varieties of police. It really was government by machine-gun and terror.

Then twenty years after the war, a totally bizarre and novel factor entered the scene. Billions of pounds, francs, florins and deutschmarks poured into the country in exchange for blue skies, warm sea and sand, cheap wine and other agricultural surpluses, and a vigorous folklore. Spanish capitalism took off vertically. Mass tourism had arrived.

The country which three centuries earlier was the first World Power had become moribund. Features which had virtually died out in the rest of Europe were still very much alive—a military class, a priestly class, competing monarchical claims, near-serfdom among seasonal rural labourers, and mass illiteracy. Consequently, understanding Spain is not easy even for those interested. But for those who are, Paul Preston's one thousand pages of text and notes deals splendidly with the enormous mass of data from before, during, and after the war.

Other than as a dress rehearsal for World War II, the events in Spain from 1936-9 were not of great consequence for the rest of the world, but they have generated an enormous amount of debate. At the time the issue appeared to be a simple matter of democracy versus dictatorship, and provoked passionate debate in the Socialist Party as it did in the reformists parties here and abroad. The attempt of the Communist Party to enter the debate was frustrated by their rejection of democracy in the first place ("democratic centralism" was what they called their version of dictatorship). But for libertarian organisations there was a real problem. If there is no democracy, how could Socialist ideas be spread? On the other hand, a war within capitalism could only be fought on capitalist terms. You can't have a democratic army, as the anarchists in the CNT found out.

"Arming of the people is meaningless. The nature of military warfare is determined by the class directing it. An army fighting in defence of a bourgeois state, even if it should be antifascist, is an
army in the service of capitalism . . . War between a fascist state and an antifascist state is not a revolutionary class war. The proletariat's intervention on one side is an indication that it has already been defeated. Insuperable technical and professional inferiority on the part of the popular or militia-based army was implicit in military struggle on a military front" (Guillaman, p.10).

And if you have an overwhelming majority, you don't need any army anyway. No amount of oppression can be made to work against it, as the Communist Party found out in Moscow in 1989. But that overwhelming majority has to know what it is about. And that is what the Friends of Durruti concluded:

"What happened was what had to happen. The CNT was utterly devoid of revolutionary theory. We did not have a concrete programme. We had no idea where we were going . . . By not knowing what to do we handed the revolution on a platter to the bourgeoisie and the Communists who support the farce of yesterday."

There are a number of traps for the unwary in Guillamon's book. The word junta does not mean the same to a Spanish speaker as to an English speaker. Also, the revolution we are told has to be "totalitarian". This cannot be personal dictatorship which is what the word has come to mean. It can only mean wholehearted, excluding the possibility of a halfway house between capitalism and socialism.

A greater problem arises on page 11: "why the revolutionary option was not exercised. And the answer is very simple: there was no revolutionary vanguard capable of steering the revolution". This Trotskyist recipe contradicts anarchist emphasis on personal responsibility and originally arose from keeping bad company and because the consciousness and conditions for real social change were not there.

The Friends of Durruti were "not brilliant theorists nor gifted organisers but essentially barricade fighters". Heroism is not enough, although there was plenty of that. These brave people deserved better from history.

K. Smith
Sunday, 1 February 1998
The Friends of Durruti Group: 1937-1939
Agustín Guillamón

Los Amigos de Durruti