

The Rising of July 1936

This is an edited extract from Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain, a book by the US socialist Felix Morrow.

When the Nationalist rebellion began, the government refused to arm the workers. But workers in Barcelona during the afternoon of July 18th were raiding sporting goods stores for rifles, construction jobs for sticks of dynamite, fascist homes for concealed weapons. With the aid of a few friendly police, they had seized a few racks of government rifles. That – and as many motor vehicles as they could find – was all the workers had when, at five o'clock on the morning of the 19th, the fascist officers began to lead detachments from the barracks.

Isolated battles before paving-stone barricades led to a general battle in the afternoon. And here political weapons more than made up for the superior armament of the fascists. Heroic workers stepped forward from the lines to call upon the soldiers to learn why they were shooting down their fellow toilers. They fell under rifle and machine-gun fire, but others took their place. Here and there a soldier began shooting wide. Soon, bolder ones turned on their officers.

Some nameless military genius – perhaps he died then – seized the moment and the mass of workers abandoned their prone positions and surged forward. The first barracks were taken. General Goded was captured that afternoon. With arms from the arsenals the workers cleaned up Barcelona. Within a few days, all Catalonia was in their hands.

In Malaga, strategic port opposite Morocco, the ingenious workers, unarmed at first, had surrounded the reactionary garrison with a wall of gasoline-fired houses and barricades.

Most of the army was with the fascists. It must be confronted by a new army. Every workers' organization proceeded to organize militia regiments, equip them, and send them to the front.

In Catalonia, within a week from July 19, transport and industry was almost entirely in the hands of workers' committees. The union committees systematically took over, re-established order and speeded up production for wartime needs.

1. What did the government do?
2. What action did the workers of Barcelona take?
3. What do you think the writer means when he says 'political weapons'? (paragraph 2)
4. How did the workers of Malaga defeat the army? (paragraph 4)
5. What was 'in the hands of the workers' committees'? (paragraph 6)