

El Solidario is the mouthpiece of the Confederacion Sindical Solidaridad Obrera organization. Attached to its issue No 12 (Spring 2006) was a *Mera Dossier*, sub-titled *Cipriano Mera. Thirty Years Gone*

https://solidaridadobrero.org/ateneo_nacho/peri%C3%B3dicos/Cipriano%20Mera.%20Treinta%20a%C3%B1os%20de%20ausencia.pdf

CIPRIANO MERA, RADICAL ANARCHIST (1897-1936)

Cipriano Mera was born in Madrid's Calle Juan del Risco, No 6, on 5 November 1897. He was born on the ground floor of the house there at one o'clock in the morning. It was there that he lived out the earliest years of his life's partnership with Teresa and there that their son Vicente was born and died.

We have very little information regarding that early phase of his life prior to the civil war in 1936.

He was 16 in 1913 when his father found him work in the construction sector and signed him up for the UGT union. It was during the 1920s that Cipriano came into contact with anarchism and he was a member of an anarchist group within the UGT (such wonders!) and during Primo de Rivera's dictatorship he was caught up in certain incidents that led to his winding up behind bars on several occasions.

One such incident was the so-called *Sanjuanada*, or San Juan's Night plot in 1926, an attempted military coup headed by Francisco Aguilera and General Valeriano Weiler, with backing from Alcalá Zamora, Melquíades Álvarez and the Count of Romanones, as well as some CNT personnel who would see to the calling of a General Strike (more wonders!)

There are several testimonials dating from those early days outlining Cipriano's character: one of the best known comes from Miguel González Inestal:

"My earliest contacts with Cipriano date back to 1924 and 1925.

By the time I first met him, 'el Chimeno' was already a byword for quality in his trade. On one occasion I, being blacklisted, he took me under his wing and had no hesitation in taking me on as his helper, whilst fully cognizant that I lacked experience in that regard, and in the full knowledge that, initially at any rate, he was going to have to cover his own work plus mine. And let me say that I was not alone in this, as I witnessed his spirit of solidarity, especially vis a vis those who were ideologically of like mind to his own, in which case there were no limits to his commitment.

In those early days, his education was very rudimentary, but, with huge strength of will, he used to seize upon every moment of leisure, on site or at home, to dip into whatever book he was reading and there was always one in his tool box."

Mera impressed me right from the off, which could scarcely have been more casual. It came in an apartment on the Calle Infantas in Madrid, during the latter days of Primo de Rivera. There were six or seven comrades there with expertise in clandestine matters and they included the Inestal brothers, whose affability ruled out any sort of violence.

Mera spotted me, just as I spotted him. When I spotted him there in the hallway, leaning with his back against the wall, hand thrust into the pocket of his denim jacket, unshaven and with that nonchalant manner of his, I thought to myself: this is some leftwing non-entity out to gain notice through some sort of extravagant behaviour. I gazed at Mera with hidden scorn. Cipriano Mera, however, made no secret of how he felt about me. You're a jumped-up bourgeois – he seemed to be

saying to me – drawn here by curiosity; maybe even an under-cover policeman. Mera's disdain wounded me deeply: Maybe it was just Mera's natural reaction. Where he was concerned, it was all rough and ready honesty. His innocence rivalled the malignancy of the great criminals of history. I grasped that and from then on there was no shade between us.

Ramón J Sender, in *Album de radiografías secretas*

During the Dictatorship, Madrid's libertarians lived under cover inside the UGT and in various cultural clubs that were more or less tolerated or operating under ground. As the Dictatorship neared its end the Ateneo de Divulgación Social was to become a meeting-place up until the collapse of the monarchy meant that the CNT and the Ateneos Libertarios could function normally.

It looks as if Mera was no eloquent public speaker and he had no gift of the gab, something that may have reflected his rather introverted and backward character (in the sense that he was circumspect, not much of a talker at work and with a hint of dour sullenness, as Eduardo de Guzman put it).

However, the CNT's strong upsurge once the monarchy had fallen (in six months it grew from non-existence into an organization with a membership larger than that of all the leftwing, right-wing, monarchist or republican parties combined) and Mera's status within the CNT Construction Union in Madrid (he was to serve as its president) prompted him to take part in lots of public gatherings at this time.

The uprising in Aragon in 1933 led to Mera's being jailed for his part in the Revolutionary Committee alongside Orobón, Durruti, Puente, etc., etc. He had been drafted in by the CNT National Committee to serve on that Revolutionary Committee and that earned Mera some hostility that would last his entire life.

Interviewed for the documentary *Vivir la utopia* (in the unedited version held in the Fundación Anselmo Lorenzo), Miguel Celma contends that Mera took off for Aragon to head the uprising there, neglecting the uprising in his own Centre Region.

"For which reason, I have never shaken hands with Cipriano Mera."

Jacinto Azcona has left us some splendid information regarding that prison term, stating, among other things:

"I made Cipriano Mera's acquaintance in Torrero prison in late 1933 at the time of the government crackdown targeting the CNT ...

On one occasion, Mera spoke to us and informed us that his life added up to shuttling between scaffolding and prison and from prison back to the scaffolding. He said something of that sort but his tone was different because his voice was serious, ponderous and profound and when he spoke, it was as if he was entirely made up of the pulley and the plumb-line associated with his trade.

In Madrid, in October 1934 there was a strong strike wave, timed to coincide with the revolution in Asturias. That too led to Mera's ending up back behind bars.

Mera's final period in custody from that stage in his life arose out of his role in the 1936 construction industry strike. And he was to remain behind bars right up until the outbreak of the civil war.

To conclude with this period, allow us to recount two anecdotes that will give some idea of Cipriano's mettle and demeanour.

We heard the first of these from Frank Mintz on his recent visit to Madrid and we shall set it out just as the conversation went:

"This October sees the 30th anniversary of Cipriano Mera's death. Did you ever meet him?"

I knew him very slightly: I bumped into him over several years. He was a very self-contained Castilian, but he was very good-natured and likeable. Used to say hello to everybody. He was a very, very uncomplicated man.

Garcia Pradas's son could tell you a story: he is pretty much the same age as me and he tells it that his father, a journalist, tried to join the CNT here in Madrid and Cipriano Mera, who happened to be in charge at the time, asked him:

- *Journalist, eh? What do you do? Show me your hands*
- *Oh no. It takes horny hands to make a CNT member ...*

Whereupon Garcia Pradas decided to do some labouring work on some sites, digging ditches, and three months later he was back and he got his union card.

The other anecdote is the very well-known story from the Zaragoza Congress. The version we offer here is the one Ramón Álvarez mentions in the videoed interview he gave to the TV documentary *Vivir la utopia*. Although this fragment did not make it into the final screening, it is on record at the Fundación Anselmo Lorenzo, in a VHS as well as in the DVD version. *Ramonín* (Ramón Álvarez) states:

"At the Zaragoza Congress, when García Oliver, representing the Manufacturing and Textile Union of Barcelona, urged the CNT to set up para-military groups so that, when the time came, it might stand up to an emergency situation, Cipriano Mera, who was, at that time, a very radical activist from the Centre Regional, rose to his feet and said:

- *That does it! Maybe García Oliver could tell us what colour of scrambled egg and braid do the Catalan comrades reckon the CNT's general would prefer?*
- *And of course, the whole place dissolved into laughter ...*
- *Such is fate. García Oliver never had anything to do with military affairs, whereas Mera, who had poked fun at him, ended up as a lieutenant-colonel with the powers of a general in that he came to command an Army Corps.*

MERA (1936-1939) ANARCHIST AVENGER

MILITIAN

On 18 July 1936, Cipriano was in custody in the Modelo Prison in connection with the construction sector strike that had been called in Madrid by the CNT and the UGT, and he was freed only on 19 July.

It was typical of Cipriano to prioritize the struggle over personal relations and he demonstrated this upon his release from prison. Mora urged him to go see his family first, only to receive the response that "if, as you claim, we are in the throes of revolution, the first thing to do is to report back to the union."

The very next day Cipriano was involved in the storming of the Carabanchel and Campamento barracks but he took no part in the attack on the Montana barracks, as there were upwards of twenty thousand people in position there, ready for the attack.

Over the ensuing days, with more shrewdness than gear, equipment and men, he helped secure Alcala de Henares and Guadalajara and Cuenca and virtually the whole of the province for the Republic, displaying in the course of the fighting his innate talents as a strategist. After that, he fought in Paredes de Buitrago and Casavieja as part of the Del Rosal Column.

When Madrid was placed under siege by the fascists, it was Cipriano Mera who pulled strings to stop in Tarancon the government that fled from Madrid on 6 November, *the last chance to achieve a proletarian revolution*. However, in order to appreciate this one would need to read between the lines of his memoirs (and we are not dealing here with a Garcia Oliver, Mera being a very modest fellow, not one to “award himself medals”, real or fictitious).

In Tarancon, Mera was to give a dressing down to ministers (some of them from the CNT), secretaries (including the CNT’s own National Committee) and the mayor of Madrid, among others, for running away from the city.

With a 1,000-strong column of anarcho-syndicalists he joined the defence of Madrid on 8 November, placing himself at Miaja’s disposal.

Durruti’s arrival in Madrid was to strengthen the bonds of friendship between them both and Mera was to caution Durruti against those who were out to use his column as “cannon-fodder” by ordering it to attack in the most dangerous sectors without aerial or artillery back-up.

Durruti’s death on 20 November was to hit everyone hard.

It was no accident that the switch from militias to regular army was most readily accepted in the Centre region. Mera was to observe that self-discipline was not enough and that men tempered through long years of trade union struggles folded at the sight of death approaching and abandoned prized positions.

Whatever might be said about the arguments backwards and forwards regarding militarization, great democratization as far as the “confederal” units might have been secured. In this as in so many other matters, the Organization, over all, just failed the test.

THE SOLDIER

The raising of the 14th Division, based on anarcho-syndicalist militias, was to see Mera awarded the rank of major. From then on Mera’s actions did not go unnoticed by members of the CP who saw him as the leader that might overshadow them in their eagerness to capture every position of command in the army of the Republic.

Relentless efforts were made to discredit him and set ambushes for him. However they always foundered in the face of Mera and his men. In the Battle of Jarama, the 14th Division’s 70th Brigade was deployed as “cannon fodder” in the attack on El Pingarron, at Lister’s command. However, these men’s fighting spirit ensured that they came to be known as “the heroes of El Pingarron”, which meant that the CP dropped that approach and the laurels went elsewhere. Further attempts were to be made to hang Mera’s men out to dry during joint attacks: to pin the blame on Mera for the loss of a given territory, as in Brunete, and other jiggery-pokery, that was to culminate in an assassination bid in Modesto’s territory, an attempt from which Mera and his chief of staff, Verardini, were to emerge unscathed.

In October 1937 Mera was appointed to command of the IV Army Corps and in April 1938 he was promoted to lieutenant-colonel. Mera was to remain seconded to the Army of the Centre, meaning

that he was left comparatively untroubled throughout 1938. However, as the war approached its end, he was to play a very outstanding role.

THE FINALE

In late January 1939, Catalonia was lost to the Republic. From then on, the Republic boiled down to a single zone flanking the Valencia highway and covering about a fifth of the nation.

There was no agricultural base since the big productive areas were inside fascist territory.

There was no industry, since the main industrial centre – Catalonia – had fallen into enemy hands.

As a result, there could also be no reliance on what few war materials there were produced there (Stalin was already making overtures to Hitler, looking for a German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, and his arms shipments to Spain had been seriously reduced. He had sent everything that he had been paid to send!)

The only thing in plentiful supply in the Republic by then was hunger: it is estimated that about 400 people a month were starving to death in Madrid by that point. In the larger cities, they were reduced to eating alfalfa.

Come the end of January 1939, the Republic's president, Azana, tendered his resignation, leaving it without a figurehead. Rojo resigned as well.

At around the same time, London and Paris recognized Franco.

Against this backdrop and even though it was universally acknowledged that the war was lost, two stances emerged inside the republican zone:

One backed resistance to the death in the hope that a wider conflagration across Europe or worldwide might rescue the Republic. That was a stance backed by the PCE and, to back it up, they contended that there were enormous stocks of war materials being held in France for the rearming of the Republic's army. However, it had been overlooked that the Republic's army, which had crossed over into France following the loss of Catalonia, had been stripped of its weapons and that anybody willing to return to the peninsula had had to do so empty-handed.

Likewise, no mention was made of the fact that France was not about to allow arms into the country; It had not done so while the Republic's government had enjoyed international recognition and it was highly unlikely to do so now that Franco had been recognized. Besides, the "imminence" of that worldwide conflagration was nothing more than wishful thinking.

The other stance reckoned that, things being as they were, they should go for a negotiated settlement that might allow the most compromised persons to leave Spain. That was the stance backed by the rest of the republican forces – socialists, republicans and anarcho-syndicalists.

In early March, Negrin and the PCE mounted an attempted "putsch" from a position of power. To make up for the loss of Catalonia, those mostly responsible for that disaster were given promotions: Modesto became a general, Lister, Galan and Taguena were made colonels. Every one of them belonged to the PCE.

That clumsy provocation triggered the desired response and 5 March saw the establishment of the CND [National Defence Council] around Colonel Casado and it included representatives from every element within the Republic, excepting the PCE, and its establishment was announced over the airwaves of Union Radio at ten o'clock that night.

Now that they had achieved their purpose of pinning the responsibility for the ending of the war on to other people's shoulders, the much-trumpeted defenders of the a Numantine resistance, scurried to their planes on 6 March as Negrin, Uribe, La Pasionaria, Lister, Modesto and other Leninist leaders flew out of Spain. However, in the Centre region what erupted was what has come to be known as a civil war within the civil war.

Portions of the Republic's first three Army Corps – every one of them commanded by professional soldiers affiliated to the PCE – revolted against the CND. Several divisions from those same Army Corps walked away from the front lines and headed for Madrid, with their tanks leading the way, whilst the commander of I Army Corps – Barceló – proclaimed himself Commander of the Army of the Centre (bear in mind that there was no one there to award him the title, as all his party leaders had scarpered).

All the CND could call upon was the 14th Division of IV Army Corps, which was being held in reserve in the south of Guadalajara province. It was under the command of bricklayer Cipriano Mera (CNT) and Liberino González (UGT).

Battle was joined on 7 March 1939 in Torrejón and San Fernando de Henares was captured for the CND on 8 and 9 March. 10 March witnessed the recapture of Posición Jaca (Alameda de Osuna) and on 11 March, five columns from the 14th Division converged in Manuel Becerra, which put paid to the revolt.

After that there was a falling out between Mera and Casado as Mera refused to have any hand in negotiations with Franco, whereupon Casado found himself "empty-handed" when he declined to carry out the plans that had previously been drawn up as means of applying pressure – measures like threatening to blow up the Almaden mines and to collect in a single location a huge number of Franco loyalists from the "nationalist" zone, to be used as hostages in the negotiations. After the negotiations then fell through, Casado ordered Mera to start a phased withdrawal of his Army Corps on 27 March, but before that could be done, the other front lines caved in. Mera then left for Valencia and on 29 March caught a flight out along with Luzón, Verardini and Liberino, landing 80 kilometres outside Oran in North Africa. And so began Cipriano's first period in exile.

- *You were a general of great merit. How did you learn to soldier? I saw him smile. How come?*
- *Because I learnt my trade whilst working as a bricklayer. No, I was never an outstanding general; not even a general, full stop. The highest rank I achieved was lieutenant colonel. Prior to the war, my knowledge of military matters was nil. To this day I still do not know much about them. But in all likelihood I was possessed of a certain intuition and benefited from familiarity with the terrain in which I had to fight. I am not the sort that likes to brag on that score. My trump card was the appreciation I had that all of those alongside whom I was fighting had placed all their trust in me. And it was also important that most of those men did not look upon me as their military commander, but as a comrade who had fought side by side with them over many years, as part of the unions. Whenever they spoke to me, they did not refer to me by my army rank, but simply called me by my name.*
- Statement made to Jean Descola for his book *Oh España*

NERA AND HEMINGWAY

At the start of the war, Cipriano Mera was commanding civilian troops successfully defending the mountain passes between the provinces of Segovia and Madrid. An American novelist colleague, a world famous tourist of armed conflicts showed up there on his travels: my friend Ernest Hemingway.

It seems that Mera did not give him much of a warm welcome in Somosierra.

Hemingway, goggle-eyed, later told me:

- Mera wanted to shoot me.

I could only take that as a joke. They were two contradictory and opposing figures and personalities. Hemingway was a giant, herculean, athletic, childishly presumptuous and Mera was small, dour and reserved, with no notions about himself and with a prodigious strength of will.

Wherever Mera was, Hemingway could not be, and vice versa. One of them overshadowed the other physically, morally and intellectually.

But I knew Mera and knew that the last thing he would do was shoot a giant just for being a giant and that he must have struck him as a comical figure, given his childish (poor) command of Spanish and his ideas about danger and courage. Hemingway was forever playing cops-and-robbers, just as he had as a child. Plus awarding himself medals.

The moment he laid eyes on him, Mera could tell that everything about Hemingway was phoney, except for his vanity and there was no danger in that because it was on display and innocently done.

Mera never gave another thought to Hemingway once he disappeared from view, but Hemingway was never able to forget Mera.

Poor Hemingway! Poor all of us!

Ramón J Sender Album de radiografías secretas

MERA (1939-1947): ANARCHIST FELLOWSHIP

AFRICAN EXILE

Cipriano Mera served out his time in exile in Africa in Algeria and Morocco, meaning in French colonial territories, from 29 March 1939 and 20 February 1942. The interval between a yearned-for but sad exit from Spain and his shameful, fatalistic return to that country. An interval witnessed the formal ending of the civil war and the consummation of the tragedy.

These were not easy years for Cipriano since they became a cycle that saw him shuttle from prison to prison, from fortified castles to concentration camps, from police stations to hiding out in comrades' homes: and all of this without at any time knowing clearly what his status was: political refugee, ordinary prisoner or military prisoner, given the ambiguous treatment meted out to him by the French colonial authorities. Be that as it may, no matter what their ideological leanings, everybody had high hopes of getting away from there and leaving for the Americas, especially for Mexico or Chile, or, at the very least, France, so that from there they might try something to alter the denouement of the civil war. There was an organization serving that purpose – the SERE (Spanish Refugee Evacuation Agency) that had been set up by Negrín; it had funding from the Republic to cover the cost of sea passages, but, being under communist control, with whom Cipriano clashed,

that prompted him to refuse any assistance they might be inclined to offer him. And he was plainly not the only one who thought like that. Indalecio Prieto set up a parallel organization for supporting expatriates – the JARE (Spanish Refugee Aid Council) which had the backing of every organization, except the communists, and with which Cipriano was actively involved.

On four separate occasions, Cipriano was on the verge of setting sail and each time, due to bureaucratic, judicial or political considerations, he remained on shore. The JARE laid on the first three of those intended Americas-bound trips and the fifth was organized by Cipriano and a few others, the aim being to reach Gibraltar by ship and, from there, on to Portugal. Even though this latter plan was not organized by the JARE, it had financial backing from the JARE. All of these plans were made during his time in Casablanca, where he first arrived after breaking out his concentration camp. In Casablanca he hid out in the homes of comrades and found employment and obtained a work permit, but, time and again, he finished up in the cells in police stations due to his solidarity work.

EXTRADITED TO SPAIN

And then along came 24 December 1941, when he was informed that the French authorities had received an extradition request from their Spanish counterparts, relating to Cipriano and another two comrades (Francisco Sánchez and Juan Medina); Cipriano was being accused of “killings and looting”.

A hearing took place in Rabat, and the request to extradite Cipriano was granted, but those for the other two were refused. It looks as if one of the preconditions imposed on the Spanish authorities by the French was that Cipriano’s life be spared. And so, at three o’clock on the afternoon of 20 February 1942, he was handed over at the Spanish Protectorate’s border post, his days as an exile over and his time as a prisoner just beginning.

He spent a month in jail in Tetuán. On 1 April he arrived in Algeciras and was taken from there to the prison in Linares. It was while in transit that he learned of the death of his son, Sergio. He arrived in Madrid on 1 April and was placed in Yererías prison and held incommunicado. On 26 April they moved him to Porlier prison where again he was held in isolation. That night he had his first sight of a “saca” (removal) of prisoners with their hands bound behind their backs and with mouths gagged to stop them from speaking. Mera remained in solitary until 4 November when he was moved into Landing No 5 and held in the same conditions as the other inmates. 16 April 1943 saw the holding of the Council of War that sentenced him to death. It was while awaiting that verdict that he was first reunited with his partner Teresa, their son, his father, sisters and some other relatives. On his return to prison, he was moved on to death row. On 28 July, he and seventy others under sentence of death, had their sentences commuted to a lesser sentence: he was moved on to another landing set aside for prisoners serving time and was able to resume his connections with his comrades. Three days later he was moved to Santa Rita prison to work on the construction of Carabanchel prison. After the new year he received a visit from Manuel Amil, the secretary of the CNT National Committee; braving the dangers, Amil slipped on to the site to brief him on the creation of the ANFD (National Alliance of Democratic Forces) and to ask for his help, to which end Cipriano was to kick off his underground membership from right there in the prison. Mera was advised several times to apply for clemency and release, but steadfastly refused each time. Even though he made no such application, he was released on 1 October. Meeting with other comrades inside the prison, they reckoned that the decision by the Francoists was designed to have a political impact, since the crackdown on the Organization never let up for a minute. Less than one hour after his discharge from prison, Mera was meeting with the Madrid Local Federation.

During this phase of his life, what with his being in exile and later behind bars in Spain, the solidarity that Cipriano displayed bordered upon grandeur. In his memoirs, he could barely “hide” the actions he had undertaken on behalf of his comrades: the sacrifices made for the sake of their common cause, the quiet battle to save even a single life or rescue it from fascist clutches.

At the beginning of January 1947, the CNT held a Plenum in Madrid. There, it was determined that a three-man delegation be sent to France without delay on a proper fact-finding mission regarding the Libertarian Movement’s circumstances in exile. The Centre regional picked Mera as its representative on that delegation and on 11 February he surreptitiously crossed over into France. There was no going back to Spain now.

MERA (1947-1975): ANARCHIST HARD NUT

The mission entrusted by the CNT to Mera was to promote a reunification of the CNT in exile.

MERA AND ANARCHO-SYNDICALIST UNITY

The Organization that Cipriano found in France had been divided since 1945. The pretexts for that split had to do with – on one side – ideological purist considerations – parliamentary action had to be repudiated – plus considerations relative to effectiveness against the Franco regime on the other side – for as long as Franco was around, thoughts had to be entertained of alliances, even parliamentary alliances, with an eye to unseating him. On both sides, what both factions had a hard time disguising was a desire to jettison revolutionary struggle.

Mera sided with the “possibilists” in exile and toiled indefatigably to bring about the yearned for reunification.

That tireless endeavour on behalf of unity, plus the authenticity of how he behaved: he was faultless and exemplary and surrounded by an anarchist ethic that the self-proclaimed holders of a “patent” on anarcho-syndicalism unwilling and unable to compete with, did bear some fruit, leading to the reunification at the 1961 Limoges Congress. Mera was to chair the reconciliation meeting in Paris that November, but on the other hand it earned him the “undying” enmity of the ultra-revolutionary rabble-rousers once that unity was achieved. “It would have been better if they had shot you”, was shouted at him by one “comrade” at the Montpellier Congress in 1965.

Of course, the campaign for unity was not Mera’s one man band, albeit that may have been the mirror held up to all those who were fed up with the frictions stymying activity.

DEFENSA INTERIOR

That unity, though, proved a very delicate bloom: as a result, one effort to consolidate it was to go under the name of Defensa Interior, an agency that emerged from the reunification congress: its aims were to boost the fight against Franco.

García Oliver, Alberola and Mera, among others, were to serve as its “invisible” brains trust.

How come the DI failed? We find it unduly simplistic to blame its failure solely on the chicanery of the Esgleas-Montseny duo and the pathetic FAI of the day, although they did of course contribute to that failure. Plainly at the level of international capital, there were more heavyweight interests at play, and naturally they went all-in.

In 1963 Mera was to be jailed with some others for his Defensa Interior activities: he was then 66 years of age.

MERA POINTS THE FINGER

At the Montpellier Congress in 1965, Cipriano was to impugn Germinal Esgleas and Vicente Llansola, accusing them of having boycotted the DI, as well as of having resorted to bolshevist practices, bureaucratic corruption, chicanery and misuse of funds raised to help the organization in the Spanish interior and in their stewardship as heads of the Libertarian Movement. That arraignment closed by “Demanding that those comrades be organizationally disbarred or myself disbarred, should it be found that what I allege is untrue.”

However, due to their gift for jiggery-pokery, the “authentic anarchists” who made a living out of their paid posts, did not take kindly to the furore and they were to make him pay dearly for that bitter pill.

EXPELLED FROM THE CNT

At the Bordeaux Congress, it was Mera who found himself accused of having misused 5,000 francs from the DI; this was money that had never passed through his hands, as his accusers perfectly well knew. But Mera was a thorn in their side.

Mera was to be expelled, and as a result of purges mounted by the Sanhedrin in exile, he joined many another in establishing the Grupos de Presencia Confederal, an organization that published the newspaper *Frente Libertario* and, subsequently, the review *Presencia* and he was to fight on relentlessly for unification of the CNT, its unity having inevitably been shattered again in 1965. Although Mera never did get see his dreams of unity come to pass.

But the aged revolutionary had not yet erected his last barricade: R. J. Sender tells us that during the events of May '68 in Paris, Mera was in the front ranks of the assault troops, in the forward trenches.

The very thought of him guessing at the beach lurking beneath the cobble stones at the age of 71!

BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

Throughout his time abroad, Cipriano survived on a bricklayer's wage, barely enough to get by on. He always declined “offers” of less arduous and dangerous but more lucrative work, because his trade was laying bricks and he prided himself on the fact. “I am helping to build the world by placing these bricks”, he used to say, somewhat wryly.

At the age of 72, Cipriano was finally able to climb down off the scaffolding and he died in Paris on 24 October 1975 at the age of 78, just a few days ahead of the demise of the dictator of the whole of Spain.

The enlightened “anarchist court” that had so busied itself cleansing its principles, aims and tactics of every blemish and which had expelled him from the organization on behalf of which he had racked up a life-time of struggle and which slandered him while he was alive, had no hesitation in hijacking his memory once he was dead.

TREMENDOUS POVERTY

Mera lived with his life-long partner Teresa in the rue Jean Jaurès on the outskirts of Paris. This is what Francisco Simancas has to say to us about his circumstances during those years:

“The very modest apartment consisted of a single bedroom and the kitchen-dining room had but a single window, overlooking a courtyard. There was no elevator in the building, nor, many a time, was there communal lighting, meaning that he had to climb the stairs groping for the walls. Once at his apartment, a switch on the inside flicked on the electric light brightening the gloom and welcoming the visitor.”

Following retirement, Mera survived on a very modest pension, but never failed to make his monthly contribution to support *Frente Libertario* on time.

Back to Simancas who recounts the arrival at his home of an unexpected visitor:

“Mera was all agog with delight and was even jittery ...

- I'd invite you to stay over, but you'd have to sleep on the floor.
- We've done that so often, Cipriano, that it wouldn't amount to anything ...
- I'll take you to the home of a comrade living two streets from here and you'll be made welcome as if it were your own home in terms of comradeship ...
- I may be retired now but having to live surrounded by friends in need makes me consider picking up my trowel again.
- For instance, one comrade has asked me to smarten up his bathroom which is untiled. The wages he is on won't stretch to it ...”

Cipriano was a great champion of the CNT and of anarcho-syndicalism. Which is why, if anyone should happen to bring up his name, all of us from our different organizations, offshoots of that old Organization, fight on for the very same ideals, for a society without exploiters or exploited, those being the ideas to which Cipriano devoted his entire life: especially all who understand that for those ideas to be turned into reality, what is required, today, just as it was in the past, is ANARCHO-SYNDICALIST UNITY; we cannot help it if our words fail us, our eyes grow teary or a shiver runs down our spines.

THE 1st of MAY RALLY IN TOULOUSE, 1947

A LETTER FROM MERA TO THE CNT OF THE INTERIOR, PRESERVED IN HIS EXILE'S DIARIES IN FRANCE

And now, dear comrades, allow me to recount to you something so disgraceful the like of which I have never, in all my days as a militant, encountered. It never would have occurred to me that such things could happen in our ranks. And one needs to have witnessed such monstrous behaviours in order to credit them.

I am completely certain that not one of the militants present in the Spanish interior could imagine that such things could be happening in this bare-faced exile.

There is not, dear comrades, the slightest doubt but that one would need to have seen these things in order to believe them. These are the facts to which I am referring:

On the first of May, the date on which we all set aside our struggles in order to commemorate our Chicago martyrs and those who follow in their footsteps, the Toulouse Regional laid on a rally with Ramón Liarte speaking on behalf of the Youth, Doménech for the Departmental committee and I on behalf of the Regional.

Some comrades had, in order to attend this rally, travelled in from places at a cost of upwards of 500 francs, making that effort at their own expense. Well, Liarte, who was the first speaker and who was certainly very well prepared, was not ten minutes into his address when the “comrades” who follow

Federica and company, started to kick up a stink with their muttering and noisy interruptions, so much so as to make it impossible for the speaker to carry on, triggering a hell of a disruption. There was kicking and punching and chairs flying through the air. It was humanly impossible to restore order. Thankfully, our comrades had the upper hand and managing to shove the disruptors out of the premises. I say "our comrades" because the word "comrades" cannot be used for those who [illegible here] throw tear gas in order to thwart a meeting. Yes, they threw tear gas at a rally being held by our organization ...

I would find it very hard to describe to you the thoughts that passed through my mind at that time. I had no idea where I was ... All I know is that when it came my turn to speak, I was unable to cobble my thoughts together as I was obliged to make it very brief ...

But, at the sight of comrade Liarte tearful from anger and pain, and comrades keeping a grip on themselves lest things turn into a day of mourning triggered by youngsters under the sway of cowards, for there is no other way of describing them, such was the impression I was left with that I was unspeakably on edge for the entire day. All I wanted was to be left alone ...

MERA'S OBITUARY NOTICE FOR MELCHOR RODRÍGUEZ

In March 1972 Frente Libertario carried this heartfelt death notice by Cipriano for his former comrade and friend Melchor Rodríguez, another of the "great" 20th century anarchists

Melchor Rodríguez

The telegram from Madrid on 14 February notified us of the death of comrade Melchor Rodríguez. Burial took place on the 15th at the San Justo y Pastor cemetery, with some 500 people in attendance. That he received a Catholic burial, given the feelings of the deceased and the wish that he had always expressed that, upon his death, he be given a civil burial, caused, not only widespread surprise but also huge indignation in lots of the comrades present for the ceremony. By whom and why this affront to the ideas to which our great friend subscribed? The family? Some meddler, capitalizing upon his being unconscious in his last moments, may have misrepresented the intentions of the dying man. So far, we cannot tell for certain ... What we do know is that at the cemetery, his coffin was draped in a red-and-black flag, together with a wreath of red carnations and ribbons in our colours, with an inscription that stated: "Your comrades and friends from the CNT."

Then, according to what we have heard from the capital, the writer Javier Martín Artajo, who was a friend of Melchor's, having acknowledged that Melchor had rescued him from death, along with so many more, during the civil war, made so bold as to pay tribute to the deceased, to his pursuit and perseverance in the fight for a fairer world, finally reading out the poem *Anarquía*, written by our comrade Melchor some years ago:

Anarchism is ...

Beauty, Love, Poetry

Equality, Fraternity

Feelings, Freedom

Reason as the supreme guide

Science, the over-arching truth

Life, Nobility, Kindness

Satisfaction, Joy

All of these are Anarchy

And Anarchy, Humanity!

I made Melchor's acquaintance sometime in 1927 in Madrid. He had just arrived from Seville where he had begun his activist life with gusto. I can testify from then on as to his everyday actions on behalf of the CNT and in anarchist circles to which he was committed and not for a second did he resile from his humanistic feelings. Melchor was there to help anyone going through a painful situation, regardless of ideological sympathies or differences. On a number of occasions, he served on committees and spoke at rallies. He also served as secretary of the National Prisoners' Aid Committee and, given his contacts with prisoners and their families – who as a rule were penniless – as well as his dealings and consultations with lawyers, trials and such, his greatest concern as with the defence and assistance of victims of persecution. Come the war, against the tragic backdrop of a besieged Madrid, Melchor was awarded the great responsibility as Director of Prisons, from where he did what he could to humanize prisoner conditions, seeing to it that detainees were protected and resolutely opposing all attempts at reprisals. I think this is the reason why Catholics were to dub him 'The Red Angel', which Melchor took as an insult. An insult that has been repeated – as we have said – on the occasion of his death.

There is much else that could say about Melchor. Such as the thirty-four arrests he endured during his lifetime, the death sentence passed on him by a court martial at the end of the civil war. All of this would require a lot of space and, since I am pressed for time, let me finish by saying that our Melchor – a panel-beater by trade – was a tireless worker and, even in old age, and on the brink of death, he made a living, supporting himself and his sister Asunción, as an agent for an insurance company. Some day we will find out what he actually was and the true worth of our beloved comrade Melchor Rodríguez García. Meanwhile, this is my own modest tribute.

From *Mujeres Libres*, No 8, 1937

NERA: OUR GREAT BATTLER

Cipriano Mera is the man who, years ago, split his wages with his helper on an equal basis: who stoically withstood physical beatings during strikes: the man who, having listened at a rally to stirring words about the reason behind the struggle and hearing a clear and concrete explanation of constructive anarcho-syndicalism and the international scene, declared: "If Spain is not to share in the fate of Italy and Germany, it is not enough for us to go away from here persuaded: we need to prepare ourselves for the great battle ahead. And since our organization does not possess the requisite material means for everybody, each and every one of us must acquire them howsoever we are able. Just the same way as you put a few pesetas away for a suit or a pair of shoes, you can save for weapons. The fight against fascism is drawing nearer and we need to be on our guard ..."

The fight drawing nearer. Cipriano Mera has shown by his deeds that he was ready for it. With his singular courage, and disciplined moral integrity, he made our men ready to defeat an entire Italian army. Everybody has individually come to believe in the reality of victory.

Cipriano Mera has injected his spirit into our fighters. He has brought them victory and has, furthermore, outdone himself.

From *CNT*, 17 January 1937

CIPRIANO MERA, OR THE FIGHTING MAN

When the Revolution came along, many who had spent their lives prattling about it failed the test, whereas others, in the course of the battle for social change have, by their own actions, acquired a stature that matched their quiet mental performance. Durruti, our Durruti, was never so great as he was on the front lines in Aragon and Madrid, where the firing lines, danger, even as it cut down his life, raised his profile, affording him the proportions of a simply mythical titan. His side-kick, comrade Manzana, has undergone a similar transformation: once an obscure Artillery sergeant, he is today, after six months of antifascist warfare and without losing any of his huge humility, without ever seeking the limelight, without mounting a rostrum, without yielding to the harrying of news-hungry reporters, but solely by dint of the influence wielded by his own actions, occupies a place in the first rank of the Confederal Militias on the basis of his prestige and actions on the Aragon front and in the heroic resistance in Madrid.

Teodoro Mora and Cipriano Mera are cut from the same cloth as those two comrades. Comrades on site as members of the Construction Union and in the daring warfare of the initial attacks and within the CNT columns, in the proletarian fight against fascism. Mera was robbed of his finest fighting comrade. Teodoro fell victim to the daring with which he did his duty, just as Durruti did in the University City, and Cipriano, who has not lost and will not ever lose his mettle and worker's character, has been turned by the war into the heart and soul of a column. Fighting the way he always has. On the front line, he remains the same working man, gun in hand, driving the Falangists off building sites they had seized as strike-breakers. In the line of fire, he has lost nothing of his profile as a CNT militant and his love for the CNT, flat out over many months of fighting, is as evident today as ever.

Mera is a living symbol of the fight against fascism, the war against the Revolution's enemies: the proletarian fighter of today's Spain. He came out of prison, where political partisanship had had him locked up, to head off to Guadalajara, to fight on a variety of fronts, and when in the line of fire and without making any concession to militarism, remains a union man, a man mindful of his Organization, a militant concerned about the work that needs doing in the rearguard and which must be complementary to the front lines the same way as the war is to the revolution. Like so many other militians who think for themselves, like all the fighters with a well-developed revolutionary mind-set, stands above the pain of the fighting, but cannot help but be alive to the shortcomings in social accomplishments. What goes on in the rearguard, where so many folk disgrace themselves with their vile frivolousness, where surplus value seems doomed to help embed a brand-new class, where party political jiggery-poker and trickery thwart the seizure of what is only a heap of rubble, is that we are moving on to socialization, which ought to be a constructive effort and instead causes indignation and that indignation does not flow along politicking channels and does not target Organizations and Parties unconnected with our anarcho-syndicalist movement, but makes its voice heard in CNT bodies. Because they must be the ones from where the clearing up of the shortcomings we can all see in the overall ethos of antifascist Spain has to emerge.

The only photos of Mera the combatant are those held in police files and we do not have access to them today: a ten-peseta militiaman, an authentically proletarian battler, would be entitled these days to wear a colonel's chevrons on his battle-dress but he does not; instead, at the head of his forces, leading comrades who follow him because they are conversant with his unblemished record as a CNT, revolutionary militant, fights day in and day out like just another soldier: as an authentic worker, he proceeds down to path of revolution and war, on which so many have marched out to meet their deaths. Hail Cipriano Mera! May the future bring you better luck than it did comrade Mora. The CNT needs you. And we would ask you to forgive us for daring to saying who you are.

OPEN LETTER TO THE EDITORS OF PRESENCIA

Following his expulsion from the Confederation, Cipriano moved on to activism within the Grupos de Presencia Confederal which produced the newspaper Frente Libertario and the review Presencia. This open letter, dealing with some comrades' illusions about the emergent Workers' Commissions (CC.OO) which, due to their pugnaciousness, were at the time reminiscent of certain approaches espoused by the old CNT. Mera sounded the alarm about those who were behind them and cautioned then that, for that very reason, they might some day turn into a cog in the capitalist system, as inevitably proved to be the case.

All modesty aside, I know myself well enough to know that whatever talent and dexterity I may have when it comes to handling a trowel, lets me down when it comes to using a pen. Even so, I feel impelled to offer my candid opinion, just like any other militant in the anarcho-sindicalist movement is entitled to do, in light of the host of muddles surrounding Spain's National Confederation of Labour (CNT). Because each and every one of us has an unshirkable duty to outline our position to put paid to these muddles once and for all. There should be no monkeying about with ideas nor damage done to the CNT. As I see it, the underlying issue is lack of consistency in the ideals that we claim to support. I am not about to delve into history, first of all because I would not be up to the task and also because the time for story-telling is long past ...

The CNT is what it is and operates how it operates because the militant's sense of responsibility is as absent in the highest profile comrade as it is in the most modest one. Even God cannot lift the burden of blame off our shoulders. Frankly, I own up to my own share of it. Let others do the same. And let us get down to the nitty-gritty. Which is placing the National Confederation of labour and anarchism on a proper footing inside Spain, with and for working people.

Sticking to the issue at hand, let me say that the *Presencia* editorial in its June-July '67 issue, entitled "Where We Stand Vis a Vis Spain's Trade Union Reality" really struck me. It mentions a number of blunt truths, but champions and advocates an argument which, in my view, can only be argued at personal level and not in the name of a review which, given its origins and audience and the thinking of those who collectively run it, has to drag its heels when it comes to outlining stances and tracing routes across the intricate map of how things stand in Spain at present.

When it comes to setting criteria, shedding light on issues and offering guidelines within the native ideological parameters of a review or newspaper, it is not hard for those who bear the burden of "Editorship", if they feel closely imbued with that same doctrine and the concerns and goals pursued by that review, the editorials which it should be faithfully mirroring in terms of loftiness and deliberation; but when, on the other hand, matters drift in the direction of foreign fields, into areas

and perspectives that occasionally have to do with the realm of imagination and controversy, then there is the risk of mistaking our own wishful thinking for the fruits of reason and collective responsibility. From there it is only a single step to a misstep. And the editors of *Presencia* have taken that misstep with the publication of the editorial to which I refer.

Why and where is the misstep? Let us look and see.

After a wide-ranging and detailed range of arguments regarding our own and outsiders' circumstances, that editorial arrives at the clear cut conclusion that members of the CNT and anarchists should straight away join the 'Workers' Commissions' ... "because these are – and this is why we back them – the most appropriate way for anarchists today to manifest their determination to stride towards a goal."

Before we go any further, it might be good to establish unequivocally what those famous Commissions amount to. They cater for all tastes and can be very contradictory. Domestically as well as in exile, the outlook varies according to the politico-social talents of the observer. As the poet has it: "Everything takes on the colour of the lens through which it is being examined". In the very same edition of *Presencia* and under the title "The Day-to-Day Struggle of the CC.OO.", J. López Pérez says: "It is worth stressing that inside the Commissions there are ONLY (his emphasis) two organized forces: the Communist Party and the AST (a Christian Democratic trade union) and that anything said about other forces that are represented is sheer invention." A well-known militant who is usually well-informed about things happening inside and outside of Spain stated, pathetically, in one of the most recent general meetings of the Paris Local Federation: "Take care, comrades. Watch out for the Workers' Commissions, which are just a useful tool serving the CP's recruitment drive." The odd thing here is that not one was raised from among the many in attendance to reject or at least query this assertion. And in his recent book *New Approaches to Today's Problems*, Santiago Carrillo praises the Commissions to the heavens and assesses them as "the best instrument of struggle devised by Spanish workers" ... and, naturally, they echo the watchwords and guidelines of the "glorious Party".

Bearing in mind the tactical skills and subtleties of communist leaders, who customarily wear a "democratic" mask of impartiality and unity in all their initiatives, it should come as no surprise that there are also plenty of "neutral" elements (most of them young people drawn from the upcoming generation) who unhesitatingly proclaim that the CC.OO. are in hock to no party or outlook, but only to the "democratic" keynote stamped upon them by the toiling "masses" in their exclusively labour struggles and demands.

Might it not, maybe, be good timing to admit a degree of parallels, if not wholesale identity of structures, between the Russian "soviet", the "Popular Fronts", "a unified command" during our civil war and the "unified parties" in the satellite countries and certain underlying features displayed by the current Workers' Commissions? Inside such bodies, what was the fate that awaited militants and organization that were anarcho-syndicalist or anarchist, or from other liberal tendencies opposed to Bolshevik totalitarianism? I do not believe that I need to answer that, as the educated readers of *Presencia* as well as the editorial board, know the answer too well. When the notion of REALISM is invoked and we are urged to analyse situations in order to ferret out the best tactics and finest fruits of anarcho-syndicalist militant activity, there can be no skirting the REALITY of the lessons and readings from an experience from which we still carry the scars from top to toe.

Besides, in urging immediate entry into the CC.OO., all the *Presencia* editorial is doing is "building the house from the roof down".

First: Can we be absolutely sure that “the Commissions are a flexible movement wherein anarchists can be active without having to surrender any fraction of their ideas and specific purposes”, since they are going to have to peddle them and defend them in the face of communists and social Christians?

Secondly: Who is it who should be joining these bodies – “ex-militants” burdened by age, misgivings, isolation and bitterness and fractured in organizational terms into three or four National Committees, and youthful sympathizers knowing hardly anything about the basic ideas and trade union dynamic needed for them to be capable of achieving encouraging and useful activities? Is that the scattered, skeptical personnel the CNT and anarchism is supposed to be bringing into the CC.OO. so as to compete with the strongly organized and supported communists and Catholics?

The building of a house starts with the foundations rather than the ridge-tiles, scree and plastering, but concentrating on solid building materials use for the building today of the great buildings of the future.

Even accepting the notion (and that is a big ask) that due to the situation existing inside Spain there might be an inescapable need to seek out the CC.OO. in order to make contact with the working class and help it out in its search for emancipation and justice, the first thing we should all of us should be doing – and *Presencia* in pride of place – is offering (as one of its own postulates puts it) “a forum for setting out libertarian thinking adapted to the reality of today’s Spain” and pouring all of our resources and powers of persuasion and organization into REBUILDING the CNT and, if possible, the Libertarian Movement, on a nationwide scale; putting Spaniards, old and young, in touch with one another in this or that location, county or region: reconciling and welding together the membership in exile and in the interior by establishing a single organizational entity; shrugging off the negative outcome of the ASO experiment, the backsliding in Madrid and the July-obsessed dreams (overtaken by time) of the stick-in-the-mud faction abroad.¹

In the new process opened up in Spain by the innovative circumstances of a world that is moving on from the utter failure of Francoist totalitarianism as a viable and tolerable 20th century socio-political structure, the primary task facing us as workers, as libertarians and as Spaniards is to re-make our Confederation into the living, real, revolutionary movement of yesteryear but adapted to today’s needs and options.

Once that has been achieved, maybe not entirely but at least in part, that will be the time to debate, on the basis of knowledge of the reasons why and in light of events, whether the right thing is for the CNT and anarchists to join bodies or campaigning movements conjured up by other folk.

Cipriano Mera

MORTUOS VOCO, VIVOS PLANGO

On the republication of the memoirs of elderly CNT militant Cipriano Mera

Anarchism had to combat the enmity from the authoritarian socialists, as well as the intolerance of other “anarchists” who believed in only one way of thinking about anarchy and thus felt themselves

1 ASO : Alianza Sindical Obrera, an attempt to cobble together worker trade union activism outside of the Vertical Syndicates in 1962 through concerted action by what was left of the CNT and UGT plus the Basque nationalist STV and a few Christian Workers'groups. Essentially a non-communist coalition.

adversaries of the comrades of other persuasions closest to their own, in acknowledging only one anarchist teaching: their own.

Max Nettlau *A History of Anarchy*

During the High Middle Ages, it was customary to place on the facades of church and abbey bell-towers, an arcane inscription in “educated language”, regarding the sounds and melodies they tolled out as they intoned *Vivos voco, Mortuos plango*, which in common parlance means *I Summon the Living and Mourn the Dead*.

Plainly this is not the title chosen for this article nor any part of the intent behind it, as it reviews the republication – albeit with no tolling of the bells – of the memoirs and recollections of this elderly and much-loved militant. In the Castilian employed in the Tetuán district of Madrid, the title would be something along the lines of *I Summon the Dead and Mourn the Living*.

I Summon the Living

For one thing, our gratitude should go here to Valentín Figueres for his having issued a summons to the living, given that, but for him, this book would no doubt have been reissued but, inevitably, in a different format. So much so that the first surprise is finding the book endorsed by a sizeable number of libertarian movement bodies or entities, a miscellany criss-crossing all tendencies, with every position represented: and, aside from that circumstance, we are prompted to think that if Cipriano managed to bring together the varying CNT factions for his own funeral some thirty years ago, he has surprisingly pulled off the same miracle again today with the republication of his little book.

And not for nothing, either. Mera is one of the best loved militants, acknowledged by all of the tendencies and organizations purporting to be anarcho-syndicalists, in that he was a great campaigner for the unification of them all. Could it be that all these tendencies can see in him what is lacking in themselves?

I Mourn the Dead

Dragging Cipriano back from the depths of Erebus, or at any rate, rescuing his life experiences: resuscitating him in our memories is the intention behind the reissue of this book and certain other plans which are in motion, such as the publication of his diaries, or the retrieval of his spoken voice as he recounts his part in the Battle of Guadalajara in one unmissable documentary as well as in a documentary movie about his transit through life.

Something, alas! that is not going to be possible in the cases of so many others who suffered the same fate as him, or worse.

What would Cipriano think if he knew that Feliciano Benito, his comrade and commissar with the IV Army Corps, could have been spared from death by firing squad for just five hundred pesetas, three measly euros?

What would he make of Val, about whom he writes in his memoirs that he was one of our most prized and best-loved militants, when in the 1950s Val walked away from the organization, having had his fill of all the nonsense?

About the others, the guys in the concentration camps, the shooting victims, the living dead in the prisons or the ones that perished along with Ponzán, Sabaté, Facerías ... Did the Organization in exile live up to their example? Does the present day? Is this what they fought for?

But let us set aside the mourning for the dead and cut to the quick.

The republished book had a different format from the old Ruedo Ibérico edition, not just in terms of the dust jacket or cover, but in terms of content that complements and accompanies the old man's narrative.

Even so, if we had to highlight certain complementary content, we would without any doubt have to refer to Cipriano's own added material, salvaged from his diaries and correspondence and including striking phrases such as "I'd rather be the deceived than the deceiver". Or: "It was this damned exile that in part taught me to know men" (!!!)

We might also highlight the contributions made by Francisco Olaya and by Renée Pradas. Cherished contributions in terms both of their relationships with Mera and due to their connections with this book.

The first of these – Olaya – who wrote the foreword or preamble (as he prefers to describe it) to this new edition was invited by Cipriano to write the book, back in the day: Olaya turned down that proposal, on grounds that he now explains.

The second of them, Renée, was Cipriano's discreet and confidential "amanuensis", the one that typed up whatever Cipriano was dictating, whatever was dredged up from his recollections and his notes.

It was Renée that supplied the raw materials that enabled Manuel Fabra finally to put the whole thing in order and turn it into a book.

She tells us that she was acquainted with Mera: by then, he was almost an adult and she almost a child at the time of that legendary May in Paris when so many could sense the beach beneath the cobblestones of Montmartre.

Mortuos Voco

We would have preferred if Fate had delayed a while – maybe just a month – before bringing down the scythe. But in the end, Cipriano was lucky because he died amid warmth from all of those who heartily despised one another. There were so many others who were hated even on the day they died!

In order to invoke the departed and bring him back into the present and embrace him as our own, it is not enough to relive his trajectory: we need to think about him and call to mind or familiarize ourselves with his image. Which is why this book also comes with a small iconography in which, alas! there are no portraits or snapshots prior to the din of warfare and which have even vanished from the police files from the 1920s and 1930s, with only his fingerprint records surviving.

To help revive his memory and commemorate the whole of his life, there has been – compared with the previous edition – a notable upgrading of supplementary content, be it appendices or documentary materials, in an effort to recount the life cycle that Mera himself did not disclose: thus, it covers his days in exile in France, a stage in Cipriano's life that is of such fascination to us today, when this elderly CNT activist taught us lessons in anarchism that shed light on the past and throw the present into relief and may well prove of great use to us for the future: and – why not admit it? – embroiled in the never-ending polemic with such "anarchists" as persist in the belief that theirs is the only anarchism, that they hold a patent on anarchism, and everything has been thought through already ...

I Mourn the Living

As we stated before, this republication is intended for the poor, or, if you prefer to put that another way, for the dispossessed. The folk Cipriano fought for his whole life through. One need only bear this in mind to get some notion of the love that went into the effort to publish the book. This book will not only help upcoming generations to familiarize themselves with the man, but we are sure that plenty of veteran activists will “couple” this new book with the older one, not just because of anything the new edition might have to offer them, but simply to resurrect the timeless ritual of revisiting old loves again.

Because, as we have already said, Cipriano was always loved.

Today, thirty years on from the death of our old comrade, the situation remains, sad to say, the same, because, even though the pretexts cited might be different, the libertarian trade union movement remains divided against itself. The old resentments, articulated now through different strategies, prolong the old fissure within the mother organization that broke out in France back in the 1940s, with only brief encounters in the 1960s and late 1970s, albeit that even those were fraught with issues and misadventures.

Why is why, today, reunifying – on almost every score – all (or nearly all) the tendencies coming together to breathe life into the memoirs of this CNT veteran, is such a significant and timely development in that it refreshes the fight for the unity and concord that our elderly comrade so cherished.

Might this be the beginning of the route to a final reconciliation?

We can only dream ...

Were you aware, Cipriano, that Aldabaldetrecu aka *Trecu* starved to death in exile in Mexico back in the 1960s? Even though nagging voices in print are forever yelling at us that he actually died of grief: not grief for Spain – for he never had a homeland – but for his Organization Ramshackle and fractured.

Vivos plango.

C. Carretero

REMEMBERING CIPRIANO MERA

A CONVERSATION WITH ÁNGELA GUIJARRO MERA AND RENÉE PRADAS

El Solidario: Angela, tell us about your connection with Cipriano.

Ángela: Well, my mother is Isabel, the youngest of the Mera Sanz siblings. My mother saw Cipriano as her favourite sibling and the reverse was also true, because, to Cipriano, my mother was always his favourite sister, partly perhaps because she was the youngest and because she followed the family second-hand clothes trade, like her parents, which is to say, my grandparents.

El Solidario: And you, Renée, how did you come to know Cipriano and what was your connection to him?

Renée: Well, my father was Jacinto Pradas, a long-standing CNT militant and, long before I ever met Mera, I had heard my father talking countless times at home about Mera and the meetings of the “local federation” in Paris and such like, but when I got to meet Mera was during that famous May ’68 in the Latin Quarter in Paris. There was a bunch of us young students, half-dazed, mixed in with some elderly exiles and up comes this elderly gent who starts to organize us, telling us: “Watch out, they’re just two blocks away and they’re going to be charging down this way” (he meant the police), so you need to head for this place or that place, whereupon the entire bunch started to follow his lead.

Later, when we dropped in on him at home he told me: “Listen, you’re educated. Why not type up a few notes that I have around here?”, and that was the start of our connection which amounted to me typing up something that would later be made into a book published by Ruedo Ibérico, albeit that I knew nothing about that process and had no hand in it.

El Solidario: Maybe Ángela could tell us a little about this house.

Ángela: The site on which this building was erected belonged to my grandparents. They lived here, as did Cipriano and his family and my own mother. In actual fact, Cipriano lived downstairs from here. Back then it was single-story housing. Access was via the Calle Lepanto (known these days as the Calle Alfalfa) ... No 22, actually. Through what we might call the main door there was a yard, the one you can see here, and Cipriano’s place was in that yard, his parents’ place facing on to the street. At the far end of the yard, where there are some low houses now, there was a grassy area leading on to the countryside. These days it is the Calle del Divino Redentor and that was how Cipriano use to escape when they would come looking for him. When suspicious footsteps were heard, it was a case of ‘The Civil Guards are coming!’ And my uncle would slip out the back way.

That site was sold off in 1997, before my mother passed away.

El Solidario: Right, but there was another house at 6, Calle Juan del Risco, an old three-story building. Can you tell me if that was the very building where he was born?

Ángela: Well, you need to know that Cipriano’s mother, my granny, was a widow with four children from her first marriage. Later she joined up with another man by whom she had four children, the oldest of them being Cipriano, followed by Manolita, who had no children of her own and who died in Barcelona as a married woman. Pepe, the third of them, died during his military service and he too had no children. Then there was my own mother, Isabel, the youngest of them.

They were in the second-hand clothes trade, and got by by tending the odd cow, foraging in the fields and so on: they got by. Initially they lived over there in the house on the Calle Juan del Risco.

I have it from my mother that they bought this site in 1910 and moved in here to the Calle Alfalfa in 1911, when my mother was three years old. Bear in mind that there was a ten-year age-gap between my mother and Cipriano. So all of the kids were born in the Calle Juan del Risco.

Renée: Right. But there must have been another house because whenever he found out that I was marrying a Spaniard who was moving to live in Madrid, Cipriano said to me: “You don’t say! Drop into Francos Rodrigues street and take a trip down memory lane for me. Neither I nor Teresa will ever be able to set foot there again. Drop by Francos Rodriguez and capture some memories for me.”

Ángela: To tell the truth, I have no knowledge of there ever having been a family home on Francos Rodríguez Street. What happened was that Cipriano spent his boyhood at any rate in Juan del Risco street and that street very nearly abuts Francos Rodríguez street which is broad, main thoroughfare where Cipriano would have played as a child. But there is a grey area in Cipriano's life as we know that his parents and my own mother at any rate moved into the Calle Lepanto or Alfalfa there in 1911 as I said, back in the days when Cipriano must have been starting out in the building trade, and I do not know if Cipriano moved here as well at that point, or stayed on at the other house. But, as it happens, he also lived on Juan del Risco street during the first years of his partnership with Teresa, and they then moved here to Alfalfa street, after their son Vicente passed away.

El Solidario: Maybe so. What's this about their son Vicente dying?

Ángela: Cipriano had three children. The first-born was called Vicente, like Cipriano's own father, and he survived for only 18 months: the second child was Floreal, who died a short while ago and the third was Sergio who starved to death at the age of nine, in this house, during the post-war period in 1942, at a time when Cipriano was in prison.

El Solidario: Well this is news, because everybody reckoned that Cipriano had only two sons, the pair that appear in that famous snapshot together with Major Juan Perea on the Guadalajara front. But, on another issue: Was theirs a church wedding?

Ángela: Come on, now, I don't think Cipriano set foot inside a church in his entire life. I mean, not even for his grand-daughter's wedding, I can tell you that much.

And after the civil war, a lot of civil marriages from Republican times had to undergo a church wedding before they could carry on living together. And that even extended to the right to visit one's partner in jail.

It seems that Cipriano and Teresa went out together for a couple of years and then spent the remainder of their lives together. Teresa was his life partner and a good partner at that.

El Solidario: When did they start living together?

Ángela: It must have been in the early 1920s, although I could not place an exact date on it.

El Solidario: And were the children baptized?

Ángela: I think so. I think the boys were baptized by Teresa, but surreptitiously, without Cipriano's knowledge, at the time anyway; he only found out later.

Of course, he spent months on end out of the home and it was left to her to make the decisions that needed making and she had to cope with the circumstances of the day.

El Solidario: Let's talk about Floreal and his relationship with Cipriano.

Ángela: The truth is that it was never all that good, more than anything else because of the sort of person Cipriano was, in that he was a very severe, very strict man. Initially, Floreal also started out working as a bricklayer like his father, but at some point he could bear it no longer. He said to him: Here's the trowel, *I'm done*. It's over.

Renée: And of course his character created issues between Cipriano and some of his comrades because he was so uncompromising, even when it came to championing his beliefs or point of view. He would draw a line and stick strictly to it, which was all swell and good in war-time, enabling him to

do what he did, but on other occasions, there could be no quibbling and in certain respects he was impossible ...

El Solidario: And what line of work did Floreal go into then?

Ángela: He went on to become a road surveyor and did that up until he retired. Another issue that may also have driven them apart was his wedding, because Christianne's parents owned the largest cider plant in Normandy and even though they always lived off Floreal's earnings, Cipriano did not take kindly to that.

El Solidario: We also know that Floreal was never on very good terms with the libertarian movement ...

Renée: I did not know Floreal very well; he was a passing acquaintance although we did once bump into one another at his parents' home. He used to come on his own, and it looks as if he did not bring the children with him, or at least not as often as Teresa and Mera himself would have liked him to. If the subject was brought up, Cipriano usually had very little to say about it and there was that helpless gesture: *My son does not want to know about the Organization.*

They rubbed each other up the wrong way, each for his own good reasons, but the fact is that Floreal was disgruntled and could not forget the fact that his brother had starved to death during the post-civil war years. Mera was too uncompromising and made no attempt or simply could not explore his own feelings.

Ángela: True, but in his dealings with his father Floreal was also partly at fault. Let me explain that: it is not acceptable not teaching your kids Spanish to enable them to converse with their grandparents.

Many a time they never even spoke to one another. One year my mother went to Paris and said to Cipriano:

- Brother, when are we going to visit Floreal at home?
- Relax, sister, we'll get there ...

And once he had left for work, Teresa would tell my mother:

- This man is such a pain. He never changes, never changes.

And then she fell out with him. It was a year before they spoke again.

And my mother returned to Spain without having set eyes on her nephew.

Renée: Yes, there was a lot of friction, but if Teresa put up with it all, it was because it never occurred to her than things could be any different than they were with her son. It was no easy task living with somebody like Cipriano, for whom the libertarian movement came first. He was a born fighter, with moral convictions. Day to day living was tough for most of the women that shared their lives with men and were obliged to grapple with the practicalities of their "ideas". And the same goes for the men where it was the woman that was committed to the movement. That was asking a lot. So the way of protecting oneself might be not teaching your own children a language and standing aloof as best one could. I would not bring blame into it; it was more a question of self-protection. I have not the slightest doubt but that Floreal really loved and respected his father, as he showed that.

I see Cipriano Mera as somebody who inspired interest and affection and, above all, respect, but that does not mean that when I saw him standing there alongside Teresa we had no concept of what life was like for that woman.

Ángela: A victim.

Renée: As were the children.

Ángela: Of course, and as far as Cipriano was concerned his ideal was prioritized even over his own family. He gave his all to the ideal and not to his wife; even though he really, really loved her, in some fashion that I cannot fathom.

Renée: Yes, she was always by Cipriano's side, wholly committed to him, faithful and loyal. And there was no shortage of folk like Teresa and Cipriano in activist exile circles ... If only the walls could talk! I share many of the ideas that my father taught me, even though I am no activist and never have been. There must have been some sort of a "genetic deformity" at work, but over time and after a lot of reading, I came around, but that, of course, had nothing to do with him ... as he was at home. Behaving in a consistent manner is such a complicated matter.

Ángela: He never wanted a television, nor a washing-machine ... He wanted to lead a humble life, live as a poor person.

My mother travelled up to Paris one time and as they sat together Cipriano asked her:

- Brother, let me put this question to you. Do folk in Spain live like the son? He did not say my son, just the son. And my mother said to him:
- Well, yes, Cipriano. My own daughter has a television, a runaround car and keep the two boys entertained ...
- Sister, are you okay with that? And do working folk in Spain like my son does?
- And better.

As it happens, Floreal's house was just a regular house; he did not even own it; he paid rent and it was very old in fact.

Renée: The older fighters, activists who suffered lots of blows and been through disasters and who had given their all could not fathom how life was relatively comfortable in Spain, when there was no trade union disputes, no worries and, above all, a loss of memory. In Spain people were as much into consumerism as they were in France and there was no shortage of work ... one might even have two wages a day! ... Too many years had gone by and they had suffered too many disappointments, and that created a gulf between that Spain and the Spain that they had had to leave behind. They forgot that their own generation had sown the seeds and all our generation had to do was reap the harvest. Life here was very tough after the civil war, but exile was no cushy number either.

El Solidario: Have you held on to his diaries?

Ángela: Well, I found out that my family had held on to his war diaries when I read as much in Cipriano's memoirs, because my mother never breathed a word of it to me. When I went to Paris with her when I was eleven, I know she brought him some books, but whether those were his diaries or whether those made their way to France by some other route, I do not know.

Renée: I can't quite remember whether I tackled him one day, calling him by his full name. Actually I found him an imposing figure. Some called him "Cipri" and some called him "Cipriano" and lots of others referred to him simply as "The Old Man", or quite simply as Mera. His handwriting was frankly awful, not unexpectedly, given that he learned to write as an adult and in a hurry. That was an issue with lots of Spaniards back then. Actually, my own father knew how to read, having learned at the night classes offered at the CNT union premises in Manresa. In the end, between his scrawl and my faltering Spanish we did manage to get some pages typed up. He used to dictate to me from his own

hand-written notes; sometimes it was stuff already typed up during the war, mixed in with things he remembered.

El Solidario: But it was other people that put the book together.

Renée: Correct. That was done by Manuel Fabra and the people from Ruedo Ibérico publishers who gathered together all of the materials, sorted them out and made the odd adjustment here and there, etc. Given what he was like, I am not sure that Cipriano would have taken too kindly to the finished book, because it only came out after his death, in 1976. Together we used to go over everything that was written and “thrash it out” and in fact the typescript was peppered with lots of hand-written notes and corrections. It was like making a translation. He would dictate, but when it came to arranging it into a comprehensive format, inevitably the odd change had to be made ...

El Solidario: And then there was the matter of the book’s being handed over to the libertarian movement.

Renée: Yes, bear in mind that he had been booted out of the CNT, although we all know that he was always *of the CNT*, in spite of all that. I can recall that at one point – he was sitting over there and I was sat here – he said to me: “Should this book ever bring in any money, it is goes to the libertarian movement”. He did not say “for *Frente Libertario*” that being, as you know, the group to which he belonged. No, it was earmarked for the libertarian movement, for everybody, regardless of groups and organizations, and this for the CNT as well, even though they had expelled him. That expulsion is part and parcel of the history of the Organization, but I do not think my own father ever forgave. Any more than many another comrade ...

Ángela: Plus which he said: I leave no legacy and have no heirs. Actually all Floreal ever got from Ruedo Ibérico was five copies of the book.

El Solidario: When turning to his human side and his fellowship, What was Cipriano like?

Ángela: Oh. Cipriano barely ate and would skip a meal just to be able to give money to the Organization. Floreal used to recount that in Caen, where all the Spanish refugees had ended up, in that there were very tiny bungalows there, homes that they built for themselves as they were being released from the camps and finding work, Cipriano was working there and then arrived home:

- Teresa! Teresa! I have a comrade of mine coming here today and we’ll need to feed him.

Whereupon Teresa would cook something.

But then along came Floreal:

- He’ll need somewhere to stay!
- But, father, why do I always end up having to share ...
- Make up a bed, Teresa ...

And Floreal had to share his bed with the visitor.

Next morning:

- Where is my jacket, Mum?

And the comrade who had been staying overnight had gone off with it, as Cipriano had given it to him. On other occasions, he gave away his own jacket.

And Floreal and he had a spat about Cipriano's needing to bring his pay home. Cipriano used to hand all his money over to the CNT. So they had an argument:

- I can't stand this any longer, slogging away like an idiot and handing over all my money to Mum so that we can live a little better, while you hand everything over to the organization ...

Renée; In that regard, it needs saying that they all had a wonderful sense of solidarity, even though, naturally, they failed to appreciate or could not countenance that the folk they lived with might not share their feelings. I remember that my own first pay-packet ended up with the Solidarity Fund which was used to cover expenses like the legal fees of lawyers defending some case, and all because that was what my father had decided should become of it. Such funds drained a lot quicker than they filled up and each and every comrade had to do his bit. The needs were many but the resources were few. And my father was quick to answer the call!

Ángela: You'll be aware that Cipriano did a bit of acting. He used to perform at the Europa cinema on the Calle Bravo Murillo here and any money he made was earmarked for feeding a family of seven siblings, the youngest of which was only three years old, as they had lost their parents. That was during the Primo de Rivera dictatorship, because the youngest girl is still alive and is now 85 years of age.

Before he left for France following his release from prison, he worked on a house for some neighbour women who had nothing but four walls and a ramshackle roof. Cipriano showed up with a gang of union comrades and I could not say if he fed them, although I think not: between them, they finished off the house.

El Solidario: Of course it has to be acknowledged that whilst Cipriano was much loved, the fact is that, regardless of any drawbacks, he did not care about the consequences for his family. The fact that all the CNTs showed up for his funeral bears witness to that.

Ángela: Yes, but the fact of the matter is that they treated him very badly. Even after his death, they promised Floreal that they were going to bring his body back to Spain for a civil burial, but not another word was ever heard about that.

Renée: But remember what the organization was like back then, compared to what is now. Everybody loved Cipriano but they just could not get along with one another. The regrettable thing is that his death preceded Franco's. He said to my father: "Comrade Pradas, I'll be gone before he will, but so what? It'll all be straightened out."

Ángela: Yes, that's the pity; besides he was in his right mind right up until the end. When he was nearing his end, the doctors told Floreal that they were going to unplug him, but he found out and asked them not to do so until his sister could come up from Spain. When my mother arrived on 24 October and after he had a chat with her, they pulled the plug and he only lasted another three hours.

And then, at the request of the organization, Floreal asked that the body be held for eight days to allow everyone to show up. And so he was buried on 1 November and the procession included folk from all over, from Italy and Germany and Spain and Mexico ... Floreal did that out of respect for his father, as he knew that he wanted to be buried with his flag, with everyone in attendance.

Renée: I can still remember, how, when we fell out over something, he would refuse to answer back or else played dumb. The way he used to tilt his head to one side, with that half-smile of his.

Thirty years is not a long time, as you well know, Cipriano. The squabbles dividing us divide us to this very day. In the past the contention was that principles had to be the priority, that and the impact of the fight against Franco. These days, principles are the primary concern, and whether or not the struggle should be pursued through the Company Committees or not Yesterday it was wretched excuses and these days it is pointless excuses. Unforgivable, all of them. Deep down, what we have today is a belief that we are in possession of “revealed truth”. Like Lenin.

All that vitriol!

And in another 30 years what tale will we have to tell? That the “other side” is still in the wrong?

By then, many of us will have passed on.

But wherever you may be, up in the eternal ether where there are no class divisions, we can finally get to know one another. In our first and final encounter guided by Fate ...

“We have so much to talk about, my soul brother”.

Translated by Paul Sharkey for the Kate Sharpley Library <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/>