

THE RUE DUGUESCLIN HOLD-UP AND THE STORY OF THE SPANISH ANARCHISTS IN LYON AND VILLURBANNE

At 6:54 p.m. on 18 January 1951, a post office van pulled up outside the Rue Duguesclin post office on the corner of the Rue de Sèze in the 6th arrondissement in Lyon to pick up a sackful of securities. The postman-driver and a security guard escort climbed out of the van. At that same moment, they were confronted by two individuals brandishing sub-machineguns. A second security guard who had remained inside the van opened fire at the two robbers. There was an exchange of gunfire. About twenty gunshots rang out even as the alarm inside the van, triggered by the guard within, screamed out. Given the response from the guards the sub-machinegun-wielding individuals fled in a car that was waiting for them in the Rue de Sèze. Another individual on the footpath across the street joined them at the car and they sped down the street in the direction of the Rhone. Police were swiftly deployed to stop the robbers. There were several wounded among the Post Office customers, security guards and the drive-postman. One of the guards, Guy Arnaud – the one who had stayed inside the van – passed away within minutes of arrival at the hospital. The other, Louis Moran, was to die sixteen days later. A further nine people suffered various injuries.

Over the ensuing days news about the shoot-out took up a remarkable amount of space in the local press. An investigation opened by the Sûreté and Police Judiciaire squad initially failed to come up with any leads. As the robbers' car – a Citroen 15 CV – had not been located, despite the police checkpoints, a “garage operation” was launched to find it. Not until 27 January was the car found in the Jonage canal out by the Croix-Luizet bridge in Villeurbanne. That discovery breathed fresh life into the investigation which quickly zeroed in on the alleged culprits. Supposedly, they were a gang of Spanish anarchist militants, members of the Libertarian Movement in Exile.

On the evening of 29 January, an initial arrest was made. This was Juan Sánchez aka *El Pelao*. Overnight on 31 January-1 February, Francisco Bailo Mata was arrested and, within hours, Juan Catalá Balaña and Antonio Guardia Socada. That left a fifth member of the gang – José Bailo Mata. A manhunt was launched by the police to track him down. Finally, on 5 February, his corpse was found in a hut on some waste ground in the town of Villeurbanne, south-east of Lyon. Police reports spoke of suicide. José Bailo had supposedly shot himself in the head and left behind a message explaining why.

Juan Sánchez aka *El Pelao* was a Spanish anarchist who had settled in Villeurbanne with his family back in the 1920s. He was 37 years old at the time of the incident. A native of Lorca (Murcia) he had had no steady job. After taking part in the Spanish civil war, he had been held in the French concentration camps and been shipped off to one in Djelfa (Algeria) from where he had escaped, making his way to London in 1943. Having enlisted in the army, he had later returned to France.

The brothers Francisco and José Bailo Mata had been born in Leciñena (Aragon) and had arrived in France before the end of the civil war in Spain. Francisco had been deported to Mauthausen, where he was to spend a little over four years. That experience had left him traumatized and left him with chronic anxiety. José, very young at the time, had worked on a farm and worked with the Resistance as a courier. At the time of the incident they were 33 and 27 years old, respectively.

Juan Catalá Balaña had a lengthy record in the underground struggle. Thus, he had worked with the Ponzán group and had significant contacts with the British and French intelligence services. Some commentators also held that Juan Sanchez was also connected with the British intelligence services. Juan Catala and Antonio Guardia Socada had been living in Toulouse and were 37 and 34 years old, respectively.

Many other anarchist militants – Spanish and French – were rounded up and interrogated by the police in the wake of the attempted hold-up. There was a very extensive police deployment, involving

the setting up of roadblocks and checkpoints in order to seal off the city and prevent the authors of the hold-up from escaping, and many apartments and premises had been searched for leads. The interrogations and the intensity of them had also been very significant. Evidence from some of those arrested was indicative of aggression and violence on the part of the police officers concerned. In addition to the nearest and several members of the families of the persons arrested, other militants of some standing – José Peirats for one, who was general secretary of the CNT at the time – Quico Sabaté or Juan Peñalver had also been picked up and interrogated. They had all been processed through the police stations and been subjected to terrifying torture, or so they claimed.

The Spanish Libertarian Movement was comparatively significant in the Lyon area. The demand for man-power during the inter-war years had drawn lots of Spaniards who arrived there for jobs in industry. For the most part they came from areas in the southeast of the Iberian Peninsula. There was a not inconsiderable anarchist presence within the Spanish colony, so much so that a social network had fairly quickly emerged that had, among other things, its own theatre troupe, the *Tierra y Libertad* theatre troupe. In the autumn of 1927 for instance, Ascaso and Durruti. In their secret travels, had been welcomed by some local anarchist comrades. The activities of libertarian militants had been sustained over the following decade and some of them had gone back to Spain for the fight against fascism at the time of the civil war. Which was a commitment that some of them then carried on from France during the Second World War, from within the Allied forces or in Resistance networks.

The end of the civil war and the exile of thousands of Spanish antifascists had led to more Spaniards settling in the Lyon area and, as a result, to a replenishment of the anarchist rank-and-file. During that time, some Spanish libertarian families in Lyon and Villeurbanne are supposed to have harboured clandestine comrades, Francisco Ponzán for one, during the winter of 1942. After the world war, the Spanish libertarian community there was very active. The town of Villeurbanne held most of this activist working class community, but the presence of anarchist exiles was also considerable in Lyon and in the outlying towns of Vénissieux, Oullins, Saint-Priest or Givors. In the surrounding areas and departments, there was an equally importance presence of Spanish libertarians. Saint-Etienne, Grenoble, Roanne or Villefranche-sur-Saône also welcomed militants organized under the aegis of the Spanish Libertarian Movement: the Spanish CNT, the FAI and the Libertarian Youth.

The 1940s and 1950s were the golden age of the Spanish anarchists in the Lyon region. The libertarian movement's activities centred on the premises in the Cours Zola in Villeurbanne – *La Baraque*. This building, ground floor, first floor and backyard became the chief destination for Spanish anarchist exiles for their rendezvous and social activities. At the time, those activities covered a wide range: gatherings, meetings, lectures, cultural activities, excursions, etc. For concerts, staging plays or events marking 19 July and the anniversary of the Spanish Revolution, more spacious premises were used, such as the *Maison du Peuple* in Monplaisir-la-Plaine, or the Etienne Dolet hall just behind the Perrache train station.

With such activities booming again, the Rue Duguesclin affair confronted the Spanish Libertarian Movement with a serious problem: operating within the law. There was a very real chance of the anarchist organizations in exile being banned. Hitherto, those organizations had been tolerated by the different French government, as long as there was no meddling in internal French politics. But the repeated hold-ups and the death toll claimed by the Lyon operation placed the libertarian movement in a tight spot. The French authorities tried to exploit the hold-up attempt to ban CNT activities and those of the overall Spanish Libertarian Movement in exile. In which regard the police catalogued the hold-ups carried out by Spanish anarchists across the entire country, in order to support the contention that Spanish libertarian organizations in France were inherently criminal.

Which may explain the reaction of the CNT and MLE which quickly washed their hands of the five comrades implicated in the hold-up and distanced themselves from that operation which was portrayed as a venture by persons outside the organization. It seemed obvious that they were fearful of

the consequences for the CNT, FAI and Libertarian Youth. For instance, the contention that José Bailo had committed suicide was not queried but was embraced and argued by the Spanish libertarian organizations. By contrast, other militants or organizations, one being, say, the communist newspaper *La Voix du Peuple*, raised the possibility that José Bailo had “been suicided”. Likewise, the Bailo family has always had its doubts about how he died; that doubt has been bolstered by the fact that it was never able to retrieve José’s corpse for burial. Quite apart from the formal stance coming from the MLE, it must be borne in mind that some of the network of anarchist militants and sympathizers did mobilize to help and protect the persecuted comrades. On the other hand, they were all very on the same page in denouncing the very swingeing crackdown that followed the hold-up attempt.

The arrests, bruising interrogations and the pressures brought to bear on those rounded up left a deep impression on the minds of militants.

The background issue was the timeless debate within anarchism between illegality and legality. A debate that was cutting edge among the Spanish anarchists in exile, between those who supported “expropriation” as a way of funding the organization of the fight against Franco, and those who rejected any such practices that might lead to a ban on the MLE’s activities in France. The boundary lines between illegality and anti-Franco resistance were certainly blurred. Militants who embarked on “expropriations” justified their actions in terms of the need to fund the Spanish anarchist organizations in exile and to do their bit for the fight against dictatorship in Spain, which entailed very considerable costs. Even if they held back some of the cash to cover their personal expenses, most of the funds seem in fact to have ended up in the coffers of the organization, funding propaganda, arms purchases and other running costs. A significant number of militants had no hand in such practices, but we need to bear in mind the straitened financial circumstances of the libertarian movement in exile and the precarious circumstances in which the vast majority of the membership and militants were living. It was not a straightforward choice. The uncertain social and economic circumstances of the post-war years in France was no help either when it came to re-establishing a degree of financial stability. In personal terms, for many of the militants who had taken part in the war in Spain and in the world war, a return to “normal” life was very complicated and even impossible. This appeared to apply mostly to the younger ones who had been in their 20s at the time of the war in Spain and who had spent a decade of their lives living on the edge, without laws or rules, having taken up arms in defence of their beliefs, their families and their comrades in arms. This is the turbulent dynamic against which the action by the militants implicated in the Rue Duguesclin affair needs to be seen.

Over the years the Spanish anarchists in and around Lyon had made a far from negligible contribution to the armed struggle against Francoism. Thus we could cite the case of the young “*Lyonnais*” Francisco Conesa, Antonio Miracle Guitart and Manuel Ruiz Montoya, recruited by Quico Sabaté in late 1959 to participate in an operation in Spain (Sabaté’s last). Another young man, Rogelio Madrigal Torres was also to join that group. All five were to be slain by the Spanish Civil Guard. In the 1960s some “*Lyonnais*” also did their bit for the armed struggle against Franco as part of the Defensa Interior: take, for instance, Antonio Ros, a militant whose family lived in Lyon, where he had partly grown up and engaged in his militant activity.

Besides the Sánchez and Bailo Mata families – three of the members of which were involved in the 1951 hold-up – other Spanish anarchists from the Lyon metropolitan area deserve to be mentioned: the Padrôs and RUIPÉREZ families, who arrived at the end of the Great War. And we might cite other militants, especially from the 1940s onwards, people such as: Juan de la Flor (very active in the Tierra y Libertad drama group), Vicente Galindo aka *Fontaura* (who wrote very regularly for the libertarian press in exile), Cayetano Zaplana, Eduardo Puncel, José del Amo, Juan Figueras and his partner, Vida; Enrique Soler; José Ruiz; Agustín Longas; the Hiraldo brothers; the Bernabeu brothers; the Flores family; the Hernández family or the Izquierdo family. Given the intense mobility of certain

exiles, other militants too sent part of their exile in the city of Lyon, in Villeurbanne or on neighbouring towns; this, for instance, was the case with Bernardo Pou prior to his move to Paris.

The crackdown in the wake of the Rue Duguesclin hold-up brought the activities of Spanish anarchists in the region to a stand-still. Court and police restrictions as well as the negative image of Spanish anarchists conjured up by the local press undoubtedly influenced libertarians' choice to keep a low profile and withdraw. Some militants, banned from living in Lyon, set off for nearby towns such as Villefranche-sur-Saône. The four militants directly involved in the hold-up were sentenced to death, which sentences were then commuted to close imprisonment. Not until mid-decade was there any discernible resumption of organized activity by libertarians.

Activity remained significant in the Lyon area right up until the 1960s. It is from that point on that we can detect the onset of a progressive decline. The fall in the number of militants, the absence of transmission from one generation to the next, the crises and internal differences within the MLE in exile, or the absence of fundamental political change in Spain all help account for this new situation. The "historic" premises in the Cours Zola in Villeurbanne were abandoned. Thereafter, meetings would be held in the halls of the Palais du Travail in Villeurbanne. The decline was inexorable, but there was not anything extraordinary about it. It reflected the overall dynamic within the Spanish exile community. The MLE's organizations remained active, but efforts at convergence with other Spanish opposition forces – such as the launch of an Ateneo Cervantes, say – popped up. We also find young people from the families of Spanish libertarian exiles – in Lyon and elsewhere – in the May '68 mobilizations and those over the ensuing decade. Over the latter years of the dictatorship in Spain, there were meetings and actions in solidarity with political prisoners. Spanish exiles retained their presence in the Lyon metropolitan area but the end of Francoism ultimately undermined Spanish anarchist activity in the area. That said, we ought to remember that in the 1980s Spanish "old hands" were still meeting up informally on the premises of the La Gryffe bookshop collective with anarchist militants and sympathizers from Lyon. Today, the memory of Spanish anarchists in the Lyon area is preserved mainly by some of the offspring of such militants; and the history of these libertarians in exile – a century of it now – has yet to be written, on the basis of sundry accounts and documentation scattered across several archives and libraries.

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