

A Danish Trotskyist in the Spanish Civil War

Åge Kjelsø

This piece was first published in 1977 in issue No.17 of the Danish magazine *Hug!* The translation is by Mike Jones, who contributes the following note: "This verbal account of his experience in Spain by Åge Kjelsø, was written down by Carl Heinrich Petersen and agreed as a true record in June 1976. Åge Kjelsø begins his account with an analysis of the civil war from its start. He goes on to describe the workers' organisations, their revolutionary actions, and the counter-revolutionary role of the orthodox Communists, pointing out that these events unfolded at the same time as the Moscow Trials and purges in the USSR. He furthermore points out that the Communists had made clear that anarcho-syndicalists and Trotskyists in Spain would be destroyed just as efficiently as in the USSR, 'and that this would not just remain a threat I myself would find out very clearly during my stay in Spain 1936-38'. In order to save space I have omitted this first part of the account in order to give the personal experiences of Åge Kjelsø."

IT WAS during a journey in Yugoslavia together with a Danish comrade and co-thinker, Tage Lau, that I became aware of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. We had travelled from Denmark owing to unemployment, and we were fed and received other assistance from workers-esperantoists and other socialists.¹ In Yugoslavia we experienced a number of great strikes, and it gave us a strong impression of the solidarity and will to struggle, of which a few years later the world would see an even greater manifestation in the resolute struggle of the Yugoslav workers and peasants against the army of the fascist great power which attacked their country. But otherwise it was the struggle in Spain which mostly concerned us, and for us as for thousands, yes millions, of workers the world over, the struggle of the Spanish workers stood out almost like a miracle.

In the winter of 1933, with horror and shame, we had seen the collapse of the German labour movement without a fight as Hitler was installed, and the year after we experienced the February battles in Austria, where a few thousand members of the socialist defence organisation, the *Schutzbund*, attempted a hopeless defensive fight to prevent the forward march of fascism. Mussolini was in power in Italy, and in most of southern and eastern Europe reaction and semi-fascism had

triumphed, and even in our country large sections of the farmers and bourgeoisie admired Hitler and Mussolini.

In this situation, the magnificent and partially victorious struggle of the Spanish workers against fascism resulted in a huge enthusiasm and admiration for it among many of the young socialists of that time, and this atmosphere led to me deciding to go to Spain to participate in the first serious resistance struggle against fascism raging there.

Therefore, I set course from Yugoslavia to Spain, and after a long and exhausting journey by cycle I reached the great southern French port of Marseilles, from which I assumed good possibilities existed for journeying to Spain. At first, I tried to contact the Trotskyists and anarchists through their meeting rooms, and I did succeed in contacting some anarchists; but as they didn't quickly assist my further journey to my promised land, I tried to take a short-cut to it with the aid of the French trade unions and Peoples Front. It seemed to go well, as I was able to get on board a ship which was taking volunteers of different nationalities to Spain. I lived on the ship for a few days, where I engaged in frank discussions with a part of the other volunteers, among them some Greeks and Germans. It resulted

in me being summoned to an interrogation room, where the tone in my regard was sharp and in the manner of the police in a murder case, and where I – despite my protest – was forced into being photographed. Thereafter I was shown out and put off the ship with the message that I was not wanted in Spain owing to my anti-Stalinist, so-called “provocative” statements. This was my first clash with the international Stalinist apparatus during the Spanish Civil War.

Before I continue with my political description, it would be opportune to say a few words about my previous political development up to the summer of 1936.

I joined DsU² as a 15-year-old in 1930, and in the following years had different jobs as a labourer and messenger-boy, but was often unemployed. After Hitler’s elevation to power on 30 January 1933, a number of political émigrés from the defeated German labour movement arrived in Denmark, and among them was Professor Tschachotin, the inventor of the three-arrows emblem,³ spokesman for a more active struggle against Nazism and therefore oppositionally inclined towards the leadership of the German social democracy. Tschachotin influenced many Copenhagen DsUers in an oppositional direction, among them myself, and I remember that Hartvig Frisch⁴ took part in some of our meetings and expressed a certain criticism in respect to the toleration of Brüning and general passivity in the face of reaction by the SPD – in the same way that he did in his book *Pest over Europa*, which was published in the autumn of 1933. Through the then well-known wholesaler Boggild, who was active within DsU and the social democracy in Copenhagen, but had at the same time close links with the German émigré Trotskyist group, also located in the city, I came into contact with these Trotskyists, was excluded from DsU and participated in the establishment of a Danish Trotskyist group, which we called the “Leninist Work Group”. I was also a member of the “Anti-Fascist Struggle League”, which had been built by expelled DsUers, who wanted a degree of joint struggle with the Communists against the Nazis, and which broke up a number of the Nazi meetings in Copenhagen during their first manifestations in those years. Before I left Copenhagen in the summer of 1936, the Leninist Work Group gave me a statement to present to foreign comrades, and it was amusing for me to see the confusion the mere name of the group caused among those Stalinists who got to see it.

After being thrown off the ship in Marseilles, I again contacted the anarchists, who gave me an introductory letter to the Spanish comrades and a train ticket to the Spanish frontier, where I received

an excellent reception from the Spanish anarchists, who also took care of my further transport to Barcelona. It was August 1936, and I was one of the first Danish volunteers in Spain. At an anarchist barracks I received training in the use of a rifle and hand grenades for a few weeks, and then was sent to the front at Huesca in Aragon, where I spent a couple of months.

Apart from myself, at that moment there were only very few foreigners in the Durruti Column, which was stationed here and had been named after the famous Spanish anarchist Durruti, whose life had been one long struggle for the liberation of the working class. He had been condemned to death in the '20s, both in Spain and in Argentina, for his contribution, and he was in the van on the barricades and during the attack on the fascist positions in Barcelona on 19 July 1936. During the following weeks, the Durruti Column took part in purging Catalonia of fascists, and half of Aragon too, and during the critical November days of that year Durruti and 6000 of his column hurried to Madrid’s relief. Durruti fell there on 20 November, on a section of the front otherwise quiet at the time, apparently assassinated by a political opponent. The whole of Barcelona was on its feet for his funeral to salute this great son of the city, and the workers of Spain cried at his bier.

I had some extraordinarily good comrades in the Durruti Column, and although only a few of them had a talent for languages, we nevertheless had the best understanding between us on account of the common cause we fought for. I sometimes use the term anarchist for them, but could just as well use syndicalist instead. This is because all members of the anarchist elite organisation FAI (Iberian Anarchist Federation) were at the same time members of the bigger syndicalist union confederation CNT, where they played a leading role, so the relationship between them was akin to that between the social democracy and the Danish trade unions here.

After a couple of months’ service in the Durruti Column on the Huesca Front, I sought and got leave in the autumn of 1936, as despite being on excellent terms with the Spanish anarchists and syndicalists, who were my militia comrades there, I did not want to remain inactive too long on what was almost a “dead” front. The Durruti Column was very badly supplied with arms and could therefore not carry out very much of an offensive nature against the better supplied fascists on this front, and when the Russian arms arrived they were directed elsewhere than to the revolutionary elements on the Aragon front.

Therefore, I went back to Barcelona and reported at the office of the International Brigade. The aim was partly to get to a livelier front with

better weapons, and partly to agitate among the many German Stalinists in the brigade; but it proved to be an illusion that anything could be attained in that fashion. As far as the great majority of these people were concerned, the authority of the party and its discipline was far too strong for that. As a member of the brigade I was sent to a training camp at Albacete in south-eastern Spain, and there I learnt to service machine-guns; but for a while I was occupied with unpacking Mexican weapons. Mexico was the only country which delivered arms to the fighting Spanish Republic on the basis of an openly proclaimed sympathy with its struggle against fascism and, in contrast to the USSR, without placing special conditions for the aid. The small and quite backward Mexico was naturally unable to provide the same quantities as the European fascist powers did on Franco's behalf.

From Albacete I went to the Andalucian front in southern Spain, and in the war of manoeuvre there we came up against the very skilful Moroccan sharpshooters and foreign legionnaires, who, among other things, perched up in the olive trees and shot at us as we advanced. It led to great losses amongst us, sometimes as much as every other man. Of course, there were also dead on the other side, and I found numerous dead Moroccans with a hand closed around a madonna figure. It was quite strange that these primitive Mohammedans were equipped thus with Catholic saint figures; but both these Moors, as they have been called in Spain since ancient times, and the foreign legionnaires, played a great, maybe even a decisive role in the fascist advances, especially during the first months of the civil war. *It was a very great error, which approximates to suicide, that the republic did not, as soon as the war started, proclaim independence for the then Spanish Morocco*, as in all probability it would have removed the possibilities for recruitment by the fascists among the Moors and forced them to leave the Foreign Legion in Morocco, if they wished to maintain power over this country. Among the republican parties, only the left-socialist POUM went in for the independence of Morocco, while the Socialist Party, for example, entertained illusions about aid from Britain and France, if one avoided annoying the ruling classes there by stimulating independence movements in their colonies by liberating Spanish Morocco. The great syndicalist CNT was also passive on this issue, strangely enough, maybe a result of its one-sided trade unionist-economical and anti-political orientation.

It was as a soldier in the Thälmann Battalion, mainly composed of Germans but also including other foreigners, that I participated in the fights of the International Brigade on the southern front

and later on the Madrid front. I came to the general conclusion that in the military-technical sphere the fascist officers were more skilful than those of the brigade; but the former also had much better equipment at their disposal than we had. On the other hand, there was a higher morale and greater courage in the brigade and the republican army than among the fascists, and the brigade has as its due the greatest share of the honour for succeeding in stopping the fascist onslaught on Madrid at the end of 1936. There were long periods between our leave, and the food was alien and quite spartan, in the main consisting of tinned stuff. We were somewhat better supplied with spirits.

A lot was said and written about Franco's fifth column. The description came from the fact that four columns were advancing on Madrid while Franco boasted that he had a fifth one of secret supporters in the city itself. The Stalinists shamefully misused the description by applying it to all the anti-Stalinists, namely to us revolutionaries; but that such a fifth column did exist is unquestionable. In Albacete it happened that people from the brigade could get their throat cut by barbers in the town. The criminals concerned were naturally shot themselves when caught; but the slogan "Don't go to the barber", was quite common in the brigade for a time!

I saw the horror of war at close quarters and in many ways. In the south I saw endless horrible lines of refugees, and the material superiority of the fascists, which was especially manifest in the air, showed itself often by German planes in particular attacking the crowds of refugees. During the war in the south I also saw the disfigurement of the corpses of comrades, and in the University City in Madrid, where I spent the winter of 1937 in the trenches, I experienced a true hell. The civilian population of the capital received almost as much bombardment as us at the front by the way. Aerial bombardments with great destruction and many dead and wounded were a common occurrence. Myself, I was wounded in the leg by a bullet and, physically exhausted and mentally depressed, I was taken to a hospital in Madrid, near the Puerto del Sol.

During my stay in hospital I tried to leave the brigade. This was not a result of the wound and the rest of my physical weakness, but because of deep disappointment over developments in the republic, where the Stalinist influence had dramatically increased in tempo with the Russian arms deliveries and the Russian pressure, exercised by all the Soviet representatives, including the Spanish CP, which had expanded massively in its capacity as political spokesman for the arms suppliers. Another source of the growing Stalinist

influence was the appearance of the Spanish CP as spokesman for all the petty bourgeois, moderate and conservative elements in regard to economic and social affairs, especially concerning the party's struggle against collectivisation and for re-privatisation. Because of its energetic struggle for a unified command and blind discipline in the new unified army, for re-establishing the authority of the state and the police, and not least by its violent witch-hunts against all kinds of revolutionary "experiments" and their proponents, the CP became the natural party for civil servants, officers and policemen, while, on the other hand, its adherents among the working class were still quite scarce and, relatively speaking, even less than at the outbreak of the war. In brief: the Stalinist counter-revolution was rapidly advancing, and as a revolutionary worker, for whom the task was of war (against fascism) and revolution (against capitalism and feudalism), I was finding it difficult to remain in the International Brigade led by the Stalinists. As a volunteer I could surely leave again when the preconditions for my original application to join were no longer present. I stated this in my application to be demobilised, but received a rejection.

However, there were still masses of revolutionary comrades in Spain, both native and foreign, and I always met with some of them when in difficulty. This was also the case in the hospital, and some of them helped me get out past the guard when I was again able to walk, and I mixed with a large group leaving, so he was unable to check the papers of everyone.

I visited the POUM in Madrid, and here I arrived among co-thinkers, because in this city, as opposed to its main section in Catalonia, it was Trotskyist-oriented, partly as a result of the influence of foreign Trotskyists. The POUM was only a small party in Madrid; but before the May fighting in Barcelona in 1937, it did have at its disposal in Madrid a small tailoring workshop, where uniforms were produced, together with a radio station and a detachment at the front, with a small tank with Trotsky's picture on it. It also distributed some small front papers and the main party organ *La Batalla*, which was published in Barcelona. The Madrid POUMists were mainly youngsters; there were, however, some more mature people among the leaders. They expected a campaign of extermination by the Stalinists and advised me to go to Barcelona, where the anti-Stalinist forces as a whole were stronger than in Madrid, and I succeeded in reaching the city via Valencia in a POUM motor car.

In Barcelona I was quartered in a POUM-run hotel on the main street, the Ramblas, and soon came into contact with the POUMists and the

Trotskyists, even being elected to the central committee of the Trotskyist section. The latter wasn't very big, and about 50% of the participants in Trotskyist meetings were foreigners, while the POUM was quite a numerically large party in Barcelona, even though it could in no way compete with the mighty syndicalist CNT movement, which included the majority of the workers of Barcelona. It was these people who, partly spontaneously, and partly through their great union organisation CNT, immediately after the victory over the military coup in the city in July 1936, moved to the greatest direct workers' take-over of production, distribution and transport the world has ever seen. It was a totally free and popular but also natural and effective collectivisation, and through such different jobs as a waiter in a spa hotel, assistant in a market garden and worker in an ammunition factory, where we produced grenades, I was able, during the next period, to experience this unique working class socialism at close quarters. The co-operation in these worker-controlled enterprises was excellent, and the spirit among the employees so good that a wage-slave under capitalism can only dream of it, when imagining the liberation of the working class. But to return to earth again, I must add that the heat in the market garden and from the furnaces in the ammunition factory was especially unpleasant for me – in spite of collectivisation!

On 3 May 1937, the May fighting broke out in Barcelona. A series of episodes and a violent witch-hunt from the Stalinists had preceded this – directed against the revolutionaries in general and against the POUM and the Trotskyists in particular, as the two currents were accused of being Franco agents and fascists. Totally contrary to the truth also, the POUM was presented by the Stalinists as a purely Trotskyist party; but this was one of their more innocent lies. Right from July 1936 the telephone centre in Barcelona had been collectivised, and it was even run jointly by both of the large union organisations, the syndicalist CNT and socialist-led UGT, and had functioned excellently under its employees. Probably as a test run, but also probably as a provocation, the Stalinist police chief Salas sent police against the building in order to seize it from its rightful owners: the telephone workers and functionaries. As soon as the police forced their way into the building they were met with resistance by its occupiers and forced back, but when the rumour of the attack on the Telefónica spread round the city – and it went quickly – Barcelona's workers went onto the streets just as on 19 July 1936, and built barricades everywhere. Together with the other occupants of the POUM hotel on the

Ramblas I helped build barricades on the Ramblas, and in the space of a few hours almost the whole city, and especially the working class quarters, was once again ruled by the revolutionary workers. If the CNT leaders had wished it, we could have smashed the whole Stalinist counter-revolution, at least in Barcelona and Catalonia; but the fact that the Russians would again place an arms blockade against the republic, and that Franco could take advantage of a split in the official anti-fascist unity in the republic, made these leaders reach a compromise with the Stalinists. The police-chief Salas resigned, and in return we had to remove the barricades and hand over our weapons.

From then on, the Stalinists and their helpers were by far the strongest, as the sacrifice of Salas was only of symbolic significance, and when Largo Caballero, the head of the central government and a left-socialist, and the four CNT ministers in the same government, refused to go along with Stalinist demand for the prohibition of the POUM, they were forced to stand down by the demand of the Russian ambassador, and a Stalinised social democrat, Dr Negrín, took over as head of the government. From then on the terror against all the different revolutionaries met with no hindrance. The POUM and the Trotskyists in particular, together with the foreign anti-Stalinist militants who had rushed to Spain to participate in the fight against fascism and to aid the building of socialism in the republic, were targeted.

After some days on the barricade I was arrested myself, as I was going to a working class quarter with some comrades from the POUM hotel to join our co-thinkers, though we were released again after 36 hours. For a while I lived half way up Mont Monich with the wife of an imprisoned anarchist, and it was there that I was arrested again early one morning by Spaniards in the service of the GPU, and the same occurred to a comrade I lived together with – together with the whole of the Barcelona Trotskyist group. At first we were put in an ordinary prison with a number in each cell, and I was able to smuggle out a letter to the leader of the Danish Trotskyists, Poul Moth, with an enclosed description of the situation in the hope that he could promote an international campaign to help us through our international movement. It proved to be impossible for them to help us from outside. Later I heard that one of Trotsky's earlier secretaries by the name of Erwin Wolf would have attempted to do so; but he himself was kidnapped together with another Trotskyist, Hans Freund, by the GPU in Spain, and has never been seen since. One should note that when the POUM leader Andrés Nin vanished into the clutches of the GPU in the summer of 1937 the leader of the Independent Labour Party, James

Maxton, undertook a large journey of investigation to Spain, but succeeded only in finding out, being told by no less than three members of the central government, that Nin had never been in any prison run by the government, but had vanished in a private house. One of them added that there was no evidence to back up the charges against the POUM leaders of espionage – in spite of them all being arrested shortly beforehand!

Just as with Nin, my comrades and I were transferred to a private GPU prison in a villa, and there we were subject to many and long-lasting nightly interrogations in English and German by out-and-out sadists and psychopaths of different nationalities. We were shown the photo of a young German captain in the International Brigade, where he was to have operated for the Trotskyists, and the photo showed us him as a terribly mutilated and maltreated corpse; but he had been murdered somewhere other than where the photo had been taken. We were accused of having murdered him, which we hadn't, of course. Maybe the GPU had mistreated him until he died of it, in order to get information from him on others?⁵ Under interrogation I was subjected to kicks and other forms of rough mistreatment, sharp electric light in the face, and was confronted by an Italian, wholly broken by them, who reeled off quite incredible false accusations against me. Apart from the murder of the said captain, who we had supposedly considered as a traitor, I was also accused of a plan to kill Dr Negrín, etc. The other Trotskyists experienced the same, and the villa often resounded with terrible screams from the prisoners.

Finally, we were put before a proper Spanish judge, and as a result of our thorough treatment our tormentors were able to present a number of false confessions to him, both from the above-mentioned Italian and also from a Frenchman and a few others. The likeness to the "real" Moscow Trials was therefore quite significant; there was, though, the important difference that most of us refused to confess. The prosecutor demanded the death penalty for us all; but a Spanish anarchist among the guards in the court helped me to escape, so I missed the end of the trial.

I went straight to the headquarters of the CNT-FAI and explained the whole case to the well-known German syndicalist Augustin Souchy, in the hope that the anarcho-syndicalists could stop it. I remember a leading Spanish anarchist there said to me: "You Trotskyists are leading us to catastrophe!", to which I replied: "You anarchists have already led us to catastrophe!"

I admit that the situation was difficult for the CNT leaders; but in my opinion they should have

acted against the GPU. There was also an opposition among the anarcho-syndicalists, which called itself “The Friends of Durruti”, which was opposed to the compromises of the CNT leaders, especially participation in the government and the rotten deal after the May fighting. They were close to the Trotskyists and the left wing of the POUM, and supported the working class taking power, but unfortunately attained no decisive influence.

Anarchism is a beautiful dream, of which some parts were to become materialised in Spain during the summer of 1936; but because of the capitulationist line of their leaders, over the next few years the anarchists disappointed their worker base so fundamentally that when Franco’s troops advanced into Barcelona, on 25 January 1939, not one barricade was raised against them – and no arms arrived from the democracies, just as the Russians gradually stopped their supplies to the republic, in spite of the CNT-FAI leaders’ policy of capitulation to the Stalinists.

After my escape from the GPU prison I lived for a while in the CNT building. My hair was dyed black from time to time and I received food and very good economic support from the CNT, and I went out only in the dark. Later I found good lodgings in a large room with an anarchist doctor’s family, and I escaped from Spain with the aid of Scandinavian seamen, who brought me on board their ship in a staged and collective bawling bout of drunkenness.

I had visited the Danish consul in Barcelona beforehand; but he refused me any help whatever and marked me down as an “adventurer”! In Marseilles, I was arrested and expelled, and back in Denmark my reports from Spain were not very enthusiastically received in all circles. During a meeting at the Painters House in Copenhagen, I got an umbrella on the head from a Stalinist woman, and I was once attacked by young Stalinists too.⁶

In November 1942 I was interned by the Danish police along with most of the other Spanish volunteers; but I was released again during the summer of 1943, maybe because I had never belonged to DKP or its youth organisation.⁷ The Danish police stole books from me, including Lenin’s Works and other working class literature, together with diaries trying to reconstruct my experiences in Spain. The GPU had also stolen my Spanish diaries from me in Spain when I fell into their hands.

Finally, I can recount that at least a part of my companions in suffering from the above-mentioned “little Moscow Trial” emerged from it with their lives, because I know that one of the Trotskyist leaders from the Barcelona case of 1937 arrived in France after the collapse of the republic. He was

called Muniz Grandizo. After developing disagreements with the leaders of the Fourth International, he went back to Spain where he was caught and imprisoned for twenty years. Maybe he is still inside rotting away in one of the Spanish prisons, if he isn’t already dead.⁸

Editorial notes

1. Poul Moth and Tage Lau were talented linguists and the group made an intervention into the Workers Esperanto movement, where they built a fraction and published Trotskyist materials in Esperanto. According to Steen Bille Larsen’s book *Mod Strømmen* on the Communist oppositions in 1930s Denmark (Copenhagen, 1986), Kjelsø and Lau were cycling to an Esperanto Congress in Yugoslavia, and from Croatia cycled together to Marseilles. As Lau spoke various languages he worked in a POUM propaganda section in Barcelona instead of being sent to the front. Why Lau isn’t mentioned as being in Spain by Kjelsø is a mystery.

2. DsU is the social democratic youth organisation, founded after the original one, SUF, attached itself first to Zimmerwald and then to the Communist International.

3. Sergej Tschachotin designed the three arrows symbol for the Iron Front, the anti-Nazi alliance formed in Germany in 1931 by the Social Democrats with the Catholic Centre party and others.

4. Hartvig Frisch was the translator for Trotsky when he delivered his speech to social democratic students in Copenhagen 1932, published as *In Defence of the October Revolution* (see *Mod Strømmen* for details). Bøggild is also covered in the same book, as is Professor Tschachotin and his theories.

5. The reference is to Leon Narvitch, a Stalinist spy who had infiltrated the Trotskyist group in Spain, though Narvitch claimed to be Russian not German (he was in fact Polish). He was killed by a POUM action squad in retaliation for the murder of Andrés Nin, whom he had betrayed to the Stalinists.

6. The Painters House was the then Painters Union building. It has since moved.

7. Those Spanish volunteers not interned founded the Communist-led resistance organisation BOPA, the main one during the Second World War in Denmark. The DKP was the Communist Party of Denmark.

8. Having returned to Spain to take part in the Barcelona strike of 1951, Muniz was arrested the following year and given a ten-year prison sentence. After his release he lived in Paris where he led a small revolutionary grouping. He died in 1989.