

## **The Spanish Civil War in Barbastro**

Barbastro, the capital of the Alto Aragones region of Somontano, experienced during the first months of the Spanish Civil War, one of the most challenging periods of its history. Historians of all kinds agree that the city can be considered one of the capitals of the revolution. To use the word “revolution” here implies using a specific term that responds to the complexity of the context and the moment and explains the scope of the events that took place around the military coup of July 1936.

The elections of February 1936 produced a favourable result for the Popular Front in Barbastro, which obtained 34% of the votes. The second most voted list was that of the CEDA, getting 29%. As in the rest of Spain, the political forces in Barbastro were relatively equal. However, in the complex scenario of the spring of 1936, this balance did not lead to moderation but to polarization and violence. There was, therefore, growing tension between February and July that, at the political level, favored the rise of populist and extremist proposals.

Political anxiety was closely linked to socioeconomic problems. The high number of members of the anarchist union CNT in the Somontano region, more than 500 people (200 of them in Barbastro), indicates the existence of broad layers of poverty in the area as well as the force that labour protests had acquired. Proof of this was the celebration of the first of May in 1936, which was experienced in the region as a social turning point characterized by intense protest. What for some neighbours was the road to a new era of justice and freedom was seen by others as the breeding ground for the dreaded revolution. For this reason, there was also a civilian Assembly in the city in favour of military intervention, with 120 members.

The coup d'état, initiated on July 17 in Melilla, did not stop the revolution but provoked it in those areas where social conflict was more significant, as was the case in Barbastro. In the capital of Somontano, three elements converged which determined the preponderance of revolutionary anarchism from July 18: the vacuum of local power, created by the inhibition in its functions of the Republican city council of the Popular Front; the uncertainty of Colonel Villalba, head of the military detachment, on what position to take before the military uprising; and, finally, the organizational capacity and the operability of the local anarchist committee.

The anarchists of Barbastro (CNT) immediately set themselves two objectives: neutralizing the security forces and creating a new political organization. To this end, they set up three committees: the revolutionary committee, of a political nature; the investigation committee - in charge of identifying and arresting the alleged accomplices of the rebels; and the vigilance committee, whose most important function was to patrol the streets, to ensure revolutionary public order. The three committees began to act in coordination on July 18. The following day, the arrests of prominent clergy representatives began, among them the vicar general, some canons, and several parish priests.

The imprisonment of the Religious began on the 20th, as well as the expulsion of the nuns from their convents. The local committee arrested the Bishop on the 21st to pressure Colonel Villalba so he would not join the military coup plotters. The arrival of the anarchists from Barcelona, on July 25, on their way to the Huesca front, generated a revolutionary euphoria that increased pressure on the local committee to physically eliminate all alleged fascists present in the region. Included indiscriminately among these were priests and members of the three male Congregations present in the town: Benedictines, Piarists, and Claretians.

The religious persecution did not take long to radicalise until it reached unimaginable limits. The diocese of Barbastro has the sad merit of heading the list of the number of ecclesiastics murdered: 88% of its clergy was eliminated. The bishop, 24 priests, some outstanding laypeople, and 78 Religious were martyred in the city alone. Among the latter are 51 Claretian Missionaries, most under 25 years of age.

**Antonio Bellella cmf**