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Carl Einstein in “Fairest Spain”

From Picasso to Durruti

Let us begin with George Grosz’s watercolour of 1919. Like most of his works at the time, the paper is filled with angular scenes depicting vice. Two naked women occupy the centre. Lower down on the right, there is a fat, bald chap with round glasses, smoking a pipe. His bald head is superimposed over a woman’s thigh. The short-sighted man with the sardonic smile is Carl Einstein: “a chap sandwiched between a businessman, a gramophone and a woman’s leg” he wrote years later, clearly referring to Grosz’s work¹.

HE HAD JUST RETURNED FROM Brussels, where he had spent the First World War and had taken part in revolutionary soldiers’ councils. The Einstein we see in the painting had just joined the KPD² –the German Communist Party, to which Grosz also belonged. Einstein was committed to the Spartacist League, which was then being brutally repressed. That same year –1919– opened with the murders of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg on 15th

January. For Einstein, events followed a pattern that was to be repeated in the future. The police arrested him on 15th January and he spent much of 1919 hiding out in the homes of acquaintances and friends. From November 1919, Einstein and Grosz published the journal *Der Blutige Ernst* (In Bloody Earnest), of which only six issues saw the light of day, given the censorship then in force. The writer and artist warned their

■ ¹ C. EINSTEIN. “George Grosz” (1926) *ad idem: El Arte como revuelta. Escritos sobre las vanguardias (1912-1923)*, Madrid: Lampreave & Millán, 2008. p. 107 pub. U. FLECKNER. Among the general bibliography on Einstein, see L. MEFFRE, *Carl Einstein. 1885-1940. Itinéraires d’une pensée moderne*. Paris: Presses de l’Université Paris-Sorbonne. 2002; U. FLECKNER, *Carl Einstein und sein Jahrhundert. Fragmente einer Intellektuellen Biographie*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2006.

² Translator’s note [A.S.]: *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*.

readers to spurn both “Art for Art’s sake” and “Literature for Literature’s sake”, promising readers that their work –with its combination of the printed word and drawings– would have a “deadly impact”³.

In his book: *A Little Yes and a Big No: The Autobiography of George Grosz*⁴ the author does not mention Einstein at all –which speaks volumes on Grosz’s memory and the painter’s ability to gloss over difficult episodes. The glaring omission also reveals Einstein’s importance.

Many have noted Einstein’s commitment to the Spartacist Revolt in 1919 –an experience that was to be decisive in his later support for Anarchist Trade Unionism during The Spanish Civil War. In fact, when his tomb was found at Boeil-Bézing in 1968, Michel Leiris and Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler wanted to write on the tombstone: “A Fighter for the Spartacist Revolution and the Spanish Republican Army”. How curious this is! In Grosz’s watercolour, there is a gramophone from which waft the words *Fern im Süd’ das schöne Spanien* (Far to the south lies fairest Spain). This is the opening line of a poem written in 1834 by Emanuel Geibel⁵, to which Karl Reissig put music. Geibel was a popular poet of the time and he was particularly interested in Spanish folklore. He translated romances and published a book of Spanish songs that he made up himself, one of which contains the words from the gramophone in the whore house depicted by Grosz. As one can imagine, Geibel’s poem speaks of the sun, mountains, flowers, rivers, castanets,

Arabs and the Fandango. In other words, the song with its reference to “Fairest Spain” not only reveals shared romantic notions of the country and its wild gypsy music but also a kind of parallel world where everything was genuine and passionate. For Northern European romantics, Spain had the exoticism of the East and was a great deal more accessible. Perhaps one needs to know just how popular this romantic song was in Weimar Germany but as one can see, it must have been played in cabarets and brothels. It certainly strikes a discordant note, with the gramophone horn spouting the words *Fern im Süd’ das schöne Spanien* in the midst of a brothel full of naked tarts and their ugly customers. This is the scene Carl Einstein dispassionately beholds as he smokes a pipe. However, this musical air recalling the old, romantic Spain had, in the years following the Great War, been turned into a seedy little number in cabarets in Germany, Paris and elsewhere. In Grosz’s sinister scenes, the “Spanish” music is not a cheerful *lied* but rather a sign of the sordidness and menace of the setting.

Given how Einstein’s life panned out, one might see these as prophetic words. Einstein had a passionate relationship with Spain towards the end of his life, fighting on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War as a member of the Durruti Column⁶. However, his interests as a critic and art historian had brought him into contact with things Spanish before that. This came about through his friendship with Juan Gris and Picasso and his later interest in

■ ³ L. MEFFRE. *op. cit.* p.85.

⁴ Published by The Dial Press (New York, 1946).

⁵ Translator’s note: The poem is *Der Zigeunerbube im Norden*. Those wondering what the song sounded like can find out by listening to the 1908 recording here: <http://www.archive.org/details/edgm-15925>.

⁶ His texts from this period have been gathered in C. EINSTEIN, *La Columna Durruti y otros artículos y entrevistas de la guerra civil española*. Barcelona: Mudito & Co., 2006 pub. U. Fleckner

⁷ On Einstein and the *avant-garde*, see: L. MEFFRE. *Carl Einstein et la problematique des avantgardes dans les arts plastiques*, Bern: Peter Lang. 1989; U. FLECKNER, *La invención del siglo xx. Carl Einstein y las vanguardias*. Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia: and C. EINSTEIN, *El arte como revuelta*. cit.

other artists such as Miró and Dalí⁷. On the one hand, these links stemmed from European stereotypes of Spain that were a hangover from Romanticism. On the other hand, they were rooted in Einstein’s belief that the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War marked the beginning of a revolution.

Let us begin with Picasso, given that it seems the artist was one of the last people Einstein wrote to before his death. From his dwelling in Barcelona’s carrer Verdi (Verdi Street), Einstein penned his last missive to Picasso. It was also to be the last letter he sent from Spain⁸. “You cannot imagine,” he wrote, “how happy I feel to have fought alongside your countrymen. It is the happiest of my memories.” He followed this up with: “Believe me, I am ready to lay down my life for your country and there can be no doubt that Franco will be defeated.” The letter was dated 6th January 1939. Just twenty days later, Fascist troops marched into Barcelona. *Match* magazine featured a double-page photo spread in its February 1939 edition⁹. A sensationalist double-page photo was plastered with snapshots of ministers, generals and ambassadors crossing the French border. One of the photos was of Carl Einstein. He was wearing clothes he had dyed blue just a few days before after removing all military insignia. He then passed himself off as a militia officer and told tall tales as he sat on a Perpignan café terrace. Yet *Fortune* had other things in store for Einstein and his role as a spinner of yarns would prove short-lived. Even so, Einstein’s letter

takes a more serious tone, with the writer insisting on the need both to avoid easy literature and to treat the artist as a hero.

Let us turn back the clock to 1912 and Einstein’s first reference to Picasso. It cropped up in an article on the latest in French painting. Despite the French context of the piece and its treatment of Picasso as the culmination of French tradition of painting, Einstein cannot help making the following comment: “Standing before one of Picasso’s canvases, one is reminded of Spanish architecture and its intricate Gothic forms.” Later in 1923, in another article¹⁰ he considered Picasso’s work to be full of “Cervantine contrasts”. In a 1928 article simply titled “Picasso”, he noted the painter’s work was “full of Spanish emphasis” and that his still lifes “recalled Zubarán’s nocturnal intensity and rigour” and so forth¹¹. It is interesting that Einstein’s discussion of Picasso as a great “French” painter includes references to Spanish art, albeit minor ones.

The allusion to “the Gothic complexity of Spanish architecture” is unsettling and merits discussion. Einstein’s words are revealing because they encapsulate the notion of Spanish Art as grotesque –an idea whose roots lay in Romanticism and that had gained currency among critics in the eighteen eighties. Far from being abandoned, the notion was taken to absurd lengths in the early 20th century. Einstein was as convinced of the “Gothic complexity” of Picasso’s Cubism as other critics were of the “excess” and monstrous nature of El Greco’s works¹².

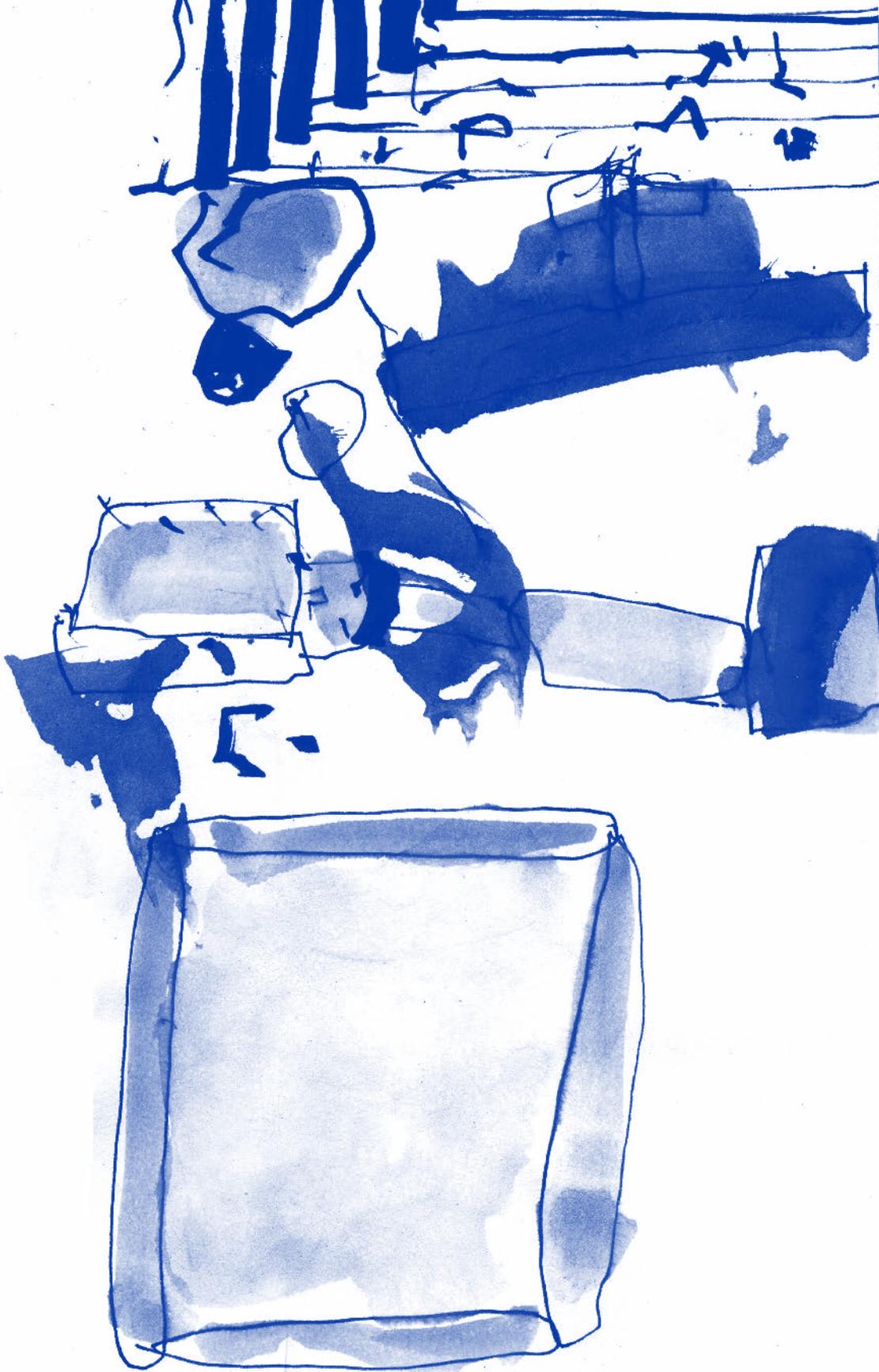
■ ⁸ *Correspondencia Carl Einstein-Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, 1921-1939*. Barcelona, Ediciones de La Central, 2008. pp. 124-125 (L. Meffre edition).

⁹ U. FLECKNER, *op. cit.*, p. 420.

¹⁰ Translator’s note: See “Gerettete Malerei, enttäuschte Pompiers” [Rescued Paintings, Disappointed Academic Painters], *Werke Band 2. 1919–1928*, ed. Hermann Haarmann and Klaus Siebenhaar (Berlin: Fannei & Walz, 1996), 334–39. 334.

¹¹ C. EINSTEIN, *op. cit.*, pp. 25, 149, 157.

¹² In the German context, ranging from historians – Carl Justi, Julius Meier-Graefe, Hugo Von Tschudi, Kurt Steinbart and Max Dvorak, and researchers such as Arthur Weese (all at the beginning of the century) to artists



However, there is more to it than this. In the France of the First-World War and post-war, Picasso was interpreted in two ways. The first was as an exponent of art in the “monstrous” Spanish tradition, the second was as a “great architect” in the French tradition. While André Salmon used the name “Lucifer” in the pages of *L’Esprit Nouveau* to describe Picasso as a Spanish artist, his colleagues were hailing the painter as the master of architectural composition. The latter saw Picasso as the epitome of modernity and wrote “Picasso’s Cubist paintings are the kind of works that get one into The Academy of Arts.”¹³

We have just seen how Einstein spoke of “the Gothic complexity”, “Cervantine contrasts” and “Zúrbaranesque darkness” and “the Spanish emphasis” of Picasso’s works. Yet in the self-same texts he also lauded “the tectonic power”, “tectonic pathos” and “tectonic architecture” of the artist’s canvases –qualities that have nothing to do with Spanish Gothic and can just as easily be applied to Poussin and Cézanne.

Does this mean that Einstein’s interpretation of Picasso was based upon both the “monstrous” Spanish nature of Picasso’s work and on lauding his French classicism? Paraphrasing Einstein’s friend Grosz, the answer is a small “yes” and a big “no”. While the critic –like many of his fellows– spoke of the “excessively” Spanish nature of Picasso’s art, he also compared his work to architecture, albeit Gothic! Like other critics, he spoke of

architecture but instead of using it as a metaphor for composition and order, he employed it to highlight the “tectonic” nature of Picasso’s work and its earthiness.

This is one of the keys to Einstein’s art criticism. His shining visions, radical analyses and sheer originality made him one of a kind. Yet that does not mean he was an eccentric whose views one can pass off with a condescending smile – indeed, quite the contrary. The fact is, Einstein’s views were part and parcel of the most conventional modern art criticism.

Even so, he had a disconcerting habit of breaking the spell and coming up with maverick ideas¹⁴. Einstein was fated to be deliberately forgotten not because he was a fringe figure but because he was so central. “The Picasso continent” is the name Uwe Fleckner gave to one of the chapters of his anthology on Einstein’s writings and reveals this to perfection. Once again, we bump into the unsettling “tectonic” simile used time and time again by Einstein in relation to Cubism. The notion is tactile rather than metaphorical. “Gothic complexity” is another *leitmotiv* in his art criticism. In a text on an exhibition of Picasso’s work in 1913, he wrote: “The Cubists’ work harks back to that of their Gothic forbears.” Ten years later, in an article cited earlier –*Gerettete Malerei, enttäuschte Pompeiers*– Einstein was at it again, writing: “The Cubists, as in Gothic times, base their art on what they see, not on prejudice.” Lastly, in a 1929 article on Picasso, he wrote: “Giotto’s paintings stemmed from architecture. The artist

■ such as Franz Marc and Wassili Kandinski (who turned El Greco to good advantage), together with the modern Gothicism of the Eiffel Tower and his *Almanach of Der Blaue Reiter* group of artists, published in 1912.

¹³ A. SALMON. *Propos d’atelier*, Paris: Crès & Cie., 1922: J. BISSIÈRE, “Notes sur Ingres”, *L’Esprit Nouveau*, Issue 4. Paris, January 1921. pp. 387-409.

¹⁴ G. DIDI-HUBERMAN, “L’anachronisme fabrique l’histoire: sur l’inactualité de Carl Einstein”, *Études Germaniques*, Issue 1. Paris, January-March 1998. pp. 29-54.

came up with a set of visual systems that are analogous to architecture. In our Age, the sculptor and architect stem from the artist. Cézanne was the first architect of our Age and now Picasso occupies his place.¹⁵ He could not have been more explicit. Einstein was not using metaphors but rather was saying that “painting” is “architecture” in a way whose only parallel is to be found in the Gothic. It is not a question of architectural “composition” –the balance of plans, colours, volumes and so on as in the Classical scheme– but rather of a “tectonic”, collective approach to building. Hence Einstein’s constant mention of collectivism, which he contrasts with Picasso’s genius. He argues that collective art characterised the distant past and that myth, not genius, lay at its core. Here, he venerates Picasso as an interpreter of myth rather than as a genius. Could it be that Einstein was following the German tradition that –ever since the days of Romanticism– had set greater store by Gothic cathedrals than by Classical temples? This needs looking into but, in any case, for Einstein the catalyst for the collective and mythical traits lay not in a German “spirit” but rather in the “devilish” Picasso.

Carl Einstein was born in Neuwied (Rhineland-Palatinate), Germany in 1885. He was the son of an active member of the local Jewish community. In 1904, he went to Berlin to study the History of Art, Philosophy, History and the Classics at Friederich Wilhelm University but did not finish his degree. He began his career as an art critic and experimental writer. In 1912, Einstein published the novel *Bubuquin oder die Dilettanten des Wunders*. On the outbreak of war in 1914, he volunteered

for military service and received a head injury at the front. In 1915, he published *Negerplastik* (Negro Sculpture), in which he linked African masks and sculpture with Contemporary Art, particularly Cubism. In 1919, he returned to Berlin, where he joined the Spartacist League and the German Communist Party (KPD). Einstein worked with the Dadaists and with George Grosz, published the magazine *Der blutige Ernst*. In 1926, he published his greatest work: *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* (20th Century Art). He moved to Paris in 1928, where he founded the magazine *Documents*. The Nazis’ rise to power meant Einstein chose exile in Paris over living in Germany. In 1936, he gave up writing to go to Spain and fight on the Republican side in the civil war. Einstein enlisted in the Durruti Column. He fled to France in 1939 as the Republic succumbed to Franco’s armies. After being interned in a camp near Bordeaux, he took his own life on 5th July 1940. Carl Einstein is buried at Boeil-Bézing in the *Département des Pyrénées-Atlantiques* (Aquitaine, France). Einstein’s “Spanish emphasis” apart, what can we say about Einstein’s real-life journey to Spain in 1936, when he enlisted in The Durruti Column¹⁶? The song that floated from the gramophone in Grosz’s brothel contains the lines:

*Far to the south lies fairest Spain,
Spain thou art my homeland,
Where the shady chestnuts fain
Rustle by the Ebro’s strand*

Translator’s adaptation of the German:

*Fern im Süd das schöne Spanien,
Spanien ist mein Heimatland,
Wo die schattigen Kastanien,
Rauschen an des Ebro Strand*

■ ¹⁵ C. EINSTEIN, *op. cit.*, pp. 147, 149, 165.

¹⁶ In addition to the books cited in footnotes 1 and 6, see M. KRÖGER, H. ROLAND (eds.) *Carl Einstein im Exil. Kunst und Politik in den 1930er Jahren*, Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2007. also varied information on Einstein’s last years, compiled by Les Giménologies and which can be found at <http://gimenologies.org>.

Einstein travelled from the north in his quest for the chestnuts on the River Ebro’s banks¹⁷. He would have recalled that it was at Horta d’Ebre that Picasso began his Cubist period, though he painted chimney-like palm trees, not chestnut trees. In any case, Einstein ended his dalliance with “The South” by scribbling some of his last lines on the Ebro Front.

What was written of Spain back in 1936? Issue 200 of *L’art vivant* announced an Easter trip to Spain by *wagon-lit* for its subscribers. The magazine described Spain as “ardent and mysterious”. This is what Romantic artists said of the country. Yet it is the date –April 1936– that grabs one’s attention. It was just three months before the outbreak of a civil war that was to unleash Spain’s terrible, simmering passions. The whole thing provides a surprising contrast between modern holidays, means of transport and tourism on the one hand and war on the other. After the war broke out, many tourists went to Spain to see what was afoot¹⁸. Let us forget the celebrities and focus on the people who interest us here. Foreigners in the Durruti Column were organised in an International Brigade. By October 1936, there were some two hundred of these volunteers. Things were much the same in “The Ascaso Column”¹⁹. However, for the CNT and FAI, the volunteers were numerically unimportant and even a strategic burden. In fact, both CNT and

FAI propaganda called for fewer volunteers and more arms. In one of his last orders, Durruti asked the foreign volunteers to stop making “tourist trips” to the front²⁰.

In May 1938, *Meridia* –a magazine that styled itself as an anti-Fascist forum– published an article in which Sebastià Gasch interviewed Einstein in Barcelona²¹. It was introduced by way of a rhetorical exchange between Gasch and Joan Prats. Gasch asked Prats who had driven his vehicle the other day and was taken aback when Prats told him it was none other than Carl Einstein. Prats added that Einstein was “fighting in our army’s ranks”. “I am stunned,” replied Gasch. Are we to believe that in 1938, Gasch did not know that Einstein was in Barcelona? After Gasch’s surprise (feigned or not), the way in which Einstein was presented could not have been more theatrical. The article stated: “Einstein is known to Art-lovers the world over [...] a discoverer of Primitive Art, Director of *Documents* magazine [...] big-game hunter in Africa; international sportsman, boxer and soccer player and currently the only world-famed intellectual fighting at the front.” Einstein was put over as a pioneer and globetrotter rolled into one. So, was Einstein one of that war-happy band of “revolutionary tourists”? The answer in this case is a resounding “no”.

Let us examine four scattered pieces of evidence. The DAS group was set up in 1934 by exiled German anarchists²². The

■ ¹⁷ Translator’s note: The Ebro has many tree species but the notion of rustling glades of chestnut trees along its banks is mere poetic invention. However *Kastanien* (chestnut trees) is an easy rhyme with *Spanien* (Spain) in German. ‘Fain’ has been used in the same way to make the English adaptation rhyme.

¹⁸ W. FOSS, C. GERANTHY, *The Spanish Arena*, London: John Gifford. 1938.

¹⁹ Translator’s note: A unit of some 2000 men, raised in Barcelona. The unit subsequently merged with other “columns” (or brigades) to form a force of some 7000 men and later became the 28th Division.

²⁰ D. BERRY, “French Anarchists in Spain, 1936-1939”, *French History*, vol. 3, Issue 5, Oxford, December 1989, pp. 427-441.

²¹ “Unes declaraciones sensacionales de Carl Einstein...”, now in C. EINSTEIN, *La Columna Durruti y otros artículos y entrevistas de la guerra civil española*, cit., pp. 28-31.

²² On the colony of German anarchists in Barcelona, see: D. NELLES, H. PIOTROWSKI, U. LINSE, C. GARCÍA, *Antifascistas alemanes en Barcelona (1933-1939)*, *El Grupo DAS: sus actividades contra la red nazi y en el frente de Aragón*, Barcelona: Sintra. 2010.

community of German exiles had begun organising themselves in 1932. It soon became one of Europe's biggest anarchist groupings. Barcelona became the favourite place for exiles, who included: Etta Federn; Augustin Souchy; Gees and Paul Helberg. Emma Goldman, Arthur Lehninger and Hans Kaminsky spent important parts of their lives in the city. The works of yet others, such as Helmut Rüdiger, Rudolf Michaelis and his wife, Margaret Michaelis, were to make their mark. Margaret Michaelis' reports on Barcelona's Red Light District for *AC* and similar art magazines made her one of the pioneers of Spain's *avant-garde* photography. Her remarkable contribution has only recently come to light²³. Many of the exiles met in carrer del Migdia (street name), where el Bar i la Pensió Escandinavia (bar-hostel name) stood, even though DAS headquarters was at carrer Aribau (street name). The letters Einstein posted from Barcelona were sent from carrer Verdi, 182 (street address) in Barcelona's Gràcia district. When war broke out, DAS –which had hitherto acted as a self-help organisation– became a politically important group, squabbling with exiled German Communists in the city and with delegates and commissioners of a Revolutionary German Consulate (the official German Consulate had closed, given Hitler's support for Franco). The German exiles were organised more or less along CNT-FAI lines (although not without ructions). As we noted earlier, it had its own sections in the Durruti and Ascaso columns. So when Einstein arrived,

he found a fully-functional organisation where he could slot in. None of this smacked of the "tourist-cum-hero". Einstein arrived in Barcelona between August and September 1936, shortly after the war's outbreak. He came with his wife Lydia, who worked as a nurse and seamstress up until 1939. They had left Paris without telling any of their friends. Einstein's first letter was to Kahnweiler from Barcelona in the summer of 1938. He was "convalescing" at the time –a year after the notorious *fets de maig*²⁴ of 1937, which led to the CNT losing power to the communists and the dismantling of the POUM and the "disappearance" (among others) of Andreu Nin²⁵. A "shadow" communist police force was used to terrorise and bump off anarchists. This and the forging of an alliance between the PSUC (the Catalan Communist Party) and the bourgeois factions in the Catalan Government further reduced the anarchists' room for manoeuvre. The DAS at the time was suffering severe persecution. With almost all of its members in prison, to all intents and purposes it had ceased to exist. In this context, the opening words of Einstein's letter to Kahnweiler make a big impression: "Dear Friends, How are you and the family? Do not blame me for not having written to you for I have been very busy"²⁶. He tells us very little but that is hardly surprising for Einstein would have erred on the side of caution. Spelling out what he had been up to between 1936 and the time the letter was written would have been risky to say the least. What we do

■ ²³ J. J. LAHUERTA, J. MENDELSON, *Margaret Michaelis. Fotografía, vanguardia y política en la Barcelona de la República*. Valencia: IVAM, 1998.

²⁴ Translator's note: The so-called 'Events of May', during which Anarchists and Communists engaged in fratricidal street battles in Barcelona.

²⁵ Translator's note: The Russian authorities have admitted that Nin was murdered by Soviet agents.

²⁶ *Correspondencia Carl Einstein-Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler*, cit. p. 104.

²⁷ See Les Giménologues edition by A. GIMÉNEZ, *Les fils de la nuit. Souvenirs de la guerre d'Espagne (juillet 1936-février 1939)*, 2nd. Ed. Montreuil-Marseille: L'insomniaque & Les Giménologues, 2006, p. 152. There is a translation in Spanish by Pepitas de Calabaza, Logroño, 2009.

know is that he was “Technical Director” of a nine-kilometre stretch of front under the Durruti Column’s command. We also know Einstein still held this post in January 1937, when the Durruti Column became the 26th Division and that he continued holding this command. It is confirmed by Bruno Salvadori, alias Antonio Giménez²⁷, who recalls Einstein building a barricade in front of the *Spartikus* group’s headquarters during “The Events of May”. *Spartikus* brought together French and German anarchists. Salvadori took him to be Albert Einstein’s brother and so had no idea who he really was. Another thing that is known is that Einstein wrote the funeral elogy for Durruti – a discourse that was read over the radio from the CNT’s Barcelona headquarters in November 1936. Einstein also wrote an article in 1937 analysing the strategic importance of the Aragon Front. We also know that he gave talks, such as one at the Ateneu Enciclopèdic Popular (People’s Arts Club) in which he spoke on “The artist’s current role”. In 1938, he gave interviews with various Barcelona media. In his letters to Kahnweiler from summer 1938 onwards, Einstein constantly repeats that he would never again write about art on his return to Germany. Why was he so keen to forget his craft? When Gasch asked him what role an intellectual should play in a country at war, Einstein said that it was “to abandon the privileges of venerable but poorly-paid cowardice and leave for the trenches”²⁸. Words had become obscene for Einstein after seeing his comrades killed at the front – a sentiment that crops up again and again in his letters.

I have spoken of the numerous German anarchists who fought in the war but I could just as easily have mentioned the German Communists who took part. For example, take the writer Ludwig Renn. He arrived in Barcelona on 1st October 1936 – a little after Einstein. He enlisted in the Thalmann Brigade, comprising communist volunteers²⁹. In his memoirs of the Spanish Civil War, Renn recalls his duties as a technical advisor (possibly playing a similar role to Einstein’s). Here one should remember both Germans had gained their combat experience in the First World War. However, Renn is scathing about the Spanish Republic’s military incompetence and its hopelessly outdated methods of waging war. Renn was also shocked at the way soldiers and officers addressed each other in a familiar, off-hand way. He also rails against the Spaniards’ “pathetic rhetoric” and “false idea of heroism”. In a report written after a visit to the front, Renn wrote: “I fear for the Republic for while its soldiers are as keen as mustard, they do not have the foggiest notion of tactics.” It is clear that Renn, as a good communist, was a natural organiser and that was his mission in Spain. He is quick to highlight the anarchists’ faults: foolish heroism; unbounded enthusiasm; fleeting comradeship; dreams of revolution; naivety; inexperience; lack of training and discipline; not to mention suspicions of conspiracy and betrayal. Renn’s style is as cold as ice and he sees the anarchists as the biggest hurdle to organising the Republican armies and winning the war against Fascism. The finger of blame was pointed at the anarchists back then and has not wavered since.

■ ²⁸ *Correspondencia Carl Einstein-Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler*, cit. p. 104; C. EINSTEIN, *La Columna Durruti y otros artículos y entrevistas de la guerra española*, cit. p. 30. This book also contains the texts mentioned above.

²⁹ L. RENN, *Der Spanische Krieg*, Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1956. See: H. PLARD, “*Les écrivains allemands*” in M. HANREZ (ed.), *Les écrivains de la Guerre d’Espagne*, Les Dossiers H, Paris: Pantheon Press, 1975, pp. 24-27, containing the quotations that follow [as translated] citations.

Yet when one reads “The Durruti Column” in Carl Einstein’s discourse, broadcast by CNT radio, one tends to forget this straight away. Instead, one is again taken by Einstein’s unsettling, untimely pronouncements. We read: “Durruti has consigned the pronoun ‘I’ to the scrap heap of history.” Einstein then goes on to praise the anonymity of collective work. On the other hand, he stressed action rather than words. He saw action not only as experience but also as the path to wisdom. Should this surprise us, coming from Einstein? Collectivism (in the guise of Gothic architecture) is the *leitmotiv* of his writings on Picasso and Cubism. His tectonic forces represent action, which Einstein prizes more than words. Criticisms of the anarchists’ libertarian policies or, more pointedly, the lack of supplies and armament suffered by anarchist forces on the Aragon Front also elicits the kind of response that one might expect from a maverick like Einstein. He writes: “Why is there so much distrust? Are we not all fighting for the same cause, namely the freedom of The Spanish People? Should we win the war first? The answer is ‘yes, but war as revolution’. Who does not want to wage war among the CNT’s ranks on the Aragon Front? Who would dare to lengthen this war? Who would dare withhold weapons and supplies from our soldiers³⁰?” The whole text is a litany of awkward, untimely complaints for which many would cheerfully have consigned their author to oblivion. Yet does that make Einstein a traitor and a romantic in comparison with his communist comrades-in-arms? The answer is clearly “no”.

Let us make another comparison. What were intellectuals elsewhere doing about the Spanish Civil War—for example, in the Parisian circles Einstein had frequented? In his first letter to Kahnweiler, written in the summer of 1938, Einstein asks after a few old friends. One of them was Michel Leiris, an old colleague at *Documents*. Spain and everything Spanish had become the focus of Leiris’ literary endeavours, in which he harped on his version of bullfighting, death and atonement. The same themes had been in vogue since the days of Romanticism—passion, death, cruelty, tragic dance and so on. Spain’s art was seen in the same devilish light. With this intellectual baggage, it was easy to see the Spanish Civil War as just the last and bloodiest bullfight. The temptation of framing the war in bullfighting terms proved irresistible and the Minotaur in the labyrinth was a favourite metaphor. The books, articles and poems written by Michel Leiris in those years exemplified the trend. *Miroir de la tauromachie* (The Bullfight as Mirror) and *La Tauromaquie* (Bullfighting), published in 1937: the poem *Ventall per als toros*³¹ (A Window on Bulls) of 1938, published later in *Haut mal: De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie* (Literature as a Bullfight, 1939). In 1938, Leiris published a text on André Masson, another of his colleagues at *Documents*. Not surprisingly, it once again took the bull by the horns: *le peintre-matador* (The Painter-Matador). Yet Masson’s work during those years was also full of bulls, labyrinths and skulls. In the same vein, his set for Cervantes’ *Numancia* at the Théâtre Antoine in Paris (April 1937)

■ ³⁰ C. EINSTEIN, “El frente de Aragón” (1937), now in *La Columna Durruti y otros artículos y entrevistas de la guerra civil española*, cit., p. 27.

³¹ Translator’s note: The original title in French not found on the Internet.

³² E. GUIGON (ed.), *El surrealismo y la guerra civil española*, Terol: Museo de Teruel, 1998; Milan: Electa, 2006, pp. 59-66.

³³ *Correspondencia Carl Einstein-Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler*, cit. pp. 124-125.

depicted a Spain with lunar landscapes, black skies and purple lamps. It evoked the colours found in Spain’s dirge-like Easter processions, full of the dark passions and mystery expected by tourists. Spain had been abandoned to her fate by Europe’s dwindling democracies. The way French artists and intellectuals mystified the war partly stemmed from their feeling of powerlessness. However, it also had roots in the past. It is symptomatic that when the war was already six months old, Masson (who had lived with Bataille in Catalonia between 1934 and 1936) put on an exhibition in Paris, titled *Espagne* (Spain). Commenting on this exhibition, Leiris used an expression that by now will be familiar: “passionate Spain”. Masson’s aim was to convey the tragedy

of war. Yet if the truth be told, most of the works had been painted before the war’s outbreak. “Passionate Spain” was thus an all-too-predictable stereotype³².

Both Leiris and Masson had been Einstein’s friends in Paris. Could they remain so? The answer is “no”. When Einstein wrote from Barcelona on 6th January 1939, it was just twenty days before the Fascists marched into the city amid an outpouring of works on the “artistic” and “poetic” theme of “The Fall of Barcelona”. Einstein had already written to Kahnweiler to say he would never write on art again. In his last letter, he wrote to Picasso: “I need no sermons nor literary persuasion to vindicate my ideas. There is no more to be said on the issue. One should know when the time for words has run out.”³³ II