

# Gaston Leval

## CNT Radical, Anarcho-Syndicalist, and Spanish Civil War Historian

(1895 - 1978)

**Description :** He was a French anarchist during the Spanish Civil War and was the son of a French Communard. Leval, himself was a French anarcho-syndicalist militant and a participant in the foundation congress of the Red International of Labor Unions from June-August 1921. (From : Anarchy Archives)

**Tags :** anarcho-syndicalist, militia, historian, spanish revolution, spanish civil war, anti-war, anti-draft, cnt, spanish, anarchist.

### Quotes :

*"The methodical police terror, the [Bolshevik] Party's tightening grip upon the whole of social life, the systematic annihilation of all non-Bolshevik currents, the no less systematic extermination of all revolutionaries who thought along lines different from those of the new masters, and indeed the eradication of every hint of dissent within the Party all proved that we were on the road to a new despotism that was not merely political but also intellectual, mental and moral, reminiscent of the darkest days of the Middle Ages."*

(From : "Anarchists Behind Bars," by Gaston Leval, Summer, 1921.)

*"...the Spanish Libertarian workers co-ordinate and rationalize production in a much more satisfactory way than Capitalism had done. And I lay special stress on the disappearance of small unhealthy and costly workshops and factories, besides the correct use of machinery for the work most suited to it."*

(From : "Collectives in Spain," by Gaston Leval, 1945.)

*"...the means of production remained unused in the barns of the rich, whilst the poor peasants worked the land with roman plows drawn by worn out donkeys and mules!"* (From :

"Collectives in Spain," by Gaston Leval, 1945.)

## **Biography :**

Gaston Leval 1

Pedro R. Piller, born in 1895, went under the pseudonym of Gaston Leval. He was a French anarchist during the Spanish Civil War and was the son of a French Communard. Leval, himself was a French anarcho-syndicalist militant and a participant in the foundation congress of the Red International of Labor Unions from June-August 1921. Leval worked as a delegate from the Spanish CNT and his negative report about what he had seen in Russia led the CNT to refuse to join the International. During his time in Moscow, Leval's attention turned to the fate of imprisoned Russian anarchists. Leval was still a young delegate to the Profintern Congress at the time and was granted access to visit Volin in prison. Speaking in flawless French, Volin regaled him for some time with the story of his travels in the Ukraine. Leval soon became a political prisoner himself, after avoiding the draft during the first World War, spending many years in the prisons of Spain and Latin America.

Below is a brief biography contributed by Ern  Berthier

In 1915 Gaston Leval refused to fight in the war and went to Barcelona with false ID papers under the name of Josep Venutti. He was then 18 years old. He had thought that the French anarchists and the revolutionary syndicalists would have answered the mobilization orders by a general strike and an insurrection. Many of those who, behind the black flag, had adopted heroic attitudes went to the front.

In Barcelona he contacts other French anarchists but very quickly he stops seeing them for they all, directly or not, worked for the war industry. Later he meets Pierre Galy, a French deserter who had fought 14 months on the front and who had fled to Barcelona. Galy was a professor in philosophy who inculcated in Leval the taste for study; in return, Leval converted him to anarchism. Galy wrote in the libertarian press under the name of "Lyg". "He was the only master I had in my life" wrote Leval in 1962 when Galy died (*Cahiers du socialisme libertaire*, #83).

At that period Spain knew a great social unrest due to many strikes. In Barcelona he spent five months in prison for "lack of ID papers". He then went to Saragossa and then returned to Barcelona where he worked in a forge until 1919. He wrote quite regularly in the anarchist papers. At the end of 1919 he once more had

problems with the police and went to Valencia where he was asked to publish a libertarian paper, "La Guerra Social". The police found him quickly and he spent three months in prison. There were many strikes in Barcelona at that time and the anarchists were the first victims of police repression. Thousands of anarchists were then in jail. As was the case for many activists at that time, prison gave him the opportunity to read and study.

When he left prison, he went back to Barcelona where the anarchists were greatly preoccupied with the Russian revolution. He met Victor Serge. Gaston showed a great skepticism concerning the development of the revolution in Russia. Therefore, the federation of anarchist groups of Barcelona appointed him as deputy delegate of the CNT and he went to Moscow in 1921 to take part in the constitutive congress of the Red unions international. It was in that period that he chose the pseudonym of Gaston Leval.

At his arrival in Moscow, he contacted a group of French communists among whom was Victor Serge, Alfred Rosmer and Marcel Body. M. Body was a French soldier who was a member of the French expeditionary army in Russia, deserted and joined the bolchevik party. He became a member of the International but later gave up communism, became an anarchist and translated Bakunin in French. He worked at the end of his life for the Institute of social history of Amsterdam, which published the works of Bakunin. Marcel once told us that three months after they had seized power, the bolchevik leaders made an enormous party to celebrate the fact that they had lasted as long as the Paris Commune in 1871. This was to explain that they were conscious their power was extremely fragile and that anything could overthrow them.

In Russia, Gaston asked a lot of questions, particularly about the thousands of anarchists who were in jail. He met Voline, Emma Goldman, and Alexander Berkman who tell him about the situation. He told us about his meetings with Alexandra Kollontai, who was afraid of Boukharin, Zinoviev and Trotsky. He tried to convince the other delegations to take action against the imprisonment of anarchist and socialist activists. During the congress, certain delegations ask very precise questions to the head of the Komintern and particularly Boukharin who, considering them too embarrassing, orders the Red Guard to protect the tribune against the attacks of the "anarchist" syndicalists who dared ask the representatives of the

Soviet workers accounts for their actions. This initiative produces a great uproar in the congress room. Gaston and a group of comrades climb on the tribune, demanding the withdrawal of the Red guard.

The Spanish delegation was in a very strange position. In fact the majority of the Spanish delegation agreed with the joining of the CNT to the Komintern. They had not been appointed by a congress of the CNT because the repressive context in Spain forbade the calling of a congress. However, there had been a clandestine plenum in Lerida, which had been infiltrated by the communists. In his book *l'Insoumis*, Gaston writes: "Four newcomers had come, influenced by the Russian revolution, source of so many hopes within the proletarian masses. We didn't know them. They made a good impression, their mandates were valid, that was enough"; I only knew the first one (Arlendis) recently passed over to bolchevism, but I realized then that the other three belonged also to the Communist party and had taken profit of the situation caused by our clandestineness to get appointed delegates, deceiving the confidence of the members on the national plenum."

Gaston Leval returned to Spain at the end of 1921, but he first stayed some time in Paris where he wrote for the *Libertaire* a series of articles on his impressions in Russia ("Choses de Russie" (Things from Russia), *Le Libertaire*, 11-17 November 1921). These articles will constitute the basis of his report to the congress of the CNT in Saragossa in 1922. The information he will bring, and those of Angel Pestana will lead to the definite separation of the CNT from the Third International.

A little later Gaston will write a pamphlet, "Los anarquistas rusos in prison", where he develops his observations, denounces the bolchevik repression and the regressive character of the bolchevik regime.

He told many anecdotes about his stay in Russia. Bolchevik officials had once proposed a visit to a school. Gaston noted that the children were very well dressed and behaved like well educated bourgeois children, the little girls making elegant bows when the delegation passed. That made Gaston suspicious and he finally was told that the school was a special school for children of bolchevik leaders and members of the czarist regime who had joined the regime. He also told us he had managed to meet Trotsky and told him about the anarchist prisoners. Trotsky got infuriated and answered that no anarchist was in jail because of his ideas and those

who were were in fact bandits. Gaston, clothed as a woman, managed to slip in a long file of women who brought food to their husbands, brothers, etc. He got into the prison and met a number of anarchists who told him about the real situation. This is how he got a number of anarchists out of prison, including Voline.

Gaston Leval's report to the congress of the CNT in 1922 had important consequences.

He had frequently told us about the repercussion created by the Russian revolution on the European working class, but particularly in France, where there were many anarcho-syndicalists, whose leaders had been in majority against the war.

At the end of the 19th century, what we call "bourses du travail", had been created under the influence of a well-known anarchist militant, Fernand Pelloutier. I don't know if there is anything equivalent in Anglo-Saxon countries. A "bourse du travail" is a place (a room, or a building) where local trade unions meet. It was considered at that time that the workers had to organize in two different types of structures: vertical (or industrial), and horizontal (or geographical), since the workers had to fight on their work-place within their industrial organization as well as on the place where they lived within their geographical structure, that is the "bourses du travail". In these structures, workers of many industries could meet, discuss their problems, organize solidarity between different industries, compare wages, but also take actions on extra-working problems such as specific local problems (housing, food, etc.) (The two organizations merged in 1895 to form the CGT, which still now functions on the basis of the double "vertical and horizontal" structure.)

This precision is important, because when the revolution burst out in Russia and the French workers were told about the soviets, they immediately made an analogy with their "bourses du travail", and for quite a long time they thought the bolcheviks were anarchists.

Now to get back to our subject, the French CGT, although there were many anarcho-syndicalists in it, made a favorable report concerning the question of joining in the Red international. Therefore, bolchevik activists progressively took control of the whole organization, although they had more difficulty to do so in the "bourses du travail". Within a few years, the whole CGT fell under the control of the communists.

In Spain, since the CNT had decided not to join the International, the infiltration was much more difficult and the communists did not succeed. Furthermore, the Communist party practically was not able to develop at all in Spain, which it did in France precisely because of its control over the CGT. The control over the French CGT was the basis on which the Communist party developed in France. In Spain, on the contrary, the Communist party in 1936 was constituted of hardly a few thousands of members, among whom a minority of workers.

After his return from Russia, Leval could not find a job so he traveled in the North of Spain as an itinerant photographer, which gave him the opportunity to meet a lot of people. In the Asturias he contacted the group which published "Accion Libertaria" and wrote a few articles. He finally reached La Corogne where the sailor's union of the CNT had created a rationalist school, and he became a school teacher. Unfortunately, the school was closed under the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera in 1923. Leval had been married for a few months and his situation was desperate, so he decided to go to Latin America. He traveled as a stowaway in the hold of a ship and reached Montevideo, with no ID papers. He soon went to Argentina where he lived for three years in the most extreme misery. His daughter died through lack of medical assistance, and he could not even pay for a coffin.

From : Gaston Leval Bio, by Ern  Berthier, from Anarchy Archives.

### **Works :**

Author of Collectives in Spain (June 30, 1945)

Author of Collectives in Aragon (December 31, 1969)

Author of Anarchists Behind Bars (November 30, 1920)

Author of Collectives in the Spanish Revolution (November 30, 1974)

### **Chronology :**

**October 20, 1895** : Gaston Leval's Birth Day.

**April 08, 1978** : Gaston Leval's Death Day.

**November 15, 2016** : Gaston Leval's Added to  
<http://www.RevoltLib.com>.

**April 21, 2019** : Gaston Leval's Last Updated on  
<http://www.RevoltLib.com>.

### **Links :**

- **Anarchy Archives: Gaston Leval Archive**

[http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist\\_Archives/bright/leval/leval.html](http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/bright/leval/leval.html)

• **Anarchist Library: Gaston Leval**

<https://theanarchistlibrary.org/category/author/gaston-leval>

• **Wikipedia: Gaston Leval**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaston\\_Leval](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaston_Leval)

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