

M U J E R E S L I B R E S
S E L E C T E D E D I T O R I A L S

Translated from the Spanish by T E S S C . R A N K I N

EDITORIAL, ISSUE 1 [MAY 1936]

While we do not claim to be infallible, we are certain that we have arrived at the opportune moment. Yesterday would have been too soon; tomorrow, perhaps, too late.

Here we are, then, at the peak of our time, prepared to follow the path we have marked out to its very end; to channel woman's social action, giving her a new view of things, preventing her sensibility and brain from being contaminated by male errors. By male errors, we mean all of the current concepts regarding relation and coexistence; male errors, because we vigorously reject all responsibility for historical developments in which woman has never been an actor but rather was obliged to be a defenseless witness.

This does not imply recriminations against anyone. If the whole of the ignominious past we were sunk into causes us pain, we nevertheless dare not think that it could have been another way; we know that Humanity inflicts pain upon itself in the process of creating its path forward, and we are not interested in recalling the past but rather in

forging the present and confronting the future in the certainty that, in woman, Humanity has its ultimate reserve: an unprecedented strength capable of changing, due to the law of her very nature, the entire landscape of the world.

A resurrection of feminism? Bah! The war killed feminism, giving women more than they asked for by brutally forcing them to stand in for men. We are not interested in a feminism that sought its expression outside the feminine, trying to assimilate virtues and values that are foreign to us. We are interested in another, more substantial feminism, from the inside out, the expression of a “mode,” of a nature, of a different system, one opposed to the system constructed by masculine forms of expression and male nature.

A declaration of war, perhaps? No, no. A melding of interests, a fusion of concerns, a zeal for cordiality in search of a shared destiny. The desire to give life the sense of balance that it lacks, which gives rise to all its ills.

But that is already more than feminism. Feminism and masculinism are two terms of the same scale. Several years ago, French journalist Léopold Lacour found the perfect term: integral humanism.

Due to a lack of integrity or wholeness and, as a result, a lack of balance, civilization threatens to collapse. To reproduce, the species needs two elements, masculine and feminine. Society is the medium in which the species develops and if, in the creation of that medium, those aforementioned elements do not come together equally, a dangerous

imbalance will inevitably arise in moral beings, which may lead all of Humanity down a path of ruin.

This brings us to the terrible crossroads at which we now find ourselves. An excess of audacity, roughness, inflexibility—male virtues—have given life this sense of brutality that leads some to feed on the misery and hunger of others. Humanity has unfolded in a unilateral direction, and this is the result. The absence of women from History has led to a lack of understanding, consideration, and affect, which are their virtues and would have been the counterbalance to provide the world with the stability it lacks.

These are decisive moments for History; we must set forth once more on the path, rectify mistakes, subvert concepts, and, above all, give to every thing, every fact, every human expression the value that it has in its own right based on the intention that produced it, removed from mere circumstance or accidents that have shaped it; and no one, absolutely no one, can shrug and keep this pressing task of preparation at arm's length.

Thus MUJERES LIBRES is born. In this atmosphere heavy with perplexity, we wish to make a sincere, firm, and unselfish voice heard: that of woman, but a voice that belongs to her, that is her own, one that is born of her inner nature; one not preached or learned in the choirs of theorists. To that end, we will try to prevent women, who yesterday were subjected to the tyranny of religion, from falling prey, when they open their eyes to the fullness of life, to another tyranny no less refined and even more brutal, one that

already besieges and covets women to act as the instrument of its ambitions: politics.

Politics presents itself as the art of governing the people. It may perhaps be that in the realm of abstract definitions, but in reality, in this reality that we suffer in our flesh, politics is the putrefaction that eats away at the world. To say “politics” is to say “power,” and where there is power, there is slavery, which is moral laxity and misery.

MUJERES LIBRES proclaims itself on the side of a free and decent life, where each man—we use this word in the generic sense—can be his own master.

MUJERES LIBRES asserts that to discover new horizons, it is necessary to discover new vantage points. Politics disgusts us because it does not comprehend human problems but rather sect or class interests. The interests of the people are never the interest of politics. Politics is the permanent incubator of war. It always, always carries in its gut the germ of imperialism. There are no straight paths in politics. It could be depicted as a zero eternally biting its tail.

MUJERES LIBRES seeks the infinite straight path of direct and free action by the multitudes and by individuals. We must construct a new life with new procedures.

We are certain that thousands of women will recognize their own voice here, and we will soon have alongside us a mass of young women that is now stirring disoriented in factories, fields, and universities, diligently seeking the way to channel their concerns in formulas for action.



1

A Magazine that seeks free women in Spain. But are men already free?

2

Why do women have to fight for their own liberty? Perhaps because the men who fight for this liberty forget about the liberty of women.

3

A free woman must first be free in her home. This is what the man who lives by her side must understand.

4

The primary objective of women's struggle consists in making men—their fathers, brothers, and relatives first—understand that without the liberty of women, that of men is worth nothing.

5

An emancipated woman means a free family.

6

With free women, the social struggle of men would increase its chances of triumph.

FANNY

Paris, May 1936

EDITORIAL, ISSUE 2 [N.D. 1936]

We cannot help but smile when we hear the frank tenderness with which many women utter the word *democracy*. One would think, upon hearing them, that this word contained all of the meaning of life, that it is the limit of all things, the defining term of all possibilities.

We won't try to deny that democracy has had its time and has played its role in the history of human progress, but nor can we accept that it is, as many would like it to be, a definitive political structure, nor even that it is not already exhausted and, like all dead things, now an impediment to the very same advancement that it inspired.

The birth of democracy was that renewed budding of generous impulses, that renewed valorization of human sensitivity, which periodically arises throughout History when the people's political structures grow stiff from an excess of rote automation. But democracy, like all political systems, has undergone a process I would describe as a parabola—that is the exact image—and once its momentum is exhausted, from its determination to automate the spontaneous expressions of the people, it finally becomes that obstacle we've mentioned, which Humanity must overcome if it wishes to save itself.

And no one can tell us that democracy has not outlasted its evolutionary stage and begun its dizzying descent, which always tends toward regression. Thus we see how it stumbles upon new problems every day—war, mechanization and its

consequences for the worker, exchange, etc., etc.—that are unsolvable within the scope of its political limitations.

And what has happened is that democracy, which designated itself the regime of liberty, has forgotten to secure its own liberty, allowing the most significant aspect of the old regimes to stand: privilege.

For that reason alone, we denounce its falseness. In any dictionary we will find that *democracy* means government by the people, but democracy is not even remotely government by the people but rather government by a class. Democracy—no longer capable of supporting the weight of its lie in the face of the violence prompted by the disinherited classes—has recently granted itself an adjective, calling itself “bourgeois democracy.”

Even better: we now see it exposed, just as it is, and thus can understand perfectly its inability to resolve certain problems, and thus we can also understand its new modality: regression. To continue to advance would mean endangering the interests it represents: those of privilege and keeping a tight rein on change. It has no qualms about contradicting the work of a century in an instant, and so we have seen how in Germany, Italy, and other countries, it has thrown itself into reactionary arms to contain the advancement of the people, who were overtaking it. German fascism was born of democracy; Italian fascism was born of democracy; Austrian fascism was born—despite its later gestation—of democracy. Democracy opened the world’s doors to the “shirtless”; but now that the

1. *Descamisados* refers to the revolutionary Spanish masses, a usage that dates back as early as the Peninsular War that sought to free Spain from control by Napoleon; it was also the title of a periodical, *Los Descamisados*, published briefly during the First Spanish Republic in 1873.

“shirtless”¹ have gained awareness and intend to establish themselves in the world, it slams resoundingly shut those doors and turns the keys over to the *fascio*—when it doesn’t itself turn into the *fascio* overnight.

It has had no qualms about reducing to ashes the famed rights of man—of man, it should be clear; those of woman have not yet been granted—and the rights to freedom of association, to strike, to the free expression of thought have been turned into one single right: that of complaint, and only when one is alone, when one’s neighbor (if a lover of democracy) does not notice.

These three rights contained the most substantial aspects of democracy, if not the totality of democracy. And what remains of them? Without looking any further than Spain, the April 8th law concerning public order and censorship of the press.

Let us say it again. All political regimes, as a form of human expression, obey certain biological laws, the same laws that regulate the life of organized beings: birth, development, and death. Democracy, like all living things, carried within it the seed of its own destruction: the principle of liberty. It awoke in the oppressed masses the urge for libera-

tion and it showed them the way forward. What it cannot do is stop them in the middle of their journey; the multitudes will advance over its remains. The principle of liberty has strangled it. Democracy has died. The law has been obeyed. The epitaph on its tomb: LIES.

Have the women of the Women's Republican Union finally understood this? At the very least they have already begun to express their disappointment in their recent manifesto, in which they take offense at the Republic's detour on its way toward their cause, at how legislators and leaders have disdained their actions, which were highly effective at the ballot box in support of the same men who today forget them.

I have here the six demands, all of them undoubtedly of interest, that make up the republican women's manifesto:

PACIFISM. EQUAL RIGHTS. RIGHTS FOR CHILDREN AND MOTHERS. DETERMINATION OF PATERNITY. PROHIBITION OF CHILD EXPLOITATION. EFFECTIVE PROTECTION OF CHILDHOOD AND MOTHERHOOD. MORAL AND MATERIAL WELFARE (pre-matrimonial certifications and abolition of the traffic in women). FEMALE CONTRIBUTIONS TO LOCAL GOVERNANCE AND POPULAR INITIATIVES.

We in no way wish to deny that these demands are of interest, but we are certain that the fight to achieve them will inefficiently consume an absolute outpouring of women's energies. We once stated elsewhere that woman's mission is not to ask for laws but rather to break all of the

commandments. To create a new and free life. Forever upward. Our place, as oppressed women alongside oppressed men, is to take or create for ourselves whatever we can and not expect it, as a kindness, from anyone.

EDITORIAL, ISSUE 3 [JULY 1936]

After the war,² women, who had been brutally ripped from the purely animal rhythm of their previous lives, found themselves on the frontier of the future, perturbed and abandoned in the social upheaval, unequipped except for the overwhelming impedimenta of outdated ideas and feelings.

Everything that had been their life until yesterday—family, home, religion—had crumbled to the roar of cannons, and the timidity resulting from their previous cloistered existence became an infinite agoraphobia before a wide-open future that they had to cross with inexperienced steps.

This angst was worldwide, but the place where it reached enormous proportions, for reasons that are not difficult to imagine, was Germany. It is true that there, even before the war, an “elite” group of daring women were at the head of the universal women’s movement. But it is no less true that the average German woman was the *perfecta casada*,³ or put another way, the perfect housewife. There, care for and devotion to the home reached a level of refinement that would be difficult to achieve here for various reasons. And when that angst reached a

2. This refers to the First World War, though the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War would also profoundly affect women’s lives, with some even fighting on the frontlines in militias.

3. *La perfecta casada* is the title of a work by Fray Luis de León (1527-1591); the term, along with *ángel del hogar*, the angel of hearth and home, would come to designate prescribed roles for women under Franco, emphasizing conservative, Catholic values and the importance of inculcating those values in large families.

fever pitch, Hitler emerged preaching a return to the home, to the welcome heat of a healthy, warm, protected sphere. And the unacclimated woman, not yet reeducated in the new conditions of life, turned her desperate eyes toward that blind and stupid drift that had been her prior life, believing that she had found there salvation from the angst of her present.

Hitler triumphed. In the Barcelona journal *Tiempos Nuevos* [New times], Prof. Berneri tells us how Hitler fulfilled his promise: “One cannot speak of fascism,” he says, “without seeing rivers of women’s tears run forth.”

We do not mention this to cause ourselves pain, which would be cowardly. When we ask for woman to have the utmost right, liberty, we accept for her the utmost duty: sacrifice. We advance toward our conquest of the future with the highest degree of responsibility for our actions. In shared labor, it is just for pain and joy to be shared out equally, for us to bear the cross equally, and we do not even wish that our part be the lighter of the two.

It is a strange coincidence that weighs painfully on our hearts and has led us to evoke that pain and prompted us to reflect.

This disturbing news arrives to us from Moscow: Zenl Mühsam⁴—the widow of Erich Mühsam, whose vile murder by the “Nazis” in a concentration camp was commemorated on its anniversary the second week of July—has disappeared suddenly.

Approximately a year ago, Zenzl arrived in Russia with the aim of finalizing the details of the publication of her partner's works. It seems that at first she was received with sympathy and interest. As a result of that cordial reception, she entrusted Erich's manuscripts to the Soviet authorities. Then... she disappeared.

And it was neither an escape nor a voluntary disappearance, nor a coincidence or happenstance. Someone knows where she is and what has become of her.

Zenzl Mühsam has been kidnapped. Who knows if she is on her way to Siberia right now.

A shudder of horror runs through our insides, because we must note briefly: this took place in Russia.

Russia is where many concerned "new" women turn their eyes hopefully. Verbose propagandists and profuse literature have introduced us to a chimerical Russia, a paradise for women, and now, suddenly, this news will perplex the female World: Do we not need to question where this strange coincidence between fascist Germany and Soviet Russia comes from? How could the east and west meet, when one turns its face to

4. Zenzl and Erich Mühsam were German Jewish anarchists. Erich Mühsam was a writer who fought for radical soviet democracy in the November Revolution of 1918 in Germany and would go on to attack the Nazis in his texts. SS guards murdered him in the Oranienburg concentration camp on July 10, 1934. Also a leftist activist, Zenzl Mühsam turned over Erich's literary estate to Soviet authorities in 1935. She was later arrested and would spend nearly two decades in internment camps, prisons, and in exile in Siberia. She was released in 1955 and returned to East Berlin where she died in 1962.

yesterday while the other looks to tomorrow? What is the shared foundation upon which this unknown Hermes alights?

Upon submission—we respond—upon politics, which is the supreme negation of liberty.

By natural law, all that is established tends to be conserved, and politics is nothing other than the conservative activity of established things; and politics, though it be disguised in all the colors of the rainbow, is not, can never be, a revolutionary instrument. Men make revolutions, politics stultifies and nullifies them, replacing the vital and progressive action of the multitudes with reams of printed paper, with Gazettes and Codes.

In Russia, as in Germany, if anyone tries to go beyond the Gazette or the Code—it doesn't matter if it is in praise of a more expansive justice or a more humane sentiment—politics, that conservative activity, declares that person its enemy and wipes them out, in Russia as in Germany. Politics is the shackles of the people and the people must grind them down if they wish to be free.

Meanwhile, may those who raised their voice for the liberation of Ana Pauker,⁵ if they were sincere, join it with ours to protest the kidnapping of Zenzl Mühsam in Russia.

5. Ana Pauker, also Jewish, was a Romanian communist leader who was arrested in Romania in 1935 and sentenced to ten years in prison there. Following World War II, she would go on to serve as the foreign minister of Romania.

ISSUE 4 [PAGE 1 OF 2-PAGE PAMPHLET, N.D. 1936]

*Day 32 of the Revolution**Our human compassion*

In this decisive moment, when definitions must be translated immediately into events and positions into emphatic actions, the definition and position of women—of free women, those who are firm in their resolution to be free—are determined by the events and actions that these pages summarize as vividly as possible. Along with the gentle hands of women who cure wounds, care for children, or offer a sip of water to quench the burning thirst of a combatant, we call attention to the strong arm of the woman that brandishes a rifle. This in no way implies a renunciation of the human compassion that we wish to proclaim above all things. But our human compassion is comprehensive, active, and belligerent. And it is transcendent. That is, it extends to more than the immediate relief of immediate pain. It aspires to the radical elimination of pain, at least of social pain—better put: the source of pain—that is born of political oppression and economic injustice. And it is not our fault if, now, the fight before us is ruthless and urgent, with the stubborn insistence of a final duel, in the deadly thundering of weapons. It is not our fault that we cannot at the moment minimize or use feminine tenderness or humanitarian reasoning to contain the aggression that is organized to wipe us out and armed with cannons, machine guns, bombs, and

rifles. We are fighting for life, and it is not our fault that in that fight we must contend with death.

Our proclamation of mercy is for later. For when the enemy cannon fire ceases to sing at our very door the ferocious hymn of fascism. For when the executioner's ax does not cast a tragic shadow over our heads. For when, in the face of our aspirations for an ascendant life, the imminent threat of the most loathsome historic regressions does not loom over us.

In the meantime, our human compassion, and it is just that, obliges us to enter the harsh, bloody, relentless fight against a relentless enemy. Through death, above and beyond death, we defend life. The only life that deserves to be defended: life lived in the fullness of liberty.

“Mujeres Libres”

C.N.T. A.I.T. F.A.I.⁶

6. These are the initials of the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (National Confederation of Labor), the Asociación Internacional de los Trabajadores (International Workers' Association), and the Federación Anarquista Ibérica (Iberian Anarchist Federation): these and other anarcho-syndicalist groups and trade unions organized much of the initial response to Franco's uprising as well as the leftist Social Revolution. The women who made up the *Mujeres Libres* were involved with and overlapped with these groups despite wanting a separate space that would support and focus on women. The Confederación General del Trabajo (General Confederation of Labor), which resulted from a split in the CNT, hosts on their website digitized versions of all of the extant issues of *Mujeres Libres*: <https://cgt.org.es/revista-mujeres-libres/>

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: *Mujeres Libres*, or Free Women, an organization that emerged from the Spanish anarchist and libertarian movements and came to include twenty thousand women during its short existence, was founded in 1936 prior to Francisco Franco's coup attempt and was brought to an end by his 1939 victory in the resulting Spanish Civil War, which would lead to a nearly four-decade dictatorship. The group formed as a response to women's marginalization in supposedly non-hierarchical anarchist circles active during the Spanish Second Republic (1931-1939), and true to its name and libertarian ideals, it centered women's freedom as necessary to all people's freedom.

I have translated the opening editorials from the first three issues

of their periodical, before the Civil War would come to dominate its pages, and the opening text from a two-page pamphlet released after the start of the war. In these initial issues, without the context of the war, the *Mujeres Libres* have the freedom to explain their mission and worldview to their readers, and these opening texts set out to do so, including after the first editorial a six-point summation of their positions and goals. The printing of their fourteenth and final issue was interrupted by the outbreak of war in Barcelona (Ackelsberg 100). In later issues, they would cover the actions of the *milicianas*, women who formed part of usually anarchist- and trade union-led militias and who toward the beginning of the war were allowed to fight on the frontlines.

i. Libertarianism, in this context, refers generally to political philosophies and social movements, related to anarchism, centered on liberty and freedom. It does not have the connotations of the current Libertarian Party or libertarianism in the United States. In the original texts, the adjective *libre* and the noun *libertad* appear throughout: I have used both *liberty* and *freedom* for *libertad*. I believe it is important to hear the echo of "free women" in their references to *freedom*, but also to pick up on their references to a broader libertarian tradition when they reference *liberty*: in the original, these resonances are present all at once.

They followed events unfolding under Hitler and Mussolini, and they denounced oppression in the Soviet Union. The tone of exhortation only grows in those later issues as the texts read more than ever like a call to arms.

Their prewar articles, however, were more wide-ranging and intended to reach women who were not affiliated or even familiar with the anarcho-syndicalist movement, as well as those who were: Jesús María Montero Barrado, in his study of letters sent to and from the editorial committee, cites one that reads: "You will see that it is not a publication of struggle but rather one of orientation. Before women may enter the battle, they must be taught to see with new eyes" (23). The tone, especially in these opening texts where they set out their principles and address current events, is generally lofty although the authors are also speaking directly to their readers with some intimacy and occasion-

ally slip into an oral register. They published pieces on childcare, health, and "conscientious maternity"; single-sex education versus coeducation, pedagogy, and education reform; sports ("The true sport is always insurgency," [No. 1, p. 14]); books and film; beauty and clothing; the successes of union actions; free love; and more.

These issues at first glance might look similar to many other women's magazines from the period, and, even during the war, they never stopped publishing on issues that largely affected women, such as caring for children. In some ways, we might note a conflict between the radical reimagining of political and social life that they call for and some of their positions, such as their denunciation of sex work: an article in the fifth issue states that "[t]he most urgent task to be undertaken in the new social structure is the abolition of prostitution" (p. 8). Though they also denounce those attempts at

abolishing sex work that do not offer other forms of professional training to former sex workers. Even while they feature writings on free love and some among their ranks eschewed all marriage, others wanted members of anarchist groups to perform ceremonies in lieu of the Church. Particularly in these strongly worded editorials, this diversity of opinions, feelings, and attachments gets lost.

Martha Ackelsberg describes the environment that would give rise to what became known as the Social Revolution of 1936, a period of intense libertarian mobilization: "In the weeks and months that followed [the fascist uprising], anarchist and socialist activists drew on their experiences in labor unions, community groups, and informal cultural and educational centers to mobilize millions of people and take control over vast areas of the economy and society" (68). The *Mujeres Libres* and other groups were not just responding

reactively to the rise and spread of fascism, they were actively imagining and working to bring about collaborative and nonexploitative futures. These initial texts capture a moment when things might have evolved differently, and the *Mujeres Libres* wanted to prepare women for a new and different future, certainly not for the one they would experience under Franco, though we might ask if and how this knowledge stayed with women in the decades of repression that would follow.

While this particular struggle for social liberty through women's liberty would be suppressed by the dictatorship as women were forced into more regressive roles, the libertarian and anarchist impetus that drove the *Mujeres Libres* was not entirely lost and would play an important role in counter-cultural movements of the 1970s and 1980s. The *Mujeres Libres* legacy would perhaps only be visible to those most attuned to it: they

are explicitly referenced, for example, in a 1977 issue of *Ajoblanco*, a key independent and libertarian magazine of the period. While the dictatorship isolated Spain and contributed to a narrative of its insurmountable difference from the rest of Europe and modernity, in the articles published by the *Mujeres Libres*, we see an explicit interest and involvement in worldwide struggles and transnational solidarity. In the third editorial here, they denounce the disappearance of Zenzl Mühsam in the Soviet Union, noting that while that country was viewed by many on the Left as a model, its actions could not go without critique (a position that also reflects the conflict between the Communist Party and anarchist groups that would unfold during the Spanish Civil War). That same issue includes a text on school reform in Mexico, and in the next issue an article on children captions a photo, “The children of the Congo are also

children, as the smiles of these youngsters clearly demonstrate. Children of Spain: your playmates will be children from all over” (No. 5, p. 4).

As we see in these excerpts, the *Mujeres Libres* ask their readers to question the true meaning and operation of concepts like democracy, politics, feminism, and freedom. I believe that their reframing of liberty and feminism and their insistence that women not be content with current, even popular, political and social models continue to be salient and compelling arguments in Spain and beyond today.

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