At the beginning of the Civil War, it was still relatively easy for the diverse anti-fascist forces to agree: they had a common enemy in what was being called the military-fascist uprising, and the enemy had already triumphed in several areas of the Republic. For Catalonia, the closest threats, apart from the insurgents within the region itself, were in the neighbouring region of Aragon and on the island of Mallorca. The need to defend Catalonia and to liberate those territories was urgent, but it would not be easy: after all, the Catalan army had effectively disappeared after the defeat of the uprising. Moreover, there was scant possibility of rebuilding the military force, not only because the popular mobilisation had so effectively suppressed it, but also because the Republican government had discharged all the soldiers, freeing them from their duties (see Chapter Two). As a result, the army had practically ceased to exist in zones that remained loyal to the Republic. And even though many army officers had opposed the uprising, the Catalan working class was not inclined to trust them: Catalan workers were traditionally anti-military, and not many years had passed since the army had been systematically used to repress workers’ strikes. The converse was also true: while many members of the military had remained loyal to the Republic, they did not trust the workers’ revolution.
Given these circumstances, the only way to challenge the military rebellion was by creating a volunteer army, building from the ground up new military units suffused with a combative spirit and supplied with arms. Arms may not have been abundant, but this new army seemed to have enough to achieve their initial objective: an offensive on the three Aragon provincial capitals, where the rebellion was known to have succeeded, in order to prevent a fascist attack on Catalonia. There have been claims that the offensive, and the use of volunteers to accomplish it, was President Companys’s own idea, but it in fact sprang spontaneously from the popular movement: the cry ‘To Zaragoza!’ could be heard in the streets of Barcelona soon after the rebellion was defeated. Zaragoza, the largest city of Aragon and the regional capital, held special significance for many anarchists: not only was it considered Spain’s second anarchist capital (after Barcelona itself), but it was also the birthplace of many anarchists then living in Barcelona.

As early as 21 July, some CNT militants, improvising as they went along, left Barcelona for Zaragoza, but they were stopped in the small Aragonese village of Pina de Ebro. In one of the first skirmishes against the fascists, Manuel Prieto, who had been one of the leaders of an anarchist insurrection in Fígols in 1932, was killed. On the following day, four airplanes, three Savoias and a Vickers, left Barcelona’s Prat airport with the objective of bombing the Aragonese capital. Soon, however, the Militias Committee took charge of organising the offensive. Buenaventura Durruti, perhaps Spain’s most famous anarchist, volunteered to lead the first column, and he was accompanied by two military advisors, Commander Pérez i Farràs and Sergeant José Manzana, and a Lieutenant of the Civil Guard, Pere Garrido. They intended to attack Zaragoza by surprise and occupy the city in less than a week.

The first call for volunteers met with a wave of enthusiasm so strong that not everyone who responded was able to enlist. On 23 July, the Durruti Column was ready, but some organisational problems delayed their departure until the following day. According to official sources, there were around four thousand men in the column as they waited on the large avenue Paseo de Gracia, between Provenza Street and the Pi i Margall monument. A source from the president’s offices of the Generalitat described the Durruti Column:

The column had ninety-six vehicles – around thirty cars and sixty trucks – filled with militia personnel. It had a variety of trucks provisioned with food, four CAMPSA (gasoline) tanker-trucks, an army tanker with drinking water, and around fifteen trucks with twelve artillery pieces and modern ammunition.

1. [TN] The common spelling in English for the Aragonese capital is Saragossa.