Chapter Fourteen
The Battle of the Ebro and the Deterioration of Conditions in the Rearguard

As Catalonia’s hungry and fearful civil population became more demoralised, and conflict between the Generalitat and the Republican Government intensified, military defeats on the front led to further political difficulties in the rearguard. Someone had to be blamed for the disaster of Teruel and the crumbling of the Aragon front, and the PCE and the PSUC had no trouble finding a scapegoat: the socialist defence minister, Indalecio Prieto. Prieto had been an ally of the communists in their fight against Largo Caballero, but he had tried to block the communists’ rise to power within the Republican army. He was notorious for his disagreements with the communists over matters of defence.

On 16 March 1938, a week after Franco’s offensive against the Aragon front, a cabinet meeting held in Barcelona’s Pedralbes neighbourhood was interrupted when a demonstration organised by the communists demanded the expulsion of the government’s ‘treasonous’ ministers. The reference to Prieto was clear. According to the next day’s newspapers, the demonstration had been called to ‘express the desire of mothers that the fighting continue until total victory is achieved and fascism completely annihilated’. The demonstrators, ‘carrying expressive placards, posters, and banners’, began their march on the Fourteenth of April Avenue – now Barcelona’s Diagonal Avenue – at the Pedralbes Palace. A commission including Dolores Ibárruri (PCE), Mariano R. Vázquez (CNT),
Felipe Pretel (UGT), Perrero (FAI), Vidarte (Syndicalist Party), Serra Pàmies (PSUC), and Santiago Carrillo (Juventudes Socialistas Unificadas) met with Negrín to express the position of the demonstrators, summarised by the press as follows:

1. Against all agreements and pacts.
2. For fighting until the definitive crushing of Franco.
3. Against vacillators and traitors.
4. For a firm and focussed government, capable of achieving victory.

The notice in the press finished with the following description:

The President of the Government pointed out to the demonstration’s commission that nothing had changed his desire, stated clearly and emphatically in his last statements, to continue the fight to victory in our war of independence, and that he agreed with the wishes of the demonstrators.

Upon rejoining the march, the commission informed the rest of the demonstrators of Mr Negrín’s comments, which prompted great applause and shouts of support for the President of the Government.

Soon afterwards, the demonstrators began their return march, breaking apart without violence and continuing to show their enthusiasm.1

Prieto’s inveterate pessimism regarding the military situation was well known. Three days after the demonstration, La Vanguardia published comments that Prieto had just made for the British newspaper, the Daily Express. His remarks on the war included the following:

We have just suffered a setback. We will not try to hide it. The enemy has opened a breach on the Aragon front, and the Italian divisions, aided by the German air force and artillery, have succeeded in advancing to the Western shores of the Mediterranean, in hopes of having the entire sea for themselves, and they are also approaching the eastern Pyrenees.2

This attitude gave Negrín a pretext to remove Prieto from government and assume the role of defence minister himself. The new government, formed officially on 6 April, dramatically changed the ministerial appointments. At the same time, with the inclusion of Segundo Blanco González, it brought the CNT back onto the Cabinet:

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1. La Vanguardia, 17 March 1938.
2. La Vanguardia, 19 March 1938.