

A day Mournful and Overcast...

An "Uncontrollable" from the Iron Column

March 1937

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"NOSOSTROS", the daily newspaper of the Iron Column in Valencia, printed this article in March 1937, on the eve of the column's militarisation. In 1961 it was resurrected by Burnett Bolloten in a chapter devoted to the column in his book, 'The Grand Camouflage'. About one third of the present text appeared there in translation. The remaining bulk of the article was dredged up only in 1979, in a complete bilingual edition published by "CHAMP LIBRE". An Italian translation appeared 2 years later. As far we know there was at least one version in English which was reprinted in 1987 by 'News From Everywhere'. This is the text we have used. Throughout the text references to "man" and "men" have been left as they were in the 1937 original, although the Iron Column like many other workers militias in Spain at the time was made up of fighters of both sexes. The word 'penitentiary' has been altered to 'prison', which is easier to spell..

INTRODUCTION

This text was written by a member of the Iron Column, a revolutionary militia active in the Spanish Civil War. It was written in response to the impending militarisation of the militias by the Republican government. This meant their reorganisation along the lines of a regular army, with all the hierarchies of rank and decision-making that this entailed. Militarisation was one of the key elements in the Stalinist consolidation of power over the working class and against the revolution. They were able to achieve this because of the success of the Republicans' anti-fascist ideology which persuaded many workers to fight for the State in its democratic form against the potential 'fascist' State, and to abandon the struggle for revolution. Stalinist Russia wanted power in Spain in order to pursue its long term foreign policy objectives. Ultimately Stalin was more willing to concede a victory to fascism than to revolution. This can be seen throughout the attempts by Spanish workers especially in Catalonia to seize control and collectivise land and industry, which the government fiercely repressed, and in the events of Barcelona in May 1937, when government troops attacked the armed workers militias in control of much of the city. The defeat of the Spanish revolution and the victory of Franco showed as every uprising, revolution, and working class movement since has shown - that the state is our enemy, whatever political colours it wears.

A DAY MOURNFUL AND OVERCAST

I am an escaped convict from San Miguel de los Reyes, that sinister prison, which the monarchy set up in order to bury alive those who, because they weren't cowards, would never submit to the infamous laws dictated by the powerful against the oppressed. I was taken there, like so many others, to wipe out an offence, namely for revolting against the humiliations to which an entire village had been subjected. In short for killing a political boss.

I was young and still am young, because I entered the prison when I was twenty-three and was released, thanks to the anarchist comrades who opened the gates, when I was thirty-four. For eleven years I was subjected to the torment of not being a man, of being merely a thing, a number!

Many prisoners who had suffered as I had from bad treatment received since birth, were released with me. Some of them, once on the street, went their own way. Others like myself, joined

our liberators, who treated us like friends and loved us like brothers. With them we gradually formed the Iron Column, with them, at a mounting tempo, we stormed barracks and disarmed ferocious Civil Guards; and with them we rudely drove the fascists to the peaks of the Sierra, where they are now held. Accustomed to taking whatever we needed, we seized provisions and guns from the fascists as we drove them back. For a time we fed ourselves on offerings from the peasants, and we armed ourselves, not with weapons extended to us in gift, but with what we wrested from the insurgents with our bare hands. The rifle that I hold and caress, which accompanies me since the day that I forsook the prison, is mine; it belongs to me. I stripped it like a man from the hands of its former owner, and in the same manner was obtained almost every other rifle held or owned by my comrades.

Hardly a soul has ever bothered about us. The stupefaction of the bourgeoisie when we left the prison is still being shared by everyone. Instead of our being attended to, instead of our being aided and supported, we have been treated like outlaws, and accused of being "uncontrollable", because we did not subordinate the rhythm of our lives, which we desired and still desire to be free, to the stupid whims of those who, occupying a seat in some ministry or on some committee, sottishly and arrogantly regarded themselves as the masters of men. Also because, after expropriating the fascists, we changed the mode of life in the villages through which we passed - annihilating the brutal political bosses who had robbed and tormented the peasants and placing their wealth in the hands of the only ones who knew how to create it: the workers.

Nobody, I guarantee it, nobody could have behaved more properly towards the helpless and needy, towards those who had been robbed and persecuted all their lives, than us, the uncontrollables, outlaws and escaped convicts. Nobody, nobody - I challenge anyone to prove otherwise - has been more affectionate and obliging with children, women and old people; nobody absolutely nobody can reproach this column - which alone, unaided and even obstructed has been in the front lines from the very beginning - with a lack of solidarity, for being arbitrary, for cowardliness or laxness in battle, or for hostility towards the peasants, or for not being revolutionary enough, because boldness and bravery have been our standard, magnanimity toward the vanquished our law, cordiality towards brothers and sisters our motto and goodness and respect the underlying framework of our lives.

Why the black legend that has been woven around us? Why the senseless eagerness to discredit us, an impossible venture, when such discredit would only work to the detriment of the revolutionary cause and the war itself?

There is - and those of us from the prison, having suffered more than anybody else on earth, are well aware of it - a pronounced spreading of bourgeois values on all sides. The bourgeois individual of body and soul, the personification of mediocrity and servility, trembles at the idea of losing peace and quiet, coffee and cigars, bullfights, theatregoing, and frequenting of prostitutes; and when he first got wind of the Column, the Iron Column, pillar of the revolution in the Levante, or when he heard that the Column was coming to Valencia, he quaked and trembled at the thought of seeing his pampered and miserable life taken away from him. And the bourgeoisie - there are many kinds of bourgeois individuals and they are in many places - wove ceaselessly with the threads of calumny the evil slanders with which we have been regaled, because they, and they alone, have been injured and are capable of being injured by our activities, by our rebelliousness, and by the wildly irrepressible desires we carry in our hearts to be free like the eagles on the highest mountain peaks, like the lions in the jungle.

Even our brothers, who suffered with us in the fields and the factories and were vilely exploited by the bourgeoisie, echoed the latter's terrible fears, and began to believe, because they were so informed by people who wish to be regarded as leaders, that the men fighting in the Iron Column were merciless bandits. A wave of hatred, often reaching the point of cruelty and merciless fanaticism, created a rock-strewn path in our advance against fascism.

On some nights, on those dark nights when armed and alert I would try to penetrate the obscurity of the fields and the mystery of things, I rose from behind my parapet as if in a dream, not to awaken my numbed limbs, which having been tempered in pain are like steel, but to grip more furiously my rifle, feeling a desire to fire not merely at the enemy sheltered barely a hundred yards away, but at the other concealed at my side, the one calling me comrade, all the while selling my interests in most sordid a manner, for no sale is more cowardly than one nourished by treason. And I would feel a desire to laugh and to weep, and to run through the fields, shouting and tearing throats open with my iron fingers, just as I had torn open the throat of that filthy political boss, and to smash this wretched world into smithereens, a world in which it is hard to find a loving hand to wipe away one's sweat and to stop the blood flowing from one's wounds on returning from the battlefield, tired and wounded.

At night, conveying my sorrow and pain to the men, my anarchist comrades there in the harsh Sierra, huddled in small bunches under the vigilant eyes of the enemy, how often would a friendly voice and loving arms restore my love for life! And each time the sufferings of the past, with all the horrors and torments that wracked my body, would be thrown to the wind as though from a distant age, and I would abandon myself joyfully to dreams of adventure, beholding with heated imagination a world that I knew not in life but in desire, a world that no man has known in life but that many of us have known in dreams. And dreaming, time would fly by, and my body would stand weariness at bay, and I would redouble my enthusiasm, and become bold, and go out on reconnaissance at dawn to find out the enemy's position, and... All of this in order to change life, to stamp a different rhythm onto this life of ours; all of this because men could be brothers and I among them; all of this because joy that surges forth even once from our breasts must surge out of the earth, because the Revolution, this Revolution that has been the guiding light and watchword of the Iron Column, could soon be tangible reality.

My dreams would fade away like the wispy clouds blown high over the Sierra, and my disenchantment would return, only to give way at night; once again to joy. And so my life has alternated between sorrow and joy, between anguish and weeping, a joyful life in the midst of danger compares with that life of darkness and misery in the dark and miserable prison.

One day - a day that was mournful and overcast - the news that we must be militarised descended on the crests of the Sierra like an icy wind that penetrates the flesh. It pierced my body a dagger, and I suffered, in advance, the anguish of the present moment. At night, behind the parapet, the news was repeated: "Militarisation is coming!"

At my side, keeping vigil while I rested without sleeping, was the delegate of my group, a would-be lieutenant; and two steps further over, lying on the ground, head propped on a pile of bombs, slept the delegate of my century, a would-be captain or colonel. I... would continue being myself, a son of the countryside, a rebel unto death. I neither desired nor desire crosses, stripes, or command positions. I am who I am, a peasant who learned to read in prison, who has seen pain and death at close quarters, who was an anarchist without being aware of it, and who knowing it is still more an anarchist than yesterday, when I had to kill in order to be free.

I will never forget that day, that day far away when the woeful news came down from the crests of the Sierra, piercing my soul like a freezing wind, as I will never forget so many days of my life of suffering. That day far away... Bah!

Militarisation is coming!

Life has more to teach men than all the theories and books combined. Those who would put into practice what they have learned from others via books deceive themselves; those who would put into books what they have learned along the winding path of life are perhaps in the process of creating masterpieces. Reality and dreaming are two different things. It is good and beautiful to dream, for dreams are nearly always an intimation of what must be, but it is sublime to render life beautiful, to take life and fashion from it a true work of beauty.

I have lived life at an accelerated pace. I never tasted youth, which according to what I have read, is happiness and gentleness, and a sense of well-being. In the prison I was only aware of pain. Even though I am young as years go, I have been made an old man by having lived through so much, wept so often, and suffered for so long, For inside the prison one hardly ever laughs, inside the prison, whether under roof or open sky, one is always weeping.

Reading a book in a cell, separated from human contact, is dreaming; reading the book of life as the guard presents it to you open at any page, whether insulting you or merely spying on you, is being in contact with reality.

One day I happened to read, where or by whom I can no longer say, that one could not have an exact idea of the earth's roundness without having travelled around it, measured it, run ones hands over it, in short discovered it. Such a claim seemed ridiculous to me; however that short sentence so imprinted itself in my mind that now and again, during my forced soliloquies in the solitude of my cell, I came back to it. To the point that one day, as if I too had discovered something marvellous until then hidden to other men, I felt the joy of having discovered for myself that the earth was round. And on that day, like the unknown author, I travelled around, measured, and ran my hands over the earth, my imagination lit up with the "vision" of the earth turning in endless space, part of the universal harmony of the worlds.

The same thing is true of pain. Pain must be weighed, measured, touched, tasted, understood, and discovered for the mind to have a clear idea of what it is. I have been side by side with men who, like mules, were pulling a cart in which other people were riding, singing and enjoying themselves. No one suffered; there was no secret rumble of protest; they considered it just and logical that the riders in the cart, because they were seÑores, should be the ones pulling on the reins and holding the whip in their hands, and it even seemed logical and just to my companions when the master struck them across the face with his lash. They bellowed like animals, stamped their hooves on the ground and set off at a gallop. And oh!, what sarcasm!, when in the end they were unhitched, they ran like grovelling dogs to lick the hand that had whipped them.

Anybody who has not been humiliated, harassed; anybody who has not felt like the most unfortunate being on earth, and at the same time the noblest, most possessed of goodness, and most human, and who, during this moment of combined wretchedness, happiness, and strength, has not suddenly felt a cold hand grabbing his shoulder or face, the hand of a brutish jailer wanting to hurt or humiliate him; anybody who has not been dragged to the Hole for rebelliousness, and once inside, been struck on the face and trampled underfoot, heard his bones splinter and his

blood gush, until finally dropping to the floor like a sack of potatoes; anybody who, having been tormented at the hands of other men, has not been dominated by a feeling of powerlessness, and reacted by cursing and uttering great blasphemies, a first step in gathering together one's forces again; anybody who, having been punished and insultingly abused, has not become conscious of the injustice of being punished and the ignominy of being abused, and becoming conscious of it, has not proposed doing away with the privileges that give some the power to punish and abuse others; in short, anybody, captive in prison or captive in the world, who has not understood the tragedy of men condemned to spend their lives blindly and silently obeying orders, can ever know the nether regions of pain or the terrible scar it leaves in those who must drink, touch, and feel the pain of silence and obedience. Wishing to speak and keeping quiet; wishing to sing and remaining hushed; wishing to laugh and having to strangle the feeblest impulse with brute force; wishing to love and condemned to swim in the slime of hatred!

I have lived in barracks, and there I learned to hate. I have been in prison, and it was there, strangely enough, in the midst of tears and torment, I learned to love, to love intensely.

In the barracks, I was on the verge of losing my personality, so severe was the treatment and the stupid discipline they tried to impose on me. In prison, after a great struggle, I recovered that personality, for every punishment made me more rebellious. There I learned to hate every kind of hierarchy from top to bottom; and in the midst of the most agonising suffering, to love my unfortunate brothers, though keeping my barracks-suckled hatred for hierarchy pure and untarnished. Prisons and barracks mean the same thing: tyranny and free rein for the evil instincts of a few, and suffering for everyone else. Barracks no more teach what is not injurious to bodily and mental health than prisons correct their inmates.

As a result of this experience - honestly gotten, because I have bathed my life in pain - when in the distance, I heard murmurs of the militarisation order, I felt my body become limp, for I could see clearly that the guerrilla fearlessness I had derived from the Revolution would perish, that the being shorn of all personal attributes by prison and barrack life would continue in its stead, and that I would fall once again into the abyss of obedience, into the animal-like stupor to which both barrack and prison discipline lead. And, on the parapet, gripping my rifle in fury while I looked out over enemy and "friend", forward positions and rearguard, I cursed as I used to curse when they were dragging me to the Hole for rebelliousness, and deep inside I shed a tear like the tears that used to escape me, unobserved when I was in the throes of feeling my own powerlessness. And it was driven home to me that the self-righteous hypocrites who would like to turn the world into a barrack and a prison are the same ones - the same ones - the same ones who yesterday in the hole used to splinter our bones - the bones of men.

Barracks...prisons...what a contemptible and miserable life.

We have never been understood, and this is lack of understanding has not rewarded us with love. We have struggled - and there is no need here for false modesty, which leads nowhere - we have struggled, I repeat, as have few others. Our firing line has always been in the forefront, if only because from the very first day, we have been the only ones in our sector.

There was never any relief for us, and worse still there was never a kind word. Everyone, fascists and anti-fascists and even members of our own movement - what shame we have felt! - have treated us with aversion.

We have never been understood. Or even more tragic, in the middle of this tragedy embracing us, perhaps we have not made ourselves understood, because having borne the brunt every kind of contemptuous and harsh treatment from lifelong supporters of the hierarchy, we wished, even during the war itself, to lead a life based on libertarian principles, while others, both to their misfortune and ours, have remained yoked to the chariot of the state.

This failure to understand, which has produced enormous suffering in our ranks, strewed our path with misfortunes, and not only the fascists considered us dangerous, because we treated them as they deserved, but in addition those who call themselves anti-fascists, shouting their anti-fascism until they are hoarse, have viewed us in the same light. This hatred woven about us led to grievous clashes, the majority of which - and the lowness of it makes our stomachs heave and our hands squeeze our rifles - took place in Valencia itself when certain red anti-fascists opened fire on us. If only...bah!...If only we had put a stop to the counter-revolution then, before it came into full swing.

History, which records the good and evil that men do, will one day speak. And History will say that the Iron Column was perhaps the only column in Spain that had a clear vision of what our Revolution ought to be. It will also say that of all columns, ours offered the greatest resistance to militarisation, and that there were times when because of that resistance, it was completely abandoned to its fate, at the front awaiting battle, as if six thousand men, hardened by war and ready for victory or death, should be abandoned to the enemy to be devoured.

History will say so many, many things, and so many, many figures who think themselves glorious will find themselves execrated and damned!

Our past opposition to militarisation was founded on what we knew about officers. Our present opposition is founded on what we know about them now.

Professional officers form, now and for all time, here and in Russia, a caste. They are the ones giving orders, while the rest of us are left with nothing but an obligation to obey. They hate with all their might anything connected with civilian life, which they consider inferior.

I have seen - I always look men right in the eye - an officer tremble with rage or disgust when I spoke to him familiarly, and I know cases today of battalions which call themselves proletarian, whose officers, having forgotten their humble origin, do not permit the militiamen on pain of terrible punishment to address them as *éthouí*.

The proletarian army is not calling for the kind of discipline that would mean respecting war orders; it is calling for submission, blind obedience, and the obliteration of men's personalities.

I experienced the exact same thing in the barracks. I experienced it again, later, in the prison.

We used to live happily in the trenches. It is true that we saw comrades fall at our side who had been in the war with us from the beginning; furthermore, we were aware that at any moment a bullet might leave us stretched out in the middle of a field - the reward expected by a revolutionary - but we used to live happily. We used to eat when we could, and fast, when rations were in short supply. And everyone was content. Why? Because none of us was superior to the other, all of us were friends, all comrades, all guerrillas of the Revolution.

The delegate of a group or century was not imposed on us, he was elected by us. He did not regard himself as a lieutenant or as a captain, but as a comrade. Nor were the delegates of the Committees or the Column colonels or generals; they were comrades. We used to eat, fight, laugh and swear together. For a while we received no pay, and they received nothing either. Later our pay was ten pesetas, and they too received, and still receive, ten pesetas.

The one thing that we do accept from them is their proven ability, which is why they were chosen; they are also of proven bravery, which is why they are our delegates. There is no hierarchy, there are no superiors, there are no harsh orders, but rather camaraderie, goodness and friendship among comrades, a joyful life amidst the disasters of war. And so, surrounded by comrades who believe that the struggle is for and about something, war seems gratifying and even death is accepted with pleasure. But when you find yourself surrounded by officers and everything is hierarchy and orders; when in your hands you hold the wretched soldier's pay, scarcely enough to support your family in the rearguard, while the lieutenant, captain, commander and colonel are all receiving three, four, ten times as much - without contributing one whit more enthusiasm, knowledge or courage - life has a bitter taste to it, for you realise that this is no Revolution, but a few individuals taking advantage of an unfortunate situation at the expense of the people.

I don't know how we shall live now. I don't know whether we shall be able to accustom ourselves to abuse from corporals, from sergeants, and from lieutenants. I do not know whether, after having felt ourselves to be men in the fullest sense of the word, we shall get used to being domestic animals, for that is what discipline leads to and what militarisation implies.

We know that for us it will be totally impossible to submit to tyranny and ill treatment, because it would take something less than a full man to stand meekly by, rifle in hand, swallowing insults; we are in possession, nevertheless, of disquieting news of militarised comrades having - like being handed slabs of lead - to take orders from people in many cases inept and in every case hostile.

We used to believe that we were fighting for redemption and salvation, and here we see ourselves slipping back into the same thing that we are fighting against: tyranny, the power of castes, and the most brutal and penetrating authoritarianism.

But the hour is grave. We have been caught - we know not why, and if we did know, we would say nothing now - we have been caught, I repeat, in a trap, and we must get out of it, we must escape from it as best we can, for there are traps bristling all over now.

The militarists, all the militarists - and there are fanatical ones in our own camp - have us surrounded. Yesterday we were masters; today they are. The popular army, which has nothing popular about it except that the people form it, and this has always been the same in any case, does not belong to the people but to the Government and it is the Government that commands, it is the Government that gives orders. The people are allowed only to obey, as they are required to do always.

Caught as we are in the militarists' net, there are only two possible roads. The first road leads to our separating comrades who have long been in the struggle together, through the dissolution of the Iron Column, the second road leads to its militarisation.

The Column, our Column, must not be dissolved. The homogeneity that it has demonstrated on every occasion has been admirable - I am speaking for ourselves only, comrades - the sentiment of comradeship among our members will be considered a shining example in the history of the Spanish Revolution; the bravery displayed over the course of a hundred engagements may perhaps be equalled in this struggle of heroes, but it will never be surpassed. From the very first day we were friends; more than that, we were comrades and brothers. To disband, to go off in all directions, to no longer see one another, and not to have, as up until now, the impulse to fight and win, all this is impossible.

The Column, that Iron Column which caused the bourgeoisie and the fascists to tremble from Valencia to Teruel must not be dissolved, it must continue to the end.

Who can claim that in combat, thanks to militarisation, they have been stronger, more vigorous, and more generous to water the battlefield with their blood? We have fought like brothers defending a noble cause; we have dreamt in the trenches like brothers sharing the same ideals; we have pushed forward courageously like brothers aspiring to a better world. Dissolve ourselves as a homogenous unit? Comrades, never. So long as one century of the Column remains, forward in struggle; so long as have a single survivor, forward to victory.

Having to reconcile ourselves to taking orders from unelected officers will be a great evil, but the lesser of two evils. However... Forming a column or a Battalion comes down almost to the same thing. What is not the same at all is seeing that we lack respect.

If our group of individuals presently making up our formation stays together, whether as a Column or a battalion, the result will be the same. When in combat, no-one will be needed to imbue us with enthusiasm, and when at rest, no-one will tell us what to do, because it will not be tolerated.

Either the corporal, sergeant, lieutenant and captain will be from within our movement, in which case we will all be comrades; or they will be enemies, in which case it will be necessary to treat them as such.

Column or battalion will mean the same thing to us, if we so desire. We have been and will keep on being, yesterday, today and tomorrow, guerrillas of the Revolution.

What happens in the future depends on ourselves alone, on the cohesion that exists among us. Nobody will be imposing another rhythm on us, on the contrary, we will be imposing our rhythm on those around us by maintaining our personality.

Comrades, we must take one thing into account: the struggle demands that our muscle and enthusiasm not be withdrawn from the war. Whether in our own column or battalion, or in some other division or battalion, we must carry on the fight.

If we were to break up the Column, if we were to disband and were later drafted, we should have to march, not with those with whom we choose, but with those with whom we are ordered to march. And since we are not and have no desire to be mere domestic animals, we might very well come to blows with those who, for better or worse, are our allies.

Whatever we be called, Column, Battalion, or Division, the Revolution, our anarchist and proletarian Revolution, to which we have contributed glorious pages from the very first day, bids us not to surrender our arms and not to abandon the compact body we have constituted until now.

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