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Rejecting the Legend

Louis Mercier Vega

Temoins, No 12-13, 1956

Being built on men, the Spanish revolution is neither a perfect construction nor a castle of legend. The first thing we have to do if we are to be balanced is re-examine the civil war item by item on the basis of the facts, rather than encourage nostalgia through our paeans. This is a task that has never been undertaken conscientiously and courageously, for it might have ended up exposing not only the shortcomings and treacheries of others, but also the illusions and failings of us libertarians as well.

The mania that amounts to bragging about our acts of heroism and our improvisational abilities is a fatal one, because it reduces the search for social solutions to the level of the individual only and, by a trick of propaganda, plays down the situations we were incapable of facing up to. The tendency to 'talk up' the militants of the CNT and the FAI masks our powerlessness to operate effectively wheresoever we may be, in the places where we may be working and in a position to intervene. It is too often an escape from our time and from our world. Not to mention that the Spanish militants themselves are absolved of their own responsibilities and find themselves hovering like

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images of the saints which they know they are not, and frozen in poses when they ought to be acting with eyes wide open.

We cannot live in disdain for the present in order to contend that what once was will not be again, with pride covering our retreat. Spain was not thrown up only by random societal changes: any more than it was only the crucible in which individual destinies were melted. So let us steer clear of accounts that transfigure the past and furnish an alibi for our present weariness. When nothing remains but images d'Epinal,¹ the betrayal of those who survived is taken as read.

In 1956, hopes of return and of revenge assume, more clearly maybe than back in 1936, the shape of a beautiful ending rather than an engagement with reality. To many of the revolutionaries who rushed to a Spain in flames and in battle, it was not an aspiration but the ultimate sacrifice relished as a gauntlet thrown down to a complicated world that made no sense, as the tragic outworking of a society wherein human dignity is trampled underfoot day in and day out. Wholly committed to realising their individual destinies in a context where they might give their all, only a few of them had a thought to spare for the future.

So, in their heart of hearts, in the isolation which is the answer to the puke and the promiscuities of everyday living, harking back to July 1936 became a cult, like the wait for some barbarous religious celebration. Let us steer clear of any such wait if we do not want to finish up in bitterness and disappointment. The cerebral dynamite of 1936 Spain had withered in the sunshine of wretchedness and revolt. It exploded and was all swallowed up by the four corners of the peninsula and of the wider world, leaving wretchedness and rebellious factories in its wake. Courage was not to be found only sitting before the

¹ images d'Epinal: brightly coloured popular prints, so here, 'heroic images' [KSL] From: Temoins, No 12-13, 1956 "Keeping Faith with Spain". Translated by: Paul Sharkey.

tripod of a machine-gun. Heroism was not deployed only in the mounting of attacks. Both were etched into the bedrock of day to day life and afforded some shape to the on-off impulses of the masses. Today as yesterday, they had to contend with the nonsensicality emanating from economic formulae and the outcry from the shifting crowds.

The high price paid by a painful apprenticeship for this awareness of social situations is one we cannot lose, whether in Spain or anywhere else. The libertarian passion only has value as an answer to problems in need of resolution; it cannot be frittered away on circumstantial apocalypses or spent on gloomy paeans. True, it draws sustenance from the experience of the militiaman clinging to his rifle as a guarantee of his own independence, but also from the efforts of the nameless worker who harbours lucid dreams and lays the groundwork for a less despair-inducing future.

In the curious universe in which we live, the false hopes that allow us to forget about the hundred methods that conspired to manufacture totalitarianism are neither courageous nor heroic. Individual determination and individual daring can also impact upon schemes, statistics and facts. As much as the actions of concerted wills can have a bearing upon the world, as long as there is planning and measurement.

In the fox-holes dug into the hillsides of Aragon, men lived as brothers and in danger, with no use for hope, in that they were living life to the full, cognizant that they were what they had chosen to be. We have tried to enter into a dialogue with them, a dialogue with the dead in order to preserve, from their truth, whatever is left that might be of assistance to the survivors and the living. Bianchi, the thief who put up the proceeds of his house-breaking so as to buy weapons. Staradolz, the Bulgarian vagabond who died like a lord. Bolshakov, the Makhnovist who, albeit horseless, was the continuation of rebel Ukraine. Santin from Bordeaux whose tattoos spoke of the fears of a pure life. Giua, the young thinker from Milan,

come to burn himself out in the open air. Jimenez of the many names, who gave proof of the power in a weak body. Manolo whose dauntlessness showed us the measure of our own daring.

All that remains of them and of thousands of others are a few trace chemicals, the remnants of bodies doused in petrol and the remembrance of brotherliness. We had been given proof that a collective existence with neither God nor master, but alongside men as they actually are and in the context of a world such as men have made it, is feasible.

Why would that example be pertinent only in times of high tension? Why could we not forge our destiny day by day?