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Pierre van Paassen

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Dutch-Canadian journalist Pierre van Paassen recounts his visit of liberated Barcelona, his meeting with libertarian fighter Buenaventura Durruti, and the taking of the town of Sietamo by anarchist forces. This is an extract from van Paassen's book *Days of our Years*, which documents his experiences in Europe, Africa and the Middle East before the outbreak of World War II.

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Three months later when I visited Barcelona again, there remained not a trace of disorder. The old regime was making way for a new order of things. Theaters had reopened. The transportation system, including the taxicabs and the underground railway, was functioning normally, and food was plentiful. But the false Montmartre atmosphere in the Paralelo neighbourhood had completely evaporated. You could walk through the quarter known as the Chinese City without an army of pimps and harlots and dope peddlers on to your coattails. The brothels, night clubs, gambling casinos, peep shows, honky-tonks and obscene movies had been closed. That was the work of the working-class committees. On the other hand, the churches and convents which had escaped the fury of the masses in July had been turned into kindergartens, cultural centres, hospitals, lecture halls and popular universities. Scores of small bookshops had made their appearance. People apparently were turning to reading in a country where letters and

learning were for ages, if not proscribed, then at least the privilege of a minority of *monsignori* and bourgeois lawyers. The famous monastery of Montserrat, located on the mountain overlooking the city, had been transformed into a sanatorium for tubercular children, but nobody could tell me where the monks had gone, nor did anyone seem to care a great deal.

[...]

I spent the first weeks of the civil war behind the lines in Catalonia with a column of libertarian partisans. The Catalan labor unions had performed the miracle of beating down Goded and his army of forty thousand men in Barcelona proper. Whatever war equipment was available for the campaign to dislodge the Fascists from the provincial cities in Catalonia and Aragon had been collected from the abandoned stores of the defeated insurgents and from the monasteries and churches in the capital.

Even so, supplies for a campaign in the rural regions were ridiculously inadequate: no artillery, no machine guns, no trucks. When on my first contact with the militia on the outskirts of the town of Sietamo I saw the poverty of their equipment my heart sank in my shoes. How could these men in overalls and canvas slippers expect to halt the drive that would certainly be coming from the direction of Saragossa? Thoughts of Ethiopia flitted through my mind. Men were lying about in all attitudes alongside a rural road, sleeping, eating, discussing what was to be done. Hundreds of farmers from the surrounding districts had joined them. They wanted to enlist. But there were no rifles to hand out. Three planes zoomed overhead and dropped their bombs on the railroad tracks and on the orchards. A wheat field had caught fire. Fragments of high explosives clattered on the barn roofs. Machine-gun bullets pecked away at the plaster walls of the cottages. One group of *milicianos* sat about under an umbrella tree staring somberly at the evolutions of the metal birds in the sky. One pursuit plane veered around and almost touched the roofs of the houses and rattled its death spray.

The machine flew so low I could see the observer swing his machine gun around.

“If he comes again,” I said to a group of men who watched from the cover of a railroad culvert, “you can drop him with your rifles. Surely someone is bound to hit the gasoline tank, if you give him a salvo.”

“Sure we could,” came the answer, “but we have no cartridges, *compañero!*”

No cartridges, no medical supplies, no blankets, exactly two hundred old shells for the antiquated cannons that had been found in the fortress of Montjuich. But those shells were now crashing into the tower of Sietamo. Men who had never fired a gun in their lives: schoolteachers, dock workers, typesetters, Ford employees – all had found the range after a dozen misses. You could see chunks of masonry crashing on the cathedral roof. Smoke puffs were issuing from the belfry.

“We must take Sietamo before the Fascists bring their artillery and tanks from Huesca,” said Durruti, the leader of the column. “With the stores we capture in Sietamo we can advance.”

Advance? One *miliciano* looked around the corner of the first house on the street leading into the town. There was a sharp rap as of an anchor chain slipping a dozen notches through the hawser, and the *miliciano's* brains splashed out against the whitewashed wall.

“We’ll go over the roofs and through the cellars,” said Durruti. “We must take that church over there by morning.”

A violent explosion cut his words short. Everybody got up. The air was filled with an acrid smell. Cautiously some men crawled forward to investigate.

“A shell?” I asked.

“No, Jimines has wiped out that machine-gun crew,” came the answer. “That was Jimines’ brother who was just killed, the man who looked around the corner. Jimines threw a packet of dynamite. We have another machine gun now, brand-new.”

“Now we can take a step further,” announced Durruti.

An armoured train came rumbling up the track. There was a red-black flag on the locomotive and the letters FAI, initials of the Anarchist Federation. The train stopped at the level crossing behind us. The engineer came over to talk with Durruti’s general staff, which was comprised of an English boatswain, named Middleton, who had deserted ship at Barcelona, a French journalist of the newspaper *Barrage*, and a Señor Panjanú, the only one of the forty-nine colonels in Barcelona who had not joined Goded’s revolt.

Three men were carrying the body of Jimines away. They had wrapped his broken head in a newspaper. The door of the house on the corner opened and an old man stepped out driving five chickens before him. He greeted me with a flourish of his tattered hat.

“Why do you stay here?” I asked.

“Why shouldn’t I?” he returned. “This is my house. Everything is in order, except that the Whites took my donkey yesterday. The chickens they missed.”

He laughed and showed his toothless gums.

“How many were they?” I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

“They’re in the church,” he said, pointing in the direction of the city’s center. “They have fortified it. Have you heard whether they are sending up any rifles from Barcelona?”

“Do you want to fight, too?” I asked in amazement.

“Why shouldn’t I?” replied the old peasant. “My eyes are good!”

The armoured train rolled on. It had twenty machine guns on board.

“Unless the Whites get a direct hit on that train with their guns, we will be in the railway station in an hour’s time,” remarked Durruti.

The body of a boy lay slumped against the side of a house. His left hand was stretched forward towards his rifle, which had fallen a few paces ahead of him. His mouth was stuffed with bread. Death had caught him in the act of eating. In his right hand he held the

He did not finish. The *milicianos* burst out laughing. One of the Fascists had dropped on his knees and was making the sign of the cross with a lightning-like rapidity.

As the prisoners were being marched off, five airplanes came zooming down from the direction of Saragossa. The entire population of Sietamo ran out into the streets to see the machines. The balconies of the houses and the roofs were black with people. When they were overhead the machines let go their bombs. A series of terrific explosions followed.

I went to the quarter where the first torpedoes had fallen. Several houses had collapsed; *milicianos* were already digging out the wounded whose cries could be heard under the piles of pulverized masonry. A little girl was the first to be dragged out. A beam had crushed her chest. Then came the body of an old woman. Far away the detonations of other exploding torpedoes were heard.

"Where they Spanish planes, *compañero*?" a *miliciano* asked me.

"They were Junker planes, *compañero*, German planes!"

"Don't those German bastards have mothers and children?" he asked.

rest of the loaf. The bread was soaking up the blood that trickled in a thin stream from his side...

A tank came lumbering towards us. It crunched over the barbed-wire entanglements fifty yards up the street. The *milicianos* grabbed their rifles and jumped to their feet. I was ordered into the rail guard's cabin. After ten minutes a *miliciano* told me to come out: "It's all right. The tank is one of ours," he said. "Some peasants captured it." Everybody crowded about the engine to look it over. The boy who had driven it over was being questioned by Durruti. He climbed on top and tumbled inside leaving the lid open. Presently he reappeared and began handing out sacks of hand grenades. Durruti smiled.

"We'll soon have as much ammunition as Franco," he said.

Death lurked around every corner. Every house had to be carried by storm. From every window snipers picked off *milicianos* and peasants. A man would suddenly gasp his head and sink to his knees. Another running across an open court would stumble as a little boy who stubs his toe, his rifle slipping from his hands and clattering on the cobblestones. Before his body struck the ground it was riddled with bullets.

I saw a Fascist lying in the rain conduit of an official building quietly emptying the drum of his *mitraillette* into the street below, until a *miliciano*'s head appeared behind him through a garret window. The Fascist turned sharply and fired at the militiaman and brought him down. But in his fall, before plunging into the street below, the *miliciano* grabbed the Fascist and both rolled off the edge of the roof. Their bodies locked together came down with a smack in the street. A worker quietly picked up the *mitraillette*. A few minutes later it was spitting bullets in the direction of the central square.

Darkness came. Some houses were on fire. The reflection of the leaping flames on the flanks of the tower gave the scene a strange, unreal aspect. It made me think of a Fourteenth of July celebration in France with Bengal fire, before the days of floodlighting. But the

square in the middle of which stood the church remained unshaken. Only the captured tank had ventured into the bullet-swept area to reconnoitre. It had not returned. From all sides the *milicianos* were converging upon the medieval building with its massive walls and buttresses and counterforts. They fired blindly at the windows and porticos. Short tongues of flame would leap in answer from a sound hole in the tower and from between the pillars of a broad balcony that ran in front of the façade. That was the point where the Fascists had concentrated their machine guns, that balcony. The place could not be approached. Durruti said: "We will wait till dawn, but then we must go into the square. We will bring up a piece of artillery and blow away that balcony."

At daybreak he was told that not a single shell remained.

"Then we'll dislodge them with hand grenades!"

The hand grenades did not reach the balcony. Those who pitched them did it awkwardly. They were shot down the moment they ventured into the open. The square was littered with motionless little mounds. By the first streaks of dawn they looked like piles of clothing. Wounded men were calling from the square, cursing the delay. Others crawled back slowly, inch by inch, into the safety of the side streets. The Fascist machine guns barked in quick, nervous bursts. The *milicianos* stood silently flattened against the walls impotent, disgusted.

"To make a rush means to be cut down like ripe corn," said Colonel Panjanu.

Durruti looked at him sharply, questioningly.

"We are going to rush the square," replied Durruti, "and you will lead us."

But no mass attack was necessary. Two barefooted, ragged peasant boys quietly wrapped bundles of dynamite around their waists, inserted the caps in one of the sticks, and then, with a lighted cigarette in the one hand and the short fuse in the other, suddenly dashed across the square. One fell wounded by a burst of machine-gun fire, but he crawled on and reached the cathedral's porch. His

companion had already applied his cigarette to the fuse. There was a moment of suspense and then the ear-tearing rip of an explosion... and another one. The boys had blown themselves up. The balcony with the machine guns crashed down in chunks to the flagstones.

A minute later the militia stormed across and a thick column of smoke poured from the tower. The Fascists in the bell chamber were roasting to death. Those inside the church surrendered.

The town of Sietamo<sup>1</sup> was taken. But one horrible surprise awaited the victors. In the dank cellars of the municipal building, where a detachment of Whites held out till the afternoon, were found the bodies of the hostages, the labor leaders and the liberals of the community. They lay in pools of fresh blood, but the clots of brains adhering to the mildewed walls showed that they had been shot at close range.

The inhabitants were circulating freely in the streets towards sunset when a batch of prisoners was being led away. They were all military men, several officers amongst them. On the west side of the church they were halted and placed against the wall. A crowd collected to see the execution. Just as the firing squad had taken up its position Durruti appeared on the scene.

"What are you doing?" he asked the *milicianos*. "Who gave orders for this? Are you going to shoot defenceless men?" There was an angry murmur at these words and shouts of hate. "They executed our *compañeros* you say?" shouted Durruti, his face livid with anger. "Does that mean that we have to do the same? No!" he thundered. "Down with your rifles!" These men are going to Barcelona for trial. They are human even if they behaved like swine."

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<sup>1</sup> An error in the transmission of two separate dispatches on the capture of the small town of Sietamo situated on the outskirts of the provincial capital of Huesca made it appear as if I had reported the taking of the provincial capital itself, which is also named Huesca. In this city the loyalists secured but a precarious hold and were driven back after a few days' occupation of the outer districts