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ELIAS MANZANERA

THE IRON COLUMN: TESTAMENT OF A REVOLUTIONARY

Eliás Manzanera

The Iron Column : Testament of a Revolutionary

Translated by Paul Sharkey

With a profile by Ramón Liarte and an introduction
by the KSL

Eliás Manzanera helped to set up the Valencian anarchist militia unit, the Iron Column, to unleash social revolution against the military and fascist revolt of July 1936 which began the Spanish Civil War. The Iron Column was the most intransigent and most maligned of the anarchist militias. Manzanera served on its War Committee and here remembers both its achievements, and his comrades who fell fighting, not only against fascism, but for anarchy.

Kate Sharpley Library

BM Hurricane, London WC1N 3XX, UK

PMB 820, 2425 Channing Way, Berkeley CA 94704, USA

www.katesharpleylibrary.net

cover art: Josh MacPhee, justseeds.org

ISBN-13: 9781873605196

ISBN-10: 1873605196



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42

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Translated by Paul Sharkey from *Documento histórico (La Columna de Hierro)*

Barcelona, 1981.

Thanks to everyone who helped us out and The Great Corrector.

Cover by Josh MacPhee: justseeds.org

First English publication 2006 by the Kate Sharpley Library. ©2006 KSL

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Manzanera, Elias

The Iron Column : testament of a revolutionary. -
(Anarchist library series ; 15)

1.Columna de Hierro (Organization) 2.Anarchism - Spain -
History - 20th century 3.Spain - History - Civil War,
1936-1939 - Campaigns

I.Title

946'.0814

ISBN-13: 9781873605196

ISBN-10: 1873605196

What is Anarchism?

Anarchism is a political theory which opposes the State and capitalism. It says that people with economic power (capitalists) and those with political power (politicians of all stripes left, right or centre) use that power for their own benefit, and not (like they claim) for the benefit of society. Anarchism says that neither exploitation nor government is natural or necessary, and that a society based on freedom, mutual aid and equal shares of the good things in life would work better than this one.

Anarchism is also a political movement. Anarchists take part in day-to-day struggles (against poverty, oppression of any kind, war etc) and also promote the idea of comprehensive social change. Based on bitter experience, they warn that new 'revolutionary' bosses are no improvement: 'ends' and 'means' (what you want and how you get it) are closely connected.

INTRODUCTION: THE IRON COLUMN AND THE SPANISH REVOLUTION

Elías Manzanera was one of the revolutionaries who, in the summer of 1936, set up the Columna de Hierro, the famous (or notorious) anarchist militia unit, the Iron Column. For years anarchists organised in the CNT and FAI¹ had been at the cutting edge of the class struggle in Spain. From industrial cities like Barcelona to the rural areas of Andalusia, they fought employers and their gunmen and feudal landowners and their Civil Guard enforcers with strikes, shoot-outs, insurrections and the power of their ideal. They wanted to destroy capitalism by expropriating the bourgeoisie and introducing libertarian communism. But they were not Marxists, trusting a vanguard of experts to control the state until it withered away. They wanted to lay waste to it now.

In July 1936 Spain exploded. A military coup was launched by a reactionary coalition of fascists, monarchists, authoritarians and the army, aiming to destroy the republic and slaughter the working class to teach it a lesson about the 'sanctity of private property', the 'rebirth of the nation' and 'Christian morality'. Unlike the republican politicians, the anarchists were ready and over half of Spain the people in arms, anarchist and socialist alike, together with loyal military units, defeated the revolt. In the liberated areas anarchists pushed for libertarian communism and the reconstruction of society. Factories were taken over by their workers. Villages decided – free for the first time of the landowners' power – if they wanted to become a collective or divide the landowners' acres between them. For Isaac Puente, the writer who best encapsulated the idea, 'Living in libertarian communism will be like learning to live. Its weak points and its failing will be shown up when it is introduced. If we were politicians we would paint a paradise brimful of perfections. Being human and being aware what human nature can be like, we trust that people will learn to walk the only way it is possible for them to learn: by walking.'² The shift to the new world was not always immediate (or smooth): Manzanera mentions both free stores and wages. Presumably the stores held essentials (flour, potatoes) and that wages could be used for 'extras' (like the cakes he mentions.)

¹ CNT, Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (National Confederation of Labour): Anarcho-syndicalist union established in 1910. Included non-anarchist workers. FAI, Federación Anarquista Ibérica (Iberian Anarchist Federation): federation of anarchist affinity groups founded in 1927.

² p.30, 'Libertarian communism' in *Cienfuegos Press Anarchist Review*, n.6 (1982); first published 1932. Puente took part in the uprising of December 1933 with Durruti and Cipriano Mera. He was killed by the fascists in 1936.

The groups of workers who fought on the barricades formed themselves into militia columns to defend all this. Ten groups of ten militians³ made a century and these centuries elected delegates to coordinate the column. These were revolutionary bodies intent on both changing society and defeating the enemy without succumbing to militarism.

These are the dramatic events that Manzanera looks back through the years to recall. While – inevitably – there are some factual errors, the attitudes stand in sharp relief. First, he has an intense pride, both in his association with the Iron Column and in the place that he comes from. Secondly, he expressed the firm, almost puritan idealism which drove him and so many of his comrades: bourgeois society was on the way out and the new one would have no need of bourgeois vices. His language comes from another time when ‘manhood’ meant ‘dignity’. Now we would say ‘Do the right thing.’

Finally, he has the bitter tone of someone used to being lied about. The people in arms had defeated the military revolt but the republican bourgeoisie and their Communist Party allies campaigned ceaselessly against the revolution. The Iron Column was one of their favourite targets. In the language of power, Communists destroying collectives and killing peasants were ‘restoring order’ – anarchists defending them were ‘uncontrollables’. For anyone unwilling to come out and say ‘I believe in power and I want my snout in the trough!’ it’s always a good trick to divide your anarchist opponents into impractical idealists or criminal opportunists. But the Iron Column were neither ‘bandits’ nor ‘saints’. They were revolutionaries who knew who their enemies were. For that reason, their long and painful odyssey is worth studying.

Kate Sharpley Library, July 2006.

Further reading on the Iron Column

KSL: Bulletin of the Kate Sharpley Library #46-7 Spanish Revolution/ Iron Column special.

Burnett Bolloten *The Spanish Civil War: revolution and counterrevolution*. 1991.

Abel Paz *The Iron Column: Militant Anarchism in the Spanish Civil War*. (KSL, Forthcoming. Includes a partial list of Iron Column members, articles from the Iron Column paper *Línea de Fuego* and a completely new translation of the articles published as *A Day Mournful and Overcast*)

An ‘Uncontrollable’ from the Iron Column *A Day Mournful and Overcast*. KSL, 2003, also reprinted by ‘Everyone is Born One Publishing’.

³ Militian: militia fighter. There were male (*miliciano*) and female (*milicana*) militians.

DEDICATION

To the heroic youth of Levante and Spain, the sentinels of an informed, responsible, free humanity. EM

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

My gratitude to the student Pilarin Atienza, who was kind enough to review and type up the notes that, overcome by tedium, I penned one night in Paris by way of an historical testimony for the enlightenment of all who may study and read it.

PROFILE OF THE AUTHOR

Elías Manzanera is the prototypical anarchist gladiator. Nothing short of a man of action cut from the cloth of the CNT. A hardworking organiser, a skilled craftsman, a cabinet-maker of note, Manzanera is possessed of the solidity characteristic of men from his native soil. A quick-witted Valencian, he is one of those people who should be allowed to have their say and who deserve a hearing if we are to be in a position to understand their inner selves: a child’s heart sensitive to all of the griefs of the universe.

This document, written in broad brush-strokes, encapsulates the most significant details about the Iron Column. It embodies the great battle fought by a harassed and die-hard Spain, the Spain of silence and ideas, a Spain decimated and wounded but at the same time invincible. This document sheds light upon the events of the Spanish Civil War, and highlights the anarchist approach to revolution.

Elías Manzanera’s intention was to leave us a moral and ethical testament from the Iron Column, summarised and put together in such a way as to be illuminating for its members and outsiders alike. The men and women of the Iron Column were models of anti-fascist struggle, symbols of the libertarian social revolution, the events of which Manzanera has evoked in order to tell the world about the thoughts, feelings and feats of the militants of the CNT.

If only documents like this were to fill the vacuum that our people’s history needs to fill if it is to pay tribute to the mighty fallen who gave up their lives for the cause of liberating all the world’s workers!

Ramón Liarte

PROLOGUE

36 years on. In the early spring of 1979 I was seized by an irresistible yearning to go home. I wanted to see again the delightful countryside where my loved ones mingled with the fertile soil of Valencia. Why do human beings, like animals, have this inclination to end their days in the place of their birth? The laws of nature are so simple and yet so complex, that the intellect of the human race has not been able to decipher them.

I was keen to return to the *Pais Valenciano*, the home of austere and agreeable folk, an oasis of loves as pure as the spring water rushing over the rock, an expression of industry and good taste, where art is everywhere on view and where the perfume of flowers and orange blossoms mingle on the breeze, infusing it with their scent. A place of hard work, love and colour. Here in Valencia to live is to love. Hatred is pitted against beauty. As in ancient and modern Greece, ugliness hides its face because nature's wonders magnify and beautify everything.

My wife packed our bags, set things in order and in no time at all we were strolling on our '*patria chica*' (home ground). What a delight to return to our beloved country and savour the delights one drank in as a child! In the few days I spent there I paid a call upon my old friend Cano, a dynamic writer and journalist. Bubbling over with belief in justice and love of one's fellow man, he holds human dignity in the highest regard. Needless to say he welcomed us with open arms to his spacious apartment, furnished with that simplicity that typifies this great humanitarian and high-minded dreamer.

After an aperitif, his splendid wife, a Valencian woman of the finest stock, served up a delicious paella, seasoned as only Valencians know how. Good taste is bred in her bones. With a hand that had retained its vigour, kind-hearted Cano poured us each a glass from a carafe of delicious claret. Good wine savouring of the earth.

Earlier, over the telephone, Cano had invited two old friends to drop in at coffee time. They arrived as arranged, and after an emotion-filled greeting redolent of memories of the intervening years, we settled down to drink our bottle of cognac. Which began to warm the cockles of our hearts. Between one drink and another, we started to dance the Blue Danube. All of a sudden, amid the light-heartedness, I exclaimed:

'Unintentionally, my old friends, we have opened the dance card from three tragic years when we were still youngsters.'

For a book on which he was working, Cano asked me for details about the creation of what became the splendid and stalwart 'Iron Column', even though he, as a journalist and as the then director of *Fragua Social* might well have been conversant with most of the tragic events outlined in the history of Spain. There, on that unforgettable night, was born the obligation which I assumed to pen a few simple, concrete pages on our experiences during the civil war and the social revolution that engulfed our peninsula.

I derive the utmost pleasure from the fact that this information may serve as an historical record and moral testament to whomsoever may read it and to future generations hungry for knowledge of the lofty, titanic drama played out by a great and selfless people such as ours, which proved its capacity for fighting for its freedom and for justice and human rights for every people on this planet.

It is to be hoped that, some day, justice may be rendered to our agonised and tortured Spain. Upwards of 40,000 books have been written about our glorious, epic struggle: there is not a single writer of worldwide renown who has not written about Spain's civil war, from whatever curious and different angle. And little by little the truth will out. And that truth, heavy with humanism and grandeur, resides in the hearts and souls of our people, a beacon of universal brotherhood and an example of honest dealing setting the standard to be met in the near future for which we are all bound, in some way or another. To live is to struggle for the welfare of one's fellow-men.

TOURING VALENCIA

After we had answered one another's questions about what we had been up to and how our lives had developed over the long, painful intervening years, we stepped outside for a stroll through the streets of enchanting Valencia. The city on the Guadalquivir or Turia is as bright as the daylight when the sun casts its beauty upon this land of enchantment. Valencia is as gay as her leafy orchards, as upright as her stout tree trunks: the air in these parts is delicate and almost transparent.

It rains seldom in the city: the climate is dry: the sky as blue as the Mediterranean. With its clean and friendly streets, the city is always radiant, luminous. This is a people who work, laugh, sing – waging war on unhappiness and making the orange crop a barrier against pain. Living in Valencia is living life 200%.

I could see dove-white homes, windows flung open to the good weather. I was overcome with emotion at the changes carried out as part of the

redevelopment of the city, and at the atmosphere generally. Lots of things have changed. Time does not pass in vain. Then again, I saw some things that displeased me. They run counter to my moral outlook and I foresee a dizzying decline into degeneration of the human race. Outlandish young folk, bordering upon the slovenly in their sloppy dress and manners. Young folk who style themselves hippies and behave in a self-satisfied way. Their homes stink to high heaven and in many instances their cleanliness leaves a lot to be desired. Yet it is common knowledge that civilisation is not just masculinity and pragmatism, but also includes running water, the touchstone of all progress. They wallow in a sordid eroticism, a poorly comprehended sexual freedom, brazen pornography and rococo artiness. All of which is something of which we would not even have dreamt in my younger days and it is part of the inheritance bequeathed us by fascism, a regime rooted in State violence, in rampant amorality, in the most sordid vices and in the corruption of body and soul. I find that with material like this to work with, the building of a free, conscious society is precluded. And yet, we must grapple with the evils that beset us until we arrive at unblemished beauty and the living truth.

I wandered into the El Carmen district, to which I was drawn like a moth to a flame. Signs that technology has not achieved a very high profile. This is the age of hustle and bustle: a few vacant sites upon which modern buildings have been erected, their silhouettes standing out like exotic plants in an ancient garden. Renovation is a wonderful thing, but only if the reforms are handled properly, with skill and tastefully. Otherwise, things become so deformed that everything is doomed to perdition. Which is not art but artistic failure.

Little by little I tramped the byways I had frequented in my childhood days. From the Calle de Lepanto – an evocative name, that – through Guillén de Castro to Torres de Cuarte. For a while I gazed upon an old building bearing the pock marks of the artillery shells fired by the French during our War of Independence. The facade was fairly peppered with shrapnel. And I reckon that this people, whose love of peace is well-proven, turns into a people of heroes when the time comes to defend its rights, prerogatives and liberties. Come the moment of truth, Valencia the handsome, Valencia the exquisite, can explode like a fire-cracker.

The El Carmen *barrio* remains a real labyrinth. The streets and lanes there wind in and out of one another, and you would think you were in a city built by the Arabs. I noted that the bright red of the El Carmen district of my youth has faded a lot. And this sent my thoughts backwards, as if listening for some sound

of the bygone time, of all the fleeting days. I am sensible of the fact that I no longer feel the allure that all this pink world used to hold for me... And the fact is that I am not the same person I once was. Something has changed. The passage of 35 years over my now stooping shoulders has wrought changes in my face and body and in my inner self and how I view things. With the upshot that the eager beaver lad full of hopes and dreams has now turned into an old man burdened by infirmities.

Life is unforgiving with us all. As the wise man once said in answer to the king's question: 'Men are born, they grow and they die'. Until such time as we breathe our last, let us strive to live an exemplary life to serve as a model for others.

THE FASCIST REVOLT

The fascist troops commanded by General Franco rose in revolt on 18 July 1936. In response to which reactionary, genocidal and barbaric gesture the National Confederation of Labour (CNT) called a general strike right across Spain.

In Valencia we CNT militants, ever on the alert, were monitoring the barracks. At the instigation of comrade Torres from the Transport Union, three trucks were fitted with armour plate. On 4 August 1936, three teams of us from the CNT and the FAI went to the shipyards to take delivery of the armoured trucks. We left the shipyards, bound for Valencia around 11.00 p.m.

As we passed through the Alameda, where the cavalry – the mainstay of the garrison – had its barracks, we were greeted by machine-gun fire. We replied through the tanks' peepholes with heavy rifle fire, until the machine-guns had been riddled into silence.

In Madrid, the fighting had gone in the people's favour at the historic La Montaña barracks.

Barcelona won that crucial encounter by defeating the rebels in the immortal Atarazanas barracks, where anarcho-syndicalists under the command of Ascaso (who perished in the fighting) with Durruti and García Oliver demonstrated their power as strategists and showed what a people can do when it knows that it is fighting for its imperilled freedom.

In Valencia the people's first success came at the cavalry barracks, where the fascist bosses were crushed and the people's dignity and rights made safe. The men and women who played their part in that immortal popular upheaval deserve the gratitude of Spanish and world history, because it was in Spain that the world's despots, backed by Arab, Portuguese, Italian and German forces,

played out the first crucial battle of what was later to expand into the Second World War.

AN ENTIRE COLUMN

Much has been written and a lot of ink expended in Spain as well as abroad on the performance of the Iron Column. Not only has the heroism of its men been praised to the skies, but indeed the Column has become the stuff of legend on account of its effervescent heroic membership. In his book *La CNT en la Revolución Española*, José Peirats has this to say:

'The confederal troops manning the Teruel front mounted an incursion into the rearguard. In the capital of Valencia there were bloody clashes with the troops in the rear.' Which is untrue.¹

The Iron Column detached not a single young fighter from the front, for the column had comrades aplenty based in Valencia to cope with any eventuality. The fact is that several comrades did return from the front to attend the funeral of the comrade murdered in Valencia by the so-called State communists who were paid, led and used as pawns by the tyrants and killers in the Soviet Union. The funeral cortege, attended by some two thousand people, many of them women and children, came under surprise machine-gun attack from goons ensconced in what had been the headquarters of the Levantine Regional Right (DRV) as it crossed the Plaza de Tetuán. This shameful onslaught left us with fatalities and several seriously wounded. Rest assured that, had we thought for one instant, that such a vile and craven attack was likely, not a single one of the lowlife, cowardly communists who mounted the surprise attack like ruthless enemies would have been left alive to mount it.²

However, as the headquarters building was being stormed, and as the despicable communists were scurrying like yellow rats across the rooftops, we were collecting our wounded and dead. And the funeral proceeded on its way.

¹ Manzanera is keen to defend the reputation of the Iron Column against any suggestion that it abandoned the front lines. [KSL]

² The massacre of the Plaza de Tetuán took place on 30 October 1936. In *The Iron Column* (KSL, forthcoming) Abel Paz quotes the Iron Column manifesto issued after this attack (published in *Línea de Fuego*, 37 [5 November 1936],) part of which reads: 'Although we returned fire, given the surprise nature of the attack and the position we were all in, we were totally ineffective. Whereas their shots, fired cold-bloodedly into a mass of people caused mayhem. It was not a case of some unavoidable clash but of a deliberately prepared attack.' [KSL]

In the Plaza de Emilio Castelar, the very heart of beautiful Valencia, the noble folk of Valencia awaited their sons with eyes brimming with tears, for the Iron Column was the living embodiment of the Valencian people.

All praise and all tribute to the *Pais Valenciano* and its brave and selfless Iron Column! In the long run, a people of heroes and high-minded workers can never be defeated or vanquished. That cowardly attack cost us the life of our beloved comrade Armando, a militant of great mettle, an intelligent, educated man, an idealist without spot or blemish. Another of those who perished was Dimas, a real Hercules, a giant who belonged to the merchant marine and whose personality and approach lent a greatness to everything.

If we were to list the fallen confederal comrades, the list would have no end to it. The communist goons were under orders to murder anarcho-syndicalists to create serious difficulties for the CNT and undermine its constructive revolutionary endeavours. Wheresoever the hand of Stalin was felt, the counter-revolution prospered and the workers' gains were forever being whittled away. These persistent traitors never missed a chance to hinder the people's progress towards social and economic emancipation.

Such communism, kowtowing to Moscow, ran up against an impregnable barrier in the battle-hardened Iron Column, made up of manual and intellectual workers, selfless, undemanding women and by the very flower and salt of the earth of the Valencian people. One would be hard put to find a historical parallel for the vigour of its menfolk, the courage of its fighters and their whole-hearted commitment of their own lives to the defence of the Spanish people and of the whole of mankind.

The Iron Column has gone down in history shrouded in the glory of unmatched heroism and faith in a victory wrested from it because all of the forces of evil from around the world joined forces to beat and destroy us so that our ideas about self-management and libertarian federalism might not triumph and prosper. But ideas are imperishable and there are green shoots sprouting amid the debris of the past. Even in the midst of death there is life.

THE SALESIAN CONVENT [JULY, 1936]

Continuing our march we entered the city centre. The Valencian people welcomed us with much cheering and celebration. Immediately we went to the Civil Government building, making for the governor's office. We soon realised that this representative of the authorities was a poor specimen. He knew nothing about anything and was terror-stricken. After a few words we advised him to

take himself off home to rest easy in his bed, our view being that his term as civil governor in Valencia was now at an end.

At daybreak we drew up our tanks facing the cavalry barracks, a fortress that surrendered without firing a single shot. We filled the trucks with all of the arms we could find in the barracks and made for the Salesian sisters' convent, which had been occupied by the Libertarian Youth after the nuns had abandoned it.

We had to get the popular struggle underway. A first call for volunteers brought a massive response from the youth of Valencia. Prisoners held for social offences were set free when the revolt had erupted and, in a tide of fervour and enthusiasm they had thrown in their lot with the militians. A lot of nonsense has been peddled, throwing mud and insult upon these inmates from the Los Reyes penitentiary. On leaving prison, many of them had headed for home. But a number of them reported to us and these comrades enlisted with us en masse. Two of our delegates had them line up to enlist. These comrades enjoyed our implicit trust. We knew them all. As comrades passed through San Miguel de Los Reyes, they signed up those who behaved like men in the prison in terms of their upright and decent conduct. And they certainly did sterling work. Despite what some hacks and jobbing writers might claim. The profession of writer ought to be closed to those who, because of ethical shortcomings and dishonesty, disgrace the loftiest values of journalism and literature. That is the truth of the matter and not the slander and abuse heaped upon those who well deserved the respect of each and every one of us.

THE MAKE-UP OF THE COLUMN

The youngsters who formed the Iron Column in 1936 were between 22 and 26 years of age. They were brave and undaunted, brimming with the commitment and belief in their liberating ideas. They were all members of the CNT, the FAI, and the FIJL.

ARMANDO: a sharp-witted machine fitter who brought his love of everything fine and decent to a love of learning. Murdered by communist scum in the Plaza de Tetuán in Valencia.

PELLICER: Two indefatigable, honest, genuine brothers: sons of a comfortable and wealthy family long established in Valencian. Intelligent and alert, lovers of life and reason. José Pellicer was an expert bookkeeper, conversant with financial matters: a capable polyglot with a perfect command of English and French, in addition to speaking good Spanish and his native Valencian tongue.

José was shot in Paterna (Valencia) along with his brother Pedro. A younger brother escaped being shot because of his tender years.

The Pellicers were slim and tall young men – standing 1 metre 80 and 1 metre 85, respectively. José Pellicer was taken from the bullring in Alicante to the Santa Barbara Castle in that city. When the war was lost and the army collapsed in Levante and in the Centre, he was captured by the puppet general Gambara,³ who led those of Mussolini's thugs who had come to overthrow the legitimate Spanish republic. They transferred him to the sinister castle, where he was subjected to a cowardly interrogation and given a terrifying beating that left him half-blinded. Both brothers were shot in Valencia much later [8 June 1942].

The news, when it broke, plunged the entire populace of Valencia into utter desolation. The local girls knew that two individuals, paragons of handsomeness and goodness, had been executed: mothers wept, knowing that sons like the Pellicers are not readily conceived. And the menfolk thought that Valencia had been robbed of two sons who were exponents of the notion of selflessness, noble struggle and love of their fellow man, without distinction. What extraordinary men those sons of Valencia were!

Who gave our column its name? Let us see. The people of Valencia are renowned for their wit and gift of the gab. In those heady times, they used to say to one another:

'Hey! Are we going to form a column?'

To which others would answer:

'Of course, man, of course: a Column of Iron!'

And that's how it was, how some Valencian wit christened what would later come to be known to one and all as the Iron Column.

Brave youngsters carried away by belief in the people's victory, peasants, blacksmiths, bricklayers, labourers, barbers, carpenters, craftsmen and people of all trades swelled the ranks of the Iron Column which was a living symbol of the people's freedoms. And the column was Iron because the breasts and bodies of these daring youngsters formed a bulwark upon which the army of treachery and opprobrium was to founder dozens of times.

An Iron Column made up of lion cubs, of the wolf cubs of the Great Idea, of children become men, marching off to fight in hope of making a new Spain in the image of their practices and ideas. Alone now and in old age, I salute the youth of Levante and of Spain who, ethically and morally the superiors of their

³ General Gastone Gambara (1891-1962) [KSL]

enemies, were able to defend our peoples' rights to independence, autonomy, equality and fraternity at work and in the earning of their daily bread.

Ah, battle-scarred column of liberation: I remember you and my heart is racked with pain at the knowledge that your finest militians, those who most readily did their freely accepted duty, perished, mown down by machine-gun fire, blown to pieces by shells, always with a smile playing upon their lips at the thought of some beloved sweetheart, some idolised mother, a Spain yet to be forged for the greater good of all Spaniards and of the world as a whole, of the whole world!

ANGEL GÓMEZ DE LA HIGUERA: we call to mind a decent, upright militant of the CNT. One on a par with Ascaso, Durruti, Vicente Ballester, Higinio Carrocera, David Antona⁴ and so many other distinguished and anonymous militants whose impeccable conduct and daily conduct at work brought honour to the Confederation. A tradesman from the construction industry. Intelligent and skilful, well-read and experienced. He received such a beating that he opened his veins in search of the peace of the grave but was caught in time. He passed away in Gandia recently, leaving a swathe of happy and indelible memories in his wake.

MANZANERA: Elías Manzanera is a French polisher. From his earliest youth he has been active in CNT and anarcho-syndicalist circles. Of this hard-working fellow – the people's historian has written – it may be said that he is cut from the same cloth as the likes of Mera or Morato, Maximo Franco or Evaristo Viñuales,⁵ and all those battlers who gave their all without asking anything in

⁴ Francisco Ascaso (1901-1936): anarchist leader who perished in the resistance to fascism in Barcelona in July 1936.

Buenaventura Durruti (1896-1936): led the Column named after him and perished in the defence of Madrid in November 1936.

Vicente Ballester (1903-1936): prominent Andalusian anarchist and writer of novels in the Novela Ideal series. Died at the hands of the fascists.

Higinio Carrocera (1908-1938): anarchist commander prominent in the defence of Asturias against the Francoists. Executed after refusing a commission in Franco's army.

David Antona (1904-1945): anarchist leader in Madrid, close associate of Cipriano Mera. [KSL]

⁵ Cipriano Mera (1897-1975): anarchist bricklayer who rose to command of an Corps of the Republican Army and thwarted an attempted communist coup in the latter stages of the civil war.

Morato: probably Francisco Maroto (?-1938), see note 9 (page 29).

Maximo Franco (1913-1939): commanded a unit in Aragon. Committed suicide in

return during the Spanish Civil War. A member of the Woodworkers' Union, and many years in exile, he later rejoined Spanish life. Manzanera is self-educated, a good judge of men and books, studious and considered in his opinions. A thoroughly decent man who, whilst not describing himself as an anarchist, carries his beliefs in his heart, firmly ensconced in his impeccable conscience.

MARTÍ: Rafael Martí, cinema operator, the life and soul of the Iron Column. A fighter of boundless courage. Sparing in his speech and eloquent in his deeds. Of average height, with a lively face and steely eyes. His strong personality a magnet to all the young people who had dealings with him. Our Rafael perished in Puerto de Escandón (Teruel), fighting like a lion, because he was a lion with a child's sentiments. The fascists put his corpse on display in Teruel's Plaza del Torico to show that even the greatest fighters perish in the fray. He left a widow and two sons who spent long, unhappy years in the most abject poverty. His hands were always clean and he died an example to generations to come.

DIEGO: I cannot call to mind his second name.⁶ But I readily recall the qualities this comrade boasted. He was straightforward and affectionate, loyal to the end. He never created serious problems: instead he helped resolve difficulties, no matter how problematical or dangerous. He was the very embodiment of dependability.

[JOSÉ] SEGARRA: A student of philosophy and literature. Approachable and glib and confident in his speech. The very epitome of intelligence and fine words. Indefatigable and of unfathomable kindness. Like so many other fallen young men, he could have offered Spain much in the education and instruction of the needy and the luckless, that is to say, those denied a place at life's banquet.

FORMATION OF THE WAR COMMITTEE

Later, after positions had been manned in Puerto de Escandón, the base of the War Committee was broadened in the following manner. The name and their responsibilities were made public in the newspaper published daily in the village of Valverde, where the following announcement was made:

Alicante in 1939.

Evaristo Viñuales (1913-1939): headed the Information department of the Council of Aragon. Died in a suicide pact with Maximo Franco (see above) rather than be captured by the Francoists. [KSL]

⁶ Abel Paz's book on the Iron Column refers to a Diego Navarro. [KSL]

Comrades:

To circumvent pointless problems in discovering to whom you should address yourself in a particular instance, we print below the list of the comrades who make up the Committee and the responsibility assigned to each of them.

War: Pellicer, Montoya, Rodilla, Gómez and Rufino.

General Supplies: Manzanera.

Food for the Front: Diego and Gumbau.

Administration: Serna.

Transport: Dolz.

Information and Liaison: Cortés and Segarra.

Miscellaneous: Canet.

The make-up of the War Committee was, by all accounts, a successful one. We had to get things up and running and it should be demonstrated that the decision made was a good one.

LEAVING VALENCIA FOR THE FRONT

Some comrades arrived to inform us that a number of groups had left Sagunto under escort from Civil Guard pickets who had assured them that Teruel could be taken with minimal effort. On reaching La Puebla de Valverde, while resting up and having a meal at four o'clock in the afternoon, they issued an appeal to the lads from the port of Sagunto. And once they were assembled in the square, the Civil Guards opened fire on them, killing most. A few of them escaped across country. This made us bring forward our departure for Teruel.

REACHING BARRACAS

Some 150 of us set out aboard a small train which the railway comrades had managed to rustle up to transport us. On reaching Barracas, the next day, without any further delay, several groups set out on foot, because we had no transportation of any sort.

FROM BARRACAS TO SARRIÓN

We reached Sarrión at about 6.00 p.m. There were other groups of young people there ahead of us. The group from Sagunto, which was the most reliable one and known to comrade Rufino, called everybody together and then, not letting down our guard, we decided to prepare to defend ourselves against possible surprise attack, against which local residents had cautioned us.

We mounted guard around the village. At 2.00 a.m., a lorry coming from Teruel approached us with headlights switched off. Our comrades, nerves on edge, fired several shots and the Civil Guard occupants of the lorry took off at a run, leaving the lorry behind. This fascist operation could have cost us dearly. On other occasions greater coolness and sangfroid was displayed. When the enemy draws close, the right thing to do is to give him the reception he merits, returning blow for blow and ambush for ambush. Such is the inflexible law of warfare. And war is waged by cunning or not at all.

THE BATTLE OF SARRIÓN

The following day, reinforcements began to pour in from Valencia. We dug in in Sarrión as best we could. Our group of Column organisers set up shop in a small mansion, a dilapidated old farmhouse where there was only a big kitchen with a table and an old piano.

We slept on the floor, for beds were scarce. Comrade Martí began to tinkle the piano around midnight, playing 'Farewell to life' from the opera *Tosca*. And comrade Manzanera, with his mighty baritone, sang, putting everything he had into it.

Several days passed and then, one morning, with the sun already high overhead, we were startled by some artillery shells. The fighting erupted immediately. The fascists attacked with machine-gun and rifle fire along a front located on the right hand side of the cemetery.

With three machine-guns manned by Sergeant Montola and Araico, we wasted no time in returning their fire. Montola was a machine-gunner sergeant and Araico was a fellow who had done his military service in Melilla with the machine-gunner corps. Elsewhere our young people, with unequalled courage, continually pressed forward with the four old rifles we had.

The fighting was becoming increasingly vicious and many a time we were reduced to hand to hand combat. No question about it: the fascists fought back well, but our young lads' impetuosity overwhelmed them. The constant gunfire and the chatter of the machine-guns were forever intensifying. Our wounded, some slightly hurt and some serious, were removed to Valencia in a lorry that ferried them to hospital.

By 1.00 p.m. we noticed that the resistance offered on our left flank was weak. We immediately pressed forward and the fascists, finding themselves hemmed in, started to fall back, since the battery they had set up was quickly silenced. Rifle fire intensified and machine-guns vomited fury and fire, but they were

dying down. The fascists then began to run for the trucks which had arrived. Which left just one machine-gun firing. But comrade Rafael Martí, pouncing like a lion, rushed the machine-gun and silenced it. Firm, sure action by this hero accomplished his mission in the Spartan style. The fighters of the Iron Column covered themselves with glory.

The toll taken by the battle was as follows:

The fascists lost 93 dead.

We sustained seven fatalities and 37 wounded.

Without doubt this was one of the bloodiest battles fought between the Iron Column and the fascist army.

Had we had access to transport after the battle that day, we could have taken Teruel. When we reached La Puebla de Valverde, the villagers told us that the retreating fascists had told them that we 'Reds' were horned devils with tails, and that they had been half-crazed with terror.

ON TO LA PUEBLA DE VALVERDE

In Sarrión the position became untenable. Our young men, brimful of courage, wanted to press on to Teruel at all costs. The Valencia comrades belonging to the Defence Committee advised us not to advance until reinforcements would arrive. In the end a half-company of Carabineers with one battery of small-calibre field guns arrived. We set out urgently for La Puebla de Valverde a few kilometres outside Sarrión.

We encountered no resistance in La Puebla de Valverde. We ventured as far as the village square and left immediately for Puerto de Escandón where heavy artillery fire greeted our arrival. Our young men started to dig in and our professional soldiers ordered that the battery they had brought should be set up: they opened up on the enemy whom they had spotted through their field-glasses and using telemetry. They were pounded to hell. An indescribable racket erupted. The boom of cannons was joined by the crack of rifle fire.

The enemy was entrenched a few metres away from us, just as our professional soldiers had said. The clash that ensued was outstanding, terrifying. And we had to hold out with courage, giving not an inch, but carrying on with the fight.

Bullets were raining down everywhere. We were forced to be sparing with our ammunition, wasting absolutely nothing. Thereby ensuring that we were not caught on the hop. We weathered the 'hail' several times in this measured, painstaking way, until the enemy got tired and stopped shooting. Night having

fallen, we set to the digging of our trenches, to await the time to mount our attack on Teruel. It is hard to fight in such materially straitened conditions of inferiority. But hardship sorts out the men from the boys.

The next day we went down into La Puebla to procure supplies. We were all utterly exhausted, and spitting feathers. We ached with thirst and there was no sign of water anywhere. The residents of La Puebla helped us out. We ferried water to our trenches so that our young men could assuage the constant thirst gnawing at their entrails.

La Puebla de Valverde is a small village whose tasteful lay-out is visible upon entry. In the main street there is a rather interesting arch. Off to right and left there are several little streets of old, very old, houses built of dried mud. La Puebla had very few living there. Only the old people could be seen. The fact is that all of the young people from Teruel itself and from lower Teruel province had gone to Valencia and Barcelona in search of work and a livelihood. These villages are dismal places, abandoned by the young, off in search of life. There were no shops of any sort in La Puebla, no money changing hands, indeed, very little money at all. A butchered pig sustained the villagers for the year, plus a little wheat they harvested to make their bread throughout the year. Only those who were pretty well off could slaughter a sheep.

The inhabitants of La Puebla were almost all fair-haired and blue-eyed, with broad foreheads and quite high cheekbones. I had no doubt at all that these folk were descended from some immigrant Nordic people. Were the first inhabitants of La Puebla de Valverde like them? All races have their special characteristics.

SEARCHING FOR AND CAPTURING THE WRETCHES MISUSING THE COLUMN'S NAME

Some comrades came down to La Puebla de Valverde and informed the War Committee that other armed groups, claiming to belong to the Iron Column, were acting in its name. These groups which had settled in Segorbe used to enter villages and loot homes, stealing money from the inhabitants and manhandling all who refused to comply with the whims of these wretched bandits.

Wasting no time, the Committee despatched a squad of young men to track down these low-lives who were killing and carrying out dirty deeds in our name. They were soon run to ground. They were arrested, and a full investigation was carried out. Identified by the victims whom they had robbed, they were punished on the spot.

It should be placed on record that all the villages of the district out as far as Castellón were relieved of this accursed nightmare. The young men visited all outlying villages, reporting on what had happened, so that the Iron Column's unblemished record should be preserved. We were revolutionaries, that was true: but we were not bandits. This was always the line of militant anarcho-syndicalism.

Everything the miscreants had stolen and the money found in their possession was returned to the families which had been subjected to their crimes. The comrades from Segorbe carried out this mission of just restoration at the instigation of the Column's Committee. Everyone was pleased with the outcome of this social clean-up.

We Spanish anarchists have been portrayed by reactionaries as the scum of the earth: but they have failed in their efforts to do so. Their legendary slander which may have worked for them on occasion still lingers, but anarchist integrity has always shone through. When all is said and done there are blemishes that need to be set straight, but the CNT is the very model of dignity because it despises greed and preaches altruism by examples that stand forever through all revolutionary upheavals.

IN PUERTO DE ESCANDÓN

Lorries in great numbers poured into La Puebla from every direction. No problem now with keeping the Column supplied. Merchandise was mounting up in an ancient farmhouse. The people were summoned to assemble in the square. And from a small balcony in the town hall we addressed the assembled public and told them: 'We have no wish to meddle in matters affecting domestic life.'

A number of men who claimed to be of the left were appointed. After a few days, as a result of the altruistic conduct of the comrades from the Column, the village came to identify with the libertarians and the good womenfolk came forward to sew for us and wash our clothes.

The Column supplied all of the inhabitants. In addition, anyone working for the Iron Column was paid 300 pesetas, the wage paid to everyone from the War Committee down to our youngest fighter. Not with words does one spread equality, but with actions. A placard was posted up on the old farmhouse, reading as follows: 'Free Commune'. Which is to say: help yourselves. To each according to needs, from each according to ability, as the First Internationalists used to have it. And we were as good as our word. Implementing our anarchist

ideas, the accords passed at the fourth National Congress held in May 1936 in Zaragoza were put into effect and Libertarian Communism installed as our model of society.

After taking up positions in Puerto de Escandón, our centuries were organised and they elected their own direct delegates. The Column comprised 15,000 men, but later, some 30,000 enlisted.

The War Committee worked around the clock. Comrade Manzanera saw to the Column's supplies: Gómez ran the Administration. A medical team was appointed to look to the most urgent requirements. An emergency clinic was set up in Sarrión with two doctors and an eminent surgeon, assisted by a number of nurses. Comrade Quiles was appointed Health delegate. And every week a lorry delivered clean clothing for all our centuries and collected our dirty laundry. Which prevented a lot of sicknesses. We mention these things because CNT people were able to show that even in the midst of war, which incubates human misery, man need not be brutish nor turn into an animal.

WHAT OUR YOUNG MEN WROTE IN THE NEWSPAPER

Comrades belonging to the Graphic Arts Union of Valencia set up a printworks where our newspaper was published: it comprised four pages. Its title was *Línea de Fuego* (*Line of Fire*). This platform of ours carried news from the war and the more pertinent items of life in the rearguard.

Also in Valencia we produced another newspaper called *Nosotros*. Plus a weekly magazine and a very well-stocked public library that was a marvel to us and to outsiders. In the villages occupied by our Column, schools were opened under teachers who were serving alongside us. And the CNT's cultural endeavours were not in vain, for they produced fine fruits.

The CNT's watchword was as follows:

'Not a single school without its light

Nor a single mind unenlightened:

Bread and knowledge

Are the birthright of us all.'

Since anarchy is the highest expression of learning and love, our goal was to put paid to the age-old bane of illiteracy, eradicating the plague of ignorance and bringing culture, making education and knowledge available to all men and villages. On learning of the cultural endeavours of the CNT, others hastened to do likewise and out of this commendable work grew the plan for Cultural Militias whose efforts drew praise at home and abroad. Anarchists have always

considered that one of the best means of emancipating human beings is through culture, morality and labour in the service of human well-being. The planting of ideas carries a guarantee of harvest, however long it may take to reap the crop. And the fruits belong to the planter...

GLIMPSES OF LA PUEBLA⁷

To my friend and comrade Olcina, sculptor of souls. Noon. The comrades are climbing down off their 'phaetons' and as they do so, their weather-beaten faces mirror their delight. Usually behind a face toughened by the ravages of nature lurks a heart hungry for tenderness.

The militians go around in groups of four and six: but as they approach the arch, they meander through the streets and alleys of the 'metropolis'. Some of them are munching the cakes which the village matrons sell to the revolutionaries. And yes, they are revolutionaries rather than militians...

Several children are scurrying around these titans of human determination, and the latter in turn, mingle with the kids, handing out slices of cake that they devour with relish. One of them clambers on to a comrade's shoulders and, very quietly, tells him:

'Look. I wish that I was bigger like you so that I could pick up a rifle and go with you.'

His mother appears in a doorway and calls out to him:

'Come here. Come here right away: you have to go with your sister to fetch wood.'

'Hold on!' the little lad tells her 'Until I give him grandmother's name. She is up there in Teruel, sick and lonely.'

The child's words echo in the mother's mind and heart... And, with a hurt expression, she remembers that she has left her hopes and her loved ones there.

Human scenes of raw, heart-rending emotion!

A Da Vinci would immortalise them, sublime and strong, like the rocks used as breastworks.

The light dims and the cold closes in pitilessly as if oblivious to human suffering. Leaving the streets lonely and dismal. And in every home there are revolutionaries sitting in the firelight chatting about the day's happenings and the latest letter from their loved ones. The hours pass and it is time to go back to

the parapet. Slowly, the militians amble from their billets where people have lived for generation after generation

I melt into the half-darkness of the falling night shadows. And call to mind the young folk, filled with joy and courage, who carried the dream of a better tomorrow in their mind's eyes. A free youth is the north star, the light of the world.

I stand stock-still, deep in thought. A door closes and I hear a murmured kiss. A woman's lips are the cup of happiness and life's nectar.

THE SORT OF THING THE YOUNG PEOPLE WROTE FOR OUR NEWSPAPER LÍNEA DE FUEGO
There is no avoiding it: it never can be avoided. What a joy it would be if we could all be in the same line! Or rather: it was the comrades from the trenches who dragged them down from the parapet and told them:

'For the good of the revolution, you must stay behind!'

No, it can never be avoided. Because with the best will and all the tolerance in the world, there are times, when, being in difficulty, in one of those times so frequent in all wars, one of those points when body and spirit, in desperate strife find their needs and wishes roundly denied. In such times you see the nameless, the unknowns from some far-flung village or obscure factory stoically braving every vicissitude. You see the first of them, without any great ado, reach the enemy parapet and wrest away some weapon or flag: only to vanish in a trice, his disappearance every bit as obscure as his life before it. He will be laid away on some gully or hillside where no-one sets foot. And there alone, in some remote little hamlet, in some room with tiny windows, shrouded in shadows indeed, there may well be a little old lady sitting and chanting with the obsessive regularity of some ancient grandfather clock:

'Where is my Juan? Where can he be?'

A mother's love is the greatest treasure in all the universe.

IN PUERTO DE ESCANDÓN

There was daily skirmishing on the front. Our comrade Rafael Martí, along with a team of comrades from Puerto de Sagunto, set about storming an enemy trench. Barely 100 metres separated the two trenches. Stunned by the audacity of Martí and the comrades he had with him, the fascists stopped shooting and produced a white flag. Rafael, trusting and in the belief that they really were about to surrender, approached them. As he did so there was heavy gunfire from the fascists that left all our comrades stretched upon the ground. This was an

⁷ In an appendix about *Línea de Fuego* in *The Iron Column*, Abel Paz lists 'Snapshots from La Puebla' as one of the articles they published.

irreparable loss, for Rafael, on account of his courage and stature, had become the best-loved man in the Column. Some things just cannot ever be forgotten.

The Iron Column garrisoned the whole length of the front from Andegüela to Forniche. In Andegüela, a century whose delegate had been a carabineer on the Eastern Pyrenees border was posted on a plateau. The delegate was an experienced old fox. One day, at daybreak, he launched a frontal assault upon the fascist positions, and, after some vicious fighting, the defenders surrendered. 100 prisoners were taken, all of them Moors.

In the course of that operation comrade Rufino and a number of young libertarians were wounded. The captured Moors we took into La Puebla and we interrogated one or two, but the only thing they would say in their language was:

‘Me Red, chum.’

The knapsacks they were carrying contained a little bit of everything, being filled with jewellery and watches as well as tools of varying worth. In the course at the war, lots of Moorish prisoners were found in possession of severed heads that they were carrying in their knapsacks until such time as they might find the time to extract their gold teeth. These degenerate savages, from African climes, had carte blanche to murder and rob all they pleased. In addition to raping young girls and children, they perpetrated glaring outrages. So much for the triumph of this breed sired by Sodom and Gomorrah, hurtled against us in order to bring civilisation to Spain. There never was a greater crime.

The War Committee, ensconced in an old farmhouse very near the parapets, set up a splendid, fully-equipped kitchen. It was headed by a comrade from the Catering Union, a superb cook. Piping hot food was taken up to the parapets daily. Every effort was made to ensure that the fighting man was something more than just a soldier or militiaman, that is, to see that he was a man.

The War Committee met weekly with the century leaders. The Committee was chaired by Lieutenant Colonel Pérez Salas and artillery commander Gallego. Lieutenant Colonel Pérez Salas was like a father figure to us. When the war ended and he was brought to trial, he had this to say:

‘I would account it a dishonour if those who breached their pledge to the Republic were not to shoot me.’

As a man and as a soldier, he had pledged his loyalty to the Government of the Republic, a regime that he defended to the last.

The Committee, under the chairmanship of Lieutenant Colonel Pérez Salas twice had talks with the then War minister, Largo Caballero: but the latter refused to issue weapons to our Column, on the pretext that the Teruel front

was of no account. Largo Caballero’s incompetence as head of the republican government was a complete disaster, with no extenuating circumstances.

The same underhanded Marxist tactics were deployed against the confederal columns operating on the Aragón front. The object was to ensure that anarcho-syndicalists would score no prestigious successes, lest their influence among the people grow in any way. With the war handled in this way by an incompetent fanatic, progress was impossible. His failure was plain for all to see, but the serious point is that his personal failure reduced Spain’s anti-fascists to a situation that was plainly untenable.

Clemenceau once said that war was too serious a matter to be entrusted to the generals: but perhaps he forgot to add that, being an undertaking in which the destinies of a people are at stake, it ought not to be entrusted to incompetents either.

MANIFESTO

In response to the sordid propaganda of the right and from self-styled anti-fascists, unleashing a tide of infamies and slanders against the Iron Column, we felt called upon to issue a manifesto to the people of Valencia and to all of the regions still under the government of, as the saying had it, republicans without republicanism.

This is that manifesto:

‘The Iron Column, comprising personnel from the FAI and the CNT and others who, whilst members of no organisation, identify with anarchist ideas and practices, is sensible – in view of the consequences flowing from its actions in Valencia and the comment passed upon it in certain quarters – of an overwhelming need to publicise its activity, lest anyone attempt to make party political capital at our expense.

‘We, the men who fight under the shared description of the ‘Iron Column’ against the clerical and militaristic reaction on the Teruel front, being anarchists, are equally interested in matters related to the front and affairs in the rearguard which, far from being a reassurance to us, was a matter of some concern and doubt to us, and so we determined to intervene, to which end we made the following requests of the organisations concerned:

- ‘1. Complete disarmament and dissolution of the Civil Guard.
- ‘2. Immediate despatch to the front of all of the armed corps in the State’s service (Assault Guards, Carabineers, Security Guards, etc.)

'3. Destruction of all archives and files held by all capitalist and State institutions.

'We based these requests upon two criteria: the revolutionary and the ideological. As anarchists and as revolutionaries, it was our understanding that the existence of the Civil Guard, a plainly reactionary corps, which throughout time and especially during this present rebellion, has so plainly begun to display its ethos and procedures, posed a threat.

'We found the Civil Guard odious and had no wish to look upon it because we have grounds aplenty for distrusting it. And so we asked that it be disarmed and for that reason we disarmed it.

'We asked that all of the armed corps be moved up to the front, because there is a shortage of manpower and weapons on the front, and, given how things presently stand, their presence in the city was a hindrance rather than a necessity. We have gone halfway towards achieving this and we shall not rest until we have completed the task.

'Finally, we asked for the destruction of all those documents that REPRESENTED A PAST OF TYRANNY AND OPPRESSION, offensive to our free consciences. We destroy such papers and we intend to impound them from offices like the High Court which in bygone days were used to bury revolutionaries in the prisons and which, today, as we stand on the brink of a libertarian society, have lost all *raison d'être*.

'Such objectives brought us to Valencia, and we carried out our task employing the methods we deemed most appropriate.

'In addition, during our stay in Valencia, we noticed that while arms purchasing deals were falling through for want of money, there was a huge quantity of gold and other precious metals in many establishments, and it was this that prompted us to impound the gold, silver and platinum from certain jewellers, insignificant amounts that were passed on to the organisation.

'All of the above we did. Now let us see what we did not do.

'We are accused of looting establishments. Which is a falsehood. We defy anyone to present the receipts we issued and show that our men were motivated by some whim or intent to cause upset rather than by necessity. We are accused of committing common murder of people. Which is a foul lie. What have we done to merit this charge? What crimes have we committed? A regrettable accident, which we were the first to deplore and condemn, appears to be the basis for this. The death of socialist comrade José Pardo Arcil had nothing to do with us. It was demonstrated on the night in question that no member of our

column had any hand in it. IT HAS NEVER OCCURRED TO US TO ATTACK THE SOCIALISTS NOR THE OTHER ANTI-FASCIST DENOMINATIONS, much less to do so in the underhand fashion in which Pardo was attacked. Not that this means that we forswear our aims, which are the only reason we fight, but we appreciate that internecine strife would be criminal at this time. We have before us a redoubtable enemy and all of our efforts must be directed at his destruction.

'We believe that what we have said will suffice to clarify our conduct. We are revolutionaries, and we have conducted ourselves as such. With honesty and in a high-minded way. Only a cretin could see evil intent and frivolity in our activity.

'Our position, in these crucial times for Spain's development, is plain and emphatic. We will fight with all of our men, with all of our energy, with all of our zeal until we crush this squalid fascism once and for all. We are fighting for SOCIAL REVOLUTION. We are on the march towards ANARCHY. And so, now and later, we will defend everything that promises a life of greater freedom and promises to smash the yokes by which we are burdened and to destroy the vestiges of the past.

'To all workers, all revolutionaries, all anarchists, we say: On the front and in the rearguard, wherever you may be, fight against all of the enemies of your freedoms and destroy fascism. But ensure also that the fruits of your efforts are not the installation of some dictatorial regime that would be the continuation, with all of its vices and shortcomings, of the whole state of affairs we are trying to eradicate. With arms now and later with work tools, learn how to live without tyrants and to shift for yourselves, that being the only road to freedom. Such is the message of the Iron Column, clearly and plainly spelled out.'

REPORT

The situation was becoming increasingly intolerable. In spite of the forays carried out daily, the young people manning their parapets were growing impatient. A time came when we had to be miserly in dispensing our ammunition. In those circumstances, an all-out attack to take Teruel was impracticable. Had we had abundant arms and munitions, it is a certainty that we would have taken Teruel, or the Iron Column would have been cut to shreds.

Most of the units that were organised were organised by the so-called republican government which had nothing consequential or responsible about it and they were cafe table revolutionaries who got together to ease their

digestions. With things that way, they set about militarising all units into militarised Brigades and Army Corps.

The inevitable occurred. The quintessentially anarchist and revolutionary Iron Column refused militarisation, its view being that this was a counter-revolutionary ploy designed to reduce an entire people to slavery again. The CNT, flouting the principles and objectives by which it was informed, had joined the government, in the shape of four ministers – Federica Montseny, Juan García Oliver, Juan Peiró and Juan López. These CNT ministers, by agreement with the Government bigwigs, insisted that the Column's anti-militarist stance could no longer be countenanced in any way, and they threatened to isolate us, to give us not a single cartridge and to issue us with no cash pay, in order to break down our identity and smash the Column.

In the face of this chicanery, the War Committee issued the following report, addressed to the Column's fighters:

'The State is a spectre, which should have been ignored.

'The workers' organisations embodied in the UGT and CNT represent the only guarantee for the Spanish people. Politics has been played and, almost unnoticed, the lifeless, listless spectre has been resuscitated. Our beloved Confederal Labour Organisation, by directing its strength and respect into the bolstering of the State, has become a simple appendage of the same, yet another hose playing upon the flames of revolution so brilliantly begun by the toiling masses from the UGT and CNT unions.

'With the Government strengthened, the drive towards purely governmental organising began. And now they have an army just like the armies in the service of the State, and forces of coercion after the old model. Like before, the police operate against workers intent upon doing something useful in terms of society. The people's militias are no more. In short, the Social Revolution has had the life strangled out of it.

'Had we enjoyed the support of the Government and indeed of our own organisation, by which we mean its responsible committees, we might have had more equipment and more men and introduced a system of reliefs and furloughs, but such was not the case, and having been obliged to countenance comrades spending month after month behind their parapets, the upshot is that that degree of spirit of sacrifice cannot be demanded, nor is it forthcoming, and every day brings daunting problems. We recognise that the problem within the Column is hard to resolve. And before something serious happens, before demoralisation and weariness take their toll and do tremendous damage to the

gains already achieved and maintained at the cost of such peerless sacrifice, we say again, before that happens, some formula has to be worked out that is acceptable to all.

'Were we the only ones not militarised and in opposition to the accords of the CNT and the FAI, we should be left, not merely bereft of Government assistance, but of the organisation's as well. We in this Column of ours, which might, properly assisted, have preserved intact the revolutionary principles that make up our character, must, for the lack and because of the absence of such assistance concede that our system of warfare has failed.

'We appreciate that the vast majority of comrades will be furious with those who are the culprits in this, but we also want to alert our comrades to the fact that their protest would be stifled with violence by the agencies of the State: in that nothing can be organised that conflicts with it or with its preferences. It has strength enough to smash anything that dares challenge the course it has plotted. Also, the extreme gravity of the times require that we leave our indignation unspoken. Yet again we must play the part of Christ.

'We know the drawbacks to militarisation. The system does not fit in with our temperament, any more than it does with any of us who have ever had a proper understanding of freedom. But we also know the drawbacks to remaining beyond the purview of the Ministry of War. It pains us to concede the fact, but we have but two options left open: dissolution of the Column, or militarisation. Anything else would avail us nothing...'

That being the case, the Iron Column was replaced by the 82nd Mixed Brigade which comrade Rufino had organised. Two months after he was in Puerto de Escandón, Rufino had left with three centuries from the Column and, with the aid of comrade Hermosilla, a professional soldier, had organised the 82nd Brigade.

Once back in Valencia, the Iron Column held two assemblies in the La Princesa theatre. And on 21 March it agreed to militarisation. José Pellicer was appointed as commander and Segarra as political commissar. It thereby became the 83rd Brigade.

And so ended the defamed and blackened 'Iron Column'.

The fact is that with four old rifles and little ammunition, the young fighters of the Iron Column helped halt international fascism 150 kilometres outside Valencia. Let History judge us all.

Militarisation solved absolutely nothing. No, we were not able to win the war: inevitably we lost. Facing us were four hundred thousand Italians, forty thousand Germans from the Condor Legion, despatched by a mighty Germany of which the megalomaniac Adolf Hitler was absolute master. In addition, there were twenty thousand Portuguese and Africans. Not to mention the Spanish units under the orders of General Franco.

The Italians were plainly and simply comic opera troops, because when attacked they ran like scared rabbits, singing, to mandolin accompaniment, 'La Donna Inmobile Qual Prio Mal Vento'. These Italians were under the command of General Gambara who, once the war was over, became governor of Alicante. In addition to Gambara, there was General Escagachino and General Culatino.⁸

DESERVEDLY REMEMBERED

They were blonde, blue-eyed and innocent. They had been with the Column since the first parapets were built. Neither the Committee nor the century delegate ever had much to say to them. And the two women never asked for a thing. They were always in the front line and they fought well in every attack. They never sought leave to return to the rearguard. They rarely called in at the village. No one bothered them, for they commanded respect. No one knew whence they had come from nor what were their names.

When the Column returned to Valencia for militarisation, these two young female fighters entered the Military Academy. Some time after that I spotted them having a coffee in the Bar Balanza, in brand-new lieutenants' uniforms. That being the rank with which they had graduated from the Academy. They told me that they had been assigned to the Madrid front. And we said our farewells with a 'so long'.

Some months later I saw them for the last time at the Defence Committee. One of them had just left hospital where she had been treated for wounds received in combat. I invited them to lunch and before we parted, I hugged them like a brother and gave them a few packs of cigarettes.

I do not know why but I had a feeling that I would never see them again. I was overcome by tremendous anguish. Some months went by and the Committee gave me the dismal news: 'The two young women have perished fighting selflessly at the head of their respective companies.'

⁸ Escagachino and Culatino are invented names to mock the Italian 'volunteers' [KSL]

The news struck me like a crack on the head from a shovel. The blood was pounding in my veins. I could not have cared less where they were from nor what their names had been. It was enough for me to know that, from the earliest days when the Teruel front was forming, through to the Madrid front, they fought with exemplary gallantry in defence of the people's freedom and rights.

Today, even though so many years of reminiscence, recollection and bitterness have gone by, my face is lined with tears, unbeknownst to myself as I call to mind those two young women, long since dead.

THE VICTORY BELONGS TO YOU, GALILEO

Under the label of Falange Española Tradicionalista y de las JONS, Franco's fascism was imported from a Germany then under the rule of Hitler, the 20th century's greatest megalomaniac and Herostratus. What this madman and his crew of wretches did with the concentration camp inmates, their bombing of open cities and the mass extermination of human beings amounts to something of which not even Dante could have dreamed. Worse than Hell, if Hell existed.

Thanks to the camera, the movies and television which have brought us incontrovertible evidence of such monstrosities, people the world over have been enlightened as to the ghastly mass butchery perpetrated by Nazism and fascism.

Any who disagreed with these aberrations were hauled away to concentration camps with the prisoners: and were subjected to the same treatment, being tortured, reduced to starvation, assaulted by scientific tortures and decimated without the slightest compunction, without regard to whether they were blameless children, defenceless women, old folk unable to budge to protest at this brutality, desolation and criminality, and merely resigned to enduring it all.

And the Jews? What didn't they do to the Jews just because they belonged to the 'seed' of Israel, or were descendants of Judea? The scenes were indescribable, defying description and so shameful and vile as to defy all adjectives and categorisation. The mass graves into which dying creatures were dumped; the crematoria in which they, dying, breathed their last; the armoured trucks serving as mobile gas chambers, into which people were packed like sardines, whereupon the doors were hermetically sealed and the jets of asphyxiating gas turned on – this whole black, Cain-like barbarism deserves the condemnation of History's highest tribunal and must be repudiated by human reason and by the truth incarnate in wisdom, knowledge, tenderness and kindness placed in the service of body and soul.

The methods and procedures employed by Francoism, copied from the German Nazis, were put into effect in Spain once the civil war was over, and would be in force still had the Francoists been able to count upon a German victory in the Second World War. These farceurs who sought to build 'A Spain Great and Free, to the Greater Glory of God', what they actually achieved was to bring our villages into ruination and to sow doubt and confusion, inciting treachery and trampling underfoot the loftiest values of science, progress, mentality and learning.

The drama of Spain is a drama without parallel. We have been assailed by intense genocide, by a sense-numbing fanaticism, by the rage of Cain when he killed his brother Abel. But it has pleased nature and the passage of time that the tyrants should have been defeated and that truth should emerge triumphant.

When the strident voice cried out: 'Woe to the conquered!', the voices of all liberators retorted in all avenging tongues: 'Woe betide the victors!' Towering over the terrorisers of peoples and the government's professional grave-diggers and stronger than the executioner's and inquisitor's axe is human reason and it endures in the ten commandments of the new life which does not perish on the gallows, burned at the stake, strangled by the garrotte or before the firing squad.

Progress marches on and a freedom stifled and eroded but never murdered recovers itself in time and space. In the long run, the battle is not won by the sword but rather by the invincible, eternal spirit. From the peaks and valleys, people come down onto the plains to keep the rendezvous, chanting the radiant hymn of peace and happiness. And when the voices die away, the liberator's lips shout, much louder than all of the tyrants the world has ever seen, 'The victory belongs to you, Galileo!'

A FRATERNAL LIBERTARIAN MESSAGE

Rufino, the commander of the 82nd Mixed Brigade, was shot down in Paterna, Valencia. Rufino was a young working man, a foundry worker in the ironworks in Sagunto.

Canet succumbed to illness, his health sapped by past deprivation and a gnawing suffering.

Montoya was a professional soldier. He wound up as a Commander in the Maquis in France. He left Marseilles with the Foreign Legion with the rank of lieutenant colonel. Only to die in the fighting in Indochina.

Rodilla perished too, like a hero. He set out from Paris along with a number of Iron Column fighters who were the first to perish resisting the Germans.

Lieutenant Colonel Pérez Salas, as well as his brother, a high-ranking officer, along with Commander Gallego were shot as part of Franco's reprisals.

When the Iron Column was militarised it became the 83rd Mixed Brigade. José Pellicer was appointed its commander and Segarra was made its political commissar.

Later, Pellicer was replaced by comrade Mares, a sturdily made man in his forties. One of the best soldiers produced by the Construction Union of Valencia. A brave man even among brave men. A mortal enemy of 'paradoxes' and cheap cant. A bit of a poet and every inch a man of incontrovertible decency. Given to calling a spade a spade.

Mares finished at the head of his Brigade, standing firm in the last push mounted on the Extremadura front. He was arrested in Barcelona. They transferred him to Torrente (Valencia). Before they shot him he was paraded, hands bound, through the streets of Torrente. Beaten to within an inch of his life, covered in sweat and blood, he walked without a word of complaint. At the sight of such savagery, the good people of the town closed the doors of their homes and left the streets empty and deserted.

Facing the firing squad, he died like a man. Because this was Mares, and what a man! The fighters of the Iron Column fought on every front with exemplary heroism, an object lesson in the grandeur and unselfishness of the militants of the CNT.

I salute you, you Column of stalwarts of the anarchist ideal, staunch fighters on a par with Spartacus, or Viriato, El Cid, El Empecinado, Durruti, Ascaso, Carroceras, Maroto, Mera, Jover, Ponzán, Máximo Franco, Arnal⁹ and

⁹ Spartacus: leader of a famous revolt against the Roman Empire.

Viriato: leader of the Lusitan resistance to the Romans in what is now Portugal.

El Cid: Castilian hero who recaptured Valencia from the Moors.

El Empecinado (real name Juan Martin Diaz, 1775-1825): hero of the Spanish guerrilla resistance to Napoleonic occupation in the Spanish War of Independence.

Francisco Maroto (?-1938): anarchist who formed a column before clashing with the communists, being sentenced to death, stripped of his command and then rehabilitated in 1938. Tortured and shot out of hand by the Francoists in 1939.

Gregorio Jover (1891-1964): anarchist who commanded the 28th Division of the Republican Army.

Francisco Ponzán (1911-1944): Aragonese anarchist schoolteacher specializing in intelligence-gathering. Murdered by the Nazis in France in 1944.

Adolfo Arnal (1913-1938): held the Agriculture portfolio on the Council of Aragon. Died in action on the Aragon front. [KSL]

thousands upon thousands of brave and tenacious fighters who gave their all for their beliefs and for the liberation of the human race!

All praise to you, beloved deceased, cherished brothers!

Now well-advanced in years, and awaiting my own last journey, I who had the good fortune to fight alongside you, knowing you to be men ready to brave anything and your immense courage, tells you with the love of a brother, a comrade, a friend: Goodbye forever! OR SEE YOU SOON! Because men of your calibre die only a physical death and live on morally because you are the leaven of ideas and a torch lighting the paths into eternity.

EPILOGUE

My holiday over, I passed through Puerto de Escandón on my way back to Paris. I got out of the car to take in this still mountain of brown, inhospitable dirt, with not a blade of grass in sight.

I walked towards the highest point on the Puerto. And in my deluded mind's eye I saw again the dashing, vigorous figure of Rafael, eyes closed, rifle in his right hand, his left urging his warriors into battle, with his shabby shirt and cartridge belt slung across his body. Which is how the great man whom a village priest tried to salvage met his death, because he favoured face to face combat over crime committed in the name of God or Idea. He had a warrior soul. Without any doubt he would have led thousands of men to victory. He was made for fighting.

I humbly bowed my head. And from the depths of my being I sent my salute to the thousands upon thousands of young people done to death by international fascism. The years may pass but space does not recognise time. The torch of decency and human dignity will be handed on to fresh generations. But the crime committed against the whole of a sacrificed and offended humanity will be etched indelibly on imperishable time and on enuring space.

For justice knows not death.

coming soon

Abel Paz, *The Iron Column:*

Militant Anarchism in the Spanish Civil War

Translated by Paul Sharkey. First published (in Catalan) as *Crónica de la Columna de Ferro* Barcelona: Editorial Hacer, 1984.

Abel Paz, a veteran of the anarchist Durruti Column, is one of the foremost writers on the Spanish anarchist movement and Spanish Revolution, best known to English-speakers for his biography of Durruti. In *The Iron Column* he tells the story of one of the most famous militia units of the Spanish Civil War which held out for the revolutionary gains of 1936 longer than almost anyone. This is the story of a group of revolutionaries willing to take the fight to fascism: and unwilling to tolerate dictatorship behind them, either. Paz uses the testimony of its members, extracts from their newspaper *Línea de Fuego* and internal documents to tell the story of the Iron Column in the context of the rise and fall of the Spanish Revolution which raged alongside the Spanish Civil War.

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