

José Pellicer

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The word that best describes José Pellicer is revolutionary, a description that is related with a status of prestige that is hard to understand today, since today popular prestige is linked to image more than to example and the value of a man is determined by his ratings in the spectacle rather than his courage or his integrity. If we allow the facts to speak for themselves, José Pellicer was not just another radical personality but a great revolutionary, someone who wanted to radically extirpate injustice and exploitation and who devoted all his intelligence and all his efforts to this goal, reaching very great heights in the process. The course of his life in the service of the proletarian revolution is more than enough proof of this. His advocacy of the revolutionary cause was all the more deeply held and real insofar as it was not based on economic motivations, as he grew up in a family that had a comfortable standard of living. He became an anarchist out of idealism; his dedication was always altruistic, putting his life in the balance and looking for the dignity of the weak and the oppressed in the struggle against the powerful and the exploiters. Pellicer attained the dimensions of a historical figure because the virtues of all those who accompanied him in the struggle were concentrated within him, and he represented the ideal combination of the emancipatory thought of the oppressed class and the effective struggle for its liberation. A CNT militant since 1932, he participated in all the insurrectional struggles of his time, earning persecution and prison sentences. We should call attention especially to the role he played in the insurrectional strike in Manresa, in October 1934, his activities as a militant in the FAI, his participation in the defense committees of the CNT and above all his intervention in the famous Iron Column, whose very name caused so many supporters of the oppressive order to tremble when they heard it. With barely a thousand men armed more with enthusiasm than with the inadequate equipment they obtained in the assault on the Alameda barracks in Valencia, they fought in Sarrión and Puerto Escandón, forcing the fascists to retreat to the gates of Teruel. A large region was liberated from the fascists and this helped take the pressure off Castellón and Sagunto. He was outstanding not only for his courage, but for his gifts as an organizer and strategist of the libertarian revolution, which were comparable to those of Durruti, Máximo Franco or Francisco Maroto. He was highly educated, multilingual, theoretically proficient, with very clear ideas which he was capable of expressing incisively, which, together with his tall stature and his steady voice, impressed everyone who met him. Those who knew him and shared his ideas and goals recognized in him an uncommon human dimension and charisma. He needed these qualities in order to lead a column composed of people who did not recognize any authority and

had no leaders to give a revolutionary meaning to their initiative. The Iron Column collaborated with the peasants of the villages in which it was stationed, showing them the way to live in freedom. The first experiences of libertarian communism took place in the heat of the battles fought by the militias. More than any other unit, even more than the Durruti Column, the Iron Column acted as a militia and as a revolutionary organization at the same time: it published the minutes of its assemblies, printed a newspaper (“The Line of Fire”), and distributed manifestos and issued communiqués, because it had to explain its actions in the rearguard and justify its activities and decisions to the workers and the peasants. Such an organization preached by example and gave proof of it. This was its principal characteristic that Burnett Bolloten recalled in his book *The Grand Camouflage*.

Historians have dealt very badly with him for the simple reason that they never considered the civil war to be a failed revolution, the last of the revolutions based on emancipatory ideals, and they instead presented it as a military and clerical revolt against a legitimately constituted democratic government. Proceeding in this manner, historians took the side of the Republic and deliberately concealed the fierce class confrontation that lay beneath the cloak of republican politics. The independent and revolutionary action of an entire historical class, the proletariat, was ignored, and along with it, its greatest social achievements and its most outstanding figures. Even the pain and suffering of the victims was passed over. The mass graves were only excavated almost thirty years after Franco’s death. The political interests of the future post-Francoist leaders required social amnesia and their historians handed it to them on a platter. Spanish democracy was built on forgetting.

But this is even more serious: our contemporary libertarians have not paid very much attention to their heroes, either, beyond a deplorable sanctification of Durruti. Insisting on making a myth out of Durruti, they ended up killing the revolutionary Durruti. This is just as understandable as the first time he was killed. The weight of the past is too heavy for today’s libertarians, who are confused and depressed in the face of their historical responsibilities. This is why they feel so comfortable in the company of pathetic renegades like García Oliver, heroic moderates like Juan Peiró, or hollow figureheads like Federica Montseny. Furthermore, we must not forget to mention the fact that many *cenetistas* were hardly revolutionary and that their activities, in the light of history, led to discouragement and bewilderment. If we also consider the fact that important Valencian *cenetistas* like Juan López and the supporters of the Manifesto of the Five Points collaborated during the sixties with Francoism, it should not surprise us that José Pellicer would be indigestible for so many of his coreligionists.

Everyone knows that the libertarian movement was profoundly divided over questions of principles, tactics and goals, and the Zaragoza Congress did not resolve the problem. When the fascist revolt began on July 18, a clear dividing line rapidly emerged among the anarchosyndicalists between two antagonistic orientations for action, one that was possibilist and prepared to make compromises, and the other that was idealist and revolutionary. Pellicer was to be found among the latter, and given his disposition it could not have been otherwise. In Valencia the two positions, represented by the Strike Committee (syndicalist) and the Defense Committee (FAI), respectively, became evident from the very first day of the civil war. After the storming of the barracks both tendencies found the road wide open to them; the former reestablished republican legality via the Popular Executive Committee, an independent entity that politically incorporated itself in the new reality represented by the eruption of the CNT and the UGT. The latter, on the one hand, created rank and file committees that took over factories and towns, and on the other

hand organized the militia columns that stopped the advance of the military in Teruel, Andalusia and Madrid. José Pellicer represents the revolutionary initiative of the Valencian workers and peasants; Juan López, his counterpart among the moderate faction, represented the political cunning of the nascent libertarian bureaucracy, which sought to get a foothold in a share of the power that had been conquered, especially in the economic domain. The accommodationist tendency of the CNT, which enjoyed majority support among the militants, would tolerate the bourgeois forms of legality and authority in order to participate in them, while the revolutionary tendency would be trapped at the front, short of weapons and other military supplies, only to discover a rearguard where everything went on like before, without the least trace of revolutionary spirit. The notorious expeditions of the Iron Column to the rearguard in search of weapons in the armories of the Civil Guard or the new communist police force known as the Popular Guard, or in search of money in jewelry shops and the homes of the rich, not to speak of the burning of government records or the assaults on the courts, made the collaborationist leaders of the CNT look bad to their political partners. These leaders turned their backs on the revolutionaries who were left to face the reconstructed and rearmed republican legal system alone. The result was the massacre of December 30 at the Plaza de Tetuán where Pellicer was wounded, foreshadowing the May events in Barcelona. The revolutionaries were caught in the grips of the moral blackmail of their own organization: if they abandoned the front to return to Valencia and start a civil war in the Republican camp they would hand victory to the fascists. They could only postpone their revenge until better times. But by surrendering on this point they surrendered on all of them; in the dissolution of the Committees, in the entry into the Government of four anarchist ministers, in the disarming of the peasant collectives and the militarization of the militia columns. Once again, blackmail: either adjust or disappear. The militarization order was agreed to with ninety-two members of the Iron Column imprisoned in the Torres de Quart for the events at Vinalesa. It would, however, be unjust to say that José Pellicer submitted to circumstances as Mera suggests in his memoirs, for example. Within the FAI itself, Pellicer, as a member of the group known as “Nosotros”, advocated an organic conduct more in accordance with the ideas of liberation and only accepted transitory alliances with the other self-proclaimed sectors of the anti-fascist front for imperative military reasons. With funds provided by the Column, his comrades founded the daily newspaper, *Nosotros*, providing the Valencian anarchist groups with the best anti-authoritarian newspaper published on the peninsula. *Nosotros* did not conform to the official directives as long as it was controlled by Pellicer’s group, and it was the mouthpiece for the best anarchist revolutionary spirit until the FAI was transformed into a political party and the Peninsular Committee selected it to be its organ, seizing it after cunning machinations in the plenums.

The good times of the revolution would never return. Pellicer was wounded in Albarracín and separated from the 83rd Brigade, the former Iron Column, an event that was taken advantage of by the communists, who were much more powerful in Negrín’s Government, in order to arrest him through the use of SIM agents and he was sent from one secret prison to another. They did not dare to assassinate him as they did Andrés Nin and he was finally released and reintegrated into the Popular Army at the front with the 129th Brigade. During the last days of the war he was in Alicante, entirely preoccupied, as always, with saving others, even at the cost of his own safety. Arrested by the Italians, he was denounced and savagely beaten by the victors. Torture was not enough and since they could not destroy his manhood and his integrity with violence and humiliation they tried to do so with the most treacherous methods: they attempted to corrupt

him in exchange for sparing his life. His executioners did not know that someone like Pellicer did not sell himself, that there was nothing in the world that could buy his honor. Pellicer faced death with tranquility. He was shot in Paterna, together with his brother Pedro, his comrade in the struggle. Although today courage has very little meaning, perhaps because it has no price, someone who feels the call of revolt stir within him may try to understand that on that day a courageous man died. His executioners, however, were unable to kill the symbol he represented.

The heroic life of José Pellicer is of no interest to the historians that ignore the revolution and limit themselves to arranging appearances in order to undermine the legitimacy of Francoism and little more. Nor is it of interest to the heirs of state anarchism, for whom the past is a murky chapter whose truths must be explained to the laymen from the temple of organic orthodoxy. For revolutionaries, however, or simply for those who are on the side of the truth, for those who do not see anarchist ideology as something quaint and inoffensive to be used for entertainment purposes only, the deliberate suppression of the memory of José Pellicer is more than just a crime; it is the worst insult that could be perpetrated against the ideals for which he fought and died. No one may consider himself, especially in Valencia, an anarchist, and thus a revolutionary, without maintaining in his heart the example of the greatest anarchist of all. Memory is the only thing that defeated ideas cannot do without. It is the only thing that can guide those who profess them in the present. Therefore, with regard to the human patrimony of the betrayed Spanish revolution, the biography of José Pellicer is a subject that requires further attention.

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