

The Day They Killed José Pellicer

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On June 8, 1942 they shot the brothers José and Pedro Pellicer Gandía. That day, so tragic for their families, friends and comrades, was, however, just another day in the first years of the Francoist regime, characterized by physical annihilation as a political weapon and state terrorism as a method of government. We would be entirely justified to speak of genocide, since what took place was not the simple execution of opponents, but the elimination, by means of summary proceedings accompanied by every kind of mistreatment and humiliation, of a significant part of the population, which was considered to be hostile, and sympathetic to the republican cause. If we consider the cruel repression meted out to the working class in particular, and especially to those proletarians who played a leading role in the revolutionary events, the Francoist genocide was not as atavistic as a certain postwar literature and the propagandists of the transition to democracy would have us believe. The atrocities and suffering, usually inflicted in a mechanical and routine manner, were not the result of a strange irrationality or a mania on the part of the leaders, they conformed to the same rationality that rules social destiny to this day, although in a less brutal way. This rationality was economic rationality. It was a rescue operation for the bourgeoisie, a counterrevolution; an abrupt step in the process of capitalist modernization that necessarily entailed a cost in human lives: the massacre of the rural and urban proletariat. The result was not a fascist state, but a capitalist state under martial law that utilized fascist means. And it was precisely capitalist development that, by rendering those means obsolete, caused the Francoist apparatus to be reconciled with the surviving opposition, and those who defeated the proletariat in 1937 made peace with those who decimated it in 1939, those who attempted to kill Pellicer in the Plaza Tetuán in Valencia reached an understanding with those who shot him down in the prison courtyard at Paterna.

For obvious reasons this national reconciliation, as the PCE called it, or the reform agreement, as the liberal Francoists called it, was established on the basis of the most absolute amnesia regarding not only the genocide but also the repression that accompanied the regime up to its last day. The corpses are still in their graves, wherever they are buried, and the victims are still anonymous, and there are few left to seek justice for them. History was concealed behind an oath of silence, as if the tens of thousands of deaths were the result of a chance accident, a contingent event that should not be recalled, a macabre lottery. The real memory of the civil war and Francoism was declared closed and court was adjourned: this coincided with amnesia. The changes would not affect those lying under the ground. The attack on memory and the

mutilation of the collective memory laid the basis for the legitimization of the new hybrid regime that called itself a “democracy”. This regime contrasted itself to the previous one in the name of certain “democratic values” that were restored by means with which we are quite familiar. Its ideologues whitewashed it by projecting its darkest aspects into the past, as if, with the end of Francoism, all “anti-democratic” methods had also come to an end. A mere glance at the administrative authoritarianism, the parliamentary circus, the disappearance of the public space, the infamous working conditions, the treatment of immigrants, the servile posture of the trade unions, the dismantling of even the most insignificant mechanisms for political participation or oversight, the enormous technical development of social control, consumerist brutalization, totalitarian urbanism, and finally, the increasing harshness of the laws and prisons, are enough to demonstrate the existence of links between Franco’s dictatorship and the televised “democracy”, and even to reveal the existence of a specifically “democratic” barbarism, which does not resort to the physical liquidation of the opposition because it possesses more subtle procedures for neutralizing it.

The new regime that came into existence in 1977 turned history over to the professionals, so that they could select that which it was appropriate to recall and smooth over the contradictions that could not be concealed. The history of this regime is the history of its acts of amnesia, and the latter provide an index of its complicity with the executioners. It all came to a culmination almost forty years later with a law to put a period on that sentence, called the “law of historical memory”. This law nullified any legal possibility of a review for litigation, allowing for a rhetorical and sentimental rehabilitation, and an inoffensive happy ending with its ephemeral emotional discharge. Just what the victims did not need, since the horror of the past is not something that can be ameliorated with distance and escapism. These deaths were characterized by the fact that they are and they will be irreplaceable, they had names, ideas and passions, a life, a history.... Some were anarchists and revolutionaries like Pellicer. All of their deaths constitute a wound inflicted on memory that cannot and must not be healed because its memory fills a signal place in the understanding of and the commitment to fight against barbarism. Any reflection on his martyrdom must always be accompanied by a commitment to never allow it to be integrated into the ideology of power and thus be used to legitimize power. Their deaths cannot form part of the established order. The memory of the victims is not past; it is present. It is not commiseration and sadness; it is determination and combat. In order not to betray their memory we have to contemplate the development of historical struggles from the perspective of the victims. Only the perspective of the victims will prevent their Calvary from being attributed to a bit of bad luck, or worse yet, to a stage in the process of transformation leading to the prevailing form of domination, since it is not hard to discern the features of the disaster that befell the victims in modern afflictions and the unhappiness of so many lives sabotaged by the economic violence of capital and the bureaucratic oppression of the existing institutions.

José Pellicer, who participated in the reorganization of the Valencian FAI and was a combatant of the CNT construction workers trade union, who freed prisoners, who helped found the Iron Column, who was imprisoned by the SIM, who was the commander of the 83rd Mixed Brigade, who was a victim of Franco and a libertarian: as long as yearnings for justice arise among the oppressed your memory will have a profound meaning! *Salud!*

The day they killed José Pellicer was a day just like today.

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