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Spain As I Saw It

By Charles B. Pyper, War Correspondent,
Toronto Telegram.

Colonel James Mess:—War Correspondent; What visions of romance, danger and bravery those words conjured up for us in the South African War. In the Great War—tragedy, suffering and filth—but no romance. In the present conflict what?

Last year Mr. Charles B. Pyper was commissioned by his newspaper, *The Evening Telegram,* to report the Vimy Pilgrimage, and from that memorial he was sent to Spain to report this further folly.

Many of you read his articles with interest—too few perhaps appreciated the inherent honesty and modesty that lay behind the dispatches. Mr. Pyper himself hardly realized when he chose as his subject "Spain as I Saw It" just how adequately those four words serve to describe his writings. Perhaps his experience between 1914 and 1918, as a Tommy in the Cavalry, as an officer in the infantry, and as a serious casualty, helped him in handling this assignment. When he went to Spain he travelled light—with a suit case, a brief case, a haversack, field glasses, and a grey flannel suit. When he followed the armies into action, or rambled over the battlefields he took only his field glasses, his flannel suit and his own very observant eyes. Something of what those eyes saw, he will tell you. Gentlemen, Mr. Charles B. Pyper.

Mr. Pyper:—Mr. Chairman and members of the Canadian Club: I have been warned that it is bad form for a speaker to disparage himself in advance, so I shall not do it. I shall only warn you of what you will soon discover for yourselves—that today you are to have the unique privilege of hearing the world's worst speaker.

I need not warn you to take a grain of salt with anything you hear from me. The experience of any one man is necessarily limited, and his conclusions are as likely as not to be faulty. I shall merely try to set my experience before you, and, when I advance any opinions, leave you to subject them to the discount necessary for personal bias and faultiness of judgment.

One question that I have been asked frequently since my return from Spain is: "On which side do your sympathies lie?" That question is very hard to answer. I liked the Spaniards whom I met on both sides of the war. I found them friendly, honest and courteous—courteous to a degree hitherto unknown to me—and extraordinarily obliging. That is their character as I found it on both sides and everywhere I went.

With my personal sympathies equally divided, the choice narrows itself down to one between Fascism and Communism. That choice, for one who likes neither Fascism nor Communism, is equally hard to make.

Here I may say that, in the beginning, the terms Fascist and Communist, as applied to the forces on either side, were in the nature of misnomers. There were Fascists in Franco's forces, but they were not predominant. As well as Fascists, there were the Carlists—adherents of a royal house that had been for some generations out of luck; there was the property-owning class that had suffered with the rise of the proletariat; there was the military class and, in addition, a great body of religious people whose feelings had been outraged by the real or reported attacks on the church. It was, therefore, incorrect to apply the blanket term "Fascist" to the insurgents as a body. It was equally incorrect to speak of the government forces as "Communist". There were Communists among them, but they were not predominant. In addition to the Communists there were the Socialists—the government was Socialist—as well as anarchists, syndicalists, Basque Nationalists and Catalonian Nationalists.

The latter—the Basque and Catalonian Nationalists—had aims something similar to those of the Irish Nationalists, who sat in the British parliament before the Free State was formed. They wanted self-government in their own

provinces, and the extremists among them wanted complete separation. To come nearer home, they were something like the growing Nationalist party in Quebec.

In the beginning, therefore, the opposing forces were not purely Fascist and Communist. With the prolongation of the war, however, there has been a tendency to push the extremes to the front on both sides, as usually happens in cases of this kind. This tendency has been increased by the help both sides received from abroad. The insurgents have had a great deal of assistance from Hitler and Mussolini, with the natural result that they look on these two as their saviours. Before I left, it was noticeable that even the Carlists were beginning to look on the German and Italian systems as models.

Similarly, with the government forces receiving help from Russia, it was natural for them to look on Russia as their saviour and to consider the Soviet system as a model.

So now it has become a matter of choice between these two great opposed forces of Fascism and Communism, and that is a choice I do not wish to make till I have to. In any case it was not my job to decide on the rights and wrongs of the conflict, but to see the war and report what I saw.

The actual seeing of the war was extraordinarily easy in the beginning. As you will see by the map, the coast of France comes down to meet the coast of Spain, forming a right angle and enclosing the Bay of Biscay. At the angle begins the frontier, with Hendaye in France on one side and Irun in Spain, just across a bridge, on the other side of the frontier, which was marked by the river Bidassoa. We could see the fighting beautifully from Hendaye, which was enjoying unusual prosperity from the influx of tourists and newspapermen. It was easy to see, and hear. Guns were booming, rifles and machine guns were crackling in the mountains, and in the Bay of Biscay warships were shelling San Sebastian, Fort Guadelupe and the mountain positions protecting Irun.

From Hendaye Plage, a few kilometres from Hendaye, we could see the warships, and by going down to the frontier bridge we could see and talk to the government troops guarding the Spanish end of the bridge. It was easy to

get talking to them but they did not give us much information, not so much because they didn't want to as because they had not much to give. What was happening in the mountains they did not know. They were all armed and having a good time in the fine weather but the real war seemed very far away to them.

A few kilometres east of Hendaye was the French village of Behobie, with the Spanish village of Behobia across a bridge on the other side of the frontier, which was marked by the river Bidassoa. Here again we could see and get in touch with the government forces. Farther east was the French village of Biriatou. Here there was a pleasant little hotel on the hillside, with an arbored terrace on which the correspondents could eat their lunch and watch the war from their tables with field glasses. At this point it was only a few hundred yards away.

At first there was little to be seen except the government positions and the explosions of shells, as the attacking troops were behind the mountains. But gradually they began to come over the mountains and we could see them advancing—Carlists with red berets—the limit of advance marked by the Spanish flag which they carried and placed on the hillside. The war then was spread before us like a football match.

At that time is was possible to "crash the gates" and get into Spain. We could go down, to the Spanish end of the bridge, talk to the soldiers there, and sometimes slip in when they were not looking. In this way we were able to see Irun and San Sebastian before the capture of these two places. We were able to get into Irun, after the capture, while it was still burning, and before the Carlist troops had fully occupied it.

The whole affair at the beginning was in the nature of a Roman holiday. The weather was delightful and the visitors enjoyed the spectacle. Even the Spaniards enjoyed it at first. Up to the time when Irun was captured the war did not seem too near, and they were having a good time, playing at "soldiers", confident that the battle would not come close.

At that time they were amateurs—on both sides. We could tell that by watching them fight. On the government

side, which we could see more closely, there was little discipline and no fire control. They fired chiefly to make a noise, and casualties, as far as I could see, were very few.

Once, at Behobia, I watched them fire for five hours and saw only one man hit. It was then that I saw the first break in the government forces on the Irun front. They had been firing all afternoon, behind sandbags and a wall, at an enemy between 1,000 and 1,500 yards away. Suddenly the whole party behind the breastworks—about 50—broke and came across the bridge into France. One man followed and tried to persuade them to go back, but they wouldn't go, so he went back alone. That began the crack in the defences of Irun.

Taking time off to cross into France was something of a habit with the government troops. They would come across the bridge, park their guns and rifles with the French gardes mobiles, and go into a French café for a drink. Then they would pick up their weapons and return to the fight. After one battle I asked one of the men how many had been killed. He seemed surprised at the question and replied, "Oh, rien de tués"—nobody killed. It almost seemed to be against the rules of the game that anyone should be killed.

The shelling of San Sebastian was a puzzling thing; it seemed so aimless. The cruiser or battleship would fire a shot and then there would be silence for fifteen minutes or half an hour. Then there might be another shot with another long rest. I used to wonder what decided the officer in charge at any given moment that it was time to fire his gun. That kind of shelling is more or less ineffective. If you drop a shell near a body of men it shakes their nerves and if you drop a few more quickly they will get jumpy. But if you give them time to get over their fright between shots they see that stray shells don't do so much damage as is supposed. It is amazing how much ammunition you can sprinkle over a position without hitting anyone.

The same method of firing prevailed on the other side, At Hendaye the government had an old gunboat lying in the river. For weeks she had been lying idle. Then one day she began to fire over the hills at the Carlists coming up the other side. That was another strange spectacle.

The gunboat was not more than two hundred yards away from us and we could see the crew lolling on the deck in the sunshine. On the dockside Spanish civilians were standing looking down at the performance. Every now and then a couple of the crew would detach themselves from their friends, walk forward, tinker about with the gun and then fire. After that they would go back and loll about for half an hour or so before firing again.

Fortunately the Carlists did not reply. If they had, some of their shells might have landed in Hendaye, as they would have passed right over the town. The French government, it was said, made representations to the Spanish government, pointing out the danger to French territory. After that the gunboat fired no more.

It was possible at the same time to get into Spain on the insurgent side. Just north of Hendaye, on the Bay of Biscay, is St. Jean de Luz, a summer resort popular with the wealthier Spanish refugees. Here Franco's friends had established a sort of consulate, which provided courier cars to take correspondents into insurgent Spain. These took us to Pampeluna and then to Burgos, where we got passes permitting us to come and go from France to Spain.

Getting a pass for the front was a different matter and sometimes a heart-breaking job. These passes were issued at first at the commandancias at Pampeluna, and we generally arrived at Pampeluna during a siesta, when there was nothing doing. That meant we had to hang around until evening, and often in the evening the necessary official was away, and we had to wait till morning. In the morning no one appears before ten o'clock—sometimes eleven—and there were times when the man you wanted would not be down before twelve, which meant another siesta. I wasted five days once trying to get a pass to the Bilbao front. When I got there I found everything was quiet and there was nothing to see.

At this time is was possible to see both sides of the war almost at once. One afternoon I was up on a hilltop front on the insurgent side, looking right across to my hotel home in Hendaye. The following afternoon I went from Hendaye to Irun and got to a hilltop front on the government side from which I was able to look back at the hill on which I had been the previous day.

I mention this because it gives me an opportunity to explain something of my attitude toward the war. In viewing all struggles like this, there is a tendency to take sides. To some people this is easy. For them it is a clear issue of an oppressed people fighting to maintain their constitutional rights against brutal tyranny, or of "decent" people fighting against Moscow-minded Bolshevists. To all such people the issue is clear. To me the issue is not so clear. The people on both sides, I found generally decent people, fighting for their ideals.

One day on the insurgent side I met a Carlist officer. He spoke English well; knew me for a newspaperman, and had some notion of what I wanted to learn. He told me to ask him questions so I asked him a few about the fighting. He pressed me to ask him more—anything I wanted. Finally I said, hesitatingly, "Tell me, is it true you kill your prisoners?" His face sobered and he replied: "Yes, it is. We feel it is a question of their lives or ours, and when we hear of the atrocities they have committed—you may see them yourselves in the papers—we feel that they are better out of the way. We may be wrong, but that is what we think. Your business as a newspaperman", he added, "is to look at this thing objectively, but I suggest that before you condemn us too harshly you look at what is happening in other countries, the treatment of the Negroes in the southern United States, for instance."

The next day I was on the government side in a position manned by foreign volunteers. The man in charge was a Frenchman who had fought in the World War with the Americans. It was a well constructed position with well-placed wire and a good field of fire—the best position I had seen. The men were all experienced veterans who knew what they were about. Their leader told me that he had fought in the World War. "What's the matter?" I asked him. "Can't you keep out of wars? Do you have to run all over the world looking for a fight?" "No", he said. "I came here to fight against war. I am here to fight against Fascism, and Fascism means war." "That's right", said a Belgian. An Italian anti-fascist chimed in "That's right", and a German anti-fascist agreed. They were all there to fight against Fascism. Then the leader, in exactly the same

words as the Carlist officer had used the day before, said, "We may be wrong, but that is what we think".

That partly explains, why I have been unable to take sides. On both sides of the Spanish war they are fighting for ideals. I would almost go so far as to say that this is true of any war. As a rule men don't fight merely for motives of selfishness or greed, but for something in which they believe.

After the taking of Irun, the war passed from us in France and we had to go into Spain to see it. Hendaye became almost an empty village. It lost most of its tourist traffic and the newspapermen disappeared. Over night the face of the countryside changed. The little river Bidassoa, the boundary between the two countries, which had been swept by bullets one afternoon, on the following afternoon was thronged with French fishermen, some in boats and some on the banks. The Frenchman is the most indefatigable fisherman to be found anywhere, and only war can keep him from his favourite pastime.

Then it became a question for the newspapermen of where to go. Most of us went to the insurgent side, because it was easier to reach, and because we had been going in that way since the beginning. Our gathering place was Talavera, about one hundred and fifty kilometres from Madrid, and about eighty from Toledo. At that time Franco was advancing on Toledo. This was the second stage of the war. It was now a war of professional soldiers against amateurs. Franco's Moors and legionaries were trained troops who knew all the tricks of warfare. The government militia were not trained; they were not accustomed to discipline; they had never been trained to war; they had no notion of how to withstand a bayonet attack, and did not have the reliance on one another that comes from regimentation and company training. They could fight as long as fighting was only a matter of firing at a distant enemy, but, when the enemy advanced and the bayonets came creeping nearer, they broke. I am not blaming them, for I would be the first to break in the same circumstances. When men are not trained to meet bayonet with bayonet, they are likely to make for the nearest road when the attack is pushed home.

That is my reading of what took place during the advance on Toledo when position after position was yielded with only a slight resistance. I had always thought that up till then this war was not a case of stern hand-to-hand fighting because, behind the lines, I had never seen more than a few wounded men. You cannot have hard-fought battles without having lots of wounded to show for it. There were plenty of dead to be seen, but they were mostly government troops, and I came to the conclusion that they had been shot on the run, or killed as prisoners.

I have said that both sides killed their prisoners. There is no doubt of this and it has never been denied. But I would make a distinction between the two. On the insurgent side the killing was done quickly, for the purpose of getting enemies—political and military—out of the way. On the government side there were extremists who went in for mutilation and torture rather than quick killing. They did not represent the main body of the government troops, and I believe the government would have been wise, if it had shot its extremists at the beginning.

There is another thing to be noted about the killing of prisoners. When the revolution started there were regular soldiers and civil guards scattered all over the country and these had to fight on whichever side they found themselves. They were not shot because both sides recognized that they were acting under orders which they had to obey. Their officers were killed, but the men were spared and enrolled in the army of their captors.

One of the things noticeable in insurgent Spain was the enthusiasm of the people. On all sides you heard the cry "Viva Espana" accompanied by the Fascist salute. Whether this enthusiasm was genuine or assumed for the occasion was hard to say. It is said that, at one place newly occupied by the rebels, when the people were drawn up to welcome the victors, they all gave the Fascist salute properly except for one child in his mother's arms who held up a tiny clenched fist in the Communist style. He had been overlooked when the new exercises were being taught. What happened to the child and his family, history does not say.

We watched the advance on Toledo for a period of ten days or so. When the insurgents got close to the city, it

was evacuated just like Irun and San Sebastian. The whole mass of government forces cleared out before Franco's troops went in. Franco always gave them time to clear out. He never wasted a life on his own side. He never went in where there was any danger, if he could get a position by waiting. On the day Toledo was captured we went into the city along with Franco himself. Even then I did not see any wounded men. There were lots of bodies lying about, but none that I could see were of the attacking forces. I was told that there had been fierce street fighting that very morning, and that seventy men, barricaded in the hospital, had fought till they were shot down. I asked about the casualties on the attacking side and was told that they were very light. Now if seventy men, armed with rifles or machine guns and barricaded in a building like that, are willing to put up a fight, they cannot be taken without heavy loss to the attackers unless the building is destroyed. This hospital was not destroyed, and I took it that the defenders had surrendered, and had been shot down when they came out.

My observations may be wrong. I tried to verify them with regard to the taking of the position between Talavera and Toledo. These were strong positions, and should have been easily held. I was told that in the trenches on either flank there were no spent cartridges to be found, which seemed to indicate that the man on the flanks had crowded to the centre before breaking for the road. At that time I was puzzled because it seemed to me that it would require a great superiority in numbers to outflank the position, but I heard later that Franco had sent his Moorish cavalry round the flanks and that their very appearance in the rear was enough to make the government troops break.

This marked the beginning of the third phase of the war, as I saw it. At first it had been amateurs against amateurs, then it was professional against amateurs, now it was to be professionals against professionals. But before going on to speak of this phase, I want to tell you of one fight that is worth recording, and that will be worth recording a hundred years from now. That was the resistance of the garrison of the Alcazar at Toledo. I don't know what the Alcazar was like before the war, because I only

saw it after it had smashed to pieces during the siege. It was a small community in itself in the city of Toledo with barracks, riding school and residences. The garrison consisted of soldiers of the regular army, civil guards and cadets with the families of the soldiers and the guards. They were bombarded, bombed, and assaulted for seventy days. The walls had been mined and huge blocks of masonry were hurled about like pebbles. The place was in ruins.

When we went in on the morning of the taking of Toledo we were met by the garrison. Any one of them could be distinguished at once by the indescribable greenish yellow pallor on his or her face. The men were still full of courage, and modestly proud to receive congratulations. Of the women, some were in a stupor, some were weeping, but some were cheerful enough.

In the underground dungeons, huge vaulted halls with only a few candles here and there to lighten the gloom, women and children had been living in a sickening atmosphere on an appalling bread, made of wheat grains mixed with horse fat, and the flesh of horses and mules. They had got down to their last half-dozen animals before they were relieved.

The outer wall had been breached and battered to pieces by bombs and shells. One corner tower was half shot away, but here, on the day they were relieved, sixteen of the defenders were still holding out. The government troops had mounted the wall three times and had been thrown back three times. Every time a breach was made in the outer wall, the opening was covered with machine guns placed in windows in the main building or in small breaches made for the purpose. The garrison were drawn up to welcome Franco and when he spoke to them there were tears streaming down his cheeks.

After Toledo Franco pushed on to Madrid. When he reached the suburbs he expected that the capital would be evacuated as other cities had been. So did I. So did all the newspapermen. So, too, did Mussolini and Hitler. It was about the time that Germany and Italy recognized the Franco government, and it was about that time that Mussolini made his provocative speech about the Mediterranean.

Everyone was sure Madrid would be evacuated, and for this reason Franco left the road to the east open.

For three or four weeks we watched the attack on Madrid. Every day we drove out from Talavera to within three miles of the capital to watch the bombing. The bombing planes—seven at a time—came over twice a day regularly, with an escort of about twenty-five fighting planes. From the roof of a villa we could see the bombers like great black beetles sweeping over the government lines to drop their bombs, and could watch the projectiles fall from the planes to the ground, where they exploded in tremendous clouds of smoke and debris. During practically all of this bombardment there was no opposition from the government air force. On the last day I was at the Madrid front, fourteen insurgent bombing planes came over, with about forty pursuit planes in escort. On this day for the first time government planes appeared in the sky. As the last bomber swept over the position, three government pursuit planes came up from below. The bomber turned at once and made for home while the insurgent fighters dropped from the sky, and the fight was on. I saw one machine crash, but to which side it belonged, I could not say. Then the government planes returned to Madrid and the air was clear again.

The initial attack on Madrid was largely carried on from the air with the Moors and legionaries fighting their way into the suburbs. In bad weather the bombers were held to the ground and operations were slowed up. That was the situation, when I left the Madrid front. Winter was beginning to set in and the planes were held down for a week at a time. The resistance of the government had stiffened. We could not understand why, until we began to get reports that in captured positions, not one single Spaniard had been found. The bodies were of foreign volunteers—the international column, as we learned later.

The international column, I believe, saved Madrid. It was composed principally, we were told, of Russians, French and English, and the resistance they put up, brought a new phase to the conflict. That is the phase at present—professionals against professionals.

Up to that time the assistance given Franco by Germany

and Italy had been very little in the way of manpower. It was mostly specialists—aviators, tanks and their crews, batteries of artillery and the men to man them. When the insurgents were held up so long at Madrid, it was reported that Mussolini had given Franco an ultimatum that if he did not take the capital soon, they would take it for him. Whether that was true or not, I don't know. But, shortly afterwards, the first contingent of five thousand Germans landed at Cadiz. Since then there has been an influx of foreign reinforcements to both sides, so that the war is now practically out of Spanish hands. What will be the ultimate result of it all, I don't know. At present it is a case of something approaching stalemate, with winter helping the defence.

One of the questions that interested me in watching this war was the fighting value of the Moors and legionaries. They were well trained and looked like good light infantry, and they had high reputations, but I wondered how they would stand up against say British, Canadian, or German troops. There was an Irish officer with the legionaries in Talavera, and I asked him about the Moors. He said they were wonderful soldiers, and that when you were in front of them it was very heartening to hear their yells as they came up from behind. He added that the yells scared the life out of the enemy. I said "Do you think they would scare the life out of a good Scottish battalion?" Why I picked Scottish, I don't know, because he was Irish, and so am I, but I did. He said he didn't think anything would scare a Scottish battalion.

There's another question that is frequently asked. It is: "Which side would you like to win?" There are a great many factors to be considered here. When your personal sympathies are equally divided you have to ask yourself what would be the best result for the world, and for the country, involved. As between Fascism and Communism, I am unable to decide, which would be better for the world, but I do know that prolongation of the struggle is dangerous and therefore I can only hope that one side or the other may win quickly.

For this reason, and for this reason only, I am at present inclined to be in favour of the insurgents because

I think Franco has a better chance of a quick victory than the government. I cannot wholeheartedly hope for an insurgent victory on its merits, because a Fascist Spain might mean danger to this world. On the other hand a Communist Spain might mean just as much danger.

If I were asked to make a bet on the result, I would not do it, but if I were forced to bet I should pick Franco as the winner. This for several reasons. In the first place, the insurgents alone have shown initiative so far and there is a vast difference between bold initiative and stern resistance. In the second place, I believe Germany and Italy can bring help to the insurgents much more effectively, than Russia to the government.

Then again, Russia could afford to look upon a Fascist government in Spain without undue concern, as Spain is a long way off; and she would not suffer any great loss of prestige in a rebel victory. Mussolini, on the other hand, could not afford to have a red government in Spain on his flank, nor could he safely accept the blow to his prestige which a government victory would mean. For these reasons, if no other, startling developments may occur. I think the ultimate victory will rest with Franco, but what will happen from day to day is impossible to predict. Till the winter is over, there will not be much of an advance in any direction, and the present condition of stalemate is likely to continue until spring. Before spring comes there may, of course, be further international complications, but that problem is one for the statesmen of Europe to deal with.