

# American Fighters in Spain

*Vivas from the people and bombs from the fascist airmen are only part of the tumult of impressions gathered moving up to the front*

**By an American Anti-Fascist Volunteer**

**T**HROUGH the train window the picturesque countryside of eastern Spain looked like a colored movie travelogue. Red-tinted clouds, low over the mountains, greeted us as we sang American songs on our way to our mobilization point. At every train-stop, ruddy-faced peasants rushed to the train and showered oranges, bread, and sausages into our waiting hands. This part of the country is famous for its orange groves. We could almost pick them off the trees from our passing train. Wine seems more plentiful than water here, and it is said to be more healthful, so the boys are keeping healthy—but not too healthy. The villages, nestled on the mountain slopes, look unreal, like Hollywood villages. We have passed four castles situated on high bluffs; it is time to sing songs about castles in Spain.

The piping voices of the village children shouting "*Salud*" touch you. As soon as a child is able to toddle around, it seems, he is also able to clench his tiny fist in the *Frente Popular* salute. An inspiring picture was a lone peasant, on his little plot of land, his plow beside him, giving us the *Frente Popular* salute and shouting at the top of his husky lungs, "*Viva Americanos!*" We responded to that with "*Viva España!*"

The reception we received by the villagers when they were told we were Americans was something to remember. An Anarchist army commander, with tears flowing from his eyes unashamed, poured forth his gratitude. It was astounding and wonderful to him that Americans, the "rich" Americans, should come all the way from their comfortable homes to help defeat fascism in Spain. This was probably what most of the villagers felt about us.

At our first stop-over for the night, we were quartered with about

five hundred men who had come from every conceivable place on the globe: Germans, Italians, Greeks, Arabs, American and Cuban Negroes, Chinese, and, interestingly enough, a Palestine Jew who had spent his last cent to come here. That night we marched into a large hall in the village and every group represented had to sing a song. The effect was superb. We heard revolutionary songs of the Greeks, the Arabs, the Italians, and the Austrians. The Arab comrade was the most popular of all. He sang, clapped his hands, and danced at the same time. His wailing, rhythmic cadence had all of us clapping hands and shaking hips.

There were eight Austrians with us who had skied all the way from their country, across the mountains, for ten days. Four of their party, including a woman medical student, had either been shot or captured by the border guards. There was a young German Communist who had escaped from a concentration camp. That night he sang a prison song, the "Peat-Bog Soldiers." He was about

nineteen and had light golden hair. He looked like a little boy, but his voice was heavy and low. He was striking back at fascism, and was happy.

Four women were quartered with us, ate the same food, and roughed it with the men. Three were French nurses on their way to join the International Brigade, and the fourth was a Swiss chemist who was there with her brother, father, and grandfather! She explained seriously to one of the boys that were her mother alive, she would have been there too. She said simply, "Could one of us go and leave the other? All of us love freedom. All of us must fight."

At Valencia we met the first trainload of refugees from Málaga. They were a pitiful sight. Old, toothless men, ragged women and children, and young boys—not a young man amongst them. They told us of a terrible slaughter by the fascist troops. Our boys made a collection, and a few hundred pesetas were given to the refugees. The International Red Aid was on the job, however, right at



*Those Who Always Pay*

Lithograph by Georges Schreier



the station, feeding the stricken people while accommodation for them was being arranged. Many a Yankee tongue spat forth profane abuse of the fascists who had done this to Málaga. It was then that we composed our fighting song, now sung by the entire American battalion at the front. It was composed by four Americans and two Canadians, and is sung to the tune of some American college song. If possible, I shall try to have the music written out and sent to America. It has a marvelous swing, and when we march to it our chests swell, our hands swing proudly, and our voices shout it defiantly.

We march, we Americans,  
To defend our working class,  
To uphold democracy  
And mow the fascists down like grass;  
We're marching to victory,  
Our hearts are set, our fists are clenched,  
A cause like ours can't help but win,  
The fascists' steel will bend like tin,  
We give our word they shall not pass,  
*No pasaran!*  
*We give our word they shall not pass!*

At our base we learned that we would act as the reserve for the American battalion already in action. We drilled in a bull-ring, and it was here that we saw our first Spanish bull-fight, American style. The automobile worker from Detroit painted a swastika on a white handkerchief, and the actor from Boston panted and snorted and charged. The actor tore the hated insignia to shreds, and the matador, together with the rest of us, gave three cheers.

The night before we left for our final training ground, we were treated to a bombing party by a fleet of fascist planes, probably from Málaga. The whine and roar were terrifying to us rookies, but when the American commandant asked for volunteers for rescue work in the villages, twenty of us stepped forward. Back home we had seen the pictures of dead Spanish children, but here, rushing through the streets with the drone of the planes above us, crouching low near a wall to escape the shower of glass and stone, and then digging out three dead babes from beneath the ruins of a house, gave us our first real hard swallow of this war. A little boy shrieked hysterically for his mother and father, buried beneath the ruins of something that was once his home. A cruel joke: the dining room was intact and all the family pictures remained on the walls. On one side was the picture of the father in his wedding clothes; on the other, the smiling face of the mother in her bridal gown. We worked on the ruins for three hours, but could not find the bodies. Another rescue squad relieved us and began where we left off.

A bomb dropped a few hundred feet away and we all fell prone on the ground. That horrible whine, that terrific impact made our knees quiver. We tried to joke about it, but all of us were angry. Here was some fascist aviator, up in the dark heavens, dropping bombs on people who couldn't see to fight back. And the people who were killed were innocent civilians. How many people were killed in that four-hour bombardment I do



*"What's the yip? Didn't I say there'd be an inquiry?"*

Gardner Bea

not know. One of the doctors said about twelve. The fascist aviators (they came in relays) must have been cockeyed. Out of one hundred and twenty bombs, only four made direct hits. The American commandant, who knew I had done newspaper work, said grimly, "Well, here's your story." He had organized the rescue work, and went around the place throughout the bombardment as if it were raining raindrops instead of bombs.

Before leaving for our final training ground, we were addressed by the French commandant, whose speech was translated into four different languages. He spoke briefly. There were two things he asked from us: proletarian discipline and the erasing of political differences during the time we were fighting our common enemy. There was no need, he said, to explain the

situation, because had we not known it, we would not have been there. We couldn't lose, he said, but our sacrifices would have to be many. The bull-ring thundered to the shouts of "Red Front!" in four languages, and we marched to our waiting train.

Through the streets the villagers raised their fists and cheered madly. The night's bombardment seemed to have had no effect upon their morale. The American song rang through the dusty air and, as the train got under way, a mighty, "*No pasaran—we give our word they shall not pass!*" rose to the Spanish heavens from the lips of Americans prepared to die for freedom and democracy. Our train gathered speed. We waved our final good-bys to the villagers. In ten hours we would be at the front. It felt good.

# André Gide on the Soviet Union

*The famous Frenchman's need for jumping to opposites may explain his indiscipline*

By Paul Nizan

**I**N his little book, *Return from the U.S.S.R.*, André Gide sought to define the politics, the culture, and the folkways of 170 million people.

It is astounding that Gide, who supported his opinions on the Congo timber companies by such prudent factual verification, should so hastily hand down a verdict against the Soviet Union which puts it somewhat below Hitler Germany.

Are we to believe that Gide obeyed that famous "diversity of sentiment which forces me, once having finished a book, to leap to the opposite extreme of myself (through a need for balance) and write precisely that which is least capable of pleasing the readers won for me by the preceding work?"

We can quite well understand the value of paradoxes and what they contribute to the fine arts; but I find it more difficult to understand their value for a political writer, as Gide, whether he so desired it or not, has become.

"The U.S.S.R.," writes Gide, "is in 'construction,' and this should be repeated constantly."

A correct analysis would have required Gide to remember that the U.S.S.R. is a changing world—but he forgets this in almost every page and describes the U.S.S.R. as a world which no longer changes, where everything has been completed, where history is at an end.

Neither was psychology the best avenue of approach. This is the least reliable of the sciences, especially when it does not base itself upon objective data. And psychology requires a patience and leisure seldom at the disposal of the visitor. In this respect, Gide is not on solid ground.

"Only psychological questions are within my grasp," he writes. Agreed. But he should not then proceed to render psychological verdicts on this "forest" of social questions in which Gide himself feels that he is lost—in which he did lose himself. He says further: "Economic questions are beyond my abilities." True. But they are not beyond his ambitions. For he passes judgment on economic and social questions after extremely hasty psychological inquiries, which omit the peculiarities, the diversity, the varied psychological "epochs" of a country where they are more numerous than anywhere else.

THIS FAILURE of Gide's method becomes evident when he undertakes to resolve the problem of Soviet trade or productivity of labor. He deplores the lack of taste in most Soviet manufactured goods, explicable by the difficulty of rapidly organizing a highly skilled

group of producers, the delay in achieving satisfactory collaboration between engineer and planner, the requirements of mass production at particular stages.

Similarly, it is not enough to use some classical notions of Russian literature for interpreting certain phases of Soviet life. To explain the problems of labor productivity by "Russian indolence" is to disregard all the real elements involved in the problem of training skilled workers or the technical backwardness of the unskilled. Gide might have found a rigorous explanation of this question in a famous article by Lenin on labor productivity. Let us not confuse the *Oblomovschina* of the '40s with the state of Russian economy before the October Revolution.

Gide's psychological assertions are hardly proven. His example of the Soviet "superiority complex" sums up the matter. Recourse to Gogol-like boasting, in that modern garb, the superiority complex, does not explain facts, and does not give one the right to generalize, especially when the facts are taken from the lives of children. It is quite true, of course, that Soviet citizens often boast. They have a right to boast, considering what had to be done and what they have already done. But Soviet citizens scorn the foreigner far less than Gide imagines. Different experiences might just as well have brought him to the conclusion that the Russians suffer from an inferiority complex. But Gide explains boasting, which he prefers to consider general, by the systematic keeping of the Soviet citizen in ignorance of foreign events. He claims that the Soviet people were not told about the Paris subway and could thus boast about their own.

But what are the actual facts? The wall newspapers of Moscow were for many months full of stories, photographs, and sketches of the foreign subways; the whole of Moscow knew that the builders of their subways were experimenting on the four branches of the Sokolniki line with the methods employed in the subways of Paris, London, New York, and Berlin.

Very excellent Soviet newspapers inform the public on foreign events, *Za Rubezhom*, *Vokrug Tsvet*, and others, not to speak of the technical magazines in which one reads only about Detroit, Billancourt, etc., and the books which are being translated. Indeed, the Russians not only translate Aragon and André Gide, but also reactionaries like François Mauriac and Drieu la Rochelle.

All of this seems of serious import to me, since it is a question of proving facts, and Gide's "facts" are false or incomplete.

No one doubts that Gide met ignorant persons. But M. Jacques Bardoux, of the French Institute, once wrote that New York is the capital of the United States, and André Gide himself writes that Bolshevo was founded on the initiative of Gorky six years ago—both the "fact" and the date are wrong.

It is true that success sometimes intoxicates Soviet citizens when they compare the terrible past of their country with its present. Gide fails to make this necessary comparison because he is concerned less with historical perspectives than with geographical analogies. But it was not Gide who gave the first warning signal. "Superiority complex" in contemporary Russian is known as "dizziness from success," a phrase coined by Stalin.

NOT EVERYTHING in Gide's book is false, but almost everything is badly interpreted through a lack of real knowledge. It is true that there are some poor people in the U.S.S.R., but there are far less of them than in 1933. Gide should have given up an hour with the souls of men and spent it with statistics. It is still true that Soviet civilization is hard and that many people there lack the philanthropic spirit. But how can Gide, who appeals so glibly to the history of revolutionary Russia, neglect to consider that history when it is a question of defining one of its struggles?

Again, it was not Gide who brought attention to this fact. It was Stalin who told the following story to show that the heritage of callousness had to be overcome: One day in Siberia peasants, floating logs, let a man drown without trying to save him. They later said to Stalin, then in exile: "If it had been a



Arthur Getz