

# FORSYTHE'S PAGE

## Norman Thomas on the Sidelines

**T**O the best of my knowledge I have only seen Norman Thomas once. On that occasion he was making a speech in Union Square before a microphone, and it was a bit embarrassing to me because he had just been preceded by a Communist who may have been a great soul but who was most assuredly a bad talker. By contrast Norman Thomas resembled the younger Pitt addressing the noble judges in the treason trial of Warren Hastings. I remember that the contrast gave me a severe twinge because I was accompanied by a gentleman who took some pains to point out the difference in the speakers.

What prompts me to this memory is the news that Mr. Thomas was making a speech recently in Boston at the weekly meeting of the Community Church of Boston (non-sectarian) in Symphony Hall. The Rev. Donald G. Lothrop, leader of the church, presided. The session took place simultaneously with the world celebrations on the twentieth anniversary of the Soviet Union, and Mr. Thomas took advantage of the occasion to charge that the policies of the Soviet Union violated socialist principles. According to the news report, Mr. Thomas then added that "Russia was a poor nation mainly because one fifth of its national income must be spent on the army on which the power of the government rests."

Only occasionally am I seized by a physical compulsion which would make it a great pleasure to bash in the countenance of an utter stranger, but I must confess that the hearing of those few words changed the nature of an otherwise gentle soul. "Russia was a poor nation MAINLY because one fifth of its national income must be spent on the army on which the power of the government rests." It is a sentence so inherently dishonest and delicately vicious that one despairs of hearing it. On its face it is a sentiment alien to any decent person. We all hate militarism, we all hate war. So, if we hate war, we must hate the Russian army, which, according to Norman Thomas, has not only the faults of every army, but which in addition keeps the nation in poverty. And which not only keeps it in poverty, but does so merely for the sake of suppressing the people of the Soviet Union.

Nowhere does Norman Thomas suggest that there may be a need in the outside world,

which might call for the presence of an army in Russia. Nowhere does he mention that from its earliest days the Soviet Union called for complete disarmament of all nations. So far as the dispatch stated, he made no mention of the menace of Germany-Japan-Italy as necessitating the army of the Soviet Union. The army, Mr. Thomas infers, is merely a device by which the present government of the Soviet Union maintains itself in power.

The bitterest part of this dishonest statement is that the threat of war has been a cruel thing for the Russian people. It is incontestably true that if it were not for the fear of war and the need of preparing to protect the Soviet Union, the people could have the consumers' goods they need. Never in all my life have I realized what war meant until I visited Moscow in September. One who believes in socialism as I do can only grit his teeth in rage when he thinks that if it were not for the menace of the fascist powers, these brave people could have the clothes they need, could have better houses, could have joy and a sense of relief. The marks of the struggle are in their faces, and one wants to weep as one thinks that they may now be faced with that battle all over again. They have fought the revolution, the civil war, the intervention of foreign powers, and famine; they have carried on a majestic struggle for industrialization and collectivization of the farms—and just when their triumph has made it possible for them to reap the rewards of their efforts, they must gird themselves again to face the hatred of a mad world.

Can even the most mendacious believe that the government deliberately altered the First Five-Year Plan to provide provisions for the Far Eastern Army at the time Japan took Manchuria? Does anybody in his right mind believe that the authorities wanted to increase the military budget at a time when it strained every nerve to keep the country alive? If all that Stalin craves is power, why in the name of all sense does he bother with industrialization and collectivization? Why wouldn't he be content to be another Pilsudski in a land of poverty and dirt and misery?

Just what is it that Norman Thomas seeks to prove by such statements? Would he be better satisfied if the Soviet Union were another China? Would he like Russia to disband its army and turn its interest solely to the production of consumers' goods? Would

he trust the good intentions of such men as Araki and Hitler? What is this new fifth column of the intellect which poses such questions about Russia at a moment like this? If Mr. Thomas will recall, there was once a country known as the German republic which was so gentle with its enemies, so given to freedom of speech and freedom of action (for all except Communists, of course) that it found itself shortly surrendering the keys of Berlin to a group of men in brown shirts. Is that the sort of socialist land he wants the Soviet Union to be?

One lesson I learned in Russia this summer was that it matters very little what the Norman Thomases feel about the Soviet Union. The liberals have always been prompt to desert Russia in a crisis, and the Russians have learned not to depend upon them. At a time when the longshoremen of Seattle were refusing to load cargoes consigned to Kolchak in Siberia, the liberals were giving their entire time to a condemnation of Bolshevik Russia for failing to institute the beautiful, perfect parliamentary system which has worked so miraculously in Great Britain and the United States. A liberal is one who wastes no word of sympathy over the assassination of Kirov but who later keeps the cables hot with demands that his murderers go unpunished. The Soviet people do not understand such fine distinctions of freedom and justice. The righteous arrogance of these critics of the Soviet Union is almost more than can be borne. The pure and simple truth is that we can do nothing much for Russia, but that the Soviet

Union is almost our sole hope. It is upon the backs of those courageous and ill-clad Russian workers that our own sweet civilization rests. In that great world conflict which is inevitable, the Norman Thomases will be on the sidelines, crying for peace and strict democracy. If his words should happen to please the powers then ruling America, he will be allowed to speak. His mellifluous voice will



Scott Johnston  
Norman Thomas

be raised to the peak of its sweetness. I can hear it now. . . . A Nazi spy has been caught behind the Soviet lines and shot . . . (hum-hum-hum, goes the voice). . . . This is an outrage. . . . That such things should be done in a country which calls itself socialist. . . . Why wasn't a parliamentary commission appointed to look into the matter? . . . And why wasn't the spy spared, given the benefits of education, turned into an honorable citizen, and returned to his family in Germany, where his example would be so effective as to shame Herr Hitler and his followers out of their ruthlessness? . . . hum-hum-hum. . . .

ROBERT FORSYTHE.

# Spain's Shirt-Sleeve General

By Edwin Rolfe

THERE isn't a person in Spain who hasn't heard the name of "el Campesino." When one hears that a certain position is being held by men under el Campesino's command, one smiles, says "That's good," and goes off feeling very safe, very secure. Or, when el Campesino's men are attacking on a certain front, the Spaniards *know* that the attack will be successful, if it is humanly or militarily possible.

Who is el Campesino? Beyond the fact that, with Enrique Lister, Modesto, Duran, Ortega, and a few others, he has been referred to as one of republican Spain's young "shirt-sleeve generals," little is known about him outside of Spain. His real name is Valentin Gonzales—"el Campesino," meaning "the peasant," is what his soldiers call him, what the people call him, and what he likes to call himself. And, in a land where the people have an uncanny knack of hitting upon the exact nickname, his is the most exact, the most appropriate.

He is by birth a peasant. At the outbreak of the rebellion in July 1936, he hastily formed a battalion of peasants from all parts of Spain. With these men he fought the fascists in the Guadarramas—fought them so well, in fact, that an English correspondent, Geoffrey Cox, quotes the fascists as having said that "this must be a trained group of professional soldiers opposing us." Similar battalions, made up of Spaniards who had never held rifles before in their lives, were resisting the rebels in every part of Spain. But Campesino's men were in the center of things, in the thick of it, on the Madrid front. Badly clothed, hastily armed, the Campesino battalion soon earned the respect, and the fear, of its well-trained enemies. This peasant soldier, who had served his military apprenticeship in Morocco, had the ability and the personality to evoke discipline and selfless effort from the men he commanded. But slowly the normal casualties of intensive warfare thinned down his ranks. It was at Somosierra that the original battalion made its last great effort; after terrific fighting, under which few soldiers could stand up, the survivors of his original band withdrew to Madrid. The story goes that less than ten men returned—among them were Campesino himself, and a Cuban-American named Policarpo Candon. Candon is now commander of the First Mobile Shock Brigade of the 46th Division under Campesino. And Campesino himself is now division commander.

After Somosierra, Campesino enlisted the services of other loyal young Spaniards, formed a new battalion, and with them held the trenches at Carabanchel and at the outskirts of Madrid. During the critical days of



Bertrando Valloton

El Campesino

last November and December—just before and just after the first international columns arrived—battalions like that of Campesino, composed wholly of native workers and peasants, held the fascists at bay, stopped them at the gates of the city, and thus changed the whole course of the war.

And this great division commander, with a wealth of diverse and dangerous experience behind him, is only thirty-three years old! Although he is of medium height—about five feet eight inches tall at the most—his large, black-bearded face and massive shoulders and powerful arms make him appear huge. He cannot enter any hall in which a mass meeting is in progress without being recognized, without the people drowning the voice of the speaker in applause and great shouts of "El Campesino! We want el Campesino!" Only after he has made his appearance on the platform and spoken a few words of greeting is the meeting permitted to proceed. How he taught his raw recruits to become the skilled and experienced soldiers that they are today can best be illustrated by the following example.

IN THE EARLY DAYS of the war, the non-mechanically-minded Spanish peasant soldiers feared, more than anything else, the enemy tanks. A battle might be progressing perfectly, fulfilling every point in its previously drawn-up strategic plan; but the appearance of tanks would demoralize the peasant soldiers, some of whom had never even seen an automobile before, throwing them into panicky retreat. Which is not strange—there is something about an enemy tank approaching, its machine guns spitting uninterrupted death, which

throws fear into the heart of any, even the most experienced, soldier. Talk and explain as they might, the officers of the young republican army could do nothing to dispel this panic, this fear of tanks on the part of the men. But Campesino did not talk. When his lines on the Jarama front, early last March, spied the rebel tanks approaching, Campesino himself shouted at his men, told them to hold their lines and watch him. Quickly he fastened a number of primitive can-grenades of dynamite to his ample belt; stooping low in the hastily dug front-line trenches, he lighted a cigar (it was a Corona Corona, taken from one of Madrid's ritziest tobacconists for distribution to the soldiers—no cheaper brands were available at the moment). Then, slowly, he lifted himself through a sap, a large slanted tunnel in the parapet. From their peep-holes, his men watched, silently, breathing heavily, as he crawled along the broken earth; they watched him, breathless, as he crept into a foxhole not fifty yards away; watched him and the approaching tanks. In other foxholes between the fascist and government lines were three other courageous officers of the Campesino battalion. Finally the moment came; the tanks were almost upon him; he had not yet been seen. Suddenly he raised his right arm—the men saw the rapid arc it formed as he hurled the first of the sticks of dynamite at the nearest tank-track, and another at the tank-guns. Simultaneously, the other officers let loose their dynamite and hand grenades. In three minutes it was all over. Seven enemy tanks were out of commission, the others were in hasty and lumbering retreat. And Campesino had himself disabled three of the seven tanks. From that point on the soldiers got the idea. Campesino had showed them. If tanks were not, as they had thought, invincible, then they too could and would have a crack at them. Today, when it comes to tank-warfare, the far-famed Asturian miners have nothing on Campesino's youthful battalion of *dinamiteros*, the anti-tank battalion of the 46th Division.

Because of deeds such as this, the figure of Campesino has assumed almost mythic proportions in Spain. And his own soldiers love him.

His violent language [says Geoffrey Cox in his excellent book, *Defense of Madrid*], his capacity for sleep at any moment, his ability to secure food and supplies for his men from empty regimental store-rooms are proverbial. He curses his men with the vocabulary which, in former days, he used for his plow-team. But they take it cheerily enough, because they trust him as a leader, and they know he looks after them as few other Spanish commanders do. When he enters a depot the supply clerks imme-