

“Protest to the libertarians of the present and the future about the capitulations of 1937”¹

I am one of those who was rescued from San Miguel de las Reyes, the sinister penitentiary that was built by the monarchy to bury alive the men who – because they were not cowards – never submitted to the infamous laws that the powerful dictated to the oppressed. They took me down there, like so many others, for having avenged an offense, for rebelling against the humiliations of which an entire village was the victim: in other words, for killing a “*cacique*.”²

I was young, and I am young now, since I entered prison at 23, and I left – because anarchist comrades opened the doors – when I was 34. Eleven years subjected to the torture of not being a man, of being a thing, of being a number!

With me came many men, who had endured as much, who were also marked by the mistreatment they had experienced since their births. Some of them went out into the world as soon as they set foot upon the paving stones of the streets; and the others we united with our liberators, who treated us like friends and loved us like brothers. With them, little by little, we formed the “Iron Column”; with them, in great strides, we launched an assault on the barracks and made the redoubtable civilian guards surrender their arms; with them, after these attacks, we drove the fascists back as far as the crests of the mountains, where they still are. Accustomed to taking what we needed, to hunting down the fascists, we took their provisions and guns from them. And we fed ourselves for a time on what we were offered by the peasants, and we armed ourselves without anyone giving us a weapon, with what we took, with the strength of our arms, from the insurgent soldiers. The rifle that I hold and caress, which has accompanied me since I left that fateful prison, it is mine, it is my own; if I took, like a man, what I have in my hands, almost all those weapons that my comrades have in their hands are ours, properly ours.

No one, or almost no one, has ever had respect for us. The stupefaction of the bourgeois, seeing us leave the prison, has not ended and has even spread to everyone, even at this moment, with the result that, instead of taking us into consideration and helping us, supporting us, we have been treated like bandits, we are accused of being uncontrollable: because we do not submit the rhythm of our lives, which we have wanted and [still] want to be free, to the stupid caprices of people who idiotically and haughtily consider themselves to be the owners of men because

¹ Originally written in Spanish by an anonymous “Uncontrollable” in the Iron Column, this “Protestation devant les libertaires du présent et du future sur les capitulations de 1937” was published by *Nosotros*, an anarchist daily newspaper in Valencia, over the course of two weeks in March 1937. It was translated into French by “two aficionados without qualities,” that is to say, by Alice Becker-Ho and Guy Debord. Their translation, along with a brief introduction that is appended to the end of the present text, was published by Editions Gérard Lebovici in December 1979 and reprinted by Editions Ivrea in November 1995. There was an English translation published by News From Everywhere in 1987 and then reprinted by the London Anarchist Black Cross in 1993. Now unavailable, it was not consulted during the creation of this version, which was translated from the French, with recourse to the Spanish original when necessary, by Bill Brown, on 9 January 2025.

² Spanish retained in the French translation. In English: both a chief and a petty tyrant or despot.

they have become part of some governmental ministry or committee; and because, in the villages through which we have passed – after having seized the possessions of the fascists – , we have changed the system of life, annihilating the ferocious “*caciques*” who tormented the entire existence of the peasants after having robbed them, and putting those riches back into the hands of those who know how to create it, into the hands of the workers.

No one, I can assure you, no one has involved themselves with the dispossessed, with the needy, with those who were pillaged and persecuted their whole lives, better than us, the uncontrollables, the bandits, the escapees from prison. No one, no one – I defy anyone to prove otherwise – has ever been more affectionate and obliging towards the children, the women and the elderly; no one, absolutely no one, could disapprove of this Column that, alone, without help – and, one must even say, despite being hindered – has been in the vanguard since the beginning; no one can accuse it of a lack of solidarity or despotism, of softness or cowardice that lacks revolutionary spirit; because boldness and valor in combat have been our norm, nobleness with respect to the defeated our law, cordiality with our brothers our motto, and kindness and respect the criteria for the unfolding of our entire lives.

Why this black legend that has been woven around us? Why this senseless determination to discredit us, when our discredit, which is not possible, could only damage the revolutionary cause and the [revolutionary] war itself?

There is – we, the men from prison, who have suffered more than anyone on Earth, we know it well – there is, I say, an extreme gentrification [*embourgeoisement*] in the atmosphere. The bourgeois in soul and body, who are completely mediocre and servile, tremble at the idea of losing their tranquility, their cigars and their coffee, their bulls, their theater and their prostituted relations; and when they hear something about the Column, about this Iron Column, the support of the Revolution in the lands of the Levant, or when they learn that the Column has announced its descent upon Valencia, they tremble like leaves, thinking that those of the Column have come to tear them out of their lives of miserable pleasures. And the bourgeois – there are bourgeois of different classes and in many positions – weave, without respite, with the threads of calumny, the black legend with which they favor us; because it is the bourgeois, and only the bourgeois, who have and can still harm our activities, our revolts and the irrepressible desires that madly carry away our hearts, the desire to be free like eagles on the highest summits or lions in the deepest forests.

Even brothers, those who suffered with us in the fields and the workshops, those who were exploited shamefully by the bourgeoisie, made themselves echo its terrible fears and came to believe them, because certain people – finding it in their interests to be leaders – told them that we, the men who fought in the Iron Column, are bandits and people without souls; with the result that this hatred, which has many times come to cruelty and murderous fanaticism, scatters rocks on our road, so as to hinder our advance against fascism.

Some nights, those dark nights in which – my weapon in my arms and my ears on the alert – I would strive to penetrate into the depths of the surrounding country, and also into the mystery of things, I could not find any other remedy, as in a nightmare, than standing up straight, unsheltered, and this not so as to relieve the numbness of my limbs, which are made of steel because they were passed through the crucible of pain, but to grip my weapon with more fury, feeling keenly the desire to fire, not only upon the enemy who hides less than 100 meters from me, but also upon the other enemy, against the one whom I cannot see, against the one who hides at my side, and is still there now, who calls me comrade while he basely fails me, since there is no failure more cowardly than the one that feeds on betrayals. And I left like crying and

laughing, and running across the fields crying out and wringing necks with my iron fingers, as I did when I broke the neck of the vile “*cacique*,” and blowing up – until only ruins remained – this miserable world, in which it is so difficult to find loving hands that wipe away your sweat and staunch the flow of blood from your wounds when, tired and injured, you return from battle.

How many nights, the men being together, and only forming a small bunch or a handful, when I would express to my comrades, the anarchists, my pains and my sorrows, I found there in the harshness of the mountain-side, faced with the enemy who lay in wait for us, friendly voices and affectionate arms that made me love life again! And then, I would throw to the wind all of the suffering, all of the past, all of the horrors and all of the torments that have marked my body, as if they belonged to some other era, and I would joyfully abandon myself to dreams of adventure, perceiving, in the fever of my imagination, a world different from the one in which I have lived, but which I desire: a world different from the one in which men have lived, but which many of us have dreamed of. And time would pass for me as if it were flying and fatigue did not trouble me, and my enthusiasm redoubled and rendered me foolhardy and made me go out at daybreak to reconnoiter the enemy and . . . everything to change life; to impose another rhythm on this life that is ours; so that men, and I among them, can be brothers; so that, once at least, joy, bursting from our hearts, could seed the land; so that the Revolution, this Revolution that has been the pole and motto of the Iron Column, could soon be an accomplished fact.

My dream would dissipate like the thin white clouds that, above us, passed over the mountain, and I would return to my disenchantment so as to come back, another time, at night, to my joys. And so, between sorrows and joys, between anguish and tears, I passed my life, happy at the heart of peril, comparing this dark and miserable life to the dark and miserable prison.

But one day – it was a gray and sad day – on the summits of the mountain, there came news like a wind made of snow that bites the flesh: “We must militarize.”³ And this news was like a dagger that tore me apart and I suffered in advance the anguish that we now feel so keenly. During the night, while sheltered, I repeated the news to myself: “We must militarize. . . .”

Beside me, keeping watch while I rested, although I could not sleep, there was the delegate of my group, who would now become a lieutenant, and several steps away, sleeping on the same soil, resting his head on a pile of bombs, was bedded the delegate of my century,⁴ who would become a captain or a colonel. Me . . . I would continue to be me, a child of the countryside, a rebel until death. I did not want, and I still do not want, crosses, stripes or commands. I am as I am, a peasant who learned to read in prison, who has seen sorrow and death up close, who was an anarchist without knowing it and who now, knowing it, is more of an anarchist than yesterday, when I killed to be free.

That day, that day on which the gruesome news fell from the peaks of the mountain like an icy wind that tears the soul, was unforgettable, like so many other days in my life of sorrows. That day . . . Well!

We must militarize!

Life teaches men more than all the theories, more than all the books. Those who want to put into practice what they have learned from others by drinking from what is written in books, they will deceive themselves; those who put into books what they have learned along the detours of the road of life, they can perhaps create masterpieces. Reality and reverie are distinct things.

³ That is to say, “we must become part of the regular military forces.”

⁴ In ancient Rome, a military unit consisting of 100 men.

Dreaming is good and beautiful, because the dream is almost always the anticipation of what must be; but the sublime is rendering life beautiful, to make life, concretely, a beautiful work.

Me, I have lived my life at great speed. I did not taste the youth that, according to what one reads about it, is joy, sweetness, and wellbeing. In prison, I only knew sorrow. Young according to the number of my years, I am an old man by all that I have lived, by all that I have cried, by all that I have suffered. Because, in prison, one hardly ever laughs; in prison, whether one is under a roof or the sky, one always cries.

To read a book in a cell, separated from contact with other men, is to dream; to read the book of life, when the jailer, who insults you or merely spies on you, presents it to you open at any page within it, is to find oneself in contact with reality.

One day I read, I do not know where nor from whom, that the author could not get an exact idea of the roundness of the Earth in so far as he had never wandered it, measured it, felt it: discovered it. Such a pretension seemed ridiculous to me, but this short phrase remained so imprinted upon me that sometimes, during my forced soliloquies in the solitude of my cell, I thought of it. Until one day, as if I too had discovered something marvelous that previously had been hidden to the rest of mankind, I felt keenly the satisfaction of being, on my own, the discoverer of the roundness of the Earth. And that day, like the author of the phrase, I wandered, I measured and I felt the planet, in my imagination the light making itself a “vision” of the Earth turning in the infinite spaces, forming a part of the universal harmony of the worlds.

The same thing happened with respect to pain and suffering. It is necessary to weigh it, to measure it, to feel it, to taste it, to understand it, to discover it, to be able to have a clear idea in the mind of what it is. Beside me, pulling a cart on which others, singing and rejoicing, were perched, I saw the men who, like me, served as mules. And they did not suffer; and they did not grumble their protests from below; and they found it just and logical that these people, in so far as they were masters, should be the ones who held them by reins and grasped the whip, and that it was even logical and just that the boss, with a tug on the leash, scarred their faces. Like animals, they would let out a whinny, strike the ground with their hooves and begin to gallop. Afterwards, oh, such sarcasm! When they had been unharnessed, they licked the hand that had whipped them like enslaved dogs.

There is no one who, having been humiliated, vexed, outraged – who having felt himself to be the most unfortunate being on Earth and at the same time the noblest, the best, the most human of human beings, and who, at the same time and all together, experienced his misfortune and felt himself to be happy and strong, and who felt on his back and on his face, without warming, without motivation, for the pure pleasure of hurting and humiliating someone else, the icy fist of the carceral beast – no one who, having seen himself dragged into solitary confinement for rebellion and, while in it, slapped on the face and trampled on the feet, hearing his bones crack and seeing his blood flow until he fell on the ground like a mass – no one who, after having suffered tortures inflicted by other men, having been obliged to feel his powerlessness and to curse and blaspheme that which was also beginning to gather together his strength for another time – no one who, receiving punishment and outrages, has become aware of the injustice of punishment and the infamy of outrages and who, having this awareness, has proposed to finish off the privilege that grants to a few people the ability to punish and outrage all the others – no one, finally, who has been held captive in prison or held captive in the world and has understood the tragedy of the men who are condemned to obey in silence the orders that they have received – there is none among them who does not know the depths of the pain, the terrible marks that pain leaves on those who have drunk, felt and breathed the pain of staying

silent and obeying. Desiring to speak and having to keep quiet, desiring to sing and remain mute, desiring to laugh and having to forcibly strangle the laughter in one's own mouth, desiring to love and be condemned to swim in the mud of hatred!

I passed through the barracks, and there I learned to hate. I passed through the prison, and there, among the tears and the suffering, strangely, I learned to love, to love intensely.

In the barracks, I almost lost my personality, so rigorous was the treatment that I suffered, because they wanted to inculcate in me a stupid discipline. In prison, through many struggles, I found my personality again, each time becoming more rebellious against all that was imposed on me. Previously, I had learned to hate, from the lowest to the highest levels, all the hierarchies; but, in prison, experiencing the most distressing pain, I learned to love the unfortunate, my brothers, while I conserved, pure and clear, my hatred of hierarchies that the barracks had instilled in me. Prisons and barracks are one and the same: despotism and the free exercise of the evil natures on the part of a few, for the suffering of all the rest. The barracks do not teach anything that does not damage physical and mental health; and the prison does not correct [or rehabilitate].

With this judgment, with this experience – experience acquired because my life has been bathed in sorrow –, when I heard, at the foot of the mountain, that the order for militarization was prowling around, in an instant I felt that my whole being had collapsed, because I saw clearly that the audacious *guerrillero*⁵ of the Revolution within me would die, that I would continue to lead the existence that, in the barracks and in prison, had stripped me of all personal attributes; that I would once more fall into the abyss of obedience, into the bestial somnambulism to which the discipline of both the barracks and the prison lead. And, angrily grasping my gun, which was then my shelter, and looking at my enemies and my “friends,” looking ahead of and behind the lines, I hurled a curse similar to those I hurled when, as a rebel, they led me to the dungeon, and I held back a tear, similar to those that escaped from me then, when no one could see them, at the extent of my powerlessness. And I saw well that the hypocrites who wished to make the whole world a barracks and a prison are the same ones, the same ones, the same ones who, yesterday, in the dungeons, cracked our bones, us, men – men.

Barracks . . . prisons . . . a shameful and miserable life.

We were not understood, and because we were not be understood, we were not loved. We fought – today false modesty is not appropriate, it leads to nothing – we fought, I repeat, as few have done. Our place has always been at the front, for the good reason that, in our sector, ever since the very first day, we were the only ones there.

For us, there was never any relief or . . . a kind word, which was even worse. Both the fascists and the antifascists, and even our own forces – what shame we felt! – they all treated us with antipathy.

We have not been understood. Or, and this is the most tragic thing within the tragedy that we are living through, perhaps we did not make ourselves understood; since we, having carried on our shoulders the weight of all the scorn and all the cruelty of those who were on the side of hierarchy in life, we wanted to live a libertarian life, even during a war, whereas the others followed the chariot of the State by harnessing themselves to it, which was their misfortune and ours.

This incomprehension, which has caused us immense difficulties, has lined our path with misfortunes; and not only the fascists, whom we treat as they deserve, have seen a danger in us,

⁵ The French translation retains the Spanish word for “guerrilla.”

but also those who call themselves antifascists and shout out their antifascism until they become hoarse. This hatred that was constructed around us led to painful confrontations, the most ignominious of which – it brings disgust to the mouth and one’s hand to one’s gun – took place in the middle of Valencia, when “authentic, Red antifascists” opened fire on us. So . . . well! . . . then we must come to conclusions concerning what the counter-revolution is now doing.

History, which records all the good and all the bad that men do, will speak one day.

And then History will say that the Iron Column was perhaps the only one in Spain that had a clear vision of what our Revolution must be. History will also say that it was this Column that offered the greatest resistance to militarization. And, what’s more, it will also say that, because the Column resisted militarization, there were moments when it was totally abandoned to its fate, in the midst of battle, as if a unit of 6,000 men, seasoned and resolved to vanquish or be killed, had to be abandoned to the enemy and annihilated.

How many things History will say, and how many figures who believe themselves to be glorious will be execrated and cursed!

Our resistance to militarization was founded on what we knew about military men. Our current resistance is founded on what we currently know about military men.

The professional military has constituted, now as always, here as in Russia,⁶ a caste. It is this caste that commands; to the others, there must remain nothing more than the obligation to obey. The professional military leader hates with all of his strength, and much more so if it is a question of a compatriot, the one he believes to be his inferior.

I myself have seen – I always look at men’s eyes – an officer tremble with rage or disgust when, addressing him, I have addressed him informally, and I know examples from today, even from today, of battalions that call themselves proletarian, in which the officer corps, which has already forgotten its humble origins, cannot permit a militiaman to speak to him informally – there are severe punishments for doing so.

The “proletarian” army does not demand a discipline that would, in short, be the execution of the orders of war; it demands submission, blind obedience, the annihilation of the personalities of its men.

The same thing, the same thing when, yesterday, I was in the barracks. The same thing, the same thing a little later when I was in prison.

We, in the trenches, lived happily. We certainly see fall next to us the comrades who began this Civil War with us; we know, moreover, that at any instant a bullet can leave us stretched out on the field of battle – this is the compensation the revolutionary can expect – but we live happily. We ate when there was enough; when food was lacking, we fasted. And everyone was content. Why? Because no one was superior to another. All were friends, all were comrades, all were *guerrilleros* of the Revolution.

The group or century delegate was not imposed upon us, but was elected by us, and he does not feel himself to be a lieutenant or captain, but a comrade. The delegates to the Committees of the Column were never colonels or generals, but comrades. We ate together, we fought together, we laughed and cursed together. We had no pay for a long time and they didn’t have any either. And when we got ten *pesetas*, they get ten *pesetas*.

The only thing that we considered was their proven ability and it is for this that we chose them; as long as their merit was confirmed, they were our delegates. There were no hierarchies,

⁶ The so-called Soviet Union of Socialist Republics, which was one of the countries that was heavily involved in the suppression of the Spanish Revolution in 1936-1937.

there were no superiorities, there were no severe orders: there was sympathy, affection, camaraderie; a happy life in the midst of the disasters of war. And so, among comrades, we say that one fights because of something and for something, that war pleases us and we even accept death with pleasure. But when you find yourself among soldiers, where everything is only orders and hierarchies; when you see in your hands the sad pay with which you can barely support the family that you have left behind, and when you see that the lieutenant, the captain, the commander and the colonel pocket three, four, even 10 times more than you, even though they do not have more enthusiasm, more knowledge, or more bravery than you, life becomes bitter to you, because you see clearly that this, this is not the Revolution, but a manner in which a small number takes advantage of an unfortunate situation, which only works to the detriment of the people.

I do not know how we will live from now on. I do not know if we can accustom ourselves to hearing the hurtful words of a corporal, a sergeant or a lieutenant. I do not know if, after we have fully felt like human beings, we can accept being [treated like] domesticated animals, because that is what discipline leads to and that is what militarization represents.

It is certain that we will not be able to do so, it will be totally impossible for us to accept despotism and mistreatment, because you would have to be something less than a man to peacefully endure insults while having a weapon in your hand; nevertheless, we have worrisome examples of comrades who, having been militarized, submit, like a lead slab, to the weight of the orders that emanate from people who are most often inept and always hostile.

We believe that we are in the process of emancipating ourselves, of saving ourselves, and we risk falling into the very things we are fighting against: into despotism, into the power of castes, into the most brutal and the most alienating authoritarianism.

But this moment is a serious one. Having been caught – we do not know why and, if we do know why, we keep quiet about it at this moment – having been caught, I repeat, in a trap, we must get out of it, we must escape from it the best that we can, because, after all, the whole field is filled with them.

The militarists, all of the militarists – there are a few furious ones in our camp – have encircled us. Yesterday, we were the masters of everything; today they are. The people's army [*L'armée populaire*], whose "popularity" is nothing other than the fact that it is recruited from among the people, does not belong to the people (this is always what happens); it belongs to the Government, and the Government leads and the Government gives orders. The people are simply permitted to obey, and the people must always obey.

Swept up in the militarist net, we only have two choices: the first leads us to separate ourselves, we who have – until today – been comrades in the struggle, by proclaiming the dissolution of the Iron Column; the second leads us to militarization.

The Column, our Column, must not dissolve. The homogeneity that it has always possessed has been admirable – I only speak for us, comrades – ; the camaraderie among us will remain an example in the history of the Spanish Revolution; the bravery that has appeared in a hundred battles can be equaled in this struggle of heroes, but not surpassed. Since the first day, we have been friends; more than friends, [we have been] comrades, brothers. To separate us, to leave each other, to no longer see each other again, to no longer experience, as we have until now, our desires to fight and conquer – all that is impossible.

The Column, this Iron Column, which from Valencia to Teruel has made the bourgeois and the fascists tremble, must not dissolve, but must continue until the end.

Who can say that others, having been militarized, have been stronger, bolder, more generous with their blood on the field of battle? Like brothers who defend a noble cause, we have fought; like brothers who have the same ideals, we have dreamed in the trenches; like brothers who aspire to a better world, we have gone forward with courage. Dissolve our homogeneous totality? Never, comrades. As long as we remain a century, we must fight. As long as there is one of us, we must be victorious.

It would be a lesser evil, although the evil would be great if we have to accept that someone, without being elected by us, gives us orders. Nevertheless. . . .

To be a column or a battalion is nearly the same. What is not the same thing for us is that we are not respected.

If we remain, united, the same individuals whom we are now, whether we form a column or a battalion makes no difference to us. In the struggle, we have no need of people who encourage us to rest, nor do we need people who forbid us from resting, because we will not consent to it.

Either the corporal, the sergeant, the lieutenant and the captain will be one of us, in which case we will all be comrades, or they will be our enemies, in which case we will only treat them like enemies.

For us, a column or a battalion (if that is what we want) would be the same thing. We, yesterday, today and tomorrow, we will always be the *guerrilleros* of the Revolution.

What happens to us after this depends on us, on the cohesion that exists between us. No one will impose his rhythm on us, it is we who will impose it, so as to keep an attitude that is adapted to those who will find themselves fighting at our side.

Keep one thing in mind, comrades. The fight demands that we withdraw neither our arms nor our enthusiasm from this war. In a column, it is ours, or in a battalion, it is ours; in a division or a battalion that would not be ours, we must fight against them, too.

If the Column is dissolved, if we disperse, then – being obligated to militarize – we would have to go where they order us to go, and not with those whom we have chosen. And, since we are not and do not want to be domesticated animals, it is quite possible that we will clash with people with whom we should not clash: with those who, whether for bad or good, are our allies.

The Revolution, our Revolution, this proletarian and anarchist Revolution, to which we offered pages of glory from the first days, requires us to not abandon our weapons and to not abandon the compact core that we have constituted until now, whatever name it is called: column, division or battalion.

An “Uncontrollable” of the Iron Column

Back cover note written by Guy Debord

This appeal from an unknown anarchist militiaman, who was part of the famous “Iron Column,” seems to be, to this day, the most truthful and beautiful piece of writing left behind by the Spanish proletarian revolution. The content of that revolution, its intentions and its practices,

are coldly and passionately summarized by it. The principal causes of the revolution's failure are also denounced: those that proceeded from the constant counter-revolutionary action of the Stalinists, who, in the Republic, replaced the disarmed forces of the bourgeoisie, and from the constant concessions made by the leaders of the CNT-FAI⁷ (here bitterly evoked by the term "ours") from July 1936 to March 1937.

The man who proudly claimed the title of "uncontrollable," which was insulting at the time, demonstrates the greatest historical and strategic understanding. The revolution had been made only halfway, forgetting that time waits for no one. "Yesterday we were the masters of everything, today they are." At that time, all that remained for the libertarians of the "Iron Column" to do was "continue until the end," together. After having lived through such a great moment, it wasn't possible "to separate us, to leave each other, to no longer see each other again." But everything else was rejected and squandered.

Mentioned in a work by Burnett Bolloten,⁸ this text was published by *Nosotros*, an anarchist daily in Valencia, on 12, 13, 15 and 16 March 1937. On 21 March, the "Iron Column" was integrated into the "people's army" of the Republic, under the name of the 83rd Brigade. On 3 May, the armed uprising of the workers in Barcelona was disavowed by those very leaders, who succeeded in terminating it on 7 May. Thereafter there remained only two governmental powers of the counter-revolution, the strongest of which⁹ won the civil war.

⁷ The Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT) (the National Confederation of Labor) and the Federación Anarquista Ibérica (FAI) (the Iberian Anarchist Federation).

⁸ See Burnett Bolloten, *The Spanish Revolution: The Left and the struggle for power during the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: the University of North Carolina Press, 1979), pp. 192-193.

⁹ The fascists, who continued to rule Spain until 1975.