

The Spanish War and the Spanish Mind

A Study of "Red" Psychology

Behind the Spanish Barricades. By John Langdon-Davies. London: Seeker and Warburg. 12s. 6d. net.

EVEN a short acquaintance with John Langdon-Davies—and the present reviewer's was short enough—was enough to convince one that the Militia never would be likely to arrest him as a "Fascist" spy. Other journalists, gossiping round the café tables in Barcelona, might be approving or discreetly silent about the course of events, but there never was any doubt that Langdon-Davies went further than "approval" of the Government, or that he had quite genuinely made its cause his own. It was in the early part of August that he arrived in Barcelona, having ridden his motor cycle down from the frontier at Puigorda. Since then he has taken that remarkable machine all through the country—even up to the walls of the Alcazar, at Toledo—and this book tells the story of his experiences.

It has in print all those qualities that its author showed in conversation. Almost on every page it bears evidence of a personal and passionate belief in the rightness of the Spanish Government's cause, a genuine detestation of the rebels, and a contempt for those people who are not willing to join in the fight against them. This quality is at the same time a virtue and a drawback. The book will be attacked—and reasonably so—by those who hold that a chronicler who wishes to weigh the events of the Spanish civil war should hold the scales more evenly. Indeed, one knows that one side cannot possibly be so good, and the other side so contemptible, as the author has painted them. Are there no scoundrels, then, among the F.A.I. or the P.O.U.M., and were there no rebel heroes and idealists in that astonishing defence of the Alcazar, which is dismissed by Mr. Langdon-Davies with a passing reference to the "ghastly bravery" of the garrison? Again, is there not something almost too calm in the references to the burnt churches and the shot priests?

Spanish Characteristics

Yet these qualities, weakening the effect of a book which is packed with really valuable evidence, make "Behind the Spanish Barricades" all the better from another point of view. They must not be dismissed as propaganda, because they bear the obvious marks of a sincere and intelligent mind, and the really striking thing about them, to me, is that they seem to be Spanish rather than English. An almost-Irish idealism, a ferocious individualism, and a curious indifference to death and suffering—these are things in the Spanish attitude to life which will strike even a visitor. The impression conveyed by this book is that it reproduces the Spanish Left-Wing point of view. The reader who likes to think of Left-Wing Spaniards as "filthy Reds" will not be impressed, but for anybody who really wants to get behind the Spanish barricades, and to find out not only how the men are acting, but how they are thinking, Mr. Langdon-Davies is the best possible guide. In every sense of the phrase, he speaks their language, and his book has almost more value as an explanation of mental processes than as a relation of facts.

A Different Mentality

To get any idea of the Spanish civil war, it is essential to remember the Spanish mind; it simply will not do to apply one's own standards to the struggle, and to judge it by them. People who burn down their churches in an almost casual manner, or who, alternatively, fortify their churches with sandbags and machine-guns, are certainly not of our way of thinking. Nor did church-burning and church-defending begin in Spain in 1936; it seems to have been practised for generations. Again, the state of mind which now expresses itself in Anarcho-Syndicalism is no modern import from Russia, but a home-grown product.

Communism

As many of the Government supporters are so unmistakably "Red," it may savour of hair-splitting to say that only a small minority are Communists, but the point is more important than it may seem. Actually, Communism never is likely to become the ruling force in Spain, and anybody who reads this book will readily understand why a system which places all power in the hands of the State cannot be popular with the most individualistic race in Europe. Spain, as Mr. Langdon-Davies points out, never has taken kindly to central government; it always has concerned itself more with its own systems of municipal government, and this "decentralising" tendency can be seen plainly at work under the pressure of the civil war. At the moment, as well as the "official" Governments of Madrid and Barcelona (and leaving out of account General Franco's own "Government") there are minor "Governments" in Aragon and the Basque Provinces, an Anarcho-Syndicalist system in Barcelona which renounces the idea of government altogether, and more than one district where self-contained systems (such as "Libertarian Communism") are at work. One of these, at Port de la Selva, is described by the author, and I have passed through others in Aragon. Anything less resembling the Russian theory would be hard to imagine, and one of the reasons for thinking that General Franco has no great measure of popular support behind him is that his brand of Fascism

should be even less likely to appeal to the Spanish mind than Communism does.

Attacks on the Church

Again, there is the vexed question of the Church. There was more than one "real" reason why the Church should find itself so fiercely attacked in Spain, and one of them is illustrated in the author's quotation from the New Catechism: "Question—What sin is committed by those who vote Liberal? Answer—Usually, mortal sin." Besides taking a very close interest in politics, the Church was an enormously wealthy landlord, and, as such, was almost bound to be attacked in any rising of a land-hungry peasantry. While one must deplore the results, one must recognise that there were causes.

But Mr. Langdon-Davies brings forward other and more curious "causes." The people sacked the churches, destroyed the relics, and killed the priests, not because they felt that they had cast off superstition, but because they remained superstitious. So he holds, at any rate, and the argument should not be dismissed too lightly as fantastic.

In Saragossa Cathedral (now behind the rebel lines) the Virgin of the Pillar stands, a very famous relic. It was worshipped with such a personal devotion in the old days that in the Napoleonic Wars the Spanish soldiers had a song to the effect that the Virgin of the Pillar was saying that she did not want to be French, because she was the Captain General of the Army of Aragon. Is it not strange that the militiamen in their trenches before Saragossa, altering the song without any feeling of incongruity, should be singing:—

*La Virgen del Pilar dice
Que no quiere ser feixista
Es el capitán general
Del partido anarquista?*

A Contrast

If the Virgin of the Pillar has been enrolled in the Anarchist Party, there are other relics which are thought to be less entitled to membership. The author tells one extraordinary story about the bones of a saint which were removed, for destruction, from one of the sacked churches. On a previous occasion when the bones had been removed, it was said that the coffin became so heavy when passing an ironmonger's shop that the bearers could carry it no further. On this occasion "Ting" saw six anarchists put their disengaged hands to their belts, draw six revolvers, point them threateningly in the direction of the saint, while one said: "If you dare get heavy we'll shoot you."

Is it because they still believe in the power of the relics, and because they think that the power may be enrolled on the rebel side against them, that these ignorant people have committed such pointless blasphemies? Mr. Langdon-Davies thinks so, and, while the theory does not excuse the conduct, at all events it gives some explanation for it. To most people one of the real mysteries of the Spanish civil war is the ferocity with which the churches have been attacked by people whose practice and tradition have bound them very closely to the churches.

As a description of experiences, the book throws a vivid light on conditions in Spain at the present moment. As a summary of events, it is admittedly partisan, and some of its partisanship will be found extremely irritating. But as an exploration of the Spanish mind it is extremely good, so good that nobody who wants to know the truth about Spain can afford to leave it unread.

L. T. F.

Scotland Yard

Secrets of Scotland Yard. By Edwin J. Woodhall. London: The Bodley Head. 12/6 net.

BEHIND the grim and somewhat prosaic walls of Scotland Yard lie the accumulated crime mysteries and strange histories of crime for many years. Almost equally entertaining are the stories of the men who have had to do with these macabre happenings and the means they employ to unravel the numberless problems with which they are constantly faced.

Mr. Woodhall, whose long connection with the Yard has enabled him to write with rare authority, now gives us a very fine résumé of all of major importance which happened in the annals of crime from the eighteenth century down to the present day. Famous names in the history of the force are mentioned, and there are the criminals, too—"Peter the Painter," "Chicago May," Engelstein and Percy Topless, and many another. The scientific side of the Yard is given at length. We see the splendid training which makes such fine detectives, and some of the brilliant scientific methods which have so greatly advanced the powers of crime detection within recent years. For a complete history of British crime within the last century this book would be hard to better.

Travelling Dancer

Russia, Farewell. By Marina Yurlova. London: Michael Joseph. 7/6 net.

THE author resumes in this volume the tale of her adventures at the point at which she broke off in "Cossack Girl." Once again she tells her story so well that it reads like a novel. If anything she is here even more ingenuous and naïve than before. As she makes her way from the mud of Vladivostok's "Rotten Corner" to Japan, where she dances for a living,