



Alvah Bessie

Men in Battle

SEVEN SEAS BOOKS

MEN IN BATTLE

A STORY OF AMERICANS IN SPAIN

BY ALVAH BESSIE

SEVEN SEAS PUBLISHERS BERLIN

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Briefly,
ABOUT THE BOOK

This is a true story, told by the man to whom it happened – told with such honesty that it becomes a personal experience for every reader. No man who ever wore a uniform, no woman who ever waited for war's end, will fail to be moved by the soldier who hears a bird sing in the midst of battle. . . . What person who has known pain and stress will not laugh aloud at the horseplay, the obscenities, the quarrels which endless waiting engenders? . . . And who will not share the hope of the six-year-old who writes, *Poppy, I love you!* to his father on the firing line? . . . The book reviewers wrote that this true story was *an almost unique document of human experience. . . . A searing and unforgettable picture. . . . Few books are born so directly out of living.* One critic rated it equal to the American classic, Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*. . . . Seven Seas Books believes that *MEN IN BATTLE* will take its place with those rare books one reads without pause from the first to the final page. . .

SEVEN SEAS BOOKS

A Collection of Works by Writers in the English Language



MEN IN BATTLE by ALVAH BESSIE

BY THE AUTHOR

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Bread and a Stone

The un-Americans

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Men in Battle

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Books by

Pierre Louys

René Maran

Octave Mirbeau

Théophile Gautier

Roger Verce

Émile Gabory

For my daughter, Eve,
a young American artist,
who, with her contemporaries,
will live to see the promises
of the Spanish Republic
fulfilled throughout the world.

A. B.

A Note

THE QUESTION most frequently asked of the American volunteers who returned from fighting for the Spanish Republic in the second war of Spain's independence, was: "Why did you go?" Even people whose experience had made them aware of the world-wide peril to democracy could not somehow take the logical step in thinking that would have answered the question for them.

They wanted to know why Americans who had families, friends, work and obligations in their native land could leave those families and friends and jobs and apparently forget their obligations to the extent of going 3,500 miles to fight in a foreign country, in a war that was "not their own."

This book, whose chronology covers only my own experience and whose sentiments are entirely my own, was intended to elaborate and explain the role that these Americans played in what is still called the "Spanish Civil War."

That it has now been reissued for the third time in twenty-one years must be flattering to any writer and I am deeply grateful that Seven Seas feels my book retains enough validity to warrant its presentation to English-speaking readers of a new generation.

But it is certain that the emotions and convictions that inspired this narrative are still very much alive in millions of human beings who were involved in the Spanish war, either directly or indirectly.

During that struggle we partisans of the Republic said that if Spain was lost there would be a second world war. Since World War II ended we have been

saying that if Spain remains fascist, the danger of a third is always imminent.

The alliance our American spokesmen have made with the Spanish butcher, we regard today as the second American betrayal of the Spanish people, as well as treason to our own. It cannot be justified on any grounds except the obvious fact that a third world war *is* in preparation.

For the maintenance – by force and violence – of Franco's grip on Spain explodes the pretensions of our government to the leadership of the "free world." It also constitutes a cynical repudiation of every American (and United Nations) soldier who died to accomplish the final destruction of fascism.

Those Americans who went to Spain to fight Franco and to stave off World War II have never minded being called "premature anti-fascists." They were proud of the label.

And it is therefore inevitable that an Administration that considers Franco an ally must consider us veterans of the anti-Franco war "subversives" and "traitors" to its cause: the cause of maintaining fascism on the Iberian Peninsula.

But it is much easier for the Administration to rewrite history than to reverse its motion. And that is why most of us confidently expect to live to see Madrid become the tomb of fascism, as the Spanish people in 1936 said that it would be.

We will live to see Franco meet the end of Hitler and Mussolini – and the Spanish land returned to a people whose kindness, whose dignity and whose spirit we have not forgotten for a single day during the twenty years that have passed since the war in Spain "ended."

The same understanding of history that inspires this confidence convinces us, too, that we will live to see the McCarrans, the would-be McCarthys and the complete

proliferating breed of witch-hunters that plague our beloved land return to the dust from which they were created, and the American earth returned to the rank and file Americans in whom the Founders placed their ultimate confidence.

We have long memories. We have developed a relative immunity to the endless barrage of propaganda, slander and outright lies that has been laid upon us. And especially, we are immune to the Big Lie that destroyed Spain and which Hitler developed to such a point of perfection that it was necessary for millions of human beings to die to achieve the Axis' defeat.

Yet the Big Lie survives and flourishes mightily in our own country today. As it is promulgated daily, hourly and every minute of the day through every medium of communication, so it must be answered – until our own people see it for what it is and explode it in their own good time.

Whenever we hear it said that Communism threatens us from within and without; whenever we are told that the Soviet Union menaces our “way of life” and wants to conquer the world; whenever we are summoned to a Holy Crusade that – if it is allowed to begin – will ravish the entire earth, we recall the following simple facts of history:

Mussolini killed whatever democracy existed in Italy by claiming that Italy was threatened by Communism;

- Hitler destroyed the German Republic with the same weapon;*
- Tojo broke the resistance of the people of Japan by using the identical thesis;*
- Franco murdered the Spanish Republic in the name of the “Red menace”;*
- The Axis launched World War II under the slogan of saving the world from Communism.*

These simple facts will not vanish no matter what the real enemies of the people do to conceal them or to give them a new or "one hundred per cent American" coloration.

We are faced, within the boundaries of our country, with a "dynamic crusade" to destroy the liberties of the American people in the name of "national security." We are faced with a major and desperate attempt to return the American worker to the days of the open shop; to deny the American Negro people their rightful place in society.

In the field of foreign affairs, actions are taken daily in the name of the American people which have – in the space of fourteen years – made us hated throughout the world, and feared more than we are hated.

It is a safe bet that the "dynamic crusade" will fail, but thousands of Americans will suffer deeply before it peters out in the face of the resistance of a people which has never accepted any tyranny, foreign or domestic.

If the republication of this book serves in any way to inform a generation that has grown up since Spain about the issues of that war and the Americans who helped to fight it, and to illuminate the shocking parallels between the actions of the Franco regime and the intentions of our Western reactionaries, the paper and ink used in this edition will not have been consumed in vain.

This writer, at least, is prouder of his membership in the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade than he is of any other action he has taken in the *fifty-five* years of his life.

A. B.

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THE RETREAT

I

[*Late January*]

THE SHIP WAS SEVERAL HOURS LATE AT LE HAVRE, and so we did not arrive in Paris until one o'clock in the morning. Paris late at night is a dead city, but it could not diminish our excitement, and we were all sorry that we were so tired and that no places were open at that hour. So we took a cab to a hotel near the Gare St. Lazare, and rang the doorbell. A sleepy young man finally answered.

"We're expected?" we said.

"No," he said.

"Weren't you informed that six Americans would arrive today?"

"No."

We looked at each other, then asked for rooms; three rooms for six men. We wondered what had become of the three other men who had been on the ship, and were going to the same place – Hoover and Garfield and Earl, all from California.

"This way," the concierge said, and we followed him to the top floor, where he opened the three rooms. There was a double bed in each room, and immediately Proios, the Greek, announced that he would sleep on the floor. Looking at Merkel, the enormous German-American seaman, we couldn't blame him, but that was his affair. We couldn't understand a word that Proios said, but he made himself understood nevertheless. Without a word of English at his command, he had even managed

to clean out the third-class passengers at poker. He could laugh; he laughed every time he raked in a pot and spread his hands in an apologetic manner. He had beautiful teeth, framed in gold.

The two Cubans, Prieto and Diaz, were content to sleep together, and "Lopez" and I drew the other room. Looking at Lopez I laughed. A New York Jew, he had managed to get a Spanish passport that, he confidently believed, would carry him into Spain aboard a train. (After all, I'm a Spanish citizen, he said. But you can't speak a word of Spanish, we had said . . . That's all right; I was brought to America when I was a kid.)

"What're you laughing at?" he said.

"The furnishings." There was the inevitable Roman-striped wallpaper, the red carpet, the nineteenth-century gilt clock under a glass bell, the deep closet, the push button that turned on the light if you kept pushing it long enough. I left a note outside, *Please wake me at seven o'clock* and we turned in. We knew there was a committee that assisted men anxious to get to Spain, but I had a feeling that no one would be there at that time of night.

Early the next morning I reported, by cab, to the Committee and received a few hundred francs, six tickets to a co-operative restaurant near by and instructions to bring the others to the Committee's headquarters at two that afternoon. I asked about Hoover and Garfield and Earl, but they had not yet turned up. I taxied back to the hotel near St. Lazare, where the other boys were waking up, and we went out to see the town. I had wanted to show them the Sainte Chapelle, Notre Dame and the chastity-belts in the Musée de Cluny, but there was little time to spend and nothing much to see; only thousands of people going to work, who looked just the same as other people going to work all over the world; dejected, tired, defeated but content. Our job was to keep our mouths shut and not attract attention,