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HEMINGWAY'S SPANISH CIVIL WAR DISPATCHES

By RICHARD FREEDMAN

ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S REFUSAL in August, 1958, to allow *Esquire* Magazine to republish two of his Spanish Civil War stories in *The Armchair Esquire* has focused attention on just what Hemingway's role was during the Civil War, and on whether his attitude toward the issues of the conflict has changed in the two decades since it raged. The purpose of this article is to examine the little-known newspaper dispatches that Hemingway sent from Spain at the time he wrote the *Esquire* pieces, in the hope of shedding some light on a rather obscure aspect of this controversial author's career.

When the tensions which had been steadily mounting in Spain ever since the resignation in 1930 of Primo de Rivera exploded into civil war six years later, the aspect of the fighting which most strongly gripped the imagination of the period was that for the first time in the twentieth century a "total war," involving the entire civilian population, was being waged ruthlessly with modern weapons in a supposedly "civilized" European country.

It was this aspect of the war which John Wheeler, the executive vice-president of the North American Newspaper Alliance, asked his friend Ernest Hemingway in the winter of 1937 to cover for his news service at the handsome rate of approximately a dollar a word. A "promotion box" sent by N.A.N.A. to its member newspapers said that Hemingway's assignment was to get "both from the bombed towns and bombed trenches the human side of the war, not just an account of the game being played by general staffs with pins and a map."¹ The dispatches, some cabled, some sent air mail, were to be features, written, as Wheeler told Hemingway, "in your colorful style,"² rather than drily factual spot news stories. This is the normal policy of N.A.N.A., which, unable to compete in news gathering with the octopus-like Associated Press, concentrates rather on supplementing the news with background

¹ Hemingway dispatches (promotion box), New York, March 1, 1937. The Hemingway dispatches, both in the original cable and in the expanded newspaper versions, as well as the letters from John Wheeler to Ernest Hemingway, are in the files of the North American Newspaper Alliance in New York City. The expanded versions were published in the *New York Times* as well as in numerous other papers throughout the country. I have used both versions of the stories in preparing this article.

² John Wheeler to Ernest Hemingway, June 8, 1937.

stories aimed for use by member newspapers alongside the hard news story.

In recent years N.A.N.A. has paid so high a fee only for occasional stories by such writers as Sir Winston Churchill and Harry S. Truman, whose fame is not exclusively journalistic. In 1937, of course, this rate was even more opulent than it is today, and it leads one to wonder what Mr. Wheeler's reaction was when Hemingway cabled a description of "the sudden appearance of Government bombing planes that dropped clutches of eggs boom boom boom boom then boom boom boom boom just beyond us."³ Wheeler did protect himself somewhat by specifying that no matter how much copy Hemingway filed he was to receive no more than \$1,000 in a given week.

Hemingway's qualifications for the job amply justified the expenditure. In addition to the intimate knowledge of Spain he displayed in *The Sun Also Rises* and *Death in the Afternoon*, and the ability to describe military actions and the feelings of men under fire to which *A Farewell to Arms* testified, Hemingway had behind him a highly varied and successful career as a newspaperman. He had worked for seven months on the *Kansas City Star* under the exacting city-room pressure of two expert newspapermen, "Pete" Wellington and Lionel Moise, and then, after the First World War, had spent four years writing for the *Toronto Star* and its magazine supplement, the *Star Weekly*, where he was paid at the something less than fabulous rate of $\frac{3}{4}\text{¢}$ a word. He had been extremely precocious. At twenty-three he was given the complex assignment of covering the Genoa Economic Conference, where he had his first brush with fascism and his first lesson in the use of *cabelese*, that concise and intriguing language devised by newspapers for the frustration of Western Union. In the Autumn of 1922 he covered the Greco-Turkish War, which later furnished him with the material for some of the finest vignettes of *in our time*. Furthermore, he had been sufficiently skillful and fortunate to draw mainly feature assignments, of the sort Wheeler had given him, rather than the spot news assignments which are the young reporter's usual lot.

Thus it was a highly competent reporter as well as a world-famous novelist and authority on Spain who embarked for Europe February 27, 1937, on the S.S. *Paris*. Hemingway was accompanied by his friend, the bullfighter Sidney Franklin, who was supposed to act as an aide, and who would, according to Hemingway, "tag along and help Ernie get into trouble and out of it and fight bulls in whichever arena we

³ Hemingway Dispatches, Madrid, April 9, 1937.

happen to pass.”⁴ Franklin’s role was brief and inglorious. The State Department refused him a visa to Spain on the grounds that he was not a bona fide correspondent, and that it was their duty rather to keep Americans *out* of the war area than to let them in. Hemingway expressed his scorn for this attitude in a cable to N.A.N.A. on March 12: “Jack Dempsey turned newsman overnight, so why not Franklin?”⁵ Since the State Department would not relent, Hemingway arranged to have Franklin smuggled over the French border into Spain, where they met later and proceeded to corner “all the Johnnie Walker in Madrid.”⁶ In his autobiography, *Bullfighter from Brooklyn*, Franklin describes their working method:

From the time we arrived, Ernest and I would go out to the front lines, he in one direction and I in another. We’d come in around noon. I’d tell him what I had heard and seen. Then he would write the entire report in long-hand. I’d type it, and after his final approval, I would take it to the censors and send it off on the cable.⁷

Dismayed by wartime privations, Franklin made the Coolidge-esque comment that in embattled Madrid the steaks were not as juicy as they had been before the war. After seven months he left, during the evacuation of civilians from the city.

Hemingway’s attitude toward the issues of the war is somewhat more difficult to ascertain. According to Franklin, who went mainly to purchase bulls for his own use in Cuba, Hemingway’s motives were opportunistic: “He had made his reputation as a war correspondent. Wars definitely were what he needed to keep his writing fresh. He had thought things over and came to the conclusion that since there was a war in Spain, he had to go there to keep in the swim.”⁸ Franklin maintains that it was not until they had arrived in Paris that Hemingway revealed to him that they would cover the war from the Loyalists’ side, although trying to remain as objective as possible. Franklin, in his own words, “didn’t care one way or another,” and “couldn’t afford to take sides.”⁹

The issue is further obscured by the somewhat callous bravado of Hemingway’s own statements to the press. He told Ira Wolfert during a shipboard interview:

⁴ Ira Wolfert Dispatch, New York, February 28, 1937.

⁵ Hemingway Dispatches, Paris, March 12, 1937.

⁶ Sidney Franklin, *Bullfighter from Brooklyn* (New York, 1952), p. 231.

⁷ Franklin, pp. 231–232.

⁸ Franklin, p. 215.

⁹ Franklin, pp. 234–235.

Everybody is trying to push us into the next war, the new style war, the kind of war they fought in Ethiopia and are fighting in Spain, the total war, where there is no such thing as a non-combatant, where everybody who lives across a line on a map is a target. The horror of that kind of war hasn't been brought home enough . . . the people I know don't get excited about the next war. Maybe they still think that when it comes, they can sit on their big fat chairs and sing "Keep the Home Fires Burning" and feel sentimental, like when they're crying over some beautiful hero in the movies. The idea is, this next war isn't going to be a picnic for anybody. There will be airplanes to lay eggs all over everybody and the war is going to come right smash into everybody's home and drip blood all over the carpets . . . if enough people get fear-knots tied into their guts, then we just are not going to get into the next war.

This would hardly seem to display what writers of the period were fond of calling "a political consciousness," nor would the additional statement Hemingway made to Wolfert place him among the ranks of the idealists: "Like for instance, what to do when the eggs start scrambling all around. We're going to take along a bottle of Scotch and drink plenty. We've got it figured out we'll see twice as many shells and not get scared half so much."¹⁰

There is ample reason to believe, however, that this was merely the attitudinizing of which Hemingway is so fond at times when other newsmen want him to be serious. As far back as 1922, when he covered the Genoa Economic Conference, he had been aware of the less appealing aspects of a nascent fascism. "The fascisti," he had cabled home, "are young, tough, ardent, intensely patriotic . . . and firmly convinced that they are in the right. They have an abundance of the valor and the intolerance of youth."¹¹ He had taken an instant dislike to Mussolini when more experienced reporters were praising *Il Duce* for making the trains run on time.

In a letter to Carlos Baker written April 1, 1951, Hemingway tried to clarify his position:

There were at least five parties in the Spanish Civil War on the Republic side. I tried to understand and evaluate all five (very difficult) and belonged to none . . . I had no party but a deep interest in and love for the Republic . . . In Spain I had, and have, many friends on the other side. I tried to write truly about them, too. Politically I was always on the side of the Republic from the day it was declared and for a long time before.¹²

¹⁰ Wolfert Dispatch, New York, February 28, 1937.

¹¹ Charles Fenton, *The Apprenticeship of Ernest Hemingway* (New York, 1954), p. 136.

¹² Carlos Baker, *Hemingway, The Writer as Artist* (Princeton, 1956), p. 228.

Hemingway has also stated that “the period of fighting when we thought that the Republic could win was the happiest period of our lives.”¹³

In his N.A.N.A. dispatches Hemingway reported the war “without bias” as agreed upon in his contract, although he operated exclusively from the Loyalist side. He reserved what developed into a passionate espousal of the Loyalist cause for his novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and especially for his film *The Spanish Earth*. The cables are written in the politically neutral, understated, but savagely antiwar tone which characterizes many of the interchapters of *in our time*, and such short stories as “A Way You’ll Never Be” and “A Natural History of the Dead.” Indeed, one of his earliest dispatches recalls the latter:

Hot weather makes all dead look alike, but these Italian dead lay with waxy gray faces in the cold rain, looking very small and pitiful. They did not look like men, but, where a bursting shell had caught three of them, the remains took on the shape of curiously broken toys. One doll had lost its feet and lay with no expression on its waxy, stubbled face. Another doll had lost half its head, while a third doll was simply broken as a bar of chocolate breaks in your pocket.¹⁴

He refuses to ascribe the crushing defeat the Italian Fascists received at Brihuega to any cowardice on their part: “Tank tracks lead to where they died, not as cowards, but defending skilfully constructed machine gun and automatic positions, where the tanks found them and where they still lie.”¹⁵ To Hemingway, after his First World War experiences, “the Italian dead were always your dead,” and their defeat at Brihuega was “the worst since Caporetto.”¹⁶

Among the best dispatches are those in which Hemingway describes the way it feels to be under fire. The gratuitous, random violence of the Fascist shelling of Madrid, for instance, elicits this picture of how the shells

killed an old woman returning from market, dropping her in a huddled black heap of clothing, with one leg, suddenly detached, whirling against the wall of an adjoining house. A motor car coming along the road stopped suddenly and swerved after the bright flash and roar and the driver lurched out, his scalp hanging down over his eyes, to sit down on the sidewalk with his hand against his face, the blood making a smooth sheet down over his chin.¹⁷

¹³ Baker, pp. 230–231.

¹⁴ Hemingway Dispatches, from the Guadalajara Front, March 23, 1937.

¹⁵ Hemingway Dispatches, Madrid, March 28, 1937.

¹⁶ Hemingway Dispatches, from the Guadalajara Front, March 23, 1937.

¹⁷ Hemingway Dispatches, Madrid, April 11, 1937.

Not all the dispatches are this grim. Hemingway gives free rein to his underrated sense of humor in this account of the booze situation in besieged Madrid:

Beer is scarce and whisky is almost unobtainable. Store windows are full of Spanish imitations of all cordials, whiskies and vermouths. These are not recommended for internal use, although I am employing something called Milords Ecosse whisky on my face after shaving. It smarts a little, but I feel very hygienic. I believe it would be possible to cure athletes foot with it, but one must be very careful not to spill it on one's clothes because it eats wool.¹⁸

Passages like this remind us that Hemingway's first literary model was Ring Lardner, and that during his newspaper career he frequently contemplated becoming a satirist.

Occasionally his humor is the grimmest sort of irony. Franco's attack on Bilbao "would eliminate the embarrassment that the self-styled Red-destroying general suffers when his troops are bombing and killing Basque Catholic Nationalists."¹⁹ In *The Spanish Earth*, when a Junker has been shot down, revealing to the camera its instrument panel with instructions in German, Hemingway's sole comment on Nazi intervention in Spain is, "I can't read German either."²⁰

Sometimes he combines tragedy and comedy, as in this account of the entry of three newspapermen into a town previously held by the Fascists:

in the road was a dead officer who had led a company in the final assault. The company had gone on and this was the phase where the dead did not rate stretchers, so we lifted him, still limp and warm, to the side of the road and left him with his serious waxen face where the tanks would not bother him now nor anything else and went on into the town.

In town, the population all embraced us, gave us wine, asked us if we didn't know their brother, uncle or cousin in Barcelona, and it was all very fine. We had never received the surrender of a town before and we were the only civilians in the place. I wondered who they thought we were. Tom Delmer, London newspaper correspondent, looks like a bishop. Herbert L. Matthews, of the New York Times, like Savonarola, and I like, say, Wallace Beery three years back, so they must have thought the new regime would be, say, complicated.²¹

¹⁸ Hemingway Dispatches, Madrid, September 30, 1937.

¹⁹ Hemingway Dispatches, Madrid, May 3, 1937.

²⁰ Ernest Hemingway, *The Spanish Earth* (Cleveland, 1938), p. 46.

²¹ Hemingway Dispatches, from the Teruel Front, December 23, 1937.

One of the most interesting artistic problems raised by the dispatches is the effect, if any, that *cabelese* had on the celebrated Hemingway style. The excerpts quoted so far have not been from Hemingway's cables, but from the finished stories that were unscrambled and expanded according to the rules of *cabelese* by an N.A.N.A. editor in New York. According to Charles Fenton, Hemingway was early "absorbed by the technical possibilities of *cabelese*" for terseness, compression, and rhythmic effects. He once insisted that Lincoln Steffens read a cable he had written, not for the exposition, but for the *cabelese*, which he called "a great language."²²

Frequently in the finished news stories which N.A.N.A. distributed the *cabelese* has been incompletely translated, resulting in passages rich in compounds and unusual adjective clusters. In these passages the outlines of the original cable are discernible behind the prose like the imperfectly erased first writing on a palimpsest. The following is just such a passage, taken from the finished news story, describing the progress of Hemingway, the camera crew of *The Spanish Earth*, and a United Press reporter: "Eight minutes of unbreakfasted downhill walking, loaded with cameras and gastric remorse from an excellent pre-battle celebration, brought us to brigade headquarters."²³ Sometimes the *cabelese* gives a Joycean effect to Hemingway's prose: "You'd hear the double boom of the guns, then the whirling cloth-ripping incoming rush and dirt would fountain brownly up among the grapevines."²⁴ He speaks of "the pleasant autumn-falling dusk,"²⁵ and of shells which "were going overhead, sounding like downcurving aerial subway trains with a boom at the end." This last episode also provides Hemingway with a chance to play most effectively with levels of diction: "This filled your correspondent with inquietude. I remarked, 'Let's get out of this joint before they open up on it.'"²⁶

The dispatches are rich, too, in fresh, often startling imagery. Tanks work "like deadly, intelligent beetles," infantry men march "bent forward like men walking along a dock in a heavy rain," "the dead lay like so many torn bundles of old clothing,"²⁷ and "in the fall, the Castilian Plateau is the color of a lion and as bare as a clipped dog."²⁸ When the

²² Fenton, pp. 186–187.

²³ Hemingway Dispatches, Madrid, April 9, 1937.

²⁴ Hemingway Dispatches, Ebro Delta, April 18, 1938.

²⁵ Hemingway Dispatches, from the Teruel Front, December 23, 1937.

²⁶ Hemingway Dispatches, Madrid, April 9, 1937.

²⁷ Hemingway Dispatches, Madrid, April 11, 1937.

²⁸ Hemingway Dispatches, Madrid, October 7, 1937.

rains come, “the roads melt into a pulp. They get to look like . . . a butter-yellow custard,”²⁹ while “pear trees candelabraed along the gray walls.”³⁰ Cabelese is combined with simile in this description of artillery shells, which have “a high inrushing sound, like the ripping of a bale of silk,”³¹ or in “You [saw] a yellow, flat-topped, steep-flanked hill with a shiplike prow rising from the plain to protect the yellow brick-built town.”³² Many of the best dispatches, like the latter, describe terrain, always a specialty of Hemingway’s.

Ever an economical writer, Hemingway refuses to let a good simile die. In a letter to Sherwood Anderson shortly before Christmas of 1921, Hemingway wrote: “You ought to see the Spanish coast. Big brown mountains looking like tired dinosaurs slumped down into the sea.”³³ Fourteen months later, in a *Star Weekly* dispatch, the “Sun-baked brown mountains slump down to the sea like tired old dinosaurs,”³⁴ and then, sixteen years later, on May 8, 1938, the tired old dinosaurs have at last become thirsty: “a brown range of hills that slid down into the sea like a dinosaur come to drink.”³⁵

On the whole, though, John Wheeler got his money’s worth of Hemingway’s “colorful style,” despite an occasional “boom boom boom” and a predilection for describing “the incoming rush of shells.” The place the Spanish dispatches occupy in the Hemingway canon, however, is another matter. Occasionally they are illuminated by vivid passages of impressionistic beauty, as in this lead to one of the last cables Hemingway sent to N.A.N.A., which must be quoted in the original cabelese:

There were poppy petals in the newdug trench blown from the grassy fields whipped flat by the wind from the snowcapped mountains stop across pinewoods of the old royal hunting lodge rose the white skyline of Madrid stop forty yards away a fiat light machine-gun tapped in sharp deadliness and the bullets passed with the quick cracking sound that makes recruits think theyre explosives stop we sheltered our heads behind the upthrown dirt.³⁶

²⁹ Hemingway Dispatches, New York, August 14, 1937.

³⁰ Hemingway Dispatches, Lerida, April 29, 1938.

³¹ Hemingway Dispatches, Madrid, April 11, 1937.

³² Hemingway Dispatches, from the Teruel Front, September 23, 1937.

³³ Ernest Hemingway to Sherwood Anderson, quoted in Fenton, pp. 118–119.

³⁴ *The Star Weekly*, Toronto, February 18, 1922, quoted in Fenton, pp. 121–122.

³⁵ Hemingway Dispatches, Castellon, May 8, 1938.

³⁶ Hemingway Dispatches, Madrid, May 10, 1938.

But rarely is the prose as finely wrought as this. Often—especially in descriptions of strategy—it is merely competent, as in the cable sent from Madrid on May 2, 1937, analyzing Franco’s motives in the Bilbao campaign. Here Hemingway becomes a military pundit, depending on secondhand information and dealing in the abstractions of strategy, where his unique talents for rendering firsthand physical sensation have no play. It is easy to see, after reading the dispatches in a mass, why Hemingway wrote to Sherwood Anderson in 1922, “This goddamn newspaper stuff is gradually ruining me.”³⁷ The demands newspapers make on one’s verbal facility and on one’s ability to turn emotion on and off like a spigot Hemingway found useful at first, but vitiating and irksome after a point. He early learned that he was unable to use material for serious fiction once he had already used it in feature-writing because once the emotion had been drained from him he could not bring himself to revivify it.

Perhaps this explains why he transmuted so few of the scenes and events he had reported as a correspondent into his serious work of the Civil War period. The only correlation with the play *The Fifth Column*, which he wrote at the time he was reporting for N.A.N.A., is that Hemingway lived in the Hotel Florida, where the action takes place. Nowhere in the dispatches does he mention the plot material of the play—the execution of Fascist spies by Loyalists in Madrid—and, in fact, in one dispatch he says that none of his friends of the old days, including many members of the middle class, had been executed by the “so-called Reds” who occupied the city.³⁸ Neither does Hemingway mention in his dispatches the guerillas camped sixty miles northwest of Madrid, in the Sierra de Guadarramas, who are the protagonists of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. He seems to have kept the materials he whipped into stories for N.A.N.A. carefully separated from those he knew he could use for fiction, in order not to spoil them by premature writing. This, despite the fact that his contract “in no way” limited him “from writing magazine articles or books” about his war experiences.³⁹

It is significant of Hemingway’s attitude toward these dispatches that when N.A.N.A. asked his permission to reprint some of them for a roundup on “The 20th Anniversary of the Battle of Madrid,” he flatly refused. His attitude toward the reprinting by *Esquire* of two short stories

³⁷ Ernest Hemingway to Sherwood Anderson, March 9, 1922, quoted in Fenton, p. 126.

³⁸ Hemingway Dispatches, Madrid, April 22, 1937.

³⁹ John Wheeler to Ernest Hemingway, June 8, 1937.

of the period, "The Denunciation" and "Night Before Battle," similarly appears to be that they are too ephemeral for republication in book form without a good deal of rewriting. Hemingway's statement to the *New York Times* on the matter indicates that his refusal was based on artistic, rather than on political grounds:

In these stories I did not try to be pro-Loyalist or anti-Loyalist. But if anyone wants to know how I feel today let me say that I have not changed my attitude about the Spanish Civil War. I was for the Loyalists and I still feel that way about the Loyalists. The only change is that I know more about the war.⁴⁰

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⁴⁰ *New York Times*, August 7, 1958, p. 27.