

Excerpt: Roderick Stewart and Sharon Stewart. "Chapter 10: The Path with Lions: Madrid, Valencia, Almería, January–February 1937." *Phoenix: The Life of Norman Bethune*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press. 2011. 190-192.

By 7 pm on 12 February the Renault was still being repaired. As Bethune and Worsley stood watching the mechanic, the lights suddenly went out and a siren sounded. Seconds later the ground shook and a series of explosions rent the air. As a shower of stone, metal, and glass rained down on them, Bethune pulled Worsley to the floor, yelling at him to cover his head. The deafening bombardment continued for several minutes, then stopped. After a few seconds of silence, they began to hear screams. Raising their heads, they found everything suffused by a reddish-orange glow. From the doorway they could see buildings a block away engulfed in flames. Bethune yanked Worsley's arm and started to run toward the burning buildings. Pushing his way through the crowds of terrified, stunned people, he kept shouting "*Médico! Médico!*" Ahead of them a bomb had destroyed a house. Screaming people covered with blood were trapped beneath jagged pieces of masonry, shattered timber, and a tangle of electrical wires. For the next six hours Bethune worked with others to aid the victims of the bombing. The savage incendiary attack had been carried out by a squad of the German Condor Legion. Though their bombs did some slight damage to a Republican cruiser in the harbour, their principal target had been the helpless refugees jammed into the city.

Bethune returned to the hotel at 2 am to sleep. Later that morning, with the Renault repaired, he and Worsley drove west on the Málaga road again. In the early afternoon they picked up Sise some fifty kilometres west of Almería and continued along the road to Motril, meeting fewer and fewer refugees until, rounding a bend, they found the road ahead of them clear for as far as they could see. They drove on a few more kilometres before realizing that they had passed the last refugee from Málaga. Worsley and Sise urged Bethune to turn around, but he was determined to reach Motril where, he argued, there must be refugees in need of medical treatment. They continued to a point about fifteen kilometres from Motril where a military barrier was erected across the road. There an officer turned them back, insisting medical personnel in Motril were attending to those who needed care. Only then did Bethune permit Worsley to turn the Renault around. Catching up with the last refugees, they stopped, filled the vehicle with women and

children, and made their way back to Almería, pulling up in front of the hospital just before midnight. It was their last load of refugees. Bethune, Sise, and Worsley had witnessed one of the greatest atrocities of the Spanish Civil War and were the only foreigners who did anything to help the refugees on the Málaga road.

That night Bethune could not sleep. He was furious because of rumours he had heard in Almería that, as elsewhere during the Civil War, disputes had broken out in Málaga between local communists and anarchists. This dissension among left-wing elements had worsened the situation there, contributing to the demoralization and rout of the population from the city and the disaster on the road to Almería. Later, in Valencia, he would fume that there were “about a million of these anarchist bastards that we will have to put up against the wall and shoot.”²⁹ The horrors of the Málaga road and the bombardment of Almería replayed themselves in his mind. The fascists’ savage treatment of helpless human beings, particularly children, evoked sheer rage in him, and he burned to express his revulsion. He fired off telegrams to various press organizations informing them of what had happened. Then he sat down and wrote an impassioned account of the three days that he and his companions had spent in their efforts to assist the refugees from Málaga, and described the aerial attack:

And now comes the final barbarism. Not content with bombing and shelling this procession of unarmed peasants on this long road, on the evening of the 12th when the little seaport of Almeria was completely filled with refugees, its population swollen to double its size, when forty thousand exhausted people had reached a haven of what they thought was safety, we were heavily bombed by German and Italian fascist air planes. The siren alarm sounded thirty seconds before the first bomb fell. These planes made no effort to hit the government battleship in the harbor or bomb the barracks. They deliberately dropped ten great bombs in the very centre of the town where on the main street were sleeping huddled together on the pavement so closely that a car could pass only with difficulty, the exhausted refugees. After the planes had passed I picked up in my arms three dead children from the pavement in front of the Provincial Committee for the Evacuation of Refugees where they had been standing in a great queue waiting for a cupful of preserved milk and a handful of dry bread, the only food some of them had for

days. The street was a shambles of the dead and dying, lit only by the orange glare of burning buildings. In the darkness the moans of the wounded children, shrieks of agonized mothers, the curses of the men rose in a massed cry higher and higher to a pitch of intolerable intensity. One's body felt as heavy as the dead themselves, but empty and hollow, and in one's brain burned a bright flame of hate. That night were murdered fifty civilians and an additional fifty were wounded. There were two soldiers killed.

Bethune called this account "The Crime on the Road: Málaga to Almería," and with a selection from the many photographs taken by Sise, it was later turned into an effective propaganda pamphlet circulated in France and North America.