

NOTEBOOK / CARNET

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Canadian Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War: New Evidence from the Comintern Archives

Michael Petrou

WHEN THE BERLIN WALL came down in 1989, symbolically ending the Cold War, few imagined that the resulting shockwaves that toppled the Soviet Union would also reach a perpetually dark and quiet microfilm reading room on the third floor of Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa. But this is what occurred. The disintegration of the Communist order in Russia loosened rigid Soviet control of state archives and made available to Western researchers material which had been inaccessible for the length of the Cold War. This included tens of thousands of documents pertaining to the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War — foreign volunteers, including roughly 1,600 Canadians, who had been recruited and sent to Spain by the Communist International to fight a fascist rebellion lead by General Francisco Franco.

In 1993 and 1994, George Bolotenko, an archivist at Library and Archives Canada, visited the Centre for the Preservation and Study of Records of Contemporary History in Moscow, also known as the Comintern Archives, to purchase microfilmed copies of some 10,000 pages of documents on Canadians in the International Brigades.¹ Although the impact of this material on historical scholarship has thus far been light, it has the potential to irrevocably change scholarship on Canadians in the Spanish Civil War. Among hundreds of letters, reports, questionnaires, and political evaluations in the archives, there are meticulously kept records of the Canadians who fought in Spain — their ages, ethnicities, political affiliations, education, criminal records, and a host of similar biographical data, even aliases and “party names.” Until the Comintern Archives were opened and this material was made available, it was impossible to accurately answer even the most basic questions about the Canadians who fought in Spain. How many went? And who were they?

Of course much was written about the International Brigades in Spain prior to the opening of the Comintern Archives. Indeed many veterans of the International Brigades have written memoirs of their experiences or have contributed their recollections to historians writing about the conflict. Some of these memoirs and histories are excellent. They provide a soldier’s-eye view of the war. But because veterans were so close to the action, they often lack an analysis of the bigger picture. A memoir, or a historical study based on the recollection of a war’s participants, can vividly recount an individual’s experience in war. It cannot, for example, tell the reader biographical details about the 500 other men in the author’s battalion.

Three book-length studies have been written about Canadians in the Spanish Civil War. Of these, only one — *The Gallant Cause* by Mark Zuehlke — draws on material from the Comintern Archives. However, Zuehlke avoids a detailed analysis of exactly who were the Canadians who fought in Spain. “This book is a work of literary non-fiction,” he writes. “As such it adopts certain stylistic conventions that require shaping the narrative around the limited point of view of the participants.”²

¹The acquisition of this material took place as part of a much larger cooperative project between the National Archives of Canada and the Russian Centre for the Preservation and Study of Records of Contemporary History, which included the training of Russian archivists in Canada. I am grateful to Dr. Bolotenko for speaking to me in detail about this project. For more information see George Bolotenko, “The National Archives of Canada and Left-Wing Sources from Russia: Records of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion, the Communist Party of Canada, and Left-Wing Internationals,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 37 (Spring 1996), 179-203.

²Mark Zuehlke, *The Gallant Cause: Canadians in the Spanish Civil War 1936-1939* (Vancouver 1996), xiv-xv.

The other two books on Canadians in Spain were written before the Comintern Archives were opened.³

Reliable and detailed data on international volunteers, including Canadians, were gathered in two locations following the end of the Civil War: Spain and Moscow. The problem for historians was accessing this material. As late as 1965, historians wishing to access documents pertaining to the International Brigades in Franco's Spain — which include information on international prisoners as well as captured Republican documents — were refused.⁴ Far more valuable are the thousands of documents that were spirited away to Moscow by Comintern representatives at the end of the Spanish Civil War. These have only been made available in the last twelve years.

The lack of primary source material frustrated historians writing about volunteers who came from all over the world. But Canadian volunteers present unique research problems. The first is the nature of the Canadian volunteers themselves. Almost all Canadian volunteers were working-class immigrants, many of whom spoke and wrote only simple English. They came from the margins of Canadian society, often with no other family in the country. They left few accounts prior to leaving for Spain, and although the Communist Party of Canada and its associated front organizations kept some records, many of these were lost when the party was declared illegal and its offices were shut down during World War II.⁵

Once in Spain, the Canadian volunteers remained difficult to track down. They served in several different units, battalions, and even brigades. Although the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion was nominally a Canadian battalion, all Canadians who fought in Spain were not part of it. Most Canadian volunteers had been born outside of Canada, and a number of these men chose, or were assigned, to serve with volunteers from their country of origin rather than with other Canadians. In Spain, some Canadians chose to fight with Polish, Hungarian, and Yugoslav units, instead of with the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion. A scholar would have to cover the history of most of the International Brigades just to provide a complete account of the Canadian volunteers.

The opening of the Comintern Archives in Moscow solved many but not all of the above problems. There is still much confusion and contradictory information in

³The other books on Canadians in Spain are: Victor Howard, *The Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion: Canadian Participation in the Spanish Civil War* (Toronto 1969) and William C. Beeching, *Canadian Volunteers: Spain, 1936-1939* (Regina 1989).

⁴Vincent Brome, *The International Brigades: Spain 1936-1939* (London 1965), 9.

⁵This claim comes from Tim Buck, who was leader of the Communist Party of Canada during the Spanish Civil War, in a 1964 interview with CBC researcher Mac Reynolds. However, Peter Hunter, who helped coordinate much of the party's recruitment of volunteers for Spain in Toronto, said in a 1967 interview with Reynolds that the party kept few records: "Our problem was to get them off our hands as quickly as possible." Both interviews are now archived at CBC Radio Archives in Toronto.

the files about a volunteer's nationality. For example, a Hungarian immigrant to Canada might be listed as Hungarian because he fought with other Hungarians in the *Rakosi* Battalion, named after the Hungarian Communist Matyas Rakosi. And a Finnish man who had never lived in Canada might be listed as Canadian because he served with Canadian Finns in the machine-gun company of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion. Many Canadians are listed as Americans and vice versa. And although brigade and party officials tried to keep track of aliases in much of the documentation, they found it difficult to translate obscure sounding Scandinavian or Slavic names into Spanish or English; this problem produced endless variations in the ways one individual's name might be spelled.

At one point International Brigade command established a "cadre service" for the Canadians in Albacete, Spain. It was staffed for a time by Canadians Ron Liversedge and Jack Lawson. Liversedge says International Brigade leadership, recognizing the lack of documentation on Canadians in Spain, assigned Lawson and himself the task of tracking all the Canadians in Spain, including those serving outside the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion. Liversedge believes that unfortunately most of these records were lost when the International Brigades evacuated Albacete following the disbanding of the International Brigades in late 1938.⁶ Even with these limitations, however, files from the Moscow archives reveal for the first time a largely accurate profile of the Canadians who fought in Spain. In the past, it was possible to describe the makeup of Canadian volunteers in broad and vague terms. Volunteer William Beeching, for example, says of the Canadians: "Some were politically active in the Communist Party of Canada; others in the CCF and Liberal parties. Still others had no political party affiliation at all."⁷ In fact, a careful examination of records in the Comintern Archives on the Canadians in Spain reveals only a handful were involved in the CCF and one was a Liberal. More than 600 were Communists.

As part of my doctoral research on Canadians in the International Brigades, I have constructed a database containing biographical information on more than 1,600 Canadians who fought in Spain.⁸ This database, which draws largely on information from the Comintern Archives files, tracks where the volunteers were born, when they immigrated to Canada, where they lived in Canada, to which organizations they belonged, whether they were employed, their occupations, political affiliations, education, criminal records, ages, marital status, and number of children. By analysing this information together, and by noting broad trends, a much

⁶Marx Memorial Library (London, England), Ron Liversedge's unpublished memoirs, Box A 15, file 10.

⁷Beeching, *Canadian Volunteers*, 202.

⁸Much of my database builds on research carried out by Myron Momryk, an archivist at Library and Archives Canada. Momryk is writing a biographical dictionary of Canadians who fought in the Spanish Civil War and has been extremely generous in sharing his research results and in helping me navigate conflicting information in my own database.

clearer picture emerges of exactly who made up the Canadian contingent in Spain. Some long-standing conceptions about the volunteers are confirmed. We now know that at least half were members of the Communist Party or Young Communist League, for example. But other stereotypes can now be conclusively debunked. Although many of the volunteers had been arrested for illegal political activity, such as distributing pamphlets or for riding in boxcars, almost none had committed serious criminal offenses. They were not the dangerous riff-raff they were often described as being in some contemporary media reports.

Clear differences also emerge between the Canadian contingent and volunteers from the United States with whom the Canadians most often fought. The Canadians were on average older and possessed less formal education than did their American counterparts. The Canadian volunteers were overwhelmingly immigrants, usually from Finland, the Balkans, Great Britain, Ireland, and Eastern and Central Europe. And unlike many of the American volunteers who came from cities such as New York and were often involved in highly organized party cells, the Canadians were usually transient. They criss-crossed the country, working in lumber and mining camps or agitating in relief camps for unemployed workers established by the government in the Canadian hinterland during the Depression.

In Spain, the Canadians' unique qualities played out in a number of ways. One American veteran, for example, recalls that when the Americans and Canadians went into battle together, only the Canadians, many of whom lived and worked in lumber camps back in Canada, knew enough not to discard their heavy blankets and canteens when they began the advance, and were thus able to comfortably bed down that night.⁹ Other American commanders complained during the war about what they perceived as the poor "political education" the Canadians had received in North America.¹⁰

Files from the Comintern Archives contain much more information on the Canadians than biographical statistics. There are also hundreds of letters, orders of the day, political assessments, and completed questionnaires. All of these documents are valuable and allow for greatly expanded study on Canadians in the Spanish Civil War. But details about the individual volunteers provide a foundation for all other research on the topic. Before we can understand why more than 1,600 Canadians fought in Spain and what happened to them during the war, it is necessary to know exactly who they were.

⁹From a 1965 interview with Steve Nelson, an American veteran of the International Brigades. The interview was conducted by CBC researcher Mac Reynolds. A copy of the interview is held at Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa, accession number A1 2004-05-0021.

¹⁰Various American (and leading Canadian) commanders and commissars in Spain commented on this. It is frequently noted in personal evaluations of individual Canadians signed by American Irving Weissman, for example.



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