

# **Renegades**

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**Michael Petrou**

**Renegades**  
Canadians in the Spanish Civil War



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## Spain

When the bare branch responds to leaf and light  
Remember them: it is for this they fight.  
It is for haze-swept hills and the green thrust  
Of pine, that they lie choked with battle dust.

You who hold beauty at your finger-tips  
Hold it because the splintering gunshot rips  
Between your comrades' eyes; hold it across  
Their bodies' barricade of blood and loss.

You who live quietly in sunlit space  
Reading The Herald after morning grace  
Can count peace dear, when it has driven  
Your sons to struggle for this grim, new heaven.

Dorothy Livesay



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# Preface: Spanish Tinderbox

Spain, on the eve of its civil war of 1936 to 1939, was a country plagued by unsustainable divisions. The modernizing reforms that had swept much of Europe passed over Spain, leaving a country that was conservative, backward, and home to growing unrest among the poor and those who sought to break down the power of the military, the landed nobility, and the Catholic Church. In 1931, these tensions forced the abdication of King Alfonso XIII and the restoration of democracy in the form of the Second Republic. The new left-leaning government embarked on a series of ambitious measures to secularize the country and curb the power of wealthy landowners. This led to fury from conservatives, and also disillusionment from many rural peasants, who remained mired in poverty. A right-wing coalition therefore triumphed in the elections of 1933. Factions among the Spanish left tried to launch a nationwide revolutionary strike the following year. They were most successful in the northern coal-mining region of Asturias, where the strike morphed into a military uprising. Miners held out for two weeks before they were bombed and shelled into submission and overrun by government forces. The uprising led to accusations from the right that their opponents on the left respected the electoral process only when they were successful.

The left, however, did learn the lessons of democracy. It formed a broad coalition of socialists, liberals, Catalan nationalists, and anarchists who called themselves the Popular Front to contest the 1936 elections. The Popular Front defeated a right-wing coalition known as the National Front, and in May 1936 Manuel Azaña was elected president of the Republic. By this time, however, the divisions within Spain were irreconcilable and conflict was moving beyond the political arena. Churches were torched, and high-profile assassinations shook the country.

Spain's military elite began planning a coup to depose their country's elected government. It was launched, by Francisco Franco and other generals, on the night of 17 July 1936, with a revolt by the colonial army in Morocco. The rebellion spread to mainland Spain the following day. It was, however, not totally

successful. Some military garrisons remained loyal to the Republic; others that rebelled were defeated by informal citizen militias. Almost immediately, Spain was divided into regions controlled by forces loyal to the insurgents and those that stood with the government. The rebels were victorious in much of northwestern Spain. Crucially, however, the Basque and Asturian regions remained loyal to the Republic. Although traditional and fiercely Catholic, the Basques – like the Catalans – sought greater autonomy and supported the government because it promised them exactly this. The Republic held most of eastern Spain, including its two greatest cities, Barcelona and the country's capital, Madrid. Both sides committed widespread atrocities against real and imagined political opponents. These acts hardened divisions within Spain.

Those who supported the coup feared the changes underway in their country and fought to preserve the old order and their privileged positions in it. Their coalition included monarchists, conservatives, outright fascists, and wealthy landowners.

Those who opposed the rebellion included socialists, anarchists, regional nationalists, liberal democrats, and communists. Their unlikely alliance would be strained – sometimes to the breaking point – during the course of the war. At issue was not their opposition to fascism or to Franco's rebellion but, rather, contrary ideas about how the war should be fought and the kind of country they wanted Spain to become. Some fought for regional autonomy and for their rights as Basques or Catalans. Some fought for communism, some fought for socialism, some fought for an anarchist revolution, and some fought for a traditional liberal democracy. These competing visions were reconciled – or at least accommodated – for much of the war. But tensions among those who fought together in Spain also erupted into episodes of violence.<sup>1</sup>

Some of those who fought for the rebels, or for the government, also did so because of an accident of geography. The tragic reality of a civil war is that many will find themselves trapped in what they consider to be enemy territory.

Facing a probable defeat in the early days of the war, the Spanish rebels requested and received assistance from Adolf Hitler to transport the crack Army of Africa, including Spain's foreign legion, across the Strait of Gibraltar to southern Spain, from where their columns began a seemingly unstoppable offensive north.

Hitler and his fellow dictator Benito Mussolini in Italy would later provide Franco with tanks, artillery, planes, pilots, instructors, and tens of thousands of troops. Germany's contribution amounted to some six hundred planes, two hundred tanks, highly effective artillery pieces, and sixteen thousand men, including civilian instructors.<sup>2</sup> Spain functioned as a testing ground for Hitler's incipient war machine and was also something of a secret playground for the young pilots of Germany's Condor Legion. Adolf Galand, a German

pilot, recalled that between 1936 and 1939 a colleague who had disappeared for six months might suddenly show up again in Germany “in high spirits, with a suntan and having bought himself a new car” and confide to his friends about his Spanish adventures.<sup>3</sup>

Benito Mussolini, motivated by ideological affinity with Franco as well as grandiose national vanity, sent 75,000 soldiers and airmen, 800 artillery pieces, 660 aircraft, 150 tanks, as well as aircraft motors, bombs, ammunition, rifles, and almost 7,660 motor vehicles. Italian airmen were extremely active in bombing raids and in aerial combat; Italian warships and submarines were also engaged in the war. But Italy’s intervention was not as pleasing for those who took part as it was for the Germans. Italian troops were mauled on the battlefield, with more than 4,000 killed over the course of the war. Italy also lost perhaps as much as 25 percent of the effective military equipment that it had sent to Spain.<sup>4</sup>

Franco’s soldiers included some seventy-five thousand Moroccan Moors from Spain’s colony in North Africa. These capable troops were used to great effect during Franco’s advance north from the Strait of Gibraltar and, along with his German and Italian allies, would prove crucial to his ultimate success in the war. Smaller contingents, notably soldiers from Portugal and private volunteers from Ireland, also fought for the rebels, though their support was not decisive. Two Canadians are known to have fought with Franco. Warde Harry Phalen volunteered as a pilot but was soon back in Canada and charged with assaulting a taxi driver.<sup>5</sup> The second man, “Tug” Wilson, deserted a British navy vessel to join the Spanish Foreign Legion and subsequently deserted again, surreptitiously leaving the country with the Irish volunteers for Franco.<sup>6</sup>

The Spanish government also sought help from abroad. The Republic, however, was barred from buying weapons on the open market by an arms embargo imposed by the great powers. Nominally designed to prevent Spain’s civil war from spreading, the Non-Intervention Agreement placed Spain’s elected government on equal footing with the rebels leading a coup d’état. The agreement itself was a chimera designed to give the international community the veneer of neutrality. But the blockade still severely restricted the Spanish government’s ability to defend itself. Mexico flouted the agreement and sold Spain rifles, ammunition, and trucks, though much of the equipment was of poor quality.<sup>7</sup> France also supplied equipment and planes, and the Republic was able to obtain weapons from international arms dealers. Spain’s biggest and most reliable supplier was the Soviet Union, which sold Spain a thousand aircraft and nine hundred tanks, as well as ammunition, fuel, artillery, and trucks.<sup>8</sup> Soviet personnel in Spain included pilots, tank drivers, and instructors – and also military advisors and intelligence agents who were able to pressure and influence the Spanish government and military because of the aid they brought with them. The size and strength of the Spanish Communist Party would grow substantially during the course of the war.

Soviet leaders might have sympathized with the left-leaning Spanish government, but their support for Spain was also motivated by Russian security concerns. When the Spanish Civil War began, the Soviet Union was following a policy of rapprochement with the Western democracies against the growing powers of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. Fearing an attack from Germany, the Soviet Union entered the League of Nations in 1934, and in 1935 concluded a pact with France. Moscow instructed foreign communist parties to pursue a popular front strategy, seeking alliances with “progressive” or anti-fascist movements in their own countries, even those composed of the so-called liberal bourgeoisie. The only anti-fascists whom communists were instructed to shun were Trotskyists – a term that referred to followers of Stalin’s former rival and nemesis Leon Trotsky, but which was a label communists affixed to almost anyone suspected of opposition to their party.

After hoping for more than a decade to export socialist revolution, the Communist International, or Comintern, now postponed this goal and concentrated on protecting the Soviet Union. Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin feared that a nationalist victory in Spain would surround the Soviet Union’s ally France on three sides with potentially hostile neighbours, making it easier for an emboldened Germany to attack Russia without worrying about a French strike from the west.<sup>9</sup> These concerns were articulated at a 3 November 1936 meeting between Ivan Maisky, the Soviet ambassador to London, and British foreign secretary Anthony Eden. Eden reported that Maisky told him that the Soviet government was convinced that if General Franco were to win, “the encouragement given to Germany and Italy would be such as to bring nearer the day when another active aggression would be committed – this time perhaps in central or eastern Europe. That was a state of affairs that Russia wished at all costs to avoid and that was her main reason for wishing the Spanish government to win in this civil strife.”<sup>10</sup> Laurence Collier, head of the Northern Department at the Foreign Office, accepted Maisky’s account as “substantially accurate.”<sup>11</sup>

The Soviets, however, did not commit sufficient troops and materiel to guarantee a quick victory. They were concerned that a victorious Spanish Republic, especially one explicitly committed to socialist revolution, might lead to a wider European conflict, with France and Britain neutral or possibly even aligned against Russia. Stalin wanted to avoid altering the international balance of power and alienating France and Britain while his armies were unprepared for war. Instead, he hoped to prolong the war in Spain, bog down Hitler far from Russia’s borders, and keep the Spanish Republic alive for as long as possible while the Soviet Union rearmed and prepared for an inevitable confrontation with Nazi Germany.<sup>12</sup>

The Soviet Union, through the Communist International and national communist parties around the world, was also responsible for the recruitment and organization of forty thousand international volunteers, who fought in

Spain on the side of the Spanish government. These volunteers, known as the International Brigades, included the vast majority of the Canadians who took part in the Spanish Civil War. Shortly after hostilities began in Spain, it became clear that there was a desire among sufficient numbers of leftists and democrats around the world to physically confront fascism. Unorganized volunteers intent on fighting had been arriving in Spain since the war began. The Soviet Union saw an opportunity to capitalize on popular sentiment and seized it. The International Brigades epitomized the Soviet ideal of a broad, anti-fascist popular front. Built on a communist foundation, but with wider leftist and even mainstream support, the brigades were a stirring and tangible symbol of global support for an anti-fascist cause that was not explicitly linked to the Soviet Union. The Spanish government, though initially reluctant, accepted its formation in October 1936, recognizing both the military and propaganda value of the international volunteers, and the benefits of Soviet military aid, which would not have been so forthcoming had the Republic rejected the brigades.

The International Brigades made their first appearance as a fighting force in November 1936, as rebel columns began their assault on Madrid. The Spanish capital took on enormous symbolic importance around the world for those who believed that Spain was the centre of a global showdown between fascism and freedom. The city was expected to fall quickly. But pro-government militias and civilians, poorly armed and desperate, kept the attacking rebels at bay under banners that read *No Pasarán* – “They shall not pass.” Madrid’s defenders were joined by mostly German and Italian volunteers, plus some British, French, and Polish. No Canadians were yet in their ranks; they would arrive within months. But already the Canadian doctor Norman Bethune was at work in the besieged city, bringing blood to wounded soldiers and civilians. Together, the city’s defenders stopped the nationalist advance on Madrid.

The Spanish capital would remain beyond the reach of Franco until the final days of the war, in March 1939. By then the Spanish Republic was defeated and in ruins. Hundreds of thousands of refugees were streaming toward France or to Spanish ports, hoping – usually in vain – that they would be evacuated before Franco’s troops caught up with them.

Their fear was justified; tens of thousands of suspected republican supporters and soldiers were imprisoned, sentenced to forced labour, and executed in bloody purges after Franco’s victory. The international volunteers who had survived the previous three years had all left Spain by this time. Thousands of Germans, Italians, and Hungarians, who knew they would face prison or worse in their home countries, stayed in France, where many were interned in concentration camps. Volunteers from Canada, the United States, and Britain, those with homes to which they could safely return, did so.

War, however, would soon find these men, as it would engulf the world.

The Second World War, a conflict many internationals in Spain said they had foreseen and fought to prevent, broke out within months of Franco's victory. The Western democracies, which had turned a blind eye to fascism's rise in Europe, and which had sacrificed Spain in a vain attempt to appease it, belatedly took up arms in their own defence.

# Acknowledgments

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This book is dedicated with love and thanks to Janyce McGregor, my wife.

# Chronology

April 1931	Second Spanish Republic proclaimed following abdication of King Alfonso XIII
November 1933	Right-wing coalition wins general election
October 1934	Attempted uprising in Asturias
February 1936	Popular Front wins general election
July 1936	Spanish Civil War begins Bill Williamson arrives in Spain
September 1936	William Krehm arrives in Spain
November 1936	Norman Bethune arrives in Madrid International Brigades join defence of the Spanish capital
January 1937	First volunteers from Canada enlist in the International Brigades
February-June 1937	Battle of Jarama
May 1937	Violent clashes in Barcelona between republican advocates and opponents of revolution Norman Bethune leaves Spain

July 1937	Formation of Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion Battle of Brunete
August-October 1937	Battles at Quinto, Belchite, Fuentes de Ebro
December 1937-February 1938	Battles at Teruel and Segura de los Baños
March-April 1938	Retreats
July-November 1938	Battle of the Ebro
September 1938	International Brigades withdrawn from lines
January 1939	Barcelona falls to the nationalists Canadians begin leaving Spain in large numbers
March 1939	Nationalists enter Madrid
April 1939	General Francisco Franco announces that the war is over

# Renegades



Spain, July 1936

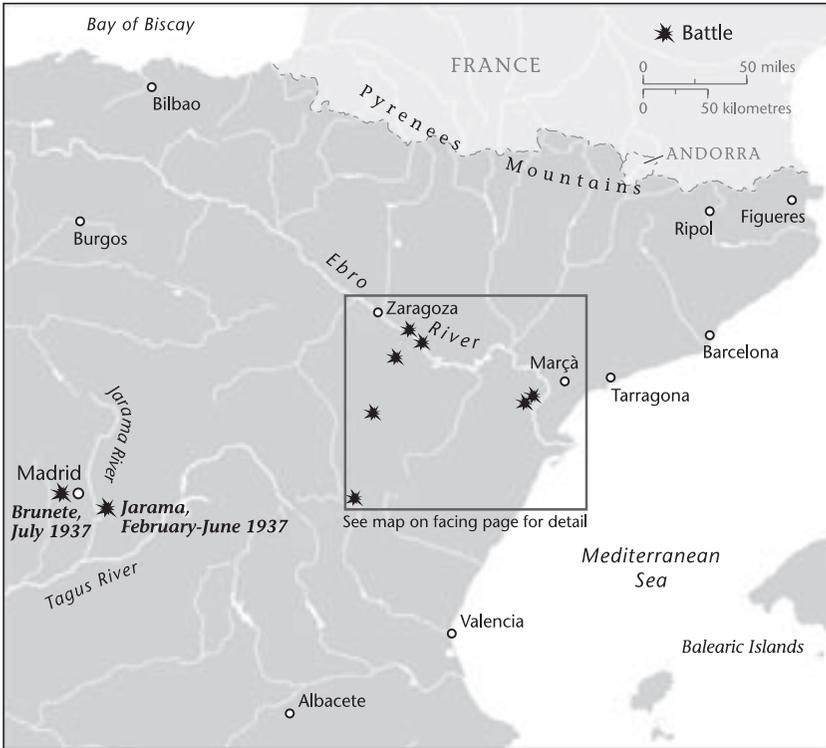
# Introduction

Canadians in the 1930s had little obvious reason to feel as if their own lives and fates were entwined with those of Spaniards. Spain was, after all, far away. Its inhabitants spoke a different language. Few Canadians could trace their origins to Spain or had any relatives there. The two nations might as well have belonged to different worlds. And yet, between 1936 and 1939, almost seventeen hundred Canadians chose to fight in the Spanish Civil War, of whom more than four hundred were killed. Why?

This book is an attempt to answer that question – to establish who were the Canadian men and handful of women who risked their lives in Spain, why they volunteered, and what happened to them during the course of the war and in the years that followed. The focus is on the majority of the Canadians who served in the International Brigades, and several chapters are devoted to the major campaigns in which they fought. But this book also includes chapters on three Canadians – Bill Williamson, William Krehm, and Norman Bethune – who spent significant amounts of time in other units. Their stories are unique and have been given a detailed examination here. Two chapters are devoted to the issues of discipline, morale, and punishments in the International Brigades – a topic on which much of the current historiographical debate on internationals in Spain is centred. The book concludes by examining the reaction of the Canadian government and security services to Canadians fighting in Spain, and to the return of the volunteers in the years, and decades, after the war.

Writing history, especially the history of a war, is always contentious and political. But rarely has a war evoked such passion and produced such intense debate as has the Spanish Civil War. It was a conflict that divided much of the world as it occurred, and today, seven decades later, old and new divisions are fought out in history books, movies, novels, and academic journals.

The battle over how the civil war should be described and remembered began as soon as the guns fell silent. During the almost forty years of Franco's dictatorship, Spanish historians were not permitted to write accounts of the

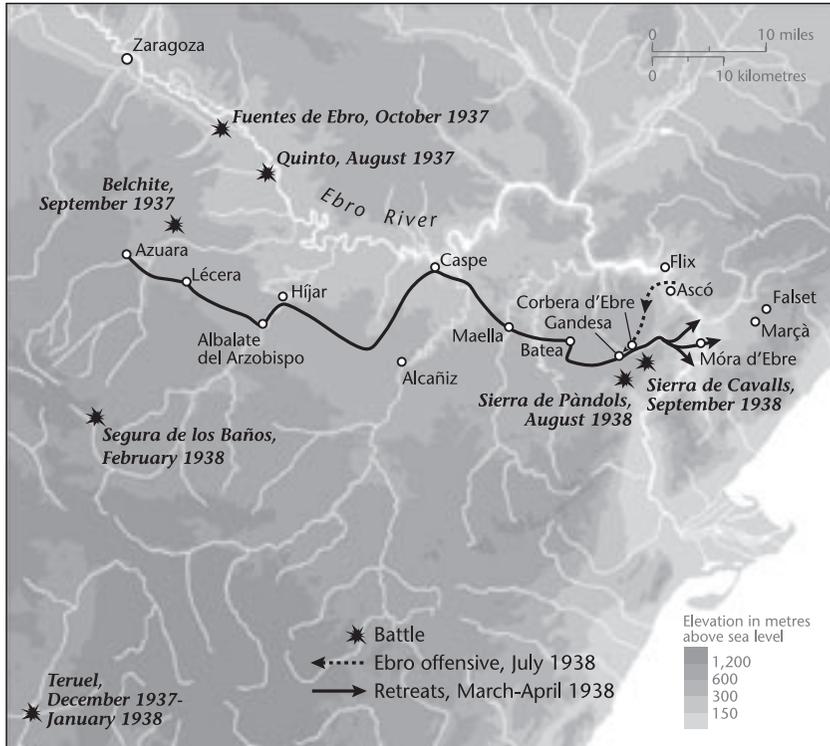


Spanish Civil War military actions involving Canadians

civil war in a way that cast shame on the nationalist cause and on Franco's regime. Francoist historians blamed the war on left wing, usually communist, extremists who drove moderate men in the Spanish military to fight in defence of Spain. Atrocities committed by republicans, especially crimes against the Catholic Church and clergy, were recounted in detail; nationalist crimes were brushed over.<sup>1</sup>

Franco had good reasons to portray his military rebellion as a necessary, glorious, and defensive war beyond a need to legitimize his regime. The Second World War concluded with many observers believing that Franco's fate would soon follow that of his erstwhile comrades Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini. But as Berlin fell to the Allies, a new conflict – the Cold War – divided Europe. Franco's regime now found itself on the right side of the Iron Curtain, and it sought to exploit its position as sentinel of the West against communism. Francoist historians played up the dictator's supposed clairvoyance in recognizing the dangers of communism and fighting against it. Franco was rehabilitated in the eyes of the West, and his regime persisted unmolested for decades.

Of course, not all Spaniards who survived the Spanish Civil War were nationalists, and many republicans were equally anxious to write about the



Spanish Civil War military actions involving Canadians, detail

conflict. Those in Spain, for obvious reasons, could not. But thousands of republicans found exile outside the country. They were hampered by their lack of access to Spanish archives. For some, the wounds of war were also too fresh. Unable to agree on the reason for their defeat, exiled republicans continued wartime debates about how the war should have been fought in the first place.

The inevitable result of all this turmoil within Spanish historiography was that many of the most important histories written about the conflict in the decades following the war were published outside Spain.<sup>2</sup> Non-Spanish historians have been criticized for exaggerating the international dimension of the civil war. This criticism is valid – to a point. The Spanish Civil War was deeply rooted in Spain's class and regional divides. However, the conflict was also played out on the international stage. Tens of thousands of foreigners fought on both sides of the civil war, and international diplomacy and intervention played a significant role. The nationalist uprising might have failed at its inception without the assistance of Hitler's air force, which carried Franco's Army of Africa to mainland Spain.

The International Brigades also sharply reflected the Spanish Civil War's

global dimensions. For nationalists, the brigades represented the threat of international communism made real. The existence of foreigners fighting on behalf of the Republic provided them with tangible proof that they were fighting to liberate Spain from outsiders and traitors. For their supporters, the brigades were the purest example of international solidarity. Foreigners have always been especially inspired by the International Brigades and have written most of the books about them.<sup>3</sup>

The Canadians, however, have attracted little attention. This is only the fourth book to be written about Canadians in the Spanish Civil War. The first, *The Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion*, by Victor Hoar, was not published until 1969.<sup>4</sup> Hoar's study was hampered by his inability to access key archives in the Soviet Union. But he assembled an impressive collection of material and recollections from surviving veterans; his book is still essential reading for anyone interested in the topic. *Canadian Volunteers: Spain 1936-1939*, by veteran William Beeching, is a celebratory account of Canadians in Spain that lacks much in the way of objective analysis but contains valuable recollections from veterans who were still living in the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> *The Gallant Cause: Canadians in the Spanish Civil War 1936-1939*, by Mark Zuehlke, is written in a style the author describes as literary non-fiction.<sup>6</sup> It is a vivid description of the war from the perspective of those who took part. It lacks footnotes or endnotes. In addition to these books about the entire Canadian contingent in Spain, there is one published memoir, by Douglas Padrig (Pat) Stephens, which is an engaging account of the author's experiences. Greg Lewis recently wrote a short and lively biography of Bob Peters, who emigrated to Canada in 1931 and later fought in Spain. A biography of volunteer Jack Brent, who was born in Cobourg, Ontario, and moved to Scotland as a child, was also published over fifty years ago.<sup>7</sup>

This book builds on the work of previous authors but also breaks significant new ground, in part because of its extensive use of recently declassified documents from the archives of the Communist International in Moscow. These documents reveal tantalizing details about the makeup of the volunteers, how they lived in Spain, the battles they fought, and the influence of the Communist Party among them.<sup>8</sup> The party carefully evaluated the Canadian volunteers on their attitudes and political commitment and kept detailed notes. Many, while described as brave men and good soldiers, were accused of insufficient loyalty to the Communist Party. These evaluations help us to understand what demands were made by the party in Spain and how Canadians responded. Most did so with solid, if irreverent, resolve to continue their fight against fascism. Others rebelled against the party. Faced with high casualty rates and extremely punishing conditions, scores of Canadians tried to flee the war. Documents in the Comintern archives show how these men were treated.

The archives also include sensational material about two Canadians – one famous, one virtually unknown – who were both unjustly accused of

espionage in Spain. The first, Dr. Norman Bethune, became romantically embroiled with a woman whom Spanish authorities believed was a spy or a fascist. Bethune left Spain with his life and reputation intact. The second, William Krehm, a young student at the University of Toronto, was accused of spying by the Republican secret police but had no fame to protect him. He spent three months in various Barcelona jails and was lucky to escape Spain alive. I interviewed Krehm at his Toronto home in 2004.

Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa contains several collections pertaining to Canadians in the Spanish Civil War, including extensive files from the RCMP, which closely watched the volunteers during and after the war. I have obtained additional material from the RCMP through government access-to-information requests.<sup>9</sup>

The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's Radio Archives in Toronto holds dozens of interviews with Canadian veterans of the Spanish Civil War that were recorded in the 1960s but never broadcast. They are an excellent resource.<sup>10</sup>

The Thomas Fisher Rare Books Library at the University of Toronto contains material relating to Methodist minister and communist Albert E. Smith, including a notebook he kept with him while visiting Canadians in Spain. The library has a small amount of good material on radical anti-Stalinist leftist organizations in Toronto during the 1930s, including the League for a Revolutionary Workers' Party, to which William Krehm belonged. William Krehm's personal archives are also an excellent resource. They are located at his home, and it is, of course, necessary to obtain Krehm's permission to consult them.

The Sound Archive of the Imperial War Museum in London contains recordings of interviews with several Canadian veterans who lived in Britain after the war. The museum's Department of Documents holds letters and recollections from Canadian veteran Joseph Turnbull, and its Photograph Archive includes good unpublished material on the Dr. Norman Bethune. The Marx Memorial Library in London, an excellent repository of material on the British in the Spanish Civil War, has useful material on Canadians in the conflict.

Twelve veterans shared their memories and recollections with me as I researched this book. Their insights were invaluable. I have also visited the battlefields where Canadians fought and died, and the villages where they prepared for attacks and recuperated afterward. International Brigades veterans and Spaniards, civilians and former fighters, were there and recalled what they had seen and experienced all those years before. The civil war is never very deep beneath the surface in Spain, and this becomes clear when one walks on the ground where it was fought.



Part 1  
Origins of the Volunteers

## Who Were the Canadian Volunteers?

On 17 January 1937, Thomas Beckett, a twenty-two-year-old from Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, wrote a letter from the International Brigades base at Albacete, where he had just arrived, to a girl in Canada named Audrey. Beckett told Audrey that the Spanish girls reminded him of her, and he asked her to try to explain to others back in Canada why he had come to Spain. “You no doubt know why I am here,” he wrote. “It is because I am what you do not want me to be, a Communist. Even if I had no political beliefs and was not a Communist, my abhorrence of cruelty, of unnecessary suffering, brutality, greed, and tyranny would lead me to do the same thing ... I feel as though I was talking to you, and would like to go on. I could write pages, but it is necessary for me to close now, for reasons I might tell you some day, if all goes well. As I said in the postcard – ‘Wish me luck?’”

All did not go well for young Beckett. In February he joined the predominantly American Abraham Lincoln Battalion, along with up to forty other Canadians.<sup>2</sup> On 15 February, battalion members climbed onto trucks and began a long, cold, and crowded night journey to the village of Morata de Tajuña, just behind the front lines in the Jarama Valley, where republican forces were trying to prevent a nationalist encirclement of Madrid. Around dawn the convoy stopped and the new recruits were told to fire five shots at a nearby hill. The next evening, when the battalion drove toward the front, the drivers of two trucks, including one carrying Thomas Beckett, got lost and veered toward enemy lines. More than twenty men disappeared and were not heard from again.

Beckett’s mother, Jessie, and his father, Reid, spent the remainder of the war seeking information about the fate of their lost son. They wrote the Canadian and British governments, asking them to intervene on his behalf. British diplomats accredited to Franco’s government made inquiries but were told that Beckett was not in nationalist custody.<sup>3</sup> A friend of a friend even wrote to Franco asking for information about Beckett and received a similar reply saying that the nationalist government had no record of the Canadian

in any of its prison camps.<sup>4</sup> Beckett's former comrades corresponded with Beckett's parents as well. "The world would look much brighter to me too, if I knew Tommy to be alive," wrote Larry Ryan from a Hamilton sanatorium. Ryan had been at Jarama the day Beckett disappeared. "But I tried to be honest in my talk to you," Ryan continued, "and I cannot allow my hopes to rise for in my heart I still feel as I told you."<sup>5</sup>

It was not until nearly five decades after the war that Beckett's fate was confirmed. The American veteran Carl Geiser returned to Spain and talked with a former nationalist sergeant who witnessed the two American trucks drive through his army's lines. The first truck rolled onto its side, and the second, following close behind, crashed into it. The uninjured international volunteers took up rifles and remained with the trucks or made a run for it. All were killed but one, who was taken prisoner and presumably shot later, as he does not appear to have survived the war.<sup>6</sup> Thomas Beckett, in the country for barely two weeks, perhaps without ever firing a shot at the fascists he had come to fight, became the first Canadian to die in the Spanish Civil War.

Over the next nineteen months, more than four hundred Canadians in the International Brigades would follow Beckett to their graves in Spain. Of these men, and of those who survived, little was known for decades. The Friends of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion, a Communist Party of Canada-affiliated support group, kept file-card records on almost seven hundred volunteers. However, these often amounted to little more than a name, possibly a photograph or listed hometown, and a note about the volunteer's ultimate fate. After the war, the organization recorded that 1,239 Canadians volunteered to fight in Spain, but it did not have detailed biographical information for most of them.

Efforts were made – by veterans and researchers – in the postwar years to compile an accurate roster of the Canadians who fought in Spain, but this was not an easy task. In Spain, volunteers might have anglicized their names or altered them to sound more Spanish. As well, often volunteers fought in a variety of units, sometimes with foreigners from other countries, almost always with Spaniards, making it difficult to immediately identify them. This was especially the case with the Canadians. Most were immigrants and often joined battalions made up of volunteers from their countries of origin. It was not until the international volunteers were pulled from the lines in the autumn of 1938 that all the Canadians were gathered in one place and collectively became known as the Mac-Paps, after the nominally Canadian Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion. But by this time, hundreds had already died and disappeared.

The opening of the Moscow archives made it more feasible to reconstruct the identities of these Canadians. International Brigades officials and party leaders kept meticulous notes, recording biographical details on individual volunteers and reporting on their actions and fates in Spain. Numerous lists

were compiled, evaluations were made, letters to and from home were seized and filed. However, the real identities of some volunteers remain obscure even in party and brigade records that were meant to be clear and accurate. In addition to numerous aliases, party names, and nicknames, some volunteers came to Spain having appropriated someone else's identity. American Eugene Cullen, for example, noted that he was in the country on the passport of another comrade.<sup>7</sup> Another American, Israel Goldenberg, was known in Spain as José and travelled with the documents of an American named Joseph Budish.<sup>8</sup> Some American volunteers were listed as Canadians because they served in the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion, and several Canadian-born volunteers were listed as Poles or Hungarian because they fought in units made up of volunteers from these countries.

Sometimes files on volunteers simply got lost or were misplaced in the normal course of trying to run a bureaucracy in the midst of war. In October 1937, a brigade official paid a visit to Canadian Bob Kerr, who, as head of the Canadian cadre service, was assigned the task of keeping track of all the Canadians in Spain. Most Canadians belonged to the 15th International Brigade. Kerr knew that Canadians were fighting in other units – with the Hungarian Rakosi Battalion, for example, or with the mostly Slavic Dombrowsky. But he did not have accurate records on men who were so widely scattered. Kerry told the official that of the eight hundred Canadians then in Spain, he had no idea where two hundred of them were.<sup>9</sup> Many volunteers were killed or captured before anything could be recorded about them.

Record keeping had improved somewhat by the end of the war. A majority of the Canadian volunteers had a personnel file that has survived in the Comintern archives – although some contain only a scrap of paper with a name scrawled on it. Other files are more detailed and contain evaluations made by party officials and notes about promotions, demotions, hospitalizations, attempts to desert, and punishments. Many Canadians also completed questionnaires during their time in Spain. Questionnaires from the Historical Commission of the International Brigades were given to members of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion in August 1937, before most of them had been in action. Other questionnaires, from the International Brigades War Commissariat and from the Communist Party of Spain, were distributed in the spring of 1938, and again in October and December 1938, when the Canadians were awaiting repatriation at Ripoll, in northern Spain. They were asked about their political affiliations, their roles in the labour movement in Canada, why they volunteered, if they had been unemployed or jailed, their impressions of Spain and of their comrades, and what they wanted to do after the war.

Volunteers were not always open and truthful on these questionnaires. Few who deserted and were subsequently jailed recalled the event when asked if they had been punished. Others appear to have been wearily fed up with the lengthy paperwork. Asked to write, “even using a separate sheet if necessary,”

what they thought of the popular front policy, the International Brigades, or Spanish prime minister Juan Negrín's government, scores of volunteers gave one-word answers: "good," "okay." Some filled their forms with phrases that might have come from a propaganda pamphlet, while others were less verbose but perhaps more honest. One American in the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion said he had come to Spain for the sunshine. Another, asked what was the most outstanding thing he had noticed since leaving North America, described a recent bowel movement.<sup>10</sup>

I have sifted through these reports, lists, and questionnaires from the Comintern archives and from other sources to construct a database of all the Canadians who fought or served in Spain.<sup>11</sup> An abbreviated version is included as an appendix to this book. The information in the database is not perfect, but it forms the most accurate and complete biographical profile in existence of the Canadians in Spain. It contains the names of 1,681 volunteers, including nine women.<sup>12</sup>

### **Age**

The Canadians who fought in Spain were on average older than their comrades in other countries.<sup>13</sup> In 1937, the year most enlisted, their average age was thirty-two, and their most common ages were thirty-three and thirty-four. More than half were between the ages of thirty and forty, and those aged thirty and over totalled almost two-thirds. The youngest volunteers were sixteen and the eldest fifty-seven.<sup>14</sup>

The Canadian volunteers entered the world at an unlucky time and came of age in the midst of social upheaval. Most were born between 1895 and 1910. Those in Europe and Scandinavia had their youth interrupted by the First World War and the disorder that followed, including civil wars, the Russian Revolution, and other attempted socialist revolutions. Unable to find peace and prosperity in Europe, they emigrated to Canada. The Canadian-born volunteers, though typically younger than those born abroad, also grew up in a time of uncertainty. A few fought in the First World War. Others were born too late to establish themselves in the relative prosperity of the 1920s. They entered adulthood as Canada plunged into the Great Depression of the 1930s.

### **Marital Status**

Choosing to risk one's life in a war is an easier decision for a single man to make than it is for a married man, and the Canadians who fought in Spain were no exception. The Communist Party preferred volunteers without families so that it would not be responsible for widowed wives and orphaned children should its recruits die. Information is available on the marital status of 611 of the Canadian volunteers. Of these, 492 were single when they volunteered to join the war; 103 were married before going to Spain; and a further 6 married during the war. Three were divorced or separated; 6 were widowed, including female nurse Florence Pike; and another was in a common-law marriage.

Fifty-seven Canadian volunteers, including those who were widowed or divorced, had children.

**Employment**

Volunteers were asked in several questionnaires about the jobs they held before the war. These details emerge in letters, memoirs, and postwar interviews also. Employment data are available for 815 volunteers. Many listed more than one profession, and some might have been trained or had experience in a certain job but were unemployed.

**Manual and skilled labourers**

Miners ..... 136  
 Lumberjacks ..... 111  
 Factory and mill workers (including machinists, steelworkers, etc.) ..... 74  
 Drivers ..... 59  
 Mechanics ..... 57  
 Construction workers (including carpenters, roofers, crane operators, etc.) 56  
 Farmers and farm workers (including ranchers and cowboys) ..... 42  
 Sailors ..... 28  
 Painters ..... 26  
 Cooks ..... 20  
 Road and railway workers ..... 20  
 Hotel, bar, and restaurant workers ..... 17  
 Blacksmiths ..... 15  
 Electricians ..... 12  
 Bakers ..... 7  
 Barbers ..... 7  
 Dockworkers ..... 6  
 Furriers and tanners ..... 5  
 Plumbers ..... 4  
 Trappers ..... 4  
 Fishermen ..... 3  
 Butchers ..... 2  
 Firefighters ..... 2  
 Gardeners ..... 2  
 Masseurs ..... 2  
 Prospectors ..... 2  
 Sports instructors ..... 2  
 Surveyors ..... 2  
 Telegraphers and telephone operators ..... 2  
 Amateur boxer ..... 1  
 Grocer ..... 1

Horse trainer .....	I
Jockey .....	I
Letter carrier .....	I
Photographer .....	I
Radio technician .....	I
Warehouse worker.....	I
Workers .....	110

### Craftsmen

Shoemakers .....	13
Tailors and textile workers .....	13
Upholsterers .....	2
Cigar maker.....	I
Glassworker.....	I
Gunsmith .....	I
Harness maker .....	I
Jeweller.....	I
Leather cutter .....	I
Locksmith .....	I

### Professionals and students

Accountants, bookkeepers, and clerks.....	23
Writers and journalists.....	19
Salesmen .....	15
Nurses, medics, orderlies, and other hospital staff.....	13
Students .....	13
Teachers .....	8
Engineers .....	6
Doctors (including one likely fraud) .....	4
Pilots .....	4
Chemists .....	3
Musicians .....	3
Pharmacists.....	3
Social workers .....	2
Architect .....	I
Artist .....	I
Businessman .....	I
Laboratory assistant .....	I
Lawyer.....	I
Office worker .....	I
Public servant.....	I
Secretary .....	I

The majority of Canadian volunteers were workers, and many listed themselves simply as such. More than two hundred held punishing jobs in mines and lumber camps. The rest were manual and semi-skilled workers whose work was mostly seasonal or temporary. Few volunteers held steady jobs, and hundreds found work only in relief camps, where they laboured on road crews or make-work projects deep in the woods. Some men optimistically listed themselves as skilled workers even though it appears that their most recent jobs were more manual. Danilo Gabrylyk, for example, said he was a blacksmith but most often worked in lumber camps or on railway crews.

Several volunteers held jobs that are usually associated with higher education or an elevated social status, but these were a notable minority. They included accountants, students, pilots, teachers, chemists, a businessman, and at least one public servant. Seven nurses, including five women, volunteered, as did four doctors – though one of the four was almost certainly a fraud, only posing as a doctor.<sup>15</sup>

The jobs held by volunteers often divide roughly along ethnic lines. All but two Croatian Canadians worked as workers or miners, most often in northern Ontario or Quebec mining towns such as Val d'Or, Timmins, Schumacher, and Kirkland Lake. A disproportionate number of Finns worked as lumberjacks, frequently in Silver Mountain and the lakehead cities of Port Arthur and Fort William. More Jews had skilled jobs, often requiring some training or education, than did volunteers from other ethnic groups. Almost half of all the cooks were Macedonians, usually from Toronto.

Volunteers from other countries were, like those from Canada, predominantly workers. But there were notable differences. The British contingent included a minority of middle- and upper-class volunteers, often writers and intellectuals who at times struggled to fit in with their working-class countrymen.<sup>16</sup> As many as five hundred American volunteers were students or recent graduates.<sup>17</sup> Many were attending or had recently graduated from the City College of New York, a major centre of communist activity. A large number were also Jewish. They made up a close-knit group with comparatively high levels of political training. One Canadian volunteer would later complain that the 15th International Brigade was run by a “clique of New York [Young Communist League] Jews.”<sup>18</sup>

Even for an army of workers, the Canadians had led difficult lives. The work they carried out was gruelling and often dangerous. Safety standards in mines were minimal. Cave-ins were frequent and deadly. Few would willingly choose to cut trees during a Canadian winter if alternative work was available. Many of the jobs Canadian volunteers held were seasonal or temporary, forcing the men to continually move in search of employment, travelling on the tops of trains and sleeping on the ground. In the eyes of some of the Canadian volunteers, this set them apart from the Americans with whom they most often served. “Let’s put it this way,” Louis Tellier later recalled of his

American comrades, “I don’t think any of them ever slept out under the stars. I think most of them would starve to death in a grocery store.”<sup>19</sup>

One hundred and thirteen Canadian volunteers said in various questionnaires, interviews, or letters that they had been unemployed before the war, but the actual number was probably much higher. In December 1938, Edward Cecil-Smith, the top Canadian commander in Spain, addressed the Foreign Cadres Commission of the Spanish Communist Party to discuss alleged problems the party was having with the Canadian volunteers. He said that the Canadians were quite different from their comrades in the 15th International Brigade: “Most of these boys have never had any but the most casual transient kind of a job in their lives . . . Neither do they have any homes, having been on the tramp since leaving the school.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Education**

The Canadian volunteers by and large lacked the education or professional training that might have helped stave off the worst effects of the Great Depression. Only thirty-two Canadian volunteers are known to have received some form of higher education – either from a university, medical school, or college.<sup>21</sup> This figure includes six volunteers who attended community colleges, one who attended a college of pharmacy, and four who enrolled in medical school. Not all of these men and women graduated. Volunteers with higher education were almost all born in Canada and were often Jewish.

The majority of volunteers, however, received only a rudimentary formal education – attending elementary or, if they were lucky, secondary school. Half the volunteers who did attend secondary school did not finish; many dropped out in their early or mid-teens. Even this basic education was often more than that attained by immigrant volunteers, whose education might have been interrupted by war and revolution. One Finnish Canadian noted that he had been working since he was eight years old.<sup>22</sup>

### **Criminal Activity**

Questionnaires given to Canadian volunteers asked if they had been arrested, faced trial, or had been detained by police before coming Spain. Although the surveys did not reach all the Canadians who volunteered, they nevertheless reveal that a minimum of 105 Canadians had a criminal record of some sort in Canada – or had at least been held in custody by police.

The nature of the offences for which they were charged tell us as much about the official Canadian attitude toward transient unemployed men and political militants in the 1920s and 1930s as they do about the volunteers themselves. Most were charged during protests and confrontations with the police, or for flexibly defined offences such as vagrancy, illegal assembly, soliciting funds without a permit, or hitching a ride on railway wagons – a common means of transport during the 1930s for unemployed men looking for work. A few men

were charged with more serious offences. Bert “Yank” Levy was jailed for six years for armed robbery.<sup>23</sup> Frank Whitfield, a Canadian army veteran of the First World War, said he spent three years in the infamous Alcatraz prison, though his name does not appear in prison records.<sup>24</sup> Harry Rushton said he was framed for kidnapping a municipal official during a strike.<sup>25</sup>

There is little to indicate that serious criminals were attracted to joining the International Brigades or were welcomed by its leadership. An unsigned 22 June 1937 report on Fred Walker describes an unrepentant drunkard who was arrested for brawling in the streets with local Spaniards. “This element has a troubled past,” the note reads. “He spent three years in prison for burglary and was condemned under the name of Wilson Dan and investigated by the police. He says that to live in Canada it is necessary to take dollars where they are, but he refuses to indicate the crimes that he has committed.”<sup>26</sup> Walker was recommended for expulsion and left Spain in January 1938.

### **Social Organizations and Activities**

Communist officials, who wanted to discern the depth of the volunteers’ political commitment, asked Canadians about their involvement in unions and community organizations. From surviving questionnaires and reports on several hundred Canadians, it is clear that the majority were involved in unions, ethnic community groups, or labour and unemployment organizations, which were occasionally fronts for or affiliated with the Communist Party.

One of the most important organizations in Canada for future volunteers was the Relief Camp Workers’ Union, later called the Relief Project Workers’ Union. About 20 percent of all Canadian volunteers had belonged to this group, which organized and agitated on behalf of the hundreds of relief-camp workers who eventually made their way to Spain. Communist Party members easily infiltrated the camps, which were established in the Canadian wilderness during the 1930s to house and provide menial labour for unemployed young men. The camps became hotbeds of militant radicalism. Thomas Aucoin, when asked on a questionnaire how he got involved in the labour movement, responded, “While in relief camps in [British Columbia], Canada.”<sup>27</sup> Many other volunteers would have said the same thing.

Future volunteers who were lucky enough to have real jobs joined trade unions in large numbers. The most popular included the Lumber and Sawmill Workers’ Union, whose leaders were affiliated with the Communist Party. Miners’ unions also attracted numerous future volunteers. The most prominent of these was the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers’ Union. Other volunteers typically joined trade unions relevant to their own profession. More than sixty said they had been involved in strikes and demonstrations.

Ethnic community organizations, many of which were explicitly political, played an important role in organizing immigrants and ethnic minorities, from whose ranks so many future volunteers were drawn. Left-wing Ukrainians

became active in the Ukrainian Labour Farmer Temple Association and the Association to Aid the Liberation Movement in Western Ukraine. Konstantin “Mike” Olynyk, a future volunteer, was one of the founding members of the Association for the Defence of Bukovina and Bessarabia.<sup>28</sup> Other eastern European emigrants joined organizations such as the Federation of Russian Canadians, the Maxim Gorky Club, and various left-wing Polish, Hungarian, and Russian clubs. Left-wing Finns established the Finnish Organization of Canada and numerous Finnish sports clubs.

Many of these organizations had their own ethnic-language newspapers and community halls, with networks stretching across the country. The Association to Aid the Liberation Movement in Western Ukraine made contacts with communists in Europe, and its board of directors included known communists such as Peter Arsen (Krawchuk), who had worked in the communist underground in eastern Europe before coming to Canada. By 1932, the organization had seventy-eight branches across Canada and 6,675 members. In 1937, it sponsored a speaking event by Dr. Norman Bethune, who had just returned from Spain to promote the republican cause.<sup>29</sup> The left-wing Ukrainian newspaper *Narodna hazeta* also carried regular reports about the conflict in Spain and Ukrainian volunteers who were arriving there from Europe and North America.<sup>30</sup>

The Communist Party of Canada recruited heavily through these organizations. Some, including the Croatian Fraternal Union and the Ukrainian Labour Farmer Temple Association, they were able to control. Even when the party did not infiltrate the leadership of an ethnic community group, they were often popular places for politically radical immigrants to gather. Joe Juk, a Canadian volunteer from Hungary, first made contact with the Young Communist League through Hungarian organizations in Winnipeg.<sup>31</sup>

Future volunteers also joined organizations that campaigned on behalf of the unemployed, such as the Single Men’s Unemployed Association, and the Canadian Labour Defence League – a Communist Party front. Other party fronts included the Friends of the Soviet Union, the Workers’ Ex-Servicemen’s League, and the League against War and Fascism. They played an important role in the Communist Party’s attempts to reach out beyond its traditional radical base. Party official Zack McEwen was candid about the strategy: “We’ve never made any bones about it that the Communist Party is vitally interested in the promotion of such organizations, because we know that among the social circles in Canada and in other countries there are people . . . who are sympathetic to many things, who are devoted advocates of peace, but who wouldn’t come near so-called communists with a ten-foot pole. So what are you going to do with those people? You’ve got to play around and help to create those organizational channels through which they feel they can work.”<sup>32</sup>

## Hometown

Few Canadian future volunteers lived in the same place for long.<sup>33</sup> They moved frequently in search of work in mining and lumber towns or on prairie farms. Some said they were familiar with dozens of Canadian cities, from Halifax to Vancouver. They usually lived among their working-class compatriots; many also sought homes in towns and cities that contained large numbers of immigrants or established ethnic communities.

Hundreds of volunteers drifted to British Columbia, where winters are mild, the Communist Party was strong, and the labour movement was active. Vancouver held a status among Canadians similar to New York's among Americans as a centre for the politically radicalized, and the surrounding wilderness contained scores of company towns and relief camps full of unemployed and disaffected young men. At least 350 volunteers lived in the province. The majority, almost 300, lived in Vancouver. The remaining volunteers from British Columbia generally lived and worked in interior lumber and mining towns such as Fernie, Kamloops, and Prince George. At least two men lived for a while in Yukon.

Ontario was home to more volunteers than any other province. At least 780 lived there at some point before going to Spain. Toronto, a popular destination for new immigrants, housed more than 300 future volunteers, including almost all the Macedonians and Bulgarians.<sup>34</sup> Ontario's industrial towns in the southwest of the province also attracted future volunteers. At least 47 lived in Hamilton and 42 in Windsor. Outside the heavily populated areas around Lake Ontario, many future volunteers lived in or near northern mining and forestry centres, such as Sudbury and Timmins, which were home to 37 and 32 volunteers respectively. Scores more lived in smaller northern outposts such as Kapuskasing, South Porcupine, and Kirkland Lake. Many of these men were Croatian emigrants. The Ontario settlements that sent the most volunteers besides Toronto, however, were the twin cities of Port Arthur and Fort William, home to at least 119 future volunteers – predominantly Finnish-Canadian lumberjacks.

In Quebec, at least 150 volunteers lived in Montreal, including many of the Jewish volunteers. Outside Montreal, few of the French-Canadian towns or cities in the province sent many men to Spain, though 6 did come from Quebec City. The northern mining towns of Val d'Or, Rouyn, and Noranda, home to many Slavic miners, sent at least 22 volunteers. All told, the province sent approximately 200 volunteers.

About another 200 volunteers came from Manitoba, of whom more than 150 lived in Winnipeg. Many of these men were Ukrainian emigrants or their descendents who settled the Canadian Prairies earlier in the twentieth century. Alberta sent approximately 180 volunteers. Sixty-two came from Edmonton, 41 from Calgary, 26 from Lethbridge, and 16 from Drumheller. These numbers included several Ukrainian Canadians, though many Hungarian volunteers

who had not settled in Toronto, Windsor, or Montreal also had found homes in Alberta cities and towns, including Lethbridge, Drumheller, and Edmonton.

Relatively few volunteers came from the Atlantic provinces: 31 in total from Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick. Newfoundland, which had not yet joined Confederation, sent at least one of its sons to Spain. At least 19 volunteers came from Nova Scotia. Five of these men came from Halifax; most of the others lived in Cape Breton mining towns such as New Waterford or Glace Bay, which itself sent 6 volunteers. Given the generally poor economic climate in Atlantic Canada, few immigrants tried to settle there. Almost all the volunteers from the region were born in Canada, and most travelled to other parts of the country in search of work before deciding to fight in Spain.

### **Military Experience**

At least 215 Canadian volunteers had previous military experience. Of those who lived through actual combat, most had fought in the First World War and in the European civil conflicts that followed. One Canadian volunteer, Bert “Yank” Levy, reportedly trained soldiers in Mexico and then fought with Augusto César Sandino in Nicaragua.<sup>35</sup> Future Canadian commander Edward Cecil-Smith was also rumoured to have fought in Central and South America. These men were the exception, however; the Canadian contingent did not comprise professional soldiers or mercenaries.

Thirty-five volunteers had served in the Canadian army, navy, and air force, at least twenty-three of whom fought in the First World War. Another twenty-nine had been in the Canadian militia or reserve forces. Three men had been members of the Canadian Officers Training Corps at college or university. Twenty-five British-born volunteers were veterans of the British army, navy, or air force, of whom at least seventeen fought in the First World War. Nine Canadian volunteers were members of armed groups in Ireland, usually the Irish Republican Army; another nine had served in the American army, navy, coast guard, and the Reserve Officers Training Corps university cadets. The remaining Canadian volunteers with military experience usually acquired it in a European army or revolutionary group.

The Canadian volunteers on average had less military experience than did volunteers from many countries in Europe, where military conscription was common.<sup>36</sup> But they were more battle-tested than their American partners in the 15th International Brigade, many of whom had formal military training but had not experienced combat.<sup>37</sup> Not all the Canadians were prepared for what they would face in Spain, however. Asked if they had previous military experience, several responded with a mixture of bravado and bewildering naïveté, claiming, yes, in street fights and riots against the police.

## Ethnicity

The vast majority of the Canadian volunteers, 78 percent, were born in another country. It is the one thing – along with poverty – that almost all the volunteers shared: they were immigrants. More than 80 percent of the immigrant volunteers arrived in Canada between 1925 and 1930.<sup>38</sup> Many came as single men, some with families. Others left a wife and children behind, believing they would earn enough to send for them in six months or a few years. Some never did. They uprooted their lives and gambled on a new start in Canada only a year or two before the country's economy collapsed, hitting the poor and those with shallow roots in Canada the hardest.

The exact breakdown of Canadian volunteers' ethnicity, excluding those whose birthplace is unknown, is as follows:<sup>39</sup>

Canadian (25 Jewish) .....	245
Ukrainian (4 Jewish; at least 80 lived in areas under Polish control before emigrating to Canada).....	239
Hungarian (2 Jewish) .....	135
Finnish (1 Jewish).....	116
English .....	100
Scottish .....	69
Croatian .....	63
Polish (3 Jewish).....	59
French Canadian .....	56
Irish .....	42
Slovak .....	35
Czech (3 Czechoslovakian) .....	23
Bulgarian.....	20
Macedonian .....	19
American (4 Jewish).....	18
German .....	16
Danish (1 Jewish) .....	12
Swedish .....	12
Lithuanian (2 Jewish).....	11
Belarusian (1 Jewish).....	9
Russian (2 Jewish).....	9
Yugoslav (more specific identity unknown) .....	9
Jewish (birthplace unknown).....	7
Serbian .....	7
Swiss.....	6
Welsh .....	6
Greek (at least 1 Greek Cypriot) .....	5
Slovenian.....	5
Australian.....	4

Norwegian.....	4
Romanian.....	3
“Slavic”.....	3
Spanish.....	3
Aboriginal (1 from Canada; 1 from Alaska).....	2
Belgian.....	2
Dutch.....	2
Estonian.....	2
Armenian.....	1
Austrian.....	1
Icelandic.....	1
Newfoundlander.....	1
New Zealander.....	1
Ruthenian.....	1

Certain ethnic groups were disproportionately represented among the Canadian volunteers, especially Finns, Hungarians, Ukrainians, and Poles. Large numbers of southern European Slavs also volunteered. If Croats, Macedonians, Bulgarians, Slovenians, Serbs, and Yugoslavs are counted together, the total is 123 volunteers – this from a group of immigrants that made up a relatively small percentage of Canada’s overall population. Many Scottish and English-born Canadians volunteered. However, given the high percentage of ethnic Britons in Canada at the time, this group does not stand out.

Volunteers from no other country included as high a percentage of immigrants as did those from Canada. France had its exiles from failed revolutions. Britain sent a large contingent of Jews, mostly from London’s East End, making them a sizable ethnic minority of sorts. At least one-third of the American volunteers were also Jewish.<sup>40</sup> And a survey in the 1980s of two hundred surviving American volunteers revealed that one-third had been born in Europe, and 80 percent had at least one parent born outside the United States.<sup>41</sup> But more than three-quarters of the Canadian volunteers were born abroad and emigrated to Canada. This presented some problems for Communist Party recruiters who, according to RCMP investigations, sought to recruit volunteers who would be more appealing to mainstream Canada, especially those of United Empire Loyalist ancestry.<sup>42</sup>

### **Party Affiliation**

National communist parties downplayed the number of their members who volunteered to fight in Spain because they wanted to bolster the image of a popular front uniting communists, socialists, and liberals against fascism. North American propaganda in support of the International Brigades invoked not communism but patriotism and democracy. Battalions were named after

national figures such as Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, and, for the Canadians, 1837 rebellion leaders Louis-Joseph Papineau and William Lyon Mackenzie. “In Defending Spain – They Defend Canada” read a typical banner from a wartime rally.

Party officials, however, considered it of vital importance to know exactly who among the volunteers were communists – and how well they were keeping up their party obligations. The resulting lists and evaluations have survived in Moscow archives and are the source for most of our information about the political affiliations of Canadian volunteers.

Approximately 76 percent of the Canadians in Spain were communists – either full-fledged party members or members of the Young Communist League.<sup>43</sup> More than 90 percent of these men and women became communists during the 1930s, and enrolment was highest in 1935 and 1936 – years of heightened militancy on the part of unemployed Canadians, and of the Communist Party’s strategy of a popular front.<sup>44</sup> It is unclear if some future volunteers joined the party specifically as a result of the Spanish Civil War but, given the spike in enlistment in 1936, it is reasonable to assume this might have been the case.

Communist recruiters usually welcomed non-communist volunteers as proof of anti-fascism’s growing appeal. But potential volunteers without knowledge of the party would have moved in different circles and might not have known how or where to enlist. Nevertheless, 176 Canadian volunteers – or about 25 percent of those for whom information is available – are identified in Comintern files or elsewhere as non-communists. (At least ten of these men later joined the Communist Party for the first time in Spain.) Seven belonged to the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation or its youth wing; four belonged to the Industrial Workers of the World, or Wobblies, a radical union movement; two belonged to the Liberal Party; one was an anarchist. At least one volunteer was a member of the Conservative Party; another belonged to the League for a Revolutionary Workers’ Party, a radical Marxist organization.

Other documents from the Moscow archives support an estimate of 65 to 80 percent for the number of communists in the Canadian contingent. Near the end of the war, Helge Meyer, a Danish emigrant to Canada and trusted party member in Spain, wrote to party officials to ask what his fellow Canadians should do about their party cards. “Chances are that we will be frisked thoroughly by the Canadian immigration officials at our arrival to Canada,” he wrote. “On one hand it [would] be politically bad if they [find out] that 65% of the Mac-Pap Battalion was ‘red,’ and on the other hand we would hate to lose our cards.”<sup>45</sup> Sandor Voros, an American communist, kept a notebook during his time in Spain in which he lamented the high percentage of volunteers who were communists. He put the figure at 70 percent, and as high as 80 percent in some units. Despite its popular front strategy, the party in Canada still had a difficult time attracting non-communist volunteers for Spain. The “aim was

to bring 3-4 times as many non-communists as communists," he wrote.<sup>46</sup>

The number of communists among the Canadian volunteers is roughly in line with contingents from other countries. More than 70 percent of American volunteers were members of the Communist Party or its youth wing.<sup>47</sup> Some 64 percent of French volunteers belonged to the party or one of its front organizations.<sup>48</sup> Three-quarters of the British volunteers were communists, including those who belonged to the Young Communist League.<sup>49</sup> The Irish were an exception. The atheistic nature of communism repelled most people in Catholic Ireland, and comparatively few Irish volunteers were party members.<sup>50</sup>

Asked thirty years after the war what set the Canadian volunteers apart, Irving Weissman, an American commissar in the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion, said they were on average five to seven years older than their American comrades and were much graver in their demeanour. "I consider them to be far more proletarian," he said. "They were very, very working class. The overwhelming majority – it was stamped on them."<sup>51</sup> Carl Geiser, another American commissar who served with Canadians in the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion, recalled that many were lumberjacks.<sup>52</sup> Both these men were right, figuratively and literally. The Canadians in Spain were a rough-hewn group. Their ranks contained few urban aesthetes and undergraduate poets. They had come to Canada in the 1920s from a Europe ravaged by war and revolution, with little money or formal education, and they faced a hard life when they arrived. Hundreds worked as lumberjacks or as miners or farm and road-crew workers. They were unemployed for months and years at a time. Looking for work scattered them across the country, most often into the west, riding in boxcars and sleeping in flophouses or in the woods near rail yards.

Unemployment drove many into relief camps, make-work projects that isolated the poor and angry far from the eyes of polite society. In these camps, and in ethnic community halls where they sought kin and comfort, hundreds of future volunteers encountered and often joined the Communist Party of Canada and groups such as the Single Men's Unemployed Association or the Relief Camp Workers' Union. They became more political and more radicalized, striking, rioting, and fighting with police. The Canadians, for the most part, were neither adolescent naïfs nor militant revolutionaries – though their numbers contained a few of each. Most lacked a formal education. They were poor and in many cases desperate. But they were not ignorant. They read, attended meetings and classes, listened to speeches. And although most were members of the Communist Party of Canada, they were not ordered to fight by the party. They made a choice.