

Saving Memories: Canadian Veterans of the Spanish Civil War and their Pursuit of Government Recognition.

By Matthew Poggi, M.A.

8-1594 Bathurst St.

Toronto, ON. M5P 3H9

mvpoggi@gmail.com

(647) 389-8947

In May 1980, the *Ottawa Citizen* wrote that Ross Russell, a Canadian veteran of the Spanish Civil War “does not want a medal for the war he fought 42 years ago, he just wants history to treat him kindly.”¹ Russell, who fought in the International Brigades on behalf of Republican Spain, was one of the main organizers of a lobbying campaign that demanded the Canadian federal government grant veteran status to Canadians who defended Spain’s democratically-elected republic against General Francisco Franco’s 1936 military revolt. Franco’s forces were supported by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, and many historians have described the conflict as a prelude to the Second World War.² The campaign for government recognition was formally launched in the fall of 1979 when fewer than 200 of the Canadian veterans were still alive.³ In the late 1930s, approximately 1,700 Canadians had gone to Spain and defied Prime Minister Mackenzie King’s Foreign Enlistment Act of 1937, which outlawed Canadian participation in the war.⁴ Decades later, as these veterans were entering their final years, they wished to be, in the words of Russell, “vindicated as patriots” through official government recognition of their service in Spain.⁵

Although veteran status included a government pension, most of the veterans routinely stated they were not concerned about financial compensation.⁶ Instead, the Canadians who volunteered for Spain hoped government recognition would place them on equal footing with veterans of the Second World War and enable them to leave behind a legacy as “Canada’s first

¹ Ken MacQueen, “Spanish War Survivors Ask for Veterans’ Benefits,” *Ottawa Citizen*, May 21, 1980, item 13, Spanish Civil War Collection, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.

² See, for example, Paul Preston, *The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution, and Revenge* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006)

³ Mark Peacock to Lorne Nystrom, November 20, 1979, box 7, folder 3, Spanish Civil War Collection.

⁴ Michael Petrou, *Renegades: Canadians in the Spanish Civil War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008), 13, 170.

⁵ Jeff Cossette, “Fighting for Recognition,” *The Charlatan* (Carleton University newspaper), January 22, 1981, box 14, file 4, Spanish Civil War Collection.

⁶ Richard Wright, “The war Ottawa forgot,” *Maclean’s*, October 20, 1986, box 14, file 5, October 20, 1986, Spanish Civil War Collection.

fighters against fascism”.⁷ The veterans’ push for official recognition was not successful. Despite extensive media coverage and a range of supporters on their side, including politicians and artists, the veterans could not convince Ottawa that they should be given official status. By the late 1980s, with more and more veterans passing away each year, the campaign lost steam.

A close analysis of the veterans’ twilight years provides valuable insight into the nature of both collective and historical memory: two theoretical frameworks that historians have examined extensively since the ‘memory boom’ of the 1980s.⁸ The campaign for government recognition illuminates a moment in the veterans’ lives when their collective memory of the Spanish Civil War was on the verge of disappearing and they began contemplating how their experiences of the war should be preserved as historical memory. Yet rather than having these ‘lived experiences’ mediated and represented by an actor outside the group such as an historian, a number of veterans attempted to define their own historical legacy while they were still alive by campaigning for recognition from the Canadian government and claiming the right to be remembered as patriotic citizens who “saw the menace of fascism and fought it.”⁹ The veterans’ active interest in salvaging their collective past supports Susan A. Crane’s conception of a new kind of historical memory that focuses on “the way individuals experience themselves as historical entities.”¹⁰ Indeed, the campaign demonstrates the possibility of individuals contesting and shaping historical memory.

⁷ Poster advertising fundraising event for the Canadian volunteers, January 22, 1981, item 13, Spanish Civil War Collection.

⁸ See, for example, Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” in “Memory and Counter-Memory,” special issue, *Representations*, no. 26, Spring 1989, 7-24; Yosef Yerushalmi, *Zakhor, Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982).

⁹ Ross Russell quoted in Olivia Ward, “Canadians recall Spanish Civil War,” *Toronto Star*, July 13, 1986, item 13, Spanish Civil War Collection.

¹⁰ Susan A. Crane, “Writing the Individual Back into Collective History,” *The American Historical Review*, 102: 5 (December 1997), 1375.

The veterans' desire, however, to leave behind a legacy of anti-fascism and preserve their memories of the war was a complicated undertaking that leads to a more specific question pertaining to the form and content of their campaign. After the end of the Spanish Civil War in 1939, the Canadian volunteers faced a difficult homecoming; although they were never prosecuted in the decades following the war, the Canadians who served in Spain were considered criminals for defying the Foreign Enlistment Act.¹¹ Some veterans were denied entry into the armed forces during the Second World War and the RCMP closely monitored their activities over a span of decades.¹² But perhaps a greater offence in the eyes of the Canadian government was their political leanings. According to the most recent study on the subject, approximately three-quarters of the Canadians who fought in Spain were Communists and the Communist Party of Canada played a central role in recruiting volunteers.¹³ All these factors were still looming large when the campaign began in 1979.

The veterans had the difficult task of presenting their case for official recognition in a manner that would downplay their Communist past but highlight their commitment as anti-fascists. With this in mind, they chose to portray themselves in the same light as veterans of the Second World War, a group held in high regard throughout Canada. During the campaign, a concerted effort was made to demonstrate that the Canadians who served in Spain fought the same enemy the Canadian military encountered in the Second World War. The veterans of the civil war argued that the Second World War was simply a "continuation of the war in Spain in which we actively participated."¹⁴ In appeals to the federal government and Canadian public, the

¹¹ Petrou, 170.

¹² Ibid., 184.

¹³ Ibid., 52-54.

¹⁴ Statement from veterans' association to Minister of Veterans Affairs Daniel McDonald, May 20, 1980, box 9, file 11, Spanish Civil War Collection.

role of the Communist Party in the veterans' lives was not given prominent attention even though their affiliation with the Party and leftist politics remained a source of pride for a significant number of them. The veterans' overarching goal of ingraining themselves into Canada's historical narrative as 'patriots' meant that only certain memories of the war could be preserved. Therefore, the memory of anti-fascism they promoted during their campaign was largely de-politicized and removed from its origins in the Communist Party and other progressive movements of the 1930s.

The historiography of the International Brigades, particularly work covering the Canadian volunteers, lacks analyses that take into account the entire lives of the veterans. This is evident in Michael Petrou's *Renegades: Canadians in the Spanish Civil War*: the most up-to date account of Canadians who fought in Spain.¹⁵ Petrou's research relies heavily on documents from the Comintern archives that provide useful biographical information on the volunteers. Significantly, Petrou is able to conclude that the Canadians who went to Spain were predominantly from the working class, with 78% of the volunteers born outside of Canada.¹⁶ Unfortunately, Petrou's study barely touches upon themes that go beyond military history, such as the nature of memory. A thorough study of the Canadian veterans' push for official status adds another dimension to the historiography of the International Brigades that moves closer in line with the work currently being conducted on the politics of memory within Spain itself. A number of scholars, including Michael Richards, Helen Graham, and Paloma Aguilar, have done extensive research on the impact of the civil war on Spanish society and looked into how "the

¹⁵ Before Petrou's work, there had been only three books on the Canadian volunteers: Victor Hoar, *The Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion: Canadian Participation in the Spanish Civil War* (Toronto: Cop, Clark Pub., 1969); William C. Beeching, *Canadian Volunteers, Spain 1936-1939* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 1989); Mark Zuelke, *The Gallant Cause: Canadians in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (Vancouver: Whitecap Books, 1996).

¹⁶ Petrou, *Renegades*, 24-25.

war became a battlefield of memories as both sides drew on it as a source of political and moral lessons.”¹⁷ This tension over the legacy of the war was found in Canada as well.

Beginnings

In the years preceding the campaign for government recognition, the veterans were not a particularly vocal group within Canadian society. As mentioned above, many of the men were not well-received by authorities on their return from Spain. In addition to some veterans being barred from enlisting in the Second World War, a few were interned by the Canadian government in 1940 under the War Measures Act because of their Communist politics.¹⁸ In fact, the RCMP had initially planned on preventing veterans, especially those who were born abroad, from re-entering Canada.¹⁹ In the 1950s and 1960s, many veterans wished to remain anonymous and not dig too deep into the past.²⁰ In the midst of the Cold War, the role of the Communist Party in the Spanish Civil War was still a sensitive issue. Jules Paivio, a Finnish-Canadian who fought in the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion²¹, was quite reluctant to discuss the topic in a 1965 interview for CBC Radio. When asked by interviewer Mac Reynolds about the volunteers’ connections to the Communist Party and its role in arranging their trip across the Atlantic, Paivio tersely replied, “Why do you want to know?”²²

¹⁷ Michael Richards, “From War Culture to Civil Society: Francoism, Social Change and Memories of the Spanish Civil War,” *History and Memory* 14:1/2 (Fall 2002): 94.

¹⁸ At least four veterans were interned during the Second World War. See, Beeching, *Canadian Volunteers*, 201; Leonard Norris, “Veterans Support for Mac Paps,” *Mac-Paps News Bulletin*, May 1983, box 25, Spanish Civil War Collection,.

¹⁹ Petrou, 170.

²⁰ Alex Cramer, “The Loneliest Veterans” *The Montreal Star Weekend Magazine*, November 7, 1970, box 14, file 2, Spanish Civil War Collection.

²¹ The majority of Canadians in Spain fought in the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion, which was named after two leaders of the 1837 rebellions. These Canadians are commonly referred to as the ‘Mac-Paps.’

²² Jules Paivio interview with Mac Reynolds, 1965, CBC Radio Archives.

The death of Franco in November 1975 was an important factor that inspired the veterans to focus on their legacy in Canada. Franco's tenure in power had been difficult to digest for the Mac-Paps: over 400 Canadians had died fighting his forces.²³ Veterans such as Ross Russell were adamant in their hatred for the dictator. "I have been waiting and looking forward to Franco dying for a long, long time" he told a *Toronto Star* reporter shortly before the General's death."²⁴ With their average age hovering around seventy years old, it was "now or never" for the Canadian volunteers to ensure their lived experiences would be depicted in historical memory on their own terms.²⁵ In 1979, an association called *Veterans of the International Brigades-Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion of Canada (VMPB)* had roughly 150 members, out of approximately 200 veterans who were still alive. It also had a new chairman in Ross Russell, who had recently retired as a union organizer. Russell was extremely committed to gaining official government recognition and would become one of the veterans' main representatives throughout the 1980s. A key event that gave the campaign momentum was a trip to Spain in September 1979 for twenty-five Canadian veterans; most Canadian volunteers had refused to set foot on Spanish soil during Franco's reign.²⁶ According to Russell, their return after 30 years was fulfilling a responsibility to "those comrades who died here."²⁷ The Canadian volunteers, accompanied by family and friends, retraced their steps through famous battlegrounds such as Belchite and Jarama, and received an official reception in almost every town they visited.²⁸ It

²³ Petrou, 11.

²⁴ Bob Graham, "Civil War vets hail end of Franco's rule," November 7, 1975, box 14, file 2, Spanish Civil War Collection.

²⁵ Ross Russell quoted in Wayne Gooding, "Canadian Veterans returning to Spanish Civil War battlefields," *The Globe and Mail*, August 24, 1979, item 13, Spanish Civil War Collection.

²⁶ Jill Jolliffe, "Canadian veterans relive Spanish war scenes." *The Globe and Mail*, August 29, 1979, item 13, Spanish Civil War Collection.

²⁷ Eve Drobot, "Tears and sweat: the Mac-Paps back in Spain," *Maclean's*, October 8 1979, item 13, Spanish Civil War Collection.

²⁸ Peter Krawchuk, "Spain 1979: the Mac-Paps return," *Canadian Tribune* (Communist Party newspaper), October 15, 1979, item 13, Spanish Civil War Collection.

was an emotionally charged trip that culminated in a meeting between the Canadian volunteers and a group of Spaniards who had been political prisoners under Franco; both sides had a profound respect for each other.²⁹ Yet the veterans' return to Spain was not simply for reasons of nostalgia: the extensive media coverage provided them the opportunity to present their narrative of anti-fascism in a light the Canadian government and public could accept and understand.

Throughout their trip, the veterans highlighted the similarities between the civil war in Spain and the Second World War. Canadian volunteer Len Norris explained to the *Vancouver Sun* that the Loyalists would have won if the "Germans and Italians hadn't intervened on the side of Franco."³⁰ Gerry Delaney, who had spent almost two years as a prisoner of war in Spain, emphasized the volunteers had been "trying to stop the outbreak of the Second World War when our governments were just sitting back doing nothing."³¹ Toward the end of their stay, the veterans had the chance to communicate directly with the Canadian government. The embassy in Madrid held a reception for the men and their families, which was hosted by Chargé d'affaires Emile Martel and attended by the leaders of Spain's political parties and numerous Canadian journalists.³² In a speech addressed to Martel, who was the Canadian government's chief representative in Spain in 1979, Russell re-iterated the connection between the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War. Russell told the audience that when he decided to enlist for Spain, "it seemed clear to me, as I feel certain it did to most others in the International Brigades, that if the Nazi and fascist governments could smash the duly-elected government of Spain, then

²⁹Drobot, "Tears and sweat: the Mac-Paps back in Spain," *Maclean's*, October 8, 1979.

³⁰Martha Robinson, "Mac-Pap vets recall Spain's horror and joy," *The Vancouver Sun*, August 24, 1979, item 13, Spanish Civil War Collection.

³¹"Canadians recall war days on tour of Spanish front," *The Record* (Kitchener-Waterloo, ON), October 10, 1979, item 13, Spanish Civil War Collection.

³²Krawchuk, "Spain 1979: the Mac-Paps return," *Canadian Tribune*. October 15, 1979

the possibility of a second world war was quite likely.”³³ Russell’s words were warmly received by those in attendance, including Martel. The Chargé d’affaires referred to the volunteers as “heroes” and said he was “most touched by the occasion which gathers us here today.”³⁴ Martel’s praise gave the veterans hope that perhaps official recognition would be possible.

An equally essential facet of the veterans’ collective past was their ties to the Communist Party but this was not discussed openly with the Canadian media who accompanied the veterans back to Spain. The problems many veterans had encountered in previous decades, largely because of their ties to the Party, made the group wary of broaching the subject in detail; instead, the veterans argued that the Canadians who volunteered to fight for the Spanish Republic were not driven by ideology but “were just ordinary people going to the defence of democracy.”³⁵ Russell’s speech at the embassy made a point of highlighting the diversity of political views the volunteers held. The only reference to ideology was when Russell stated the volunteers were united by their commitment to anti-fascism.³⁶ The veterans’ framed their motivations for heading to Spain around the Depression of the 1930s, an event most Canadians understood well. Wally Waywood, who became a carpenter after serving in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade and the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion, told a reporter that “many joined up because it was the height of the Depression and there were no jobs.”³⁷ Jules Paivio of Sudbury described his decision to volunteer as a result of the “hungry thirties” when unemployment was rampant and the future

³³ Transcript of Russell’s speech to Embassy, box 7, file 3. Spanish Civil War Collection.

³⁴ Krawchuk, “Spain 1979: the Mac-Paps return,” *Canadian Tribune*, October 15, 1979.

³⁵ Russell quoted in Gooding, “Canadian Veterans returning to Spanish Civil War battlefields,” *The Globe and Mail*, August 24, 1979.

³⁶ Transcript of Russell’s Speech to Embassy.

³⁷ Robinson, “Mac-Pap vets recall Spain’s horror and joy,” *The Vancouver Sun*, August 24, 1979.

was bleak.³⁸ As veteran John George Johnson explained to the *Kitchener-Waterloo Record*, there had been “a lot of Mac-Paps riding the rails” before they decided to volunteer.³⁹

When reporters did in fact question the veterans on the role of the Communist Party in their lives, many of them suggested that their involvement with the movement was a mere formality. Walter Dent described how the only way to Spain was through the Party. In Toronto, Dent had gone to a Communist-run travel agency on Bay Street where “an apparatus was set up.”⁴⁰ Indeed, a common route for volunteers was to visit a Communist Party office in Toronto or Montreal where they were given a boat ticket for Le Havre, France. Once in France, the volunteers were guided by Communist handlers to the Spanish border and crossed the Pyrenees at night.⁴¹ Petrou notes that “almost everyone travelled with financial and organizational support from the Communist Party or front organizations.”⁴² However, for volunteers such as William Beeching, the Communist Party had been more than simply a means for crossing the Atlantic. Beeching had been a Communist before the civil war erupted and was interned by the Canadian government in 1940 for two years because of his politics. As an editor of the *Canadian Tribune*, a party organ, Beeching’s faith in Communism remained strong in the post-war years.⁴³ In 1978, a dispute with the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Canada led to his expulsion but Beeching would remain a committed Marxist until his death in 1990.⁴⁴

³⁸ Jolliffe, “Canadian veterans relive Spanish War scenes,” *The Globe and Mail*, August 29, 1979.

³⁹ “Canadians recall war days on tour of Spanish fronts,” *The Record* (Kitchener-Waterloo, ON), October 10, 1979.

⁴⁰ Bill Dampier, “The heroes of a forgotten war,” *Toronto Star*, August 26, 1979, item 13, Spanish Civil War Collection.

⁴¹ Veterans Louis Tellier and Lionel Edwards interview with Mac Reynolds, 1965, CBC Radio Archives.

⁴² Petrou, 52.

⁴³ For an account of Beeching’s politics and his early years in the Party, see his interview with Reynolds, 1965, CBC Radio Archives; Beeching notes his role as editor of the *Tribune* in Forbes, “The Loneliest Veterans,” *The Montreal Star Weekend*, November 7, 1970.

⁴⁴ Beeching was banned for life from the Party because of his position as editor of former leader Tim Buck’s memoirs, which the Party felt portrayed the recently deceased Buck as a Maoist. Shortly afterward, Beeching

During Beeching's return to Spain, he highlighted his reasons for volunteering without referencing the Party. Beeching pointed to "a spirit of adventure when you are young" and the need to "make a stand" as his prime motivations for joining the International Brigades.⁴⁵ Beeching's association with Communism had been a part of his identity throughout his lifetime and its omission in his reminiscences on Spain was striking. Undoubtedly, his recent expulsion from the Party contributed to his silence but another likely factor was the repression he had suffered at the hands of the Canadian government. The few times the veterans did speak at length about the Party were with the Communist press. Russell, who became a card carrying member after the war, had high praise for the organization and told the *Canadian Tribune* that the "only political party in Canada that took a forthright position and did something about the war was the Communist Party."⁴⁶ Although Russell correctly assessed the central role the Communist Party of Canada played in supporting the Republican cause, neither he nor the other returning veterans shared these views with Canada's mainstream newspapers or in their interactions with the embassy in Madrid.

A Public Divided

The extensive press coverage the veterans had received in the previous months contributed to a revived interest in their story amongst the Canadian public. Playwright George Luscombe, founder of the left leaning *Toronto Workshop Productions*, directed a play in January 1980 based on the Canadian volunteers entitled *The Mac-Paps*. Luscombe's perception of the

founded the *Committee for Canadian Communists*, now known as *Canadians for Peace and Socialism*. Their website is <http://www.focusonsocialism.ca/index.asp>.

⁴⁵ "Canadians recall war days on tour of Spanish fronts," *The Record* (Kitchener-Waterloo, ON), October 10, 1979.

⁴⁶ "Mac-Paps back in Spain," *Canadian Tribune*, September 3, 1979, item 13, Spanish Civil War Collection.

Spanish Civil War coincided with the legacy the veterans were attempting to leave behind; the director emphasized that “all the ingredients of the Second World War were fashioned in Spain.”⁴⁷ Tom Butler, one of the stars of play, was also extremely impressed with the veterans after learning about their experiences. In perhaps an indication of the public’s lack of familiarity with the topic, Butler claimed that “like most people, I thought the Canadians were fighting with the Rebels.”⁴⁸ While the veterans were slowly enjoying a rise in popularity among certain sectors of the public, many Canadians continued to disparage them as Communist dupes. A letter to the editor of the *Globe and Mail* in the spring of 1980 repeated a Francoist narrative by claiming that if “the Mac-Paps had been successful, Spain would have become a Communist satellite.” The author went on to associate the Canadian volunteers with acts of violence committed by some factions of the Spanish left, writing that “the world should not forget that more than 2,000 priests, bishops, and nuns were butchered by the red rats [who] ran Spain until they were dislodged by Francisco Franco.” Almost 7,000 members of the Spanish clergy were indeed murdered during the war but there is little evidence to suggest that the International Brigades were involved in these massacres. Much of the violence directed towards the Church came from Spaniards who resented its support of the rebellion.⁴⁹ The letter concluded on a sarcastic note, with the suggestion that the veterans “apply to Moscow for their war pension.”⁵⁰

Despite its historical inaccuracies and the aggressive tone of the author, the letter demonstrated that some Canadians continued to view the veterans as having fought for the interests of the Soviet Union rather than their own nation; a reader of the *Hamilton Spectator*

⁴⁷ Adele Freedman, “The Mac-Paps enter new theatre of war,” *The Globe and Mail*, January 26, 1980. item 13., Spanish Civil War Collection.

⁴⁸ Bruce Blackadar, “Civil War comes alive on the stage,” *Toronto Star*, January 26, 1980, item 13, Spanish Civil War Collection.

⁴⁹ Helen Graham. *The Spanish Civil War: A Very Short Introduction*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 27.

⁵⁰ Frank M. Kennedy, letter to the editor, *The Globe and Mail*, May 30, 1980, box 14, file 3, Spanish Civil War Collection.

characterized the veterans as “messiahs who answered the call from Moscow’ for a war that did not concern Canada.⁵¹ Likewise, *the Peterborough Examiner* argued in an editorial that the Spanish Civil War was a “foreign war” and the federal government was not obliged to compensate the veterans for their service.⁵² Even within the city councils that supported the campaign, there was a considerable degree of scepticism concerning the validity of the veterans’ claims. North York City Controller Robert Yuill saw the veterans as “soldiers of fortune” and felt no need to support their cause.⁵³ On May 20, 1980, the *Veterans of the International Brigades-Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion of Canada (VMPB)* sent its first official written statement to federal government. The lengthy document was addressed to the Minister of Veterans Affairs Daniel Macdonald and explained the intentions of the Canadian volunteers. As was the case in the preceding months, the veterans highlighted their loyalty to Canada and the sacrifices they had made in the war. On the first page, it was noted that the Canadians who went to Spain were “dedicated anti-fascists” whose defence of a freely-elected government against the advances of Hitler made them “patriotic Canadians.”⁵⁴ In order to drive home their point that the Spanish Civil War was the opening battle of World War II, the veterans specified that “the 88 mm guns and the Stuka dive bombers the Nazis tested on us in Spain became the basis for the blitzkrieg in the Second World War.”⁵⁵ The veterans also stated their involvement in Spain was through the International Brigades but avoided mentioning the Soviet Union’s role in the creation of the volunteer army. The final page listed the *VMPB*’s two specific demands: an

⁵¹ E.W. Dzierzek, letter to the editor, “Mac-Paps not patriots,” *The Spectator* (Hamilton), March 18, 1981, box 7, file 8, Spanish Civil War Collection.

⁵² Editorial, *Peterborough Examiner*, May 24, 1980. box 14, file 3, Spanish Civil War Collection.

⁵³ “Spanish Civil War has council divided,” *Toronto Star*, March 14, 1980, box 14, file 3, Spanish Civil War Collection.

⁵⁴ Statement from veterans’ association to Minister of Veterans Affairs Daniel McDonald, May 20, 1980, box 9, file 11, Spanish Civil War Collection.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

amendment to the Foreign Enlistment Act of 1937, which would exempt their service in Spain from criminal sanctions; and the granting of official veteran status.⁵⁶

A few months later, the association received a reply from the Trudeau government. The Department of Veterans Affairs assured the volunteers that they would not be prosecuted under the current legislation. However, regarding the question of government recognition, the veterans were notified that official status could only be applied “to those who served in Canada’s armed forces, and in some instances, to allied veterans.”⁵⁷ The Canadian volunteers were extremely disappointed but they received the chance to have their case heard in front of the House of Commons later that year. On December 15, 1980, New Democratic Party Member of Parliament Bob Rae introduced a Private Members’ Motion that advocated the federal government grant veteran status to Canadians who fought on the side of Republican Spain; the NDP had passed a unanimous resolution at a recent convention in support of the veterans’ campaign.⁵⁸ Rae had been in contact with the veterans over the past year and agreed with their portrayal of the war. The future premier of Ontario framed the conflict in Spain as a “great and noble cause” and argued against the notion that it was a war conducted with soldiers of fortune.⁵⁹ Invoking the comparison with the Second World War, Rae described Spain as the “central arena where the forces of fascism decided to become involved.”⁶⁰ The veterans’ sacrifices were highlighted when Rae spoke of the damage Hitler’s Luftwaffe inflicted on Spain while the governments of the West were following a doctrine of appeasement. The Canadians volunteers had made a

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Minister of Veterans Affairs (Acting) J. Gilles Lamontagne to Russell, Oct 17, 1980, box 9, file 14, Spanish Civil War Collection.

⁵⁸ Leonard Norris, “Spain Revisited,” *Mac- Paps News Bulletin*, December, 1979, box 25, Spanish Civil War Collection.

⁵⁹ Commons Debates, Private Members’ Motions, December 15, 1980, box 9, file 17, Spanish Civil War Collection.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

“contribution on behalf of our country and on behalf of the democratic ideal” according to the MP.⁶¹

As expected, Rae’s motion was met with resistance in the House. The political connotations of the Spanish Civil War continued to hinder the veterans’ efforts, even though they presented a legacy of anti-fascism that did not draw attention to their Party ties. Progressive Conservative MP Donald W. Munro criticized Rae for suggesting that there is a “parallel between what occurred in Spain and what occurred in the 1939-1945 war.”⁶² Munro perceived the Spanish Civil War as a battle between the forces of fascism and communism, and claimed “those who went abroad were urged to do so by communist influences and not in the interest of democracy.”⁶³ Munro suggested that a more deserving group of veterans were those Canadians who had fought for the American military in the Vietnam War.⁶⁴ As in Spain, the Canadian army had not been involved in the conflict in Southeast Asia. John Campbell, the parliamentary secretary for the Minister of Veterans Affairs, took a more objective view but stated the federal government could not accept Rae’s proposal. In referring to the Canadian volunteers, Campbell admitted that “history has proven them right” but emphatically noted the government does not agree that “men who fought in a war not sanctioned by Canada are entitled to the benefits reserved for people who answered their own nation’s call to arms.”⁶⁵ Rae’s motion was subsequently denied.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Commons Debates, Private Members’ Motions, December 15, 1980, box 9, file 17.

Which memories to save?

Campbell's complimentary words were only a small consolation to the veterans, who began to seek other outlets for the preservation of their experiences in Spain. The *VMPB* decided the timing was right for the veterans themselves to write a history of their fight against fascism. A book could document their narrative of the war for future generations and also drum up support for the campaign.⁶⁶ At the time, only one full length book had been written on the Canadian volunteers. Victor Hoar's *The Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion* was published in 1969 and was mostly based on the interviews veterans had conducted with CBC Radio in the mid 1960s. Hoar's work was a standard military history that covered a range of battles the Canadians fought in Spain. It was also extremely well-researched for the era, considering access to the Comintern archives would not become available until two decades later.⁶⁷ Hoar, however, was disliked by a number of veterans because of his background as an American professor of English at Michigan State University. Within the *VMPB*, he was characterized as a dilettante who could never truly understand the Canadian experience in the war. There was a degree of anger amongst the veterans that they had never been able to write their own story.⁶⁸ Beeching, the chosen author of the new book, noted the irony that the "men who were the first to fight fascism are the last to write their own histories."⁶⁹

A former accountant and newspaper editor, Beeching was one the few veterans qualified to conduct the necessary research for the project. Petrou's findings suggest that the majority of Canadian volunteers had only a basic education; many veterans never attended school past the

⁶⁶ William Beeching, "Report on the Mac-Pap History," *Mac-Paps News Bulletin*, September 1982, box 25, Spanish Civil War Collection.

⁶⁷ Petrou, 6.

⁶⁸ Beeching to Russell, April 13, 1984, box 9, file 5, Spanish Civil War Collection.

⁶⁹ Beeching, "Report on the Mac-Pap History," *Mac-Paps News Bulletin*, September 1982.

primary level. In fact, only thirty-two Canadian volunteers are known to have gone to university or college. Furthermore, English was a second or third language for a large number of volunteers.⁷⁰ Despite Beeching's qualifications, a few veterans who were also active Party members felt his recent expulsion made him an unsuitable candidate.⁷¹ Beeching received a vote of confidence from the *VMPB*'s leadership and eventually produced a book that coincided with the association's portrayal of the war. Titled simply *Canadian Volunteers*, the book was published in 1989 after almost a decade of research. Similar to the narrative presented by the veterans during the campaign, Beeching's book largely ignores the political dimension of the Spanish Civil War; in its primary focus on the Canadians' valiant efforts against Franco and his allies, the book resembles a standard military account of the war, such as the one Hoar wrote in the late 1960s. The veterans felt that a detailed description of their sacrifices in the face of fascist artillery would help them gain sympathy from the Canadian public. On the rare occasion when the role of the Communist Party is mentioned, Beeching is quick to note the diverse political outlooks found among the Canadian volunteers. In his conclusion, he writes that above all, the Canadians "shared a common recognition that the establishment of fascism would entail the destruction of democracy."⁷² Before Beeching began the project, he envisioned the book as a "fine and vivid chapter in Canadian history."⁷³ Indeed, through the publication of *Canadian Volunteers*, Beeching and the *VMPB* attempted to preserve certain lived experiences of the war as historical memory.

⁷⁰ Petrou, 17.

⁷¹ Leonard Norris to Russell, October 9, 1979, box 7, file 3, Spanish Civil War Collection, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library. Norris revealed that Communist Party of Canada leader William Kashtan was not pleased with the decision to allow Beeching to write the book and wanted Party members in the *VMPB* to oppose it.

⁷² Beeching, 202.

⁷³ Beeching quoted in Scott Blythe, "Spanish Civil War veterans face final battle," *Toronto Star*, October 27, 1982, box 14, file 4, Spanish Civil War Collection..

The veterans' respect for the Soviet Union and their continued affiliation with the Communist Party was most apparent in the *VMPB's* newsletters. The *Mac-Pap'r*, one of the association's outlets for communicating with veterans living across the country, emphasized drastically different memories of the Spanish conflict than the ones highlighted in the ongoing campaign. In these newsletters, published throughout the 1980s and intended for an audience comprised solely of veterans, there was no attempt to downplay the profound influence radical politics had on the lives of Canadians who went to Spain. Most issues of the *Mac-Pap'r* contained articles that praised the Soviet Union's efforts in the war. These articles were often reprinted from the *Daily World*, a newspaper connected with the Communist Party USA. For instance, the July 1984 edition of the *Mac-Pap'r* contained a harsh critique of George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* from *Daily World* reporter Art Shields.⁷⁴ In *Homage*, Orwell had depicted the persecution of the anti-Stalinist POUM militia in May 1937 by the Spanish Communist Party and NKVD agents sent to Spain.⁷⁵ Shields concluded there was no Communist repression in Spain and characterized the anarchists and Trotskyists who were members of POUM as part of a "fifth column that worked hand in hand with General Franco." With a number of Canadian veterans still sensitive to any criticism of the Soviet Union, the *Mac-Pap'r* agreed with Shields and referred to Orwell's portrayal of the war as "garbage."⁷⁶

The newsletters also provided glowing descriptions of how the Spanish Civil War was commemorated in the Soviet Union. The *Mac-Pap'r* printed a report in their December 1983 issue from Abraham Lincoln veteran Len Levenson that documented his recent trip to Moscow. Levenson praised the efforts of the Soviet government in educating its citizens about the war,

⁷⁴ Art Shields, "Eyewitness Sets the 'Story Straight'," *The Mac-Pap'r*, July 1984, box 25. Spanish Civil War Collection.

⁷⁵ Caroll, 77.

⁷⁶ *The Mac-Pap'r*, July 1984, box 25. Spanish Civil War Collection, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library.

and cited the example of an elementary school he visited where the students had created their own museum honouring the International Brigades.⁷⁷ In 1986, the newsletter profiled the work of Alexander Osipenko, the president of a group representing Soviet veterans who fought in Spain. Osipenko was in the midst of organizing a celebration in Moscow to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the war. The piece highlighted the importance of the event for Soviet citizens, and Osipenko emphasized it would reinforce the USSR's commitment to fighting fascism.⁷⁸ Besides demonstrating the Soviet Union's willingness to remember the war in a positive light, *The Mac-Pap'r* argued that Communist countries were not a threat to the West. Its July 1984 edition contained a news item from *TASS*, the Soviet Union's state-run news agency, which examined a recent meeting in Moscow between Spanish Members of Parliament and Soviet officials. The peaceful relationship between the two nations was a central focus of the article; the leader of the Spanish delegation had declared during the trip that "Spain is not an opponent of the USSR."⁷⁹ On the other hand, the *VMPB* considered the hostile stance Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher had taken toward the Soviet Union the biggest threat to world peace. In a particularly revealing editorial, *The Mac-Pap'r* equated anti-Soviet sentiment with fascism. It argued that "far from being dead, fascism is with us in its many guises", and one of the ideology's "most notable features is anti-Sovietism."⁸⁰ The editorial went on to state that "as veterans who were among the first to take up the anti-fascist fight, it is our duty to warn and fight against it."⁸¹ The Cold War rhetoric of Reagan and Thatcher was deeply disturbing to the numerous Canadian volunteers who still felt a deep attachment to the USSR.

⁷⁷ Len Levenson, "Lincoln Vet Visits Moscow," *The Mac-Pap'r*, December 1983, box 25, Spanish Civil War Collection.

⁷⁸ A. Osipenko, "Letters," *The Mac-Pap'r*, September 1985, box 25, Spanish Civil War Collection.

⁷⁹ Sr. Martinez quoted in "Spanish MPs in Moscow," *The Mac-Pap'r*, July 1984, box 25, Spanish Civil War Collection.

⁸⁰ Editorial, "Yesh Gvul-There's a Limit," *The Mac-Pap'r*, March 1984, box 25, Spanish Civil War Collection.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

Last Chance

By 1986, there remained approximately eighty Canadian survivors of the Spanish Civil War still alive.⁸² The *VMPB* was continuing its campaign for government recognition but more and more veterans were passing away each month. With time running out, the volunteers reiterated that they were more concerned about their legacy than receiving a veterans' pension. In a letter to Minister of Veterans Affairs George Hees, the volunteers specified they were not "interested in financial or economic matters, but are very much interested that our place in history should be known and understood by future generations of Canadians."⁸³ Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's recent acknowledgement that the government had made a mistake in evacuating Japanese-Canadians from the coast of British Columbia during the Second World War gave the *VMPB* hope its cause still stood a chance.⁸⁴ Russell recognized the ability of individuals to shape historical memory and told *Maclean's* that "history changes."⁸⁵ In school, Russell had been taught that Métis leader Louis Riel was a "terrible person", but he noted that in the past few years Riel's image as a traitor had been re-examined through the efforts of ordinary citizens. "Now they have a statue of him in Regina," the veteran emphasized.⁸⁶ The *VMPB* received a piece of good news in July 1986 when Bud Jardine, Deputy Chairman of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, invited the veterans to present their case to the government for a

⁸² Russell quoted in "Spanish Vets get nod from Senate Committee," *Canadian Tribune*, December 22, 1986, box 14, file 5, Spanish Civil War Collection.

⁸³ "Letter to George Hees," *The Mac-Pap'r*, February 1986, box 25, Spanish Civil War Collection.

⁸⁴ Russell quoted in "Spanish Vets get nod from Senate Committee," *Canadian Tribune*, December 22, 1986, box 14, file 5, Spanish Civil War Collection.

⁸⁵ Richard Wright, "The War Ottawa Forgot," *Maclean's*, October 20, 1986, box 14, file 5, Spanish Civil War Collection.

⁸⁶ Wright, "The War Ottawa Forgot," *Maclean's*, October 20, 1986, box 14, file 5,

second time.⁸⁷ Jardine had spoken highly of the Canadian volunteers in an interview with CBC Radio and felt it was “time to refresh Canadians’ memories of what these people did.”⁸⁸

The veterans’ appearance in front of the committee in December 1986 would mark the *VMPB*’s final attempt at government recognition. According to the volunteers, it was also the “closest we’ve ever come” to gaining official status.⁸⁹ Russell was joined by Walter Dent and William Stapleton: two Canadians who had fought in the Second World War.⁹⁰ The support from these men added a layer of legitimacy to the Canadian volunteers’ narrative of the Spanish Civil War. While their entire campaign had revolved around the similarities between the two conflicts, the volunteers’ relationship with veterans of the Canadian armed forces had been tenuous. For instance, in 1980 the *VMPB* had requested help from the *Royal Canadian Legion (RCL)*, a veterans’ association for men and women who had served in the Canadian military. The elected members of the *RCL* stated that the association had “some sympathy” for the Canadian volunteers, but was unwilling to officially endorse their campaign.⁹¹ During the hearing, Dent and Stapleton were assigned prominent roles by the *VMPB*. In his opening address, Russell made a point of introducing the two men as veterans of the Second World War. Furthermore, since Dent had also been a volunteer in Spain, Russell highlighted this as an indication of the patriotism of the Canadians who fought in the civil war. Dent prominently displayed on his chest the medals he earned for his service in the Canadian military.⁹² Stapleton’s speech was the centerpiece of the *VMPB*’s presentation. The Toronto native had taken an interest in the

⁸⁷ Russell to Peter Davies, March 2, 1988, box 8, file 20, Spanish Civil War Collection.

⁸⁸ Transcript of CBC Interview in House of Commons, Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, December 9, 1986, box 8, file 1, Spanish Civil War Collection.

⁸⁹ Russell quoted in “Spanish Vets get nod from Senate Committee,” *Canadian Tribune*, December 22, 1986.

⁹⁰ House of Commons, Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, December 9, 1986.

⁹¹ Dominion secretary of RCL, J. Lamy to Russell, April 17, 1980, box 9, file 14, Spanish Civil War Collection.

⁹² House of Commons, Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, December 9, 1986.

campaign a few years earlier and wrote many letters to Minister Hees pleading the veterans' case. Stapleton viewed the war in the same manner as the volunteers, having told the *Toronto Star* it was the "testing ground for fascist weaponry and power."⁹³ His speech to the committee repeated this viewpoint but Stapleton emphasized his background as a soldier in the Second World War and a member of the *RCL*.⁹⁴ The session concluded with Russell reminding the committee that the Canadian volunteers were open to being granted official status through various means, such as the distribution of Beeching's book to libraries and schools across Canada or a public statement from the government honouring the volunteers' contributions in fighting fascism.⁹⁵

The veterans would wait over a year to hear back from the committee. In 1988, a decision was rendered and the *VMPB* was informed that the government was unwilling to officially recognize the veterans' service in Spain.⁹⁶ Two years later both Russell and Beeching would pass away. The reasons behind the government's refusal on this occasion to grant official status remain unclear. The Canadian volunteers were kept in the dark about why their request was denied but one can presume the government was still apprehensive about acknowledging the sacrifices of a group that was not part of the country's armed forces. The decision was also likely influenced by political considerations, since a few committee members had questioned the volunteers on the extent of Communist influence within the International Brigades.⁹⁷ The campaign was indeed unsuccessful, but the veterans' efforts to preserve some of their lived experiences of the war are an example of individuals re-defining and contesting historical

⁹³ Lois Sweet, "Our Mac-Paps deserve some recognition, too," *Toronto Star*, October 11, 1985, Spanish Civil War Collection.

⁹⁴ "Ottawa Meeting Dec. 9, 1986," *The Mac-Pap'r*, April 1987, Spanish Civil War Collection.

⁹⁵ House of Commons, Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, December 18, 1986.

⁹⁶ Russell to Davies, March 2, 1988.

⁹⁷ "Ottawa Meeting Dec. 9, 1986," *The Mac-Pap'r*, April 1987.

memory. However, the veterans' decision concerning which memories to save was a selective process that resulted in them promoting a narrative of the war that omitted essential facets of their collective past.

Today, the place of the Spanish Civil War within Canada's historical narrative is by no means resolved. Monuments and plaques honouring the volunteers are found in Winnipeg, Victoria, and Toronto; and in October 2001 a statue dedicated to the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion was unveiled in Ottawa.⁹⁸ The Ottawa monument was made possible through donations collected by *The Veterans and Friends of the Mackenzie Papineau Battalion*, an association that continues the work of the *VMPB* but on a much smaller scale. At the unveiling ceremony, Governor General Adrienne Clarkson, who was one of the few government representatives on hand, stated that the veterans were finally given "a lasting memorial, here, where it should be, in their homeland."⁹⁹ Clarkson's words remain up for debate. Some Canadian historians have pointed to the fact that these monuments are largely unknown within the cities they are located; Cynthia Wright describes the Toronto monument "as a rock in a corner of Queen's Park."¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, while there is now a memorial dedicated to the veterans in the nation's capital, this has been the extent of the government's acknowledgement of the Canadian volunteers. One thing is certain: the Spanish Civil War remains a "battlefield of memories" in both Spain and Canada.

Word Count: 7,494.

⁹⁸ For a complete list of these monuments, see, <http://www.web.net/~macpap/>.

⁹⁹ For a transcript of Clarkson's speech, see, <http://www.web.net/~macpap/>.

¹⁰⁰ Cynthia Wright, review of *Renegades: Canadians in the Spanish Civil War*, by Michael Petrou, *The Canadian Historical Review*, 91:1, (March 2010): 160.

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