

**Michael Petrou. Renegades: Canadians in the Spanish Civil War. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2008. (part of the Canadian War Museum's Studies in Canadian Military History series)**

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Renegade: n. 1. a- person who deserts a party or principles. b- a person who challenges allegiance. 2. a person living outside of or in opposition to a society; an outlaw. 3 *archaic* an apostate, a person who abandons one religion for another. Adj. 1. traitorous, rebellious. 2. of changed allegiance. *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary*.

More than is true of most conflicts or wars, the titles of books set against the backdrop of the Spanish Civil War tend to indicate overarching themes. Think George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*—ode to a noble dream usurped and destroyed by the Soviet Union and its Spanish Communist Party dupes. Would Orwell have gone on to write either *Animal Farm* or *1984* had he not experienced Stalinism's totalitarianism first hand while fighting for the Spanish Republic? Think *The Passionate War* by American Peter Wyden. The pages sizzle with raw emotion, idealism, and ultimately tragedy. We vividly see the Republic slowly, inexorably crushed simultaneously by the Republican coalition's fratricidal infighting, particularly Communist attempts to stamp out Trotskyists and anarchists, and Franco's forces—supported by his fascist allies. Meanwhile, the world's democracies turn a cold shoulder and allow Spanish democracy to be snuffed out for a generation. Think *Canadian Volunteers* by William Beeching, himself a volunteer who travelled to Spain and fought in the International Brigades. Think my own *The Gallant Cause: Canadians in the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939*. *Gallant* makes clear from the outset my belief that the Spanish Republic was a worthy, even noble, cause.

So what to make of *Maclean's* magazine writer and doctor of modern history Michael Petrou's *Renegades: Canadians in the Spanish Civil War*? One relative of a Canadian volunteer to Spain contacted me when the book was being launched at the Canadian War Museum to say she had declined attending because the cover so disturbed her. She suspected the book would cast the Canadians who joined the International Brigades in a negative light. The cover is unsettling. Two men returned to Canada from Spain stand one behind the other. They wear conservative black blazers, ties, dress shirts with buttoned down collars. Two ordinary young Canadians, one might think, except that the man in front has a white square of gauze taped across his left eye while the one behind has a white eye-patch covering his right eye and held in place by a string around his head. Surely such a photo does not grace a book's cover unless it is intended to symbolize the central premise to be found in its pages.

So what does Petrou have to say about the Canadians who went to Spain's war? The bare facts are quickly set out. Spain in 1936 was a tinderbox waiting for a spark to set it afire. Democratic elections had yielded a coalition government—the Popular Front. The coalition was unwieldy, comprised primarily of three major political groups. Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT) was the dominant anarchist group, but just one of many advancing this ideology. Partido Comunista de España was Spain's powerful Communist party. It was recognized by the Soviet Union's Comintern and endorsed by the Canadian Communist Party, as it was by most communist parties the world over. Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (POUM) was a dissident communist party embracing Trotskyism and despised by Soviet communism.

Opposing the Republic and its sweeping attempts to reform and modernize Spain were the country's Roman Catholic Church and various factions aligned to it, such as the Carlists, most Spanish army officers, and an assortment of others declaring themselves Royalists, Monarchists, or Nationalists and coalesced under the leadership of fascist general Francisco Franco. This right-wing coalition included the Basque nationalist party, Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PNV). In July 1936, Franco and the army staged a coup narrowly defeated by the Nationals, as those loyal to the Popular Front were known. A Popular Army was raised to defend the Republic and the country lapsed into all-out civil war where neither side extended much mercy to the other and non-combatant atrocities became daily fare.

Franco received support from Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini. The former provided vast amounts of arms and limited specialized troops, such as tankers and artillery gunners. He also unleashed the Condor Legion, so-called German pilot volunteers who flew German fighters and bombers. Spain proved ideal ground to test tactics and weapon systems. The Germans used the opportunity well. Mussolini sent 75,000 soldiers and a large armoury of weapons and supplies.

With the democracies touting Non-Intervention and burying their heads ostrich-like in the sand of denial that Hitler and Mussolini were flagrantly violating this pact, the Republic was left with only one seemingly reliable ally—Stalin's Soviet Union. Stalin sent aid, weapons, supplies, some soldiers, and a large number of NKVD secret police. Reliance on Soviet aid ensured the Spanish Communist Party rose to ascendancy and gradually the other Republican movements were virtually displaced—often violently.

Against this labyrinthic backdrop the International Brigades were formed. Most of the first volunteers from countries around the world arrived to fight for the Republic just in time for the defence of Madrid in November 1936. At the high-water mark the Internationals would total about 40,000 men and women. Almost 1,700 were Canadians.

Above is actually more background on the war's genesis and the makeup of factions on either side than Petrou provides. This soon becomes hardly surprising for he quickly snaps open in the first chapter, "Who were the Canadian Volunteers?" the lens through which this analysis of their involvement in the Spanish War will be viewed. I'm reminded of *Bullwinkle* cartoons, especially one episode where Earth is visited by Martians and a U.S. Senator declares their visit "a Communist plot." Bullwinkle finally asks, "Why?" The Senator decries, "I think that everything is a Communist plot." While not quite as extreme, Petrou is determined to make clear that the communists were behind the raising of Canadian volunteers and that any other groups or non-communists involved were either dupes or actively fronting for them.

It makes for some curiously selective treatments of Canadian left-leaning factions active during the Great Depression that was wracking the nation and generating a desire among thousands of people from all walks of life for meaningful social and political change. One organization inextricably linked to generating support in Canada for the Spanish Republic was the Canadian League Against War and Fascism, which Petrou writes was one of many organizations that "played an important role in the Communist Party's attempts to reach out beyond its traditional base" and also lumps into a group of organizations that were "party fronts." But the League was anything but a

communist front. Boasting a membership of 337,000 Canadians, it was established by a coalition of 211 organizations at a meeting in a Toronto Oddfellow's Hall on October 6, 1934. Founding organizations included the Co-Operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), the Trades and Labor Congress, the Federation of Catholic Workers of Canada, a host of unions, the Toronto and Edmonton Boards of Education, and the Workers' Party of Canada. Most of the founding organizations were definitely not affiliated with or fronts for the Communist Party, although this was not the case for the Workers' Party. With the Communist Party driven underground by federal legislation in 1931, this party became its public front until the communists were once again permitted to operate openly in 1936.

With the civil war's outbreak, the League spawned an organization specifically focused on Spain—the Canadian Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy. Prominent Ontario CCFer and a United Church minister, Ben Spence, became its first chairman while its secretary was communist Norman Freed. Vice-chairs were communist party leader Tim Buck and Ontario CCF leader Graham Spry. Virtually all of the 211 founding bodies committed to participation within the new committee. Certainly the communist agenda aimed at using the committee to advance its membership growth and influence in Canada's leftist movements. But they did not control it, and were even forced to create a parallel body—the Communist Central Committee—headed by A. A. MacLeod to work fulltime on the Spanish issue's strategic operations. This included recruitment of volunteers for the International Brigades. But the Communist Central Committee never eclipsed the Canadian Committee, which also played an active role in such recruitment

with such leaders as the Methodist activist Salem Bland supporting the raising of a Canadian volunteer force.

Petrou's concentrated focus on communists perhaps explains his giving only passing mention to the role the On to Ottawa Trek played in galvanizing the decision of many Canadians to go to Spain. Although the Workers' Party played a significant role in initiating the British Columbia Relief Camp strikes that brought thousands of unemployed men into Vancouver, the decision to ride the rails to Ottawa to voice their grievances was spontaneous. Overnight, a grassroots movement was born that saw the men met in town after town as they headed east by citizens ready to serve up food and provide needed clothes or whatever else the trekkers required to keep going. When the trek was busted up by police in Regina, many participants were left bitter and disillusioned. As Petrou acknowledges, as many as 500 of the volunteers to Spain had been trekkers. Many, such as Bill Williamson, who Petrou singles out for one of three profiles set apart from the body of the book, were not communists. More an adventurer, Williamson set off alone on a journey overseas that ended with his stowing away on a Spanish freighter. He became the first Canadian volunteer to the Spanish Republic—serving with an anarchist-dominated military force raised in northwestern Spain.

Other Canadians were motivated by the breakup of the Trek to look to Spain. Twenty-year-old Thomas Beckett joined a group of hundreds of young Ontarians who went to Ottawa to demonstrate for the same reforms sought by the trekkers. Rebuffed, not even blessed with an attack by police, they finally trailed home. Beckett went back to organizing for the CCF's Youth Movement in Toronto, but finally decided change would not come in Canada. He decided to go to Spain and became the first Canadian to

die there. By the time of his death, Beckett flatly declared himself a Communist, but his migration leftward to that ideological position came about intellectually rather than through party indoctrination. Ottawa, he wrote, “is going to see something that has not been seen since 1837–38, when William Lyon Mackenzie, the progressive, exposed and fought against the parasites of that period.” He predicted a youth rising against “degenerate capitalism.”

Beckett wrote of Mackenzie before it was decided that the Canadians volunteering for Spain would march under the banner of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion. While Canadians at home believed their fellows overseas were fighting as Mac-Paps, this was not initially the case. And even when the battalion was formed only about half of the Canadians served in its ranks. Most others served in American battalions, while some fought in other ethnic units.

Petrou describes the battles they waged, the conditions under which they fought, and the losses they suffered in a workmanlike fashion that runs to thirty-eight pages. Light on detail, this section suffers the same problem as much of the book. Except for a few brief passages, it reads like a doctoral dissertation—factual and dry as a Catalan ridge in summer. Petrou’s doctoral dissertation was the basis of this book, but there seems to have been little effort to transcend from academia to reach out to a general readership. Yet the book is obviously intended for such readers, at least this is to be assumed from the marketing effort.

Much is made in the press releases about the ground-breaking research that reveals how the RCMP spied on surviving veterans until at least 1984. Which is hardly

news, but Petrou is to be credited for proving the case by drawing on recently declassified government and police files.

New and “sensational” information is promised on Dr. Norman Bethune that explains why he was sent home from Spain in quasi-disgrace and possibly just ahead of gun-toting Communist police bent on arresting a spy. A woman, one of many the notorious womanizer bedded while in Spain, and his open disdain for every aspect of Spanish bureaucracy were the causes. Although interesting, the woman’s story is hardly sensational, and Bethune’s disdain for bureaucracy was legendary.

There’s the nominal roll that makes up a large part of the book’s pages, listing each of the volunteers and some information about them and their fate. Much of that, of course, came from Myrom Momryk, a scholar at Library Archives Canada who has been compiling such a list for many years. Petrou rightly acknowledges this.

Ultimately that’s the problem with *Renegades*. It never manages to engage the reader. The narrative is dry throughout. Yet the Spanish Civil War and the Canadian participation in it cry out to be brought alive and there is no shortage of material to make this possible.

The emphasis on the Communist Party’s role is overstated. Petrou ultimately seems defeated by his thesis due to an obviously sincere respect that developed as he interviewed a few survivors. After interviewing one veteran on his deathbed, Petrou writes: “I wanted to say something that sounded reassuring instead of accusatory, to tell him I thought that what he did was brave and good. But I did neither of these things...thinking back now, five years later, I wish I had told him.” *Renegades* fails to



redress this regret. And one ends the book with no sense of why Petrou elected to call those volunteers renegades.

*Mark Zuehlke is the author of 21 books, of which 11 deal with military history. The Globe & Mail, reviewing his most recent, Operation Husky, about Canada's role in the Sicily invasion declared that this latest entry in his Canadian Battle Series—which traces the experience of soldiers serving in Canada's Army through World War II—"can only cement Zuehlke's position as among our foremost chroniclers of Canada at war."*