Introduction

When the Spanish Civil War broke out in the summer of 1936, it was the culmination of a long history of political, economic, religious, and social conflicts within the country. The immediate background to the war can be traced to 1931, when the constitutional monarchy under Alphonso XIII effectively went into exile after republicans captured a large share of the vote in urban municipal elections. The republican provisional government took power in April 1931.

The new government took measures to address some of the problems which had long plagued the country. It introduced labour and land reforms, as well as measures designed to curb the power of the church and the clergy. The initial appearance of unity soon gave way, however, to real divisions. Labour reform, for example, did not satisfy more radical elements such as the Confederación Nacional de Trabajo (CNT), an anarcho-syndicalist union which began staging strikes and protests against the government as early as 1932. The government members themselves spanned the political spectrum, from moderate liberals to fiercely anti-clerical socialists. By 1933, radical leftists within government were openly critical of what they perceived to be an overly moderate program. Under these conditions, it is not surprising that the government showed signs of breaking down, and that right-wing elements began to exploit its weaknesses. In the elections of November 1933, the government lost a large share of its support to the Confederación Española de Derechas Atonómicas (CEDA), an umbrella group of right-wing parties. After just two years in power, the government had made political enemies to its left and right.

The government survived until 1936 as a Popular Front of anti-fascist forces which was formed in 1935. The Popular Front was victorious in the election of February 1936, but more radical leftists continued to block attempts at compromise with centrist or right-wing members. The right, meanwhile, took advantage of the situation to accuse the government of failing to control the escalating chaos which had gripped the country. A crucial point in this deteriorating situation was the assassination on 13 July of José Calvo Sotelo, a leader of the parliamentary monarchists, who was allegedly killed in retaliation for the murder of a member of the leftist
Assault Guard. Among those advocating a military solution to the political turmoil and street rioting was General Francisco Franco. On 18 July a military revolt began in Spain and in Spanish Morocco. On 30 July troops from Morocco began pouring into Spain, and the country was plunged into a bloody civil war.

Considering the political and military situation at the time, it might have appeared that the Franco forces (who called themselves the "nationalists") would encounter little sustained resistance, especially since almost from the outset the insurgents had military support from both Germany and Italy. That the Republican forces were able to maintain a three-year military effort against Franco was due in large part to an enormous international volunteer effort. By July 1937, one year after the outbreak of war, 24 battalions of international volunteers had been formed, and over the course of the war some 40,000 volunteers from Germany, France, Russia, Great Britain, Poland, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Italy, the Balkans, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Albania, the United States, Canada, and elsewhere, poured into Spain to fight on the side of the republicans.

The main organizational force behind this effort was the Communist International in Moscow, which undertook a major recruitment and transportation campaign. For committed communists, the war was an opportunity to put their political principles into action. For others, the Communist Party seemed to be the only major international force prepared to confront Franco, and the Party's recruitment campaign provided the means for participation. To many, regardless of their political beliefs, stopping Franco in Spain appeared crucial when one considered the implications of a fascist victory for the rest of Europe and the world, especially with the Hitler and Mussolini regimes increasing in both influence and aggression.

Communist Party of Canada (CPC) leader Tim Buck visited Spain during August-September 1936 and saw the situation firsthand. At the time, Buck said he thought that about 250 volunteers could be found in Canada.¹ By 1 July 1937, about 500 Canadians had volunteered to serve in Spain, and an official Canadian battalion, the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion of the 15th International Brigade, had been formed. An association known as the Friends of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion had also been established, and many Canadian cities had Spanish Aid Committees in place. Estimates vary, but some 1,400 Canadians are believed to have volunteered for duty in Spain.²

²In The Mackenzie Papineau-Battalion: The Canadian Contingent in the Spanish Civil War (Ottawa 1986), 12, Victor Howard claims that about 1,200 Canadians went to Spain. William C. Beeching, in the Dedication of Canadian Volunteers: Spain,
There are several reasons why it is difficult to arrive at an exact number of international volunteers, Canadian or otherwise. Some Canadians (such as Pat Stephens) served in battalions other than the Mackenzie-Papineau and are therefore difficult to track using records and informants from that unit. Also, because the International Brigades were not composed of professional military forces, record-keeping was simply more difficult and less stringent. In some cases, for example, people may have volunteered for Spain, but not actually have got there.

In addition, much of the recruitment and volunteering process took place illegally and therefore secretly. At the outbreak of the civil war many countries attempted to isolate the conflict and adopted a policy of non-intervention. By September 1936, an official Non-Intervention Committee had been formed with representation from Great Britain, Czechoslovakia, France, Italy, Germany, Sweden, Russia, and Belgium. (Russia dropped its non-interventionist policy when Germany and Italy began supplying military aid to the fascists in September 1936.) The Canadian government followed the lead of Britain, and introduced measures designed to prevent Canadians from volunteering in Spain. On 31 July 1937, the government extended the Foreign Enlistment Act so that it applied to the Spanish war. This made it illegal for Canadians to volunteer for either combatant in Spain, and imposed a $2,000 fine or 2 years in prison for violators.

The Canadian state's attempt to prevent CPC recruitment and to stem the flow of volunteers was not confined to legislative changes. The RCMP, in conjunction with the Department of External Affairs, also conducted surveillance operations designed to identify and intercept volunteers. On 23 June 1937, for example, the Office of the Commissioner, RCMP, informed External Affairs that the CPC was successfully recruiting volunteers, and that as many as 20 individuals a week were being secretly processed through Montreal on the way to Spain. Others, the correspondence stated, were passing through Winnipeg and Toronto, and many were going to Spain by way of the United States. The RCMP warned External Affairs that the CPC

1936-1939 (Regina 1989), puts the number at 1,448. According to Mark Zuehlk's *The Gallant Cause: Canadians in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (Vancouver 1996), xi, the memorial monument to the Canadian volunteers in Toronto's Queen's Park claims that 1,500 Canadians served. Another list, compiled by Mackenzie-Papineau veteran Lee Burke, has 1,438 names. This list is referred to in Myron Momryk's "Hungarian Volunteers from Canada in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939." *Hungarian Studies Review* XXIV, 1-2 (1997), 3-13.

intended to recruit 500 volunteers, and that 500 were already in Spain.\footnote{NAC MG 30 E173 Vol. 5, File #6.} On 30 July, the day before the Foreign Enlistment Act was extended, the RCMP requested from External Affairs a list of passports which had been issued between 1933 and 1937, which they hoped to use to identify and intercept volunteers.\footnote{NAC MG 30 E173 Vol.5, File#6. Beeching claims that the RCMP and the government were fearful not so much of involvement in the Spanish war as such, but of the implications of the CPC's activities and the war experience for the domestic scene: \textit{Canadian Volunteers}, 12-13. For an account of the growth and activities of the RCMP and the Canadian state surveillance system in this period, see, Gregory S. Kealey and Reg Whitaker, eds., \textit{R.C.M.P. Security Bulletins: The Depression Years}, vols. 1-4 (St. John's 1993-1998). Lobigs makes extensive use of RCMP and other state documents in "Canadian Repsonses."}

With the government and the police joining forces to outlaw and prevent their participation, and with little idea of what to expect in going off to fight with an unconventional army in a distant country, why did so many Canadians go to Spain? It is important first of all, as historian Martin Lobigs has pointed out, to distinguish between the official response of the state and the response of the general public. Lobigs has shown that the attitude of the general public, and even of some Liberal politicians, toward the volunteers differed in many instances from the official policy of the government. Many supported and encouraged the volunteers throughout and after the civil war.\footnote{Lobigs, "Canadian Responses," 133-84; 219-76.} To many, despite the dangers and the opposition, their duty must have seemed clear — to fight Franco and quash fascism in Spain. In many cases, only they know, and their reasons were no doubt various and complex. It is important to bear in mind, when considering their motivations, the political and economic climate in Canada at the time. The Great Depression had created mass unemployment across the country, and shattered many people's faith in the liberal capitalist state. The government of R.B. Bennett, especially, did little to reassure them with its repressive social welfare policies.\footnote{Victor Howard, for example, claims that the Depression and the Canadian government's policy's toward the unemployed left many Canadians feeling bitter and marginalized, and this contributed to the Canadian involvement in the Spanish war: \textit{The Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion}, 27.} Experiences of the work camps and of mass protests such as the On-to-Ottawa Trek had created a highly politicized population.\footnote{See Lorne Brown, \textit{When Freedom was Lost: The Unemployed, the Agitator and the State} (Montreal1987); and James Struthers, \textit{No Fault of their Own: Unemployment and the Canadian Welfare State, 1914-1941} (Toronto 1985).}

Many Canadian volunteers were immigrants. One source estimates that of 1,043 volunteers for which we have ethnic origins, 810 (or about 75%)
were Western European, Scandinavian, or Eastern European. Many of them brought experiences of European war and politics with them to Canada, and were especially aware of the implications of the Spanish situation. Nor was Canada itself immune to the influence of far-right politics. The 1930s was a period of alarming growth in right-wing movements across the country, and this brought the fascist threat home in a very tangible way. In short, the general climate in the country at the time likely encouraged volunteers to act on their personal and political convictions.

One person who did so early in the war was Douglas Patrick (Pat) Stephens. Stephens was born in Armenia on 22 November 1910. His given name was Badrig der Stepanian, and he was the fourth of five boys born to Esther Bedrossian and Solomon der Stephanian. Solomon, a pharmacist and a landowner, was married twice so Stephens also had two stepbrothers and two stepsisters. Stephens' experience with war and politics began early in life. During World War I, in which Turkey sided with the Axis, the Armenian minority was subjected to extreme persecution at the hands of the Turks. Stephens' father and his uncle, Mugerditch, were active in local politics, and early in the war Mugerditch was taken away and executed. Stephens' father narrowly escaped the same fate, but died shortly after. Stephens' family experienced other, similar tragedies during the war, which he relates in this memoir.

After the war, the family began selling off their property, and on 9 July 1921, they left Armenia. They made their way through Turkey and from there to Syria, where they stayed until 1926. They hoped eventually to join relatives in America, but immigration laws made that difficult, so they chose Canada instead. They went to Beirut, boarded a ship called Canada, and arrived in Quebec City in July 1926, when Pat Stephens was sixteen.

The family settled in Windsor, Ontario, partly to be close to the US border in case of opportunity to emigrate there. Stephens enrolled in Walkerville Windsor High School to take a Commercial Course, but his great love was history, at which he excelled. In August, 1928, however, he began work as an accountant with General Motors. His mother was eventually granted a visa to go to the US, and she settled in Detroit, where she died in 1929. Not long after this personal loss, Stephens was dealt another blow when he became a victim of the Great Depression. In the fall of 1929, he was laid off from General Motors. In January 1930 he arrived in Toronto, where he took a number of low-paying restaurant jobs before heading back to Windsor to try his hand at selling refrigerators. When that did not work out he went to back to Toronto to try selling electric signs. Throughout this

period, he kept company primarily with other Armenians, and in 1930 he began working as a houseman for a Mr. Babayan in Toronto.  

Stephens’ civil war memoir picks up in Toronto in 1936, when he was 26 years old, and some of the details about his life during the years 1930-36 are mentioned in the early pages of the memoir. One of the things he must have done during these years was become associated with the CPC: he volunteered for Spain through his connections in the Young Communist League (YCL) in Toronto. Stephens volunteered in December 1936 and travelled to Spain via New York and then Paris (with a brief side-trip to Boston). According to his official service file, he arrived in Spain on 14 February 1937. As such, he was one of those approximately 500 Canadians who went to Spain before the promulgation of the Foreign Enlistment Act in July 1937. He served in the Abraham Lincoln Battalion of the 15th Brigade (to which the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion also belonged). Though it is often considered the American battalion, the Lincoln contained soldiers from other countries, including Canada, just as the Mackenzie-Papineau contained non-Canadians. Stephens began duty as a Machine Gunner, but also served as a Chief of Intendencia (a supply post), and later as military investigator.

Stephens’ account of his civil war experience is especially revealing because of his background and his range of experiences. His Armenian heritage, the fact that he was a Canadian serving in a primarily American battalion, and the variety of posts he held in Spain, combine to give him a special insight into the war and the international brigades.

While Stephens’ manuscript has been left mostly intact, I have deleted some material which was clearly superfluous. I have made corrections in some cases where Stephens was factually wrong about something (he wrote the memoir nearly fifty years after the events). I have also pointed out on occasion that there exist alternative accounts of a given incident. The chapter breaks and chapter titles are also mine. In some instances, Stephens related potentially embarrassing or defamatory anecdotes about certain individuals — ordinary volunteers like himself. In such cases I have related the story as Stephens told it, but omitted the name. It is important to include such stories: they show us what people do in very trying and unusual

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11 This summary of Stephens’ early life is taken from an unpublished memoir entitled “An Armenian Childhood,” in the possession of the Canadian Committee on Labour History.

12 NAC Reel K265. These microfilm reels contain the personal, military, and political assessment reports conducted by the War Commissariat of the International Brigades in Barcelona at the conclusion of the war.

13 The 15th Battalion is often referred to as the “Lincoln Battalion” or even the “Lincoln Brigade.” Stephens, for example, uses the terms interchangeably.
circumstances, and tell us a lot about the nature of discipline in the brigades. Removing the names, however, does not detract from the story or its intent, and I felt there was little to be gained at this stage by naming names. This is not a history of the Spanish Civil War, but of one man’s experience and interpretation of the war. For the purpose of orientation, however, I have provided a chronology of events and a list of the Lincoln Battalion’s major engagements. I have also provided footnote references intended to explain various things in the text, or direct the reader to other sources.

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