

Teaching Module:

This Time a Better Earth

Canada and the Spanish Civil War

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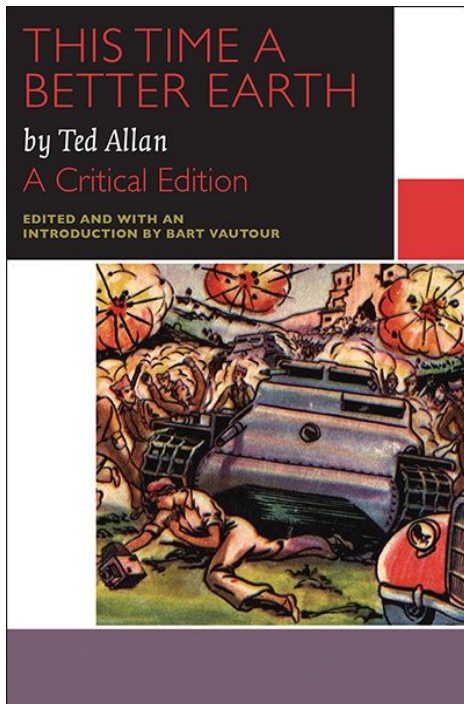
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BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVEL

It is the final years of the Great Depression, and Bob Curtis is one of Canada's countless unemployed. "Seeking a way out" (Allan 86), he marches over the Pyrenees and enters into history by joining the International Brigades—men and women from around the



world who volunteered to fight against fascism in the Spanish Civil War. His fellow volunteers present a cross-section of the North American anti-fascist movement: the French-Canadian Lucien; Doug, an African-American stockyard worker; the bohemian Allan; Harry, a miner, union organizer and family man; and Milton, a young Jewish man with military experience. The men share the excitement and horror of defending the Spanish people against fascist bombardments, until an injury sidelines Bob to radio broadcasting work in Madrid. There, he falls in love with Lisa, a German photojournalist, and he struggles to

reconcile his desire to be with her with his drive to return to his comrades at the front. Ted Allan worked as a journalist during the Spanish Civil War, and he brings his own passion and experience to his writing. *This Time a Better Earth* is a war novel, a bildungsroman, a love story, and a window into an important moment in Canadian history, when Canadians committed their art and their lives to an international struggle against fascism.

THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

The Spanish Civil War, which lasted from 17 July 1936 to 1 April 1939, was a conflict between the Spanish Republic and a coalition of nationalist rebels. The Republic, which had democratically elected a new government after the abdication of King

Alfonso XIII in 1931, was faced with a number of ultra-conservative political groups who perceived the dissolution of the monarchy as a destruction of Spanish national identity. Francisco Franco led a military coup d'état in July 1936. Those loyal to the Republic attempted to hold Spain against the rebels—or Nationalists. The Republican forces adopted Republican leader Dolores Ibárruri's iconic phrase *No pasarán*—they shall not pass. Despite the military determination of the Republicans and the thousands of international volunteers that joined their cause against fascism, the war ended in a Nationalist victory, and Franco would go on to govern Spain until his death in 1975.

THE INTERNATIONAL BRIGADES

After the Spanish Civil War broke out, many of the world's governments took a stance of non-interventionism, despite the widespread support that Franco received from Adolf Hitler in Germany and Benito Mussolini in Italy. Regardless of governmental reaction, the rise of fascism in Europe and the economic disparity of the 1930s prompted an explosive public and cultural response throughout the world, and thousands of volunteers opted to travel to Spain to support the Republican cause. In total, around 50 000 volunteers from 53 countries took up arms and travelled (often against the wishes of their own governments) to Spain to assist the Spanish Republicans against Franco's fascist rebellion. Ultimately, the diversity of individual experience, camaraderie, and class consciousness that was shared within these groups served to confirm the socialist leanings of many Canadian volunteers, as there was no room for exclusivity or xenophobia in a volunteer army that was ideologically united in their anti-fascism.

The Republican forces were not the only ones who received international assistance; Italy's dictator Benito Mussolini supplied troops and support to the Nationalist side, and Adolf Hitler aided Franco by deploying his Condor Legion, a combination of the German Luftwaffe and Wehrmacht regiments, to Spain. The Nationalists also had control over the Army of Africa, made up of soldiers from the Spanish colony of

Spanish Morocco. These troops are often referred to as the Moors.

CANADIANS AND ANTI-FASCISM

More than 1700 Canadians went to Spain to support the Republican front. Many initially joined the American and British battalions, but eventually they formed their own battalion: the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion (commonly referred to as the Mac-Paps). Only half of these veterans returned home after the war, to a country whose government denounced their participation in the conflict; those that did return were often persecuted or simply ignored.

Although not all Canadians necessarily knew the details of Franco's rise to power or the many facets of Spanish fascism, the thought of travelling to Spain to fight directly against this political oppression seemed like a tempting option, especially after seeing a similar ideological system at work within their own country. Prime Minister R.B. Bennett could hardly be described as a fascist, but many of his conservative policies and the suppression of leftist sympathies during the Great Depression was certainly seen by many Canadians as part of the global trend towards fascism. Economically exhausted and quickly running out of options, the Canadians that would later join the International Brigades saw something familiar in the cause of the Spanish Republicans, and many were confident that stopping the spread of fascism abroad was preferable than quietly suffering by its hand in their own country.

Canadian writers and artists took up the Spanish Civil War in their cultural production. Many of Canada's foremost poets of the 1930s—Dorothy Livesay, F.R. Scott, Leo Kennedy, A.M. Klein, among others—wrote about Spain, and their poetry was published in the leftist periodicals *New Frontier* and the *Canadian Forum*. To this day, Canadian writers continued to engage with the Spanish Civil War in their writing.

Sources: Hoar, "Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion", Petrou,

JOURNALISM AND MEDIA

Journalistic publications played a huge role in reporting on and representing the events of the Spanish Civil War both in Spain and in North America, as well as representing the

various ideologies to viewers in Spain and abroad. It was the first war to be broadcast over short-wave radio; there was innovative coverage by photojournalists such as Gerda Taro and Robert Capa; there were documentaries produced in Spain that toured the world (*Heart of Spain, The Spanish Earth*); and due to the war's polarizing politics, both sides and their supporters produced and circulated a large amount of propaganda. Ted Allan worked for the radio Station EAQ Madrid, broadcasting from Madrid to North America twice a day, and he wrote articles for the Canadian communist newspaper the *Daily Clarion*.

Sources: Peck.

TED ALLAN

Ted Allan (1916 - 1995) was born Alan Herman into a Jewish family in Montreal, Quebec. As a young man Allan left school to earn money to help supplement the family income. He worked as a correspondent for the *Toronto Daily Worker* and as a Montreal-based journalist for the Communist Party of Canada's publication *The Clarion*. A dedicated communist, he adopted the name 'Ted Allan' in order to infiltrate a fascist organization and write about it. He kept the pseudonym for the remainder of his life. Allan met Dr. Norman Bethune in 1936 and in the following year he joined the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion to fight in the war against fascism in Spain. Allan's experiences in Spain—of fighting, of meeting Gerda Taro and Robert Capa, of working with Bethune—form the basis of his first novel *This Time a Better Earth* (1939). Allan went on to write television and radio scripts which broadcast in both Canada and the United Kingdom. He wrote several plays and screenplays including the Academy Award nominated *Lies My Father Told Me* (1975) and a screenplay about Bethune entitled *Bethune: The Making of a Hero* (1990). Allan died in Toronto at the age of 79.

Sources: "Ted Allan", Vautour.

GERDA TARO

Gerda Taro (1910 - 1937), born Gerta Pohorylle, was a Jewish photographer raised in Stuttgart, Germany. She was imprisoned in her late teens for anti-Nazi activities, and upon her release she fled Germany for the relative safety of Paris. She spent the rest of

her short life in exile, and never saw her family again. They were murdered by the Nazis during the occupation of Serbia. In Paris, she met Hungarian photographer André Friedmann and he taught her photography. Though he trained her well, work was scarce and they lived in relative poverty. Eventually, the two invented the persona of Robert Capa, a name that immediately attracted professional attention. Their new names—Robert Capa and Gerda Taro—also recalled contemporary Hollywood stars Frank Capra and Greta Garbo. Taro and Capa both published under the credit “Capa,” then “Capa and Taro,” and eventually Taro began publishing under her own assumed name. Taro travelled to Spain early in the war to work as a photographer. Her work was widely published. She often photographed refugees and orphans, the civilians caught in the conflict, and she did a memorable series of a crowd waiting outside the morgue to see the bodies of their loved ones after a bombardment. Taro died in July 1937, of injuries sustained in a car crash with a tank during the Republican retreat from Brunete. For some time, Capa’s fame overtook Taro’s memory. Recently, there has been more study of her career, spurred in part by the 2007 recovery of a suitcase in Mexico that contained hundreds of her lost negatives, and which was the subject of the 2012 Mexican/American documentary, *The Mexican Suitcase*.

Sources: Rogoyska, Schaber.

PUBLICATION HISTORY

This Time a Better Earth was first published in 1939, in London by William Heinemann and in New York by William Morrow. A Canadian edition *may* have been published by McClelland & Stewart, but this remains unconfirmed (Vautour xxvi). A new scholarly edition of the text, edited by Bart Vautour, was published by the University of Ottawa Press in 2015. Allan wrote several other pieces of journalism and fiction about the Spanish Civil War, including “Lisa: A Story” and “A Gun is Watered,” which take up the characters of Lisa and Milton, respectively.

THIS TIME A BETTER EARTH

CRITICAL SUMMARY

This Time a Better Earth follows the young Canadian Bob Curtis and his comrades as they arrive in Spain to fight Franco's fascists.

KEY TERMS

- **Fascism:** "An authoritarian and nationalistic system of government and social organization which emerge after the end of the First World War in 1918, and became a prominent force in European politics during the 1920s and 1930s, most notably in Italy and Germany, [...] an extreme right-wing political ideology based on based on the principles underlying this system" (Oxford English Dictionary).
- **Anti-fascism:** Opposition to fascist ideologies, parties, groups and individuals, often intersecting with opposition to racism and capitalism.
- **Internationalism:** "The principle of cooperation and understanding between different nations; belief in or advocacy of this principle [...] A movement or doctrine advocating international proletarian revolution" (Oxford English Dictionary).
- **Socialist realism:** A theory or style of art and literature that realistically depicts life from a socialist perspective. It emerged from the First Congress of Soviet Writers. Georg Lukács described it as "using [a concrete socialist] perspective to describe the forces working towards socialism *from the inside*. Socialist society is seen as an independent entity, not simply a foil to capitalist society, or as a refuge from its dilemmas" (93).
- **Bildungsroman:** A novel that primarily depicts a protagonist's formative years and (emotional, moral, sexual, intellectual, etc) education. A coming-of-age story.

METHODOLOGY AND APPROACHES

1. **Biocultural:** Bob carries his Canadian identity into an international—and

internationalist–conflict. His comrades each bring their own unique national, racial, and cultural contexts to the narrative. The novel can be read alongside historical accounts of Canada, the United States, Germany, etc., during the 1930s. It is useful to think about the personal and national contexts that brought people like Bob, Lisa, Doug, or Milton to Spain, and how these contexts are represented in the novel.

2. **Biographical:** This novel has many resonances with Ted Allan’s life: he also travelled to Spain, worked as broadcaster in Madrid, and became friends with the German photographer Gerda Taro. He was with her when she died. This novel can be read biographically, alongside biographies of Allan and Taro.
3. **Bildungsroman:** There are many references in the novel to Bob’s youth and innocence. Over the course of the novel, he undergoes formative experiences, including the bombardment, his relationship with Lisa, and returning to the front lines to visit his comrades.
4. **Canadian war literature:** This novel can be read and taught in conversation with canonical Canadian war novels, including Timothy Findley’s *The Wars*, Joseph Boyden’s *Three Day Road*, and Charles Yale Harrison’s *Generals Die in Bed*.
5. **Technology and witnessing/technologies of witnessing:** Due to the rapid advance of technology in the first part of the 20th century, the Spanish Civil War was technologically innovative in compelling and horrific ways. It was the first war to be broadcast across the ocean via short-wave radio. It was the first time civilian populations were subject to aerial bombardment. War photographers were closer to the action than ever before, and more in danger. All of these technologies of war and witnessing are at work in *This Time a Better Earth*.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **Biocultural**
 - a. Why, in section 4, do the characters discuss their family ancestries? What is the significance of their personal pasts' to the narrative?

- b. Why did Canadians volunteer to fight in Spain? Does the novel offer a narrative to explain this?
 - c. Discuss constructions of race—Judaism, Blackness, Whiteness—in the novel, and in the anti-fascist community it imagines.
 - d. How does music and poetry function as a marker of identity, or as form cultural exchange?
2. **Biographical**
 - a. Is this an autobiographical novel, and how does this affect our reading?
2. **Bildungsroman**
 - a. Is this novel a bildungsroman? Why or why not?
 - b. In what sense does Bob develop over the course of *This Time a Better Earth*?
 - c. Is the Bob at the end of the novel significantly more mature than the Bob of the first chapters?
3. **Canadian war literature**
 - a. Does the unique context of the Spanish Civil War distinguish this book from other war novels, particularly those that represent wars that involved the Canadian state (ie: World War I and II)?
 - b. Does *This Time a Better Earth* endorse violence as a method of change? Is it critical of the mechanizations of war?
 - c. How do nationalism and internationalism play out in this novel?
4. **Technology and witnessing/technologies of witnessing**
 - a. In Part II, the chapters become shorter with many more references to media, the geography of the novel narrows to Madrid, and there's a lot more noise—what is the significance of this shift alongside Bob's new job? (multimodal storytelling through letters, reports...)
 - b. What does the novel have to say about the value of witnessing and media in war? How does the novel itself function as witness?
 - c. How does gender intersect with practices of witnessing, media and censorship?
5. Is the novel's conclusion a happy one?

ASSIGNMENTS

Group work

- Character sketch: In a group, prepare a character sketch. The sketch will include the character's family history as far back as possible, and some good quotations by and about the character. Each group will be asked to present their character sketch to the class.

Individual work

- Art-based research: Sketch or draw a possible cover for *This Time a Better Earth*. Submit alongside a short introduction (200-250 words) that explains what your drawing highlighted and why you consider it representative of or relevant to the novel.

SUGGESTED LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Students will recognize how genre shapes a text's meaning. They will recognize how writers can transgress or subvert generic expectations, as well as fulfill them.
- Students will read complex texts actively, recognize key passages, raise questions.
- Students will develop an ability to read texts in relation to their historical and cultural contexts, in order to gain a richer understanding of both text and context, and to become more aware of themselves as situated historically and culturally.

RESOURCES

[Kardash, William A. *I Fought for Canada in Spain...* Toronto: New Era Publishers, n.d.](#)

This is a first-hand account by a Canadian who fought in Spain, William Kardash. He argues that fighting for the Spanish people was tantamount to defending Canadian people, and so illustrates the international threat of fascism. [An abridged version of this pamphlet](#) was circulated during Kardash's election campaign: he was elected to the Manitoba legislature in 1941.

[Smith, A.E. *Hello Canada!* Toronto: Friends of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion, n.d.](#)

This pamphlet, published and circulated in Canada during the Spanish Civil War, describes A.E. Smith's travels around Spain to visit Canadian volunteers. It also includes an introduction by Ted Allan himself. It is useful as historical context and as another form of media and witnessing that circulated during the war.

[Watts, Jean. "This is EAQ Madrid Calling." *Daily Clarion* 27 April 1937: 5.](#)

Jean Watts reported alongside Ted Allan in Spain. In this article for the Canadian Communist paper, she describes a night of broadcasting to a North American audience. She represents radio as an intimate, immediate form that can bridge the physical and ethical gap between Canada and Spain.

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CREDITS

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