

# Towards a Collective Body: Locating the Socialist Hero in EAQ's *Listen In* Pamphlet

JULIA McMILLAN

The Spanish Civil War was one of the first wars ever recorded and broadcast on the radio, and Canadian voices were prominent on the international airwaves coming out of Spain between 1936-1938. The broadcasts were recorded at Station UGT in Madrid, and relayed over the shortwave radio station EAQ. These reports were intended to not only communicate wartime news to an international audience, but also to “arouse sympathy” in the English-speaking world (“Forward”). The 1936-1937 pamphlet *Listen In!*, published by the Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, transcribes broadcasts by Canadians Norman Bethune, Hazen Sise, Allen May, Henning Sorenson, and Professor J.B.S Haldane. This pamphlet touts the typical socialist optimism for the anti-Fascist project while also detailing the progress of Bethune’s blood transfusion project in Spain. In combining “science and skill” with “heroism and enthusiasm,” the stories in these broadcasts detail “one of the finest jobs of practical humanitarianism and medical achievement in history” (“Forward”).

The emphasis on heroism recurs throughout the broadcasts, and sets up the conditions for the emergence—and the triumph—of a socialist hero. However, unlike traditional hero-figures, the socialist hero is not a specific individual, and their struggle is not physical, but ideological. Indeed, through the broadcasters’ repeated emphasis on the centrality of unity and collectivity in the socialist consciousness, it is evident that the ideal socialist hero is not a triumphant individual agent, but rather is a comrade willing to sacrifice everything for the

international socialist project. In this way, the socialist hero demonstrates a shift away from the physical body to the collective body. Like the concept of the collective, a socialist hero is not represented by just one kind of person, but by many. These broadcasts outline three kinds of heroes: 1) the medical professional, 2) the dead or wounded soldier, and 3) the listener at home. Each of these iterations of the socialist hero embodies the qualities of “unity” and “sacrifice” that lie at the heart of the socialist project in Spain (Sise “Social and Military Aspects” 1937). Through each level of heroism outlined here, we can observe the gradual disappearance of the heroic body, and the increased emphasis of the collective body. The double meaning of the word “body” is significant in this context: we have, on the one hand, the physical body of the individual, and on the other hand, the body as a signifier of a “group of people with a common purpose or function acting as an organized unit” (OED). The socialist hero is located within the second sense of the word, where the physical body is subsumed by the collective.

The broadcasts transcribed in the *Listen In!* pamphlet between December 1936 and January 1937 begin by detailing the medical doctor’s contribution to the Republican cause in Spain. In Norman Bethune’s segment “Practical International Comradeship,” he begins by drawing attention to the fact that “some of the most famous surgeons of Spain” are at work in the hospitals in Madrid (“Practical International”). As he profiles several doctors at work, he emphasizes their commitment to the anti-fascist cause by signalling their readiness to sacrifice their former status and material compensation. The first doctor he describes, a “famous brain surgeon” operating on a head wound, used to receive

\$5,000 for a similar operation, but in Spain, “he does it gladly for his \$1.00 a day” (Bethune “Madrid Hospital Scene”). The second doctor, a “great abdominal surgeon” is “tired and weary” from performing twenty operations that day, but he happily carries on with his work because “his love for his countrymen, his pride in his art is as high as ever” (ibid). Both of these doctors embody the role of the socialist hero not only because of their medical achievements, but because of their willingness to sacrifice physical comforts and compensation for their patients’ wellbeing. In this way, the doctors’ efforts are released into, and expressed through, the soldiers’ bodies: they allow their own bodies to weaken so that the soldiers’ bodies can grow stronger. Importantly, the doctors are described only by their vocation, not by name or by physical characteristics. This lack of individuation, coupled with the doctors’ bodily and material sacrifices, demonstrates the dissolution of social hierarchies within the anti-fascist project. Indeed, the power dynamic typically associated with the doctor-patient relationship is rendered irrelevant due to their mutual dependence on one another: the patient relies on the doctor to heal his wounds, while the doctor relies on the soldier’s physical contribution in the war. In this way, the role of the hero is shared because the soldier and the doctor both perform heroic acts that further the anti-fascist cause as a whole, but neither of their roles can be completed without the other.

While the first level of heroism shows the doctor and the patient’s bodies working in tandem to forge a strengthened collective body, the second level allows us to observe the ways in which the weakened, or even absent, individual body can still work productively as part of the collective political body. Indeed, for the socialist hero, dying is, in itself,

a contribution to the socialist cause, as evidenced by the role of the wounded or dying soldier. For this hero, the act of dying is rooted in sacrifice and selfishness, and demonstrates the subsumption of the individual body into the collective. The *Listen In!* broadcasts reveal that in Spain, the threat of death was not only imminent, but expected, and in a way, welcomed. In a January 6, 1937 broadcast titled “Chuck the Job, Franco!,” Prof. J. B. S. Haldane even describes dying as a collective *event*, stating that: “It’s quite a good show, you know. We actually take democracy seriously in Spain, and are willing to die for it. Why not come out and see us die, or even help us?” (Haldane 1937). Haldane’s appeal to listeners to “help us die” illustrates the ways in which dying is a form of labour for the socialist mission, both physically and ideologically. The socialist hero’s death involves the physical labour of fighting against fascism as a vulnerable individual, and stepping in to take the place of a deceased soldier. This cycle of death and subsequent replacement continues the chain of combative labour involved in the war, and illustrates the regenerative strength of the socialist mission.

Furthermore, dying as an anti-fascist does the work of enacting and reinforcing the sacrificial ideology rooted in the socialist mission. The broadcasts equate this kind of individual sacrifice with religious sacrifice. In his January 13<sup>th</sup> segment, titled “Blood Transfusions Described,” Haldane explains that:

The Spaniards take blood and suffering very much as a matter of course. The crucifixion of Jesus was probably the part of the Christian story which appealed to them most deeply. The crucifixion of a people—for that is what the present war amounts to—is an idea which the Spaniards can

understand, and are willing to undergo. The trams of Madrid mostly carry a poster which runs as follows: “Let us write with our blood the most heroic page in the glorious history of Madrid.” (Haldane 1937)

This conflation of religion and ideology is worth noting because whereas Christ is largely absent from the socialist consciousness, the soldier—particularly the wounded, sacrificial soldier—is ever present, and indeed indispensable. The soldier then stands in for Christ in socialist ideology, representing selfless human sacrifice for the larger anti-fascist cause—a cause apparently on par with divinity. It is furthermore significant that this poster appears on a tram, because as Haldane points out in an earlier broadcast, “the tram is a symbol of the spirit of Madrid” (“Madrid’s Trams Keep Moving”). It is, literally and metaphorically, a vehicle for collective action. The tram and the religious emphasis on personal sacrifice thus represent the shift away from the individual body to the collective body, as the anti-fascist caused is kept moving by the sustained and unified labour of the masses, rather than by the actions of a few.

If we can begin to trace the gradual disappearance of the socialist hero’s individual body through the figure of the wounded or dying soldier, then the process of disappearance is completed when we begin to consider the third iteration of the socialist hero: the listener at home. The listener represents the potential for socialist heroism on an international scale. Despite their disparate geographic locations, the listeners, like the doctors and the soldiers in Spain, are united through a shared ideological commitment to the anti-fascist project. The listeners, as a disembodied public, therefore create an extended network of

socialist supporters across the globe. Although the physical body is absent from the listeners' contributions to Spain, Bethune suggests in a 1937 broadcast that the "unification of intellect and emotion" facilitates the body's sustained commitment to the socialist cause. Bethune thus provides a way for listeners to become implicated in the fight against fascism from home by lending their intellectual and emotional labour to the cause, therefore indirectly strengthening the body of both the individual combatant and the collective army in Spain. Bethune states:

The people of Madrid may be seen as unified and consolidated mass of both emotional and intellectual forces. This gives them strength and endurance. Against the daily bombardment of German and Italian airplanes, against hunger and cold. Nothing less than this unification of the intellect and the emotions could produce such profound belief in this rightness of their fight against the Fascist aggressor. (Bethune "Wars Contrasted" 1937)

Here, Bethune creates a hierarchy of faculties, wherein emotion and intellect are held above the body. When unified, these immaterial faculties have the power to govern, inspire, and sustain the physical body. Although Bethune is referring here to the people of Madrid, his comments could equally apply to the listeners at home. Their engagement with the Spanish Civil War is fuelled by emotional and intellectual responses because they listen to broadcasts that use affective rhetoric as a rallying device. The ideological commitment that results from this relationship to both war and radio therefore motivates listeners to perform the role of the hero from home. One way to enact this role is through donation. Listeners' donations to troops in Spain represent a

disembodied sacrifice that mirrors, in a small way, the sacrifice of those working and fighting abroad. Their contributions also help strengthen the bodies fighting abroad by providing resources for food and shelter. Another way that listeners could use their ideological ties to socialism is to become cultural producers or archivists or chroniclers of the war. By thinking and writing about the war, or by collecting and persevering war memorabilia—both of which are emotional and intellectual activities—listeners create new bodies of knowledge that honour the socialist heroes abroad through art and archival documentation. These disembodied manifestations of sacrifice and production mirror the ways in which physical bodies were fighting abroad, while also demonstrating the global reach and impact of socialist ideology. Taken together, the listeners' efforts from home worked to strengthen the collective socialist body, both literally and artistically.

Throughout the *Listen In!* broadcasts, the language of heroism is employed to demonstrate the virtue and value of the socialist project in Spain. However, the representations of socialist heroes throughout these broadcasts differ from the traditional model of heroism. Instead of depicting individual heroes who go through great physical lengths to achieve their mission, the physical body is largely unimportant to the socialist hero. Rather, the socialist hero operates at the intersection of the individual and the collective, and in the *Listen In!* reports, we can trace the disappearance and absorption of the individual socialist body into the collective body.

## Works Cited

- Bethune, Norman, Hazen Sise, Allen May, J. B.S. Haldane, and Henning Sorenson. *Listen In! This Is Station EAQ Madrid, Spain*. Madrid: Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, 1936-7. Print.
- “body, *n.*” Oxford English Dictionary Additions Series. 1993. OED Online. Oxford University Press. 8 Nov 2015  
<<http://dictionary.oed.com/>>.



