

Election Handbills of a Spanish Civil War Veteran

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Lieutenant William (Bill) Kardash served as a tank unit member in Spain, where he lost his right leg to gangrene brought on by shrapnel wounds (Petrou 76). After returning from Spain, he served in the Manitoba legislature for seventeen years as a representative of the Communist Party of Canada, which was renamed the Labour Progressive Party in 1943 (“Biographies”). These election handbills from his 1941 campaign place Kardash and his service in Spain within a wider narrative of democracy in Canada. They are compelling documents for the ways in which they reframe the Spanish Civil War for a Second World War working class audience.

The handbill “Elect a True Champion of Peoples’ Democracy!” (figure 1) devotes an entire page to Kardash’s biography entitled “Servant of the People.” As the title suggests, it is a heroic narrative. Born to poverty, Kardash came of age during the Great Depression of the 1930s, but he refused to accept the desperate economic circumstances thrust upon him. “With Bill, thought and action could never be separated”: so he acted upon his beliefs, first as an organizer among the farmers and workers, then as a volunteer for the International Brigades in Spain. The amputation of his right leg is highlighted in many of the handbills through narrative and photos and functions as a testament to his heroism and commitment to action (see figure 2). Such a visible sacrifice might easily resonate with a Canadian public who were already welcoming home Canadian soldiers wounded in the battlefields of the Second World War. The missing leg is employed as a symbol of suffering and sacrifice through military service that would help the public make the significant connection between the men enlisting to fight in the Second World War and Kardash’s

service in Spain.

When Kardash returned home wounded, he found new ways to serve his country. Like Norman Bethune and French intellectual André Malraux before him,¹ Kardash toured Canada, educating his fellow citizens about the Spanish Civil War and the threat of Fascism. His campaign for office is staged as the next logical step in his democratic service to the people of Canada. His record of military service and activism are evidence that he is “a true champion of peoples’ democracy!” (see figure 1).

Of course, the peoples’ democracy he fought to defend was the Spanish Republic, not Canada. Canada took a non-interventionist stance towards the Spanish conflict and outlawed its citizens from participating through the Foreign Enlistment Act of 1937 (Armstrong and Leier 19). This law, however, was never enforced. Though there was some difficulty funding their repatriation, and though many Spanish Civil War veterans were watched by the RCMP for decades following the war, none of the veterans or recruiters were prosecuted, perhaps because there was a good deal of public support for the returning volunteers (Howard and Reynolds 225-228). When the first train of volunteers arrived at Toronto’s Union Station, it was greeted by thousands of people.² Among them was Reverend Salem Bland, who welcomed the volunteers with a rousing statement: “Canada didn’t understand at first what you were doing, but understands now, and as time goes on, you will have more friends, more honour, because you have done one of the most gallant things done

¹ Bethune’s tour is discussed in Norman Penner’s *Canadian Communism: The Stalin Years and Beyond*. For a description of Malraux’s inspiring tour, see Petrou 46.

² Howard and Reynolds write that 10 000 people met the volunteers at Union Station, but Peck’s records 2000 people.

in history.”³ Bland is quoted in Kardash’s publication, *I Fought For Canada In Spain*, and in his election handbills (see figure 2). This appeal to Bland, a well-known religious authority, is meant to inspire the public and highlight Kardash’s status as an honourable veteran, even if the Canadian government did not officially acknowledge this status.

The ambivalence of the Canadian government and people towards the veterans of the Spanish Civil War was a political opportunity for Kardash. Historian Michael Petrou writes: “Some veterans of the International Brigades have said that the Spanish Civil War was the first battle of the Second World War” (183). Kardash surely held this belief. As the title of his memoir suggests, he believes he was defending Canada when he defended Spain. His writing in the handbills carefully frames his service in Spain for a Second World War audience. The Canadian media coverage of the Spanish conflict was often confusing and contradictory,⁴ but in Kardash’s handbills the Spanish Civil War is described in the same simple terms as the Second World War: as a fight for Democracy against Fascism.

This democratic, anti-fascist framing simplifies a very complicated conflict, but it also avoids a great deal of leftist terminology that had been associated with the Spanish Popular Front and its supporters. The handbills avoid terms such as communism, socialism, proletariat, and capitalism, even though Kardash was a card-carrying member of the Communist Party of Canada. Such language was risky; the Communist Party of Canada had a difficult history. When the Second World War was declared,

³ As quoted in Howard and Reynolds, 235.

⁴ See Peck for a comprehensive analysis of the representation of the Spanish Civil War by Canadian media.

the party was in favour of Canada's participation. But when the Soviet Union made a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany,⁵ the Communist Party of Canada fell in line with Soviet Union policy and opposed Canadian involvement in the war. Though many Communist Party members, including Kardash, individually supported the war, the Communist Party of Canada was officially banned under the War Measures Act of 1939 (Penner 50). By avoiding the terminology associated with the Communist party and reframing the Spanish conflict in simpler terms, Kardash sidesteps, to some degree, this controversial history.

Nonetheless, Kardash still practiced communist politics and his handbills still speak to a class conflict. Kardash highlights his history of poverty and activism in order to appeal to a working class audience that had recently suffered through the Great Depression. He is described as a worker who lost his leg "fighting side by side with the Spanish workers," and who now "fights for labor rights, trade union wages...for the needs of the people of Manitoba" (figure 3). The handbills emphasize the "conflict" aspect of class conflict by using a great deal of military language. Phrases like "The working class was attacked on every front" and "The Front Line Trench of Democracy is here and now" (figure 3) appeal to a voting public who had become accustomed to culturally pervasive military language. Voting in the Manitoba election is rewritten as a way of participating in the war effort on the "home front." This is most evident in a handbill addressed to "Mothers and Wives of Winnipeg," which calls to women to vote in line

⁵ Soviet foreign minister Molotov and German foreign minister Ribbentrop signed the non-aggression pact in August of 1939; it included the division of Poland between the two military powers. The non-aggression pact did not last long, and Hitler launched his invasion of Soviet territory in the summer of 1941 (Suny 221-22).

with their husbands' values (figure 3). Such gendered rhetoric may have been more poignant to women whose husbands were risking their lives overseas.

The use of military language serves to emphasize the connection between Kardash's service in Spain and the contemporary Manitoba working class, and it achieves this by using Second World War patriotism as a bridge between these two political moments. The people of Winnipeg responded favourably: they elected Kardash in 1941, and he served several terms in the legislative assembly. But there is one handbill that retrospectively puts Kardash's democratic rhetoric into question. This is not a campaign pamphlet, but a flyer for a rally demanding freedom for the Labour leaders imprisoned because of the War Measures Act. This handbill uses the same language of democracy and anti-fascism to appeal to the innocence of these prisoners, but it does so at the expense of the other Camp Kananaskis prisoners.⁶ The Labour leaders are said to be in danger, as they are imprisoned with violent "German Nazis and Italian fascists." The handbill emphasizes that these Labour leaders are citizens of Canada, but downplays the citizenship of the German-Canadian and Italian-Canadian prisoners. Kardash spoke at this rally, and the strong language of the handbill suggests that he did not fight for the rights of these prisoners of German and Italian descent (or the

⁶ According to the Columbus Centre, Kananaskis Internment Camp #130 was built in 1939 as a work camp for "enemy aliens." Prisoners included German merchant marines, German Canadians, Italian Canadians, and Canadians belonging to the Communist Party. The War Measures Act allowed the Canadian Government to classify 31 000 Italian Canadians as enemy aliens, and 600 of these citizens were interned for the majority of the war (Pier 21). Forty-eight Italian Canadians were interned at Camp Kananaskis, but in 1941 they were all released or moved to Petawawa Internment Camp #33 in northern Ontario. German Prisoners of War took their place at Camp Kananaskis.

Japanese-Canadians who were interned the following year) as he fought for the rights of so many others. This could indicate many things: the lasting effects of the Spanish conflict, where Kardash fought against Italian and German soldiers; the compromises politicians make in their pursuit of political progress; or the willful ignorance and indifference of the Canadian people to their own acts of oppression. Whatever it may signify, this handbill is a strong reminder that political events—this rally, Kardash’s campaign, the Spanish Civil War—cannot be understood historically in simple terms. When examined closely enough, every democratic vision has its own gaps and flaws.

Figure 1: “Elect a True Champion of Peoples’ Democracy!”

Figure 2: “Who is Kardash?”

Figure 3: “Mothers and Wives of Winnipeg”

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